

Survival Mode

She'd been in the water for seven hours.
The lighthouse was her only hope. Almost

BY CLARE LOUIS, Oldsmar, Florida

SWIM TO MY VOICE. THE WORDS washed over me like the waves I was hopelessly fighting, salt water spraying my face. My legs were cramping from the exertion of staying afloat. But I kept moving. I had to. I was stranded in the Gulf of Mexico. What would happen if I stopped fighting the terrible current? Would I be swept out further into the gulf, my body never even found?

I was miles from shore. It was dark. I scanned the horizon, looking for a sign

that help was on the way. All I saw were the blinking red lights of a cell tower and the faint beam of a lighthouse, both miles farther than I could swim.

I bobbed up and down with the waves, kicking my legs and struggling to get a steady flow of air. I'm a nurse, so I'm no stranger to crisis situations. I'm used to do-or-die, life-or-death scenarios. It's my job to keep a level head. But I'd never been the one in danger before. Not till now. Not like this.

I'd been adrift since sunset. It had

been a wonderful day. I'd met my friend Rusty for dinner in Tampa. We had plans to go to a restaurant in town, but Rusty had an impulse. "Let's take my boat out and watch the sunset from the water first." It was a warm summer evening and the smooth, sparkling surface of Tampa Bay looked so peaceful, so tempting.

We left from the St. Petersburg marina and sailed toward the gulf under the Skyway Bridge and then stopped south of Fort De Soto Park, the last

spit of land before it's nothing but open water. We watched the clouds turn orange and pink. The faint scent of fish lingered in the air.

Our stomachs growled. The sky darkened. Time to head back to land.

"I'm going to cool off in the water first," I said. I lowered myself halfway down the ladder on the side of the boat and let my legs dangle. All at once, a swell surged up and knocked me into the bay.

"Hey!" I yelled, waving at Rusty up

above me. “I fell overboard! Throw me a line!”

Rusty tossed a rope over the side, but the current was surprisingly fast. It whisked me away from the boat.

I swam as hard as I could. Then I heard a splash. I craned my neck to see...Rusty?

“What are you doing?” I yelled, my limbs already tiring from fighting the current. “You should stay with the boat!” Too late. We were both good swimmers—I’d been a certified diver for more than 20 years—but the tide was going out. Within seconds, the boat was little more than a tiny dot in the distance.

Clare, *don’t panic*, I thought. I’d learned that panic was the deadliest factor in any emergency. But how could I be calm now? My muscles ached, it was almost dark, we were rapidly being carried out into the gulf. And nobody knew where we were.

“We have to keep our eyes on the Egmont Key lighthouse,” Rusty shouted over the waves, pointing to a white light south of us. “Once we get past it, we need to swim toward the cell tower at Fort De Soto Park.”

I LOOKED AT THE FLICKERING lights in the distance, one white, one red, both seemingly as far away as the stars beginning to twinkle in the sky above. “I don’t know if I can make it,” I gasped.

“Clare, you have to,” Rusty said. “Don’t give up.”

I wanted to berate him. Why had he



BACK ON LAND Clare was adrift for seven hours. “As a nurse I’m used to crisis situations, but this tested all my skills and faith.”

played the hero and jumped off the boat in the first place? Why hadn’t he simply stayed on board and navigated toward me? He knew better! But I couldn’t waste energy dwelling on it—I had to stay calm. Focused. My survival depended on it.

My head dipped underwater and for a moment I lost sight of Rusty. The current pulled us slowly apart. “Where are you?” I yelled. “I’m scared!”

“I’m right here, Clare. Swim to my voice.”

He sounded so far off! I couldn’t see him. His voice became fainter and fainter, till I heard nothing at all.

I jerked. Something slimy brushed against my leg. The gulf was full of tarpon at this time of year, and tarpon was one of the bull shark’s favorite prey. I tried to swim away, tried not to panic. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and storm clouds suddenly obscured the stars. *Swim to my voice*, Rusty had

said. But I had nothing to guide me now. I was alone.

Not totally alone. I took a deep breath. *God, I prayed, it’s you and me now. I’ll fight with everything I have to get back to shore, but I need you to keep me safe. I can’t do it on my own. I need to hear your voice.*

I’d never prayed like that before. My girlfriend and I had laughed at a singles meeting at church just a week earlier when the group leader asked us to share our testimony. *Testimony?* I’d balked. I was a regular churchgoer and faith was important to me, but I was the practical one in the family. If something needed to be done, I didn’t just pray about it. I made sure it got done.

Now I was desperate. I was in surviv-

al mode. The prayer had come so naturally to me, with such conviction, like an inner voice, and for the first time since I’d drifted from the boat, I felt at ease. As I moved, a piece of slippery seaweed got tangled up in my hands. *That’s the culprit*, I thought. Not a hungry shark after all.

I swam with all the energy I could muster, listening for that inner voice. But my muscles cramped, and I knew that without liquids, the cramping would only get worse. I could experience kidney failure. I looked up at the sky, a hazy moon now hanging almost directly overhead. *It must be nearly midnight.*

A flash of lightning lit the sky. All at once, the storm clouds let loose a tor-

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rent of rain. The winds picked up. Two-foot waves churned and crashed over my head. Raindrops stung my face like a hundred needles. I fought to stay afloat as the salt water flooded into my mouth.

Lord, is this the end?

My leg muscles clenched. I kicked my feet and stayed above the surface, but I couldn't hold on much longer. I'd never felt so exhausted in my life. I'd promised

What if I stopped fighting? Would God still help me? Or would I die in the silent waters of the gulf?

to keep fighting. But what if I stopped? Would God still help me? Or would I die in the silent waters of the gulf?

I didn't know what to do but let go. I had no more strength. Wherever the current took me, that's where I'd go. I felt the tide pulling me out. I stopped kicking. I bobbed up and down in the waves like a piece of driftwood.

The rain stopped. The waves went down. The water became calm. I floated on my back, just drifting, letting go. The moon was bright and full, and the brilliance of the stars enthralled me. I had never felt so peaceful.

My foot brushed against something solid. Sand! I pressed down with both feet. I'd found a sandbar. I'm only five foot two, so I had to work to stay on. But it meant land must be very near. I bobbed in the current and peered into the dark around me. Off in the distance,

I saw two faint white lights. The lights moved closer. A car's headlights!

"Help!" I screamed. I waved my arms. The lights kept moving. "Over here!" I yelled. But the lights disappeared. Had the driver even heard me? Was I just hallucinating?

Then, as if in a dream, the lights returned. They were pointed right at me. "I see you!" a man's voice called out.

"Swim to me."

"I can't!" I shouted. "I can't see anything!"

"Swim to my voice!" he shouted back.

Swim to my voice. I gathered all my strength and pushed off the sand-

bar. I was back in the open water, swimming with all I had left.

The man's arms wrapped around me. He'd walked out into the water chest-deep and pulled me to shore. He guided me to his truck and wrapped me in a blanket.

"You have no idea how lucky you are," he said. Rusty had made it to shore and called 911 a half hour earlier. The Coast Guard had sent out an alert that I was missing, and my rescuer, a park ranger asleep at home, had heard the call on his radio and started looking for me. It was 3:15 A.M.—I'd been in the bay almost seven hours, an amount of time verging on unsurvivable in open water.

"You really hung on, didn't you?" the ranger said. I just nodded. I couldn't explain that my survival wasn't dependent on hanging on but letting go. **G**