

CHAPTER TWO

First Step: Prepare to Fall

It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure.

—JOSEPH CAMPBELL, mythologist

I WAS THE MOTHER OF THREE DAUGHTERS when my older sister Brenna told me, “Watching you is like watching someone run with her hands tied behind her back.”

“What does that mean, Brenna?” I asked.

“It means you need professional help,” she answered.

“As in pay someone to talk with me?” I countered.

I had to admit that Brenna was right. Not only had she always been older than me, she was also always wiser. Guess that’s what happens when you are an August-born Leo, the oldest girl in the family and gifted with a fiercely independent spirit that understands things others can’t or won’t, and has the language to confidently articulate it. And she was naturally svelte, which I was not. Possessed of a princess-like composure conferred upon her by her status as the oldest daughter and granddaughter to two sets of grandparents, I’d frequently call upon her to get me

unstuck in my life. And now, without me even having to ask, she had called it right. As the singer-composer Julia Blum sang in her song “Dream Big,” *In my mind, I run. In my life, I fall*. I was running, but not managing to get anywhere.

Dr. Norma was one of the prominent therapists in my city, known for her creative methods for teaching children to be responsible for their emotional well-being as well as their academic progress. At the turn of sixty, she still wore a short, wavy mass of black hair around a face marked by clear blue eyes, clean chin lines, and a warm, understanding smile that promised to help you in a direct, but respectful, manner—hard-pressing if necessary, but never abusive. Her Italian values favored solid mothering, good food, and a driven work ethic, making this a good fit, clinically speaking. For the sake of my highest good, I could overlook that she was very thin, an enthusiastic, daily treadmiller, and a passionate cook who made her own yogurt.

Meeting in her home office situated in the enclosed patio adjoining her living room, I took for myself the red-cushioned white rocking chair facing her swivel arm chair at the side of her small, unimposing walnut desk. She was dressed in her neatly-pressed khaki slacks with a red turtleneck tucked over them at the waist. With her dainty gold chain resting quietly on her heart, Dr. Norma turned her head to me. It was on this third visit with her that I shared the dream.

“I love the feel of water, Dr. Norma. Water is still and graceful. My bath waters hold me in their embrace, often kissing away the coldness of a winter day. And the boating waters of summer invite the untamed spirit to rip through them, pretending to briefly dominate the unseen expanse of life.”

But this body of water was different. I was surprised how often and how deeply this particular body of water flowed through my subconscious in the dark night hours.

“Shifra, where is the water? Do you recognize it?” asked Dr. Norma.

“She sits on the edge of Highview and Shorepoint Road, near my growing-up home. She is called Shore Valley Creek.

Shore Valley Creek starts on one side of the road and travels underground through a tunnel to the other side of the road. I don't think most people are aware that she does that, because she does this in a most secretive and unobserved way."

"Is the water quiet in your dream? Is there any kind of conversation between you and the water?"

I hesitate. "At first, the water is quiet and peaceful. She can be trusted. But then she twists and turns in fits of fury. We don't exchange words, only images. I am holding a small child, sometimes two, in the water. The child—no, both children—whose safety is resting perfectly in my hands begin to fall."

"What do you do when this happens, when they begin to fall?" she asked, inviting the drama.

"They begin to fall, and I reach for them. I reach for them, but I cannot grasp them. I cannot grasp them, so I reach for them more. And they are falling, falling, falling."

Dr. Norma turned to her desk drawer and withdrew a piece of paper. "Shifra, can you read this?"

let me fall

(from *Cirque du Soleil*)

JAMES CORCORAN AND JUTRAS BENOIT

Let me fall
Let me climb
There's a moment when fear
And dreams must collide

Someone I am
Is waiting for courage
The one I want
The one I will become
Will catch me

So let me fall
If I must fall
I won't heed your warnings
I won't hear them

Let me fall
If I fall
Though the phoenix may
Or may not rise

I will dance so freely
Holding on to no one
You can hold me only
If you too will fall
Away from all these
Useless fears and chains

Someone I am
Is waiting for my courage
The one I want
The one I will become
Will catch me

So let me fall
If I must fall
I won't heed your warning
I won't hear

Let me fall
If I fall
There's no reason
To miss this one chance

Lifting my eyes from the page, I asked, "Dr. Norma, what does this mean?"

“Shifra, it means you are about to do some important, life-altering work. Are you ready?”

If not now, when? If I am not for me, then who will be?

(Ethics of the Fathers 1:14)

Do you want to live large, to matter?

Prepare to fall.

I knew that no one is too big to fall. Even if you are a bank. Remember that notion in the economic chaos of 2008—that some financial institutions were too big to fail? Lehman Brothers wasn't. It did. In September 2008, this venerated, 158-year-old titan totally collapsed. Bear Stearns and Merrill Lynch—among the most stable, exalted names on Wall Street—toppled like sandcastles (even though they were ultimately saved).

Falling. It is a huge piece of living. Have you noticed?

My life has been generous in that way, giving me ample opportunity to practice stumbling. I started young, and it began with overeating.

How, *while dieting*, had my 5' 4" body expanded to 200 pounds before I graduated high school? Geneen Roth, author of multiple books on disordered eating, posits the “Fourth Law of the Universe: For every diet, there is an equal and opposite binge. Every action has a reaction, and like gravity, every over-controlling diet that does not have your loving, realistic cooperation leads to a let-loose eating binge, to the eventual backlash on our healthiest intentions.” I began to realize that my life was minimized to just two compartments: my dieting days and my bingeing days.

Like a venomous snake, these coiled issues of eating, body size, and mattering slithered around my life for decades. Lying low at times, it would spring up at others, keeping my joy in a chokehold. I had come to agree with Geneen, that “diets were built on the belief that if I trusted myself, I would destroy myself. . . that my hunger was bottomless, that I was crazy and self-destructive.” Trying to figure out this growing, illogical insanity that had sucked my life dry, I got heavier by the day,

further eroding any sense of trust that I could get myself out of this desperate pit. The scale would steadily climb, reaching 240 pounds.

Being fat was a public affair. Some years ago at a family wedding, an older male relative approached me. It was in between the ceremony known as the *Chuppah* (literally, a canopy to which the groom and bride are escorted, usually by their parents, and under which they stand while seven blessings are said) and the seated formal dinner hosting more than three hundred guests in a large hall, decorated in purple and gold tones beneath two massive chandeliers giving off equal amounts of light and warmth. Soft music accompanied the guests to their tables, men on one side of the room and women on the other, in accord with the religious practice of modesty separating the genders at an Orthodox Jewish wedding. The male attire featured mostly dark suits buttoned over white shirts that were held closed at the top by paisley, striped, or floral ties. The women walked delicately on heels no lower than two inches, often much higher, beneath colorful dresses or two-piece outfits with careful lines and lengths protecting their feminine dignity.

This relative of mine was one of those really nice guys in his mid-60's whose exchanges with my siblings and me sometimes bordered on minding our business. His banter was consistently joking and jolly, always asking for a hug which he knew I would not give to the opposite gender because he was not my grand/father, brother, son, grandson, or husband. In his typical fashion, he found his way over to the women's tables so that he could catch up with his younger female relatives, which didn't happen often. After exchanging the pleasantries, he could not let the conversation end without surprising me: "When you get around to it, I would like you to lose some weight."

With a poise shaped from decades of experience with well-intentioned but misguided people, I replied, "Okay, so you want me to lose weight when I get around to it."

"Yeah, you know, you are attractive, and I want you to be the absolute best-looking you can be," he innocently stated.

Resisting the temptation to feel complimented, and looking at his own considerably overgrown belly, I countered, “Well, I’ll keep this in mind. But you know what? I don’t know if it’s in the cards for me.”

“It’s in the cards. It’s in the cards,” he reassured himself.

I must be holding the wrong deck of cards.

Nike, You Got It Wrong

If I *could* “just do it,” I would. Yes, Nike, I’ve been wanting to tell you that for a long time.

Being a young girl in a big body had its advantages. True, my body was too heavy to comfortably carry around, but I was noticed. *I mattered*—in the sense that my science teacher defined matter: taking up space. Wedged between my sixth- and seventh-grade years, I was eleven when my mother took me to Diet Workshop. Hoping to drop her extra fifty pounds hanging around after the February birth of her sixth child—a robust 8½ pound mixture of ruddy skin, an unruly black mop of hair, and a brilliant rattler of nerves who was now my fourth and final sister named Hadassah—my mother and I spent this summer before my Bat Mitzva focused on getting a thinner body. I dropped thirty-two pounds of myself. *How many pounds of shame is that?* I suddenly became beautiful. To say it another way, I now mattered because I *didn’t* take up space. But the shame did not go away. Like fat cells, shame easily multiplies and gets in the way of a good fit.

Weight gains, weight losses, and weight regains were constant companions as I fell on and off dieting plans, none of which I could understand how to make work for me. Full friendships fed themselves on my dieting life, such as my relationship with my classmate Leah that centered on our weekly meetings, this time at Weight Watchers. Maybe their scales would be better balanced than the Diet Workshop scales. But when Leah lost weight and I did not (even after our joint session of eating excessively out of the same peanut butter jar), I thoughtfully advised her to continue on without

me, and that I would figure out something else for myself, which I didn't.

In my senior year, I returned to Diet Workshop for my third time because they had upped their game, offering a new six-week session designed to accelerate our weight loss. So now, in addition to starving me, they had me paying to sit in circles of women twice and thrice my age and older, discussing why we ate so much. Well, if I knew *that*, I wouldn't be wasting my time going around in circles. After each session, I exercised my desperation by quickly splitting to the nearest ice cream store to figure out on my own *why* I could possibly eat so much. All I could think of was that it probably had something to do with how *good* the food tasted.

Full Body, Empty Self

My body may have been abundantly fed, but I was on empty.

My home was not always the best place to expect hunger to be consistently and deeply filled. Dinners that were meant for the whole family were barely enough to feed my double-portion hunger. Sitting alone at the kitchen table—my thin sisters had already contented themselves with a small plate of nutrition, followed by generous helpings of candy—I feasted over the daily *Baltimore Sun*, sports section first, while feeding every morsel of aloneness that I could. All the eating got done before my parents came home, so they could have the room they needed to unwind quietly after yet another grueling day at work.

In our home, one was encouraged to get A⁺s, be thin and pretty, be quiet, be happy, and to limit expressions of fear. All of these were generally out of my comfortable, consistent reach. But the cookies in the breadbox, the cabinet closest to the floor, were well within my grasp. The breadbox, known in other homes as the candy drawer, held all the heaven you could possibly need on this earth. Creamy Kit Kats and exquisitely bitable Skor bars, Tootsie Roll candy that turned over and under your tongue as it blissfully melted away, and all other compelling

combinations of chocolate and sugar, were there for the having. And when that could no longer satisfy . . . not to worry. With a half-body turn away, ice cream by the pint could be secured from the freezer and allowed to soften so it could slide down like a kid water sledding on a crazy-hot day.

And as I'd get scared or anxious about not being enough or having enough, I could reach for food because it would feed the emptiness and the fear. I would head to that drawer and, without even bending down, use my big toe to draw it open and restore myself to some balance. In those moments of unwrapping life's kindness—known to humans as candy or sweet calories—I held tightly to the imminent escape from life's gripping angst. As my lips tightened around the smooth edges of my richly-coated friends, an ocean of warmth flooded my belly with a delicious current of pleasure. So full, so satisfying . . . for thirty whole seconds, I was totally consumed by the absolute joy and comfort of being. But then, too soon after the swallow, the pit of angst began to fill again with fear, drowning me in familiar worry. I'd then help myself again to these household remedies for the loneliness of being too big in my body and too small in spirit. The only challenge was that I had to do it all in secret. If caught, I'd risk the food being denied me, or worse, be shamed for feeding my too-heavy body. If you were thin, you had permission to eat. If you were fat, you had the permission, the right, the duty to starve.

Skating: Lesson for Life

After I tripped into motherhood, I had a dream in which I was skating. I was carrying many, many extra pounds and as I twirled and swizzled with my pale-peach chiffon gown kicking up behind me, my concerned mother turned to Brenna, my older sister, and said, “She can't do that. She's too fat. Won't she get hurt?”

To which Brenna responded, “But, Ma, she's doing it.”

Despite my notion that thin people could effortlessly skate and fat people would fall and maybe die, I knew it was time to

stop dreaming and start skating. Skating would have me tread on my fears and begin to prove that others' presumptive limits for me don't get to define my path.

I phoned Courtney, the pony-tailed, thirty-something, skating teacher who taught nine-year old Basya—my second daughter, whose signature smile was as sweet as it was big—to skate, asking her when she could fit me in. Of course, I clued her in to several things: I'd probably be the hardest student she ever had, certainly the most scared, and probably the fattest. And also, we'd be skating to a piece of Yanni music. Would that be okay?

Bless her kindness for putting Yanni in the overhead speaker, powering my spirit. In our first lesson, I held her as tightly as an unsteady, newly walking baby holds on before knowing he or she can do this. Like the shiny shoes just placed on the novice young walker, my skates hugged ankles with just enough strength to stand on their own, held back by fear that can only be undone by actually taking the steps forward—with lots of encouragement from others. The air was predictably cold, hardly made warmer by my thick opaque leggings under a loose black skirt, hooded sweater, and still-dry gloves. My breathing was already labored with fright while I watched others rhythmically dance in this round space of life called the rink, circling it with ever-growing ease and passion. Legs burning already from standing on anorexic-thin blades stiling forward, I began to move across the ice with a slight uplift, carrying myself from one step to the next.

“Shifra, our first lesson in learning how to skate is preparing to fall. Today, I will teach you how to fall.” *This should be easy*, I thought to myself. *I am a natural . . . at falling.*

Courtney showed me how to fall, which took a surprising amount of my courage—and finesse. Basic rule: Keep your composure, keep your hands close to you, get up quickly, continue with the move you fell on, and be prepared to fall again. It was that simple. I'd remember this long after leaving the ice rink. I could learn to stay composed after a fall which

would allow for a quick rebound, and then to pick up precisely at the falling point. After three sessions of lovingly, securely holding my hands while skating around the rink, Courtney prompted me, “Shifra, it’s time for you to skate around on your own. I will be right here in this corner, working with another student.” And, pointing to the far right speaker, she smiled. “Yanni’s here, too.”

“Sure,” I said, “I can do this.” Knowing she had one eye on me from across the rink, I was ready. Forward I leaned, lifting one foot in the air and then the other in delectable slices of joy. It was on the second go-around, as I circled the far-end corner of the rink, that my skate got caught in a piece of music that sent me to the cold ground.

“Shifra, are you okay?” Courtney called out, her blonde pony-tail already swinging, as she started to skate towards me.

“Yes, I am fine; I really am. Don’t come.” And I really was. Because as I hit the ice, I broke my fear, and that, to me, was the dance I was really after.

Yes, I say *dance* because she is the mother of the arts. In the larger sense, dance represents the forward movement that has us flowing into our spirit, showcasing our release from its weighty bonds of human limitations. In this way, dance encourages the human spirit to articulate its intense and unspoken language as it seeks to convey the landscape of human dream and drama.

As I began to make my way back up, a guy whizzed by me on his skates to say, “We all start that way.”

Do we? I wondered. Do we all start that way? Yes, that guy was right that we all fall, even if we are not all equally terrified to do so. I remember the day I put my then-nine-year-old Daniel on skates. No fear in his skates; the ice bowed to his bravado. No Yanni playing, the beat in his heart pulled him around in easy lines, with nary a falling moment on the ground. What a joy to watch that fearlessness in such a young child. I did not know that could exist, certainly not in one of my offspring. (But then again, Zack is his father—the man whose decision to marry me must have somehow bestowed

on little Daniel a similar zest for taking on a challenge, indeed thriving on the edge of danger.)

To live large, you don't need a sizable body that takes up ample space. Nor a thin one that doesn't. You need your spirit, *yourself*.

“Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm,” said Winston Churchill. And for each of us, and for all of us, fat or thin, scared or stoic, we take the steps—and missteps—we need, to move us in the ways we wish.

Learning how to fall is one of life's greatest lessons. Prepare. It is often the first step in the journey. Small steps make large strides. Be willing to fall, for that is the pathway to rise.