

# Eskimo Woman's Sons Die While Fleeing Plague in Umiak

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(Editor's Note: At the end of the first installment of the story, several people at the Kukpuk River camp had become ill with the same sickness the traveler from Kivaliniq (Kivalina) had. The dreadful realization of it struck the people with great alarm).

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"Alakaa! (Alas!)— What evil is this that has descended upon us?" Attungana dispaired.

"What is going to become of us, Attungana? This terrible sickness spells tragedy for all of us," Siqvoana lamented.

During the next few days most of the people in the camp had been stricken, a frightening experience to all the people. This hit home with a terrible impact when four of the oldest children contracted the disease.

The youngest girl, Olaqroaq, was not affected. Seeing her sister and brothers becoming ill unnerved her at first and she cried with grief and fright. For some unknown reason she became a sobered little girl and tried to be helpful to her mother and father.

## Attungana Stricken

Then to the horror of the family, Attungana came down with the disease!

"What is to become of us, my dear husband, Attungana?" Siqvoana said in despair. "What is to become of us?"

"Yes, what is this evil that descended upon us? Siqvoana, take care of the children and try not to worry about me. I have been a strong man all my life — I may win over this sickness yet. Take care of the children," Attungana said with difficulty.

## Dying Camp

Siqvoana took care of her family as best she could. After doing so, she visited other families in the camp and what she found was devastation. Death was everywhere! She brought water from the Kukpuk to the stricken people—it was the only thing she could do.

In the meantime, Attungana actually seemed to improve and

it looked as if he might get over the terrible illness. He was a strongwilled man and this might have been the only reason for his apparent improvement.

And then — his eldest daughter, younger sister of his oldest boy, died! This was a numbing blow to the family.

## Desperation

"Siqvoana, we should try to get back to Tikikqaq. It would be more comfortable for the children in our igloo. There is more room and it's clean," said Attungana painfully. "I have some strength left and I will carry the children to the umiak."

"Yes, Attungana, this might be best for all of us," Siqvoana said, hopefully. "I'll bring some of these caribou skins to the gravel bar now."

Taking an armful of skins, Siqvoana went out of the little igloo. A drizzle of rain had started to come down. From somewhere to the east, close by she heard the wailing of a grieving woman — piercing and tragic! It was the only sound. The rest was silence — a pall of death!

"This camp is dying — all of it is dying," Siqvoana sobbed.

"I'm not going to die, mother. I will take care of you when I grow up because you are not going to die," Olaqroaq said, her voice ringing clearly.

Siqvoana was startled. She had failed to notice when her little daughter followed her out. She turned to her little girl, tears streaming down her cheeks. She took her child in her arms.

"What about — your —?" Siqvoana broke down completely, desperately holding on to her little daughter.

As the mother and child held on to one another, Attungana emerged out of the little igloo. He was having difficulty staying on his feet. His strength had waned alarmingly in spite of the short duration of his illness.

"My dear ones, we must go to the umiak now and put it next to the water," said Attungana hoarsely — brokenly.

## Exhausting Effort

Moving the umiak was difficult because of Attungana's weakened condition. They did it by partially lifting one end and walking with it toward the water. They did the same at the other

end.

Taking the children to the umiak was an exhausting job. The parents took the dead girl first and placed her at the bow on a mattress of caribou skin. They then covered her with another skin.

When the exhausting work was finally over, Attungana collapsed on the coarse gravel. There was nothing his wife could do. She was exhausted also and she was a tiny woman.

"I'll be all right after I rest awhile," Attungana whispered.

After a long while, Attungana was able to get up with the help of his wife. They sloshed into the shallow water and the desperately ill man half rolled into the umiak.

## Doomed Camp

Siqvoana walked wearily to the stern of the umiak. She shoved the craft into the water and climbed aboard. The current caught it and the desperate family began to drift down the Kukpuk River.

Reluctantly, Siqvoana looked back to the camp. Her eyes brimmed with tears. There was not a soul stirring. The camp was doomed. Even as she looked a dog appeared over a rise followed by another, then another — then another.

The dogs had begun to run in packs! Siqvoana looked away in horror making an anguished cry.

When the tragic Attungana family started to drift down the river, it was sometime after mid-day. Siqvoana could tell that it was from the position of the sun when it faintly filtered through the overcast sky.

A drizzle of rain continued to come down. This distressed the mother because it would add to the discomfort of her ill family. Little Olaqroaq had snuggled close to Siqvoana. There was a dreary chill in the air.

"You don't have to worry about me mother. I'm warm in this new parka you made for me," said the little girl.

Siqvoana pulled in her pad-dle and hugged her daughter tenderly but didn't say a word. She took the paddle she used for steering and dug it urgently into the water to help the umiak go

faster. She kept doing this for some minutes when the oldest boy became delirious.

Siqvoana pulled in her paddle and scrambled over to the sick boy. She was helpless to do anything for her son. She tried to comfort him.

"My son was such a strong boy and such a promising hunter," thought Siqvoana. "And now he's desperately ill. My son is not going to last much longer."

After about a half hour, the boy was quiet. He was dead!

The umiak drifted aimlessly down the Kukpuk River.

## Silent Grief

Although terribly stunned, the mother grieved in silence. She did not dare to display it to the other sick boys and her husband.

She covered the dead boy. She comforted the two boys and then moved over to Attungana.

"Alakaa! (Alas!) Siqvoana, this terrible sickness is so shattering. The harm it is doing in such a short time is frightening!" Attungana said in a strained whisper.

Siqvoana started to say something but she couldn't. She choked a sob audibly. There was a jar in the umiak. The bow had bumped the bank and the current swung the craft completely around. The anguished mother scrambled to the stern to steady it. She began to paddle once again.

"It's not very good to be a little girl, mother," Olaqroaq said in a tiny voice. "If I was a big girl, I would help you a lot. Will you let me steer the umiak while you take care of my father and my brothers?"

Siqvoana looked away from her daughter to hide the tears that welled in her eyes. She couldn't say a word for several moments. She finally managed to gather her strength and said quietly without turning around:

"My little girl, you're too little to steer the umiak. You're a great help to me by being a good girl. You might fall into the water if you tried. I don't want you to fall into the water."

"Akhagng (Mother), I don't like being a little girl," Olaqroaq said, her little voice barely audible to her mother.

## The Boys Die

Soon after the short exchange of conversation, one of the boys worsened. Siqvoana went to him. Even as she did so, it became apparent that the other boy was sinking. She did her best to comfort them despairing in her mind of her helplessness and inability to do anything for them.

The terrible intent of the disease was frightening and its effects on her children and husband were alarming — deadly. The ugliness of the disease at once filled her with revulsion but drew her closer to her loved ones. It was taking the lives of the members of her family — her flesh and blood!

The youngest boy was dying. Siqvoana hovered over her son helplessly. Even as she murmured encouragements, the boy died. And in an incredibly short time later, the other boy also succumbed.

Siqvoana was stunned into silence by the terrible realization of the death of all of her older children. She knew her grief was overpowering. She wondered why she was not crying or showing sorrow. She wondered if little Olaqroaq and Attungana noticed her apparent lack of grief.

Her mind was clear enough because she could feel the cold pricks on her face of the drizzle of rain that was coming down. She was moving and doing things that had to be done under the circumstances.

She went to her husband's side and adjusted the caribou skins that protected him from the rain.

The umiak drifted aimlessly down the river all the while.

Attungana knew that all of his children except Olaqroaq were gone. As he looked at her, Siqvoana could see in his eyes the sorrow that was beyond description. He looked away slowly. An agonized cry came out from him and faded in his ragged breathing.

(To Be Continued)