

ENJOY THE SEASON
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Page 1

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Ah, Independence Day. Everyday during the summer of my elementary/junior high school years saw me flaunting my independence. Around the fourth of the hottest month was special, more so in 1958.

Growing up on the shores of Lake Michigan, I really didn't suffer from the heat. Most kids don't anyway. The July temps made swimming all the more enjoyable.

The favorite daytime hangout during the summers after my fifth and sixth grades was Southport Beach. The polio outbreak had had a couple of years to subside since the Salk vaccine had been distributed. So hordes of us from elementary school age to high schoolers flocked to the "in" spot. There were rarely any problems, as crowded as the bath house, beach, water and piers were. Mom even let me go alone sometimes. One of those times was the summer after seventh grade. It was extremely important. I was on a mission.

There was an unwritten, unspoken code regarding a rite of passage among kids in our southside neighborhoods. How we all assimilated this knowledge was a mystery. We just knew all about the contest, the timing, the rules. We also knew that each who tried had to be successful or suffer everlasting humiliation.

The summer before a kid started eighth grade, he/she was expected to swim the channel between the breakwaters at Southport. When he made it, he BELONGED. This was paramount to every kid who was a "people person". Some of my friends already belonged.

It was rumored to be dangerous. The choppiest water in the area was in the channel. There were stories of undertows pulling kids miles off shore and their bodies being found days later several miles south of the state line into Illinois. But I couldn't dwell on that. I was a good diver and swimmer. The day had come. I was ready. July 5, 1958 - one day before my 12th birthday.

As I approached the beach on my bike, I noticed that the water was calm and sparkling. I set my bike in a rack (no lock needed) and gazed out over the lake. The swimming area was almost entirely enclosed by breakwater. Huge boulders were stacked next to and on top of each other until they rose out of the water. At the spot farthest from shore was a large gap in the breakwater. The channel. As I stared at it, it seemed to double in size. Could I swim the length of a football field?

Several girls who were going into ninth grade (we had three year junior high schools) strolled past me while whispering among themselves. I watched them prance up onto the boulders at the shore and skip along the rocks to the end of the breakwater. One by one, they swam effortlessly across the channel and climbed onto the opposite breakwater. From atop the highest boulder, one of them called, "Your turn, Marcy." That was keen. Bobbie actually talked to me.

I slowly removed my tennies, as we called them, and climbed the boulders. Although I had walked on the breakwater hundreds of times, I did so more deliberately

that day, hoping to exude confidence and determination. Physically I was staunch; emotionally I was a mess. What if I couldn't make it? And the lifeguard had to rescue me? Utter humiliation would prevent me from attending public school.

At the edge of the channel I stopped and peered down. Giant swells rose and fell as if to dare anyone to disrupt their motion. I was nearly mesmerized when Bobbie's good luck call reached my ears. It was then that realization slapped me in the face.

I had been accepted by the kids already! It wasn't about what I was on the verge of doing. It was about who I already was. Everyone I ever saw try the channel swim made it. If it wasn't safe, the lifeguard wouldn't have been smiling at me. The whole business was just a formality.

I drew myself up to my full 5'6", inhaled until my lungs hurt and dived in with all of the force my 100 pounds could muster. After one strong underwater stroke, I looked around. Scores of plants waved at me from the channel bottom. Plants didn't grow in undertow areas. I was saved!

I surfaced halfway across the channel. A few easy strokes took me to the breakwater. Bobbie gave me a hand to the top of the rocks. There, we all chatted and even spoke to some BOYS. One part of me felt pumped up while another part felt let down. Generally, I was relieved.

That night, I went into my sister's room to tell her about my episode. She was going to be a high school senior and had just recently started to accept me as a relative.

"In a way it's stupid, Penne. It's stupid but it's neat."

"I know," she said with a grin.

Most kids think that a way to become independent is to become one of their crowd. Acceptance and all that. But from then on, I wasn't too eager to play the same societal games that my peers deemed necessary to BELONG. I knew what was important. Perhaps that was the most useful birthday and Independence Day gift I ever received.

Happy birthday, Annie.

Happy birthday, U.S.A.



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