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DIANA NYAD

[SWIMMER]

"IT STARTED WITH RAGE, AND I WON'T SAY THAT IT QUITE ENDED IN PEACE, BUT I DID WORK THROUGH QUITE A BIT IN THE OCEAN."

Possible motivations for getting involved in marathon swimming:
To find space for contemplation
To see the turtles
To get a paycheck

Diana Nyad is a special kind of swimmer. She is the kind of swimmer who, at twenty-six years old, was possessed to swim uninterrupted around the island of Manhattan. She is the kind who swam over a hundred miles, three years later, at age twenty-nine, from the Bahamas to Florida. She is the kind who sets records not concerned with speed or medals but rather with endurance and pluck. Nyad established herself as a world-class distance-swimmer in the 1970s, when she was in her twenties (she appeared on The Johnny Carson Show, *if that is any indication of her past renown), and in 2010, after thirty years out of the water, decided to give the sport another go. This time she had her sights set on a goal even harder and more ambitious: swimming continuously from Cuba to Florida. That's over one hundred miles, sixty hours, and about two hundred thousand strokes. At the time, she was sixty years old.*

I learned about Nyad just like most other people: through the swell of press that surrounded her attempts at swimming this distance. Since announcing her aim, Nyad has given many interviews and granted over a hundred press requests of various kinds (I contacted Nyad for this piece through several members of her press team). As I began to follow her story more closely, I tracked her in the New York Times, Time *magazine, the* Huffington Post, *ESPN, the* Los Angeles Times, *NPR, and scores of other media outlets. I watched her multiple CNN specials with Sanjay Gupta without once getting up, and her 2011 TED talk after that. As I did more research, I became increasingly gun-shy about speaking to her. In the wake of all of this public exposure, I wondered, was there anything original to ask Nyad? And would I be any match for her*

Illustration by Charles Burns

commanding personality, so evident in her television specials and her own radio program, The Score? *I swam on the morning of our interview to get my mind into shape. The answers to my questions turned out to be: yes (to the first) and no (to the second). Our interview was at once willful and efficient, just as I imagine her swims to be.* —*Carmen Winant*

THE BELIEVER: You grew up in Florida, and were a swimmer from an early age. In fact, you won three Florida state championships in high school. I can relate to this—training and competing from before puberty, in my case—though I was never quite that accomplished. How intensively did you train at that age, as a teenager and even earlier?

DIANA NYAD: I am not terribly interested in this particular conversation at all, and I really don't know what it has to do with anything. The life that I am living now has absolutely nothing to do with swimming. I am sixty-three years old, living a life of passion and rediscovered commitment. I could give a shit if I swam, or was a sculptor, or anything else. That life meant nothing to me. My coach sexually molested me as a teenager. Swimming did not define who I was as much as my personality and goals did. I am not some little "age-group swimmer" who has discovered the sport. I have no memories or attachment to it in that sense.

BLVR: OK, well, then, let's move ahead to your twenties. In the early 1970s, you started competing in marathon swimming in earnest. When you were just twenty-six, you swam around the island of Manhattan—twenty-eight miles—in seven hours and fifty-seven minutes. When you were twenty-nine—my age now, in fact—you set the record for the longest aided ocean swim in history, at one hundred two and a half miles, from the Bahamas to Florida. In the simplest of terms, what did marathon swimming offer to you at that point in your life?

DN: Ocean swimming was a place of power and success for me. People gravitate toward where their talents are, and I simply had more talent gliding across the ocean for many hours than I did swimming one hundred meters in a pool.

BLVR: I imagine that your body feels differently in the water now than it did then.

DN: A lot of people ask me that question, and the answer is that I feel more in my prime at sixty-three than I ever have. To be honest, I was as surprised as anyone that I had it in me—initially I didn't know if my shoulder could take it, or if the upper-body strength was there.

But, to answer your previous question, I was very angry then. The sexual abuse I suffered as a child made me deeply, deeply angry. I used to feel it when I was swimming; I used to feel the rage, and I would act it out as I swam. In the water I felt totally and completely safe. No one can get you out there. Another thing is that the profound isolation and sensory deprivation inevitably led me to contemplate my own life. It's a metronymic state. You can hear an amniotic fluid in your ear. More so than sitting on a shrink's couch or doing yoga in your backyard—both of those can be great and I've certainly done them—but nothing took me to a place of healing like all those hours of swimming. It started with rage, and I won't say that it quite ended in peace, but I did work through quite a bit in the ocean.

BLVR: I am interested in this part of your personal history in relationship to swimming. You've spoken publicly about having been the victim of sexual abuse when you were a teenager, and the years of subsequent negative reinforcement that you inflicted on yourself as an adult. During your 2011 TED talk, you described distance swimming as being a "remedy to [your] malaise." I wonder if being an endurance athlete is similar to being a comedian in this way? The assumption being that in order to do what you do, to subject yourself to such extreme discomfort, there must be some inert trauma being worked out and relived in the process. Andre Agassi said in his autobiography, *Open,* that the key driving his success was not confidence but rather "to feel rage. Endless, all-consuming rage." Do you think that has any credence?

DN: I think that's too facile. If you went around and interviewed a hundred marathon swimmers or Tour de France cyclists, their answers would range as wildly as those of violinists and physicists. Everyone is different. There is no common denominator. Not everyone is working out childhood trauma. There are other marathon swimmers who would say, "I don't know what the hell you are talking about; I want to see the turtles," or "I want the paycheck." For the past thirty

years I have worked interviewing all kind of athletes—which is what I do for a living—and find that there is no standard among "types." I can't go there, I just can't believe that.

BLVR: You stopped swimming almost three decades ago, when you turned thirty. Do you think that being prone to extreme habits runs both ways? As in, is the quality that allowed you to swim for eighty-nine hours the same as the one that allowed you to stop abruptly? Another way of asking this same question is: why do you think you didn't become a recreational swimmer?

DN: I think that any serious, world-class swimmer will tell you that it's a sport of discipline. Once they give it up, a lot of those people never swim again, or it takes them ten, twenty, thirty years to try. I know a lot of former golfers, for instance, who, when they are done formally competing in their sport, still go out and hit the ball with friends on the weekends. But swimmers who have really gone to the mat, put in that difficult, disciplined time for a minimum of a decade—no swimmer gets to be world-class without a minimum of a decade of commitment—are not that way. In 1972, Mark Spitz was the greatest swimmer in the world. But since quitting the sport, he didn't swim for over a decade. He was drained. It didn't take some big vision for me *not* to swim. I was just ready.

BLVR: Once you did return to swimming, you did so with the mighty goal of swimming from Cuba to Florida, which you had attempted at the age of twenty-eight. That's over one hundred miles. Your first reattempt was in 2011, at age sixty-one, but you were delayed a year due to weather problems. You did swim up to twenty-four hours in preparation. I imagine that you get this question a lot, but I can't help it: how do you swim so long without sleeping?

DN: It's true, everyone wants to know that. Are you afraid of falling asleep in the water? This is a swim that, on paper, is between sixty and eighty hours. That's an average of three nonstop days and nights. The truth is that you feel everything else: adrenaline is pumping, hypothermia, hallucinations... at night, my mind was way out there. I didn't know what was real and what wasn't. I mistook the lights from the boat ahead for railroad tracks, as the yellow brick road from *The Wizard of Oz.* But that is a very different state from sleepiness, which I can't imagine feeling out there.

BLVR: And how frequently do you take breaks to refuel?

DN: I rapidly burn calories in the water—I probably lost seventeen pounds in this last swim—so fuel is highly necessary. But digestion doesn't work that well in the salt water, a fact that saltwater swimmers are always struggling with. In the past, I've tried strictly liquid fuels, ingesting mostly electrolyte and protein powders. But Bonnie [Stoll, Nyad's trainer and best friend] and I found that it was helpful to eat real, hard foods as well. She would stick her fingers into a thermos where she had warm, lightly buttered pasta. I would come over like a trained seal and open my mouth, while treading water, to feed every ninety minutes.

BLVR: The notion of sensory deprivation and the resulting hallucination is fascinating to me. In Haruki Murakami's book *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running,* he wrote a lot about this state between perceived awareness and its opposite, delirium. One of my favorite lines was "Nothing in the real world is as beautiful as the illusions of a person about to lose consciousness." Can you expound a little upon your own hallucinatory experiences, resulting from sensory deprivation, hyper-repetition, and lack of sleep?

DN: Well, they are not fantasies akin to someone taking a drug. It's not as if the desired effect is hallucination, as if, *Oh goody,* I'm tripping.

BLVR: Still, there is a kind of fearlessness to the hallucinations, no? Fear disbands along with rationality.

DN: Yes, even in those far-out moments, there is no fear. But in the water in general I am not frightened by anything. At one point there was a big shark scare—all six shark divers were in the water—but I wasn't frightened. Once you start, there is nothing that is going to get you there more than your will. Your will has got to be intact. The feeling is: I will either die out here or make it to the other side.

BLVR: In past interviews, you've spoken of developing counting systems in English, French, German, and Span-

Diana Nyad beginning her third attempt to swim from Cuba to Florida, August 2012. Photo by Christi Barli. Courtesy of the photographer.

ish, as well as singing Beatles songs and Neil Young to yourself throughout the long nights of being in the water. Are there other long stretches where you surrender to the emptiness and just allow your mind to go numb and blank? I wonder if you fight that kind of nothingness or welcome it.

DN: Neither, really... your mind just does what it does. I got a whistle from Bonnie every ninety minutes when it was time to come in and feed, so that helped me measure and manage time. Still, sometimes that hour and a half feels interminable. But I have a really accurate sense of time passing—most runners and swimmers do. If I sing Janis Joplin's version of "Me and Bobby McGee" exactly two thousand times to the note, I *know* that it is going to be eight hours and forty-five minutes. Not eight hours and forty-six minutes, or forty-four minutes. Sometimes I start out with a goal of counting like that, and then I lose it, I begin tripping out. I start thinking about the zeitgeist of the universe, or the meaning of life, or friends who are no longer friends. What happened there? What went wrong? Then all of a sudden a whistle blows, and I assume that it must be a shark sighting. Instead, ninety minutes have passed, and I think: It can't be possible! It has been only one minute since the last feeding.

BLVR: Your first Cuba-to-Florida attempt, in 2011, ended due to strong eastward currents, venomous box jellyfish stings on your forearm and neck, and a bad asthma flare-up. How, exactly, after twenty-nine hours of swimming, and perhaps in a semi-delirious state that you just described as one without any fear, did you know when the moment arrived to stop?

DN: Well, that is a discussion with my core team. The navigator comes in and says, "The Gulf Stream has thrown us far to the west, five-foot waves are coming, and we are forty-two hours from the shore." It is not humanly possible at that point. If you were climbing Everest, how would you know? Either you are sick as a dog, unable to take the oxygen deprivation, or the Sherpa tells you that the weather is too dangerous to proceed. It is the same set of questions and circumstances.

BLVR: There has been a lot of publicity around the attempts, most notably with continued coverage from CNN and several prominent articles in the *New York Times*. You told a CNN reporter after getting out of the water in 2011 that you were "deeply, deeply disappointed"; how do you measure your own feelings, be they disappointment or

something else, against the public expectation of your performance, and the public's vested interest in you and your success? At this point, are they the same thing, or do you feel there are two sets of responsibilities to navigate?

DN: I'm not immune to public opinion. There were some million and a half responses on Twitter to this last swim. Largely, people are inspired by the attempt, even if I don't make it. People like to see someone shoot for the stars, and they admire big goals. On the other hand, there are people who write, "My god, it's enough already. Isn't it about time you take this off your bucket list? It's too much! You are going to die out there. Go climb some other mountain." That can be hard to take. I don't want to fail again, just like I didn't want to the first, second, or third time on this particular swim. But I have to do what I have to do. I have to sleep with my decisions, and no one else's.

BLVR: Would you consider your distance swimming to be a masochistic pursuit? And before you answer, let me qualify that question a little: I think people often misuse and misunderstand the meaning of that word, flattening it to mean, most simply, a person who feels pleasure in painful acts. In fact, it has a much richer and more complicated signification; both Sigmund Freud and the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote about masochism as defined by the qualities of repetition and anticipation more than those of suffering or agony. Freud in particular came to conclude that masochism can never be a unique or accidental act, but rather *must* be enacted over and over as a kind of deliberate and elementary compulsion. Deleuze took that a step further, writing that "the masochist is not a strange being who finds pleasure in pain... Beneath the sound and fury of sadism and masochism... repetition runs wild and becomes independent of all previous pleasure." For him, masochism and repetition were actually one and the same. For both these men, the idea of masochism is entangled with sort of a prolonged cycle of longing and desire.

DN: Well, I am not sure if I agree with that judgment at all. There is a very clear definition of masochism to me, and that is to hurt for self-punishment's sake. So swimming, and repetition, can be filled with boredom, pain, and duress, but I don't think it is masochistic in any way. I am not out there trying to hurt myself or punish myself. There are people who self-pierce and cut, who self-flagellate. Don't get me wrong, I am not judging in any way, but *that* is masochism, not what I do. Someone who stays in an abusive relationship because they think that they deserve it, because they want to be beaten down...that is masochism. I am doing something very different, and am willing to sacrifice a lot to achieve something very difficult. There is joy in having stuck with something for so long. Swimming is difficult, it's arduous, it may be tougher than any other sport that exists—but I don't think that the word *masochism* is accurate to describe it.

BLVR: I'd like to end this interview by asking you about your KCRW short radio program, *The Score*. I discovered the show sort of late in the game—after you had already stopped doing it, in fact, to train full-time for this swim—but have since come to really love it. You have also had similar shows covering sports culture in the past on FOX, CNBC, and ABC. Will you return to it at some point? I certainly hope so.

DN: I'm not finished with swimming yet. But I have been a journalist for a long time, and an NPR columnist for a long time. I will likely return to television and the radio, though I doubt I will do *The Score* any longer. My interest in doing a sports column every week has run its course.

BLVR: Well, I'm glad I caught it, then. There is so little content on the radio that is dedicated to the intersection of sports and sociology. The only other program that comes to mind is Dave Zirin's *Edge of Sports* on Sirius XM. Among other things, *The Score* investigated cheerleader politics, the social history of the Super Bowl, and debates over the requisite pre-game national anthem. I regard it as a profoundly feminist program, as sensitive to gender politics as it is to any other kind of ethical debate. Would you describe it that way?

DN: No matter the sport I was covering or the show I was doing, I am always, always concerned with civil rights, human rights, women's rights. I am a feminist, and I live that reality every day. All of who one is comes out in one's journalism, even if one is just reporting on a Wimbledon final. These are human standards, and relate back to my first answer: my project is much larger than swimming, or even sports. It is a human project. We've come full circle. ✶