

# Washday

Mrs. Decker looked up just as Michael went past the window. He wasn't exactly sneaking past but somehow he had that look of a boy who is trying a bit too casually to make a getaway. Mrs. Decker recognized the look, and was at the door in a minute, wiping her wet hands on the yellow apron covering her housedress.

Michael had reached the road when she called, her voice angry, "Now, just tell me where you think you're going," she said. "I saw you sneaking past the window—half a second more'n you'd be out of sight. Haul your freight in here," and she stood sideways in the doorway, drawing her stomach in to let the boy scoot past. For a minute she thought of giving him a good one with her wet hands but he was too fast for her, getting through the kitchen door and into the porch before she'd turned around. But he was caught in the porch, he suddenly realized. The big tub of dirty clothes sitting on the stool, another tub on the floor filled with newly scrubbed work-clothes, the sink piled high with more clothes left him no place to hide, no place of refuge. So he sat on the edge of the empty woodbox waiting for the wrath to descend.

"I'd like to know just where you think you're going," his mother said following him into the porch. "You may well sit on the woodbox—fall into it you might—there's nothing to keep you from going right to the bottom. Sneaking off, the wood not in. Look at them pails. Not a drop of water and me washing clothes. You get them glad rags off you and hie yourself off to the well. An' I want that wood in the house and some work done around here before you go tearing off down to the shore."

**KATHLEEN TUDOR**  
**Saint Mary's University**

While she spoke Michael pulled off his play jacket and reached for his mackinaw on the nail above the box, being careful all the time to keep as far as possible from his mother's reach, refusing to catch the eye of his sister coming into the porch now with a huge pail of hot water to fling into the dirty water in the galvanized washtub. Sometimes, if she had just been the butt of her mother's anger, she'd be glad when Michael came along and drew off some of Mrs. Decker's energy, giving her a respite,



**KATHERINE**  
Cheryl Lean, 1976,  
From a series of photographs called WAITING

but now she sent a look of sympathy to Michael, aware of how easy it would be once he was out at the well for her mother's unspent fury to descend on her own head for some obscure wrongdoing. But Michael wouldn't look at her. His head down, he thrust his arms in the old mackinaw and, grabbing his cap from the floor where it had fallen, he scurried out of the porch past his mother who now had her arms plunged deep into the wash water pummelling the heavy workclothes furiously, dragging their weight over the washboard, pausing fretfully to push the damp hair from her face with her bent arm.

For a while she felt consumed with her own anger. Sheer hatred poured through her body making her muscles ache and her heart pound harshly in her chest. She looked up for a minute from the tub and caught the sight of Michael struggling up the hill, a pail of water in each hand, his arms stretched stiff at his sides with the weight, his legs buckling at the knees as he fought against the wind blowing down the hill against him and out onto the sea behind him. And then the anger became shame and she suffered now more than before with pity for the little boy driven by fear to struggle up the hill carrying heavy pails, yet fearful of arriving in the porch. And she felt such pity for him, so suddenly was there with him her own arms aching from the weight of the water pails, her own knees trembling under the load that her eyes filled with tears and she ran to the kitchen door.

"Let me take one of those," she said, "here give it to me."

Her voice wasn't softened but the boy knew that somehow for some reason he was safe now and he passed one pail to his mother and followed her into the porch. No one said anything and Michael went out to get the wood and Catherine, his sister, breathed softly, the water in the rinsing tub feeling warm on her hands, the washed clothes pleasant to touch. And when Michael went out for the wood, Mrs. Decker sat for a moment in the rocking chair near the window, her hands lying listlessly in her lap, her gaze falling idly on the faded clothes flapping on the line and over them to the sea where the boats

strained at their mooring on the blue water. It was there, all that beauty, and for a moment it warmed her, gave her some kind of hope. She didn't know what the hope had to do with the beauty. It was just hope that the washing would get done, that supper would get cooked, that floors would be scrubbed, and sick children nursed, and the worn doorstep fixed, and clothes for Sunday school tomorrow somehow mended and the books for school bought. And the sea stay calm for only a week so that Reuban could fish.

Michael came to the door, loaded down with wood, trying to turn the doorknob with his arms full and his mother went and opened the door, "Now that's some load that is. Lazy man's load I call it," and she took a few sticks from the top and followed him to the porch and helped him load the wood into the box. She didn't touch him nor he her but they were close to each other and the three of them, Catherine and Michael and the mother, felt cut off for a minute from the others, Martha sick in bed with an earache, Libby studying in the cold room upstairs for her grade eleven exams, older sisters and brothers off around the place making beds or mending the traps at the wharf. And then Michael went to get more wood.

When, later, Mrs. Decker looked up to see him going off down the road she was indifferent to his going. She went on about her work always with half an eye on the wharf and fish houses, the boats at anchor in the harbour. Michael would be fishing from the wharf, catching sculpins, ugly things. His father was there overhauling some trawl. Uncle Ned was there and Al and Leroy, his older brothers, fishermen now too. As she looked up now and then she'd see the fishermen around the shore, out on the wharf for something, rowing out to a boat to pump it out, dragging a lobster trap or a net into the fish house, she envied the men—the comradeship, all working together, laughing. Her work was always alone or with children but when they weren't fishing the fishermen could sit around for hours smoking and telling stories, not much to do. But she never had a time like that. Rain and high winds and storms meant often she

had to work harder, clean up the messes left by wet boots on the floor, try to do the housework with men lying about in the way. It didn't seem fair. Threaded through all her toil of the morning, lugging the heavy wet clothes to the line trying to hold them against the pull of the wind to put the clothespin on, was the resentment. This women's work, as the men called it, was heavier than the work the men were doing at the wharf this morning, but they wouldn't have thought of helping her. So that when she turned toward the wharf as she lifted the flannel sheets and shook them out to line up the edges for pinning to the line her face reflected a mixture of anger for her own state and longing for the freedom of the men at the shore and a profound yearning to be young again like Michael and able to walk down the hill kicking the stones and raising little clouds of dust and feeling the wind push hard against your back forcing you to run toward the sea. She saw Michael go onto the wharf and for a moment thought, if he leans over too far he'll fall in but she didn't think about that too much because the fishermen were there and anyway he'd gone fishing from the wharf since he was five years old. She turned back to the house, the empty clothes basket at her side, and glanced at the clothesline, the pole carrying the clothes well aloft, all the sheets blowing wildly now in the strong wind, making a flapping sound. And she felt pleased. It was a beautiful washday. The clothes would smell good when they were brought in.

She'd half emptied the big washtub and was just about to lift it, arms grasping the cold metal, to empty what was left in the sink when suddenly Catherine called, "Mum, Mum. Something has happened," and she dropped the tub back on its stool, the water splashing her apron, and rushed to the kitchen where Catherine was

standing, her eyes straining toward the wharf and her mother looked and saw the men clustered at the end of the wharf and someone or something, she couldn't see what, was in the water. There seemed to be two people in the water and a man was down a rung of the ladder on the side of the wharf holding out an arm, trying to reach those in the water. "Mum, it's Michael," Catherine said, beginning to cry. "I think Michael fell overboard."

"Of course it's not Michael," her mother said sternly, "The men must've dropped something. Trawl or something," but she knew it was Michael and she saw the man hanging from the ladder grasp the bundle being pushed upward toward him by the man in the water and she knew it was Michael. He was wearing his red mackinaw, she could see a bit of red colour, and then he was being grasped by other hands, Reuban's she was sure and she waited while Catherine whimpered, her face pressed against the window pane and she saw Reuban stand Michael on his feet and she could almost hear him say, "Now you get home with you there. Falling overboard. You're some fisherman, you are. Get your stern up the road and into the house." And then she watched while the little boy, his clothes sodden, his hair plastered against his head, came sobbing up the road, cold and miserable, and just for a moment her hand gripped Catherine fast and held her. And when she opened the door she grabbed Michael by the wet collar of his red mackinaw and before he knew what had got hold of him she'd laid him over her yellow apron and given his backside such a beating as he hadn't had in years. And Michael screamed with pain and fear and self-pity. And later when Michael had been sent to bed with a hot water bottle she emptied the washtub and put some fish and potatoes on for dinner.