# The Swim

## Santander Brunal - Creative Non-Fiction

Summer of 1986, in Far Rockaway Beach, Queens, N.Y. We used to go there a few times of year with my father's longtime friends, Raphael, Evita and their three kids. They had two boys and one girl: Alex, the oldest; Ivette; and Neil the youngest son. Along with my two brothers and sister, I used to love hanging out with them. Unfortunately, they were not related, yet we considered them cousins just the same. We would often pair up, my older brother Charles with Alex while my older sister, Lesly, would spend her time with Ivette. As the youngest of the group, Neil and I would sneak around and play tricks on both our sisters. It was fun to make them miserable. I had a younger brother, too--Harold--, but he was young. During these hot summer days, he was content to be with mom and all the other younger kids, playing under the shade of the boardwalk. They would spend their time digging holes, filling buckets and feeling the sting of sand in their shorts.

We all spent our time swimming in the surf, trying to keep the haze and humidity of summer off our sun-red necks. As hot as it was, we were grateful for the cold Atlantic waves that would crash on the beach. Far Rockaway, with its long, worn and splintered boardwalk, was infamous for the sudden rip currents that would drag people out in a hurry. You would often watch people getting pulled out gasping for breath by the lifeguards. Today they wouldn't be any help.

We were having so much fun that I hadn't noticed Neil had disappeared with his friend Hector up on the boardwalk. We continued to fight the surf and laugh when somebody would get rolled by the thunderous waves, the loud snap and deep "growl" as the energy would dissipate from the waves on to the beach. As the day got late, we could see the life guards closing their umbrellas up and down the beach. The loud screaming of kids and the constant sound of music also began to fade as people made their way to the parking lots. Just as the beach became less crowded, Neil returned with Hector. It wasn't the same 15-year-old Neil that had left. He was slurring his speech, and Hector was moving around like he had the ocean inside him. His brother Alex gave him a disapproving stare, but Neil didn't notice it. Suddenly Hector and Neil grabbed Lesly and Ivette. They pushed them into the surf. We all laughed and swam around for a while fighting the waves that seemed to get heavier this time of the day.

As we began to make our way out of the surf, I turned around to see where everybody was. Everybody was out except for Neil and Hector. Looking toward the water, I stood there in shock. Neil was in the distance bobbing up and down trying to keep his head above the water. Hector was motioning frantically. I looked over to tell someone that Neil was in trouble, but they were already under the boardwalk drying out. Trying to make my way to them, I swam, ducked through some waves and swam some more. The tide pulled me further, but by the time I reach them, I was breathing hard, and my muscles were burning. Just as I started to get my breath, Neil pulled under in a total panic. I fought him off and pushed him away. "Neil, what the hell are you doing?" I yelled in terror. I could see the desperation on his face as he flapped and flopped his arms in a frenzied attempt to hold on to something. I needed to calm him down, but Hector also looked alarmed. His eyes were wide open, red and continuously looking at me and then to Neil. Once I gained my senses, I told Hector to swim for help. While I continued to

paddle, I talked to Neil more calmly, "If you want me to help you, you can't drag me under". There we were staring at each other, paddling to stay afloat. "Calm down and float," I said with more stern voice. I reached over and put my arm around his waist. I told him "You need to paddle too," as we began to make our way in, but Neil wasn't floating very well.  He was flapping his arms, but it wasn't helping. As we swam, we would get consumed by the large swells that were this far out from the break. Each time I went under, I swallowed my share of seawater.

The beach sand was so distant, and the more I looked, the more scared I got. As I began praying, "God, please help me" over and over in my head, strangely, I could feel the warm sunlight on my face.  After a while, I told Neil to float, I let go, and I tried to touch the bottom with my feet. What a mistake, we were deep, and it really freaked me out. "Neil, you have to swim!" I yelled. He looked at me and I think he understood what I was saying. Luckily, with the greater urgency, we had reached the breaking waves. I was really tired now, and after a while, I could feel the ground. "Just a little bit longer," I thought. The waves were heavy, I got turned upside down and swallowed some more sea water. Neil didn't look good, his arms just barely were moving over his head as he paddled in. Finally, we caught a wave that propelled us to the edge of the sand. Crawling out of the sea foam, I could see Alex reach for Neil and everybody gathering around us.

I could hardly catch air in my lungs. Neil was practically face down in the sand, when suddenly I saw his body lurch. A mixture of bile, beer and hotdogs spilled out of him. I stood there shaking, cold and feeling kind of faint. The life guards ran over to us, but there was nothing they could do. Their shifts had ended, and legally they could not help him. They instructed us to call for 911. Just as my body began to warm up, Neil's mother and father began to thank me over and over again. Once the ambulance arrived

they placed Neil on a stretcher. With the stretcher on board, his mother began to cry. The ambulance left with its sirens blaring moving the crowd that had gathered. I felt proud of myself. Several years later I would tell Neil jokingly "Hey you owe me!" and when life feels as if it is pounding down on me like those waves that turned me upside down that day, I never panic. I just keep swimming.