MY PERSONAL ESKIMO

“You were hard to find, young man.”

“*I* always know where I am.” The fat man’s eyes narrowed. I had sat across a desk from fat policemen, fat parole officers, and fat judges and could read them fast. This guy was old but a tough motherfucker and I better take my foot off the gas. Plonski and Son had been Granda’s lawyers since you could be sued by dinosaurs and I didn’t need trouble. He looked down at the papers in his hand.

“You’ve led a rough life, young man. Kicked out of foster homes, kicked out of schools, a session in Juvenile detention and then a career as a roughneck in the oil fields. Did you like North Dakota?”

“No. And if you’re curious, I didn’t like the foster homes, the crappy schools, or the prison for kids. I’m hoping for some improvements.”

“Six foster homes in nine years. Sounds bad. Ran away once and arrested for living in a library. Why that?”

“ I like to read. It's quiet and nobody fucks with you."

“Your parents had moved out to California. And then after you were eighteen you went to Texas, North Dakota, Kentucky - it’s almost a miracle we found you.”

“Yeah. My brilliant parents. Went out to Hollywood to be movie stars. My dad ended up selling insurance, my mom was a hostess at a hoity toity restaurant until they both got killed in a car wreck driving home drunk from a party when I was nine. I remember how great Amber my baby sitter was that night. Bet she never got paid. Like the times I never got paid. I’m gonna look into it.”

“Went to Texas at eighteen and worked as a laborer in the oil industry.” He looked up at me. “I can tell you’re pretty bright. You could have been in college.”

“Yeah. Costs money I hear. Instead I jumped parole, hitch-hiked to Texas and tried to make some working for a little company that cleaned out those big white oil tanks you see from the freeway. You unbolt a little side door, go in where it’s about 120º Fahrenheit, and shovel out the stinking sludge with a couple of cage lights to see by. Stick with that, you’re probably dead at thirty-five.”

“Restaurant work in Austin . . “

“Waited a few tables and then bought a forged i.d. from a Mexican so I could tend bar. Made a little money, bought an old truck, got a place and a girlfriend. You get used to Texas. Mucho trabajo, poco dinero.”

“Various jobs in the gas fields in North Dakota, misdemeanor arrests for fighting in bars . . ..”

“Girl friend split so I drove north to El Dorado to try my luck. Wanted a new girl friend really bad. I don’t seem to get along with people in small town bars.” The fat man shook his head and shuffled through the papers.

“Yes. The Punching Poet they called you. My detective was very amused by something a bartender in Fargo remembered you’d said after you knocked a fellow’s teeth out, something by Sir Walter Raleigh?”

“Yeah. ‘Who writes a history that follows too close on the heels of truth may haply have his teeth kicked out.’”

“And what provoked that, pray?”

“He said I was a drunk and a loser.” The fat man smiled at me for the first time.

“And then last month we locate you at age twenty-five in Paducah, Kentucky. Unemployed.”

“I was writing a novel. About the evil energy industry.”

“Really? I’ll watch for it. I think we’re about done.” He paused.“ I think the way you have lived has corroded your character. Now you have a chance to change yourself but I find that is rarely done. Do you plan to cash this inheritance out and take the first plane to Las Vegas?”

“Nah. I’m going to set a pitcher of ice tea on the front porch and spend my days mowing the lawn.”

He gave me a funny look and then collapsed in hysterical laughter. When he recovered he said, “You must tell me how that works out for you. Your grandfather and I were close. I will hope. Here are the keys to the house. You won’t really need them because some your disappointed relatives have contested the will in their own way. I’ll keep all the paperwork on file. Unless you’d like to change attorneys?”

“Why? You’re so likable.”

My grandfather had been a doctor in the suburbs north of Chicago, and a good one. He had worked long hours, invested his money, and owned a sizable but not ostentatious house on a leafy street. After my grandmother died, he hired a housekeeper and a cook to come on Mondays and filled the freezer with microwavable food. When I drove in from Kentucky in my beat-up old pickup with ten boxes of books and a cardboard suitcase, I decided to continue those arrangements now that I had a bank account.

In the back yard was a small guest house where his Eskimo lived. This was a little outside my experience, but by the age of twenty-five I'd learned to survive any surprise, no matter how unpleasant. And the Eskimo wasn't unpleasant, just a surprise. I had the cook bring him beef and fish every Monday which the Eskimo stored in a small freezer and cooked on a makeshift grill. We avoided each other and got along fine.

I found a handwritten journal among the papers strewn all over the floor of the study in front of the footprint of a big desk that had been against the wall. The relatives must have gone through the drawers and pitched everything out before they carried it off. Maybe they even found some cash, can't say.

The journal began with the year after Grandma died and contained details of hunting and fishing trips. He mentioned Grandma frequently, almost as if she were with him and he was talking to her. "Marie loves this vista." Not "would love." I began to know my grandfather through dead deer and dead fish. And in there was his history with the Eskimo.

Natkusiak is an old man, about five foot two, with shaggy gray hair and a prosthetic right leg. This he had received after my grandfather shot him while trying to unfreeze a rifle magazine on the north side of Baffin Island in midwinter. Why was my grandfather playing with guns above the Arctic Circle in January? Well, in the journal he said it was more sporting to hunt polar bears in the dark. Hmm. Grandpa.

After the accident, Grandpa radioed for a plane. Natkusiak carved seal oil lamps out of driftwood and my grandfather set them out in the minus forty degree weather to mark out a landing strip for the plane. Natkusiak was taken to a small hospital in Newfoundland where his leg was amputated. He then explained to Grandpa that he had no close family so he would starve if he went back to his village. My grandfather,

the stand-up guy, brought him home to America and had him fitted with an artificial leg. Natkusiak quickly mastered it. In summer he dressed in shorts, a t-shirt, and wore a reversed baseball cap which looked like a yarmulke on his shaggy white head. In winter he wore a heavy fur coat and sometimes slept out on the lawn in the snow.

He loved showing off his artificial leg to the neighborhood children. He would sit for hours under a tree and carve little wooden animals that he handed out, explaining the meaning of each one to the recipient child who would stand frozen under his intense gaze, bewildered by his fractured English. Naturally, they loved him.

I have mentioned a cook and a housekeeper but not a groundskeeper because there wasn't one. The Eskimo fell in love with the hand-pushed gasoline lawn mower with a twenty-two inch blade. He mowed the extensive grounds almost daily. Grandpa had hung a big clock on the porch to show him the time. At nine a.m. he could start, at five pm he had to finish. He would mow the lawn and then frequently go up the street and mow the lawns of neighbors. At first this had caused consternation. Usually the husbands were away at work and the wives were too intimidated to intervene, or as the bolder ones found, he was equally impervious to threats or entreaties. The woman who called the police? Well. . .

"Lady. He's mowing your lawn for nothing. And you want me to throw him in jail? I think I'll tell him where *I* live." The neighborhood adjusted. Grandpa replaced the lawnmowers as they wore out.

I had been in Grandpa's house about two months and was settling in. I had gotten a few pieces of thrift store furniture and kept my truck with patches of primer on it parked in the driveway in front of the closed garage door that concealed Grandpa's shiny geezermobile. The neighbors were slower in adjusting to me than they had been to the Eskimo but they confined themselves to hostile stares. At least they couldn't complain that the lawn wasn't mowed.

Then one afternoon as I was sitting in my boxer shorts watching a women's tennis match, the doorbell rang. It was not a cook or housekeeper day and I normally had no callers, so I went to the door as I was, expecting a salesman or someone serving a subpoena. Nope. It was Rhonda.

"Excuse me, are you Derrick Zurowsky?" The speaker was a short, muscular girl about my age, carrying a briefcase and wearing a small backpack. A bicycle was tipped over on the lawn.

"Yeah?"

"I'm Rhonda Rodgers. I'm an anthropology graduate student at the University of Illinois and I've been working on Inuit communities in Greenland and Northern Canada. I understand you have an Inuit gentleman living here?"

I looked at the bicycle. "U of Illinois? That's a long way to bike."

Irritation flashed across her face. "My mother lives up here. I'm staying with her while I'm writing my dissertation. The Inuit?"

"The Eskimo lives in the back."

"The correct term is Inuit. Do you think he'd talk to me?"

"Hnh. He talks to little kids so he'll probably talk to you. I don't hear the lawnmower so he'll be out back whittling. Give it a shot." We both turned away from the doorway like it was a zone of toxic gases. I went back to my television to watch the beautiful Russian girls and wonder if I should take up tennis.

A couple of hours elapsed and the endless wonderland of ESPN had now taken me to a golf course where high winds were troubling the stoic athletes and could occasionally be heard above the hushed whisper of the announcer. The doorbell rang again. I opened to Rhonda.

"May I come in? I wanted to talk to you for a minute about Natkusiak." I shrugged, waved her in and muted the television. She looked at my scarred table, painted chairs and the stuffed sofa with the stuffing leaking out . "What's with the old furniture? Hardly fits with the house."

"My relatives cleaned the place out when my grandfather died. Got all my grandmother's stuff. Weak front door lock and neighbors who didn't give a shit."

She looked back at the heavy expensive deadbolt with floor and upper jam pins. "That looks like a door from Fort Knox."

"I replaced it. It's to keep people I don't want in out."

She walked over to the two battered bookcases. My books are mostly crumbling paperbacks whose wear I feel in no way diminishes the dramas and ideas they contain.

She fingered a few spines. I have noticed that academic people are drawn to a bookshelf like poultry to a heap of corn. I don't like it. It feels like a stranger looking into my mind.

"What do you do for a living?" she asked. Jesus give me strength.

"Nothing right now. I just inherited this and moved here."

"So your a rentier."

"A What?"

"An economics term for someone who lives off rents and interest. The labor of others." My first impulse was to grab this little witch by her collar and throw her out the front door on top of her bicycle. But I'm not like that. Anymore. After many years of schooling on the care and maintenance of snide, obnoxious people who talk down to me.

"So you're a graduate student? Likely live on a scholarship - produce nothing people can eat? Not clothes, not housing, not transportation - what's the term in economics?" She glared at me.

"We increase knowledge about the ways people live and societies function, how they did it in the past, a guide to how it could be improved in the future. But I wouldn't expect you to understand or value that."

"Nope. But I understand the Enlightenment has been over for a couple hundred years and some people today can still make a living off it. And I understand you wanted to talk to me about the Eskimo?" I gave her my sweetest smile.

"Inuit." She paused. It was a pleasure to watch someone else visibly struggling to control their temper. "Do you have any idea how old he is?"

"Nope. Pretty old. Seventy maybe?"

"From the things he remembers he could be as old as ninety."

"No way! You ought to see that one-legged guy push a lawnmower around. He's bullshitting you."

"Has he been to see a doctor?"

"Never been sick so far as I know."

"He should be given a thorough physical. You're neglecting your responsibility."

I chuckled. “I imagine he’d live about three days after the American medical system got ahold of him. And he’s my grandfather’s deal, not mine. I’m just carrying on with what he was doing. It’s in his will. If he get’s sick, I’ll take him to the doctor. If he needs something, I’ll get it for him. Like I would if I’d come here and found a pit bull on a chain in the back yard.” For a second it was hard to tell if she were going to faint or destroy her laptop on my cranium. She blinked. She swallowed. But this girl had been in the field.

“He must be lonely here. Do you ever have him in for dinner?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because he doesn’t like what I eat and I don’t like what he eats and we can’t talk to each other and he has the whole damn neighborhood hypnotized into treating him like a treasured village mascot. He’s fine.” She turned for the door.

“I need to listen to these recordings. He’s a Baffin Islander and I’m best with the Greenland dialects. I’ll be back.”

“I’ll anticipate that. Rhonda Rodgers was it? I can remember railroad. Have a nice ride home. I’ll go check on the Eskimo and see if he’s still alive.”

“Inuit,” she spat. It’s amazing how fast fury can pedal a bicycle.

Now, for all that I hadn’t been so pissed off at anyone since a particularly unique conversation with my parole officer many years ago, she had set me to thinking and I wasn’t proud of myself for just playing with somebody’s temper. I had cleaned myself up; no alcohol or drugs in the house, but I had been chewing over the idea that I really couldn’t go on being relatively rich and sitting on my sofa in a dim room. I had to get something going. And I truly had been neglecting Natkusiak. He was hard for me to understand and since he seemed happy he was easy to ignore. Maybe he did need a medical checkup, and maybe he wanted some things but was too embarrassed to ask. So I went to the back yard.

Natkusiak was sitting in the shade with the blonde Woodson twins from up the street. He had just finished carving two identical seals that.

“The sea is the seal’s home. These make you strong and swift in water.”

Yeah, lucky call, swami. He mowed around the Woodson's pool and saw their pro swim coach talking them up to visiting prep school swim coaches and the kids were still only twelve years old. The two beautiful girls thanked him like they'd been blessed by the Buddha and walked away, bumping into one another as they compared their carvings. How does he do it? Actually, the carvings had a surprising grace and force for something whittled with a jack knife - I couldn't tell them apart.

I had not been totally neglectful. When I had seen the scope of his wood carving craziness - cutting up dead beech branches with a dull saw and shaping them up with a hatchet - I had ordered some Canadian spruce which I had read is the commonest driftwood in the Arctic, and had it cut into little blocks. He had taken them with a big smile.

He was sitting on a stump wearing his Igaaks. These were a knockoff of the traditional snow goggles of the Arctic, wooden eyeglasses with narrow slits to protect the eyes from glare off the snow and ice and prevent snow blindness. I had found them on a website advertising versions in stainless steel, colorful plastic, and other decorative styles mostly worn by rock bands, fashion models, and motorcycle gangs for their cool, mask-like effect. He loved the plain wooden pair I got him, but why was he wearing them in the shade? Impress the kids? That got me to thinking about the optical properties of slits and how all old people seem to need reading glasses. Have to get his eyes checked.

I sat down in front of him and kept a respectful silence. Then I asked him, "Did the talk with the woman go well?"

His eyes twinkled under his heavy white brows. He smiled and nodded. "She talks Greenland talk, Inuktitut. Smart. Good questions. Asked if I carve tupilaqs, monster-makers." He waved a finger at me. "No, no. Only animals and little people. Bring luck."

I nodded. "Good. With me she was . . ."I struggled to think what I wanted to say and the words he would understand . . ."loud."

He laughed and pulled at his wispy beard with his left hand and pointed the little knife at me with the right. "That woman is for you. You will have many children."

"What! I'd rather have a wolf chasing me around the house."

"You must tame her. But you. You want to beat her."

I was startled. It was as though he saw right into the bad me.

"We don't do that here," I muttered.

"Not in my village either. But weak men do it. Be strong. Find the good way." Jesus Christ. My flea-bitten Eskimo was turning out to be some combination of Ann Landers and the Dalai Lama. Scary guy. I had chased women in sleazy bars in Fargo and Bismarck. They all wanted my money. Now I was rich and I was chasing women in cocktail lounges in Chicago. They wore nicer clothes, higher heels, used fancier English - and wanted my money. Could this guy who lived on ice floes and ate seals raw actually know something I needed to know?

"So, if you don't beat them. . ." in this particular case an option I discarded with great regret . . ."what do you do?"

"When wolf mates with our dogs, babies are big, powerful, make good lead dogs for the sledge. But these babies are wild - fighters. You must tame them. Much work. Give them food. Pet them. Talk to them. Sleep beside them. Then they trust you. Then they help you, work with you."

I heaved up, thanked him and headed back home to think. While the analogy between dog training and girlfriend getting is not one I would dare air in the presence of any female I'd ever met, there was an idea here.

The next afternoon Rhonda was back. She rang the bell and I was fully dressed.

"I came to ask him a few more questions. Just thought I ought to check in." She was wary but the chip seemed to be off her shoulder.

"Yeah. He's around back. Say, I wanted to apologize for the other day. I was in a bad mood. I shouldn't have said those things about graduate students. Somebody really should talk to Natkusiak and find out what he knows before he's gone. And I do think something of him as a person."

She smiled. "I wasn't at my best that day either. Forget it."

"Well, a couple of things you said did get me thinking. I ought to get his eyes checked. See if he needs reading glasses, all that carving he does. Could you kind of broach that subject? Explain glasses to him? I'm not sure he'd understand me."

"Sure. Good idea." She went around back and I returned to the study. I thought about Rhonda and the Eskimo. Not that I was sure I liked her, mind you, but I had some new ideas I needed to try out, and actually, she was kind of cute. Two hours later the bell rang again. It came to my mind, *Talk to her.*

"How'd it go?" I asked.

"He's incredible. I'm completely worn out trying to take it all in. Thank God for recording."

"Come on in and sit down. Let me get you something. Tell me a little about what you're trying to get out of him." She looked at me gratefully and plopped down on my crappy sofa. "When you're up there you must be the only young white girl in about five hundred miles. Everybody probably wants to talk to you."

"Yeah, like the types with two foot long beards and the vocabulary of a mountain gorilla, and skinny Dr. Mengele anthropologists, and earnest save-the-planet geologists. The Inuit are mostly nice but I have to be so careful what I say." She looked up at me like a feisty terrier. "At least with you I can say any god damn thing I feel like."

That hit me funny and I could hardly stop laughing, which got her going too.

"Aw, tell me about Natkusiak."

"Well . . . he spent an hour explaining the correct way to build an igloo and its advantages over a tent, stuff we'd never think about because we've never been anyplace that is consistently fifty degrees below zero."

"Like?"

"Snow, with its trapped air, is the warmest insulation around, that's your friend. You cut your blocks out of snow of just the right consistency and lay them round and round to form an arched dome. The entrance is open but it's down in a dugout trench a few feet deep so the relatively warmer air inside stays trapped by the heavy cold air in the trench. After you've built it, you make a little fire of seal oil or driftwood and the warmth melts the surface layer inside while the intense cold outside causes it to immediately freeze, so you get an ice glazing inside. You knock a little hole in the roof to let the fumes of your fire and some the your body moisture escape. Elegant."

"Can't believe all that would be better than a tent you could set up in ten minutes."

"And get it blown down. The big problem is that moisture from your breath condenses on the super cold canvas and forms flakes that can fall down on you and your bag and melt, getting you wet. In the igloo, it condenses on the ice ceiling and runs down the walls. It's like being on another planet with different physics."

"Didn't you hear about all that when you were doing your field work?"

"Some of it, but a lot of the old ways are being lost. Snowmobiles, cell phones, t.v. - it's all changing. Natkusiak used to make long journeys out on the ice cap in winter with dogs and sledges he'd made from willow branches. They lived on seals out there."

"There are seals crawling around way out on an ice floe? What do they eat?"

"No, no. They live under the ice eating fish and shrimp. They chew breathing holes every few hundred yards that they're able to maintain, even when the ice gets up to six feet thick. They are cones several feet in diameter at the bottom with just a little hole of a couple inches at the top that gets covered with snow so they are hard for the bears to find. The dogs smell them, then the hunter puts a little marker like a soda straw straight up and down through the snow into the little hole and waits. When the seal comes up for air, the straw goes up and the hunter drives a harpoon into his head and a partner chops the hole big enough to pull the seal out. Totally gruesome, but you can live on nothing but seal meat and fat for months, three parts lean to one part fat. Talking to Natkusiak is like talking to someone pulled out of the Stone Age by a time machine." I looked up at the elaborate molding surrounding the coffered living room ceiling and knew exactly what she meant. *Give her a gift.* I fetched Grandpa's journal from the study.

"This is a journal my grandfather kept of all his fishing and hunting expeditions. His handwriting was really tough for me to figure out, so I've only read a few parts of it, mostly the parts about the trip that involved Natkusiak. But there was a little inscription in the front that I think Grandpa wrote." I had memorized the passage in its cribbed handwriting and recited it.

“Here - look to the Eskimo for food, for light, for shelter. Here - their gods rule.” I paused for effect. “I thought you might like to sit down with this. Grandpa spent a lot of time up there and he was no fool. You’ll read a lot of stuff about Marie, his wife. I think he went a little off his head when she died. He lived his ordinary doctor’s life around here and then every year he took a trip to some remote place. He writes this as though she’s there with him and he’s telling her things and she’s advising him. It got to me so much I could hardly read it. I typed out the parts about Natkusiak that I needed to see and it might speed you up like sort of a Rosetta Stone to help you with his micro-nutso handwriting. Got to say; can’t let this leave the house, but you’re welcome to use the study.” I had set up a card table with a laptop on it beside a filing cabinet, and bought a cheap office chair.

She was in there for two hours. When she finally came out she was shaking her head.

“That was some heavy stuff, his wife and all. One page was just Marie, Marie, Marie, maybe a couple hundred times. In the last part there was a lot about you.”

“Me! I only met him once on a trip back here when I was about six. My parents got killed and not one word from any relative. Not. One. Word.”

“Did your parents do something odd like change their names?”

I stared at her. “Yeah. Actually they did, to John and Mary Cabernet. Something about getting a better shot at the movies with more photoaudial names. Zurowsky, you know. You think . . .maybe, he never knew?”

“In the last few entries he tells Marie that his lawyer has solved the mystery of his daughter’s disappearance. And his grandson. They were about to find you just before he died.”

I put my head in my hands. “I always wanted to love my Grandpa and Grandma. When they didn’t come for me after Mom and Dad got killed, I got lost. I didn’t know what to think. Nobody was there. People were mean.”

She came over and put an arm around me. *Pet her.*

I turned and hugged her.

"You know, you were right when you more or less said I act like Natkusiak is just some dog I keep in the back yard. Way I grew up, people treated me that way. 'Did you forget to feed him yesterday? Again? Blankets are expensive. It's not that cold - makes him tough.' I want to do better than that, be better than that."

We held each other while a lawnmower chattered in the distance. The kitchen timer went off. I ran into the kitchen and tried to turn it off but it wouldn't quit. I knocked it on the counter a couple of times and then pitched it into the water in the sink. She had followed me. *Feed her.*

"I just cooked us dinner. Let's chow down." I had gotten a roast and some vegetables. Somehow, the cook's frozen dinners just didn't feel like the right touch. We were doing great justice to my roast and I was telling Rhonda about my new idea of opening a restaurant/bar downtown that I thought could succeed. A lot of work, but I'm used to that, I bragged.

"You know what?" I said, laughing at a memory. "I got a whole lot of big salmon filets for Natkusiak because I figured he'd like salmon and put them in his freezer. You know what he did? He set up a clothesline and hung them all out to dry in the sun, right there on the street. What are we gonna do with him?"

"Buy him a vegetarian cookbook?" We laughed. *Sleep beside her.*

It was getting dark so I went out and pulled her bicycle into the front room. When I came back in she smiled.