

Julia Christensen

The Komatik Lesson

I have to get out of bed early today; there is so much I have to do. Louise is still sleeping in the other bed beside me. I lie for a while, watching the silhouette of her pregnant belly rising and falling under the blankets. Her mouth open, she snores softly. Lately, she has been having trouble sleeping, so I do not want to wake her. She often has nightmares about her boyfriend, Jesse, who has done some terrible things. That's why she is living here now, to be away from him. One night last week, she woke us both up with her screaming. I reached across the space between our beds and held her hand while she cried; her palm was cold with sweat.

I sit up and pull the covers off my legs. Quietly, quietly, I tap my bare feet along the cold floor, searching for my moccasins with my toes. They were a gift from Louise when we first became roommates. In her community, the women are known for their beadwork. I once saw a show on CBC about it. Louise recently told me she was in that show, that the TV crews came to film her and her mother, beading in their living room.

I pull a sweatshirt over my head and tiptoe out of the room, careful not to make too much noise as I open and close the bedroom door.

In the kitchen, Betty is frying dough in the skillet. Beside her on the counter is a huge pile of already-fried bannock, grease soaking into the paper towel underneath. I shuffle in, say good morning, and take my favourite mug from the drying rack beside the sink. The coffee pot is already half empty. We usually go through two whole pots before 9 a.m.

"Here," Betty says, producing a small piece of dry meat from the pouch of her sweatshirt. "My boy brought some to me yesterday. Not much, but I saved you a piece."

I smear some lard on the dry meat, like Betty taught me to, and put it on a plate next to a piece of bannock. With my plate and coffee in hand, I sit down at the table and look out the window. The smoke from the furnace pipes on the houses across the street floats up into the sky in a stick-straight line. It must be cold today. If it is this cold here, I think, imagine how cold it must be at home. I picture my mother, stepping outside her house for the

first time today. "*Alaappa!*" she will say to herself when the wind first hits her face. "Is it ever cold!" Then I think of my daughter Jessica, following her grandmother out the door, probably dressed in just a thin jacket and jeans. The kids at home never dress properly for the weather.

"What do you want from Yellowknife?" I asked Jessica when I spoke with her on the phone yesterday.

"Anything Hannah Montana," she told me right away. Then she paused for a moment, thinking. "And Tim Hortons doughnuts."

"Some goldfish," Norman replied to the same question. "And Tim Hortons doughnuts ... especially those kind with the rainbow sprinkles."

"We need a new cooler, because your brother gave the other one away," Mom said. "Can't go to camp this spring if we don't have a cooler."

"And I need some more embroidery thread for Jessica's mukluks ... you just pick the colours," her voice trailed off in thought. "And oh, my girl, some doughnuts might be nice. Bring some for your brother and his family, too."

As I eat my breakfast, I go through the list of places I must visit today: Walmart, Tim Hortons, Auntie's house, and maybe JJ Hobbies to pick up a goldfish. I am not sure about that last one; the other time I tried to bring a goldfish home, it died while we were on the plane. What did we do before these stores, I wonder? As a little girl, most of my clothes came from the Northern Store, the Eaton's catalogue, or those big garbage bags filled with donations from ladies down south who would send up their kids' old clothes. We sure didn't have the Internet. I can remember the day we got our first TV, with only three channels even! These days, if Jessica and Norman Jr. can't get on the computer to send messages to their friends or play games, they get upset. And whenever I go visiting my aunts, it seems one of my cousins is always playing Internet poker. It's just the way things are these days.

Today, I will also see my cousin, Sarah. And Paul. My Paul, but now he is really Sarah's Paul. I reach down and rub my belly, which is still a bit loose from carrying him. Even though he was born over two months ago, my breasts are still producing some milk. At night they often ache so badly, I wake up from the discomfort. I know Paul will be happy with Sarah and her family. But the thought of saying goodbye tomorrow causes pain so deep inside of me, I almost do not want to see him today at all. The bannock in my mouth has no taste at all this morning.

After breakfast, Sarah arrives to meet me. Paul is fast asleep inside the *amautiq*. I poke my face inside to look at him, his cheeks even chubbier than they were when I saw him two days ago. I can feel the warmth of

his little body through the thick fabric of the hood; his back rises and falls underneath my hand with his breath. My breasts ache as I breathe in his sweet smell; the pain deep inside of me returns. I try to swallow, to keep it all down.

Sarah catches my eye. "Cousin," she says, "You know it is better like this."

I've wanted babies since I was a little girl. When I was still very young, I was put in charge of my even younger cousins. When we were out at camp in the spring, goose hunting, I would care for the little ones while the men were out and the women were busy sewing and making lunch. "Little mother," my aunties would call me.

When I was sixteen, I became a mother for the first time. Norman and I had only been going out together for a few months when I got pregnant, but we were already so in love. The month I had to spend alone in Inuvik, waiting for the baby to come, was one of the loneliest in my whole life. I missed Norman, my parents, my aunties, my cousins. I will never forget how excited Norman looked when I arrived back home with Jessica in the *amautiq*. He was so excited to hold her, to touch the soft fuzz of her hair, like the newborn feathers of a tiny gosling.

My mother's house was already too full, so Jessica and I moved into Norman's parents' house while we waited for a house to become available through the local housing office. Norman's house was full, too, with his parents, two brothers, and an uncle who slept in the living room. Eight of us in total. It was very crowded in the house, especially when Norman's brothers would go on a drink and the rest of us would try to stay out of their way. Soon after we moved in, Norman started to drink, too. When he drank, he would get depressed and was rough with me, even if I had Jessica in my arms. One night, he came into the room where Jessica and I were sleeping and put a knife to my neck. I remember sensing Jessica's sleeping body so close beside me, softly breathing in the darkness. When I started to cry, begging him to leave me alone, Jessica startled out of sleep and starting crying, too, louder and louder.

"Shut up!" Norman whispered forcefully. Then again, louder, "I said, SHUT UP!" He dropped the knife on the floor beside me and picked Jessica up, shaking her. "Shut up! Shut up!" he yelled. At that moment, his uncle burst into the bedroom and grabbed the baby from Norman's grasp. He handed me the baby and then wrestled Norman to the ground. I did not even wait to see what would happen. I threw on my parka, wearing only my pyjamas underneath, tucking Jessica inside against my chest, her tiny body wrapped only in a diaper. Outside, the cold air bit my face as I

ran down to the road to my parents' house. I struggled to run, my bare feet inside my boots made it awkward, but I made it to their front door. Inside, my brothers were still awake watching television. I remember seeing their faces, like small moons illuminated by the blue television light.

My parents' house was more crowded than Norman's. My old room now housed my auntie and uncle who had just moved back from Inuvik. My parents, my two brothers, my sister, and two cousins who my parents had recently adopted, all lived in the three-bedroom house. Jessica and I had to sleep on the living room floor, while my two brothers slept above us on the couches.

Norman came around often to apologize. I did not want to see him, but I did not want to keep Jessica away from her father, either. His mother would often come to visit and ask me to come back to live with them. "My boy is a different person when he's drinking," she would say. "He's been rough with me, too, but I've been good enough to forgive." When my aunties came to visit, they said they felt sorry for Norman, sorry that he was now alone. It's not right for a father to be away from his baby, Auntie Rose said as she sorted embroidery thread in her lap. He's been through a lot, Auntie Muriel added. I started to feel very guilty then, like I was a bad person for not giving him more chances.

It was not long before Jessica and I moved back in with Norman and his family. Shortly after that, we finally got our own place through the housing office. By then, I was pregnant with Norman Jr. I was very hopeful that with our own place, and the extra space, things between Norman and I might be better. I put a lot of work into fixing up our new home. I bought some fabric at the Northern Store and sewed curtains for all the windows, with pillows for the couches to match. I made a needlepoint wall hanging for above the kitchen table that said "Home Sweet Home," like ones I had seen in magazines. Looking around our place in those early days, I sometimes felt at home.

Once Norman Jr. was born, though, things just seemed to get worse and worse. Norman was fine when he was not drinking, but whenever he went on a drink, he would come home ready to pick a fight. Once, he put my head through the wall while Norman Jr. and Jessica stood by and watched, terrified, their little bodies shaking.

Lying in bed at night, all I could think of was how badly I wanted to get out. For a long time, that is what I really wanted. But I did not know where else I could go. There was no room for the three of us anywhere else in the community. Besides, anywhere we could go, Norman could find us, and everyone around me would tell me to go back to him. People would

talk. I already knew from the last time I left him what it was like to feel people looking at me at the Northern Store, watching but saying nothing. Their silence made my ears burn.

When I got pregnant with Paul, I knew we were even more trapped. But when I was four months pregnant, Norman beat me so badly that the RCMP came to arrest him. The social worker also came to the house. She told me that she could not force me to leave but that Jessica and Norman Jr. would have to go stay with my parents. She could not allow them to be there anymore. She told me that when the baby was born, the baby could not stay there either. She told me that I could go to a place in Yellowknife until I had my baby, but that Jessica and Norman Jr. would not be able to join me while I was staying there.

"You don't have much choice, I'm afraid," she said, her hand on my arm. "Either you go, or I have to place the kids in care."

"It's too dangerous here for them and you know it," she added, looking around at all the holes in the walls.

I was afraid to go to Yellowknife. I was afraid to leave my children behind. Leaving my community meant leaving everything: my family, my cousins, everyone I knew in the whole world. But I started to think that moving to Yellowknife might be good for me. There were more houses there, more jobs. There were others from my community who had gone to Yellowknife and it had worked out for them. I could have the baby, find a job and soon Jessica and Norman Jr. could move to Yellowknife, too. I could have a fresh start, I thought. I thought of a movie I had seen on TV once about a woman who left her husband because he hit her; she left him and made a new life for herself. She got a new hairdo, some new clothes, a new apartment and a new job and everything. I imagined something like that for myself in Yellowknife. I had always wanted to work in a school. Maybe I could get a job as a teacher's assistant. Jessica could take dance classes in Yellowknife, and Norman Jr. could play hockey. I imagined myself in a new car, picking them up from their friend's house on Saturday afternoon. I had many dreams for how our new life in Yellowknife would be.

Sarah and I open the front door; a cold burst of air hits my face. Cars drive by, their exhaust billowing like huge clouds in the frozen air. At home, you do not see so many cars. There are a few trucks in the community, and a taxi that Georgie drives around when he is in town, but most people get around on their skidoos or on ATVs. Even then, there is usually not far to go, except when you're going out on the land. Even after living here for almost eight months, I still get nervous when I try to cross the street. I can never tell if someone is going to stop for me.

We start walking. The snow crunches under our feet as we go. Paul is still fast asleep in the *amautiq*. Every now and I then, I reach out and place my mittened hand on his little back. When I see you next, you'll be a little boy, I think to myself. The lump in my throat returns like a sharp stone.

When I first arrived in Yellowknife, it was late summer. It had been quite cold at home, but here, there were still some green leaves on the trees. On the taxi ride to the women's centre, I saw the remnants of summer flower gardens in the front yards of many homes. I can do this, I thought. I can live here. The taxi passed by the hospital, McDonald's, then house after house after house. The taxi driver told me that there are 18,000 people in Yellowknife. Imagine that, I thought. 18,000 people! At home, there are just a few hundred. I know everyone by name. I know who they are related to. There are no secrets, because everyone knows everybody's business. At that moment, Yellowknife struck me as a place where there might be many secrets. There were far too many people to really keep track of. At least I won't be lonely, I thought.

The taxi driver told me he was from a country in Africa, a name that started with an S. He was the second black man I had ever met in my life. The first was the old principal at the school at home. He lived in my community for almost ten years before he moved back to his home in Nova Scotia. He once taught my mother to make cakes out of fish at the church cooking club. He was well-liked in the community; it was almost as though he was a part of it. In the end, though, it wasn't his home, and he wanted to be closer to his family when he retired. The whole community went to the airport to say goodbye to him when he left.

Sarah and I keep walking along Franklin Avenue towards the swimming pool. The cold air is harsh against my face and I try to pull my coat tighter around my shoulders to keep me warm. When we reach the pool, we cut across the parking lot and make our way down to the Frame Lake trail to take the shortcut to Walmart. I worked at Walmart for a few weeks after Paul was born and it is the route I took every day to get there and back. At first, I tried to get a job at a school, but when I visited the school board office, they told me that I would need some previous work experience, which I did not have. There weren't really many steady jobs back at home, and I had been so busy caring for my babies. The secretary at the school board office suggested I start in the service sector. "Like housekeeping at a hotel. Or something at Walmart," she explained.

Even though I had never really worked before, the manager at Walmart said he would take a chance on me. "Besides," he said, "we have such a hard time finding good staff. You have honest eyes. I'd be a fool to not at

least give you a try." I could not start work right away, though, because I did not have a social insurance number. The manager said I needed one of those to work, so I had to go to the blue government building downtown to apply for one. A week or so later, I had my first shift in the ladies' clothing department at Walmart.

Before my shift began, the ladies' clothing supervisor pulled me aside. "Look," she said, "I've had people like you work here before. You better be on time and if I smell alcohol on you, I will tell the manager immediately. I'm not racist or anything, but I know what people are like around here, so it's up to you to change my mind." Heat rose to my face, almost like the heat I felt when Norman would threaten me. I tried hard to hold back the tears I felt building at the backs of my eyes. "I won't be late," I promised, "and I don't drink."

"Well, we'll just see about that," she said, her eyes passing over me, up and down. "Now come let me show you how to stock the bras."

Those three weeks at Walmart were like a whiteout. Like the whiteouts at home, the kind that lose people out on the land. I could not see where I was going, where I had been, even where I was. It reminded me of the time when I was a little girl, when my mother and I were out visiting my auntie who lives at the edge of town. As we walked home, the weather suddenly changed, snow blowing in faster and thicker until we couldn't see in front of us, or behind us. I could barely make out my mother's shape beside me. I was little and scared. I cried and held tightly to my mother's hand while she felt around her with her free hand and her feet. Eventually, she found our way back to auntie's. Working at Walmart reminded me of this, that same feeling of being lost, of feeling panicked. Except now my mother was far away.

Everything I did there seemed to be wrong, or not fast enough. Or I did not show enough "initiative." I repeated that word over and over in my head so I wouldn't forget it, so I could ask Louise what it meant when I saw her later that day. I felt out of place there under those bright lights, wearing that uniform, stocking all those bras and pantyhose. I began to see my dreams of driving Jessica and Norman Jr. to ballet and hockey practice disappear.

When Lottie, the custom adoptions commissioner who had arranged Paul's adoption by Sarah, found out that I lost my job, she called me at the women's centre. She wanted to take me for Chinese, she said.

"You've got to get back out there and try again," she said. "I'll help you put together a resume. It's a new way of life here, yes, but you can learn it."

While Lottie spoke, I looked out the window. Across the street, two small children chased each other down the sidewalk while a woman pushed a stroller behind them. I wished for my babies more than ever then, to feel their arms around me, to be back home.

At Walmart, Sarah and I walk through the girls' and boys' clothing sections. I find jeans and a Hannah Montana sweatshirt for Jessica, and pants and a long-sleeved shirt for Norman. I buy new running shoes for both of them. In the crafts section, I find embroidery thread in every colour for my mother. I choose some colours specially for Paul, deciding I will make him a pair of mukluks to grow into when I get home. It will be a good project, I think, to keep my mind off of too many other things. In the camping section, I find a good cooler for my mother. Goose hunting season is coming up soon, and she will need this cooler then.

After we check out, we call a cab to come help us with our things. I decide to buy the doughnuts and the goldfish tomorrow on the way to the airport. The cab stops first at Sarah's apartment.

"Wait here a minute, eh?" I tell the driver and get out of the car after Sarah.

"What are you doing, cousin?" she asks.

I tell her that I want to say goodbye now.

"But I'm coming with you to the airport," she says, her face frowning.

No, I say with my eyes. I can't do it. I want to say goodbye now, I plead. She nods yes, she understands.

I open the *amautiq*, where Paul is wide awake. His eyes flash at me, he knows me. My heart aches. He opens his mouth into a big smile and reaches for me with two tiny, mittened hands.

"Goodbye, my boy," I whisper to him, each word sharp as a knife in my throat. A tear drops from my eye onto Paul's little face and I wipe it off. "Be good, my boy," I say.

I cover Paul back up in the *amautiq* and hug Sarah, our cold cheeks touching.

"Cousin," she says, but I turn so she cannot see my face before I run back to the cab, opening and closing the door quickly behind me.

The drive to the women's centre feels longer than usual. I bite down on my hand to keep from sobbing loudly as the tears spill out onto my face, one after the other. The cab driver looks at me from the rear-view mirror and turns up the volume on the radio.

When I get home, I call my mother on the phone. I can hear the noise of the TV in the background, and I imagine her with her legs stretched

out on the floor in front of her, embroidery thread on her lap. When I hear her voice on the phone, I cannot keep it in anymore. I feel it rise up inside me, spilling out of my mouth like a fountain. I want to tell her I am afraid. I want to tell her that I am lonely. I want to tell her I am in pain. I want to tell her all these things, but instead, I say nothing. I just cry. I can hear the women in the kitchen talking, pots clanging, laughter. It's almost suppertime. The smell of caribou stew wafts throughout the women's centre. Louise pokes her head into the telephone room, sees me, and knows to leave.

"My girl," my mother says, her voice cutting through the TV noise at home and the kitchen noise here. "I am going to tell you a story now, one you have never heard before. It's about the day I brought you home to our community, the day you met your father for the first time.

"In those days," she says, "they flew women to Yellowknife to have their babies. Oh boy, I remember that long flight! It was the loneliest time of my life. I became friends with the other ladies at the hospital who were waiting for their babies, too. They were from communities all over the North, as far away as Rankin Inlet. There was one lady there I remember who knew your auntie from the residential school in Inuvik. But even though they became my friends, it wasn't the same, you know.

"My family is what I missed the most," she says. "My family, the land, our country food. Without that, I was not comfortable at all. I was not at home."

After I arrived, my mother couldn't wait to get home. She counted the days. And when she finally returned home, my father, her sisters, and her parents were waiting by the tarmac to meet me.

"I've never seen your father look so happy in my life," my mother says. "But he wouldn't let anyone hold you. Before anyone else had a chance to hold you, he put you down in his *komatik*, and bundled you in a blanket.

"What are you doing, Charlie? I asked him. I was so afraid then, my girl. You looked so tiny and fragile. Your big eyes looked up at me, as though you were asking me, who is this crazy man?" She laughs. "Your aunties and your *nanuk* and *daduk*, they all started arguing with him, asking your father what was he doing?

"But your father, he just ignored them. It was ever cold that day, but he started walking away, dragging you on the *komatik* behind him. Your father has always been a wise man, and so we decided that he must have a reason for doing this. I followed you both home, walking closely behind the sled the entire way. You didn't cry or fuss or nothing.

"When we finally got home, your father picked you up from the *komatik* and brought you inside the house. Later, we watched you sleep, and he told me that he pulled you in the *komatik* to teach you to fend for yourself. He told me we would not always be there to care for you, to keep you warm, and that you needed to learn right away, even as a baby, how to look after yourself.

"My girl, you see? You've learned from your earliest days to be strong."

That night, in the quiet of the night, Louise wakes up to my sobs, muffled in my pillow. I hear her blankets rustle and then she is beside me, sitting on the edge of my bed. I whisper to her, I am afraid. Saying nothing, she nods her head and touches my hair. She has been there. This is the not the first time she has come to stay here. But still, she keeps trying to make it home for good. "Most of us here, we're in the same boat," she says.

In the darkness of that room, Louise cradles me with her body, and I think of how my father told me that in the old days, our people did not get along with one another. "But things have changed, my girl," he had said. "These days, we gotta stick together."

The next morning, Lottie arrives to take me to Tim Hortons, JJ Hobbies, and then the airport.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she asks.

"Yes," I nod.

"What about Norman? Are you going to be safe up there?"

"I don't know ... I don't know what will happen with him," I say. "I'm afraid."

Lottie stares me in the eyes for what seems like forever. Finally, she says, "I know a lot of women just like you, Clara. Women who go back to where they're from, where their exes still are. Some of them just end up right back here. Some end up back in the relationships, back with the abuse, sometimes worse. Believe me, I wish it weren't this way, Clara, but this is what I've seen."

"I know, Lottie," I say, because I do. "But it hasn't worked out for me here. It's just too much for me, too different. There's no place for me here. I just want my girl and my boy, my family. I want to be in the place where I am comfortable."

On the drive along the Old Airport Road, I cradle the bag with the goldfish in it carefully in my hands. I think of Norman Jr.'s aquarium in his room, the way the water bubbles continuously day and night. I think of the way his face looks while he sleeps, his skin aglow with the blue-green light of the aquarium. Out of the window, the big Yellowknife buildings pass

quickly by, the cars and trucks beside us on the road race off to different places. I look down at the tiny goldfish, his little body catching sunlight, scales flashing, and I tell him we are almost home.