

A True Story
fatty legs

Christy JORDAN-FENTON &
Margaret POKIAK-FENTON

Artwork by Liz Amini-Holmes



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FOR MY THREE LITTLE INSPIRATIONS—Qugyuk, Aklak, and Paniktuaq—and their loving father, my husband, Garth. None of this would have been possible without your patience. For Penny Howe, my grade 7/8 teacher: thank you for sharing with a young girl that people as fantastic as you came from the same place as people like me. For Brad Hawranik, my first section commander: I still think of you as one of the finest role models I have ever known. And, for Margaret: you have given us a powerful gift. Thank you for being brave enough to share your story.

—*Christy*

FOR MY LATE HUSBAND, LYLE, who helped me to work through the many fears I carried with me from residential school. Your love gave me courage. And, for our children, their husbands and wives, and our many grandchildren.

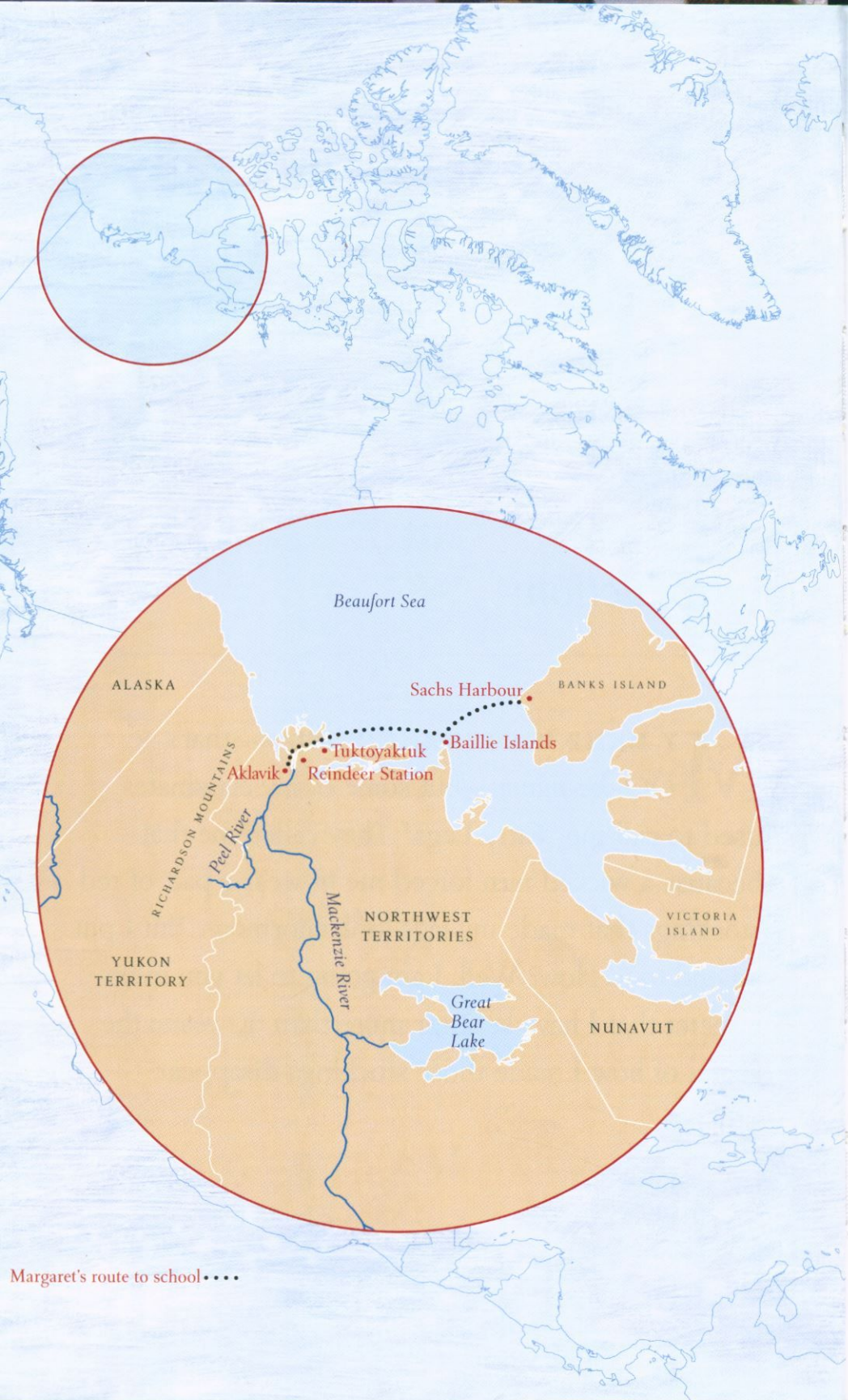
—*Margaret*



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.



ALASKA

Beaufort Sea

Sachs Harbour

BANKS ISLAND

RICHARDSON MOUNTAINS
Peel River

Tuktoyaktuk
Reindeer Station

Baillie Islands

NORTHWEST
TERRITORIES

VICTORIA
ISLAND

YUKON
TERRITORY

Mackenzie River

Great
Bear
Lake

NUNAVUT

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.

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



See photo
on page 88



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 cook-stove 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?”

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



photo
page 89.



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



See photo
on page 90.

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.

“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.



*See photo
on page 90.*

Olemaun's SCRAPBOOK



Margaret and her family on the five-day journey to Aklavik. Margaret is second from the right.



My older half-sister Ayouniq had been plucked before I was born, but we called her Rosie after her return. In this photo, Rosie wears Inuvialuit-style kamiks on her feet.



Rosie turned, pulled apart the flaps of the tent door, and disappeared through the tunnel in the snow that formed the entrance to our home.



We traveled by dogsled for several hours, until we came to a place where game was plentiful.

Margaret and her
father sitting on top
of the schooner, the
North Star.



Margaret's mother



We traveled with six other schooners, each carrying as many as six or seven families. Our schooner was the North Star.



Beyond Tuktoyaktuk, the pingos rose out of the ocean like goose eggs with smashed-in tops. Pingos are formed when a large lump of ice pushes soil up to make a temporary mountain.



*We came to Reindeer Station, a settlement of herders,
and excitement consumed me.*



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. Margaret's great grandfather poses with his family in Aklavik, 1922. When Margaret went to school, the houses in Aklavik were similar to this one.



A tractor drives past the Hudson's Bay Company store in Aklavik.



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 photo, taken from the water, shows the school on the left and the hospital on the right. In the school building, the boys' dormitory is on the left wing, while the girls' dormitory is on the right. The classrooms are on the bottom floor.



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 king of all of the outsiders. They told me he was also my king. This king is George VI, who ruled from 1936 to 1952.



Letters, like those from Rosie's books, decorated the walls of the classroom. I stared at them, trying to decipher what they might mean. This photo shows a classroom in the school that Margaret attended.



The nuns starched the peaks and the place where they shaved their heads underneath was sometimes visible.



An Anglican school room in Hay River, in the Northwest Territories, similar to the one Margaret sat in.



Even an outing like a trip to pick berries was tied to some sort of work. Because Margaret came from a treeless area, the berry bushes scared her.



Here, three of Margaret's sisters and her cousin play outside the hospital.



When the first boats began to appear, I could hardly believe the time had come. It would not be long before my parents arrived. In this photo, the community waits on the banks for the mail boats to arrive.



A nurse and patients in the Anglican hospital in Aklavik. This hospital was similar to the one where Margaret worked.



The Brothers at Margaret's school dressed like the men in this photo.



A radio station similar to the one where Margaret refused to speak.



Margaret and other school kids hauling wood.



As soon as the Raven was gone, I pulled my favorite book from underneath my pillow and imagined the Raven in the role of the Queen of Hearts. Alice meets the Queen of Hearts.



The trip to Tuktoyaktuk aboard the Roman Catholic boat, the Immaculata, was crowded.



We made our way across the bay to Tuktoyaktuk, and there was the North Star, anchored in the harbor.



Margaret's brother Ernest, her father and mother,
and her sister Millie in front.



Here is a typical winter scene in Aklavik at the time
Margaret was a child.



Many Aboriginal children were sent to church-run schools. The girls in this picture boarded at an Aklavik school in the 1940s, the same time that Margaret went to school.



Margaret at 16, in an outfit she made herself.

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CHRISTY JORDAN-FENTON has been an infantry soldier, a pipeline laborer, a survival instructor, and a bareback bronco rider. Christy has also worked with street children. She was born just outside of Rimbey, Alberta, and has lived in Australia, South Africa, and the United States. Christy now lives on a farm near Fort St. John, British Columbia, where she and her husband are raising three small children, a few chickens, three dogs, a llama, two rabbits, and enough horses to outfit an entire town. Christy worked with her mother-in-law, Margaret Pokiak-Fenton, to write this story.



MARGARET POKIAK-FENTON was born on a tiny island far north of the Arctic Circle. She spent her early years on Banks Island; when she was eight years old she traveled to the mainland to attend the Catholic residential school in Aklavik, Northwest Territories. In her early twenties,