

Excerpt: Chapter 3 of *The Kids from Nowhere* (Northwest Books, 2007). This is true story of events that took place in the Siberian Yupik (Eskimo) whaling village of Gambell, on blizzard-swept St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea.

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I spend the rest of the weekend organizing my classroom.

Except it isn't a classroom. It is the library. Except it isn't that, either. The "library" is two sets of tall metal shelving crowded with books other places discarded. Flanking me are ancient textbooks, scientific tomes meaningless to anyone but specialists, and dozens of remaindered romance novels, their covers torn off to indicate that the stores returned them to publishers. All sent here, I figure, for tax reasons.

What little classroom remains is crammed with ten typing desks, each with an IBM typewriter, for a dozen students taking social studies. Unless everyone sits and clacks all period, there will be no way for the kids to take notes, much less open a book without laying it across the machine. The only answer is to put two kids at a table, facing the wall in the only available corner, and have the others put the typewriters under the desks and sit with their feet on them.

Worse, the principal's office window looks into my classroom, giving him an unsubtle control of what I do there. Behind the bookshelves is the secretary's nook, with a telephone that, I will discover to endless irritation, will ring almost all day.

On Monday, the first day of school, we have our first storm. I trudge the mile to the high school through the deep gravel, into 40-knot winds and driving rain and sleet, to find many kids already there, playing with the typewriters. Their feet are in water, the storm having beaten under the door. I frantically pull plugs and mop like a madman as the students sit bemused.

“You’re a new teacher,” a girl says without looking up from her typewriter. Slender and pretty except for a bad complexion, she has the top of the typewriter open and is playing with the ribbon cartridge, clearly intrigued. “You got a name?”

“George.” It is custom, we learned at the interview, to use first names. Only the principal is referred to by last name. “Yours?”

“Londa.”

I check my roll book, discover that she’s a sophomore, and realize that I’ve forgotten to take roll.

A muscular student — Marshall, I will later discover — sits toward the rear of the room. He has his feet up on the desk, up on the typewriter, one arm around a basketball, his face toward the ceiling in a look of studied nonchalance. He wears a tank top, a garment he will don whenever the temperature is above 10 degrees.

“George the janitor,” he says.

“Gonna stay all year?” Londa asks in a neutral voice. “Or quit early.”

“Bet he leaves by Christmas,” Marshall says. He spins the basketball on an index finger.

“I’m not a quitter,” I tell him, loud enough so everyone will hear, and keep mopping.

“Coming back next year?” Londa asks.

“High school teachers never come back,” Marshall says.

“Keenan came back,” Londa tells him.

“He’s not a real teacher,” Marshall says. “He’s a shop teacher.”

As I stick the mop in possibly the corner I feel a headache coming on. “I plan to stay at least five years.”

Marshall brings the basketball down to his forehead. “No one’s that stupid.”

A boy I will come to know as Boone has been standing in the corner, watching everything. He has the chiseled features of a Greek god and the easy grace of a gifted athlete. He sits down, eyeing me with interest. Unlike the rest, he has shown no desire to play with the typewriters.

A straggly haired boy has his T-shirt pulled up and is fondling a nipple. “Five . . . years!” He belches the words, swallowing a huge breath in between.

Lobert, I decide from my roll book. To help me remember his name I think of him as “Lobe,” as in “Lacking in frontal.”

Two boys in the chairs in the corner giggle and put their heads together as if they need to snuggle to control their mirth. “Chip and Dale,” I decide, and much to my delight later find out that one really is named “Dale.”

Marshall starts tossing up the basketball and catching it.

“Put the ball down,” I tell him.

“Why?”

“This isn’t basketball practice. It’s social studies.”

“School’s for basketball,” he says.

“Put the ball under the desk,” I tell him. “Put your typewriter under your desk too.” When I see him glare I add, trying to defuse his temper, “Everyone put the machines under the desks.”

The anger leaves Marshall’s face as the other students start moving their machines. At last he acquiesces and places his typewriter below the desk as well.

“Are you gonna give us straight A’s?” Londa asks. “That’s what our teacher did last year.”

“He only give me B’s,” Lobert says. His typewriter under his desk, he has returned to fondling his nipple. “Cause I punch him out.” He grins a lopsided grin. “After that he *pay* me to be good.”

I gather my chalk and blackboard compass for our first lesson, on earth’s position in space. “This year, you get what you earn.”

“That’s what they all say, at first,” Marshall remarks.

I ignore him. “We’ll start with the solar system. On average, Earth is 93 million miles from the sun.” I inscribe circles on the board and indicate the distance with a dual-ended arrow. “Lobert,” I ask, hoping to embarrass him into paying attention and into not playing with his chest, “how many miles is the earth from the sun?”

He gulps another breath, and belches, “Ninety-three million!”

Chip and Dale giggle and put their arms around each other. Lobert looks around the room for approval. The others ignore him, as do I.

“We call that average distance from the earth to the sun an ‘astronomical unit,’” I tell everyone. “Okay, what’s an astronomical unit?”

Lobert waves a hand in front of my face. “Average distance from the earth to the sun!”

His turnabout astonishes me. He even has his T-shirt down, though he continues to pinch the nipple through the cloth.

“So if the average distance from the earth to the sun is 93 million miles, and an astronomical unit is the average distance from the earth to the sun,” I ask everyone, “then how long” — I hold out my hands as if to indicate length — “is an astronomical unit?”

“I know! I know!” Lobert frantically waves.

No one else seems willing to answer, so I defer to the kid with the nipple.

“April!” he announces.

“April?” I ask.

He cocks his head sideways like that of a curious bird. “It isn’t?” His grin broadens with confidence. “February!” he says. Realizing that isn’t right either, he adds, “Thursday! It’s Thursday!”

Some of the other students groan and roll their eyes. Londa picks up the globe off its crescent base and looks at it appreciatively. “It is really true that the earth goes around the sun?”

“That’s crap,” Marshall says. He leans over and slashes a large X on the globe with a black permanent marker. I grab the globe from Londa, who looks hurt that I’ve taken it away.

“Must you damage school property?” I ask Marshall.

“It’s not *my* property,” he says.

“It’s your school,” I tell him.

“That’s what you say.” He leans back in his chair. “Besides, the sun goes around the earth. It comes up behind the mountain and goes down in the sea. Everyone knows that. This is stupid, man.”

I sit the globe in its rocker and take a flashlight from my desk. I turn off one light and show them the position of the sun, walking around as best I can amid the desks. Most students seem interested. Marshall stares at the ceiling. A tiny girl — Puffin, I will later discover, named after the Bering Sea’s colorful bird that looks like a toucan — has her geography book open, reading. She closes it and, without so much as a glance my way, exits the room.

“Where’re you going?” I ask, rushing to the door.

She doesn’t answer. Just turns the corner in the hallway, and is gone. In exasperation I return to the others. “You can’t leave class without asking,” I tell them.

Lobert gives me a look of disbelief. “We gotta ask to pee?”

A girl says in an incredulous voice, “We gotta ask to fart?” She rolls up a hip as if to demonstrate.

“You gotta . . . oh, never mind.” My head is pounding. “Open your books. Read the first chapter.”

At the interview last year’s principal said, “Sustained silent reading. Have at least 45 minutes of sustained silent reading each day.” He also said, “The kids are passive. They’re just no trouble whatsoever. During hunting season there’s a mystical thing that comes over the boys, and they really need to be out hunting. But they’re never any problem, and the main hunting season isn’t until the end of the school year.”

The kids open their books. Marshall starts dribbling his basketball.

“That’s not reading,” I tell him, my head now a jackhammer.

Marshall flips his book shut. “This isn’t about basketball. And it isn’t about Eskimos. What good is it.”

“It’s about . . . ,” I start to say. But I’m not going to argue with him. I sit down at my desk, not wanting to seem the aggressor but all the while wishing that corporal punishment were still in vogue. No: *capital* punishment. “It’s reading,” I tell him. “That’s what it is.”

“I don’t like reading,” he says.

I concentrate on keeping my face calm. I feel as if I’m standing on a volcano about to erupt. The other kids are eyeing us, seeing who will win this first, all-important confrontation. Lobert eases from his desk and sidles down the hall. I say nothing. Even my eyes don’t speak. If there was one thing I learned in the sales school I attended during part of a summer after high school, it was that silence is retail’s most powerful weapon.

*Maybe he'll leave*, I tell myself hopefully.

“Okay, I’ll read.” Marshall snatches up the book and climbs defiantly onto his desk. “I’ll read up here. Try to stop me,” he snarls, “I’ll throw you through the goddamn window.”

“Just so you’re reading,” I tell him in as business-like tone as I can muster. Secretly, though, I am shaken by the obvious depth of his anger.

To keep what calm I can, I concentrate on wondering about how much of the text the kids understand. All speak English as a second language, and they lack the world knowledge that gives context. Few have been off the island, except perhaps to go to other villages for basketball games or wrestling. The previous principal told me that the kids possess great decoding skills in reading — that is, the ability to sound out words. “But do they know the words’ meanings?” I asked. “How much do they comprehend?” He had changed the subject.

There is a scuffling near the door. I leave my desk and peer around the bookshelves. Puffin is battling with Lobert, who has one arm around her neck, another up under her T-shirt. The fight, though animated, seems as if in slow motion. There is a desperate look in her eyes, but she makes no sound.

I take hold of his shoulder and pull him off her. He balls his right hand into a fist, and his eyes narrow to slits. His hand remains fisted as he breaks into a grin.

“You go to the principal’s office,” I tell him, unsure what to do.

His grin broadens. “Maybe I should kill you, man.”

He ambles off and I turn my attention to Puffin, who has a hand under her T-shirt, rearranging her bra. She has the body of a ten-year-old. I feel that she should be playing with dolls, not having to deal with someone trying to paw her.

“You okay?” I ask.

She sneers at me. “What do you care.”

She goes back to her desk, settles herself, starts reading.

Thankfully, the bell rings. The kids troop out, Marshall dribbling his basketball.

“Five years?” he asks me. “You won’t last five days.”

An older student, wearing glasses and a cap that says *John Deere*, comes down the hall to his locker. He moves with fluid athleticism but without the jive movements some of the other kids, Marshall especially, seem to have copied from black basketball players they have seen on what little TV the village has.

The older student gives Boone, my Greek god student, a high-five, but that too seems without affect.

Marshall nods toward me. “This guy says he’s staying five years.”

The older student smiles, appraising me. “Maybe someone should straightjacket you and put you in a museum. What’s that one called? . . . the Smithsonian?”

“Our teacher last year quit before Easter,” Boone tells me. “The teacher before that lasted all year — but he showed movies all day.”

“Sometimes the same one over and over, all day long,” the older student says.

“Merle and I were in the same class then,” Boone says. “We’re cousins.”

“The Dynamic Duo,” Merle says.

As if on cue Boone pretends to dribble his geography book, then flips it over his back to Merle, who enters the room, springs up and slam-dunks it on the top bookshelf.

“We had one teacher we called ‘Statue,’ Merle says, retrieving the book and handing it back to Boone. “She fell on the ice and then sued the government for not scraping the sidewalks and streets we don’t have.”



“Statue walked a wheelchair to school over the snowdrifts,” Boone adds, “and then sat in it all day. She said our village had crippled her.”

“Statue?” I ask, not making the connection.

“*Statue!*” Boone goes back as if to throw a pass. The old Statue of Liberty play. Merle circles behind Boone and then, in a movement combining football and basketball, takes the handoff and reverse-dunks the book back onto the top shelf, where it teeters.

“Come to the end of America,” Merle says, with an angry laughter. “Give us your inept, your incompetent, your incapacitated.”

Perhaps seeing my confusion, Boone adds, “One of our teachers taught us a unit on the Statue of Liberty.”

“Like maybe it would help us appreciate *America*,” Merle says.

“Regardless, you’ve quite the vocabulary,” I tell him.

The ease that characterized his body language turns to a sense of suspicion. “For an Eskimo, you mean.”

“For anyone in high school,” I tell him. His smile returns, and I add, “Especially someone who speaks English as a second language.” I glance up at the top shelf. “That’s quite a leap you have.”

“Merle can Eskimo-high-kick six-feet-eight,” Boone says.

Perhaps 5 feet, 8 inches tall, Merle jumps up and with both feet expertly knocks the book from the shelf and catches it.

“You’re scheduled for my journalism class, aren’t you?” I check my roll book. A special kid: sports plus scholastic ability. Athletics and academics. After Marshall and Lobert, Merle is a

blessing. “Maybe you should be editor. We might end up with the best school paper in western Alaska.”

“Why bother?” Boone says, his earlier enthusiasm gone. “We’re Eskimos. Nobody cares about us.”

“I care,” I tell him.

“Because we’re special, right?” — his tone now one of angry sarcasm.

“Because *I’m* special,” I tell him.

He gives me a look as though I have abruptly gone through a reappraisal. His lips remain tight, but the smile returns to his eyes. He takes the book from Merle and heads down the hall. Merle hurries after him, but stops and looks back.

“Maybe you *can* last the whole year,” he tells me. “*Maybe.*”



Author’s Note: Eighteen months later, using my methods, ten of the students from that school of 41 – including Londa, Boone, Merle, and Marshall – stunned the world of academic competition by becoming the only team of Native Americans ever to win national championships in academics, a feat they accomplished twice. They won despite having no computers, almost no books, and despite having to compete against students from schools for the gifted on subjects, such as genetic engineering and nuclear waste disposal, the Eskimo students had never heard of before. Today, Merle is a Native leader; Boone is an executive officer for the island’s corporation; and Boone is a world-renowned sculptor whose regular customers include Jewel, the singer, and golf legend Jack Nicklaus.