

Immanjarok and the Shaman's Ghost

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Seated in an idling yellow snowplow the Indian man studies a distant ghost. Ten thousand years of hunting heritage direct the flits and dilations of his eyes, admitting floods of information. His mind sorts the sensory input with limitless expertise.

The ghost is a white figure on a snowfield touched copper-pink by the dawn sun.

The sun is a golden ball being hauled out of a bucket of blood.

No man walks out here, the man reasons, not alone in winter. It must be a ghost. The man squints. And see—a large low white mass follows obediently. That must be nanuq, a polar bear. Nanuq stalks men, but not when it's that close.

So. I am looking at a ghost leading nanuq.

Just before dawn I'm entranced by a milkwhite auroral streak that arches from north snowy horizon to south snowy horizon. When it fades and is gone I'm released from the spell and walk again. *Fifteen miles to Barrow and a hot shower.* My supply sled bumps along behind me, nosing steeply up over humps of snow before crashing down my side. In the darkness of Arctic winter I can only tell the horizon ahead because the stars stop abruptly in a line.

As I walk the snow and ice speak beneath my boots. There are deep coughs as snow granules are crushed together and tight squeaks like screws boring into dry wood. At other times I hear the catastrophic bending of plate metal; the muffled crump of artillery in a war movie; the sweet crack of a baseball bat.

The air sits as a heavy block on the land, frigid and dry, supercooled and sterile as though it derives from a canister of liquid oxygen. It has no taste. It does not move.

When I see a glimpse of light on the horizon ahead I stop walking and squint. Waving dense fog away from my frostbite mask, I hold my breath. Again? Yes—a blink. A spark. A twinkle of light, far off. I wait. It's still there. A chill wriggles down my spine and my scalp prickles. Not just because sweat is already freezing inside my clothes, but because of a word: *immanjarok*.

“Immanjarok,” the Indian woman had warned me, weeks ago, about lights out on the tundra.

“The Little People. They trick you. It’s dark most of the time in Winter, right? So they trick you with lights. You see a light out there and then you follow it out on the sea ice and then the ice breaks and you drown.”

“Huh,” I’d said.

“Yep,” she’d said, “Immanjarok. Little people that trick you. If you see a light out there on the land, don’t follow it.”

The sparkle dwindles out, leaving a patch of darkness that seems to wriggle. I scrape my goggles and check my compass. The spark was dead ahead, right on my bearing for Barrow. I have to go that way.

Trekking across the surface of the frozen ocean I think about the Little People while groans and crashing sounds suggest that I’m walking on the roof of a cathedral and large pieces are falling away underfoot. Many cultures’ lore includes mysterious night lights. In Germany they’re known as *irrlichter*—crazy lights. In the Icelandic mythos they’re the torches carried by wights, land-spirits that also lead men astray.

Now—as I wrestle the sled up off the sea ice and onto a frozen beach—there’s another wink, this time on the edge of my vision. I hop up from my work and look left and right. My clothes are loud, iced and crackling, which seems to interfere with my vision. But there! And then it blinks, no more than a sprite, a mote; a speck of gold swept past you in a clear stream. Am I losing my mind? *Immanjarok*.

Between me and Barrow there are fissures in the snow; not as deep as crevasses, but they’re often snowed over with a thin crust and they swallow up a couple of snowmobiles every winter. There are polar bears, too. Even in town you aren’t safe; people in Barrow leave their doors unlocked so everyone has a place to duck into when *nanuq* comes. I’ve obsessed about polar bears for months. The mental stress has been enormous. Every day, out shooting video or recording sound, I’ve been on edge, anticipating the heavy tackle from behind.

Were the Little People leading me towards a crack in the snow, or maybe a desperate, winter-hungry bear?

Scanning for nanuq, I turn back over my shoulder, East. The lowest cuticle of the horizon brimms a dull orange. In moments the snowfields are burnished pink-white.

I turn west again. Ahead is a telephone pole, a dark toothpick standing on the horizon. A gleam of yellow flares near it and, though it vanishes quickly, I know it wasn't a mirage.

Later, nearing the telephone pole, I see a big yellow snowplow clearing the ice road to town. I wave and then drag down my frostbite mask as the snowplow slows and an Indian man leans over to open the passenger-side door. He tells me to hop in. I lash the sled to the back bumper and climb into the metal monster. We roll along in silence for a minute. I'm thawing out.

"What you been doin out there on the land?" the Indian man asks. His voice is calm and broad. He's the first person I've seen in ten days.

"Just looking around, I guess. I wanted to feel the cold."

After a pause he nods and says "You been talking to the creator."

"Guess so."

Later he says "You know when I first saw you I thought you was a ghost."

"How's that?"

"You was a mile out but I saw you and I thought you was the ghost of a old shaman who used to live out East there."

"A shaman dragging a sled? Did they drag sleds?"

"I dunno," he says, "but there was a old one who lived out East there. Shamans was kinda crazy guys, they had to live alone. People was scared of 'em. So he lived out there except when he came into town for supplies or to heal someone or get drunk something. I thought you was his ghost, leading a polar bear. I couldn't see too good, you know. So I thought your white sled was a polar bear following you."

"I'm glad it wasn't."

"Yeah," he laughs, "me too, I guess."

"Hey," I ask, "Have you been out here long? Did you see lights out here before sunup?"

"What, you mean Little People?"

"Well,"

“There’s all kinda lights out here on the land,” he says, “Nobody knows what they are. Maybe you saw my headlights.”

“No, it was just one light and it didn’t move.”

“Yeah,” he says, smiling, “I seen that out here sometimes.”

The Indian man shifts gears and turns for town.

About the author: *Cameron M. Smith is a writer in Portland, Oregon. He has traveled from the Arctic to the equator in some of the least-reasonable ways imaginable, including trekking across ice caps and sailing a primitive log raft on the Pacific. His writing has appeared in South American Explorer, Archaeology, Playboy, Spaceflight and many other magazines, and in the anthologies They Lived to Tell the Tale: True Stories of Adventure from the Legendary Explorers Club and The Best Travel Writing 2008. He’ll return to Alaska’s north shore in Winters 2008-2009 to pilot a paraglider over the terrain and SCUBA dive beneath the sea ice. His blog covers his recent activities:*

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