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Out of My Depth

All I can see is a mammoth wall of water towering above me, and salty spray fills my nostrils. I'm choking; I'm drowning; I'm dying. There's no reprieve. Panic fills my being. My heart isn't beating; it's crashing. And while the waves engulf me, all I can see is a hazy layer of blue and white as my arms keep flailing. My strength is waning. Then, I pass out.

That was two summers ago on a dazzlingly hot day at the beach with my family. My mother and sisters were settling into a quiet corner, putting up chairs and pulling out snacks and drinks, while I walked down to the water to paddle. Okay, I'll be honest; I didn't just paddle. I went in till the water reached my knees, something that my mother had always told me not to do without someone supervising. But the sparkling aquamarine of the sea was beckoning, and I waded in further and further.

I still don't know what happened next; whether it was a huge

wave that made me lose my footing or whether I was standing on quicksand, but somehow, before I could scream or flail or swim, I was being carried away by a current stronger than anything I'd ever felt. I tried to swim, tried so hard to swim, but I couldn't. I thrashed, kicked, and screamed. Water poured over me, under me, through me. *You're dying*, I told myself. I tried to think, couldn't think, and my body was beginning to give up on me as I sputtered for air and found only water. *Swim, Laylie, swim!* I thought, and then the world went black.

I awoke on the sand to a crowd of terrified faces, a paramedic hovering over me, and the sky — still a brilliant blue — above. *I'm alive*, I realized.

Later, after I'd been checked out of the hospital, my mother told me that it was a stranger who had saved me, who swam out far and deep and dragged me back to shore. I threw up salty water for a day and was shaking like crazy, but I was alive, and that's all that mattered. I was okay, *baruch Hashem*. Except for one tiny thing... I knew I was never, ever going into the sea again.

At first, I didn't tell anyone about this decision of mine. Although we vacation near the beach each summer, throughout the year, we live far, far away from the waves, and that suited me perfectly. Until July drew near again, and the panic set in.

Every time someone mentioned the word "sea," I felt the color drain from my face, my heart start to race, and my hands feel clammy. I started to have recurring nightmares that would make me wake up, shaking, in the wee hours of the morning. When vacation finally arrived, I was a wreck.

I told myself I'd be okay. I reminded myself that no harm could come upon me if I just sat on the sand, so that's what I did. With three weeks booked in our apartment near the beach, I bought new books and an MP3 player, and each day found me sitting in the same spot in the furthestmost corner of the bay. Reading,

listening to music, and facing the sky or the parking lot. I never faced the sea.

The sounds and smells were reminders too, but I couldn't let that ruin my family's vacation. I kept quiet even when I felt sick and scared and shaky and told my sisters that they should go into the water without me. My mother, quite traumatized herself from my experiences, insisted on taking them to the sea each time. She urged me to join them; I think she realized that something was up, but I point-blank refused. Eventually, on the third day, when she pushed me to go in, I told her.

"I can't. It's too scary. I can't, Mommy."

She gave me a long look. "Are you sure, Laylie?"

I nodded miserably. I couldn't. I wouldn't. And no one would make me. My mother sighed and walked off. I turned up Mordechai Shapiro's "*Machar*" in my ears and stared at the clouds.

And so, a week passed. My mother tried a few more times, but after realizing she wasn't getting anywhere, left me to it. Needless to say, I was pretty miserable.

It was my Aunt Shalva who decided that enough was enough. Shalva comes and joins us for weekends on vacation when she's not working, but last year she managed to wrangle an extra few days off. My young aunt with her wide smile and wacky personality is always a welcome guest, and if not for my constant anxiety, I would have been thrilled to have her.

On the first day of Shalva's visit, we walked down to our beach spot. I laid out my teal-colored throw and arranged myself, feeling slightly conscious of my aunt watching me curiously while my sisters pranced down to the glistening seafront.

"Can I join you?" Shalva asked after I'd settled. I shrugged and shifted over, and she plonked herself down, sending granules of sand flying in all directions.

"You have sand in your hair," I remarked tersely, feeling

somewhat tense at my little space being invaded. Shalva merrily shook her brown curls like an excited puppy, showering me with grains while she was at it, and I had to laugh. A comfortable silence set in. But only for a minute.

“I hear you’re not too keen on the sea, Lay,” Shalva said conversationally. I shrugged, noncommittal. *I’m not having this discussion. I’m really not*, I thought. But Shalva, persistent as she is, wouldn’t leave me.

“Laylie?”

I grunted.

“I understand, you know. Fear’s bad, awful. Being terrified feels like the worst thing in the world.”

I looked at her then — my aunt, young in years and filled with pep, energy, cheer. What did she know about fear, anyway? Shalva looked at me and nodded. An understanding, I-get-this kind of nod. I looked down, traced circles on the throw.

“But there’s one thing worse than fear, ya know?”

My head shot up; I glared at her. There was nothing, nothing at all, worse than fear.

Oblivious, Shalva soldiered on. “You know what’s worse than fear? When your fear defines you. When it cages you in, stops you from moving, doing, being.” Shalva looked at me straight, and I couldn’t hold up anymore. My eyes shimmered. Then the world blurred, hazed, and doubled. As the tears leaked out, I felt a hand in mine, hoisting me up.

“We’re doing this, Laylie. We’re doing it together,” Shalva said, a compelling mixture of compassion and firmness in her tone. And she walked me, my eyes raining, down, down, down to the water’s edge. My breathing became ragged; I was going to throw up. I pulled back.

“No. I’m not doing it; I’m not!” I sounded hysterical. I knew I did, but I couldn’t help it.

“Just till your ankles, Lay; that’s all,” Shalva soothed. “C’mon, we can do this!”

I still don’t know why I listened to her. Maybe because some small part of me believed I could, even above the huge din of voices and sweating and panic that enveloped me. Maybe because I knew Shalva was right. I couldn’t let my fear define me any longer, its grasping tentacles killing me, sucking away my freedom to just live. And maybe because I felt, in my hearts of hearts, that feelings don’t go away when you ignore them. They linger and fester and silently eat away at everything you are, until there’s nothing left apart from them, alone.

So I walked. Slowly, hesitantly, eyes squinting, head pounding, chest constricting. Shalva gripped me tight and squeezed my hand so hard that it hurt. Then we were there. The waves lapped a few inches away, playfully frothing in the sunshine. I looked at my aunt, and she nodded. We walked in.

Tepid water splashed against my ankles. I wanted to run, retreat, turn and flee for the safety of my throw and books and MP3 player. I didn’t. I stayed there for a two-minute eternity — not hearing, not seeing — just feeling. It felt like panic; it felt like victory. It felt like fear; it felt like freedom. Heavy with strain, lighter than air — it was magic.

Change, as most people know, is not a linear process. And that day at the beach, ankle-deep in the sea, was just the beginning of a journey that’s still ongoing. There are days when I don’t feel like going in the sea at all and days when the fear still grips me, the old panic returning while I try to breathe. There are days when I get almost to the water’s edge and retreat back to the safety of the sand and my throw and my music. But then there are the other days, spurred on by that first time I tried, dipped a toe, let it go. The days when I feel okay enough, safe enough, sure enough to venture back in with a sister, a friend, an aunt behind me. And

slowly but surely, those days are becoming more frequent as I face my demons one splash at a time.

When I first went down to the sea that day with Shalva, I knew that my ankle-deep foray was just a start. Yet once I did that, I started to feel, really feel, that however long it would take, I would be okay. I had seen how even one small step out of my depth to face my fears was one giant leap toward the gift of healing. And I knew then, like I do now, that however hard it may be, I choose to heal.