

Southeast to Western Alaska: we started in Juneau, a temperate rainforest, and flew to Anchorage in a big Alaska Airlines 737 jet. Then, from Anchorage to Bethel on a twelve-passenger Raven Airlines plane. Next, Bethel to St. Mary's on a six-passenger aircraft, and finally, from St. Mary's to Kotlik on another six-passenger plane. I counted 78 moose down below on the tundra along the final ride. Four flights, one day, 1,028 miles, and 78 moose later, we finally arrived in the village of Kotlik, Alaska. A place with no roads or cars, only boardwalks, two grocery stores, and around 600 people—most of whom I am related to.

My first dance. I was returning to the homelands of my Yup'ik ancestors, the birthplace of my mother and her mother, and so forth, to partake in my coming-of-age ceremony: *nayanganraliit*. I wore a pink kuspuk, sewn by my mom, and seal fur kumkook crafted by her grandmother, Masook. And I danced to the songs written by her grandfather. We practiced for weeks, dancing by night and going to school with my cousins by day, often hitching rides on snow machines. We ate, and we danced—to the beat of the drum and to the rhythm of our hearts.

The room was filled with laughter, pride, and an abundance of food. These were my people—people who looked, laughed, and loved like my mom and me. When it was my turn to dance, I moved as if no one was watching, yet feeling the presence of everyone around me. While dancing, I gave away seal hide vests, socks, hair ties, hats, kuspuks, fish, moose, berries, and bracelets. We expressed our gratitude—through gifts that symbolize strength, love, and community. It was my way of saying thank you for welcoming me into a community where we care for one another; where the health of one is the health of all.

My whole world is the people that are in it and the environment we inhabit. It is the way we care for each other, like trees in a forest, each one vital to the health of the whole. It truly does take a village. We aren't solitary beings; we thrive in community. We learn to love and care for one another. Now, I immerse myself in every community I can—running, skiing, school—all to build and be part of something greater than myself. And I can't say thank you enough. Thank you to all who have shaped me, who nurtured my curiosity and strength. Thank you to those who take the time to answer my questions and teach me about what they have spent time gaining wisdom and knowledge. Thank you to those who will continue this journey with me, and those I will learn to care for. This gratitude and way of life has been instilled upon me through my blood, whether I consciously knew it or not.

Western culture often tells us that you have to learn to do it all by yourself, and once you hit the real world, you're on your own. While I believe in the importance of self-reliance, and learning to take care of myself, I also know that caring for others means letting them care for you. As long as I continue to surround myself with people who understand that the health of one is the health of us all, I believe I can face whatever challenges come my way—because we all lean on each other. The energy you put into something always finds its way back to you.

So now, I think back to the day of my first dance in Kotlik, the day I said, "Quyanna"—thank you. The day I was swept up in song and dance and shown how I will navigate this world: with gratitude, community, and the strength that comes from caring for others, and letting them care for me.