

ABRAHAM SNOW AND THE ICE THAT HE CARRIED

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“ARE YOU THE CAPTAIN?”

Abraham couldn't place the accent. Toronto, maybe, or Calgary. The man had a beard and was wearing a floppy cowboy hat and aviator sunglasses too big for his face. His head poking into the cabin reminded Abraham of a caribou he'd seen at Hebron once, antlers stuck through the window of a ruined chapel.

“Yeah b'y,” Abraham said, nodding. “It's my boat.”

“What's your dog's name?”

Course. “Ferrari,” Abraham said.

The tourists always fussed over Abraham's dog, a tiny Cocker Spaniel the colour of a new penny. They spent their trips through Saglek Bay scratching the dog behind the ears, coaxing him to pose for photos against the backdrops of plunging orange cliffs and turquoise water. Abraham wondered if they realized they were paying so much attention to the one thing living up here in the Torngat Mountains that came from their own world.

“Furry?” the man said.

“Ferrari,” Abraham shouted. “Like the car, eh.” The man stared.

“He's fast,” Abraham said, shrugging.

“Aww! Cute!” Caribou man poked his head back out to tell his friends.

Abraham liked to joke how his daughter Nicole had given him a Ferrari. She'd surprised him with the dog last fall, before starting university at McGill, where she was taking something called Native Studies. He'd told her there were plenty of natives to study in Labrador, asked why she had to go all the way down to Montreal, such a tough place for a young Inuit girl. But not many kids like her got the chance to go to a big fancy school. Nicole had the brains to make something of herself, was smart enough that they'd given her a full scholarship. Abraham had been happy to see her so excited, even though he was losing both his daughter and his help.

When she was home, Nicole always rode with him out on the boat, talking to the tourists, brewing tea and cutting up pieces of dried char for them to eat. Before Abraham left her in her narrow Mile End apartment with the grimy walls and the sour milk smell, Nicole had told him he'd need someone other than old Mary Merkeratsuk to keep him company while she was gone, and handed him the little red puppy to take back to the Torngats.

"Can he fish?" Abraham had asked her, curling the warm dog in his arm. It reminded him of Nicole as a baby, wrapped in furs.

"You can teach him," Nicole said. "Besides, the tourists will love him."

That was almost a year ago now. Ferrari still couldn't fish or make tea, but Nicole was right. The tourists loved the dog. The dog and the boat.

The *Benjamin Freeman* was the biggest boat in Nain, and one of the oldest. A hundred-foot longliner that smelled like a rusty herring tin, it was a much larger boat than Abraham needed these days, but he liked the heft of it. There weren't enough fish left for Abraham to live off the sea, but he and the *Freeman* still made money together, working with the cruise companies to give iceberg tours through the fjords of the northern coast. The boat had seen visitors from across the globe; a sign taped to the wall outside the head listed the word for "Welcome" in seven languages.

The *Freeman* always felt haunted after Abraham dropped off a boatload of tourists at base camp. Tonight the feeling was stronger than usual. A thick fog had settled in, and as the boat droned northward Abraham felt as though he and Ferrari were the only inhabitants of a lost planet. Inside the cabin the roar of the *Freeman's* engine drowned out all other sound, but when Abraham stepped out on deck, the moaning of the wind made the boat seem small and meek. The dark mountains rose up all around, spotted with remnants of glacial ice that glowed in the shapes of animals, hunters, hearts.

His world.

Back in the cabin, Abraham sipped hot coffee and scrunched his hand into the warm fur behind Ferrari's ears. They were heading past the Big Island, to where Bear's Gut snaked into the old, stratified rock of the Torngats. Abraham Snow had been traveling the waters around Saglek and Ramah since he was a boy—first with his father, by dog team, over ice, then over years spent hauling in longlines of cod and glimmering char. Now he traveled them as a guide and an elder, or near enough. He'd passed his present quarry dozens of times over the last month, knew its blunt wavelike shape and the spectrum of swirling blues and greens that glowed in its frozen mass.

Abraham slid open the window and breathed in the deep salty musk of the ocean. He could navigate these waters with his eyes closed.

It was probably why they'd chosen him for this particular bit of madness.

"What I'm after, Abraham," said Alain Bourque, tinny voice straining through the connection to Montreal, "is closure."

Alain Bourque was an investment banker who spoke in fits, like his blood kept surging twice as fast as it should. He had reason. Months back, his parents had been on the Labrador whale cruiser *Go Forward* when it got caught in a heavy fog and the captain, maybe after too much whiskey, steered the boat into an iceberg drifting off Battle Harbour. Eleven people died, Bourque's parents included. Bourque hadn't taken the news well. In a fit of extravagant rage, the Frenchman had hired a crew of Norwegian scientists to track the iceberg and report back to him on its whereabouts.

Over the last few weeks, the thing had taken a curious route, drifting north against the natural flow of the Labrador Current. "Funny," Bourque said. "Almost like it's *running*." Eventually it had swung westward into the mouth of Bear's Gut, where it now sat, luminous in the mists.

"This," said Bourque, "is where you and your boat come in."

Bourque needed someone to tow the iceberg down to Nain, where a big tug would pick it up to take it all the way to Halifax. There, in the harbour, he meant to blow up the iceberg with several tons of plastic explosives—in accordance, he said, with a special set of regulations negotiated with the Port Authority, which in turn retained the right to promote the event to tourists. The banker's voice was like a volley of fireworks as he told Abraham how everyone in the city would be able to raise a glass to the destruction of the *thing* that had brought tragedy down on his family. Abraham imagined the scene, a plume of white crystals evaporating into vapour, a crowd of awestruck *qallunaat* looking on, clapping like dolphins begging for fish.

Bourque said that the Labrador Minister of Tourism, who'd visited the Torngats last summer and spent a few days admiring the scenery from the deck of the *Benjamin Freeman*, had told him Abraham Snow knew the north Atlantic coast better than any other. Besides, Abraham had the only local boat big enough to tow the iceberg, which was still about the size of a small house, even after losing some of its mass in the collision with *Go Forward*, and from melting in the weeks since.

“You’re the only one who can help me with this, Abe,” Bourque said. “So, I am willing to pay handsomely.”

Abraham had run iceberg missions before, working as a guide when the vodka companies hired a fleet of tugs to haul growlers down to the NLC Plant in St. John’s. He’d spent his childhood hunting and fishing the land around the bend from Bear’s Gut. He knew Bourque’s plan was crazy. Even so, he was the best man for the job.

He was getting by with the tours. He still preferred to live simply, using what the land offered, what was left. But things were different for Nicole. She had tuition to pay, the costs of living in the big city. Plane tickets home weren’t cheap.

“How much?”

When Abraham heard the number, his heart jackrabbited into his throat.

He made Bourque double it.

Abraham stared out into the distance, the cliffs seeming to warp with the rhythm of light through the clouds and the churning of the *Freeman’s* engine. He checked the gauges, sipped from his tin mug. Outside, fingers of mist coiled over the water like fumes.

He crested the bend of Bear’s Gut and there it was, waiting for him. Unearthly blue crag, wreathed in clouds of frost.

Hello, friend.

The boat cruised in slow, wide rings, and Abraham began letting out the sailcloth net threaded with a thick belt of steel cable, expensive specialty equipment Bourque had supplied to transport the cargo. It trailed the *Freeman* like the ribbon stalk of a jellyfish, and Abraham imagined it electrified, sizzling with voltage. A dangerous thing. He curled around the iceberg, letting the net unfurl behind him, surrounding its girth.

The voice came on suddenly, gusting out from a stripe of blue translucence spiked into the wall of white ice looming over the *Freeman’s* port side. When it spoke, Abraham felt as though the ice was expanding to engulf him, filling his head and chest with its weight.

Abraham. I feel the shivering in you.

At first, he reeled. He knew the voice. Stern and measured, with a hint of bitterness.

I felt it before I saw you. Heard the noise of your boat over the water. You don't come with a light heart.

His father had died years ago, when Abraham was still a child, after the relocations. Spanish flu. It took his spirit first, leaving his wasted body to rattle itself to death with bloody coughs. By the time he died he could barely whisper his last words.

But this voice from the iceberg was different. This was the voice his father had used when Abraham was young and his father was teaching him how to hunt, to fish. To survive.

Abraham knew better than to answer the thing. It was trying to trick him—to talk its way out of the deal. He kept steering the *Freeman* in its slow arc around the iceberg, and watched the ice transform, revealing new shapes with every angle: one minute a sharp-beaked eagle, the next minute a sleeping giant; one minute a church spire, the next the face of a bear—or maybe Tungak, god of animals, pretending to be a bear. The boat shuddered as it turned back into its own wake. Abraham went out on deck and fished the loose end of the towing line out of the water with a hook, lifting it onto the deck and looping it into the reel of a power winch bolted to the transom. The iceberg kept changing, taking Abraham's measure.

A trapper now, are you?, it said, louder, the voice stretching out across the bay, pulsing through the valleys and the sky. *Come to snare me like a fox?* Abraham felt the weight of his cargo beginning to pull against the belt, its submerged mass resisting the mechanized tug of the winch. The steel cable whined with tension.

Abraham. You remember the story of Sedna?

Abraham knew the story. Everyone knew it. Sedna, goddess of the sea. She couldn't find a husband at home, so her father married her to a hunter from a distant land, a man dressed in fine furs and feathers. After he took Sedna away, the hunter shed his disguise: this was no man, but a great raven. The life of comfort that had been promised to Sedna was a lie. Instead, the raven kept her confined to a narrow cell, where he fed her scraps and left her alone for days at a time. She was miserable, and her trapped spirit began wailing in sorrow.

Far away, Sedna's father heard her weeping in the wind, and saw wisps of her spirit floating away. He felt guilt in his heart, and decided to set out and retrieve his daughter.

The raven, seeing that he was about to be robbed, became enraged. He waited until Sedna's father reached her, and just as she was stepping into her father's kayak, called forth a devastating storm to drown them both in the sea. Sedna's father feared for his life. He was desperate and confused. So he threw his daughter overboard to appease the raging waters, to give her back to the raven. Sedna tried to claw her way back into the boat, but her fingers froze and cracked off and sank to the depths, where they transformed into the seals and whales. Then Sedna also sank to the bottom of the sea, where she still rages, throwing up storms to punish the world that betrayed her.

And what of your own daughter, Abraham Snow?

Abraham stayed quiet. He didn't like where the iceberg was taking him. He had no love for this job, but the truth was, he was afraid. The last few seasons, the hunt had been thin, the weather unpredictable. Before, Abraham could clean two fish in the water before his hands went numb and he had to stop to warm them. Last year he cleaned four fish before realizing his hands weren't as cold as they should be. Changes were coming. Sedna was probably boiling to death, and though they said the warming was good for tourism, who knew how long the tourists would come? The *qallunaat* loved nothing better than changing their minds.

This job would help Nicole finish school, plus give Abraham security for old age. He could buy a little house next to Mary Merkuratsuk, spend his last winters sitting in a comfortable chair, carving little statues to sell to the Labrador craft council. He'd have the comfort of being around familiar faces, after years cruising the water with a boatful of strangers.

All he had to do was drag this chunk of ice down to Nain. A day and a half, maybe two. If he started talking to it now, he'd be in for a long chat, longer than he liked. There was mischief in it. He was worried it could convince him.

Haven't you given them enough already?

Abraham cranked off the winch and secured the last clasps and cables to thick iron posts on the stern. In the cabin, Ferrari sat waiting in his captain's chair. Abraham pushed the boat slowly into gear, and the dog yipped as the *Freeman* registered its protest at bearing such weight. He tried not to feel the iceberg's cold breath seeping into the cabin, reaching in to tingle on the back of his neck.

It's the same thing, it said, whispering in his ear.

"What thing?" Abraham said.

He grimaced. Now there would be no end to it.

He walked on spongy ground, taking long, weightless strides. The land glowed the colours of a fishscale, green flecked with orange, silver mottled with black, pale purple overlaid with deep yellow, glimmering when the sun came out to blaze over the slopes and ridges rising up from the cobalt sea. Above, clouds swirled like an eddying stream.

His father was beside him. They went together over the soft mossy hills of *Sallikuluk*, Rose Island. Abraham had been born here in a sod house, but he didn't recognize the place they were walking. Two dun-coloured Arctic hare scampered ahead of them, hopping through a circle of rocks, an old tent ring. His father's steps were slow and measured, yet he moved across the terrain at uncanny speed. He said nothing. Abraham knew he was to follow.

They reached a mound tufted with grass and red lichen, facing a pond of deep iridescent blue. In the middle of the pond, radiating light, the iceberg sat like a great silver nugget.

Abraham. Do you know how many years my spirit has lived?

The voice came from the iceberg, but also from his father. His father's lips were not moving, but Abraham could feel the vibrations of the voice inside his chest. Abraham turned to his father, wanting to answer the question: *Yes, father.* But his father was no longer beside him. With a hiss of chill breath, the iceberg drew his gaze, and in the distance he saw his father standing on top, eyes fixed on Abraham alone on the shore. There was another figure next to him, its face turned away, looking out from the icy white plateau across the ocean's distance. The figure turned slowly, and Abraham saw Nicole's face, framed with a fur hood, her eyes sad. Abraham wanted to call her name, but his voice was choked and made no sound.

Below her, in the folds of the ice, Abraham saw the sleek face of the white bear, the bleached skull of a caribou. Now the animals spoke, and the sound boomed out from their jaws to careen through the valley and shake the loam under Abraham's feet.

Ten thousand years, Abraham, the voice said. Will you help them take more?

The last word reverberated through the mountains, echoing with such force that the iceberg began to quake and shudder, a horrible groaning sound erupting from its solid girth. A white spike of light flared up through its centre. With a colossal blast, it shattered into dust, millions of powder blue crystals blooming out in a mercurial fog.

When it cleared, both his father and Nicole were gone, the turquoise lake flooded with a cataract of red.

Abraham bolted awake in his chair. The fog outside was so thick it had filled the cabin with haze. The boat bobbed in the waves, and Abraham saw the iceberg looming too close to the stern, like a huge grey tooth in the mist. He rushed to crank the engine into higher gear, wrenching hard at the ship's wheel, trying to put some distance between the boat and the thousands of tons of ice it bore. The *Freeman* listed hard and Abraham stumbled. He gripped the wheel, didn't let go of until he had the ship righted.

His breaths came in deep rasps as he tried to regain his calm, not wanting to admit how close he'd come to a collision.

He looked around for Ferrari, but the dog wasn't in the cabin. Abraham looked out the window and saw him perched on the bow, tail alert, nose pointed southward, like he could smell the *qallunaat* getting closer.

Some partner, Abraham thought. *Maybe he's just been waiting to get back the whole time.*

Abraham went into the galley to brew a fresh pot of coffee. His head swam with images from his dream, nerves buzzing with tension.

I'm just tired is all, he told himself. *Getting too old for this.*

There was a bottle of whisky in the galley cupboard, a gift from one of his passengers. Abraham never touched the stuff anymore. But it had a voice, too.

He thought of Nicole, in Montreal, digging through textbooks, learning to be Native. He thought of her here, on the boat, steering it home to camp on the nights he'd had too much and couldn't finish the trip. Heard her telling him, *It's okay, Dad. I got it.*

Too many voices, he thought, *for such a lonely place.*

Hours passed. The *Freeman* pushed southward through waves that spumed and frothed against the jagged coast, turning back in on themselves. The wind howled a wolf song, long and hungry. Abraham leaned on the throttle, trying to concentrate on the sounds of the storm, to hear its intent. He scratched Ferrari nervously on the scruff of the neck and tried not to spill his coffee as the boat lurched, struggling forward through the roaring day.

For a while, the iceberg had spoken regularly, arguing with solemn confidence. *Abraham, I am of the North, like you. Abraham, you are headed the wrong way.* Abraham kept his mouth shut. Then, it had begun asking questions, or maybe making threats. *Abraham, are your hands cold? Are*

you sure your heart is still beating? Perhaps it has frozen stiff. Why would your blood turn against you, Abraham Snow?

Now the thing had gone quiet. Abraham tried to tell himself the ocean and the wind were drowning it out, asserting the indifference of the land to such small quarrels as this one. But he couldn't shake the dread that had come over him. He told himself it was all just a trickster's scheme, to coerce him into letting the iceberg go. Still, the silence sat heavy on his head, like drifts of snow piled up around his ears. He almost wished for one more word from it, one more prompt to which he could respond with a reprimand, a defense. He would talk about Nicole. Say her name, speak of her dreams. Make the thing ashamed for putting up such a fight. As if it didn't know.

Just around the bend, north of the frayed hollow in the land that led into Unity Bay, Nain sat perched like a white bird on the coast. Abraham geared the *Freeman* down and killed the engine, giving the boat over to the waves. His ears buzzed from the mechanical noise. He lit a cigarette and watched the tip glow bright orange against the darkening sky, pink and golden and raven-black clouds undulating in the animal wind, the whole world reeling. Abraham blew cones of white smoke out into the darkness to float up and join the tumult. Smoke signals, he thought. But for whom?

Cigarette hanging from his lips, he steadied himself on the lip of the boat and edged over to the outer wall of the cabin, where the axe hung in its cradle. The butt of the handle felt warm in his palm. He lifted it out, laid its blade flat across his free hand. Gauged the strength of its bite.

Behind him, the iceberg glowed a nervous blue in the dusk. Abraham thought he could hear it breathing deeply, the rhythm radiating through the waves all the way back to the glacial valleys and fjords of *Torngait*, the spirit lands. Abraham turned to face it. A cold draft gusted in, surrounding him.

Abraham, the thing said, finally. *Aput*.

He knew the word. Many times, Abraham had heard the myth about how the Inuit have hundreds of words for snow. His passengers, the tourists, lots of them still believed it. But there were really only a few Inuktitut words for different kinds of snow. This was one.

Abraham, *Aput*. Spread-out Snow.

Maybe it was a warning. An insult, an admonition.

Or maybe, thought Abraham, a final request.

The iceberg strained against its net, making the *Freeman* list and wobble under his feet. Abraham stood steady.

“Okay,” he said, and stepped toward the ice.

Night settled over the outer bay. A hint of summer breeze teased the cool air, and traces of northern light skimmed across the sky. Abraham hadn’t noticed the weather grow calm, but the ocean was still now, and the *Benjamin Freeman* drifted over the black water like a paper boat floating on a slick of shimmering oil. The sensation made Abraham dizzy, tired. He rubbed his hands together and buried them in the velveteen fur behind Ferrari’s ears. The dog yipped in consolation.

The drop-off had been accomplished without a hitch. Abraham could still see the iceberg, gemlike against the distant shore. However small and remote Nain was—a little over a thousand people, mostly Inuit or mixed, and the place still only accessible by boat or plane—its presence was enough to hold the iceberg there in the bay rimmed with electric light. Nain: northernmost town in Labrador, southernmost edge of the world his father inhabited—first as a man, and now as a spirit. Gateway to the greater world of metal and concrete, noise and light, that churned away beyond the southern horizon. Toronto, Halifax, Montreal. Alain Bourque’s world. Maybe Nicole’s, too.

Abraham lowered the *Freeman*’s rusty anchor into the water. Across the bay, the tugboat bound for Halifax was also moored, waiting to start its leg of the journey at dawn. He could see lights twinkling in the cabin. Abraham wondered if the boat had a dog.

He climbed down into his small motorboat, the hull clunking as it knocked against the side of the *Freeman*. Bracing his legs on the metal thwart, Abraham reached up and helped Ferrari into the dinghy, then grabbed the black tub resting on the lip of the deck and hauled it down, too. The contents clattered, casting no light but seeming to glow lightly from within. He pushed off from the *Freeman*, yanked the motor and began pattering toward shore, leaving a wake in the water that slivered the moonlight into a million glittering shards.

Mary Merkuratsuk was at home, watching hockey on TV. She had a thing for the Montreal Canadiens—an obsession Nicole shared. Abraham never understood hockey, but he thought about how maybe Nicole could use some of Alain Bourque’s money to go see a real game, where, Mary said, you could sit in the padded bleachers and eat big soft pretzels and feel the cold rising up from the ice.

“Who’s winnin’?” Abraham asked, as Mary let him into the warm yellow kitchen. Ferrari scampered in at his feet, sniffing madly.

“Montreal,” said Mary. “Nicole’ll be happy, eh b’y? Whatcha got there?”

Abraham hugged the plastic tub to his chest.

“You got some room in your freezer?”

“Fer what? Ice? Got lotta that already.” Mary looked skeptical, her plump head cocked to one side.

“Just dropped off the iceberg for the French guy,” he said. “Chunked this piece off before I handed ’er over. Don’t tell no one, though.”

“Whatcha gonna do with it?”

Abraham stood there in his thick rubber boots, holding the tub of ice, blinking in the light.

“Dunno,” he said. “Share it round, I guess.” He put the tub on the counter and picked up a chunk small enough to fit into a cooking pot. The ice was already slick with melt; a droplet coursed down Abraham’s hand and soaked his cuff.

“Feel like a drink?”

The Canadiens took the game. Mary and Abraham sat, chipped mugs in hand, watching the players file off the rink. Abraham imagined Alain Bourque in the stands, his face red from shouting, drawing a tiny phone out of his pocket to take the call he’d been waiting for, the one confirming that the iceberg had been delivered, the quarry taken. He’d never know it was missing a few pounds.

Abraham took a sip from the mug, feeling the warmed glacier water slide all the way down his throat.

“S’good, eh?” said Mary.

“Yuh,” said Abraham, nodding.

“Ten-thousand-year-old water, eh?”

“Yuh.”

The air in the cozy kitchen felt good on Abraham’s skin. He thought about Nicole standing in the same crowd as Alain Bourque, cheering along with all those people, thousands of voices speaking dozens of different languages, like the tourists who came on Abraham’s boat, but multiplied, so that all the differences dissolved into one voice, something joyous and huge. He imagined her raising her hands and letting a whoop out over the ice, mingled in with all the other hoots of the crowd, reverberating through the rafters of the massive arena.

He wondered if the ice would answer her.