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SMOKED FISH: A Christmas Story
by Suzanne Andersen

My father was a fisherman, and he died at the only possible time: in winter. Summer was out of the question, because that was when he wanted to be fishing. It couldn't have been in fall, as that would have interfered with hunting. And it couldn't have been before Christmas; who would have kippered the fish for friends and family? He died in that short period of downtime when the main activity is waiting for spring. He was 80, but he had had his sights set on 150. "You can always lower your sights," he said.

He raised his family on Lisianski Inlet, a fjord slicing into Chichagof Island in Southeast Alaska. In the spring, when the snow began to melt and the sun began to prolong its visits, we would emerge from hibernation along with the bears. Boats would be painted, gear would be fixed, and the fishermen would scrutinize the weather, waiting to go to sea. It was excitement, adventure, peril. More than anything it was a challenge to outwit the king salmon. Daddy made it seem like sport on a grand scale. I was twelve before I realized the object was to make money.

In his last summer I went fishing with him, and he landed a 45-pound king salmon. Not a record-breaker by any means, but pretty respectable for a last summer fishing. The hydraulic gurdy hauled in the steel line and

brought the leader to the surface, where he could see how taut it was. "Well, well," he said, trying to repress his excitement.

"Looks like this one's a *fish*."

Of course he had known when it struck that it was a king salmon. Kings strike differently than coho salmon, which are smaller and come up practically sputtering in their indignation at being caught. King salmon fight with composure, convinced to the end that their guile and magnificence will save them. It didn't save that one.

For most of my life I thought that landing a king salmon was easy. That's because Daddy almost never got it wrong, and he thought it was beyond a girl's ability, so I was never allowed to do it. As a condition of going fishing with him in his last summer, I insisted on landing some king salmon, and discovered that there are countless ways to drop a fish off a line. Once you have the fish at the surface, you must keep tension on the leader - otherwise the fish will run and break it. When you get the fish close to the boat you must hold the leader in one hand, pick up a five-foot gaff hook, lean over the side of the boat, and hit it on the head in an area the size of a quarter. If you try to pull it in with the gaffhook without stunning it, it will twist the gaffhook out of your hand, and throw itself back

in the sea. If you hit it in the wrong place, it will go crazy, thrashing around like an oversized coho, and rip out the hook. The difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that you are bobbing around in a boat. On the whole it is like placing a golf ball on the floor and trying to hit it one-handed with a golf club while bouncing up and down on a water bed. Meanwhile the golf ball is trying to swim away.

After my father had gracefully brought several king salmon on board, he realized he was going to have to make good his promise. "OK," he said, "You can land the next one."

Soon a king salmon struck, and he ignored it, assuming that my inexperienced eye had missed it.

Crafty, I thought. He's going to drag it on the hook and let it drown so I can pull it in dead.

Sure enough, after about fifteen minutes he said with feigned excitement, "I think there's one on the starboard bow line. Why don't you check it."

"Great," I said, also with feigned excitement. I went back to the gear area, so nervous that I forgot where to turn on the hydraulic switch to pull the gear. Daddy was even more nervous, and stayed in the pilot house where he couldn't watch me. It's a good thing, because I dropped the fish off the line. Fortunately he couldn't say, "You lost a *dead* fish off the line?"

However later I landed a 35-pound live one: my husband took a photograph to prove it. I hope my father was proud of me, but mostly he was amazed.

Growing up on Lisianski Inlet, my brother and I thought the four basic food groups were king salmon, venison, crab and herring. The main food group was king salmon. Its constituents were lox, kippered salmon, pickled salmon, and salmon steaks. Kippered salmon was Daddy's specialty, and all the young guys came to him for advice on how to make it. Of course there

are hazards in an activity that involves building a fire in a small wooden structure. His advice invariably began, "First you have to burn down a smokehouse...."

I grew up and went away to college, and the king salmon, with its remarkable homing instincts, followed me. It was the turbulent sixties, and like all young students in all times and all places, my friends and I checked our mailboxes regularly for reminders of home. Most kids got letters; many got checks; a few got cookies; I got kippered salmon.

The seventies found me roving around the United States, with the king salmon in close pursuit. One Christmas, in Iowa, a shipment of lox arrived from Alaska. As we ate it, I explained to my friends that a side of salmon was more or less as big as a side of beef. I was lying, of course, but people in Iowa are too polite to say so.

The end of the seventies found me in Berkeley, which held a new set of challenges for the migrating salmon. It was warm in the Post Office, and the salmon was likely to mold before they delivered it. I took the view that moldy king salmon was better than no king salmon, but Daddy started to mail it insured so the Post Office would treat it with proper respect. A box of kippered salmon arrived on the day I took my Ph.D. orals.

When I went to Harvard as an Assistant Professor, Daddy was sympathetic. "You mean you can't get a job in Alaska?" he asked. To help with the deprivations, he upped the frequency of delivery, and I became a regular at the Mt. Auburn Street Post Office. After seminars, my colleagues would go out for drinks or dinner. "Can't come," I would say. "Have to get to the Post Office before five."

The salmon's migration persisted into the late eighties, when I moved back to Berkeley. It always arrived at Christmas, often when friends were coming over to decorate the tree. The

friends who shared it were the urban variety that populate academic communities: Most grew up in New York or Philadelphia or Berkeley or London, and if they knew that fish spawned at all, thought they spawned in delicatessens. "You mean he *caught* it?" they would say. Where did they *think* salmon come from?

Along with the shipments of salmon, my father sometimes enclosed a letter telling me who had gone fishing with him, and how big the fish was. He would conspicuously omit mention of where he had caught it or on what lure. I would phone him up to ask.

"Oh, I can't tell you *that*," he would say reproachfully. This was a spoof on the complex etiquette of the fishing community, where information is jealously guarded. Usually I would hold up my end by pressing him for details. Finally he would say, "Well, here's what you do to catch a king salmon. First, you find some salmon tracks. Then you follow the trail." Right.

Daddy's accumulating medical problems made it difficult for him to fish in his last winter, and he fretted for weeks before Christmas because he did not have a fresh king salmon to kipper. Finally he kippered a frozen salmon that he had caught the previous summer. Our shipment came with fulsome apologies for the fact that the salmon had been frozen, but we and our friends thought it was wonderful. Later in the winter he lay in a Seattle hospital, unconscious of his own misery. My brother arrived from Alaska with a box full of venison and lox. I had never needed comfort food more. He died that winter, and my brother took his ashes to sea.

We don't have kippered salmon at Christmas anymore, or even lox. I went to the delicatessen last year on December 24, and found it full of salmon, beautifully executed and reasonably priced. I dithered at the counter for at least half an hour, trying to make a choice, and trying the patience of the clerk who was helping me. Where does it come from? Alaska? Oregon? Is

it wild fish or farm fish? Where was it smoked? Was it smoked over alder?

In the end I didn't buy any. They didn't have the right kind.

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