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# If I Were Straight, I Would Never Have Learned How to Swim

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CW: Fear of drowning

Sure, I splashed around at the beach in Rockaway in New York where my family rented an apartment for many summers a few blocks away from the festival of colorful umbrellas, transistor radios, beach balls, frolicking teens, and ice cream sellers marching past like clockwork.

We'd go after noon to avoid the worst of the sun—that's what our family doctor recommended. My mother was an excellent swimmer, but never thought to teach me and I didn't ask. The heat, the blueberry blintzes we bought at the boardwalk, and the breeze that always seemed to come up around 5 p.m. were enough. The beach was a refuge from life at school where I was sometimes bullied and often struggled with any class that wasn't English. And it was a place to watch beautiful bodies without seeming obvious about it.

I did take a swim class in high school, but I never felt I knew what I was doing—and being around all those hot guys was intimidating. It didn't matter, though, because living in Manhattan, I needed to know how to swim as badly as I needed to know how to drive.

Even when I joined a palatial health club years later in Michigan with indoor and outdoor pools, I kept my routine to free weights, machines, cardio, and yoga and spin classes. Swimming just wasn't on my map.

Then I saw him.

Jeff was our health club's new swimming instructor, and he was hard to miss. Towering at six foot five inches, possessing the perfect body for swimming, he was like a clone of Olympian Michael Phelps from the neck down: huge shoulders, V-shaped torso, hands and feet like paddles. From the neck up, he was as handsome as Henry Cavill when he played Superman.

A huge glass wall separated the weight room at our club from the indoor swimming pool, and when he'd start his own workout standing at the far edge of the pool, stretching and loosening his muscles, swinging those powerful long arms, time seemed to stop on our side of the glass.

Everyone stared. Men, women, even trainers. They all watched him, transfixed. Twentyish Jeff was that charismatic.

A woman friend at the club joked with me, "Maybe he can help me with my breast stroke." She was happily married and so was I. Well, partnered then—marriage would come later after it became legal in Canada, our second home at the time. Watching him,

I was in awe of his giant frame and dazzling good looks, but he was oddly human. He wasn't one of those preening muscle gods drifting through the gym inside a kind of force field. Even at a distance, Jeff seemed approachable.

My guess was right because when I called the club to inquire about swimming lessons and met him at the pool a week later, it turned out we weren't complete strangers since he'd read about me in local newspapers when I was interviewed about a new book—and he was a keen fan of fiction.

The bond between us was instant, and he was easy-going, without a trace of arrogance. And my being gay wasn't remotely an issue: I didn't have to come out to him since he knew my work and a lot about my life, given all the Michigan media coverage I'd had.

Up close, I was relating to the person, not the hunk.

I confessed to him that I had never been in a pool as we stood there with the tang of chlorine rising around us like a fog and the sound of vigorous swimmers in other lanes making elegant flip turns at each end.

Then it burst out of me: "I've been afraid of getting into the water ever since I saw *Jaws* and had nightmares about it. I'm afraid of drowning."

He didn't laugh. "Lots of people are. But you can't drown in this pool. You won't drown in this pool. And I've never lost a student yet. Anywhere." His eyes lit up. "Come on, let's stand in the shallow end of the pool and see what that feels like."

I sat at the edge and slid down into the water. It seemed cold despite the summer heat outside and being in that much water, even waist-high, was terrifying. I could feel my head starting to pound as if I was on the verge of a migraine. Jeff saw my distress when he lowered himself into the pool and stood looming over me.

As if trying to talk someone down from a ledge, he said "Give me your hand."

"What?"

"I'm going to do what I do with little kids, pull you through the water so you get the feel of it moving past you."

And that's what we did. I wanted to say "Don't let go!" but thought it would be ridiculous. I relaxed a little on our slow passage, but by the time we got to the deep end, I was starting to panic again and wondered how I could escape.

"Let's just stand here for a while, Lev. *Breathe.*"

The water was practically over my head, or felt like it could be at any moment. I was so lost in my own fear and embarrassment I had no idea if people were gawking at me or not. But I didn't care. I just wanted to survive—and calm down. I did, a little, as he talked about a novel he was reading, asked what I was working on, and clearly tried to de-stress what was for me a very frightening scene.

When I said I was ready, Jeff pulled me back and forth from one end of our lane to the

other until I was feeling safe. That took quite a while.

But I trusted him. I liked him. Though he was half my age, he was very fatherly. And he was so much bigger than me, which made me feel safe. Well, safer.

“You can swim. You *will* swim. It’s just gonna take getting over your fear.” Then he talked about how we would structure our half-hour lessons from that point on if we had a weekly lesson.

That’s when I told him I’d also freaked out watching *The Poseidon Adventure* (which came out before *Jaws*) and thought that I would for sure have died in that disaster.

“Well, don’t go on any cruises until we have some more lessons, okay?” he said, grinning.

At that moment I knew for sure that he was the teacher for me. Very easy on the eye, yes, but more important than that, way more important, he was easy to be with. Jeff had a sense of humor, he loved to read, and his confidence would keep me afloat.