

OOGRUK!

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My contentment and increasing droopy-eyed drowsiness were suddenly shattered by the rhythmic, booming sound of long, flexible sticks slamming against the round, wooden rims of skin drums. I looked up from my seat to see Paul Iyapana standing in the front of the room, his brown, smile-creased face frozen in fierce concentration, stamping his walrus-hide, fur-trimmed mukluk-clad feet, moving his arms in sharply-choreographed gestures and spasmodically jerking his body back and forth. He uttered sharp, barking cries as he began to pay tribute to the success of the hunt. Beside him danced his wife, Molly, also mukluk-clad, raising her high, thin voice in keening counterpoint, swaying her arms and body more restrainedly.

Sitting on the floor behind them in a semi-circle were the four skin-drum percussionists—happy, perspiring, and a bit odoriferous—enthusiastically whipping sticks against their flat, hand-held drums made of seal gut stretched across circular frames. Packed into the overheated room behind us sat the rest of the villagers, watching and vicariously participating in the playing out of the hunt's activity and conclusion.

I yawned hugely and smiled. It was only this morning -no, yesterday -well, whenever it was, that seemed to make no difference to anyone - that Paul, myself, and four members of his crew, were sitting silently in an oomiak - a wooden-framed, walrus skin-covered boat - at the end of the world, waiting for something to happen. We had left King Island Village, a small settlement just east of Nome, Alaska, early that May morning and made our way out onto the waters of the

Bering Strait toward Sledge Island, a low island a mile and a half long lying around five miles from Nome. We rounded it and droned along its southern side for a short distance before Paul stopped the boat's small outboard motor. In the sudden stillness we slowly and quietly paddled our way with small oars toward the island through the patchy fog and uncertain light toward a line of partially-beached ice floes.

A thin sheet of ice was slowly building on the sides of the boat as it dipped and rose in the milky-thick water, still turgid with ice spicules even this late in spring. I wondered how deep the water was; how many spider crabs might be crawling across the bottom, following their age-old migration instincts, and whether this bottom we were paddling over was part of the ancient land bridge that had once connected Alaska and Siberia.

As familiar as I had become with the Arctic, I still found myself fascinated by this part of the world. In the depth of winter, it was a dark land of deep snow, iron-hard ice, and brutal wind that cut through clothing like driven nails. In the short summer, it was a land of 24-hour sunlight, frantically-growing flowers and grasses, and alive with mosquitoes, fish-filled rivers, and bears and caribou roaming the tundra. I didn't know which season I liked best.

We finally reached the line of ice and Paul guided our boat inside the curve of a large floe. Now we waited with the boat nestled tightly against the ice to match its slow up and down motion. I tried to join my mind and body into the same patience and stoic outlook of the people with whom I now lived. Our intrusion into that half-lit world of ice, water and cold had been done as quietly as possible, yet that world itself gurgled, slurped and groaned in complete indifference to our efforts. The dampness was beginning to infiltrate my white-camouflaged parka, and the morning's hot, heavily-sugared tea, without which no Eskimo seemed able to five miles from

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I again marveled at the unfailing optimism and acceptance of circumstances the Inupiat, or Inuit -the People -displayed. Each man sat motionless in his place; each anticipating face moving almost imperceptibly through a search pattern--near, far, and middle distance—honed by countless generations of the hunt. We were looking for the tell-tale bubbles rising through the water that meant that Oogruk, the bearded seal, was coming up.

Hours passed. Centuries. I inanely wondered what seals ran in. Pods? Packs? Herds? Why couldn't I remember? I also wondered if we would even find any seals. Oogruk males normally did not move in large numbers, and mating season had already passed

I slowly moved my half-frozen feet - quietly, I thought - against a curved, wooden rib of the boat. "Sssshht!" whispered Dwight Milligrock, seated behind me. In that moment I saw everyone's head turn as one in my direction as a slight swirl in the black water in my search area silently exploded with a few silver bubbles. Almost immediately, the black nose of a seal emerged, nostrils opening with a chuff of exhalation, followed a second later by its head breaking water alongside our boat. Its long, white whiskers stood out against its dark head as the animal slowly surveyed the area with large, dark-brown, almost-luminous eyes. Lifetimes passed as we waited, motionless, hardly breathing. I wondered if this could be a solitary seal hunting alone, or if it would be joined by others. How could it avoid not detecting that our boat and its unnaturally-shaped occupants were not part of the ice?

Suddenly, as if solidly joined together, more noisily-exhaling seals slid upward from the water into view. Turmoil suddenly erupted as we all raised our arms as one. Without any conscious thought of moving, I saw the short harpoon I had been holding flying toward the first gray form I saw before me. The water swirled violently as the seals started in fright. Before they could inhale and submerge, our almost-instinctive action had taken its toll. Three—no, four—Oogruk had been hit, as testified by a like number of inflated seal-gut floats, attached by short lines to the harpoons, bobbing and skittering about on the water's surface. After a few seconds of noise-filled celebration, we retrieved and pulled in each shock-stunned seal and clubbed it into oblivion. And one of them carried my spear in its body.

I smiled and laughed in modest exultation with my friends -my partners -because I had achieved a measure of stature among these people who had tolerantly accepted my initial curiosity and questions—who had gradually opened their homes and customs, and their lives, to this white man who did not scorn or demean but sought to learn their different and simple ways, and who had made a place for him in their dances and taught him (what he could comprehend) something of their soft, liquid-sounding language. And who had now honored him by inviting him to be a neophyte member of a subsistence hunt.

Our return to King Island Village was celebrated with the traditional sharing of the catch among the families of the crew. Paul gracefully recognized and publicly honored my accomplishment by placing himself, this one time, in a woman's role by personally severing and awarding me the rear flippers, considered delicacies, from my Oogruk. Following the obligatory visits to each of the hunter's homes and ensuring everyone received something, the dancing had started.

And so, here I sat in the front row with the other members of the crew, nodding with too much warmth and full of too much tea and seal meat, watching Paul and his wife, their arms encased in ceremonial, walrus-hide gauntlets decorated with ivory spangles, reenacting through song and dance, the hunt and the waiting of the villagers for the returning boat.

In the days of my memory, Paul and his crew still hunt Oogruk, and they still celebrate and give thanks, and ask forgiveness of Oogruk for taking what they must to survive. And as long as they continue to seek Oogruk, they will have an extra, unseen crew member sharing a place in their boat.