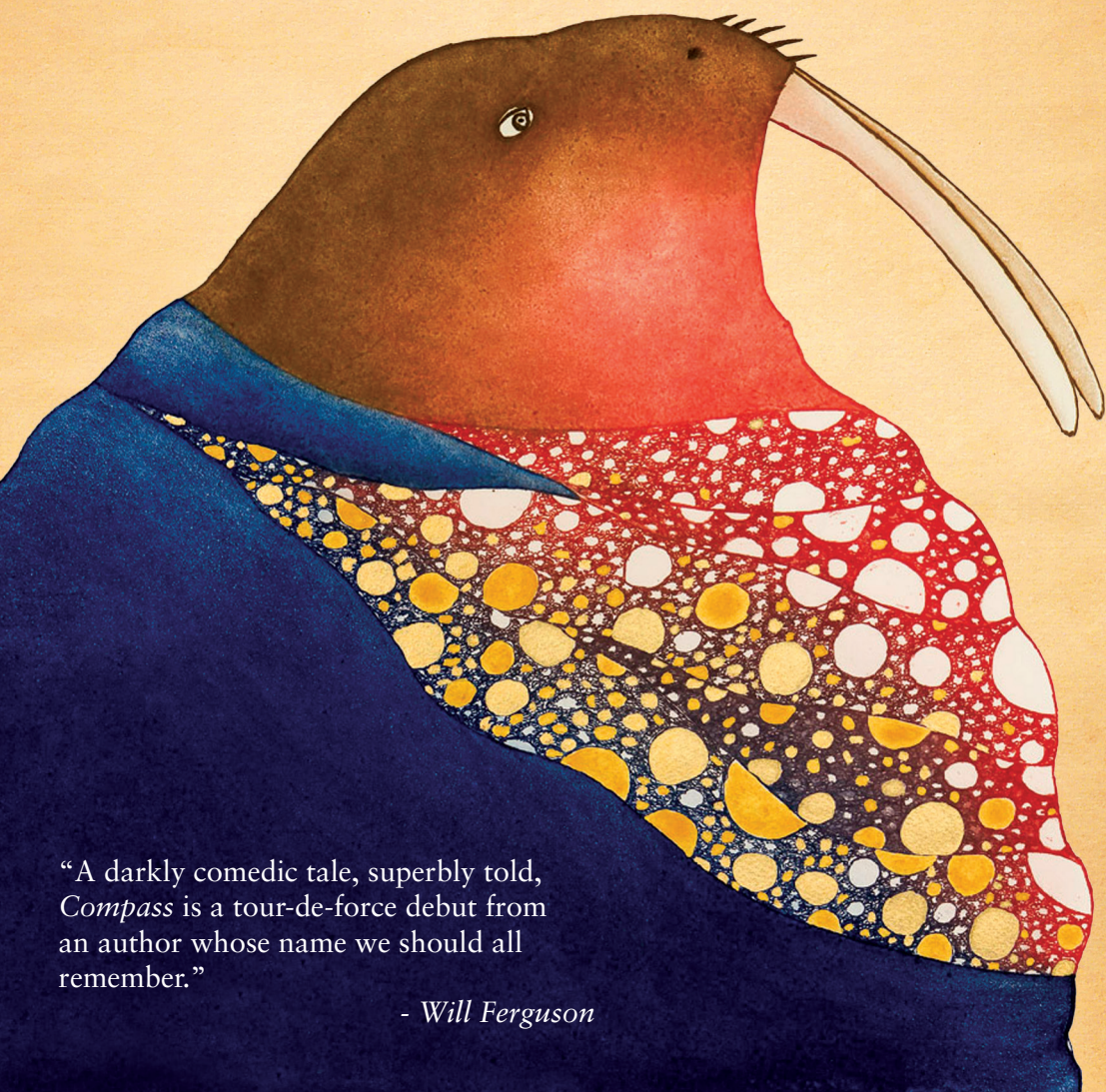


# COMPASS

MURRAY LEE



"A darkly comedic tale, superbly told, *Compass* is a tour-de-force debut from an author whose name we should all remember."

- Will Ferguson

## ADVANCE PRAISE

"A darkly comedic tale, superbly told, *Compass* is a tour-de-force debut from an author whose name we should all remember. This is storytelling at its finest, featuring shape-shifting Arctic landscapes, a wryly laconic Inuit guide, an undersea sorceress, hockey stick harpoons, a chorus of seals and a disturbing finale. I read it wrapped in warm blankets, both grateful and envious at not having to face the same travails as the novel's hapless narrator."

WILL FERGUSON, winner of the Giller Prize, the Leacock Medal and the Libris Award Fiction Book of the Year; author of *The Finder*, *Road Trip Rwanda* and *419*

"I could not put down Murray Lee's *Compass*. It's not only that it is a highly literate, intelligent novel or that the story is riveting, but also the unstrained, steady humor, the easy erudition about the history of and conditions in the high Arctic combine to make it such a compelling read. Most remarkable is the **stunningly good writing, an effortless flow of language, word choices of startling precision and beauty.** Such a rare gift Lee has, a writer we'll be hearing of. *Compass* is a joy."

SHARON BUTALA, finalist for the Governor General's Award, winner of the W.O. Mitchell Book Prize; author of *Season of Fury and Wonder*, *Zara's Dead*, and *Where I Live Now*

"Start with long experience of the Arctic and its people. Add a deep knowledge of exploration history and a gift for telling tall tales. Sprinkle with dark humor and bare-faced fabrications – why did Franklin go back to sea again? – and you get a **phantasmagoric adventure, wildly original, from the land of the midnight sun.**"

KEN MCGOOGAN, award-winning author of *Fatal Passage*, *Lady Franklin's Revenge*, and *Dead Reckoning*

"A bleakly comic cautionary tale. **The narrative is witty, honest, sardonic.** This is a man-against-nature novel in a grand tradition."

DOUG LOGAN, author of *Boatsense*

"Murray Lee's *Compass* flips the old-school hagiographies of European explorers lost in the High Arctic, and in their place offers up a hallucinatory, perilous voyage to The Edge, narrated by a less-than-stable outsider with **a suitcase full of stories of long-dead adventurers and a penchant for comic asides.**"

BRIAN PRESTON, author of *All the Romance a Man Can Stomach*

"A **powerful and visceral exploration** of one man's journey to the physical and psychological edge. *Compass* fuses the solitary struggle of *The Martian*, the magical realism of *Life of Pi*, and the twisted psychology of *Heart of Darkness*, layered on a stark northern landscape."

ARUN LAKRA, winner of the Woodward Newman Drama Prize and the Praxis Screenplay Competition;  
author of *Sequence*

"Murray Lee's debut novel *Compass* is a meditation on hubris that takes the reader to **the blinding white light of the Arctic** and the limits of a southern adventurer's endurance."

MONICA KIDD, author of *Chance Encounters with Wild Animals*

# COMPASS

A NOVEL



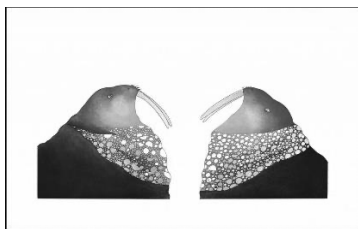
MURRAY LEE

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*For Marla*



“In a bleak land is not the place to enjoy solitude.”

Joshua Slocum





# PROLOGUE

*T*oday's delivery was the most difficult yet. I didn't bother to count my steps — the double load and my gammy leg would have made the measure unreliable. Still, I am certain new ice is forming. The floe's edge feels farther away than it has for months. If any ships were searching for us they surely would be well on their way home by now. The birds, too, have departed. For the first time since we set sail from Portsmouth, I am alone.

*It is sad to part company with Coombs and McClintock. Though I cannot say either man paid me much heed during the voyage or over the course of our troubles, they have both been most generous since their deaths. What a surprise it was to have survived them. It was Coombs, after all, who most obsessed on the "Custom of the Sea." He first made mention of it when our larder was still half-full. Alas, when it came time, Coombs could not muster much of an appetite and McClintock had no remaining teeth. If not for the sustenance they so gamely provided, I would never have had the strength to deliver them to the sea.*

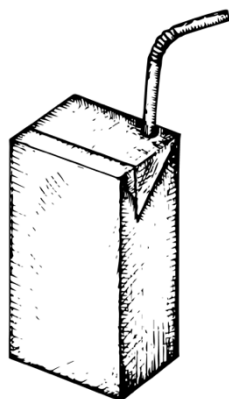
*What a relief it is to be finally free of this chore. The little fortitude I gained from the summer sun is waning as fast as the light. The extra time it took to sink Coombs (for some reason the Welshman bobbed like a cork in the slush) almost scuppered me. Tonight I will burn the toboggan, a celebratory bonfire to retire it from its funebrial duty. Tomorrow, if the weather is fair, I will walk back to the water without it. Thirty-nine men I have delivered off the edge. With the fortieth my work will be done.*

Last recorded entry in the journal  
of Jedediah Briggs, Midshipman  
on the HMS *Corinthian*

October 18, 1848



# PART ONE





# CHAPTER 1

I trade in the tales of adventurers. Men, mostly white, all long-since dead. Ideally they are men who had the good form to die *in extremis*, after a suitably heroic battle between their indomitable will and nature's merciless fury. An Arctic whaler locked in the ice. An ocean rower eaten by a shark. The Captain Ahabs. The Major Toms. Braggarts and boors, good riddance to them all. They can't be trusted to tell their own tales.

As a general rule, survivors make shitty storytellers.

To be sure, I am capable of constructing a story out of a man's full biography. I find, however, that those who have gone to great personal pain to escape society do not tend to function well when confined back to it. Sorting through the late-life misadventure typical of such characters—the marital discord, the mental breakdown, the bankruptcy—is more the job of the researcher I once was and not the storyteller I have become. Death in a whorehouse is a decent postscript for the hero of one of my tales. The years of despondency and alcoholism that preceded the climactic coronary are not.

Lawrence Oates' suicidal walk into an Antarctic blizzard on gangrenous feet is the archetype of the stories I tell. His final words—*I'm just going out and may be some time*—are almost certainly a fiction first told by his boss, Robert Scott, shortly before he and the rest of his party also died. I have read each of their journals and am familiar with

all of their lies. My professional opinion is that Scott likely told the dying Oates to leave, lest the others eat him. Regardless, with Oates out of the way, Scott gifted us with *a very gallant gentleman*, then set down his pen and died with every expectation we would say much the same of him. Both men were martyrs to the grand idea of sacrifice. To the nobility of exploration. To adventure and perseverance. As David Livingstone is said to have proclaimed, *I am prepared to go anywhere as long as it is forward*.

Dr. Livingstone spent the next decade wandering about in a daze, then died.

For years I trolled through the diaries of dead adventurers and reconstructed from their records tales of adversity and ingenuity. I assembled a cast of very gallant gentlemen. Then I traveled the world (or at least the pale, wealthy world where I was likely to find an audience) dressed up like Indiana Jones and convinced auditoriums full of soft, pasty people that somehow, miraculously, adventure is within us all. I am, I'm led to believe, a great storyteller. Until recently I was in the employ of a preeminent international geography magazine which, due to recent events, I am no longer permitted to name. Nevertheless, I earned a significant amount of money and a useful sort of fame after I abandoned academia to shill stories.

They are great stories. They are all lies.

To be clear, I have not been dishonest to the historical record. I have been faithful to the word set down by my subjects and am certain I have been telling their tales as they wished them to be told. But in being true to their word, I am complicit in their lies. I have seen the smudge marks in the margins of these men's journals. They are the fossilized tracks of the tears that once infused their emotionless text.

They are our secret. These men died believing no one wanted to know of the special sort of insanity that sets in when a man realizes he has just committed a very slow suicide.

My adventure, when it came, was of a different sort. I, too, kept a journal, but it adds nothing to my narrative. Unlike the articulate and even hand of Victorian explorers who documented each day's adventure with clinical precision (*Frederick lost his two remaining toes today, poor chap. Wind stiffening, NNE*), my notebook contains little more than the doodles of a madman. There are drawings of birds—robins I think—even though I saw no birds and have no particular affinity for the things. There is what I believe to be a map, although it too might be a bird, albeit unfinished. What text there is mostly appears in bursts of single words and short phrases, scattered throughout the journal with no regard to relative size or orientation, as random and informative as something sneezed onto the page. The overall effect is about as sensible as an envelope of cutout words, the ransom note of a glue-less psycho. In a moment of early lucidity, I took the time to carefully record an inventory of the contents of the sled: skin (caribou?); rifle; shell (1); fuel cans (2); knife; and so on. The food items I boxed off into a corner of the page, like in a larder, crossing each off in turn as the list became less a tool for rationing and more a countdown to what I assumed would be my eventual starvation. Of the scant legible prose contained in the journal, two pieces stand out. The first—a note to my wife—primarily comprised a bulleted list of things I thought she ought to do upon discovery of my body. It could charitably be described as stoic, if not for the fact that it was immediately followed by a much more effusive letter to a former and entirely estranged girlfriend. In my defense, I have a tendency to



sentimentality when I'm hungry, something my wife will not bear. Remarkably, these were not among the several pages I ate.

There are, of course, no timestamps.

As a historian, I am satisfied that my failings as a diarist are unlikely to disappoint any future biographers, if for no other reason than my story no longer attracts the interest of anyone. The popular account of what happened has already been told. A stick of kindling fed into the fire of modern media—a brief flame of infamy, told rapturously once, before a couple of days when it was scrolled in type across the bottom of bigger, breaking stories. Besides, I survived, memory intact and much else in ruins. If anyone wants to know what really happened on the ice they can read my account here.

## CHAPTER 2

**I**n the early part of my career—the earnest, honest part—I was a marine archaeologist. My focus was the North: searching for the lost ships of the Franklin expedition; exhuming the corpses of dead whalers; scrabbling along beaches in search of trinkets, tin cans, or teeth in the sand. It was good work. The Arctic is chock full of such artifacts. The only problem is that for most of the year they are encased beneath ten feet of ice.

To get around this obstacle, I timed my trips north to coincide with the short window each summer when the land was thawed and the ice gone. I'd set up research camps on nameless islands, filled with graduate students who mucked about the mud in search of my treasure. Like migratory birds, we would drop in and flit around, with one eye always on the timing of our escape. Mangy icebergs lingered offshore, relics of the winter past. We would stay a few weeks, a month at most, and leave as snow flurries signaled winter's return.

Aside from that short spell each summer, the beaches and bays in which we worked are usually frozen solid. The windswept snow on the land slopes down and fuses to the flat, white plane of solid sea ice. In much of the Arctic, through most of the year, you can walk off the land and onto the ocean as easily and mindlessly as you step off your driveway and onto the street. The Inuit have been using the sea ice—the floe—for ages. They need it to get around, to hunt and to camp. It

is a crucial piece of traditional Arctic infrastructure. But it has a limit. There is always a point some ways out where the sea's solid surface stops and the ocean becomes fluid again. They call that place The Edge.

For years, I have read my adventurers' accounts of The Edge. They were outsiders who bumped up against the thing in their boats, stymied in their attempts to sail onward by a great, white wall of impenetrable ice. Others, arriving from the opposite side, stopped and stared forlornly at an impassable expanse of extremely cold water. To those explorers, The Edge was a perilous place. It was the horizon made manifest in a single, straight line. It was the end from either side.

In those summer camps, however, I heard my Inuit colleagues speak of a different sort of place. To them, The Edge wasn't an obstacle or a dead end. It was a destination. A clean, crisp line marking the border between two worlds. On the dry side, man. On occasion, a bear. On the wet side, every other animal of the North. Beluga. Narwhal. Walrus. Seal. And everywhere birds, passing between the two worlds as freely as spirits. To the Inuit, The Edge is a market town, a place of wealth and renewal. Whether it was true to the stories as told or just my imagination I don't know, but in my mind I populated that place as densely as the Bronx Zoo. It was as though Noah himself had emptied his Ark right there on The Edge. Sitting in the cold gray drizzle on an empty Arctic beach while dining on tinned beef and weak tea, it sounded pretty good. It sounded like Shangri-La.

Years later, while sailing through the same waters on summer "adventure cruises," this was the story of The Edge I would tell. A place where all the animals of the North would gather, on the ice or in the ocean depending on their proclivity, to negotiate their peace or arrange for their next meal. A vivid, Arctic Eden. The description

became so engorged and arousing that it seemed ridiculous I hadn't actually been there myself. So, like a teenage virgin recounting in breathless detail an imaginary conquest, I lied. In rooms that reeked of mosquito repellant and popcorn (the lecture theatres were invariably repurposed cinemas from the ships' earlier, more family-friendly, tours of duty) I painted a beautiful and intimate picture of a place I had never been.

Not that anyone really cared. The lecture series on those boats were about as academic as the passengers were adventurous. We were all pretenders. Some days I felt like I was part of an enrichment program on a busload of baboons. Besides, no one would ever know the accuracy of the floe edge I described. The voyages were so carefully timed and charted that we were pretty well guaranteed the only ice we would encounter would be in our drinks. If a ship named the *Titanic* could be taken down by a rogue iceberg in the mid-Atlantic, I didn't like the chances of the *Polar Princess* were she to come across a sheet of pack ice in the Northwest Passage. If all went well and we made good time, the same satellites that had guided us free of the islands would be tuned to find a lone iceberg in the open ocean towards the end of our voyage. There, while the ship idled safely nearby, the hardest of the passengers would board Zodiacs for a short trip out to touch the thing, the little launches circling the berg like pilgrims at Hadj. In preparation for their supplication, each passenger would dress head to toe in a Gore-Tex outfit that cost more than the entire earnings of any member of the ship's bewildered Filipino staff. I was certain that within a week each of those jackets would be permanently stowed in some suburban closet, outgassing DEET and fraudulent memories for a lifetime.

The cruises were a side gig in what I thought was going to be the second half of my career. Usually I was part of a team of onboard experts that included an ornithologist (the bird guy) and a geologist (the rock girl—whether for gender equity purposes or in an attempt to make rocks more interesting, the geologist was pretty well always a young woman). I was the history guy. They were fun little teams, far more friendly than any group of colleagues I had ever associated with at a scientific conference. The collegiality was probably due to the fact that despite our disparate backgrounds we had one key thing in common. Nobody does the cruise ship circuit to advance an academic career.

Rachel was the rock girl who first called me out on my lie. She worked in a mine where Inuit laborers were gradually giving up their territory's gold in exchange for alcohol and gonorrhea, which when you think of it is a fairly ancient barter. A PhD thesis in invertebrate paleontology had already become trivia ("I'm the second most useless doctor in the world," she had said with a nod towards the ship's geriatric physician), and she was now working to retire her debts and support her travels. Rachel had been in the Arctic for five years. Already she had seen and done more in the North than I had in my entire career.

I saw her slip into the back row at the beginning of my talk on the Copper Inuit and their prolonged ice camps on Coronation Gulf. Rachel's presence was a welcome distraction from the man in the front row who was actually taking notes. I was happy to see her lingering by the bar with a beer during the inevitable post-talk meet and greet. I headed towards her as soon as I was free.

“The floe edge is truly amazing, isn’t it?” she said.

“That it is,” I said, keeping my attention on the bartender. There had been a look in her eye that had me worried and I was relieved when she said nothing more. I got my beer and turned to raise the bottle in a toast. She raised her own, then waited for me to take the first sip.

“You should see it sometime.”

Any chance I had to cover my lie was betrayed by the beer I coughed out my nose. Fortunately, she was smiling as she handed me her napkin.

“What gave me away?” I asked after recovering use of my trachea.

“It was a pretty evocative description,” she said. “You almost had me convinced.”

Her emphasis was on the almost. I waited for her to finish.

“But you were missing the key bit.”

“Yeah?” I said. I couldn’t imagine what I might have been missing. I think The Edge I described even had penguins.

“It moves.”

She drew out the ‘ooh’ like a long ocean swell.

If Rachel judged me on my fiction she didn’t let on. She did, however, tell me about a professional guide in the town of Iviliq who could take me out, a man by the name of Simeonie. She had done an extended trip with him the year before and thought he would be the ideal guide for a trip to The Edge. I demurred.

“You do want to go, don’t you?”

“I do,” I said. “But I also feel like it’s too late. It seems like someplace I should have already been.”

“And yet, here you are,” she said. “Telling stories.”

“They’re good stories.”

“They’d be better if they were your own,” she said. “Just call Sim. You’ll like him. And you’ll finally get to experience what life is really like at The Edge.”

“If you say so. Honestly, though, I’ve always felt that the most authentic experiences are those that aren’t planned.”

“Not everything has to be an expedition,” Rachel said. “But sometimes you are going to have to make the first move.”

## CHAPTER 3

People used to ask me what I have against modern adventurers, why the subjects of my stories were always the wool-wearing relics of a bygone era. The short answer is simple: I'm a historian. I'm not sure how long some idiot's GoPro footage has to be up on YouTube before it becomes my business, but I can promise you that it hasn't happened yet.

There is another, longer answer and it isn't much more complicated: I disdain them. Modern adventurers are too transparently narcissistic—they are so fascinated by themselves that there isn't room for the rest of us. Their combination of self-promotion and shallowness leaves nothing to be discovered. I have always found it to be a safe bet that when someone on first glance appears to be an asshole, when you dig deep you will discover that they really, *really* are an asshole. There is an honesty to them that way. No doubt many of my Victorian gentlemen were also assholes—who else would not only be willing to leave a family behind for two years but, more tellingly, would also have a family that was happy to see them go? I know for a fact that my stable of adventurers also includes narcissists, pederasts, bigots, and bullies. But they at least had the class to pretend they were doing it for Queen and Country.

Worse, today's adventurers are too careful, too prepared. They live-blog their feat while engineering all the risk, both physical and



psychic, out of it. There is something about sailing off the edge of the known world that just doesn't compare to jumping off a bridge with exactly the right amount of rope. It's not that I don't appreciate good planning or sound engineering, it's just that I don't find it all that exciting. Flying at 40,000 feet in a 787 may be amazing but it isn't an adventure and I don't need some blowhard in the seat next to me nattering on about it all the way across the Atlantic.

I had nine months between my encounter with Rachel and when I first stepped foot on the ice. I had a full three-quarters of a year to prepare. I think I only took two days to pack.

I wasn't rushed, nor was I unready. I just wanted to feel authentic.

## CHAPTER 4

My journey to Iviliq took me first to Winnipeg, a city that believes there is something special about being almost exactly in the center of the continent. Well, Winnipeg, there's not. If you don't believe me, ask Tashkent. Although there ought to be some poetry in starting an expedition to the edge of a continent from its center, there is as it turns out, absolutely nothing poetic about Winnipeg. It's the kind of city that prides itself on a list of famous people who have left, without acknowledging that other, longer, list of regular people who also managed to get out and aren't coming back. I used to have to travel through the city regularly—it, along with the dozen or so other self-proclaimed "Gateways to the North," was an important stop for both earlier research trips and later speaking tours. I've done my time in the Peg. I don't think they will be asking me back.

From Winnipeg I traveled more or less due north on a series of ever-smaller aircraft. The kind of planes where pimple-faced pilots—kids I wouldn't trust to drive my car—stoop part-way out of the cockpit to give the safety briefing. On one of the legs one of these child-pilots handed me a juice box.

By the second stop I noticed that the trees had grown thin and scraggly. By the third, they were gone.

At each landing strip the plane would taxi off the gravel runway and up to a terminal building that had the general dimensions and grace of a shipping container. There, my fellow passengers and I would mill about as the pilots rearranged cargo. “Gotta get the balance right,” the juice-box pilot told me. It sounded like a delicate job, but the work on the apron looked about as methodical as when I rummage around the house searching for my keys.

I distracted myself by studying my fellow passengers. There was a young mother who was no doubt returning from giving birth in the South, carrying, as she was, a newborn baby and a large box of doughnuts. I could only hope that the latter was her own idea and not a request of the expectant father (“Oh hey, honey, while you’re down there...”). They were in the company of an older woman who, despite her joy with the baby, did not look well. A hospital bracelet under her cuff suggested that she, too, was on medical travel. Then there were the two other southerners besides me. One was obvious—a tradesman, a Newfoundlander by the sounds of it, who had his toolbox as his carry-on. “If they’re gonna lose anything, it ain’t gonna be my tools,” he said, looking out the window at the gong show beneath the plane. The other southerner was young and looked at ease with the delay. I would have thought she was a teacher, but it was the time of year when they migrate the other way. I lingered a little too long attempting to figure her out. She took this as an invitation to talk.

“I’m guessing this isn’t your first time in the North?”

“How can you tell?” I asked.

“I dunno. You look like you belong up here,” she said. “Maybe it’s the beard?”

*You don't know the half of it, my friend,* I thought. I'm paid to look like the North. It's a cultivated ruggedness. The magazine I worked for hired a stylist who so filled my closet with flannel shirts and down vests that I could outfit a camp of lumberjacks. That was the closet I had looted when packing for this trip. And the beard? It was specifically designed to be longer and looser than what any professional might wear, but still shorter and less self-conscious than current hipster fashion. It could be nothing but the beard of an adventurer. And it cost me thirty bucks twice a month to have some hipster barber shape it that way.

"It's a disguise," I said. "Besides, I have a very weak chin. I'm actually from the States. How about yourself?"

"Flin Flon," she said, with apparent confidence that an American would know where that might be.

"You don't say," I said. "What brings you up here?"

"I travel around the territory digitizing the work of artists in the smaller communities."

"Neat. So like a virtual museum?"

"In part. But it functions more like an online community. And a marketplace. There are some exceptional people out here doing stuff that nobody ever sees."

"Is it still art if nobody sees it?"

"What else would it be?"

"I don't know. Craft? Like is a book a book if it's never read?"

"If it's any good it ought to be." She handed me her card. "Here. You can see for yourself."

The card had the beautiful but disturbing image of a man throttling a seal. I slipped it into my pocket.

“So what communities have you seen so far?” I asked.

“All of them. I’ve been at it for four years.”

Everybody I had ever met in the Arctic had a specific reason for why they were there. In some cases it is entirely economic—the Newfoundland laborer looking for work, for instance. More often it is personal. Generally speaking, most of them were either drawn to the North or were pushed from the South. Either they wanted to experience life at the edge of civilization or civilization wanted to be rid of them. Aside from the Inuit, of course. For them it’s just home. The artist seemed to be drawn north. At the time, I believed the same to be true of me. Still, I hadn’t told many people what I was up to with my trip and was coy when she brought the conversation back to me.

“I’m an author,” I said. “I’m doing research for my next book.”

As it turned out this wasn’t even a lie.

The artist and I parted ways in the town of Rankin Inlet. She headed off with the juice-box pilot on a flight to Baker Lake while I waited for my plane to Iviliq to be cleared for departure. Apparently there was “weather” somewhere along the route. When I asked the guy manning the counter what sort of weather, he replied with a shrug. “Fog?” he suggested. He added a goofy smile to make it even more clear he had no clue. The pilot, sitting just behind him in a little side office, continued to play with his phone and said nothing.

With the other flight already gone and my delayed flight the only one left on the day’s schedule, the airport had emptied out. It was just me, the dying elder, and the new mother and her baby. I wandered the small space looking for distraction, pacing out the perimeter of my enclosure like a confined bear. In one corner I found a machine selling

Coke for three dollars a can. Taped next to the coin slot was a hand-lettered sign reading *MIGHT NOT WORK*. Next to that was the kind of candy machine that offers everything from gum, to chips, to chocolate bars, except in this case every row of its display was bare. Without a sign suggesting otherwise, I assumed this machine was operational. I wondered whether it would be more frustrating to put money in a machine that harbored Coke but refused to deliver, or in a machine that would dutifully spin an empty rack in an honest effort to provide something it did not contain. My deliberation was interrupted by the sudden static of a PA system being turned on.

“For the attention of passengers travelling to Iviliq.”

The three of us turned to the desk where the agent, only a few feet away, leaned into a microphone.

“There are no current updates.”

Again with the goofy smile.

After switching off the mic the man added something in Inuktitut, which garnered a laugh from the young mother and elder. As always when people laugh in a foreign language, I assumed they were laughing at me. I suspect it is one of the fundamental insecurities of the monoglot in a multilingual world. In my case the fear is further stoked by a particularly unsettling interview I once gave on a German TV talk show. I had been discussing the varying rates of cannibalism among explorers of different European nations. From the audience’s mirthful reaction, I can only hope the interpreter was talking about something else.

“Any idea when there might be an update?” I asked, trying not to sound like an impatient prick. I find the gift of empty time is only of use when you know roughly how long it is going to last.

“There’s a new weather report every hour,” he said. “So maybe four-o-five?”

I looked at the clock. It was 3:20. For the next forty-five minutes I attempted to read my novel but was distracted by the constant effort of trying not to check the clock every five minutes. At 4:10, a similarly suspenseful announcement on the PA was made. Still delayed. I stowed the novel and pulled out a new biography of Shackleton. I already knew how the story went and figured it wouldn’t need much concentration. At least it had pictures.

From 5:05 to 6:10, I wandered the room a couple more times, played Sudoku on my phone, and made an unsuccessful attempt to return to the novel and push my way to the end of a chapter.

At 6:10, I decided the adage *no news is good news* is garbage. I realized I was hungry. I gambled three dollars on a Coke and lost. Sitting back down next to my pack, I stared for a while at the new mother’s box of doughnuts.

Sometime around 6:30 I must have fallen asleep.

I woke at 7:20 to the elder kicking my foot. She gestured to the door with her thumb. Through the window I saw the mother climbing up the steps to the plane. Years of travel stress, long lines, and nearly missed connections rose up in an angst that was entirely incommensurate with the current situation. I shoved my loose gear back into my bag, hurried to the door, then fumbled through my pockets for the boarding pass. I finally found one stashed in the pages of my novel. It was for an earlier flight on a different airline but that didn’t matter. The door was open and the agent waved me through without any concern to see my credentials.

A few minutes later the little plane was airborne. I looked around the cabin—the mother and baby were now sitting a row ahead of me and to my left. The elder sat two rows directly behind. It occurred to me that for an entire day we had been playing some strange Kafkaesque game of musical chairs.

I am a seasoned traveler. I don't say that with any pride. I'm not some smug, card-waving snob who shows open contempt for the tourists clogging my airports. Although, in the interest of full disclosure, I do have a Trusted Traveler card. I used to recommend to everybody that they get one until I realized that everybody *was* getting one and as result our lines were growing as long as theirs. I am in no way offended by people who can't quite work out the rules in security lines—shoes off in the US, shoes on in Canada (the opposite of what you do in their homes, oddly). On the contrary, I envy the innocence of the novice traveler. I still remember a time when the smell of jet fuel provoked a sense of excitement in me. When I was a child, my father schlepped the bags and my mother managed the paperwork and food—all I had to do was stare out the airport window with my trusted travel companion (a ratty sock monkey whose name I'm ashamed to say was just Monkey) and inhale the fumes of adventure. Now all I get from the smell of an airport is the same sort of emotion triggered by milk that might be a little off. You know—the kind you decide not to put in your coffee but still put back in the fridge. Not revulsion. More like resignation.

By seasoned what I mean is that I'm experienced. I am a competent and generally efficient traveler. I have familiarity with airports and airplanes and can trudge through the routines of travel as



brainlessly as you make your way through your morning ablutions. On occasion, fellow travelers—particularly worried travelers—read this dulling of emotion as a sign of great patience, as if through contemplation and repetition I have managed to achieve some sort of enlightenment that goes beyond my frequent-flyer status. I have not. If there is an ascetic aspect to my travelling, the monastic traditions I adhere to are much more Benedictine than Buddhist. More hair shirt, less Zen.

I think back to the untold hours I have spent in completely unintentional trance-like states and realize I have squandered a great opportunity. I have given months of my life to standing in lines and staring at the sky and have accomplished nothing for it. I have *spent* time. And in return I received nothing. Stoners coming out of a thirty-minute high have more life-changing insights than I have had in years of travel. I may be relatively patient and am a rockstar at Sudoku, but I don't think either of those attributes would impress my fellow friars after six months of contemplative silence.

Perhaps for my next career I'll start a chain of yoga studios and meditation centers in the departures areas of airports across the world. I could call it *A Higher Plane*. We would announce the flights with a gong. Someday when you find yourself wedged into a seat beside a blissed-out businessman who reeks of massage oil and incense you'll know that I've found success.

For much of the final flight to Iviliq I drifted in and out of consciousness. It was the kind of airplane sleep that approximates the light sedation offered with a colonoscopy and it had the same effect of only partially relieving the suffering. The world beneath us was

entirely white. Feature-filled but completely foreign, it was like a NASA image of that icy moon of Jupiter (Ganymede? Europa?). I knew that some of what I was looking at was sea ice and some was land, but it was difficult to tell one from the other. My focus was frustrated by swaths of low wispy clouds that moved in and obscured the defining bits every time I thought I knew what I was seeing. As with pixelated porn, I couldn't distinguish between a crack and a ridge. At one point I woke to see that the clouds had cleared, revealing a single dark line cleaving the world in two. Blue on the right, white on the left. The floe edge. Compared to the washed-out whiteness of everything else out the window, it was absolute. Then I fell back asleep.

I had one of those intense dreams that happens right at the onset of sleep, the kind that explode fully formed within the unconscious brain. I love those dreams. They're like a single, beautiful firework that wakes you with a bang and leaves you with only traces of smoke to hint at what just happened. I get night jerks too, sometimes at the same time as these dreams. It makes me wonder if the same neuronal discharge that fires off a wild spasm in my leg has also zapped the deep brain structures that house memory and love and fear. I've never much been fond of drugs, but these dreams make me want to experiment with electricity. In this one, I was lying stark naked on a metal gurney as a team of medical students dug around elbows-deep in my open abdomen. *It's got to be in here somewhere*, one of them said. She handed me my liver. *Here. Hold this.*

I woke, as they say, with a start. It's a nice little word to encapsulate a snort, a flail, a quick search for drool and the other various processes a man requires for a rapid return from reverie to reality. I had been asleep for only a minute but when I looked back

out the window the floe edge was gone. I watched for a while longer in the hope I might see it again but the low clouds were gathering closer. A few minutes later I realized that everything I was staring at and trying to sort through was cloud. There was no land, no sea—just sky. The clouds carried on unbroken until we found our own way down through them, punching out the underside five hundred feet above ground and two minutes from target.

The small plane came back to earth like a windblown balloon, bouncing twice on the gravel runway before the pilot cut back on the throttle and the plane's full weight returned to it with a sigh. The magic of flight was over. Visibility was good, the sky was bright. I, however, was still in a fog.