

ABOUT AL

“S he just needs a compass, some lights, and maybe another coat of paint,” says Al, looking down into his 1886 Newfoundland dory, in which he plans to circumnavigate Vancouver Island this summer. “Then I’ll be ready.”

Looking at the boat’s makeshift, sail-less mast, secured by a fraying network of painted ropes, and taking stock of the rusty tools and empty cans of extra-strength lager that line the bilge, this seems unlikely.

But then, unlikely is the kind of life Al’s had.

It’s an early April morning, and the 20-foot-long dory—*Raven*—lies tied up to three long trunks of cedar and fir lashed to the rocks at the south end of the Selkirk Trestle, near downtown Victoria. A steady stream of walkers, joggers and cyclists flow to and fro along the wooden walkway above. Few look down.

On the other side of the booms lies the dishevelled, mastless Coronado sailboat—*Galewind*—that has been Al’s home here for the last two years. Along one side of the cabin is Al’s bunk. A small foldable table juts out from the other, holding aloft a jumbled collection of lighters, ashtrays, scissors, half a granola bar, binoculars, a porcelain kitten, a half-read copy of Wilbur Smith’s *Monsoon*, and a grapefruit. Wood chips and smatterings of briquette ash from the Samover stove Al uses to warm his food are scattered across the blue vinyl flooring, which is melted in places.

“There was a fire,” says Al. “I woke up one night and someone had set fire to my boat.”

Al sits at the little table, looking into a round plastic mirror and scraping away the last of his bright red whiskers with a disposable Bic razor that he manoeuvres with bloody, blackened hands. He’s been working on the dory’s mast, unravelling scrap rope and wrapping the individual cords around it for strength. The oils and chemicals from the rope along with its abrasive fibres have left their marks.

Before Al lived on the boat, he lived in a tent pitched on a piece of plywood, on the bank of Victoria’s Gorge waterway, just yards from his current moorage.

“There was a fire, I woke up one night and someone had set fire to my boat”



Al swings from the mast of his 1886 Newfoundland dory.

Then, a year and a half ago, on the night of Nov. 5, 2010 (Al remembers exactly—he has a memory for dates) a huge tide, coupled with gale force winds, liberated dozens of vessels from their anchors. One was the Coronado, and Al began living on it immediately.

Ten months later, a man showed up, saying Al was on his boat, the boat that he’d bought for his son, but his son didn’t want it. So he said Al could have it, so Al had a place to live.

“Which was nice,” says Al.

Long before arriving here in the relative peace and quiet of what is a migratory bird sanctuary, Al was in Rhodesia.

He says his family had to leave their native Canada, that his dad was a “glory hound” and thought he could make it big in Africa.

He says his dad was an engineer, and now owns half of the Victoria firm United Engineering.

“All his business partners thought he was the greatest guy,” says Al. “They should have seen him when he got back from work...like Jekyll and fucking Hyde man.”

Al tells, with tangible sadness, about how his dad set him up as an apprentice machinist with Rhodesia Railways, then left the country less than six months later, essentially

dumping Al in southern Africa. He was 15 years old.

When Al signed on to work for the government-run company, his contract stipulated that he could be called into military service at any time. So when then-Prime Minister Ian Smith declared Rhodesia's unilateral independence from England in 1965, the army came looking for soldiers.

"It was happening all over the place," says Al. "If someone didn't show up for work one day, you knew what happened to him. The army got him."

Al's recruitment came in 1969, when he showed up for work, only to be taken away by waiting men. For the next five years Al would fight with the Selous Scouts—a special forces regiment of the Rhodesian Army—against the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army and Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army in a three-way war for control of the country that would, in 1980, become Zimbabwe.

But Al doesn't want to talk about the war much.

"That shit'll fuck your life up," he says. "It really will."

The war appears often, though, in his poetry, of which he has written volumes.

*At 21 I'm thinking of all the terror I've seen,
As I put another round in my magazine.*

All Al says he remembers about the war is being scared all the time. Every day. For five years.

The civil war, known also as the Rhodesian Bush War, would last for 15 years, but early in 1974, sensing little hope for himself or for the cause that he'd been thrust behind, Al deserted.

"On a 350 Yamaha," he says, eyes widening. "Clear across the Kalahari Desert, across Botswana and into South Africa."

On Mar 3, 1974 (Al remembers exactly) he boarded a flight from Johannesburg, and landed back in Victoria two days later.

All he carried onto the flight was a Bible that he'd hollowed out with a knife. Here were stashed a double barrel Derringer and two bullets, one for the

first man that tried to bring him back, and another for himself.

"Anything to declare?" they'd asked him at customs.

"No, just me and my Bible," he'd replied.

Back in Canada, Al couldn't hold a job, he couldn't do anything, and he didn't know why.

That's when he started drinking.

"I didn't drink at all before then," he says. Then, grinning: "I sure made up for it though."

Al thinks many of his difficulties stem from what he calls delayed stress, a condition he believes doctors now call post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Men are not supposed to kill each other, of course they're not, of course it's going to fuck you up," says Al.

"I was just a man in the middle of things. I'm not a murdering bastard, but we did a lot of it."

The first thing Al did when he got back to Canada was throw away the Derringer and the two, unspent bullets. The Bible he kept, along with his faith.

Now, three times a week, Al makes his way to the Mustard Seed Church, a mission focused on Victoria's underprivileged and addicted.

Al darts about the congregation—a few dozen of the city's street people facing a seven-piece gospel group. As they sing their songs of praise, Al grows restless, and soon wants to leave.

"I just have to be here, I don't have to listen to every word they say," says Al. "I don't want to miss the Eucharist though."

Al receives a little money through welfare, and is trying to get more through a disability claim, but the doctor won't write him the necessary notes.

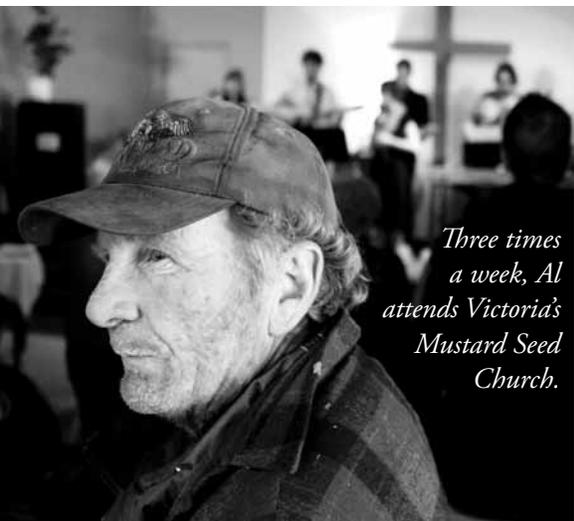
"There's nothing wrong with me besides I'm an alcoholic."

So he subsidises himself with odd janitorial work around town and by collecting empties and cashing them in at the bottle depot that backs on to the church.

*It was just another day of bottle picking,
And another day of shame,
As I bend to pick up a bottle,
I smile and add 10 cents to my name.*

Back at the boat, Al brings out a tattered navigation chart that he needs to get laminated. He also needs to hang the sail, mount a small outboard motor and fix the rudder. Then he'll be ready.

"I don't think I'm getting out of here May first mind," says Al.



*Three times
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attends Victoria's
Mustard Seed
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