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Escape from Darien

Something here still casts a dark net.

ANOTHER BIG PACIFIC SWELL CAME UP FAST AND silent, moonlight flashing on its face. Hurrying east, it lifted and then dropped our sixty-foot raft with the smooth motions of an elevator. I caught my stomach and adjusted a steering plank. The glowing compass revolved slowly as the raft pointed back on course. I marveled at how quickly it responded, and in perfect measure.

But I didn't marvel for long. My mind was following the eastward-driving swell, thinking on where it would end up. I knew exactly where it would end up, but I didn't want to believe it. I knew that eight miles east the swell would rise and then curl and crash as luminescent foam on a dark, stony beach that cowered beneath thick jungle vegetation. I sensed the Darien out there, to my right, like the open jaws of a medieval Hell-Mouth.

Darien. I said it softly aloud. How many conquistadores' tales ended there? How many human disasters had that monstrous jungle hosted, like a grinning specter? How many old explorers' tales of the Darien had I read throughout my life, and had the jungle—like an enormous net—finally drawn me in?

I took a breath and told myself that none of that mattered. All that mattered now was the wind. If it gave up completely our raft would follow that swell and run aground on that beach. There would be nobody to help us. Our sailing raft, a replica of a native vessel encountered by Spaniards in 1526, was built of logs, rope, and canvas. We had no engine. Our radio took an hour to set up, and contact was intermittent. We were halfway up a 200-mile stretch of primordial jungle that for five centuries had shrugged off every bloody club and every subtle wedge of civilization.

Manila rope creaked and clicked as the raft wallowed ahead. I looked up at the mainsail, a three-story high triangle of dirty canvas glowing yellow from a kerosene lamp. The sail fluttered, barely tugging us along. If the wind died we'd have just a few hours before the swells drove us aground. I imagined six men scrambling in the dark to get clear of a heaving raft that weighed almost as much as a Sherman tank. The breakers would destroy the little bamboo deckhouse, containing our supplies and the radio. And then what?

As another swell swiftly elevated the raft I turned and looked back at the deckhouse. There was no light and I turned back to stare at the compass.

Hours later the stars winked out as the Earth rolled sunward. Dowar Medina, a fit Ecuadorian fisherman, slipped on a t-shirt as he came out of the deckhouse. He

inhaled deeply, smelling the jungle, and glanced at the scraps of vegetation floating in the water. He knew we were too close to shore, but he stood calmly and put a hand on my shoulder.

"*Todos* O.K.?" he asked. "No," I said, pointing at the barely-inflated mainsail. "We're too close to land and the wind is dying," Dowar nodded absently and stepped back inside.

He returned with John Haslett, the mastermind of the expedition. John and Dowar had sailed this route three years before, on a raft that was eventually devoured by shipworms. They'd landed in Panama after thirty-five days at sea. Now it was reassuring to see them coldly assessing the conditions together. John stood with his arms folded and his legs spread wide against the swells. He sucked his teeth and said, "This is no good," punching out the words as cold as tickertape. "We've got to get offshore. If the wind gives up," he said, jabbing his thumb eastward, "we're done."

By noon all six of us were on deck, facing east. The wind had given up and the swells had driven us in. We were only three miles offshore. The entire eastern horizon was a billowing chaos of vegetation that roiled skyward, tier upon tier, like oil smoke. Here and there the greens were smudged gray by pockets of clinging mist.

Through my binoculars individual trees sharpened before swinging wildly away as the raft rolled. I looked up at the sails. They hung like great curtains. We were going in. Our charts weren't good enough to tell us where to drop our anchor. The desperate idea of letting it drag as we approached shore—in the hope of snagging rocks, seagrass, anything—rattled around my mind.

I imagined the pieces of a horrible puzzle sliding into position; the raft would run aground, spinning and heaving against a nameless, cobbled beach; we would escape with minimal gear and perhaps a quick SOS; we would be stranded in southern Darien, where F.A.R.C. guerrillas held dominion; nobody could risk a rescue attempt; we'd try to hack our way out, alone. Maybe some of us would make it.

It was an old story. Darien had a bad reputation. Since the conquistadores arrived in the early 1500s, expeditions had been swallowed up time and again. I imagined a legion of ghosts out there, rags of mist in the treetops.

Perhaps some of those mists were all that remained of a handful of Columbus's men; in 1502, on the Caribbean side of the jungle, they'd paddled up a river for wood and fresh water. They returned as arrow-pierced corpses floating downstream. Later, Balboa lost men by the score, forcing himself across the Isthmus of Panama for the first European glimpse of the Pacific. A little later, seven hundred Spaniards died in a year out there, enfeebled by disease as their colony failed. It was the same gruesome dysentery fate that withered and finally buckled a thousand Scots in their disastrous 1599 colonization effort. Even into the 1800s, Darien's appetite was sharp. In 1854 it took less than two months to reduce a disciplined American expedition crew to maggot-infested, crazed, and near-cannibalistic survivors. And the jungle produced weird tales, like prospector Thaddeus O'Shea's ravings about having shot a ten-foot ape. The jungle remained so impenetrable that a 1970's plan seriously considered "nuclear excavation." The "final solution" to this entangling forest, it was said, was to blast it with civilization's most devastating weapons. The idea

sounded less like an engineering plan than deep human frustration with Nature in the same days that men walked on the moon.

Not much has changed. In the late 1990s, the able adventurer Alvah Simon took on Darien against all advice. Clawing his way up a mere hill through grasping vegetation, he babbled into his video camera: "This has become something more than crazy, something that not anyone could call safe, or even prudent." He retreated not long after. More recently the Briton Karl Bushby successfully threaded the jungle from south to north, avoiding Colombian guerillas by disguising himself as a transient and then clinging to a log that floated him, like Gollum, down the sluggish rivers.

Part of the Darien is a Panamanian National Park now, but it's often closed, and it's never advertised as a destination. Panama doesn't have an army, and they don't confront the F.A.R.C. guerillas that wander freely across the border. A party or two make it through the Darien each year, and some researchers return year after year, without incident. But still others go in, and never come out.

As I recalled all this history, my mind crafted an image of Darien as a diabolical mirror-house; a place of quarter-truths where you might look at your watch and see time running backwards; a place where water might flow uphill and only the Cuna Indians and the F.A.R.C. could expect to survive; the former because they'd been there for thousands of years, the latter because they were insane. We couldn't survive: I was sure of it.

John broke us from the spell. "O.K.," he said calmly. We all turned to listen to him. "We're closing in on the two-mile mark. If we land here, whoever survives is

going to have to go overland on that coast, fifty miles south to the nearest settlement."

Fifty miles overland, wrestling through mangrove swamps! The buccaneer Henry Morgan tried the same thing in 1670, and within a week his crew was eating leather. I gulped as I thought of my friend, Evan Davies, who'd spent months in the Congo and years later was still taking dog heartworm pills to combat parasites. I looked at John's left leg. It was already swollen from a massive infection that had started from a little scratch. I'd always been drawn to snowy mountains, expansive glaciers or open savannah, and now I felt sick.

Nobody liked the overland trek idea, least of all John. In 1995 he narrowly avoided landing on an island that turned out to be an unstaffed prison colony, an event that understandably soured him on uncontrolled landings in strange places.

"So," John said, coolly peeling a half-rotten pineapple, "We're going to turn south and try to sail down and make a controlled landing in that last settlement." We all knew that the settlement, a simple black dot on our chart, might be abandoned, or a drug-runner's lair, or a pirate's cove, or a F.A.R.C. base. "But," John said, tossing a rind into the water with a quiet plop, "anything is better than landing here."

We set to work. Only the meagerest puffs of wind came from the southwest, but we worked the steering planks and the sails to hook a gust that wheeled us around, putting the bow south against the northward-flowing Humboldt current. We moved the sails to the landward side of the raft and worked their lines with the greatest finesse, coaxing them like horse reins. By nightfall we were still just under two miles from shore. Even

my landlubber's nose detected the wet, crawling soil, and I could hear the occasional crash of a breaker. By midnight we'd slowed our eastward drift, but we hadn't moved a mile south. Pointed south against the swift current, and shoved from the west by wind and swell, we were on the wrong side of just holding our position. We were edging in. Soon we were only a mile offshore.

In the morning we didn't need binoculars to make out the huge, twisted limbs of ancient trees, netted with enormous vines. Someone spotted a white, box-like shape on the beach. It was a small house, almost overgrown. There was no sign of life, but we doubled our watch for pirates.

Early in the voyage, Ecuadorean fishermen had warned us to stay at least thirty miles offshore, particularly off Colombia, where pirates approached their victims in boats painted like those of the Colombian Coast Guard. We checked out our only armament, a rusty double-barreled shotgun purchased in a back alley in Ecuador. Even if it worked, what good would it be against half a dozen automatic rifles? We all knew we couldn't survive an attack. *My God*, I thought, *if I ever come back here, I'm going to be armed to the teeth.*

After midnight I was on watch again. Now I could hear the soft crash of every wave on the shore. The sail hung limp. The rest of the crew slept, or pretended to sleep, saving their strength for the disaster. Scott, my watch partner, produced a bottle of red wine. At least we would go down in style.

Just as he poured a wind crept up and the mainsail fully inflated for the first time in forty-eight hours. The wine bottle clattered away underfoot as we jumped up and yelled for the crew and set to work. By dawn we

were seven miles offshore. The relief was enormous. But we still had to land safely in a friendly place.

At noon we were just five miles out from the bay and the little settlement dot on our chart. We'd successfully navigated the lumbering raft against the current, and with poor winds, to precisely where we needed to be. At two miles out we sailed through a narrow passage between enormous rocks. Soon the little harbor appeared, an ear carved neatly out of the coastline. Several vessels were anchored in the flat water and we were all out on deck for the moment of truth. Come what may, we were headed in, totally visible now, and we would meet the owners of those vessels in less than an hour. Peering through binoculars, John told us he saw a sophisticated vessel, possibly a warship. If it was F.A.R.C., we were finished. We'd be captured for ransom and probably killed even if the money was paid; that had happened to the brother of our Colombian crewmates.

Through binoculars I could see that the ship bore the insignia of the Colombian Coast Guard. I saw figures standing at the ship's railing, watching us as we came in. I couldn't tell if they wore uniforms.

When we were closer in it was clear that the vessel was armed with light cannon and heavy machine guns. We were all very quiet as we let off the sail a little and slowed our approach. A launch was lowered from the ship and motored out towards us. Again we saw the Colombian Coast Guard insignia. This was it. We could only wait; we were at their mercy.

Reprieve! It was the real Colombian armada, anchored here while on patrol for pirates. The executive officer inspected our passports and invited us to dine

with the captain that night. Laughing with disbelief at our luck, we anchored right next to the 100-foot *Simon del Benalcazar*, the greatest concentration of firepower on the entire Colombian coast. Even the F.A.R.C. would steer clear of her.

Early the next evening we paddled our inflatable dinghy towards the Darien and waded to shore, setting our feet on land for the first time in seventeen days. The jungle was silent. We explored the weedy ruins of an abandoned settlement, a cluster of leaning houses.

I was overawed by our connection with a bloody history. Over four hundred years ago Francisco Pizarro had landed exactly here, and fought a battle on this very beach. As we looked into the muddy house frames, where filthy mattresses lay abandoned in bare rooms and blackening magazines rotted like leaves, I imagined Pizarro grunting as he poked through Indian huts, looking for food or gold. In the end, despite capturing the wealth of the Aztecs and the Inca, Spain was no better off, and declined as a European power. *All that effort*, I thought, *for what?*

In the end, all that remained here was the Darien; leering, stoic, unassailable as ever. Its greenery would crawl up and engulf whatever was built here. Only a rain of hydrogen bombs could annihilate this forest. And when that happened, nobody would be left to care.

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Ecuador and West Mexico on a replica of a native balsa sailing raft—was John Haslett's second balsa raft expedition. Smith and Haslett are currently planning another attempt, documented at www.balsaraft.com. You can read Haslett's account of his expeditions in Voyage of the Manteño.