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## Oomingmak

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# NON-FICTION

## OOMINGMAK (OOMING-MĀK) JEREMY BROOKS

I awake to the blaring sound of the default Verizon ringtone, an insult to the silence that drags me out of sleep and into an energizing rage. It doesn't make it past the third riff. Struggling through the hardest part of the day, I sit up to drain the sleep away and try to keep my head bowed to avoid the middle bar of the bunk, a lesson I am slow to learn. My bunkmate and I groan simultaneously. He turns over, asleep again, and I throw on my blue work coat, still wet from the downpour that's promising to last all week. It is four a.m. Alaska Time, and the summer sun would have just begun to summit the mountains, had they not been shrouded by the breath of rain. As my muck boots splash through the westernmost tip of the Tongass National Rainforest, I can hear the screams for food and company. It has been four hours, and Musk Ox calves only have two settings; starving or wet and starving. Grabbing their bottles from the intern kitchen, I push aside my desperate need for sleep and replace it with thoughts of the two calves. Tsuni (sue-knee), who had been born two weeks after I arrived, was strong and healthy, weighing around 40 pounds. Nami (nah-me) however, who had been born on my second day, weighed only 18 pounds, 3 less than when she was born. I was afraid to walk over to their shelter. I could see two black shapes, but only one was standing at the gate, crying out for life.

I remember when my direct flight from Chicago to Anchorage pulled into gate A12; it was a balmy 75 degrees, and 18 years, 362 days and 6 hours of pent up energy and excitement was shaking in my cramped legs. Everybody has a dream – to climb Mount Everest, to be an astronaut – but mine was rooted in my dad's childhood stories. Mine was a King Salmon hanging over my grandpa's fireplace. Mine was Alaska. When I stepped off the plane and onto the tarmac, Alaska rushed to

greet me. The Chugach Mountains thrust out a hardy handshake, the blue sky reflected the welcoming ocean, and a bald eagle gave a courteous nod as it flew over. My sense of belonging swelled as I walked to the baggage claim to begin my summer as a Naturalist Intern at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center.

The Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC) is a refuge for injured animals and those affected by humans (cue the trash-bears and porcupine pets). Most were destined to live there forever, but there were three species that were going places. The wood bison, similar to the plains bison of Yellowstone, had been slaughtered and hybridized to the point where only 24 pure wood bison were left worldwide. Now there is a herd of 3,000 in Canada and a total of 150 in the U.S. One hundred of the U.S. bison have now been reintroduced in the plains of Alaska near the village of Shageluk, and the rest remain at the AWCC. There were also elk, which as a species had not been in Alaska for over ten thousand years, but were going to be introduced onto several islands to supplement the diets of native Alaskans. Finally, there was the musk ox, there through a partnership with the University of Alaska in Fairbanks for research on diet and habitat. They are a remarkable species; they thrived in the last ice age and were found across Europe, Asia, and North America. Their fur, called Qiviut (kiv-ee-et), is considered to be the warmest fiber in the world; it is warmer than wool and softer than Kashmir. A scarf made out of Qiviut will sell for around 200 dollars, making them another name on the long list of species nearly hunted to extinction. They are just now making a comeback in the wild. I had done my research on the AWCC, but now I was ready to get my hands dirty in the land of the midnight sun.

Now standing at the baggage claim, Erin, the Intern Coordinator, saw me first. Nursing a 24-ounce can of monster with her short unruly hair supported by a buff, she introduced herself and helped carry my luggage to the parking garage. It took us thirty minutes and four trips on the same escalator to find her truck. When she finally remembered where it was I couldn't help but notice a heavily taped cooler sitting in the bed. "I know this is kind of a rough way to start out, but we had our musk ox calf die last night. We need to take it to the post office to have it sent off for a necropsy." Rough indeed, but I shrugged it off; neither of us wanted my first day soiled with death. Two weeks later, we received an empty cooler, a bundle of decaying blankets and a report. One of the other mothers had gored the calf at two days old, the over-aggressive bitches. The cooler was simply hosed out and bleached, and the blankets were put through the washer and dryer in the intern housing. My clothing still remembers; my shirts are tinted orange from the iron in the water and the fabric wrinkled and faded.

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The frantic moans from Tsuni die down when I get to the gate. I slam my size-14 boots into a sterilizing bucket of bleach and don a pair of rubber gloves, ripping them around the wrist as my hands shake from the rain and cold. I lift the simple latch that separates them from the swooning tourists and wedge my way through the narrow gate. Tsuni, her hair matted down in dripping strands, greets me by ramming her head into my shin, teeth searching for a teat to suck on, and I repay the favor by rubbing her dripping ears and whispering “good morning to you too. Now, where’s your sister?” Carefully stepping over Tsuni, I walk around the side of the small wooden structure that does nothing more than put a roof over their heads, and peer into the opening. Two black beads stare up at me. Nami lies with her legs folded tightly against her body, her disproportionate head lifted slightly to acknowledge my arrival. Her fur is dry and curly, and with the back of my hand I trace her unique streak of white fur from the top of her head to her lower back. The straw directly behind her is green and runny; her hind legs are caked in shit. She probably has not moved in several hours. We have been giving her 4.5 ounces of children’s Pepto Bismol instead of formula off and on for the past month, but not anymore. She has lost too much weight and will not make it unless she gets nutrients, shits or not. Having followed me in, Tsuni again rams my leg and I stick out two fingers for her to suckle on before I swap them with her bottle. I encourage Nami to stand up and take her bottle while Tsuni sucks away at her 12 ounces. Unmoving, the two black beads look beyond me, out into the blur of rain.

I remember the day Nami was born. I was sitting in the living room of the bunkhouse after work, and Teal, a previous intern who now did a mixture of maintenance and animal care, yelled in from the entrance that everyone needed to help get a newborn musk ox calf. The calves are separated from their mothers because the soil lacks essential minerals, specifically copper. Without supplements, the calves will freeze to death come the frigid winter. In previous years they tried putting the minerals in the main enclosure, but the adults would prevent the calves from getting any. To complicate things further, the calves have to suckle from their mothers at least once to get some essential nutrients and vitamins before being removed. Remembering my first day and the cooler in the back of Erin’s pick-up, I jumped to my feet and headed for the enclosure.

The AWCC has a unique way of doing things. When I ran out of the bunkhouse, there were two brave souls on a four-wheeler mentally preparing to steal a baby from an 800-pound mother whose species have been known to literally crack each other’s skulls in half when fighting. I’d rather be fending off a bear with a shovel, which happens to be another on-the-job skill AWCC employees learn. I am posted at the gate, ready to slam it shut when the four-wheeler comes tearing through,

while the others stand ready to throw fruit over to the main herd in hopes of distracting them. Ready as we will ever be, the signal is given and the four-wheeler engine revs to life as it shoots through the gate towards the mother and calf. I had never considered the sound an angry musk ox makes, but it drowned out the motor of the four-wheeler. When the pair entered the enclosure, the main herd took off to the other side, but the mother spun around, her head stretched to the end of her neck and her black eyes bulging out of their sockets as she let loose a challenging roar that would put a lion to shame. Instinctively, the calf stayed between the mother's legs, but as the four-wheeler approached I could see doubt and panic come over its face. Unsure of what to do, both the calf and mother scattered in opposite directions. In one fluid motion the two on the four-wheeler sped up to the calf, scooped it up and spun around, high-tailing it out of there. I will never forget the mother's look of pure hatred as generations of evolution kicked in. She roared, pointed her thick horns at the four-wheeler and me, and charged. With the mother close behind, the four-wheeler flew through the gate and I slammed it shut, forcing the mother to skid to a stop, blood-shot white sticking out around the edges of the giant marbles of her eyes. She roared for three days, standing up on the high hill in their enclosure, desperately searching.

We immediately took the calf into an enclosure far away from the angry mother and left it alone to recover from the shock. A few hours later we went in, found out it was a girl, and began getting her adjusted to being around us and feeding from a bottle. It took 19 hours before she finally drank from her bottle, a good 12 hours earlier than any musk ox calf before her. Two weeks later one more girl was born, giving us interns the opportunity of a lifetime, to take care of two musk ox calves and watch them grow up.

Bottle-raising musk ox calves is a big commitment; they have to be fed every 4 hours, including midnight and 4 a.m., they have terrible diarrhea because the only thing they are eating is nutrient rich formula, and you have to change your clothes every time you go in and out of their enclosure to prevent spreading disease. If anything, baby-wiping a musk ox's hairy ass is great birth control and the closest thing to a baby I plan on having for a while. But more important than all the hard work we were going to be doing, was coming up with names. We were trying to come up with something meaningful. All the calves in the past had been named after "Alaska" things; Chugatch and Wrangle were named after national forests; Mukluk was named after traditional native foot wear, the list goes on. Fortunately, we had a great idea.

That summer was the 50th anniversary of The Great Alaska Earthquake of 1964. At that time, a little town called Portage sat right where the AWCC sits today, and on March 27th they were hit by a 9.2 magnitude earthquake, the second largest in recorded history. The town of Portage dropped

10 feet and a tsunami 15 feet high flooded up the Turnagain arm, washing away the city. If you drive on the Seward Highway you can still see old log cabins that were scooped up by the water and deposited like silt on grasslands now over a mile away from the ocean. Over 400 million dollars of damage and destruction was wrought and 130 lives were lost. We thought we could find a cute name for a musk ox somewhere in that destruction, and we did. We chose to break apart the word tsunami into Tsuni and Nami, and thus the dynamic duo was made.

I found myself in a very fortunate position as we settled into our daily routines. I was the main dietician, meaning that I got to work at 8 am, an hour before everyone else, to prepare diets and, more importantly, feed the musk ox calves. The other interns would have to negotiate who would get to take the other feedings throughout the day, but I got to start my day with the best wake-up call imaginable. At first Tsuni and Nami were nervous around me, only approaching me to drink from their bottles. I remember my first time feeding them by myself, they instinctively stood together, attempting to form a wagon circle for protection. When I showed them the bottle, they hesitantly broke ranks to drink their formula before rushing off again. As time wore on, they became more comfortable around me, sticking around after finishing their bottles to see if I offered any other food. They started with my muck boots, licking the tops and sucking on the straps. But then they discovered the wonders of pant legs, and from that moment on the cuffs of my pants had permanent saliva stains that still cause my pants to fold at odd angles. I took advantage of the time close to them to find their weak spots, noting the particular pleasure they got when I rubbed their ears. Each day they would stick around longer and longer, even running to my voice if I called to them when walking by on another task. Eventually both straps of my muck boots were broken and even the antennae of my radio was fair game when I would go in just to sit with them. I discovered they each had a particular way they liked to be petted; Tsuni was content to proudly stand with her head held high as I vigorously scratched up and down the length of her body. Nami, on the other hand, would only be content if she was suckling on something at all times, even taking a liking to Tsuni's ears and tail. My favorite thing to do was take off running and have them come charging after me. They would usually only last about a minute or two and then be ready to plop down and nap beside me as I rubbed their ears.

Even though I was the first one up, I would usually be the last one to go back to the bunk house. "How are your little girls?" would be the first thing I heard as I climbed up the stairs leading to the living room. Grinning from ear to ear, I'd reply, "Wonderful as always." Most days we would give behind the scenes tours, and my first and last stop would always be my little girls, first to get me and the group excited and involved, and last because I straight up loved getting to see them, and my group usually felt the same way. I always started off by telling my favorite fact, that "Oomingmak" was the

Nunavut word for Musk Ox, and its literal translation is “the bearded one.” That would always get a chuckle and comment or two about how I had become their mother and even looked the part.

Before I could get Nami to start on her bottle, I heard the raspy sucking that signified Tsuni had finished hers, so I pulled it out of her mouth and set it on a shelf by my head. Looking for more, Tsuni began the ritual of ramming my shin, sucking on my boot strap and moving on to whatever else she could find. Still Nami sat there, unwilling, or perhaps unable, to move. I gently ran my fingers through her soft qiviut, whispering to her that she was going to be fine. I moved my hands underneath her and eased her up off the ground, jumpstarting her legs to start kicking out. She managed to stabilize them beneath her and awkwardly walk over to her water bowl, her legs stiff and complaining. The water seemed to spark new life in her and when I offered her the bottle, she sucked down all 4.5 ounces of the formula. It would probably run right through her, but at least she was getting some nutrients. I took the opportunity to wipe her hind legs with baby wipes as much as possible, and I replaced the straw where she had been lying. Her burst of energy left as quickly as it came and she lay back down in the same spot. I sat there beside her rubbing her ears and keeping Tsuni company for close to an hour, distantly watching the rain fall. Finally, I gave into my desperate need for a few more hours of sleep and managed to stand up and move without stepping on either of them. But my departure was not unnoticed, and as I closed the gate and began walking back to the intern kitchen they begin a low moan. As the sky cried and stomachs churned, I smiled, listening to the two voices call out into the night.

On my final day of the summer, I spent my last few hours sitting in the warm sun with them. I collected a bit of their qiviut and now keep it in a small bag along with a water color of them one of the interns painted for me. They are my only piece of decoration in my room besides a framed photo of the bunkhouse I lived in with the inlet of the Turnagain Arm and the emerald mountains of the Chugach National Forest rising up in the background.