

Arctic Survival—

Aunt Mumangeena Always Bragged of 'Mother's' Prowess

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"Mother, I better put some muk-tuk and meat in your pack. It won't tire you. They're very light," Aunt Mumangeena said affectionately.

My grandmother, Siqvoan, had died two weeks before I was born and I was promptly named after her. My aunt had loved her a great deal and when I was named after her, she adopted me as her "mother." So ever since I could remember she called me that.

I was a big boy, 10 years old now, and I had gotten quite used to being called "mother" by my aunt, except when there was a crowd, such as ones after church. I tried to avoid her at such times.

I didn't mind being called "mother" that early morning in August. She was very kind to me and the prospect of walking five miles to a low hill east of Point Hope to pick berries, promised adventure.

Early Riser

Mumangeena was always an early riser but that morning she arose even earlier. She woke me up, of course, then shook Uncle Nayukuk who was sound asleep. He turned on his side away from her and grunted.

"If you had been man enough you'd have taken us in an umiak to the hill," Mumangeena said with disgust.

"Everyone is using his umiak now," Nayukuk answered sleepily.

"Did you ask anyone? No, you didn't!" retorted his wife. "You're nothing but a useless husband around this house."

Nayukuk stayed on his side facing the wall and said nothing, breathing easily. Aunt Mumangeena hissed disgustedly looking at her husband but said nothing.

Uncle Nayukuk was the kind of a man anyone would not have changed. He just kept right on being himself, seemingly unworried, somewhat lazy, and thick-skinned to his wife's frequent nagging.

Trip Starts

"Kee, ahkahng, owluqlook," ("Alright, mother, let us leave,") said Mumangeena quickly.

With that we went out of the sod igloo. The dawn was just

creeping up out of the east. The sky was clear. It was going to be a beautiful day.

We started walking east. The village was very quiet except for one dog that occasionally barked. I was full of energy and I kept getting ahead of my aunt. I would look back and there she was waddling along rather slowly but steadily. She had very bowed legs that made her waddle.

Full of Energy

After walking about a half mile, I had gotten quite a distance ahead of Aunt Mumangeena. I ran back to her and said, "You are very slow."

"You better not run back to me like that because you'll be tired before the day is over," she warned.

We finally reached the small lagoon a mile east of the village. Mumangeena sat down on the gravel beach and said, "Let us rest a while here."

Instead of resting, I threw pebbles at flying seafuls and terns. Tiring of that, I looked around for flat rocks and skipped them on the water of the lagoon.

Trip Continues

After about five minutes of rest, Mumangeena got up and we resumed our foot journey. Beyond the small lagoon was a big one that stretched 12 miles east to the mouth of Kukpuk River. There was a narrow strip of land between the lagoon and the Arctic Ocean that widened as it hit the hill where we were to pick berries. Most of the land was made up of gravel and sand with only a few patches of soil with grass. Our foot travel was mostly on gravel that was tiring to walk on.

About the fourth mile of our walk, I was no longer getting ahead of my aunt. I began to welcome the rest stops.

"You see mother, one of the things you have to learn while you're growing up is to conserve your strength," Mumangeena said quietly. "Can you see now why you shouldn't waste your energy?"

Follows Tradition

Aunt Mumangeena was a person of the old school. She observed traditions as thoroughly as her ancestors must have done. When I came to live with her

and Uncle Nayukuk two years before, she started at once to train me for a future hunter. One of the things she required of me to do was very difficult. I protested at first but she wouldn't hear of it. If I didn't I would go without breakfast. She was determined and firm.

She commenced to toughen me up so I could stand the rigors of the weather. For what seemed a long time she required me, without clothes, to comfort myself first thing in the morning out in the weather no matter how cold it was. At the beginning, I cried with protest and frustration because many of those mornings were bitterly cold.

"Mother, a great hunter never cries. He has to be tough and be able to meet all kinds of hardships," she would say, while showing genuine sympathy.

Success

Finally a day came when I did this without whimpering. Mumangeena was a picture of happiness. She was proud and convinced that I would be a greater hunter of the future.

On the morning of my success, she looked at me questioning as I hurriedly entered the sod igloo. When she saw I wasn't going to whimper, she waddled over to me and took me in her arms. I felt very proud and felt that I had done something of major importance; so proud that I almost cried in Aunt Mumangeena's arms.

"You will be a great hunter, I'm sure of it. You will live a good life with many things to eat. Your village will look up to you. I'm very proud of you," she said tenderly looking straight into my eyes. "I will do something nice for you. I'll make you a nice new parka and a new pair of mukluks."

She was true to her promise and she treated me with greater kindness. She was also quite voluble about my success to her neighbors and told them that she was sure that I was a coming great hunter. Once in a while she would add, "He will never be like that man, his uncle Nayukuk."

Reach Hill

When we finally reached the hill, I was somewhat tired but

not enough to discourage me from berry picking. After we rested a while we began to walk up the gentle incline of the hill to a place Mumangeena pointed out as a likely place for berries. When we came to it we found there were quite a few but not as many as my aunt had expected.

She had given me a small kettle to carry the berries in. At first, we picked around the same spots but after a while we separated. Soon we were about 150 yards apart.

As I picked, I noticed that there were patches of mud-crusted spots in the grassy earth. I walked on them and they were solid. As I moved from place to place I saw several of them and thought nothing of it.

My kettle was just about full. I looked at the berries in it and was eating some when I started to cross one of the crusted spots. It was about five feet in diameter.

The Fall

Suddenly the crust broke under my young weight and I started falling into a soft, muddy morass. In a moment I was up, to my waist in it. I twisted to my right and grabbed the grassy earth and held on and then swung my left hand and grabbed onto the grass. Even then my body seemed to want to sink into the soft mud. It seemed to want to pull me under.

I started to pull myself up. I got up a few inches but it took all my young strength to do it. The suction of the morass was great.

As I struggled I could hear Aunt Mumangeena screaming, "Ahkahng! Ahkahng! Where are you? Answer me, Ahkahng."

I could not answer. All I could think of was to get out of the mud.

Escape

In inching myself out of the mud little by little, I kept grabbing the soil and grass farther out from the edge of the mud hole and soon had my elbows on solid ground. Using my elbows for leverage and grabbing the earth hard, I strained upward. I got my shoulders up and over the edge of the morass.

I pulled up my right leg. It was like trying to pull it out of

chilled molasses. As soon as I got my knee on the surface of the mud, it felt like it was freed of a great weight.

I looked toward Aunt Mumangeena who was still hollering and screaming. She was on a waddling run toward me. She fell down as I watched. When she finally reached me, I was out of the mud completely. She was a picture of alarm and worry.

"Why did I ever let you wander off?" She kept saying that over and over again.

Fright

A great emotion began to well up in me and I broke out sobbing. Mumangeena was crying from sympathy and relief as she held me in her arms and I was crying from sudden fright.

When I calmed down a little I looked at the deep mudhole. There were salmon berries scattered all over the thin crust but there was no sign of the kettle. I apparently shoved it under because there were berries in the mud I was in.

"Wait here until I get the bucket, mother," Mumangeena said.

She went back to where she had left it. When she came back I noticed there were not many berries in it. When she started her dash toward me she had stumbled and spilled her bucket. Without bothering to recover them, she hurried back to me.

Miserable

I was feeling miserable in the mud on my body. Mumangeena took me by the hand and we started down the hill and stopped on dry grass near the bank of the lagoon.

She took my muddy parka off and told me to undress. She took my clothes and took them to the water and washed them. "You better wash the mud off your body," she said.

After wringing my clothes, Mumangeena took some dry grass and rubbed most of the moisture off. When I put them on they were uncomfortable and damp. When I complained she told me to run around for a while.

"Let's go home now. We won't do anymore berry picking today," my aunt said.

Talks All the Way

On the way home, Mumangeena talked the whole distance. When she was not berating herself for the near tragedy, she gave advice. She told about our ancestors naming them from generations back.

The return trip didn't seem as long because of Mumangeena's continuous and interesting chatter. But when we finally got home I was a very tired boy. I had almost forgotten the day's incident, but not my Aunt Mumangeena. She didn't waste any time telling about it to my parents and other people.

Tells of Near Tragedy

"I had seen mother picking berries a moment before, but when I looked again he had disappeared completely. I got worried and started calling but not a sound came from him. I was getting more worried by the moment so I started running to where he was. I kept getting ahead of my poor old legs and stumbled many times.

"When I reached him, there he was, poor like mother, getting himself out of that terrible mudhole. He was the dirtiest thing I have ever seen — all covered with dirty wet mud."

Aunt Mumangeena went on and on in that fashion telling of the incident and after saying that the mudhole must have been bottomless, she continued:

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