

Chapter Three

In the Bush

1957-1959

Our move to Tanana set a pattern for our family migrations, one in which Mom was left with us children to pack up and bring in tow. Prior to moving out of our Anchorage home, Mom and Dad had purchased a year's supply of Kix[®] cereal, canned peas and green beans, powdered eggs, Jello[®] mix, soup, cake mixes, instant potatoes, flour and laundry detergent. Of course, Mom was the one who had estimated how much a "year's worth" was. And *she* painstakingly labeled and addressed every box of the \$1,000 worth of goods that were piled mountain high in our living room. All these were hauled, along with our household items, to the train station and transported to Nenana (Nee-NA-na), where they were loaded onto a barge.¹ In the ice-free window from June through September, these lumbering flat-bottomed vessels chugged up and down the Yukon River, the lifeline for the villagers living along its banks.

Mom delighted in our new home in the village. The broad living room window captured the glint of the wide Yukon River running before it. After awhile its perpetual motion became a familiar backdrop to our lives. Ruth and I squinted, trying to see the island Dad told us lay across the half-mile of water. From the kitchen window, opposite this panorama, we could see airplanes gaining altitude above the spruce trees after they lifted off the airstrip. We sisters ran around the three bedrooms and tested the green, prickly living room couch and chairs. Mark joined us to hover at Mom's elbows as she inspected the modern bottled gas stove and automatic washer and dryer. I was starting to feel more excited and less sad about this relocation.

After sharing space with the Carlsons in Anchorage, this house seemed enormous! But without the furnishings provided with the house, it would have been empty. At this point, all we had were the clothes in our two suitcases. Again, we were without toys and bicycles. And Mom had bare cupboards and an empty pantry. Every day we looked upriver for the barge to bring us the rest of our home. *Finally*, after ten days, we heard what we thought was an earthquake. Instead, it was the throbbing of the barge's engine, audible well before we saw it. Boxes and pallets were dumped without ceremony, crowding the shore like a shipwreck until owners identified and hauled away their cargo – not always an easy task.

Before leaving Anchorage, Dad sold the Chevy. Almost everything in the village was accessible by foot. Besides, we'd heard how the temperatures

¹ The *Tanana*, *Yukon*, *Yutanana* and *Taku-Chief* ran the Yukon during that time.

plummeted in the winter. After our Anchorage experiences, Mom and Dad didn't want the additional hardship of cajoling a frozen vehicle into action when it wasn't absolutely necessary. So, for this situation, most likely Mom and Dad used the hospital ambulance to transport our things to the house, or borrowed a truck – scarce as they were – from some other source.

In the first week of September, the bell clanged at the dilapidated Tanana Day School.² The white building was so close to our duplex that before the bell had ceased its clangor, Ruth and I could have run from buttered toast to opening exercises. But Ruth didn't want to run *to* school. Even though we shared one of the two classrooms, Ruth cried with anxiety as we walked hand-in-hand in our first-day-of-school dresses. We'd barely arrived in this very strange place and knew no one – a terrifying prospect for a timid girl such as Ruth, and even a fairly bold one like me. It didn't matter that our house was nearby.

We lined up with the rest of the children before going inside; first and second graders in one line, and third through eighth in the other. A few curly-headed blonds from CAA families stood out in the predominantly dark-haired group. The large room, with its tall ceilings and high windows, was divided by a large double door, creating separate teaching areas. Two teachers ushered us inside. I was relieved to see that Miss Bortel, the younger, friendlier one, would be my teacher, rather than the austere older one with her hair knotted in a bun.

After my first day of school, I skipped home gaily to tell Mom about Miss Bortel, who made me want to return the next day. Ruth wasn't so elated. She felt overwhelmed by her extroverted teacher's enthusiasm. Mom must have been perplexed that one of her grade schoolers felt comfortable in a new place, while the other was in tears. And, she must have blinked back tears of despair when she thought about trying to keep Mark from tumbling down the riverbank into the churning water just fifty feet across the narrow road.

Dad may have “dragged us along” on his quest for the *real* Alaska, but before long, all of us had embraced village life. We began to learn the culture and joined in community events. From the beginning, Mom shared tea with the Native women in their one and two-room cabins, where babies swung from hammocks in the corners. Hot water boiled on wood stoves fashioned from 55-gallon oil barrels that were turned on their sides and fitted with scrap iron legs.

² After grade 8, Native children could go to Mt. Edgecumbe Vocational (boarding) School in Sitka. They suffered from homesickness, and in early years were expected to adapt to a white culture, including language, foods, and “civilized” social behavior.

A flat piece of metal attached to the top served as cooking surface. The cups of strong, steaming tea sat on wooden crates or Blazo³ boxes. Mom, skilled in embroidery and crochet, paid rapt attention when the women showed her colorful beadwork flowers on moose-skin slippers and rabbit fur edging on soft moose-skin mittens. Later, she asked an old-timer, affectionately known by everyone as Grandma (Maggie) Elia, to sew red-fox furs onto our parkas.

Mom invited these neighbors for coffee and homemade cinnamon rolls, and for evening meals as well. Regardless of race, culture, and living situations, they shared interests in cooking, child-rearing, and sewing. Together, they talked about daily living – obtaining groceries, preparing wild meat and dealing with extreme weather.

I quickly integrated with my classmates. Sally, an Athabascan girl, became my best friend. We baked chocolate drop cookies and played with dolls at my house, then walked toward her cabin at the other end of the village, where, in summer, her mother would be slicing fish to hang on horizontal poles to dry. Along the way, we stuck our faces in the fragrant wild roses, inhaling quickly, and sucking the petals up against our noses.

Always reserved and cautious, Ruth did not make friends easily, but she, otherwise, settled into village life and seemed content playing with our electric train set in the basement and riding her bike outdoors. And, as always, we had each other to play with dolls, dishes, stuffed animals, coloring books, and, of course, our farm animals.

We'd barely arrived in Tanana when Mom excitedly packed up moose burgers, homemade buns, Kool-Aid,[®] and marshmallows. She was the quintessential picnic queen and loved gathering twigs and sticks to make a fire, smelling food dripping and sizzling over the crackling yellow-orange blaze, and sharing the camaraderie of friends and family in the fresh outdoors.

Sometimes, we'd head upriver in the Gronning's motorboat to a sandy island. Roy and Margie were an arresting pair: she was a tiny woman, less than five feet tall, he a blonde Swede towering over six feet. They lived as simply as the Natives, getting water from a hole through the river ice in the winter, using kerosene lamps, heating with a barrel woodstove, and running to an outhouse. Often times, we'd invite Anna Bortel or one of the hospital's nurses to join us. Then we'd pile into the red hospital ambulance and rumble off to Picnic Point, seven miles west on a high bluff overlooking the river. Literally at the end of the road, it offered spectacular views of the island and miles beyond.

³ Brand of white gas.

Once moose season opened, Dad used after-work hours to go after our winter meat supply. He'd grabbed a bologna sandwich and his .300 Magnum rifle and walk to the river shore, where the J-3 rocked on the water. He'd hop onto the right float, hand-propped the engine,⁴ pushed the airplane into the river's current, and climbed inside. Without much effort, he bagged a moose for our family. Then he took Roy Gronning to hunt, then the village chief, Alfred Grant. With the cramped space in the small plane, Roy's Paul Bunyan size and the mass of meat and skin that make up a 900-pound moose, a kill required repeated jaunts back and forth to pack the meat home.

Mom could see the plane from the living room window as it lifted off the river, and later as it plopped back down in a spray of water. We children would crowd around her at the living room window, our knees against the back of the scratchy couch and our arms crossed over the backrest. More often than she liked, she observed with concern as Dad fought into the wind and rain. She watched landings with equal apprehension as the fragile aircraft bounced like a kite in the air until he could force it to settle down onto the soon-to-be-frozen river. Even if she didn't see his plane, she paid attention to the *sound* of his J-3. Without realizing it, we children also tuned into the unique sound of the various airplanes landing, taking off, and passing overhead, and we learned to distinguish Dad's airplane from the others.

I could feel and hear Mom's anxiety, but I don't remember being *worried* about Dad – he always made it back safely. With cliff-hanging confidence he'd relate what happened.

Mom felt acutely the lack of dairy products, eggs, fryers, pork chops, and produce. She struggled to find variety in a daily diet of moose meat. Ruth, Mark, and I grew up believing that Spam[®] slices dipped in egg, rolled in crushed cornflakes and fried crisp was a house special. Mom wrote home:

Monday we were given Grouse hen that one of the construction men had shot. I dipped them in milk, then flour, and deep fat fried chunks. Oh, it was such good eating for a change from moose. Have I mentioned that I'm using powdered eggs? It makes baked foods heavier than with fresh eggs and it smells like soy-meal. I don't see how any of you would like eating here. You'd want to bring a case of eggs, a couple gallons of cream, milk, and butter. Fairbanks eggs are so old that whites run all over the skillet and the yolk is so deep orange and thick.

⁴ "Hand-propping" is starting the engine by hand. After turning on the ignition, the propeller is spun by a swing of the arm until the engine starts.

By mid-October, the river was getting thick. Bumpy blobs of ice flowed down the center, and an advancing ledge of thickening ice formed along the water's edges. One morning, Mom drew back the drapes to palpable stillness. The flow in the river's center had stopped. The river was frozen solid. Ruth and I climbed onto the couch and draped ourselves over the back to look out the window, eying the transformation curiously.

The Yukon doesn't freeze into a smooth ribbon-like sheet the way a skating rink or a lake does. Its powerful current smashes huge wedges of ice together, some rising perpendicular as other frozen masses push from behind. Our world had changed overnight. Other people live with the constants of ocean tides, afternoon mountain showers, or cows following each other single-file to a barn at milking time. We expected subconsciously to see the reliable backdrop of moving water in front of our house as we went about our lives. Even though we knew the river would freeze, it caught us off guard. For the other villagers, freeze-up was just part of the natural ebb and flow of their seasons. For us, it was as if we'd awakened on a new planet.

Mark was now safe – from drowning in the river at least – and regardless of the strangeness, Mom didn't have one of her worries anymore. She had survived the summer without losing him in the river, but it was not that Mark didn't get wet. Although later in life he hated plumbing projects, at this stage plumbing fascinated him, and he drenched himself several times a day. The toilet could entertain him for hours, much to Mom's dismay.

Rigors brought out the best in Mom. She adeptly took on the challenge of blending the known with the unknown. In temperatures 50 degrees below zero, she organized a caroling group of a dozen children and adults. In a letter to her parents, she mentioned, "We had to watch our noses and lungs so they would not get frost bitten." No joke.

Ruth, Mark and I disregarded the weather as well. We bundled up and played outside. When Mom or Dad accompanied us, we turned the frozen river into our playground. Jumbled ice masses had frozen into a grotesquely fascinating landscape. The hospital staff smoothed out a section on the ice with a D-8 Caterpillar⁵ tractor, and the entire village ran down the banks for ice-skating. The clear, dark depths of ice showed vertical cracks, but if a multi-ton chunk of machinery could run up and down without breaking through, then no one doubted it would hold 80-pound children and 160-pound adults.

⁵ Alaskans refer to all heavy equipment bulldozers as "Cats."

Two bonfires on the bank shone through the perpetual darkness, and skaters huddled around to warm tingling fingers and defrost lashes and noses. Their thick moose-skin mittens didn't prevent their holding a cup of coffee or roasting a hot dog. Sometimes, the aurora borealis played overhead in spectacular ever-changing curtains of green, blue and crimson. These mysterious events and other experiences in Tanana were deeply satisfying for me, and, as much as the Kansas farm spelled security and comfort, Tanana's untamed and remote nature found a place in my heart and being. This might not have happened if I wasn't bent toward curiosity or an appreciation for the outdoors – and snow.

A grand exploration for me was to hike with Dad across the river to the island. He was always so busy taking care of patients, hunting, or discussing village issues with the chief, that spending time with him, especially alone, was a rare treat. I wanted to be like him, daring and strong. Someone whose everyday life merited story-telling. On a sparkling cold day, the two of us set off across the rugged river icescape, working our way through snowdrifts and around pressure heaves. We floundered across a winter wonderland.

“Look Daddy!” I exclaimed, gesturing to the myriad of irregular, snow-frosted ice shapes. Occasionally we looked back. As the buildings shrank, the village panorama expanded. We could see the high ridge of Picnic Point to the west, the belfry of the Episcopal Church in the middle of the village, and Mission Hill rising into a bluff to the east. A slogging half-mile later, we reached the island. After being confined for months within a mile or two along one shoreline, I experienced this mini-trek as traveling to a faraway country.

At this time of the year, the sun was barely lifting its face above the horizon. Official daylight hours ranged from after 10 A.M. to around 1:30 P.M. – but only on clear days. On overcast days, it didn't even open an eye. We craved sunlight, even if the sun only climbed to tree-top height. Yet temperatures plunged on clear days and “warmed” on cloudy days, because the dense clouds held the heat onto the land; 20 degrees below zero still felt better than 50 below.

Dad's medical field trips could only take place within these slivers of daylight. Not only did the daylight and weather throw roadblocks into his medical care, but keeping his airplane alive was another matter. Engine oil would freeze, frost would form life-killing ice on the wings, and a heat lamp to keep the plane thawed could start a fire and destroy the entire plane. Most likely though, Dad did not view these aspects as adversity, but as a *challenge*. These were the kinds of things a true Alaskan would brag about. That was Man against Nature.

Besides using his airplane for medical work, Dad used it for the good of the community. Giving back to people around them was a fundamental part of

his and Mom's characters. Among many other things, he brought in moose or caribou for potlatches. This Alaska Native celebration included a meal, dancing, and gifts to commemorate a special event. Such community activities took place in the log Community Hall. Guests arrived around 6:00 P.M. and seated themselves with their backs to the wall, on wooden benches around the perimeter of the large room. A three- or four-foot wide oil cloth runner was rolled out on the floor in front of them. Latecomers sat on the floor, across the runners, facing the people on the benches.

Our family usually sat cross-legged on the wood-slab floor. Initially, we were surprised to see the servers walking down the *middle* of the runners. Some of the men carried containers made from five-gallon Blazo cans to hold the soup, which consisted of moose or other game, canned vegetables, and macaroni. Everyone brought along personal eating utensils for soup, fruit cocktail, and chunks of boiled meat. Mom, Anna, and Margie Gronning added salt shakers. Large round Pilot Boy crackers⁶ followed, along with butter, tea, gum, and cigarettes. I looked forward to these occasions, and after awhile we all matter-of-factly picked moose hair out of the flat, salt-free soup, and took in stride the thick smell of fish, perspiration, fur skins and wood smoke. What mattered was that we were accepted by these people, who liberally allowed us to share in their culture.

⁶ The blue-and-white boxed Sailor Boy Pilot Bread is not really from a risen loaf, but a three-inch round, thick, flat, saltless cracker made by Interbake, Inc., in Tacoma, WA. Today, this Alaska staple, made without eggs or oil so it can never become rancid, is still prized by bush pilots, fisherman, school children, and teething toddlers. It can be spread with peanut butter, seal oil, smoked salmon, cheese, or anything else that suits one's fancy. It calms a sea sick stomach and morning sickness—and it can be used as a Frisbee®.