

Diary of a Shark Catcher

Orit Bergman



Diary of a Shark Catcher tells of one pivotal and eventful summer in the life of Gal, who sets out to solve the riddle of her father's disappearance. She runs away from her home in Jerusalem and joins the scuba crew at the Underwater Observatory in Eilat.

As the only girl on the team, Gal struggles to be accepted as an equal. Oren, a charming but arrogant diver, gives her a particularly hard time. Gal learns about the strange and wondrous secrets of the underwater world, befriends an injured stingray and dives into the deeps to capture sharks for the Observatory. Little by little, she uncovers details of her father's story. The revelations will leave her frustrated and upset - but will also lead to new insights that will change her life.

Diary of a Shark Catcher

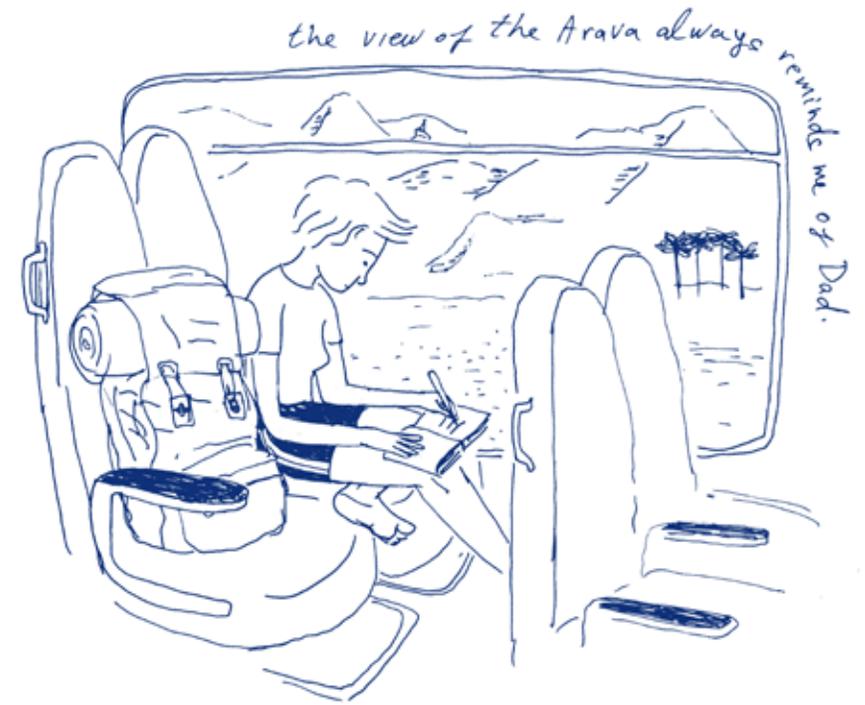
By Orit Bergman

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translation by Gili Bar-Hillel



SOUTHWARD BOUND 6am, Bus 444 to Eilat

Mom is probably waking up right about now; in a moment she'll notice my bed is empty. She'll find the letter I left her, with my cellphone next to it, and realize that I've left home.

It was the middle of the night when I slipped out into the dark street. I wanted to say goodbye to Mouse, but I was afraid I'd wake Mom up too. Now I'm sitting on the bus, the moon is shining over the mountains of Edom, the Arava Desert is rushing by in clouds of dust, and I'm southward bound.

Seven years have passed since I was last in Eilat. I remember that terrible day, the scorching heat wave. How mom shoved all of our belongings angrily into suitcases

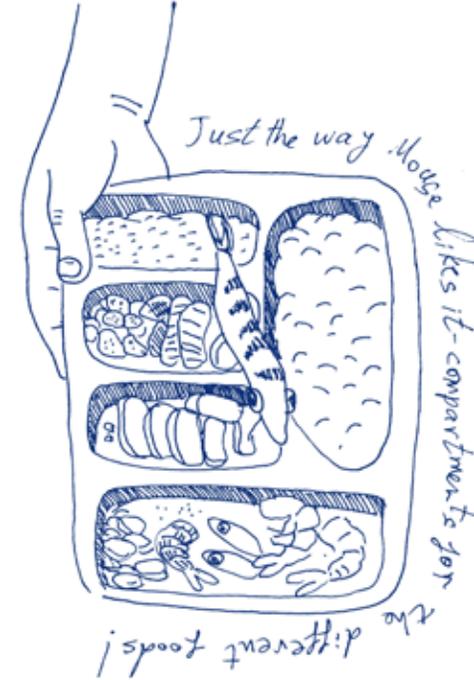
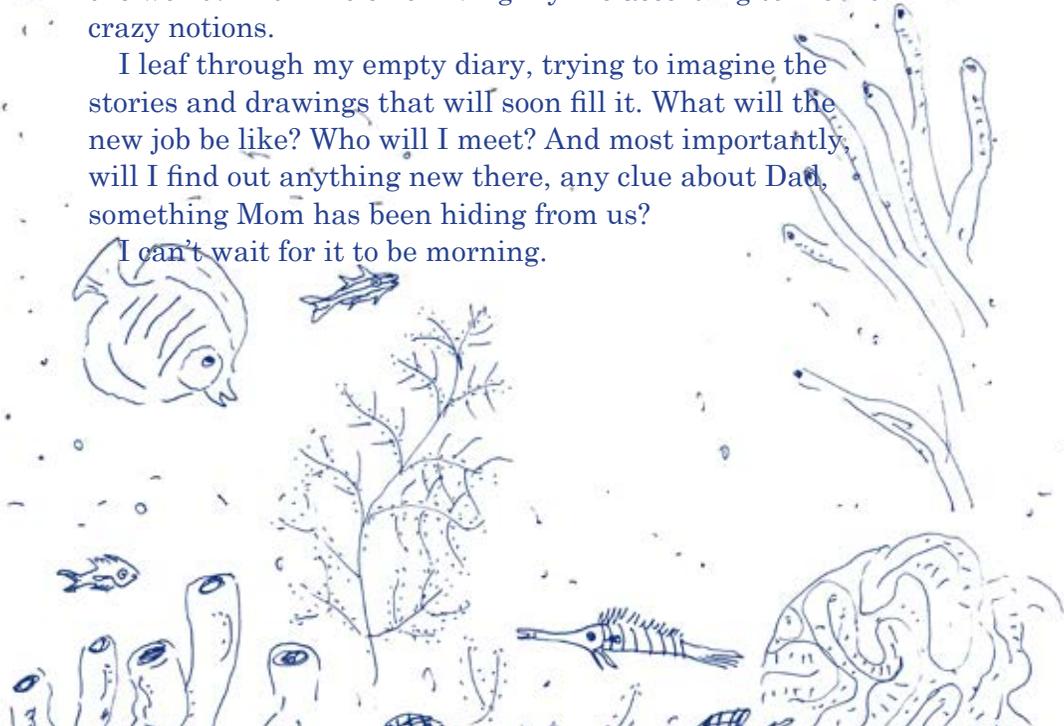
and rushed us onto the bus to Jerusalem. I was sure we'd be back, that it was temporary, but we never came back again. Mom wouldn't even let us visit the desert waterfalls in Ein Gedi, more than two hours away from Eilat.

Every year on my birthday, I would ask for the same gift: to go back to the Marine Park, just for a visit – but Mom would pull that pained face of hers, the one that always came before “I know it's rough on you, Gali, but...” End of discussion.

Finally I'm on my way back. Big time. It's not just some waitressing gig I have lined up for me in Eilat, it's an honest-to-goodness job. I phoned the Underwater Observatory Marine Park and it turned out they were looking for summer help, on the scuba crew, no less! A lucky break for me. If Mom knew about this she would freak out; the Marine Park is her least favorite place in the world. But I'm sick of living my life according to Mom's crazy notions.

I leaf through my empty diary, trying to imagine the stories and drawings that will soon fill it. What will the new job be like? Who will I meet? And most importantly, will I find out anything new there, any clue about Dad, something Mom has been hiding from us?

I can't wait for it to be morning.



FISH MOTHER Day 1 at the Marine Park

Despite the early hour it was already unbearably hot when the bus pulled in to the Marine Park stop, and the sun was beating down. I got off the bus all sweaty, and a skinny man with long arms came over and held his hand out to me in greeting.

“Welcome, Gal! My, how you've grown!”

I shook the outstretched hand and peered into his tanned face.

“I'm so glad you're finally here,” he continued. “Our fish have been needing a mother for some time now, and I'm sure you'll be great at it – it's in your blood.”

Yakov! How could I have forgotten. He ran the Marine Park back when Dad still worked here. A good start. I was sure that after seven years there'd be nobody around who

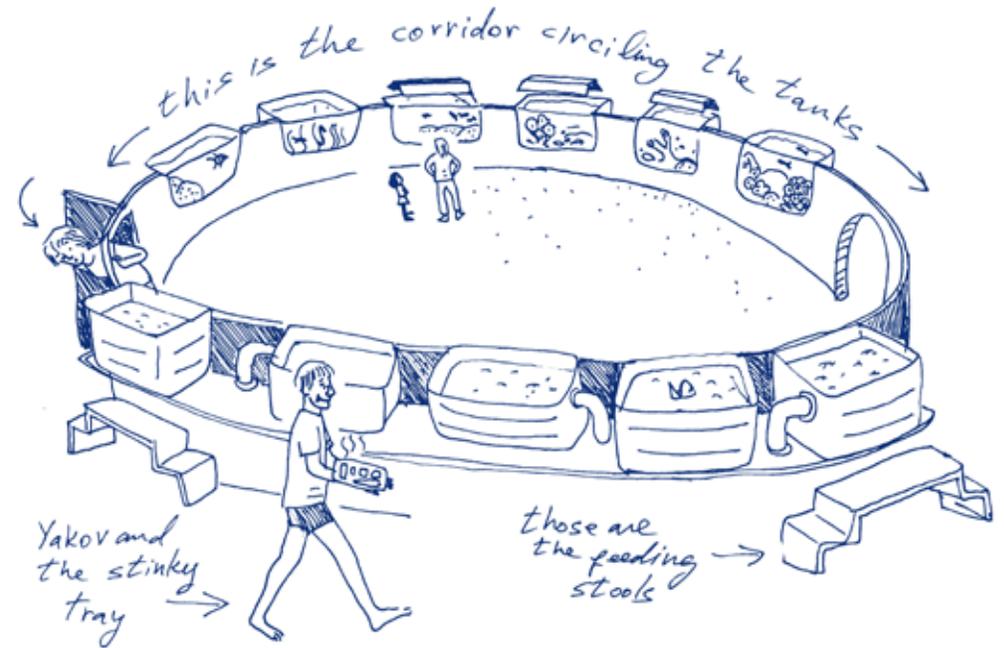
still remembered Michael, but the search could turn out to be easier than I thought.

Yakov looked nothing like my memory of him. First of all he was really old, at least forty, and he stank of fish. I can't stand the smell of fish, especially first thing in the morning. Yakov followed my gaze and held up a grayish plastic tray. On the tray were some unidentifiable lumps of various colors. Some were mashed like potatoes, some crudely chopped, all reeking to high heaven.

"Breakfast is ready!" said Yakov with a cheery smile. "This plate contains everything your little ones will need."

With lolling steps he led the way to an igloo-shaped building and stopped inside a round, dark room. The aquarium. I was hit by the stench of damp carpet and salt water tinged with seaweed. All around us were fish tanks set into the walls, and hundreds of fish of different sizes were weaving in and out of the magnificent, many-hued corals. Back at last. I stepped over to my favorite tank, the one with the seahorses. There they floated, fragile and translucent, twining their tails around the delicate stalks, like little flags rippling in the flowing water. When we left they had been the size of my finger, but now they looked so much tinier...

"The aquarium simulates the coral reef," I heard Yakov lecture next to one of the tanks by the door. "Each tank represents a different section of the reef, a different habitat. Look at this tank here – these are clownfish." He pointed at two striped fish hiding between the dancing tentacles of a sea anemone. "The anemone is highly poisonous to other fish, but it's where the clownfish live.



Did you know that clownfish can change their sex? Like Minerva here, this beauty with the long tail – she used to be male." He opened a hidden door in the aquarium wall, exposing the curve of a narrow corridor filled with strange equipment.

"This is your kingdom." He stepped onto a stool next to one of the tanks. "Here you can tend to the fish without the visitors seeing you. And remember: when you put your hand in a tank, you're a guest in the fishes' home, so be polite. Move your hand slowly and carefully. Scatter the food evenly and avoid sudden movements."

As I stepped onto the stool, a white head with sharp teeth leapt out of the water and snapped at the air, right by Yakov's hands. I was startled, but Yakov laughed.

Minerva before and after her sex change



“The Moray eels are hungry. Look how gorgeous they are! Let’s feed them.”

He grabbed a skewer, speared a chunk of fish on its end and held it over the tank. Four heads burst out of the water, their gaping mouths full of teeth. The big white Moray won, grabbing the fish and retreating among the rocks inside the tank.

“You need to make sure they all get to eat, not just fatso over there. And watch out for your fingers,” he added, gazing fondly at the monsters leaping out of the water to battle over the hunks of fish speared on the end of the stick. “The Morays can’t tell a hand from a fish. Eva will never forgive me if something happens to you.”

“If Dad could handle them, so can I,” I said, and stuck a piece of fish on the end of a stick. Why is he even talking about Mom? I should be careful. The last thing I need is for her to find out that I’m here – she’ll show up at the Marine Park the next day with a ticket for the bus back home. Before I could reach out my arm I felt a strong bite on my thumb.

“Watch out!” yelled Yakov and pushed the Moray back into the water. “Feeding the fish takes more than just guts and a sense of adventure.”

I shoved my hand into my pocket and tried to squeeze my thumb to keep it from bleeding too much. Dammit, my first day on the job and I’m already screwing up.

From the end of the corridor, a guy with sun-bleached hair and green eyes came running up to Yakov, panting. “There’s a seahorse missing from the deep-sea tank. It wasn’t eaten, it’s just gone. Weird stuff is happening at the

aquarium.”

“That doesn’t make sense!” Yakov put down the tray and hurried to the visitors’ area. I sat down on one of the benches and examined my thumb: the teeth had left a precise half-circle of indentations. Monsters.

Yakov returned through the narrow corridor. “Back to work,” he said shortly, and turned to the next tank in the circle.

“How can a seahorse just vanish from the aquarium?” I asked. “I didn’t see any predators in the seahorse tank.”

“Lots of things happen here that we don’t understand. Maybe the seahorse was eaten after all. Could be a rare case. Let’s get back to work. The fish are hungry.”

The feeding went on. Each fish had a Latin name, a common name, and sometimes a nickname as well. Surgeonfish, tangs and unicornfish brushed against eight-lined wrasse, cheek-lined wrasse and barred thicklips. A toothy goby rested on a *Latruncularia*, and a longnose hawkfish hid between the branches of a *Subergorgia Hicksoni*. Whoever made up those names had an odd sense of humor.

My head hurt; the heat was unbearable. After what felt like an eternity, Yakov lifted the lid off the last tank and sighed.

“Now that they’ve had breakfast, it’s our turn. Come meet the rest of the crew.”



POMACANTHUS IMPERATOR

When we stepped out of the aquarium building I was surprised to discover that the sun was already high in the sky, and the Marine Park was full of visitors. Yakov led me through another secret door behind the shark pool, and I found myself in a small bower shaded by vines, overlooking the sea. Lounging in the bower was the suntanned guy who had brought us the news about the missing seahorse.

Yakov introduced him: "This is Pomacanthus Imperator. He's responsible for gathering food for the fish."

What an odd name, I thought.

"I see you've already met the Morays," snickered Pomacanthus, pointing at my bleeding hand.

Yakov started fussing. "Oh dear, I didn't notice you were

bleeding. I'll bring something to bandage that up."

"It's nothing," I said. The last thing I needed was for people to start babying me here, too, especially with Pomacanthus watching me with those green eyes of his, all amused. I was saved when a chubby guy with glasses came in, grinning from ear to ear and balancing a tray of piping hot tea. Yakov introduced our chef, "Arothron Diadematus". I wasn't sure what language I should answer in, so I just smiled.

"And this is Pempheris!" said Yakov, pointing at me.

"Welcome!" said Pomacanthus and Arothron, sipping their tea loudly. I guess it's a macho thing, sipping boiling hot tea when it's 104 degrees in the shade.

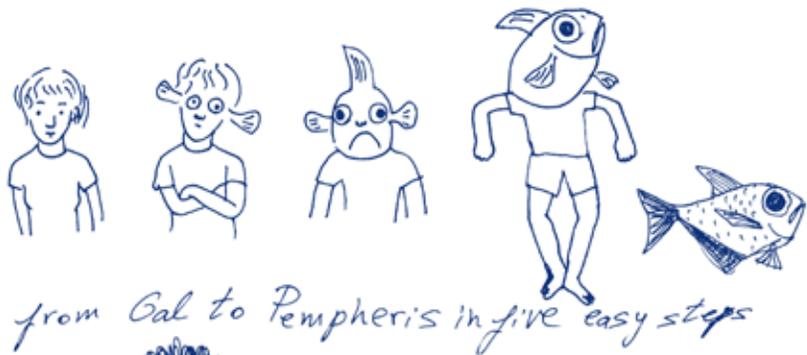
On the ride back to the dorms, the business with the names was explained to me. Oren, aka Pomacanthus, explained that Yakov names each person after a fish, using the Latin names. Pomacanthus Imperator is the Emperor Angelfish.

"It's a highly territorial fish. Its brilliant coloring serves to intimidate enemies and attract mates," explained Oren. "I have no idea why he named me that. Arthoron is the Spectacled Puffer Fish," he said with a smile, "Spot on, in Alon's case." I agreed.

"How about Pempheris?" I asked.

"A shy little nocturnal fish that lives in shoals inside caves. I'll show it to you tomorrow in the nocturnal fish tank. Its common name is the 'Glassy Sweeper', because the young are almost transparent," answered Oren.

Not very flattering – I'd rather be a Butterfly Fish or a Spanish Dancer, and not a gray little fish that nobody notices.



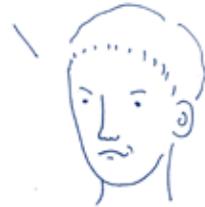
Alon, Spectacled Puffer Fish

Emperor Angelfish,



*Pompcanthus
Imperator*

*I see you've
met the Morays*



*Oren has the exact
same expression as the
Emperor Angelfish*

HAND LOTION

The morning began with a staff meeting for the scuba crew, which I'd officially joined as of yesterday. Sounds great, except things didn't work out the way I'd hoped. At the end of the meeting, Yakov gave everyone assignments. Yesterday when he called me "mother" I thought he was joking; turns out he was serious. He led me to a sink full of fish, set down the smelly feeding tray from the day before and headed out to run his errands.

How in the world does one skin a fish, what am I supposed to do with the bones, and where do they keep the gloves and aprons around here? I took a deep breath and got chopping. Soon my t-shirt was splattered with fish scales, fishy entrails decorated my hair, and the tiny fish bones had pricked my fingers bloody. I glanced over enviously at Alon and Oren, who were setting up scuba gear to load onto the truck. Their assignment was to drive up to the north beach to gather seaweed for the turtles, while I was stuck here with a tray full of mackerel.

"Let's see how you're getting on," said Oren, entering the kitchen and peering over my shoulder. "Hmm, lots of bones here. You didn't peel the shrimp properly, and the mash is full of lumps. Are you trying to kill the fish?"

I resisted the urge to throw the stinky tray in his face.

"And what's that smell? Hand lotion?"

"Of course," I answered with a smile. At least someone noticed that I didn't reek of fish. But Oren had something entirely different in mind.

"Lotion is poisonous to fish. It dissolves in the water and



can kill them. Wash your hands thoroughly before you feed them. What do you need lotion for, anyway?” He added. “Stupid idea.”

I was so surprised I didn’t even answer. Pompous old Emperor Fish!

I stood over the chopping board and tried to pull the rest of the bones out of the fish and work on the mash. After a few minutes I gave up. The meal looked good enough to me. It’s not like back in the sea anybody stands around blending perfect shrimp mousse with a mint leaf on top. Funny that the first meal I’d ever prepared should be for fish.

I stepped into the corridor and started feeding the fish. I scattered generous handfuls of chopped mackerel, pureed shrimp, diced squid and a cupful of Artemia for dessert. I wanted to give them a “nice balanced meal” like Mom always says, because if it’s good for us it must be good for the fish...Soon I realized I had made a big deal out of nothing. If this was all there was to it, I could finish the

feeding in half an hour and go on to do something more interesting. I even found a way to manage the Morays. Instead of messing around with the stick, I just tossed some chunks of fish into their tank and slammed down the lid. I’d had enough of Oren smirking at my bleeding fingers.

After feeding five tanks, I went around to the visitors’ side to see how the fish were getting on.

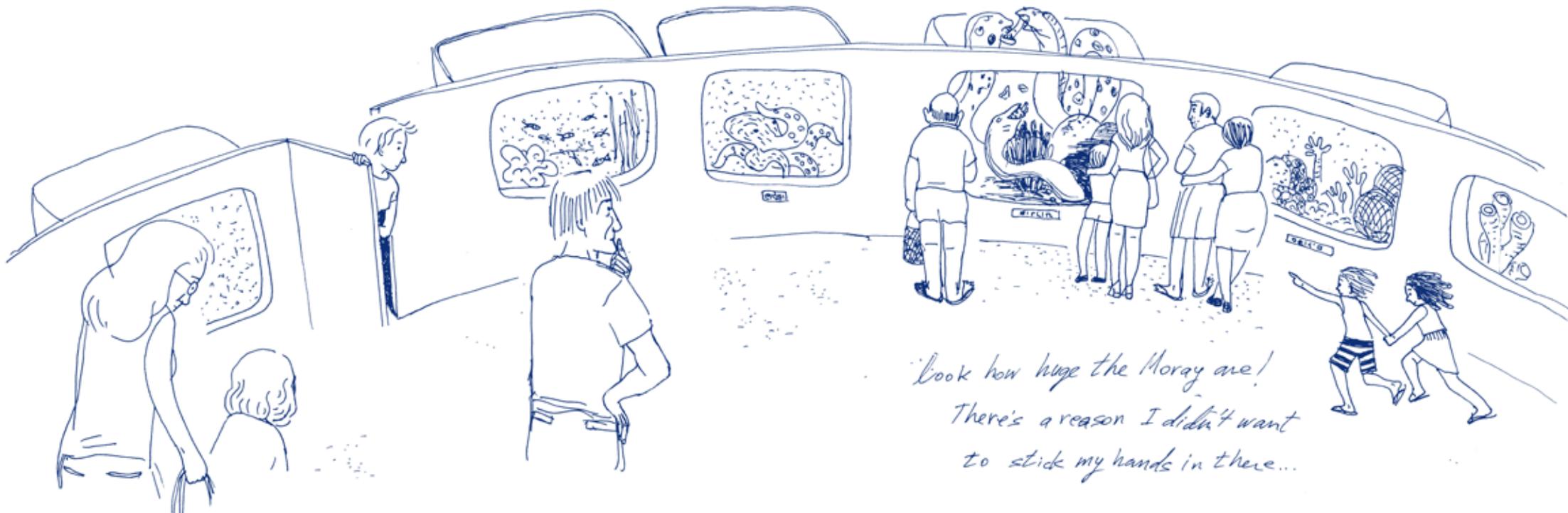
What a disaster! Where once there had been five crystal clear windows onto a glorious reef, there were now just five tanks full of cloudy murk. Bones littered the bottom of the tanks and the fish weren’t even visible. A crowd had gathered around the Moray tank, where a battle was raging. The Morays had become a tangle of twining tails, chomping and ripping chunks of fish and snapping at each other. So that’s why you have to feed them with a stick, one by one! How could I have been so stupid?

“Good God,” I heard a voice behind me. “What have you done, Pempheris? Didn’t you learn anything yesterday?” It was Yakov.

We finished the rest of the feeding together. At this rate I would never graduate to the more interesting jobs – nobody would trust me.

Lunch break was even worse. Oren looked particularly smug. “You should have listened to me. You could have killed all the fish on your first day here. It took years to collect these fish from all over, and find the right tanks for each one. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get the balance right in the tanks?”

“Pomacanthus, that’s enough. Take it easy on Pempheris,” Yakov tried to intervene, but Oren went on.



“I wouldn’t let her do the feeding tomorrow. Back in the Unit, we never let rookies practice with live ammunition. It’s too dangerous. You know what, the equipment room is a royal mess, it’s time someone cleaned that place out. Why don’t you...”

“I said, that’s ENOUGH.”

I was glad Yakov cut Oren short.

“It will take Pempheris a while to get her bearings. Every fish needs time to acclimate to a new reef.”

As soon as lunch was over, I was glad to return to the chopping board in the kitchen. I shut the door behind me. Anything was better than sitting in the same room as Oren. The sharp fish bones pricked my fingers, but I didn’t care, I kept doggedly cleaning them out – this time I wouldn’t leave a single bone.

How could I have been so dumb? Why didn’t I take notes

on Yakov’s explanations? I couldn’t ask him to say it all again, and asking help from Oren was out of the question. I thought I’d be a natural, that I’d step in and just know what to do. I’d imagined myself donning a wetsuit, skipping from pool to pool as parents pointed me out to their children: Look, she’s with the scuba crew!

I continued picking out the tiny bones that kept popping up everywhere. If only I had Mouse here with me – she would have something funny to say to cheer me up. But she’s so far away! Why did I have to muscle my way into the scuba crew? I’d only been here for two days and already I reeked of fish. I stayed locked in the kitchen until it was time for the ride home, my saving grace.

That evening I went over the stuff I’d brought from home. I pulled the mermaid figurines from Daddy out of my bag, and hung up a picture of us on the wall – we look

so happy in it. My heart skipped a beat when I first found it in one of the drawers of Mom's wardrobe. For years it hung in our living room, until one day it disappeared. The photo was taken here on the beach in Eilat, the day Daddy taught me to snorkel.

He had taken me on an inflatable mattress – just me – and pulled me out to the deep water. He swam beside me until Mom and Mouse were just tiny dots on the beach, and then he told me to put my head in the water. I found myself floating over a deep abyss. Far below me the reef glittered, haloed by schools of fish. I cried out to Dad – I wanted him to hold my hand – but through the snorkel my voice came out like a growl.

Dad dove under me and swam down deep, just like a dolphin. He lay down on the bottom and blew big bubbles of air that danced up towards me. I thought that he'd run out of air, that he'd swum down too deep and couldn't get back, until he popped up behind me squirting water from his snorkel and smiling.

When we got back to the beach, Mom was standing there looking terrified, her face as white as a pineapple popsicle. She was always such a worrier, if it were up to her I'd never have learned how to dive. I bet she's calling the whole world now, searching everywhere for me. But she wouldn't look for me here, and I sure as heck wasn't going to call her.

I lay down in bed and examined the picture. Dad looked tan, full of confidence. If he were here they wouldn't dare foist all these stupid jobs on me; they would never have made me the feeder. I need to catch a quiet moment with

Yakov and talk to him about Dad. But it's no easy task, finding a quiet moment in the busy schedule of the Marine Park. And I'll have to go about it carefully, or he might start asking questions about home and Mom.



CHARLIE

In the middle of our morning meeting, a large truck pulled into the scuba crew lot. Yakov cut the meeting short and went out to talk to the fishermen. They're good friends of his, and every time something interesting gets caught in their nets, they bring it over to the Marine Park. If it's dead they cook it, and if it's alive they give it to Yakov so he can try to nurse it back to health it and return it to the sea.

They were standing around a large plastic tub with a big stingray, darker than the ones in the pool. The fishermen had pulled it up from the ocean depths, more than thirty meters underwater, and it looked frightened and worse for wear. We wasted no time untangling it from the net and putting it into an empty pool in the shade. It's dark in the depths, and the blinding light was disturbing it.

Yakov looked at the stingray, cowering in a far corner of the pool. "Poor little thing. We need to get him to eat something. That's the only way he'll get well enough to go back to the sea. Pempheris, that will be your job. He'll be your special ward. Which means you also get to name him."

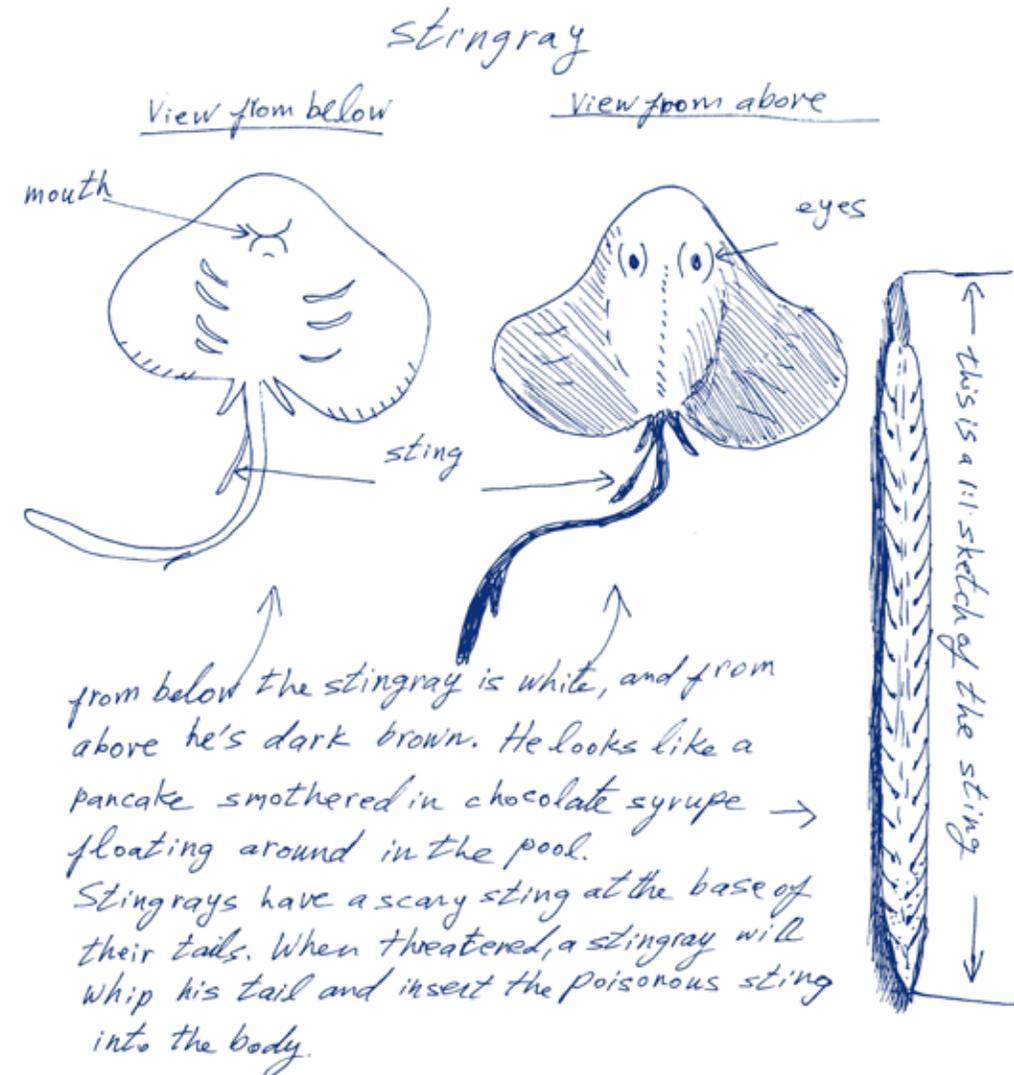
Yakov gave all the people at the Marine Park fish names, and all the fish human names. That way we were all one big family. I named the stingray Charlie, after the cute guy who was our troop leader back when I was in Scouts.

"Watch out for its sting," said Oren. "The poison works on your nervous system – it can be really nasty."

"Thanks for the encouragement!" I went to the kitchen to fetch a bowl of shrimp, stingrays' favorite food, and poured it into the pool. Yakov had told me that stingrays have a highly developed sense of smell: they can't see their

food, but they can smell it. They live down on the seabed and they filter crustaceans and small fish out of the sand. Charlie didn't respond to the shrimp.

I hope he eats during the night; maybe he's just scared by all the commotion.





POLPO

Yakov designated Alon to help me with the feeding rounds. At first I thought it was a kind of punishment, but it turned out that Alon was an excellent teacher.

“Deboning fish is an art,” he said, demonstrating. “First you gently pull out the bones of the dorsal fin. If you peel off the flesh here, the backbone lifts out like butter. Chop it with a rolling motion and pile up the meat on one side of the plate.”

He sounded just like a chef on one of those cooking shows that Mom watches. It drove me nuts that he managed to do all this without getting dirty – not even a speck!

“You’re spotted like a barracuda,” he said when he saw me standing proudly with my tray, flecked all over with leftover fish. “But at least today all the bones are out.”

The feeding went better than it did yesterday. Unlike Yakov, Alon doesn’t spend time delving into the emotional issues of each fish. He handed me an organized feeding list that looked like a menu in a restaurant: each fish and its favorite foods.

Finally a normal person around here.

I practiced moving my hands “gently and lovingly” like Yakov said. Alon watched me from the side, humming to himself quietly and grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

“I think you can handle it on your own from here. Maya asked for some help with her pearl oysters. I’ll be in the gift shop if you need anything.”

And then he was off. I looked at the list despairingly. I can’t believe I left home and traveled so far for THIS. To stand on a wet stool in the stifling heat, “gently and lovingly” scattering fish hash. I progressed with the smelly menu, feeding one tank at a time. At this rate I wouldn’t be done before noon.

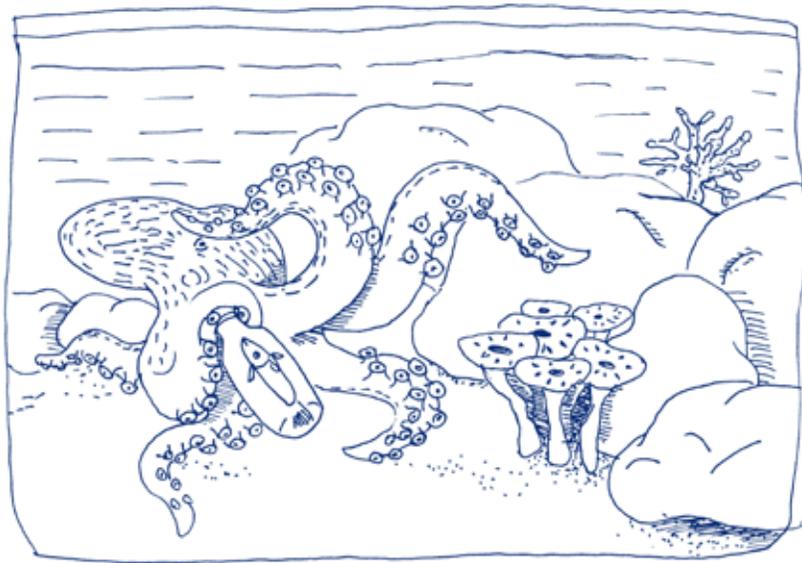
The octopus tank was last on the list. I read the instructions: “Polpo the octopus: fish in a bottle (close cap tightly)”. Oddly, the tank looked empty, just gravel and a few rocks. I couldn’t see the octopus anywhere. I inserted a fish into a small bottle, screwed the cap on tightly and submerged it in the water. Nothing happened – Alon must have been pulling my leg.

I was about to take the bottle back out when suddenly one of the rocks shifted, blinked angrily with one eye turned upwards and the other fixed firmly on the bottle, and started moving. Polpo extended one long curly tentacle dotted with suckers, latched onto the bottle gently, and

started exploring its surface. A second tentacle soon joined and started twisting the cap. Within minutes, the bottle was open! In went a tentacle, feeling around the inside, and finally with a flourish it drew out the fish.

I could hear cries of surprise from kids standing on the visitors' side. Polpo sucked the fish into his beaklike mouth, and then spat out the emptied husk. At the same time he sent out another tentacle to check whether I had any more snacks in my hand. The tentacle winding around my arm felt soft and pleasant. How fun, at least one of the animals here wanted to be friends! A second tentacle soon joined the first and traveled up my arm. Polpo started to climb out.

"Oh no you don't!" Yakov stood behind me, grabbed on to one of the octopus tentacles and pulled. Sucker after sucker detached with a sickening slurp, leaving behind



painful red welts. With his other hand Yakov picked up a rod and used it to shove Polpo back down into the water. The octopus tried to grab the rod, and its color changed to an angry red. But Yakov was quicker, and very determined. The struggle ended, Polpo peeled off my arm like a muscle going slack and slid back down between the rocks, where he huddled, sending us a stink eye. The welts on my arm turned a brilliant red. I tried not to cry.

"We'll have to make up more interesting challenges for him. Polpo's a clever octopus, always curious. He's bored with that bottle. That's why he climbed up on you like that."

Thanks a lot for the advance warning. But Yakov wasn't done yet.

"You might try a bottle with a cork instead of a screw top, or maybe a smaller bottle..." He opened another hidden door into a narrow room full of small tanks, faded



photographs and old books, and stood in the entrance.

“How’s it going with Charlie?” he asked. “Has he eaten yet?”

I was forced to admit that he hadn’t eaten a thing. This morning I’d found the shrimp I’d given him, floating on top of the pool.

“That’s not good. He’s weak and injured; he has to eat. Why don’t you go down and have a word with him. Think of what your mother does when one of you girls gets sick: she sits at your bedside and tells you stories. She wouldn’t just toss some food in a sick stingray’s pool and walk off.”

“It was Dad who worked here, not Mom,” I answered. “Mom can’t stand animals.”

Yakov looked at me absentmindedly. “Yes, it was Michael who worked here. I was sorry I couldn’t convince your mother to join our team. I’m sure she would have done a fantastic job.”

If it weren’t so annoying that Yakov keeps comparing me to Mom, it would be funny. How could he imagine Mom, who wouldn’t even let us have a pet hamster, working at the Marine Park? Yakov may know his fish, but he’s not great at reading people. And now he wants me to go down and talk to a deadly stingray!

“What if it stings me?” I asked.

Yakov looked surprised.

“He’ll only attack you if he feels threatened. Go talk to him, Pempheris. He’s lonely and scared, far away from the sandy bottom he came from. He needs you.”

I took some weights, a mask and a snorkel and went to Charlie’s pool. I bet Oren is just waiting for me to fail. He told me about the sting so that I’d be afraid to enter the

pool, but I won’t give him that satisfaction. Still, I wish that Yakov had told me a bit more about exactly what makes stingrays feel threatened.

Just in case, I entered the pool at the corner farthest from the stingray. The weights helped me stay underwater. I placed the food as close to him as I dared, and went back to my corner. Under the water all sounds are muffled; it’s a bit like stepping into a dream. I tried calling out to him. He turned around, but came no closer.

Looks like he does react to sound.

I kept talking. Maybe if he gets used to my voice, he’ll start coming to eat when I call him.

I talked to him about the aquarium, and told him about the role I’d been given here at the Marine Park. Actually, I talked to him the same way I would have talked to Mouse. Since I left home I’ve had no one to talk to. I was so used to our conversations before bedtime, in my room.

Under the water my speech sounded rumbly, like whales singing to each other. I felt free to discuss anything. I told him about the last summer we spent together as a family, here at the Marine Park. About the day when we stood mesmerized, Mouse and I, watching Dad climb up on the bridge over the shark pool, holding a large fish in his hand. And how the sharks, completely tame, jumped out to him and grabbed the fish. We were so proud of him.

I told Charlie how ever since we moved back to the city, not a single pet has been allowed in our house. No dogs, no cats, and definitely no fish. And how we waited for Dad to call us back to Eilat. I told Charlie how after we returned to Jerusalem, Daddy disappeared. Only once a year, on my

birthday, he'd send me a gift. It was the same every year: a mermaid made of lacquered seashells. Other than that, nothing, not even a letter.

"Now I've got the job he used to have here with the scuba crew," I rumbled at Charlie. "The crew I've dreamed about for years. Except instead of diving, they have me feeding the fish. If I have to spend all these months in the kitchen I'll go crazy. When will they finally give me something interesting to do?"

Charlie was a good listener, but he kept his distance. Once in a while he would billow his fins and stir up the sand. But he never came closer to me. I kept on talking until my fingers were pickled like gherkins, and only then did I come out. On my way to return the mask I crossed the bridge over the shark pool. Right here (I was still talking to Charlie in my head) – this is the very spot where Daddy had stood. I waved goodbye to Charlie, and went down to return the equipment.



CLOUDY WATER

Once again it was me versus the tray of mackerel. Luckily Alon helped me with the chopping again. With his help it took half the time.

"So, Pempheris? Acclimating to your new reef?" he asked with a smile. "Or would you rather go back on land?"

How appropriate to call our home in Jerusalem "land". As far from the sea as possible.

"I'm fine," I said. "Learning."

"You do learn fast. Yakov says that with the kind of example you had at home, he's sure you'll make an excellent mother to our fish. When Yakov trusts someone like that he's usually right."

"Why does Yakov think he knows my mother so well? He hasn't talked to her in years. And anyway it's fish he knows so much about, not families. Maybe fish are content just to be fed and fussed over day after day, but I'm not a fish. Ouch! Dammit!" Pricked by another bone.

“Maybe you’re right, but he’s always talked about you that way. Enviously. Eva’s family, the three girls on the hill.”

“He’s talked about us? You mean, you heard about me before I came?”

It sounded strange to me. Mom had cut off all her ties with the Marine Park. What was Yakov doing talking about her?

“Of course, lots of times. You should have seen him when he told us that Eva’s daughter was coming to work here. He was over the moon. I bet they miss you lots, Mouse and Eva.”

He even knew Mouse’s nickname! I grabbed the full tray and the feeding list and headed to the tanks. What else does Yakov know? What if he’s still in touch with Mom? And how come he hasn’t said anything? She must be furious. If she really knew where I was, I would have heard from her by now. The girls on the hill... What does Yakov know about our lives, anyway?

On the way to the tanks I stopped to look out at the sea – a cool, tempting strip nestled calmly between the hills of Eilat and the hills of Eilat. Under that sparkling veneer dwelled a whole other world, teeming with life. I saw a small dot rapidly approaching the shore. The fisherman docked his dinghy and came ashore, carrying a brace of fish threaded on a rope.

How I wish I could jump into the water right now! I turned back to the humid corridor, and started my rounds.

After ten tanks were fed, I thought I’d take a break and go see how the fish were faring from the visitors’ side. I put down my tray, washed my hands (which did nothing at all to lessen the stench) and stepped into the visitors’

side of the aquarium. One glance around was enough for me to slide down the wall and crumple in despair. The best and most beautiful fish and corals had been swallowed in a murky soup. Failed again! Distracted by my thoughts about home, I must have added more and more cupfuls of Artemia. But Artemia isn’t that tiny. I stuck my nose up to the glass of a tank and peered inside – what could that be?

“Terrific!” I heard Yakov proclaim behind me. “Just great!”

I muttered an unintelligible response.

“We’ve managed to trigger synchronized coral spawning in captivity! There’s nothing like this in any of the literature. We might be the first aquarium to ever witness such an event!”

It wasn’t my mistake that had made the water cloudy after all!

“Synchronized coral spawning?” I asked. It could be synchronized eel puking for all I cared, as long as it wasn’t my fault.

“Have you ever wondered how corals reproduce? There aren’t any bees in the sea to fertilize them, and corals, like plants, can’t move.”

I had to admit I had never thought about this.

“Corals are actually colonies of polyps, some male, some female,” Yakov explained. “In perfect synchronization, the colonies release gametes – eggs and sperm – and cast them in to the water. Fertilization occurs in the ocean, and the water then carries the newly formed larva, called planula, to a new location on the reef. The release of the gametes is tied to the full moon. It’s a happy night out in the ocean: the coral honeymoon. On such a night the fish get a proper feast.”

He was very excited.

"Come help me. We'll gather up some of the liquid and try to raise new corals. This water contains enough tiny corals to fill an entire reef!"

We filled two bottles with the murky water and took them out through the corridor, stopping next to the octopus tank. Yakov pressed the wall, opening the hidden door to his room. He went up to one of the dozens of unoccupied tanks on the shelves and gently submerged the bottles in it, so that the temperatures would equalize.

We looked at the bottles floating in the tanks and stood there patiently. Now was the chance I'd been waiting for.

"So you kept in touch with Mom after she left Dad and took us to Jerusalem?" I dared to ask. "She never wanted to talk to us girls about the Marine Park."

Yakov looked uncomfortable.

"Your mother never left Michael. She stayed here until it was quite obvious he wasn't coming back. Only then did she pack up your stuff and go home."

"That's not true," I answered at once. "She couldn't stand Eilat, she couldn't wait to get back to Jerusalem. She's the one who left."

Yakov was preoccupied with the bottles and didn't answer.

"I remember. I wasn't that young."

"I think these are things you should be discussing with your mother. I'm sure she'd do a better job of explaining."

For a moment it seemed to me that Yakov was scared.

*the Polyps honeymoon. most of them are eaten
before they reach a new reef.*

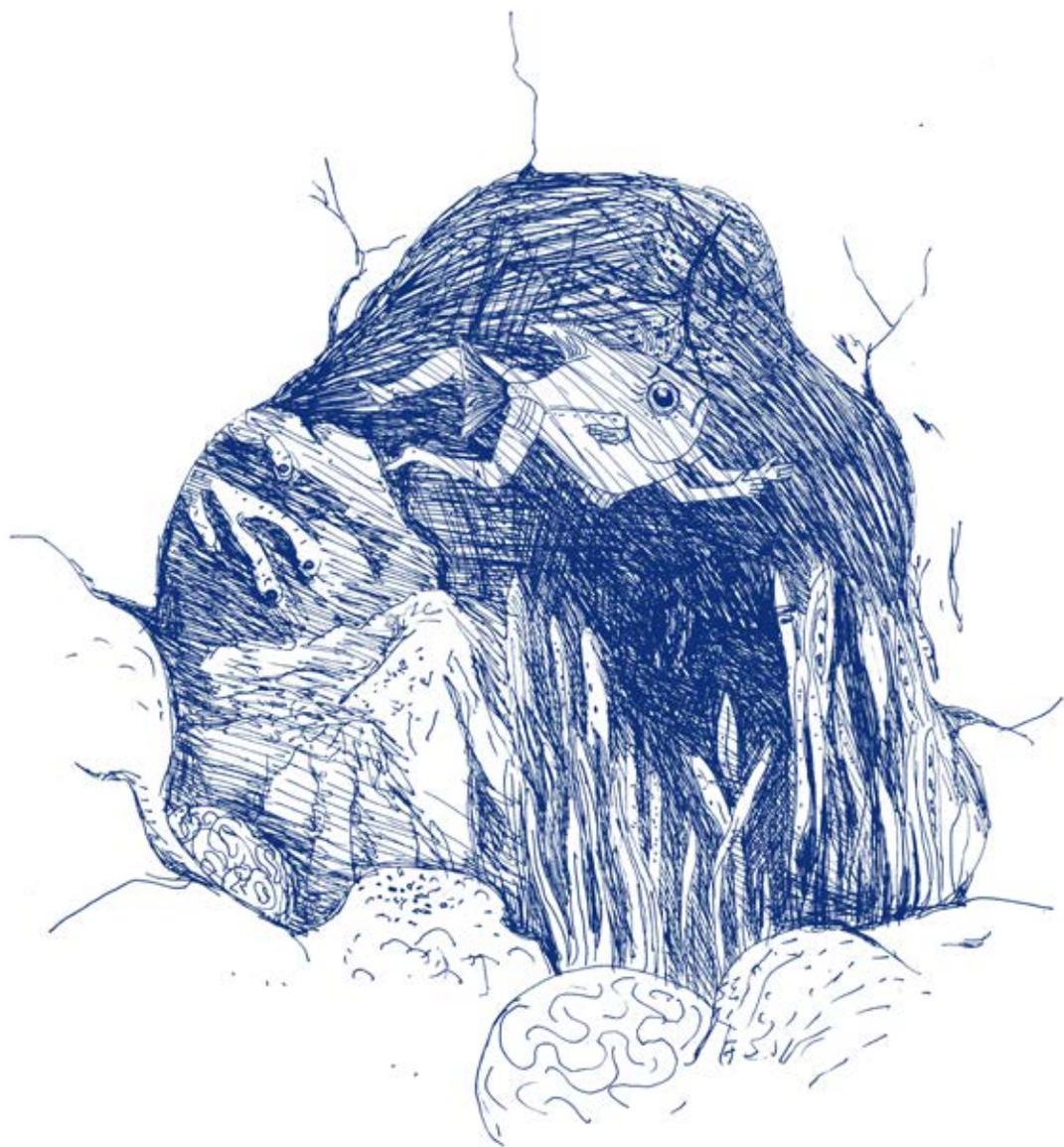
He unscrewed one of the bottles and started pouring the tiny polyps gently into the water. Any attempt I made to change the subject back to Dad failed.

For the rest of the day I couldn't stop thinking about everything he'd said. As soon as I could, I went down to Charlie's pool. At least there I could sit and think without Oren popping up. Charlie didn't stir when I sank with my weights down to the bottom and handed him the bowl of shrimp.

"I thought that was the one part of the story that I knew," I said to Charlie. "In the beginning, when our picture together was still on display in the living room, when Mom still agreed to talk about him, she would say that the sea was his natural habitat. That Marine Parks are his home. I thought some day we'd join him again, like we'd done before. But we never came back. One day his picture disappeared and Mom stopped talking about him. But why did she say Marine Parks? Why not just this one Marine Park in Eilat?"

Maybe that's what Yakov meant when he called me Pempheris? A tiny fish in a cavern, swimming around blindly in the dark?"

Charlie turned towards me but kept his distance. It's been a few days since his arrival, but his injuries haven't yet healed. He absolutely has to eat something to grow stronger. If we release him back to sea in this condition he will surely die. But if I can't get him to eat in captivity, his days are numbered anyway.



POLPO'S GREAT ESCAPE

The morning meeting today was more tense than usual. Yesterday I discovered that the Electric Ray had gone missing. At first I thought that it must have burrowed under the sand in its tank, as usual, but then even Yakov couldn't find it. It was simply gone.

"It's a rare fish. We don't find many of them in these parts." Yakov was at a loss as he spoke to the group. "I brought him here a year and a half ago from the Straits of Tiran. I don't understand where he could have gone. What's odd is that I didn't even find any trace that he'd been eaten – not a single bone. None of the fish in the tank

with him are particularly aggressive, but if he had been injured they'd have had a go at him."

"If you ask me, it's someone who works here," muttered Oren. "It doesn't look like something an animal would do."

Yakov looked skeptical. "There are people here during the day and a guard at night. If it were a person, we would have caught him already."

During feeding time I thought about what Oren had said. For once, I actually agreed with him. I don't think any of the tank fish would have attacked an Electric Ray – the jolt of electricity would have scared them off, and anyway, they're always well fed.

I wanted to go straight down to Charlie's pool to see how he had fared overnight, but first I had to feed the fish in the tanks. I left Polpo's daily riddle for last – a fish inside a small bottle. I opened the lid of the tank and dunked the bottle in the water. Someone is stealing fish from the tanks, fish that I'm responsible for – I have to keep my eyes peeled. If it's someone here on staff, I'll find them. Boy, I'd love to see the look on Oren's face when I tell everyone how I caught the thief.

My eyes wandered back to the tank. Something was amiss. No curious tentacle crawled out to explore the bottle. I set the tray aside and leaned in for a closer look. The tank was empty!

Soon the entire staff gathered around the step-stool, peering into the abandoned tank.

"Each day another fish goes missing. Polpo couldn't just lift the lid off his tank," I said. "Oren was right. It has to

be a person."

Oren smirked.

"Really, Pempheris. Look again. Don't you see the filter floating on top of the water? Back in the Unit they taught us to pay attention to detail. It wasn't a person."

He left and came back a few minutes later with Polpo, fuming, in a bucket of water.

"He was in the upper pool," explained Oren. "That's where all these pipes lead to eventually. You should have thought of that, Pempheris."

"I don't get it. How could he have gotten through the pipes? They're too narrow for him."

"Octopi are very flexible. They can pass through pipes the size of their eye's diameter. That's how they hide themselves in cracks. Polpo is looking for a way back to the ocean."

Of course! After we taught him to unscrew various lids, the filter would have been child's play for him.

Yakov eyed the bucket sympathetically. "He's outgrown his tank. We should release him and find ourselves a new octopus. Maybe a younger octopus will be happier here."

We all went down to the shore together. Yakov put the bucket in the water and overturned it slowly. As befits an octopus who loves narrow, shadowy spaces, Polpo huddled in the bucket and refused to slide out.

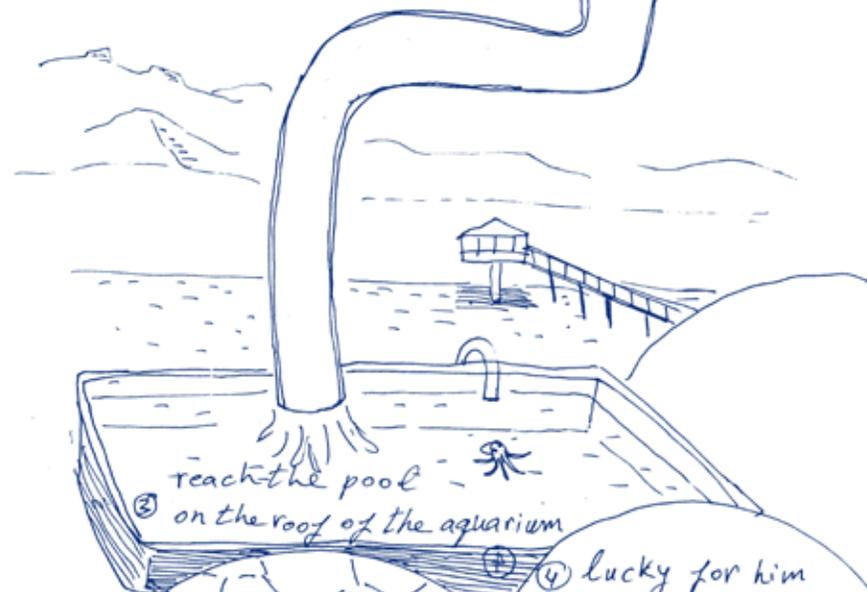
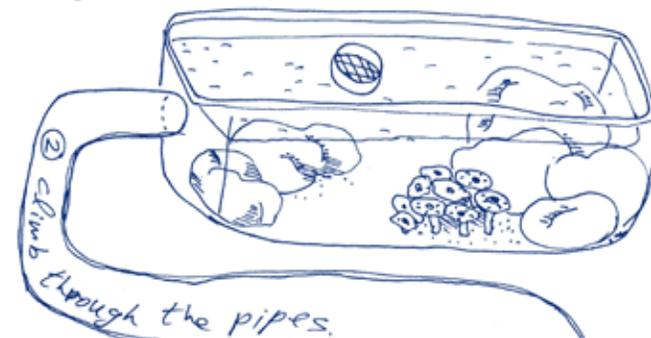
"Come on," urged Yakov, and lifted the upturned bucket. Finding himself suddenly in open water, Polpo made a dash for the nearest rocks and changed to a grayish color. His camouflage was perfect. Even knowing where he was, I had trouble spotting him.

“Tomorrow night we’ll go out and get ourselves a new octopus,” said Yakov. “And Pempheris – you’ll come along with me. That way you can see where the octopus came from, and try to simulate those surroundings in the tank.”

I hurried to bed early that night. Tomorrow was going to be a big day. I was finally being released from the kitchen!

Palpo's plan of escape

① unscrew the filter



④ lucky for him
Ozen found him
there, he would have
starved to death in
that pool.



HOW TO CATCH AN OCTOPUS

What an eventful day. Some of what happened made me proud, and some of it... well, I'll start at the beginning. The Marine Park closed in the afternoon. After the visitors left, most of the employees went off duty. It was strange to see the place so empty, with the aquarium lights dimmed. Once in a while a fin would cut through the surface of one of the pools, or a stingray wing would slap against the side.

Octopi like to come out at twilight, so we arrived at the beach shortly before sunset and chose one of the rocky points close to shore. Catching an octopus isn't easy. They know how to hide in tiny cracks between the rocks, and they have perfect camouflage abilities.

Under water hand signals



Can you tell what I'm saying here?





We put on diving belts with weights in order to stay submerged without floating to the surface. Then we donned our diving masks and stepped into the shallow water by the edge of a large boulder. It seemed like an excellent hiding place for an octopus. We speared some small fish on a long pole and stuck the end in the water, waiting to see who would take the bait. Then we walked around the boulder slowly, waving the speared fish and watching for any movement.

I saw a dark crevasse about a meter and a half away. If I were an octopus looking for a hiding place, I thought to myself, this is the spot I would pick. I brought the fish closer to the opening of the crevasse. A long tentacle, spotted with suckers, slid out from one of the rocky corners...Gotcha!

Within seconds, Yakov was at my side. Keep feeding it, he signaled to me. Meanwhile he was spreading a large net over the boulder. The octopus retreated into a crack. We continued circling the boulder, trying to startle it out of its hiding place. Suddenly a red lump burst out, swimming rapidly towards a nearby rock cluster. But the boulder

was completely wrapped in netting, and the octopus was trapped. The water filled with a dense black fluid. For a moment I couldn't see, and I lifted my head out of the water in a panic.

I didn't know that octopi have black blood! There must have been something sharp in the net that injured it. I looked beneath me. The black fluid was thinning, and through the cloudy water I could see the trapped octopus, safe and unharmed.

Quick! Yakov motioned. The bucket!

Still underwater, we maneuvered the octopus into the bucket, and covered it with a net. Our octopus was caught.

As we stepped out of the water, Yakov explained that when octopi feel threatened, they squirt a black ink-like liquid at whoever is chasing them. By the time the pursuer recovers his vision, the octopus is long gone.

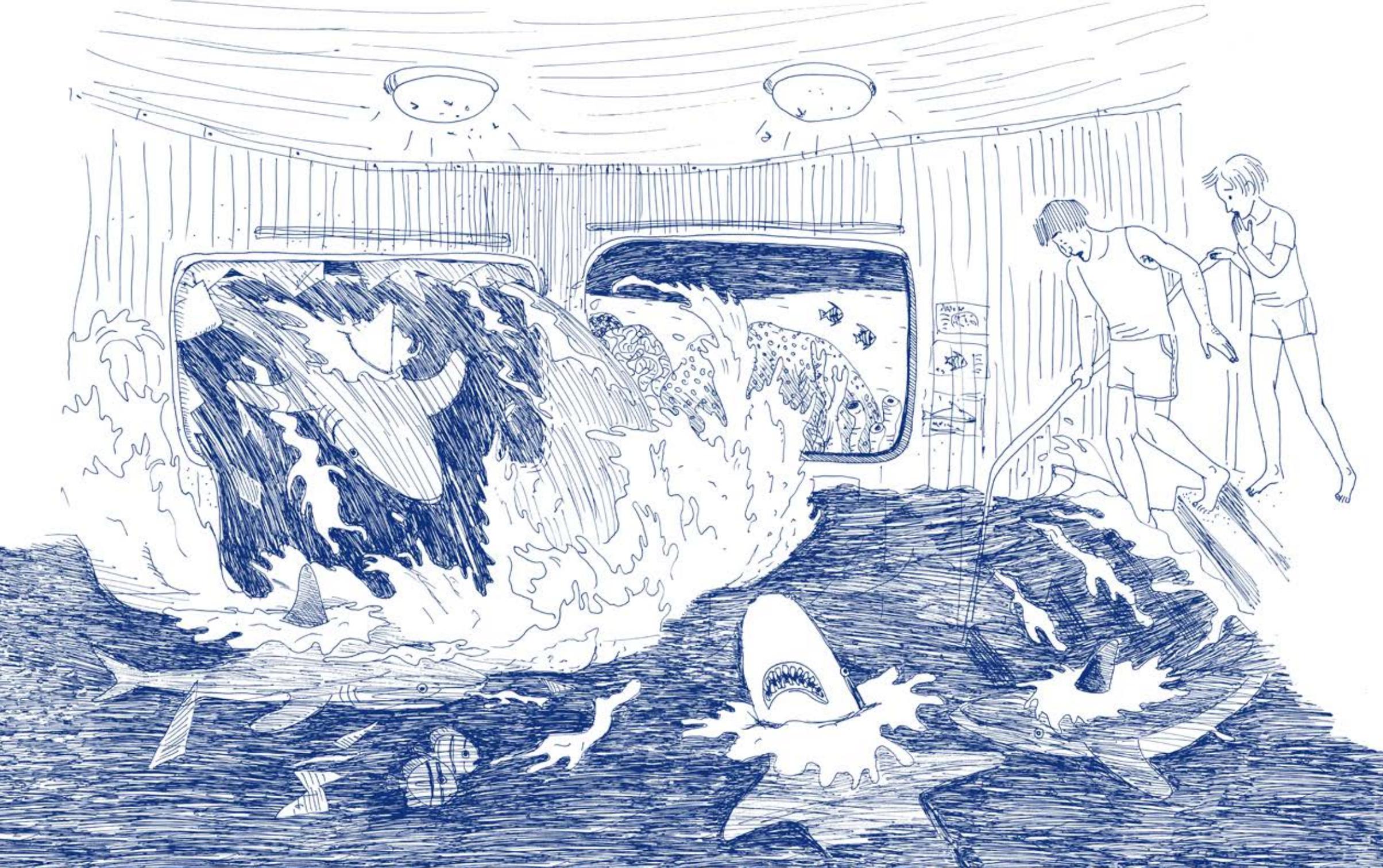
We released the octopus into the tank, and stayed to watch him checking out his new home.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a very loud crash, followed immediately by the rush of water, as if someone had opened a huge faucet over the pools. Startled, we ran towards the door separating the aquarium from the pools – but the door was locked!

"I don't believe it!" Yakov shouted. "We just came in through this door. Help me push!"

We pushed the door as hard as we could until it opened just a crack – and a rush of cold water dotted with fish came pouring out at us. A column of water was blocking the door from opening!

"Lord of all fish," cried Yakov. "There's a breach in the shark pool!"



We ran around to access the area from the other side and then we just stood there in shock. The glass pane of the large pool had shattered, and through the open window water was streaming out, and collecting in a shallow pool on the floor of the visitor's area, along with the sharks and other large fish. Who knew where the water had carried the smaller fish!

Yakov came to his senses.

"We can't leave the sharks in this shallow water. They'll suffocate!"

I thought this was an odd time to make jokes – who'd ever heard of a fish suffocating in water? But when I looked at the sharks in the dim light, I realized Yakov was right. They were squirming in the shallow puddle in a desperate attempt to swim and breathe free.

"Quickly!" called Yakov. "Catch them by the tail and toss them into the turtle pool!"

He waded in the darkness between the writhing sharks until he was up to his knees in water. He then grabbed a tail and heaved. The Lemon Shark, the largest and scariest of the aquarium sharks, was pulled out of the water and launched in a graceful curve over to the turtle pool.

"Hurry up!" cried Yakov. "There's no time to waste, you HAVE to help me."

But my legs simply wouldn't move. On every side I saw jutting fins and terrible jaws. There was Yakov, working relentlessly, and here I was, frozen like a lump of coral.

When the last of the sharks had splashed into the pool, Yakov sat next to me, panting.

"I'm so sorry," I stammered. "I just couldn't move. If my Dad were here I bet he would have helped you."

Yakov sighed.

"That's perfectly natural, Pempheris. Before you sense that the Marine Park is your reef, you won't feel comfortable swimming here. Michael was like a fish in water when he was here, from day one."



Finally, he was talking about Dad!

“Dad had a special connection with the sharks. I remember him feeding them...”

Yakov sighed again and leaned on the fence of the turtle pool. “You’re right, your father had a special connection with the fish. But I prefer your help. With him you never knew how things would end up.”

He looked at the sharks swimming in the pool. “We were very fortunate. If this had happened later at night when nobody’s around, not a single shark would have survived.”

The sound of hurried footsteps cut our conversation short. Oren and Alon came running and panting, then stopped aghast before the shattered pane.

“Excellent! About time.” Yakov headed towards the meeting room. “Oren, take a pair of gloves from the storage room and pick up the broken glass. Alon, take a bucket and go find the smaller fish that were swept out of the aquarium. Pempheris, you get the pump and go pump the water out of the visitor’s area. By tomorrow I don’t want the visitors to be able to see any trace of what happened here tonight.”

This time I was grateful for the task that Yakov assigned to me, because I could wander around alone among the dark tanks without anyone bothering me. I went over the entire space slowly with a vacuum cleaner that made the most awful guzzling noises. I cleaned the visitors’ area, then went on to the feeding corridor and vacuumed up the water with the diligence that only a guilty conscience can produce.

“With him you never knew how things would end up.”

Yakov’s words echoed back at me. I remembered how Dad dove down under me and disappeared into the depths. I was left all by myself with a mask full of water, yelling through the snorkel, “Daddy, Daddy!” My voice blended with the water coming through the snorkel, and I began to cough. I saw him lying on the sand between the reefs, blowing air bubbles that leapt up towards me, roiling and expanding as they drew near. I lifted my head out of the water and shouted for Mom, but my mouth was full of water. I wasn’t able to calm down until I was back on shore, with Mom, pale and angry, briskly toweling me dry. “Did you think I wasn’t coming back?” Dad laughed.

“We’ll talk about it this evening.” Mom shot him one of her piercing looks, and he shut up. I’d completely forgotten that part. I was always so proud of how he’d taught me to snorkel in a single day.

What did Yakov mean? Maybe they had had an argument and Daddy left because of Yakov? Maybe that’s why Yakov refuses to talk about him...

Without even noticing I’d reached the entrance to Yakov’s room. I’d grown used to hidden doors with no handles, meant to keep visitors from entering the private areas of the Marine Park. I pushed at the wall, searching for the hidden catch, but couldn’t find anything. I was sorry I didn’t have Mouse with me – that little one is a master at riddles. I’m sure she would have figured out how to open the door. I slid my fingers all the way around the crack. In Yakov’s room there was bound to be some trace from Dad’s time here, if only I could get the door open.

“Pempheris,” someone was standing at the far end of the

corridor. "Stop hiding out and come eat with us. We're driving out to the Chinese place in town, management's treat!"

It was Oren, of course. What's wrong with him? Why must he always embarrass me?

"I'm not hungry," I said. "There's still lots of work left to do. I'll walk back to the dorms later."

Oren didn't insist. The last of the employees departed together, and I was left alone in the Marine Park. I lay down on the wooden deck next to Charlie's pool and looked into the water. Charlie emerged from the dark corner where he'd been hiding all day and swam over to the edge of the pool. Could it be that he recognized me? Maybe he also needs a little dark and quiet to come out of his corner? I stuck my head in the water.

"The glass in the shark aquarium burst," I hummed at him. "The sharks were choking in the shallow water, and all I could do was stand there petrified, staring as Yakov tossed them one at a time into the turtle pool. I failed."

No reaction from Charlie.

I pulled my head back out of the water. The sensation in my throat, when I called out to Daddy and swallowed water through my snorkel, had come back to me. How could I have been such a scaredy-cat? Why couldn't I help Yakov? It was time for me to give up and go back home.

Home... I bet they're eating dinner now. I can almost hear the classical music playing in the background as Mom flips through the Arts section of the newspaper...

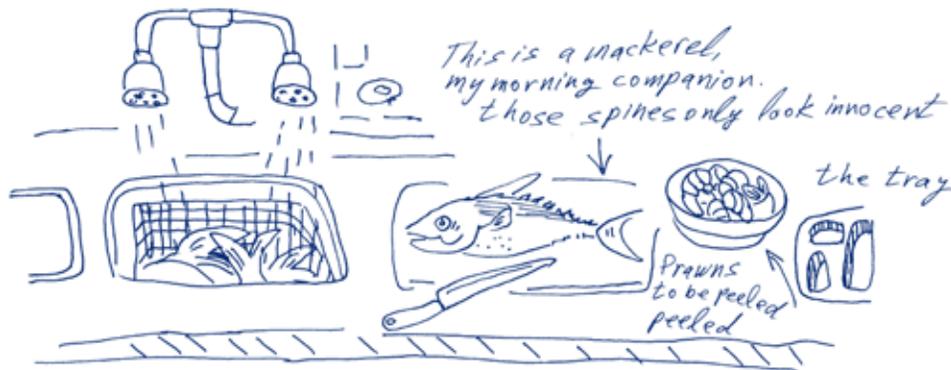
How could I have done this to her? She must be going out of her mind with worry. Strange that she hasn't found me yet. She always knows where I am, no matter how

hard I try to escape her. It's one of the things about her that drives me crazy.

This whole trip had been a terrible mistake. I'd have been better off working at Mom's studio than making a fool of myself here. Opening up at 7am, refilling the coffee and the sugar jars, then spending the whole day moving blocks of type: two millimeters to the right, two millimeters to the left.

I stared at the water. Charlie was swimming around the border of the pool, slowing down as he passed me. His dark back glistened in the water, reflecting the light from the moon. At night he seemed calmer, almost friendly. Maybe tomorrow he'd finally eat? I can't abandon him before he starts to recover, he'll never accept a new handler. But how can I show my face at work tomorrow after what happened tonight? No, I've got to quit.

Later that night I found a working payphone and tried to call home. I hoped that Mouse would answer, but it went straight to voicemail. I hung up.



IT'S RAINING FISH

The next morning, everyone was exhausted. Only David, the night watchman, was happy.

"You won't believe what happened! Last night I was walking down the path by the aquarium, and a rain of fish fell down on me! They were fresh, too! I was planning to go fishing this morning, but now there's no need. I'm telling you, the sea provides for those who ask." He went off patting his tummy contentedly. That's how we found out what happened to the fish that were swept away in the flow from the broken pane.

"He's a nutcase, that guy," said Alon. "I can't believe he's lasted here so long. Most of the watchmen stick around for a couple of months, a year tops."

"Well, you know," interjected Oren. "Yakov takes in people for these jobs, just like he takes in fish that get tangled in fishermen's nets. He can't see an injured creature without trying to heal it."

Oren and Alon went off on their morning rounds and I

stayed behind, waiting for a chance to talk to Yakov alone. But he beat me to it.

"Pempheris, I think it's time that..."

"Yes, I think we should talk, too." I was going to launch into the speech I'd prepared the night before, but Yakov cut me off. He was already by the door, reading through one of his endless lists.

"It's time to expand your territory. You're doing a great job with the tanks."

Maybe he'd finally assign me something more interesting to do!

"From now on, you'll take care of the fish in the Ring Pool, too," he went on. "I'm sure you and Iddo will get on just fine."

I swallowed my disappointment and went to my station by the sink. Dammit. When Dad was here on the scuba crew, I'm sure he didn't have such a boring job.

A few minutes later Alon joined me. Even though I'm fine on my own now, he never misses an opportunity to spend time in the kitchen. While he works he talks incessantly. This morning he was in a particularly chatty mood.

"What a drag that Oren is. Not that it's surprising, given his background. The only child on a farm has to live up to a million expectations." He tossed another mackerel head into the bucket and waited for me to say something. When I didn't take the bait, he went on. "He's just another guy who came here to disappear. For lots of people Eilat is the end of the earth. A refuge."

"So what are you running away from?" I asked.

"I was born here," he smiled. "What I'm really curious

about is what brings you here.”

I ignored his question and went on chopping the mackerel. I thought about the way Mom looked the night before I left. I came home at 3am to find her red-eyed, standing in the doorway in her pajamas. She looked at me as if I were still a little girl who couldn't be trusted. All we did was have a bonfire in the valley. Yes, we lost track of time. But I'm sure that none of the other kids came home to a welcome party like mine. I went off to shower and saw that she had thrown up in the sink. She has a knack for making me feel guilty, as if everything I do is meant to hurt her. At least here she's not on my case all the time...

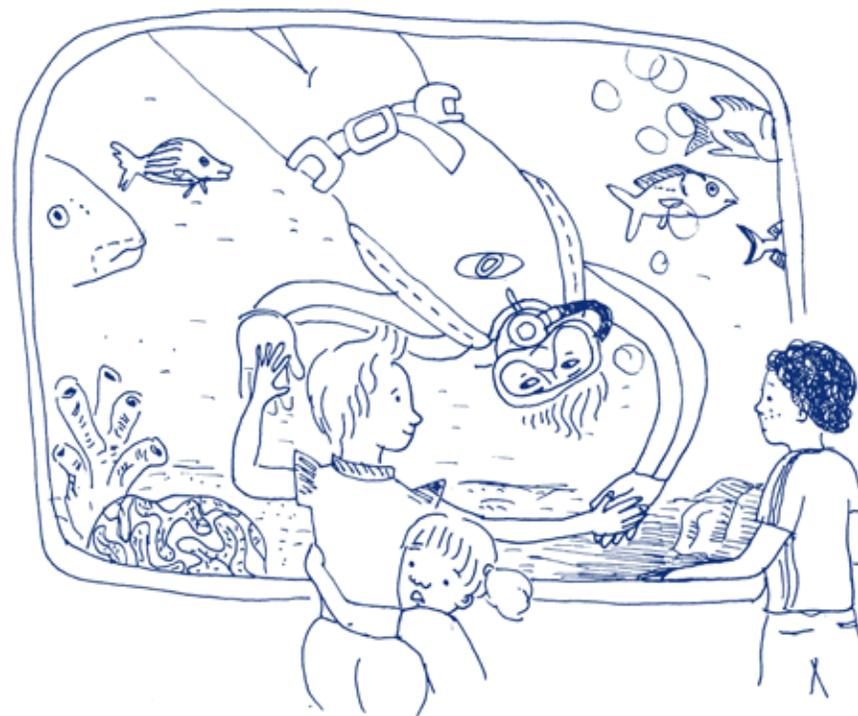
“So, Pempheris? Made up your mind as to what you're running away from?” Alon brought me back to reality.

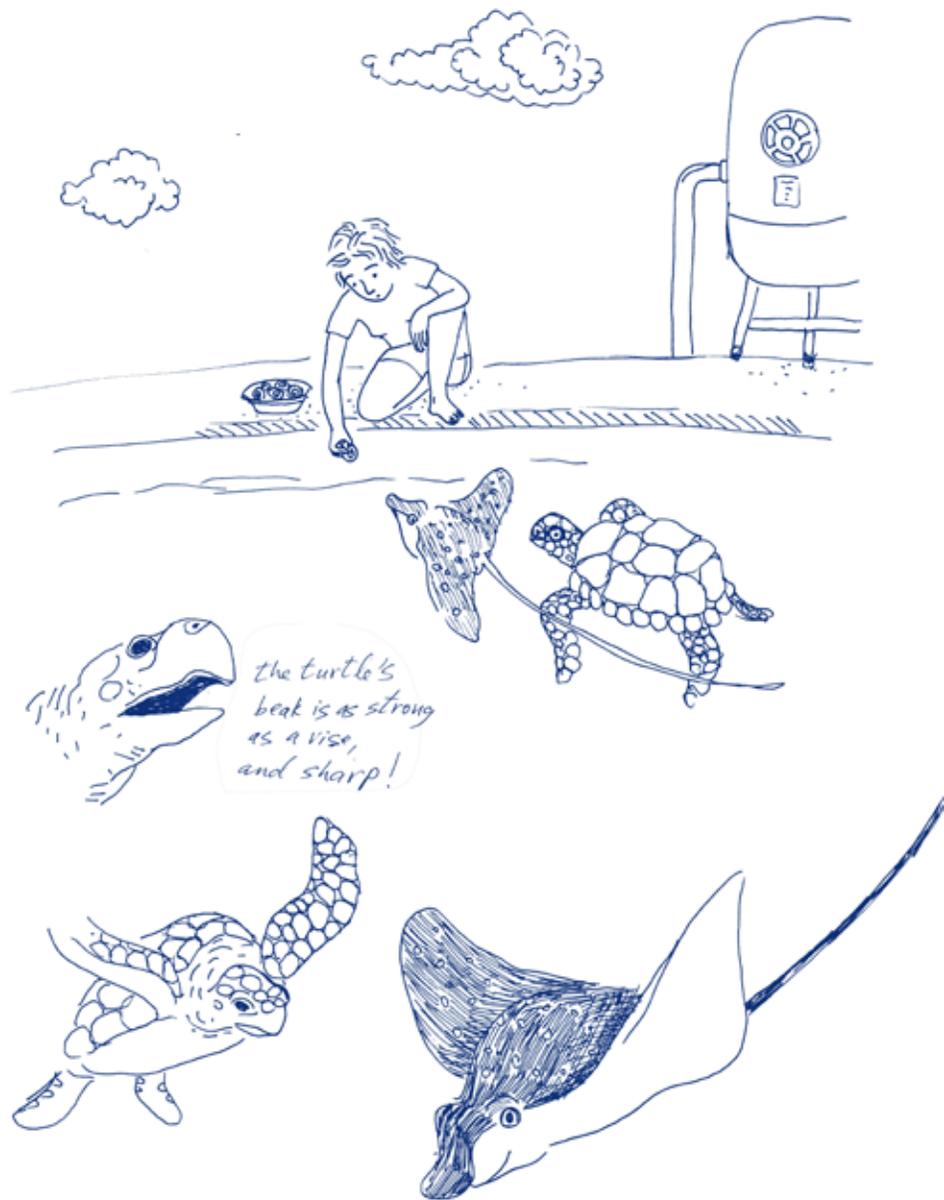
“Soon as I find out I'll let you know,” I said, chopping the heads off a handful of shrimp. Busybody. “The fish are calling.”

I took the tray and left for the Ring Pool. I couldn't stop thinking about Alon's question. If people come here to run away, then what was Dad's story? I always thought it was Mom who ran away when she refused to live in Eilat and went back to Jerusalem; but after that conversation with Yakov, I was no longer so sure. And I still don't know where Dad went after he left; it's been years since we heard from him, after all – not even a letter. I was sure that here, at the Marine Park, I would solve the mystery of his disappearance, but Yakov has been evading my questions and there's nobody else here who knew him back then.

It was time to head out to my new territory, as Yakov called it. I climbed the ladder up to the roof of the Ring Pool. The pool is built like a donut: Visitors enter through

a tunnel and stand in the middle, with the aquarium surrounding them on all sides. All around aquatic life flourishes, undisturbed: anemones sending out tentacles to seek food, parrot fish nibbling on corals, schools of fish swimming round and round like runners circling a track. It's like scuba diving without getting wet. I remember standing here years ago with Mouse, along with about twenty other kids, watching Daddy in his diving suit cleaning the glass from the inside. Schools of fish were swimming all around him. Mouse was still so tiny, and she shouted “Daddy, Daddy!” and pounded on the glass, and all the kids were dying of jealousy when Daddy waved to us.





I walked around the roof of the pool, scattering food. I had no idea who Iddo was, but I knew Yakov well enough by now to know that Iddo had to be a fish.

I picked up a snail and dipped my hand in the water. I didn't have to wait long. A graceful polka-dotted form glided towards me, gently flapping its wings. It swept slowly past my hand and delicately plucked out the snail. A whitish snub nose rubbed against my hand briefly before turning back to its cyclical route. The Eagle Ray cracked the shell and ate the soft interior. Smaller fish swam behind and gobbled up the leftovers. There's no waste on the reef, no piles of refuse like humans leave behind.

Iddo came back for a second serving. How long do Eagle Rays live? Maybe Daddy had stroked that same soft nose?

I took another snail, dipped my hand in the water and shut my eyes. I thought I'd seen a spotted black creature passing behind Dad, back then. Had it been the same eagle ray? A painful bite to my hand jolted me back to the present. I jumped in alarm. A mean-looking turtle was stretching his wrinkly neck, trying to dig his sharp beak into my hand, which was now bleeding. It was just two days ago that Polpo's suction marks had finally faded. I couldn't believe I was injured again! As always, I realized too late that unlike the vegetarian turtles that amble along in the turtle pool and enjoy having their backs scratched, carnivorous turtles are sneaky, and they bite. Every time I put my hand near the water, the turtle popped out and tried to snatch the snail from me. I found myself running around the roof in circles alongside Iddo the eagle ray, trying to feed him a snail before that nasty head emerged with its jaws wide open. If Daddy were here he'd know what to do!



THE LEMON SHARK

Today there was no morning meeting. Instead, Yakov took all the staff over to the turtle pool.

“I don’t like the look of that turtle,” he said. The soft parts of the turtle, around its neck and along the flippers, were bitten and bleeding. The sharks had started biting; the pool was too small and crowded for them.

“No choice,” said Yakov. “We’ve got to release them back into the sea until we’re done repairing the big pool. Pomacanthus, Arthoron, come give me a hand.” They headed towards the sheds.

I sat on the edge of the pool. Almost a week had gone by since the night of the sharks, but somehow I hadn’t found an opportunity to talk to Yakov, and somehow I couldn’t get anyone at home to answer my calls, either. Where

had they gone? I was sure that Mom would be sitting by the phone waiting, but whenever I tried to call it went through to voicemail. It was hard enough for me to get to a payphone, since the one at the dorms was out of order. Weren’t they worried about me?

Alon, Oren and Yakov came back from the shed with a strange stretcher, covered with straps and buckles. It looked like an odd way to catch a shark, but I didn’t say anything. Yakov leaned the stretcher against the pool, entered the water with a mask and snorkel, and started closing in on the lemon shark, the most aggressive of the bunch. Yakov claims that in order to swim with sharks in a pool you have to make a show of confidence, a battle of wills he calls it, and whoever comes out the ruler of the pool can do as he pleases. I stood there with Oren and Alon, quaking inside, and looking at the shark swimming in ever-tightening circles. I wish I knew how Yakov kept his calm. He swam behind the shark like a shepherd ushering a sheep into an enclosure. After the shark pool burst, while I was siphoning the water out of the carpets, I swore I would never again be such a scaredy-cat. I knew I had to control myself; but with a monster swimming under you, it isn’t easy.

“Stand by me, it’ll be here any second.” Oren was speaking over my head to Alon. “Be prepared.”

The lemon shark tried to get away, but Yakov directed it so that it passed right beneath us.

“And – now!” Oren leaned over the deck and tried to catch the tail. It slipped between his fingers and flapped wildly.



“Catch him already,” yelled Oren, “he’s getting away!” Alon stood stock still. I breathed in deeply, and like in a dream I reached out my arms and caught hold of the thick tail. Its touch surprised me, rough and dry like an old tire left out in the sun.

“Lift on three! Mind you, don’t hurt yourself. Alon, what the heck, come and help me!”

The shark was heavier than I expected. I saw at once that there was no chance I’d be able to help catch it. Why did I get myself involved? I glanced sideways, hoping Alon would replace me, but he was nowhere in sight. It was up to me. I heaved with all my might, but the shark didn’t budge. Luckily its skin was so rough that it didn’t slip out of my hands. Slowly and excruciatingly, we lifted the bottom half of the body onto the stretcher. I could see the head banging sideways against the side of the pool, and two sharp rows of teeth twisted towards us, looking for a hold.

“On three we lift out the head, ready?” I didn’t answer, but I didn’t let go, either. I looked on horrified as the head lifted out of the water, thrashing, turning from me to Oren and back. Don’t let go, whatever you do, don’t let go. My hands ached from holding on – I wouldn’t last much

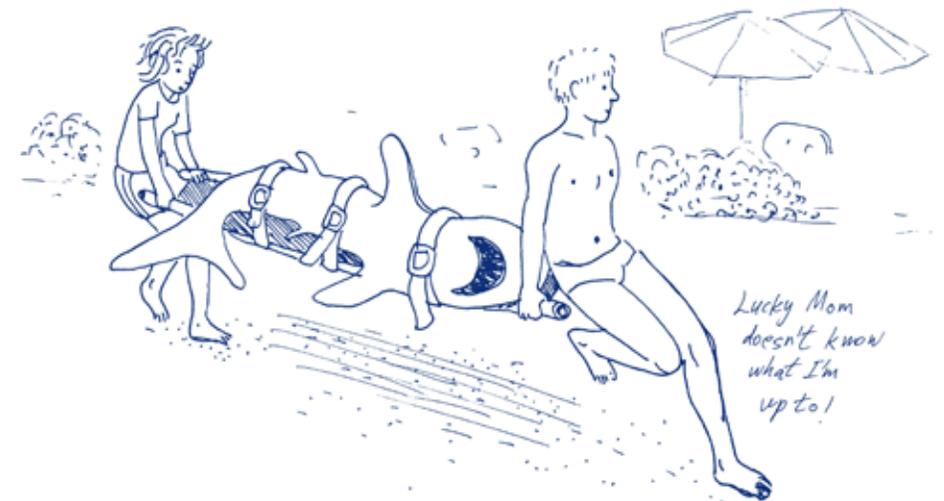
longer. Alon popped up behind us, and with ninja speed I didn’t know he had in him, he tightened the strap around the twisting head and fixed the jaws in an area with a smaller hit zone.

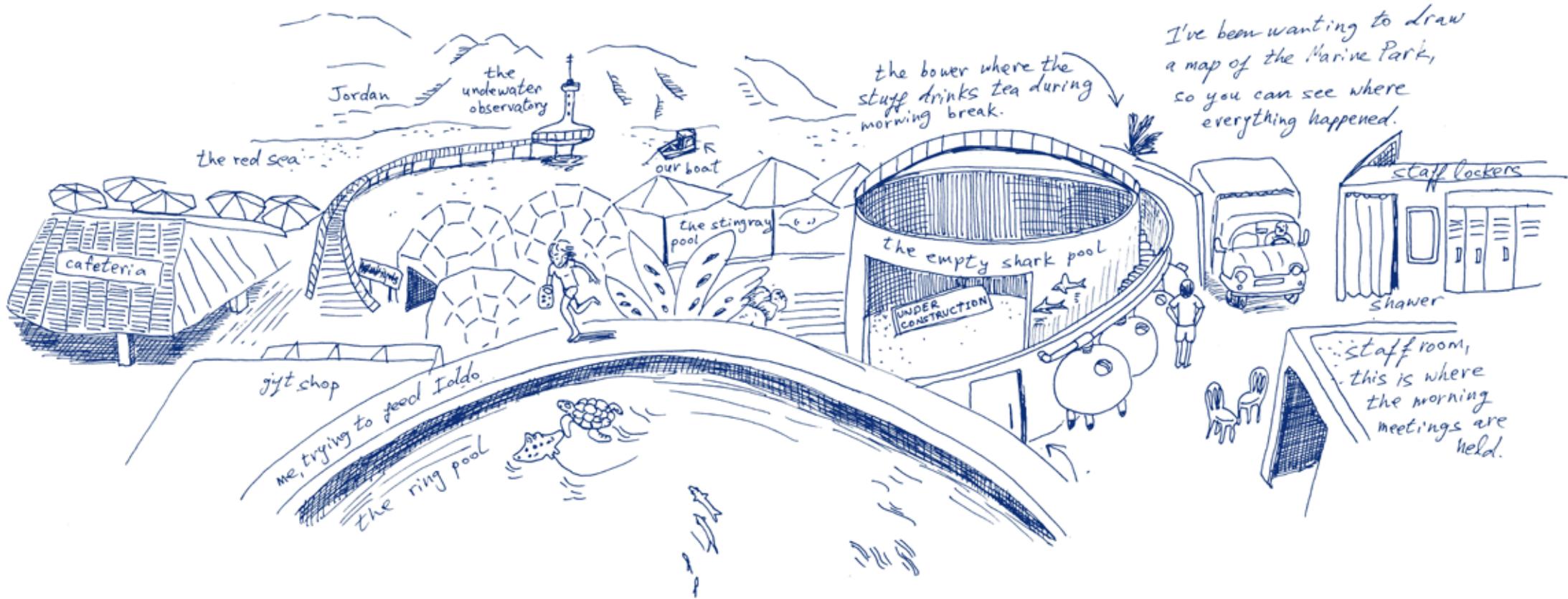
“Quickly,” called Oren, “to the sea.”

There wasn’t a minute to lose. We picked up the heavy, thrashing stretcher and ran the short distance to the beach. On the water’s edge, Oren loosened the buckles and pushed the shark out into the water. The water flowing into its mouth woke it up. It flopped off the stretcher with a wild twist and swam out to the deep.

“Nice job!” commented Alon, and straightened the collar of his shirt, which was still spotless.

“Back in the Unit we’d never let a girl do a job like that,” snapped Oren at Alon. “Where were you when we lifted the shark out of the pool? Are you crazy, letting her run with





the stretcher all the way to the beach?"

I couldn't believe it. That's all the jackass had to say? For once, I didn't keep quiet.

"Maybe back in the Unit the girls you knew were a form of plant life, but I come from a place where girls can do anything. If I weren't there, the shark would have slipped out of your hands. The least you can do is to thank me."

"You were wonderful, Pempheris! Sometimes the little fish are braver than the whole reef put together," Yakov

praised me. "He's not a pushover, that shark. I've known him since he was 30 centimeters long. How he's grown! We raised a shark we can be proud of."

We stood and watched as the lithe shadow slipped away in the distance. Until the pool can be fixed, we'll have to release all the sharks.

"It's madness setting those scary animals loose in the sea!" I said.

"Pempheris, I'm surprised at you." Yakov looked

disappointed. “I don’t understand why people hate them so much. In my mind, sharks are amazing animals! They have an important role to play in the sea, cleaning it of sick and injured fish. The average person has a better chance of dying from a coconut falling on their head than being eaten by a shark. Yet I’ve never heard anyone advocating chopping down all the coconut trees in the world. I don’t understand why people insist on persecuting this ancient, noble creature!”

In the shower that night, I saw that the injury from the turtle bite was already beginning to heal. Maybe I’d give this job another chance. Today hadn’t been bad at all.



YAKOV'S ROOM

This morning another fish had turned up missing from the Ring Pool, and Yakov was beside himself.

“Apricot was a quick swimmer. I don’t know what could have eaten him.”

We were all down in the dumps and unsettled by the mystery. Apricot was a big old shy Orange Soldierfish who used to like hiding down among the corals. He was a nocturnal hunter, so he was hard to see during the day, but when I fed the fish I used to see him come out, grab a bit of fish and retreat quickly back into the corals.

Everyone left to go about their daily tasks, and I hurried to finish the feeding so that I could go down and talk to Charlie. He was lurking quietly in a shadowed corner, his velvety brown back showing signs of healing. I hurried to put on my mask, snorkel and weights and entered the water. I left a trail of shrimp on the bottom of the pool, and sat down. Charlie turned in my direction, but didn’t move

from his spot. It seemed it would take longer to recover from his fear of humans than from his injuries.

“As you can see,” I burred, “I’m back to feeding you. Oren on the other hand was sent to plant young corals on the reef surrounding the Underwater Observatory. I saw him enter the sea with a bucket full of them, along with some special underwater glue. When he saw me he gave a huge grin and waved at me. Show-off. That’s a job I bet I’d do better than him, but nobody here asks me what I want to do. And worst of all, I haven’t yet found a single lead about Dad. Yakov will only talk about Mom, and there’s no one else who was working here seven years ago. I’ve got to find a way to get into Yakov’s room... If Mouse were here, she’d help me think up a plan – she has a good head for these kinds of things.”

Charlie listened quietly without stirring. He didn’t eat anything. How long can a stingray survive without eating?

When I surfaced I was surprised to find Oren standing over the pool.

“How’s it going, Pempheris? Have you finally got yourself a boyfriend? You’ve been in there for an hour. Come on, get out already and help me with the turtles.”

“I have stuff to do,” I answered.

I wasn’t up to listening to his lectures. I would have loved to feed the turtles, but instead I went to check up on the new octopus. I had decorated his tank with rocks I gathered at the spot where we trapped him. Yakov thinks I did a super job, and the new octopus did look as if he felt at home. I watched him from above and he stretched out a friendly tentacle, feeling around to check if I’d brought



anything to eat. This time I knew enough to be cautious. I closed the lid and turned to step off the stepstool...

Suddenly I noticed a strip of light shining along the wall. The door to Yakov’s office was ajar! I pushed it gently and peeked inside. The room was empty. I shut the door behind me and looked around. The walls were covered with pictures and books. Dozens of tanks containing broken corals shone their yellow fluorescent eyes on me. The room was jam-packed from floor to ceiling. If there was a clue to be found anywhere about Dad’s disappearance, it was bound to be here. I knew my time was limited; Yakov could return at any minute. I opened the desk drawers. There was a stack of documents. I scanned them with a quick glance: correspondence with the Aquarium of the Pacific in California, regarding the



raising of butterflyfish; licenses to collect fish with stamps in Arabic; nautical maps of the bay. Nothing of interest. On the table I found a telephone directory. I looked under Michael, but there was nothing. Under Hoffman there was one number listed. Eva Hoffman, with our current home phone number. From outside I heard the sounds of people approaching. I pressed against the wall and waited. Yakov and Oren came close to the door, earnestly discussing the care of sponges.

“It’s all a matter of quick transit from the sea,” I heard Yakov saying. “Sponges are particularly sensitive to water quality...”

I squeezed into a corner, trying to think up a good excuse for being here. Maybe I was looking for a book on raising octopi? Or a new bottle for the octopus, or... where was Mouse when I needed her? She would have thought of something.

I looked around for anything that might save me. Suddenly I saw a familiar photograph, a snapshot of us when we were little with our parents in Eilat, like the one I had hanging in my room. It was odd to see it here, part of a collection of photographs of strangers. Next to it was another snapshot of someone who looked familiar. It took me a moment to recognize I was looking at Dad. It had been taken at night, and he looked a little different, wearing an unfamiliar uniform and holding a flashlight. I stared at the photograph, trying to remember when I’d seen Dad like that. The loud conversation brought me back to reality.

“Come see the sponge I rescued last week on the North

Beach. I think it's starting to recover."

Yakov was just behind the door. I tried hiding behind a small cabinet. Please, please don't let them come in here!

"I think we should take a look at the sponges in the dark room, first," said Oren. "Ever since Pempheris started feeding them, they've been growing like mad. You've gotta see this."

"You're right, I haven't been there in a while," Yakov pulled a hidden string at the side of the door, and it began to open. So THAT'S how the room opens! I held my breath.

"Come see this sponge, it's something else," continued Yakov.

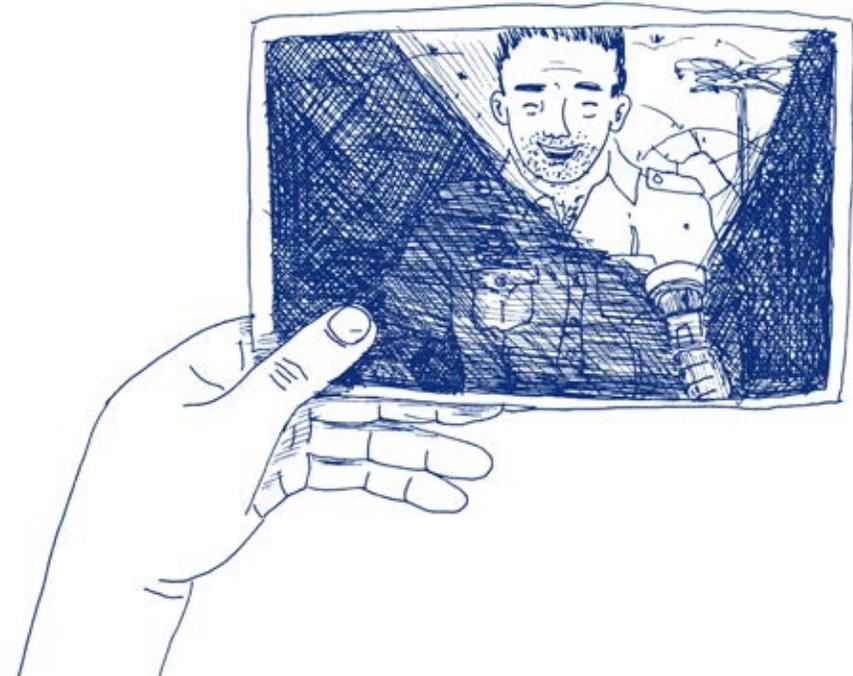
"The sponges can wait, but now's the time to see the fish in the dark room. They're most active right after a feeding."

I heard Oren walk away towards the dark room aisle, and Yakov followed. Finally I could breathe again. For a change, this time Oren had saved me, though I bet if he had known I was here, he wouldn't have missed the chance to embarrass me.

I looked at the snapshot again, and couldn't help myself. I took it. I thought I remembered when I'd last seen Dad in that uniform. It was at night, seven years ago, here in Eilat, shortly before we returned to Jerusalem. Mom and Dad were arguing as usual in the kitchen, and I peeked in through the door. Dad was wearing the uniform, anxious to leave. I heard him say, "We'll talk about it later. I've got to go to work. You know I can't be late again." And then the door slammed. A few days later we went back to Jerusalem – for good. I was used to these breakups, they

had happened so many times before – but this time it was final.

I think that's when I made up the story about Dad's secret mission, because of the uniform. Under the covers in Mom's bed, I told Mouse how he had been sent on a secret mission to bring home a special kind of luminous plankton that would be used to light submarines at night. He was diving around remote islands in the Pacific, in caves that no one had entered before, all by himself, to find it. And one night he would come back to Jerusalem with a glowing round fishbowl, and the whole street would light up when he entered the house. I'd told the story so many times that I started believing it myself, and now this picture... On what mission had he left that night? He did say something about being late to work. I've simply got to find a chance to talk to Yakov. If he's got a copy of this picture, he MUST know something.





HARVESTING THE OCEAN

At the morning meeting, Yakov came up to me and handed me a package: SPF 30 sunblock, toothpaste, laundry detergent and a bag of homemade granola mix. He didn't need to explain where it had all come from.

"Eva said you would need this. She sends kisses." I stood there like an idiot holding everything, and stammered, "Thanks... I tried calling..."

Yakov stepped into the staff room. Detergent and toothpaste. She could have sent me something more cheerful. There was a note attached to the care package: "Sweetheart, don't forget to use sunscreen. Mouse is at summer camp – she says hi. Gotta run to work. Call me sometime. Kisses, Mom."

I stared at the note. That's it? She's not on her way

here? She's not demanding I come back? I should have known that Yakov was keeping her updated – otherwise she would have called the police a long time ago. I should have figured that out when I saw our home number in Yakov's telephone directory...

"What'cha got there? More lotion?" Oren caught sight of the package before I could hide it under the table. Jerk. On the plus side, though, I was given a new assignment at the morning meeting: finally I'd be going out to dive in the open sea, thanks to Alon!

"My stomach's upside-down," he said. "I ate something last night that didn't agree with me, and I can't zip myself into a diving suit, let alone dive. The pressure would kill me."

Oren sniggered, but Yakov nodded understandingly. And so, Alon was sent to drive around to all the restaurants in town collecting leftover fish, a task that was clearly to his liking, while Oren and I went out to collect seaweed for the turtles. Oren was not pleased with the new arrangement.

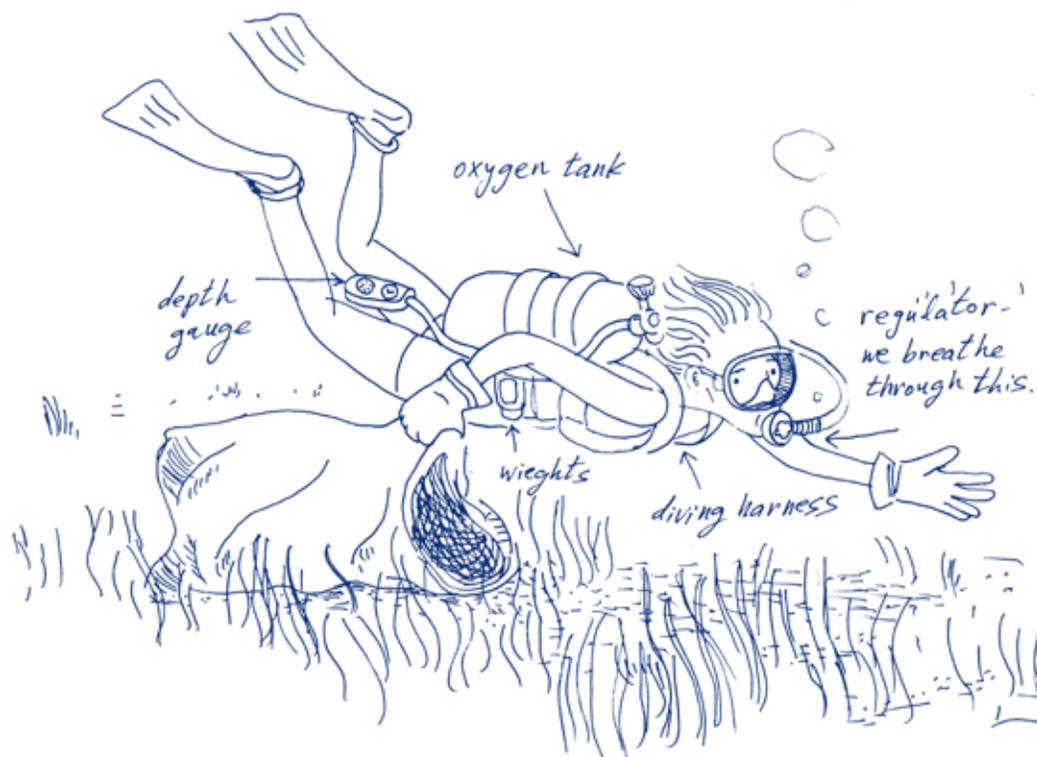
"Are you sure you're OK with this?" he asked. "This is professional diving, not kid's play, you know. Be careful, stick close to me – that way nothing will happen to you. You should know that most of the bay is a wildlife sanctuary. That means no fishing or coral collecting, though we have special permission for some areas."

I nodded obediently. I couldn't care less about his preaching. In a few minutes I'd be underwater! We put on our diving gear and entered the sea.

Oren sank in the water and waited for me to join him.

I put the regulator in my mouth, stopped kicking with my feet and felt myself sink. It was worth it, working like mad three summers in a row to pay for the diving course. Mom only caught on at the very end, and even so she managed to ruin it by showing up suddenly at the graduation ceremony, with a cake, no less! All they did was give us a laminated card with a picture. Of course she was the only mother there. Everyone licked their fingers from the cake, but I was embarrassed. Why did she always have to butt in?

The water was rising up to my mask. I glimpsed the blue bay and the red mountains surrounding it, and then



the water was over my mask and everything was tinted blue. I looked down on a strange new landscape. On the flat, sandy bottom, a dense forest of green seaweed rippled in the stream like hair whipped by the wind – we had entered the grazing grounds of the sea turtles. The short seaweed, as high as week-old grass, isn't cropped with a mower – you need to use your hands. We put on our gloves and started gathering seaweed into sacks. The vegetarian turtles eat nearly half a sack a day, and we wanted a week's supply.



[image: depth gauge and air gauge, air tank, weights, diving harness, regulator – we breathe through this]

Working underwater is harder than on land. Though you feel weightless, every movement is slow and awkward, plus you have to carry your equipment and all of the full sacks. Oren worked vigorously, and I tried hard not to fall behind. Within the seaweed, I discovered an odd couple, two tiny sea monsters in knight's armor, with horses' heads and wing-like fins. Of all the strange animals I've seen at sea, the Pegasus Sea Moths are the strangest. Slowly they hopped along, side by side on the ends of their spiny fins, and vanished into the seaweed.



I was so engrossed in observing the sea moths that when I lifted my head I saw that Oren had gone on ahead, swimming rapidly towards a long, black shadow. I know that when diving it's important to stick close to

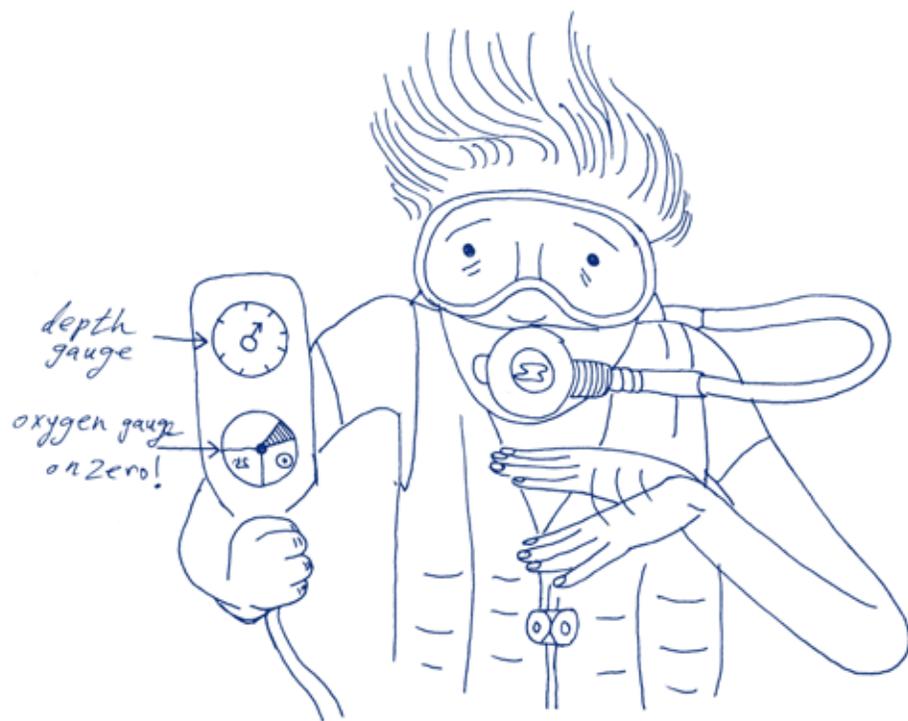
your partner. That's what they taught us in class – Oren shouldn't have left me behind like that. I put down my sacks and swam after him.

The shadow looked like a sea monster, with long skinny arms waving in the water and a restless black lump at its center. I had never seen a creature like that underwater. I tried beckoning to Oren to wait for me, but he swam right ahead. I swam as fast as I could after him, swallowing air like a sprinter. Oren reached the black lump, pulled out the diving knife that was strapped to his ankle and started cutting away. I didn't realize at first what he was cutting. He worked angrily, circling the black lump in a frenzy. A cloud of small fish burst out and scattered in all directions. Finally I reached him.

Floating in the cloud of fish, I tried to regulate my breathing. Now I could see it was an old fishing net that had caught on a rock. Dozens of fish had been trapped inside it, unable to break free. There was still a large, immobile lump stuck in the center of it. Oren ripped what was left of the net, and lunged upwards towards the surface, dragging along a huge marine turtle. I stayed below, stunned. One thing we were taught in diving class was that rapid ascension is one of the most dangerous things one can do while diving. Nitrogen bubbles in the bloodstream expand when you rise rapidly, and can cause injuries. Oren was floating about me, holding the turtle's head above water. Only when the turtle started flapping its large fins and moving slowly did Oren release it and swim back down towards me. I didn't need universal underwater hand signals to express exactly what I thought about what he'd done.

Suddenly I felt an odd sensation. I tried inhaling through the regulator, but nothing came out. I looked at my air gauge (a sort of clock that shows how much air is left in the tank); I had completely forgotten to check it in the past few minutes, and now it was showing zero! I was out of air! Panicked, I signaled to Oren. I guess all the excitement and the rapid swimming had made me use up the air in my tank faster than expected.

Oren swam towards me, holding out another regulator connected to his own tank. It only took a moment, but I felt like we were moving slower than the line at the corner grocery. Finally I put the regulator in my mouth and drew a long breath.



Now I understood why it's crucial to stay together during a dive. He shouldn't have gone so far without me. I bet that "back in the Unit" it's cool to bend the rules, but if he hadn't reached me in time, I would have suffocated. We gathered the sacks and returned to the beach breathing out of the same tank. When we stepped out of the water I was furious.

"Why did you leave me like that?" I said. "I could have died out there, without air. Don't you know you're supposed to stay by your partner while diving?"

"I'm sorry, Pempheris, I really am. I forgot that you gulp down air and I need to look out for you. Back in the Unit this would never have happened, we were all experienced divers. I thought I could count on you to stay calm in the water, but next time I'll pay more attention."

The nerve! Even his apologies are put-downs. But Oren wasn't finished yet. "If I hadn't reached that turtle in time, it would have drowned. As it is, I'm not sure it will survive, I don't know how long it was without oxygen."

"Turtles aren't like sharks," I said. "They don't need to be in motion in order to breathe."

"Really, Pempheris. You should know that turtles need to surface for oxygen. They breathe air just like you and I. A turtle can stay under water for several days, even, if it's hibernating, but eventually if it doesn't breathe it will drown, just like us."

I turned towards the sea and watched the turtle floating with its head above water, gasping in air. I sympathized completely: I, too, was grateful for the ability to breathe freely. The turtle surfaced for one last breath, and then dove deep. I watched it swimming away in the clear water.

what a ridiculous watch. Who needs all those dials anyway?



We loaded the truck and headed back to the Marine Park. Oren kept lecturing me.

“See this watch?” Oren handed me his clunky diving watch. “The hand stopped at our lowest depth. We dove at least 15 meters and stayed under water for an hour.” He pulled out a colored chart. “You can calculate the decompression, it will be an excellent exercise for you. I know it by heart.”

I had no intention of performing his calculation. Was he kidding, thinking I’d start counting nitrogen bubbles now? Especially when there was no way I was going to dive again today. I shoved the chart into the cluttered glove compartment and said nothing.

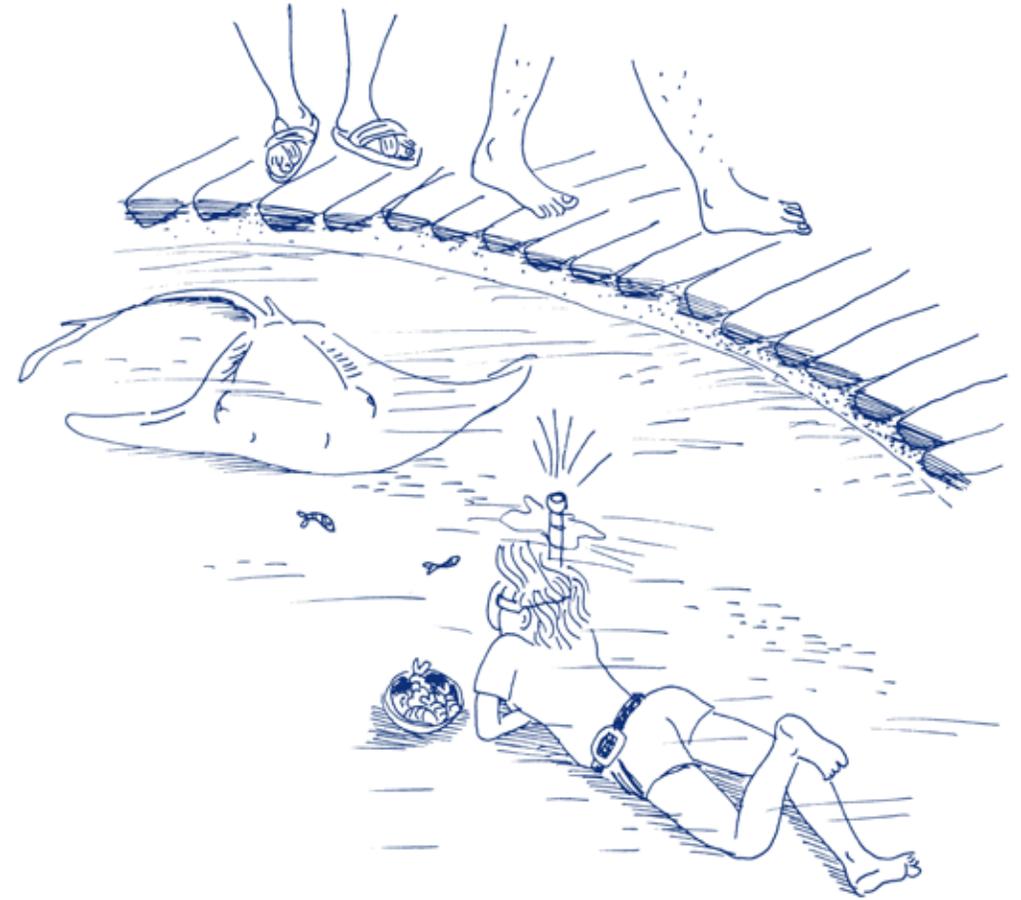
As soon as we returned, I went straight down to care for Charlie. If I couldn’t feed him soon, he’d die. I was spending almost an hour each day underwater, trying to coax him. He’s the only one I can really talk to. Today I had a lot to say to him.

“Hell, Charlie. Mister ‘back in the Unit’ almost got me killed today, and didn’t even bother apologizing. A turtle is more important to him than my life? I hate him. Mom always said that people who love animals are capable of being the cruelest to other people. This time I agree with her, for a change. What has he got against me, anyway? I overcome my fear of sharks, and he mocks me; I fill five sacks full of seaweed, just like him, and he sneers. I wish he’d just go back to his ‘Unit’.”

Charlie could sense my anger. He turned restlessly and flapped his wings.

“I’ve been here a long time by now. Yakov gives all the

good jobs to Mister ‘back in the Unit’ and to Alon, and I’m at the bottom of the food chain. A mollusk, a polyp. They’ll never treat me like an equal here, like a true member of the scuba crew. And what’s worse, the first time they let me out on a dive I run out of air. I’m sure he’ll tell Yakov. They’ll never let me dive again. I’ll never take a boat out to sea, and no one will let me plant corals around the



Observatory. I'll be stuck in the kitchen, forced to play mother all summer long.”

It's a lucky thing nobody could hear me whining on and on. That would have been embarrassing.

When I got back to my room I washed all my clothes for the first time since my arrival. At least I was able to get rid of the fish stench for one evening, and the lotion helped too – my hands looked human again.

On the way to the payphone I noticed I hadn't smelled this good in a long time. I didn't mean to lose it with Mom when I called. I actually wanted to apologize for worrying her, and ask how she and Mouse were doing, but I didn't get the chance. Before I could say a word she started with her usual barrage of questions: “Are you using sunscreen? Don't you need a haircut? What have you been eating? Is your stingray doing any bett–”

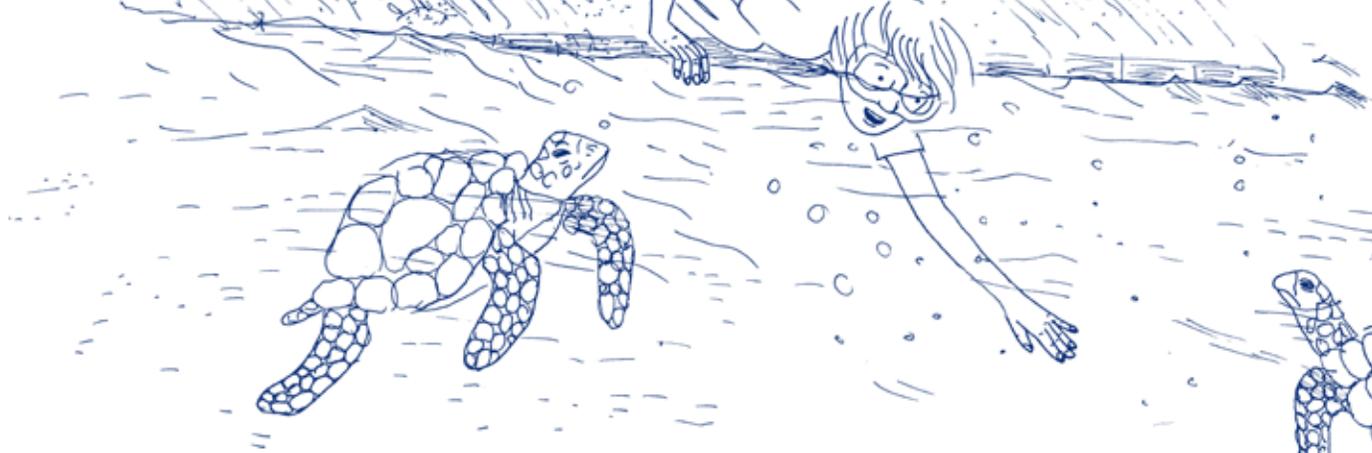
I hung up and cut her off. I finally got it. She knew. She had known all along that I was in Eilat; she'd found out about my job at the Marine Park and all the while she'd been getting updates from Yakov. No, she never meant to let me in on it!! She let me stew in my guilt while all along she hadn't lost control for a minute. All this time I thought I was striking out on my own, carving my own way in the world, but she was there all along, peeking over Yakov's shoulder. I bet she was the one who asked him to give me this job, to make me mother to all the fish. I hung up on her. That'll teach her. I won't let her control my life out here, too.

THE GRACE OF A TURTLE

Oren showed up at the morning meeting in an especially foul mood. He told us that on his way to the Marine Park his motorbike had choked, coughed and sputtered strangely. I'd never heard him speak of anyone or anything else with such affection. He didn't bother sticking around for the meeting, but headed off straight to the parking lot to take his motorbike apart. After the feeding, Alon called me over to the turtle pool, looking quite sour himself.

“Today of all days he ditches me! On the one day we need to prepare the hatching grounds and lug all those sacks of wet seaweed!” Alon was fuming. The sacks we'd collected the day before had been submerged in big tanks with running seawater to keep them fresh. Underwater I could just about handle them, but on land they were impossibly heavy. Alon muttered something and went off the way he does, towards the gift shop. The sun was beating down, the air about me hung oppressive and merciless, and I felt like I was about to lose my mind; what was keeping him so long? If I'd at least seen some sort of result with Charlie I'd have felt like I'd accomplished something, but he still hadn't touched his food or come a millimeter closer.

The heat was unbearable. The pool grew hazy before me, the sounds of the visitors crowding the Marine Park grew louder like a buzzing racket of summertime insects. I've got to take care of myself, got to cool down somehow. Alon must be deep in conversation with Maya; it could take hours.

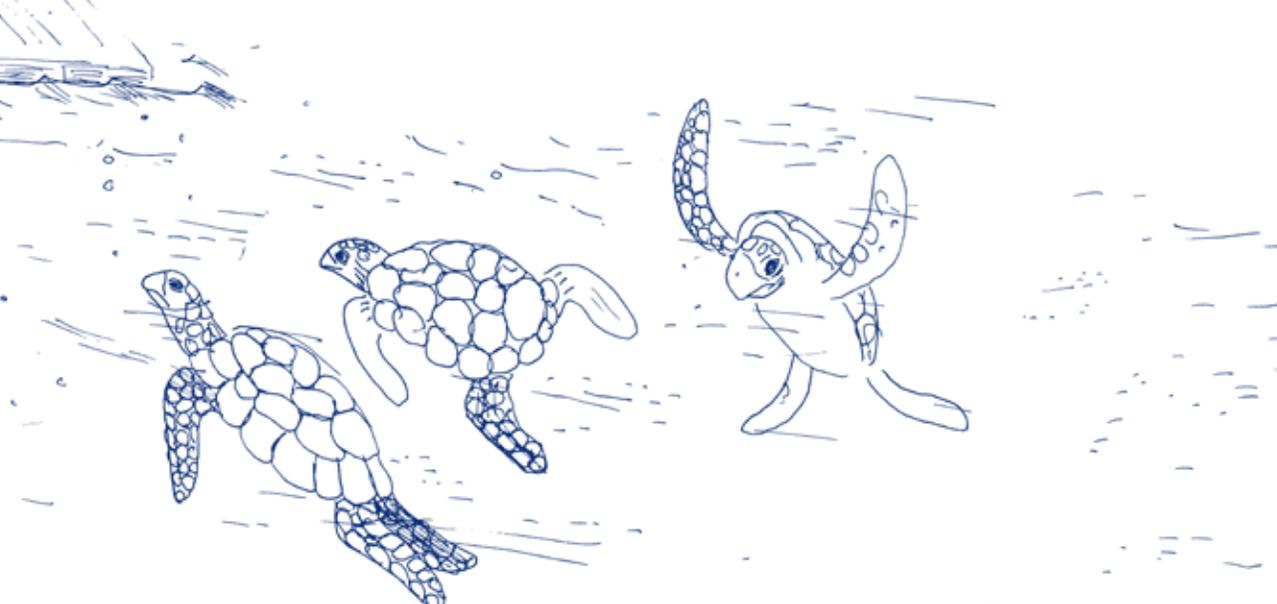


I stuck my head in the water, and the sounds of the Park were instantly silenced. I shut my eyes. Mouse and I were sitting together on the sofa in the living room on a cool Jerusalem evening, waiting for Mom to come back from the studio, singing silly songs to pass the time. Distractedly I started humming – it was relaxing, I could almost feel Mouse sitting next to me. But then a sudden movement in the water startled me, and I opened my eyes in alarm. The turtles had stretched their wrinkly necks in my direction and were swimming towards me with surprising grace. So that’s what it takes! And at home I was laughed at for singing off key... I kept on humming. The turtles were competing for my attention: they stretched their heads towards me like armored cats, and savored my pampering strokes.

“You’ve a bit of your father in you. He used to like singing to the fish.”

I lifted my head. Yakov was standing on the bridge. I thought I had heard longing in his voice, and my heart danced: I’d never heard him speaking of Daddy like this.

“And you don’t even have seaweed in your hand! Amazing!” Oren showed up out of nowhere and inserted



himself into the conversation. “No wonder Yakov chose you to be the feeder.” He came closer to the pool, his eyes shining. “Good job, Pempheris! You’ve learned a thing or two.”

“So Dad used to sing to the fish...” I turned back to Yakov, but he was already gone. Alon showed up with a cart from the gift shop, and the work became much easier. We piled on the sacks of seaweed, rolled them over to the feeding platform and scattered a generous amount along the edge of the deck. It’s funny watching turtles try to do something quickly. They were so eager to eat the seaweed, but they looked like they were moving in slow motion. In the meantime we scattered clean sand over another platform, hoping that the female turtles might climb up to lay their eggs.

The chances of turtles laying eggs in captivity are slim. In the wild they always go back to the beach where they



were hatched to dig holes in the sand and lay their eggs. The turtles in the pool are imprinted with the memory of a distant sandy beach, the first sight they ever saw. Just as I dreamt for years of the beach here, at the Marine Park, they wait for the day when they can go back to their beach. But Yakov insists on trying. His dream is to raise a batch of Hawksbill Turtles that will be released to the sea when they reach maturity, helping to replenish the dwindling wild population.

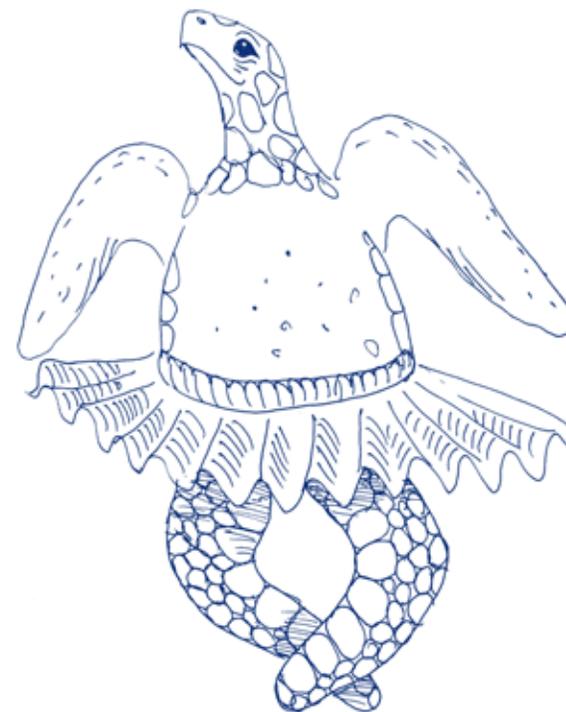
I stayed by the turtle pool for a long time. There's something fascinating about the movements of the turtles under water. Unlike their clumsy maneuvers on land, when swimming, they look like ballet dancers. Ballet dancers who've swallowed a giant mango pit.

Alon left the empty sacks by the pool. Typical of him to leave the cleanup to me! He'd probably gone back to the gift shop and to Maya. I gathered up the sacks and headed for the divers' area, looking for a place to stash them. All the lockers were stuffed, full of jumbles of ropes, hooks, floats, and all sorts of unidentifiable contraptions.

Finally I found a nearly empty shelf in a side locker. I took out some old clothes and stuffed in the sacks instead. I was about to put the clothes back on the shelf when I suddenly realized they looked familiar. This was the uniform Dad was wearing in that photo! Odd, it looked like it had been worn recently, and it gave off a strong smell of fish. I went through the pockets. One of them contained a wrinkled note. A list of fish like the one Alon had prepared for me. I wondered whose list it was. Dad hadn't fed the fish here – it couldn't be his list. And these couldn't be his

clothes. They couldn't have been lying here for the past seven years, that wouldn't make sense – so who did they belong to?

I put the uniform back in the locker, but I took the list. I pinned it up next to the two pictures in my room. I'm turning into a real thief, but I don't care, maybe it all has something to do with Dad – in which case it's rightfully mine. I wonder what Mouse would make of this. She smiled out at me from the old photograph, a five year old girl without a care in the world.





"BACK IN THE UNIT"

The heat wave finally broke yesterday. A light breeze blew, and the temperature dipped under one hundred degrees for the first time since my arrival. After the usual round of work assignments, Yakov announced, "It's time to restock the shark pool. Tonight I'm going out to trap some new sharks. Who wants to come along?"

Before I could respond, "Back in the Unit" burst in. "I think that's the perfect job for Pempheris," he said, to my astonishment. "It's time she learned how to steer a boat, she's part of the scuba team after all, isn't she? What do you say, Pempheris?"

Yakov didn't look the least bit happy. "I don't know, I

don't want to take that kind of responsibility, I'm sure your mother wouldn't..."

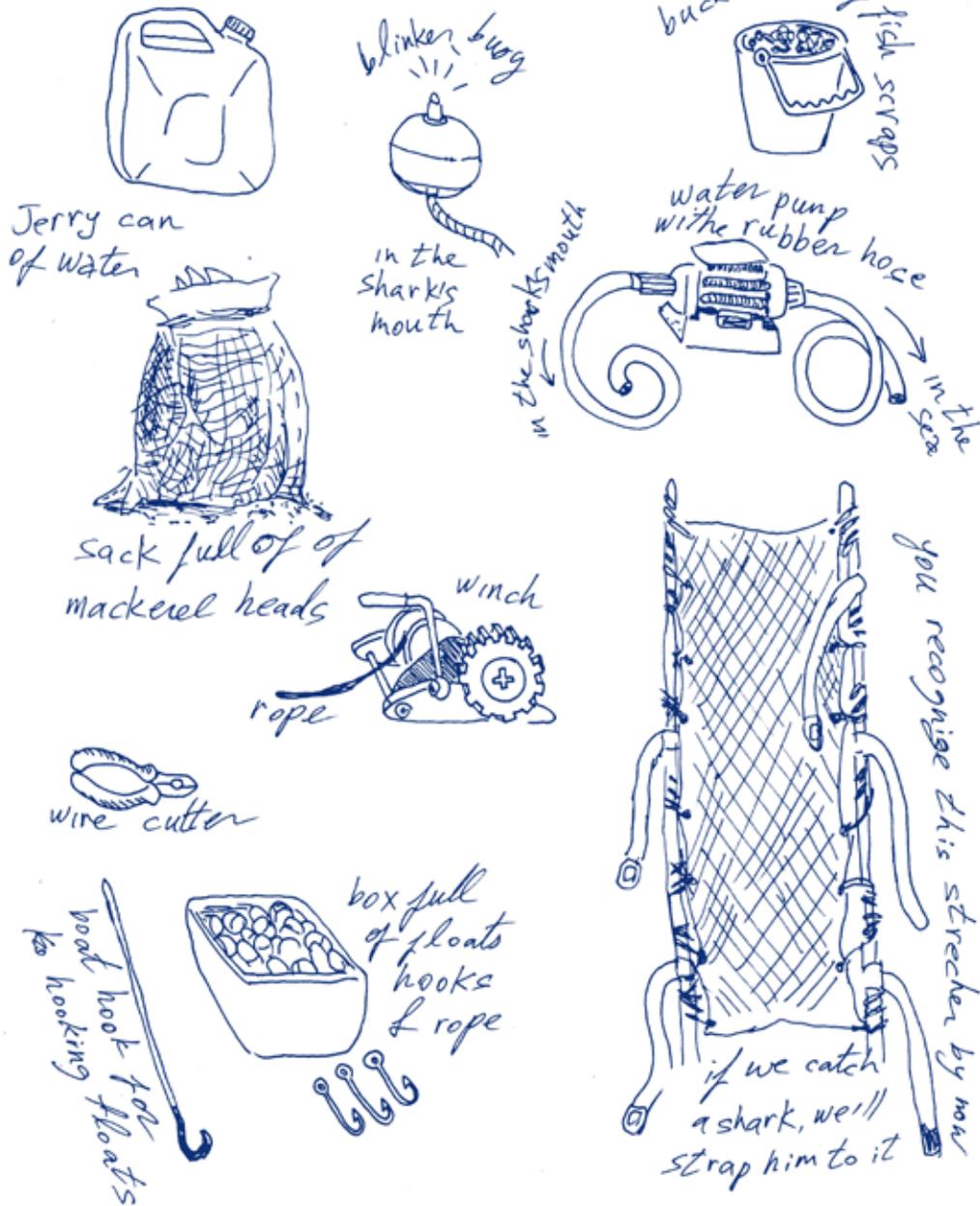
"She did fine with the lemon shark," interrupted Oren. "I bet she's as ready to go out to sea as the rest of us."

I remembered the mad rush to the water with the flopping stretcher, the dorsal fin swimming away. I simply had to speak up. This was the chance I'd been waiting for.

"I'm old enough to make my own decisions," I said. "We'll meet tonight by the boat." I ended the conversation and headed towards my post in the kitchen.

"Pempheris!" I heard Yakov call behind me. "I don't think that's a good idea..." but I was already chopping fish.

this is just a sampling of the tackle we loaded on the boat



THE DISTANCE A SHARK CAN SMELL BLOOD IN THE WATER

That evening after everyone left, Yakov and I loaded the small fishing boat and went off to sea.

"Sharks are most active in the twilight and at dawn," said Yakov. "That's when they go out hunting. They come up from the deep and approach the shore looking for food."

The sea around us was pitch-black and it blended with the dark sky. Only the stars and the city lights twinkled from afar. Every splash of water had me turning nervously. I kept imagining I saw the wedge of a dorsal fin and jaws to match. And we were actually out looking for them! Why did I agree to this? I'm not sure I can overcome my fear again, not here, in the middle of the sea. About five miles from shore Yakov stopped the motor. Not a sound came from Eilat, spread out in colored lights across the beach. All around there was nothing but wind and the sound of gentle waves lapping at the sides of the boat.

"Here's where we'll set down the rig," Yakov placed the bucket of fish in the middle of the boat. We baited all the hooks on the rig with pieces of fish. It was dirty work and not much fun. You need to watch out for the hooks, they're very sharp and can easily cut your finger if you don't pay attention. The hooks were large and thick. I tried not to imagine the mouths of the creatures they would catch.

"You know," I said. "I remember Daddy feeding the sharks. When I was little I saw them jump out and take a fish from his hand. It was glorious."

Yakov paused before answering.

"I remember that trick of Michael's very well," he let out at last. "I forbade him to do that – it was completely irresponsible. Now that you're a feeder yourself, you can see how dangerous that could be. It's insane to train sharks to jump for their food. What if some parent decides to hold his kid out over the pool to see the fish better? Another one of those crazy ideas..." Yakov tossed in the first float, together with the hook and bait.

"I thought it was a great show," I said. "The audience loved it."

"The audience did love it. But he was endangering the visitors at the Park." Yakov glanced at the float, drifting away.

"You know, Pempheris, your father knows the sea better than any other person I've met. He should have been born in the water. He's like a clownfish in his anemone down there, it's his territory. There was a reason we called him the fish whisperer: they would swim after him, hypnotized. But outside the water – that's a different story. He just couldn't behave himself. He didn't understand the responsibilities he held. It could have ended in disaster, and I had to put a stop to it."

Yakov picked up the next float. I tossed the float I was holding with all my might out to the water, and looked at the lights on the beach. So it was Yakov who make Daddy leave the Marine Park!

"Back up, slowly," he instructed me.

I turned the gas throttle and the boat lurched back.

"Not so fast! Focus. You'll tangle the lines." A second float was tossed in the water, and a third, and a fourth,



until only the last, big float remained in the boat.

"Stop!" Yakov turned on the blinking light on the buoy before throwing it in the water.

"That doesn't seem like a good enough reason to fire someone," I said. "Especially someone who knew the sea as well as Dad did."

Yakov started the motor.

"I didn't fire your father, that wouldn't have occurred to me. I just reassigned him to a different job, somewhere where he could do less damage." He turned his back to me and started doing something with the sack of mackerel.

"The rig is 30 meters deep now. That's where the deep water shark swim," he yelled over the rattling motor. "We'll leave it in for a couple of hours and see what the sea sends us. Now let's take the boat to the shallows. The big sharks looking for food swim right up to the shallow reef."

I turned the bow westward and set a course towards the shore. When I looked back, I could see the faint glimmer of the blinker bobbing up and down in the waves. What a mad idea to leave the rig; we'd never find it again. If sharks get caught on it, they'll stay there forever.

bait is
30 m deep





“We’ll never find it,” I grumbled. “It’s less responsible to leave sharks hanging on the line than to train them to jump for food.” Yakov was not impressed.

“Look at the shore,” said Yakov, “and find two spots of light that you recognize on the mountains, two lights that are lined up exactly one above the other.”

“I don’t understand how two lights on the mountain will help find a drowning shark.”

“This is the only location in the sea where you’ll see them like this, one above the other. You can use those

lights to navigate right back to where we left the rig.”

I chose two lights, and indeed when we started sailing the lights grew further away from each other. We continued towards the shore, with me steering the boat and Yakov tying one end of the rope from the sack of mackerel to the stern and throwing it out to sea. A splash of cold water soaked me. What size shark was he hoping to catch tonight with that sack? A shark that can swallow a sackful of bleeding heads must be some monster. The sea was dark and calm and luckily the kerosene lamp was

shining. Earlier, on the beach, its light had looked so faint, but here, out at sea, it blazed like a lighthouse.

“Keep drifting slowly along the shoreline,” Yakov directed. “I hope the trail of blood from the sack will attract some sharks. They can smell blood from half a kilometer away.”

I steered the boat slowly. The small waves lapped against the stern and I imagined all the sharks within a radius of half a kilometer turning their noses towards our boat and swimming with all their might.

“How are things at home?” Yakov interrupted my daydream.

“Just great,” I said. Yakov didn’t press me. He stared at the sea in silence. Actually, I would like to know what’s happening at home right now, while I’m sitting on top of a trail of bleeding bait. I bet Mouse is reading in bed, and you can hear the TV blaring the news in the living room, Mom is finishing up the work she took home – another fashion catalog for a shop in Tel Aviv or a program for some cultural event. Those evenings at home seem so far away out here in the middle of the sea, when any minute a shark might show up. Once in a while the boat shuddered, lurching forward or backward, and then it returned to its course. Yakov said nothing, but looked out towards the sea.

“When was the last time you saw Dad?” I asked casually, though I think my voice wavered a bit. Yakov wasn’t quick to answer.

“The last time I saw him was more or less the same time you girls were here.” He took a long pause, then continued, “The summer your mother decided to try living in Eilat.”

“Yes, it was the perfect summer.”

“For your mother it was rough. It was the hottest August I can remember. And yet you stayed. Eva found work in town, at the local newspaper. You girls spent all day here at the Marine Park.”

It all sounded very strange. I couldn't imagine Mom working in the graphics department of a small local paper; she already had her own office in Jerusalem.

“You must be confused; you saw him later, too. He stayed here on the scuba crew after we left, after all.”

“Michael left before you girls. When he left you went back home. I’m sorry, Pempheris, but that’s how it was.”

“Maybe he left, but just briefly!” I was sick of him twisting the facts. “He had this important mission, but afterwards he came back! For years he’d still send me birthday presents from the Marine Park, like a mermaid made of seashells that’s only sold here, at the gift shop. So I know he stayed at the Marine Park.”

Yakov leaned over the stern and tested the rope.

“Time to move on.” He started the motor and cut off our conversation. “We’re not catching any sharks here tonight. We need to go back and check on the rig. Sharks can’t be left on the line for too long or they weaken.”

I hauled back what was left of the sack of mackerel – just a few lousy heads – and we headed back out to the open sea to check if we’d been luckier with the rig.

“You steer.” Yakov tuned the radio to a station that played old Israeli songs, and turned up the volume. I looked towards the shore at the two lights I had picked, and tried to steer the boat so that they’d line up exactly.

But my thoughts kept drifting back to Dad. I'd been sure that Mom was the one who left, that she was sick of living in Eilat. But maybe it was he who'd bailed out first? And if so, who sent me all those mermaids for my birthdays? Instead of things growing clearer, I was getting more and more confused.

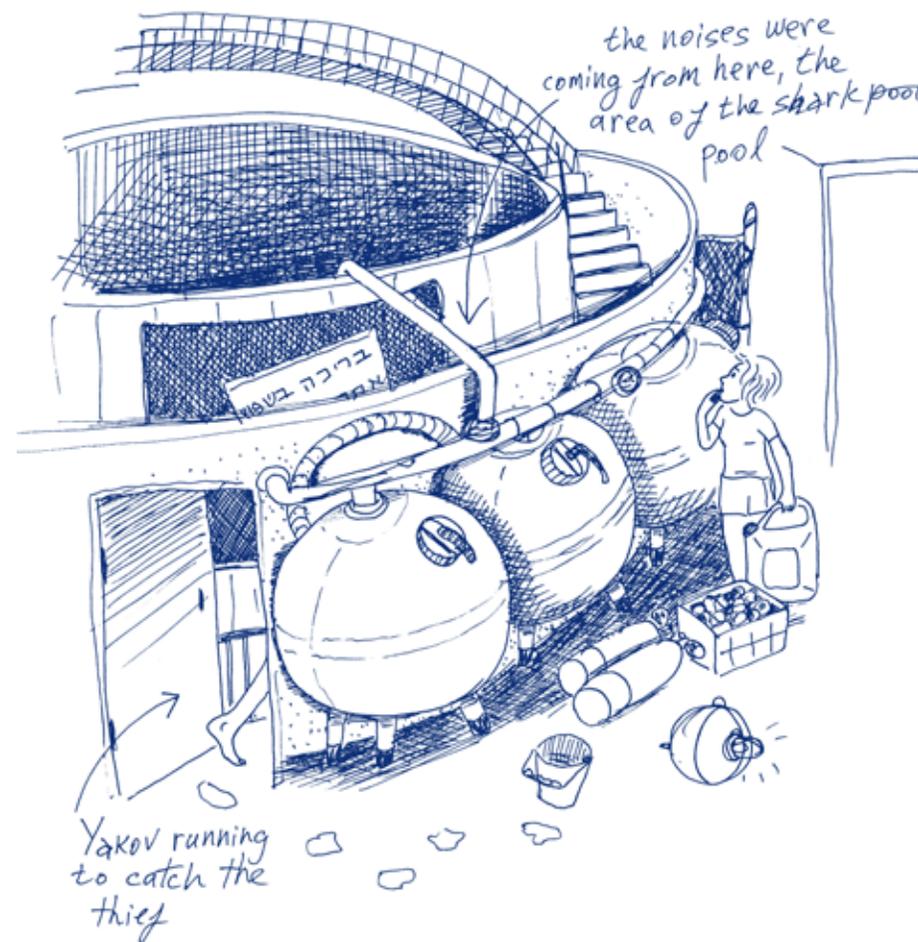
With all these swirling thoughts, it took me almost an hour to get to the buoy. Yakov listened to his music peacefully and didn't rush me. At last I saw the dim flicker of the blinker on the waves. Yakov extended the boat hook, caught the rope tied to the buoy and pulled it aboard. He tied the rope to the winch and turned on the motor. The floats started reeling in towards the boat like a row of ducklings sensing danger, hurrying to hide under mama duck's wings. Every time a float reached the boat, we stopped the winch and slowly pulled up the hooks from below, but they were all empty.

"Never mind, Pempheris," Yakov tried to console me. "It doesn't always work the first time. Next time we'll leave a little earlier."

It's hard to say I was disappointed. Things hadn't gone my way tonight, and I didn't feel like topping it all off by meeting a shark.

Silently we headed back to the Park and unloaded our gear. As we were putting the crates back in the shed, we heard a strange noise. Someone was prowling around! I thought I saw a figure in uniform slipping quickly over the roof of the Ring Pool. Yakov motioned to me to stay silent and wait. I heard him creeping around behind the wall.

Stealthily, I traced his course along the other side of the wall separating the shark pool from the hidden staff area. Now I could hear the thief clearly, he wasn't even trying to keep quiet. I thought I could hear him whistling. I guess it didn't occur to him there could be someone else here at such a late hour of the night. Yakov should have reached him by



now. A sudden noise jolted me, followed by a muffled cry. Yakov! What happened? The whistling stopped.

“Stop!” cried Yakov, breathless. “The police are on their way!” he improvised, “you can’t get away!”

Did Yakov mean for ME to call the police? Why oh why did I leave my cellphone in Jerusalem, now that I really needed it?

“Is that you, Yakov?” I heard an unfamiliar voice. “What are you doing down there on the floor? Are you hurt?”

“David! Thank goodness it’s you. I tripped like an idiot over a net that somebody left here.”

“I think someone had another go at the Ring Pool. Maybe it’s time you give me a weapon. What will I do if the thief is armed? I can’t guard the park at night armed with only a flashlight.”

“There will be no weapons at the Marine Park. None of our watchmen have ever been armed, and I don’t see why you should be any different.”

We hadn’t caught anything tonight, no sharks, no thief. Some days are like that: Nothing goes right.





THE SINGING FEEDER

The next morning we discovered that a Devil Firefish had gone missing from the ring pool. Now we knew that the culprit couldn't be an animal: the Devil Firefish is highly poisonous – no animal would touch it. So the person we thought we saw yesterday was a thief after all! The thought gave me the chills.

When we finished work, it was time to feed Charlie. I gathered up the bowl of shrimp, the weights and the swimming mask, and went down to the pool like I did every day. Charlie still hadn't eaten a thing, and if he kept up his fast he would soon die of hunger. The food would help him heal so that we could release him back to the wild. But try explaining that to a clinically depressed stingray.

I scattered the shrimp and started telling Charlie about my night-time conversation with Yakov. Instead of things being revealed as I hoped they would be when I came here, everything was becoming less and less clear. I felt like one of those fish in the tanks on my first day of feeding, when the water went all cloudy. I stared at Charlie over at the other end of the pool. He didn't react to my talking, and looked stressed and sad. I thought of the sea turtles – maybe Charlie would respond in the same way? So I started singing an old Russian folk song that Mom used to sing to us when we were little:

Lyushinka, Lyushinka,
He's come back for you, Lyushinka,
He's come back for you, Lyushinka,
Why couldn't you wait?

Under the water it sounded more like this:

Ba ba baaa ba ba baaa
Bo bo bo bo ba ba baaa
Bo bo bo bo ba baaa
Ba ba ba ba be bee boooo?

Charlie reacted at once. As I sounded the first notes he turned around quickly and swam to me. Oren's words came back to me: a jab from the sting at the base of that tail could kill me. I didn't dare move, but I kept on singing. Charlie glided over to me, the edges of his wings hovering just above the bottom of the pool. He seemed so light

and fleet. If I tried to escape him now I wouldn't stand a chance. Better not to make any sudden movement, not to look aggressive.

Charlie stopped at my knees, staring at me with his beady eyes. Suddenly he rose swiftly, exposing a white underbelly, and hovered, rippling his wings along my arms and waiting. I picked up a shrimp and handed it to the round mouth in the center of the belly. Charlie sucked it in, glided back down to the bottom and did a victory lap around the pool. A minute later he was back for a second helping.

I sighed in relief. How lucky that Mom taught me old Russian folksongs that stingrays love! I kept singing, and within five minutes Charlie had polished off the entire bowl of shrimp. When I lifted my head out of the water I saw a pair of tanned legs on the edge of the pool. Oren was standing there, clapping hands.

"Good job, Pempheris!" he said. "I didn't think this ray was going to make it. Now that he's eating, he's got a fighting chance. Feeder and singer. Would you like to celebrate with an early lunch?"

I wondered how long he'd been standing there, and what he'd heard of my conversation with Charlie. He'd heard me singing, after all... good thing that everything underwater sounds like it's been played on a comb.

"Come on, Pempheris, I'm starving. You've been down there for hours."

"Oh, all right. I was going to eat anyway. I just need to go towel off."

When I returned he was still standing there, staring at

Charlie.

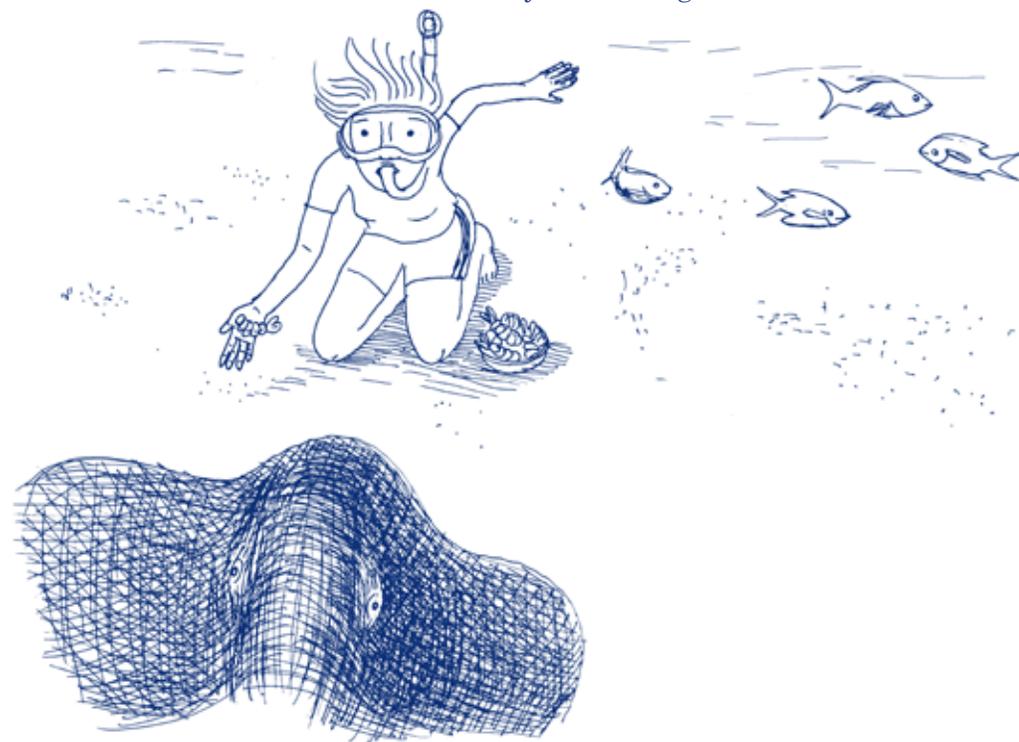
"We're heading for the cafeteria too." It was Alon and Maya, coming from the gift shop. So the four of us sat down together at a table, and Alon told us about his plans to open a Fish Grill on the beach.

"My signature dish will be sea bass in green sauce. I've been practicing it for a week, and last night it came out just right. The delicate aroma of the basil works perfectly with the rich flavor of the sea bass."

"I could help you design the place, I have experience from working in the gift shop and I know what people go for," Maya looked charmed.

"Anything but those tacky seashell mermaids," Alon laughed.

"No way," chuckled Maya. "Only Yakov thinks those are still fashionable. He buys them as gifts for all the little



girls he knows. I tried interesting him in the pearl oysters, but he wouldn't hear of it."

"Really?" I tried to join the conversation, but no one was paying attention to me.

"On the side," continued Alon, "I'll serve pureed beans with olive oil. That will compliment the flavors perfectly."

If Mom were there with us I bet she'd have some great advice for him, but I shut my mouth, silent as a fish.

"I'm going to go check on the turtle laying grounds," Oren stood and picked up his tray. "Don't stay here all day, Alon, I need your help."

Why did he ask me to join him for lunch if he wasn't going to say a word and then just get up and leave? I guess that's how they do it, back in "the Unit".



THE NOTE

In the middle of the night I woke up from a nightmare. I was riding a spiny seahorse while being chased by an electric ray. Out of breath, I tried to hide in a dark cave. But then behind me, two pairs of eyes opened... an orange soldierfish and a devil firefish, both gigantic, were swimming slowly towards me!

I woke up in a cold sweat. The list! The note I'd found in the uniform: seahorse, electric ray, orange soldierfish, devil firefish... those were all the fish that had gone missing. Based on this, Iddo the eagle ray was next in line! I couldn't let this happen. I had to tell Yakov at once.

I reached for my bag to pull out my cellphone, then remembered again that I had left it at home. Damn. I started pulling on my clothes. If I spoke to Yakov, I'd have to tell him where the list came from, to admit that I'd stolen it from the pocket of that uniform. The uniform from the picture I'd stolen from his room. It wouldn't be pleasant, but I had to save Iddo.

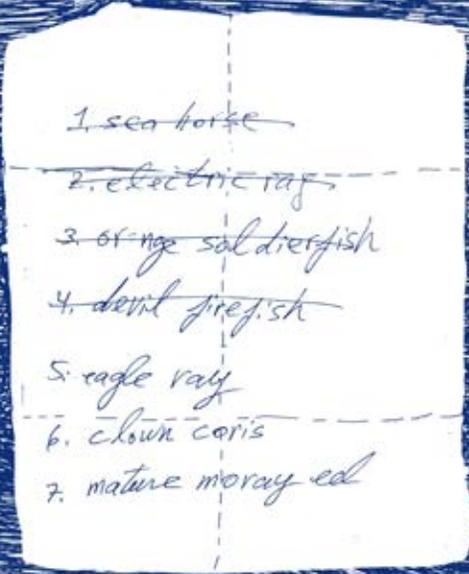
On the way to the payphone I paused. What if Dad was not as far away as I thought? What if that uniform was his? But if he had been around here recently, I would have known, someone would have told me. Unless his mission really is secret, but not the way I imagined when I was little, no. The kind of secret mission that means you have to hide from the law...

No, it couldn't be. He wouldn't have anything to do with it – he would NEVER steal a fish. He loved them too much, even Yakov said as much. And yet, somebody else might

suspect him. Maybe someone else had seen him in that uniform. Why had I found that picture of him? Why had I taken that list from the uniform pocket? Things would have been better if I'd never come here at all. I'm no longer even sure that I want to know anything else about Dad. I turned and went back to my room. I wouldn't go talk to Yakov.

There's another way.

I WON'T let whoever it was steal my eagle ray, and I WILL find out his connection to Dad – but I'll do it on my own.

- 
1. sea horse
 2. electric ray
 3. orange sandier fish
 4. devil fish
 5. eagle ray
 6. clown coral
 7. mature moray eel

A TIGER IN THE WATER

After the morning meeting I approached Yakov.

“Iddo isn’t happy in the Ring Pool,” I said. “I want to transfer him to the turtle pool, I think he’ll have more space there.”

“I’m happy you pay attention to these details. Do what you feel is right for him. I trust you.”

I was lucky – Iddo really did look happy in his new pool. I really hoped the thief wouldn’t look for him there! I couldn’t watch over him day and night. But tonight I was going out again with Yakov to catch sharks. When we returned I’d be able to check if he’s all right.

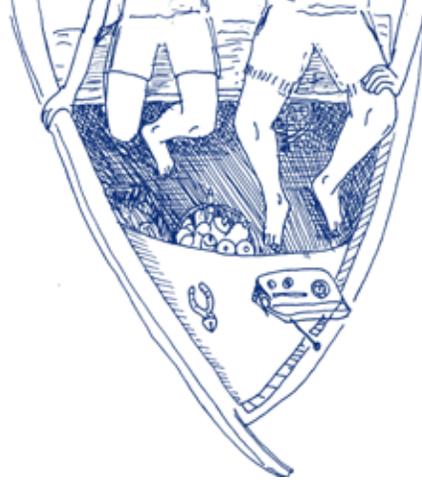
When I headed for the beach to get to the Marine Park boat, there was a surprise waiting for me. Instead of Yakov, Oren was at the helm.

“Yakov asked me to fill in for him tonight,” he looked almost apologetic. “I’ll try not to go on and on about the Unit.”

“That’ll be a new experience,” I said, and sat down beside him in the boat.

Until now I hadn’t noticed how small the boat was. I couldn’t move without bumping into Oren. Each time he turned the steering wheel he elbowed me.

Imagine the soundtrack for our little foray like this: a small boat, night time, and the splash of waves against the side of the boat, punctuated from time to time by mumbles of sorry, sorry, that wasn’t me, sorry... Good thing that at some point Oren turned on the radio. The soundtrack changed to Beatles songs. We were almost



opposite the Observatory when the boat rocked, shuddered for a moment and then started being pulled in the opposite direction.

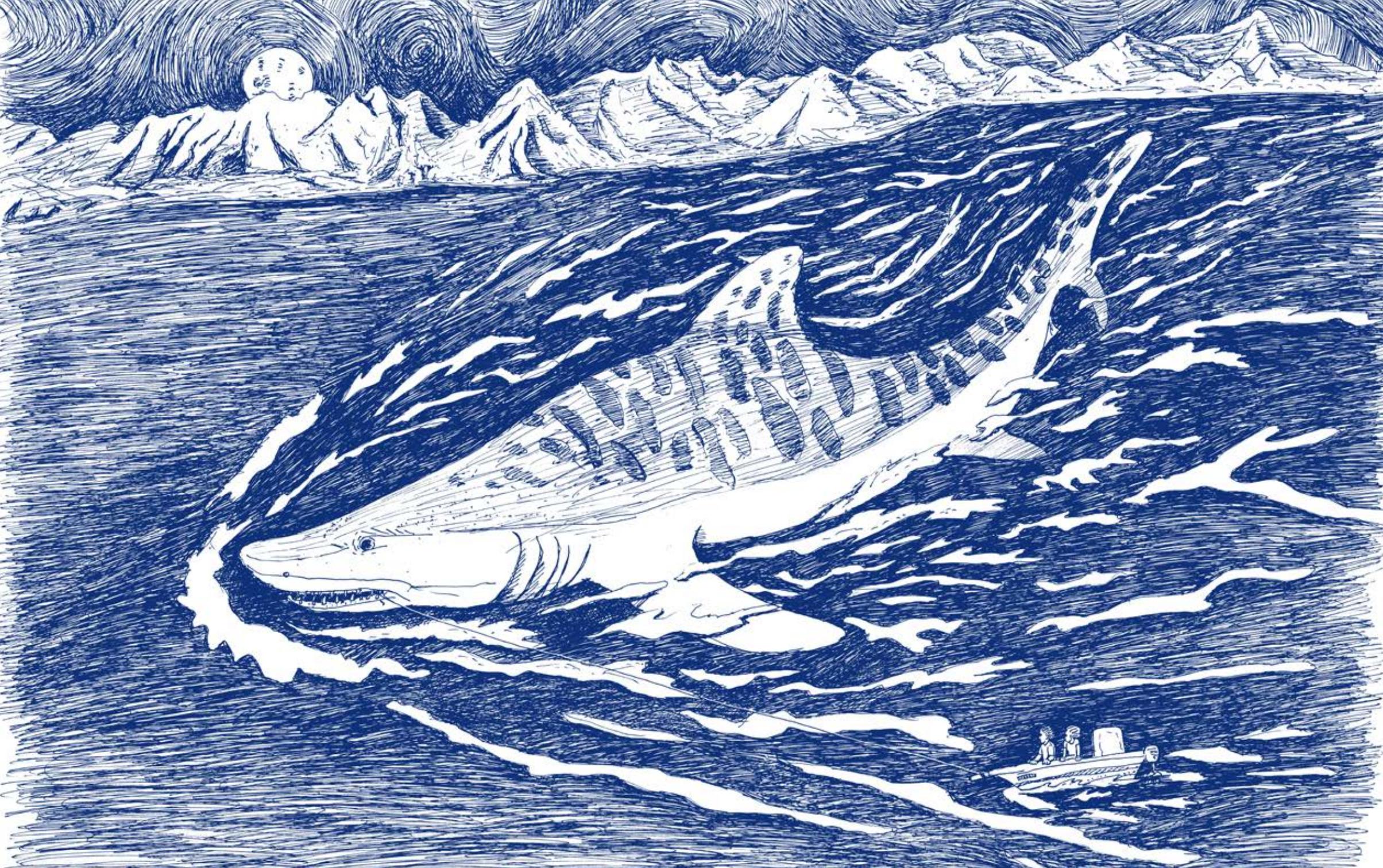
“Arms and legs in the boat!” yelled Oren. “Shark in the water!”

Dammit, NOW the sharks turn up? For the first time I was glad of Oren’s experience in “the Unit.” I’m sure they taught him to keep cool under pressure – he’d know what to do. Oren sat at the wheel and tried to steer the boat back on track.

“The trick to catching a shark is to keep going alongside it until it’s worn out. Then we can hoist it aboard without the hook slipping out of its mouth.”

It was reassuring, listening to him lecture me again. The boat struggled to move forward, but instead of progressing it started turning in circles. Around us the water grew choppy and millions of luminous dots began to glow in it. The motion of the boat had stirred up plankton in the water, and the microscopic creatures were emitting light. We watched the swirls of light, enchanted, until suddenly, with no warning, a striped dorsal fin and back bobbed out of the water, illuminated in the fluorescent glow, and sank back down.





“A tiger shark!” said Oren, and I thought I heard a tremble in his voice. I remembered Yakov talking about tiger sharks once. They’d never had one at the Marine Park. Tigers were the largest and most dangerous sharks in the Gulf of Eilat. They could grow to a length of five meters!

Oren let go of the helm and let the boat drift on its own. Again and again the striped dorsal fin bobbed above the waves and disappeared under the boat; I prayed it wouldn’t capsize us. The boat stopped spinning in circles; it turned east towards the mountains of Edom and started heading quickly away from the shore. The prow dipped; the shark was trying to dive downwards! My knuckles were beginning to hurt from gripping the sides. I saw the rope tighten and the prow tugged forward. I felt like throwing up. The rocking motion and the fear had tied my stomach in knots. Oren was as green as I was. I didn’t dare lean over the stern to vomit. I tried swallowing and centering myself steadily in the boat. How long would this mad rush last? Was Oren seriously planning to bring aboard a tiger shark? It seemed to me that even Yakov would have cut the rope.

Suddenly the boat lurched in the air, flopped down on the water and stood still. The rope that had been tied to the sack of mackerel slackened over the stern, severed as neatly as though it had been cut with a knife. The water glowed for another moment and then dimmed, calm and smooth as though it had never been disrupted. I couldn’t hold it in any longer: I leaned over the side of the boat and vomited. I was so exhausted that I felt as though I were



falling into the water. Oren caught me from behind and waited patiently for me to finish throwing up.

“Are you all right, Pempheris?” He handed me a bottle of water. “Maybe it’s best this way.” He turned and looked towards where the shark had disappeared. “I don’t know if I would have had the guts to hoist it aboard all alone.”

“You’re not alone, you know.”

Oren turned his eyes back towards me. “You’re right.” He was silent for a few seconds. I sipped my water and waited, then his voice changed. “In the Unit, the only women I knew were the USO girls. Their job was just to pamper us back at the base. You’re different. Maybe together we could have caught it. Imagine what Yakov would have said!” His eyes sparkled. “Maybe we could have trained it to jump for food, you know, like your Dad used to do. For a show like that, people would come from as far as the north of Israel.”

It sounded great up until the point he mentioned Dad. “How do you know so much about my father?” I asked

angrily. “There’s no way you could have known about his act with the sharks.”

Even in the dark I could see him blush.

“Did Yakov tell you?” I demanded. “Do you guys talk about me behind my back?”

“I don’t talk about stuff like that with Yakov. No way... It’s not like that...”

“So what’s it like, exactly?”

“The snorkel. You can hear everything through the snorkel. When you went down to feed Charlie, I could hear your stories. The first time I walked by just by mistake, I swear...”

“What are you talking about?” I cut him off.

“Underwater everything sounds totally muffled. You couldn’t possibly have understood what I said there.”

“You’re right, under water voices are muffled. But people above the surface can hear just fine.”

I tried to remember everything I’d said to Charlie underwater.

“Why didn’t you tell me you could hear everything? Did you enjoy listening in on all my secrets?” I lost it. “You have no respect. I gathered that you’re a sexist pig a long time ago, but I didn’t know that you were a jerk too.”

“Pempheris, I’m really sorry. I know it’s no excuse, but your stories fascinated me. It was like listening in on a conversation between sisters. Nobody’s ever spoken to me like that...”

The blush was gone from his face. He couldn’t look me in the eye.

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

“But it was me you went out on your first dive with,” he was trying to smile. “And who do you think saved your skin that day back at Yakov’s office? Your wet footprints were everywhere. And why did you think I volunteered you to go out catching sharks, the very day after you cried to Charlie that you’re always left behind? Without me you’d still be stuck behind a tray of mackerel.”

“No one asked you to be my fairy godmother, granting my wishes. I don’t need any favors from you.”

We went back the rest of the way in silence. When we docked the boat, we found Yakov waiting on the beach. He listened quietly to Oren’s story about the tiger shark.

“You should have let it go at once. You know we’re not equipped to take in a shark of that size. You’re lucky it made the decision for you,” he said.

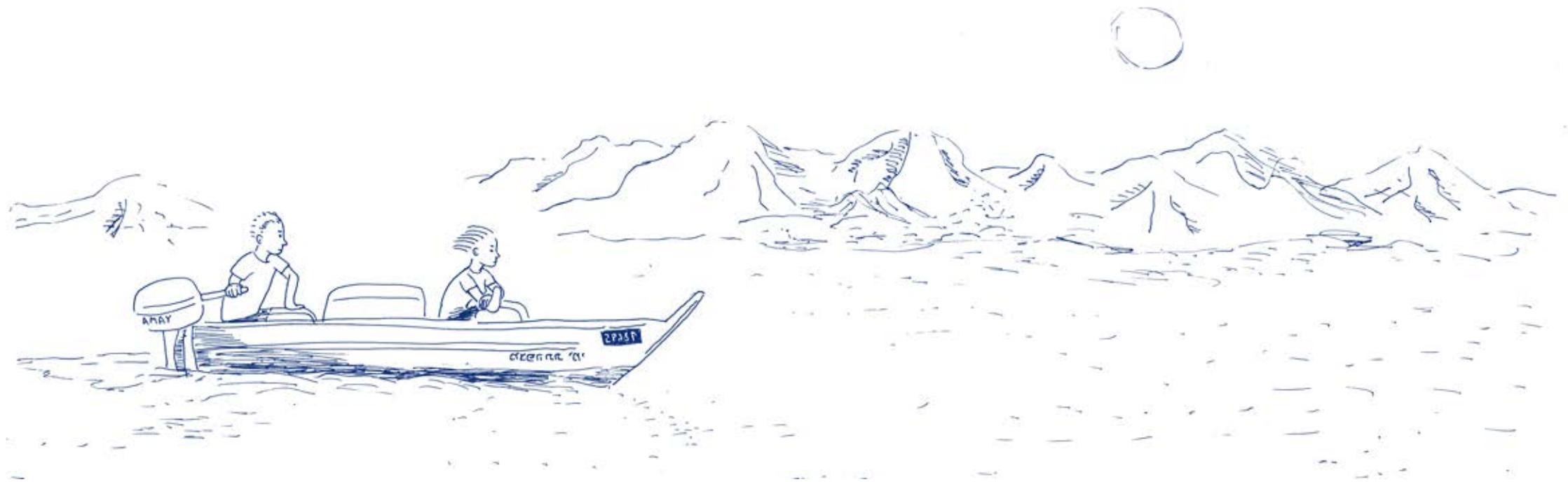
“Yes, I know, but I couldn’t cut the rope. I’d never come across a shark that big before. If I had managed to catch it...” Oren’s voice trailed off, and he sank in thought.

“What are you doing here at this time of night?” I asked Yakov.

“I heard noises from the Ring Pool. I’m sure the thief was there again tonight. But I’ve checked, there are no fish missing.”

So I was right! The thief was looking for Iddo tonight. Good thing I moved him to a different pool just in time. I ran over to the turtle pool. Between the little islands of turtle backs, I was able to discern Iddo’s polka-dotted wings pumping underwater. At least I was able to save him tonight!

“Let me stay here,” said Oren. “I’ll catch that thief.”



“You will go to bed and let David do his job. You took enough risks for one night with that tiger shark. I don’t want any more heroics around here.”

Oren slammed the crate of bait down on the floor. “If David had been doing his job to begin with, those fish wouldn’t have gone missing.”

All that night I couldn’t fall asleep. I kept trying to recreate my conversations with Charlie. I felt as though Oren had read my diary and intruded on my most private stories. What was he thinking to himself – that taking me out to gather seaweed for the turtles and hunting sharks at night would make up for what he’d done?

CORAL ISLAND

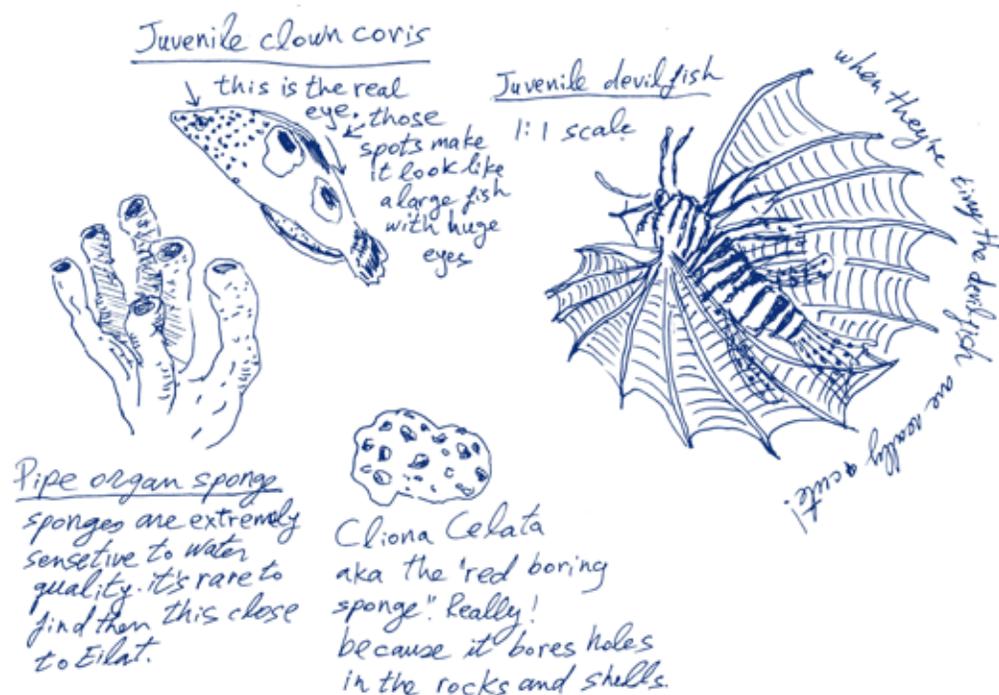
Yakov says that every once in a while it’s important to refresh the population in the tanks. So one morning we loaded our gear onto the van and drove to the harbor, where a boat from the university was waiting to leave for Coral Island.

As we drove south, the landscape became wild and desolate. I didn’t see a single house, not even a tent. Occasionally a car would drive by on the road winding between the mountains; it looked miniscule amidst the jagged, reddish mountains.

All at once Coral Island appeared before us, as though floating between the blue of the water and the blue of the sky. Its crumbling Crusader castle walls rose in a zigzag

toward the sky. We docked in the bay on the eastern shore of the island. Yakov assigned us jobs: unfortunately he teamed me up with Oren again. Lucky we don't need to do any talking underwater. At least this time he promised to stay close to me.

Together we were able to work and gather, without any incident, the following specimens:



We put them into large plastic containers, where the fish that Yakov and Alon had caught were already swimming. We sat on the deck and sipped the traditional afternoon tea.

Yakov poured in a third spoonful of sugar and stirred.

"You breathe well, Pempheris. I noticed you ran out of air at the same time as Pomacanthus, and he has years of experience on you."

"Back in the Unit" stirred his tea irritably.

"You know, your dad really loved this island."

I gulped down the steaming tea and waited for Yakov to go on.

"We used to come here lots on weekends, with a sleeping bag and some food, dive around all day and grill fish on the fire at night. Michael would stay in the water for hours after me. I don't know how he could breathe down there, like a fish. He taught me things I didn't know about this sea. Together we discovered the secret nesting grounds of the turtles, and together we once swam in the middle of a school of eagle rays out on a hunt."

A light breeze blew past, the boat turned its prow to the wind and the anchor rope grew taut.

"If Michael was so happy here, why did he leave?" grumbled Oren.

"I'm sure he had excellent reasons!" I snapped. There he goes butting in again.

"I also thought he was happy, overall, which was why I was so surprised when he left. Left just like that, to join some new marine park they were building in the Bahamas, without any advance notice. The things that people do sometimes, I just don't understand it."

“Dad’s in the Bahamas? Are you in touch with him?”

“No, Pempheris, I don’t know where Michael is now. For years I kept in touch with him, told him all about you girls, about Eva, about the sea, hoping he’d come back. After two years he did announce he was coming back. I even drove to pick him up from the airport. I was the last person standing in Arrivals before I realized he wasn’t coming after all. You mother was wiser; she didn’t even take the day off work. She told me he’d be a no show.”

I think I remember that day. It was the day the family picture from Eilat disappeared from the living room. Mom made a particularly fancy dinner, and lit candles all over the house. When we asked her what she was celebrating, she said that sometimes you need to know how to celebrate without any reason, but as far as I recall, that evening was not particularly joyous. The next morning the picture was gone.

Yakov interrupted my thoughts.

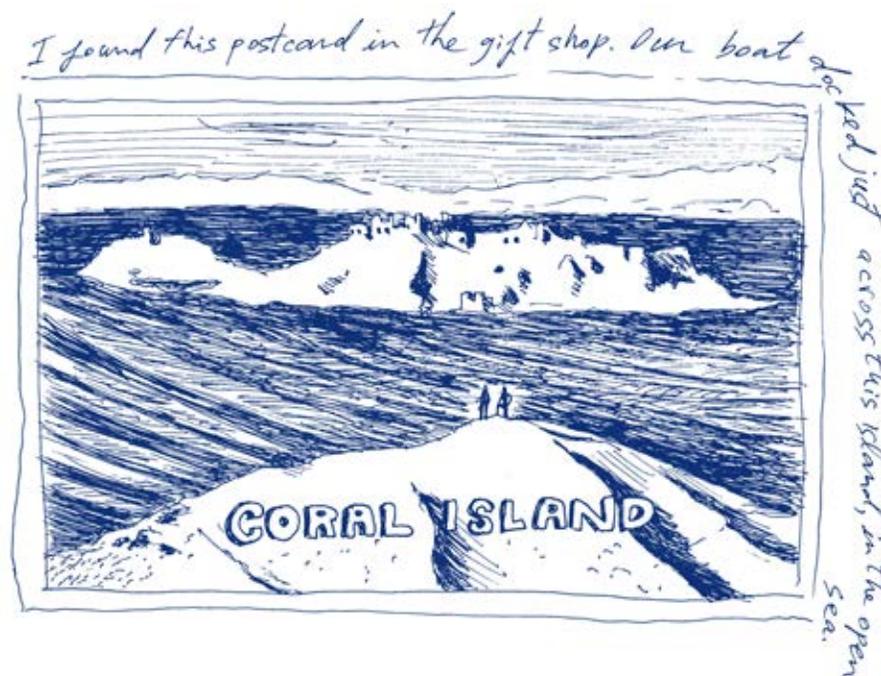
“I was sure Eva had told you girls. I’m really sorry, Pempheris. It’s time you knew what happened. After the Bahamas he transferred to another marine park in the Canary Islands, and then to one in the Seychelles. A few years ago I lost touch with him. I think what it comes down to is that Michael was better at connecting with creatures under water than he was with other humans.”

I wanted to yell that it wasn’t true, that he had a great connection with us girls, that he had a perfectly legitimate reason for leaving, that he had a mission, and that Yakov should stop hiding things from me; but instead I sat there sipping my tea and staring at the view. Luckily Oren also

remained silent, staring out at the ocean.

At sunset we sailed back to the Marine Park, but even the glow over the hills of Edom couldn’t cheer me up. Now, when I’m finally living here in Eilat, working as part of the scuba crew, Dad seems farther away than ever before. The memories of our summer together blur and twist, and I’m no longer sure I know that man I missed so much. This really wasn’t what I had in mind when I came here.

That night I called Mom. It’s high time she told me what really happened. I waited on the line for an hour, but it just rang and rang, I didn’t even get voicemail. She’s always on my case, suffocating me like an octopus wrapped around my neck, until I need her and then she’s gone!





DOING SUMS AT 40 METERS

It's not just me who's been in the doldrums these past few days: the thefts are weighing on our morning meetings like a sack of wet seaweed. In order to cheer us up Yakov suggested that we do something special: go down for a deepwater dive to collect rare fish. We took our gathering equipment and diving gear and drove out to the old oil port. On the beach, before we entered the water, Yakov stopped us.

"I know you're all experienced divers, but..." he paused for a moment to make sure we were all listening. "I want to remind you of a few rules about deep sea diving. The deeper we go, the higher the pressure, and the more oxygen we'll need for each breath. We'll only have three

minutes at forty meters to gather our fish. If we don't start to head back up after three minutes, we won't have enough oxygen to last us all the way up."

Oren sneered, but stopped himself when he saw the expression on my face. Since that night with the tiger shark, we hadn't exchanged a word. Yakov pointed to a small whiteboard attached to his belt.

"At forty meters down I'm going to give each one of you a simple math problem to solve. Anyone who can't solve it has to go straight back up. Am I clear?"

I remembered what we were taught in my diving course about nitrogen narcosis, or "raptures of the deep." The symptoms are confusion, visual impairment and disorientation. That's what Yakov was afraid of. I'd heard of divers succumbing to narcosis and disappearing at sea.

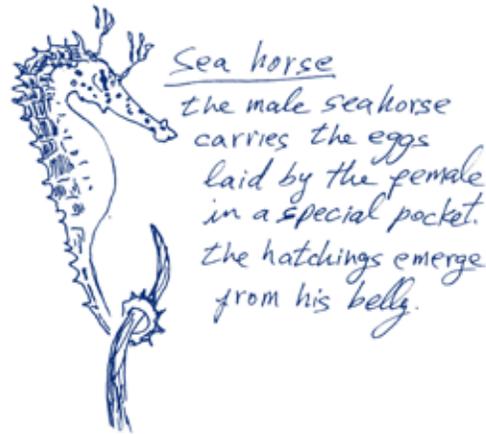
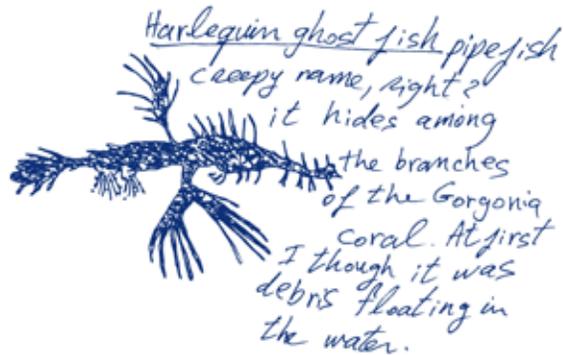
We entered the water beside one of the huge columns of the terminal. The column jutted out like the tentacle of some giant sea monster, all covered with soft corals and fan corals, and surrounded by schools of fish. The base of the column was lost in the dark, blue abyss. Once, the terminal had served for docking oil tankers, which was why it was dug so deep, but for years it had stood there unused, and the sea wrapped it with its own colorful wallpaper.

We dived straight down around the column, as fast as we could. The fish and corals changed shape the deeper we went, the light dimmed and turned blue, the gay colors of the reef faded out. The place seemed alien and forbidding. We lit our flashlights and kept sinking down. A lovely feeling washed over me, something between peace and

sleepiness. The descent seemed endless.

Suddenly I felt a hand grab onto me. Yakov fixed me with a stern look, and signaled something with his hands. Dimly I recalled that sign – keep level. We had arrived at forty meters. He handed me the whiteboard with a sum: three times three. I stared for a moment at the numbers, and with great effort wrote down the answer: nine.

Unlike me, Yakov looked as though he were born in the water. Here his sweeping arm gestures and big feet lent him a special grace. With tiny, precise movements he floated around the column, brandishing a small net to collect fish. I joined in the collecting. I had never seen such odd-looking fish.



Suddenly I noticed a large black form sinking downwards. It was Oren. He was diving rapidly to great depths: I guess he didn't learn anything from that time when we went collecting seaweed for the turtles. Yakov had said to stay level and stick together, and I had no intention of taking a foolish risk and swimming after him. I looked down. Oren had disappeared in the darkness of the deep, and only the air bubbles floating up signaled where he was now. Why was he leaving the group again? Why dive so deep? Something didn't add up.

I stopped thinking and dived after him. The light vanished quickly, and the pressure in my ears was intolerable. I reached out my arm and caught his shoulder, and turned him to face me. He looked strange. He was a bit cross-eyed, and grinning this goofy grin.

There wasn't a moment to spare. I had to get him out of the water. I hoped it wasn't already too late. I grabbed his buoyancy compensator, signaled to Yakov and started ascending slowly. The way down had taken fewer than five minutes, but I knew that on the way up we had to take it slowly, especially with the state Oren was in. I wasn't sure we'd have enough oxygen; we'd gone down to fifty meters, a depth that isn't even listed on the decompression charts. I had to climb up as slowly as possible, and make sure he didn't sink again.

We drifted together, face to face. I tried to glimpse a glimmer of recognition in his glassy eyes, anything to show he was snapping out of the daze that had overtaken him. Bit by bit Oren's gaze came back into focus, looking as though he was waking up from a deep sleep. He blinked

his eyes, fixed me with that familiar look of his green eyes and smiled. I didn't let go – it was still too dangerous. We floated facing each other, Oren looked amused. I took his pressure gauge and pointed at it, trying to explain what had happened. For a moment he looked confused, but then it sank in and he loosed himself from my grip and turned to swim alone. I signaled to him to stay together and not go too far. Each one of us had enough air to spend about half an hour more at ten meters depth. I signaled to him to stay level.

We kept swimming around the glowing columns. Oren looked busy gazing at the reef, and I was careful not to interrupt him. Only when both our air gauges pointed to reserves did we surface. We inflated our buoyancy controllers and swam to the shore without saying a word.

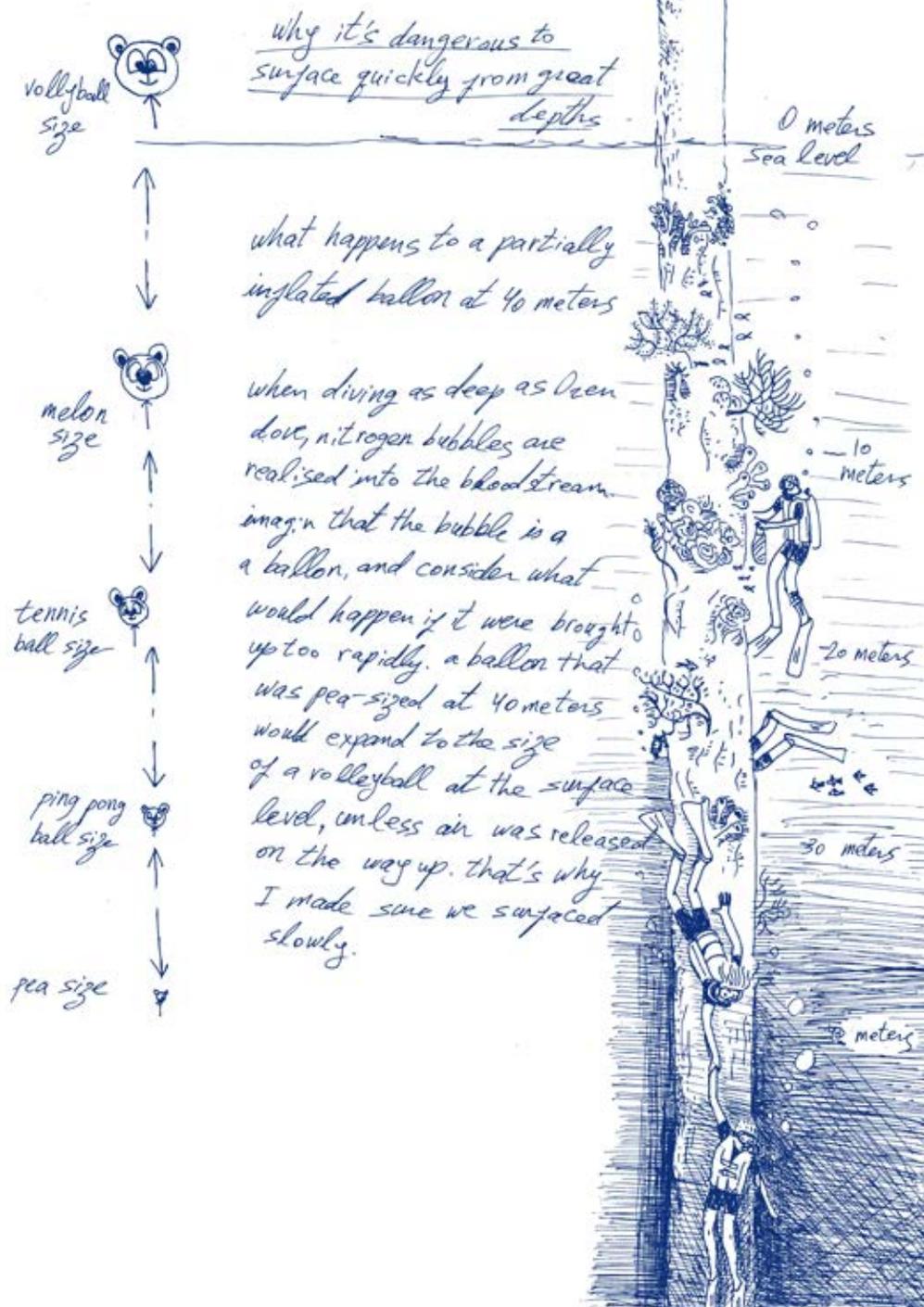
“Are you all right, Pomacanthus?” asked Yakov when we came out of the water. “For a moment down there I thought we'd lost you.”

“Never been better,” retorted Oren, and avoided my eyes.

When we reached the Marine Park, we put the fish into temporary tanks, until they could grow used to the change in pressure. The harlequin ghost pipefish I'd caught looked pretty pleased with the seaweed I'd arranged for him, but when I put the seahorse into a tank I noticed something wrong. It was floating on the surface, flapping its fins helplessly in a desperate attempt to dive down to the bottom.

“Quickly!” cried Yakov. “I need something sharp!”

He pulled a fish-shaped lapel pin from Alon's shirt collar – by some miracle Alon was already dressed – and



broke it in two. He brought the pointy end to what looked like a swollen balloon in the sea horse's abdomen. We all held our breaths. Yakov inserted the point into the sea horse's abdomen and pulled the pin back out. For a second nothing happened, but then we heard the hiss of escaping air. The balloon vanished and Yakov slipped the seahorse back into the water. It sank in the tank, fluttered its tiny fins for a moment and then wrapped its tail around a frond of seaweed and settled down comfortably.

"Its air-bladder was clogged," explained Yakov. "Like us, it also needs to decompress during a slow ascent. Otherwise it can blow up like a balloon and pop."

Alon seemed dejected by the loss of his pin. Yakov placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "It was a gift from Maya, wasn't it? I'm sure she'll forgive you. She's a boxfish, after all, and boxfishes always forgive." Alon didn't look particularly consoled.

Yakov gestured with his hand towards the row of tanks teeming with fish. "You did a great job. The sea gave us a nice crop!" He turned to me. "Pempheris, I'm particularly pleased with the part you played in all this. You didn't lose your head even at 40 meters under, and acted responsibly. More experienced divers than you can lose their wits in a situation like that."

I didn't dare meet Oren's eyes; he had turned bright red.

I wish I could stick Alon's pin in Oren, and let out all his air with a hiss. Why did he have to be so complicated? At night, on the boat, before I realized he had eavesdropped on my conversations with Charlie, I felt that he was softening towards me – but now that I'd saved him, it

seemed he would never forgive me. Owing someone something as important as your life – that's not easy, and I'm sure he would rather it were the other way around.

Oren mumbled something unintelligible and stalked off down the corridor. He said nothing to me, not even thank you.



THE BIRTHDAY SHARK



I completely forgot it's my birthday today. At the morning meeting there was a care package waiting for me on the table. Yakov and Alon admired Mom's cookies loudly, and polished off the fancy gourmet chocolates. Only I knew she'd made the chocolates, too. Other than that, the package contained her traditional rhyming birthday greeting, a funny letter from Mouse and a skipper's cap! How did she know I'd been dreaming of a hat just like it? Now I look like a true seafarer!

Before we went out for our nightly shark run, I transferred Iddo into Charlie's pool, just in case. As we loaded up the boat I sensed that tonight would be different – maybe because it was my birthday?

The sky was clear and full of stars, the winch rattled softly as we pulled in the empty hooks, one by one. I looked out to sea, and suddenly I realized that this year I hadn't received a mermaid, for the first time since Daddy left.

The rattle ceased. Yakov stopped the winch and pointed down at the water. A long dark shadow was snaking slowly around the rope – a shark! My heart started pounding,

filling in the silence left by the still motor.

"Pempheris," Yakov turned to look at me. "We don't have much time to get this shark back to the Marine Park alive. It may have been swimming in circles here for the past hour, if not more. I'm counting on you, you know what to do."

I turned on the water pump and signaled to Yakov that I was ready. The winch started turning again, slowly. I looked, entranced, at the shark's silhouette slowly expanding as it approached the surface.

"The stretcher, Pempheris. Don't daydream. As soon as the dorsal fin surfaces, get ready with the straps."

I laid the stretcher out along the center of the boat and prepared the straps for tying. It took a while, because my hands were shaking. Yakov stopped the winch.

"On the count of three," he said. I stooped next to Yakov, the safest spot on the boat, holding the bottom buckle.

"One, two, three!" The shark was hoisted out of the water and landed on the stretcher, amazed and furious. The other night, when the shark pool sprang a leak, I could keep my distance from the sharks. But now a meter-and-a-half-long shark occupied the entire boat. There was nowhere to escape. Yakov kept hold of the tail, but the front end of the shark was loose, thrashing desperately from side to side.

As if in a dream, I bent forward and tightened the strap closest to the tail. As soon as the tail was restrained, Yakov hopped from side to side in a strange dance, avoiding the jaws. He waited for his chance, then lunged forward at an amazing speed and tightened the strap

around the head of the defeated shark.

As to everything that happened from that point on – I still find it hard to believe. Maybe the hat Mom sent really did bring me luck. In order for the shark to be able to breathe until we reached the Marine Park, it needed to have water streaming through its mouth and gills. The water pump on the boat is attached to a thick plastic hose. It draws water from the sea and squirts it out through the hose. My job was to insert that hose into a maw full of teeth. In a dreamlike state I saw myself bringing the hose towards the jaws. The shark bit straight down on the hose, slicing off a clean section.

“Deeper in the throat!” yelled Yakov, quickly reeling in the remaining hooks from the water. Everything was happening so fast. Yakov cut off the end of the hook that was still stuck in the shark’s mouth, turned the boat around and made for shore at full speed. “The faster we make it to shore, the better chance of survival this sandbar shark has.”

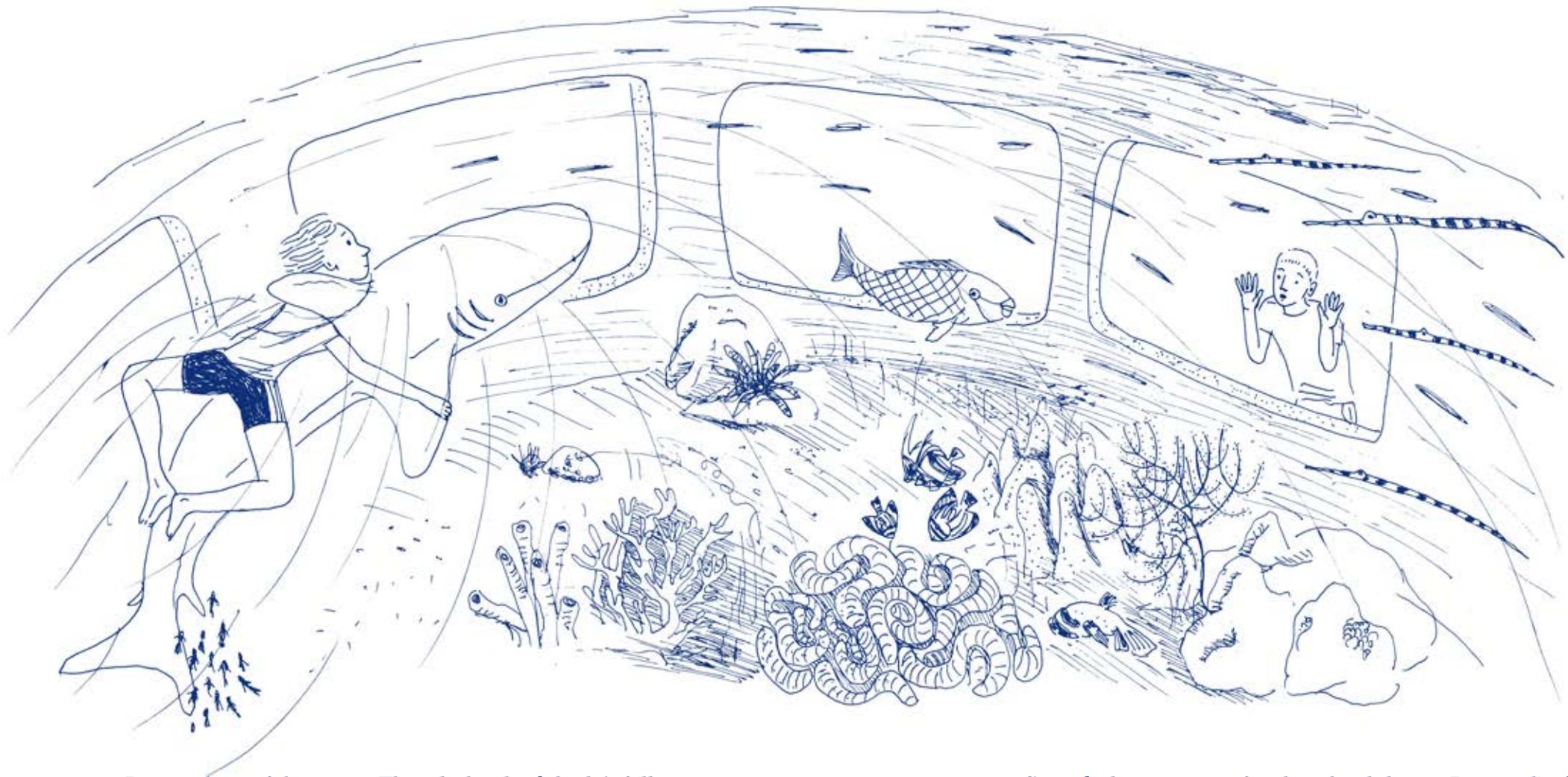
With one hand I held on to the side of the speeding boat, and with the other I kept pushing the hose into that gaping maw. The boat bounced like crazy over the waves. I felt a cold sweat coming over me, but I didn’t let go. I wouldn’t have forgiven myself if the shark had suffocated along the way.

We tied off at the dock, ran barefoot with the stretcher to the new pool, unbuckled the straps and slid the shark into the water. It sank like a stone and stayed there, motionless. Suddenly I realized it was drowning! I couldn’t believe it. We’d finally caught a shark successfully – I’d aspirated it

with my own hands, run with it from the shore to the pool as it squirmed on the stretcher – only to see it die?

I leapt into the water, swam quickly towards the large, prone body and caught hold of the jutting pectoral fins, pulling it under me in the dark water. I felt as though I were dragging a large weight, as rough and lifeless as old rubber. Just a short while ago it was a terrifying living creature, and now it flopped under me, helpless, and all I could do was keep on swimming. I thought this must be the closest to mouth to mouth resuscitation that one can do with a shark. Minutes passed. Suddenly, the still, heavy body filled with life. It squirmed forcefully, escaped my grasp and started swimming rapidly to the opposite side of the pool. It bumped into the glass panel, stopped for a moment and started swimming along the wall, looking for a way out.



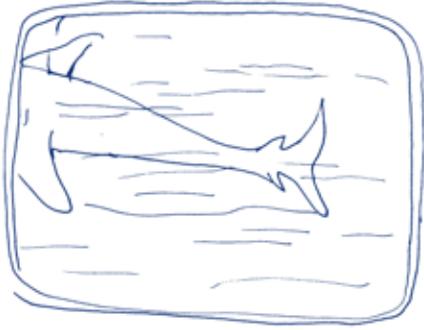


I jumped out of the water. Though the shark hadn't fully revived yet, and despite Yakov's claim that if I project enough confidence the shark will know it's in my territory, I still felt safer looking at it through the new, thick glass pane.

"It's a female," called Yakov happily. "We'll call her Gal, because we caught her on your birthday."

Some kids get ponies for their birthdays – I got a shark. "Happy birthday, Pempheris!" Oren stepped out of the shadows and looked at the pool. "She's a beauty."

In the dim light I saw he was holding something in his hand.



OREN

Even in Eilat the air is cool in the predawn hours, but I didn't feel the cold.

"Sorry about the packaging," said Oren, and handed me something wrapped in newspaper. "I didn't have a lot of time. Happy birthday!"

In the package was Oren's diving watch. The depth gauge showed -49 meters. I stood there, dripping wet, and didn't know what to say. He handed me a dry shirt.

"I left it set to the lowest depth I reached when we dived together," he explained, when he saw me looking surprised. "If you hadn't caught me in time, I'd be resting at the bottom of the bay." He hesitated a moment and went on, "Back in the unit' they give diving watches to people who've finished their training."

It took me a while to grasp that he was poking fun at himself, and then something came unstuck, and we both just started laughing. Oren fastened the watch on my wrist.

"Come, let's walk a bit, we can go see the sun rise over the Observatory. You're not tired, are you?"

We walked together along the dark pools and had a rousing conversation about the best ways to conserve air while diving, where best to collect snails for the eagle ray and what conditions are best for raising soft sponges. A blinding light directed into our eyes cut the conversation short.

"Who's there? Stop! Password!" called David the guard from the shadows, sounding startled. "What are you doing here at this hour?" he said, once he'd identified us. "I thought you were the nighttime thief."

"You've gotta be kidding," chuckled Oren. "A thief wouldn't make this much noise."

We rode back to the dorms on Oren's old motorbike. The sun came up all at once. I'd come a long way since arriving here.





A SOUTHERN WIND

That night, a wind started up from the south. Eilatians call it a “Souther” and drawl it out fondly, like it’s a nickname for their crazy aunt who’s in for a visit. They welcome it joyfully, because it signifies that autumn is coming. But to me it’s the enemy, for precisely the same reason. At the end of the summer I’d have to leave the Marine Park and go back home. Now, when I’d finally gotten to know Oren, and Yakov had started trusting me with real jobs around the park, it was my time to say goodbye. What would happen to Charlie and all my fish? Who would take care of Iddo?

Yakov called the dorms around midnight. “Pempheris, I need your help up at the park. Can you come at once? It’s urgent.” Alon and Oren were already waiting in the car

with Yakov, who looked worried.

“The Souther’s very dangerous for the park, none of the harbors in the Gulf are protected from Southern winds and waves. We need to take the boat out to sea, otherwise it could smash on the beach. And we’ve got to keep the filters clear of sand, or else water won’t reach the pools and the tanks. We have a long night ahead of us.”

When we reached the park, I heard a low growl as though an ancient monster had escaped from the underground dungeon in which it had been trapped.

I climbed on the bridge leading to the underwater observatory tower and turned my face south, into the wind. The sea, which was usually so blue and calm, had become foreign territory. Waves like tall black mountains rushed northward, crashing on the shore with a terrifying din. I had never seen the Red Sea like this.

Yakov hurried to assign duties. Alon would go out to sea with the boat and wait until the storm subsided. Oren and I were sent to clear out the deep sea filters, to allow a steady flow of clean water to the tanks, while Yakov ran through the corridors of the aquarium, opening and closing faucets, tightening knots and testing the water in the tanks.

We squeezed into the damp diving suits. Both of us made the exact same face. It isn’t pleasant, zipping into a clammy suit in the middle of the night; it sticks to you like wet seal skin. The wind was blowing salty spray into our eyes and ears, and the waves were crashing over our heads. We hurried to sink under the waves. Things weren’t much better down there. By the beam of the



flashlight I could see that the fish, big and small, were facing south and swimming with full force without making any progress. Once in a while, a particularly strong surge would toss them backward or forward like a giant swing set. I was also thrown about in the surges, gliding with the fish on the underwater currents.

Oren and I tied ourselves to each other with some flexible rubber tubing. During a dive like this, at night and during a storm, we really can't afford to lose each other.

He took hold of my hand, and we each put our spare hand on the pipe and started swimming along it into the dark waters. The pipe is anchored to the sea bottom so that it won't be damaged by the propellers of passing boats. We swam along it on the sandy bottom, surrounded by a sandstorm caused by the waves. The sandy plateau ended suddenly, and the bottom dropped into a murky abyss. We glided downward, enveloped in the cloud of sand. Even before we reached the filter we could hear it: a croaking gasp, like my straining to breath that time when I ran out of air. The inflow had stopped almost entirely, sand clogging the fine net.

We pulled out brushes and started clearing sand off the filter. It was totally dark around us, and we struggled to stay in place and work quickly. It was hard work, the currents buffeted us from side to side, and the sand swirling around us piled up to a great height near the



pipe opening. It took us several precious minutes to clear away all the sand. We swiveled the opening northward to prevent further clogging, and turned back. This time, I swam in the lead, blindly advancing along the pipe, like Ariadne following the thread out of the Minotaur's labyrinth. But halfway back the pipe disappeared, buried entirely under the sand. We turned our flashlights to the bottom, but the beams couldn't penetrate the opaque wall of swirling sand. We were lost. Oren tried to signal something – swim up. But which way was up? I started panicking in earnest.

When you dive in daylight hours you can see the light shining above you, and even during night dives you can see the light of the stars. But now, the moment we left the bottom, I completely lost my sense of direction. I had no idea which way was up and which way was down. I thought of the tiger shark that Oren and I had almost caught. It was somewhere in the water right now, searching for prey. I had to get out of here right now! I had to get my head above water, no matter how far away from shore we were. Panic lodged in my throat, making it hard to breathe. I started swimming upward rapidly, dragging Oren after me like a weight. But Oren wouldn't budge.

I turned to him and tried to motion with my flashlight that he should follow me, and hurry. Oren pulled me towards him and shone his flashlight on his mask. He was trying to say something. He signaled towards the opposite direction from the way I was swimming. Was I swimming downwards? Impossible. He must be mistaken. I pulled at him again and tried to continue swimming up. We



struggled like that for a while, tied to each other by that awful rubber tubing, pulling in opposite directions. Until I caved in. The struggle and the fear had worn me out. I felt paralyzed. It was clear to me that we wouldn't get out of this alive.

Oren hugged my shoulders, lifted up my air gauge and shone his light on it. It showed 30. I had to relax or I would run out of air. I shut my eyes and tried to focus. I saw Mom and Mouse, sitting in the kitchen, on a wintry Saturday morning in Jerusalem. I had just gotten out of bed, the last one up, as usual. Mom was reading the paper, Mouse was buried in a book, and breakfast was laid out for me on the table. I could almost smell Mom's heavenly pancakes. They both lifted their heads and smiled at me forgivingly when they saw me step out of my bedroom still dressed in pajamas. I stretched, my breath eased, and I felt like I was floating. Mom lifted her eyes from the paper. "Lovely to see you, Gal. We waited for you. Let's eat." She tucked her reading glasses into their case, and the three of us sat at the table. For several minutes the only sounds were of clinking cutlery and smacking lips. It was raining outside, but indoors the stove was radiating a pleasant warmth.

Then my head burst out of the water, and salty spray splashed on my mask. Oren let go of me and looked around. The wind was blowing towards us and waves were hitting our faces, tall and choppy. In the valley between the waves we couldn't see a thing. Only when we climbed to the crest of the wave could we make out a chain of tall, unfamiliar mountains far ahead of us. I had no idea where

we were. I spun in the water, bobbing up and down on the waves as if on a trampoline, trying to recognize a familiar stretch of shore. Dimly, between the waves, I made out the distant lights of the Marine Park. I realized that we had swum towards Jordan!

We inflated our buoyancy controllers and swam back to the shore. Or rather, we drifted back, because I had no energy to swim. Luckily the souther was pushing at our backs and blowing us in the right direction. We floated like a pair of awkward turtles towards the familiar lights.

BREAKFAST

We looked out to sea. The wind had abated and morning was dawning.

“What did you think about, out there at sea, that helped you relax so much?” asked Oren as we rinsed out our diving equipment. “Wherever you went to, I wish I could be there now.”

“It’s a bit of a ways,” I answered, and hung out my gear to dry. “I was thinking of Saturday breakfast back home in Jerusalem.”

“I’m starving. Let’s go have breakfast at the harbor.”

“Awesome idea.” I was ravenous too.

When we arrived, we saw that many of the yachts had sailed out on time, but those that stayed behind had been pushed up on the pier by the waves and stranded in odd

positions, like the carcasses of beached whales. We ordered two breakfasts. We tore into two basketfuls of bread and butter without saying a word, even before the eggs arrived. Boatmen were gathering at the harbor to assess the damages. They clustered around the stranded boats, giving advice and moralizing, happy it wasn’t their boat up on the pier.

“Have you found out anything new about your dad?” asked Oren.

“Not a whole lot,” I answered. “Truth is, I’m not sure I want to know any more. After what Yakov told us about him, I realized he wasn’t exactly the father I had made him out to be. All these years I’d carried around such a different image of him. When we returned to Jerusalem, Mom would tell us stories about him at bedtime: how all



the fish swam after him in a trance, how he would talk to them. Mom's stories got mixed up with the memories from this place. All these years I couldn't wait to come back here, to relive that summer at the Marine Park."

"Well, I'm glad she did that, or we wouldn't have met." Oren smiled. "And it sounds like you caught your love for the sea from listening to her stories." It was odd to think that way about Mom, but it was true.

"She told us those stories about him only in the beginning. Later she wouldn't talk about him at all. Why didn't she explain to us that he was the one who left? Why did she leave us with the dream that he'd return?"

"I don't know, Pempheris, but I'm sure she wanted to protect you. Maybe she thought that the truth would hurt more."

Suddenly his words clicked into place. Mama Hen, we always called her, and maybe that was what she did: kept us under her wings to protect us, preserved our rosy memories of Dad. Actually, come to think of it, it couldn't have been easy for her that I ran away to this place, to meet people who knew Dad; that I was finally finding out the truth.

"And who sent me the mermaids? And what's up with that uniform from the snapshot? It's like he's still hanging around here. There's got to be more to the story." I fought my urge to tell Oren about the note.

"I didn't see the snapshot, but I'm sure there's a simple explanation for everything." Oren placed his hand on mine. "I'm sure he had a very good reason for disappearing the way he did. Otherwise I really can't understand how

he could leave a girl like you. What kind of person would do that?"

I shut my eyes. I could picture Mom and Mouse standing at the Central Bus Station in Jerusalem, waiting for me with a hand-lettered sign: "Welcome home Gal!" They'd come up to the window of the bus, and Mom would place her hand on my head. "I'm so glad to have you back home!" she'd say.

I'd be home in a week.



THE THIEF IN THE NIGHT

Today Oren assisted me with the feedings. I was surprised to discover how good he was at the job.

“You’re a great mother,” I complimented him.

“I know, but don’t tell Yakov, or he’ll stick me with this job after you leave.” That would have been hilarious: Oren the feeder.

“Promise me something.”

“Okay.”

“After I go home, look after Iddo, okay?”

“Pempheris, you’re acting weird.”

“He can’t stay in the same pool for more than a few days. I can’t explain why. You need to transfer him every few days. Just do it, for me.”

“That’s a strange request. Do you know something about what might happen to Iddo? I’ll do it if you explain why.”

I stayed silent.

“Don’t you trust me?” Oren stood up. “I hope whoever you’re protecting is worth it.” He turned and walked towards the turtle pool.

So now I was going to lose Oren. And for whose sake? Who WAS I protecting?

“Wait,” I cried out to him. “I can’t tell you here.”

“Let’s take the boat out. No one will look for us there.”

The fishing boat was anchored in the shallow water, a short way out from shore. We lay down on the benches, hidden from view, rocking gently on the waves.

Oren knew most of the details already, thanks to the snorkel, but there were a few things that were new to him.



I told him how I had found the snapshot of Dad in uniform in Yakov's room, about the argument my parents had the night before we left Eilat, about the uniform I had found in the locker, about the note with the list of fish, about the night when I figured out its significance. I explained how once every few days I'd been transferring Iddo into a new pool.

"I'm afraid that it might have something to do with Dad, and I'm afraid to find out who the thief really is."

"Pempheris, you've got to find out who it is before you go. You can't leave like this. And anyway I'm sure it's not your Dad. Maybe he wasn't father of the year, but he doesn't strike me as a thief. Fish taken out of the Red Sea rarely survive more than a week. It's hard to recreate the conditions we have here. Your dad wouldn't have gotten caught up in something like that, not according to everything I've heard about him."

"I don't know who he is any more."

"Let's stay here tonight. If you're right, the thief will come back looking for Iddo."

Oren waded to shore and came back carrying pastries, chocolate milk and ice-cream bars from the cafeteria. "I asked for pancakes, but they don't make them this late in the day."

Night was falling. A cool breeze started up at last. We stretched out among the remains of our fancy dinner and watched the emptying beach. The last visitors were leaving the Marine Park. Then it was quiet. The moon rose over the hills of Edom, and the Observatory went dark. We stepped out of the boat and waded in the shallow water to

the shore.

"You're shivering." Oren hugged me. "We'll catch the thief, and it won't be your Dad. You'll see."

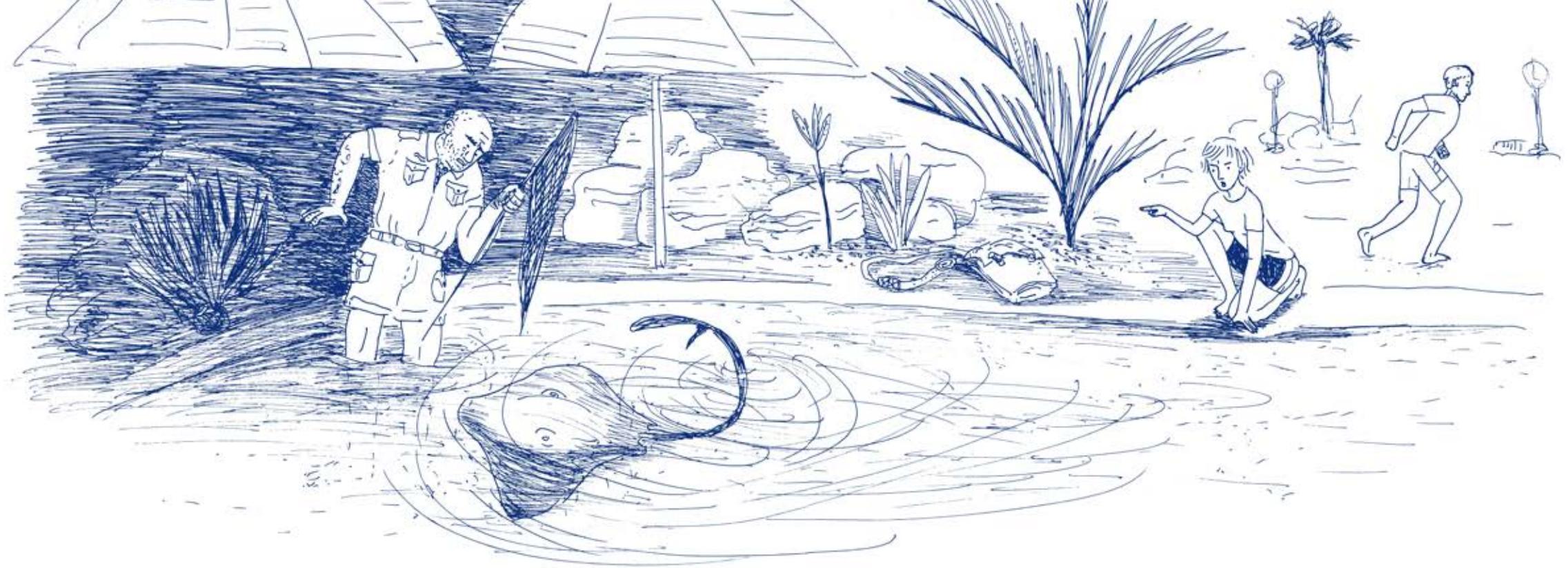
We walked around the Ring Pool, slowly. We passed through the unlit corridors and over the Shark Pool, and ran into nobody, not even the guard.

"I have a feeling that the thief hangs around the Marine Park during the day, gathering information. Probably not every day, that would arouse suspicion, but he probably already knows that I've moved Iddo into the Turtle Pool," I whispered to Oren. "A few days ago he was looking in the Ring Pool. This time he'll come to the Turtle Pool. Unless he already knows I've moved him to Charlie's pool... I'll wait by the Turtle Pool, and you go over to Charlie's pool," I suggested.

"I'm not splitting up," Oren said firmly. "He could be dangerous. We'll wait by the Turtle Pool and see what happens."

We hid behind the pumps and prepared ourselves for a stakeout. Once in a while a turtle head would surface to breathe in some air, but nothing else disturbed the calm of the night. I leaned my head on Oren's shoulder and shut my eyes. It was a chilly evening. The breeze we'd felt earlier that night grew stronger, blowing steadily from the east, bringing in fresh air from the sea. The turtles flopped elegantly in the water, and other than the swish of their fins, not a sound was heard.

I don't know how long I slept. I woke up suddenly when I heard the splash of water and a muffled yelp from the direction of Charlie's pool. We had bet wrong! The thief



was more clued in than I'd imagined. He knew that I'd transferred Iddo to a new pool. I hoped we weren't too late – don't let anything happen to Iddo!

Oren was on his feet in a second, racing towards the pool from which we'd heard the noise. We arrived breathless. In the middle of the pool stood the frozen figure of a man, holding a large net and staring at a point in the water ahead of him.

He looked familiar; it was hard to see in the dim nighttime lighting, but I knew for certain I had met him before. He was wearing a uniform – Dad's uniform! Oren came to his senses first.

“How could you, David! You've been working here for seven years – Yakov trusted you!”

David stayed frozen in the same position, and made no attempt to run away.

“That uniform – where did you get it?” I asked.

He didn't seem to hear us, only stared, hypnotized, at a spot in the water about a meter ahead of him.

“Were you working here seven years ago? Did you know my Dad?”

“Get out of the water. You can't escape. At least have the sense to come with us, without any funny business.” Oren walked around the pool and stood on the bridge looking

out over the water.

“Please, I beg you. Take him away from here – he’s going to kill me!”

“Michael, my Dad – did you know him?” I persisted. “He was here on the scuba crew seven years ago. You’re wearing his uniform. You must have known him.”

“Michael’s your father?” He didn’t even turn to look at me. “I’m sorry I didn’t know before. Sure, sure I knew him, we were good friends. So you’re Michael’s girl. We used to go sailing together. An excellent fellow. He was always up for an outing, whatever the weather, whatever the hour. We were like brothers. If you’re his daughter, you’ve got to help me. I heard you’re like your father; you sing to the fish. Take him away from here. Michael will never forgive you if you don’t help me.”

“Have you no shame? Asking us to help you? Man up and get out of the water.”

“I can’t – he’ll kill me.”

I looked where David was staring, at the bottom of the pool, across from his feet. I saw Charlie. His tail was arched up in attack position and he was moving skittishly from side to side. Above him a dark, spotted form flitted by – Iddo! He hadn’t harmed him yet.

“I’m off to alert the police,” Oren ran towards the offices. “Keep him standing there, it shouldn’t be too hard.”

David shot a look at Charlie and blinked nervously. “Michael’s daughter, you say. He wouldn’t have turned me in to the police...”

“And that uniform, where did you get it?” I ignored his pleading.

“He gave it to me. This was his job, you know. He was the night watchman before me. When he left for the Bahamas, I inherited his job, and this uniform. Tell you the truth, he was never cut out for a uniform.”

“Dad worked on the scuba crew,” I said. “You’re confusing him with someone else.”

“I’ll tell you whatever you want to hear, just take him away from here.”

“I want you to tell me the truth.”

“I’ll tell you the truth. Just get me outta here. Promise me you’ll do that. I don’t want to die like this, I know what stingray venom can do... please, promise you’ll take him away from here!”

“If you stay still he won’t attack you.” I bent over the edge of the pool and called out to Charlie under the water. He turned towards me, but stayed dangerously near David.

“I’m listening. He won’t attack you now, as long as you don’t move.”

“Michael started out on the scuba crew,” David voice was wheezy with panic, and he wouldn’t take his eyes off Charlie. “But he wasn’t cut out for orderly jobs like that, he needed his freedom. Yakov made him the night watchman, after he found out what he’d been up to with the sharks. I thought it was more up his alley... night shifts... that way we could go out together in the mornings, fishing. A true seaman, your Dad. He would have been understanding about my hobby. He loved the fishes too... maybe a little bit differently than I do...”

“They’ll be here in a minute,” Oren came back and stood

at my side.

“If you’re such a good friend of his, then you must know where he is now. Do you have his address? Phone number? Email?”

“Finding Michael is like looking for a fish in the ocean. One day he’s here, the next he’s there. Even if you find him – tomorrow he’ll be gone again. When he got that offer to work in the Bahamas, there was a big argument. Your mother wouldn’t go with him, she wanted you all to stay here, together. One day he got on a plane and left, alone.”

“That may be true, but after the Bahamas he had to have come back here, I know it. He sent me presents for my birthday, from here. You’re lying.”

“Presents, from Michael? That doesn’t sound like him. I know Yakov stayed in touch with your mother all these years. Now maybe you could help me please? I told you everything I know.”

How could I have been such a fool? All this time I was waiting for Dad to show up with his glowing fishbowl, to come back home with me, lighting up the whole street. I was sure that then he’d sit down in the living room and explain how he’d had no choice about leaving, how he wasn’t allowed any contact with us, how it broke his heart, too, but that now he was back forever. Little girl dreams. From the day we returned to Jerusalem, I’d been waiting for the opportunity to come back and find him. I wanted to be just like him: tanned, free and close to nature. I kept my happy memories stopped up in a bottle, and now that bottle had shattered. There was nothing mysterious about his disappearance, no heroic tale. Dad had never

reared sponges in dark tanks, he hadn’t rescued an injured stingray from death, or collected sharks from the sea. I did all that, me, on my own. And where had he been all these years?

“What a gem of a guy, leaving a wife and two young daughters to go off to the Bahamas,” I said, “and not even bothering to write. Not a single postcard. And that’s your best friend...” I felt like I was about to cry.

I pulled away from Oren, stood at the end of the pool and looked out to sea. All the years I was waiting for him to come back, all the stories I’d made up about his life, all a lie. A stupid fantasy. He’d simply abandoned us, left the three of us without a trace. How many times had I dreamt of that summer, of the last time we had all lived together as a family. This was the man I had dreamt of being like, the one for whom I had run away from home to work here at the Marine Park. I always felt he was close to me, guarding me. That man never existed. Mom was right whenever she said to us “it’s just us three girls”. There had never been anyone else. Just Mom, Mouse and me.

Oren hugged me. “Pempheris,” he started saying, and I burst into tears.

“He moved!” David’s yelp brought me back to reality.

“Get him out of here! I’ll give you anything, I have his address, I have his email, just help me, that animal’s gonna do me in. I swear I won’t run away; just get that sting away from me!”

Charlie was nervous, he swam around David faster and faster.

“Pempheris, this is a dangerous situation, he could

attack any minute. Even a thief doesn't deserve that kind of punishment. Only you can help him. But be careful. And you, no funny business, you hear me?"

"Whatever you say, just make her take that monster away!"

I stepped into the warm water at the far end of the pool and started singing. I'd never been in the pool with Charlie at night. It was hard to gauge distances in the dark. I couldn't see Charlie on the other side, but I knew he was there, and I knew he was scared. Even the nearby walls of the pool were invisible in the dark. I felt almost blind.

I kept singing. Just don't let him surprise me from behind. I made for the wall. I groped around me. Everything was black, I could hardly see my own hand. Suddenly I saw a large form approach rapidly: Charlie! I didn't even have a piece of shrimp to feed him. Just don't let him attack me. He looked so different, his movements sharp and choppy. Yakov always went on about how you can't train wild animals, you can only befriend them; they'll always remain true to their natures, and Charlie felt threatened. A strange man had entered his territory. He came up to me and with his accustomed maneuver, exposed his mouth to receive a shrimp. I sighed in relief.

"I have nothing for you," I stroked the smooth belly. Charlie slid down to my feet and swam restlessly around me.

"Pempheris!" I heard Oren shouting. Why was he shouting? He could startle Charlie. I reared my head out of the water.

"He ran away, the bastard. Took the opportunity and

hopped over the wall."

"Get him! What are you waiting for?"

"First get out of the water. Charlie's in no mood for chitchat tonight." He held his hand out to me and pulled me out of the water.

"I'll inform the police. They're on their way here anyway – maybe they'll pick him up on the road." And he was off again, headed towards the office. I sat at the edge of the pool, staring. A soft nose pushed against my foot, looking for food. Iddo. At least we had rescued him.

David's bag rolled on its side. He must have left it behind when he ran. Its contents spilled out: a plaid shirt, fish hooks and some newspaper clippings. One of them caught my eye:



[this section should look like a newspaper clipping]

Greenpeace: Japanese Whaling Season Opens

Jonathan Barazani

Every year, Japanese ships sail to the Antarctic Ocean to capture hundreds of whales, purportedly for research. Australia, New Zealand and organizations such as Greenpeace claim that, in actual fact, these are commercial whaling ships, operating in violation of international treaties.

The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is not satisfied with passive protest, and has promised the whalers: "We will be your nightmare." There's an Israeli connection: Michael Hoffman, captain of the activists' flagship, "Gal." Hoffman has released a statement to the press, saying: "We'll hound the whaling ships until they stop the horrific and illegal massacre of large whales in the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary."

Last year, activists were able to reduce whaling rates significantly, and saved hundreds of endangered whales.

Petitions against whaling in Iceland

Iceland's Minister of Fisheries stated recently that the moratorium on whaling will be lifted in his country, despite international agreements signed by Iceland in 1986. Iceland dropped out of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1992, and upon attempting to return in 2002, stated reservations to the paragraph forbidding commercial trade in the giant mammals, who despite their massive size are incapable of defending themselves against whalers. Thus Iceland joined the ranks of Norway

and Japan, countries that continue to support a whaling industry. Upon the announcement from Iceland's Minister of Fisheries, global ecological organizations began distributing petitions aimed at saving the whales.]

"What's that?" Oren was by my side again. "Let me see." He read quickly.

"At least now we know he had nothing to do with the thefts."

"He's not a thief, but I guess whales in the Antarctic are more important to him than his daughters," I said.

"Did you notice the name of his boat?"

"I'd rather he had sent a letter."

Oren wrapped his arms around me. "You can write to him, now that you know where he is. He'll probably be glad to hear about your life at the Marine Park. You could reach out to him."

"The one I really miss is Mom. She's the one I want to talk to. Tomorrow I'm going home. The Antarctic Ocean can wait."

FAREWELL TO CHARLIE

“You saved lives last night,” Yakov opened the morning meeting with a dramatic statement. “Iddo’s life, as well as David’s. I’m proud of you, Pempheris. You acted bravely!”

“It was my fault he got away.”

“I wouldn’t wish for anyone to be stung by a stingray. And I’m sure they’ll catch him. I’ve got a surprise for you.” He opened up a large cooler, covered all over with decals and writing. Inside the cooler, in separate compartments, swam a seahorse, an electric ray, an orange soldier fish and a Devil Firefish.

“The police is on their trail. A network smuggling rare fish abroad. This delivery was caught en route to the airfield; who knows if they would have survived the flight. David was working for them. He won’t get far.”

“Pempheris,” he turned to me. “There’s one more thing we need to do before you go. Charlie’s behavior last night



proved that he’s capable of defending himself. He doesn’t need us any more – we should release him back to the sea.”

I went to the pool for one last feeding. Charlie recognized me at once, flew over to me softly and exposed his white belly. Not a trace was left of his jumpiness last night.

“Be careful, out there in the open sea,” I placed a juicy shrimp in the round mouth. “I bet you’ll miss my chatter out there in the deep. I’ll come back to visit you, I promise.” Charlie understood. He caressed my face fondly with his smooth wings, and floated around me like a besotted flamenco dancer.

“We’re ready,” I said to Yakov, who was waiting outside. We dunked a large tub in the water and lured Charlie into it. It seemed he understood, or perhaps he had just learned to trust us. Even when we hoisted the tub up and loaded it on the cart, he showed no sign of distress. We drove the tub to the shore, and I sang Charlie our song, Lyushinka, one last time.

“I really think he’ll be better off in the wild,” said Yakov. “We have no room for such a large ray here at the Marine Park.” The tub sank in the water. Charlie hesitated for a moment, hovering over the tub like chocolate icing. I stroked the smooth, dark back.

“Go on,” I whispered. “Courage!”

A tremor ran through the flexible wings, and in one swift motion Charlie slid down the steep sandy incline. I stuck my head in the water and called after him: “boo bah bah bee, bee bee boo!” Meaning, “Goodbye Charlie, see you soon!”



MAMA HEN

Tomorrow morning I'll get on the bus and say goodbye to everything I love here at the Marine Park. Now, when I've finally found out that Oren is really a sea urchin – prickly on the outside, sweet on the inside – now is when I have to go.

On the beach, where our adventurous fishing boat was docked, the staff members were gathering driftwood for a giant bonfire. All the staff would come out after sunset for my goodbye party. Oren and I passed the time at the Marine Park, meandering one last time between the different pools. We stopped outside the Shark Pool. Gal the sandbar shark swam up to us from the depths of the dark water. Oren followed her with his eyes.

“Won't you miss the sea, and Eilat?”

“I always miss this sea and Eilat,” I said, and turned to him. “But now I'll miss you, too.”

“I'll be waiting here for you, you know.” Oren smiled and hugged me. The warm wind enveloped us and drowned out the noise from the people on the beach. The pools sparkled, quiet and calm, caressed by the breeze.

When we reached the bonfire we found everybody already waiting for us. Yakov raised a glass of juice and called: “To Pempheris: you recite Latin names as well as any member of the team, you've learned how to save a drowning shark, how to coax a reluctant stingray to eat, and how to part from it and release it back into the wild. I'm sure all these skills will be useful to you in life. I wish you many more adventures, and I hope that on every birthday you can catch a shark!” Yakov stood up and proclaimed enthusiastically, “every octopus finds its corner, every coral a place to grow, and I know that you too will find your reef!”

I went over to Yakov and handed him a giftwrapped parcel. “This is for you,” I said. He opened the wrapping carefully and took out a small mermaid, made of shells.

“Pempheris, I do love these figurines, but...”

“It's a farewell gift,” I cut him off. “They made me very happy when I was small, but you can stop sending them now. I've grown up.”

Yakov smiled and wrapped the gift back up carefully. “I wish I could have done more,” he sighed.

“I know,” I said.

Oren grabbed my hand and led me to the edge of the

beach. “You’ll be back, right?” He asked.

I didn’t answer. The thought of being away from him hurt, but at that moment I could only think of going home, to Mouse and to Mom. Everyone sat down to eat, and I felt a little like that octopus that was afraid to leave its bucket, hanging on to the sides and looking out to the open sea. Maybe the name Pempheris, shy little big-eyed cave fish, was a fitting name for me after all?

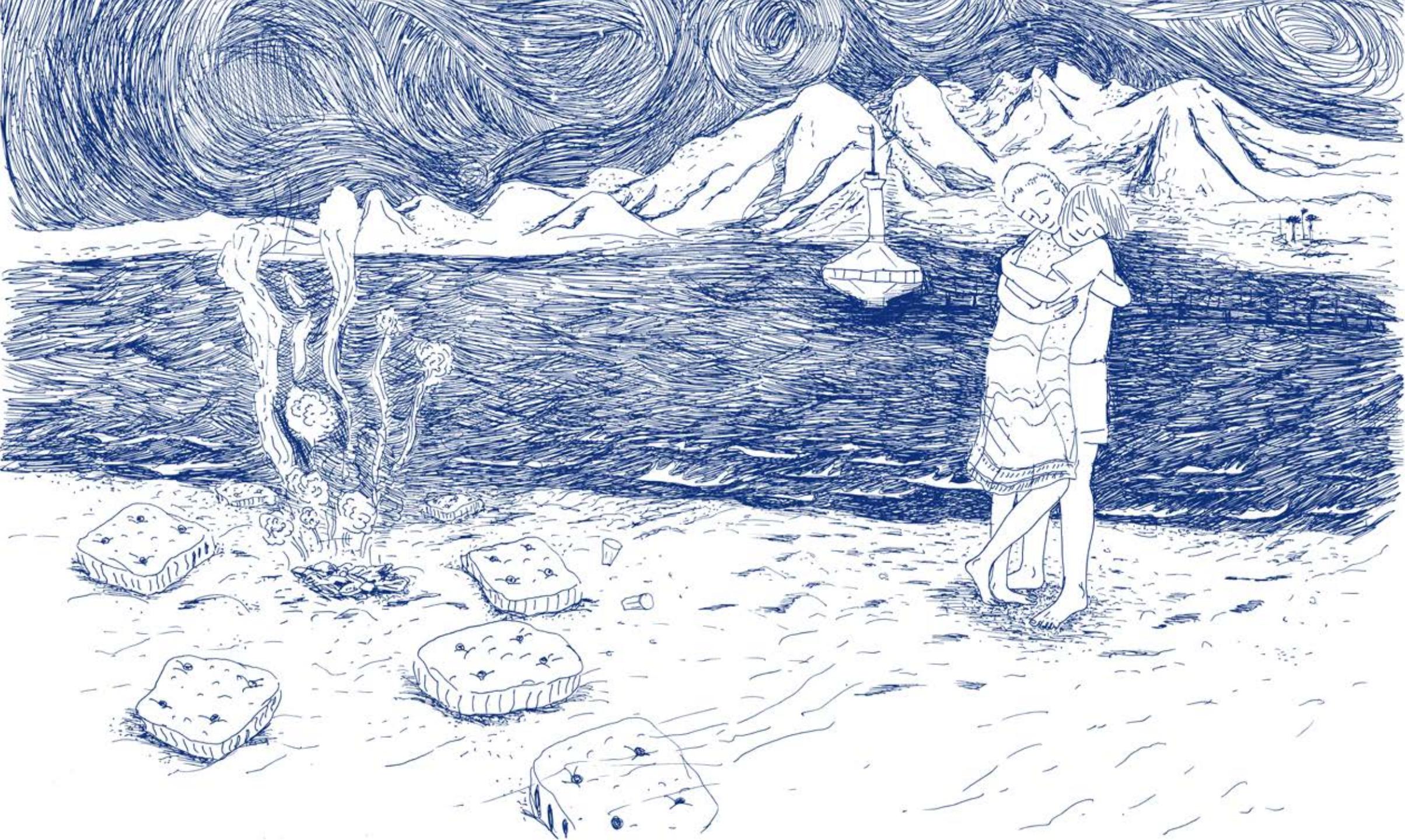
I left Oren’s side and entered the sea. The water was warm, with only a light breeze to serve as a reminder that summer was ending. Tomorrow we’d be together again, we three girls. I had so much to tell them!

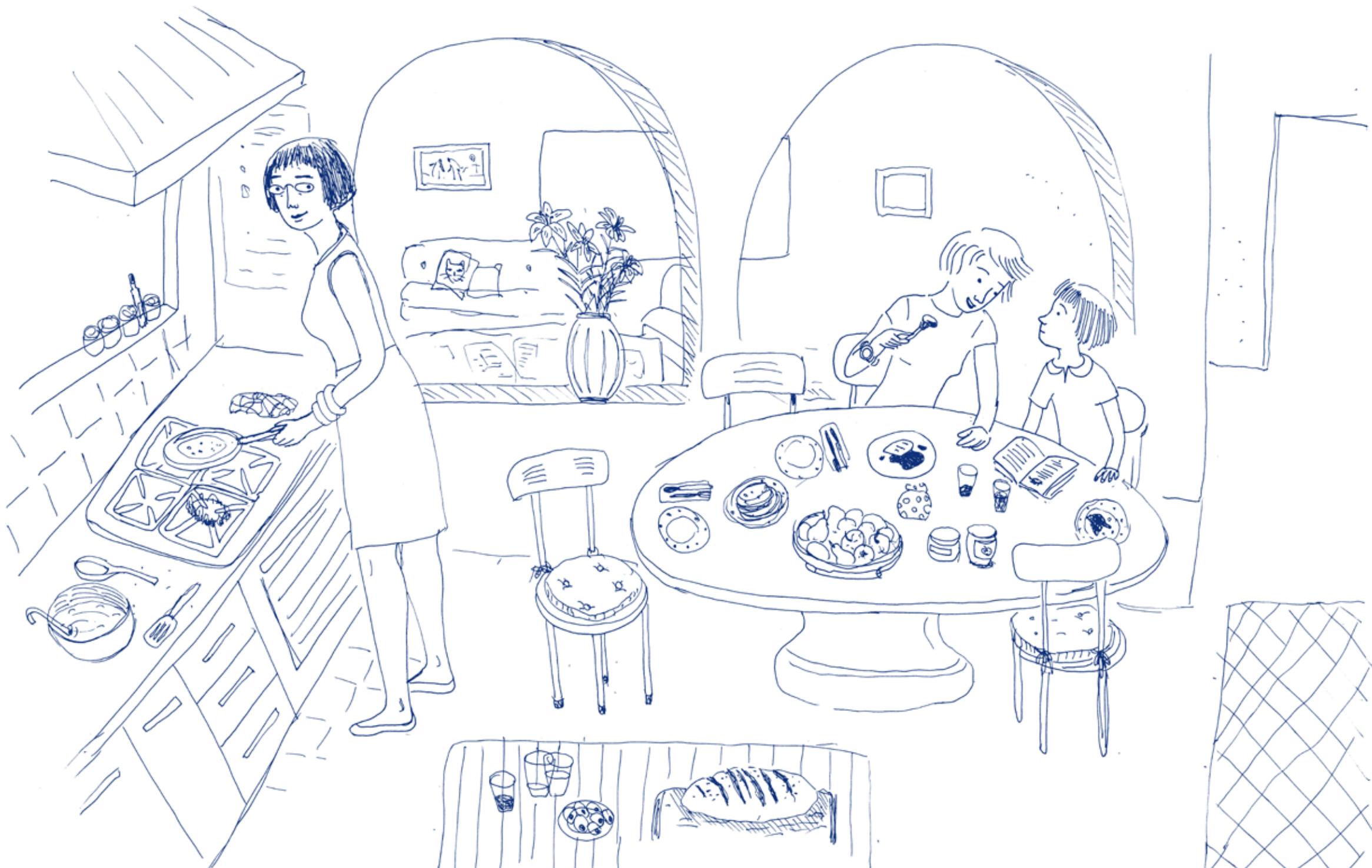
I didn’t dare swim far from the shore. The image of that tiger shark would stay with me for a long time. Around me, a glowing cloud of plankton swirled with my every move. The sky and the sea were one continuous plane, dotted with light. How many stories take place beneath that light-spangled blanket. I’d seen so very little. Not far from me in the shallow water, I saw the flash of a fin. Maybe Charlie had come back to say goodbye.

When I stepped out of the water it was late, and chilly. The bonfire was out, and most of the people had left. Only Oren was waiting for me on the beach, holding out a large towel.

“Just what I was missing, another Mama Hen.” I laughed.

“Actually, I think that’s exactly what you’ve been missing.”





AUTHOR'S NOTE

Many years ago I worked on the scuba crew of the Underwater Observatory Marine Park in Eilat, for one magical summer. During that time I learned to love the sea and the vast variety of creatures living in it. Like Gal, I was also assigned to work as the feeder. I learned what each fish prefers to eat and struggled to remember their Latin names, while chopping shrimp to serve as breakfast for the tank fish. As the only woman on the team, it took a while before I was trusted with tasks such as going out to collect food for the sea turtles, or sailing out to sea looking for sharks. The book before you is not exactly my story, but many of the thoughts that troubled me and many of the fish I met found their way into these pages.

Charlie, the injured stingray, was my good friend, and I'm still proud I was able to heal him and send him back to the wild. Like Gal, I also pulled a scary Lemon Shark out of a pool and ran with it to the beach, strapped to a stretcher; like Gal I hunted sharks late at night in order to refill the renovated pool, and I really did catch a shark on my birthday.

The Marine Park has undergone many changes since I worked there: fish, corals and seaweed are no longer collected from the reef, but raised on site; a diver goes down into the shark pool to hand feed the sharks; and a real submarine, a yellow submarine, has joined the attractions. And yet many things remain the same.

For the writing of this book I returned to the Marine Park. I interviewed people working on the scuba crew, and

I tagged along to one of the fish feeders for a day. Before I parted from my new hosts at the Park, I went to see the boat we had sailed out on to catch sharks. There it was, anchored in the still waters, smaller than I remembered, but still ready for adventure. I came back home and started writing.

Yours,
Pempheris (Orit)

