

Adventures in the Water



By Lauren Kratz Prushko

To listen call:

“Spending time by the ocean this summer will be unforgettable because anything is possible with Grandma Arlene!” Curtis thinks to himself. (ocean sound effect)

“Curtis, did you remember to pack the new underwear we bought yesterday?” Mom shouts as she sticks her head into my room.

“Yes, Mom, and do you have to shout about underwear? I don’t want the neighbors to hear about my new underwear.”

My mom laughs and replies, “I am sorry, Curtis, talking loud runs in the family. So get ready to stick your fingers in your ears when your Grandma gets excited and starts bellowing out stories on the plane, on the beach, and in the hotel room.” Mom continues to laugh as she walks away.

I just smile and keep packing. I’m going on my first trip on a plane with my favorite person, Grandma Arlene. We’re going to visit the Florida Keys for snorkeling in the Atlantic Ocean.

I was so afraid of the water last summer, especially the ocean, because I didn’t know how to swim. Living in the city, there aren’t many opportunities to be near water, except at some of the local parks that have public pools. Grandma came to the rescue. She knew how to swim, but she hadn’t swum in a very long time and needed a refresher class.

I think about our conversation last summer. “Okay, Curtis,” said Grandma Arlene, her voice growing louder with excitement. “I signed us up for swimming lessons at the public pool. We’ll learn and practice together this summer, and then we’ll take our swimming skills to the Atlantic ocean in Florida next year. What do you say?”

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The swimming lessons made me nervous. I didn't even like getting my head wet in the bath! But Grandma Arlene and I knew I would have to face my fear of swimming sometime. Grandma told me lessons would help me feel safe around water and keep fear from hanging like a rain cloud over my head all the time.

So, we spent all last summer learning how to swim side by side. First, we held onto the edge of the pool. Then, we kicked our legs out, gripping our swimming teacher's hands as we practiced putting our faces underwater, holding our breath, and dunking our whole bodies. By the end of the summer, I was able to hold my breath and float in the pool all on my own!

I grin and zip up my suitcase, ready for a new adventure with Grandma Arlene this summer.

When we arrive at our hotel in Key West in the Florida Keys, Grandma Arlene walks through the hotel lobby waving and smiling to all. I can't help but jump up and down behind her, looking around, excited to be in a new place!

Somehow Grandma has already made friends with the staff at our hotel. She introduces us and says, "How do you do? My name is Arlene, and this is my grandson Curtis." She rests her hand on my shoulder, reminding me to stand straight, put my shoulders down and back, make eye contact with the person, and smile.

Grandma Arlene gives me a slight nod, which means she approves. This is one of the many reasons I like spending time with my grandma. She treats me like an equal, and sometimes she even lets me call her by her first name!

"Okay, Curtis, are you ready to travel to the beach?"

"Sure, I'm ready to stick my feet into the Atlantic Ocean!" I replied.

We spread out our towels on the white sandy beach.

"Wow! Grandma Arlene, the sand here is white and soft! The beach back home in the city doesn't look like this!"

"Well, Curtis, we can thank our friend the parrotfish for these beautiful natural beaches."

"Parrotfish? I've never heard of that fish before," I say curiously.

"Ah! Parrotfish have colorful scales and strong teeth like a parrot," explains Grandma Arlene as she sticks her front teeth out over her bottom lip.

I laugh. "Why do the parrotfish need teeth like that?"

"Ah! The parrotfish lives in the coral reef and likes to eat the algae hidden inside the coral. Their teeth can bite into the corals and rocks. Guess what? They also have teeth in their throats to grind and crush the coral and rocks, turning into sand in their bodies. Then the sand comes out of them and gives us beaches!"

I think about this for a moment, then I laugh. "What do you mean sand comes out of the parrotfish? Do you mean we're sitting on parrotfish poop?" I fall back onto my towel laughing.

"Okay, okay, Curtis, I think marine scientists would use the word excrement instead of poop," replies Grandma Arlene smiling. "The parrotfish can be helpful to the coral reef because they help keep the coral reef area clean and healthy by eating all that algae."

"Hopefully, during our snorkeling trip, you'll get to see some parrotfish."

I know the aquarium we are going to houses rainbow parrotfish and midnight parrotfish,” continues Grandma Arlene.

I sit back up and say, “Thank you, Grandma, for taking me here, and thanks again for helping me learn how to swim.”

“Curtis, it’s time for one of our grownup conversations. You can call me Arlene.”

“Arlene, what are we talking about?” I ask, resting my elbow on my knees

“When I retired from work, I knew I wanted to spend more time with you and be able to give you fun and positive memories. I could afford this trip because I saved some money every month while I was working and called this the Curtis and Arlene adventure fund! Just like the parrotfish can be good for the well-being of the coral reef, you are good for my well-being.”

Grandma and I both start to become a little teary-eyed. “Oh, Arlene, let’s not start crying with people around on this beach,” I tease, nudging Grandma with my elbow.

The next day, we find ourselves standing side by side on a boat ready for an adventure, surrounded by a group of people and our snorkeling tour guides. We have masks so we can see clearly underwater, snorkels that will allow us to breathe through a tube while we’re face-down in the water, fins for our feet to help us swim faster, and flotation vests for safety, since I’m still a new swimmer.

After listening to all the instructions from our tour guides, we take turns climbing down a ladder on the side of the boat and jumping into the ocean. Grandma Arlene goes down first and waits for me to climb down next.

As I stand on the side of the boat looking down at Grandma Arlene and her big grin, I remember last summer and my fear of learning how to swim. I expect to have that feeling of a rain cloud following me around again, but I realize that now I only feel the sunshine. I climb down and jump into the ocean, hooting with joy! Grandma hoots even louder!
(ocean sound effect)

After a while, one of the snorkeling tour guides points out a large school of Princess parrotfish grazing for algae, their coral blue and pink scales glistening in the salt water filtered sunlight. We can’t talk underwater, so we give each other a thumbs up.

When our snorkel tour is over, we thank our guides and climb off the boat.

“Let’s see who can make it back to our blanket the fastest,” says Grandma Arlene.

As we start to race across the beach, I silently thank the parrotfish for the soft white sand beneath my feet. Then I look over and see one of my favorite people in the world running next to me and think, “I knew this summer would be unforgettable because anything is possible with Grandma Arlene!”

(ocean sound effect)

