

The Israeli Baby

BY MONIKA JONES

UNEXPECTEDLY, THE BABY JUMPED into the swimming pool. His chubby little legs sprang from the tiles and he was in the water. He sunk immediately. His floppy brown hair waved. Sinking.

Only in retrospect can I imagine the whole episode in slow-motion movie-reel form. Slide by slide I see his eyes squeezed shut, his arms above his head, his back facing us as his body sank into the water.

I was in the water the minute I heard him splash.

I was grabbing his soft waving hair, pulling his arms up and pushing him up, up, up to the surface.

It was only a second that he was under.

A long, long second.

Then I held him up.

And he coughed.

Thank God! His mother had rushed over, reaching for him. I was panting out of fear, disbelief.

I'm sorry, I said. I'm so sorry.

A human life, the potential future, a child, someone else's child. My responsibility. What had I done? Oh, the baby, the baby. He could have drowned. What if I hadn't gotten to him in time? How had I let him jump in?

I felt sick. I clutched the side of the pool.

His mother held him as his tiny frame heaved. I wondered if my CPR skills would come back to me. I squinted, panting, leaning against the side of the pool. Was it seven pumps or ten? Did you breathe in first, or after?

Then he was fine. Spitting, breathing and crying.

Thank God!

His mother finally looked at me. I'm so sorry, I said again.

No, she said, thank you for catching him. I should have been watching closer, he is a daring child, always taking risks. We should have put a life preserver on him.

I nodded to her, maybe even smiled. I was ready to cry. I hopped out of the pool. The moment of emergency is so great. It burned me. I am ready to cry, even now, hours later. Out of fear of the moment. Out of relief.

The baby is alive. He could have been taken in an instant. Just one breath

of that clear chlorine water and he would have been gone.

He was bubbly only minutes later. Splashing around the pool in yellow water wings, all smiles.

His mother laid down, her eyes closed, dark hair spread like a fan on the blue and white lawn chair.

She must be used to the constant fear of maternity now, the fact that every thing in life can potentially hurt her child, take him from her.

Perhaps his present laughter calmed her. He floated around, smacking his hands on the water. The droplets flew in all directions, splashing the water until the pool was all ripples, no calm.

They are on vacation, flew in from Tel-aviv the day after we arrived. What was her fear a moment ago compared to her fear of always?

Israel. To me daily life would always be rippled there; it is a place that can maintain no semblance of calm, or the calmness is always rigid. Living there, does she worry of death for her child when it is always around her?

I wonder, do humans concentrate on the inevitable death when it wraps itself around us? When mortality taunts us every moment, do we look away and shudder in fear? Or, do we instead face the other side, tell ourselves we must understand? We are extremely adaptable, we human beings are.

And maybe that baby kept her up all night, and now she is catching the sleep she so desires, in the Mediterranean sun, on a vacation from her reality.