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End Times for Ruby

We were at the beach sober for once, not even tipsy, down past where the last fall storm had eaten the road and cut deep into tundra. It was out of the safety zone set by Fish and Game and we were unarmed, as usual. I was watching the gray waves so tall and roaring Ruby's yell reached my ears like a distant seagull cry. When I looked over her mouth was wide open, both hands frozen halfway to her lips.

The bear was slouching toward us. Fifty feet away and it stank of rotten meat. It had no blubber, all rib bones and dirty white fur from wandering on land where it didn't belong. In its deep-set eyes, the angle of the weaving, snaky head as it sniffed the air—they can detect you from a hundred miles off if you're upwind—I saw the moment it decided we were food ...

This is what you probably expect in a northern story, but not what happened next. I didn't save Ruby's life like the Canadian who pummeled and kicked the *nanuq* as it tried to eat her baby, nor did gun-toting estranged fathers or star-crossed lovers arrive at the last second in a redemption; we had no fathers or lovers. Nor did we open the dead bear to find the remains of a missing classmate.

And I saw Ruby nearly give herself to it.

The day before at the hospital they'd left me alone with her and pulled the curtain, which made me nervous. Was it a deathbed request? Her life force was so powerful she'd never be able to snuff it out with her methods, these days when even ten-year-old girls used guns or ropes.

She'd called for me, no one else, as if I held the answers. The traditional healer on payroll had visited and apparently did not hold the answers.

"Your report, Agent X?" Ruby asked.

"All is chaos, as usual, Sir." My voice quavered like I was the one who had nearly crossed over.

"Climate chaos."

"Yes Sir, pack ice in record retreat. And post-carbon famine. The locals are restless; they sense trouble."

"Starving people sense more than 'trouble'." Ruby chuckled, trying to make it sound evil but it split her dry lip, chapped from the tube they stuck down her esophagus.

The first time we partied, the day I met her, we were also getting our first periods. Gas was cheaper and plentiful, so no one even locked up their tanks and you could walk up the beach with a can. Sniff, bleed, howl at the midnight sun, chase the rising waves to spite the old ladies and their warning to never tease the ocean. Well, it was already so angry it took all the fish camps. What more could *we* do to arouse it?

But we grew up and Ruby had moved on from our childish huffing. Her hair fanned on the pillow like black kelp on white sand but there was puke in it. Her eyes looked flat. A drowned mermaid. I thought of the old myth, the orphan who sank to the bottom of the sea and turned into a goddess of death. Death, life, rebirth, all the animals and humans at her mercy.

"And your report for Ugungoraseok clan?" she asked.

"All as expected. Transition culture, so ... you know. The usual."

"Ah. Blackouts? Diabetes. Primary hunter lost. Oh wait, how can you have diabetes in a famine?" Ruby frowned.

"They're worried about you!" I blurted, mad at our game of Transition Town scenario—that is, transition from animist hunter-gatherer, not the transition town in the UK trying to live without petroleum. Well, they were doing that here too, one generation into oil, and suddenly, "the cliff." Soon she would do Shadow Government with plans for Total Spectrum Domination. Or she would start the dying android scene we play-acted in Arctic variations, taking turns being the exterminator, but she made me take that role most because I was the oppressor race: *You have no idea of the things that I have seen with these eyes ... I ... I have seen herds of lemmings a thousand strong ...*

"You told me you were babysitting!" I said. She turned her head away. Ruby Ugungoraseok. Her name was for "ruby sand," the red deposit on northern beaches that signifies the presence of gold. I smelled her sour breath, whiskey still coming out her pores. "Just tell me what's going on," I muttered.

"Can't tell white man with forked tongue."

"Shut up! Just stop it and promise—" My eyes were leaking tears, horrifyingly, and her eyes grew scared, shifting away, stones in a creek. I

got control, sucking the outburst back in, the words you can't say up here unless you're fuckface and no one will remember, dangerous words like a storm surge when black water rushes in, swallowing, flooding, caving in, your house teetering on the edge.

"They saw more polar bears yesterday," I said. "Eleven up on Iron River."

"*Izhigii*. They ate a girl in Chukotka."

"I know." Fifty miles across Bering Strait—an easy swim for them—and stranded up and down our coast looking for fat and not finding it. They had replaced grizzlies as the bogeyman for Ruby and me on our walks out of town. Ruby's family was too poor for a truck, four-wheeler, and bear gun; mine was too Outsider and green.

"He ate her all the way down to the bones in seconds flat. Bad way to lose weight."

"How sweet an Arctic tale," I said. We'd just rented that tear-jerker with the baby animals, double feature with *The 11th Hour*. In our giggling judgment Leo was getting old and teacher-like. There were elders at Ruby's cabin, sitting on beds and on the floor. They watched both shows as silent as ice, faces still, no joking like they usually did. I stopped snickering and was afraid to breathe. They didn't need a movie from Outside to tell them things were going down. And they were no backwater innocents. They had just been to Greenland, banding together with circumpolar activists to sue the government over climate change. It would not do to tell them riding in planes all over the place was a big factor. Only Ruby could be mouthy like that, disrespecting. I had to be ten times as humble.

Someone murmured "*End Times*," in English. In the discreet local way they looked at me without looking, like I was to blame, and it made me blush. I cared more about the cute cub than about them—was that their accusation? And yet they pitied the cub too.

An uncle brought in a *nanuq* and for three days we all scraped the hide that filled the cabin, huge, white, and its head watching us so scary. The odor made me gag. We got it ready for the taxidermist; this one was going Outside for big bucks.

Ruby's mom was lecturing softly, training me, "Your people say we should wear furs like old times, like a museum, then they say we are immoral to wear furs. Why can't they mind their own business?" I looked down, as Ruby had taught me—was she smirking from her side of the bearskin? Later she would apologize.

"This will buy us clothes and fuel, and dentures, Internet, all kinds of things. We are so thankful for him to let us." The mother had bowed her head to her moon-shaped knife, like she was in church.

"You know what Kafka said: if it is a contest between you and a bear, bet on the bear." Ruby sat up in bed. "I want to see one alive!" She made as if to get dressed.

She had a goal then, I saw it in her eyes. She would find a bear and I'd go with her. There was an alert out. They warned people, but I right away said okay. Wasn't it a good sign for her to have a plan? Outside the hospital window in a pond, the healing view, the loons and wild ducks mated up in a flurry of wings and things seemed better.

We'd been through so much together. Once, we woke up after a party to find come in our crotches, dried on our thighs, and I stared at her dumbstruck face while she did the same to mine. We'd been used, but we could not remember. Ruby thought it was the same guy, "an equal opportunist." Maybe a cop, someone's father. I still had no clue about anything here, though my mother was an anthropological expert. We took the test together at the clinic with the same mean nurse. Maybe she'd have been nicer if we said it was rape. But we could not say it.

Outside City Hall we marched in the winter peace march we organized online. It was only us. Two white women administrators shuffling by cast looks from deep in their parka hoods and we heard a muttered *right on*.

"We're for peace," Ruby explained the absence of local interest. "My people can always tell liars, and we know everything about you in our land is a conspiracy, so why not the rest of the world? But we are a non-confronting people. It's a crime to tell others what to do."

A crime except when elders told *us* what to do. Ruby's uncle pulled up in his truck at the coldest part of the vigil when the moon was looking cruel and my eyelashes stuck together. So much for Arctic warming.

"You girls go on home now. You don't know economics. You got a nice warm house because of that invasion."

He was a vet and a member of two Native corporations. Ruby said the "sustainable" corporation wanted the Indigenous to live underground in pre-contact sod huts, no carbon footprint, and they would banish me. But the "exploiting" one promoted oil drilling on every coast and had a factory overseas that made body bags. They'd build a nuclear reactor.

Now Ruby and I saluted whenever we saw his truck. We saluted at every mud-splattered tour bus rumbling through town with the pale faces in the windows. When we were younger it was old ones from Asia

and the Midwest, and Ruby would pretend to be retarded with me as her exasperated caretaker. We'd run after the fake summer dog team with the sled on wheels, we'd bug them at the fake gold panning, where they wore orange nylon parkas. "Let's show them the authenticity of adolescence," said Ruby.

But tourists changed, and they grew harder to tease. They looked askance at us like we were spoiling their view of nature. We couldn't believe all the new, but soiled, men's underpants we found stashed on the tundra—thirty pairs where European ecotourists had camped. They didn't want to wash them in the creek. But birders complained about seeing Pampers at ancient campsites. The difference was the outsiders were sneaky.

"Whites are so hypocritical," said Ruby.

"Am I?" I hated it when I blushed.

Ruby smiled gently, patting my hand. "You have learned great wisdom, my child."

She made me go with her to crash an international shaman conference at the Center. They were old white ladies with factory drums, led by a real Russian Eskimo. "I am the town *angutkoq*," Ruby told them, trying to make her eyes spooky, "I am being trained by my grandmother." They looked so respectful, but also somewhat doubtful. We hurried away, giggling.

We visited her great-grandmother with tithes of porcupine or ptarmigan, and listened to prophecies of End Times. Just as we had before, human kind would go down again, except for a few who knew how to share. Evildoers would drown or die in battle. The animals would get too mad and leave forever, or tear the humans apart. End Times were coming, they were already here. Watch for the signs.

In school we learned Native food was better for your health, omega threes, but it was so full of toxins it was hazardous waste. We wondered if a Native diet was Atkins. Our asses were getting fat. Somehow we got fatter after the night with the opportunist. We tried being vegan, for a day or two. We hiked out to the hills and gorged on berries, ran a white musher's dogs when he was too lazy. Once we released a snowy owl from a trap though that was a sin, since it had volunteered itself as someone's dinner.

On boring blizzard nights, Ruby's mom had us cut seals and sew skin iPod and cell phone cases to sell on eBay. She taught us kindly in the old way, without many words. Her family were refugees after storm surges destroyed their village. That was where Ruby got so used to outsiders, in the form of reporters, TV crews, politicians, and celebrities all wanting

a piece of her disaster as history's first global warming victim. Her dad got fewer and fewer seals on the thinning and receding ice—the sea was growing bald of ice—and gas for his Evinrude and snogo got too expensive, until at last he broke through the ice to the cold sea, and they had no more primary hunter.

She taught me to not say goodbye, or knock on doors. She taught me never to look in the old people's eyes, or hers for too long. Raise my eyebrows for "yes." Don't argue (only Ruby could). And hide to read books, because it is "mean" to the others (going online was okay though). Assimilate. And so I got along better and became somewhat more likeable.

We roamed and picked flowers, and drank from ponds until a kid died that way from hazardous waste stashed there in the Cold War. After graduation we'd do haz-mat cleanup in white suits, or take core samples of the permafrost to see how far down it had melted. We could be welders on the new gas pipeline, build the new tunnel to Russia, drive a bulldozer for the new open-pit gold mines. Or be Fish and Game with semi-automatics to shoot poachers if they gave any trouble—but they might be Ruby's cousins. Patrol the pipeline for Homeland Security, learn Arabic for when terrorists came on Zodiacs. Or join up or get drafted, drive convoys. Build Ruby's mom a Habitat for Humanity dwelling. Cultivate stinkweed for absinthe, hemp for fuel. We could even be extras or work on the sets for all the climate change film projects here. Although he never got paid, Ruby's cousin had built the set for a movie in which a white man—with just karate—saved everyone from the oil companies.

As long as we were together. There were so many possibilities until you actually graduated.

We ended up as part-time maids in the hotel by the new mini-mall. It had fake castle spires and already sagged from the melting land so you felt off-kilter, like with sea legs. We cleaned up tourist come from bedposts and carpets, and puke made of steakhouse dinners. They pointed their fingers at Natives drunk downtown, Ruby's uncles, cousins, sometimes even Ruby, but what was the difference? Just the cash to party in a fancy room instead of outdoors ...

The *nanuq* fell—almost gently, easing down to the sand where sea water washed the blood away. The Fish and Game agent waited a time, watching for life, then gave us a raised eyebrow look—*I told you so*— and strode to his truck and put his gun back on the rack. That was it.

Down South people imagine all kinds of wildlife up here, but if you can't get out in the country you never see creatures, and hunters go for days with no luck. Or we see them already dead, and dead animals mean it's time for girls to get to work. But we weren't going to cut up this one; I don't know who got the fur or if anyone wanted it in such poor condition.

We saw the bear fall, executed for entering the safety zone. When it was clear it would never rise again, Ruby went to the body and stared down. The wind rose bitter from the sea. She averted her eyes and I remembered it once was forbidden for a woman to look. The hunter used to sever the head and leave it away on the ice so the soul could not get revenge. And you couldn't say its name. For a second, when the bear was coming for us, Ruby seemed to step toward it, like she was making some kind of offer, like she was still not for this world and the *nanuq* was going to help her leave it.

She stooped and reached out, almost but not quite touching the giant black-clawed pad that could have taken off her head. Tears gushed out of her, amazing me. Ruby crying. Her lips formed words unheard in the drum of the surf and wind, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."