

Journey's end

In 1944 my grandmother, Atsa Louise Sørensen, set out from a small village named Arsuk, 'the beloved place', in an umiak, a small boat powered by up to twenty rowers. She travelled up the western coast of Greenland to Aasiaat where she was to enter a boarding school for those deemed gifted enough to become catechists. It was a journey of more than a week and at night they pulled the boat on shore and slept beneath it. On the way she passed by Narsaq from where her mother, Sofie Jakobsen, had travelled in the opposite direction when she moved to Arsuk as a young girl to work in her brother's household. Atsa was in Aasiaat for two years. She was selected to go to the teacher-training college in Nuuk and this led to her move, in 1950, to Denmark where she continued her training as a teacher. After finishing her education she met Viggo, my grandfather, she started a family and never returned to live in her country of birth. Sixty-four years after Atsa's first journey to Aasiaat, her oldest daughter, her son-in-law and their two children crossed the ocean in the opposite direction.

By then Arsuk had experienced both growth and decline. Two of Atsa's brothers, Julius and Abel, stayed in Arsuk to carry on the hunting and fishing trade of their father, Pavia Jakobsen. But the way of kayak hunting was replaced by the fishing cutter, and when they introduced pound nets fishing became easier and more profitable. Within years the per capita income rose to the second highest in the world only surpassed by Kuwait. The sixties and seventies was an adventure for the fishing industry that brought people and money to Arsuk and eventually wiped out almost the entire population of cod and Greenland halibut. As the fish disappeared so did the money and the population fell back to the hundred and fifty people that live there today. We stayed in Arsuk for a week in Atsa's brother Abel's house. Abel's son Ejner and his family gave us a warm welcome and took us out to see the life in the fjords. Ejner is the last of the Jakobsens to make a living from hunting and fishing in Arsuk.

The trips to the fjords were most enjoyable. Being in the achingly beautiful territory of our ancestors with someone so attuned to it as Ejner was truly inspiring. Whatever was moving in the landscape he immediately recognised. I was embarrassed a number of times to find myself pretending to see the musk ox he pointed to far off in the distance. He is a man of multiple talents, he hunts seal, musk, deer, and birds, he fishes, makes handicrafts, does all his own repairs, helps his wife in the shop, is on the board of the various organisations regarding hunting and fishing, and he is a full-time father and community member. He is at home in this world like water in the ocean. And this far from all the places I have ever called home he made me feel at home. Thoughts that had hibernated in the midst of so many new observations and impressions welled up from the depths. I remembered the views of the many lives I have lived, and I saw that I could judge the speed with which I had travelled by the clarity of their vision. Thoughts of places I hurried through made me slightly melancholic with regret.

Arsuk is situated on a small plateau surrounded by rock. One day we walked up the mountainside to look at the landscape. From above, the community appeared like a collection of toy houses scattered on a small plot of land in an vast archipelago stretching as far north and south as the eye could see. The previous day I had seen a white-tailed eagle coming over the ridge we were sitting on. Circling high above, it was detecting any irregular motion in the landscape. All things have their own pattern, from the growing of petals on a willow herb to the shaping of coast lines, and any change in the pattern of the ground below might, for the eagle, be a sign of food. Up here it seemed like we were patterns ourselves, patterns continuously and spontaneously unfolding. Viewed from the inside it might be hard to keep track of such movement. Or easy to forget that all movements are occurring at the same time as part of a whole. By

narrowing our vision to focus on the irregularity that might feed us, we get distracted from the pattern itself. I looked at the small village beneath and tried to imagine this same view back when my grandmother was a child.

I think of her now, sitting at her small table solving crossword puzzles or standing by the window admiring her view (she lives on the fourth floor). Her many journeys and my own are naturally intertwined. Every turn she made on the way led to the road I am travelling. Had she moved just an inch in a different direction you would not be reading these words. Had my grandmother, Atsa Louise Sørensen, not travelled from Arsuk to Aasiaat you would not be thinking these thoughts, turning these pages, pausing at this full stop. Your day wouldn't have started like it did and it wouldn't end as it does. In hindsight it looks incredible, almost impossible, but so is the world. So utterly improbable that one is tempted to regard it all as mere chance. The random collision of bodies. And yet flowers and lives alike unfold in patterns, patterns that connect your thoughts and mine, that connects the journey of an old Inuit with your choice of story. It cannot be different, we just unfold in this marvellous fashion. We cannot help unfolding like we do. And if we step back for a second and watch this process it suddenly appears new and tremendously varied. It is only in thought we can impose dead pictures on this continuously changing pattern. It is only by identifying this particular twitch in the pattern as something innate to myself that I come to believe that 'I' exist separately from the rest of the pattern.

And so we reach the end of a journey. The landscape we traced might not lay down a detailed map to follow but the excitement of travelling is exploring for oneself. And our enquiry provides a field study for further investigations. The next part of our story might be a little less scenic in beauty but, I expect, it will reveal more of the intricate details of a fascinating pattern.