

## Rituals

The vibrant shades of red that creep into the leaves in fall here always remind me of the rocky berry-filled hills surrounding Lake Harbour in August, when the first hints of frost are felt. Almost overnight the lush green hills change to vivid burgundy-red. I soon discovered that this was the signal to the women and children of the community to start the trek up into the patches for hours of relaxing picking.

The day after my arrival to this remote Arctic town, I was immersed in self-pity since I had left the sandy beaches of Prince Edward Island begrudgingly. My husband, Ivan, had accepted a teaching job here and we both felt it would be an interesting experience to live in the north. Looking out of my front window onto the barren rocky hills surrounding us, though, I couldn't feel any of the romance we had imagined it would have. A knock at the door was a welcome interruption from my thoughts and, upon opening it, it revealed a young Inuit woman. She introduced herself, in perfect English, as Peesee and asked me if I would like to go berry-picking. I gratefully accepted and she said she would come by for me the next morning.

Peesee arrived shortly after sun-up with a knapsack of bannock, a thermos of tea, some buckets, and fishing gear. Trailing behind her were two little girls, one with short black locks and the other with long braids to her knees. They both smiled at me with toothless grins as Peesee introduced them to me as Tai, her niece, and Ooloosie, her sister, respectively. Their eyes wandered towards my St. Bernard, Alpie, and Peesee informed me of their fascination with him. He apparently was the topic of conversation among the children since they had never seen one before. I suggested we

take him with us and met squeals of approval from the girls. It was apparent that they had accomplished their mission!

We headed out to meet the rest of the women and children at the Hudson's Bay store, since it was in the centre of town. On our way there, Peesee told me that she taught grade one. Having spent time in southern Canada, she had perfected her English to much beyond the level of anyone else in town. She mentioned the criticism she was subject to from some of the Elders in town. She felt it was important for the children to be given the same opportunities as southern people and so she continued to encourage English in the community. I could feel the inner turmoil she was having as she spoke, and so was not surprised when the conversation ended abruptly.

As we approached the Bay, I saw three women and six children awaiting our arrival. Peesee introduced the women to me as the children patted Alphie, and then we began our hike on the narrow sandy trail to the berries. It wound up the mountain behind us and could send a child tumbling down the side of the hill in a minute if they were not sure-footed. These children had no problem with it, though, since they were carried over this glacial landform from birth and had hiked it from the time they could walk. They ran ahead and played among the white painted rocks that had been strategically placed on the hill at the turn of the century by the original Hudson's Bay settlers. In bold white letters you could read H B C 1910, as if signifying when this tiny northern settlement had been conquered. It somehow seemed appropriate to me that the children stepped on these white symbols and periodically shifted them and rearranged them.

When we reunited with the children, laughter and chatter filled the otherwise silent environment. The children chased Alphie while I attempted to communicate with some of the unilingual Inuit women. That was very

entertaining, and most of the time was spent laughing, which seemed to be a preferred universal language.

As we rounded the corner of the Bay hill, the trail took a steep drop into a boulder and seaweed-filled tidal bed. Here, Peesee told me, fifty-foot ocean tides spilled intermittently. Today, the remnants of the flooding left clear, cold puddles behind for Alphie to play in, while we carefully stepped from rock to rock avoiding the slippery moss-covered ones in case we should fall. The environment was too harsh, even on those first fall days, to spend more than a few minutes in wet clothing without risking illness. Warnings were given in Inuktitut by the women, so even the youngest of our clan was careful not to get wet in fear of being sent home. Once this obstacle course was completed, we were in a lichen meadow that led us to a number of summits that surrounded us. The one that the women preferred was the summit named Inukshuk Mountain. It was topped by a stone constructed landmark in the shape of an Inuk or man, more commonly known as an inukshuk. A well packed caribou trail wound gently from the inukshuk to the meadow in which we stood, giving the illusion of once having been a stream trickling down the side of the mountain. The caribou abandoned this trail in summer, Peesee said, since it was well-travelled by hikers and three-wheelers alike, neither of which they are too fond. The most common wildlife we saw as we hiked this trail were "siksiks", which are a northern relative of the prairie dog. They scampered around playing hide and seek with us beneath the rocks while chattering incessantly. Alphie was unable to silence them, but trying to gave him an enjoyable diversion. Periodically Alphie would catch the scent of a hare and head off in its direction, revealing its location to us only once the well-camouflaged ball of fur hopped away. The hunting skills of this domesticated hound were not well-

honed and so we were not faced with the unpleasant task of skinning out an Arctic hare. I soon accepted that they were just there for our visual enjoyment, as I was not able to even photograph one.

Once we reached the top of the hill, we looked down the valley at the small settlement of pre-fabricated houses nestled in among the rocks and opening out onto the sparkling bay. Everyone expressed the feeling of freedom they felt being out of town and back on the hills. Peesee explained to me that it was not so long ago that these ladies lived on the land and being out here felt more like home than in town.

Before reaching the berry patch, we crossed an old mica pit where all of the children hunted for chunks of the shiny mineral to fill their pockets. Peesee said it would be used in school for art projects or in play where it would acquire magical qualities befitting its appearance. Just beyond the mica lay the hills of clustered blue-black berries. Alphie ran ahead and reached the patch before us. He found the most succulent patch to plunk himself down in, where he contentedly stayed, munching on his find. We spread out over the hill, like ants do, seeking out an area to be carefully cleaned of berries. Before getting into any serious picking though, we sampled the goods, as a small reward for our efforts in arriving at our destination.

The rest of the afternoon we spent talking, laughing and picking. As the sun acquired more heat, clothing was stripped off and laid aside for the cool of the evening. Some of the children rolled and bounced down the hill, as though the rays of the sun had energized them. Others curled up on the piles of clothing to bask in the sun as a kitten does, contentedly purring.

Once our buckets were full, we placed them along the trail for our return journey to town. One of the ladies suggested we head to a further

destination just beyond the mountain to try catching some fish. Descending the north side, we came upon a glistening body of clear green water that, Peesee mentioned, had long ago been named Lost Lake. Here, we joined the ravens, seagulls and peregrine falcons in their competition for the rose-coloured flesh of the Arctic char. They apparently were partial to shrimp and corn kernels, so the ladies had an ample supply of both of these delicacies with them. I wondered how this Arctic fish had acquired such a specific and exotic palate, but if it meant fresh fish for supper, I would try anything. The lake was only about one hundred metres long but it was quite deep, so our gear consisted of fishing rods with a lot of line, hooks, bait and lead weights. We all scrambled to get a comfortable spot around the lake and patiently awaited the first sign of life beneath the glistening surface. At times the quiet became deafening, as even the children were silent in tense anticipation of the first catch. Over and over again the lines were cast out, making a soft plunking sound as the lead sinkers broke the reflective surface of the lake. Rings of water emanated from the centre until they also blended into the calm. Then the only sound I could hear was the steady hum of the lines being reeled in, in hopes of luring the trout towards the fatal bait.

Oolooosie, Peesee's sister, was the first person to catch a fish. She was amply rewarded for her efforts, as everyone rushed towards her to watch until the shiny scales of the char could be seen just beneath the surface of the water. She pulled it into shore to be sized and admired by all of us. Fortunately, it was not smaller than fifteen centimetres, so it was not released to be caught the following season. Once we had all congratulated her, we went back to fishing. As the air cooled down and we all had at least one fish to bring home, we decided to head back to town.

The return home after this full day on the hills was welcomed with a sense of regret. I began to feel the freedom that the other women felt. Each step we took would bring us closer to an artificial environment that was strange to these northern nomadic people and would become stranger to me, a southern transplant, the longer I stayed here.

Descending Inukshuk mountain, a fatigued silence overtook us, as all of our concentration was needed to place one foot in front of the next without stumbling. Some of the smaller children were carried on their mothers' backs, their bronzed faces peaceful as they slept to the rhythm of our pace. The older children were subdued and periodically one would complain about being tired of walking but would soon resume the pace with a bit of encouragement. Soon we were back in town and, after brief goodbyes, we went to our homes.

This was the first of many hikes we took up into the hills surrounding Lake Harbour. It is one of the most memorable, though, since it was my introduction to the people of the north and a different way of life.

*This is much better. It's greatly improved my personality the piece. You still need to do more about varying the length + tempo of your sentences.*

*B+*