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BIG MIRACLE

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www.stmartins.com

Design by Kathryn Parise

ISBN 978-0-312-62519-1

First Edition: December 2011

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The Hunt

The bitter weather came early along Alaska's North Slope in September 1988. The Siberian air that rolled in brought high winds and unseasonable cold. In one week, the average temperature went from ten degrees above to twenty degrees below zero. An unusually strong rim of ice formed along the shore, sealing off America's northernmost coastline from the fierce Arctic Ocean.

Most of the thousands of whales that feed in these waters began to migrate south a few weeks early. Three young California gray whales did not. Two adolescents and one yearling did not sense the ice closing in overhead. Had they known what was in store, they obviously would have joined the others. Instead, they continued to feed on the tasty crustaceans that lined the endless ocean bottom.

These whales were in no hurry to leave. Why should they be? Their food supply was as limitless as their appetites were voracious; they faced no dangers of which they were aware. Besides, once they left these rich feeding grounds for their winter, warmer home off Baja, California, they wouldn't eat again until they returned to Alaska the following spring—five months later. By then they would have completed a 9,000-mile round-trip, the longest

migration of any mammal in the world. That's a long time for an eating machine to fast.

Migration meant confrontation. Killer whales, great white sharks, and many other predators feed on young grays because it is their youth that makes them such easy pickings. These uninitiated gray whales would soon be provided a first-rate education in the real world of Arctic survival.

The whales heedlessly rolled on their sides to suck the shrimplike amphipods from the seabed just a few hundred feet off Point Barrow, a narrow sandspit five miles long. It was the very tip of North America. Four miles to the southwest stood Barrow, the largest, oldest, and farthest northern Eskimo settlement on the globe. At any other time at any other spot on the Arctic coast of Alaska, the whales would have drowned unnoticed under the ice.

In just a few short weeks, a strong case can be made that these three creatures would become the luckiest animals in all history; the recipients of unprecedented assistance from an alien species. The first of their kind before or since to be spared—at least as far as we know—the fate that had doomed all the others. They would not drown like other stranded whales; they would not be reduced to Japanese beauty products or Russian ice cream by high-tech factory ships; nor, at least for now, would they end up as local Inuit dinners, as the Inuits took advantage of unfilled whaling quotas.

After each spring thaw, carcasses of young whales almost littered Alaska's Arctic coast. The locals who found them months after their deaths every year knew the most probable cause of death was drowning because nearly all the carcasses were of young or even infant grays. Lest a tear be shed in vain, one can rest assured that these dead did not die in vain. Nothing in nature ever does. They were an important element all the way up and down the Arctic food chain.

These three whales occasionally stopped eating to scratch their ungainly snouts on the gravelly bottom for relief from the whale lice and barnacles infesting their skin. Ironically, it was these itchy pests that would deliver them from the first of many death traps they would encounter over the next several months.

Since time immemorial, local Inuits (they used to call themselves

Eskimos—and did not take offense when others did, too) built an entire subsistence civilization around the whale upon whom they depended for survival. Over the centuries, they acquired a taste for the much tastier bowhead whale. The bowhead's clean, glossy sleek skin made far better eating than the unsightly and unappetizing California gray.

While the barnacles annoyed these three grays, the tiny pests were nothing compared to one local Eskimo hunter. Despite a five-foot-three-inch frame, his prowess as a whaling captain earned him the nickname Malik, which, in his Inupiat language, means "Little Big Man." He spent most of his sixty-odd years roaming the always oscillating ice shelf off Point Barrow in search of the bowhead. Most older Eskimos, like many other peoples only recently introduced to the Western calendar, can't tell you exactly how old they are.

Until recently, whales were the only food source plentiful enough to feed all the people who lived at the frozen and forlorn top of the world. The bounty from a typical sixty-foot bowhead whale could feed a standard-size Inuit village for an average year. Outsiders called Malik's job "subsistence whaling." But one man's subsistence whaler is another man's cowboy.

By early September 1988, Barrow's whaling captains were starting to worry about what was turning into a dismal fall hunt. No one from the area had caught a whale since spring, and winter—which comes quickly in the Arctic—was nearly upon them. And when winter comes here it doesn't come empty-handed. It brings with it six months of some of the world's coldest temperatures and sixty-seven days of absolute darkness. In Barrow, Alaska, the sun sets every November 17 and doesn't rise again until January 21 of the following year. Temperatures of fifty degrees below zero are not unusual. Factor in the howling winds that whip down from the North Pole or across the Beaufort and Chukchi seas from Siberia at speeds of up to 100 miles an hour, and the windchill reading can drop to 175 degrees below zero. Of course, Alaskans don't bother with windchills. The ambient readings are bad enough.

As any Alaskan knows, the forty-ninth state has only two seasons: winter and damned late in the fall. This gets less funny the farther north you travel in Alaska—and Barrow is as far north as you can get.

Barrowans proudly called their town “The Top of the World.”¹ For all intents and purposes it was. Located 320 miles north of the Arctic Circle, it could be reached only by air except for two or three weeks in the summer when the ice receded far enough for a thick-hulled supply ship to get through.

Malik and his people have called Barrow home since their forbearers first paddled, walked or skated across the Bering Sea from Siberia as long as 25,000 years ago. These intrepid seafarers came in nimble open boats made of dried walrus or sealskin called umiaks. These were certainly among the first people to have permanently settled in North America. Whether they displaced anyone else is not known, so they call themselves the first Americans, and who can blame them?

By 1988, there were a little more than 3,000 people living in Barrow, around 2,700 of whom claimed to descend in some degree from those original explorers. On the night of September 16, 1988, Malik assembled his six-man whaling crew outside Sam & Lee’s on Nachick Street, advertised as the world’s northernmost Chinese restaurant, to arrange their gear. When the gear was sorted, assembled, and packed, the men were ready to hunt the open waters of the Arctic Ocean in search of migrating bowhead whales.

In one of nature’s most daring matches, these seven men sought battle with an immensely powerful, agile and resilient forty-ton whale. These men hunted not from an umiak, but from a much sturdier but still small aluminum dinghy powered interchangeably by oars and a modern outboard motor. A kicking whale’s tail or slapping whale fins could easily capsize the boat. Together, the whale’s tail and fins, called flukes, propel and guide the massive mammal with both precision and stealth, equally able to challenge or simply evade anything or anyone foolish enough to confront it.

If cast out of their boat and into the frigid waters—for any reason, be it man caused, ocean caused, or whale caused—the jettisoned men would not have long to enjoy the refreshing chill of the eight-degree Arctic Ocean

¹ The current town of Barrow derived its modern name from Point Barrow, America’s northernmost point, named by English explorer Frederick Beechey in 1825 to honor British admiral Sir John Barrow. The Inupiat name for Barrow is *Ukpeagvik*, or “place where snowy owls are hunted.” Maybe that’s why the name Barrow is now used by all.

water before dying. But the prospect of a bitter winter without locally hunted whale blubber—more appetizingly called muktuk, the primary but long since essential food choice for natives—provided these whalers with the chance to simultaneously ply their trade and win local plaudits.

In one of modernity's most predictable phenomenon, the prosperity delivered by Alaska's oil wealth did not cut Barrowans off from their past; it helped them recreate it. Before the oil boon of the mid-1970s, Eskimos hunted whales only in springtime. Prior to widespread adoption of the outboard motor and two-way radio, hunting whales anytime other than in the spring was pointless. The only way premodern whalers could effectively hunt was by waiting out on the sea ice in pitched tents for days, sometimes even weeks at a time, for whales to pass them by.

While their cultural betters down in the Lower 48 lamented the "lost innocence" of Inuits and other newly modern peoples, Barrowans were as eager to improve their own lives as anyone else. Why they should continue living as fossilized museum pieces so that members of the faraway commentariat in the Lower 48 could congratulate themselves for preserving was a question few people on the North Slope had the time to waste asking.

Now that they had outboard motors, Malik didn't have to wait for whales or the approval of their distant and unknowing superiors. They could go get the whales themselves. Once they found and harpooned one, they could use their two-way radios to get help towing it in. But make no mistake: while whaling was much easier than it had ever been, it was still challenging and dangerous.

Malik's father and grandfather earned the title of Great Whaler. Even though this title usually followed a family's line, Malik had to prove he, too, was worthy of it. He listened to his elders. He learned their lessons. With over seventy harvested whales to his credit, Malik was well known in every whaling village up and down Alaska's Arctic coast. The adventures of whalers like Malik were the popular subject for elaborate epic poems celebrating the hunt. These poems were taught in schools, preached in churches, and retold on local radio and television.

On the morning of September 12, 1988, the strong gusts that had prevailed over previous days calmed. But even so, the thickened clouds trapped the unseasonably cold air keeping temperatures near zero degrees. To keep warm, Malik and his six-man crew wore two layers of department-store

quality long underwear under handmade sealskin pants and rawhide parkas. As they launched their boat from the beach behind the Top of the World Hotel, the whalers wondered whether they would be able to return there before the beach froze over.

About an hour after shoving off, the crew heard on their two-way radio another local whaling crew report their having spotted a bowhead roughly two miles off the tip of Point Barrow. Malik squatted in the bow. He redirected his helmsman to throttle up in order to get to the site, eight miles north–northeast as quickly as possible. The dinghy’s top speed of twenty knots should get them there in about thirty minutes. The windchill made it feel far colder than the zero degrees it really was. The men rolled down the fur seal linings of their hoods to protect themselves from frostbite during the ramped-up ride across the rough sea.

From more than a mile away, Malik could make out the unmistakable mist on the horizon. The fine spray lingering thirty feet above the surface of the water before vanishing into the atmosphere was proof the initial sighting was accurate and that the spotted whale was still in the area. But Malik had company. Two other whaling crews were now hovering in the same area. Still, Malik was better positioned than his rivals and would remain so—unless the whale decided to change course. Without dramatic changes, the whale was Malik’s for the taking. Malik signaled to slow the boat. He pulled off his hood and exchanged his fur mitts for the baggy bloodstained cotton work gloves he wore to kill many whales. The crew sorted the weapons they would use to strike their prey.

Before local whalers started using the modern machines and techniques developed and perfected by their more efficient commercial whaling competitors, the only way Eskimos could kill a whale was to repeatedly stab it with their handmade animal-derived ivory harpoons until it died. By 1988, those days were long over. Malik grabbed his four-pound graphite harpoon armed with a unique explosive device designed to detonate on impact to produce a larger diameter, and thus more severe wound. The helmsmen loaded the explosive cartridges into a shoulder gun, a stubby brass rifle custom made for killing whales.

Crew preparations proceeded quietly and unobtrusively. Malik and his men tried to remain invisible to the whale, or at the very least, distant and nonthreatening. While not much can threaten a forty-ton whale, why add

to its already copious advantages? Malik looked at his watch: 10:30 A.M. His crew had seven hours of daylight. If they got lucky and struck the whale soon, getting the haul onto land before nightfall would still be a tall task and was by no means assured. The crew would need help. Lots of it. Everyone in town with a boat would be called upon to lend a hand. Darkness just added to list of dangers all creatures had to endure to survive in the Arctic: exposure, the cold, disorientation, and good ole Nanook, the omnipresent, rarely-seen-but-always-feared polar bear, an animal whose nondiscriminating tastes range from the tiny Arctic fox to the huge bowhead whale and a growing fondness for human dumpster delights tossed in for good measure.

For the moment, the six men and their boat lay between the beach and the site of the whale. Malik ordered his rudderman, Roy Ahmaogak, to try and position the boat north and east of the whale so that they could run with the harpooned mammal toward the shore. They didn't want to tow a huge and unstable carcass any farther than they had to. But Roy knew that his main objective was to keep the boat close enough to attack the whale. If it meant a longer haul home, so be it.

Malik waved his paddle to signal other whalers in the area to back off as his crew was preparing a strike. It appeared to Malik that the fifty-five-foot whale was still not aware of his predicament as it continued to surface and breathe normally. Its hot breath formed a spout almost directing its pursuers toward the precise spot where they could collect their biggest and tastiest gift of the year.

Observing the whale's trajectory, the depth of its dives, its rate of respiration, and the distance between surfacings, Malik directed his crew to the site where he calculated the whale would next appear. Trailing the bowhead by about a hundred feet, Roy skillfully piloted the boat to intersect the whale's path. Malik held his breath, hoping the whale would not decide to surface under his boat. All the modern technology at his disposal could still not guarantee he wouldn't position himself and his crew directly on top of the moving whale rather than astride it.

Whalers aim their harpoons at a spot behind the two perpendicular breathing holes located at the base of the whale's skull. It is the animal's most vulnerable part, exposing a narrow cavity leading to the heart. If properly executed, the harpoon pierces through the blubber, through the

cavity, and into the unprotected heart. A lacerated whale heart pounds with such force that those few whalers expert or lucky enough to have landed the “perfect strike” compare notes on how long they were able to maintain a hold on the harpoon before its wild pulsations knocked them off their feet.

Had this whale sensed the shadowy forms on the crew hovering ominously above it? Malik did not know. All he could do was prepare his harpoon. But for the pattering idle of the Johnson outboard, the crew was silent, consumed by their anticipation of the instant when the silence and stillness would be shattered.

Anxiety mounted as the whale submerged longer and deeper than at any point since it was first spotted. Before its last dive, Malik and his crew were close enough to actually see that the whale’s blowholes did not open wide enough to signal a longer or deeper dive, yet longer and deeper it was. But it couldn’t go on. The whale would have to surface. And when it did, Malik would be sure to be ready.

He grasped the harpoon firmly in his left hand, undulating comfortably to the rhythms of the churning sea. No one needed to be told where to look for the whale to next emerge. These were whalers, born of and for this moment. Nor did Roy, the rudderman, need to be told where or how to shuttle his craft into Malik’s desired position. The two men did not need to communicate. They worked as integral parts of a whole.

At that instant the whale’s shimmering black skin effortlessly glided upward through the surface of the roiling waters of Chukchi Sea at the precise point where every eye on Malik’s crew was trained. Malik cocked his arms behind his round, thinly thatched head. His triceps tightened as he raised his hollow graphite harpoon. He knew the whale was at its most vulnerable immediately before starting its exhale. Harpoon in hand, a strong impulse ran through Malik’s wiry frame lunging him forward toward his target. Carefully but forcefully shifting his weight from his back foot forward, Malik’s throwing mechanics generated enough linear momentum to pull his shoulders around to create the rotational momentum needed to properly launch the harpoon. The force of such an explosion would have tossed nearly anyone else into the swirling waters below. But Malik emerged from his harpoon release as firmly planted in the bow of his boat as any baseball pitcher’s feet would be at the base of the mound.

The razor-sharp tip pierced the lustrous black skin of the graceful giant. A primer charge planted at the end of the harpoon detonated as it lodged inside the whale. Recoiling from the shock of a bomb literally exploding inside it, the whale roared in confusion and terror as it plunged below the waterline in a hopeless attempt to escape its fate. The next blast came seconds later. This bomb, on a five-second fuse, detonated even deeper inside the whale and tore apart its pulmonary cavity.

Roy waited patiently for the sound of that second blast, which was his signal to raise his forty-pound brass shoulder gun to land still more exploding shells at or near the whale's head, a target so huge he could hardly miss. The whale surfaced, exhaling a geyser of blood, at which point Roy jerked the trigger of the lumbering weapon back toward him. The charge misfired. Instead of detonating only after it had lodged inside the whale, it instead exploded on contact. Chunks of charred blubber spewed in all directions. The whale fell back into the sea, leaving a storm of crimson hail in its wake.

Roy reloaded and fired twice more. The whale violently writhed in a frantic but powerful attempt to unshackle the inflated sealskin floats tied to the harpoon securely lodged inside it. The whale spun circles as the red water foamed in its wake.

After Roy scored his third shot securely in the whale's arched back, Malik motioned the helmsman to steer him still closer to the crippled and disoriented whale. As wounded as it was, the whale was still capable of escaping the crew, if not its fate, by plunging deep beneath the surface. If Malik could hit the whale with another wire-guided harpoon, the harpoon's floats might slow down the whale just enough to kill it. Malik readied and fired again. The sudden bloat of the whale's shiny black skin signaled another hit. The whale's huge tail caught one side of the boat, slamming it violently forward into its diamond-shaped shoulder blade.

Drenched in the whale's blood, the men grabbed hold of the gunwales to steady themselves inside their rocking dinghy. When Malik regained enough balance to look up, he saw a sluggish whale too gravely injured to carry on much longer. Concerned that the bowhead might make one last attempt to dive beneath a patch of ice before it died, Malik reached for another harpoon. Just because the beast was mortally wounded did not mean it had yet been subdued. The whale's size and its will to live could still push

it onward for many miles, prolonging the endurance test between whale and Eskimo.

Malik need not have worried. Before he could fire again, the whale suddenly and quietly succumbed. Now the challenge was to secure their prize before it sank and the men did not have much time. Three other whaling crews out that morning watched and cheered the strike through binoculars from their respective vantage points stretched across the Chukchi horizon. Once the whale was dead, neighborly cooperation replaced friendly competition. Upon confirmation that the whale had succumbed, the sidelined crews went from passive spectators to active participants. They rushed to help Malik's crew keep the dead whale on the surface so it could be towed to shore for butchering.

As in ancient times, the modern way of "sharing the whale wealth" was to distribute the tasty proceeds in accordance to the contribution of the recipient. The more a crew participated, the more meat it got. The crews now rushing to Malik's assistance would be compensated with the butchered whales' choicest cuts.

People have always been the most important resource in a subsistence whaling community. The act of hunting, catching, securing, towing, butchering, distributing, and disposing of a creature as large as a bowhead whale required as many people as possible to help. Dragging a giant dead whale onto the beach for butchering—particularly one this size and during such an unusual time of year—is no small task. As word spread that Malik's crew had a whale in tow, Barrowans readied themselves to help.

Within minutes, regular programming on KBRW-AM, the only commercial radio station on Alaska's North Slope (serving an area bigger than the state of California) was interrupted to broadcast news of the kill, particularly Malik's current sea location so that designated town volunteers with boats could meet Malik at sea and help his crew ballast the whale and bring it safely to shore. Within an hour, more than eighty people in twenty-two boats had arrived on the scene. Even with such help, it still took four hours to haul the mammoth carcass across six miles of choppy seas and back to the beach.



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