

Joseph D. Williams in his first collection of short fiction.

Thirteen: Stories from the Mitten State

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# **Thirteen**

**Stories from the  
Mitten State**

**Joseph D. Williams**

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## OSCODA

“We’re quite a pair, huh?” Charlie said to his son as the two of them limped through the two feet of snow covering the cottage driveway.

“Huh?” Max grunted.

“I said we’re quite a pair, with our legs and everything.”

“Oh,” Max grinned. “Yep, we are.”

His father’s words reminded him of the pain in his leg and he unconsciously reached his hand down to touch where the medial meniscus was torn on his left knee. Charlie, similarly, lifted his right leg to get a closer look at his high-ankle sprain.

“You can ice yours first,” Charlie commanded as the two of them stepped up onto the front porch and he pushed the key into the lock.

Max nodded and turned to look off at the haunting ebony of Lake Huron in the distance. The sky was pitch black; foreboding. A stretch of forest cut their property off from the road, restricting all light to guide their steps but the Moon and stars, hanging over their heads like sparkling rosaries. But that still wasn’t quite bright enough to see their way. And even the Great Lake, which had done nothing but embrace Max since his childhood when the family had first built their cottage up in Oscoda, was utterly dark and menacing beyond the glacial mounds lining the beach.

The winters on the coast of Michigan, Max thought, are nothing to make light of.

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As Charlie struggled with the door, Max's eyes wandered from the side of the secluded driveway, through the grass backyard, and down onto the white beach.

The snow spread out in front of him like one of his mother's tablecloths; taut and stainless before Max and Charlie's starving feet would come to mark it. His duffel was heavy, his feet were cold, his knee was throbbing. Looking down at the water, it seemed like he was on the very brink of the innermost layer of Hell. And the breath from the lake threatened to push him down. He folded his head and arms into his coat.

*The wind's howling* Max thought, reminding himself of the three hour car ride up to the now-deserted summer haven for the wealthy, Charlie blasting Hendrix's rendition of the Dylan classic with a cigar gripped harshly in his left hand.

Every once in a while, his father would ash the flaming stick into an empty coffee mug resting in the cup-holder and sing out the lyrics with a reserved glee.

*There must be some kinda' way outta' here, said the joker to the thief.*

*That's us; the joker and the thief. Which one am I?*

"Dave Mason did a great version of this," Charlie told Max.

"Yeah? I'm not a big fan of his but I haven't heard that one."

"You should listen to it some time. I've got the vinyl."

*Joseph D. Williams*

Every now and then, they'd comment on the music that Charlie played, but mostly Max just watched the flat farmland pass them by and worried that he would never get what he wanted.

The waves roared, hungry, up into Max's ears. They told of shipwrecks and sea-monsters in one beat, airbase closings and economic hardship in the next. That was the way of things in Oscoda, the last stronghold of a dying town on its way to being swallowed whole by Lake Huron. It was a place somehow simultaneously nostalgic and depressingly modern for Max; a winter ghost town that only had brief revivals of its former glory for about twelve weeks in the summer.

At times, it had its own mythic beauty. It was simplistic only in the day to day drone of life in a small town, divine in the commitment of those who had suffered the hardships and stayed long enough to scream back at the water that they were holding their ground come Hell or high water. And on that cold January night, like a good sport, Lake Huron brought them both.

Oscoda was down on its luck, desperately wanting for money and the return of the good ol' days when the air force base was booming; back before Wurtsmith closed down and the barracks were emptied, haunted, and turned into cheap housing. As if to laugh in the town's face, Lake Huron stayed thundering and majestic the way that it always was; unrelenting, powerful, and dark. It never conceded its spirit, standing hard against the

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wind and flowing seamlessly with the passing of days.

“There,” Charlie cut into Max’s thoughts. “You go on inside and turn the heat on, I’m gonna’ go through the crawl space to get the water goin’.”

“Yep,” Max returned, stepping through the doorway.

He was shocked to feel how cold the place was, even though he’d known that the thermostat had been at fifty for well over a month and the water was turned off so the pipes wouldn’t freeze while they were back home in Northville. Max and Charlie didn’t make it up there that much in the winter. Charlie would come by himself once in a while, but Max rarely made time for it. Being up there then, he wished that he had.

He found the dial on the main floor for the heating and turned it up to seventy-two, checked the mirror beside it to see how his dark hair and the rest of his five eleven one-seventy frame was looking, then walked over to the L-shaped couch and plopped down. The old cushions greeted him with the smell of sun block, smores, and garage sales, all reminders of the family’s summers up in their little slice of paradise. His eyes wandered about the room and drowned him with memories of bonfires, lovers, friends, carefree days gone by. The fake-wooden walls stared at him as though they were observing his pathetic melancholy, waiting to see what trite lament would come next. He stared back just as intently, but Max didn’t have any more laments. Max was only waiting for Charlie.

*Joseph D. Williams*

The place was actually more of a house than a humble cottage, but that was what Max's family had always called it and so that was the name that stuck. The Cottage. It was still fairly new, having been constructed under Charlie's instruction a decade earlier when Max didn't care about anything except the Red Wings and the Tigers (more specifically, Steve Yzerman and Tony Clark).

There was one bedroom on the first floor that hung in a hallway off of the kitchen, along with one bathroom, a closet with a washer and dryer, and the L shape (like the couch) of the open area stretching from extreme north to extreme south and parallel to the hallway. The L formed the kitchen and family room respectively. Upstairs were two more bedrooms, a bathroom, and a balcony with a view of the backyard and the bonfire pit, then the beach and the lake.

The heat and water snapped to attention, causing Max to do the same.

The door creaked open and there was Charlie again, limping from the high ankle sprain and brushing dirt off of his clothing from the crawl space. The hanging light in the kitchen reflected off of the bald parts of his head (which made up the entire front half of it, the rest being sparse and gray) and Max winced at the shine of it.

Charlie was six feet tall, muscular for his fifty-four years, and never slouched. He was tough, hard-working, no-nonsense. Maybe abrasive at times. Yet, every once in a while, he would cast his intensity aside and catch Max completely off guard with a

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heartfelt expression of love that left his son feeling awkward and a little ashamed.

Max thought this with the door open and the waves roaring outside.

They were both silent for a while as Charlie finished rubbing cobwebs away from his winter coat and set the flashlight down on the red counter to the left of the front door.

“D’you turn the heat on?”

“Yep.”

“Great. Wanna’ go get a Guinness while it warms up?”

Max smiled.

“Yeah! That sounds good.”

“All right, let’s go.”

Just as painfully as they’d labored through the woods to the northern getaway, they both limped back to the street where Charlie’s Honda was parked (and what a sin to drive a foreign car in the state where Henry Ford had done his life’s work) because the snow was too high to negotiate the driveway.

They walked silently. They looked through the trees and back at the water when they could, thinking their own thoughts and worrying their own worries. Max worried about becoming a full-fledged adult with a wife and a job and a car payment, and Charlie worried about getting old and digging his way out of the quicksand from his recently imposed unemployment. But, like men, neither of them voiced these concerns. Neither of them spoke at all. Small talk goes light between father and son.

*Joseph D. Williams*

The drive to the bar only took five minutes. It was never difficult to find a dive where you could wet your tongue in a town like Oscoda, where the population rose collectively at 5:30, worked hard and good until 5:00, and went straight to their local haunt until it was time for them to go to bed and start the routine all over again. There was only one traffic light between where the cottage hunkered down next to Sacred Heart Catholic Church (by Max's mother's design) and Stachelski's Irish Pub.

"That's a pretty Irish name," Charlie joked, pointing at the sign.

STACHELSKI'S IRISH PUB  
SINCE 1973

Max laughed until they were parked and tried not to groan while he pulled himself out of the passenger seat.

The two of them entered Stachelski's through the back way, the waves of mighty Lake Huron still taunting them in the distance with windswept boasts of power and enormity that would never be silenced by struggling economies and job layoffs. Charlie looked at Max, expressionless. Both of them wished to be in the other's shoes.

Charlie wanted to be young again and to not have to worry about paying off mortgages and putting his children through private schools. Max wanted to fast forward through the years it would take to establish himself into a fiscally comfortable life. Both wanted nothing more than to support their family.

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The bar was filled wall to wall with smoke even though there were only four customers inside. They were two men and two women, presumably husbands and wives. Each of them looked to be in their fifties but maybe just *looked* that way because they'd spent half of their life in dive bars smoking cigarettes and drinking whatever the needle decreed was on special. Every hour in Stachelski's, the bartender would spin a wheel behind the bar with the names of eight different drinks. Whichever name the needle landed on was a dollar for the next hour. Many Oscodians had spent many nights abiding by the will of that wheel, and Max wondered how many fates it had decided in its time.

The four patrons were hanging on each other like they were posing for a dramatic painting, their bodies spelling out a scene that Max could have read without needing to listen at all. It would have been a Romantic painting, he was sure. They laughed loud and often. Only one of the women seemed to be talking at all though. She wore a baggy leather jacket, a tattoo of a rose just behind her ear where her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, bleached white jeans with holes in them, and a black tee-shirt with sparkles spelling a word that Max couldn't read and didn't think he wanted to. She was a biker woman, and they weren't rare in those parts.

His father led him to a seat underneath the only TV (a small thing that looked like it had been there as long as the bar) and motioned for the bartender to come.

Joseph D. Williams

“Hiya, how ya’ guys doin’ t’night!” a woman of about thirty asked, obviously pleased to see some new faces in the bar. New faces usually meant tourists with flexible wallets; new faces meant they might not be regulars anywhere, regulars who tipped next to nothing because the bartender might as well have been their wives grabbing them a cold one from the fridge. New faces equaled big tips.

“Hi,” Charlie smiled politely. “Could we get a couple Guinness?”

“Sure!” she gleamed, too enthusiastic to be sincere.

She turned to Max.

“I’m sorry, I just need to see yer ID, hon.”

Max grimaced in annoyance. It wasn’t that he minded getting out his driver’s license to prove he was of legal age, it was that he despised being called ‘hon’, ‘sweetie’, and ‘babe’ by waitresses. How old did they think he *was*?

The woman studied the card and struggled with the math necessary to subtract his birth year from the current date, but only because of how young the new year was. Max was young enough that months were a factor.

“Okay, thanks! I’ll be right back with yer drinks.”

“Thanks,” Charlie said without looking. His eyes were on the TV with the Pistons game. “This is pretty local,” he told Max, still watching Rip Hamilton and the boys charge down court.

“Huh?”

“The bar,” he finally turned. “A local hangout.”

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Charlie grinned when it seemed Max had caught his meaning. The barroom banter of the four other patrons seemed as natural as if they were sitting in their own bedrooms with their spouses, spouting off last minute complaints about the day ahead and the day behind before nodding off to silence. For those people, Stachelski's was their home.

"Yeah," Max smirked. "Pretty 'local'."

"Here you go!" the bartender was back a few moments later. "Did you wanna' pay now or open a tab?" she asked Charlie.

"Umm...", he considered, "I think I'll pay now."

He reached for his wallet and so did Max.

"No, I got it," Charlie announced.

Max put his wallet away.

"How much?"

"Six for the two."

Charlie handed her eight.

"Thanks a lot guys! Lemme know if ya' need anything."

"All right, thanks."

When she was gone, Charlie and Max touched their glasses to each other.

"You won't get three dollar pints of Guinness downstate," Charlie said.

"Nope."

"Here's to a stress-free weekend."

Max took his first sip and looked around the room.

There were three mirrors with maps of Ireland in varying detail painted across them. The walls were adorned with witty sayings like 'Free Beer

*Joseph D. Williams*

Tomorrow' and pictures of old athletes lit by strings of Christmas lights. One or two old, leather baseball mitts were nailed to the wall without any plaques proclaiming their significance. The white paint was cracked and falling in most places. There was one pool table that looked like it had been built into the floor, one jukebox that was a touch screen and seemed too modern for the rest of the bar, and one bathroom back by the kitchen. The bar itself was an island about eight feet long and five feet wide that only had four stools on either side of it. There were four tables with two chairs each, too. It was a small place.

Max wondered how a place like that could even *have* Guinness, let alone sell it three bucks a pint. Max wondered how, in an economy like that, the place could even stay open. There were at least eight other bars within two miles that he knew of, and business didn't exactly seem to be booming. It was 8:30 on a Friday night and Max and Charlie accounted for a third of Stachelski's patronage.

"Pretty dead in here," he remarked.

Charlie nodded.

"Yeah, I think it's probably in between rushes now. People probably come right when they get off work or wait until after dinner."

"Still, I've never seen more than, like, three cars parked out front."

Charlie swallowed and shrugged.

"You'd be surprised. You come in here in the summer and it's jumpin'."

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“Well, yeah. The *summer’s* probably fine. But how can a place like this stay open through the *winter* though? They don’t even have food!”

Charlie smirked.

“In a blue-collar town like this, I think bartenders probably have the best job security of anyone.”

Max grinned, dove back into his Guinness, and couldn’t help but listen to the only other sound in the bar.

The four portraits of barroom vulgarity were deep in conversation.

“Dorothy Sidlick lost her house,” one of the men informed.

“Christ are you serious?”

“You gotta’ be shittin’ me!”

“No, she lost it. I think she’s movin’ back downstate to live with her daughter.”

“How’d she lose it?”

The man shrugged between sips.

“Bank foreclosed I guess. Her son had been makin’ payments on it but he got laid off from GM a few months back. I don’t think he’s been helpin’ much since.”

“Fuck that shit!” the most talkative of the women chimed in. “Those fucking bastards need ta’ be less assholes about everything! They been chargin’ me interest out the ass on my loan! I’m like, fuck, *everyone’s* got it rough right now, it ain’t just them!”

“Yeah,” her man agreed. “There’s a few places goin’ outta’ business around here too. Like the

Joseph D. Williams

Kmart they just closed, and that pizza place that used to do all the tourist business in the summer. I heard Stan's shop is closin' too 'cause he went to jail for kitin' checks."

"People just ain't comin' up here no more. Nobody's got the money," the other man said.

"It's the fuckin' politicians," the loud woman cut in and stood up a little shaky, clearly drunk. "Those are some greedy fuckers. We should take all the money from *them* to keep all these business goin'."

The others laughed at her intensity. She didn't get the joke.

"I swear, if I gotta' see one more kid come to school with a spring coat on 'cause their parents don't got no money for a fuckin'...proper jacket..."

More laughter.

"...I'm gonna' fuckin' go down to city hall and kick some ass!"

"How *is* work goin' then, Renee? You still teachin' second grade?"

"Fuck, man. I don't know how it's goin'. Some parent keeps callin' me and tellin' me I ain't bein' fair to her kid. Raferty, you know her? Well guess what? Her kid's a fuckin' retard! How's that my fault?"

There was a great howl of laughter from all four of them. Max wasn't sure whether he should laugh or let his jaw drop.

*A teacher?*

"Anyway," she continued. "They've laid off like five people because 'a how bad things are 'round here. Everyone's movin' downstate or outta' state

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‘cause there ain’t shit for them to make here. I’ll probably be next, who knows.”

Max looked at Charlie. They were both grinning.

Then, it fell quiet for a while. All six of the bar patrons were worrying about their own futures in the marsh of the Michigan economy.

When Max was about three-quarters done with his beer, Charlie leaned over to fish some change out of his pocket.

“How ‘bout some tunes?” he said.

“Sure.”

Charlie limped over to the jukebox. The others watched, waiting to make judgment on the musical taste of the newcomer. He was clearly an out-of-towner, or they would have known his name and what kind of socks he preferred in the winter when the woods were bare and white. If his choice didn’t fit their style, he wasn’t welcome in their home.

Max watched his father pick three songs on the jukebox and struggle back to their table. The others did too, only with more intensity. As soon as a familiar piano beat hit the air though, an acceptable classic from Michigan’s own Bob Seger called “Against the Wind”, everything turned back to normal and conversation started up again.

Max smiled and tilted his glass toward Charlie.

“Nice choice.”

Charlie smiled back.

“Thought you’d like it.”

“Yeah, well I don’t think it’s me you need to worry about.”

They both laughed.

*Joseph D. Williams*

The song played. Charlie tapped his finger on the table. Max watched him hum along. Both of them thought about 'simpler' days. Max hung his head, staring into his beer and thinking about finishing it. Charlie sang along under his breath.

For Charlie, the carefree days of being 'young' and 'strong' were long gone. Max was trying desperately to cling to them before they slipped away from him completely, but he was so disenchanted by their departure that he could do nothing more than mourn their passing.

Max sighed deep in his chest but didn't let it break into the open air. That would 'cheapen' his inner nostalgia. Those 'drifter days' were passing him faster than he could bear; he was moving on to the married life and adulthood. And what then? If it was so hard for Charlie and millions of other Michiganders to find employment in the wake of the dying auto industry, streaming like a freighter through Great Lake ice, cracking through in snaking, pure white veins until the blocks were severed, how could Max hope to support a wife? Children? Himself?

"I want this song played at my funeral," Charlie broke into his thoughts.

Max looked up without registering his father's command.

"What?"

"This song, I want it at my funeral."

Both of them went quiet. Max didn't know what to say. He initially thought of laughter, but realized it wasn't funny. He looked in his father's eyes,

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noticing wrinkles at the edges of them that he'd never seen before. They were new, he thought. Brought on by stresses and burdens that were at least thirty years beyond Max's understanding. They were beyond his own petty notions of worry, still half a year in the distance over waters much calmer. If Max went under, the undertow wouldn't rip him down to the green depths and suck his feet until he was entangled in the sandy bottom with no prayer of escape. Not like Charlie.

Charlie had three mortgages (two on the cottage they were visiting), four car payments, two tuitions he was still paying, and five other people (four children and a wife he was good and faithful to) counting on him. That was stress that Max couldn't have known, in spite of his vague grasp here and there of the responsibilities adulthood would bring. That would be enough to put Max over the edge by itself. But on top of that, being wrongfully terminated from a company he had put on the map like Charlie had would be absolutely devastating.

And yet, whenever Max needed any money, Charlie didn't hesitate to help him out.

*Would I do the same? Guess I'm the thief. Does that make him the joker?*

He couldn't bring himself to respond to Charlie's allusion to death. He didn't want to think about funeral songs. His father was too young, too important in his life to be thinking about *that*.

"It's a good song," he forced out, wishing there was still some beer in the bottom of his glass to occupy himself with.

Joseph D. Williams

The quartet at the bar began to sing along with the fade-out.

*Against the wind*

*Against the wind*

*Against the wind*

Max smiled. They were all miserably off key. The men were humorously aware of it. The women were trying hard to get it right.

Charlie smiled back at him.

“Guess I picked a good one.”

They listened, father and son, to the next two songs, neither of which had any significance to Max but probably meant the world to Charlie. Each one was accompanied by Charlie’s fond reminiscence of when he’d first heard the tune or who it reminded him of. The whole time, Max was thinking about everything Charlie must have gone through since being *his* age. And Bob Seger’s voice kept ringing in his head, hinting at a mysterious connection that Max hadn’t understood before.

Was that what had happened to his father? Had he once been the young man Seger lamented? Was there a Janey he’d held oh so tight? Did he feel life passing him by?

*He must.*

Charlie *was* still running against the wind. Max, who’d initially thought the song a somewhat cheesy homage to Seger’s old flame but that he’d enjoyed nonetheless, realized that there was a message in the lyrics. Not from Bob Seger, but from Charlie to Max; from father to son. It was a message about the

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road ahead. It was a message to cherish his time while it lasted; it only got harder.

Max wondered what it would be like to be Charlie's age and finding a job, starting from square one.

*Exhausting. How does he have the energy?*

He looked back at Charlie, who was staring blankly off at the emerald sheet of the pool table.

*It doesn't get any easier. It doesn't stop.*

Max felt overwhelmed and relieved all at once.

The songs ended. Charlie stretched and scratched at his stubble.

"Ready?"

"Yep."

The two of them limped out of the bar without turning to get a final look at the quartet. They were inconsequential. They'd be taken when the waves of Lake Huron rose to claim what was theirs...and the waves were coming. Whether they'd come like a freighter or like a storm, they'd come. Max wondered if any of Michigan would still be standing when they finished their work.

Max and Charlie returned to the cottage in silence. They parked on the street again and labored under a black sky through the thirty yards or so of secluded driveway before they reached the door.

Charlie, as before, pushed the key into the lock, ready to settle in and spend a weekend pretending to relax for his family's benefit. Deep down, Max finally understood, Charlie *would* still be worrying though. Worry running that deep can't be drawn out. It's like a poison scraping through your veins.

Joseph D. Williams

Or a freighter sending cracks in the ice a mile down your body. The wind was howling.

“*Standing* against the wind isn’t so bad,” Max remarked to his father jokingly. “I don’t know about running though.”

Charlie laughed obligingly.

Max looked off at the black water. The waves were cresting in glowing whites that looked like a thousand pointed teeth, ready to roll over the land for the kill.

“I’m gonna’ go for a walk,” he told Charlie.

“I think you should ice your knee first,” Charlie returned, pushing his right shoulder through the door into the kitchen.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll make it a quick one.”

“All right. You want anything from the store?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

Max limped around the house, down the boardwalk, and onto the white beach. He made fresh tracks on the way. The sky didn’t get any lighter as he went out and neither did the waves. They thundered like jet engines with threats designed specifically for Max. He watched them lick their barred teeth and thought about Charlie.

He thought about the way that the cottage stood defiant against the blind reckoning of Lake Huron. He thought about worries that he would only understand thirty years down the line. And he wondered what would happen to Oscoda when it was time to pay the piper. It had lasted *that* long, just like Charlie had. What made him think they’d

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do anything but last like always? Even the waves of Lake Huron weren't *always* that rough.

Max stood there with his hands in his coat pockets, bracing himself against the howling wind, feeling a little small and a little young.

Joseph D. Williams in his first collection of short fiction.

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