

(CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT)

KELLY KENOYER IN KETCHIKAN CIRCA 2007

KELLY KENOYER WITH HER GRANDFATHER, DON KENOYER, CIRCA 1994

BLACK BEARS STEALING COFFEE

A STONE HEART CARVED BY THE WRITER'S GREAT-GRANDFATHER, HALLI GUDMUNDSSON

A WOODEN BEAR STATUE CARVED BY HALLI GUDMUNDSSON

CREEK STREET IN KETCHIKAN

PHOTOS BY KELLY KENOYER OR COURTESY KENOYER FAMILY



We hiked and went crabbing, visited art galleries and spent long, rainy afternoons reading in my grandma's living room.

I'd like to write an article giving advice on how to enjoy a visit to Ketchikan, Alaska, but Ketchikan means too much to me for me to credibly share it with anyone.

The town is cute, there's a surprising amount of high quality art that comes out of there, and there's an incredible museum dedicated to the Tlingit people. That region of Alaska is perfect for fishing, for hiking, for hunting and for sitting inside and enjoying the sound of rain.

But I can't describe this place without describing my family. I associate Ketchikan with long, wet hikes, with cups of coffee over card games, with the elegant woodcarvings of dancing bears that my great grandfather carved for each member of my family. Ketchikan, in my mind, is my grandmother's house and my aunt's stories of chasing black bears away from her property with bottle rockets. She lives near a fishery and the bears are ubiquitous.

Ketchikan is eagles swarming like crows over the guts of a freshly killed salmon thrown into the water off my grandfather's boat. It's holding that salmon's still-beating

heart in my hand, fascinated by the mechanics of life and death. It's eating the same fish that very night, fresh and tastier for having caught it ourselves.

Ketchikan is reflecting on my great-grandfather, an immigrant from Iceland, who loved my father and me more than anyone in the world. It's laughing 10 years after his death over the pranks he pulled on our family — he loved to shove your thumb in the butter when you asked him to pass it to you at the dinner table.

My aunt this summer gave me a stone heart Grandpa had carved my name into. It felt like a message from beyond the grave — "You are still loved."

When you don't live in a place, but visit it often, it becomes a symbol of so much more than it would ever be to a local. Ketchikan is just home to my grandma, but to me, it's familial love itself.

So yes, you should visit Ketchikan. Look for the mural my aunt Halli painted on the wall of the New York Cafe with her good friend, Ray Troll. Look at the fishing boats and look for eagles and bears.

But also visit the town that means the same things to you. I've never regretted it.

