

SEYMOUR GOLDFARB HAS A BIG PROBLEM

He's afraid of everything! He dreads roller coasters and the beach. He refuses to go to Camp Sportahama. He won't even learn to ride a bike.

Quick thinking helps Seymour hide his fears from the world. But things change the summer his cousin Pesach comes to visit from Israel. Big, confident Pesach is strong and fearless. His idea of a good time is parachuting from a plane. And he wants Seymour to show him how Americans have fun! How will Seymour ever survive the summer?

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KLUTZ

A basketball was coming right at my head, and I threw up my hands in self-defense. “Ow!” I yelled as the ball crunched against my finger. I grabbed my injured hand with my good one. “I think it’s broken,” I moaned.

“Time-out, time-out,” Ted called. It helps when your best friend is captain of the team.

“What’s wrong, Seymour?” Everyone was crowding around me.

I tried to act cool. “Ah, nothing. Just a broken finger, probably.”

The sound of a shrill whistle announced the approach of Mr. Evans, our gym teacher. “I could have predicted it would be you, Goldfarb,” he barked at me. “On the last day of school, too.” His muscles rippled as he started writing something down on his clipboard. “What did you do this time?”

I wanted to tell him, “It was dumb to have gym on the last day of school, Mr. Evans, and it was because of this dumb gym class that I got hurt,” but I controlled myself and said absolutely nothing. Silently, I showed

him my finger, which was starting to swell.

“Someday they’ll do a set of X-rays on you and find out why you are such a medical marvel, Goldfarb: a magnet for balls and injuries.” Mr. Evans chuckled at his own joke.

“Don’t you think he’d better go to the nurse, Mr. Evans?” Ted suggested. Mr. Evans loves Ted as much as he can’t stand me.

“Yes, you might as well go, Goldfarb,” Mr. Evans agreed.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Ted asked me.

“No, stay and finish the game,” I said. “I could probably find the nurse’s office blindfolded, and my broken finger won’t even make me limp.” Everyone but Mr. Evans laughed. Ted slapped me gently on the back.

Mrs. McShane, the school nurse, was busy packing up the last thermometer when I walked in the door. I guess she was not too surprised to see me in her office, even on the very last day of school.

“Oh, it’s you, Seymour. What is it?”

I showed her my finger. “Hmm, how’d you do that?” she asked calmly. As she spoke, she opened the little refrigerator that stands in her office and handed me a blue plastic ice pack from the otherwise empty shelves. “Hold this on your finger, Seymour.”

I was glad she didn’t say something like, “I’ve been expecting you, Seymour. No day would be complete

without our school klutz, would it?” (Klutz is a Yiddish word for an extremely clumsy person.)

After a minute, she took the ice pack off and bent my finger around. “Does this hurt?” she asked.

“Ow! Yes.” I winced. You’d think that a person with so much experience in pain would be better at tolerating it.

“I don’t think it’s broken,” Mrs. McShane concluded, “but just to be on the safe side, I’ll immobilize it with a splint. Then your parents can decide if they think it needs to be X-rayed.” Mrs. McShane knows that my parents are both doctors.

Everyone assumes that my folks can just take care of my many and varied injuries at home. But that’s not their specialty. My father always jokes about it: “Sy, if I’d known you were going to be my son, I’d have gone into plastic surgery or orthopedics. I’m no use to you as an ear, nose, and throat specialist.”

Mom’s no help, either; she’s a neurologist. Neurologists take care of heads and spines and serious stuff, though at the rate I’m going, maybe she will get to take care of me someday in the future.

“I don’t understand why he’s so accident prone,” she told my father once when they thought I was out of hearing range.

“So, he’s a little klutzy; he’ll outgrow it,” my father reassured my mother. “It’s a phase. He’ll turn out fine.

With his genes, he can't help but grow into a fine man, a real mensch." (A mensch is much better than the opposite of a klutz. It's a person who can handle the world and does really good things.)

I'm glad my parents have faith in my automatically having some dramatic transformation, because I sure don't. If I were a tadpole, I'd relax, knowing that I'd turn into a frog. If I were a caterpillar, I'd just wait to turn into a butterfly (or with my luck, a moth). But what does a scaredy-cat, klutz kid turn into? Probably a nerdy-type adult.

Mrs. McShane had produced a long stick of metal, and she bent it around my finger. Then she wrapped tape around it. Now I had a cool-looking bandage, but every time I looked at it, it just reminded me what a klutz I was.

Slowly I walked back outside, just in time to hear the bell ring. We had an hour left, one hour of school. It seemed to me that every kid in the whole world couldn't wait for school to end and summer to begin—everyone but me. I dreaded summer—it was just more time to be outside to face bugs and sports, two things I did not particularly enjoy.

Why was I the only one who liked to be in school, where it was safe (except for gym days)? I couldn't understand why other kids liked to be outside. Outside, you could get hit by a ball, fall down running, or get stung by some frightening-looking insect.

Maybe, I thought, I was the only one smart enough

to worry about those things. But Ted was pretty smart, too, and he didn't worry about getting hurt or being a loser at sports. Actually, Ted's great at anything that has the word *ball* in it. He's on the traveling soccer team, the all-star baseball team, and the school basketball team.

There was no sport invented yet that I was good at. It was too bad that reading, math, and computers were not considered sports. I guess it was amazing that Ted and I were best friends. That's probably because we'd been friends since nursery school, when we were too young to know that I would turn into a klutz, while he would become an athletic wonder.

Maybe I could have been great at sports and stuff if it weren't for this one minor problem I had: I was afraid. It's hard to explain what I was afraid of, because there were too many things. If I'd made two lists, one that said *THINGS I AM NOT AFRAID OF* and the other one called *THINGS I AM AFRAID OF*, you'd see what I mean. I wasn't afraid of eating, school, reading, drawing, computers, and walking slowly. As for the other list, *THINGS I AM AFRAID OF*, I'd probably never even have had enough paper or enough time to write everything all down, unless I could have done it until infinity.

My parents said most kids were afraid of something, had nightmares and stuff, but I knew that I was different. The bus ride that morning was the perfect example:

everyone in my class, and even the little kids on my bus, had been singing, “No more pencils, no more books, no more teacher’s dirty looks,” and there was I, hating to say goodbye to the classroom and to Mrs. Fitzgerald. I, Seymour J. Goldfarb—the short kid, the only one with a finger wrapped in metal and a dumb blue ice pack—was miserable.

“What’s the matter, Seym?” Ted asked as I entered the classroom. “You don’t look too good. Does your finger hurt that badly?”

“No, it’s not bad at all. It looks worse than it is.” I was determined to act cool. I couldn’t admit that the real reason for my mood was the end of the school year. Even Ted would have trouble understanding that.

“This has been one of the best fourth grades I’ve ever taught,” Mrs. Fitzgerald told us just a few minutes before the end of the day. “I’m going to miss you, but I’m sure you’ll all have a wonderful summer and terrific vacations.”

“Hey, Mrs. Fitzgerald, want to come to the beach today?” David suggested. “Jordan is having a birthday beach party. Practically the whole class is going, except for the girls, of course.”

“Thanks, David, but I’m busy this afternoon,” she said.

Gee, it was so easy for her, I thought. When I got invited to go someplace like the beach, either I had to go, and worry about what would go wrong, or I had to think

of an excuse, fast. I've got to admit that I was pretty good at excuses. In fact, I didn't think anyone knew what a scaredy-cat I really was. They just thought I was clumsy. So when I said I had a pulled muscle, a sore tendon, a fractured toe, a trick knee, or a sprained ankle, everyone believed me. That type of injury is hard to prove, so most people just had to take my word for it.

I'd gotten so good at excuses that no one knew that I couldn't ride a two-wheeler. And in my neighborhood, where most guys my age are attached to the seats of their bikes, that was pretty amazing. But I'd worked out a pretty elaborate scheme to keep everyone from figuring out why I didn't ride. If someone said, "Hey, Seymour, do you want to go for a bike ride?" I just said that one of my tires was flat and my parents were too busy working to have it fixed. Everyone knew that they were doctors and that doctors are busy. If anyone offered to lend me a bike, I just said it was too big for me (which it usually was), or I fell back on one of my hard-to-prove ailments.

This time, I had a visible excuse. Mrs. McShane had said to keep my finger dry. That was a perfect last-minute reason to skip Jordan's beach party. As we walked out of school, I felt a little better. I even thought this finger might come in handy after all.