

# **The story of Nuntaq, the runner**

Andrew Cook, February 2019

Nuntaq was the second human to whom A'akuluujjusi the Seal Goddess gave breath. He was a great runner, and moved across the ice and rock of Winter like the wind. In Summer his footprints stretched for miles across the great tundra.

But Nuntaq also loved to argue. With anyone and everyone he met, he found something to quarrel about. Or to complain about. Or just to shout about in an obnoxious manner.

He insulted Qilalugaqqirniqtaq the Narwhal, who slipped back into the sea and did not show himself for months. He scowled at Pisukkaa'q the Fox, who then made himself white so as to be invisible against the snow (except for two beady black eyes that followed Nuntaq around). He berated the Moon and the Sun and Stars for no good reason; who then took turns to hide away from him in a quiet place beneath the Earth. Even the Seal Goddess was scolded, so her children refused to come near any of the ice holes that Nuntaq cut.

Soon, nobody wanted to speak to Nuntaq. He was perfectly happy about this... He argued and shouted and quarrelled because he looked at everyone else and could not see himself. "Who am I?" he shouted at the sky in fury. Inside he was so sad and alone - that he dare not even think of feeling his sadness. So instead, at night he sat by a fire, fuming. His anger was so infective that Ikkumayok the Fire Spirit – who up to now had been peaceful and gentle - began to burn angrily and with a fierce all-consuming rage.

One day the Seal Goddess came to see him and asked him to be a little more kind to his fellows. In reply, Nuntaq cursed and spat on the ground in ill temper.

"So" - said the Seal Goddess. "You are Nuntaq the Runner?"

"Yes – obviously" said Nuntaq, pulling a sour face at her.

"Then you should run", said the Seal.

Nuntaq found that his legs were moving themselves. And he began to run. Faster and faster he ran. Soon he overtook the Wind. He looked back at it in surprise – but his legs just carried on moving. The day finished as Siqiniq the Sun hid from him, and pushed Taqqiq the Moon along with her Stars up into the sky so they could take their turn. But Nuntaq continued to run.

Time passed. Sun and Moon came and went many times, and warm Summer turned to icy Winter. Still Nuntaq ran, and the ground moved under him as a blur. Deep winter came, and a storm greater than he had ever seen moved towards him. The wind was heavy with sharp ice, and it tore at his smock and leggings.

Greater and greater blew the wind, and after shredding his clothes it stung his skin and he yelped. Then it started to shred Nuntaq himself. But he still kept running – he just couldn't help himself. He begged the Seal Goddess to let him stop and make a shelter. But there was no reply, and gradually all of Nuntaq's flesh was taken by the wind and ice. Even his bones were scoured white. Still he carried on running through the blind white gale, which rushed through his eye sockets and cleaned out his brains. The only part left that was even the slightest bit soft was his heart – which showed red through the white cage of his ribs. And still he ran.

Eventually his bones were also reduced by the ice blast, and their white dust fell onto the white snow. All that remained was their raw marrow – and the beating heart. And still Nuntaq ran.

Old man Winter turned his head towards where Spring lay sleeping, and stroked her forehead with his cold hand. Her eyes opened, laughing and bright green. The gale softened, the ice needles fell to Earth and melted. Tiny Gentians and blades of grass trembled under the ice in expectation, as the Sun drew them up out of the ground.

Then a strange thing happened. Nuntaq's heart began drawing all kind of flotsam and jetsam towards it, as if it were a magnet. And whatever touched him stuck – just like a fly might stick to a spiders web. Or maybe more like a baby might latch onto its mothers breast. Or as one snowflake might embrace and melt into another as they fall to Earth beside each other.

Nuntaq felt each piece as it stuck fast to him.

A hair from the coat of Atiqtaalaaq the White Bear was the first to come. Closely followed by a grain of sand that had been blown high by the wind all the way from Africa.

A tear shed by Okkpik the Owl when she took her very first mouse in her very first summer landed directly on his heart. Nuntaq felt a certain companionship in that.

He was less certain about the drop of urine from Qimmiq the Dog. And even less willing to touch the hot air, moist with mucous and snot from the blowhole of Aġvik the Whale. But Nuntaq had no choice in the matter – all he could do was watch.

The left hindleg of an Ant gatecrashed the party. A small piece of dried dung dropped ten seasons ago by Ijiraq the Caribou also made its home, next to a very small (so small it was almost invisible) piece of the Altai Mountains.

A fragment of Avaalaqiaq's silvery bark and one of Pingik's green Larch needles adorned the growing and jostling crowd that was gradually taking shape around Nuntaq. Here too was pollen from Katsitsanóron, the sweetest of flowers.

Shards of light from the Sun, Moon and Stars also somehow joined in, as did the shapes and colours of the landscape that he was running through.

A particle of dust that had fallen from Nutjuitok the Pole star. A whisp of moss. A flake of Kalugruak the Salmon (that Aklark the Bear had half-eaten and left on a rock to dry in the sun). And even stranger things came from times and places that lie on the edges of imagination. Nuntaq sensed that each fragment was grateful - joyful about being taken into this growing bundle of oddments around Nuntaq's heart.

And so it continued, seemingly for ever.

There came a moment when Nuntaq realised that he could see. And what he saw – was that Seal was watching him closely, curiously, with something of a sparkle in her eye. He looked down, and found that he, Nuntaq, had a body once more. It was standing naked in a large field of white Spring flowers. The Sun also was also beaming at him in a strange way – almost like it was nudging the Sky and telling a private joke.

The world was an infinity of stillness. The lightest of warm breezes rose from the South and caressed his face. In it was the scent of ice and distant pine forests.

More stillness filled a space, that echoed a time before there was even an Earth.

A long lost memory stirred from deep inside Nuntaq, and he started to speak to the Seal...

“Who am ...”

“?”

Before his lips had formed the first word-shape, Nuntaq knew that the question was already answered. He was everything. There was not one part of this world from sea to lake to mountain, or any animal or fish or bird from the largest to the tiniest, or any plant from any place on Earth – that was not inside him. There was no point naming Tulugaq the Raven as he flew above Nuntaq on

his way home - because a fragment one of Tulugaq's wing feathers was also now Nuntaq. There was nothing that was not Nuntaq, just as he was also Tulugaq.

Just as he was everyone.

And everything.

The Seal looked at him curiously again ... and Nuntaq realised that the one thing that had not stuck to him was – a piece of Seal.

There was another long silence as his mind tried to find the question that would seek the answer to the indescribable feeling in the middle of his breast. He was still searching for it, fumbling for its shape under mossy stones (that had come to rest a couple of inches under his scalp) just as a child would hunt for crabs, when Seal started to speak :

“It's good to have you back.”

She smiled.

“You know, you are really hardly any different from the Nuntaq I used to know ... ”

Nuntaq blinked. The Seal's eyes were deep pools. They would be full of Stars, if only he could fall far enough into them. They were no longer standing on the field, but he was on the sea-ice.

Nuntaq was wearing his best sealskin trousers and smock, with warm sealskin boots. What he thought was Seal's right eye was actually a circular ice hole in which Seal's head was visible. What he had thought was the left eye turned into the shape of his wife, as she rose from where she had been curled up, asleep in a small hollow. For a long time her face and dark sealskins had not walked into the front of his memory.

“Do I really have a wife?” said Nuntaq to himself in surprise and not a little wonder.

Nuntaq realised that the Seal was speaking to him. It was all a bit too much like a dream. He took so long to shake himself and feel awake enough - that he only caught the last couple of sentences ...

“ ... I Love everything in this world. I suppose you could say I always put my heart into everything I make ... You should consider doing the same”, said the Seal.

As her last word came to its end the Seal's nostrils closed, her nose disappeared under the dark water without a ripple, and Nuntaq was left staring at a reflection of the sky. The Sun beamed happily.

“No”, said Nuntaq to the ice hole. “I am not Nuntaq the Runner. But what I really am – my real name – that might take quite a while to discover.”

He turned towards his wife, Tupaksimayok. The dark pools at the centre of her eyes reminded him of something. But hard as he tried, he really couldn't remember what it was. Maybe if he searched hard enough – he would find it again?

She smiled.

A'akuluujjusi and the Sun and the Sky watched, as they always do. The Seal Goddess turned to the Sun and said “Didn't you once ask me – why I made Humans to be hunters?”

## NOTES

This, so far as I know, is *not* an Inuit tale. But I have used Inuit words because that is how it came into my mind – a story that *could* have come from that culture; and somehow it seemed important that the animals and other characters be given names far older than any than can be found in my own language. The Seal Goddess is named after the Inuit Goddess who first created humans from her clothes. Again, how it came to me was as a Seal, and somehow that feels right. The name Nuntaq is my own invention, and has no meaning at all. His wife's name (Tupaksimayok) means “is awake”. The first version I wrote had Nuntaq being the first human created, his wife being made by the Seal/A'akuluujjusi from the abraded parts of Nuntaq's body “because I don't waste anything”. It also works. But I think this version works better.