

Midsummer's Nightmare

“(...) I’m involved as a defense attorney. This time it’s a little different. You’re about to see a case in which both of us, you and I, are directly involved. Among other things, this case is about dreams. Now, there’s a funny thing about dreams: most of them are based on reality. And of course, there’s the dream that turns into a nightmare. There are many solutions to the crimes you will see committed, some more obvious than others. It will be interesting to see how many you become aware of in the following story: the case of Midsummer’s Nightmare.”

In her back yard and in her undisturbed world of dolls and things, Julie Anderson prepares her favorite doll for a dip in the pool. Inside her house, Julie’s parents are bustling about preparing a picnic lunch for the beach. And in a few moments, Mrs. Anderson will be calling Julie to get into the car. It’s a Sunday with the delicious promise of a comfortably warm and peaceful afternoon.

“Julie. Julie? Julie? Come on, we’re ready to go.”

The Andersons often pack a lunch and take a drive to a favorite beach of theirs just outside the city where they can relax and enjoy themselves together. It’s as a Sunday should be.

THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE
IN COOPERATION WITH THE AMERICAN NATIONAL RED CROSS
PRESENTS
MIDSUMMER’S NIGHTMARE

Days as glorious as these, Julie will remember for a lifetime. The excitement of being near the water, the sure, strong confidence in her father’s rough-and-tumble play, the delicacy of her castles in the sand and the dreaminess and drowsiness and magic of the day.

A lonely search for adventure, a shell, a snail, a starfish perhaps. What can a little girl find as her parents sleep away a Sunday afternoon? There’s sky and sun and sand and water, and precious little prizes she’ll bring back when she returns, if she returns.

It was Memorial Day, with the first hint of the warmth of the summer soon to follow. A car full of squirming, impatient teenagers wait for Jimmy Howell to join them in their first day at the beach.

“Be careful, Jimmy.”

It’s almost a routine. A mother’s gentle reminder to her son to be careful and her son’s somewhat less-than-gentle disregard. It’s a wide-open world and he’s been waiting to swim all winter long. So have all of them.

Sure enough, someone makes the suggestion to race to the sandbar and everybody follows.

“Come on in, water’s fine. Last one in’s a rotten egg.” Then a familiar sound to kids of all ages: “Come on Jimmy, you can do it. Don’t be chicken. We’re all gonna do it.” Just a moment’s hesitation before he heads for the water. Nobody’s going to call him chicken.

“Hey”, Jimmy yells. “Wait for me”. It’s daring, it’s exciting and it’s fun. There will be lots of laughs out at the island when Jimmy gets to the island, if Jimmy gets to the island.

And this is Harry Johnson, weekend fisherman. You've been watching his Saturday morning ritual. He drives down to the dock in his station wagon and loads up his rowboat. Then he rows out to his favorite fishing spot, just round the bend in the bay. Harry's wife packs his lunch, makes him a thermos of coffee. Every Saturday morning. Looks as if there's no room for that. Actually, there rarely is. Harry doesn't like wearing a life preserver. He got it as a Christmas present from his wife a few years back. Sort of a gag.

You see, Harry doesn't swim a stroke. He's never been afraid of the water, just doesn't swim. But he handles a boat with the best of 'em. Just give him his rowboat and fishing gear and his lunch and coffee, and Harry Johnson's at peace with the world. As always, Harry's pretty optimistic about the day's catch. Matter of fact, he's counting on a fresh fish diner tonight when he returns, if he returns.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of Julies and Jimmys and Harrys. For this summer, like every summer, 100 million of us in America will make our way to our favorite swimming and boating areas. And this year, like every year, about 6,500 of us won't come back. Next to automobile accidents, drowning is the leading cause of accidental death between the ages of 5 and 24. Drowning claims more lives each year than influenza. And most of these lives could have been saved with a better understanding of the basic rules of water safety.

LEARN TO SWIM

One of the most basic rules in water safety is "learn to swim". Your local Red Cross, Y, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and community clubs offer instruction. Swimming is a learned process and you're never too old or too young to learn it. Most drowning victims are people who can swim only a few strokes. 40% of those who engage in water sports would probably drown if their lives depended on swimming 50 feet or more. It makes a lot of sense to learn to swim and certainly, the best time is when you're young. You don't have to be an expert. In fact, whether or not you can swim yourself, you can teach your children a healthy attitude and respect for the water. You can start by helping your child become accustomed to playing in the water without fear. Teach her to blow bubbles and splash about. And from there, it's easy to teach her to float. Confidence is quickly built at any early age. And it is not done by forcing or threatening. No matter how comfortable your children are in the water, all children, especially preschoolers, need constant individual attention when they are in or near water. Another basic water safety rule pertains to swimmers. Even if you are a good swimmer, know your limitations. The reason for so many early summer drownings is that people forget their swimming muscles aren't in shape to do all they could at the end of the previous summer.

LIFEGUARD ON DUTY

Take it easy at first and gradually work up to last year's level. Of course, the safest places to swim are where lifeguards are on duty. Look for this sign and be sure you obey all the rest wherever you swim. They're all there for a reason.

Never, never swim alone. Always swim with a buddy whether you're an experienced swimmer or a beginner. Accidents can happen to anyone. And they do. A sudden illness, exhaustion, a cramp, a strong wave may render any swimmer helpless.

Nothing quite compares to the enjoyment of being out in a boat. But even if you're a good swimmer, observe these three basic rules of water safety. Enter small craft sensibly. Be sure

that there is one preserver in the boat for each occupant. Non-swimmers should wear their life preservers. Countless people drown each year because they try to swim to shore instead of hanging on to overturned boats. Remember: most boats don't sink when overturned. Unless your boat is drifting into dangerous waters, it's usually best to hang on until help comes. Your struggling head isn't as visible in the water as an overturned boat.

Somehow, the tragedy of drowning always seems to start the same way: a beautiful summer day, a family, a few friends, a young couple plan a day at the beach full of smiles and fun and pleasant dreams. Then somebody makes a mistake. And the dreams turn suddenly into nightmares. It happens almost 6,500 times a year. Need it be so? Not at all. For if we were to learn the basic rules of water safety and follow them closely, these tragedies just would not happen.

Suppose the first rules of water safety were second nature to Julie's parents. Suppose they were given another chance and instead of falling asleep under their umbrella, they stayed awake watching Julie, as they should have been. The lonesome walk in search of adventure should never have happened. Quite possibly another adventure far more exciting could have taken its place. Under the watchful eyes of her father, Julie could have learned about the water, not to fear it but to respect it. She could have learned about keeping her balance in the water, how to put her head in it without fear, how to float, maybe even a few proud strokes on her own. And she should have learned that she should never go in the water alone. Many days of her life will be spent near the water, and the more Julie learns about swimming and feeling comfortable in the water, the more she'll enjoy herself in the years to come and the less chance she will have of ever becoming a casualty of drowning. Sure, there are shells to collect and interesting little animals to see by the shore, even more fun while daddy is there to explain, answer questions and hold her hand. This is as a Sunday should be.

And suppose Jimmy, when his moment of decision came, was more aware of a basic rule of water safety. Even if you are a swimmer, know your limitations. He should have known. For it's every swimmer's responsibility to know not only what he can do in the water but also what he can't. And Jimmy's friends should have known that too. The place for Jimmy that Memorial Day was in the shallow water where he could practice swimming safely and build up his endurance. Even at that, he shouldn't have been alone. Any time you go in the water you should have someone nearby. It's impossible to predict where or when you're going to need help. Never swim alone. Sure, a few of the boys are bound to tease Jimmy for a while but he'll take it good-naturedly, and he'll show them he may outswim them all in a short while. But even more important than that, he'll be alive to try.

And Harry Johnson, our non-swimming weekend fisherman, really should have known better. When a non-swimmer enters a small craft, a canoe, a sailboat, a motorboat or a rowboat without a life preserver, he's just asking for trouble. It's very easy to put on a life preserver, no extra effort at all and certainly far safer.

You can never tell when a strong wave or a sudden movement will turn over a small boat. Following a basic rule in water safety, Harry holds on to his boat - it'll never sink - and waits for help. And his boat is much easier to spot in the water than his bobbing head. It's all very simple when you know the rules.

Maybe when the tragedy of foolishness is realized, 6,500 people in our country won't drown each year. Maybe when the tragedy of foolishness is realized, more people will make it their business to know the rules of water safety and teach them to their children. Then, and only then, those beautiful midsummer dreams will stay as they are without turning into nightmares.

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The scenes you just saw are examples of incidents that occur with alarming frequency every summer. Almost 7,000 people drown in our country every year, nearly half of them youngsters. Now, you may feel that is merely a statistic but think of it for a moment in terms of your friends, your loved ones and your own family. It's a little different, isn't it? Listen, listen to me. Most of these tragedies could easily be prevented if you were to practice safe habits in and around water and if you were to teach them to your children. Of course, the best way for you to teach them is to set a good example yourself. This is your responsibility. There's only you to blame if your happy summertime dreams are turned into nightmares. I've joined in the Blueprint for Life, program designed by the Greater Cleveland Safety Council to build for you and your family a healthy, happier summer in the year to come.

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