

SANDOWN BAY

John Randolph

It was Friday, 17 April 2009.

The day was overcast, but not dark. There were continual spots of rain in the air which did not reach the ground.

I was early for my appointment and so I walked along the esplanade of Sandown Bay on the picturesque Isle of Wight. As I approached the War Memorial from the south, I decided to sit down on one of the dark wooden slat seats in one of the shelters. It was almost three o'clock.

There were people walking in both directions along the esplanade and others were sitting in the shelters or on the open air seats. In front of me and slightly to my left was the War Memorial.

A few people were on the beach. It was not yet the season, although it was the last Friday in the Easter school holidays. Standing with their backs to the sea and almost facing me was a coloured man in his thirties with a lady, presumably his wife. A child stood at her side. Opposite them and a few feet in front of them was blond girl of about eight years of age who was sideways on as I looked at her. Standing before her was a man, also in his thirties, who, I took to be her father.

The three adults and the coloured child were all fully dressed in accordance with the April temperature. The blond girl had her hair tied back although there was little hair to tie back. She was wearing a one piece swimsuit, dark blue in colour with a distinctive green thin jagged panel on both sides from the armpit to the thigh. Her skin was pure white but she did not appear to be cold. She made me feel cold.

After a few minutes, she took a small reddish towel and put it across her back and, with the help of her father, lowered her swimsuit slowly and stepped out of it. She turned sideways and then almost full frontal to kick the bathing costume out of the way. I turned away as I felt uncomfortable at seeing nudity but a sudden movement, which happened almost immediately on my right hand side, made me turn back.

A woman in the same shelter had lifted her binoculars and had focused them on the naked child.

The girl showed no embarrassment. The towel was now discarded and she was facing the low tide of the calm sea.

Her father was crouched down sitting on his ankles and his hands were in a bag on the sand from which he took out a pair of white knickers and the girl stepped into them slowly. The father slowly pulled them up standing in the process. Was this necessary? Cannot an eight year old dress herself and pull up her knickers herself?

With her back now to us she bent over to find her dark pink dress which she began to put on, unaided by her father. She took her time. The dress was like a shirt in that it was buttoned from top to bottom.

All the buttons fastened, the woman with the binoculars lost interest in the child who was now working on the waist tie and eventually secured it. Then she ran to the sea's edge.

She was a pretty, able-bodied little girl

I stood up as it was time for me to walk to my appointment. But there were questions in my mind.

Should a girl of that age be naked on the beach in front of the public?

At what age should any child of either sex not be naked on the beach or naked in any other public place?

At what age should a father no longer see his daughter naked?

Is the behaviour of the father suspect? He took a long time putting her knickers on but did not help her with her dress? Where was the child's mother?

At what age should a mother no longer see her son naked?

Could not a girl of eight years of age dress herself?

What judgment should be arrived at about the woman with binoculars?

Should I feel guilty at what I had seen?

In say ten years' time, the woman with the binoculars met this girl, now a teenager, and, in front of others told her that she had seen her naked on Sandown beach years before, how would that girl react? Would that be abuse?

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