

INT. TRUCK - END OF STORY, LOOKING BACK - DRIVING

The NARRATOR drives the truck, and speaks into a recorder.

NARRATOR

Water, water everywhere, and plenty of it to drink, you've got half a mind to. Lake after lake. I couldn't count 'em all in a lifetime, but if they say there're ten thousand, I've no reason to doubt it. The days are hot here, almost as hot as the nights are cold. Hotter than they ought to be, this far north. I think I'd fancy a swim. Next lake I see I'll park Old Stars by the bank and do just that. Whattya think, Smokey Jr.? Maybe wash the last bit of this ash off us? Still got a fair share of it tucked in my ears and collected in my hair. The road's already cleared most of it off Old Stars, but there was quite a bit to start. That man's breath did us all a number.

The recorder switches off.

INT. TRUCK - PRESENT - DRIVING

Narrator drives the truck.

NARRATOR

It's been a while since town, should be gettin' to the loggin' camp soon. Hopefully before dark settles in. Dusk has already swept across the tree line. I've been tryin' as best I can not to drive at night. Don't know what I'll run into if I can't see it. And there's more than potholes to worry about up north. These new roads weren't built for eighteen-wheelers.

A loud BOOM is heard, shaking the ground somewhat.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Don't much like the sound of that. Must be gettin' closer. Maybe they're still out fellin' trees.

Another BOOM, closer.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Maybe not. Fallen trees shouldn't shake the ground like that.

Birds fly out of the trees, flock together above the truck.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Can't be an earthquake, can it? Not sure if they get 'em in Minnesota. You'd know, wouldn't you? You were always spoutin' off stuff like that. Not that I minded.

Another LOUD BOOM, much closer. Trees fall behind the truck, block the road back.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Son of a-. Now that's what a fallin' tree sounds like.

(sigh)

Well, there goes my way back. A common occurrence, trees fallin' behind me. Wonder what it means they never seem to fall in front? Some cosmic power usherin' me forward, I suppose. Only this time the way back is the way forward, least it will be when I'm loaded up with lumber. Well, I hope they know another road to town from the loggin' camp, otherwise it will be a while clearin' the road out.

The LOUD BOOM is farther off, retreating.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Seems like whatever it was makin' the earth shake like that has diverted, at least. A small comfort there. And this must be the camp ahead. Right in time.

The truck comes to a stop.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

A recorder switches on.

NARRATOR

No sign marked the camp, but it was close enough to the road to see.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

A fair few houses clapped together with fresh lumber and shingles surrounded by massive log piles on all sides but my entrance. The log piles formed a haphazard fence of sorts, no tellin' if it was accidental or grown from the intention to keep somethin' out. Or in. The logs were white pine, the same ones I'd come to collect. White gold, more like. They'd been near harvested out before the collapse, but to hear it told they've been growin' up like weeds since, almost faster than they can chop 'em down. And they're worth a pretty penny to the cities and towns rebuildin', fightin' the tide of nature. Hence the new white gold rush. Camps like this one can be found from here all the way to the shores of Lake Superior. Maybe not quite like this one, though.

The recorder SWITCHES OFF.

EXT. LOGGING CAMP - EVENING - PRESENT

The Narrator climbs out of the truck in the logging camp. Loggers gather after a hard days work in the timber forests. Women, all of them. Lumberjills.

LUMBERJILL JANE walks up to the Narrator and his truck.

LUMBERJILL JANE

Hello there! You picked a great time to show. We're just about to settle into supper.

NARRATOR

(playful)

Great timin's what I'm known for. I came for the logs, though there seem to be a lot more here than will fit on my trailer.

LUMBERJILL JANE

That there are. We're in a bit of a standoff, trying to beat the boys over the way. Don't you mind that, though. We'll load your rig up with as much as we can.

NARRATOR

Can't exactly deliver it, things the way they stand. There was a tremor of sorts a ways back, felled a few trees over the road behind.

LUMBERJILL JANE

Can't say it doesn't happen. I'll send some of the women up to clear it in the morning, after we load up your truck. Come on, join us for supper. And if you're tired of your rig, you're welcome to spend the night here. We've got an empty house you could bunk in.

NARRATOR

I appreciate the offer. Might even take you up on it.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

A recorder SWITCHES ON.

NARRATOR

She walked over to the mess hall, but I lingered a moment. The sun had set on the camp, but the light hadn't waned completely. I walked up to one of the log pyramids, higher than Old Stars, even. Beautiful wood, though a bit eerie. One thing to hear the trees grew like weeds, another to see the timber and count the tree rings, or lack thereof. They were young, alright. Hopefully sturdy. I left the logs and joined the Lumberjills in their makeshift mess hall.

Recorder SWITCHES OFF.

INT. MESS HALL - EVENING - PRESENT

The Narrator enters the long mess hall.

The lumberjills chow down on their dinners.

LUMBERJILL JANE

(calling)
Over here!

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

Close to thirty women lined the dinin' tables in the hall. Noisily chowin' down. I made my way to the one who greeted me, sat down across from her. Two women busy eatin' to my sides. An empty bowl and cup were set in front of me. They were filled in quick order, a thick, hearty soup and a dark wine. Had a bit of a shock when I dug in, though. No meat in the soup. Nothin' that needed cookin' as a matter of fact. Both the soup and the wine were freezin' cold, the both of 'em, difficult to put down despite my gnawin' hunger. They were generous in sharin', but I coulda done with some hot food, in all honesty. The cold had already begun settlin' in, shiverin' my bones. I've driven all over these broken roads, yet I still chill easy. A lifetime of the northern cold couldn't change my warm blood, it'd seem. But I'm not one to turn my nose up at generosity.

RECORDER OFF.

INT. MESS HALL - EVENING - PRESENT

The Narrator SLURPS his cold soup. SETS the spoon in his bowl. He sits across from Lumberjill Jane. Next to and between other lumberjills.

NARRATOR

A fine meal. Thank you for the hospitality. Shame I can't transport all your timber. Is this everyone that cut those trees down?

LUMBERJILL JANE

Yep, we're it.

Beside the Narrator LUMBERJILL ROSE speaks up.

LUMBERJILL ROSE
We either chose this life or it
chose us, but we're all Lumberjills
the same. I'm from the city.

LUMBERJILL JANE
I'm from down south, if you
couldn't tell.

LUMBERJILL MEG, beside Jane, speaks. She's upset.

LUMBERJILL MEG
(upset)
This isn't everyone. I'm going to
wait for her by the wood site.

LUMBERJILL JANE
Fine, just don't stay out too late
past dark. You were lucky last
time.

LUMBERJILL MEG
It wasn't luck. I know these woods.

LUMBERJILL JANE
Start thinking like that you're
sure to wander off and get lost,
and then the only thing you'll
really know is just how cold it is
at the bottom of whichever lake you
fall into. And if that happens...
well, you know the rule.

LUMBERJILL MEG
No fires.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR
No fires. Not even for cookin' it
would seem. Smart rule, that.

RECORDER OFF.

INT. MESS HALL - EVENING - PRESENT

LUMBERJILL ROSE
Poor girl.

LUMBERJILL JANE

I misspoke earlier. We were one more before. But her sister, she, uh... she left us a couple of weeks back.

LUMBERJILL ROSE

(to herself)
She shouldn't have gone with him.

LUMBERJILL JANE

(to Rose)
Enough of that. What's done is done.
(cheerfully)
You must be tired from the road, let me show you the spare house.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

Recorder ON.

NARRATOR

I was tired, especially after that meal. Never ceases to bewilder how much sittin' and holdin' a wheel can take out of you. Or from you. All that effort to point your truck in one direction when every atom and molecule in you is vibratin' the opposite way. Tryin' to shake you loose, bring you back to where you left. I spent a lot of energy fightin' that feelin'. The itch to return. Course now there's nowhere to return to, is there? And no way to, even if there were. Too much overgrowth and fallen trees blockin' the path. That cosmic power usherin' me forward.

Recorder OFF.

EXT. LOGGING CAMP - NARRATOR'S CABIN - NIGHT - PRESENT

Lumberjill Jane stands outside the cabin with the narrator.

LUMBERJILL JANE

Here you are. Bedding and things are inside, make yourself comfortable I'll see you in the morning. And don't forget-

NARRATOR
No fires. Got it.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

Recorder ON.

NARRATOR
She left me at the door, walked back into the dark of the camp. Soon as she did I collapsed onto the bed. Quite literally fell to sleep, if you like. Can't say how much time passed before the sound woke me. Or was it the quakes that woke me first? Guess I can't say that either.

Recorder OFF.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT - PRESENT

A LOUD BOOM shakes the cabin.

The narrator wakes up, hears a FAINT VOICE.

FAINT VOICE
Help. Help. Help.

He gets up and opens the cabin door.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

Recorder ON.

NARRATOR
I bolted out the door and to the cry, the stars barely lightin' the white pine log piles behind the cabin. I heard it again, faint, from just beyond that barrier. I pressed myself up against the logs, found the smallest gap to peer through, and saw her. Soakin' wet, skin white as the pine logs separatin' us, lips blue as the clear lake she must've fallen into. The other one was right. She might've known the woods, sure, but now she knew just how cold the lakes could be.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Plenty of blankets in the cabin,
filled one arm with as many as I
could when I ran back in. Saved the
other to carry lantern and flint I
found disused in the corner,
though. Rules be damned, I wasn't
about to let that poor woman die. I
rushed toward the entrance, tryin'
to light the lantern as I went
when—

The Narrator mimics a fall, OOMPHS.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

—another quake took me to my knees,
the lantern dropped out of my hands
and to the ground, spun, and
toppled over, spillin' a fair bit
of that oil before I righted it.
Good thing it wasn't lit. I
scrambled out the entrance and
around the perimeter, found her
freezin' on the cold ground, her
shivers already subsidin', skin
waxy as the sliver of moon in the
sky. Hypothermia was settin' in
fast. I got her wrapped in the
blankets as quick as I could, lit
the lantern and set it beside her,
then scrambled to find some rocks.
Fast as I was movin' it only took a
minute to find enough to make a
small circle. Cleared the brush
around it and broke their rule. It
was small, but it was warmth. A
fire. Mistake wasn't there though.
That fire never left that ring of
rocks. Mistake was right behind me.

Recorder OFF.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE LOGGING CAMP - NIGHT - PRESENT

The Narrator nurses Lumberjill Meg.

NARRATOR

That's it Miss, come back to us
now. Take it slowly, you've—

A LOUD BOOM.

Glass SHATTERS.

Flames WHOOSH and spread.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Awww, sh-

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

Recorder ON.

NARRATOR

Should'a listened. Not always the best at that. Listenin'. She was comin' back, the hypothermia wrap and small fire workin' their cure, when that quake shook us. Shook the lantern, too, still lit behind me, forgotten. Broke the glass, sent the flame in it shootin' through the brush and pine needles, takin' to the whole forest around us. Cold was the last thing on my mind then. I scooped her up as quick as I could and ran back to the camp, fire lickin' the trees, consumin' them, growin' around us. Someone had the presence of mind to sweep the perimeter of pine needles, and the fire skirted it, for now. I carried her through the entrance and back into the camp. Plenty of light to see by.

Recorder OFF.

EXT. LOGGING CAMP - NIGHT - PRESENT

Chaos in the camp, the surrounding forests aflame.

LUMBERJILL JANE

Let's go ladies! Go go go!

(sees Narrator)

You! What happened? Wait, is that-

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

The forewoman called off a few of the lumberjills to gather the shiverin' one from out of my arms.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

The rest ran around, loaded themselves and some equipment up onto the flat-bed trailer behind my semi-truck as quick as they could. I understood the lumberjills' intentions immediately, didn't argue with 'em at all. Even if the fire weren't my fault, I knew Old Stars was the best chance any of us had of escapin' the spreadin' flames. They had already burnt their way out to the forest around us, but not yet past the white pine log stacks fencin' the camp in. We didn't have too long, though. I asked the forewoman if that was all of the lumberjills, and she nodded yes. No one there to dispute her like in the mess hall, and no time to waste on searchin' for stragglers. The women were all loaded up on the back, holdin' on as tight as they could. The shiverin' one was with another in my sleeper cab, bundled up in new blankets for warmth. The forewoman climbed up with me and we drove out, burst through the entrance and the flames not too far outside it, and down the mostly clear road I had come from. No time to check on the women, just had to keep movin', slow as I did to keep from shakin' 'em off. I told the forewoman what had happened. She just watched the flames.

Recorder OFF.

INT. TRUCK - NIGHT - PRESENT - DRIVING

The Narrator drives the truck, Jane in the passenger seat.

LUMBERJILL JANE

Fire's catching up.

NARRATOR

Can't go much faster or your lumberjills will fall off the back. If we can keep this speed-

The Narrator brakes hard.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)
The felled trees I told you about.

Jane opens the door and hops down.

LUMBERJILL JANE
Let's go ladies (people)! Fast as
you can, clear the road!

The lumberjills call out.

LUMBERJILLS
Yes ma'am.

The rush off the back and toward the fallen trees, use
chainsaws they brought with them to cut. The chainsaws WHIR.
The flames CRACKLING nearby.

A LOUD BOOM shakes the area.

LUMBERJILL JANE
Look what you've done! You happy,
then, you oversized cartoon?!

An incredibly loud MOO.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

Recorder ON.

NARRATOR
The flames were comin' fast. Too
fast. The lumberjills were quick on
the fallen trees, watchin' them I
had no doubt they felled and
stacked the white pine logs in
their camp with the same speed.
They weren't movin' quick enough
now, though. The fire was just
about on top of us, the women still
workin' on clearin' the road, when
that last quake came. The forewoman
got out and started yellin' at the
sky, angry as all hell. I got out
too, blasted by a wave of heat.
That's when I saw him. Well, I saw
the cow first.

LOUD MOO.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)
Then him. Twice as tall as the
trees around us.
(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I recognized 'em both at first glance, the ragin' fire illuminatin' them well enough in the night. That, and I'd seen the both of them all over Minnesota, first in Akeley, then Bemidji. Always in fiberglass, albeit. Seein' em in the flesh was a first for me. But there they were, alive and all. Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox. The first lumberjack. Him in his red flannel and jeans. A large ax in his hand. He looked sad. Maybe remorseful, even. Large drops of sweat crashed down from his forehead and arms, dousin' the forest below. And on his shoulder, way up high, sat a figure, hard to make out in the flickerin' light of the forest fire. A woman maybe. Didn't have too long to strain for clarity. Paul Bunyan furrowed his brow and sucked in as much air as he could, his whole body swellin' up.

LONG WHOOSH.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Then he blew it out. And kept blowin', till he had blowed the whole forest fire out. Hadn't seen the likes of it before, doubt I will again. The lumberjills stared up in a mix of awe and anger. The forewoman shook her head. Seemed they all knew about ol' Paul and Babe. I looked over and saw the shiverin' woman, not shiverin' now, all bundled up. The ash from the fire settlin' on her damp hair. She smiled up at Paul. Or up at his shoulder. Without the forest fire to light up the night I could barely make out his shape. Until he knelt down amongst us. And then I saw her clearly, the woman perched by his neck. The family resemblance was uncanny. The shiverin' woman's sister. She hopped off, ran to her shiverin' sister beside me and grabbed her in her arms. She turned back to Paul, a sad smile on her lips.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

He opened his mouth to speak to her, but it was all burnt up. All that hot air he had sucked in had taken its toll. He didn't stick around long after that. Headed off toward the distance, Babe the Blue Ox with him.

Recorder OFF.

EXT. FOREST ROAD - NIGHT - PRESENT

The lumberjills stand in the falling ash.

LOUD BOOMS recede into the distance.

LUMBERJILL JANE

Show's over ladies, let's go.

(to Narrator)

Think you could give us a lift back to camp? Or what's left of it.

NARRATOR

(still in awe)

Sure can.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

Recorder ON.

NARRATOR

I drove 'em back to the camp, the ash fallin' all around Old Stars, blockin' the headlights as we went. I went real slow. Don't know what I'll run into if I can't see it. When we got back the sky was blue, near dawn. Damage wasn't as bad as I'd have thought. The white pine log stacks had taken the brunt of the flames. The camp itself was largely spared, and that what wasn't could be rebuilt. But their timber was useless now. All save one stack near the back. It was soaked through in a salty wetness, I had my theory what from. It would dry, though, and just as well it was enough to fit on the flatbed trailer. The lumberjills loaded it up in silence. It wasn't all somber, though.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

They might not beat 'em, but I had a suspicion they didn't need to worry about Paul Bunyan helpin' the boys across the way for a while. Enough time at least to replenish their log stacks to where they had been before. The white pine does grow like weeds. And I'd seen first hand how well the lumberjills worked together to chop it up. Before I left the forewoman gave me one of their chainsaws. Told me if I wanted to keep drivin' these roads I'd best learn to use it, the next time a tree blocked my way. She had a point, and it was a decent gift as well. She said it wasn't a gift, though, but payment. For never coming back. I had broken the rule, and she hadn't forgotten. No fires.

Recorder OFF.

EXT. LOGGING CAMP - MORNING - PRESENT

The Narrator approaches his truck. Before he can climb up, LUMBERJILL MEG'S SISTER calls out to him.

MEG'S SISTER

You're leaving? Thanks for saving my sister. We were a bit late in coming last night, I guess she went looking. She shouldn't have, though. There are a lot of lakes here.

NARRATOR

So I've heard. You take care, then.

MEG'S SISTER

So, you aren't curious about how me and...

NARRATOR

Paul Bunyan? No. There ain't a whole lot of happiness left, I can't judge you for finding some. Long as nobody gets hurt, that is.

MEG'S SISTER

Paul's mouth will heal. The rest of us will be fine.

NARRATOR

You need a ride somewhere?

MEG'S SISTER

No, he'll come for me when he's able to. Until then I'll help rebuild here. And try to make my sister understand.

NARRATOR

You best do that. Don't want her wanderin' into any more lakes.

INT. TRUCK - LATER - DRIVING - PRESENT

The truck BRAKES.

The Narrator gets out.

EXT. FOREST ROAD - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Sounds of the forest.

NARRATOR

Hey there, little fella. You doin' alright?

INT. TRUCK - END OF STORY, LOOKING BACK - DRIVING

Recorder ON.

NARRATOR

A small black bear cub clung to a tree branch not too far from the camp, the bottom of the tree scorched by the night's fire. He was scared, alone. Kept lickin' his paws, and I could see they'd been burnt. Couldn't just leave him there, now could I? He'll grow up to be something fierce, but right now he's barely bigger than my arms. And it was my fault he'd been burnt. I gathered him up and wrapped him in the same bundle they'd wrapped the shiverin' woman in, left behind in my sleeper. He was still for a while, but eventually he found that rock candy I'd taken from those mountains a few roads back.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

He's still lickin' it now. Don't know how long I can take him with me, but I figure I can bring him at least as far as the Company mill. There are fiberglass statues in that town, too. Minnesota has some strange fascination with 'em. That big green one down south. All the Paul Bunyans and Babe the Blue Oxes. And the one at the mill town. Standin' there shirtless with his jeans and ranger's hat, shovel in hand. Two small cubs at his sides. Smokey Bear. Maybe he'll come to life like Paul Bunyan and take this cub off my hands, raise him up right. More likely he'll give me quite the lecture. He'd be well within his rights to. "Only you can prevent wild fires." Yeah Smokey, you're right about that. I promise to be more careful. Can't count on Paul Bunyan to bail me out in the future. No fires. A smart rule, that. They don't belong here, anyway. This is the land of ten thousand lakes. A place of water. Speakin' of, I just passed a sign for Voyageurs National Park. Lake Kabetogama visitor center. Sounds like as good a place as any to take a daytime dip, wash the last of this ash off. Whattya think, Smokey Jr.? Should we make a stop?

Recorder OFF.

END OF EPISODE.