

Storm

A low sound hums across the frozen air. In the distance, four dark shapes glide through the white, like ghosts in negative. Their headlights cast a yellow glow. The only colour in a land of white and grey. When the snow is deep, the humming sound is lower. When there are ridges to cross, it is more like an angry wasp. On each snowmobile sits a figure, dressed in layers of leather and fur. A man leads the group, followed by a woman, then a woman, followed by a man.

They have been travelling since first light. Soon they must find a sheltered place to spend the night. This far north the sun barely rises above the horizon before sinking once more to slumber. They know where they are going. These trails were used by their parents; by their grandparents; by generations before them all.

Wind whistles over the tundra. Everything in its path must bow down or drift. Nothing is foolish enough to challenge the wind, not this far north. The place where

they are heading is protected from its relentless power. A small wooden hut nestled in a hollow. Normally they would be there by now. Lighting the fat-lamp to dry their sealskin mittens. But the weather has surprised them. At this time of year it is very cold but calm. A good time to hunt caribou. The weather was calm and still when they left, now it is the opposite. A gale is blowing in from the sea.

The two shapes at the back begin to fall behind. The man's snowmobile is losing power. The woman slows down to wait for him. He needs to check the cylinders but it's not possible here. When they reach shelter he will check. For now, they will just have to keep going, however slowly.

The wind is getting stronger by the minute. A flurry of snow whips past. More snow falls, and the wind blows it into smoky swirls. The two lead vehicles fade to pale grey, then seconds later disappear from view. They will arrive at the shelter first and get things ready for the others.

The man's snowmobile slows and then stops. He tries to restart it but the engine is dead. He will have to leave it here. It is a hard decision. They will fix it or drag it home on their return journey. The woman motions to the man. He climbs on the back of her snowmobile. The fur around the edge of their hoods captures flakes of snow

for a split second before the wind blasts it away. The pair start moving, but the blizzard is becoming a white-out.

After five minutes they are forced to stop again, disorientated. There is no faint glow from the sun to show them which way to head. The landmarks they have memorized, which their ancestors memorized, have disappeared. They cannot get off the snowmobile. The wind would be too strong for them to stand up. The man leans forwards and hugs the woman. His arms barely reach round the many layers she is wearing.

Darkness is falling. They cannot stay here. They will certainly freeze to death. They must keep going. This land is part of them, they breathe its rhythms, but those rhythms are becoming unpredictable. There shouldn't be a storm now. It shouldn't blow in this suddenly, and with such force. The weather is changing, and centuries of knowledge cannot keep up. The bonds which connect people and nature are beginning to fray. Something precious beyond imagining, is coming apart.



Yutu 1

Someone shoves me hard from behind. I stumble to my knees and my school bag flies a few metres to the right. A strong hand grips my shoulder and tries to roll me over. I look up. Sami stares down at me. I grab his coat and pull him into the snow next to me. We roll over like seals. Four or five kids stand and watch, shouting for Sami to get me, hold me down. After one final twist I roll him onto his side and sit on him. He can't move. The snow in my ear melts and runs inside my hood and down my neck. I stand up and brush the snow from my legs and arms, then offer Sami my hand.

'Nice try,' I say.

'Nearly had you,' he grins back. 'So nearly.'

I collect my bag from the snowy edge of the path and give it a shake.

'Come round tomorrow? Gaming?' he asks.

'I have to check first. Grandma might need something doing.'

‘You’re going to start your assignment, aren’t you?’
Sami says. ‘You’re such a nerd.’

I smile. We both know he’s right.

Sami and the others head off down the path towards a cluster of small houses. ‘See ya!’ they call without turning round. Sami waves a hand in the air.

I walk slowly in the opposite direction, towards a low hill, dyed orange by the setting sun. At the foot of the hill is a building unlike any others in our village. The other houses have smooth dark-red walls and look as if they are floating. They need to be raised up on pillars, or else the heat from inside would melt the solid permafrost foundations, and the buildings would sink. This house looks as if it has already sunk beneath the earth and then risen up to breathe, like some kind of rocky whale. Its walls are made of rough stones the size of someone’s head. They pile up to join a wooden roof which looks like it was made from driftwood. Because it was.

This is my house. I live here with my *anaanatsiaq*—my grandma. She’s always lived here. People keep trying to move her into what she calls *modern* houses, even though families have been living in these *modern* houses since well before I was born. They worry our house isn’t warm enough, that

without pillars it might begin to sink. I could tell them it never gets warm enough in our house to melt any kind of frost, let alone permafrost. Often I can see my own breath. I'm used to it though. The raised sleeping area at the back is always cosy, which helps.

I bend down to open the front door—also made from driftwood. The doorway is Hobbit-height, which was fine until recently. Now I am officially the tallest boy in my class, possibly in my school. I bang my head on the doorway at least once a day.

Inside, Grandma is sitting in her chair, sewing. A piece of sealskin is draped across her knees, colourful stitches blooming along one edge. She looks up and gives me a smile.

'Welcome home,' she says, as if I've been away for days.

I dump my bag on the floor and sit in the chair next to her. I don't know how she can see well enough to sew. Weak sunlight filters through the window behind her. I switch on the light and she makes a soft sighing sound. She doesn't like the light. She only stopped using her seal-fat lamp a few years ago. I had a cough which wouldn't get better. In the end the doctor said the lamp had to go. It kept turning the walls black anyway.

‘How was school?’ She speaks to me in the language of our ancestors. She knows English words, but it tires her out to make the strange noises English requires. The old language starts at the back of the throat. The sounds are shorter and more precise. Very different to English sounds. I love the rhythm of her words, calm and steady.

‘School was OK. I have homework and a science assignment to finish over the holidays. I don’t know if anyone else will bother doing them.’

Grandma is silent. She looks at me, her hands resting on the sealskin. Grandma speaks when she has thought things through. Never in anger, or impulsively. That means conversations often move quite slowly. On a few occasions I’ve begun to wonder whether she’s fallen asleep, then quietly and carefully she will begin to talk.

‘What will you do to have fun, this holiday?’ she asks, finally.

‘I don’t know. I’ll think about that when I’ve done the assignment. Maybe play table tennis with Sami. Or some ball hockey.’

She looks at me. She looks past the words and studies my face. I swear she can see right inside my head.

Perhaps it’s time to tell her what I really want. I have a feeling she already knows. The idea has been

floating round my brain for months. The more I think about it, the faster my words evaporate. The opposite of Grandma, I guess.

‘If the weather is good, maybe I could go north to the cabin for a few days.’

Grandma makes another soft sighing sound.

I can’t stop now.

‘I want to take the sledge. Petur has said he’ll let me borrow two dogs. You’re always telling me it’s important to keep the old ways alive.’

‘Learning the old ways is one thing. Taking the sledge because we don’t have a snowmobile is a different thing. You’re too young to go off on your own. Especially with someone else’s dogs.’

I feel my shoulders sink. Grandma has a way of saying things which makes it hard to argue. I try a different tack.

‘I want to bring back some seal meat. I want to contribute to the communal food store. I know the store is running low.’

After a few minutes she says, ‘When I was young, boys would go out to watch seal hunts as soon as they could walk on the sea ice. They would learn how to find a lair, how to find a blowhole. How to throw a harpoon. It would take years to learn everything. Then they would be ready to hunt for themselves.’

‘But I’ve been out with Petur loads of times. He’s been teaching me for *years*. He says I have a gift for hunting.’

Grandma stares at me for a long time. ‘You cannot go alone,’ she says. End of story. She doesn’t say that, but it’s clear.

I pick up my school bag and head to the back of the house. ‘I’m going to read for a bit,’ I call.

I lie on my bed and stare at the ceiling, made up of close-fitting wooden panels. The walls are clad in the same honey-coloured wood. Each piece is different. Some have swirling knots, or wavy lines. I know them all. Beneath me, the bedcover is made of caribou skin. Sewn together by Grandma. People come from other villages to buy things she has made. People respect her because she is a village elder, but also because she makes beautiful things, using techniques which are slowly being forgotten. They also respect her because she looks after me.

For seven years Grandma has taken care of me, even though she barely makes enough money to pay for the oil which lights the stove. Maybe that’s why I find it so hard when we disagree. But I don’t think she’s realized that I’m not a little boy any more. I’m fourteen. I can’t stay in this frozen village for ever. She wants me to learn the old ways, but she won’t let

me go and try them out for real. She doesn't like using the food store, but she won't let me go and hunt. We seem to be pulling in opposite directions more and more, and I don't know how to fix it.

I guess there's one thing I can rely on. It's Friday and that means trout for dinner. Again.