

## TALL POPLAR

In Canada in the spring of 1971, where the forests of the Ontario and Manitoba borders meet. Through miles of thick White Spruce, among the blooming Trillium and Prairie Crocus, a young Spruce spoke up, “The Walking Trees, they act as if we did something wrong, like we are in their way.”

The old Pine swayed, his voice gently flowed, slow and hearty with the breeze. “Some admire us. Some Walking Trees still remember.”

“They are all the same” said the White Spruce. “What is it like to be so tall?”

As a raft of Great Northern Loon passed over, the Pine remarked, “It's the same up here, as down there. The same feelings.”

Three hundred miles south, Carl and Eddie bounced along in a old faded red Ford pickup truck on Highway 72 towards the town of Sioux Lookout. Carl's lanky body, well over six gangling feet, was hunched over the steering wheel that was tightly gripped by his long, paint speckled fingers. His short black hair curled over his forehead, as he squinted to focus and to keep the decrepit truck from swerving. His long and narrow face came to a point at his chin, which held up his bottom lip and a cigarette. Eddie, who was of average height, with a square face, moved the dial on the radio around until he found an old boogie-woogie song that brought a smile to both their faces. Carl held his hand out the window, watching it open and close to catch the wind.

“Look at all this beauty!” he said. Eddie pulled a paper and some tobacco from the pouch tucked between his elbow and ribs then rolled up a thin cigarette, and promptly placed it in his mouth, lit it, and puffed away.

“This truck is getting harder and harder to steer,” Carl remarked as he went hand over hand at a wide angle, nearly running off the road completely.

“I almost spilled this precious drink,” said Eddie, raising a bottle of whiskey from his lap. Carl reached for it, took a swig and handed it back.

## TALL POPLAR

“Once when I was a boy,” said Carl, “out checking on some traps I laid, I swear I heard this old pine tree spout off, plain as you hear me. It said, 'Go where there is Sunlight!’”

Eddie took a puff from his cigarette and asked, “What's that supposed to mean eh? The mountains are alive... its... its... the trees! What does 'go where there is sunshine' mean eh?” Carl sat back, pondering the question for the first time. Eddie broke the silence.

“Ya well its like our grandfathers would say, everything is alive.” Carl pulled the truck to the side of the road, opened the door, and let out a loud “AHAA-YAAAH” as he stepped out. Eddie jumped from the truck and ran around the other side to join his friend yelling, “YAAAHAA!” He then ran past Carl, who had picked up a large stick and was poking between the bushes.

“You believe me though... right? That’s why I started painting them, all this... stuff. I never had luck trapping or hunting anyway.” Eddie looked back at Carl poking around the brush and at the forest surrounding them.

“You are crazy brother, but I believe you. It's kinda crazy to be out here at night with no heat in that truck.” It was the first time Carl had noticed that the two of them did not have jackets, only flannels.

“Ya, lets go, first though...” Carl said, his voice trailing off. He poked his stick between two bushes and pulled them apart to reveal a painting half buried under thick leaves and brush.

“What is it?” asked Eddie.

Carl puffed on his cigarette, and cocked his eyebrow up, “That's my soul.”

Eddie laughed and walked back to the truck saying over his shoulder, “Well if you show people that one, they will see the world different eh.” Carl took one last look at the painting and up at an old Pine.

“You weren’t here before,” he said.

That night, in bed that lay in a small room above a saloon, Carl slept. Down below in the

## TALL POPLAR

bar, a pretty young waitress wearing Carl's flannel walked up to the tender.

“Gimme a whiskey!” she said, and took the glass to a table where Eddie sat playing cards with three other guys. “Is he gonna sleep here tonight?” she asked. Eddie only shrugged, keeping his eyes on his cards. Up in the room, Carl dreamt he was standing in the woods at night. All around him were trees lit by the moonlight. He touched his stomach in pain. He then walked towards a large pine and fell forward, trying desperately to breathe. Suddenly the tree snapped and fell towards Carl. His eyes opened wide, as he sat up in the bed taking a deep breath. He reached out and knocked a bottle off the night stand. He turned the light on to look at a stack of his paintings in a corner of the room, all blue and green, deep forest landscapes. Carl took a fresh shirt and a bag out of a closet, then got dressed. He ran downstairs to the table where Eddie was.

“I’m going out to those woods for a few days,” he said. Eddie, not looking up, moved a few cards in his hand from right to left.

“Why?” he asked.

“Something's calling me I think,” said Carl. The same boogie-woogie song came on the jukebox and the two of them smiled as Eddie stood up and started to dance.

“Hey man... whatcha doin', are ya playin' or not!” bellowed a man from the across the table angrily. His nose flat and broken, raised from his seat as he set down his cards and jumped to his feet. “HEY GUY! HEY!” he shouted. The man became even more agitated when Eddie and Carl did not respond. He picked up his cowboy hat and an empty bottle from the table then broke it over Eddie's head. Carl who was taller than the man, but not as fast, tried to throw a punch. The man ducked, took a knife out, and kicked him through the card table. The Cowboy was about to plunge the knife into Carl's stomach, when a chair broke over his back and he fell to the floor. Eddie stood over him. Instantly the whole bar was in a riot like a scene from an old western. Eddie took another chair and slammed it over the Cowboys head.

## TALL POPLAR

“I WIN!” he shouted. He helped Carl up and grabbed some dollar bills from the floor. As the two of them headed out the door, Eddie shouted with his hands in the air, “I WIN!”

They sat at another bar on the other side of town. Eddie carried on talking while Carl sat slumped over, holding the back of his head. “Your drunk Eddie! My lips busted. We gotta get outta here eh,” said Carl. Eddie stood and held the bar.

“I’m gonna go piss, then we can go anywhere you wanna go.” He walked slowly, sliding his hand along the bar rail saying excuse me and chatting up every person he bumped.

Carl looked at the blood on his palms and the paint on his fingers.

“Is that it for you, Carl?” asks the bartender. “What’s all over yer hands eh?”

“Colors... paint,” Carl said.

“Better than beer eh!” the bartender remarked. The door to the bar opened and the Cowboy stood examining the room.

Carl lifted his head to the ceiling and said, “Hey your letting in the cold air!” The Cowboy ran towards Carl and wrapped himself around him, with a hug that caused Carl to fall backward. Carl looked at his stomach to see the blood pooling out of his shirt. He felt his body getting colder and heard people screaming. He saw human figures standing over him, fading. In their places became Pine trees. The Cowboy picked up his hat and knife and ran out the door. Eddie stumbled out of the bathroom and saw people huddled and talking. He rushed passed them and knelt over his friend who was still, and no longer breathing.

“Carl? Tall Poplar?”

Deep in the woods, a Great Grey Owl rested on the young Spruce who asked, “What happened to that Walking Tree?”

“He transformed,” creaked the old Pine. “He’s close, a part of me now, even further away as well.”