

A Dark Silhouette Rode the Surf...

by J. R. Warnet

The hot, glaring sun just peeked around a cloud long enough to poke me in the eyes. I shaded myself the best I could, but the sun peered through each space between my fingers. I was just getting used to sitting on the sand and watching the water crash back when my mother called over to me and asked me to come see her. After a mild bout of moaning, I went over to her beach towel.

"Davey, pull up your pants; the sand will get in your pants if you don't!"

"But mother, it's hot. I don't like the beach. I want to go home." Such insolence for a young boy at the age of 16, in 1916, was just unheard of. I was lucky I didn't catch a handful of punishment, but this time I had risked the slap. It was my first time at the beach and the whole situation made me very uncomfortable. As most boys find out, you do what your mother tells you and that's that.

"You're lucky your father didn't hear that! He spent his overtime on this trip to the beach, so you best respect him and his wishes. Now go over there, pull your pants up, and get your sister another towel."

Pants from that time were not like the pants you see today. In fact, if I wore what most people wear to the beach now, I wouldn't have a mouth to mouth off with again. As I walked back to my towel, I noticed the people all laughing and cheering and being active at the shore. I was definitely not one of them. I just had to cope with the situation for now and pray for more clouds to pass over the sun. Looking around at the new environment was quite a thrill for a city boy in his early years - the sights, the smells. I can still remember the first time I had a hot dog down by the shore. People with all different types of beach clothes were walking around and talking about most things people talk about. I handed my sister another towel for her feet and proceeded to sit on my towel and sulk.

Swimming wasn't one of my passions, and neither was a hot day on even hotter sand. Growing up in New York City let me have my fair share of hot days, but the beach heat was terrible that day, no wind, just a lot of dark-colored clouds moving back and forth through the open sky. I watched as other boys my age swam in the water that was a lot clearer than it is today and hoped they would ask me to swim, but they never did. Music was playing in the background while a little breeze blew in and gave me a scent of the ocean and all it had to offer. As I shaded my eyes to look out onto the water, the birds dove in and out of the water, probably chasing fish of some sort. Splashing and jumping and screaming children played in the surf while their parents read books and discussed politics on a very normal beach day in central New Jersey.

My left hand reached out and picked up sand and watched as it fell threw the cracks back onto the ground. A very crowded beach still offered enough sand for me to pile up in front of my towel.

"Davey, knock it off! Go swim in the water with the other boys; they are having fun; look!"

But ma, please. I don't want to. I...I."

"Just go and play; you can play baseball in the



street when we get home but just go play in the water like your brothers!" She then started to rant and rave about how much of a hermit I was, when the shade came back over my head. Her ramblings to the neighbors were drowned out by the fact that you could see the line of the clouds cascading down the beach.

I looked up with my hand shading my eyes to see past the sun, but a large, very dark cloud covered what was thought to be the sun. As I looked down to begin my sand-moving, something told me to glance back up toward the water. I scanned the surf to look for my brothers and found a single swimmer thrashing in the water. Foam and suds poured out from under his body and he stopped to head back to shore, but never made it. A dark silhouette rode the surf from right to left and stopped right near where the swimmer had abruptly stopped. I first had thought it was another cloud, but I then saw the young man go under and pop back up like a buoy I had seen earlier that day. He was flailing his arms and legs in an effort to move from that spot, and fast. The pure white foam suddenly turned to a reddish color and the boy was struggling with extreme difficulty. I could honestly believe that I was the only one who had heard his screams in between the various other sounds heard on a beach.

I jumped up and snapped back to reality as I could still hear my mother complaining about my social habits. I ran toward the scene with a vengeance as I tripped over beach towel after beach towel. No one around me was paying attention to the surf, and the other swimmers were heading toward dry land just as fast as I was heading into the unknown. Slowly but surely, the rest of the beach caught notice of the somewhat helpless swimmer surrounded in a pool of crimson and churning water. My pants were still falling down, but as I entered the surf, they followed my lead in a swimming fury to help whoever and whatever was in the far-off distance. In between my arm strokes the sound of people screaming from the surf grew louder and louder and then suddenly got very quiet as I reached the then lifeless bather. His body was being moved side to side by something, and I had no idea what I was doing in the middle of

the whirlpool of fear. I grabbed the boy's arm and began a tug-o-war with an anonymous thing under the water. For about thirty seconds we pushed and pulled the lifeless, pale body in the now blood-red tide. One final pull by the assailant and I was under the water level with the victim, all the while having my eyes closed. I finally got the courage to open them, and I saw a black hole, rolling around on a white surface, up and down, up and down. The thing stared me down with its black eyeball, and for a brief moment we both stopped time and waited for the other to do something. My body was frozen with fear and shaking with an adrenaline rush, but the creature swam off in an instant, never looking back at what carnage it had left in its wake.

As I gulped the free air at the surface, my ear drums filled with the sound of birds calling and people shouting. Having never physically swum another human back to shore, I was a little curious about what to do. On my side, still shaking and crying in the tide, I pulled the young man to where my feet could touch the bottom again. Several men came to my aid and helped both myself and the other boy onto shore. By this time so much had happened; people were all staring at me as if I had bitten into the swimmer. Police sirens and fire engines were all closer to the main road when they pulled the body onto the sand. As the blood poured from his leg, the sand began to stick to the wounds like glue. My mother and my father all ran toward me and knocked me down with the force they exerted.

"Davey, Davey!! Say something, say something!!! Oh, my God!"

"Can, can we go home now, mother..?"

The last time I saw that young man was when they put him into an ambulance and drove away into the distance. They tried to bring him back to life, but he had lost too much blood in the Jersey surf on that God-awful day. Every day since that violent day I still see that emotionless eye staring back at me, waiting and watching my every move. For forty-seven years I studied sharks and eventually received a degree in Marine Biology. I still look around the surf of the water every time I swim at the beach. I'm not sure what I'm looking for, but I'll know what it is when I find it. ■

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