



JORDAN WHEELER

## *The Seventh Wave*

The sky was wet. Jerry Ducharme stared through the screen window of his pup tent and watched it fall. Raindrops splashed his nose. He could hear footsteps and talking as people walked past, but the bushes and trees hid them. They gabbed merrily as the rain fell. Jerry shook his head. He pulled lint from his navel and scratched his belly, then a stone fell on the tent. Another one hit the car. Suddenly people begin running and shouting, their feet splashing through puddles. Jerry looked up. Hail.

Lynn Lake struggled with the zipper of the pup tent, her body wet with the Pacific Ocean and the coastal rain.

"Damn it Jerry, I can't get this thing open," she muttered. Jerry sat up and undid the thing. She burst in spraying water across the tent. A drop landed in his navel. Lynn fell to the floor and cuddled up to him like young kittens do, burying herself in his warm skin. Jerry pulled the sleeping bag over her shivering body. The hail stopped and it rained again. Then the rain stopped. Jerry stifled laughter.

"It's not funny," she told him, touching her tender skull. "It

hurt." He couldn't hold back. Laughter burst out and hit her in the face. She buried her fist in his stomach. Jerry felt his face burn red as the jolt filled his body. He couldn't breathe. He rolled over and pulled his knees up to his chest.

"I'm sorry, did I hurt you?" Lynn asked. Jerry groaned, waiting for his breath to come back. Lynn kissed him slow and soft beneath his ear. "I'll kiss it better," she whispered. Jerry felt the air fill his lungs. Gingerly he rolled onto his back. Lynn slid down and kissed him on the belly, then she stopped and stared at a hair. Jerry stared at the ceiling. She plucked the hair and he flinched.

"Look," she said. "It's gray." Jerry grabbed it and held it up to his eyes. She passed him his glasses. Sure enough, the hair was white.

"I'll be damned," he mused.

"I think it's distinguishing," she told him. "a sign of wisdom."

"A sign of age."

"You're not that old."

There was something in the way she said "that." He was old, but not "that" old. Old like a '65 Chevy, but not a Model T. Old like a raisin not yet mouldy. Old like a turn-of-the-century barn before it falls. Old. "Don't worry, you should see how gray my dad is."

Jerry sighed. "Isn't it time for lunch?"

Canada is known for a lot of things, but not its surfing. There's Waikiki, Ulu Watu, Kuta, but in Canada, the best known surfing spot is the West Edmonton Mall. Then there's a spot three hours west of Vancouver - Long Beach. Twelve miles of sand stretching to the open sea. At one time you could camp and drive on the beach. Then the government took

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over, made it a national park, and called it Pacific Rim. But at Long Beach there's surf. Not a Waikiki surf, or an Ulu Watu surf, but surf. Pacific Rim surf.

Jerry had never surfed. He was an undergraduate from Brandon attending UBC. He met Lynn there. "Lynn Lake," he mused, thinking of the Manitoba town. "I have relatives there." So they talked. Then they started going out. Lynn's friend, Georgina, had a boyfriend, Mr. Muscles, who surfed. When the July long week-end happened, Lynn and Georgina decided the four of them should do something. Mr. Muscles suggested surfing and the first thing that came to Jerry's mind was the mall. He had never heard of Long Beach.

"Look at the waves," Lynn gushed. Jerry did. They'd been there ten minutes and he was already tired of sucking in his gut. She watched Georgina and Mr. Muscles, Mike, through a pair of binoculars. Jerry sipped from his beer. He was on his fifth when the sun broke. Mike and Georgina bounded up the beach. Lynn passed him a wet suit. Jerry looked at her, confused.

"You said you'd surf if the sun broke," she told him. she reached for the boards. Jerry looked up and cursed the sun. The sun smiled. Mike moved in and assumed authority. Jerry was a novice, so he should try bodysurfing first.

"Who's body do I surf on?" Jerry asked. They laughed and he decided to keep his mouth shut. He donned the wet suit and followed Mike toward the water watching the waves break toward shore. From a distance they looked safe enough,

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almost pretty. His feet hit the water and he leapt into the air. Ice.

"The bodysuit will keep you warm," Mike assured him. At waist level Jerry forgot what warm was. Maybe when his first layer of skin numbed up he'd be all right. Small waves hit him. Jerry was surprised at their force. He turned and faced the beach where Lynn stood with a Nikon camera. A large wave knocked him off his feet. The salt stung his eyes. He stood up and followed Mike with a waddle induced by numbness and five beers.

They started to swim. The waves were relentless. Jerry felt like a hunk of driftwood. "How much further?" he yelled. Mike pointed to where the waves were breaking.

"Past there," he said. Jerry started getting nervous. He was in the Pacific, a mass of water sixteen times the size of Canada. He might wash ashore in Okinawa. Give me mosquitoes, he thought, bullflies, something to swipe at. The sea foamed and swallowed. Salt and sand grazed his teeth. He surfaced and there was calm.

"They come in groups of seven," Mike told him.

Like dwarfs, Jerry thought, or elevens and big gulps. Sea gulls flew overhead. Ocean buzzards. A new group of seven began. Mike and Jerry bobbed and swayed like discarded pop bottles at the sea's mercy. If there were messages in the bottles, Jerry's would read five beer too many.

"Get ready," Mike yelled. Jerry copied Mike and began swimming toward shore. The water level dropped and Mike accelerated. Jerry followed. From behind, a wave caught

them. Jerry felt his body rise as Mike slid down the wave's face. The wave curled with Jerry in it, tons of water crushing in on itself. It drove him face first into the sand, then twisted and fluttered him about. Ten seconds later, the sea released him. Jerry tried to stand, but his head hit the bottom. He flipped and shot up into the sun gasping for breath. His forehead was scraped from his hairline to his nose. Mike swam over.

"Some fun, eh? What happened to your forehead?"

"A shark bit me," Jerry said, heading for shore, his forehead stinging with salt.

There was a lineup at the outdoor shower. Surfers and their boards stood like totems. At the front of the line, Jerry was beneath the shower. Water splashed at his scrape as Lynn plucked out sand with tweezers. A herd of giggling kids surrounded them, some threw stones at Jerry's feet.

"Must we do this here?" he asked. Lynn squinted and plucked.

"There's no running water at our campsite. How did you maim yourself like this?"

"It was a shark."

Lynn pulled back. "All done." Jerry turned and walked into the closest bush. He came out beside a Winnebago. A middle-aged couple from Burbank were playing crib. Jerry waved and walked through to the next campsite. A surfboard rammed into him. Another muscle-bound kid peered from behind.

"Sorry," the kid said, toddling off. Jerry produced a smile.

"Are you lost or something?" Jerry turned. A woman his age was sitting in a lawn chair.

"I was taking a shortcut."

"What happened to your forehead?"

Jerry saw some instinctual, motherly concern. "Shark," he said. The woman laughed.

"Would you like a beer?"

"Sure. I noticed your boyfriend there. I'm going out with a younger woman myself." He read the license plate on her Hyundai. Idaho. The woman returned with two Coors.

"He's my son," she said, crooning. "But thanks for the compliment." Jerry nodded, then accepted the beer.

"You seem depressed," Lynn said as they sat by the fire pit. Jerry was looking up at Orion. Orion flickered back.

"You want to go golfing tomorrow?"

"That was your first try," she said, trying to soothe him. "I thought you did well."

"It was that damn shark." He breathed in the night air and let his belly hang, trying not to listen to Mike and Georgina doing naughty things in their tent. Lynn didn't seem to notice.

"You deserve another try. Once you get it, you won't believe how much fun it can be," Lynn said. "Mike says it might help if you were stoned."

"Mushrooms," Mike called from the tent, evidently finished. "I did it in Bali. You can eat them in the restaurants there. It puts you in the perfect state of mind for letting go and feeling the rhythm of the waves."

"That so," Jerry said.

"Yeah, so come on old man, give it another try."

Jerry looked at Lynn. "Anything to save our relationship."

Lynn giggled and cuddled up to him. Jerry cuddled back.

With dawn came rain that lasted until they awoke and beyond. Muscles Mike was glum. Jerry whistled as he prepared breakfast.

"Isn't that a Simon and Garfunkel tune?" Georgina asked.  
"My mom has all their records."

"Mott the Hoople," said Jerry. "We're out of Perrier, I'm going to the store."

Jerry trotted for three-quarters of a mile and stopped short of the Pacific Rim Groceries' parking lot. He wasn't sure if he could make it over the speed bumps. He bought a pack of smokes, a case of Perrier, and returned the Deep Woods Off he bought on their way in. "I'm from Brandon," he shrugged. "It's habit." The grocer smiled. He was a young kid. Probably from UBC, too, Jerry mused.

"What happened to your forehead?" the kid asked.

"Shark," said Jerry. The kid smiled knowingly.

"If you get in trouble, the trick is to tuck and duck under."

"Tuck and duck, Jerry repeated. The kid nodded.

The sun broke and they ate mushroom omelets without eggs. "I don't feel a thing," Jerry confessed to Lynn as they passed beneath the needly limbs of a cedar on their way to the beach. Lynn shrugged.

"Sometimes you don't get a reaction, she said.

He peered through sea drop crystals, vaguely aware that his feet were no longer planted, then rolled lazily onto his back exposing his navel to the sky. If only our eyes were on the tops of our heads, he thought, watching the small clouds. The sea lapped at his ears. His toes touched the air and he was filled with a lightness of being. He rotated his head like a

panoramic camera. The trees were upside-down, but it seemed plausible. No telling why the ocean didn't fall.

"Wave!" Mike shouted.

Mushrooms, Jerry thought. He turned and treaded before an eight foot ocean, noticing how curiously huge the curl looked. Intrigued and trusting, he watched the tons of water wash toward him. Mike was swimming frantically toward shore. Give it up, Muscles, Jerry thought, it's going to catch you. Still the wave rose. The wind of the water. Then a hurricane of wet heaved and stomped on Jerry. People on the beach gasped.

It was soft as kisses went, Jerry thought, but somehow clinical. He opened his eyes and saw Mike and a crowd of people over him.

"Are you alright?" Mike asked.

"Yeah," Jerry sighed. "I felt the rhythm of the wave." He got up and walked back to the ocean, the crowd yammering in his wake. "Tuck and duck," he repeated to himself. The words imprinted in the corners of his skull (mushroom murals were everywhere else), and he tucked and ducked all afternoon between lectures on the Native perspective of the "Native problem." We're not the problem, you guys are," he expounded. Mike wanted to escape, but they were in the ocean.

"I mastered the tuck and duck," Jerry told Lynn that night as they lay on the grass staring at the moon.

"Did you ever think of the moon in terms of gender?" Jerry



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wondered if she had eaten another omelet. "The moon is woman. You know, the lunar cycle, our menstruation. The sun is man, commanding, garish."

"But I like the moon."

"Of course you like the moon, you're the sun."

Jerry shook his head. Mushrooms are dangerous, especially when bodysurfing," he said and headed to bed.

Like a miracle, the sunshine persisted. Jerry and Lynn walked to the store the following morning for more eggs and beef jerky, and met up with the woman from Idaho and her surfing son.

"No more sharks?" she asked.

"Just jellyfish," Jerry answered.

The surfer snickered. They walked to the store as a group. Then in pairs on the way back. Lynn with the surfer and Jerry with Idaho. "I'm divorced and my kid's twenty. I've got all this time on my hands," she said. Jerry watched her feet.

"I'm getting my Master's."

"What's it like?" she asked, looking at Lynn. "She's awfully young."

"Like watching Bambi."

Camp Idaho came first. Jerry watched her go fondly, then turned to see Lynn watching Idaho's son go fondly. Lynn and Jerry walked back toward their camp arm in arm, then gradually separated. When they walked into lot sixty-nine, Mike and Georgina were frying oysters. Jerry dumped the eggs on the skillet. Mike added mushrooms.

"I was thinking about what you said yesterday."

"About what?" Jerry queried.

"Indians."

"Mmm."

"Don't you think all the ethnic groups should be treated equal?"

"We're not ethnic, we're aboriginal. Are we going surfing?"

"Try a raw oyster first," Georgina said. Jerry tried it, then threw up. He saw a melancholy expression on Lynn's face. They left for the beach and her melancholy persisted. Jerry searched within himself and found some of his own.

There was wind - ocean wind - moist, fresh, and fast. It pushed back his hair like it did to the trees, their branches reaching inland. The sea stood before him, waiting. Jerry felt enticed, but intimidated. The sea was big. He could get swallowed and wash up years later in Hiroshima among the crabs and sea urchins. The Souris River never had waves like this.

As Georgina and Mike frolicked in the driftwood, Lynn leaned against Jerry as he stood contemplating the Pacific. "You would have rather stayed in Vancouver, huh?"

Jerry watched the gulls fly against the wind, others dove for fish. He wondered which one was Jonathon. Then his eyes dropped to the sand where flies picked at dried kelp.

"It's a beautiful place," he said.

"Are you gonna try again? I'll go with you."

Jerry sighed, letting out his tummy a bit too much. Mike and Georgina joined them, and they walked into the surf. The waves were still huge. Jerry tucked and ducked as the others

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rode, but by noon, he attempted his first ride. He missed, but felt its breaking point.

"Let's go in for lunch," Lynn yelled. Jerry shook his head.

"I'm getting the hang of it, I think." Lynn turned and went for port. Jerry turned to the sea. Come on, he thought, where's that big one. He bobbed and peered over the smaller waves looking for the larger ones. When they came, he was invariably out of position. He nearly caught a five footer, but it stuck him in the sand, reopening the gash on his forehead.

He could feel his toes going numb, despite the rubber suit. The little waves peppered his face with salt, but he watched for the big ones. A new cycle began. Wave one was little. Jerry counted. Wave two, wave three. Wave four was big, Jerry tucked and ducked, then swam out to meet wave number five. It was huge. Jerry felt the rush of water being pulled into the wave giving it its volume. "Christ," he muttered, then tucked and ducked. The fringe of the wave's swirl caught him as he surfaced, but he escaped and swam to meet wave number six. Surfers on the beach took note. They cursed themselves for taking lunch. Number six came, and it was mammoth. Jerry wondered if he'd miscounted, this was the largest wave he'd seen since they arrived. He tried looking over it, but couldn't. It rose and he swallowed, then tucked and ducked. He felt the power of the wave rush past, but he was disappointed in his retreat. If there was a seventh, he would ride it.

Jerry surfaced and looked west. Twenty yards before him was a ten-foot wall of water closing in fast. The surfers on the beach guffawed and spat. They watched as Jerry turned to ride.

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Jerry swam, his arms and legs flailing. Water receded beneath him and he was swallowed up by the growing wave. Jerry swam harder. The water started to rise. The wave hadn't yet curled, but it had steepened. He looked up and behind. The wave was almost on top of him. He felt his body being picked up and propelled. He was now at the wave's mercy. It swung him up its face. Jerry nearly panicked. This wave wouldn't scrape his head - it would crush it. He saw the curl out of the corner of his eye and waited for it to crush him as his arms and legs picked up tempo. The wave curled to his right. Jerry turned to his left and the wave dropped him a couple of feet down its face. He stuck out his right hand to steer himself left and quit kicking. The wave grabbed him, and he rode.

It lasted all of ten seconds, but was an exhilarating ten seconds. Jerry frolicked in the white water like a pig in mud howling at the daylight moon. Tourists clapped. He waded from the Pacific in triumph. "Hey mister," a kid yelled. "What happened to your forehead?"

"Bodysurfing," Jerry gushed.

Further up the beach he found Lynn sitting with Mike, Georgina, and the surfer kid from Idaho.

"Great ride," Mike congratulated. "Want an oyster?" Jerry shook his head.

"We're leaving after lunch," Lynn said. "Dave is coming with us." Jerry looked at the surfer kid.

"It's a drag travelling with your mom," the kid drawled.

Jerry smirked. "I bet."

They took down Mike and Georgina's tent first. Mike scrambled to gather the used condoms. Dave the surfer was

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gone, packing his stuff. "Mike has four tickets to REM," Lynn said, as they packed their clothes in the pup tent. "They're at the coliseum tonight."

"Who?"

"REM."

Jerry nodded, wondering who in the hell they were. His *Rolling Stone* subscription ran out years ago. They separated their sleeping bags. Lynn rolled hers up as Jerry packed his unread Beatrice Culleton novel. He'd wanted to read it over the weekend. He rolled up his green, down-filled sleeping bag slowly. It grew like the seventh wave. Jerry stopped and sat. Lynn was tying hers up when she noticed. "What is it?" she asked.

Jerry looked at his toes, then at her. "I think I'm gonna stay."

They were silent, motionless. The words became clear. "The waves got to you, huh?" She smiled. Jerry laughed.

"I think it's best," he said. She nodded. "No hard feelings?" She shook her head, then hugged him.

Running footsteps stomped into camp. "Okay dudes, I'm packed." It was Dave the surfer kid.

There was plenty of leftover beer and food. Mike and Georgina offered to leave them.

"If you get bored, visit my mom. She could use the company," Dave the surfer kid told him.

"Just hope she finds you when she gets back to Van."

"Yeah," the kid laughed. They piled into the car leaving Lynn and Jerry to say goodbye. They stood silent, then it

started to rain. Lynn waved with her fingers and got into the car. Jerry crawled into the pup tent and curled up with his novel, waiting for the rain to end. He could hear the waves crush the beach.

A little later, he was sitting with Karen, Mrs. Idaho, sipping his politically correct beer in her large tent. The rain hadn't stopped. "I've been on the same path for twenty years. I want something different now," she was saying.

Jerry sniffed the ocean breeze as it spilled through the screen windows. "I want a house by the ocean."



JORDAN WHEELER, of Cree, Assiniboine, Ojibway, Irish, English, Scottish, and French descent, is the epitome of the modern Métis. Born in 1964, he began his writing career at the age of seventeen. Since then he has been published in newspapers, magazines, periodicals, children's books, and anthologies. *Brothers in Arms*, his first foray into "mature" fiction, came out in the fall of 1989. He has also written plays with inner city youth and a film for CBC. Jordan Wheeler has freelanced in the film and video industries to support his writing habit. He likes to travel, tell stories, and share his closet musicianship. Currently living in Winnipeg, he "stands six foot four, has two kids, and a sixteen-year-old cat."