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Jensen, Boris Brorman; Iversen, John

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HOW I MET THE PRESIDENT OF INATSIARTUT

BY BORIS BRORMAN JENSEN

“Those who have dared venture out in the flooded streets of Nuuk smile to each other indulgently.”



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN IVERSEN, AARCH

NUUK: MONDAY, FEBRUARY 13TH, 2012

My planned day of sightseeing with a local American guide around Nuuk has been cancelled because of bad weather. You don't have to be in Greenland for very long to realize that all activities depend on the weather. It is very unpredictable, and things happen only if they are possible. This is probably why Greenlanders have learned to say "perhaps" (*Immaqa*). "I will come round and pick you up Monday morning and give you a tour of Nuuk, *immaqa*." Maybe that is the reason why Greenlanders are often accused of being fatalistic. This may to some extent be true, but anyone who mistakes a level-headed attitude to life with resignation or a lack of confidence in their own ability to act should take a trip to Greenland with "Immaqa Airlines," in order to put their prejudices to the test. I can understand the pragmatic attitude to life you have to adopt here, but my nervous system tells me that I have difficulties accepting that the forces of nature continually overrule my plans. Being stranded on a deserted island or being lost in the middle of the Greenland ice sheet would be easier to accept. But this is the capital of Greenland, and right next to the hotel you can buy authentic Thai food as well as a freshly brewed cafe latte. Here, culture ought to rule supreme, but it does so only on the surface. Even in the center of the largest town of Greenland, nature always has a strong presence. It is always right there in your face, even when the weather is fine. People here don't tend to complain a lot about the weather. The weather is a shared condition of life.

“ *Back home in Denmark, all remaining nature is threatened and has been placed under well-ordered systems of management. Here the situation is still the exact opposite.* ”

The changing weather is, nevertheless, frustrating. Yesterday it was an absolutely perfect winter’s day. It was snowing, there was next to no wind, and the temperature was minus ten degrees Celsius. Nuuk was wrapped in a thick white powdery blanket of snow that connected the spaces between the houses, and which made the colored buildings stand out in a friendly warm light. But during the night, the direction of the wind changed and the temperature increased by almost fifteen degrees to well above freezing. The attractive snowfall was transformed into heavy rain early in the morning, and the streets were completely flooded. Below the rivers of melt water there is an invisible layer of ice, which makes it very risky to move around on foot. The roadside ditches are full, and it is impossible to see where the pavement ends and where the meters deep canals begin. There is about twenty to thirty centimeters of water right outside the hotel’s main entrance—a bit more than my new polar boots can handle. The hotel receptionist apologizes with a smile and talks about the foehn winds. He has got more than enough on his hands. Water is gushing out of the light fittings in the back corridor. Outside, a guy from the hotel is struggling to manage Euro-pallets that provide a kind of gangway leading from the roadway to the hotel. On the steps of the supermarket next door, a group of men are drinking beer. They have clearly been at it for quite some time, and they seem to be welcoming the situation as a distraction. I am only familiar with foehn winds from my holidays in Switzerland, and it is completely unreal to feel the warm wind coming from the ice sheet in the middle of an Arctic winter. It is a bit like

experiencing the northern lights. I have a vague understanding of the phenomenon from physics lessons at school, but it has never been embedded in my body as an undisputed experience. It hits you with the full power of surprise every time, just like icebergs, which to me never cease to hold a terrifying beauty. Back home in Denmark, all remaining nature is threatened and has been placed under well-ordered systems of management. Here the situation is still the exact opposite.

It is my last day in Nuuk, and I feel the need for something to happen. The Hotel cable-television system must be affected by the invading masses of water, as it shows nothing but porn movies—no local news, no weather forecasts, no American series, not even CNN. I decide to defy the weather and head down to the tourist office. I would like to see Inatsisartut (the parliament of Greenland) from inside, and I will try to book a guided tour. Those who have dared venture out in the flooded streets of Nuuk smile to each other indulgently. This rainy Monday morning, the tourist office is far from busy. The desk is unmanned, but a man sits at a desk in front of a poster depicting tupilaks while looking at a computer monitor. From the corner of my eye I can see that he is on Facebook. I have brought my camera with me in a bag slung across my shoulder, and I feel an urge to capture the whole scene: a young man surrounded by historic artifacts, but his whole attention directed at a new social reality. My own self-awareness prevents me from taking photos. I am trying to retain my self-esteem by being a discreet tourist. My camera rests in a regular bag, and I am most at ease looking like any man you might encounter on the street, so I make

do with inscribing the scene in my mind: the nostalgic and commercial staging of the culture of the past by the tourism industry as a photogenic backdrop for the young Greenlander who is sucked into cyberspace. Some day, I will probably have to buy a tupilak, but I feel just like that man at the desk. In Greenland it is equally exciting, if not more, to look forward towards the future.

After a while, the man looks away from the monitor, catches my eye, and carefully asks me if he can be of any assistance. He turns out to be both friendly and helpful, and he informs me that there is a free, guided tour of the parliament every day at 14:00. He also recommends that I spend some of the waiting time at the National Museum, which is just a little further down the road. They have real mummies; Qjvitoq, a Danish romance film featuring Poul Reichhardt on DVD (do not be mistaken, it IS actually interesting); and plenty of literature on life in Greenland today.

When I leave, I am content. I have a new plan for the day, and I fight my way to the National Museum through the town’s chaos of melt water. The museum turns out to be closed every Monday. The remaining days of the week the museum does not open until 13:00, so the suggestion from the man at the tourist office would in any case have been impossible to realize. I decide to double-check his information directly at the reception desk in the entrance to Inatsisartut. Here the receptionist tells me that there is a tour every day at 13:00. Obviously, tourist offers are not completely synchronized in Nuuk. When I come back a few hours later, the tour is cancelled because the guide has taken ill in the

meantime. I must have been unable to hide my complete disillusionment, for the receptionist resolutely picks up the phone and speaks a few words in Greenlandic. Shortly after, an employee emerges from a side door to accompany me around the building. He is not a guide, and he does not speak Danish very well, and hardly any English at all, so we communicate using few words and gestures. I have the parliamentary hall all to myself, and I take my time photographing the room.

On the way, my taciturn companion points out various paintings on the walls without providing further comments, and he shows me something that might be a official meeting room. A little later, we stop by a somewhat larger office. The secretary in the front office says something in Greenlandic and an older gentleman comes forward to meet me. He smiles and gives me a very solid handshake. It turns out to be the president of the parliament, Josef Motzfeldt. Cakes and coffee have just been placed on the table, and he asks me to take a seat. The meeting with the president of the Inatsisartut takes place without much ado, and I only gradually realize the rather unusual nature of the situation. A chain of cancellations, coincidence and incorrect information has led me straight into the arms of Tuusi, one of Greenland’s most charismatic national father figures. On the walls are pictures of Motzfeldt in company with the world’s leading politicians, including the Danish monarch, who, back

home in Denmark, is invariably addressed as “Your Royal Highness.” In Greenland, Tuusi is just Tuusi. Knowledgeable, friendly and very interested in learning what I am doing in Greenland. I tell him about the Venice exhibition and the project I am involved in. “Why do architects find it so difficult to understand the landscape of Greenland?” he asks me. I promise to think about it and come up with an answer if I can find one. In the course of the conversation he rises a couple of times to print out some pages about the journeys of Erik the Red and the medieval history of Greenland that he thinks I ought to read. It occurs to me that the catalog for the exhibition might be designed as a travel narrative. A narrative about how Greenland has transformed my understanding of landscapes, towns, networks and social spaces, about a world outside the realm of urban planning.

We drink coffee and eat cake for an hour while we talk more about the current situation of Greenland, about the relationship with Denmark and about the time Motzfeldt was a grammar school student in my hometown Aarhus. “You must come by and visit me in my home town next time you are in Greenland. You really have to experience the southern part of the country, which is very different from Nuuk,” he says when I am leaving. Being invited to drink coffee with a president twice in less than one hour is a bit overwhelming. The secretary offers to follow me back to the reception. While we are walking down the

corridor she draws me into a room with photos of various politicians on the walls. “Tuusi is an amazing human being, don’t you think?” she asks in a subdued voice. “Well, yes I do!” Imagine if it were possible to write the openness he personifies into the future constitution of Greenland.

Back at the hotel I remember a text by Finn Lynge, another national father figure of Greenland. It was published as part of an anthology on the topic “Magt og demokrati i Grønland” (Power and Democracy in Greenland), but it can also be found at Naalakkersuisut’s web site (the Greenlandic government). Kunuk – op gennem tiden (Kunuk – Through Time) is the title, and it starts like this: “A deep distaste for all kinds of chieftainship. Leading comrades through the power of the example. Taking care of the lowest in this society of equals, and having the best of intentions on their behalf.”¹

I sincerely hope they will succeed.

¹ http://www.nanoq.gl/emner/landsstyre/selvstyre/selvstyrekommissionen/debat/kommissionens_debatoplaeg/kunuk_-_op_gennem_tiden_finn_lynge.aspx

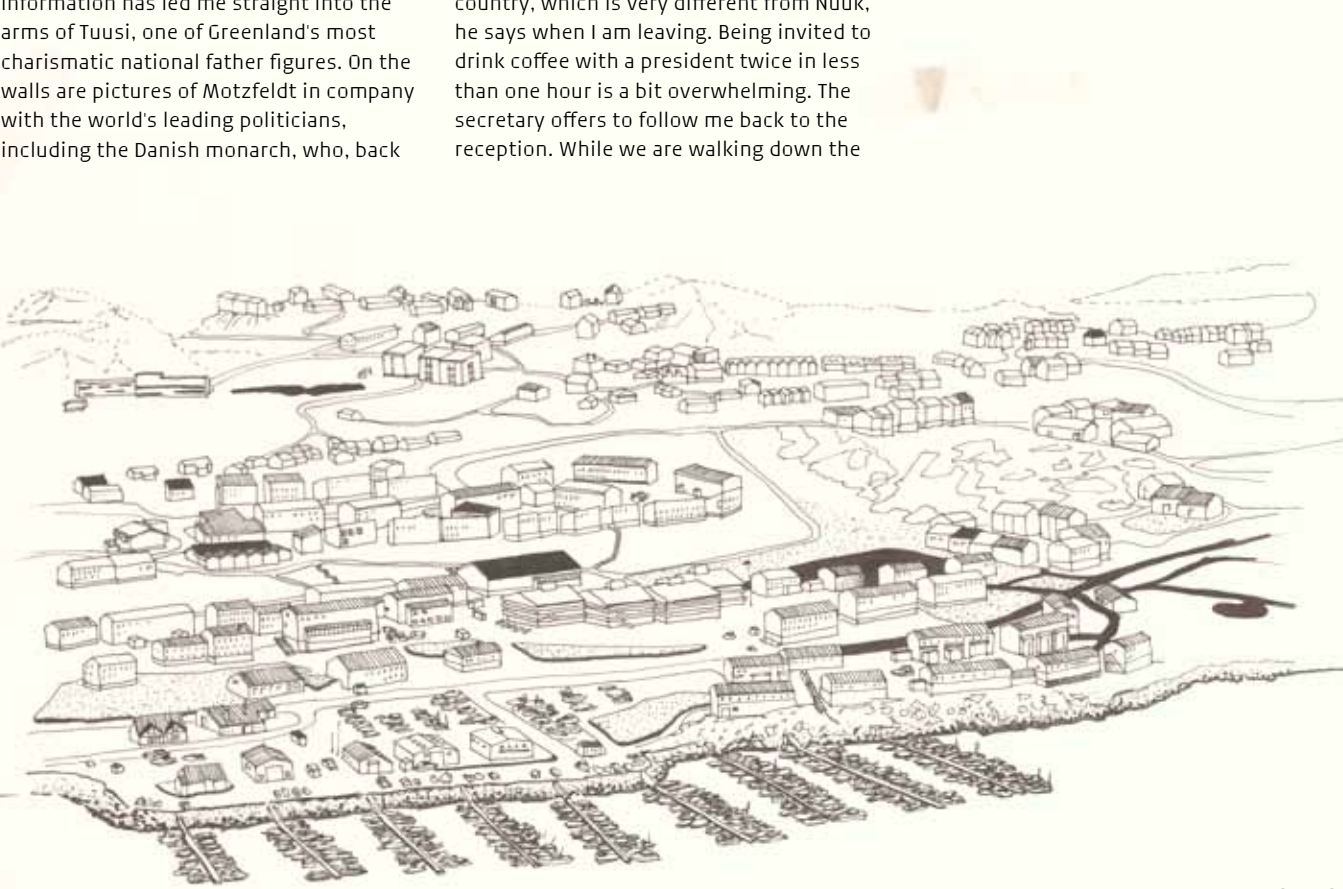


ILLUSTRATION BY MATEJA VRLIC (STUDENT AT AARHUS SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, AAA)