They Don’t Tell You

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Thursday was wash day for as long as I could remember. We lived commune-style—my cousins, aunts, uncles, and my immediate family—most of the summer. The cottage we rented was rickety; sometimes it seemed as if the old walls could barely withstand the laughter, not to mention ten kids between the ages of eight and sixteen. This place was a virtual paradise—we lived in swimsuits and stayed in the lake until our lips turned blue. Hair slicked back and streaked with blonde, arms and legs nut-brown from the sun, we played and tumbled and grew up together. There was no piano to practice; who could ask for more? With the exception of various duties assigned by the adult who was acting as sergeant-at-arms for the week, we were blissfully unconstrained.
I am the oldest and my cousin Laurie is six months younger than I. We worked our way up through the ranks from watching for sea monsters (friendly ones), to sweeping away the ever-present sand, to (ta-da!)—laundry. The privilege of doing laundry came with the driver’s license; we were still too young to know what an undesirable chore washing could be. Especially if you have to do it. Every Thursday we filled the entire back of the station wagon with laundry or, to be more precise, a mixture of laundry and sand. It would have been one part laundry to one part sand, but wet beach towels and soggy sneakers added bulk to the laundry side. The hilly drive was a relatively short one, past all the familiar landmarks: Butch’s Mariana and the A & W Rootbeer Stand.

Once inside the laundromat, Laurie and I filled every available washer. (Even if we could have used them all, we would have had to run two batches). But, the other regulars were there too—Mrs. Grimm from Lookout Point, a nice old lady who smelled horribly of sachet and had blue hair; the Baxter twins—blonde, blue eyed “sweet little things” about fourteen years old, and, of course, the Dunnigans. The Dunnigans were my favorites. They were fat and jolly and nice. Today they had brought their brand-new granddaughter with them so that their son and his wife could see some friends. They only stayed for a couple of weeks each summer, and the Dunnigans, in their children’s absence, adopted my cousin and me. We were all comfortable with each other and with the same old magazines, the same old washers and dryers, and the same temperamental candy machine.

Laurie and I didn’t rush as much that Thursday. The wind was pretty strong and cold for July—definitely not a good day to work on a tan, so we opted for the relative peace and quiet of the laundromat instead of babysitting cousins and siblings. The time came, however, when each beach towel was perfectly and symmetrically folded, the contour sheets were masterpieces of patience, and the tennis shoes were so dry they had shriveled. The others had long since left the laundromat. Good thing, too, because it was starting to rain. We reloaded the station wagon and started for home.

Once back at the cottage we donned suits and sweatsuits in hopes we could at least swim our “morning constitutional” (as our grandmother called it) since the rain seemed to be holding off. The water was too rough, though, rougher than I had ever seen it. The wind whipped the surface of the small lake, turning it a mottled grey-green with white caps crowning the waves at their highest point. We sat on the sand,
sheltered between the breakwater and the first terrace, and watched, fascinated with the change from our normally peaceful lake to this wild, tossing, threatening body of water.

"My God," Laurie whispered. "Look!"

I followed her pointing finger. I couldn't believe what I saw: three people—large ones at that—loaded into a flat-bottomed aluminum skiff capable of supporting only about half of their accumulated weight. The motor, carefully adapted to attach to the back of a boat meant to be rowed, weighed the skiff down even more. What would have been potentially dangerous under normal conditions was an incredible folly now. And they were heading for the middle of the lake!

Laurie and I split up. She ran for the cottage and the car to find a phone: I took a position at the end of the dock, standing on a seat and holding on to one of the anchor poles. The wind whipped at my clothes and hair. I could barely keep my footing; the spray from the uncustomed waves made the dock slippery. I had a hard time keeping them in sight. They wouldn't turn back! The little boat bobbed and weaved—the motor died several times, but the people started it up again and kept on going. What did they think they were doing? I just prayed that they could all swim, and swim well. I noticed that only one of them was wearing a life jacket.

By this time, a small crowd had gathered on our shoreline. Even the younger children were quiet, watching the slow progress of the boat. Several times the boat came very near to overturning; the three boys raced off to alert neighbors with boats of sufficient power to handle the storm—just in case. The people in the boat were more distinct now—a man in the back and two fat women lurching from side to side in the unstable craft.

They were more than halfway now, about three hundred yards from the end of our dock. Now they were fighting time, too—the clouds began to roll in, blacker and more ominous than before. The water was dark and frothy. The motor stopped.

After pulling the cord several times without success, the man began to stand. It was Mr. Dunnigan. "Sit down!" I yelled, but the wind caught the words, and he never heard me. The boat rocked violently; it almost seemed to jump out of the water, spitting the foolish couple and their daughter-in-law into the water.

"Count heads!" my father yelled. Sometimes I could see them and sometimes I couldn't. They looked so tiny, bobbing furiously in the angry water. Certainly they'll grab the boat, I thought. My father had
come out to help, but he was too heavy to stand where I was. He did what he could to brace me against the wind—I was the only one now who could see the human buoys, flailing ineffectually behind their overturned boat. One of the figures did grasp the boat, I thought, and the one in the life jacket was easy to spot and staying upright. Why didn’t the other woman grab the boat—it seemed close enough. She didn’t seem to be struggling much. I blinked my eyes against the wind and—only two heads were left.

“One’s under!” I shouted. I had never felt so helpless in all my life. Too far to swim in this weather, no boat at all, and someone drowning. Right there. Right in front of me. I was watching it. It was really happening. I wasn’t doing anything at all to help. I knew...

“Get ahold of yourself.” My father’s grip on my legs tightened. I blinked back the tears, swallowed hard and tried to breathe normally.

“Keep your eyes on the other two.” I did. But time was running out.

I heard a motor in the distance, just around the bend. Thank God—I hope it’s not too late. The boat circled the skiff, and two men jumped overboard—they pulled three people out of the water. I stayed on my perch until they had fished the Dunnigans out of the water and headed toward our dock. They came in fast, hitting the dock sideways with such force I thought it would break. The men in the boat didn’t hesitate, they grabbed the inert figure of Mrs. Dunnigan and half-dragged, half-carried her to the relative stability of the dock. My aunt stripped the old woman’s fluorescent suit down to her waist, pounded once on her chest, and began the steady pressure-release of cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. Hand over hand, heel of the palm between the ponderous breasts, my aunt bent over the bluish figure. The men then carried the old man to the shore and helped the younger woman away from her mother-in-law. They had their hands full.

“Dawn.” I started.

“Mouth to mouth. You know how. Get to it!”

In a minute I was down on my knees by the old woman, Mrs. Dunnigan, routinely performing what I had performed many times on a dummy. A lifeless, plastic dummy.

What they don’t tell you about saving lives is how cold the face of a drowned person feels as you cover his mouth with yours. Or the taste of seaweed and water and vomit as the stomach loses control. They don’t mention how the eyes can be open and looking at you—looking at you like they saw things you can’t see. They don’t talk about how the muscles and bones seem to melt into a heap of flesh—blue, cold. They just don’t tell you.
I cleaned out her mouth with a towel and concentrated on counting. I had to breathe for her every fifth time my aunt put pressure on her heart. One, two, three, four, five, breathe, one, two, three, four, five, breathe.

“Rescue squad’s here!”
One, two, three, four, five, breathe, one, two, three, four, five, breathe...

“O.K. I’ll take over.”

I quickly moved over and a man in uniform took my place. Another had an open medical bag. He checked her heart and pupils. He looked up.

“How long?”

“About twenty minutes on the dock, three to four under the water.”

He shook his head. The other men stopped. I couldn’t control my stomach anymore. I leaned over the side of the dock.

“Nothing more you could have done. We’ll want to talk to a few of you.”

“Of course,” my father said.

We watched as they covered the old lady with a coarse blanket. It wasn’t until then I remembered the others who were with her. Mr. Dunnigan stood there shivering and moaning, tears running down his cheeks. The chubby daughter-in-law began to shriek and was led away to lie down and take a sedative.

The sun peeked through the clouds and the wind died down. The sheriff, the ambulance, the men—they were all gone. The cottage was quiet except for the martins who swooped and quarreled noisily. The younger kids played half-heartedly. They didn’t ask to swim. The adults smoked in silence. Even my grandmother had a stiff drink. Supper was forgotten.

I watched the lengthening shadows of the trees intrude into the room. They fell across the pile of clean laundry, neatly-folded and waiting to be put away. I closed my eyes—could smell the soap and cement of the laundromat, hear the whirring and jostling of the washers and the thump of sneakers chasing each other around in a dryer. I saw Mrs. Dunnigan nestling her new granddaughter proudly in the crook of her arm and beaming senseless endearments at the child.

Her son stopped by the next day.

“I thank you,” he said, choking with emotion. “There’s nothing more you could have done. I want you to know that. Nothing more.”

And he was right. But it didn’t matter.