

I SAT ON THE STUMP AND UNLACED MY BOOTS. The northern lights slipped onto the pine-fringed stage; green and white lights swayed with drunken grace above our nomad homestead.

A small dirt clearing.

A sky-blue tent with a moody zipper and a carefully duct-taped hole.

A pair of D-handle shovels stuck into the soft earth; an empty wine bottle reflecting the beam of my flashlight; stiff heaps of sun-dried muddy clothes scattered around like colourful dead unearthed by domestic-minded masters of voodoo.

The zipper opened smoothly. I covered the beam of the flashlight, and the dirt under my nails stood out as opaque lines in the red glow of my fingers. The tent was faintly illuminated. A sleeping form stirred under the heap of sleeping bags and blankets.

You murmured a vague complaint as my icy feet brushed your skin.

The sharp bell of my alarm clock startled me from a dream in which I had just awakened as a giant mosquito. You rolled over and pulled the blankets around you as I sat up.

I told you my dream.

“No more Kafka before bed,” you said after a pause.

“You should get up,” I told you. “It’s after six-thirty.”

You yawned out a hollow pledge and I set the alarm to go off in ten minutes. I dug through the clothes and pulled out long johns, sports bra, tattered T-shirt, threadbare army pants with yellow flagging tape trailing from a pocket. I sat with my feet out the tent door lacing my boots. I grabbed my bags and shovel and headed down the widening path to the mess tent. The sun was hidden in a wall of fog. The figures stepping into the clearing were shrouded in mist; shadowy gnomes and faeries slipping from their secret lairs. Dew soaked into the cuffs of my pants and slowly seeped up.

A woodstove warmed the mess tent. We crowded around the fire, faces blank with exhaustion and grim anticipation. I got my breakfast and ate slowly. We piled into an old school bus that was garishly spray-painted with drunken treeplanter witticisms. Work boots shuffled over a floor textured with dried mud and littered with roaches, empty rolls of flagging tape, sandwich bags caked with

cookie crumbs, filthy discarded finger guards made from layers of duct tape.

Before we'd left camp you were asleep on my shoulder, your long legs stretching into the aisle, a perfect circle of gleaming steel where the leather on your right boot had worn away. Rain covered the window in glossy sheets and I closed my eyes against the chill.

The bus rattling to a stop.

The grim unloading of bodies and gear.

Dancing along the edges of rapidly expanding puddles for an extra half-hour of dry feet.

Rain washing muddy raincoats clean.

After a wet trudge my crew arrived at our block. My crew boss, Gordie, told me that I was going off on a satellite mission with Peg and Dave to plant an old block.

"I haven't checked it out," he told us. "It's pretty far in, they cut it five years ago but nobody's been out there since."

We heaped the trailer full of boxes of trees, climbed onto the back of the four-wheeler, followed the rough trail deep into the forest. We stopped in front of an overgrown old cut.

Gordie wiped mud from the laminated map and decided that this must be it: Block 56.

We unloaded the trailer and covered the trees with a white tarp in case the sun came out. Gordie told us to walk out when we finished the block, turned the four-wheeler in a wide U and hurtled back the way we'd come.

We stood at the edge of the cut, looked over the land and agreed, with little rancour, that it was a shitty overgrown piece of swamp. We tore open tree boxes and squatted next to them, loading seedlings into our planting bags.

Once I'd squeezed three hundred seedlings into my bulging silvicool bags I slipped my arms through the soggy shoulder straps, closed the buckle at my waist. I started sectioning off a piece of land with strips of flagging tape. A sharp branch caught at my rain pants; I pulled loose and it tore a ragged hole over my knee. The rain paused; the day's first mosquitoes ventured out. One hovered over my hand, briefly deterred by the scent of freshly applied citronella oil.

I thought, *Nobody's been here in five years.*

I turned to see my footprints in the mud and my shovel neatly halved a flabbergasted earthworm.

Can you remember?

Boots, heavy with mud, slosh through trenches roughly gouged by powerful distant hands.

Raw fingers close around the throat of a seedling.

Shovel tears into the ground; duct-taped knuckles graze metal as the roots slide into the hole and the earth closes around them.

The rain starts, stops, starts. Every two metres, another tree.

The motions of walking and planting synchronize with your heartbeat.

Part of my mind fell back from muddy reality; space passed steadily while I wandered through time. Our last day off, our next day off. Last winter. Next summer. Yesterday's northern lights. Tonight's dinner. My next apartment, my childhood home.

My childhood home on a July afternoon.

Sharp gravel under bare feet, the soft dampness of the grass on the front lawn. A clandestine mission to the well. Crowding around the lid, six small hands on the metal handle, skinny biceps straining. Disappointment tinged with secret relief when we couldn't lift the lid.

Sore arms.

The taste of metal on damp palms.

I kicked away a wet mat of sphagnum moss and opened a hole. A mosquito flew into my eye and flapped around in a panic. I dropped my shovel and lifted it out with my less-muddy hand. The eye stung; I squinted it closed and planted with one eye for a few trees. My depth perception was off; I lifted my shovel and the base of the blade bashed into a bruise next to my kneecap. The mosquitoes closed in, a buzzing, stinging cloud, as I stopped for a moment to console my screaming knee. I tried to picture you in your rookie year, when you decided to break your hand. The desperate trade: a flash of pain for the persistent quiet misery. Drinking deeply from a flask of bourbon, laying your hand across the flat surface of a stump, lifting your shovel high, closing your eyes. Counting down with tensed muscles.

Hesitating.

Lowering your shovel, picking up nearly full bags. Pulling out a seedling, lifting your shovel, opening a hole in the earth. The roots, licked clean by frigid rain, sliding neatly into the wet clay.

I reached for a tree and found my bags empty. I walked back to the cache, dug through my daypack and found an apple. Its skin glistened in the rain. Lingering notes of pine and dirt.

I threw the core into the cut, trying to hit Peg, and just missed her. Jovial, shouted obscenities drifted back toward the cache as she moved away. I dumped the black-brown water from the bottom of my bags before I loaded the

trees in. Chilled from the few minutes of relative inactivity, my skin felt damply numb under my rain-soaked clothes. I walked back to my land, my steps slowed by the extra weight.

Before I'd put in a dozen trees, the bags slipped down over my bruised hipbones and fell heavily to the ground, dragging my soaked pants with them. The rain pelted rhythmically against the leaves on the alders, the back of my right hand on my shovel, the scratches on my bare legs. I speared my shovel into the ground, retrieved my pants and the seedlings that had spilled out of my bags. I tried to tighten the waist belt, but it was jammed with mud.

I turned at the tree line and assessed my proximity to the heaped boxes of the tree cache, a patch of glaring white, maybe twenty minutes away.

Distance measured in minutes, hours passing in two-metre intervals.

Time and space hidden under identical veiled glasses, endlessly switched back and forth. Sisyphus pulled back his stained cuff to reveal an ancient watch, its face emptied of clockworks and filled with sand. He winked at me as he stepped aside to let the stone fall.

At the cache, Dave and Peg were sitting down, smoking. The rain had stopped. The sun was a pale glow behind the wall of clouds. Mosquitoes attacked us insistently; we gave up fighting. I bagged up my next box of trees, unwrapped a peanut butter and honey sandwich. My hands left smudges of dirt on the pale, spongy bread. We talked about what might be for dinner, whether it was going to rain again, how many hours it would take us to finish the block.

A branch cracked loudly at the tree line and stopped our conversation. A black bear was at the edge of the forest, watching us. It stood on its hind legs, arms hanging loosely in front of it. Thin, but not emaciated; young, but no longer a cub. Head tilted slightly, eyes wide, ears trembling. Warily intent.

Nobody moved.

As we gawked at the bear and it stared back at us I started to feel uneasy, somehow inappropriately conspicuous. But I couldn't tear my eyes away.

I don't know how long the bear stood there before Dave gasped sharply. Peg and I turned to see the stub of his cigarette falling from his burned fingers. I looked quickly back to the tree line to see the bear drop to all fours and lope back into the forest.

We all watched the spot for a moment.

"Little guy probably hasn't seen people before," Peg said softly. "Can you imagine?"

We packed up the remains of our lunches and strapped on our bags.

I headed back into my piece of land with three hundred seedlings and the bear's steady gaze.

Two steps, left hand jiggling a seedling loose from the tangled roots of all the others. Lifting my shovel, letting its momentum open a startling brown slit in a rare patch of soft green moss. Holding the seedling at the root collar, placing it on the inner edge of the hole, closing the soil around it as I walked away. My left hand reaching for the next tree as my attention strained back toward the fascinated, appalled countenance the bear had seemed to regard us with.

I thought, *If you got close enough to those eyes you could see your reflection. Your slightly open mouth, your own wide eyes. The marks of exile suddenly visible on your brow.*

I splashed through a puddle and my left foot sunk, muddy water flowing over into my boot. I braced with my other leg and tried to lift it, then pulled with both hands. The mud sucked air under my foot but wouldn't release me. I slid my sodden foot out, sat down, and pulled the boot out with both hands. Poured out the water, hesitated, slid my foot back inside.

I started to plant faster and found my rhythm. My mind stretched back, then further back.

The smell of damp earth and rotting compost. Arm scratches from raspberry brambles. The irrevocable crunch of a sap beetle inside a juicy berry. Crawling through the secret tunnel in the cedar hedge and finding a squawking baby robin in the grass. Lifting it gingerly—conscious of both its fragility and its sharp little beak—and self-importantly placing it back into the nest.

Being shocked into tears by my brother's smug assurance that the mother would throw it out again. Because I had touched it.

"She won't take it back," he said. "You should have worn gloves."

I tried to picture us through the bear's eyes: clothed bodies, shiny synthetic tarps and backpacks, tiny fires held casually in fur-less hands. As though aliens had landed in the forest clearing. Or visiting deities, their form revealing an ancient kinship. The incongruousness of their presence betraying the depth of their estrangement.

A scarred, weary collection of outcast gods.

A pantheon of pariahs.

We finished the little block late in the afternoon; the sun was still high in the northern sky. The three of us walked back down the muddy trail to meet up with the rest of the planters, help them finish up their land. Across the block, I saw you

put in your last tree and head for your cache. You threw your shovel in the air and it somersaulted neatly but landed flat. You saw me and smiled. I smiled back. We all gathered our things and started walking out. In one low-lying section, the deep puddles we'd skirted around that morning had united into a pond that stretched across the width of the trail. The first people out had already worn a path around it, climbing over stumps and scratched by black spruce, the drapey moss catching on tangled hair and muddy backpacks.

We crowded at the start of the narrow detour, and I turned to speak to you but you weren't beside me. I looked over and saw you grasp your shovel with both hands, lift it above your head and walk slowly through the waist-deep water, with closed eyes and a broad grin.