

the
Unforgiving
LAND

a novel

Paul Sullivan

Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

*For Nita,
a special person*



This book is a novel. It is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locations, and events either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or places or events is entirely coincidental.



Copyright © 2020, 1996
Royal Fireworks Online Learning, Inc.
All Rights Reserved.

Royal Fireworks Press
P.O. Box 399
41 First Avenue
Unionville, NY 10988-0399
(845) 726-4444
fax: (845) 726-3824
email: mail@rfwp.com
website: rfwp.com



ISBN: 978-0-88092-256-2

Publisher: Dr. T.M. Kemnitz
Editor: Jennifer Ault
Book and Cover Designer: Kerri Ann Ruhl
Cover Art: Christopher Tice

Printed and bound in Unionville, New York, on acid-free paper
using vegetable-based inks at the Royal Fireworks facility.

20my20

local



363

CHAPTER ONE

The Promise

Inatukk had a vision. It came to him when he was a boy, and if it had not been for this, the people would not have settled to hunt the land and sea ice of the place later known as Hewitt Sound. It was with this vision that it started, and it was because of the vision that it ended as it did.

The people came out of the mist of time. They traveled over the harsh, frozen land with their dogs and sleds, carrying all they owned with them. They were hunters, and Inatukk's father was the greatest and most respected of these.

They had not set out for the place deliberately. They came over the tundra and ice because they traveled in search of food. It was a time of hunger, and so it was a long search, a journey across an Arctic so vast that they did not know there was an end to it. Some died. The harsh land was their land and they her children, but in these years they were starving. Not even old Maatek, Inatukk's father, could find caribou or seals. The shaggy musk ox was gone, the small Arctic hare and wandering fox elusive. The hunters killed little game, and it fed few people. The hunters ate first, then the children and the women. It had always been that the hunters ate first,

for they were the most important of the families. If there were no hunters, then there would be no food, and there would be nothing. But now, even with the best of them, they brought little back to the snow houses.

The families did not blame the hunters when the hunters came back with empty sleds. Even in the worst times they still respected old Maatek, who led them. And they did not blame the land that was empty of game. They respected the land and looked upon their situation as a part of living on the tundra. Hunger had come to them because the spirits did not honor them. The caribou and seals and musk oxen were gone because the spirits had driven them away. No hunter, no matter how great his skill, could work against the will of the spirits that dictated the laws of the land.

So the people made a long journey, and though they never lost respect for the land, it seemed that the land was against them. They traveled in the winter of 1872, the worst in memory. Even in story and song, no winter was as harsh as that one.

It is the wind in the Arctic that is the worst enemy; it is not the cold. One can dress against the cold. A snow house can be warmed by a small seal-oil lamp. A fur parka and pants and sealskin boots will keep a person warm. The cold, in fact, is welcome because people can travel over the tundra most easily when the ice is hard and the snow frozen on its surface. Dog sleds slide quickly over frozen snow and can be used to travel long distances in a short time. It's when the snow is soft and the runners sink that the panting dogs pull the hardest, and they can cover little distance. And with

the cold, one can build a snow house, cutting the hard snow into blocks and placing them in such a way to make a warm shelter. In these ways, the cold is a blessing.

It is the wind, crossing the open land like a thousand screaming demons, that is the true enemy. The wind takes the cold and drops it to a point below reason. It takes the loose snow from the surface of the land and uses it to blind one and cut at one's flesh. The only true protection from the wind is a snow house. In the time of the wind, to travel over the tundra is to expose oneself to great hardship.

It was at a time when the wind came out of the north that the people made the long journey. The wind came on endlessly, blinding the men and coating their parkas with an icy layer of snow so that they looked like walking snowmen. Most of the men and women walked beside the sleds, while the children and the elders rode under piles of caribou skins, which the wind covered with the same icy coating. The dogs pulled hard at the traces, hearing only the sound of the snapping whip at their ears above the cry of the wind. The people were white drifters in a white land, and they moved slowly. But every new part of the land that they traveled was empty of game. When he knew that the people could not last and that the dogs had no more strength to pull, Maatek ordered the first dogs killed and eaten.

They made camp, and two dogs were taken from each of the eight teams. They chose those dogs that were the weakest. Inatukk, a boy of nine years, helped his father with the killing and the cutting up of the meat. Part of this was

given to the people and another part to the remaining dogs. Nothing was wasted.

At the place where the killing and butchering was done, the snow was covered with blood. It was the scent of the blood that attracted a great snow bear. It came out of the blinding wind into the small camp, scattering hunters and driving the dogs wild on their traces. When the bear rose up to its full height, only the boy, Inatukk, was standing before it. Inatukk knew only the hot breath of the bear as it came down upon him. He did not hear the shouts of the hunters as they fought to drive the bear away. He did not hear the cries of the women or the howling of the dogs. There was only the hot breath of the giant and the sharp claws that tossed him around as if he were weightless.

By the time the men drove the bear off, the boy lay close to death. The bear went away into the blinding wind, and Maatek lifted his son into his arms and carried him to the temporary snow house. There the boy lay for seven days. Each day, the women who cared for him were certain that death was coming for him. Maatek gave up all hope for his son. The old hunter led the men out to find the great bear, but it was not to be found, nor did they find any other game in all the miles they traveled from the camp. It was as if the bear had come from nowhere and returned to nowhere. It was as if nothing existed on the land except the people. On the sixth day, they killed more dogs.

While he was lying in the temporary snow house fighting against death, Inatukk had a vision. In it he traveled far from the camp. He took to the air as if he had the wings of a

raven. The wind screamed over the land, but it did not stop him. He rode the wind, and far below, he saw the hunters returning. He saw the rolling white tundra and the blue ice. At a distance, a long way from the hunters, he saw the snow bear moving across the ice. The bear moved easily, its muscles rippling in its powerful shoulders. From up high, Inatukk watched the bear for a long time, and then he traveled on, riding the wind like smoke.

He came to a place of high ground that overlooked the land for a great distance, and there he stopped and looked out at the white earth. The land he saw was empty. Nothing moved upon it but the wind. Even the bear had gone away. Then Inatukk saw something.

It was difficult to see, for it was white upon white. The boy did not see it until it moved, and even then he was not sure. But when it moved again, it was coming toward him. It was coming up the hill to the very place where he was standing. Inatukk waited quietly.

The little white fox moved with its nose to the snow, stopping often to look back over its shoulder, past its bushy tail. It came until it was almost at the boy's feet, and then it stopped. Lifting its nose, it sniffed the air, but it seemed not to see the boy standing in front of it. Then it moved on again, but this time cautiously. When the fox was close enough, Inatukk simply reached down and caught it by the tail. He lifted it into the air and held it there. For some minutes the fox kicked its legs, scrambling to free itself, but when it realized that it could not, it gave up the struggle. It looked at Inatukk and asked, "Are you going to eat me?"

“You can talk?” asked the boy.

“Of course,” replied the fox. “Are you going to eat me?”

“I don’t know,” said Inatukk. “I am very hungry, and I would rather have fox meat over dog meat, if the choice were mine to make.”

“Dog is far more tasty,” said the fox. “And anyway, I think it was quite unfair making yourself invisible that way.”

“Me? Invisible?”

“Of course. How else do you think you caught me? I did not see you until you had hold of my tail—which you are hurting very badly at the moment.”

“I’m sorry to hurt you,” said the boy. “But if I put you down, you will run away.”

“I give you my word that I will not,” said the fox. “If you put me on the snow, I will not try to escape. With your invisibility, you would only catch me again anyway. Please? I feel that if you don’t, my tail is going to pull off.”

Inatukk lowered the fox to the snow. It made a complete circle, looking back at its tail, and then it looked up at Inatukk. “Now what?”

“I’m not sure,” said the boy. “But I think that I should take you to my people because there is great hunger there. The hunters have brought no food back for a long time.”

“But how many could I feed?” asked the fox.

“There is little meat on you,” conceded the boy.

“Actually, I’m very much underweight,” said the fox. “What you see is mostly fur.”

“But even a little meat is better than none,” said Inatukk.

“This is true,” the fox agreed, and it thought for a moment. Then, looking up at Inatukk, it said, “I think what you need to feed your people is a lot of meat—not a small, underweight fox with no taste at all but something large and tasty and fat, like a caribou.”

“I think you are right,” said Inatukk, “and I am sorry that you are not a caribou. But I will have to make do with what I have caught.”

“I might make a suggestion that will interest you,” said the fox. “Because I am so small with no honest amount of meat on my bones, why not trade me for a caribou? I’m sure that your people would prefer a caribou over me. Just think of the difference in the amount of meat. You would need twenty of me to make one such animal.”

“I would make such a trade if there were a caribou to trade for,” Inatukk told the fox.

“I know where one may be found,” said the fox. “If I take you to this place and there is such a caribou, will we trade?”

“I will need to see the caribou first,” said the boy.

“Fair enough,” agreed the fox. “It is not far away. Follow me.”

They traveled for almost an hour, the boy and the fox. The fox was true to its word and made no effort to escape. They came to a small, frozen bay edged with pressure ice and crossed it, and on the far side they arrived at a place of low, rocky hills. The wind had swept away the snow, and short grass grew there. The fox said, "Here is where the caribou feed. You must go as quietly as I go. Perhaps you may want to make yourself invisible again?"

"I'm not sure if I can," said Inatukk.

"Well, then we will just have to take our chances," said the fox. "But it would be much better if the caribou couldn't see you. Don't you think you could at least try to be invisible?"

"I'll try," said the boy, and closing his eyes and wishing with all his heart, for he very much wanted to take a caribou back to his people, he made himself invisible.

"Splendid!" said the fox. "I wish you would teach me that. It would be a great trick to use on rabbits."

They moved on, crossing over one of the low, rocky hills. On the far side, just as the fox had promised, grazed a caribou. The caribou looked up briefly upon seeing the fox, then continued its feeding. There was no reason for the caribou to fear the fox. It was only when the fox was nose to nose with the caribou that the caribou took a step back, surprised by the small creature's aggressiveness. But when the caribou stepped back, lifting its head, the boy took hold of its antlers and twisted the animal to the ground.

The fox moved back a few paces and looked the caribou over carefully. “Fat,” it said. “I’ve never seen a caribou with such fine hindquarters. There is enough meat there to feed a hundred people.”

The caribou, with its neck twisted in pain and its tongue hanging long from its mouth, saw the boy for the first time. The fox said happily, “He’s going to eat you!”

The caribou tried desperately to free itself from the boy’s hold, but Inatukk seemed to have a strength far beyond that of an average boy. Finally, tiring itself in the effort to escape, the caribou relaxed its body into the snow. To Inatukk it said, “It is well-known that we caribou have poor eyesight, but I did not see you until you took hold of me.”

“He was invisible,” explained the fox. “It is a great trick. I wish I knew it.”

“I don’t think it’s very fair,” observed the caribou.

“Fair doesn’t matter,” said the fox. “All that matters is that he’s got you, and you have more meat than I do.” The fox turned to Inatukk. “Isn’t he a fat one?”

“He does have much more meat than you offer,” admitted Inatukk. “I will take him back to the camp for the people.”

“People?” asked the caribou.

“Yes. They are hungry.”

The caribou thought for a moment. “I am old and tough,” it said. “So old and tough that your people will wear out

their teeth trying to chew me. My good years have gone. I should have been taken long ago.”

“You look to be in good shape for your years,” said the fox.

“How would you know?” asked the caribou. “You have never gone through winter trying to survive on a little dry grass. Do you know what that does to one’s body? Year after year of the same poor nourishment? What you see is not fat but the bloat of hunger.” To Inatukk it said, “Run your hands over my rib bones, and you will see.”

Inatukk ran his hand over the caribou’s side, and he could feel the rib bones like high ridges under the fur. He said with disappointment, “You’re not much to talk about.”

“Even less to feed people with,” said the caribou.

“He’s just trying to get out of it,” protested the fox.

“But rib bones don’t lie,” stated the caribou.

Inatukk looked at the fox. “Perhaps I should take both of you back to the camp,” he said.

“A deal is a deal!” the fox argued. “One caribou for one fox.”

“One fat caribou,” Inatukk pointed out. “That was the deal. This one is nothing but fur and bone.”

“It’s the best I could do in the moment,” panicked the fox. “Give me more time, and I’m certain I can do better. A few days. Maybe a week. I’ll find a herd, all fat and easy chewing.”

“Don’t listen to him,” said the caribou. “Give him one day, and he’ll be on the far side of the Arctic. A fox will lie about anything to save his own skin.”

The fox came forward. When it was nose to nose with the caribou, it whispered, “If you don’t stop talking, I’m going to eat you myself.”

“And if this boy lets go of me, I’m going to chase you all over the tundra,” returned the caribou.

Inatukk interrupted them. “There’s no reason to argue. I have made up my mind to take you both back to my people. There will not be enough meat with only the one.”

“See what you’ve done!” the fox accused the caribou.

“It was you who brought him here!”

“I did that to save myself!”

“And now you’ve lost us both!” The caribou sighed heavily. “Why me and not some fat seal out on the sea ice? You foxes have such poor judgment.”

“Seal!” the white fox nearly shouted. “What a wonderful idea! A fat seal.” The fox looked up at Inatukk. “Would a fat seal please you?”

“Of course,” said Inatukk.

“I know of a breathing hole in the ice,” said the fox. “A fat seal pokes his nose through for air there. He is faithful to this hole in the ice. Would you trade a fat seal for a thin little fox?”

“And an undernourished deer?” added the caribou.

Inatukk looked thoughtfully at the fox and the caribou. “I will need to see the seal,” he told them.

“Follow me,” said the fox.

“I’ll wait for you here,” offered the caribou.

“No, you must come with us,” said the boy. “The deal is not done until I have seen the seal. I may yet want to eat you.”

The caribou got up from the snow on shaky legs. Looking at the fox, it said, “I hope this seal is as fat as you say he is.”

“So fat that we may have trouble pulling him through the hole,” the fox smiled.

The three of them went off over the tundra. The fox led the way, with the caribou behind him, and following both was Inatukk. They traveled to the sea ice and went a long way out on its surface, and there, just as the fox had said, was a breathing hole. When they reached it, the fox told them, “Now we must sit and wait quietly.”

So the three of them sat by the hole and were so quiet that the only sound was that of the wind over the hard blue ice. They had not waited long when a nose broke through the water. It was followed by long whiskers and large, sad eyes.

“Grab him!” shouted the fox, and Inatukk did, catching hold of a flipper and pulling the seal up and onto the ice. The seal slipped out of Inatukk’s arms and started back for the hole. Inatukk got hold of it again, and again the slippery seal got away and started for the hole. The caribou, seeing the

inevitable outcome of this battle, sprang to action and lay its large body down over the hole. The seal stopped, confused.

The fox said, "Isn't he a fat one?"

"The fattest seal I have ever seen," said the caribou. "I must admit, Fox, this time you told the truth."

The seal wrinkled its nose and looked from the fox to the caribou. Then it rested its eyes on the boy. "What is happening?" it asked.

"We've come to invite you to dinner," said the fox, and both it and the caribou laughed. "We are having seal meat," the fox added, and they laughed even harder.

"I don't think that's funny," said the seal. It waddled off a short distance and then turned to face the three of them. "Who is this boy?"

"He is the one who is going to eat you," answered the fox.

"Why me?"

"His people are hungry and have no food," explained the caribou. "So he caught us—the fox and me. We made an agreement with him."

"What kind of agreement?"

"One fat seal for the two of us," replied the fox.

"Two for one?" asked the seal. "Doesn't sound like a very good agreement to me." It waddled over to Inatukk. Looking up with its sad eyes, it said, "Any child, even a boy your age, would know that two is better than one. If a person

were to offer you something, wouldn't you rather have two and not one?"

Inatukk thought about this and said, "Yes. There is no doubt."

"Then why do you trade two for one?"

"I thought it best a short time ago," said Inatukk.

"You're lucky that you caught a smart seal," said the seal.

"Don't listen to anything he says," the fox warned Inatukk.

"But two *are* better than one," Inatukk countered. "It is simple to understand. More is better than less."

"Absolutely true," agreed the seal.

"But three is better than two," observed Inatukk. "So I think that all of you will feed my people the best. I will take all three of you."

"That's not fair!" cried the caribou.

"A deal is a deal!" protested the fox.

"But I did not make a deal. I agreed only to look at the seal," Inatukk pointed out.

"We must renegotiate," said the seal.

"I have decided," said Inatukk.

"See what you've done!" the caribou told the seal.

"It was you who brought him to this place!" the seal defended.

“Not me! The fox!”

“You caribou are always trying to blame us foxes for everything!”

“You foxes have no sense of guilt!”

“I’m returning to the water,” interrupted the seal. “I’m not involved in this. All I was doing was trying to breathe.”

“I want to go back to the hill and chew my grass,” said the caribou.

“If I get eaten, then you get eaten with me,” insisted the fox.

Inatukk turned away from them. They were making so much noise that they were hurting his ears. He sat on the ice and watched the three of them argue. A long time passed, and still they argued. The wind blew cold over the frozen sea, but they made more noise than even the wind. They were making so much noise that for a moment Inatukk thought he should just leave the three of them. But then he remembered how hungry his people were.

As he was thinking, a snowy owl landed on the ice beside him. The owl studied the situation and then turned to the boy. “Tell me,” it said to Inatukk, “what is all the fuss about? Never have I heard so much noise.”

“It’s a long story,” said Inatukk, “but it has no ending yet. If you have time and care to listen, I will tell you.”

“I have time,” said the owl, “and I like stories.”

“Then I will tell you,” said Inatukk. And he told the owl the entire story. He told it carefully, starting all the way back with the attack of the snow bear and leaving nothing out.

When Inatukk finished the story, the owl was quiet, its eyes closed in contemplation. The fox, the caribou, and the seal were still deep in argument. The wind was still blowing cold over the sea of ice. The owl’s eyes were closed for such a long time that Inatukk thought perhaps it had fallen asleep. But then it opened its eyes and spoke calmly. “Inatukk, you are having a vision.”

“A vision?”

“Yes,” said the owl. “Not a very exciting vision, perhaps, but a vision all the same.”

“That’s why I can vanish so no one can see me?”

“All part of the vision. But the problem now is to understand it. Then you must decide what to do.”

“How do I understand it?” asked Inatukk.

“The spirits have given you a chance to catch the animals that even your best hunters have failed to find,” explained the owl. “And you have caught three of them. What do you do with the three?”

“I take them back to the camp,” said Inatukk.

“Not so quickly,” warned the owl. “Think carefully.”

Inatukk thought and said, “Maybe I should let the fox go. I did make somewhat of an agreement with it. Then I will take back the caribou and the seal.”

“No! No!” said the owl. “That is not the answer, and it is not even a fair way to think about it. The fox brought you to the caribou and the seal only to save its own skin.”

“Then what should I do?” asked Inatukk.

The owl closed its eyes again. “Young boys never know what it is they are given to do.” The owl moved closer to Inatukk and whispered, “Negotiate.”

“I don’t understand,” said Inatukk.

“You have already learned that two is better than one, and three is better than two. Doesn’t it stand to reason that a thousand is far better than three?”

“Certainly.”

“Is it only food for one day that your people need? Or is it food for all the days to come?”

“For all the days.”

“And food will not be your only problem. You also need caribou for parkas and seals for boots and sled traces. Your women need bones for needles and your hunters antlers for harness rings. Are your people to get all of this from only three animals?”

“No,” admitted Inatukk.

“If one can bring back three, it may be that he can just as easily bring back a thousand,” the owl told him.

“What does that mean?” asked Inatukk.

The owl sighed. "Come with me." It turned, lifted, and flew low over the ice. The three animals were still in debate as to who should and should not be eaten when the owl flew into the center of the argument with a great flapping of wings. The animals were startled into silence.

The fox spoke first. "What do you want?" it asked the owl.

The caribou asked, "Is he going to eat you, too?"

"No," said the owl. "And if you listen carefully, he will eat none of you."

"Is this true?" asked the seal.

"The boy is willing to make a deal," explained the owl.

"What kind of deal?" asked the caribou.

"A promise," said the owl. "He wants a promise."

"That's all?" asked the seal. "A promise?"

The fox narrowed its eyes suspiciously. "What promise?"

The owl looked at Inatukk. "Tell them," it said.

"I want enough food for my people for all the days to come," said the boy.

The animals were quiet. The seal broke the silence. "That is a heavy promise."

The fox asked, "And what do we get for it?"

Inatukk said, "Today I will spare you to show my respect for you." He looked at the owl to be sure he was saying the right thing, and the owl blinked its approval. Inatukk went

on. “And I will give you my word that in all the time to come, my people will show you that respect. We will take from your herds and dens and breathing holes only what we need to survive. We will respect the spirit in you and pay homage to it so that it will pass on to the next ones yet to be born. If you bring your kind back onto the tundra and the sea ice so that my people will not die of hunger, you may go free this day.”

“Well said,” the owl told Inatukk. The boy smiled happily.

The fox said to the caribou and the seal, “We must discuss this offer.”

“A good idea,” said the seal, and it and the caribou followed the fox a short distance away, where they talked in whispers.

The owl said to the boy, “Your people must always keep your word. If the animals once again populate the land, food will be plentiful. But if the people do not keep this promise, if they kill and take needlessly, there will be hunger as they have never before known. There will be no living thing on this land where we now stand.”

The fox, the caribou, and the seal returned. The fox spoke for them. “We agree,” it said. “The promise is made. And it will never be broken by us.”

“A thousand is better than three,” the owl said to Inatukk.

“You are free to go,” Inatukk told them. “I will return and tell my people that once again the land will be rich with

life, and there will be no more hunger in their bellies. My people will remember and honor the promise made to you and all your kind on this day.”

“A thousand is better than three,” the owl said again. “Any hunter may bring back three. You have brought back a thousand. The story of this will be told and remembered for all the winters to come, Inatukk. Never let your promise be forgotten.”