

The Heart shaped

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SUMMARY

The Heart shaped depicts the life of four elderly people in Uummannaq, north western Greenland. Through the hunting culture and the old traditions tied to it, nature permeate every aspect of their lives. In the midst of this magnificent landscape the names of the deceased are passed on across time and families. An audio ethnographic montage about ageing, loss and belonging.

The Heart-shaped

by Nanna Hauge Kristensen with
support from the EGV Foundation



A brief context

Kalaallit Nunaat is the Inuit word for Greenland. This vast country is three-quarters covered in swathes of ice. It's population of only 56,370 makes it the least densely populated country in the world.

Greenland is a self-governing entity, but part of the Kingdom of Denmark. Their colonial history stretches back more than three hundred years. In the 1960s, Danish politicians initiated a process aiming to make Greenland more Danish. As a result, villages were shut down, people were forcibly relocated to the cities, and Danish became the dominant language in schools and public institutions.

The elderly people, whose voices you will listen to, grew up in that context. Most speak Danish, but not as their native tongue. In my meetings with them, I have reflected on what it means that I am Danish. The colonial history is not directly present in the montage. Yet it is an inherent aspect of the lives and encounters represented.

Prologue

00.01: 89, 80, 53, 25, 64

00.20: Bingo.

00.23: 15, 28, 34, 35, 70, 75

00.30: 70, 75?

00.31: 70, 75, -2- 76, 85, 90

00.35: 2, 16, 19, 22, 28, 29, 33, 36, 85, 90.

00.47: Narrator:

We're in Uummannaq's assembly hall.

A small red wooden building in the middle of town.

The elderly association meets here on Thursdays.

There are white tablecloths on the tables, and the song folders are in place.

01.03: *Choir*

01.24: *Uummannaq means "the heart-shaped", named after a mountain with two peaks towering over the scene. The town is placed on a small island on the western coast of Greenland. Approx. 460 km north of the arctic circle.*

01.47: *I'm in Uummannaq because I want to know more about the everyday life of the elderly. What happens when loved ones move or pass away?*

What happens when the body changes? And you can no longer move around like you used to? What is it like to grow older here, where nature is such a big and constantly present part of life?

Scene 1

- 02.34: Karen: I don't clean.
N: Why don't you clean?
K: I'm lazy. I'm more interested in crafts than... no one ever comes here. Only from Denmark.
N: Those are the only guests?
K: Look, now I can't find my other slipper ... Here it is.
- 02.53: Na: *The furnace is humming in Karen's red house on one of the outermost cliffs by the Uummannaq fjord.*
- 03.00: N: Have you always been lazy?
K: When the husband lived ... we had two children, and I was always cleaning up.
But I no longer want to.
- 03.10: Na: *Karen is 72 and moves quickly between the kitchen and the living room.*
- 03.15: K: Look, my daughter's trousers... celebration trousers, skin. She's a bit of a fatty here.
N: And that's your husband?
K: That's my handsome husband right there.
N: He's very handsome.
K: He's very handsome. He's like... still waters, I'm like the wind. He's a quiet man.
N: You were the wind, and he was silence?
K: He was still waters, and I'm like the wind. Like... different. We're a good match.
That's why no one can replace him.
- 03.51: Na: *It's been 10 years since Karen's husband passed.*
- 03.54: K: I have only seen him in dreams, three times... But I can hear his voice.
The most beautiful person you'll find on this damn island.
He also taught me how to treat the hides. He is the one who taught me how to

scrape them.

04.13: Na: *Karen's sewing table is full of sealskins.*

04.15: K: Sealskins all over. Sealskins and sealskins and sealskins and sealskins.

04.20: Na: *She is sewing a sealskin cap.*

04.23: K: Look! That's what I wanted to show you. Look! I think it's drop dead gorgeous.

Sewing

04.35: K: In and out. In.

K: It needs sewing.

04.47: N: But can you tell me, Karen... You have two children and how many grandchildren?
Can you tell me about your family?

K: Sure. So, my husband died of cancer. I took care of him in this house. He didn't want to go to the hospital.

N: You took care of your husband here in the living room?

K: I took care of my husband in that bed. He was lying there sleeping. He took medication, but he quickly became very ill.

In the end, right during Christmas, at midnight the day before Christmas Eve, I called the nurse:

"Peter, he's not going to make it any longer."

05.34: Outside, white. And two stars. It was special. The Christmas ornaments were in place. Lights and battery-powered... lots of tiny lamps and Christmas stars on the windows. Decorated to the hilt. And then we had the white table-cloth and a smell of... round of reindeer that had been given to me by my grandchild. Him, my husband, and I were going to eat it. Maybe I would just wet his lips with the gravy.

Then I called the nurse: "Peter, he's not going to make it". His name is Peter. He needs morphine or something to sleep. Then he opened his eyes...
06.20: His eyes started to... when he opened them that way... it's like they were filled with sea water.
He looks like a seal. He loves them, the seals.
The boy held his hand when he died.
He didn't want to go to the hospital.
He died at home.
06.49: Now, I'll show you my confirmation suit.

Scene 2

06.57: *Footsteps on the ice*

07.12: Nanna:
How do you know the ice is safe?

07.16: Ole: Well, I'm walking on it. *Laughter.*
If the ice goes bad, you'll see it begin to get wet on the top.

07.30: Na: *Ole is using two skiing poles for support.*

O: We're walking...

Na: *I have met him several times by the same bench at Uummannaq's church.*

O: ...on a day trip...

Na: *With dried fish in his bag.*

O: ... so we can catch some cod for eating.

Na: *Now he has invited me to go fishing.*

07.50: N: How... What do you do during the day?

O: Nothing. I play cards. We have a small gambling club.

I don't do much else. I am an early retiree.

I have a bad back, so...

08.16: N: How often do you go fishing, Ole?

O: Huh?

N: How often do you go fishing?

O: This is my third time this year. Not that often, because it's hard to go out there.

For me anyway.

08.38: O: And now the sun is coming out. That's nice.

N: Yes. Can you describe the landscape we're in?

O: We're about... 100 meters from... from the Uummannaq island, heading south. We can't see a whole lot, because it's ... it's foggy, which we call Naternaq. But the sun is warm, so we'll get to see some scenery around us during the day.

N: Yes, it's completely white.

09.29: O: Yeah.

09.31: Na: *The Uummannaq fjord is covered in ice during the winter season.
There's a handful of figures fishing.*

09.38: O: I've been speaking so much in Danish that I might soon forget the Greenlandic.

Man fishing: Sorry, I don't understand.

09.47: O: We have a small hole over here that we can use.

Ole breaks the ice with a tuc (stick)

10.00: N: How deep is it here?

O: It's maybe around 130-140 meters.

It'll be interesting to see what we can do today. You can try fishing as well.

N: I'd like that.

O: Yeah.

10.25: Na: *We are sitting on a fish box on the ice.*

The Uummannaq island has come into view, and the sun has broken through over the white mountains.

10.36: N: So, what are you doing right now, Ole?

O: I fish, and once in a while I trawl.

Since I was nine, I've been fishing. And riding a dog sled.

That's the way to live they say.

11.03 N: But when you're out here for seven hours, what... what happens inside you?

O: Slowly, you get peace of mind.

That's how it is. You relax. You are grounded when you are in nature, instead of scurrying around somewhere.

Yes. It gives you the urge to live a little longer. Instead of surrendering to death.

N: Instead of surrendering to death?

O: Yes.

Dogs barking

12.06 N: Where did you live as a child here?

O: I grew up in the house I live in now.

And I'm 22 steps from the nursing home in case that's where I end up.

N: It's very practical.

O: Yes.

Laughter

O: I was sailing Sanatit up here, almost eight years. Then I moved down to Julianehåb and had an address there for 16 years.
Then I moved back again because I'm homesick. You cannot do without Uummannaq.

13.00: O: As for my offspring, I have two daughters.
N: Where do they live?
O: Well, they live in the south.
N: Then how do you keep in touch with them?
O: They've invented this small telephone that you can use to make calls.
N: That's the one you use?

Laughter

O: Yes.

13.28: N: Do you ever miss having them here, closer?
O: Yes, of course you miss them. But Uummannaq, you can't do without it.
O: Ah! Here it comes...

Ole pulls the line onto the ice

14.00: O: It's a nice cod of 3.5 kg.

Scene 3

Computer games

14.12: Johannes:
Haha. You never know where it will end. Now I need a strong one.
There it was.

- 14.31: Na: *Johannes' room is in the basement of Uummannaq's nursing home. The desk is in front of the window, so he can look out at the church and the fjord behind it.*
- 14.43: J: This one...
Mm. Now I have that one.
Shit. *Laughter.*
- 15.01: J: I need to stretch, because I've been sitting too much.
N: Yes.
- 15.06: Na: *Even though Johannes is only 67, he's been living at the nursing home for seven years.*
- 15.11: J: When I dream about running up the mountains, and I wake up like "what the heck am I doing here?", because I can't do what I was just dreaming about... That's the most depressing thing.
- 15.34: Na: *Like Ole, Johannes is plagued by back pain.*
- 15.38: J: Like I once said, we were born at the wrong time, when everything was manual work.
The most extreme place I've worked at is Maarmorilik. It's also called Engeli Qurnertoq in Greenlandic.
- 16.02: Na: *Maarmorilik, or "The Black Angel", was a marble quarry and later an ore mine north of Uummannaq.*
- 16.09: J: I drove trains into the mine and transported the ore to where it had to be crushed.
Ten hours every day, all week.
N: No days off?
J: No. You needed two people to do the job. Someone to fill the wagons, someone to drive back and forth.

We had such big shovels with long handles. You can't pour too much on before you hit ten kilos. It is lead ore.

N: And the stretch you drove, how long is it?

J: About three km towards the ice sheet. It's dark in there. And there is permafrost in there, so there's frost all the way.

17.13: Na: *Only during his lunch break did Johannes come out into the light.*

17.17: J: There is a platform right in front of the hole where we can go out to get some sun and eat.

Then we make paper airplanes. Out from 600 meters.

N: And you send them off?

J: Yes. Who can get the furthest.

One guy, he made this paper airplane, and it just became invisible.

Laughter.

Yes, it was fun back then.

Scene 4

17.54: Karen:

Well, I'm doing the dishes. Yes. I have lost my mind.

Lots of soap, because it's been sitting there... five days, I've counted.

This is really nice. Lovely.

Now we have to start on this damn skin.

18.19: Na: *Karen's grandchild has given her a sealskin.*

18.22: N: So, the skin hangs from a hook in the ceiling.

K: Yes.

N: What have you done to it so far?

K: Nothing. It's just thawed. Now I'll get the tub to put it in.

And all my ulues there.

18.37: Na: *She collects her knives, ulues.*

18.42: K: The first ulu was given to me by my husband, he made it for me.

Look. That's the very first one. It's almost completely worn down. It has to be dull because I'll use it that way after I wash it.

And the soapy water is for when I finish the skin. It needs washing as well.

And then I need a bunch of nice gloves. They're called like... millionaire's gloves.

For the fat.

19.26: K: Now I start to remove the blubber from the sealskin.

19.31: Na: *The sealskin is resting on a wooden board, while Karen uses the ulu to scrape the red-marbled blubber into a tub.*

19.39: N: What's your technique, can you describe what you're doing?

K: Look! The blubber is cut from the skin without creating holes. You easily make holes, but a seasoned old wife like me, I've learned it.

19.58: K: The Ulu is the Greenlandic woman's tool for scraping off her sealskin. You can also eat... its skin. I cook it. Look, now it's... breath skin. You also eat it.
Mm, tastes salty.

20.22: N: How do you say seal in Greenlandic?

K: "Puisi". Phhh. When it breathes, it goes like: "Phhh". Puisi. Phhh. Puis. Breath animal. They are warm-blooded, those seals.

20.39: K: Sometimes I manage three in one day. Back then I was much more skilled, and

back then the husband helped me sharpen the ulus. To make them sharp.

Karen sharpens the ulus

20.56: K: As I stand here thinking of my husband, I get all his strength. Then I become very strong. He lends his powers to me. My dearest husband.
But I have left him.

21.14: K: We didn't argue or anything. I just left.

21.18: Na: *Karen traveled to Denmark. She left a note on the dining table with a single word.*

21.25: K: Bye.

N: You just wrote bye, and then you left?

K: "Bye", it says. I'm done with people. Now, I want to live peacefully, all by myself, without being disturbed by the whimsies of others. Just me.

Two days, then I wanted to go home. Two days in Denmark.

It was dark, October. The trees crying every night. Ooh. And my sister's poor dog... I don't like having dogs inside the house.

I missed the dirty little kitchen, I missed my sealskins. And I missed him. I did. I still miss him. But I'll knock him over the head the next time I see him.

22.21: K: Now I have enough blubber.

N: That was the tail that came off?

K: Yes. The blubber of the tail came out.

All this needs to soak, and then I'll do it one more time.

Scene 5

Footsteps in the snow

- 22.54 N: The snow is falling. And the mountains are covered by a layer of clouds towards the middle. They go right through the clouds.
- 23.11: Na: *In the early mornings I have seen an elderly man walking around on the ice with his stick.*
- 23.17: N: And the dogs are chained out on the ice.
- 23.20: Na: *He's the only one in town who still wears pants of polar bear fur. Now we're sitting in his living room, which is full of walrus teeth and diplomas.*
- Pavia is speaking in Greenlandic.*
- 23.41: Na: *Pavia is the oldest and best hunter in town.*
- 23.45: Annika:
Yes, his name is Pavia Nielsen. Born and raised in Qaarsut. Born in 1936.
P: July 28th.
A: July 28th, yes.
N: And can you tell me who you are?
A: Yes, my name is Annika and I'm Pavia's granddaughter.
- 24.04: Na: *On the couch, Pavia's wife is lying with an iPad.*
- 24.12: N: Are you getting news about the baby?
A: Maybe, yes. *Laughter.*
- 24.15: Na: *A great-grandchild is about to be born in Ilulissat, while Pavia talks about how he started as a hunter.*

Pavia is speaking. Translation from Greenlandic to Danish follows.

- 24.31: A: It was a tradition in their time that fathers teach their children when they turn 12.
- 24.52: A: He talks about how he really liked listening to hunters who had come home after a day's catch and talked about their experiences on the trip. It was the best university in the world.
- Laughter.*
- A: Yes.
- 25.10: N: It makes a lot of sense.
- 24.23: A: They are five siblings who were hunters. Pavia and his four brothers. And his father always said, before anyone was talking about sustainability, uh... You shouldn't catch more than you can eat.
- 25.46: N: Can he tell us some more about how he's experienced the changes of nature or the landscape during his lifetime?
- 26.23: A: He's saying that the climate is changing. Bad weather and storms are much stronger today, and they can last up to... several days. That's a long time.
- 26.45: A: Fishermen and hunters, even if they have big boats, they have to stay home when there's a storm. Even though they want to go fishing, their whole profession is a bit stuck. It's not something you can control, and the catch really depends on it a lot – on the weather and climate that is.
- 27.10: N: Can he try to describe what he likes about being a hunter?
- 27.24: A: When he can take off with his catch. Meaning, when he's caught something and he can bring it home with him.

- 27.34: A: When you treat your dogs right and take good care of them, they bring you a lot of joy. And he's had strong dogs that could carry a lot when he was on a catch. Sometimes he would bring home more than ten seals that the dogs would carry on the dog sled. The dogs are quick learners, and they never forget.
- 28.16: A: Yes, he is really, really happy when he's out and the weather is good. Deep down inside. And he can sometimes feel, when he's out on the dog sled or sailing with his boat, that he starts to sing, singing hymns.

Interlude

- 28.40: *Dog sled*
- 28.52: Johannes:
Sila, the weather...
- 28.55: Na: *The term for weather is also the term for universe, consciousness, and balance.*
- 29.02: J: Yes, that's the universe, Silarsuaq.
- 29.10: *Choir*
- 29.44 Na: *For Easter, the choir sings on the steps in front of the church. The residents of Uumnannaq are in a semi-circle listening, while the song is flowing out over the ice fjord.*

Scene 6

Footsteps on icy stairs. A door opens.

30.32 Nanna: Hello.

Ole: Ah.

N: Howdy, Ole.

O: Good morning. Ah.

Hi! Come on in.

N: You're in bed?

O: Ah.

N: Did you sleep for most of the day?

O: It's the low-pressure nearby weighing on me.

O: I fell down today.

N: Oh, jeez.

31.07 Na: *Ole is living in a small green treehouse behind the church.*

O: Ah. I can't even lift... lift the coffee pot.

Na: It's a single room. The wood-burning stove and the kitchen are just inside the door.

Ole is lying on a couch in the corner. The film "Seven Years in Tibet" is playing on the TV.

31.35: O: It might be something he's dreaming?

N: Yes.

31.46: Na: *A violet curtain is drawn over the window.*

31.51: N: Would you like to dream again, Ole?

O: Yes. When we get the north wind, I sleep a lot.

N: Yes. But you haven't played cards at all the past few days?

O: No. We haven't played because it's the holidays, so they're with their families during Easter, so... I don't call them. They have to call me.

32.31: N: Where did you meet your wife then?

O: Quqortoq. Julianehåb. It was called Julianehåb back then.

The first time I came to Julianehåb was in '72. I was 17 years old.

March plays on tv

33.00: O: Then we came here in... '86, that's when we came here.

But the wife, she only lasted one year. She couldn't handle being up here with everything... during the winter. She never sees the sun in the winter. She's not used to that. So, she left the following year.

N: Did you consider going with her?

O: No. I'm home now, so why would I leave?

O: But that's what she wanted, for me to come along. But now that I'm home, I'm going to stay here.

O: In '92, our divorce was put in writing. With papers from the Queen and everything.

34.25: N: That's a nicely colored curtain you have there.

O: Huh?

N: That's a nicely colored curtain you have there.

O: Yeah. The sun is shining during the day, and I have nothing to do during the day, so I end up watching TV.

I can't sleep when it's off. I have tonitis in the ears, in both ears.

Isn't that how you say it, tonitis?

N: Tinnitus.

O: Tinnitus, yes. There's a constant ringing.

N: Oh, that's so unpleasant.

O: When I'm on the ice or walking in the mountains, it goes away.
When it's... silence and there are no cars around, the ringing in my ears stops.

Gunfire and bombardment on TV

35.36: O: I don't know why.

Scene 7

35.50: Johannes: Here it is.

Staff: Where is this going?

36.01: Na: *22 steps from Ole's house, inside the nursing home, Easter decorations have been put up.*

Johannes is playing with the employees.

I've seen him in the window several times when I've walked past the nursing home, and now we are yet again sitting at the desk in his room.

36.26: Nanna: But you mentioned that... that you had a friend here?

Johannes: Oh, yes, you bet.

We were so close that we almost couldn't manage without each other's company.

We hardly watched any television because we talked about things that would lift our spirits. That game we just played, he was completely obsessed with it. He really liked playing Triomonos with me.

He was a good friend to everyone. Especially me.

37.19: Na: *Now, Johannes mostly chats with the staff.*

37.23: J: The cleaning staff, yeah, they're like my family. My second family.

As soon as they arrive at seven, the building becomes alive.

Yes, they are my reporters. *Laughter.*

Interlude

Church bells

37.59: Na: *It's the morning of Easter.*

Karen is counting the widows at the church.

38.07: Karen: *We're only 16 widows at church today.*

38.17: Na: *On the ice, there's a dog sled race.*

38.40: Na: *And in the sports hall, the senior team is playing a football cup tournament.*

Many team members also attend bingo and singing at the elderly association.

Voice over the speakers and applause

39.03: Na: *Karen wins the trophy for best fighter.*

Scene 8

Fish is filleted

39.14: Ole: *I just need to take the skin off... off the fish.*

39.29: Na: *We are standing at a hole far out on the ice.*

39.33: Endelik: *It is a pity that there is no polar cod.*

39.36: Na: *Ole has invited me to go longline fishing with the fisherman Endelik.*

- 39.41: N: Can you ask if there's a reason why this particular place is his spot?
O: No.
N: That doesn't make sense?
- 39.50: E: I have cut some bait
Endelik lowers the sheet and the line into the water.
- 40.01: O: Now, 500 hooks will go down.
- 40.24: O: Longline is something they use for fishing down to 600 meters. It should stay there over-night, ideally.
N: And down there in the deep-sea, do you catch different kinds of fish?
O: Yes, it's halibut and sole, and we've also caught rays here.
- 40.12: E: It's a little too short.
O: It's great to get away from home.
E: Yes.
- 41.10: N: Oh, what's that?
O: The halibut, still squirming.
N: It's a lively box.
O: Yes. It must be the nerves trying to settle down.

41.27: O: Isn't it great being out here? Can you hear it?
Silence is essential here in Greenland. No one is hassling you out here,
no need to tell the time, we have the sun.
It's probably... ten, half past nine.
N: I think it's... almost half past twelve.
O: Eleven, then.
O: Half... Yes.
N: Who's closest?
O: You.
Laughter
N: You were far off, Ole.
O: Yeah.

42.28: N: Now the white birds are back, they were just here.
O: I can hear them.

42.40: O: I have the cig itch.
N: You're sick?
O: The cigarette itch. N:
Oh.

Ole lights a cigarette

42.58: O: In the winter, you can smell the cold here. It's great.
You have to experience it to know what I'm talking about.
N: It makes sense to me.

Ole coughs

43.29: N: You told me that thing about northern lights earlier. Can you tell me again? O: As children, we were really scared of the northern lights. So, we went home early in the evening, when the weather was clear for the northern lights, because that's the dead playing football into the air.

N: You didn't want to stay for the game?

O: No, no.

Oh, there's my uncle kicking a ball up there.

Laughter

44.18: O: Us Greenlanders, death is our companion through life. It's a law of nature that we have up here.

Death comes and goes, but the name never dies.

Scene 9

Orgel

44.44: Johannes: The name is reborn with a child.

It's a tradition here that cannot be broken.

For example, I have four names. All of them connected to someone who has died.

It's a form of respect for the deceased and the family.

Choir

45.26: J: If I die, someone might have a daughter named after me.

Then I know she will be loved dearly by my daughter or daughters and grandchildren.

Even if we're from different families, we're still bonded together.

46.11: J: They love you and you love them.
I'm loved everywhere throughout the fjord system. *Laughter.*
You better believe I am.

Scene 10

46.34: Driver: Which grave site?

Nanna: Excuse me?

D: Which grave site?

N: Karen, he's asking which grave site we're going to?

46.41: K: We are going to the farthest cemetery

46.48: N: We're heading out of the town now.

K: Out, far out.

46.53: Na: *Uummanaq's new cemetery is located between a newly constructed football pitch and the landfill.*

Car door opens

47.02: K: What a hassle.

47.09: Na: *White wooden crosses are placed in rows in the white snow.*

47.14: N: Lots of graves here.
K: Lots of them. The whole island, including those from the settlements, when they die in the hospital, they are still buried at home here in Uummanaq.
N: Oh, the snow is deep here.
K: Sorry?
N: The snow is deep.
K: Yes, it is. We need to be careful.
N: Oh, we're sinking to our knees.
Laughter
Footsteps in deep, powdery snow.
K: What a... Now we've been buried as well.
N: We're being buried.
K: All the way down to my husband. We're so crazy.
N: And there are no tracks.
K: It was snowing yesterday.
K: So, now we're at his home. His grave.
K: That's the name. Jakob Aron Peter Thorbjørn Zeeb.
The wife brings a beautiful little flower.

48.12: Na: *Karen has brought a whistle to scare the wild dogs. And a wreath of yellow plastic flowers.*

48.18: K: Now he needs to listen.
Whistling

48.22: Na: *She wraps the wreath around the cross*

48.24: K: Look, the beautiful flower. It also needs to be seen.

My dearest husband. No one compares.

N: But there are other flowers here.

K: Yes, I have... The angel is lying there and...

N: Oh, there's an angel under the snow.

K: Yes. We should head home now.

Bye bye, my harsh lover, my wonderful husband.

K: Adieu.

Footsteps in the snow