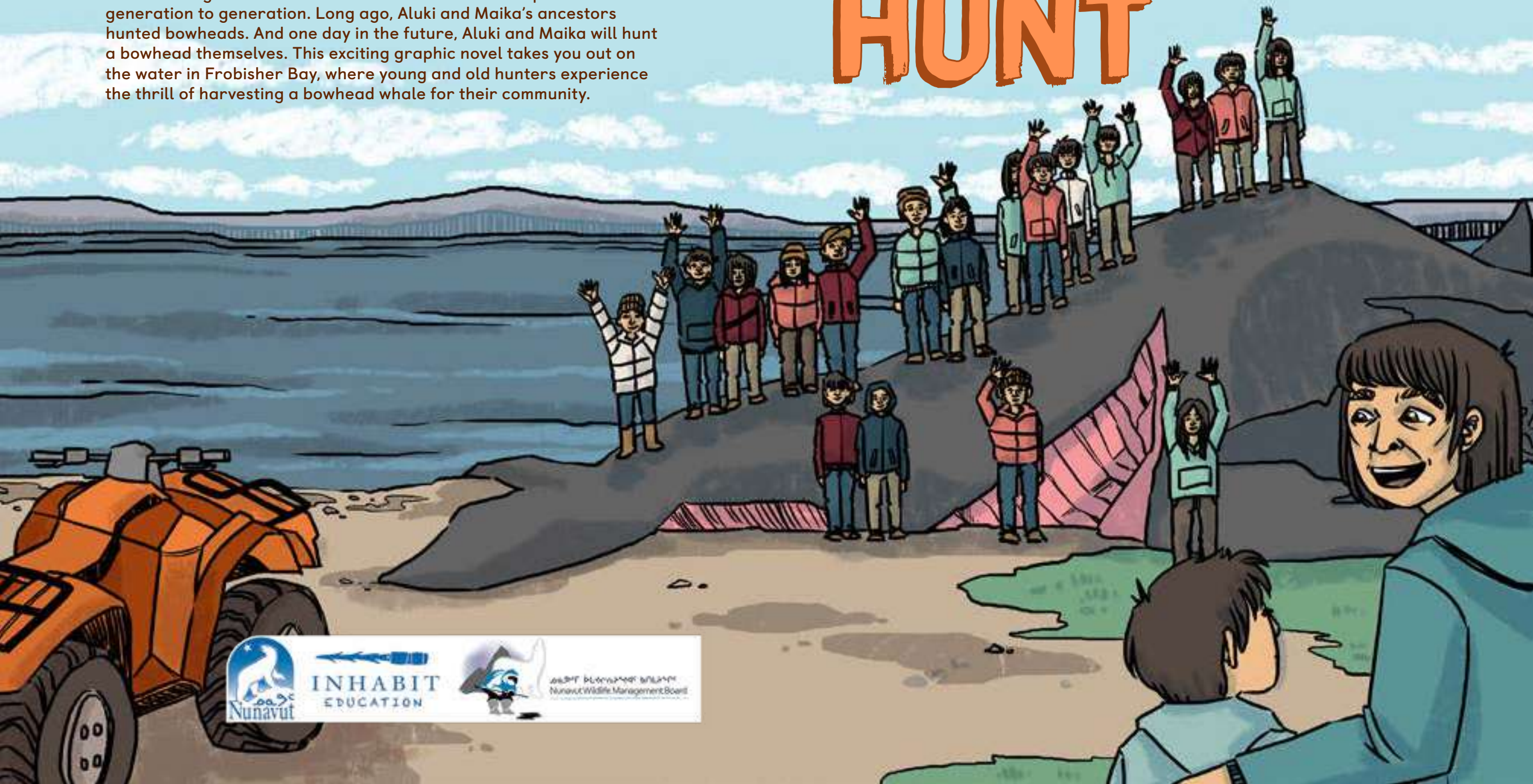


# THE BOWHEAD HUNT

Aluki dreams of being a great hunter and catching a bowhead whale like Inuit did long ago. Whale hunting was part of Inuit life for centuries, but today is the first hunt to happen in Aluki's lifetime. He and his sister Maika can't wait to be part of the celebration when the hunters return with their catch. It's almost as fun as being on the hunt when everyone works together to haul the whale ashore and butcher it.

The knowledge and skills to hunt bowhead whales are passed from generation to generation. Long ago, Aluki and Maika's ancestors hunted bowheads. And one day in the future, Aluki and Maika will hunt a bowhead themselves. This exciting graphic novel takes you out on the water in Frobisher Bay, where young and old hunters experience the thrill of harvesting a bowhead whale for their community.



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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Aviaq Johnston** is a young Inuk author from Igloolik, Nunavut. Her debut novel *Those Who Run in the Sky* was released in the spring of 2017. In 2014, she won first place in the Aboriginal Arts and Stories competition for her short story “Tarnikuluk,” which also earned her a Governor General’s History Award. Aviaq is a graduate of Nunavut Sivuniksavut, and she has a diploma in Social Service Work from Canadore College. Aviaq loves to travel and has lived in Australia and Vietnam. She spends most of her time reading, writing, studying, and procrastinating. She is currently living in Iqaluit.

**Koovian Flanagan** was a harpooner on the bowhead hunt in Iqaluit in 2018. It was her first hunt. Her sister, Mary, was also a harpooner on the hunt. Koovian generously shared her first-hand account of the bowhead hunt to help create this graphic novel. Koovian and Mary are both from Iqaluit.

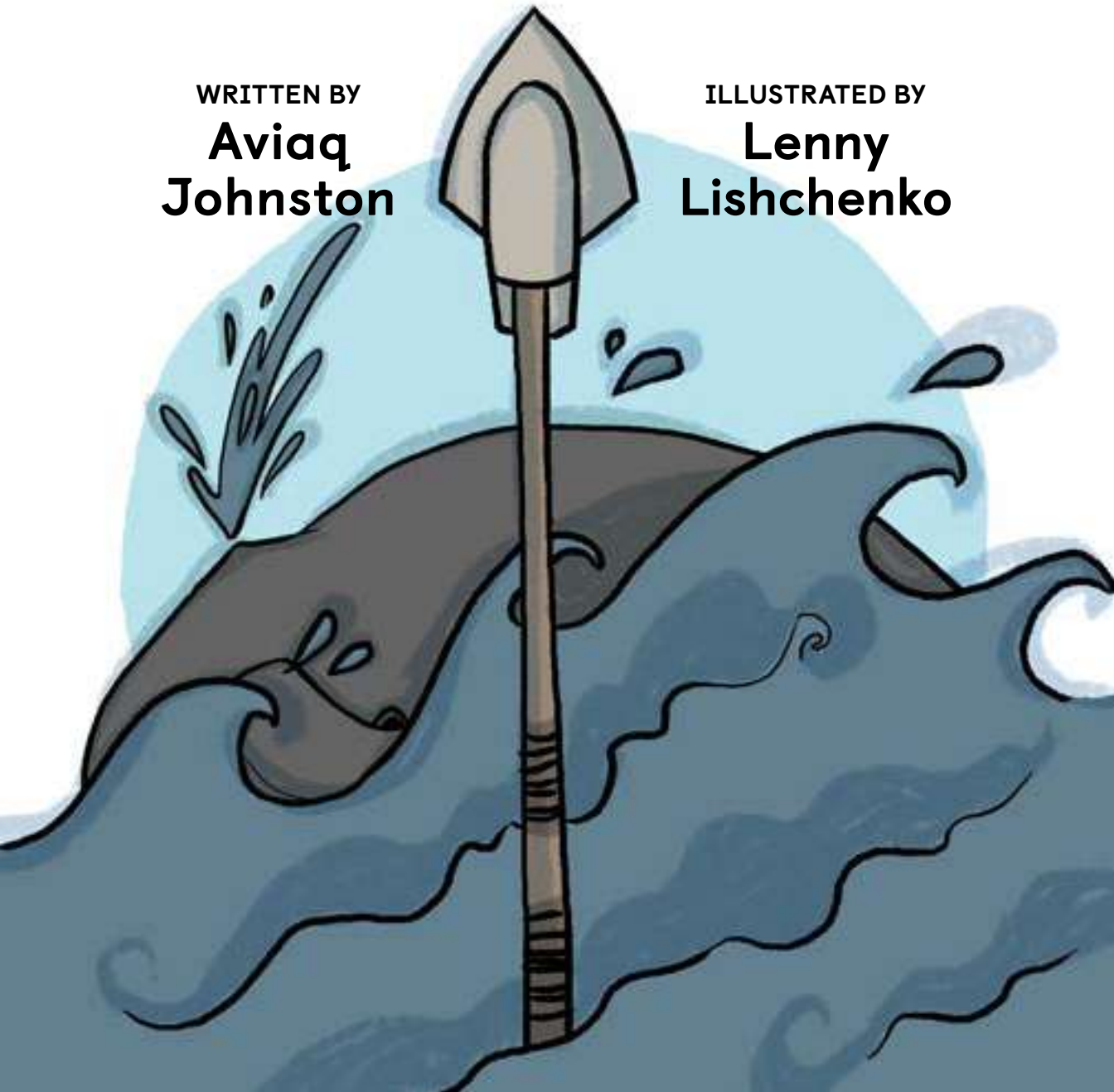
**Solomon Awa** was born in a sod house near Iglulik on November 2, 1959. From a young age, he was curious about everything around him. He is a talented carver, hunter, and storyteller. He teaches traditional knowledge at Nunavut Arctic College and works for Inuit Uqausinginnik Taiguusiliuqtiit.



# THE BOWHEAD HUNT

WRITTEN BY  
**Aviaq  
Johnston**

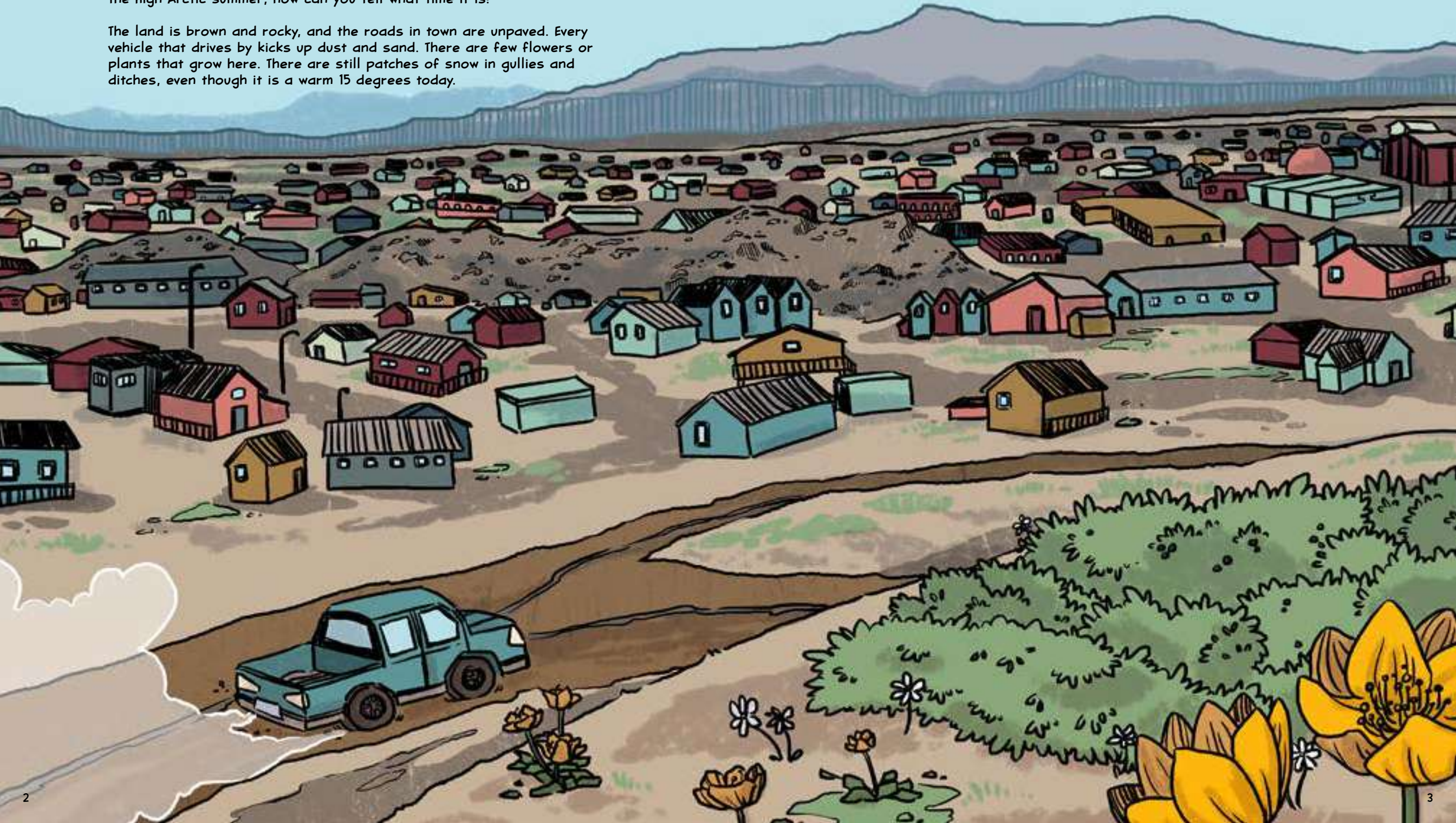
ILLUSTRATED BY  
**Lenny  
Lishchenko**



Nunavut, 2011.

The sun is high in the sky. It looks like it might be mid-afternoon, but in the High Arctic summer, how can you tell what time it is?

The land is brown and rocky, and the roads in town are unpaved. Every vehicle that drives by kicks up dust and sand. There are few flowers or plants that grow here. There are still patches of snow in gullies and ditches, even though it is a warm 15 degrees today.



The hunter raises his harpoon...



Isa? What are you doing?



Come on, Maika! I was about to catch the bowhead.

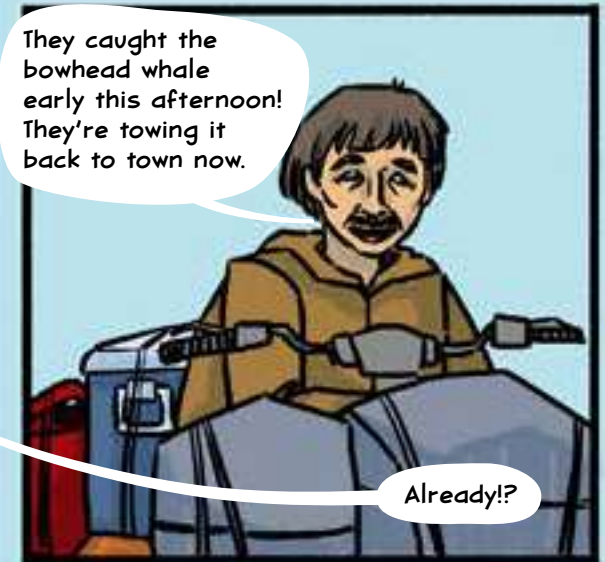
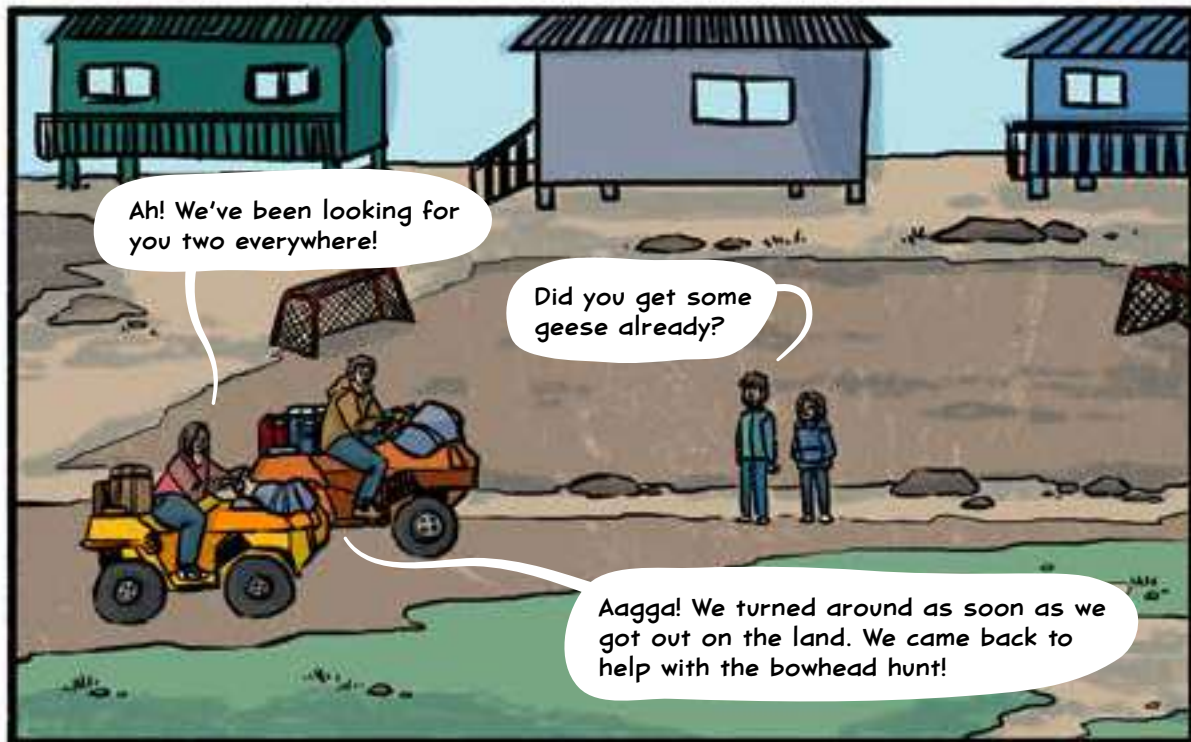
You're too old to be playing like that. Annoying. I want to play ball hockey!

Why didn't you go on the bowhead hunt with Ataata? You go on all the other hunts.

I'm going to help butcher it, though!

I'm too young for this one. Bowhead hunts are dangerous. The whales are massive. I think the youngest guy that's going is David, and he's 19. I'm only 14.







Where's the whale?



You see those boats on the water?

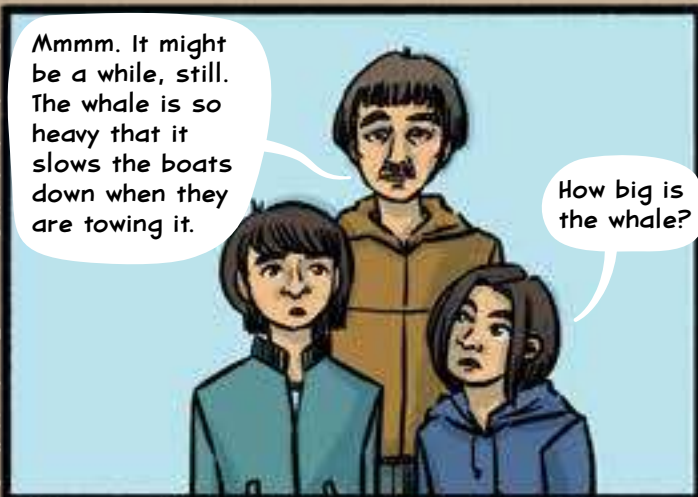


Those boats are towing the whale.



Awesome...

Will they be here soon?



Mmmm. It might be a while, still. The whale is so heavy that it slows the boats down when they are towing it.

How big is the whale?



Some bowhead whales can be 18 metres long!

How big is that?

Hmmm. Almost as big as a hockey rink, I think!

WHOA!



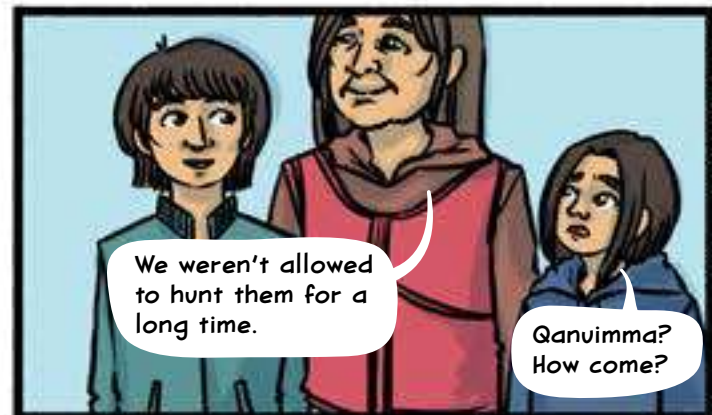
When they get to shore, you can go and look at it up close.

Oh! I just can't wait for them to get back. I haven't had the maktak of a bowhead since I was a child!

How come?



Well, we haven't caught a bowhead in many, many years.



We weren't allowed to hunt them for a long time.

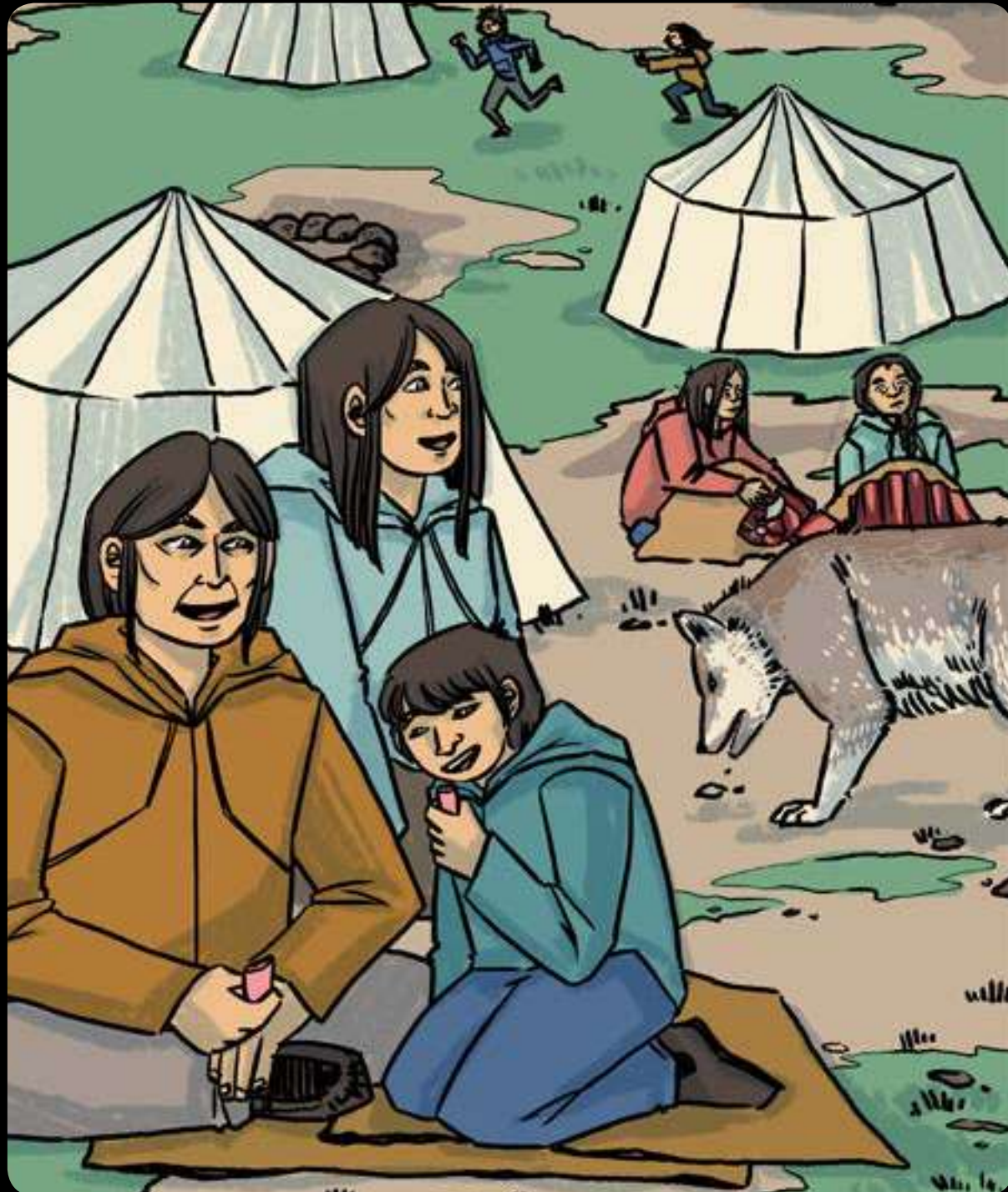
Qanvamma? How come?



Ah, we have lots of time before the boats come in. Let me start from the beginning.

Inuit have always used the land and animals to help us live our lives. We used to respectfully hunt bowhead whales because they were able to provide so much for our communities.

One bowhead could feed a camp for a year if they properly prepared and cached the food. The meat fed our dogs, too.



Uqsuq, the blubber, was the best for our qulliit, our stone lamps. Its oil was the cleanest to use. The inside of the iglu would stay much cleaner than if we used seal blubber.



The jaw bones were sometimes used for qamutiik runners, and the rib bones were used for our qarmaq or tent frames.



So how come we weren't allowed to hunt them for a long time?

A long time ago, whalers from Europe and America came here to hunt bowhead whales...

They wanted the oil and baleen. The oil was used for lamps, but it was also used to make perfume and make-up. The baleen was used for many things, like clothing and umbrellas.

But the whalers overhunted. Over time, the population decreased. Then the whalers left.

By then, it was very rare that we would see bowheads in our waters anymore. The Canadian government limited the harvesting of bowhead whales in 1979. In time, the population returned to a healthy size.



Wow...



li. But because commercial hunting stopped and we also stopped hunting them, the population has rebounded. Now we can hunt bowhead whales again.

Inuit and government monitor the population closely so that they are never put at risk again.

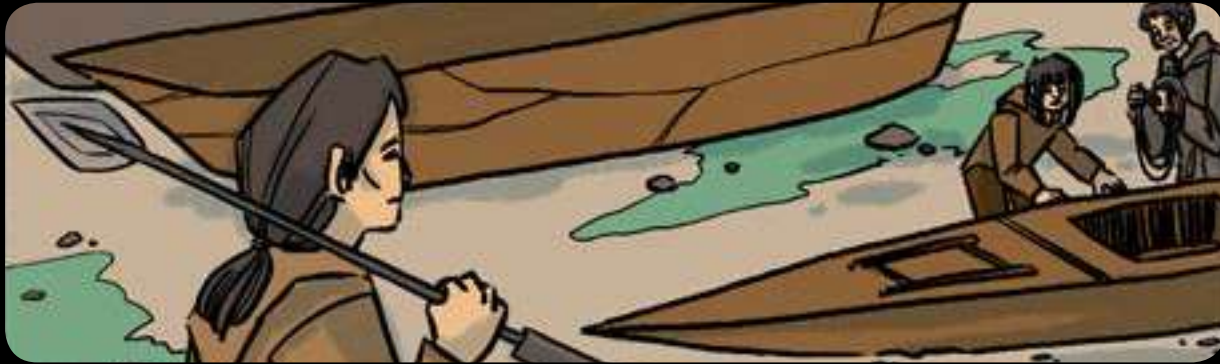
That is a great question! After not hunting them for so long, we almost lost the traditional way of hunting bowheads. Luckily our parents and grandparents shared stories of their hunts so that the knowledge wouldn't be forgotten.

Our ancestors may not have had guns or metal boats and motors, but they were skilled and resourceful! Different communities had different techniques, of course.

Bowhead whales are huge! How did we hunt them before we had rifles? Or boats with motors?



We did have sealskin umiat that could hold a small group of men, but the main harpooners on a bowhead hunt were usually in a qajaq.



The harpener would get very close to the whale and aim for its heart, between the neck and the upper back. Once the harpener made the strike, they paddled the qajaq away as fast as they could. The thrashing whale could capsize their boat.

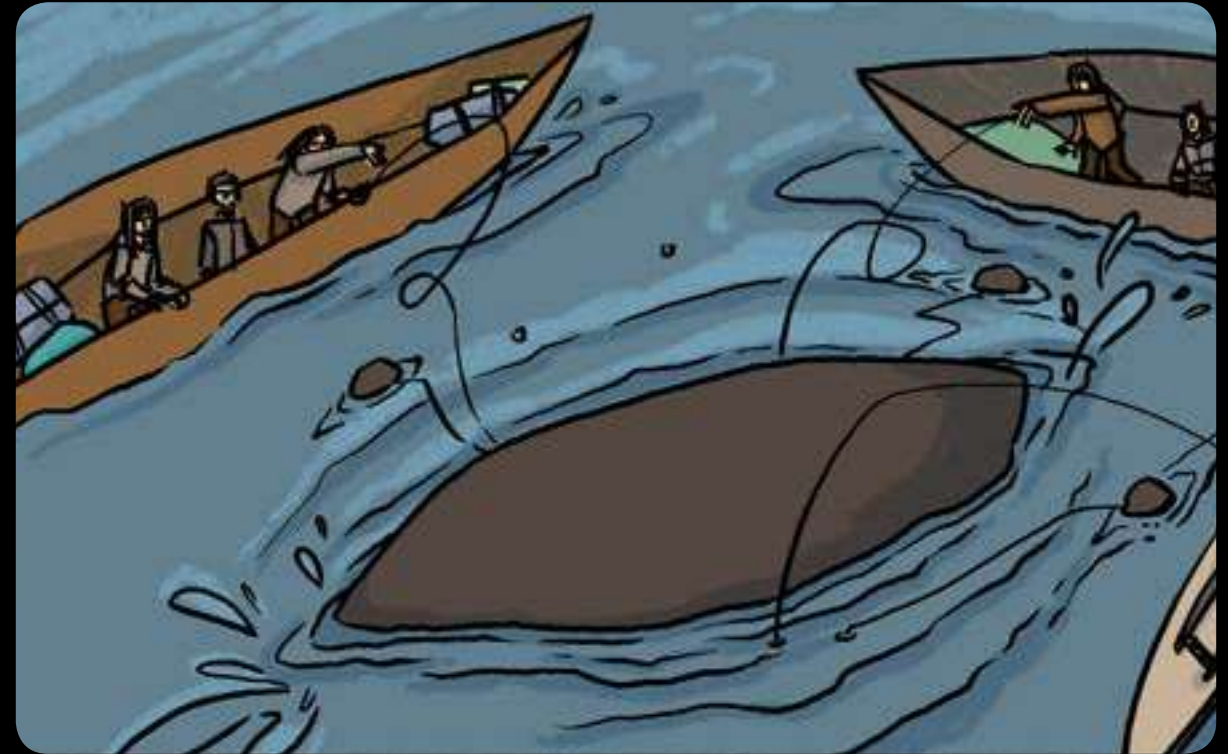


The harpoon would be attached to an avataq, a buoy made from sealskin. The buoy was tethered to a short rope so it wouldn't tangle with the whale's tail. The avataq would float above the water, so you could see which direction the whale was swimming in, even if it was deep underwater. Sometimes the whale would dive so deep that it would carry the rope and the avataq down below. In that case, we would watch closely to see where the avataq would come above the surface again.



A niutaq was used to slow the whale down. A niutaq was almost like a sealskin drum that was attached to the line of the harpoon. It would drag in the water and make it difficult for the whale to swim quickly. This made it easier for the hunters because they could get close to the whale and penetrate its thick skin with their lances.

After being harpooned, the whale always dove very deep. The hunters had to track it very well so that when it surfaced again, they'd be able to use lances to strike it again. At these moments, they would try to pierce the whale's vital organs, like the lungs.



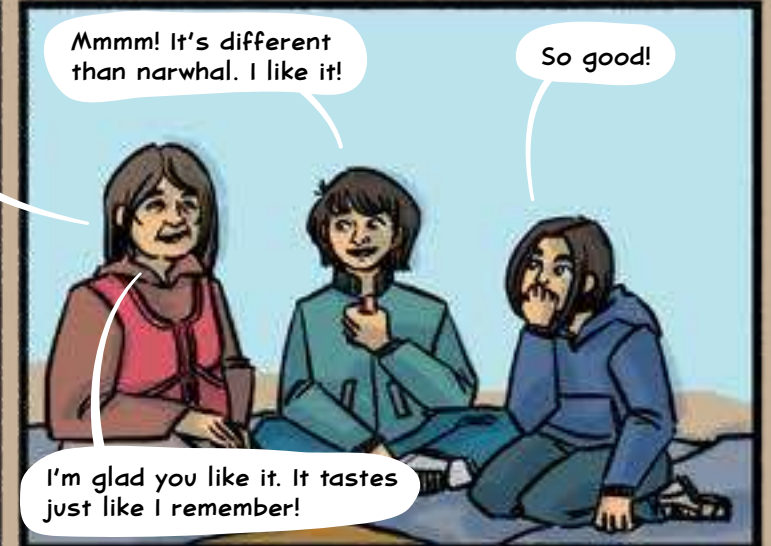
Once the whale was dead, the hunters would return to land. The whale was often too heavy to tow with their qajait, so the hunters would wait for it to sink. Soon, the whale would bloat as its stomach filled up with gases. This would cause the whale to float and eventually end up on shore, where the hunters could harvest it.





Even though the population of bowheads is larger now, we are still trying to protect them by not overhunting. So every year, depending on the region, one or two communities are selected to do the hunt. Next year it might be or Panniqtuvq or Mittimatalik.





Years later...



So, the weather for tomorrow is clear. We will be heading out first thing to set up camp. Let's have a good hunt!



We have spent nearly a year planning this hunt. I can't believe it is tomorrow.

Ataata, what will you be doing on the hunt?



I will be a harpooner, and your aunt Maika will be driving her boat.

Can I come?

No, irniq. You're still too young. A bowhead hunt can be dangerous. You will wait with your ataatsiaq and will come meet us when we bring the whale to shore.

The next day...



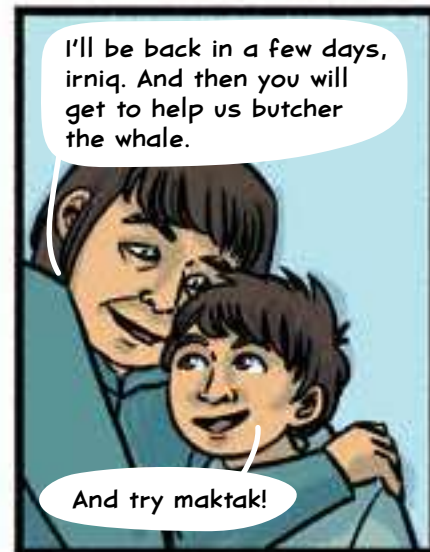
Uarajaaaa. Are you sure I can't go too?



Little Aluki, you're named after the most patient man in the world. While you are waiting for us to come home, just think of your great-grandfather's spirit.



Okay, I think that's everything...Maika, don't tell me you forgot anything! You need to get going!



I'll be back in a few days, irniq. And then you will get to help us butcher the whale.

And try maktak!





I can't believe we are here. I remember the last bowhead hunt so well.

Aksu. Me too. I remember how badly you wanted to go on that hunt. Just like your irniq today.



Ha ha! You're right. I hope we can get a whale so he can learn just as much as we did that day on the shore.

We will. Now, let's set up camp.



A few hours later...



A few whales are coming this way!



You ready, Isa?

Very!



Over there! A whale!



Ha ha! I guess Grandpa Aluki forgot to tell you about that smell!

Ugh!



**THWACK**



Got it!



Follow the avataq! A bowhead can stay underwater for a long time...



Keep driving, Maika!



Solomon, get the grenade launcher ready!



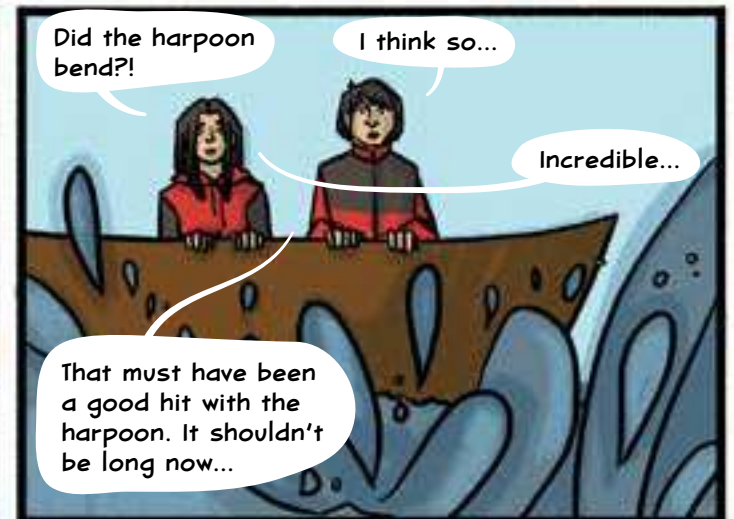
Whoa!

That was close! He almost dropped the grenade launcher in the ocean!

But he got the whale! Nice, Solomon!



Did you see that?!

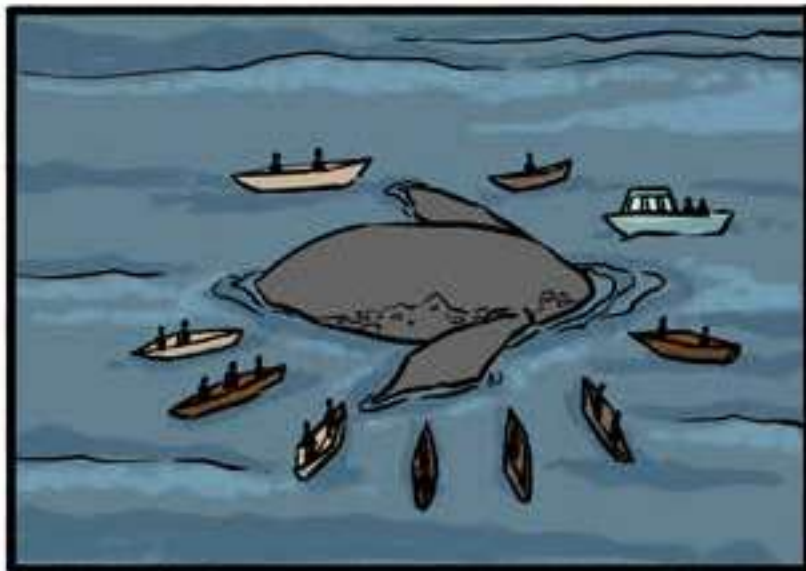
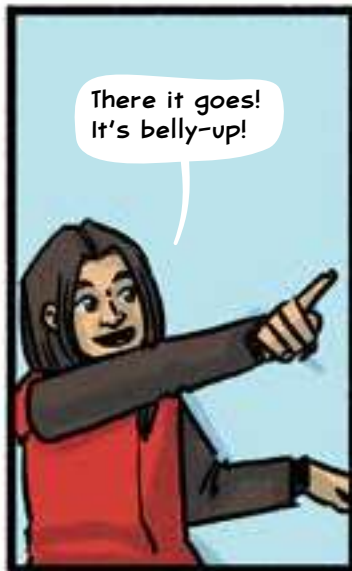


Did the harpoon bend?!

I think so...

Incredible...

That must have been a good hit with the harpoon. It shouldn't be long now...





The whale is caught!  
We are hauling it back  
to camp!

Alianait!!!

We will need as many people as possible to help us cut up  
the maktak. Come down to the beach. We should be there in  
a few hours!



Okay, Aluki! Get dressed and I will  
prepare some bannock and tea. We'll  
pick up your ataatsiaq and head down  
to the beach soon to wait for Ataata  
and Aja!



A few hours later, the entire community  
is gathered on the beach.

There they are!



When your ataata was  
just a boy, he told me  
that he was going to be  
on the next bowhead  
whale hunt. And here we  
are today. I'm very proud  
of him. And very proud  
of your aja Maika.



There's land!

It looks like the whole  
community is there  
waiting for us! Amazing!

It's going to  
be such a  
celebration!



We did it, irniq!  
We got the bowhead.  
Do you see it?



It's huge! Can I go see it?

Atil!



Ataata, can I go on  
the next hunt?

Yes, Aluki. I would be  
very proud if you did.

