

Harriet Report #19 – Lost at the Beach

May 13, 2001 Sunday

Mother's Day is full of lyrical bliss. What?

It had been a normally mixed day and by 5:30 p.m. I was finally relaxing at the beach, as much as I can when I'm standing on my own two feet instead of reclining.

I was cooling off from the overheated tram ride by standing ankle deep in the chilly North Sea, watching Arthur happily playing in the wet sand and reflecting with relief that Peter had finally quit pouting on the towel and was playing with Arthur. Looked all clear, so I decided to take a turn sitting on the towel. Then I briefly lost my life.

I didn't die, but I lost my son Arthur. He's only seven.

We were at Schevingen, a Dutch beach on the North Sea. I had just been thinking what a great setting it would be for a James Bond movie; with it's Victorian era jumbo casino and rows of tasteful high-rises, wide cement boardwalk, carousel, outdoor cafes and rock bands, crowds and crowds and crowds of Sunday beach scene absorbers. It was finally hot summery weather in Holland and everyone was undressed and swimming or laying in the sun if they weren't on the boardwalk strolling their stuff. The whole family was there, all three or five thousand.

I actually counted a section of beach and extrapolated there were at least two thousand people on the sand part alone. Arthur was among them, I hoped. Not under the sea, which really was quite shallow for a long way out, since it was low tide.

So far that afternoon he hadn't been in the sea at all so I hoped he hadn't ventured that way in the 78 seconds I hadn't been watching.

I looked around and could only see Peter, my ten year old. I figured Arthur was behind some of the people clustered in Peter's area; well, clustered everywhere. When Peter started to come toward me with no Arthur, I got off my butt to check it out.

"I don't know where he is, Mom," said Peter.

Deep breath, I can fix this. It might take a while, but it will be ok, but my soon-to-be-ex husband Alex will kill me, but that doesn't matter anymore, he's almost ex, or does it?

Ok. Let's employ logic. It seemed most realistic that Arthur had been walking the fifty feet between our towel on the beach, where I had JUST parked myself, and the hole in the wet sand he had spent an hour digging, and had somehow gotten lost. It was fifty feet and there weren't THAT many people in between, but he's only seven.

He was definitely missing. I looked calmly at first, not calling his name, assuming I'd see him soon. Peter waited, standing up so Arthur could spot him easily, right next to Arthur's hole in the wet sand in case he came back there.

After my first swing through the two or three hundred feet of beach immediately around us, I went back to Peter and asked him to stand by the towel

instead. I went about a quarter mile to the south, calling Arthur's name and earning funny looks; maybe for my baseball cap and shade shirt, or maybe for my calling out on the beach filled with two thousand people in thongs, bikini's and surprising lack of shouting.

I returned to Peter and then went five hundred feet to the north which led under the pier. Arthur wouldn't have gone this way, would he? He could tell we hadn't come under the pier when we came to the beach. He'd remember that wouldn't he?

Finally I tearfully asked some women about my age if they spoke English. One answered "A little," like most totally fluent but humble Dutch. I asked what to do if I lost my child. She said "What?" And I practically shouted at her "I lost my kinder!"

She said something to her husband sitting behind us, and he answered, then she pointed to a flag up the beach a little way that said "Politie" (police). I went there. No police, no office. I asked someone where the police were. They pointed to a building down a little farther. I went there and all the doors were locked. I asked someone else where to find the police and they pointed to the locked doors. I was really getting panicky, but just kept breathing deeply.

Arthur was probably back with Peter already, right?

But even I had trouble finding Peter and I'd memorized his position relative to a couple with a stroller and the flags marking the sand castle competition. Peter was helpfully still standing up as I'd asked him.

No sign of Arthur. This was freaking me out. Should I leave Peter on the beach while I went onto the boardwalk to try to find some police?

And then, after these 30 horrible worrying minutes, Arthur came stumbling across the sand traveling north. I called and RAN to him. I heard people laughing as I ran shouting, but I ignored them. Dickheads! Why hadn't anyone offered to help me? Not very Dutch-like of them; not the kindness I've learned to expect.

Arthur heard me and we hugged as I led him back to the towel to sit in my lap and explain what the hell happened. He said he was going to give me the cut off plastic soda bottle he'd been using for a bucket before he rinsed off in the shallows but he couldn't find me. Then he went back toward the water and couldn't find Peter and he started walking down the beach to the south until he hit the end. That's about a kilometer! No wonder I couldn't find him! He had a head start and I didn't go that far down.

He said he walked along crying and nobody offered to help him! I was so relieved to find him and he was so SAD and Happy to be back together. What a fright!

I said we could have ice cream for dinner, it was Mother's Day, but Arthur wanted U-Nork Pizza (New York Pizza, a slice chain, pretty good for Europe). So we had some slices behind the boardwalk and then an ice cream and then a second ice cream just for good luck. Umm, mint chip.

We had to fight to get on a tram back home, there were all those hundreds of people wanting to get home also. But first I cut my foot very slightly on a broken bottle in the sand. Hardly worth mentioning compared to losing Arthur.

We fit on the third tram that came, after I coached the boys to “really think like a New Yorker this time, ok guys?” It worked. I think I can resemble a bull rhinoceros when I feel like it.

I told Alex about Arthur getting lost because I knew it was my responsibility to tell him major stuff about what’s happening with the boys, that’s part of *sharing* custody. I gave him the bare facts and he only said “Thank you for telling me. Arthur must have been scared.” Not that I think I’m off the hook. Until the divorce is signed, who knows what will come back to hassle me at his hand. But let’s think positive. Any parent could have this happen?

I have some suggestions for the beach managers; portable trash cans all over the beach in a grid pattern, roving safety officers, poles with alphabet or numbers for orientation like at the zoo parking lot. This beach was wall to wall people and I *had* been enjoying the unrestrained people and body watching.

The benefit of the crowd was that I could stare at someone from behind my dark glasses and there were five other people in the same line of vision I might really be looking at. I was really curious how those thongs work. Why do they have two hooks on each hip? I wonder. All the women wearing them were also topless. Most of the topless women were in good shape, but there were a few with a who-cares attitude flopping their heavy breasts as they strolled the beach. And one unconcerned couple were sort of coupled, but I was laughing to see the woman, on top, had extremely sunburned buttocks. Maybe there’s a reason to wear a swim suit other than modesty. Her thong wasn’t protecting her poor cheeks from the burning sun. Ouch!

Peter had been really upset and annoyed in Naples at the antiquities museum with all the naked sculpture. So I asked him if all the topless women were bothering him. “I didn’t see any,” he said.

“What?” I asked incredulously. “There were about five even when we were walking down here together.

“I didn’t notice,” he added.

“There, like that lady,” I helpfully pointed out. “Oh,” Peter replied with disinterest.

I guess it didn’t bother him. Maybe it was the men’s privates in Naples that bothered him, not the women? Whatever!

And why was the rest of the day so mixed? Well, you know.

It started nicely. Arthur had slept in my big bed while Peter slept over at friends. In the morning, Arthur made me breakfast on the sunny patio with strawberries and cornflakes and orange juice. It was too hot, so we moved inside, but we kept it picnic-like and it was fun.

Then some grumbling began when he wanted to play cards and I had to do the dishes. I tried to explain and offered for him to do the dishes. Wise beyond his years, Arthur said “No thank you.”

At noon, Peter was supposed to be home. At 12:15 I called him at the friends and he didn’t want to come home and blamed me for thinking he should be home as we’d agreed. What was this? The breeding of a litigator? “Be home at noon” means be home at noon, not something like “mom will call me at noon” as he tried to convince me.

He didn't want to come home, even though it was to go out to fun lunch with his fun loving mother and certainly never bratty little brother, and gee I wasn't disappointed that he didn't want to hang out with me, was I? So I let him stay at the friends, vowing to myself to make sure Arthur and I did something really fun to get Peter back for choosing friends over my Mother's Day.

But Arthur didn't want poffertjes with mountains of fresh strawberries and thick whipped cream sitting on the market square under an umbrella, like I was looking forward to. He wanted to go the bagel shop. Sigh, poor Mom. She's so darn flexible, off to the bagel shop we went. I had my favorite but it was the Bagel Man's son and he didn't have any quality control, soggy lettuce and dead cucumber adorned my plate and that was just the garnish. Arthur ate his, that's what counts.

I suggested we rent a bicycle boat in the canal, something we'd never done in our nine months living here. So we asked the nice boat man to help us rig it so Arthur could reach the pedals, I wasn't going to do all the work for the little prince, you can bet, it was Mother's Day!

We pedaled away and took the short cut to our canal through the longest tunnel in Delft, one whole block long underneath our favorite ice cream shop. It was a little bit disgusting, but I just didn't think about it. Well, the smell was pretty gross too. Quite sewagey.

There was a duck nest at the end with four unhatched eggs, a mom and dad duck, and six ducklings. Some swimming around, some sitting in the nest crying for food. That was great to see up close. Arthur was sure the unhatched eggs would hatch if we waited, but based on the swimming skills of the other ducklings, I was doubtful they would ever hatch.

By the time we peddled the next block to the front of our house, Arthur was tired of it. I was too. So we tried to get Alex's attention in the house by ringing the doorbell and Arthur yelling "Dad!" at the open windows so Arthur could show his dad his excellent adventure. No success.

We peddled back through the tunnel, another great visit with the ducklings and returned the boat in under a half hour for a seven guilder savings.

When we arrived home, I called Peter at the friend's house. Arthur and I had blown almost two hours on ourselves and Peter sure as hell better come home now. He wasn't pleased but he came.

We took the one hour tram, too hot, to the beach and the rest is history.

And a very Happy Mother's Day to you too! Hey, it really was nice, not too bad. I got some whining, some fussing, some fright, some panic, two ice creams and a bunch of strawberries and time to stand in the soothing North Sea in the sun with a few thousand other people. Pretty good, eh?