

North of Sixty:
The Herb Bachor Story

by Arlene Kroeker

Herb parks his Volkswagen Jetta in the shopping mall parking lot and makes his way past the row of shops and services, the liquor store, the Riptide Pub, and, carrying a bag of groceries, he walks down the plank to the Tyee Marina in Campbell River. In the distance, past the sea of swaying masts and flags, the Quadra Island ferry sails by. Herb continues along the dock where the familiar scent of sea and creosote greet him. He walks, as he does sometimes ten times a day, past the office and the washrooms, the sailboats and yachts, Patti's Fish House which promises to open at the end of May according to the sign in the window. Herb ignores a large brown seal that lolls between the rows of boats and the seagulls that call from the sky. He turns on J finger and continues to the end of the dock, stops to pat Huckleberry, an old Golden Retriever, reaches into his pocket and pulls out a milk bone. Huckleberry, as well as Thunder, Frank, Molly, and Poncho, know Herb carries a supply of milk bones in his right hand pocket; Herb buys a box of them every week.

"How are you today, Herb?" asks Britt from the *Huron II*, a 1936 wooden fishing boat. "You feeling okay?"

"I'm more better today, thanks," Herb nods, waves, and carries on. Just past the water taps he stops, scoops a loose white buoy from the water, and leaves it at the side of the dock. And then he climbs aboard home, the *Chiquita III*, resplendent in a crisp white coat of paint, polished brass port holes, burgundy and ebony wood trim. The Canadian Fisherman's Union built the *Chiquita III* in 1946 to travel the west coast recruiting

fishermen. Herb bought it six years ago, after his marriage of thirty years dissolved. He'd painted enough houses, cut enough grass, planted enough trees and gardens in his life, so he gave his wife the house and with a desire to never be tied down again, he embarked on his dream of living on, and restoring, a boat. For the first two years, he cruised the inlets around Campbell River and explored the islands – Quadra, Read, Mitlenatch, Cortes – throwing out the anchor whenever he pleased, and then he proceeded to rip the boat apart. He kept stripping until he exposed the frame and then, slowly, he began reconstruction, his way. Mahogany, inlaid wood floors, custom-built trim, two heads, a galley complete with top-of-the-line stainless steel appliances and a propane oven for heat on cold winter nights. The wheelhouse separates the galley from the front berth where the bed is laden with homemade duvets and down pillows. He installed a water maker, a generator as well as a wind generator, and several depth sounders. He believes in backups for his backups and knows and understands every square inch of his boat. Still in the process of restoration, boxes of tools cover the floor, the galley table and bench. These are visible, stacked on top of each other, but under the floor, in the engine compartment are more, filling the many shelves he built. He forgets sometimes, where he put a certain hand tool or bolt, and he means to do an inventory. He can see how it might be: Bilge area port side second shelf. One of these days, he reminds himself, one of these days. Meanwhile he buys what needs, like a certain sized screw, knowing there is one, or two, or three, on board already. He will likely find what he's looking for one day, because he always keeps backups.

Herb clears receipts, Power Squadron newsletters, and bits of paper from the galley counter and puts down the bag of groceries. He shrugs off his dirty jeans and

denim shirt and stuffs them in the washing machine, an efficient European model that dries the clothes after washing them. He quickly showers, to conserve water, combs back his silver hair, and after he slips on a pair of grey sweatpants and an old sweatshirt, he makes himself a sandwich, whole wheat bread, no butter, slices of roast chicken from the deli, a piece of lettuce, and he eats it standing up, looking out the port hole. Physically fit, he maintains his weight just below 200 pounds, but at sixty-four years old, he is acutely aware of the frailty of life. Herb has survived a heart attack and prostate cancer. Doctors blasted his kidney stones a year ago, and they lifted his eyelids to correct his impaired peripheral vision as was required to renew his license. Herb is tired. He remembers the days when he worked eight hours, came home and did another four hours of work around the house. He doesn't have the stamina for that anymore, besides, he doesn't want to work like that again. The prostate cancer forced him into early retirement from a lifetime of flying, and while he misses the physical enjoyment of flying, he doesn't miss the loading and unloading, the politics and the paperwork. Nor does he miss the tests – two medicals and two flight tests per year. If he lost any one of those four tests he would have lost his job. When he wasn't flying, he plied his trade as an electrician, and that's what he does these days, strings wire, installs furnaces and plugs and switches, or whatever else might be required. It's messy work, sometimes in the cramped quarters of attics and crawl spaces, but it pays the bills.

He pours a glass of water as George Jones plays on the DVD and he sings along:

*He said "I'll love you till I die.
She told him: "You'll forget in time."
As the years went slowly by,
She still preyed upon his mind.
Kept some letters by his bed,
Dated nineteen sixty-two.*

*He had underlined in red,
Every single "I love you".*

He likes this song. The words make sense to him and remind him of a guy he knew in Inuvik who loved a woman, but after she split the sheets with him he never got involved with anybody again. Every time Herb hears the song, he really thinks of himself. He was in love, once, and only once, with a girl in Edmonton. He was in his mid-twenties with a private pilot's license, but he wasn't good enough for Jean's parents. They wanted their only daughter to marry a doctor or a lawyer, anybody with a degree. Herb couldn't even spell "degree" back then, but he could fix anything. He fixed plenty of things around their house; he even wired the basement. He did more than fix things, he got Jean pregnant and a month after the baby girl was born, in 1964, Jean's mother told Herb, "We make enough money to support Jean and the baby. We don't want you around anymore." Those were the exact words and he never forgot them.

Jean didn't have much to say. She didn't like it, but she couldn't, or wouldn't, fight her parents' decision. Herb left town. He went to Inuvik to fly commercially and try to forget everything, forget that love had knocked the hell out of him. He joined the pioneer bush plane pilots in Inuvik, a northern wild west; frozen planes, bad weather, the kinds of danger and adventure that remind one of life's sweetness and swiftness. Pilots died, it was the nature of the job, but they continued to push the boundaries and take risks.

Christmas Eve one year, in Inuvik, snow fell, temperatures hovered around fifty below zero, night had lasted two weeks, and Herb had just finished a day's work of flying. Four fellows from a geophysical seismic outfit asked him to fly them to Edmonton. They had missed the weekly Saturday mainliner flight out of Inuvik and

wanted to get home to family for Christmas. Herb considered it. Edmonton wasn't exactly across the street, it was 1,231 miles away, but when each fellow told Herb they would pay for gas, he deemed the deal worthwhile, and said okay, but they were going to do it his way. While his Cessna 185 warmed up, he filled three outboard motor tanks with aviation fuel, placed them on the floor of the back seats, and rigged them to the fuel tank in the wings. With four full tanks in the wings, a seat tank, and the three extra tanks, he figured he could fly nonstop from Inuvik to Edmonton. He knew if he took off he better be able to make the distance because weather conditions prohibited landing en route. This was of course, totally illegal for a single engine plane. Three of the guys sat in the back with their feet on top of each gas tank. Herb gave them a pump and said, okay, when this one is empty, you start pumping, it's your job. They took off and finally, at nine thousand feet, broke through the clouds and saw the stars. Herb breathed in relief. They flew for seven and half hours without landing, the men pumping fervently when their time came, and at seven in the morning, as he approached Edmonton, Herb had a dilemma, his plane was on straight skies, no tires, so where was he going to land? Certainly not on the paved runway. He landed in the center of the triangle of three runways, on packed snow, with thirty minutes of fuel left. His plane, oiled up after leaking gas as it barreled through the sky for seven and half hours, caught the attention of Gavin Breckenridge, who said, "Herb, if you ever want to come work for a good outfit give me a call, because if you can fly this thing in the middle of the night from Inuvik to Edmonton, you're worth a try."

For the moment though, he liked his job. It allowed him to pay support for his daughter, a hundred bucks a month, a substantial amount of money in the sixties, and he continued to pay until he offered a lump sum of six thousand bucks which the family

accepted as final payment. Never, not once in all those years, did Herb see his daughter. He tried, whenever he was in Edmonton, but Jean's parents refused his request. He phoned, but no interest was ever extended to him. Jean never did marry; instead she lived with a philandering writer. She received a doctorate in something, but Herb doesn't know, or care, in what field, he only knows that she never did practice what she earned.

When his daughter was eighteen, Herb received a call. She asked if they could meet. She'd known about him all those years, so the call bothered him. Why now? He was right to question the motive. She wanted money for college so Herb gave her a thousand bucks, but she never did attend school and later she asked for more. He said no. She had two sons with different fathers and Herb heard rumors a few years ago of drug use. How different their lives would have been, he thinks, if he and Jean had moved to Calgary and lived their own life, with their daughter, away from the parents. But then, he wouldn't have Brian.

Herb throws the last of his sandwich out the port hole to Jonathon, a one legged seagull. He washes and dries his plate and knife, lifts and pulls a brass handle to open a drawer, puts the utensils away, and slides the drawer shut.

Brian. He couldn't imagine his life without Brian, not really. But when he thinks about his life, about the purpose, about what he's doing, about his children, he wonders if it all happens by chance. He feels like he is on a circuit, but he doesn't know if this is the beginning or the end. Is his life all working out the way it was supposed too? It's one of those things he doesn't know, one of those things he can't put into perspective.

Brian. Herb met his wife at Kelly's Dance Hall in Stony Plain, Alberta, during one of his trips to Edmonton. He gave her an airplane ride in his new Twin Bonanza.

She'd never flown before, loved it, and shortly thereafter, piled everything she owned, and two pillows, into the plane, and sat in the single front seat with Herb. They spent two days traveling at ninety miles an hour to Inuvik and lived there for several years before settling on acreage in Edmonton, where Brian was born.

These days Brian takes care of Herb. Even though he lives in Victoria, Brian takes his dad to doctors' appointments, and as a nurse, he asks the questions Herb doesn't think to ask. Over the years, Brian has spent hours on the highway between Victoria and Campbell River. Without complaint, he has always helped his dad, whether it was building a garage, painting the house, chopping and stacking three cords of wood, or detailing the vehicles inside and out. Herb admires Brian's knowledge and way of doing things and Brian is quick to ask for Herb's advice. They work well as a team, even when it comes to mechanics. Herb, of the old school, does the shoe brakes; Brian, of the new school, does the disc brakes. It works. Trained as a mechanic, Brian had told his dad that he considered a career change into nursing. Herb said, "Go ahead." And he supported him, a thousand bucks a month for sixty months. He doesn't begrudge the money. He is just glad he did it when he could. These days, he wouldn't be able to help. One day, he figures, the boat will be Brian's to do with as he wishes, and already, as he eliminates the stuff that comprised a lifetime, he has given Brian the air compressor, chop saw, pressure washer, and the like. When he was married, life was a certain way, and even when he worked, life followed a pattern, but now that he's not married and not flying, well, he no longer exists with the pattern, the structure of routine. When he flew, he looked for the hole in the clouds and aimed for that. His life was like that too, set a goal, and go for it, but now, well, everyday is overcast, he can't see the holes. Brian's life will be different

than his. Brian will never have a family; he won't spend half his life nurturing someone else and end up with what's left over after sacrificing for a family, because Brian is gay, a fact that Herb found hard to accept when Brian told him almost five years ago. Brian, his tall, good-looking son, gay? Herb's of the old school, and doesn't think it's a normal lifestyle, even though he hears that ten percent of the population is gay, but what can he do? Nothing. He thinks back on arriving at Brian's house unannounced. He walked in on a party with thirty or more of Brian's friends, and he left. But Herb doesn't hesitate to tell Brian he's privileged to be his father. Love is part of their bond, but so is the knowing that someone has an eye on you, is watching out for you. And that's something that a thousand bucks or a million bucks cannot buy.

A ring breaks his concentration and he picks up his cell phone from the table.

"Hay-lo," he answers.

"Herb, it's Bev."

"Bev."

"Herb, I've thought about the May long weekend trip and I'm sorry, but I don't know you well enough to go."

"Okay," he says. "Whatever."

What else is there to know he wonders? How many times did he drive the three and a half hours to Victoria to see her? They'd meet for coffee at Java House on Cook Street, walk from the village to the water and along the water's edge to Odgen Point where they ate lunch. They did that many times, and he had developed a liking for her. She was nice, easy going, not judgmental. As well, she was a good-looking lady with a grown family. He thought they got on well and he was looking forward to having her on

the boat for a few days, sailing to Gorge Harbour with the Power Squadron group. But he figures that doesn't matter anymore. He decides not to take the situation too seriously. He won't call her again. If she calls him, fine, but he won't call her. To put the experience into perspective, he tells himself that he enjoyed her company, they walked a lot, and the exercise was good for him. Maybe Brian had been right, she was indecisive about commitment. His thoughts turn to a woman he recently met, Mary; maybe she'll go with him. Herb believes in backups.

Herb tells his closest friends that he's not actively looking for someone, but if she comes by and they hit it off, sure, he'd be interested. "If it happens, fine," he says. "If it doesn't, fine." But after a couple of beers, he says that he's looking for a lady who does her own thing. "I would like to appreciate some of her qualities and have her appreciate some of mine," he says. "I think the reason I would be interested in a lady is if she's independent and has many interests. I'd be more than willing to bend over backwards to enjoy her interests." After a few more beers, Herb says that maybe what he wants and what he's looking for doesn't exist. Who knows, he says. But if that's the case, he's not prepared to sacrifice his well-being for the simple sake of company. If he hasn't found anybody in these past few years, well, maybe that's how it is supposed to be. "Is that a bad attitude?" he asks, and after a moment of contemplation, "I'm sure there's someone out there, but I have no idea where."

The fact is that lots of women come by and want to stay. When he was in ICU after suffering chest pains last year, three women came to visit. A nurse caught on quickly that they didn't know about each other and she juggled Herb's visiting roster. But

he felt no chemistry with any of the women. Sure they were good cooks, but there's got to be more than just cooking; he can make himself a sandwich if he has too.

He's heard that Mary is good with finances and good in the kitchen. She told him she has a freezer full of prawns and all kinds of good things. He figures she would be the type to move in tomorrow, but that's not what he wants. He wants a companion for the May long weekend trip and he will see what happens. Eventually, like Bev, women show him who they are, but initially he finds it hard to see past the attractive appearance, warm personality, and his full stomach.

He's tired. He checks the laundry before stretching out on the bed. Tomorrow he has a full day of electrical work. Tomorrow he'll call Mary. It would be nice if everything worked out. He wants a relationship like his friends Max and Judith have. Judith, middle-aged, lives four hours from Campbell River on Rendezvous Island. Her ten acres once belonged to Japanese fishermen and the orchards they planted are still producing today. She operates an oyster lease, and in winter when low tide occurs at midnight, she's out there in her boat, donned in rubber boots, in the pouring rain, harvesting oysters. She works hard and she's handy, but when her house needed a new roof, she asked at the post office for a woodworker. They directed her to Max, a seventy-year-old Dane, on Read Island, second bay over, make a right turn, there should be a little dock, walk up and make a left turn at the top of the road, and his place should be there. She found him sitting on his front porch and he promised to be come by the following Saturday, which he did. He arrived in the late afternoon and she made supper for them both. By then it was late and dark and she insisted he spend the night. He never left.

Herb visits them as often as he can. He carries a folded up invitation to their garden party in his jacket pocket and uses the backside of it for a phone list. On one visit, he went fishing with Max, in the mini catamaran Max designed and built for Judith. A beautiful boat, not a bolt or screw or nail holding it together, skimming on top of the waves, none of the bang, bang, bang, bang of deep-hulled boats. Herb caught a four-foot ling cod. He cut off the head, cut out the guts, stuck them into a plastic container drilled with holes and used them as bait in the prawn trap. Four hours later, at dusk, they hauled the trap in and counted 81 prawns. The next day they ate cod and prawns, vegetables from the garden, a pie from orchard fruit, a bottle of wine. None of the food on the table was purchased, everything came from the garden, the trees, or the sea. And everything was cooked over a wood fire.

Herb wonders how many people sail past Rendezvous Island and don't realize that people live there, exist off the land and the sea. If they knew, they'd probably think they were crazy. But there's a side of life that so many urbanites and suburbanites know nothing about. A life where there is no hustle, where every day brings something new, where ideas and inventions flourish. Like Judith's idea. She took a car's alternator and instead of having the engine turn it on a belt, she made her own little paddle wheel in her creek, and when the water flows, that alternator turns and charges the batteries giving Judith light 24 hours a day if she wants. She told Herb she'd read up on it. And if by chance, one day, she has nothing to do, she reads a book and Max tinkers in the shop he built. Herb thinks they were made for each other. They're rare, women who can talk alternators and cook, and oh how he wishes for a story like theirs.

He thinks he might continue his journey after the Gorge Harbour weekend, zig-zag his way through Shark's Spit, head north past the Von Donop Inlet, down Calm Channel to the bottom end of the northern Rendezvous Island and visit Max and Judith. If their boat's at the dock, they're home.

He turns out the light. The waves lap gently at the boat, through the port hole, he sees the stars, and in the quiet, he hears the eerie whistle of a slight breeze as it navigates through the masts in the marina.

He can easily find his way to Max and Judith's dock, but how does one navigate life? He has the paper work to prove that he's certified to navigate the skies, and the seas (although he doesn't know where the documents are at the moment), but nothing prepared him for this stage of his journey. Of course he knows to take into consideration the variations life brings, but a degree or two out and where does that get him? Many years ago, when the small-fleeted PWA took over mega Canadian Pacific Airlines, PWA sent CP pilots on a flight from Yellowknife to Cambridge Bay. These pilots took the variation and, instead of subtracting it, they added thirty degrees. Thirty degrees plus thirty degrees equals sixty degrees, so they were sixty degrees off their destination. One degree in sixty miles is a mile and before long, instead of going from here to there, the air space increased with every passing mile. At the top of the world, they were going the wrong way.

The pilot called, "Cambridge Bay, Cambridge Bay, this is PWA flight 201."

Cambridge Bay couldn't answer because they were out of range. Baker Lake came on, "This is Baker Lake, can we help?"

"Negative, we'll be landing in Cambridge Bay in a few minutes."

“I don’t think so. I show you on our direction finder at ninety miles to the west.”

There was silence. These CP pilots had never flown in the north where compasses don’t work, and they didn’t know how to navigate in true degrees instead of magnetic. They didn’t know a different way of navigating. Most of the pilots had never been out of the provinces. They had flown east coast to west coast, but never had they been north of sixty in their life. “How do you navigate without a compass?” they’d ask Herb.

How indeed do you navigate north of sixty without a compass?