

1954

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Recommended Citation

Richard, Jerry. "Drowning." *New Mexico Quarterly* 24, 1 (1954). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol24/iss1/14>

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Jerry Richard

DROWNING

"Where's Lenny?"

"Aint he up his house?"

"No. I just came from there."

"Well, I don't know where he is."

Harry sat down on the steps in front of Lenny's house between the two placid stone lions which flanked the entrance to the narrow garbage-strewn hallway. He looked out at the East Bronx sidewalks littered with rubbish and people, at the gutters littered with rubbish, people, and cars. It was summer and it was Saturday morning and the groups which now included men as well as women were like human shrubs clustered around the entrances to each of the five-story houses which lined the street.

Harry lighted a cigarette and eyed the street; there was no sign of Lenny. He glanced at his watch; it was already ten-thirty. When he finished his cigarette he got up and crossed the street to where Sally was standing. Sally was seventeen and had shallow blue eyes, full lips, and a nose which still showed the effects of a fracture incurred when she was fifteen. Her hair lost its blond color toward the roots and she was very careful to put on just a little too much rouge and just a little too much mascara.

"Hello, Sally. Have you seen Lenny?"

"Gimme a cigarette."

She took the cigarette but spurned the matches, lighting it instead with a cheap cigarette lighter.

"No," she said. "I aint seen him, Harry.—You know, with all the years I know you, it still sounds funny calling you Harry."

"Why?"

"You're so young for a Harry."

"People named Harry are born young too."

"Yeah, I guess they are. What do you want him for?"

"Who?"

"Lenny."

"I'm taking him to the beach. My old man loaned me the car."

"You're not allowed to drive a car."

"Sure I am. I'm eighteen."

"Yeah, but you have to have a license too, stupid. . . . Can I go?"

Harry thought it over. He didn't like being called stupid, especially by a girl like Sally, but he had the car and he knew how to humble her. His index finger wandered slowly across his lips.

"Sure," he said. "If you bring along lunch for us."

"Lunch for you?"

"Yeah. And see if you can get a girl for Lenny."

"My girlfriends don't like to go out with Lenny."

"You want to go to the beach?"

"All right, all right. Maybe Doris will go. When are you going?"

"Meet me here in a half-hour."

Harry walked down to the corner and looked about; then he returned to his seat in front of Lenny's house. He had to wait another ten minutes before Lenny appeared with his gray eyes staring out uncertainly over the two big brown paper bags which contained the morning's shopping. Harry saw him coming but waited until Lenny was at the house. Lenny greeted him peremptorily and started into the dark hallway, but Harry stopped him.

"Where ya been, Lenny? I been waiting almost an hour for you."

Lenny carefully placed the two bags down on the steps and brushed his tired black hair away from his forehead. Lenny's hair seemed determined to hang almost straight down on all sides, as if to further depress his already short stature.

"I've been shopping," he said, indicating the shopping bags as evidence.

Harry gazed up at the sky. "Good old Lenny. Works hard all week and come Saturday he's up early in the morning to do his mother's shopping. I gotta hand it to you, Kid. You're all right."

Lenny just shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. He wondered why Harry would wait so long to see him, but he didn't ask. He didn't have to.

"I got my old man's car," said Harry, lighting a cigarette. "We're going to the beach."

Lenny loved the beach. He loved to lie on the warm sand and know that the cool water was so near by; he loved to look up uninhibited at the sky until the sun hurt his eyes, and he hadn't been to the beach all summer. He said he would go, though Harry had already taken this for granted. He said he would be right down; he picked up his packages and started into the house, but Harry stopped him again and told him not to forget to bring his camera.

"Gee, Harry. I don't know about the camera." He put the packages down again. "It's a pretty good one."

Harry put out his cigarette. "Yeah," he said. "And it's a pretty good car too, but I'm taking you to the beach in it. Anyway, I want some pictures of myself in a bathing suit."

"All right," agreed Lenny, then added: "But I don't have any film."

"Don't worry," Harry assured him. "I'll get film." And before Lenny could again pick up the packages he said, "You don't have to worry about lunch either. Sally's coming and she'll bring lunch for us. She may bring a girl for you too."

"I don't need a girl to go to the beach, Harry."

"She said she would try to get Doris."

"Aw no, Harry. Not Doris. You know I used to go out with her."

"So what? That was two years ago. She won't even remember.

Besides, you're not going out on a date with her. She'll probably get herself picked up as soon as she gets there."

There wasn't much Lenny could do about it now. By now she had probably already been asked, and Lenny wanted so much to go to the beach. He picked up his packages and went into the house. Harry called after him and told him to hurry. He said he would be right down and Harry said he would wait for him in front of the house.

Lenny kissed his mother drily, automatically, put the packages down on the kitchen table and told his mother that he was going to the beach. In five minutes he had his bathing suit on under his jeans and was running down the stairs, towel in hand. He was so excited he didn't even think about Doris. But Doris was the first one he saw when he came out into the street.

"Hello, Lenny," she said simply.

Lenny said hello to Doris and to Sally, Sally said nothing and Harry was already in the car. They got in: Lenny and Doris in the back seat and Sally alongside Harry in the front seat. Harry stepped on the starter, put her in gear and released the clutch while pressing on the gas. The car leaned forward but did not go. Sally leaned over and released the hand brake.

"You sure you know how to drive this thing?"

"Sure I'm sure. I've done plenty of driving."

They stopped for a red light at the corner and Harry asked Lenny if he had brought the camera. Lenny jumped out of the car and ran back to his house. He returned quickly with the camera and found everyone laughing as he climbed into the car. He managed to smile foolishly, self-consciously, as he fell into the seat.

The car passed slowly through the dirty, overcrowded section, stopping not only for traffic lights, but even more often for the kids who reluctantly interrupted their games to let the car pass. They had also to pause once or twice for old women who strolled majestically across the street, oblivious of traffic lights and cars

alike. Then, almost suddenly, they were between the clean new white and red brick apartment houses which hid the slums from the smooth, tree-shaded parkway which was the pride of the Bronx. The car picked up speed on the black road and everyone relaxed. In the back seat Doris dominated what little conversation there was; Lenny could think of little to say. In the front seat, however, Harry and Sally each had plenty to say.

"... and we should have brought a radio."

"What's the matter, Sally? Don't you like my company?"

"Sure, Harry. But I'd like to hear the ball game."

"Since when are you interested in baseball?"

"I always liked it. I used to play ball."

"I'll bet you did. Want to play with me?"

"Play what with you?"

"A ball game."

"You're pretty cute, Harry. I'd like ..."

As they entered the parking lot they could see only the back of the beach pavilion with its tall white-washed flagpole. The flag hardly stirred and a gold-colored bronze ball sat on top of the pole and warmed itself in the sun. It was a good day for the beach.

It was not until they climbed to the top of the white stone steps that they could see the long curved apron of sand. The beach was dirty; Lenny had forgotten that. The debris was scattered all over and much waste was clustered around the wire-baskets, thrown there by people whose aim did not quite equal their intentions. However, it was not too crowded and they soon selected a spot on which to lay their blanket.

They all wore their bathing suits under their outer clothes and when they had all disrobed Harry, Sally, and Doris decided to go in for a swim. Lenny said he would stay by the blanket and take a sun bath. Doris piled her long red hair on top of her head and after several attempts finally succeeded in snapping shut the strap of her bathing cap. Sally, whose hair was short to conform with the latest style, wore no cap. When they had gone Lenny stretched

himself out on the blanket and tried to look at the sun. He soon had to close his eyes and he lay still not wanting, not trying to think, but thinking nevertheless. He thought of irrelevant and unconnected things like the gray dirty house he lived in and the clean white ones along the parkway, of how it would be in the future when he would be honored and wealthy. He thought of Doris and he wasn't quite sure what to think of her. He thought of the camera and groped around until his hand embraced the genuine leather case, the camera a present from his uncle. Then he looked up at the gold-colored bronze ball high up on top of the flagpole and thought how noble it looks, how, even when the flag comes down and the sun declines, it stays there untouched, indifferent. He pictured himself sitting on top of that gilded ball and he saw himself falling off and that was a silly thing to think about so he closed his eyes again and was devoid of thought.

After a while Lenny spread a towel over his face to protect his eyes and the long nose that burned so easily. The sun was hot, but Lenny sweated it out. He was several times pelted with water and sand by careless people running to or from the water, but the water which dropped on him now was too deliberate to be the result of thoughtlessness. Doris was playfully pouring water on him from her bathing cap. Harry and Sally were drying each other off and when all were dry they adopted Harry's suggestion to play cards. They drew cards to determine partners for gin rummy and Lenny was paired with Sally. Lenny proved to be a rather ineffectual card player and Sally was not much better; they lost almost every game. Sally continually blamed Lenny for their losses (even though they were not playing for money) and she soon refused to play with him. Doris offered to take him as a partner but the game was already broken up and everyone took to sunbathing.

It wasn't long before Harry decided it was time to take pictures and he said he would go get film. Since Sally was already rummaging through the lunch bags, they decided it was also time

to eat and Harry said he would bring back some beer. Sally accompanied him as they ran quickly over the hot sand.

Lenny was now exposing his back to the sun and Doris lay next to him, face up. They were silent for some time and then Doris spoke:

"I haven't seen you for some time now, Lenny."

"Yeah." He had to brush some sand from his mouth when he spoke.

She was quite pretty and he was less than handsome and everyone had been surprised, not that they broke up, but that they had ever gone together in the first place. But Doris asked: "Why did we ever break up?" Her tone was soft and Lenny had to raise his head to hear her. He wondered if she was teasing him; he couldn't decide.

"I don't know," answered Lenny, and he really didn't know. Although they had such different personalities, Lenny often serious and Doris seldom so, still she had always seemed to take some sort of vicarious pride in his seriousness, without, however, ever being serious when she was with him. He was still trying to figure out exactly why they had stopped seeing each other when Doris asked: "What do you think of me now?"

Again Lenny did not know and said so. She rolled over next to him and Lenny said: "You know, you have a bad reputation."

"Don't believe everything you hear about me."

Now her hand was in his hair and she curled the long black strands around her finger saying, "We used to have some good times together."

Maybe that was it. She always wanted to have a good time, never wanted to be serious. She always wanted to go to places he couldn't afford to go. Maybe it was just that he couldn't afford to go out with her.

A little rubber ball rolled near them and Lenny jumped up quickly to retrieve it. He saw the owner, a little boy, and tossed the ball to him. Then he looked about for Harry and Sally but

could not see them. He lay down again and heard the guitar some distance away. There were two or three people humming along with the soft guitar music and Doris moved closer so that her still damp body was pressed against his.

"Don't believe everything you hear about me," she repeated.

He didn't, but had the funny feeling that he wanted to. Her hand was on his neck and just the thumb moved, slowly brushing up against his hair. He looked at her bright blue eyes and saw the sun in each one. He moved his face closer to hers and their noses almost touched. He held back a moment and then gave in. Their lips parted and he kissed her again. "Can I see you tonight?" he asked; his lips brushed her cheek as he spoke. "Not tonight," she said. "Make it next week; next Saturday night." "Next Saturday night," he repeated.

They remained close, unspeaking for several moments more and then Doris sat up and said, "I wonder what happened to Sally and Harry." Lenny sat up, searched the beach and announced: "Here they come now."

Harry and Sally, still some distance away, could be seen holding hands and dancing over the burning sand. Each, in the free hand, held two bottles of beer and Harry also had two rolls of film sticking out of his bathing suit. Lenny erased the lipstick from around his mouth and Doris, having repainted her lips, was combing out her long red hair when Harry and Sally deposited the cold beer on the blanket and Sally said, "Let's eat."

They ate quickly, drank the beer, and then all but Lenny took out cigarettes. Doris induced Lenny to try one but after a few puffs he coughed and had to throw it away. Harry, still laughing over Lenny's difficulty with the cigarette, tossed a roll of film over and Lenny removed the camera from its case and, lifting a corner of the blanket for shade, proceeded to insert the film. It was a good camera and Lenny took very good care of it, although he seldom used it. When the film was in place Lenny's head emerged from under the blanket and he turned the knob on the

camera's side until the number one appeared in the little red window.

Harry was already posing when Lenny was ready. Harry stood with his stomach drawn in and his arms folded over his not too robust chest; it was a pose he had copied from a physical culture magazine.

"Stand with your back to the sun," he cautioned Lenny.

Lenny moved into position and was ready to take the picture.

"Make sure you get all of me in," said Harry.

Lenny saw Harry in the finder and advised him to smile. Harry decided it would look better if he didn't smile and Lenny snapped the picture. Pictures were then taken of Sally and of Doris and, after some coaxing, Lenny also submitted to having his picture taken. Since no one went to the beach without taking novelty pictures, they took several trick pictures and then came to the inevitable pyramid. Harry was already balanced on the backs of the two kneeling girls and Lenny was just about to snap the picture when people on all sides of them started running towards the water. Sally, seeing the excitement, got up, unbalanced Harry, spoiled the picture and looked out at the water.

"Come on," she said, already moving with the running people. "Some one must have drowned."

It happened just the way all those things seem to happen. No one heard any screams; no one saw anyone actually drowning; you just saw everyone around you running and so you ran along with them, not sure what you were running to see, but not wanting to miss anything. No matter who in the moving crowd you picked out to ask: What happened? the reply would have been: I don't know. I just saw everybody running so I started running too.

Of course there are always some who sit it out, disdaining the action of the curiosity seekers and whether or not the other three would follow Sally was, for a minute, uncertain. But then Harry broke and Doris and Lenny followed in quick succession.

They reached the water's edge in time to see a lifeguard swimming towards shore, one arm gripped firmly around another person in the manner prescribed for such exigencies. Two more lifeguards swam along with them. The tide was in and still some distance from shore the lifeguard found the water shallow enough to stand up and carry his prize the rest of the way to the beach. He held the person he had rescued against his chest, one arm under the back and the other under the legs, and the people on the shore saw now that he carried a girl. The crowd edged closer to the water but all they could make out about her was that she was evidently of medium height, had large pointed breasts and that she had dark hair which was long enough to lay wet and tangled around the lifeguard's arm. The lifeguard looked exactly like most people imagine a lifeguard to look: tall, blond, well-tanned and muscular—the kind young girls in no danger of drowning would like to have rescue them. He strode towards the beach, the girl held tenderly in his arms as the recalcitrant water shrank slowly down.

Lenny, observing all this, decided to take a picture of the lifeguard still knee-deep in water and walking boldly shore-ward with the girl in his arms. He checked the camera and finding one picture still to be taken he maneuvered his way to the front of the crowd, knelt down on the wet sand and, after making the proper adjustments on the camera's various dials, snapped the picture. He looked about and finding his three companions together, went over to join them just as another lifeguard started clearing a path for the stricken girl. Lenny mentioned the picture he had just taken and Harry was the first to realize the possibility of selling the picture to a newspaper.

"You really think they might buy the picture?" asked Lenny doubtfully.

"Sure. They always have pictures like that in the paper."

Doris and Sally confirmed this and Lenny could remember seeing pictures of similar incidents in the paper and he knew that they often bought pictures from amateurs and, as far as he

knew, he was the only one who had taken a picture of the scene.

"How do you go about trying to sell pictures to newspapers, Harry?"

"Just take the negative down to the office of one of the local newspapers and let them develop it. If they like it, they'll buy it."

"I guess it's worth trying."

"In fact," said Harry, "you ought to take a few pictures just to make sure."

Lenny had already thought of this and he ran back to the banket to get the other roll of film. When he returned they were giving artificial respiration to the girl who looked to be about eighteen years old and was rather pretty. He took a couple of pictures of the lifeguard leaning on the girl's back and then asked Harry how much he thought they might pay for such a picture.

"I don't know," said Harry. "But I'll bet they pay pretty good if they like the picture.—Of course," he added, "if she doesn't die, they may not buy it."

What? Not buy it if she doesn't die? "Why not?"

"Well, a lot of people are pulled out of the water every day. It's only the ones that die that make news."

Lenny glanced at the still unconscious girl; the lifeguard continued machine-like on her back.

"Well, I wouldn't want her to die," said Lenny nervously.

By this time Sally remembered someone who had taken a picture of a man who had jumped from the top of a building and, she assured Lenny, he had sold the picture for a lot of money to one of the local papers.

"Stand back. Let her have some air," shouted the policeman who had just arrived on the scene. He circled the crowd and pushed everyone back a few inches before looking down at the lifeguard. The lifeguard looked up and shook his head, but continued his methodical leaning and rising, leaning and rising on the girl's back.

Lenny noticed the lifeguard shake his head and he looked at

Harry who had also noticed and Harry nodded his head and smiled. Lenny again expressed the hope that the girl wouldn't die, but his mind had already seen the next day's paper with his picture in it and under the picture the words: *photo by Lenny Fisher*. And now Doris suggested the possibility of this starting him on a career as a photographer and Lenny had thought of this too.

Doris put her hands on Lenny's shoulders and asked him what he was going to do with the money. Lenny reminded her that if the girl lives he probably would not be able to sell the picture at all. "And," he said, "I certainly hope she lives."

"So do I," said Doris quickly. "But just the same, if she does die it's not your fault and you may as well make what you can on it. You can't help her anyway."

"That's right. There's nothing I can do about it anyway, is there?"

Lenny went over to where the policeman was talking to a tearful young man. The young man was the girl's boyfriend and Lenny made a note of the girl's name and other particulars as they were related to the officer. The boy had been out swimming with the girl and they were going to race each other in. He reached shore before he noticed she wasn't with him. After a futile search, he finally called a lifeguard who, from his high platformed chair, saw her pretty far out and struggling in the water.

The rest Lenny knew and he adjusted the camera so as to take a picture of the policeman talking to the girl's sobbing boyfriend. As he stepped back to take the picture a little girl, no more than six years old, tapped him on his arm.

"Take my picture, mister?"

He looked at the girl disbelieving, as if she had suddenly appeared in the men's locker room and caught him naked.

"Not now," he said finally.

"When?"

"Later."

"Aw, c'mon. Just one picture. Please?"

"Stop bothering me; I'm busy now. Go away, I'll take it later."

"Aw, you can take just one picture now."

"I said I'm busy. GODAMMIT! CAN'T YOU SEE I'M BUSY?"

He watched her run and then turned towards the policeman who now saw the camera and warned him not to take any pictures.

The cry of the ambulance on the concrete walk at the rear of the beach had just about expired as Lenny rejoined his friends. Sally reported that the girl appeared to her to be almost dead now. Lenny looked down and saw the shuttered eyes and the blue lips; she was not responding to the artificial respiration. Lenny agreed that the girl looked pretty bad and then he noticed a woman standing nearby who appeared to be watching him. He looked at her and fairly shouted: "I don't *want* her to die!"

Now two white-coated ambulance attendants broke into the circle. They put their stretcher down and one took the girl's pulse. "We better hurry," he said, and they put the girl on the stretcher and trotted off.

"You better go after them and see where they take her," said Harry. "So you can find out what happens to her."

The crowd by this time was largely dispersed and now, when the girl was taken away, most of the remaining people disbanded. Sally said she was hungry and was going back to the blanket and Lenny thought of giving the whole thing up and returning to the blanket himself. He hesitated and Harry told him to hurry. Doris took his hand and started to run after the attendants who bounced along on the sand, the stretcher held precariously between them. Lenny ran along with her.

A few people ran along with Lenny and Doris towards the ambulance. Harry stood where he was and watched them until he was satisfied that they reached the ambulance before it left.

Lenny and Doris joined in the new crowd that was gathering on the walk and Lenny read the name of the hospital printed neatly on the side of the ambulance. Then he went around to the back and through the two windows on the rear doors he could see an attendant holding an oxygen mask over the girl's face. The siren cried again and as the big ambulance moved slowly down the walk, Lenny ran along behind it. He could still see the attendants working over the girl; one stubbornly held the mask over the girl's face and the other conscientiously prepared a hypodermic. The hot concrete blistered his bare feet as he jogged along. Doris had rejoined Harry at the water's edge and Lenny was the only one who followed the ambulance as it made its way gradually along the clean white promenade which bordered the long beach. The tide was in and the cool water seemed very close and the hot sun hurt Lenny's eyes as he strained to get a look at the girl inside the ambulance.