

Prologue

The English Channel, 51°09' N, 1°26' E, approximately 2.5 miles SSE of Kingsdown Beach, Great Britain. 17:30 French Summer Time, August 6, 1926.

She has been in the water for nearly twelve hours, tossed up and down, forward and back, upside down and sideways in the froth and spray of the channel between France and England. The white cliffs of Dover loom over the horizon in the fading light only a few miles ahead, and Cape Gris-Nez, the headland where she entered the water in France, is now nearly twenty miles and half a day behind her. The water temperature hovers just above sixty degrees, cold, no warmer than the surrounding air. It is raining and the white-capped waves are running nearly six feet, tossing her up and down and up again with each surge. A stiff wind blows the spray from atop the waves back into her face.

But Trudy Ederle doesn't really notice, not anymore. Every moment, every breath, every stroke of her arms and kick of her legs is the same. She is nineteen years old and she is wearing a nearly scandalous two-piece, silk swimming suit. She is covered in sheep grease and petroleum jelly and wears a tight rubber bathing cap over her close-cropped auburn hair. Amber-tinted goggles shield her eyes from the salt water. To her, the sea is not the slate gray it appears from above, or blue, or green. Through the goggles it is a delicious golden ochre.

She has been swimming since dawn, first at twenty-eight strokes per minute, and now, after almost twelve hours, a slightly slower twenty-two or twenty-four, swimming a new stroke known as the American crawl, a stroke no one has ever used to cross the English Channel.

In all of human history, only five men have ever made such a

crossing. No woman has ever swum the Channel before, and only a handful have ever tried. For more than a year, however, the world has followed Trudy's quest, first tracking her failure and now, on this day, hoping for her success. If she makes it across she will be the most recognized and famous woman in the world. Everywhere, from the Ederles' summer home in Highlands, New Jersey, to the White House in Washington, D.C., and Lloyd's of London, where oddsmakers give her only a slim chance of succeeding, everyone is listening to the radio and reading newspaper bulletins and rooting for her to succeed. She has captured their imaginations. And if she succeeds, she will win their hearts as well.

Trudy does not think of this, any of it, for such thoughts left her consciousness hours ago, and now there is only this moment, broken into breaths. Every fourth stroke she tilts her head, takes a mouthful of air, then slowly exhales from her nose, watching the bubbles dance before her face as if they belong to some other creature swimming below her, just out sight, and she is somehow riding on its crest.

It is quiet but it is not completely silent. The sea makes its own muffled sound, and she cannot discern the splash that comes from her arms pinwheeling into the water from the slap of the sea itself against her body, or that of the waves colliding and collapsing and rising again. She is half in, half out of the water, testing the surface beneath the stray gull that sounds overhead, pulling herself and being pulled by the tides and the currents at the same time.

There are two boats, motorized tugs, one several yards behind her to the starboard side, and another, farther off to the stern, both straining to keep her in sight as she lifts and falls and slips between the waves. The faint hum of the engines spreads like velvet in the water, as natural and soundless as the beating of her own heart.

One boat holds her father, her sister Meg, her ghostwriter, Julia, and her trainer and coach, Bill Burgess, one of those five men who have swum the Channel before. The second boat holds the press, reporters wrapped in rain gear scratching notes on pads of paper and typing out dispatches in the pilothouse to be sent ashore by wireless. They are waiting for the final moment: the instant she makes it across, is pulled from the water short of her goal, or, as some fear, slips from consciousness and disappears forever beneath the waves. Whatever happens—success, failure, or tragedy—will be a headline

the next morning. Trudy Ederle will be either a heroine or a figure of pity known to nearly every man, woman, and child who can read a newspaper.

She does not think of this. Her thoughts have slowed, and she is all sense—touch and taste, sight and sound.

She feels these things from afar, notes the sensations, and continues as if she is a kind of artist taking stock of the features of a model, working on a still life, oblivious to time. She does not, really, feel them herself, for her consciousness has closed her off from her own body. She is only a spectator peering out from far inside, focused only on this next stroke, this next breath.

She is exhausted but not tired. She is cold but does not feel cold. How strange is that? Her lips are chapped and cracking, her thighs and armpits chaffed and stinging, her ears inflamed, her tongue swollen by salt water. Her limbs are numb, and her feet and legs kick on of their own accord. But her center is warm, even glowing, the embers protected deep within.

And there is no place in the world she would rather be. She has hours still to go, and she is deliriously, hopelessly happy.

On the rare clear day when fog and clouds do not obscure the view, at the English Channel's narrowest point, when one gazes toward England from Cape Gris-Nez in France, the English coastline looks tantalizingly close. The gleaming cliffs of Dover stretch along the horizon in a horizontal stream like a landscape in an oil painting, a smear of titanium white touched with cadmium yellow, daubed above an azure sea. From the heights at Cape Gris-Nez, where wildflowers dance in the offshore breezes, the waters in mid-Channel, filled with boats of all shapes and sizes, can look deceptively calm, even placid. Swimming from one coast to the other seems more a matter of willpower and stamina than anything else, a difficult task, to be sure, and one that requires significant discipline and great athletic ability, but not an impossible one.

Yet those clear days that make the Channel swim seem so feasible are not just uncommon, but, in fact, a cruel illusion. There are reasons far, far fewer human beings have swum the English Channel than have climbed Mount Everest. More than three thousand people have stood on top of the world since Tensing Norgay and Sir Ed-

mund Hillary first accomplished the feat in 1953, yet only nine hundred or so swimmers—one out of every ten who make the attempt—have succeeded in swimming English Channel. The fine weather that makes the journey appear so attainable rarely lasts for long. Conditions in the English Channel can and do change in minutes. A day that begins with gentle breezes and bright sunshine can end in a full-blown gale that even today regularly drives huge ships up onto the shore and sends even the most experienced sailors to their deaths. The waters of the Channel, even in midsummer, in bright sunshine, are bone-chillingly cold, rarely warming much above sixty degrees. Bad weather, not good, is the norm. On most days both the French and the English coasts are obscured behind banks of fog and thick clouds. Each shore is invisible not only from the other, but also to most ships that ply the passage in between. The proximity of either shore provides little comfort.

The waters of the Channel are rarely quiet. The surf claws at each coast with ferocity, relentlessly wearing it down and occasionally and inexorably causing portions of the cliffs and headlands along the shore to collapse and slip into the sea. In this way the Channel grows ever wider each day as the tides and currents funneled through the narrow passage between the northern Atlantic and the North Sea cause the waters of the Channel to lift and heave as if trying to rip the fabric of what the French refer to as *La Manche*, “the sleeve.”

To fully understand the achievement of Trudy Ederle, one must also understand the Channel itself, which is unlike any other body of water on the planet. The waters of the North Sea and those of the Atlantic, brought together in a vicious collision that first created the Channel, have yet to rest. They grasp and pull at everyone and everything that breach their waters. One does not cross the Channel as much as one learns its intricacies and then tries to sneak across before they turn violent and deadly.

Today, those swimmers who choose to test the waters of the Channel do so for the same reasons that Sir Edmund Hillary chose to climb Mount Everest—because “it is there,” a well-defined challenge and a way to test oneself. If the weather cooperates and the swimmer is in adequate physical condition, psychologically prepared to swim for upward of half a day, and can avoid hypothermia, the path across the Channel is well known. Over time the captains of escort boats

and swimmers have managed to decode the complicated tides and currents, and modern sports medicine is adept at preparing swimmers for the challenge through diet and exercise and assisting them along the way with proper nutrition and fluids.

None of this was the case in 1926. A true pioneer, Trudy Ederle enjoyed none of these advantages. She did not choose to swim the Channel as some kind of complicated existential test, but for reasons that were both larger than herself and intensely personal. She wanted to swim the Channel, but—at least at the beginning—she did not need to do so.

She knew, of course, that no woman had ever swum the Channel before. From 1922 through 1925 she had been the greatest female swimmer the world had ever seen, winning Olympic medals and setting more than a dozen world records, leaving the English Channel as her only remaining challenge. While she wanted to prove to those who believed a woman could not swim the Channel that, in fact, a woman could, and that she was that woman, Trudy Ederle was no feminist swimming for a cause. Although she was fully aware of the significance of doing what no woman had ever done before, she first decided to try to swim the Channel in 1925 simply because she had nothing left to accomplish in her sport and because others—her coaches and her family—believed she could.

She failed in that attempt, pulled from the water only halfway across, and afterward members of the crowd nodded knowingly, certain that if Trudy Ederle could not swim the English Channel, then in all likelihood no woman could. And even if a woman ever did swim the Channel, she would not do so using the American crawl. And, most assuredly, her name would not be Trudy Ederle.

The only way for Trudy to prove everyone wrong was to try again—and succeed. Swimming the English Channel became a challenge to her imagination. Crossing that divide would prove to be the ultimate test of man's—and a woman's—endurance.