Chapter 14
The Agony of Makushin

After she arrived at Unalaska for medical treatment in the fall of 1935, Annie Olsen informed authorities that Pete Olsen had been molesting her for five years. She was seventeen. Tatiana Olsen corroborated her adopted daughter's affidavit and on September 6, 1935, Olsen was brought to Unalaska by the U.S. deputy marshal on a charge of rape. When the women appeared in court, however, they reversed their testimony, and the case against him was dismissed for insufficient evidence. Court officials considered conducting an investigation to determine if the women had perjured themselves. Annie returned to Makushin with her mother and, less than a year later, on June 19, 1936, she died at the age of eighteen. She was buried near the church. "What there was done to me in Sept. 1935," Olsen wrote bitterly five years later, referring to those who had instigated and pursued the case, "is not forgotten and never will be."[1]

By the mid-1930s, Elia Borenin had been selected as village chief. Akenfa Galaktionoff was second chief.[2] Men continued traveling to the Pribilof Islands each June to work in the seal harvest. This meant that Olsen had to shear his sheep earlier than he might have wished. He confessed to the manager of the sheep ranch at Chernofski that he wasn't much of sheep man. Nevertheless, he steadily increased the size of his herd, ran more fencing and experimented with local and imported grass for feed. He traded rams and ewes with the much larger ranch at Chernofski.

One June day in 1932, while the men were away to the Pribilofs, a group of women took a dory out to an islet to collect sea gull eggs.[3] Among the women was one of Peter Petikoff's daughters, Oleanna. In Nick Galaktionoff's description of subsequent events, the women anchored on one side of the islet and set about gathering eggs. When they were ready to return, Oleanna was missing. After searching the island,

they took the dory to the opposite side where they found her floating below the surface. They recovered the body and returned home.

"Why did they bury her?" young Nick asked his grandmother. The girl had often played with him. "That was the first time I saw a dead person," Nick said. "I didn't cry, however, but when they started to bury her I began crying and couldn't stop…. My mom said that she had passed away. She spoke in Aleut, but I didn't understand even then. To me it looked like she was sleeping."[4]

"I have heard that 'Pete Olsen would just as soon shoot you as look at you,'" wrote Arletta Carter, the teacher at Kashega and one of his rare admirers. "There are other stories circulating that Pete Olsen is cruel to his Natives; that he beats them and abuses them." She wrote that he was suspected in the death of a girl who "fell" off a bluff near the village in 1932, but when the Coast Guard arrived to investigate he proved he had been "two miles away reading a book."[5]

In August 1936 John Corston, a postal clerk aboard the S.S. *Starr*, arrived to resolve a dispute over the handling of mail that had arisen between residents of the village and Olsen whom the captain of the *Starr* said was "known widely as the King of Makushin." Corston's solution was to tie the mail sacks with knots so secure they could not be opened surreptitiously. His description of Olsen is ominous and dark, depicting a man isolated by language, grief, and culture. He described him as a "very large fully bearded specimen of a Russian promishlenik, or maybe a baidarschik (a captain of a baidara fleet)" who first drank "all the liquor in sight in the captain's cabin" and then three bottles of Corston's own beer, "talking steadily for two hours in the deep silence of the sleeping ship about the old, good days at Makushin village…." Eventually, he sought out the skiff tied alongside the ship "with two patient retainers waiting for him to get his fill. They knew their king."[6]

In 1936 Makushin had forty-four residents (12 men, nine women, and 23 children).[7] Within a year that number would be cut in half. In the spring of 1937, Simeon Lekanoff had the audacity to sell a gas generator to John Yatchmeneff of Unalaska. There was already bad blood between Yatchmeneff and Olsen and the storekeeper was furious with Simeon and refused to sell him groceries, telling him he could get them from Yatchmeneff. Lekanoff, a well-built individual—"pretty husky man, that guy" was how Nick Galaktionoff remembered his grandfather—was not easily intimidated.[8] "Okay," he told Olsen, "I will." Moses Galanin happened to be visiting from St. George, and Simeon used him as an interpreter to arrange passage for himself and his family aboard the mailboat to Unalaska.[9] This family of eight was the largest at Makushin and their exodus was a serious blow.[10] Arriving at Unalaska, they stayed with their uncle, Andrew Galaktionoff, until Simeon's son Nick located a small house that his father purchased from George and Victoria Gardner. The Gardners made a business of buying abandoned buildings, fixing them up, and selling them. Andrew served the Church of the Holy Ascension in various

capacities, and Nick began assisting him and Father Theodosius. When the priest was transferred to St. George about a year later, Nick had learned enough to become an alter boy for Bishop Alexei, the former Alexander Panteleev, who spent months working out of his old parish.

The gradual arrival of Makushin residents at Unalaska was reflected by purchases made on credit at the AC Company where the agent frequently noted purchasers' home villages. In 1936 Arthur Lekanoff, an older son of Simeon Lekanoff, was shown as a Makushin resident for the last time. Beginning in April 1937 there were steady purchases made by Philip and Frank Galaktionoff and by Simeon and Nick Lekanoff. Another of Simeon's adult sons, Constantine, also arrived. They were joined in 1940 by Jack (Yakim) and Matfey Petikoff. Whoever kept company records in 1940 was especially careful to record the home villages of people with lines of credit. He noted three men from Biorka and one from Kashega in addition to men from Akutan, Belkovski, Umnak (Nikolski), St. George, Atka, King Cove, and St. Paul. None of the seven Makushin men who made purchases were listed as residing in their home village. It is significant that no purchases were recorded for Elia Borenin who remained at Makushin.[11]

Akenfa Galaktionoff took his twelve-year-old son Nick fishing on Makushin Bay in April 1937. They were startled when a walrus surfaced near the dory. As his father pulled for the beach, Nick noticed that one of the tusks was broken near its point. Akenfa shot at the creature and before long the sea was colored red. A day or two later the walrus appeared outside the village and was shot at again. Walrus are rare in the Aleutians, but not unknown. In September 1938 Olsen told Victor B. Scheffer that in the late fall of 1926 or 1927 he was in Anderson Bay in his power dory and towed a walrus onto the beach that had been killed by local men.[12]

Holy Thursday, commemorating the Last Supper, the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the betrayal of Christ by Judas, fell on April 22 in 1937.[13] The day broke calm and clear. Matfey Borenin, Akenfa Galaktionoff and his half-brother John Borenin left the village about eight in the morning in a 14-½ foot dory borrowed from Pete Olsen. It was equipped with three pairs of oars. Planning to collect driftwood and to fish for cod, they took enough food for the day, including three loaves of bread. Each man had a rifle and Akenfa also brought his shotgun. They headed in the direction of West End and north along the coast toward Volcano Bay.[14]

Elia Borenin spent the day repairing the fence that kept Olsen's herd of sheep from straying. Marva Borenin took Nick and a few others for a walk into the hills. Back in the village early in the afternoon, Nick fished for pogies from shore. When he returned to his grandmother's house, he told her he had heard gunfire in the distance, adding, "Maybe my dad is coming back."

But no one returned. The evening was calm. The sky grew dark. The women were nervous because the only men left in the village were Elia and Pete Olsen. "And Pete Olsen never help anybody anyway," Nick said.

"Everything is all right," Marva Borenin told her grandson. "Go to bed."

The next morning, the men were still not back. Nick played outside, but every time he went home he asked about his dad and the answer was always the same. He could tell from his grandmother's voice that she had grown concerned. "And dark comes again," Nick said. "It came fast."

The third day, the wives of the three men went out with Elia Borenin. According to his own testimony, Pete Olsen went with them. A gale had come up out of the northwest and a big sea was running. They returned in the evening having found pieces of the dory and three oars along the beach. They carried a four-foot section of the boat back to the village where it was examined. A bullet hole was found, apparently made by a 30/30 and entering from the outside at a 45-degree angle.

"Still," Nick said, "we have hope that they're going to come home." But every time he saw his dad's clothes or belongings, he would start crying and Marva would tell him not to cry. The next day Elia Borenin scoured the beach alone almost as far as Volcano Bay. That afternoon Nick kept his eyes on the trail from the old village, and for a moment he thought he saw three people approaching. He and other kids ran out but it was only Elia.

"He didn't tell us nothing," Nick said, "'cause we're kids."

The search continued for a week. Elia recovered about three-fourths of the wrecked dory, a cod fishing line, and about ten 30/30 cartridges in a bag tied to part of the frame. Pete Olsen sent word to Unalaska on the mailboat and William C. Brown, the deputy U.S. marshal, arrived on a Coast Guard vessel to investigate. Brown's mother was Unangax̂ and he spoke the language. Elia told the marshal "that he firmly believes that the three men had met their end by being attacked by the same wounded Walrus" that had been seen off the village.[15]

Despite Elia's conclusion, two other theories about the disappearance persisted. The first was that they had fallen victims to intruding Japanese fishermen. Nick Galaktionoff expressed this belief a number of times. The second explanation centered on Pete Olsen himself when it was learned that two of the men were scheduled to testify against him at an upcoming court appearance. Lieutenant C. F. Edge of the Coast Guard Cutter *Spencer* suggested that Olsen be kept under observation "with a view of ending his reputedly illegal activities, or of bringing him to justice."

> He is supposed to have illegal interests in fox raising rights on Ogliuga and Skagul Islands. It is stated that natives are leaving the vicinity of Makushin because they are being driven off by Olsen. He was recently convicted of illegal possession of firearms, the Collector of Customs at Dutch Harbor, Mr. Durrell Finch, acting as attorney in his defense. His fine is believed to have been paid by the agent of the Alaska Commercial Company

> at Dutch Harbor. Prior to his trial, three natives, two of whom were to have appeared against him at his trial, were reported missing in a small boat. Olsen is said to have gone out to look for them, and on his return reported that he had found the remains of their boat, showing evidence of having been attacked and crushed by a walrus. Other persons reported subsequently that they had discovered the boat, stove in, and with a rifle bullet hole through the side.[16]

Henry Swanson's comments are relevant. "The man did good for the village," he said, "but he also did a lot of bad. He was known to have a bad character and to be awful mean."[17] Swanson said the three men had "just got around a pinnacle point—a kind of Priest Rock—going towards Volcano Bay.

> Olsen was up on the hill above them. In those days they had lights up on the hills for markers. There was one at Makushin for the mailboats and one at Chernofski and Umnak. These were coal-oil or kerosene lamps, and once every couple of weeks someone from the village would have to go and refill them. The wick might need trimming or the chimney need cleaning. Well, Pete Olsen was up on the hill where this light was and he said he saw what happened. All those fellows disappeared. They never did find their bodies. Pete Olsen said they were attacked by a bunch of walruses![18]

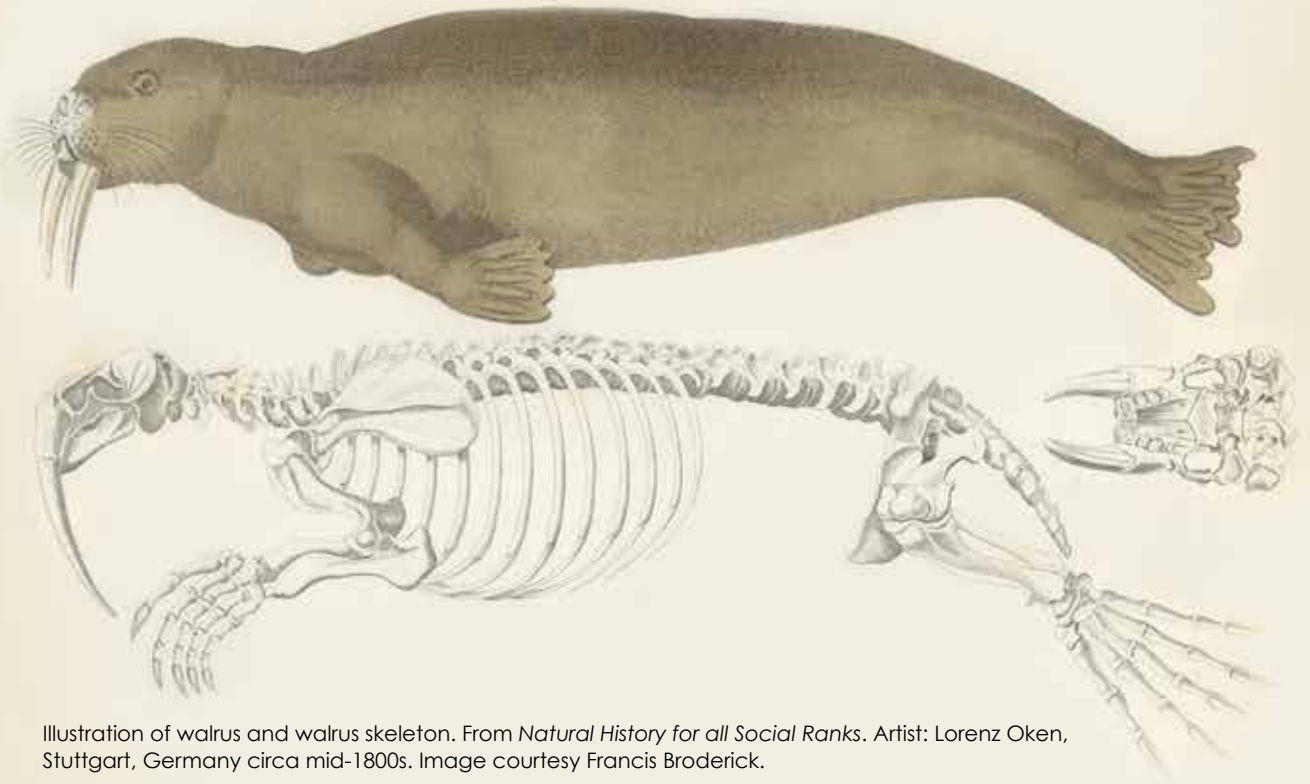

Illustration of walrus and walrus skeleton. From *Natural History for all Social Ranks*. Artist: Lorenz Oken, Stuttgart, Germany circa mid-1800s. Image courtesy Francis Broderick.

Henry Swanson, July 26, 1966. Photograph courtesy Francis Broderick.

The mystery of the disappearance will never be solved. Three women were widowed and 13 children were left without fathers. Akenfa's wife, Parascovia, had seven children. Natalia Borenin, Matfey's wife, was pregnant and had five children. Tina (Valentine) Borenin, John Borenin's young wife, had an infant and she also was pregnant.[19] According to information supplied by Pete Olsen, she was from St. Paul Island where her father and two brothers lived.[20] In addition, Marva Borenin, the mother-in-law of Parascovia and Tina, had been dependent on her sons. In the weeks following his father's disappearance, Nick would go down to the beach and sit. If he had a candy bar he would eat half of it and throw the other half into the water for his dad. "Pretty hard to get over it," he said almost seventy years later. "He used to teach me. Goddamn, he used to read Aleut books."[21]

The deaths had happened at the end of winter, at a time when any money earned from work in the Pribilof Islands the previous summer would have been long spent. Men needed to fish and hunt to put food

on the tables. Pete and Tatiana Olsen provided the three families with canned food from their store for about a month, but by May 27 they had cut off credit.[22] In early June Father Theodosius Kulchitsky arrived aboard the Coast Guard cutter *Ingham* to "investigate condition of those reported destitute due to man-killing walrus." The Coast Guard issued emergency provisions to the three women: 90 pounds of potatoes, 75 of biscuits, 150 of flour, 60 of rice, sugar, and dried lima beans, 15 pounds of tea, and 2 cases of canned milk, a total value of $33.74.[23] By July 20, Olsen had departed for a trip to the Lower 48, leaving Tatiana in charge of his store and sheep ranch. A brief sentence written July 21, 1937, by Noble G. Ricketts, commanding the Coast Guard Cutter *Tallapoosa*, dates the departure of two of the widows and Marva Borenin: "Left Makushin, having received aboard 12 destitute native women and children with their belongings for transportation to Unalaska."[24] Nick brought one toy: a small inflatable dory that he had received for Christmas. He had that boat, patched and patched again, for a long time. Natalia Borenin chose to remain at Makushin with her five children under the care of her brother-in-law, Elia Borenin.

Ricketts moored the *Tallapoosa* at Dutch Harbor at 1:30 on the afternoon of July 21 and the Makushin people were taken ashore in a launch with Makarii Zaochney of Atka who had been working as a guide for the anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička.[25] The buildings looked very tall to young Nick. Pariscovia Galaktionoff and her children stayed first in an extra house that Sergie Shaishnikoff owned. Later they lived with Mike Borenin and then with Bill Dyakanoff and his family. Eventually, she was able to get a small house of her own.

The deaths of the three men ended Makushin as a viable village. Art Harris, the sheep rancher at Kashega, wrote in March 1938 that only one Native family was left.[26] Even so, a coast guard report in May 1939 suggested the village was flourishing under Olsen's guidance.

> The natives earn their livelihood by working at St. Paul Island, about 2 ½ to 3 months of the year during which they earn approximately $175 each. This is supplemented by local trapping on a small scale…. Olsen maintains a small store in which he stocks supplies and a limited amount of food stuff which he sells to the natives.
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> The natives of this village apparently live more after the form of the traditional way of the natives before the coming of the whites, that is, they eat very little canned foods, in fact there is none stocked in the local store, but subsist on mutton grown on the island, sea lions, seals, fish, clams, etc., which they take for their own use. It is believed that Olsen is responsible for these habits of the natives, and he boasts that they are better off than any other natives in the islands.[27]

A more realistic summary came from a doctor aboard the *Itasca* in August who found only two elderly women and three children subsisting on canned goods and fish they caught using a small dory. Any men were away working elsewhere. "The white man who had been looking after the village was expected to return when the canning season had ended."[28]

"The village, once thriving, is about to die out," wrote E.S. Endom, the executive officer on the Coast Guard cutter *Shoshone* in July 1940. He described a village where houses far outnumbered families. The report suggests that whomever he spoke with expected the return of some of the people who had left. Endom was confused, to say the least, and erroneously concluded that Makushin was inhabited only during the summer months.

> There are only 9 people (native) living regularly in the village—4 males and 5 females. At the time of our visit 3 males were away from the village working at St. Paul Island. A white man, Mr. Olsen, lives at this village with his native wife and son, and appears to look after the well-being of the natives to a certain extent. A Russian Catholic Church is located in the village, but there is no Priest. Water is piped to several houses in the village and the rest of them carry their water from a stream, which is only a short distance away. Mr. Olsen has installed a hydro-electric power plant at a nearby waterfall and provides the village with electricity.
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> All dwellings are frame houses of the usual type occupied by the natives in the Aleutian chain. However, Mr. Olsen's house is modern. No radio facilities are available for communication with the outside at this time, but Mr. Olsen appeared very interested in radio. No school facilities are provided.
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> The village is supported by the usual hunting and fishing, and the men go to St. Paul Island to work during the summer months. Mr. Olsen has a few hundred head of sheep, which provide some employment to the natives. Many old bones and relics are found near the village. The FERN calls about once a month, bringing mail and supplies, and picks up any freight which they may have for market.
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> The village is inhabited only during the summer, which accounts for the fact that no provisions are made for a school.[29]

The government logbook for St. Paul identified Elia Borenin and his sixteen-year-old nephew Nick as the only temporary workers from Makushin in 1939 and 1940.[30] At the end of October 1941, Pete Olsen wrote a long letter to Don Green at Chernofski related to his sheep

business. He had built a new winter pasture and planned moving sheep into it the middle of November. The pasture was situated so that he could corral the animals when severe weather arose and bring them closer to the village where he kept hay in the barn. He confessed that he was inexperienced with sheep but he thought the venture was looking up.

> Regards the sheeps they is better this year and i ever have seing them, the lams is just as big as there mothers. The increase is not so big as it should be, i have to kil of quit a bunch every year to get what i need, if it was not for that i would a fine little bunch right now And this year I got 43 cents a pound for the wool best i ever got, only truble i did not have any more to sale

He mentioned his adopted son, John, and "the few natives" still at Makushin.

> i dont know if you saw my boy on the Fern he is man now hi do most of the work for me and the few natives there is left here helps mi, i cant do much my back is on the bum. I pay the natives back in meat and they sure can eat mutton….There is no news[31]

Makushin's misfortunes were inexorably tied to Pete Olsen. His house at Unalaska, frequently uninhabited, was a popular target for vandalism. He suspected village children were responsible, but marshal Bill Brown refused to take action unless Olsen swore out a warrant. In 1939 Verne Robinson arrived as the new deputy U.S. marshal. Olsen wrote to him. Robinson investigated and suggested he rent the property to keep it safe. Robinson's attention to this long-running problem produced a remarkable letter from Olsen in October 1940.[32] Fragmented, inarticulate, and rambling—not unlike the description of Olsen's two-hour monologue aboard the *Starr* in 1936—the letter accused people of theft, rape, threatening murder, and murder itself. He had been lied to by the U.S. commissioner and by Natives, denied the right to call witnesses when accused, and jailed when he attempted to protect the little that was his. Maligned, isolated from people in power and excluded from the close-knit Native community, he had been "blamed for everything from murder" on down although not one of the accusations would hold water. Those people who had left Makushin had been "a bunch of dam dyvles [devils]" but they were gone and he was still there and would remain until he was ready to move out. But not now. He remained defiant.

"And I could tell you Mr. Robinson a whole lot more if I wanted to," he wrote. What people had done to him, they had done to others. "They can have that fun for a little while longer," he wrote. "Their times are getting shorter."

Time was closing in on everyone.

Ugadaga Bay. Photograph by Ray Hudson.