

Prologue

In the summer of 1981 I flew to Sachs Harbour on Banks Island. I had intended to spend time on the tundra with Susie Tikalik, my adopted Eskimo mother, her granddaughter Bella, and Bella's baby son, Vernon. I had just seen the family two years earlier when we had all gone fishing and hunting at Fish Lakes. It was an incredibly beautiful day in the arctic: the ice had just gone out of the harbour and we had to push the icebergs away with our paddles. I vowed to return. I remember Susie's last words as translated by Bella were, "Next time

attack because they were tied to a sled anchored in the ice . . . and they were no match for four polar bears.

Susie didn't panic. She swung the seal hooks around and around her head, making them sing. They were brightly polished and glistened in the sun.

Then she crouched low, making coarse, guttural noises that rose to a shout as she moved slowly toward the bears. A few yards away they stopped and stared at this strange apparition. They turned and shambled away.

Three weeks after I met Susie I went roaming with her on what was to be her last caribou hunt. I thought I would capture some of the traditional romance of the Arctic. With Bella to act as interpreter, I would walk the tundra with Susie, camp out on caribou skins, share dried seal meat and tea and pack our kill home by dog team. Our only link with modernity would be matches and a rifle.

Nothing turned out as expected. Gone forever were the igloos, the kayaks, the harpoons. Now native people drive snowmobiles, use outboard motors, and are taken on government or oil company planes to hunt their game. The white man's technology has overwhelmed Eskimo traditions.

Plans changed even before we started. Most caribou at this time were still 200 miles north of the settlement. "Granny says we can find caribou closer if we go to Johnson's Point," Bella reported. "And Edith wants to come, too."

Edith Hoagak was Susie's daughter, a plump, middle-aged mother of four who had been widowed 12 years ago when her husband's canoe overturned and he died in the frigid water.

I arranged for the four of us and five

come for the summer. We will camp if I am still well."

I came but Susie Tikalik died in Sachs Harbour September 19, 1980. Our fishing trip had been her last. Bella and Vernon had gone to Paulatuk.

Susie did not speak English. I did not speak Inuktitut. We communicated only by smile and gesture and touch. But I felt a bonding that transcends other barriers. Edith Hoagak, her daughter, said simply, I miss my Mum." Edith, so do I. I print this story of our first hunt together in Susie's memory.

dogs to fly with Northward Airlines to Johnson Point, a winter base for oil exploration about 150 miles to the northeast. We would hike on from there.

At the Sachs Harbour airstrips the unexpected happened in earnest. Susie had exchanged her usual long, fur-trimmed attigi for a pair of jeans and a faded blue nylon jacket — hardly photogenic attire for a film of the Great Caribou Hunt.

Then while we were loading the DC3 she decided that her fifth dog was too mean to take aboard so that meant she wouldn't take the sled but would make canvas packsacks for the dogs. The four dogs were hauled into the plane by

their chains and tied to upturned, empty seats along the aisle.

Our intention was to camp overnight at Johnson Point base, enquire from pilots about the possible caribou areas, and set off early next morning with the dogs.

But Johnson Point hospitality overwhelmed us all. Mac the helpful, jovial type in charge of the radio installations drove our gear to the base. Cece, the foreman, insisted we spend the night not in our tent on the tundra but in a large orange trailer set high off the ground on movable tracks. The dogs were tied up behind it.

The trailer was very comfortable. It had three rooms, eight beds, a fridge full of canned food, pop, fresh fruit and vegetables — even a freezer full of salmon slices. Another empty trailer next door provided washrooms, showers and hot, running water. A few yards away, in the mess hut, we were offered three-course meals.

Elijah, a former trapper from the Mackenzie Delta was the only Eskimo in camp. He hurried over, beaming enthusiastically, with clean sheets to make up the beds.

The way they settled in was a fascinating mixture of the old and the new.

They took their boots off at the door — and washed the dishes left in the crowded sink — but, spurning chairs, sat crosslegged on the floor to eat. Not

Susie's face was tattooed. She had never left Banks Island (top left). Edith, Bella, Susie, and the author, leave Johnson's Point on the caribou hunt.

