

INTO THE UNKNOWN

Elizabeth Weil and Daniel Duane train for the open-water Alcatraz swim in the ultimate test of their bodies—and their marriage. Photographed by Annie Leibovitz.



TWO IF BY SEA

With Alcatraz looming in the background, Weil and Duane prepare to take the plunge. On her: Moncler Grenoble jacket. On him: Marmot jacket. Orca wet suits. Hair, Tony Chavez for Shu Uemura Art of Hair at FrankReps; makeup, Alice Lane for NARS Cosmetics at Jed Root, Inc. Produced on location by Tom Hoynes. Details, see In This Issue.

Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

ey, honey, what do you think about doing an Alcatraz swim?"

I dropped this bomb on my husband one night as he was drifting off to sleep.

"What?" Dan said, pulling off the pillow he'd wrapped around his head to block out my reading light.

"An Alcatraz swim! You know, swimming across the

bay from Alcatraz to Crissy Field."

Dan squinted, confused.

Then I dropped the second bomb: "Together."

At that point, Dan and I had been married ten years. He still, amazingly, called me *darling*. I still tried to sit next to him at every dinner party, even though we ate together at home nearly every night. Yet I'd started to grow antsy in our kids-jobs-mortgage cocoon. We both worked from home as writers. Dan cooked; I cleaned and tended finances. We kept our bodies fit. The machine of our lives ran smoothly—a little too smoothly, I was starting to think. We both were workout fanatics (or really, I should say, both had psyches that required exercise); many evenings, after dinner, Dan sat on the couch studying his barbell manual, *Starting Strength*. I read *Brain Training for Runners*. Our separate obsessions with physical pursuits had spun us into great shape, sure. But by late last summer these individual manias had started to feel poignant. Disconnected. Like driving to the cineplex and watching different movies.

Due to a ridiculous lifelong habit of taking the anvil of hard work to even the squishiest matters, like love, I'd started writing a book about marriage improvement—investigating whether inventions like sex therapy and joint financial planning actually help. Then, last fall, an article in the paper about Venn diagrams of marriage caught my eye. Researchers asked couples to pick the pairs of circles that best represented their relationships, options ranging from wholly separate to almost entirely overlapping. Anybody who knew Dan and me would have said we needed more togetherness like Brangelina needed more kids. Still, the researchers found that the happiest couples picked the circles that were the most joined. Couldn't we—shouldn't we—find a sport, an adventure, to train for together? What could it hurt?

Daniel: *Hurt? Let's start with our egos. The few times Liz and I had tried sharing a sport, it hadn't gone well. Take surfing: I'd been doing it for ages when we met. Liz let me try to teach her, and she got so sick of being the beginner to my expert that she insisted on joining me in big, violent surf at San Francisco's Ocean Beach. The episode ended with six stitches in her backside. Running—Liz's sport—went about the same. She'd been a serious marathoner in her 20s; she still ran fast and long, and I was so ploddingly slow that when we ran together she got frustrated, and I got insecure and mad.*

But I could hear in Liz's voice that she was serious about the swim.

"You know this is two miles in freezing water, right?" I said.

"Of course," she said, blithe and confident as ever.

A few days later: "You realize there's a heavy current, and we'll get pummeled by chop, and it'll be really disorienting and chaotic in that way you hate."

"Yes, yes, I know."

I made one more attempt, one week after her initial proposal. "This isn't going to be like floating around in the pool, like you did when you were pregnant. You're going to have to really train."

"C'mon, honey. It'll be fun."

I relented and said yes.

Elizabeth: Wanting Dan to at least enjoy our freezing misadventure—to think, if nothing else, that it had brought to our marriage the thrill of learning something new—I lined us up a joint lesson with David Durden, coach of the University of California, Berkeley, men's swim team.

The ride to Berkeley, crossing the San Francisco Bay, suddenly felt different—much longer. Durden started by asking us each to swim 25 yards. Then he asked us to swim back to him. He scratched his head.

"OK, let's start at the beginning," he said. "Swimming is about efficiency. Think about feeling your body glide through water. Think of slipping, needling, not muscling through it."

Uh-oh. I stared at Dan; he laughed. Muscling, we both knew, was my specialty. I'd been counting on a swim-training regimen to be pretty much exactly like my running one: an hour or so of heart-whomping cardio, four or five days a week. Now I was supposed to slowly, painstakingly needle through the water?

Dan set one of his big hands on my head, jostled my swim cap a bit. He then asked the coach lots of, to my mind, irritating questions about "front-quadrant timing" and "high-elbow catch." I hadn't intended to move my workout life squarely onto his turf. Maybe this *was* a bad idea.

I hurled myself at technique—reading wonky swim-training manuals, watching YouTube videos of Michael Phelps, trying for that effortless grace. Liz joined me for the videos but finally couldn't resist approaching swimming as she approaches everything else: like a teenager on Red Bull. (Her mother, at 73, has the same energy.) She likes going hard, fine points be damned. We couldn't often work out at the same time, so after each ses-

Liz would text me her yardage—3,500! 4,000! 4,500! She's always loved to earn a gold star

sion she'd text me her yardage—3,500! 4,000! 4,500! She's always loved to earn a gold star.

The plan was to swim three times a week for three months. About a month and a half in, Liz and I finally found a window to work out together, in the rooftop pool at her new gym. Floating in her suit, she looked about 20 years old. But it was a lousy afternoon for my self-esteem. By then I'd broken down my freestyle—the angle of my head, the timing of my hips—to the point where it was just plain broken. As in, it didn't work, forcing me to rest and refocus after each lap. Meanwhile, Liz cruised back and forth happily—flip-flip-flip-flip-flip.

This brought up a truly unpleasant possibility: Our crossing would not be a joint adventure. I'd been a lifelong waterman—surfing, spearfishing, abalone diving, water polo. Now my wife was going to crush me at my own game?



SWIM TEAM

The authors approach the end of their 2.3-mile aquatic adventure.

Just after Christmas, as I stood waiting for Dan on the corner of Van Ness Avenue and Bay Street, I felt like I was on a date—a real date, with someone who might unnerve or surprise me, not out to dinner for a "date night," that pale married person's substitute. I'd been feeling extremely intimidated by Dan, his grasshopper's approach to learning technique, patiently biding his time, then emerging a master. We'd agreed from the start not to compete, not to race from Alcatraz. Still, I couldn't help thinking I was going to lose.

Our plan that day was simple: to spend at least an hour in the open water, to approximate our big swim. Stupidly, by that point, I'd swum in the bay only twice before (much preferring the comforts of a heated pool). My first time in the bay felt like a day at the beach, as I'd chosen a gorgeous Indian-summer afternoon. The second was a cool and gray Sunday morning. The cold water stung like a slap in the face.

Dan and I changed in the locker rooms of the Dolphin Club, a mecca for open-water swimmers, then met on the dock. As Dan appeared in his neoprene, I thought: Who is this man that I married, this man too sensitive to watch scary movies yet brave enough to carve S-turns in double-overhead waves? For the first time I felt the real thrill of the Alcatraz swim, and also its underbelly: risk. This wasn't some Masters swim meet I'd signed us up for: 200, maybe 400 chlorinated yards. This was 2.3 miles in bone-chilling brine, against stiff currents, possibly even foot-high chop. Our swim would be scary, and it would be romantic, the way real romance—so hard to capture in marriage—is. Sharks weren't the problem; few big ones live in the bay. The real danger was more insidious: slow down, space out, lose your bearings, and get swept out to sea. Plenty of sharks there.

Dan and I planned to swim five loops around the buoys, and as we freestyled out, toward a painted sloop, I immediately noticed a shift: We'd switched from jousting with each other to battling the elements. We swam together easily—no bickering, no ego, even gliding a bit. I felt very cold but told myself not to panic, just feel the sensation and trust I'd be OK. Back in the shower, my feet looked purple as day-old

bruises. But I didn't mention this to Dan afterward on the sidewalk. I didn't want to ruin the moment.

On the night before the swim, East Beach at Crissy Field couldn't have been more beautiful: Bright city lights reflected on the black water, and distant Marin County homes glittered like jewels. But I was nervous—far more than Liz, at least as far as I could tell. I knew I was fit enough, and Liz was fit enough, but Alcatraz Island looked so dark and distant, the water in between cold and deep. The weather forecast wasn't great, either, and I knew a small thing like wind could utterly transform the face of the sea, turning it from a placid pool to a nausea-inducing roller coaster in which every attempt to breathe would lead to a mouthful of sea foam. Still, I loved the unusual feeling that Liz and I were about to have an authentic adventure, here in our hometown.

"I like you," I said to my wife. We said

"I love you" all the time. Liking, ten years into marriage, felt more special. It felt conditional.

And then we jumped. After waking up at 5:45 A.M., we pulled off our warm hats and ski parkas, slid Bodyglide along our necks (to prevent our wet suits from chafing), kissed our older daughter, Hannah, who'd ridden out with us on the open-top inflatable Zodiac, then cannonballed into that bay. As with love, vulnerability is everything. We leaped, feet first. No gingerly half step off the boat.

My first strokes felt fantastic—strong and smooth. The air and water had become strangely calm as a storm collected in the distance, and in my relief over the surface conditions, I failed to notice the water temperature: It had dropped since our last session, to 50 degrees. When I rolled to breathe, I could see Dan, and there, in that beautiful quiet stillness of the bay, I felt proud to be with him, proud of us, exhilarated to be alone together in the middle of this huge, watery expanse, in the middle of our big city, in the middle of our lives. We were not racing—as we'd agreed. We were just together, each moving forward, keeping track of our own bodies and each other's, occasionally craning to glimpse our daughter's freckled face.

After 20 minutes I finally mustered the courage to look back, to see how far we'd swum. Except Alcatraz wasn't where I expected it to be. We'd drifted much farther than planned, and Angel Island was at my back. I lowered my head, tried to feel the cadence of my stroke. Then fifteen minutes later I stopped again and called out to Dan. I knew this was a mistake—I'd get too cold. But I wanted, needed, to connect with him. My arms had started rotating clumsily. I'd swallowed some water. Every time I went to breathe, I lifted the crown of my head, and as a result my body sank. My efficiency had evaporated. My mind was a little fuzzy. I no longer felt invincible. I felt alarmingly hungry.

I could see it in the way Liz's whole head was coming out of the water with each breath: She was getting cold, slowing down. Not that I was a porpoise. By that (continued on page 328)

point, my feet felt like numb clubs, and I could swim straight only if I breathed on my left side. I had a strong impulse to sprint for shore but a stronger one to stay close to Liz. She wasn't in any condition to sprint. I loved that crazy side of her, that optimism bordering on hubris that caused her to jump in far over her head. I wanted to protect that spirit in her, what it brought to me, our marriage. I also wanted to savor those last minutes of a journey we weren't likely to repeat. I never truly doubted her, but I worried. We'd seen a pair of 1,000-pound sea lions on the boat ride out. Liz looked like an easy target. What if one wanted to brawl? But she just kept soldiering on, stroke after stroke after stroke. Soon I could see our mothers on the beach ahead, jumping up and down. Then, through the clear, cold water, the sand below.

“Oh, my God, we made it,” I said, finding my feet beneath me, standing, reaching out for Dan’s arm.

Our bodies were swollen, our faces had frozen into red masks, it would take me two days to warm up, but we’d done it. We’d willed this passage into being. Normally you don’t get to schedule a morning for a big change. You get sick or you fall in love, and transformation washes over you. Or else you decide to trek through India, and it takes a month. Or you try to find God, and it takes a lifetime. But here we were. We’d jumped into the bay 75 minutes earlier and traveled the distance of a nice, modest walk. Yet we’d slipped out of our daily lives, taken a dip with each other in the unknown.

Then, not being one to leave well enough alone, Dan, two weeks later, made his own proposal: the Escape from Alcatraz Triathlon. Now he wanted to add to the challenge an eighteen-mile bike and an eight-mile run? For about ten days, I demurred. Physically, at least, I’d felt bested by our swim. I did not even own a bike. But I’d loved the thrill, the tension, the unexpected romance, of training with Dan for a big adventure. Plus, this one would end on my home turf, the run. I said yes, of course—I had to. Only one question remained: Would we cross the finish line together? □