

# Chapter 1: Over Greenland

Autumn 2019. With a full stomach, I'm sleepily leaning back in my seat in the cabin of a jumbo jet 30,000-something feet over Greenland on the way to America. It is not exactly eco-friendly and is not widely applauded these days. At home, that is to say, far beneath me on the ground, precisely 1,839 miles behind me, daughters and grandchildren—and at least ten thousand others—recently assembled in front of the Norwegian Parliament to demand stricter climate policies. Here I am, enjoying life and the view while the plane burns tons of fuel and spits out carbon dioxide.

An old black-and-white Western film flickers soundlessly on the TV screen on the back of the seat in front of me. A friendly man with gold stripes moves about to offer coffee and refreshments after the dinner trays have been cleared away. "Would you like another glass of wine or perhaps some cognac?" he asks.

The time in the sky, where everything is included and within reach, is an invitation to some philosophical reflection over an actual and controversial theme: Do I have a bad conscience sitting here? Well, probably a touch of it. Am I ashamed of flying? No, because this flight is part of a project I *must* complete: in the baggage compartment above me is a package weighing 13 pounds, and it is to be taken there by *me* and no one else.

And in my inside pocket, there is the letter—the fragile sign of life from the past, a sort of sorrowful muttering with pen and ink from a man I didn't know anything about but whom I have gradually gotten to know. It is a man who has been dead for fifty years but who, in spite of his anonymity and forgotten existence, has given me a glimpse into a series of traumatic and heretofore unknown dramas in the life of my ancestors.

*It is this man's final resting place I'm about to visit.*

The queens of the Atlantic, the floating giants that people traveled on in days past, were not so environmentally friendly either. They have long since been turned into scrap iron or anchored as worn-out, half-rusted and landlocked reminders of a time of greatness that once was. So what I am doing just now, where I am sitting, is like swearing loudly in the environmental cathedral because I am flying once again.

Climate is the main issue now, on all the TV channels all hours of the day, with receding glaciers, violent and more frequent storms, rising sea levels, fires in the Amazon, spreading deserts and dying insects.

Far beneath me to the left, half concealed behind light fog and spread-out clouds, I make out Cape Farewell on the southern tip of Greenland. I taste the name. Cape Farewell.

It is one of the globe's godforsaken places, cold, weather-beaten, and hardly visited by a single soul, I think. But now the place will probably be overrun with tourists because the temperature is rising and the ice is melting at record tempo. I see hundreds of small and large icebergs bobbing up and down along the coast, and even more of them further in the branches of the fjord. They break off from interior ice masses with increasing speed.

And I see enormous land areas free of snow and ice. But I also see endless white snow-covered plateaus—white for the time being, that is.

Only weeks have passed where I am sitting since the U.S. president created international amusement in his attempt to purchase Greenland. If he knew this part of American history, Donald Trump may have looked back to March 1867 when one of his predecessors purchased the Alaskan wilderness from the Russian czar Alexander II for 7.2 million dollars.

The purchase was very controversial. Why in the world would America have use for the vast wildernesses south of the North Pole? The czar feared that Alaska, an area he had no use for, could be lost in a future war with Great Britain, so he decreed that the wilderness could just as well be put up for sale. In addition, the czar needed money.

There was plenty of money and gold in America at the time. Andrew Johnson, who took over as president when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated a couple of years earlier, took action and secured the land that would join the union as the forty-ninth state nearly one hundred years later. It is an area that, up to the present day, has been a sanctuary for emigrated Norwegians, well accustomed to cold, stormy weather and rich fishing banks as they were then.

Sulking and disappointed over the definite and mirthful rejection from Danes and Greenlanders of his offer to buy the island, Trump abruptly canceled a long-planned visit to Denmark. As bad as this was for the environment, one outcome was increased interest in visiting the island. American tour operators announced very quickly a record interest in Greenland.

“Traffic on our website regarding Greenland has increased by 2,800 percent compared to the same week a year earlier,” a travel bureau in the United States gleefully reported. “And 70 percent of those who want to visit there are Americans.”

The result may be even more pollution over the ever-decreasing snow-covered areas beneath me.

The Western film flickers on. I have probably seen it several times before, and my thoughts wander 150 years back to the time depicted in the film, to a time when few or no one gave a thought to the environment. That may not be entirely true because people just like me—white men who traveled to America—slaughtered tens of millions of bison. They cut down the forests on the prairies, polluted rivers and waterways, stole land and drove away and massacred the indigenous people. But the indigenous people—the Indians—spoke about the environment. Then as now.

I think about *the mystery of Ed* and the thin airmail envelope from Minnesota that is burning a hole in my inner jacket pocket: A very little and insignificant piece of paper, but even so, it is the document that is the reason for my being here at all high in the sky above Greenland for the umpteenth time. It tells that the young man from the Tørdal valley, Ed, or Eivind Ytterbø, his real name, packed his suitcase and crossed the ocean to the country with gold in the streets, never to look back.

Eivind Ytterbø was hardly heard from for nearly 50 years. It took the tragic death of his brother in the Old Country before he took a pen and paper in hand to share a few brief thoughts with those back home. And I wonder, of course, why this took him such a long time. I have found some information in old archives, for life there at home on the little farm would

reveal itself to be not only poor and challenging, no, there were also long and painful years filled with insanity, threats and traumas.

So, did the depressing memories from his childhood and youth lead him to break all ties? Or was there something else? Something I have not understood, something that has slipped past me?

Cape Farewell, I think to myself, while the vast island slowly disappears on the horizon, is located at about the same latitude as Tørdal. I know because I have roots in this little bit of Telemark furthest north in Drangedal municipality. As a boy, I often guided my finger slowly on the globe to see who lived as far north as the people in Tørdal.

I learned then that they were the people in Helsinki and St. Petersburg, Anchorage and Whitehorse, Cape Farewell, the Orkney Islands and Stockholm. That is now a long time ago, but still correct.

And now, I am on my way from Tørdal to America in the hope of putting an end to the puzzle that has churned around in my head for over 20 years. This is the sixth—or maybe the seventh—trip to the USA within four years. I have traveled time and again and lost count along the way, hoping to understand why it should take a whole generation before an immigrant in my own family was heard from. For me, Ed was an unknown man who came to the world at the little farm Ytterbø almost 140 years ago. *My farm.*

Who was Ed, really? Why did he leave, and why didn't he write home? Was he running away from something? Or was he escaping something? And did he find the life he sought after? And why am I searching for him? Yes, why has this Ed mania been with me for so many years?

I am soon about to reach my goal. This trip to America will be my last because in the little baggage compartment above me, well wrapped in a blanket in a little bag, I have a cast iron plate, bordered and framed with the finest ornamentation.

The plate is from an old wood stove that once stood in the sitting room in Ytterbø, the poorest farm in upper Tørdal, where the young emigrant grew up. A friend of mine, Rasmus, the blacksmith, has cut out a little brass plate and fastened it to the cast iron centered between the ornamentation. Engraved on the plate is the text EDWIN YETREBO. 1881-1974. It looks old and worn, but it is made to look very attractive.

Finally, 120 years after the young man from Tørdal traveled to America and 50 years after his death, Ed's story will have a final conclusion. I have met descendants formerly unknown to me, have attempted to read his thoughts, poked my nose into the life he lived, and attempted to the best of my ability to understand. He did the best he could, he never gave up, like hundreds of thousands of other Norwegian emigrants. But did he find happiness? And what really is happiness?

I have found his unmarked grave in this land where he settled, a tiny and anonymous depression in the ground.

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