

Memories of Sons Killed by Plague Fill Mother's Mind

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: As the desperate Attungana family fled the plague that hit the Kukpuk River fishing grounds, all three sons of Attungana and Siqvoana died as the umiak drifted down the river. At the conclusion of the previous installation, the deathly ill father had made an agonized cry upon realization that all of his children, except the youngest girl, had all died of the Plague.)

THINGS THAT WERE

Siqvoana laid her head briefly on the breast of her suffering husband. She got up and went to the stern of the umiak. Olacroaq was huddled there. She had begun to whimper. The brave little girl had been unnerved by the agonized cry of her father.

Siqvoana took her child in her arms. The little girl quieted down as she felt the closeness of her mother.

Siqvoana went to the seat at the stern and righted the direction of the umiak. She began to paddle not knowing exactly why she was doing it. Her mind drifted away from the immediate situation and wandered into the past. It was pleasant and effortless.

The dusk of the evening had begun to descend upon the Kukpuk River.

"How that Kasik, my oldest son, behaved when he was ten years old," recalled Siqvoana. "His father always said he would be a fine hunter and now he lies dead in our umiak — my oldest son, Kasik. All of my children were good.

"And my little Olacroaq — how strong she is for such a little girl. Something — something is making her strong. I wonder what it is — I wonder —"

Siqvoana recalled two springs before when she and Attungana had permitted Kasik to stay up all night along with other boys. They had told him to behave and Kasik had promised that he would. He was taught throughout his childhood days that when he made a promise he must keep it — but Kasik had not kept his.

Siqvoana smiled faintly as the memory coursed through her mind.

The Consequences

"Attungana, I saw your son, Kasik, leaping from one piece of ice to another off the beach very early this morning," a man had told him.

They did not believe the man, but when they had a talk with Kasik, they found out that it was true. Kasik had denied it at first — and he shouldn't have done that because it made things worse for him. Lying was never allowed in the family.

How angry Attungana was when he found out the truth. He made sure the rest of the children were present when he punished Kasik. The punishment was severe and the rest of the children had cried just by watching. Poor little Kasik couldn't sit down for two days and he slept on his belly.

Siqvoana herself had almost cried because it was the first time Attungana ever punished any of the children. Attungana could be stern when he had to be.

"You could have drowned!" Attungana had said angrily.

Kasik could have drowned all right except for one of the boys who had taken along an oogruk hide line. He had slipped on one of the cakes of ice and down he went into the water that was as deep as ten times the height of Attungana.

A boy had thrown the line to Kasik and pulled him and dragged him up on a large cake of ice.

"Someone pushed me into the water," Kasik had said at first when Attungana and Siqvoana noticed that his clothes were wet.

It was dangerous for boys of Kasik's age to do what they did. When the ice melted in spring, small pieces floated around and in between large ones, most of them not big enough to float anyone, even boys.

Lesson of Survival

Kasik should have waited another two years. Attungana, himself, would have shown him exactly the way how to do it. He did do it this spring under the watchful eye of his father and Kasik had learned it well indeed. It was one of his lessons of survival.

Yes, Kasik learned his lesson very well indeed. In a 25 or 30

foot space of water filled with small cakes of ice, some of them no bigger than his hips, he could leap from one cake to another with unerring ability and as quick as a squirrel.

When Attungana was teaching Kasik this difficult lesson, Siqvoana had been watching nervously. The father taught his son to do this in narrow spaces at first.

"Son, you have to know exactly where to step and you have to know it instantly. Otherwise, you'll slip and fall in. That's what happened two years ago when you sneaked and did it," Attungana had instructed and needed his son.

Kasik had blushed a little and looked sheepish.

It was exciting and fascinating to watch the father and son as the lesson progressed. Attungana would demonstrate from time to time and how superbly he did it. Kasik could do it almost as well by the time it was over.

Siqvoana had tingled with excitement a bit as she watched her son step quickly on each piece of ice. The moment he stepped on a cake, it would plunge straight down into the water and then bob up to the surface an instant later.

When the lessons were over, Attungana made sure to tell Kasik, "My son, don't ever forget what you have learned and don't ever take unnecessary chances."

Attungana would never praise his son to his face. He merely looked pleased but he would tell his wife how delighted he was with the progress Kasik was making.

"I'm quite sure our son will be a fine hunter," he had predicted.

Good Children

Siqvoana had been very proud of their son's progress, of course, and she was more demonstrative of her pleasure to him than was her husband. As a result, Kasik had known for certain that he had done well.

Yes, all of the children were good. They squabbled of course, like any others in other families. They were devoted to their parents and they were loved in turn. Attungana's family was a happy family.

Back to Reality

Siqvoana had been completely obsessed by her reveries. She suddenly noticed that she was having some difficulty in seeing clearly. It had become quite dark now.

The bow of the umiak swiped a bank to the left and the impact jerked the craft. The jar brought Siqvoana to full reality of the situation and alarmed her.

"Ours was a happy family — and now —" she sobbed audibly. She slumped forward, her elbows resting on her thighs — her hands on her face. She wept.

"Mother, when you do that it makes me want to cry, too," Olacroaq said in a miserable little voice.

The remark steadied Siqvoana and she took hold of her little daughter. She embraced her as if nothing would ever part them. It was many moments before she let the little girl down in front of her on a seat close to the stern. She began to paddle once again.

Brazen Animals

"Mother, there are five dogs on the gravel over there ahead of us," Olacroaq pointed. "See them, mother?"

Siqvoana looked hard through the deepening dusk. The hair on the back of her neck bristled and a chill coursed down her spine.

Wolves!

The animals had probably been sleeping when they heard a noise from the umiak. They were restlessly slinking on the gravel bar — their heads lowered — their tails between their legs.

Siqvoana steered the umiak toward the far side of the river away from the wolves. She paddled urgently.

As the umiak was just about to come opposite them, two of the wolves rushed out into the shallow water, snarling wickedly. Even in the darkness, Siqvoana could see the cruel fangs — ugly — menacing! She jerked involuntarily away from them.

"How brazen they are. They know we are helpless and have no protection. They know Attungana is sick! They know he is sick!" thought Siqvoana, bitterly.

The two wolves splashed into the water up to their chests and stopped. One of them looked as if it was about to go on to the

deep water to swim after the umiak.

They turned back, as if reluctantly, to the gravel bar, snarling. They shook the water off and joined the other three that were slinking along the edge of the water. They were following the umiak.

(To be continued)