

Collected short stories of fifty years among Native and Mixed Blood people of Western and Central Alaska. The Native American author writes fictionalized accounts about the lives of these Alaskans. The tales cover a broad scope of all human experience.

Tales of Nunavut, Stories of Nunavunga

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**TALES
FROM
NUNAVUT,
STORIES FROM
NUNAVUNGA**

**STORIES OF
ALASKAN NATIVE PEOPLE**

BY

JACQUES L. CONDOR MAKAI MEH

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SALVATION AND BENNY NAUGAPUK

Nobody in the village could remember the exact day when Benny Naugapuk left Nunavunga, but everybody remembered the day he came back. It was the fifth of July, the day after the big party on our beach. The day before, all the villagers had attended the party-feast down on the beach by the airstrip.

On the fifth, everyone was either tired and sleepy, or lazy and slow from eating so much and staying up all through the night of near-endless sun. Of course, some of the young men and a couple of the older ones had hangovers from drinking the booze somebody had bootlegged in from Rich Millie's store. There wasn't supposed to be any drinking in the village because we'd voted ourselves dry about a year before, but when somebody in Nunavunga wants a drink, there's always a way to get it.

Even Little Daniel, our village policeman, went along with the drinking at our Fourth of July celebration. He told the drinkers that he'd arrest them if they drank inside the village town limits, but if they sat on the other side of the airstrip on government property and drank, he couldn't arrest them.

It sure was funny watching those men come weaving and wobbling across the airstrip to get some of the meat and muktuk and then stagger back to drink booze while they ate. By three in the morning they couldn't even crawl back across the airstrip and we all made fun of them, especially Grannie Niakognaluk, the oldest person in the village. She hates it when our best young men get so drunk they can't even stand up. Grannie Nia sure lectured them for about half an hour from our side of the airstrip, but I think they were so drunk by that time, they didn't hear a single one of the names she called them. I didn't know the old woman knew so many *Kabloonaq-white-man's* cuss words.

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As you probably have guessed, it was a really good party and Fourth of July celebration. We had plenty of meat and fish and lots of canned GI foods my uncle Kakokto got from his friends at the Air Force base on the northeast end of our island. We didn't have fireworks because it never gets dark enough to see them up here in summer.

I was assigned to be part of the clean-up crew the next morning by our head man, Amak George, who was acting like his usual official, important self. That was the morning the mail plane from Nome came in, and who stepped off that plane but Benny Naugapuk. Of course, none of us knew who he was at first.

I have to tell you something about Benny. He was the village 'bad-boy'. If there was trouble, you could bet your best parka Benny was mixed up in the middle of it. If something went missing, the first person everyone thought of was Benny. If there was mischief and sneaky things going on, Benny was behind it. One day, Amak George, who is sort of our village chief, and was elected because he's the richest man around, told Benny he had two days to get his things together, because Amak George and the elders were kicking him out of the village. Benny didn't need two days. He was gone the next day, and until he came back, everyone had just about forgotten about him. It had been eight or nine years.

I didn't recognize him at first, and I don't think he really recognized me. I saw the pilot say something to Benny while he waited for his bag to be unloaded.

The pilot must have told Benny who we were, because Benny yelled out, "*Hey! Moses, how ya doin'?* *Hello Auntie Edith and you, too, Willie and Clara, Hello.*"

I remember that clearly because we were all surprised when this strange guy called to us.

"Who is that?" Clara asked the rest of us.

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Auntie Edith, being the elder in charge called out a question in the language and asked him who he was.

“*Suna una? Kina? Susiorput? Suwit?* What do you want? Who are you?” she said.

“It’s me, Benjamin Naugapuk!” He answered in English, but we knew he must be Yup’ik because he understood Auntie Edith. But we couldn’t be sure. From this distance it looked like he had on a *Kabloonaq* business suit, with a tie and everything. “Don’t you remember me, Auntie Edith? Little Benny?” The man in the business suit hollered.

We all looked at Auntie Edith because she’d clapped her hand to her mouth to cover her surprise when he said his name. Auntie Edith shook her head with quick jerks as if she was trying to shake off a pesky bot fly.

“I don’t like hearin’ that name,” she whispered to us. “I have bad memories about that boy. He caused a lot of trouble around here not too long ago. Besides, he don’t have any kin folk or relatives out here.”

I remembered some of the scrapes that young Benny got into, but he was much older now. Clara was too young to remember him; so was Willie. “Maybe he’s changed, Auntie Edith,” I said. “He looks different from here.”

“A whale can scrape the barnacles off his head and look different, but he’s still a whale,” Edith replied.

The young man, who said he was Benny, picked up his suitcase and walked across the airstrip toward us. As he came closer, I could see he had a white-man’s haircut and clothes, but he was definitely a Native. He smiled like there was no tomorrow, and kept on smiling after he set his bag down and took turns shaking hands and giving little nodding bows to all of us.

“God Bless you all. Glory to His holy name, Jesus,” he said. “I’m home to bring you the word of the Lord. I’m here to lead my people to salvation!”

I looked at Willie and Willie looked at Clara and we all looked at Auntie Edith who stood there with her mouth open wide enough for a big bug to fly right in. She closed her mouth with a little popping sound and studied the man calling himself Benny for a long time. He just kept smiling.

“You sound like Benny and you look like him, I guess. But are you sure you ain’t just joking with us? You sure you be Benny?”

“Positive, Auntie Edith. This is the new Benny. Praise His name!” Benny lifted his eyes up to the dome of the sky and raised his hands up and waved them a couple of times in little waggling motions. “The Lord found me and set my feet upon His righteous path, Hallelujah,” Benny said.

“You sound like a missionary,” Willie giggled.

Benny knelt down and looked the boy square in the eye and said, “That’s exactly what I am, Willie. A missionary for the *Church of the Holy Word of the Lamb*.”

“We got enough missionaries already,” Auntie Edith scowled. “Maybe you ought’a go to somewhere they don’t have any.”

“Nunavunga is where I am needed. I intend to spread the word among my own people, and bring them in to the sweet love of Jesus. Praise His holy name.”

Auntie Edith turned away and picked up some more of the paper plates littering the ground. “I joined Fadda Bouvier’s church. So did Clara and Moses here. I don’t know about little Willie.”

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"I'm a Moravian," Willie explained. "They got to me first---before Fadda Bouvier ever came here."

Auntie Edith straightened up, and relieved the strain on her back. She put her hands on her waist and leaned backward as far as she could. "I'm a Catholic now, Benny."

"But are you *saved*?" Benny said the word 'saved' like it was all in capital letters. "Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

"There's nothing but caribou on this island and you know it, Benny." Nobody ever brought over any lambs from the mainland like they did the reindeer. I never heard of anyone who hunted any lambs. What are you talking about?"

"I am speaking figuratively, Auntie Edith," Benny answered.

"Then speak in Yup'ik if you want me to understand. I only know English and Yup'ik."

"I'm asking you if you have given your heart to Jesus. Have you accepted the blessed Lord, Jesus Christ, as your savior?"

Auntie Edith paused to think before she answered him, "I certainly know who Jesus is. After all, don't I pray to Him and eat the little round cracker-thing at mass. Fadda Bouvier told me God was inside of the tiny white disc, but I still have a hard time understanding that." She looked right at Benny and said, "The Catholic Jesus never came right out and asked me to give him my heart, not that I can remember." Auntie Edith smiled and included all of us in her smile, looking around, waiting for our opinions on the subject of *saved*.

"We've been baptized," Clara offered. "Doesn't that count?"

"You're baptized, but you are not yet totally *saved*, Clara," Benny said. "If you were, you wouldn't wear that red lipstick and paint your

face for men. When you do that you desecrate the holy temple of your body. Don't you know that?"

"No," she answered. She dropped her voice so low you could barely hear her say the rest. "I didn't know that," she whispered.

"Auntie Edith, let me come to your house and kneel down with you to pray for your salvation and that of your niece, Clara. May I pray with you?"

"Sure. Prayin' is fun. Remember, I don't live where I did when you were younger, Benny. I live with my sister Niakognaluk most of the time now. Clara lives there, too. It's her papa's house. The man named Kakokto. Remember him?"

Benny smiled and immediately answered. "Yes, I do. I owe Kakokto an apology for some mischief I committed on his property years ago. I will make my apologies. I know Kakokto will forgive me, as the blessed Lord Jesus has forgiven me, of my past sins."

"Kakokto has a long memory, Benny," I said. "I don't know if he's ready to forget about what you did to his fish dryin' rack. Be sure you tell him you talked to Jesus, and tell him Jesus forgot about the fish rack being ripped up."

"I'll pray Jesus to soften Kakokto's heart."

"You sure do sound like a missionary," Willie said again.

Benny patted Willie like you pat a cute puppy, and turned to me and smiled that too-wide smile of his. "Maybe you could join us, Moses," he said. "I'm sure you have the sinful ways of most young men. Come, pray with us, give your soul to Jesus and be saved. What about you, Willie? Want to join us?"

Willie stepped back a step and said, "Not me. My folks are really full-blood Moravians and my Pa would skin my butt good if I even

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thought about another kind of *Kabloonaq* religion!" Willie turned to Auntie Edith and asked, "Can I go home now, Auntie? Everything's cleaned up here."

"We'll all go back to the village together," Auntie Edith said. "Moses, bring those garbage sacks and let's go. My stomach tells me it's time to eat. You come with me and Clara, Benny. Kakokto will sure be surprised to see you again, I betcha."

Auntie Edith led us up the beach path to the village. We walked single file with Benny carrying his suitcase and bringing up the rear. Every so often, when the wind blew his mutterings over our backs, I could hear him saying missionary things.

"God will give us guidance," Benny repeated into the wind, "Praise Jesus!"

Just before we went up the last ridge to Kakokto and May's cabin, Willie yelled goodbyes and took off running for his house. Clara hurried to the front of the line and turned to stop Auntie Edith.

"I think I'd better run on ahead and make sure Mama has plenty of tea made. What do you think, Auntie Edith?"

"Make sure your papa knows we're bringin' him some company," Auntie Edith said.

Benny overheard what the old woman said and he said, "Have no fear of man's wrath when the Lord is with thee. The good book tells me to trust in the power of the Lord to soften a heart hardened against me."

I watched him move up the path and take Auntie Edith's arm like she was a real old lady who needed help to walk---which she wasn't. She's only in her early sixties, and she still can get around faster than a ten-legged sled dog.

You could tell that Benny was all puffed up with himself by the way he held the torshor door open for Auntie Edith to duck in under his arm. He followed her and left me to close and tie off the latchstring so the dogs wouldn't nose their way in to the passageway. All that wind went out of his sails pretty fast when he entered the cabin and saw Father Bouvier sitting at the kitchen table drinking tea with May and Kakokto.

"*Kin' pagvisarpok?*" he said. "Do I disturb you?" Benny's sudden change to Yup'ik was a surprise and his use of the language was strange, like he'd forgotten how *to* speak it properly. His accent was a *Kabloonaq's*.

"*Nukapiaark-ingi-tyurmiangoyok,*" May said. "A young man is a welcome guest."

May introduced Father Bouvier to Benny, and it seemed to me that all of a sudden, Benny got tongue-tied, or something. He just sat there for a long time and smiled that wide, foolish smile of his. We just let him sit there while we helped ourselves to tea. May glared at us for treating a new guest so rudely and not offering him everything first. Kakokto made a point of pouring himself another cup of tea before offering one to Benny. Clara kicked me under the table when her father did that and we winked at each other when Benny wasn't looking. I didn't think that all of Benny's prayers had softened Kakokto's hard heart. You could tell Clara's father was still remembering how a younger Benny had pulled the fish-rack completely apart just to be mean and ornery.

Father Bouvier drained his mug and set it down, "Well. It was pleasant to meet another '*servant of God*'," he said. I could hear the edge of teasing in his voice. "I'm off to the social hall at the church. There's a catechism class in less than twenty minutes. Don't get up, I'll let myself out."

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Kakokto stood and said, "I'll go with you Fadda. I got things to do down at my boat."

I saw May raise a questioning eyebrow and I knew that Kakokto was just trying to get out of the house before he lost his temper with Benny, and before May made him accept an apology from the fish-rack breaker.

When we were left alone, Benny puffed up again and started acting as important as Amak George does. "I see you have desecrated your body, Omayok May," he said. "The same way as Clara. Why do you paint your lips and fingernails in that sinful manner? Don't you know that is an abomination?"

"What's that last thing you called my lipstick, Benny?" You could tell May was irritated because she sounded like she was about to scold a bad puppy for stealing dried fish off the rack. "What was that word again, Benny. Tell me!"

"Abomination, that's what I called your lipstick." Benny wasn't speaking with respect to an Elder, and May wasn't about to let him get away with it.

"For as long as you've been gone off this island, living with the *Kabloonaq*, you sure haven't learned much, Benny Naugapuk." May pulled out her tube of lipstick from her *kuspuk* pocket and waved it under Benny's nose.

"This is not the kind you called it, it says right there on the cover: *Max Factor*. So there, Mr. Too-big-for-his-fur-britches. Kakokto traded fresh salmon at the post to get me this. He likes it and I like it."

"I meant the lipstick on your face is an abomination in the sight of the Lord."

“You know what, Mr. *Krayuyiwok-tamaluktar*, you, *thinks-he-knows-everything-but-doesn't*. Not only didn't you learn much Outside, but you forget your manners, too!”

I almost choked trying to keep from laughing out loud when May call Benny a *Krayuyipok-tar*, a ‘knows-all’. Benny pressed himself against the back of his chair and looked at May like she'd just shot him.

Auntie Edith had her eyes all squinted up and was biting on her lower lip to keep from being impolite and laughing right in Benny's face.

May stood up quickly and looked at Clara and said, “Clara, I think your father needs me to help him with his boat.” May picked up her outside parka and swished right past Benny and out the door. She didn't even look at him when she left.

That cabin was full of silence for a long while. Clara and I just looked up at the ceiling and tried not to laugh. Benny had this double-foolish grin on his face, like he hadn't said a thing to make May angry.

Auntie Edith sat next to Benny and plucked and fussed with the braid-trims on her *kuspuk*. After a while she patted Benny's hand and talked to him like he was about five years old.

“It's a good thing my sister Niakognaluk is not here visiting with us. She would have a lot more to say about your manners than Omayok May did---and my sister wouldn't have left the house the way May just did. You'd be the one to go, Benny.”

“I have forgotten some of the customs here. I've been away a long time, Auntie Edith,”

“Maybe not long enough,” Auntie Edith replied. Benny's smile melted as fast as lake ice in boiling water.

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"I thought we was gonna pray," Auntie Edith said. "I like prayin'. I do it a lot."

"I thank my Blessed Savior that you asked me that," Benny said. "Let's kneel down right here in May's kitchen, and pray together for your salvation, Auntie Edith."

"Maybe I don't have to do that again, Benny. Fadda Bouvier already made arrangements with *his* Jesus." Edith knelt beside her chair anyway. "Fadda gave me a recommend to the Catholic heaven. In Catholic heaven, there's angels makin' music and lots of prayin' and praisin' but I don't think they have much else. Do you know what else they have up there? Is your church's heaven different?"

Benny didn't know how to answer that. You could tell because he let his mouth hang open for a minute. Then he said, "Let's pray that He will give you guidance and show you the way to give your confused, old heart to the true Jesus, so He can prepare a place for you in heaven."

"How many of them are there?" Edith asked. "Heavens, I mean?"

"Just pray, Auntie," Benny whispered.

"I'm praying," Edith whispered back. "I don't feel different yet. Maybe we have to get Clara and her friend to pray with us."

"I'm just listening and watching," I said.

"Me, too," Clara said.

Benny prayed away in a real loud voice, like he thought maybe Jesus was deaf or something. He kept it up for a long time until Auntie Edith reached up and put her hand on her chair, preparing to stand up.

"Maybe the problem is you, Benny," Auntie Edith said. "Maybe He ain't listenin' to you now that you're back on Nunavunga. You used

to be the meanest little boy I ever did see. You was always pickin' on some little child or borrowing things what didn't belong to you. I remember when you took to wreckin' things and breakin' up people's fish racks or boats and hitting folks if they so much as looked at you wrong."

Benny stopped praying and smiling.

"Maybe the memory of all the bad things you did here on the island is still floatin' around somewhere in the air---up there in your heaven," Aunt Edith said.

Auntie Edith used the chair arm to pull herself to her feet. She reached down and tugged on Benny's coat collar and told him to forget about the praying and sit down.

"How did you get it into your head to become a missionary, Benny?" Clara passed Benny a cup of hot tea.

"It was when I was sent off---when I left the island," Benny answered. "I went to Nome and then Fairbanks and finally drifted down to Anchorage. I was hellin' it up and drinkin' like ten fish in all the bars on Fourth Avenue. One night I liked to nearly froze to death. I would have, too, if some good church people hadn't found me passed out in an alleyway. They took me home with them to their *Church of the Holy Word of the Lamb*. Those fine Pentecostal people sobered me up and prayed over me every day for a week."

"Then what?" Clara asked.

"Then I saw the light of the Lord shine on the error of my ways. I dropped right down on my knees and started praying and I haven't stopped since. Praise the Lord. The next night, I joined the *Church of the Holy Word of the Lamb* and all those good people laid their hands on me and prayed over me some more. I was saved that night, and since then, I haven't stole anything or wrecked anything or called anybody a

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son-of-a-bitch, or worse. I gave up drinking, playing cards and all the sinful things.”

“What about girls?” I asked.

“That, too. I put it all behind me. I replaced all that lust with righteous love. I figured I’d make a real good preacher of the Gospels.”

“You got the loud voice for it,” Clara said.

“Yeah,” Benny finally allowed a tiny smile to return. “When I get going and get my steam up I can pray and shout with the best of them. Praise Jesus, the Lord gave me the call. That’s why I came here to spread the good news about the heaven that awaits all who are saved.” While Benny worked himself up, the smile was just about full grown, and spread all over his face.

Auntie Edith claimed Benny’s untouched cup of tea for her own. She sat down and put her face close to Benny’s. “Tell me about your kinda heaven,” she said.

“Praise the Lord!” Benny yelled. “The Lord has prepared a place for you in Heaven, Auntie Edith. He has a mansion waiting for you, all filled with new furniture and a big television and all. There are golden streets for you to ride down in the biggest car you want to pick from the heavenly car lot.”

“That sounds good, Auntie Edith said. “I heard about them but I never seen one of them televisions. I guess I’ll have to wait ‘til I get to this heaven of yours to see one.”

“Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!” Benny raised his arms in the air.” Then you’ve accepted the Lord as your savior?”

“Wait a bit, Benny,” Auntie Edith said. “I gotta have time to think on it. Let’s hear some more about your ‘cost-a-penny people’.”

“That’s Pentecostal, Auntie, but praise be and amen for asking!” Benny shouted.

Benny was getting up a head of steam now. He pulled out a little Bible from his bag and started thumbing through it to the places he’d marked with little pieces of white paper. He was into the Book of Revelation, and just listening to what he was reading scared the hell out of me. Clara sat there listening with her eyes bugged out. Just then a cold rush of wind came blowing across the floor and when we looked, Kakokto and May were standing in the *torshor* entrance.

“Don’t you think it’s time for you to stop reading to Auntie Edith, Benny? She’s tired,” Kakokto grumbled.

“No I’m not tired, my nephew.” Auntie said. “Benny is telling me about the end of the world and his heaven so I can decide which heaven I want to go to.”

“Yes, you *are* tired, Auntie Edith!” May crossed to the table and put her arms around Auntie Edith like she was protecting her from something. “Let’s get you to bed, Auntie. Good night, Benny Naugapuk.”

Benny got the message because Kakokto just stood there holding the door open and freezing the rest of us. After Benny left, May told Auntie Edith she’d made plans to go to mass the next day and wanted all of us to go together. Kakokto declined, but I agreed to go.

Clara brought out her scrabble board and we played until May fell asleep in her chair and spilled all her letters on the floor. Kakokto made a place for me to sleep. Auntie Edith woke us all up really early Sunday morning. She led the way when we all trooped down to Father Bouvier’s church.

After mass, everyone went into the social hall---which is the other Quonset hut beside the church, and had coffee and doughnuts. Father

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Bouvier was making the rounds of each table and visiting with everybody. When he came to our table, Auntie Edith pulled him down into the chair beside her.

“Fadda, I been doing a lot of thinkin’ about heaven.”

“That’s a good thing, Edith,” Father Bouvier said.

“No, it’s a bad thing, Fadda. Kept me up all night trying to decide which heaven I wanted to go to---yours or Benny Naugatok’s cost-a-penny heaven.”

Father Bouvier’s eyebrows went up higher than usual and he leaned close to Auntie Edith. “There’s but one heaven for all of us,” he said

“Not according to the way Benny Naugapuk tells the gospels,” Auntie Edith insisted.

“The Catholic Church has been interpreting the gospels for hundreds of years Edith. I’m sure we have it as correctly interpreted as any one---and more than some.”

“I’m glad to know that, Fadda. Helps me make up my mind now.”

“What have you decided, Edith?” The priest asked.

“To keep on bein’ a Catholic.”

“Now I’m glad to hear *that*, Edith. Especially since I baptized you a Catholic not so many years ago.” Father Bouvier seemed to find Auntie Edith’s decision funny, because he beamed out one of his seldom seen smiles to all of us at the table.

“I got other reasons for not wantin’ to go to Benny’s heaven,” Edith said.

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“Is that so? What are those reasons?” Father Bouvier seemed anxious for Auntie Edith’s answer.

“I don’t want one of them big mansion houses. It’d be too hard to keep warm--- and fuel-oil prices must be terrible high up there. I don’t know how to drive any kind of car and I’m too old to learn, and I bet them gold streets get iced over easy and just walking around would be real dangerous.”

Father Bouvier kept smiling and nodding in agreement at everything Auntie Edith said, “I think you’ve made a wise choice, Edith.”

“Me too, Fadda. Besides, I like makin’ music and prayin’ and listenin’ to singin’ angels a lot more than cleaning a big mansion-house.”

I never saw Benny again. He left on the next plane off the island to Nome. At least that was the information I got, according to Willie, who saw him at the airstrip. I guess Benny just couldn’t fit in again after being gone so long and turning himself into a white man’s missionary. Last fall, I did hear rumors about how Benny was up in Kotzebue trying to start a little church of his own cost-a-penny religion. I hope he has good luck with his plans, because his success will keep him up there. He’ll be so busy, he won’t come back to preach at us here on Nunavunga. I told Fadda about the rumor, and Fadda Bouvier told me my news about Benny was a *real* blessing.

THE UNUSUAL AFFLICTION OF PRUNELLA KREAYOK

My name is Oxenia Okradlapok. Most people, I mean, most white people---I call them '*Bloonies*'---can't begin to pronounce my name. So you can just call me 'Zennie'---like my best friends do---or you could call me double 'O'. Me, I don't mind. I know why some of boys call me 'Double O'. It's because I've got a lot of meat on my bones. Let's face it, I'm kinda plump, but that's okay with me. If anybody doesn't like a sixteen-year-old, super-sized, big girl---they can just look the other way when I pass by.

Anyway, you probably won't believe a word of what I'm going to tell you, but honest, it's all true. I can tell you now, because the medics came a few weeks ago from Nome and took poor old Prunela Kreayok off the island. What I mean is: they put her on one of those rolling hospital bed-things called a 'gurnsey', or something like that. Tied her down, they did---with straps so she couldn't jump off the 'gurnsey' and run away. They just rolled poor old Prunela on the plane and off they flew.

Of course, we haven't seen her since, but her family got word that she's in a special kind of hospital in Anchorage called the Anchorage Psychiatric Institute, or something like that. Some of us sort of figured out that the AIP---that's what they called it for short---was just a fancy name for the 'nut house'.

It was Clara who told us what kind of hospital it was, but she didn't call it what I just did. She called it a 'mental facility.' Me, I probably shouldn't call it a 'nut house' but the truth is, Old Prunie---that's what we mostly called her---well, she was just was plain 'nutso'. Just as crazy as she could be, if you want my opinion. I mean, that's how most of my gang of young people feel about the whole thing---Old Prunie was just a case of a semi-loony gone completely crazy.

But of course, the Elders saw it differently. Some of the real old women said somebody had put a curse on Old Prunie. Clara's grandma and her two old Aunties said it was a sure-fire case of some evil Shaman putting a bad spell on Prunela.

Most of us younger ones in the village haven't ever even seen a real live *evil* Shaman that we know of. Shamans haven't been all that popular around here since about the 1960's when the big push by the missionaries began. Of course, some people say Clara's Grannie Niakognaluk is still a practicing Shaman---a *good* type of Shaman---but she kind of slacked off on the old religion since that young new priest, Father Stephens came to live in Nunavunga. Speaking of Father Stephens, he was the one Grannie Nia went to see and asked for his help when Old Prunie got really bad near the end.

Anyway, the reason I know all of this is because Clara and me are best friends and being best friends with Clara got me mixed up smack in the middle of what Father Stephens started calling 'Old Prunie's unusual affliction'

Anyway, a few months before Old Prunie got air-vaced off the island, I was with my friend, Winnie---her real name is Winifred. Anyway, Winnie and me and Clara were just having ourselves a lot of fun playing that new board game called *Scrabble*. Ever heard of it? I guess it's not all that new Outside, but it was new to us in Nunavunga village.

Clara was real good at it, but sometimes I got lucky and ended up with a couple of the bright red, triple word boxes in the corners, you know? And then once in a while I'd win. Poor Winnie never won a single game. It's because she still thinks in Yup'ik and that slows down her game a lot. Anyway, we were playing *Scrabble* and Grannie Nia was playing her solitaire, when in comes Old Prunie's grandson, Jacob. That little boy was all red in the face, and his eyes was about to bug right out of his head he was so scared.

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“You gotta come quick, Grannie Nia!” He screamed. “My grandma Prunie’s having a terrible spell of the fits!”

Well! I can tell you, we all jumped up and got into our mukluks and parkas---because it was about thirty-five below outside. Then we had to hustle fast to keep up with that boy Jacob because he ran as fast as he could back to Old Prunie’s cabin---which is something you shouldn’t do---I mean, running when it’s so cold. It can freeze your lungs up and you’ll die, for heaven’s sake! Me, I hardly ever run, but I had to that night to keep up.

Sometimes I can still hear Old Prunie screeching inside my head, just like she was doing when we came in through the passageway door into the cabin. I never saw anything like it before in my whole life---of course I’m just sixteen--- but I *never* had seen a fit before.

Old Prunie was sitting right smack in the middle of the kitchen floor with nothing on but a pair of sealskin britches and she was screeching like a mad seagull---you know, shrill like. And in between times she was screaming bloody murder and flaying her arms about.

She was yelling things like, “Make them stop! Oh! Ow! Oh, *Nutkarpok!* Stop! *Anernartok!* It hurts! *Anertok!*”

Grannie Nia asked her, “What’s hurting you?”

“Can’t you see them little evil things, the *pit-piktaungitok*, the demons? They’re beating me with their dog-whips! OH! OW! OWWW!”

Well, I’ll tell you this, none of us girls could see anything near Old Prunie. There wasn’t anyone or anything else in that cabin, except Grannie Nia, us and the boy Jacob. He huddled over by the stove and hid his eyes with his hands. Every so often the poor little thing would peek through his fingers at his grandma carrying on like a wild thing

right there in the middle of the cabin, and then he'd cover up his eyes again. Me, I could see how scared he was.

Anyway, Grannie Nia acted like she could see these evil little creatures that are whipping Old Prunie. She pretended to chase them away from that screaming old woman by waving her arms and hands the way you'd chase flies off a piece of meat or scare away the puppy that's trying to take that meat.

"Shoo! Get out of her! *Atti! Atsuk! Attai!* Go! Go on! Get out! *Aniyok!* Leave Prunela alone! Let her be! Go on! Shoo!"

Granny Nia stomped around smacking the soles of her mukluks down real hard on the floor, making a loud noise. She stomped in a tight little circle around Old Prunie and while she stomped one foot before the other she clapped her hands together to make sharp noises. Then she snatched a tin plate off the table and began banging on it with a piece of stove-wood Clara handed to her. Every time she hit that tin plate, little Jacob nearly jumped right out of his parka.

Then Grannie Nia did the strangest thing---well, me, I thought it was strange anyway, and I'm sure Winnie did too, because her squinty little eyes got big and round all of a sudden when Grannie Nia went up and spit straight into Old Prunie's hair---on the top of her head! She spit on the almost bald place where old Prunie's hair was parted for her braids. Then she blew her breath on the very same spot. Next she pulled a little amulet pouch off her own neck and draped it around Old Prunie's scrawny, wrinkled old neck. I hope you know I respect the Elders, but I still have to say it: Old Prunie's neck was the scrawniest neck I ever saw before.

Anyway, Old Prunie stopped her screaming instantly. Grannie pulled her to her feet and said, "They're gone now, Prunela. I scared them off. Now let's get some warm clothes on you and sit you down for a cup of tea."

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Grannie Nia pointed with her lips toward the copper teapot sitting on the counter and inclined her head toward the stove where Jacob was huddled. Clara got the hint at once.

We sat the cold pot of tea on the stove to heat it up. I tell you that tea must have been four or five days old---at least that---because that's how old it tasted. We drank it anyway. It was awful bad tea, I can tell you that. Anyway, Grannie Nia got Old Prunie dressed and sat her down at the table. Clara draped a worn out army blanket around the old woman's shoulders and we all sat there with nobody saying a word for a long while. Then little Jacob came sniveling and looking droop-eyed as an abandoned seal pup. He skittered up to the table and just stood there looking as sorrowful as could be. Winnie pulled him on her lap and let him drink from her tea mug.

Grannie Nia waited a little longer and then spoke to Old Prunie, "Tell me about those evil little men, Prunela."

That's when Old Prunie came out with the whole story. "Them little *pitpiktaungitok* is somebody's spirit devils," she said. "I don't know who hates me enough to send them against me, but somebody does." Old Prunie let out a big sobbing noise. "They don't just beat me 'til I got bruises and whip-marks, but they do terrible things to my cabin, too," the old woman said.

Grannie Nia asked her to tell us more. "What terrible things did they do?"

"When ever I leave my cabin to go carry water or go visiting away, when I come back my cabin is all messed up," Old Prunie explained. "They throw things out of my storage cupboard. Then they rip open the bed packs and toss the skins all over the place. They even pour my good tea out of the canister and spread it around the floor!"

Winnie said, "*Kappianartoraluk! Maiksuk!*" That means, "It's terrible! This is bad!" and Clara and I said, "*Ima, Ima!* Yes it is!"

Because we thought it was terrible of some one to do that to the old woman's cabin and her food and bed stuff---and me, I thought it was a terrible waste of tea."

"Do these little devils bother you at night?" Grannie Nia asked.

"That's when they're the meanest," Old Prunie whispered. "I can't get good sleep because they hide under my sleeping place and chatter and whisper and say bad things. They talk about me all night long. Sometimes I can hear them scrabblin' about the house and if they figure out I'm listenin' to them, they come runnin' and try to pull me out of bed. In the mornings---early---if I sit down at the table to drink tea, they come scurryin' over to where I'm sittin' and start dancin' around me. All the time they're shoutin' out my name and dancin' faster and faster and closer and closer. I can smell their bad stink when they get so close to me."

Winnie said, "How awful!" again and Clara and I agreed with her.

Grannie Nia patted poor Old Prunie's thin arm and tugged the blanket closer around the old woman. "Would you like me to stay with you tonight? I can stay with you and chase away the evil things."

"That would be comforting to me," Old Prunie said.

Well, Winnie and me took little Jacob home with us to Clara's house and gave him a good meal. Clara had to go back so as to carry Grannie Nia's sleeping pack to Old Prunie's cabin. When Clara came back, the three of us sat up late after Jacob fell asleep and tried to make sense of what Old Prunie had said about the little demons. We couldn't figure it out.

When us girls woke up the next morning, Grannie Nia was there, already drinking tea and eating fish with Jacob. We were as curious as

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kit foxes to know what had happened at Old Prunie's cabin during the night.

"Nothing. Nothing happened," Grannie Nia said. "Prunela snored louder than I thought a woman could. That kept me awake for a long time. I watched her. Sometimes she'd let out a little yelp and twitch her legs and kick a bit, but that was all."

That afternoon we all waded through the snow that had drifted during the night and went back to Old Prunie's cabin again. When we went inside, we could hear the old woman crying and sobbing. She was still in her bed pack on the sleeping rack. Grannie Nia tried to soothe her, but it was a long time before she stopped crying and talked to us.

"They came while you were gone, Niakognaluk! " She covered her face with her thin, bony fingers. "They tried to do bad things to me. To me! A woman who has seen eighty-three winters. They tried to do bad things. I crossed my legs tight and wouldn't let them do it. They got angry with me and started tearin' up the place again. Look what they did to my kitchen!"

Well I can tell you this, when we looked around the chairs had been knocked over. There were two smashed tea mugs on the floor and a big puddle of tea poured out in the center of the table. All of Old Prunie's pilot crackers was scattered everywhere.

"Do you think I'll ever have any peace from them evil devils? They hide when you are here with me, Niakognaluk, but the minute you leave they start in. They whisper things to me. They are trying to get me to kill myself. That's what they want me to do!"

When she heard this, Grannie Nia's eyes turned into slits in her face. She pushed her lips together and I could see she was thinking real hard about what Old Prunie had just said. Well, the next thing I know,

Clara and I are running down to the Catholic church---you know, the Quonset huts side-by-side down by the beach---well it was hard getting there because of the snow but we made it and brought Father Stephens and his bag of medicines back to Old Prunie's cabin, just like Grannie Nia said to do. The priest, he talked to Grannie Nia alone and they whispered, so I don't know what they said to each other, or else me, I would tell you.

Anyway, Father Stephens came out from the partition where Old Prunie slept and told us he'd given her a shot to *see-date* her. That means it put her to sleep.

"The woman has an unusual affliction," he said. "God bless her. I'm not sure of what we can do, but I'll go down to the airstrip and send a wire to Nome. She should sleep for at least ten hours before the shot wears off."

I can tell you that was good news for all of us because we were just worn out from running here and running there and staying up talking and looking after Jacob. Grannie Nia said she might as well stay another night since her bed-pack was already there, so Clara and me banked the fire in the stove and left. Winnie went on ahead with the little boy and we spent the night at Clara's house again---which was fun, because when the three of us are together, we get to gossip and have great times

I don't know what time it was when we heard the screaming. You can't always tell what time it is when it's dark most of the time and there's no moon or anything to give you a clue. Anyway, we jumped up and looked out the window and there was Old Prunie wearing nothing but those old seal skin britches running around and around between the shed and Clara's house yelling like a white bear was chasing her.

Grannie Nia was calling to her asking her to stop but she just kept on running around in this funny way. Clara's papa and Father Stephens were having a hard time catching that old woman. Sometimes

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everybody would disappear from our view when Old Prunie took off in another direction, so I never really saw *all* of the things that happened.

Finally, Kakokto reversed his direction and ran around the other way and grabbed Old Prunie when she ran right into his arms in front of the kitchen window where we watching. He pushed her down in the snow and I saw Father Stephens give that poor old woman another shot. She went limp and Kakokto carried her inside and Clara's mother, May, made her a bed. Well, we thought that was the end of it, but it wasn't.

When Old Prunie came too, she was as limp as a sealskin doll with half the stuffing pulled out. May and Grannie Nia nursed her while Kakokto and Father Stephens went down to the airstrip to meet the medics who were flying in from Nome.

The old woman started up again, telling us about the evil things that had stabbed her and made her arms sore and how they slobbered blood all over her and chased her with big knives and their dog-whips. We all just looked at each other and said nothing, because we knew for sure that Old Prunie had been in that bed sleeping, being *see-dated* as she was.

Father Stephens and the medics came into the cabin and Kakokto told Old Prunie---in the language of the old people, that they were going to take her to Nome to see the doctor. Well, I can tell you that was the *wrong* thing to say to old Prunie. She didn't like the idea at all.

Nobody could convince her to go willingly, not Grannie Nia, not May, not Father Stephens or the two medics from Nome. So that's when one of the medics put another needle into the poor old woman's skinny butt and she went out like a lantern in a gale.

We all went along, following Kakokto's sled down to the airstrip. Old Prunie was bundled up in the sled and covered with furs and she snored away. At the airport they put her on that gurnsey thing I told you

about, and flew her off to Nome. About a week later, we heard she was down in Anchorage at that AIP place.

Everybody talked about poor Old Prunie for a long time---at least for the next two weeks, anyway. They said it was terrible for her to be so old and to be so far away from Nunavunga---which we all agreed was true. Everybody felt sorry for her and wondered what in the world had caused her to act the way she did. Father Stephens said it certainly wasn't any demonic possession, and that he didn't believe too much in that stuff about little *pit-piktaungitok demons* anyway. Grannie Nia said there weren't any Shamans around who were powerful enough to call down evil things to torment anybody nowadays.

A lot of people guessed but nobody came up with the answer for what caused Old Prunie's 'unusual affliction'---we all took to calling it that because of Father Stephens.

Anyway, we didn't figure it out until March, when Little Daniel and Charlie Cleveland came home from the University at Fairbanks on spring break to help Amak George with the whale hunt.

One night we were all visiting at May and Kakoto's house, playing the *Scrabble* game. Father Stephens was there, too---sort of baby sitting little Jacob and playing checkers with him. The rest of us were just gossiping away in the language while we played, when the subject of Old Prunie's 'unusual affliction' came up in the gossip.

Right straight away, Little Daniel said that he'd been studying about that in the University. He said the *Kabloonaq* had a word for what caused the old woman to carry on like she did.

Grannie Nia looked up from her game of solitaire and said---real serious like, "What can this word be? How did the *Kabloonaq* know about this? I want to learn the name of this thing Prunela thought was an evil spell."

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Little Daniel reached out and put the red jack on the black queen for Grannie Nia. Then he said, real polite and in the formal way you're supposed to address Elders, "Honorable Grandmother, this is what the *Kabloonaq* call these spells."

When Little Daniel said the word, Father Stephens sat straight up in his chair and said, "Of course! Why didn't I see that?"

Anyway, I'm not sure I'm pronouncing it right. Sometimes I can't get my tongue around some of those long *Bloonie* words, but anyway, it sounded something like, '*see-knoll-die-mint-sha*'---did I say it right? It's a disease people get in the head when they're very old. Winnie says it makes their brains turn to mush. Clara says that's not so.

Either way, me, I don't have to bother worrying about stuff like that for a long, long time. Why should I worry? I'm a long ways from being as old as poor Prunie. I just turned sixteen two weeks ago.

WINNING A WIFE

“There is one animal that roams the autumn tundra that few young girls have seen,” Grannie Niakognaluk told her granddaughter, Clara.

“What animal is this?” Clara asked. “Me, I have never heard you speak of it before.”

The old woman pushed up the blood-spattered sleeves of her calico kuspuk and continued skinning out the caribou her hunter son had brought to their cabin. “Maybe that is because you have just recently truly become a woman.”

“What has *that* to do with this animal you speak of?” Clara did not follow her frail old grandmother's explanation. She shifted positions and knelt on both knees to hold the hide taut so her grandmother could flense off bits of fat and flesh.

“It has a lot to do with it,” Grannie said. “More women than men see this animal because it is attracted to women. When you had your first woman's blood moon, the animal I am talking about knew it.”

“The whole village knew when that happened,” Clara blushed remembering her embarrassment when her family spread the word just one moon ago.

“Of course they knew, I told them. I was proud that my granddaughter had finally become a woman. The animal must have been listening for the news, also.”

“Tell me the name of this animal, Grannie Nia.”

“Oh, dear Clara, maybe I should not speak the name.”

“Please, Grannie. You started this talk of some strange animal.” Clara pulled the hide free and rolled it into a bundle, hair side in.

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Grannie Niakognaluk slowly pulled herself upright and waddled slowly on her bowed legs to a seat on one of the battered kitchen chairs.

“The name I have heard the animal called is ‘*Gettuyu*’.”

“I have never heard that name before,” Clara said. “What does it look like?”

“It is about the size of a *sik-sik-puk* ground squirrel, only I have been told it has no fur, no hair and is smooth like your forearm,” Grannie Nia answered.

“Grannie, are you making a joke with me?”

“No, Clara, this is a serious matter. The young men say a *Gettuyu* is delicious to eat, but it is forbidden for a woman to touch their flesh until she is properly married.” Grannie Niakognaluk grunted twice to stress the importance of her words. “If ever you are offered the meat of *Gettuyu*, refuse it immediately.

“How will I be able to tell what meat I am being offered?”

“A woman can always tell the kind of meat set before her. Now that you are a woman, you will know.”

“Your answer only confuses me more, Grannie.”

“It is one of our most powerful custom-laws. An unmarried woman must always be told that she is being offered the meat of a *Gettuyu*. Our traditions say this must be.”

Clara looked at her grandmother and studied the wrinkled features of the old one’s face trying to find a clue that would suggest Grannie Nia was actually joking, even though she said she was not.

“Why is it that I have not heard of this before?” Clara questioned.

“When you were a girl, you did not know all the secrets of the women, did you?”

“No,” Clara answered.

“There are things women know and girls do not. When a girl becomes a woman, *then* she learns a woman’s secrets.”

“But now I am a woman, so tell me.”

“Yes, now that you are a woman, I must tell you how to avoid the *Gettuyu*, and how to avoid the pestering young men and hunters of this village.”

“I do not find the young men ‘pestering’,” Clara answered. “I like the young men.”

“That is precisely the problem, Granddaughter!” Grannie Nia was swabbing the blood from her hands with a wet piece of rag. “Now listen to the advice I give you. If you follow my advice you may avoid the *Gettuyu* and the young hunters, until the proper time comes for you to select the best one to be a husband to you.”

“Come, Grandmother,” Clara said. “I will carry the hide out to the stretching rack and while we lace it up, you can give the advice the old women give to granddaughters.”

Clara opened the door to the passageway and the old woman moved in her waddling, side-to-side gait down the low hall into the open air. Clara placed the rolled caribou hide high on the eaves of the cabin so the dogs could not reach it while they prepared the lashing frame. Moments later, they talked together while they strung the lacing, and soon the hide was almost properly secured into a wooden frame to dry, with but a few inches of lacing to go.

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No matter how she tried to pry the information of the *Gettuyu* from her grandmother, the old woman constantly changed the subject. Clara felt sulky and defeated, but she knew it was no use pursuing the subject further, if Grannie Nia had decided otherwise. She walked away from the laced hide on the frame and held her hand to shade her eyes against the sun-glare. Clara turned in a circle taking in the view of her world.

Snow crusted the dome; a rise of the glacier rounded granite mass the villagers called Kettle-Upside-Down- Mountain. The great curve of the sky was a blue so brilliant it hurt Clara's eyes. She shaded them with both hands now and glanced down toward the place where the Chukchi Sea met the cliffs and ridges of the village of Nunavunga.

People were busy down there, doing what they must to prepare for the long winter to come. Fish racks were decorated with the red flesh of salmon trout and char. Piles of driftwood were being made higher each day beside houses. Hides of seal, uguruk and caribou were drying or bleaching in the pale arctic sun. Clara loved her village. She loved her relatives who lived in this place. She loved the people of Nunavunga for the industrious, efficient and high-spirited villagers they were.

One of the most spirited of the villagers was the young man, Carlie Leonard, whose Yup'ik name was *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie. Carlie had been named for his cleverness, and most of the village people called him by his Yup'ik name. Clara saw him walking a beach ridge so she waved to him. When Grannie Nia saw Clara's greeting, she grunted twice to show her displeasure. It was too late. *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie returned Clara's wave and hurried up the beach trail to her father's cabin where Grannie worked at finishing the lacing of the caribou hide to its frame.

Clara found *Kak-kit-ta-yok* Carlie an interesting young man. She thought him handsome, but would never say that to anyone, not even to Grannie Nia. However, there was another side to *Ka-Kit-ta-yok* Carlie that irritated Clara. He was the village clown and jokester. It seemed *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie just couldn't be serious about any thing, and Clara knew a good husband must taking hunting seriously.

“Here comes the clown,” Grannie Nia said. “Some people say he was funny from the time he came out of his mother’s body. Have you ever listened to him tell a story? Have you seen all the hundreds of funny faces he can contort with the rubbery face of his?”

“Yes, I have seen him. I have watched him at the village feasts. He can twist those lips of his into any shape,” Clara said. “When he tells tales of the sea animals you can watch him become the face of the animal he describes.”

“He is entertaining enough and quite funny, but he’s not a man who would make a good husband,” Grannie Nia grunted. “He plays too many tricks on people. He can spring a surprise on a person as fast as he tells his stories.”

“I have been told that his grandfather was just as clever and as funny,” Clara was really asking her Grannie a question.

“So, you know about the time when I was a young girl and Tchabala Leonard--- that was his grandfather’s name---used to try and court me with his cleverness and funny stories.”

“And what happened back then?”

“Oh, he was clever; he was funny, all right. He was a charming darling of a man. It was hard to resist him. But I did! I married your grandfather instead.” Grannie Nia grunted twice to show her satisfaction with her choice. “Shah! Stop talking about this. Here is the clown; almost on our laps.”

Ka-kit-Ta-Yok Carlie suddenly dropped to his knees, made a somersault and rolled like a ball to within inches of Clara’s feet. Clara giggled and jumped backward and bumped into Grannie Nia.

“Can’t you just walk up to people like a normal person, Carlie Leonard?” Grannie asked.

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“What new thing is happening here with you, Clara?” *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie asked.

“My grandmother has just told me of a strange animal called the ‘*Gettuyu*’. Have you heard of this animal, whose flesh an unmarried girl must not eat?” Clara smiled at *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie and batted her eyes.

“Indeed I have. It’s supposed to be hairless and looks like a small ground squirrel, is this not so, Grandmother of Clara?”

Grannie Nia grunted twice again and then grunted two more times just for emphasis. “Say your ‘hellos’, tell us a clever joke, make your funniest face, and then be off with you. My granddaughter and I have much work yet to do on this hide.”

Ka-kit-ta-yok Carlie twisted his face into an expression of total pain and sorrow, mimicked a girl sobbing and said, “How this old one has cut me with her sharp-skinning knife of a tongue. I know when I am not welcome. Farewell, beautiful Clara and you, too, old walrus cow!” He dropped onto his butt and threw his legs back up over his head, and flipped himself up on his feet before he ran down the beach trail laughing. He shouted back at Clara. “One day soon, you will be mine.”

“Not if I have a say in the matter!” Grannie waved her skinning knife in his direction with violent motions. Clara giggled and kept giggling until her Grannie Nia suddenly hissed, “Shah! I can see that I must give my next advice to you immediately, Clara. So listen to me and listen well to what I have to say!”

“Just because you have known that young man since childhood---in fact, you even played together, joked together and played games on the beach---does not mean you can continue to do so. You have been to the women's house for your first moon cycle. You must forget about the boys who were your former playmates. It is not proper for a woman to play with boys as she once did. As for that Carlie Leonard, forget

about him, and start learning to be a woman who will choose her husbands well; as our traditions require."

Clara stood still and nodded obediently to show that she was listening to her Grandmother's words of advice, even though a part of her mind was still thinking of *Kat-kit-ta-yok* Carlie's, handsome face and clever ways.

Grannie Nia began again. "You have learned from the old women to cook, to clean. How to wash and care for babies---how to sing the woman's songs. You learned all the womanly things and learned them well. But you have yet more to learn about the relationships of men and women. You have great beauty, Clara, my darling girl, and this beauty requires me to invoke another tradition to protect you from the young men and the *Gettuyu*. I ask that you vow to stop talking to all young men, all the hunters, all men except your father, Kakokto until I release you from this pledge."

"But Grannie Nia, this will be most difficult."

"At first it may seem so, Clara, but women who have done this in the past have found good hunters to make into husbands," Grannie explained. "Isn't this what you want?"

"Yes," I think this is what I want."

"If you want it enough, then, you must accept this vow of silence to get yourself the proper husband."

"I accept," Clara said. "I will talk to no man outside my family. You may tell all the village that I will not speak to the young men at all."

"Clara, all the young men who desire you for wife will try to make you talk with them," Grannie Nia said.

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“Then you can tell all the young village men that I will marry the one who can make me talk to him,” Clara said. “I am as stubborn as you, my grandmother, so I will never talk to such men.”

“I will help you in this and speak for you if necessary or perhaps I will just chase all the young men away from you with this skinning knife.” Grannie Nia poked the knife into the air, imagining it was the belly of one of Clara’s unsuitable admirers.

#

Weeks went by, and Clara began her period of silence around the young men and hunters. Many tried to get her to speak, but Grannie Nia answered their questions with wit, or grunts of disdain, and not too infrequently with a wave of her skinning knife. Among these young men was the persistent *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie.

Ka-Kit-ta-yok Carlie would sit by the hours at village feasts and dances to watch the girl he began to call ‘my darling Clara’. When she took the floor in a woman’s dance, her gloved hands waved the caribou hair fans with more grace and rhythm than most. *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie watched while she kept time to the booming drums; bending her knees and swaying with such grace in her dancing style, his heart thumped in his chest.

Ka-kit-ta-yok Carlie smiled every time he saw her teeth gleam like ivory beads held in her mouth. When Clara saw him smiling, she smiled back and her smile sent warm thrills racing through his body. At times like these, *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie forgot to be funny and play the clown.

He sat up straight on the *Karsghi* bench and watched her move in the dances. He was, however, not the only young hunter in the village community house who was watching Clara and the old grandmother who hovered like a tern; constantly near the girl.

In a few days, Clara had a long string of suitors bringing gifts to her father's house and they went away disappointed when Clara did not speak to them, but only smiled and waved. Grannie Nia scuttled around, always nearby, huddling over Clara like a mother seal tending her furry white pup.

Word of Clara's vow to marry the only man who could make her speak appealed to the macho sense of competition among the village men. Many from other villages nearby joined the line of suitors just to get a close look at Clara's famed beauty. Some of these young men went directly to Kakokto to ask for Clara's hand, which was the tradition of the village. But all they ever heard from Kakokto was a very loud: *No! No! Clara has vowed to not to speak to men and I cannot speak for her.*

There was nothing for the young men to do, but try to trick Clara into speaking. But Clara, backed by Grannie Nia, was able to avoid their tricks. Every afternoon a small group of young men gathered around Kakokto's cabin. The village girls and boys joined in the fun and came to watch the tricksters at work. Each of the young hunters had a unique trick or question for Clara that was original and his own.

"Clara, would you like me to get fresh water for you from the Pond of the Loons?" Clara nodded but did not speak and the young man tried to slink off, but not before Grannie Nia caught him and handed him not one, but two large buckets to fill from the pond nearly half a mile away.

Another hunter pretended he had cut his thumb on a harpoon point and held up an obviously badly bandaged thumb. "Look Clara, I cut myself. Have you any medicine for a salve?" Clara bustled back into the cabin and returned with a bottle of iodine and a box of G.I. band-aides. The wounded hunter decided he could heal himself and left. The village children followed him a short way down the trail and hooted taunts at him. But there were still many other young men who waited their turn to try tricks.

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“Clara, I think the sled-dogs have pulled down your drying rack and eaten your caribou hide,” one such trickster called out.

Clara didn’t move or speak, but Grannie Nia charged around to the south side of the house, saw no damage done, and came back just as fast as her bowed legs could waddle. She waved her skinning knife at this particular trickster and he never came back a second time.

One young man complained to Clara that her father was snoring so loudly at night that he had driven all the seals back to Siberia.

Clara widened her eyes at this insult, but her lips were sealed. All the teasing, trickery and coaxing remarks only kept her lips closed all the tighter. Days of this went on and Grannie Nia’s patience with the young men was growing thin. When she saw a group of hunters coming up the trail to the cabin, she took to untying the most vicious of Kakoto’s sled dogs, and if this failed, she yelled threats and sliced the air with her *ulu*-skinning knife.

One afternoon, when Clara and Grannie Nia were taking advantage of the few hours of sunlight to soften their caribou hides with their cleaning sticks, *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie, came sauntering up the path.

“I’ve been expecting you, Carlie Leonard,” Grannie spoke for Clara. “What took you so long to try your tricks? I thought you’d be the first one here.”

“Grandmother of Clara, I know tradition requires that I speak to Kakokto, and I did not wish to bother so important a man about his daughter’s hand.”

“You just didn’t want to risk hearing him say ‘No! And No! Again,” Grannie chuckled.

“I thought I’d come over and give you both an afternoon of jokes and laughter,” *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie answered.

“Don’t bother me, I have work to do and so does Clara,” Grannie grunted four times.

Ka-kit-ta-yok Carlie tried making faces. *This just might trick her into speech*, he thought. First he puckered in his lower lip and puffed out his cheeks to make his walrus face. Clara smiled a wide smile but said nothing. He made his lost puppy face and his seal-at-a-breathing-hole face, without results. He did a somersault and a couple of back-flips to no avail.

“Go hunt something. Go kill some rabbits or a ptarmigan or two. Go kill anything, just get out of here, because you’re killing my patience with those silly animal faces and your flopping around here like a tomcod on ice,” Grannie said. Clara smiled and had to hide her face in her hands, because she wanted to laugh out loud, but she kept silent.

Two days later, Clara was on her way to the loon pond for water. She passed a thick clump of dwarf willows and heard a voice like Grannie’s asking question after question of Clara. They were important questions that needed answers, but Clara was not fooled by *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie’s excellent mimicry of Grannie Nia’s voice.

This young man's gift of the ability imitate animals or other people’s voices, was one of the reasons he was known as the village clown. He joined forces with two of his best friends and hunting partners in a new attempt to trick Clara into speech.

Ka-Kit-ta-yok Carlie had enlisted Little Daniel and Wesley Sidjark to help him trick Clara into speaking. The trio had tried to approach Kakokto’s cabin on several occasions, but Grannie Nia was always perched on a log stool beside the passageway, looking like a vicious peregrine hawk-mother defending the nest, which in fact, was exactly what Grannie Nia thought she was doing.

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Grannie's verbal reproaches and her slicing the air with a skinning knife *ulu* kept the three young men at bay.

On early morning, when the sky was not yet blue and the stars still eluded the clouds herding them in the sky, *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie and his friends quietly secluded themselves in a matted growth of heavy cover along the loon pond trail. They had not long to wait. Clara came down the path swinging her bucket and humming. After she had passed their hiding place, *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie, Little Daniel and Wesley crept forward like hunting wolves and followed Clara as quietly as they could. They circled around her and hid in another clump of willows, unseen by anyone but each other and waited.

On this particular morning, *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie had dressed in his best parka and boots, but he had painted his face white with clay and blacked out his front teeth with charcoal mixed in goose grease. He slung a hunting bag over his shoulder. Inside the bag was the trick he placed all his hopes on. Something he planned to show to Clara.

He had Wesley and Little Daniel help him to pull his hair up on top of his head and tie it in a knot. Into the hair knot he inserted some of feathers and a few twigs. He thought this the best appearance for a ghost, which is what he was pretending to be. If he could scare Clara in the early darkness she just might scream and then speak.

A few loons, who had not yet flown south, wavered their wild voices and let their strange laughter shatter the quiet dark. Clara sat her bucket down on the gravel shore. She positioned a few large rocks in a small circle and prepared to build a fire while she waited for the hesitant sun and the tardy daylight. She lit the fire and while it burned to proper cooking coals, she pulled on the fishing line she had left baited in the pond the night before. Her catch was a large salmon trout, which she promptly cleaned and skewered for her cooking fire.

Ka-kit-ta-yok Carlie, Little Daniel and Wesley could smell the cooking fish. They wanted Clara to speak, but they also wanted a

portion of her breakfast. *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie hadn't planned for this unexpected event, but suddenly he had an idea.

"Circle around behind Clara and make some strange noises to distract her," *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie, instructed.

Wesley and Little Daniel crept silently back down the trail and began to hoot and screech like owls, whistle like swans, and grunt like walrus calves. Clara turned to the sound but did not appear to be frightened. The unusual combination of animal voices convinced her it was a trick to get her to speak. She set her lips tight and walked to where Little Daniel and Wesley hid in the willows.

While Clara was distracted, *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie hurried to the fire and dropped the skinned *Sik-sik-puk*, ground squirrel he had carried in his bag, onto the fire coals. The animal's scorching flesh sent up an unpleasant odor. He scooped up the partially cooked fish---singeing his fingers, and popped it into the bag where the squirrel had been. The trickster scampered back to his hiding place and waited.

Clara came back to her cooking fire with Little Daniel and Wesley trailing her. Suddenly, *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie popped out of the willows and shouted at Clara. She was startled and fell backward into the arms of Wesley and Little Daniel.

With his white face and crazy hair-do, *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie really looked more the clown than the ghost he pretended to be, but his sudden appearance had frightened Clara. The girl set her lips tight and did not scream.

The pretend ghost pranced around and waved his arms and made gibbering noises. Clara stared at him with an expression of disbelief on her face. *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie was acting more ridiculous than any one in the village had ever seen him act before. Little Daniel couldn't contain himself and laughed so hard at the clownish antics he fell to the gravel beach.

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Clara's wonder at this strange behavior changed to amusement when Little Daniel started laughing and a smile widened on her face, but she still made no sound. Wesley joined Little Daniel in laughter and Clara's grin grew wider but she didn't utter a word. Soon the three young men were laughing at each other.

Clara shook her head, let the grin fade from her face as she mentally dismissed the silliness of the three would be suitors and walked past the trio to her cooking fire. She saw the something lying on the coals of her fire where her fish had been.

All at once, *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie jumped up and waved his arms and pointed to Clara's small fireplace. "Clara, my darling, you are beautiful, but not very smart. Look!

You roast a hairless *something* on the fire. Tradition says you cannot eat this meat unless you know what it is. What are you thinking?"

Clara turned around and faced *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie then looked back to the thing on her cooking coals. There, on the ashes was *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie's *something*! It was now a shrunken and scorched.

"A *Gettuyu!*" *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie yelled.

Clara caught her breath and looked from *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie to his two friends and broke into laughter. "It cannot be, *Ka-Kit-ta-yok* Carlie! I put a fish there, didn't I Little Daniel? Wesley?"

"Aha! You did it! You spoke to me!" *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie chortled in triumph. "Now me, the village clown will have the most beautiful girl in Nunavunga for a wife!"

"Wait a minute, Friend," Little Daniel said. "I tell you now, that Clara doesn't belong to you."

“Oh no? Little Daniel, the trick with the dead ground squirrel was mine,” *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie yelled and hopped around in his glee.

“Yeah, maybe, but I’m the one who shot the *Sik-sik-puk* and gave it to you,” Little Daniel puffed out his chest in defiance.

“And I loaned him the gun and besides, I skinned the damned squirrel,” Wesley insisted.

“No! The idea was mine! The trick was mine! I started all this and I won Clara.”

Ka-kit-ta-yok Carlie laughed loudly. He jumped around on the beach like the clown he was and waved his arms in the air.

Clara stood, amazed, watching the village clown do a little dance of joy in the gravel of the pond’s beach. She was suddenly aware that Wesley and Little Daniel stood one either side of her. Wesley called out to *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie.

Hey! Carlie, she spoke my name, too!" She spoke to me."

"And to me!" Little Daniel yelled. "She's mine to claim."

"She spoke to me!" *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie insisted.

"Hey, clown!" Wesley hollered. "I have heard of a man on Punuk Island who had three wives, that was their tradition. But I have never heard of any woman on Nunavunga having three husbands!"

"She spoke to me!" *Ka-Kit-ta-yok* Carlie insisted.

"She spoke to all three of us," Little Daniel interrupted.

"Yeah. That’s right, so she either belongs to all of us or none of us," Wesley argued in a loud voice.

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Clara saw *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie's face lengthen and confusion showed on his features.

"What in the hell are you saying, Wesley?" Carlie asked.

The village clown wasn't laughing now.

Clara pressed her lips together in a quiet, sly grin. She looked directly into *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie's eyes in a very rude manner. "There is nothing in our traditions that would allow such a foolish thing as a woman having three useless husbands!"

She said nothing more, walked to the pond edge, picked up her bucket and dipped it full of water. The three young men watched her pour the water on her cooking fire. The white puff of smoke that rose up instantly carried the unpleasant smell of the burnt ground squirrel *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie had called a '*Gettuyu*'.

Little Daniel and Wesley looked at their dejected friend. The young clown-suitor was staring at his mukluk tops. They couldn't read his face. Perhaps he was embarrassed or even hurt by the loss of Clara.

Suddenly *Ka-kit-ta-yok* Carlie's face brightened and he began to laugh. He patted the bag slung across his shoulder.

"Well, anyway, I got your fish!

"Keep it," Clara said, "Think of it as a traditional consolation prize, one awarded to silly clowns for their efforts."

With that said Clara dipped her bucket full of water again. Little Daniel and Wesley scuffled over the privilege of carrying the heavy bucket for her back down the long trail to Kakokto's Cabin.

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