



Swimming

IN THE DARK

BY WENDY BURTON

To qualify for the privilege of swimming the English Channel, you have to swim for six hours in water that's below 15 degrees Celsius, unaided, under the supervision of a qualified observer. Twice I've tried to qualify. Both efforts were failures.

At home on Hornby Island, I plotted the currents and distance, and determined that swimming in June would be do-able, with the right timing and tides. The difficulty, however, was the swim would have to start at 8 pm and conclude hours before sunrise.

I would be swimming in the dark.

The ocean is not *terra nullius* to me. I know the colonies of sea creatures busy with their lives beneath the surface as I swim. I know the seals who come to investigate and the sea lions who are curious but pose no threat—unless the herring are about. I know that whales and six-gill sharks are possible companions, but I decided long ago to be worried only if and when the time came.

No, the sea creatures weren't the issue. Swimming in the dark when I can see nothing below and nothing above is a challenge for another reason. As the cold and distance become factors, I'd begin to populate the deep with demons of my own making.

The man in the kayak knew this too.

Just before sunset on a cloudy June evening, I walk into the Salish Sea at Collishaw Point. The water is up to my knees and the well-known stony bottom is solid under my bare feet. A qualifying swimmer must wear only a few ounces of polyester bathing suit, a cap, and goggles. The observer checks to ensure that I'm wearing only one suit and claps his hand on my shoulder. This will be the last human touch until I emerge from the sea, six hours or more later. Roger takes up his position in his kayak, staying a body length behind me. I must lead the way. The observer and my team are in a small motor vessel, and they will stay well back until either the swim's conclusion or they hear a shrill blast from Roger's whistle signalling my failure.

From Collishaw to Galleon, with the current running with me, I make good progress. The water is 14°C, a manageable temperature. The steady movement of my arms, legs, and breathing generates the heat I need, as I so often quip that I have a well-padded core, and I waste little energy when I swim. Lights disorient a night swimmer, so I wear glow sticks in both the back of my goggles and the back strap of my suit so my support team can see me. But since I swim low in the water, Roger has told me that these lights, dim at best, are often barely visible. Closing his eyes, Roger could often not hear me in the water, I made so few splashes.

He never closes his eyes when I swim in the dark.

Roger is seasoned. He knows my stroking pattern. Knows to watch for glints, like stars, which signify my location. Knows my fears. Knows what lies before me. Knows this is my last attempt to qualify. Even so, Roger can often not trace my progress. It is dark, and I am nearly silent.

The greatest fear of a night swim is losing the swimmer in the dark. Disoriented and suffering from hypothermia, a swimmer can veer off course and simply get lost. Swim away into the unlit ocean. As we were, all of us, far too aware, a drowning long-distance swimmer makes no noise—just drop below the surface without any sound of a struggle. As if a giant hand grabs ahold and pulls the swimmer down. We all feared this risk.

Collishaw to Galleon. Galleon to Hidden Beach. Across the big bay to Tralee Point. Tralee to Whaling Station, the Helliwell traverse around the outside of Flora Island, well out in the channel. Then, with luck and good conditions, I'll navigate across the top of the two big bays to Dunlop Point, far enough away from the beaches to avoid incoming currents.

It's colder now. 12°C and falling. A minor wind has picked up. Cloud cover makes the night—at 2 am—darker than we'd anticipated. I am in the bay. Barely visible. The support team radios their concern to Roger.

Now comes Lynn, down to the shore from her home, carrying an unlit lantern, picking her way over the slippery rocks to stand vigil in the night. Listening. In this deep dark, just before the tide turns. In the hush, as if the sea's breath is inhaled, she hears nothing. Sees nothing.

To see better, Lynn stands in her own darkness. To hear better, her breathing is shallow. Her head is tipped to one side. Used to the gusty gulps of sea lions, the commotion of seals, the great announcements of whales, the splash of salmon, the flutter of herring, she hears nothing.

But I am coming. Afraid now, in the dark, unable to see the way, lights flashing in the corner of my left eye that may be the beginning of hallucination. Because if this dark becomes alive with monsters I will falter, lose the favourable tide, and fail.

A sharp whistle tells me to stop. I'm afraid to tread water because giant hands will grab my feet. I wish for the trivial fear of sharks, giant octopus, deadly sea snakes, a python inexplicably acclimatized to the northwest Pacific ocean.

I scull on my back. Roger has extinguished his lights. The launch is well behind us, engine off, waiting. He doesn't ask, "How are you?" because he knows. He extends the feeding pole and I take the gel. I no longer want food or water but if I stop feeding they'll pull me out. In the basket are two fresh glow sticks. We say little. I do not speak because he might hear the slurring of words, and he will signal that my attempt is over.

My goggles are now sealed to my face. I keep my mind off the pain of removing them when I reach the point. Before I do, though, I may hear the radiophones. The observers will talk to me and then decide. Now I will lie about the cramp in my thigh, the droop on the right side of my mouth, the slow twist of my fingers, the monsters beneath me, waiting.

Roger turns off his light. "On you go," he says. I know what lies ahead. I swim into the fear. It has joined me. I am so cold.

Lynn has heard the whistle. She's heard Roger's voice. She peers into the dark, listening. Is the swimmer in the water? Out in the bay? Attempting the headland? If only she could see it. I am coming.

At 5 hours 45 minutes, in 10°C, I swim.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, breathe. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, breathe. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, breathe.

"... if this dark becomes alive with monsters I will falter, lose the favourable tide, and fail."

I switch to breaststroke, trying to sight the headland. Nothing. Am I lost? Swimming out, heading toward Bowser and certain failure?

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, breathe, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, breathe.

Maybe I will never find it. The tide will turn, the current reverse, and I will be lost in the dark. I need to know I'm somewhere. Making headway.

Lynn is listening intently and begins to separate the sounds of the sea, the movement of the water on the rocks, the low wind. In there is a rhythm. She hears her swimmer taking breaths. She counts, loses track of the sound, counts some more, hears it.

*"I am, as we so often joke, 'nearly there.'
This time, I really am nearly there."*

Yes. The swimmer's in the bay. Swimming alone in the dark.

Lynn takes up the oil lamp. Lights it. Turns the mantle up. Lifts it into her arms, holding it at her centre as high as she can, because she cannot raise it over her head or swing it. Not anymore.

Barely lifting my face out of the water to breathe, head down, I do not see it. Roger blows his whistle twice—look ahead. Lynn, sensing this is the moment, somehow manages to hoist the heavy lamp over her head.

And this is the miracle. The light cascades across the water, illuminating everything, turning the monsters into shadows. Announces dawn hours before it comes. Turns the infinite into less than 60 metres of open water. I am, as we so often joke, "nearly there." This time, I really am nearly there.

There will be no exuberant greeting.

A swimmer suffering hypothermia must be met with calm. My crew will be quiet and efficient. The man in the kayak will lower his head to his paddle. I will find my footing on the rocks about five metres from where Lynn is standing. Will walk toward her as the lamp goes out. Will, in the dark of this rocky point, as the crew comes toward me, only whisper. **F**

