

DOGSONG

GARY PAULSEN

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF HATCHET



1

I came wet into the world.

*On both sides there were cliffs,
white cliffs that were my mother's thighs.*

*And I didn't cry though it was cold
by the white cliffs and I was afraid.*

I came wet into the world.

—an old Eskimo man relating the memory of
his birth in a snowhouse on the sea ice.

Russel Susskit rolled out of the bunk and put his feet on the floor and listened in the darkness to the sounds of morning.

They were the same sounds he had always heard, sounds he used to listen for. Now in the small government house—sixteen by twenty—they grated like the ends of a broken bone.

He heard his father get up and hack and cough and spit into the stove. His father smoked cigarettes all day, rolled them with Prince Albert tobacco, and had one hanging on his lip late into the night. In the mornings he had to cough the cigarettes up. The sound tore at Russel more than at his father.

It meant something that did not belong on the coast of the sea in a small Eskimo village. The coughing came from Outside, came from the tobacco which came from Outside and Russel hated it.

After the coughing and spitting there was the sound of the fire being lit, a sound he used to look forward to as he woke. The rustle of paper and kindling and diesel fuel, which was used to start the wood, the scratch of a match, the flame taking and the stink of the diesel oil filling the one room. Russel did not like the smell of the diesel oil but he did not hate it the way he hated his father's coughing in the morning.

Russel heard the wind outside and that was good except that it carried the sounds of the village waking, which meant the sound of snowmachine engines starting up.

The snowmachines were loud and scared the seals. To fourteen-year-old Russel the whine of them above the wind hurt as much as the sound of coughing. He was coming to hate them, too.

It was still dark in the house because the village generator hadn't been turned on for the day. The darkness was cut by the light of the oil lamp on the table as his father touched a match to the wick.

Flat light filled the room and Russel looked around as he always did. It was a standard government house—a winter

house. They would move to summer fish-camps later. But in the winter they came into the village and stayed in the government houses. Boxes is what they are, really, he thought: boxes to put people in.

In one corner there was a small table with an oilcloth table cover. The cloth was patterned with roses and Russel did not know why his father had ordered it. There were no women there. Russel's mother had been gone for years, gone with a white trapper. But his father had liked the roses on the tablecloth and had sent for it. Russel had never seen a rose except on the tablecloth and on television over at the central meeting house where there was a set for watching. He did not think roses were as pretty as the small flowers that came in the tundra in the summer while they were taking salmon from the rivers. But his father liked the roses and Russel liked his father so he tried liking the roses.

All around the walls were pictures of Jesus.

His father loved Jesus more than he loved the roses. When he was young his father had told him about Jesus and Russel had listened but he didn't understand. He supposed the idea was something that came when you got old, the understanding of Jesus, and in the meantime he looked at all the pictures and wondered what they meant.

There was one in which Jesus had thorns

ONCE, THERE WERE SONGS. . . .

Russel Susskit is disillusioned by the changes to his Eskimo village: the smell of diesel oil in the morning, the sound of snowmobiles scaring the seals away. In need of guidance, he turns to the oldest member of his village. The elderly man understands Russel's desire for the old ways and sets him on a powerful vision quest to learn the songs that celebrated them.

Russel must venture north by dogsled, dressed only in deer skins and armed with a simple bow and lance. Alone, gliding along the icy landscape, miles away from civilization, Russel hopes to discover his own song.

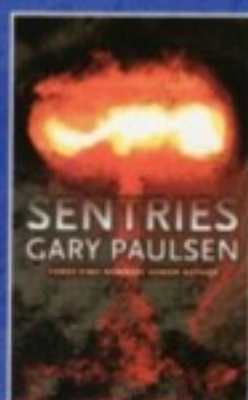
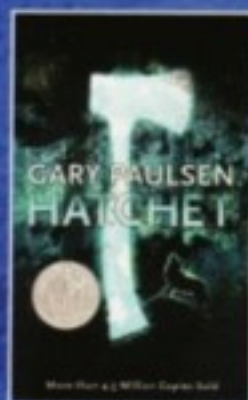
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