



SWIMMING TO ANTARCTICA

TALES OF A LONG-DISTANCE SWIMMER

LYNNE COX


A K N O P F  B O O K



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A KNOPF  BOOK

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To Mom and Dad

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PROLOGUE

A Cold Day in August

It is August 7, 1987, and I am swimming across the Bering Sea. I am somewhere near—or across—the U.S.-Soviet border. The water stings. It's icy cold. My face feels as if it has been shot full of novocaine and it's separating from my skull. It's as if I'm swimming naked into a blizzard. My hands are numb, and they ache deep down through the bone. I can't tell if they are pulling any water. They feel as though they are becoming detached from my body. I look down at them through the ash-colored water: they are splotchy and bluish white; they are the hands of a dead person. I take a tight, nervous breath. Suddenly it occurs to me that my life is escaping through my hands.

This frigid and ominous sea is behaving like an enormous vampire slowly sucking the warmth, the life from my body, and I think, *Oh my God, pick up your pace. Swim faster, faster. You've got to go as fast as you can. You've got to create more heat. Or you will die!*

I try to lift my arms over more rapidly. They are sore and sluggish. I am tired. I have been sprinting, swimming as fast as I can go, for more than an hour. But I sense that I am fading, becoming less of myself. *Is my blood sugar dropping? Is that why I feel so strange? Or is my body temperature plunging? Am I hypothermic?* Systematically I check my body. *My lips feel pickled; my throat is parched and raw from the briny water. I want to stop to drink some fresh water and catch my breath. But the water is too cold to allow me to pause for even a moment. If I do, more heat will be drained from my body, heat that I will never regain.*

Through foggy goggles, I continue monitoring my body. I've never pushed myself this far. The coldest water I've ever swum in was thirty-eight degrees in Glacier Bay Alaska, and that was only for twenty-eight minutes. This swim is five times longer. I am afraid of going beyond the point of no return. The problem is that my brain could cool down without my being aware of it, which would cause a dangerous loss of judgment. I glance at my shoulders and arms: they are as red as lobsters. This is a very good sign. My body is fighting to protect itself from the cold by employing a defense mechanism called vasoconstriction. It is diverting blood flow away from my hands and feet, arms and legs to the core of my body; it is keeping my brain and vital organs warm so they will continue to function normally.

I reach out and pull faster and, through muscle movement, try to create heat more quickly than I am losing it. My breaths are short and rapid, and my chest is heaving. My heart is pounding. I am afraid.

The fog is growing heavier; the air is saturated and raw. It feels as though I am trying to breathe through a wet blanket. With each breath, the chill rolls deeper into my lungs. Now I am cooling down from the inside out. I can't help myself; I think of David Yudovin.

David was a seasoned long-distance swimmer who, during an attempt to swim from Anacapa Island to the California mainland, technically died from hypothermia. His body tried to fight the cold by shunting the blood flow to his brain and vital organs. For a period of time, his core was protected. But at some critical point the blood vessels in his extremities became paralyzed. Blood rushed from his core to his hands and feet, where it was cooled by the fifty-eight-degree water; when it flowed back into his torso, it caused his core temperature to drop. As a result, David became disoriented. His swimming speed dropped, and then his heart went into atrial fibrillation. As he continued to cool down, his heart became less functional, until it suddenly stopped beating altogether.

There had been warning signs: his lips were purple, he was shivering, and his shoulders had turned blue. But his crew didn't recognize the severity of the situation. When they spoke to David, he said he was doing okay, and the decrease in his body temperature was so gradual, they didn't notice his deteriorating condition. Neither did David. His brain had been cooled down so far that he wasn't able to recognize the warning signs. He had no idea he was dying.

At the hospital in Ventura doctors and nurses shot Adrenalin directly into his heart and repeatedly shocked his heart with a defibrillator. They warmed his blood and had him breathe warmed oxygen. An hour and fifty minutes after his initial cardiac arrest, the medical team revived David. He had been lucky.

Will I be that lucky? The water here is twenty degrees colder. Will I be able to recognize if I've gone too far?

Yes. Yes. I will. I can do this. I've broken the world records for the English Channel, I've swum across the frigid waters of the Strait of Magellan, and I've done swims in icy waters where no one else has ever survived.

I can do it.

Thank God (or Ben & Jerry's) for my body fat; it's insulating me from the cold. Still, the cold is moving deep into the marrow of my bones. Chills are curling up my spine and spreading out across my shoulders. My teeth are clenched and my lips are quivering. My muscles are as tight as boards.

I am pushing myself to the limit. But I've got to do this. This swim is not about me. It's about all of us.

It's about doing something that's going to make a positive difference in the world. For eleven years, I have hoped when there was no reason to hope. I have believed when there was little to believe. For the last forty-two years we've been engaged in a Cold War with the Soviets. Somehow it has to be stopped. I believe that this swim will create

a thaw in the Cold War. I cannot fail. If I die doing this, the Soviets will regret giving me permission to make this swim. I can't let that happen. *Swim faster! Don't focus on the cold or the pain. Don't give any energy to it. Focus on the finish. Swim faster.*

I think of my parents, brother, and sisters, of friends and of the people who have gotten me this far. I conjure up their faces in my mind's eye. This gives me energy, and I imagine how wonderful it will feel to embrace the people who are waiting for us on Big Diomedes Island and to hold their warm hands. This is inspiring. I replay a sentence in my head: *Hand to hand, heart to heart, we can change the world*. This is what I have grown to believe.

With every part of my being I am reaching forward, racing against time and the pervasively cold sea.

I lift my head and look up.

Something is very wrong.

Out in front of me, to the left and to the right, are the two thirty-foot-long walrus-skin boats that are supposed to be guiding and protecting me. On board the one to the right is a group of physicians who are monitoring me during the swim. To the left is a boatful of journalists huddled against the chill. Inuit guides—Eskimos who live on Little Diomedes Island—are driving the walrus-skin boats. They are veering away from each other.

The dark fog has grown so thick that our visibility is down to twenty feet. We planned to meet the Soviets at the border so they could guide us to Big Diomedes Island, to their shore. Our guides have never ventured across the border. They were afraid that the Soviets would pick them up and jail them in a Siberian prison. This had happened to relatives. They had been imprisoned for fifty-two days.

Pat Omiak, the lead navigator from Little Diomedes, asks Dr. Keatinge, one of the doctors, "Which direction do you think we should take?" Keatinge says, "I'm not sure."

Like Omiak, he has never ventured into these waters. But he recommends going straight ahead. I follow them. They are making abrupt turns to the right and left. I am frustrated. Each moment we spend off course diminishes our chances of making it across. It hits me that we are lost somewhere in the middle of the Bering Sea. But I keep swimming and I keep thinking, *Please, God, please let the Soviet boats find us*. I strain to see them through the fog, listen for high-pitched engine sounds in the water, feel for vibrations, and continue praying.

When I turn my head to breathe I notice that the boats are drifting away from me. I shout at the top of my lungs, "Move closer! Move closer!"

They have no idea how frightened I am. They don't know what's happened before. I don't know how long I can last.

1

Beginnings

“Please. Please. Please, Coach, let us out of the pool, we’re freezing,” pleaded three purple-lipped eight-year-olds in lane two.

Coach Muritt scowled at my teammates clinging to the swimming pool wall. Usually this was all he had to do to motivate them, and they’d continue swimming. But this day was different. Ominous black clouds were crouched on the horizon, and the wind was gusting from all different directions. Even though it was a mid-July morning in Manchester, New Hampshire, it felt like it would snow.

Cupping his large hands against his red face, and covering the wine-colored birthmark on his left cheek, Coach Muritt bellowed, “Get off the wall! Swim!”

“We’re too cold,” the boys protested.

Coach Muritt did not like to be challenged by anyone, let alone three eight-year-old boys. Irritated, he shouted again at the swimmers to get moving, and when they didn’t respond, he jogged across the deck with his fist clenched, his thick shoulders hunched against the wind and his short-chopped brown hair standing on end. Anger flashed in his icy blue eyes, and I thought, *I’d better swim or I’ll get in trouble too*, but I wanted to see what was going to happen to the boys.

Coach Muritt shook his head and shouted, “Swim and you’ll get warm!”

But the boys weren’t budging. They were shaking, their teeth chattering.

“Come on, swim. If you swim, you’ll warm up,” Coach Muritt coaxed them. He looked up at the sky, then checked his watch, as if trying to decide what to do. In other lanes, swimmers were doing the breaststroke underwater, trying to keep their arms warm. More teammates were stopping at the wall and complaining that they were cold. Laddie and Brooks McQuade, brothers who were always getting into trouble, were breaking rank, climbing out of the pool and doing cannonballs from the deck. Other young boys and girls were joining them.

“Hey, stop it! Someone’s going to get hurt—get your butts back in the water!” Coach Muritt yelled. He knew he was losing control, that he had pushed the team as far as we could go, so he waved us in. When all seventy-five of us reached the wall, he motioned for us to move toward a central lane and then he shouted, “Okay, listen up. Listen up. I’ll make a deal with you. If I let you get out now, you will all change into something warm

and we'll meet in the boys' locker room. Then we will do two hours of calisthenics."

Cheering wildly, my teammates leaped out of the pool, scurried across the deck, grabbed towels slung over the chain-link fence surrounding the pool, and squeezed against one another as they tried to be first through the locker room doors.

Getting out of the water was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. I hated doing calisthenics with the team. Usually we did them five days a week for an hour, after our two-hour swimming workout. A typical workout included five hundred sit-ups, two hundred pushups, five hundred leg extensions, five hundred half sit-ups, two hundred leg lifts on our backs, and two hundred leg lifts on our stomachs. As we did the exercises, Coach Muritt counted and we had to keep pace with him. Between each set of fifty repetitions, he gave us a one-minute break, but if anyone fell off pace or did the exercises incorrectly, he made us start the set all over again. He wanted to make us tough, teach us discipline and team unity. And I didn't mind that. I liked to work hard, and I liked the challenge of staying on pace, but I detested having to start an exercise all over again because someone else was slacking off or fooling around. Brooks and Laddie McQuade were notorious for that. They were always trying to see how much they could get away with before they got caught. For them, it was a big game. Older boys on the team yelled at them and tossed kick-boards at them, but they didn't care; they liked the attention they were getting from the team and the coach. I didn't want to play their game, and I didn't want to do two long hours of calisthenics with them, so I shouted, "Coach Muritt, can I stay in the pool and swim?"

He was wiping his eyes and nose with a handkerchief, and asked incredulously, "Jeez, aren't you freezing?"

"If I keep swimming, I'm okay," I said, and smiled, trying my very best to convince him. I was a chubby nine-year-old, and I was a slow swimmer, so I rarely got a chance to stop and take a rest. But because I just kept going, I managed to constantly create body heat, and that way I stayed warm when all the other swimmers were freezing.

"Is there anyone else who wants to stay in the water?"

"We do," said three of his Harvard swimmers in lane one.

During the college season, Muritt coached the Harvard University Swim Team. He was considered to be one of the best coaches in all of New England; at least a dozen of his college swimmers had qualified for the U.S. Nationals. In the summer, most of his college swimmers worked out with our age groupers on the Manchester Swim Team, and they inspired us by their example. Somehow my parents knew from the start that to become your best, you needed to train with the best. And that's why I think they put my older brother, David, me, and my two younger sisters, Laura and Ruth, into Coach Muritt's swimming program.

Coach Muritt studied the sky, and we followed his gaze. "I still don't like the looks of those clouds," he said pensively.

"Coach, we'll get out immediately if it starts to thunder. I promise," I said, and held my breath, hoping he wouldn't make me do calisthenics.

He considered for a moment, but he was distracted by uproarious laughter, high-

pitched hoots, and shouts coming from the locker room.

“Please, Coach Muritt, please can we stay in?” I said.

“Okay, but I’ll have to take the pace clock or it’s going to blow over—you’ll have to swim at your own pace for the next couple of hours.”

“Thank you, Coach,” I said, and clapped my hands; I was doubly thrilled. I had escaped calisthenics and now I was going to be able to swim for three hours straight. I loved swimming and I loved swimming at my own pace, alone in my own lane, with no one kicking water in my face, and no one behind tapping my toes, telling me I had to swim faster. It was a feeling of buoyant freedom. But swimming into a storm was even better; waves were rushing around me, and lifting me, and tossing me from side to side. The wind was howling, slamming against the chain-link fence so strongly that it sounded like the clanging of a warning bell. I felt the vibrations rattle right through my body, and I wondered if the wind would tear the fence from its hinges. Turning on my side to breathe, I checked the sky. It looked like a tornado was approaching, only without the funnel cloud. I wondered for a second if I should climb out of the water. But I pushed that thought away; I didn’t want to get out. I was immersed in unbridled energy and supernatural beauty, and I wanted to see what would happen next.

My world was reduced to the blur of my arms stroking as a cold, driving rain began. The raindrops that hit my lips tasted sweet and cold, and I enjoyed the sensations of every new moment. The pool was no longer a flat, boring rectangle of blue; it was now a place of constant change, a place that I had to continually adjust to as I swam or I’d get big gulps of water instead of air. That day, I realized that nature was strong, beautiful, dramatic, and wonderful, and being out in the water during that storm made me feel somehow a part of it, somehow connected to it.

When the hail began, the connection diminished considerably. I scrambled for the gutters while the college swimmers leaped out of the water and ran as fast as they could into the locker room. One looked back at me and shouted, “Aren’t you getting out?”

“No, I don’t want to,” I said, crawling into the gutter by the stairs. The hail came down so fast and hard that all I heard was the rush and pinging of the stones as they hit the deck and pool. Thankful for the white bathing cap and goggles protecting my head and eyes, I covered my cheeks with my hands. Hailstones the size of frozen peas blasted my hands, neck, and shoulders, and I winced and cringed and tried to squeeze into a tighter ball, hoping that it would be over soon.

When the hail finally changed to a heavy rain, I crawled out of the gutter and started swimming again. As I pulled my arms through the water, I felt as if I were swimming through a giant bowl of icy tapioca. The hailstones floated to the water’s surface and rolled around my body as I swam through them. I realized that by putting myself in a situation different from everyone else’s, I had experienced something different, beautiful, and amazing.

In the parking lot outside, I saw Mrs. Milligan sitting in her car with her headlights aimed at me. Mrs. Milligan was Joyce’s mother, and Joyce was the fastest and nicest girl on the team. Joyce had qualified for nationals a couple of times, and I wanted to be just

like her. Once I'd asked her why she was so fast. She'd said that she did what Coach Muritt asked of her. It was such a simple statement, but one that was a revelation for me. If I did what Joyce did, then maybe I could also make it to nationals. I wondered how long Mrs. Milligan had been watching me. When I saw my teammates poking their heads out of the locker room, I knew the workout was over, so I climbed out of the pool.

Mrs. Milligan ran to me; her raincoat was plastered to her body and her short brown hair was standing on end. She was carrying a large towel, and when a gust hit it, the towel spread open like a sail. She wrapped it tightly around me and shouted, "How long have you been swimming in this storm?"

"The whole time," I said.

"Oh, my goodness. Coach Muritt let you swim in this?" she said, guiding me quickly into the girls' locker room and putting my hands between hers to warm them.

"He sure did, and I had a lot of fun." I grinned. It had been one of the most enjoyable workouts of my swimming career.

Rubbing the towel rapidly on my back, she bent over and said in my ear, with absolute certainty, "Someday, Lynne, you're going to swim across the English Channel."

It kind of took my breath away, but from the moment she said it, I believed that it could happen. After all, Mrs. Milligan was Joyce's mother, and I knew how her encouragement had helped Joyce become a fast swimmer. Even though I was only nine years old at the time, I somehow knew that one day I would swim the English Channel.

When I stepped out of the locker room, Coach Muritt turned and looked at me with surprise and said, "Are you just getting out of the pool now?"

"Yes, thank you, Coach Muritt. I had so much fun. You know what? Mrs. Milligan said that someday I'm going to swim the English Channel."

He looked at me for a few moments and said, "Yes, I think you will."

I remember telling my mother, as she drove my siblings and me home from workout in her bright red Buick station wagon, "Mom, Mrs. Milligan said that someday I'm going to swim the English Channel."

Without giving it much consideration, she said, "Well, if you train hard, I'm sure someday you probably will."

I couldn't wait to get home. I ran upstairs, grabbed our National Geographic atlas, and flipped through it until I found the page that featured England and France. Then I began to wonder, How far across is the English Channel? Where do you start to swim? I studied the map and the idea began to take hold in my mind. Maybe someday I would swim the English Channel.

Leaving Home

Three years later, when I was twelve years old, my father came home from work one winter evening, opened that same atlas to the pages depicting the United States, and placed the map on the dining room table. He motioned for my brother and sisters and me to look at the map.

“Your mother and I have been discussing moving. We believe that if you want to be successful with your swimming, you need to train with a top-notch coach. We’ve done our research and found that most of the best swimming programs are in these areas,” he said, pointing to Arizona, California, and Hawaii.

We crowded around the table, and my mother said, “We’re tired of the long, cold winters, and your father would like to work with a new group of radiologists with more up-to-date radiology equipment.”

I had never thought of leaving New Hampshire. I loved it there. I loved exploring the wide-open fields of wild red poppies and bright yellow daylilies, the deep emerald forests. I loved gathering brilliantly colored leaves in fall, and building snow caves in the winter. But I knew that I wanted to be a great swimmer.

My father said, “We need to make this decision as a family. If there is anyone who doesn’t want to move, we will stay here.”

For the next couple of weeks we discussed the idea and finally decided to move to California. And with each day I grew more excited. I’d never been there before, but I’d seen it on television and I expected to be surrounded by ranches and cowboys, and large orange orchards. When we flew over Los Angeles, I couldn’t believe what I saw. Below us in the haze of thin smog was a cement city that filled the entire basin, spread to the mountains, and expanded out along the coast. And I had this sinking feeling inside.

Somehow my father knew that it was important for the family to make an immediate connection with California so we would feel like we belonged. He drove us directly from the airport down the 405 freeway to the Belmont Plaza Olympic swimming pool in Long Beach. This was where we would be training with Don Gambril, the head coach for the United States Olympic Team. Gambril had an age-group club team called Phillips 66, which we planned to join, and he coached a college team at California State University, Long Beach. In coaching circles, Gambril was known as one of the best in the world, and

because of that he was able to recruit Olympic swimmers from around the world to swim for his college team.

The Belmont Plaza swimming complex had been built for the 1968 Olympic Trials. It was an enormous modern building of tinted glass and metal, situated on a plot of land four hundred yards from the beach, near the Long Beach pier. We stood outside, just staring at the building. Then my mother said, "Look, it's open. There are people inside."

I pulled the heavy glass door open and stepped into the spectators' area. All at once warm, heavy, humid, chlorine-filled air engulfed me. Off to my right was an enormous rectangular pool fifty meters long and twenty-five yards wide. Only a year old, it was beautiful. The water was crystal blue, and the deep blue tile along the edge of the pool sparkled. From the moment I saw it I knew this was a sea of dreams, almost a sacred place. This was the place where the best in the United States had competed to represent us in the Olympic Games. This was the arena, the stage, where they'd played out their dreams, where they'd given everything they had to be the best. I could almost hear the cheers of the crowd reverberating off the walls and glass windows and skylit ceiling. This building was full of energy, and I was absorbing it. I couldn't wait to jump into that pool, and I couldn't wait to meet Don Gambril.

We drove from the pool to a rental home. Long Beach was just one big city, and I didn't like it. California was not what I had expected it to be. It was a concrete desert with palm trees. A place where all the cities ran together and all the houses looked alike. I felt boxed in, lonely, isolated, and I just wanted to go home. But that wasn't possible. Our house in New Hampshire had been sold. My parents told us that we would have to buy a new one if we returned. I cried through the night. Nothing they did could console me.

A couple of days later, my brother and sisters and I met with Mr. Gambril. He was a bear of a man, five foot ten, a former football player with a thick neck, a crew cut, and dark brown eyes. I liked him. He was kind and had a quick smile and an instant way of making us feel welcome. He started the team on their warm-up set and pulled us to the side and told us what he expected of us. We had to be at the pool in time for each workout. If we were late we wouldn't be allowed to get into the water. We would work out for two hours a day to start with, and if we did well we could eventually do two workouts a day, for a total of four hours. He told us he expected us to work hard, but also to have fun. He didn't want us on the team if we didn't want to be there. Then he explained what we could expect of him. He would coach us for the workouts and prepare us for the swim meets, and he would keep track of our progress during both. He also expected us to keep track of our times during workouts and get our results from swim meets. He told us he would always be available to answer our questions. "Do you understand all of this?" he asked.

We nodded. I glanced at Laura, ten years old; Ruth, seven; and David, who was fourteen. They were as wide-eyed as I was. We knew we were now in an entirely different league. This was serious. And if we didn't follow these rules, we wouldn't make the team.

We walked along the pool's edge and stopped at each lane so Mr. Gambril could

introduce the team members. Squatting down to their level, he told us kids' names, joked with them, teased them a little without using sarcasm, and told us funny anecdotes or habits about some of the kids, making them laugh. It was obvious that they loved and respected him.

Mr. Gambril explained that lane assignments were designated according to a swimmer's speed, race distance, stroke preference, and age. Girls and boys trained together. The first two lanes were for the slowest swimmers. This would be where we started working out; as we improved, we would be moved to the faster lanes. Lanes three and four were for the fast age-group swimmers, five and six were for the Olympic sprinters, and seven and eight were for the Olympic distance swimmers. That was where I wanted to be, in lane eight.

"Do you have any questions?" he asked, willing to answer anything.

Mustering my courage, I said, "Mr. Gambril, how old do you have to be to swim in the Olympic distance lanes?"

There was a flash of recognition in his eyes. "Please call me Coach," he said. "You don't need to be formal here. You can be any age to swim in lane eight, as long as you are able to do the workout at the pace of the swimmers in that lane." He knew that the difference in speed between the swimmers in lane eight and mine was like the distance between the moon and Neptune, an enormous difference; but Coach Gambril was the master of inspiring dreams. He made a long, high-pitched whistle through his teeth to get the swimmers' attention. They were in the middle of a kicking set. "Hans, Gunnar, come on over here. I want to introduce you to the Cox family."

As they kicked toward the wall, Coach Gambril told us about their amazing background: "Hans is from Germany, and Gunnar is from Sweden. They are on my team at Cal State Long Beach. Both are also training for spots on their Olympic teams. If they keep working hard, they have a great chance. Right now Hans Fassnacht is the fastest man in world in the mile and the fifteen-hundred-meter freestyle, and he has a very good chance of winning the gold medal for Germany at the 1972 Olympic Games. Gunnar Larsson swims the four-hundred medley, all four strokes, four laps each. He's one of the fastest men in the world for that event, and he also has a great chance of winning a gold medal in the 1972 Olympics, for Sweden. If he keeps working hard," Coach added, making sure they heard him.

Sunlight as if from the gods poured down through the skylight in one solid, bright beam, illuminating Hans and Gunnar. As they stood up in the pool, glistening water streamed down their faces, rippled down from their wide shoulders, along their muscular chests, and tapered along their powerful arms. They looked like Greek sculptures of Olympic athletes, only better, for they were alive and they were speaking to me. I could hardly believe it as, in a strong German accent, Hans was saying to me, "Welcome to the team." He extended his hand to each of us. It must have been twice as large as mine and thick with muscles.

Gunnar echoed the welcome: "Glad to have you join us." His voice lilted with his heavy Swedish accent. And he reached up, too, and shook our hands. His hands were bigger than Hans's, like paddles instead of hands.

Getting to talk with them was pretty heady stuff. But somehow I managed to reply, "Thank you. Someday I hope I will be able to swim in your lane." I was a chubby, awkward twelve-year-old girl without any intense training and with no reason to believe I could ever be as good as they were. I was only filled with hope and promise. And they were also so much older than I was, perhaps nineteen or twenty years old. But they recognized that they had once been like me, at the very beginning of their dreams. And they understood what it was like to leave everything they knew behind, in pursuit of their dreams.

Hans smiled at me and there was real kindness in his brown eyes. "If you work very hard, someday you will swim here in lane eight with us."

"And when you make it here, then you will have to work even harder." Gunnar laughed. His light blue eyes shone. He had a pleasing face, oval shaped with a square jaw, light clear skin, and very blond hair.

Adjusting to life in California was difficult. Seventh grade was miserable; I was shy and felt like I didn't fit in. In New Hampshire, students never spoke unless the teacher called on them for an answer. Students never moved out of their chairs. It was so different in California. Classmates blurted out answers, and even turned around in their seats to talk to other students without the teachers disciplining them.

My parents always stressed that first I needed to be an excellent student, and second an athlete. So I paid attention, worked hard, and got good grades, but in my physical education class I was terrible. I was the slowest runner, the worst softball thrower, and during my introduction to gymnastics I broke my foot in two places attempting a back walkover. Worse than that, my physical education teacher, a woman named Miss Larson, disliked me. She thought I wasn't making any effort at all in class. She screamed at me every day to try harder. I did, but how can you do better if no one shows you how? How can you make corrections if someone doesn't show you what you need to correct? I dreaded being in her class and I even had nightmares about her. But in her class I made my first true friend, Cathy Kuhnau. We had spoken a few times in French class, and she had helped me understand French grammar. We were also the worst tennis players in Miss Larson's class. Cathy was petite and I was chubby; no one wanted us, so naturally we became doubles partners. We tried hard, but we were both so unskilled that neither of us could hit the ball over the net. This became an advantage; when Miss Larson came across the court and yelled at us, we got her wrath together.

I was still unhappy in junior high school, but my solace was swimming with the team. Making friends with them wasn't easy. When I swam on the team in New Hampshire, we took time to hang on to the walls and talk. The swimmers on the Phillips 66 team were so much more intense, even in lane two. No one stopped in the middle of a set and talked. No one suddenly did a somersault just for fun. Everyone was serious. Worse than that, I was always the last one to finish in lane two. It was very discouraging, but one day when Coach Gambril came by to check on the swimmers in my lane, he figured out what I was doing wrong. He had us doing a series of thirty one-hundred-meter drills in one minute and forty-five-second intervals. This meant that we were supposed to swim two laps of the pool, check our time, and begin swimming again when the hands of the

pace clock at the edge of the pool hit the one-minute-and-forty-five-second mark. Most of the swimmers got ten seconds' rest.

Coach Gambril stopped me and asked, "What was your time for your last one hundred?"

"I don't know," I said.

He looked like he was going to get mad. "Didn't I tell you that you have to keep track of your times during workouts, so you know how you're doing? Well, then, why didn't you get it?"

"I never have time to stop. I had to keep going so I could stay up with the other kids," I said.

"You mean to say that for the last six months you've been swimming through every one of these workouts without taking any rest?"

I nodded, sure that I was in big trouble.

He shook his head and sighed. "I'm so sorry; I should have been watching you more closely. It's okay for you to stop. You need to take a break between each one hundred or two hundred, whatever we're doing. From now on, I want you to take at least ten seconds' rest."

I looked down at the water, afraid that he wouldn't understand.

"What's wrong?" His voice softened.

"If I do that, I'll be even farther behind the other swimmers." I hated to be behind.

"That's okay; by resting and working each set harder, you'll get stronger. If the kids are doing a set of ten one hundreds or ten two hundreds, just do eight. If you train with more intensity, you will get faster, and I'll bet it won't be long before you are the lead swimmer in the lane," he reassured me.

I could tell he cared about me, and he knew what he was doing, so I followed what he said.

He was right: within a few months, I was the lead swimmer in my lane. Still, it was only lane two. I wanted to continue improving, but I wasn't sure what it took to become faster.

During workouts, Coach Gambril had our top swimmers demonstrate their strokes for us, to show the techniques they used to move through the water. Sometimes we watched films with stroke analysis, but seeing the swimmers in the water with us made it so much easier to understand.

From lane two I began watching Hans and Gunnar, trying to see what they were doing so I could imitate them. It was obvious that they worked out with incredible intensity. Everything they did got their fullest effort. They never cruised through workouts or just got by. It was amazing that they could push themselves so hard. I didn't fully understand it. I didn't know that they were pushing through the pain and fatigue barriers; I was just trying to complete the workouts. But one day I asked one of the top breaststroke swimmers in the nation why she was so fast. She said that she worked hard on every lap, every single day. The message about what it takes to be the best became clearer.

During one workout, Coach Gambril made a “deal” with Hans: if Hans could swim the mile race under a specific time, the whole team could get out of the water early. Hans agreed to the deal. We all moved to lane five, where the water was calmer. Half the team stood in lane four, the other half in lane six, preparing to cheer him on.

Hans climbed out onto the pool deck, walked around, shook his arms, and psyched himself up so much that he hyperventilated and collapsed on the pool deck. He twisted and contorted like a fish out of water, gasping for air. Immediately Coach Gambril grabbed a paper bag from the office, dumped the contents on the pool deck, raced over, and put the bag over Hans’s head, so he could get enough carbon dioxide in his blood to stimulate breathing. The bag moved in and out as he sucked in air. In shock, the team stood on deck to watch. It seemed like it took forever before Hans sat up slowly and pulled the bag off his head. He looked dazed and frightened, and he really scared me. I couldn’t believe that this was happening to my hero. He got through it, and it made me appreciate Hans even more; it showed me the focus it took to be a champion, the strong connection between the mind and body.

Two weeks later, near the end of the workout, Coach Gambril asked Hans if he wanted to try a “deal” again. The deal was that he would swim the mile in segments: fifteen one hundreds, with a ten-second rest in between each one hundred. This was an exercise that would give him enough rest to go fast, and also enable him to feel the speed he would need to maintain for an Olympic race. When it got closer to the time of the Olympic Games, he repeated this exercise with only a five-second rest in between each one hundred, and then months before the Olympics he would do it again with only a one-second rest.

The whole team stopped what they were doing, lined the wall, and instantly became silent. Hans looked at us and then said, “Okay. I think I can do it.”

“All right, Hans. Let’s go then! Come on, you can do it,” team members encouraged him.

My heart was pounding in my chest when Hans climbed out of the pool. I thought, *I hope he’s not going to collapse on the deck again.* Hans curled his toes around the edge of the pool, bent over, and flexed his knees. As Coach Gambril whistled he circled his arms and sprang into the air. In flight he heard the entire team shouting, “Go, Hans! Go!” And he entered the water like a torpedo. In seconds he was moving like a speedboat across the pool, arms and legs propelling him forward, with a wide bubbling wake behind him.

When he reached the wall after the first hundred, he rested for ten seconds. As he pushed off this time, four of the older girls and boys jumped out of the water, picked up their towels, and waved them in giant circles so Hans could see them as he swam.

He made the second one hundred on time. He pushed off again, and the team began shouting louder. Other swimmers got up on the deck to walk along with him, waving their towels, encouraging him to swim faster. In the background we heard Coach Gambril making a loud piercing whistle, urging Hans to go faster. He made the third, fourth, and fifth times, but by the eleventh he began to slow down. The team went wild, jumped up and down, pushed him with their voices. Finally, after the fifteenth one hundred, when Hans touched the wall at the finish, he looked up, gasping for air, and

Coach Gambril broke into a huge smile and said, “You did it. You made the time by three seconds. And all you have to do now is go three seconds faster with an unbroken swim and you’ll break the world record.”

Hans grinned, and everyone hugged him and patted him on the back. And a few days later, Gunnar made a nearly record-breaking swim in workout in the eight-hundred individual medley.

One day after practice, I swam across the pool and asked them if they would watch me swim and help me with my stroke. They both said, “Sure.”

Hans demonstrated the freestyle for me, and Gunnar swam the butterfly, backstroke, and breaststroke. Then they had me swim for them.

“You look really good, but you need to change your breathing if you’re going to be a long-distance swimmer,” Hans said. “Try breathing every third or fifth stroke—that will help you balance out your stroke. And you could try kicking a bit harder on your freestyle.”

And Gunnar added, “When you’re pulling the water with your hands, try to accelerate through your stroke, starting out, say, at one mile an hour and speeding up to one hundred miles an hour. You’ll get more from your pull.”

So I practiced what they told me, listened to Gambril, and worked hard. I enjoyed being a part of the team. And there was nothing as satisfying as seeing myself improving, getting stronger, and even having a few seconds to talk with the kids on the team when we took short rest breaks.

Gradually I began to feel I was accepted. We had been doing long and hard workouts during Christmas vacation and everyone was tired and grouchy. Gambril was about to tell the team what we were going to be doing when I came up from behind him, lifted all 220 pounds of him up, and hung him over the edge of the pool. “How far are we swimming tonight, Coach?” I asked.

The college swimmers broke into cheers. “Drop him in; let him go.” And the rest of the team joined in.

Coach Gambril was so shocked, at first he didn’t know what to say. When he found his voice he warned, “You better not drop me.”

I laughed really hard so he couldn’t be sure what I was going to do. The tension in the pool immediately lifted. After that, whenever I sensed that the team was dragging, I’d sneak up behind Gambril and dangle him over the pool, sometimes letting him slip just a little for drama. He would squawk and threaten to make us swim more if I dropped him.

During the course of that first year, Gambril watched over me, gave me pointers, and simply cared. Because of that I was strong enough to move up into lane three. I wanted to improve more quickly, so after a while I asked him if I could start doing double workouts at the college, along with my brother and the college team. I was fourteen years old. He suggested that I wait until I was a year older. He thought it was too soon to start me on four hours a day. All summer long I worked hard, and I moved up to lane four. Finally Gambril agreed to let me start double workouts.

But there was one huge stumbling block: Miss Larson. I had the misfortune to have her for my second year of physical education. And I could only participate in Gambрил's morning workouts if I was released from her class. We were learning how to play basketball, and I was doing well, until the day she came by to watch us play

The game was tied, and we were in the final five seconds of the match. Someone threw the ball to me. Determined to show her that I wasn't a total failure, I leaped up, hit the basket, and collided with three other girls. They landed on top of me on the asphalt. For the first time, Miss Larson said, "Good job." I held back my tears. I'd hit the ground so hard that I had heard my elbow crack and I felt the pain spread up my arm and start to throb. All I could think was, How is this going to affect my swimming? And I knew Miss Larson was going to be mad at me for hurting myself. But I didn't say a word. That year I didn't enjoy school any more than the previous year, but I wanted to get high grades, and I didn't want to miss any classes. But by the end of the day, I couldn't straighten my arm, so much fluid had accumulated in the joint, and it was hot and throbbing with each heartbeat. Finally I asked to leave school one period early.

My father was working at the hospital, and when he read the X ray he said that I had fractured my elbow. He said that usually a fracture like the one I had was put in a cast in a bent position. But if my elbow healed that way, I would never regain full extension of my arm. So he said he would put my arm in a sling. He told me I could continue working out. I wouldn't be able to swim using my arms; I could just kick with a kickboard. But the water would support my arm and reduce the swelling; gradually I would be able to start using my arm again, and the resistance of the water would strengthen it.

When Miss Larson saw me the next day at school she was furious. She thought I was faking the injury. She demanded that I bring in a doctor's note. I showed her the X rays. She was angry that I had to take an adaptive physical education class. She didn't realize that she was a great motivator: as soon as my arm healed, I asked Coach Gambрил again if I could do double workouts. He agreed.

My father set up a meeting with the principal, Mr. Hughes, and Miss Larson. Mr. Hughes was willing to let me out of physical education class, but Miss Larson fought to keep me in. She said that I needed the full range of athletic experience and the social experience. She said I was far too shy. My father argued on my behalf, explaining that I had a talent for swimming; it was both a gift and something I had worked hard for. He was able to convince the principal to let me out of her class, and I was overjoyed.

3

Open Water

After I'd been training with Coach Gambril for two years, he noticed that my times were beginning to level off and I was getting frustrated. But Gambril also noticed something that I wasn't aware of: I was stronger at the end of the workout than I was at the beginning. Gambril had insight that no one else had and realized that my problem was that there weren't any races long enough for me in a swimming pool. At that time, there wasn't even a 1500-meter race for women in the Olympic Games. He recognized that it didn't make any sense to continue coaching me in the pool for a race that didn't exist. So after one workout, Coach Gambril said, "Lynne, why don't you enter the Seal Beach Rough Water Swim? There are one-, two-, and three-mile races. It's an ocean swim, and a couple of other swimmers have done it and had fun. Why don't you try the three-mile race?"

I loved swimming in open water. That was where I'd first learned to swim, along with my brother and sisters. My grandparents had a camp on a lake in Maine called Snow Pond. It was the place where we spent our summers, learning how to kick and blow bubbles. Our dalmatian, Beth, would jump in and paddle over to us.

My grandfather, Arthur Daviau, had been an excellent swimmer. He had swum across many of the lakes in Maine, and once rescued some college students who had fallen out of their canoe in the Hudson River. He had taught my mother to swim, and she in turn taught us.

Snow Pond was the center of our lives in the summertime; we swam along the edges of the pond, paddled our red canoe to explore the Messalonskee River, to the north, and at night fished with our grandfather near the islands in the middle of the pond. Once my grandfather told me he had swum all the way from our camp to an island and back, about three miles. He showed me the island he had swum to, and I always wanted to swim to it too.

The three-mile race started at six in the morning. When we checked in we were given numbers to pin to the back of our swim-suits. Mine was lucky 13.

We stood shoulder to shoulder along the shore, an official fired the starting gun, and we ran across the beach and dolphined under the waves. The water was cold, salty, buoyant, smooth, and the deepest blue. And I swam as if I had learned to fly I raced

across the water. My strokes felt powerful, and I felt strong, alive, as if awakened for the first time. Nothing in the swimming pool gave me this pleasure. I was free, moving fast, feeling the waves lifting and embracing me, and I couldn't believe how happy I was. It was like I had gone from a cage into limitless possibilities. With each stroke, my own strength grew; I felt the speed, the wake my body created, just like Hans's did in the pool when he swam freestyle. It was such a tremendous sensation, as if I had found my place, finally, found my niche in the universe. I swam with all my heart, and found myself passing one swimmer after another. *I am really going somewhere. I am really moving forward.* I lifted my head up and I could see the oil rig that represented the halfway point in the distance, about a mile away. I couldn't believe I had swum so fast, but there was nothing holding me back. There were no walls, no black lines to follow, no lane lines or backstroke flags; I was surrounded by the wide-open sea and the infinite sky filled with puffy white clouds.

Before I knew it, I rounded the large white buoy in front of the oil rig and started my return to shore. I felt currents tugging me first in one direction, then the other, and I wondered with great fascination how the currents moved, how they chose a direction.

Everything was new, fresh, alive, and wonderful. The water played like music around my head, my shoulders shimmered in the sunlight, and I grew stronger, my strokes became more powerful. I went faster and faster, catching more swimmers, delighted with everything. There were white sails on the horizon, slowly drifting toward me; pelicans soared overhead in single file, wings stretched wide, each bird riding the tailwind of the bird ahead. There were fishing boats, with seagulls circling and crying overhead.

I could see the end of the pier and there were people cheering. I saw my mother smiling at me, in a warm, honey-colored coat, and my tall father standing beside her, clapping. They were waving at me. And I was elated. I was flying across the water, stronger, so much stronger than when I'd started. I passed two more male swimmers, saw the beach beneath the water, rode a wave in to shore, ran up the beach, and won the race. For the first time, I'd finished first. It wasn't the age-group race; it was the women's race, and I was thrilled. When the results of the swim were posted, I discovered that I had come in third in the overall standings. That meant that I had raced against not just kids my age but men and women who were much older.

Just an hour later, I entered the two-mile race. It didn't matter that I hadn't had much rest; I felt all warmed up. And this time, I ran across the beach faster, cleared the waves, and won the second race. Then I entered the one-mile race and placed second place. I wanted to do better, but another girl was faster. Still, it was sweetly satisfying to realize that there was something out there for me. All those years of training in the pool had paid off. My parents came over and wrapped a towel around me. "You did a great job," my mother said. Her brown eyes shimmered, and she smiled. My father patted me solidly on the back. "Good job," he said. "How did you feel?"

"I felt great. I wonder if there are other rough-water races. This was so much fun."

Over the P.A. system, Ron Blackledge, the coach of the Seal Beach Swim Team, was announcing that some of the members of his team were going to be attempting a swim

across the Catalina Channel. In a straight line, it was a twenty-one-mile trip from Catalina Island to the California mainland. I don't know why I even thought that it might be possible, but I knew I wanted to do it more than anything I had ever done before.

The next morning at workout I asked Coach Gambрил if he would ask Ron Blackledge if I could train with his team and attempt the swim with them.

Ron Blackledge called me that evening. He said he had seen me swim and yes, he would be pleased to have me join them. He explained that I didn't have to commit right away; I could come to some of their workouts and see what they were like. The team was training six days a week, with Sundays off for recovery. Workouts started at five a.m. and went for three to four hours, depending on the distance they were swimming that day. The team had been training for this swim for a year. They planned to make the swim in August, so I would have only six weeks to train with them. "Is this really something you'd be interested in doing? It's a lot different from working out in a pool," Ron cautioned.

"Yes, I really want to do this. I'm so excited that you'll let me try out for the team," I said.

The next morning, my mother drove me to Seal Beach. Beneath the lights of the pier, a group of swimmers were standing in a semicircle around Ron, huddling against the morning chill, while Ron discussed the previous day's workout. He made comments to each swimmer about his or her performance. That was important to me. He saw each swimmer as an individual, and this was how he ensured I would know exactly how I was doing.

"Oh, hello, Lynne." Ron was in his thirties and had a youthful face, wavy dark brown hair, brown eyes, and thin gold-rimmed glasses. He motioned for me to join them, and suggested that my mother join the other mothers on the pier. In a few minutes he would be going up there, where they could watch us swim together.

Ron went around the circle making introductions: "This is Stacey Fresonske, Nancy Dale, Dennis Sullivan, Dale O'Connor, and Andy Taylor. Andy is the youngest one here—he's twelve. Everyone else is the same age as you, fourteen." They each said hello and immediately made me feel welcome.

"This is Lynne's first time working out in the ocean," Ron said, "so I want you to help her, teach her what you have learned. Okay, you're going to start with a mile warm-up. Stretch it out and stay together. Lynne, you swim between Stacey and Dale. Okay, let's get started."

At 5:00 a.m. the Pacific Ocean was onyx black, illuminated only by the small globe lights along the pier.

Stacey led the way into the water, advising, "Make sure to slide your feet along the bottom. There are lots of stingrays here. They look like small bat rays, but they have a long tail with a stinger at the very tip, and they'll zap you if you step on them. It's just a defensive mechanism—they don't attack—but if you get stung, your foot will become as large as a football. If you slide your feet, you'll stir up the bottom sand and scare them away."

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