

THE FOREVER SWIM



ANTONIO ARGÜELLES

The thrilling and inspiring story
of the seventh person to complete
the Oceans Seven

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Passion

Strait of Gibraltar

Adapt

The Tsugaru Strait

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The
Forever
Swim

— THE OCEANS SEVEN —

2017
The North
Channel

—
TIME
13 HR 32 MIN
—
DISTANCE
35 KM

2016
The Ka'iwi
Channel

—
TIME
23 HR 10 MIN
—
DISTANCE
45 KM

2017
The Catalina
Channel

—
TIME
14 HR 27 MIN
—
DISTANCE
32.3 KM

2015
Strait of
Gibraltar

—
TIME
4 HR 23 MIN
—
DISTANCE
14.4 KM

2017
Cook
Strait

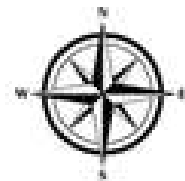
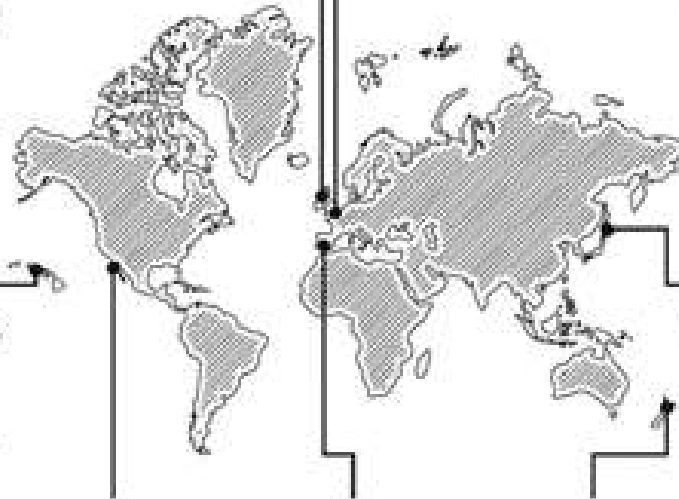
—
TIME
11 HR 22 MIN
—
DISTANCE
23 KM

2009
The English
Channel

—
TIME
12 HR 54 MIN
—
DISTANCE
33.5 KM

2015
The Tsugaru
Strait

—
TIME
12 HR 38 MIN
—
DISTANCE
19.5 KM



The Forever Swim

ANTONIO
ARGÜELLES



EDITORIAL
REVERTÉ

To Shirley and Bill Lee, who adopted me and treated me like their own child, and whose affection and generosity I will never forget. The opportunity they gave me changed my life and enabled this journey.

PROLOGUE

You are about to set out, dear reader, on a fascinating journey. Thanks to this book, you will accompany Antonio Argüelles on an amazing adventure that very few human beings have dared to attempt and that only six before Antonio had completed: swimming across seven channels located in seven different seas.

A feat. An ambitious exploit. An adventure so audacious that comes close to madness and that involved swimming continuously for more than four hours in the case of the shortest crossing, the 14.4-kilometer Strait of Gibraltar, and for almost a full day in that of the longest, the 45-kilometer Kaiwi Channel. Accomplishing this feat meant enduring waters colder than the human body is usually capable of withstanding—according to the experts—as well as depriving himself of sleep for very long periods of time while performing intense physical activity. As if that were not enough, Antonio conquered this triumph at the ripe age of 58, thus becoming the oldest swimmer to complete it.

You will enjoy, attentive reader, a detailed, entertaining, and sometimes chilling account of each of the crossings that comprise the Oceans Seven, since it so happens that Toño, besides being a good swimmer, is a very good storyteller—his excellent co-author, Adam Skolnick, can certainly attest to that.

I imagine, sensitive reader, that you will suffer—as I did—in the many difficult moments, some of them almost tragic, that the protagonist of this adventure experienced as he covered such long distances in open and inhospitable waters. You will also rejoice with admiration when you read of his triumphant landings in the conquered channels, after having overcome episodes that put his physical ability, strength, and will to the test, and after having been able to

find the courage not to give up and to keep swimming, literally defeating the most adverse currents until reaching the long-awaited shore.

In addition, diligent and curious reader, you will accompany Antonio in the discovery of the geography, cultures, and people of the places that generously welcomed him in each of the stages of his feat. A very important part of the story Antonio tells is what he had to do before—long before— starting each of his seven successful swims. As much as in these admirable achievements of will and physical effort, Antonio gives us a very important life lesson when he tells us how he came up with the idea of completing these seven epic feats; how he made a plan to prepare himself and how he carried it out step by step with firm discipline. Along the way, as he tells this story, Antonio walks us through the unique circumstances, dreams, and vicissitudes of his childhood, youth, and maturity.

Another great lesson is in the way in which Toño recognizes the importance of the people who have motivated, trained, and supported him in his extraordinary adventures. With sincerity, gratitude, and humility, he recognizes that his successes are also those of others, a message that is no small thing in this age of abominable narcissism and individualism.

Immerse yourself without further delay, enthusiastic reader, in Antonio Argüelles' very special journeys, because I can assure you that you will enjoy them very much.

ERNESTO ZEDILLO PONCE DE LEÓN

Yale University

PREFACE

Dream

When it's going well, I can feel its rhythm. The way the sea rises and falls, as I reach with my right arm, then my left, extending to my very physical limit. My legs and feet flutter and churn a wake behind me while I count the strokes that propel me forward above an abyss of inky blue.

Even with a support crew on my escort boat nearby, the hours bleed into one another, and I begin to feel alone, adrift in the channel, kilometers from my starting point, kilometers from the nearest shore. It's a longing, a beautiful kind of loneliness. Under the moonlight, in the rain, beneath a relentless sun, I swim, I sign my name in the tides.

Numbers keep me company. My stroke count occupies my brain with an endless, monotonous task. As I push my body, it's helpful to give my mind something to do. Necessary even. An unoccupied mind is a ticking time bomb, a disaster in waiting when combined with pain and discomfort: it will rebel or short circuit, like a country without opportunity.

Don't we all crave purpose? In endurance sports, especially open water swimming, like in politics and life itself, most failures are an inside job. So, I feed my mind numbers. I hand it bland tasks until it surrenders all identity, unifies around a single purpose, and I lose track of myself entirely.

Before any marathon swim begins or after it's finally over, once I've reached a destination my team and I have envisioned and worked towards for years, there's a buzz of

immediacy in the air. But the swim itself feels as elastic as a dream.

A running clock ticks and tocks like white noise I can hear even in those moments when I give into the illusion, float up and out of my body high enough to peer down with a seabird's eye on the entire scene and see the truth. No matter how hard I train or how strong I feel, I'm at nature's mercy; a mere dot in a vast expanse of dark water, which swirls with currents guided by winds, and connects or divides shores and people.

Ever since I was a young boy, dwarfed by the immensity of Mexico City, riding streetcars to city pools, swimming has been my passion; that thing I've loved over and above everything else. At various times in my life, my entire being has been shaped by swimming. I've chased Olympic dreams. I swam at Stanford University in California, and though I've worked in education and politics throughout my adult life and have run marathons, competed in triathlons and climbed mountains, it is to the water where I always return. Because no matter what else is happening in my life, good or bad, in the water I always feel free.

That's what I remembered in 2012 when I found myself towed under by the currents of life once again and woke up in a hospital bed. One minute I was at lunch, talking about climbing Mount Everest, and the next I'd slipped on the stairs, planted my foot to stop my fall, felt my leg buckle, and heard my femur crack.

During the long months of recovery, I was bored and depressed because I couldn't move. I spent six weeks at home without being able to go out, and that meant a long spell away from work. My unoccupied mind verged on rebellion and implosion, until the cast came off and I got back in the pool for the first time in three years. On terra firma, I was still limping, but in the water I was fully operational. The more I swam, the better I felt.

Then one day, after a nourishing swim at Sport City—my gym in Mexico—I ran into a good friend who told me about a new challenge called the Oceans Seven. It was created by Steven Munatones, one of open water swimming's most devoted enthusiasts and documentarians. He'd created an unprecedented challenge of seven geographically diverse channels, the aquatic version of climbing the Seven Summits—the highest points on each of the seven continents sought after by elite mountaineers.

When I got home, I logged online and the more I read about the challenges inherent in each individual swim, the more excited I became. The iconic, 33.5-kilometer long English Channel was on the Oceans Seven list, along with the 32.3-kilometer Catalina Channel. The longest was the Ka'iwi Channel, which stretches for 45 kilometers between the islands of Oahu and Molokai in Hawaii. New Zealand's 23-kilometer Cook Strait was the southern most crossing, and the 19.5-kilometer Tsugaru strait in Japan was Asia's entry. The 14.4-kilometer Strait of Gibraltar between Spain and Morocco was the shortest. Each of those six channels delivered their own particular set of hazards, including high winds, towering ocean swells, sharks, jellyfish, and busy shipping lanes, but the North Channel, which connects Northern Ireland and Scotland with 35 kilometers of frigid, dark water, was the coldest, most unpredictable, and most difficult of all.

The mere thought of swimming all over the world woke something up within me. Suddenly, my mind was no longer sluggish or surly; it was singularly focused. I ramped up my commitment and trained every day in the pool. Each weekend, I swam for hours at a time at Las Estacas, a cool, spring fed river near Cuernavaca, 90 minutes from Mexico City, and I regularly flew to La Jolla and San Francisco to taste the cold waters of the Pacific. Within a year, this was no longer a passing notion or a distant dream, but reality. In July 2015, I boarded a plane to Spain, where I would

begin my quest to become just the seventh person, the first Mexican, and the oldest swimmer to complete the Oceans Seven.

Each swim taught me something vital, delivering lessons of risk, passion, adaptation, and perseverance. I learned to manage my fear and doubt and how to let go. More than anything, I learned how small I really am. How small we all are.

Often times our troubles and personal drama can feel all-encompassing, when in reality all we are is a speck of consciousness here on Earth to glow for as long as we can, like fleeting bioluminescence in an infinite sea. But as long as we are here, why not burn as brightly as possible? Why not risk everything, wake early and train hard, work your ass off all day long, drink deeply of all that life offers?

Why not swim across oceans?

Every hour of the day, all over the world, oceans relax and nourish neurotic sinners like me. They feed us and nurture all life by absorbing carbon from the atmosphere, while its phytoplankton photosynthesizes the oxygen that keeps us alive. And sometimes they hit back and brew hurricanes and typhoons of terrifying force. Oceans are all powerful, magnificent, and unpredictable, reminding us how fragile we are.

The sea—any sea—is my favorite place on Earth.

I enter and emerge at its whim.

ANTONIO ARGÜELLES

Swimming gives me a sort of joy, a sense of well-being so extreme that it becomes at times a sort of ecstasy. There is a total engagement in the act of swimming, in each stroke, and at the same time the mind can float free, become spellbound, in a state like a trance.

I have never known anything so powerfully, so healthily euphoriant—and I am addicted to it, fretful when I cannot swim.

— OLIVER SACKS



"In each

training

session or

event, one must

become the

hero of one's

own story."

The English Channel

Just two hours into the most challenging swim of my life, my stomach was already twisted into knots. I was teetering on the brink. Any starlight from the moonless sky above was smothered by a cloud bank I couldn't see. I had no rhythm, no true sense of where I was or in which direction I was headed. All I knew was that I was somewhere in the North Atlantic between England and France, facing a stiff current, driven by a fierce wind.

The swells were twice their anticipated size, which made each stroke a struggle. At times I couldn't even raise my arm out of the water, and the only visible marker I could see through my goggles was a faint yellow glow from my escort boat bobbing in and out of view. It was like trying to steady yourself by locking your gaze on a yoyo dangling in space. It made me dizzy which made me queasy.

Each breath felt like a gasp between the constant waves as I strained to locate my support boat in front of me. My coach, Rodolfo Aznar, hung a lamp which he'd built himself off the stern. It was supposed to function as a guiding light, but unfortunately the yellow bulb that burned so bright on land was swallowed up by total darkness. At 3:00 a.m. my nausea spiked, and I vomited for the first time. This was a problem because I wasn't just trying to cross the English Channel once. I started in the Port of Dover with a goal to

accomplish something only 27 people had accomplished before: complete a non-stop double 67-kilometer crossing from Dover to Cap Gris-Nez and back.

Up to that point in my career, I'd only been seasick once before during a marathon swim. It happened on my first attempt to swim the Catalina Channel in California. At the time, it was the most difficult and longest swim I'd ever attempted, and the boat ride out from the mainland had been rocky. The entire crew on my escort boat became ill, and I was still seasick when I jumped into the Pacific Ocean to begin the long, slow swim back toward the Southern California coast.

If you've ever been seasick, you know that it's rare to throw up just once. And each time I vomited, my anxiety boiled over because it meant I was losing energy and hydration. My body temperature began to drop. My margin of error, already razor thin, shrunk fast, and within four hours, I'd quit. The pain, the bad weather, and my illness proved too much to bear.

Now it seemed to be happening a second time, but there was something else—or rather someone else—on my mind. Her name was Fausta Marín, another Mexican swimmer who, just two weeks before, had collapsed mid-swim in the English Channel and was never revived. When she was pronounced dead, she became just the eighth swimmer in 124 years to perish while attempting to swim the Channel. Her death was major news in Mexico. She was just 41 years old.

I wasn't the only person thinking about her as I struggled to harness my energy and plow through the wind and waves. My crew was too. They watched me carefully, especially my friend and close advisor Nora Toledano. Fausta was her good friend and Nora had been with her the day she died; in fact, she was coaching her. The earliest sign that Nora had of anything going wrong with Fausta was when she vomited two hours into her swim. In other

words, through Nora's eyes it looked like the wrong kind of history was starting to repeat itself.

Today, open water swimming is one of the world's fastest growing endurance sports, but back in 1999 when I stepped into the English Channel, it was still relatively obscure. Nobody paid much attention then to who crossed the Catalina Channel, and the extremists who swam around the island of Manhattan in New York City weren't celebrated for much except their sheer lunacy. Remember when Kramer took up swimming off the Manhattan piers in *Seinfeld*, the hit television show? His East River stink didn't help make open water swimming popular in New York!

But the English Channel, the first audacious channel swim to populate our cultural radar, has long claimed a special place in human hearts. Perhaps it's because the history between England and France is so loaded, or maybe it's that the thought of anybody greasing themselves up, and swimming across the North Atlantic Ocean from one country to another, while wearing just a Speedo, a swim cap and goggles, sounds as mad as it ever has.

As far as oceans go, the Channel itself is relatively shallow, but it links parts of the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean and is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. It's a stretch of water that has been patrolled by Romans and the Spanish Armada, Napoleonic sailing ships, and Nazi U-boats. It has also managed to keep the English safe from all potential invaders except the aforementioned Romans and a French and Flemish force led by William the Conqueror in the 11th century (the Vikings successfully invaded England twice, but via Scotland). On the other hand, the Brits and their allies have crossed the Channel multiple times, most famously in 1944, with the U.S. invasion of occupied France on D-Day. The first swimmer to cross the English Channel was British Navy Captain Matthew Webb, who swam breaststroke head- up between August 24-25, 1875. It took him nearly 22 hours, maybe

because he was getting his hydration and energy from single malt scotch.

More than 50 years later, there were still less than ten swimmers who had managed to duplicate his feat, including one woman. Gertrude Ederle made it across in 1926. That didn't stop dozens of others from *claiming* they'd crossed the English Channel. Thus, in 1927 the first channel swimming association was founded as an official governing body to authenticate and ratify all channel attempts. They set the ground rules that almost all other channel associations now adhere to. Following the precedent of Matthew Webb, swimmers may only wear a swimsuit, cap and goggles, but unlike the Navy captain, drinking alcohol along the way for both the swimmer and crew is no longer allowed.

At the time of writing, more than 1,800 people have swum across the English Channel unassisted. But swimming 'unassisted' doesn't mean those swimmers didn't have help. It means that they were not touched by anyone along the way, and that they never stopped to hold onto the side of a boat, kayak or flotation device of any kind. Oh, but to cross the English Channel—to complete any major marathon swim—swimmers do need plenty of help.



Open water swimming wasn't even on my mind until 1996, when just two days before the 100th Boston Marathon, I tore my calf muscle during a training run. I was 37 years old and was in charge of the largest technical high-school system in Mexico: the Colegio Nacional de Educación Profesional Técnica (Conalep). I was accomplished in politics and public administration, and I'd achieved a fair bit as an amateur athlete too. I was a triathlete, an Ironman, and I once ran the New York City marathon in two

hours and 55 minutes. My life had a familiar rhythm to it. I set big goals—both in work and sports—and used them to give my life shape, texture, structure and, most important, purpose. But once any of my goals were accomplished, I wouldn't spend more than a few seconds celebrating the victory before I'd sense a black hole opening up below me, driving me once again to the next challenge.

What I'm trying to say is nothing I did—no matter how well I did it—made me feel good about myself. There was always an inherent insecurity nibbling at my well-being. The setting of a new goal allowed me to momentarily ignore that existential itch, but once I'd achieved my immediate goal at hand, my sense of inadequacy always reappeared. Nothing was ever good enough. I was never good enough.

*Within a few
weeks that small
seed—a casual,
passing notion
from a friend—
had germinated
into a dream of my
own.*

Laid up because of my injured calf, I felt demoralized and knew I needed to focus my attention on another objective before I drowned myself in alcohol. Just like in sports and at work, one drink was never enough at the bar. As soon as I could see the bottom of my glass, I needed to fill it up.

One day, a friend who knew my background as a swimmer suggested I swim the English Channel. It struck me as odd because in my mind I wasn't a swimmer anymore. I swam to compete in triathlons, but I spent much more time riding my bicycle and running. Since graduating from college, the longest swim I'd completed was the 3.9-kilometer swim in the Ironman in Kona. I hadn't swum more than 3000 meters in a pool in almost 20 years and I had never come close to swimming 33.5 kilometers in one shot. I told him he was crazy and told myself to forget all about it.

Except I didn't forget. I couldn't. The seed had been planted and the more I thought about it and researched the Channel's history, the more attached to the idea I became. Within a few weeks that small seed—a casual, passing notion from a friend—had germinated into a dream of my own, one I had no clue how to pull off.

My friend Alexander Kormanowski, a Russian biochemist who was one of the first scientists in Mexico to test the blood of athletes and use the findings to help them tailor their training, suggested getting in touch with Nora Toledano. Nora was just the second Mexican woman to cross the Channel under her own power. By 1996, when I sought her out, she had already done it five separate times. But what made her an international open water legend was her 1994 swim when she became just the 12th person, and first Latin American, to complete a two-way crossing from Dover to France and back. It took her nearly 24 hours. In 1996 she was still just 26 years old, and in Mexico very few people had ever heard her name, but no other Mexican swimmer—and very few swimmers worldwide— had her level of experience in the English Channel.

We met five weeks after my injury, on May 10th, 1996, on the riverside of Las Estacas. The swimmable portion of the river is not very long. It stretches just one kilometer from end to end, and the goal that morning wasn't to cover some pre-meditated distance. It was simply to swim continuously up and down the river for three hours without stopping.

I was nervous at first because I wasn't sure I could keep up with a legend like Nora, and if she did leave me behind, I wondered if she would still be willing to advise my team. Perhaps she was going easy on me, but I was able to keep up. Though it was a boring swim, that was good too, because there was one thing I already knew: if I was going to complete the English Channel, I was going to have to fight the boredom battle countless times. After that initial swim, we sat together on the riverbank.

"Crossing the Channel," she said, "isn't merely a matter of endurance. Swimming continuously for hours and hours won't be enough. To break through tough currents, it's important to keep up a strong pace."

She helped my coach, Rodolfo Aznar, put a training plan together, focused on my speed. We set timed goals for every 1500 meters I swam in the pool. Once a month we also did a test set to see how many meters I could cover in a full hour. I supplemented pool work with the occasional swim at Las Estacas and a lot of time in the gym to build up my back and shoulder muscles, biceps and triceps. Once my pace picked up, we scheduled a series of longer swims to prepare me for the challenge to come and to prove myself to the Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation. You are permitted to hire one of the boats (and boat captains) sanctioned by the Federation only after your qualification swim is confirmed. Then, on the day of the crossing, the Federation arranges for an official observer to be aboard your support boat to confirm that you swim unassisted across the English Channel from beginning to end.

Qualifying meant swimming at least six hours continuously in open water at a temperature that hovers between 16-18°C. Our best option was Lake Zirahuén, a natural lake in the Michoacán countryside surrounded by green hills and pasture land that is especially lovely in the early morning. Nora and I arrived the night before our swim, and when we told the inn keepers of our intentions—that we planned on waking at 3:30 a.m. so we could swim across the lake at 4 a.m.—they thought we were crazy and almost kicked us out. After some sweet talking, they handed over the keys to the inn so we could make our exit as quietly as possible the following morning.

A thick fog had rolled in overnight. When we stepped outside, we couldn't see the lake from the shore. Visibility was three meters at the most, and the air temperature was quite a bit colder than the water, which is the only reason we jumped in and started swimming. It wasn't an easy swim, because my blood sugar was low, but my discomfort was soothed by the natural beauty. As the sun rose and burned through the fog, pine-dappled hills and golden fields appeared. The deep lake was crystalline and looked bottomless. I wasn't bored. I was mesmerized. Once we arrived back on shore after swimming six hours non-stop, I was English Channel qualified.

That was just one of eleven long swims I completed from July 1997 to July 1999 as I prepared for the English Channel. I circumnavigated Manhattan Island in New York and felt energized by seeing one of my favorite cities in the world from the water. I swam in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty and up the East River where I passed beneath the Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Williamsburg Bridges, before merging with the Harlem River and swimming to the top of the island. From there, it was a long swim down the Hudson River, around the heart of New York City. I remember seeing the Twin Towers rising in the distance as I closed in on the finish line at Battery Park.

Not all of my long training swims were so enjoyable. When I swam for 12 straight hours, from 4:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., at Las Estacas, it was a test of my sanity more than anything. Talk about battling boredom. I was swimming the same stretch of water over and over again for half a day. In the wee hours, I had the river to myself, while at sunrise I enjoyed watching turtles swim, fish, and rest on the riverbanks. After 8:00 a.m., so many people showed up that the river became a slalom course. In the afternoon most visitors left, and the turtles went into hiding, so it was up to me to contend with mind-numbing nothingness. But once it was over, I'd learned something about patience, endurance, and my own ability to keep going long past mental and physical exhaustion.

My final adventure before the main event—the two-way English Channel crossing—was another attempt of the Catalina Channel on July 12th, 1999 (more on Catalina later). This time I made it, which meant a successful crossing of the English Channel would enable me to achieve the Triple Crown of Open Water Swimming. At the time, there was no Oceans Seven and the Triple Crown (a circumnavigation of Manhattan, and crossing of both the Catalina and the English Channel) was the most sought-after achievement in the open water. After that twelve-and-a-half-hour Catalina swim, I remember standing on the rocky shore of California, just north of Long Beach, thinking how cold the Pacific Ocean felt that day. In July, the Pacific is nearly as cold as the English Channel, and yet I felt so good, I was more convinced than ever that I could achieve the English Channel double. But I still had six more weeks until I would be able to prove it, and a lot can happen in six short weeks.



I was in my office in Metepec, near Toluca in the State of Mexico, on August 20th, 1999, when I first heard the news. In those days we all had beepers, and I received a message from a friend that afternoon: a swimmer had died in the English Channel. I was aware that Fausta was supposed to be swimming that day, but there can be as many as five swimmers attempting an English Channel crossing on any given day. Yet when I went online and read the AP story, my heart dropped.

Fausta Marín was born poor in a rural pueblo in Mexico and came to the capital city to work and study as a young woman. She found a job as a housekeeper, and her boss quickly saw that she was bright and burned with an inner drive, so she gave her time off to study. Fausta began secondary school later than most, but graduated and then moved on to university, where she met Nora.

Though they were 15 years apart in age, Nora and Fausta became close as they studied biology and swam together for three years. Fausta was never the gifted swimmer that Nora was (very few are), and she idolized her young friend. When Nora crossed the Channel for the first time and was celebrated within the worldwide open water swimming community, a seed was planted within Fausta. Nora never formally coached Fausta in Mexico. I was the first athlete Nora had ever consulted with, but we both knew that Fausta was also training for the Channel. Given that open water swimming is an expensive sport and she was doing the best she could on a limited income, we invited her to join in some of our training swims. When she found out that Nora would be in Dover for my attempt at the Channel double, she asked Nora to act as her coach and crew chief on her crossing.

After reading the AP report, I called Nora. She didn't pick up the telephone in England, but I kept trying for hours. When I finally reached her, she was in tears. The press was

all over her. News outlets from around the world wanted to know what had gone wrong. Nora told me the whole story.

Fausta was seasick from the beginning of the swim and had trouble keeping her food and fluid down. On long channel crossings, it's common for swimmers to vomit. Many swimmers will throw up at some point during a 33.5-kilometer swim. It's less common to start out feeling ill, but despite that, Fausta never looked to be in life or death distress and, true to her nature, she never complained.

By hour three, Fausta began having trouble urinating and at the four-hour mark, she changed her position from freestyle to backstroke. She was obviously uncomfortable, but discomfort is a given on any marathon swim. Her decision to abandon her most efficient stroke (freestyle) just four hours into the crossing puzzled Nora, so she called Fausta over to the side of the boat.

Nora leaned over the railing, mulling the series of easy questions she would ask to gauge Fausta's responsiveness. Until then, Fausta had been alert and communicative, and Nora knew that she'd done much longer swims before, but she was also aware that hypothermia can sneak up on a swimmer and before anybody realizes it, their mind may begin to malfunction. Simple questions enable coaches and crew chiefs to evaluate their athlete. Is their speech slurred? Are they confused? How quickly do those easy answers come? Nora waited, but Fausta did not answer and kept swimming.

She called to her friend one more time. Again, there was no response. Fausta kept hammering away, so Nora took action. She pulled off her shoes, jumped into the water, fully clothed, swam over and took a good look at Fausta, who looked to be awake but lost in a fog. She didn't even realize that Nora was swimming alongside her. Alarmed, Nora grabbed her and as soon as she did, Fausta went limp. Nora swam her towards the boat using a side stroke like a lifeguard might during a rescue, and along the way Fausta

lost consciousness. The crew pulled Fausta on deck and laid her down flat. Dripping wet, Nora climbed aboard and kneeled beside her. She was no longer breathing.

The captain radioed the coast guard, and Nora and her support crew delivered CPR. It took the coast guard about forty minutes to locate them and when they arrived, they brought Fausta aboard their rescue boat, and continued CPR as they accelerated toward England. An hour later Nora and her crew landed at Dover and heard the news. Fausta was gone. The cause of death was listed as pulmonary edema—a build up of fluid in the lungs, which prevents the exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen. Pulmonary edema is like an internal drowning, and it's one of the deadliest side effects of hypothermia.

It was a horrible story to hear, let alone live through, and all I could do was try and calm Nora, and walk her through how to deal with the press. Of course, given this news I had some messaging of my own to do. Within days, my closest friends and family, especially my wife, Lucía, and my daughter, Ximena, would beg me to cancel my swim.

Among the dozens of people who approached me the week of Fausta's death was Nelson Vargas, the coach of Mexico's national swimming team, and my former coach and business partner. He asked me how I could trust someone who had lost a swimmer like that. He wasn't the only one to ask the question, but I found it unfair. Nora did not drown Fausta. If anything, her death simply underlined the inherent risks of open water swimming, something I should have always understood. Marathon swimming in cold water is an extreme sport and I shouldn't be casual about discounting those potentially deadly risks. When it came to training, I hadn't been casual at all. I'd trained hard and it was Rodolfo and Nora who had pushed and prepared me. I was in great shape and now it was up to me to remain mentally strong in the aftermath of a crisis.

I came home that night and explained to Lucía that even though I understood why she was concerned, I still had to try and swim the Channel. She didn't like my decision but accepted it. With Ximena, my daughter, the situation was much more delicate. Initially, I'd hoped to shield her from the news of Fausta's death because I didn't want her to worry; her classmates, however, made sure she heard the truth. They taunted her and told her that the same thing would happen to me. That I would die in the middle of the ocean. I explained that lightning seldom strikes twice and that I planned to make her proud.

The three of us left for Europe about ten days after Fausta's death. We flew to Paris, where we met up with Nora, and the four of us took the train to Calais on the northern shore of France and boarded a ferry to Dover. Nora had not set foot in the water since Fausta's death. So, while Lucía and Ximena checked us into our hotel, Nora and I walked down to Swimmers' Beach in Dover. That's where swimmers gather and train before they swim the Channel.

Open water swimming had made Nora Toledano a star in the marathon swim community worldwide. It had given her a career as an athlete and a coach, but now the thought of going back to the ocean terrified her. She hesitated. I took her hand and led her toward the tide line. The water lapped at our toes. "I will hold your hand as long as necessary," I said, "and when you are ready, we will swim, and you will see that nothing will happen to us."

We were both crying as we walked forward until the water was knee high, then up to our hips. When it reached my navel, I looked over, she wiped her tears away and nodded. We began to swim. When we first arrived in Dover, she told me she didn't think she wanted to swim again, but after two nourishing hours, she was able to relax for the first time since her friend died.



A week later, I was on nearby Shakespeare Beach. It was 1:00 a.m. and Nora wasn't with me. She was aboard my support boat, the *Aegean Blue*, which idled about 100 meters offshore. There was no wind and the water in the sheltered harbor was glassy and calm. When Captain Mike Oram sounded his horn, the clock started and after nearly three years of preparation, my attempt to swim across the English Channel and back finally began.

My strokes felt powerful as I glided through the harbor and found an early rhythm, but as soon as we rounded the corner and entered the Channel itself, the swell and the current picked up, and what started out as perfect conditions deteriorated fast. I struggled to meet the moment and my form eroded. Nora watched me closely.

Although our relaxing swims in the previous days eased her mind somewhat, she still did not want to board the boat that night. She was anxious and unsure, but I told her that I needed her, and she agreed. Then for the next two hours I fought currents and swam at a near standstill as I struggled to see the boat. When I started to vomit, my mind unraveled a little further and the sicker I became the more Nora's concern mushroomed.

When I swam to the boat for fluids and food, I could see her watching me, hunting for signs of distress, wondering when—not if—I would crack. Being so sick early on in a swim is not normal, and as my most experienced advisor, I'd given her, and her alone, the power to end my swim if she felt I was in trouble, even though I knew that in the aftermath of Fausta's death, she would not hesitate to give the order.

I kept fighting, trying to stay focused as images of Lucía and Ximena continued to occupy my mind. Before I left for the beach that night, I'd promised Lucía that if the swim

wasn't going well and my health suffered, I would give up. When I said it, I felt like I meant it, but now I wasn't so sure. Maybe I would keep swimming no matter how I felt. Was I conditioned to swim until my body gave out, like Fausta? That realization chilled my bones even more.

My only hope was to quit worrying about distance and time and start focusing on damage control. I needed to stop throwing up because my energy was being depleted and even though the water was on the warmer side as far as the English Channel goes (16°C), my core temperature was dropping because I was so sick. I needed to relax my pace and gain control of my mind and body.

I slowed down and relaxed my breathing, yet my nausea persisted. Four hours into the swim, at 5:00 a.m., I should have been nearly 40% through my first crossing, and I'd just passed the 20% mark. But I couldn't think about that because my intestines were still twisted in knots. I'd been fighting the urge to expel everything inside me. I was worried it would take too long, and, given the current, I'd lose ground, but it had to be done, so I shifted to a sidestroke and dropped my Speedo.

It took a long time, but I was finally able to let everything go and my abdominal pain subsided. That's when the cold seeped in. I began shivering uncontrollably. I heard my bones rattle and felt weak. My muscles were stiffening. My skin burned. I thought I'd done everything possible to prepare myself for the cold. I'd packed on 33 pounds of muscle and fat and hadn't taken a warm shower for months. I'd completed multiple swims in water nearly as cold as the English Channel only to tremble in its grip. Fausta's face bloomed in my imagination. I told myself I was feeling everything she must have experienced. I was swimming in her wake. Negativity was dead weight dragging me down in the darkest waters.

But as dawn approached, the sky faded from dark blue to orange and finally the sun broke through. In the daylight, I