

CHAPTER 18 – OLD CURSES

The sun rose early on Amanda's first morning of camping in the Arctic. Warm under the caribou blanket, she didn't want to get up. Lars was already outside. She opened her eyes and thought for a moment she must be in a dream. The beautiful Aurora Borealis and stillness of the night gave her a sense that this place didn't really exist.

Lars had left a packet of soup and some biscuits for her by the thermos of hot water. She made quick work of it and went outside.

“Good morning,” Amanda announced.

Lars turned around from sorting out the dog traces.

“Good morning. Did you see the biscuits and soup I left for you?”

“Yes, thank you. I needed that to warm up.”

“Are you still hungry?”

Amanda was becoming acutely aware of how many calories of energy one required per day to survive out here. Already she had felt some brief moments of hunger, but she had not complained about it. Perhaps it was a throw back to a brief period of her life when she thought she might become bulimic in high school, a thought that she had hid well. Now, this ‘close to the edge’ existence concerned her at times, but she felt and trusted Lars’ confidence in this forbidding world. “Yes,” she nodded enthusiastically.

“There is some walrus meat in a plastic container over by the tent. I thought I would give it all to the dogs this morning, but there are some leftovers. ”

“Walrus meat? Does it taste like the seal meat?”

“Don’t ask, just try it. You’ll need the energy.”

Amanda walked back over to the tent and found the container. It was a darker looking meat than the seal she had eaten yesterday. She mustered up her sense of bravery and took a bite, she grunted and swallowed it down. She stuck her tongue out in disgust.

Lars was laughing as he continued to sort out the dog traces.

The meat tasted like old, moldy, sharp, rich cheese. She forced herself to eat the rest, she was hungry. Hunger has a way of making anything seem edible.

“The meat from the walrus is perhaps the best dog food one can get. “

“Oh, is that right?” Amanda beamed.

“It gets slowly digested in the dog’s stomach.”

“And in a human’s stomach?”

Lars didn’t answer the question.

“I’ll stick with the seal meat. The walrus meat is for the dogs!”

“Glad you are enjoying it. Are you ready?” came Lars’ voice from behind.

Amanda turned around from chewing on the last bit of walrus meat

“We need to take down the tent and secure everything to the sledge.”

They packed and tied everything up.

“How far are we going today?”

“Maybe around 50 km. We are going to camp out on the pack ice tonight.”

“How long will it take to cover that distance?”

“We can sledge about 8 to 10 km per hour, so 5 to 6 hours of actual sledge time if we don’t encounter too many obstacles. We will also need to do some seal hunting today. We will need more meat for the dogs and ourselves to eat. If we are lucky, we will have boiled seal meat tonight.”

“How many polar bears are in this area?”

“The last figures I saw were about 2,000 to 2,500 in

the entire Baffin Bay area. This covers a large area though. In the fall, many of the bears in this area reside on Bylot and Baffin Island in Canada, then they migrate east for the winter and spring. They hunt on the pack ice near where we are right now. Most go back to Canada during the summer, but there are always a few stragglers. There are also a few hundred bears to the north of here in the Kane Basin area too.”

“The chances are good then?”

“Our chances will improve as we get closer toward the Melville Bay Reserve.”

“Any tips on spotting one?”

“The polar bear is well camouflaged. You can look for their black nose. They like to hide that with their paws when they’re laying low. In the summer their coats turn yellowish, but it is too early for that. I guess the best advice is to scan the horizon with care. Polar bears tend not to move very fast so you have to be patient.”

“Good to know,” she responded as she got on board the sledge.

“Taama, taama,” yelled Lars. The dogs were off and they were gliding across the snow and ice again. The panting of the dogs echoed in Amanda’s ears.

They sledged for several miles until a large iceberg came into view. It was in the shape of a flattened triangle. It was frozen in place, surrounded by the pack ice. When they got closer, Amanda estimated it must have stood out of the ground about 250 feet.

“I’m going to climb to the top of this iceberg to get a better view. It might be too dangerous for you to climb it. You can walk around the base. Just watch out for falling ice.”

Lars fastened a pair of crampons to his boots and proceeded to walk toward the steep incline of the iceberg with a pair of binoculars around his neck.

Lars made his way up while Amanda made her way around. A small object caught her eye, she picked it up. Staring back at her were two bulging eyes, part of a small ivory and light brown colored figure with thin skinny legs, a

pointed head, and an oversized grotesque face with a mischievous smile. She recoiled in a moment of shock, but managed to hold onto the figurine. Amanda stared into the eyes of the small, well preserved, miniature doll-like object. It seemed like it might come alive. She stopped exploring around the iceberg and headed back to the sledge, eager to find out more about her discovery.

As Amanda reached the sledge, she looked up and saw Lars at the top of the iceberg scanning the surrounding area. She waved as he turned in her direction. He waved back. Amanda was still holding the figurine, not wanting to put it in her pocket just yet. It still looked a little too creepy though it would qualify as a neat souvenir.

Lars walked back down the iceberg and returned to the sledge. "How was your hike around the iceberg?"

"I found this strange figure by the base of the iceberg. Do you know what it is?"

"You've found a tupilak!" He picked up the figurine from Amanda's open palm and began to study it with a focused gaze.

"What's a tupilak?" Amanda asked disconcertingly in reaction to Lars' expression.

"A tupilak is a talisman. You might call it a voodoo doll. It is a form of black magic that the Inuit have historically used when they wanted to curse someone. They created a figure in a secret location using the bones of various animals that they would tie together. Sometimes they would use parts of dead children."

"Dead children?"

"The figure would be made into the shape of the creature which they wanted to hurt the intended victim. Such as a seal which might drag an enemy down and drown him, a polar bear which might eat the enemy, or as an invisible spirit which would frighten a victim to death or steal its soul."

"Whoa."

"The creature was activated with a chant, and then the creator would stroke the figure against their sexual organs to

give it power. Then it would be thrown in the water to find its victim.”

“Did it ever work?” she asked in a hopeful manner.

“Tradition says that whether the tupilak would work or not depended on the magic ability of the enemy or intended victim. If their magic power was greater, then they could reverse the tupilak to attack its creator. Stories abound, but I think that sometimes fear itself could have been a self-fulfilling prophecy in the past, just as it is today. People react based on their beliefs which cause them to behave a certain way.”

Amanda took a deep breath as Lars handed the tupilak back to Amanda.

“I’ve only seen them in stores before. I have never come across one outside, in the wild, before. They are only bought as souvenirs now. They were made of sperm whale tooth from the early 1930s-70s. Ever since whale hunting began to be regulated, tupilaks have been made from caribou horns and narwhal tusks. This one looks to be older though. It seems to be made of several different types of bone. I wonder how it ended up here and still in such good condition.”

“Where do you think this one was made?”

“Hard to say. The souvenir versions are made mostly in East Greenland as that is where this particular part of Inuit culture continues to thrive. But, they can be found all over Greenland. This doesn’t look like one of those souvenir versions.”

“So, you think this was actually used?” Amanda asked as she held the tupilak away from her in the sun.

”It’s possible, maybe it got stuck in some ice and became preserved, only being released by the melting of that ice. That wouldn’t be surprising, as the Arctic has warmed up, ice that has been frozen for many, many years, has revealed whole bodies in some instances. I can’t see any other explanation as it should have disintegrated being such a perishable material.”

“Should I keep it?”

“That depends on how superstitious you are. It would make an interesting souvenir, or maybe it is best if you leave it here.”

“I’m not too superstitious. I’m sure my friends would get a kick out of looking at it.” Amanda stuck the tupilak in her coat pocket. An eerie silence followed Amanda’s decision to keep it.

“Did you see anything up there?” Amanda asked, changing subjects.

“I spotted some seals a little further ahead. Let’s get moving while they are still there.”

Any remaining thoughts about the meaning of finding the tupilak were forgotten. The hunt was on.

Lars stopped the sledge. He motioned in silence and directed Amanda’s attention to a seal lying on a distant piece of ice. He pulled out a pair of binoculars and handed them to Amanda for a better look.

Amanda focused in on the seal. It was marked with gray-white rings on its dark gray back. Its silver colored belly was lying flat on the ice. Where before Amanda would coo at the sight of such an animal, she felt a strange primal urge wash over her as she thought about the nourishment it would provide in such a forbidding place.

“What kind of seal is it?”

“It is a hair seal, or better known as a ringed seal.”

Lars pulled out his .22-caliber rifle and sat down on the ice to steady himself.

Amanda looked on, eyes focused in the binoculars, looking at the seal which was not moving. Lars fired a shot. The bullet hit its mark. Amanda yanked the binoculars away from her eyes as she caught a glimpse of the seal’s final moments of life, and its blood spilling onto the white ice. A few tears ran down her eyes even as she was still feeling a primal urge to hunt.

“Would you like to help me retrieve it?”

“I’d like to stay here if that is ok.”

“No problem.”

Amanda watched in awe as Lars retrieved the seal carcass by dragging it back to the sledge. With methodical precision he skinned the seal with a large knife, blood was everywhere. When he finished, he took the skin back toward the breathing hole to wash off the blood. When he returned, he folded it and secured it to the sledge. Amanda remained silent the entire time.

“The trick is to stay downwind from the seal. It is best to shoot it while it sleeps and to aim for the brain. Even after the seal is killed, one has to react fast as there is a risk the seal could slip back into the water. Ice at the edge of breathing holes is smooth and inclined.”

Lars’ advice on seal hunting seemed to bounce off Amanda. She didn’t want to know this much, but this was the reality of life. She couldn’t hide behind the magic of consumerism.

A feeling of weakness came over her, maybe she should have stayed home. She took a deep breath and remembered why she was out here, and the lessons about life she had already learned, but perhaps not absorbed. She stiffened her spine against this momentary weakness.

The seal fat was satisfying and gave Amanda a sense of warmth as the wind kicked up. The fresh, dark, rich meat, still had a faint fishy taste. She chewed another piece and was reminded of eating liver.

It occurred to Amanda that she was eating in near silence. She wasn’t reading a book or magazine, watching TV, or talking on the phone. She wasn’t listening to music or pondering some gossip or problem at work, it was just her and the food. There was something spiritual about it, though she couldn’t put her finger on it.

“Tonight, we will cook some of the meat in seal fat and soup. A seal dinner is filling, and a perfect high calorie meal for this place.”

“That sounds good,” Amanda mumbled as she chewed away to satisfy her hunger that was forgotten about

when they had found the tupilak. She wasn't worrying about minding any manners or eating etiquette out here in the wilderness.

"What do you think about people who think that seals are cute and shouldn't be hunted?" Amanda asked as she licked her lips.

"Before you ask that question, I think it is better to talk about the concept of nature as people perceive it. Nature in opposition to culture is a Western phenomenon."

"What do you mean?"

"The Inuit don't think of nature as many modern city dwellers might. I think many urban people think that nature should be some sort of pristine environment. Which isn't surprising if one spends most of their days in a concrete jungle. I think the idea of national parks contributes to this belief. There is an expectation that nature should be special, but this is not always true."

"I can identify with that."

"There can be an artificial classification of rigid territories. The Inuit don't think like this. They don't look at nature as either here or there. They exist within it. It is a question of survival to them."

"A question of survival," she repeated.

"Many modern city dwellers live in an artificial environment and in places of excess consumerism. Now these people want to go extreme on the environment. That is why there is a conflict between those who want to protect seals, and Inuit who want to continue hunting."

Amanda thought about Lars' words as she reflected on her life. She had grown up in a world of malls and stores filled with every imaginable product. Even the nature she had experienced in the suburbs was an illusion. The rows of planted trees. The manicured parks with their lawns mowed on a predictable schedule. It was like the zoo.

"While many might see nature as a playground, the Inuit see it as home. There is no nature, only survival."

"Maybe it isn't just Inuit thinking. Maybe the same

thinking could explain the difference between rural and city dwellers,” Amanda thought in a further epiphany of revelation. “It sounds like the conflict in my own country, in Alaska. Some Alaskans want to drill for more oil in a wildlife refuge, many environmentalists who often live far away, do not.”

“I never thought of it that way. It makes sense the way you describe it. But I would be careful to consider whether the Alaskans you mention are transplants or indigenous natives.”

“You sound like you’re only giving me the Inuit perspective. What do you believe?”

“I think both ways of thought are short sighted. The question isn’t about whether to allow hunting, even hunting for furs, it is the scale. On one hand, I don’t think the Inuit grasp just how much more of an impact they have on the delicate Arctic. Their cumulative impact increases as their population expands from historical levels. As their use of technology such as snowmobiles and rifles increases, they become more efficient so they can kill more in the same amount of time. A Danish author raised many of these issues in a controversial book a while back.”

“What about your other hand?”

“Do people who criticize hunting of seals for fur ever consider the impact of the clothes they wear? I think a lot of those people need to get better connected with the everyday items they consume.”

“How so?”

“How much discussion is there about the petrochemicals required to make synthetic clothes like polyester? The leather for their shoes and jackets which come from resource intensive cattle. One hundred grams of beef, one half pound of beef, requires 15,000 gallons of water. How about the large amounts of water required for growing cotton? Water which comes from irrigation, which comes from dams. Dams which affect river life. I know where this seal skin and fur comes from. Do you know how your clothes

were made?”

Amanda looked at her clothes and realized she had no idea, none whatsoever.

“Do people ever think about buying less clothes or shoes because of this?”

She shook her head sideways, recognizing the truth of his words.

“Everything we do has repercussions. Every product we own requires natural resources. On a bigger picture, do people who wouldn’t wear a fur coat, think about the resources they consume that affect other wildlife? Do they live in large homes which contribute to land sprawl which forces animals into smaller and smaller areas? Large homes which require more furniture – wood – and a whole range of consumer products.”

Visions of suburbia flashed through Amanda’s mind.

“How about the cars we drive and energy we consume? Or how that contributes to global warming in the Arctic, where it is magnified, and how that might affect the wildlife here.”

Amanda thought about the people she knew who might be anti-fur, with an exception here or there, they didn’t qualify.

“Before we start accusing others, we need to come clean with our own impact. Not just empty words, but action. Our modern societies are a testament to our ingenuity and success, but there is a lot of waste. The Inuit have a lot to learn from the modern world, but so do we from them.”

“I guess each side could not only do more listening, but more concrete action.”

“The Inuit lost a major source of income when seal furs were banned from importation to America and Europe due to the whole anti-fur movement. That was a loss of a major source of livelihood for the Inuit. Maybe the people in other countries should pay more attention to burping.”

“Burping?”

“Cow burping.”

“Huh?” Amanda was confused at what seemed like a whimsical statement. Lars’ face was all business.

“Cow belching, or burping as you might call it is a very serious issue. “

Amanda had heard of mad cow’s disease and growth hormones, but not cow burping. “Explain.”

“Cows burp methane. Methane is one of the greenhouse gases that warm the earth. It is more than twenty times better at trapping heat. The average cow burps at least 280 liters per day, everyday. You might think of it as 140 two liter bottles of soda filled with gas everyday.”

A look of astonishment crossed Amanda’s face.

“I’ve heard that a cow’s burps per day is equivalent to driving a car two miles. That may not sound like much, until you consider how many cows are out there today.” Lars let out a hearty laugh.

Amanda hesitated then laughed with him.

“It’s funny, but serious too. Even simple and silly things can make a difference. I’ve heard the global population of cattle has doubled in the past forty years to 1.3 billion.”

“That’s a lot of cows.”

“It’s not just cows, but also sheep. In New Zealand, they are taxing farmers based off the number of livestock they keep. In New Zealand there are 50,000,000 sheep, and only 4,000,000 people. Maybe your country should consider the same idea.”

“You aren’t kidding.” Were cow burps now somehow related to Stephanie’s death and the change in weather patterns?

“Speaking of numbers, environmentalists may not realize how many seals live up here. I’ve heard environmentalists talk about their being many more seals before. That is probably true, but there were a lot more of many things prior to our growing and collective impact on the world. We have to be realistic.”

“What can be done?”

“Maybe if we looked at the world through the eyes of

our children. Or at the very least, we should remember how we felt about things when we were children. Maybe that is how we should remake our world.”

Amanda labored to remember how she used to view the world. Her childhood wasn't all rosy, but she did have Polar Bear. She wouldn't be here if she had never opened her closet and accidentally rediscovered her stuffed bear.

“We need to look in the mirror. Then, making the hard decisions on who will sacrifice what. Products should be priced at their true value with less subsidies. Rigorous management too. Your US Alaskan salmon industry might be a good place to start.”

“That doesn't sound easy.”

“I can simplify the philosophy.”

“Tell me.”

“Eat or use what is not taken to excess.”

Before Amanda could make another comment, Lars interrupted. “Let's get going. We will have plenty of time to discuss this later.”

Lars finished cutting up the rest of the seal and fed most of it to the dogs, saving a little for their next few meals. They would need to hunt again for the dogs.

The rest of the day went by without incidence as they continued to sledge on the pack ice looking for a polar bear. They stopped to camp several miles from shore on the pack ice.

Evening set in and Amanda was treated to another Aurora Borealis.

“It is more beautiful than if all the best painters in the world got together to put on an exhibition. It's not like a painting. It's alive,” Amanda remarked as she settled in under her covers.

“We are lucky to be out here.”

“I hope we get even luckier soon to see a polar bear.”

“In the Arctic, luck can change in a hurry. We are getting closer to prime polar bear territory. If we do meet a polar bear, just remember, it isn't like your stuffed animal. It

always strikes first with its left front paw.”

Amanda thought for a moment about what Lars said as she glanced at Polar Bear in the darkness of the tent. This was the first time that Lars had acknowledged the presence of her stuffed bear. She wanted to ask him another question, but he was already snoring.

Any feelings of concern about being out in such a remote place with a man she didn't know well, were all but gone. Lars was a man she could trust. People wearing furs weren't so different after all. They could be very intelligent, witty, humorous. She was purging her stereotypes over the impressions of dress. She had yet to know well a native Inuit though. Perhaps that would come in time too.