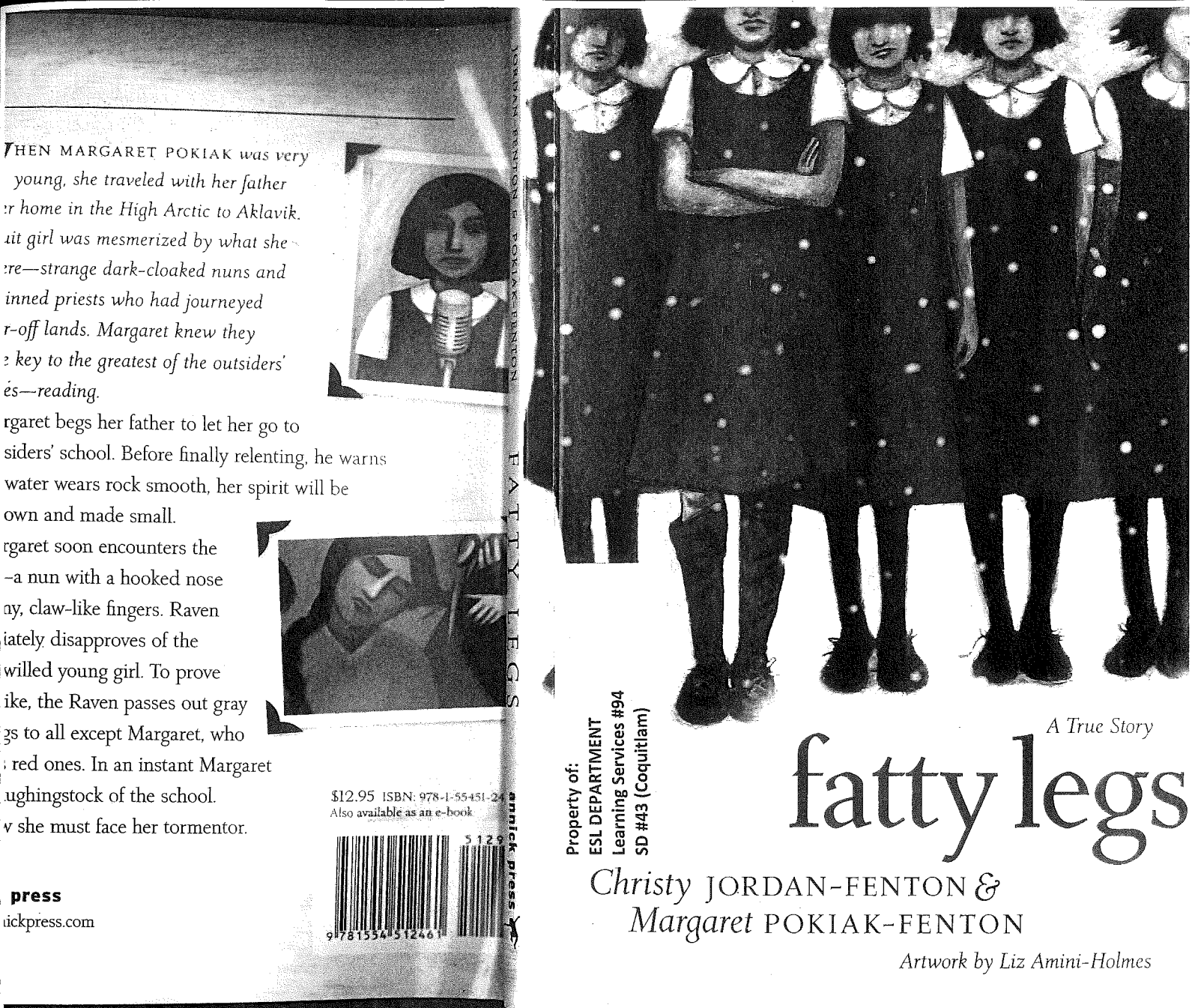

fatty legs

A True Story

Christy JORDAN-FENTON &
Margaret POKIAK-FENTON

Artwork by Liz Amini-Holmes

HEN MARGARET POKIAK was very young, she traveled with her father r home in the High Arctic to Aklavik. uit girl was mesmerized by what she re—strange dark-cloaked nuns and inned priests who had journeyed r-off lands. Margaret knew they e key to the greatest of the outsiders' és—reading.

rgaret begs her father to let her go to siders' school. Before finally relenting, he warns water wears rock smooth, her spirit will be own and made small.

rgaret soon encounters the –a nun with a hooked nose ny, claw-like fingers. Raven iately disapproves of the willed young girl. To prove ike, the Raven passes out gray gs to all except Margaret, who red ones. In an instant Margaret ughingstock of the school. v she must face her tormentor.

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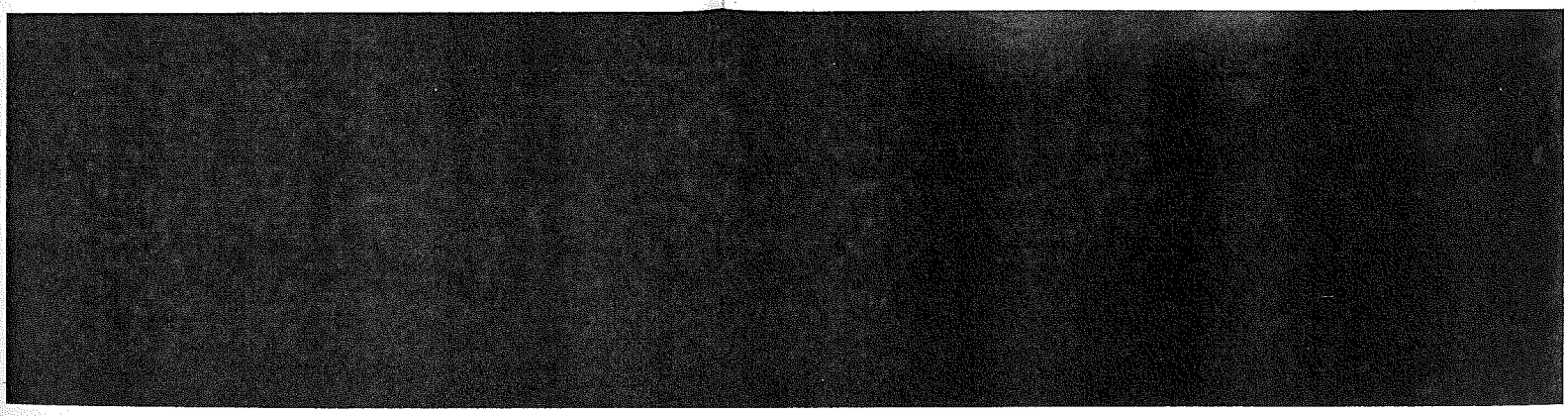
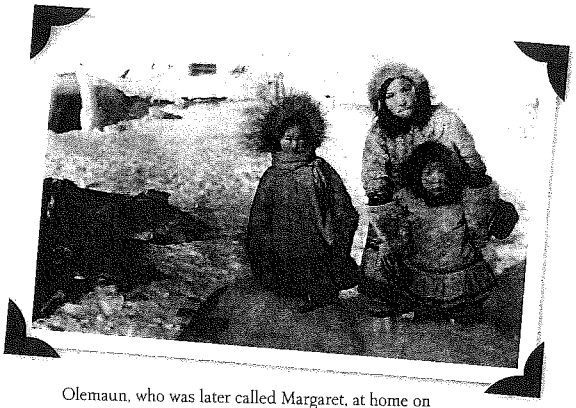
while working for the Hudson's Bay Company in Tuktoyaktuk, she met her husband-to-be, Lyle, who was working on the DEW Line project. She followed him south to Fort St. John. Together they raised eight children. Margaret can be found most Saturdays at the local farmers' market, where she sells traditional Inuit crafts and the best bread and bannock in the North Peace.

LIZ AMINI-HOLMES spent her childhood daydreaming, drawing, reading, and writing in her family's backyard tree house. As an adult, she graduated from the Academy of Art College in San Francisco, California, with a BFA in Illustration. She now works as a freelance illustrator and her work has appeared in numerous publications, including children's books, and has been exhibited widely. She now lives in her own tree house in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband, two children, and an ever-growing assortment of pets.

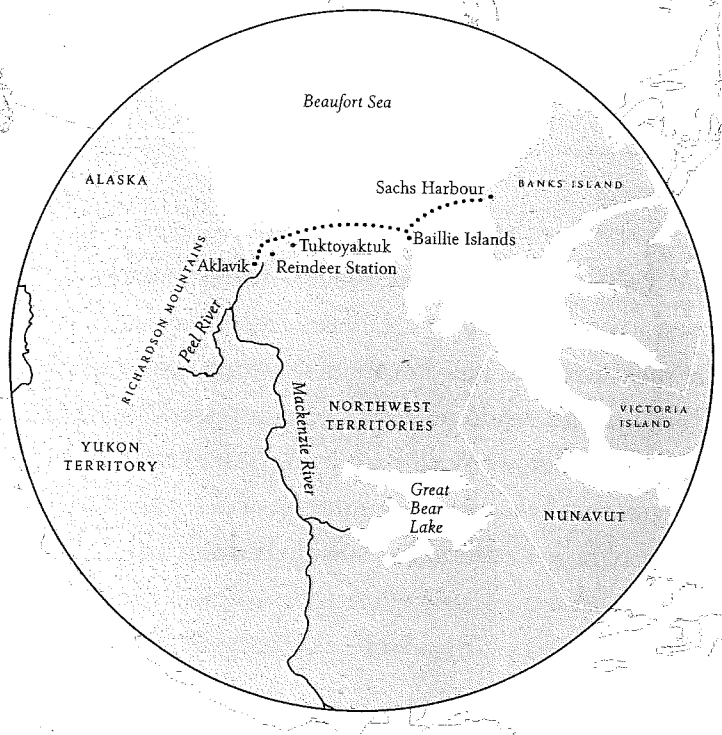




Olemaun, who was later called Margaret, at home on Banks Island. Here she stands (on the right) with two of her younger sisters, Elizabeth and Mabel.

Introduction

MY NAME IS OLEMAUN POKIAK—that's OO-*lee-mawn*—but some of my classmates used to call me "Fatty Legs." They called me that because a wicked nun forced me to wear a pair of red stockings that made my legs look enormous. But I put an end to it. How? Well, I am going to let you in on a secret that I have kept for more than 60 years: the secret of how I made those stockings disappear.



Margaret's route to school • • • •

Chapter ONE

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG GIRL, outsiders came flitting about the North. They plucked us from our homes on the scattered islands of the Arctic Ocean and carried us back to the nests they called schools, in Aklavik.

See on p

Three times I had made the five-day journey to Aklavik with my father, across the open ocean, past Tuktoyaktuk, and through the tangled Mackenzie River delta, to buy supplies. I was mesmerized on each trip by the spectacle of the strange dark-cloaked

nuns, whose tongues flickered with French-Canadian accents, and the pale-skinned priests who had traveled across a different ocean from a far-off land called Belgium. They held the key to the greatest of the outsiders' mysteries—reading.

My older half-sister, Ayouniq, had been plucked before I was born, but we called her "Rosie" after her return. She would tell me nothing about the school tucked away in the maze of the delta, where she had gone for four years, but when I was seven she did read to me from a collection of beautifully colored books my father had given her for Christmas. The stories were precious treasures to be enjoyed in the well-lit, toasty warmth of our smoke-scented tent, as the darkness of winter was constant, and the temperatures outside were cold enough to freeze bare skin in seconds. The books were written in English, so I understood very little of them. I was always left with many unanswered questions.

"What's a rabbit?" I asked Rosie in our language, Inuvialuktun.

"It's like a hare," she told me, lifting her eyes from

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

"Oh. Well, why did Alice follow it down the hole? To hunt it?"

Rosie gave me a funny look. "No, Olemaun. She followed it because she was curious."

I tried to imagine being Alice, as the large cookstove crackled behind me. She was brave to go into that long, dark tunnel, all for curiosity.

"What was it like?"

Rosie looked up from the book again. "What was what like?"

"The outsiders' school."

"I don't know. You ask too many questions," she

Inuvialuktun: the language of the Inuvialuit, who are Aboriginal people of the western Arctic.

said. Her face grew dark in the light of the coal oil lamp. She closed the book and looked away.

"It must have been exciting to live with the outsiders."

She shrugged her shoulders and dropped the book on the table.

"But they taught you how to read..."

Rosie was silent.

"Please," I begged, tugging at her leg as she got up from the table and slipped on her Mother Hubbard parka.

"They cut our hair because our mothers weren't there to braid it for us."

"I don't need my mother to braid my hair. I can do it myself."

"They'd cut it anyway. They always cut the little ones' hair."

"I'm not that little."

"They don't care. They don't have the patience to wait for you to braid your hair. They want all of your time for chores and for kneeling on your knees to ask forgiveness."

"Oh, well. It's only hair."

"It isn't just your hair, Olemaun. They take everything," she said, slipping her feet inside her kamik.

"Well, can you at least finish reading me the story?"

Rosie gave me an icy look. "You want to know about the school so much, you can go there and learn to read for yourself." She turned, pulled apart the flaps of the tent door, and disappeared through the tunnel in the snow that formed the entrance to our home. I ran after her down the dark corridor, but she was already gone into the pitch-black afternoon of the Arctic winter. She knew that our father would not let me go to school. He had told the outsiders "No" the past four summers they had come for me. Rosie was lucky that her aunt had allowed her to go.

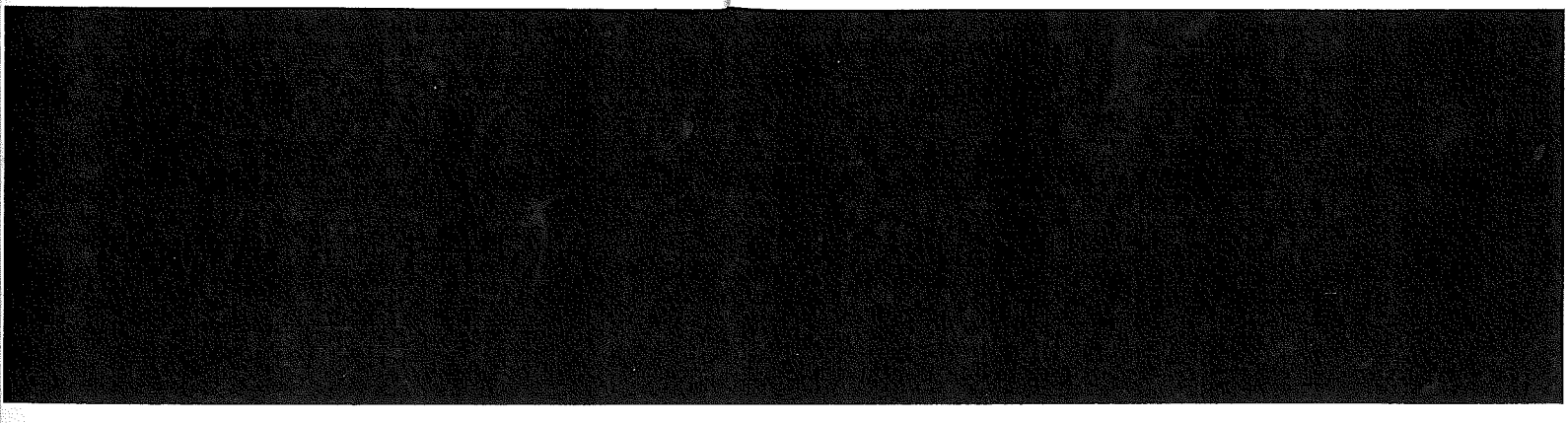
See photo on page 89.

ONE DAY AT THE end of February 1944, when the sun had just begun to return to the sky, my father took me hunting with him. We traveled by dogsled for several hours, until we came to a place where game was plentiful.

"Father," I said when we finally stopped, "can I go to the school this year?"

Mother Hubbard parka: the traditional parka worn by Inuvialuit women of the western Arctic.

kamik/kamak: a type of boot worn by the Inuit. Also called mukluks.



"No," he said.

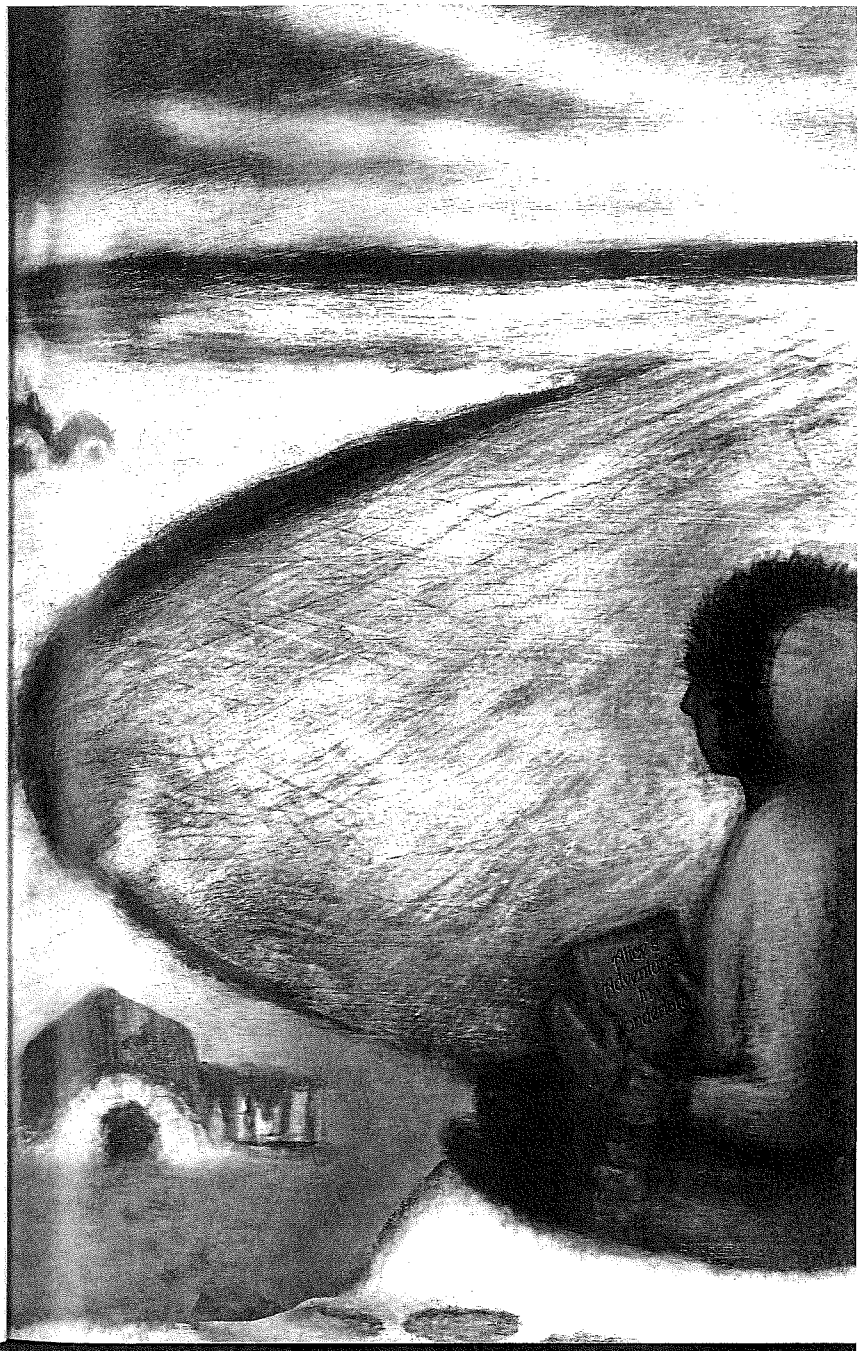
"But you and Rosie both went, and I will be eight in June when the ice melts."

He raised his hand, silencing me, and motioned for me to return to the dogsled. Atop a distant hill stood a wolf, its silhouette stark in the afternoon twilight. My father had it in the sights of his rifle. A shot cracked through the air, killing my chance to convince him.

When he returned to the dogsled with the wolf carcass, his knit brow and hard eyes told me that he was finished discussing the matter. I cringed under the cold flash of defeat, but I was careful not to talk any further about my desire to go to school. Instead, I held it inside all through the long months that followed.

My father rarely spoke of the school and would never tell me of the wonderful things I could learn there. He was a smart man who loved to read, but he put little value in the outsiders' learning compared to the things that our people knew.

But my heart would not give up hope. I climbed the cemetery hill and stared out over the sleeping, stone-still water each day, waiting for the sea to come



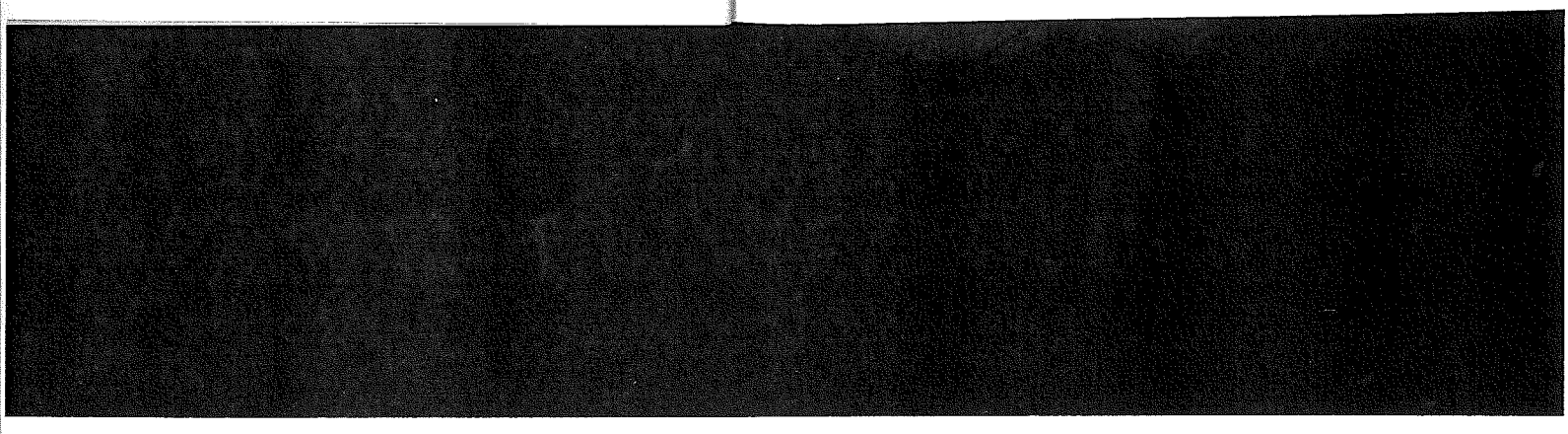
alive with waves. Sometimes, I brought the book with me, the one about the girl named Alice who followed the hare-like creature down the burrow. I looked at the pictures and remembered the tea party she had, and how her body had become small and large again. But I still did not know what happened to her at the end of that burrow. Did she catch the hare?

IN LATE MAY, WHEN the sun stood constant watch in the sky and night traversed it only briefly like the shadow of a passing bird's wing, I found my father preparing the hides of animals he had collected from his trapline. I knew the topic was forbidden, but I could not silence my heart another day. I asked him once again to allow me to go to school.

"The outsiders do not teach you how to hunt," he said, pointing his knife at the fox he was about to skin. "They only use your knowledge of making snares for their own profit and send you to gather the animals from *their* traplines. They do not teach you how to cure meat and clean fish so that you can live off of the land. They feed you cabbage soup and porridge. They do not teach you how to make parkas and kamik," he said, eyeing the beautifully crafted Delta braid on my parka and the embroidered, fur-lined boots on my feet. "They make you wear their scratchy outsiders' clothes, which keep out neither the mosquitoes nor the cold. They teach you their songs and dances instead of your own. And they tell you that the spirit inside of you is bad and needs their forgiveness."

I had already learned a lot about hunting, trapping, and curing foods. My friend Agnes, who was 10, had already gone to the school. She told me that the nuns made you sew all of the time. It would not be difficult to learn to sew parkas and kamik if I was used to sewing all of the time. And how could I ever forget our songs and our dances? They were a part of me. But I had once heard the outsiders' beautiful chants resonating from the church in Tuktoyaktuk, and I dreamed of learning to make such music. I would be careful to stay out of trouble, and no one would say I had to kneel and ask forgiveness. They would see that my spirit was good.

Delta braid: a decoration made by cutting patterns from long strips of fabric and layering them on each other; used to decorate Mother Hubbard parkas.



I would be patient, but I would not give up. I would wait and ask my father again.

Time melted away. My eighth birthday came and went. The sea began to wake from its slumber, and I knew it would not be long before the ice broke from the shore and was carried out to be swallowed by the ocean. Soon all of us—my father and the other hunters and trappers, along with their families—would leave our winter home on Banks Island to carry boatloads of pelts to Aklavik. The outsiders had many islands to scour for children during the short summer season, and ours was a long distance from Aklavik. As it was so far for them to travel, it was unlikely that we would be there when they came. My father was my only hope.

One day in late June, I looked up from staring at the book I was so desperate to read and saw that the enormous splintering chunks of ice had left enough of a gap to allow us passage. I slammed the book shut, sped down the hill, and ran along the rocky shore as fast as I could—which was fast, because my legs were muscular and strong. I was determined and ready to ask again. "Father, Father, please, Father... *Pleeease,* can I go to school this year?" I huffed in heavy breaths, darting through the small groups of men who were loading the schooners for the journey.

My father heaved a bale of white fox pelts over the edge of the *North Star.* His answer had not changed: "No."

"Please, please, *pleeease,*" I begged. "You can drop me at Aklavik when you go for supplies."

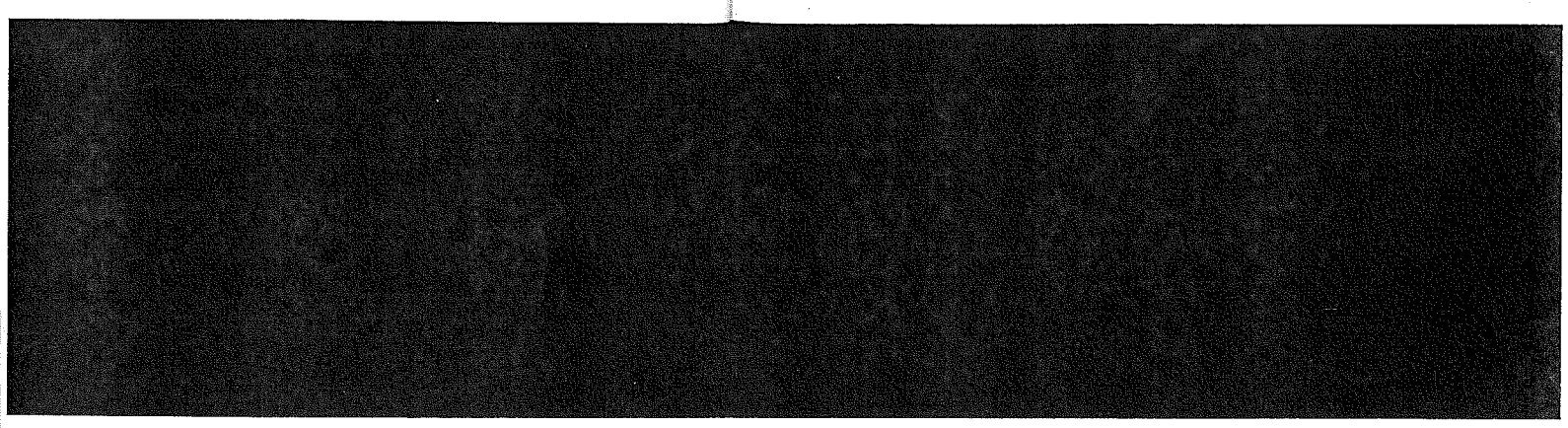
My father paused to swat a mosquito. He looked into my eyes. "You are a stubborn girl," he told me, "and the outsiders do not like stubborn children."

"Please," I said again. "Please."

He crouched to my height. He picked up a rock with one of his hands and held it out to me. "Do you see this rock? It was once jagged and full of sharp, jutting points, but the water of the ocean slapped and slapped at it, carrying away its angles and edges. Now it is nothing but a small pebble. That is what the outsiders will do to you at the school."

"But Father, the water did not change the stone inside the rock. Besides, I am not a rock. I am a girl,

schooner: a type of sailing vessel with masts.



I can move. I am not stuck upon the shore for eternity."

"You are a clever one," he said, touching my cheek and then looking down at the book in my hand.

"Does that mean I can go?" My hope blossomed, billowing beneath my parka.

He looked deep into my eyes, the rock held tightly in his fist. "I suppose it is the only way I will hear the end of it."

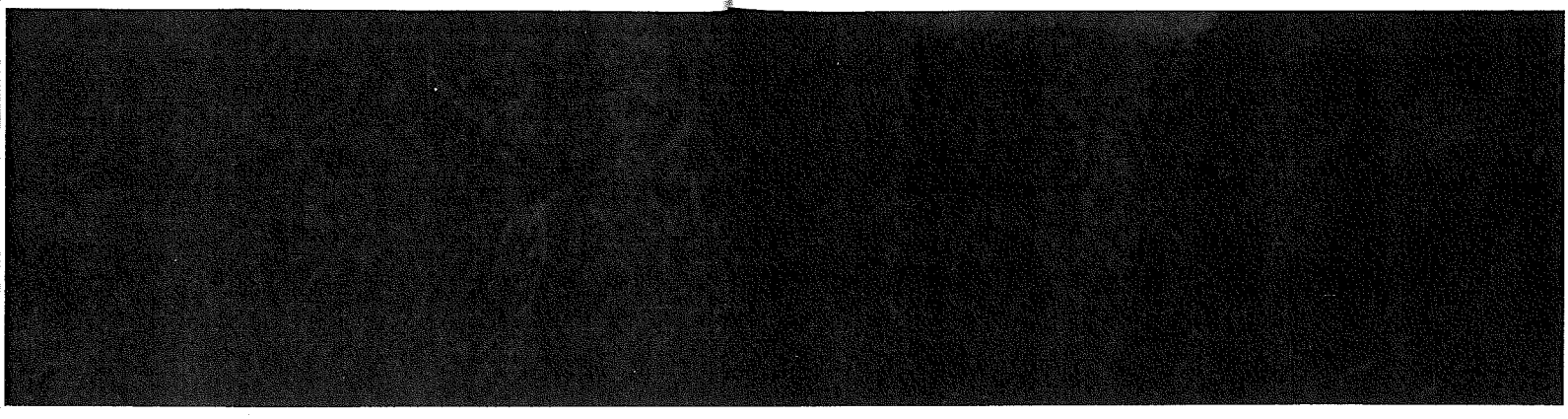
I turned to run and tell my mother the news, but my father reached for me and pulled me in. He held me in his arms for a long time, the fur of his parka pressed against my face, so that I could hardly breathe. When he finally let go, I did not give him a single moment to change his mind. Even faster than I had run to the shore, I ran back up to my mother, who was in our tent packing up the belongings we would need for the journey.

See photo on page 90.

"Mother, Mother!" I shouted as I rushed through the entrance. "Father says I can go to school this year!"

She did not say a word. Instead, she set my little sister down on a caribou hide, pushed past me out of the tent, and headed straight for him.

I could tell she did not think it was such terrific news.



Chapter TWO

THE SCHOONERS WERE FULL to the gunwales with a winter's worth of pelts for trading. Everything we needed for the trip had been packed from our tents. The men used long poles to pry the boats free of the shore, where they were stored for the winter, and a system of pulleys to pull them back into the water. Planks were laid down to bridge the gap between the shore and the schooners, and we all climbed aboard and prepared for our spring migration.

Stefansson expedition: the Arctic expedition of 1913 to 1916, organized by Vilhjalmur Stefansson, a Canadian explorer of Icelandic descent.

We traveled with six other schooners, each carrying as many as six or seven families. Our schooner was the *North Star.* It was owned by Mr. Carpenter and Mr. Wolki, but had once been part of the famous Stefansson expedition's fleet. We stayed aboard the ships for the entire five-day journey.

See photo on page 91

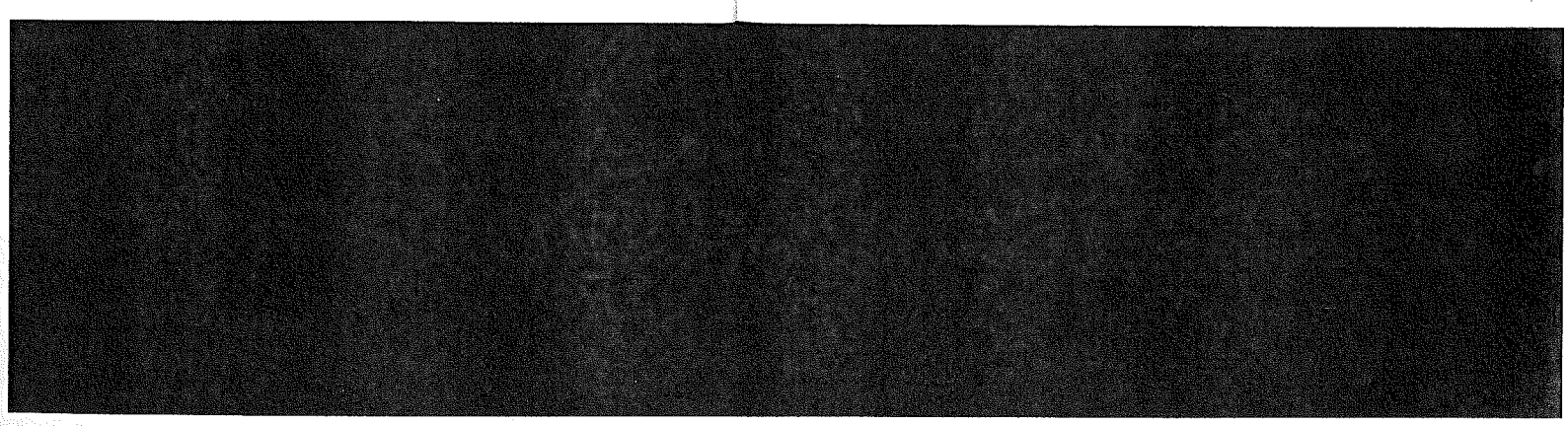
Five days may not seem like much, but to me it might as well have been a year. From the first day, I searched for signs that we were nearing the mainland. The voyage across the ocean was fraught with anticipation, and when we finally reached Tuktoyaktuk, I felt both happiness that we had made it that far and sadness that we still had a long way to go. Beyond Tuktoyaktuk, the pingos rose out of the ocean like goose eggs with smashed-in tops. We passed them and entered the mouth of the Mackenzie River. The Richardson Mountains cut into the horizon far off to the southwest, and small, sparse trees lined the shores. We came to Reindeer Station, a settlement of herders, and excitement consumed me. We would soon be heading up the Peel River, the last leg of our journey.

See photo on page 91

See photo on page 92

Sometime after lunch, on the final day, the noise

pingos: when ice forms in the ground during winter months, it pushes the surface earth up into small hills, or pingos, which grow bigger year after year. The name pingo *comes from the Inuvialuktun word for small hill.*



of children playing reached our ears, and we could see spiraling towers of smoke rising high into the sky from many campfires. A dozen boats as large as whales were tethered to the bank. We had made it! We had reached Aklavik!

After our schooner was secured and a large board was laid over the side of the *North Star,* we children were given permission to go and seek out our friends and cousins, who had also arrived to sell their pelts and stock up on supplies for the year. We made our way down the plank and scrambled up the steep muddy slope to the settlement our own great-grandfather, Old Man Pokiak, had founded as a trading post.

LATER THAT DAY, AFTER my father had sold his winter's catch of furs, my mother came to find me. I was giddy with excitement, knowing what was to come. I tossed the caribou-hide ball I was playing with high into the air, leaving a cluster of children scrambling for it, as I followed my mother to the Hudson's Bay Company. The Hudson's Bay Company was a magical place. They sold everything a person could ever need, from furniture to ladies' dresses, from rifles to candy.

Hudson's Bay Company: the oldest surviving company in North America, incorporated by a royal charter in 1670. Hunters and trappers traded their pelts there for goods and supplies.

See photo on page 9

My mother stopped me on the stairs before I could race into the small treasure-packed timber building. She took one of my long braids in her hand. "You know, the nuns will cut your hair. Are you sure you still want to attend the school?"

"Yes," I told her and tried to make my face very serious.

"They will make you work hard. Harder than you do when you help your father."

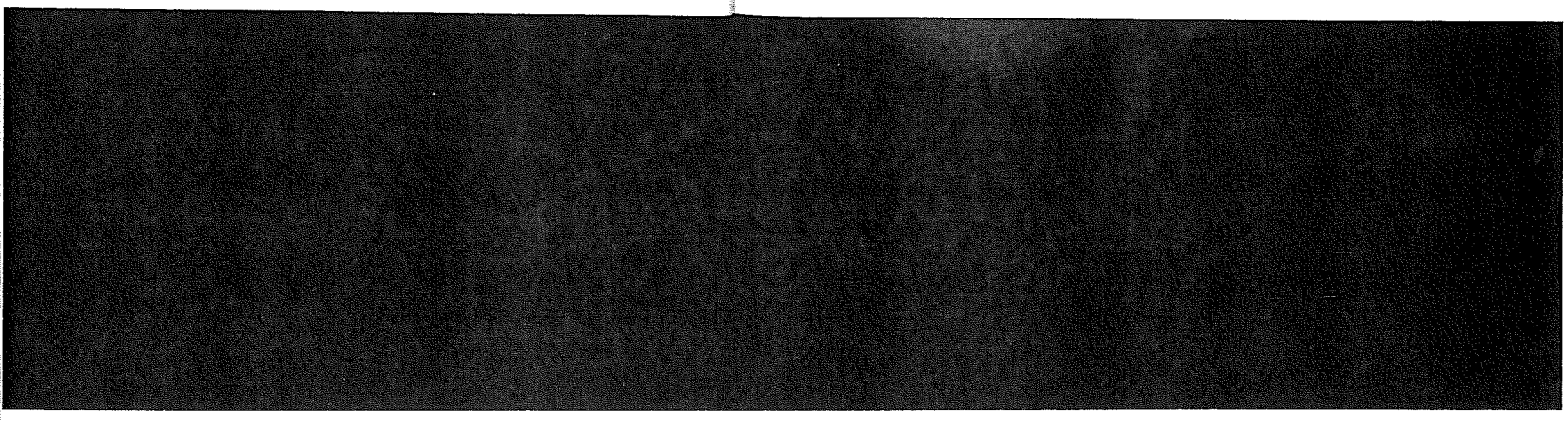
"I am strong," I said, pushing my shoulders back.

"They will not be kind to you. They are not your family, and they are not like us."

"I will have Agnes. I will be fine. You will see."

My mother sure seemed to know a lot about a place she had never been. I figured she was trying to scare me. Life would be more difficult without me there to help her with the smaller children, and she was likely jealous of my opportunity to learn to read.

"Well then, we had better go in and find you some



new stockings to keep your legs warm underneath your uniform."

My mother bought me some strange-smelling soap, a comb to keep my hair neat, a brush for my teeth, and something in a white tube. She also bought me a thick, heavy pair of gray stockings. They were like the kind I had seen the outsiders wear, the kind that pull up above your knees. I wanted to put them on right away, but my mother told me I had to wait. I would not want to soil them before school, because the outsiders loved cleanliness.

As we left the store, I noticed a member of the RCMP relaxing on a chair near the entrance. The Mountie was reading from one of the many richly colored books that crammed a tall column of shelves beside him. How distinguished he looked as he pulled at a pipe, a book in his hand. Soon, I, too, would be able to read.

MY PARENTS DID NOT let me go to school right away. They wanted to keep me until after the athletic

RCMP or Mounties: Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Canada's national police force.

games, which were held on Dominion Day, the first of July—three whole days after our arrival. July was a festive time of year for the Inuit, including us Inuvialuit, and for the Dene Nation, made up of native peoples such as the Gwich'in. Freed at last from the ice, the men would bring their families to Aklavik not only for supplies, but to also compete against each other in

Dominion Day: Canada's national holiday, now known as Canada Day, which is celebrated on July 1.

tests of strength. I was disappointed that I could not go to school immediately, but I did not often get to see my cousins and enjoyed visiting with them.

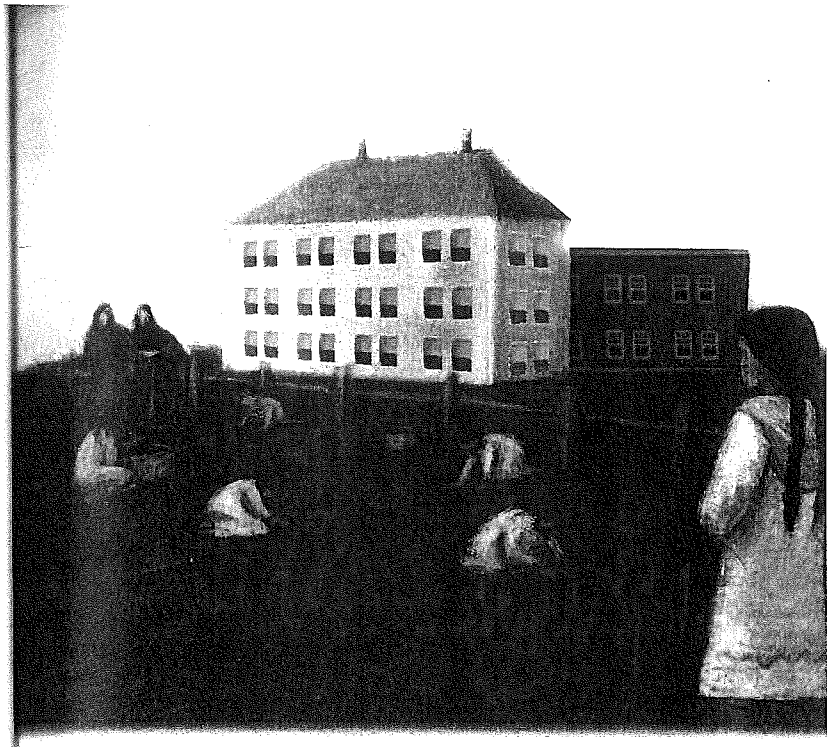
On the first day of the games, my father made a balloon for us by blowing up the sac from the throat of a ptarmigan. We chased each other down a long, seemingly endless street, the sound of our feet clomping and thudding against the wooden boardwalk, batting the balloon into the air and stealing it from one another. I caught it and ran. Soon I could no longer hear my sisters and cousins behind me. I had lost them.

I looked up and stopped, forgetting the balloon.

In front of me, at least a dozen children dressed in uniforms crouched in a silty garden, breaking the earth and pulling at roots with small tools. These had to be the naughty children who were made to kneel for forgiveness. Behind them stood two immense wooden buildings, so much larger than our schooner, with rows and rows of windows. I had forgotten how big these buildings were.

This was where I would go to school, but I would not be like these children. I would be good and spend

ptarmigan: white game birds of the grouse family and the official bird of Nunavut, a territory in Canada. Also known as snow chickens.



all of my time inside, learning to read. I batted the balloon from one hand to the other, and turned and ran back to find my cousins and my sisters.

The day after the athletic games began, a boat docked. We watched its passengers file up the beach. They were children with solemn faces, some of them crying. I searched the faces for Agnes, but she was not among them.

See ph on pag

"See those children," my mother said to me. "They will be your classmates."

"Why are they crying?" I asked.

"Because they do not want to go to the outsiders' school."

"Don't they know they are going to learn to read?"

"They would rather be with their families than read," my mother said, tightening her lips. Her words stung.

"Now that the other new children are here, it is time for us to take you to the school," my father said, coming up behind us. "Go and gather your things."

MY PARENTS LED ME along the same street I had run down to lose my sisters and cousins, the day before. The buildings came into view. The garden was deserted now.

"Are they both schools?" I asked my father.

"No. Only that one." He pointed at the building on the right. "The other is the hospital where you will be trained when you are old enough. You may be asked to help out there at times."

"Like a nurse? That sounds fun."

My father gave me a look that said he did not think so. "The top floor is where the students sleep. The building is divided into a boys' side and a girls' side, and you will not be allowed to talk with the boys, even if they are your cousins."

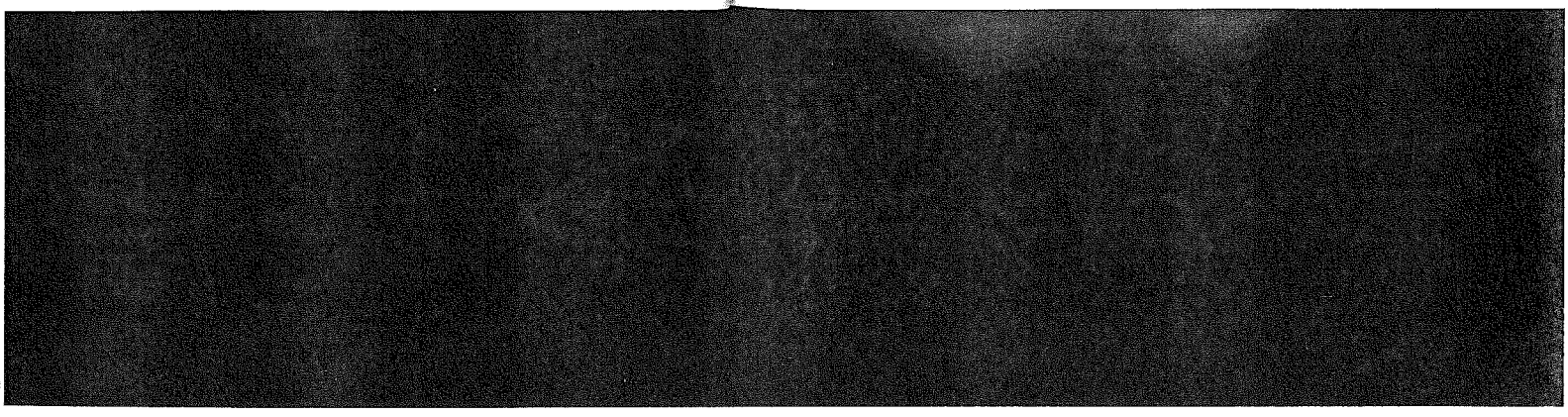
The school was beginning to look less inviting. I wondered how I would ever feel safe enough to sleep in such a large place. I was used to staring at the glowing coals of my father's pipe, from where I slept under his bed, until I drifted off. It suddenly sank in. My family would not be staying with me. How would I fall asleep without that smoky red glow?

"The church is in the middle of the dorm rooms, and the classrooms and refectory are below them," he explained.

"What is a refectory?"

"A place where many people eat together."

My mother was silent. She did not say a word until my father had his hand on the big double doors of the school. "It is not too late to change your mind, Olemaun."



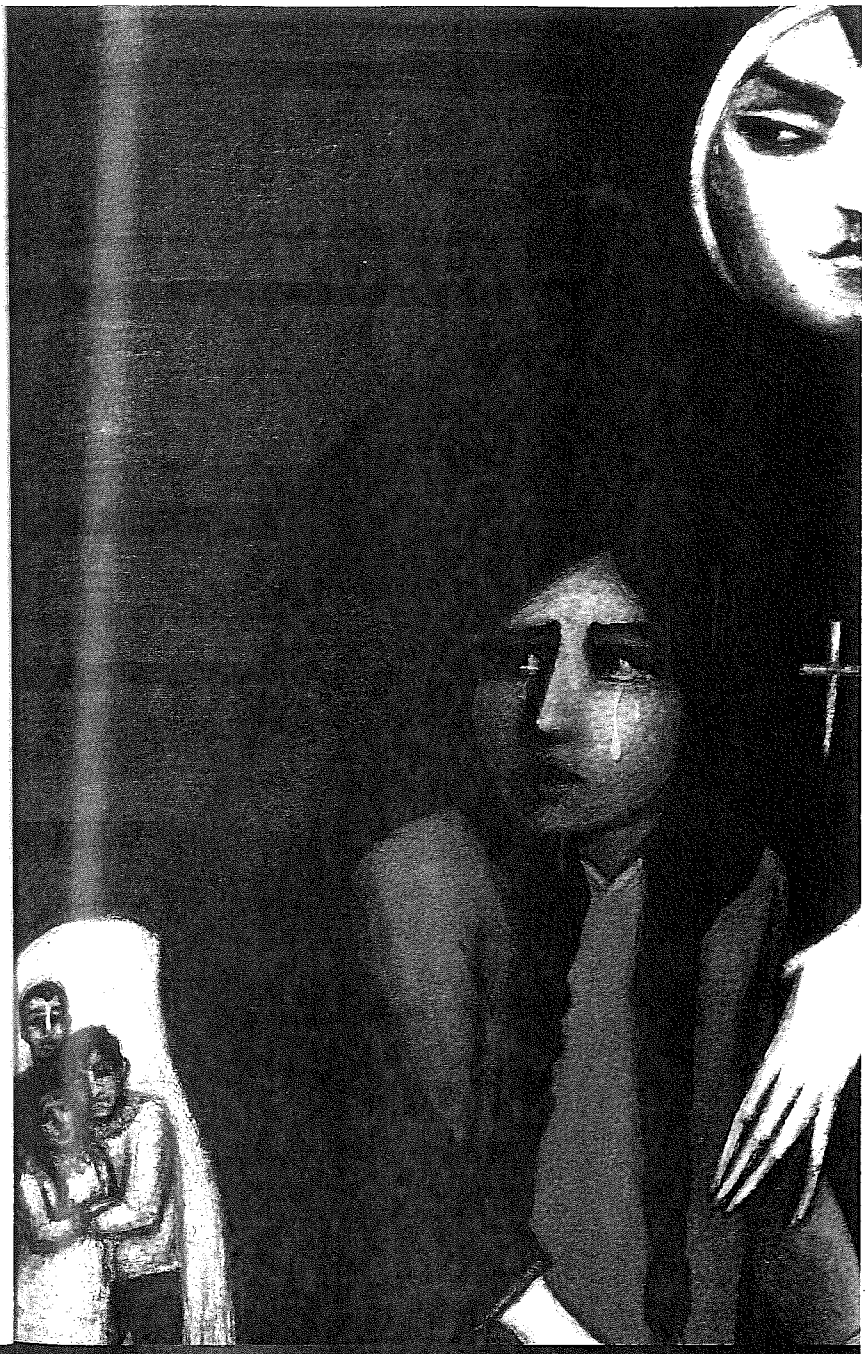
Change my mind? I could manage. I would read myself to sleep like Rosie did. I wasn't going to let anything stop me. I couldn't wait to go inside.

My father placed a hand on my shoulder. "You will not be able to return home for a very long time."

"I know," I said, but I didn't.

My eighth birthday had only just passed. I did not yet understand how long a year was. It had not crossed my mind that the same ice that allowed my people to travel only in the brief weeks of summer would keep me from going home. I did not know that an unusually short summer in 1945 would hold me prisoner for a second year with the Sisters, the Fathers, and the Brothers. They were not family; they were like owls and ravens raising wrens.

My father pulled open the door, and I stepped past him. I was inside a school for the first time in my life. All around me was glass and wood. An enormous photograph hung on one of the clean, painted walls. In it, an outsider wore a fancy sash. Medallions like large coins hung from his chest—I would learn later that he was the king of all of the outsiders. They told

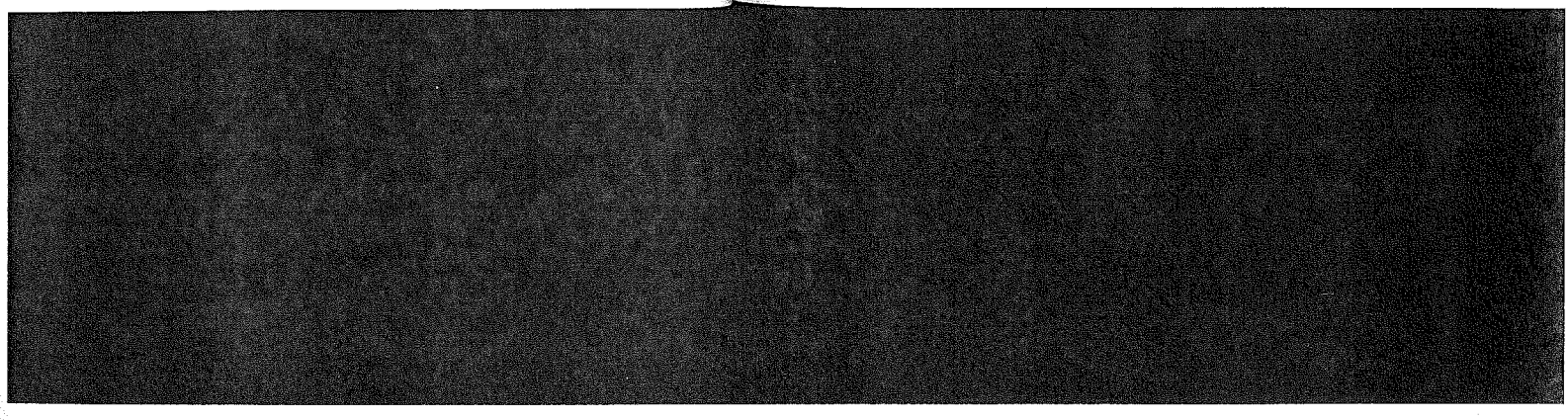


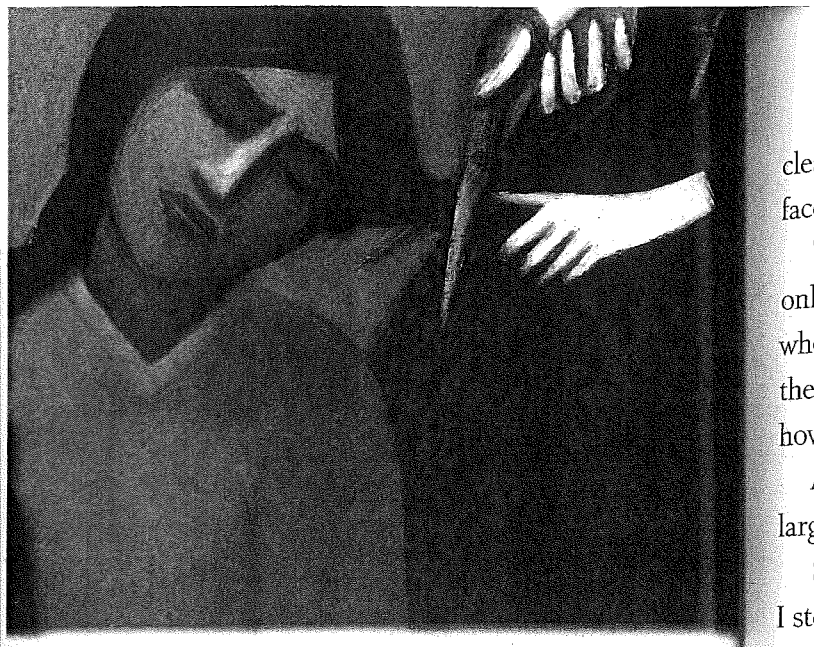
me he was also my king, but I knew that my family listened to no one but Mr. Carpenter and Mr. Wolki, who owned the *North Star*. The school's smells were unfriendly and harsh against the tender skin of my inner nostrils. I craned my head in every possible direction I could, without moving my feet. It was like someone had enlarged the Hudson's Bay Company by many times and stripped it clean. My eyes darted from wall to wall, trying to take it all in.

An outsider with a hooked nose like a beak came for me, her scraping footsteps echoing through the long, otherwise silent halls. "I am glad you have come to your senses," she told my father in Inuvialuktun. "*You* certainly can't teach her the things she needs to know." She wrapped a dark-cloaked arm around my shoulder and ushered me away, without giving me a chance to say goodbye. I looked back and saw my father wiping tears from my mother's face. I wanted to run to her and tell her that it would be all right, but a priest approached them right then and they walked away with him.

Chapter THREE

I FOLLOWED THE BEAKED NUN up stairs that creaked under my feet to a large room filled with beds. Across the room were seven girls, who had been among the sullen children I had seen earlier. They were standing in a somber line in front of four foul-smelling, wooden stalls along one wall. The outsider pushed me into place at the end of the row, and I nearly gagged from the odor that wafted from the stalls behind us.





Another dark-cloaked nun passed by the girls, eyeing them up and down, one by one. She clutched a large pair of shears. She stopped in front of a small sickly looking Inuit girl. I knew the girl must be of the Copper Inuit from Victoria Island, because her parka cover was drawn high at the sides, the front and back hanging low like a beaver's tail, unlike the Mother Hubbard parkas we wore in the west. The girl shrank under the nun's glare. Catching a firm hold on one of the girl's long braids, the nun snipped it off with a clean slice and let it fall to the floor. The girl hid her face in her hands as the second braid was cut.

The nun did the same to four other girls, sparing only one older girl and one of the outsiders' children, who was likely a trapper's daughter. The sound of the shears severing thick black hair drowned out the howls of the disgraced girls.

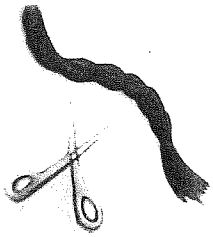
At last, only I remained. I held my breath. I was large for my age. Surely she would pass over me.

She did not. She stopped directly in front of me. I stepped back from her heavy cross, which nearly struck me in the face, but she reached out and yanked me back by one braid.

"I can fix my own hair," I protested in Inuvialuktun, but she held tight and, with the same motion a bird makes to pull a piece of flesh from a fish, clamped the jaws of the shears down on my braid and severed it. I was horrified. I wasn't a baby. My other braid fell to the floor to meet the first, and I joined the others in their weeping.

There we stood, sobbing in the humiliation of our discarded hair.

Inuit: a general term for the Aboriginal peoples—including the Inuvialiut and Copper Inuit—who inhabit the Arctic regions of Canada, Greenland, Russia, and the United States. The term "Inuit" has largely replaced "Eskimo."



A tall Gwich'in girl in a uniform came into the room. She gave a comforting look to one of the weeping girls, who I knew to also be Gwich'in by the wraparound moccasins she wore. My mother had warned me about the Gwich'in. They were not like us Inuvialuit and did not get along with our people. The uniformed girl looked at me. A thin, malicious smile crinkled her lips.

I wished they would cut her hair, too.

She was joined by three other braided girls in uniforms. One of the nuns said something to them that I did not understand. They marched out the door and returned, moments later, with their arms full. I looked for Agnes among them, as they scurried between us passing out the impractical clothes that we were to wear. They had us exchange our warm, comfortable kamik and moccasins for outsider-shoes, and issued each of us a short-sleeved blouse and two pinafores, one navy blue and one khaki. But the worst were the scratchy canvas bloomers. They expected us to wear

underwear made out of the same stuff that tents were made with. They knew nothing of living in the North, nor how to dress for it.

The hook-nosed nun shrieked something. I had no idea what she was saying. She held her bony finger out, pointing it directly at me. The floorboards of the dormitory groaned, and I held my breath, scared of what might come next. From a distance, a familiar voice whispered, "Change into the new clothes."

I turned, and there was Agnes. She had come in and joined the other uniformed girls. One of the nuns hurried over to her, a harsh rasp flying from her mouth. I felt bad that Agnes had gotten into trouble for speaking to me, but I was glad she was there. I gave her a hint of a smile and began to dress.

I hated my new clothes. I was much larger than the other girls my age, and the clothes did not fit well. The shoes pinched my feet. The bottoms were hard and stiff. They did not form to the shape of my foot like I was used to, and there was no padding inside of them. The faded, black secondhand stockings were as transparent as walrus intestines and much too small. They did not reach to the elastic bottoms of my bloomers, so I had no way of holding them up. It was a good thing my mother had bought me my own stockings. I reached into my bag and pulled them out, but the nun snatched them from me with a scaly claw. I stood up straight, hands on my hips, and let out a huff.

"And who do you think you are?" she asked me in my own language.

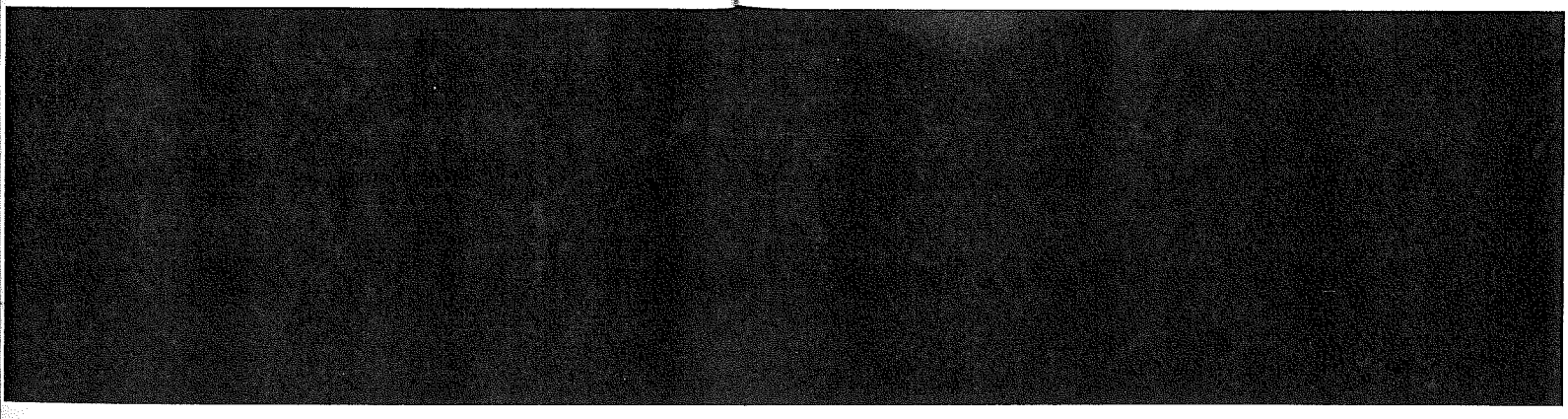
"I am Olemaun Pokiak," I told her, puffing my chest.

"We use our Christian names here. And we speak English." She narrowed her eyes. "You are Margaret," she said, switching languages.

She could say what she wanted—I knew what my grandfather had named me. It was Olemaun, the same as his Alaskan-Yup'ik mother, and it meant the hard stone that is used to sharpen an ulu. But I could not tell her, because I did not speak nearly enough English. Nor could I do anything about my clothing, though I knew my knees would play peek-a-boo with the cold when I walked, and my toes would freeze as they poked holes through the ends of my onionskin tights. Why would she not just let me wear my own stockings?

Yup'ik: the Inuit who live in western and central Alaska and at the easternmost point of Russia.

ulu: a knife with a rocker-like blade, traditionally used by Inuit women for tasks such as scraping hides, cutting hair, and preparing food.



The nun scuttled to the wall facing the stalls. With one long bony hand, she picked up a cloth from a shelf that was lined with washbasins and made a circular motion with it in front of her face. She pretended to scrub behind her ears and under her armpits. I didn't need a lesson on how to wash my face. I already knew how to do that. What I needed was to learn how to read.

After she finished her class on washing, she opened her mouth and let out a squawk. First, the outsider's daughter took out a tube and a toothbrush from among her belongings. The rest of us did as she did. I placed some paste from the tube on the end of my toothbrush, and stuck it in my mouth. It was worse than a fly's breakfast. I couldn't help but gag and spit it out. The raven-like nun called out "Katherine," and the Gwich'in girl who had smiled when my hair was cut tore the tube from my hand and took it to her. The nun cackled and held the tube up for the other girls to see. The older ones laughed loudly, especially the Gwich'in girl called Katherine. The Gwich'in always thought they were better than us.

A tall slender nun appeared in the doorway. She was pale and seemed to float across the bathroom floor. She turned to the Raven, seeking an explanation for the commotion.

I could hardly take my eyes off her.

The Raven made a gesture from her cheekbone to her jaw, like a man shaving his whiskers. The new girls now laughed, too.

My mother had bought that tube for me. They were not just laughing at me. They were laughing at her. I wanted to tell the nun that it was not funny. My mother could not read. How was she to know that she was buying shaving cream and not toothpaste?

I saw the muscles of the tall nun's beautiful, long neck tense, but she did not laugh. She glided toward me and pulled a small tube from her pocket.

I am not trying that, I thought. *I have had enough of the outsiders' pastes.*

She took a drop from the tube, placed it on her own tongue, and smiled. After rinsing my brush, she put a strip of the paste on it. "Mmm," she said.

I trusted her smile, so I put it in my mouth. It was cool and refreshing like the mints my father had once bought us at the Hudson's Bay Company. As I ran the brush across my teeth, I could see the tall nun in the mirror. She looked like a pale swan, long and elegant. Later, Agnes told me that her name was Sister MacQuillan, and that she was in charge of all of the other nuns. She would be the perfect woman to teach me how to read, but reading, as I discovered, would have to wait.

Once we had finished cleaning ourselves, it was time to clean the school. We were separated into groups. I was lucky: I was put into Agnes's group. We were assigned to clean one of the classrooms. We wiped down the desks, the walls, and the floor with a harsh-smelling liquid that made our eyes water and ate at the skin on our fingers.

After we had dusted, swept, and washed everything, we rubbed wax into the wood floor until it was as smooth and as slick as ice. Agnes and the other girls had fun slipping and sliding around on it, but my stockings were too worn on the bottoms for sliding. I perched myself in one of the small wooden desks to see how it would feel. Letters, like those from Rosie's books, decorated the walls of the classroom. I stared at them, trying to decipher what they might mean.

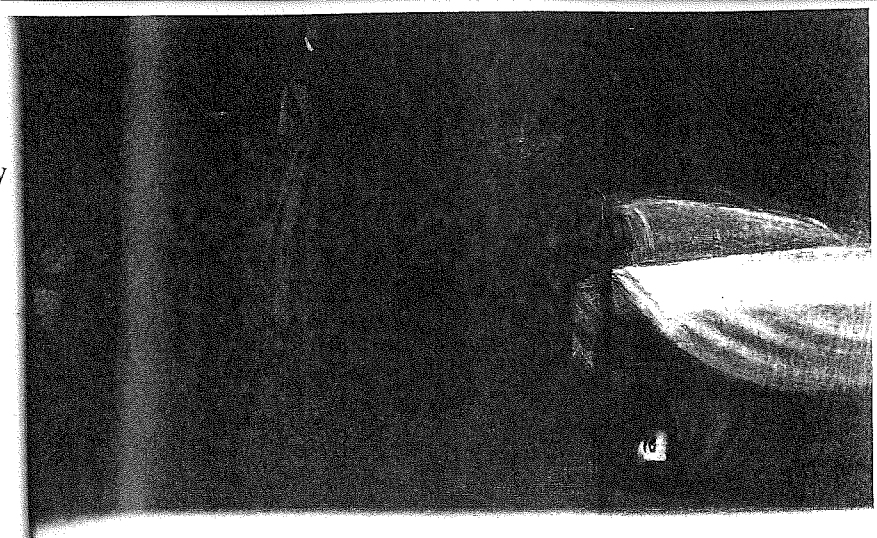
See photo on page 94.

Suddenly, the girls fell silent. I turned to see why. *WHAP!* A stick came down on the desk I was sitting in. I jumped in my skin. The Raven stood over me, with a look that made it clear she did not approve of me sitting down. I scrambled to my feet. She shoved a dusting cloth in my hand and pointed to the rows and rows of books at the back of the class. The other girls were dismissed to get ready for dinner, but I had to stay.

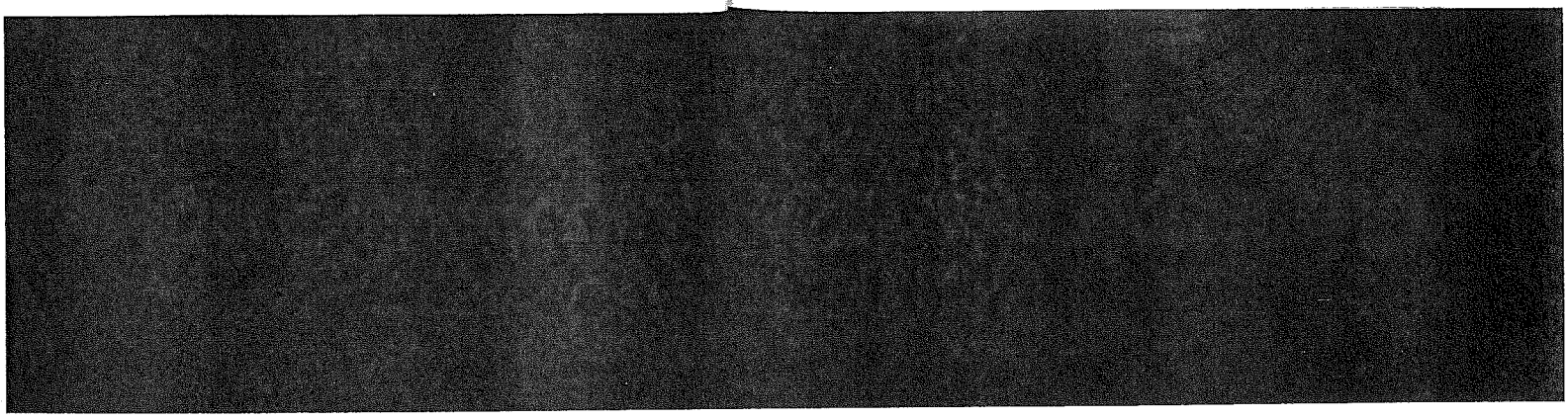
By the end of my first day, the only books I had touched were the ones I dusted.

I HARDLY SLEPT THAT night. The bed had a rickety frame that creaked every time I took a breath. Each girl's bed was as loud as mine, and the noise filled the vast space of the large room with a disjointed foreign sound, unlike the sleepy rhythmic breathing of my mother, father, and siblings, with whom I had shared a tent since birth. Sobs also carried through the room. My eiderdown blanket was soft, but I missed the musky smell of furry hides, the comforting aroma of smoke drifting through the air, and the darkness of the tent, even in summer. The thin serge curtain above my bed did little to keep the midnight sun from penetrating the huge room. Gathering the blanket off my assigned bed, I crawled underneath it, squinted my eyes, and imagined that my father's pipe was glowing in the distance.

They woke us very early the next morning, but my sleep had been almost as brief as the short-lived darkness. By the time the nuns entered the room, clapping their hands fiercely, I was dressed and seated on the edge of my bed. I was not about to let another minute stand between me and my chance to learn.



However, all I was about to learn was what was to be done with the smelly buckets I had discovered in the stalls, the night before. We called them honey buckets, but there was nothing sweet about a bucket that was used as a toilet. With extreme care, we hauled them down the stairs and across the school yard, where we dumped them in the river. When we returned, we were set to work cleaning the chicken coop. A long time passed before we were herded back upstairs and given a few minutes to attend to our hygiene. My stomach ached with hunger and my mind ached for knowledge. I could not wait to go to Sister MacQuillan's class and begin reading.



After we were inspected for cleanliness, we were led in single file into a strange room that separated the boys' and girls' dormitories. It was filled with long benches, instead of desks, but there were books placed along them. At last, I would learn to read. Standing at the head of the room was the priest who had taken my parents away the day before. I spotted Sister MacQuillan in the front row, but she did not get up to teach us. Instead, the nuns came around and made us get down on our knees and hang our heads. It seemed like an odd way to learn anything. Agnes saw my confusion and whispered to me in Inuvialuktun, "We are supposed to pray for our souls."

I nodded my head and prayed to start class soon.

My prayers were not answered.

After kneeling, we were taken to eat a breakfast of soggy, bland, mushy oatmeal. Each bowl was sprinkled with a scant teaspoon of brown sugar, which hardly disguised the revolting, tasteless stuff.

I wondered how Agnes, who was sitting next to me, could eat it with such enthusiasm.

"You get used to it," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

"Really? So, do we learn to read after breakfast?"

Agnes put down her spoon and turned to face me. Her face was sad and sympathetic. "Oh, no, we will not begin classes until the ice freezes again in the fall."

I stared at her, horror replacing hunger in my belly. My spirit sank like the stockings that slouched around my ankles.

Why had I been so eager to come here? I thought of my sisters and cousins. They were still in Aklavik, nearly within shouting distance. I wanted to yell to them to wake my father and tell him to come and get me so that I could spend the day dancing and watching the games.

"What do we do, until then?" I asked her, fearing the answer.

"We do chores, and we play."

I had spent so many days anticipating the thaw, and now I would spend my days scrubbing, gathering wood, and mending uniforms, impatiently waiting for the freeze.