

One summer, life seemed to be a little more generous and glorious

by Tiny Demientieff Devlin
for the Tundra Times

One summer, life seemed to be a little more generous and glorious than usual.

Birthdays were something that Mom never let slip by. She always baked a cake no matter where we were. She fixed them from scratch.

We had a little tradition. I'm not sure where it came from, but we kept it up. We'd take a penny, a dime, a little ring and thimble and wrap them individually in waxed paper. Then we'd toss them into the cake batter.

After the cake was baked and decorated we all celebrated with song and presents.

The penny meant whoever got it was going to be poor. The dime meant wealth, and the ring, marriage. The thimble meant that whoever got it would become good at sewing. Simple, but fun.

When I got my piece of cake I'd look to see if I was lucky enough to

tion. He could read the river and all of its telltale indications of low water.

Dad would send one of the men "to sound" the river. Whoever was sounding would take the sounding pole and stand up at the front of the barge. (The pole was painted red and white — one foot of red, then one foot of white. It was like a big, huge thermometer, only it was used to measure the depth of the river.)

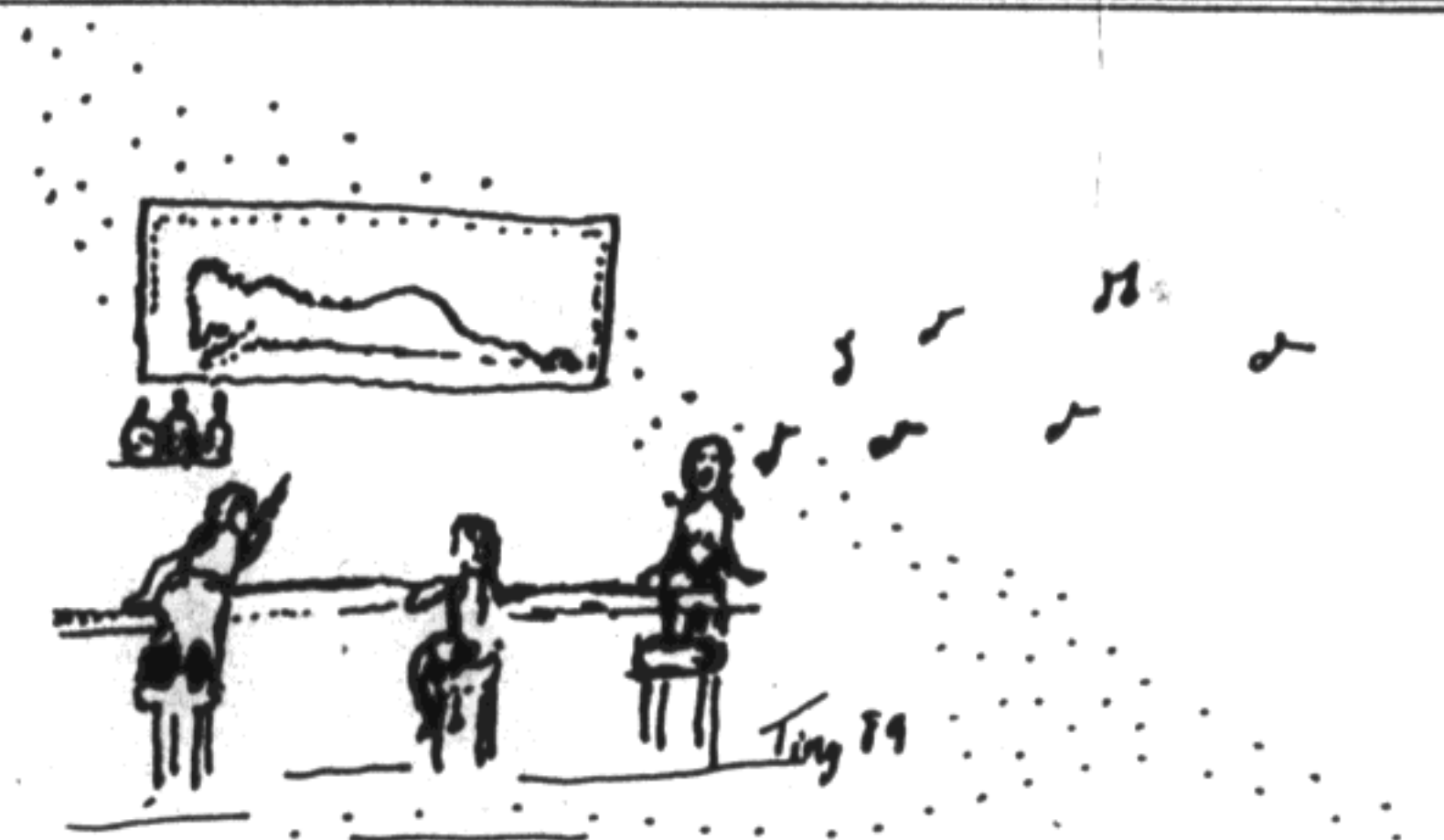
The deckhand would reach ahead in the river with the pole and feel for the bottom. He'd hold up the pole with his hand on the waterline. This gave Dad a good idea of how much water he was dealing with.

Dad was real good at maneuvering the boat in and out of shallow waters. It was exciting, but kind of scary.

I loved to sit in the pilot house and watch out over the river. Dad stood over his domain and enjoyed the trees, the moose, the swans, the ducks and geese, the fresh air and the beauty of our great land. He enjoyed sharing the



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get a prize. I didn't like getting the thimble, it was iggy. iggy, iggy, iggy. Whenever Mom would refer to something that she didn't like she would call it iggy. To me the thimble was iggy.

It was June and we celebrated my birthday. Out came the cake, presents and singing. I enjoyed blowing out the candles, the cake, and singing and the PRESENTS. It sure was great.

The summer months were so busy with activity that before I knew it, they were singing Happy Birthday, again.

It seemed a little strange. Time must be going by real fast. It just seemed like the other day they were singing to me.

But who am I to question? I just let 'em sing. I opened my presents and was having a great time.

That was when Sugar was noticing that I just had a birthday. When was it ever her turn? When was her birthday?

She got to bugging Mom about it. Mom was so busy with her daily work, the cooking, taking care of us kids and everything that she didn't even notice that I just got done celebrating about a couple of months ago.

Sugar's birthday was June 19th, and mine was the 19th of August. Mom got the months mixed up in her head. Things got a little strained. We got into a big discussion on whose birthday was when.

That was the first time we all memorized which was our month so this would never happen again. But for me it was a great year!

In the summer we were making our way up the Iditarod River real slow. The Iditarod was a lot narrower than the Yukon or Tanana Rivers. It had a tendency to be pretty shallow.

Dad kept a good eye on our naviga-

beauty with us.

He set up a signaling system that we all recognized. He would ring a bell that was located in the house portion of the boat. That would tell us there was something out there, something exciting. We'd hurry out, climb up the ladder and stand in front of the pilot house.

This time, as we were moving through the flats of the Iditarod, Dad told us to be real quiet. We moved along slowly and steadily amongst the swamplike flats. I would try and see what the fuss was all about.

I was absorbed in questioning my reference of knowledge, looking for something that might seem out of the ordinary. Somewhere out there was maybe a moose, maybe a bear, maybe...

Dad sounded the airhorn. The loud blast startled me. Then the whole sky grew dark with the ducks and geese lifting into flight. It was awesome. The birds flew about in different directions, some to the east, some to the north and some settling right back down. It was truly something to remember.

Sugar, Toot and I knew about Mom's old Carnation milk case sitting behind Lolly's cabin. Her cabin was right behind Mom and Dad's cabin which was just behind the pilot house.

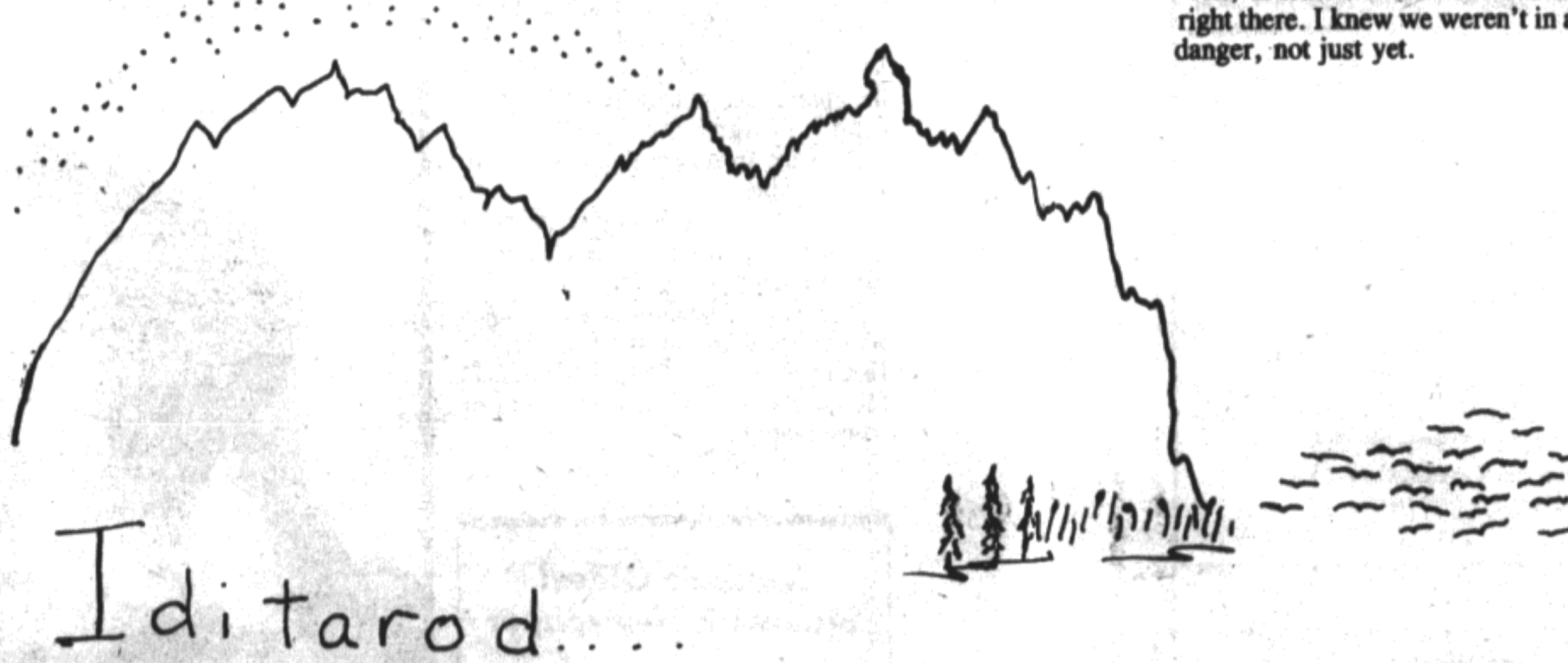
We'd go up there, dig into the box and find a good piece of dried moose meat. We'd sit, nibble on the dried meat and enjoy chatting about nothing.

On this trip we knew we had to be pretty careful. We remembered about the witch's home on the mountain.

Sure enough, there they were. The mountains so high that no one could possibly climb up there. Who would want to, that's where SHE lived. We'd sit and watch.

The mountains were so jagged that it was easy to spot HER sitting there.

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We made sure she didn't sneak down or make any movements while we made our way past her place. She never did. Not while we were there.

Finally, we made it. It sure was tricky, passing through shallow water, ducks and geese, a witch on the mountain, God knows what else was out there, but we made it.

After the crew unloaded all of the freight everyone seemed to relax. Mom, Dad, the crew and everyone would go into town and visit friends.

Flat was not like any village along the rivers. It was a little city. Maybe it was the fact that the people weren't all Native.

Mom and Dad had lots of friends. That was when we met Tootsie. Mom and Dad took all of us to visit her. There was Bing, Birdie, Lumpy, Irene, Sugar, Toot and me.

The door opened, and there she was. I wasn't quite sure what to think. She was all black.

I just kind of walked in behind Mom. We didn't have time to discuss this amongst ourselves. We were used to talking things over, sizing things up, making plans and being ready.

This time we were caught cold. Everyone had to think on their own. Well, at least we had Mom and Dad right there. I knew we weren't in any danger, not just yet.

This Tootsie was happy to see Mom and Dad. She walked toward us, to look us over. As she took steps toward us, we all backed up against the wall.

Dad wanted us to shake hands with her. She must have put her hand out to one of us, and that was it, everyone bolted for the door. We were moving so fast and without any plan in mind, we just jammed her doorway.

Somehow Dad and Mom calmed us back down and got us to tour the house with her. We got a chance to whisper a few ideas back and forth.

We imagined that if she touched us we would turn black. We just had to keep an eye on her.

She showed us all around her house. It was real cozy, nice and warm. It smelled like cooking was going on. It was different, not like Mom's cooking.

Then she showed us into her bedroom. She had one of those big huge wooden store-bought beds, with corner posts. That was when I saw THEM.

On each corner post was hair. I didn't know about wigs then. All I knew that it was hair on them, different colors, red, yellow, black.

That was the limit. She could even move her hair. My boundaries of trust just came down. I'm not staying here. No way. We just made it past the witch's house and all that other business. I'm not sure who this is, but I ain't staying.

After our visit, we went over to the saloon. It was like something out of the movies. The room was huge. All wood.

The hard-wood floors, the big captain's chairs, the pool tables and the round tables and the bar.

Behind the bar was a smiley-faced man. Over him hung a big long picture of some lady. She was lying on her side with her face cradled in her hand. She had long hair and was real nice looking.

Anyway, Mom and Dad had friends there, too. Everyone was real happy to see us. There sure was a lot of talk.

Sugar, Toot and I climbed up on the stools and leaned over the bar like we owned the joint.

Toot could sing real good. The men knew about it. They would ask her to sing. Her fame grew with the song "Kookaberra." They paid her for her singing. We all enjoyed it.

Later, Mom and Dad would make sounds of getting us kids back to the boat, to bed. The men asked us if Mom and Dad could stay and visit.

What an idea! Man, this is incredible. Talk about opportunity! We were in a position to ah, well, say if it would be alright for Mom and Dad could stay.

What a switch, someone asking US for PERMISSION? We didn't know that we would enjoy the taste of power.

The bartender saw this and offered us a choice of candy from his well stocked shelf.

After a long drawn out review of what was available, I picked out my favorite. The other men joined in. "Ah, now can your Mom and Dad stay?"

We took advantage of this moment. "Well no. We just can't let them stay. We need them to bring us home and take care of us..." we said.

"How about another candy bar?"

the men said.

"Well, maybe, maybe this other candy bar," we said.

Before I knew it each of us had a shopping bag full of candy, potatoe shoe strings, everything and anything we wanted. Again the question.

"Well I guess, yea it's OK this time," we said.

After we took our hard earned bag of goodies, we said goodnight. Halloween was never this good or easy.

We climbed into Johnny's Archie car and headed off for the boat. This car was great, it looked like the car in the Archie comic books. I liked the rumble seat.

There I stood, with a tight grip on my bag of candy. I looked up into the dark night's sky. I could see the stars, the big dipper and the North Star. The night air was warm and we bumped our way back to the boat. Life was glorious.

In 1964 I visited Tootsie Crosby in the Pioneers Home in Fairbanks. She remembered me and asked about Mom and Dad. We talked about our visit so many years ago. Her memory was just as clear as if it was just yesterday. She was real happy for our brief time together.

I planned to come back again, but she died before I made it back.

