

The Old Man and His Igloo

By Weston Goodman

There was an old man who resided in a tiny, little igloo two-thirds of the way into Antarctica. It was two-thirds from the left side of the continent, not two-thirds from the right. That's a mistake Sally Hartman made last time she tried to visit. She was a doctor and while she was top of her class at Oxford, a neuroscience Ph.D., she didn't follow the instructions. She hiked two-thirds into Antarctica from the left and found nothing. Of course she did. The man had explicitly said two-thirds from the right.

In every newspaper across the world, two-thirds from the right was the standard route. Not a single newspaper misprinted the ad. Which begs the question, what was Sally thinking? Going two-thirds in from the left? Ridiculous!

When people wanted to visit the old man and his igloo, they always asked for his address. Can you imagine? The fact of the matter is, any one who sincerely believes igloos have government-issued addresses is both a jester and a fool. Antarctica has no government, thus they have no addresses— they don't experience many insurrections and those that live there never felt any need for a government, fishing and camping and all, so addresses never came to be. In the eyes of the old man, two-thirds from the right was a perfectly detailed description, succinct and sufficient, indeed.

Some people went so far as to ask for coordinates. Coordinates! Imagine walking through the cruel winds of polar rage with the expectation that you'd be guided by a numbered grid, as if each few hundred yards there was a meager stick, poking its pathetic head up, pulling journeymen towards the igloo. Absurd! It's really not that hard, just hike two-thirds into the continent from the right.

Cooper Wellington tried to visit the old man last year, he even followed the directions and approached the continent from the right. His problem was he over shot it— by only a sixth or seventh. It was a small margin, but in the great expanse of the Antarctic Tundra, it was the difference of three hundred miles.

Mr. Wellington lived in the penthouse suite of a Chicago skyscraper, but after some time, grew tired of selling stocks and moved to the shores of Normandy. It was there that he met his wife Amelie. She was a florist and they had three kids. It really was that sudden.

He collected abalone shells and read Nietzsche on the sand, while his kids danced in the waves, tip-toeing through the foam, but splashing in the chop and tumble. His wife would plant radishes and while she did, she'd hum this three-tone melody that echoed through the cobble-stone streets. It was a simple song, an intimate and personal one, but she sang it so brilliantly the wind would carry it to the nearby cottages to share with the neighbors.

It's an inexplicable thing to be so happy and so sad all at once, but Mr. Wellington did it with such grace. He loved his family and the life they'd created, but it wasn't enough. He yearned for thrill— it tugged on his soul with the persistence of an uneasy child. Some would say, it clouded his judgement.

There was one morning where Mr. Wellington sat on his porch and read the newspaper. It was this day that he saw the ad. In the dark of night — it was either that night or next— he left his wife and kids to go visit the old man in Antarctica.

He had healthy savings, stocks and such, and bought himself a sled, nine huskies, a backpack and a sleeping bag. He followed the directions, he approached from the right, but at a certain point, the difference between two-thirds and five-sixths became inextricable. He was desperately lost.

He built a shelter out of ice and tarp and shoveled the snow to stay occupied. He built tunnels, some to stay warm, but most to combat the evil temptings of boredom. He wandered in hopes of stumbling into the second third, to the old man and his igloo, but the second third never came and eventually he found himself hopeless. He shot flares into the sky only to be met with the ambivalent shrug of Mother Nature. He'd look at his feet, his big padded boots and the felty white powder that covered them, then he'd raise his head to find that same white powder stretched endlessly in each direction. He approached from the right, but after some time, right became left and left became right; it was all the same to Mr. Wellington who was miserably lost.

It didn't take long for starvation to set in, but he managed for two weeks before he killed his first husky. He skinned its pelt off with the machete he kept in his backpack, peeling the fur off in bouts, but when the hair was sufficiently gone, the bones picked clean, and the eyeballs gouged, he tore into the raw meat, barbarically. He bit off small chunks and shared them with the other pups, careful to ration accordingly.

It wasn't until his eighth husky was properly digested that Mr. Wellington decided to die. He would have lived a little longer had he eaten his ninth and final dog, but somewhere deep in his mind he knew he'd rather die hungry than alone.

He sat in his tunnel, his husky under his arm, and he yearned for the French shores he so foolishly abandoned, for Amelie, for his kids. He wished, with all his might, for a time machine to go back and change it all, but alas he died a cold and frigid death. It was with his last fleeting thought that he resented the old man and his igloo.

The old man who resided in the igloo didn't always live there. When he was twelve, he inhabited a small corner of Grand Central Station, wedged between platform four and five, in a small heap of paper garbage. The cardboard was worn, but around the edges of each slab, ornate patterns of mold weaved in and out of each other, like two serpents slithering in for a gentle kiss.

He was a principled boy, which was especially notable, given he had no one to instill these values in him. He was quite simply kind and thoughtful, all on his lonesome. He had this rule where he never stole.

He was poor and hungry and oftentimes desperate, but he never— and I repeat, never— stole. When commuters passed by, in their hustle and bustle, they'd drop little things, a battery here and a nickel there. As soon as it touched the cold hard granite of the station's floor, whatever it was, in the eyes of the boy, it was fair game. That was his one exception.

He'd stroll through the station on weekdays after school and scrounge through the scattered trinkets passengers left behind. He'd build elaborate contraptions, piece them together with cinching and staples, and before long— with the help of scholarships from a local youth group—he went to college across the country. He studied physics and with the ease of Hephaestus he started building machines, complex machines, different machines; whatever he built— this time or that— it was always revolutionary. It was always new and ingenious.

He became rich, very rich, and his life turned swiftly around.

He never married or had kids, but his legend preceeded him, and when he'd stroll down the streets looking for brief respite, he'd be poked and prodded by pedestrians who so desperately wanted his photo, an ounce of his time, a quick nugget of advice. It wasn't until he relinquished his board membership and officially retired that the fogginess of youth swam back to him.

He yearned for those days in the station, the uncertainty of it all, the infinite opportunity to find something new and special; so the old man traveled.

He traveled all over the world, from the Turkish Straits to the Philippine Islands, but it was Antarctica that took hold of his heart. Some say, he enjoyed the solitude. Others say he was gravely ill and wanted to escape the judgment of declining health. It doesn't quite matter, he moved to Antarctica and built himself an igloo.

An igloo— to be fair— might not be the most appropriate word to describe his home. But that's the thing! It wasn't a home, certainly not in the traditional sense. There was no fireplace or oven, working office nor picture frames; its ambience was far different from a home. It was an ice castle, with three enormous towers that jutted violently out of the snow. It was an Antarctic Olympus and its halls were pure elegance, etched with the same embellished patterns of his childhood cardboard. Its shadow was miles long, its structure tall and firm. If it had been built under the beaming sun of the Saharan Desert, its glacial form would have stood just as strong and formidable. It was the fortress he always envisioned.

The old man lived in his snow palace alone. He had hired a crew to build it— of course, he was just one old man— but when the crew was finished and appropriately paid, he was left to his work and lonesome.

He spent years in the palace, alone, hardworking, and with his vast wealth flew in mechanical parts from all over the world. He built. He built beautiful contraptions of all shapes and sizes, some that flew, others that leapt— legend has it, he built himself a family.

When the old man felt Death's grip tightening, his cough ever worsening, he phoned his lawyer back home with one simple request. "Put an ad in the newspaper for me. Have it say, 'An old man's vast fortune buried two-thirds of the way into Antarctica.'"

"Two-thirds from the left or right?" the lawyer asked, unsure of what to do with this information.

"Good call. Two-thirds from the right."