



WORDS ON A WHARF, 1974

By

Michael Chouinard

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

Michael Chouinard's, "Words on a Wharf, 1974," is a heartfelt and heart wrenching feeling of nostalgia and loss that reminds me of Junot Diaz or Sherman Alexie, or maybe even Sherwood Anderson and J. Robert Lennon having a beach day.

There is so much longing within this story.

There is a need to shed the bounds of childhood and yet a constant compulsion to go back to that time in our minds, there is the discovery of young love and the realization that it will end, there is the sense of being lost in the summer and not knowing what the future will bring.

The voice is like a rocking chair, as if the tragedy needed to be told a thousand times before the tenor stopped cracking into tears.

My version of 1974 is much different than someone who actually lived in 1974, but I've seen enough movies to be able to imagine meeting your first best connection on some yellow sand, next to an ocean that doesn't have any great white sharks, and it seemed like a decade with a lot of heavy shit to deal with, a lot of much needed discovery, a lot of hair, and a lot of juggling of what identity can be classified as.

*Chouinard manages to capture the essence of a time period as well as create a story that makes you long for love and still live in a world of loss – sort of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that you don't wake up from, but life goes on.*

I don't know, maybe that is nostalgia?

Enjoy.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

The Most Beautiful Girl sighed and shook her head. She walked back in the house and sat down to take off her sneakers. She felt under the couch cushions and discovered yet again her mother was stashing candy bar wrappers. Her sister with Down syndrome was sitting in the room watching television with her face planted inches from the screen. Meanwhile, she could hear her baby brother holding a one-person hockey game with a stuffed toy animal as his opponent in the hall.

Words on a Wharf, 1974

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“Sometimes I wish I could be thirteen forever, Mrs. H,” said The Most Beautiful Girl in the World to The Most Beautiful Woman in the World while the two were spread out on beach towels on a lakeside wharf one scorching late August day. The Girl was mesmerized by the iridescence of a blue dragonfly that had just landed beside her.

“We all do, honey,” said The Most Beautiful Woman, as she stuffed the burning end of her long brown cigarette into an empty tin can of Tab. “I think we all wish we could stay young. Your mom, dad, everyone.”

“Really?” The girl said. “I feel like nobody has ever felt this. I liked being a little kid, but I don’t feel like one anymore. But not grown up either. My friends all suddenly seem different, some are kinda phoney, and I don’t know who they are anymore. Or who I am. Or going to be. But this summer I just felt right, and now it’s over.”

At that, the dragonfly darted off into the sky.

That summer, The Most Beautiful Girl had become friends with The Most Beautiful Woman’s eldest niece, who had come out to the West Coast after school ended for what was supposed to be a short visit with the relatives at the summer cabin. This turned out to last almost two months.

The Most Beautiful Girl was spending the summer at her family’s own cabin nearby with her preoccupied parents, her sister with Down syndrome who tried to watch fuzzy TV pulled in off the rabbit ears and snuck glasses of red wine and swam like a dolphin, and her baby brother who still followed her around like a house-pet and insisted on playing board games at every opportunity. Her other sisters, all older, had moved out or were getting ready to leave. She’d been expecting to die of boredom that summer, especially if it rained a lot, but when she met The Most Beautiful Woman’s niece, her assumptions floated away like dandelion seeds.

She was to meet the closest friend she would ever have in a summer that, even with the July rains, could do nothing but shine for her, even glisten, a summer in which the days could never be long enough, a summer when time seemed to stretch, even warp, turn into something like those big wads of Silly Putty she’d use to blow her brother’s mind.

The two tried smoking pot and listened to never-ending loops of Joni Mitchell and Elton John and Alice Cooper eight-tracks on the hi-fi or the tape deck in the Lincoln Continental The Girl’s father owned.

They soaked up the health-giving rays of the sun and flipped off older teenage boys cruising around in muscle cars with nothing better to do.

The pair would swing gently in hammocks talking of boys and men, present and future, into all hours. At least once a day, they swam out to the buoy that marked the area where powerboats had to slow to five miles an hour. No one was to swim outside this, but The Most Beautiful Girl could never resist a few strokes into the forbidden zone. And at night they’d sneak down to the lake to go swimming without their bathing suits.

They wished the days would never grow short again, even though the days had been growing shorter from the time they’d met on this summer holiday. As Labour Day approached and the day came for the friend to return home, The Most Beautiful Girl realized the long days had been an illusion all along. The two hugged, said they’d be friends forever, and before they separated, The Most Beautiful Girl whispered into her friend’s ear, “I kinda love you.... You’re my best friend.”

The Most Beautiful Girl in the World spent the remaining days of summer trying to distract herself by playing Go Fish with her brother and sister, or as was the case on this day, hanging

around at the beach hiding behind a pair of sun glasses. “Really, it’d be great if she could’ve stayed,” she said, handing a bottle of suntan lotion to The Most Beautiful Woman. “I’m not looking forward to junior high. I’m kinda scared.”

“I know, honey, but she had to go back home to my sister’s. You two can stay in touch and she’ll be out again next summer,” said The Woman, spreading a greasy dollop of lotion over The Girl’s shoulder blades. “I know. It’s like I said, I wish this summer wouldn’t end. It’s like somehow, I know deep down I can never be this happy again and no one in my family understands this. Really, I wish I could just stay thirteen.”

At that moment trudging down the road that led to the cabins was The Girl’s mother, yelling, “Yoo-hoo,” as she waved. Stuffed into an oversized floral one-piece, The Girl’s mother was making her way toward the beach while trying to pull on an ugly yellow bathing cap that turned her head into a lemon. “There you are,” she said while still at a distance.

“Oh, shit,” The Girl said under her breath, forcing a sheepish grin when she realized she’d just cursed in front of a grown-up. “Ooops.”

“Don’t worry, dear. I won’t tell your mom,” The Most Beautiful Woman said, adding, “About anything.”

Labour Day arrived and school returned, and The Most Beautiful Girl adjusted to life in junior high school, and a life that was somewhere between kiddom and grown-up-hood. Lockers instead of coat hooks and your own desks, class blocks and a different teacher every hour. It was a lot to take in.

Life had already been changing before her eyes, seemingly anytime she was in a bathroom or stood before a mirror. Maxi-pads, tampons, and, Jesus, she thought, some girls really caked on the makeup! Her small breasts she tried to support with a training bra, but they were getting in the way of her sets and spikes at volleyball. She dreaded what these tits would do to her outside shot come basketball season.

One day after school in the gym, she was out on the court working away on her can’t-miss jump shot. She’d go to the free throw line and then move the same distance out firing up jumpers from fifteen feet in all directions, some swishing but more clanking off the rim. The harder she tried, the more she missed. At one point, she went on a small run and sank six clean baskets in a row.

“Looking good there,” a voice said from the back of the gym. Her coach had been watching her.

“I stink. Can’t hit anything today.”

“You’re too hard on yourself. It’s not even close to basketball season yet. You’ve got volleyball in the mean time.”

“Don’t remind me,” she said, firing up a shot that hit the heel of the rim and then bounced to the other side of the court at a high angle. “Damn,” she muttered.

The coach laughed. “Don’t let me hear you say anything worse out there, or I’ll have to give you a detention. I know how much you hate staying after school, or so I thought.”

As troubled as she felt on the court, it was a temporary escape from the rest of the school, with its timetables and multiple teachers and different classrooms all day. She was noticing creepy men leering at her when hanging out with friends, even the odd teacher. If none ever made advances, she could feel their eyes all over her.

Even boys she’d trusted as buddies through elementary school were different now. One of her favourites asked her several times that fall if he could carry her books home. He had once told her during the sixth grade that she was “the prettiest girl in school.” She’d just blushed and told him to stop being a goof. Now though, he seemed less innocent, and one day she overheard him telling his friends she was a “fox.” The word made her cringe, like she could almost hear the hounds on her trail in the distance.

Watergate was all over the TV, even at breakfast, and she hated that the world was changing everywhere, that no one from the U.S. president on down could be trusted, that her summer to end all summers had had to end, and she was sliding into a murky world that whispered dirty things to her from the shadows. There was only the vague promise of some adulthood in a distant future. She wasn’t old enough to live on her own, but the idea of running away seemed like a stunt little kids pulled.

One Sunday in November that seemed like any other Sunday, she decided to escape out to the driveway and work on fundamentals as well as her outside game, firing jump shot after jump shot at the rim attached the garage. The weather was cooperating and while she knew she had homework, she was taking advantage of the break in the rain. Besides, she thought, she was going to a friend’s house that evening to study.

For a couple of hours, she worked on her dribble, took countless free throws, ran lay-ups, shot jumpers. She started to find her rhythm, sinking basket after basket, while battling a drizzle starting to spit at her. She kept moving further and further away from the hoop and was half-cocked, ready to launch the ball from beyond twenty feet when the screen door opened and her mother yelled, “Yoo-hoo,” and told her to come in to help get dinner ready.

The ball was in mid-flight and the mere presence of her mother seemed to suck all the air out. The Most Beautiful Girl stood there in disgust, watching the orange sphere fall well short of the basket and hit the blacktop with the fat thud of a pumpkin. “Fuck,” she said under her breath.

“What was that?” her mother shouted.

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m coming.”

“You do that. It’s going to pour any minute,” her mother said, turning to walk back inside. “You’ll catch your death out here.”

The Most Beautiful Girl sighed and shook her head. She walked back in the house and sat down to take off her sneakers. She felt under the couch cushions and discovered yet again her mother was stashing candy bar wrappers. Her sister with Down syndrome was sitting in the room watching television with her face planted inches from the screen. Meanwhile, she could hear her baby brother holding a one-person hockey game with a stuffed toy animal as his opponent in the hall.

She set the table and started bringing out the dishes, followed by the roast beef, potatoes and vegetables. True to form, her brother made it clear he wouldn't eat, her mother wouldn't stop eating, her father groused about his colleagues in the medical practice and her sister with Down syndrome smiled through all of these solo performances.

The Most Beautiful Girl consumed her meal in about six mouthfuls – everyone in her family seemed to eat like it was race, even her brother when he actually would eat.

After the last forkful, she excused herself and rushed out the door to go to her friend's to do homework. "Don't you want dessert?" her mother asked.

"Nope," she yelled, lacing up her sneakers. "Don't wanna get too fat."

"That's 'No, thank you,'" her mother corrected.

"No, thank you."

"Don't you be late," her father yelled.

But she was already out the back door and jumped on her boys' ten-speed, straddling it like some sheriff from an old Western riding his steed.

It was already dark outside and the rain was heavier now, but she didn't care as she pedalled her way to her friend's, taking each corner as quickly as she could, imagining herself in the Tour de France. Simply being outside and away from the house and on her own felt like total freedom, as she took in deep breaths and let her lungs drink in the cool, quenching air.

The only thing in the world she liked better was to hold a basketball and dispatch it toward its destination, and then watch, standing there, satisfied and smiling, as the sphere did exactly what she'd intended, falling gently through the nylon cords of the net, making only the slightest rustling. But more and more often now, these shots were clanking off the rim, and she feared she would never be the same again, that her aim had abandoned her.

Studying with the friend offered a distraction. The girl was very nice, but it wasn't the same as being with her summer friend. Everyone from her hometown now seemed so stiff, so pious. After hitting the books for a few hours, it was time to go home.

The rain was falling hard now, a real November sobbing that could last forever, and for a second, she considered calling her parents but hung up the phone. She was thrilled at the thought of

getting back on her bicycle to speed through the fluid night, so dark, dank and unholy, and letting the drops kiss her face, stain her clothes, soak into every deepest pore.

So she left, straddling the bike, squinting to try to find her way through the slick streets, pushing the pedals towards home like a demon was chasing her. Only a few blocks from her friend's house, there was a streetlight that had burned out half an hour earlier, leaving her blind, trying to feel her way home.

And there was a car.

And sometimes people lose sight of the things in their path. It's like when they have every expectation, every intention in the world to sink a basketball but instead it glances off the rim. There are objects and there are forces that act on these objects independently.

She didn't plan things this way. No, The Most Beautiful Girl hadn't wanted it to be like this. If she'd had the time, she would've wondered about her mother and the secret wrappers buried under the sofa cushions, wondered about her father who she guessed would not be many years behind her, wondered about her sister with Down syndrome that would still dream of her long after this day, wondered about her older sisters continuing to plug along at their independent adult lives of which she had no experience, wondered about her baby brother and who would take him to ice hockey and make his Halloween costumes.

More time, more space. She needed a chance to consider what was happening and that she might never see them again, but there was no more, as the distance between a bike and the blacktop is negligible, at least from the universe's point of view, and the duration for this interaction as short as the squeal of car brakes.

Later that night, after a little more time had passed, the same hospital where her father toiled away for hours examining X-rays was stuck with the task of calling the family. They called to say they were sorry but that there'd been an accident, that The Most Beautiful Girl was being sent by ambulance into the city, so the mother drove while the father, too shaken to handle the wheel, sat as passenger, travelling in the wake of the ambulance, at the exact moment when the oldest child, having been informed of the accident, was driving on the same highway in the opposite direction toward the family home.

What no one from the hospital told the family, or could tell the family, was that The Most Beautiful Girl in the World would now remain thirteen forever as hoped because there was, after all, only person who knew this.

In the years that followed, it was a struggle to speak of her, think of her, even remember the sound of her voice for some. As the baby brother grew bigger, he flinched whenever someone asked him how many sisters he had, thoroughly paralyzed at how he could ever bring up what had happened in mere casual conversation.

One day though, Mrs. H, otherwise known as The Most Beautiful Woman in the World, was sitting having coffee with The Most Beautiful Girl's mother, and she remembered something a

thirteen-year-old girl had told her by the water one shining summer day in 1974, and she recognized how her friend, how the whole family had struggled through countless dark nights, and though she'd made a promise to the girl, she also knew that the words could perhaps console and, being beautiful, she understood the greater good and that it was time to break the promise, to pass on a message from beyond, so she poured herself and her friend another cup of coffee and said, "We should talk ... I really need to tell you something..."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story took shape in my head while driving from Turtle Lake to Saskatoon years ago and was inspired by something my mom once told me—eventually. I was musing on the end of innocence and the fragility of the family amid the Watergate era; that damned bit of history interrupted my cartoons every morning! As far as my influences, I have too many. A lot are old, white guys like me, but my current literary obsession is Mexican writer Fernanda Melchor. She's too damned good for me to claim as an influence though.*

AUTHOR BIO: Michael Chouinard is a British Columbia-based writer with fiction published in print and online. He has worked in a warehouse, driven a cab and done graveyard at a convenience store. Mostly, he's been a newspaper reporter. He lives with his wife Carie and their cats, Alice and Iris, in an old farmhouse. He is trying to find a good home for one novel, revising another and outlining a third.

Publishing credits:

- Story – "And All the Dreamers Are Waking," Seek It: Writers and artists do sleep. Red Claw Press, November 2012
- Story – "The One that Clix with Chix," Spring, Vol. 8, February 2013
- Story – "The Beckoning Cat," Bareback (online), July 2013 edition
- Story – "The levee, she breaks," Tracer (online), September 8, 2015 edition (Named honourable mention by Yann Martel at Saskatoon's We Are Many Festival 2008)
- Story – "White Rock," Words, Pauses, Noises (online), November 1, 2015 edition
- Story – "And your bird can sing," winner of North Island College's 2017 3-Hour Short Story Contest. To be published in Island Word spring issue and in I and Eye (online).
- Story – "X Spots the Mark," in The Hungry Chimera, Fall 2018
- Story – "In the land of the dairy queen" in The Petrigru Review, Fall 2020
- Story – "You Are Cordially Invited" in Bengalu Review (online), Spring 2021
- Story – "Our dog days have only just begun," (online), Rockvale Review, May 2023
- Story – "Rain Dog in the Halogen Light," Prairie Fire, accepted for Summer 2023