

The Swim

Today is the day I swim across the Columbia River. I stand in front of the motel bathroom mirror, florescent light flickering, and observe my middle-aged body wearing a colorful, competitive swimsuit.

I begin to shake.

Am I cold?

Or am I scared?

"You don't have to do this," my husband says, giving me a way out. Larry means it, even though we hired a dog sitter, drove to Hood River, and paid a fortune for the motel room on Labor Day weekend.

"I can do this," I say.

After all, I'm here for a reason. My mastectomy was in January, and I feel like I need this event to become myself again. I registered for the swim in March, although my reconstruction surgery was scheduled for May. That gave me three months to train for the 1.1-mile open-water swim.

Registration for the 74th Roy Webster Cross Channel Swim opened at 5:30 am, and we arrived ten minutes after they opened. It's dark, cold, and windy, yet 240 people are ahead of me. One fellow swimmer explained that they began lining up at 3:00 am. *Wow, motivated.*

We sit in the warm car, looking at my transportation, the Columbia Gorge Sternwheeler. This paddleboat will take us to the Washington side of the river. The ship seems inviting and brightly lit as the sun rises behind us. I wait for someone to board her because it feels like a cruel joke that we can't bring sweats or shoes. Sure enough, someone walks aboard wearing a wetsuit and goggles dangling from his hand. *Should I have rented a wet suit?*

No more stalling. I lean in to kiss Larry, grab my stuff, and open the car door. He yells, "Good luck!" as I approach the gangplank, I mean, ramp. My bare feet navigate the rough surface. I'm conscious that my 56-year-old body doesn't look great in a tightly fitted Dolfin Ugglies swimsuit. Swimmers know that no one can camouflage their body in Speedo-like attire. I carry my cap, goggles, and fins and can't wait to get warm inside.

When I open the door, to my surprise, a party atmosphere greets me. Instead of quiet contemplation before a competition, the mood is laughter and gaiety. The joy soothes me, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I find a spot to sit next to the window and welcome the warmth of the body beside me. A few people wear big, fluffy robes. I learn they plan to leave them on the ship as a donation to charity. Others have plastic trash bags to defend themselves against the wind. *Next time.*

Outside, I spot a woman on crutches negotiating the ramp. When she enters the ship, I realize she only has one leg. I'm in awe of her. A man carrying an alligator inflatable makes way for her. An announcer makes notable introductions: an 82-year-old man, a pair of women in their 70s, and one swimmer participating for the 42nd time. Everyone has a story for being here.

At 7:00 am, we cast off as scheduled. The crowd of nearly five-hundred quiets down a bit as we cross the resplendent river from the Oregon side upriver to the Washington side. The paddlewheel chugs melodically as we take in the view of basalt cliffs dotted with evergreens. Before long, we dock and are ready to begin. As we gather our swimming paraphernalia, our organizer states that the water, at 64 degrees, is colder than usual. As a youngster in Junior Lifeguards, I did drown-proofing for an hour—that water was 55 degrees.

I don my swim cap, tuck in my hair, and place my goggles on my head. Our swim caps indicate our flight or group of ten. My cap says 25-8, the eighth person in group twenty-five. A

man with a bullhorn calls out each group, asks them to step to the ship's edge, and jump the ten feet into the river. He encourages us to move out of the way after hitting the water to make way for others.

Ahead of me is a man whose son appears to have Down Syndrome. As we approach the launch point, I overhear their conversation. The father reassures the son, "It's like swimming in a pool, only different." I want to hug them both: the dad for being such an encouraging father and the son for trusting his father despite uncertainty. With wide eyes and halted steps, the son seems apprehensive but plods forward to the edge. After the pair jumps in, the son flounders in place, apparently shocked by the cold water. The bullhorn man pauses while the father persuades his son to start swimming, and he does. The dad's dedication to his son's welfare warms my heart. My fear dissipates as I step toward the ship's edge. *Compared to the other life stories, mine pales.*

The bullhorn man calls our group. I put on my fins and move my goggles to my hand so they won't fall off during entry. He yells, "Three, two, one, JUMP!" After a brief hesitation, all ten of us leap into the water. My head doesn't go under with my left fin forward and my right fin back. I put on my goggles and take off fast. The water is cold, but I know brisk swimming will cure that. Besides, I must negotiate around a sea of bodies, which distracts me.

Soon, I establish a rhythm as my limbs numb. To my right, fun-loving folks lollygag along. They chat with their group and are having a good time. To my left, Masters level swimmers, who see this as a training opportunity, pass me. I swim fast and hard because a mile initially seems like a long way. I happily acknowledge that the river current is giving me an assist. The water of unknown depth is dark green, and I can't see anything below. *Just as well.* I

swim mostly freestyle, but I switch to breaststroke if I have to dodge people. I realize I'm neither tired nor cold and decide to take in the scene.

Boats are everywhere forming a route, and we swimmers are the parade. Coast Guard, Port Patrol, private boats, and more kayaks and paddleboarders than I can count form a channel to safeguard us. They ensure the brightly-colored swim caps bobbing in the choppy river don't get by them. Instead, the channel guides us toward shore back to Hood River. All these well-wishers got up early on a holiday for us, and my heart swells, buttressed by their concern for our safety.

The swim ends quickly, and before long, I see a crowd on the shore and view the finish line flags. Once I see the river bottom, I remove my fins and traverse the rocks. *Ouch!* As I reach the sand, I begin looking for Larry, and he welcomes me with a warm towel and a hug.

A hot shower awaits, and we start to leave. I look behind me at the landscape of boats and swimmers making their way. I think of the woman with one leg and the 82-year-old man and admire their resilience and spunk. I ask Larry about the father and son I overheard, and he assures me they made it in.

As I make my way to the car, I reflect on the event and the many people here today. My story is just one of many, and it feels smaller. We all overcame obstacles and achieved this goal together. My inward focus turns outward. *We did this!*