Learning to Swim

Learning something new can be a scary experience. One of the hardest things I've ever had to do was learn how to swim. I was always afraid of the water, but I decided that swimming was an important skill that I should learn. I also thought it would be good exercise and help me to become physically stronger. What I didn't realize was that learning to swim would also make me a more confident person.

New situations always make me a bit nervous, and my first swimming lesson was no exception. After I changed into my bathing suit in the locker room, I stood timidly by the side of the pool waiting for the teacher and other students to show up. After a couple of minutes the teacher came over. She smiled and introduced herself, and two more students joined us. Although they were both older than me, they didn't seem to be embarrassed about not knowing how to swim. I began to feel more at ease.

We got into the pool, and the teacher had us put on brightly colored water wings to help us stay afloat. One of the other students, May, had already taken the beginning class once before, so she took a kickboard and went splashing off by herself. The other student, Jerry, and I were told to hold on to the side of the pool and shown how to kick for the breaststroke. One by one, the teacher had us hold on to a kickboard while she pulled it through the water and we kicked. Pretty soon Jerry was off doing this by himself, traveling at a fast clip across the short end of the pool.

Things were not quite that easy for me, but the teacher was very patient. After a few more weeks, when I seemed to have caught on with my legs, she taught me the arm strokes. Now I had two things to concentrate on, my arms and my legs. I felt hopelessly uncoordinated. Sooner than I imagined, however, things began to feel "right" and I was able to swim! It was a wonderful free feeling - like flying, maybe - to be able to shoot across the water.

Learning to swim was not easy for me, but in the end my persistence paid off. Not only did I learn how to swim and to conquer my fear of the water, but I also learned something about learning. Now when I am faced with a new situation I am not so nervous. I may feel uncomfortable to begin with, but I know that as I practice being in that situation and as my skills get better, I will feel more and more comfortable. It is a wonderful, free feeling when you achieve a goal you have set for yourself.

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#### The Climb *(Not a complete narrative, but what is done well in this small portion?)*

I have this fear. It causes my legs to shake. I break out in a cold sweat. I start jabbering to anyone who is nearby. As thoughts of certain death run through my mind, the world appears a precious, treasured place. I imagine my own funeral, then shrink back at the implications of where my thoughts are taking me. My stomach feels strange. My palms are clammy.

I am terrified of heights.

Of course, it’s not really a fear of being in a high place. Rather, it is the view of a long way to fall, of rocks far below me and no firm wall between me and the edge. My sense of security is screamingly absent. There are no guardrails, flimsy though I picture them, or other safety devices. I can rely only on my own surefootedness—or lack thereof.

Despite my fear, two summers ago I somehow found myself climbing to a high place, while quaking inside and out. Most of our high school had come along on a day trip to the Boquerón, a gorgeous, lush spot in the foothills of Peru. Its prime attraction is the main waterfall, about 100 feet high, that thunders into a crystal clear pool feeding the Aguaytia River. All around the pool and on down to the rushing river are boulders large and small. The beach is strewn with rocks. On both sides of the fall, the jungle stretches to meet it, rising parallel to it on a gentler slope.

#### Take Me to Casablanca

My day in Africa was one I’ll not soon forget. I toured two major cities of Morocco—land of mystery, enticement, and enchantment. I was expecting belly dancers, snake charmers, and many exotic sights filled with color and intricate decoration. While I did see some of what I expected, the majority of what I saw was totally unexpected and will haunt me forever.

As I boarded the ship that was to take me across the Mediterranean Sea to the northern shores of Morocco, I felt an array of mixed emotions. Mainly, I was excited. After all, I was only 13 and about to become “tricontinental.” The previous five days I had spent in sunny Spain, and now I was to travel to Africa for one day. Besides excited, I also felt deeply intrigued and mystified. Moroccans practice the Muslim religion, and Arabic is one of their main languages. This may seem a bit prejudiced, but as I took my seat in the boat, the song “Arabian Nights” was playing over and over in my mind. However, I was dressed very conservatively so as not to offend anybody.

The boat ride took only about 45 minutes. After we had docked and debarked the ship, we were led straight to a bus. My first glimpse of Africa wasn’t too exciting, since it was just pretty much like Andalucia, the southern region of Spain. It was a little warmer here, though, being so close to the equator.

We rode for a while and then stopped to have our passports checked in a city owned by Spain. This is when I had my first “real” glimpse of Morocco. There was trash strewn all over alongside the old, cracked pavement of the road. Natives attending to their business stopped for a moment to stare at the tour bus that held so many foreigners. Of course, they could scarcely see us because of the tinted tour bus windows, but their dark eyes seemed to pierce straight through me.

It was at this point that the Moroccan tour guide joined us. He was very short and wore a long white robe. A small maroon hat adorned his head. He spoke to us in a heavy accent that sounded sort of Spanish, warning us not to talk to any Moroccans on the streets because they would try to steal from us. He also warned us not to buy anything from the peddlers on the street, for the same reasons. He told us that the people would flock around us, harassing and trying to take advantage of us. I didn’t particularly pay attention, however, because I had heard these speeches when we were warned about the gypsies in Spain, and the gypsies had caused little trouble. I assumed the Moroccans would be the same.

After the guide gave his speech, we drove to Tétouan, one of the major cities of Morocco. I can remember thinking we’d never make it there because the narrow dirt road was built a mere two or three feet from a sheer drop-off. When we finally reached Tétouan about an hour later, I looked excitedly out of my window, hoping to see a city in better condition than that of the Spanish town we had just left. But what I saw shocked me. Huge crowds of people stopped everything they were doing to stare at us. Most of them wore dirty, tattered clothing and were startlingly thin. I couldn’t help but stare, despite all our tour guide’s warnings. My mom gave me a gentle nudge. I hugged my camera closer to my body and stepped off the bus.

Almost immediately, the native Moroccans began to step closer to our tour group. Their staring eyes burned straight into my mind. I felt like such an intruder because of the way they stared. My first feeling of guilt came when a woman holding a crying baby accidentally brushed up against me. I somehow managed to apologize, not wanting to offend her in any way. She just looked at me with sad, troubled eyes that seemed to say, “How could you? How could you allow us to live this terrible life in a third-world country?” I instantly felt gratitude for everything I had ever taken for granted.

We were led through the narrow back streets of the main section of town. There were high, white walls of buildings on either side of us. These walls had open doorways that were the entryways to small rooms, which were homes. People appeared in these doorways and stared at us as if we were gods. Emaciated children in dirty scraps of clothing played in the trash and filth in the alleyways. They gazed up at us and smiled. I always smiled back, while I wondered if they knew there were better ways of life in other parts of the world, or whether they learned that as they became older.

Our Moroccan guide led us through small, filthy alleyways that had a distinctive odor that someone said was marijuana. Perhaps these people felt that drugs were their only way of escaping terrible lives.

We were led past a small opening in the walls. We could hear the screaming and crying of a small boy, about three or four years old. His right leg, from the knee down, was gushing blood. My stomach rolled over, and I wished desperately that there were something I could do to help him. A woman wrapped gauze around the wound, but the blood soaked straight through. I felt so rude just walking right past.

A little while later, we were led into a quaint little restaurant. I didn't eat much; walking past all those sights had taken away my appetite. But I will never forget the bathroom in that restaurant. When I paid the woman attendant 100 pesetas (about 70 cents), she led me into a stall. After I had finished, the woman flushed by hand. She then poured some bottled water on my hands and squirted on soap. After I lathered, she rinsed my hands with more bottled water and pointed to the door, signaling that I was to leave.

When everyone had finished eating and had used the bathroom, we got back on the bus for another hour’s drive to Tangiers. I honestly didn’t think I could take any more.

When we reached Tangiers, the peddlers on the street flocked around us. I told all of them, politely but somewhat guiltily, “No, thank you.”

We went straight to an indoor bazaar. There we could bargain all we wanted, but I didn’t really want anything. I felt badly giving money to big businesses that didn’t need it as much as the people on the streets did.

The rest of the time in Tangiers was basically like our time in Tétouan, except that there were a great many more peddlers. After we came out of one shop, a man approached me with Moroccan hats called fezzes, which he sold for 2000 pesetas, or about 10 dollars.

I said, “No, thank you.”

The man replied, “Oh, you buy from in store but don’t buy from the street, eh?”

I honestly didn’t know what to say, so I just said, “I’m sorry.”

His reply was, “I bet.”

I just kept on walking, feeling very guilty. But as it turned out, he gave my mom a 1000 peseta discount, so she bought three of the hats.

As I boarded the bus, I felt relieved to be leaving Morocco behind me. But then I looked back at all the people, some of them children, and thought how difficult it must be to have to go through hardships every single day, hardships worse than anything we modern Americans have ever endured. I was leaving Morocco, but these people had no way out.

Even today, the sights and sounds of its cities still haunt me. I suppose those memories always will.

Two Types of Cookies

Three whole weeks filled with *Criminal Minds* reruns, sweat pants, hot chocolate, friends, and Christmas celebrations. Winter break in college is the best, and on the third day of break my freshman year of college, my older sister asked me to come over to bake Christmas cookies. When I enthusiastically agreed to make the trek from Council Bluffs to West Omaha the next morning, I had no idea what predicament I’d be getting myself into.  
 Tuesday morning I awoke, still a bit groggy, and chowed down a bowl of Captain Crunch. Halfway through my now partially soggy breakfast, I realized roughly 8 new inches of white powder snow was blanketing the ground outside… and the snow was still coming down as thick as whole milk. Immediately, I became nervous as I remembered the previous three winters I had been driving and the accidents that accompanied each winter due to my poor snow-condition driving skills. “Crap,” I thought to myself. “Should I risk it? Will I make it safely all the way across Omaha?” After enlisting my mom’s advice on the road conditions—she said the roads were fine when she went to work, just drive slowly—I decided my passion for decorating crisp sugar cookies with intricate sprinkle designs just couldn’t be put off for another day.  
 Outside was unbearably cold. My fingers were aching and chilled inside my thin, purple gloves as I tried to unbury my ‘98 Mazda Millenia from the extra snow the plows tossed its direction. The immense amounts of snow made my gloves wet as I tried to clear the windows, top and hood. The wind bit my face with bitter scorn, making snot run quickly down my chapped face. Shaking from the freezing weather, I haphazardly scrapped the frost from my windows—just enough to see directly in front of the driver seat. “The defrost will take care of the back windows,” I presumed. The cold wind blew out my better judgment; I hopped in my car and headed toward the interstate with the defrost blowing still-cold air full force while the thought of oven-fresh sugar cookies tempted my taste buds.  
 Slowly and steadily, I made my way through town to the interstate on-ramp. So far, so good. I tried to encourage myself, “I can handle these roads. They aren’t so bad.” The interstate proved to be a trickier maneuver to handle; my windshield started to fog over and suddenly snow was literally coming in to my car through the defrost. I couldn’t see anything except for a white wall of snow and fog. I hastily turned on my windshield wipers to no avail. I started to panic, trying to roll down my window to see where to pull over when I immediately felt my car lose its grip of the road. I had no idea where my car was headed. The guard rail?! Into other cars?! I tried to correct my turn, but overcorrected and BAM! I hit something hard. Quickly followed by another BAM! Nauseas from hitting both sides of the interstate and doing a complete 360, I realized my car was in the middle of the lane facing the correct direction. Instinct made me turn on my hazard lights, only to remember they hadn’t worked since I’d purchased the car. Hyperventilating, I immediately call my mom. My car won’t start; I don’t know how to get off the interstate! BAM! Someone hits me from behind and my car lurches forward. I start crying; my mom tells me to call 911.  
 Luckily, at that moment, a middle-aged semi-truck driver knocked on my window. “Mam, I parked my truck behind you so no one should rear-end you again. Try to put your car back into park and then see if it will start. I’ll wait in my truck till the police come.” I had been too scared to realize the collision had knocked my car into neutral, so of course it wouldn’t start.   
 After the police showed up, my windows defrosted, and I could see again, I had to exit the interstate in order to collect insurance information and file an accident report. Fortunately, the policeman dismissed the “reckless driving” ticket, and the other lady’s insurance paid for my back bumper to be fixed. Unfortunately, my battle with the guardrails proved to be too much for my teal Millenia to handle, as the insurance company totaled my car.  
 Crashing my car in the middle of a snowstorm on the interstate is a memory I will never forget. Before leaving the house I had a bad gut feeling about my driving abilities in the snow, and I should’ve listened to myself instead of listening to other people’s opinions. I also realized that even though the prospect of baking sugar cookies with my sister was alluring, it was not worth risking my life to venture out in poor, wintery conditions. I am proud to say that I have learned these lessons, as I remain accident free ever since.