Takla Lake

Takla Lake's got no bottom.

Eh? What?

We say there's no bottom. It just gets deeper forever.

The man grinned, happy he had an ear for his Takla Lake First Nations legend. Leathery-brown folds and furrows of a hard life almost hid the talkative kindness of his eyes. We were at the Cold Beer & Wine in Fort St. James, south of the lake. A visit to the Cold Beer & Wine in these grisly logging towns is always an insight into the battered spirits of the North. A lot of folks here don't like outsiders, Southerners, he warned, but grinning wider, said he didn't mind us so much. He cradled his basket of king-cans. I felt ashamed but didn't want to talk to him any longer. Wondered if he'd still be friendly once he found the bottom of his beers. Across the parking lot was the Zoo Pub with its sign - 'check your knife at the door'. Dust and litter drifted on the whim of the wind, and the locals moved similarly. I wanted to get in the truck and give Amanda a kiss and let some other tree-planter listen to King-cans' legends.

To see the lake, though, you believe him. It's wrapped in mountains, which descend abruptly, emphatically into the water. Everything - sky, mountains, water - is cold, grey, austere. It seems plausible the lake's as deep as the mountains are tall, and you never see the peaks through the mist. You get a sense of forever standing on the shore, and the safety and comfort of such permanence. It feels so profound and prehistoric, one considers leviathans and ice and subaqueous chasms spanning down, down and down to an abysmal ink out of the reach of time. King-can's hard days of hitchhiking from reserve to Cold Beer &

Wine are but a temporary sorrow next to the infinite caress of the lake. The answers are locked in the land.

I built my own legend that summer we camped on Takla Lake, borrowing from King-cans and his people. I hadn't felt good in a long time. Barely getting through school, teaching English to people who will never speak English, pulling nails out of old boards, driving down back roads listening to the hockey game, drinking, drugs. I could hardly talk to my family, let alone girls. Nothing seemed to have a point to it, an 'if I do this, I will be able to do this': everything was hollow. I suppose I was depressed but didn't want to think of it as such. Besides, what right did I have to feel bad compared to someone like King-cans anyhow? I worried. We saw some of the reserves hidden away up there. Packs of stray dogs, half-burnt houses bound in tarps and wire, folks huddled on decaying sofas or ripped-out car seats, news of not just teenage, but child suicides. Then I'd feel bad about feeling bad, and try to stay silent, figuring that maybe I simply wasn't meant to be special. I felt if I was really quiet and kept to myself, the universe would just forget about me. Meaning and belonging were distant and chimerical abstractions. Still, I couldn't help but dream of a spot to make a stand, a reason to put boots on the ground and slide back into the world, and when I happened upon it for a moment deep in the B.C. Interior, I wanted to stretch it out, to make it as bottomless as the lake. Of course I knew the summer would end, that I would have to find a real job and try to make things work with Amanda far away from our tent by the lake. But I thought I could take the forever of Takla Lake along with me.

Tree-planting is really, really hard. It is not the exclusive province of dreadlocked forest beings, as you may suspect, with their djembes and banjos around the campfire, harmonizing with the natural world and their whimsical zeal to repopulate the woods with

the darling, worshipped little saplings. There is some of that unfortunately, but it's not the soul of tree-planting. The soul of tree-planting is a primordial war of attrition between you and the forest, you and the silviculturists with their unscuffed boots, you and your own body and spirit. Every tree I ever planted, the ones that survive at least, will be toilet paper in 60 years. All pretences fall away instantly, you see, and you're left with only your pride and your task.

For a clear-cut block is hell. Every other step you trip on a root or a log or a hole or get a soaker, pine needles mingle with sweat between the back of your neck and your shirt, bugs have sex in your hair. Cursing through swamps and groves of devil's-club on 5km walk- ins, shuddering as spider webs coat your flushed, filthy face. Everything rots and stinks, clouds of mosquitoes and moose-flies enshroud you and never leave, moose and bears and wolves and wasps startle the Christ out of you. Hot tendonitis screams and creaks, you have to crack open your gnarled shovel hand to use it for the day, and the crew-bosses and camp supervisors are rarely satisfied. Sometimes you dream of planting all night and wake up, the murky morning filtering through the canvas of your tent, and realize you have to do it all over again. And through this nightmare, through snow or 40 degree heat, you're expected to strap 50 pounds of wet trees to your waist, forget you haven't been to a laundromat in weeks and you're rotting right along with the forest, and go to work. And that's the brutal yet beautiful simplicity of tree-planting: it's work. There's a point, a clearly defined goal to it, and you can either do it or you can't. Neolithic labour. Toil.

I've seen land - alpine vista to gnarled gully - that felt like a pocket of the Earth no one else had touched, much less every square foot of it. I've seen the sun dip to bed for only an hour. I've worked fire-hours, where it's too hot to work past noon and you have to wake

up at 3am and the bugs are so bad in the early morning you breathe them. I've seen mud so formidable, the only place to set your tent is on the road. I've seen juvenile black bears play-fighting like unruly boys. I've planted with a forest fire still smouldering beneath me, through the blackened stumps and singed earth of a World War One no-man's-land, and up the precipices of hills so steep you're hugging the terrain like a rock climber, planting at eye- level. I wasn't, but some were charged by furious momma moose. There were whispers of grizzly, even cougar sightings. Once, mired in some deplorable land and bothered increasingly by underwear I hadn't changed since I could remember, I bellowed in frustration as I tore them out like a filthy diaper and slapped the whole mess so forcefully against a tree that I am unwavering in my conviction they remain there today, clinging to a forgotten tree in a forgotten swamp.

Tree-planting is just this: plant a tree. Take two steps, quickly, readying the next tree in your hand, eyeing your next spot. Pounce, spring from your last tree to the next, closing the hole with your foot or hand, and attacking the earth with your shovel. Know that spot's too rocky and you'll feel the reverberation of steel on granite in your teeth, that spot's complicated by roots and decomposing logs, but that spot's perfect, black and moist and delectable, and your shovel will dip in effortlessly. The process shouldn't exist in your conscious mind after a while. Don't look back and doubt yourself, or use flagging tape, because you're wasting time, trust your spacing's good and the tree's not too shallow, not too deep. Plant a tree. Do it 2000, 3000, 4000 times more. Usually around 10 cents and 10 seconds per tree. No unpaid internships, no waiting on emails, no networking, no 'using your contacts', no reformatting of cover letters in the bush, just: plant a tree. And plant a tree. And plant a tree.

I planted my confidence. And a strange and wonderful thing happened slowly, so slowly and subtly through the grime, turmoil and sweat I hardly noticed it at first; but in the most uncomfortable of settings, I grew comfortable with myself once more. I wanted to open myself again, to laugh and make others laugh, and didn't need a box of beer or bag of coke to feel interesting enough. Scrambling up the mountains, my back howling, small avalanches of rock and rot cascading in my wake, I found my footing. A strength was stirring. Sweat pouring into my eyes, off my nose like a faucet, didn't matter. With stoic satisfaction, I accepted being relied on, with a handful of other veterans, to get the last trees into some treacherous land before it got dark and the bears began to circle, or to coordinate planters using a mesmeric map, a handheld radio that didn't work, and a helicopter that never came where or when it said it would. And in the lurching lullaby of the truck-ride back to camp, aching and trembling, the sweat settling to salt and the pine and spruce whipping mercifully past, in that briefest window between taking off my planting bags and submitting entirely to exhaustion, I'd stare at the drying mud and blood on my hands, and finally feel like a man.

The nomenclature colours the tribulation wonderfully: bagging up, bagging out (I always said 'bagging off', as in 'I'm finished my land, I'm gonna go bag off in Jacob's piece', because it was more fun and sounded dirty), creaming someone out (planting the easy, 'creamy' land, normally at the front of someone else's piece, a nasty thing to do, and I always said 'creaming someone off'), cache-bashing (taking long breaks at your tree-cache at the side of a logging road or four-wheeler path or helicopter drop spot), high-balling (planting the most).

You can duct tape the fingers on your planting hand, but then you're going to need a balm ordinarily used on cow udders to soothe the bleeding cracks on your knuckles. A planting glove is best. Rain-gear gets too waterlogged and slows you down – just wear a garbage bag if you have to, and move faster. Don't worry about a bug net – you'll be so hot you'll faint. Cut your heavy shovel down when you go into town. In your day bag you'll need this: water, at least four litres. Oranges or apples, or peanut butter and jam, but not - not - tuna or any kind of meat, your esophagus will scald with acid at every bend to plant. A toque. Duct tape. Toilet paper, or tear off portions of your shirt or pants if you forgot. One garbage bag and one Ziploc bag to keep the stickers you've peeled from tree-boxes to prove how much you've planted. Dry socks and I suppose a sweater too. Wear this: a hat or a headband, a shirt with the sleeves ripped off because you know you want that tan, tights, or basketball shorts over long- johns, cork boots. That's about it; see you in 12 hours.

Tree-planting plays no biases: I've seen a pneumatic-muscled giant from Edmonton taking down his tent in tears, readying his midnight escape. I've seen a petite and unassuming Australian girl high-ball camp. Only grit, mental courage, getting up every morning and doing it again, is rewarded. I wish I'd helped Amanda a little more.

Truthfully, it's absolutely God-awful 90% of the time. But that glorious, triumphant, returning-home-victorious-with-the-spoils-of-war 10% makes it all worthwhile. Wriggling off your tattered boots for the last time and spiking them like footballs into the garbage. A steely, bucolic confidence in your guts. Unleashed back on society, pockets full, feeling like you've won the Stanley Cup, dancing, giviner like a hessian at The Generator in Prince George, not even noticing or caring that someone just got bear-maced on the dance-floor. No one but your tiny clan aware of the filth and exhaustion your peace of mind grew from.

Splashing around with your girl and new friends in the Saskatoon outdoor public pool on the way back across Canada, 40 pounds lighter than in the spring. I'll always remember Amanda wrapped around me, her hands crossing behind my neck, her legs curling about my waist, the sparkling urbanity and chlorine and concrete of it all after months in the muck, and wondering if it was natural to be this happy. I was proud.

Amanda was a girl I never dreamed would like me back. She was beautiful but tactful and sneakily funny and shrewd and practical. Our crew gathered in a breathtakingly seedy hotel in Prince George to start the season, and I was buying everyone in the room a coffee, and asked would she like one, and what would she like in it, and she said 'oh...oh all the dressings' and smiled, her deep Semitic eyes tightening. I liked that a lot. We spent more and more time together, grumbling into our breakfasts, staring weary into the fire, going to the laundromat on day off, trading those delightful initiatory stories. We began to learn each other's personal peculiarities. I found reasons to be next to her in the lunch-line, or in the truck, and holes in my clothes she could maybe help me mend. And I always wanted to kiss her but was afraid I was just dreaming.

One day my crew-boss said something about helping her finish her piece and I charged off like the cavalry, dropping trees down the road, not waiting for him to finish. It was shimmering hot and she looked like a mirage striding through her land, wiggling her shovel, her dark top-knot bouncing to her beat. What would I say to her? Step, step, plant. Step, step, plant. I tried to catch up, rummaging my sun-stroked brain for something interesting to ask. She had been a lifeguard I remembered. Step, step, plant. 'What...um,' I stared at her for a moment when our lines of trees met. 'What's your favourite swimming stroke?' I managed. She laughed. Both hands on her shovel handle, taking a tiny break to

beam at me and giggle. We finished the piece and shared an orange by the road, waiting to be ferried off to the next hellish plot of land. We just sort of looked at each other as we sat there on the baked dirt. I bit my orange slice, trying to pull out of my trance-like staring. What colour were those eyes even? Purple, I decided. The sun glanced off her browning collarbones as she chewed, bemused. I was a schoolboy with a crush. She came by my tent that evening, and we talked about how birds should just shut up in the morning, and laughed and hugged, and shaking, I finally kissed her. It was heaven. She said, 'what took you so long?' She liked me back, she said, just like that. Then she moved into my tent and we combined our foamies and sleeping bags into a wondrous bedscape, a haven from battle with the forest, and made a summer of it by Takla Lake.

And it wasn't just Amanda who was dear to me: we had us a community in the woods. We shaped special bonds that exist only under such hardship. Really, because of the sheer lunacy of how we were living and what we were doing, everyone was a little unhinged and everything was hilarious. It was an autonomous little universe. Unloading 18-wheelers of trees, digging latrines or pushing trucks out of the greasy bog, we'd gang up and laugh or curse our way through it. There was Dylan, my planting partner, my half-Cree, all-gay friend. Fiercely proud and assertive, he never turned down a societal debate. Sometimes he'd erupt with revelation and chatter for the next hour about starting a LBGTQ bicycle-sharing cooperative in Saskatchewan, or an 'Indian Taco' Truck initiative. We'd laugh or bicker or bemoan the lack of homosexuals in the forest or just work in silence, trusting each other's trees. Wiggles was the superstar, camp high-baller, a salt-of-the-earth young lad who was so cool Amanda said he gave her indigestion. Nick from Quebec hated the silviculturists to the point that when they came to check his trees and have a talk, he'd

drop his pants and pretend to - or actually - defecate to scare them off. Grizzled 10 year-veteran Vaudry planted his 1.5 millionth tree that summer and we put banners and balloons around his tent and sprayed champagne at him. There was Hertwig, with his cigars and books, and beard big enough to be a second head, and Anthony from PEI who was very passionate about potatoes and once ate 22 of them. But Amanda was my favourite. Thinking about her, I'd pound through the worst land, the worst weather, all for the moment I could lean against her in the truck and say something silly like 'made us some money today, babe' or just 'there you are.'

The days were long and hard, but felt right, like being in one's destined time and place. Too tired to worry about anything beyond working, eating, sleeping. Wake up between 5 and 6am, slandering anything that involves leaving the tent with Amanda and the entwined sleeping bags. Make lunch, eat breakfast like a weary spectre, make a tea for the ride to the block, fill up water, clip shovel to planting bags, swing that over your shoulder, head for the trucks, and sit next to Amanda. Plant. Plant until 6pm, and then we'd clamour into the trucks and leave the horror of the cut-block for another day. Get back to camp, hand in your stickers proudly, peel off your fetid planting clothes, jump into the lake for as long as you could take the needles of hypothermia, eat a piece of lasagna the size of a stop-sign while drying your boots by the fire, zip open the tent, arrange your beaten body with Amanda's and sleep - oh - sleep. And what's wrong with any of that?, I thought. I wanted to be a peasant, or a caveman, or whoever got to do this forever. I wanted to feel this way forever. But only the insane, like my silver-maned buddy Hollywood, tree-plant forever. So I pieced little moments together and built my legend.

I remember scratching the thousands of mosquito bites on Amanda's legs, my nose in her hair as she fell asleep. I remember plunging into the glacial Takla water and her following across the gravelly beach, a vision of rustic erotica in a bikini and rubber boots. I remember picking all manner of forest-detritus off each other's backs on the ride home. I remember motel-rooms and a colossal eagle or falcon or something and helicopter rides over a boreal infinitude and lots and lots of giggling. I remember what I need to fit my legend.

I elect not to remember twisting my knee and almost falling off a cliff or the time I found a dead bear cub or Amanda crying at night. Those moments have no place in my legend. What really happened though, I think, is that we both got something we needed from each other but as the summer died and we packed up and left Takla Lake, we couldn't get what we needed, or didn't need it anymore. The legend was slipping away, cool Takla water through my fingers.

I tried and tried for a year to make bedrooms in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa feel like our tent by the lake. But trying only made it worse. What was once so easy and natural became so hard. I was trying to pin down and flatten the temporary into something it wasn't. Amanda pointed herself towards the future, I looked to the past. I wanted to think of her needs, but wasn't sure what they were anymore and began to doubt myself and everything I did all over again. Incompatibilities rippled through us in the city. Beers started tasting better. Assimilation back to the real world of metros and texts can be difficult after months of sweating and proving yourself in the forest. No job or schooling I've done since has felt like I'm actually doing something compared to planting 4000 trees in a day. I was somebody with something tangible to do. You just coast along in the city

though, yet another ghost, unable to meet challenges by simply putting your head down and planting. Step, step, plant. On unfamiliar subways surging with unfamiliar people, I'd think about our life in the bush, and my legend, and how not one of the millions of people around me knew or cared what Talka Lake was. I wished it was a bad dream.

I can see now that it's unfair and dangerous to put all that meaning on one person and one lonely old lake in the middle of nowhere. No one deserves that kind of pressure. Amanda looked at me for the last time, her purple eyes puffy, and I put my hand on her collarbone to ease her shaking, and knew I'd never touch her again. She said she'd cherish our memories forever. That's what they are now - memories. Legends are a good way to remember what we treasure, but I think King-cans and I both know: Takla Lake has a bottom.