

## CALL OF THE WILD ALASKA BITCH

"My parents have a homestead up near Seward," Willow said. She stuffed the hamburger in her mouth and continued, "I guess it was alright at first, but when I got older I hated it. Well, that is after I saw the city of Fairbanks. I knew I didn't want to live in the back woods." She wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve and said, "Lady you better think this thing through carefully. You know you sound more like a city person to me. You don't sound like the type that could handle long killing winters. Winters that kill, yeah, where people freeze to death or kill and eat each other."

"I came up here to homestead and that's just what I plan to do," I told her in my most stubborn voice. I pulled the pickles out of my hamburger and bit into them, "I am sick of city life. I'm ready to go back to the land. You know of any jobs? I'm going to need a little more than I got to file a claim and get the materials I need."

Willow, who was tall and dressed like an old Russian scout, stood up and said, "I'll give ya a call tomorrow. What's yer room number at the hotel?"

It was January 1975, when I arrived in Anchorage, Alaska. Having been influenced by Jack London's stories, I decided home-steading and building a log cabin was the way to go. I met Willow at the hotel's cafe. She called the next day and said the best work was on the pipeline. She said that pipeline jobs were the highest paid and only a few were available. She hung up before I could say anything. A little later the phone rang again. It was Willow. She told me about a job in Valdez as a waitress in a lively tavern, the Du Drop Inn.

"I never did that kinda work before," I said.

"It's alright tell 'em Willow the Savage sent you."

I picked up the phone and dialed the Du Drop. A woman answered. She was yelling over noise. I guessed a noisy restaurant. When I asked about the job, She demanded to know why I couldn't come at once. This should have been a clue. This should have prepared me for what was to come. I found out later that the person I spoke with was a waitress who had worked 24 hours straight and was anxious for anyone to get down there and relieve her. She handed the phone over to a man with an accent. He introduced himself as French.

I said, "Willow the Savage sent me. Do I get free room and board like she said I would."

"Oh yes, yes!" They were desperate for help.

I went to the airport to buy a ticket to Valdez. A woman was sitting behind the counter with her feet propped up on a chair, reading a magazine and munching on an apple.

"Scuse me," I said, clearing my throat. She stood up slowly still reading and munching then put the magazine down and said, "Yeah?"

"I wanna buy a ticket to Valdez."

She told me the planes had not gone to Valdez for days because of the wind and snow. The pass and one road from Anchorage to Valdez was closed for the same reason. I bought a round trip ticket anyway and she told me to come back everyday until it left at 8 a.m. There were some rugged looking fellows propped up on benches waiting for the same plane.

I had never been on a plane that small. I sat under a wing and watched the door to the cock pit flap back and forth. We rocked and shimmed all the way through a mountain pass and I thought for sure we would slam into a hillside.

After I crawled out of the plane, I asked the pilot where the terminal was since I couldn't see anything. The pilot pointed to a shack some distance from the plane. I followed two burly men

passengers to the shack.

A pregnant woman sat behind a desk talking on the phone. The burly men took up space in the small room. After the woman hung up, I pushed my way to the phone and called the Du Drop Inn. The man named French said he would be right over to pick me up.

French's car slid across icy roads through enormous piles of snow. He told me he was from Reillanne. He told me with his important sounding air that he was a manager at the tavern. I got the impression that he saw himself as a famous chef or maitre d. It was his attitude more than anything else. He dressed in fine fitting suits and jutted his chin out and curled his lip when he spoke. The chef part of my imagining who he was, was seeing his stomach. His stomach hung out from his belt and seemed to get in the way of his driving.

We stopped briefly in front of a pile of snow. A pole with a round yellow light stuck out on top. French told me to meet him there that night. I tried to see where he was pointing. The yellow light said, Du Drop Inn in black letters.

We turned the corner. The streets were walled in by snow. We drove three blocks, stopping in front of another pile of snow. He whizzed away leaving me in there with my bags. I walked around slipping and falling a few times before I came to a porch where a woman with long, dark hair, met me and helped me climb the makeshift porch.

Valdez is a fishing village that was completely wiped out by an earthquake and tidal wave shortly before I arrived. It was in a state of chaos because some companies from the "Lower 48" decided to run a pipe line through Alaska. The pipe line ended in Valdez where ships would carry it to Japan while the "Lower 48" had an oil shortage.

The dark haired woman asked me to sit at the table with her. She had a companion, a man with sun glasses, who grunted when we were introduced. I looked around at the garbage against the wall and the pile of peanut shells in the middle of the table. The woman sat like a mannequin. "I think we're suppose to wait here until one of the managers from the Inn comes and shows us where to take our things," she said sweetly. The man with the dark glasses kissed her and left.

That was the last time I remember the house being so quiet. A few minutes later four men came in. They went to another room returning shortly after with black instrument cases.

"You two gonna work at the Inn?" One wanted to know.

We both nodded, wide eyed. Then they told us they were in the band and quit because of some friction between them and the leader, Bobby. They left wishing us luck, "and if you see Bobby tell him we're gonna get 'em," then they were gone.

A tiny woman appeared in the hallway stretching and yawning. "Hi you guys! Ya commin' as cocktail waitresses or food waitresses?" She had the most incredible sounding voice like it should have been on a much larger woman. "How 'bout some music around here?" She turned on a tape and the room became acid rock. I was too stunned to move.

We introduced ourselves. The unusual woman's name was Jelly-roll and I can't for the life of me remember the straight laced, dark haired woman's name, but we became roommates when a man called Tiny came in and assigned us a room. It was small with two sets of bunk beds. Tiny was nearly seven feet tall and rotund.

The dark haired woman gave me a blanket and I used my knap-sack for a pillow.

"Get some rest," Tiny told us, "because you're doing the night shift." We each took a bottom bunk and laid down obediently. Yes, like people do when they don't know any better. I closed my eyes. My mind raced - my body tensed. I would save every penny and find out about homesteading as soon as I could. I pictured my cabin in the woods and steamy - breathed wolves

howling in the distance.

"Do you know if those guys from the band left yet or not?" I looked up at a beautiful man standing in the doorway. He looked like a deer with large, innocent brown eyes. I sat up. My roommate didn't budge. She was curled up on her bed. I said, "Yes they left and if your Bobby you'd better watch out."

He sat on the edge of my bed. "I'm Bobby and I plan to get everything straightened out as soon as I can. The Inn fouled up our checks € as usual." He leaned back against the wall looking off into space and biting his nails.

"What kinda place is this, anyhow?" I wanted to know.

Bobby called Jellyroll from the other room and she sat on the floor next to me with her thin legs all bunched up next to her chest.

"My dear this nice person wants to know what happens here."

"Ha! well now," Jellyroll started in her loud voice, "This here is the employees house and be glad you got a place to live 'cause people are pouring into this town like flies. Oil ya know. There are seven managers. Hey did you fly in?"

I nodded.

"Oh wow good thing you made it five of those things crashed last month."

I squirmed and Bobby smiled sweetly and nodded, "Ya know how they tell if it's clear in Valdez from Anchorage?"

My mouth dropped and I shook my head back and forth.

"Well someone in Anchorage calls down here and asks that pregnant woman to look outside and if she can see the mountains, if she can -- the plane leaves."

After they left I curled up on the bed and slept. I was a little girl in my grandmother's garden. I was married to a dragon and the lover who left me screamed my name...

"NOT TILL I GET MY FIFTY BUCKS!"

I opened my eyes. It was a woman's voice from the room across the hall. My roommate woke up and stretched. She appeared unaffected by the shouting. She checked her watch. "Good still time before work," she said winding it.

I sat up with my back against the wall. She told me she worked as a narcotics agent in the San Francisco area. The man with the dark glasses was her partner and lover.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why? Why? Do know where this country is heading with all the drugs around?"

"Well," I said, "This is America, you know." I thought people should be able to do what ever they wanted as long as it didn't hurt anyone else. "After all we should be grown up enough to know what we want."

"Even kids are getting into drugs. And parents don't care."

I thought she was exaggerating. She told me how she and her lover would go to parties in Marin and set people up with drugs, then call in the "Narc squad". The people arrested were smoking marijuana in private homes.

"That leads to other drugs," She was careful to remind me.

"Did you have friends who overdosed?" I asked believing there was something more personal in her quest.

"Nope. We got paid \$4,000 for every party we did." She went to the bathroom to shower and closed the door before I could find out exactly who was paying her. "Why didn't I think of that?" I thought out loud, "I could have my homestead by now."

Tiny was in the hall banging on someone's door. "Come on Audrey ya gotta work tonight."  
"Shit man, I only got two hours sleep and you got two new girls."

"Hey and Audrey tell your girl friend she can't stay at the house € bosses orders."  
"Fuck the boss, Ronny ain't got no place to go."

The heavy fist fell against our door.

"Okay, we're coming."

I was grateful we were not expected to wear uniforms. My roommate and Audrey and I slid down the icy streets. We all wore jeans and boots. Audrey had a sweat shirt with Peanuts on the front. My roommate had on new jeans and a carefully ironed blouse. That night I wore two undershirts, a sweat shirt with THE RAMS written on the front, and a sweater, a vest plus a very heavy parka that could have doubled as a sleeping bag. I nearly roasted. A light snow was falling and a huge plow forced more snow against the walls. The streets were hard ice. There were only a few stores in town. A hardware store was a block from the house and the Inn. The store was how I knew where I was when I walked home alone through the walled in maze of white. Behind the hardware store was a trailer court where Audrey said Bobby lived.

A giant woman welcomed us as the door of the Inn then told us to wait for French while she tossed some drunk through the door. Audrey waved and disappeared through swinging doors on the other side of the tavern.

A girl who was about twelve said she was the waitress and French would come soon and that my roomy could go to the bar. She disappeared through the same swinging doors as Audrey.

I sat at the counter and looked around the room. Some guy who sat a few stools over was banging his fork on the counter.

"Hey can I get some service over here!"

French never came so the girl gave me some food tickets and asked me if I had any money for a bank to make change with. No, I didn't. She gave me ten bucks in change and left.

"Hey war's the goddamn waitress?"

I made the rounds to angry customers and tried to act like the waitresses who waited on me.

Never € would I ever, again, get mad at a waitress.

Bobby came in and I confided that I didn't know how to do this kind work, "I worked in offices. I typed, I filed, I answered phones..." This was a challenge to Bobby. He danced around bussing dishes, "Be patient," Bobby told the customers, "Please understand the lady is new, just got here from, where are you from?"

"Oh, just the Lower 48," I said.

A man who was a Viking in another life stood at the front door with a vicious looking dog. I watched Jellyroll wave to him and I asked Bobby if that was her trick. "Nooooo! That's the owner," He said in a hushed voice, "He's also the head of the syndicate."

Bobby went up to him and ask if he could work at the Inn. The Viking shook his blond bearded head. He winked at me as he passed through the kitchen to a narrow stairwell. The giant woman bouncer followed him and I heard her say, "Another one's coming in tonight from the lower 48." "Another what?" I thought but didn't ask. I didn't dare ask.

A customer wanted to cash a check. French told me to get one of the managers to approve any checks because if they bounced I would be responsible. I left the other customers and looked for a manager € pushed through the swinging doors to the dimly lit bar. I stood for a minute letting my eyes adjust. A new band arrived and were tuning up. Bobby wanted to know if I'd quit already.

"Some Turkey wants to cash a check so where's the managers,"

Bobby guided me around to a group of pool tables where a gang of pipeliners all stood watching the big man, Tiny, shoot. I started to barge right into the middle of the pool game. I was nervous because the customers were waiting and they wouldn't get mad at Tiny, they'd get mad at me.

The pipeliners were waiting to see how good this big man shot pool. He stood back from the table a little, then leaned forward holding the cue stick out in front of him and closing one eye. He knocked all the appropriate balls into the appreciate pockets and, in the mists of cheers and beer mugs clinking, he put his initials on the check.

The customers were ranting and raving when I got back. French approached me, waving his finger, standing next to me he said, "You mus be mor fas an you tol zat man to geet drink from bar € nono! you mus geet drink. An wen phone rings you anser € if some un comes and vant pissa from ze bar you mus order and deliver to customer in ze bar."

How oh how was I going to remember what French told me? An older woman named Elsie joined my shift. She said she usually did mornings but Tiny told her to come to work or else. I was relieved knowing I would be working with someone older. The twelve year old left and no one knew where she had gone.

"Looky this," Elsie said in a slow southern drawl with her foot on the table.

"My gawd! what's wrong with your foot?" I gasped. Her foot up past the ankle was swollen and full of sores.

"Ma medicine's in Anchorage and I can't get up thar cause of the weather and workin'," Her dyed blond hair tumbled over her rugged face, "One o ma girlfriends is gonna come down. Maybe she'll bring me ma medicine."

Later, Jellyroll told me tidbits about the people we were working with. She was so efficient, answering the phone, placing orders and talking to me all at the same time.

"Hey, did Elsie tell ya about her girlfriend?" Jellyroll asked, "Her and the other woman that works in the morning are old whores from Anchorage. Wait 'till the third one comes in. Are we in for a treat."

The phone rings € a customer at the counter complains about the food being cold € the cook tells me to tell him to ram it up his ass € I answer the phone. It's not for a pizza it's for the cook. Jellyroll told me that the cook's lady was coming and he hated her and their one year old kid.

The cook was banging around the kitchen, "Why can't she stay with her mother!?"

The next day, or whenever, (it was hard knowing what time it was because of the limited number of light hours) the cook's lady and child arrived. She was a thin person with a narrow little face and wore her hair in a beehive. The baby boy was healthy and spotless. I worked sixteen hours straight at the Inn. My roomy was already home when I got there. Bobby and Audrey walked with me coming back. We all locked arms and slid down the street.

"I was fired," Audrey said, "And can you believe it was 'cause I didn't want to work my day off!" Poor Audrey. Bobby let out a heavy sigh. We tried to keep each other up without falling on the ice. "The owner said I couldn't let Ronnie stay at the house anymore."

"Who's Ronnie," I wanted to know but was ignored in favor of the rage over the injustice Audrey was given.

"How rude!" Bobby said, "They're afraid of Ronnie because she carries a gun and flashes it when anyone gives her a bad time. Beside the fact that you girls don't give out to anyone."

"Man, we spend everything we make on their booze and dope."

So, Ronnie was Audrey's good friend from reform school in Juneau. They told me they were

blood sisters and Ronnie had a scar on her wrist - not from the Blood Sister Ritual but from when she once tried to kill herself.

My roommate slept until her next shift. I slept for about four hours. I woke to shouting:

"Hey it's about time you got here!"

"Where's my pot?"

I went to the kitchen where a half dozen people gathered around a native woman with a shopping bag. A small child clung to her leg. The dishwasher was standing on the table saying, "Hey dija get my acid?" Bobby was giving the shopping bag mamma some bills for a lid of Marijuana. This was when I met Ronnie. Audrey introduced me to Ronnie as her, "friend who was in hiding." I was surprised she didn't look like a cross between Calamity Jane and Amelia Earhart. She looked like me. Dumpy with short, sandy hair that stood out like a porcupine. She bought some drugs. She told Audrey she found another job. One of the managers at the Inn introduced her to the owner of the cab company and he said she could be a dispatcher. One of the conditions was that she would have to sleep with him. It was all so accepted, so matter of fact. I tried not to show my righteous hysterical side.

"Oh I see, yes, that is very interesting," I said too many times. I was feeling insecure at the thought of being in this town with the possibility of no work, no home, no end to winter.

Bobby took my arm and asked to share half a chair with him. He was telling everyone about his life in show business as a female impersonator.

My roomy came slowly into the kitchen from the hall, her long dark hair covering her shoulders as went quietly to the stove where she heated some water for coffee. She stood staring at the kettle. My roommate, the narcotics agent. The nice looking girl who made thousands of dollars turning in marijuana users. The native woman with the shopping bag left with her child € all sales having been made.

Bobby asked me when my shift was. I got nervous about my roomy who took her coffee to our room. I grabbed Bobby's arm and pulled him into the bare living room and whispered, "That woman is a narc agent"

Bobby ran to the other room and threw his hands into the air dropping them loosely at the wrist, "Hey! everyone listen!" Everyone stopped talking. Bobby told them what I'd said. It wasn't that I cared about anyone in particular but I don't use drugs and I didn't want to be caught with the wrong crowd if there was a bust - to be caught in the Inn crowd.

Within a few days my roomy took up with a greasy fisherman. He was part of the Inn's syndicate. He was her protection. She lived on his boat and when she came to work she looked sea sick. Before she left, the people in the house taunted her or walked out of the room when she entered. When she moved onto the boat with the greasy fisherman, she left the blanket she lent me and said I could borrow it for as long as I needed. That made me feel bad. Sometime later I learned that she had to make a choice between her agent boyfriend and the fisherman, who was part of the syndicate. She was sitting in back of the restaurant one night looking depressed. I got a drink and sat with her. She told me I should get out of Valdez before things got too heavy. She told me to save myself. I listened to this advice.

The Du Drop Inn was housed in a large building that was half sunk in the ground. Half of the downstairs was a separate dinning room and half was a bar with a dance floor and pool room with a stage for the band. The owner lived upstairs with his vicious dog and young women. I heard about these women but I never saw them.

There was a trailer nestled in the snow bank behind the Inn that was used by Tiny. He bragged

and boasted in his loud heavy voice of having the best gambling casino in Alaska and took gangs of males out there to prove it.

"Upstairs" was a whispered thing. I heard rumors of white slavery, of the owners wife, who was there but no one ever saw, and watched men stumble up the stairs after half discreetly giving money to the giant woman, who wore overalls and tucked the money men slipped her into her top pocket. She had a boyfriend from Nome who was a native half her size. Bobby said he was very smart and studied at the university, but I never really talked to him myself, except to say, "Wadda wanna eat?" and write it down. Bobby lived with the native woman who sold dope.

Flo owned the trailer where they Bobby and the native lived. Flo worked at a hospital where natives were sent and complained about their bad habits and how they were every where and their kids were retarded because there was so much incest. I said that I thought they did fine before the white government stepped in and she treated me like a trader, like if we whites didn't stick together we would be destroyed by the natives.

The white people were always complaining about the natives. The dope lady and her child lived in a tiny village that became a big town for white people.

I was on my break at the Inn when Bobby told me about his friend in Fairbanks who was going to have a sex change and encouraged Bobby to do the same. I tried not to yawn. I wasn't bored I was tired.

"So I took loads of hormones. You should have seen me I was beautiful. And then I got ready for the big event, you know the final operation, and the Bitch died a sudden death."

"Who died?" I asked, wincing.

"My best friend, my room mate in Fairbanks. I was so upset I ran off to Anchorage, gained weight, grew a beard and became a bouncer for some bar. I want to go back into drag. I miss being a woman."

Two natives were dragging a wooden crate into the restaurant. It was filled with live lobster that were ten times any size I had ever seen. They wanted to see a manager and Bobby, ever full of energy, volunteered to get one.

I spent the shift with a young woman who was in love with the cook. The orders piled up.irate customers were stomping their feet while the young waitress cuddled up in the cooks lap in the back of the kitchen. Bobby came back with the giant woman, who stood over the natives and conferred about payment for the lobsters. The lobsters were crawling all over the restaurant. I shuddered and took some guy's order. He was not affected by the lobsters.

"Hey, this is the owner of the theater," Bobby announced. The man who was not moved to disgust - by free roaming lobsters - was the owner of a store front that served as a theater. I had heard about the western movies he showed there. The same cast of characters came off the screen and were right here with us in o'l Valdez.

I had just come from the bar with a drink for a cowboy, when Bobby yelled from across the room, "Linda, this guy's gonna let me do a show in his theater." He danced around the room, "Oh boy I'm sending to Anchorage for my dresses."

The cowboy I was serving snickered. I tried to imagine Bobby with a long frilly dress on and realized it would be quite a show.

Things changed when Bea and the gambler came to town. There wasn't anymore talk about "upstairs" or Tiny's gambling place. Not even a shy whisper. One day when we were alone Bobby said, looking over his shoulder as he did, "The Inn better watch it. Bea's little group won't let these characters make money not without paying, uh you know, "taxes". This was about the

syndicate. I looked syndicate up in my pocket dictionary. It said, "business association", which hardly conjured up images of Al Capone.

It was my coffee break and I was slurping a beer. Bobby was biting his nails and spitting them across the room. He suddenly jumped up and shouted at a woman who walked in, "Bea, ooh Bea." He held his hand delicately to his mouth "Bea". The woman came to our table. Two young blond women nodded to her and went into the bar.

"Oh Linda, you simply must meet Bea € she is really just the finest person I've ever known." The stout, handsome woman sat next to me. She said she was from South America. I stared at her. Studied her. People around the room were also staring and buzzing. She was in her forties. Black wavy hair surrounded her Latin features. She wore black pants and a black jacket with silver jewelry sewn into the seams and huge silver rings on her full brown fingers. Tiny peeked over the swinging doors of the bar, saw Bea and quickly left. Jelly-roll stood at the kitchen with her mouth open. Bea said in a mellow sweet voice, "Oh, Bobby it is so good to see you. My girls are here, well two of them so far."

"Did you see any of my friends in Anchorage or Fairbanks." Bobby squeaked.

"Oh yes, I saw Jane Ann in Kodiak. She has had the operation and is more neurotic than ever."

Bobby looked intense. "Is she okay? I mean she knows for sure now that she's not a man?" He looked at me. "Oh yeah Linda, Jane Ann was this other person I took hormones with."

I turned to Bea, "Are those women you came with sex changes?" I thought those were the only people she dealt with.

"No, oh no!" She licked her lips and moved a little in her chair and talked to me in her soft slow way. "Those are my girls and I am a madam. I have houses in several towns around Alaska. I'm down here on business. Valdez will be wide open come summer and I want to make sure we're all tucked in before then."

I looked around the room to see if any one was listening. I never met anyone who came right out and said stuff like that. I blushed. I wished I wore something classier than the Ram's sweat shirt. I tried to act natural and show her I knew what she was talking about, "Did you know there's a group (that word sounded so proper just then) that wants to legalize prostitution in California. Have your thought about anything like that?"

"Hell no! I don't want any part of the lower 48," Her eyes narrowed and her voice hardened. I backed away a little. "We do things our way in these parts and that's the way it should be." I really must of wound her up because she railed on and on about her girls and how respectable her houses were and how rich everyone was getting off of the pipe line. Bobby said, "Bea is known everywhere and liked because her girls have the reputation of being clean and polite and they don't rip guys off." I only met one of Bea's girls and she looked tired, but was well groomed, like a suburban housewife, and said, "Oh darn" instead of damn and "Oh phooey" instead of fuck.

Some guy known to me only as the gambler but known to Bobby by his full name joined us. He leaned over the table and kissed Bea's hand then his kissed mine. A cloud of smoke covered his bearded face. A huge cigar protruded from his mouth. They all talked so slow and smooth:

Bea: Hear you've got yourself a nice big place setup on the other side of town?

Gambler: That's right and I intend on it being the most popular spot in town.

(Laughter) (If one were making a cowboy flick they would zoom into a close up of Bobby)

Bobby: I hear from Linda and my own observations there are quite a few things going on at the

Du Drop Inn. Like traffic upstairs to see the owner and his wife and his ah hem! ladies? Plus the big guy has quite a roulette wheel out back.

I started twitching. Maybe no one was suppose to know about that. I expected a show down at high noon. Bea and the gambler looked serious and interested. Bobby bounced around on his chair excited about what seemed to him like any other gossip. After my narc agent roomy left and before I met Elsie's friend Shirley, I had a fifteen year old roommate. She was speeding on something and kept me awake all night.

"€€Then my mother said give me the money or split, then the guy started to hit her an' shit but he wasn't ready for the gun she pulled, ha ha ha. I never saw anyone leave in such a hurry."

When she laughed she laughed so that I thought I'd have to slap her one to stop her.

"Do you go to school?" I went to school at fifteen why wouldn't she? "Everyone I know drops out of school at thirteen. I did it last year caus' shit man that teacher was so dumb. All I ever went to school for was to get dope € hey dija ever try coke?"

I rolled and moaned on the bed. I was so tired and I had to work another shift in a few hours.

Could this really be happening? Was everyone in Valdez on drugs? The girl went on and on about her mother who was a whore in a trailer out near the pipeline and what all her drug experiences were and how she didn't want to marry the boy her mother wanted her to marry and just before I left for work the boy came and took her away. I was too tired to care. I was glad she was gone and when I heard I was getting a middle aged roommate I was delighted. But that didn't last.

My last roommate, a gawd yeah! my last roommate was a friend of Elsie's. Elsie, who finally got the medicine for her swollen foot. The woman's name was Shirley and the only good thing about her was that she brought Elsie's medicine.

Shirley was the grandmother of four. We met through Tiny. He dragged in through the flurries, covered with snow and demanded to know why I wasn't ready for work.

"One of the other managers told me I didn't hafta work 'till tomorrow."

"Well that's changed."

Then Bobby who was sitting at the kitchen table with me asked, squirming like he did sometimes, "Is there any work at the Inn? I gotta find a job."

Tiny shook the snow off of his hat, "Sorry Bobby nothing yet. Maybe you can fill in for someone next week." I was sitting across the table that was filled with peanut shells and had my feet propped up in the middle of it.

"Com'on Linda, get Shirley and let's go," Tiny insisted. What made him think he could talk to me so pushy like? And who was Shirley? What did he mean my roommate. I was in that room a minute ago and no one was there.

I went back to find Shirley. Bobby trailed along behind. I felt sorry for him because as Jellyroll said, "No one wanted to hire a queer boy." They didn't seem to care about the women, if they were strong, great, they could do more work, if they were frail and cute, finer yet because they could turn tricks. I was too plain, too muscular for a girl and too full of myself to stay in Valdez long.

"Hey 'er you Shirley?"

The woman sat up on the bed and put her teeth in her mouth. She said she was and sounded like a rose without thorns. She brushed her hair. Bobby sat on the bed across from her and rambled on and on like he did with me the first day I arrived, so that Shirley, if she had been listening would know as much as I did about Bobby.

Three people were off work that night and Shirley was just plain off. She was pretty soused when we got to work and gone within a few hours. She was confused about the food tickets and where she was suppose to work. I tried to explain while the customers complained. Everyone in town came to eat at the Inn that night. Even the people from Reverend Wright's Church of God, who were gonna build the most spectacular church in the world. Bobby hit someone up for money and went to the bar to get a drink. The new band knew five songs and played them over and over and seemed to get worse as the night wore on. The owner and managers pulled some tables together in the middle of the restaurant and demanded special attention, like some kind of royalty. One wanted to know why the dishes were not being bused any faster. Shirley was giving my orders away to customers who didn't want them, then bringing them back to the cook who would throw them out before I could rescue them for my customers. The dishwasher was freaking out on acid and breaking plates in back. Shirley was grabbing up my tips and disappearing into the bar to buy drinks for her self. the customers in her station were raging mad, banging forks stomping on their napkins, and screaming obscenities.

The cook told me a few times I would have to wait because there weren't any clean dishes.

"Here's a dirty one, cover it with food and they'll never know the difference," he told me.

Two fishermen came in, this time, with a box of crabs and wanted to see a manager. Tiny negotiated money while the crabs crawled around the restaurant, looking for a place to nest. I took an order from a man who ask me if I wanted to go dancing later, and wouldn't let go of the edge of my shirt.

I went back to the cook's station scratching and the cook wanted to know if I had scabies because everyone else that worked there did. Someone sitting at the counter behind me, heard the word scabies and ran out the front door.

Jellyroll came screaming from the kitchen wanting to know who ordered a mushroom pizza that had been sitting there for an hour. "Well I didn't!" Goddamn it!" I screamed back.

"There's no fuckin' organization in this place!" She shouted. "Look bitch!" I screamed over the customers heads. "There's the managers, tell them!" The managers sat up straight. Jellyroll stood in the middle of the floor of the restaurant and threw the pizza through the cooks station. The cook ducked just in time. That pizza stayed stuck up against the back wall of the kitchen the rest of the night. The managers dropped back over their dinners. Shirley was in the bar with a drink in her hand slurring, "Hey war's that ugly bald sonovabitch that ordered a mushroom pizza?"

The same bald guy came in later and wanted to know if his pizza was ready. "Mushroom?" I swallowed and bit my hand when he nodded. I slowly went to the cook's station and yelled over the noise of the fans to Jellyroll that I wanted a mushroom pizza. She grumbled a little and started fixing one.

Shirley was picking up my customer's food tickets and taking the money she got for them and leaving the tickets on the table so I thought the customers were walking out without paying. I finally left my customers and went in the bar looking for Shirley, ready to kill her, while the customers and managers complained and jellyroll carried on about her latest creation getting cold. And I don't know where that bald ugly guy went. The bar was more crowded than I'd ever seen it. Bobby was drunk and danced up behind me, rubbing his bone against my back.

"Better get that thing away from me if you wanna keep it," I said.

"Whatsa matter, Lois Lane?"

"Where's that waitress I was suppose to work with tonight?"

"Oh my dear, she's passed out on the bar € see?"

I looked over to where Bobby was pointing. Shirley was sleeping on the bar. "Fer cris sake Bobby, why don't you taker her home and dump 'er in bed?" So he did. French stormed through the double doors, adjusting his tie, looking around the room like someone of great importance would.

"Someone vishes to pay 'es bell in ze restaurant. Please go at once and take car of it."

I was about to loose it. I was about to strangle French with my bare hands when a customer slipped me a rather large tip. I walked away from French as he repeated, "Ze customer es always right!"

"Which customers are you talking about, French, Reverend Wrights' church people? The family with eight kids? The drunk pipeliners? Which ones?"

The giant woman in overalls approached me just as another church group filed neatly through the front door and a gang of pipeliners fell through the swinging doors of the bar. "Who's station is that over there?" She demanded, pointing her finger.

"How the hell should I know?" I spit. "As far as I know I've been alone all night."

"Well you should get your stations straightened out when you come to work," She said, "Now, bring me a cinnamon roll."

Bea came in with her pimp and the gambler and the managers all went with the owner upstairs. The restaurant got quiet. Well, all except the church people who were making joyful noises unto the lord. The pimp and gambler waited while Bea ordered for them and herself.

There weren't any clean dishes so I took their order and washed a few. The dishwasher was passed out in back. I threw water on him and he moaned but didn't budge. The cook came to get the dishes. Jellyroll was leaning against the wall sucking on a joint. The cook said, "Know why the managers split?" We peeked around the corner to the stairwell and looked up. The door was shut and no one could hear us.

"Why?" We ask in a loud whisper.

"The pressure's on. If they don't want trouble they'd better join the syndicate." He tossed his head toward Bea and her boys, "That means the customers pay more or we get paid less."

"How do ya figure," I wanted to know.

"Someone's gotta pay the syndicate you know," the cook answered, "I'm thinking of opening a house this summer. Gonna talk to Bea about it. Yeah, I could get six girls and a trailer out by the pipeline. The girls wouldn't have to live there but they'd live close enough for me to keep track of them. If any of 'um messed around, the syndicate would straighten 'um out."

I asked, "What happens to Bea's girls if they leave?"

"I saw one that got pretty missed up and heard about another one that froze to death up near Fairbanks. By the way, better tell Bobby to tell that little native chick that's been dealing around here that Bea's in town."

I brought Bea her meal and jellyroll brought a pizza for her boys. Bea smiled warmly and I wondered if she had ever been a little girl or if she cried or did any thing that every day kind of people do. She gave me a check with a fat tip and I tramped upstairs to have it okay'd by a manager.

I suppose I could have accepted it. I don't think she was the type to pass bad checks. After all she was a pillar of society. I guess I wanted to see the faces of those who hid from her. I went up the unlit stairwell and knocked on the door, "Who is it?" Three or four people asked. A dog barked. When I said who I was French came to the door, looked the check over, then gave it back to me

signed, without fully opening the door and without speaking or looking at me.

Another dishwasher was found to relieve the first. The first one had worked for fourteen hours and slept two when a manager came and told him he had to go to work. Bea left. She waved sweetly and thanked me, like we were good friends and I wondered how anyone so nice could be in the "syndicate". Did she ever have a cold? Did her mother curl her hair? Did she have a mother?

I finally took a break to go to the bathroom where I found Ronnie, Audrey's friend in the only available stall with "Tex the Cabbie" Tex was sitting on the back of the stall and both were sharing a joint. Tex had his feet on the toilet seat. Ronnie told me to come on in. I said I wanted use the toilet and she said, "Wait, wait, I got to tell you about Tiny. He used to be one of my johns, and you know why they call him Tiny?"

We were all three crowded into that little stall in the women's bathroom. I still had to go so bad I thought I would pass out. "Tex the cabby wasn't moving." Every time I'd ever seen him he was stoned. He was a wild looking man who drove one of the three cabs in town. He would stumble into the restaurant, smoking a joint and want to know if anyone wanted a cab. When no one answered, he would say, "Good I'm gonna get me a drink."

Ronny said, "Do you know why they call 'em Tiny?"

Tex looked down between his legs and blushed.

"Yep, that's why!" Ronny roared and I squeezed my legs together. They stepped out of the stall so I could go. When we left, a woman brushed past us with a discussed look on her face. I think she must have been with the Reverend Wright religious group.

An old native man came in and ordered a fourteen ounce stake. He sat at the counter gnawing away with the stake in both hands. He was panting and pulling at the meat that was dripping juice down his parka and staining his face. When he finished he slept with his face in the half empty plate. His fur cap rolled across the counter. I picked up the hat and sat it on his head and tried to take the plate. He wouldn't let me budge it so I let him sleep.

Another guy sat at the end of the counter and although he was alone, he started yelling at someone who wasn't there and wasn't me but was somewhere. An Aleut fisherman tried to start a fight soon as he came past the swinging doors of the bar. He stormed in knocking a chair over. He was a large man about forty and wore fur boots and a knit hat with a tassel hanging on the back. I told him to sit down that no one wanted to fight. He smiled and mellowed out like a little boy. Most of the customers were people who worked on the pipeline or people hanging around waiting for jobs on the pipeline. As Willow the Savage told me, It paid higher than anywhere else. I wondered how Willow was. I didn't know her last name or where she lived. One guy curled up in a snow bank every night because there wasn't enough housing and no place for him to sleep. People out of work came in. Some of them had no money so I would give them soup or whatever I didn't have to get from the cook. The cook I worked with most of the time was too honest to rip off the Inn for some hungry person.

Since there was no cash register, I made change from the money in my pocket. If we, the waitresses, didn't have change we had to run to the bar and wait behind customers and cocktail waitresses for the bartender to give us change. As for approving checks, the managers could be anywhere at anytime.

Bobby and Ronnie were behind the counter swatting each other with towels and jumping around. The old native woke up wiping his face with his sleeve and calling me. I gave him change for a twenty. Reverend Wright's people called me and gave me a check for \$50.00.

I went to the pool room where French and Tiny were hanging over a serious game of pool. French straightened his tie and walked over. After he approved the check he told me the customers were complaining that I didn't get their drinks fast enough, even though I wasn't a cocktail waitress. I looked and saw two long lines of people at the bar and decided I didn't want to argue anymore. What did he care, he wasn't a waitress. He was too important. Just look at him waving his hand this way and that with his chin jetting out.

The crowds finally cleared out around two o'clock. The bars closed at 5 AM. I wiped the last tables down and only one or two coffee drinkers sat the counter. The next waitress came on. She was some woman who lived in Bobby's trailer court and had worked for thirty years as a waitress € ten hour shifts € without a break € yep. She told me that herself and how damn lazy all those young people were. She jumped, ran and skidded around the restaurant like a little weasel.

"You take that small station over there and, ah, an I'll take the big station, oh dear, oh never mind you take 'em. He's in your station."

There was one person in my station. I got a cup of coffee for him and sat down with a cup for myself. I started talking to myself € right there € right out loud. "What the hell are you doing here?" I asked suspended space. "I know, I know, It's all a nightmare and I'm gonna wake up on my homestead and, yeah, my dogs are gonna to be sleeping around the log cabin, and a frozen caribou will be hanging up outside € it will be quiet it will be so peaceful."

I was a rugged mass sitting heavily on a chair in a restaurant looking across the table into Tex's puffed face. He offered me a joint. We each took turns sucking on it then he left.

The woman who took my station was banging her fists on the table, "Why aren't these ketchup bottles filled?" My mouth fell opened. I pushed my chair back and wrapped my arms around my breasts.

The woman screeched, "And why don't you get off your lazy ass and do something?"

Was she talking to me? I couldn't move. She was talking to me all right and I worked my ass off all night, but what did she know? I told her to complain to the management, "If they're not in the pool room, try over where the cinnamon rolls are kept."

I slid home around 5 AM. Actually I scooted along, falling several times until I got to the house where I slipped and fell off the porch once before I was able to get to the door. Shirley was up on her bed tipping a bottle of rum. She insisted on telling me about her two husbands who died. I did not bother mentioning the awful night I had just been through, no thanks to her. I would ride this thing out until I got my pay and then leave for the Yukon. Oh, how I wish I knew where Willow was.

Shirley told me she had a brand new hair dryer and did I know what happened to it. "I figure that woman in the other room took it. Now, do YOU know what happened to it?"

The new cocktail waitress got it when Shirley was out and was rip roaring mad that her hair dryer had been stolen. Shirley took it. She assumed once it was in her hands that it was hers. I sat on my bed quietly watching Shirley bounce around the room with her bottle of wine.

Bobby came around the next day and we went bar hopping together. He wanted to see if anyone had work. The Inn hired a new cook and waitress, Sonny and Teresa. They had worked with each other on the north slope and were pipeliners until their camp was closed because the furnaces stopped working and a pipeliner froze to death.

When I asked Sonny where the north slope was he said, "The north slope is like the very tip of the earth and if you turn just right or walk wrong you fall off the earth 'POOF! ' right into a sea of dragons." His girl friend, Teresa thought that was so funny that she laughed and coughed a

smokers cough until she nearly fell from the bar stool.

Bobby and I met Teresa and Sonny at the Tipi. where Rocky, the ex-stripper tended bar. Rocky was a small woman with extra large breasts that hung half out of her blouse. Teresa straddled a bar stool, tapped her cowboy boots to a Neil Diamond record and scratched under her left breast over her plaid work shirt. She pulled the leather parka off her thin frame and said, "shit!", for some reason, and ordered a scotch. Sonny was humped over the bar staring at his drink. Bobby ordered a bloody mary and danced around the bar.

"Rocky could you get me a cup of coffee?" I asked softly.

"Coffee?"

"Coffee?" Everyone ask at once. "Donja wanna drink nothing?"

"If it's a matter of money," Bobby said, and Sonny dove his hand into his pocket and said, "I'll get it." I had two cups of black coffee and listened to more of Neil Diamond.

While I watched Sonny and Teresa dance Bobby told me about them, "Sonny's an ex-con, my dear. He was up for murdering the governor's son in a bar brawl. He is a good friend of Bea's and he is the biggest crook in town. Teresa is no lady. She is as tough as nails." I had become privy to information that could get me killed in a movie. I could be arrested for being in the syndicate, "Even though I am but an innocent bystander?" I ask the judge in my mind's eye.

"Teresa got pneumonia," Bobby said, "And when the pipeliners hauled her off to the hospital she cursed them because she hated hospitals so they had to take her back to the camp."

"Gawd, and she lived!" I was amazed.

"Darling, her mom was a hooker in Montana."

"Wow, maybe that's why she's so tough," I said stirring my coffee.

I watched Sonny and Teresa shuffle around the floor behind me at the Tipi. Rocky popped her gum and rattled glasses under the counter. Then Bea arrived with one of her girls. They sat down quietly at a table in the corner. Bobby and I joined them.

"I told you not to accept gifts," Bea was telling the girl, "You take only what they owe you."

"But he insisted on buying it for me," the girl whined.

"I don't care you didn't need that coat," Bea said, lighting the cigarette in its jeweled holder, "All I need now are a bunch of wives on my back. Besides you've been spending too much time with him. You have other customers." A gang of pipeliners came in and Bea's girl left to sit at the bar. The men swarmed her and droned on about how beautiful she was.

Bea asked Bobby and me about the employees house. How big was it? How many rooms did it have? I volunteered to draw a diagram of both the upstairs and down. I told her the exact location of bathrooms. I informed her of the general complaints about plumbing, and so on. Bobby explained exactly how big the rooms were.

Then Bea said in the sweetest voice, "Well if you're going to be home later on, maybe I'll drop by for coffee." She moved into the house with her girls after I left. I understand it was the agreement reached between the syndicate and the Inn after the strike. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Later that day, Bobby was in the kitchen of the employees house talking a mile a minute to Sonny about how good he looked in what kinds of outfits. Sonny was shaving with a straight razor over the sink. His red suspenders hung around his hips.

"Yeah, that's real nice Bobby. I'm sure a pink pant suit would look nice on you."

At the same time, Teresa was showing me the gun in her purse. She told me she left her four kids and husband in Anchorage, "They were all good people but I just couldn't stand to stay

home. I mean I love Sonny. We get along so well together."

I flipped the safety on the gun and pulled the trigger. Blood ran down Sonny's neck. Bobby turned gray. Teresa jumped at the blast then laughed hysterically. I shot a hole in the wall and Sonny cut himself shaving.

Teresa locked her arm around Sonny's and both went off to work. Bobby trotted out after them still babbling on and on to Sonny. Bea never came for coffee. I decided after working fourteen days straight, to take a day off. Most nights at 4 O'clock, when it was pitch black out, the electricity shut down. We would wait, sometimes, an hour before it went back on again. Shirley had a flash light and people gathered in our room for doing what ever they had to with a light. Such as the cook's lady, who needed to diaper her baby. This was the last night I stayed at that house. One of the freaky dishwashers came by to tell me Tiny sent him to ask me to go to work.

"No way man! I worked fourteen days straight," I said throwing my hands up.

"Lady, you are gonna be in trouble if you don't go to work."

"Tell Tiny to come over here and tell me himself," I said holding my fist up, "Shit! I ain't afraid of him. Tell 'em I'm not comin' ta work 'till Monday." It was Friday.

The woman with the baby came in just as the lights went out. Shirley pulled out her flashlight. We could barely see the baby. The light showed the outline of his chubby little body. I heard him pee and coo and watched the tiny bubbles he made with his mouth. I couldn't see the pee but I felt it on my leg.

People crowded around the flashlight, cooing, and carrying on about how cute the baby was. And I wondered how long it would take for the pee to dry. Shirley threw the baby's diaper in a corner of the bathroom just as the light went on. Everyone backed out of the room. I pulled myself up on the top bunk and straddled my legs around the bed post.

"These 'er my grandkids," Shirley said, sticking some photos on my thigh. She paced the floor with a cigarette dangling from her lips. I was exhausted.

"Ummm their cute," I said meaning it and handed the pictures back. I dropped down from the bunk and slid on my bed, wishing I had sheets and blankets and a great big soft pillow. Shirley came out of the bathroom with her teeth in her hand. Her soft lips fell back in her mouth. Her sunken cheeks made her eyes bulge. She picked at her teeth. Then she clacked them together in my face. I laughed meekly. She adjusted the teeth back against her gums then climbed up on the bunk and sat next to me. She put her arm around my shoulder and said, "Hey sweetie, you really aren't feelin' good are ya? Let me go an fex ya a brandy Alexander." I wondered how I could have gotten so mad at such a nice lady. She brought the drink and said she was going over to the Inn.

I slept a few hours, sweating out a fever when Shirley barged in with a trick and flipped on the light, "This har is John. Ya mind if he stays har tonight?" I rolled over and groaned. Then she said to him, "That is yer name, isn't it?"

"That's good enough," he answered.

She woke up one of the hookers from the next room and I heard the other woman say, "No now don't go touching none of my stuff, Shirley, you hear?" It seemed once Shirley touched something she liked, it automatically became hers, and believe me, there was no question in her mind.

Well, Shirley and her trick jumped into the missionary position on the lower bunk next to me. I sat up and wondered if I shouldn't climb back up on the top bunk. I pulled my knees up to my

chest.

"Would you mind turning the light out?" I ask politely. She ignored me. I turned it out myself, once, and she switched it back on again. So I gave up. The guy was about twenty-five and hung like a horse. I waited for what seemed like hours for them to finish. I just sat there yawning and cleaning my nails with a tooth pick. I was turned to the wall when they began then decided why not watch.

The young man and Shirley began to converse with one another during their intercourse. "I had two cesareans," she said, "And yeah, I can't have no more kids either 'cause ma tubes were tied. Look at my tits, boy. Any fourteen year old would be proud to have tits like mine." She talked on while he pumped up and down.

They finally finished and the guy went to the bathroom. Shirley lit up a cigarette and said, "Wat ja donin' in dar?" Then blew smoke in my face like I wasn't there. Her john shouted back, "A'm jes tak kin a crap." Shirley got up scratched her pubic hair and followed him into the bathroom. I laid back on the bed and put my arm over my eyes. I heard Shirley ask, "War'd ja get yer scars?" "I got me this here in Nam."

"Wal this is war my husband stabbed me with a ice pick."

They fell on the bed and the man passed out. Shirley sat on the edge of the bed blowing smoke in my face. She wanted to know if I needed anything and if I was still sick. I stared blankly at her for a moment. I wasn't sure she was talking to me. I pulled the blanket further around my shoulders. I was completely dressed to stay warm. All I wanted was sleep. I watched Shirley tip a bottle of rum to her mouth.

"I would feel better if you turned off the lights." I whispered.

"Turn off the LIGHTS!?!?" She screamed, "An who do ya wan when the lights go out? uh UH? me Me ME ME!" She was slapping her chest causing her breast to shiver. I laid back and moaned. She pulled hard on her cigarette and appeared very serious, "An who stole that dirty diaper in the bathroom?" She poured more rum down her throat. "Hey A'm askin' you a question!"

I got up and ran to another room. I found a corner in the front part of the house and curled up in it. After a while I went back and got my napsack and the dark haired woman's blanket. Shirley was still up, drinking and seemed pleased to see me, "Oh honey, your back." I took the knapsack and blanket and returned to the corner. A shadow, in the dim light, swelled across the wall. I jumped back and screamed.

"It's okay. It's just me," a voice echoed in the darkness. It was Elsie, with the swollen feet.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. She said the owner of the Inn threw her out of her room because he rented it to Bea for one of her girls for the night. "Why didn't you sleep on the other bed?" I wanted to know, not fully realizing the injustice of it all.

"They locked me out, sweetie, so I just bedded down here. Ah, gee, it's okay. Mind if I borrow some of your blanket?" I gave her part of my blanket and we slept snuggly together until morning. Her snoring blared into night. Her heavy body kept my left side warm.

It was colder than cold. The furnace worked sometimes. We were all locked together in this village 'locked together by the weather. The winds screeched and howled rattling the windows until I thought they would fall in splinters on the floor. When the winds ceased to blow, there was no sound. An eerie silence took over. Perhaps, after all this time I should say it takes over. But I am no longer disturbed by it. As a matter of fact I find the silence comforting. But I am getting ahead of myself.

The next morning Bobby came over and found me and Elsie curled up together. I left Elsie tucked under the blanket and went to the bathroom. Someone was floating in the tub, reading a book. I sat on the toilet with my head in hands. Bobby sat on the edge of the tub. I told him what happened the night before. Bobby stood up and said, "My dear, you must pack and come with me. You simply can not stay here!" The native lady who dealt drugs, moved. She heard that Bea was in town and left with her child, in a hurry. This was lucky for me because I could then use her room in the trailer where Bobby lived.

Flo was Bobby's landlady and she lived on the opposite end of the trailer. Bobby and I had room next to each other. The beds were attached to the wall and the wall was paper thin. When Bobby turned over I yelled at him for waking me up. Water ran constantly from the kitchen tap so that the pipes would not freeze.

Flo worked at the hospital eight hours a day and would come home tired to not only Bobby and me but to our strange friends like Ronnie and Tex. She would tell us to clean up our messes and pay the rent and we would act insulted and tell her she was being unreasonable.

On Monday I went to work on the morning shift. A fellow who arrived the day before was made head waiter. He called me in after I finished half a shift. He told me I was fired. French stood behind him like he was afraid of me.

"Why are you firing me?" I demanded.

"The managers are complaining because of the way you worked the other night."

"Oh yeah, yeah, right!" I said to the fluffy, new head waiter, "I won't argue with you but I will consult my attorney."

French seemed disturbed by this. He believed I had a lawyer tucked away somewhere. He begged me to go upstairs and talk with the owner. There was no way I was going to get trapped

"upstairs." I grabbed my coat and told Bobby, who was flirting with a guy from the pipeline, that I was leaving. I walked out with my tips and the money from the food tickets. Bobby ran down the street after me. I thought he was on my side. He seemed so supportive.

"Darling, that new guy just got out of college," Bobby told me, "He studied business administration and so he thinks he's cleaning the place up."

"That doesn't help me, Bobby. I've gotta get more money for my homestead."

"Of course you do. And you will. Now, give me your arm and we'll tell everyone in town how awful those people at the Inn are."

Bobby and I hopped bars and told our combined stories of the chaos and corruption of those involved with the Inn. We made things up ' lied. And we embellished the truth.

The head waiter chased me all over town and wanted the money from the food tickets. I told him he couldn't have them and that he should have thought about that before he fired me, "You jerk, didn't they teach you that in college? What do they teach you guys anyway?"

Sonny and Teresa walked into Tipi bar with their arms around a familiar looking person. A person, who at this point in time had become a long lost relative. I felt myself grinning from cheek to cheek. My breathing became shallow. It was Willow the Savage. Willow tore her gloves off with her teeth and hugged me with polar bear arms. "Still wanna homestead, Lady?" She told me she would help me and bless her where ever she is, she did. I haven't seen her now for six months.

Back to the Tipi bar. Sonny and Teresa both worked sixteen hour shifts and got right down with Bobby and I and our, "I hate the Inn" rave. If a pack of wolves looked in though the door at that moment they would have said, "Let's get outta here. Can't you see their foaming at the mouth?"

The next day Willow joined Bobby and me at the Tipi. She showed me a map of where she thought I should homestead. It wasn't far from her family, who I visit every Christmas.

Bobby, perhaps feeling left out, started me up again on the injustices committed at the Inn. I felt the rage all over again. I forgot the homestead. I imagined myself bombing the Inn. My fist fell against the table and Willow laughed at the sight.

Bobby turned his attention to a burly man at the counter. Just as I was becoming calm, there was a loud commotion at the door. The entire staff from the Inn poured in and pushed tables together. I heard my name being called.

"Hey Linda, we're having us a WILD cat strike!"

I sat with my former co-workers and felt all cuddly inside. I was so proud to be with them. We ordered rounds of drinks and congratulated one another. All except Bobby. Bobby whispered in my ear, "Listen, I'll be back later, okay?" I didn't give it much thought. Willow told me later that he knew all along what Bobby was going to do. The workers, meanwhile, leaned over the tables and yelled over each other:

"They wanna cut our wages and I haven't even been paid yet!"

"I left a stake burning on the grill."

"Atta boy!"

"I left a pizza burning in the oven."

"Two of us here worked twentyfour hours straight."

"They plan to take money from our wages to pay the syndicate -- bastards."

Bea walked in with her girls and the workers threw food at them until they left.

"They ain't sposta be taking money outta out checks for rent either."

Jellyroll said her mother would let them use the hardware store to make picket signs. Everyone got louder and drunker until they split up and were seen sliding in different directions around Valdez. The town reeked of howling drunken strikers. Even stray dogs took to the streets to join the howling.

"Hey man, like we're having a wildcat strike over at the Inn!" The news spread to all the pipeliners who told their comrades in the camps. The pipeliners would never cross a picket line. I told Willow I wanted to leave Valdez as soon as possible. It was fine with her. She had come the day before and the roads were clear. I heard my name being called. I let go of Willow's arm and fell into a snow bank. When I wiped off my face I saw Bobby's blurred image heading toward me. He took my hands in his and shook them up and down, like a little kid, "Sis, guess what? I finally got a job at the Inn."

Bobby got his dream. He replaced the head waiter at the Inn. And I got my dream. Look around you. I have a little house with a wood stove. I have a sled and seven dogs. I have the wind and neighbors only ten miles away.