



# That Treeplanting Story

Stories by Dan De Vries

*That Treeplanting Story* is a cycle of eight tales, including two novella length, set in or around treeplanting camps in British Columbia. The first four stories were awarded an Avery Hopwood prize in major fiction at the University of Michigan in 1980.

Dan De Vries was born in Grand Rapids, MI. Living in San Francisco since 1991. Before then, Denver, Laramie, Vancouver, Ann Arbor, and periodically up and down the San Francisco peninsula. Grad school in Wyoming and the University of Michigan. Author of three novels, *Trees for Tomorrow*, *Blasphemous Rumors*, and *Piggery*. Whatever else of much importance is in the stories.

“You can’t go wrong with a Dan De Vries book”

— Overheard at Green Apple Books, San Francisco

I have discussed the matter at some length with Frans Vander Grove and we agree that the time has come to reveal these stories in book form.

The cover image may or may not be Dan De Vries. That matter is still being debated in certain circles.

—Thomas Fuller





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*for Christine Zupanovich (Stella Pacifica)  
and in honor of the memory of Bernard Van't Hul*

*And I saw you in my nightmares  
But I'll see you in my dreams  
And I might live a thousand years  
Before I know what that means*

*Now the earth was a formless void,  
there was darkness over the deep . . .*

(epigraphs from the Jerusalem Bible and songs by Neil Young)

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## That Treeplanting Story

*... see the sky about to rain...*

It was late afternoon when Alex arrived. The narrow clearing was dusted with fine snow, and a low cloud hung over the little plateau, seeming to rise up the mountainside, whiteness joining whiteness at some point and hiding the peak. Alex stood for a long time on the wooden bridge gazing down the mountain at the arm of water that led eventually to the city whose lights were beginning to sparkle beneath the cloud.

Two switchbacks down the road a waterfall dashed a refracting mist into the air, and there the truck with the house on its back crossed another bridge. The rest of the crew followed on foot. When he saw them coming, Alex advanced into the clearing.

He dropped his pack beneath a tree and pitched his tent on a flat place overlooking the river. Its rushing noise promised solitude and sleep.

As he finished, the truck with the house on its back rumbled into the clearing. Vern got out and asked him what he was doing.

“This was the first flat place I came to,” Alex replied. “There might not be another one for miles.”

“That’s for Vern to say,” Ray told him, and turned to Vern. “How close are we to the site? That’s where we should camp.”

Vern pondered the map. “We just passed mile three. The site is at mile seven.” He and Ray got back into the truck and drove it slowly toward the steep grade at the end of the clearing. Again, with weary feet, the crew trudged along behind. Only Catherine remained with Alex, staring up the road, as though she should be following as well.

“We can’t stay here by ourselves,” she said.

The cloud seemed to be lowering over them. The truck was nearly lost in mist by the time it stopped on the grade. In the damp twilight, the sounds of a struggling engine and tires grinding on gravel reported down the mountain. “If that thing falls off again,” Alex said to Catherine.

“Vern chained it down this time,” she reminded him. The house rested precariously on the back of the truck, and from their distance it was impossible to tell if its weight had shifted. The tires ground more sharply against the road and then the engine coughed and died. Ray jumped from the passenger door and stepped back to examine the situation. He said something, inaudible to Alex and Catherine at their distance, and waved his arms. The crew scattered into the bush, returned with armloads of branches, and laid them in front of the tires. “We should help,” suggested Catherine, but Alex did not move and neither did she. The engine grumbled again, and they could hear the clawing noise of gears failing to engage. For a moment it looked as though the truck was going to move forward once more, perhaps it briefly did, but then mountain silence reigned. Ray circled out of their line of vision to the driver’s side and was gone for a while. By the time he reappeared, the two young men were kicking the branches off the road. When they had finished that,

the truck inched backward toward Alex and Catherine. She began unpacking and arranging her sleeping bag in the tent.

Vern parked in front of an open space that looked as though it had once, long ago, been a campsite. “You can all camp here,” he told his crew.

“Shouldn’t we put the cookshack there?” suggested Alex.

“This is just for tonight,” Vern told him. “We’ll camp at the site tomorrow.” It was growing dark, and snow was beginning to fall. Alex’s feet were getting cold. Vern opened the door to the house and Alex could see the rubble of gear thrown into a chaos when it had fallen off the truck. His shoulders still ached from helping lift it back up. Vern climbed inside and rooted for packs among the boxes and bags and barrels. Each time he found one he handed it out to Alex, who stacked them against a boulder. The crew members eventually each found their own and wandered into the area Vern had indicated. Tents rose in the gathering darkness. “Shall Cookie and I try to make some supper?” asked Virginia.

“I’m not hungry,” Vern decided. “Don’t we have something that people can eat without cooking?” He pawed inside the house. “Here,” he said to Alex, handing out a wooden box. “There’s food in here.”

A bag of flour had burst and everything in the box was covered with white dust. Alex scooped two handfuls of granola and brought them to Catherine, still inside their tent. “Are you hungry?” he asked her through the screen, proffering the granola.

“You shouldn’t go off by yourself like that,” she warned him. “You’re part of this crew too.”

“Would you like some granola?” he repeated, squatting at the door. Catherine had rolled out her bag and lay on her stomach, staring at him.

“I’m not hungry,” she decided.

“Well, can you take this, so I can get in? It’s cold out here.”

“Jesus Christ, Alex,” she muttered, “what a mess. Can’t you eat it out there?”

He stood looking over the river, chewing carelessly. The snow seemed to be falling harder, and the wind was beginning to blow. When he finished the first handful he threw the second into the water. Finally, he was allowed into the tent. “Shall we zip these bags together?” he wondered.

“No,” she replied. “I’m already settled.”

He unrolled his bag and pad, undressed, redressed in heavy underwear, and crawled into the bag. It was stiff with cold, and he pulled it over his head, shivering, waiting for his breath to warm the space inside it.

“I heard Vern and Virginia arguing on the boat,” Catherine told him when he peeped out. “They’re supposed to have four-wheel drive. She’s worried about it, but he says the nine-ton can make it up the hill.”

“It took us all afternoon to climb three miles,” he pointed out.

“Well,” she answered sharply, “if you think negatively about this, it will never happen. Now I’m tired.” And she turned away from him.

Alex’s shoulders and back were very stiff when he awoke the next morning. He struggled into yesterday’s clothes. The jeans were frozen around the ankles. He crawled out of the little tent, leaving Catherine mumbling in half sleep. Vern and Ray were standing by the truck smoking something, and Ray was also eating bright yellow powder from a plastic bag. The ground was covered with snow, but a fine mist filled the air. “Find some wood for a fire,” Ray told him.

A fire sounded like a good idea and Alex did as he was told. He went into the bush and gathered an armload of dead

twigs and branches for kindling. When he returned, one of the crew, a shortish man with wire rim glasses and a black walrus mustache was smoking with Vern and Ray. A chain saw lay at his feet. "Find a log and Stoner will cut it up," Ray told Alex, who did as he was told and returned with a wet dead one. Stoner passed the pipe to Vern and fired up the saw. He quickly reduced the log to lengths. Alex was returning with a second when Stoner tipped the saw over the pile of kindling and poured out fuel. Vern lit the pipe and tossed the match at the brush pile, and it exploded in flame. As the first pieces of log took fire, Catherine came around the corner. "What happens now?" she asked Alex.

"I don't know," he replied. "Ask Vern."

Vern and Ray were still leaning against the truck. "Gee, ah, I dunno . . ." said Vern. "What do we do now, Ray?"

"Is everybody up?" wondered Ray.

Virginia and Cookie, the two young men, French Pierre, and the guy named Nick were not. Vern reached into the cab and blew the horn. A high-pitched undulating scream echoed back and forth across the valley. "That'll get 'em," said Vern.

Virginia stuck her head out of the house. "Cut that out!" she cried.

"Time to get up," Vern shouted back. "We need breakfast. We didn't get any supper last night and I've got the munchies . . . Cookie!" he called across the clearing. "Get up and cook!"

People emerged from the tents in the clearing. The two young men arrived together. "Good morning, Vern," said one. "What should we do?"

"Got a little fire going here," Vern replied.

"Good morning, Vern," said the other. "Can we help?"

"We're going to have breakfast," Vern told them.

“I don’t s’pose,” said the first, “you have any a’t that hash?”

“Shouldn’t we build a cookshack?” wondered Alex.

“Hey, Ray,” called Vern. “Should we build a cookshack?”

“Listen,” said Ray. “Building a cookshack is downtime. And we don’t have any time to waste. We don’t make any money for downtime. We have to get to work right away. This isn’t like working for MacMillan Blowjob where you can just fuck off all day and still get paid. And we don’t have to punch any timeclocks or take any orders from assholes. Building a cookshack is downtime and we have to get to work.”

Alex turned his eyes up the road to the mountain, which stretched high, snow-dusted, into the lifting mist. He heard voices, Nick’s, whom he had not seen arrive, and then Virginia’s.

Virginia said, “We can’t cook without a cookshack.”

Nick said, “We can’t work without trees, and the trees are down at the landing.”

“I agree,” said Ray. “And it’s all downtime. We don’t get paid for getting the trees. We’re not working for MacMillan Blowjob.”

“Do you know what’s going on here?” Alex asked Catherine.

“Don’t be so negative,” she told him.

It seemed to occur to Vern that in order to get the trees they would have to get the house off the truck. He said as much. “But that’s more downtime,” said Ray. Still, it had to be done, and it took time. First, they had to take out all the remaining gear, and Vern and Virginia’s personal belongings. Then they had to gather logs to wedge under the house’s back corners already sticking off the truck bed. When that was done, Vern put a jack under the third corner. “Everyone over there,” he said, and pointed at the fourth. Ray stood back and waved his arms as Vern inched the truck away, leaving the house perched on a foundation

of logs, jack, and humanity.

“Vern,” thought one of the young men, “we can’t hang on t’this all day.”

Alex thought his back might crack.

“We better get more logs,” Vern said to Ray. “You women help us.” It took them an awful long time to get enough. “Hang on!” Vern told them all. “Come on! Lift! Higher!”

“This is fun, Vern,” said the other young man. One by one the lifters fell away and the house wobbled into place on what was jammed beneath it. Alex stumbled over to a boulder and inventoried his pain: fingers, wrists, forearms, elbows, calves, ankles, heels, toes, all complaining extravagantly. “It’s crooked,” noticed Catherine.

“I’m going to die,” he told her.

“No you’re not,” she reassured him.

No one had even noticed the red pickup parked on the road. There sat two men with orange hardhats and puzzled expressions. A representational map of the province graced the door facing the crew. “I’m Dick and this is Rick,” said the man with the red hair when they approached. “Are any of you Simon Phillips?”

No one batted an eye at that. “Oh, heh heh, that’s me,” said Vern. “Are you our checkers?”

“Yes,” said the man with the red hair. “I’m Dick and this is Rick. The trees just came in. They’re down at the landing. Is that your only vehicle?” He looked the least little bit askance at the nine-ton flatbed. No one said anything so he went on. “The specifications call for four-wheel drive. The road ahead is pretty steep.”

“I had one,” said Vern. “But it broke down on Saturday.”

“Hey,” said Ray. “Why don’t you let us use your truck to haul up the trees?”

The red-haired man stopped for about a tenth of a second. “But that’s against regulations,” he told them.

“Well listen,” Ray insisted. “We’re all in this together. I mean, don’t we all want the same thing, to plant those trees?”

“Yes, I mean, we just want to do it,” agreed Vern. “We’ve just got to get out there and plant those trees.”

Dick and Rick looked at one another and shrugged their shoulders. “We really can’t,” explained Dick.

“So that’s the way it is,” Ray realized. “All the way by the book. We’re gonna be out here bustin’ ass but nobody’s gonna help us. C’mon Vern, let’s go down and get those trees. This talking is all downtime. We aren’t working for MacMillan Blowjob.”

“What about a cookshack?” Alex asked tentatively.

“We aren’t here to build cookshacks,” Ray shouted at the mountain, hopping from one foot to another. “We got to get out there and plant the trees.”

“Yes but . . .” Alex tried.

“Listen here,” Ray shot back, “We’re all in this together. We’re not working for MacMillan Blowjob. You better do what you’re told.”

Dick the checker turned toward Vern. “But you can’t plant until the snow melts,” he pointed out. “It will be even heavier further up the mountain. You should use today to get the trees and make your camp.”

“I plant trees in the snow,” Ray insisted. “When I was working for . . .”

But Vern interrupted him. “Does anybody here know how to build a cookshack?” he inquired.

“I build lots,” said French Pierre.

“Nick’s a good carpenter,” Vern remembered to himself.

“How do you want it built?” asked Nick.

“You guys figure that out,” Vern told him. “All the stuff

is in that pile there. We have to get organized.”

“We sure do,” agreed Ray, still hopping from foot to foot. “This is all . . .”

One of the checkers turned to Vern. “Well, I guess you got that thing up here once, you can probably do it again, eh? But you still have to go four more miles to get to the site.”

“Of course we’ll make it,” insisted Vern. “Listen here. Pierre and Nick and the women stay and make a camp. The rest of us will go get the trees.”

Meltoff ran down the road and toward the stream in rivulets. Vern and Ray got into the front seat of the nine-ton and Alex, Stoner, and the two young men climbed on the back. “Got any dope, Stoner?” asked one of the young men, and Stoner inserted a joint between the shafts of his black walrus mustache. The air lay heavy around them as they headed down the mountain. Had they been moving faster, it would have been very very cold; as it was, the truck crept, and it was simply damp and miserable. Alex huddled inside his raingear and held on as they bounced along. The mist was too thick for him to see the water below, or the mountains across the water, or the peak of their own mountain.

There was no snow on the ground for the last mile down to the landing and the dock there. The tree boxes lay stacked in a pile by the dock. The checkers’ red pickup was parked by a ramshackle cabin in which the two of them had taken up very temporary residence – a thin wisp of smoke rose from the chimney. Vern backed the truck to the pile of boxes and Rick or Dick approached him with a clipboard and told him to sign for receipt of the trees. Alex ached from the day before, and it hurt to pick up the boxes; their length taxed his entire reach and they were heavy. The cardboard was wet, and the hand slots on the ends had a tendency to tear from his grasp when he lifted. It seemed like a long time before the

entire stack had been transferred from the ground to the bed of the truck.

Vern and Ray stood and contemplated it.

“Think we’ll make it?” wondered Vern.

“Oh yea,” said Ray.

Vern pulled the little wooden pipe out of his pocket and scraped hashish into it with his fingernail. They passed it around, huddled against the side of the truck away from the checker’s cabin. The hash hit Alex like a hammer. It made him more aware that his feet were wet and cold, but also seemed to numb his aching joints a little, and he pondered the wet gravel at his feet with infinite appreciation as he began the long walk back to camp. The truck started up the hill well enough, and Alex was hardly noticing it until he heard a thunk as of tire hitting pothole and looked up in time to see it stop and then lurch. The boxes swayed forward, then backward, the straight lines of tension between them gradually bending and increasing in width, this all so slow he felt as though if he could just shout **Stop!** the load would shudder and settle back into place. Instead, Vern gunned the engine, the back tires spewed mud and gravel, caught something, and the mountain of boxes came tumbling down, piece by piece, at Alex’s feet.

Vern climbed in great amusement from the truck. “How do you like that?” he chortled. “We got further than this yesterday. We should have tied them down.”

Rick and Dick were coming up the hill. “What happened?” they wanted to know.

“You and your regulations,” said Ray. “See, if we could use your truck, none of this would happen.”

The checkers contemplated the situation. “Separate out the broken boxes,” they finally told Vern. “And this time tie them down.”

There was nothing to do but start over, and a new set of problems had created itself. The truck was parked on a steep vertical and although it was not terribly difficult to layer the bed one, and then two, deep with boxes, at the third layer gravitational forces exerted themselves, and the boxes having been in some cases bent out of shape by their fall, things just generally had a tendency to tumble back down the hill. Ray and Vern gradually became aware of this and they discussed the situation over more hashish. Apparently, the only solution at which they could arrive was to pile as many boxes as would stay there back onto the truck and then to take that load down the hill. The rest had to be carried by hand. There was some complaining about this since the boxes weighed a great deal, and it was at least a quarter mile back to the landing. But, as Ray was quick to point out, it was down the hill all the way, and besides they weren't working for . . . Most of the boxes on the truck made it safely to the landing and, although it took a while to carry the remainder, sometime around mid-afternoon all those that had not broken open were piled on the bed and roped in place. This accomplishment was celebrated with some hashish. Rick and Dick drove their pickup slowly up the mountain and the crew tagged along behind, throwing the broken boxes and trees that had been in them into its bed. Ray and Vern, Stoner, and the two young men started back down to the nine-ton. Alex jumped into the back of the pickup truck for the ride up to camp. As the pickup disappeared around a switchback, Vern shouted something he couldn't hear.

The first thing Alex noticed when he arrived at the camp was that the snow had pretty much melted. The second was that a small frame for a cookshack had arisen where the tents had all been pitched. The third was that Catherine was deeply disgusted. "What took you so long?" she wanted to

know. "And where's everyone else?" Alex began to explain about the trees falling off the truck. "I don't even want to hear about it," she stopped him.

Dick, or was it Rick, approached. "We have to take these trees up to the site and someone has to heel them in," said the checker. "Can you come with us?"

"Sure," said Alex. "Coming along?" he asked Catherine.

"I may as well do something useful," she agreed.

Again he attempted to tell her about the trees falling off the truck and she still did not want to hear about it at all. She did want to tell him about building the cookshack, though. She and French Pierre, who was not French at all, but Dutch ("They think anyone who doesn't speak Canajun is French," she explained), and Nick could have used some help. The other two women were no use, although they had sorted out all the cooking gear and food. "It looked pretty small," said Alex.

"Well, there's only ten of us," she pointed out.

"Eleven, I think," Alex corrected her.

She counted. Herself and French Pierre and Nick, the two women, the two young men, Stoner and Vern and Ray made ten. "And me," Alex reminded her. "Oh," she said, "I guess you're right."

The truck climbed steadily higher into the mist. The top of the mountain was still covered, invisible, seemingly no closer for their climbing. More snow appeared on the ground and the fog thickened and finally adhered to their sweaters in droplets. The truck cleared a steep grade, turned a switchback, and entered a precipitous deforested mountain valley. "This has to be it," said Alex. "Look at that slope."

"It doesn't look too bad," decided Catherine.

The pickup followed an only slightly graded road along

the side of the mountain, turned down into a valley, crossed a bridge over the river, and headed for the north face. It climbed a few hundred yards, cleared a crest, and stopped on a flat open patch of gravel. The mountain loomed massive above them, still revealing no trace of its actual height in the cloud.

Alex and Catherine jumped down from the back of the pickup. “We have a problem,” said Dick, or was it Rick? “Or rather, you have a problem. All those loose trees . . . Well, we have two different varieties, a spruce and Douglas fir. Rick and I can separate them out, but you have to heel them in in separate places, and keep them straight. One goes above this road, and the other goes below. Can you keep that straight?”

It was a legitimate question, Alex agreed. Catherine was quick to point out that none of it was her fault. She would know enough to tie down the trees, especially after watching the house fall off the day before.

“It may not be your fault, but it’s going to be your problem,” the checker told them firmly. “We can fine the contract for what happened today. Abuse of the trees, eh? We won’t, because I don’t think any real harm was done, but we have to issue a warning. Next time, we’ll be required to fine you.”

“Listen,” said Alex, “I can keep two piles of trees straight, but I can’t speak for everyone else.”

Rick and Dick seemed to understand what he was driving at. “Don’t you see,” said one of them, “that everyone has to keep it straight?” He did not mention fines again. “This has all been carefully planned.” The two checkers began sorting the loose bundles of trees into two groups. Catherine and Alex layered them neatly, bundle atop bundle, against the banks on either side of the road. They covered the roots with dirt and packed it firmly, she the spruce below the road, and he the Douglas fir above it. Dick and Rick left in the pickup

after they finished sorting. “What do we do when we’re done?” Alex asked Catherine. “Why don’t we worry about that when we’re done?” she returned.

They were done soon enough. “Did you count the bundles?” she asked him. “I did actually,” he told her. “We should remember in case it matters.”

“Now what?” Catherine wondered. “Do you think they’ll try to get the rest of the trees up here yet today?”

“And what if they can’t? The truck couldn’t make it yesterday.”

“Vern said something about mud chains.”

“Well, there’s no point standing around here,” Alex suggested.

“There’s also no point walking four miles if we’re just coming back up.”

“There’s really no point standing around in the rain,” Alex maintained. The cloud seemed to have crept further down the mountain again, and the mist had turned to drizzle. It was hard to tell whether the gathering darkness signified dusk or more rainfall.

“Well I’m staying here,” she decided.

“Jesus, Cathy, we could be here all night. My feet are cold. I have to keep moving.”

“So get moving,” she told him. There were a lot of things he wanted to say just then, about him, about them, about planting trees. He might even have chosen one finally had she herself not muttered, “Oh, all right,” in feigned disinterest, and started moving down the road.

“You know,” he suggested as they crossed the bridge and headed up the hill toward the main road, “we don’t have to stay on this contract. There must be some boat traffic up and down the Arm. You could probably get a job cooking for Frans. I know I can’t go back to work for him, but I

could catch on somewhere. We don't have to be on the same contract."

She turned sharply to face him. "Goddammit Alex! Do you have to quit everything you do? I've got a commitment here and so do you. I intend to stick to mine." She wheeled and stalked away, surprising him with her speed.

They walked most of the four miles in stiff silence that was finally broken with the by then familiar sound of tires grinding against gravel road. When Vern saw them come over the hill he made a violent motion at the ignition key and jammed on the emergency brake with a force that shook both the truck and its load. He stormed out of the cab toward them. "Where have you been?" he fairly screamed at Alex. "You can't just be wandering all over this mountain whenever you please. We're all in this together, one for all and all for one, and you keep disrupting our group harmony."

"Yea, listen here," Ray joined in, jumping up and down from one foot to another. "How'd you like to be working for MacMillan Blowjob and have to punch a timeclock and work for some asshole?"

Alex stopped for a moment and scratched his head. He turned and looked back up the road for the mountain, hardly visible at all now in the falling darkness. Not far below, the cookshack frame was nearly half-covered with plastic and a stovepipe spewed smoke graced by an occasional flurry of orange sparks into the grey night. It was a welcome sight. "Is there any supper?" he asked quietly, and walked past them toward the camp.

"Alex!" Catherine's shout cut the thick air like a steam whistle. "You come back here and talk to Ray and Vern." Wearily, he turned and leaned against the truck, and waited for them to approach him. "We needed you down here to work on the cookshack," Vern told him.

“I was heeling in the trees that fell off your truck,” said Alex.

“What’s this your?” Vern challenged him. “I thought I told you we were all in this together.”

“All for one, one for all,” agreed Ray.

“Did the bozos talk to you?” Alex asked them.

“The what?” cried Vern and Ray in unison.

“You know, Dick and Rick, the checkers,” said Alex.

“What did you call them?” demanded Vern.

“Bozos. That’s what we always call them.”

“Well I don’t know about that,” said Vern.

“Did they talk to you?”

“Who?”

“Dick and Rick, the checkers.”

“No, they waved as they went by. They said they’d talk to me in the morning.”

Alex began to explain about the spruce and the Douglas fir. “What a couple of Noofs,” said Vern.

“Everybody knows the difference between spruce and Douglas fir,” said Ray.

“Well anyway,” said Alex, “I know how many of both are up there.”

Vern looked at him blankly. “Well don’t be going off by yourself like that,” he insisted.

“But they told me to,” Alex answered foolishly. He resumed his way toward the cookshack and, before entering, stopped and shouted back at them over his shoulder: “Shouldn’t you try your chains if we’re ever going to get up that hill?” Ray was saying something to Catherine about all for one in a fairly loud voice.

“Well, you sure had a fine day,” she told him later when they were alone in the tent. “Look, I told them that you were just hungry and tired, but, really, you should be more cooperative.”

“I suppose,” he said. “Shall we zip these bags together?”

“Not tonight,” she said. “I’m tired.”

The next day saw no sunlight, but did at least find some definition of dry land as the snow melted off, and Alex had a chance to plant a few trees. On the one hand, there was some consolation in that, since it was what he had come to do in the first place. On the other, it did not happen immediately, or conveniently, and certainly not easily. First of all there was the matter of getting the trees up to the site and that took all morning. Right after breakfast – and it had been good for everyone’s spirits to have a breakfast, even if it was only porridge and raisins – Ray and Vern jumped into the truck, backed it to the bridge at the beginning of the clearing and roared through the camp at the mountain. The two young men shouted in unison and followed running up the hill, their long slender legs flailing at the gravel almost as though they were a single pair. The truck ground to a halt perhaps a hundred yards further along than it had progressed the night before, and still a full hundred yards short of the first crest. The two young men reached it there as its tires spun in the mud and hit it like football players, as though they would shove it the rest of the way themselves. Instead, Vern chose that very moment to throw into reverse, and they bounced off hard. Fortunately, they kept their footing and careened outside the truck’s path or they would have been crushed by the wheels. They jumped up and down and howled with glee.

Vern finally remembered his chains. It took nearly an hour to find them in the piles of gear spread around the cookshack, partly because the two chains were in two separate piles. When he and Ray got them on the tires, the truck rumbled up the hill and over the crest with little difficulty. A spontaneous cheer rose from the people watching by the cookshack, and there was a mad scramble for hoedads and

tree bags as the crew scrambled up the mountain after the truck. With some momentum finally going, Vern never did stop driving, so the rest hiked all the way. The four miles were, of course, a much longer walk uphill than down, and Alex and Catherine were the last to reach the site. As they started down to the bridge over the river, they could see Vern and Ray and the two young men unloading the boxes. Heading uphill from the bridge were Stoner, Nick, and French Pierre. "I wonder," said Alex, "If Vern and Ray remembered their bags and hoedads."

"Someone should have thought of that," said Catherine. "Why didn't you?"

"Did you keep the spruce and Douglas fir separate?" Alex asked when he reached the truck.

"Listen to this!" Vern hooted from the bed. "Last one here and he's telling us how to unload."

"Let's take care of these," said Ray. He dragged one of the boxes across the road to the place where Catherine had heeled in loose bundles the night before. "Arty, Jerry," he called to the two young men. "One of you guys feed me." They both jumped over the road and started throwing bundles at him. "No, no, not at me," cried Ray. "Hit the dirt here." They threw the trees into layered rows with extraordinary accuracy. "Are those spruce?" Alex called to him. "Cathy heeled spruce in there last night. They go on different sides of the road."

"And these are spruce?" marveled Ray, pointing at his feet. "Hey, these aren't spruce. Who told you these were spruce?"

"The bozos did," said Alex.

"What?" Vern jumped down from the bed. "What did you call them?"

"Bozos," Alex repeated.

"Listen here," Vern told him angrily, "I'm not into call-

ing them bozos. What's a bozo? A bozo's a clown. Listen, we can't be calling our checkers clowns."

"So I won't say it around them," conceded Alex.

"Don't be saying it anywhere," cried Vern. "You might slip. Bozos! A bozo's a clown with big floppy ears! Bozos! Listen, you call them Sir!"

Alex threw up his hands. "OK," he agreed, and walked over to where Ray was still heeling in trees. "Ray," he said, "these are Douglas fir in this box."

"What do you mean?" Ray jumped down from the bank. "You think I don't know Douglas fir from spruce? Do you know how long I've been planting trees? For years! I've been planting trees for seven years and you're trying to tell me Douglas fir from spruce. How long have you been planting trees, just tell me that, how long have you been planting trees?" He waved his hoedad in Alex's face and awaited his answer.

Alex's calmness, his virtual passivity, amazed him. "Ray," he sighed. "It says Douglas fir on the box."

"Where?" Ray spit out the word. He leapt at the box and read the side panel. "No!" he protested, and Alex ducked as the little man swung the hoedad at the box like an axe, splitting it wide open, sending trees tumbling out onto the road.

"Look at this!" Vern stormed at Alex. "Is all you do is make trouble? Is that all you do?"

Alex's sense of calm struck him as all but preternatural. He spoke quietly, deliberately measuring his words. "The . . . that is Rick and Dick told us last night here that if we screwed up any more with the trees the contract would be fined." He gestured to his right, where the two young men stood on the bank below the road, where Ray had been working. "They told us those were spruce. Those, on the other side, are Douglas fir. The box here says Douglas fir. We have

to keep them separate. We're not making enough money to get fined."

"You can say that again," said Vern.

Alex took a bundle from the far end of the layered stacks. After glancing to make sure that he was out of Ray's range, he compared it with a bundle from the box labeled Douglas fir. "The Douglas fir," he told Vern, "are a year older. You can see the difference in size."

Ray and Vern stood side by side looking at him. "So the spruce are on one side and the Douglas fir are on the other?" realized Vern. "Well what's so tricky about that? Why don't you pull out all the spruce that Ray heeled in and put them where they belong?" Without correcting them, Alex did what was necessary. "Can't tell Douglas fir from spruce," Ray muttered to Vern as he walked away.

It was early afternoon by the time they finished heeling in the trees. Mounds of wet snow still clung to the rocks and fallen logs on the slope. The air hung dead and heavy over them, promising a drizzle that was not quite happening yet. But there was a problem. Ray and Vern had not remembered their own hoedads and bags. On the face of it, it seemed only to mean that they would be the ones not to plant, but the issue was apparently not that simple.

"Maybe Catherine and someone else should skip it today if no one else minds," suggested Vern.

Alex watched Catherine's jaw tighten. "Catherine's a very good planter," he said. "And she remembered her equipment."

Vern and Ray trained significant stares upon him. "Well, uh . . ." said Vern. A little grin crossed Ray's face. "She is, huh? Well, well."

"Look," said Vern. "I just think we should all be working together out here. We're all in this together."