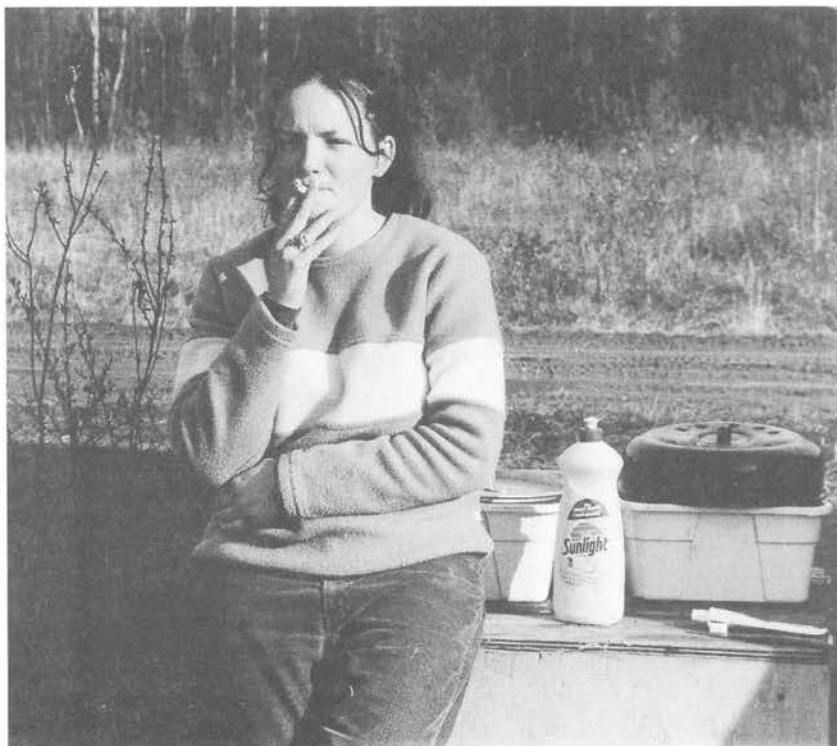


by Lisa Richardson



At night we sit around the mess tent and even the non-smokers smoke because we need to indulge and the head rush is great after a day of hard work. We share stories. About the land. About the tree prices. About a granite hill which we have to plant tomorrow. About a crazy day a couple of years ago when someone was supposed to plant a quicksand strip out in Alberta. About a woman from BC who planted 10,000 trees in a single day...

We are lured here as though it is the road to the gold mine. Before I planted, stories of highballers pulling in \$400-\$500 a day resonated louder and longer than those about the bug swarms and sweaty 14 hour days in pesticide clouds. We fill up on dollar signs—I think the management might be slipping greed pills into our oatmeal.





There's a botanist on our crew who keeps a list of the plant species which he sees. Whenever he encounters Labrador Tea, his favourite, he yells out *Leduc Decembers*, *Leduc Decembers* as though he has bumped into a nursery school friend in the middle of a wasteland. You can hear him from three pieces away.

Cracks around the knuckles are the tree planter's stigmata. It's better to let the skin harden so that the armour coat shields your hands from the soil's acid. I watch some people wrapping their fingers with duct tape during the bus ride to the block every morning. Others holding out a distended ankle or wrist to be taped up like a boxer. The school bus spits out people encasted in silver.

