

MISCONCEPTIONS OF LIFEGUARDING

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[Assignment: Write an essay in which you tell of an incident that influenced your life in a specific way. Help the reader to participate in your narrative by appealing to sensory perceptions. Remember to avoid clichés.]

I remember, during the summers of my youth, playing in the sun at Ridgeland Common Pool. My next door neighbors and I loved to play "Marco Polo" and under-water tea party. I would occasionally look up at the bronzed teen-aged lifeguards twirling their silver whistles and wonder what they were thinking about. They looked so confident and cool, and everyone at the pool had to do what they said, even my mom and dad. I wanted to be like that and I couldn't wait until I would be that age. When I was at home playing in my baby pool, my friends and I would always play "lifeguard" and strut around shouting at each other to walk on the deck and to stop splashing. Sometimes we would even make each other do the deadman's float so someone would have to jump in and make a heroic rescue.

The year I turned sixteen, I signed up for lifeguard training as an elective course for gym class. I took both the written exam and the in-pool sections of the test, and passed both. I remember how proud I was, how I ran out of the pool to stand dripping at the pay phone yelling the good news to my mother. Even though it was only February, I called Ridgeland Common Pool and set up an interview with the boss in charge of lifeguards, Amy. After a successful interview, an introductory course, more in-pool training, a swimming test and about a million papers to sign, I was finally a lifeguard.

The day I got my blue and green uniform guard suit, I couldn't take it off. I wore it around the house and blew my guard whistle at everyone in my family. My mom even took me out to buy a matching towel, shorts and flip-flops. I could hardly wait until the first day of work. I kept picturing myself in one of the guard chairs, basking in the sun, gazing across the pool at one of the great-looking guys that I had noticed in my lifeguard training class, and getting paid for it all. I could almost see my friends driving by on the way to their boring indoor jobs waving at me with complete jealousy.

When that day came, it wasn't sunny; it was chilly and drizzling. I sat in the guard chair, anyway, scanning the pool under a huge blue and white guard-umbrella. There were only two guards working since there were not many patrons, so I had to stay in the chair without a break. After four and a half hours of total boredom watching an almost empty pool, I had to clean out the bathroom and mop the concession area. During all of this, I kept telling myself that as soon as the weather warmed up, the job would be more fun.

The next week, it seemed as though my prayers were answered. It was almost eighty-five degrees, and the sky was clear. I climbed up in the guard chair with renewed hope. The pool was packed that day; and as I looked down on the screaming children and gabbing preteens, I felt a hint of panic. I couldn't even see the bottom of the fifty meter Olympic-sized pool. What if someone went under and I couldn't see them? What should I do if someone passed out from sun stroke? What if I had a heart attack and fell off my chair? All these questions and more flooded my already cluttered mind, and I seemed to have forgotten everything Amy had worked so hard to drill into our minds. Then I noticed a little girl gazing up at me with a wondering look on her face and I remembered how I used to do the same thing. If she could only see what I was thinking, she would not be so interested anymore. I waved at her and tried to clear my mind of my doubts so I could do my job. That day at closing, I was instructed to take the trash out to the dumpsters. As I was dragging two huge bags around the outside fence of the pool, I was startled by honking from a passing car. I turned and caught a glimpse of my friends waving from the windows of a familiar Buick.

Later as I was mopping the adult sun deck, I thought about how different things were than what I had expected. I never thought there was work or worry involved in lifeguarding, while in fact there was an abundance of both. That summer I learned a great deal about responsibility. Even though I didn't want to get up in the morning and drag myself to work, I did it because it was my job. I am not sorry I did it, but I did not go back the next summer. I think that next time I apply for a job, I will look into it a little bit more first.

[Editor's Note: Readers may observe how this paper is organized around a carefully controlled comparison of Emily's expectations about lifeguarding and the realities she encountered, which she sets up in the third paragraph and very skillfully completes at the end.]