

WHITE GOOSE

by
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The crunch crunch of my caribou mukluks on crystalline snow comforts me. The climb to the cairn from my cabin is short: less than the length of a hockey rink. The empty bucket I carry bangs my leg; so I raise my arm straight out from my side, the other one, too, thinking, *I am a raven*. Sunshine flashes off snow, dazzling my eyes. I shove the hood of my parka back. My black hair soaks its warmth.

I welcome the unending summer days, bringing light, warmth, life to us—Inuit and animals—who live on this peninsula and the endlessly level tundra running from hilltop to horizon. Spring came early, thinning the ice. Papa repeated, “Life is fragile in the Arctic. Take precautions, Kirima.” Why didn’t *you*, Papa? Each day since he left me, never to return, the sun arcs higher across the sky. Glancing at the glacier blue, cloud-spotted sky, I smile up at him. He isn’t paddling his kayak across the sea, dodging icebergs, hunting the walrus of his dreams. No, Papa skates across blue ice, pummeling a hockey puck past white-clad opponents for a game-winning goal. Thoughts of him in the happy land are like the fires that cure. The hole in my chest is beginning to heal.

I turn the bucket over, sit. The cairn looks like a stone igloo—unlike the innes of our people and totally alien to the fir, rock, and cedar cabin Papa and I share...shared. I had the cairn built on this hill, overlooking our cabin and ice-dotted bay so Papa can rest in a familiar place—a place filled with memories, resonating with the songs and drums of our ancestors.

Last month, the elders’ words harpooned my heart: “Your Papa won’t be coming home.” Papa *is* home.

Papa said the seasons he traveled with the St. Louis Blues taught him to sleep in strange places. But I heard the silence behind his words. I knew he missed me—like I missed him—and he missed his people, his home.

I let my gaze wander down the hill, past the cabin to the bay.

Those seasons floated downriver to the sea twelve years ago. I was only six, but I still don’t forget the day Papa told me he was staying home to school me in the ways of the outside world and the ways of the Inuit. That day, our elders received the three-hundred-year-old bones of an inuk woman, returned by a museum for proper burial. Papa held me so I could watch the ceremony. I saw ice fog on his eyelashes. The beating of drums and the chanting of singers echoed from the past for our ancestress.

As they did again last month...for Papa.

With my thumb, I brush my eyes as they caress the totem, a seven-foot cylinder of Douglas fir guarding the cairn. I imagine Papa’s eyes, gleaming like soapstone, as he admires it, too. His pride swells in my chest. The artist I found on the internet carved it exactly as I wanted. The lower half—covered with hockey emblems, kayaks, the peninsula, cabin, and hill behind it—reminds me of Papa’s physical life. Spreading from the center, the wings of a raven symbolize Papa’s love of life. Above, the neck and head of a wolf. Papa’s fans, even if they don’t understand Inuktitut, know Amaruq is The Wolf. It reminds me Papa’s spirit never dies.

It and the cairn are an inuksuk, landmark, for everyone who travels our treeless tundra. We located Papa's snowmobile using my laptop and GPS, but they could only help us save his frozen body for the ceremony. Ancient landmarks guide the soul.

I stand like the wolf totem, facing the place where water and sky become one, and shout, "I am Kirima Akuliakat!"

My soul and the name Papa gave me are intertwined with the hill and peninsula. In Inuktitut, Kirima is a hill, Akuliakat a point of land between two bays. Alaska is the only mother I know. Alaska was part of Papa. Now he is part of her.

I whisper, "Yes, Papa, life is fragile. But love is strong."

Through my window, I watch a black "V" of southbound geese. In my blood, I feel the fever of salmon spawning in river-lakes further south. Taliriktug is pushing me to marry him. He has become Christian and craves commitment. I don't know what I am or what I crave. I try to concentrate. Designing a new layout for my clan's web site proves too difficult today. I settle for uploading the latest pictures of our wares—handwoven blankets, silver jewelry, soapstone carvings, and handcrafted snowshoes. Before I save them to the laptop, I accidentally erase them from my camera. *Groan.*

I push back my chair and twist the end of my long black braid.

I must go to the village and surrounding area and retake the snapshots. Three trips and as many days. In the village, I can visit my grandparents. I slip out of my caribou fur dress and moccasins and into my trousers, two pullovers, mukluks, mittens, and parka. Grabbing my helmet and goggles from the peg beside the door, I start to open it, pause, shake my head. I'm forgetting the camera.

Four times I try to start the snowmobile. At last, it growls like a team of huskies fighting over a piece of meat. Turning, I observe the bay's metallic sheen. Like polished chrome it reflects the early autumn sky. My nose and cheekbones sense the temperature dropping. Winter crouches behind the horizon. Darkness creeps closer. In two months, the sun will set one final time, plunging this land into everlasting night—still and silent, nearly black as the grave. I ride to the hilltop and stop beside the totem, a creature from another world. I listen for Papa's laughter and hear the bark of a seal.

An hour later, I park my snowmobile in front of my grandparents' hut. My grandmother greets me, seats me in a chair opposite my grandfather, picks up her sewing and sits down in the chair beside him. My grandmother sews. My grandfather smokes. They are silent. I cannot read what is in their eyes.

Finally, Grandfather says, "Kirima, time you know other half who you are."

I start to speak. He holds up his hand. I shut my mouth.

"I have address, your mother's family in Mis-sour-i. Know them ... know yourself."

"My mother is dead. My father is dead. You're my grandparents. I know who I am. I am Inuk."

Grandmother rests her hands in her lap. "Half Inuk. Half white," she says calmly.

My face stings as if she slapped me.

Gently, she adds, "Kirima, we don't know for sure that your mother is dead."

My eyes water from a pressure building up inside me from my earliest memories, a pressure building from those days when I asked why I had no mother and Grandmother

would hold me close and sing the old songs ... a mounting urgency, a growing hunger, a glacier, moving imperceptibly but inexorably, carving its way through me, piling up debris until now it is pressing against my lips and eyelids.

I repeat, "...don't know for sure..."

I ask the taxi driver to wait. Beads of perspiration tickle my neck and run down my back. I wear only a sweatshirt with the Blues' emblem, jeans, no jacket. Even this is too much. Breathing is difficult. The air stinks with fumes, trash, dung. I center my backpack between my shoulder blades and march slowly to the front door.

Twice I knock. The door opens and a walrus in overalls, close-cropped gray hair, and white chin stubble frowns at me. He glances at my backpack and the cab parked along the curb. He stares at my sweatshirt. His eyes avoid mine.

I smile and say, "I'm..."

He interrupts. "You're my little Eskimo, aren't you?" He scratches his chin, rubs the bib of his overalls, shakes his head.

I wince. I want to say, "I am Inuit." Instead, I ask, "Grandfather?"

I hear the braying of a caribou, a woman calling from inside. "Bob, who's at the door?"

"Just a student, Barbara, filling out a survey."

He drops the lie from his mouth as naturally as a glacier calves.

He steps onto the porch, closing the door behind him. "Good thing that taxi's waiting," he mutters.

His words rub my ears like gravel in a miner's pan.

"Your grandmother wouldn't like it—you being here."

My stomach sours.

"Why did you come?"

"My father is dead. I want to know if my mother lives."

The walrus face softens. A tender smile peeks at me from inside the whiskers.

Hope, like a gosling, flutters against my sweatshirt.

The walrus man says, "She's in Florida. You have money to get there?"

I nod.

"Good," he replies. "Barbara doesn't know it, but I've got Lisa's address. I'll get it for you." He disappears inside. When he returns, he hands me a piece of paper and says, "It was good seeing my little Eskimo again." He winks.

I hear the calving of the glacier.

I take a bus and sit by the window. Green farmland gives way to green trees and blue rivers, soars to green mountains, drops to green coastal plains edged in blue Gulf waters. Color saturates the outside world. My laptop's monitor and built-in speaker didn't prepare me for this constant assault of sights and sounds. Engines grumble, electricity hums, people talking talking—so many, all different, crowding every space. I wonder ... does Mother look like the woman across the aisle? Is her hair dark like mine or yellow like gold? One question gnaws at my throat. I try to strangle it. It devours me: Will she ask me to stay?

The bus arrives in Orlando early Sunday. Compared to a dogsled trek, the trip was easier on my body but harder on my mind. Both feel flabby. I eat a convenience

store breakfast so my stomach won't growl. I buy a tee-shirt. In the restroom, I wash, put on the tee-shirt and clean jeans. I wrap my dirty clothes around my laptop and struggle to zip my backpack. I buy a map, board a city bus. It passes lakes, ponds, pools—much water—like home. The bus deposits me within blocks of the address. Walking wakes me. I chant an old song while observing my new surroundings.

I reach the address. A monument stands like an inuksuk at the entrance. Below it, yellow and red flowers smile up at me. My heart is a goose, glad to be passing winter in the south. I wander among rows of apartments three layers high until I find the building, see the number of her door on the second floor.

Suddenly, the warm air in my lungs rushes out, leaving my chest cold. My arms feel naked, legs tired. Climbing the white metal steps is like trudging through a foot of snow. Now, standing outside her window, I hear sounds of laughter, music, voices—TV—good, she's awake. I pound the door, step back, wait.

She opens the door and raises her thin brown eyebrows. She sucks her upper lip. Her round ice blue eyes widen. Mist forms in their corners. She whispers, "Kirima?"

I smile.

She pushes back the door, steps toward me, hesitates, slowly extends her arms.

I lean forward and rest my forehead on hers as she pats my shoulders, strokes my arms, and begins to cry softly. She smells like musk. I breathe deeply.

She brings me into her home. My eyes embrace the room. It is white. The walls are fresh snowfall. The sofa and two plush chairs are yellow snow. The carpet is polar bear fur. Light criss-crosses the open space.

She steers me to a round table of glass and seats me in a chair of soft white cushions. A pile of envelopes, bills, newspapers, and advertisements sprawl across the table. She opens the refrigerator. "This calls for a toast."

Her voice is thin and vibrates like a taut snowshoe string, plucked. I strain to hear her over the TV voices. I watch with apprehension as she fills her glass with blood-red liquid. "I'm not thirsty," I say. Vodka makes Tal's brother vomit in the snow and lie beside it. Tal and I vowed to each other we wouldn't drink alcohol. She pours a spoonful in another glass, hands it to me.

"Just a little wine," she says, raising her glass. "To the future, Kiri."

I wince. Hearing my name sliced in two makes me feel as if I've been split and the halves are held together only by a sinew. We empty our glasses. She brings the bottle to the table, sits across from me behind the pile of papers.

Her hair is the color of a pale Kodiak bear, blonde-silver-pinkish brown. Her features are delicate, her body stout. She wears a housecoat, no make-up. Her complexion is uneven. Her lips are wispy like ptarmigan tracks. She reminds me of a ptarmigan. I will think of her as Aqiggiq.

I smile and say, "You're home is beautiful—so spacious."

She laughs. "This tiny apartment? You're seeing most of it from where you sit." She raises her brows and chews her upper lip. "I've only got one bedroom, but if you don't mind sleeping on the couch ... How about it? Can you stay awhile?"

I exhale a breath I didn't know I was holding. "Yes."

"That calls for another drink," she says and pours herself a glass. She takes my glass. "Let me get you something—tea, coffee, cola, Florida orange juice?"

"Juice, please."

With her back to me, she asks, “What brings you to Florida?”
“I came to see you.”

Facing the refrigerator, she tilts her head back as if seeing something on the ceiling. When she turns, her eyes are shining. She says something I don’t hear because music blares on the TV. I ask her to repeat it. She crosses the room, snatches the remote control from an arm of the recliner, mutes the program. Facing the TV, she asks, “So, how’s your father?”

I examine the rough white texture of the ceiling. “He was killed in a snowmobile accident five months ago.”

She drops the remote control, rushes into another room, shuts the door. I hear water running, toilet flushing. I sip my juice and watch TV people silently fight, run to cars, race away. She emerges from the bathroom, sees my glass is empty and takes it. Only then do I notice the silver band, engraved with a wolf’s head, on the ring finger of her left hand.

Her eyes are dusted with powder. “Sorry,” she murmurs. “Must be the wine.”

She talks about Orlando, her office job, jobs I might enjoy. I tell her I will help with rent and food. She refuses, then agrees.

She reaches toward me. Some papers fall to the floor. “Why don’t we have some fun?” she says, touching my hand.

She gives me a “make-over” and puts my hair up in a French braid. She changes clothes and remarks how we’re nearly the same size. She hands me a shiny blouse and dressy sandals. My heart races like an arctic fox. We will go shopping, eat at her favorite restaurant, watch a movie. All day I am living a dream, doing these things...with my mother.

We stay up late, eating microwaved popcorn, watching black-and-white movies. When I can’t keep my eyes open, she makes the sofa into a bed and says, “I’m calling in sick tomorrow and maybe the day after, too. We’ll go to all the amusement parks. It’s not every day I find a daughter on my doorstep.”

I frown. “But you’re not sick...?”

“After wine and no sleep, I might as well be! What good would I be at work, thinking of the fun we could be having? I’ve got sick days. I’m using them.” She kisses the top of my head and tucks the comforter around me. “I’ve been thinking,” she whispers. “Around other people, you’d better call me Aunt Lisa. That’ll avoid a lot of questions.”

“Aunt Lisa.”

“But when we’re by ourselves, if you want, that is, you can call me...”

“Mother.”

She squeezes my hand.

Aqiggiq says I’ve helped her pay off some bills. Buying the instant-print digital camera was a good idea. I like taking snapshots at theme parks. Easy money—show people their picture, for five dollars print it on film and give to them. No time to write in my blog. Tal’s blog bores me now. I’m putting together a portfolio. For Christmas, I’ll surprise Aqiggiq with a poster made from the photo I took of us, dressed up for her office Christmas party.

Hot-cold-hot-cold inside and out, and only February. I used to think the sun left Alaska in winter to vacation in the south. Now I know it vacations in Alaska. In winter, it returns south to work—rising, setting, heating, cooking. It hammers the back of my head. I have headaches for the first time ever. Air conditioning chills my skin. This surprises me. Cold is the air I breathe in Alaska, but there is no breath in the cold here, only stale recycled air.

I sit in my chair on the balcony to escape the noise—TV, telephone, upstairs people fighting and making up, downstairs people playing music that enters my body through my feet, vibrating my bones. Aqiggiq has many friends—women she shops with, gossips with, drinks with. I must call her “Aunt Lisa” for these friends.

She calls me inside to eat pizza we phoned for.

We eat, she talks, I think.

While she chews, I ask, “Have you ever played Blanket?”

She shakes her head.

“It’s a game we play in Alaska. Everyone in the community takes hold of a sealskin blanket. We stretch it taut and toss someone in the air to see who can bounce the highest. Tal usually wins.”

She swallows and says, “I think there’s a trampoline competition on TV tonight.”

I wonder if there is anyone in her community I would trust to hold the Blanket.

One evening, after she turns off the TV, I ask, “How did you meet Papa?”

“Kiri, I’m tired. We’ll talk about that another time. Okay?”

She must see my disappointment because she says, “Wait.” She goes to her room and returns with a photo album. “Here. Maybe later we’ll talk.”

She goes to bed. I open the album. A dark-haired baby on a polar bear rug. *Me*. Me in an amautik, hanging from Aqiggiq’s shoulders, my nose and eyes peeping over the edge of its pouch at the snow. Behind us stands an inne. The amautik swallows Aqiggiq. Next, me in a high chair, grinning, the walrus with his caribou woman at the table, frowning. Then, Aqiggiq holding the baby, looking like a little girl trying not to drop her doll. Now, Papa, young like me, wearing his hockey uniform and a big smile, his black eyes gleaming. Seeing this picture breaks a block of ice in me. I cry. I can’t stop crying. I put the album under my pillow and weep until I sleep.

The next day I thank her for letting me look at the photo album.

She says I can have it. “Now that you’re here, Kiri, I don’t need it.” Her voice is bright. Her words have no weight.

I say, “What about the plane ticket to Alaska—the one in the back of the album?”

She reddens. “I didn’t ask your father to buy it for me.” She grabs her purse and says, “I’ve got to go. I’ll be late for work.” She rushes out the door.

I think of Tal, of his new faith that makes me feel uncomfortable, yet secure in his love.

I rent a car, drive to the Everglades. It’s only March. Already I’m wearing shorts and a sleeveless top. My waterproof boots are hot and heavy. Humidity drenches me. The glades are an ocean of grass—tepid, sluggish, crowded with creatures. Long-legged birds dip long bills into murky water and snatch slimy fish. Alligators sun themselves. One is tossing its meal into the air, catching it, tossing it, trying to break it into pieces. I

move closer, raise my camera, freeze. A white goose. Its feathers are caked in mud, dripping vegetation. Its head wobbles. The alligator grins at me, feathers stuck between its teeth.

I cook the evening meal. When my mother tastes the salmon, she comments, “Delicious. Where did you learn to cook like this?”

“From Grandmother in Alaska.”

She lowers her head.

“Mother,” I begin.

She glances up at me. I seldom call her that these days.

“I’m going home next month.”

She puts down her fork.

I try to shoot my harpoon swiftly and directly. “Winter will be over. I want to photograph the land as it awakens from its sleep. I never finished redesigning the clan’s web site. Tal and I must talk.”

“You don’t like it here.”

I reach across the table, touch her wrist. “I’ll visit, Mother.”

She nods.

“Why not come with me?” I ask. “For a visit.” I sit up, lean forward. “Alaska is beautiful in the summer. You should see it.”

She picks up her fork and stabs her fish. “I have.”

The morning of my departure, after breakfast, I slip the photo album underneath the pile of papers on the table.

Mother drives me to the airport.

“Are you sure Tali-whatever-his-name-is will be in Anchorage to meet you?”

“He’ll be there.”

“When I get a computer, I’ll e-mail you.”

“Good. I’d like that.”

“Send me a postcard. I’ll write you.”

“I will.”

We stand by her car at the curb.

“I wish these airport people would let me go inside with you like they used to.”

“It’s all right, Mother.”

I lower my backpack and suitcase to the sidewalk. I hold out my arms. She steps forward and rests her head on my forehead. I pat her shoulders and sigh.

Overhead, I hear the honking of the geese.

THE END