A Fine Day

Elinor Holmberg*
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Abstract

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About six o'clock a large, swanky station wagon, a speck of the Friday night exodus from the city, drove onto the beach a few hundred yards away from us and went into the ritual of setting up their picnic. We happened to be watching when the older man in a large pair of dignified black draw-string shorts was being coaxed by the middle aged woman with the denim skirt and sandals and duck-billed cap-to-match and cigarette to take little Stevie down for "a little dip." And Stevie came from behind the station-wagon in his little red trunks with STEVIE written on the pocket in real chenille letters, being about two or three and not seeming to care what his mother would have anyone doing with him and looking chilled and small in the early evening wind.

It was plain that the duck-billed woman was going to have her way; "that's nice" . . . "Now dry him" . . . "towel . . . here." . . . "nice." and they started toward the water slowly as she looked after and then turned back to fuss with the outdoor barbecue set and arrange the portable-beach-chairs-in-three-bright-colors.

The old man was a fine, grayed head that was carried on top of a white collar and dark flannel suit all week, plus the timid, pale, and fleshy body that the suit didn't cover now—the thin legs and proud stomach and sloping shoulders shivering as they neared the wet sand and the water. The head had its hair exactly in place with a non-greasy dressing
and his eyes were those sad kind of eyes whose shape had been lifted just enough by habit to be shrewd and bland and not too apparently sad anymore. He was at the shore now — as he had been told — not caring to be either naked or wet — but probably caring that nothing be thought but that he was a good grandfather. The little boy who held limply to his hand still didn’t seem to care anymore as they stood apart in ankle deep water, bewildered and uncomfortable, facing the huge plain sea, the little boy who wore little creased trousers and a little bow tie on Sunday and always had his hat put on and his nose blown, not knowing what they expected of him now.

We didn’t look again until we heard the sharp high yelp and then nothing and then the old man was in knee-deep, his hands groping forward over the swaying water and then we knew that Stevie was the white blob a few feet farther out and we nearly felt the strain of those pale legs pulling through the heaviness of the water — not fast enough — and we were up and half way down the shore when the old man’s bulk sank down and then up again with the kicking, squawking boy at the top of the long white arms that held him against the sky — and then the laughter, the honest, scattered, glad laughter — through tears and sea water. They were quite wet now. And when the women, the nice unknowing women, began calling from the shore “time to . . .” the laughter went on and ignored them all for a while as the two splashed up and down and clung together — the laughter telling of the surprise and silkiness of each new lap of salt water, the texture of wet caked sand between toes, the nudging beauty of the sunset, and the nearness of wet slippery skins, of aliveness hugging safely together.

They left less than an hour after the sun was all gone, long after we had begun to mind our own business again, but the sound of the high sudden, honest 16th notes of laughter from a man and a small boy lasted long after the sunset — falling up the beach again and again with the clean and gentle, forever-washing sound of the sea against the shore.

It had been a fine day.

—Elinor Holmberg, Sci.’55