

POINT OF VIEW



by



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The Plane

Tuttu

One moment the warm cabin of the twin-propellered aircraft was filled with animated conversation of 30 people, their discussions enlivened by occasional glances below at the snowcovered arctic plain and the prospect of new though brief adventure. Then the aircraft began to fall.

One second.

Two seconds.

Down.

Down, at a deep gliding angle.

Charles Miek, seated nearest the rear exit, squeezed the arm rests until he felt metal. His belly seemed to have been left several hundred feet above him. He gave his seat belt an additional unneeded slight hitch. He had heeded the "Fasten Seat Belts" sign which had flashed on minutes earlier. Until this moment he had been virtually unaware of the throbbing of the powerful engines. Now they seemed almost silent, and the plane continued to fall.

Miek glanced out the porthole. Rapidly reaching up as though to strike them were the snowcovered, braided channels of the Saganvanirktok River. In the darkening and flat distance was Heald Point extending into frozen Beaufort Sea.

Still the plane fell.

Miek watched the other passengers now. A correspondent for a chain of western newspapers still held her cocktail glass above her head where the sudden drop of the aircraft had thrown it—the liquor neatly shooting out then ricocheting from the luggage rack to the floor. The lean, bronzed magazine writer had chopped off his conversation with two young women representatives of press services. The blonde uttered a prolonged "Ohhhhh!" as the sudden drop forced air from her lungs. Some writers in aisle seats braced themselves against the increasing pull of gravity and leaned over other passengers to take hasty looks out the portholes. Miek could see hands strongly grasping aisle arm rests. One nearby portly gentleman, audibly grunting, began pulling himself toward the pilot's compartment. Still others looked toward the rear exit. Their eyes locked onto Miek's. Eloquent too were the agitated motions of their heads and contorted necks.

Still the plane fell and now Miek could see a few lights and a tall tower-like structure.

It would soon be over.

The portly man was banging on the door to the pilot's compartment now, and Miek remembered that he was an Air Force ex-pilot representing an aviation magazine.

Abruptly, Miek reached up and pressed the button to the intercom system. A stewardess forced herself from a seat and, as the engines roared and the drop ended and the plane began to level off then climb a bit, the girl started to hand sheets of parchment to the passengers.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press," Miek said, "you have just been initiated into The Arctic Club. The certificates attest to that fact.

"Look below. You will see the Prudhoe Bay area, Arctic bonanza and one of the world's richest pieces of oil real estate. We'll be there in about five minutes, and then you'll see what's going to enrich Alaska and Alaskans far more than did the Gold Rush of '98. Here is your story."

Tuttu halted the dog team. The emaciated animals dropped while the Eskimo scanned the snowdrift angling into the frozen Saganvanirktok River. He walked several feet, knelt and carefully brushed away snow. The first trap was empty.

The second.

Third.

Fourth!

Fatigue and deep fingers of apprehension tugged as he lit the primus stove, boiled tea, and pondered the past, and the bleak future as the beverage warmed his empty belly.

Empty traps! Again. He wanted the furs; he, his pregnant wife, the dogs needed the poor meat.

Empty traps. Empty Arctic plain. Empty future?

Tuttu had gambled. From their barabara atop a moundlike pingo the Eskimo had watched the first airplane flying toward Prudhoe Bay. Tractors 'dozed a strip. More vehicles crawled across the land. Tundra, water, and rocks erupted skyward amid explosions. Tuttu silently watched one crew prepare more shots.

"Why? Traps will be empty. Ptarmigan and caribou will flee the land. Fish will leave these waters."

"Oil, man. There's oil here. We need to trace it out."

Two years. Buildings rose. More airplanes, tractors, and explosions. Deep ruts in the lichens. The caribou were slow to come in fewer numbers and there was little in the meat pits when the snow fell.

The part Native bush pilot brought supplies to Tuttu's lake this last spring. He shook his head after viewing the pelts, and had not unloaded everything.

"Not enough furs, Tuttu. Sorry."

He started to leave, then unloaded the rest of the cargo.

"I'll pay the trader. Settle with me later. You must return to the village, Tuttu. These men will stay—for the sake of many people."

Return? To a village with too many people for the land to support?

Tuttu stared at the tea leaves in the cup. Roughly 200 miles to the village. Perhaps more of the weakest dogs would be meat enough, but where from there?

The lead dog whined, then squirmed with anticipation. Tuttu seized the rifle as the great caribou herd began angling toward the hunter. They coughed and clicked leg bones and crunched the snow. Tuttu would have enough meat—if the caribou would not turn.

Closer. Soon Tuttu could take the lead animals. He lowered the gun as the new sound sent a visible ripple over the thousands of caribou backs.

The plane was low. It would pass almost directly overhead. Now the herd was undulating this way and that. Where would the leaders take it?

The engines slowed. The plane was falling.

Down.

Down.

The caribou rippled closer.

Tuttu felt pity for the plane's people. He thought of his wife, the dogs, his empty belly.

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The light was almost gone.

He would fire at the animals that were taking the herd away. Still the plane fell and the animals sensed its closeness. Tuttu's trigger finger tightened.

Then the engines roared into life and the great herd jumped and reced away from the ineffectual, desperate fusillade of shots Tuttu poured into the maelstrom of snow and sound and empty darkness.