

The Rare Bird

Part One

Skip loved his job. Every day brought heart-pounding thrills. He sat at his desk near his telephone. For the most part he was alone in his little windowless office. He spent much of the time writing reports, reading, or working on crossword puzzles, but when the phone rang, he knew that it was his job to immediately mobilize a team of dedicated specialists. Sometimes it was a matter of life or death.

Skip was enjoying his third cherry Danish of the morning when the phone rang. He licked his fingers and pushed the record button on the phone. He picked up the receiver and spoke his agency's standard greeting: "You have reached the National Birdwire. This call is being recorded for scientific purposes. Do you have a bird to report?"

"Um, hello?" said a voice.

"Hello," Skip said. He relaxed into a more natural tone. Now that the formalities were out of the way, he could be himself. "Would you like to report a bird sighting?"

The voice hesitated. "Yeah."

"Go right ahead," Skip said. "What bird did you see?"

"I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I think I saw a Henslow's sparrow. We all saw it."

"Where did you see the bird?"

"We're in North Dakota."

"More specifically?" Skip asked.

"Near Lake Tschida," said the voice. Skip couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman on the line.

"Spell that for me," Skip said.

"T-S-C-H-I-D-A."

"Thanks," Skip said. "Did you get a photograph?"

"No."

These were all standard questions that Skip was required to ask during any call. He scribbled the answers quickly on the RBSF, the Rare Bird Sighting Form. Later he would enter the information electronically.

Skip asked, "In what kind of habitat did you see it? What was the bird doing?"

There was a pause. Skip heard the voice consulting with some other voices. "It was in the tall grass down near the water. And it ran away into the grass. It didn't fly away when we got close. That's mostly what made us think it was a Henslow's."

Skip asked one last question: "What time did you observe the bird?"

The voice said, "We just saw it. What time was it? Around 6:30 in the morning."

Skip looked at his clock. It was 9:44. Skip calculated the time zone difference and asked, "You saw it over an hour ago?"

"No sir," the voice said. "We just saw it a couple of minutes ago."

"What time zone are you in?" Skip asked.

"Mountain," the voice said. "I know it's a little confusing. Most of North Dakota's in the Central Time Zone, but out here in the west we're in Mountain."

"Oh," Skip said. "That is confusing. Is there anything else you'd like to report?"

"I guess not," said the voice. "That's it if you say so."

"Thank you for calling the National Birdwire." Skip hung up. Now the real work began. He immediately logged into his computer and entered the information. He cross-checked the conservation status of the Henslow's sparrow in North Dakota. It was a rare visitor bordering on endangered. Skip's heart began to pound a little faster in his chest. Despite the name, birders all across the world subscribed to the National Birdwire's database, and they watched constantly for updates. As soon as Skip sent word that a Henslow's might be in North Dakota, bands of avid birders would descend on Lake Tschida with state-of-the-art binoculars and high-powered cameras to confirm the sighting. With the push of a button, Skip called forth a small army.



Skip sat back in his chair and waited. Before long, the birders began to post their own status updates on the National Birdwire's open online forum. Some reported that they were en route to Lake Tschida. Others disputed the possibility of a Henslow's being found anywhere in North Dakota. Soon, some were posting live reports from the scene. Within the hour, Skip had photographic evidence that the

bird was, in fact, a rare Henslow's sparrow. Skip posted his thanks and congratulations. He had no doubt that with the confirmation, birders would be visiting Lake Tschida all day long to catch a glimpse. Skip left his desk and rewarded himself with the last cherry Danish.

He was licking the icing from his fingers when the phone lit up again. He repeated the standard greeting: "You have reached the National Birdwire. This call is being recorded for scientific purposes. Do you have a bird to report?"

"A penguin! There's a penguin!" It was a child's voice, and it yelled into the phone so loudly that Skip had to turn his head away from the receiver.

Skip said, "Whoa, there. You saw a penguin, huh? Where did you see it?"

The child said, "It's in the water now. First it was up on a rock, but then it jumped into the water, and then we couldn't see it. We thought we lost it, but now it's back. Oh! It just jumped back up onto the rocks. Look, Grandma! It has some fish in its mouth. Grandma, do you see? It caught some fish!"

The child spoke very good English but had a strange accent. Skip said, "Where are you calling from exactly?"

The child said, "We're on my dad's boat."

"I mean what continent and country? Argentina, South America? Australia? South Africa?"

"Qeqqata, Greenland," the child said.

"Greenland?" Skip shook his head. He got a lot of calls throughout the day that were a waste of time. He became impatient. "That's impossible. There

are no penguins in Greenland. Is there an adult I can speak to? Put your Grandma on."

Skip heard rustling and fumbling. He heard the deafening rumble of a boat's engine and then a woman's voice. "It is a penguin," she said.

"Penguins are found only in the southern hemisphere. There are no penguins in Greenland," Skip repeated.

"Why do you think we're calling you?" said the woman.

"It must be another bird. A razorbill, a murre, or even a dovekie. My guess is a razorbill. Just wait for it to fly."

"It's definitely a penguin," the woman insisted. "You think I would have called you if I saw a razorbill? Its wings are just tiny little things. It's massive. At least three feet tall. I've never seen anything like it. It's so big. Its bill is black and striped, almost like a puffin but without the color."

Skip frowned. "I don't appreciate this," he said. There was only one bird that could have matched the woman's description, the great auk, and that bird had been extinct since 1850. "I'm a very busy man who's trying to provide a valuable service," he said. "I'm not interested in hoaxes and practical jokes. Good-bye." Skip gave the phone an emphatic slam. It immediately began to ring again but he refused to answer. And he refused to consider the possibility that the woman and child had seen a great auk.



"Some people," he muttered.

Part Two

The little boy looked up from the phone. He spoke in his native Danish, saying, "They're not answering, Grandma."

Grandma was busy peering through her binoculars at the funny bird that hopped from its perch on the rocks and disappeared again beneath the choppy waves. The fishing boat turned slowly and she backed across the deck to the other side, keeping the binoculars to her eyes and the shoreline in her sights. A second later, all she spied through her binoculars was a

close-up of the young man spinning the wheel at the small ship's helm. It was the captain, her son.

"Do we have to keep turning, Lyder?" she called.

Lyder steadied the wheel, cut the engine, and let the boat drift.

Grandma, whose name was Alita, turned to her young grandson. "Do you see it, Vesti?"

The boy shook his head. He handed his grandmother the phone and put his gloves back on. Then he ran around the boat peering into the water, hoping to find the bird again.

Alita again called to her son, "Have you ever seen anything like that bird before, Lyder?"

Lyder raised his eyebrows and scratched his head beneath his cap. His eyes circled in their sockets as he searched his memory. He said, "A razorbill."

Alita became incensed. She waved her hands wildly. She scolded her son. "It was not a razorbill! How can you say it was a razorbill? You saw it with your own two eyes. It didn't fly. It couldn't fly with those tiny little wings."

Lyder corrected himself. "It wasn't a razorbill."

Alita said, "It was most certainly not. It was a penguin."

Lyder said, "Okay, mother, it was a penguin."

"It was a penguin," Alita muttered under her breath. She looked out to the shore. A gray cliff of craggy stone rose up from the water to a high plateau covered in green mossy grass. Far beyond rose massive mountains of snow and ice. And beyond the mountains was Greenland's desolate interior, a land of glaciers that had carved the fjords eons ago. The family had spent the entire day boating in and out and around the maze of water, stone, and ice. These trips were Alita's idea. On the few days when Lyder did not fish, the boat was hers to command. She adored the creatures of the sea. It was a fascination she had passed down to both her son and grandson.

"Are we going home now, Grandma?" Vesti asked.

Alita looked to her son at the helm, who nodded his head yes. The boat's engines rumbled beneath the water as they chugged south down the rocky coastline. "Your father says it's time to go home, Vesti. But we had fun today, didn't we, looking at all the birds and the whales and polar bears? You're a lucky boy to have a father who takes you out to look at the sea!"



Nuuk is both the capital and largest city in Greenland, which isn't saying much. As capital cities go, it is perhaps the smallest in the world because only 16,000 people call it home. Among those 16,000, though, Alita was certain she could find someone who might also have once seen the penguin.

The fishing boat glided softly into the harbor. Quaint little seaside homes with brightly painted boxes with triangle roofs lined the shore. Alita, Lyder, and Vesti all crossed themselves when they passed below the red and barnlike Nuuk Cathedral, perched on the precipice above the harbor. Soon they were mooring the boat in a chaotic jumble of masts, nets, rocking hulls, and ringing bells.

"Are you coming home, Grandma?" Vesti asked. Alita had fallen a little behind her son and grandson. She lingered in front of one of the saloons that lined the street closest to the wharf. Fishermen came and went. Music and raucous laughter spilled out onto the street each time the bright yellow door opened.

"You go ahead," Alita said.

Lyder gave her a sidelong glance. He knew Alita was not coming home for dinner.

"Say *goodnight* to your grandmother, Vesti," Lyder said. "Mother, if you really want to talk to someone who knows about the sea, then go to the Bowl Sjøv. Naduq is there most nights. She likes to watch the bowlers, from what I hear."

Naduq was an old Inuit woman, a Kalaallit, descended from a family of mighty whalers. She was beloved by her tribe for her uncanny understanding of the sea and its bounty of fish. She became famous amongst the Danish Greenlanders in the 1970s and 80s for making

dramatic appearances on the Parliamentary floor during debates over fishing rights and treaties.

Most locals, Inuit and Danish alike, had forgotten her. Only the oldest and most serious fishermen in and around Nuuk still spoke about her with reverence and awe. Apparently Naduq felt at home at the local bowling alley. Alita entered into a world of thunderous rolling balls and the explosion of pins.

"You need a lane?" asked a clerk standing in front of a wall of bowling shoes.

"No, thank you," Alita said. She looked up and down the bowling alley. At the far end she saw a small group of Inuit women sitting together on chairs busily knitting away. Alita approached them slowly. Every time a bowling ball struck a set of pins, she jumped. By the time she reached Naduq and her friends, Alita's nerves were a mess.

Alita stood over the seated women for a long while. She did not know what to say. Alita watched them knit. There were beautiful mittens with hanging pom-poms. Fur-lined hats and scarves. One woman knit a traditional silken beaded anorak that looked like a rainbow sweeping from shoulder to shoulder. Another embellished her sealskin kamiks with colorful avittat embroidery. The women worked silently. They occasionally raised their heads to Alita, rested their expressionless eyes on her for a moment, and then returned to their handiwork. Alita was mesmerized. It took another crash of pins to startle her into a chair and introduce herself.

"I'm sorry to be so forward," she said. "I don't want to interrupt. These are such beautiful pieces."



Naduq interrupted her with a warm invitation. "You wish to learn about our traditional crafts?" she asked. "Welcome. You are welcome to join us." Naduq rose and handed Alita her needles and unfinished scarf. The ball of yarn tumbled down from Alita's lap and unraveled across the floor.

"Well, thank you, but...," Alita paused. Naduq paused too.

"But what?" Naduq asked.

"You are Naduq," Alita said. "Is that right? I wanted to find you. My son told me you would be here." Alita handed the knitting back to Naduq, who put it aside in a great sealskin basket with her other knitting supplies. She sat down, placed her hands on her knees, and sat up straight. She said, "Your son is Lyder Kleist, the fisherman. You are his mother, Alita Kleist."

"Yes, that's right," Alita said.

"I know your son," Naduq continued. "He helps my nephew fish for halibut sometimes, out of Sisimiut and up to Disko Bay."

"My son loves the sea," Alita said.

"He's a good fisherman," Naduq said. Such praise from Naduq made Alita blush with pride. It emboldened her.

"I saw something," Alita said. "Something in the water near Sisimiut and the islands to the south."

"A fish," Naduq said.

"No," Alita said. "It looked like a penguin."

Naduq frowned. She spoke some words to the other women who continued their knitting. Most women did not respond or even look up, but one replied in Naduq's language.

Naduq said, "Razorbill."

Alita threw her head back in frustration. "No," she said. "No. This wasn't a razorbill. I know razorbills, and I know murre and dovekeys. This was different. It was huge with little wings and a large black bill. It didn't fly. It swam swiftly through the water." Alita covered her face with her hands and moaned. When she opened her eyes she saw all the Inuit women staring at her. She couldn't help but laugh.

"There are no penguins," Naduq said.

"I know, I know," Alita said. "There are no penguins in the Arctic. Maybe one escaped from a zoo in Canada and swam all the way to Greenland. I thought that if anyone knew what this bird was it would be you."

Naduq shook her head. "No. I'm sorry." She rose to her feet. "Please, Alita, stay and knit. You are always welcome." With that, Naduq gathered her

sealskin bag, spoke some words of good-bye to her friends, and left the bowling alley. Alita sat in the chair and watched her go. Her ears had fallen deaf to the rumbling of the balls and pins.

Part Three

Naduq had very many friends in Nuuk and all along the west coast of Greenland. She left the bowling alley and headed straight for the yellow-doored saloon on the wharf of the harbor. When she entered the bar, she received a warm but whispered welcome. Naduq had not been seen walking through the yellow door in decades.

At his spot at a round table in the center of the room, holding court to a number of younger Danish fishermen, sat Inunnguaq. On any given night, his mates could find him spinning tales of swimming with polar bears or kayaking with whales, of surviving for days on an iceberg or catching a 20-pound Arctic char with a 10-pound line. His storytelling was unmatched. He also owned a seaplane.

Inunnguaq saw Naduq immediately. He pushed the table away and stood up, leaving his story unfinished, his beer glass full, and his audience open-mouthed. He came close to Naduq—he stood a foot taller than she did—and hugged her with two big arms.

Naduq whispered into his chest, “Can you fly me to Sisimiut tonight?”

The usually garrulous Inunnguaq stood speechless. He twisted his hat in his hands and gritted his teeth. He knew that flying 200 miles through the night and landing in dark waters was dangerous.

“May I borrow your seaplane to fly to Sisimiut tonight?” Naduq asked.

Inunnguaq fitted his hat upon his head. “I will fly you,” he said. “But I have to be back by morning for a charter.”

“You can fly back tonight if you like. Let me make a call, and then I will meet you at your plane.” Naduq disappeared out the yellow door and into the night.

It wasn’t until Naduq and Inunnguaq were airborne that Inunnguaq dared to ask what the sudden flight was all about.

“I must speak with some women from my family,” Naduq said.

"Is there a problem with our fishing?" Inunnguaq asked. It was the only thing Inunnguaq could think of that would move Naduq to such dire and solemn action.

"No," Naduq replied. Inunnguaq was satisfied to leave her with her mystery, and he trusted her enough that he did not worry about his fishing livelihood. The pair was silent for the rest of the flight. The loud hum of the small plane's engines filled their ears. They had not quite reached Sisimiut when Naduq said, "Land here."

"We're still twenty miles south of Sisimiut," Inunnguaq said.

"Land me there." Naduq pointed downward through the windshield to where she knew a small series of islands hugged the rugged coast. Now, in the dark, there was nothing but blackness below them.

Inunnguaq still did not object. He held Naduq in too high esteem. He glided the seaplane low, cautious of the mountainous escarpments rising on his left side. Then, down in the oily black sea, he spied a flicker of orange light, and then the pink arc of a rising flare.

"Do you see it?" Naduq asked.

Inunnguaq nodded. He guided his plane down, down, until the sea kissed the plane's pontoons and they glided across the water to where a woman waited for them on an island shore, waving the fiery flare.

The woman was dressed from head to toe in traditional kayaking gear made of sealskin and fur. Naduq stepped lightly from the rocking pontoon to the shore. She held tightly to her friend's arm and said only her name in greeting, "Pipaluk." Then she turned to Inunnguaq. "Thank you," she said.

Inunnguaq shook his head with a confused smile. "Maybe you can tell me what this is all about someday. It will make a great story." Then the fisherman ducked back inside his seaplane and flew off into the night.

Meanwhile, Naduq had pulled on her kayaking gear. She and Pipaluk cast their slim boats into the sea and paddled into the darkness.

Naduq and Pipaluk knew all the surrounding islands and their ocean currents very well. They had paddled them many times before and often in the dark of night. Their destination was a small and secluded island where they harbored a great secret.

As they approached the island, they heard a familiar animal call. The rock island was home to a little over thirty flightless birds that looked remarkably like penguins. They were large birds, white-bellied and black-backed, with tiny wings incapable of flight. Their bills were long and black with a pattern of grooves running to the tip. They were not razorbills or murrelets or dovekies. They were, in fact, great auks, long thought to be extinct, and they would have been if not for the work of a small group of Inuit women over the past 150 years. Naduq had been initiated into the secret protection of the great auks as a teenager and had handed that responsibility down to her daughter and her daughter's daughter. It was a precious and secret responsibility.

These great auks were penned into their small island home by a short fence. They were watched over all year long by a revolving group of women who lived alongside them in traditional huts made of turf, stone, driftwood, and animal hide. Recently one of the birds had escaped. That very bird had been discovered by Alita, her son, and her grandson.

The Inuit women huddled closely together in the largest of the huts around the light of a campfire. They had been called together to discuss a matter of great importance.

"Should we try to recapture it?" Pipaluk asked.

Naduq did not have an answer. They could attempt to retrieve the great auk, but now that it was gone, it would most likely return to its natural migratory rhythms. To bring it back to their protected island would do more harm than good.

"We must let it go," Naduq concluded. This was the question she had been struggling with the entire night. She had known that this day would come eventually. Their success with the great auks meant that someday the birds would leave their protection and be returned to the wider world. This was a reality that she had often struggled with over the years. Success was the great auk's greatest threat. "We will protect and raise the remaining great auks, but the one we must let go. If it returns, so be it, but we must let these wild birds be wild."

The End
