The last summer that my father worked at hauling freight to the Tin City mine was 1918, the summer before the fall of my accident. Taking care of seven children was just too much for Mama to handle with help only from the older ones, along with fishing, berry-picking, preparing skins, sewing, and all her other duties. Papa’s presence at home was more important than the cash he earned at the mines.

It was over fifty miles from Nook to Tin City, and if anything happened while he was there, it took too long to get home—a two-day walk down the beach. It would have been quicker to go by sea, but it was just too dangerous to travel to Tin City by small boat because beyond Point Spencer was the open Bering Strait with no protection from westerly or southerly winds. There were no inlets along the way where one could run for shelter in case of a sudden blow. All the way to Cape Prince of Wales it was one long, straight stretch of treacherous beach toward which the never-ending rollers came sweeping in from the ocean to trip on the offshore shallows, tumble, and break their backs in booming, windblown surf. So to get to Tin City, or back to Teller, you either walked, rode horseback, or went by a horse team and wagon that the company owned.
We had a telephone that was a one-party line that ran from the Tin City mines to Nook. It was the old-fashioned kind where you cranked the handle to make it ring at the other end. Once, when my father was at Tin City, we got to roughhousing and a rifle was knocked from the gun rack and cut a deep gash in Mary's scalp. I can still see my mother, after she got the blood stopped, going to the phone, turning the crank, and asking the person at the tin mine to have Albert (she called him “Albut”) come home because one of the girls had been hurt. He called back, and a couple of days later he was there. With seven lively kids, too many things could happen while he was away.

Papa had a graphite mine up the Tuksuk River which he and Tommy worked on part of the time. I remember how they used to have several gunny-sacks ready for Captain Pederson when he stopped by in the fall to pick up Papa's barrels of salmon for the San Francisco markets. After quitting the tin mines, Papa worked for several seasons on his own near the Rice’s gold mine up Sunset Creek. The diggings were only about six miles from home, on the other side of Grantley Harbor. By 1930, most of the worthwhile deposits of gold in the area had been worked out and the mines shut down. From then on we had to live off the land. It wasn’t too difficult if a person had a capacity for lots of hard work, and both of our parents certainly had that. Still, it wasn’t as easy to do as it had been in the early years of their marriage when they were much younger and there weren’t so many young mouths to feed. In about 1920, a law was passed that took away the aboriginal rights of white men who were married to Native women. After that Papa and several of the neighbor men could no longer legally hunt, trap, and fish without regard to season or region. The restriction didn’t bother us too much because the laws specifically stated that it was lawful to kill game out of season when in need of food. And what family in the North wasn’t always in need of food?

Papa would often come home from the trap line in the wintertime with his moustache and eyelashes fringed in frost. He would stomp his feet as he came in the door “to get the circulation going,” and then take off his heavy fur clothes, muskrat parka, fur cap with ear flaps, mukluks, sealskin pants, and fur mitts. Sometimes he would get stormbound at his trap line cabin up the Tuksuk for several days, and Mama would worry about him. It wouldn't have been so bad if he could have just phoned us and said, “The weather up here is not fit for an animal to be out in,” but we just had to wait and worry. By the grace of God and thanks to his trusty dog team, he
always made it home. I can remember many times when Mama would walk the floor when a blizzard came up by the time darkness fell, and Papa had not yet come home. She seemed instinctively to know that he was safe in his cabin and would be home as soon as the weather permitted. But they both knew that that was part of the ordeal of making a living in that “god-forsaken” country, as I have heard it called many times. Living in the Far North had many discomforts, but in many ways it was sweet and there were compensations.

Whenever the vicious winter storms kept my father home from his trap lines, he did what he enjoyed most to do for us, and that was to bake pies or make doughnuts. I still think to this day that he made the most delicious apple pies that anyone ever baked, and the doughnuts he made were out of this world. Another specialty that my father made often in the wintertime was corn fritters. He still remembered the recipe his mother made back in the Old Country. We ate them hot from the iron kettle with syrup or molasses.

Another thing that he liked to do for us was play his accordion. He loved music, and he wanted us to appreciate it too. He played all the Strauss waltzes, German polkas, and schottisches, mostly music from the Old Country. Sometimes he would say, “Gussie, you and Albert get up and dance while I play a waltz,” and he would play “The Blue Danube,” “Tales from the Vienna Woods,” or “Wiener Blut,” just to name a few.

Where fish and meat were concerned, hunger was not a problem at Teller unless a person was downright lazy, a drinker, or both. The wildlife that had been so decimated by the whalers, sealers, and the gold rush hordes had come back dramatically since the turn of the century. All one needed was a rifle and ammunition or traps or snares to take squirrels and rabbits, ptarmigan, emperor geese, ducks, and other waterfowl. The reindeer herds had multiplied greatly, too. They were the private property of individuals, families, and the Lomen Reindeer Company, but one could always trade something for a carcass—or perhaps even poach an unbranded animal now and then.

While the Natives could and did live on meat or fish alone, the eating habits of the white man, which he passed on to his offspring, made it imperative that he have a source of cash or something of value to sell or trade for the flour, sugar, salt, beans, rice, and canned goods; the kerosene and gasoline to light his house and run his boat; the coal to feed his fires; and
all the other items such as tobacco and matches, guns and ammunition that were necessary to adapt the basic Arctic environment to the minimum that his civilized tastes required.

After the mining dwindled down, Papa managed to earn money one way or another. After the freeze-up and the snows came, he would go out and mark the winter trails for the Alaska Road Commission. He used red flags that were fastened to five-foot wooden laths. We all pitched in to point the stakes and tack the flags onto them. Even the youngest ones had a hand in this task. In the spring after the ice went out, Papa would sound the channel and rechart the passage between Port Clarence and Grantley Harbor and set marker buoys for the government so ships entering and leaving would not run aground. He also tended the lighthouse at Nook, which marked the narrowest point in the channel between Nook and Teller. In the summer, he had his business of ferrying people and supplies on their way from Teller to Tin City, which was the only route of getting supplies overland to the tin mines. He was deputized as a U.S. Marshal for many years in the early part of the century. He also was an outspoken member of the school board for more years than anyone else at Teller. He built his own boats, of which some were dories, and he also built some made to order for people in the general area or from Nome. He made his own nets for fishing salmon or herring or to seine for fish. Whenever the nets needed mending or repairing, he did that too, and sometimes I would help him; he taught me how to use the shuttle to make the knots. Our father was a practical man, and he made do with what others would throw away.

Our mother was also affected by Papa’s practical ways. She baked sourdough bread three times a week, tanned the skins that were made into parkas and mukluks, dried and made the sinew into strands with which she sewed the skins. She taught me how to do all this because I could not go out and do the outside chores that the able-bodied ones had to do. Also, with the yarn that Uncle Ed sent me, I knitted socks, mittens, scarves, and other useful items. In the winter months, Mama’s evenings at home were spent making clothing and parkas out of fur and hide. There were definite styles to the parkas for men and women. The men’s parkas were not made quite as fancy as the women’s were, and as for mukluks, the men’s were made with intricate fancywork around the top and more wolverine trim. The men’s could be made of reindeer calf, sealskin, squirrel, or Arctic hare, with fancywork made of small squares, oblong or triangle pieces of black and white
tanned unborn reindeer calf skin, sewn in a pattern. The reason they used this kind of hide for the fancywork was that it was more pliable and the hair was fine and short and therefore much easier to sew the little designs together with sinew. I helped my mother make many of these strips, which she would then use around the cuff parts of the parkas and also around the bottom edge of the parka. The parkas were made like a tunic with a hood, and their hem came halfway between the thigh and the knee of a man. After the front and back were sewn together, the sleeves were sewn in and then the hood; finally, the fancywork at the cuff of the sleeve and the bottom edge of the parka itself was sewn. The finishing touches were the narrow strips of wolverine edging around the bottom of the tunic. Last but not least was the most expensive piece of fur—the ruff, or the thick grayish-white scruff of wolf fur around the face of the hood. The Eskimos never used wolf hide for garments, only for trim, and the wolverine fur the same way. The wolf head skin was used for the topside of mittens. Many Eskimo men had two sets of parkas, one made of the heavy reindeer skins with much more wolf trim for winter wear, and the other a parka of lighter weight fur such as squirrel or reindeer calf. For summer wear, they had parkas made of duck, a heavy cotton material, or of just cotton calico. In winter, the men who had to go out for meat wore both winter and summer parkas together. The summer weight one was worn under the heavier winter reindeer parka in order to withstand temperatures of minus forty degrees or colder.

The old style of the women’s parka was the slit up each side about to the knee, with the front and back panels rounded. The women’s parkas also had more fancy strips, such as the insert from the front of the hood down to the breast. That part would be made of black and white designs of the unborn calf of the reindeer. After the early 1920s, the women’s parka style changed to resemble the men’s somewhat in that they no longer had the slit sides. I also helped my mother make mukluks, the footwear which everyone in the family wore. The tops were made of seal or reindeer calf, and the soles were made of walrus hide, for it was thick, tough, and would wear for quite some time.

Papa believed cleanliness was next to godliness. About once a week, we girls had to take turns scrubbing our wooden plank floors with strong brown soap and water and a stiff brush. We would scrub the plank floors until they were almost white. Mama saw to it that our bodies were clean—if we didn’t wash our hair as often as she thought we should, she put herself to the task
for us. We didn't have fancy soaps and shampoos. We used Fels Naptha soap for baths, shampoos, and laundry. One thing Papa could not tolerate was long hair on the boys. On a Saturday, he would get out his barber shears, a stool, and a towel, and would line the boys up, each one taking his turn in the chair. We girls, however, all had long hair, which we wore in braids with the ends tied with ribbon or yarn, and if we went one day without redoing our braids we heard about it from Papa. He not only reprimanded us but threatened to shave all the hair off our heads if we neglected to keep our hair clean and neatly done. Our oldest sister, Margaret, had the longest and most beautiful hair of all of us girls. When her hair hung down her back, and was not done up, it would almost reach the floor when she sat in a chair. My mother had shiny black hair which was always clean, and she kept it in two neat braids. She was slender in build, small in height, and I don't think she ever weighed more than one hundred ten pounds. Of any of the girls in the family, I came the nearest to resembling my mother, in height, weight, and appearance. I also resemble my maternal grandmother, Kinaviak, in many ways—she also was slender and agile, and there was not a lazy bone in her body. I have known three generations, including myself, of my Eskimo ancestry, and they were all on the lean and slender side.

As the younger sisters and brothers were expected to arrive into the world, my mother would begin walking the floor and Papa made sure that he was not somewhere on the trail, or over across the bay in the boat, but that he was near enough to hear if she should call to him. My father was present at all our births, either in the capacity of midwife or assisting the midwife, and we all saw the first light of day at our own home. My father, being a staunch Catholic, baptized each and every one of us at birth as soon as he and Mama could bathe our little bodies and wrap us in warm blankets. I remember when my oldest sister's twins were born. My mother and a midwife and the mother-to-be were in a tent, for we were out camping near the Tukusk River to pick our winter supply of berries. My mother cleared us all out of the big tent, made sure there was plenty of hot water, some clean towels, and a blanket, and then she and the midwife proceeded to walk the floor and wait it out. Then they started to work strenuously over my sister, talking to her encouragingly, and hours passed before we heard the cry of her firstborn, a girl. Mama bathed the baby, wrapped her in a clean cotton blanket, and doing so said to the midwife, “I think there is another one to be born.” The woman answered, “I have the same feeling that there is another
baby there.” Soon another muffled cry came from where my sister lay, tired and weary. My mother said, “Let me take it and see what I can do for she is going limp.” We had no idea that an emergency had arisen. But my mother told us later that the second twin was almost stillborn, until my mother put her fingers down the little throat and pulled out some thick phlegm which was choking the little one. That was only one of the times that I was glad that my mother had such great intuition and instinctively knew what to do in dire situations. I have thought many times that the Almighty above answered her prayers for I knew when she was praying fervently.

* * *

Before airplanes became common in the North in the 1930s, few visitors came to Teller between the freeze-up in October, when navigation ended, and the June breakup when ships could get in again. Each month a dog team driver brought the mail from Fairbanks, down the frozen Tanana and Yukon Rivers to Norton Sound, up the coast to Nome, then over the winter trails to Teller, Tin City, Wales, and Kotzebue. Father LaFortune, from the mission at Pilgrim Springs (which was called Mary’s Igloo), usually came at Easter, before the thaw, while good dog team travel was still possible.

Everything slowed down during the winter months, but there was little idleness. The reindeer herds had to be cared for, men trapped and hunted, and the women and children fished through holes in the sea ice. I would often go out with Mama onto the frozen bay, where we’d sit for hours on a deerskin on a sled, fishing for sole and tomcod through the ice. The sole is a flat fish, and the tomcod looks like a little shark with a black back and white belly. It is not the smartest fish around and can be easily caught. It swims straight ahead and snaps at anything that gets in front of it. If you jiggle the line, you can’t even feel a tomcod on your hook. You have to “weigh” the line with your hand, and if it feels a bit heavier than the bait, you pull it in and usually have a fish. Every few minutes, you must scrape the scum of ice that forms on the surface of the water. Mama had an instrument that my grandfather made for her for that purpose. The handle was long, made from willow driftwood, and the end was carved flat like a spoon, leaving just a frame—something like a tennis racket only much smaller—which then was woven with strips of rawhide to make sort of a latticework effect.

Where we fished, the water was about a hundred feet deep, but generally we only let our line down about ten or fifteen feet, and at the most
eighty-eight

Elizabeth Bernhardt Pinson

twenty or twenty-five. Sometimes we would catch the bottom fish like sole, rock cod, and lots of bullheads. We used just ordinary twine for fishline, and made our own hooks from the soft iron wire that came around kerosene and potato cases. We’d use two sticks to wind in the line so we wouldn’t get our mittens wet, which would have caused our hands to freeze in an instant when it was twenty-five or thirty below zero. I had one advantage out there fishing on the ice—my feet didn’t get cold.

We all had chores. After Tommy went to sea, David was the big brother of the family. He loved the outdoors and was hardly ever inside except to eat and rest or get dried out and warmed up so he could go back out hunting or fishing or doing things with his friends. He seemed to be more Eskimo than any of us. His chores were caring for the dogs and hauling ice. In summer the dogs were fed fish heads and tails and guts. They got dried salmon and dried tomcod in the winter. Also, Papa cooked cornmeal with fat to feed the dogs, as they needed fat for energy. David had to bring the dogs out of their inside stalls to chain them to posts outside of the barn so they could get fresh air and exercise everyday. If a blizzard was blowing, he had a day off from that job. In winter, when the wells were frozen solid, David would take the team and sled and go out to the lake back of town and cut blocks of ice about eighteen inches square and haul them home to be melted in buckets and tubs for drinking and cooking. It gave us the purest water you ever saw. There was never a speck of anything in it, clear as crystal. We kept a bucket on the back of the stove into which a block of ice was put to melt so there would always be drinking water available. Behind the stove was a 55-gallon oil drum with the top cut out. My father had rigged pipes to it from the firebox of the stove and this was kept full by adding blocks of ice. There was a brass spigot at the bottom of the drum from which water could be drawn for washing clothes and bathing. When the fire was banked for the night, that big barrel of hot water helped keep the room warm until the stove was rekindled in the morning.

Sarah and Anne cut kindling wood and stacked it behind the kitchen stove. They also hauled a couple of sacks of coal at a time on a small sled from the warehouse to the entry shed. This made it easier to fill the coal scuttles for the heater and the kitchen stove without having to go across the street to the warehouse when there was a blizzard or snowdrifts outside almost concealing the door. There were times after a three or four-day blizzard when we had to use a side entrance door to shovel away the snow that had completely
blocked our main entrance door. Sometimes the windows would also be completely covered over with snow and had to be swept off. After a fifty or sixty mile-an-hour gale had blown the snow and compacted it so hard against the doors and windows, you had to use an adze to chip it away. It would be packed onto the door or window as if a mason had cemented it on.

Sometimes a winter would set in early and last longer into the spring than usual, and we’d run short of coal. Then Papa would go out in the tundra and cut chucks of sod about eight or ten inches square that would just fit in the firebox of the cookstove. These oil-soaked chunks of sod would smolder all night long, just like peat. Except for a little stunted willow and alder that grew along the creeks, we had no wood other than the driftwood that washed ashore after every summer storm. When the wind and seas had moderated, everyone with a boat would be out along the coastline from Nook Spit to Cape Spencer to the Brevig Lagoon grabbing up the driftwood as fast as it came in. There was never enough, and people would almost pray for another storm so they could get more of the wood. Most of it had been carried down to sea via the Yukon and the Kuskokwim Rivers and other streams that drained the timber regions of the interior, but my father said that a lot of the driftwood must come from rivers in Russia and the Kamchatka Peninsula, drifting north and northwest to our beaches.

We had a natural cold storage—an excavation under our house at Teller with a hatch lid for an entrance. During the dead of winter, Papa would keep a kerosene lantern down there to keep the chill out so the food would not freeze but would stay at a temperature of about thirty-five to thirty-seven degrees. This underground storage space was about five feet from floor to ceiling and perhaps ten feet wide by fifteen feet long. That is where we kept our perishables such as crates of eggs and potatoes, onions, sacks of carrots, and also cases of canned goods. I remember the tasteful cheeses in a wheel—Papa made sure these were kept in a large tin can with a tight lid so that the mice wouldn’t get into them. Even though we would get down to our last few potatoes—flour and sugar were low and coffee and tea almost had to be rationed—we were by no means in danger of starvation. There was plenty of dried fish and salted and smoked salmon, and the new runs of smelt, herring, and salmon would have begun. Reindeer and seal meat were plentiful and available when you had the ammunition.

In the spring, my brothers brought home brant and emperor geese, nice and fat and right for roasting. I remember one time when Tommy was
about sixteen years old, he brought home a swan that he had shot, and Mama baked it, but it was so tough it was like eating shoe leather. It must have been an old one, for they are reputed to live nearly a century. That incident happened before the swan became an endangered species. Those were the days when we used to see flocks of trumpeter swan, about ten or fifteen in a flock, flying over in the early spring, their long wings making a slow sweeping motion as they made their silent journey to the tundra flats north of Nook where they would nest. They have not been seen in that area since the early 1920s, but a few are still found to breed in the tundra flats of northern Canada. We also saw many birds that are now endangered, such as whooping crane, whistling swan, brant (a species of geese which I don’t think even exists anymore), and some that are not endangered but were more plentiful fifty years ago, such as emperor geese, pintail, Arctic tern, jaeger, and more.

The Natives used every part of the animals that they killed, nothing was thrown away. The meat was eaten, fresh or dried, and some of the bones were used for tools. I can remember my grandfather having snow goggles made of two pieces of ivory the size of a fifty cent piece each. They were thinner than a fourth of an inch, each with a slit an inch and a quarter long and not wider than an eighth of an inch for the opening. These were fastened with a piece of rawhide and tied around the head. A person would get snow blindness if they didn’t have such gear when they hunted seal or rabbits or other game in the winter. There were days when the sun would shine so bright that it made your eyes water, and you couldn’t stay outside very long without snow goggles. There was one delicacy that my grandparents and my mother relished and that we younger ones learned to really like as well, and that was bone marrow. My mother used to bake skinned reindeer legs, the shin parts, until they were nice and brown, and after we had eaten the roasted meat from the bone, she would crack the bones so that we could scoop out the delicious marrow which we spread on bread as you would butter. When we ate an Eskimo meal with Mama, we would eat while sitting on the ground outdoors. These meals were mainly boiled or dried fish with seal oil, soorut greens, and berries. While Mama would drink tea, we had cool clear water from an artesian well. When Papa ate his lunch or dinner inside with the boys at the dinner table, he would have fried or boiled fish, boiled potatoes, some boiled dandelion or wild onion greens with vinegar, or fresh greens from our little vegetable patch, such as radishes, leaf lettuce, young carrots, or turnips.
About forty miles directly east of Teller was a place called Hot Springs or Pilgrim Springs. That was the same area where we lived when I was three years old. Then it was a Catholic Mission called Mary’s Igloo. It was protected by the Saw Tooth Mountains and far enough inland to be more or less free from the northerly winds blowing off the ice packs. There were natural hot springs or geothermal areas where the mission monks (or brothers, as we called them) cultivated beautiful vegetable gardens. They made even broader use of the geothermal activity by building a spa where people from all around, including my father, used to go to soak their tired stiff muscles. Papa made at least one trip every winter to soak away the pain of his rheumatism. He would come home feeling fresh and supple. He and Father LaFortune, a French priest, and Brother Wilhelm, a German monk, would relax in the hot baths for hours, chatting in German and reminiscing about the Old Country.

All of the staff at Mary’s Igloo Mission were either German, Belgian, or French. Everything was immaculate and run on an orderly basis. The main vegetables that they grew were spinach, Brussels sprouts, celery, carrots, cabbage, rutabagas, and several varieties of lettuce. All this produce grew fast and big in the short but intense growing season of twenty-four hours a day of sunlight during the summer. What they didn’t harvest for immediate use, they stored in frost-proof root cellars, and when Papa visited the mission during the winter, he’d always take along smoked and salted salmon for the staff and the children, and he would come home with a sack or two of vegetables.

He never forgot the children, some of whom were orphans. He always brought them a bucket of hard Christmas candy that he had saved especially for them. Some of our neighbors’ kids were not as fortunate as we Bernhardts. Almost every family in Teller had lots of children, and if the father was sickly, lazy, a drinker, or a gambler, they had terrible times and would have starved without the charity of others. There were no welfare programs then, of course, and those who were more provident and had a little extra would help care for the dependents of those who were not. Papa would always give someone less fortunate a helping hand; he would say, “You can’t let children suffer just because their parents are no good.” There was one old fellow, also married to a Native woman, who never seemed to be able to
put by enough food to see his large family through the winter. I’d see him measure out the food, and if he spilled just one bean or one grain of rice, he’d pick it up and put it in the pot. He seemed to work hard enough but apparently was not the manager that my father was. Papa was known as a good provider and never were we cold or hungry or without proper clothing, even after a season when the fish runs had been poor or bad weather interfered.

One of Papa’s favorite foods was eggs, but they always were a problem to keep. No matter how he tried to keep them fresh longer, by the end of winter any that hadn’t been used would have spoiled. Some egg-starved people, who couldn’t wait for the arrival of supply ships, would go to offshore islands in the spring and rob the nests of seabirds on the cliffs. Such eggs had a strong fishy taste that got worse with age. We gathered sea gull eggs, which we thought delicious compared to some other birds. The eider duck eggs that we gathered in the marshy places were nearly as big as turkey eggs and dark of yolk but good eating. We also found ptarmigan eggs, which we thought the closest thing to hen eggs, for they could be used in baking cakes. The chicken eggs we got at home arrived on the MS Patterson, and by the time they reached us in July, they would already have been weeks away from the chickens that laid them. Stored in the cellar at thirty-nine degrees and the cases turned over every few weeks, made it possible to have eggs at Christmas as well as a few even for Easter.

Papa made it a point that we would observe Easter Sunday with joy and happiness. He believed very strongly in the resurrection, as he did in the other Catholic doctrines that he taught us. He would bake hot cross buns and a couple of apple pies, and for Easter breakfast he would make us corn fritters. Easter and Christmas were two big holidays at our house. Papa and Mama would go all out to make them memorable for all of us. Easter time meant excitement not only in our immediate family but also the two other Catholic families in Teller.

We also knew that Father La Fortune, our traveling priest, would be arriving any day as near to Easter as the weather would permit him to travel with his dog team, for he had a rough trail of more than fifty miles over frozen lakes, rivers, and snow-packed terrain. He would spend about a month traveling to out-of-the-way settlements to minister to the sick, comfort the aged, perform the baptismal ceremony to the newborn, and give the last rites to those at death’s door. He spoke fluent Iñupiaq and even said Mass
in Inupiaq for the Natives in the most remote places. He also advised young people about adolescence and what marriage should mean.

My parents especially loved to make Christmas a time of happiness for us. They seemed to enjoy the season, the preparation, and the meaning of this great day. We children believed in Santa Claus when we were small, and I still remember when I found out who Saint Nick really was. Mama would set a plate with cookies and a cup for coffee for Santa as he would be cold and hungry when he dropped down from the North Pole. One Christmas Eve, when I was seven or eight, Anne and I, who slept together upstairs, had been giggling and whispering until late, too excited for sleep. Then we heard the jingle of bells outside. A few minutes later there was the sound of paper bags being opened and our parents talking in low tones. Slipping out of bed I made my way in the dark to the door where I could see my parents putting things in our stockings. Those long black cotton stockings that we wore would be hung on the ladder that led to our sleeping quarters in the garret.

The only gifts we received were the contents of the stockings, which consisted of a small bag of hard candy, an orange and apple, some mixed nuts, and an inexpensive trinket. But how happy we were to receive even that much. The boys might get a harmonica or pocketknife; we girls got a comb or barrettes for the hair or one of those little pink celluloid dolls with the arms and legs that could be twirled around and around and would fall off when the rubber band that held them together was wound too tight and broke.

Right after the stockings were distributed and a special breakfast of eggs and oatmeal was over, Mama would put a big reindeer roast in the oven, to be served with potatoes and carrots sautéed in the juice of the roast, rich brown gravy, and canned peas. For dessert we had Papa’s homemade apple pie. One time Papa ordered a turkey from one of the markets at Nome, and it came frozen via dog team a week or two before Christmas. We did not like it for we thought it tasted fishy. Not that we disliked fish, but it being a fowl, we thought it should have a somewhat different flavor.

The only and biggest social event of the year was the Christmas program presented by our school. It meant excitement, cheerfulness, and good will prevailing at every turn. Expectations were high throughout the days of preparation for the big day. We children would begin to get nervous about our parts in the Christmas play.
There was no such a thing as wearing a bright new dress every year—perhaps the dress we wore last year just needed lengthening at the hem or the side seams let out a little. It was too nice a dress for just any occasion, even if it was made of calico. If last year’s dress did not fit, even with the necessary alterations, it was handed down to the next in line. We never expected our parents to furnish us with dresses of silk or satin or rayon for we instinctively knew we had to be satisfied with things as they were.

Our teachers put every effort into making it as happy and exciting as they could for us all. Despite the lack of many things in the Arctic that in other parts of the world make the Christmas season a merry and enjoyable one, we made substitutions wherever we could. We had no fir trees to decorate in our homes or schoolhouse. But our teacher would have the older boys go out and chop the biggest alder or willow they could find. My brother David, Tommy Blatchford, and Heinie Müller would take our sled and go to the end of the big lake back of Teller where there was a willow grove in the lowland and where the ground would be swampy in the summertime. First the boys would have to shovel the snow away from the trunk, which was buried deep. They would find the sturdiest one with the thickest trunk, at least six feet tall and perhaps two and a half to three inches in diameter.

While the boys were out in the cold selecting the willow tree, we girls were in the warm schoolhouse popping corn on the old potbellied heating stove, and we would string the popcorn to be part of the decorations for the tree. The smaller boys and girls made daisy chains out of colored paper to be draped around the tree. All the decorations were handmade by the students, with whatever material was available. The willow or alder tree was usually sparse of branches so the boys would also bring home extra branches cut from other willows. The boys would then drill different sized holes in the trunk of the willow or alder at scattered intervals and then stick more branches in these holes to make the tree a little fuller. Then the whole trunk and all the branches would be wrapped with green crepe paper. By the time the tree was decorated with everything we could make, and the teacher had put up the handmade star that we had covered with chewing-gum foil, we were pretty proud of the tree. Everyone at school had a hand in the completion of the Christmas tree, and it was really something to behold for our eager eyes. It lifted our spirits no end.

After completion of the tree, the schoolroom was decorated with red and green crepe paper streamers. Then the stage platform was set up,
complete with curtains hung on heavy-duty wire strung from one end of
the stage to the other. And finally came the climax to our labor of love, the
taffy pull. Our teacher furnished all the supplies, and what fun we all had.

Discipline in our small school was excellent, and we respected our
teachers. We were all so eager to learn and felt so fortunate to have a school-
house and a teacher that we would stay after school to help her clean the
blackboard and the erasers or any other jobs she had for us. All eight grades
were taught in one room.

*   *   *

In the spring, after the ice started breaking up in Grantley Harbor and
pan ice, or ice floes, began churning around in Port Clarence Bay, we began
to get anxious to move to the Nook, which meant also that school would be
out. We would load the scow, which Papa had built for the purpose of mov-
ing us to Nook and back to Teller in the fall, with household goods, clothes,
and bedding. Papa steered a straight course north with the forty-horsepower
Evinrude motor straining at the stern of the scow.

Most of the time in early June, the ice pack would move back into the
harbor, and with the force of the incoming tide, it would pile the beach high
with icebergs. As if by some giant hand playing jackstraws, the bergs would
be deposited grotesquely on top of each other. When icebergs are adrift and
the two main forces are present—wind and current—they can be seen mov-
ing against the motion of the surrounding ice pack. If the current is south-
erly and the wind northerly, the two motions of ice oppose each other, and
the icebergs pile up with giant roars and squeaks as they buckle and snap.
When the pressure ridges get fifteen or twenty, even thirty feet high, the
topmost cakes of ice come tumbling down with a horrendous crash.

David was always the instigator of bold ventures. He would dare Sarah
and Anne to jump from the shore ice to a loose cake of ice. Then he would
see how far he could travel along the shore ice with the tide without going
so far from shore that he couldn’t make it back by hopscotching on cakes of
ice. That was just one of the daring feats that David used to do. I’m sure that
boy had no fear of nature. While my siblings were testing their skills on the
ice floes, I would stand on the shore ice, after carefully plotting my course
so as not to slip, and breathlessly watch the proceedings from there. Almost
constantly, we could hear distant sharp squeaks or a low hum, almost like
a human voice. They were the seals and whales calling to each other out in
Port Clarence Bay as there were many open leads past the ice floes. If you put your ear to the surface of the ice, you could hear an eerie underwater symphony.

From the early 1920s onward, Papa supported his family principally by trapping fox and fishing. The first fish to arrive after the breakup were harbor trout, smelt, and eulachon, the fat candlefish that everybody called “hooligans.” Caught with fine-meshed seines, the first few messes of trout and smelt tasted wonderful after a winter of salted, dried, or smoked fish, tomcod, and reindeer meat.

When the smelt runs were over, huge schools of herring came swarming into Grantley Harbor. The water would be just black with the fish, an almost solid mass about three feet deep, twenty or thirty feet across, and hundreds of yards in length. From a long distance you could see that the herring were coming by the ripple they made while swimming just below the surface. They seldom broke water unless pursued by salmon or belugas (small white whales), and then many of the fish in the school would jump all at once. Falling back into the sea, they made a sound like gravel being dumped on a tin roof. The herring were harvested by net or seine. One end of the seine would be held by people on the beach, while the rest of it was paid out of a dory in a half circle around the milling fish. Having cork floats on the topside and lead sinkers on the underwater side, the net hung upright in the water like a fence. It was then pulled onto the beach. Sometimes 300 or 400 pounds of herring would be caught in a single haul. Beluga whales would be right behind the school of herring—many times we could see the mother whale surface with a baby whale lying on her back. The herring were a delicacy. Papa salted them in barrels, smoked them, or pickled them with vinegar and spices. Sometimes he preserved them Eskimo style by putting them into a pit dug six feet or so into the permafrost where they were preserved in nature’s cold storage to be eaten later. Smoked, baked, fried, or boiled, they were real good eating.

King salmon, weighing up to fifty pounds, showed up with the herring runs late in June. The kings were often gorged with the smaller fish they had just eaten. Accompanying the migrating kings were immature salmon that we called “salmon-trout” or blackmouths. These were another delicacy sold fresh to those who weren’t fishermen. The salmon were caught in gill nets. One end of the net, which was fitted with floats and sinkers as the seines were, would be tied to the beach and the other end anchored in deep
water so that it formed a fence-like barrier extending in a half circle out from shore. The openings in the mesh were about four inches square, allowing smaller fish to pass through but entangling the larger ones about the gills: hence the name “gill nets.” Several times each day the nets would be checked for salmon.

Papa got the surprise of his life one morning when he and Albert, who was ten years old at the time, went out in the dory to get the salmon catch from the net. He noticed that one part of the salmon net was being weighted down more than ever. He thought there might be a seal entangled in the net, as sometimes was the case. When he got the net partly in the boat, he found that he had caught a ninety-eight pound king salmon. Up to that time, it was the largest king salmon caught by net.

The moneymakers were the sockeyes or red salmon. They came in July. Not a large fish, weighing on average about six pounds apiece, the bright reddish flesh and delicate flavor of the sockeye made it one of the most desirable of commercial fish. Over the years, my father developed and improved processing methods that made his salmon so popular on the San Francisco market and in New York delicatessens that he could never satisfy the demand. He also had a commitment to supply his Nome customers, businessmen and store owners.

After the sockeyes had been caught and butchered, several things could be done with them. A delicacy favored by Scandinavians was the bellies, a narrow strip of fat flesh that was salted in kegs with a dash of brown sugar added to sweeten the brine. The remainder of each fish was dried or hand-canned. Papa’s major product, though, was fillets of salmon salted down in barrels. He tried to have at least 500 barrels filled and ready for shipment south at the end of every season. Sacks of rock salt were imported via the *Patterson*, Captain Pederson’s ship from the States, as were disassembled staves and hoops and barrel heads to be coopered together as needed to make barrels.

Papa smoked about half of the king salmon that he caught. They’d be cut in strips, soaked overnight in a light brine, hung on racks outside to partially dry, then put in the smokehouse and smoke cured. He used slow fires of green willow or alder, which gave off a dense, moist smoke that seasoned the already tasty fish with a pungent, mouth-watering flavor. Some of the smoked king salmon was spiced and canned in olive oil and produced the greatest tidbit of all.
In August and September, after the king and sockeye runs had moved on up into the spawning streams beyond the Imuruk Basin, the silver salmon, or coho, appeared from the sea. Then came the dog salmon, or chums, and then the pink salmon also called humpies. The silvers and dogs were quite a bit larger than the sockeyes but not so valuable commercially. These were usually split and boned and hung on wooden racks to dry, rock-hard, in the wind and sun, to feed our dogs or to sell to other dog owners. Occasionally, an exploration ship going into the Arctic would stop and buy our dried salmon for expedition dog teams. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) bought a lot of Papa’s dried salmon for dog food as they stopped at Teller on their way to Herschel Island and points north in the Canadian Arctic.

We also seined for tomcod in late August when the schools would be almost as thick as the herring. These we dried for winter use and for dog feed as they were more plentiful than salmon. When the Tomcod runs came, Papa would build us a shelter of a tarpaulin hung over a frame as a windbreak from the sharp fall winds and rains. There we would spend most of the day cleaning and stringing tomcods on a length of wire. When the length of wire was full of cleaned tomcods, perhaps twenty or thirty, we would fasten it into a ring so the fish could be draped over a wooden railing to dry. About four of us girls would be assigned this task as long as the tomcod run was on, which could last two or three weeks. Sometimes we would get so tired
by the end of the day that we would start getting playful and silly and throw
tomcod guts at each other. Some would land in our hair and some square in
the face, and the girls making the bull’s-eye would laugh the loudest. Soon,
the bickering would start, and then Papa would have to step in and settle
things. We got our share of whippings when the punishment was due. I can
still recall seeing that big black leather strop hanging in his closet, and we all
dreaded the times when he would go to the closet to get it.

We didn’t always fish at Nook. Sometimes the salmon runs didn’t re-
main long in Grantley Harbor but migrated directly to the Tuksuk River, a
narrow, winding tidal channel leading to the Imuruk Basin, which we called
the “Salt Lake” but which was actually a landlocked bay. When fishing was
poor at Nook and salmon were jumping in the Tuksuk, Papa and Mama,
kids, dogs, and camping equipment would be loaded into our big power
launch, the Devil Whale, which Papa had purchased in 1925. With a dory
carrying the fishnets and other gear towing astern, we’d go chugging off up
Grantley Harbor, probably looking like a tribe of Chukchis on the move.

Through the years, Papa owned many boats—some he built, but the
Devil Whale was his favorite. Captain Pederson brought it up one year on
the Patterson. “I got a good deal on this boat in Frisco,” said Captain Pederson.
“It looked like just what you could use up here so I brought it along.”
The boat was lowered into the water, the diesel engine started, and Papa fell
in love with it immediately. A deal was made with Pederson, and we had a
fine boat that lasted many years. She was about thirty feet long, had a good
seaworthy hull, and was large enough for our entire family to travel safely
in at one time. There was a small cabin with bunks and a place to cook.
Nothing fancy, but as far as we were concerned, it was a yacht. In a local
fleet of Model T-type skiffs and dories, the Devil Whale was a Cadillac. We
had great times with it.

Mama especially liked it when we went to fish the Tuksuk where some-
times we’d spend a whole summer. As soon as camp was set up, she’d take
us girls out picking berries. The first of the season were the big, yellow, juicy
salmonberries which grew on low bushes. Later came the blueberries and
blackberries and red cranberries. The blackberries weren’t the blackberry
that we know in the Lower 48, being more like a currant and resembling
a little black bead. They were sweet and filled with tiny seeds and grew on
a low vine that crawled in the tundra moss. Scandinavians said they were
similar to the lingonberries they’d known in the Old Country.
Being the only fruit that grows in the Arctic, wild berries were the only source of sweetening and flavoring in Mama’s Native diet. She gathered them diligently. The different varieties were not always kept separate but were all put together in a keg or sealskin poke. Stored in a cool place, they never spoiled or fermented and would keep until they were all used up by midwinter. We ate them plain or with sugar and canned milk like Stateside people do strawberries and cream. A dish that contained berries that we all liked was kamahmuk or “Eskimo ice cream.” With her hands, my mother would mix reindeer suet and a little water in a bowl until it was soft, then whipping it with her fingers, she’d add a few more drops of water at a time until it got fluffy like whipped cream. She’d then add a bit of sugar, mix in the berries, and we had our kamahmuk. The mixing had to be done slowly and just so, or you’d end up with an inedible mess of lumpy grease. Sometimes Mama would crush boiled tomcod liver to a paste, add a bit of sugar, mix in the berries, and this we would have as a dessert that we relished. This was called ugrupuck.

One misconception held by the white population is that seal oil tastes and smells like fish. This is far from true. If properly cared for, it has no odor and has a buttery flavor. When it gets old and rancid, like any other oily substance, it does get a potent smell to it and gets dark in color. An uninitiated person, wanting to get the oil from a piece of blubber, might put it in a kettle over a hot fire and render it as he would hog fat for the lard. If one did seal oil by that method, it would get an unpleasant taste and smell. Seal blubber must be allowed to render itself in a cool place. Mama had an ulu (pronounced oo-loo) which she used to scrape the layer of blubber from the seal hide as soon as the seal was killed. An ulu is a woman’s cutting knife, usually made from the steel blade of a saw, cut in the shape of a half-moon with an ivory or bone handle. She also used it in cutting the furs she made into parkas, mukluks, and other clothes. When she scraped the blubber, it would come off the carcass with the skin, in a blanket two or three inches thick. After being separated from the skin, the blubber was cut into strips, put in a keg or five-gallon tin, and stored in a cool, dark place for a few weeks during which time the oil gradually seeped out of the blubber. Rendered in this manner, seal oil is almost colorless and has about as much flavor as olive oil. Light and warmth affect it, and so does time. As it ages, it turns a dark yellow, then brown, becoming thick and rancid, perhaps from bacterial action. Sometimes, such older oil could or would be used by the
elderly Eskimos, for that was all they had left until new oil was made during seal hunting time in the early spring.

After we moved to Nook in the spring, and Mama had some fresh seal oil on hand, she would tell David to build a fire outside on the gravel in the yard. She would put on a large iron pot half-full of seal oil and begin making what we called “Eskimo doughnuts.” She had her own recipe for the dough made from sourdough, but she never rolled out the dough or used a cookie cutter to cut out the rings. She would pinch off a small amount of dough, poke her finger through the center, and drop it into the hot seal oil. She would turn them as they got a lovely brown and use a forked twig to dip them out. I’ve never tasted anything so good made from scratch!

When all the oil had seeped from the tissues of the blubber, there remained a pinkish fiber the Eskimos called *tung yuq*. They would put this in a seal poke with some fresh seal oil and *ugruk* meat—young walrus meat that has been partially dried, then boiled, and then cut into three- or four-inch pieces. This was served along with *soorut* (tender young willow greens) and made a fairly balanced meal. I had such a meal many times with my grandparents and also with my mother, and it was very good.

Though some seals were speared during the winter months when they poked their heads from breathing holes in the ice to fill their lungs with fresh air, most were shot in the spring when they hauled out of open leads to bask on the ice in the bright sunlight. Most common was the harbor seal, also called the leopard seal because of its spotted coat. Seal liver was considered to be a delicacy in our part of the country. The flavor is very delicate, and it is as tender as chicken liver. Even Europeans, once they’ve tried it, say it’s the best liver they’ve ever eaten. It is said to be very high in vitamins and certain minerals. The old-time seamen and explorers who ate seal liver never had scurvy or other vitamin-deficiency diseases. After the main ice fields had broken and leads appeared, boatloads of hunters would go out to the open sea and kill the big, fat walruses as they slept on drifting ice floes. Weighing as much as a ton and a half, these largest of the northern seal furnished, in addition to meat and blubber, tough skins for mukluk soles and *oomiak* hulls, and ivory from their tusks for carving and trading. The walrus uses its tusks for digging clams and mussels at the bottom of the sea. In very early times, the walrus hunter would slit open the stomach and scoop out the partly-digested shellfish and devour them with relish, a gourmet item.
Except for the beluga, or white whale that would become entangled in fishnets while following herring and salmon runs, few whales were taken in our region of Grantley Harbor. The Native whalers at Point Barrow paddled many miles from land through the shifting ice pack in search of their quarry. Often we would be surrounded by the gray whales as we rowed our skiff or dory to Teller, crossing the channel from Nook. They would surface near our boat, and sometimes we saw a mother whale carrying her baby on her back. In the summertime, there were schools or pods of beluga whale all around the channel. They seemed to be migrating up to the Tuksuk for we would even see them up in the Tuksuk River as we picked berries up on the bluffs. The hillsides were very steep in some areas, affording a view where we could look down and see the forms of white whales swimming under the surface.

From these animals and skins, Eskimos made clothing, tents, and boat covers, and from reindeer and caribou legs came sinew for thread, cord, and bows. They used beluga whale and caribou sinew to sew walrus hides that are the covering over the driftwood frames of *oomiaks* and kayaks. The skin covering the frame of the *oomiak* is so tight that it gives and rebounds when it bumps the ice cakes. They used strips of rawhide left over from the hull to lash the hide to the framework. Hunters used the bladder of the seal, or the whole sealskin, which they inflated and then fastened to a line attached to a spear that they shot into the seal; this kept the seal afloat until they could get to it. The harpooning instrument they used is an ingenious combination of a harpoon head mounted on a bore or ivory fore-shaft lashed into a socket fixed to the end of a wooden shaft. When the head of the harpoon had gone into the hide and blubber of the animal they were hunting, the foreshaft separated from the head, which remained in the animal, and the shaft floated free, while the hunter held his catch on a line connected only to the head of the shaft. For hauling up a walrus or whale which he had killed, the hunter used a pulley attached to the shore ice.

My father also loved the land that we homesteaded at Nook, and he even tried a bit of agriculture on a small scale. The hardy vegetables, such as radishes, green onions, leaf lettuce, and carrots, we had no difficulty raising; the twenty-four hours of daylight that time of year matured the vegetables in almost half the time that it takes in the Lower 48. We kids couldn’t wait to raid the garden; before the radishes and carrots were even half-grown, we would be munching on them as we played. Every spring, one of Papa’s regular orders of the day was that we go out and gather the wild dandelions and
wild green onions, which grew profusely everywhere. These we would boil gently and serve hot with a little vinegar. Papa said we had to have a certain amount of fresh greens to help keep us fit. We had them with our lunch or dinner nearly everyday while they were in season.

Also during the early spring and summer, one could see blue seas of forget-me-nots, orange-yellow poppies, purple hyacinths, white daisies, foxgloves, wild sweet peas, and bluebells, which grew in areas where it was sandy, such as between the beach and the flatlands. There were wildflowers of every color for as far as the eye could see.

We got to know quite well the officers and crews of most of the ships that came to the North each year, beginning with the famous revenue cutter *Bear*, which made history in Alaska and in later years in the Antarctic. In her forty-one years of service, she helped shape the history of Alaska during the time that it was a United States territory and even years before when Alaska was under the jurisdiction of the treasury department. She enforced the law and order of the U.S. government. She patrolled the Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean for about seven months of every year for all those many years. From the bleak shores of the Bering Sea, from the Aleutians to the Bering Strait and the Arctic, Eskimos, missionaries, teachers, criminals, senators, and high government officials stood on her decks as passengers. She was a sight to behold when she came into Port Clarence Bay, all decked out in her best, and her white sails bellowed out as she came gliding into her anchorage. Admiral Byrd took her to the Antarctic in 1933 and again in 1939. After that, she briefly became a museum. I have a brother-in-law who served on her during her last years on the Bering Patrol. Her days of glory still ring in the hearts of those of us who remember.

The prestigious *St. Roch* was another ship that called into Port Clarence Bay and also made history. She, under Captain Henry Larsen, was the first ship to circumnavigate the Northwest Passage, that is, to make a path around the North American continent by traversing from east to west and vice versa. Her captain Henry Larsen, was a very good friend of my family. Another noteworthy ship was the USMS *Boxer* in the service of the United States government through the interior department (Bureau of Indian Affairs), which had almost direct control of the health and welfare of the Alaskan Natives. There were also freighters of all kinds, scruffy little trading schooners, and the boats that carried the mail during the navigational season.
Our best friend and our mail link with the outside world was the MS Patterson. An aging sailing schooner, powered by a diesel engine, with a sawed-off bowsprit, ice-gouged hull, and cluttered decks, she was anything but a beauty. But never mind her dirt and rust and ugliness, she was the magic craft that brought us the products of a world we could only dream about. She was Easter, the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas all rolled into one. Captain Pederson was our Santa Claus because it was he who brought, in late August, the gifts we got at Christmas and most of the makings of our Christmas dinner. He also brought us muktuk, which, when fresh, is a layer of grayish-black fat just beneath the black outer, shiny skin of the whale. Eaten raw, muktuk is considered by the Eskimos to be the very best food that comes from the sea. It may sound outlandish to some, but to us it had the flavor of coconut. He also brought gunnysacks full of cracklins, which were rendered-out bits of whale fat, nice and brown and crunchy. Each fall we couldn’t wait until Captain Pederson would stop by to bring us such goodies.

The Patterson’s home port was San Francisco. After a winter at dockside being overhauled, painted, and refitted, she’d load with supplies and trade goods and head for the North in late spring. Before sailing for the Far North, she’d take on a deck load of sacked coal, drums of oil, cases of tinned gasoline and kerosene, and stacks of lumber for transport to Arctic regions barren of such items.

Teller was one of the Patterson’s first ports of call when she returned to the North. Sometimes the open sea beyond Point Spencer would be free of ice while Grantley Harbor still had floating bergs, some as large as a football field. We’d see the ship lying out on the horizon, waiting for an offshore wind to move the ice and open up the anchorage. By now, we would have been down nearly to the end of everything. We had the necessities for existence but were short of the little extras that added spice and variety to our everyday existence. Dried beans, rice and macaroni, oatmeal flour and sugar, yeast, baking powder, salt, pepper, and other spices, canned and dried fruits, crates of eggs, potatoes and big, brown-skinned onions—all our staples, supplies, and fuel came from the Lower 48 on the Patterson. Then there were mysterious boxes that vanished to some hiding place we never could find—gifts that would turn up in our stockings at Christmas. But we could always find the boxes of dried prunes and apricots, figs, Fig Newtons, and Eagle Brand milk, which we loved to get into. My father always got a few
extras for our wintertime treats, such as a few boxes of apples, two crates of oranges, assorted cookies, and wooden buckets of hard candy and mixed nuts for our Christmas stockings. I don’t know how my father did it. He’d spend everything he had on food and clothing for his family. If we needed something that he didn’t ordinarily have on the order, he’d sell a skin or two to one of the local stores and buy it.

In the fall, driven from the Arctic by the southward creep of the ice pack, one of the Patterson’s last stops en route home to San Francisco would be Teller. Our muktuk was unloaded, and Papa’s kegs of spiced herring, barrels of salt salmon, and cases of tinned and smoked salmon were taken aboard. The fur skins he’d taken the past winter would be shipped off to a St. Louis fur company. Just before the battered old schooner sailed, Papa would give Captain Pederson his order for groceries and supplies to be brought north on the next voyage in the early summer. And Captain Pederson would always say to Papa, “Albert, do you suppose you could put up a bit more fish this year than you did last season? These people down in San Francisco can’t seem to get enough of it, especially your smoked salmon.” The San Francisco outlet would send some to the New York City delicatessens, especially spiced herring and cases of smoked, kippered salmon put up in olive oil. Of course, the size of the runs and the fishing weather were the controlling factors, but each year, Papa tried to put up a few more kegs of
herring, a few more barrels of salt salmon, and a few more cases of smoked salmon packed in olive oil. His fields were the sea, his crop was fish, and, like any good farmer, he harvested everything he could.

★★★★

It was the practice of the early Eskimos that the father, who was the hunter and provider for his family, was always fed first and got the choice skins for his clothing. The mother was next in line because she was the preparer of the food and maker of the clothes. Then came the older boys. Next to be fed and clothed were the nonproviders, the girls and small children or old grandparents. It was a brutal system, but one that insured the survival of the family. If the hunter did not have strength and protection from the weather, he could not go in search of game to feed the family, and all would perish.

Mama and her contemporaries had known hunger at Shishmaref and Ikpek. She remembered when all they had left were a few pieces of seal meat in the poke and a few frozen tomcods. Everything else had been depleted months before they would be able to trade a fox skin for some flour and tea from the traders, who would come after the breakup of the ice that had locked them in for as long as eight months. The arrival of spring meant not only that the traders would arrive with badly needed staples and goods, but that the gathering of fresh greens would be possible and a welcome supplement to the meager diet of fish and meat. Summer would bring berries to be put up for winter use. Sometimes, however, summer would be cool and not warm enough to produce all the leaves and greens they needed to harvest for use during the long cold winters. They had to harvest whatever they would need to tide them over the foreboding winters for they had no corner grocery store. In that land, in those days, you gathered the edible commodity while the gathering was good. When my mother was a young child, she saw the deaths of starving babies, and she saw old people, the ill and feeble, using the last of their energy to plod out onto the sea ice or off into the tundra to die alone rather than be a further burden on their families. Even when she was a young woman, she used to hear of the strangulation at birth of baby girls in the more remote tribes. A baby boy was an asset because he’d grow up to be a hunter, a provider. A girl would only produce more mouths that could not be fed in a land where the game in the lean years could not be found. The struggle for survival was first and foremost, as it always has been in any frontier life.
Mama, having been born into the old culture with its shamanism and superstitions, believed very firmly in the supernatural, and these beliefs stuck with her in spite of being a converted Catholic. She had a strong sense of what is called extrasensory perception, seemed to know of things that were happening some place else, and often had forebodings of the future. If my mother had a hunch something was going to happen, it generally did, and we would hear of it later. She could feel things when we could not.

An example of this was a human-like creature reportedly seen in the early 1920s by Eskimos up near Mary’s Igloo, around the Imuruk Basin, the Tuksuk River area, and other nearby places. Mama saw it a couple of times while picking berries. Once she got within twenty feet of it, and she said it walked upright like a man. It was peeking at her from behind some tall willows. Its face was thin and bony with dry wrinkled skin covering it. It wore a ragged fur parka with a fringe of ragged fur around the head. Whatever the thing was, it never spoke or made any human noises, but it whistled and made sounds like the bird that people called *tuva* in Siberia. It was occasionally seen taking salmon from drying racks or meat from caches. It was considered to be harmless by those who saw it, and there was never a posse organized to go out and kill or capture it, as there might be if such a thing were reported around a modern community. Some thought it was a ghost or apparition, a specter visible only to Native eyes. Nowadays, it might be thought of as the Himalayan abominable snowman or yeti, or, as in the northwest United States, a sasquatch or bigfoot. Or was it a refugee from Russian Siberia, who did not want to be found out so he would not be deported back to the Siberian salt mines?

In northwestern Alaska, the Eskimo call it the “hiding man” or *inoogoorock*. Tales about the hiding men are numerous from Bristol Bay to Barrow and all along the Bering Sea coast to the Arctic Ocean. From the time that I was a little girl, I heard sketchy stories about hiding men from my grandmother and my mother. Their recollections were possibly recounted from their own mothers and grandmothers. All my life, I have heard mothers say to their children, not only my mother but other Native mothers, “If you don’t be good little boys and girls the *inoogoorock* will get you.” Or if a child was afraid of the dark it was because the hiding man would get them.

The mysterious hiding man of northern Alaska goes many generations back in history. There were definite sightings when my mother was growing up. Her mother told her of strange characters dashing into willow groves
when spotted by a human. They were from all reports always thin in stature, with the skin on their face dry and wrinkled, not from old age apparently, but sort of weather-beaten. The ones who were sighted appeared to be about in their forties or fifties in age, for they were very quick and agile. Their clothing was usually well-worn, ragged, and faded whether it be of cloth or hides. Their lower extremities were never seen, except from long distances; consequently it could not be said for certain what sort of footwear they had. But in the summer, when tracks could be seen in the sandy river beach of the Tuksuk River, there were barefoot prints, and in the winter in the snow they had some sort of footwear for the tracks that were made were not from bare feet.

I had a strange experience of my own when we were camping one summer up near the Tuksuk River. While we all slept in our tent one night, I was awakened just before dawn by the sound of voices speaking in some foreign Native language. Perhaps, I, too, possess a trace of a supernatural sense. Or maybe the ones I heard were actually Russian refugees. The very way they giggled and laughed, they sounded like children, perhaps two or three of them. Their voices sounded similar to the way a 33 LP record would sound if played at 45 speed. When I heard the voices, in a vague way I said to myself, “Gee, the rest of the kids are up already and playing outside.” I rubbed the sleep from my eyes as I raised my head from the pillow to see if everyone was accounted for. They were all still sound asleep; after all it was still dusk outside. I heard muffled laughter and chattering but could not understand a word that was said. “They” were laughing and playing on the side of the tent where I slept with Anne and Gussie. I slept near the outside wall. The antics continued for several minutes, and my heart was pounding in my throat. I was so frightened. Soon the playfulness faded away. I really didn’t go back to sleep, for I couldn’t wait to tell Mama and the rest what I had heard while everyone slept. As soon as everyone was awake and we were rolling up the bedding, I told them what I had heard in the wee hours before daybreak. We wasted no time going outside and found evidence of playful activity in the sandy ground outside the tent. There actually were scooped out places, footprints, and general disarray in the sand. Later that day a neighbor who was camped a hundred yards away said some of their dried salmon was missing from the racks, and footprints of people could be seen as if there had been a scuffle. We thought they could be extraterrestrial beings or visitors from outer space.
My father, who was quite a practical person and not given to inventing tall stories, had some experiences that are hard to explain unless one believes in Sasquatch or other beings of such types. He had a hut out on the Tuksuk—similar to an igloo, dug partly into the ground and roofed with sod—where he stayed when hunting and trapping in the winter. Several times while spending the night there he heard something walking about near his cabin. The thing would walk on the snow-packed roof of his cabin and stomp its feet. The snow would crunch under the heavy footsteps, and his dogs would become nervous and bristle and bark in a manner that indicated a fear of something they did not quite understand.

Another time, while gathering driftwood at Brevig Lagoon, he had taken along my younger brother Tony and my two younger sisters Wilma and Pauline. They were sitting on a log near the shoreline eating their lunch when the younger ones noticed Papa stand up quickly to get a better look at something that he thought was a human. For some minutes, Papa’s gaze was fixed on the being as it walked upright at first, then got down on all fours and scampered along that way for awhile, then stood up like a man again. It came within a hundred yards of him, but always stayed partially hidden by some willows. The younger children seemed unaware that Papa was getting quite concerned at this creature playing hide-and-seek with him. They were too busy playing and horsing around. As dusk began to fall and a souther began to whip up, Papa said, “Come, let’s start for home.”

In his meanderings around the wilds of Alaska, even in some places where no human had been before him, he encountered at least four unexplainable creatures. They were always alone, and he never could get up close to them. They had a way of eluding a man. I guess that’s why we always called them hiding men.