Translated excerpt

Isabel Pin
Ada Blackjack. Überleben auf der Bäreninsel

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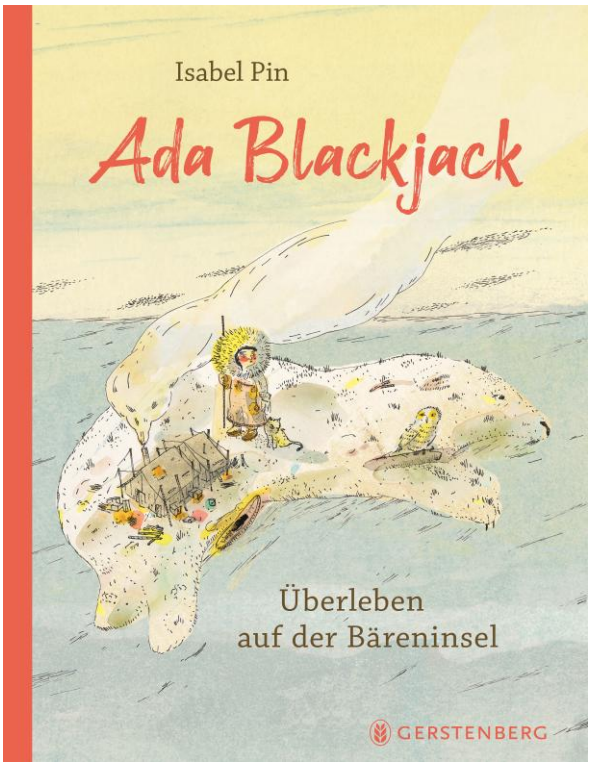
Ada Blackjack. Survival on Bear Island

Translated by Claire Storey



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In Nome, word went around that men from the south had arrived and were looking for workers for their expedition. They were willing to pay 50 dollars per month.

L. E. Jordan, Nome's Chief of Police, knew Ada needed money for her son Bennett who was sick, and that she was an expert in sewing traditional clothing from animal skins. These provided the only protection from the bitter winds and icy water of the Arctic. She also spoke English and knew how to write. So Jordan recommended that Ada join the expedition. Ada was fearful of undertaking such a great journey, but she loved Bennett and needed the money for his care so, in the end, she agreed to go.

On the morning of 9th September 1921, Bennett and her sister Rita accompanied Ada to the harbour.

In her suitcase were a few items of clothing, her mother's favourite gloves which were embroidered with flowers, and a small piece of driftwood that Bennett had found on the beach.



When they arrived at the harbour, they saw the expedition ship, the *Silver Wave*, ready to depart. The crew had gathered on the beach. Men were milling around, loading tonnes of goods onto the vessel: boxes, barrels, food, dogs and much, much more.

Ada had been told there would be families on the expedition, with other women like her, but Ada could see only white men. She did not recognise anyone from Nome or the other villages nearby.

“Where are the other Inupiat people?” she asked one of the crewmen who was standing a little off to one side smoking a cigarette.

“You’re the only one who is coming with us,” he replied. “We’ll collect some other natives in Siberia. Don’t worry, you won’t be the only woman.”

Ada said goodbye to Bennett, saying, “I’ll be back as soon as possible. And then we need never be apart again.”



Rita gave Ada the dried salmon she had prepared for the journey. Rita gave her sister a tender hug and returned home with Bennett. It was with a heavy heart that Ada approached the crewmen and introduced herself, saying,
“My name is Ada Blackjack, and I am here to work for you.”

The Silver Wave left Nome that same September afternoon. As the ship headed out to sea, Ada watched her life in Nome growing more and more distant. She tried not to cry. She wanted to believe that she would be back home again the following summer.

The ship was travelling north.
The sea was calm, the wind low and the sky blue.



On board the small ship, the crew, Ada, seven husky dogs and a cat named Vic crossed the Bering Sea to Siberia. Their final destination lay beyond: the wild and uninhabited Wrangel Island.
During the crossing, Ada had become aware of the vast grandeur of the earth and the power of the sea. This woman who had never before left her local area now suddenly felt the enormity and endlessness of the ocean.

She also felt a profound fear, deep down inside her. It was a fear she could not share with the men on board.
She picked Vic up in her arms and decided that this ball of fur would be her travel companion.
“We will always have each other,” she whispered in the cat’s ear.

On the 11th September 1921, the *Silver Wave* reached Siberia and dropped anchor in Cape Dezhnev.



Ada stood at the railing and gazed out at the steep Siberian mountains. Near where the *Silver Wave* had docked and the tundra began, Ada could see round stone houses (*qasgiit*). Whale bones lay strewn across the beach. This was where they were to pick up other Indigenous families.

Ada was pleased. Groups of curious children, women and men came up to the boat.
The inhabitants of the Siberian coast did not speak the same language as Ada, but she was able to communicate with them though body language and hand gestures.

She bought yarn and seal skins from them so she could begin to sew the first garments for the men on the expedition. Allan, Lorne, Fred and Milton were less successful in their tasks. They didn't manage to buy a boat (*umiaq*) for hunting walrus nor did they convince any other families to join them. And so they journeyed onwards without them. Ada was not happy about it. "Will I really be travelling alone on this expedition?"



The journey over the Chukchi Sea to Wrangel Island turned into a real adventure. High winds from the west and stormy waves battered the boat. The lifeboat was even torn from the ship and tossed into the sea. Ada stayed below deck in the hold of the ship, curled up tightly with Vic.

She was absolutely terrified and prayed the storm would soon be over. Finally, four days later, on the 15th September 1921, Allan cried “Land Ahoy!”

Wrangel Island rose tall and majestic out of the Arctic Ocean. Powerful waves pounded the cliffs.

Through the clouds they caught a glimpse of the snow-covered peaks of the steeply sloping mountains in the distance. The island was huge and grey. “It looks bare and wild,” thought Ada. “What am I even doing here?” But thinking about Bennett and the money she so desperately needed gave her greater courage. “Island of the bears, you’re my home now. Even if you’re wild, I’m sure we’ll get used to each other!”



The *Silver Wave* was anchored near to Roger Harbour, the same place where some years earlier Fred and the other members of his team had been before. The crew unloaded all of the goods which they – and the seven dogs – would rely on to survive the next year.

Vic immediately leapt from the boat, happy to feel firm land beneath her four paws again. Once they were finished, the *Silver Wave* bid them farewell with three blasts from its horn and continued onwards to Alaska. Ada watched the boat go with tears in her eyes.

Standing there under the sunny skies of the north, she suddenly felt very alone. Wherever she looked, it was all unknown: the four unfamiliar men, the unwelcoming island, the bleak mountains. Even the sea smelled different to the one at home, sour and bitter.

Milton, Fred, Allan, Lorne and Ada built their camp. They had a large tent in which they would all live together. In the middle was a log burner with a chimney that poked through a hole in the roof. Later on, they built a small hut in which they would store and cook their food.



They took the only photo of the whole group with the camera.
Photo: Ada, the Iñupiaq woman, the four white men from the south and Vic.

Little by little, the men explored Wrangel Island. The north, like the south where their camp lay, was covered in moss and shrubs. Only a few kilometres away, the Skeleton River split the tundra in two and in the middle of the island rose two mountain ranges with snow-covered peaks.

It was all very bare; there were no trees. Fortunately, there was plenty of driftwood that had wash up on the beaches that they could burn for heat.
In the tents, the men stowed away everything they had brought with them: camp beds, typewriters, journals, photographic equipment, temperature measuring devices and compasses. Soon they shot their first seal. Ada too was giving her all. While Milton cleaned the seal skins, she was sewing hooded cloaks (*atigiit*) from the furs. On the 1st October, Allan, Lorne and Fred hunted a bear. That evening Lorne wrote in his diary, “The bear came towards me. I aimed well and shot it in the head. It died instantly.” The meat and skin would serve them well to survive the coming winter.

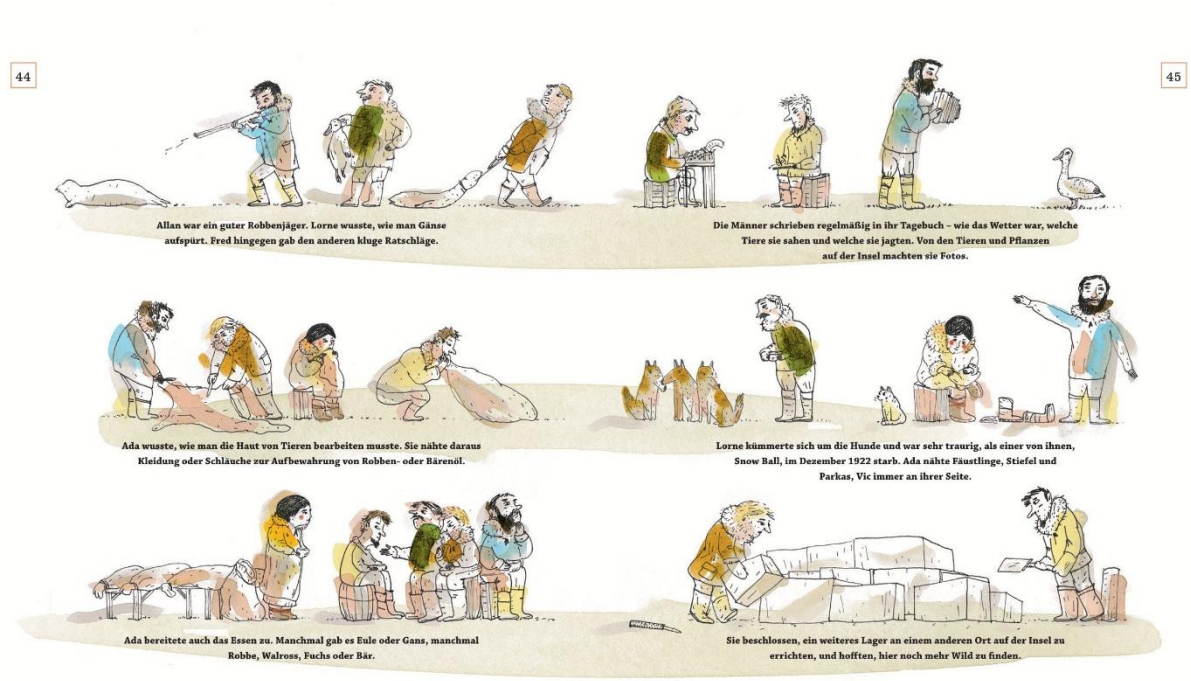


Even though Ada was busy with many tasks, it was impossible to forget Bennett and her people – their warmth and their comfort. Their happy times together and the hours spent gathering berries. The time spent waiting together on the edge of an ice hole, waiting for a fish to bite. She was overcome by a wave of sadness and home sickness that prevented her from completing the work which the men brought to her.

Lorne enjoyed his role as Team Leader and he couldn't stand it when people did not obey him. He shouted at her:

"What on Earth is wrong with you, woman?" One day when he was raging, he couldn't contain his rage anymore and he chained Ada up to a pole outside. She was freezing cold and terrified of polar bears. Only Milton understood Ada and tried to defend her.

However, Lorne would not change his mind, and Ada had to stay outside for several hours unprotected from the cold and the dangers around her. Fortunately, Vic remained by her side throughout the whole ordeal.



The days grew shorter. Winter was cold and dark.
Then came spring. Snowstorms and blustery winds swept across the lonely island. The snow began to melt. The tundra welcomed the water with bushes, flowers and later berries spouting up from the ground.

Ada and the four men were now getting on better.
Under the extreme climatic condition and despite the many challenges they were forced to overcome, they held firm together. They were often visited by wild animals. While on the one hand, animals like polar bears were a grave danger to them, the explorers were able to shoot them and use their flesh for food and their fur to keep them warm. There was always plenty to do in their camp. As all Inupiat people, Ada made sure that as little as possible of the animals would go to waste.



In August 1922, the ice around Wrangel Island finally melted. Every morning, Ada would climb the nearby hills and look south towards the horizon, hoping and searching for the ship coming from Nome to finally take them home. But September came, and with it, the ice which would prevent access to the island once again. Ada would have to wait another year. Another year on this harsh, cold island. Another year far from home and far from Bennett. “My darling, I’m so sorry I cannot come home to you,” she whispered as she stroked the piece of wood he had given to her.

The second autumn was hard, and the team had problems catching polar bears and seals. Food was becoming scarce, and the temperature dropped to minus thirty degrees Celsius. Their Christmas dinner comprised of dried walrus meat, a little seal oil and dry bread. Lorne wrote in his journal, “A howling storm has torn off part of the wall and we have snow blowing into the hut.”



“Without sufficient food reserves, we will die out here.”
Their worries swirling, the men planned to take the sled and five remaining dogs over the ice to Siberia to seek help. Such thoughts frightened Ada. More than one hundred and fifty kilometres lay between Wrangel Island and the Chukchi coast. The ice was unsafe and the wind extremely powerful. Moreover, there was very little light every day and hungry polar bears made regular patrols looking for something to eat. On the 28th January 1923 Allan, Fred and Milton were ready to leave. The sled was heavily laden with bread, seal oil, tools and the tent. They had also packed their journals. Ada was to stay on the island to look after Lorne who had fallen sick. She was alone with Lorne of all people, the man who had so often treated Ada badly.

“It’s good that you’re here with me, my little Vic,” thought Ada.



Some days later, Lorne fell unconscious while chopping wood. He was very weak and his legs and joints ached. Ada knew he was suffering from scurvy. This disease occurs from a lack of vitamin C. They had not had any vegetables, fresh meat or raw fish for a long time now. Ada had to take matters into her own hands. She had never been hunting herself before. “I have to do it like you do, little Vic: lie in wait and creep up on it.”
She was completely overjoyed when she caught her first salmon. She cooked it and gave it to Lorne, so he could begin to regain his strength.

At the end of April, she saw geese and gulls. She happily said to Vic, “Summer is not far away. We’ll soon be saved!”
On the 9th June she found a treasure in a nest: an egg! And although Lorne had so often wronged her, she rushed to give it to him.

But even the egg could not save him.



During the night of 22nd into the 23rd June, Lorne died. As she had done every morning for the last five months, Ada went to his bedside to take him a cup of hot tea and to warm his sandbag (which acted as his hot water bottle). But he did not stir. Lorne was dead. Ada sat down on the cushion next to his bed and picked up the tea in both hands. She wanted to warm herself up and drive away the emptiness she suddenly felt. There she was, alone on the island with nothing but ice and the sea, unending and unchanging. As Ada looked at Lorne, she imagined for a moment that she saw his ghost take the form of an animal, perhaps a bird. This would take his soul back to Nome and then to his family in Seatle. She was able to take some strength from these thoughts.

Ada sat herself at the table and began to type on Milton's typewriter. "Bennett, my beloved, I want you to know that I love you and I hope I will see you again soon."



Ada did not bury Lorne. She left his body lying on his bed in the large tent. Together with Vic, she moved into the tiny hut that had served as their food store. She gathered new courage: she had to survive – for Bennett! Ada took the rifle and walked west with Vic, always following the coast. A few days earlier she had seen signs of seals on the ice.
During long winter nights a long time earlier, she had listened to her father and the other men talk about seal hunts. “If you want to trap a seal, you have to behave like one yourself,” they had said. When she saw a seal on the ice, Ada did not hesitate. She lay down on her stomach and slowly crept towards the animal. Then she shot.
Using a fur stretcher and the last of her strength, Ada dragged the seal back to her camp. Relieved to have something to eat and shivering from the cold, that day she wrote in the journal, “This is the very first seal I have ever shot.”



Together with Vic, Ada explored the island. She always carried the rifle on her shoulder, just in case she encountered a polar bear.
As far as the eye could see, there was tundra, cliffs and steep, steep mountains, covered in lichen, moss, roots and small bushes. The tundra bloomed with gold, pink and blue flowers. There were even some wild berries.
Time and time again, Ada came across arctic foxes. They lived with their offspring in dens and hunted together. With their excellent hearing, they could sense small animals like hares, lemmings and geese which they ate.
Ada observed that the lemmings – like the arctic foxes – did not hibernate over winter. Their thick fur enabled them to stay active all year round. Even under heavy snow these clever animals could find food they had previously hidden.



Up on the hills, Ada watched the nature on the island. As time went by, she became more at one with her surroundings. She often saw wild geese which had arrived in June to nest for a while in search of food and to raise their offspring.
Then, before the harsh winter months arrived, they left, flying towards the south. How Ada wished she could do the same, fly home to her Bennett!
At some point, the walruses appeared – huge marine mammals with long tusks and wiry, white whiskers. They lay around in groups on the island. Ada could watch them for hours,
just like the seals which would lie all alone on an ice floe before quickly sliding into the water if a polar bear came along.



During the long winter evenings, Ada's grandmother and her sisters used to tell stories about the polar bears in the far north. They were said to be stronger and more powerful than a man, and could swim, run and hunt. In Ada's community, they would say it was very dangerous to kill a polar bear without showing it the respect it deserved. If not, its spirit would seek revenge. Ada was terrified of meeting a polar bear.
One day, she heard a loud growl outside her tent.
Her body tensed and a wave of terror rolled over her. She carefully picked up her gun and went outside. There it was, no more than five metres away, motionless and staring at her – *nanuq*, a polar bear.
Without thinking, Ada let off several shots into the air and the bear ran away. That evening, she wrote in the journal: "I looked through the door and saw a polar bear and a cub. I was very frightened, so I shot over the top of them and they ran away." Ada had saved her own life.



For many weeks now, Ada had been alone, but Bennett was in her thoughts every minute of the day. To survive, she had to draw on what she had deep down inside: her memories, her hope, and her courage. And she learned to listen to herself.
On the 10th July 1923 she wrote in her journal. “I did not go out today. I spent the whole day at home. It is very beautiful and sunny. I am happy that today I can relax.”
As her family had instilled in her when she was little, Ada hunted and harvested only what she really needed. She didn’t waste food or energy and worked with nature. When possible, she built up her supplies. She had been born an Iñupiaq and had never forgotten it. The hardest thing for Ada to deal with was the loneliness. Sometimes she had to force herself to get out of bed and fight for her life. She was so grateful that she had Vic – the little cat gave her the tenderness she so desperately missed.



On Wrangel Island, summer came around again. The temperature rose to five degrees Celsius. Ada had been on the island for nearly two years, and alone for nearly two months.
The wind blew strongly and blew a storm onto the island.
In the mountains, Ada saw a raven flying east. “Is it trying to warn me of a disaster?” she wondered. She fled to her tent and crawled into her sleeping bag. She hugged Vic tightly in her arms and closed her eyes.
Ada fell into a deep, heavy sleep. She dreamed she was with Bennett and many others – even whales, bears, birds and spirits. In her dream, they all burred into one great being.
When she awoke, Ada opened her journal and wrote
“I am happy to be alive.” Vic lay at her feet, purring quietly. Ada picked up Bennett’s small piece of driftwood, her lucky charm, and whispered, “I need to go back now. I don’t know why, but I must.”



It was early in the morning when Ada stepped out of her hut on the 20th August 1923. Mist hung over the sea, clouding her gaze. Suddenly she heard an unusual sound. It came again.

"Am I still dreaming," she thought. But there was no doubt about it.
She could hear a ship's horn. Quickly, Ada grabbed her binoculars and ran to the cliffs.

A boat had docked on the beach and some men were coming towards her. It was a strange creature they saw as they approached. She was dressed in warm furs, her hair was tangled from the wind and the cold. This little lady with a husky voice croaked, "I am Ada

Blackjack." And the skinny little cat next to her let out a hoarse "Miaow."
Ada left Wrangel Island two years after she arrived.
The journey home was uneventful. Ada could hardly wait to take Bennett in her arms once again. It had been so long!