

*A True Story*  
**fatty legs**

10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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**annick press**

toronto • berkeley

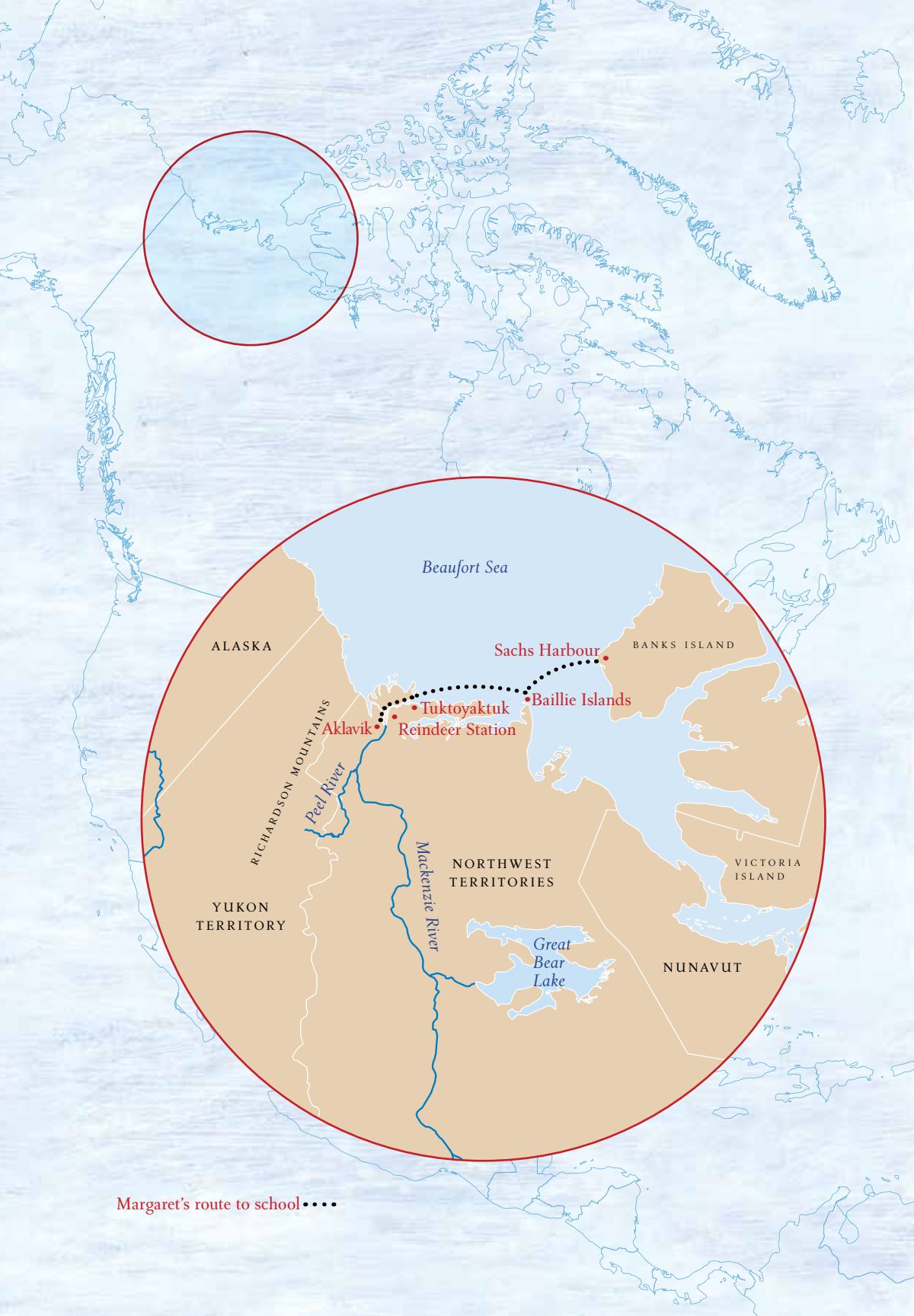


Olemaun, who was later called Margaret, at home on Banks Island. Here she stands (on the right) with two of her younger sisters, Elizabeth and Mabel.

## *Introduction*

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



Margaret's route to school.....

## Chapter ONE

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

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



*See photo  
on page 92.*



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

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

“What’s a rabbit?” I asked Rosie in our language, Inuvialuktun.

“It’s like a hare,” she told me, lifting her eyes from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.



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

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

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

“What was it like?”

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

“The outsiders’ school.”

“I don’t know. You ask too many questions,” she said. Her face grew dark in the light of the coal oil lamp.

She closed the book and looked away.

“It must have been exciting to live with the outsiders.”

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

“But they taught you how to read. . .”

Rosie was silent.

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

“They cut our hair because our mothers weren’t there to braid it for us.”

“I don’t need my mother to braid my hair. I can do it myself.”

“They’d cut it anyway. They always cut the little ones’ hair.”

“I’m not that little.”

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

“Oh, well. It’s only hair.”

“It isn’t just your hair, Olemaun. They take everything,” she said, slipping her feet inside her kamik.



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

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



See photo  
on page 93.

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

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

“No,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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



*See photo  
on page 93.*



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

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

“The outsiders do not teach you how to hunt,” he said, pointing his knife at the fox he was about to skin. “They only use your knowledge of making snares for their own profit and send you to gather the animals from *their* traplines. They do not teach you how to cure meat and clean fish so that you can live off of the land. They feed you cabbage soup and



See photo  
on page 94.

porridge. They do not teach you how to make parkas and kamik,” he said, eyeing the beautifully crafted Delta braid on my parka and the embroidered, fur-lined boots on my feet. “They make you wear their scratchy outsiders’ clothes, which keep out neither the mosquitoes nor the cold. They teach you their songs and dances instead of your own. And they tell you that the spirit inside of you is bad and needs their forgiveness.”

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

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

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

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

One day in late June, I looked up from staring at the book I was so desperate to read and saw that the enormous splintering chunks of ice had left enough of a gap to allow us passage. I slammed the book shut, sped down the hill, and ran along the rocky shore as fast as I could—which was fast, because my legs were muscular and strong. I was determined and ready to ask again.

“Father, Father, please, Father. . . *Pleeese*, can I go to school this year?” I huffed in heavy breaths, darting through the small groups of men who were loading the schooners for the journey.

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

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

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

“Please,” I said again. “Please.”

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

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



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

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

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

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

I turned to run and tell my mother the news, but my father reached for me and pulled me in. He held me in his arms for a long time, the fur of his parka pressed



against my face, so that I could hardly breathe. When he finally let go, I did not give him a single moment to change his mind. Even faster than I had run to the shore, I ran back up to my mother, who was in our tent packing up the belongings we would need for the journey.

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

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

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



*See photo  
on page 94.*