

HOME

We stood atop a vertical cliff on the western edge of Nunivak Island. Broken, ever-shifting Bering Sea ice, interspersed by leads of steaming water stretched from the foot of the 200 foot precipice to the horizon. Plaintive keening cries of wintering long-tailed ducks drifted from the mercury colored leads. At our feet, a massive cornice, sculpted by incessant winter winds, curled over the edge of the escarpment. Looking inward was a natural lithograph of ancient decaying volcanic craters, black basaltic lava fields, tundra and snow.

We were there to count muskox—an annual inventory required for management of the herd. There were three of us. Tony, a younger Cup'ik man with the graceful, natural approach Nunivak residents have gained from years of traveling the land, myself, a born and raised Alaskan biologist new to the unique Nunivak Island environment, and our leader, Richard, a lanky, unusually tall, quietly competent Cup'ik man. Richard, peering seaward, looked concerned. He quietly told us we needed to start traveling away from the precipitous cliffs as the weather was going to change. We started our snow machines and began following Richard with the edge of the cliff close by on our right side. Each of us had a handmade wooden sled, loaded with gear, tied to the back of our snow machines with a length of heavy line.

It was very subtle. The sky, over the next couple of hours, became opaque. Lightly falling snow and the Bering Sea began to meld until horizon was indistinguishable. It was impossible to tell

up from down or if a rock was a distant object or right at your feet. Visibility was extremely limited and daylight was waning. It was as if a soft down blanket was being gently set upon us.

At darkness the snowfall became heavy, driven by a freshening southwest wind. Each flake of snow left a meteor-like streak in the glare of our headlights. I had to averted my face from the frigid wind to keep my cheeks from freezing. I wore a warm parka, snow pants, a traditional beaver hat sewn by my wife, and my feet were ensconced in sealskin boots with dried grass as insoles...a hand-sewn gift from my mother-in-law.

Richard knew the island like most people know the layout of their home. Keenly observant, he and spent most of his life traveling the island on foot, dogsled and snow machine. He seemed to recognize every promontory, ravine, knoll and creek. We slowly traveled from one nearly indiscernible landmark to the next. To my untrained eyes it appeared impossible.

Visibility was so limited that I could only focus on the tail lights of Richard's machine, and note the flickering headlight from Tony's machine as an assurance he hadn't fallen behind.

After hours of travel, my eyes and mind became confused. At times, the incessant wind-blown snow made it appear as I was stationary and suspended in a near aqueous state. Only the thumps and bumps of the snow machine's relentless progress assured me that I was still moving and in contact with the earth. My mind wandered. I struggled to remain mindful of the present risks

and dangers, knowing alertness and awareness are the only defenses against the unseen and unknown in such a risky, chaotic environment.

The entire landscape, itself sculpted by violently expelled magma from deep within the earth was being reformed with graceful, artistic sand dune-like creations of hardened drift.

Occasionally we passed muskox in the periphery of our limited vision. The ancient, Pleistocene creatures, with long, flowing hair, stood with their backs to the wind, heads down, and stationary.

Ever present, even though I was in extremely competent company, was the fear of having to spend the night out in this confusion. The cold, carried by both wind and snow found every gap in my clothing. Exposed skin at wrist and face eventually succumbed to the onslaught and became numb. Great weariness began to overcome me.

Time became difficult to measure, and our travels began to feel endless. Occasionally we stopped to check our sleds, adjust clothing and stretch tired muscles. It was difficult to hear each other speak, but there was no need to talk. Our needs were unspoken, but clear. We knew we couldn't stay out in the blizzard indefinitely. There was urgency to our travel. Over the muffled muttering of our idling machines it felt as if giant brooms were sweeping the land. In some places, where the wind was restricted by rock or drift there was a low, moaning sound. When we faced the wind the long hairs of our wolf ruffs snapped at our cold-soaked faces.

Even though we were traveling slowly, I nearly ran into Richard's sled when he suddenly stopped. He began rummaging under the tightly lashed tarp on his sled and extracted a shovel. I had visions of us digging a snow cave in a drift and spending a long night waiting for clarity and daylight, a possibility we had briefly discussed earlier.

I stumbled through the uneven snow toward Richard, my legs rubbery, and cold. As Tony joined us, I saw a weathered wooden hatch standing vertical, nearly covered with hardened drift.

Richard began to dig, throwing irregular blocks of snow with the wind. Soon, he uncovered a small door, untied a cord wrapped around a nail and pulled outward. In the dim peripheral light of the snow machine headlights was a passageway sloping downward. With the aid of a flashlight, its beam weakened by frozen batteries, we ducked into a low, narrow tunnel. After several steps Richard unlatched another door which swung inward, and we emerged into a room—a traditional sod house, buried into the crust of the earth.

Smells of life assailed my nose, a richness of earth, rocks, roots, and remnants of dried fish, and seal oil, from previous occupants. Devoid of the scrape of drifting snow and intense wind, it was absolutely silent. I felt near deafness in the absence of sound and we spoke to each other in hushed tones.

The dramatic change was overwhelming and it took me several minutes to accept and recognize where we were. The radiant heat from the very core of our planet earth immediately began to warm our frigid bodies. Above us, in the soft glow of the flashlight, were stalwart drift logs

forming a frame, topped with a heavy layer of soil and tundra, The beams culminated in a square-peaked center with a small opening, covered by drifted snow, to what I now perceived as the “outside world”.

We had reached safe haven in the crust of the earth. All concerns and worries, real and unreal were left behind in the maelstrom above. Exhaustion from our travails had left us spent, thirsty, and hungry. After retrieving sleeping gear, food, a lantern and a gas stove we ate boiled reindeer meat and drank hot tea. Our heavy outer gear, hung against the wall, steamed in the warmth of our underground chamber. Satiated, and exhausted, we sat on the wooden sleeping benches surrounded by peacefulness, warmth, and a sense of affinity with each other, and the earth.

Truly, we were home.

