

THE KETTLE ON THE BOAT

IT IS MORNING. Papa is loading some bags onto our little boat. I ask him where we are going. He says we are going to the other side of the lake.

"Why are we going to the other side of the lake, Papa?" I ask again. Papa doesn't answer me.

"Why are we going, Papa?"

"Little girls ask too many questions," he says.

Mama is taking down the curtains. There are two cracks in the window. I ask again.

"Mama? Why are we going to the other side of the lake?" Mama hides her face in the curtains.

Something inside me knows something.



I am Qissúnguaq. It is an Inuit name. It means 'little piece of wood'. I am six years old. I live with my Papa, my Mama and my baby sister. On one side of our house is the sea, on the other side is the lake. This lake is so big I cannot see across. In winter the water in the lake freezes as thick as thick. Then the sea freezes. Some men cut blocks of ice and make icehouses.

Once, they cut a block with a fish inside it. The fish looked at me with big eyes. Its mouth was open.

Papa traps animals, shoots them and skins them. In winter the snow is red with blood. In summer he goes out in his boat and catches fish. He guts the fish black red and the birds scream. He hangs the empty fish on wooden gallows in front of our house. They hang there for two weeks. I like to go and visit them, watch their eyes shrivel up, dry and fall out. I keep the birds away.

When the eyes fall out the fish are ready. Mama cuts them down, dries them and packs them in salt, so we have fish to eat when the ice comes back. For a long time there have not been enough fish.

Once, Papa went out to help catch pilot whales. The whales were smooth, shiny and black. They made the water boil with froth. Papa trapped the whales and the water in the bay was as red as the snow. I remember it. There are no whales in the bay now.

Sometimes Papa shoots big geese with his gun. I pull off their feathers and the down flies round the kitchen and tickles my nose, then Mama cooks some meat, dries some on the gallows. The geese have not arrived this year. Papa waited and waited. He had his gun ready behind the door. Now it is too late. They will not come now.

Sometimes there is not enough soup to fill the pan on the stove.



I am on our small boat with Papa, Mama and my baby sister. They don't often take little girls out in boats. It is cold, I am bundled up. My cheeks are frozen. The motor is going put-put-put.

There is a kettle on the boat. It is our kettle from home, the one that goes "hushhhh" when it boils. It is balanced on a cardboard box. I wonder if it has water in. Mama is rubbing her fur boot softly up and down the kettle.

I am glad it is on our boat. That kettle is magic. It fills the room with a big cloud, a warm cloud, and the window gets covered in giant's breath. Mama wipes the glass with her fingers and shows me how to make shapes. When Papa comes back from emptying his traps, the cloud escapes and goes outside. It looks like fingers in the air. They mix with his breath then disappear.

Papa is sitting beside me, one hand on the tiller, the other holding my sleeve very tight. I will not fall in, there are not many waves. It is hard to see my Mama's face because she has a hood up. She is opposite me, turned sideways so she is facing Papa, not facing me. She has the kettle near her legs, and my baby sister is on her back in a caribou papoose. I can just see my sister's head. Her eyes are black beads. Black holes in a hood.

It is a long time since I've been out in the boat. It lives in a tin shed next to our house; even in the summer it lives in the tin shed. Papa pulls it up on wooden poles on the ground for it to roll better. I help him rub the weed off it. The weed

is green, and the boat is red.

We are going somewhere. It is a special day. This should be fun, but it does not feel like fun in my belly. I want to ask Mama now where we are going. But Papa is cross, so I don't. Mama is busy with my sister, busy keeping the bags and boxes straight against the rocking of the boat. The curtains are in a bag.

The boat rocks on the lake and I hold on. Papa's hand is tight on my sleeve. He lights a cigarette, a dry old cigarette from a tin under the table. Because it is cold, I can make smoke in the air too, and I blow a white cloud when Papa does. I hope it will make him smile. I have not seen him with a cigarette before. Not in his own mouth. I saw a cigarette when they gave one to the man from over the lake.

We do not have much to give to visitors. We do not often have visitors. We are just me, my Papa, Mama and my sister, some fish in salt and some meat. That's all there is.

The kettle boiled for the visitors. The man and woman from over the lake. The man with the cigarette and the woman with a shawl tied under her chin and no smile. She held my arm and felt it. She said I was strong. When the kettle boiled I could not see them for the cloud.

Mama has a big belly under her coat. She says it is a stone in her belly. When she says that I laugh.

I see something. I look up and see a big bird in the sky. I pull Papa. I say, "Look Papa! It is a goose!"

It is. It is a goose, a big fat goose and it flies round so close I can hear wings pushing the air away. It lands on the lake a little way away from the boat. Mama looks at Papa. He looks at the goose.

I say, "Papa? Shall I get the gun and you can shoot the goose for us?" but Papa does not answer. He is watching the sky, and he is sitting up straight. In a while he sits back, and says, "There is only one goose."

I am sleepy with the rocking of the boat. I rest against Papa and doze. When I wake up, my Mama has the kettle on her lap. I know there is no water in it then. The stone in her belly is pushing the kettle off her knee, but she is holding it there with a mitten. She is holding it to her with one hand on its handle, the other stroking it round.

Now I can see the shore a long way away, and I can see three houses, they are wood. There are no people.

I look at the shore because Mama is looking at the shore. Then I look back at Mama. She is holding her kettle on her knee, holding it tight with her mittens. She has hunched over it. My sister on her back is wriggling, and Mama shrugs her shoulder to move my sister so she is not bent in the papoose. My Mama is holding the kettle like it might break, holding it gently but steady. She is holding it, hunched over, and her lips are moving.

I cannot hear what she is saying. My ears lean forward to listen but all I hear is the slap slap of the lake against the boat, the put-put of the engine, and the whistle of my Papa's breathing.

Something inside me knows something again.

"Mama? Is the kettle to go away?"

Mama does not answer me. She looks up, a fast look. Even though I am small I can feel this... it is a special day, the kettle has to go away. Mama is sad.

I look back at the shore. I look at the shore and the houses, no bigger than my little fingernail when I hold up my hands and squint through my fingers at the sun. So I do that. I cover my face with my hands and look at the houses through my fingers. They move around, they are brown birds that will fly up into the gray sky, wheel about and scream.

As the houses get bigger, they rock up and down like they are boats. There are two people there now. I do not think for me at that moment. I think for Mama.

The boat comes to the jetty, Papa throws a rope to the man. It is the man from across the lake.

We go up the ladder. Papa and I, we go up the ladder. There is weed on the lower steps. It slips my feet and he holds my hand. He has a bag round his shoulders. At the top I look back into the boat. I wait for Mama, but she does not come. She is not looking at me. She is holding the kettle, looking back over the water.

There is the woman from across the lake. I look up at Papa. I cannot see him properly even though he is close and I can smell his Papa smell. He gives my hand to the woman. I have mittens on, but her hand is hard, cold. Papa gives the bag to the man.

I say, "Papa...?"

"These people will look after you," he says.

I stand and let the woman hold my hand. I watch my Papa going back down the ladder.

Then I see a shape in the sky! Behind Papa there is another goose in the sky and I shout to him.

But it is not a goose. It is only another brown bird.

I think I shout, "Mama?" Then I know I didn't because no noise came out. I only shouted in my head. Mama heard it though.

Papa is starting the motor, pulling on the string, one, two, three. Our little boat is naughty. It only ever starts after five pulls on the string.

Mama nearly stands up. She holds onto the side of the boat and she has the kettle in her other hand. My baby sister and the stone in Mama's belly are so heavy. They bend her over and I think she will break, I can see her trying to stand up straight. And I hear the motor start to go put-put.

My head says "Mama?" again, and the boat moves away from the jetty. Mama holds on and lifts her head up. I think she is looking at me but I can't see properly. There is too much water.

Then Mama swings her arm and throws the kettle into the lake. Papa catches hold of her and she sits down again. The boat rocks a little.

The kettle bobs on the lake like a round gray bird with a big long beak. It rocks on the water when the boat begins to go away. I don't watch the boat. I watch the kettle rocking on the waves. The kettle-boat-bird. It is coming closer to me, slowly, and I think if I can hold tight to the ladder and go back down, maybe I can get it.

I hold the woman's hand and wish hard for the kettle to come to me. I wish that the man will help me on the ladder and not let my feet slip on the weed. I wish that I can go somewhere where the kettle will send giant's breath round my head so no one can see me.

But my wishes are heavy wishes. They fill the kettle-boat-bird up too much and it tips forward and drinks the lake through its beak. It sinks.

I watch where the kettle has gone. There is a mark on the water and the brown birds are screaming. I look up and follow the boat. It is very small. It is not going the way we have come, it is going a different way. When I look back to the mark, it has gone. When I look back to the boat, it has gone too.

The brown birds here have big beaks. They are screaming over the water. I know, if Papa makes another gallows, and if they hang fish to dry, these brown birds might steal the fish's eyes.

If I am not there to help, how will Mama know when the fish are ready?

Vanessa Gebbie is from Wales. She is a writer, editor and creative writing tutor. Her work has been widely published and has won many awards (Bridport, Fish International, Per Contra and The Daily Telegraph among others). Her debut collection *Words from a Glass Bubble* (Salt Publishing 2008) was nominated for the Frank O'Connor Prize. A second collection is forthcoming in 2009.