

RIP TIDE

By JAMES COLLINS

In 1950 I went to Rockaway on the Atlantic with my family for a summer vacation. I was 14. The ocean was blue with white topped waves and I went to get some exercise and cool down. Two mistakes were made that day. I was swimming alone and the lifeguard was chatting up a trio of teenagers.

Only out 20 feet from shore, I was swimming parallel to the beach when suddenly; I started to move out to sea. Not by my action, but by the ocean current. I was on a wild blue horse that was headed to England. Startled, I tried to swim back to shore - no use, I was overpowered. So I stopped and waited to see where I was going. The tip of the jetty passed me on my right as I faced the beach and I was picking up speed. I was terrified but inquisitive. I didn't know what was happening but I literally went along for the ride. Out more than a quarter mile I suddenly decelerated until the water was calm with small waves and I came to a stop. The beach which was 300 feet wide looked to be one eighth of an inch wide. Nobody could see me. I didn't know what happened but I knew I couldn't swim back. It was too far and I was 5'2" and 120 pounds. But I could float and I wouldn't panic. If you panic you die. That had been drilled into me as a child by my parents and it served me in good stead.

45 minutes later the process continued; float, turn, take two to three strokes, roll over and float. Do this a few hundred times and you slowly reach the beach. Again I passed a jetty on my right, and suddenly I became visible to a lifeguard who was waving and blowing a whistle and gesturing for me to come in to shore. I wanted nothing more, but the process could not be stopped. It got me here and I was not going to change the cadence. It worked. Finally I felt sand under my feet and I rushed to dry land. The lifeguard was having a tirade but I was not having any part of it. I was exhausted. I explained to him what happened and he asked where I went in the water. I said "right here on 104 street" He told me I was now on 105 street beach and the last jetty I passed was a quarter mile south of where I went in. He also explained that I was caught in a rip tide and that the 104th street beach lifeguard was supposed to warn swimmers of the danger. I then walked up the beach to find the lifeguard still talking with the young girls and gave him a piece of my mind. He was twice my size, and though I was livid with anger I was also thankful to be alive. I could have died. My guardian angel had to work overtime that day and my children and grandchildren have learned from my experience. Never swim alone and never panic; if you panic you die.

THE END

Alt title

IF YOU PANIC YOU DIE