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DEVIL'S CLUB TEA by Suzanne Andersen

Devil's club is a plant, not a weapon. However it might be the devil's weapon of choice if he found himself in a fight on an Alaskan mountainside. It grows throughout the Pacific Northwest, extending as far east as Alberta. Devil's club has the structure of a very large rhubarb plant. Thick stalks grow out of the base, and are topped by eighteen-inch leaves that form a canopy above it. The stalks are covered by vicious spines. It is an Alaska-sized menace, and sometimes grows in such abundance that one must skirt an entire canyon to avoid it. It belongs to the same plant family as poison oak: one of God's mistakes.

On the other hand, it has medicinal properties.

I acquired my first batch of devil's club tea from Clarence, who was in the hospital arguing with the medical profession about whether he had cancer. I found him sitting cheerfully on his bed, planning his escape. Cancer was not on his agenda.

My feeling of relief was perhaps unwarranted, but he looked terrific. In his seventies he still had flawless black hair that hinted more at his Chinese ancestry than his Tlingit ancestry. The melting pot was Southeast Alaska. The Chinese had come in the early century to work in the salmon

canneries, when canning was the main technology for storing and shipping fish. It was after the Russians had come and gone, and before Alaska was a State. The Chinese came and went quietly, and the only remnant I knew was the successful Moy family. Clarence's durable connection to Alaska, and his acquaintance with devil's club tea, came from his Tlingit side through his mother.

"I can't see what the fuss is about," he said. "I have been drinking this devil's club tea, and I feel fine." He pointed to a jar of something that looked like garden mulch.

I sniffed the jar curiously, and immediately jerked my nose away.

"A smell like that could cure anybody of anything," I said. "What's it for?"

"The Tlingits used it for a lot of things," he said.

"You mean like scaring off bears? Keeping the moths out of the closets? Poisoning rats?"

"I'm serious," he said. "It clears the nasal passages,relaxes you, soothes a bad stomach..."

I eyed the dried bark suspiciously.

I had reason to be wary. When I was 8, and starting to worry about my tenacious baby fat, he had convinced me to swallow a baby frog. He said that it would jump around in my stomach, and keep me from getting hungry. You have to be 8 to believe such a thing, and you have to be Clarence to think up such a story. He later defended himself by pointing out that after I had swallowed the frog the baby fat had gone away.

"After Grandma Moy got old, I used to pick the stalks for her in the fall, then strip off the bark, and dry it," he said. "She drank a cup of the tea every night, and lived to be 90."

He was referring to his mother, not his grandmother. But there were so many grandchildren who called her "Grandma" that it seemed to be her name. All of us adopted it. Maybe it was because her real name was Tlingit, and we could neither say it nor write it with the sounds available in English. Of course Chinese names cannot be written or pronounced with the English alphabet either, but we have been pretending longer.

When Grandma Moy was old and could no longer get out to the forest or sea, the children, grandchildren, friends of children, and friends of grandchildren brought her things: deer hides, seal skins, salmon, driftwood, berries.

She transformed everything into either a comestible delicacy or a work of art. We all had mocassins made by Grandma Moy. I don't remember the devil's club bark, perhaps because it was not conducive to art.

I wish the end of this story was that the devil's club tea saved my friend Clarence from his cancer. It didn't, but neither did the medical profession. There was nothing they could do, and the doctor sent him home that

day with some pills to ease his discomfort. Clarence humored the doctor by putting the pills in his bag, but I had the impression that they would stay in the bottles. These were, after all, mere palliatives, and the devil's club tea had more style.

I saved the devil's club tea I had pocketed that day, and later looked it up in one of Berkeley's herb boutiques. I found it mentioned in a book called *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West* by Michael Moore. It is obviously not in the same plant family as poison oak (I apologize), and given its medicinal properties, it is probably not even one of God's mistakes. Its botanical name is *oplopanax horridum*. "Oplopanax" leaves me mystified, but "horridum" is clear.

It is harvested, as Clarence said, by stripping the bark off the stalks and root-stalks in the late summer and autumn. In addition one can render oil from the roots, which is what I found in the herbal-medicine store. Mr. Moore describes it mainly as an expectorant, and also as a remedy for adult onset, insulin-resistant diabetes. He agrees with Clarence that it reduces stress and increases one's feeling of well-being.

I keep the devil's club tea on a kitchen shelf, in an airtight container that confines the odor. It is sort of like a genie in a bottle. When I feel sick I open it and let the odor waft out. It makes me think of the day Clarence gave it to me in the hospital.

Then I think of Clarence and Esther in their glory days as highliner salmon fishermen. Then I think of Grandma Moy and the other women picking wild strawberries alongside salmon streams, while the men watched for grizzly bears and the children romped merrily through the strawberry fields, intoxicated by the knock-you-over aroma of strawberry jam.

And after a while I feel better.

One day a friend was staying for the weekend at our home in California, and came down with a bad cold. It was the middle of the night, and all I had was Tylenol and devil's club tea. Tylenol was the wrong thing, so I offered her some devil's club tea.

"How does it work?" she asked.

"I don't know. But my friend Clarence drank a lot of it when he was sick with cancer."

"Did it cure the cancer?"

"Maybe for a while," I said. "But eventually we lost him."

"Then why do you think it works? And why should I take it for a cold?"

"Drink it," I said impatiently. "It works."

She took Tylenol instead.

I shook my head in resignation. There are things you can't explain to your friends Down South.

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