



SOURDOUGH CHRONICLES

FISHING TALE OF THE BIG BROWN VISITOR

Story by Dawn Kostelnik | Illustrations by Eleanor Rosenberg

“Look! Look over there going down the river. What the heck is Joel doing?” From where we stand on the banks of the Blanchard River it looks like Joel Hackney is riding a 45-pound king salmon (known as chinook salmon on the coast). It’s hard to tell what’s going on.

The giant fish is slamming its tattered tail through rocks and gravel in the stream. Water splashes in the air as the combatants struggle.

Joel straddles this slippery whale of a fish and tries scooping the giant toward shore—his fishing line surely wasn’t meant to land a salmon of this caliber in shallow water. Joel wants to ensure the fish doesn’t cross the border into B.C. where the rules, regulations, and fishing-licence requirements change. Alaska is just over the hill and down the road. My imagination may be running away with me, but I thought Joel could be swept out to the ocean on the back of this king.

It’s late summer in 1978 and there are five of us from Whitehorse fishing on the Blanchard River where it meets the Takahanni River in the Yukon. It’s an area where Champagne and Aishihik First Nations people gaff salmon to fill the year’s food quota. The bright orange meat is smoked, dried, canned, or frozen and carries many northern families through the long, dark nights of winter.

At the end of the day, we line the riverbank and clean our precious catch. We have reached our limit for the weekend: two salmon each for a total of 20—roughly 800 pounds of fish. I’m taking pictures during the gutting process to preserve the moment.

My partner, Rob, has his back to the river and is intent on getting this bloody process completed. Swarms of flies are clouds of irritation, procreating on the fish flesh. Wasps are droning around, demanding their share. They’re mean, biting creatures that hide inside the fish and sting fingers. Suddenly my mouth drops open. I raise the camera and peer through the lens only to immediately put it back down. I don’t believe what I see.

Mere feet away is a big brown bear that is catching and consuming the delicious salmon innards Rob’s tossing over his shoulder. The large mammal snaps this delicacy out of the air like a well-trained house dog and takes care that nothing is lost to the sparkling river below him. “Rob!” I scream. “Look behind you.” It’s all good until it goes bad. Big Brown Bear might be content to be hand-fed until Rob runs out of salmon guts, but we know this could get deadly in a flash.

I DON'T WANT MY FRIENDS EATEN IN THE NIGHT. SLEEPING IN A TENT WITH A HUNGRY BEAR AROUND IS TOO DANGEROUS.

Rob turns and yells at Big Brown Bear, startling it. It falls into the river and is swept down and around the curve. Tourists heading for Haines, Alaska, are on the bank howling at us. “What are you idiots doing feeding the bears?” they shout. But we’re not doing anything out of the ordinary. Throwing fish scraps into the river is a common form of disposal in an area with no garbage cans. Besides, a garbage can full of guts will turn into an attraction all by itself. We tell the passing tourists we have 800 pounds of salmon to clean and gut, so a lot of bear bait will be thrown into the water. It’s our friendly warning this might not be the best area to camp at tonight. Sure enough, our bear friend spent the rest of the day looking for more grub, so we yell and bounce rocks in the river to keep him at bay.

At dusk, (which means it’s late, considering the summer’s midnight sun) we have finished cleaning our magnificent catch. It’s a good feeling to have the security of food for the winter. Rob and I plan to sleep in the back of a truck, Heather and Joel are tenting, and Michelle is set to curl up in her car for the night. The long sloped window in the back of her vehicle allows for a perfect view of the sky. She expects to snuggle into her sleeping bag and spend a quiet night drifting into a peaceful sleep while counting stars.

I start to wonder what will keep Big Brown Bear out of our camp overnight. The light of the fire doesn’t shine into the black of the bush, and we don’t have coolers big enough or strong enough to keep a determined bear out of our cache. It only makes sense to put the fish in the trunk of Michelle’s car.

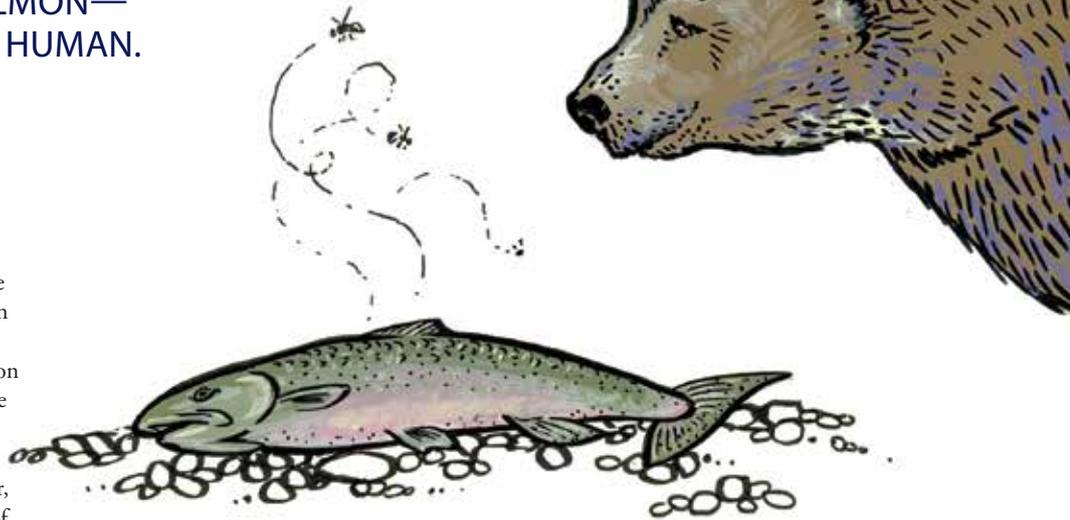
After discussing our bear situation, Heather isn’t sure she feels secure enough to tent and may opt to sleep in their vehicle. I’m glad. I don’t want my friends eaten in the night. Sleeping in a tent with a hungry bear around is too dangerous.

ALL NIGHT LONG, BIG BROWN BEAR TRIES GNAWING OPEN THIS TIN CAN CONTAINING HIS FAVOURITE FOOD: SALMON— WITH A POSSIBLE SIDE OF HUMAN.

We sit around a blazing fire, sparks flying up to join the brilliant stars in the dark blue hole at the tops of the trees. Leaning back in the glow of the firelight with good friends, beer, and a trunk full of fish, we are in Yukon heaven. We begin feeling the effect from the hard work cleaning and fileting fish. Our eyes grow heavy, and we decide to turn in.

Whether due to the hard work or the beer, we all fall into a deep sleep that night. All of us, that is, except Michelle. Minutes after we leave our friend to sleep by herself in the back seat of her stargazing car, Big Brown Bear returns—hungry and looking for his dinner.

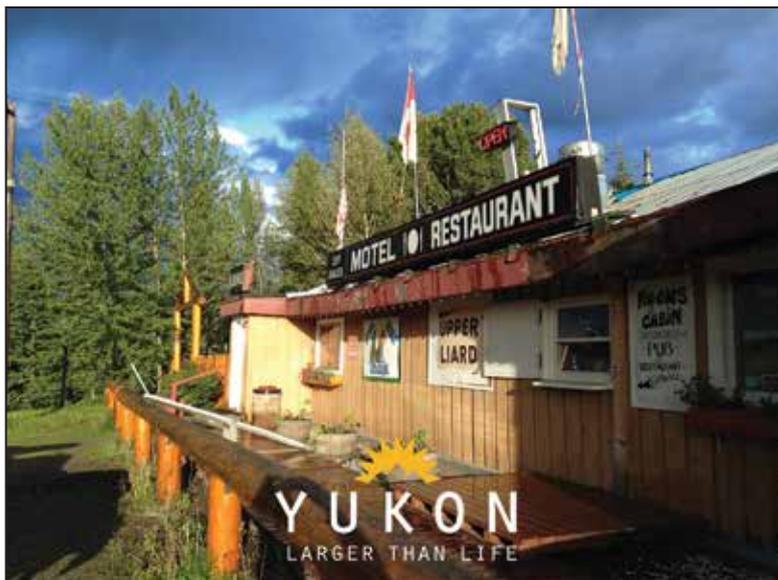
Michelle is curled up in the car when she notices a shadow pass. Big Brown Bear snorts, huffs, and attempts to pull the back of the car open. He rocks it and then jumps up to bounce on the back of it. Michelle is too terrified to scream, let alone move. Big Brown Bear stands on the trunk, looking at her through the back window as he bounces on the car. The whole time he maintains eye contact with Michelle. She's horrified and senses a warm trickling creep down the back of her jeans.



All night long, Big Brown Bear tries gnawing open this tin can containing his favourite food: salmon—with a possible side of human. Meanwhile, Michelle spends the night terrified Big Brown Bear will break the back window and end up in her sleeping bag. At dawn, she finds her voice and screams bloody murder. She screams again and again. She simply can't stop screaming after hours of pent-up fear and despair. Rob and Joel are up in a flash. Big Brown Bear decides it's time to move on, grunts once or twice, and heads to the Blanchard River for breakfast.

With wet pants and wobbly knees, Michelle recounts her night of horror. The car has some damage, but can still be driven home to Whitehorse.

There is no moral to this story, but Michelle emerged from the experience with a legendary tale to tell. And obviously this close encounter is one we'll never forget. There are many such stories about fishing and hunting trips in the North, when you rub shoulders with the wild and sometimes it rubs back. **Y**



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