

Eskimos Abhor Smell, Taste of Canned Cabbage; Peaches 'Delightful'

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Aunt Mumangeena was unusually attentive that morning many years ago. As I luxuriated in the warmth of my reindeer hide sleeping bag, I could hear her talking softly to Uncle Nayukuk who, to our great surprise, had gotten up before he was asked by his wife.

Uncle Nayukuk had an incurable streak of laziness. This was evident in almost everything he did but he never seemed to care what anyone thought of him. He went right on living in his own unique way. This dubious characteristic left him open to many a criticism which he neither acknowledged nor complained about.

Chief Critic

His chief critic was, of course, Aunt Mumangeena. It was doubtful that she relished being a nagging wife but she was forced into being one. Her patience wore thin only after repeated manifestations of Uncle Nayukuk's aversion to work.

She would, at first, try to wheedle her husband into doing things. When this failed, she would openly demand. Failing in this, she would commence to hurl epithets at him. My uncle also showed amazing patience withstanding his wife's tirades. He moved only with harmony in our little household seemed to be in danger of collapsing.

Uncle Nayukuk had a capacity of producing on occasions and did them well — in fact so well, especially in hunting, he was the equal of any fine hunter in the village.

My aunt and I used to wish that he would continue to exert this superb ability but that was hoping almost for the impossible. As a result, we lived on the verge of complete poverty. Aunt Mumangeena bemoaned the fact that we would have been one of the more prosperous households in Tikikq (Point Hope) if her husband had been consistent.

Element of Surprise

My uncle seemed to have possessed an element of surprise as one facet in his unique personality. He did things when we least expected them. The morning in question was one of them when he had gotten up without being urged by my aunt.

The usual thing was that Aunt Mumangeena jostled him on the shoulder almost every morning. The force of it depended on how she felt. When she was especially impatient about his laziness, she would give him a vigorous, almost violent, shake accompanied by, "You lazy aiviq (walrus), GET UP!"

Jolted into sudden wakefulness, Uncle Nayukuk would grunt, turned his back and faced the wall.

Careening Voice

I was awakened by the quiet, almost careening voice of my aunt and it was pleasant to hear. I peeked out of the opening of my sleeping bag and Nayukuk was already checking on his 30-30 rifle. He was getting ready to go hunting.

"Let me check your mukluks," Mumangeena was saying softly, "before you put them on. I may have overlooked some broken stitches, I don't want you to have cold feet and it is cold this morning."

She did this quickly. "They're fine — nothing wrong with your mukluks. I better start frying the sourdough hotcakes right away. The coffee is done now, Nayukuk, and it's the way you like it — strong."

"I better wake mother up pretty quick too," Aunt Mumangeena continued soothingly. "He has to go to school. He's working for the teacher, you know. This is Friday and the teacher will be paying him something. I can never tell what

he's going to bring home. Last Friday, he brought home so peashis—I can never say that thing like mother can."

Aunt Mumangeena meant "peaches," the canned fruit she had learned to like a great deal.

I was, of course, "mother" to my aunt having been named after my grandmother, Mumangeena's mother. She had been very close to me ever since I could remember. When I was seven years old, she had asked my parents to come and live with her and Uncle Nayukuk.

Irresponsible Man

When I moved in with them, I was at a loss as to how my uncle felt about me. He was generally an unsmiling man and his great reticence was hard to get used to. His black eyebrows and mustache seemed to intensify his strange personality. But in spite of this, I felt at home with him and I used to wonder why. Aunt Mumangeena was the opposite, of course. She treated me as if I was her very

Mutual Understanding

During the summer of the year I moved in with them, Uncle Nayukuk surprised me when he asked that I go to the beach with him. It was a beautiful day. Myriads of Forget-Me-Not's, Anemones and other moss flowers were in full bloom.

As we walked along, my toe caught on something and I sprawled to the ground. My uncle took me by the left hand and helped me up and he continued to hold my hand as we resumed walking. I knew then I had more than a casual affection for Uncle Nayukuk and I was sure he had the same feeling for me.

Buoyed up by this pleasant feeling, I began to ask my uncle many questions. Being a man of few words, his answers were, "Eee," (yes) "nahka," (no) and "ahmy," (I don't know).

Feigned Sleep

Aunt Mumangeena walked over to wake me. I closed my eyes without her notice. She shook me gently and said quietly:

"Mother — mother, it's time to get up. I have some hotcakes cooking now. You have to go to school and you mustn't miss work today for that teacher. Get up, mother."

Enjoyable Breakfast

The breakfast was most enjoyable. It wasn't any different from others in what was served, but it was different in quantity. Mumangeena usually allowed me one good sized hotcake but that morning, she served me two of them. She did the same for my uncle.

My aunt, of course, was in a happy mood and she had a double reason for being so. Uncle Nayukuk had gotten up by himself and he was going hunting. I was going to school and it was Friday — my pay day. In anticipation of the day's returns, she was anxious to serve us the best way she knew how.

Would Nayukuk have more coffee? Did mother have any holes in his mukluks?

As soon as breakfast was over, Nayukuk went out to hunt.

"You know, mother, that uncle of yours never failed to surprise me," Aunt Mumangeena chuckled. "He got up without me having to wake him up. He has a way of making me feel guilty of what I've done or said to him."

"When he does thing like this something usually happens. Sometime I wonder whether he knew things before they happen. Maybe he's an ahngatkuq (medicine man) and I never knew it."

My aunt made me do odds and ends around the little household before it was time for me to go to school. When school was over, I did my usual work for the teacher. I cut a boxful of kindling and carried coal into the coalbins. Al-

though I was eleven years old, I was small for my age and carrying buckets full of coal was quite a chore.

When the work was done, I knocked on the teacher's door as usual. He never seemed to have any previous plans as to what he was going to pay me for my weeks work.

After he opened the door, he walked into another room, probably the pantry, and he came back twirling a can in his hands. It was the same size as a can of peaches or tomatoes, it was neither of these because I could tell by the color of the can.

"My boy, did you ever eat cabbage before?" the teacher asked.

"No sir," I answered, mystified.

"Well, my boy, you're going to eat some today. Here, take this home and I hope you'll enjoy it."

"Thank you, sir."

I walked out scrutinizing the can. It had a picture of a round green thing on it. One part of it looked as if it was peeling. As I wondered what the thing might be, a boyish voice shouted:

"Umah! (hey you!) Your uncle got a polar bear!" It was one of my young friends in the village.

Elated, I broke into a run tucking the can in the crook of my arm. A surge of happiness came to me. My Uncle Nayukuk had gotten a polar bear! As I ran, I thought to myself that I was also bringing something home — something called "cabbage" but I didn't know what it was!

Happy Woman

When I hurriedly entered our sod igloo, I found my aunt in a state of excitement but a happy one. There were several visitors and Mumangeena was busy cutting pieces of polar bear meat to give away and she was enjoying it immensely.

This was one of the few times she wasn't on the receiving end and it was giving her ego a needed shot in the arm. It had suffered much too often because of Uncle Nayukuk's inconsistent efforts.

What is it, Mother?

Aunt Mumangeena was much too busy to notice what I had brought home from the teacher. After many minutes, she finally noticed me.

"There you are, mother. I didn't even notice you were home. Did you bring some peashis?"

"No," Aunt Mumangeena, it's something the teacher called "cabbage."

"Ca — ca — cabbish? What is that?"

"The teacher said it was, 'cabbage' not 'cabbish.'"

"Carbish — never mind, we'll see what it is later. I have to boil some polar bear meat right away. You and your uncle are hungry and what fine dinner you're going to have."

The "carbish" was forgotten until after dinner. The dinner itself was most enjoyable. While we ate, Aunt Mumangeena was already planning to buy this and that from Peter Koonooyak, the storekeeper.

Uncle Nayukuk's bear was medium-sized and it measured just over nine feet. At five dollars a foot, the price at the time, it would bring us a little over forty-five dollars worth of goods from the store. One of the foremost items Mumangeena mentioned was peaches.

"I never seemed to get enough of those peashis and I'm going to buy three of them from Koonooyak," she anticipated. "By the way, mother, what is that thing you brought home — that — ca — cabbish — carbish —?"

"It's cabbage — cabbage. See, it says on the can—C-A-B-B-A-G-E—and the teacher calls it cabbage — not carbish," I corrected, impatiently.

"I've never heard of such a thing

and Koonooyak doesn't sell it at the store."

"How could you tell, Aunt Mumangeena? You can't read."

"Just the same I know it, mother, because I've never heard of it—and stop being so smart and let your uncle open that thing. And remember, mother, you should never talk to me like that!"

Negative Smell

Uncle Nayukuk took his hunting knife and opened the can without much effort. He pried the tin up and look at the contents for several moments. He raised the can to his nose slowly and smelled. His eyes darted at me and Mumangeena as his nose crinkled above his black mustache. It was plain that my uncle did not relish what he smelled.

Without a word, he gave the can to me. I followed his example and smelled the contents. The odor was strong. It seemed to have a somewhat familiar smell to it but I couldn't connect it at the moment.

"What do you and your uncle smell in that thing anyway? Give it to me, mother," Mumangeena demanded.

She smelled it — put it down — and smelled it again. There was a look of surprise in her face.

"Hmmm, this thing smells something like the oogruk gut peelings and it looks something like them too — but this looks dull and dirty compared to the peelings. Taste it and see what it's like, mother."

"No, you taste it, Aunt Mumangeena."

"You're the one who should taste it because you work for it for a whole week. Here, let me have it."

She pinched a small piece and put it in her mouth. She rolled it on her tongue and chewed it half-heartedly. The corners of her mouth dropped but she managed to swallow it.

"Here, Nayukuk, try this and see what you think of it."

My uncle hesitantly took a piece that was apparently larger than he wanted. Part of it flapped over his lower lip. He retrieved it with his tongue and gingerly made chewing motions.

Nayukuk started to get up off the floor. He evidently wanted to spit his mouthful into the stove. His left foot slipped and the resulting jerk made him swallow the cabbage. He settled slowly into a sitting position, his mouth slightly open — his face in a grimace.

"Mother, what is that thing you brought home today? You should be demanding peashis for pay every week. It looks as if you've been working all week for nothing!"

Mumangeena paused a moment. "Mother, why don't you give that ca—carbish to the dogs and see if they like it."

Dogs Refuse Cabbage

I did as I was told and doled the contents of the can to each of the seven dogs we had. Each of them sniffed at his portion, looked at me and then curled back on the snow.

"Did they like it?" Aunt Mumangeena asked as I came back in. "They didn't like it at all. They just sniffed at it and then laid back down."

"Poor mother, you have been working all week for nothing," Mumangeena sympathized. "Just the same we have had a good day. Your Uncle got us a nice bear and — you brought home the ca — carbish."

Aunt Mumangeena broke into a loud laughter. I looked at Uncle Nayukuk. He had a faint grin on his face.

When her laughter subsided, my aunt looked at me and said, "Mother, don't you mind one bit. When the bear skin is dry, I'll buy you a can of peashis."