

Taking Water

by Ben SD

Right now, it's February in Ohio. It's cold, overcast, and generally shitty. I'm at home, researching a time that was hot, sunny, and generally ideal. I'm sitting at my desk, asking for help remembering something I know more intimately than any of the authors of the articles I've already read a hundred times. I've written more about it than any of them.

The first one I find reads, "Las autoridades informaron que una turista se ahogó a eso de las 6:40 de la tarde en el área del Condado, detrás del Hotel La Concha." I don't speak Spanish, but I don't need to translate it. That's the article where I learned her name. I've been reading it for almost eight years.

It's around three in the morning when we leave our home. It's the big family vacation. The trip is great, all things considered; nothing goes wrong, and I call that a good start. We land in Puerto Rico around noon, head over to the Whatever Hotel, get checked in, then start decompressing from the journey. We're all tired and hungry, so we seek out some of Candado's finest dining (Burger King in this instance) and retire to our room for some rest. The rest of the fam wants to sleep, but this is an adventure, so I announce a solo walk on the beach. This puts us at about about five o'clock.

I walk out westward, alone with my thoughts. The sun is still high up in the sky, but not quite as high as the hotels along the beach, which are cloaking everything in a thin veil of shadow. It's an ideal day. I'm out in the sun, on some stone pier behind one of those monstrous buildings, and there are people and voices all over. I barely notice the voices from the water. I don't recognize them as anything requiring my attention, but I look over.

“Help!” they’re screaming. There are two of them, just girls. They’re probably the same age as my own oldest daughter, who’s already fast asleep in the hotel. “Seriously, help!” I take it for immature play, a stupid joke. Nobody else is doing anything either. I start to walk away. “Seriously!” one of them calls again.

I have to be clear at this point: I’m no hero, I’m not brave, and I’m not noble. I’m a coward. I’m timid and avoid putting myself in positions that draw attention. Normal social situations make me anxious. I’m not even a good swimmer; I grew up in Ohio, for Christ’s sake. When I got in the water that day, it was only after I considered that I could just keep walking and pretend that I didn’t hear, that somebody else would help them, that they weren’t that far out anyway. For reasons I still don’t understand, I didn’t consider that I could die out there with them, or that it might be my name appearing in some tragically incomplete article in a language I don’t even speak. Maybe I would have kept walking.

The second paragraph says, “Según el agente Alejandro García de la Zona Turística de San Juan, la joven turista, Jazmin Bulciaga de 18 años disfrutaba con sus padres en la playa antes mencionada cuando ocurrieron los hechos.” I still remember her mother’s face. I wanted to tell her how sorry I was, but I don’t think I said anything at all.

I make eye contact with one of them. That’s what seals it. Somehow she’s not so far out there. Somehow she’s made her way to the pier while the other is still thrashing in the waves. She says, “Please, my cousin is drowning,” and she’s not shouting; she’s just speaking, pleading, begging, and she’s begging me personally. I offer to get somebody. It’s hollow and thin and there’s no way she even hears me. I want to explain that my

swimming prowess would be about as helpful as a bag of M&Ms, but I can't say anything, so I take to the water.

I'm out in the ocean now, but I only tread water nearby. I don't even know how to help. I don't want to help. Somebody else is approaching now, swimming up to her, and he looks so much braver than I feel. Another somebody is swimming up with an infant-sized life jacket. The first lends his buoyancy to hers and she thanks him by raking at his skin in wild desperation, clinging to his neck, nearly drowning him with her. Both Samaritans give up and head back to shore.

By the time I can make myself do anything, I'm the fourth "rescuer" to the drowning girl. Her head is lolling, and she is barely staying afloat. Another person, who looks comfortingly terrified, has arrived. He's the third. There's a life preserver between us – I can't explain its origin – and the girl is listless. She makes a feeble attempt to grab onto me as my arm entwines hers, but that's all.

How long have we been out here, pushing against the waves, getting nowhere? Hours, days, weeks maybe. Maybe minutes. My companion says, "I think we're stuck out here." I think he's right. The girl's face keeps bobbing under the water. Her lips are blue, bluer than in the movies. I boost her up, unsubmerge her head, and the ocean foams from her mouth. Her eyes are open but sightless. She is so pale. The act now seems less like rescue and more like retrieval. I could leave her here and probably get back to shore. I could stay and valiantly go down with her.

I remember the day my father died. I remember how pale he looked. I remember how years of illness sapped all the pigment from his skin until he was practically albino. There was still no comparison; Jazmin Bulciaga was so pale.

They eventually reeled us in with a long pole held by a chain of people. They pulled us up onto shore where everybody was a savior. Someone was shouting for an AED. All the hotels had to have one, she said, or they could get sued, they would get sued so bad, they would lose everything they had if they didn't have one. Someone started doing chest compressions. Someone was a nurse and needed to get through. Someone was wailing uncontrollably, cursing the heavens or pleading with Hell in Spanish between sobs that sounded like they were threatening to steal her last breath as well. It's hard to remember any specific person amid all that chaos. Meanwhile, there was this girl, belly round and pregnant with sea water, heaving with each press on her chest, mimicking her own last breath from several – many – minutes before.

The article is very short. The third paragraph only says, “La Policía indicó que a la joven se logró sacar del agua y darle los primeros auxilios por enfermeras graduadas que se encontraban en el lugar, pero mientras era conducida al Hospital Presbiteriano falleció.” I disagree; she died with me, barely suspended in the water by two strangers.

Now back on shore, the girl comes up to me. Not the dead girl, but the beggar. Her face is more distorted and terrible than her cousin's, but she's alive. I half expect her to be angry. She tells me thank you, and I struggle to puzzle out exactly what she's thankful for. Then she fades back into the wall of people pressed around us.

I am collapsed in the sand. I'm exhausted. My fellow swimmer, my fellow survivor, is also lying nearby. I go to him, thank him, apologize for not being a better swimmer. He says he can't swim well either. A woman is knelt on the ground near the drowned girl, shrieking, showing more pain than I've ever seen. I know it's her mother.

Only a mother could hurt like that. Maybe I tell her I'm sorry. Maybe I say nothing. My mind is a vacuum at this point, but it doesn't matter what I say; it doesn't bring her daughter back.

When I got back to our hotel room, I flipped on the light, immediately waking my wife who bolted upright in bed. I remember clearly how the sudden intrusion on her sleep scared her. I managed the good sense to say, "I'm alright. The kids are alright" before anything else. I asked her outside with me, and we took the stairs to the roof where I told my story. She said that she thinks I'm a hero, and it made me want to cry. Maybe I did.

It was the next day before I could find an article about the event. Everybody I talked to about it was so casual; there are a few of these cases every summer, they all said. Business as usual. The article ends without any kind of ending. "El agente Alejandro García continuaba con la investigación." I wasn't part of any investigation. I doubt anybody was. It was just business as usual, and the only story that got an ending was that one young girl's.