The air was crisp and clear, not a cloud in the sky, and the gentle wind blowing from the shoreline seemed to caress my face. From astern a low bright sun cast a long shadow of the vessel and her rigging as the ship slowly cruised a straight course through the choppy green water. Besides the familiar scent of salt sea and kelp, there was an aroma in the breeze that I could not identify. I asked, “What’s that sweet smell?”

“That’s the woods, the spruce trees.”

This was my first look at real, live trees. The ones I had seen before were in pictures and books. I thought to myself, “Just wouldn’t the kids at home, and Mama, like to cast eyes on these lovely, stately, nice-smelling overgrown willows!” On the mainland to the left and on the islands to the right, there grew more trees than I would have believed grew in all the world. Except for the stunted alders and willows that struggled to thrive along the streams back home, these were the first trees of any size I’d seen and the first evergreens. I have loved trees ever since.

Before the day was over, I would experience many more firsts. It was not just Resurrection Bay that we were entering, but a completely new world.
for me. This being the last day of November just a few minutes in the brisk
wind was enough, and I was glad to reach the warmth inside the pilothouse.
A seaman was at the wheel, and the mate on watch was peering through a
partly opened window. Off to the left a string of snowy peaks rose abruptly
from the water. “That’s the Aialik Peninsula,” the mate said. “Up there over
the port bow is Bear Glacier.” A great tongue of ice—reaching almost to
the bay ahead, white on its surface, blue in the shadows, and a dirty gray
at its front—filled the two-mile width of the valley. It was the largest of
many such tongues thrust impudently out of the mouths of other valleys
and canyons from an ice field overflowing from the highlands between two
mountain ranges. Here and there small islands of barren rock pierced the

calm sea.

To our right were other islands, steep and wooded, snow-crowned
sentinels guarding the fiord-like harbor we were entering. In the distance
smoke was rising from the base of a peak where the water ended and the
land began. “There’s Seward,” someone yelled. The view ahead was gor-
deous, a range of jagged, snow-covered mountains on either side of a blue-
green harbor. A whale rolled and spouted steamy spray half a mile away. For
a time we were escorted by playful porpoises with black backs and white
underbodies. They plunged and jumped and raced along the side of the
ship. They were the welcoming committee.

The throbbing diesel engine, aided by a flood tide, carried us quickly
through Resurrection Bay. Soon signs of human endeavor began to rise from
below the tree line. First, a radio tower, then large buildings, some oil tanks,
and the masts of two steamers lying at dock. Soon individual houses took
form. To the right, beyond the town, a fair-sized river flowed into the bay.
One of the steamers was just leaving, and as it pulled away, I saw a black
locomotive sending jets of steam and puffs of smoke into the air and push-
ing railroad cars out onto the pier. It was the first train I’d ever seen! “What
an iron horse,” I said to myself.

Captain Whitlam pointed out to me on a hillside in a snowy clearing
in a forest a couple of miles from Seward the Jesse Lee Home. “There’s your
new home, Elizabeth.” A black sedan drove onto the dock. “And there’s the
car come to get you. I’ll bet you’ll be glad to get off this tub.” I told Captain
Whitlam I enjoyed the trip except for the crossing of the Bering Sea. I think
Captain Whitlam sensed that I was a little reluctant to leave the Boxer and the
shipmates who had become my good friends on this thirty-five-day voyage.
He said that on the way back north come spring, he would check up on me. “You’ll make out all right. The Hattens, and everybody out there, are fine people. You won’t be a stranger long.”

Almost as soon as we were moored to the dock and the gangplank was rigged from ship to shore, the driver of the sedan came aboard. He was introduced by Captain Whitlam as Mr. Hatten, superintendent of the Jesse Lee Home. He was a tall pleasant man with a stern demeanor. He helped me across the gangplank to the dock and into the car. Mr. Hatten, who was a minister, was friendly, but I wasn’t sure whether we would be compatible or not. To some of the boys at Jesse Lee he was the nearest to a real father that they ever knew. As we drove along the icy streets, past the business district, and up the winding road to the school, Mr. Hatten told me all about the Jesse Lee Home.

The mission boarding school had its start at Unalaska in the Aleutians in 1890. It was named for Jesse Lee, a traveling preacher who brought the Methodist religion to New England in the early days of our country, and the school was founded by a young New Englander named Agnes Soule. The school was moved to Seward in 1924. The Jesse Lee Home was a school for homeless children and also a school for children who lived in villages where there were no schools.

The sun still shone on the upper crags on the far side of the bay, but it was dusk already on our side in the shadow of Mount Marathon, which rose abruptly from the back edge of town. The street lamps were on, and lights were shining through the steamed-up windows of the establishments on either side of the street. As we drove cautiously through the few blocks of the business district, I saw a movie theater, steamship office, hotel, pool hall and cardrooms, a couple of cafes, a bakery, photo shop, hardware store, grocery, laundry, and bank. For the first time in my life, I saw many shops and places of service. I realized that it takes all kinds of businesses to make a town a “town.”

That was my first automobile ride, and I didn’t enjoy it nearly as much as I expected I would. The ice-glazed road was so slick that in spite of Mr. Hatten’s careful driving, the car slithered and bumped so from the chuckholes in the road that I was scared half to death and glad when we reached the school. Out of the car and on solid ground again, I had the feeling that there was still a rolling deck beneath me. I grabbed for Mr. Hatten’s arm to keep from falling. “What’s the matter, Elizabeth?” he asked.
“It just felt like I was on the ship again,” I explained.

He laughed. “You’ve still got your sea legs,” he said, then, hurriedly, “You’ll be all right in a little while,” as though the mention of “legs” in my presence might be insensitive. It wasn’t of course. It was just part of being me to have strangers be curious as to why I walked as I did. Everyone at the school knew about my condition before I arrived so there was a lot of natural curiosity and staring at the underpinnings of the “new girl with wooden legs.” Some of the staff and older girls were inclined to be over solicitous about my welfare. But I was perfectly capable of caring for myself as I had always done.

The Jesse Lee Home was open to any child with Native blood, whether Indian, Aleut, or Eskimo. Only a very few were Eskimos, most being of Indian descent from the Kenai Peninsula and Cook Inlet and Aleuts from Kodiak, the Shumagin Islands, and the Aleutians. A few of the children at the school were the illegitimate offspring of Native mothers and unknown fathers, usually seasonal cannery workers or fishermen or passing seamen on a spree ashore. These were not necessarily white men because many of the children had the facial characteristics of Filipinos and other Asians. There were others whose white fathers had been legally married to their mothers, but who’d abandoned their families leaving the mother with several youngsters she could not support and with no choice but to send them
to the orphanage. Alcohol, more often than not, was responsible for such liaisons and subsequent desertions.

There were also true orphans at the Jesse Lee Home whose parents were both dead. The life expectancy of the Alaska Native was short then, especially to the westward where the rates of accidental deaths were high, principally from drownings at sea or in swiftly flowing rivers as the Natives pursued their way of subsistence. Many died of gunshot wounds while hunting miles from assistance of any kind. Nearly every year on Kodiak Island and the Alaska Peninsula, unwary hunters, hikers, and campers were killed or mauled by the great brown bear, the grizzly, whose domain they invaded. Those who survived the hazards of merely existing, could expect to die at an early age of tuberculosis, malnourishment, and other diseases. If they were spared from accident or disease, then poisonous alcoholic concoctions, such as mokoola, brewed in any sort of receptacle, finished them off or blinded them. Communicable diseases brought by the white travelers took their toll. Few Natives lived to reach their fifties then.

A few of the residents at the Jesse Lee Home were of full blood with the ivory skin, dark hair, and eyes of their aboriginal forebears. There were some though whose fair hair and skin and blue eyes indicated Scandinavian ancestry, yet they still qualified as Natives. One girl was as blonde a person as I had ever known. She had a Russian name and considered herself to be an Aleut. Most of the girls were good-looking and the boys handsome, and ninety-nine percent Russian, Norwegian, or Swedish on their paternal side. There was no age limit. I was in A Group, which was for girls sixteen and older. B Group represented the twelve to fifteen year olds, C represented the eight to eleven year olds, and D was the small children and babies. Each group was supervised by a deaconess or matron who had a private room adjacent to the dorm she governed. In the boys’ dormitory they had deacons or male teachers in charge. The men in charge all were married, and their wives were often teachers or matrons. The dining room was in the basement of the girls’ dormitory, as was the extensive kitchen with modern furnishings. We ate at long tables assigned according to age group, but boys and girls could dine together if they chose.

The Jesse Lee Home was not a resort for idlers. The rules were strict but fair. In addition to our classwork, everyone had to take two-week turns at different tasks. For the boys it was caring for the cows, pigs, and chickens; sawing and splitting wood; shoveling coal into the furnaces; and working in
the laundry. In the summer months, they worked in the hay fields and vegetable gardens or fished for salmon in the little gill-net boat owned by the school. Some of the older boys owned rifles, and during hunting season they would shoot moose, mountain sheep, or goats, which added to the larder. I experienced many firsts at the Jesse Lee Home. For instance, new kinds of food such as fresh vegetables grown from acres of tilled soil: spinach, celery, potatoes, cabbage, carrots, and beets (mostly root vegetables). Though I had to acquire a taste for certain fresh vegetables, I actually grew to like them. I had also my first taste of fresh milk, which I must say was foreign to my taste buds. Also for the first time in my life, I enjoyed a diet of such protein as beef, in the form of hamburger for meat loaf or meatballs. We had no such thing as beef steaks for that was reserved for the teachers and school supervisors to be savored on their weekends at their own retreats. I also had my first taste of pork through the efforts of the older boys in raising porkers, which were butchered in the fall. I would refuse to drink a glass of milk at times until the teachers would say, “All growing youngsters need milk.” I did not like the taste of fresh milk.

Another plus I found at the Jesse Lee was readily available health care; there was an infirmary on the upper floor of the boys’ building and a registered nurse in charge. She administered to the sick, whether it be for the flu, an outbreak of an infectious disease, a broken finger, or any non-medical condition. She would do whatever was deemed necessary to help us, whereas when I was growing up at Teller, we had no professional health care person available. The injured or ill person would be treated according to a “wait and see” approach. In any case, as I have noted we at home were treated by our father, who was very knowledgeable in which course of treatment a sick person required. He had a closet shelf supplied with all first aid requirements, such as aspirin, salves, rubbing alcohol, emollients for sore muscles, and such.

The girls worked in the kitchen and dining room, the laundry, and the ironing and sewing rooms and tended the small children. They even worked as aides to the RN in the infirmary. We learned to make jams and jellies from the wild berries that were picked by the groups who went on berry-picking jaunts when the high- and low-bush currants were in season. Also every fall just before Thanksgiving, there would come a large shipment of apples from the eastern Washington fruit growers who were kind enough to donate this much needed commodity to the school. We would make applesauce and
apple butter to spice up our tables during the cold dark days of winter. This was the first time in my life that I could eat apples to my heart’s content, and I did just that. The availability of fresh fruit in the Far North was almost nil. I thought many times how fortunate a family was who could just go to the grocery store or fruit stand and buy any variety of fruit they desired (fresh and not canned or dried as we had). If someone at Nome had a yearning for any kind of fresh fruit during the long winter months, they had to mail order it from a store in Fairbanks and have it flown by plane to Nome, wrapped well in newspaper, then double boxed in cardboard boxes so the cold air couldn’t penetrate and cause frostbite. If someone in Teller had a craving for fresh apples or oranges in the middle of winter, they had to order it from the Nome source, double wrap it again, and put it into a reindeer skin bag to insure it wouldn’t be frozen by the time the mailman, who depended on his dog team, got it to Teller.

To help my generation hold our own in the competitive culture brought to our land by the white man, the staff at Jesse Lee prepared us with education, hard work, and large doses of Christian doctrine as laid down by the Methodists. Grace was said before each meal and a good share of every Sunday was devoted to religious activities—Sunday School, church services, and evening vespers. On Wednesday evenings, there were prayer meetings and also weekly gatherings of the Epworth League. As a paying student, it was not mandatory that I participate, but the deaconesses and the superintendent and his wife were always encouraging me to take a more active part in the religious part of the program. One day Mr. Hatten admonishingly said, “Why don’t you like to go to prayer meeting and Epworth League, Elizabeth?”

I responded, “I was born a Catholic, and I want to keep on being one. I will celebrate my inherited religion in my own way.” The subject was not brought up again, and I know the matter must have been brought to the attention of my Uncle Ed, probably in a letter to him from Mr. Hatten.

At the beginning of my residence at Jesse Lee, I was exempt from being assigned most of the usual chores, as I was a paying student. Having arrived three months after the school term commenced, I had more than enough to do to catch up with the freshman class, but I was eager to tackle the challenging subjects at school. By the beginning of the second semester I was up with the rest of the class and sailing smoothly along. When summer vacation time rolled around, the matrons would take their charges on
picnics and outings in the beautiful countryside. Soon the second school term rolled around, and we were quite content to keep busy with our studies and chores during the long dark, rainy, and cold days.

Holidays were always exciting, starting with Halloween, when the eighth to twelfth grades would have a big party in the gym. Then, of course, there were Thanksgiving and Christmas, which were great days, with everything from the religious aspect of the celebrations to great feasts.

In my second year, I was encouraged by Mrs. Hatten to take journalism along with the other requirements. It was a fascinating subject, and one that I seemed to fit into. I found that I could write a story on the least hint of a subject. And as my uncle said, I had a way of using descriptive words most effectively. Besides my regular studies, I took piano lessons and practiced at every opportunity, but only after I did my stint at sewing and ironing, folding and sorting clothes, and using the mangle machine in the laundry room. I spent a lot of time with my English teacher, Mrs. Bernice Groth, a niece of the famous author Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain. She believed that my future was in writing. She told me, “You’ve had a remarkable background, Elizabeth. You’ve known some famous people and seen history being made. Why your parents’ and grandparents’ lives are stories in themselves. You have a natural bent for telling things in a way that makes others feel that they were with you when it happened. You must learn to put things on paper as well as you can.” With encouragement from her and Mrs. Hatten, I began to write little short stories and poems and to win prizes for them at school.

My curriculum included all the necessary subjects: math, English, world and ancient history, Latin, typing, home economics, and so on. Because of my disability, I did not go out much in the winter months. Compared with northern Alaska where the winters were much colder, but very dry and usually clear, the Seward weather was damp and foggy most of the winter. Moist winds warmed by the Japan Current flowing through the Gulf of Alaska a few miles offshore blew across the Kenai Peninsula ice fields and generated violent williwaws that could at times easily knock even a person with normal walking ability off his feet. Overnight a south wind off the ocean converging with cold air from the glaciers could dump two feet of snow on Seward. This could be immediately followed by a frigid norther that blew most of the snow back into the sea, leaving walks and roads and stairways slick and dangerous. I was aware of all those hazards.
Adjacent to the railroad yards, built out over the bay on pilings, was a long low building which was the San Juan Salmon Cannery. Behind a breakwater near the cannery and hauled up on the shore were fishing boats, pleasure craft, and small barges. During the summer when this cannery and a smaller one on the other side of town were in operation, a few of the older boys from the home worked there. In those days there was a saying that the steamship companies owned Alaska. Most Alaskans said that a dollar never changed hands without the steamship lines taking a bite out of it. For instance, a person living in Seward could not go to one of the local canneries, even if he worked there, and buy a case of salmon for his own use, nor could a store owner buy it there for resale. In order to have a steamship company carry its product to the States, a cannery had to agree that its entire pack, every last can, would be shipped to Seattle. Anything to be consumed locally then had to be shipped back north again, virtually doubling the freight charges. Before a can of salmon produced at the San Juan Cannery could be used by a householder a block away, it had to travel a 3000-mile round trip, not to mention loading at Seward, unloading at Seattle, transferring to a warehouse and back to the dock, reloading to another ship, and unloading from storage again upon returning to the point of origin in Alaska.

It was no wonder that most Alaskans begrudged the steamship companies. There was no competition. There was not, and still is not, any railroad from the contiguous United States to Alaska, and in those days there was no highway and no long distance air freight. Air freight was out of the question, as it was too expensive. You either used the steamships on the companies’ own terms, or you did without. Seward, being a seaport town and the south terminus of the Alaska Railroad, was also a busy port for freight and passengers going west to Dutch Harbor and Unalaska and points along the way to the Aleutian Chain or to Fairbanks and points in between.

Once a group of men at Seward, thoroughly disgusted and angered by a newly-contrived money-making scheme of a major steamship line, took things into their own hands. In those days there was little work in the North during the winter months except for trapping for furs and chopping wood. But in the countryside along the government-owned and operated Alaska Railroad were hundreds of men and women who lived near the rail route and who cut railroad ties to supplement their earnings after a few months of fishing or working in the canneries or mines. Officials of the steamship companies did not like the tie-cutting business at all. Anything
that was produced and used locally put no money into corporate treasur-
ies, and 470.8 miles of mainline plus sidetracks and yards used a lot of ties
each year.

So company lobbyists in Washington were alerted and soon an or-
der was issued by the Department of the Interior, which ran the Alaska
Railroad, that henceforth ties would not be bought locally unless they met
certain specifications: they must be sawed, not hewn; steam-creosoted; and
competitive in price with ties produced in high-speed sawmills on Puget
Sound. Men working with crosscut saws and axes could by no means pro-
duce ties for what they could be purchased stateside. And as for creosoting
them under steam pressure, that was an utter impossibility.

The Alaska residents, whites and Natives, were often hired only as me-
nial beach gang laborers or cannery workers at an hourly wage which gave
no incentive to work any harder than they had to. Labor unions had not
yet gotten a strong foothold in the North, and a workman could be fired at
the whim of his foreman. Another sore point that caused bitterness in the
Alaskan labor force was that imported fishermen and cannery men were
paid a base wage that commenced the day they boarded a ship in Seattle for
the ten-day or two-week trip by steamer to the cannery and continued until
they returned to the port of departure. This usually meant three to four
weeks’ pay each season for doing nothing but riding a steamship. Thus an
outsider could expect to receive four months’ pay for a three-month season,
plus his “lay” or percentage of the pack, and could return home with a fair-
sized nest egg.

But what could anyone do about it? Who could buck anything as
big as Uncle Sam working in connivance with the greedy directors and
stockholders of the monopolistic steamship companies? The tie-cutters of
the Kenai Peninsula section of the Alaska Railroad did something about it
though. Taking a tip from an earlier group of American citizens outraged
by the policies of a far away government, they pulled their own version of
the Boston Tea Party and dumped hundreds of manufactured and creosoted
ties off the Alaska Railroad dock at Seward into Resurrection Bay, with the
threat that other cargo would be given the deep six, too, if the stateside ties
continued to be imported.

The action didn’t change the Department of the Interior’s mind at all,
but the publicity generated by the “Seward Tie Party” focused nationwide
attention on the workers’ plight, and in the early years of President
Roosevelt’s New Deal, many federal projects were ordered for Alaska that more than offset the tie-cutters’ losses and also generated even larger profits for the steamship companies in transporting building supplies and construction equipment. They made more fortunes, too, carrying Depression-hurt people who came North in droves on steamships, attracted by newspaper stories of lots of work and big wages in Alaska. Such information was often traceable to press releases put out by public relations agencies for the same companies whose false advertising had lured the throngs to Nome over thirty years before. Few steamers docked at Seward during the hard times of the thirties without bringing destitute workmen and families in their steerage who’d spent all they had for tickets to the “Land of Promise.” Many were returned to the States on the same ship on which they had come at public expense or with contributions. Wages were higher in Alaska, and those with jobs wanted no competition from men with hungry families who might work for less than the going rates. And it was cheaper to pay someone’s passage back to Seattle than support him. Some came North believing they could live off the land with only a rifle and a fishline. Then there were the farmers who had moved to Alaska to live life anew in the Matanuska Valley, sometimes called the grub box of Alaska. They were refugees from the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma, Kansas, and neighboring states. The younger generation of this influx of people are still there, some on the same farms.

Seldom did one of the older girls who lived at the school as a worker go to town that she did not return with the story of being offered money or drinks to go aboard a ship with some sailor, or to a hotel room, or to somebody’s shack. We were trusted but were chaperoned whenever we went to town, so we had no opportunity to get into trouble. Occasionally one of the boys would get caught smoking out behind the barn or in town and be hauled up before Mr. Hatten for a lecture. The biggest problem that faced the residents of the Jesse Lee Home and other boarding schools for Alaska Native children was what we would do when we finished high school and had to leave. The boys could go to sea, become cannery workers, fishermen, miners, or section hands on the railroad. The girls, though, except for summer cannery work, had little to look forward to but returning to their home villages or marrying some local fellow. Finding a mate was no big problem if a girl was not too particular for there were plenty lonely trappers, prospectors, homesteaders, and fishermen. These men were generally much older than the girls they wanted and always on the lookout for girls from
Jesse Lee as they were usually good homemakers by training. The staff tried to make sure that the prospective husband was a good risk before giving their blessing for a marriage. Too often, after a few years of hard work and several babies, a pretty girl would get fat and sloppy, lose the good looks that had attracted the man, and he would wander off, leaving more children to be raised in a government school or church-run orphanage. This is the general situation, not only in Alaska, but nearly anywhere you go. After the girls were eighteen years old, the Jesse Lee Home had no legal authority to prevent them from marrying, but everything was done to see that they got a decent man, especially one with a sense of Christian responsibility and sober habits. In general, the matches seemed to work out fairly successfully and many of the girls returned to their hometowns and married and had families. I heard from a few in later years and found they were leading normal family-oriented lives. After finishing school, many of the girls went to town to work as live-in housekeepers for the people who owned businesses, some doctors and lawyers, and the wealthy of Seward. Some of the scholastically superior girls were sent “outside” to the Lower 48 for higher education in such schools as Chemawa in Oregon.

As for me, I intended to honor my Uncle Ed’s and my father’s trust in me by finishing my education and becoming a useful citizen. I studied hard and concentrated on getting as much out of my lessons as I possibly could cram into my head. I absorbed all my curricula like a sponge. I never knew there was so much to getting an education. Math and history were my favorite subjects, and although Latin was a drain on my brain, I still made good grades and even took several years of it.

Often I had to work late into the night and many hours on the weekends. I was so busy studying that I hardly had time to dwell on homesickness. There were weekends though when my thoughts would take me back to home and family. Through letters from my Uncle Ed and my father, encouragement was given to me in large doses. I kept telling myself, “I must put every effort into learning for the sake of them and for myself.” The more and harder that I applied myself, the easier it became for I had the backing of two important men in my life, namely the one to whom I owed my life and the one who was involving his life to make something of me.

There were all kinds of school activities to engage everyone. There were competitive high school sports, such as basketball, volleyball, and baseball, for the boys. Mr. and Mrs. Hatten allowed us to attend while they
chaperoned. There were quilting bees for the girls and music recitals. Then there were get-togethers in the parlor, which was a large sitting room with a huge fireplace at one end. We were allowed to entertain one visitor a month in the parlor. Many of the students had relatives who would come to visit and lived within a few days’ traveling distance from the home. My visitors would come when the USMS Boxer arrived on her annual trip to the Bering Sea. Then I would have such distinguished callers as Captain Whitlam, the chief engineer, or the chef, Sig Sundt, come and spend a few hours with me. In that way they would have a firsthand account to give my father and mother when they reached Teller that summer.

I have always loved music and dreamed of the day when I would be able to play some kind of musical instrument. Every one of my five brothers played one or more musical instruments. Robert, the youngest, played professionally in a band in his spare time as an army soldier at Fort Richardson. By summer I began to take piano lessons, and my teacher said I advanced surprisingly well, reaching the second-year class by the time school started again. There were so many piano students that we could only practice once or twice a week, and then it would have to be by appointment for even though there were three pianos in the two buildings, they were always in use. The Jesse Lee Home had a harmoniously pleasing glee club and a cappella choir. They were much in demand for special occasions in Seward as well as in other larger towns, such as Anchorage and Fairbanks, to which they would travel by train. They were deemed the best in all of Alaska. The majority of the students played some musical instrument even without instruction.

One of the most worldly wise and popular people I knew was a classmate of mine at the Jesse Lee Home. His name was Benny Benson. He was the boy who designed the Alaska state flag. He was an intelligent, good-looking lad from Chignik, a village out on the Alaska Peninsula west of Kodiak Island. His father was a Scandinavian fisherman who’d had to put Benny and his younger brother in the school after his Aleut mother died. He was an ingenious fellow, who could do anything from overhauling an engine to smoking salmon and playing the guitar and piano. Benny Benson was an outdoorsman and in the winter had a trap line out in the woods where he trapped for fox, mink, and marten. He was the headman in tending the milk cows for the school and maintaining the school’s small dog team, which consisted of only five dogs of undetermined breed. He hunted moose,
coyote, bear, and ducks. In the summer he was in charge of the salmon fishing for the institution. And when we took day-long trips to Tonsina Creek, Bear Glacier, and Rugged Island, it was usually Benny who ran the boat. He was sixteen when I came to the Jesse Lee Home. In 1926, when he was twelve, the American Legion in Alaska sponsored a contest for schoolchildren to design a territorial flag. Benny Benson’s entry, a blue banner with eight stars of gold depicting the Big Dipper and the North Star, won first prize. He was awarded a gold watch engraved with the flag he designed and a trip to Washington, D.C., to present the first Alaska flag to President Coolidge. Before he could make the trip, his father became ill, and they were not able to go. He was given $1,000 for winning the first prize. This came fourteen years after Alaska became a territory. This same flag now is the official flag for the state of Alaska. I am very proud of the fact that I was a schoolmate of Benny Benson.

Things began to buzz in my head. What a new kind of world I was now living in: automobiles which I had never seen before going to and fro on the road near the school, trains traveling on tracks just below the hillside from the school, and stores with newfangled products I’d only seen in Sears or Montgomery Ward catalogs. All this seemed so strange in my fast-changing world. New friends, new sights, new sounds, and new experiences. Everything was so different from back home. The winters were milder and shorter. In the spring my thoughts went back to the breakup of the harbor ice back home. It was something to witness the coming of spring at Teller—the sound of the harbor ice breaking up was like a continuous roar of thunder. At Teller spring came upon us instantly when it did arrive. The lengthening days and brilliant sunlight that rotted the sea ice caused leads to open up. Patches of bare ground appeared here and there, showing the dead brown grass of the previous season. Trash and lost articles covered during the winter by succeeding snowfalls, came into view. One day in June an offshore wind would blow strong enough to spread the ice floes apart and move them out to the Bering Sea. Once Grantley Harbor and Port Clarence Bay were free of ice, ships of all descriptions would begin moving in and out. That was summer in northern Alaska where I grew up.

In Seward it was entirely different. There was a slow transition from spring to summer. The sea never froze, which was the reason Resurrection Bay had been chosen as the terminus of the Alaska Railroad because ships bringing freight, mail, and passengers could be handled all year round. The
thaw came many weeks earlier than it did at Teller, where long after spring
was on the calendar in Seward, winter was still upon the land up north. But on the Kenai Peninsula late in April, a warm wind would blow in from
the Pacific Ocean and the Japan Current just offshore, bringing banks of
low clouds that carried the warm rains in across the mountains to the west.
Within a day or so, the waterfall on Mount Marathon began to flow full
force again after months of frozen silence. Iron Mountain, the sheer 4,000
foot peak directly behind the school and just one mile away, commenced
to shed its winter mantle in thundering avalanches that caused heavy rever-
berations that shook our buildings, rattled the windows, and terrified me
the first time they happened. I thought the whole mountain would tumble
down upon us. It was not unlike an earthquake when the ground would
shake beneath. We felt earth tremors also at Seward every now and then,
usually when there had been a quake in the Aleutian Chain or on the Kenai
Peninsula.

After a few days, except in the gullies and deeper shadows of the for-
est, the ground was nearly bare of snow, as were the steeper faces of the
mountains. Roads and pathways became mucky, and cars and trucks were
always getting stuck as there were no paved roads. Finally the heavy clouds
blew over, the sun came out bright and hot; soon green grass was shooting
up from brown fields and pastures and meadows on the upper slopes. The
gaunt trunks and branches of winter-naked willows, cottonwoods, birch,
and alder were quickly clothed in soft foliage that rustled in the wind. Wild-
flowers popped up everywhere. Roadside thickets were pink with blossoms
of the wild roses and fireweed and white with the salmonberry bushes and
three-petaled trillium poking out everywhere. The warming atmosphere was
permeating the air with a hundred new fragrances.

New life was everywhere. In the chicken yard I saw for the first time
hens with baby chicks, and the gallant rooster scratched up tidbits then
called his flock to come and eat while he stood by self-satisfied. Sows with
winter-born piglets were turned out to root, and calves kicked up their heels
and frolicked about, tails held high, exuberant with the joy of discovering
the world of freedom beyond the confines of dark stalls inside the barn. We
saw wild young creatures, too. Black bears with cubs born during winter
hibernation would come out of the woods at evening to raid the garbage
cans. Great ugly moose cows, gaunt and bony from long months on short
rations, brought long-legged ungainly calves to browse on the tender leaves
and new growth of the willows and alders that grew along the edge of the cemetery adjoining the property of the school.

Summer vacation did not mean rest and leisure for the residents of Jesse Lee, either staff or students. When classes ended for the term, everyone who was old enough to work did his share. The buildings were given a top-to-bottom spring cleaning, repaired, and painted. Bedding and mattresses were taken out for sunning and airing. Heavy winter garments were laundered, repaired, and stored away until needed again. When the ground had partially dried out enough for tilling, the old Fordson tractor that had been donated by a Seward businessman was cranked up, and the garden tract plowed, harrowed, and planted. Lots of potatoes were put in, as well as cabbage, kale, spinach, and Brussels sprouts—all sturdy, iron-filled leaf plants—and carrots, turnips, and other root crops that would keep well after harvesting. The vegetables flourished well in the short but fast growing season practically astride the sixtieth parallel of latitude, two-thirds of the way between the Equator and the North Pole.

A few days after planting, what had been naked ground one evening would the next morning have rows of seedlings that had sprung up in the daylight of night. When the weather was clear, the sun, reflecting from the surrounding glaciers and ice fields, was in the sky from half past two in the morning until nearly ten pm. The temperature sometimes would go up to over eighty. If there was no wind, it cooled off only a little during the few hours that the sun was below the mountains to the north. Being from a region where gardening was neither practical nor practiced to any great extent, I was fascinated by the growing crops and how fast they grew during the long hours of daylight.

Summer was also a time of increased earthquake activity. Though we’d had small tremors now and then throughout the winter, with the coming of warm weather there was hardly a month when we would not feel the trembling of the ground beneath the buildings, see the electric lights swing overhead, and hear the rattle of chinaware in the cupboards. It was said the increase was caused by the movement of the glaciers as they were lightened by millions of tons of melting ice. The rock beneath the ice was being forced upward by pressures deep within the earth. Whatever the reason, apparently it was an omen or forewarning of violent things to come. On March 27, 1964, Anchorage, Seward, Valdez, Kodiak, and many other towns and villages in this part of Alaska were partially or totally destroyed by the Good
Friday earthquake and the seismic waves that followed. During the temblor, the bottom of Resurrection Bay dropped hundreds of feet, the water vanished, and for a few moments the bay was as dry as a drained bathtub. Then a wall of water came rushing in from the ocean to fill the void. Sloshing back and forth from end to end of the bay, it washed hundred-foot boats, diesel locomotives and boxcars, bulldozers, and vehicles high up on the hillsides. The docks, oil tanks, canneries, buildings, and houses near the shore were wrecked and deposited in the trees on the lower slopes of Mount Marathon, along with the bodies of the victims. Being on high ground beyond the head of the bay the Jesse Lee Home was spared.

The big event of the summer season was the Fourth of July celebration. The canneries closed, fishermen tied up their boats, stevedore and railroad operations stopped. The highlight of Seward’s Independence Day celebration was the annual race up to the top of Marathon Mountain. There was a flagpole at the summit, and the first person to reach it and raise the flag got a hundred dollars. One of the fastest times ever made was by one of the Jesse Lee boys, Ephriam Kalmakoff, fifty-five minutes from starting line to flagpole. He later died of tuberculosis brought on, some believed, by overstraining his lungs during trial runs up the mountain. He won the marathon race three years in a row. During the Second World War, when over 3,000 soldiers and sailors were stationed at Seward to defend the port facilities and the railhead from an expected Japanese attack, the Fourth of July race was discontinued.

The salmonberries ripened in July. Sweet and juicy, they did not keep and had to be eaten fresh. The blueberries weren’t ready until late August. There were thousands of acres of them on the lower slopes of Mount Alice, Bear Mountain, and other peaks on the east side of the bay and valley. Mama would have loved it here, I used to think, as I picked a gallon of the fat, sweet berries without moving from my tracks. We shared the blueberry thickets with black bears. It was not uncommon to be filling our buckets within a hundred feet of several bears, sleek and fat and stinking from the spawned-out salmon they’d gorged on along the streams. We had an agreement with the bears that if they would stay on their side of the thicket, we’d stay on ours. If we came on one unexpectedly it usually ran. If it stood its ground and growled, we retreated.

We never heard of anyone being harmed by a black bear. Brownies were something else again. Weighing as much as 1,600 pounds, the great
Alaska brown bear, or grizzly, is one of the largest carnivores in the world, second only to the polar bear. When surprised or wounded, or if their young are threatened, they are the most dangerous and vindictive of wild creatures. Almost yearly in brown bear country, someone is killed or maimed. It only happens to people who invade the bears’ home territory because, unlike the smaller blacks, the big fellows avoid human habitations. We were warned that when we were in the woods, we should make lots of noise to alert any brownies that might be in the vicinity. They would then slip away deeper into the forest, and you’d never know they had ever been there except for their tracks and the fishy stink they left behind. Experienced travelers of Alaskan trails often carried bear alarms—empty tobacco tins with pebbles in them that rattled as they walked and gave notice of their presence to the brown bears. At home in northern Alaska, whenever we went berry-picking, Mama always carried a tin dishpan, and every now and then she would take a stick and beat on the tin pan to let the bears know that we were picking berries also and to let us be. If, however, you came on one unexpectedly, and he reared up on hind legs to his full nine feet a few yards away, woodsmen said the wisest thing was to stand your ground and talk to the bear in a normal voice, and he’d usually drop down on all fours and amble off. If startled though, he’d charge the thing that frightened him and attack with fangs and claws. If there was time and a tree was handy, you could scoot up to safety because a grown brownie is too heavy to climb. You dared not stop until you were at least twelve feet up into the branches because the erect brown bear could reach that high and drag you down. No such incidents happened to us though. Moose, too, that could bowl you over with their antlers and chop you to bits with their sharp hooves, were best dealt with by standing still and calling to them to be on their way. The animals, standing six feet tall at the shoulder, not wanting an encounter, usually faded away into the underbrush. If it happened to be a cow with a calf, a bull in rutting season, or a rogue of the moose world, it was good to have a tree at hand. It is said that men have climbed trees with snowshoes when being chased by a moose. Now, this may be one of the entertaining tales invented by Alaskans for the benefit of cheechakos, but I wouldn’t swear it is.