

The Walrus and the Tub

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The only bathtub on the island belonged to the high school, and no one—not even the old natives—knew exactly where it came from. It wasn't easy to get a head of fresh lettuce that far into the Alaskan passages, let alone an antique French tub. A few suspected the Russian mafia had smuggled it over during the turn of the century, when they'd built a fur empire in the southeast. Others thought it had simply washed ashore one day, the rusty remains of a luxury cruiser sunken in the Aleutians.

In the past, the tub had belonged to Principal Amelia Baranoff, the last of the great Alaska Baranoffs. She was an eccentric woman who ate clams three meals a day and died from an allergic reaction to the shellfish (or so they'd always assumed) which had turned her skin a puffy pink. At the time of her death, she bequeathed her estate to her pilot son, who disappeared in the bush some years later, leaving the bathtub—as a tribute to his mother's memory—to the entire high school staff. There'd originally been talk of bronzing it, setting it up as a statue near Swan Lake, but the practical need for warmth settled in their winter bones, and they reconsidered. The high school administrators worked out a yearly schedule, and the tub had been home to nearly every oily bottom in town over the years. Aside from one incident with Andy the crabber, they had been peacefully rotating the tub for thirty-four years the winter Principal Love stole it.

The theft, surprisingly simple to accomplish, happened one Tuesday in December. Principal Love was supposed to return the bathtub on Christmas Eve, but that morning when he saw it steaming happily in the corner, he couldn't

imagine ripping out the plumbing just to hand it over to the Johnsons, a young couple who probably didn't even get cold. At their weekly staff meeting, he announced he needed the tub a little longer, for an experiment. (Marty the science teacher mocked him, putting "experiment" in air quotes. But the joke was really on Marty, who'd lost fingers to frostbite—or a shark?—and looked like he was trying to pinch Principal Love.) They gave him until New Years, citing his old, rheumatic bones. That evening, as he happily toweled off his red body, he noticed that his skin felt thicker than usual, and his throbbing pulse took longer to quiet.

During the Christmas vacation, he bloated and stewed and pruned. He spent long afternoons—then whole *days*—in the bathtub, until his skin creased like good linen. He began to develop—*symptoms*. New teeth pushing through his meaty gums. A carnivorous inclination. He'd munch through fifty pounds of salmon in a sitting, a sore jaw the only thing stopping him from eating more.

At the first staff meeting of the year, the teachers seemed anxious, like nervous creditors who knew they'd being hustled. Still, he asked again—begged, really—for more time. By then, he could swim just a *touch* faster than the average 63-year-old. He'd been the high school dive instructor before his principal days, but the water had never slid off him with such ease. Now, when he dove in the bay in search of abalone, he was furtive, lithe, his 300 pounds menacing. No longer did he awkwardly propel himself forward with plastic flippers. With his own secret stopwatch, he timed himself able to out-swim the state champion.

One night in early February, soaking in water so hot it made his blood pump—and maybe boiled him, just a little—he thought to himself (as they all had in the throes of winter) *Well, what if I just didn't give it up at all?* And that's how the whole slimy mess started.

"I'm not giving it up at all," Principal Love said at the February staff meeting. In the back corner, the secretary loudly—angrily—stapled the fish plant's brochures. "I'm an

old man,” Principal Love said, “and I’ve had my moment of clarity. All I want is some peace and hot water at the end of the day.”

It had taken Principal Love 14 years to get the bathtub in the first place, and if it took him another 14, he’d be in his seventies, too old to install the tub himself. If one of the young guys tired to snake it out from under him, what could he do but hobble after him, throwing his cane like a shooting star? There was really no other way about it. It was winter and this was Alaska and any moment one of his loose joints could slide out of place.

Cecilia, the traveling music teacher, said, “What do you think happens to the rest of us when we get old?”

“Wouldn’t it just be easier for everyone to buy their own bathtubs?” Principal Love asked.

“A new bathtub. Special ferry fees. Plumbers,” Cecilia said, ticking these off on her thin fingers. “Are you going to pay for each of us?”

“It’s time to be adults. All this swapping has gone on long enough,” Principal Love said. “You can come to my house and bathe there if you must. Can’t you learn to live like this?”

He was the Principal—weren’t his decisions supposed to carry heft? If your king told you he was taking a few peasants off your land, did you whine and grovel like these poor teachers? The secretary walked around the room, passing out the fish plant brochures. Principal Love rubbed his hand over the smooth picture on the front of Marty the science teacher in a wet suit holding a purple octopus in front of him like a trophy.

Lately, soaking in his tub after a long day, Principal Love had begun to picture himself as a sea creature—his figure, already broad, stretched to accommodate the hulking muscles required to maneuver flippers, his face covered in a thick brown hide. He’d be able to out-swim a leopard seal, go diving after salmon for his fellow teachers, like a team player. He could open tuna cans with his tusks! His

whiskers, little more than a runaway handlebar mustache, would make him more distinguished.

"You've taken away our hope, our light in the long winter," Marty said. "Where will I wash my clams?"

"Gross," Cecilia said. "*That's* what you've been doing with the tub?"

"A citizen may do as he pleases in the privacy of his home."

"I think we should vote Marty out of the schedule," Cecilia said, raising her hand. "Who else uses the tub to wash clams? What other nasty things do you people do in there?"

"Well it won't matter now," Principal Love said, "since I'm keeping it."

"And what disgusting practices do you have?" Cecilia asked. "Please tell us you have an exotic illness, so we can feel sorry for you. And not like to we want you to freeze to death."

Principal Love paused, unsure whether to continue. "I might be turning into a walrus."

Cecilia sniffed. "That'd better not leave a stain."

An old native could get away with talk like that—already had: the tales of the blueberry rain, the 106-year-old who turned into a polar bear. When he looked back on his life, it seemed inevitable, the result of saltwater swims, island living, oyster parties; he was surprisingly unsurprised by the whole ordeal. As though he'd known all along people who go against the group turn into monsters.

Saturday, Principal Love drove out to see Charlie the vet, who doubled as the island's only registered nurse. The vet had pigment issues so his hair and eyelashes were bright white, ghost-like, as though somehow he'd convinced God to give him a jellyfish wig. Charlie's office was a slope-roofed attachment to the ferry terminal and smelled of cat urine and something faintly dizzying, like a sugar buzz. While Charlie calmed down the owner of a missing black lab (who later hobbled into town on a broken hind leg),

Principal Love waited next to a woman stroking a bright orange tomcat. Out the window, he watched the ferry crew lower a new skiff into the water.

Charlie came out of the back room with a syringe. “Did you hear the story about the bear?” He squeezed the syringe and a trickle of liquid dribbled down the side. “This bear, stalked into town and ate poor Miss Carrie’s dog right off its chain. He snapped the head right off. Something was wrong with that animal.”

Charlie lunged forward and plunged the syringe into the rump of the orange cat. The cat’s green eyes bulged round like marbles, then settled back into their sockets. “It’s dead,” Charlie said, and the woman began to cry. “Get that thing buried quick, Mrs. Williams,” he said. Mrs. Williams furiously smoothed the cat’s ears, something it would never had allowed while alive. She took a small canvas bag from beside her chair, delicately lifted the cat, and placed it in the bottom of the bag. The orange tail stuck out the top like a feather.

“We’re friends, Charlie, aren’t we?” Principal Love asked. A long time ago, when Principal Love had just moved to the island, he and Charlie had run a charter fishing business. They were a frightening pair, the Principal big as a walrus, and Charlie pale as cancer. It hadn’t gone well. Tourists left them *get well* notes attached to bottles of brown hair dye and yoga instructional videos.

“Cecilia told me about the meeting,” Charlie said. He put his hand under Mrs. William’s elbow and helped her to her feet. More pushing than guiding, he led her out of the vet office. Principal Love stared at Mrs. William’s back. She wore a lumpy brown jacket that bunched around her shoulders like plumage.

“Can I give you some advice?” Charlie poked the tip of the syringe along his thigh absentmindedly. Then he waved it under Principal Love’s nose. “This isn’t like being a policeman or a leprechaun. Do you realize what you’re asking of us?”

Principal Love shrugged. He cuffed his right sleeve to expose his forearm, then took a pencil out of his back pocket and rubbed the tip against the thick hairs on his arm. It came away sharp as a sewing needle. He held the tip up for Charlie to examine.

Charlie leaned in and whispered, “Do you think you might be losing your mind?”

Principal Love cocked his head to the side, and the extra skin on his neck bunched like leather. “I think you should check me out.”

“I could cover my couch with all this skin around your neck,” Charlie said.

In the back room, Principal Love sat on the black examining table. Charlie took a stethoscope from a shelf that also held dog muzzles and an empty aquarium. He huffed on it twice and then slid it between the buttons on Principal Love’s shirt.

“Symptoms, symptoms,” Charlie muttered, his eyes closed. His hair, as though alive in and of itself, waved like seaweed. Principal Love had a nearly overwhelming urge to run his hand through it. Charlie tapped at his lips with a long wooden stick. “Open up.”

The vet shone a flashlight into the deep recess of his mouth. “Smells like fish in here,” he said.

“Increased appetite.”

“Is that a bone?” Charlie whispered. Using the wooden stick to push Principal Love’s upper lip against his nose, Charlie rubbed his own thumbs along the Principal’s gum line. He pulled back suddenly, a sliver of blood on his finger pads.

Principal Love rubbed his sweaty palms against his thighs. “Did my tusks cut you?”

“How did this start? Did you get bit? Did you—” he gulped, unsettled, “*eat* walrus recently?”

“I’ve been taking a bath every day. I started diving again—I’ve become very fast.”

“Based on my knowledge of the *animal*, I’d say you have

about a month,” Charlie said.

“What’s my diagnosis?”

“Let’s just say you should get your affairs in order,” Charlie said.

As Principal Love struggled back into his coat, Charlie looked furtively out his window, drew the shade, and, red-faced, mumbled, “Say, while you still have the tub, can I come over tonight for a bath?” He laughed. “We old guys have to stick together.”

When Principal Love got home, he found Cecilia and Marty on his front steps, Cecilia gripping a red bucket with crab legs sticking out the top, Marty dressed in a full wetsuit. As he unlocked his door, Principal Love motioned for them to follow him inside. The house was a shoddy attachment to the boy’s dorm, and the walls had a layer of newspaper paper maché across them as insulation. When you leaned up against a doorjamb, the faded black ink rubbed off onto your clothes like wet paint. In the kitchen, a meat-stained roll of butcher’s paper for wrapping fish leaned against an industrial-sized stainless steel freezer. Above it hung a rack of knives that ranged in size from a steak knife to a harpoon.

Marty hopped up onto the freezer and his black wetsuit squeaked across the top. “Larry, don’t you think you’re being the least bit selfish?” Marty asked

“Look,” Cecilia said, peering into the bathroom, “just turn off the water, and I’ll unhook the tub and take it to my place. We can put this all behind us.”

Principal Love shook his head. He stared at Marty’s nose, big and bulbous as an oxygen mask. “Marty,” he said, “when you turn into an octopus you’ll understand. You’ll want to be surrounded by your natural habitat.”

“I’m turning into a water flute,” Cecilia said. She pulled a crab leg out of the bucket and used it to point accusingly at Principal Love. “It’s *true*.”

“It’s a gradual process,” Principal Love said.

Cecilia tapped the crab leg against her open palm. “Walrus live in *cold* water, Larry,” she said. “We all know

this is just a ruse. An elaborate, *mean* ruse.”

“Enough,” Principal Love said. “I’m still the principal.” He reached out and snatched the crab leg from her hands. He snapped the spiny bicep against his knee and used his thumbs to yank out the sinewy white meat in one long strip. The empty shell clattered on the floor like cheap plastic. Tipping his head back so his jaw opened wide enough to expose his burgeoning tusks, he slid the meat down his throat without chewing. That was a new development, not needing to chew. Cecilia froze for a moment—perhaps imitating a water flute?—and then crossed her long arms.

“I’m not unhooking the pipes,” Principal Love said. He stepped on the discarded crab shell, and it broke into pieces. “And if you rip it out, you’ll flood the school.”

“We’ll call the water company ourselves,” Marty said. ““Cut to the source.”” He leapt off the freezer and shuffled in his flippers across the room. After a few minutes on the phone, he covered the mouthpiece. “They can only take orders from the person whose name is on the invoice.”

Cecilia walked over. “Yes,” she said into the receiver, “this is Principal Love’s wife.” Then after a pause, “Oh, damn you, Dale, I hope you know this means Kenneth’s getting a D in music.” She hung up.

They looked at Principal Love with fishhooks in their eyes. He spread his hands—flippers, he supposed—and shrugged. “This is not an elaborate prank,” he said.

“No one’s going to believe you’re a walrus until you surrender that tub,” Cecilia said.

Marty took the remaining crab legs out of the bucket and tossed them across the room as you would toss a stick to divert a dog. Principal Love’s eyes tracked the legs.

“I hope you know this means the fish plant is off limits,” Marty said.

It’s important to know the story of how Andy the crabber made off with the bathtub. Andy had lived in a dog musher’s shack out near the ferry port and the barbecue hole. At the end of his turn with the tub, he asked for an

extension. Carl and Vesta, the Tlingit couple next on the list, quietly asked Principal Love to “involve himself,” to recoup the bathtub for the sake of the whole staff. Andy, feeling betrayed, cold, and alone, slid the tub out onto the harbor ice like a giant skate and slept out there with wolf pelts packed around his torso. When Carl and Vesta went to the lake’s shore the next morning to lure the crabber away with hot crab bisque, they found a smooth hole where the bathtub had been, the black winter water taut as a bed sheet under the ice.

No one could prove—or rule out—sabotage. The ice around the hole hadn’t cracked, as it would if a whale or wayward seal had thwaped the surface. Instead, the hole was clean, smooth as icing, with no sign of Andy or his furs. Naturally, they suspected each other. The staff nosily invited themselves to each other’s houses, looking for proof someone had monkied with the hot water lines or left a sloppy wet trail up from the basement. The cold made them grumpy, and they slammed their doors on each other. Everyone assumed the tub was gone, sunken with the lead-bottomed icebreakers, oil-soaked birds, and faultily-wired salmon skiffs. They would have been upset with Andy, and probably stolen fish off his line at night, except that they presumed he was dead. Nobody could survive in a winter ocean.

Then that summer when Marty was out looking for an octopus for the second grade class pet, he found the tub not twenty feet offshore, green as a sunken ship, barnacles covering it like warts, hot pink sea anemones waving like mermaid hair. Andy the crabber’s body was welded to the porcelain frame, his skin hard and red as an exoskeleton, his hands curled in on themselves like claws. After seeing his frozen body, it took many of the villagers weeks to get up the courage to boil crabs for dinner.

Even after they thawed out Andy, his shell was still stained red like a nasty sunburn. *Or a crab*, the high school students whispered to each other. Of course, everyone

knew that was hyperbole and folklore. Only the very old people still swore that it had once rained blueberries when they were children. The fruit splashed and broke on their faces like raindrops. One old woman had an Africa-shaped blue stain on her right thigh. Of course, any Alaskan would argue it was probably just frostbite.

It took five scuba divers to retrieve the tub. The staff found a huge winch and the divers tied a noose under the bathtub's collar. Everyone waded into the waves in their black rain boots, grasped the line, and heaved. The island's reporter took a photo for the front page. The bathtub surfaced with a family of orange sea slugs in its belly, and the children grabbed for them, waving them like trophies. Principal Love had been in the after-care group, and as the women moved in with steak knives to pry off the barnacles, he took Andy's frozen body and propped him up by the bonfire. Throughout the night, he stuck toothpicks into Andy's fingers, testing to see if he was done.

Monday, Principal Love drove over to the fish plant to check out the high school interns. They sent a dozen students every semester, and it was his job, his *responsibility* to monitor their progress. Principal Love sampled as he walked through the gutting stations, asking for a taste of fresh meat at every station. He watched students slice salmon thin as paper, and then they held the pieces up to the light, checking their translucency. Out of the corner of his eye, Principal Love spotted the smooth glint of a fish skin, and he whirled around. In a corner, a freshman with stringy blonde hair pried open clams with a letter opener and pulled out their meaty tongues. Behind him, two boys stuffed sardines into pickling jars, and it took a moment for him to control his wild eyes; they wanted to follow the fish from bucket to jar, bucket to jar, bucket to jar.

A senior carrying a tray rippling with fish eggs walked past, and Principal Love got distracted by the jiggling mass. Then a fish hit him in the back of the head. Before it could drop to the ground, Principal Love twisted his arm behind

his back and caught it in his massive paw.

“Cool,” the senior said.

Principal Love bared his teeth. The tusks pushed painfully against his lips, and freeing them felt like uncurling your legs after a long car ride. Deep inside himself—in his heart, his liver, his enlarged stomach—he felt a deep pull to stick the fish into his mouth. In the hot water of the bath, his blood boiled and popped, and he felt the same heat rush now, his face red and murderous.

With two hands, he heaved the fish onto the tray of eggs and dodged into the smoke hut. A charcoal fire sizzled, casting a faint orange light into the room. Principal Love could just make out the shadows of two boys wallpapering the room with halibut the size of second graders. When their backs were turned, Principal Love pulled a juicy halibut off its grappling hook, and then devoured it. When he finished, he wiped his greasy palms on his suit pants, smearing the evidence. The fish left his mouth feeling abused, distended, and he sent his tongue to dislodge a finger-length bone lodged in the muscle of his cheek.

The fish plant was no place for a Principal who had to hide out in the smoke hut, feeling his skin dry and crisp like bacon. As he headed toward the back door and the safety of the salty air of the bay, he spotted a young native boy feeding hunks of multi-colored meat into a metal shoot. When it came out the other side, a girl caught the ground meat in a large plastic sack. They both had chunks of pink meat stuck to their lips and eyebrows, like the flakes of white fish in Principal Love’s stubble. The girl caught Principal Love looking at her and smiled. “Dog food,” she shouted over the whir of the machine, and the boy laughed.

“I’m Principal Love,” said Principal Love. “Checking progress. That’s all.”

The native boy, his hands waxy with fish bits, dropped the lump of pink flesh he was holding and walked over to Principal Love. He reached up and put his hands on either side of the Principal’s face.

“Has your blubber started coming in yet?” the boy asked.

Principal Love drew a deep breath. “Has anyone ever gotten *hurt*? While this happened?”

The boy shrugged. “You’ll get used to it.”

When he got home that afternoon, Principal Love found his bathtub full of starfish. A note taped to his mirror read: *Need a hand moving the tub?* Underneath, a small P.S. in block print: BRING THE TUB TO THE MEETING OR ELSE scrawled in soft pencil.

Principal Love stuck a finger into the tub and put it to his lips. Someone had gone to the trouble of hauling in saltwater; someone who didn’t want to kill forty starfish. Marty. As a child, Principal Love had found starfish frightening, like an organ suddenly exposed to the light. Their ability to re-grow themselves kept him up at night. What if they found ways to replace their arms with claws? Or shark teeth? They were the color of fruit—bright purple and orange—except unnatural, chaotic, a strange cross-breed between a tongue and a gourd.

Principal Love plunged his hand into the water, locked his fingers in the creases between a starfish’s legs, and pulled the creature to the surface. In the air, its skin felt warty, diseased, and Principal Love almost let it go. Gripping the starfish’s body, he tugged at the thin skin between its legs. Before he knew what he was doing, he pulled a little harder, heard a satisfying rip, and dug his fingers into the tendons, prying them apart. A leg came loose in his hand, and he set it next to the faucet. Then he gently lowered the body back into the water, on top of the pile, where it stood out—partly from its red color and partly because it had been mutilated, changed, made into something the other starfish didn’t recognize.

He removed the rest of starfish gingerly, as one might handle a closet full of musty hats. As he dropped them into the buckets and slung the load over his arm, he thought about simply taking them out to the sea. He could slip into the water for a *second*, nose around for some oysters. But

then the clock in the kitchen chimed, and he realized he was late for a staff meeting.

“We are sobered by the knowledge that you are handling the situation with less *panache* than one would expect from a man of your—*ahem*—maturity,” Brenda the secretary said at the meeting as a way of introduction.

Principal Love took one of the sloshing blue buckets and heaved it on the table. A boisterous yellow starfish curled a hand over the bucket’s lip. “There’s five sides to every argument,” he said.

“You have a rare gift of candor,” Marty said.

Cecilia fingered the leather of her trumpet case. “What did Charlie have to say?”

With his thumbs Principal Love nudged his upper lip into the cleft made between his gum line and his nose. Two gleaming, thick tusks exposed themselves.

“Good god, the apocalypse is upon us,” Brenda said.

“Please give Principal Love a hand,” Cecilia said. “Best Halloween costume I’ve seen yet.” She gave a few half-hearted claps to the quiet room.

Lately, everything had begun to sound muffled, as though Principal Love had two seashells pressed to his ears. His world had begun to sound like the ocean. “It’s not a costume,” he said.

Marty flipped through a planner. “It’s also March.”

Cecilia rubbed her temples. “I *know*,” she said. “For heaven’s sake, we all *know* it’s *March*.”

“Are we finished here?” Marty asked. “I have a cold shower waiting for me.”

Principal love reached into the water and grabbed the starfish missing its leg. He tossed it between his hands for a minute, flicking water angrily on those sitting near him. Then he rolled his shoulders back and hurled the star over everyone’s heads. It hit the ceiling with the wet smack of a kiss and suctioned itself up there next to the ceiling fan.

No one could find the janitor that evening to unlock the ladder closet, and when they all finally left, one of its legs

had peeled off and hung limp, in danger of being chopped to bits by the fan's blades. The next week, when Principal Love was long gone, it turned the sickly green of a bruise and fell onto the table, startling the teacher's sipping their morning coffee. For years after that, they could see the faint outline of the four-legged starfish on the ceiling. Cecilia was once heard to tell a new math teacher, "I *know* it doesn't look like a starfish, but it was. *Something* bad happened to it. We didn't want to watch it die, so Marty flung it back into the ocean. And we all feel very sad about that."

Principal Love began to see walrus everywhere—in the clouds, on signs around the ferry terminal, in his dreams. He had a vivid dream of stepping into a lumpy brown walrus hide, putting on a furry head and wandering onto the basketball court during a game, the school's mascot. In another dream, he wore the same costume to a staff meeting. They gave him rolls of uncooked spaghetti to shove up his nostrils like tusks. They applauded when he smacked his flippers together. He was a spectacle. A *star*.

It wasn't long before he could no longer squeeze into his suits. Then he stopped going to the school altogether. Like a teething child, he stuffed ice cubes under his upper lip, trying to soothe the itchy red welts the tusks had made when they carelessly pushed his gums aside. One day in desperation, he went to the dentist.

The dentist ran a one-room business out of the back of the Russian Orthodox Church. You could have a crown replaced and attend mass all in one morning. He was a short, stout man with khaki colored-hair and chocolate wool suits. When the dentist had him in the chair, he jerked on the right tusk, and Principal Love roared in pain. It surprised both men, who looked warily at each other. The receptionist peeked nervously around the corner, but when she saw Principal Love's huge pelvis tipped up at that unnatural angle, his neck fat spilling off the sides, she put her hand over her eyes and backed out of the room.

The dentist snapped a few X-Rays, and together the men

stared at the films, which were propped up on a small white box that looked like a little girl's makeup mirror. They had to whack it periodically to keep the light from flickering.

"You have tuscular teeth growing," the dentist said, pointing at the dental records.

Principal Love ran his tongue over the tusks. The skin bulging around them itched like a bad scar. "You've seen this before?"

"And other odd things. You wouldn't believe the things people put in their mouths."

"Is it supposed to hurt like this?"

The dentist peeled off his gloves and tossed them into a bucket at his feet. "You're getting old."

"I'm sixty-three," Principal Love said. "That's not old anymore."

"It's not *just* that," the dentist said. "Your body's going through its final growth spurt. Belated growth. It must know you're going to die soon."

"Charlie never said anything about *dying*."

"Well," he sighed, "Charlie's carrying around a horse gauge needle full of tranquilizer. He's preparing for *something*."

By the time Principal Love left the office, it had turned dark. He drove home by way of the harbor, and as he swung his car along the shore, his beams raked the bay and lit up dozens of ice skaters. In the glare coming off the ice, the students looked ethereal, misty, their edges melting into the silver edges of frost, their earthy moose wool sweaters and red snow pants the only tangible things about them. He turned off his head lights and rolled into a gravel parking lot.

Looking down, he could see the whole town gathered as spectators at the party to which he had not been invited. It was almost April, but still cold. The harbor had frozen over half a dozen times that winter, and the town hadn't been able to put in the skiffs they used to take the summer tourists fishing. The trees were leafless, and snow still covered the

Totem Poles built on the hill as sentinels. Frozen ice floes jutted up where the harbor met the shore, and the students skated between them as though on an obstacle course.

On the pebbly beach, his staff stood around a fire. A few people took sips from bottles covered in brown paper sacks. The old natives sat bunched far away from the ice, their backs propped against the base of the hill on which Principal Love stood. A few of them had dogs on leashes, and they threw frozen starfish just out of the range so the animals jerked at the end of their ropes, whining, learning they couldn't have everything they wanted.

A few pilots had brought a case of creamed corn from Anchorage by mistake, and periodically the staff took a can, shook it, and sprayed it into the air like fireworks. Charlie the vet carried around an octopus suctioned to the black rubber glove on his right arm. With his keen eyes, Principal Love could see the bulge the tranquilizer needle made in his front pocket. While Principal Love tried to decide what to do, the dentist pulled in, and nodding at the principal, walked past, picking his way down the hill.

Principal Love got out of the car and stood at the top of the hill long enough that his whiskers frosted over and when he breathed, his nose hairs crinkled. The native boy from the fish plant looked up and waved, then put his hands in his pockets and nonchalantly skated away, his red scarf flapping behind him like a flag. Principal Love watched as the boy, out near an outcropping of slate-gray ice, peeked over his shoulder, then brought his right skate to its toe. He pivoted in a circle, twisting faster and faster as he picked up speed. Soon he was just a blur of colors, his long ponytail wrapping around his body like a second skin. When the boy stopped, he stepped off the circle he'd etched in the ice, lifting, his skates delicately, as one would treat a set of expensive knives. Then he reached down, pried up the edges of the circle, and lifted the whole hunk of ice right out of the ground. He looked around for a minute—warily—and then dove into the hole.

For a moment, all Principal Love could think about was the hole in the ice after Andy the crab—wait, *crabber*—had sunk with the tub. Then he was running down the hill, the loose skin around his ankles and wrists flapping in the breeze, his frozen lungs pumping. Principal Love pointed, and like a school of fish, the crowd whipped their heads toward the harbor. There were no words for the hole in the ice, just the feeling that someone had dropped a trap door, leaving them dangling in mid-air.

As the crowd rushed to the hole, they let out quick steamy breaths, fogging the ice. They toed up to the edge, and the icy blue water peered back at them like an angry pupil. There was no trace of the native boy, no symbolic, floating skate, no fingers frozen to the lip, trying to hoist the rest of him out of the water.

Principal Love saw the boy's hair fanning out like a cape, enveloping him. The shift of his facial features as his nose and jaw puffed out, his skin mottling itself gray in the water. His skin would thicken instantaneously against the cold as he shot out after a school of sardines. For don't we all wish that the people we've lost have simply found a better life, that the drowning victim became the dolphin that guides the shipwrecked crew to shore? Instead of wasting away old and pruned in nursing home beds, old people could simply drop out of airplanes, and instead of face-planting on cow paddies, necks broken, they'd never come down, but instead migrate north the next summer as Canadian geese. Simple, happy, capable of doing something they could never before have imagined.

"Walrus man will save him!" Cecilia called, igniting the crowd.

Marty the science guy poked him in the back, his finger rumpling Principal Love's skin like a pile of leather. "Was stealing the tub really worth all this?" he asked.

It seemed no one had asked Principal Love such a complicated question. "This is the proof you need?" he asked.

“Huzzah!” shouted the teachers.

It was another couple of days before Cecilia and Marty could get in to reclaim the tub. They brought a chainsaw, a tool belt from the shop teacher, and Cecilia’s brain, which remembered not only the snub from the water company, but Kenneth’s abysmal year-end grades. They found the tub right where Principal Love had left it—scummy from the starfish, but otherwise intact. Hot water lines connected. A ring of dried salt crusted around the drain.

Before he dove under the ice, Principal Love tried to reason with them. They could have the bathtub back in the summer. They could make a big 4th of July spectacle. He’d pay for the parade! Surely, as winter melted away, his whisker line would recede, his tusks would burrow back into his gums, his flabby, sea-thick skin would tighten and grow taut like any normal human’s. Charlie the vet said he had *every hope* for a normal recovery.

“Do you recant?” Cecilia asked. “Tell us everything is normal and we’ll let you go.”

“You still have time,” Marty said.

Principal Love looked into the hole. His eyes, never before able to distinguish the silver scales of a fish from the deep navy knit of the water, caught a glimpse of a furry flipper. This time, the color nearly blinded him, shining in his eyes like a quarter left in the sun. The ice began to crack under his enormous sumo-walrus weight. Then there was a great shift, a jostle that dropped the crowd a few feet. The gasps caught in their throats, and suddenly, water from the open hole spilled over and ran toward their shoes, wicking up their pant legs. A few people froze in place and had to abandon their expensive boots. All ran back for the shore. The hole started to gurgle like an unplugged drain, and Principal Love could feel the tide pull at his own flippers. Suddenly his sweater seemed too heavy, itching against his skin. He pulled it over his head and tossed it behind him on the ice. As he dipped a naked toe in the water, he was surprised to find it warm, the lip of the hole curving

smooth as ceramic as it melted into the hot water. He held up one arm in a wave and then gracefully, as though he'd been practicing his whole life, dove into the hole with the ease of a walrus going after food.