

“Come on, let’s go snorkeling!”

Golden shafts of sunlight shifted across the pale water, glistening on the ripples of the deep blue sea. A warm, stiff breeze tingled on my face as I dug my bare feet into the sun-warmed sand, feeling it soft and fine between my toes. My mother and I had decided to go snorkeling together, and I turned to her, asking, “Which part of the beach do you want to snorkel at?”

My mother’s deep, dark eyes reflected the sparkling sea as she scanned the beach. “How about over there?” she suggested, pointing to a rocky section of the sea.

I nodded approvingly, knowing the rocks jutting from the water would hold all sorts of beautiful marine life. “Okay.” Sprinting ahead, my feet threw up clumps of sand as I ran towards the sea. The bubbling white foam lapped at the shore as I splashed into the water, feeling the cold relief as the waves chilled my sun burnt body. My mother handed me my snorkel and helped me fit the large goggles over my eyes. Sticking the rubber tube in my mouth, I slipped on my bulky life vest and together, we waded deep into the water.

At first, my feet brushed nothing on the ocean floor but sand and a few pebbles. I dipped my head into the water, admiring the wavering sunlight dappling the ground like shards of broken glass, and saw up ahead a cluster of brownish rocks with fish that darted around it. I drew up my head and gurgled, “Come on,” to my mother, motioning for her to follow.

Side by side, floating on our stomachs, we paddled over to the rocks and gasped through our snorkels when we saw the amazing fish slipping around the boulders. Blue, silver, yellow, red, black, spotted, striped, multicolored—hundreds of different-colored fish with swift, scaly bodies. I let out a squeal when I saw a thick black creature lying on a rock, realizing that it was a sea cucumber. It looked like a swollen caterpillar!

As my mother and I glided forward on the surface of the water, large, ragged rocks covered the sandy ocean floor, covering in multicolored coral and seaweed. Since the rocks took up most of the space, the water became shallower and it was difficult to swim. I decided to propel myself forward with my hands, because I was afraid that if I kicked, my foot would hit some coral and I’d cut myself.

Suddenly, my mom shook my shoulder. “What is it?” I gasped, lifting my head and tugging the tube out of my mouth.

My mother looked anxiously at me. “Something’s wrong with my snorkel. Water keeps coming in.”

I frowned at her, understanding her concern. She couldn't swim very well, and if she couldn't use her snorkel, she could drown. "We'll have to go back, then," I decided. Glancing back at the shore, I realized with a jolt that the beach was very far away. How would I get her back? We couldn't go back the same way we had come, because my mother couldn't swim anymore.

Turning, I announced, "We're going to have to walk over the underwater rocks back to shore."

My mother nodded, determination masking the glittering fear in her hazy dark eyes. I could see my own worries reflected in their depths.

Dipping my head under the water to see where I was stepping, I carefully placed my foot on a flat stone, ignoring the pain when I trod on a sharp barnacle. My mother followed behind me as I shifted forward, keeping my face just below the surface. It was painful and uncomfortable as we struggled across the ocean floor, the soft flesh on our feet unaccustomed to the feel of the sharp rocks, but we managed to take a few steps across the underwater stones.

As we scrambled closer to the shore, step by painstaking step, I tried not to tread on the coral that grew densely across the rocks. There was also some unique marine life that I didn't dare touch: strange patches of some yellowish fungus, a plump grey sea cucumber that I nearly stepped on, spindly fish with long whiskers and odd patterns. Each one was another obstacle that I had to find my way around because I was cautious enough not to disturb it.

I drew up my head above the surface and scanned the ocean, realizing with a sinking heart that a wall of jutting rocks was blocking my way, too tall to climb over. "We're going to have to go around this," I announced to my mother.

She nodded breathlessly, her eyes brimming with exhaustion beneath the glitter of determination in their glowing brown depths. She trailed behind me as I dipped my head underwater and stared around, tracing the best route we could take. I stepped onto a large rock covered in patches of some slippery yellow fungus, deciding to avoid the patches in case they were somehow dangerous. Finding the next rock, I leaped onto it and scraped my foot on a jungle of bright orange coral growing on it. Biting back a squeal of pain, I gestured to the coral underwater to warn her about it.

We traveled slowly, scratching our feet countless times on the coral and rocks. I tried to stay as close as possible to the wall of boulders that was barring our way, so I knew when the line of rocks ended. My feet were sore and covered in deep cuts that pulsed with blood. Each step was painful, and the salt water irritated the wounds and

made them sting. My hair was waterlogged and sticky with salt, and kept floating in front of my face in a mass of tangles. My bulky life vest, instead of keeping me afloat, was dragging me down, soaked with water.

Finally, my mother touched my shoulder. Drawing my head above the surface, I asked, "What is it?"

"I can't go any further. I'm too tired," she gasped, staring breathlessly at me.

Her words sent my heart sinking like a stone. If she was too tired to swim anymore, how would we ever get back to the shore? Panic welled up inside me, and I struggled against the waves of anxiousness and fear that crashed through my body. "We have to," I pleaded, unable to keep the sharp edge of desperation out of my voice. "Can't you just make it a little bit further? We're almost there."

My mother looked helplessly at me for a moment, then, to my relief, she nodded her head uncertainly. "I think I can make it."

"We just have to go around this group of rocks," I assured her. Sucking in a deep breath and puffing out my cheeks, I splashed my head under the surface and swept a glance around the underwater landscape. Hopping forward, I landed on a rock and shifted slightly to make space for my mother. She followed behind me as we continued the painful journey over the rocks. I stubbed my toes countless times on the stones, and stepped on so many pieces of sharp coral that the flesh on the soles of my feet was red and raw. Once I encountered a huge, jagged boulder that was blocking our way that we had to go around.

When I popped my head above the surface, I realized that we were nearly to the end of the wall of rocks. "Finally!" I exclaimed breathlessly, relief swamping me like a wave. Eagerly I bounded forward onto the next rock, but in my haste, when I landed I slipped on its smooth surface. Falling backwards, I crashed onto a boulder covered in barnacles and scraped my legs on another rock with clumps of coral all over it. My head slammed against the jagged edge of the boulder, sending an explosion of dizzying pain through my body. "Ouch!" I cried, scrambling to my feet and feeling the cuts all over my legs burn.

"Are you alright?" my mother demanded anxiously, examining my battered body with worry brimming in her eyes.

I rubbed the swelling bruise on the back of my head, flinching as it throbbed with pain. "Yes, I think so," I groaned. "We're almost around this line of rocks. We have to keep going." Heaving myself to my feet, I continued forward with my mother trailing just behind, making sure I didn't slip again. After a few painstaking steps, we

finally made it around the last boulder and I peered out from behind it. The sandy shore bubbled with foaming white waves that crashed against it, and I felt relief well up inside me when I saw how close it was. “We’re almost there!” I exclaimed. My mother stared at the beach with fizzing excitement in her eyes. “Come on!”

The water level was about to my knees now, and thankfully there were hardly any rocks covering the ocean floor. Heedlessly I slogged forward, feeling the soft sand between my toes, and the cool spray of the salt water against my face. Only bits of dried coral littered the sand, but I ignored the stabs of pain when I trod on one. My mother splashed along behind me, and excitement lent the energy to my exhausted legs. Finally, we arrived at the shore, and my bouncing feet left deep footprints in the damp sand. “We made it!” I gasped.

“Yes, we did,” my mother agreed softly. She turned to me with gratitude glowing in her warm eyes. “Thank you for getting me out, Emily.”

Pride bubbled up inside me, warming my cold, dripping body. “I can’t believe we made it!” I exclaimed happily. I stared out at the frothing, rippling blue ocean, tracing the long route we had had to travel to get back to the shore. It had been a frightening experience for me, but now, looking back on it, also a very exciting one. I will never forget that day.



When I received no answer, I turned. “Mom?”

——Where was she? A gasp scratched my throat when I saw the ocean empty. Foaming white waves rippled across the water, splashing against rocks sticking above the surface. “Mom!”

——No reply. Where could she be? Did I leave her behind? My heart thudded faster as I splashed my way through the waves, tracing my route back the way I’d come. I could hardly feel the sharp jolt of pain as my feet scraped against underwater coral and rocks, heedless of hurting myself. Waves bubbled against my face, stinging on my tongue. I let out a strangled cry, “Mom!”

——Terror scorched my heart, sending waves of anxiousness crashing down on me. My mother couldn’t swim, and out here in the sea, with the rough waves and dangerous undersea life, anything could happen. Unbearable possibilities whirled through my mind like fallen leaves stirred up by the wind. Splashing around desperately, I searched for my mom, feeling my heart thud faster when I saw nothing but empty, foaming water and several rocks.

——Where was she? Did she drown? My stomach curdled at the thought. I paddled breathlessly against the waves, coughing and sputtering as the warm, salty water flooded my mouth. The roar of my fast-pulsing blood thundered in my ears. Where did we get separated?

Pausing to take a breath, I clutched onto a rock covered in barnacles as waves lapped at my life vest. The rough surface stung my hands, and my muscles burned with the effort of climbing over underwater stones. I had no idea what to do, I realized despairingly.