

THE STOKER

I

It was late summer, the year 1954, and not only had our logging foreman told us it was time to shut down for the season, but Mother Nature was starting to give us subtle hints as well. The days were getting shorter and the leaves were starting to turn, offering us a last blast of autumn colour before the winter's grey set in. We wouldn't be working in the bush again until the muskeg froze and ice settled on the lake.

One night not long afterwards I was at a party with my old buddy Skip Robbins. We had our pockets full of money after having earned a whopping \$1.25 an hour all summer, which probably meant around \$400 between the two of us. Someone asked Skip, "What are you two clowns going to do until we start up again?"

"Oh I dunno," slurred Skip in his rapidly advancing state of intoxication. "Maybe we'll go and join the navy." This statement brought a round of laughter, as well it should have, considering who it was might be doing the joining.

"I doubt the navy is that hard up for men that they'd take the pair of you," came the expected reply.

"Oh yeah? Well betcha, what, ten dollars they'd be happy to have a couple of able-bodied men like us—right, Mel?"

The sound of my name and the mention of ten dollars took me, momentarily, away from my pursuit of a young lady who, at that point of the night, looked an awful lot like Marilyn Monroe. When, in actual fact, in the cruel light of day and without the benefit of the alcohol's rosy mist and the bad lighting, she had dark hair and was built more like a mason jar than an hourglass.

"You betcha, Skip—whatever," I said. Not surprisingly, Skip and I agreed on just about everything, especially at a party. We'd

been working and hanging around together for over a year now, and had built up a pretty good friendship as a result. He was a likeable guy, about 5-foot-10 with a stocky build; he had a great head of sandy curly hair roofing a round face, and a slightly turned up nose with just a hint of freckles. He was an easy person to like with his impish grin and matching sense of humour and girls, especially older women, seemed to love running their fingers through his hair. In retrospect, I think they wanted to mother him. I don't remember what his real first name was—Harry James or something like that—I think when he was born his mother had a crush on some famous big band leader at the time—but he was Skip to everyone else.

Skip didn't really give a damn what people thought of him and would say just about anything that came to mind while I, on the other hand, happened to be very self-conscious and thus none too outspoken at the time. When I think back, we had to be about the two most contradictory personalities you could ever run into together, but maybe that's why we got along so well.

Skip and I did have one thing in common though: we both liked girls. The only difference was, I would fall in love while Skip would fall in lust. I was a romantic; Skip was more of a horny clown. I would always get a nice goodnight kiss; Skip would get laid. I would be considered a gentleman; Skip would get laid. At this time of my life, a girl I thought I was in love with, the girl I'd wanted to spend the rest of my life with, had just dumped me, which left me even more gun-shy. Even so, in the matter and manner of women, Skip was a lot smarter than I.

We didn't have a Foreign Legion, so why not the navy, we thought. After all, if you're going to run away, you might just as well run away on a boat; sailing's a lot easier than marching. We could have joined the air force right there in Prince George, but after much deliberation, about fifteen seconds or so, we decided the sailors' suits would be that much more appealing to the girls. The next ten years of my life were to be based on this single assessment.

We hung around Prince George for a week or two, but with the taunting of our so-called friends and the idea of having to pay someone ten dollars, we bid our mothers and siblings goodbye

and headed for the coast. After a short expensive stopover in Vancouver to give the girls there the gift of our presence and a great deal of our money, we caught the ferry to Victoria. Besides, we weren't going to need money; the navy was going to take care of us. Or so we thought.

Joining the navy turned out to be more complicated than we had initially anticipated. They wanted to know this and that and they wanted documentation for all of it. The fact I had a grade eight education was suddenly a little difficult to prove. I had come by it in a roundabout way. When I was fourteen years old, I was going to Prince George Junior-Senior High School. I was about halfway through grade eight and doing quite well. The only problem was, according to my teachers, I was mentally lazy (in those days if you were dyslexic you were either mentally lazy or stupid) and would sooner be riding in a lumber truck than sitting in a classroom.

One day our Principal, Mister Ray Williston, called me into his office and said, "Lester,"—that's my actual first name—"you are not doing yourself or me any good by being here. I think it's time you go out and pursue whatever it is you want to do with your life."

So I left school.

Now before you go thinking that such a statement by a person in his position seemed a little harsh, it is important to realize that Mister Williston was a very intelligent man. After his stint as Principal, he later became the Minister of Forests for the government at the time. Williston Lake was named after him.

Then, early in my working career, I ruptured my appendix. While I was busy convulsing, the teacher of the small one-room school in the little mill town of Aleza Lake in which I lived, some 45 miles east of Prince George, formulated a plan. Every spring the schools from all the mill towns along the East Line, as the railroad running east out off Prince George was very astutely called at the time, put on a track meet, and a trophy was awarded to the school with the most points. As it was, our Aleza Lake School was one of the smallest, with the least amount of students, and it never won.

Most of the twelve students were younger and had to compete against older and bigger students from the other schools, and

they were always missing out on the first place medals. Well this teacher wanted to change all that. He was a very enterprising young man. So we made a deal. He would get me my grade eight diploma if I, being a fairly good athlete, would compete at the track meet for his school that spring.

My school days were usually a pretty laid back affair. After the teacher gave the rest of the students their assignments, he and I would go sit on the front porch and smoke a cigarette, and talk about girls and the other really important things in life. Then it was a matter of completing a couple of small assignments before heading home. This was a lot better than the regimentation of Mr. Williston's School, I clearly remember thinking at the time.

The track meet was a success. I won three or four firsts and a couple of seconds, and with the formula they used based on student population, little Aleza Lake won the trophy.

There was a lot of talk about our school bringing in a ringer, so I finished grade eight in order to make it legitimate. I wasn't given any sort of actual certificate, but I was assured it was on record. But now it was creating a holdup in our application process, finding this record.

And so we waited. And waited. And every day I phoned the recruiting office to find out what was happening. "Not all the documentation has come through yet. They're having trouble finding your school records," was the answer I got.

By this time we'd moved into a little motel in Esquimalt where a lot of old age pensioners lived. It was quite a bit cheaper than the hotel room we'd been living in and besides, our summer money was rapidly running out. The room had two single beds, a table, two chairs, a hot plate and a small refrigerator, and the landlady had given us a couple of plates, utensils and some pots and pans so we could cook for ourselves. It wasn't palatial, but at least it was affordable.

As it was, there was a little restaurant about a block from the motel, and the lady who owned it took a liking to us, or maybe just to Skip. When she learned of our plight, she had us wash dishes and perform other odd jobs around the place, and in return she fed us three squares a day.

About this time we were considering hitchhiking home, and that would have been no easy task considering we were on an island. Then suddenly I got the call to report to the recruiting office to pick up my travel warrant, tickets and meal vouchers. I was on my way. I was officially in the navy. Skip, however, wouldn't be leaving until the following week, which concerned me a little bit.

The lady at the restaurant had a little going-away party for me, though it seemed to me that both she and Skip were a little too happy to see me leave. Being buddies, I offered him part of the money I had left, but he assured me he'd be all right. I often wondered if maybe I'd been getting in the way of his carnal endeavours. In retrospect we were being fed pretty well for doing so little work around the place.

