

STRIKE

An excerpt from the novel *Downriver Drift*

BY TIM BOWLING

Five days passed. Now the nights crackled under their trellised galaxies and the air tar-nished the bright-silver bodies of the rushing salmon. Now the corncobs had fattened and threatened to burst their husks like boys' shoulders in outgrown suits. Now the river and its cat-combing sloughs remembered the glacial touch and the paddles and the armstrokes and the cries of the coast's human dead. And now darkness fell over the bloodfat evening light like an executioner's hood. Everything became night and pregnant silence. The heart copied the sun and went down in the body, and the body became driftwood on the same charged current.

Fishermen unable to sleep floated through the streets and along the riverbanks, their necks harnessed to the current. Some carried vials of battery acid to pour on the nets of scabs, while others paced the wharf beside their own boats, resisting the urge to throw their reputations away just to have that cold silver weight their palms. And every night, sirens rent the stillness, as something else—a netshed, a pile of fishboxes beside a cannery, a boathouse—went up in flames. Always now, somewhere in the kerosene black of the first hours after midnight, a fire would build silently

until it finally raged to life and screamed awake the mute bedrooms of the town.

The river had opened again two days after Raskin had first gone out. And this time he was not the only fisherman to break the strike. The word had spread not only about his scabbing, but also about how many fish he'd hauled in. As a result, when the canneries held firm to their last offer, some non-union fishermen decided the risk of being blackballed was worth taking. As each day passed without a settlement, and the Stuart run peaked, fishermen eyed each other suspiciously, with a half-concealed hope in their bloodshot eyes, as if waiting for someone to say "Ah, what the hell, might as well make a set before they're all gone."

But no one would say it. Most just muttered into their fidgeting hands and tried to convince themselves that the strike would be settled any minute and that they wouldn't be forced into making a decision that would cost them their self-respect.

Meanwhile, the scabs were harassed, on the river and in the town. The government, at the request of the canners, sent police patrols onto the river to protect the men who were fishing, but

I L L U S T R A T I O N B Y J A M E S L O R I N C Z

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after a while the protection wasn’t necessary. Few of the strikers could stomach being on the river while others were hauling in fish, and fewer still believed so firmly in the union’s position that they were prepared to face arrest. Slowly, hour by hour, the solidarity of the strike was dissolving under the magnetic pull of the salmon and the growing sense that the gillnetters were being sacrificed for the sake of the seiners. Only the older fishermen and a few of their sons held out with any conviction.

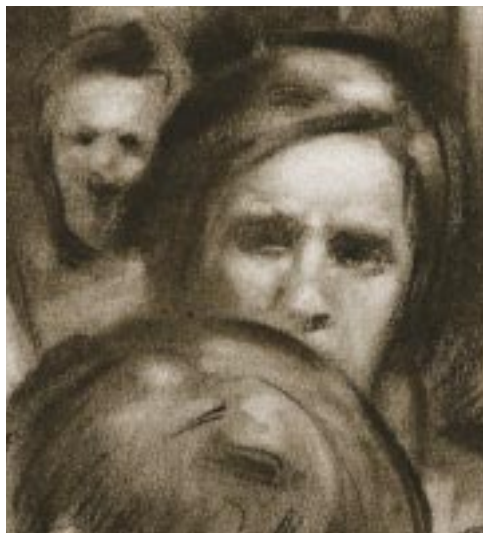
The town no longer moved in rhythm with the events of the fishery. The local newspaper decried the violence of the strikers, accused them of setting the fires, and called for the police to start making arrests. Much of the citizenry either agreed or was indifferent, the world of the river already fading into the clamour and rush of the daily commute to Vancouver. And for those who wanted a fresh salmon, one could always be bought on the black market the natives conducted through their ceremonial food fishery.

On the sixth day, there was a change. The union circulated word of a meeting to be held in Chilukthan Harbour that evening at nine o’clock. The Mawsons and all the remaining strikers could hardly contain their hopes. Vic and Corbett went out into the yard after supper and sat by the fire. All through the meal, they had speculated on whether the companies had made another offer or whether the union was just trying to keep its membership behind the strike. Despite the scabbing and the big catches, the majority of fishermen had remained tied up, so the canneries, feeling the pinch, might very well be wanting to settle.

“Hard to say,” Vic mused now. “The companies might think we’re weakening. They might be making the same offer as before.”

Corbett couldn’t even remember what that offer had been, nor did he care. “We’ll accept it, won’t we? What with all the fish around and guys breaking away?”

Vic studied his son carefully, surprised by his seeming anxiety to have the strike end. Since when did Corbett care



so much about missing out on fish? “No reason to,” Vic answered, “not if we’d be settling for the same price we rejected a week ago. No point in that.”

Corbett stared into the flames. He wished he could tell his father about Margo, but the last thing he wanted was his parents’ disapproval. He had already decided that, no matter what the offer was, he would vote to accept it, even if such a move worked against his father.

Meanwhile, Troy’s situation had suddenly become more complicated. He had not been home for supper

because he’d heard that Reg Tanner was looking for him. Now he stood in the older man’s backyard, listening to his opinions on the strike.

“This is it for me,” Reg said, crossing his long, bony arms over his sunken chest. “Whatever happens tonight, I’m going out for the next opening. And if you’re fishing my other boat, I expect you to be out there too. Or I’m going to have to get someone else.”

Troy coughed nervously. “What if the offer’s no good? My dad says the companies might just be making the same offer to test how strong we are.”

Reg scratched his sharp chin with a finger thin as a twig. “Could be. But I don’t much care. I stand to lose more money this way than if I go out for whatever it is they offer.” He paused, as if offended. “Listen, we tried, but a strike’s no good if guys start scabbing without paying for it. I’m not gonna sit back while the scabs are catching my fish.”

But you’ll just be another scab, Troy thought, you’ll be one of the reasons the strike will fail. He didn’t say the words aloud, but the older man read them on his face.

Reg yanked his grubby skullcap off his head and crumpled it in his hand. “If you’re not gonna fish my boat, just say so! There’s other guys, you know, who are itching to get out there and make some money!”

“No, I’ll fish,” Troy countered, panicked at the thought of losing his boat in the middle of a big sockeye season. Also, he remembered what his mother had said about honouring his word. But she couldn’t have foreseen this,

“A scab is just a man like any other who believes he doesn’t need anybody but himself to get by in this world.”

Troy thought, she wouldn’t want me to keep my word by scabbing. “See you later,” he said, and walked back to his car through the lengthening shadows.

By quarter to nine, most of the fishermen had started to arrive at the harbour. Vic and Corbett walked over from the house, neither one speaking. There was nothing more to say until the union made its position clear.

The upper wharf was once more packed with fishermen. The only difference from the weeks before lay in their faces, which were more serious and drawn, decidedly older in the faint hues of the setting sun, like charcoal sketches discovered beneath oil canvases. Also, the men smoked more cigarettes and smoked them faster, the butts sizzling into the river in a steady stream. Few of the men spoke, and those who did hardly raised their voices above a murmur. No one had to say anything. The river would open again in two days, the Stuarts were still coming, and this was the last chance for an easy resolution to all their difficulties. As one, they waited for Ed Leary to arrive.

Ed scowled as he climbed the dyke to the wharf. Ten minutes late, and he still hadn’t decided how to say what the union executive had told him to say. He had been walking the dyke most of the evening, rubbing his thick beard so hard it was as though he was trying to tear it off. The companies, sensing dissension in the union ranks, had come back with the same offer as before. And this time the union executive had recommended acceptance. Accept, Ed repeated incredulously, accept? What the hell was he supposed to say to these men who had given up huge catches for absolutely nothing? Bastards, god-damned bastards! Ed couldn’t believe that his union, the one he’d believed in and even gone to prison for, could be so gutless and irresponsible.

When Ed had been told the news, he could hardly believe it. The executive had essentially caved in to the companies right at the critical moment, without so much as a whimper of resistance. Jesus, what was he supposed to say to the men? Sorry, fellas, about those thousand sock-



eye you’ve each missed out on for nothing, better luck next year?

Only when he stepped up on the fish-crate did he make his decision, only then did the term “swan song” enter his mind. This is it, he said, surprising himself a little, this is the last speech I’m ever going to make.

It was a beautiful night. There’d be a full moon and a perfect high slack, and the same would be true on the night of the next opening. If the boys fished, they’d probably load up. Ed turned his back, probing eyes to the worried faces in the crowd, cleared his throat, and put

his hands out as if he was weighing each word as it left his mouth.

“I’ve fished on the river for almost forty years,” he began, “ever since I was a boy and Newt McCullough first took me out in the Pass in his old one-lunger. I grew up in this industry back when a fisherman had nothing to fall back on but himself, and I saw a lot of strong men break down when everything they had worked for disappeared because of bad luck, an injury, a fire, two bad seasons in a row, and I saw the families of dead fishermen, men who’d drowned or had heart attacks or whatever, get bugger-all for compensation, not even something to help them bury their dead.”

He felt a sudden knot in the pit of his stomach as he spoke the last word; it seemed to clunk to the wharf and then echo across the channel. Uneasily, Ed sensed that he was delivering a eulogy and that the subject of it was standing in front of him, gazing up in a hundred disbelieving faces. He rallied, and shook the image away. Now his voice rumbled out of his mouth.

“And I know what happened when we fought for decent wages and working conditions, I know the scare tactics the companies used to try to break us when we organized all up and down the coast, and I know what it’s like to have every goddamned authority in the land tell you that you’re a troublemaker and a threat to the Canadian way of life just because you want fair treatment for the work you do.”

He dropped his hands and filled his broad chest with the sweet summer air. The men on the wharf hardly

breathed or moved at all.

"I've always been a union man," Ed thundered on, "I've always believed that the only way to protect myself against greed and power was to put my faith in other men who knew what I was fighting against. And we made gains!" He raised his voice even higher as if declaring this truth to the last of the sun. "Compensation, better prices, more say in how the resource was handled. Gains, real gains. And we made them because we stood together, because we knew that the system was in place to benefit those who invented it. This wasn't a mystery. We all knew it, we all accepted it, and the union always fought to represent our common interests as fishermen, plain and simple. Well, something's changed, and I'm asking you to be patient and listen to what I have to say before you put the latest offer to a vote."

The men still did not move, yet they appeared to press forward in a dark tide. Their heavy, eager faces, bunched so close together, made Ed think of salmon pulled up in a net. The smell of the rivermud seemed to flow from their parted mouths.

"You all think you know what a scab is," Ed continued, pressing his bulk forward against the tide. "You think he's something evil, that he's out to cut your throat just because he's a greedy bastard. Well, that's not what a scab is. A scab is just a man like any other who believes he doesn't need anybody but himself to get by in this world. And he believes this because that's what the whole power-base of society is telling him to believe, every day, over and over, you don't need anyone, you can make it on your own. And eventually he learns to believe what he's hearing, despite all the evidence in his own life that it isn't true, despite the fact that someone birthed him and raised him and wiped his snotty nose. Or maybe he wasn't so lucky, but if he wasn't, he knew it, knew in his heart that he was missing out, that it wasn't natural to have no one and think that it was fine. Who can live that way? The cannery don't, the politicians don't, the judges don't, even the god-damned journalists don't. But they're busy telling you all the time that the only proper way to live is to be a scab, to turn your back on everyone who's in a position to help you, to trust them and some magical market system to look after you. But they don't know anything about how you live, except that they don't give a shit about it."

Ed curled his lip and pounded a fist into his open palm. "If I've learned anything in my life it's that you've got to live it with your eyes wide open, but it doesn't do any damned good if you don't take in what you're seeing. Jesus Christ! The salmon have their eyes open when they're dying, but what good does it do them when they're lying in your stern gasping, what the hell does it mean to see the world if you're useless to act on what you see?"

Ed paused again, and it seemed that his own shadow stood up from the wharf to listen. He lowered his voice. "The world is changing. More scabs every day, more talk about the free market. You all laugh when someone stands

up here and talks about South America. Hell, sometimes I even laugh with you. Who gives a shit about grape-pickers in Chile? Nothing to do with us. But if you're blind to the rest of the world, then you're not going to see what's going on right under your goddamned noses."

Now his tone filled with disgust. He tried to pick out the Brunovs in the crowd, but all the fishermen suddenly looked the same to him, unblinking, slack-mouthed innocents.

"Oh, you'll look right at it, you'll watch the springs disappear, you'll watch the river fill up with shit until you have to wear gloves to keep from being poisoned, you'll watch whole streams and runs die because some company cuts down trees in a watershed, but you won't see anything because you don't know how to look! Is this commie talk? Is this what you've been warned about since you were laid in the cradle?"

Ed shook his head and laughed so deeply that his whole body seemed to come at the crowd in waves. Then, scowling, he stared straight into the motionless faces. "The salmon are blind, but at least they see enough to know where they're going, at least they have to be ripped out of the water before they stop trying to live."

With these words, he seemed to go into a brief sleep. The heavy, mingled smells of the tide wafted into his nostrils, and he gulped it down as though he'd never have another chance to do so. In a few seconds, he recovered, and turned to the matter at hand.

"The companies have repeated their offer of a week ago. Thirty-nine cents for sockeye, 13 for pinks, 18 for dogs." Now Ed hesitated, still unsure whether he should announce the union's recommendation. He felt betrayed by it, but he knew that the membership had a right to hear the whole truth. "I hate like hell to say this, but the union's position is that you accept the offer."

The crowd reacted as Ed had expected, with a combination of disbelief and anger. Somebody shouted, "What the hell have we been striking for?" and that sentiment was written on all the faces darkening in the settling dusk.

Ed drew himself up to his full height and made his last appeal. "This is the hardest thing I've ever had to say. In fact, it makes me sick to say it. But if you do what the union wants, and end the strike, then you're all scabs, every single one of you, and you'll always be scabs. If you can live your life that way, fine. But remember, sooner or later a scab gets picked, and when that happens, you'll be on your own to stop the bleeding." He stepped down from the crate and held the ballots out on his open palm. ✖

Tim Bowling was born and raised on the West Coast, where he worked for many years in the commercial fishing industry. A widely published poet, his most recent collections are *Dying Scarlet* (winner of the 1998 Alberta Book Award) and *The Thin Smoke of the Heart* (just released). "Strike" is an excerpt from *Downriver Drift* (Harbour Publishing, 2000), his first novel. He lives in Edmonton.