



Season 4
Episode 5 Transcript
Rip Current Rescue

Torah Kachur:

Liv Titor and her sister are driving out of Brisbane, Australia. They're heading south along the Gold Coast to one of their favorite beaches, Fingal Head.

Liv Titor:

It's just a beautiful place. I always loved it. In the low tide, it's exposed all the little creatures and beautiful rocks.

Torah Kachur:

Those rocks and craggy, dark cliffs are a big part of what makes Fingal Head a stunning beach. Liv and her sister can't wait to get in the water. She takes a few steps into the shallows.

Liv Titor:

But then it dropped a little bit. It was still just maybe above my knees, but I could feel the grip around my legs and it just took me.

Torah Kachur:

Liv is caught in a rip current. It's pulling her around the jagged headland into rough water.

Liv Titor:

I couldn't resist. I couldn't do anything. It was so strong. It's just taking me out into the ocean.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur, and this is Tell Me What Happened: True Stories of People Helping People, an original podcast by OnStar. Every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things every day.

Liv is from Ukraine. She moved to Australia when she was 17.

Liv Titor:

It was a tough move for me because I left everything behind at the time when all my friends and still my family there in Kiev. It was a big adjustment, especially with language barrier. Definitely still have my accent. I don't think I'll ever lose it.

Torah Kachur:

But Liv quickly discovered how much she loved living near the ocean.

Liv Titor:

Just that feeling of freedom and flying through it, catching the wave and swimming. Yeah, it's just amazing.

Torah Kachur:

And Fingal Head Beach in New South Wales is one of her favorite spots.

Liv Titor:

It's volcanic rock and a lighthouse on the top.

Torah Kachur:

The old lighthouse sits on a rocky headland that juts out into the ocean, splitting the shore into two beaches. And the waves at this section of the coastline can be powerful.

Liv Titor:

You can just see the force of nature, like all those waves just crushing on this rocks. I always loved it.

Torah Kachur:

And that's where Liv and her sister, Olena, headed in April 2023. Their first stop? The lighthouse.

Liv Titor:

There's a panoramic view. Yeah, I took lots of photos and videos and just admired the scene. I remember just seeing how rough the ocean was that morning, and the waves were like a thunder to the rocks.

Torah Kachur:

Then the sisters walked to Dreamtime Beach on the right side of the headland.

Liv Titor:

And then as usual, we just went to have a swim.

Torah Kachur:

Dreamtime Beach isn't patrolled by lifeguards, but Liv had been swimming in the area many times before. She also noticed other people enjoying the water.

Liv Titor:

And in my mind I automatically thought, "Oh yes, those people are coming out of the water and it's okay."

Torah Kachur:

So Liv went for a dip.

Liv Titor:

And my sister did the same. But then I walked out and I thought, "Oh, I really want to go to the rock."

Torah Kachur:

The rock sticks out of the water right beside the headland.

Liv Titor:

I could see a bit of water swooshing around it, but it was very shallow, so it didn't alert me.

Torah Kachur:

Liv waded in a few steps.

Liv Titor:

And I could feel that I'm going into a little bit of hole. I sank in a little bit to the sand.

Torah Kachur:

Then she felt the force of the current.

Liv Titor:

I could feel water swirling around my legs and pulling me, but it happened so quickly. It was just like milliseconds.

Torah Kachur:

Liv tried to react.

Liv Titor:

I thought, "Oh, can I grab the rock? What can I do?"

Torah Kachur:

But the current was moving too fast, dragging her out to sea.

Liv Titor:

I did try to swim back and somebody was yelling from the beach like, "Yeah, keep kicking. Keep swimming."

Torah Kachur:

After a few seconds, Liv realized that her kicking and swimming wasn't helping.

Liv Titor:

I quickly realized I'm going to lose my strength and I can't fight it. It's just taking me out. It was so strong. I felt like I had no control.

Torah Kachur:

She was being pulled further and further away from shore.

Liv Titor:

I just turned around to the shore to let people know that I'm in trouble, and I saw people noticing me from the beach. I saw my sister in panic. I thought, "Is this it? Am I going to die today?"

Torah Kachur:

This is Tell Me What Happened, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase the importance of a human connection when you need help, whether you're attacked by a wild animal, trapped in a burning building, or minutes away from drowning.

Liv was dragged out to sea by a rip current. She tried to swim back to shore, but the pull was too strong. She was in a dangerous spot and at serious risk of drowning unless someone came to her rescue.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

Johnny Matthew Gordon is my name, but my nickname's been Gordo the Great. And it sounds pretty vain, but I didn't give myself the name.

Torah Kachur:

Johnny earned that nickname while working as a camera operator on the World Surf League for 20 years. The job took him all over the world to places like South Africa, Tahiti, Hawaii, and Brazil.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

I lived the dream. I made the vocation, the vacation. So I'm a world tourer and I'm a dead keen surfer myself, so I love having a paddle.

Torah Kachur:

But on that day in April, Johnny was not feeling great. He'd recently lost his job.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

I was in a really low moment.

Torah Kachur:

He was also thinking about a recent tragic incident at a local beach.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

And we lost a guy. I'm hanging in the car park and I could see them pulling a guy into the sand bank. So I run down and we just did the compression, and I was really bummed. We lost that chap and his family's right there. It was horrible.

Torah Kachur:

Johnny needed a distraction. He hadn't been to Fingal Head for 10 years. So when his son asked him for a ride somewhere close by, he thought it would be a good chance to clear his mind.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

It's like you're being cleansed. And you're paddling out like there's free beer and a barbecue out there. You're like, "Yeah, I want to get out there."

Torah Kachur:

And that's what Johnny was planning to do that day until he actually got into the water.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

The swell on this day was like six feet. It was massive. And I've gone paddle out and I kept paddling, paddling. And I'm going, flipping backwards sort of a thing, so I'm not even going to bother with it. So I've just done a U-ey, paddle in.

Torah Kachur:

So Johnny went for a quick swim instead. Back on the beach, he was getting ready to leave when he glanced over and saw Liv walking towards the rock.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

She was only in knee-deep water. And she's taken one step and it was into a hole, and it was like underwater jiu-jitsu, mate. It's like, "Bang. Gotcha." And she was traveling.

Torah Kachur:

Johnny knew right away that Liv was in big trouble.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

Well, I know she's in the most dangerous spot in this region. She's heading straight to the cheese grater.

Torah Kachur:

The cheese grater. Johnny's talking about a jagged volcanic rock sticking out of the water just below the lighthouse on Fingal Head. He knows Liv is heading straight for it.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

I swear, mate. Within about, I don't know, eight seconds, she was out of frame. She was around the corner.

Torah Kachur:

Then Johnny spots Liv's sister.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

The color's just running from their face. They were looking at me and I'm looking at them, but there was nothing said.

Torah Kachur:

There were lifeguards at another nearby beach. Johnny thought about calling one of them for help.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

And I'm going, "No, the rip's too gnarly. By the time I even give them a heads-up, this chick's done."

Torah Kachur:

He remembered the man he couldn't save a few weeks earlier.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

After losing the chap a couple of weeks before, it was just like, “Not on my watch. I’m going to give it my best shot.” It was like an instinct to me to just go jump on right now.

Torah Kachur:

Johnny strapped his surfboard to his ankle, tucked under his arm, and ran into the water.

Liv Titor:

I just saw this person jump on a surfboard towards me.

Torah Kachur:

Johnny paddled out using the force of the rip current to get to Liv as fast as he could.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

I was telling myself to don’t worry about yourself. You’ve got a job to do. Stay focused and just do it, mate.

Torah Kachur:

When he reached Liv ...

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

I said, “Hey, we got this. This is nothing. I’ve been bitten by a mosquito harder than this. I promise you we’re both going home.”

Liv Titor:

And then he tried to make a joke that we’re going to have a drink together.

Torah Kachur:

Johnny pulled Liv onto the front of his surfboard. He knew he needed to keep her calm.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

I said, “The only thing that’ll bite us on the arse is if you freak out.”

Liv Titor:

I thought, “Oh, why is he saying that?” Not realizing that we still will be taken to the rocks.

Torah Kachur:

The rip was pulling them towards the rocks at the base of Fingal Head.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

This deadly cliff with the six-foot waves building against the cliff with massive back-wash.

Torah Kachur:

Johnny told Liv to lay down on the front of the board and paddled into the waves.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

It’s like trying to fight Hercules or something. You just can’t swim against it. It’s got you, and you’re going somewhere you don’t want to go.

Liv Titor:

But Johnny, he just kept talking to me, and I just concentrated on him totally.

Torah Kachur:

They braced themselves as wave after wave hit them.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

Massive waves belting down 12 feet from the rocks.

Liv Titor:

The waves would knock me and Johnny off. And just being under the water, the waves were so harsh.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

Imagine 500 buckets of water coming down from a great height. It was a life-and-death situation.

Torah Kachur:

Every time Johnny and Liv got knocked off the surfboard, they managed to swim back to it and climb on. But they were getting closer and closer to the rocks.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

When we were under those cliffs, you could see in her face. You could just see it, mate.

Torah Kachur:

The look Johnny saw in Liv's face? Terror.

Liv Titor:

That was terrifying moment. The wave took me up really, really high, and at that second I thought, "Can I actually hang onto the rock?" But I couldn't do anything. I just fell down.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

And it's like the worst road rash you've ever had. You've got the impact and you've got all the jagged bits where an elbow or an ankle can be caught.

Torah Kachur:

But cuts and scrapes were the least of Johnny's worries.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

Only got to get a smack on your temple and bang. You were out for a couple of seconds and then you'd be doomed.

Torah Kachur:

The waves continued to pummel Liv and Johnny near the cliffs.

Liv Titor:

And I just braced myself. So every time we were getting under the water onto the rocks, it was just like this repetitive horror.

Torah Kachur:

But they weren't even at the most dangerous spot. The rip was pulling them towards the tip of the headland, where a small opening in the rock leads to a narrow channel.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

And it's this gnarly, gnarly spot. And I guarantee if you got sucked in there, you're done, mate.

Liv Titor:

I did think, "Is this is? Am I going to die today?"

Torah Kachur:

At this point, they'd been in the water for 10 exhausting minutes. The waves kept pounding.

Liv Titor:

Johnny would tell me, "This is the big one." He would give me instructions to say, "Paddle now. Paddle quickly."

Torah Kachur:

Then Johnny saw a break in the waves. He knew it would only last a few seconds. It was their chance to escape the current and paddle out of the danger zone to the beach on the other side of Fingal Head.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

I just stuck my head down as she did the same. We were in sync, and we just paddled like flipping gladiators. And we're actually making ground. I would just scream, "Go, go. We got this."

Torah Kachur:

They escaped the current and emerged on the calmer side of the headland.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

It was like bang, that relief, like finally out of jail. We pulled it off.

Torah Kachur:

They were exhausted. A surprised surfer spotted them and helped them paddle into the beach.

Liv Titor:

As I was walking out of the ocean, I was saying, "Is this it? Are we okay? Am I okay?"

Torah Kachur:

Johnny and Liv were lucky to be alive. They escaped with only minor injuries, just a few scrapes and bruises. They landed on a beach that was patrolled by lifeguards. One lifeguard who witnessed the rescue told them at least six people had drowned at Fingal head in the last few years. Liv found a phone and called her sister.

Liv Titor:

And said, "I'm okay. It's over. Everything's okay. I'm okay." And she was crying and she couldn't believe it.

Torah Kachur:

Liv and Johnny hugged and exchanged numbers and took photos with people on the beach who'd witnessed the rescue. One of the lifeguards showed them drone footage of the rescue.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

And I looked at the footag ... Shit, it was bigger than I thought. It was scary as shit.

Liv Titor:

I realized later that he knew the risk he was taking by jumping after me, and I'm so grateful to him for that. He just risked his own life, pretty much.

Torah Kachur:

The rescue created a real bond between Johnny and Liv. In the weeks after, Liv struggled with guilt.

Liv Titor:

I got a little bit depressed afterwards. Just the disappointment of myself being in that situation, exposing other people like Johnny and putting my sisters through the stress of it and my family.

Torah Kachur:

A few months after the rescue, Liv told Johnny how she was feeling. Then she asked for his help.

Liv Titor:

I told him, "I think I have the fear of water. And I've never swam after the day, and I don't know if I can do it." And he said, "Let's go together."

Torah Kachur:

This time, they went to a beach where lifeguards regularly patrolled the waters.

Liv Titor:

And as soon as I stepped into the water, I was like, "Oh. I have this feeling, this kind of tumble feeling."

Torah Kachur:

Johnny reassured Liv everything would be okay. He held her hand and encouraged her to dive in with him.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

She goes under the water and then came up and then did it a couple of times. She wanted to stay out there. She was stoked. So she certainly got blood in one arm and saltwater in the other.

Liv Titor:

I remember when we dived together under the wave and I was coming out, I was like, "Oh." I felt this weight lifted off my shoulders. I felt so much better. Johnny did help me remember the joy of water.

Torah Kachur:

But Johnny thinks Liv is the one who helped him.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

I was half a shattered man after losing the other chap and then losing my job for nothing. And after I saved Liv, I haven't had a bad thought, mate. I didn't save Liv. She saved me.

Torah Kachur:

Today, Johnny and Liv are good friends. They've met each other's families, and they give presents on birthdays and Christmas. More than a year after the rescue, Johnny is still trying to protect Liv.

Johnny Matthew Gordon:

She's got a new boyfriend. And they come down the other day and I was like the uncle going, "Do the right thing, buddy boy. She's got back up around here, mate. She might be from the Ukraine, but she's a kangaroo now."

Torah Kachur:

Liv is confident she wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for Johnny. But more than that, she knows her life is better because he's in it.

Liv Titor:

It's just his whole energy and how he is, his personality. He lifts up your spirits every time you're around him, and he's amazing person. There's never a dull moment when you're with him, and I feel like I'm very lucky just to have him in my life.

Torah Kachur:

A day at the beach is usually full of sun, fun and surf, so it's easy to forget that the ocean is extremely powerful and, if you don't take the proper precautions, dangerous. One of the biggest dangers is rip currents.

Kelsey Cummings is a member of the California Surf Lifesaving Association and a competitive lifeguard in LA County. Kelsey has helped many people out of trouble at

the beach. So how do you know if a beach has a rip current?

Kelsey Cummings:

Most people are just not familiar with the ocean, so they just don't know what rip currents look like. You can see the water pulling out. The water will typically be a little bit brown and murky and not as many waves breaking. And so they'll be swimming, they'll be standing on a sandbar, and they might accidentally step into a rip current and they're just unaware. It'll be nice and shallow. And if you just step a few steps to the left or to the right, there could be a hole, what we call inshore holes, and those generally feed into rip currents.

So an inshore hole is just where the sand has been dug out based on the ocean conditions. And you could be standing on the sandbar, it's only waist deep, and then a few steps to the right and you're in a hole and you're neck deep. And those holes, generally they feed into the rip current. The water starts to move. When it's deeper, it'll actually be part of the rip current, and then you could get yourself into trouble.

Torah Kachur:

Are rip currents always in the same place, or can they change spots?

Kelsey Cummings:

A lot of beaches do have rip currents located in specific areas. In California, we have a lot of storm drains, and that will dig out the sand in that area and that will cause a rip current. Piers and jetties are known to always have rip currents next to them just because of the way the sand moves. But the holes are really changing every day based on the ocean conditions, where the sand has been moving, because of the waves and the currents and everything.

Torah Kachur:

What are you supposed to do if you're getting caught in a rip current?

Kelsey Cummings:

The best thing to do is to swim parallel to shore. So if you feel yourself getting pulled out, if you just try to swim in. Most people are not quite the strongest swimmers to swim against the rip current, and you'll be swimming for quite a long time and you'll begin to get fatigued. So we tell everyone to swim parallel to shore, either north or south. But you could be swimming for a while until you get into safer water. The best thing to do is to just, as hard as it is to say, to stay calm, signal for help. And then if you feel like you're getting pulled out, to swim parallel to shore. The best way would just be raise your arms. Shake them above your head. Generally, a lifeguard will be watching, and they know the signs of drowning.

Torah Kachur:

And what would be your top tips for people to stay safe in the ocean?

Kelsey Cummings:

I would tell people to always swim near an open lifeguard tower. So always check in with the lifeguard and ask them where the safest place to swim is. Remember that the ocean is a very hazardous environment and to always swim within your abilities. So if you know you're not the strongest swimmer, to probably want to stay waist deep. Don't push yourself to swim out past the large waves if you know it's not within your ability.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's Tell Me What Happened: True Stories of People

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While you're at it, share some love for this podcast. It really helps if you review and rate us or share this with someone who would enjoy it. On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please be safe out there.