

Arctic Survival—

Uncle Nayukuk Had Talent for Hunting When Needed

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It was a joy to watch Aunt Mumangeena in her performance as a model wife. It was not hard for her because, basically, she was sweetnatured and tender hearted. The reason was that her husband, Nayukuk, during the past month, had done some remarkable things when his village needed him most.

She was tender as she served him his food. She lovingly repaired his clothing and she looked after his comfort. She was tender in every way to her husband. Uncle Nayukuk took all this attention in his usual manner without comment or acknowledgement. He either sat quietly or went about his business without ever changing his expression while his wife gave him her loving attentions.

Homely Attention

It was hard to figure out why Mumangeena never seemed to mind when she failed to get any response for her affections. Instead, she seemed to savor giving every bit of it. Perhaps she and Uncle Nayukuk had little secrets of their own that no one ever knew about. At any rate, to watch Mumangeena giving attention to her husband was amusing, poignant, homely, all at the same time.

I used to get impatient with Uncle Nayukuk when Aunt Mumangeena was so attentive and mentally urged him, "Why don't you hug Aunt Mumangeena or something?" However, it was an impossible wish and Nayukuk kept right on being stolid, silent, unattentive, expressionless to his wife's attentions.

Lean Period Begins

The story began during the month of February. It was one of those times when the Arctic refused to yield or yielded grudgingly. The weather in turn was bitterly cold, high winds, blizzards. Hunters of the village of Tigara were having difficulty bringing in game needed for food. They went out day after day and came back empty-handed. Food supplies became low and many people began to feel

hunger as days went on.

Surprisingly Well-off

It was a little different in our sod igloo. Surprisingly, we were better off than some of the families because Uncle Nayukuk was one of the few men who was able to bring home seals occasionally.

Before the lean period began, there was, as usual, frequent periods of nagging on the part of Aunt Mumangeena due to Uncle Nayukuk's lackadaisical attitude towards hunting. His philosophy seemed to have been that as long as there was food in the village, he would do as little as possible. He got away with it too, under protest, of course, to an amazing degree or until his wife would get so aggravated that she might burst a blood vessel.

Unwilling Beggar

During better times in the village, much to her disgust, Aunt Mumangeena was forever bringing home pieces of meat from other families. Some women, like my mother and Mumangeena's sister, Keshorna, came to mock her and berate her for being nothing but a common beggar.

"What have you got for a husband, a walrus? All he seem to want to do is bask in the sun and doze. And when hunger forces him, he gets a few clams," mother would tell my aunt.

"Sister, you are cruel to say things like that about my Nayukuk. He has a delicate health and he has not been feeling well lately," Mumangeena alibied for her husband.

"Hm, he's the healthiest looking sick man I have ever seen," mother retorted.

Sister was Caustic

Keshorna never turned Mumangeena down but would make her squirm before she gave her a piece of seal, oogruk, polar bear or caribou meat.

Although feeling that there would be little or no chance of returning the favor, Mumangeena said with honest conviction "Sister, you will get every bit as much back when my Nayukuk gets well."

"When, when we're all dead?"

"You should never talk like that to your older sister. What is this generation coming to? In our mother's and father's day, things were never like this!" Aunt Mumangeena reprimanded.

"We didn't have Nayukuks those days either," Keshorna quickly answered.

Aunt Mumangeena let out a pitiful cry that sounded like a sob. She clutched the precious piece of meat and walked out the door. The biting remarks her sister had made rankled her on the way home. When she walked into the igloo, she didn't notice that Uncle Nayukuk was cleaning his 30-30 carbine. She slammed into her husband without looking at him while getting ready to cook the meat.

Surprised

"There you are! Are you sick? You're the healthiest looking sick dog I have ever seen. You are — oh, you're cleaning your supootin (gun)."

Mumangeena changed the tone of her voice in an instant.

"Let me cook this meat quickly and we'll have a nice meal. The weather is cold now but it will be a nice day tomorrow. Are you going hunting tomorrow?" she asked quietly.

"I'll see how I feel in the morning," Nayukuk said.

This was usually an excellent sign that Uncle Nayukuk would be going hunting the next morning. Knowing this, Mumangeena chattered happily. Her vehemence was gone completely and the atmosphere in the little sod igloo became easy and comforting.

Strangely Distinctive

Shortly after this episode, unfavorable hunting conditions descended upon the village. It brought with it an amazing change in Uncle Nayukuk. He became a hunter and a great one. There was something strangely inspirational about the man.

Nayukuk was a distinctive looking man. He was handsome. His reticence seemed to fit him perfectly. He had rather large, intelligent, melancholy eyes that gave him an air of asceticism. The rest of his face was fine and he had a dense black mustache. His figure was straight, not fat, not skinny — a wellproportioned masculine build. He was about 5 feet 7 inches tall.

There was another quality about Uncle Nayukuk. He apparently did not fear man or beast. He was largely left to his own designs. No one joshed him to his face but he was subject of much amusement behind his back.

Nayukuk hunted. Every man in the village hunted and some of them were occasionally successful. So was Nayukuk.

As days went by, all the men ceased to take any game — except Uncle Nayukuk. Every few days he would come home with a seal, sometimes two. When he came home, his eyebrows, lashes and his mustache would be covered with hoarfrost from the bitter cold.

Determined Hunter

He went hunting every day — determined — silent. His consistent taking of game became the talk of the village. The unbelieving villagers no longer made amusing remarks about Uncle Nayukuk. He began to loom out at the highest ice ridge. People asked, "What is Nayukuk, an ungatkuq? (medicine man)? Or is he a great hunter?"

One evening he came home rather late. Mumangeena and I were waiting anxiously for him when we saw him coming from the northwest of the village. He was dragging something that was hard to make out in the moonlit dusk. I ran to meet him. He was dragging a polar bear skin with some of its meat in it.

As soon as he got home, he went to visit some men, which he rarely did, and told them exactly where the rest of the polar bear meat was. The men got two better conditioned dogteams (most of the dogs were half-starved) and the two teams set out that night to go after the meat. The almost full moon was shining and the visibility was good. The men didn't want to take a chance of the meat being carried away by ice break.

Unbelievable Performance

So that was the way it was — an unbelievable performance when the village needed him most, Uncle Nayukuk delivered. Since he never divulged anything, it was unknown whether he knew more secrets of the Arctic or he had an unusual run of luck. It was he who saved a bad situation the outcome of which might have been much worse.

During this time, Aunt Mumangeena was beside herself. She was obviously enjoying the reverse of the situation. She was now giving instead of receiving. She was living in the sweetness of reflected glory.

Gave Happily

When her husband brought home the seals, she happily cut them up in pieces that would make a fair meal and then she would direct me: "Kee, ahkahng (Alright, mother), bring this to the Samaroona family. This one to Koonook family. I'll bring this to my sister Keshorna myself."

This was an apparent attempt to get even with her sister when the situation was reversed. Although she never did say it, this thought must have entered her mind, "I told you so."

Unrelated Chatter

After entering her sister's house, Mumangeena chattered endlessly. She talked about unrelated matters never once mentioning the cryptic remarks Keshorna had directed at her. She was practicing a subtle psychology on her sister while saying:

"We are having an unusually cold winter this year. I feel sorry for our poor men who have to hunt in it. The weather should break soon and everything should be alright. This bad situation will not last too long."

"I have noticed a hole on the right mukluk of my mother today. I must patch it right away. I have to make him a new parka soon, too. Children certainly wear their clothes out fast. He has been so helpful. I don't know what I'd do without him."

"As you know, the teacher hired him to make kindling and bring coal into the school. After working a whole week, the teacher paid him a can of tomatoes. A week before that, he brought home a can of peaches."

Unbelievable Man

"That man, that Nayukuk, will never cease to amaze me," said Keshorna more to herself than to her sister.

"Isn't he something? As much as I nagged him when he wasn't hunting, there is something exciting about Nayukuk. He may be quiet and lazy at times, but he is my man. He's good looking too, don't you think, sister?" Mumangeena said coyly.

Overtaken with sudden urgency, she said, "I better get

home and feed my man. He must be pretty hungry by now. What's the matter with me anyway? I always talk too much. I should have been home long ago."

"You know, Sister, when I did something wrong, like staying too long, Nayukuk never even say anything to me. He's a good husband but he sure is a hard one to figure out."

No Slighting Remarks

Keshorna was not making any slighting remarks to her sister that evening and Mumangeena was not reminding her about it. She had done a slick piece of psychology on her younger sister. It would be a long time before Keshorna would make any attempt to mock her sister again. At the moment, Mumangeena had the definite upper hand in the matter.

The Bitter Pill

Keshorna's husband, Weyahok my father, who was one of the finest hunters in the village, as were many of the men, was only mildly successful during the lean period. The family, and many families in Tigara, had to swallow the bitter pill when they were forced to receive meat from the Nayukuk family. Many of them had been known to make slighting remarks about Nayukuk and Mumangeena.

There was nothing they could do about it. The food was needed and Nayukuk brought it in. This resulted in no little admiration for my Uncle. The village paid him silent tribute and with respect.

During this period, Uncle Nayukuk was his same old self. He neither looked proud of his vital contribution nor did he say anything about it. He acted as if he had been through any ordinary times.

Back to Normal

Soon after Nayukuk caught his polar bear, hunting conditions began to improve. Hunters, once again, brought in game in ample numbers and the village rapidly came back to normal.

Nayukuk kept on hunting for quite some time after getting the bear. Mumangeena was able to store away meat in our under ground cache. She was a very happy woman during this time and she couldn't do enough to please her husband.

Back To Old Habits

However, Uncle Nayukuk had the habit of ending all good things. He began to relax his hunting. It was noticeable on Aunt Mumangeena. Although she chattered as usual, she smiled less. Due to the recent memorable effort of her husband, she did not say anything to her husband about hunting for a long time.

The food in our cache was getting low. Nayukuk replenished it by hunting occasionally but, inevitably, it was gone. Mumangeena must have felt somewhat reassured because whaling season was just around the corner. This one hunt Uncle Nayukuk seemed to relish. He would be going out as my father's helmsman. He was amazingly well qualified for this difficult job.

One evening, after being pathetically attentive to her husband, Aunt Mumangeena said gently, "My good husband, our cache is empty. We need food now. Will you be going hunting tomorrow?"

After a long silence, Nayukuk said, "I don't know what's wrong with me but my whole body has been aching lately. It should be gone in two or three days."

Mumangeena looked away without saying a word.

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