

‘I begin to hear an awful droning sound, like bagpipes. Bloody hell, I’m now starting to hallucinate.’

In this extract, Steve describes how he took on the Catalina Channel, a 22-mile stretch between Catalina Island and the coast of southern California.

The receptionist wishes us good luck as we leave the keys at the desk and explain where we are going. I suppose she has seen all kinds of crazy here; we are just another two fools to add to the list. We both have on a few layers of clothing, as it can get quite cool at night, and the journey to the island will take a while. As we walk along the sea front towards the landing, a great calm descends over me; it now feels like we are just going out for a nice meal and a few drinks instead of heading out to a bloody island in the Pacific Ocean to swim back to the mainland. I smile at the mad ramblings flashing through my head at lightning speed. Anthony is quite worried about the Red Bull team, and I just tell him to be himself, and when he has run out of bullshit, start lying as hard as he can. One thing I have learned from these swims is how to accept and get on with all types of people. Plus, they will see very quickly if you behave like an asshole and will treat you accordingly.

We make it to the 22nd Street entrance and wander down the moorings towards the only boat that’s lit up. I have seen pictures of the Bottom Scratcher, so I have a rough idea what it looks like, a large live-aboard cruiser with a high wheelhouse and large deck. Everything is big here. We smile with relief that we have found it and drop our gear on the wharf and wait to be invited aboard, as it’s bad luck to go onboard without permission, and the last thing we need to do is tempt fate. There is a fair bit of commotion coming from below decks

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and there is a toolbox on deck with some tools scattered about, not a good sign when you are supposed to be leaving in the next hour.

Greg, the skipper, comes up out of the bowel of the engine room in a boiler suit and shakes hands with us. Straight away, I like him. He is what you imagine every captain to look like; tall and bearded, he is wearing a baseball cap and a sun-weathered smile. As he shows us around the boat, he tells us that they are working on one of the starters for one of the boat's two engines, and it shouldn't take too long. Martha and David, who are the observers supplied by the Catalina Channel Swimming Association, arrive shortly afterwards, with Grace Van De Byl and Forrest Nelson arriving soon after. Grace and Forrest will be the paddlers keeping an eye on me in the water. They'll direct me in the right direction and bring feeds from the boat. This is all new to us and we take it all in as they go through the briefing. They sure like rules and regulations, but this is good, as it shows you how much they care and want you to succeed. They go through the procedures of how the swim will start, how the feeds will proceed and even how we will finish. By the end of the briefing, my head is spinning, but I am glad that it's still going ahead. Martha explains that Grace will be the first paddler in with me, and for the next four hours she'll paddle beside me on a long stable board. Then Forrest will take over. Grace is a thin blond wisp of a girl who is a swim coach, which is great, as she can tell me where I am going wrong out there. She proceeds to plaster her paddle board with glow sticks and a guardian light so the boat can see us in the dark.

We have already informed the Association that a Red Bull team is going to record the swim, and Martha, Grace, and Greg seem delighted to have them along, as it's great exposure for the channel swim and the skipper's boat. They have been here a while bringing lighting gear and the like onboard. Nicholas is bouncing around the place introducing himself to everyone. The crazy bugger wants their photographer to take some pictures of me standing on the marina next to the boat. In all my life, I have never looked good in a picture, but now

I am blown up with food and fluids, and I really must look terrible. Steve, the photographer, encourages me to look like a hero instead of a brick. Anthony looks at me and jams his fist into his mouth to control his laughter, eventually sprinting to the end of the marina to explode. Bastard! We are introduced to another boat also bringing a swimmer out; we wish them luck as they steam away and then head back to the Bottom Scratcher. We discuss the main problems for this swim: the kelp forest at the start and finish, and the fact that sharks tend to patrol these areas looking for sea lion pups playing in the kelp. Great. The currents that sweep along the coast can carry a swimmer for long distances.

If you think this is an easy swim, you are a fool. I already know I am a fool, so that makes it easier for sure.

It is now 9pm, and we really need to get going, but we must wait until the boat is ready. I start to wonder if we are cursed, as the swim will be put back for 24 hours if the starter cannot be fixed. I have often used a hammer to get a sticking starter to work again; if I get near this one, it will get some beating. The delay at least provides a chance for the reporter to ask questions and take more pictures; it's interesting, as they have never been on a swim before and are treating it pretty much like a normal event. No, it's nothing close to normal. I try to explain how a swim is never over till the last moment when you walk up onto the beach unaided; only then is it over. They will learn quickly; everyone does. You always come back from a swim different to how you leave. I have from all of mine. I can't really explain it. I just know it in my bones.

By 9.50pm, the starter is fixed, and we are all primed and ready to go. As the journey will take more than three hours, we have bunks to rest in on the way out. I have been given the best one, which is forward of the main cabin, so after watching the harbour slip away in the dark, Anthony gets me into the bunk to rest. It's like I'm a little child again as I am put on the top bunk and a couple of blankets are thrown over me. As the curtains are drawn, I am told to rest. I try listening

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to some music, but I can't, so I just jam in some ear plugs and try to drown out some of the engine noise. Greg is on full throttle, as we are a couple of hours behind schedule, so the boat is crashing through the water, making it very hard to sleep. I eventually stop trying and get up to see where we are. As I'm climbing down, Anthony appears to tell me that we are getting closer, and it is time to start getting greased up. At last, it has come. In the cabin, the observers explain the procedure of feeding again. The paddler will bring the feed to me while also being the liaison with the boat. This is different to what I am used to, as I would normally come to the boat to feed. Nicholas is throwing questions at me while I try to take it all in. How do I feel? How the hell do you think I feel? I am petrified. Anthony smears lanolin mixed with Vaseline under my arms and around my shoulders. If we do not get enough in the right places, I will start to chaff and bleed, which feels like someone is sticking a knife into my ribs with every stroke. Once it's on, there is no sitting down or touching any part of the boat, as its dreadful stuff to get off. If I get it on the lenses of my goggles, they are impossible to clean, so I put an old towel over my shoulder and stand still at the door to the deck and attempt to stay warm. There is a bit of a delay as we try to find the closest point to the shore that the boat can get to, and for twenty minutes, we steam up and down the kelp forest which stretches along the shore. This side of the island is uninhabited and is in complete darkness. Martha explains that I need to swim over the kelp into the beach, as the boat can go no further, so Grace will guide me. She also explains that I am to be careful about any sea lions in the water, as they tend to hide in the kelp from sharks. Great news, indeed.

I put on my Irish tricolour cap, and I have decided to use blue lenses for the night-time part of the swim. The Aquasphere lenses are great, as they seal well and are very comfortable. I have a guardian light attached to the straps of the goggles, so the boat can pick me out in the water. I'm still bloody cold and feeling disoriented as they launch the paddle boat. There is a lot of chatter (the Americans love

talking) and the photographer is clicking away. The camera flash is going off so often that it is almost blinding me. To me, it just adds to the insanity of the whole situation.

I tell Anthony that whatever happens, he must get me to the other side and not let me stop. Despite looking apprehensive, he attempts to assure me that it will be fine. To be honest, I wasn't sure who he was trying to calm down, himself or me. I get down on the deck and begin to pray. I am not terribly religious, but I have always asked for help and protection from whoever or whatever is out there. I talk to Bernard and my aunts and uncles. I pray for strength as I hit the boat with my fist to wake the gods. I pray to anybody who will listen. I stay down hoping this is just a dream and I will wake up safe in the hotel. When that doesn't work, I realise that there is nothing else to do except get on with it and hope that everything works out. Greg tells me that it's great to see shark bait greased up with a light on top (like a cherry) attracting them. I know it's a joke, but it doesn't help matters.

Anthony gives me a pat on the back and guides me to the back of the boat where Grace is in the water waiting for me. Swinging my arms to keep my shoulders loose, pretending to look like I know what I'm doing, I leap into the water holding my goggles in place, so they don't dislodge. It doesn't matter how much I try to prepare myself for each swim, I always have that moment when the shock of the cold hits me as I glide into the water. As I float back up to the surface, Grace points me towards the shore and I tentatively begin to take my first few strokes. The water is colder than I thought it would be, but it's not unpleasant once I start swimming.

As I reach the first of the kelp barriers, it's like swimming through fishing nets; every time I plunge my hand in and try to pull back, it catches on a long slimy piece of kelp. It's a horrible feeling touching something in the dark and not knowing what's going to be there. Not the best way to start a swim, but then, compared to being battered previously, I know I've had worse, and besides, I know it's going to get a lot worse before I finish.

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I catch my arms repeatedly in the weed, jarring my shoulders as I stroke. I was looking forward to clear sea and warm water, and for some reason, I didn't think it was going to be like this. After what seems like forever, I begin to see the glow of the bottom signifying that I am closer to the beach; it's like being in a church at night-time with candles glowing, throwing strange shadows all around, and I finally get to stand on the beach and make my way over the large, slippery rocks. It takes about ten minutes to get in, but it seems like I have already been to the moon and back. Dazed, I stand up, feeling dizzy and disoriented.

Grace brings me back to my senses by telling me that we are ready to go, and to confirm this, I hear a yell from the boat and a horn starts blasting. Then, just in case I haven't got the hint yet, they shine a light on me standing on the beach. I clamber back into the water and start to swim, encountering the kelp almost straight away. I try to find a shortcut over it but instead end up amongst even thicker stuff. Jesus Christ, I will be beaten before I even get out to the boat.

After what seems like ages, we finally get back out to the clear sea, and the boat throttles on and turns to point us in the general direction of home. I start trying to stretch my stroke and get my rhythm together. I try to use my legs to kick, as the water should be warmer here, but it feels bloody cold, and I encounter blinding phosphorous exploding in my face with every stroke. This is a true nightmare. Jesus, I am not going to get a break at all. I breathe in threes as normal, which gives me an idea of where I'm going, as I can hardly see the running lights of the boat. It's bloody dark here in America. Grace is on my right, and every time I come up on her side for a breath, she says something to me. I am not used to this constant talking and to be honest, I find it somewhat disturbing. Why do Americans love to talk so much? I know it sounds like I am flying through the water, but realistically, I look like a dead horse covered in grease trying to swim. We batter on, Grace talking, me wondering about what.

Eventually, Grace thankfully disappears away over to the boat, and

I keep swimming in pleasant silence. Although the water is quite calm with the odd swell coming in, I can feel currents pushing at me in the water, but this could just be my vivid imagination at work. I hear the engine of the boat as the green ghostly glow of the board with Grace on it slides back beside me with the first feed. I quickly consume it all while treading water. It doesn't taste like anything in particular and isn't as warm as I expected. As she heads back to the boat with the empty bottle, I ask her to bring back something hotter for the next feed.

I start shutting my eyes as I stroke under the water to avoid the retina burn from the algae, but with every breath, I am blinded by the algae. It is now 4am and it's getting colder; it is always the worst time on the body – that's if my body is on LA time, I'm not sure. The feeds are now at 40-minute intervals. I see the boat on my left, which is a relief, and as I look at Anthony, I wonder how he's getting on with the reporter; it's a shame I didn't bring Noel out, as he could really embellish the story. But having said that, I know Anthony has a terrible job counting my stroke and making feeds while enduring seasickness. I do hope he has taken something for it. I took something, but I don't think it has done anything, as I am still feeling nauseous. All my years on boats, and I have never been seasick, but tonight? I've decided that if I survive, I will get the best seasick tablets for the next swim.

Grace is the only person I have ever seen who looks good in a wet-suit. She's like a model reclining on her board with a bright orange woolly hat on, and as the swim continues, I find myself beginning to enjoy her constant chatter, and I realise how kind and caring she really is. She must have been so bored watching this slow fool plodding along through the nothingness of the water, and since she is an Olympic standard swimmer, I am truly honoured to have such a great paddler out here with me.

I always find it strange being out in the middle of an ocean as the world goes about its business, regardless of what I do. I have come to understand that the world doesn't care what I'm doing, and it makes

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me feel so alone; and this is the moment when I realise that if I truly want to make it, I have to begin to fight my fears, thoughts and feelings.

As I am still cold after the fourth feed, I begin to wonder if the feeds are being absorbed into energy for my body to use. It's starting to feel like my Gibraltar. I am blocked somewhere, so I've begun praying for my body to start working, because if I bonk out here, there's no come-back.

As the water begins to turn grey, I know that dawn is starting to break, and as Grace has done her shift and gone to bed, Forrest is on the board next to me. As I swim, I begin to hear an awful droning sound, like bagpipes. Bloody hell, I'm now starting to hallucinate.

I am getting weaker and feeling much worse; this can't be happening to me, not here, not after coming so far to do the bloody thing. We swim on into the grey morning, and into the gloom. I am afraid, as I am already feeling totally beat. I begin to search for something to give me some hope, anything to lift my spirits and take my mind away from this dreadful pain in my stomach from the undigested feeds.

I stop and begin to thrash the water. I yell out to Forrest that I am in serious trouble and must get out. He looks shocked and surprised but tells me to keep going as he relays this to the boat. I am too slow for this swim, I just want to stop, get out, go home, and say to hell with Oceans Seven. I tread water as the Bottom Scratcher comes in closer. Everyone is on the deck, including the bloody reporter. I am going to look like an asshole when I come out.

I scream to Anthony, "I want to stop, I know I have never said this before, but I am so wrecked. My stomach feels like it's about to explode with the pressure of the undigested feeds." Anthony looks down and I can see that he is having none of this. He throws down some water with pain killers in the bottle for me and tells me to "calm down, as stopping and getting out is not going to happen." Jesus Christ, I want to get out. I demand to get out. I have no strength left. I can't go on. I see someone making a move towards the ladder; it is one of the Red

Bull team. He gets pulled away from the ladder roughly by David, one of the observers. Christ, they are not going to let me back on the boat. I am going to die out in the middle of nowhere. Greg tells me that the tide has turned and is pushing me in towards the shore. I do not believe any of this crap. I want to get out, I tell you, it's over.

Suddenly, Forrest is by my side with some more water. He seems to be whispering a question to me, "Who is Siadbh, who is Siadbh and Stevie?" If I could have hit him, I would have.

"They are my kids, Forrest. Why do you want to know?" I say to him in a whisper.

"They have just been on the phone to Anthony, and they want to know why you are giving up. What will I tell them, Steve?"

You bastard, Forrest, I cry in rage, and the tears come as I break down completely in this cursed channel, in the middle of nowhere. How can Forrest ask me about my kids when he doesn't know them? But more importantly, how can I give up and let them down? Welling up, I look at everyone on board. I sink down under the waves and take in a huge mouthful of seawater and swallow hard.

The seawater has the desired effect of making me puke up the feed violently for about three to five minutes; it's hard to believe that so much fluid can come out of me. Poor Forrest sits there stunned. This is the last resort, as I know once you start getting sick, you dehydrate very quickly and it's very hard to stomach anything as your belly muscles are completely spasmed. But strangely, with me it's different. I feel my strength return with each retch, and then, I call for some tea and a Milky Way as the reporter looks on shocked.

The clever bastard got me going again, as he knew what to tell Forrest; he knew that I would sooner die than let the kids down but hearing their names from a stranger in the middle of this channel threw me completely. I start stroking before Anthony returns with the extra tea. No words are spoken, we just silently move away from this defining moment. It was almost over. I came so close to giving up. Thank you.

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This is not a happy swim, but with Forrest by my side whispering that I can do it, I keep going. And even though I feel like I am swimming poorly, he keeps my mood up by telling me that I am flying. I feel that the only word that I can use to describe all of this is love: a love that he has for me when nothing else in the world matters. It may seem strange to the person who has never been in this situation, but it is important to understand that these people are doing this not for money or a prize but to be a part of something, and they have kept me alive so far. It becomes their swim as well; they have ownership of it and have become as important to its success as much as anything else.

We wander on into the grey again, and although I'm still not happy, I am determined to keep going until the end. Forrest has done his shift on the board and is cold and tired. I thank him as he tells me that he is leaving me and that the next time we talk, I will be finished. Grace paddles out to me for the home run, which gives me great hope. The feeds are still horrible, and the water remains cold and grey. Strangely, I have not seen any marine life for the whole swim, not even a jellyfish. Suits me.

I think this is the worst swim I have ever done, and I begin to berate myself for being so appalling. All I want to do is finish and debrief, and as I see land in the distance, I try not to look, as it will only give me a false hope. Grace is lying on her board beside me, with her orange hat on. How the hell does she keep paddling along with her arms? She sees me looking at her weirdly and tells me that we are getting closer. I don't believe her, as it's her job to keep me moving. To be honest, the thought of it all being over is the only thing that keeps me going.

We seem to be skirting along the coast, and again, I look for anything that might be recognizable to me. But seriously, what am I thinking? I have never seen any of this coastline before, and I know that I won't see anything familiar, but I still search for a familiarity. I am still in a foul mood, which I have not been able to shake for the

whole swim. They all know this and are just pointing me in the right direction, while they won't let me stop or give up.

Sea lions have begun to swim around me. I remember Greg's advice about sea lions and sharks, but I am too far gone to care about them or anything else. Let them come. I see Anthony looking ahead with the photographer, and my hopes rise despite the excruciating pain of my stomach.

"Two more feeds," Grace tells me when she arrives back with the feed bottle. The Californian shore is now clear in front of me, and it looks like something from a film, reddish-brown hills as far as the eye can see. We seem to be running parallel with the shore and I assume they are looking for a way into the surf so I can safely get up on the beach, as there are a lot of sheer cliffs and very few places where we can land safely, so I must put my entire faith in my team; they have got me this far and kept me going when all seemed lost.

I take on another feed and plough on toward the shore. Grace, my paddler and new best friend, tells me that we are heading for Point Vincent. We head on into the kelp and watch out for more sea lions; they come and play through the kelp like crazed surfers, and they really do give me some hope that we are getting closer. The sun has come out, a bit late, but we will take anything we can get. Yet again, I am using the mantras on my hands to keep me going, Siadh, Stevie, Siadh, Stevie, over and over again to keep the rhythm going.

I look up at the boat and I notice that they have lowered the punt into the water. Steve, the Red Bull photographer, jumps into the water in a wet suit and is given a large contraption. I must be getting closer, as we are in thick kelp again. Suddenly, there is something underneath me. Jaysus, Steve has started taking pictures of me and all I can think is that I must look like a corpse. I catch the rotten smell of the punt's exhaust fumes as I inhale. It really is a marvellous smell, only because I know that it's all coming to an end. The punt, with three people squeezed incongruously into its tiny space, guides us through the kelp. We are now no more than a kilometre away from the shore,

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and once more, Grace leads the way. Steve has made his way onto the shore and waits for us to stagger up.

The tension melts as the seabed rises towards me. I thank God that I have not let anyone down at home. Thanks, Bernard; you swam every stroke. I then realise that I can't celebrate yet, as this is going to be tricky; there are huge round boulders all along the shore, so the exit is not going to be graceful, but more like a beached whale coming to rest. But seriously, when is anything I ever do graceful? I thank Grace and we both cry and take in the moment. I swim on until I can finally stand up, but I fall back in as the cheers go up from the boat. Grace and I swim in a bit further over the rocks, as its impossible to walk through them and it's easier to just pull myself up over them. At last, I am finished. Steve shoots away. These pictures will be grim. I don't look that good at the best of times, so today, I have no doubt that I will certainly look like shite. Despite this, I smile, and he shakes my hand. "I have never seen anything so awesome, Steve," he roars. I am just relieved and look around in a complete daze.

Even though I am in a state of euphoria, I realise that I had better keep going as I may just collapse and go to sleep right where I am. For some reason, Denis Griffin, a great friend from Schull, comes to mind. One of his favourite sayings is, "Steve, you're the man.". I wish I was fishing off Schull with him now. I slip and fall. I am afraid I will turn an ankle over the rock, but I clamber on until I manage to get back to the board. Grace, realising how weary I am, helps me to climb up, and we start paddling out towards the Bottom Scratcher. As I climb up awkwardly on board, I am greeted by wild roaring and whooping. Anthony cannot stop laughing.

"How did I get away with that?" I ask him.

"God knows, but you did," he laughs.

"Thanks, Anthony, thanks," I mutter, as he throws a towel over me and leads me into the toilet where I puke like the girl in *The Exorcist*. Then it's into the shower, shaking uncontrollably, where I sit on the ground for at least half an hour. I have been handed some warm fluids

and tea in the hope of getting my stomach and system going again. Nicholas, who has followed me into the shower-room with his recorder, cannot get over the swim and the sheer brutality involved.

He asks, "Are you angry with your brother for not letting you out in the middle of the swim?"

I reply, "Anthony had a job to do. He got me through the bad times, and I can never thank him enough. To think that he had such faith in me and knew that I could complete the swim is unbelievable. I have realised that when I have that kind of positive back-up, I can't let anyone down. Also, as Red Bull were on board, my warped ego sort of kept me going, as I would have looked like a complete fool if I had come out of the water. After talking the talk, I imagine that I have to walk the walk. If I did get out, I wouldn't have had much of a story for you, would I?"

Nicholas just smiles; he knows how close I came to failure. Steve, the photographer, cannot stop crying and hugging me, as he is overcome with emotion. Everyone reacts to the end of a swim in their own way.

Americans are very joyful people, and as I come back into the main cabin and sit down with a big stupid smile, I get congratulated by them all. Martha and David, my observers from the Catalina Swimming Association, are filling in the paperwork and are getting everyone to sign papers as the witnesses. I understand that with so many coming to swim this channel, they must have all these rules and regulations, and it is the right way to do it. Their professionalism makes swimmers feel like they are really being cared for in the water. They tell me about Greg playing the bagpipes at dawn, and I find it hilarious that I did not see him out on the fly deck. I tell them how I thought I was hallucinating a god-awful noise but was not sure what the hell it was. I shake Greg's hand every time I see him on the two-hour trip back to port. I have promised to take Forrest, Martha, David, and Grace for a meal as thanks for looking after me so well. I would sooner go home to the hotel and collapse into bed, but I really do owe

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them, and they won't take any money.

At last, we dock and are greeted by some of the observers from the other boat. They did not have success and the girl was pulled. They knew we were still out and had been waiting for us to return. When someone fails, it feels like a death in the family. Greg tells me that he has never seen anyone get going again after treading water for that amount of time. You don't have to tell me, but I know I was, once again, very lucky.