

A Keewatin Tale



Mara Feeney

When I was growing up, girls were cautioned against getting a “reputation.” The assumption was that any reputation you might get would be a bad one.

In 1974, at the age of 23, I was sent from Yellowknife to manage housing programs in the Keewatin Region of the Northwest Territories (now the Kivalliq Region of Nunavut). After spending a couple of months in my new home community of Rankin Inlet, I wanted to visit the other settlements in the region. I began to hitch rides on bush planes, whenever the opportunity arose. One day I hitched a ride with a bush pilot to Whale Cove.

I received a chilly reception in Whale Cove. Most of the housing directors were out on the land, and it took the Secretary a few days to round them up. They were not too pleased to learn they had been called away from their camps to discuss new procedures and rules suggested by the people far away in Yellowknife. Initially, and then after our meeting, I found myself stuck in the Transient Centre, subsisting on saltine crackers, Velveeta cheese, and canned smoked oysters from the Bay. I waited for the next flight out, but none came. I had packed only a toothbrush and one change of underwear, so it was a long wait.

Finally, several weeks later, a boat arrived from Rankin Inlet. An Inuit man had been hired to bring the regional social worker to Whale Cove. They planned to return to Rankin Inlet the next day and agreed to take me back with them.

I boarded the Peterhead early the next morning, anxious to get going, since I had been away much longer than planned. I could only imagine the pile of mail and telex messages that would be waiting on my desk.

Whale Cove is less than 50 miles from Rankin Inlet, so I expected to be home in just a few hours. I was perplexed when I saw our Inuit captain steer the boat westward, up a long, narrow inlet.

“What’s up?” I asked the social worker.

“Maybe he wants to stop and make tea,” Andy replied.

Thomas anchored the boat near a rock outcropping that formed a natural dock. Clearly, he knew his way around this country and had been to this spot before. After securing the boat, he went below-deck and fetched two rifles—one for himself and one for Andy.

“We’re going to go hunt for caribou,” he said.

“How long will you be gone?” I asked.

“Long as it takes to find *tuktu*,” Thomas replied, with a grin.

Andy shrugged and looked sheepish. If I were in his position, I would not miss this opportunity to understand Inuit ways either. But I also thought I detected a bit of swagger as the two men strode off across the tundra.

After they were out of sight, I sat on a rock and admired the views of land and rock, water and sky. I





listened to the *siksiks* chattering. I stretched out on the moss and watched clouds for a while. I dozed.

I woke up with a start, and looked at my watch. Almost two hours had passed. I stood up and gazed around. There was no sign of anyone, just the boat rocking at its moorings.

I began to think that something might have gone wrong. What if they encountered a polar bear? What if they got lost? What if they were trampled by a herd of caribou? What if they never returned?

I took stock of what was in the boat, in case I had to be on my own for some time. I found one aluminum cooking pot that had seen better days, a box of pilot biscuits with three stale crackers left in it, a single envelope of dry Lipton's Onion Soup Mix, and a box of matches. That was all.

I gathered bits of moss and driftwood and got a fire going. I filled the pot with sea water, and threw in the


onion soup mix. Just then, I noticed a flock of Ptarmigan, fluttering on the rocks nearby. I studied their movements, and after a while, I threw some stones, to see if I could hit one of the birds. It worked! The Ptarmigan collapsed, stunned. I twisted its neck to kill it, gutted it with a sharp stone, then plucked its feathers and threw it into the pot. Then I threw more stones, stunned another bird, then another, and another. Soon I had six birds stewing in my pot of onion broth over the campfire. I broke up the stale pilot biscuits and threw them in for good measure, as dumplings of a sort.

About an hour later, I saw two figures on the horizon, growing larger by the minute. It was Thomas and Andy, returning empty-handed. As they approached, I could see they were impressed with my fire and the aromas coming from the cauldron.

"What's this?" they asked in unison.

"Stewed Ptarmigan," I announced proudly. The three of us ate in silence, chewing every delicious morsel off the bones.

After we'd eaten, Thomas said, "So, today we did not find *tuktu*. I suppose you think it is easy to hunt. I bet you don't even know how to shoot a gun." He handed me his rifle, taunting me. I took the rifle and pointed it skyward. I pulled the trigger, without even aiming.

A seagull fell out of the air, landing at our feet with a thump. Thomas and Andy just smiled at each other and shook their heads. I knew at that moment that I had begun to establish a "reputation," and that it was not going to be a bad thing. 

Mara Feeney

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Ulu Lessons

The smell of blood from sealskin being cleaned permeates the air. To my four-year-old nose, it is not a repugnant odour, but one that sends a shiver of excitement down my spine. The air is crisp and cold, even though the powerful rays of spring have begun to thaw the frozen tundra.



Sarah Daitch.



Four-year-old Sarah Daitch and Leah Qavavaug clean the sealskin.

“Mom,” I ask, “can I use my ulu?” The ulu is an Inuit women’s knife designed to clean flesh from hides. Shaped like a half moon with a half circular handle on one end, I can barely get my hand around the handle. I climb eagerly into my red and white snowsuit, put on my Pangnirtung knitted hat and, clutching my ulu, trundle across the ice to our next-door neighbour’s yard.

Leah is hard at work cleaning the hides. Their skins are stretched as tight as an elastic band in the middle of a wooden frame. She expertly manoeuvres her own ulu from side to side, cleaning the fat and blood from the hide. The blood smells like copper and seeps into the snow, turning the ground orange.

There is much work to be done as Leah’s husband, Aiyow, caught three seals yesterday. The spring is a good time to hunt. As the sun’s rays break up the Arctic Ocean, seals, whales and bears gather at the meeting point of the ice and the open water, a place known as the floe edge. That is where the hunters go.

My eyes follow the nimble work of Leah’s fingers as she removes the white blobs of flesh from the silvery seal fur. She will use the fur to make qammiks — winter boots, and mittens for her children.


“Eeeeeeee!” she exclaims when she sees me watching intently. Gently setting her ulu down, she rubs her nose against mine and ruffles my chestnut brown curls, which poke out in all directions from under my knitted cap. Laughing, she spots my knife clutched in my hands, “You’ve come to help!” I nod and she puts me to work scraping one small corner of the hide in front of her.

My mom comes out from our house to watch.

“Sarah,” she calls, “put your mitts back on, it’s -20 out!”

My fingers are now coated with sticky red blood mixed with oil from the seal’s fat that gives off a pungent odour.

“No Mom,” I call back, “It’s too hot.”

I point a sticky red finger toward the glaring Arctic mid afternoon sun, which will not set for another three months. 

Sarah Daitch

The author dedicates this story to the late Leah Qavavaug who taught her how to use an ulu.