

North Sea

a hazardous sea kayak voyage

Johann van Rossum

This story is fiction.
All characters and events have sprung
from the author's imagination.



In this story about a sea kayak voyage along the west coast of Denmark and encounters with Danes, I cannot avoid using the Danish language, nor can I avoid using terms from the world of sea kayaking and sailing. Where the story permits, I provide a translation or explanation.

1

That annoying push in my back as I willingly step into the cell of the Danish police station, the sound of the impressively thick cell door slamming behind me and the cold metal on metal sound that keeps me locked up for the night; I will never get used to it, nor to the dinner that is handed to me through the hatch in the cell door: four fish fingers, a pile of mashed potatoes and red cabbage with apples, served on a plastic plate and accompanied by matching plastic cutlery. I pull the steaming meal out from under the warming lid. It came with a bottle of spring water. I am hungry and attack immediately. The hatch remains closed, there will be no dessert.

This afternoon I was taken from the beach to the police station in Thisted. My canoeing equipment was loaded onto a trailer and taken into the town. 'Arrested on suspicion of criminal activity' is the officer's preliminary statement as he removes my handcuffs in the interrogation room. I have to sit on a hard wooden chair at a table anchored to the floor. On my side, just below the table top, a bar has been fixed across its full width; apparently I am not a threat to the two plainclothes officers facing me, so my handcuff does not have to be fixed to the bar. The tall, blond detective orders the officer to remove the second handcuff as well. The older policeman reaches out to me and introduces himself: "Sven Svendsen, nice to meet you."

"It's not that nice! Why am I here?"

The blond policeman has his notepad open and writes down this remark. Everything I say now is obviously important to him; I have to watch my words.

"Tell us why you are paddling alone in your sea kayak along our coast. It seems to me that sea kayaking is a very dangerous activity. Anything can go wrong at sea and you need the help of others. Why don't you paddle here with others?"

"I've tried to get companions, but this time I couldn't."

"And then you go off on your own? That seems a bit implausible to us. You didn't want any uninvited spectators, did you?"

I look at officer Svendsen in disbelief; what on earth is this man talking about?

With an angry gesture, the blonde officer puts the pen down on the table and stands up.

"Do you not understand that my colleague is trying to make it clear that we are on to you? There is no point in denying it. We know everything! From the beginning of your journey through Germany and the south of our country to Esbjerg. Paddling along the coast, while you were involved in questionable business and had contacts with people of questionable reputation. You are not here as a tourist in our country, that much is clear to us."

"I navigate my sea kayak from Esbjerg to Skagen, a challenge of about two hundred miles. About a week of sea kayaking. What could be wrong with that? I really didn't like the fact that there was no one to do this with me."

The blonde sits down and writes it all down again.

Now it's his neighbour's turn: "You just happened to be in the places we were watching. Why did you go to the outer buoy?"

I shrug my shoulders. What can I say? The blonde writer notices that I am at a loss for an answer.

"You're going to tell us about the people you met on your trip! Who did you arrange to meet with?"

"Arrange to meet? I didn't know anyone. They were on the beach, or I saw them on a camping site, in a youth hostel, a restaurant or a café. I had never seen or spoken to the people I met before."

"That is a lie! We can prove that you have had contact with some of them, now tell us."

I strongly suspect that these Danish interrogators have no idea what has been going on and to what extent I might have been involved. Some things are still a mystery to me at the moment.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I want to talk to a lawyer. Just arrange that."

"Just arrange it? We are not your employees!"

"Fine, give me a phone and I'll call you myself."

"You need a Danish lawyer. Your Dutch lawyer can't help you here, I'm afraid."

"Oh, that's no problem. Just bring me the phone."

I am tired of this hassle. I can't think of any answers to their ridiculous questions and apparently these policemen have no intention of letting me leave just yet. They arrested me on the beach and think they have caught a criminal sea kayaker. I had wanted to spare them this disappointment.

The detectives stand up. I want to do the same, but the blonde gestures me to remain seated. A policeman enters the interrogation room as they leave. The uniformed assistant is standing at the door, his hand resting on the belt pouch with the pepper spray; this young man is clearly unaware of my peaceful disposition.

The blond detective has taken the time to pick up my mobile phone from the counter where I had to leave it a few hours earlier. Across the table he slides my phone and a list of local lawyers to me.

"Can I have my wallet too? There is a Danish lawyer's card in there. I want to call him."

The surprise on the young detective's face would have made me laugh in a different environment and situation.

"How do you know a Danish lawyer? Have you ever been in contact with our justice system? I have to consult my colleague first. Just a moment."

The man disappears in a hurry, and the uniformed hand returns to the spray can.

The two interrogators did not return today. The business card of the lawyer from the Danish capital could be the reason for an extensive consultation.

I spent the night in a Scandinavian police cell.

2

It's half past six, perhaps seven o'clock, when I'm awakened by a face peering through the small, lockable opening in the metal door. Through the hatch below, two hands belonging to the face push a tray with a modest breakfast into my quarters. Not much later, the officer expects me to have finished my breakfast and gives me barely fifteen minutes to shower, shave and brush my teeth. I manage to keep to the schedule. I am taken to another cell, from which I am soon removed and taken back to the interrogation room. The same detectives from yesterday enter and take the seat opposite me.

The older officer points to the microphone in the middle of the table. "We have found the lawyer in Copenhagen who is willing to help you. He can only be here this afternoon. We will record our conversation with you this morning so that your lawyer can take note of it later."

"I will not tell you anything without talking to my lawyer first," I insist sternly. I have seen a lot of police films.

Sven Svendsen makes a new attempt today.

"Sir, please try to understand us and cooperate in your own interest. There is no need for you to make a statement that could incriminate you. We have almost dismantled a large criminal organisation, and if you are really not involved, you have nothing to fear. But you can help us by telling us why you are canoeing alone along our coast, and who you have been in contact with in preparation for and during this trip about the nature of your journey. It can't be that difficult, can it?"

I shake my head and press my lips together. I don't speak, the recording equipment only picks up the detective's voice.

"Surely you can tell us what happened at sea near the outer buoy? You don't need to talk to your lawyer about that first, do you? Tell us what you know about your journey to and from the first buoy and you can go."

For the umpteenth time I count the slats of the blinds.

The younger detective has taken out his smartphone: "I googled your name. I saw that you write books. Have you written a lot, just travel books?"

I would like to tell the young man about the special places I have visited around the world and the interesting people I have met, but I realise that the policeman is trying to exploit one of my weaknesses. I live for and by travelling and writing. They are my greatest hobby and my most enjoyable occupation.

The policeman must have seen my doubt and changed course: "You speak our language perfectly. Where did you learn it?"

After this compliment, I find it very difficult to remain silent.

"Have you lived in our country? Are you married to a Dane?"

His older colleague now realises how the young man is trying to get me to talk.

He too tries to break my silence: "Your first name is Scandinavian. Norwegian, right?"

I get the hang of it and continue to 'play dumb', not talking until I have spoken to the lawyer.

The police think they can't keep me here for more than twelve hours, I understand. They are in a hurry, I am patient. The lawyer will be here this afternoon and then maybe I will hear what I have to do.

At midday I was given a sandwich and a cup of lukewarm tea on the interrogation table. The two officers insist on asking the same questions over and over again.

I am tired of their insistence and try not to listen. I never knew it took so much energy to ignore people. I try to think about what has happened in the last few days. I remember some incidents in fragments. I get lost in my own memory, the constant questions of the two officers start to have an effect.

There is a loud knock on the door of the interrogation room and a young man in an immaculate three-piece suit enters. He holds out his hand to me and walks past the two policemen with professional arrogance: he must be a lawyer.

"Mr. van Grondelle van Heemstede? My name is Axel Stig Møller from Rasmussen, Stig Møller & Stig Møller. My colleague has asked me to assist you in the first instance. He may take over from me at a later stage in a possible case against you."

He turns to the detectives: "I think you are done with my client for now. Will Mr. van Grondelle stay here and you go elsewhere, or will you arrange another room for us? And can I have my client's arrest papers from you?"

Dupont og Dupond', the Danish equivalent of Tintin's 'Jansen & Janssen', immediately make off with their recording equipment, and Mr. Stig Møller hurries to close the door behind them.

"So tell me why you were arrested," begins the young lawyer.

"I wish I knew. I was on a solo trip along the coast in a sea kayak. The police think that is suspicious and that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I am trying to find out for myself what happened. What do they want from me? What am I suspected of or what have I been involved in? I have been told nothing. I hope that you can bring some clarity to this."

There is a knock on the door and the uniformed guard from the previous day brings the requested papers for the lawyer.

The lawyer plunges into the papers.

Coffee is brought. I greet the steaming cup of coffee like a friend I have found again. After almost two days without caffeine, I began to feel the effects of withdrawal. During the interrogations I was given only lukewarm tea. Warm or hot drinks are a potential weapon in the interrogation room, the officer explained.

Axel Stig Møller is now reading the official papers about the reason for my arrest for the third time, taking two bulky law books out of his briefcase and, after a quick glance, laying them open on the table in front of him.

His gaze moves from the arrest papers to the articles in the two codices and back again.

"During your stay in our country, did you take any steps to bring goods into Danish territory, and if so, did you do so after consultation or in cooperation with third parties?"

I have no idea what the lawyer is talking about; I look at him questioningly. My Danish is not that good.

The young lawyer switches to English and immediately translates the reason for my arrest into less legal terms.

"Have I been smuggling? No, I only have the camping equipment and less than the permitted amount of food and alcohol. Did the police find any illegal goods in my kayak or equipment? I didn't put anything in it, mind you."

"You are telling me the truth, aren't you?"

"I have no reason to lie. I want to get out of here as soon as possible."

"I'll arrange that for you. As far as I know, the police have no hard evidence against you. You were just unlucky enough to be in an inappropriate place and all the signs are against you. I will talk to the police."

Mr. Stig Møller of Rasmussen, Stig Møller & Stig Møller leaves the interrogation room and I am rejoined by the man with the pepper spray.

"May I have another cup of coffee?"

The policeman shakes his head, 'no', and his gaze goes off into the distance again.

I could try...

It takes a long time before the lawyer is back in the company of the two detectives. The lawyer sits down and Sven Svendsen also sits down. The blond policeman has the disadvantage of his age, he has to stand.

"In connection with the further examination of the sea kayak and your equipment, your presence here is still required. The provisional detention is lifted immediately. You are free to go, but I could arrange with the people here that you can stay until the inspection of your belongings has been completed."

"The cell door will not be locked, you can use our staff canteen. The only 'no go' area for you will be the shed where the Technical Investigation colleagues are examining your kayak and luggage."

We'll do our best to get you back on your sea voyage as soon as possible," the older detective has a completely different attitude!

"If there is anything else, please do not hesitate to contact us. From tomorrow, Mr. Rasmussen will be back in the office and will be happy to help you further. It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. van Grondelle van Heemstede."

I shake the lawyer's hand in farewell. With the same smugness towards the two officers with whom the lawyer had entered this morning, the man disappears down the bare corridor of the Thisted police station.

3

Ingelise is still a little dazed by the phone call from Denmark. Hagar is in a police cell. Arrested 'for illegal activities', was the message. What those activities were, the policeman could not say. He spoke Danish, German and English, which did not make the message any clearer.

Hagar left a week ago for a sea kayaking trip along the west coast of Denmark. She didn't like the idea of her husband paddling along the Jutland coast alone for a week. Of course, he can take care of himself; he has the necessary experience at sea and good equipment, but now he's locked up in a police station somewhere halfway through the trip.

Why this is so is completely unclear to her at the moment. She knows that her husband does not hold back when a law enforcement officer stands on his stripes. He usually makes no secret of his contempt for those who make and enforce the rules.

Ingelise also knows that wild camping is strictly regulated in Denmark and that her husband likes to pitch his tent wherever he feels like it. To turn this into a criminal activity... Maybe it was the language mix on the phone that went wrong, she thinks. As long as she doesn't get a message from Hagar herself, she doesn't have to do anything. She has learned in the past that her husband prefers to look after himself.

In his early fifties, Hagar is still the adventurer she fell in love with over twenty years ago. He is now an author of fascinating and best-selling travel stories. Together they can live comfortably off the royalties, and Ingelise doesn't really need a job. Her work as an acquisitions editor for the publisher of Hagar's travel books is not only exciting, but also provides the extra budget needed for Hagar's travels. After all, he has to travel to write his books.

She met him for the first time at the publisher's, a handsome, curly-haired, athletic outdoorsman with early greying hair who had come to discuss the manuscript of his first book. She had read the story

and immediately liked the writing, the themes and the author. They hit it off. Within a year they were living together in this beautiful old villa on the edge of the city park, Hagar's childhood home, which they were able to take over when his parents decided to move to a luxury penthouse in the city centre.

4

Ingelise takes the dog's lead from the wardrobe. Bwana is right in front of her. He is a five-year-old, red-haired Rhodesian Ridgeback. The dog is Hagar's travelling companion on most walks and hikes. The four-legged friend has become quite accustomed to staying in the transport boxes during flights. Scandinavia, Russia, Canada, the United States, East Africa and Mongolia, Bwana has accompanied Hagar. The collection of stamps in his vaccination booklet is as impressive as those in his owner's passport. Ingelise knows very well how important Hagar and Bwana are to each other, they cannot live without each other; from the first moment an unconditional bond was formed, a loyal companionship between man and beast. The two are very similar in character. Hagar is as independent as his dog, both can be quite arrogant and confident, but Bwana is calmer than his master. They both have that 'not-so-ordinary', 'something special' about them.

When Hagar is at home, the dog usually lies under the desk at the author's feet.

Its imposing dog, with its hair stripe on his back, plays an important part in many of these stories. Standing almost seventy centimetres at the withers, with a short, shiny coat and weighing almost forty kilos, this sturdy dog immediately wins you over with its friendly head.

Although this dog breed is known to be wary of strangers, Bwana's presence is often a breakthrough at first meetings, Hagar told. The dog manages to make friends, including the readers of his travel books. They find it attractive that the stories are not just about landscapes and people.

A customs check by a tough Swiss border guard suddenly becomes a lot more interesting to the reader when the snarling official abandons a planned thorough inspection of the Landrover at the sight of the razor-sharp fangs shown briefly by the fellow passenger when the uniformed arm moves a little too hastily towards the door

handle. Hagar always knows how to give his buddy a supporting role in his stories, according to Ingelise.

She locks the front door behind her and leads the dog across the front garden to the gate of the driveway. Bwana sits down just as Ingelise stops to open the gate. The dog watches her every move and only gets up when she says 'all right'. Walking with this dog is a pleasure, thanks to the good training they have given him. Bwana stays 'on foot', never straying half a metre from his companion's left leg. Collar and leash are really unnecessary. He is only interested in other dogs after the command 'free' in the walking park.

Bwana enthusiastically searches for the last scent flags and immediately puts his own mark on them. Seeing her dog so busy, Ingelise remembers that the sea kayak trip her husband had planned this time would not be suitable for the four-legged friend. The lion dog loves sailing in an open canoe. He has often canoed with them through the Biesbosch. In France, the three of them spent a week canoeing on the Dordogne, and they recently took the dog on a canoe trip in the southern Swedish region of Götaland.

The African lion hunter cannot travel in a sea kayak. In the slim canoe, the kayaker is secured in the boat with a splash guard, his lower body locked in the dry seat. The luggage is stored in compartments below deck under watertight hatches.

Ingelise is fine with it. She can walk the dog for hours in the woods and it forces her to go for long walks three or four times a day, even when the weather is not so good.

Also, now that her husband is away, having a dog in the house makes her feel very safe.

Her husband has been away for ten days now and is being questioned at a Danish police station halfway through his sea kayaking trip. Ingelise feels uncomfortable at the moment because there is nothing she can do for Hagar.

Bwana seems to sense this and is remarkably close to her today.

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