

## The Walrus Tusk

The Sallirmiut, an Inuit island tribe of what is now Nova Scotia, was self-reliant and, for many years, wanted for little. Each year a seal hunt was held after whelping. After a week or so of hunting, there were months and months of work skinning seals, preparing meat, rendering fat, and conditioning sinew and skins. After this work was done, the darkest winter days arrived, and inside work began. Everyone cut skins and pieced them into mukluks and parkas, using gut and sinew as thread. The older men made fine needles from seal teeth and bone; the stronger men shaped bone into flensing tools and barbed harpoon points. Every second year, sometimes more frequently, a walrus was killed, though they were very rare. Walrus meat was a welcome change from seal and fish, and pieces were always dried to have on hand for wedding, birth, and death ceremonies. The tusk of the walrus was traditionally carved into adornments for the chieftain, but as ways changed, it was often a Russian fur trader who ended up with the tusks. Rifles and ammunition might be received in trade, making hunting easier, but leaving people with more idle time.

In one Inuit village lived a young man named Anguta (ahn Guh tah) and his little family. Anguta was known among his people as one of the most skillful hunters. He was fairly newly wed and very newly the father of a son, Kreelut (KRE IUt). As is customary, the baby was named on its eighth day. A baby surviving that long is given the name of the tribe member who has most recently died; in this case, Kreelut was named for his mother's father, who was drowned. Aulanerk (ahoo Lan erk), the baby's mother, was happy with the timing of his birth. She knew her father's spirit would stay with his name, so she was not so lonely for him when she looked at her baby.

Over the years, life for the Sallirmiut became less simple, and new desires tugged at people's hearts. More skins were traded at the Russian trading post up river, and women began to wish for pretty calicos to wear in place of their seal breeches. Men admired the shining rifles and tiny, fierce bullets in the merchant's gun case, and soon one, and then two rifles came to the village.

In the season after Kreelut's birth, the seal hunt was more eagerly anticipated than ever. The seals were abundant, and fancy notions filled people's heads—they pictured themselves leaving the trading post with sleds weighed down with fine merchandise. Life would be so much better! The shaman warned the villagers to keep their independence from the trading post—somehow he knew that if they abandoned traditional ways, their village would never be the same. He told the people there were terrible spirits hiding in the vodka they were so fond of, mischievous spirits that grabbed reason from a man's brain and buried it in a snowbank. He reminded them how Kreelut (for whom the baby was named) was drowned by those demons on his way home from the trading post, where he'd tried to slake his unquenchable thirst. People decided maybe the shaman was just getting old; he was too old to hunt and too old to appreciate the trove of merchandise the trading post had to offer. The villagers prepared their kayaks, sharpened their harpoons and knives, prepared lengths of sinew towline, and set out to hunt.

For the first time in recent memory, Anguta did not kill the most seals. He was as stealthy as ever in his skin kayak, slipping around the floating ice sheets noiselessly, catching the seals unaware. He was so silent, he could kill several before any other seal noticed the danger and sounded a barking alarm. This year, when Anguta returned to the village towing his seals behind him, he was amazed to find heaps and heaps of seals, too many seals, piled on the ice. Several men with guns had killed more than the rest of the hunters combined! So many skins! These men would be rich this year!

Anguta and the others brought their skins to the trading post. Aulanerk came and brought Kreelut, too, happy with the anticipation of seeing friends and gazing in wonder at this year's merchandise at the trading post. The fur buyer looked at the piles of skins and named his price. The villagers were terribly offended. "This is what you paid for half as many seals last season!" one man cried. The fur buyer wouldn't relent. "The price is firm. We've got more skins than we can handle, so take it or leave it." The group conferred, and reluctantly agreed to his price.

By the time they left for home, Anguta had a rifle for himself and a supply of ammunition. Never again would other hunters get the best of him! Aulanerk clasped a gingham bag in her fist, holding six glass buttons. Kreelut's eyes shine as brightly as these buttons, she thought, as she carried him toward the village. "We traded every last skin, Anguta," she said, "We will need skins later when the baby travels on two legs." Anguta assured her that they could make the swaddling furs into clothes for Kreelut when the time came for walking.

*Brief outline of the remaining story:*

After the visit to the trading post, baby Kreelut falls ill with smallpox. The shaman tries to cure the baby, but says, because Kreelut has the white man's disease, he needs the white man's medicine. Anguta goes to the trading post and asks for patent medicine, but has no way to pay for it. The Russian turns him down, saying he needs to save that medicine for white men.

The baby gets sicker, and Anguta and Aulanerk grow desperate. Anguta goes to hunt, even though he knows the seals have moved their pups far away. Anguta hunts far from home and turns back when the weather grows fierce. Just before he arrives at his village, he sees a bull walrus with one tusk and kills it.

Anguta returns home triumphant, and shows off the walrus tusk to his neighbors. He brags about how many goods he'll trade it for when he travels to Coral Harbor (where he's never been before), having decided the Russian trader isn't deserving of his business.

The Russian trader catches wind of Anguta's treasure and comes to Anguta's home, offering to trade the medicine for the tusk. Anguta refuses but inadvertently glances into the corner of the house where the tusk is hidden, and the trader notices. Anguta hides the tusk in his baby's swaddling clothes for the night and is not surprised when a robber comes poking around in the dark.

The next morning, Aulanerk pleads with Anguta to trade with the Russian, because the baby is getting sicker, but he refuses. Instead, he packs their belongings, and they head out of the village toward Coral Harbor. As they leave, the shaman sees them and cautions them about the risks they are taking in traveling with a sick baby. Aulanerk agrees with him, and tries to get Anguta to see reason. Anguta silences her, explaining that he is a man and will take care of things.

After a day's travel they make camp. In the middle of the night, Aulanerk steals away with the tusk, and Anguta wakes as she leaves and chases her. He grabs her just as she is reaching back to throw the tusk into the ocean. He beats her terribly and returns to the camp with the tusk. As he arrives, a group of thieves ambush him and try to steal the tusk. He fights the robbers and kills one of them. The others run away, one of them holding the tusk. They bump into Aulanerk as she returns to the camp and unknowingly drop the tusk. She takes it back to Anguta, and, knowing he will be branded a murderer, they grab the baby and flee.

They hide by day and travel by night, but it is not long before Anguta realizes the thieves are back on their trail. The baby grows sicker and sicker. They climb a mountain, hoping to elude the thieves. They rest in a cave, and Anguta tries to mislead the thieves by making a false trail up the mountain.

Unfortunately, the thieves aren't fooled, and they camp right below the cave where the family is hiding. Anguta decides he needs to sneak up on them before they can attack his family. Just as he prepares to attack, Kree lut lets out a little cry and wakes the thieves. One of them fires his rifle in the direction of the cry, and Anguta makes his move, killing all of them in a violent fury. In the aftermath, Anguta realizes that the thieves shot and killed his son in the cave.

The next day, the heartsick couple makes its way back through the trading post and to their village. Aulanerk carries her dead baby slung over her shoulder. They walk all the way to the sea, and onlookers gather in silence. Aulanerk pulls the tusk from her pack and wordlessly hands it to Anguta. Anguta takes it, gives it one last hard look, and throws it with all his might into the sea.