



Introduction

A Story to Invoke All Stories

FAR TO THE NORTH, there is a mystical place where the ice cracks like thunder and Bears wear coats that look like thick white frost. Whale and Walrus play in the waves, while White Fox and Raven scavenge the beach.[†]

There, in a snug stone-and-sod lodge on a rise overlooking the water, lives an ageless elder known as Bezhig (Paddles-Alone). Some say he lives by himself; however, he will tell you that he lives with his stories, and that they keep him good company.

On a winter's long night, the ancient storyteller's relations, who are of the White Bear clan, come to visit him and listen to his tales of the long-ago. His voice travels like words on the wind, because like the wind it sails in from places unknown, fans the fires, and then travels on to find the future. This happens to be one of those storytelling nights, so let us join Bezhig in his lodge.

One day before your parents were born, I walked out to the edge of the ice in front of the family Lodge to spear some Fish. I was a young Man with mate and Children, we were nearly out of food, and I was anxious to try out a new lure I had just made. "It is a lazy day," I thought to myself when I reached the Water, "I will take a nap and then I will fish. I am tired from trudging through the Snow; and besides, the Fish like to feed after the Water warms up from the midday Sun." I found a comfortable place to lie down, and the softly lapping Water soon lulled me to sleep.

"Where am I?" I gasped as I sprung to my feet and looked around frantically. When I fell asleep I was surrounded by a field of white, and now

[†] In keeping with the Native tradition of showing respect for all life, the names of specific plant, animal, and mineral entities are capitalized.



in every direction all I could see was blue—a Sea of blue and a Sky of blue—and I could not tell where one ended and the other began. That, and the tiny island of ice under my feet, rolling on the swells, caused me to sway so much that I no longer knew which way was up. I remember saying, “I feel dizzy ...” and then everything went black.

“Oooh, my head,” I moaned as I awoke. Struggling to get up on my knees, I reached up to find a gash across my forehead. “I must have fainted,” I realized, “and crashed down face-first.” Blood was splattered on the jagged ice.

“What sorcery is this that marooned me on this crumbling scrap of rotten ice?” I screamed up at Sky. “Why didn’t the Great Mother Water boom and shake, like She always does, to warn her Children when She is about to shed her skin of ice? Why has She forsaken me? Could I have slept through her thundering voice?” I wondered. “Impossible! Now I am in this caught like a tiny Fish in the jaws of a great hungry Whale.”

I drifted all the next day and into the next. There was not a Bird, nor a Seal, nor even a Fish swimming by—only Water and the Wind murmuring to the waves. I was warm in my white Wolf-skin parka and had good sweet ice for Water, yet I grew colder and colder because I had no food to stoke my inner Fire.

Early on the fourth morning I woke up, barely able to raise my head. My teeth clattered like shells rattling in a Basket. “I fear it is my time to die,” I lamented. “If it were intended for me alone, I would be at peace; however, my Children have no food, and my dear mate will kill herself trying to find some. Her aged parents will steal away naked into the night so that their furs and foodshares might keep the Children alive longer. When our clan mates next come to visit, they will find my family frozen to death, and they will say, ‘Bezhig is no good; he has abandoned them.’”

With no more need to live, I wailed to the setting Moon, then dragged my defeated flesh into a hollow in the ice and curled up. My last memory before I fell into a deep sleep was of an incessant Wind tearing at me and the ice around me. In my sleep I had the vague impression of a soft Snow falling and covering me like a warm fur.

Sometime in the night came a vision: Far in the distance I could see Great White Bear swimming from floe to floe. For four days she swam, gradually coming closer and closer, until she finally reached the floe that carried me. She was so gaunt and weary that she was barely able to drag herself up onto the ice, where she immediately scouted for a place to collapse.

My resting place must have looked like a comfortable nest, as she lay on top of me and was soon fast asleep. Had she any idea what lay beneath her, I’m sure she would have first filled her belly!

“Wake up!” I hollered inwardly to my sleeping body, but it could not hear me. “You are a fool,” I shouted, “you lay there feeling sorry for yourself while your family starves!” Still, my almost lifeless form would not move.

The Wind continued to howl above, and yet all I could hear under my heavy cover was a whisper. “Wait,” I cautioned myself, “Listen ... it’s a voice ...” It was an ancient voice, that of an Elder from my youth, saying just as he did so long ago, “Your bowl is half empty because your mind says it is. Listen to your heart and your bowl will become half full, and then you will be able to fill it the rest of the way.”

My ocean of rage cascaded from me like Water down a rapids. There before me stood my clan: Children, Elders, Sisters, Brothers. I could not tell whether they were Bear or Human, I simply knew intuitively that they were both. Among them stood Caribou, and Seal, and Wolverine, and hovering overhead, Falcon and Owl. “My Relations,” I whispered



softly, as tears filled my eyes. “I will live for love—I will live for you.”

The strong, musky smell of wet fur tickled my nose and shook me awake. At the same time Great Bear started to stir. “Nooo!” I screamed as I came to fully realize what lay on top of me. “I will not die!” In a flash I had slipped my knife from its sheath, forced it up through the Snow, and plunged it into the heart of the Bear.

Life-giving blood gushed down through the Snow and into my mouth, and between chokes I gulped it down. Immediately the Fire of life charged through me and I squeezed out from under the massive, limp body. Kneeling beside her, I opened my heart and it showered these words upon her: “Great Bear Spirit, this Man has walked into the icy jaws of death, and you have gifted him with a second life. His other life was for himself only, and he is glad that it has passed. His new life is for his People, and he is glad that it has come.”

I then cut out White Bear’s heart and held it in my hands as my tears washed over it. “You will live on within me,” I spoke, “and your strength and passion to serve others will continue to nourish my People. In the tradition of those who have walked before me, your heart will now become mine.”

I feasted upon the heart, wrapped myself in White Bear’s pelt, and slept soundly through the night. And yet I only got physical rest, as I dreamed on and on about White Bear swimming, swimming, swimming, far out on an endless ocean. For days nothing appeared on the horizon, though she still seemed to know where she was going.

“Of course,” I blurted out as I woke up to first light, “White Bear is a great swimmer; surely she can take me back to my People, because she is me—I am the White Bear!”

Right then I set myself to cleaning her broad curved ribs and lashing them together



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with sinew to form a framework. Over that I stretched her hide, tied it down, and soaked it with Bear oil to make it waterproof. From one of White Bear's broad front paws I fashioned a Paddle, and then I loaded the boat with meat and fat for my kin.

Before I pushed off, I bowed my head to the face of my tiny island of ice and forced these choked words: "Every time the ice thunders, this grateful Person will look out upon You, honored Mother Water, and his voice will rise in a Song of Thanks-giving. When he did not listen, he was shown how to listen. In dying, he has been given reason to live. When he despaired, he was given trust. In the alone of alone, he found a circle of love. The cursed Wind stole him away; the same Wind—the Blessing Wind—now whispers his way home."

* * *

My friend Nick Vander Puy is also like the wind—he comes in from a far-off place with stories of things unknown. Recently he came to harvest wild rice with my family; we gave him food and he gave us stories. He had heard the story of Bezhig and White Bear from a man who lived with Bezhig's people, the Yup'ik, on the western coast of Alaska.

Storytellers, like the wind, come softly

and forcefully, announced and unannounced, invited and scorned. Take for example, the story you were just given. How did it come to you? Did you expect it? Do you have any idea how it might affect you? Are you aware that, like the wind, these stories will travel through you and beyond you, because you are also a storyteller?

We are all storytellers, and life is our story. Whether or not you retell this tale of Bezhig, you will share the spirit of the story with those in your life, and you will pass that spirit on to the next generation. That is because you are part of the continuum that began even before our kind knew language, and will continue until the last person's final breath.

This book is a doorway to that continuum. When you turn the page you will step into another world: a sacred place where plants have spirits and animals speak and lead lives of purpose, just like humans. You will find yourself back in the time when listening to stories was considered a spiritual experience.

Part I of this book, which gives an understanding of story and storytelling, acts as a prelude to Part II—a feast of some of the world's most evocative and soul-touching stories. The whole book is a celebration of the magic of story and the mystique of the storyteller, so come and listen to the Whispers of the Ancients. ✨

