

# Self-Imposed Exile in Alaska

Never go to Alaska on account of a woman.

Even to this day, the thought of last summer is a burning reminder that love is blind, and there is a price to be paid for amorous naivete.

Well, what the hell, so I got dumped for her former beau. Despite my better judgment, I flew to Anchorage. Love isn't stupid though; it took me four days to figure that out. After my enlightenment, I had to leave, but home wasn't the answer — just get me out of Anchorage.

At the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska, it was survival of the fittest, with literally hundreds of lower 48-state "cannery rats" prowling at the doors of the fish-processing plants in search of a job. I quickly made that observation living in my new abode, a tent (purchased three days prior), in the gravel pit above the bank of Kenai River.

I owe my life to my long underwear.

I should have known better. I, spoiled with cooked food and a roof to live under, was in no condition to adjust to the rigorous Alaskan weather, from the wind that chaffs your skin by day to the cold that freezes you by night. I came to live in Limbo, population 14.

All that time spent on the bench outside Salamatof

Seafoods — endless hours of nothingness. How long could it go on? At first the lack of mental activity and nightly drunken stupors came as a welcome relief from the strains of school, but as time crawled to a standstill, there was the Kenai Public Library for entertainment.

"The Picture of Dorian Grey" came as a welcome friend to me, poisoning my mind with the degradation and loss of faith in relationships, which confirmed my earlier suspicions that there is no such thing as ideal love.

"Romance begins by deceiving oneself. Romance ends by deceiving another." — Oscar Wilde.

I had been deceived; an illusion shattered, frozen forever in my mind.

The legend of Alaska as the land of summer fortunes began to look like a deception too, especially after two weeks without a permanent job and dwindling personal resources.

My God, the thought of "dumpster diving in search of the nine-minute burger" became more of a reality by the day. Talk of the pit had it that Arby's hamburgers had a shelf-life of nine minutes.

We looked. We found. We ate.

Anything to pass the time and

A Delta Zeta sweatshirt provided some warmth, but nothing like what the warmth of another body drawn near could have done. When the zipper on my sleeping bag broke, it was the beginning of the end of my battle with the cold. I thought I was going to die.

satisfy the hunger.

Alaska brought out the worst in me. "Power shopping bulk food," a grocery store counterpart to restaurant "dine and dashing," was always an option when the pangs of hunger became too severe.

The food in Alaska is expensive, and no one could afford vine-ripened tomatoes at \$2.49 a pound, let alone most fresh food. I ate salmon, canned foods and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Dairy Queen 49ers, which have more onions and relish than actual meat, were the staple diet of the starving. Forty-nine cents doesn't buy much hamburger.

The good samaritan who served hot soup and bread at Shoshana's Oven for the Homer "spit rats" proves there are still good people left in this world. "Jesus never fails" hung above the door of the modified hangar, which was open 5-7 p.m. daily. However, the one day I went to

Shoshana's to eat, the oven was closed. Don't fail me Jesus. Please, not in a God-forsaken place like Alaska.

The samaritan and his wife fed Kenai cannery workers too, providing the means for both physical and spiritual strength. The pair saved lost souls in a way a traditional church service could not.

By night, we fended for ourselves from locals who would play grand prix racing in the gravel pit while we slept. When the madmen's car axle broke one night, the gravel pit community flipped the driver's car on its hood for the added touch. Extremist (or those who came the closest to being run over in the night) would have proceeded to burn the car, but the police came and put an end to any such thoughts.

The police came back again when a fight erupted over the disputed ownership of some firewood. Tempers flared, and one guy drew a knife, only to be clubbed in the temple with a walking stick by the other guy. The police took them both in.

Besides roving, gravel-throwing motor vehicles and knife-wielding men, being found frozen dead in a tent was an additional fear that crept into dispirited minds by night. A Delta Zeta sweatshirt provided some warmth, but nothing like what the warmth of another body drawn near could have done. When the zipper on my sleeping bag broke, it was the beginning of the end of my battle with the cold. I thought I was going to die.

One 19-year-old guy living in the gravel pit did die, but it happened at work and at a different plant. Asthma and 100-plus-hour weeks are a lethal combination. Fish mist, ever present in the lungs of the cannery workers, so it was like having a smoker's hack minus the habit.

By July most everyone is working: the butcher crew, shivering in blood-splattered

rain gear working on a good case of tendonitis; the egg-packing crew, always under the watchful eye of a Japanese foreman; the beach crew, braving the elements and working day and night to unload the fishing boats; the packing crew, incessantly bending over to pick up frozen salmon from deep, 1,000-pound cages; and the freezer crew, bundled like a postal worker on a brisk January morning.

Just as the mail must be delivered, so must the salmon be cleaned. And as the bins of salmon piled up, so would the sickly, vile smell of rotten fish fill the air.

There was no rest until the plant filled its order. Sleep? Who needs sleep?

Tables turned as the foremen at Salamatof, who prior to the onslaught of the salmon had the advantage at work, were suddenly your friends. Don't quit on us, they pleaded very nonchalantly. Oh, but where was the classic music to soothe my nerves? Phil, Billy, Michael McDonald and virtuous music that pleads, "Honey, I was wrong and I'm sorry, but I'm coming back" made me quit.

I'm sorry. I'd have stayed had I heard virtuous music part two, with something like, "You won't take me back? It's your choice to bear. Yeah, I'm sad but what can I say, there are other women out there." It's a fallacy to think relationships are as simple as, "Take me, I'm back." Fleetwood Mac says it right. Alaska makes you believe it.

Did she make you cry, make you break down, shatter your illusion of love? Is it over now—do you know how to pick up the pieces and go home?" Gold Dust Woman. I made it home all right, but I know I will never be the same.

— STAN NELSON

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 A publication of the Oregon Daily Emerald

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Cover photo by Michael Wilhelm

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