

Into the village of Nanuk

By Angus Cockney

Armed with skis, snowmobiles, a camera and a story from my grandfather, I perceived a truth about the great white bear.

My grandfather, Nugliak, was born in 1895 in the Mackenzie Delta region of the Northwest Territories. His life encompassed the transition from the ancient traditions of the hunt to the development of what we know as the modern Arctic.

Before he died in 1966, he wrote his memoirs. His stories were published and became a well-known book, *I, Nugliak*. One of the stories told an ancient tale about polar bears, nanuk, which I'll retell here to the best of memory.

"On the ice lived a band of polar bears. Inside an igloo, an older bear was telling a story. `A long time ago, when I was a youth, I had a narrow escape while hunting the One who-staggers (Man). The staggerer is a dangerous one. To catch you he sets after you those who-annoy (dogs). Their voices sound like hearty bursts of laughter, which steal all strength from our legs. They have marks above their eyes. They tire you, they bark, they bite you- you cannot get rid of them!`

A young cub listened to the old bear and said, " If ever I hunt man, I shall not let him catch me!" The old bear replied, `If you intend to hunt man, you'd better change your mind. Men are dangerous, I tell you. Besides, their scratchers (dogs) are fast runners and they will easily catch you. It would be child's play for them to do so.` The young cub retorted that if he ran with the wind, no being in the world would catch him.

The old bear rebuked him severely but the young cub went to try his system- run with the wind. One night while everyone was asleep, he left the igloo and disappeared into the darkness. All night long he walked on the thick edge of the ice separating him from the shore. Lo and behold he came across footprints; footprints belonging to the staggerer, man's footprints. He was hungry and looked for an aglu, the breathing hole of a seal. He found one. He lay in wait and noticed a strong wind was blowing.

Then he heard a noise behind him and turned around. Ah yes! The old bear was right. Here was one of the scratchers. The dog was almost upon him. The cub scented the direction of the wind and began to run with it. But no matter how fast he ran, the dog outran him in a few seconds. The bear felt sharp teeth enter his rump and this forced him to sit down. Other dogs were soon upon him. His legs grew weak- it was impossible to flee.

At that moment he looked around him and, as in the old bear's story, he saw him coming, the staggerer- a man. He was walking erect and looked like he was about to fall. He was getting closer and closer. The young cub wanted to run away. He struggled to escape but the dogs held on to him.

The man came close and stuck a long thin wooden rod into his body. The cub's strength abandoned him and he could move no longer. Yet he was aware of everything around him. He was skinned, cut in pieces and carried away. The man brought the cub to his home and his wife began to cook him. Smoke rose and the cub inhaled the odour. Four days he stayed there. As an offering, an Eskimo gimlet as well as its pivot, the knucklebone of the bearded seal, had been laid beside him.

The young bear took them and left, as a spirit, for the place he had come from. When he returned to the igloo, he met the old bear. The young cub saw too that the old bear was wearing, as a necklace, the gimlet he had received as a gift. The young cub said, 'The men made me breathe the odour of soft wood and smoke.' The old bear replied, 'As you were told and you now realize, man is dangerous.'

'It was those who-annoy- their loud laughter stripped the strength from my legs.'

Then the spirit of the cub left for the place where dead bears have their own village far off on the ice of the ocean."

Thus is the Inuit story of the bear's perspective on this world.

As an Inuk now living in Alberta's Bow Valley, I feel compelled to share my thoughts on the one we call nanuk. I have two stories: the first is from my journey to the North Pole in 1989. The second one is from my excursion out on the polar ice to film the great nanuk.

First, I want to say that I grew up somewhat removed from my Inuit culture. Unlike my grandfather, Nugliak, I did not fully experience life in continual co-existence with the great white bear and its incredible Arctic environment. Instead, I went to school at an early age. Thus, these stories are significant to me.

The first story took place in March 1989 on the northern tip of Ellesmere Island as my travelling companions and I prepared to take the first strides in a ski trip to the geographical North Pole.

The air temperature was freezing: -55°C, typical for this time of year. There was a slight breeze. Although it made the air feel colder, it was a good thing. A stronger wind would have damaged our confidence in this environment. Consequently, the state of affairs looked relatively positive.

There were eight of us on the expedition and, before we could start, we had to line up for yet another photo-op. Sponsor's orders. I was anxious to get on the ice. I paused and looked due north. For the next two months, that would be our direction. I knew there would be obstacles ahead: pressure ridges, open water, frostbite, exhaustion- even each other. But as an Inuk, I was well aware of another concern, something alive- nanuk.

With the photos over, we set off along a slight downward slope to the sea ice. As our packs were heavy and we pulled sleds, we must have looked clumsy. I could imagine the sight from nanuk's perspective. We were truly the ones who-staggered.

Three days passed. It was cold, but the sky remained clear and the air still. It was pristine. The wind had formed beautiful patterns in the snowdrifts. The textures of the snow were diverse with old and new ice, some clear and some opaque. The environment looked void of life, something like the view one has of the lunar Sea of Tranquility. It was incredibly cold: 53 below zero and still no sign of nanuk.

As we travelled, I often thought of the comforts of home. I imagined a warm place, a couch, a television, and a glass of wine. Then we came across tracks. The sight was incredible. It was unbelievable to think that something could live out here. Yet, unlike us-who-stagger, the bear's tracks seem to indicate casual gait. There was no signs of rush or hurry. The creature moved nonchalantly. It was just passing through. The tracks went west and disappeared over the snow bank. My thoughts of home and comfort disappeared. At that moment, there was no place else I would rather have been. I was not aware of myself, but of something else. It seemed right. I staggered on.

After skiing 1200 kilometres, we finally reached the Pole. We came across bear tracks on many occasions. But even after covering all the distance, we did not see nanuk. I wondered how many times he saw us. There was not one day that passed that I was unaware of the great white bear. I looked to my left and right constantly, hoping to see him. In the end, nanuk was only a part of my imagination. Like my grandfather's story, maybe most young cubs heed the old bear's advice- stay clear of the one-who-staggers. He is dangerous.

The second story takes place during a time known in the Inuit language as Kriblakvik: the moon for April when the top snow begins to sparkle with the colours of the rainbow. It's a beautiful time. The colours and the light are evidence that sun's heat is beginning to melt the snow, even though the air temperature remains cold.

Once again, we were in the icy environment of nanuk, an area just south of the small town of Resolute in the High Arctic of Nunavut. The local Inuit regarded this area as prime polar bear habitat. Yet, like my experience of skiing to the North Pole, the region seemed void of life.

I was on assignment for the Government of the Northwest Territories to film the polar bear. This time I was travelling by snowmobile with two Inuit guides. Unlike me, they were experienced with snowmachines and handled them like confident athletes. Their affinity with this cold environment was also evident. This was a place they really wanted to be. You could see the significance and the value they placed on the environment on their faces.

Like the hunter in my grandfather's story, we also travelled with scratchers, or those-who-annoy, a pair of large Eskimo dogs. The dogs were also well adapted to the cold. They belonged here and seemed to know their reason for existence.

We set up base camp and spent the next few days in search of nanuk. We found tracks everywhere and my companions were well-schooled in deciphering their meanings. They could tell the difference between tracks that were two days old and a week old. They could determine whether the bear was male or female, and if it was male, how many cubs she was travelling with. But even though we were in prime bear habitat, fresh tracks eluded us. It seemed as though they were staying clear of the one-who-staggers and his scratchers.

One day we set up on top of a pressure ridge. These ridges form when ice floes collide and rise up. They can reach heights of up to 10 metres and are an excellent perch from which to scan the horizon while you wait to see what you are looking for.

In this environment waiting is not a waste of time. It is a simple and necessary act of patience. Soon, on the nice clear day with snow sparking with rainbow colours, we saw two specks hovering on the horizon. They were ravens, the cunning scavenger of the Arctic. Perhaps a bear had killed a seal and left morsels of food behind for these hardy birds. Perhaps nanuk was nearby.

We moved forward on our snowmachines and carefully approached the scene from downwind. If there was a bear in the vicinity, we didn't want it to detect us first. When we got to within a few hundred metres of the scene, we throttled down and turned off the machines. We climbed a ridge and saw the two ravens. We kept the dogs on their leashes. We wouldn't release those-who-annoy until we knew a bear was present.

As we got closer, we could see the ravens were indeed scavenging the carcass of a seal. There wasn't much of it left. It had been reduced to bones with a little flesh. Its excavated lair was not far off. My guides figured it was killed a day or so earlier.

With tracks as the only sign of nanuk, the great white bear remained part of my imagination. I surveyed the scene. The bear must have had an incredible sense of smell. To me, this High Arctic realm remained void of life. Yet the bear had located the breathing hole of the

seal, waited, and then pounced on its unsuspecting prey. Amazing. But I was missing film of the bear.

A day later, on our way back to the base camp, we came across huge tracks, certainly those of a big male. The tracks had the familiar sweeping pattern caused by the bear's lazy gait and the dragging of its long guard hairs. They looked quite fresh. My guides tested the sides of the tracks for softness. Yes, indeed. We looked at each other, but said nothing. We didn't have to. We smiled at each other and knew, as if telepathically, that these were the tracks we should pursue.

It had already been a long day expectation restored our reserves of energy. Were the pictures in my imagination about to become reality? I looked at the dogs. They too seemed to sense nanuk. Was this their chance to annoy?

We followed the tracks to a relatively flat expanse of ice. The sun was low on the horizon and it cast warm shades of orange and red. There was no wind. We stopped and my guides pulled out their binoculars. This was a good place to scan the horizon. I didn't have binoculars, but something far off to the left caught my eye. I quickly set up the camera and zoomed in with the lens. Yes, indeed, there he was. He was walking like he the king of this icy sea. With his lumbering gait, it was obvious he hadn't detected us.

I quickly packed the camera and sped off without telling my guides. They could certainly know my intentions.

In the past few days I had gained experience on the snowmobile and was now in full throttle, skipping and bouncing off the snow and ice. It didn't me long before I was onto my bear. He was incredibly big, a three-, maybe four-metre master of the Arctic.

I drove parallel to him for a while. He didn't seem too concerned with my presence. Suddenly he stopped. My heart was pounding, but I kept calm and moved slowly, keeping about 100 metres between us. With the snowmobile idling, I quickly set up the camera. For two minutes, I was alone with nanuk. My imagination was now reality.

The bear's fur had a tinge of yellow reflected from the sun's rays. His breathing seemed normal, with no sign of distress. Its vapour quickly disappeared in the dry cold air. I was getting incredible shots. As I zoomed in for a close-up, I wondered what this loner thought of my company. I could see the others, my guides coming fast and I believed the bear sensed their impending company. The dogs were barking. I wondered if my bear was mindful of the old bear's story of the one-who-staggers with their scratchers.

The bear began digging down in the snowdrift. His powerful paws clawed into a metre of cemented snow in just a few seconds. Soon the dogs were onto him. They scratched and bit his rump. Like the old bear said in the story, the dogs certainly were those-who-annoy. They were relentless in their barking. Yes, indeed, it did sound like hearty bursts of laughter.

The bear wanted to escape but couldn't. It began pounding hard on the sea ice. He wanted to escape into the water. Even with his incredible strength, he could not break through the ice. The scratchers, meanwhile, were agile and kept the bear at bay.

One of my guides approached the bear. With the ice and crusty snow, he fought, at times, to keep his balance. Just like my grandfather's story, "he was walking erect and looked like he was about to fall." This time, however, the staggerer had a different plan for the bear. He had not come to "stick a long this wooden rod into his body."

My guide yelled at the dogs and commanded to back off. They did. There was no need to harass the bear. The dogs were leashed up again.

With dogs present, we had shut down the snowmachines. I don't think my guides were as awestruck by the scene as I was. They sat and enjoyed their never-ending puffs on cigarettes while I continued rolling film. The bear had calmed down and despite our presence acted more naturally. Soon he was on his way and I'm sure he wanted nothing to do with man. Occasionally he looked back at us, probably grateful and relieved to be free of those-who-annoy and the staggers.

After a while, the bear left us. I thought about my grandfather's story. It seemed as though he was a spirit who had moved to that great village of nanuk somewhere far off the ice of the ocean.