

the deep

FOR REBECCA FIELD JAGER, GETTING SCUBA CERTIFIED PROVED IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO CONQUER A LIFE-LONG PHOBIA

I climb the steps of the scuba diving shop with the trepidation of someone ascending the gallows. I'm in Freeport on Grand Bahama Island on a mission: to swallow a lifelong fear and obtain my diving certification, even if it kills me. Which it won't, I remind myself, if fear is all I swallow.

The notion of boldly exploring shipwrecks and gracefully moving among aquatic life has always struck me as adventuresome and romantic. But my dread of confined spaces (I can get in an elevator but would sooner cut my head off than poke it into a tunnel) turns to terror at the thought of being trapped underwater and drowning.

According to Toronto-based therapist, Sue Sonshine, a phobia is an exaggerated and persistent fear that causes you to overestimate the probability of harm and underestimate your ability to cope. Among the most effective ways to get over a phobia is exposure therapy—slowly but surely facing your demons. A person afraid of heights might stand on the rooftop of a two-storey building and then a four-storey one and so on until finally she is able to tolerate the view from the top of the CN Tower. While I buy into this theory, I'm also a believer in mind over matter, and so I signed up for a diving course at Mississauga, Ont.-based Aqua Systems diving school, figuring I'd be Jacqueline Cousteau in no time. My Caribbean vacation was mere months away and, at 47, I was tired of being limited by my phobia. And what the heck, it's not like sunbathing is the safest of pastimes either.

Other than being able to swim and enjoying reasonably good health with no heart or lung conditions, one doesn't have to have any special skills to scuba dive. The lightness of being underwater makes it a relatively gentle sport that can be experienced by young and old. In fact, Todd Shannon, who owns the school, says he sees a lot of boom-

ers signing up for scuba courses. "As the 45-plus crowd travels more often and to more exotic places such as Fiji and the Galapagos, they're becoming increasingly interested in taking up diving. We teach a lot more people in this age group than we did years ago."

Sure enough, I was not the oldest person in my class. I was, however, the only one who failed. After sailing through the theory and pool portions of the program, I was devastated when I couldn't will myself to descend beyond a foot or two into the dark and murky depths of Lake Ontario. Maybe, I thought desperately as I watched my fellow classmates celebrate — as the islands' current ad slogan claims — It's better in the Bahamas. Perhaps the turquoise clarity of the Caribbean would make it easier. It was time to find out.

Heart racing, I step into Sunn Odyssey dive shop and blurt out my failures and phobias to its owners, Nick and Karen Rolle. The couple, having been in the business for more than 25 years, exchange a knowing look, the type that might pass between a seasoned doctor-and-nurse team in an obstetrics ward. Nick immediately gets down to business. Over the next two days, he tells me, we will execute four dives at depths of 60 feet. I will be required to perform a series of exercises, from navigating with a compass to sharing my oxygen source while swimming along the ocean floor. Before any of this has time to sink in, Nick and I board his boat and anchor about a quarter mile offshore. Together, we take the plunge. In the slightly choppy water, Nick guides me to a taut rope

tethered to the boat, which runs to the bottom of the sea. "Hold on to this as you descend," he says. "Don't worry. I'll be with you all the way."

"Got it," I reply with false bravado. The ocean is warm and clear compared to Lake Ontario — but you can drown in it just the same.

I release the air from my BCD (Buoyancy Control Device, a jacket that divers wear to enable them to control whether they float or sink), and my head slowly slips beneath the surface. All is well for the first few feet of my descent but then suddenly it feels like something is grabbing me, planting a tentacle on my face! I claw at it, dislodging my mask and mouthpiece, and madly kick and thrash my way to the surface. Within seconds, Nick's head pops up beside me.

He spits out his mouthpiece. "What happened? You were doing so well!"

I struggle to regain my composure. "I got a little panicky."

We try again. And again and again. But on each attempt, my demons defeat me. Finally, Nick breaks the bad news. "I'm not giving up on you but I think you need more time practising in the pool," he says as we bob up and down in the water.

My heart sinks. Not another failure! I beg him for one more chance. "If I start to swim up, couldn't you just pull me down?"

Nick explains that the use of force is not in the instructor's manual but agrees to give it another go. With him just beneath me, again we descend. One foot. Two. Three ...

I panic and begin my customary race to the surface. But wait — there is a gentle pressure on my ankles; it is Nick holding me still. We are suspended in time, for less than a minute I'm sure but just long enough for my instinct to flee to subside. ▶ *Continued on page 129*

HAIR & MAKEUP: JORDANA MAXWELL, TRESMME HAIR CARE/JUDYINC.COM; EQUIPMENT COURTESY OF AQUA SYSTEMS DIVING SCHOOL



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