

This is a story set in a small northern town on Highway 11.

The road snakes north away from the Great Lakes, goes through North Bay and then curves up onto the flat lands of the Canadian Shield. It turns west to head over Timmins and eventually comes through to Thunder Bay. It is a long desolate road where you can drive for hours and not see a soul.

They settled immigrants from Poland and the Ukraine there after the war, to stake out farms. But the soil was no good and the winters too harsh, so all the farmers eventually gathered into the towns where the industries of mining and of pulp and paper were getting going in the 50's.

"Russ" had moved in from Alberta during one of the down turns in the Boom & Bust times.

He was young and strong and willing and got a job quickly on a logging crew.

The crew set out along the dirt roads, winding between lakes and eskers of gravel left by the Ice Age. A crew would be gone for weeks, staying in the logging camps at night and working in the winter snow while the ground was hard enough for trucks and equipment. It was hard physical work and rough on a body, but the company of men as good for Russ, and friendships grew in the adversity of minus 20C and colder. He began to feel like a man and that he was standing up on his own a doing well.

At the end of a turn in the bush the men would come back into a town carrying sometimes a thousand dollars, cash in hand. The crew would fill the rooms of the hotels and the seats of the bars.

His first time was a wild week, and by Sunday Russ found his pockets empty and his head hurt and his eyes were watery. He made his way to the only place that was open and free. He went to a church. The preacher stood up and said, "The time is fulfilled! The Kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the good news!" People were nice after church and gave him coffee and kind words. One old Chinese lady brought a little bag of food for him to take on his way. "My husband worked the bush," she said, "It is hard. You need to start a new life! Soon! Soon!"

He hooked up with another crew and went back to the bush to cut trees, strip off the limbs, stack them on the ice for the spring float, and then go and cut more trees. There was a cycle to his life. Weeks of hard work, then rolls of bank notes, then a days of heavy drinking and back to the bush again. But, each time, Russ always headed for that little church, bleary eyed and hung over.

The only words he ever remembered were about the Kingdom of God coming near, and it was the time to change and begin a new life. But it never was the time to begin again when you were in a bar, and by the time that was done you had no money and you had to get back to the logging camp.

How many times would the Kingdom of God come near him, he wondered. Would he miss his chance to repent and start a new life? He had no idea, but a vague uneasy feeling.

In the Spring the bitter cold of the north gave way suddenly to warmth. A wind from the west would come and literally blow the snow away and the streams would fill with raging water. The loggers gathered where huge walls, pyramids and mountains of logs had been stacked all winter beside the river's course. By hand and by machine they would roll and throw the logs into the swirling waters to be carried down to the mill. When that was done they were off. Back to town with a bonus worth a king's ransom.

Coming into town Russ got off the company bus and literally bumped into the Chinese lady from the Church. "Come and get a bath!" she commanded him. "You stink!" Obediently he followed her to her house where she lived quite alone.

"You live alone!" said Russ, suddenly feeling foolish. "Yes," she replied, "I told you, my husband worked the bush. One day a big feller-buncher rolled in soft mud and crushed him. 8 years ago. The kids have all gone. He was going to retire. Start a new life. It never came for him. He liked the money too much!"

Russ sat and looked at his socked feet. Dirty, tired, lost inside. And words came back to him.

"Has the Kingdom of God come near?" he asked her. "Yes," she said, "it is very near you now."

"Is it good in the Kingdom?" he asked. "It is good, very good," she said, "and sometimes sad too."

"Does everything change?" Russ asked. "Yes...and no...but yes." She replied. "Look! Look out my window. You see the trees?"

The poplars outside the window were tall slim trees, shiny barked, covered in thousands of fresh, round, green leaves, all dancing in the breeze. "They are beautiful!" said Russ, seeing them, as if for the first time. She said, "When Winter has gone on so long you cannot remember anything else. The trees here look dead, so dead. Can they be alive? you wonder. Then it happens...ah! Suddenly spring comes. Children swim in the lake and birds fly and leaves are on every tree and flowers in my yard."

"I work in the bush," Russ began, "I get up, eat, drive out to the cut and I work. It is hard. All morning, then all afternoon, and then I come back and eat, and then sleep. I don't remember the trees I cut. I don't remember what I eat. It is like being dead inside, just working. Then we come to town and we party. But I don't remember the party. I don't remember the girls, the music, the hotel room. It is like being dead too. Then I come to your church, and it is quiet, and there is light, and you are kind to me. I feel that is the only time I am awake."

There was a tear in Russ' eye. But Hilda, for that was her name, did not see it. Her sight was misted by tears too.

"Have that bath!" she commanded, without the authority in her voice that she had hoped for.

Russ ate lunch with Hilda, and she took him to the church. In those days, when churches could stay open, anyone could go in, and she said that to Russ as he hesitated at the door.

They went in and sat as the yellow light filtered through the windows. They looked up at the cross, carved with vine leaves and grapes, that hung, simply, on the far wall. It was peaceful.

Hilda reached for a Bible and thumbed through to a page. She read these words.

"For God alone my soul in silence waits. Truly, my hope is in him. He alone is my rock and my salvation. He is my strong hold! so that I shall not be shaken. In God is my safety, and my honour. My God is my strong rock, and my refuge." Then turning to Russ she continued, not needing to read, "Put your trust in him always, Russ, pour out your heart before him, for God is our refuge."

Russ heard those words from his first Sunday again, "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent. Believe the good news."

Russ reached over and took Hilda's hand. "Say something for me." he said. "A prayer."

She took his hand and said, "First I will ask you a question. What do you want to leave behind?"

"I want to leave behind the money and the drink and being asleep. I want to leave behind the ache in my heart for my Pop. I left angry. I haven't even told him I'm alive. I want to leave behind the things I've done wrong here. The things I've done drunk. The people I hurt. The things I busted up. The women I disrespected. I want to leave that "Me" behind, and say sorry. I want to start clean and fresh. Can I do that Hilda? Can I do that with God?"

Hilda put a hand on his shoulder. He was bent down now and looked broken inside.

"When the Kingdom of God comes near, it's like a great eagle coming down for you. You have to put down all your stuff. You got to go empty. That is what you just did. You emptied. When you are truly emptied

then you are forgiven, and you can climb onboard that eagle. You can begin again and live in God, live in his Kingdom like I do. And like the others at Church, and the Reverend too! Everything changes! Like winter to summer. Inside.”

And here she tapped onto his chest as she pulled him more upright.

“In here is where the summer never ends. Outside, it comes and goes, those seasons.

But now you’ll see the light dance on the diamonds of ice, and look deep into God’s sky, dark on a winter’s noon above your head.

And you’ll sing for the first moving water of spring and you will even bless the first black-fly, and later, the first snow flake.”

Hilda put the Bible in his hands, open to the psalm 62. Together they read as she had alone...

For God alone my soul in silence waits,  
my hope is in him.  
He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken.  
In God is my safety and my honour.  
God is my strong rock and my refuge.  
Put your trust in him, O people,  
pour out your hearts before him,  
for God is our refuge.”

And there was silence, like the stillness of the first dawn.

“Say these words after me.” she said. “I will” he replied.

She led him simply with these words. And I invite you, if you would like to, to repeat them, as he did.

Lord Jesus, I give you my life.  
I give you all I am and can be.  
You have forgiven me of all I did wrong.  
Let me be your follower.  
And now I am your child.  
New in the Kingdom of God.  
Amen.