

## **Evgenia Arbugaeva: Arctic Stories Podcast (Transcripts)**

### Arctic Stories - Introduction (04:17m)

In my work I often return to my homeland, the Arctic, and I think I do this mainly because I really miss it, because now I live in London and I've been living in different cities and countries for years, so for me it's a way to come back and spend time there. But also I feel very much related to the people, to the mentality – the way people see nature and landscape.

And this project started a long time ago actually, it started in 2013 when I first went on a 2 and a half month journey on an icebreaker ship that delivered supplies to the remote Arctic stations, and I visited 21 stations and some of the places that I've seen, that I didn't even know existed.

The most difficult part of my work is always travel logistics because all these places are quite remote and isolated, so oftentimes it requires taking a ship, and then a boat, and then a dog sled, or then walking... So sometimes it takes a month or a couple of months just to get there or get out of the place. I have quite a bit of spare time to think about things when I travel, but that's the beauty of it as well, you know, by the time you're waiting for so long, through endless weather delays or some other things, but then you get there and I think you appreciate it more.

I prefer to travel alone, because I feel that I want the story to be about people, not about me, and I want to have my presence as small as possible and not to influence things or and how people behave. [And] Also, I'm quite conscious about energy that different people can bring into situations. But, I do travel with my brother sometimes, he's a filmmaker and he assists me, and I'm very much sure of him, of his energy and he brings actually quite a lot into the dynamic between me and people, so it's either I'm alone or with my brother Max.

There are so many things that are very special about the Arctic. The first thing that you notice is visual – the emptiness, the whiteness, but darkness as well. It's months of constant darkness during polar nights, so you don't see the sun for a few months, which on its own is a very weird and strange experience. It does something to you, to your mind. And then there is the never-ending polar day, which is also a sleepless Summer full of insomnia and sun and never-ending light. These are the first things that you notice. Then the deeper things that you start to notice to you, inside yourself, is all this free time, once your eyes have rested on this empty landscape and on the horizon, all the things that you kept in your unconscious start to creep out and run around in your head, so there's a lot of questions that you start to ask yourself and you have time to answer them. I think in that way, the Arctic has a very cleansing effect on many people, certainly on me – it's a visual cleansing, emotional and personal.

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## Chapter 1: The Lighthouse Keepers (05:11m)



Image credit: From the series Kanin Nos, © Evgenia Arbugaeva. Courtesy the artist and The Photographers' Gallery

In January, which is the coldest month in the Arctic, I went to the lighthouse and meteorological station called Kanin Nos. It is located on the narrow peninsula between the White and Barents seas. And when I first heard about this lighthouse and learned that there are only a couple that man the station in lighthouse, I was really surprised, considering the isolation of this place. And also I thought that, you know, maybe this is a real life story of escaping with a loved one to the edge of the world. So I was very curious to meet this couple. The first image actually that I took there was a portrait of Evgenia and Ivan, they are the couple that work at the meteorological station and the lighthouse. I wanted to capture that landscape, because everywhere I looked was just ice, snow and sea and there was nothing else around for hundreds of miles. It was just these two people, and I wanted to capture that in this portrait. So here they are, together with their dog named Dragon.

Every day Evgenia and Ivan go to collect a water sample to measure the salinity of the seawater, so here they are collecting water. They go everywhere together. One of the reasons is because recently Evgenia developed a fear of polar bears because, she says, they come to her in her dreams and follow her through the ice and it's a reoccurring nightmare. So she wants Ivan always by her side. The light was great, just how I like it, that soft Arctic light through this overcast sky. Everything that appears in the landscape when the light is like this looks very special and it looks lit from all sides, from everywhere, because the sky becomes this giant light box.

Evgenia is a very interesting character. She's very strong, even though she looks very fragile. They say that everybody who lives in the Arctic in this condition needs to be very strong people, but she is particularly strong because she decided that she wanted to be a meteorologist when she was 19 after hearing stories from a friend of her family. So Evgenia went to study to be a meteorologist and went to her first station and immediately realised that this is the place for her, even though she'd never been to the Arctic before. Now she's 31 years old, and a few years ago when she was on vacation, she met Ivan and they fell in love, and she asked him if he would want to join her to live at the lighthouse, in the middle of nowhere, and he agreed without hesitation.

For me, it was interesting also to observe how a couple live in such conditions. How do you live with a person that you love, so far away from everything else? And how do you manage to not get on each other's nerves? That was probably the first question, and they really manage it very well. Well, first of all, Evgenia said, when they argue she can't just walk away because there's nowhere to go, so they talk through their issues and it's over very quickly. Also what I found interesting is how careful they are with each other, how they're always very conscious about their wellbeing,

both emotional and physical, because they know very well that there's no help. So if something happens to you, you call a medical helicopter, but it might be delayed by weeks, sometimes months, because of the bad weather. Emotionally too, it can get very difficult, especially during the dark polar nights. So, I felt that, in this couple, I saw an example of teamwork, how they spread their chores between each other, they help each other, they're there to listen. And sometimes not listen and give each other space. They worked it out, and for me, it was very interesting and a positive story to witness.

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## Chapter 2: Apples That Travelled A Long Way (03:26m)



Image credit: From the series Kanin Nos, © Evgenia Arbugaeva, Courtesy the artist and The Photographers' Gallery

This is a photograph of apples that travelled a long way before they ended up on this table. Before I embarked on the journey to get to the lighthouse, I got in touch with Evgenia and Ivan and I asked them what to bring them, and the list was very typical of Arctic outposts, which was mostly fresh things. So, they were very precise – it was one kilo of cucumbers, 10 bulbs of garlic, one kilo of apples... They want fresh things because the only food supplies they get is delivered once a year by icebreaker ships, so most of the food is frozen or canned.

I bought these apples in village Shoina, and because it took us 17 hours by snowmobile, I anticipated that, so I packed them in my bag quite well. But then when I was on the sled looking at my snow covered bag I was scrutinizing my packing in my head, you know, trying to remember where I put them and some I covered in my jumpers some I squeezed into my slippers, and I was wondering if they will arrive OK. And then when I finally arrived and I gave it to Evgenia she had the biggest smile on her face. You know, they're so precious those apples and it took so much to preserve them. So the first thing that Evgenia did, she took them and wrapped them in newspaper one by one so that they wouldn't get frozen. And as she was doing it It looked like they were made of crystal or that they were jewels.

When I saw this situation, I thought immediately how everything was so soft – the colours, the newspaper, the cloth, the wallpaper, the aluminum forks. Everything has this tonally very soft and pastel colour, but then there are these apples that are yellow and quite bright – they appear very bright in this light. And it kind of reminded me of the landscape.

I didn't intend it to be symbolic. I suppose it became symbolic now that I look at this image, symbolic of the couple, symbolic of also faraway home and what they left behind – that life they left

behind for the snowy landscapes of the Arctic. And that's the thing about that place, because everything in it becomes symbolic somehow. Because it's so stripped of any noise and anything really, that anything you put in the landscape or anything that you put on the table, anything you say becomes symbolic and becomes important.

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### Chapter 3: During the light of Aurora (03:17m)



Image credit: From the series Dikson, © Evgenia Arbugaeva, Courtesy the artist and The Photographers' Gallery

This photograph was taken in the town Dikson. They used to call this town the capital of the Russian Arctic, and it was built as part of this massive infrastructure around the Northern sea route. As with many other towns like this, after the fall of the Soviet Union, they became deserted, and Dikson was completely abandoned in 2013. I spent three weeks in Dikson, staying in the nearby meteorological station. And for two weeks, nothing was really happening, and I was regretting coming there because photography was not happening. I was not happy with my images, it was too dark. I was kicking myself for coming during the deep polar nights because it was so dark, and I wasn't able to capture the atmosphere of the town. And then one day, Aurora exploded and the sky was probably the brightest and the most beautiful Aurora Borealis I've ever seen in my life, even though I grew up seeing it almost, you know, every Winter. It coloured everything in these surreal neon colours, and the town started to look as if it was taken from a dream or a hallucination.

Aurora is very unpredictable, it can just suddenly appear. The only thing you can kind of predict that you're kind of on the lookout for it when the days are windless and particularly cold. When I took this picture, it was close to minus 40 degrees, it was extremely cold, and when it started, it lasted for a few hours, which happens sometimes that it lasts for a few hours, sometimes it lasts for minutes... But when it did start, I thought, OK, this is the time, this is how I should photograph Dikson. The whole series ended up being taken in the span of those few hours during the light of Aurora.

And when I was with my brother, he was running around, filming, I was running around photographing – we were split. And then when Aurora faded and everything turned back into this darkness, we met and we just couldn't say anything, we were just looking at each other and laughing hysterically because it was just so magnificent. I'd never seen anything like this in my life.

I also thought it was all worth it, you know, this two weeks of waiting, and the long journey. It was all worth it, just for this few hours of beauty.

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#### Chapter 4: The Piano (01:58m)



Image Credit: From the series Dikson © Evgenia Arbugaeva, Courtesy the artist and The Photographers' Gallery

I had been in this room a few times before this image was taken, but something was missing every time. I mean, I really liked this piano and I was trying to imagine how it was for someone to sit there playing piano and looking out of the window to see this frozen sea. But something was not quite there, and I couldn't get it. And then when the Northern Lights appeared, I immediately thought that I needed to return to this room and see how it looks now. And when I entered, I almost felt like I heard the music playing and the stars were sparkling in unison, and everything was kind of moving somehow. And I took this picture, everything was very quiet, and then there was this gust of wind, and the doors were slamming in the corridor. And then I thought that I heard somebody's footsteps. In my imagination, I really felt like somebody coming in.

Of course, I remembered the precautions of the people from the station saying to be careful of polar bears and all those things, and so I turned off my torch. I tried not to breathe and I quietly walked out of the building and then I ran faster than I have ever ran in my entire life. I don't think it was a polar bear. I don't know what it was, but it was really really scary in this room. Scary and beautiful at the same time.

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## Chapter 5: Circle of Life (05:26m)



Image credit: From the series Chukotka © Evgenia Arbugaeva, Courtesy the artist and The Photographers' Gallery

This photograph was made in Enurmino village. It is one of the most northern and isolated villages in the Chukotka region. It is located on the shore of the Chukchi Sea, and this village is a home to the Chukchi community. It's quite small, it's only 300 people and, partly because of their remoteness and isolation, people there kept their traditions and they still live off the land and the sea. Here in this picture is Nikolai, he is one of the elders of the community, and he still remembers the time before Soviet collectivisation, before the houses were built. And he remembers a time when his family lived in Yaranga, which is the traditional Chukchi house made of wooden poles and reindeer skin. I feel like when he talks about this time he misses it, but also, he says that when they lived like that, the community was more in balance, somehow. He said that people were better and kinder to each other back then. Here he is in his room in the house, which is a former metrological station. He used to live here with his wife, but she died a year ago. He was actually talking to me about her, and then he paused for a few minutes lost in his own thoughts and I could really feel how much he misses her.

I feel connected to the people that I photograph in the Arctic the most, I think, more than any other people, I think people also take me for their own somehow, because, as I said, it's just a very different way of being and thinking. In Chukotka, for example, people still believe in the spirits of nature and animals they talk to. When they hunt an animal – when they hunt, a whale or a walrus – they think of it as the walrus sacrificing his or her life for them, or giving them life so that they can continue living. It's kind of this exchange of energy, it's a circle of energy. It's not killing, it's not taking, it's being part of the circle. This is how we view nature where I'm from, so, when I go to the new place I always do little rituals that are normal practice in my community.

I think that was a very strong connecting point for me. I feel that people instantly take me for their daughter or sister... it always becomes a family. But also I think people appreciate maybe that I take such effort to come there without any particular reason, without any agenda.

There's no need to explain yourself there... Just by the way you behave can tell people a lot about you. Just by the way you speak, or by the way you don't speak that you don't start talking. In the north, nobody does small talk, for example. There's no reason, because every word you say is supposed to mean something. And people don't talk if they don't want to say and mean something.

Silence is probably the main soundtrack for these stories because most of the time is spent in silence really. For example, in Chukotka people are careful with what you say. Because when you

say something, it might materialize, or somebody can hear you, spirits can hear you. But also you can talk without talking, for example, when they hunt a whale, they talk - each hunter on the boat talks to the whale. It's a tradition and I saw it when I was on the boat – they were just all silent and still somehow and they were talking to the whale, asking forgiveness for taking its life and telling the whale exactly what his energy will be used for – for their families, for their village, for their community. So there's a lot of things happening without talking.

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## Chapter 6: The Walrus (04:30m)



Image credit: From the series Chukotka © Evgenia Arbugaeva, Courtesy the artist and The Photographers' Gallery

The biggest Pacific walrus hole out is located 12 kilometres from [the] village. It's the biggest site on the planet. Last summer in 2019, I was there in a hut together with the local scientists who study walrus, and that summer, there were about 100,000 walrus holing out. The reason that it's such a huge number is because there is not enough ice in the sea anymore during the summer. So walrus are not able to rest on the floating ice, so they are all forced to hole out together on this shore. They lay in two, sometimes three layers, and that is quite a scary sight because this causes suffocation and death of the weaker animals and cubs.

When this massive hole out happened, I was in the hut and we were stranded in the hut for three days because we didn't want to come out and disturb the walrus and cause micro panics. So this was the view from the hut door for three days. The roaring of the animals was quite loud, so we couldn't sleep at night, and the temperature in the hut rose because of the body heat of all these animals outside. To me, this was probably the most visceral experience of climate change. I travel a lot in the Arctic and I see things of course – changes – but this was so physical, it was so dramatic that it really made a strong impression.

So because I couldn't come out of the hut, I was sitting by the door watching walrus going by. Some of them were in good shape, some of them were very tired from the long migration. Some of them seemed like they were making eye contact - but it's impossible because I was sitting in the dark and their eyesight is not very strong, so I don't think they saw me, but I was just sitting there and watching them.

You have to be very careful in those holes outside, and the natives try to be quite careful because walrus are easily scared, and then if you scare them, they start to panic, and that can cause pressure – it's dangerous for animals, especially the little ones when these massive animals start to move on top of each other.

I am definitely not finished with this project. I think it will be what I will be doing all my life because it gives me a purpose to go there again, and I cannot live without being there. And I just need to be there.

I've always been comfortable with solitude, and I crave it. But I also really like to interact with people of course – there needs to be balance. But solitude in the city – the solitude that many of us experienced during lockdown, is different to solitude you have in the Arctic landscape. Things are alive and have their own spirit, like water and tundra and wind, you never feel alone. You just feel part of something bigger. So it's not really a solitude. It's very different to solitude in the city for sure. Solitude in a city would be very difficult for me; but solitude in the Arctic is a beautiful thing.

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