



My son stopped speaking English today. Entirely. To me. Even to me! His father. His real father!

I was raking the runway in the hot equatorial sun. What else would I be doing on Akira's Island? My son brought me water, which was nice. Of course, it was at gunpoint, but boys will be boys. Or so I liked to tell myself.

I didn't know what to tell myself when he ordered me to take the metal cup in terse, militaristic Japanese.

My boy has stopped speaking English to his mother too, but that doesn't really count – she's learned the language of our captor and has been speaking to our son in the imperial tongue for some time. I was the hold out. His last link to the land from which he came. I refused to learn for just that reason – our son. My son.

Akira's son...

My God.

This day has officially become the worst of our journey. And I thought my life had bottomed out when we sailed over

that World War II sea mine and the bottom fell, or rather, was blown out from under our boat.

These kinds of things aren't supposed to happen to people on vacation. That's right – vacation!

People on pleasure cruises aren't supposed to become prisoners of war, especially of wars that ended years ago. Years? Decades ago. Decades, decades, and decades ago!

Please send help. The entire U.S. Navy if possible. His army is growing.

Hell, send the air force too. The runway is nearly complete. I know. I built it...have been building it. Over the last, good Lord, how long has it been now? One year? Two years? Four?...

It's hard to keep track anymore. Our calendar sank with our ship. And all other means to calculate how long we've been deserted here have proven hopeless: I drew lines in the sand, until it rained; I etched in the trees with my fingernails, until Akira forced me to cut them down for something worthless like Kendo swords; I used a scroll of rice paper stolen from Akira's hut, until I was caught, had my rations cut, and was forced to eat the scroll, small rope ties and all. Either way, the guilt of losing track of time subsided long ago. Lord knows Akira – sensei to my son – lost track of the year years ago.

I now track the date and passage of time through my son's height.

He's growing fast now.

So is Akira's Army.

My access to bottles on this island, however, has grown increasingly scarce. My entire stash, in fact, lost in the middle of the night. By a rogue wave? An imperial security sweep? A secretive visit from the island's hermit? Who could say? All I could assume, as now must you, is that this SOS may be one

of, if not, my last. And yes, that's right – I said hermit; Akira and my wife aren't the only crazy people on this island.

Our last known coordinates were 10-ish-degrees latitude north, 170-or-so-degrees longitude east. But please check it both ways, as I have been known to confuse the two. We were definitely west of Hawaii (Ah, Hawaii, why couldn't our boat have sank, or been sunk, there?) and east of Japan, but somewhere within the untold millions of square nautical ocean miles that made up their former empire, if that helps.

Yes, OK, I'll admit it – my knowledge of modern seafaring navigation and the computerized instrumentation therein was at the time of attack a bit limited for the amount of our money (all) spent on that boat. Boat? – Yacht! Now sunk at the bottom of the lagoon. Lost forever. Like me.

Sorry...

I know I must remain hopeful, even if somewhat delusionally, that all these bottles of distress I've sent from this un-chartered and un-armisticed island don't wind up at the bottom of the ocean. Or in a whale's stomach. Or, more disturbingly, that I am the only person stranded in the whole of the South Pacific – the only person who hasn't completely lost their mind, anyway. One thing I'm quite sure of though, is that I'm the only prisoner of war...or at least of World War II.

Nicole, my wife, the traitor, has joined the ranks of the enemy. Niki-chan as Akira calls her. Niki-chan...come on, please!

Please, indeed. The runway, as I've said, is almost completed. And my wife, I fear, will be having babies to grow Akira's Army. Every nine months, I imagine. Without protest. More troubling – without me.

Thus, my need on this island, Akira's, is running out, and therefore, I must assume, so is my time.

SOS. Yes, Save Our Souls...or at least mine.

Of sound mind and sole witness,

P.O.W. Ray Quincy

No rank. No serial number.

Date: 5 feet 4 inches. Just shy of a foot in growth since our capture.

P.S. and my son's name is Michel. Not Musashi, despite what Akira, and my wife...and now my son think...



I rolled up the note like it was holy scripture, corked and sealed the bottle as if the air preserved inside was for a living being, then with the patience I watched Akira teach to my son in learning how to fish on the other side of the island, I watched the tide drift almost imperceptibly out, an inch at a time, to its lowest point. And I lacked the patience needed to be a good father, Nicole said. Ha!

I then ran like a bat out of hell until the splash from the salt water stung my eyes, and heaved the bottle almost out of sight.

Yes, this was my side of the island. Well, it was my side of the island as much as any one person could say 'my' about anything when they themselves lived in a cage.

My cage was made of bamboo. It was right there behind me on the back of the beach.

My beach.

Ray's beach.

Why not? I knew that stretch of shore like no other. I woke up on it every morning at the crack of dawn to the smell of thirty

different species of flowers that made me sneeze and a dead fish on a bowl of rice. And I returned every evening at sunset to watch the final dying rays of the sun melt into the sea as I collapsed back into my cage next to another dead fish on a bowl of rice – the same as the one before. The same blackened eye, soy-sauced gills and fire-crisped scales; the same size (I measured them against my etched chopsticks) and of course – the same taste. Which was awful. Lord knows what species they are? Or whether they've ever been seen outside of these waters? It doesn't really matter; I've scientifically named and classified them myself – *Same Fish*. And with each one that I eat, it is like I am eating the exact same Same Fish as the one before.

It all makes it seem as if I had seen every sunrise and sunset from the beginning of time on this crescent-shaped beach that stretches eight-hundred-ninety-three paces from curved tip to curved tip at high-tide, walking along the fine line where the wet sand flattened by the ocean meets the puffy and pristine, baby white stuff behind it. If I closed my eyes, as I often did in this place, it was the kind of beach I could see getting developed into a tourist resort.

I knew a thing or two about such topics back in the day before I became a prisoner of war – of a war that no longer existed.

The only thing that might have made the beach (Ray's) not so promising for a tourist trap – other than the fact that Akira would shoot an invasion of Bermuda short-wearing vacationers dead on sight – was the fast moving tide. It wasn't quite a rip tide. Lord knows if it was, I'd have drown, mercifully, eons ago. But just look at that tide move. Look at it take my SOS bottle away.

I watched it sail and sail, and bob and bob...

And sink.

Patience...

No! I had been patient enough for a rescue that was never to come. ‘How’ was what I wanted to know? How was this even possible for someone who had had such anachronistically brutal luck? Could it have been a hairline fracture in the glass? An imperfect cork? Was glass itself no longer buoyant on Akira’s Island? It was all unfathomable for someone who led a scavenger’s existence.

That someone, for the record, happened to be me, spending my free time (about a minute a day) hopelessly sifting through driftwood and seaweed and whatever other offerings of garbage the ocean had for me. Which wasn’t much. And the thought of how long and how hard it would be for me to get my hands on another bottle, cork, and piece of paper...and then ready them for sea voyage was more than my soul could bear. Especially without a morning cup of coffee.

Coffee doesn’t grow on Akira’s Island, you see. Green tea does. I hate green tea. *Ocha*, they call it. And if you’ve never had the pleasure – *ocha* looks and tastes like dirty seawater. That is what they gave me every meal to wash down my Same Fish with.

I looked down at my dirty Docksidiers, standing in the warm, *ocha*-like seawater.

How had my life come to this, I wondered?

Actually, I knew well how my life had come to this, but no one else would if I could never get a bottle off this island that history forgot.

The tip of my sinking bottle then bobbed up for a fleeting gasp of air, like a drowning man, offering the thinnest ray of hope. And since I was the thinnest ‘Ray’ I had ever been, and otherwise had no hope – I went for it!

Jumping, kicking and splashing...if not flailing for the open seas, I could immediately see that I had made just about the

worst decision ever. Like marrying Nicole. Like sailing around the world for marriage therapy.

I was not a good swimmer, you see, and soon was taking on water into my mouth, nose, ears, you name it. Like our blown-up boat had. I guess survival swimming, along with maritime navigation, was another deep-sea skill set I took for granted on this trip. In much the same way I took for granted that World War II had ended. Silly me.

And now the sun was rising up over the island, which meant that a rifle was coming with my name on it. Yes, any moment now Akira would appear out of the bush to take me out to the runway at bayonet point to toil till the sun set. What would he do when he saw me swimming for the open sea? I knew what he'd do! But no need to frighten you.

I swam faster.

And then lost a shoe.

I might as well have lost my family.

I did lose my family. Already. Now my shoes, along with my SOS bottles and walking more or less upright, were my last links to civilization.

I turned and desperately headed back for it; the thought of what it would be like hobbling about the rest of my days with one shoe burning into my brain as the splashing salt water burnt into my eyes. Miraculously though, in this land of no miracles, the shoe stayed afloat! The worn-through leather and worn-out rubber sole now so thin that they were apparently buoyant!

Buoyed by this discovery, I turned back for the bottle, which wasn't floating. I barely got my sight on where it took its final bob, however, before I felt the sites trained on my back. It was a feeling I knew all too well: the *Arisaka* type-99 rifle. From the moment we dragged ourselves ashore after Akira sank our yacht...actually, from the moment Nicole, in her last loyal act, dragged us ashore (she was the swimmer in the family, a former

lifeguard) I have had that rifle pointed at me so many times it was like the crude bolt and lever action gun had developed laser technology. And I could now feel the hot, red glow from its beam.

Akira had never shot me before, though, despite all the countless times he fired warning shots around me. Nicole said if I'd just learned Japanese and could thus understand his orders, his relentless orders, these 'incidents' would be far fewer. But that was neither here nor there – I clearly had my reasons for retaining my native tongue (patriotism) and she hers for learning his (treachery). Case and point: the one time on this island I had actually been shot wasn't at Akira's hand. It was at Nicole's.

Actually, my finger was on the trigger, but it was her fighting to get the rifle away from me to sabotage our escape attempt that made it discharge and fire right through my calf. Nicole operated. First aid training from lifeguarding and all. Still, I limped for four-and-a-half-inches, what in non-Michel Height Standard Time might've been a year...maybe two.

How long would I limp if I got shot this time? If I didn't drown? It was only a matter of time before ancient Akira's aim left him, as had his touch with time itself. And surely, missing someone by an inch was a harder shot than simply plugging them dead?

I turned back for shore, via my shoe, which was going keel, or rather, heel up on its own death plunge. Time seemed to stand still for a moment, then in the trough of a wave my shoe went under like the Titanic, and when it did I don't think I could've been more saddened if it actually was the Titanic and I was watching my wife go down with it.

An unmistakable rustle then emanated from the jungle – the kind made by approaching army boots. My thundering heartbeat echoed their ominous steps as I dove into the green tea-like

depths. Same Fish scattered all around me. And the one that didn't, I took a chance on and bit right into.

Crusty leather. Salty and acidic. Nothing ever tasted so sweet. I shot up for air with an inverted frown wrapped around my shoe, which was clenched between my teeth. I'd call it a smile, but smiles did not exist on Akira's Island, though I must have been as close as possible to making one when I rolled up on my back like an otter and slipped my reclaimed left shoe back onto my foot. I held it up in the air, out of the water, marveled at it...

Bang!

Then there was a hole in my foot. Everything immediately grew hot, just like it was under the beating sun on the runway...where I was supposed to be, but was not, and now, as my head began to slip under the waves, never would be again.

There is something so unnatural about getting shot, I thought as the seawater swallowed me. That momentarily un-painful burn, then the blood...then, in my case – drowning in the ocean, the further burn of salt singeing into the wound, and finally there was the almost indescribable mental acknowledgement that a chunk of lead had just ripped through your flesh. It was a feeling, I imagine, many POW's knew well. I now did. Well, twice anyway.

I fought to get my head above water. Then my foot. I saw the entry and exit wound...pondered the trajectory...and when I considered how it was that the bullet didn't go straight on through my head, I almost went into shock.

As it was, it wasn't until a moment later when I looked up from my bloody foot to the promontory high above the lagoon and saw who was holding the *Arisaka* rifle that I went into shock...

Five-feet and change. Not much change. Short legs, slightly bowed. But a back as stiff and straight as an arrow. And his