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Opening extract from

Island

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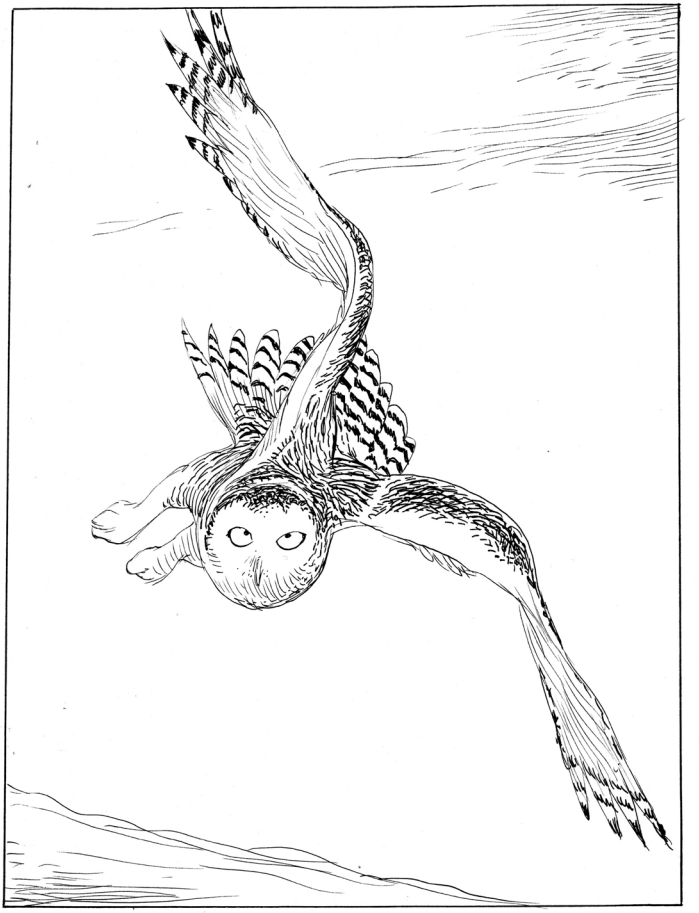

UKPIK

1

The island waited.

It was midnight but not dark. The sun was out. An Arctic summer sun that lit a pathway across the freezing water. The air shimmered. And in that shimmering air was the rhythmic beat of wings.

Ukpik was flying.

Ukpik, the owl with the yellow eyes and the snow-white feathers.

The tundra ghost, they called her. White against the glassy sea, white against the black sand of the beach. And white on the hill.

If she landed on the hill.

In times gone by, the island's hunters would have watched for that bird, tracked it as it came inland.

For *ukpik* on the hill – so the ancestors said – meant death.

But the hunters were long dead themselves, buried in the sacred ground, and only the sun looked down that night. So no one heard the beat of *ukpik*'s wings, or followed the yellow eyes and the snow-white feathers.

And no one saw where the great bird landed.

2

Three thousand, eight hundred and thirty-five miles south and east of the island, in a small London flat, Cameron O'Connor banged his fist on the kitchen table.

'No,' he said. 'No. No, NO!'

Dr Pascale O'Connor (research scientist, mother), watched her coffee mug jiggle. She watched her laptop jiggle. Her screensaver – which was a picture of the island – went up and down. 'Don't shout, Cameron,' she said.

'No way,' shouted Cameron. 'I am not going to Herschel Island. End of.'

'The trip's been booked for months,' his mother reminded him.

'So, cancel it!'

'Oh, right,' said Pascale. 'That'll just be the return flight from London to Calgary and the one from Calgary to Whitehorse and the one from Whitehorse to Inuvik and the one from Inuvik . . .' She paused. 'Cameron, we leave on Monday.'

'You leave on Monday,' said Cameron.

'Most boys your age would give their right arm for a week on an Arctic island,' Pascale mentioned.

There were many things Cameron might have said about that. He might have said: *Since when was I most boys?* Or, *have you forgotten it's Tom's birthday party on*

Thursday? Or, perhaps a little more accurately, *Not if they had to go with YOU!*

'Besides,' Pascale continued, 'you agreed.'

'Yes,' said Cameron. 'I fell for the Arctic bit. You know – snow and ice. I didn't realise that it was going to be,' he gestured at the green, hillocky land of her screensaver, 'just like Scotland.'

Pascale arched an eyebrow. She always conducted her climate research in the summer. For each of ten years, in fact, she'd made the annual trip in July, so the island was always 'just like Scotland'. He'd seen the photos and he wasn't stupid (well, not that stupid) and . . . She smiled sweetly. 'Well, since it was your dad who paid for the tickets and with whom you'll presumably be staying if you don't come, perhaps you'd better just run the new plan past him?'

'Obviously,' said Cameron, and his mouth set into a little line which made him, Pascale thought, look not unlike her ex-husband.

She closed her laptop. 'Cameron,' she said, 'what exactly do you think is going to happen on the island?'

'Nothing,' exploded Cameron. 'That's the point. A whole week of absolutely nothing!'

3

A hundred miles north of the island, the 2 a.m. sun threw long shadows across the pack-ice. Where the edge of the ice met the open sea, waves crashed and battered. Under the relentless pounding, ice broke away, floating in giant floes on the surface of the water. The floes moved with the swell of the ocean, pulled back and forth with the tides.

Or, at least, they should have done.

But there was one floe which was not moving in time with the rest. This huge disc of ice seemed to be being buffeted by some other force. It moved and trembled as if it was being pushed from below. As if some powerful thing was rising from a place deeper than the ocean itself.

If the ancestors had been watching (and the ancestors were always watching) they would have nodded to each other and said:

A spirit is walking.

Then they would have waited – patiently – to see what form that restless soul would take, and where it might be heading.

'*Pisugtoq*,' they would have murmured to each other when the creature finally broke the surface of the water. 'It is *pisugtoq*. The Ever-Wandering One.'

And then, as the creature twisted south: 'Ah. The island then. The spirit is going to the island.'

4

'So what changed, exactly, Cam?' Cameron's father's tone was light and business-like down the phone.

'Nothing,' said Cameron.

Hugh O'Connor waited.

'She told me about the power situation,' Cameron improvised.

'Power situation?'

'Electricity. Wi-fi. Phone signal. Or lack of.'

'Come on, Cam! Herschel Island is about as far north as you can go without bumping into the North Pole,' said his father. 'What exactly did you expect?'

Actually, Cameron had expected full power and possibly internet. Why not? His mother took her computer every year, didn't she? How was he to know that the tiny generator on the island was apparently marked For the Benefit of Science Only? And as for the phone signal – well, phone signals bounced off satellites, didn't they? Was Herschel in some parallel universe?

'I just want to stay with you,' said Cameron in a rush.

'Stay?'

'Yes.' There, he'd said it. 'With you.'

There was a pause. 'Look, Cam, flight costs aside – and to be frank that's quite a big aside – next week isn't brilliant timing for me.'

'It's Christine, isn't it?' His father's new girlfriend.

‘Well, not just Chris, no.’

Just Chris, then. Just Chris!

‘Only she doesn’t have kids of her own, as you know, and it’s early days and . . .’ his father trailed off.

It had been like this since the divorce. For years he’d had to take second place. To them. His father’s women. And there were so many women in the world. But a son only ever had one father. Couldn’t his dad see that?

‘Besides,’ continued Hugh, ‘your mum’s wanted to take you to Herschel Island pretty much since you were born. And you’ve never been old enough. And now you’re thirteen . . .’

Nearly fourteen, actually.

‘I’d rather stay with you,’ said Cameron solidly, wishing he could say that thing that could never be said. That thing that sounded so simple. *I love you, Dad*.

‘You could take pictures,’ said Hugh. ‘Or make a video diary, maybe. Come down the weekend after you get back. Give Chris and me a show.’

‘No vid-cam,’ said Cameron.

‘Well, I’m sure we could sort that,’ said Hugh.

With money, Cameron thought. His father sorted a lot of things with money.

Silence.

‘Look,’ said Hugh, ‘I know things haven’t been too good between you and your mum recently, Cam, but, well – think of it maybe as quality mother and son time.’

And that, perhaps, was what was really frightening Cameron.

5

In the summer of the Arctic circle, the sun neither rises nor sets, so it's difficult to know when time passes. But time had passed and the creature from the north had almost reached its destination.

As it approached the island it looked not much more than a wave. And perhaps, in this moment, it was just a wave. For spirit creatures travel in many guises and one must be careful to assume nothing about shape and form. For shapes can change. Shift.

So here it was, then, this wave, one of the many waves that formed the ridge of water making its relentless way towards the shore. Nearer and nearer the wave came. And only the most watchful hunter would have seen the moment when, beneath the plume and spray, this wave gained muscle and sinew.

And also claws.

The creature did not fall upon the beach, it pounced and leapt there. Leaving, in the soft black soil, a mark. Four marks. Prints, the beginning of a track. The depth of the indentations would have told an island hunter that the creature must weigh at least seven hundred pounds. The heavy pads, the five distinctive toes and the non-retractable claw marks would all have said *pisugtoq* – the Ever-Wandering One. The slightly pigeon-toed gait would have given away her sex – female.

But the island's hunters were all in the sacred

PISUGTOQ

ground, so there was no one to see that day as the huge creature lumbered up the beach.

This sea-bear.

She-bear.

Spirit-bear.

The bear shook herself. In the Arctic summer sun the spray glittered from her coat. Against the shrub greens and browns of the tundra, she looked white. But her fur was actually flashed with apricot, gold, cream and straw yellow; the deeper tones of an older bear.

The bear stood still a moment, lifting her great snout to the wind. Her nostrils quivered with the fresh sweetness of her birthplace, the island's grasses, lichens, crowberries – and then it came, that sudden burning tang of jet fuel.

So, Atka the old she-bear thought, *I was right*.

She moved swiftly up the beach, picking her way between the strewn wood. There were single branches here and whole tree trunks. Wood which had been swept down the Mackenzie River, stripped white by the sea and then flung onto the shore like so many whale bones.

Within a few minutes the bear had gained sufficient ground to be able to see down to the inland side of the spit, where the makeshift runway was. The plane was already departing. Left behind on the ground were some boxes, some crates and two brightly coloured figures. One figure she recognised instantly. The woman

who came every year. The woman whose mind she had tried – and failed – to reach so many times. The woman who saw nothing of the island, heard nothing of the island. The other figure was new to her. The bear focused her pin-prick dark eyes, waited until the slight figure turned, and the face became visible.

It was a child.

A child!

A child could change everything.

6

Cameron stood on the runway and watched the departure of the twin-engined airplane with a certain sense of disbelief. It seemed only a moment since he had emphatically refused to come to the island.

No way. I am not going to Herschel Island. End of!

Yet here he was.

Approximately three thousand, eight hundred and thirty-five miles from home. His final contact with civilisation (he was still staring upwards) getting smaller by the moment.

OK, so the departing twin-engined otter wasn't exactly the class of plane on which they had journeyed from London to Canada (decent food, uninterrupted multimedia) or even the one in which they'd made the trip from Calgary to Whitehorse (tolerably interesting trip to cockpit), it was just some howling tin bucket held together with rust and a prayer but at least it came with some life and some noise and a human being that wasn't his mother. And what was this marvellous contraption doing? Flying away, that's what: roar, boom, sputter.

Gone.

Even the vapour trail had almost vanished now. As though the plane had just been some mirage, and reality now consisted of this minuscule island in the middle of exactly nowhere. Herschel Island, to give it it's

correct geographical name. With the emphasis on the 'her' bit. Her island.

'Oh look, Cameron!' his mother had screamed above the noise of the plane engine. 'There it is, can you see it?'

Did she think he was blind? Of course he could see it.

What there was of it.

This over-excitement of his mother's had begun when they'd first entered Canadian airspace.

'Why don't you just turn that thing off and look out the window?' she said. 'It's amazing. Look!'

Without turning the sound down on his film, he'd looked. There had been miles and miles of nothing: not a road, not a building, not a house, no habitation of any kind, in fact. Worse still, a whole hour's flying-time later – when she'd forced his nose against the window glass a second time – it had looked *precisely the same*. As though they weren't moving, or time had stood still. In every direction, as far as the eye could see, there it was again: this stretching nothingness. But at least it had been a big nothingness, big dark forests and big blue lakes and big white mountain tops. But here?

What was this island?

From the air it had been a tiny green dot. And now they'd arrived? It was a very slightly larger green dot. A green dot with a long mud beach attached. This beach which stuck out from the main island like some

extra leg was actually, so his mother had been happy to inform him, a *spit*. Spit was about right. It was dirt. A long dirt beach with an inland bay one side and the Arctic Ocean the other, topped off (he briefly swung his head left and right) by some seriously weird tree trunks.

There was also – now the plane had gone – the silence.

Only not quite the silence. From somewhere near Cameron's face came a high-pitched whining noise. He slapped at his cheek.

'I don't believe it,' he exclaimed. 'An Arctic island. With mosquitoes!'

Dr Pascale O'Connor, who had her back to her son, did not reply. Dressed in a bright purple windcheater, her tall, athletic body was bent over sleeping bags, billy cans, data loggers and levelling rods.

Cameron looked back up into the sky as if he could make the plane reappear by force of will alone.

The heavens remained resolutely empty. The plane wouldn't be back for a week. A week! As the full horror of it hit him, he consoled himself with the thought of the gun.

Yes, that's what had persuaded him to come to the island.

She'd finally promised to let him have a go with her Wards Western Field bolt-action rifle.