

## Indian Picnic Cornbread

1.

So it's that Friday and Saturday in July, what we call the Weekend of the National Picnic at home, or what a lot of people call Indian Picnic, somehow forgetting all of our picnics are Indian Picnics. To this one, though, we don't bring dishes-to-pass. National Picnic is an open-to-the-public event, where we invite white people to join us, and the food passing from one hand to another is from vendors, requiring dollar bills to pass in exchange, the way it works outside the reservation. And the money, yes, the money, goes into that fund called "The Nation," and though I have never known the specific beneficiaries of that fund, I still buy overpriced water and frybread and Cornsoup because the taste of home is worth it and where else will I find it?

2.

There are fewer vendors this year, and the woodsmoke smell usually permeating the grove is absent along with the people who would light that fire and set the kettle on top and sit around it on folding chairs, waiting for the water to heat, and despite what you've heard, a watched pot does eventually boil, particularly when you focus your mind on the story at hand in the setting sun, and not on the water. And eventually, steam and water dance on the surface. These missing people are from the family who generally make cornbread (no, not that yellow kind you get with barbeque--This is made from Indian corn, dreid, lyed and ground, mixed with kidney beans, without flour, shaped into large oval bricks, wrapped in tinfoil and thrown into a vat of boiling water until the loaves rise to the surface.) so I know I won't be getting cornbread this year, and already people can tell the difference. Next year, they might call this "The Year There Wasn't Any Cornbread" or "The Year They Stopped Bringing Cornbread." For my sake, I hope it is just the one year and not a permanent new condition, because I have no idea how to make cornbread.

3.

My nephew knows how and his father-in-law grows Indian corn, but usually, my nephew makes Soup rather than Bread from the dried ears of Indian corn, and the preparation is so difficult, it is not the kind of thing you can ask someone to bring to a regular Indian picnic. They might ask, "What can I bring?" and you say back "Whatever you want" and hope for the best. Sometimes it is Indian Tacos, and sometimes it is Cornsoup, and almost never is it these loaves of pressed corn that has been boiled in ashes and dried and manipulated to resemble bread. These loaves, my nephew had to make hundreds of them the day before he was married, all those years ago, because after the wedding ceremony, during the reception, tradition required him to walk around and offer pieces to every guest, from his arm to theirs, his hand to theirs, cut from loaves he carried in a basket, to show he would be a good provider for his future family and after the hours and hours of that ritual, how could anyone blame him for not making cornbread very often?

4.

But this family, the ones who are not here this year, their usual spot near the parking field and a couple yards from the cook house, this is one of the things they do and are known to do. This is their gig. They know which rocks to gather for their circle, which wood to dry for kindling, for stoking, for maintaining. They know the right weight and shape to form the oval loaves, and this is no small thing. My nephew tells me in the Spring of 1998 that he is trading information with

Louis, a half-assed cousin-in-law of ours who is teaching him the traditional songs. In return for the songs, and the voice and the place to sing them, he is showing Louis the half-assed cousin-in-law how to make cornbread. I ask him why he is giving up his secrets. He says self-defense. He says: "I ate some of that cornbread he's selling now, trying to pay his past-due bills before his electric gets cut off, and it's so nasty that there isn't a non-brain-damaged person out here who will buy it. If I don't show him how to make the cornbread right, he's gonna starve to death, and then who will I go to for my songs? Supply and demand."

5.

And that year's National Picnic Friday, I stop at the burnt out foundation and new growth trees that had been the house I grew up in, where I make sure to visit at least once a year, to remember my home, I hear someone call from an open windows at my aunt and uncle's next door and I cross the growth between their house and my memory. One of my cousins is in the window. Her father is from across the customs border and his name is Joe, and because this is the reservation and everyone has a name given to them in the ceremonies of family gatherings where weakness is discovered and exploited--to toughen you to life with us and life in general--we give him the last name "Canada" and sing his name like the National Anthem of that country minutes north of us. He's okay with it because he knows we only make those distinctions when we are forced to, declaring "North American Native" when asked our citizenship at the customs office. His daughter in the window is a woman who grew up here and in Hamilton, and who knows the loss of homefires herself, having caused theirs at the age of four, combining matches and curiosity in the family's hall closet. She asks if I have gotten the new Tragically Hip CD.

6.

I tell her "of course," and she demands we listen to it right then and there, so I drive the few yards between our places, pop my trunk and we sit on the front porch my uncle the carpenter made in his spare time. The Canadian side of her DNA wakes up, and since we don't consider it another country, the Canadian side of my DNA wakes up as well, as we listen to Gordon Downie singing of poets and hockey and ice storms and hockey and Toronto and hockey and penguins and hockey and fireworks and the power of phantoms, or fleeting, phantom power, and in return, she walks in the house and returns, offering me slices of cornbread, buttered and salted, on a paper towel. I taste it and everything is as it should be despite the fact that my home has been gone for four years and in another year the foundation will be lost to trees striving for light, but because the house was lost to a fire caused by an accident involving her father, the only ashes we discuss are those used in one step of making the cornbread.

7.

She says she bought it at the Picnic from Louis, and I understand that my nephew's new singing voice was not traded to him in vain, as Louis has found the way to our memory and information passed on for generations. I understand that recipes and songs are not that far removed from one another and as we listen to the last Hip song the second time through, a piece about the endurance of Emperor Penguins and the things they do to help their families survive, huddling together and turning themselves against the wind, I finally see she has set down beside her a half a loaf of cornbread, neatly wrapped in tinfoil, which she hands to me as I climb in my car to head for the city. "For home," she says, "for home, and when you get there and need a taste of here."

originally published in *Sentence*