

## Down By The Berry Patch

### "Dock Rules"

Rita Luks

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The day we made an offer to buy the cabin, the dock was piled on the bank but from the edge of the lake we could see the sandy bottom stretching far out into shallow water. When the two heavy sections of dock went into the water after we gained possession of the cabin, it was reassuring to know that if a grandchild fell off the dock that they would suffer no more harm than a good soaking. To make certain they would be safe, two rules were put into effect. A child wasn't to step foot on the dock without a life jacket and, unless an adult was present, they couldn't even be on the dock.



After two summers, the water logged and hand constructed dock made way for a new lighter, longer aluminum one. The following summer, two more sections were added. Six or more life-jacketed grandkids would line up, run the full length of the dock, come to a dead stop at the end, and then jumped into two feet of water. Yea!

The same two rules were enforced until the older kids began insisting that there was no need for them to put on a life jacket when they wanted to go on the dock. There really wasn't and it became a chore to enforce something that really didn't serve a purpose any longer. After all, the worst that could happen if they fell in the water was that they'd get wet.

Abby wasn't a "big kid" in my eyes, but she didn't see it that way. When she saw her big sister, along with three cousins, walk out on those planks with no jackets strapped around them, she wanted to shed hers, too. Her resistance only increased when she was told, "They don't need one because they are older, but you still can't be on the dock unless you are wearing a life jacket." She got as far as the third dock section with no life jacket and was snagged by Grandma who immediately slipped one on her. Just as her tantrum was gearing up to full force, she backed off the dock into the lake. That made her really furious.

"See? I knew this would happen if I put on a life jacket!" she shouted as she stood in water that didn't even come up to her knees. "It made me fall in the lake!" were the next words out of her mouth.

She didn't win the battle that day but by the end of the week she was allowed go on the dock without her jacket. It really was safe enough for her and it certainly made my life easier. The rule mandating the presence of an adult stood firm for everyone.

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My actions reminded me of the way her mother relaxed rules. Beth called in tears when Rachel was a baby because she had learned a bad word at the baby sitters. "Cookie, Mom! She said cookie! We don't give them to her and we've never used that word around her. Cookies are bad for her teeth." When Abby came along a cookie was an occasional treat and nothing to be alarmed about. By the time Tom was a toddler it was, "Come eat breakfast Tom. Oh, you want a cookie? Sure. Here, have two!"

The dock rules would never become that relaxed because safety was a bigger issue than tooth decay but I was keenly aware of a shift in my position. Susan's boys came along next and didn't put up any resistance to the life jacket rule for a few years. Once Josh became aware that slightly older Tom didn't have his on, he decided he was also too old for the life jacket routine. Jacob and Nicholas were convinced they could do whatever big brother Josh did, so once again it was back to, "You do have wear your life jacket on the boat—it's a law—but you don't have to wear it on the dock. You **do** have to have an adult or a really big cousin with you to go on the dock." Grandma had the last word on who qualified as a really big cousin.

The younger ones continued to grab life jackets when they went in the water and didn't attempt to go out as far as their older cousins were playing. Until they felt safe, they didn't venture into the water past the end of the dock.

The complaint heard from the older kids was that the water was too shallow to swim. There was nothing Grandma could do to change it. It didn't get really deep until you got past the milk carton marker put there to warn boaters of a large rock and by then you were into unsafe boat territory. **"See that marker? That's absolutely how far you can go out. End of argument."** It was possible to swim before the marker and besides, by that time the paddle boat became the biggest draw.

As long as they paddled close to the shore, they could explore as far away as the cove on the right of the dock and all the way around the point on the left side. Around the point was out of sight of the cabin but it wasn't much fun to paddle in the reeds that grew there. The feeling of freedom where Grandma and Grandpa couldn't see them kept them going back around the point. It was always a fast trip but a favorite destination. We knew Dave and Dorothy were always vigilant when they spotted the paddle boat passing their cabin and rounding the point. Grandkids were unaware they weren't completely on their own as they imagined!

Joseph and Daniel, the youngest grandchildren, were on the dock Memorial Day weekend with an adult and without life jackets. Daniel insisted on holding an adult's hand for the first two days and never would have ventured all the way to the end if Grandpa's pontoon or his Daddy' speed boat hadn't been his destination.

By the third day I was on their tail as they scampered to the boatlift at the end of the dock. Daniel kept yelling, "Speedboat! Speedboat! Speedboat!" Once is never enough for a three-year-old. For Daniel, his brother's six years qualified him as a grown up, so he latched on to Joe's hand and felt perfectly safe. They were about to retrieve their life jackets from their dad so they could go on the paddleboat with Grandma. Just then something happened to my balance.

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I tried to push my weight to the left but it settled on the right and suddenly I was in the lake. The water was shallow and very cold. All I needed to do was stand up and climb back up on the dock. That was easier said than done. My feet wouldn't go to the bottom. They floated straight out in front of me and I couldn't make my hands touch the bottom of the lake so I could get myself straightened up. My head went under and my mouth filled with water.

Championship swimmer Patty, who was up on the hill watching the whole thing was yelling, "Are you OK? Oh my God! Are you OK?" I pretended to be calm, assuring her that I just needed to get out of the water. Something so simple seemed almost impossible until I finally worked my way against the dock. There, at the edge of the dock, exactly where I grabbed it and finally stood up, was a confident three-year-old, his arm extended, and hand out, ready to pull Grandma out of the water.

Maybe a child falling off the dock would get more than wet. Maybe they'd be scared and need help. Maybe Fourth of July weekend all the grandchildren, from 3 to 25 will be wearing life jackets to walk on the dock. Plus, maybe their parents will have to be out there with them! That would be reassuring to Grandma.... in case she falls in again.