

2012 CWC Non-Fiction Winner

I Blame Dorothy Hamill

by Tia Creighton

Dorothy Hamill got me fired from my first job.

I was doing yard work for a single guy who lived roughly in our neighborhood. Back then I thought he was 40, but now I'd say he was probably 27. I was eleven.

I answered an ad taped to the window of a neighborhood market. It said "Saturday Yard Work Help Wanted. No Experience Required." My hope was I wasn't overqualified. I had had lots of experience as a yard child. What I hadn't had was pay.

All of us kids were assigned various tasks on the weekends cleaning up the front and back yards of Pine Street. We were like a chain gang—Ted mowing the lawn; me raking; Toby pretending to pull weeds; Todd sweeping the gutter; Tori watering the azaleas. Each week, we were assigned different tasks my father said to keep the work fresh, but I suspect it was for continuity. In case any of us fell ill or were put in solitary, the others could

fill in seamlessly for the missing coolie, and the work would get done.

I, therefore, became a yard expert. I steered a push-mower with the gentility of guiding a baby carriage. An edger was a mere extension of my body. I even knew tricks of the trade. I could use the cutting edge of a shovel to dead-head weeds peering up between sidewalk cracks. I could blast moss off bricks with a hose. All without any allowance.

My dad did start an allowance experiment once. I remember thinking, “This is a dream. This can’t really be happening” as my father stood with a small gathering of bills in his hand prepared to dole them out to us. “We’re getting allowance.” None of us made too big a deal out of it for fear we’d scare our father out of the sleep-walk he must have been in that caused him to open his wallet and hand us money. We just took our allotment quietly and stepped aside for the next one to receive his or her bills. The payroll for all five of us was twelve dollars a week. I remember it happening twice and then just fizzling out.

We didn’t push too hard for reinstatement after the money dried up, feeling thankful for the two weeks pay we did get. We knew it was a lark and as larks are, they sometimes come back unexpectedly. Once in anger I did mention the lost wages. I was sweating over a toothless rake trying to clean up an October’s week worth of leaves.

Frustrated because I couldn't get any kind of pattern going on the lawn, I threw the rake down and shouted at my dad, "I can't use that thing. There's no teeth left on it. It's not picking anything up."

"That's a perfectly good rake," my father shouted back. "There's plenty of meat on it. Use the sides. Angle it."

Exasperated, I picked up the nine-teeth-on-a-stick and mumbled loudly enough to be heard, "Whatever happened to our allowance anyway?"

"Allowance?" my father shrieked. "I'll tell you about allowance. Have you ever gone hungry in this house? Have you ever gone to school naked? Have you ever had to walk to Peacock Gap for a softball game? That's your allowance!"

Meatloaf, tube socks and a ride share. Okay, maybe that was a square deal, but I was still itching for some cash. I was coming into an age where buying was an important social test. Self-esteem in the pre-teen years is heavily predicated upon consumerism. I needed some power. I needed some independence. I needed some jangle in my kit, so I answered the yard-work ad.

Chuck put me to work immediately, and I felt right at home. He had rusted clippers and a dull lawn mower. His brooms were all straw nubs. He equipped me with a duct-taped ladder and a cracked dust pan. What I wasn't prepared for, however, was

the tangled-up mess of Chuck's yard. At least at our house, five of us worked weekly to keep the yard aligned. No one had touched Chuck's yard since the Pleistocene era. Working under a canopy of overgrown branches and vines, I imagined I might come upon a nest of mini dinosaurs and earn my fame and fortune displaying them on tour.

In addition to the usual mowing, edging and sweeping, Chuck had me on ladders pruning trees; raking through leaves layered three-feet deep; hacking through thistles and brambles and Constantine-wire, ivy vines every Saturday. He obviously needed a professional with gas-powered and electric equipment, but he was either too cheap or a renter whose landlord was too cheap to hire one.

Chuck lived alone. We didn't talk much. Every week I'd show up, and he'd tell me what he wanted done. About midway through the job, he'd come out and hand me a Coke in a long-neck bottle. He would ask about sports and what I did in school that week, then he would go inside until it was time to drive me home.

I liked that he didn't want to talk. I liked just doing the work even though I never actually felt any satisfaction in it. I never made a dent in his ruthless yard. It just never looked better after I left. Sometimes, I would get resentful and mumble under my breath as I was machete-ing through a bewilderment of ivy, "Why are you paying an

eleven-year-old girl to do this, you lazy sucker? Pull these goddamn tentacles out yourself.” It’s not like I saw him inside taking a nap or anything. Chuck would just disappear. Maybe he had the good sense to nap in an interior room where I couldn’t see him.

He’d let me know my time was up after three hours. Then, he’d hand me \$6.00 and drive me home.

One day when Chuck dropped me off at my house, my dad was outside. He was securing a loose headlight on his car with duct tape. Chuck drove a Volkswagen Bug which like all Bugs blasted that earsplitting, patternless, exhaust stutter from its pipes you could hear blocks away. When Chuck’s car rounded the corner, my dad looked up. Chuck stopped in the middle of the street to let me out, and as I was thanking him for the day’s work, my dad approached. Chuck leaned across the passenger seat to say something.

“Your son sure is a hard worker,” Chuck said.

“Oh, one of my sons came to your house and did some work did he?” my dad asked confused.

Then Chuck was confused. He cocked his head and pointed at me.

“Oh!” my dad laughed. “That’s not my son, that’s my daughter.” He slapped me on the back and rubbed my shoulder.

Chuck glanced at me with a look of betrayal then looked back at my dad. “Alright,” he said. “Well, have a good weekend.” He pulled the door shut and drove off. I knew I was fired. My dad went back to his roll of tape, and I lingered in the street.

I never told Chuck I was a boy. I was just as shocked that he thought I was a boy as he was to find out I was a girl. He just assumed. I had short hair and wore jeans. I answered an ad to do yard work. I had a low voice that I inherited from my mom and her mom. But my name was “Tia” for Christ’s sake! Wasn’t that a tip off? Maybe not. Whoever heard of that name? Maybe he didn’t even know my name. And now, I’m going to lose my job because what? Because I’m a girl? Can I file some papers here? Believe me, no eleven-year-old boy was going to go to that guy’s house and work in his jungle yard for two dollars an hour. A boy would have demanded more or would have said, “Forget it, man. This place is a dump.”

And so, what? He’s too embarrassed now to call me? Embarrassed that he had a girl doing his yard work instead of doing it himself like a man? Is there an impropriety to it all now that didn’t exist before, when I was a boy? A grown single man alone in the wilds of his yard with a young girl. How would it look?

I had been mistaken for a boy before Chuck and his ailing eyeballs—but things had really ramped up since the 1976 Olympics. That's when that kewpie doll Dorothy Hamill debuted with her hair and set off a craze I just had to be a part of: the Dorothy Hamill wedge. It was a cute look, but mixed with my body type—skinny and curveless—the boy remarks really gathered speed. I was so skinny back then I could slide through the narrowest part of a bike rack. I used to bet people I could do it, and I'd win a few bucks every few weeks. The only part that was tough was my head, but I guess even at that age bones aren't fully formed, and I was able to compress my skull just enough to get through. Having the shorter hair helped, too. There was less bulk to get through the rails.

I never ever corrected people after they called me a boy. I didn't want to embarrass them. And what did it matter anyway? They were usually store clerks or passersby on the street or substitute mailmen for our usual carrier—not people I was going to see again. Why correct them? Instead, I would take on more masculine behaviors, so as not to tip the person off to his or her mistake. I would kind of puff up around the neck, flex my back muscles, hold my arms out bigger to the sides like my brothers did when they were trying to look tough, then move on with my day.

One time, though, I was with my friend Teal Moynihan, a gangly, mussed-up, rabid girl quick to

fight over any perceived insult. We were in a store looking at bracelets. A saleslady came up to me and asked if I were looking for something special for Teal. I understood immediately she had mistaken me for a boy and Teal for my girlfriend. After a pause, Teal caught on, too.

Teal began jumping in the air like a rhesus monkey shaking her fist at the saleslady and screaming, “What, do you think she’s my boyfriend? She’s a girl! What’s the matter with you? Can’t you tell a girl from a boy?”

I stood there frozen except for my eyes, which were marching out of my sockets in a desperate but futile mission to shut Teal up. Shut up now. I don’t care. You’re making it worse. I’m leaving. But she was too entranced in her spell-setting machinations to see me. So, I walked out of the store.

I stood on the sidewalk watching through the window as Teal began flailing her arms. A cyclonic force field formed around her throwing merchandise about the store. Earrings were darting off the circular racks. Scarves were blowing like wind socks in the swirling air. Tights dropped from their display stands like heavy fruit. Purses blew across the store like mangled tin off Florida rooftops in a hurricane. Teal was screeching but she wasn’t using words. She was just making noise like microphone feedback.

The saleslady put her hands in front of her for protection and began backing up. She tried in vain to stop a few bits of merchandise mid-air, but Teal's shrieking was boring like a pair of rusty drill bits through her ear canals. She had to have some distance. Her hands flew to her ears. She screamed, then ran in utter anguish to the storeroom weeping in fear.

Teal finally noticed I was gone and ran out indignant that I hadn't joined her tirade. "That woman called you a boy!" she said. "How can you just stand there? Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't stand there," I said. "I left. Besides, what difference would it make? Why embarrass her?"

"She embarrassed you. She called you a boy!"

The truth is I didn't see the insult. I knew it was better to be a boy. Boys got to do more and had to do less. At that age, with three brothers, I was embarrassed to be a girl. My brothers got to play later at night, go farther from the house and ride their bikes to school. They mocked me when I wore a dress. They laughed at me in my ballet clothes. They even got more allowance those two times, though we all did the same amount of work. It was obvious to me which was the more embarrassing sex to be.

Standing in the street that Saturday afternoon after working for Chuck, I felt inadequate and apologetic again for being a girl.

I called Chuck the next Saturday just to see if he wanted me to work, though I knew the answer.

“You know, you really jump-started the yard,” he said, “and I appreciate it. I’m going to take it from here.”

The very first time I was mistaken for a boy, I told my mom about it thinking she’d nurse me through the experience. I got nothing. “Well, look at you. Look at the way you dress,” she said. “No wonder people think you’re a boy. If you don’t want people to think you’re a boy, add some style to your wardrobe. Wear a scarf or a brightly colored belt or a blouse instead of those football jerseys.”

I didn’t wear football jerseys, but she was letting me know what she thought of my tee-shirt collection.

Accessorizing wouldn’t have helped with Chuck. What was I supposed to have done? Shoved a bangle past my elbow and shown up in Mary Janes to do his yard work? I wouldn’t have even gotten that first Saturday’s worth of work. At least I made \$30 dollars over the span of my career with Chuck.

I kept looking for other ways to make money after my humiliating layoff. I finally answered an ad to take in ironing. I did that job in the comfort of our home in front of the TV in my Lee jeans, Pumas and “Mr. Magoo” tee shirt. I did however wise up. Going to my customer’s to pick up or drop off work, I’d place two small pink and two small red barrettes in my hair—evident enough for the customer to see; subtle enough for my mom to miss. No need in letting her know I was taking her advice. I was swerving in the pre-teen years trying to find my place on life’s road, and following the markers my mom laid out seemed like a definite path to Boresville.