

After a week's work, value of the payment was often very confusing

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I had just come home from the schoolhouse after chopping kindling and carrying half full buckets of coal. I wasn't grown enough yet to carry full buckets. The teacher had hired me to do these chores after school during the week.

I probably wasn't the best worker, but I had one advantage. I could speak a little better English than most of my fellow students.

It was Friday and that was my payday. As I worked I anticipated it but I never knew what I was going to get. One week it would be a can of tomatoes, another week, a can of peaches, a bag of beans, rice, a can of tea or coffee and so forth.

This time the teacher gave me something I couldn't figure out — as mightily as I tried. It was an oblong package about 2 inches thick, 4 inches wide and 6 inches long. It was in a paper carton, and I couldn't tell what was in it.

The teacher tried to explain, but since my understanding of English was still limited, I couldn't fully make out what he was talking about. He kept spelling out P-I-E, and then he would say *pie*.

The more he tried, the more confused I got. I vaguely remembered hearing the word before, but I didn't bother to find out what it was. After making a valiant try to make me understand, the teacher finally gave up and said, "Here, you go home now."

I left obediently, clutching the package. Instead of going home to Mumangeena's and Uncle Nayukuk's sod igloo, I ran to my parents' house which was nearby. When I entered my brothers and sisters and my mother looked up. Almost in unison they asked, "What is that in your hand?"

"*Amai* (I don't know)," I said.
"Let's see what's in it," my sister



Akniachak demanded.

I opened one end of the package and pulled out the contents. The oblong object was covered with transparent paper. I opened the end and smelled it. So did my brothers and sisters and mother, too.

"It smells something like prunes, and yet it's not," mother said. "What does it say on the container?"

"I don't know what it is, but I can

spell the letters. M-I-N-C-E M-E-A-T. The teacher told me it was *mince meat*, but I don't know what it's for," I answered.

All of us tasted it. It tasted sweet, but it didn't taste like fruit. I told my mother what I could make out of the writing on the package.

"If that is meat it's the strangest kind of meat I have ever tasted," mother said resignedly. "You better take it to your aunt. That woman can eat anything, and she'll probably like it."

I hurried home. Mumangeena was boiling some seal meat for our dinner. Nayukuk came back from hunting shortly after I did. He brought home two seals. My aunt was overjoyed because Uncle Nayukuk didn't always hunt because he was somewhat lazy. When he did go, he usually brought something home.

When I entered the igloo with my week's pay, Mumangeena became curious at once.

"Mother, you got paid today. What is it this time?" she asked.

"I don't know. Here, you taste it," I offered.

She pinched a piece off and put it in her mouth. She chewed on it gingerly. There was a questioning look on her face.

"This stuff doesn't taste like anything I've ever tasted. I don't think I like it. I wish the teacher had paid you a can of peaches. How good those peaches are," Mumangeena said.

When Nayukuk had taken off his hunting clothes, his wife offered him a piece of my pay saying, "Mother was paid today with this stuff. See if you like it."

Mumangeena gave him a mouthful. He chewed on it for several moments and then walked over to our little Arctic stove, removed the lid and spat the mouthful into it. He went to the side of the room and sat down without comment.

It was around the last part of March and the men and women were busy getting ready for spring whaling. It was an exciting time of the year in the village. Aunt Mumangeena was busy making mukluks and a new reindeer skin parka for Nayukuk.

"I don't think we can do anything with this stuff," said Mumangeena, ruefully. "It's kind of funny sweetness, isn't it, mother?"

She put the mincemeat into its container and tossed it behind the stove, and I don't know what she ever did with it after that.

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I kept doing the chores for the teacher, sometimes hurriedly because I didn't want to miss the nice custom of whaling captains when they pass out tidbits of mukluk, caribou meat, sourdough biscuits, Eskimo doughnuts and other things to the children after the crews put new coverings of oograk skins on their whaling umiak frames.

When Friday came around again I had a pleasant feeling of anticipation of what I was going to be paid that day.

"Let's see, what shall we get you for this week," the teacher said. "Yes, I think I know."

He walked into a room and came out in a couple of minutes carrying a paper bag.

"You know what these are?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I answered with pleasure.

"A frying pan will work fine when you prepare them. Be sure and put the cover on it," he instructed.

I had seen them prepared before, and I knew exactly what to do, but suddenly I realized that Aunt Mumangeena didn't have a frying pan. I began to think of what I was going to use. I thanked the teacher and walked out.

As soon as I got into the house I asked, "Aunt Mumangeena, have you got an empty coffee can?"

"Yes, mother, there is one or two over there in the corner. What do you want it for?"

"Can I have it? I want to cook something in it," I said anxiously.

"That's ridiculous. Coffee can is so small. How can you cook anything in it?"

"I will. You wait and see," I promised. I took the can and went outside and with an ax made a slit in it about an inch and a half wide. Then I went in and got a hammer and some nails. Aunt Mumangeena was curiously watching me and so was Uncle Nayukuk.

"What is mother going to do now?" my aunt asked herself.

"Wait a while and you'll see," I said hammering a piece of kindling a foot long on the can for a handle. I showed the contents of my week's pay to Mumangeena and Nayukuk.

"They look almost exactly like ground willow seeds to me. What are they?" my aunt wondered. I put some of them into the can and they rattled tinnily. I could feel the suspense building up in Aunt Mumangeena and Uncle Nayukuk. I put the cover on the can and put it on the hot stove.

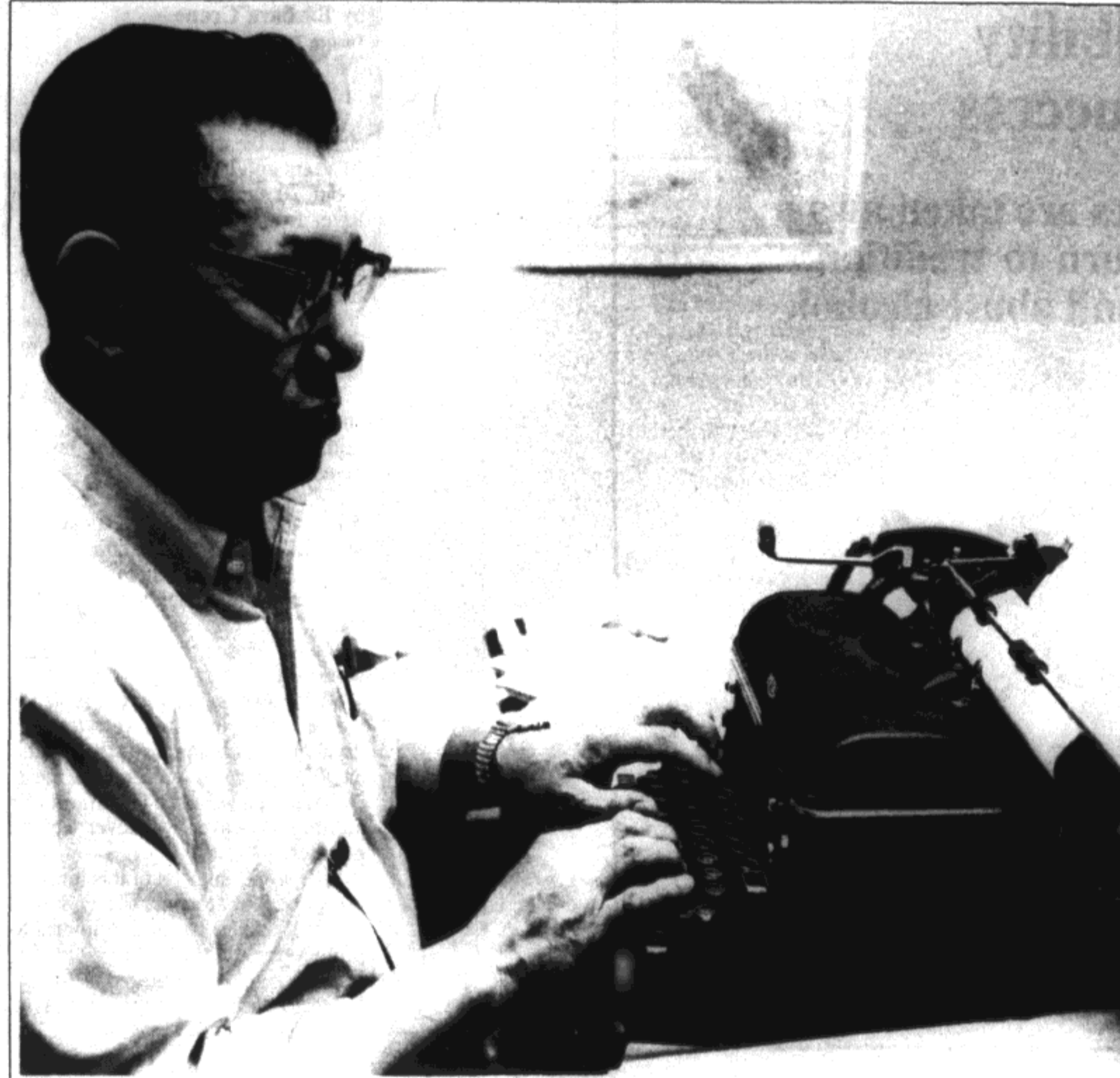
"Such going on!" my aunt exclaimed. "You're not very rational today, mother. If you're going to cook those things, why don't you put water with them?"

"They don't need any water," I answered proudly. "Come over here and watch me while I do this."

She sidled over close to me and watched with interest and wonder. I moved the can from side to side and forth and back in small swift motions. I could sense Aunt Mumangeena keeping time with her head. All of a sudden, there was a distinct "POP" in the can and a simultaneous "PING" as the object hit the tin cover. Mumangeena jerked and let out a cry.

"What was that?" she asked worriedly. Other pops began to follow in quick succession. Aunt Mumangeena emitted quick little cries and began to

get alarmed. She got up on her feet and began to walk backwards watching intently. Soon she was in the corner back of the room looking at me incredulously.



"Mother, you should stop that. It might hurt you!"

I smiled at her. The pops continued rapidly in the can. When they subsided, I pulled the can out of the coals. My aunt was still in the back of the room watching warily, not daring to come close.

"Come and see what I did, Aunt Mumangeena. Don't be afraid. Come and see these," I pleaded with amusement.

She came forward gingerly. The can was still hot so I put my mittens on and took the lid off. There they were, a coffee can full of clean white fluffs — and what a savory aroma they had. My aunt looked at them, then at me for several moments. Her eyes were wide and then she suddenly broke in to laughter. Uncle Nayukuk was also looking with much more interest than I had ever seen him display.

"I know them! I know what they are. So that's the way they do them. What do you call them? I have forgotten."

"Popcorn, Aunt Mumangeena!" I volunteered proudly.

Both my aunt and uncle had eaten popcorn before but they were completely ignorant of how it was made and how it looked before it popped. I offered the contents of the can. Mumangeena chatted happily as she ate while Nayukuk was silent but obviously enjoying the popcorn. The can was quickly consumed. Swallowing her last mouthful, Aunt Mumangeena looked at me and smiled.

"Mother, you better make some more of these... these..."

"Popcorn," I said with glee.

The next payday Mumangeena was in a happy mood, and she had double reason for being so. Uncle Nayukuk had gotten up by himself and he was

going hunting. In anticipation of the day's returns she was anxious to serve us the best way she knew, which meant an enjoyable breakfast of hotcakes.

It wasn't any different from others in what was served, but it was different in quantity. Mumangeena usually allowed me one good sized hotcake, but that morning she served me two of them. She did the same for my uncle. Would Nayukuk have more coffee? Did mother have any holes in his mukluks that needed mending?

As soon as breakfast was over Nayukuk went out to hunt.

"You know, mother, that uncle of yours never failed to surprise me," Aunt Mumangeena chuckled. "He got up without my having to wake him. He has a way of making me feel guilty for what I've done or said to him. When he does things like this something usually happens. Sometimes I wonder whether he knew things before they happen. Maybe he's an *ahngatuk* (medicine man), and I never knew it."

When work was done that night I knocked on the teacher's door as usual. He never seemed to have any previous plans as to what he was going to pay me. This time it was a can the same size as peaches or tomatoes, but it was neither. I could tell because of the color of the label.

"My boy, did you ever eat cabbage before?" the teacher asked.

"No sir," I answered, mystified. "Well, my boy, you're going to eat some today. Here, take this home, and I hope you'll enjoy it."

"Thank you, sir," I walked out, scrutinizing the can. It had a picture of a round green thing on it. One part of it looked as if it was peeling. As I wondered what the thing might be, a boyish voice shouted.

"*Umah!* (Hey, you!) Your uncle got a polar bear!" It was one of my young friends. Elated I broke into a run, tucking the can in the crook of

my arm. A surge of happiness came to me. My Uncle Nayukuk had gotten a polar bear! As I ran, I thought to myself that I was also bringing something home — something called "cabbage," but I didn't know what it was.

When I hurried into our sod igloo, I found my aunt in a state of excitement, but a happy one. There were several visitors, and Mumangeena was busy cutting pieces of polar bear meat to give away. And she was enjoying it immensely.

This was one of the few times she wasn't on the receiving end, and it was giving her ego a needed shot in the arm. It had suffered much too often because of Uncle Nayukuk's inconsistent efforts.

Aunt Mumangeena was much too busy to see what I had brought, but after many minutes she finally noticed me.

"There you are, mother. I didn't even notice you were home. Did you bring some peashis? Pea... peashis... I can never say the thing like mother can."

"Peaches," I corrected. "No, Aunt Mumangeena. It's something the teacher calls, 'cabbage.'"

"Carbish... never mind. We'll see what it is later. I have to boil some polar bear meat right away. You and your uncle are hungry, and what a fine dinner you're going to have."

The "carbish" was forgotten until after dinner. The dinner itself was most enjoyable. While we ate, Aunt Mumangeena was already planning to buy this and that from Peter Koonooyak, the storekeeper.

Uncle Nayukuk's bear was medium-sized and it measured just over 9 feet. At \$5 a foot, the price at the time, it would bring us a little over \$45 worth of goods from the store. One of the foremost items Mumangeena mentioned was peaches.

"I never seemed to get enough of

My uncle hesitantly took a piece that was apparently larger than he wanted. He retrieved it with his tongue and gingerly made chewing motions. Nayukuk started to get up off the floor. He evidently wanted to spit his mouthful into the stove. His left foot slipped, and the resulting jerk made him swallow the cabbage. He settled slowly into a sitting position, his mouth slightly open, his face in a grimace.

those peashis, and I'm going to buy three of them from Koonooyak," she anticipated. "By the way, mother, what is that thing you brought home... that ca... carbish... carbish...?"

"It's cabbage — cabbage. See it says on the can, C-A-B-B-A-G-E. And the teacher calls it cabbage, not carbish," I corrected, impatiently.

"I've never heard of such a thing, and Koonooyak doesn't sell it at the store."

"How would you tell, Aunt Mumangeena? You can't read."

"Just the same I know it, mother, because I've never heard of it. And stop being so smart and let your uncle open that thing. And remember, mother, you should never talk to me like that!"

Uncle Nayukuk took his hunting knife and opened the can without much effort. He pried the tin up and looked at the contents for several moments. He raised the can to his nose slowly and smelled.

His eyes darted at me and Mumangeena as his nose crinkled above his black mustache. It was plain that my uncle did not relish what he smelled. Without a word he gave the can to me. I followed his example and smelled the contents. The odor was strong. It seemed to have a somewhat familiar smell to it, but I couldn't connect it at the moment.

"What do you and your uncle smell in that thing, anyway. Give it to me, mother," Mumangeena demanded. She smelled it, put it down, and smelled it again. There was a look of surprise on her face.

"Hmmm, this thing smells something like the oograk gut peeling, and it looks something like them, too. But this looks dull and dirty compared to the peelings. Taste it and see what it's like, mother."

"No, you taste it, Aunt Mumangeena."

"You're the one who should taste it because you work for a whole week.

Here, let me have it." She pinched a small piece and put it in her mouth. She rolled it on her tongue and chewed it half-heartedly. The corners of her mouth dropped, but she managed to swallow it.

"Here, Nayukuk, try this and see what you think of it."

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"Mother, what is that thing you brought home today? You should be demanding peashis for pay every week. It looks as if you've been working all week for nothing!"

Mumangeena paused a moment. "Mother, why don't you give that ca... carbish to the dogs and see if they like it."

I did as I was told and doled the contents of the can to each of the seven dogs we had. Each of them sniffed at his portion, looked at me and then curled back on the snow.

"Did they like it?" Aunt Mumangeena asked when I came back.

"They didn't like it at all. They just sniffed at it and then laid back down." "Poor mother, you have been working all week for nothing," Mumangeena sympathized. "Just the same we have had a good day. Your uncle got us a nice bear and... you brought home car... carbish."

Aunt Mumangeena broke into a loud laugh. I looked at Uncle Nayukuk. He had a faint grin on his face. When her laughter subsided, my aunt looked at me and said, "Mother, don't you mind one bit. When the bear skin is dry, I'll buy you a can of peashis."