

# The Sun Rises over The Ice-Desert

## Initiating choice and resourceful integration through somatic storytelling

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What is a learning process? It is a process of eating and digesting. First, you take in something that is not yet yours; you taste it, you check it for palatability. If you decide to, you take a mouthful and then your body takes over in making it yours. Sometimes, even when you thought you liked something, your body couldn't tolerate it; this isn't you. At other times, your sense of taste matures gradually, becoming more susceptible to those foods which once were impossible to digest, developing a more complicated palate.

And now that you are here, you probably realise that skilled digestion is not about recipes but about balance, learning and body. And as you listen to it, maybe your body can teach you something about taste and digestion; about change.

Millie was born in a strange era. In some respect, she had the most traditional family - her dad was a hunter, and he left home for long weeks in his hunting journeys. As early as she could remember herself, Millie recalled the barking of the sled-dogs as they prepared to leave, instinctively knowing that the days of warm fire and wealth of food would be over for a while, that an adventure awaits them. Millie remembered how she used to hear the roaring sounds of dogsleds and hurry out, standing in the snow with the rest of the village's children and wives, the smiles on their faces widened as they watched their fathers and husbands coming back home, their food and cloths approaching. She used to look at her mom with fascination, as she skinned the meat and chopped the fish, as she skilfully used every useable part of a polar bear, a seal, a walrus or fish. Like the rest of the women in her village, Millie's mother was a housewife, and she attended the igloo and it's chores with great dedication and skill, with tolerance and ecological movement.

In many ways, Millie's village was a most traditional Inuit village, where the only language spoken and understood was Inuktitut; where the cloths were manually made and the food traditionally cooked by the women.

The village was beautiful. It consisted of no more than fifty igloos, which were crafted with great skill. In the freezing ice deserts, a skill of doing things ecologically was essential, without it you would die. The white horizons and the blue skies were often painted pink or orange by a peculiar sunrise or sunset, and the villagers woke up with awe and curiosity and looked at their homeland changing colours. For Millie, these moments were full with magic, and she remembered them every time she felt the freezing touch of an ice-cold wind gliding over her neck.

But the times were strange for a young Inuit girl, because western civilisation was quick to send its sprouts into the ice desert of her homeland, and soon the Inuits found themselves, almost without realising what had happened or why they have agreed to, living in houses. By the time Millie was five, the igloo village was neatly replaced by big wooden houses, and her igloo remained present in her dreams alone. But as much as these changes affected Millie, her parents were even more affected by them. Their heritage was endangered, their past questioned.

So, Millie was raised in an exciting era, of change and re-evaluation of the way her ancestors used to live. Like other children who are raised in a time of change, Millie had plenty of curiosity and eagerness to learn new things. "You are as thirsty for knowledge as your dad is hungry for whale's liver," her mother used to tease her, and indeed, Millie wanted to know everything. At times, her parents were worried that she spent so much time wanting to learn things, that she would waist all her energy and freeze to death; they were used to calculating their movements, their words, their feelings. Without such calculations, the ice desert destroys you. To fight death, an old shamanic poem said, you need to be too slow for it to notice you. But Millie's parents, although they were very traditional in some respects, have also acknowledged the great opportunities that awaited them, and especially those, which awaited their daughter. And so, Millie was the first girl to be sent to the local school that opened in the neighbouring town.

When you arrive to therapy, you are frequently here, standing on the edge of a cliff, with brand new wings. Looking down, too frightened to fly, unable to go back. Perhaps the first fly will be tandem; perhaps you can do with a hand.

And she loved school. She learned about different cultures and different languages; about people whose skin is black, white, yellow and red. She learned about distant countries where the earth is green and the lakes are never frozen, about colourful animals and birds. Millie learned about the stars and the moon, and when she came home she told her parents about the different things she learned and the three would let their eyes gaze in the nothingness and dream. A strange thing happened to Millie as she went to school, though. Unlike her father's appetite for whale's liver, she never became full. Quite the contrary, the more Millie learned the more she wanted to know. Her dreams became more colourful, her manners restless. With each and every month that passed, her mother and father watched Millie growing more curious, and they knew that their home, as big as it were, would soon be too little for their daughter. And so, one day when Millie was thirteen, she expressed her wish to continue her studies, her parents knew that this could not be done in the near town. "My daughter," said her father, "we have anticipated this moment for many years, and we agreed that you will be allowed to go and study." "Your thirst is so strong, and nothing we can say will stop you from developing," her mother continued, "we can only postpone your growth and neither of us wishes to stop you." And then her father added "but before you leave us to explore different cultures and languages, before you learn about other people's life, I want to offer you to learn something about us. I want to invite you to come with me to a hunting journey, into the ice-desert, so that even when you are away, you will always have your ancestral heritage with you." Millie was amazed and honoured. She knew that never before was a woman, let alone a girl, allowed on such a journey. She agreed.

For several weeks Millie and her father prepared for the journey. Mother made strong, warm cloths to protect them from the cold, and masses of fur and leather were used to assure the warmest outfit possible. Millie's father taught her to fix her boots and prepare them to tolerate rough weather conditions. They ate a lot, to gain weight and prepare for times of hunger, and they packed their sled wisely and ecologically with only what was essential. Nothing too much, nothing too little; the perfect amount of food for the dogs, for them; the right amount of firestones. When the dogs were

encouraged to move, the dogsled glided smoothly on the ice. This time, there is only one dogsled, two people who become smaller and smaller to the eye of a mother, who is excited and worried, who watches her two loved ones disappear into the empty whiteness of the ice desert.

The days have passed. Millie learned how to move ecologically. In the ice desert, you need only to move when it is necessary. To fight death, an Inuit shamanic verse said, you need to be too slow for it to notice you. She learned how to eat with little effort and how to walk with economy of movement and energy. She learned how to watch the stars and the formations they make in the sky, and how to recognise her way in day and night. Her father taught her the difference between the footprints of a male polar bear and that of a female, and that the footprints of a cub are dangerous, because they tell of a protective mother nearby. Millie learned how to find the best spots for breaking the ice and where is it likely to find seals or walruses. With each day that passed, she had more respect to the way of her father and grandfather, to the way her ancestors lived. It was a graceful way of living, and Millie learned the art of using little resources for plenty of energy. She learned how to set a fire and about the preciousness of flames. She learned to respect the ice and to honour her relationship with the dogs. And she learned about death. In the ice desert, death was always a possibility, and in order to live she had to kill. For the first time in her life, Millie tasted the different taste of a seal she killed herself, and when one of her dogs died, she learned about the importance of using every chance of survival offered to her by nature.

But perhaps the most important lesson Millie received was about silence. Her father didn't talk much, and slowly Millie learned to stay in silence. Words, like actions, were an investment of energy, and in the vast whiteness ahead, a wise woman had to calculate her investments of energy. She noticed how tired she became after a long conversation, and how much she learned when she waited. It was a valuable lesson and one that changed her perception and life.

After coming back home, Millie's manner changed. She had more respect and honour to her parents, to the older Inuits who didn't say very much and to her homeland. She was still eager to learn, though, and probably more ready to do so than ever before. And so, when Millie was merely fourteen, she was sent down south to study.

Her boarding school wouldn't have been stranger for Millie if it were on a different planet. There were grass loans and flowerbeds around. The school premises contained a beautiful lake that was never frozen, and in the lake she saw fish and birds she has never seen before. The sky was of different colour, the houses made of different material, the people looked differently, talked differently. Everything was unknown and exciting. There was so much to learn, and every day Millie learned as many things from her surroundings as she did from her teachers. And her hunger was gradually and systematically growing.

But Millie did not forget her journey, and she was extremely aware of the economy of her energies. She only moved when it was necessary and talked when it was crucial. She expressed emotions only when it was essential and ate only the foods that nourished her, and in a slow manner. Although she was at the same age of her peers, Millie was the oldest, most peculiar girl in her school, and the others started picking

on her. But Millie paid little attention to these kids, who didn't have any understanding of her heritage and skills, of her ancestral knowledge and energetic economy. One day, as Millie entered her room bruised, her roommate asked her "Why are you so slow, Millie? Why can't you be like everybody else?" "I mustn't forget what my parents taught me," she answered, and told her friend about her journey. "But you are just a teenage girl," her roommate replied, "Why won't you have some fun?"

So how about chocolate? Certainly it must be good for you, otherwise it wasn't so appealing, but can you live on it? How do you learn to contextualise your digestion? To straighten your spine when needed and collapse into the hands of another when appropriate?

That night Millie didn't sleep. She had strange dreams and disturbing thoughts. She thought about the whiteness of her homeland and the solemn faces in her village. She felt so far from them and so sad. A little voice in her head kept thinking, why couldn't I have some fun? And indeed, when she woke up Millie had made a decision. She started having fun.

Millie started talking more, moving quicker and socialising. She explored new behaviours and new friendships; she ate things that tasted nice, even if she knew they are not nourishing and tried different things that changed her perception, such as cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. The more she explored, the more she felt free, and the more she was accepted by her peers. Her grades were still ok, and even if she hadn't the brightest grades, who cares? She had fun. For the first time in her life, Millie learned about popularity and about guys. There was a boy that was interested in her, and she learned about the excitement of first love, about the anticipations and fears. Millie was alive.

In fact, she was so much alive that when the year was over and she had to go back and visit her parents for the summer holiday, she was quite reluctant to go home. It is all dead over there, she thought, white and dead and boring. And how she would miss her new boyfriend! But then again, a bus was waiting for her and after many hours of riding, of replacing buses and of quick snacking and drinking on the way, she stepped down the bus in the neighbouring town to her parents village. As soon as Millie set her eyes on her parents she started crying. What have I done, she thought, I forgot everything I have ever learned. How selfish and inconsiderate of me, how unloving, what have I done? Her parents were there, excited and weeping waiting to hold their girl whom they haven't seen for a year, their girl that grew to be a young, beautiful woman. And they met, and upon their hugging each other, Millie wished in her heart that she had never left.

In the first few days nothing was said, Millie was far too busy crying. No matter what her parents said, or how much comfort they gave her - she was unwilling to be comforted. But when she stopped crying Millie started to notice that everything around her changed. The house got bigger, and it had electricity and gas. Father was dressed differently, and Millie learned that he is no longer a hunter. The neighbouring town got bigger and the village became a part of it; meat was now bought in supermarkets and cloths in the shops and the hunters used Snowmobiles instead of dogsleds. Much change has happened while she weren't even noticing! One night,

when Millie sat in her bed and thought her gloomy, shameful thoughts, her mother knocked on the door and entered. "You are unhappy, Millie," she said, "and I think I know how to help you feel better." Millie looked at her mom with astonishment, how could she ever help me, she thought.

"When the town people first came to our village," her mom said and took Millie's hand, leading her outside, "We understood that an era is over. We also realised that we have no money and that we wouldn't possibly survive or be able to support you at school unless we made a change." At the back of the house, a big wooden place was built and Millie's mother opened the heavy door. Millie could smell the presence of leather and meat, of her dogs and her journey. "And your father was very sad for some long weeks, feeling that all our heritage is dying. I remember how he pulled me here, to this space, and showed me everything that was our life and will no longer be. His pride, the beautiful dogsled was no longer as quick and efficient as the new snowmobiles, and it frustrated and saddened your father and me. Your father wanted to leave the village forever. And then," Millie was taken to see her father's sled. It was shining and fresh, as if it is still used with great honour and skill, and her mother continued "I offered your father an idea, and he accepted it. In the next community meeting that was held in town, your father talked about the danger of losing our heritage and at the same time about the importance of adjusting to change. He told them about you, Millie, the first girl to go to school, the first one to leave our village. Your father told them that in the future many other young Inuits will leave the town and village, and that it is impossible to deny change. And then, my child, your father told the people about your journey, and he offered to run such journeys for the boys and girls who reached a certain age, so that their ancestral heritage will forever be carved in their hearts." Millie's mom became quite, and Millie knew that something very important, a crossroad of changes is occurring at the very moment. "They have agreed, and this is how we make our living now," Millie's mother smiled, "You have taught your father and me a valuable lesson about change and it seems that you need to learn the same lesson."

Millie was left alone in the shed. Surrounded by the bright electrical light she touched the sled and had a lot of thinking. She couldn't think straight, though, there was so much going on, but she knew that there was a piece of important learning for her there. At first she felt a little jealousy, of all the young people who are guided by her father, but then she felt privileged. She came into the house and hugged her father without an account of economy, she hugged him thoroughly. And she hugged her mother without thinking of the right degree of effort, she hugged her thoroughly.

When you can take a loving touch and place it where it is mostly needed, where it serves best; this is when the food becomes you - this is when you have really learned.

That night she dreamt about her boyfriend, and she had many other dreams. She was excited about the ability to be both, to know when it is too much, and when it is too little; and to know when to have fun. She dreamt about herself riding in her dogsled and reaching a warm country where the dogs could run in the meadows. For the first time in her life, she felt alive and free and belonging at the same time.