

Happiness is a sad Dane





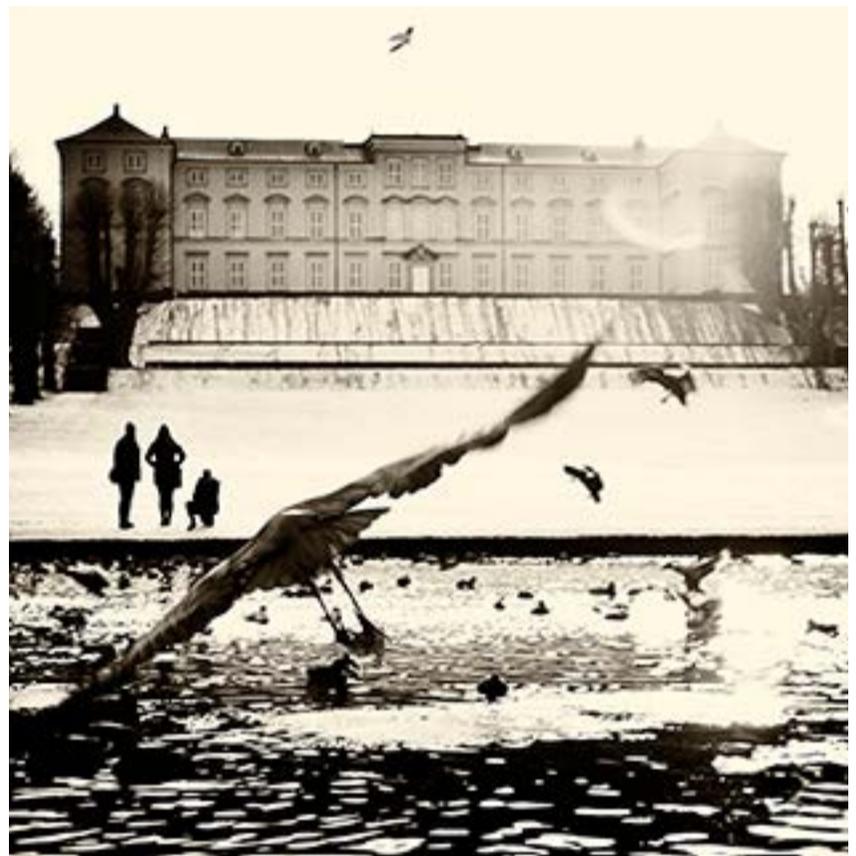
The country deemed the world's official happiest two years running is not such a cheery place after all, reports **Jeni Porter** from Copenhagen.

AT THE ENTRANCE TO Copenhagen's Frederiksberg Gardens there's a statue of King Frederik VI who so loved the palace park that in about 1800 he transformed it into English-style romantic gardens of lakes, canals, and groves of trees. The king enjoyed walking in the park and being rowed around the canals in a gondola saluting at those of his subjects who were allowed in. "Here he felt happy in the midst of loyal people," says the inscription at the base of the statue.

His legacy is a popular park where everybody seems to feel happy. On sunny days it's full of picnicking families celebrating birthdays with cakes decorated with Danish flags and an inordinate number of stylish young mothers with strollers. But all may not be as it seems. For the Danish writer Dorthe Nors the park is where you "exhibit your happiness" rather than feel it.

"I was in Copenhagen last week for three days," says Nors, who moved from the Danish capital to its wild, west coast last year. "I walked in Frederiksberg Gardens and it really hit me how severe it is: these young women, they're super dressed, everything is super around them, but they've got that sadness in their eyes. I think it's because it's hard to be a mother but apparently we can't talk about the darker side of life. We can't talk about the painful situations that we're in, we constantly stress the successful part of it and we call it happiness, which is, pardon my French, bullshit."

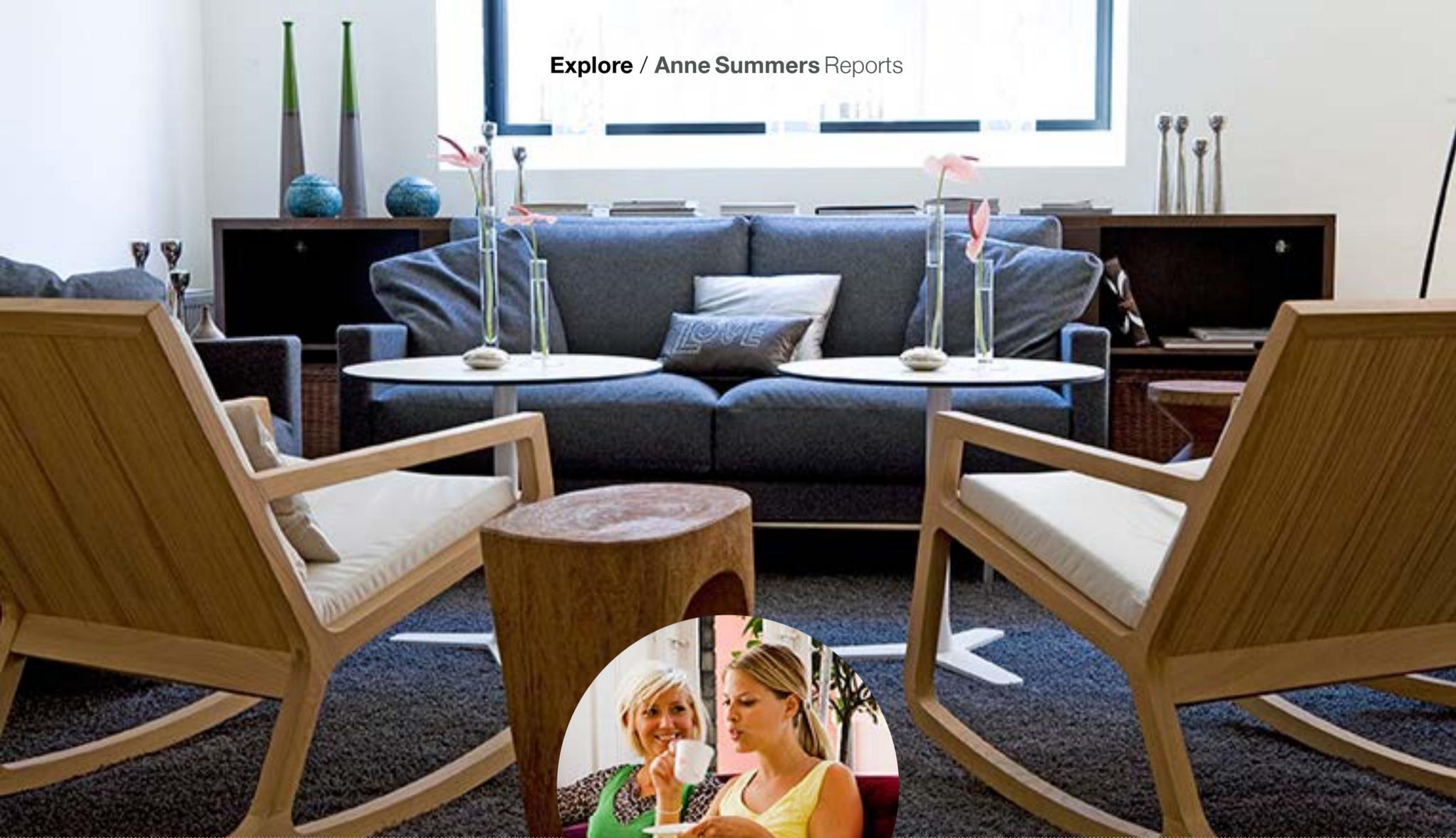
Nors says Danes are not brought up to accept that things can be difficult and the mantra about being the happiest people in the world is a "self-made hell".



Frederiksberg Palace in Frederiksberg Garden.

It's hard being unhappy in a happy society and especially in one as small and tribal as Denmark, where everyone seems to know everyone else or be connected in some way.

The happiness story starts as soon as you touch down at Copenhagen Airport. "Welcome to the world's happiest nation," says a billboard in the arrivals hall. It's actually an advertisement for Carlsberg, happiness being as good a reason as any to have a beer. The refrain is pretty much relentless from then on. "Welcome to Denmark—the happiest place on Earth!" says the official tourism guide, Visit Denmark. There are mugs, cards, T-shirts, plates



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even, crowing about how Danes by various measures are the happiest people in the world.

While Denmark has topped various European surveys of sentiment for decades, it achieved global acclaim in 2012 when the “first ever” global happiness report, the *World Happiness Report*, produced by Columbia University’s Earth Institute for the United Nations, crowned it world champion. The report collated various surveys to produce a country ranking based on how people evaluated their lives—how happy and how satisfied they were. Denmark retained the top spot in the second report, which was released in September 2013, but dropped to fourth in this year’s report, which is just out. (Statistically, it is not particularly significant.)

Defining and measuring happiness has become

an industry in itself. The Earth Institute calls its research part of the “new science of happiness” and identifies six characteristics which, it says, explain 75 per cent of the international differences: GDP per capita, years of healthy life expectancy, social support or having someone to count on in times of trouble, perceptions of corruption, prevalence of generosity based on charitable donations, and freedom to make life choices.

The UN is pushing for countries to include happiness as a way of measuring progress rather than relying on dreary economic data. It’s one reason why there’s so much attention on “little Denmark” (this is how most Danes, with a mixture of pride and humility, refer to their country). The American political scientist and commentator

Francis Fukuyama talks about “getting to Denmark” although more in the sense of an imagined prosperous and happy country and researchers worldwide are trying to understand the so-called “Danish effect”.

Denmark has its very own Happiness Research Institute, an independent think-tank run by Meik Wiking, whose surname is pronounced Viking. Danes have the highest level of trust in the world, says Wiking, both of political institutions and of strangers. His favourite hobby is “spotting the manifestations” of trust.

“The classic one is the kids in prams parked outside the cafés and the shops when their parents are running errands or having coffee,” he told ASR. It’s a wonderful way of showing how we feel that we’re surrounded by people who don’t bear any ill will to each other, he says.

Another manifestation of trust, which would horrify Australians, is that you rarely meet a Dane who resents paying tax. They trust their governments—national and local—to spend their money well on free healthcare, education, generous pensions and infrastructure. Danes have the highest tax burden in the OECD—in 2013 total tax revenue as a percentage of GDP was 48.6 per cent versus an average of 34 (Australia clocks in around 27). By some estimates Danes hand over more than two-thirds of what they earn in various taxes—the top marginal tax rate is 56 per cent, there’s a 25 per cent consumption tax, plus property and capital gains taxes.

IT DOES RAISE THE QUESTION of how people can afford to live, let alone dine at acclaimed new Nordic restaurants or fill their homes with desirable Danish-designed furniture and objects. Most households have two incomes. There’s a high proportion of working mothers thanks to a generous parental leave scheme, guaranteed access to childcare, and working conditions that are so

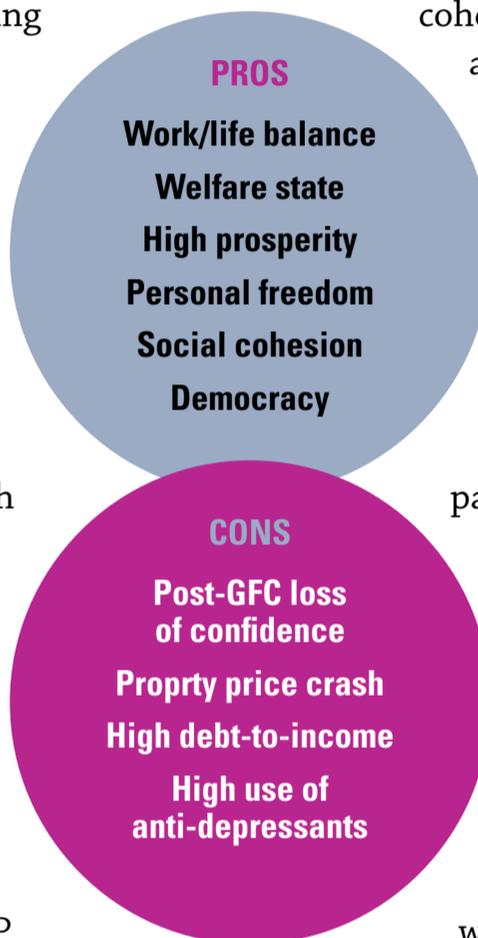
flexible meetings are rarely held after 3 p.m. so that one or the other parent can collect the kids from school. Bosses trust their workers to get a job done rather than monitor how much time they spend in the office.

Wiking’s institute rates that work/life balance as crucial to Danish happiness. It also identifies the security that comes from living in a welfare state, high levels of prosperity (per capita income is above the OECD average), personal freedom, social cohesion (there’s lot of volunteers), and a well-functioning democracy. Plus, if you live in Copenhagen, as do almost a quarter of Denmark’s 5.6 million people, you enjoy the benefits of a city that feels like it’s been designed for people, not cars, and is run by a progressive council which, among other things, has set 2015 as a deadline to create enough new city parks to ensure that everyone can walk to a park or the beach in less than 15 minutes.

If it all sounds too perfect (we’ll mention the weather later), that’s right—and it isn’t. British writer Michael Booth had lived in Denmark on and off for years and was bemused that the Danes he interacted with daily seemed to be travelling on something other than what he calls “the Danish happiness bandwagon”. Having set out to understand his fellow adopted countrymen in his book *The Almost Nearly Perfect People: Behind the myth of the Scandinavian Utopia*, Booth also investigated Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland, all of which score highly in the happiness stakes.

Booth’s trite answer to the question of why Danes are so happy is: “They’re good looking, they’re rich and they don’t work very much.” (Two of which he backs up with OECD stats.)

But he thinks they’re heading for a fall. Gallup polls show dramatic drops in the number of Danes who believe they are “thriving” since the global financial crisis when unemployment rose, property





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prices crashed and the gap between rich and poor widened. “Money makes you happy after all,” says Booth, “the Danes were stinking rich and now they’re not so much.”

Two of his favourite stats are IMF estimates that Danish households have the highest ratio of debt-to-income in the Western world and that Danes are Europe’s second highest consumers of antidepressants—behind Iceland.

BOOTH’S BOOK HAS SOLD WELL in the UK, Canada, US and Sweden. There are editions in Danish, Finnish and Norwegian and it’s being translated into Chinese, Polish, Korean, Taiwanese and Japanese. So he’s having a good ride on the happiness bandwagon.

But Booth is increasingly convinced happiness surveys are “spurious and unscientific”, encouraging a self-satisfaction and contentedness that make Danes feel removed and immune from the world’s problems.

Nors, too, is sceptical. “Danes are extremely good at checking out what the trend is and what we are supposed to express right now. We know that it’s a successful thing to say that we are happy but we still kill ourselves during the winter.”

Experiencing Copenhagen in January, after all the Christmas cheer has blown away, it’s hard to believe that anyone could be even moderately happy, let alone world champions. The sun rises about 8.30 a.m. and sets about 4 p.m. and in between it’s fifty shades of grey, heavy clouds—torture in anyone’s language.

This January was better than January 2014, when there were 17 hours of sunshine in the whole month.

Researchers from the University of Copenhagen estimate that more than 15 per cent of Copenhageners suffer from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), which is basically winter depression. As well as anti-depressants, Danes consume vitamin D in bulk and many start their day in front of lamps that give off a bright light, which mimics natural outdoor light and supposedly restores circadian rhythms.

There's a massive effort to create a cosy atmosphere at home. The light timbers, white walls, superior light fittings and candles that are synonymous with Danish style derive from this desire to make the home a haven during the dark months.

When I suggested to chef and restaurateur Bo Bech that I thought Danes were much less materialistic than Australians, he laughed. "I actually think that we are some of the most materialistic people in the world in terms of how much we spend on our apartments," he told ASR. "So we are creating a comfort zone at home and then we can't afford to go out." He thinks this has made his fellow countrymen insular although he sees a big change in the younger generation.

The Danes have a word for that comfort zone: *hygge*. Pronounced *hooga*, it roughly translates to cosiness but it's more encompassing. "In essence, *hygge* means creating a warm atmosphere and enjoying the good things in life with good people," says Visit Denmark. "The warm glow of candlelight is *hygge*. Friends and family, that's *hygge* too. Danish winters are long and dark and so the Danes fight the darkness with their best weapon: *hygge*."

Booth writes that he's come to detest *hygge*. He describes it as a "tyrannical, relentless drive towards middle-ground consensus" and cites a British anthropologist who says it's "normative to the point of coercive."

For Nors, *hygge*, at its best, is a lovely side of Danish life but otherwise "it's a scary thing", a way of controlling social structures and interactions.

"You can't say anything unpleasant, you can't say you're sad or upset, you can't start crying and you don't bring anything that smells like a conflict to the table," she says. She's saved a newspaper report of a murder where they ask the man why he murdered his female companion. "He said, 'Well we were just sitting on the couch and we were *hygging* and then suddenly I killed her,' so what the fuck happened from being cosy to actually strangling her? There must be something underneath that *hygge* that wasn't right."

While Nors gets inspiration for her dark, short stories from the contradictions between Danes' proclaimed happiness and the reality she sees, Wiking's institute writes reports about "happiness as a brand". The former bureaucrat, who loves his job so much he gives me an interview while he's packing for a trip to Mexico, is probably that brand's best advertisement.

"I really, really enjoy my work," he says. "For me, it's part of being joyful to have meaningful work."

Is he worried about the wheels falling off the happiness bandwagon if Denmark drops in the world rankings? "I'm sure we'll be doing fine. It will only be covered here in the press if we don't get first place—we've grown accustomed to being first place." ❖

See also Engaging with jihadists, page 7.



b **Karate Chop & Minna Needs Rehearsal Space**
Dorthe Nors, trans. Martin Aitken, Misha Hoekstra. Faber Factory, Pushkin, London, 2015.

b **The Almost Nearly Perfect People: Behind the myth of the Scandinavian Utopia**
Michael Booth, Vintage, London, 2014.