

## « SUMMER GUIDE 2011

# Castaway!

In which our man voyages to a deserted Brooklyn isle, battles the elements—and loses.

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Marooned on Ruffle Bar, in Jamaica Bay, with only a survival kit and water.

(Photo: Randy Harris)

## CHAPTER ONE

### Our Hero Sets Foot in His Own Private Eden, Eager to Test His Mind, Body, and Spirit.

The idea first takes my fancy on a 747 stuck in a holding pattern over JFK. Looking down from my miserable prison in the sky, I notice what I never do on a map: islands. Little egg-shaped ones in the East River, specks of green just past the harbor's mouth; there are even some surprisingly sizable blobs right next to the airport itself. *What if*, I think to myself in a high-altitude fever dream, *the plane crashed and no one noticed?* What if I were a modern-day castaway, marooned on an island? Could I survive in the wilderness? Did I have what it took? On my favorite TV show, *Man Vs. Wild*, I've seen Bear Grylls make insect repellent on the hoof, squeeze drinking water from elephant poop, and set up a homey little camp with little more than the clothes on his back. Surely, I think, I could hold my own for a couple of days in the wilds of New York.

It's just a silly notion until I'm introduced to Duke Riley. Duke's an artist and the owner of a tattoo shop, and, I'll admit, the coolest guy I've ever met. Long before I came to know him, I'd read about him. He's the guy who, during the 2004 Republican National Convention, "liberated" Belmont Island—a scrap of rock in the East River, directly across from the U.N.—by rowing out and hoisting a 21-foot-long flag of his own design. Of course, I have to tell him about my Robinson Crusoe fantasy.

"Aw, man, that's an awesome project," he says. "I'm actually kinda jealous. You're gonna have a blast."

In his charming Massachusetts brogue, Duke walks me through the logistics. It turns out he has spent the night on most of the islands I had spotted from the plane. Mulling over my options, he suggests Ruffle Bar, a 143-acre sandbar in Jamaica Bay that had been an oyster outpost until the mid-twentieth century. The last known resident, a subsistence fisherman, left around 1944. Duke seems sure that I could live off the land, too, as fish and seafood abound in the surrounding waters. He then very kindly offers to row me to the island. Within 48 hours we are launching from Floyd Bennett Field and heading across the bay. To make it "real," I'm marooning myself with only the bare minimum: little more than the clothes on my back, a knife, a tarp, and some matches. It's all happening so fast that I don't even have time to feel unprepared. But that's the point, right?

The morning of the launch is hot and muggy, but the wind starts to pick up and cool things down as we cast off from the shore in Duke's inflatable dinghy. Broad-sided by the increasing gusts, we take the better part of an hour to get the wilting rubber boat across the choppy gunmetal waves. Unbeknownst to him, Duke is testing my heterosexuality to its very limits. He's a spry, charismatic, *Mad Max*-era Mel

Gibson doppelgänger, with seadog tattoos and a mischievous glint in his eyes. My scrawny frame and fey affect make me slightly embarrassed to be in such rugged and self-assured company. I make a conscious effort to butch up, pretending not to be bothered that I'm sitting in an inch of chilly seawater that's filled the bottom of Riley's overloaded vessel. Duke hands me an oar, and we paddle the final 150 yards canoe style, enabling me to feel at least a little useful.

True to his word, the island teems with delectables: a collection of birds' eggs; expansive beds of pearlescent, silver-blue mussels; fields of perfectly edible seaweed; and, most surprising, dozens of coconuts strewn about the shoreline. Not quite a wayward polar bear, but still, their presence leaves me perplexed. "I think it's from a Hindu festival," he says as we pull his little boat farther up the beach. "They put coconuts and other fruit in the water, and they eventually wash up over here. Looks like you'll have a lot of options for dinner."

A considerable amount of less exotic flotsam has wound up on the island. Several skiffs in varying states of disrepair, about a dozen living-room chairs, a bunch of plastic buckets, and a disgusting amount of city trash. Among it all, I find a decent metal bowl that I could use to steam mussels, half of a fishing pole, a fishing lure, and a jar of Golden Blossom honey with the lid rusted on solid.

"That honey will still be okay to eat," says Duke.

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