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Introduction

In the Federal Aviation Administration's lexicon of world airports, it's AKP. To the post office it's 99721. To the state of Alaska, it's one of dozens of "second-class cities." To backpackers and hikers from around the world, it's the portal to the Gates of the Arctic National Park. It's a tourist destination as well to day visitors who fly in from Fairbanks to experience a Native village and real bush Alaska. To the Nunamiut Eskimo who live there it is home. Regardless of what it is called, Anaktuvuk Pass is a memorably scenic place, cradled by the gray shale mountains that rise around it, verdant in the moment of summer, pristinely white in the deep freeze of winter.

One hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle, thirty-five miles beyond the treeline, an hour and a half flight in a small airplane from Fairbanks, there is something about this small settlement in the middle of the roadless tundra that draws outsiders like me. My journey to this place began in 1980 at the end of a summer camping trip in Alaska's Brooks Range with my archaeologist husband Ed Hall and his eight-year-old son, Justin. We stopped in Anaktuvuk Pass just long enough to meet a few villagers and visit the village store and new school before flying on to Fairbanks. But it was long enough to know that I wanted to return. Ed and I did return, as working anthropologists. In the summer of 1988 we came with our five-year-old daughter Meryn to begin what we hoped would be a long-term oral history project with village elders. For each of the next several summers we came back with tape recorders and long lists of questions. We accumulated over one hundred hours of interviews, some of it village history, some of it family history, and some of it stories of hunting, camping, and traveling the land. The oral history project became its own journey as we followed villagers' lives from the 1940s and 50s to the present.

Ed had first come to Anaktuvuk nearly thirty years before and had been committed to arctic research ever since. Coming to "his Arctic," I was, in a sense, as I had been twenty years earlier in graduate school, his student. But I was also learning about Anaktuvuk Pass through the eyes of our young daughter and her Nunamiut playmates. I was exploring my own research interests in the village, and I was eager to tell my own stories of discovery.

Other matters derailed our master research plan. By the summer of 1991, Ed had become noticeably ill with multiple sclerosis. He had difficulty walking and talking, but none of this deterred him from making his annual summer pilgrimage north. Villagers mistook his slurred speech and his stumbling for drunkenness. He walked with a cane and soldiered through interviews and conversations, repeating himself when people couldn't un-

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derstand him. He saved his many frustrations for the privacy of our rented quarters.

Ed was determined to return the following summer, though his condition had worsened both physically and mentally. Two years later, in the summer of 1994, I returned to Anaktuvuk Pass with Meryn, but without Ed. It was a shorter than usual trip; I had planned no specific research, just camping, visiting, finding inspiration to write, and enjoying the arctic summer with Meryn. I found most of what I had come for, but I was ill-prepared for Meryn's preadolescent boredom with village life. Her village friends from childhood now had their own teenage concerns, and camping no longer held the excitement for her that it once did. I knew that summer that Ed would never return to Anaktuvuk, but I did not know then that three years hence we would be divorced.

In the summer of 1997, I returned again to Anaktuvuk with a student but without Ed and without Meryn. I carried with me my essays and the desire to write more. I shared some of them with villagers and talked to the village council about the collection I hoped to produce. I told our village friends of Ed's and my divorce, hoping they would understand, and of the progression of his illness. I extended Ed's greetings—a "big hello," as villagers say—and I relayed Meryn's messages to her friends, a few of whom were now young mothers.

Ed and Meryn have been a large part of my seasons among the Nunamiut, but they are not all of it. I returned to Anaktuvuk Pass in 1999 and again in 2001 and 2002 to work on a new research project involving caribou-skin masks. I experienced, in 1999, for the first time in thirty years, the loneliness of solitary fieldwork and then the exhilaration of forgotten freedoms. I visited villagers; I spent a day without talking to anyone. I hiked up the Anaktuvuk valley and sat for a long time on a ridge overlooking the village. I picked blueberries at midnight. I wrote.

Through writing, I had gradually become aware of my changing relationship to my academic discipline. Like others of my scholarly profession, I learned to write with the objective remove and the dispassionate voice of the social scientist. I mastered the passive, impersonal, omniscient voice—"The Nunamiut *are* . . ."—and appropriately absented myself from my writing.

Eventually, though, I tired of academic writing—my own and others'. I disliked its strictures, its repetitiveness, its jargon, its arrogance. In my annual search for reading materials to engage my introductory anthropology students, I became increasingly irritated with the uncanny ability of so many anthropologists to render, in stilted prose, the most interesting cultures hopelessly pedantic and unappealing. I wanted to write differently about Anaktuvuk Pass and its people.

Even had I wanted to write in that impersonal, omniscient voice, I lacked

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the authority. My field seasons in Anaktuvuk were short summer ones. I didn't have the sustained perspective of someone who had spent a year or more living in the village. My experience and my knowledge, like the essays in this collection, were episodic. And there was one other thing. My personal life *was* part of my fieldwork. I was drawn as much to watching and reflecting on my daughter's adaptation to village life as I was to observing my Nunamiut friend butchering a caribou.

I'm certainly no maverick in anthropology. More than two decades ago, Clifford Geertz was writing the observer back into the cultural scene, arguing for an interpretive anthropology that emphasized the observer's experience. Many anthropologists since, engaging in what they call "reflexive ethnography," have trained their critical eyes on themselves in the field—the observer self-observed. But these essays are less about that than they are about portraying the summer seasons of a place and a people, and about what one discovers in the process of writing. When I began an essay I never knew where it would lead, nor did I know when, or about what, subsequent essays would be written. I wrote them—ten seasons of fieldwork over a period of ten years—as they came to me. Essays are like that, free to follow their own maps.

It is hard to imagine that, while people have occupied the Pass for almost seven thousand years, this so-called city is just fifty-four years old. It is hard to imagine that its residents have been able to send and receive mail for less time than that; that they have had local K-12 schools for not even two generations; that they have enjoyed electricity and television for just a generation and have just recently acquired running water and flush toilets. Still, modern conveniences have come here in rapid-fire order, and they have been enthusiastically embraced. As an anthropologist, I am torn between following the journeys of some villagers down the likes of the Information Superhighway and following the journeys of others back to a time when technology was a rifle, a distant plane in the sky, and a battery-powered radio that tuned in news of World War II in a foreign language—English. I try, in these essays, to follow both.

Yet as much as these essays were intended to focus on the Nunamiut journey from pedestrian nomads to bush airline passengers to travelers on the Information Superhighway, they also record more than a decade of my own personal journey. For the anthropologist, the journey in the field is a special one. Regardless of place, it is travel from the familiar to the strange. It is leaving behind the material comforts and plenitude of home for cramped spaces, few possessions, and a different and not always palatable cuisine. It is travel across vast geography, with space for reflection and adjustment. It is travel over time, as "the field" draws one back season after season.

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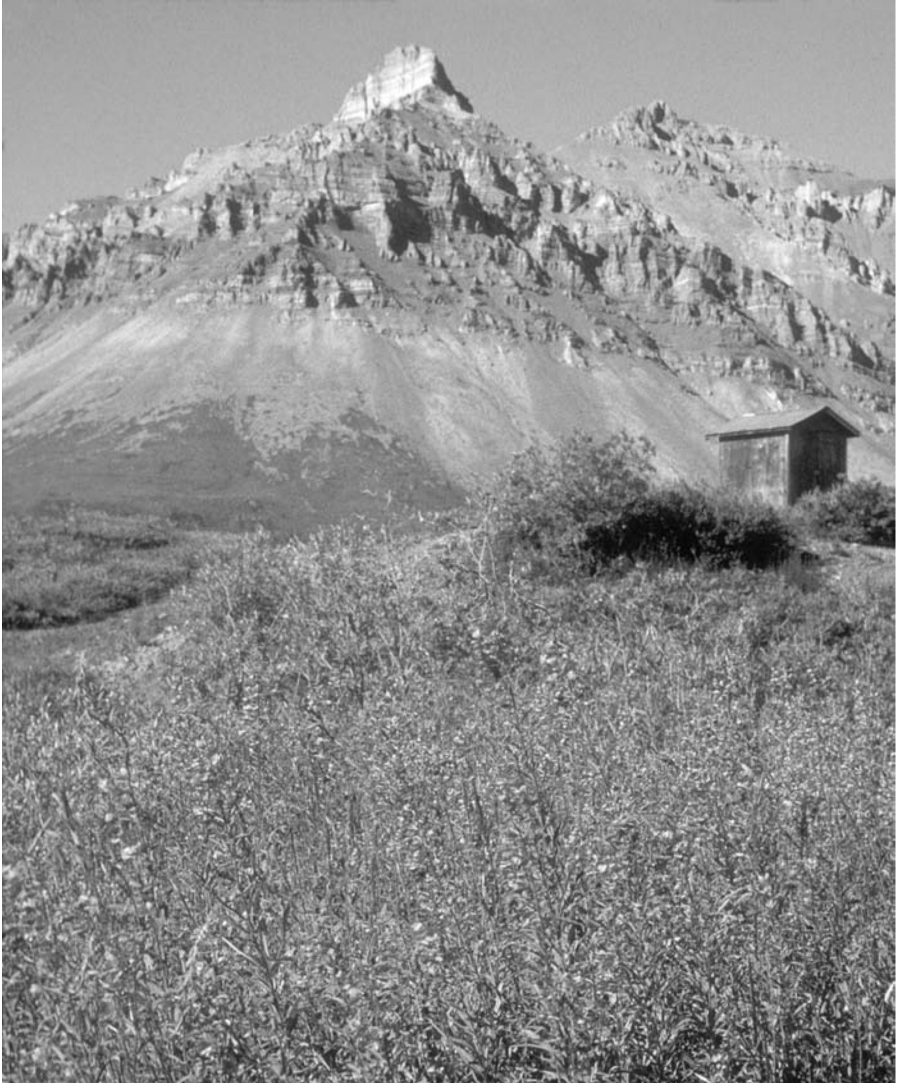
August



Fireweed by Suaqpak Mountain, Anaktuvuk Pass.

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Anaq = *feces*
tua = *having many*
vIk = *place, source*

The barren-ground caribou pass through this mountain valley in the thousands in the fall as they head to the interior from their calving grounds on the Arctic coast. In the spring, they make the return journey. Like other Nunamiut names that dot the landscape—Kanŋuumavik, "gathering place"; Napaaqtualuit, "looks like trees"; Miluk, "breast mountain"—the name is pragmatic, visual, and unadorned. Although a Nunamiut name, the credit for placing it on the USGS *map, and thus officially into the lexicon of Alaska place names, goes not to a Native but to W. J. Peters, a geologist who, in 1901, called the pass "Anaktuvuk" after the Native name for the river that runs through it.*

Just over fifty years ago three wandering bands of Nunamiut Eskimos came together to settle in the broad Anaktuvuk Valley. Here, at the continental divide, there was an abundance of water and a lush growth of arctic willows. Here was a major thoroughfare for migrating caribou and a small lake where airplanes might land. Here was a place that held the promise of sustaining the Nunamiut in the two worlds in which they were beginning to live.

"Amigiksivik" on the North Slope Borough calendar that hangs in the village store and post office. "Caribou skins are good for making parka," "the month for skinning caribou." Fall arrives, overnight it seems. By early August, green tundra grasses shimmer golden at their tips, as patches of brilliant red dwarf birch and bearberry flash on the flanks of the Brooks Range. Scrubby willows in autumn yellow drop their leaves, smell like October back home.

August is the beginning of sheep season and the ripening of arctic blueberries and cloudberries. Men take leave of work to go into the mountains in search of Dall sheep; women bend low on the tundra, filling plastic bags and buckets with salmon-colored *akpiks*, cloudberries.

More and more the big U.S. flag flying above the tiny post office unfurls toward the south in the cold north wind that blows off the Arctic Ocean. On any August morning the mountains might be dressed in snow down to their feet; wet snow hangs on the willow branches and leaves, then melts under the midday sun. The light of August is softer, less intense than that of a few weeks earlier. The sun is leaving. Night returns to the Pass, seven minutes more of it each day, the sun sliding below the mountains in its ever-dipping circle.

Fog rolls in, not on little cat feet but on a strong north wind, eating up the

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mountains in its path. The village becomes small, then isolated. We retreat indoors against the cold, closing the two doors of our little house, bumping against each other in its close confines as we negotiate our individual spaces. Kids don't come by "walking around;" we bury ourselves in our books. A weekend day goes by without any contact with villagers. The skies are silent; no planes land.

We leave the Pass the third week in August, watching autumn turn back to summer as we fly south over the Brooks Range to Fairbanks. Up north the caribou cows are starting to get fat. Soon it will be September—Amigaiqsivik, "when the velvet is shed from antlers"—and the caribou will gather in preparation for their southward journey through Anaktuvuk Pass, the "place of many caribou droppings."

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Tulugak Lake and Beyond

Susie Paneak at Tulugak Lake.

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Anaktuvuk Pass has a population of just over three hundred, more than ninety percent of whom are Nunamiut Eskimo—the mountain people—the only truly inland Eskimo in Alaska. The village occupies less than one hundred acres in the middle of the broadest and longest mountain pass in Alaska's Brooks Range. As a settlement, it's just over a half-century old, but as a place and a name on the landscape of human memory, it's much older and much larger than its small size would suggest. Archaeological remains of human encampments date back seven thousand years, and the historic seminomadic Nunamiut have hunted through this mountain pass for at least the last two hundred years.

It was a long step from seminomadism to a post office. In the winter of 1943, when bush pilot Sig Wien was flying supplies from Fairbanks to Barrow, he landed southwest of Anaktuvuk Pass at Chandler Lake, where one band of Nunamiut had a winter camp. On subsequent occasional visits, Wien transported the furs they had trapped to the Northern Commercial Company in Fairbanks, using store credit to purchase and supply the Nunamiut with store goods and ammunition. As Wien came to know the Nunamiut over the next few years, they told him that they wanted schooling for their children and supplies on a more regular basis. This meant staying in one place for a longer period of time, which, in turn, demanded a substantial and regular supply of firewood. The Anaktuvuk Valley, with its large stands of tall arctic willows and several small lakes on which float and ski planes could land, promised these things.

Though she lives in a Fairbanks subdivision, Mabel Paneak Burris is a Nunamiut—a mountain person, lean and slight and graceful. Her eyes crinkle when she smiles, and she still giggles like the shy young girl Norwegian ethnographer Helge Ingstad met in 1949 and described in his book *Nunamiut*.

Mabel and I are close in age. She was born at Chandler Lake, some thirty miles west of Anaktuvuk Pass, during World War II—before the Nunamiut knew airplanes and before Helge Ingstad became the first white man to spend a winter with her people. Before the Nunamiut became villagers, and before her father's Eskimo name, Paneak, was given to the whole family by the first census taker.

She was called Sigiaruk by her grandmother, May Kakinya, named after May's young son who died at Chandler Lake. Her father, Simon, gave her the English name Mabel. One of two surviving daughters of Susie and Simon Paneak, Mabel moved with her parents and grandparents as they followed

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the caribou, returning each summer to Tulugak Lake. Those days they lived in a dome-shaped caribou-skin tent, an *itchalik*, built on a frame of bent willow poles, its floor of willow branches overlain with caribou-skin bedrolls. They cooked their meals and brewed their tea on a tiny handmade sheet metal stove inside the tent. They traveled by dog team and wore skin clothing in winter.

The outside world came to Mabel on her father's battery-operated table model Zenith radio, tuned to station KFAR in Fairbanks. She learned her first English words listening to *Tundra Topics* at 9:30 each evening and learning the lyrics of country and western songs. Like her older brothers before her, Mabel found her way out of the Pass through Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools, leaving at age nine to go to Wrangel Institute in Southeastern Alaska and coming home to the land each summer. After graduating from high school, she found a job at Bettles Airfield on the Koyukuk River doing everything from kitchen work to relaying weather information to pilots. There she drank her first Coca-Cola and met the white man who would become her husband. She married Bernie Burris at age twenty-three, in Anchorage, with her father's scientist friend Laurence Irving standing in his place to give his daughter in marriage. The Burrises raised a family of three sons and a daughter, living first in Minnesota, then Montana, then Washington, before returning to Alaska to settle in Fairbanks.

Anaktuvuk draws Mabel back often. Her mother is here, as are four brothers and a village full of nieces, nephews, cousins, and in-laws. She comes to visit as well as to hike the land around the Pass, to camp, eat caribou, and pick berries. She spends a lot of her time in the company of her mother, Susie, sitting on the floor of her mother's house, sewing caribou-skin masks with her. When her visits to Anaktuvuk coincide with ours, Ed calls on Mabel to translate for Susie. He's interviewing her about the biography he is writing of Simon.

On the first weekend in August 1990, Ed, Meryn, and I are out on the land, at Tulugak Lake, where Simon Paneak's band of Nunamiut have camped in summers beginning in 1947 and where Simon and his father-in-law, Elijah Kakinya, continued to live with their families for several winters after the others settled at Anaktuvuk Pass. It was a favorable place to live, for even when there were no caribou, there was always fresh fish from the lake. We've brought our fishing poles in anticipation.

We traveled, not as they did so many summers ago on foot with their pack dogs, but by summoning a floatplane from Bettles Airfield to transport us and our camping gear the sixteen miles from Anaktuvuk to Tulugak Lake. Susie and Mabel came with us, along with Susie's little terrier dog, Aluk, jokingly referred to as her "lead [sled] dog." We will spend the weekend camping, fishing for grayling and lake trout, sifting through the ruins of

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Simon and Susie's old sod house, and interviewing Susie and Mabel about their lives here in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Mabel and I fall easily into each other's company. We both like to hike and talk, so we set off in the early evening of the first day to climb a mountain about a mile to the east of the lake. The evening is sunny and warm, and we quickly shed our jackets, hanging them on the bushy willows in the flats. I push myself to match Mabel's long, comfortable strides. She is surefooted over tussocks, and she easily clambers up the steep talus slopes in a pair of flimsy gum boots while I labor to keep from twisting an ankle in my steel shank Eddie Bauer shoe pacs. Mabel walks the land with the agility and assurance of one who took her first steps on the uneven tundra.

Mabel first climbed this mountain as a girl in 1956 with Ethel Ross Oliver, an Anchorage schoolteacher who came to the Nunamiut that summer to teach school in a Quonset-hut tent pitched near Tulugak Lake. We find the stone cairn they built at the very top and look inside it for the paper written with their names and encased in aluminum foil, but it is gone.

It is hot on top of the mountain in the lee of the wind, and we sit down to cool off and enjoy the view. Under a clear arctic summer sky, the mountaintop rewards us with vistas of enormous expanse. Beyond the valley to the north, the low mountains flatten into the Arctic coastal plain. South around a gentle bend lies Anaktuvuk, its orange-roofed health center on the village's highest point just visible through binoculars. To the west, the tiny domes of our nylon tents are bright against the shimmering oval of Tulugak Lake, and Nahauraq, a long-ridged mountain, beyond it. A bull moose browsing in the willows near the lake is the only moving object in the panorama.

Only when our stomachs remind us of dinner do we reluctantly head back, pausing first to take pictures of each other with the camera Mabel has brought. We stop halfway down the mountain as Mabel spots a bird among the rocks. Raising the binoculars, she confirms its identity, naming it both in English and Iñupiaq. Her knowledge of birds is a legacy from her father. For many years, Simon assisted Arctic biologist Laurence Irving in a study of the bird life of northern interior Alaska, and Mabel in turn assisted her father, noting the arrival of nesting birds, collecting eggs, and preparing specimens.

I imagine the memories that walking this land must stir. Trekking from here to Anaktuvuk and back in the 1950s when the mail plane came in, returning in the company of Anaktuvuk girlfriends with supplies and a bagful of mail for Simon. Trying to curl straight black hair around bleached, weathered caribou ribs and becoming frustrated when the bones fell out. Flying out of the Brooks Range once, dangerously sick with pneumonia, lucky that the twice-monthly mail plane had come when it did. Remembering Nick Gubser, just a few years older than she, who came here as a young anthropology student from Yale in 1959 to spend the year with her family. His under-

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graduate thesis, rewritten for publication, became the major ethnographic work on the Nunamiut. "Sometimes I have dreams about living here," Mabel offers. "Not too often, though." Wistfully she adds, "I wonder sometimes what it'd be like if we lived here today."

This morning, we are all going hunting for the past. When they began spending winters at Tulugak, in the mid-1950s, Simon and Susie built a sod house, its skeleton made of spruce hauled by sled from the timbered mountains to the south. They flattened tin Blazo gasoline cans for shingles and siding to cover the sod blocks, and they put a window in each of the south and west walls of the house. As they settled into these more permanent quarters, their possessions grew. "Many, many more things are kept indoors: books, pictures, mirror . . . guitar. I could not take in everything this first visit," commented Ethel Ross Oliver, the summer-school teacher. Susie liked living here. "Sod house warm, alright," she remembers, smiling.

The walls and roof have long since eroded in the quarter-century the house has stood abandoned, but we easily find its square depression. We build a fire in the willows just to the north of the house, where Simon used to stake his dog team, make hot tea, and eat strips of smoked salmon and pilot bread, before moving down to the site of the house. I set up the tape recorder on the remains of an old wooden box shelf and point the microphone toward Susie and Mabel. "About what year was this house built?" I begin.

Suddenly Mabel remembers the ten marbles she once hid here to dig up at a later date. She doesn't find them but does retrieve a rusted can of her father's Prince Albert tobacco, the frontispiece to the old Zenith radio, and an aluminum teapot in which a vole has begun to construct its winter nest. A tiny rubberized mitten falls out with the nest, and we speculate which of her younger brothers the mitten had belonged to. By the end of the interview, Mabel has added to her bounty a broken boat paddle and two rusted sheet metal stoves. Her brother Roosevelt will be amused at her trove of artifacts. "Mabel's been collecting her childhood," Ed chuckles.

The weekend passes in a blur of fishing, eating, napping, hiking, and avoiding the cold wind that blows out of the north. The lake yields a respectable harvest of grayling during our stay, mostly to Mabel, who catches nine of them. We roast the fish in the fire, with potatoes, and eat the leftovers our last day as fish chowder. Inside Susie's tent, the Coleman stove warms us. Eight-year-old Meryn, splayed out on the rumple of sleeping bags, reads Judy Blume's *Otherwise Known as Sheila the Great* for the fifth time. "You making a story?" Susie asks as I open my bound book to write. "Journal," I smile. "Like Simon, I write every day."

Mabel disappears outside the tent while the rest of us continue to bask in the warmth of the stove. She likes being outside. She paces slowly back and forth in front of the tent, hands drawn up in the sleeves of her coat against the

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cold, looking, as she has since a young girl, for game, for birds, for airplanes. All the while she carries on a conversation in Iñupiaq with Susie, who is still inside. They are enviably companionable, perhaps increasingly so as Susie has grown older and more frail. "I wonder how many more times my mom will go camping," Mabel confesses to me during one of our hikes.

Their talk goes on long into the night. After we have turned in to our own tent, they are still talking. As far apart culturally as they might seem, this Fairbanks suburbanite and her bush village mother, they move today in each other's worlds, Susie journeying to Fairbanks about as often as Mabel comes home to Anaktuvuk. Either way, it's just an hour and a half flight. Yet, from Tulugak Lake, they have traveled farther than most of us.

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