

A LETTER TO THE YMCA
REGARDING THE NEW POOL REGULATIONS
By Harrison Scott Key

Dear Mr. B_ _ _ _ ,

Let me start by saying that my wife and I have deeply enjoyed our membership at the YMCA. Our city has so few summer activities for young children, and your pool has been a godsend. We float and frolic for hours at a time, celebrating the simple pleasures of family life. But something has changed this summer, turning those pleasures into hazards of unholy terror. I speak of your new pool regulations.

Please allow me to begin with the most egregious new policy, vis-à-vis the abolition of inflatable flotation devices. In May, my three-year-old daughter and I were enjoying a quiet day in the shallow end. We were playing "Robot Dolphin," a game where I (in the role of the demonic Robot Dolphin) lunge at her violently through the water. The premise is simple: the mechanical beast has escaped from an animatronic show at a nearby marine park and is threatening the lives of children (it is a playful way to teach her how to survive a real life Robot Dolphin attack). During this particularly vigorous game, I was surprised to hear a lifeguard yelling at me from across the pool. Let's call him Dragon Danny, owing to (what appeared to be) a large reptilian tattoo on his left leg.

"Hey!" Dragon Danny said, "You'll have to remove that flotation device, man!"

I chafed immediately, as I find it very difficult to be corrected by lifeguards bearing tattoos of mythical creatures. I like the Robot Dolphin, but you don't see me with a green tattoo of a mechanized sea mammal on my leg, do you?

"Son," I said, "this thing is made of vulcanized rubber." I lifted my daughter out of the water, innertube and all, to show him. "As you can see, it is a quality device."

He did not react immediately. Perhaps Dragon Danny does not know about vulcanized rubber. Perhaps he is unschooled in the fusion of polymers and the major

characters of Roman mythology. Finally, after his reptilian brain grappled with, and tossed aside, this complicated reference, he spoke.

"What if it busted and she drowned?" he said.

"Then," I said, "we would have a funeral," I said.

Irony had no quarter in his reptilian mind. He blinked a few more times and explained that my daughter would have to wear something that wasn't inflatable.

"You mean like a tire iron or an engine block?" I said.

Again, no reaction. I knew it would be futile to reference Archimedes' buoyancy principle. Finally, I acquiesced and removed her innertube. I do not want to be a troublemaker, sir.

Now when we go to the pool, I tie a foam water noodle around my daughter's tiny body. It is the color of a Twinkie, and it usually explodes out of its loose knot, causing her to sink like a fleshy bag of rocks. Please don't misunderstand: I do not mind saving my daughter's life. She and her mother always seem very appreciative.

Your institution's policies are strange to me, sir. I understand that it's possible to purchase a tiny lifejacket or child's swimsuit with buoyant foam padding built into the sides of the garment, but I refuse to buy such things. Lifejackets are for boats, and when I dress my child in buoyant swimwear, her unusually large head causes her to float upside down. This is quite funny to watch, but makes breathing problematic.

I could stop there, but this is about far more than vulcanized rubber and a foam noodle. To wit:

In June, I witnessed Dragon Danny telling a group of children that they are no longer allowed to have underwater breath-holding contests, thus abolishing the last competitive pool activity available to our community's fat children. That same day, I saw him tell a father to stop playfully tossing his toddler in the air. "No more playing," he said. "Too dangerous." Dragon Danny mostly likes it when people just kind of lie there, on their

backs, very still. Sometimes, when we get to the pool, I have mistakenly believed it was filled with dead people. But this makes sense, as the dead are easy to keep from drowning.

I understand that changes in the economy may have forced the leadership of the YMCA to reduce the number of lifeguard staff and perhaps the quality. This seemed to be the case, at least, on one Saturday in July, when the children's wading pool had no lifeguard for at least thirty minutes. Now that my daughter is no longer permitted to float, we spend much of our time in the wading pool, which is more fun because it is smaller, warmer, and filled with the urine of small children. Several times throughout the day, one of them stumbled and sank quietly to the bottom of the wading pool. My wife, who does not always like other people's children, nevertheless decided to rescue them. You might be wondering, "Where were these drowning children's parents?" Well, between you and me, I believe they were in the larger pool, trying to teach their older children how to go underwater without actually holding their breath, which turns out to require gills.

I could go on. And I will.

Earlier this summer, I opened the restroom door and your most rotund lifeguard – let's call him El Gordo – was coming out at the same time. He lumbered past me without saying *pardon* or displaying even the semblance of human civility. I said, "Oh, excuse me!" as politely as possible, and he uttered not a word. In his hand, he had what looked like either the world's largest burrito or a small baby wrapped in a flour tortilla. It was hard to tell, as I was reeling from the smell of the restroom, which fondly reminded me of a childhood visit to a cattle auction. Given El Gordo's unusual girth, I am assuming he saves lives in the pool by displacing all of its water. I must admit, it is a progressive strategy.

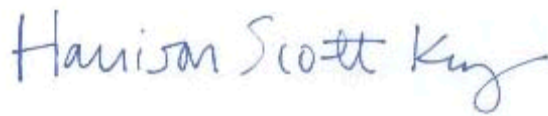
One final incident. On my very last visit to the pool this summer, I noticed several lifeguards loitering near the pool office. One of them, a tan and twiggy young man wearing the conical straw hat of a Cambodian rice farmer, cursed very loudly. The exact word, if you would like to know for your official YMCA records, was *shit*. I sometimes say that word, too, and I've been known to enjoy saying it. But never in front of customers or

children. And so, as a way to help this lifeguard fulfill the Christian mission of the YMCA, I politely asked him to watch what comes out of his piehole. This seemed the best thing to do, particularly in the absence of any apparent supervision or leadership from you and your crackerjack team. The next time he curses in front of my child, dear sir, I am going to wrap him in a tortilla and feed him to El Gordo. Same goes for Dragon Danny and the rest.

Robot Dolphin is on the loose. Look out.

That is all. Thank you for your kind attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Harrison Scott Key". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Harrison Scott Key

THE END