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# PAYING THE LAND

**JOE SACCO**




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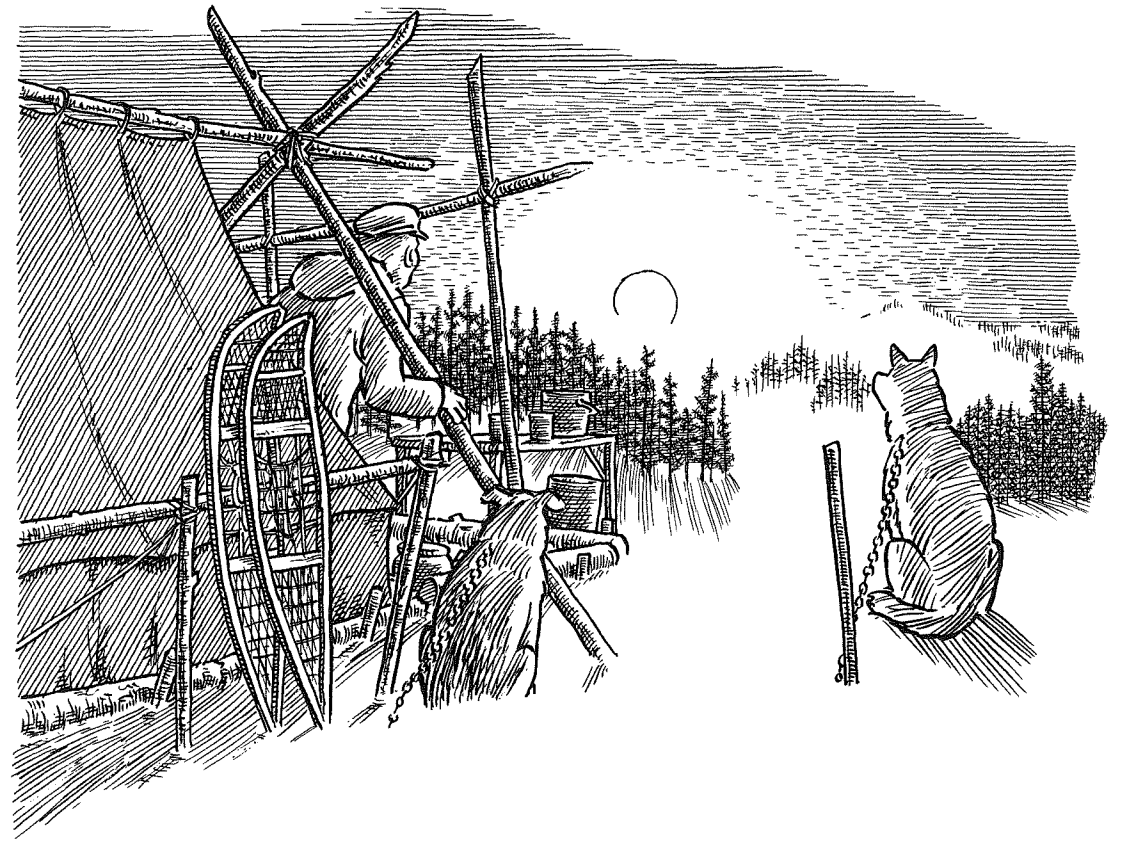
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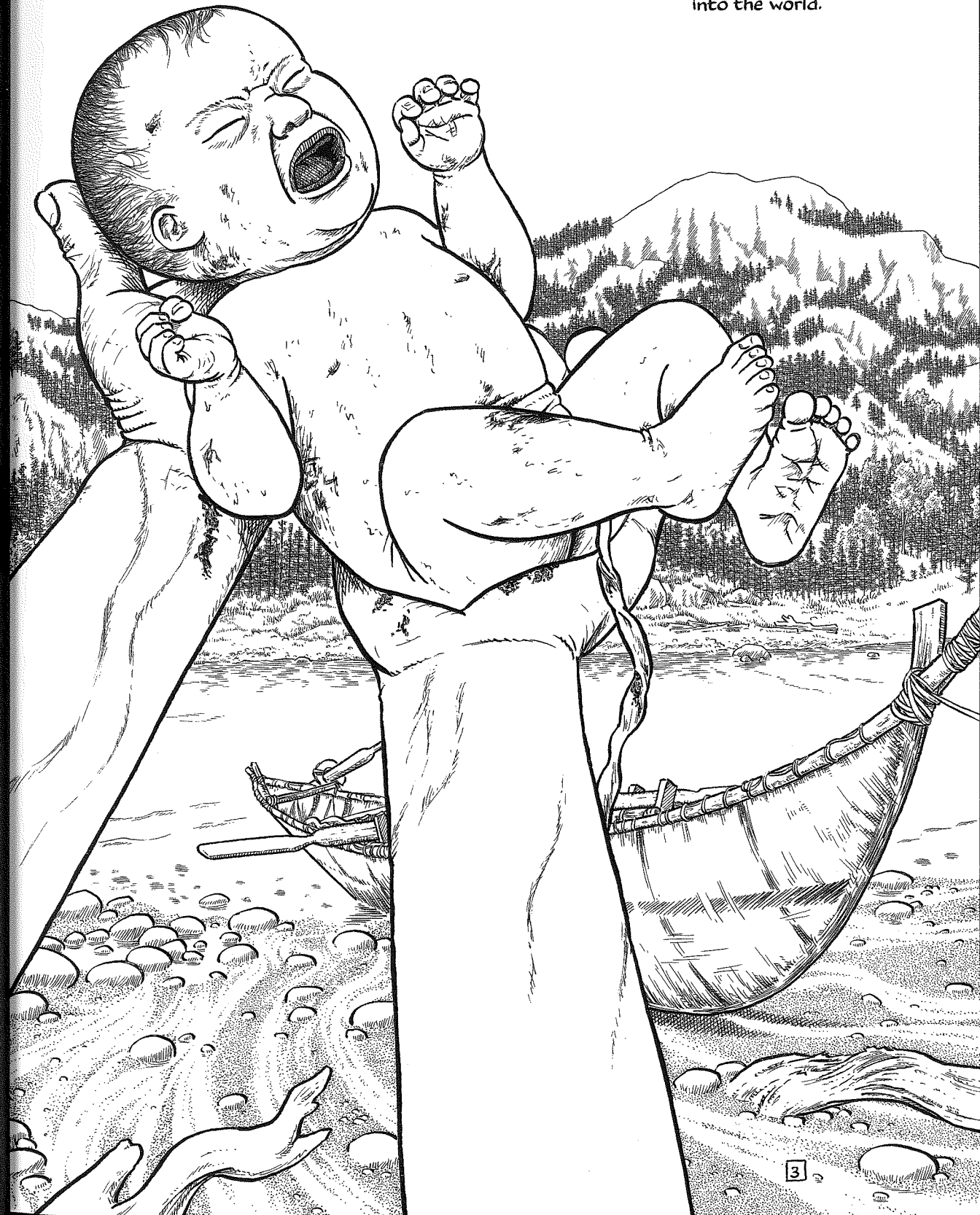
To the people of the land

# I



# YOU FIND YOURSELF IN THE CIRCLE

"My grandfather tells me that when they were traveling in a moose-skin boat, that's when I came into the world."





"He said, 'We didn't know what to do with you because we were traveling, we were busy, there was no time for a baby.'



"You learn about relationships and connections with the land and the animals. You learn how important they are to you, how important the world is, essentially."



"He says that he took me, put me [at] the head of the moose-skin."

"The first ten years of my life were basically out on the land."

"And so very, very little contact with the outside world. We came into town maybe once a year, maybe twice..."



"You were required to get up early, usually when it's dawn, so you can say hello to the sun when it comes out."

"You went to sleep early because you had to allow the other spirits to do their thing at night, to visit each other and visit you in your dreams."

"And I remember our lives being dictated by the environment, by the animals."

"There's a fish run at a certain place. It's time to go there."

"The moose skin is thick now."

"It's time to get moose."

"Basically [you] grew up having meat three times a day, a lot of times fish also, and berries."

"...when you're a nomadic you need to travel light, you need to travel fast..."

"Everything had to be done really quickly so you carried the very basics."

PEOPLE HAD AN AVERAGE OF FOUR OR FIVE TEAMS, DOG TEAMS.

SOMETIMES THERE WAS MORE.

PER FAMILY?

YEAH, AND THAT'S HOW WE WOULD TRAVEL.

IT WOULD BE 10, 12, 13 KILOMETERS A DAY UNTIL YOU MADE YOUR DESTINATION.

"The basic essentials are in the dog sleigh so you don't have the luxury of riding... in the winter time."

"A lot of times it was just walking with dog packs in the summer time."

AND THEN IN THE SPRINGTIME... THEY BUILD THE MOOSE-SKIN BOAT THAT ALLOWED THEM TO GET OUT OF THE MOUNTAINS INTO TULITA'...

LIKE ONCE A YEAR YOU'D BUILD A BOAT?

\* THEN CALLED FORT NORMAN



YEAH, YEAH...

"They were very, very specific about the kind of trees to use... Sometimes they would spend the whole day looking for the right tree."

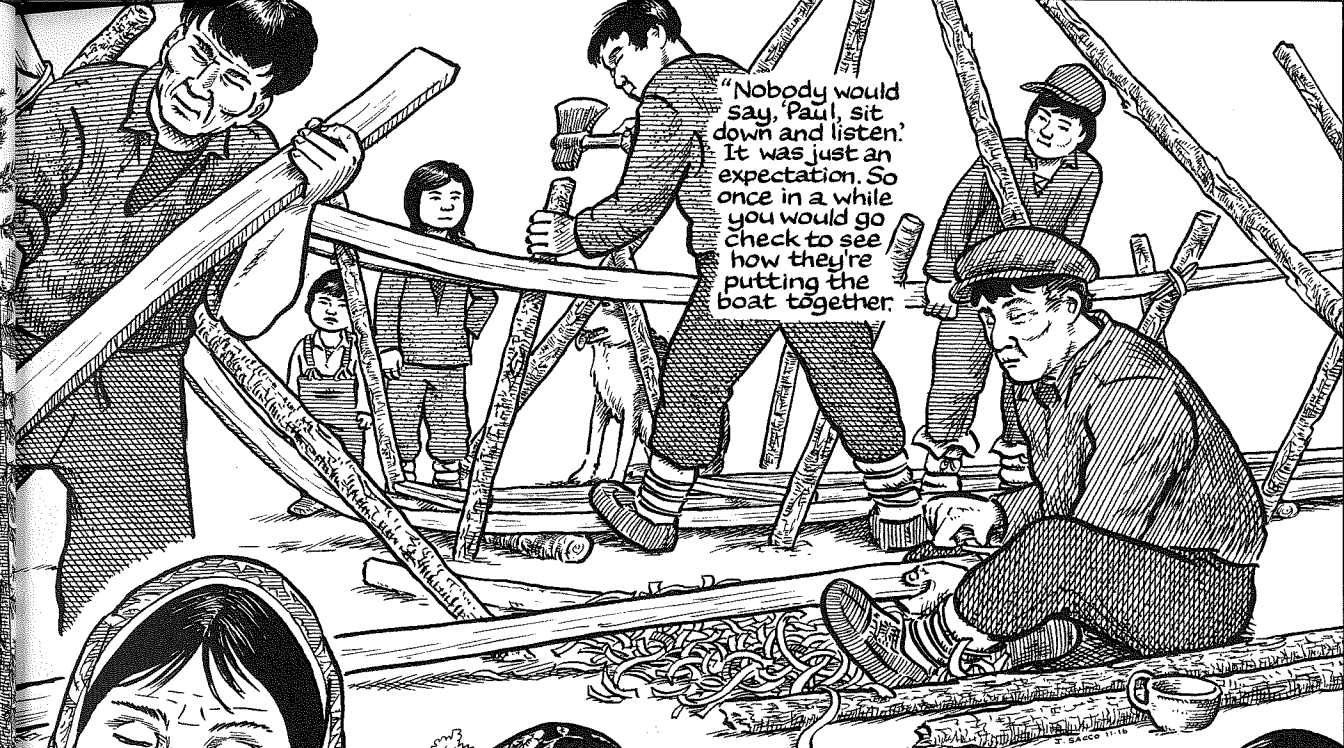


"[My] job was to go out to get the spruce gum... what they use that for is like an amberoid to fill the holes."

"Me and usually an elder, who can't carry the heavy load... would be out on the land collecting that."

"And they would tell you the kind to use: 'This is no good. This is too thick... This is the one you want.'"

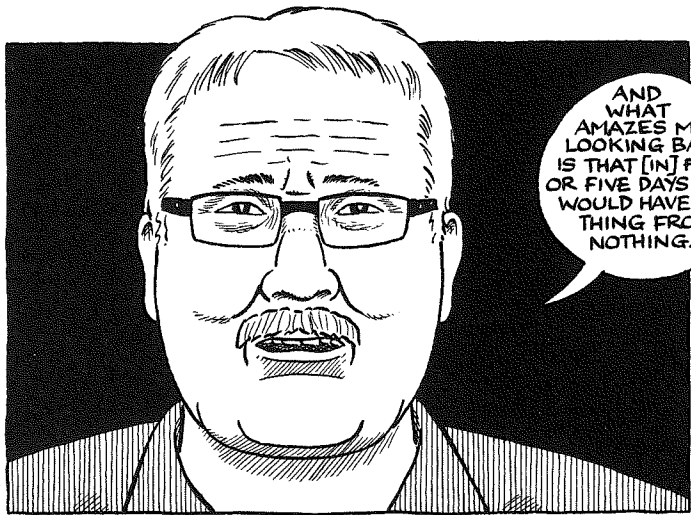
"Nobody would say, 'Paul, sit down and listen.' It was just an expectation. So once in a while you would go check to see how they're putting the boat together."



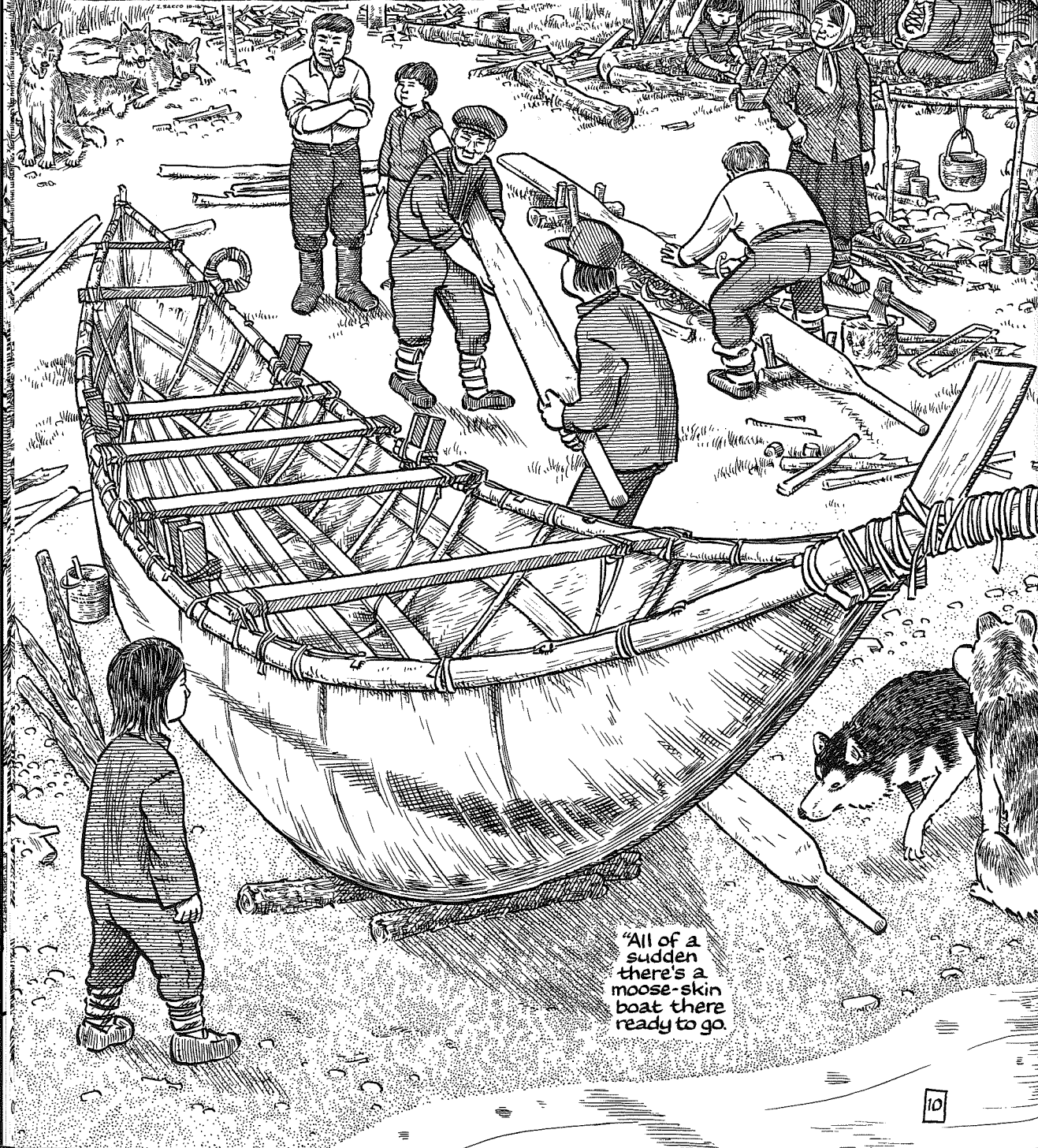
"You spend time with the women. They'd make the sinew. And that would be pretty thick because it needs to be strong. It needs to hold."



"And then the sewing starts. Again you watch."



AND WHAT AMAZES ME, LOOKING BACK, IS THAT [IN] FOUR OR FIVE DAYS THEY WOULD HAVE THIS THING FROM NOTHING.



"All of a sudden there's a moose-skin boat there ready to go."

"There's a number of families that would go to different areas in the mountains and they would all agree that they would meet at a certain time during the year..."



"So the one who is farthest down the river would wait for the others."

HOW DID YOU KEEP TIME IN THAT CASE?

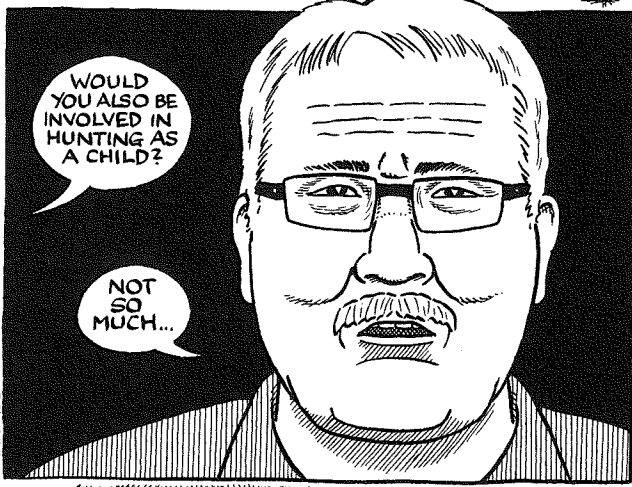
WELL, AGAIN, IT'S THE ENVIRONMENT THAT DICTATES THOSE KINDS OF STUFF.



"You don't want to do it in the fall, for example, because the water is really low. You don't do it when the water is really high because the waves are too high... So you do it in between. It would be June, for example."



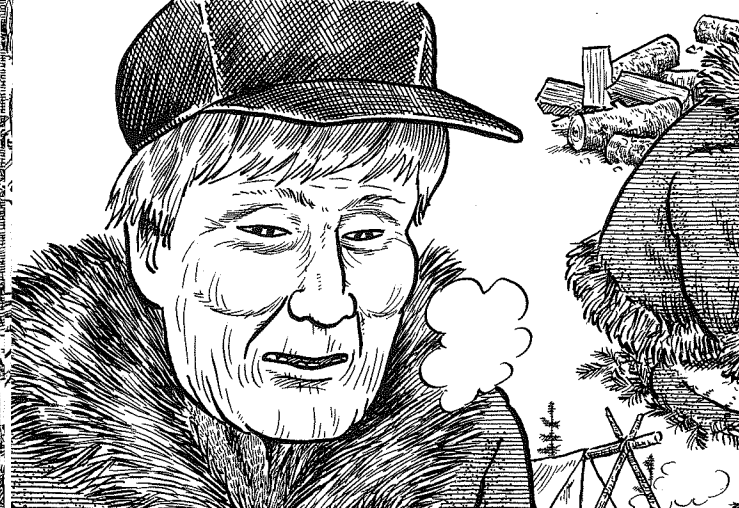




WOULD YOU ALSO BE INVOLVED IN HUNTING AS A CHILD?

NOT SO MUCH...

"When you're two or three years old—even earlier...—they know that this person is going to be a good leader or hunter or whatever... So they start grooming that person by then."



"So by the time you're five years old, you know what your role was going to be."

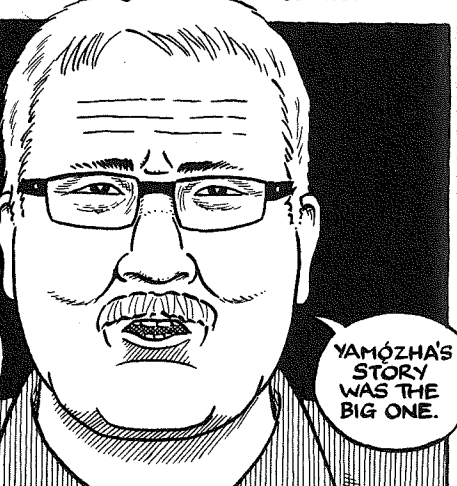


"If you're going to be a hunter, then of course they will take you out much earlier..."



I THINK ONE OF THE THINGS THAT THEY REALLY WERE TRYING TO TEACH ME WAS... THAT MAYBE [I HAD] POTENTIAL TO BE A LEADER.

CAN YOU PUT YOUR FINGER ON ANYTHING THAT WAS TAUGHT TO YOU THAT HAD TO DO WITH THE LEADERSHIP ROLE...?



YAMÓZHA'S STORY WAS THE BIG ONE.

The relationship between man and animals was getting so unbalanced that man would be wiped out pretty soon if it continued.



"Yamózha's role was to straighten everything out..."

"In those days it was animals that were giants. We're talking about giant beaver and various other animals."

"So he had to have negotiating skills. He had to have skills in relationships... to communicate, articulate his views."

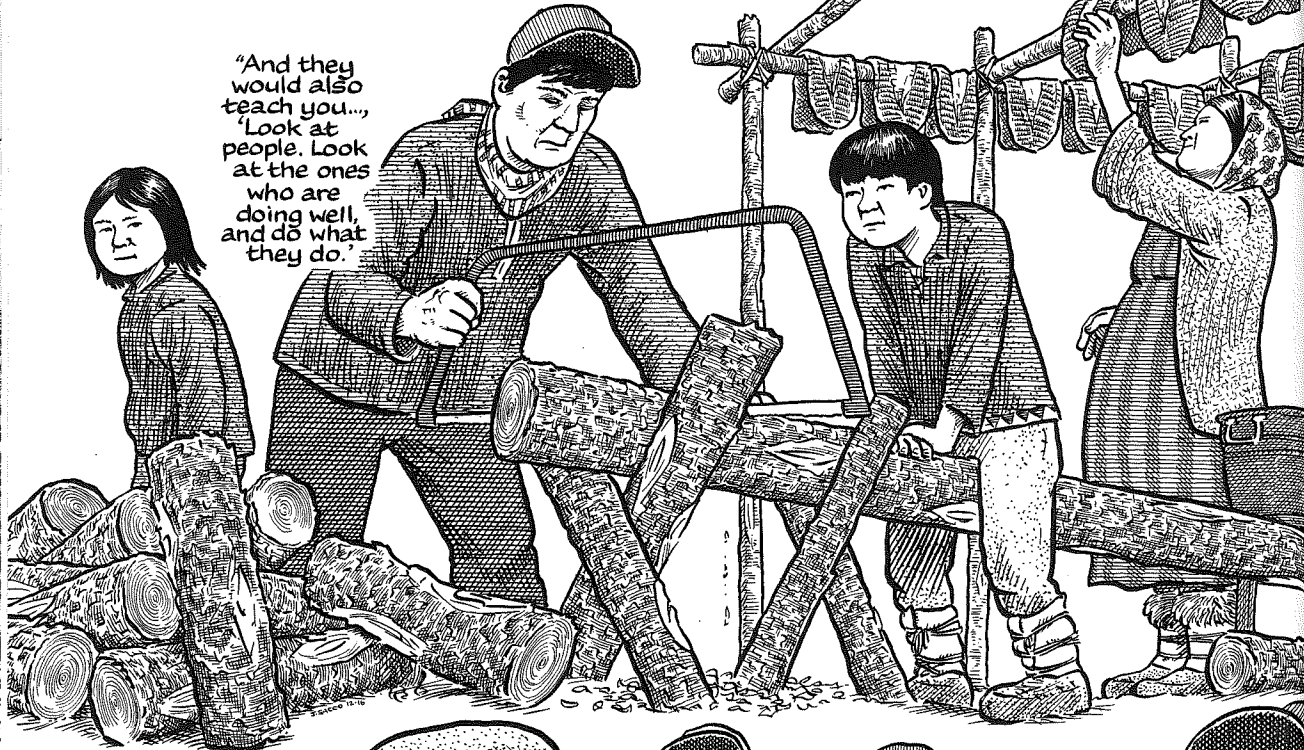


"And at times he had to be mean and rough and do those kind of stuff..."



"They'd say, 'Hey, here's an example of a man, how he made peace between man and animal in those days...'"

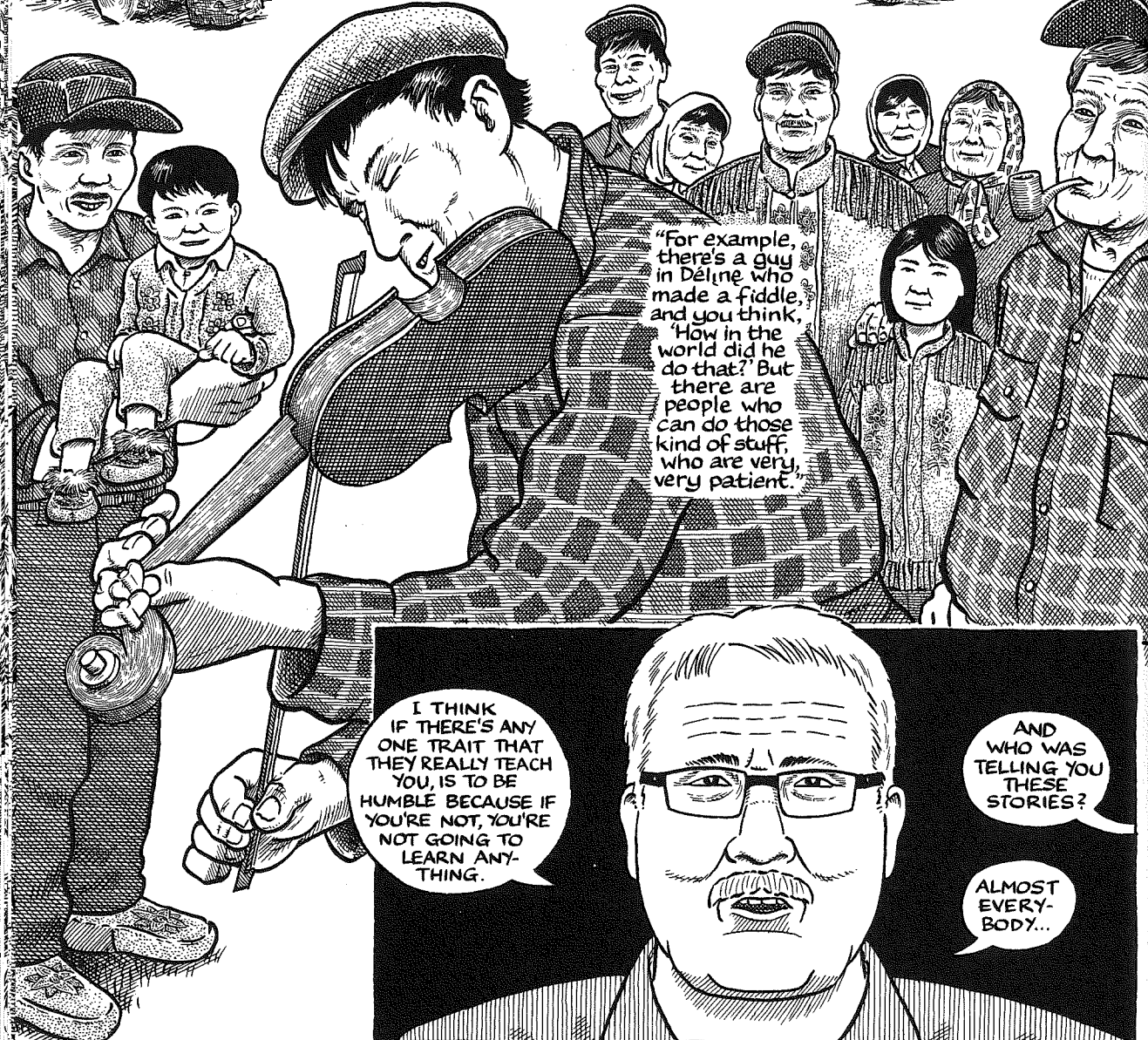
"And they would also teach you... Look at people. Look at the ones who are doing well, and do what they do."



"We had about maybe four or five camps... They're in various parts of the mountains... So my mother and dad let me roam around because they knew I was always in good hands..."



"There was always good teachers..."



"For example, there's a guy in Deline who made a fiddle, and you think, 'How in the world did he do that?' But there are people who can do those kind of stuff, who are very, very patient."

I THINK IF THERE'S ANY ONE TRAIT THAT THEY REALLY TEACH YOU, IS TO BE HUMBLE BECAUSE IF YOU'RE NOT, YOU'RE NOT GOING TO LEARN ANYTHING.

AND WHO WAS TELLING YOU THESE STORIES?

ALMOST EVERYBODY...

SO THEY STARTED TEACHING THOSE KIND OF STUFF EARLY ON, BUT NOT NEGLECTING MY OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES.



"In those days there was no woman's role and male role because there's always a potential you'll end up on the land by yourself. And if you don't know how to cook or... sew or... do the supposedly female role, then you're screwed..."

"Nobody will tell you, 'Do this, do this.' You're expected to know what to do."

"You're expected to come into a camp and look at it."

"Somebody's putting the tent up."

"Somebody is making tea."

"Maybe I should get water."

YOU LOOK AT WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE AND YOU DO IT.

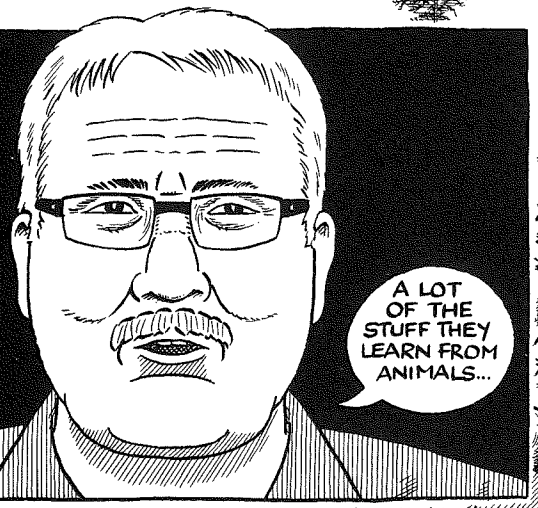
"So you find yourself in the circle."

"You work yourself in [to] the circle of that community."

WHAT WERE THE MOST DIFFICULT THINGS?... WAS THERE HUNGER SOMETIMES?

...ONCE YOUR BODY GETS USED TO THAT YOU CAN GO A FEW DAYS... NOT EATING... JUST LIKE AN ANIMAL.

A LOT OF THE STUFF THEY LEARN FROM ANIMALS...



"Yeah, there were times we were hungry, but..."

"There was a lot of faith in each other... that, yeah, it's going to be okay..."



"Somebody said it was cold. I don't know cold weather. Nobody told us it was 40 below. It was just part of life..."

"All we know was that you just put on extra clothing."

"But we knew that it was cold when you had a hard time finding animals."

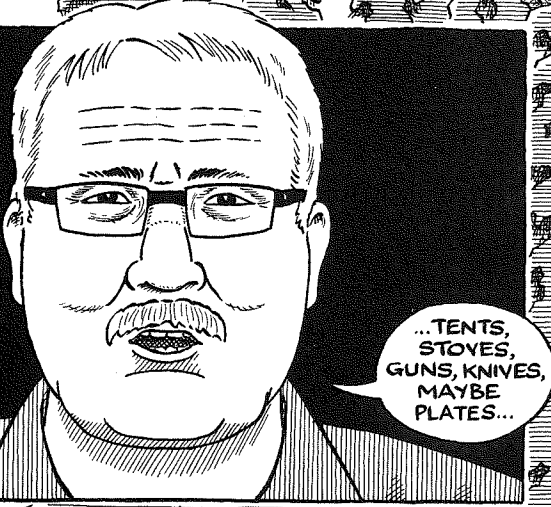
"By the season, by the moon, you can tell where the animals usually are, and sometimes they're not there..."

"When it's really cold... they start hiding."



WHAT WERE THE SPECIFIC THINGS YOU HAD FROM THE EURO-WESTERN WORLD THAT YOU WOULD BRING IN-TO THE BUSH WITH YOU?

...TENTS, STOVES, GUNS, KNIVES, MAYBE PLATES...

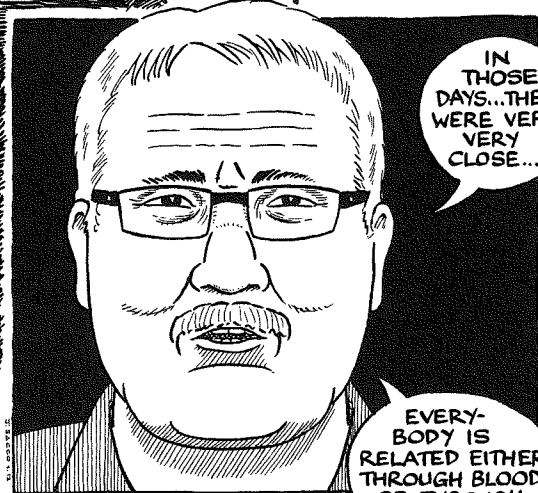


"Even [then] my uncle was showing me how to skin a moose with a rock, with flint."

"He said, 'This is what we used to use before there was knives coming in. And if you don't have knives this is what you use to skin.'"

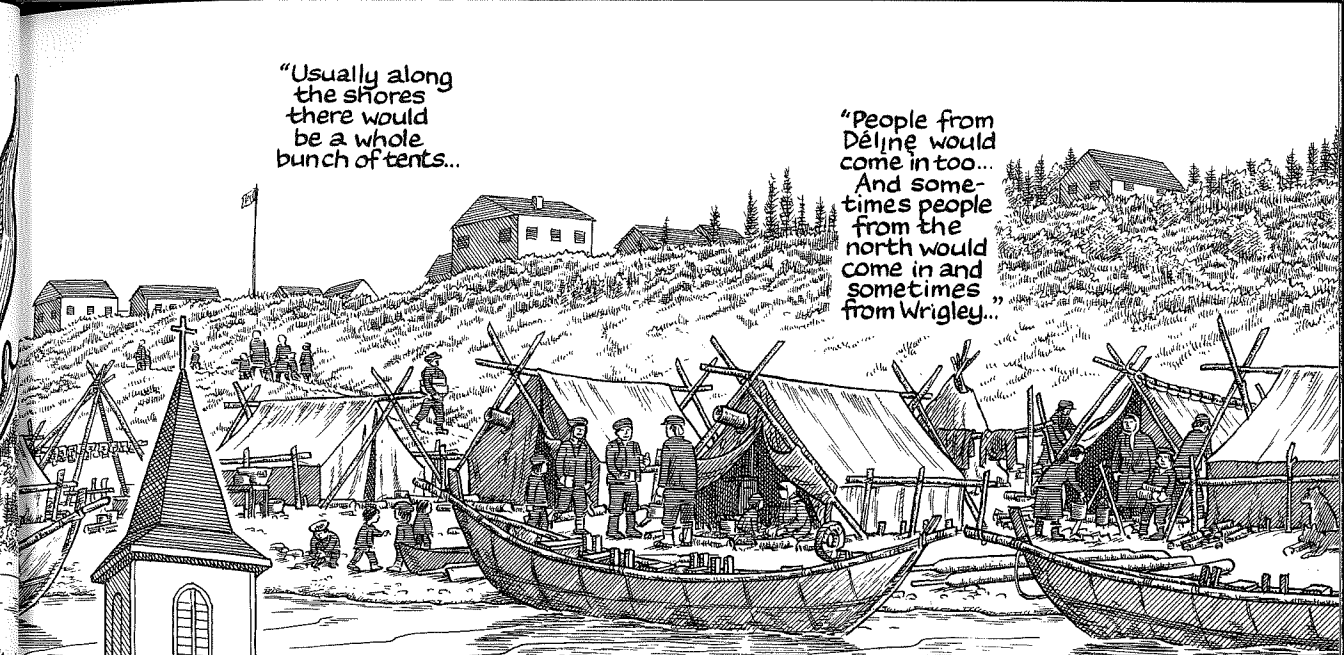
IN THOSE DAYS...THEY WERE VERY, VERY CLOSE...

EVERYBODY IS RELATED EITHER THROUGH BLOOD OR THROUGH MARRIAGE...



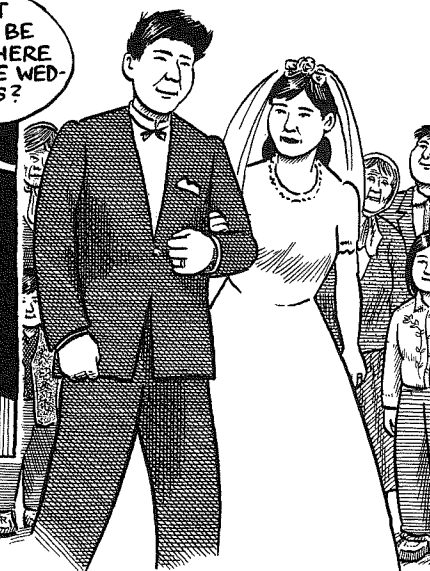
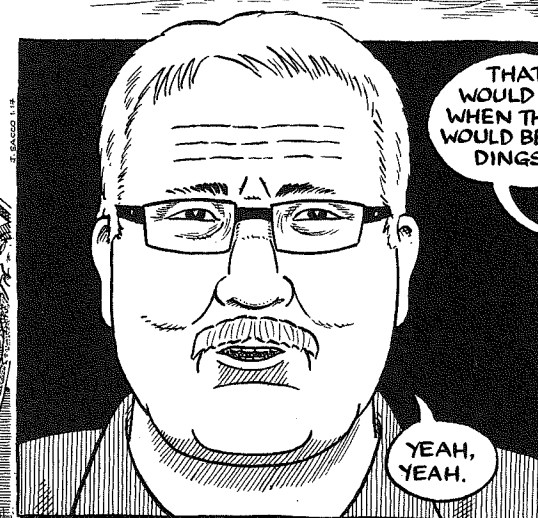
"Usually along the shores there would be a whole bunch of tents..."

"People from Délı̄ne would come in too... And sometimes people from the north would come in and sometimes from Wrigley..."



THAT WOULD BE WHEN THERE WOULD BE WEDDINGS?

YEAH, YEAH.

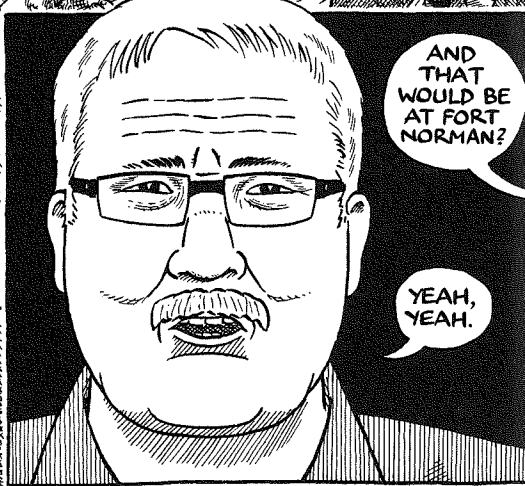


"Sometimes families would marry into other tribes and other communities so they want to know how the families are doing..."

"Usually in July is when we get together."

AND THAT WOULD BE AT FORT NORMAN?

YEAH, YEAH.



"People got together to catch up... Like they want to know where you're going, what part of the country you're going to."

"And then they talk to each other about when they're going to see each other again. 'I will be here when the leaves fall,' for example."



"They would spend maybe a month, but sometimes not even that

"because in the summertime the Mackenzie had some good fish



"so you got to go out and get some fish and make dry fish...for the winter, and also to [feed] your dogs."

OKAY. THIS IS VERY FASCINATING. BUT I GUESS WE SHOULD GET TO THE POINT WHERE A PLANE SHOWS UP.



YEAH, YEAH.

PAUL ANDREW

## II

