



## *(Almost) lost at sea!*

It was high noon off the Queenscliff beach, near Melbourne, Australia. The airbed I was half-dozing on had contrived to drift away from shore, into deep water; not extremely deep, but certainly deeper than me! As I stepped nonchalantly from my plastic platform, expecting to hit firm sand, all I felt was more seawater. Panic!



Since then, I have this image imprinted on my brain, where my frantic gaze pans across the slightly choppy water, to distant figures on the beach, in the hot midday sun. Slivers of voices carry to me; intermittent sounds skipping over the waves.

As the saying goes, *'I couldn't swim to save myself'*, thus was faced with a Catch22 choice: strike out into deeper waters to retrieve the airbed - already making its seaward escape - or label that a lost cause and try for shallower parts and the beach. Instead, I did neither. Terror set in, and I raised my arms, yelling in desperation to all those I couldn't see.

Ingesting copious quantities of seawater and in danger of going under for time number three, I spotted a miracle (or was it a mirage): the silhouette of a lone form swimming



towards me! It seemed forever until this *form* pulled alongside and put his arm under mine, thus stopping my descent into a final underwater adventure. Not a mirage after all. "*Hold on to me,*" his only words.

I must have hung from his neck like a lump of lead! Six feet tall and 85 kilograms; It was no mean feat for my rescuer to get me back to the shallows. When I was able to stand, he still held on to me as we staggered towards the beach, both exhausted and collapsing in a heap on the sand.

He regained his composure, took my pulse, saying '*You're fine mate,*' then disappeared. I can still see him now, a dark shape running into the distance. I owe my life to that shape! That man! If he had not materialised, in response to my distress, I would have become a small item in the next day's news: another incompetent victim of the Australian surf.

As I lay there, resuming my life - breathing hard and blowing seawater like a beached whale - I remember passers-by chastising me: another young hooligan who had drunk too many beers or inhaled too much marijuana. It seemed a harsh conclusion; even I didn't get legless before noon. In truth it had been sheer unthinking carelessness – nothing to do with drink or drugs - which endangered my own life (and that of my rescuer). But it did emphasise the need to learn to swim properly, before venturing into the Aussie surf once again. Next time there might not be any *Miracle Man* on hand to save me!



I shrugged it off, picked myself up and headed over the sand dunes for lunch. I told no-one the story for many years – too embarrassed I guess - but the event has re-visited my consciousness a thousand times since the day it happened. Eventually I did learn to swim ‘to save myself’ ... but whatever I do, I cannot expel the overwhelming fear of deep water!

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