

Grandfather

He walked a giant. I'd follow him through the forest under the broad-leafed maple trees, gathering medicines from the bark of trees or root of plants, gently simmered and steeped into a tea. I think even the taste of that medicine scared the sickness from us over the long grey winters, and my cousins and I would try to avoid coughing where they might hear us and get us to drink some of the tea; often bitter, with the taste of the soil and moss, and not like other tea where you could put sugar and the canned condensed milk we used because it would last a long time in storage.

Or he stood tall in a canoe which he'd carved from a tall cedar tree, and used a long pole or a paddle to maneuver us in the current. He'd pull up on the worn net line when we saw the floats bob and get yanked under water, which meant a fish had hit. The net lines were colder than ice and only the swirling movement of the foggy green river kept the water from freezing except for the little bubbly sheets of ice around the edges which cemented the rounded river rocks together.

The green in the water was from the mountains ground down during the Great Ice many thousands of years ago, and washed downstream as finely ground as flour, from the headwaters of the powerful rivers. The tiny stone particles swirled sparking like tiny gems around our hands until we could barely move our fingers, swirled around the large dog salmon who thrashed and slapped at us with their tails trying to escape.

He'd drive away sometimes, leaving me behind after he'd determined that I'd be a nuisance in the car on the long highway trip. When he returned he'd have some more netting which his sister's husband had given him, and he'd hang it himself, or when he got older he'd get my uncle to take that part over. They'd stretch the net across the wide yard between a fruit tree and a post that wobbled but went deep enough never to fall over.

The nets had worn ropes top and bottom with the light green of the netting laced between. On the top were paced some floats like beads, and the bottom rope was heavy with lead completely encased with the woven strands of the thick corded rope. My uncles laughed and teased each other when they hung the net and fixed the holes with carefully rewoven knot work. They would carefully tease out sticks caught in the net, much gentler than my mother brushing out the burrs from my hair, little balls of hooks that we always seemed to have on us after visiting my grandfather's house.

Rarely we would catch a seal or even a bird in the net which sometimes had to be cut out to free the unintentional catch before it drowned. If they couldn't save the creature they dispatch it quickly and bring it home. If we killed it we would eat it. I remember the seal meat was dark and rich and not everyone at my grandfather's house would eat it so he'd bring it to grateful elders who only rarely got that meat anymore.

When we brought the salmon home in big cold galvanized tubs we'd gather at the back of the house to a table made from sagging plywood board over two sawhorses and use long curved knives to slice and clean the salmon. Some salmon we'd freeze or jar for later, but

more went into the smokehouse, splayed open with cedar sticks piercing through the edges to hold them open for the four to seven days bathing in swirls of alder and maple wood smoke. Inside the smokehouse it was almost impossible to see with the clouds of smoke stinging our eyes so we younger cousins would just carry the fish in and run out as soon as we could.

We burned alder and broad-leafed maple wood, trees cut down in the summer, and split and dried and stacked. They would only burn the cedar or fir wood to start a fire, and would then carefully mix in the sweeter maple wood or barky tasting alder in half split rounds so that they would smoulder slowly rather than burn hot and simply cook the salmon so that it softened and fell.

When we got the first loads of smoked salmon we try it out, soaking or boiling the fish first because it was as hard as a board and a translucent deep red when the winter sun shone through them. After that first meal we'd drive all over and give the fish to the family members who would share it with their family members who were still around or had to move away to the city. Sometimes an old lady would make them take five dollars for gas money and get mad if my uncles tried to refuse. When I was young I never really understood how this was their job because they had other work which actually brought in money. They'd laugh when I asked them, and it was only after they died that I realized how rare and precious all of those moments were.