

THE
ISLANDS

IAN SAUNDERS

Friday

1.

When she woke the sun was already hot on her skin. She could feel her hair, heavy and matted with salt and sand. Everywhere sand. Nothing else, just the white sand that she lay on, that caked her body. Then, the sound of birds, of surf. Nothing made sense. She pushed herself up: a beach, as empty as she was. The low waves coming in, one by one, running up over a stretch of stone and then across a wide strip of sand to just a few yards short of where she had slept, and then running back again, to drain into the endless expanse of blue-grey ocean, stretching as far as she could see.

‘Boatswain!’

‘Here, master: what cheer?’

She stared blankly, trying to fit it together: the sea, the rocks and sand, blindingly white in the sunlight, and only herself, alone on it. Exhausted, barely able to think. Or remember.

‘Yet again! What do you here? Shall we give o’er, and drown? Have you a mind to sink?’

To sink? Was that it? There had been a boat, they had been on a boat. Sailing out there, somewhere. And now she was here, on the rough white sand, between the foaming surf and the line of low scrub that rose up behind her.

‘We split, we split!’ – ‘Farewell!’ – ‘We split, we split, we split!’
‘Let’s all sink wi’ th’ King.’

She looked out across the beach, one way, then the other. Nothing, just a jumble of rocks, the sand, the birds, seaweed here and there. And bits and pieces of plastic, bottles, scraps of rope, discarded and washed up from God knows where. As exhausted as she was. And something a little larger, further along. Almost as if someone was lying there, sleeping like she had been.

‘We split! – Farewell, brother! – We split!’

Her brother, he had been on the boat. Of course he had, with the rest of them. And now, drowned? She pulled herself to her feet, sobbing as she half ran, half staggered across the sand and rough stone to where he lay. One arm stretched out above his head, just as he did every night in bed. His life jacket still on, but his pants gone. It dawned on her that her jacket was still on, too. Perhaps it had saved her, after all. She dropped to her knees, and shook him, panting, whispering his name through her tears, beseeching him.

‘Seb, wake up. Seb, it’s me, Brie. Wake up. Please, wake up.’

And he did. Frowning, half complaining, then blinking, rubbing salt from his eyes and looking back at her, confused, uncomprehending.

‘There was an accident, Seb. Our boat was hit. We had to swim, remember?’

There was a nasty scratch across his cheek, another on this forehead, but he did not seem to notice. He simply looked back at her, then out to the sea, his eyes vaguely following a bird as it lazily glided over the water. Aimless.

She stayed as she was, motionless, willing the events of the night into some kind of order. All she could think of was the moment when Johnny shouted out in terror, shouting something, and then he was gone, half their boat was gone, as if split in two, everything crashing and heaving, ripping apart, the water rushing in at them, and then

somehow grabbing Seb's hand as he threw himself towards her at the very moment the sky disappeared, and all was churning black water.

'I was dreaming,' Seb said. 'Dad and Johnny were on the boat, talking, but I couldn't really hear what they were saying. Something about the islands. They were laughing, and I felt happy, as if we would keep sailing for ever.'

He looked past her, tears now welling. Brie squeezed his hand, trying to hold back her own tears.

'We made it, Seb. We're safe now.'

'But Dad and Johnny, did they drown?' He paused, staring out to the sea, as if somehow it might answer his question. 'We're lost, aren't we?'

2.

‘We need to find out where we are,’ Brie said. ‘Look for help.’

Behind them was a mess of rock and low shrub struggling to grow in the sand. There was nothing more to be seen on the beach. Perhaps there was something further in, she thought.

So, leaving their life jackets on the sand, they clambered up through the line of scrub, the rocks painful under their bare feet. Then, they were through. Brie looked around and could have cried. Before them was a desert landscape: a more or less even stretch of rock, strewn with boulders, here and there stunted vegetation, salt grey. All stained with the white of bird excrement. And beyond, barely two hundred yards away, if that, was the ocean, stretching into the distance. To the left, more ocean; to the right, more rock, climbing a slight rise but, Brie was sure, nothing but ocean behind it. They were on an island: tiny, barren, deserted. An island of rock that was not much more than a rock itself. There was a smudge on the horizon off to their left: another island, she guessed. She looked at it for a while, trying to see in it something that might signify hope. Nothing. Too far away to be of any use, and probably just like the one they had found themselves on. Its silent double, adrift as they were. There was no help here, and there would be nothing there, either. There was nothing, nothing at all.

‘It’s a desert island,’ she said. ‘There’s nothing here for us.’

‘What will happen, then?’

She sat down on one of the first of the boulders, already warm from the morning sun. They were going to die, alone on this rock.

‘We wait, I guess.’ She attempted a smile. ‘And hope.’

In response Seb looked around, as if perhaps there was something. Brie watched him as he wandered about, unsure what exactly he was looking for. No more than she. Then he sat down near her and waited.

It seemed as if time had stopped too, she thought. There was nothing to mark it, and nothing to see: their world was this parched rock, and they were alone on it.

She stared out across the water to the other island: nothing.

Then, time started again. Seb stirred and pointed to the sky. An unspoken question, hesitant. Something high above them. She saw him strain to make sense of it, something in the distance, and followed his gaze.

‘It’s a plane,’ she said at last.

It glinted in the morning sunlight, tracking a route above them. Thirty thousand feet, she thought automatically, an ocean of space between them and anyone who might look down.

‘Do you think they can see us?’ Seb asked, young enough to be hopeful, but needing confirmation.

Brie looked at it for a few moments, then back to her brother.

‘No, they can’t see us,’ she said gently. ‘I’m sorry Seb.’

He scrunched his lips together but kept his eyes on it as it moved across the sky.

‘Probably Manila to Hong Kong,’ she added, for no particular reason. ‘Maybe Vietnam. I don’t know.’

How strange, she thought, that that other world, the one that they had been part of just one day earlier, should go on, exactly as it had before. A plane full of people sure that they would be home in an hour or two, or wherever it was that they were going. While for them, abandoned on their island rock, there was no going home: not now, perhaps ever. She watched the plane for a few moments; bit by bit it grew smaller, and then it was gone, lost in the blue.

She looked down, out across the rocks of the island feeling, if it was

possible, even more empty than before. It was a wasteland, a barren wasteland, with nothing to give. Seb was waiting for her, waiting for her to tell him the plan, but she had nothing. Like the island itself, nothing to give, nothing to say.

It was Seb who broke their long silence. Again.

‘What’s that?’ he asked, pointing. ‘Over there.’

Just for an instant she saw it, a sparkle amongst the rocks, glinting as if in delayed response to the reflected sunlight they had seen overhead. She stood up, uncertain; whatever it was had already disappeared, like the plane all those miles away. Maybe a mirage, maybe nothing at all. Probably nothing at all. But she needed to find out. So she set out, at first cautiously, then more desperately.

‘Please,’ she whispered, to herself more than Seb, who followed her, a few steps behind. ‘Let it be.’

The rocky ground was difficult to walk over in bare feet, but she was determined. Then, climbing over one last protruding outcrop, she saw it again: water. Reflecting the bright sky above. It was pooled in a series of indentations in what must have been the low point of the rocky ground, perhaps half a dozen ponds, the largest no more than a couple of yards across.

‘It’s water,’ she cried, turning to her brother. ‘We might make it, after all.’

They ran to the nearest, and then stopped, wary. It was water, but could they drink it? Seb looked up at her, waiting for a decision.

‘I’ll try some,’ she said after a moment of thought, mind made up. ‘We’ll wait a bit, and if I’m okay, you can have some too. All right?’

Seb nodded, wide-eyed.

She knelt down on the hard rock and leant forward to scoop some into the palm of her hand. It tasted chalky, or stony. A bit salty, but not like the ocean. Probably rainwater, collected as it fell onto the rocky ground and then draining down the slope to make the ponds. Like a

waterhole in the desert. She felt tears well in the corners of her eyes. It was going to be alright. They were not going to die. Not yet, anyway.

3.

Her father had acquired the yacht just a few months earlier, specifically with the idea of an ‘epic’ adventure, Hong Kong to the Philippines, just the four of them. As a way of getting to know Johnny, he had said. Back then, Brie was not sure she wanted to know Johnny, but whatever. The two men would then sail the boat back to Hong Kong, leaving the children to meet up with their mother and stay together for a few days at one of the resorts on Palawan, the long sliver of an island running north-south, and representing the western most part of the Philippines. Further out to the west from it, nothing but the waters of the South China Sea as far as the eye could see. And, of course, dotted here and there, the reefs and shoals of the Spratlys.

It had been a shock. First, there was the separation of her parents, Dad leaving their apartment and setting up in a one-bedroom place, and then the revelation that it was with someone else – Johnny. She did not know what to think of it. Literally lost without words, she told herself. Everything in their life had been so ordered, so neat, and now the reality had changed, utterly. But without meaning to she found she liked Johnny: he was funny, and made her father laugh, something she had not heard for a long time. She preferred not to think about what her father and he did in private, in their new apartment, or now for that matter, up front in the triangular double cabin; the main thing was that, to her surprise, rather than resenting Johnny for his part in the breakdown of her family, she was attracted to him. And, evidently, he to her, squeezing past her in the little kitchen below, letting his groin rub against her from behind, massaging her shoulders as he did so. She

knew she probably should be upset, she was just fifteen, after all, and even more to the point he was a man and—what was the phrase?—her father’s partner. Yet she liked the attention, and said nothing, pretending not to notice. For all that, she was glad she had to share a cabin with her brother. At first, she was offended; after all, she was a girl, and much older, he was just a ten-year-old kid. Now, though, it was a kind of protection. Even after one or two whiskeys too many Johnny would not come stumbling into their cabin in the night with Seb sleeping beside her. So, she could let him slide against her in the pocket-sized galley, lingering close behind for a few seconds, his breath on her neck, letting the bulge in his pants push against her bottom.

And while the idea for the boat trip was her father’s, as for the detour, that was all Johnny. The Spratly Islands. What had he said? ‘Right of free passage.’ Brie did not exactly know what that meant when he first said it but liked the conspiratorial air he assumed. We’ll just take a meander off route, he had said. A day, maybe a couple. And stick it to the Chinese. It’s our water as much as theirs. Nothing wrong with a little mischief.

Her father had been cautious at first.

‘But what if they don’t see it that way?’

‘The Americans and the Australians are doing it. No problems. Why not us? Anyway, I’d like to see the place.’

‘The Americans have the world’s strongest military. We have a forty-foot yacht.’

‘And a beautiful yacht it is, Alistair,’ Johnny said, flashing his smile to her father, and then to her.

* * *

It had cost a lot of money, she knew that. Over two million Hong Kong dollars. Or close to two hundred thousand pounds in real money, as

her father liked to put it, even after two decades of calling Hong Kong home. He had called it *White Jade*. ‘Good luck,’ according to Chinese tradition, he had said: that and, she gathered, a cryptic reference to the lucrative business deal that was the source of the funds that had bank-rolled the purchase. She had never quite understood what he did – something to do with creating commercial partnerships, oiling the wheels that kept the machine in motion, as he liked to put it. That particular deal had involved packaging water pumped from under the ground in Australia, and then selling it in China. She knew that much. Everyone benefitted, he had said. After all, they could not drink their own water anymore, the miracle of industrial development had seen to that, and the Australians had plenty of the stuff, as clean as God had intended. Not that he believed in God, she reflected. They were just words. The sort of thing he would say. Anyway, he had explained, nothing would happen unless there was someone prepared to roll their sleeves up and get the machine going, and that was where he came in. One step after another, and before you know it, we are in business. The happy result of which was the purchase of their designer yacht. That, plus all the extras: state of the art communications gear, a self-steering system, and four mini solar panels that ran an equally diminutive desalination set-up, crowded into the space that would have been the starboard cabin, back behind the galley. Or aft, as her father insisted on saying. As if speaking like a sailor in some old movie made it more like the real thing, she thought, amused at the subtle change the whole venture seemed to be working on him.

Their own cabin was port-side, tucked beside the steep steps that led up to the cockpit. It was tiny, with its ceiling dipping down over the foot of their bed to accommodate the cockpit above. She could sit cross-legged on the bed, alongside the rectangular window, but could only stand just inside the door, which meant they had to take turns to get dressed. Which was fine by her.

In fact, as Seb and she had discovered on the practise run her father insisted they take with him a fortnight out from the big day, the heat was stifling in their cabin during the day, even in the relatively mild weather of March. The choice was between lounging on the sofa opposite the galley, still hot but not like the stuffy cubby hole of a cabin, or upstairs, in the cockpit or on the forward deck, both of which had the advantage of the breeze, but, aside from the brief period in the middle of the day when protected by the shadow of the massive mainsail, were everywhere exposed to the sun. In April it would be bearing down upon them for twelve hours in every twenty-four, all but inescapable. The next day she bought the widest brim hats she could find for Seb and herself. Their Filipino helper had sewn cords on each, and reassured Brie that it suited her perfectly, which made her feel a bit better about the whole business.

Everything was, of course, planned to the last detail: that was just the kind of person her father was. The trip itself, he had said, would take about a week. Exactly four days if we maintain eight knots in a straight line between Hong Kong and Palawan, southwest of Manila. But the wind will be variable, he had elaborated, we might need to tack, so let's say six days. Plenty of food for ten, and when the sun was shining the watermaker would pump out fifteen gallons an hour, more than enough. The plan was to leave in April, a good two months ahead of the usual start to the typhoon season, but with enough weather about to give them a fairly consistent south-easterly, with just occasional light rain. They would be on a tight port tack close to the wind for most of the passage, but, or so her father has said, that was exactly what the boat liked best.

Brie had rolled her eyes at that. Please. As if the boat had a view on this. It was a thing, for God's sake. A thing made of fibreglass and plastic and metal. She was not interested in what it liked or did not like, nor how it was put together or how it worked. And she was definitely not

going to follow her father's example and call it a 'she'. She had taken fifteen years to begin to work out what being a 'she' was, and whatever that was it did not include bestowing the status on something made in a factory on the other side of the world to be sold to wealthy men who happened to have done all right on the stock market, or in insurance, or, like her father, in the business of selling bottled water.

It was only after they were well under way that it occurred to Brie that the seemingly arcane issues of wind direction and bearing actually mattered, and that by luck it had worked out well for her and Seb. With the wind coming in from the front left, the boat was on a permanent ten- to fifteen-degree tilt the other way, leaning over to starboard as it traced its port tack down across the waters of the South China Sea. Which meant that their bunk was on the high side, and since it angled into the centre of the boat that in turn meant the pillow end was slightly higher than the foot, and their window framed a picture postcard view of a gossamer of ocean mist over an endless expanse of blue sky. Back in her bedroom in Hong Kong she would have thought it neither here nor there. Floors do not slope, after all. You just need to see for yourself what happens when they do, she reflected, sitting next to the cabin window on the first night – Seb already asleep beside her – and falling into the rhythm of the moving yacht as the colour ebbed from the sky above them. Then you know. On a starboard tack everything would be reversed, their sleeping bodies uncomfortably angled down to their heads and, instead of the expanse of sky, their porthole would look down to the water rushing only inches away, and then into the blackness of the night sea.