

“Your lips are blue.”



## SHARK SWIM

Leslie Absher

The boat house is old and funky. In the locker room—white tiles faded to gray, benches with peeling paint—we change into bathing suits. We’re as giggly as schoolgirls because this is our first swim in the bay. And because we’re not doing any of our usual Tuesday morning stuff: I’m not sitting at my writing desk or answering student emails. Chris isn’t brushing up her résumé as she heads back into the job market and Anna isn’t driving her sons to school. We’re all in uncharted waters. Literally.

We’re training for an open water swim from Alcatraz Island to San Francisco. I call it the “shark swim.” None of us have done anything like this before. I worry about sharks that might wander into the bay, Anna worries about the cold. Chris doesn’t worry about anything.

We walk out onto the old wooden dock and see three elderly swimmers in the water, no wetsuits, doing laps around the ring that makes up the aquatic park. Just beyond the barrier is the Golden Gate Bridge. The thrill of what I’m about to do pricks my skin.

I walk over to the water and get my ankles wet. Cold. Too cold. Anna clambers successfully into her wetsuit. She looks lithe except I don’t think she can bend her elbows. Chris was smart. She researched ahead of time and found a wetsuit designed for women. I move back to the bench and start to put mine on. A girdle would be easier to get into, I think, as I stuff my flesh into the tight rubbery casing. I push the rubber over my wet calves and swear never to do this again in this order. It’s impossible to get into a wetsuit when you’re already wet.

Finally, I’m in. Sort of. I go to zip up, search for the zipper fob and realize it’s not on the outside where it should be.

“Oh my god!” Anna cackles. “You put it on inside out!”

I feel ridiculous. Here we are, 40-something women with full lives trying to get out of our daily skin, so to speak, and I am having difficulty with the equipment. Anna is right. The whole thing is inside out. It’s just like me to not want to follow the rules, do what I’m supposed to do—like wear a wetsuit in the freezing ocean. I want to feel the water on my skin. Be *in* the wild.

I get out of the damn thing and look out at the gray-green bay water. The seniors are still doing laps.

I twist and pull the rubbery fabric until I see the bright orange side stripe on the *outside*. I retug, repull, restuff my curvy self into the binding suit designed for a lanky dude body. My back sweat slows the process. Finally, I’m in. I go to zip up again, find the zipper fob successfully and start pulling it. It comes up but then

slows around my breasts. I curse the male designer of my suit. “Why is this thing pulling so hard at my arms?” I ask my cohorts.

Anna looks over, drops onto the bench and starts laughing uncontrollably. “It’s on backwards!” Chris looks over. “Shit,” I say. I want to be a good sport and so I laugh but I feel foolish. Once again, I struggle again to dress myself properly.

When we wade into the water, the suit buoys me up to the surface. We head out toward the far buoy and I move along but feel like I’m floating, not really swimming. I need the feel of water on my skin to feel, well, me. I reach

around, tug at the zipper string and unzip myself from the suit I have put myself in three times today. It slips off my shoulders like a second skin. The arctic water rushes over *me*. I tie the suit arms around my middle and start swimming. It drags behind me like a plastic blow-up doll.

The water is so cold my heart leaps inside my chest. I hyperventilate as I start to try and catch up to Anna and Chris, which heightens the feeling of danger. No life-guard here.

After twenty minutes, I’m numb but feeling fine. I love moving through the frigid water, swimming outside the lines of my ordered daily life. I could actually die from the cold. Still, I feel more alive than I have in years. We pass the buoy and start back.

“Hey!” Anna yells over at Chris who has veered off course and is swimming toward

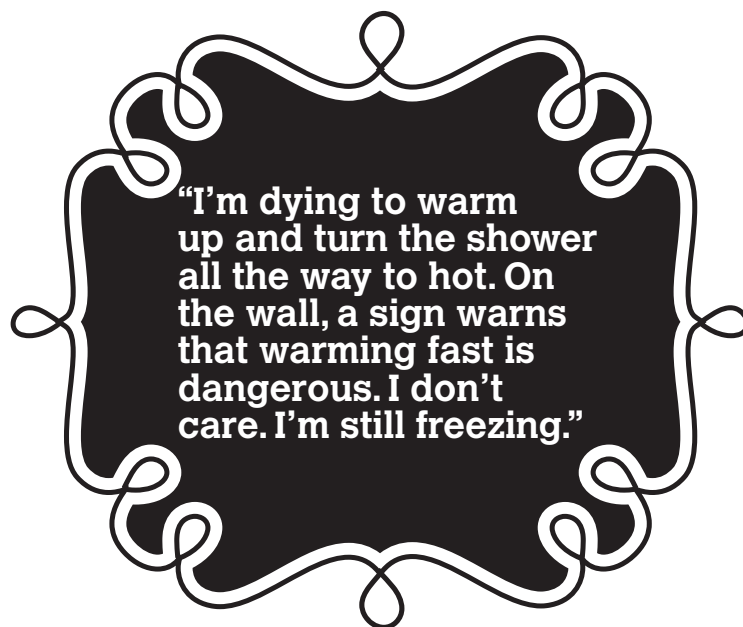
the opening of the swim park, and in my mind, closer to errant sharks. Chris can’t hear her at all.

“Chris!” we both yell. Finally, she hears. Her head bobs up, thick goggles. Anna, who has been our parent the whole day, yells, “You’re going the wrong way!” Chris nods and starts heading our way.

We finish the swim and head to the locker room. Suddenly, I’m cold. Colder than I’ve ever been. I’m dying to warm up and turn the shower all the way to hot. On the wall, a sign warns that warming fast is dangerous. I don’t care. I’m still freezing.

“Your lips are blue,” Anna says when we move to the sauna, which to me feels broken, not warm at all. I try to control my teeth chattering.

A woman in the sauna says it is working just fine—102 degrees. “You’ve been in the bay. You’re just cold.” She tells us she’s done the open water swim a few times. Anna looks in awe at her. She is our role model, this fit woman who must be in her late 50s and who has swum with sharks more than once. I’m still intensely cold trying to imagine us swimming choppy bay waters, doing what some of our friends have called “crazy.” Maybe that’s what the swim is about—getting back in touch with my tree climbing, bike riding, rebel girl self. The part of me that took chances and wouldn’t be *told*. Not that this self is entirely gone, just buried beneath the logistics of adulthood. I lean back against the worn wood of the sauna wall, close my eyes and let go.



Leslie Absher's essays have appeared in the Los Angeles Times and Ms. Magazine. When she's not struggling to get into her wetsuit or teaching high school students, she is putting the final edits on her memoir about growing up with a CIA dad. You can find her at [leslieabsher.com](http://leslieabsher.com).