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Four short stories | Alaska quartet

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*The University of Montana*

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Four Short Stories: Alaska Quartet

by

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I wish to thank my professors at the University of Montana, especially Earl Ganz.

And to Diann and Mariah and Dad, Taikuu!
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The Border

It was a scorching day in early August when the old yellow Chevy pickup pulled into the border crossing. Covering the back of the Chevy was a brown and white S&W canopy and atop the rig, on handmade cargo carriers, rode a red Coleman canoe. It shaded the two occupants, a man and a boy who nonetheless appeared to be uncomfortably hot as they waited for the Canadian border guard to finish examining the trunk of the Lincoln Continental up ahead.

The man looked at the garbage can next to the metal building. It overflowed with fruit, mostly apples, and the apples he saw on top of the grey can and on the black pavement below appeared edible. The man was about to make a snide remark about how the Mounties subsidized their lunches, but something about the overpowering heat and the perfectly good fruit disuaded him and he thought of something else to say.

"Remember," said the man, "agree with everything I say and if they separate us, stick with the story I told you, word for word. Got that?"

The boy nodded. "But what if I mess up?" he said.

The man reached over, patted the boy's knee. "Don't worry," he said. "You won't. Besides, I'll take care of everything."

Presently a young officer walked up to the Chevy's open window on the driver's side. He carried a clipboard with a
white piece of paper attached and glanced into the interior of the vehicle as he spoke.

"It's a hot one, ay?" he said.

"Certainly is," said the man.

"Where are you from?"

"Spokane."

"Going to be in Canada long?"

"No, we're just passing through on our way to Alaska."

"Oh. Whereabouts in Alaska?"

"Anchorage."

"Are you going there to live or vacation?"

"Vacation."

"What's in the back?"

"Camping gear, cooler, tent, stove, food, fishing poles etc."

"OK, are you carrying any rifles, pistols, shotguns, anything like that?" The young guard made his voice sound nonchalant, but he was really asking about pistols.

"Yes," said the man, "we have a 6mm and a .270 in a case."

"I'm sorry," said the border guard, "what kind of guns again?"

".270 and 6mm."

"Oh, .270, 6mm. How many boxes of shells do you have with those weapons?"

"Two boxes."

"What calibre of ammunition?"
".270 and 6mm."

"No pistols?"

"No."

"I'd like to look at those rifles if you don't mind, said the clean-shaven guard."

"Don't mind a bit," said the man. "Here, let me get the case for you." He looked over at the boy who was munching a handful of Doritoes and sipping a Coke. "Hang on a second Jerry. We'll be done soon."

The boy nodded, then glanced down at his watch. It said 11:20.

As soon as he unlocked and opened the tan case the man knew he'd made a mistake. Damn, he thought, I should never have let Jerry pack this case. He looked quickly at the overflowing can of apples, at the heat waves rising from the pavement, and then at the guard.

"Those don't look like rifle shells," said the guard, "What are they?"

"That's a box of .357 shells."

"Why are they in the case?"

"I forgot to leave them behind."

"Would you mind pulling over to the curb. I'm afraid we'll need to search your vehicle."

"For pistols?" said the man.

"Yes."
"But I left my pistol at my sister's place. You can call her if you'd like. Her phone number is 509-325-4562."

"We'll do that and we'll search your vehicle. Now just..."

"How long is this going to take?"

"Shouldn't be more than a half an hour. You and your boy can wait inside if you'd like. It's cooler."

"He's not my boy. He's my nephew and we planned to eat lunch at Fort Steele."

"This won't take long," said the officer.

But the officer had underestimated the size and complexity of the load. Box after box of food and camping paraphernalia lay stacked and crisscrossed behind the pickup. A large blue cooler, Coleman cook stove, paddles for the canoe, orange life jackets, folding chairs, and backpacks littered the black pavement. Each item had been systematically poked through and reassembled, approximately, by three officers in white shirts, royal blue slacks, and shiny black shoes.

"It took us a day to pack all that gear," said the boy.

"Don't worry," said his uncle, "We'll rearrange the load tonight. They are trying to be careful."

From their vantage point on the dry grassy bank, the uncle and nephew watched two officers sweat and labor, bending low and handing containers back to the third officer.
who placed them on the pavement. Then they went through the
suitcases, bags, and boxes one by one.

"It's kind of like having a stranger look through your
underwear drawer," said the uncle.

"Makes me feel creepy." replied his nephew, "Do you
think they enjoy it?"

"Sometimes. Suppose the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders
vacationed in Calgary. Figure a day and a half going and
coming through here."

The boy laughed and licked his lips.

"But with a couple farts like us," continued the man,"its just a job. I mean if you've seen one pair of support
hose you've seen them all."

"What are support hose?"

"Special socks guys like me wear because we're fat and
our veins bulge out."

"You aint fat."

"Thanks kid, but I'm no skinny minnie and today I feel
it. Must be ninety-five in the shade."

"You got any suntan lotion?" asked the boy.

"Yeh. It's in the green bag. If I'd known they'd take
this long we could have worked on our tans!"

"Why did they want to check the truck anyway?"

"Found some .357 shells we left in the gun case." said
the man.

"That doesn't prove anything."

"Yes it does. It proves we're careless."
The large man adjusted his Washington Husky baseball cap and sunglasses. The sweat under his arms made large half moon stains on his light blue polo shirt. He leaned back, rested the weight of his curly yellow head and ruddy neck in his right hand, leaned on his elbow and stretched out. All seemed still save for the relentless drone of insects drawn to the pile of savory fruit in the garbage can.

"I wish they would hurry up," said the nephew. He too had stretched out, but a piece of dry stubble poked through his T-shirt and irritated him. He swung at a yellow jacket which hovered too closely.

"We could go inside," said the uncle.

"No."

"Then why don't you grab us a couple Cokes? And be sure to ask politely if you can open the cooler."

"Our own cooler?"

"Yes."

As the youngster walked jauntily across the asphalt, the uncle noticed the boy's floppy shoe laces. Too bad the kid has to bring the city with him he thought. An officer eyeballed the kid too when he opened the cooler and withdrew the Cokes. With that sloppy hair and those skin-tight jeans it's a wonder they don't arrest him for vagrancy he thought, wishing he'd walked over for the drinks himself. Presently the sweet smell of exhaust diverted the man's attention and
he glanced down at his own worn Nike running shoes. Comfortable. Like his khaki slacks they were tough, serviceable, and light weight. Oh well, he reasoned, there was plenty of time left for the boy to grow up, overcome the obstacles of life. After all, hadn't he done plenty of dumb things and survived?

"Can I sit in the pickup and listen to the radio?" asked the boy.

"That's up to the Mounties. It's their show now."

"I thought Mounties always wore the red coats!"

"Too damned hot for those monkey suits today!"

"How much longer......." began the boy.

"Don't ask me!"

"Mind if I ask the boy a few questions?" said the officer.

The man hadn't seen her come out of the customs building because he had gone over to help the others arrange the gear back in its proper order. She was a stout woman, very white complected, and wore thick black-rimmed glasses and had black bangs like Larry of the Three Stooges.

"Go ahead," he said trying to suppress a smile.

The officer, in her white blouse and black skirt, ambled up to the right side of the pickup, leaned on the door with both hands gripping the curve where the window rolled in and set herself as if she were going to rip off the panel with a mighty heave.
Observing her approach, the boy stuffed a handful of Doritoes into his mouth and washed them down with a swig of pop.

"Would you mind turning down the radio?" said the sturdy officer.

"Huh?" said the boy.

"THE RADIO. DOWN PLEASE!"

"Sure," he said and lowered the volume a notch.

"All the way off please."

"I can hear just fine," he said, but after appraising the look in her eyes, he complied.

"We know you are carrying pistols," she said. "Your uncle could be fined and sent to jail for a long time and you would be sent home. There's a law against transporting pistols into Canada you know."

"I don't know anything about any pistols," the boy said. "My uncle left his in Spokane. Did you call my mom to check?"

"Yes we did, but she couldn't describe them accurately."

"Like I said, I don't know anything about pistols. You'll have to ask my uncle."

"Unless you help us find these pistols we intend to impound your truck and charge your uncle with smuggling which is a felony in Canada. It's up to you."

The boy, who had been facing the front windshield with his head slightly bowed now turned to face the officer and,
while adjusting his reflective sunglasses, summoned a mighty belch from the bottom of his stomach which took the officer full in the face.

"What in the hell did you want to do that for?" said the uncle. "Now they will take every screw and bolt out of the pickup and maybe we'll only be here another two or three weeks. Why did you do it?"

"She's a bitch."

"Yeah, but you cannot treat a law officer that way. I mean you just can't." The uncle rose and started to walk off to another part of the hill side in disgust, but then he thought better of it and came back. "Don't worry," he said, "We'll be out of here soon enough. May have to camp closer to Radium than I figured, but we can make up the lost time further north where there's more daylight!" You're not worried are you?"

"No," said the boy. He stretched out like a hobo about to nap on a park lawn.

"Let's go inside where it's cooler," said the uncle. "This heat is making me queasy."

"You go ahead," said the nephew, "I'm going to work on my tan for awhile."

"Suit yourself, but if one of the cops tries to corner you again, stall him untill I arrive."

"I don't like smart-assed people accusing me of crimes."
"I know."

"Say, that bitch said mom couldn't describe the pistols."

"She lied. Your mom knows my guns to an eyelash and I left the serial numbers by the phone just in case."

"I thought so."

"Relax, sun yourself, and for god's sakes if you have to pee, c'mon inside."

"I'd like you to sign this document stating you are fully aware of Canada's firearms regulations and that you do not have pistols in your possession," said the young officer.

"Sure I'll sign it. I told you before we weren't carrying any pistols."

"OK. Thank you very much. And now we are going to search your truck again and when we find the pistols we plan to throw the book at you and your......"

"Nephew. But you won't find anything because there is nothing there."

"You had better hope so," said the officer.

No wonder the Indians called this Grandmother's land thought the man. What a bunch of tight-assed old women. Instead of the maple leaf they should adopt poison oak as their symbol. Give them plenty to do, all that scratching and digging, instead of hasseling law abiding citizens. He
watched as the three officers rooted about like bears in the back of the pickup, smiled inwardly as they reopened box after box of food and camping paraphenalia, the suitcases of innocent old clothing. I wonder how far they can go, he thought, in tearing the rig down? Wish I knew more about the law. Surely they can't rip the fenders off or tear apart the engine. Surely..........as he shifted his weight from one large cheek to another he looked out to see one officer probing the roof of the pickup cab with both hands. The awkwardness of the Canadian's position reminded the man of a weightlifter asked to perform a dance routine. Wonder if rich people face such degradation, he thought. Geez, I wish I owned one of those Winnebagos, one with a hitch to tie on your motor boat, so's all I'd have to do was drive up to the customs window and say, "No sir I'm not carrying nothing except money and if you'd like to see it I'd be glad to give you a little peek. Only don't take too long because my big business deal at the Great Slave Lake can't wait!"

"I still think you have those pistols concealed somewhere, but I can't spare the time to find them," said the young customs agent, "so we'll have to let you go."

"I could have told you that," said the man, "We don't have pistol one in our rig and that's the truth."

"I don't believe that, but under the circumstances you are free to go." And he handed the man the deys to his Chevy.
"Wait a minute," said the uncle as he walked into the blazing parking area, "Do you expect me to repack that truck all by myself?"

"We didn't know exactly how you wanted the load repacked so we......"

"You mean you want me to put back together what it took you three hours to mess up?"

"It's not that bad," said the officer.

"Well if it ain't that bad maybe you could help me repack it."

"I'll send someone out," he said.

"You fellas look like you're going to be out for a while!" said the customs agent who looked like he had just reported for duty. "Where you headed?"

"Alaska," said the nephew, who crouched inside the cavernous canopy receiving the goods from his uncle and the agent outside. Stuffy and hot in the still air, he felt the perspiration trickle over his ribs. He couldn't believe their luck and knowing this he could keep his mouth shut, for a little while anyway, but he felt like telling off the entire Canadian government. If his dad had been there, he told himself, he would have said plenty. Of course his dad wouldn't have been so stupid as to leave pistol shells in the rifle case. You couldn't blame uncle Guy though. He tried to show you a good time in a roundabout way. That's how he kept you quiet though. Set a person up with kindness
and then when the trouble started you couldn't very well turn against him. Tricky, but he wasn't going to put up with too much shit before.....

"Hey, you want to ride back there to Alaska or what?"
"We're done?" said the nephew emerging from his cubby hole.

"And how," said the uncle. "Throw in the spare tire and we're otta here!"

"You should enjoy some of those lakes up north like Dease or Kluane," said the border guard.

"We'll be driving straight through," said uncle Guy.
"That's a shame. We have some fine Provincial Parks along the way, and very few bear incidents really."

"Do you know what they've done to us this afternoon?" said the uncle, nodding his head toward the customs office.

"Looks like they searched your truck sir," said the guard. "Nothing personal. It's just routine."

"They took this truck apart three goddamn times," uncle Guy said, glaring at the guard. "I wouldn't stop to piss in Canada if the state weren't so dang long."

"Province, sir. Up her we call them....."

"I don't care what they are called. We plan to drive straight through."

"I understand perfectly, sir."

Half expecting to see the Mounties burst from their station like a calf roper after his calf, Guy stared into
the rear view mirror. However all remained calm. A motorist in cut-off jeans was depositing a white plastic sack of, presumably, apples into the recently emptied barrel. Someone must have dumped them while we were reloading the truck thought Guy. Funny I missed it. He carefully pulled onto the two lane, shifted into third gear and began pulling further and further away from the checkpoint.

"Well, I didn't tell them any lies," said Guy. "I told them we weren't carrying any pistols in the pickup." The two travellers looked at one another and grinned.

"Could you pull over for a second uncle Guy?" said his nephew.

"What for Chuck?"

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"Nah, you could have done that any time in the last twenty minutes."

Chuck looked into his uncles pale blue eyes. "Must be those Cokes," he offered.

"Oh no you don't. Drizzle down your leg if you have to, but you're too antsy to let out in sight of the cop shop."

"I just gotta pee."

"Like hell you do."

"Alright," said Chuck, "I want to tell those self righteous bastards we've got a canoe seat full of pistols and they are the stupidest excuse for cops I've ever seen."
"Are you nuts? That Mountie with the razor blades for eyes would reserve me a room in the crowbar hotel and send you home to tend mama's roses for the summer. Think for Christsakes before you act." Guy noticed he was still in third gear and the motor was whining very loudly. He quickly shifted into fourth. "From now on," he continued, "we are in Grandmother's land, like it or not and if you don't like it by golly there's buses here that run south and I'll put you on one of them and when you get to the border you can gripe all you want about injustice or stupidity or whatever's gotten your face so goddamn red."

The boy looked down at the dusty black mat by his feet for a moment and then he said, "Did you see me belch in that witch's face?"

"I saw, heard and smelled that onion-scented bouquet all the way across the parking lot and I didn't think a man could emit such a gross gift and still be alive. That must have taken some practice."

"Every day at school Eddie Dramer, Bill Eustice and I guzzled Cokes and gobbled chips. The loudest burp, according to Janis Kneckle, didn't have to buy his first Coke the next day. Anyway we got pretty fancy after a few weeks. I was the first to do the triple twister identitly surprise which...........hey, don't you want to hear about it?"

"Yeah."
"OK, its three loud belches followed by the person burping out the syllables of his name."

"No girls allowed?"

"No. They could do it, but they giggle too much. Not serious enough."

"I can tell you've been practicing."

"Yeah. Say, uncle Guy, why didn't the guards look up at the canoe?"

"I dunno. Mindset I guess. You figure a boat turned upside down is empty, right? Well it is, unless the seats are hollow like ours."

"And full of gun wrapped in towels."

"Not full. Only five."

"You knew about this law didn't you."

"Sure. Why do you think we talked so much about it at Eureka. But they did change the law after we planned this trip. Besides there is no one to send the pistols to in Alaska. What else could we do?"

"Were we in serious trouble back there?"

"Not at first. They would have taken the guns, fined me, and said don't be a naughty boy no more. And goodbye fifteen hundred bucks! Later, though, goodbye pickup, hello felony wrap. T'was getting serious. You held up well through all the malarky."

"Maybe not as well as you think."

"Oh no?"
"I want you to find me that bus you were talking about."

"Hey, back there I was trying to calm you down. I didn't really mean........you ain't worried about the guns are you?"

"No, huh uh. I just don't like Canada very much."

"C'mon Chuck. You can't get down on the entire country because of a fruity law or two. Most of the people are regular folks, not like the county mounties back there."

"I still think I'd rather head back to Spokane."

"You mean forget about fishing in Alaska?"

"You can still go."

"You must not have been as hot about the trip as you sounded back home."

"It was mostly your and mom's idea from the beginning. I'd rather hang out with my friends."

Pulling off the road and down beside a lakeside camping area, Guy reached his stubby, muscular arm over and squeezed Chuck's neck. "I got so busy planning this thing," he said, "I assumed you would be excited too. Don't worry about it, I'll take you home. We wouldn't have any trouble getting up through British Columbia though."

"I know," said Chuck. His hands were clasped and he seemed to be studying the worn places on his jeans. "Why don't you drop me off in the next town and I'll catch the bus?"

"What's your mom going to say?" said Guy.
"She'll say I better get a job."
"You got any money right now?"
"No," said Chuck.
"Neither do I..... for buses. It's no problem going back down. American officials don't ask funny questions."
"How will you get back up though?"
"Oh, I don't know," said Guy. "Get rid of the shells. Different port of entry. I'll think of something. Now tell me, truthfully, wouldn't you rather fish than work?"
"Not right now I wouldn't."

The air in the cab of the pickup felt thick and motionless in the afternoon heat. Huge thunderheads mushroomed over the mountains to the west. Feeling the drops bead and trickle down his temples, Guy said, "I need to get out and walk or start driving again. What do you say?"
"Go back," said Chuck.
To Guy it didn't seem too hard for the boy to say. "You got it, kid," he said and directed the Chevy south toward the border.

"Have you anything to declare?" said the U.S. border patrolman.
"No," said Guy. "Didn't have a chance. We were only in Canada about an hour."
"Oh," said the patrolman, "Any problems?"
"Didn't have time to develop any," grinned Guy.
"I noticed they took their time inspecting your truck," said the gregarious patrolman. "What were they looking for?"

"Pistols," said Guy.

"Yes, they frown on pistols these days I'm afraid. You didn't have any, I take it."

"They never found a thing," replied Guy.

"Where you headed from here?" he said and took a step, glanced into the cab at the glowering boy who looked straight back at him.

"I'm going back to Spokane and take a fresh start at this thing," said Guy.

"And how long do you plan to be in Spokane?"

"Hard telling," said Guy, "A night, maybe two."

"Forever," said Chuck very loudly and quite distinctly.

"Well, have a safe trip," smiled the patrolman as he waved them through.

Guy inspected the tanned figure of the border patrolman in his rear view mirror, saw the man in his white short sleeved shirt and blue slacks turn and reenter his compact office. The man sat down at a desk and shut the door.

"Must be air conditioned," he muttered.

"What's that?" said Chuck.

"I said it must be the life, being a cop," said Guy. "Might give it a whirl someday."

The nephew shook his head quietly, turned on the radio and began studying a frayed section of cloth near the cuff of his jeans.
Thomas Lei Siqiniq felt lousy. He walked back along the snow machine track toward a bush just off the crest of the knob. It was -30 degrees and the fresh snow guinched under his seal skin mukluks. The snowmachine motor idled, a muffled snare drum beating lower in the frozen distance. Hearing the ack, ack, Thomas thought, "I don't believe it. Two weeks ago nobody be hunting with Albert's machine but Albert. But then Bertha break up with him and he grab that electric cord and...Ahh, I don't want to think about no damn suicide, but I wonder why he want to give me that brand new machine. Me, instead of Willis, or Qatiq, or Frederick; we are all cousins. I didn't know he thought so much about me."

Thomas walked toward the gray spiny bush well out of sight of Qatiq, the cousin he was hunting with today, or any other would-be passerby. But when he was three feet from it, a throbbing blackness crossed his vision and he staggered sideways into the unpacked snow where he lay momentarily, his right arm embedded to the elbow. "Shit," he said, "I didn't want to do that. You foolish legs!"

Upon waking earlier that day Siqiniq had felt woozy, a vibration deep in his head and a weakness hard to pin point, perhaps lodged in his groin or stomach. More than the alcohol, he reasoned, poking the trembling fingers of his hands into the stomach folds searching for the location of
the pain. Fingers almost like someone else's curled under his rib cage. Experimentally, he stood and looked at the view from the small, frostless oval, all that remained of the glass that was his bedroom window before winter hit.

This is my day he thought, taking in the fresh snow, crisp blue sky, and stick-straight columns of smoke rising from the three village homes across the street. My kind of day. Wonder if Qatiq want to go out? A sharp twinge of pain doubled him and he eased back to the bed fighting with all his might the urge to cry out. He knew what his mother would do. She'd called the clinic or, worse, the village doctor and I'd have to do what they said. Unless...He slipped on his mukluks, furtively tied the red and green braided ties, ran his fingers along their tops. So soft...

He could stand. Finally. The wall supported the first feeble steps. Then Siqiniq swung along the door into the hall, out, keeping one foot ahead, wide and ready to catch the other, pivoting through the kitchen. The garbage sack by the sink reeked of yesterdays cold coffee grounds and fish skins. It nearly gagged him, might have but for the soft voice which diverted his attention.

"Where you gonna go, Thomas?" said his mother through the wall of her bedroom.

"Out," he said, "Go get wood I guess."

"Aw, you just wanna ride around."

"You want some wood or no?" said Thomas.

"How long you gonna be?"
"I don't know. Maybe take the Polaris. Get back faster."

"You'll be faster if you go with Qatiq," she said.

"Maybe," he said, meaning yes.

"I'd rather be hunting with Albert," said Siqiniq to one of the sled dogs tied to a nearby stake. But, he thought, then I wouldn't have this machine to warm up. He shoved the hair dryer under the hood, pointed it toward the motor, and rested the handle on top of the exhaust manifold. The dryer whirred for ten minutes on high heat while Siqiniq gathered his .223, shells, goggles, ski pants, and heavy gloves from the kunnisuk, not daring to re-enter the house. Perhaps I should just ride he thought, get used to the new machine. But Qatiq would want to check out the tundra for wolf tracks. Only two days ago another cousin, Frederick, had taken a big white male near the mouth of Isingnok Creek. No, the fresh snow and the gathering light must not be passed up. Go for it. Surely this weak feeling was some flu and he had beaten the flu before. Many times. But it had been years since he'd had his own brand new snow machine.

It even smells new, he thought, pulling the hair drier out from under the hood and tarp, tenderly replacing the frozen lengths of chord in the kunnisuk where they could slowly become pliable again. Though the resistance was considerable, he tugged five times on the starter rope. It took all his concentration to start the frozen engine.
"Adii, I feel sick," he said to the dog that had remained huddled in a ball. Maybe I breathe that new paint fume or bad exhaust try to make me sicker...

At that moment the thin whine of another engine drowned the sound of Thomas's own idling motor and Qatiq, his oldest cousin, spun through the thin stand of birches by the cache and up the trail to the house.

"I figured I'd have to wake you up!" he said, "You was feeling no pain last night."

Thomas grinned in spite of himself, turned slowly toward the blanketed entrance to the house.

"Hey, where you going?" said Qatiq.

Siqiniq clutched a black face mask and martin hat from the scatter of clothing inside the entrance. "You think I'm gonna waste this day, you ain't thinkin'' he said. "Let's cruise." He had second thoughts however as they roared by the clinic and a wave of nausea burst into his chest cavity and down the wall of his stomach. Maybe I should turn around he thought, but the speed felt good and the illness subsided a little, and, although it didn't allow him to relax completely, Siqiniq knew he would try to make it through this day in spite of his problem.

Let'em, he thought. Me and this machine can beat this thing. Past the edge of town he revved the engine, whipping around Qatiq. He raced by hunched forward over the steering column and elbowing the wind. Qatiq grinned, hollered in mock surprise, and also gunned his engine. The
two men passed each other several times along the wide trail north of the village before lining out, Siqiniq in front, to travel with an unobstructed view of the shining peaks ahead, big zig zags in the blue March sky. Along the river ice fog hung on thousands of branches, formed when temperatures dropped forty degrees overnight. The birch trees glittered like candleabras. The men left the main trail and began hunting in the same direction, but several hundred yards apart.

Siqiniq grunted as he pulled his arm from the snow. He rose, stumbled, rose again and urinated. A motor roared, then faded, and he thought Qatiq had passed by. "Wonder why my cousin never stop and come check," he thought. "He knows I'm kinda sick. Maybe he's on a hot track. Better catch him up." But after hustling to where he had parked the machine, he stopped, bewildered at what waited for him there. Nothing. No cousin Qatiq. No Polaris. Only the bright sun and the empty tundra.

"My snow-go run away!" Siqiniq blurted. He could not believe what he had just said so he looked for fresh tracks. "Somebody try to fool.... who...?" But no explanation lay in the snow and soon, in disbelief, Siqiniq found himself following the only track departing from the hill, that of his new snowmachine. The snow was incredibly loud under his feet and when he realized this he stopped to listen. Far ahead a low hum sounded below a dazzling white rise. He
could see no tracks in the distance. Only emptiness, foggy places, splotches of brush here and there, the shrouded river bottom and the land gently sloping toward the mountains and bright blue sky. There! Directly in front of him and slightly to the right the Polaris climbed the next pitch steadily and from where he stood shading his eyes it appeared riderless!

"Shit," said Thomas. He stomped hard with the left foot and it punched deep beneath the track. He righted himself and began following again. This never happen to me before he thought and tried to remember it ever happening to anybody else. All the while the machine ran on ahead. Once, as he stopped to watch it and get his bearings, it seemed to maneuver on its own but generally maintained a northerly course. If it kept to this direction it would run up the mountain and hit one of the scrubby black spruces where the treeline started. More likely it would bottom out and turn upside down in a gully, spinning its track until he found it. Or Qatiq found it. "Where is he when I need him," thought Thomas. Already he felt a tiredness in his legs. Several times he plunged through the uppermost crust of snow and he lurched. But he dared not stop. All his survival gear was on the snowmachine and he'd already worked up a considerable sweat. No problem, I've walked home before..., he said to himself. No hypothermia's going to get me. I've still got my lighter and knife in case...and Qatiq. Maybe if I'd stayed where I was at first and
waited.... Then he realized he was not walking toward the village but out and away from home.

Up ahead the snow machine sunk out of sight into a gully.

Siqiniq paused, considering, then moved on at a somewhat slower pace. No sense burning up my muscles he thought. Nobody going to believe this though. George Jacks start his machine one day and it run into a tree and burn up. I saw it, but that was a no-good starter. Nobody I ever hear about have a faulty idle. Why it happen to me? Siqiniq began to think of what people would say and what he would say and he almost missed seeing the machine run out of the gully heading north.

This time it swerved and turned as if the thing possessed eyes. It avoided a clump of birches which could easily have halted its flight. From a distance of a mile or better, Siqiniq thought he saw the front end weaving as though a driver controlled the willy nilly motions which by rights should have resulted in a blunder and the snogo on its back like an upended beetle.

However it kept running on, over, and around until finally it dove into a fog bank on the distant tundra. Once as he trudged along the stubbornly retreating track he felt certain he heard the Polaris returning on its own trail. The loud whine of engine suddenly. But it was Bering Air's afternoon flight, the noise of the engine muffled by the low lying ice fog. He looked up, saw it, and waved. The sun
sparked on the motor mounts. Then he lost sight of the twin engine Cessna 402 in the mist over the river.

They found the machine two hours later still idling but for some reason stationary— not a single obstruction within a half mile. Qatiq had been delayed by a hot otter track that blew up in the thick brush and overflow near Spruce Hen Creek. Naturally he thought Siqiniq was lying and laughed loudly in his face, then pushed his machine hard to reveal the punch-line to the best joke since one of the teachers lit the river on fire with spilled gas. But following a clinical approach and a quick check the results were sobering. Nothing wrong. Stopped for the same reason it started. An electronic quirk...something frozen had thawed or the other way around. When Siqiniq first saw the runaway machine he felt a pang of disbelief, the same as he had when it escaped and rather than punish it with a kick like he wanted to do, he approached gingerly and lightly touched the seat, half expecting it to rise straight up on its track and go sailing off.

"I can't believe it didn't gutuk right away," said Qatiq. For the track had avoided, as if externally guided, a half an hour of obstacles which should have terminated its forward motion immediately.

"You sure nobody drive it away?" continued Qatiq.

"Where their tracks go?" said Siqiniq. "You see any helicopter around here?"
"But it just go up to that tree, next go around. How come?"

"Maybe it don't wanna get murder," said Siqiniq, but Qatiq wasn't listening. He was fiddling with the throttle, apparently urging the Polaris to "run away" again. Finally he lifted the hood, knocked on the carburetor, grabbed one of its skis and tilted the machine, felt it rock and roll back. Nothing.

"Does that exhaust smell funny to you?" he said.

"You think they put funny gas at the store?" said Siqiniq. A chill had come over him soon after they stopped and his words shook.

"What you scared of?" said Qatiq. "If it try to run you down, I shoot it!" He laughed loudly. Siqiniq didn't laugh. "I joke," he said, "Here, lift the back end and I'll rev it."

The motor purred, the track raced round and round then idled benignly.

"Let's go hunt," said Qatiq abruptly ending his investigation.

"Are you crazy?" said Siqiniq, not believing for a moment Qatiq had uttered the words, but convinced he could no more hunt again this day than fly backwards. "I ain't even getting back on that thing. It's haunted!"

Qatiq let go a loud belly laugh, leaning so far backwards he nearly toppled.
"Don't kid around," Siqiniq said, with his hands seeming to seek something to grasp, finding nothing. "You can drive that one. In fact you want it, it's yours."

Siqiniq, eyes averted, staggered to Qatiq's machine, as if the matter had been already settled and without a glance backwards accelerated the motor and wheeled back along their tracks toward the village.

The trip back seemed endless. His body trembled involuntarily with the effort of steering, sweat trickled along his cheek and down his back, and he felt in his daze that something was terribly wrong, not simply mysterious but bad. It had messed up his perfect day and he wanted to put it all behind him fast. He saw snow glitter on the hummocks around him. Now Qatiq on the newer Polaris caught up and passed him. By now Siqiniq hardly noticed these things. Everything was messed up. Let Qatiq enjoy that uminyaq machine, he thought; I got to get a drink to loosen up this tight stomach. I'll fix you, you dizzy head. I'll black you out.

In town Siqiniq was greeted with jeers and laughter. Every CB in the village buzzed with Qatiq's news.

"How come your snogo run away from you?" said Paul Grant.

"You always forget where you leave that new Polaris," hollered Mary Jones from the post office steps.
"You should tie a leash to your leg when you need to go pee," said his cousin Frederick. But people mostly slapped their knees, doubling over when they saw Siqiniq.

Within minutes he'd located a bottle of 151 and seconds after that the clear liquid boiled on the back of his throat. As long as the liquor lasted—and so many friends wanted to hear the story—Siqiniq recounted the details of the troubled day, absorbed the taunts and poor jokes. He have out long before the supply of liquor did and Charlie Skin, seeing him crawling toward the Friends Church and fearing he might freeze to death, loaded Siqiniq into his basket sled and took him home. Before leaving, Charlie helped Siqiniq's mother carry him to bed and cover him. Still fully clothed except for his mukluks, beaver cap, jacket and ski pants which had slipped off easily, Siqiniq groaned.

Qatiq, an eager partaker of the 151, thought he heard the unscheduled plane land but by then everything was buzzing—the frying pan, the T.V., the CB, and he couldn't be sure. At last his sister, Martha, shook him saying, "They take Siqiniq out on life flight. He got dehydration. Aana Ikayuk says he's real yellow on the face. You better get up. It's ten o'clock already and Betty want to talk to you."

"You got the coffee on?" he said.
"Can't you smell it, inuk?" said Martha, "You must have slept on your nose!"

At the table, he hadn't taken the first sip when his cousin, Betty, lit into him.

"What kind of rotgut you drink last night?" she hollered.

"I never try to drink bad shit," he said, feeling a blackness close behind his eyes.

"Burton say Charlie had to carry my brother home in his sled. Somehow had to take off his clothes too. Who try to slip him some poison?"

"For Christ's sake, lower your voice..."

"I ain't gonna shut up until..."

Qatiq pounded the table with his fist. Utensils jumped, rattled and the coffee tipped. "Get out then."

"I'm calling the cop," she snarled, "and they better not let Siqiniq die or they'll hang your ass." Betty slammed the door behind her.

"She sure like to get excited, next hurry up and calm down just as quick as she explode," he told Martha. "She can't worry me.". He drank coffee and watched T.V. until 11:30 when Walter McKinley, the council chairman said over the C.B., "Siqiniq never made it to Fairbanks. He die on that life flight. They take the body down to Anchorage for autopsy. They never say when the funeral will be. Maybe Friday. Depends on the weather."
"Everything depend on the weather," murmured Qatiq, dumbly dropping onto the kitchen chair, grasping his long black hair in his hands and pulling, letting the pain wake him, focus, try to get away from the greater hurting of the unreal dream of Siqiniq's death. "I don't want to believe it," Qatiq said to himself. He stumbled to the kitchen window and looked out and saw, big as life, the Polaris there by the chopping block where he'd left it.

First Albert next Siqiniq, next.... and then a picture of how it would be clicked as he fought off the tears. But he wouldn't sit and cry about it. Not if a way could be found around the trap. Suddenly Qatiq knew what he would do and without hesitation he dressed, slammed out of the house walked quickly across the street toward the Friends Church.

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away," said the pastor, Johnny Sams, briskly. He had bared his head and the slight breeze fluttered the leaves of his Bible. The temperature was -25 degrees though the sun shone brilliantly and picked up all the color of the furs and fabrics--rich browns, bright greens, reds, oranges-- worn by the congregation, resplendent in the open air. "We never know how long we gonna have. Nobody ever knows...."

Qatiq shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. He hoped Johnny Sams would get it over with. He hadn't thought this would happen—all this rigamarole when he
went to the church for help, but the pastor took it to the
council and they decided— which night was it— Monday— no,
Tuesday— to do it this way just in case.

"All the money under the sun can't stop the Lord doing
His will" Johnny droned on...

All the village was there like it was the Christmas
program or the fireworks down the beach on the 4th of July.
They had asked him at the council meeting if that snogo was
his. No way he'd said. Thomas wanted me to have it, but I
never said yes. You fellas go ahead and do what you want
with the damn thing.

"Hold a raffle," said Irene Jones. "Give the money to
the Church."

"We don't want that kinda money," replied the pastor,
"Let Siqiniq's Aana use the money."

"Who say I want the blood money?" said his Aana.

"Take it to Fairbanks and sell it," said Frank
Napaknatuk.

"Whose going to drive it there? You?" said Qatiq.

"Well..."

Finally the pastor took the podium, "Some of the elders
been talking," he said. "Some kinda spirit, they say, got
into Thomas's snogo and brought him down."

"I heard it was hepatitis," said Bertha Thomas, the
village nurse.
"That's what some doctor say," replied Johnny, "but the village doctor say that snogo has some real bad curse with it. Maybe it cause that hepatitis, or even made it worse."

"That's true," said Qatiq. All the walking and sweating never helped Siqiniq either. He'd heard Siqiniq had died of dehydration, but after deals like this you can hear anything.

"Maybe the motor mount twist, dump a little gas in the carburetor," said Elmer Thompson, "I could..."

"But what caused that motor to tip?" said Johnny. "We all talk about it. All we know is two men own this machine and two men die too soon. Some things a man can't explain. No sense to try."

"Then what are we talking about," said Elmer. "What the elders want to do?"

"Only thing we can do," said the pastor. "Only way to let the evil spirit get outa there. Burn it."

The pungent smell of raw gasoline brought Qatiq reeling back to the service.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," said Johnny. Qatiq noticed the torn plastic bags attached to the dump fence fluttering more and more. The pastor had replaced his martin cap and was fumbling in his pocket.

"Hurry up," said Elmer, "Don't let all that gas evaporate." The crowd of onlookers backed up as if they expected the new Polaris to blow sky high.
"You sure you empty that tank?" said Johnny to Elmer. "Plumb dry," replied Elmer. "We drug it out here even. We come this morning. Nobody want to be jinxed!"

A couple of men snickered, but Johnny silenced them with an icy stare. "Go back where you came from," he said to the snow machine. The pastor lit his torch of rolled newspaper. "Tell the devil we don't want no spirits coming around." He threw the flame, then shielded his eyes as the well-soaked snogo blazed. Within seconds the hissing hulk of metal and plastic took its place among the other wind swept relics of scattered junk. Then Elmer started up his Cat and tumbled the wreckage into the shallow grave he'd prepared and carefully covered it with a layer of refuse, soil and snow.

Qatiq considered it a good omen when the wind picked up that night and blew away all signs of the ceremony including the whereabouts of the hole.

However he had a change of heart when Elmer stopped plowing the airstrip after two passes up and down and walked into the clinic to be diagnosed with the second case of Hepatitis A in the village that week.

Qatiq then decided to personally take charge of his own destiny. Something all the elders had advised, but he had never before listened to, struck him with the force of timely wisdom and all of a sudden he decided to give up drinking forever. What else could he do?
Gift Baby

Alan had ridden earlier on the back of a sandhill crane, high in a column of air during one of his Aana's stories and later in several dreams. Always the same brown speckled male lifted him spiraling up and up, he clutching a patch of feathery skin while the birds counseled one another with harsh, shrill honks. The village soon became the size of a silver dollar, then a marble, and finally a speck of sand. All the while his excitement grew. Cranes surrounded him like a tornado, flapping their enormous wings and straining their necks until the long climb crescendoed and they caught the jet stream south. Then, at speeds faster than a sandhill could power himself, Alan relaxed and let the winds buffet his black hair. He observed the sunlight and shadows changing the shape of the clouds into rolling seas. As the cranes soared further south, Alan tuned out all but the sensations of roaring wind and eye-watering sunlight, felt all-powerful and powerless in the same terrifying, joyous instants of pure flight. He was eight years old.

Funny how the caribou beyond First Lake reminded him of the cranes this evening in mid September. Until a bull turned his white neck and chest out of the low brush, he wasn't sure what the moving was and then he knew and smiled inwardly. He was a good sport about the jokes nature played on him, had been since his taata's laughter teased away the futility of his anger. Perhaps this explained his own love
of making fun. He thrived on patience and humoring, not threats, anger, or useless shouting.

"Adii, Alan, get in here!" boomed his aana, Martha, across the gravel road, "You're late."

The hard wind drowned out all but the high notes, still two long-haired school kids stared at him a moment before hitching up their arms to scare crow height and flapping around the cache on a gallop.

"I had to get cleaned up," he said.

"Saglu, you lie," she said and raised her arm as if to strike his grin. Then she dashed to the stove and began shifting the pans, all the while laughing, beaming, bustling, her large arms jiggling with the weight of the stew kettle. "Look. I bake for you all day yesterday and you never come back. What's the matter with you?"

"I go hunt with Jerry up the Mannilik, way up to the mountains and back, but we see nothing."

"That's because they move down here. Your Dad saw a bunch yesterday on the other side of First Lake. Every hill had one."

"They are not there now. All I saw out there were cranes......hundreds of them."

Looking good naturedly over the top of her glasses, she did a double take. The blue and orange handkerchief in the graying hair sagged as she smiled her full cheeked widest. "You.....you got me again. I really don't like it! Go tell your taata to come on. Dinner is almost ready."
Toward the back of the room, his father pushed the baby back and forth in its portable swing. "Rockabye baby, in the tree's top. When the wind blows, the cradle will rock..."

The old black wood stove sat empty, waiting to be used and each time the pendulum of swing and baby swept closer to its iron edge, Arnold, Alan's taata, would catch her and blow breath past six remaining teeth into her grimacing face.

Outside, long grey clouds with pink bottoms hung across the sky a couple inches above the lighter pink horizon. The shining lake below the blue mountains made a third rosy streak across the tundra.

"Tonight it will be colder, he said to his taata.

"Surely. It makes the herd move faster. Soon the valley will be full of them. Soon snow and after, ice on the river." The older Inupiat man, named Naasri in his native tongue, looked into the face of his son, whose Eskimo name was Taapsualuk, but whom they called Alan out of respect to the church. They also called him Boyuk every so often as a nickname.

Alan looked back at the brown skin and dark, deep-set eyes of his taata. Always they were warm, glowing and friendly, but tonight the eyes were too wide, questioning, although the rest of the face showed no emotion. Alan glanced down at the baby, his baby, Antonia, or Anigayuk in Eskimo. Named after his wife's mother. Just then she flung out her arms excitedly and babbled and kicked with glee.
"A sign," Arnold said, "she knows you!"

Making a racket, Alan's mother, Martha, Ayagiaq in Inupiat, unloaded some of the cardboard boxes of groceries from Anchorage and hurriedly placed them on the shelves. Steam rolled out of the kettle and evaporated in the dry air. Since the boxes rested on the high counter, her arms going in and out looked like crabs arms moving.

When he turned around and saw this, Alan laughed. "Maybe we should throw you in the pot!"

"You could," said Martha, "and live for a long time and never miss me!"

"I wonder how red you get?" teased Alan, but she wouldn't bite this time.

"C'mon to dinner you two. Hunger makes you silly."

Alan picked up Antonia and lifted her. She spread her tiny arms and legs like a sky diver. "What have you been feeding her, all the fish in your net?" He rubbed Antonia's huge fleshy jowls against his own, more angular, cheek and kissed her stubby nose.

"I forget," said Arnold, "you go away for three weeks now. Sure, you forget how easy a baby grows!"

"How was it?" asked Martha as the men sidled up to the table.

"Not too good," said Alan, and he picked up the tarnished spoon and began eating slowly. From the large living room window to the wall by the wood stove, tiny baby shirts, a few cloth diapers and a pair of yellow Handy Andy
gloves hung side by side on a thin rope. Deliberately, Alan's eye followed their shapes along the clothes line until his eye sunk into the landscape beyond the window. A V of geese flew south, almost a dot. The low-lying hillocks far out on the tundra were dark, too dark to distinguish bands of caribou travelling west toward the Kobuk, but First Lake still reflected a shiny grey, inviting his eye. In the low brush to the left of the lake two of Delbert Baker's dogs started yowling. There was a loud clatter of dog dishes. Delbert's wife, Wyona shouted at the dogs, but nothing changed. The dogs continued barking. Wyona kept shouting. Neither seemed to want to quit. Finally, Alan saw the scarfed outline of the neighbor bobble between the lake and his parents home, her shawl blowing ahead as she tried to gather it in. A sudden yowl and a whine and then the barking stopped for good.

"She's afraid if we have the second baby there won't be enough to go around," said Alan, chewing slowly.

"I knew.......," began his aana.

"We both knew something was wrong," said Arnold. "It is not like you two to fight. She is so young."

"But she wants Antonia, loves her. We will take her home with us tonight."

"Ah, that's good,"said Alan's taata. That is right and we can talk later when she come." Arnold circulated the blueberry muffins. "Aasriga! How Anigayuk is tonight reminds me of our reindeer herding. The women took even the
little babies with us and some were birthing out there in the tent. Cold. Alapaa, it was cold. They line the inside of the tent with reindeer skins like we have insulation today and it was warmer. Babies could crawl around and play with sticks. Never had diapers like your Antonia, but use moss and grasses inside the skin cover wrap around and every so often take it out and throw it and put more in."

Alan, who had memorized most of taata's reindeer stories, remembered this one, but this evening it seemed more important than ever to be polite. He watched the baby struggling to regrasp her pacifier and sat very still.

After three or four minutes, boots stomped on the kunnisuk floor, the door cracked, and a cool slice of air dashed in ahead of Alan's wife, Debra. All smiles, she turned to close the laminated door and make certain of its latching. No mistaking, this young woman was Antonia's mother. Her cheekbones were wide and full like the baby's. Dark shining eyes and a tiny nose further accentuated the fact. Still beaming as the bouncing child lured her to the elastic supported swing, Debra said, "Ah," and knelt in front of the child. "Have you been good for Aana and Taata?"

The baby drooled out of the corner of its mouth and held up its arms. Instantly, Debra, whose Inupiat name was Immaq, picked her up and swooped about the room, swinging the child up and down. The imprompteau dance ended with a passionate hug and mother and child plopping onto the couch.
A blue crocheted blanket was draped over the couch. Swinging her little right arm forward, Antonia clasped the loose covering and jerked it into her mouth, fist and all.

"Teething alright," said Martha, who pulled the blanket out of Antonia's hand, but the toothless baby snagged the cloth with a flailing hand and stuffed it further in. Everyone laughed. The mother and daughter were the center of attention.

"She is just like you, little Immaq," said Arnold. "I remember your mom struggling with you. OH, you were a stubborn one!"

"Adii, you fool me," laughed Debra, "I never."

"You can see her jaw looks like yours. Square as a bulldog's."

Debra hid her face in mock horror and covered Antonia's head until she screamed. "See how you are!" she said to Arnold.

"You know it's true," replied Naasri. "One day when you were a little girl you wanted candy, but your aana said, no, so you went with a cup to every house like it was Halloween. Charlie Williams brought you home and told us the story of how you took his candy, but wouldn't kiss him like you promised!"

"I nev-er," Debra laughed.

"Not only stubborn, but saglu. You fib!"

Everyone laughed together again and the baby bounced on Debra's lap, as if infected by the commotion.
"Oh, I miss you so!" sighed Debra, stopping Antonia's lively springing and smothering her with kisses. "How was she for you?"

Arnold said, "She slept most of the afternoon. In the morning we crawled from the kitchen all the way into Alan's old room. Then I read two... no three... books to her. I forgot about reading Goldilocks. But I changed that one a little bit. In my story Ravenhair stumbles upon the igloo of three grizzly bears while picking blueberries near the short hills.

Finishing his muffin, Alan rose and stepped over to the cook stove for another cup of coffee. He wondered about the plate-like piece the stove pipe fit into, the platter design which poked out from under a thin coat of paint. Was it really a used dish, as Arnold once told him? Not likely. And yet the light blue color of the "plate" reminded him of what he thought when he was younger. How travelling up river to Brenda's and Bob's camp meant more than a trip to Fairbanks might now. At camp the spirits of the family loosened. Sometimes you wore no shoes at all and ran on the sand bars with the younger dogs, marvelling how, at eight months old, they could out race a ten year old like you. Elders drank strong coffee and told Eskimo stories. The hard k's and q's rose and fell melodically when the group worked hard together cutting fish, draping them over the fish racks, and funnelling the remains from the metal tubs to the
dogs. Someone was always laughing. Putting down their hair.

The darkness lapped at the kitchen window to the right of the black stove pipe. Everything seemed brighter inside because of the waning day. The sheet rock, cracking, but kept white by his aana, the cabinets whose doors stayed perpetually open beyond all intentions, the torn spots along the edge of the linoleum where two inch boards shoved through; all these sights didn't bother him on account of the laughter, the warmth of the meal and because he'd only seen their new government house, dark gray, gradually lose its luster and become old by degrees. Besides, in a few minutes he'd be leaving with Debra and they would drop off Antonia at her folk's place and go party with Lee and Marion and the rest of the gang. This he realized very clearly.

"So, Debra," said Ayagiaq. "Alan said something about trouble....I mean with your parents. Its not the new, about to be, baby I hope."

"Yes," said Debra, "I'm. Oh, I mean no, it's not the new baby, but Don and Linda, Linda especially, don't want to raise Anigayuk and I don't know why." Debra attempted to keep her smile. It was one of her greatest features. "She's my own aana, but now she can't be bothered with Antonia and she knows we are too poor to raise another, too."

"But it can't be so bad," said Arnold, "What did she...or they say exactly?"
Softly the young mother replied while slumping away from Antonia and pulling herself onto the faded green couch beside Naasri. "She said, 'nooooo'." And then Debra began to shake until Naasri gathered her to his side and they rocked back and forth until the sobbing subsided.

"Turn off the radio!" bristled Arnold. Judith Allen was giving the Eskimo word for today on KOTZ and it usually irritated him because she spoke a different dialect than the Upper Kobuk Inupiat. Today seemed insufferable.

At that moment the baby Antonia, who remained strangely silent until then began howling so loudly that everyone laughed again, even Debra through glazed eyes.

Isn't it the way it was mom?" said Alan. "You and Dad almost gave up Louisa and Aunt Jessica left Amy and Mariah with Grandmother?"

"Yes, but that was different."

"How was it?"

"She had problems and no husband to speak of. But I see what you mean. We have always taken care of one another to survive. A baby's laugh adds years to a life, and they care for you too in other ways when you grow too old to even see or run. The good ones work. They sew and cook or go to store in the winter. Remember Anita Stewart? She could trap rabbits, make snares, shoot beaver too. I bet Betty miss her lots."

"What happened?" asked Alan.
"She went Selawik in June, said Martha to stay with Roy's family and she decide to go to school there....I really don't know....Maybe she come back. It's hard for young ones to decide when they are only ten years old."

"Well, we better go," said Debra, and after hugging the baby she grabbed her black Kobuk jacket with the yellow lynx on the back. Halfway out the door she telegraphed a look to Alan. A cold draft rippled the sleeve of the jacket still dangling in her hand.

"Mom, could you take care of baby tonight? We need to talk it over."

"Sure Boyuk. Come by in the morning and try bring Debra too for pancakes, panuktuq, and coffee."

Debra had vanished into the night, but Alan paused to rub his stomach, roll his deep brown eyes.

Of all the boys, thought Debra, his teeth are altogether yet. So bright and shiny. Who wouldn't go with him. Ha. He even walks like a Tarzan. She shivered with thoughts of Alan. Not surprising to her, a breeze had sprung up in the village. Dust blew under the street lights and the mountains, visible all night in the summer, were gone. They walked along, he holding her around the back and under the left elbow. The wind whipped over the bluff and into their faces, sending their hair straight back from bowed heads. Hurrying to be out of it, they scampered down the long wooden stairway to the log cabin on the beach where Alex
lived. And once inside with the music and the old friends, the night seemed so much warmer to behold.

"It was a boy." announced Martha to Arnold, who raised his eyebrows.

"But she didn't say," he came back. "Not to me."

"Yes. You looked only to her lips for the word, but she said it another way, and now she wants to give baby."

"But not to her mother!" said Naasri. "That woman is no Christian. Did you hear Debra say she refused our little one?"

"I'm not surprised," said Ayagiaq. "That family raises a young Damon yet and also Laura and Alexis. Though the way they fight and drink it sound more like six or eight inside. I'd keep Antonia to spite them, but I doubt if they come right out and ask us to adopt her."

Arnold looked down at his hands and then at the tiny dimpled fingers of Anigayuk. Grasping and releasing the plastic like a person kneading bread, she gripped the sides of the swing. Something, however, didn't feel right to him. This easy asking and refusal. A noise came on the CB and distracted him for a moment. It was a groan. "Are you sure?" he said. "I mean the sonogram, or whatever, happened what, a week ago at most?"

"Ummmmmm," replied Martha, raising her eyebrows to signal yes.
Now as he looked back down at Antonia, he thought he noticed a slowness he had not observed before. "Come here, Aana. The baby is drooling too much."

"Well wipe it!" she laughed.

Silly to think about, thought Arnold as he cleansed the tiny face. Besides the Lord would love her even if something was wrong and we should too. The picture of Jesus looked down from the living room wall. I wonder, he thought, if they had alcohol babies in his time like now? Out of the CB the voice whined, "Billi, Bilba, bo, bluhbaaao."

A cross between a moan and a belch followed. It was long and drawn out. Disgustedly, Arnold crossed the living room and flipped it off. Out of habit he turned on the T.V., one cabinet shelf below. Antonia strained around in her seat, eyes aglow. For awhile she sputtered as if imitating a boat motor.

"Nani, nani," said Arnold to her. Dishes clinked in the dish strainer, rinsed. He chucked her under the chin and she giggled, hiccupped, and gummed her left hand. "Tuttu nani itpa?"

The heavy footsteps of Martha progressed from the back of the kitchen to the couch and she sagged beside him and groaned. "Adii, my hands," she said. "They break." It was true. Even in the dimly lit room, one light over the table by the window, one above the sink, you could still see the cracks along the sides of her fingers.
"Soak too much," said Arnold. "Let Debra do dishes once in a while."

"But who will pull my net?" replied Martha. "And besides, when I call, Debra is running around on the four-wheeler!"

Naasri lifted the rough hand he had been examining to his lips and kissed it. Ayagiaq laughed loudly and hugged him. "You never learn," she said. "Now it is all wet again. You hurt me with those kisses!"

Taata smiled. Quietly he said, "I don't want you to raise Antonia either. Christian or not, Debra's mother is right....."

"About what?"

"Raising Debra's child. Anigayuk. The one who sleeps now in her seat."

"But Judith is the reason Debra is like she is. So irresponsible."

Already the strain of so much talking and reasoning tired Naasri. He stared blankly toward the T.V., at two battered automobiles careening down a city street, one banging the other's bumper, then passing.

"I mean she couldn't raise her like us. I have nothing else to do but..."

"Neither does Immaq," said Arnold, interrupting almost against his will. "All day she is gazing at television. Do you ever see her on the beach mending Judith's nets?"
''Only one time when Simon came up to fish camp with Alan and I took Antonia so Debra could help her aana sew the torn places in the big qalugruak net.''

''What about the other times we took her? Why did we do it?''

A small red fox skirted the dim outline of First Lake on its way to where the cranes nested. Soon she would be alone, a speck, moving through the tundra. Arnold turned back from the kunnisuk, from the door he spit out of. She was looking at him, one hand rocking Antonia who had fallen asleep with the pacifier still embedded in between the puffy cheeks.

''I'm kind of surprised at you, Naasri,'' she said. Her voice was so soft the T.V. program blurred some of the words, but not the tone. He felt his heart being touched. It wasn't her fault, this generous brown woman whose tenderness fooled him often, coming as it did from such a boisterous, loud, tough exterior. He turned down the volume of the television and went to sit beside her on the green couch once again.

''I only meant,'' he said, ''she doesn't work as hard as you. Arnold looked at his own weathered hands. ''When old time people took a child it was to ease the mother's burden and let her fish.''

''But we always kept children. No one turned away anybody's baby, not even outside the family. Even the
missionary agreed we probably hung together for that reason. It was good and now you want to change?"

"Aasriga. It's how you say. I remember the glowing candle and huddling away in skins when the temperature drop and the snow got loud. All of a sudden a baby would break loose and crawl like crazy for another bed of hides. Pretty soon all the beds are moving like ninja turtles. Ha!" Arnold's hands imitated writhing caribou skin beds which ended up together on Martha's substantial arm. Then he kissed her cheek and she beamed.

"You never turn down T.V. for me before!" she laughed

"And you never talk so serious to me before!" He too laughed and then he sighed and shook his head. The day was beginning to get too long. He rose from the couch and headed for the bathroom. Absentmindedly, Naasri turned on the CB.

"Adii, you somnabitchin gowang awhoooooo." The yowling faded. Then a belch and more slurring tones.

"Adii is right," said Arnold, "On the drinking nights you cannot listen. Old people must use telephone."

"Who you wanna call?" she said.

"Adii. I call Harold for an Eskimo poke. For my blister."

"Oh, let me see it."

He drew back in mock horror, making her laugh. C'mon, let's go to bed early for once," he suggested.
"Oh sure, and you will get up after and fix her bottle! Look how she still hangs in the seat like rag. Maybe cramping up. Now, change her will you? I'll heat a bottle for later and listen to the weather. If you hurry I stay awake for you."

In passing on the slippery blue linoleum, Ayagiaq squeezed his arm. Aasriga. It was good, he thought. But a Honda blared around the corner down by Amy's. Gathering speed before the down shift, it spun gravel against Arnold's burn barrel next to the light pole. Two dark figures in raven black nylon jackets hunched together leaning into the wind.

"Look!" said Arnold, "Look how they travel with no light. Everybody out is drinking. They should stay home!"

"It's only a Friday night," said Ayagiaq, "They are playing ball at the gym tonight. You were once young too, now. Hurry up!"


"Shut up you, you, foooolkerr," replied the other, louder voice, "I told you. I told....."

Mercifully, to Arnold's ear, the din from Baker's dog lot drowned all but the indistinct rising and falling of human guttural noises slurred and shouted along the village streets in the night.
"Finally those damn dogs are good for something!"
muttered Arnold, a wry grin easing across his two bottom teeth. He'd rather listen to the dogs than to most children. Their commotion began for a reason anyhow and when it ended he always felt a great peace and it made him glad he'd endured the racket and never shouted, betraying his true feelings.

In bed, Arnold made vigorous love to Martha. Something about their disagreeing stirred up some dormant blood, tired and routine blood normally, which throbbed anew with the thrill of argument. But upon release of the physical tension, no relief eased Arnold's mind. The once white ceiling with the old brown water spot returned his stare like on the nights Alan travelled for basketball. He thought of crashing then. A team of broken survivors freezing to death on the wind swept tundra. Why they would land on tundra in the fantasy puzzled Arnold. In the winter pilots usually followed the river. Maybe it was neater to consider his son's death that way, with only the wind and cold and space to consider instead of everything cluttered by willows.

When herding reindeer, Naasri welcomed sleep each night. First the skins warmed his legs which ached sometimes even though they were accustomed to working. Then the back softened and cracked when sinuous arms folded and hands squeezed elbows. By the time heat rubbed his eyes he was gone. But now, beyond forty, nothing worked as it should.
Things he shrugged off at twenty-six kept the eyes open now. For no reason, his left knee throbbed. Possibly the arthritis which plagued Aunt Koluk thirty years before was at fault. Privately, Arnold felt hard work was the culprit. That and the gradual knowing of what could happen and how. And year by year with the growth of his and Martha's family, the possibility of disaster multiplied. Despite the stress he learned to laugh, accept the turn of the card, and then again some nights he ran a trouble around in his head for hours. Seemed like problems came in streaks though, and Arnold hated to see this beginning tonight, especially after loving his Ayagiaq so well.

The bed sagged more and more each year until this year he slept touching Martha, which was fine most evenings, but caused irritation on sleepless nights like tonight. Try as he might, Taata remained alert. When playing possum grew aggravating, Arnold rose, whispered to Martha that the baby might be getting cold, and quietly eased into jeans, shoes, hat, and an old canvas jacket.

He didn't know where he was going. Hunters and herders learned to follow their feet by faith. The old trails led them, without thinking it seemed, to magical rendezvous places, spots where edible mosses and grasses lay just below the wind-rubbed snow, or where newborn calves were exposed. The narrow gravel road led out to and around the lagoon. When they first drove the cat out to scrape a hole for the waste disposal, Arnold walked this route often to inspect
its progress, intrigued as much as anything by the man hole covers spaced about a hundred yards apart and emitting a gaseous stink when someone left one off. "Anyone could fall in there!" Arnold said to the city council that first year. "Suppose a child came along at night and fell in? You'd never think to look. Rushing water down there would muffle cries for help." But no one listened. Later he gave up protesting and forgot all about it because no little children ever died in one. Now the uncovered holes with heavy iron covers lying beside them were part of the landscape. No one, including Arnold, thought much about their existence unless their noses rudely forced them to. However, walking this way tonight, Arnold heard unusual noises croaking from the holes. He had been looking up at the pulsing ribbons of light overhead, listening to the wind, and thinking of brighter displays he had seen when a sound like cawing come from the sewer. As he was walking toward the sound, a sudden gust flung his Stihl Saws cap into the darkness. Kneeling to retrieve it from a blueberry bush, he heard the unmistakable sound of cranes whooping southward for the winter, throwing their final arctic shindig of the year before flapping down Florida way. But there must be some mistake he thought. Cranes might fly until dusk, but hardly ever at night unless disturbed or frightened. Not until Arnold passed a coverless sewer hole did it occur to him that the sound he heard was water running and echoing below ground, until magnified and
scattered by the wind. Then Naasri knew he had been listening for the cranes, wanting to hear them for some reason, because the sound of the sewage system never came to him that way, even though the huge speckled sandhills often ate blueberries nearby and pooped on the road he now walked. Big purple flat stools. More like stains since the liquid part soaked into the gravel or evaporated. He was probably treading on some now.

Five shots burst in quick succession, a semi-automatic, .223 probably, thought Arnold, already running toward the stairs which led to the beach. Other sounds, muffled by the wind came from where the shots began. Lights flicked on until the crest of the hill blazed with golden light and flickered with shadows. A CB crackled. Then a man was screeching, broken glass toppled from a window. All the commotion concentrated, Arnold clearly noted, at Alex's place on the beach, where Alan and Debra were attending their party. Everyone was shouting from there and Willie Braxton had a man pinned as Arnold ran up. The man on the ground kicked savagely. Someone punched him hard, twice, and the struggling stopped.

"What's going on?" yelled Naasri to no one in particular. He saw then it was Alan who had struck the man on the ground. "Who?"

"It's Alvin, Dad. He shot Johnny Willard." Boyuk's eyes were wide. "They went to get Caldwell and the V.P.S.O. Go help Johnny, Dad, he's hurt!"
Inside the shack, Arnold found Johnny cradled by his cousins, Rebecca and Sandy. Wounded through the left calf, Willard's arms stiffened in pain, then relaxed. Neck muscles stood out where they connected to the jaw when the head rolled back. He hissed breath in and out.

"Why he do that thing?" asked Arnold.

"Crazy bastard," cried Johnny, "Oh, my leeggg!"

The wound was heavily bandaged with blue flowered sheets. The flowers looked huge, Hawaiian. Overhead a single 100w. light swung gently from a cord, lifting shadows up and down on the wall. All the blood on the sheet looked dark, but a few drips puddled up on the wood floor at irregular intervals. Pale, Johnny looked like he'd pull through. Still you could never be sure. A ruckus sounded outside and the girls looked up. One person shouted another down. A scuffle broke out and two men rolled down into the grass below the house.

"Boyuk?" hollered Naasri.

"It's OK," shouted Alan, "One of Alvin's cousins was pissed."

That's the trouble thought Arnold. The whole town's related to each other. Sometimes culprits go free. He tried to put a blanket on Johnny, but, being brave, the injured boy refused. His breath reeked of alcohol when he talked.

"I ain't hurt bad," he said.

"Did somebody go for help?" asked Arnold.
"Betty go clinic for morphine," said Sandy.

Arnold nodded. He looked down at his worn shoes. Nikes. First time he used them for running and sweat trickled yet over his ribs. "What happened?"

"I don't know," said Sandy, relating a story she would repeat dozens of times in days to come. "We were all sitting around laughing, listening to music, not hurting anybody. Debra and Mary were......"

"Hey," interrupted Arnold, "Where's Debra now?"

"Alan had Charlie take her home. They left right away. You know she and Alvin were close once?" said Sandy.

"Sure. Did he...."

"No. I don't think Alvin came gunning for her. He and Carl got in a fight outside the gym. You know how Alvin likes to get tanked up and play wild basketball?"

Arnold nodded.

"Well, Carl wasn't going to let him play. That's all. Carl punched Alvin. Then Alvin follow him over here. There's where the bullets came through. He used some kind .223 with a five round clip."

Naasri shuddered to think of the thirty round banana clips also commonly used. Both windows were shattered. Two holes punctured the east wall, one high, one low, and the other that hit Johnny burst through the front door, splintering the plywood lengthwise where it entered. A spine of wood pointed up and out toward the bullet hole. It was golden and the opening surprisingly small. Blood
splatters, drops, and smears surrounded Johnny's chair by the door.

"Anyways, we dove on the ground after the first two shots," related Sandy. "Lucky more weren't hurt. I guess the second shot hit Johnny."

"Where was Carl during all this?" Arnold asked. Now he felt tired, but since Martha would ask questions and worry, he wanted a few more details. For her.

"In the bathroom," said Mary this time. "It was so weird. Right after Al stopped shooting, Carl galloped out the back holding up his pants with one hand. First time I see him that scared!"

Dozens of people were arriving. They tied Alvin's hands and started pushing him up the walkway. "What you doing that to me for?" wailed Alvin. "You hurting my hands! What you do? I never kill nobody."

"You bushwhack bastard," snarled Richard Johnson, Johnny's cousin, "Shut your mouth." A thud, like a leather mallet hitting a wooden bucket sounded, and Alvin moaned, but talked no more. Feet tromped on the boards outside, coming up and down. Finally four of his friends grew tired of waiting for Betty and packed Johnny, against Arnold's protests, to the clinic. The shock had weakened him, even took the strength from his groans, so it looked more like they hauled away a dead man than a live one in the green blanket.
The V.P.S.O. told everybody to stay put, but people were coming and going and since he hadn't been around, inside anyhow, when the shooting started, Arnold told Alan he'd check on Debra and go home.

"Why don't you both come over and sleep off this mess?" said Naasri.

But Alan refused. "Better to stay at home." he said.

"Immaq screamed about like Johnny! I don't know. Maybe she'd upset Antonia too. We'll come over tomorrow."

"You OK Alan?"

"Sure, Dad."

"You knock him down?"

"Yeah. Lucky he was too drunk to shoot straight. I didn't want to die in some box though, so after I push Debra to the floor, me and Melvin Russell charge the door. Like in the Guards. Out there Alvin was trying to reload, but he see's us and fumbles for shells. A box. He wasn't premeditated anyhow. So we got real lucky and put him down no sweat. No big deal. Anyhow we'll be over in the afternoon."

"I'm real glad nobody got hurt worse," said Arnold, but his words sounded small. "Especially you and Immaq." He breathed deeply, feeling relieved to be leaving the stale-smelling house. He put his arm around Alan and squeezed and they walked up the steps like they were wearing water-filled rubber boots.
"Hey, you guys stick around," pleaded the village public safety officer. "We need witnesses."

"You got," said Boyuk turning back down the steps. To Arnold he said, "Hey, he doesn't need to know Debra was here. I already told the others. She has the new baby and I'm afraid all the fuss might be bad for him."

"You just come by tomorrow. This village will be calmer then." He squeezed Alan's arm through his black wind breaker.

Four wheeler lights appeared everywhere once Naasri reached the top step. Several teenagers had taken advantage of the hubub to cruise around. Other people searched for sons and daughters still under questioning down below. A few flashlights sparkled in the woods.

They will be talking about this one for a long time, thought Naasri. What was it like to burst out that plywood door, he wondered, not knowing the outcome, who pulled the trigger, or if all the moments up till now might come to an end? What did it mean, this action, or was it simply a reflex, like a wasp protecting its nest? A pride worked itself up in Naasri for his son's bravery. He wished he had said more at the time, but maybe after a good night's sleep better words would follow. He didn't know. A slight pain rose from around his right ankle, probably a strain from running on the rocky road, but numb until now. In the morning, he suspected, there would be more stiffness, but for now the leg responded well enough to drag him home.
Two hours later Naasri lay nearly asleep. He saw a
glass doll which little by little became the twinkling face
of his mother, her brown face smiling the shy smile he
remembered whenever he thought of her. Instead of looking
at him, however, her head angled away toward someone or
something else. Vague light, enough to distinguish her, but
not enough to disclose her exact location, radiated. Only
the sweet face of his bright-eyed Aana showed and she didn't
talk to him. He loved her look with the scarf and greying
hair up in a bun, was proud of her beauty and the fact she
was happy most of the time, and didn't dwell on the hard
life they had lived. Still she remained silent and smiling,
always smiling. Naasri now felt the pleasure of her memory.
Although she was dead now for seven years, she dropped into
his head as if dropping over for coffee, a chat, or a
confirmation of a longtime friendship. She reappeared in
dreams and waking moments like this one when troubles
blackened his mood or threatened his sleep. He lay in the
slanted bed touching Ayagiaq and breathing shallowly and he
felt the gathering weight of a decision which wasn't his
alone, but couldn't possibly be right whoever made it. He
wanted to forget he had made up his mind earlier, but the
strong loving vision of his aana gave him some hope that he
was mistaken then. Sometime in the next hour he drifted off
to sleep.
In the cool morning Naasri woke up and rocked Anigayuk in his arms. She jumped and kicked against his upper legs. "Look, Aana. Look how she jumps on her Taata's legs!"

Ayagiaq glanced over and smiled. She felt rested because the tumult that woke most of the town escaped her notice. The CB was off, she had learned to ignore the barking of the dogs, and when Arnold came home he only told her that drunks were causing the usual trouble. "I see mostly you spoil Antonia to death with all your attention!" she said.

After breakfast Naasri bundled Anigayuk up in her tiny jacket and pink hat. "I'm taking Anigayuk out," he said. "I'm taking our baby out to show her around the village on the four wheeler," he said proudly.

And, later in the afternoon, when Alan and Debra came over and had coffee, it was Naasri who insisted that he be the first to tell them what they eagerly wanted to hear.
Which of your obsessions would you have yourself be known by? Since my cousin Benjamin asked me this question a couple years ago I've begun to take my life more seriously. Quit smoking pot entirely, cut way down on the harmonica practicing, left off playing poker with friends. Focusing, I think, is what you call it and normally I'd resist such a thing, being an inquisitive, daring person with an open mind. I've noticed the ineffectuality of some of my pursuits or possibly my mind is closing, like a clam, with age. Somehow Benjamin's suggestion, for that's what it really was, a hint in the form of a question, one I'd heard many times before from various friendly sources, sounded good. I began to look around, hear quotes such as, "The road to hell is paved with amateur musicians." , notice all the time I spent doing things that didn't get me anywhere, diffused my energy in the way that keno balls bounce around against the glass rather than roll with the force of a bowling ball straight toward the pins of life.

But suppose you are a person who believes in the well-rounded approach? That was me until recently and in my case showed a lack of confidence, of maturity. I saw it immediately when I started weeding out the habits which, thought to be broadening and enlivening, were stifling my greater strengths. Lest you think I'm presenting a self-help treatise, relax. My aim is simply to acquaint you with
my present state of mind and my own prejudices which may or may not be unhealthy to you.

Oddly enough I continued to jog and play "rat" basketball with the city league. I run up hills through the icy mornings wearing an old pair of long johns over my face to avoid frost biting my lungs. To the unindoctrinated, the unaddicted, jogging takes up a considerable amount of time if handled properly. Disregard those who say a person needs to run only three times a week for twenty minutes or so. That's beside the point. Much of the time involved consists of dressing, undressing, reading Runner's World articles, ordering special clothing, trying on shoes at the Native Store, talking to others about their running joys and pitfalls, and healing up. The contingent back rubs, oohhhh I love the contingencies! What is odd about continuing to jog is I live above the arctic circle in an Alaskan town called Laugvik. It's a tiny place, a village really, consisting of an electrical plant, a water system, a sewage system, an airport, and a microwave system which connects Laugvik by telephone to all parts of the world, except when a storm shorts out the system. Two hundred twenty-nine people live here in Laugvik, inhabiting thirty-eight homes, most of which were built by the government and, except for the paint, look alike. Lots of jokes circulate about where the extra person lives. If you divide the number of people by the number of dwellings, you get six to a house with one remaining. Sandi Richards and I take turns being the butt
of most of the humor. Sandi sleeps around and I'm seldom home since I'm the V.P.S.O., or village policeman, and my job keeps me circulating too.

Jogging. In the winter I've a system which varies but slightly when the mercury dips below -10 degrees Fahrenheit. I don Scott Tingley tights, orlon face mask, Walls insulated bibs, turtleneck, down jacket and my trusty Asics footgear and socks. Below -25 degrees I use Vaseline on my exposed skin around the nose and eyes. In one pocket of my old green jacket I keep my Eskimo cards, withdraw them to mouth the words during half, the going outward part, of my jog. Usually on the way back darkness sets in, first leaving by six or seven minutes a day before December 21 and then returning more slowly it seems after the solstice. I used to think solace and solstice were related. Now, without a doubt, I understand the lie of that comparison. Here the light glares incessantly on June 21 and disappears almost completely come December. Other people don't jog outside here. To the casual observer, a man who runs around outside at fifty below is freezing, what with the skimpy running shoes, the light clothing, and the icy beard hanging off the facemask. However, like a geyser in winter, the body inside the suit sweats, produces the moisture which turns to frost and ice around the apertures. Hence the Vaseline. My only real enemies are the wind and deep snow, but Laugvik receives only a smidgin of the latter which is soon flattened by the snowmachines. When the wind blows, the
young men of the village and I play "ratball", a type of run and gun basketball which combines running, gymnastics, and laughter.

The usual crimes occur here daily at a rate I'd describe as normal. People beat their wives and children and they neglect them. They steal, cheat, and murder now and then. But usually people drink, cause some destruction or disturb the peace and I haul them in. Routine, mostly. To be expected because we live in a "dry" village. Sometimes I think I'm paid to live here, symbolize authority, and enjoy the rugged, sublime Alaska countryside. Wrong, I say to myself, rubbing the six inch scar along the left side of my head where, thank goodness, some hair remains to hide the ugly thing.

Bill Robertson asked me once what I was doing when he saw me fingering it.

"I'm trying to stimulate hair growth, Billy. What the hell does it look like?"

"Look like you rubbing all of it off!"

"You think that's bad, you should have seen it before the exercise. Didn't have any hair at all!"

"That's right," said Margaret Davies, the postmistress. "You weren't here when Guy 'bout met God."

We were standing in the lobby of the post office at the time. It was a grey, blustery day, with four to six inches of new snow predicted for the valley that night. Looked
like it would come in horizontally, if at all. Not much of a night for crime. The wanted posters seemed insignificant.

"What are you doin' right now?" I asked.

"Working on Edgar's snowmachine I guess."

"In this wind?"

"Ya."

"Well, come on over after awhile. We'll watch football and compare war wounds."

Billy walked in and looked around as he always does, like he's expecting I've redone the wall paper or something. I think he forgets or is nervous. But I liked Billy because the man could listen, could give and take with calmness and humor, traits overlooked in the verbose, often pushy, and belligerent societies of the planet. He couldn't take care of himself, but I relied on him for a dose of sympathy every now and then.

"It's the same old, same old, Billy. C'mon in and sit a spell."

"Your wiring is dangerous," he said. "I could fix it so you wouldn't burn to death."

"OK," I said, "After the game."

"Who's playing?"

"I dunno. The Jets and the Bills I think. Let's turn on the set and see."

"Is Jim Kelly still playing for Buffalo?" said Billy.
"As far as I know. Those plastic joints they're making now will probably add ten years to his game if he wants to use them."

Billy plopped onto the couch, put one stocking foot up on the upside down Chevron can I use for an ottoman and a T.V. tray.

"Make yourself at home will you!" I said.

He smiled. "This office could use some art work. Why don't you buy a calendar with photographs."

"Photographs of what?"

He leered.


Billy opened the white plastic bag he'd brought in, drew out a two pound bag of Doritos Nacho Cheese and drilled me in the belly like a quarterback would.

"You ever play football much?" he asked.

"Nope, I said. Can't you tell?" I'd just fumbled the bag onto the chilly linoleum.

"You look like a football player I guess."

"I used to box. My dad coached our town team. Had a mean left hook that could lift you outa your socks, man. The guy weighed two hundred thirty pounds if he weighed an ounce. Got so whenever he'd set the left I'd take a step back. He'd set, I'd go back. Set, back, set, back. Finally I'd hit the ropes and the old man would go up on his toes like a ballerina, put those hairy old arms over his
head and spin. And laugh, Jesus, dad would laugh at me. Then, even though I knew what was happening, uncontrollably I'd go charging in, bulling my way in to get drubbed over and over again. Eventually he tired of my ignorance and set me straight. 'Best to try and counter and charge early,' he would say. 'You have short stout arms, same as your uncle Teddy, but the running backwards is hurting your confidence and tiring you out. It takes less energy to laugh than it does to back peddle.' From then on I took the blow or deflected it, kept driving in to celebrate with a little dance of my own. Made me more direct though. I tend to want to get right down where the heart of a matter lies and straighten things out, even if it takes a little pain."

"The scar?"

"Yes, that's one of the visible results. Though as you can see, I'm still kicking!" Billy took in my gun rack on the south wall, nodding approval. Or maybe he counted that way. "Here, have a Pepsi," I said.

"Got anything to go with that?" he said.

"Nope. I don't touch the stuff, man."

He shrugged. We shared some chips and watched the game silently until the Jets took possession. One thing I noticed about up here, people take eating more seriously since the coldness and darkness work a one-two combination on their psyches. If the depression and boredom don't get you then the instincts will! Besides, the air is so dry, a person's thirst kicks up something fierce. We polished off
the sodas, began working on two more and a couple fishwiches.

"I was more or less new to police work," I said.

"What?"

"The story of the scar, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." said Billy.

"And Walter Williams asked me if I wanted to go to Tulugak and play ball with a bunch of guys. Carter Mason, Reggie Truman, that bunch.

Billy nodded. He had a faraway look in his bright brown eyes which appeared ready to endure whatever blow by blow description I had to offer. He was kind and polite, his way of thanking me for the meal.

"This was before I had my old Bravo, so they threw an old thick blanket in back of Walter's basket sled and off we went all rush-rush before I had time to grab my goggles or anything. Luckily Benny Jackson rode in front of me so I didn't have to buck the full force of the wind."

Billy was smiling. He knew the extreme discomfort a fifty three mile round trip in an open sled could generate.

"And you went real slow," he said.

"Oh sure! Va-room. We hit most of the high spots. If it hadn't been for my parka and the bunny boots I'd have been one big frost bite."

"How was the trail?"
"Washboard, same as this year. My sacroiliac was plastered to the backpiece and the left elbow bruised from holding me upright. Otherwise no problem."

"Better to go fast though. Less jerky."

"True enough," I replied. "The novelty of it kept me interested too. Must have crossed the Koluk River twenty-five times. Walter gunned it on the ice, clattering like train wheels over a wide joint!"

"What?"

"Like this," I said, clapping my hands together rapidly.

"Tingiruk," said Billy.

"Yeah, we were flying alright. Think Walter figured to test my nerve somewhat too. We'd sort of bounce through the portages along the same line as the luge people in the Olympics do it. You know. Chatter, chatter, chatter, whoosh. Bounce off the wall, duck a staub, the hitch slacks up and suddenly tugs and Walter stands up and looks back to see if I'm intact. You couldn't compare it to a roller coaster for thrills, but endurance wise it was much tougher. You know its -20 degrees Fahrenheit out there, warm for February, yet with the wind chill a good -60 degrees. Next time I do that, which will be never, I'll tie my snow pants bottoms to keep the wind from blowing up the legs. Too much of a turn off for a hot blood like myself. You know if one of those froze up there'd be an Alaskan day of mourning."
Billy chuckled and nodded in all the right places, seemed to be enjoying me more than Jim Kelly, although every now and then he'd glance toward the screen, so I pressed my advantage. "Say, do they have moose detectors on those snowmachines?"

Billy thought for awhile before replying, "No. What are they?"

"They're small and make a whistling noise. Anyhow they use them for whitetail deer on Montana roads. Supposed to frighten the deer away from the highway. Psychology I suppose, but a friend of mine bashed a deer, fender, and whistle into a pulpy accordion the day after installing one on his car, so my verdict is they are a scare tactic, voodoo for the woodland traveller."

"Where you from, originally?" asked my guest.

"Northern Idaho. The panhandle."

"You have lots of deer up there?"

"Plenty. Like the caribou here, only scattered. Anyway like I was saying, we passed the wooden trail markers, the x's, and then some new trail markers with the yellow reflecting tops and finally, a crash site. We stopped there, by the twisted metal on top of that knoll. Were you here when that happened?"

"No. I lived in Noorvik then, but I heard about it. Pilot error."

"Yes. He took his eyes off the guages on take off, lost sight of the ground and burrowed into the tundra."
"You can see Tulugak from there? It's bare?"

"That's it. Not too far from town. Now the wreck looks skeletal, as if a moose died and the ravens or foxes scattered the bones. Only the angles are different, plus an odd shape, oblong or diamond. We lucked out. Wind died down early that night, so stopping to stretch felt mighty welcome. Funny though, it reminds me of the Army how people hurry each other. Walter stopped to light a cigarette, then slap, back on the sled and go. What do people do that for? We waited an hour to play once we arrived."

"I don't know," said Billy. Maybe its our pace to keep from getting too cold. We can't stop it even when its too warm alright."

"Could be. So we arrived. Hour and a half to travel twenty-six miles. I staggered around and followed Walter into his aunt's house. "Maybe you know her, Emma Peters?"

"Sure. She's my aunt too. My Mother's older sister."

"OK. So you know the fuss she makes about coffee. We watched Miss America on T.V., took off our boots and coats to warm up. I drank three cups. She said, 'drink more. We waterlog you so you run slow.' Funny lady, your auntie. Saboteur par excellence."

"You win?" asked Billy.

"Yes, thank god. After feeling powerless all the way over, controlled by that maniac and his smelly machine, I took it out on the home team. Wasn't easy though. They threw the ball to their tall old white center, you know
Emmons Wilson, the pilot. Must be six five if he's an inch. Can't run, but his eye still works. And the little guy, Putu, hacked away at us in traffic where the referee couldn't see. Didn't Tulugak win the state championship last year in high school?"

"Yes."

"OK, that's right, because the banner's tacked to the wall above the circle with the Grizzly inside. Big painting!"

"My uncle painted that one."

"Emma's husband?"

"No, my mother's older brother, Alfred Hanson."

"Hmmm," I said. That was the break I'd been looking for. I walked to the door and locked it before turning on the tape recorder. Billy didn't hear me I'm sure because he'd turned back to the game when I rose and I'd kept talking to further muffle the sounds. "I'm whipping up some tuna fish. Want some?"

"Sure," said Billy, keeping his eyes on the game. He had exceedingly long fingers, well muscled, which he laced together and unlaced with deliberation. The left thumb caressed the well worn right palm. Once he told me about sticking his fingertips into a boiling hot springs, said the skin finally grew back. He could have been a piano player. Such was the delicate nature of his hands and ample wrists.

"Ouch," I said.

"What you do?"
"The static electricity must have jumped two inches to bite me. I'll never get used to it."

"You will," he said. "How long you been up here?"

"Going on eight years," I said. "Most of it with Amalcom, the copper mine at Nelatna, until I couldn't stand it any longer."

"Use your elbow to touch the metal," said Billy.

"How's the game going?" I asked.

"Bills are walking. Lofton's caught five already for over hundred yards."

"Good. Anyhow the ball game in Talugak progressively grew rougher and more intense. I skinned both knees diving for a loose ball, hit a three pointer to tie the game and sank seven out of ten free throws down the stretch. Sweat a bucket! Oh god, I knew I was going to suffer after that one. They beat us up away from the ball because the refs were women. You know how they follow the ball. No peripheral vision!"

Billy nodded.

"The best part came afterwards when we ate muktuk and smoked salmon at Robert Sr.'s brother's place. Aasrigaa, it was good. Mary served coffee and juice and caribou goulash, blueberry jelly on Wonder bread, and Spanish rice. I slaughtered the Eskimo language and they laughed. They told me the muktuk would make me work harder, make my nose sweat. I'm afraid I made a pig of myself because I hadn't eaten since breakfast and it was one o'clock in the morning."
Dreaded the long ride home because the temperature dropped about ten degrees, but for some reason it wasn't so miserable. Probably the food warmed my feet instead of my nose!"

Billy laughed. "They are smaller, that's why."

"Smart ass," I said. "Fact is, when we arrived back in Laugvik everything heated up. The post office door resembled a wounded caribou, one leg shot to hell and hanging useless. One hinge held, the bottom one. And the casing was splintered from the crowbar blows."

"Do you know who did it?"

"Yes I do, but let me finish about the scar. Now someone hadn't been too dainty about the rest of the equipment either, because the casing looked all chewed up, beaver style, the outer door took some blows from a battering ram, and the inner door, since it was made of wood, splintered up nicely after a few blows with an axe."

Billy sat grinning at the description.

"You didn't see this did you?"

"No, I was out of town, but I wish I did. Sometimes they close the door early at Post Office and I want to break it real bad."

"You wouldn't want to see what they did to the office. They busted it up something fierce. Must have been drinking is all I can figure because no sane man would write the craziness those two wrote."

"Maybe it was kids?"
"Nope. Used too much force, scribbled too high on the walls, took the wrong things, nearly broke my head."

"Oh, the scar."

"You haven't forgotten about that?"

"No, but you're taking too much time getting there."

"I've got all night, Billy, don't you?"

"Well yes, but......sure," said Billy, "Remember I'm going to repair your wires after."

"That's the spirit," I said, "but you better quit acting like a live wire yourself or I'm gonna have to fix you!" Billy quit tugging at the back of his long dark hair, the ends of the wispy mustache, and laid his hands calmly on his lap. But when I resumed, the long hands picked up, too, where they left off. "The rest is straight forward. I told the boys to go on home because, once we closed the Post Office door, the work was done. Had I known what waited for me in the shadows, I'd have kept Walter and Benny. But, new to the job, this cowboy headed for the saloon alone."

"Saloon?"

"You know, the drinking house, Richard's."

"Oh."

"Why'd you hit me so hard, Billy? Would have saved us all a lot of trouble if you hadn't."

"I never," he said.

"Yeah, you did. When Johnny called me over to the side of the house you were waiting with the baseball bat. Doc
Mathews said a pipe swung with the same amount of force would have killed me."

"I ne-ver hit you, you goddamn liar," said Billy. But his eyes were wide as he twisted around on the couch. He didn't see the Jets drop back to punt.

"Don't call me a liar, Billy. You hid behind the black spruce tree and clubbed me like you'd keel haul a salmon. Then you and Johnny left me to die in the snow bank. Only thing saved me was my old beaver cap because it softened the blow and fought off the cold. Hadn't been for that cap, Billy, they'd be hauling you in for murder today instead of grand larceny. Man, it was thirty fucking degrees below zero out there."

"What?"

"You heard me. You're under arrest."

"You can't do that. Who said I rob?"

"Nancy Swan said Alfred Hanson and his nephew did it. Talked to her today at the Native Store. Only I didn't know who his nephew was until you told me. Nancy wouldn't fink on you. She did say Alfred had only one nephew old enough to rob with him.

"She doesn't know shit."

"You are really stupid. All she had to do was look out her bedroom window which is right across the street from the post office. Nancy said she thought a plane crashed into the building you made so much noise."
Billy let out a string of curse words two miles long which I let flow over the top of my head and fill the tape machine for additional evidence. "Let's go, Billy," I said finally.

"Where?"
"To jail."
"Don't you want to watch the rest of the game?"
"Not with you I don't, c'mon."

Billy began crying when I drew the cuffs from my coat pocket. The s.o.b. almost killed me a month ago, but when he could not do exactly as he pleased, the man cried like a child. "Please don't lock me up, Guy. I didn't hurt you much. I was drunk."

"You should have thought about that before. Took me two weeks before I could run again." Billy continued wailing across the street to the one room metal building which passed for a jail in Laugvik. It got to me to see a grown man come face to face with something bigger than he was and for which he was unprepared. When I first took over the V.P.S.O. job it happened frequently, young men and old alike who had, if they wanted to rape a girl, raped her, couldn't understand me telling them no. Could not fathom it and to a man they flooded the place with tears. Unashamedly. Pure frustration got em' and by osmosis, somehow, got me too. Of course I tried not to show it, but not starting out in police work as a younger man, I did not callous early the part that snickers at a blubbering man,
and I'm not saying I felt sorry for them, I mean the nausea set in like a sea sickness and my guts rolled when they started up and sometimes a night passed before the queasy feeling vanished.

So we crossed the snow-covered street, our boots squeaking on the frigid surface, and Billy hunched over with a face bloated and wet from tears and a runny nose. "Jesus, Billy, shut up will you?" I said, grabbing his black nylon sleeve. "You're making me sick." He was too. An old anna ambled up the street toward us. Billy, hands behind him, turned in her direction as if to start a conversation. I turned and shoved him up the three steps of the grey holding pen, unlocked the brass Master lock, and elbowed him inside. Immediately I cuffed his first pair of handcuffs with a second pair, and the two to an I bolt in the center of the room. I turned up the heat, turned on the light, and left Billy bleary eyed and threatening to disembowel me with a dull ulu.

Word travels fast up north via the CB hot line. Apparently the grandma out in the wind sized up the situation and buzzed Billy's mom. The only other creatures stirring then were two frazzled ravens streaking south, too occupied with navigation to stop and call anybody.

"What you do to my boy, Guy?" She sounded out of breath on the phone.

"Locked him up, Loretta. Had to, he...."

"He didn't do nothing. He's been with me all day."
"Not today, but last month he robbed the post office."

"Who say he rob? They lie like you do, you goddamn Guy! Now let him go to my custody and I'll forget all about it."

"Can't do it. He's going to Koluk tomorrow to face charges. The judge will decide where he goes from there."

"Who will cut my firewood if Billy don't do it? You? Just let him go couple days and then catch him. I freeze without the wood."

"I know that, Loretta. I'll call Olaf over at the church. He's got enough wood to get you by and Billy can pay him back."

"You let him go you asshole or I'll come down and....."

"Sorry, got to run. Yeah, yeah, call your congressman why don't you."

Following Loretta's call I phoned the station in Koluk and ordered a plane for first thing in the morning. Regulations say the accused must be brought before a magistrate within twenty-four hours after arrest or they throw the whole case out of court and I wasn't about to let Billy Thompson walk after what he did to me and the town. The dispatcher said the chances were good they could fly in, but a storm was expected that night which might linger, arrive later than expected, or cause any number of nefarious delays. Just in case I called Randy Williams, who plows the
runway, to remind him of the incoming squall and inform him of my flight.

I'd just hung up when a snowmobile roared to a stop and a huge Inupiat woman in a green print atigit dismounted and raced up my steps attacking the door with flailing arms and short, brutal kicks. The hood of her parka swung about loosely while she wailed, grunted, and swore a blue streak. Loretta Thompson behaved like a bucking bronc with the cinch pulled extra tight.

"Open up you filthy frigin' cop. I know you're in there hiding. Open this god...thud....damn....thud....door....thud.....and let me in." Her bulging face and eyes swung wildly in rhythm with her blows. She was missing one front tooth.

"Hello, Ernie," I said. "This is Guy."

"Yeah?"

"The sound you hear is your sister trying to get herself arrested for disturbing the peace."

"Whose peace?"

"Mine, Ernie, now get your ass down here and take her home before I arrest her too and your entire family will be minus the only bread winner you got!"

"Too?"

"I picked up Billy this afternoon for knocking over the P.O."

"He did that?"
"Yup."

"Hang him," said Ernie.

The peace was restored temporarily. It is never restored permanently, thank god, or I'd be out of a job, one I didn't mind at all after a crisis and sometimes the action itself jangled my nerves enough to make me feel keen and alive. Luckily, if the people involved are decent enough, merely blowing off steam on a drunk and shouting down the moon, they forget about it and speak to me again, often the next day. I mean they don't love me or anything, but they speak. That's all I want. So to blow off my own steam I took a ride on my Yamaha Bravo around town and out by the airport. Nothing stirred except the wind and snow which swirled and blasted across the openings. This and the occasional raven who, like me, thrilled himself by sticking his face smack dab in the middle of a tempest and daring the storm to ruffle his feathers, or perhaps he, too, needed a challenge from other than a member of his own species to sharpen his wits. I love storms. People hunker down and stay peaceful unless it lasts too long and I hunker right along with them, catch up on some sleep and play rat ball with the boys, as I said before.

This afternoon, Punky Mitchell's pitbull lay chained in his dog house, a dark hole disguising the bull's perpetually grim demeanor. To my left, Andrew Black's dog lot looked like a miniature ghost town built on a hillside. Canine
ghosts, also on chains that curled into snug enough square white housed, howled when I drove by, but only because it was supper time and one of Andrew's fur-clad kids emerged from the big red house to deliver steaming hot water and frozen fish to the hillside's lower rent district. We waved at each other, the kid and I, as was customary of arctic travellers twenty miles from the iglu or twenty feet. Then I sped on out along the frozen lake, past the colossal Friend's Church to the right and straight to the airstrip. My headlight bounced frequently because the new drifts roughed up the trail. Soon the small brown freight sled filled my light. The front door, graffiti covered, swung open and inside more obscenities caught my eye. I made a mental note to burn the damned thing when business was slow. I'd have no shortage of suspects. Already gathering snow on top of its stationery blade, the city's Caterpillar slumbered beside the stretch where planes rolled from the strip toward the large turn around area. Twenty-six miles stretched between this spot and the next town, Tulugak, so I usually turned around here at what I considered the end of my beat.

Lights from town were spaced like notes from a familiar piece of music. The dark ridge where Norris Beamon lived and made remarkable basket sleds, swooped down into town, ended near the big white church a person might mistake for snow except it was a square and had a grey roof. I heard motor and wind, felt push and sting around the eyes where
the face mask didn't cover, saw the storm bully tree tops around and whip Verna Feldon's freeze dried laundry like tattered sails as I reapproached my village. One stop to make. The store for gas and bread. Then home. No northern lights tonight. After all these years it was disappointing not to see the dazzling vibrations more often. I wondered what the weather would offer in the morning. Would the thought of Billy's crying be rubbed out by the basketball game or the news or the movie on channel nine?

Like many other arctic villages, our houses have numbers. The mayor lives in house number thirty seven, I live in twenty-two and so forth. Having numbers help when using the CB because all you have to do is flip to an open channel and say, "Twenty-two calling four, come in Charlie," and if Charlie happens to be next door, his wife says, "He's at five, over." Eliminates complicated naming. I was thinking of house numbers, trying to remember the new couple who moved into house thirty-nine, when I drove past Randy's place, house fifteen. A blast of music screamed above the wind. At first all I noticed when glancing over were six snow machines parked in a staggered line parallel to the house, but then two dark figures sacheted in front of the window. Another party. Normally I would have gone about my business, waited for a disturbance call, but this was Randy's house so I made a sharp arc with the Bravo, stopped, and knocked on the door.
"Who is it?" uttered a low voice.
"Guy."
"What do you want?"
"Tell Randy he has to be up at six a.m. tomorrow to go to work on the runway."

Laughter shook the room, and then a long silence. Wind whooshed into the back of my black snow pants, nudging me toward the door.

"You want to party, Guy?" said a voice that resembled Agnes Martin's. More laughter erupted.
"No. And don't cause trouble now. It's a bad night to get arrested."

"Good...night....Guy Walker," sang the voice I thought belonged to Agnes. Someone mumbled a phrase that defied my translation, but which sent the others into fits of loud guffaws.

Best to leave. Better to bust the importers of the hootch than hassle the bootlegger's victims, that was my motto, based on a hard year's experience. Sometimes they'd mess up, start firing rifles in the middle of the night or beating on one another, but usually, in the colder weather, tempers only simmered. Besides, I'd found what I'd stopped to discover. The only thing Randy would be plowing in the morning would be the air fields of his dreams. Come five a.m., if the storm abated, I'd fire up the city's Cat and plow the strip myself.
Famous last words. Now with the trooper plane in the air and on the way to a runway I assured them would be cleared, the mulish caterpillar refused to budge. Mimicking its operator, Randy, the machine groaned several times, turned over once, and refused to join the world of the living. Huffy, I pulled levers, choked, sprayed, primed, and prayed until I'd had it with the recalcitrant beast. In desperation I ran the Yamaha up and down the quarter mile strip of snow covered gravel, trying to knock down the high spots from the area where the wind modeled ridges, dips, and gullies on the flat surface of the new snow. The storm ceased abruptly at two a.m. and stars beamed, well defined against their huge dark background. A sliver of moon revealed low, snow-capped hills which haloed the tundra in a mighty circle around Laugvik. Smoke calmly rose in lazy curves from forty eight chimneys and the dependable street lamps watched while I, the lone frantic creature, living or dead, barrelled back and forth, a pinball catapulted between two banks and rebounding madly. Bing, bing, bing, I could fairly hear the ringing in my ears, or was it the machine pinging? Fortunately I'd remembered to bring a shovel. At least twelve spots were over two feet deep and what wouldn't pack readily with the machine demanded loosening and scattering first by hand. When the plane's landing lights appeared I raced for my radio at home.
"We have a runway groomed by snowmachine. Its flat, but that's about all I can say for it. Snow is loose enough most places, about four to six inches deep. Can you land?"

"We'll give it a try, Guy, but could you do me a favor?"

"Sure, what?"

"Turn on the goddamn runway lights!"

Dumping the honey bucket, always the worst part, is what I did first to prevent Billy from doing it on purpose. A few scraps from last night's meal lay scattered and greasy where he tossed them impatiently before progressing with the second course. Panuktuk remains mostly, whitefish skeletons from the meal his sister brought and I delivered. He'd neatly polished off the blueberry pie and coffee, leaving only empty cup and tin, but the skeletons, a brown banana skin and three pieces of pilot bread survived for Walter's dogs. I'd loosened his constrictions somewhat after the first time I checked him, had to think of the mop-up job ahead, but at the same time took his outer clothing to prevent suicide. Jeans, T-shirt, shoelaces, the works. So the first thing he complained of that morning was the frigid draft which clouded in on my heels.

"Jesus, Guy, it's aalapah! Close the pneumonia hole."

"Get dressed, Billy, Toby Baker is flying us to town."

"The hell he is. Ernie said the runway's closed."
"Was, son, was, and if it ain't I'm driving you all the way in to the judge so put on your duds." I threw him a set of boots, snowpants, and heavy coat complete with hood. Let his hands take care of themselves, I thought. The damned trouble maker. He dawdled, so I cut the furnace, threw open the door and started the Bravo. You never saw an Eskimo move faster. He dressed like a fireman, tumbled out onto the back seat and we headed for the plane. Toby stood outside his red and white Cessna 183 taking a long look down the runway.

"I'm not riding in that thing quailed Billy as I cut the motor." He too noticed the curvature of Baker's wheel marks where the pilot used more than the usual latitude in landing the craft.

"Better re-pack my ruts," said Baker. "Lengthen her a tad too. We'll have more weight going out."

"You're risking my life!" cried Billy. "You can't take off. I know my rights." He twisted in the seat I had secured him to.

"You lost your "rights" when your buddies got Randy drunk last night, because the plan backfired and Toby landed anyway. If we die its your own fault scum bag but you are going to justice one way or another."

"I'll walk tomorrow anyway, Guy, and you know it. Why not kick back and use a good excuse?" His face turned to stone as he said this, I think, because he knew me and he knew what I would do. Billy's deep brown eyes glazed over
and his jaw clenched. He looked past me out the door, not expecting or getting an answer. I looked at the frost bite scars on his flattened nose before going back outside.

"You got somebody to pick up your machine?" asked Toby after I'd groomed the runway to his specs."

"Yup, Walter. I give him all my dog scraps and he takes good care of me."

Toby nodded and smiled. He revved up the Cessna and careened down the strip like a dragster. In fact, the further down the airfield we went the more we seemed like a car, veering every now and then and fast approaching where neither four-wheel vehicles nor aircraft could safely drive. I remember we cleared the tops of the scrub spruce beyond the runway's end by forty or fifty feet, no more, and I think the closeness of it surprised Toby.

"You've gained some weight this fall," he said. "Lucky you didn't wait to arrest him until later in the year! Hell, I thought you were a runner, Guy."

"I run to eat."

"Well, how about walkin' and just snack."

We both laughed loudly, releasing the pent up tension the near-calamitous take off produced. Billy was right. We shouldn't have risked it because without a doubt, Judge Stewart would turn him loose in the afternoon, within two hours of landing and Billy'd be swacked in two and a half. I had a notion to crash the party. Sure, he'd serve a probation, like all the people at the festivities. For
Billy, this would be probation number three. Odds are he'd borrow Woody Barnhouse's snowmachine and beat me back to Laugvik. It happened twice before and oh god does the town think it's funny until someone's brother or sister suffers an assault by the criminal. Thinking about it made me want to climb into the back and commit mayhem. Just he and I in the back, him resisting arrest like mad.....

"Hey, Guy, you got anything to drink?" asked Billy. "I sure would like a cup of coffee alright."

Toby poured me a cup from his thermos and offered me some of his Planters dry roasted peanuts to go with it. After all, he'd risked his life too and it was about the only legal way we could get to Billy, to sit there drinking fresh brew in front of him and ignoring his pleas, threats, innuendos and curses. Revealing himself as a very spoiled man, he carried on for quite a while, then turned taciturn for most of the remainder of the flight. We encountered ten minutes of turbulent air over the Prospect River and I remembered I hadn't eaten a bite since the sandwiches with Billy during the game. Justice, companionship. I stared out at the startlingly white mountainscape to my right, mountains I'd probably never see, except by air, because I liked playing games with guys like Billy. Ten minutes later I was dreaming. A bunch of us were bashing heads like the old time football players with their leather helmets. Deep down I liked the pure sport of it, running hard, squaring up for a tackle, feeling the thud, the give of muscle, hearing
the honest groans. Blood fell on my arm. I yelled at my teammates to hold the line, but play after play unfolded toward my safety position. The last man between the enemy and our goal, I delivered bone bruising blows that crippled the other team. It was a cold night for football, the sky black, star-filled and I could see my breath ejecting in hot puffs under the stadium lights. Somehow the opponents won. My team wasn't very good and when the game ended I remember standing beside the field where the baseball infield intersected the tall grass of the outfield. The football field in the fall metamorphosed, turned into a ball diamond come summer time. I surveyed my wounds; a purple forearm, a swollen thigh, the puffy knuckle of my right hand. All were throbbing violently. I had to decide what to do. The rest of the guys would be showering and all depressed. The stands were empty. Soon they would turn out the lights. Rather than join the others I walked downtown, still in my grass stained uniform. I wanted to enjoy the freedom of being alone for awhile with no one depending on my steadfastness. Out of the Eagles Club staggered Merril Sterns, the mayor of Brocktown, a churchgoer and friend of my father. He waved at Turk Snyder who sat in the city police car. Turk's spotlight flashed a hello. Then the mayor swung open his car door, stepped inside and sped away. Crooks aren't the only ones who make mistakes, I thought. Turk suddenly flashed his light on me.
"It's past curfew time kid," he said, "but I'm going to let you go because of the righteous game you played tonight. Now go on home and get some rest."

I hated Turk for blaming me while allowing the drunken mayor to go free.

"You've got cold feet, Turk. You're scared," I shouted. "Arrest the drunken s.o.b."

Billy's laughter woke me. My feet indeed were cold because I'd forgotten my bunny boots. The slobber ran out of the corner of my mouth.

"What you dreaming about, Guy?" asked Billy. "You wiggle like dreaming dog."

Billy's spirits were up again. He believed he'd be free soon. Trouble is, I thought that bringing him in like this should lead to a jail term, thought that what I did for a living was right, fair and just. Let someone teach criminals, even on the last frontier, that what they are crying for is really eight or ten years away from home, not simply one night. Then I could understand the tears of the grown men. They would be losing more than a day or two. They would be losing everything.

As soon as we landed on the long grey concrete strip, miles wide it seemed, at Koluk, I asked Toby if he was too tired.

"For what?" he replied, "I slept in till five-thirty this morning."
"A return flight to Laugvik."

"What you want to go back for?" asked Billy.

"I want to sleep with Mary and keep her warm till you get home, Billy. She's been asking me to hurry up and come around, so now I can."

"Billy smirked, but shut up. His lips kept closed tight until I slammed the cell door in his face. Then he said, "She likes you to pinch her ass real hard when the time comes, Guy."

"I know," I said and turned to rejoin Toby.

"Hate to say this Guy, but the department won't cover a charter back out this morning. Maybe we can swing half of it."

"That's OK," I said, "Can we take off after Billy and I see the judge?"

"Sure, but I'll have to de-ice the ski-plane. Hard telling if anyone's plowed in Laugvik yet. Meet me at Jordan's hangar, say eleven."

"You're on," I said. I think Toby knew how much it meant to me beating the crook back to the village. A moral victory. Anything to establish bragging rights, a vocal domination if nothing else to squelch the clever jeers of the locals. I'd cut back on Dad's Christmas present to pay Toby. Marguerite would let me pay for the seal skin slippers with two installments and, besides, Dad would love the story behind the slippers now that he'd been doubly
involved in my latest caper- as the recipient of a gift and a presence in my dream. The old boy would break up over that one. He'd never befriended a public official, besides me, in his life!