

## The Expression of the Emotions in Girl and Animals

Dehydration is the second worst thing about surviving a shipwreck.

When you wake up alone on a deserted island and your lips are already dry and your skin is already blooming red from the sun, water is the first thing you think about.

It is also the first thing you see: a blanket of dark blue dotted with white caps, resting under a clear sky pierced with an unforgiving sun. It laps at the edge of the beach only yards away from your rapidly drying body, beckoning you with steady waves. But this is not the water you need. When the breeze pushes a fine ocean spray against your cheeks, you taste the poison on your lips. Salt.

Dehydration is a cruel game; it motivates you to get up, but it also makes moving forward very difficult.

I won the game, but it wasn't pretty. I vomited up everything left in my stomach, the contents of my last meal on the boat: tuna fish salad, saltines, some mango, and precious fresh water. I stopped sweating. I staggered over sand and stones and bleached, dry branches, twisting my right ankle twice. Black crows—cawing hallucinations, figments of my traumatized imagination—taunted me as I considered the tall palm trees on the edge of the beach. I tripped over the coconut that would save my life. It took all my strength to beat the coconut against a hard rock until I felt the milk running down my forearm. Dehydration almost had me, but I won.

Constructing a shelter was my second trial. I propped tall rods of bamboo against a large rock and covered the ground with leaves. Rain leaked in during the first night, and a gust of wind knocked most of my little shelter onto my curled-up form during the second night. On the third day I explored the tiny island and found a shallow cave in the rocks. I moved in, covering the ground with palm fronds. I wove a large section of bamboo tightly together, and in the evenings propped it against the opening to the cave. I began keeping a fresh bundle of West Indian jasmine near my head when I slept at night, for the fragrance and the sweet nectar I could tongue from the base of each ruby flower.

\*\*\*

Before our boat sank and I found myself alone on this island, our mothers tried to teach us how to survive. They taught us things like building fires, desalinating water with plastic bottles, sharpening

spears for fishing, and making splints for broken bones. They were learning at the same time, from old books and, before leaving the mainland, anything they could find on the internet. Mama Anne showed us how the boat's engine worked, and Mama Yvette taught us how to tie different types of knots. Mama Yvette was patient with my little brother's impatience, pinching his cheeks and kissing the top of his head. But she was persistent.

"A half-dozen more times," she instructed, smiling. "The palomar knot is important. How are you going to fish without this knot? Do it again."

My little brother cried during our lesson on the merits of drinking turtle blood when a fresh water source was missing. Mama Anne said not to worry, that our chances of finding a sea turtle to drink were slim. The oceans were dying, and so were the turtles.

A few nights after our lesson on turtles, the boat sank and my mothers and little brother disappeared with it. I imagine that they, too, are dead.

★ ★ ★

It took me an entire day to coax a fire into existence. My body ached with the effort of convincing the wood dust to smolder enough to light the kindling. When I finally succeeded, I celebrated by catching and sacrificing several large crabs, knocking them out with a rock and cooking them over the flames. When I pulled their bodies apart and stuffed my mouth full of smoky white flesh, I laughed in relief.

The introduction to warmth and protein buoyed my spirits; the next morning I took stock of what I had accomplished. I had my little cave, a little fire, and a little protein. I had plenty of coconuts. I had a torn, white tee-shirt, an old sports bra, and a pair of shorts. I remembered what Mama Anne had said during one of our lessons when we were still anchored to the mainland: clothing becomes a tool. I took all my clothes off. Much of it would eventually become fishing line. I tore a scrap from the tee-shirt and it became a wrap for my head, shielding it from the sun, and pushing my bushy dark curls out of my face.

I walked, naked, to the beach, my feet leaving watery prints on the wet sand. I considered the dark blue ocean before me, my eyes squinting in the sunlight. The waves rolled onto the shore and the cool water curled around my calves. I thought about our boat, and my

family, and whether this water was carrying a part of their remains with it. It was difficult to believe that only months before, I had curled up in the small galley, squished on a bench with my mothers and my brother while we watched a movie on a laptop computer. We ate popcorn and drank iced tea, and we smelled like sunblock and shampoo and laundry detergent. We all sniffled and grew silent when Tom Hanks lost Wilson in the waves.

★ ★ ★

When I first arrived on the island, sunburned and thirsty and lost, I had the privilege of panic and adrenaline to keep me distracted from thoughts of my family. Once I had sustenance, I busied myself learning how to catch small fish and smoke them over the fire. I woke up one morning from a nightmare, and to chase away the sound of my brother's voice I spent the day studying the flora of the island, rubbing leaves and berries and seeds against the back of my hands to check for poison or allergies. One particularly difficult morning I woke up clutching my chest, still hearing Mama Anne's voice screaming instructions as our boat swung wildly in a storm. I spent that day in a reckless manner, hunting and killing a large snake and awarding myself with my most impressive dinner yet.

But several weeks after my arrival, I awoke with dried fish and seaweed waiting for me to eat, and hot coals still smoldering in the fire pit, and a hollowed out coconut shell filled with fresh water I discovered flowing from a small stream on the other side of the island. I awoke with no plans, no huge crisis to handle, no puzzle to solve. And I awoke with my cheeks still wet with tears from nightmares that had stalked in my sleep.

I pushed aside the bamboo entrance to my little cave and sat up. And understood:

Loneliness is the very worst thing about surviving a shipwreck.

★ ★ ★

Then Charles showed up.

He was waiting for me underneath a red mangrove tree on my way back from collecting palo santo branches. I had scrubbed away my tears and decided to burn the fragrant branches in some sort of ritualistic fashion. My family had never been religious, but we had always been grateful. If I could not forget my family, and all our loved

ones trapped on the collapsing mainlands, I would remember them. Properly. With a handful of palo santo and prayers as makeshift as my fishing net.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a dark, hulking mass ahead of me, and I stopped in my tracks. He appeared old—very old—his long neck wrinkled and dusty, his saddleback dented and scratched. His knees were ashy and scuffed and scarred, but he easily lifted his enormous weight onto all four legs.

“You,” I said to the tortoise.

It was the first word I had spoken aloud in weeks, and the sound of my own voice startled me. The tortoise did not flinch. He remained standing, studying me curiously. I might have grown self-conscious under his ancient gaze, but instead I was filled with relief.

I held up my bundle of palo santo branches. “I’m going to burn these,” I explained. “I like the way they smell. And I’m going to pray.”

The tortoise continued to stare at me.

“You’re welcome to join me,” I continued. “But I’ll probably walk faster than you.”

I did walk faster than him. I returned to my cave and burned the branches in the fire pit and thought about my family and whispered things into the fragrant smoke. I chewed on dry fish and hugged my knees and watched the flames, allowing myself to sink into despair. The heavy rattle of my breath rose over the sound of the waves and the crackling fire, and I dug my dirty nails into my thighs. All of this could have been prevented, I thought, if only my body had obediently followed my mothers under the waves. But obedience in my family ultimately meant survival, not loyalty, and I had been the most obedient. The misery threatened to wrench my ribs apart, but the sound of heavy, shuffling feet hauled me up from my spiraling gloom.

The tortoise emerged from a thicket of daisy trees. He approached slowly, his long neck swinging back and forth, taking in my little camp. He stopped and lowered his great bulk a few feet away from the fire. We considered each other through the flames.

“I think your name is Charles,” I said.

★ ★ ★

I went to sleep that night trying not to feel too hopeful that Charles would still be there when I awoke the next morning. He was there. I found him sleeping next to the fire pit. When I stirred, he stirred. Together, we set out to find and devour guava. Breaking our

fast with fruit became our daily morning ritual.

“You walk too slowly,” I said to him once.

Charles trudged a few feet behind me. Sometimes he would pause to yank up vegetation that I could not or would not eat, and I would have to wait for him to swallow and decide it was time to continue walking.

“Walking slowly does have some benefits,” I admitted. “I trip over things less often, that’s for sure. Open wounds are no joke on a deserted island, Charles.”

The tortoise especially enjoyed fruit that grew from small, stout trees. The berries looked like crab apples, but when I rubbed the flesh against the back of my hand, my skin rose up in blistered protest. I endured a painful rash for several days.

“That’s all for you, Charles,” I said.

We liked to spend late afternoons sitting under a white mangrove tree at the edge of the beach. I spent the time hollowing out coconut shells or fixing fishing line or sharpening a rock against a large stone. Charles watched the ocean waves.

“There’s no point in looking,” I told him. “No one is out there to save us. There aren’t even commercial airlines anymore. No tankers. No navies. No search teams.” I had long decided I wouldn’t bother scratching SOS into the sand, even if I thought there was a tiny chance a god might listen.

Charles responded by stretching out his long neck. A coal-black finch who had been watching us for some time hopped forward and began to peck and groom Charles’s neck.

“Who’s this?” I asked. The finch’s name was Aldo.

★ ★ ★

I awoke one morning to find a small, green snake curled up next to me, her slim head resting on my forearm.

“What’s your name?” I asked her politely. She opened her eyes and slapped her tiny snout with a forked tongue.

“Honestly, you look like a Rachel to me,” I suggested. I took to carrying her around my neck. I noticed a drop in the insect population around my little cave after she moved in with me.

“There are too many bugs to befriend, anyway,” I said to her later, as she lunged for a long, black centipede the width of my big toe. The centipede whipped back and forth, but Rachel crushed it and swallowed it and slowly digested her meal as we sat on the beach and

watched Aldo groom Charles.

Charles continued to watch the ocean.

★ ★ ★

The weather on our little island shifted. Winter would never visit us, but we did experience cooler months and rainier days, and blankets of fog that draped everything in white and gray mist. I built large bonfires on the beach and entertained the others with half-remembered songs and facts about the mainlands.

“There are zoos on the mainlands,” I said. “Or there were zoos. They could be gone, now. Everything was bad at home.” I was slowly shaving coconut meat from its shell with a thin rock and letting the small bites melt in my mouth. A large osprey named Nicola rested next to me, ignoring the smoked fish sitting at his feet. My humble offering did not interest him—he would take flight later and bring back his own meal fresh from the ocean.

“My mothers inherited the boat from an old friend who was too sick to use it anymore,” I continued. “They sold or dumped all our stuff and loaded us onto the boat. Everyone was desperate to move inland, but my mothers went the opposite direction.”

On the other side of the bonfire, a green peafowl folded and unfolded his brilliant tailfeathers excitedly.

“Exactly, Chico,” I said, nodding. “We ended up sailing right into a storm.”

A particularly large wave rolled onto the beach, carrying with it a marine iguana named Wangari. She glided gracefully from the water to the sand, carrying in her strong jaws a silvery fish. Nicola shook his wings and flew over to her, diving and taking bites of the iguana’s catch. He wasn’t too proud to steal freshly captured fish from between a friend’s teeth.

Charles, as always, stared resolutely over the waves, keeping an eye on the great, blue expanse fading softly into the afternoon fog.

“What are you waiting for, Charles?” I asked. Charles ignored the sound of my voice. He kept watching the water. Something deep rumbled in the distance, and I knew it would be cramped quarters in the cave that evening when the thunderstorm arrived.

“That sounds ominous,” I said.

★ ★ ★

I was startled awake by a loud hiss. I opened my eyes to find

Charles's wrinkled face hovering inches above mine. My limbs were covered by slumbering reptiles and birds. Rachel stirred awake when she felt my breathing quicken, lifting her head from her neat, green coil on my chest.

"What is it?" I asked.

I followed Charles from our cave to the beach. He moved more quickly than usual, his legs carrying him as fast as they could. The gray light, shifting and brightening slowly in the air, made every mangrove branch and daisy trunk and palm frond appear superimposed over the slate sky above our heads. My eyes ached, but I rubbed them and followed the tortoise over the sand.

Charles headed towards the bonfire pit. Red coals glowed through white ash. He passed the pit and stopped a few feet from the waves. He hissed again, his neck reaching out towards the water, black in the dull dawn light.

When I saw it, my stomach curled up into a tight knot. My chest felt like it was expanding, making room for my heart, which threatened to explode. A boat hung suspended on the horizon, floating like a ghost between the dark ocean and the dark western sky.

For a wild moment it was my boat. It was my boat, and Mama Anne and Mama Yvette and my little brother were on it, Mama Anne at the helm and my little brother still asleep in his sleeping bag on the bench in the galley. Mama Yvette would be holding a pair of binoculars, her long braids dancing in the ocean breeze. There would be coffee brewed in an old French press, and peanut butter and bread and tinny words of faraway people pushing through our small radio. There would be books—so many books for a little boat like ours—and clean clothes, a pillow for my head, Mama Yvette's soft arms, a bar of chocolate.

But it was not my boat. Charles hissed.

I looked down at him, and then back at the boat. I thought about the ease with which I could now build a fire. I could build several fires, line them up on the beach, each one larger than the last. I could gather up the others, loop Rachel around my neck and lead Nicola and Chico and Aldo to the water, where they would wait perched on my shoulders, holding orchids in their beaks. We could burn our way off the island, beckoning the boat to us with a brilliant conflagration.

Charles hissed again and looked up at me. He shook his head and parted his wrinkled lips.

"No," he said. He was right.

I scattered the coals in the bonfire pit, covering the hot ash and leftover branches with dry sand. We sat and watched the horizon uneasily, waiting to see if the vessel would approach. I did not feel relief until hours after the boat disappeared over the horizon.

“This is our home,” Charles said, reading my mind.

★ ★ ★

We recently had another unexpected arrival. This time I made the discovery during a leisurely walk along the beach. My only companion that afternoon was Wangari, the graceful marine iguana, who slid effortlessly in and out of the ocean, her long, thick tail whipping behind her like a lasso. Something smelled strange to her. She was excited.

I watched her glide up and down the beach and hummed to myself. An old tune, something I couldn't quite place.

I froze when I spotted the body. It was a small figure in the distance, washed onto the shore, soft and brown. This is what the marine iguana had been sensing. Wangari stopped in the waves. Then she turned back around and swam away, nervous.

I approached the figure slowly. I could not tell whether it was alive until I kneeled next to it. Waves pushed up between my legs and around my waist as I placed my hands on the figure's chest. The chest rose and fell underneath my palms. She was breathing.

“I thought you had all died,” I said, remembering my family and our lessons on the boat. These memories already felt timeworn and yellowed, but the sight of the soft face below me rekindled the image of an afternoon not so long past, when my mothers had lectured solemnly about the dying planet and everything our destruction was taking with it.

The figure stirred; she opened her mouth and gave a weak cough. Her eyes opened, chocolate pools, tired but gleaming with life. She looked up at me and sighed.

“I'm alive,” the fur seal said.

“Welcome home,” I replied.