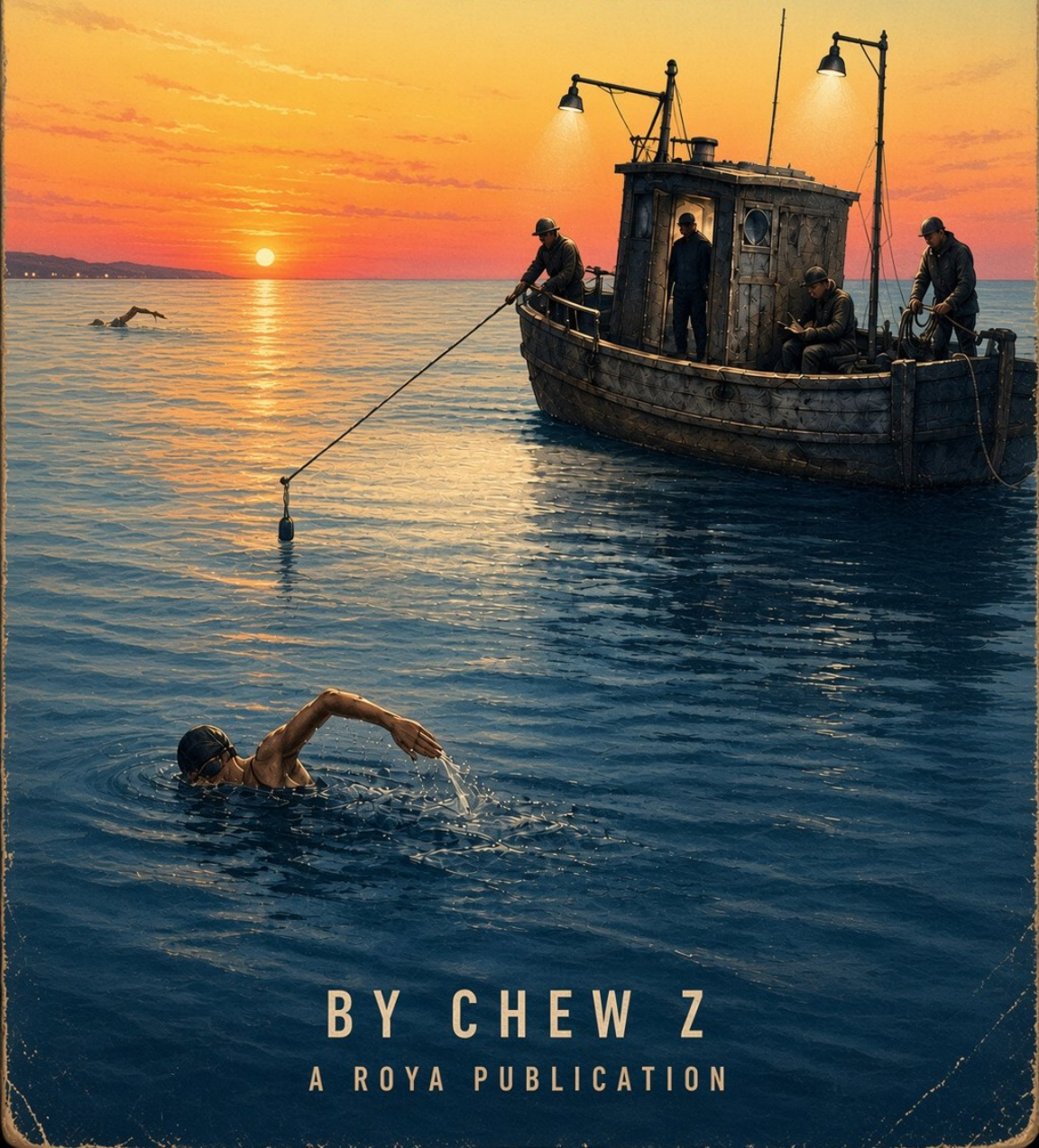


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THE SECOND SECOND SWIMMER



BY CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE SECOND SWIMMER

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 55

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RECORDED

REPORTED

00	00:	12.4C,	12.6C	1	01	20 SEC	62	
	01:	12.4C,	12.4C	1	03	18 SEC	62	62
	02:	12.3C,	12.2C	1	05	19 SEC	61	62
04	03:	12.3C,	12.4C	1	07	18 SEC	61	61
	04:	12.2C,	13.0C	1	09	18 SEC	60	61
	05:	12.2C,	13.6C	1	11	19 SEC	60	60
08	06:	12.2C,	14.2C	1	13	18 SEC	60	60
	07:	12.1C,	14.8C	1	15	20 SEC	59	60
	08:	12.1C,	15.3C	1-2	17	18 SEC	58	59
	09:	12.1C,	15.8C	1-2	19	19 SEC	58	58
12	10:	12.0C	16.2C	2	21	19 SEC	57	58
	11:	12.0C	16.5C	2	23	20 SEC	57	57
	12:	12.0C	16.7C	2	25	18 SEC	56	57
	13:	11.9C	16.6C	2	27	20 SEC	56	56
16	14:	11.9C	16.4C	2	29	18 SEC	55	56
	15:	11.9C	16.0C	2-3	31	20 SEC	55	55
	16:	11.9C	15.6C	2-3	33	19 SEC	54	55
	17:	11.9C	15.1C	2-3	35	20 SEC	54	54
20	18:	11.9C	14.7C	3	37	20 SEC	53	54
	19:	11.9C	14.2C	3	39	21 SEC	53	53
	20:	11.9C	13.8C	3	41	20 SEC	52	53
	21:	11.9C	13.5C	3	43	21 SEC	51	52
24	22:	11.9C	13.3C	3-4	45	21 SEC	51	51
	23:	11.9C	13.1C	3-4	47	22 SEC	50	51
	24:	12.0C	13.0C	4	49	22 SEC	50	50
	25:	12.1C	13.0C	4	51	23 SEC	49	50
28	26:	12.2C	13.0C	4	53	200 SEC	49	49
	27:	12.2C	13.2C	4	54	23 SEC	48	49
	28:	12.3C	13.6C	4	55	23 SEC	48	48
	29:	12.3C	14.1C	4	56	24 SEC	48	48
32	30:	12.4C	14.6C	4-5	57	24 SEC	47	48
	31:	12.4C	15.0C	4-5	58	25 SEC	47	47
	32:	12.4C	15.3C	5	58	25 SEC	47	47

02:32 First feed taken.

00:00 Jellyfish field. Extensive envenomation from this hour.

01:00 Forty-one jellyfish counted since midnight.

04:00 Feed 53. Initial refusal. All taken after 2 min. Stroke on resumption 49.

06:08 Swimmer disoriented; attempted to remove costume strap. Feeder addressed her verbally; swimmer resumed.

07:00 Observer's remark entered. Longest entry in this log.

09:40 Finished. No assistance.



Water temperature taken at the surface on the hour. Air temperature in the lee of the wheelhouse.

Sea state on the Douglas scale. Distance shown is the direct line, not the track swum.

Stroke rate counted over one minute on the hour. Costume: one suit, sleeveless and legless, one cap, one pair of goggles, grease. No neoprene of any kind.

FEED — number of the last feed administered within that hour; feeds ran at half-hourly intervals.

Observer (signed)

A. Nunan

Ratification Officer

SYNOPSIS

Farangis Roshanfar has been in cold water for thirty-six years. She is forty-seven, she has six of the seven great channels, and the North Channel — thirty-four and a half kilometres of twelve-degree water between Ireland and Scotland, fewer than a hundred and thirty crossings in the whole history of the attempt — is the one that is left.

Ten years ago, on the return leg of an English Channel two-way, her son Sohrab swam beside her as pace swimmer and drowned in the dark. Under the rules of the sport she could not have touched him, and neither could anyone else have touched her. There is a ratified log of that night. She has never read it. The observer who wrote it is aboard the boat tonight, at her specific request.

What follows is thirty-one hours in water that will not permit assistance, in the company of four people forbidden to reach out: her husband on the feed pole, a pilot, a boy, and a woman with a clipboard who has been carrying an omission for a decade. Somewhere past the twentieth hour, in the jellyfish field, in the dark, something begins swimming alongside her on the side away from the boat — and begins, gently and without malice, to correct her.

A slow, cold, procedural noir about grief that cannot find a defendant, memory that rewrites itself every time it is opened, and the interval between the alarm and the answer — which in some cases is shorter than any possible response.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book began with a physiological footnote and would not leave.

The literature of extreme endurance contains a phenomenon so consistently reported, across so many centuries and cultures and disciplines, that it has acquired a name and a small library of its own: the sense, arriving in the exhausted and the starved and the frozen and the sensorily deprived, that there is somebody else present. Shackleton had it on South Georgia. Mountaineers have it above eight thousand metres. Solo sailors have it. And marathon swimmers — who combine sensory poverty with hypothermia, hypoglycaemia and forty hours without sleep — have it more reliably than almost anyone.

What interested me was not whether the presence is real. It is not. What interested me was that a brain in extremis will manufacture a companion rather than accept solitude, and that the same brain, under the same conditions, will quietly rebuild a memory it can no longer read and hand it back with the confidence of a document.

Which raises the question this book is actually about. If the mind is a reconstruction engine rather than a record, what exactly has a grieving person been prosecuting themselves with, nightly, for ten years?

The body is the last honest witness here, as it usually is. It keeps the welts, the numb feet, the shiver that has been welded to the worst news of a life and cannot be experienced separately from it ever again. It keeps these things accurately and without editorial. Everything above the brainstem is negotiable.

The rules described are, in their essentials, the real rules, and I have not softened them. There is no more exacting moral instrument in modern sport than the prohibition on contact: four people in a boat, three metres from a person in visible distress, for thirty hours, forbidden to reach out. It is a discipline that has arranged itself, with total sincerity, around the production of witnessed solitude.

The Persian material is not decoration. In the Shahnameh, Rostam kills a boy by a river and discovers afterwards whose son he was, and sends for a remedy that exists, and works, and is real, and arrives too late by an hour. A thousand years of readers have taken that story to be about blame. I have come to think it is about intervals: that the world contains durations shorter than any possible response, and that we would rather have a villain than admit it.

I owe an obvious debt to Vonnegut, who understood before anyone that grief does not run forwards, and who gave the rest of us permission to write it the way it actually arrives — out of order, all at once, and years late.

Chew Z

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I. THE WINDOW

1. GREASE

The lanolin came out of the tub in a wad, the colour of old teeth, and it did not want to leave the tub. Dariush worked it between his palms for a full minute before it softened enough to spread, and even then it went on in ropes rather than in a film, and had to be pushed flat with the heel of the hand.

He started at the back of her neck.

"You're cold already," he said.

"I'm always cold. It's June."

"August."

"It's always June."

She was sitting on the third step down from the top of the harbour wall at Donaghadee, in a costume and nothing else, with her hair already under the first cap, and the granite was taking heat out of the backs of her thighs at a rate she could have quantified if she had wanted to. She did not want to. There were things it was useful to know and things it was useful to have stopped knowing, and after twenty-nine years in cold water the line between them had settled roughly where her skin was.

Dariush greased the trapezius first, both sides, then the deltoid heads, then the long muscle down the outside of the upper arm where the costume strap would sit for the next thirty hours and saw a groove if it was not attended to. He worked slowly. He had done this several hundred times and had never once done it quickly.

"Armpits," he said.

She lifted her arm.

The lanolin was cut fifty-fifty with zinc oxide, which was his own preference and not standard, and which he defended on the grounds that the zinc stayed put longer in salt water and had the additional benefit of being visible, so you could see what you had missed. Farangis had stopped arguing about it around 2009. The mixture smelled of sheep and of the inside of a chemist's. It smelled, more than anything else, of the four hours before a swim, which meant that it smelled of the top of the stomach going hollow,

and she had long since stopped being able to separate the smell from the sensation. Pavlov had done his dogs with a bell. Twenty-nine years had done her with a tub of grease.

"Other one."

She lifted the other arm.

Out past the harbour mouth the water was doing the flat, oiled, unconvincing thing it did in a high-pressure system, the surface holding the light like a skin of milk, and the Copeland Islands sitting three miles off in a haze that would not decide whether it was haze or the beginning of a fog. Two men were fishing off the end of the south pier. A child was throwing bread at gulls that had long ago stopped needing it. Behind her the town went about the last Sunday in July with the particular Ulster listlessness of a seaside place that has been a seaside place for two hundred years and has run out of things to say about it.

"Neck again," said Dariush. "You'll turn to breathe eight thousand times before it gets dark."

"Forty thousand."

"Before it gets dark."

She said nothing. He greased the neck again.

There was a rule, and the rule was the only thing about the sport that had never once been ambiguous, and it went like this: from the moment the swimmer's body entered the water at the start, until the moment the swimmer cleared the water at the finish under her own power, no part of the swimmer might touch the boat, and no part of any other person might touch the swimmer. Not the pilot. Not the feeder. Not the observer. Not a doctor. Not a spouse. The swimmer could be spoken to. The swimmer could be shouted at, encouraged, insulted, sung to, prayed over. Food could be thrown to her or extended on a pole and released before she took it. But a hand laid on her shoulder for one second, even to steady her, even in kindness, even in an emergency, and the swim was over. Not disputed. Not appealed. Over.

Every sport has a rule that looks arbitrary from outside and turns out, when you have lived inside it long enough, to be the entire moral architecture of the thing. This was hers. The swim is only a swim if nobody helps you. And so the sport had constructed, with great care and over a hundred and fifty years, a situation in which four adults sat in a boat six feet from a person in visible distress, for thirty hours, and were forbidden to reach out.

Dariush was the last person permitted to touch her. He had about four minutes left.

He knew it, and she knew that he knew it, and neither of them had ever said so, because saying so would have made the greasing into a ceremony, and if the greasing became a ceremony then she would start to feel it, and if she started to feel it she would be no good at the thing she had to be good at, which was not feeling anything for a day and a half.

"How's the shoulder," he said.

"Fine."

"How is it actually."

"It's fine, Dariush. It's a shoulder. It hurts. It's supposed to hurt. If it stopped hurting I'd want to know why."

He pressed his thumb into the space under the acromion, hard, the way he had been shown by a physiotherapist in Bangor in 2004, and she made a small sound through her nose and did not otherwise move.

"That's fine," he agreed.

She stood up. The grease made her look like something that had been prepared rather than dressed, a bird, a joint, something with a temperature to be got to. He handed her the goggles. She spat in them, rubbed, rinsed them over the side, and put them on, and the world went the particular tea-brown of tinted polycarbonate, which she preferred to clear even at dusk, because clear lenses let you see how much of nothing there was.

"Two hours," she said. "Out to the fairway buoy, down along the shore, back."

"Water's twelve four."

"I know what the water is."

"I'm telling you anyway."

"I know."

She went down the steps. On the third from the bottom, where the weed started, she stopped, because she always stopped there, and turned, and he was standing at the top with the tub in one hand and his palms held out from his body, shining, useless.

"See you in a bit," she said.

"Yes."

She went in.

It is worth being precise about what happens to a body in twelve degrees of water, because the whole of what follows depends on it and because most people, including most doctors, are vague about it in a way that gets people killed.

The first thing is not the cold. The first thing is the gasp. Cold shock: a reflex, mediated by skin receptors, entirely involuntary, which produces an enormous inspiratory gasp followed by two to three minutes of uncontrollable hyperventilation, a tripling of respiratory rate, a spike in heart rate and blood pressure. It has nothing to do with fitness or will. It is the reason people drown thirty seconds after falling into water they could have swum across. If you gasp with your face under, you inhale water, and if you inhale water in twelve degrees your intercostals are already in spasm and you cannot cough it out.

Farangis did not gasp. She had not gasped since she was about fourteen. The response habituates — genuinely habituates, in the neurological sense, not the folk sense — after roughly six immersions, and stays habituated for a year or so, and can be maintained indefinitely by going in once a week, every week, in every month, for decades, which she had done. The gasp had been trained out of her the way a flinch is trained out of a boxer. What remained was a hard, bright, chemical clarity in the first thirty seconds, an alertness that no drug she had ever been offered came

close to, and which was, she had privately concluded some time in her twenties, the actual reason she did this and not any of the reasons she gave in interviews.

The second thing is the hands. Peripheral vasoconstriction shuts down blood flow to the extremities to defend the core, which is sensible, and which costs you your fingers. Not immediately. Over hours. Grip goes first, then fine control, then the ability to close the hand at all, so that by hour twenty the fingers are splayed and the palm is a paddle and the catch at the front of the stroke, which is where all the propulsion comes from, is being made by a hand that no longer belongs to her in any sense she could defend philosophically.

The third thing is the core, and the core is the one that kills. Thirty-seven is normal. At thirty-five you are hypothermic and clumsy. At thirty-four your judgment is going and you will start making decisions that a person watching from six feet away can see are insane and that you will experience, from inside, as perfectly reasonable. At thirty-three you are in serious trouble. At thirty-two the shivering stops, which everyone misreads as improvement, and around here some people begin to feel warm, and take their clothes off, and lie down.

The fourth thing is that none of this is what stops swimmers. What stops swimmers is that at hour nine they are bored, and it is dark, and they cannot see their own hand, and they have eaten nothing but sugar for a day, and there is no reason on earth to continue.

She turned at the harbour mouth into the slight lop coming round the pier head, and put her face down, and began to count.

At the end of the two hours she came out at the slipway and Dariush was there with the flask and the towel and the two coats, and he did not touch her, because he had got out of the habit of touching her at the ends of swims, because for a decade the end of a swim had been the worst part of the day for both of them, and touch made it worse.

"Twelve two coming back," he said. "It dropped."

"I felt it drop."

"Wilson rang. He wants us at his house at eight."

She was shaking properly now, the deep shiver that comes on the beach and not in the water, the afterdrop, cold blood returning from the limbs to a core that had been managing without it. Her jaw was going. She got the coat round herself.

"Eight," she said.

"Eight."

"That's a window, then."

"He didn't say it was a window."

"He wouldn't say. But it's a window."

Dariush looked out at the flat brown water and the haze that had, in the two hours, decided it was fog after all, and had come in and taken the Copelands away entirely, so that there was nothing out there at all, no islands, no Scotland, no line where the sea stopped.

"Yes," he said. "It's a window."

2. THE WINDOW

Wilson's kitchen had a chart of the North Channel taped to the wall above the bread bin and had had one there, in one state of decay or another, since 1988. The current chart was six years old and had been annotated in four colours of biro by a man who did not believe in erasers. There were tide vectors on it. There were times. There were the names of people written next to smears of coastline, and about half of them had a date after the name, and about half of those had a line through the whole entry.

Farangis had learned, over three summers of coming to this kitchen, not to ask about the lines.

"Sit," said Wilson.

There were four chairs and there were five of them, so Ailbhe Nunan stood, which Farangis registered and filed and did not look at.

Wilson was sixty-five and had a face like a hand that had been left in water. He had piloted a hundred and forty attempts on the North

Channel and had put fifty-one people onto the Scottish shore, which was the best ratio of any pilot working, and which he attributed entirely to being willing to tell people not to swim. He put a mug of tea in front of Farangis without asking whether she wanted one.

"Right," he said. "Neaps are Thursday. So your window, if you get one, is Wednesday night through Sunday morning, and after that the springs come in and the tide's running two and a half knots through the middle and you're not swimming that, nobody's swimming that."

"I know."

"I know you know. She doesn't." He nodded at nobody in particular, meaning the room, meaning the general condition of people. "Say it back to me anyway."

Farangis said it back to him. It was a ritual and she had learned not to resent it.

The North Channel is thirty-four and a half kilometres from Donaghadee to Portpatrick if you draw a straight line, and nobody has ever swum a straight line, and nobody ever will. The tide in the channel does not go up and down in any way that matters to a swimmer. It goes sideways. It comes north through the narrows on the flood at up to three knots in the middle, and it goes south on the ebb at about the same, and it changes its mind every six hours and twelve minutes, and a good swimmer moves at two and a half kilometres an hour, which is to say more slowly than the water she is in.

Which means the swim is not a swim. The swim is an arithmetic problem in which the swimmer is one term.

You leave on the last of one tide so that it carries you north into the channel. You are then swimming east across a river that is going north. Six hours later the river reverses and starts going south, and if you are not far enough across by then, it takes you back the way you came, and your track on the chart makes an S, and the S costs you six hours you do not have. Get it right and the two tides cancel and you cross in eleven, twelve, thirteen hours. Get it wrong and you are still swimming at hour twenty-two with Scotland four

kilometres away and moving sideways past you like a train platform.

"So," said Wilson. "Wind."

He turned a laptop around. The forecast was a mess of colour.

"North-easterly Thursday, force four, gusting five. That's a no."

"Why," said Ailbhe, from the wall. It was the first thing she had said.

"Because a north-easterly runs against the flood and you get a short sea, a metre, metre and a half, close together, and she'll be breathing into it for six hours and she'll swallow half of it." He did not look up. "And because when it's like that I can't hold station without putting the boat on top of her, and if I put the boat on top of her that's her swim over and possibly her head."

"Right."

"Friday it backs westerly, force two, and that's lovely, and it's forecast to hold until it doesn't." He shut the laptop. "Which will be Saturday afternoon. So you're looking at a start somewhere in the small hours of Friday, and a finish before the wind comes in on Saturday, and that gives you about thirty hours of usable weather, and I have never in my life seen a forecast that far out be right."

"So we wait," said Farangis.

"So you wait."

"Until when."

"Until I ring you." Wilson took her mug away, which she had not finished, and put it in the sink, which meant the meeting was over.

"Two hours' notice. Maybe less. Don't go to Belfast. Don't drink. Don't get your hair cut, don't get a filling, don't eat anything you haven't eaten before, don't go near anybody with a child in a school, and don't, for the love of God, do anything on land that you can injure yourself with. I have lost more swims to people falling over on holiday than I have to weather."

They went out into the road. It was ten past nine and still light, that long Ulster August light that does not so much fade as get thinner, and the fog had come off the water and stood in the fields.

"Two days," said Dariush. "Maybe five."

"Maybe five."

"You'll go mad."

"Yes," said Farangis.

And here is the thing nobody puts in the documentaries. The swim is not the ordeal. The swim is the release. The ordeal is the four to six days beforehand in a rented room in a small town with a bag packed and a phone charged, tapering, which means not swimming, which means having in your body every single thing that swimming exists to remove, and nowhere to put it, and nothing to do but wait for a man in a bungalow to look at a chart and decide.

She had done it eleven times. She had, on four of those occasions, gone home without getting in the water at all.

"Farangis."

"What."

"She came," said Dariush.

"I saw."

"You asked her to come."

"I asked the association for an observer. She's the observer."

"Farangis."

"I asked for her," she said. "Yes."

They walked the rest of the way to the guesthouse without saying anything else, past the lifeboat station and the row of houses painted in the colours people paint houses when they can see the sea from them, and behind them the light went thin over the water, and somewhere out in it, thirty-four and a half kilometres away, the Scottish shore did what it had done for eleven summers, which was to sit there, entirely indifferent, being nineteen hours away.

3. THE HARDEST WATER

There is a hierarchy and everybody in the sport knows it and nobody will write it down.

The English Channel is the original and will always be the one that matters to people outside the sport, because Webb did it in 1875 and because it is between two countries that write a great deal about themselves. Thirty-three kilometres, sixteen to eighteen degrees in August, the busiest shipping lane on earth, and about two and a half thousand successful crossings since the beginning. It is not easy. Nothing here is easy. But it has been made ordinary by volume: there is an industry at Dover, there are pilots with waiting lists three years long, and a fit person with two years of preparation and eight thousand pounds has a genuine chance.

The Catalina, off California, is twenty degrees and done at night for the flat water, and the difficulty is the distance and the dark.

The Molokai — the Kaiwi Channel, between Oahu and Molokai — is forty-two kilometres of open Pacific in twenty-five degrees, and the difficulty is that it is forty-two kilometres of open Pacific, with a swell that comes at you from three directions and things in it that are large.

The Tsugaru Strait in northern Japan is nineteen kilometres and a current that runs at four knots and will simply refuse you, over and over, for years, and where the successful crossings are decided almost entirely by the pilot.

Cook Strait. Gibraltar. The Sound between Denmark and Sweden. The Bristol Channel, which nobody outside these islands has heard of and which has a fourteen-metre tidal range and is genuinely lethal.

And then there is the North Channel, and everybody who has done more than four of these will tell you the same thing, which is that the North Channel is a different order of object.

Thirty-four and a half kilometres. Shorter than the Molokai. Barely longer than the English.

Eleven and a half to twelve and a half degrees.

Fewer than a hundred and thirty successful crossings in the whole history of the attempt.

Compare: two and a half thousand for the English. Nearly five hundred for Catalina. Over eight thousand people have stood on the summit of Everest. One hundred and twenty-six, at the last count Farangis had, had swum from Ireland to Scotland.

Three things do it, and they compound.

The first is the temperature. Twelve is not four degrees colder than sixteen in any sense that a body understands. Heat loss in water is driven by the gradient between the core and the medium, and the gradient at twelve degrees is a third larger than at sixteen, and the exposure is longer because you are slower, and the slowness is caused by the cold. It is not linear. The English Channel at sixteen degrees will take a well-insulated swimmer twelve hours and leave her at thirty-six degrees. The North Channel at twelve will take her thirty and put her at thirty-three, and everything that goes wrong in a marathon swim goes wrong below thirty-four.

The second is the tide. The North Channel is the neck of a funnel: the entire Irish Sea empties and fills through a gap forty kilometres wide, twice a day, and the water in the middle of it does not move like a tide, it moves like a river. Three knots on springs. A swimmer at two and a half kilometres an hour is doing about one and a third knots. The water is faster than the swimmer by a factor of two and there is nothing anybody can do about that except arithmetic.

The third is the jellyfish, and the jellyfish are the reason it is the North Channel and not simply a cold English Channel.

Farangis had a photograph on her phone that she had never shown anybody outside the sport, of a man she knew from Cork, taken four days after his successful crossing in 2019, and in it his back and shoulders were a solid raised lattice of purple lines from the base of the skull to the waist, hundreds of them, crossing and recrossing, and his face was so swollen on one side that his eye was closed.

He had finished. He is on the list. He would do it again.

And then, beneath the hierarchy of channels, there is the thing the hierarchy is actually for, which is the set.

The Oceans Seven. Somebody in the sport invented it in 2008 in conscious imitation of the Seven Summits, and the sport as a whole affected to find it vulgar and then, in the manner of every human institution that has ever been offered a list, organised itself around it entirely.

Seven channels. The English. The North. The Catalina. The Molokai. The Tsugaru. Cook Strait. Gibraltar.

Fewer than thirty people have completed all seven.

Farangis Roshanfar had six.

She had Gibraltar in 2010 and Catalina in 2012 and Molokai in 2013 and Cook in 2015. She had Tsugaru in 2018, at the fourth attempt, on a day when the current gave her forty minutes it had no reason to give her. She had the English Channel — a single, not the two-way — in 2008, when she was twenty-nine, in fourteen hours and nine minutes, with her husband on the boat and an eleven-year-old boy at home who had been told he could stay up.

She had six and she needed the North Channel.

And every profile that had ever been written about her, and there were four, and she had read them all twice, said the same sentence in some form: *she is one of the Oceans Seven, one channel from the set.*

It was not true and it had not been true since 2016.

She could not have explained it to a journalist in a way that would have survived editing. The list was a reason. The list was an excellent reason, a publicly legible reason, a reason that fitted in a caption, a reason that stopped people asking the actual question, which is the question everybody wants to ask a woman who lost her son in a channel and went on swimming channels.

The actual answer was that the North Channel is the coldest and longest of the seven, which means the deepest, which means the furthest in.

She wanted the last one because it was the worst one.

4. HABITUATION

To make a body that can survive twelve degrees for thirty hours you need three things, and only one of them is training.

The first is time in the water. Not fitness — time. Cold habituation is a real, measurable, physiological adaptation, and it is depressingly specific: it does not transfer from a cold shower, it does not transfer from an ice bath, it does not transfer from a sauna, and it does not transfer from last year. It comes from getting into cold water repeatedly and staying there, and it decays within a few weeks of stopping. There is no way to bank it. There is no way to shortcut it. There are people, mostly men, mostly on the internet, who believe otherwise, and Wilson had a folder of their emails.

So: two winters. Ballyholme Bay, six-fifteen in the morning, November through March, when the water goes from thirteen down to seven and a half and back up again. Six-fifteen because Dariush left for the Ulster at seven and because it is easier to do a difficult thing before you are properly awake. In November you can stay in for an hour. In February you can stay in for eighteen minutes, and if you stay in for twenty-five you cannot get your own coat on afterwards, which is a fact she had learned experimentally and which had frightened her badly enough that she now carried a second person with her in the form of an old woman named Sadie who swam in a bobble hat and shouted at her when she stayed too long.

The adaptations are these. Cold shock blunts — the gasp reflex goes quiet, the hyperventilation shortens from three minutes to about forty seconds. That is habituation, and it is the one that keeps you alive. Then there is a metabolic adaptation: brown adipose tissue, which everyone is told they lose in infancy and which cold-exposed adults quietly retain and can even regrow, generating heat directly without shivering. Non-shivering thermogenesis. It is not much. It is a few watts. In a body sitting at the edge of its thermal balance for thirty hours, a few watts is the difference between finishing and being lifted out.

And then there is the insulative adaptation, which is the one nobody wants to talk about, and which is: you get fatter.

Not fat. Fatter. There is a difference and the difference is the whole of a woman's relationship with the sport.

Subcutaneous fat is the only insulation permitted under the rules. No wetsuit. No neoprene of any kind. One standard costume, sleeveless, legless, one cap, one pair of goggles, grease. That is the list, and it has been the list since Webb crossed the English Channel in 1875, and the sport defends it with a ferocity that outsiders find either admirable or deranged depending on temperament. Which means the swimmer's insulation is her own body, and the amount of it she carries is not vanity in reverse but load-bearing engineering.

Farangis was five foot seven and had raced at nine stone four when she was twenty-two, in pools, in chlorine, in a country where the water was heated to twenty-seven and a half. She now weighed eleven stone nine. She had put on the last stone deliberately over fourteen months, by eating four hundred calories a day more than she wanted, most of it in the evening, most of it fat rather than sugar because sugar went straight to training. It was not enjoyable. Nobody understood this. She had been congratulated, in supermarkets, by women she barely knew, for having "let herself go a bit" and looking "well on it."

She had also been asked, on local radio, by a man in his thirties, whether she worried about what the training did to her figure.

She had said, "It's not a figure, it's a system."

He had laughed, because he thought she was being funny.

The truth was less quotable and worse. She had grown up in two countries that both, in entirely different registers and for entirely opposed reasons, had opinions about the size and visibility of a woman's body, and had spent thirty years arriving at a private, unshareable, faintly obscene delight in having found a discipline in which the correct answer was *more*. More flesh. More of her. A body that took up room in the world and was rewarded for it. When she stood on a scale at eleven stone nine and the needle went where she wanted it, she felt something she had no clean word for, and which was closer to lust than to satisfaction, and which she had

never told anybody, including Dariush, including the sports psychologist in 2013, because it sounded — she had run the sentence many times in her head — it sounded like a woman enjoying her own destruction.

Because that is the other half of it. The fat is armour and the fat is also the thing that will be measured, at the end, by a coroner, if there is a coroner.

Her feet had been numb since 2019. Not during swims. Permanently. A band across the ball of the left foot and the outer two toes of the right, where the sensation had simply not come back one spring, and had not come back the spring after that. She had not seen anyone about it. She lived with an anaesthetist. She was aware of the irony, which was not really irony but cowardice, and she had a policy on it, which was: after.

There was a great deal filed under *after*.

5. WHO DOES THIS

The guesthouse on the New Road took swimmers because the woman who ran it, Marguerite, had a son who had swum the Channel in 2011 and had not stopped talking about it since, and because swimmers pay for a week and stay for two and eat almost nothing. In the last week of July there were four of them in the house, plus assorted crew, all waiting on the same neap tide and the same forecast and the same phone call from the same man.

It is worth looking at them, because people ask what kind of person does this, and the answer is not what they expect.

There was Colm, forty-four, an accountant from Sligo, on his fourth attempt at the North Channel. He had been pulled at nine hours, at fourteen hours, and — the one that had done something to him — at twenty hours and forty minutes, three and a half kilometres out, when the tide turned and Wilson's predecessor had made the call and Colm had argued with him from the water for eleven minutes before getting in the boat. He had a laminated printout of that track on his phone and would show it to anyone. He had spent, by his own estimate, thirty-one thousand pounds on the North

Channel. He had two daughters, and the elder one had asked him at Christmas, apparently without malice, whether he would still be doing this when she was at university.

There was Nikki, twenty-four, from Perth, who had a sponsor and a drone and a following, and who filmed her feeds, and whose people had asked Marguerite whether the guesthouse could be described as a “base camp.” Everybody had decided in advance to find her ridiculous and everybody had revised within two days, because she swam eight hours in twelve-degree water on the Tuesday without a single complaint and got out and ate a bowl of soup and went to bed at eight, and because when Colm’s hands were too clawed to do up his own bag on the Thursday she did it for him without being asked and without saying anything about it, and because the ones with the sponsors are frequently the ones who have arranged their entire lives around a single thing and are therefore the most serious people in the room.

There was Anders, sixty-one, Danish, a widower of four years, who was attempting the channel because his wife had wanted him to stop doing it and he had stopped, for eleven years, and now there was no longer anyone to stop for. He said this on the second evening, cheerfully, over dinner, and nobody knew what to do with it, and Nikki asked him what her name had been, which was the correct question and which none of the rest of them had thought to ask.

And there was Farangis, forty-seven, who was there for the ratification of nothing.

So: what kind of person.

The sport selects, first, for tolerance of tedium. This is underrated to the point of being invisible. There is no scenery. There is no crowd. There is no ball, no opponent, no score, and for most of the swim there is no visual information of any kind other than a brown-green nothing, your own arm entering the water, and — if you are lucky — the hull of a boat. The stroke does not vary. The breathing does not vary. Thirty hours at sixty strokes a minute is one hundred and eight thousand identical movements. Anyone who requires stimulation is filtered out in the first year.

It selects, second, for a very particular relationship with pain, which is not the ability to endure it but the ability to be uninterested in it. Farangis had made this distinction to a journalist once and had watched it fail to land. Endurance implies a struggle: the pain arrives, you resist it, you win. That is not what happens. What happens, in the good hours, is that the shoulder hurts and the hurting is simply a fact about the environment, like the temperature, like the swell, and it does not have any particular claim on the attention. The pain is not defeated. It is demoted.

It selects, third — and this is the one that gets left out of the profiles — for people who are trying not to be somewhere.

Not all of them. Nikki, as far as anyone could tell, was in it for the perfectly clean reason that she was extremely good at it. But go round a table of open-water swimmers at eleven o'clock at night and you will find a divorce, a bereavement, a bottle put down eight years ago, a childhood nobody wants to describe, a job that eats the person doing it. The water is six hours a day in which nobody can ring you, nobody can ask you anything, and you are legally and physically unreachable. There is no other activity available to an adult with responsibilities that provides this. Meditation retreats attempt it and fail, because you can leave. You cannot leave the middle of the North Channel.

Colm said, on the Wednesday, drunk on one glass of wine because he had not had a drink in five months: "It's the only time nobody wants anything off me."

Anders said: "It is the only time I am not being brave."

Nikki said: "It's the only time I'm not on my phone," and everyone laughed, and she said, "No, I'm serious, that's the actual reason," and after a moment everyone stopped laughing.

Farangis said nothing, and refilled the water jug, and went up at half nine.

She lay in the dark in a rented room with her bag packed at the foot of the bed and listened to the fog signal on the Copelands going every sixty seconds, and did the thing she did every night, which was to run the first hour of the swim in her head, stroke by

stroke, from the harbour steps to the fairway buoy, in real time, for as long as she could hold it before sleep took her.

She got about eleven minutes in.

It was further than usual.

6. FARANGIS AT NINE

Karaj, 1988. A walled garden on the north side of the city with a rectangular pool in it that had been built for a family who no longer lived there, and which the current occupants had inherited along with the vine and the dead fountain and a caretaker named Hushang who was ninety per cent deaf and had views about the vine.

The pool was fourteen metres long. It was filled from a tank on the roof of the outbuilding and the water arrived at the temperature of the night before, which in March was about nine degrees and in August about twenty-two. There was no filter. Once a fortnight two men came and emptied it and scrubbed it and refilled it, and for the two days after that the water was clear and after that it was green.

Zohreh woke her daughter at twenty past five.

This is the memory Farangis kept, and she kept it whole, unlike almost everything else from those years, which had gone the way of a country's worth of childhoods and become a set of smells: her mother in a cotton housecoat with a towel over her arm, standing in the doorway of a bedroom, saying nothing at all, because the arrangement was that nothing was said. If Farangis got up, they swam. If she did not get up, her mother went back to bed and it was never mentioned. There was no compulsion in it anywhere. There was only the doorway, and the towel, and a nine-year-old deciding, in the dark, four or five mornings a week for six years, to put her feet on the floor.

They went out through the kitchen and across the grass, which was wet, and Zohreh took off the housecoat and folded it on the tiles and got in without a sound, sliding in at the shallow end and going under and coming up already swimming.

Her mother had been, between 1966 and 1971, one of the four fastest women in Iran over two hundred metres freestyle.

Farangis knew this the way children know things, which is to say she knew it as a piece of furniture rather than as information. There was a photograph in a drawer, not on a wall: eight girls in dark costumes on a tiled deck in Tehran, hair under white caps, and the third from the left had her mother's chin. There were no medals in the house. There was no swimming on the television and no club and no coach and no times, and when Farangis, at eleven, asked what her mother's best two hundred had been, Zohreh said, "It was a different pool," and got up to see to something on the stove, and that was the end of it.

What Farangis learned in that pool was not technique, although she learned technique, because her mother had the stroke of someone who had been taught properly by someone who had themselves been taught properly, and it transmitted. What she learned was the register.

They swam for fifty minutes and they did not speak. Not because speaking was forbidden — because it did not occur. The water at that hour was the temperature of the air at that hour and both were cold, and the sky went from black to grey to a hard white over the wall, and the two of them went up and down a fourteen-metre rectangle passing each other on the left, and the sound was breathing and hands going in.

Then, at ten past six, Zohreh would stop at the shallow end and stand with the water at her collarbones and look at the top of the wall.

Always the same. Fifteen, twenty seconds. Head back a little. Looking at the top of a garden wall in the north of Karaj with an expression that her daughter, at nine, read as tiredness, and at fourteen read as sadness, and at thirty-one, standing on a beach in County Down after her first Channel qualifier with her hands shaking too much to hold the flask, understood in one go, completely, and had to sit down on the shingle.

Her mother had been checking that the wall was still high enough.

That was all. That was the whole of it. She swam in a walled garden at dawn because it was walled and because it was dawn, in a decade when a woman of thirty-six who had raced in front of crowds in a dark costume in 1969 now swam where nobody could see her, and had made, without ever once saying so, an arrangement with the world: I will keep this, and I will keep it small, and I will keep it out of sight, and in exchange I will be allowed to keep it.

And she had passed it on. Not the arrangement — she was too careful for that. She had passed on the thing underneath the arrangement, which was that water is where you go to be unwitnessed, and that the pleasure of it is the pleasure of a room nobody can come into.

There is a straight line, and Farangis could draw it, from a woman in a cotton housecoat standing in a doorway at twenty past five to a woman of forty-seven who had arranged her entire life around the only sport on earth in which four people watch you for thirty hours and none of them is allowed to touch you.

She had never mentioned the line to a psychologist. She had mentioned a version of it to Dariush, once, in 2011, three weeks after Zohreh died, in a car park in Dundonald, and he had listened for a long time and then said the wrong thing, which was: “So it’s her fault.”

And she had said, “No. It’s her gift.”

And he had said, “Farangis, those are the same sentence.”

7. THE FIRST COLD

They came to Northern Ireland in the spring of 1990 for reasons that were entirely legible on a form and entirely unspeakable in the house. Her father had a brother in Belfast who had come in 1974 to do a doctorate and had stayed. There was a job. There was a semi-detached in a street off the Bangor Road with a garage that never held a car. There was a school where the register went Anderson, Bell, Crawford, Dunlop, and then stopped, visibly, for a beat, before the teacher attempted her surname.

She was eleven. She learned English in fourteen months in the way children do, completely and without accent and at the cost of losing the ability to read Persian at any speed, which she would regret for the rest of her life.

What is relevant here is not the migration. What is relevant is the register the household kept afterwards.

Her father had been a hydrologist. In Belfast he did a job that involved water in a way that could be described at a dinner table without anyone having to look at their plate, and he did it for twenty-two years, and he was good at it, and he never once complained about it, out loud, in her hearing, in her life.

Her mother swam in the sea now, because there were no walls in County Down and it turned out there did not have to be, and she never once said anything about that either.

There was food in the house. There was heat in the house. There was, on the wall of the front room, a framed print of a bridge in Isfahan that nobody looked at.

And there was a rule, which was never stated, and which every child of that kind of household will recognise instantly: the family's allowance of grievance had already been spent. Not by anyone in particular and not on anything you could point to. It had simply been used up, somewhere between one country and another, and what remained was a fixed quantity of complaint per household per year, and it was gone, and if you needed some you were out of luck.

So you did not say you were cold. Not because you would be punished. Because there was nowhere to put it. Because the words *I'm cold* would arrive in a room where two adults were not saying substantially larger things, and would sit there being small.

This is the origin of it, and it is important that it is not heroic.

People assume that endurance athletes are built by hardship, and they picture something with shouting in it. The actual mechanism is quieter and more permanent. You are not taught to endure. You are taught that the readout is unavailable. The child learns to run a body without a dashboard, and the adult it becomes is not braver

than other adults, she is simply missing an instrument that other adults use to make decisions.

Farangis got into the Irish Sea for the first time in November 1990, at Ballyholme, aged eleven, on a dare from a girl called Judith Herron who did not get in herself.

It was nine degrees. She had never been in nine degrees. She went to her waist and the cold shock hit and she made a noise she had never made and could not stop making, a kind of shrieking in-breath, over and over, and Judith Herron laughed on the beach in a duffel coat, and Farangis, unable to speak, unable to control her own diaphragm, and absolutely certain that this was the moment at which she would either become someone in this town or not, put her face in the water and swam twenty-five metres out and twenty-five metres back.

She came out. She could not do her own buttons. Her lips had gone a colour that Judith Herron stopped laughing at.

And she said — this is the part she never told anyone, not Dariush, not anyone, because she could not make it sound like anything other than a boast, and because it was not a boast, it was a diagnosis —

She said: "That's not cold."

She meant it. That is the terrible part. Standing on a beach in November with her core down a full degree and her hands finished, she genuinely, sincerely, from inside, believed that what she had just experienced did not qualify.

The instrument was not broken. It had never been fitted.

Judith Herron told everyone at school, and the story went round in the shape of a joke, and by Christmas Farangis was the girl who swam in the sea in winter, which was better than being the girl whose name the teacher stopped for, and she understood the exchange rate perfectly and paid it without hesitation, and has been paying it ever since.

8. THE YEAR

The build for a North Channel takes twelve months and it is almost entirely boring, and the boredom is not incidental to it, the boredom is the training.

September to November. Base. Forty to fifty kilometres a week, six days, mostly in the sea while the sea is still fourteen degrees and habitable. Two sessions a day on Tuesdays and Thursdays: an hour before work at Ballyholme, two and a half hours in the evening at Groomsport or off the pier at Donaghadee if the wind was in the south-west. Long swim on Sunday, four hours minimum, building to six by November.

Nothing fast. This is the thing pool swimmers cannot make themselves believe: there is no speed work in a marathon build, none, not one session, because the event is contested at about sixty-five per cent of maximum heart rate and every minute spent above that is a minute spent training an energy system that will not be present after hour three.

Sixty-five per cent for six hours is a strange place to live. It is not hard. That is what nobody understands. At no point in a marathon swim, and at no point in training for one, is a swimmer out of breath. The event does not hurt in the way that a four-hundred hurts. It hurts the way a long march hurts: cumulatively, in the joints, in the same four muscles, over a duration that exceeds the mind's ability to hold an intention.

December to February. Cold maintenance, which is the least productive and most necessary phase. Volume drops to twenty-five kilometres because the sea is eight degrees and she cannot stay in it long enough to do more. Three sea swims a week of twenty to forty minutes, purely to keep the habituation alive. The rest in the pool at Bangor at twenty-eight degrees, which she hated with a completeness that had not diminished in thirty years.

Six-fifteen at Ballyholme, in the dark, in January. Sadie in the bobble hat with a stopwatch and a flask. Twenty minutes. Out. Coat, hat, sit in the car with the heater off for the first ten minutes

because putting a cold body next to a heater is how you make the afterdrop worse.

The two of them sat in a Vauxhall in a car park in the dark four days a week for three months a year for eleven years and talked about, in strict order of frequency: the water temperature, the wind, Sadie's hip, a woman called Ann who had said something in 2019, and — twice, in eleven years, and only after the second of them — Sohrab.

March to May. Rebuild. Volume back to fifty, then sixty. The sea comes up through nine, ten, eleven. Sunday swims out to five hours, then six. She began doing them without a support boat, along the coast between Donaghadee and Ballywalter and back, which is not permitted for a qualifier but is what everybody does, and which meant that between the middle of April and the end of May there were four Sundays on which Farangis Roshanfar was alone in the Irish Sea for six hours with nobody within eight hundred metres of her.

Dariush knew. They had an arrangement about it which consisted of him not saying anything and her being back by two.

June to July. The specific phase. Volume peaks at seventy kilometres in the third week of June, which is twenty-two hours in the water, and everything else in the life is subordinate. She had reduced her hours at the school office in March. They had not been on a holiday since 2015.

The qualifier: six hours continuous in water below sixteen degrees, observed, which she had done at Strangford on a Saturday in June in twelve point nine, and which had been logged and countersigned and sent to the association, and which was the last piece of administration.

The night swims. Four of them, in the last five weeks, from ten at night until four in the morning, with Dariush in a kayak, along the shore, because the crossing would have nineteen hours of dark in it and a swimmer who has never swum through the small hours will discover at two in the morning that the dark is not the same darkness she was in at midnight.

The three-thirty swim, once, in the second week of July: six hours starting at half three in the morning, deliberately after four hours' sleep, deliberately underfed, to find out what her stroke did when the whole system was wrong.

Her stroke rate fell eleven per cent and her temper went completely and she called Dariush something in the water at half six in the morning that she apologised for in the car and that he told her, correctly, was extremely useful information.

And the food.

Fourteen months of eating four hundred calories a day more than she wanted. Full-fat everything. Cheese at eleven o'clock at night. A specific and now permanent revulsion for a particular brand of chocolate mousse that she had eaten every evening for six weeks in 2024 and could no longer look at in a supermarket.

She had gained fourteen pounds by January and another five by June and had held eleven stone nine from the last week of June, which was the target, and which was, according to a set of callipers and a spreadsheet, about twenty-eight per cent body fat, which is roughly what a healthy woman of forty-seven ought to have and which in her case had been assembled deliberately, item by item, like a wall.

Total for the twelve months: two thousand two hundred and eighty kilometres.

That is the answer to the question people ask, which is *how do you train for something like that*, and it is not an interesting answer, and the reason it is not interesting is the whole point. There is no secret. There is no method. There is a woman getting into cold water six days a week for a year and doing the identical movement eight million times, and the only genuinely difficult part of it, the part that removes ninety-nine people in a hundred, is the absolute unrelenting sameness of it in a life that has other things in it.

Dariush had said it once, at a dinner, to a surgeon who had asked, and Farangis had not known he had it in him:

"It isn't a sport. It's a devotion. There's a difference and the difference is that nobody is watching and there's no ball."

9. FEEDS

On the Tuesday she made forty-one feeds in Marguerite's kitchen.

This is the least discussed and most decisive part of the entire discipline. Everyone thinks the swim is won by shoulders. The swim is won by the stomach, and the stomach is a coward.

The arithmetic. A swimmer of Farangis's size and speed burns somewhere between six and eight hundred kilocalories an hour in twelve-degree water, and the water figure is the reason the number is so brutal — a substantial share of it is going to thermoregulation, to simply not dying, and none of that share does anything to move her forward. Total muscle glycogen at the start is about two thousand kilocalories. So by hour three she is running on what she drinks, and she will do that for another twenty-seven hours.

You cannot make up the deficit. Nobody has ever made up the deficit. The upper limit on carbohydrate absorption in an exercising human gut is around sixty grams an hour for glucose alone, and can be pushed to about ninety by combining glucose and fructose, which use different intestinal transporters, and past that the sugar sits in the small intestine drawing water into the lumen and you get osmotic diarrhoea in the North Channel at four in the morning, which has happened, to people she knows, and which they do not talk about, and which is exactly as bad as it sounds because there is nowhere to go and nothing to do and you are not permitted to touch the boat.

So the target is eighty grams an hour and the tolerance for error is about ten either way.

She used maltodextrin, which is a glucose polymer with low osmolality, so you can get a lot of carbohydrate into a small volume without turning the drink into syrup; she cut it one part in four with fructose; she made it up at fifty grams per two hundred and fifty millilitres; and she added sodium, six hundred milligrams a litre, because thirty hours of sweating into salt water while drinking hypotonic fluid is the exact recipe for exercise-associated hyponatraemia, which does not feel like anything until it feels like a seizure.

Two feeds an hour. Every thirty minutes, on the half hour, from hour one to the end.

Warm. Not hot — hot is vomit at hour eighteen — warm, forty degrees going into the flask, which after two hours in a flask in a boat in a channel is about body temperature going down, and body temperature going down is the single most important comfort available to a person who has been in twelve degrees for a day, and the swimmers who have never done it do not believe this and the swimmers who have done it will tell you, without embarrassment, that they have wept at a feed.

Every fourth feed she took paracetamol. Every sixth, from hour twelve, a caffeine tablet, a hundred milligrams. From hour eighteen, if it was going badly, another. She had a protocol and the protocol was written on a laminated card that lived in Dariush's jacket, and it had his handwriting on it, and it was seven years old, and there was a line ruled through one item on it that neither of them had ever discussed.

The delivery. This is where the rule bites.

The feed goes into a bottle. The bottle is attached to a line, or to a pole, and the feeder extends it and lets go. The swimmer takes it, drinks, and releases it, and the feeder pulls it in. At no point may the line be taut while she holds it, because a taut line is assistance, and assistance is a tow, and a tow is the end of the swim. At no point may the feeder's hand come within reach.

Forty seconds. That is what a good feed costs. Thirty hours of swimming, sixty feeds, forty minutes of treading water in total, during which she is not moving forward and the tide is.

She lined the bottles up on Marguerite's counter, forty-one of them, and mixed each one and capped it and wrote the number on the lid in permanent marker, and Dariush sat at the table behind her with the crossword he had not filled in and watched her do it and did not offer to help, because it was hers.

At feed nineteen she stopped for a moment with the marker in her hand.

"What," he said.

"Nothing."

She wrote nineteen on the lid.

At the English Channel, ten years ago, the two-way, she had gone into the water at eleven at night, and she had turned at the French shore at hour eleven and forty minutes, and Sohrab had gone in at hour twelve as pace swimmer for the return leg, permitted, one hour in every three, no contact, and it had been feed nineteen when she last saw his arm going in beside hers.

She had never once, in ten years, been able to make herself write that number without stopping.

Outside a car pulled into the gravel and did not switch its engine off for a while.

"That'll be her," said Dariush.

10. THE OBSERVER

Ailbhe Nunan had been ratifying swims for twenty-six years and had the specific patience of someone whose entire professional function is to be present and to record and to have no opinion. She was fifty-eight, from Sligo, and she had a canvas bag with a clipboard in it and a thermometer and a watch and a copy of the rules that she had not needed to consult since about 2004.

She came into Marguerite's kitchen and put the bag on a chair and said, "Farangis."

"Ailbhe."

"You've made your feeds."

"I've made my feeds."

"Right." She looked at the counter, at the forty-one bottles with the numbers on the lids. "You always were tidy."

There are perhaps two hundred people in the world who do this job at this level. They are not officials in the sense that a referee is an official. Nobody is competing. There is no prize. The observer exists for one reason: because a marathon swim is unverifiable. Nobody sees it. There is no track, no timing gate, no camera that can watch

a person for thirty hours in the dark. Everything that is known about what happened in the middle of a channel at three in the morning is known because one person in a boat wrote it down.

The observer records the start time and the finish time. She records water temperature and air temperature at intervals. She records stroke rate. She records every feed and its duration. She records the swimmer's condition in whatever language she chooses, which is where it becomes an act of composition rather than measurement. She records any contact, and if there is contact she records the swim as terminated, and there is no appeal, because there is nobody to appeal to.

And then she signs it. And then the swimmer signs it. And then it goes to the association, and the association ratifies, and a name goes on a list that fewer than a hundred and twenty people are on.

If the observer does not sign, nothing happened.

If the swimmer does not sign, nothing happened.

The whole edifice — the sport, the record, the hundred and fifty years of it — rests on two signatures in a boat.

"You know the wind's wrong until Friday," Ailbhe said.

"Wilson told us."

"I'll stay in the town. There's a place on the front does a room." She sat down without being asked, which was the first informal thing she had done. "Dariush."

"Ailbhe."

"You look well."

"I don't," said Dariush, "but thank you."

Marguerite came in and went out again, sensing something, the way people who run guesthouses sense things.

Ailbhe took the clipboard out of the bag and put it on the table, face down, which was either nothing at all or was the single most deliberate thing anyone had done in that room in a week.

"I was surprised to get the call," she said.

"There aren't many of you."

"There are nine of us who'll do a North Channel." She let it sit. "You asked for me by name, Farangis. Áine rang me and said, she's asked for you, and I said, right, and Áine said, do you want me to send someone else, and I said no."

"Why not."

"Because you asked for me by name."

The three of them sat in a guesthouse kitchen in Donaghadee with forty-one bottles of maltodextrin on the counter behind them and did not say the thing.

It had been ten years and two months. Ailbhe had been the junior observer on that boat, twenty-nine years into a career, on a two-way English Channel attempt in September, and she had written the log, and the log had been ratified, and the swim had been recorded as abandoned at hour twelve on the return leg. Cause: medical emergency on board. Two lines. She had chosen the words. She had had eleven hours in a boat coming back to Dover to choose them.

Farangis had never read it.

This is not a figure of speech. The document existed; a copy had come in the post in October 2016, in an envelope with the association's crest on it, and Dariush had opened it and read it and had then, without saying anything, put it in the drawer of the desk in the back bedroom under the fuse box instructions and the manual for a dishwasher they no longer owned, and it had been there ever since. Farangis knew exactly which drawer. She had stood in front of it, by her own count, four times.

"Ailbhe," she said.

"Mm."

"When it's over. When I get out. Before I sign anything."

Ailbhe Nunan looked at her for a moment with the perfect neutrality of a woman who has spent twenty-six years training herself not to have a face.

"Ask me in Portpatrick," she said.

"That's not a no."

"It's not a yes either." She stood up and picked up the bag and left the clipboard where it was, face down on the table, which meant she was coming back. "Get some sleep. He'll ring you at three in the morning one of these days and you'll want to have banked it."

She went out. The car started. It sat there again with the engine running for a while before it moved.

Dariush turned the clipboard over.

It was blank. A fresh log sheet, dated, with her name at the top spelled correctly, and every field after that empty.

11. DARIUSH

He had married a woman who left.

Not in the way people mean. She came back. She had always come back. In twenty-five years of marriage she had come back from Dover and Sanday and Lough Erne and Loch Lomond and Cork Harbour and the Bristol Channel and Robben Island and the Kaiwi Channel and a lake in Zurich and a fjord in Denmark, and she had come back from all of them, every single time, and had walked into the kitchen carrying a bag that smelled of a wet costume and had put the kettle on.

But she left. That was the shape of the marriage. He had understood it early — earlier than she had, he thought — that the person he had fallen in love with in a corridor at Queen's in 1996 was organised around an absence, and that the absence was not a wound in her but an appetite, and that the appetite was going to be fed at intervals for as long as her shoulders held out, and that his choice was to be the man who fed it or the man who did not.

He had been twenty-two. He had thought, with the total confidence of twenty-two, that he could be the man who fed it and also, eventually, the thing that replaced it.

He had been wrong about the second part and it had taken him about eleven years to be sure.

Dariusz Roshanfar was a consultant anaesthetist. He had done the job for twenty-one years and he was, by any measure that mattered, extremely good at it, and the reason he was good at it was the reason that made the rest of his life impossible.

An anaesthetist knows numbers. That is the whole discipline: you take a human being to the edge of a set of physiological cliffs and you hold them there for four hours and you know, at every second, exactly how far the edge is. He could tell you what a core temperature of thirty-four does to the coagulation cascade. He could tell you the mechanism by which cold diuresis strips a swimmer's plasma volume and why that makes the afterdrop worse. He could tell you, because he had looked it up in 2003 when he first understood what she was going to do with her life, the survival curves for immersion in twelve degrees, and the specific point on the curve at which rescue stops being a rescue and becomes a recovery.

And then he stood on a harbour wall and greased the shoulders of the woman he loved and watched her walk into it.

Forty times a year. Every year.

People asked him how he coped and he had a line for it, which was: "She's very good at it." It landed. It ended the conversation. It was even true. It was also the most complete lie he told, because coping was not what he did. What he did was more like the thing you do with an untreatable diagnosis: he had made an arrangement in which the knowledge lived in a specific room, and he did not go into that room, and the not-going-in was a full-time occupation that he had been performing for a quarter of a century and that nobody had ever seen him do.

Here is what he actually did during her swims.

He fed her. He counted her stroke rate on a watch, in blocks of sixty seconds, four times an hour, and he wrote it in a notebook that was his and not the observer's. He watched her hands. Not her face — her hands. Because the face lies for a long time, and the stroke lies for longer, and the shoulder can keep turning over for an hour after the person driving it has effectively gone, but the

hand tells you the truth: when the fingers come apart at the entry and stay apart, she is losing the periphery, and when the recovery arm starts to come through wide and low instead of over, the shoulder girdle is going, and when both of those things arrive within twenty minutes of each other, you have somewhere between forty and ninety minutes before you are having a different kind of night.

He had a cut-off. He had never told her what it was. He had never told the observer either, because the observer's job was not that.

The cut-off was not a number, in the end. It was: *when I would rather have her alive and hate me.*

He had used it once, in 2014, in the Bristol Channel, at hour nine, and she had not spoken to him for five days and had then said, in the car outside a Tesco in Newtownards, "You were right," in exactly the tone of a woman reading out an insurance policy.

And in 2016 he had not used it, because there had been nothing to use it on, because at hour twelve on the return leg of an English Channel two-way it had not been Farangis who was in trouble.

He was fifty-two. His hair had gone at the temples and he had put on the same stone she had, for none of the same reasons. He had a good career and a lot of colleagues and about three friends, and in the ten years since it happened he had been offered, by various well-meaning people, a great many opportunities to leave.

The idea that he had stayed out of nobility was, he thought, an insult to both of them.

Here is the truth, and he had arrived at it slowly, over about four years, mostly at three in the morning in a house where the other person was also awake and also pretending:

There were, at the end of everything, two people alive who had been on that boat and had loved that boy. Ailbhe Nunan had been there but she had not loved him; she had ratified him. Wilson's predecessor was dead of something ordinary in 2019. The crew were paid. So: two. Him and her.

If he left, then there would be one person on earth carrying it who was alone with it, and there would be a second person on earth carrying it who was alone with it, and the total quantity of the thing would not go down, it would double.

That was it. That was the whole of the reason. It was not love, exactly, although he loved her; it was closer to physics. Two objects at the bottom of a well, and one of them climbing out does not empty the well.

And it had a shadow, and he knew the shadow was there.

Because he did not blame her. He had never blamed her. Not for one hour, not in one argument, not once in ten years — and he had checked, he had gone looking for it in himself, deliberately, the way you press a bruise — and there was nothing there. He knew what hour nineteen of a two-way does to a swimmer's core temperature. He knew what her visual field was. He knew, because he had been the one in the water, that the interval between the shout and the boat turning was eleven seconds and that it could not have been shorter with the crew that was aboard. He knew that his son had gone under behind her, out of her sight, on a moonless night in September, and that a woman at hour nineteen with a core of thirty-four point eight is a person whose body has already been given away.

There was nothing to forgive. That was his honest, medical, twenty-one-years-of-holding-people-at-the-edge conclusion.

And he had watched, over ten years, what that conclusion did to her.

Because she needed to be forgiven, and he could not do it, because you cannot forgive a person for something they did not do — the words come out but the transaction does not complete — and every time he said *there was nothing you could have done*, she heard it as a man declining to give evidence.

He had understood this in about the fourth year. He had never found a way round it. He had tried, twice, to say something like it out loud, and both times it had come out as *I don't blame you*,

which was the sentence that did the damage, and after the second time he stopped.

So they lived in a house in Bangor with a photograph of a boy in the hall, and she swam, and he greased her shoulders, and the thing they did not say to each other got older and more articulate every year.

On the Wednesday night, with the wind still wrong, he went out to the front of the guesthouse to ring the hospital about a list he was not covering, and afterwards he stood in the road for a while.

Marguerite came out to bring the bin round and said, because she was the kind of woman who said things: "She'll be all right. She's some woman for it."

"She is."

"My Stephen said the North Channel's a different animal. The jellyfish."

"Yes."

"He said the jellyfish."

"There's a lot of them," said Dariush.

Marguerite went in. He stayed out. The fog signal went on the Copelands, sixty seconds, sixty seconds, sixty seconds, and off to the north-east there was nothing to see at all, and he stood in a road in a small town and did the arithmetic he had been doing every August for ten years, which was: thirty hours, twelve degrees, forty-seven years old, eleven stone nine, and a woman who has come to the water this time not to swim across it but to make somebody say something.

He went in and did not sleep.

12. SOHRAB AT SIX

The Aurora leisure centre in Bangor on a Saturday morning in 2003 had a small pool at twenty-nine degrees with a wave machine in the big pool next door that went off every twenty minutes and made everyone shout.

Sohrab was six and could not swim.

This was, in the family, a joke of such long standing that it had become a fact about him, like his ears. Her son. Her actual son. Six years old and afraid of the water, and afraid of it in the specific, unbudgeable, entirely reasonable way of a child who has once been out of his depth for two seconds and has correctly concluded that the world contains a thing that will kill you and that adults think it is fun.

She had not pushed. This was the one thing she had got right and she held onto it for the rest of her life. She had not pushed, she had not made it a project, she had not stood in the shallow end with her arms out saying *come on*, and she had watched other mothers do exactly that and had wanted to drown them.

What she did instead was she took him on a Saturday morning and she got in and she stood in four feet of chlorinated water at twenty-nine degrees, which is the temperature of a bath that has gone off, and she held him.

Just held him. That was the whole activity. He put his arms round her neck and his legs round her waist, which he was slightly too big for by then and would be far too big for within a year, and she walked up and down the shallow end for thirty-five minutes.

He talked the entire time. He was a talker, that child, from the moment he had words, and he talked about a boy called Ryan who had a scooter, and about whether a shark could get into a swimming pool through the filter, which he had thought about carefully and had concluded probably not but wanted a second opinion on, and about the wave machine, which he hated, and which he wanted to know the exact time of, so that they could be somewhere else.

And at some point in the fifth or sixth Saturday, in the middle of a sentence about Ryan's scooter, he took one hand off her neck and put it on her chin.

He did it to turn her face. That was all it was. He was talking and she had been looking somewhere else — at the clock, probably, because she was always looking at a clock — and a six-year-old put

a small wet hand flat on her jaw and turned her head to face him and carried on the sentence.

She could still feel it. That was the honest situation, at forty-seven, and she had stopped trying to be reasonable about it. Not a metaphor, not a memory in the ordinary sense: a physical sensation, available on demand, on the left side of her jaw, of a wet hand with the fingers slightly spread, applying about as much pressure as you would use to move a cup.

She had had it during swims. She had had it in a car park in Dundonald in 2011 when her mother died. She had had it during a smear test in 2019 and had had to ask the nurse for a minute.

The pool smelled of chlorine and the wave machine went off next door and everybody shouted, and Sohrab said, "There it is, that's it, that's the one I don't like," and buried his face in her neck with an entirely theatrical wail, and she laughed, and walked him to the far end where the sound was smaller, and that was a Saturday morning in 2003, and there was nothing in it, and it is the single most valuable thing she owns.

He learned to swim at seven and a half, at his own speed, from a man called Trevor with a whistle, in a group of eight children, without her present.

She had wanted, so badly it embarrassed her, to be the one who taught him.

She had known, with total clarity, that she must not be.

And of everything she had done as a mother — every early morning, every missed thing, every hour of every year she had spent in water instead of in a house — that was the decision she was proudest of, and it had lasted nine years, and then she had put him in the English Channel at nineteen because she wanted him to see her do it.

13. THE ASK

He asked for the first time when he was seventeen.

They were in the kitchen in Bangor and she was making up feeds for a Lough Erne swim and he was doing something to a bicycle wheel on the good table, and he said, without looking up, "Mum. Let me pace you on the Channel."

"No."

"You didn't think about it."

"I don't need to think about it."

By then he had been swimming for nine years and racing for six, and he was — this is important, and it is the part that made everything afterwards liveable and unbearable in equal measure — he was actually good. Not a prodigy. Not her. But an Ulster Schools finalist over four hundred freestyle, a boy with a proper stroke and a genuine engine, who had qualified for and completed a six-hour qualifying swim in fourteen-degree water at Lough Neagh at seventeen with two other members of the club and had got out at the end of it grinning like an idiot and eaten four sausage rolls.

He asked again at eighteen. She said no. He asked in the January he turned nineteen and she said no, and he said, "Give me the actual reason," and she said, "The actual reason is that I'm not having my son in the water at three in the morning in the middle of the English Channel," and he said, "But you'll have Kieran in the water," and she said, "Kieran is thirty-four," and he said, "Kieran does a four-fifty-eight four hundred, Mum. I do a four-nineteen."

And she had no answer to that, and he watched her not have one, and he was smart enough to leave it there and go out of the room.

She said yes in April.

Now. The reason.

The reason she gave, at the time, to Dariush, to the club, to herself, and later to two journalists, was this: he was qualified, he was fast, he was competent in cold water, the rules permit a pace swimmer for one hour in three on a two-way, the pace swimmer is never more than a few metres from a boat with four adults on it, and it is,

statistically, one of the safest hours a nineteen-year-old competitive swimmer will spend in a year. All of which was true. Every word of it was true, and it is still true, and she had checked it again as recently as March.

The reason was not that.

The reason was that she wanted him to see her do it.

She was thirty-seven. She had been swimming for twenty-six years and had never once been watched by her son doing the thing she actually was. He had seen her come home. He had seen the bag and the wet costume and the kettle. He had seen a woman who was tired at breakfast and who missed his prize day in 2011 and who was, in the ordinary hours of the ordinary house, a slightly distracted person who worked part-time in a school office and had a hobby that people asked polite questions about at Christmas.

He had never seen her at hour fourteen.

And she wanted him to. She wanted her son, once, before he went to Liverpool in September and started the life in which she would become a woman he rang on Sundays, to be in the water beside her in the dark at the fourteenth hour of an English Channel two-way and to look across and see what his mother was.

That is it. That is the whole thing. There is no version of it in which she does not know exactly what she was doing.

She has said, out loud, four times in ten years, to Dariush, in the small hours, the sentence: *I put him in there so he'd look at me.*

And Dariush has said, four times, some version of: *He was nineteen, he was a strong swimmer, and he asked you for two years.*

Which is a true sentence that answers a different question.

There is an old story in it, and she knew the story, and she had known it since she was seven, because it is the story every Iranian child gets whether or not anybody in the house is religious or literary or interested: a great champion who does not know his own son, and who fights him for two days by a river, and who has, in his belt, on the second day, a knife.

She had never once told Sohrab that his name came from it.

She had told him it was his grandfather's brother's name, which was also true, and which was the reason she had given her mother-in-law in 1997, and which had the enormous advantage of not requiring her to explain to a child how the story ends.

He found out anyway, at fourteen, from a boy at school whose mother was from Shiraz, and came home and said, "Mum, do you know I'm named after somebody who gets killed?"

And she said, "Everybody's named after somebody who gets killed."

And he thought that was very funny, and repeated it for about a year.

14. THE LAST SUMMER

The summer of 2016 was the best year of her life and she had known it at the time, which is rare, and which is worse.

He had finished his A levels in June and had a place at Liverpool for engineering and had until the end of September, and he did not get a job, and neither of them made him, and Dariush had raised it once in April and been outvoted.

So there were fourteen weeks.

He got up at ten. He was nineteen and he got up at ten, and she was up at five, and there was a window between five and ten in which she did the whole of her training, and then she came in with her hair wet and he would be at the table eating something appalling, and she would sit down opposite him with tea and they would talk for an hour.

An hour. Every day, for fourteen weeks. She has done the arithmetic — of course she has — and it comes to somewhere near ninety hours, and it is more time than she spent talking to her son in the three years before it and infinitely more than she would have got in the thirty years after, and she has never been able to decide whether the summer was a gift or the setup for a joke.

What they talked about:

Whether the club coach was any good, which he was not, and Sohrab's four-month campaign to say so diplomatically.

A girl called Erin who worked in the Spar and whose existence was raised eleven times, obliquely, over three weeks, and then never again, and about which Farangis had asked exactly one question, at exactly the right moment, and had received exactly one answer, which was: "It's fine. It's a whole thing. Don't."

Whether their family was Iranian or Northern Irish or neither and what he was supposed to write on forms and whether he could be bothered. He had a whole routine about it that he had developed for school and that he performed for her with a level of comic control that startled her, because she had not known he had that either.

Money, briefly and unsuccessfully.

The Channel.

Because by June it was decided, and they were doing it together, and the boat was booked for the first week of September, and the training had a shape that included him in it, and this is the part that she has had to hold at arm's length for ten years because it is not survivable at close range:

He was so happy.

Not pleased. Not flattered. Happy the way a nineteen-year-old is happy about the one thing in his life that he has decided on entirely by himself and pursued for two years against opposition and got. He told the girl in the Spar. He told his uncle in Belfast twice. He put it on his phone somewhere and Farangis had never been able to find where.

He learned to feed. That was his idea; he did not want to just be a body in the water, he wanted to be crew, and he spent an afternoon in July with Dariush and a pole and a bottle in the harbour at Donaghadee learning to send a feed out on a yellow rope, and he was bad at it, and got better, and Dariush had a photograph of the two of them on the harbour wall that afternoon that lived, for ten years, in a drawer under a fuse box instruction leaflet, in an envelope, on top of a document.

In August he did a six-hour qualifier at Lough Neagh with two others from the club in fourteen-degree water, and came out and ate four sausage rolls in the car park, and rang her from the car, and said — she has this, she is sure of this, this one is intact — “Mum. That was nothing.”

And she had laughed, because it was her own sentence, the one she had said on a beach at eleven with her lips blue in front of Judith Herron, and because she had never told him about that, and because there is a thing that comes down the generations without anybody putting it there.

That was nothing.

She said: “It’s not nothing. Don’t say that.”

And he said: “You say it.”

And she said: “That’s how I know.”

Five weeks later he went into the English Channel at hour eighteen of a two-way with a green cap on, or possibly an orange one, and swam beside his mother for an hour and twenty-two minutes, in the dark, breathing every two on the left so that they were face to face on every second stroke, which was not standard, which was a thing he had started doing, and which she had not told him to stop.

15. TAPER

Three days without swimming.

The physiology of a taper is uncontroversial and mildly boring: you stop doing the volume, glycogen stores supercompensate, the small structural damage in the muscle repairs, and you arrive at the start line with a body that is, measurably, better than the body that finished the last hard session. Everyone agrees. It works. It is the least interesting true thing in sport.

The psychology of a taper is that you lose your mind.

Consider what has been removed. For eleven months she has swum between forty and seventy kilometres a week. That is between fourteen and twenty-two hours in the water. It is not a hobby and it is not exercise; it is the load-bearing structure of the day, and

everything else in the twenty-four hours has been arranged around it and downstream of it. The swimming produced the appetite, the sleep, the mood, the ability to sit in a room with other people and appear normal. Take it out and what is left is a forty-seven-year-old woman in a rented room in Donaghadee with an enormous unspent metabolism and a mind that has not been made to sit still since 1990.

By the second day her hands would not stay still on the table. By the third she had walked the length of the front eleven times before ten in the morning, slowly, deliberately slowly, because walking fast is exercise and exercise is not permitted, which meant that the only physical activity available to her was a slow walk, which is to a marathon swimmer roughly what a lozenge is to a smoker.

She could not read. She read the same four pages of a paperback of Marguerite's about a woman inheriting a house in France.

She could not watch anything.

She was unbearable, and she knew she was unbearable, and knowing it did not help, and Dariush had learned in 2009 that the correct response was to be in the same building but not the same room.

And underneath the restlessness there was the thing the taper actually is, which is the removal of the anaesthetic.

Because that is what the volume is for. Nobody who swims seventy kilometres a week is doing it for the training effect; the training effect maxes out well below that. They are doing it because at twenty hours a week you are, functionally, unconscious for a fifth of your waking life, and it is a very particular quality of unconsciousness, and you cannot get it any other way, and when you stop, everything you have been putting under it comes up in about thirty-six hours, like a body in a lake.

On the Thursday she sat on the end of the bed at four in the afternoon for fifty minutes without moving.

Now: the switch.

There is a mental technique at the centre of this sport and it is genuinely a technique, teachable, and Farangis could teach it, and had, to about nine people over the years, and had watched four of them get it and five of them not.

The rule is: you never swim the channel.

The channel is thirty-four and a half kilometres and it is unswimmable, in the sense that no human mind can hold it. Hold the whole distance in your head at hour four and you will get out. Everybody who has ever got out and been unable to say why afterwards got out because for one moment they saw the whole thing at once.

So you do not swim the channel. You swim to the feed.

Thirty minutes. That is the unit. That is the largest object permitted inside the mind. At any moment in a thirty-hour swim there are, at most, thirty minutes of future, and generally rather fewer, and when the bottle comes back in on the line the clock resets and there are thirty minutes again, and the whole crossing is not a crossing at all, it is a chain of sixty small identical rooms, and you are only ever in one of them.

Beneath the feed there is the stroke count, which is finer. Four hundred. That is her number and has been since 2004. She counts to four hundred and then she starts again, and four hundred strokes at sixty a minute is six minutes and forty seconds, and there are four and a half of them in a feed cycle, and she does not count the cycles, because counting the cycles is counting the channel.

Beneath the stroke count there is the stroke, which is the smallest room of all and the only one that is actually real. Hand enters at eleven o'clock, fingertips first, no slap. Extend forward under the surface, not down. Catch: the forearm comes vertical while the elbow stays high, which is the single hardest thing to hold when you are tired and the first thing to go. Press back. Exit at the hip. Recover over. Breathe every two on the left in a calm sea, every three when she wants to see both sides, every two on the right when the wind comes round.

That is the entire content of thirty hours.

People ask what you think about. The answer, from every swimmer who is telling the truth, is: nothing, and then, later, whatever is in you, whether or not you have consented to it.

Because the technique has a limit, and the limit is roughly hour fourteen. Up to fourteen the discipline holds and the mind stays in the small room. After fourteen, in the dark, hypoglycaemic, with the core down a degree and a half, the doors between the rooms come off their hinges. And what arrives is not chosen. Swimmers report, in a literature that is now large and remarkably consistent: conversations with the boat crew that the boat crew did not have; the certainty of being able to see the seabed in two thousand metres of water; music; the smell of specific rooms; the dead.

And the third man. The presence. Somebody swimming alongside, on the far side from the boat, in the black, matching the stroke.

She had had it twice. Once in the Kaiwi Channel in 2013, where it had been benign and vaguely male and had stayed for about ninety minutes and had gone. Once off Robben Island in 2017 for about twenty minutes.

She had never told anyone what she had done, in 2017, when it came.

She had turned her head to the left, in the dark, in the sea, at hour nine, and she had said his name out loud into the water.

And it had not answered, because they do not answer, because it is a construction of a hypoxic, hypothermic, sensorily starved brain doing the only thing brains do, which is to insist that there is somebody there.

She had been trying to get back to it for nine years.

This is the thing she had never admitted to anybody in any form, and which she was going to have to admit in about thirty hours to a woman with a clipboard: she did not train for the North Channel because it was the last of a set. She trained for the North Channel because it is thirty-plus hours, and thirty-plus hours in twelve degrees is the longest available dose, and she had come to believe — not intellectually, she was not stupid, but somewhere lower down and much more powerful than the intellect — that if she got

deep enough into it, if she went far enough out along that particular axis, she would get an hour with her son.

It is not a rational belief.

Neither is anything else that gets a person into the North Channel.

At twenty past nine on the Thursday evening the phone rang and it was Wilson and he said: "Nought two hundred. Harbour at half one."

And she stood up, and everything that had been coming up out of the lake for three days went back down, instantly, cleanly, like a light going off in a room she was leaving anyway, and she felt — she could feel it happening — the person she needed to be for the next day and a half come up through her body and take the controls.

"Right," she said.

16. NOUGHT TWO HUNDRED

Donaghadee harbour at one in the morning in the first week of August. Air fourteen degrees. Water twelve point one. No moon to speak of, and a high thin cloud, and the town entirely asleep behind them except for the lights on the lifeboat station and one window somewhere up on the hill.

The boat was a converted fishing boat called *Kestrel Star* with a wheelhouse and a lit deck and a smell of diesel and old rope, and it was already loaded: the flask crate, the feed bottles in two milk crates lashed under the gunwale, the glow sticks, the spare goggles, four caps, the medical bag Dariush never opened and always brought, the two lights on the port side that would be pointed at her for twenty-nine hours, and a length of yellow rope with a bottle carrier on the end of it that had made forty-one crossings of various kinds and had a name, which was Gerald, for a reason that had been lost in about 2011.

Wilson had a crew of two: a nephew called Ryan, who was nineteen and silent, and a man of about fifty called Dessie who had done this eighty times.

Ailbhe Nunan came down the steps at twenty past one with the canvas bag and set up on the port side under the wheelhouse where she could see the whole of the swimmer's water. She wrote the date at the top of the sheet. She wrote the air temperature. She wrote the sea state. She checked her watch against the boat's clock and against her phone and made a note of the discrepancy, which was four seconds, because that is the job.

Farangis stood at the top of the harbour steps in a costume and a towel and let her husband do her shoulders for the last time.

He did it in silence. Neck, traps, delts, the strap line, the armpits, the inside of the upper arms where they would rub against the ribs forty thousand times. He put a second coat over the zinc on the back of her neck where the sun would come at hour six if there was any. He greased her jaw where the goggle strap ran.

She said, "Don't do my face."

"I'm not doing your face."

"You're doing my face."

"I'm doing the strap."

"Right."

He finished. He capped the tub. There was about a minute left and neither of them had anything prepared, because in twenty-five years they had never once had anything prepared, because the correct thing to say before a Channel swim does not exist and everyone who tries to invent it produces something that sits in the swimmer's head for thirty hours like a stone in a shoe.

So he said: "Eighty a hour."

"Eighty a hour."

"Take the feeds even when you don't want them. Especially at fourteen and especially at twenty."

"Yes."

"If you turn away from the bottle twice in a row I'm going to shout at you, and you're going to think I'm being a bully, and I'm going to keep doing it."

"I know."

"Farangis."

"What."

He had his hands on her shoulders. They had been there for perhaps twenty seconds longer than the greasing required, and both of them knew what the next four minutes contained and that this was the last of it.

"Nothing," he said. "Go on."

He took his hands off.

She went down the steps. On the third from the bottom, where the weed was, she stopped, and turned, and he was at the top with the tub in one hand and his palms out from his body, shining, and behind him the whole small dark town.

"See you in a bit," she said.

He did not answer, because if he answered it would come out wrong.

She put the goggles on and pulled the cap down and stood in the wash for a second with the water at her ankles, and then she walked in until it was at her thighs and then she put her hands together and went.

At 02:00:04 by the observer's watch she cleared the water line and began swimming, and Ailbhe Nunan wrote *02:00 START — swimmer clear, no assistance* on a sheet of paper in a boat.

The rule was live.

For the next thirty-one hours and forty minutes, no human being would be permitted to touch Farangis Roshanfar.

II. DAYLIGHT

17. HOUR ONE

The first thing is that it is not cold.

It is never cold at the start. This surprises people and it should not: the body has fifteen or twenty minutes of stored heat in the shell before the shell gives it up, and the entry produces a flood of catecholamines that would mask a broken arm, and the first hour of any swim is the best hour of any swim and always will be. She had known swimmers who spent the whole of their careers chasing hour one and got out at hour six every time, disappointed, as though something had been withheld from them.

Air fourteen. Water twelve point one. Stroke rate sixty-two.

The harbour lights went behind and the boat came up on her left at about a hundred metres and settled there, and Wilson found the line he wanted and held it, and that was the arrangement for the next day and a half: the swimmer to starboard of the boat, three to five metres off, the boat's two lamps angled down into her water, everyone on deck able to see her and nobody able to reach her.

The water at night is not black. That is the first correction. Under a lit boat it is a dense translucent brown-green, and it has depth, in the sense that the light penetrates two or three metres and then stops, so what you are looking at is a lit room with no floor. Her right arm came into the frame at eleven o'clock, fingertips first, and pushed a small wake of bubbles down its length, and the bubbles hung in the lit water and came back past her hip and were gone, and then her left arm, and then her right.

Forty thousand times.

The mechanics, then, because the mechanics are the book, and everything that happens later happens on top of them.

Her stroke was long and it was old-fashioned. She had been taught by a woman who had been taught in the 1960s, and she had never fully converted to the high-turnover, shorter-lever stroke that pool swimming went to in the nineties, and in a channel this was an advantage: fewer strokes per kilometre means fewer shoulder rotations, and the shoulder is the thing that ends most attempts. She turned over at sixty-two in flat water and would drop to fifty-six

by hour twelve and would be at forty-nine by hour twenty-four, and the drop was expected and mapped and Dariush would write each number in his notebook and compare it to a curve he had drawn in 2015.

Breathing every two, left side. This is what marathon swimmers do and what pool coaches spend years trying to stop children doing. Bilateral breathing — every three, alternating — is better for symmetry and better for sighting and worse for oxygen, and after about six hours nobody cares about symmetry. So: left, left, left, forty thousand times, which means the right shoulder does more work in the rotation and the left side of the neck does all of the turning, and by hour twenty the neck is a hinge that has been asked to do something a hinge should not be asked to do.

Hence the grease. Hence the zinc on the jaw. The chafe points on a marathon swimmer are absolutely predictable and are the same on every swimmer of every size: the sides of the neck where the chin turns, the armpits, the inside of the upper arms, the bikini line, and — for women — under the arm where the costume edge sits. Untreated, in salt water, over thirty hours, these do not blister; they abrade. The salt goes into the abrasion and the abrasion goes on being rubbed sixty times a minute for another eighteen hours, and by the finish there are people who cannot put a shirt on for four days.

Sighting: almost none. This is the strange freedom of a piloted swim and the reason a channel swim is nothing like a race. She did not need to know where she was going. Wilson knew where she was going. Her entire navigational responsibility for thirty hours was to stay within about five metres of a boat that was on her left, which she could do on feel and sound alone, and which she monitored perhaps four times an hour with a lifted head.

She was, in the most literal sense, being driven.

There was a freedom in that so total that it verged on the obscene, and it was one of the reasons she was there, and she had never found a way to describe it that did not make her sound like a woman describing a sedative.

At 02:32 the first feed went out on the pole.

Dessie held it. Dariush would take over at feed four, because Dessie was better at the first ones and Dariush was better at the ones after hour ten, and this had been worked out in the Bristol Channel in 2014 and never revisited.

She rolled onto her back for two seconds, took the bottle, drank two hundred and fifty millilitres of warm maltodextrin in eleven seconds, said "Good," and let go.

"Twenty-two seconds," said Dariush, to Ailbhe.

Ailbhe wrote it down.

"Feed one, twenty-two seconds," she said. "Twelve one. Stroke rate sixty-two. Swimmer's condition good."

And underneath that, in the second column, in the space reserved for the observer's own remarks, she wrote nothing at all, and looked out at the woman in the water for a while, and then looked at the shape of the man standing at the rail with a pole in his hand and his coat collar up.

18. FEED FOUR

By 04:00 they had cleared the Copelands and were out into the channel proper, and the swell came round — nothing, half a metre, a long slow lift and drop with about eight seconds in it — and the boat began to work, and Ryan the nephew was sick over the stern twice and said nothing about it and went on coiling rope.

This is a fact that swimmers find funny and never stop finding funny: the crew get seasick and the swimmer does not. There is no such thing as a seasick marathon swimmer. The vestibular apparatus does not complain when the body is horizontal and in the medium; the nausea of a channel swim comes from sugar and salt and cold, never from motion. So the standard arrangement is a woman in the water at hour twelve feeling reasonably well, and four adults on a boat six feet away, in coats, on a warm deck, with food and tea and a lavatory, feeling considerably worse than she does.

Farangis had been the least ill person present at every significant event of her adult life.

Feed four. Dariush took the pole.

There is a whole language on the pole. The feeder cannot touch and mostly cannot hear — a swimmer's ears are full of water and the boat's engine is running at fifteen hundred revs three metres away — so the exchange is compressed to about six words and a set of gestures that a crew develops over years.

"Time?" she said. It is the standard first question and every swimmer asks it and every good feeder lies about it in a specific direction.

"Two hours," said Dariush.

It was two hours and four minutes. He always rounded down early in a swim, because early in a swim the elapsed time is a burden, and rounded up late in a swim, because late in a swim the elapsed time is currency.

"Where's the tide."

"Turns at ten past six. You're carrying it."

"Right."

"Take the whole bottle."

She took the whole bottle.

He watched her hands as she gave it back. Fingers together on the release. Good.

She put her face down and went, and he pulled Gerald in on the yellow rope and stowed the bottle in the crate for the empties and wrote *04:00 / 250 / 19s / all* in his notebook, and then, out of a habit twenty-five years old and entirely useless, he checked his watch against the stars, which were not visible, and put his hands back in his pockets.

Ailbhe said, from under the wheelhouse: "You round down."

"I do."

"I've seen a feeder round down by an hour and a half at hour twenty."

"That's not rounding, that's fraud."

"It's a spectrum," said Ailbhe.

It was the first time in ten years and two months that the two of them had said anything to each other that was not administrative, and both of them noticed it, and neither of them followed it up, and the boat went on north-east at two and a half kilometres an hour into the dark.

19. HOUR THREE

At 05:10, in the last of the true dark, she saw something at her left shoulder in the glare of the boat's lamp.

It was nothing. It resolved instantly into what it was, which was the edge of the lit water where the lamp's cone ended and the brown-green went to black, a moving boundary that travelled with her at exactly her own speed because it was made by a light that was on a boat that was going her speed. She had been swimming beside that boundary for eleven years. It was as familiar as a skirting board.

She saw it and something in her chest went off like a starter's pistol.

That was all. A half-second. The rate went up and the stroke shortened and she took three strokes that were not her stroke, and then she had it back, and she put her face down and counted to four hundred.

It is worth saying what happened there, physiologically, because it is going to happen again and it is going to matter.

The startle was not a mistake. She had not mistaken a shadow for a person. She had seen a shadow, correctly identified it as a shadow, and had a full autonomic response anyway, which is the ordinary functioning of a nervous system in which a specific stimulus — the appearance of a shape at the left shoulder, in water, at night — has been paired with the worst outcome available to a human animal.

Ten years. Not one swim in ten years without it.

She had done the work. That is the thing that never gets into the profiles. She had done eleven months of a trauma-focused therapy in 2018 with a woman in Belfast who was excellent, and she had done the exposure work, and she had done it honestly and completely, and it had helped, substantially and permanently, with almost everything.

It had not touched the shoulder.

The therapist had told her at the end, with the frankness Farangis had paid for, that there were two possible reasons. The first was that the stimulus was not extinguishable because she went on presenting herself with it at forty times a year with the full physiological arousal profile intact — that she was, in effect, re-consolidating the association every time she got in the sea, and that the treatment for that was to stop swimming, and that she was not going to stop swimming, and that they both knew it.

The second was that extinction requires the memory to be available for updating, and that hers was not, because there was a hole in it.

Eleven seconds.

The therapist had wanted to work on the eleven seconds. Farangis had gone twice more and then stopped going, and had told Dariush that they had finished the course, which was true in the way that things she said to Dariush were true.

At 05:40 the sky over the Scottish side went from black to a very dark blue with no event in between, and by 06:00 there was a grey light on the water, and the lamps were switched off, and the world had a horizon in it again, and the boat turned out to be a boat rather than a shape with lights on it, and Ryan the nephew turned out to have red hair.

“Sun’s up,” said Dariush at the feed.

“I noticed.”

“Twelve point one still.”

“It doesn’t feel it.”

"That's because you've been in three and a half hours."

"That's cheerful."

"You asked."

"I didn't ask," said Farangis.

She looked at him for a moment, treading, with her goggles up on her forehead and her face the particular grey-white that grease and cold produce and that photographs so badly that swimmers' families are always shocked by the pictures.

"Dariush."

"What?"

The boat rose and fell. The gap between them was three metres of water and it was, for the next twenty-six hours, uncrossable, and both of them were entirely aware of this at all times and had been for a day and a half.

"Nothing," she said.

20. HOUR FOUR

At 06:10 the tide turned, and the whole geometry of the day changed, and this is the part that outsiders never grasp and that decides everything.

Until 06:10 the flood had been running north and she had been ferried up-channel while crossing it, so her track over the ground was a long diagonal to the north-east, and the distance made good towards Scotland was less than the distance swum by a factor of about a third. Now the ebb came in and everything reversed: the water began to run south, at first slowly, then at one knot, then at a bit under two through the middle, and the track over the ground bent the other way.

The plot, if you saw it afterwards, was an elongated S lying on its side. Everybody's is. The art of piloting a channel is to make the two arms of the S the same length so they cancel, and to have the swimmer arrive at the far coast at the moment of slack, because if she arrives half an hour late the tide takes her past the headland and she has to swim the last two kilometres across a current that is

going faster than she is, and that is where swims die: not in the middle, at the end, four hundred metres off Scotland, going sideways.

Which meant that from 06:10 Wilson was steering a course that made no visual sense whatsoever.

Farangis lifted her head at 06:20 and saw the Scottish coast — actually saw it for the first time, a low grey-blue line to the east, closer than it had any right to be — and saw that the boat was pointing about thirty degrees to the left of it.

At 06:30, feed nine, she said: “We’re going north.”

“We’re crabbing,” said Dariush.

“I can see the coast.”

“You can see a coast. It’s not your coast. Your coast is Portpatrick and it’s further right and Wilson wants you high because the ebb’s going to walk you down about four kilometres before slack.”

“It feels wrong.”

“It is wrong. It’s wrong in the correct direction. Take the whole bottle.”

She took the whole bottle.

This is the least discussed and most absolute of the sport’s requirements, and it is not physical.

You have to hand over your judgment.

At hour four you are lucid, you are strong, you can see the land, and a man you have known for three summers is steering you away from it, and you are going to swim in the direction he indicates for another twenty-five hours on the basis of nothing but a chart, an almanac, and his forty years. There is no version of this in which you get to check. You cannot see the current. The current is invisible by definition; a body in a moving fluid has no way of detecting the motion of the fluid. You are inside the problem and you are made of the same water as the problem.

So you trust the boat.

And there is a specific perversity in it, which is that the sport is sold, in every article ever written about it, as the ultimate individual endeavour, the human alone against the sea, self-reliance, the unassisted crossing — and the truth is that from the moment you go in you are an instrument being operated by a man in a wheelhouse, and the only thing you actually control is whether your hand goes in at eleven o'clock.

Farangis had thought about this a great deal. She had concluded, some time around 2015, that the sport was not about self-reliance at all. It was about a very rare and very extreme form of dependence, dressed up in the language of its opposite, and that the people who were drawn to it were not people who wanted to be alone but people who could not tolerate being helped in the ordinary way, at ordinary distances, by ordinary means — and who had therefore found the one arrangement on earth in which the help arrives at exactly three metres, and never any closer, and never touches you, and cannot.

She had not said this to anybody either.

She put her head down and swam thirty degrees left of Scotland for two hours.

At 08:30, feed thirteen, the sun got over the cloud and came in low and hard from the south-east and lit the whole channel a hard silver, and everything went white in the goggles on the breathing side, and for a while she swam blind on the left and turned her head to the right, breathing every three to alternate, and Dariush wrote *08:30 switched to bilateral, glare* in his notebook, and Ailbhe wrote *08:30 stroke rate 60. Swimmer alert. Water 12.0. Sea state 2. Condition: good.*

And in the second column, the one for the observer's own remarks, Ailbhe Nunan wrote, for the first time that day:

Ten years since I last watched this swimmer.

And then she looked at it for a while, and then she scored it out, twice, until it could not be read.

21. THE RULE

At seven in the morning, with the sun up and the swimmer settled into the fifth hour and nothing to do for twenty-three minutes, Ryan the nephew asked the question that every person who has ever crewed a marathon swim asks in their first ten hours.

He asked it of the deck generally, in the way nineteen-year-olds do, so that it could be withdrawn.

"What if she was drowning, but."

Nobody answered for a moment.

Dessie was coiling something. Wilson was in the wheelhouse. Dariush was writing a number in a notebook.

"Then we'd get her out," said Dessie.

"And it's over."

"It's over."

"So she'd rather drown."

"No," said Ailbhe Nunan, without looking up. "She'd rather we got her out. She'd just rather we didn't have to."

The boy thought about that and did not get it, which is correct, because it takes about four years.

Here is the argument, and it is worth setting down properly, because the whole book is inside it.

The rule is not a rule about safety. Everybody assumes it is a rule about safety and it is the opposite of a rule about safety. It is a rule that makes an already dangerous activity considerably more dangerous, deliberately, and it has survived a hundred and fifty years of people pointing that out.

The rule descends from Webb, who in 1875 swam from Dover to Calais in twenty-one hours and forty-five minutes in a silk costume with nothing on him but porpoise oil, and who was accompanied by boats, and who was not held up by any of them. Everything since is an elaboration of that: no artificial aid to buoyancy, warmth, or propulsion; no touching the escort; no touching the swimmer; one

costume, one cap, one pair of goggles, grease, and a light for night. The sport calls it the *unassisted* crossing, and it defends the definition with an intensity that people outside find comic until they look closely.

Because here is the thing they discover when they look closely: the sport is not defending a tradition. It is defending the only thing it has.

There is no track. There is no timing gate. There is no way to compare a crossing done in flat water on a neap with a crossing done in a metre of chop on the edge of springs, and there is no way to compare either of them with a crossing done by a twenty-five-year-old and a crossing done by a woman of forty-seven. Every marathon swim is a different event conducted in a different medium under different conditions and it can never be repeated, not even by the same swimmer, not even the following week.

So the sport cannot measure. It can only certify. And the only thing it can certify is a negative: that nothing was added.

Everything else — the times, the routes, the lists, the rankings, the whole apparatus — is decoration on top of a single verifiable claim, which is: *this person crossed this water and nobody helped her*.

Take away the prohibition on contact and there is nothing left. Not a diminished sport. Nothing. A wetsuit crossing is a fine athletic achievement and it is a different activity with a different name, and everybody involved is entirely relaxed about that, and the two communities get on perfectly well, and neither pretends to be the other.

Now the second half of the argument, which is where it stops being administrative.

Because the rule does not merely forbid the swimmer from being helped. It forbids the crew from helping. And those are not the same prohibition, and the second one is the one that does the work.

A rule against assistance could have been written to bind the swimmer alone: she may not accept help. That would have been sufficient for verification. It is not what was written. What was written binds everyone on the boat, and it binds them absolutely, in

circumstances that are foreseeable and that recur on every single crossing: the swimmer visibly suffering, visibly cold, visibly failing, three metres away, for hours.

The sport looked at that and did not carve out an exception, and has been asked to about once a decade for a hundred and fifty years, and has said no every time.

The stated reason is that any exception is unverifiable. If a hand may be laid on a swimmer in an emergency, then every crossing contains an unanswerable question about whether the hand that was laid was necessary, and the certificate is worthless. That reason is correct and it is not the real reason.

The real reason, which nobody in the sport will say out loud in a room with a journalist in it, is that the prohibition is the content.

They are not swimming across water. Anybody can be transported across water. What is being demonstrated, and what is being certified in eleven pages by a woman with a clipboard, is a specific and rather terrible proposition: that a human being can be surrounded by people who love her, in full view, within arm's reach, for a day and a half, and be entirely alone.

Not abandoned. Attended. Attended with total competence and total attention by people who would die for her and who are forbidden to reach.

That is the artefact. That is what the sport makes. Everything else is logistics.

Dariush Roshanfar had worked this out somewhere around 2011 and had never told his wife, because he had also worked out the corollary, and the corollary was that he had married a woman who had gone looking, at eleven years old, on a beach in County Down, for exactly that arrangement, and had found it, and had spent thirty-six years perfecting her access to it.

"It's not that she'd rather drown," he said to the boy, eventually. "It's that she's spent her whole life looking for a room where nobody can get to her, and this is the only one that's legal."

Ryan looked at him.

"That's fucking grim," he said.

"Yes," said Dariush. "Take the pole for a minute, I need to sit down."

22. SOHRAB AT FOURTEEN

The year he got fast was 2011.

Nothing had indicated it. He had been a decent age-grouper, top eight at Ulster level, the kind of swimmer a club is glad to have and does not build a season around, and then between March and October of his fourteenth year he grew five inches and his four hundred freestyle went from five minutes and eleven to four minutes and thirty-six.

Coaches call it the window and they are careful about it because it closes. A boy at fourteen with a new lever length and a new heart is briefly a different animal, and if the technique is already sound the times fall off a cliff, and then puberty finishes and the ones who were only ever early stop improving and the ones who were actually good keep going. Nobody knows which is which until about seventeen.

He came out of the water at the Ulster Age Groups in October 2011 having done a four thirty-six and looked at the board and then looked for her in the gallery.

She was in the gallery. She had come. This mattered, because she had missed the March meet for a qualifier in Cork and had missed the June meet for reasons she could no longer reconstruct, and she had come to this one and had sat on a plastic bench in thirty-degree air among two hundred parents for four and a half hours and had watched her son swim eight lengths.

He found her. He held up both hands with the fingers spread — some private thing they had, which meant nothing, which had started as a joke in a car — and she held up both hands with the fingers spread, and he laughed and went to get his tracksuit.

And what she felt, sitting on a plastic bench in a leisure centre in Bangor in October 2011, watching her fourteen-year-old son's time go up on a board, was this:

She felt proud, which took about a second and a half.

And then, underneath it and entirely without permission, she felt a fast, hot, complete stab of envy so pure that it made her sit up straight.

Because four thirty-six is a good four hundred, and four thirty-six at fourteen is a very good four hundred, and Farangis Roshanfar's lifetime best over four hundred metres freestyle, set in a twenty-five metre pool in Dublin in the spring of 2001 at the age of twenty-two, at the absolute peak of a career she had already privately understood was not going to go anywhere, was four minutes and forty-one seconds.

Her son had beaten her by five seconds. At fourteen. In a heat. Without particularly trying.

She sat on the bench with the envy going through her like a swallow of spirits and she thought, in words, in her own voice, the sentence: *I did that for eleven years and you did it in eight months.*

And then, arriving right behind it, close enough to be the same thought, she thought: *and I could put you in the sea and you'd be nothing.*

That is the sentence. That is the actual sentence, in her own voice, in her own head, on a plastic bench, about a fourteen-year-old boy who was at that moment pulling a tracksuit over wet shoulders and looking for her again.

She has never told anybody that sentence.

She has told Dariush that she was jealous. She has said it lightly, as a joke, more than once, and it goes down well because it is charming when a mother says she is jealous of her son, it is one of the permitted forms of love. What she has not said, and what is true, is that within a second and a half of her son's best swim she had located the arena in which she could still beat him and had privately gone there for comfort.

And here is why it matters, and why she has spent ten years going round it:

That was 2011. He was fourteen. He first asked to swim the Channel with her at seventeen. She said no for two years. She said yes at nineteen.

And she cannot now, and will never be able to, establish to her own satisfaction how much of the yes came out of the thing she thought on that bench.

She has been over it ten thousand times. She has constructed a defence and she can deliver it: the sentence was involuntary, it was one second of a normal human nervous system doing an ugly thing, everybody has them, the fact that she remembers it at all is evidence that she found it appalling, and there is no mechanism by which a stray thought in 2011 steers a decision in 2016.

And then the prosecution stands up, and the prosecution is very quiet, and it says: you wanted him in the water so he would look at you. You have admitted that. You have said it out loud four times. So the only question is whether you also wanted him in a place where you were the better animal, and you cannot answer that question, because there is nobody alive who can look inside a mother and issue a finding, and because the only witness who could have told you what he saw when he looked across at you at hour nineteen is at the bottom of the English Channel.

At 10:30 in the North Channel, at feed seventeen, with the sun high and the water at twelve point two, Farangis Roshanfar took a bottle off a yellow line and drank two hundred and fifty millilitres and said "Good" and let go, and Ailbhe Nunan wrote *feed 17, 18 seconds, all taken, condition good* on a sheet of paper.

23. HOUR SIX

At 08:00 the cold started winning small arguments.

This is not a moment. That is the first thing to understand about hypothermia in a trained swimmer: there is no moment. There is a slope, and the slope is very shallow, and the person on it is the last to know because the instrument used to detect it is the thing being degraded.

The measurable stuff first.

Core temperature in a swimmer of her insulation in twelve degrees does not crash; it settles. Metabolic heat production at her workload is high — she was, in effect, doing a hard aerobic session continuously for a day and a half — and for the first several hours production and loss are close enough that the core holds at thirty-six and a half or so. Then the arithmetic tips. Glycogen depletion reduces the heat you can make; cold diuresis reduces plasma volume; the shell, which has been vasoconstricted for hours, starts to leak because vasoconstriction is not free and the smooth muscle fatigues. So from hour six the curve begins to bend, and it bends slowly, and the loss is on the order of a tenth of a degree an hour, and a tenth of a degree an hour for twenty-four hours is the entire difference between a woman swimming and a woman being lifted onto a deck.

The hands go first and go in a fixed order and she could have narrated it.

Hour two: fingers cold, fine.

Hour four: fingers cold, sensation dull at the tips, grip on the bottle still normal.

Hour six: this. The claw beginning. Not a cramp — an inability. The fingers wanted to sit slightly apart at the entry, and holding them together took an act of attention, and an act of attention is a thing you have a finite supply of and are going to want later.

Hour ten: the release of the feed bottle becomes a thing you have to plan.

Hour sixteen: the hand is a paddle. It does not close. She would take the bottle by trapping it between both palms.

Hour twenty-two: she would not be able to feel the bottle at all and would judge by sight whether she had it.

The stroke degrades accordingly and it degrades in a signature. The catch is the first casualty: holding a high elbow with a vertical forearm requires the small stabilisers of the shoulder girdle and fine proprioceptive feedback from the hand, and when the hand goes quiet and the shoulder is tired the arm drops through the water instead of pressing back against it, which is called dropping

the elbow and which every swimmer has been shouted at about since they were eight. The efficiency loss is enormous — a swimmer with a dropped elbow at hour twenty is doing eighty per cent of the work for sixty per cent of the propulsion — and there is nothing to be done about it, because the fix requires exactly the resources that are gone.

She knew all of this. She had known it since she was twenty-five. Knowing it does not confer any advantage whatsoever, and this is one of the sport's small cruelties: there is no expertise that helps. The eleventh crossing hurts the same as the first. The only thing experience buys you is the ability to predict, with great precision, exactly how bad it is about to get, which is not obviously a benefit.

At 08:30 she noticed that she had counted to four hundred twice without registering either.

At 09:15 she noticed that the water had a smell, which was impossible, because she was in it, and because you cannot smell anything through a nose that is being flooded sixty times a minute.

It smelled of a kitchen. Specifically, and unmistakably, and with total sensory conviction, of the kitchen of the house in Bangor at about four in the afternoon in the winter, with the immersion heater on and something with cumin in it going on the hob.

She logged it. She had a category for it, which was *hour nine stuff, arriving early*, and she noted the arriving early with mild professional interest and put her face back down.

At 10:00 she began, without any decision being made, to breathe every two on the left again, and to hold, at the top of each breath, for a fraction longer than the stroke required, so that the head stayed turned for perhaps a tenth of a second more than it needed to.

She was checking her left side.

She did not notice that she was doing it. Dariush, watching her hands from a boat three metres away with a stopwatch and a notebook and twenty-five years, noticed it at 10:20 and wrote it down and did not say anything to anybody.

24. WILSON

Every channel has three or four people who decide who crosses it, and they are not the swimmers.

Wilson had been on the water since he was fourteen, first with his father, who fished, and then on his own account when the fishing stopped being a thing a man could feed a family on. He had come to piloting in 1988 by the ordinary route, which is that somebody asked him to take a boat out with a lunatic swimming beside it and he said yes because it was August and there was nothing else on.

He had put fifty-one people onto the Scottish shore. It is the highest number of any working pilot in the channel and he did not know the figure and would have been mildly irritated to be told it.

His success rate — the number he did know, because the association published it, and because swimmers rang him about it — was a shade over thirty-six per cent.

Which sounds terrible until you learn that the channel average is about twenty-two.

Here is what a pilot actually does, and almost none of it is steering.

He decides whether you go. That is ninety per cent of it. He has the tide tables and the almanac and four decades of local knowledge about what the sea does in the gap between the Copelands and Portpatrick in an August high, and he sits in a kitchen in Donaghadee and looks at a swimmer who has spent thirty thousand pounds and eleven months of her life and taken two weeks off work, and who is standing in front of him at forty-seven years of age with the whole thing in her hands, and he tells her no.

That is the job. Everything else is a boat.

He had told Farangis no in 2023, on a Thursday, with a forecast that most pilots would have gone on. She had driven home to Bangor that afternoon and had not spoken for two days and had rung him on the Sunday to apologise for something she had said in the kitchen, and he had said he did not remember it, which was a lie, and a kind one, and both of them knew it.

Three weeks later a swimmer had gone out of Donaghadee on a similar forecast with a different pilot and had been pulled at eleven hours in a sea that came up two hours earlier than the model said it would, and had been extremely lucky.

Wilson had not mentioned it. He never mentioned them. There is a version of the pilot who collects these stories and tells them in the kitchen to make a point, and that version is common, and Wilson was not it.

What he was instead was almost entirely silent, which swimmers found unnerving in the first year and came to understand in the third, because the silence is not temperament. It is method.

A pilot who talks is a pilot who is managing the swimmer's morale, and a pilot who is managing the swimmer's morale is a pilot who has entered into a relationship in which he will one day have to lie, and the day he lies is the day the whole arrangement fails, because the swimmer's entire safety rests on the proposition that the man in the wheelhouse is reporting the sea accurately.

So he did not encourage. He did not tell people they were doing well. He did not say *nearly there*, which is the single most destructive sentence available on a boat and which crews say constantly, at hour eight, and which has ended more swims than weather.

He said, when asked, the distance, the time, and the state of the tide, and he said it the same way at hour four and hour twenty-eight.

He had two rules of his own, on top of the association's.

The first was that he would not tell a swimmer she was going to make it. Ever. Under any circumstances. Not at four hundred metres. A swimmer who has been told she is going to make it stops swimming and starts arriving, and the North Channel has taken people off the shore at three hundred metres with an ebb that came round the headland, and he had watched it happen to a Frenchwoman in 2009 who had been told, by a very well-meaning man on her own crew, that she had done it.

The second was that he decided when it was over, and not the swimmer, and not the swimmer's husband, and not a doctor, and he told every crew this once, in the kitchen, in the same sentence, and did not repeat it.

"It's my boat and it's my call, and if I make it you'll not argue with me on the water. You can argue with me in the harbour."

At about eleven in the morning, at hour nine, with the swimmer running well and the tide behaving, Ailbhe Nunan came and stood in the wheelhouse door.

"You've done her three times now," she said.

"Four. There was one in twenty-two we never got in the water."

"What do you make of her."

Wilson looked at the water for a while.

There are perhaps forty people in the world qualified to answer that question and he was one of them, and the answer he gave was not the answer Ailbhe expected, and she thought about it for the next nineteen hours.

"She's the best cold-water swimmer that's ever come out of this town," he said, "and she's not here for the swim, and I've known that since the day she rang me, and I took the booking anyway."

"Why?"

"Because she'd have got somebody else," said Wilson. "And somebody else wouldn't have known."

25. THE DRAWER

The drawer is in the back bedroom, in a desk that came from her mother's house in 2011, under the fuse box instructions and the manual for a dishwasher they got rid of in 2018.

In the drawer there is an envelope with the association's crest on it. In the envelope there is an eleven-page log, and a covering letter of four lines, and a photograph of a man and a boy on the harbour wall at Donaghadee in July 2016 with a pole and a yellow rope,

which Dariush put in there in October 2016 because he could not think of anywhere else to put it and could not throw it away.

She has stood in front of that drawer four times.

2017. March. Eleven o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday. She got as far as putting her hand on the handle and then went downstairs and got in the car and drove to Ballyholme and swam for two hours in eight-degree water, which was forty minutes longer than was safe, and Sadie was not there and there was nobody on the beach and she has never told anybody how long she was in.

2019. The night before the Robben Island swim, in a hotel in Cape Town, which is to say she stood in front of a drawer that was nine thousand kilometres away, in her head, for about forty minutes, and then went down to the bar and had a glass of wine, which she does not do.

2021. December. She opened it. She got the envelope out. She held it for some period of time and put it back and closed the drawer, and went and sat on the stairs, and Dariush found her there at about one in the morning and sat down two steps below her and did not say anything, and after twenty minutes she said, "It's not that I don't want to know."

And he said, "I know."

And she said, "It's that once I've read it, that's it. That's the last thing. There isn't anything after it."

And he said — and this was one of the four or five times in ten years that he came close, and she has thought about it a great deal since — "Farangis, there isn't anything in it."

And she said, "Then why did you put it under a dishwasher manual?"

2024. She did not open it. She stood in the doorway of the back bedroom for a while with the light off and then went to bed.

Here is the shape of the ten years, and it is not the shape people imagine, and the difference matters.

The first year was volume. Eighty kilometres a week, which is more than any sane build, and which everybody around her called grief

and approved of. She did not miss a day. She was, that year, the most disciplined she has ever been about anything, and the discipline had nothing whatever to do with strength, and she has said so once, to the woman in Belfast, who wrote it down.

The second year was the anger, and the anger was entirely misdirected, by design. She fell out with the club. She fell out with a woman called Ann over the arrangement of a gala. She fell out, spectacularly and permanently, with a journalist from a Sunday paper who wanted to write about her and who used, in an email, the phrase *in the wake of the tragedy*, and who received four hundred words in reply that she has never regretted and would not send now.

The third and fourth years were the house.

That is the part that is not discussed. There is a room, and the room is a nineteen-year-old's room, and there is a schedule of decisions to be made about it that nobody schedules and that arrives anyway. What comes off the walls and when. Whether the wardrobe is emptied in an afternoon or over four years, one bag at a time, which is what actually happens. Which of his things become objects that live in the house — the good ones, the ones you can put on a shelf — and which of them become the other kind, the ones that cannot be looked at and cannot be got rid of and therefore go into a box in the roof space, and the box in the roof space is the truest thing in the house and nobody ever opens it.

There is a specific, unbearable, entirely unmentionable category of object which is: the ordinary thing that is worth nothing and was touched daily. A phone charger. A bank card. A blue plastic comb from a chemist's, still with hair in it, discovered in a coat in the hall in February 2018, which stopped Farangis Roshanfar entirely for eleven minutes.

The fifth year she went to the woman in Belfast, and it helped, substantially, and permanently, and she stopped going in the eleventh month because the woman wanted to work on the seconds.

The sixth year she went back to the channels properly and did Tsugaru at the fourth attempt.

The seventh, eighth and ninth years she trained, and worked in a school office, and made dinner, and slept next to her husband, and swam forty times a year in cold water with her face down, and was, by any external measure, entirely recovered, and was in fact conducting a ten-year legal action in an empty room against a defendant who was herself, with no judge, no jury, no charge, no evidence, and no possibility of any finding whatsoever.

And in the tenth year she booked the North Channel and rang the association and asked, by name, for an observer.

Dariush found out in March. She had not told him. He found the email open on the laptop in the kitchen — genuinely by accident, he was looking for a boarding pass — and he read the name and stood in the kitchen for a while with the laptop open.

He did not say anything about it that day, or that month.

He said something about it in June, in the car, coming back from Strangford after the qualifier, with her hair still wet and the heater off, forty minutes into a fifty-minute drive.

He said: "Why Ailbhe."

And she said: "Because she was on the rail."

And he said: "Farangis. She's been on that rail for ten years."

And she looked out of the window at the Ards peninsula going past in the rain and said: "Then it's time somebody let her off it."

Which was, Dariush thought, the single most generous sentence she had produced in a decade, and also — and he could not have said this to her, and would not have been able to say it to anybody, and knew it with total certainty — completely and entirely a lie about her own motives, and he loved her enough not to ask her which of the two of them she thought she was rescuing.

26. FEED TWENTY-ONE

At 12:00, at the twenty-first feed, ten hours in, Farangis stopped treading and put her feet down into nothing and shouted across four metres of water at a woman with a clipboard.

"Ailbhe."

Nobody moved on the boat. Dariush stood with the pole and the empty bottle on the end of it.

"Ailbhe!"

Ailbhe Nunan came to the rail.

"You're wasting a feed," she said.

"Did he say anything."

The engine ran. The boat rose and fell about a foot.

"Farangis, get your head down."

"You were the only one who could hear. Dariush was in the water, Marek was steering, the other lad was on the light." Her voice came in pieces because she was breathing hard and shipping water and shouting, all at once, which is not a thing the human throat is designed to do. "You were on the rail with the sheet. Twelve feet. You were the only one in a position to hear anything. Did he say anything."

Ailbhe Nunan stood at the rail of the *Kestrel Star* with her clipboard against her chest.

"I'm the observer," she said.

"I know what you are."

"Then you know what I do and what I don't do." She said it without heat and without apology. "I'm not going to have a conversation with you at hour ten. You've twenty hours in front of you. I'm not putting anything into your head that has to sit in there for twenty hours."

"That's not a no."

"It's not a yes."

"Ailbhe—"

"Ask me in Portpatrick."

Farangis Roshanfar hung in the water for three seconds with her goggles up on her forehead.

Then she put them down, and put her face in, and went.

Ailbhe went back to the seat under the wheelhouse and sat down and wrote:

12:00. Feed 21. 41 seconds — swimmer stationary, addressing observer. All taken. Water 12.2. Air 17. Sea state 2. Stroke rate on resumption 59. Condition: good.

Forty-one seconds. It was the longest feed of the swim so far by nineteen seconds and it had cost her, at two and a half kilometres an hour with a knot of ebb under her, something in the region of forty metres.

Dariush pulled the line in and stowed the bottle and came and stood near her, not looking at her, watching the water.

"She's going to ask you again," he said.

"I know."

"She's going to ask you at three in the morning when she's got a core of thirty-four and she's fifteen hours in and she'll be able to make herself cry, which she can't do now, and you'll be tired too."

"I know."

"I'm telling you as the only other person who was on that boat," said Dariush, still watching the water, "that if you tell her anything before she's on the shingle, she will not finish. Not because she'll be upset. Because she'll stop needing to."

Ailbhe Nunan wrote the air temperature in a box on a form.

"I know that as well," she said.

27. HOUR FOURTEEN

The afternoon is the part nobody writes about, because there is nothing in it, and that is precisely the thing.

From about ten in the morning until about seven in the evening the North Channel on a good day in August is a wide, bright, blank, entirely benign expanse of grey-green water under a high sky, with the Irish coast gone behind and the Scottish coast a low line that does not appear to get any closer for six hours because it genuinely does not get any closer for six hours, because she is crossing a tide that is running sideways at more than her own speed.

Air seventeen. Water twelve point two. Wind under five knots. Sea state one, occasionally two. Gannets. A ferry, twice, four kilometres to the north, going somewhere with a bar in it. One basking shark at 13:40, three metres of it, which Dessie pointed out and which Farangis never saw and was not told about until Portpatrick.

Perfect conditions. The kind of day a swimmer waits four years for.

And it is the worst part of the swim, and every experienced marathon swimmer will tell you so, and none of them can explain it to anyone who has not done it.

Because the storm has a shape. Cold has a shape. Jellyfish have a shape. Pain, nausea, a headwind, a tide that turns early — these are events, and events can be swum through, and a swimmer's entire architecture is built for swimming through events.

There is no architecture for nothing at all.

At hour twelve she had done approximately forty-three thousand strokes. Every one of them identical. The visual field had not changed in twelve hours except for the light going from black to grey to blue. She had heard nothing but her own breathing and an engine. She had eaten twenty-four bottles of the same drink.

And there were eighteen hours left.

This is where the technique is actually spent. Not in the dark, not in the field — here, at two in the afternoon, in the sunshine, in the flat, with a boat alongside and a husband on the rail and nothing whatsoever wrong.

The mind, denied all input, does what it always does, which is to go looking for the largest available object, and the largest available object is the total remaining distance, and the total remaining distance at hour twelve is eighteen hours of this.

The technique says: you are not swimming eighteen hours. You are swimming to the feed. There are twenty-three minutes.

And the mind, which has been in the small room for twelve hours and is bored, says: *twenty-three minutes of what, though.*

She lost it at 14:20 for the first time in the swim, properly, the way you lose it — not panic, nothing dramatic, simply a collapse of the partition, and for about ninety seconds Farangis Roshanfar swam the whole North Channel at once, saw all of it, the eighteen hours, the dark that was coming, the field, the last two kilometres, and the entire distance stood up in front of her like a wall and her stroke rate went from fifty-eight to sixty-six, which is the signature, which is what it looks like from a boat.

Dariush saw it from the rail and did not say anything, because there is nothing to say, and because a feeder who addresses it makes it worse by confirming that it is visible.

She got it back at about 14:24. She got it back by doing the thing she had been taught by nobody and had worked out for herself in the Bristol Channel in 2014, which was to stop counting to four hundred and start counting to twenty.

Twenty strokes. That is the smallest room. When four hundred is too big — and at some point in every long swim four hundred becomes too big — you go to twenty, and twenty is about twenty-one seconds, and there is nothing in twenty-one seconds. Nothing can go wrong in it. No decision is required in it. You can hold twenty for eighteen hours if you have to, one at a time, and there are three thousand and eighty-six of them, and you do not count those.

She did twenty-stroke sets from 14:24 until 15:10.

At 15:00, feed twenty-seven, she said: "Talk to me."

Which is the standard request and every feeder has a repertoire and the repertoire is the most carefully constructed thing on the boat.

The rules of feeder talk, developed by Dariush Roshanfar over twenty-five years and never written down:

Nothing that requires an answer. She has one breath and it is not for conversation.

Nothing about time remaining, ever, unless she asks directly, and then round.

Nothing about how well she is doing, because it invites her to check, and checking is fatal.

Nothing about home. Nothing about anything with feeling in it. A swimmer at hour fourteen has no defences whatsoever and a sentence about a kitchen will put her in the kitchen for forty minutes.

Nothing new. Nothing she has to think about.

What is left, after all that, is a very narrow and very strange category, which is: absolutely trivial, entirely familiar, mildly irritating information.

So he told her about the boiler.

He told her, in instalments, over four feeds, about the ongoing dispute with the man who had come to service the boiler in Bangor in May and had said the expansion vessel needed replacing and had quoted four hundred and ten pounds, and about the second man, who had come in June, and had said the vessel was fine, and about what the first man had said when Dariush rang him about it, and about the review Dariush had drafted and not posted, and about the specific wording of the review, which had gone through several versions.

It is one of the stupidest conversations either of them ever had and it took forty-five minutes across four feeds and she asked, at feed thirty, unprompted, what the second man had charged for the callout, and Dariush knew at that moment that she had come back and would be all right until dark.

At 16:00 the tide slackened and turned and began to carry her north again and Wilson altered course eleven degrees and said nothing to anybody about it.

At 17:30 she asked the time and he rounded down by twelve minutes.

At 18:40 a pod of common dolphins came through, eight or nine of them, and stayed with the boat for about four minutes, and one of them came under her twice, close enough that she felt the pressure wave, and she stopped and lifted her head and watched them go, and for the first time since Donaghadee she laughed out loud in the water, and it sounded, from the deck, like something breaking.

"Feed's early," said Dariush, sending it out at 18:44.

"I'm not due."

"You're due. Take it."

She took it.

"Dariush."

"What."

"That was the best thing that's ever happened to me," said Farangis Roshanfar, at hour sixteen and forty-four minutes, in the North Channel, entirely seriously, and put her face down and swam.

28. HOUR NINETEEN

The light went at 21:30, which is late in early August at that latitude, and it went the way it goes over water on a clear evening, which is slowly and then all at once: a long orange hour with the swell picking it up in slabs, then twenty minutes of a green-grey in which the surface still had a shine on it, then nothing.

At 21:00, feed thirty-nine, Dariush cracked the first of the glow sticks and clipped it to the back of her goggle strap between the shoulder blades, using the pole, which took four attempts because it has to be clipped and not handed and neither party may touch the other. He had done it seven hundred times and it had never once gone smoothly.

The lamps went on at 21:40 and the world contracted to the size of a lit room again.

Nineteen and a half hours.

She had, by Wilson's reckoning, done just over twenty-one kilometres over the ground and had thirteen and a half left, and the second ebb had begun and was going to run until half past midnight, and after that there was a flood which would take her north and then a slack around six in the morning, and if she was where Wilson wanted her at six she would be on the Scottish coast in the middle of the morning.

If she was not, she would be swimming in the afternoon, into a wind that was forecast to come round westerly at force four by two.

At the last feed of the light she said: "How long."

"Nineteen hours."

"How long left."

"That depends on you."

"How long, Dariush."

"Eleven or twelve. Maybe more."

She took the bottle. She had to think about the release for the first time.

"Farangis."

She was already turning away.

"It's going to get dark now," he said, "and it's going to be dark for a long time, and you're going to see things. You know you are. You always do and this is a long one and you're going to see things earlier and see more of them."

"I know what happens."

"I'm saying it out loud so it's been said out loud." His voice went across three metres of water flatly, without any particular tenderness, in the manner of a man reading out a checklist, which was the only manner in which either of them could ever say anything that counted. "They're not real. All of it's not real. And it

doesn't matter that it's not real, you don't have to fight it, you don't have to argue with it. You just have to keep your hand going in at eleven o'clock."

The boat rose. The last of the green went off the water.

"And if you see anything," said Dariush, "on the left."

She waited.

"On the left," he said again, and stopped, because he had started a sentence he did not know the end of, and had known he did not know the end of it, and had started it anyway, which was the most reckless thing he had done in ten years.

Farangis Roshanfar trod water in the North Channel in the dark with a green glow stick on her back.

"Say it," she said.

"Take the whole bottle," said Dariush.

She put her face in the water and swam.

III. THE FIELD

29. THE DARK

Here is what there is.

There is a green light on your own back that you cannot see and that exists entirely for other people. There is a boat on the left with two lamps angled down, and the lamps make a cone in the water about four metres across, and inside the cone the sea is a lit brown-green and outside the cone it is nothing at all, and the boundary between them travels with you at your exact speed for hours.

There is your right hand entering the water at eleven o'clock. You can see it. It is the only object in the universe that you can see and that is yours. It is greyish and it is slightly wrong, and it goes in and pushes a stream of small silver bubbles down its length and the bubbles come off the fingers and roll back along the arm and past the shoulder and go, and then it is not there any more, and then there is the left arm, which you cannot see, because you are breathing on the left and your face is out of the water when the left arm works.

There is the sound, which is not silence. It is a very loud, very consistent white noise made of your own breathing amplified through bone, the boil of water at your ears, the boat's engine at fifteen hundred revs coming through the water rather than the air, and the sixty-times-a-minute percussion of your own hands. It is roughly as loud as a busy road. Swimmers who have never done a night swim expect silence and find instead that they are inside a machine.

There is the smell of nothing, because there is no smell.

There is the taste, which is salt and maltodextrin and, from about hour fifteen, blood, because the salt has been working on the inside of your lips and the corners of your mouth for a day and there is a split there now.

There is the temperature, which is twelve point two, and which you stopped experiencing as temperature about eighteen hours ago and now experience as a kind of ambient pressure, a fact about the world rather than a sensation in the body.

And there is the count.

That is the entire contents of the mind of a marathon swimmer at hour twenty-one, and it is worth pausing on how extraordinarily little that is, because it is the whole mechanism of everything that follows.

The technical term is sensory deprivation and it is not a metaphor. Every channel is a flotation tank with weather. The visual field is a repeating loop of four seconds' duration. The auditory field is broadband noise with no information in it. The proprioceptive field is one movement pattern executed a hundred thousand times. Temperature is constant. There is no smell, no taste that changes, no social input, no language, no decisions to make.

The brain is a prediction engine. That is all it is. It exists to build a model of the world and to check the model against the incoming data and to update the model where it is wrong. Take away the data — properly take it away, for a day — and it does not stop. It cannot stop. It goes on producing the model at full power with nothing to correct it, and what you get, reliably, in every human being who has ever been in this condition, are perceptions built out of pure prediction with no evidence in them at all.

The literature is unambiguous and it is oddly beautiful. Prisoners in solitary. Polar explorers. Solo sailors. Pilots at altitude in the 1950s. High-altitude climbers above eight thousand metres. And swimmers, who get it worse than almost anybody, because the swimmer combines sensory poverty with hypothermia, hypoglycaemia, and a day and a half without sleep.

They report: light where there is no light. Music, often orchestral, often specific. Buildings on the water. Conversations with crew that the crew did not have and can prove they did not have, because they were asleep, because they were on the other side of the boat, because they were dead. Roads. The certainty of being able to see the bottom, in three kilometres of water, in the dark, in perfect detail. Animals. Children.

And the third man: a companion, walking or climbing or swimming alongside, on the side away from the group, benign, silent, and absolutely convincing.

Shackleton had it crossing South Georgia and put it in the book and gave it the name. Every high-altitude mountaineer knows it. It is so consistent across cultures and centuries that there is a decent argument that it is not a malfunction at all but a specific, evolved, last-resort response of a social animal in extremis, which produces a companion because a companion is what keeps you moving, and which has therefore been selected for over a very long time, in exactly the conditions in which a solitary human being would otherwise lie down.

Farangis knew all of this. She had read the papers. She had read them in the way that a person reads about a country they intend to enter.

At 23:00, feed forty-three, twenty-one hours in, she took the bottle and said:

"It's started."

"What has," said Dariush.

"There's an orchestra."

"Right."

"It's not even good."

"What is it."

"It's the Ulster Orchestra doing something with a lot of brass in it and I don't like brass," said Farangis, and let the bottle go, and put her face down, and swam.

Dariush pulled the line in, and wrote 23:00 — *auditory, benign, insight intact*, and then stood at the rail for a while, watching the green light going away from him and coming back, going away and coming back, in the cone of the lamps.

Insight intact. That is the phrase and it is the whole game. A hallucination with insight is a curiosity: you see the thing, you know it is not there, you carry on. A hallucination without insight is a

woman at hour twenty-six climbing a staircase that is not there, which has happened, and which is how people drown three metres from a boat.

The clinical question is not *is she seeing things*. Everybody sees things. The clinical question is *does she still know*.

30. LION'S MANE

They came into the field at 23:40 and it lasted, on and off, for six hours.

Every channel has a signature and this is the North Channel's, and it is the reason that a crossing which is only thirty-four and a half kilometres — shorter than the Molokai, barely longer than the English — has been completed by fewer than a hundred and thirty people. Not the cold, although the cold is worse than the English by a full three degrees. Not the tide, although the tide is worse. The *Cyanea capillata*. The lion's mane jellyfish. The largest jellyfish in the world, an animal of the cold north Atlantic that in that channel in August aggregates in numbers that have no equivalent anywhere else on a recognised marathon route.

The bell can be over a metre across. The tentacles — and this is the part that matters — trail for ten metres, fifteen, in some specimens more than thirty, in a fine dense curtain of hundreds of individual filaments, and they are almost invisible in daylight and entirely invisible at night, and they extend far below and far around the animal, so that the swimmer who sees the bell and swims around it has, by seeing the bell, already been in the tentacles for eight metres.

There is no avoiding them. That is the first thing every North Channel aspirant is told and it is not a warning, it is a scheduling note. You do not avoid the field, you swim through the field, and it is six hours long, and it is in the dark.

The sting is a nematocyst discharge: hundreds of thousands of microscopic barbed capsules, each pressurised, each firing on contact, injecting a mixed venom into the epidermis. Contact with human skin is not a bite or a burn but an injection performed by an

organism that does not know you are there and has no opinion about you.

What it does at first is nothing. There is a lag of two or three seconds and swimmers say this is the worst part, because you know precisely what is arriving.

Then a line of fire.

The first one caught her across the back of the right hand and up the forearm at 23:41 and she said, aloud, into the water, a word she did not use.

The second was across the mouth.

That is the one they tell you about. Face and lips and — because you are breathing every two on the left with your mouth open — inside the mouth. The tongue. The soft palate. The inside of the cheek. Venom on mucous membrane rather than skin, where there is no keratin layer to slow it down, and the tissue responds by swelling, and there is a specific and entirely rational terror that goes with feeling the inside of your own throat begin to thicken twelve kilometres from land.

She kept swimming. There is nothing else. That is the entire content of the technique.

By midnight she had been hit eleven times and had stopped counting, which is a thing every North Channel swimmer does at about the same point.

By 01:00 the back of her neck, both shoulders, both forearms, the backs of both hands, her mouth, her chin, her left ear, and a long diagonal across the sternum that had gone in under the costume strap.

The crew could see nothing. That is the horror of it from the boat: in the lamps you get a flash of a bell now and then, a translucent brown-orange plate the size of a bin lid rolling under the surface, and you get the swimmer's rhythm breaking for two strokes, and that is all the information there is. Dessie, who had done eighty of these, kept up a running count of visible bells for Wilson, and the count between midnight and one was forty-one.

Under the rules there is nothing to be done. She could not be given anything. Nobody could put vinegar on her, or a compress, or a hand. Any topical treatment must be self-applied and there is no way to self-apply anything to your own back while treading water in the dark, and the standard practice — which every North Channel swimmer follows and which the association has never quite formally approved — is to take an antihistamine with a feed and continue.

At the 01:00 feed Dariush sent out the bottle and a second, smaller bottle with two tablets in it.

“Cetirizine and paracetamol,” he said. “Take both.”

She could not get the small bottle open.

She hung in the water in the dark with a green light on her back and worked at a child-proof cap with two hands that had stopped closing four hours previously, and Dariush stood at the rail with a pole in his hand at a distance of three metres and watched his wife fail to open a bottle of antihistamines for fifty-one seconds.

He could have done it in a second and a half.

That is the sport. That is the entire moral content of the sport in one image, and anybody who wants to understand why these people are the way they are should look at it for a while: a man with the tablet bottle open in his mind, and a rule, and three metres of black water, and fifty-one seconds.

She got it. She took both. She let go of both bottles and swam.

“Fifty-one seconds,” said Dariush.

Ailbhe Nunan wrote *01:00. Feed 47. 51 seconds. Both taken. Extensive envenomation, ongoing. Swimmer did not request assistance.*

And in the second column she wrote: *Nobody offered any.*

And she left it in.

At 02:00 they had been going twenty-four hours and Wilson came out of the wheelhouse for the first time since dark and stood beside Dariush and looked at the water for a long moment.

"She's up on the line," he said. "She'll do it if she holds."

"Will she hold."

"She's twenty-four hours in the North Channel with a face like that," said Wilson, "and she's still taking the whole bottle. I've had fellas in here at eight hours crying about a wasp."

He went back into the wheelhouse.

31. THE SECOND SWIMMER

It arrived at 01:20 and it arrived the way they always do, which is that it had been there for some time before she noticed it.

That is the thing the accounts get wrong when they are written up afterwards. Nobody sees a figure appear. The figure has been there, and at some point the swimmer becomes aware that she has been aware of it for a while, and the awareness comes with the entire history attached, so that there is no moment of onset to point at. It is a memory that arrives as a perception.

On her left. The side away from the boat.

About a metre and a half off her shoulder, slightly behind, in the black outside the cone of the lamps, where there was nothing to see and no light to see it by.

Swimming.

Breathing every two on the left, in phase with her, so that when she turned her head to breathe, the other head was turning too, out there in the dark, at the same instant, and had already turned, and was turning again.

Farangis Roshanfar swam four hundred strokes and did not look.

That is the discipline and she held it and it was one of the two or three hardest things she had ever done. Four hundred strokes, six minutes and fifty seconds at fifty-eight a minute, with something matching her stroke a metre and a half to port, and she did not lift her head, and she did not turn, and she went on putting her right hand in at eleven o'clock, because Dariush had said *you just have to keep your hand going in at eleven o'clock*, and it was the only instruction she had.

She had been here before. Twice. She knew the physiology. She could have given a lecture on it while it was happening and part of her was giving one: this is a hypothermic, hypoglycaemic, sleep-deprived, sensorily starved brain generating a social presence because that is what this brain does in this condition, it is Shackleton on the ridge, it is the mountaineer's fourth man, it is the most reliably reported perceptual event in the entire literature of human extremity, and it has a name, and it means nothing, and it is not him.

At the end of the four hundred she started again at one.

At two hundred and sixty she looked.

There was nothing there. Of course. Black water, a metre and a half of it, and the end of the light, and past that the North Channel going down two hundred metres to a bed of sand and shell that no one has ever seen.

She put her face down.

And the presence, which had not gone anywhere, and which had not been affected in the slightest by being looked at and found absent, went on swimming beside her, breathing every two on the left, in phase.

Here is what it is like, and this is the part that people who have not had it cannot be made to understand, and the part that people who have had it never argue about:

It is not visual. She could not see him. She looked and there was nothing and looking made no difference at all, because the perception was not being generated in the visual system. It was being generated much deeper down, in whatever apparatus it is that tells a human animal, in a dark room, with its eyes closed, that there is somebody else in the room.

That apparatus does not report images. It reports presence. And it does not answer to evidence, because it evolved in a world where the cost of a false positive was a wasted turn of the head and the cost of a false negative was death.

So there was a person in the water on her left.

She knew there was not.

Both of these were completely true at the same time and neither of them was available to correct the other, and this is the actual condition, and it is not madness, and every account that reports it as madness was written by somebody who has not been at hour twenty-three.

At 01:30 the feed came out on the pole and she took it and drank and gave it back.

"How is it," said Dariush.

"Fine."

"Farangis."

"It's fine."

She let go of the bottle and turned and put her face in the water, and swam eleven strokes, and then stopped, and stood up in two hundred metres of water the way swimmers do, upright, treading, and turned back to the boat with her goggles still down.

"Dariush."

He was already pulling the line in. He stopped.

"What."

There was a long moment in which the boat rose and fell and the engine ran and the green light on her back went in and out of the water.

"How many people are in the water," said Farangis Roshanfar.

On the port side, under the wheelhouse, Ailbhe Nunan put down her pen.

"One," said Dariush.

"Right," said Farangis.

"Farangis. How many do you think there are."

"One," she said. "There's one. I know there's one."

And then, with a clarity that would come back to her a great many times in the following six hours, and which she would never be able to decide the meaning of, she said:

"I'm not asking because I don't know. I'm asking because I wanted to hear somebody say it."

She swam.

Dariusz wrote *01:30 — asked how many swimmers in water. Insight intact.* and then looked at what he had written and added, in smaller letters, *(I think.)*

32. HOUR TWENTY-FOUR

At 02:00 the presence began correcting her.

It did not speak. This needs saying plainly because the temptation to make it speak is enormous and the truth is stranger and much worse. It did not say anything. There was no voice. There was never at any point a voice.

What happened was that details arrived.

She was running the memory. She had been running the memory, in fragments, since about hour eighteen, without deciding to, the way you run a memory when the mind has nothing else to do and the doors have come off the rooms. September 2016. The English Channel, the return leg of a two-way, hour nineteen. The boat. The lights. Sohrab going in at the shoulder.

And at hour twenty-four in the North Channel, with something swimming beside her that was not there, the memory began to come with items in it that she did not put there.

The first was the cap.

In her memory of that night — the memory she had carried for ten years, examined ten thousand times, given evidence from, built a decade of self-accusation on — Sohrab was wearing a green cap. She could see it. Green, the club's colour, with the club's name on it.

At 02:04 in the North Channel it was orange.

Not a doubt. Not a suggestion. The memory simply presented itself, in its entirety, with an orange cap in it, in the way a memory presents itself, with the full weight of having always been that way.

She lost her stroke for four strokes.

Then she thought, coldly, with the part of her that was still an instrument: *this is confabulation, this is a degraded brain rebuilding a file it cannot read, this is exactly what happens and I have read about it and I will not do this.*

At 02:20 the water in the memory changed direction.

At 02:35 the number of people on the deck went from four to three, and she could not get it back to four, and she went through them one by one — Marek at the wheel, Ailbhe on the rail, the boy on the light, Dariush — and every time she counted them she got four, and every time she saw the deck she saw three.

At 02:50 she remembered, with complete clarity, that she had turned and looked at him at feed nineteen and that he had held up both hands with the fingers spread.

She had never remembered that before. Not once in ten years.

And this is the moment, at hour twenty-four, in the middle of the North Channel, that Farangis Roshanfar came apart, and it is worth being exact about the mechanism, because it is not what it looks like.

It looks like grief. It is not grief. Grief she could do; she had done ten years of it and had it in a system.

What was happening was epistemological, and it went like this: for a decade she had lived inside a single account of one night, and she had used that account as the foundation of everything — her guilt, her marriage, her not-reading of a document in a drawer, her presence in this channel — and she had believed, without ever examining the belief, that the account was a record.

And at hour twenty-four the account had begun to edit itself in front of her, freely, in real time, with no more difficulty than changing the colour of a hat.

Which meant it had always been able to do that.

Which meant it was not a record. It was a reconstruction, and it had been reconstructed every single time she had gone to it, ten thousand times over ten years, and each reconstruction had been laid down again on top of the last one, and what she had in her head now had approximately the relationship to September 2016 that a photocopy of a photocopy has to a face.

The thing she had been prosecuting herself with was not evidence.

The thing she had been prosecuting herself with was a story she had been telling herself nightly for ten years, in a state of extreme distress, which is precisely the condition under which the human memory is at its most plastic and its most confident.

She stopped swimming.

She had not stopped swimming outside a feed in eleven years.

"Farangis!"

The boat came round about ten degrees; Wilson had felt it before Dariush shouted.

She was upright in the water with her goggles up, and the green stick on her back was going in and out of the black, and the lion's mane welts across her mouth had swollen the lower lip out and to the left so that when she spoke it came out damaged.

"Dariush. Was his cap green."

"What?"

"Sohrab's cap. On the night. Was it green or orange."

Three metres of water. Twenty-four hours and four minutes. A man at a rail with a pole in his hand.

He could have said either. He knew what she was doing and he knew what it would cost her either way, and he had about a second and a half.

"It was green," he said.

"You're sure."

"It was the club cap. It was green. Farangis, swim."

"You'd say that anyway."

"I would," said Dariush, "and it's also true. Both of those are true. Swim."

She looked at him for two more seconds and then put her face down and swam, and her stroke rate on resumption was fifty-one, which was five below her last count, and Ailbhe Nunan wrote it down.

33. WHAT SHE THOUGHT

Now the rest of it.

This is the part that has no defence and is not going to be given one, and there is no useful purpose in arranging it kindly, so it will be set down in the order it arrived, at hour twenty-five, in the middle of the North Channel, in a woman who had been awake for forty-four hours and in twelve-degree water for twenty-five of them, with something swimming beside her that was not there.

One.

When they got him onto the deck she was still in the water. This is a fact and it is in every account including the two-line one. Under the rules she could not be lifted out except by abandoning, and the swim was not formally abandoned until Marek made the call, and there is therefore an interval — the length of it is disputed, nobody wrote it down, Dariush says ninety seconds and Ailbhe has never said — during which her son was on the deck and she was in the water beside the boat and Dariush was doing compressions.

And in that interval, treading water in the dark in the English Channel at hour nineteen of a two-way with her son's arm hanging off the edge of a deck three metres above her, she thought:

If they get him back I can still finish.

That is the first thing. There is no version of it that is not that. She has tried. She has tried the version where it is her body thinking it and not her. She has tried the version where it is a mother's optimism, the belief that he will be fine, and therefore innocent. She knows both of those are constructions and she built them herself and she knows exactly when.

The sentence was about the swim.

Two.

When Marek abandoned the swim — when the words were actually said, and the boat turned for Dover — the thing that went through her, before anything else, before terror, before any of it, was relief.

Because she had been in the water for nineteen hours and she was one hundred and ten hours away from being a woman who had swum the English Channel and back, and she had known since about hour sixteen, in the way you know these things, that she was not going to make it, and that she was going to have to abandon in front of her son.

And now she did not have to.

That is the second thing. The abandonment arrived as a release, and she felt the release, physically, in her chest, at three in the morning in the English Channel, over the sound of her husband counting compressions.

Three.

She wanted Dariush to hit her.

Not metaphorically, and not once, and not in the aftermath. Continuously, for ten years, as a standing wish, renewed almost daily and never once approached in speech.

She wanted him to come into a room and put a hand around her throat and say *you killed him*. She has staged it. She has an entire scene, with dialogue, which she has run so many times that it has acquired production values: the kitchen in Bangor, the light off, the specific chair.

The wish is not masochism. She has checked. It is procedural.

She wants a charge. A charge is the beginning of a process, and a process has a shape, and at the end of a shape there is a verdict, and after a verdict there is a sentence, and a sentence has a duration, and a duration ends.

Instead she got a man who loved her, who knew the physiology better than she did, who had run every number and had arrived,

honestly, at *there was nothing you could have done*, and who said it, and went on saying it, kindly, for ten years.

Which meant no charge. Which meant no process. Which meant no end.

She has come to experience her husband's forgiveness as a locked door, and she has come, in the small hours, in the years since, to hate him for it — not steadily, not in a way that touches the marriage, but in short, complete, incandescent episodes lasting under a minute, in which she looks at the back of his head while he is asleep and thinks: *you coward, say it*.

Four.

The body.

In the fourteen months after Sohrab died she trained more than she has ever trained in her life. Eighty kilometres a week. Two sessions a day, sometimes three. Everybody around her called it grief and told each other, approvingly, that she was coping, and she let them.

And what she has never said to a single living person is what the body did in those months, which is that it woke up.

Twice a day she went into cold water and half killed herself and came out with a nervous system flooded with catecholamines and endorphins and every endogenous opioid a mammal can produce, and the effect was not calm. The effect was appetite. She was, at thirty-seven, four months after burying her son, more physically alive than she had been at twenty-five: hungry, wakeful, and — she is going to say it — aroused, persistently, absurdly, in the middle of the afternoon, in the car, in the kitchen, in a house with a photograph of a boy in the hall.

And she took it. She used it. She initiated, more in that year than in the previous five, with a man who was destroyed and who did not understand what was happening and who did not refuse her.

And afterwards she would lie in the dark next to him and feel the whole system come down off it, and would think, in her own voice, with perfect clarity: *what kind of animal is this*.

She has never told him. He has never asked. It is the single largest unspoken thing in a marriage that has three or four large unspoken things in it, and it will still be unspoken when one of them dies, and both of them know that.

Five.

And under all of it, the thing that arrived last, at hour twenty-five, in the North Channel, with the presence swimming beside her in the dark:

She has not, in ten years, been able to remember what his voice sounded like.

She has the wet hand on her jaw at six years old, available on demand. She has the fingers spread in a gallery in 2011. She has the shape of him going into the water. She has, apparently, a green cap, or an orange one.

She does not have the voice. It went first and it went completely and it is not coming back, and she has an eleven-second video from 2015 of him in a kitchen saying something about a charger, and she has watched it perhaps four hundred times, and it has done what watching does, which is to overwrite the original with the copy, so that what she now has is not her son's voice but the sound of a phone speaker.

She destroyed it herself. By going to it.

That is what she thought at hour twenty-five, in the order she thought it.

And then she went on swimming, because there was nothing else to do with any of it, and because the water at that particular moment was the only place in the world that would take it, and because it was twelve point two degrees and it did not care, and because that is what the water has always been for.

The presence swam beside her in the dark.

At 03:00 the feed came out on the pole and she drank it and gave it back and said nothing at all, and Ailbhe Nunan wrote *03:00. Feed 51. 24 seconds. All taken. Condition: fair*, and then sat with the pen above the second column for a long time, and did not write

anything in it, and looked out at the water where a woman she had watched for twenty-five hours was swimming with her face down and her hand going in at eleven o'clock.

34. HOUR TWENTY-SIX

At 04:00 she turned away from the bottle.

It is worth understanding what has happened by hour twenty-six to the machinery that makes decisions, because from here on the woman in the water is not the woman who got in, and the difference is chemical and structural and entirely predictable, and everybody on that boat had been waiting for it since the day before.

Blood glucose. She had taken eighty grams of carbohydrate an hour for twenty-six hours, which is close to the ceiling of what a human gut can absorb, and had burned somewhere between seven and eight hundred kilocalories an hour, so the deficit had been running at about four hundred an hour since the beginning and the arithmetic had now arrived. Liver glycogen: gone, hours ago. Muscle glycogen: gone in the prime movers, so the shoulders were running on fat oxidation and circulating glucose, and fat oxidation is slow and cannot support the intensity, and circulating glucose is what the brain eats.

And the brain does not have a store. It has about four grams of glucose in the whole bloodstream and it goes through that in a couple of minutes. It is entirely dependent on continuous delivery and when delivery drops it does not shut down evenly. It shuts down in order, and the order is: the newest parts first.

So the frontal lobe goes first. Judgment. Planning. Inhibition. The capacity to hold two things in mind and compare them. The capacity to be talked out of something.

Then the temperature. Core down, by Dariush's estimate — nobody was going to take a rectal temperature in the North Channel — somewhere around thirty-four point five, possibly a little under. At thirty-four the same structures are being suppressed by a different mechanism: enzyme kinetics slow, cerebral metabolism drops about

six per cent per degree, and the effect is indistinguishable from the inside.

Two independent processes, both attacking the same organ, both taking out the same faculty first.

The result is a swimmer who is entirely lucid in the way that matters least — she can talk, she can count, she can swim — and who has lost, completely, the ability to be reasoned with.

“Take the bottle,” said Dariush.

She turned her head away from it.

Not a refusal. Not a decision. A turn of the head, the way a child turns away from a spoon, and the whole of her body language was a child’s and everybody on the deck recognised it and nobody said so.

“Farangis. Take the bottle.”

“I don’t want it.”

“I know you don’t want it. Take it.”

“It makes me sick.”

“It doesn’t make you sick, you’ve had fifty-one of them.”

“I don’t want it.”

Dessie held the light. Ryan the nephew stood at the rail with his mouth slightly open. Ailbhe Nunan wrote the time.

Here is the thing about the twenty-sixth hour, and every experienced feeder on every channel in the world knows it and dreads it: this is the exact and only mechanism by which competent, insulated, well-trained swimmers die on marathon crossings. Not the cold, on its own. Not the sea. The refusal cascade. She turns away from a feed. The glucose drops further. The judgment degrades further. She turns away from the next one. Twenty minutes later she cannot hold a stroke, and forty minutes after that she is at thirty-three degrees and going quiet, and the entire cascade began with a woman turning her head away from a bottle in a way that looked, at the time, like a small thing.

Two feeds missed is a swim. Three is a helicopter.

Dariush Roshanfar leaned over the rail of the *Kestrel Star* and shouted at his wife.

"Take the bottle!"

"Don't shout at me."

"Take the fucking bottle, Farangis."

"Don't—"

"You told me to. In the kitchen. On Tuesday. You said if you turn away from it twice I'm to shout at you and you'll think I'm a bully and I'm to keep doing it. That was you. You said it. So take the bottle."

She hung in the water with her ruined mouth and her hands that would not close and something swimming beside her that was not there, and for about four seconds she was, visibly, twelve years old and being got out of a bed.

Then she took the bottle.

She drank about half of it and gave it back.

"All of it."

"I drank it."

"You drank half."

"Dariush."

"All of it."

And she said — and this is the sentence that Dariush Roshanfar will still be able to reproduce exactly, with the intonation, when he is eighty:

"If I take all of it I'll finish."

The boat rose and fell.

"Yes," he said.

"I don't want to finish."

"I know."

"I want to stay out here."

"I know," said Dariush. "Take the whole bottle."

She took the whole bottle.

Ailbhe Nunan wrote: *04:00. Feed 53. 3 min 20 sec. Initial refusal. All taken after 2 min. Water 12.2. Air 13. Stroke rate on resumption 49. Condition: deteriorating.*

And in the second column she wrote: *Swimmer stated she did not wish to finish. Feeder instructed her to take the feed. She took it.*

35. ELEVEN SECONDS

At 04:40, in the last of the dark, it came.

Not as a memory. She would want to be clear about that afterwards, and she would never be able to make anybody understand it, including Dariush, including a woman in Belfast whom she would eventually go back to. It did not arrive as a memory. It arrived as a place.

She was in the English Channel.

Not remembering it. In it. The water changed under her — English Channel water is different water, warmer by three degrees, dirtier, and it tastes of shipping — and the boat on her left was a different boat, and the sky had a moon in it that had not been there in the North Channel, and she was nineteen hours into a two-way and she was going to have to abandon and she had not admitted it yet.

Hour nineteen. Feed nineteen. She had done nineteen hours and forty minutes and she was two hours off the English side on the return and her stroke had gone and she knew it.

Sohrab had been in the water since hour eighteen. One hour in three. He was on her left, a metre off, breathing every two on the left so that they were face to face on every second stroke, which was not standard, which was a thing he had started doing at about hour eighteen and forty and which she had not told him to stop doing because she liked it.

Green cap.

Orange cap.

Green.

The last time she saw him he was a body-length back and to the left and his arm came over and went in and she saw the whole of the stroke and it was good, it was a good stroke, his catch was better than hers had been at nineteen, and she had thought — and this she is sure of, this one she will defend, this one is hers — she had thought: *look at that*.

And then she swam eleven strokes.

And then she stopped.

Here is the hole. Here is the thing she has been swimming towards for ten years.

She stopped. She does not know why she stopped. She has, over a decade, produced a range of accounts of why she stopped, and she has believed all of them at different times, and the fact that she has produced a range is itself the problem.

Account one: she heard something. A sound behind her and to the left, in the water, that was not the rhythm.

Account two: she did not hear anything. She stopped because she was nineteen hours in and finished and her stroke had gone, and she stopped for the reason swimmers stop, which is that they cannot do it any more, and the timing is a coincidence, and the universe is full of coincidences and this one has ruined her life.

Account three, which arrives at three in the morning and which she has never told anybody: she heard something, and she knew what it was, and she stopped, and then she did not shout, and then she started swimming again, because she was two hours off the English coast on a two-way that she had already lost and because for eleven seconds she was not a mother, she was a system that had been running for nineteen hours with one objective in it.

She trod water for eleven seconds.

Eleven. That is Ailbhe's number, from the log, from the sheet, and Dariush has it too because Dariush counted it afterwards from the boat's engine note — eleven seconds between the swimmer stopping and the boat's screw going into reverse, and the boat's

screw went into reverse because Ailbhe Nunan said, quite calmly, "Marek."

So: eleven seconds. Farangis Roshanfar stationary in the water. And then the boat turning, and Dariush going over the side in his clothes, and the light swinging, and everything after that is well documented and none of it matters, because the entire mass of a decade is loaded onto eleven seconds in which the only witness who could say what happened was the woman it happened to, and she does not know.

She did not shout. That is agreed. Nobody on the boat heard her shout, and Ailbhe was twelve feet away on the rail with a clipboard, and Ailbhe would have heard.

She has never been able to establish whether she did not shout because there was nothing to shout about, or because she was too cold to make a sound, or because she was in the process of deciding.

That is the hole, and it is eleven seconds wide, and she has been trying to get back into it for ten years by the only route she knows, which is to reproduce the conditions.

At 04:41 in the North Channel, at hour twenty-six and forty-one minutes, in the same cold, at the same hour of the night, at the same depth of the same exhaustion, with the same presence swimming beside her, Farangis Roshanfar went back in.

And she got there. She got all the way in. She was in the English Channel in September 2016 at the moment of stopping, with the whole of her nervous system in the correct state, and she looked, and this is what she found:

Nothing.

There was nothing there. There was no recovered memory, no sound, no decision, no revelation. There were eleven seconds of a woman treading water in the dark, and inside them there was no content at all, because there had never been any content, because the brain at hour nineteen and thirty-four point eight degrees does not lay down memory, full stop, and there is no key that opens a door with no room behind it.

She had built a ten-year religion on the assumption that the answer was in there.

There was no in there.

At 04:50 the sky over Scotland went from black to very dark blue with no event in between.

36. DOVER

This is the part she has never been able to put in order, and it will be set down here in the order she has it, which is not the order it happened, because there is no order it happened, because the woman it happened to had a core temperature of thirty-four point one and was in the eighth hour of a hypoglycaemic episode and does not have the file.

The deck.

Wood under her cheek. Not the deck — a folded coat, and under the coat the deck, and the deck was going up and down, and the engine was much louder than it had been all night because she was lying on it.

Her legs would not do anything. That is not a memory of pain. It is a memory of an administrative problem: she gave an instruction and the instruction went nowhere, and she gave it again, with more emphasis, and it went nowhere again, and she remembers being irritated.

Somebody's knees beside her head.

A voice saying a number, over and over, in a rhythm, and the rhythm was familiar, and she could not place it, and it was the count.

Light swinging. The deck light on a lead, swinging, so the shadows went one way and then the other, and she remembers the shadows and not the thing casting them.

The face.

A woman's face upside down over hers, close, and grey hair coming out from under a hood, and a hand putting something heavy on her, and she remembers that the woman's face was doing something

very carefully controlled, and that she recognised the control before she recognised the face.

What she said.

Here is what she has. She has this and it is all she has and she has taken it out and looked at it ten thousand times, which is to say she has ruined it:

She said, "Where's Sohrab."

She is certain of it. She said it first. That is the first thing out of her mouth on that deck, and she has said so in every account she has ever given, to Dariush, to the woman in Belfast, to her own head at four in the morning, and she believes it with the full force of a decade of daily repetition, and she now knows exactly what a decade of daily repetition is worth.

And the woman with the grey hair said something about them working on him.

And she tried to get up.

And that is the whole of it. That is the complete contents of the file. There is a hole after it that runs, as far as anybody can establish, about six hours.

Dover.

She was in a bed in a room with the curtain half round and it was daylight.

The first thing was that she was warm, and she noticed being warm before she noticed anything else, and the warmth was actively pleasant, and she lay in it for what she thinks was some time. Then she noticed her hands were bandaged, which they were not — they were not bandaged, they were just her hands, and she had misread them, and she remembers correcting it.

Then she thought: *the swim*.

Then she thought: *I got out*.

Then she thought, with a clean, procedural, entirely undramatic feeling of failure that she has never been able to make sound as small as it was: *so I didn't finish, then*.

And she lay in a bed in a hospital in Dover for some interval and was disappointed about a swim.

That is the fifth thing. That is the one that is not in the log and not in any account and that she has told nobody, including the woman in Belfast, and which arrived at hour twenty-five in the North Channel with the rest of it.

For an interval whose length is unknown — she thinks under a minute; she cannot swear to that; it might have been twenty seconds and it might have been five minutes — Farangis Roshanfar lay awake in a hospital bed in Kent and did not know, and was thinking about a swim.

Then Dariush came in.

He was in different clothes. That is what she saw first. He was in a grey sweatshirt that she did not recognise and that she later found out had been bought by somebody in a shop near the harbour, and the fact of the sweatshirt is the thing that has stayed, because it meant that time had passed and that arrangements had been made and that there had been a period in which people had gone into shops.

He came and sat down on the edge of the bed.

And she looked at his face and she knew.

There is a folk idea that people are told these things and cannot take them in, and it is wrong, and everybody who has been on either side of it knows it is wrong. She took it in instantly and completely, before a single word, from the arrangement of a man's face in a doorway, and everything that was said afterwards was administration.

He said her name.

She said, "No."

He said, "Farangis—"

She said, "No. No. No—" and went on saying it, and she does not know for how long, and it is the only part of that day for which she does not have a duration, and Dariush has never given her one, and she has never asked.

He held her.

That is the last thing in the file and it is a physical sensation and it is entirely intact, unlike everything around it: the weight of a man's hands flat between her shoulder blades, and the smell of a sweatshirt that had been in a shop that morning, and — because a body does not stop being a body, and because she had been in sixteen-degree water for nineteen hours and twelve minutes and had been out of it for eleven hours — the deep, involuntary, uncontrollable afterdrop shiver going through her the whole time, so that the two events are welded together and cannot be separated and never will be.

She has never in ten years been able to shiver without some part of it arriving.

Which is worth stating plainly, because it is the whole of what her life became: she had chosen, at eleven years old, on a beach in County Down, an activity whose central and unavoidable physical sensation is the exact sensation of being told her son was dead.

And she had gone on doing it, forty times a year, for ten years.

Nobody has ever asked her about that. It is too large and too obvious and it sits in the middle of her like a piece of furniture in a room that everybody walks around.

37. HOUR TWENTY-EIGHT

At 06:00 she got warm.

It came on over about ten minutes and it was the most pleasant sensation she had experienced in a day and a half. It began in the chest and went out along the arms, and it was not the false warmth of a hot drink or the local warmth of effort; it was general, it was deep, and it was accompanied by a flooding, generous, entirely convincing sense of wellbeing.

The welts stopped hurting.

Her hands, which had been paddles since midnight, felt like hands.

The stroke felt long and easy and correct in a way it had not felt since hour four, and when she looked at her own arm entering the

water it looked, in the grey first light, like a young woman's arm, and she thought: *there we are. That's the second wind. Everybody talks about it.*

She had been swimming for twenty-eight hours and she was four kilometres off the Scottish coast and she felt marvellous.

Paradoxical warmth. Paradoxical undressing. It is one of the most reliably reported findings in hypothermia medicine and one of the most reliably fatal. Somewhere below thirty-three degrees, after hours of maximal vasoconstriction, the smooth muscle in the peripheral arterioles fatigues and lets go, and a large volume of warm core blood rushes out to the shell. The receptors in the skin, which have been reporting cold for a day, are suddenly bathed in blood at core temperature and report — accurately, from their point of view — heat.

The subjective experience is warmth and comfort and, very often, euphoria.

The physiological reality is that the core has just been opened to the environment and is about to fall off a cliff.

They find them on mountains with their coats off and their boots beside them. They find them in flats in January in a vest. Between twenty and fifty per cent of fatal hypothermia cases involve the removal of clothing, by the victim, at the point of death, because the victim was hot.

At 06:08 Farangis Roshanfar reached up with her right hand and put a thumb under the strap of her costume at the left shoulder.

It was Dessie who saw it and Dessie who said, sharply, "Boss."

Dariush was already at the rail.

"Farangis."

She had stopped swimming. She was treading, easily, comfortably, with her head up and her goggles pushed onto her forehead, and she was smiling at him. She had not smiled at him in the water since the Kaiwi Channel in 2013.

"I'm all right," she said. "I've come good."

Her thumb was under the strap.

"Farangis, listen to me."

"No, I have. Honestly. I've come right. It happens about now, doesn't it, you always say it happens about now—"

"Take your hand off the strap."

"What?"

"Take your hand off your shoulder."

She looked at her own hand as if it belonged to a third party. And here is the thing that Dariush Roshanfar will carry: she did not look confused. She looked amused. She looked like a woman who had been caught doing something faintly silly and was about to make a joke about it.

"I'm warm," she said, reasonably.

"You're not warm. You're thirty-three degrees and your shell's opened up and you are about four minutes from being in serious trouble, and I cannot come and get you, and Wilson cannot come and get you, and if anybody puts a hand on you, you are done, so I need you to take your hand off the strap and put your face in the water and swim."

"Dariush—"

"There are four kilometres left."

"I'm hot."

"I know you are," he said. "I know. I know exactly what that is, and I know what it feels like, and I'm telling you it is a lie your skin is telling you, and I am the only person here who can tell you that, and I am three metres away and I am not allowed to touch you, and I have never in my life wanted anything the way I want to come over this rail."

The boat rose and fell.

And Farangis Roshanfar, four kilometres off Scotland, with a core temperature that Dariush would later argue in front of two doctors had been below thirty-three, said:

"Say my name again."

He said her name.

She took her hand off the strap. She put her face in the water. She swam.

At 06:20 Wilson came out of the wheelhouse and stood beside Dariush and neither of them said anything for a while.

"That's them," said Wilson.

"That's what?"

"That's them all. Every one I ever lost." He looked at the water.

"They're all lovely at the end. They're all having a great time."

38. AILBHE'S LOG

At 07:00, at hour twenty-nine, with three kilometres to go and the Scottish coast close enough to see the white of the buildings at Portpatrick, Ailbhe Nunan stood up.

She had been sitting under the wheelhouse for twenty-nine hours. She had written eleven pages. She had recorded fifty-eight feeds, forty-one visible jellyfish between midnight and one, a refusal at 04:00, an episode at 06:08, and a stroke rate that had gone from sixty-two to forty-seven.

She walked to the wheelhouse and said something to Wilson, and Wilson looked at her for a moment and then reached up and switched on the hailer, which is a small grey loudspeaker on the wheelhouse roof used for talking to swimmers over an engine and which had not been switched on all night because Dariush's voice carried well enough.

The click of it going live came across the water.

Farangis lifted her head.

And Ailbhe Nunan, fifty-eight years old, twenty-six years an observer, standing on the deck of a boat in the North Channel at seven o'clock in the morning with the Scottish coast three kilometres away, held up a sheet of paper that was ten years old and began to read.

"Observer's log. English Channel Two-Way Attempt. Roshanfar, F. Fifth of September, two thousand and sixteen."

Her voice came out of the grey box flat and administrative and enormous.

"Twenty-three hundred hours. Start. Swimmer clear of water, no assistance."

Dariusz turned round very slowly.

"Ailbhe," he said.

She did not stop.

IV. NUSHDARU

39. THE OMISSION

She read the whole of it.

Eleven hours of a swim in about six minutes, in the flat official register of the form, over a loudspeaker, to a woman in the water: the start, the water temperatures, the feeds and their durations, the sea state at three-hourly intervals, the turn at the French shore at eleven hours forty, the pace swimmer entering the water at hour eighteen with the time noted and the permission noted and the observer's confirmation that no contact occurred.

And then:

"Zero one forty-two hours. Feed nineteen. Twenty-two seconds. All taken."

"Zero one fifty-one hours. Swimmer stationary."

"Zero two hundred and two hours. Medical emergency on board. Swim abandoned."

The hailer clicked and there was the sound of the engine and nothing else.

Farangis Roshanfar trod water three kilometres off Scotland with her goggles up on her forehead and her lip swollen out and to the left.

"That's it?" she said.

Ailbhe brought the microphone up again.

"That's what's in it."

"Nine minutes."

"Nine minutes."

"There's nine minutes between the feed and the boat turning and you have got two lines in it."

"Yes."

"Where are the eleven seconds."

"They're not in it," said Ailbhe Nunan.

Farangis had known this. That is the thing. She had known it for ten years in the specific way you know the contents of a document you have refused to read: she had constructed the log's contents from Dariush's face in October 2016 when he took an envelope out of a letterbox and read it standing up in a hall and then put it in a drawer. She had known there was nothing in it. She had built the entire architecture of a decade on the certainty that there was nothing in it.

Hearing it was different.

"Say why," she said.

"Farangis, you've three kilometres—"

"Say why!"

And Ailbhe Nunan, who had spent twenty-six years being the person in the boat who has no opinion, put the microphone down for a second and looked at the water, and then picked it up again.

"Because you stopped," she said. "You stopped at zero one fifty-one and the boat turned at zero two hundred and two and I had it on the watch, and it was eleven seconds between you going upright and me saying Marek's name, and I stood on that rail for eleven seconds with a sheet of paper in my hand and I did not know what I was looking at."

The hailer buzzed slightly on the consonants.

"And afterwards I had eleven hours coming back to Dover to write it up. And I knew what would happen to those eleven seconds if I put them in. Because a log is a public document, Farangis. It goes to the association and it goes on a file and every single person in this sport reads them for pleasure, and if I write *swimmer stationary eleven seconds prior to alarm* then some man in Kent with a website has your son's death and your eleven seconds in the same paragraph by Christmas, and he does the arithmetic, and everybody does the arithmetic, forever."

"So you took it out."

"I put in *swimmer stationary* and I did not put in the number. That is all I did. I did not falsify a time. The times in that log are correct to the second." She stopped. "I left out an interval."

"You left out the only thing that mattered."

"I left out the thing that would have been used against you by people who were not there."

"You left out my defence," said Farangis Roshanfar.

Nobody on the boat had thought of it that way. It was audible in the deck going quiet.

"For ten years," she said, and her voice was going, not with grief but with the mechanical failure of a throat that had been swallowing salt water for twenty-nine hours, "I have had nothing. Do you understand? I have had no time, no number, no sequence. I have had a hole and my own head, and my own head has been at it every night for ten years, and my own head is not a reliable machine, I found that out at two o'clock this morning. If it had been in the log — if there had been eleven seconds written down by somebody who was not me — I could have gone and looked at it. I could have gone to a piece of paper and read eleven and known it was eleven. Do you know what I've been doing instead?"

Ailbhe said nothing.

"Ninety. Two hundred. Four minutes. Six minutes. I have had nights where it was six minutes, Ailbhe. Where I stood in that water for six minutes and did nothing." She was shaking; even in the water, three kilometres out, they could see it. "You took the only fixed point out of it and you gave me an unlimited one instead, and I have been filling it in for ten years."

"Yes," said Ailbhe Nunan. "I know that now."

"Now."

"I have known it," said Ailbhe, "since about the fourth year."

40. THE QUESTION

"Swim," said Dariush.

She swam. It is one of the more remarkable things about the human animal that she swam. Two and a half kilometres to go, twenty-nine hours in, at a stroke rate of forty-seven, and she put her face in the water and swam, because there was nothing else to do and because she was a person for whom continuing had never required a reason.

At 07:40 the feed went out and she took it without being asked twice.

She gave it back and said, "There's more."

Dariush closed his eyes.

"Ailbhe," said Farangis. "There's more. You didn't come out here at fifty-eight and stand on that rail for twenty-nine hours to tell me about a number."

The hailer clicked.

"No," said Ailbhe Nunan.

The sun was up properly now. Portpatrick was a white line and a green hill behind it and you could see a house with a red roof. There were gannets working about a kilometre to the north. The wind had not come round yet.

"When they got him on the deck," said Ailbhe, "you were still in the water. That's in the log by implication and it's in the log because it has to be — you were not lifted out until zero two hundred and eleven and the swim was abandoned at zero two hundred and two, and I wrote both of those, and both are correct."

"I know."

"And Dariush was doing compressions and Marek was on the radio and the lad had the light on the deck, and I was the only person aboard who did not have a job." She said it evenly. "That's what an observer is at a time like that. A person with no job."

"Ailbhe."

"You were brought aboard at zero two eleven. You had been in the water nineteen hours and twelve minutes and your core, when they got a reading in Dover, was thirty-four point one. You went out on the deck. Not unconscious — down. You were talking. People do talk. It doesn't mean anything and it doesn't get remembered."

Farangis Roshanfar trod water and did not move.

"And I was the one who put a coat over you," said Ailbhe, "because Dariush was busy and there was nobody else, and I knelt down at the top of your head, and your eyes were open, and you were looking straight up at me."

"Ailbhe."

"And you said: does it still count."

The engine ran.

Somewhere off the port bow a gannet went in from thirty metres and came up with nothing.

"That's not true," said Farangis.

"I know."

"That's not — I didn't say that. I asked where he was. That's the first thing I said. I asked where Sohrab was, I've said it a hundred times, I said it to the woman in Belfast, it's the first thing out of my mouth—"

"It was the second thing," said Ailbhe Nunan.

"No."

"About forty seconds later. You asked where he was and I told you they were working on him and you started trying to get up and Dariush shouted at somebody to hold you down." A pause. "That's all true as well. Both are true. You said the first thing and then you said the second thing and I have never in ten years been able to decide which one you meant."

Farangis was going under and coming up. She had stopped treading properly.

"Dariush."

He was at the rail. He had been at the rail for ten minutes.

"Dariush. Did I say it?"

And this is the moment, and everything in the book has been arranged to arrive at it, and it is not a revelation, it is the opposite of a revelation, it is the permanent and irreducible absence of one:

"I didn't hear it," said Dariush Roshanfar.

"That's not what I asked."

"It's what I've got." His voice was perfectly steady and would not be again for three days. "I was doing compressions on my son. I did not hear anything anybody said on that deck, including things I know for a fact were said, including Marek on the radio four feet from my head. I have no memory of the deck at all between about two and two-fifteen. So I did not hear it, and I cannot tell you that you didn't say it, and I have never been able to, and if I told you now that you didn't, you would know I was lying, because you'd know I couldn't know."

"Say it anyway."

"No."

"Dariush. Say it anyway."

"No," he said, "because you'd take it, and it would hold for about a year, and then you'd start asking how I could have known, and you'd end up with two holes instead of one. I'm not doing that to you. Not after last night."

Farangis Roshanfar hung in the water two and a half kilometres off the Scottish coast at hour twenty-nine and forty-five minutes, and understood, completely and finally, the actual shape of the ten years.

She had thought she was carrying a crime.

She was carrying an ambiguity. And an ambiguity does not weigh anything, and does not go anywhere, and cannot be paid off, and admits of no sentence, and is not the kind of thing a human being is built to carry, and she had been carrying one for a decade, and had

been dressing it as a crime every single night because a crime is a shape and this had no shape at all.

And every act of mourning she had performed in ten years — every early morning, every eighty-kilometre week, every one of the four times she had stood in front of a drawer, this channel, this swim, this thirty hours, the whole edifice — had been, she saw now, an argument. Directed at nobody. Submitted to no court. A ten-year attempt to demonstrate, by conduct, to an absent authority, that she was the kind of woman who would have asked about her son first.

You cannot prove that. There is no evidence that would settle it. And the only person who could have told her what he saw when he looked across at her, at hour nineteen, in the dark, was not available for comment.

“Swim,” said Dariush.

She swam.

41. NUSHDARU

Two kilometres.

The last two kilometres of a channel are the longest object in the sport, because the coast is now visible in detail — she could see cars — and the mind, which has spent thirty hours in a room thirty minutes wide, breaks out of the room and looks at the whole distance at once and says: *that is nothing, that is twenty minutes, that is a warm-up.*

It was not twenty minutes. At forty-seven strokes a minute against the last of the ebb it was an hour and forty.

And somewhere in it, in the last of it, with the presence still swimming on her left where it had been for nine hours, Farangis Roshanfar told herself the story. Not deliberately. It came the way the kitchen smell had come, and the orchestra, and the orange cap: unbidden, complete, in her mother’s voice, in Persian, which she had not been able to read at speed since she was fourteen and could still hear perfectly.

It is the oldest story her people have and it is about a father and a son and about how long it takes for help to arrive.

There is a champion. He is the greatest of them, the one every country invents and then spends a thousand years being embarrassed by: enormous, ungovernable, contemptuous of kings, the only man who can be sent when a thing is genuinely lost. Rostam.

And travelling, years before, he fathers a child in a border town on a woman he stays with for one night, and he leaves her an armlet, and he goes, and he does not come back, and he does not ask.

The child is a boy. He grows very fast — the story is insistent on this, that he is a man at ten — and he grows up knowing exactly who his father is, and the whole of his short life is organised around one intention, which is to find him. Not to fight him. To find him. He raises an army for it. He goes to war for it, on the wrong side, for the sole purpose of turning over enough of the world that his father is obliged to come out of it.

And the mother, who knows what is coming, does the only thing available to her, which is to say nothing. She does not send word. She is afraid of what the champion will do and she is afraid of losing the boy, and she keeps the two of them apart with silence, and the silence works, right up until it doesn't.

They meet at a river.

They do not know each other. That is the whole engine of it and there is nothing supernatural in the mechanism: the boy has never seen his father's face, and the father has been told by everyone that the enemy champion is somebody else, and he is old, and he is arrogant, and he does not ask a young man's name before a duel because a young man's name is not worth the delay.

The boy asks. Twice. Three times. He asks directly — *are you Rostam* — because he has heard something in the man's voice or seen something in the way he stands, and every time he asks, the father lies. Out of caution. Out of tactics. Because a champion does not give his name to an unknown challenger, because it is a rule, because it is what you do.

They fight for two days.

On the first day the boy has him. He has him down and his knee is on him and the knife is out, and the father, who is finished, says: it is not our custom to kill a man on the first fall; the custom is to let him up, and to kill him on the second.

There is no such custom.

The boy, who is seventeen and has been raised on courtesy and has no reason on earth to doubt the greatest warrior alive on a point of etiquette, lets him up.

The second day the father wins.

And he puts the knife in, into the side, under the ribs, and the boy goes down, and while he is dying he says the thing that everyone who hears this story at seven years old carries for the rest of their life. He says: this is nothing. I did this to myself. But my father will come. He will hear that a boy was killed at this river and he will come and find you, and there is nowhere on the earth you can go.

And the father says: what father.

And the boy tells him, and undoes the armour at the shoulder, and there is an armlet.

Now. Here is the part that is actually the story, and it is not the killing, because the killing is only the setup.

The boy is not dead.

He is dying, but not dead, not for some hours yet, and the father knows exactly what will save him. There is a medicine. The king has it — the vain, contemptible, small-minded king who has been afraid of Rostam for thirty years and has been waiting all that time for one single occasion on which the great man would have to ask him for something.

Nushdaru. The remedy. It is in a chest in the king's tent, half a day away.

And Rostam sends a rider.

And the king reads the message and puts it down and thinks about it. He thinks about what Rostam will become if the boy lives. He

thinks about the two of them together. He thinks — and the poet gives him this thought, and it is the most contemporary sentence in the whole of the epic — about his own position.

And he does not say no.

He delays.

He asks the messenger to wait. He requires the great man to come himself. He extends the hour, and the hour, and the afternoon, and it costs him nothing, and it is entirely deniable, and at no point does he refuse.

Rostam rides for it himself in the end.

And the poet — and this is why the thing has lasted a thousand years — does not have him fail on the road, or be intercepted, or lose the way.

He has him arrive.

He is on the road with the remedy in his hand when the messenger comes the other way to tell him that his son died an hour ago.

The medicine existed. It was real. It worked. It was in a chest, half a day away, and it was on its way, and it was in the correct hands, and it was travelling as fast as a horse can travel, and none of that mattered, because the only thing that has ever mattered in the entire history of any of this is whether the help arrives before the hour.

Farangis Roshanfar swam the last two kilometres of the North Channel with that in her, in her mother's voice.

Four minutes. That is what it took, that night, from the boat turning to her son on the deck: eleven seconds to the screw, ninety seconds to the boat coming round and Dariush over the side, the rest to get him up. Four minutes, in the dark, in a swell, over the side of a moving vessel, by a crew of four with one of them a boy.

She had done the arithmetic ten thousand times and had always run it as an accusation. Four minutes. Four minutes in which she did nothing.

And she saw now, in the last kilometre, with the town coming up, what the story had been telling her since she was seven years old and what she had heard every single time without once understanding it:

Four minutes was fast.

Four minutes was a competent crew doing the correct things in the correct order at three in the morning in the English Channel, and it was faster than almost anybody would have managed, and her husband was in the water inside a hundred seconds, and the compressions were textbook and were begun inside four minutes and were given by a consultant anaesthetist, which is the single best set of hands that could possibly have been on that deck.

And a nineteen-year-old boy died anyway.

There was no king. Nobody delayed. Nobody was afraid of anybody's position. The rider went at once and rode as hard as a horse can be ridden and the remedy was real and it arrived.

And the hour had already passed.

That is the story. That has always been the story. It is not a story about blame; that is what children take from it, and what she had taken from it for forty years. It is a story about the fact that the world contains intervals which are shorter than any possible response, and that inside those intervals there is no such thing as culpability, and that human beings would rather have a villain — a vain king, a lying father, a mother's silence, a woman who stopped swimming for eleven seconds — than accept that a thing can simply be too fast.

She was four hundred metres off the Scottish shore.

She turned her head to the left, at the top of a breath, into the empty water where a presence had been swimming beside her since twenty past one in the morning.

There was nobody there.

There had been nobody there since twenty past one in the morning.

She put her face down and swam.

42. SHINGLE

The last four hundred metres of a channel swim are done in water that has a bottom in it, and the bottom is the strangest thing a marathon swimmer ever sees.

For thirty hours there has been nothing underneath. Not darkness — absence; a volume of water going down two hundred metres to a floor that has no relationship to the swimmer whatsoever. And then, at some point in the last few hundred metres, the light comes back off something, and there is kelp, brown and moving, four metres down, and then rock, and then, at about a metre and a half, stones.

Swimmers weep at this. Grown men, world-ranked, weep at the kelp.

Portpatrick has a small harbour with two piers and a shingle beach to the north of it that the swims come into on the flood. There were people on the pier, because there are always people on the pier: eleven or twelve of them at twenty to ten on a Saturday morning in August, some of them because they had heard, most of them because there was a boat coming in close and a thing happening.

Wilson brought the *Kestrel Star* round to seaward and held her at forty metres and killed the way off her, because the boat cannot follow into the shallows and because the final approach is the one part of the entire crossing that the swimmer does alone in the sense that people imagine the whole thing is done alone.

Ailbhe Nunan came to the rail with the watch.

The rule for the finish is precise, and it is the last cruelty, and every marathon swimmer knows it before they ever get in: the swim is complete when the swimmer clears the water under her own power, on dry land, without assistance, upright.

Not when she touches. Not when she stands. She must get out.

And she must do it after thirty-one hours in twelve-degree water, with a core temperature around thirty-three, on legs that have not borne weight since the day before yesterday and have had no meaningful blood in them for a day, over wet shingle, in a swell,

alone, while eleven people watch from a pier and a boat holds at forty metres with her husband on it.

People have failed here. Not many, but enough that everyone knows the names. There is a man who got to the stones in Wissant and could not get up, four times, and was taken out by his crew at the fifth attempt, and whose swim does not exist.

Farangis Roshanfar came into the shallows at 09:38.

She got her feet down at 09:39 and could not stand, and went over sideways into eighteen inches of water, and got up onto her hands and knees.

On the boat, nobody said anything.

She crawled about four metres on her hands and knees through the wash, with the swell coming in behind her and pushing her forward and then dragging back, and the stones under her palms, and her hands did not feel the stones at all.

At the tide line she stopped.

Thirty-one hours and thirty-eight minutes.

She knelt on wet shingle on the Scottish coast with her head down and the water running off her and the whole of her back and shoulders and forearms and face swollen in long red weals in a pattern nobody would ever be able to read, and she put both hands flat on the stones.

Then she got one foot under her.

Then the other.

Then she stood up, on a beach at Portpatrick, at 09:40 in the morning, out of the water, upright, under her own power, unassisted, and eleven people on a pier who had no idea what they were looking at made a small ragged noise, and Ailbhe Nunan pressed a watch and wrote a time on a sheet of paper.

"Nine forty," she said. "Thirty-one hours, forty minutes. Swimmer clear."

Wilson put a hand on the horn and left it there for four seconds.

And Farangis Roshanfar stood on the stones with her arms hanging and her mouth open and looked at the place where nobody was standing.

That is the part that does not go into the log.

There is a shape that lives at the end of every swim she has ever done since she was thirty-seven, and the shape is a young man on a beach with a coat over his arm and both hands held up with the fingers spread, and it is not there, and the not-being-there of it is a physical object with edges, and she stood on the shingle at Portpatrick and looked directly at it for eleven seconds.

Then Dariush came off the boat.

He came in the tender with Ryan rowing and he was over the side in a metre of water in his shoes and he came up the shingle at a speed that a man of fifty-two should not attempt on wet stones, and about two metres away he stopped, hard, because thirty-one hours of the rule does not switch off in a man's body just because a watch has been pressed.

He stopped, and he looked at Ailbhe.

And Ailbhe Nunan, standing in the bow of a small boat with a clipboard, said: "It's done. Go on."

He put his coat around her.

That was all it was. He put a coat around his wife's shoulders on a beach in Wigtownshire and then he put his arms round her on top of it, and the first human contact Farangis Roshanfar had had in thirty-one hours and forty minutes was the weight of a man's hands flat between her shoulder blades, and she made a sound that the eleven people on the pier heard and did not understand and went home and did not talk about.

She said, into his shoulder, through a mouth that would not work: "Four minutes."

"What?"

"Four minutes," she said. "That's fast."

And Dariush Roshanfar, who had been waiting ten years for a sentence and had long ago stopped expecting one, held onto his wife on a beach and said, "Yes. It was fast."

43. THE SIGNATURE

They took her to the hotel on the front because it was closer than the hospital and because the correct treatment for a swimmer at thirty-three degrees is not a hospital, it is dry clothes, a room at twenty-two degrees, blankets, warm sweet drinks, and time — and above all it is *slowly*, because a rapid rewarming drives the shell open again and drops the core further, which is the mistake everyone's instinct makes and which kills people in the hour after rescue rather than in the water.

She was shaking so hard at eleven o'clock that she could not hold a cup. That is normal and is in fact a good sign; the shivering is thermogenesis and a person who has stopped shivering is in a different category. By half past one she had stopped shaking. By three she had eaten a bowl of soup and most of a bread roll and had fallen asleep sitting up with the roll in her hand.

At half past four in the afternoon she came downstairs into the residents' lounge in borrowed clothes, with her lower lip still out and to the left and her forearms in long raised weals going from red to purple, and her hands, which would not have full sensation for eleven days.

Ailbhe Nunan was at a table by the window with the log.

Eleven pages, plus the observer's declaration on the last one. The declaration is a short paragraph in a small font which states that the observer witnessed the swim, that it was conducted in accordance with the rules, that no assistance was given and no contact occurred, and that the times and conditions recorded are true to the best of the observer's knowledge.

She had signed it. Her signature was at the bottom, in blue, with the date.

Under it there was a second line, and the second line was empty, and beside the empty line there was a pen.

"You'll want to read it," said Ailbhe.

Farangis sat down. It took her some time.

She read the eleven pages. It took her about twenty minutes and nobody said anything while she did it. Dariush stood at the window with his back to the room.

The log recorded, in a small neat hand, a swim of thirty-one hours and forty minutes across the North Channel from Donaghadee to Portpatrick, in water between eleven point nine and twelve point four degrees, in a costume conforming to the rules, without contact or assistance of any kind. It recorded fifty-eight feeds. It recorded extensive envenomation from midnight onward. It recorded a refusal at 04:00 and its resolution. It recorded an episode at 06:08 in the observer's own words: *swimmer became disoriented and attempted to remove costume strap; feeder addressed her verbally; swimmer resumed.*

And in the second column, at 07:00, it recorded:

Observer read aloud, at swimmer's request made at hour ten and repeated at hour twenty-nine, the observer's log of the swimmer's English Channel two-way attempt of 5 September 2016, in which this observer served as junior observer. Observer confirmed to the swimmer that an interval of eleven seconds between the swimmer becoming stationary and the alarm being raised was omitted from that log by this observer's decision. Observer further disclosed a statement made by the swimmer on the deck of the pilot vessel following recovery, which was not recorded at the time and is not corroborated. This disclosure is entered here at the observer's own initiative.

It was the longest observer's remark in the eleven pages.

"You put it in," said Farangis.

"I did."

"You didn't have to."

"No."

"It'll go to the association. It'll be on a file. Some man in Kent with a website—"

"Yes," said Ailbhe Nunan.

Farangis Roshanfar looked at it for a long time.

"Why now?"

"Because I did it the other way once," said Ailbhe, "and I thought I was being kind, and I watched what it did to you for ten years, and I am fifty-eight, and I would like at some point before I stop doing this to have written down a true thing that cost me something."

She pushed the pen about an inch across the table.

"That's the swimmer's declaration. You sign, it goes to the association, they ratify. You'd be the hundred and twenty-seventh person to cross the North Channel and the eighth woman over forty-five, and there's people who'd want to talk to you about it."

Farangis put her hand flat beside the pen. The fingers still did not close.

Here is what a signature is.

It is not a receipt. It is a statement, by the swimmer, that the log is a true account of what happened in the water.

That is all it has ever been and that is why the sport rests on it.

And she had, that morning, at hour twenty-four, in the middle of the North Channel, in the dark, watched her own memory calmly and confidently change the colour of her son's cap.

Everything in those eleven pages was true. She did not doubt one word of it. The times were right. The temperatures were right. Ailbhe Nunan had spent thirty-one hours writing down exactly what she saw and had then gone further than she had to.

But the document did not say *this is what the observer saw*. It said, on the second line, in the swimmer's own hand: *I confirm this is a true account*.

And Farangis Roshanfar was no longer a person who could put her name to a sentence like that. Not about that night, and not about this one, and not about the ten years in between, and not about anything that had happened inside her own head, which she now

knew to be an instrument that rebuilds the room every time you open the door.

She had come out here to be charged with something. She had spent ten years and about forty thousand pounds and a marriage's worth of silence assembling a court, and she had got, at hour twenty-nine, the only verdict that was ever available, which was that there is no verdict, that the interval was shorter than any possible response, that the remedy was on the road and the hour had passed, and that the last person on earth who could have told her what he saw was nineteen and is not available.

There is nothing to sign.

"No," she said.

Ailbhe Nunan did not move.

"You did it," she said. "I watched you do it. Thirty-one hours and forty minutes. It happened."

"I know it happened."

"If you don't sign, it doesn't exist. There's no ratification. There's no name on the list. It's a boat trip."

"I know."

"Farangis."

"It happened," said Farangis Roshanfar, "and I'm not going to certify it."

Dariush turned round from the window.

And there is a moment in which he could have said something, and he had, over ten years, several thousand things prepared, and he looked at his wife sitting in borrowed clothes in a residents' lounge in Portpatrick with her hands ruined and her mouth ruined and the pen an inch from her fingers, and he did not say any of them.

He said: "Are you cold?"

"Yes."

"Right," he said, and took his coat off the back of the chair, and put it around her shoulders.

Ailbhe Nunan closed the log.

She put it in the canvas bag with the thermometer and the watch, and she stood up, and she put her hand on the back of the chair for a second on the way past — not on Farangis, on the chair — and she said, “I’ll be in Sligo. You have the number.”

And she went out through the lounge and out onto the front, where the boats were, and the tide was going, and the whole grey-green channel lay out to the west with thirty-four and a half kilometres of nothing in it and Ireland on the far side, entirely invisible, exactly where it had been the whole time.

GLOSSARY

Cyanea capillata sy-AN-ee-uh kap-il-AH-tuh — Latin, *blue-haired*.

The lion's mane jellyfish, the largest in the world, an animal of the cold north Atlantic whose bell can be over a metre across.

Nushdaru noosh-dah-ROO — Persian, *the remedy*. In the Shahnameh, the medicine kept in the king's tent that would have saved the dying Sohrab, and that the king withholds long enough for it to arrive too late.

Shahnameh shah-nah-MEH — Persian, *the book of kings*. Ferdowsi's tenth-century epic of the Persian kings and heroes, in which Rostam kills a boy by a river and learns afterwards whose son he was.

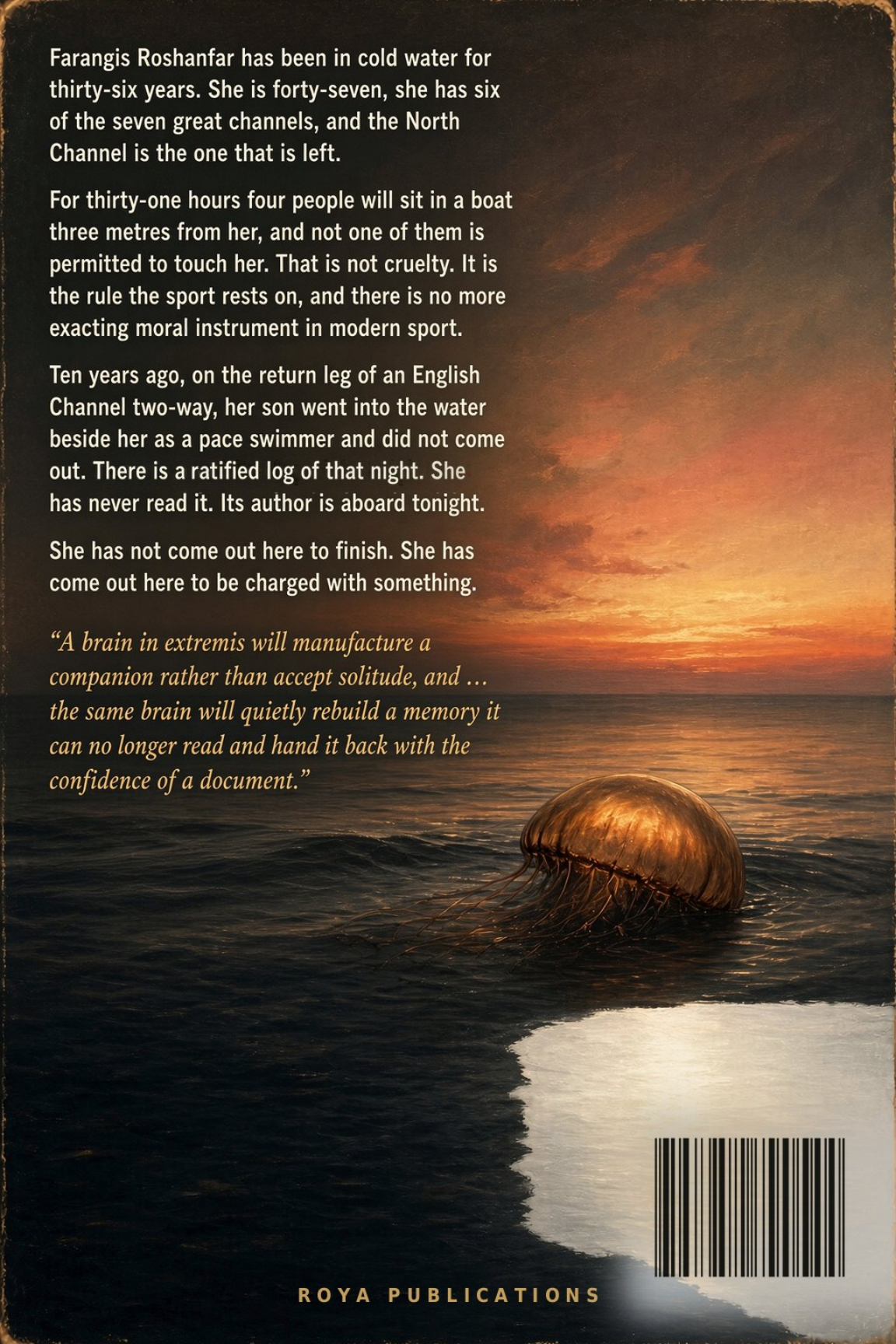
Farangis Roshanfar has been in cold water for thirty-six years. She is forty-seven, she has six of the seven great channels, and the North Channel is the one that is left.

For thirty-one hours four people will sit in a boat three metres from her, and not one of them is permitted to touch her. That is not cruelty. It is the rule the sport rests on, and there is no more exacting moral instrument in modern sport.

Ten years ago, on the return leg of an English Channel two-way, her son went into the water beside her as a pace swimmer and did not come out. There is a ratified log of that night. She has never read it. Its author is aboard tonight.

She has not come out here to finish. She has come out here to be charged with something.

"A brain in extremis will manufacture a companion rather than accept solitude, and ... the same brain will quietly rebuild a memory it can no longer read and hand it back with the confidence of a document."



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