

SIDETRACKED
BY
Fate

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Sidetracked by Fate
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Aron D. Rovner
Thank you for showing me another life...

Part I

1

Confused, she sat up slowly as she surveyed the surroundings. Her eyes darting in all directions as she took it in. In the next instant panic swept through her as a rush of memories assaulted her senses. The previous day's events unfolded in a vivid succession of snapshots as she now stared in shock at the calm, sparkling blue deep vastness that encircled her. The storm. The torrential onslaught of rain that kept coming filling the sailboat faster than they could bail it out. Hearing the angry waves crashing into the sides, then the force causing them to lose footing. The moment he fell over the side. She screams his name. Her outstretched hands wanting to pull him back into the safety of the sinking boat. The terror in his eyes when he realized his fate as a wave took him to rise higher than the boat and then bring him swiftly down. Both screaming the other's name over and over again until neither could be heard over the din. Foot by foot, yard by yard, the length of a football field, the waves separating them until their eyes could no longer see the other.

Had it been weeks that she floated in the raft? Alone. Exhaustion had overcome her and she drifted in and out of fitful sleep. The sun came out early and hot. Her skin felt baked dry, her lips cracked, her mouth so parched her body gave up on the act of swallowing. Willing herself to conserve what was left of the fresh rainwater that she had intuitively thought to collect in the bucket that first night. She didn't know how other than adrenaline and a primal urge for self-preservation that gave her the wherewithal to gather items for survival.

Something woke her just after the sun peeked over the horizon. Instantly she knew something was different. She was not able to feel movement. After so many weeks of constant rolling and rocking beneath her, she now felt nothing. Was she finally dead or just dreaming?

Scrambling to get out from under the enclosed area she grabbed onto the cord running along the top of the raft and awkwardly pulled herself up. Peering over the side of the raft she saw the dark beige color of wet sand. Land! Excited, she swiftly turned her body 180 degrees. She took in the small stretch of sand beach, a steep backdrop of a sheer rock face that reached at least one thousand feet high and no other noise except fierce blowing wind and the waves periodically lapping at the side of the raft.

Gingerly stepping out of the raft, she stumbled as her wobbly sea legs betrayed her. She hadn't stood upright in so long. Steadying herself she stretched her body, shaking her limbs to get the blood pumping through.

Once she felt stronger she tugged at the raft pulling it across the sand until it was a safe distance from the water's edge. Satisfied that it was out of harm's way from floating away she began walking the length of the beach exploring her options.

Very soon though, rough pebbly sand began collecting under the straps of her sandals, painfully rubbing against her skin. Wanting to avoid broken skin leading to a potential infection she quickly undid the Velcro, slipped her feet out and then dipped them in the warm water sighing from the instant relief. She rinsed the sandals of the offending particles and with them in hand, started off down the beach opting to walk in the harder packed wet sand at the water's edge.

The beach was small, not even a quarter-mile long that abruptly ended at a small cove. An overhang of the rock face jutted out. The waves were crashing angrily against the impenetrable wall. No way to see what was on the other side unless getting into the water, something that she did not want to do. So, she turned around and backtracked returning five minutes later to where she started. Here she was already close to the beaches end. There was an outcrop of large rocks that appeared to have developed in the middle of the cliff and then disappeared into the water on the other end. She could climb up the boulders, but the rock face was so sheer above it, she wouldn't get anywhere near the top of the cliff even if she had rock climbing equipment.

She was so hot. There was no escaping the relentless rays of the sun. Looking at the horizon where the water seemed to touch the sky and then up to where the sun was positioned not quite straight overhead she guessed it to be about 11:00 a.m. Retrieving the bucket of collected rainwater she grimaced when she saw only about an inch remained. In other words, a strictly rationed two days left at best. She took enough to just moisten her mouth and lips.

She sat down in the ocean splashing the water over her dry skin. It

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provided an instant cooling relief, but eventually the salt would continue to pull the precious moisture from her body that in the long run would make her skin feel even dryer. Pulling the sarong over her head she let it hang down like a shawl essentially shielding her pale skin from the burning rays of the midday sun. She weighed her options.

Get back in the raft and try to make it around the rocks without putting a hole in the life saving material and see what is on the other sides of the rock face. Maybe a bigger beach, maybe vegetation, a place to fish, maybe an easier access to a patch of land or island. The cons to that plan were off the charts. Being in the shark infested water again or the chance the waves or a riptide could pull her away from this island and back out into the deep end of the ocean scared the hell out of her. If she was going to die, she would at least do it on her terms. Choosing dehydration/starvation she would probably fall into a comforting sleep as opposed to being eaten alive by a marine creature.

Maybe stay put in this spot and hope rescue comes in the next five or six days. "Fat chance," she thought bitterly. It has been almost a week since the sailboat sank and she hasn't seen any mode of transportation: a helicopter, fishing boat, cruise ship, nothing.

Or, she could try and climb that cliff. There might be footholds or rock protrusions that she could use as handholds. But it was steep and high. She threw her head back looking upwards for a route. There was no pitch. It was straight up and down. That would assuredly be instant death if she fell or a miserable slow death if she broke any bones. She shuddered at the thought of birds and crabs picking at her flesh while she lay helpless unable to move.

She sighed. She had to move from this slip of beach, no question about that. There wasn't any plant life or fresh water source, cooling shade, no means to build a fire or shelter. She would die in a matter of days, or a torturous week tops. Okay, back into the raft it would have to be. Suddenly, another concern crossed her mind. She didn't want the waves to smash her against the rock face. She had no idea how far the cliff stretched around. She definitely had to avoid the time around high tide and also try and determine where the wind shadow side of the island is since the waves and swells would be much smaller there, hence safer for her to go near land. The water was not really calm where she sat right now so she prayed this wasn't the wind shadow side.

She was relieved she had a little bit of practical knowledge, but the thought of Jonathan caused her eyes to well up with tears. This man who had taught her many things about nautical life. He had taken her on the three-month sailing trip in the waters between Fiji, Tahiti and Bora Bora. They were almost two months into the trip when the sailboat started having problems.

It seemed too surreal to be real. Was it just one week ago she was lounging on a soft cushion on the deck of the sailboat, basking contentedly in the warm sun, a gentle breeze caressing her bare skin and swirling the sweet delicious smell of coconut oil around her? Sipping on a cold freshly squeezed lime margarita slushy with ice chips and decorated with salt instantly her taste buds came alive and quenched her thirst. Juicy mango and pineapple slices were her lunch of choice. And today she is slowly dying of dehydration and starvation. Alone.

What little hope that she still had that she wasn't isolated on a potentially deserted, hostile island somewhere in the vastness of the South Pacific Ocean, was now beginning to wane. She guessed it was the South Pacific for she had no way of knowing in what direction the storm carried her. Terrified, she began to cry. She couldn't help it. Filled with angst the tears freely streaming down her face. She could be here for years, maybe the rest of her life isolated, solo AND ALL ALONE! It meant nobody to help if she was injured, to never feel the embrace of a hug again. Time would essentially stand still here, as she would never learn anything new or become anything other than what she was right now. There would be nobody to talk with, *ever*. What if she forgot how to speak the English language? The enormity of what it meant to be stranded alone set off a panic attack causing her to hyperventilate, perspire and sweat out essential fluids.

"Get a grip!" she screamed hysterically while jumping up. Then began rapidly pacing up and down the beach. The wind picked up her sarong and blew it above her head like a kite. Trying to gain control of it she laughed out loud thinking she must look like a crazed hag the sea had coughed back up.

Laughing seemed to relax her a bit and helped to change her perspective. Truly believing she had some control of her situation she firmly reminded herself out loud, "Okay, you can do this! You are not going to die today."

She went to locate the backpack that she wisely filled with items before inflating the raft. She pulled out a paper towel, ripped it in half, then used it to blow her nose and wipe her tear-stained face. She rooted around in the pack until she felt the zip-lock bag with the protein bars. Only two left.

She had rationed out one per day and from that, one-third for each meal. However, not knowing what lay ahead or how much energy she would have to expend in the excursion she decided to eat an entire bar before starting out. To wash it down, she drank some of the precious little water that was left. Being literally a matter of life or death well, reason enough.

Zipping the backpack and sealing the lid on the bucket she attached both securely to the raft then pulled it back into the water. Her choice made, she looked at the water noting the direction of the current which happened to

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be close where she was standing, by the rocks. She sighed out of frustration since she was not sure how far out into the water the submerged rocks continued nor how close to the surface they or the coral reef lay. She would have to swim or row out farther than she originally wanted, but necessary to avoid the bottom of the raft scraping something sharp and risking puncturing a hole in it.

She held onto the ropes as she entered the water walking and guiding the boat near the rocks until the water was so deep that she could no longer touch the bottom. She allowed the natural flow of the waves to slowly guide her off to the right and away from the rocks and then she pulled herself into the raft. Once inside she immediately started to paddle in order to keep from being taken out to sea from the ebb and flow of the waves. It was a tedious, slow and backbreaking process. She had to fight against the wave from being swept too close to the hard cliff and then fight the wave to not be taken away from the island. For over an hour she inched her way around this seemingly never ending rock wall, her shoulders, back and arms aching from the strain. She was sweating and her mouth very dry again, but she couldn't stop. Wouldn't stop trying. And then she saw a much larger beach.

A renewed burst of energy propelled her forward, the adrenaline surging through her body. Nearer and nearer she came to the land with trees, towering with graceful fronds blowing in the breeze, tears of joy when she saw the large green fruit adorn the top of the palms. Coconuts! She was so thankful and excited that after taking a quick glance into the clear depths for sea creatures, she put on her sandals and then jumped into the water pulling the raft behind her. In the next moment, she reached paradise!

Summoning strength she couldn't believe she had left she managed to tug the raft onto the dry sand then fell on top of the side panting heavily. She rested only a few moments, controlling her breathing with slow deep breaths in and out to help it return to normal. Allowing herself the luxury of sipping several times from the fresh, albeit now hot water she swished it around slowly inside her mouth until that desperate parched feeling subsided.

Next came the search for the coconuts. There were several scattered on the ground below a palm close to where she beached herself. Ecstatic it was that easy, she gathered them up then went in search of anything with a sharp point so she could break through the outer shell. How she wished she had a machete! A rock with an edge or downed tree with a broken off branch would have to do. She was so thankful now that she had paid attention to one of the techniques to get through the hardness to the protected kernel in the middle. She broke off a branch from a nearby tree then dug a hole and forced it deep into the sand. Hoping it wouldn't snap in half, she rammed the

rind onto the broken pointy part of it. Luckily, it went in after numerous tries. She knew she only had to move it back and forth with some pressure. Soon the shell cracked enough that she could pull it apart and nestled inside the straw like husk was the kernel of the coconut. She couldn't help but smile through her tears as she looked at the natural expression of surprise nature built into the face of the coconut.

In the backpack, she had a Swiss Army knife that had many tools tucked into its compact frame. Luckily, one was a pointy awl. She would use this to pierce the eyes and mouth. But before doing that she shook the coconut making sure it had fluid in it because unfortunately, that fluid inside is available only during particular stages of its growth. Upon hearing the telltale sloshing sound, she whispered a reverent, "Thank you, God." With head tilted back, her eyes closed; the sweet liquid trickled down her parched throat. Knowing there were many coconuts at her disposal she judiciously drank the heavenly, refreshing fluid. Her thirst fully satiated for the first time in what seemed to be a very long time. She felt the tears starting again, but now the tears were from the relief that in an instant, many hurdles had been overcome.

When the coconut was emptied of the liquid she continuously banged the shell on a rock while rotating it. Soon the shell split in half revealing the white meat stuck to the insides. She would not be hungry tonight. She tediously picked and broke pieces off the hard rind, then while eating finally took a good look at her present surroundings.

Her Island. She shook her head at the irony of it. How many times she wished she could leave her former life behind with all the hustle and bustle of everyday life, bills, rent, car issues, boyfriend problems, office politics, backstabbing co-workers and girl "friends". It was the familiar dream to win the lottery and finally escape it all and hide away on a beautiful island paradise. Although, this of course wasn't exactly how she pictured it happening. How exactly did she phrase that wish?

She spent the next couple of hours exploring. The length of this beach looked to be about a half-mile long and at the widest point maybe a fifty-foot distance from the water's edge to where the trees and other vegetation grew. There was a gentle curve to the shoreline, a horseshoe shape that gave the appearance of an inlet. The sand was softer here, fine grain. The wind still blew, but it was a gentle breeze so she figured she found the wind shadow, aka leeward, side of the island. The water crested with white cap waves some distance out so she assumed coral beds and perhaps sand bars were there.

Paddling in she had noted that the water was crystal clear here enabling her to see the bottom of the ocean, which was some twenty feet down at least. It stayed clear all the way to the shore with nothing but sand at

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the bottom. Well, except for a couple of stingrays, easily identified due to their dark colors not camouflaging them at all. It was startling although not unexpected, just a menacing reminder that the water was home to countless creatures. Some were predator, some prey, but all hungry with their own unique defensive and offensive survival techniques.

She ventured about one hundred yards into the tree line excitedly counting ten fruit bearing palms and four banana trees. She squealed with delight as she jumped up and down clapping her hands like a little girl.

“I am not going to starve! Oh, thank you God, thank you!”

However, the exhilaration she felt from this find was short-lived as she realized the delectable fruit was growing out of her reach. She frantically looked around for something to stand on. There was a lot of vine undergrowth and large leafed plants forcing her to impatiently pick her way slowly back towards the beach. Finding nothing of use in the immediate area she went over to the base of the cliff thinking one of the rocks would give her the extra inches of height she needed. The larger sizes were unmovable, much too heavy. She couldn't budge them an inch. She was able to carry a medium sized one, but only about twenty feet before she dropped it with a thud. It narrowly missed landing on her right foot by inches.

“That would have sucked,” she mused while opting for rolling it over. Easier said than done considering there was no path of least resistance to that tree.

Thinking of that it became horrifyingly apparent that she really was alone out here. There didn't appear to be any human activity: no litter (finally a good thing), not a single charred piece of wood or fire ring essential for warmth or cooking, no machete cleared trails to the food trees.

The thought of being utterly alone set in motion the thoughts and feelings to trigger another panic attack, but she refused to let that control her and instead focused and harnessed that adrenaline fed energy on rolling that rock towards the tree.

Standing on it she was barely able to touch the fruit, much less pull the bunch off. Attached tightly to the tree, this tough stem was nature's way of protecting the trees during the ferocious winds and rain when it stormed. She would need a knife or machete, the latter she didn't have. She recalled the islanders always carried machetes when they entered the jungle areas and used it to lob off many varieties of fruits. She handpicked two of the not quite yellow bananas and left the rest to continue maturing.

Although late in the day it was still very warm. She sat in the shade of a large palm, leaning against the thick trunk for support. The sand was cool here and she sank her toes into its softness. She peeled the fruit and one bite

confirmed it was under ripe. The slight bitterness caused her lips to pucker, but it was still edible and she was grateful.

After eating dinner, she decided to rinse off the sand and grime that mixed with sweat and ran in dirty brown rivulets down her skin. She stripped down to her bikini and dipped her chipped pink lacquered toes into the ocean. It was soothing bath water warm. She put her sandals back on to keep her feet protected just in case she stepped on and startled a sea creature.

She waded in to waist deep splashing the water about her shoulders then plunged under. Oh, it felt so good! At a depth of only three or four feet the hot sun easily penetrated the clear water keeping the temperature at a consistent 85 degrees. She took a deep breath and then floated on her back, the water covering her ears muting the sounds of the wind and waves and birds. She imagined this was what it must feel like in the womb. The sun was warm on her face. She moved her arms and legs slowly back and forth and fluttered her hands keeping herself afloat. The water therapeutic on her aching muscles she actually felt herself relaxing in those few minutes. That is until she righted herself in the water and looked towards the island. It was idyllic, a paradise in all definition of the word, yet she was alone, without modern conveniences. How would she manage?

Letting herself air dry she walked the length of the beach. She was quiet, yet the paranoid thoughts and questions emerged and began swirling into a frantic frenzy within her head. What would she do with her days? How could she see into the dark nights? Was there enough food on the island to sustain her indefinitely? Could she catch fish or kill a bird or animal if she had to? Was there fresh water anywhere? How could she keep a fire going once the matches were used up? What if it storms? Could she build a sturdy shelter? What if she got sick or injured? What if she forgot how to talk? Will she go crazy? She realized her greatest asset would be another human being. And not just for practical reasons of physical strength and safety in numbers, but also for the camaraderie, bounce ideas off, to laugh with and find comfort in. The stretch of years ahead indeed looked hopelessly bleak.

She walked back to where the raft and backpack were. Not knowing how far the water rose during high tide she pulled the raft closer to the vegetative area and secured it to the trunk of a palm tree with a rope from its side.

She needed fire for protection from any animals that had yet to make their presence known. She carried and rolled twelve rocks to an area in the sand where she had dug a small hole then ringed the hole with the rocks creating a fire pit. Next, she gathered up several armfuls of branches in varying sizes, then small twigs and dried leaves. She stocked her piles high

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and a safe distance from any flying embers. Building the base, the dry husk from the coconut was an excellent starter. Then over that she lightly piled the leaves and small twigs. Cupping the match as she lit it so the wind wouldn't blow it out, she held it to the husk as it brightly flamed. Thankfully, the dry kindling lit quickly. The small branches were next and then she carefully placed some of the thicker, medium sized ones in an upright teepee fashion, which allowed the necessary oxygen to flow through. Once it got going she placed a large branch off to the side. She would add the thick logs one at a time throughout the night in order to prevent it from going out. She needed to conserve the remaining matches. She sighed. It would be many a restless night if she had to continuously tend the fire.

Dejected, she looked about her "camp". It would have to do for now. Tomorrow she would work on building a lean-to or something for protection from the elements. Not much more could be done this late in the day. Sitting on a rock that had a flat surface, simply wishing it had a backrest, she looked out at the horizon noting how close the sun was to it. The sky was already changing from blue to many colors. She watched for the next half hour as the sun slowly moved closer to touch the horizon. The vibrant yellows mixing to oranges and then the sun disappeared over the line until all that was left was the darkening of the sky. It was beautiful, but the dark thoughts blocked her from appreciating it at all. The dark sky brought a chill in the air suddenly causing her to shiver.

She climbed into the raft leaving the zipper down enabling her to look at the fire and was soon transfixed by its dancing flames. If only she had someone here to share in the beauty it would be perfect. Reluctantly, she got out and put another large branch on then slowly climbed back in. She pulled up on the zipper to protect against any insects and conceal her inside the cocoon of the raft. It was flimsy, but gave a small psychological boost knowing she was physically hidden, she couldn't see out and nothing could see in. But, she was still there, her scent in the air and she was alone. Covering up with the beach towel only then did she allow herself to cry again.