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ON THE ICE

EACH SPRING CAME THE SEAL HUNT. The sealing captains knew they had to reach the ice by the middle of March and hunt through the early days of April. If they waited too long the seals would swim north following the melting ice floes, the ice and the seals both chasing the cold.

The S. S. Newfoundland was forty years old and made of wood, and the fleet owners agreed to give the vessel a head start, leaving the notch out of St. John's Bay hours before the steel steamships. The S. S. Newfoundland had to make a stop at Wesleyville to pick up the heartier half of its crew. "Sealers for generations, they were." The weeks on the ice were miserable, but it was better for the young sealers to tell how much they loved being out there on the ice.

Some of them would think, *why did I come this year?* Those who had been doing so for twenty years wondered why they had come again. For the younger ones, it was certainly the excitement. Their thoughts of sealing were like other young men's thoughts of war. The young ones had heard their fathers and uncles telling of the adventures and hardships endured—a necessary rite of passage for Newfoundland men. Men in their late twenties who had never been sealing were often spoken about.

But there were men in their thirties and forties who had been sealing enough times before, had endured the cramped quarters, had worked on the cold ice, and had sworn they would never do so again. Then came February and another hungry winter, and their families were in hard need of money. The cod season would not start until May or June, and they would not see their first wages from fishing until well after that. When they did, there was that fucking "truck system," where the cod owners paid the sealers in company script, which forced them to buy everything from company stores, leaving little actual money that was their own. At least with sealing the money was real and calculated simply and fairly on the number of seals killed. There was always the chance that a sealer could make over a hundred

dollars if the season was strong. It was more likely they would get between twenty to thirty dollars for their weeks on the ice. Still, it would be enough to get to the cod season.

It took a few days to reach the ice and the seals. For the sealers, there was nothing to do but sit in cramped spaces, if there were places to sit at all, the bunks pressed on top of one another, the men pressed into the small spaces below deck. The air outside was too cold in the wind.

“Like it now boy?” an old sealer would say. It was his eighteenth year on the ice, and he was well into his thirties. “Wait until you have to sleep with seal skin and seal fat and the stench rises something incredible.”

“You think it smells bad now,” another would say.

“So greasy and smelly the fat is. You will soon be missing the next fellow’s shit stink.”

To pass the time, there was always the complaining about food. The fleet owners were cheap motherfuckers, and although they would deduct nine dollars from each sealer’s pay for food and equipment, they would still try to stretch or ignore the new laws, which required them to provide beef on Sundays and fish and brewis on three different mornings per week. Who was going to see them this far out in the North Atlantic, and what sealers had the balls to tell any authorities once they got back? The cook on this trip was a son of a bitch with never a smile or even a neutral look on his face. He did not pay heed to the new rules, and the captain did not make him, so the men did as they did every year: took what food they could and carried along their own supplies. The good stuff they brought they would eat early on the voyage, and they would be left with some rolled oats and raisins. The fucking boat could be counted on only for hard tack and tea, and you had to heat the fucking tea yourself.

Old sealers also passed the time by scaring the new ones.

“You know, when a sealer dies on the ice, you have to get them back home, for otherwise they have an awful time finding it themselves.”

“And there’s no place for them on the ice. There’s no place to go, even if they fall through the ice and the cod eat them. God won’t take you back when you die on the ice.”

“Or fall through the ice for that matter.”

“That’s different. There’s a bible ceremony, and the captain says some

words before they drop you in.”

“That’s why it’s so important to bring back every man who dies on the ice.”

“I expect they’ll be a few on this trip alright—always is. Sometimes it’s the older fellers who should have left it alone years ago.”

“Or more so it could be a young shit like yourself, not knowing any better, and pissing off your shipmates so no one will watch after you.”

“That’s right. And if we can’t fish them out the dead sealer will go looking for a place forever.”

“They say the dead sealers often try to go home. But something about being dead in a house of live relatives makes them turn out and look for another place.”

“No one knows why.”

“Sometimes you can see them wandering in their own town, and when they can’t find nothing there they wander in other towns.”

“Ever wonder why you little shits are afraid of an empty house?”

“The dead sealer doesn’t want you there.”

“He doesn’t want to have to start wandering again. And if he can’t scare you away, he’ll have to start looking for another house.”

“Where do you live?”

“Oh, dead sealers all up and down Bonavista Peninsula, Upper Amherst Cove too, I’d bet.”

“Maybe you’ll be one of them.”

The market in 1914 was good for seal hides. The women of Europe preferred the pelts of the young whitecoat seals after someone had transformed them into coats, belts, and shoes. In the St. John’s processing plants, the seal fat was rendered, filtered, and sold at a good profit. Seal oil burns well and doesn’t give off the foul odour of whale oil. The small amount of flipper meat they would harvest would not be sold off the island of Newfoundland.

The owners knew it was important to keep expenses low. It would be better to have all new steel ships that could break through the ice, but the profits only allowed them to purchase a new ship every few years, so it was worthwhile to employ ships like the S. S. Newfoundland. At forty years old, it was no great ice breaker, but if the ship became iced in, the men could jump out, chop the ice with axes and gaffs to make a pathway, and pull her through with long ropes. In recent years there had also been calls to install

wireless on the old wooden ships so they could reach the seals more quickly, but it had not been proven to the owners that wireless would result in the additional seals to justify the expense. They had tried it on the S. S. Newfoundland but had taken it out after the last season.

Walking on the ice was a necessary skill for sealers to learn. Young Newfoundland boys practised on floes that had drifted close to the shore. Beyond the waves those floes were relatively still. In the North Atlantic, the ice pans moved violently with the ocean currents and the wake from the ship. The ship could only get so close to the edge of the ice, and only the most seasoned among them did not find it unnerving when they jumped down from the ship's rope. Their weight made the ice move, and it took several leaps from pan to moving pan before the sealers reached a piece of ice large enough to give them the illusion of solid ground.

Hood and harp seals come by the hundreds of thousands, littering the large floes off the coasts of Labrador and Newfoundland. The seals left in the fall from Baffin Island in the Arctic Circle, travelling and eating until they reached the whelping ice.

The females mated here in the summer, and they came back for the flat ice suitable for birthing their pups. During their slow southern migration, the pregnant seals ate voraciously. They needed to fatten quickly to provide enough milk for the pups, and their milk was rich in fat, allowing the pups to grow at an incredible rate, gaining nearly fifty pounds in the first two weeks.

The male seals liked the cod in these waters and the capelin that the cod fed upon. The male seals also liked the females after the whelping was done. Each season, male and female seals selected different partners.

Whitecoats were what the sealers wanted—newborn pups just a few weeks old, born when March was new. Their coats were yellow when newborn and turned white after three or so days. They only stayed white for two weeks, after which they became raggedy jackets, called so by the sealers for the dark spots on their white fur. Raggedy jackets could still be taken but were not as desirable as when the pups were pure white.

Adult seals weighed over three hundred pounds and could also be marketed for their pelts and their fat, but these older seals were more difficult to catch and would have the sense and physical skill to swim away when the sealers came. Only the crew's assigned marksmen were authorized to shoot

older seals before the men reached the seal pan with their clubs. It was important for adult seals to be taken with one head shot.

“Over the side!”

The group watch spotted some whitecoats on a small pan. It was nothing like the herds of thousands they were looking for, but he ordered some younger boys from Bonavista to go and get them. *Let’s see how they do*, he thought.

The seals made a tremendous noise as the sealers approached, the parents barking and the pups crying. The pups somehow knew of the dangers, and they pleaded for their mothers not to abandon them. In the cacophony, every mother knew her baby’s voice.

“I don’t know.”

“Keep going.”

“They sound like my sister crying.”

Most of the adult seals would leave, flopping into the safety of the water, leaving their white fluffy pups screaming for them to come back, searching for their mother’s figures taken over by these taller creatures with large clubs.

The male seals would flee and not come back until the danger was over. The mothers were more confused. They would go into the water and come back again, barking incessantly. Sometimes a mother would stay to protect her pups, and she would be easily dismissed by a strong blow to the head.

“They don’t even feel it. Just give ‘em a quick hit on the top.”

The whitecoats’ eyes were terrified. It was better when they were screaming, as they would open their mouths wide, and the sealers could convince themselves that this was a sign of aggression. It was harder when they looked at you and made no sound.

“No, hit ‘em harder just above the eyes. You don’t want ‘em to suffer.”

The young man raised the gaff over his head, this time so the angle was almost perpendicular to his shoulders.

Screaming, crying, and struggling their fat little bodies, their eyes searched for their mothers, who had abandoned them. Then there was a sharp-pitched cry at impact, and a specific place in the world was silent amidst all the barking around them.

Stillness was preferred, but some pups would still be writhing on the ice, their fat bodies struggling for something. The sealers all hoped that the

skinners would wait until the baby seals stopped moving.

Even when the blood stained the white of their heads, one could still see the innocence in their eyes.

“Stop crying. The others will see you.”

Then the men got to work skinning the baby seals. When the sealer slit the animals down the belly, the heat from their young bodies would send steam into the North Atlantic air. A whitecoat’s stomach would be filled with its mother’s milk, and when the stomach was busted it would spill quickly, making a puddle whiter than the ice. The whitecoat’s blood, some twelve pints of it, would pour out more slowly, turning the ice pink when it mixed with the milk. For nourishment, and for luck, some of the men would drink the seal’s blood, and some would eat its heart and liver, raw and still warm. The experienced skinners cut away from the bone where the muscle meets the fat and were mindful to keep all the fat attached to the slippery pelt. They would leave just a piece of shoulder meat near one flipper that could be eaten later on the ship. Whatever meat was left could be sold once they returned to St. John’s. The flipper meat would need to be cut off before the pelts and fat were stacked and stored.

The sealers then began dragging the pelts back to the ship. If they were successful on the pans with thousands of seals, there would be too many to drag back, and instead the sealers would plant a flag on the ice to pick up the pelts later. Too often, other sealers would steal the pelts or replace the flag with their own.

The carcasses of bone, meat, and heads were left on the ice to drift in the North Atlantic sun. In the cold air, it took time for the carcasses to decompose. Perhaps the gulls that made it this far out to sea could eat them. If left close enough to the edge, the sun might melt the ice, and the carcasses would slip into the water and something from the ocean could eat them. Otherwise, the carcasses would slowly rot.

It would be absurd to ask the sealers to make the effort to throw the carcasses into the ocean.

It had been nearly three weeks on the ice, and the S. S. Newfoundland only had four hundred pelts thus far. The ice was thick, and the ship was often iced in, so the crew was focused more on pulling the ship through than on killing seals. The young captain was becoming desperate, his fear of fail-

ure growing.

As he had been for days, the captain looked toward his father's ship for help. His father was the greatest sealing captain of them all, and he had promised to help his son if he could. Since the S. S. Newfoundland did not have a wireless, the captain looked for the prearranged secret signal: a derrick positioned at an unusual angle. Although they worked for competing companies, the father had promised to signal his son after he had found a good deal of seals that his boy could share in.

The captain and the first hand looked at the sky and then at their glass. The weather should hold, they agreed. To their fear of failure was added an element of greed. A second hand's share was several times that of a sealer's, and the captain's share was ten times as much.

Normally second hands were afforded the luxury of staying off the ice during the seal hunt, but he agreed to lead the next group himself, even though it was a long walk to the seals and they'd have to turn back in a couple of hours.

Sealers primarily walk in single file, which distributes the weight on the ice. Too much weight on one end of a floe, and they would tip into the sea. From above it resembles a thin and lengthy creature—an ugly eel with hundreds of dirty feet, the disks of the eel's spine tending to cluster.

The sealers jumped from pan to moving pan, careful not to touch the water, as wet feet would make for a miserable day. "Keep your face from the wind" was a cry often heard, as faces could be bitten badly by the cold—even on temperate days like this one—and over time it could turn a face ugly. The walking was more difficult when there were hills made from drifts of snow and the sealers had to dig their hobnail boots deeper to steady themselves. They would use their long poles for balance and for vaulting from one ice pan to another. This useful pole had gaffs on the end they could use to both club seals and pull them on the ice.

The second hand was at the head of the line and could not see the men conspiring well behind him.

"Not going any farther."

"Anyone can see there's a storm brewing."

"I've seen the sun hounds. You all have."

Sun hounds were shapes that bracketed the sun, like parentheses of light. They occurred just after sunrise when the globe of the sun was just off the horizon. The sealers knew it meant that a fuck of a storm was coming,

and many of them thought it was God's way of warning them. The closer the sun hounds were to the rising sun, the worse was the storm, and this morning the sun hounds were almost touching.

"We're spending the night on the Stephano. Have to be."

"Might not make the Stephano."

"What will the captain say?"

"Fuck him, I say."

Even if some of the others felt the same, there were no orders to turn back. Those who did were greeted by an angry captain.

"You're a bunch of grandmothers! You'll get no pay for this or the next day."

They sunk low in their bunks below deck, most of them quiet, just a talkative few jabbering away to justify their turning back and leaving the other men to go on. Anxiety and tedium would be theirs for the next several days. Shame would be theirs for some time to come.

Those who had not gone back to the S. S. Newfoundland felt they had made the right decision when they saw the Stephano some hours later. It was a larger and more modern ship, and its steel hull could break through the ice without the help of axes and men pulling on ropes. When the men from the S. S. Newfoundland climbed aboard the new ship, they found that most of the sealers from the Stephano were out killing seals to the north, and they could pretend the ship was theirs. They found that the hard tack on the Stephano tasted better, and the tea was more refreshing. Most, however, did not have time for their tea to become warm.

"Take your boys over the side," the captain of the Stephano said. "There are swiles a mile north. Take about fifteen hundred pelts and then head back to your ship."

"Sir," was all the second hand of the S. S. Newfoundland would say.

"Go, you'll be fine," the captain said dismissively. "My glass says the weather will hold."

The second hand looked around for help, but there was none. A lack of judgment met with a lack of courage. No one would contradict the captain.

The second hand ordered the men of the S. S. Newfoundland back onto the ice, but the sealers were confused. Before climbing down the ropes, they all looked at the sky.

When he heard the grumbling, the second hand did not have the focus to correct them. When he told the captain's orders to some of his closest

men, they could not help but notice that he was crying. He still remembered the sealing season of 1898, when he had seen forty-eight men die on the ice.

After less than an hour of walking, the weather got worse, the rain turned to snow, and the wind made the snow into drifts.

“No swiles today. Turn back,” the second hand said. “I’ll stay to the rear.”

“You should be in front.”

“I want to make sure all come along.”

The S. S. Newfoundland was farther away than anyone had thought, and the snow was blowing over the trail they had made earlier in the day. It also blew out traces of the ocean and the sky, and no one had thought to bring a compass. The S. S. Newfoundland sounded its whistle only twice and was too far away to guide its crew. Many of the sealers did not feel like moving, as they did not have the energy after a long day of walking on the ice, and those who had gotten their feet wet could no longer feel them. Others wished the day had not started so warmly, as it would have made them bring along more clothing. Eight hours before, they had walked around with their shirts off and their smiles wide, their Newfoundland-born skin laughing at the cold.

“We’ll have to bunk for the night. Build some shelters for the wind.”

They were on a pan of ice in the North Atlantic many miles away from shore. They could not see in any direction. This was not land but a floating piece of ice. Only seals were designed to spend a night there. If they lived through the night, it might be clearer and warmer by morning.

“Build them high enough! With wings to block the wind!”

The sealers tried to get pieces of heavy ice from the end of the floes, and they piled them high enough that a watch of men could cluster together and the wind would not hit them in the head.

“I should not have fucking come this year. Could have gotten money some other way.”

“Last year, I fucking tell you. Last fucking year.”

When it turned dark, the temperature dropped twenty degrees. They managed to build several fires using the wood from the gaffs that would ignite from the years covered in seal fat. The fires only helped if you got close enough to them, and there were too many men trying to keep warm. When

they moved away, it felt even colder in the wind.

“You have to keep moving.”

“March, you fuckers.”

“No need for that.”

The men marched in circles on the ice pans, and the wind forced their path into the shape of an egg that continued to flatten.

Some of the sealers became disoriented in the darkness, wandered a few feet away, and fell into the sea. The others heard the screaming more than the splash. Even after they were fished out, the shock from the cold water killed them in an agonizing minute.

“We’re all going to die, aren’t we?”

Men in their forties were not grateful they had lived this long. Men in their teens and early twenties thought about how unfair it all was. They had spent so much time and energy figuring how they might eek a living off the hard land and the sea around Newfoundland, and they had often wondered if they should go somewhere else: Halifax, Montreal, the United States? They had also spent so much time looking for a girl they might marry. How unfair they had not yet fucked any of them.

“Keep moving!”

Some started singing, chanting, and doing old folk melodies of past ship and sailing disasters. Some of the men tried to tell jokes.

“Wish we had some pints.”

“Nip of fucking whisky would be better.”

“I would even take that shittin’ screech right now.”

Some stopped moving. *If only I could lie down and sleep a minute.* The ones who lay down were mostly dead.

At morning light there were mounds of men, their bodies covered in windy snow, scattered in no pattern on the ice. Some were kind enough to walk away from the other sealers before they died. Others were dragged away. The lazy men from the watch that had no ends on its barriers were mostly gone. The men from the watch that had higher barriers with better ends were still alive.

It was still snowing, but the sealers could tell from the colours of the sky that it would soon clear. When the sun had risen completely, they formed teams of stronger sealers to go look for the ship. Many of them were weakened by the cold, and there was no chance they could jump from pan to pan on the ice.

All day both the walkers and the ones waiting would see ships in the distance and be encouraged and frustrated. *The ships are right fucking there. Why aren't they looking for us? Why aren't they sounding the whistle?* The walkers told themselves to keep walking and soon they would be seen, as the ships looked iced in and could not move. But they did move, and they kept moving farther away from them. For those waiting, the ice hallucinations were of men walking with warm soup or a ship breaking through the ice and coming fast at fifteen knots or so, its bow casting a smile. Some saw the reassuring faces of dead grandmothers in the sky.

The day took a long time to pass, and the sealers knew the night would take even longer, but they still would not take clothes off the dead sealers. *Take the clothes off the dead!* someone would have screamed from the little towns along Newfoundland's hard coast. *No one would ever blame you!*

Some men gave in to the cold. Those who could not die by themselves said *fuck it* and walked off the ice pan into the water to die a hell of a lot faster. When they saw the darkness coming again, some chose that time to die, and in their last moments they were amazed at the power of giving up. However, most of them died hard, very hard, their frozen bodies struggling for hours as they lay on the ground.

When you freeze to death, the body tries hard to save you. It pulls the heat from your fingers and toes, hands and feet, and then legs and arms. Those pieces of you can be given up, as the body focuses on keeping more vital places warm.

When the body temperature falls just slightly, say to ninety-seven degrees, there's just a tenseness, mostly in the neck and shoulders.

At a body temperature of ninety-five degrees, you start to shiver, sometimes violently. This is the body's way of exercising in case you do not have the strength to keep moving.

At ninety-three, amnesia begins, and you cannot remember the last few moments, only the distant ones. At ninety-one you fall into a kind of apathy,

and at ninety you will most likely be in a stupor.

As your body temperature reaches below eighty-eight, you stop shivering, and you have an incredible need to piss. You hope at this time you have the sense not to piss in your pants, as that would freeze everything right there.

At eighty-seven you do not recognize your brother's face standing next to you. All you hear is the sound of bells in your ears.

At eighty-five, just before you lose consciousness, your skin feels like it is on fire, and the burning will make you pull the clothes off your body.

You hope to be one of the ones who give in and allow the end to come calmly. The unlucky ones struggle in their delirium before they lose consciousness and finally die.

“Keep walking. Keep fucking walking!”

Now there were too many bodies in the snow, and the sealers did not have the strength to drag them away, so they stepped over their dead brothers on every loop.

“My eyes are frozen shut!”

His friend bit the ice off his eyelids, and in the cold he did not feel his friend take away part of his lashes and his lids. The ice even pulled the skin off his friend's lips.

Men who had never touched before rubbed each other all over their bodies, pressed their torsos together, wrapped their arms around one another, and humped each other in groups. They constantly pounded themselves and each other to break off the ice coating all parts of their bodies. The ones whose mouths were too frozen to chew their hard tack asked their friends to chew it for them and then place the mush in their mouths.

Some could not move anymore, and there was nothing to do but wait to die. Time elongated in the pain that had no relief. So many times, they thought this must be it. How could it keep going on? Surely, they must be dying. *Why don't I just die?*

They remembered nights in their childhood when they were afraid to drift off to sleep because they felt like they might never wake up again, and then the next morning they could never remember how they had finally

drifted away.

When some fell to the ice, it meant they had died while standing, but for others the fall came from sleep, and the impact would revive them. There was a mild level of comfort to the few sealers who adopted this strategy.

The dawn eventually came again, and now there were many more sealers dead than alive. On one of the ice pans there were only dead bodies now, a floating ice cemetery with the mounds covered in snow.

Men looked around their freezing pans, wondering who would die next. Some smiled at their dilemma. Some remembered past grievances. *I lasted longer than that fucker*, they thought.

They had to go out again, walk again, search for the ships. They had to try. No one was looking for them. The second hand selected five he thought were strong enough to make the trip.

“These fuckers are not coming for us.”

“The fucking father and the idiot son.”

“They sent us to die to look for seals.”

The despair was incredible, but tears would only freeze on their faces.

It was only when the fucking father and the idiot son saw the staggering sealers that they realized they had ordered the men onto the ice and left them there to die. They would tell how horrified they had felt when they saw the men stumbling back and how they had erupted into action and enlisted all nearby ships to help in the rescue.

Several of the men saw their rescuers approaching and chose that time to die. Strangely cruel that was. They had suffered for suffering’s own sake.

The ones who could walk were helped to the nearest ships. Most were taken on stretchers and would never walk again.

The dead were carried back too—scores of them, stiff from the cold. They were lined together side by side on the ship’s deck, faces frozen in their last expressions. There was not enough space, and the bodies had to be stacked. The rescuers were thankful when an old sail was placed over the



“Rescue Operation after S. S. Newfoundland Sealing Disaster,” *Newfoundland Quarterly* (Summer 1914)

bodies and all they could see were points on the surface where arms and legs had frozen up in the air.

There were sealers who could not be found. They had wandered off to freeze alone or fall into the Atlantic, and their souls had to find their way back to Newfoundland and wander about their hometowns. Had badly they would feel haunting their own families.

There was such a sense of relief when the surviving sealers of the S. S. Newfoundland finally got on board another ship after fifty-four hours on the ice. They were given hot tea and rum to warm them. The cook was not a son of a bitch and made them a stew with the best of the meat and vegetables he had left.

Then their limbs started to thaw and felt as if they were on fire. The sealers said it was like pouring boiling water on the skin. The screaming lasted for a long time, and the groaning lasted all the way back to St. John's.

The sealers took a constant inventory of their bodies, thinking and re-thinking about which parts would remain and which parts would be lost. The trip took a day and a half, so they had time to be hopeful and to think about where they would tell the doctor to saw off parts of their arms and legs.

Those who could sleep did so, their exhaustion at a level few creatures experience. Others could not sleep, chasing the visions that would last the rest of their lives.

The survivors thought of how the world would be after something like this. They had survived, but their hard lives would continue. The simple men would plod on, making the best of things. The more intelligent among them would search for a face they could show everyone and train their muscles to hold it. How many stories would they be forced to tell?