

In America

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Mletkin stood in front of the familiar door for a long while. When the door opened to his tentative knocking, Sally peered over his shoulder and gave a tentative smile:

“Where’s Nelson? Come out, Nelson! I know you’re hiding somewhere. Stop teasing your little sister.”

“Nelson isn’t here,” Mletkin croaked.

“You didn’t come here together?”

“He’ll never come here again.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Nelson is gone.”

Sally was beginning to grasp his meaning. When she finally understood, she sank down to the floor. Tears streamed down her face; her body was wracked with silent convulsions. Mletkin didn’t know what to do. He had never encountered such a frank and extraordinary expression of grief, a silent weeping that was far more affecting than the noisiest cries. He knelt before the weeping woman and stroked her curly, surprisingly rough hair.

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“There’s nothing to be done . . . Nelson is very far from us now . . . But he always thought of you, and his last words were for you. He was a wonderfully kind person, and a true friend.”

“Yes, that was him,” Sally agreed through her tears.

She rose slowly and motioned for Mletkin to come inside.

“You must be hungry . . . I’m sorry, I’ll whip up something for you to eat. Would you like something to drink? Some beer, or maybe whiskey?”

“I don’t drink alcohol,” said Mletkin. “I’ll have some coffee if that’s all-right.”

During his sojourn in America Mletkin had developed a fondness for the beverage, which he liked far better than the tea commonly drunk on the Chukotka Peninsula.

The rich aroma of coffee soon filled the room.

“How did it happen?” asked Sally.

Mletkin told her of the starry night over Port Clarence that Christmas Eve, and the fire aboard the ship. To spare his sister’s feelings, he did not linger over Nelson’s horrific burns and the suffering they caused. He only emphasized how bravely and uncomplainingly Nelson had behaved.

“The whole ship honored him,” Mletkin told her.

And it was the truth: there was not one man aboard the “Belevedere” who did not respect Nelson, or honor him above the other men of the crew.

“And loved him,” Mletkin added.

Before he came, he had counted out his friend’s meager savings and added much of the money he’d earned as an exhibit to the pile. Toting up the bills neatly, Sally asked:

“And you? Have you got enough to live on?”

“Yes, of course,” Mletkin told her. “I’ve made some good money recently.” And he told her about the Chicago World’s Fair, adding, with a smile, that he’d even practiced his profession there, as he was a shaman, after all.

“Yes,” Sally recollected. “I seem to remember Nelson telling me something about that.”

Her eyes moistened at each mention of her brother’s name. After several mugs of coffee Mletkin decided he should go, and leave the woman alone with her grief. He picked up his suitcase.

“I’ll be going, then.”

“Wouldn’t you rather stay? Nelson’s room is free. I think you’ll be more comfortable here than in a hotel.”

Mletkin did like Sally’s modest and cosy apartment. He marveled at himself, that he – who had been raised in a yaranga, where hygiene was a very relative term – should be so appreciative of Tangitan neatness and cleanliness.

After some initial wavering, Mletkin agreed to stay. The only awkwardness now lay in living in such close proximity to a young and attractive woman. To his amazement, Mletkin soon stopped noticing the blackness of her skin. When the two of them spoke, he saw only the dazzling whites of her large round eyes, and the limitless kindness that emanated from them. They were like gates to a bottomless treasury of tenderness and love. It often occurred to him, that from a Luoravetlan point of view Sally was surely a Tangitan, despite her black skin. Yet precisely because of that blackness, she was somehow apart from the various multi-hued Tangitan tribes, and that gave her a kind of kinship with Mletkin, a kinship that brought them closer together.

After a few days of rest at Sally's cozy home, Mletkin went down to the San Francisco harborside, to enquire about ships due to sail for the Northwest. To his dismay, it turned out that all the vessels had long sailed, the season for navigation in high latitudes was nearing its end and there would be no ships for the Bering Sea for some time to come.

"I'll have to winter in the States," Mletkin sighed on his return to Sally's.

"No big deal," Sally smiled back. "Better to winter in a warm house than in the Arctic ice fields."

That was true enough. Yet more and more often Mletkin was overcome by a yearning for his native shores. He thought of his yaranga, his parents and friends. The young woman who had vowed to wait for his return, who waited for him still in Rentyrgin's deer camp. Mletkin's occasional need for a woman was amplified and exacerbated by the nearness of the young, attractive Sally. She seemed to radiate the heat of pent-up desire as she showered her houseguest with tender attentions. A fleeting, casual touch from Sally would ignite a spark of answering heat in Mletkin, and he was at once helpless before a sweetly excruciating tide of unspent male longing. Nights were the worst. As Sally lay just beyond a thin screen, Mletkin's feverish imagination painted her hot, naked body sprawled on on a white sheet like that of a young walrus cow resting on a slab of ice.

A few times Sally had called him Nelson, forgetting. She sometimes hugged him too, pressing her warm body close and raising a raw throbbing inside Mletkin, like a carbuncle about to burst.

Mletkin was not one to sit idly, and despite the fact that his expenditures were modest, the remainder of his pay was melting like snow on Uelen's hills. He couldn't resist buying a sea chronometer, barometer and compass

from a specialist merchant near the port. The purchases made a sizeable dent in his savings, and he still wanted to buy a set of surgical instruments to take back home.

Searching for some temporary employment, Mletkin stopped by the local hospital and, to his surprise, was hired on as a male nurse. This was a hospital for the poor, and it was badly equipped, but staffed by recent medical graduates – a bold and brave bunch overall. In large part, the patients went from the street outside straight into the operating room and Mletkin often found himself assisting in surgery. He was fascinated by surgery, and spent every free moment in the operating room.

Sally would wait for him at home with a big lunch.

Several times Mletkin had mentioned renting a room or moving into a hotel; but this always provoked a stream of tears from Sally, who asked him to consider how alone in the world she was now that Nelson had gone.

The inevitable happened late one night. It was raining heavily and Mletkin was soaked to the bone by the time he made it home. He couldn't quite get the hang of the enormous umbrella Sally had given him. And anyway, he felt that it was silly and absurd to avoid rain by this means – the equivalent of blocking a piece of the sky with the palm of your hand. At first he used to smile to see the rest of the pedestrians walking with calm and even dignity underneath the nonsensical contraption, and looking at him with amusement or confusion – he used it like a walking stick, striding through the sheets of rain with a closed umbrella, unwilling to unfurl the sheltering piece of oiled silk over his head.

“You're soaking wet!” Sally clucked, as she began to help him divest himself of his sodden clothes. Even his underclothes were wet and Mletkin soon found himself in the altogether. Sally, meanwhile, was clad in a thin

cotton robe. Every time her body brushed against his, Mletkin felt a wave of inexorable, animal hunger rise up in him. He stumbled to his room, looking for escape, but Sally followed. They crashed onto the bed together.

He could tell that Sally too had wanted this. She moaned quietly, tenderly, underneath him, writhing like a sea lion, wrapping her limbs around him, stoking his desire so completely that he did not even notice the explosion of his seed inside her, but went on claspng the lush black body in his embrace.

His first thought as he came to his senses, lying on his bed limp with exhaustion, was of how in the world he could return to Uelen with this black-skinned woman in tow. And would Givivneu put up with having an American woman obsessed with hygiene and cleanliness for a companion? Having two wives was not an extraordinary thing among his people, but Mletkin's dilemma lay in the extraordinary combination of women, and this worried him exceedingly.

“Will you come to Uelen with me?” he asked Sally.

“I'll follow you to the ends of the earth,” she whispered hotly, cutting off his air supply with a wet, open-mouth kiss. Almost smothered, Mletkin carefully extricated himself from the Tangitan kiss, and said, as if in passing:

“My people kiss a bit differently.”

“Teach me!” demanded Sally.

“Like this,” Mletkin brought his own nose to within half-an inch of Sally's broad one and inhaled noisily.

“But that's just sniffing!” Sally's voice rang with disappointment.

“But that is precisely how we kiss,” Mletkin said.

Sally was loath to quarrel with her beloved, so she said, placatingly:

“We'll just have to kiss this way, and that way too” – and she clamped

her enormous mouth over Mletkin's again, this time covering his nose into the bargain. Before he could asphyxiate, Sally released him and began to sniff him loudly from head to foot. The process tickled, vividly reminding Mletkin of the feather-light, quiet way that young Givvneu had touched the tip of her tiny nose to his – and the enormity of the deep, secret tenderness that was contained in that soft touch.

Sally was insatiable. Even in the small hours of the night she demanded his caresses, and Mletkin would show up for work dour and sluggish, with bags under his eyes. His friends at the hospital noticed this and even gave him a check-up, but could find nothing physically wrong with him.

Mletkin had never imagined that sex could be a burden. Increasingly he longed to get away. There was no question now of bringing Sally to Uelen: she would never have accepted another woman in his household, and Mletkin would have had to give up Givvneu. Alarmingly, Sally had taken to chattering about their impending marriage and wedding ceremony. As they lay together in the afterglow of lovemaking, she went on and on about her wedding dress, the groom's suit and shiny patent-leather shoes. One day she even took Mletkin to a large merchant's, where all manner of wedding gear was sold, with prices that could fetch navigation instruments for a schooner. Mletkin was always mindful of the threat of having to stay in America forever that was implicit in these preparations.

And Uelen was never far from his thoughts. The nerpa hunting season was at its height. It was now that the experienced trackers would be going out onto the ice in search of polar bears. In mid-winter, the she-bears dug lying-in caves in the soft snowdrifts underneath the crags, where they would birth their cubs, each no bigger than a fur mitten. And later still, when the sun rose daily above the horizon, would come the time of hunting for seal

with nets submerged under the ice. That was when the ice fields were at their thickest. Here, on the other hand, true winter never seemed to come. It rained often, and high waves slammed against the craggy shoreline. But there was no ice near the shore, nor on the horizon. Sally insisted that this was a true California winter. If she only knew what a true winter, a winter on Chukotka, was like! It was long, harsh, and bitterly cold, and made you long for spring. When the warm days finally came and snow began to melt, the ice fields would break away from the shore. Herds of walrus would arrive to take residence on the floating islands of ice. The men would go out and hunt the tusked beasts.

His first walrus hunt was a vivid memory. They had harpooned a young walrus cow, had finished her off with spears and dragged her onto an ice floe with some difficulty. She was so heavy that the ice floe creaked and tilted threateningly. There was a livid crimson stripe where the walrus had been dragged up and across the ice.

The hunters talked animatedly amongst themselves, anticipating the first plentiful feast after the long winter of eating fozen kopal'khen, which everyone had come to dread. Mletkin helped the hunters pull the slippery strap lassoed around the walrus; then he worked at the metal harpoon head firmly lodged in the animal's thick hide. He had discarded his wet nerpa-skin mittens long before and his hands had gone numb from the freezing water, cold air and the wet, slimy strap. He complained, quietly, to his father:

“My hands are freezing, they're throbbing.”

Mlatangin led the boy up to the walrus cow where she lay prone on the ice, and pointed to the opening between her flippers, past the folds of dark skin:

“Warm your hands in there!”

Mletkin was unsure at first. Then Richip, the chief harpoon-man, came up and shoved both hands into the walrus's fundament, held them there for a while and assured the boy, with a beatific smile:

"It's warm in there! Hot!"

Trying not to look at the other hunters, Mletkin thrust first one and then the other numbed hand into the walrus cow. And it was true: though she had been dead for an hour, inside, the body was wondrously, blessedly warm. Its residual heat quickly thawed the boy's aching wrists and fingers. Mletkin would have been happy to stay like that, with his hands inside the animal, but the hunters were already sharpening their knives.

And now, as he watched Sally lying next to him, her black body on the white sheet, he remembered his first walrus cow and the combination of pleasure and guilt, like a sweet sin, when he thrust his frozen hands into its deliciously warm womb.

In that moment Mletkin realized that he could not stay here forever, that he must return to Uelen and to Givivneu, his betrothed.

Help came from an unexpected quarter, in the form of a letter from Vladimir Bogoraz, which arrived from New York.

It was in invitation for Mletkin to join a large scientific expedition that aimed to sail to Chukotka in the spring.

Many of the American capitalists of the 19th century were not simply businessmen and entrepreneurs; they also founded major institutions such as museums, universities and scientific societies, acting as the generous benefactors of culture and science in their homeland. The railroad magnate Morris K. Jesup was one such man. Having retired from his thriving business, Jesup founded, with others, the American Museum of Natural History and

served as its president for many years, devoting the remainder of his life and considerable resources to amassing a unique collection of artifacts of Aboriginal Arctic life and other so-called primitive nations, and to funding research expeditions and the publication of ethnographic works.

The Jesup North Pacific Expedition of 1900-1901 is yet to be rivaled in importance. This is especially true where it concerns the peoples living on either side of the Bering Strait. Jesup made a bold move in inviting, among others, the former political exile Vladimir Bogoraz – a man already renowned among the learned circles of the Russian Academy of Sciences for his linguistic studies of the dialect of the Kolyma Russians, descendants of the first Cossack explorers of the far north. His works, published in Russian and English and translated into the major European languages, remain unparalleled in the field, all the more so due to his excellent knowledge of local languages and the extraordinary trust he inspired in the Aboriginal people.

After a difficult parting from Sally, which was accompanied by tears, reproaches and protestations of love, Mletkin slept for almost the entirety of the long journey from the Pacific to the Atlantic coasts, such was his feeling that a burden had been lifted.

New York turned out to be much bigger and noisier than San Francisco and Mletkin, mindful of his late friend Nelson's account of what happened to human waste in a city, could not help but imagine the enormous metropolis adrift upon an ocean of piss and shit.

For several days he slept in the basement of the Museum of Natural History, where he had been preceded by a group of polar Eskimos, brought over from Greenland as living museum exhibits by Robert Peary, the famous polar explorer.

Here Mletkin met not just with Bogoraz, but with another familiar face – his old acquaintance Ales' Hrdlicka, who had just taken up the post of chief anthropologist at the museum.

The New York winter was both changeable and unpredictable. It might be buried one day under an avalanche of snowfall that seemed as though it would smother the city until spring, and the next the weather would turn so dramatically that warm rains would flush all the snow away. Frosty days alternated with the kind of sunny weather that, back in Uelen, would pass for summer.

Mletkin was counting the days until his departure. He often pored over a large map of the United States, imagining the train journey from New York back to San Francisco, and there embarking on the ship that would take him north, toward the Bering Strait. The thought of returning home dominated his waking hours.

In the meantime he did some odd jobs at the museum, saving every penny to purchase items which would be of use to him back home in Uelen. Among them, he invested in a kit of dentistry equipment and a pair of Zeiss binoculars. He also realized his old, secretly cherished dream of buying a Victrola.

It was May by the time they finally managed to set sail from San Francisco. They would be boarding a Russian vessel at Nome.

Standing at the ship's prow as it moved into Norton Bay, Alaska, Mletkin found the familiar shingled coastline – littered with white camping tents and fanciful agglomerations of crates, barrels, sheets of corrugated iron, and walrus hides – all but unrecognizable. From among the profusion of smoking metal pipes he could hear assorted mechanised clanging, people

shouting, the squealing of unseen animals and even horses' neighing. This was not the Nome where Mletkin had buried his friend Nelson only two years ago.

The population had exploded, for a start. There were a dozen large vessels anchored in the port, among them the Russian ship *Yakut*, which Bogoraz and Mletkin intended to join in order to cross the Bering Strait.

The discovery of gold along Nome's shingled beaches had been completely accidental, as no geological or prospecting survey work had ever been done there. True, back in 1866, one Daniel V. Libby, had found unmistakable traces of the precious metal at the mouth of the small local river while digging telegraph pole shafts. But it would be another quarter of a century before the Yukon gold rush prompted him to return to the Seward Peninsula and take up prospecting in a serious way. The year 1898, when news of Nome's gold deposits reached the Yukon, brought on the great gold fever. Hordes of gold prospectors swarmed to Norton Bay, many of them armed with nothing more than a spade and bits of primitive gold-panning equipment. Among them were a great number of scoundrels, con men great and small, violent criminals, and the mentally disturbed, possessed by the idea of easy riches. Mletkin had a hard time locating Nelson's grave among the dozens of new burial plots, little mounds of tundra turf littered here and there with human bones that had been unearthed and gnawed by starving stray dogs, wolves, and gigantic polar crows. Owing to the dearth of lumber, the dead of Seward Peninsula were buried without coffins, at best wrapped in a piece of sackcloth.

As evening set in, the bustle and jangling subsided, and the prevailing noise became that of drunken shouting, curses and even gunshots.

Neither Bogoraz nor Mletkin, both of whom had by now moved their

belongings to the Russian ship, dared go ashore at night and only observed the feverish goings-on of the prospectors' encampment on shore. It resembled nothing more than a vast madhouse, and during this time there was not a single human face in Nome that bore a normal expression; every man wore an anxious, predatory look. When they heard that Mletkin hailed from Chukotka, they demanded to know about gold-bearing veins along the Chukchi sea and the particulars of mining for gold in Uelen and its environs.

The very thought of how easy it would be for this horde to cross the Bering Strait and swarm onto Uelen's beach was enough to make him shudder.

"I doubt the Russian government would allow strangers to prospect for gold on our coastline," Bogoraz opined. "They'll do the digging themselves."

At long last the *Yakut* raised anchor and set a course for the East Cape of the Bering Strait, known to the Russians as Cape Dezhnev.

Mletkin did not go to his bed. He spent the night on deck, hungrily scanning his beloved, slowly approaching native shores.

They approached the Diomed Islands from the south and swung around. On their left, they now saw the *nynlju* dwellings of the Nuvuken Eskimo settlement, hiding among the rocks, and then the Senlyn Crags, standing apart from the shore, as though they had walked into the sea. One more promontory and there it was, Uelen's dear and familiar shingled spit and the two rows of yarangas stretching out to the east, toward the narrow strait of Pil'khun.