

In the Rumor of Forests

by Jeff Beyl

I tried to discover, in the rumor of forests and waves, words that other men could not hear, and I pricked up my ears to listen to the revelation of their harmonies.

—Gustave Flaubert

Prologue

The sky was low and leaden. Rain bombarded the landscape. The truck tires spun and slipped and splashed along the muddy, potholed logging road. Rain washed like surf against the trucks' windshields. Mud splattered the bumpers and the sides of the trucks. The forest was cloaked in dense, grey fog. The heavens collapsed. A torrent. An onslaught. A barrage.

The woods in winter.

Dramatis Personae / Who We Were

We were the Reforestation crew of the United States Forest Service. The FFS. Short for the Fucking-Forest-Service. Some of us had degrees or were pursuing degrees in Forestry but, times being tough, most of us just needed a job and we had promises to keep. During the summer months, we cut trees down, thinning the forest so other trees could get more light from the sun and nutrients from the soil and room to grow bigger. Like pruning a houseplant to create better growth. After a stand was logged, we went through during the winter months and planted new trees in the clear-cut swaths. Future Timber.

LT, the crew chief, drove point. We never did know his real name. Larry or Leonard or Louis or something. We didn't care. In the military, LT is short for Lieutenant. This

wasn't the military, but some of the guys came out of the military and he was the boss-man so there ya go. In the back of his muddy avocado-green pickup truck were bunches of small trees stacked like cordwood. Douglas Fir seedlings, each about eighteen inches in size, wrapped together with a rubber band like carrots in the produce section of the grocery store. I drove the tool truck, second in line, known as the Slack Slot. In the bed of my truck were the tools needed for the day; shovels and axes and long-bladed hoedads. A hoedad is a short-handled hoe, like a pick or mattock with a flat, double-sided blade. The blade is about twenty-four inches long and slightly curved like a bear's claw or the blade of the sickle that the grim reaper carries. It was for sinking into the earth to open a deep hole to stuff the seedlings' roots into.

Behind me, bringing up the rear, driving butt, was the Crummy. The Crummy was what we called the crew van. It could hold ten men, including driver, plus packs and gear. It had yet to be decided whether the Crummy was crummier during the hot, sweaty summer months or the cold, wet winter months. Whatever the season, the crew was crammed into it and the air inside was filled with steam, sweat, BO, burps, and farts. The squad of souls inside jostled and bumped against each other as it bounced along the muddy, pot-holed roads. In rain or in sun, it was indeed a crummy ride. I had done my time in the Crummy, so when the tool truck driver quit one day I put in for the position. The tool truck held only two riders, Jimi and me. We could talk or listen to the radio, or Jimi could sleep while I drove. Sometimes we just rode along in silence, looking out at the trees, wishing we were somewhere else. Jimi's real name was Kevin. We called him Jimi because one day during lunch he suddenly stood up, tilted his head skyward, swung his arms around and yelled out, "Scuze me while I kiss the fuckin sky!"

What would you have called him?

What We Did

Working in the forest in winter can be dismal. It is not a jaunty hike. It is wet and muddy and cold. Our main goal, which became our main burden, was to keep as dry and warm as possible. One had better be prepared. Each man brought along whatever he thought he would need during a day in the rain and the mud. There was a balance

between what was enough and what was too much, and that balance differed from man to man. Each man learned what he really did and did not need. If you needed it but didn't have it, you were screwed.

During the winter months it was a foregone conclusion that we were going to get wet. Many of us carried our stuff in drybags, like a kayaker uses. In winter, we did not need to carry fire extinguishing equipment, a requirement in summer. The rain took care of any fire extinguishing that might be needed. I always brought along a couple extra pairs of dry wool socks. I kept them in zip-lock plastic sandwich bags to keep them dry, and during a break I would hunker down and change them. That was always a difficult maneuver to negotiate in the mud, but cold, wet feet were a drag. I carried a small towel to dry my feet as I changed my socks. I also carried two extra pairs of gloves. When leather gloves get wet, they stretch and become slick and slippery. I would dry the wet ones by laying them out on bricks under the wood stove at home. After a couple hours under the wood stove, they would become stiff and crackly. Out in the woods our hands were always cold. Some of the guys used small hand warmer packets. Guys would stuff them into their pockets and inside their gloves. Some guys would sprinkle powdered cayenne pepper into their socks in what I always thought was a strange attempt to keep their feet warm.

Many used chewing tobacco. They would stuff wads of it into their lower lips and they would spit long, twisting cords of brown tobacco juice onto the mud. They claimed that during the winter season it helped keep them warm. But they used it during the summer months as well. I tried it once, to my great dissatisfaction, and never tried it again.

Each man wore two rubberized canvas bags, like newspaper-boy bags, slung on a webbed belt around his waist. The bags hung heavy with the seedling trees. The trees were un-bunched, loose, and ready for planting. We gave names to our hoedads. We nicknamed them like we nicknamed each other. Some of the guys named their tool after their mother or their wife or girlfriend. Others named theirs after a celebrity or a famous movie star or Playmate. Some of the guys referred to their hoedads with derogatory names, like asshole or bitch, as in, "I gotta carry this bitch around all day."

The New Boots, so called because their boots had not been properly baptized out in the woods in winter yet, had to figure out on their own what to bring. New guys were

also known as FNG, short for Fucking-New-Guy. Invariably they brought along either way too much stuff or not enough. Maybe they didn't bring enough food to eat or enough water to drink. Maybe they didn't have the proper rain gear or their gloves had holes in them. The seasoned guys usually left the New Boots to their own devices. The thought was that they would either learn something or they wouldn't. After all, we all did. Let the FNG figure it out on his own. One time, Burl, in a moment of magnanimity, noticed that one of the New Boots had brought along way too much and started to explain it to the guy. But the belligerent FNG shot him a glare and said, "Hey man, I brang what I brang. Okay?"

Sure thing, asshole.

That guy didn't last long.

In the summer, cutting trees down, we worked in two-man teams: in winter we fanned out across a clear-cut section of forest and swept across the terrain like a swinging door. Like Joshua Chamberlain's Union troops on Little Round Top Hill at Gettysburg. Although we were part of a larger unit, each man was responsible for himself. If an FNG couldn't keep up, that was it. It was down the road for that guy. See ya. Another New Boot would take his place tomorrow. Jobs were scarce, and there was always a line of guys wanting to sign on.

LT and Strollin', the assistant crew chief, did not plant trees, but they did wear the bags around their waists stuffed with extra bunches of trees. They roamed through the woods, up and down the hills, maneuvering through the fog and the rain. They checked in with each member of the crew at intervals throughout the day in case anyone ran out of trees and needed replenishing. When they ran low, they would make their way back to LT's truck to fill their bags with more seedlings. We all knew that they sat in the warmth of the truck, listening to the radio and drinking hot coffee before heading back out into rainy woods.

Wouldn't you?

Lunch was always an interesting and uncomfortable affair. We took our breaks under dripping tree branches. We didn't want to sit in the mud, so we squatted on our haunches or stood leaning against a tree trunk for balance. We had to hunch over our ham and cheese sandwiches and our apples and chocolate chip cookies to keep them

dry. Doc, who was not a doc, just a grunt like the rest of us, never brought a sandwich. Instead, he always brought carrots or celery that he dipped into a jar of peanut butter. Sometimes he brought large dill pickles, like fat cigars. Some of the guys brought hot soup in insulated containers. It was more to carry but a Thermos of hot soup warmed both body and soul.

During the summer months, I would bring a paperback with me into the forest. I would read during lunch breaks. One afternoon one of the guys asked me what I was reading. I showed him the book. "Read it out loud," he said. So, I read it out loud and that started me reading to the crew on lunch breaks. I read from *The Old Man and the Sea* and from *Cannery Row* and short stories by Ray Bradbury. I read chapter sections from *The Grapes of Wrath*. The guys seemed to like it, whatever book I read from. Once in a while I'd read *Shakespearean Sonnets* to them. These were a tough bunch of guys who wore knives in scabbards on their belts, but *Shakespearean Sonnets*? But they listened and seemed to like it.

"Read that one again," Doc said one day. "That one was cool."

So, I read it again.

"When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweep my outcast state.
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries.
And look upon myself and curse my fate."

"I like that," Doc said pensively.

"What the hell does that mean?" Lobo asked. He was leaning against a tree with his eyes closed.

"Think about it," Doc said. "That's kinda like what we're doin'. Isn't it? Troubling deaf heaven with our bootless cries."

"Yeah," said Troop. "Only we got our boots on. Ha-ha-ha."

"Bweep my outcast state?" Lobo said. "That's kinda wimpy sounding."

"Shut up and go back to sleep," Doc said. He threw the butt end of a pickle at him. Lobo caught it and popped it into his mouth.

I could not bring books into the forest in winter, for obvious reasons. I had to rely on memory and recite lines to the guys. I quoted lyrics from Bob Dylan and Gordon Lightfoot. I recited lines from Jimmy Buffet and from The Beatles. I delivered the words as though they were poetry. I didn't put any musical emphasis to them. Sometimes the guys had no idea what I was quoting from, even though they may have known the song. I would quote lines from Yeats or T.S. Eliot or Robert Frost, telling the guys about the golden apples of the sun and crabs scuttling across the floors of silent seas. The guys nicknamed me Scholar and even though they teased me for quoting what they deemed oddball things, they liked it. Sometimes I felt like a parent reading to his kids at bedtime.

"Talk to us, Scholar," someone might say amid the pelting rain.

"Yeah, Scholar. C'mon," another would pipe in.

I never did announce what I was about to quote. I never told them what a particular line or verse was from. I just launched in. Being wet and cold and miserable was not necessarily conducive to coming up with things to recite, so I would think about it the night before, planning what I would quote the next day.

It kept their minds off the rain. Kinda.

Sui Generis

But really, nothing kept our minds off the rain. Sometimes, during an especially hard downpour, I wouldn't quote anything at all. I'd crouch down, cocooned in my rain gear. I'd wait out the break in silence like the rest of the crew while the rain strafed my back. Sometimes, it was better to skip the break altogether. Eat fast and go back to work. Working at least kept a hint of warmth in us. So, we would keep working, swinging our hoedads high above our heads and arcing them down into the dirt. The Forest Service didn't care how uncomfortable we were. They wanted their trees planted. They didn't give a rat's ass if we were wet and muddy and trembling, our teeth clicking in the cold.

We planted trees by the hundreds. We planted trees by the thousands. All. Day. Long. The seedlings smelled honey sweet of conifer sap. The sap would be sticky like molasses on our gloves. During breaks we would hunker down under the overhanging branches of a tree, rainwater dripping onto our backs, and we would bring out our

collection of files and sharpen the blades of our hoedads. It would give us something to think about other than the cold. We would hone the edges until they were razor sharp and dangerous.

The forest in winter can sometimes be a scary place. Like something out of an H.P. Lovecraft story. Menacing and foreboding. It can give you the creeps as the fog and the mist hover vaporous through the trees, creating ethereal visions. You might see an ominous figure materializing out of the miasma and the filmy murk.

“What is that?” Someone might say, pointing into the shadows.

A phantasm. A spook. A wraith in the raincloud. Then the fog undulates and the menacing figure becomes a deer or a small tree or a clump of poison oak. You shrug it off and arc your hoedad into the air and slice it down into the mud and stuff a tree into the hole and you move on. Then suddenly there is something else. Just over there. See it? Spectral. Looming. Eerie.

“What the hell is that?”

We tried to make the best of it. Sometimes the rain would let up and the fog would clear and we could see across a divide and the trees would appear in the distance like ballerinas dancing in the clouds. Sometimes we would see rainbows of such brightness and clarity it would amaze us. We felt like we could reach out and grab them. Sometimes I would look out and think about people working in office buildings and think, man, we're a bunch of lucky bastards. We might see a herd of elk or an eagle circling the thermals overhead. We would try to get squirrels and chipmunks to eat trail mix from our outstretched hands. We picked wild gooseberries and edible mushrooms and washed them in streams and ate them at lunch. We found deer antlers and we found rocks that had become so polished on the floor of the forest we could almost see our reflection in them. Sometimes the sun would peak through the clouds and send shafts of light down upon us and we would look up at the sky and close our eyes as if in prayer and feel the warmth on our faces. Then the clouds closed in again.

Denouement / Catharsis

We hated the forest. We loved the forest.

We wished we were on the beach in Malibu or Maui or Mazatlán with a cold beer and a bottle of tequila. We were reforesting the forest. That's a good thing, right? We told ourselves that we were doing something important, something that made a difference, something that benefited the environment.

We were miserable but we kept on. We just wanted to get through the day. We told ourselves that we were tough guys. We had knives in scabbards hung on our belts and we carried sharp, long-bladed tools, like Crusaders wielding medieval weapons. We moved through the clear-cuts like ghosts in the fog, fanning out across the hills. Plant a tree and move on to plant the next and the next and the next. And the next.

One afternoon, in the midst of a drenching downpour, Mane, so nicknamed because he tied his long hair into a bushy pony tail which spread across his back like the mane of a lion, suddenly threw his hardhat and hoedad down into the mud, raised his arms into the air, rainwater streaming down his face and dripping from his beard and declared to the world, "I love this shit!"

And we knew that he really didn't, but we knew that he really did.



Jeff Beyl frequently writes about fly-fishing, and his pieces have appeared in magazines such as *Big Sky Journal*, *Outside Bozeman*, *NW Sportsman*, *Idaho Magazine* and others. He also writes about the ocean, music, and food and has been published in magazines such as *Literary Hatchet* and *Snowy Egret*. His book *A Conversation with the Earth* was published in 2020.