

The Mostly True Diary of a Castaway

by Max Buckley, age 9¾, currently stranded (see Day 1)

Day 1

Dear Diary,

You are the only thing that survived in my backpack, so congratulations, you got promoted from “homework notebook” to “official survival log.”

Here is what happened. I was on Uncle Pete’s sailboat. There was a storm. There was a wave the size of our school. There was me, hugging a seat cushion and yelling words I’m not allowed to write down.

Then I woke up on a beach with sand in places sand should never be.

I have walked the whole island. It took forty-five minutes, and that includes the time I stopped to argue with a crab. The island has: one beach, one hill, seventeen palm trees (I counted), one small stream of actual fresh water, and zero other people.

The crab lives outside a hole near my washed-up seat cushion. He is red, angry, and holds his claws up like a tiny boxer. I have named him Clarence.

I am trying not to be scared. Uncle Pete made it to the life raft — I saw him get in. He will tell the coast guard. Someone will come.

Until then, it’s me, this diary, and Clarence.

Mostly Clarence.

Day 2

Dear Diary,

Things I learned today:

1. Coconuts do not just fall when you shake the tree. They wait until you give up and walk away, and THEN they fall. On you.
2. A coconut cannot be opened by throwing it at another coconut. Now I have two round brown enemies instead of one.
3. A coconut CAN be opened by smashing it on a pointy rock forty-one times while shouting encouragement at yourself.

The inside was worth it. Coconut water tastes like somebody described milk to a tree and the tree did its best.

For dinner I also had bananas from the trees by the stream. On a scale of one to ten, being stranded is a two, but the snacks are a seven.

Clarence watched me eat and did his boxing thing. I gave him a piece of banana. He took it into his hole without saying thank you.

Typical Clarence.

Day 3

Dear Diary,

Today I built a house. Okay — “house” is a strong word. I leaned big palm branches against a leaning tree until it made a triangle, then stuffed the gaps with more branches. It is one room, no doors, ocean view. In a magazine they would call it “cozy” and “open concept.”

Last night I slept on the sand and this morning a seagull was standing on my head like I was furniture. So the house matters.

I also started my SOS. I’m making giant letters on the beach out of white shells and dark rocks, big enough for planes to see. So far I have the S and half the O. Making letters the size of a swimming pool takes longer than you’d think.

Tonight it rained. My roof only leaked in nine places. I counted them out loud to Clarence, who stayed dry in his hole and did not care at all.

Day 4

Dear Diary,

BAD DAY. I’m writing this so future me remembers that I got through it.

This morning a wave came up extra far and washed away half my SOS. All those shells, gone. I sat down on the wet sand and cried a little bit, which I’m only telling you because you’re a diary and can’t laugh at me.

Then something poked my foot.

It was Clarence. He was doing his boxing pose at the WAVE. This tiny crab, fists up, ready to fight the entire ocean for messing up my letters.

It was the funniest thing I have ever seen and I laughed until my stomach hurt. Then I got up and started rebuilding, but smarter this time — higher up the beach, past the line of dried seaweed where the waves never reach. (That line shows how far the water goes. I figured that out myself. Uncle Pete would high-five me.)

New rule for the island: you’re allowed to cry a little bit, but then you have to get up and move your letters higher.

Day 5

Dear Diary,

FIRE. I MADE FIRE.

Not with sticks. I tried the rubbing-sticks thing for one hundred years (approximately) and got nothing except splinters and a new respect for cavemen.

Then I remembered my glasses. Sunlight + glasses + a pile of super-dry coconut fluff = a little smoking dot = a curl of smoke = FIRE. I danced around it yelling “I AM THE KING OF THE ISLAND” until I stepped on a coconut shell and had to sit down.

Fire changes everything. Tonight I’m warm. The mosquitoes hate the smoke and have gone to bother someone else. I roasted a banana on a stick and I am not exaggerating, it was better than birthday cake.

I keep a pile of green leaves next to the fire. Green leaves make white smoke, and white smoke can be seen from very far away. That’s not just a campfire anymore.

That’s a signal.

Day 6

Dear Diary,

A quiet day, so let me tell you the weird thing about being stranded: some of it is actually... nice?

Don’t get me wrong. I miss Mum. I miss my bed. I miss cheese SO much. If cheese washed up on this beach I would hug it before eating it.

But today I finished my SOS (it’s huge, it’s beautiful, the O is a little egg-shaped but planes won’t judge), and then I had nothing to do. Nothing! No school, no chores, nobody telling me to get off a screen. I floated in the shallow water and watched clouds. I found a tide pool with a starfish in it. I told Clarence the entire plot of my favorite movie and he only walked away twice.

At sunset the whole sky turned orange and pink like it was showing off.

I’m still going home the second I can, though. Cheese.

Day 7

Dear Diary,

A SHIP. THERE WAS A SHIP.

I was up the hill picking bananas when I saw it — a little white dot way out on the water. I have never run so fast in my life. I fell twice. Worth it.

I threw every green leaf I had onto the fire. White smoke went up in a huge puffy tower. I grabbed my shiny metal seat-cushion buckle and flashed it at the

ship. I jumped. I waved. I yelled things like “HELLO” and “OVER HERE” and “I HAVE BANANAS.”

The dot got smaller. Then it was gone.

They didn’t see me.

Here is what I did next, and Diary, I’m kind of proud of this: I didn’t sit down and cry (okay, five minutes). Then I made a plan. Bigger leaf pile. Buckle polished and kept in my pocket at all times. And I dragged driftwood up the hill to build a second signal fire at the very top, ready to light, because the hill can be seen from every direction.

One ship means there are ships. The next one is going to see me.

Day 8

Dear Diary,

The next one saw me.

I was eating breakfast (banana, coconut, repeat) when I heard a sound I’d almost forgotten — an engine. A boat engine. A coast guard boat, white and orange and REAL, and it was pointed AT MY ISLAND.

I lit the hill fire. I flashed the buckle. I stood next to my giant SOS waving my arms like an inflatable tube man at a car wash.

And on the front of the boat, someone was waving back just as crazy. Someone with a sunburned bald head and a orange life vest.

UNCLE PETE.

He made it to shore days ago and has been going out with the search boats every single day looking for me. When he hugged me he lifted me right off the sand and his voice went all wobbly and he said, “Max, you absolute barnacle, you’re okay,” and I said, “I made fire with my GLASSES,” and he laughed and cried at the same time, which I didn’t know grown-ups could do.

Before we left, I went to say goodbye to Clarence. He came out of his hole and put his claws up. Boxing pose. One last time.

“Yeah,” I told him. “You too, buddy.”

I left him the last piece of banana. King of the island now. He earned it.

Day 9 — Home

Dear Diary,

Last entry from your official survival log.

I slept in my own bed. Mum hugged me for roughly six hours. I have eaten cheese three times today and it's not even dinner yet.

Everyone keeps asking if it was scary, and here's my honest answer: yes. Parts of it were really scary. But I found water. I built a house. I made fire. I got knocked down by a wave and moved my letters higher. It turns out I can do a lot more stuff than I thought I could, and I never would have found out without seventeen palm trees and one grumpy crab.

Mum says I can't ever go sailing in a storm again.

That's fine.

But someday, when I'm big, I'm going back to visit a friend of mine.

He's small, he's red, and he'd fight the whole ocean for you.

THE END