FISH SCHOOL

BY

MICHAEL KOENIGSKNECHT

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The Cook Inlet is a part of the Pacific Ocean that extends about 200 miles northeast from the Gulf of Alaska to Anchorage. The Inlet is about 100 miles wide at its opening and narrows as it reaches Anchorage. On the northwest side of the Inlet is a rugged wilderness of snowcapped volcanos, virgin forests and pristine rivers. On the southeast side is the Kenai Peninsula. The Kenai is thickly forested with lots of game. Bears are plentiful, including the magnificent Kodiak brown bear. This far south it actually gets dark briefly during the night and I could feel the ocean breezes. I was on the Kenai to find a job in the commercial salmon fishing industry.

In 1970 Clam Gulch consisted of a single building on the Kenai coast road between Kasilof and Ninilchik. The only building in Clam Gulch was a general store, gas station, liquor store, post office, bar, and general meeting place, all in one. Cliffs border the sea at Clam Gulch. At the bottom of the cliffs are broad, rough sand beaches at low tide; at high tide the waves crash onto the cliffs, sending sea spray high into the air. The tides on the Cook Inlet are extreme, as I was soon to learn.

A mile or so south of Clam Gulch there was a salmon processing operation about 50 yards in from the cliffs. The cliffs and forest between Clam Gulch and the salmon processing building would become my home. I had hitch-hiked from Anchorage and now lingered at the sole building that was Clam Gulch. It was there that I met a fisherman who hired me. Dave was an open-faced man and at 29 was about ten years older than me. Dave planned to make a years' worth of money during the brief salmon season. Of course, I knew absolutely nothing about commercial salmon fishing; but Dave was happy to teach me. When salmon are running help is scarce.

I learned that salmon swarm by the millions up the Cook Inlet from the north Pacific, each salmon looking for the mouth of the river or stream in which it spawned several years earlier. Commercial salmon fishing is strictly regulated to ensure that sufficient salmon make it to the fresh water to spawn and continue the generational cycle. The salmon run in July and August and the Alaska DNR specifies 12-hour periods when fishing is permitted. Where I was located it was all gill nets. Large boats would tether one end of a very long net to an anchor and buoy and stretch the net from there to the back of the boat. Then they would wait for the salmon.

Dave's method was a little different. He had an open boat about 18 feet long with an outboard motor. I used a sledgehammer to pound a long post into the beach, attached a rope, and jumped into the boat. Dave took the boat straight out. Once we were out of the breaking surf I attached the other end of the rope to a gill net. Dave slowly continued out to sea and I played out the net from the back of the boat, making sure it cleared the motor and did not tangle. When we had the long net stretched perpendicular from the beach, we waited for the salmon.

Salmon eggs hatch in shallow hollows in the gravel of fresh-water streams. After hatching the baby salmon head downstream to estuaries where they acclimate to saltwater. Salmon spend their adult years feeding and traveling in the Pacific Ocean. In ways and for reasons that no human knows adult salmon by the millions simultaneously navigate over hundreds and thousands of miles of the Pacific back to the estuary where their natal stream meets the sea. From there they swim upstream to the same gravel patch where they hatched to lay and fertilize eggs. And then they die, within days of completing their quest. No one knows how salmon find their way back, but the compulsion to spawn in the same place they came from causes them to face and

overcome all obstacles, including predators, swift rapids, and waterfalls to reach the exact place of their birth, and then their death. It is a complete circle of life and of geography.

The Cook Inlet, as it narrows, acts as a funnel, consolidating millions of salmon traveling to natal streams that pour into the Inlet. Waiting in the boat with Dave, I could see the salmon coming from far off. The surface of the ocean seemed to boil as far as I could see. As they came closer and closer, I could make out tens of thousands of individual salmon leaping like dolphins as they churned up the inlet. When the salmon hit the net it violently jerked the boat around. Dave started the engine and we turned to shore, forming a circle with the net.

Then the really hard work began: pulling hundreds of writhing salmon, weighing 5 to 90 pounds each out of the net in the shallows and throwing them as far as I could up the beach. We had to work as fast as possible because of the limited time period fishing was allowed, and also because of the tide. It was a mad, frantic rush of work: in the cold surf, with uncertain footing in the moving water, covered in fish slime. As we finished our second netting and were headed back to shore, a very large dump truck appeared on the beach. The truck stopped at each shore boat's pile of fish. My job when it got to our pile was to heave each fish a second time, one by one, up and into the dump truck. Our pile was hundreds of salmon. As the fish flew high up and into the truck a man with a clip board sitting on top of the truck cab called out the type of salmon: King, Red, Silver, Pink, Dog. Each type was a different price. I was supposed to be a check on the man counting but being new I was in no position to dispute his call. On day one, all the salmon looked the same to me.

The tide ended our fishing that day. When the tide rushed in the beach was gone. The waves crashed into the cliff. Anything left on the beach was quickly pulverized and sucked out to sea. I was exhausted. Lifting and throwing each salmon twice, first out of the net to our pile above the water line and then throwing it again from the pile up into the dump truck was backbreaking. By the time we had finished it had been about a 16-hour workday and adrenaline had kept me going. Dave paid me $100 cash and told me to be ready for the next fishing period.

For the second trip I knew what was in store and could pace myself. On my third fishing period, the sea was very rough. The wind was strong and the sky threatening. After I staked the net we were nearly swamped by high waves as we turned out to sea through the surf. Waiting for the salmon we were rocking so hard in high waves that we could not stand and the spray made it hard to see. The clouds were very dark and low, moving fast across the sky. I bailed water continuously, trying to stay ahead of the waves crashing over the sides of the boat. Then, conditions got even worse. The rise and then sickening drop off the crests of the waves threatened to capsize us. Finally, Dave decided to concede defeat and head back to shore with me pulling in the net as best I could. The surf was too high to beach the boat. Dave shouted for me to cut the rope from the net and we would look for a sheltered place to come in.

As we headed back out to sea, rising and falling on the huge waves, we saw three of the larger, deep water boats headed in. They looked heavy. They were clearly in trouble. In the roaring wind and crashing seas I could hear nothing of what Dave was shouting, though he was only a few feet away. He signaled that we were going to help the other, larger boats before they sank. This was not welcome news. We were in a small open boat mostly filled with net that I was

frantically bailing so we wouldn't sink. What did Dave think we could possibly do for these other, larger boats? But I did not have a vote. We headed out towards the foundering boats, which came in and out of sight as we rose and fell on the waves. I wondered how many men Dave thought we could carry if we threw the net overboard; I hoped they brought buckets to bail water.

We were about 100 yards from the nearest boat when I saw a muzzle flash. They were shooting at us. In an open boat on the crest of a wave in plain sight of several men firing rifles is to feel entirely naked. Nowhere to hide. Panic choked me. After riding a couple of crests without either of us getting hit, Dave managed to turn our little boat away and back toward shore. As we headed in I could see intermittently in the gloom the bigger boats taking waves over their decks. Dave found a place in the lee of gigantic boulders just off the beach where it was calmer and we could bring in the boat.

Later as we dried out in front of a fire, I asked Dave what had happened. He acknowledged that he had been pushed by greed to try to fish in such bad conditions. If he missed a fishing period, that was money lost. However, he had risked his boat, his net, and our lives. He said that attempting to rescue men off the bigger boats in such terrible conditions was also a mistake but was done to atone for his greed in going out in the first place. As for the deep-water fishermen, Dave said they had the rifles to shoot seals who tore up the nets when feeding on helpless salmon. He also seemed surprised and puzzled that they would shoot at us as we approached to lend aid. He speculated that they were crazed by fear of drowning and angry at the prospect of losing their catch and boat. They were helpless and shot at us as the only thing they could do in a

hopeless situation. That did not make any sense to me but based on the many Alaskans I had met over the months, it rang true. I just nodded. I heard later that boats and men were lost that day.

Listening to Dave I could still feel the blood pounding through my veins, I could hear the crashing waves and howling wind. I could feel the rise and sickening fall of the boat in seas so high that I was surrounded by walls of grey water until we rose again, soaked and freezing. I decided that I had had enough of commercial fishing. None of the fishermen I had met or seen that day had acted reasonably or with any common sense. I would find other work. Because we brought in no fish that day, I was not paid. Dave and I parted on good terms.

I got a job as a truck driver at the salmon processing plant. The owner, Phil, was very direct and seemed honest. He owned large dump trucks that he ran on the beaches and to the docks to buy salmon from the fishermen and haul them back to his building for processing. There was a dirt access road, all switchbacks, from the cliff top to the beach. The job was to get the truck down the cliff, purchase and load salmon until the truck was full, and then get back up the cliff and to the processing plant to unload— as many times as possible until all the fish were gone, or until the tide came in. I was told that one of Phil's drivers had miscalculated and failed to get his truck off the beach before the tide came in. When the tide went out there was no sign of the truck, and Phil had to pay for the fish that never made it to the plant. Phil decided that he needed a more intelligent driver. I got the job. The main requirements— besides being smart enough to get off the beach before the tide came in— was to know how to double clutch through the gears and having the strength and nerves to manhandle the truck up and down the narrow switchbacks. I told Phil that I had been driving farm tractors since age eight or nine, so I was hired.

This was a good job. Now I was the guy sitting on the roof of the truck cab with a clip board counting the fish as they were heaved into the truck. I'd give the fisherman a receipt with the count of each type of salmon and then drive down the beach to the next pile of salmon until I was full. Then it was grinding up the cliff and back to the plant to unload. Unloading was easy. I just backed up to a concrete apron next to the plant and pushed a button. The hydraulic system tilted the dumper and the fish slid out the back.

It was hard to turn down pleading fishermen with piles of salmon, but when I knew the tide was about to turn I did so. My number one priority was to get my truck off the beach before getting caught in the surging tide— whether fully loaded or not. When the tide was in or the beach fishermen sold out, I would drive to the docks to buy from the deep-water fishermen when they came in at the end of the fishing period. I drove the truck for a couple weeks, then Phil called me in to his office.

"Michael, good job with the truck. But now I want you in the plant."

"Phil, I enjoy driving and working with the fishermen in the fresh air."

"Yes, but I need you to manage the lines. Managing is an indoor job, and the hours are longer, but I will double your salary."

"Phil, I don't know the workers. I don't know the Manager's job…."

"Don't worry about that. I will tell you all you need to know as we go."

"But, Phil… Well, if you're sure, I'll give it a try."

Phil had a large number of seasonal employees in the plant, almost all members of native tribes from villages all over south west Alaska. These folks lived on islands or in isolated areas where

no paying work was available. So, a couple of months of cleaning salmon for cash money was attractive. It was cold, slimy, repetitive work in very long shifts. Work started when the salmon started arriving at the plant and ended when the last salmon was cleaned and chilled. Shifts were often 16 hours or more.

When not cleaning fish most of the workers camped around the plant on the cliff top. There were a couple of "pop up" trailers on two wheels, but most of us were in tents or canvas lean-tos. It rained a lot; almost every day. When it wasn't raining it was often misty or foggy. Everybody lived and worked in high rubber boots and layers of flannel topped by a water-proof poncho. We cooked over wood fires among the tents and lean-tos. Since our time off was generally less than 24 hours between long shifts, sleeping, gathering, preparing and eating food was all we did.

Our main food was fresh salmon, for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Usually a whole gutted salmon would be wrapped in aluminum foil with a chopped onion and some salt and pepper and tossed in the embers. Twenty or thirty minutes later, depending on the size of the fish, it was ready. For a different taste, I would go to the enormous pile of discarded salmon heads near the plant and carve out the cheeks from several big king salmon heads and fry them in a pan. Salmon cheeks almost didn't taste like salmon. If we were off work and awake when the tide was out, several of us would descend the cliff and dig clams.

There are eight known major concentrations of razor clams between the Arctic Circle and Southern California, and four of those are in Alaska. As the name Clam Gulch implies, it is the center of a prime razor clam habitat. Once on the beach at low tide, all I needed was a narrow

shovel and a big bucket or bushel basket. I would spot an air hole in the sand and figure out the direction of the clam's escape route, typically towards the water. A mature razor clam is about five inches long and can move very fast through the sand when scared. With practice I could plunge the shovel into the sand blocking escape and in one or two scoops seize the clam. There were so many that it was easy for even a novice clam digger to fill a big basket in less than an hour. Cleaning the clams took more time than digging them, but clams were a nice change from the salmon.

Once a fellow came down the road and stopped at the plant with half of a caribou carcass. A furious bidding war broke out among us fish eaters to buy his caribou meat. He would not take salmon or clams, only cash money. It was very expensive but worth it. We lucky few had red meat that night and talked about that meat for days afterward.

There were virtually no fruits or vegetables. While a few were available in the Clam Gulch "store", they were sad looking and prohibitively expensive. But, EverClear was in abundant supply. EverClear is a vodka like drink listed as 190 proof, at least double the alcohol content of any hard liquor I had ever heard of. This made it very convenient to carry around in the bush. A little went a long way. And it was relatively cheap. KoolAid packets added flavor. And so, the beverage of choice among the tents and lean-tos was EverClear with powdered KoolAid mixed in. After a long shift most of us got stupid drunk before passing out, with luck inside a tent or under a lean-to. The hang overs were vicious.

Inevitably, the clanging bell would call everyone back to work still in mid hangover. Truckloads

of salmon would arrive, to be sorted by type. Kings, or “Chinook”, which could weigh 60 to 90 pounds each, were rare and the most prized. These were cleaned, filleted, and put in the cooler to be flown down to Seattle for distribution as fresh salmon. Reds, or “ Sockeye”, were the next most valuable and could be filleted and sold fresh or flash frozen. Silvers were more plentiful, less expensive than the Kings or Reds, and were cleaned, filleted and frozen. Pinks were cleaned and sent for canning. Dog salmon got their name because they were considered fit only to be fed to sled dogs.

This sounds simple and clean. It was anything but that. After sorting by type, the heads were cut off and discarded and the carcasses went to different lines of stainless-steel tables. Scalers would run their tools from the tail up, with scales flying in the air like a heavy snowfall covering everything in the area. Next people with very sharp, very thin, long knives slit the belly and carefully removed any roe. Roe is placed in big wooden barrels behind the workers. Then the guts are torn out in one motion and thrown into gut buckets. Of course, blood is flowing and running off the tables onto the floor.

Next are the filleters, also with very sharp, long, thin knives. As the fish carcasses move down the lines, the bones, tail and fins are removed and brushed to the floor. With experienced workers the fish are moving very fast and the knives are just a blur, flashing in and out of sight. Finally, there is a wash table before the fish meat is sent to the cooler, freezer or canner. The work continues at this pace until the fish are gone. The workers are dropping with exhaustion by the end.

Of course, accidents happen. With all these sharp knives, slippery fish and very tired workers, someone is bound to be hurt from time to time. What is not acceptable, are deliberate attacks, ambush cuttings, and brawling. Many of the workers are proud men and women, not used to being among non-family or large groups of people. They are distrustful of people of other tribes or ethnicities. They are tired, wet, cold, often sleep deprived, hungover, and generally sick and tired of camping out in the rain and working like dogs. Some seem to be constantly on a hair trigger. My job in the plant is to supervise the smooth functioning of the lines and to spot and block simmering confrontations before they turn violent. Failing that, I intervene to stop the fighting, cutting or brawling.

Sometimes simply working in close proximity would set someone off. Workers were assigned to shovel the blood, bones, scales, etc. off the floor from under and around the tables. Touching a line worker's boot with the shovel could trigger a violent sweep of the knife to the side and back of the line worker. I saw several such instance where the knife came very close or nicked the shoveler. Then of course, the shovel comes up for the line worker's head. And we are off; knife versus shovel. Partisans for each side surround the pair, some looking to get in on the action. All the lines come to a halt. Stopping the fight and getting the lines moving is my responsibility. Fresh fish does not stay fresh long. We have to process it all as soon as possible.

Among the men and few women working in the plant some were more "native" than others, judging by the clothing, hair and demeanor. All were there, far from home, for the short opportunity to make cash money. Paying jobs were rare to nonexistent in their communities. Some of the workers seemed to want to work hard, do a good job, and perhaps have other

opportunities. Others seemed sullen, worked grudgingly, and seemed to be rooting against the plant. It was puzzling to me: they depended on the plant for cash to take back home but seemed to resent the very existence of the plant. But Phil did not have a lot of choices. During the salmon season he had to hire anybody he could get.

There was one man in particular that gave me pause. Vic was a native, about 21 or 22. He had lustrous, thick, black hair and dark eyes above high cheek bones in a round face. Vic was thickly built with quick, springy muscles. His skin was a rusty brown. Vic was reserved and quiet, but when he spoke men listened. He was not one to lash out in mindless, purposeless violence. He stood out. He seemed destined to be a leader of his tribe. I respected him and in other circumstances we could have been friends. But Vic radiated resentment. I suspected that it sprang from his frustration with being treated condescendingly as an "Indian" by whites who tended to think of all natives as the same, in stereotypes.

Vic was proud of his family and tribe. He was also embarrassed by the poverty, lack of education and other conditions that fed white stereotypes of his people. He resented whites assuming he was just another shiftless Indian based on his skin and hair. I felt he had a particular anger and resentment against me. I think Vic was angry that Phil had made me manager instead of him. I believe that if he had thought about it, Phil would agree that my qualifications were no better than Vic's. It simply never occurred to Phil to consider an Indian for the job. Whites were managers and natives were workers. I understood Vic's resentment; but I was there to make money and I was not about to suggest to Phil that he reconsider my promotion. I felt guilty, but not enough to do anything to change the situation. I made friendly overtures, but Vic was having

none of that. I think he knew that it was just me trying to assuage my guilt and to obscure the injustice of the situation. He was always on guard with me and vaguely threatening. I felt I had to watch my back, not just from Vic but also because he could always get a couple of guys from his tribe to take revenge on me and then disappear into tribal lands.

So I was worried about an ambush. It would be so easy when I was breaking up a fight on the line for one of the knives to “slip” and cut or stab me. There was already much senseless violence in the plant. This would be just one more thing.

Vic and I did have one fight. It was outside the plant with a large crowd of cheering, jeering workers. It was a “feeling each other out” kind of fight. It started with what I considered good natured trash talk that never got mean but somehow we ended up squaring off. Alcohol was involved. There was a lot of yelled advice and commentary from the crowd as we circled, feinting and jabbing. As time wore on there were some good sequences of punches on both sides. In the end, though, Vic beat me rather easily. He was stronger, quicker, and a better boxer than me. I knew from that fight that Vic could take me anytime he wanted. But, worse, the other men knew he could take me. So, it was humiliating and I regretted the fight. I worried how it would play out on the plant floor.

A few days later I was asleep on my back under my canvas lean to. I woke with Vic astride my chest, his knees pinning both my arms to the ground. He had the barrel of his revolver stuck up my right nostril. The hammer was cocked. In the dim light I could see that his eyes were unfocused.

I lay very still, watching his eyes. When they seemed to come into focus I asked, “Vic, is there a problem?” I could tell that he was trying to say something. Finally, he slurred out that his hand mirror was missing. It took several attempts but eventually I got out of him that he believed that I had taken the missing mirror. I could see the nose of bullets in the outer chambers of the cylinder. I assumed there was one ready to fire if the hammer came down. Vic was swaying a bit on top of me and leaning on the revolver, jamming the barrel into my nostril. It hurt like hell, but I tried to remain still. Vic was very unsteady; I was afraid he would fall over and inadvertently pull the trigger. I assured Vic that I had not taken his mirror. He did not respond. I told him he could search my backpack, my sleeping bag, my clothes, look everywhere he liked.
As he swayed, leaning on the pistol to stay upright, I hoped Vic was considering his options other than pulling the trigger. Finally, he mumbled something. His thumb reached for the hammer just inches from my eyes. I prayed hard that his thumb would not slip as he tried to uncock the gun. When the hammer came down gently, I felt a wave of relief. Vic fell unconscious to one side dropping his gun on my chest.

After moving the pistol out of his reach I lay still, trying to slow my heart and calm my mind. Vic’s lower body was heavy and I was not sure I had the strength to move him right away. I was completely drained.

Eventually, I collected myself, wiggled out from under Vic and took his gun to the plant office, to which I had a key. I sat in Phil’s desk chair under a light, examining the gun that could have killed me. There was a bullet in the firing chamber. It seemed important that I remember all the details of this revolver. Then I put it in Phil’s top desk drawer and relocked the office door on my

way out. I walked the rest of the night, staying in open areas, along the cliff and in a small meadow across the coast road from the plant. I could not even think about being among trees. I needed to see 360 degrees.

As I walked in the half light along the cliffs I thought about the last several months in Alaska. I had been actively considering homesteading. In 1970 it was still possible to claim 160 acres of land and if I made some minimal improvements I would own it after five years. Many of the men I had met were homesteading or planning to once they found the right spot. I was tempted by the thought of free land. But, none of the available land I had seen was capable of supporting crops, so all the men had to work odd jobs for money. I was having trouble seeing myself as a hand-to-mouth homesteader in five or ten years, hunting and fishing for meat but working odd jobs for all other necessities. I respected and admired some of the settlers I had met; but, there were also many that I did not respect, and I was repelled by the unethical and ignorant way of life of others. I also knew that I did not understand or fit in with the Native peoples. I walked until dawn, uncertain about my future, uncomfortable with a vision of myself in Alaska.

It was late in the salmon season and incoming loads of fish were getting smaller. All of us were played out: exhausted by the long hours; tired of living outdoors in the rainy, damp chill; sick of eating salmon; and, getting really irritated by our fellow employees' habits and peculiarities. It was good that it was almost over. But we were not quite done yet.

On a night when it was not raining and stars were visible, I was awakened by lots of yelling. I stood beside my lean-to and saw bright flames soaring from the roof of the fish processing

building. I ran to the plant. Men were running around yelling, but to no purpose. The plant was about 200 feet long and about 30 feet high from the ground to the top of the peaked roof, made entirely of wood. The flames rose high above the roof; red and orange embers swirled up even higher than the flames in a spinning vortex into the night sky. Above the underlying roaring of the flames there were cracking and popping sounds from inside the building. It was a lot to take in. I had never considered the possibility of a fire and was dumbstruck for a time. What should I do? We were next to the ocean but with no way to get the water up the cliff. With only the equivalent of a garden hose used to wash the fish and stainless steel tables, there was no way to put out this huge fire. I found Phil. The fire was on the end of the building containing Phil's office and moving toward the center of the building. We concluded that the only thing we could do was save the processed fish in the freezers and coolers at the far end of the plant. Most importantly, we had to stop the fire from reaching the rows of man-sized tanks of compressed gas used to operate the freezers and coolers. If the fire reached those tanks there would be a huge explosion. I was to organize the men to run chains and ropes through the sides of the building and over the roof. When those were in place I would hook them to the back of a dump truck and pull down the section of the plant next to the tanks, freezers and coolers. This would create a break between the compressed gas and valuable fish inventory and the rest of the freely burning building. We could then hope the flames would not jump across the open space.

The problem was that the men were not interested in helping. They seemed to enjoy watching the fire light up the sky as they passed bottles of Ever Clear. All the resentments and anger of the past weeks seemed to well up; the fire was Nature taking their side. It was frustrating. None of the men were willing to listen to me or lend a hand. I finally ran into Vic.

“ Vic, we need to do something, save the inventory.” He just looked at me.

“ If we don’t stop the fire, the tanks will explode and many people could be hurt.”

“ Mm, uh hah…”

“ Vic, Phil will pay extra to men who help make a fire break. Will you help? Will you ask the men to help?”

Vic silently returned my searching look for what seemed a long time. Then he turned and called out to some of the nearby men in their language. They jumped to and soon ropes and chains went in the windows of one side of the building, out the windows on the other side and over the roof. We had to move fast as the fire ate more and more of the building. We had to use two trucks, but to the roar of the engines, the cheering of men, and the groaning of the roof timbers, the building gradually gave way and we dragged the roof and upper walls away. The men used axes and sledge hammers to pull away the lower parts from the concrete foundation. We then had a clear space with just bare concrete floor and stainless steel tables between the fire and the freezers and compressed gas tanks. We could all rest and watch as the bulk of the plant burned to the ground. We sat within the light of the fire, passing the Ever Clear, marveling at the brightness in the middle of the night, and at the thoroughness of the flames. The fire did not jump the gap.

In the morning, only blackened, wilted stainless steel tables stood where a large building had been the day before. There was not a trace of Phil’s office. Only the tanks, freezers and coolers stood, a low humming letting us know that the fish was safe. Ash and debris littered the surrounding area. The section of roof and upper walls was a mangled pile off to one side. In the morning light the immensity of the destruction was plain. The air was clear and calm. It felt

strangely peaceful. All of us stood around silently or talking quietly in small groups.

Phil gave a speech. He was grateful that we had saved the inventory and avoided the gas tanks exploding. No one was seriously injured. Our jobs were over for the season, but everyone would be paid that day in cash for wages owed. Once the inventory was sold in a day or two, he would honor my promise of cash rewards to all who helped during the fire. Then he would begin to rebuild the plant. He said he would be ready for the next salmon season and promised everyone a job if they returned next year. Later I saw Phil walking with Vic. They had a long conversation and shook hands.

I did not know whether to believe Phil about the rebuild or not. The idea of rebuilding from scratch was daunting. But Phil assured me that he would start the rebuild as soon as the cash from the sale of the inventory came in. He asked me to stay and help rebuild. He offered a good wage. Phil is a true Alaskan settler: bold, hardworking, and undaunted by disaster. I admired Phil for these qualities and he made me believe that he would rebuild. But I declined his offer of employment.

In that moment I knew that I did not want to claim a homestead. I was not a Native; and, I was not a settler. I knew that I would not make a life for myself in Alaska. I had other plans.