

A Saam's Tale

(Finland)

One day, in the land above the Arctic Circle where the Saams and the Lapps live, a young Saam youth named Sergevan ventured on a hunting trip. After three days his food supplies were nearly gone and no deer had been found. Having no better idea, when he noticed an overgrown path, he followed it.

The path led deep into the woods to a hut, and sitting on its front step was a very old woman.

She looked up. "Peur?" she said in a raspy voice as he approached.

"What?" said the young man. "That's the name of my great-great-great grandfather."

"You look just like him," said the old woman. "I was supposed to marry your great-great-great grandfather - oh, the memories of my Peur from so long ago!"

The old woman coughed and Sergevan offered her what was left of his food and drink. Since she had no teeth, she gnawed and sucked on his crust of bread and jam.

"Why didn't the two of you marry, if you don't mind my asking?" said Sergevan after awhile.

"I might as well tell you," said the old woman.

"Always he took the other side! If I said it was raining, he said it was snowing. If I said it was hot in the tupa, he said it was cold. If I said to go right, he went left. Oh, Peur, Peur! - what a life we would have had if only you had listened to me at least some of the time!"

The old woman noticed Sergevan's hunting arrows and supplies and empty bag. "You must be far from home. You're welcome to stay here tonight. Have you had no luck hunting?"

"There's no deer anywhere!" said Sergevan. "I've looked and looked."

"There's plenty of deer," said the old woman. "You just need to know how to look. Your great-great-great grandfather used to lure the deer by singing. When he stole up to the deer, he'd come so that the wind blew at his back. Now, that's why your great-great-great-grandfather . . ."

In a flash, Sergevan grabbed his bows and arrows and bolted back into the tundra. By the end of that day he returned to the old woman's hut, empty-handed. He didn't want to be unkind to an old woman, but in his heart he felt angry she had given him wrong advice.

"I came back to tell you that your advice did not work," he said, grim-faced.

"You are just like your great-great-great-grandfather!" said the old woman. "He never listened to me either! Now if you had only let me finish what I was saying, I would have said that he'd come up to the deer with the wind at his back and that's why he . . . wasn't a good hunter! When the wind is at your back the deer catches a whiff of human scent and runs away. The wind must be blowing toward your face, so the human scent blows away from the deer. And singing only tells them that you're there - you must be absolutely silent."

"Ah!" said Sergevan. "I'll go back to the tundra now."

"Not now - not at night!" said the old woman. "Sleep here and leave at daybreak, that's the best time to go hunting."

When dawn broke, Sergevan headed back to the tundra. He silently crept up on a deer while the wind was blowing on his face and sent a single arrow flying. Later that day, he and the old woman feasted on his game.

"You are almost like family to me," Sergevan said. "Why don't you come live with my family?"

"I could have been your great-great-great grandmother," said she. "But you know, when they get old, all animals stay at their nest or cave. I will stay here."

"Then I will stay with you," said the youth.

And so Sergevan and the old woman lived for a number of happy years in her hut with plenty to eat and plenty to talk about.

