

The Snow Whale

by John Minichillo

Prologue

Outside the Tikigaq School, a white Jeep Cherokee panted a thick white exhaust plume into the fierce cold dark Alaska morning. Tramping up the road to the school was an old man in a white parka, a legendary hunter and the clan leader. He stopped at the Jeep and tapped on the driver's side window. The woman inside, his daughter-in-law, pointed with her mittened hand at the passenger seat as a way of inviting him into the warm cab. But the chief preferred the elements, and so she reluctantly cracked open her window.

"I brought him his lunch," she said, "but the doors are locked."

"What did you bring?"

"Akmaa^q," she said, "we go through this every time, and you eat it. I am under strict instructions not to give you this lunch."

"I can take it," he said. "That way you don't come out into the cold. What is it?"

"It's fish," she said. "It's always fish. And I can handle the cold."

Her father-in-law, the old hunter, stood straight, his form bulked up in the parka and caribou pants, his face wrapped with a scarf, so that all that was seen of him was the weather-beaten band of a raccoon's mask, with his glass eye and his good eye. The woman never felt comfortable talking to him for long. With her window only slightly open, the heat of the Jeep had rushed out, and she crossed her arms to give herself a hug.

"It really is cold," he said.

She rolled up the window, unlocked the doors, and pointed to a small Igloo cooler on the back seat, the cooler not to keep the lunch cool, but to keep it from freezing. Akmaa^q opened the door,

took the cooler, and he waved as he trudged through a snowdrift to the main entrance of the school, next to the tracks his daughter-in-law had made. He used to run with a harpoon down the halls of the school to chase the children. He used to call up the principal with a list of the boys who would be excused for months during the spring hunt. He used to head the tribal council meetings. At the door of the school, he took off a mitten and fumbled around for the key. He was the clan chief—no one would ever be able to take that from him—but these days his son was the council president, and his son was the one calling the shots.

Inside the school, Akmaaq took off the second mitten and rubbed his hands together. He scuffed his sealskin boots on the mat, removed them, and left them with the others lined up along the wall. He unzipped his parka, removed his hat, and loosened his scarf. Once the Jeep Cherokee had driven away, he sat on the floor, opened the Igloo cooler, took out the packet of fish wrapped in foil, pinched off a piece, and ate until it was all gone. Then he stood, dusted off the caribou pants, took the cooler by its handle, stopped at a water fountain for a long drink, and continued down the hall.

In the school library, the council sat around a large table, with Akmaaq's son at the head. There were open brief cases, laptops, coffee mugs, stacks of paperwork. One of the council members took notes. Upon Akmaaq's entrance, they all continued about their business, and his son tried to conduct the meeting as if the old man wasn't there. Akmaaq slowly removed his parka and his scarf, and he hung them from one of the pegs on the wall. He set the Igloo cooler in front of his son who spoke. His son stopped to look inside, took out the crumpled ball of foil, slammed the lid of the cooler shut, and said, "You ate it. You ate my lunch."

"Maybe your wife thinks you are getting fat."

The other council members, some of whom were closer in age to Akmaaq than to his son, laughed at this, and they were delighted the humdrum meeting had broken up because of his antics.

"Dad, you don't need to be here."

"I brought my petition," Akmaaq said.

"It's an application."

"When I was head of the council," Akmaaq said. "We didn't need no application. We just hunted."

"There wasn't an Endangered Species Act," his son said. "It's not my idea; it's the U.S. Government. You want to whale? We have to send in the names."

Akmaaq went over to his parka, reached into the inside pocket and pulled out folded leaflets of paper. He brought them over to his son, and not out of malice, but because of his poor depth perception, missed the table and dropped them on the floor. The nearest council member picked up the papers and gave them to Akmaaq's son for his approval.

"I can't read any of these names," his son said. "It's illegible."

"I can read them," Akmaaq said. "Just ask me."

"Harpooner?"

"*Akmaaq*. That's me."

"Who are these others? They all say *Akmaaq*. You need actual names of actual hunters. And you have to type them out."

"Who has a typewriter anymore?"

"*You* do," his son said.

"Just put it through," Akmaaq said. "I'll go alone. I'll bring in a whale by myself."

"I won't let you out there alone," his son said.

"I'm not asking you. I'm asking the council. Put it up for a vote. You can't deny me my *umiak* this season and you know it. I'm your chief."

The son of the great hunter stared at the crumpled ball of foil on the table and he waited for a sign of what to do from the others in the room.

"Show of hands?"

After a quiet moment a hand was raised and then another, until everyone but Akmaaq's son had consented.

"The council will put this through," he said. "But no one will let their sons go with you. And say what you want. You can't go out there alone."

UniqCorps Plastics Division made what John Jacobs called desk doodles. They were clear plastic hourglasses filled with dyed water and a brightly colored co-polymer solution, or “goo.” When the toy was flipped over, the reservoir at the top dripped lazy liquid beads in an equidistant row that sank down a spiral maze, the effect mesmerizing. In the UniqCorps Plastics Division literature, desk doodles were known as “corporate novelties,” and the official purpose was to inspire a childlike creativity from desk-bound employees. John Jacobs never felt anything close to childlike, though his cubicle space at UniqCorps was devoted to desk doodles. He didn't design them, he didn't test them, he didn't market them, though he was acquainted with the people who did.

John Jacobs and his fellow salesmen in the plastics division spent eight hours a day sending emails or talking on the phone to very rich and powerful people, the senior executives who gave their employees token gifts from the company each year—semi-useful things like stadium blankets, fold-up lawn chairs, can coolers, visors, or anything summery, fun, and costing less than twenty dollars per unit when bought in bulk. John Jacobs sold them desk doodles. His job was to convince the rich and powerful executives that profit and company pride were likely returns on the distribution of cases of corporate novelties stamped with the company logo. And all across the land, bank officers kept desk doodles prominently displayed, while bank customers yearned to set the goo in motion.

“We can stencil a quote on it,” Jacobs had just been saying to the vice president of internal relations at a very large bank that had bought another very large bank as part of a high-profile acquisitions merger, with a lake of transitioning employees in need of the new logo. The SEC and both boards approved the collision of these two mountain ranges of money, and John Jacobs made phone

calls to everyone at the top. He imagined that in the not-too-distant past the vice president of internal relations handed out real bonuses and patted workers on the back. Now the vice president bought into the desk doodles scheme—and the money the company saved on increasingly paltry gifts would earn the vice president a bonus of his own.

"The creative mind is a happy mind," Jacobs said, trying out one of the more popular quotes. There was silence on the phone.

"The freedom to work is humankind's greatest gift to humanity," Jacobs said, which was one he'd never sold, but he was going down the list.

"Sounds like what the Nazis used to put up in the camps," the vice president of internal relations said.

"I think that was *Freedom through work*," Jacobs said.

"That's right," the vice president agreed. "Has a better ring, doesn't it?"

"Ours sounded OK before we stripped the sexism. Had been *man's* greatest gift."

"We probably can't go with that, though."

"Not if you've got women bosses," Jacobs said.

"You kidding me?" the vice president said. "It's the ones below me I worry about."

After a pause, he added, "And I *don't* have any women bosses if that's what you're thinking. It takes dedication and resolve to get here."

"I can only imagine," Jacobs said.

"Let's go with the first one," he said, trying to get Jacobs off the line. Time was important, and the running of the bank depended on him. The vice president had lost interest in the conversation and sexism was something bankers didn't like to be reminded of.

"Who said that, anyway?" he said.

"We did," Jacobs said.

It was the biggest selling quote by far, *the creative mind*. Though no one in the plastics division was able to express creativity and no

one was happy. Selling desk doodles was an embarrassment, with the single exception that it paid the bills.

When John Jacobs first got the job at UniqCorps, he set his student loans for automatic withdrawal, he went two weeks without a brown bag lunch, and he had his next car all picked out, the slightly indulgent Pontiac Sunfire. When his wife, Jessica, went on shopping sprees, he was proud to see her in new clothes and with the things she'd wanted. For a time, John Jacobs was the most nearly successful and practically contented person he knew. Until one evening when he overheard Jessica on the phone with her mother. This was before they'd gotten cell phones and he often picked up the phone to discover Jessica on the line. She either didn't notice, or didn't care, so he listened. It was Jessica's mother who had said, "He's not much of a man, is he?"

But his wife didn't defend him, and she had said, "I made a mistake. I'd hoped he'd grow into it."

So what at first seemed a worthwhile compromise—financial stability for redundancy—was the longstanding character of their relationship, with his sacrifice no longer enough to keep the couple happy as Jacobs became suddenly aware that his life was small and his work unappreciated.

Recently, Jacobs observed a change in Mike Schmidt, the salesman who occupied the cubicle next to his. He heard Mike make arrangements over the phone to fly to Ulaanbaator, Mongolia, a trip that included an overland trek and would be paid for in installments. Mike Schmidt was excited, even giddy.

"I'm *from* there," Jacobs heard Mike tell the travel agent. And this was such an odd thing for Mike to say that Jacobs did something he almost never did. At lunch, instead of using his downtime to surf the Internet for news and celebrity gossip, he rolled his office chair out from behind his desk and took his brown bag over to Mike's cube.

"I couldn't help overhearing," Jacobs said. "You're going on a trip?"

"I found out the most amazing thing," Mike said. "I used to be like everyone else. But I sent away for a DNA test where they trace your ancestry." He pulled up the Web site and used the mouse to point with the cursor. "For two hundred dollars they extract your origins. They call them haplogroups and haplotypes, which come back probabilities and percentages—and it works. All very scientific. You find out what you are and where you came from.

"My ancestors roamed Mongolian plains," Mike continued. "Or more likely they were savage barbarians sacking villages. It explains so much."

Jacobs stared at his co-worker but saw no Asian traits in his face. He was pale, he was fair-haired, he was scrawny. Jacobs couldn't imagine Mike Schmidt doing any pillaging now or in any past incarnation. He let him talk.

"I've always felt a kinship with China," Mike said. "I love pandas and I secretly root for their Olympic gymnasts over our own. The Dalai Lama is one of my all-time favorite spiritual leaders."

Jacobs seemed to think Mike was confusing his countries, but he gave him the benefit of the doubt. There were like a billion Chinese, so what was crazy about Mike Schmidt being related to some of them? And why couldn't a mild-mannered desk doodle salesman like Mike be the recipient of the Genghis Khan gene?

"So you're going?" Jacobs asked.

"I need to be with my people," Mike said. "To walk knee-deep in Mongolian snows and breathe the free Mongolian air. Before this DNA test I was nobody. Did you know they drink oxblood and they have seventeen varieties of yogurt unique to the region?"

"You're always eating yogurt," Jacobs agreed.

"I know!" Mike said. "Now it all makes sense."

Later that day Jacobs logged on to the Web site Mike had shown him and he ordered his own DNA test kit. He charged the kit to his credit card but supplied his work address. There was no denying

that what he had done was strictly against UniqCorps policy, and he could be fired for using company time and resources for personal expenditures. Except now Jacobs wanted what Mike had found. Mike sounded happy as he sold desk doodles the rest of the afternoon. Jacobs knew it was because of the DNA test and the upcoming excursion. Mike had a purpose now, something to look forward to, somewhere he was going to go. Mike researched Mongolian peoples and Mongolian culture, which he referred to as “we”—and all on company time.

“We were the first taxidermists,” Mike said.

“Ghengis Khan had his own Pony Express,” he said.

“We spread printing and gunpowder to the rest of the world,” he said.

“We invented the longbow long before the Brits,” he said.

“We race the Indy 500 on horses,” he said. “Without saddles or bridles, and all the jockeys are kids.”

Jacobs was envious, because Mike landed sale after sale the rest of the afternoon. The hawking of desk doodles came naturally all of a sudden and Mike set about his phone calls like a Hun sacking executive offices. His attitude lifted, he pitched with aggression, and he enjoyed himself.

Jacobs remained leery. He hated his job but didn't know what else he might do. There were rumors the plastics division was going to transition into a defense contract, the desk doodle line changing over to manufacture a part for a cruise missile, something small and plastic, some kind of fluid switch that was important to the accuracy and smooth functioning of America's war on terror. The defense contract would be large and secure, and the sales department would cease to exist as soon as the paperwork was signed. It was a believable scenario but Jacobs knew the higher-ups sometimes started rumors facetiously, to keep everyone in line. And the rumor worked on Jacobs whether it was true or not, because he collapsed in his chair when he got the e-memo that a sales meeting was scheduled for later that day. He'd landed a very large desk doodle account that morning but wasn't confident he'd still have his

job by mid-afternoon. If they called him out over surfing the Internet, he'd apologize and say he'd never do it again. He'd say the bank executive put the idea in his head by asking if he'd heard of these DNA ancestry kits. And so Jacobs convinced himself that he went to the Web site as a way of making better small talk for the follow-up call. It was a good-enough lie, something UniQCorps should *want* him doing. Besides, the company's Internet policy was draconian. The meeting was not a rap session, or to hand out reprimands or pink slips, but to announce a new "corporate novelty," with a prototype arriving in a few days. And days went by, and the DNA test kit arrived, and John Jacobs felt like he'd gotten away with something.

Jacobs was superstitious about swabbing himself in the offices. He was afraid his state of mind would somehow affect the test results. But there was a free pick-up and express delivery service at work, and he also didn't want his wife to know. Jessica Jacobs had a way of multiplying anything he spent by four or five. Every time she saw something she wanted, she justified her whims with his.

"You spent two hundred dollars," he imagined her saying. "And I'm only spending ninety." But then she would use this excuse over and over so that John would never escape, with Jessica soon spending more than two hundred dollars: on dancing shoes, a riverboat ride, a horse-and-buggy tour, a psychic reading, a gym membership, a share in a grocer's co-op, a donation to the black swan exhibit at the zoo, a set of noise-canceling headphones, a kitchen appliance that made bread, or yet another women's magazine subscription. John decided not to tell Jessica about his DNA test. He would wait to see the results. Then maybe they would have that conversation.

In the bathroom at work, Jacobs went into the handicapped stall. It gave him more room to pace as he read the instructions. The swab wasn't a swab at all, but a piece of plastic

that he ran along the inside of his cheeks. He did both cheeks for good measure. He put the swab in the test tube, sealed the tube with the stopper, and placed the test tube back in the Styrofoam packing. Then he flushed the toilet, in case anyone was listening. He set the small parcel on the counter as he washed up at the sink and he took a long look at himself in the mirror. It was like he didn't know the face staring back. There were red highlights in his brown hair and flecks of gray in his beard stubble. These features were written in him, and the sample of spit he'd carefully boxed up would tell him the origins.

Jacobs left the bathroom with the small parcel under his arm, and he dropped it in the outgoing mailbox on his way back to his cubicle. He felt the drip of perspiration from his armpits and he was feverish, like he was in the midst of something sinful and forbidden. He had mailed off the question, and the two hundred dollars they had debited from his checking account ensured a detailed response. His cheek cells were FedEx-ed that same day to a lab in the Silicon Valley where they would extract and decipher him. Translate him into geographic regions and bloodlines. Untangle him and tell him who made him. And within a margin of error of plus-or-minus five per cent, Jacobs would finally know what his cells knew.

Back in his office, he was distracted and he foolishly surfed the Internet for the rest of the afternoon. If there had been a globe on his desk instead of all the useless doodles, he'd have sat there spinning it and imagining the places he might have come from. He noticed that a lot of Web sites promised to trace ancestry, but the most common method was through library research. He could hardly imagine anyone digging through a library for information anymore. There were easier, more reliable ways of finding things out. With science on our side why would anyone take the time to look up marriage and death certificates? It seemed so limited, this idea of lives boiled down to publicly documented events. There were answers that he carried inside, and for two hundred dollars, he was given the key.

John Jacobs remembered his wife, Jessica, paying money every month to have her own Web site and being proud.

“Now I have a Web presence,” she had said, showing him the Google search for her name. There were a lot of Jessica Jacobses out there, but one of them was his wife, and from that moment she had her own Web page. He told her a MySpace page was free, but that didn't count in her mind as a Web presence, and so he let it go.

Jacobs typed her name into the Google search and went to her page. She hadn't made any changes since she first set it up. There was a lone picture of her, where she smiled uneasily, and the photo was several years old. She looked younger and skinnier and the light application of make-up seemed to complement her looks while these days it detracted. She wanted strangers to know that she loved cats (though she couldn't bring herself to get another after Mittens was tragically run over), that Francis of Assisi was her favorite saint, that she was a certified ballroom dance instructor, and that she was helplessly paralyzed on the couch with buttered popcorn any time *Gone With the Wind* played on cable. John clicked the link of another Jessica Jacobs—who did have a MySpace page. This young woman was so different from his wife that one of them should be made to change her name. Everything his wife had on her Web site, that was costing them twenty-nine ninety-five per month, would easily fit into the categories of the MySpace template. He was depressed to realize, but not at all surprised to see, that this other Jessica Jacobs was younger, better looking, and probably more interesting than the one he shared his life with. He supposed there were more than a few John Jacobses out there too, and that his Jessica might also want to trade him in.

He could hardly bring himself to talk about work with her anymore. Mostly, they occupied the same house, slept in the same bed, and had the same conversations again and again. Today at least, he was paid by UniqCorps to sit and daydream. And when he left that evening, he was guiltless. He'd given too much of himself to the company for far too long. He hadn't done anything wrong,

after all. He would continue to sell the desk doodles, but he was no longer compelled to. He would make the phone calls and send out the emails, but the job was no longer important to him. If they fired him, they freed him. If they found fault with his way of working, they could replace him easily, but he refused to give himself over. He wouldn't be cowed. He wouldn't kneel to the rich and powerful bank executives. He saw himself as their equal now, or perhaps their better. And he hoped that like Mike Schmidt he was also the recipient of the Genghis Khan gene. Because if it weren't for his obligations to Jessica and the bills she'd accumulated, he'd walk away from the job and never come back, wandering to a town under different stars, far enough away to leave the plastic world behind.

At home he didn't say anything about what he'd done. He noticed the parade of human variation on the TV and he felt a kinship with people who looked nothing like him. Maybe I'm one of them, he thought. Maybe I've got some of that in me. Even if just a little.

What John Jacobs hadn't eavesdropped in Jessica's phone conversations with her mother, were the times his mother-in-law defended John against Jessica, who liked to begin the call by saying, "I want a divorce."

Despite her frequent complaints against her husband, Jessica blamed her unhappiness on her mother, who had placated her with candy when she was a toddler, and all her life she was a touch overweight. When she was a child, Jessica's passion was a thing called a moonbike. They've been made of plastic these past twenty years, but she had an aluminum one, a slim tricycle that Jessica loved and her mother considered dangerous. Her mother often told Jessica she was too old for the moonbike, which was meant for young children, and her mother didn't like the way she flew down the ramp of their driveway into the street. She wasn't a cautious child and she might have gotten killed. Jessica knew the

weight limit of the moonbike was seventy-five pounds, and still she rode it, and one day she broke it, and to make her feel better her mother bought candy.

Jessica Jacobs always dieted but never lost that last thirty pounds. She tried lettuce diets, grapefruit diets, fat-absorbing pills, taking the stairs, skipping meals for ice cream, the Slim-Fast cans, the celery diet, the Brazil nut diet, the glass of wine diet, the Diet Coke diet, which became the diet root beer diet, then the organic cane syrup pomegranate soda diet, and she also didn't see anything wrong with diet pills, they just didn't work for her. The only time she was happy growing up was the summer she swam at her grandmother's lake cottage while her parents fought for four months, what they called "working things out," but what became finalizing their divorce. Jessica met a boy while swimming and he led her into the bushes where they lay on their towels. When the boy's vacation ended, they promised to stay in touch. Meanwhile Jessica brooded in her room, terrified that at fifteen she'd gotten pregnant. She wasn't, but she put back on the weight she'd lost swimming.

Before she'd met John, Jessica had dated other men, but ballroom dancing was the deal breaker. One refused to try, one tried but was embarrassed by his rigid body, one called it "flapper dancing," and one called it "ballet." The good one, the one she *really* liked—he let her down when he told her ballroom dance instruction didn't count as a career and that she lacked ambition. She read nine self-esteem books by Ph.D.s before she got over that remark. Ballroom dancing was dignified and the people who took classes came out of their shells. Ballroom dancing was exhilarating, and it was the only time she felt alive, like riding a moonbike she'd never outgrow. She'd always wanted to share that with the man in her life. When John came to the classes at the dance studio, he wasn't afraid to lead and the closed dance hold came naturally to him. He never divulged his secret but he'd learned ballroom style at some point, because he was no beginner. And for the cotillion at the end of the class, when Jessica always suggested the students dress

up a little, John had rented a tux. She knew John Jacobs respected ritual and she thought maybe he had been a priest in a previous life, maybe even someone she'd known in one of her own past lives.

She'd learned to access her past lives during the three months she attended a group meditation at the dance studio that was followed by a free backrub. Jessica was given a window into her past lives, and they were fascinating. Once she even experienced her own death. Her husband in that life drove with excessive caution while her lover drove much too fast. Jessica was with the boyfriend in the vision, carefree and happy, when the memory was halted by the blinding instant of a side collision. This experience encouraged her toward restraint in three of her next four lives, what the meditation leader called "imprinting." She wouldn't even know why she was like that, but past lives shaped future selves. In one of her lives, she knows she was martyred, though she's never accessed the burned-at-the-stake execution, one of two such executions she'd suffered, because she'd also been a Salem witch. In that life she kept her petticoats clean, and when she was widowed, the neighbor accused her of witchery because he wanted the land. She often confused these past lives because she was beautiful in both and wrongfully burned at the stake.

Jessica's favorite things were ballroom dancing, late night talk shows, anything with cheese baked inside, the black swan exhibit at the zoo, her personal relationship with God, her increasingly healthy attitude toward her body, her two standby perfumes, and her Waterford crystal punchbowl.

When the results of his test came back, John Jacobs took the envelope into the bathroom to open alone and undisturbed. His data fit neatly on a two-page printout, with racial and ethnic categories and the probable geographic regions of his ancestors arranged in descending order. There were races he'd never heard of, but a letter accompanied his profile and explained that a detailed document at

the Web site defined all terminology. At the top of John's genetic profile, in bold, he saw the word *Inuit*, with his lineage listed at thirty-seven per cent. The word was vaguely familiar but he couldn't place it: *Inuit*. He felt like running from the bathroom down the hall to the computer in his cubicle so he could look it up. He was more than a third, but less than a half Inuit, by far the most prominent category in his profile. Though he wasn't sure how comfortable he felt with this, whatever Inuit was, there was no denying what shouted out in his genetic code—because there it was at the top of the page.

He flushed the toilet, he washed up, and he walked down the hall as casually as he could muster. He looked over the other easily recognizable categories. He was four-tenths of a per cent Tuscan, three per cent Spanish Moor, seven per cent Danish, and one one-hundredth of a per cent Egyptian. He had always liked the pyramids and mummy movies, but one one-hundredth was nothing to get too excited over. It was this Inuit category he needed to find out about.

He passed Mike Schmidt on his way to his cubicle and for a moment they made eye-contact. He could easily see Mike sitting at his desk wearing animal skins and furs. He thought maybe there was a slant to Mike's eyes and he imagined him with a thick black beard. Things had changed around the office for the two of them. Though Jacobs hadn't disclosed his purchase of the DNA test kit, they gave each other a knowing look and Mike slowly nodded. It was as if desk doodles, cubicles, company logos, and cruise missiles had never existed. As if their survival depended on something more basic and Mike and himself were brought together out of a primal bond. *Inuit, Inuit, Inuit*, Jacobs said to himself searching his mind for some sense of the word's familiarity as he double-checked the spelling and typed it into a browser search.

He was taken to a page on racist language usage, the link highlighted because he had been to the page before. He recognized the page as the reference he'd used when he was told to eradicate the sexist language from the list of desk doodle quotes. He never bothered to check his list against outdated racial and ethnic slurs,

but they were listed at this same Web site. At first he was indignant, knowing instantly that the link to this page meant his people had suffered from racism, but when he saw the word—*Eskimo*—he felt a glowing kinship. And *Eskimo* was a word he was sure he was entitled to use. He was *Eskimo*. He sat there for a moment in front of his computer with his eyes closed and his smile spread as he imagined an expanse of wild snow. There was a sense of serenity coupled with the nothingness in his mind as the walls of the cubicle vanished from his awareness and he felt finally and for the first time, at home.

