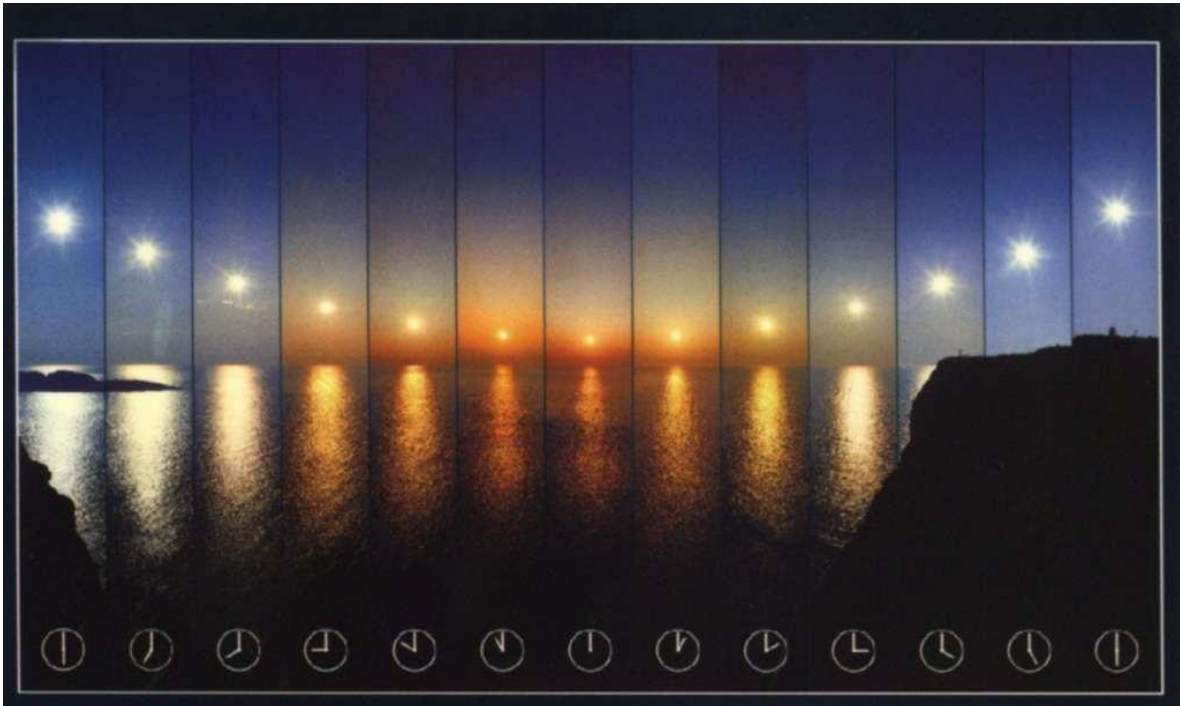


## Chapter 1: Assignment During 1982- North Norway

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### REFERENCES FOR CHAPTER 1



*Midsummernight at North Norway Section1.b, search GOOGLE for your preferred picture!*  
- courtesy of Adriana in Italy- e-mail of 13.04.2014 refers.

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## CHAPTER 1: Assignment during 1982 - North Norway

### 1.a The Prayer Room

I arrived in Bodø during January of 1982. I remember this so vividly, because it was during the reign of Mrs Thatcher in the UK and build up to what was later called the “Falkland War”.

I arrived from London principally to meet my wife’s family and work for a couple of months in the newest hot-bed of engineering circles called: “*offshore engineering*”.

I hope you do not mix this with “*offshore tax-heaven*” as in the first case you have to work for your money but in the latter it is your money which works for you!

The original plan was to save enough start capital to immigrate to the US of A.

It was a dark day and I had to stretch myself to be at the workshop early to meet my new colleagues.

I was picked up for the job due to my qualifications which seemed somewhat “*over-qualified*” for working in a simple shipyard in North Norway. Nevertheless, largely due to a lavish and personal recommendation by my supervisor in London, Professor Al-Jobrani, who was himself an emigrant from Egypt, I was picked up for the job. I was nervous because of the new situation and was worried walking into this “TERRA INCOGNITA, *un-charted territory*”.

I greeted my boss in English and wanted to apologise politely because of my lack of understanding/speaking the Norwegian language:

**Me:** Sir, I am sorry not to be able to speak Norwegian

**Him:** Don’t worry at all, consider it an advantage!

No doubt this conversation made me even more nervous, but the events later showed that there was certain honesty in his statement. I was due to work as an engineer and almost everything was written in English.

After the introduction, I have been assigned to a desk and met other members of staff in the section and slowly but surely started to work. As it was, the workshop started at 07:00 O’clock and finished at 15:00 with a 30 minutes lunch break.

I was thoroughly occupied all the time with quite a lot of formalities and doing little if any work, but by what happened, I was heading for a shock.

The occurrence was like this; once the lunch break came, I was led to a small window-less room which seemed to have been hastily emptied by moving the filing cabinets and other such objects to the adjacent areas.

I didn’t know what was expected of me in that room? but noted a compass over a small table therein. Additionally, there was a small rug also and nothing else!

What was I to do there, but to wait? After a long 5 minutes, I came out and enquired from my boss as to the idea behind this particular room. The conversation went like this:

**Me:** Sir, What is the idea behind this room?

**Him:** This is where you could say your noon prayer.

The letter from your supervisor in London clearly had the words “in the name of Allah, the most merciful” on its letter-head and we concluded that you are a practicing Muslim too!

We understand you should pray five times everyday towards Mecca; once before sun-rise, once at noon, twice again; once before and once after sun-set, and one additional time at night. Unfortunately, here you can not follow the sun-rise and sun-set as the sun does not come out until March!

However, we did what we could for your lunch time prayer; I believe you can pray following the clock and using the compass!

No doubt, I was touched by the consideration. These people have gone to such a great extent to cater for the comfort of a foreigner.

I had to put their worry to rest, by explaining that although I was born from Muslim parents, but my mind-set towards religion is neutral.

I was also puzzled as to how a Muslim can fulfil his five-time daily prayer in this part of the world as the determining parameter of the situation, *the sun*, is not visible for a portion of the year!

### 1.b 24 hours of darkness, seeing the sunshine in London etc.

I was busy working the first day in Bodø and learning about everything. Needless to say, it was difficult to hear so many people speaking in Norwegian (which sounded Chinese to me!).

In the evening, I went home to greet my wife's parents and told them all about my new job at the shipyard.

Next morning, I woke up early and prepared to go to work. It was still dark as I expected it to be. After all it was around 6:00 O'clock and it should have been dark. I came to the shipyard and noted that almost all lights were on. At that moment, the yard was the shiniest part of my life! I got busy with work and lost the pace of time.

Suddenly, around 11:00 O'clock, I noted it was still dark. Heavens! When is the sun going to come out?

The answer to this question proved to be; *never* during that day, or indeed any other day during January.

I have made every effort to accept the new situation but felt the pressure was slowly building within me. That night, I woke up several times and proved to myself that there was no difference between day and night in the North Norway!

Next day, I was very tired. My body seemed to lack energy and looking out of the office window was not refreshing at all. Everywhere seemed to be in darkness and I was starting to become desperate.

Within a week, I became desperate and went to see my boss. The conversation went like this:

**Me:** Sir, I am afraid I have made a mistake. Here, I feel that I am working day and night and every night. If things continue like this, I will go crazy!

**Him:** I am sorry to hear this. I assumed you knew enough geography to understand how is the situation here, but don't worry you get back all the lost sun-hours during the summer period!

Apparently, during the summer, one gets almost 24 hours of sunshine and could experience what is called a well and truly "mid-night sun" when the sun disappears for a couple of minutes around 12:00 O'clock at night and re-appears before you know it.

The fact that one could expect a mid-night sun in the summer would not help me then.

I was starting to be terribly agonised. Within two days, I felt compelled to see my boss again and started the same conversation one more time:

**Me:** Sir, I appreciate the upcoming mid-summer night, but I am afraid, it is not soon enough for me and I am considering quitting

**Him:** I am sorry to hear this, because our client is impressed with your technical know-how, remember if you quit your first job in Norway after such a short time, you may not be able to get another one, as the Authorities assume you are not the type who can hold a job!

His answer was not what I wanted to hear. I had plans for the wages from a job in Norway and my whole future was dependent on it. So, I said to myself; "*Alex, bear it. No matter how hard it is, you must accept your new situation. Think about the nice time that awaits you in the US and try to pretend you are asleep!*"

A week turned into two, but my frustration about the lack of sunshine was not going away. It seemed to me that *I was working day and night and every day and every night!*

At the end of two weeks, I have made my decision:

*"it was better to lose the possibility of another job in Norway than losing my mind!"*



This time, I went for the last time to see my boss:

**Me:** Sir, I am afraid, I have to take my chances. The situation is intolerable for me; I can not sleep normally, eat normally, and even work normally!

**Him:** We have gone over this subject a few times already. As much as I want to keep you here, the pre-requisite is that you can work normally!  
However, our client representative has taken a keen interest in your particular know-how (something which is in short supply around here). Let me discuss it with him and let you know the final decision.

I was relieved with the prospect of a decision, whatever it was, it could not be worse than me ending in sanatorium!

Within a day, he came back with rather interesting news which delighted me. Apparently, the yard was working for a client which was a division of a large English consulting engineering company in London. Every fortnight, a progress report was to be delivered to this English company in order to be paid by a banker's cheque as compensation.

The report was often a bulky envelope with a lot of drawings, calculation reports, pictures, and workshop certificates. In short, the report was too important to be sent by normal post and too small to be sent by a Professional Courier (e.g. DHL). Also, the banker's cheque which was the blood line of the yard was often received many days late and with the turnover in the bank it was always one week after the report has been received in London.

I was chosen as the "messenger" to hand-deliver the report and bring back the banker's cheque within 48 hours!

I could escape the 24 hour darkness of North Norway and the shipyard got its money promptly and in a secure manner. A truly "win-win" affair.

I was intrigued, and over the moon. I am sure, this was the nicest gesture the yard could have taken towards a foreigner and there was everything in it; London, travel, and the most important item; *the sun*.

During the first flight to London, the air hostess must have noted my miserable conditions. She was an English girl with a high chick bone and looking smashing in those deep blue-and-white air hostess suits. I was sitting alone in the business class and visibly troubled. The conversation with her went like this:

**Her:** Good morning Sir, would you care for a drink?

**Me:** Thank you Miss, I would love some coffee.

**Her:** You seem to be very tired. Is your business very demanding?

**Me:** No Miss, it is because, I couldn't sleep properly during the last two weeks!

**Her:** What is the trouble? Are you to see a specialist at Harley Street <sup>(3)</sup> in London?

**Me:** No, I am just going to see the sunshine!

She had nearly fainted.

Here, there was somebody who was going to London, the capital of the gray island of Britain, to see the sunshine!



### 1.c The ODD FELLOW

I was starting to get my grip back with working in Norway, and learning how to deal even with 24 hours of darkness. Actually, it is not strictly correct to call it a true “24 hours of darkness”. Just around 12:00 O’clock at noon, the colour of sky changes, i.e. it turns from pitch dark into gray dark!

To mark the day, I started to develop a routine; everyday just before 12:00, I drove a car from the yard’s motor pool to the SAS Hotel in Bodø and bought a copy of International Herald Tribune. The first act was to look at the date. Here was the big fat *proof* that we have started a new day!

After this *event*, I went back to the office and continued working.

My professional work was starting to be noted in the shipyard. Everybody seemed to note the new recruit for the engineering office. I was invited to participate in meetings both inside and outside the office. Some of these had little to do with my direct professional responsibilities and was clearly to impress the current and future clients.

One of the first trips was to Oslo, where I travelled to meet some client representatives together with my new Australian friend called Tobias (or Toby as called by everybody). He was a young emigrant from Australia who came to Norway without much education in the early 1960’s, i.e. before the oil boom. He dreamt of building himself to a “*property tycoon*” in order to secure his old age days in Australia.

I found him strange but fascinating, as his approach to life was so different from mine! (perhaps, that was *the attraction*). He could speak Norwegian fluently and gave me a lot of general tips for living in Norway (*including taxes*).

Everybody who had the *pleasure* of dealing with Norwegian Authorities knows how valuable these tips are and the dire consequences of ignoring or simply not being informed about them.

Even after 28 years of living in Norway, I still seem to have not fully grasped the totality of the existing regulations where there is a law about *everything*!

Rumours has it that these regulations were written for forty millions instead of the existing four million population of Norway with *the clever intention that when the fourth millennium arrives, the regulations do not need changing!*

Toby had a small flat in a ragged part of Oslo (Wellhavens gate), and was commuting to Bodø for the period of that project. I had a room at SAS hotel nearby and naturally went to visit him shortly after I checked into my hotel room.

His flat was part of a large block of flats which is called (bygård) in Norwegian. The block had all the hallmarks of the pre-war situation in Oslo, when life was a far cry from the recent vibrant and Lego-like developments in Norway. The block was a square building with a central court-yard and consisted of four floors. Toby told me the reason for four floor had nothing to do with the structural strength of the block, but with the fact that the *regulations* required a lift for all buildings over four floors, so the builders of this (*Versailles en miniature*<sup>(4)</sup>) were just on the safe side of the law.

Toby was living on the ground floor and conveniently visited the courtyard, whenever he pleased. The location of his flat meant to meet the tenants from other floors who came down for various reasons.

As Toby opened his apartment door to meet me, an old woman was passing by. Toby knew her and greeted her in Norwegian. Then he turned into English and said;

**Toby:** Alex, please meet Mrs Anderson, she lives upstairs from me

She looked very frail and old. Her looks did certainly no justice to her as Toby said later that she was perhaps 70 or 75 years old and the only tenant of the flat that he knew. Her clothes were casual and somewhat dirty and clearly not from any known make.

While visiting Toby, I needed to use the toilet which was located at the court yard and was common for all the persons living in the block. I entered the court yard again and found the *grave-like dungeon* which was turned into a horrible toilet.





The situation was so dreadful that I thought twice before responding to the *call of the nature!*

When I came out of the toilet and into the courtyard, I had a glance to the other tenants in that block of flats. They consisted mostly of old and middle-aged men and women who seemed to be either out of work or pensioner, as they seemed to be nearly all in their flats at lunch-time. Those who passed me wore such shabby clothes that I could immediately conclude they were not supplied by *Yves Saint Laurent* or by *Chanel!*

They wore mostly track suits with faded colours that certainly have seen better days.

Toby took me around in Oslo and tried to show me the old and new parts. In one instance, he took me to a central street called Møllergaten. This street leads the less affluent part of Oslo in the North-East, to the proud and old grand store called *Glassmagasinet*. Toby led me into a small kiosk (a modest size shop selling tobacco, sweets and other small items of convenience), and asked the keeper for *one* ice cream. As he eagerly un-wrapped the ice cream and licked the content, he talked to me suggestively and said:

*So refreshing, I can recommend!*

It was certainly odd behaviour as an ice cream did cost nearly nothing and the usual courtesy suggested to buy one for the guest also. This type of behaviour had certainly not attracted many friends for Toby.

Later events in Oslo showed that he was not the only odd fellow in town! This was what happened:

I went back to my hotel room and made a date with Toby to meet him later on. He suggested meeting just outside the National Theatre station.

I was reluctant at the beginning, as I did not know much about Oslo, but he said:

*“It is dead easy, come out of the hotel, cross the Royal Park to arrive at National Theatre building. The station is located right next to it. Find the station, look around and ignore the repetitive Norwegian faces until you find me, the “odd fellow”.*

*You can not go wrong as it will be shown by **neon lights!**”*

I became excited to go on my own and find the National Theatre which has incidentally a proper English name. I discovered later that although most public places in Oslo have typical Norwegian names, mostly derived from Norwegian folk stories, this was a deliberate exception- *a tribute to the play-write Henrik Ibsen whose theatre pieces are so very much loved in England?*

I came out of the hotel and crossed the park and arrived at National Theatre building and the station. But, there was no sign of Toby. I was not afraid, as I knew how to go back to the hotel, but was reluctant to spend my evening alone, so finding Toby was a must.

I looked everywhere, but could not find Toby and was at the verge of deciding to turn back to the hotel when suddenly the brightness of neon lights attracted my attention:

*The neon light read “**ODD FELLOW**”*

The sign was marking the odd fellow hint I was searching. I looked at the sign, which was located on the facade of a large building and lowered my sight:

*At the street level and by the entrance to the building that the sign was mounted on was my own odd-fellow, Toby!*

*(Later on, I discovered “**ODD FELLOW**” is the Norwegian branch of the American Odd Fellow Society which is involved in voluntary social work internationally)*



We had a pleasant dinner that night and went for a coffee and cognac (what Norwegians call a “kaffe avec”) to Grand Hotel's café. This is an old café, which is part of the same building as Grand Hotel (better known by its balcony where Peace Laureates wave the crowd every December).

In the café, they had still kept the table where Henrik Ibsen ate his dinner! Further, their pianist who played mixture of ancient and pre-history pieces, was nearly 100 years old and still kept his job of the previous *seventy years!*

*Talk about earning seniority at your work place!*

Back to the hotel, there was the case of preparing for the next busy day, after all that was *why* I was in Oslo at the first place!

But somehow I was still haunted by Toby's peculiar behaviour and living atmosphere in Oslo and could not wipe it off my mind. I did try to do some office work, but could not get rid of the images of Toby's shabby block of flats and ragged flat mates.

Toby's odd behaviour and his nearly non-existent relationship with his neighbours in the other floors echoed the words of one of Paul Simon's song “*the most peculiar man*” to me.

How beautifully he puts it:

*He was a most peculiar man  
That's what Mrs. Reardon says  
And she should know  
She lived upstairs from him  
She said he was a most peculiar man*

*He was a most peculiar man  
He lived all alone within a house  
Within a room, within himself  
A most peculiar man*

*He had no friends, he seldom spoke  
And no one in turn ever spoke to him  
'Cause he wasn't friendly and he didn't care  
And he wasn't like them*

*Oh, no-o-o!  
He was a most peculiar man....*

The song goes on....





## 1.d The refugee and the Best Job in the World

Back in Bodø, I found myself facing a problem that I never thought to be facing. Being treated like an expert in Muslim religion! Here is why?

The personal Recommendation letter from my Egyptian supervisor, El-Jobrani in London with the letterhead “*In the name of the Allah, the most merciful*” has been distributed all over the place, including the police and other official bodies in this central town of North Norway. Suddenly, I found myself needing to explain to *everybody* that it is not so, and my allegiance to religion is neutral. But, as this was the case with *every* new person that I met, I was starting to find it futile to explain.

I was expecting something but nothing like what happened a couple of weeks after being settled in Bodø! One dark morning, I was approached by our section secretary, Diana who spoke English with the mixture of Norwegian and German accents:

*“Alex, I took a phone message for you from the chief of police in Bodø. I promised him that you will be at the police station by 11:00 sharp. Please don’t let me down!”*

In such a small town, there is rarely a phone call from the police to the shipyard, let alone from the chief himself, so this must have been serious!

I couldn’t think of anything, that I may have done to warrant being summoned to the police. Did I bring too much drink to the country from my London trips, or was it the ivory earrings bought for my wife? (Import of Ivory is banned in Norway).

I felt miserable and was fearful to be deported for a crime that I did not know when or where I had committed. The plan for going to USA seemed to have been dashed!

As I entered the police station, I was heartened by their behaviour which was more than polite. Upon introducing myself in English, I was ushered into a large room filled with pictures of police cadets graduated during the previous years as the graduation years were marked by large bold letters underneath. I noted the chief of police in full uniform who stood up and warmly shook my hand. Here is the conversation as I remember it:

*“ Mr Pushkar, I have read in your files that you are a Muslim. The Police in Bodø wants to use your expertise here”*

He pointed his finger to a well-built up young man in shabby clothing who was sitting in the office. The man was clearly a foreigner that I have totally ignored due to my original apprehension.

Police chief continued:

*“This young man claims to be a Muslim Iraqi Kurd, and wants to be granted political asylum on the ground of being a member of an outlawed Kurdish movement therein. He has some pictures and newspaper-cuts that clearly show he was a member of the Iraqi national wrestling team which recently toured Tampere in Finland. He speaks a very broken English, but claims to know Arabic and Persian. I want you to ask him some pertinent questions that only a Muslim can answer and give me your opinion”*

I was puzzled and wanted to show my utmost helpfulness to the chief of the police, so without any protest, I addressed the young man in Persian and asked about some Muslim religious aspects. My questions were based on those that I knew within my own family and also have heard from my Egyptian supervisor in London, e.g. why AL-AQSA mosque (in Jerusalem) is so important to Muslims (it is their second Mecca) and so on?

Luckily, the young man knew a lot more than me about the subject, and slowly but surely, I discovered he was genuine. He told me, he wanted primarily to stay in Norway to avoid prosecution from Saddam Hossein's security apparatus in Iraq which was known to have mal-treated the Kurds.

I was ushered by the Police chief into a side room to express my opinion about the refugee. I was later thanked by the chief himself and was ready to leave. He told me that his office was positive towards the application for the young man’s asylum and expects it to proceed in a positive manner. He also



told me that he does not have any official proof of education or a diploma but could be used as physical worker which was at short supply in Bodø.

At the last minute, and out of the goodness of my heart, I told the young man that should he need a plain job, he could phone me as the last resort in order to be given a simple job at the shipyard.

I left the police station and nearly forgot the affair.

After a couple of weeks, I met the young man inside the SAS Hotel while buying my daily newspaper. I was out of breath by what I saw!

The gruffly young man at the police station has been transformed into a well-dressed handsome gigolo who was dressed like a movie star. The contrast couldn't be more drastic!

Without any delay, I addressed him:

**Me:** Hello! How are you, do you remember me from the police station?

**Him:** Of course I do, I wanted to phone your office to thank you for your help, but have difficulty explaining myself in English over the phone.

**Me:** Are you living comfortably?

**Him:** Oh yes, I have even started testing my luck with the Blue-eyed Norwegian girls! I can not believe my luck. This was what I mostly dreamt throughout my entire adult life.

**Me:** What about a job? You seem to have got a good one (pointing to his tie)

**Him:** Yes, the best job in the world!

**Me:** Oh ya, what is the job?

**Him:** Technical **coach of girls wrestling** team in town!

Apparently, this rather shy young Arab who must have not seen more than a couple of totally covered women in his entire adult life, has been thrown into a heaven beyond his wildest imagination!

Throughout the day, he was to “wrestle” with half naked beautiful sporty girls!

He was even paid for it!

I have never met him again, rumours has it that he must have had a

“SHORT AND SWEET LIFE”!



## 1.e Norwegian Language according to Mondaphone technique

The days were getting longer in Bodø. The elongation started slowly, but surely. Suddenly the elongation went out of hand! It was so that one day one went to work at night time, but the very next day and at the same time it was daytime!

Around the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, the spring equinox, all became normal. But there was no normality for the day and night time in Bodø. It looks that god has given the people of Nordland Province an eternal subject to talk about!

I started to have more time to attend to my personal affairs. By this time, I could afford to hire a flat, but on the *recommendation* of my wife, we did not move from her parents' house.

*(actually, she made me an offer I could not refuse!, Bless you Brando in godfather movie).*

After all, there was a large house, and we could share the running expenses. So, I have absorbed all my misgivings about living with my in-laws and ignored whatever critics they said about me,

*after all I could not understand what they said in the first place!*

Once the days got longer than 14 hours, I started to look for something useful to do in my spare time. My wife's father suggested fishing at the nearby SALTSTRAUMEN (which at certain time of the day, has the strongest underwater current anywhere in the world). It is so powerful that the water current could suck a large boat into the bottom of the ocean and drawn all of her passengers.

Although the local radio used to give information as to what time was best for fishing, but I was not ready for fishing yet. One day, as I was buying my daily Herald Tribune, I could hear a Norwegian wanting to buy a newspaper and tried to learn what he said. The sentence was "*HVA KOSTER DET or how much it costs?*" This was easy enough to be parrot-like repeated by me and understood by the newspaper agent.

Suddenly, I was brave enough to learn Norwegian. Next day, as I started work at the shipyard, I deliberately went to the workshop area to hear Norwegian as spoken by others. Workshop was full of workers who were dressed in their work overalls and looked the same as shop workers anywhere else in the world, save for one exception! I could see a couple of female workers working side by side their male colleagues and so busy not to notice the presence of an staring onlooker!

I admired the situation, here was the true manifestation of equality between the genders, even in the domain of mechanical works. The girls simply, put their long blond hair under the obligatory hard-hat and were busy cutting metal, or even welding.

(Later, I even discovered that in Norway, the word "*man*" coming at the end of words such as "*chairman*" etc. does not signify a masculine gender but the word "*man*" signifies only "*mankind*").

*How sensible.*

I tried not to stare too much and turned my attention to the Notice Board nearby. Here was a good opportunity to look at announcements therein and try to "guess" what could they mean. I planned to start with copying the letters of a particular word and to look it up in the dictionary at the office.

I started with the first notice, which was placed *over* all others.

To my utter dismay, it started with a word which had exactly 21 letters! Heavens, what kind of a language is this? How on earth am I to learn this language? If this is the taste of dictation, it is quite possible that grammar will be even worse!

Back at my desk, I started to look the 21 letter word in the dictionary but could not find it.

My salvation was my wife Julia, who did "*guess*" the meaning of that word from the scribbled notation that I had made. I can vividly remember her kind tolerance towards my first word of Norwegian. The word was:

*"BEDRIFTSIDERETTSKLUBB" or company's sport organisation in English*

Apparently, the Norwegian scripture is so that one could at times choose to separate words or connect them as one wishes!

God Bless you the language father; *BJØRNSTJERNE BJØRNSON!*

*(years later, I am told by a Norwegian friend who happens to be married to a girl from New Zealand, that there are worse examples in that country's local language, Māori.*

*One special word consists of not less than 105 letters- the name of a certain hill over there)*

I was ready for the next step. Register myself in a course to learn Norwegian. With the help of my in-laws, I registered myself for a course which was for three days a week with two hour sessions. I eagerly bought the text book and was ready to indulge!

Here, I should mention that in addition to English which is my professional language, I have learnt French and am comfortable to converse and read in both languages. Add Persian to these, and you get a fair picture of my language skills!

Norwegian classes were shown to be not so interesting. This was not the fault of the teacher by any means, the fact of the matter was that most of the adult students in the course were coming from African or Asian countries and knew no other language beside their mother tongue.

Obviously, a little bit of *bush-English* or *desert-English* did help. Together with use of all parts of the body; hand, foot, head, or their combination, they could convey a message. A little bit of English came handy as they all had to fill their job applications, or prepare their visa applications.

On top of these, they were mostly single men and women and discovered the language course to be well and truly *the start of a beautiful friendship!* (Bless you BOGART in the movie Casablanca).

After four weeks, I gave up that Norwegian language course, as I felt nothing useful was coming out of it.

What to do? Here I turned to the proven method previously used for learning French. I bought a complete course material from a famous language company called "MONDAPHONE". This worked for me for learning French, as I could listen to the cassette tapes and repeat over and over to the point of perfection.

One may think, I could have learnt Norwegian from my wife, but we spoke English since the day we met, and it was not possible to change. When I tried to converse in Norwegian with her, she mocked with repeating the catch phrase that the French use to mock foreigners who converse in French with strange accents

*(Vous parlez Française comme une vache espanol! or; You speak French like an Spanish cow!).*

I started eagerly to work on my Norwegian following the method of this world famous company. I was also using every opportunity to get a tip from my non-Norwegian colleagues who could speak or understand Norwegian. I became even more attentive to my Norwegian language efforts once I heard from an American who happened to be an Architect, John Dukakis. He told me:

*"Alex, if you learn Norwegian properly in the first year or so, you are lucky. After that, it can only get worse!"*

With this advice in mind, I went through the text book. However, soon enough, I discovered this was not so easy!

The reason; the course material, including the book and the cassette tapes, seemed to have been prepared before the First World War, yes around 1910!

As the years went by, Mondaphone had simply reprinted the book and copied the tapes without the slightest update. Overlooking the revolutionary changes in Norway after the oil boom of 1970's, their course material remained *exactly* the same as before.

A situation that truly qualified for an *utter farce!* Here are some examples:



Extract from the text-book: (translated by myself!):

**Exhibit A:** Mondaphone book writes: Norway *imports* all of its oil and gas from Unites States of America!

**Banality:** It is common knowledge that Norway exports over 2 million barrels of oil and thousands of tons of gas a day

*The nation is even called "the Arabs with blue eyes"!*

**Exhibit B.** Mondaphone book writes: Oslo's main railway station is located at the East part of town (ØSTBANE), where you can hire *porters* to carry your luggage to your *first class* wagon

**Banality:** No such things exist for *donkey's years* in Oslo. There is no East Railway station, no porter, no first class wagon. Guilty in all counts!

**Exhibit C:** Mondaphone book writes: Oslo's main street Karl Johan, is lighted by paraffin lights, which are imported from USA!

**Banality:** To my knowledge, Norway produces so much electricity that even gets exported abroad

I have often thought that Norwegian Authorities should *sponsor* companies such as Mondaphone to update their Norwegian course material or even *ban* their outdated materials from the market, what hinders this: *Regulations!*

Years later, I have even discovered that grammatical references in Mondaphone course material were Danish and not Norwegian!

*The course uses "HINANDEN" which is Danish instead of the Norwegian word "HVERANDRE, meaning each other"!*



## 1.f The Workaholic Director

Time was passing fast in Bodø. I had quite a lot on my plate with the work at shipyard and trying to learn Norwegian. However, all of these could not fill my “Looong” days. On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, when the day is at its longest, I could truly appreciate the advantage of living in North Norway.

This day is quite an occasion there. Everybody seems to plan to have a good time. For some, this meant plain and hard drinking, for others like me; it was the case of being introduced to a Norwegian delight called “RØMMEGRØT”. This is a yogurt like paste made from whole cream, whole milk and wheat, served with sugar, butter and cinnamon. When I first tasted it, I was expecting “hot porridge” from Scotland, but this was a lot better.

Regarding dinner, if one chooses to go to a restaurant with a window to the sea on this day, one is bound to be heading for a treat. One can order a starter at 11:45 P.M. when the sun is still shining and be sure to be eating the main course at sun-rise and dessert under the plain sun the next day!

I was happy to experience these delights of the nature, and could remember the words of my American colleague, John Dukakis who told me:

*“Alex, once the difficult winter of the North is over, one is surely rewarded with the best gift there is: A double dose of sunshine a day!”*

What he seemed to have forgotten was that in order to be rewarded with this large dosage of sunshine, one had to *survive* the notorious winter at the first place! It is not obvious how many aliens could withstand it. Those who have a choice of course!

At the shipyard, the bulk of the work related to external tests and sea-transport of the construction object was at full swing. I should mention that offshore engineering was a new field for Norwegian industry in early 1970’s, and most of the shipyards all over the country were struggling to come to term with this new and challenging branch of engineering and fabrication.

Our shipyard was not an exception, the very reason that they have stretched themselves to hire people like me was to strengthen their know-how and bring the state-of-the-art capabilities to their yard. We were compelled to design and develop a good number of new systems and equipment.

Some of these were simple and could be tested and approved by the equipment at the shipyard.

However, there were others also, those which required testing *outside* the yard and at the so-called “*approved research and testing institutes*” inside and outside Norway (the Underwriters Laboratory, UL in the USA is a prime example of such institutes).

I have led a team of engineers and designers that developed a series of equipment which were quite non-traditional and were required to be tested and approved outside the yard. One such institute was located further south from Bodø in TRONDHEIM.

This town is the centre of engineering education in Norway and houses a renowned technical university, NTH (presently NTNU). In addition to this university there are several research institutes and research laboratories where some of the academics in the university and their students do research work. Although the university is run by the state, the research institutes are semi-private, i.e. they work according to orders placed by private and state companies. Staff in these research institutes are drawn from both state and private sources, but persons at the top are usually state employees.

I have made a good deal of correspondence with a particular research institute in TRONDHEIM for a series of tests. I have also supervised the “test objects” to be properly made and shipped by reliable means to that institute, so as to increase our chances of success. The first of such tests was to take place for duration of two hours, during which the project leadership (myself and the team) were only allowed to “observe”.

On the due day, I arrived at the institute in the company of two of my best engineers who were partly chosen to be my “*guide*” in Trondheim also.

Once the test started, I was quite nervous and asked the leader of the team conducting the test what is expected from an “*observer*” at the test.





He seemed to have answered this previously, because the answer came in polished and clear English:

*“If you are an observer, you should open your ears and eyes, but shut yours mouth!”*

There was no other choice and I followed the instruction to the letter.

The test was a big success and we did a little bit of “can-can” dancing in the research premises which attracted a good deal of unwanted attention and raised some eye-brows.

I don’t know if this was because of the noise that we made or the sign of onlooker’s disappointment that we were not female dancers and had no costumes to dance this French practice<sup>(5)</sup>!

After the subject dance, I wanted to polish my trip with a touch of necessary formality. I went to see the Director of the research institute, a man called HALVARD LANDEGO.

He was a large man who had difficulty moving around due to his sheer extra weight. During our meeting, I noted that it took him more than usual to leave his desk and sit around the conference table with me.

I was still exited about the successful test results and could not hide my enthusiasm. Such a good test, meant a good deal of new business for the yard and at the same time ensured a rock solid reputation for me in Norway. I could imagine at least three new projects which could be on horizon.

He greeted me politely, and continued scribbling inside the file he brought with him to the conference table. It seemed to me that his days were full of approving the already approved documents. He seemed to be manifestation of a person we used to call “*a professional approver*”.

We nicknamed this type of persons as “*chief priests*”. The reason; they only “*bless*” the documents with no changes at all and are often handsomely paid because they occasionally lift that tiny little pen!

With this description, I was not expecting him to radiate a lot of energetic impulses to my enthusiasm, but what he told me was beyond what I could imagine:

**Him:** What are you dealing with, in the present and near future?

**Me:** I am busy with the current project. At the same time I am preparing tenders for three different new projects. Not counting the efforts to learn Norwegian and going fishing.

**Him:** Nice, your hand seems to be quite full

**Me:** What about yourself. What are *you* dealing with these days?

**Him:** MINST MULIG- the least possible!

There was such a tone in his voice that even after 28 years and countless number of meetings and tests, his encounter is still very much alive in my mind.

His attitude to work recalled the words of Jerome K. Jerome <sup>(6)</sup> in my head who said:

*“I like work: it fascinates me, I can sit and look at it for hours”*





## 1.g Christmas in the North Norway

After the test that day, we went to see TRONDHEIM. The town is small and has not much to offer as compared to London or Paris, save for the world Northernmost Cathedral (*NIDAROSDOMEN*).

I was not in the mood for visiting a historical place then and wanted to relieve the tensions built due to the test. One of my young engineers, Edgar, came with a suggestion:

*“Let’s go to GÅGATE, I want to check something “*

I gathered the name GÅGATE comprise from GÅ (going) and GATE (street). This proved to be a popular and busy street and quite a pleasure to visit.

OK, it was not Champs Élysées of Paris or Kings Road of London, but for a town with some 250.000 population, it was quite reasonable. In the middle of this busy street, Edgar pulled me on the side and showed me a scribble on an abandoned wall. He then whispered:

*Alex, look at this scribble on the wall, I made it four years ago and still lives on!*

I have seen such an attitude in the Old Europe, where youngsters are desperate to make their mark on the antique and ancient sites. I even recalled that during site seeing in Greece, all tourist groups had a local “companion” or a “watch dog” This was to ensure that none of them could scribble anything on the historical monuments, and here in Norway I could see the same phenomenon.

*The incident reminded me that youngsters are essentially the same no matter where they come from; The East, The West, or even Northern Europe!*

We visited a hotel with an amazing array of “palm trees” created inside its vast restaurant. The hotel served good food and was marked for my many future visits.

Back to Bodø, I was more than warmly greeted by the shipyard management. The warmth of reception at the shipyard felt extra ordinarily apparent. At times, I had a feeling that it has been unusually important for the yard that tests carried out in TRONDHEIM were successful. My hunch had proved later to be true, as this must have been the last hope for the yard not to go *bankrupt*.

What happened at the shipyard afterwards confirmed my initial feelings. The yard has been saved from bankruptcy with the approvals resulting from the above-mentioned successful tests but only just. Me and my engineers have only bought time for the yard to live another six months or so before the *final crunch* came!

Summer had started to wind down and the winter started to approach. From September 21<sup>st</sup> onward, the autumn equinox, the days turn into night like mad. By the end of October, the days were turning into pitch-dark nights and once again, I was more than eager to visit London and “*see the sunshine!*”, ref. part "1.b”

Just before Christmas, I had to go for another series of tests to TRONDHEIM and felt quite at home with the “palm tree” hotel and its good food.

Actually, that day’s menu was so good that I asked the waiter to write down the name of that meal for me with the view to ask for it in future without a hitch!

Christmas is like a “fairy tale” in North Norway and my wife’s parents and the children had the time of their life. There were lots of gifts, sweets, drinks, and traditional food. In North Norway, one eats a good number of times each 24 hours throughout Christmas period.

*(Consequently, it is usual to see Norwegian females rushing to training studios as soon as the new year festivities are over. This is to get rid of “RIBBE-FETT- fat from spare ribs”).*

In North Norway, a typical routine of eating in 24 hours comprise:

- Breakfast
- Lunch
- Dinner



- Evening food (KVELDS MAT)
- Night food (NATT MAT)

*I used to tease my in-laws suggesting why they do not also add an “early breakfast” to the routine!*

Bodø is actually not as cold as the rest of Norway in Christmas time. I am told this is due to Gulf Stream that is active in the ocean off the Northern coast.

What is peculiar about Norwegian Christmas is the role of TROLL dolls all over the Christmas decorations. I have not seen this type of doll anywhere else in Europe (*A reminder of the Norway’s pre-Christianity religion that still lives on in the Norwegian hearts and minds?*).

Difficulties were in queue at the shipyard right after Christmas. It looked that creditors observed a “Christmas grace period” for the yard and were coming for their respective “*pound of flesh*” (SHAKESPEARE words not mine). The stumbling block for me was that I had to do further tests in the UK because of the fact that the client oil company decided that tests performed in Norway could only be regarded as “*indicative*”. Full-scale tests must have been performed *outside* Norway, preferably in the UK, in order to issue the final approval. For February, I have arranged a series of tests at Borham Wood, near London, and had fixed the test date. The giant test piece (*which was, so large that it could only be sent by Cargo plane*) was already sent to the test institute and was prepared to be put in position by their technicians and awaited me and my team to come and “*observe*” the tests.

A week before flying to London, came the bomb-shell. The shipyard was declared officially bankrupt! The interesting thing was that according to the law, a standard telex was sent to *all* current contacts. This was in Norwegian, but surprising enough those at the test site in London, did somehow manage to understand the situation because I received a near-cancellation note that due to uncertainty as to who pays the expenses for the tests, they were put on HOLD.

*(who says that Brits are not clever with languages!).*

I had to act quickly, First, I found out what was the total cost of the tests and secured a bankers check written to cover all of the expenses (*The check had to be written to myself, titled to “cover my travel expenses”, as a company during receivership can not pay any third party*). I hastily arranged the trip to London and was there a couple of days earlier to ensure everything was alright.

As it happened the test site was conducting tests on those days for another Norwegian company which was one of the big names in Oslo. I explained the situation to the manager of the test institute in London and convinced him to perform the tests on time. The sight of banker’s check convinced him better than any explanation that I could give (*money sure talks!*).

For the first time, I used my Norwegian *outside* Norway, and duly impressed the visiting Norwegian group from Oslo of my newly acquired language skill.

Tests were successful and I came back to Bodø with flying colours! Now, *everybody* at the yard knew me by name (Even those who could not speak English). I was happy to see some relief in the eyes of the management and was assured to get the best possible package, should I choose to leave.

I knew my days were numbered in Bodø, and wanted to make most of the time. One day after March 21<sup>st</sup>, when the sun has decided to show itself briefly, I arranged to go shopping with Edgar (whom I befriended from the first TRONDHEIM trip). This was to use local knowledge for those Bodø specialities (like FÅRERULL- preserved meat made in traditional way for use by Nomads during winter, and gorgeous handcrafts made by Norwegian Lapland inhabitants, called SAMER in Norwegian).

As soon as we reached in the centre of Bodø, Edgar looked at me:

**Him:** Let’s go to GÅGATE!

**Me:** Hey, GÅGATE is in TRONDHEIM, remember where you have scribbled on the wall!



He was laughing all over his face. Apparently, there is one GÅGATE in *every* town in Norway! It is the main promenade of every city in the country!

My Norwegian vocabulary was enriching- the hard way.

We went to a restaurant for a meal. Suddenly, I remembered what to order. Here was an excellent opportunity to take advantage of the Nordland Province's culinary delights. I fetched carefully the paper with the name of the meal written by the waiter in TRONDHEIM.

I didn't want to confuse the issue, so I showed the paper to the waiter:

**Me:** Please bring me this meal Sir. Here is the name!

**Waiter:** I am afraid I Can't, we don't have it. Try next Christmas!

**Me:** How come, this is such a delightful dinner

**Waiter(laughing):**

You are new here aren't you? I would have been delighted to serve you this meal, but not now.

Edgar intervened. He looked at the paper and laughed too. On the paper, it was written:

“*JULETALLERKEN* or; Christmas plate in English”

This meal is a traditional Christmas dinner which comprises principally of; Sausages, smoked grilled meat and potato.

There was no end to the language surprises for this middle-aged duffer!



## 1.h Leaving for Oslo; Lock, Stock, and Barrel

Back in the office, I could hear the Xerox machines that were churning personnel CV's to get new jobs. I remembered the group of Norwegians that I met during my recent tests in London. Perhaps, their company in Oslo could absorb a person with my qualifications? Without a further ado, I called them and was forthwith interviewed by the phone and was seconded for a job in their upcoming project.

The speed of my new assignment in Oslo was noted by lawyers who were running the shipyard during bankruptcy proceedings. Their top man, a soft-speaking lawyer called NJÅL ÅGOTNES told me:

*“Alex, I don't want to discourage you from moving to Oslo, but as the Authorities representative, I can assure you that you will not be sacked!”*

Such a big fat relief. How preposterous!

At the same time, this showed how much everybody appreciated what I did for the little shipyard in Bodø. It was even evident to those at the receivership team.

I assured him and others in the receivership management that my departure will be planned and they can count on my assistance during that difficult period.

I was much apprehended. The situation was very bleak and I was compelled to make a number of decisive changes in my life, both at personal and at professional levels.

On the language front, I found no use to learn the usual first few hundred words in Norwegian like any other new language; e.g. the names of flowers or objects etc. or even how to conjugate a verb. Instead, I found myself looking in the Norwegian-English dictionary the meaning of;

*“AKKORD-KOMMISSÆR- the receiver”*

and

*“BOBESTYRER- temporary directors”*

and so on!

I am convinced that, one could live a lifetime in Norway and does find it necessary to know these words but there I was, out of the necessity, such words were compulsory to be learnt. So my *legal* vocabulary was getting rich at the expense of my *common* vocabulary!

Test results in London led to official approval of the equipment and systems that I led to develop in the shipyard. Lawyers helped to down-size and re-organise the shipyard based on mass production of the systems and equipment developed by me and my team.

Consequently, I had only good feelings when I left the yard knowing that they could survive (in a down-sized and mini-scaled level) based on trusting to appoint a foreigner.

*After all, one should be rewarded for the risk!*

As a family, we decided to move to Oslo in stages. I should move first and the wife and kids follow later.

Norway is a long stretch of land. The distance from Bodø to Oslo is the same as the distance from Oslo to Rome in Italy!

Norway on the map looks like a giant man (Hercules size) lying on the side; back to the sea, with the head in Oslo and feet up in the north, protecting Norwegians from the monsters of the sea.

I left for Oslo in May driving my near-ancient car. It was such a long drive that I felt I was driving along the spinal chords of Hercules!



It took me two days to drive all the way from Bodø to Oslo with one overnight stop at a small town half way. As I did not know anywhere in particular, I looked at my cars kilometre indicator and stopped halfway between Bodø and Oslo. I stopped by the train station there to get information about where to overnight. Suddenly, I saw two large billboards. They read:

*“ Welcome to Hell”*

and

*“Gods expedition!”*

For a split second, I thought I have died and left the mortal life. The trouble was that I felt that I found myself at the wrong side of St. Gabriel Gate (*called SIRAT BRIDGE in Muslim faith*) and was facing my eternal destiny in Hell.

God almighty must have passed the judgement on me and I was led this far to be expedited to Hell!

I came to my senses by the sight of a policeman indicating that I have stopped at station's restricted areas.

Apparently, Hell is the name of a small town in mid-Norway, and “*gods*” is the Norwegian word for “*consignment*”. The signs were simply welcoming the visitors arriving and mentioned the existence of a registration office! Also, in confusion, I must have not noted the Norwegian spelling of the word “*expedition*” which was written as: “*EKSPEDISJON*”.

*So much for my Norwegian language skills!*

I checked into a hotel and noted the receptionist great looks were a far cry from Saint Gabriel convent attire.

Here was a glittering specimen of Scandinavian beauty who wore no convent robe but a low-cut dress. If anything, she looked like the sort of women that Roald Dahl's Uncle Oswald Hendryks Cornelius must have loved to seduce!

As I continued the journey towards Oslo, I enjoyed the memories of events in the North. I have also regretted the challenges I did not master.

*Things like fishing!*



## REFERENCES FOR CHAPTER 1:

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- (1) How to Be an Alien, by George Mikes, Published in Penguin Books, 1974
- (2) The Visitor , by Roald Dahl, published in March 1968 in Avant Garde magazine
- (3) Harley Street in London, where most medical specialists have their practice
- (4) *Versailles en miniature*, a French catch phrase sarcastically referring to cheap accommodation
- (5) Can-can dancing at *Folies Bergère*, a famous cabaret house in Paris
- (6) “Three Men in a Boat” a book by Jerome K. Jerome, Published by Amazon in 2005
- (7) A quote from “The Merchant of Venice” by William Shakespeare

