

# ALMOST UNPAINTABLE CHARM

Edward Byrne

## **Almost Unpaintable Charm**

Leaving my car in a practically full parking lot that serves the busy public access portion of Indiana Dunes State Park at Waverly Beach where young sunburned lifeguards perch during these early summer days on wind-weathered and water-stained ivory stands raised high above the tan sand to watch over hundreds of swimmers and sunbathers, I start a pleasant trek away from the loud and chaotic crowds toward a more secluded and protected section of the Lake Michigan shore. At first, I stride past a confusion of movement caused by a dozen volleyball players in bathing suits bouncing around a net while more than a score of onlookers surrounds them, enthusiastically shouting encouragement or sometimes finding fault, criticizing with mildly mocking jeers. A blare of clashing music from competing sources located on various rectangular isles of beach blankets scattered throughout the area supplies an oddly appropriate accompanying soundtrack.

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Nearly noon, mothers and fathers with little kids by their sides already fill long lunch lines at the recently renovated pavilion's general concession booth or nearby specialty item food trucks, and an enticing char smell of greasy grilled beef burgers wafts into the immediate distance; an easy southeastern breeze distributes its invisible scent amid air seemingly following me. Farther on and away from that commotion closer to the water, a few families have set up their camps at the foot of a dune hill used in winter for sledding, but now its steep slope rising behind them provides a bit of protective shelter from encroachment by others. Each group is equipped with an oversized brightly colored umbrella or a compact tent offering shade for relief from the strengthening sun.

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In Frank Dudley's famous Indiana Dunes paintings of summer scenes at Waverly Beach created during the 1930s and 1940s, the crowds depicted aren't as large as we see today. In his renditions that strand of sand between the surf and the pavilion, built with classic architectural style in 1929 and opened in 1930, is more sparsely populated. Even though the artworks were produced after the Dunes Arcade Hotel with 88 guest rooms was designed by John Lloyd Wright and constructed alongside the pavilion in 1931, the number of beachgoers still appears limited. Forty years later in 1971 the hotel would be removed, yet on hot summer days the car lots would fill to capacity and overflow parking would occur along the long narrow access road from State Route 12. Nowadays, a large new parking lot has been located near where the hotel once stood, permitting more people to enjoy the beach. Nevertheless, in this season's heat even all those available spots are often taken.

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Only a quarter mile away, I approach the less-visited and better-preserved part of the park. Stepping slowly though unsteadily, I clumsily descend a smooth dune slope containing powdery particles of sand that loosely cascade toward the beach with each footprint like falling grains in an hourglass. A few ring-billed gulls fly not too far above, the eastern reaches of the beach extending beyond them, their white wings like flecks of light moving through a mostly deep blue sky when they swoop toward the turquoise water and loop over the curving shoreline. Entertained by those birds, I watch with wonder as perhaps a dozen or so cruise through a faint early-afternoon layer of low haze and glide slowly over the lake. Some dart down now and then, skimming the white flush of gently turbulent surf, following one another to examine the shallow water, each gull's quick graceful probe of the surface seemingly as energetic and as hopeful as its predecessor's descent.

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The lakeside scenery before me seems to be drawn from some simple landscape on the page of an artist's practice pad filled with delicate pastel sketches or perhaps watercolors, a place where thinly painted shapes and subdued shades of color combine to provide insight about this local setting, offering more for thoughtfulness of the natural world around us. The somewhat quiet and lightly rolling waters of Lake Michigan lie to my left side like a mesmerizing mix of light blue with a hint of green beneath a sky brightened by stunning sunlight. After leaving behind the more populated stretch of shoreline, I find myself nearly alone in the midst of a silence broken only by that slight sound, almost a whisper, from today's relaxed surf. The undulation maintains a stable pace as a series of softly sliding waves arrives on the pebbled sand and provides a rhythmic background beat like a jazz drummer's brush easily sweeping across the top of a tense snare, perhaps supporting one of those mellow compositions popularized by combos featuring Miles Davis or Dave Brubeck on records first heard in the 1950s or 1960s.

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Only an irregular arrangement of other stragglers appears here. Freed from people appearing within the scope of my photo, I pause to capture a quick handheld test image of the shore with my camera. Absence of a distracting overcast allows for a rich blue field filling the upper level of the frame and contrasting with the growing aquamarine hue of lake water beneath, as well as the whiteness in the lines of waves approaching the coast and collapsing into themselves or the tan sand of the beach seen at the bottom of my digital screen. I am attracted to the simplicity in this natural arrangement, emphasizing an interaction of the intensity in illumination with the scope of tones in those distinct tints included within the range of my viewfinder. Such a spare configuration appeals to the need for clean contours with specific color fields as might be observed in a painterly landscape or even an abstract artwork.

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One hundred years ago this beachfront was filled with a crude collection of dark forms pockmarking the current parkland, mostly as rudimentary cabins and rickety shacks inhabited year-round by local homesteaders or seasonally by artists from Chicago—whose bright skyline was visible along the horizon across the lake on clear days—and other outlying places in the Midwest. Even those organizers most passionate about preservation of the park had constructed structures along the coastline, including the celebrated Prairie Club members who not only owned personal cabins but also built a designated beach house for group gatherings. However, the setting today has been returned closer to its former purer condition. Nearby mounds of wind-smoothed dunes shimmer like heaps of glistening glass seeds with the vista broken only by those slender spikes of green leaves rising among isolated clusters of marram grass. Thin limbs of some slim beach trees twist as if stretching before exercising and then elegantly reach higher toward the sky above them, while the narrow strand of sand bordering the blue water beyond seems bleached by bright sunshine to a light beige hue.

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By the time I've hiked farther east along the coast, the beach seems almost empty, except for a duo of college-age females, each dressed in a vintage style of cut-off jeans—one wears an old red-and-white Michael Jordan Bulls jersey from the team's dynasty days with the iconic Nike swoosh while the other dons a rock-and-roll t-shirt showing the Rolling Stones tongue logo, reminding me of familiar guitar riffs going back to the 60s and 70s. Wading thigh high in calmer lake water—following last night's storm, now warmed by the strong summer sun—the two effortlessly toss a blue-and-green beach ball striped with swirling white wisps designed to resemble our cloud-shrouded planet as the globe was viewed from the moon in the famous 1968 Apollo 8 “Earthrise” photo. I remember first encountering that historic image during a high school class discussion in which the teacher had asked my classmates and me if the perspective caused us to see our world and ourselves in a different light. He questioned whether or not our relationship with the universe had somehow been changed by an awareness of this mere picture. In the middle of our

conversation, he suggested that we consider how a simple image could magically alter one's outlook in life.

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The girl with the Stones shirt displays a friendly wave and a smile as I walk past following the uneven edge of the surf line where darker sand, wet and heavy, gives way to the loosely packed sand, yet dry and soft, this top layer easily moved about the beach by a lingering but variable breeze. I imagine there appears to be a confidential politeness about her signal, as if she were simply recognizing someone else who'd also strayed away from the social norm of the main venue, the present, to experience a location almost literally off the beaten path, wishing to view the way this landscape once existed in the past, where nature most closely resembles its original state. For a bit of relief, I shift my camera backpack from one shoulder to the other. Briefly, I lift my lakeside left hand as a greeting, accompanied by a minor nod in a friendly gesture to return her acknowledgment.

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Soon, I move past a man with a dark chin strap style beard wearing a tan matte Panama hat, broad-brimmed with a chocolate brown band around the base of its crown. Wide yellowed eyes with pitch-black pupils on the vivid tattoo of a lion's head peer from his bared hairless chest. A vibrant floral print on his Bahama shorts also contributes to this individual's colorful persona. I stop a while to watch as he repeatedly pitches a little driftwood stick into the gentle surf for his eager black-and-white border collie to fetch. Those incoming ripples reaching the beach now sound like the easy breathing pattern of a deep sleep. Guided by the man's commands and compliments, the dog happily jumps in and bounces out of the shallow water's measured pulse. Admiring their performance, I am tempted to applaud how the pair have developed a coordinated tempo coincidentally synchronized with the steady but small waves breaking around them. Instead, I simply display a thumbs-up, and the man salutes with a quick tap to the outer rim of his hat.

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Walking down the shoreline about a half mile east of the park pavilion, I finally find myself isolated in a pristine setting with almost a spiritual significance for me. There, a century ago famed painter Frank Dudley and his wife Maida built a studio cottage no longer in evidence, consisting of four rooms filled with his artworks, a big brown-brick fireplace, six picture windows overlooking the coast and open to strong onshore winds, plus an old grand piano for Maida to play. While all other beachfront structures were dismantled and razed to make way for nature's resurgence after the State of Indiana officially assumed ownership for park property in 1925, Dudley was permitted to keep the cabin he'd titled Duneland Studio. Recognizing his national reputation and his position as a crucial figure who championed the Indiana Dunes environment, Dudley was allowed to continue showing his artwork and hosting prominent visitors in attempts to further promote or protect this engaging and enriching landscape. In their pleasantly cozy cabin situated on the level section of a

rise facing Lake Michigan with the distant skyline of their Chicago home in full view on the opposite side, Frank and Maida resided in the Indiana Dunes much of each year for an annual rental fee of “one large original oil painting,” a contract maintained until Dudley’s death in 1957.

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Maida suggested the name Duneland Studio after an award-winning 1918 painting by her husband had made possible purchase of the property. Due to an accumulated sum of prize money from the 1921 exhibition of *Duneland* in Chicago and its sales income, Dudley was able to contract for construction of the lakeside cottage. The artwork depicts a panorama seen from the peak of a dune hill high above the canopy of a heavily wooded valley viewed in the distance along with additional ridge lines of other hills. The painting’s evocative scenery appears to comply precisely with Dudley’s stated definition of landscape art as an appeal to emotional, poetic, and inspirational aspects of human nature. Dudley believed: “The greatness of a picture is measured by the completeness of understanding

within the heart and mind of the artist, and spiritual insight alone carries faithfully the true message of nature.” *Duneland* is currently collected among the Dudley holdings at the Brauer Museum of Art in Valparaiso University where I serve as a professor and have repeatedly studied this painting.

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As I always do when passing this way, I linger a moment to rest in the gray shade beneath an isolated tree among the little sand ridges where the Dudley couple once lived. This place has become my favorite location in the Indiana Dunes. I find myself surrounded by the kind of setting I’d been seeking for my photography. The shifting easterly breezes blowing this afternoon are rare most of the year and have only gradually increased as the afternoon advanced. A few clouds—tiny, white, and wispy—begin to slide easily before the distant hinge of the horizon, lazily chasing one another above nature’s straight-line crease. Sometimes I must remind myself this is the scenery Frank Dudley once would watch with paintbrush

in hand from his wide cabin windows on a sandy bank among those foredunes just above the beach. Frequently, I like to imagine his little building is still there among the marram grass, a squat and squared red-roofed structure with a welcoming front porch open to refreshing lake gusts and any passing visitors, all tucked just under a tree-studded hillside sloping upward toward the dominating peak of Mt. Holden rising like a natural fortification behind it.

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In 1922 Frank Dudley wrote about this threatened landscape and the need for it to be safeguarded: "...one can hardly help feeling that an understanding and appreciation on the part of the public will be slow. But this does not change the fact that it is unnecessary to journey great distances to find a locality rich in almost unpaintable charm and picturesque beauty...." Though the site of his cabin may now be merely a nondescript bluff with a group of young trees growing among patches of marram grass, their bark partially stripped in spots by winds, and perhaps

appearing very much like the setting one might find in a typical Dudley artwork, today I step where the painter once walked, and I find an attraction to this land that he surely shared.

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To capture an image between these short beach trees thick with summer's rich leaves amid an otherwise unoccupied flat opening in the shifting shapes of dunes, I set upon a tripod my camera with its wide-angle lens. The vast bluish-green expanse of Lake Michigan gleams in the distance between the two trunks. Swayed by years of an onshore air current repeatedly sweeping from the north, each tree now leans away from the water and points inland as though directing me toward this significant spot. Over time, the sandy surface has been evened as well. Indeed, this space about a hundred yards from the waterline has been smoothed by insistent onshore winds especially persistent and strong in winter, erasing any evidence of the painter's special place that once stood here, that beachfront studio where visitors frequently arrived for a greeting and

signed the studio's guest logbook before being guided through the foredunes or woodland trails. Political and social officials or cultural figures were often gathered together for assurances from an art ambassador through work demonstrations and persuasive presentations. Petitions pleading for conservation were completed, and concerns were vigorously voiced during lectures or group discussions about the exceptional nature in this landscape's scenery. However, as I press the remote digital release on my mirrorless camera to preserve later in an inkjet print the resulting tranquil setting I see in front of me, the shutter button's quick but subtle click is now the only sound in the stillness. Even the whisper of the lazy waves has hushed. Everything seems so silent, so serene—and, I believe, even reverent.

