

Dying to Swim

Jim and I sit under the umbrella of an outdoor café. Our friend, Steve, basks in the winter sun. A woman with cropped blonde hair sets our drinks on the table in front of us. "So how's the water," Steve asks.

"Aw, just beautiful," a smile spreads across her tan, weathered face.

"What about the jellyfish?" He asks, "We swam in the Whitsundays but is it okay here on the mainland?" He nods towards the turquoise bay where Tenaya floats.

"Oh, you should be okay. The season for stingers is October through May. It's June now, eh? You should be all right." She starts to walk away, then returns. "Should be, can't be certain though." She gazes away for a moment, "It's the little Irukandji you've got to look out for."

"I heard you can't see those," Steve says as he stirs his frozen concoction.

"No, you can't! They are tiny," she points half way up her pinky fingernail, "and clear. You don't even know you're stung. But 30 minutes later it hits you." She pauses. "I was stung once. Three days in Intensive Care and six months rehabilitation."

Steve's jaw drops as he bolts upright.

"My son was stung too, getting off his jet ski. Stung on his foot. He rubbed it on the back of his leg so he was stung twice." She demonstrates. "That was horrible. It's horrible when you think your son is going to die."

Steve's mouth is still gaping when she perks up, "I wasn't even swimming. Was hauling up the anchor and one splashed on my leg," She points to her thigh. "Just felt like a paper cut, nothing really. We went home. Pretty soon I was in terrible pain. We knew what it was because of my son so dialed triple *oh*. Friends said to stay and wait for the ambulance but we couldn't. You've got to do something, you know? My husband got me in the car and the ambulance met us on the road."

"It's painful?" Steve asks.

"Excruciating. My hands and feet were the worst. I couldn't imagine anyone touching them, especially my hands. It goes to your nervous system, you know, all through your body. And you don't see it coming. Get stung by a box jelly you know it. You feel the pain immediately."

"Does wearing a stinger suit help?"

"Aw, only tourists wear stinger suits," she says with a chuckle. "It's really not common to get stung."

Something catches her attention and she hurries off.

Steve gulps down the rest of his drink. Looks like it melted. Jim's beer is long gone. I'm ready to upgrade from water.

Julie comes back and says, "You know, I'm still more afraid of the sting rays."

"Out in the water?"

"No right on the beach, just in the water. You're walking along and there they are."

I think I see Steve shiver.