TUK and the WHALE

Raquel Rivera

PICTURES BY
Mary Jane Gerber

GROUNDWOOD BOOKS / HOUSE OF ANANSI PRESS
TORONTO  BERKELEY
Grandfather suddenly stopped working.

He had been drilling holes through a flat piece of driftwood. Wood was a rare find. This piece would fill another gap between the sled runners of the family’s kamotiq.

Now he sat perfectly still. His bow-drill stopped spinning.

Tuk watched while Grandfather slowly leaned back on his heels. Did the old man hear something? Tuk strained his ears. All he
could hear was the *whump-whump* of a raven’s wings beating at the wind.

“They are here,” said Grandfather. He went back to work, spinning the drill shaft deeper into the wood.

Tuk’s eyes widened.

*They are here!* Just the way Grandfather had dreamed. Tuk had to see this. He jumped up and ran toward the beach, stumbling over the snow-covered rocks.

“Sure, go,” Grandfather said to the air. “He’s young. He gets excited.”

Tuk climbed the crest that protected their camp from the wind. He reached the top and looked out over the bay.

There was the beach, cleared of snow by strong winds off the water. The sea ice stretched into the bay. It broke up into floes at the far edge.

Nothing unusual to see here. He waited a moment. Grandfather was hardly ever wrong.

There it was!

It looked like two great narwhal horns rising from the water, piercing straight through the sky. Tuk squinted against the glare that bounced off the ice. Those flapping white skins must be the “sails” Grandfather had mentioned. He said they could be turned to catch the wind, or turned away when the wind was too fierce.

Next into view came the great hull. It was the biggest boat Tuk had ever seen. What kind of creatures would travel in such a large boat? They must be giants!

Tuk felt a chill.

“Mother!” he called, even though he knew she couldn’t hear him. He turned and ran all the way back to camp.

Mother was outside the snowhouse. She was chewing on a scraped sealskin, making it soft enough to sew.

“Mother, when is Father coming back?” Tuk gasped as he reached her side.

“The light is still strong,” she replied. “He may return today.”

“Because the boat is coming! The boat that Grandfather dreamed about! I can see it already. Tomorrow it will be here!”
her with you. Make sure she comes back. I want her staying with us tonight.

Unat had a good friend in every iglu, and she often slept away from home. Even Maakut, who was a camp elder, sometimes invited Unat to stay. But Unat’s favorite place was her best friend Ooleepeeka’s iglu.

Ooleepeeka had two mothers. Her father was such a good hunter that he needed two wives to take care of the skins. So Ooleepeeka lived with more brothers and sisters than anyone Tuk and Unat knew. When it was too dark and cold to play outside, there were always games and songs in Ooleepeeka’s iglu.

Tuk’s best friend in camp was Samik.

Samik was the youngest in his family, about the same age as Tuk. His mother and father were quite old now. His brothers and sisters had husbands, wives and children of their own.

“Come on, Unat, I know where we can find him,” Tuk said. Samik would be somewhere along the river with his throwing...
bones. Sometimes he brought back a ptarmigan or a rabbit.

Unat was out of breath. It was hard to keep up with her brother’s big steps in the snow.

“Tuk, why does the boat come to bother us?”

“Don’t be scared of the boat,” Tuk said. “Remember Grandfather’s dream? He said a great skinless boat will appear from over the sea. And it will leak out treasures from the land of things.”

“Yes, but what does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” Tuk admitted. “But Grandfather would tell us if there was anything to be scared about, right?”

“I guess,” Unat said. But she didn’t sound so sure.

Tuk didn’t say it, but he wasn’t so sure, either.

The children’s thoughts were soon interrupted by distant shouts of laughter. They looked at each other. Samik wasn’t hunting, not with all that shouting. He must have gone sliding!

Unat let out a whoop and ran toward the noise. Tuk followed.

Samik and Ooleepeeka were flying down over the snow humps and boulders of Steep Hill. They rode on the skin of a bearded seal. It made sliding so much faster. They tumbled off it as they reached the bottom.

“I want to go next!” Unat shouted as soon as she reached them. But Ooleepeeka’s big sister Arna was waiting her turn.

“Unat, you’re too little to slide Steep Hill,” Arna said.

“I am not! I’m almost as big as Ooleepeeka!”

“Forget the hill,” Tuk said. “The boat, the great boat is coming into the bay! Grandfather said it would, and now it has come!”

The group ran over crusty snow and rocky ground. They crept up the crest. They peered over the ridge.

“Ooooee,” breathed Samik. “How many people must fit in that boat?”

“Grandfather dreamed that it is not a boat...
The days were so long now. It was almost never dark. Nobody slept much during this time. The sun kept them all awake.

Finally, the daylight dipped behind the hills. When it was too dark to see the frosty breath in front of their faces, everyone began to get cold and tired.

Maybe their fathers had come back from hunting. Maybe they had caught seals.

“Let’s go,” Tuk nudged Unat, whose face kept dropping into the fluffy trim on her parka. “You are falling asleep on your feet.”

Everyone started back, guided home by the camp snowhouses. Each iglu glowed like a moon in the blue night. The qulliit were lit. Even if there was no meat, they would soon be snug and warm.

As Tuk and his sister neared their home, he saw humps in the snow drifts.

“The dogs!” Tuk whispered.

“Father’s back!” Unat cried.

“Shhh!” Tuk hushed her, pointing toward the bright iglu. He could hear several voices.

They had visitors. Surely the grown-ups
had gathered to decide what should be done about the strange boat in the bay.

In the dark outside, Tuk spoke softly into Unat’s ear.

“Stay quiet as we go in. Head straight for the sleeping platform. Don’t say anything.”

Children weren’t really supposed to listen to conversations between their elders. But Tuk was almost grown now. He didn’t want Unat’s baby ways to get them both sent away.

The two of them skirted around the dogs. Father had tied them separately to keep them from fighting. One or two looked up, but they didn’t bark. They knew the two children creeping past.

Tuk eased Unat’s small form into the main room, guiding her quietly toward the back. He knew that the grown-ups were aware of their entrance. He just hoped that they couldn’t be bothered to interrupt themselves and send them to another iglu.

“Your dream says they are not evil spirits,” said a low voice, Samik’s father. “They
are ordinary men — just Qallunaat. We can drive them away. We have done this before. The stories say so.”

Samik’s father crossed his arms, tucking his hands up into his sleeves. “What about the time those strangers raided the camp at Bloody Point? What about that story? And don’t forget the story about the curious hunter who paddled too close. The Qallunaat pulled him right out of the water into their great boat, his kayak still attached! No one ever saw the hunter again. We should get them — before they get us.”

“There are other stories,” Maakut’s son said. “Stories of peaceful trading and friendship.” Long ago, Maakut had adopted her nephew’s baby. Now that he was a young hunter, Maakut’s son could feed his adoptive mother, as she had fed and cared for him.

“That is right,” Grandfather replied. “We know those stories, too. The dream said that we should help the strangers from the great boat.”

“But why, Arvik?” asked Maakut. “Are they too many to fight?”

Of all the grown-ups in camp, Maakut was the only one older than Grandfather. It was right that she be the one to question him.

“They are many,” Grandfather admitted. “And they have no women or children to feed and protect. It is better for our families if we don’t fight. The dream said that they would ask for help and, if we help them, they will go away again.”

“We are busy. And we need our food for ourselves,” Ooleepeeka’s father pointed out.

“That is true. But they bring their own provisions from far away. In that respect, they can take care of themselves.” Grandfather had an answer for everyone.

“If we share our meat, maybe they will share, too,” Maakut mused.

Samik’s father was still. They would do as Grandfather said.