

# The President's

years of wind and rain—the rivalry had been growing. Competition between our camp's three crews, for good land and high productivity, was pitched high; since treeplanting is piecemeal, paid for not by the acre or by the ounce of sweat, but by the tree. And the B.C. Ministry of Natural Resources' checking standards—at least in Kispiox—guaranteed fines, partial payment or no payment at all. One "j-rooted" tree or one tree planted too shallow ("exposed roots") or too deep ("buried leaders") out of ten meant a ten percent fine. A no payment block planted together by all three crews had caused a skirmish between André from Lyndon's crew and Tim from mine. But then, planters in the fields and planters in motel rooms are different people: the short time we have to enjoy the good forces us to leave our grudges with our shovels and our mattocks and our spears; with the unplanted seedlings on the sides of catroads: in the ground by the fields. On the hill.

I poised myself behind Cass, who held the borrowed fishing rod back and high. "Relax your forearm," I told Cass. "That's it. Now hold the line with your index against the cork grip. Pull back the catch...there, you're all set." "Where's the best place to cast?" Cass asked, glancing back over her shoulder. Her eyes always reminded me of hazelnuts. "I'd drop it just off of that ledge there." I pointed to where the river's rocky bottom suddenly dropped into blackness—just below the opposite bank. There, where the three streams formed a basin, me and André saw the long-haired Indian woman fishing a few nights back. I guided Cass's arm back a little further. "Remember to release the line about a second before you're swung the rod forward all the way—when it's, say, at the two o'clock position from where you want to land the lure." I let go.

Cass snapped the pole out in front of her; the lure whizzed diagonally over the water, dragging the line in a smooth arc like a well-pitched slowball. The lure was heading a little past its mark, but other than that, it was looking like the perfect cast. I was stooped over, about to pick up my rod and do likewise, when Cass's line stopped in mid-air, ringing the lure violently like a miniature cowbell, before it plunged straight down: into the rapids. "Oh shit!" Cass was yelling. "The line's buggered up." My eyes followed the slack, curling line in tiny circles to its source. I groaned. The spinner was the biggest nest of fluorescent yellow I'd ever seen. I straightened up, and took Cass's rod.

"It'll be pitch black before we get this mess straightened out. André'll have my head if he finds out," I grumbled. "I'm sorry," she said, in a brassy, deadpan, unapologetic voice. "No, it's no use. The spinner's old. Probably needed a bit of Three-in-One." I pulled out all the loose line and began working on the tangles: the kind of knots no fisherman could outdo, with nimble fingers or tongue. Not even André, who wove some of the finest tales I've ever heard.

Cass looked at her feet; her lips were pursed and she hid her soil-cracked hands in the front pockets of her jeans. I could tell she was unapologetic because she was too busy being mad at herself.

\* \* \*

Thud, gills opened and wilted like fireweed blossoms  
day and night/day and  
night day—the body; mother of pearl in the coming moon  
a spasm from head to tail  
its beak-mouth opened wide for all time and  
my hand dripping his red, the moon's and mine.

By the moon, me and Cass were able to find our way back to camp without the need of the rubberized army surplus flashlight strapped to my belt. It was full: Tsunga, the Rastafarian on my

crew, always said that fishing was best the day after a new moon . . . he would have to join us for breakfast.

The hum of the pipe and generator became louder: Jack was finishing up the dishes. From the road, we could see the glow of the bigtop. It was supported by a thirty-foot pole (A fresh cut log) and rod iron tent pegs. Through the translucent cotton, we could see Jack wiping up the mess tables. Ivan was seated on a bench: a sagging plank stretched between two sections of trees-tump. A Drum rollie hung out from the side of his mouth, over his thick black beard. Me and Cass walked triumphantly into the tent; Cass's fingers hooked through the fish's gills and out its mouth.

"'oly mackerelle!" André said. "That trout must weigh ten pound."

"Trout?" Jack's eyes bugged out as he bent forward and squinted to get a better look.

"Is that a trout or a steelhead?" "No way this is a trout!" I said. "Look at the beak on it. It's a salmon."

"It ain't no coho, that's for sure," Jack said, "No, I think André's right. It's got to be a rainbow." Cass broke in, "Well, why don't we clean it and find out? We all know what salmon fillets look like, right?"

Cass handed me the fish, and I took it around the back of the mess tent. I returned to borrow Jack's hunting knife and a piece of cardboard from a box of Okanagan peaches. Cass held the

flashlight for me as I slit the fish's belly from its anal fin to its gills. A large translucent sac, white with milt, spilled out onto the cardboard. I stripped out the mass of pink and liver-red organs—the stomach and intestines, the kidneys the heart—made an incision along its spine, cut off its head and peeled its scaly body open into two orangy-pink fillets. "It's a salmon alright," I said, "Just look at the colour of those fillets!"

"The colour? Look at the size! We're going to feast well tomorrow morning. I'm not sure I'm gonna be able to sleep knowing that'll be waiting. Here, let's show Jack and André," and she made a grab for the fish.

"Not yet," I said. "First we have to go down to the brook and wash it. I don't want to attract any black bears or grizzlies. I don't relish the idea of becoming the second Cedar Slopes planter to end up a bear's breakfast. So I'm gonna throw these fish parts in the water."

"Alright—why don't I get some Saran Wrap and some foil, and make some space in the fridge?"

"Right-o." I walked down the path, past Jack and Ivan's tent; fillets in one hand and remains on cardboard in the other.

By the brook, the moon was almost blinding. Every night, I thought, I fall asleep to this tiny brook's steady gurgle, underlapped by the roar of the Suskwa River into which it feeds. I bent down on the rocks to wash. Scales stuck to my hands took on a strange lustre in the cool, milky light. As the icy water ran through my fingers, I noticed the tear in my hand was clotted. The salmon sure was a fighter.

I rinsed the fillets, and laid them out on a pine log. Then I picked up the piece of cardboard box, and tipping it slightly, ever so slightly, I let the salmon's inners slide into the water; as if I were dedicating a body to the sea. "Probably a spring salmon," André would say. Cass would be wanting to get to bed. The last, bloated organ hit the water, was grabbed up by the current and pulled down. The cold brook, clear as glass, went white with milt, then cleared.

BY MICHAEL COHN

## THE MAN ON THE HUMBER RIVER BRIDGE SAID

You need colour film for winter photographs. You need the ugly dingy green of the water so people will see the river isn't clear and bright. You need the brown of the grass that sticks through the snow — there on the east bank — so people will see it isn't the crisp, fresh late spring or early summer stuff. People need to be able to tell that the skeletons of snow are truly grey, and not some other off white shade.

Of course in winter it's easy to compose shots — too easy, in fact. The snow over everything makes you see all the outlines, all the shapes you can combine. But it masks the content, too. It becomes so easy to tell lies.

Right here, for example, I can lie about the Humber River. If I back up and crouch down just a bit I can frame the river behind the bars of the bridge rail. The line of the river moves at an oblique angle to the bars, resisting the frame. Presto! 'The river is imprisoned by winter.' But of course it isn't, really. The water moves around the ice at the centre of the river, and under it too. And the seasons move again and again and again.

The content contradicts the composition.

Now the summer, that would be a different story.

There would be children wading near the shore, an old man feeding the ducks, leaves on the trees, maybe even a young couple sharing a bottle of red wine, drinking from the neck of the bottle, kissing between sips. Now that, that you couldn't distort with tricky angles and black and white film.

BY JIM FRANCIS

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