

Your Desert Island



by

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So ponder, if you will, this old chestnut: You are stranded on a desert island. You can pick three people to have with you. You know the deal. Choose anyone you want. Famous people, people you know, people you'd like to. Whatever you wish. Who do you choose?

It's a good question if you have to start a party conversation or get stuck at the airport next to a chatty stranger. Maybe you've got some new infatuation, some attractive someone you find yourself at last alone with in a crowded bar, and it serves as an innocuous way to nudge the topic toward something that hints at the sexual. Because that's usually the intent behind the question, no? A socially palatable game that lets people share their fantasies. What

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actor, singer, musician, supermodel, athlete, co-worker, etc., they might pick to accompany them to a place where constant coupling is a foregone conclusion (presumably as an escape from what would otherwise be an existence of soul-crushing monotony). Sometimes people think about it a little deeper and name artists, writers, journalists, politicians, etc. People with whom you could envision having a satisfying conversation (again, presumably after several weeks of squiggling on the sand, one might yearn for a break in that alternate monotony). A few really practical folks may pick scientists, engineers, doctors, farmers, craftsmen—those with skills that might actually help you survive on a sparse, tropical island. For example, a lauhala artisan adept at weaving palm frond mats could prove invaluable.

Of course, if you think about it, your answer could depend on a number of factors that might change over time. Consider your age at time of marooning. A young child would certainly choose their parents. Regardless of how they might think mom and dad overbearing killjoys at home, how else could a child imagine facing the terrors of such isolation? Strange animals and insects. Searing daytime heat and frigid oceanic nights. Horrific storms. The scarcity of food and water. Darkness. A thousand miles from any echo of civilization's ubiquitous incandescence, there is only incomprehensible darkness—night after night—the surrounding jungle so black that it seems to be literally nothingness, save for the sound of wind rustling in the leaves like the evil hiss of unseen demons. In such a place, who wouldn't cry out for the protection of a parent?

Though, fast forward a few years, to the cusp of teenhood. Start your exile then and you might well pointedly disinvite your parents. Those years, those magical, maddening years where you divorce yourself from the things of childhood, stretching toward half-formed images of adult independence with an empty, yet absorbent, mind and a lithe and indestructible body. At such an age, you want like companions. Your buds, your mates, your chums, your squad, your gang. Those first true friends with whom you discovered the joy of subversive disobedience, and experienced the bracing clarity of sharing something deep and painful with one who understood it in perfect parallel. That island is your playground. A world to own and conquer where the monsters of the night are dismissed as fantasies you've outgrown and vanquished by rowdy laughter. You and three friends. The smart one. The wild one. The comic one. And you. *Amicitia vincit omnia*. Friendship conquers all.

Ah, but that will not last. Eventually, hormones will kick in. And you'd trade the smart or the funny one for another, for someone with whom the inexplicable, undeniable spark of desire will take hold. Maybe you'd want a peer, long glimpsed shyly across a classroom. Maybe the power of pop stars and movie idols is so strong you'd have to pick some image of electrified erotica to have in the flesh. Maybe there's another image: an older, wiser, kinder person. A mentor, a protector, a tutor to usher you to a level of mutual lovemaking that you are just beginning to guess at. A substitute that can be both what a parent is and can never be. Well, according to the rules, you do get three. Why not take them all? That'll carry you through for quite a while.

Somewhere down the line, though, as the certainty (and appetites) of youth begin to fade, you'd want a singular companion. The older mentor will start to look, well, older--and the value of their tutelage, greatly diminished. (Matter of fact, by now, you can probably show them a thing or two.) And the pop star? You would have tired of them long ago. Without their personal trainers and executive assistants, they degenerate quickly into paunchy, whiny brats who demand a level of pampering simply not possible in a place where licking dew from hibiscus leaves is a necessity and katydids are a delicacy. After only a few months, the star is likely to storm off into the jungle in a huff, to live alone in the volcanic caves, only to crawl back to camp pathetically humbled two days later, now utterly subservient and unappealing. You take them in for old times' sake only.

Your attention now, romantic and emotional, turns to your peer. The one nearest you in age and pre-castaway background. A bond is formed--with or without formal promise--and shared pleasure often takes the form of simply caring for one another. A routine is established. You leave the hut at sunrise to gather okari nuts in season, return home for the midday pineapple, and nestle together at night under coconut fiber blankets reciting to one another lines from books and movies, still vividly remembered, from the otherwise fading dream that was your former lives.

Your old mentor still comes around often, but is now more like a meddlesome in-law whom you seem completely unable to please. The star is constantly sponging for food or shreds of plumeria vine clothing, which you can barely weave enough of to keep yourself decent. Your beloved peer starts demanding that you send the star away, and that you stop being so snide to your poor, old mentor. You argue. Every small slight rankles for days. The

once vast expanse of the island slowly begins to feel claustrophobic, and you find any excuse you can to sneak off beyond the clearing to chew on the little stash of hemp you told the others was gone long ago. Perhaps, while your singular companion is foraging, you rekindle a liaison with the star (always nervous to make sure the mentor-in-law doesn't spot you). Perhaps, in a dark, secret place inside you can scarcely admit to yourself exists, you start to dream about some other island. With some other trio.

Then, something happens. There is an illness, an injury, a disaster. Something, in a stroke, sweeps away all the pent up pettiness. Someone needs to be cared for, requires an around-the-sundial vigil, and you each rise to the task with a determination you thought had vanished on the day of your first post-coital nap under a gently swaying palm. Now you find yourself wishing anew for that doctor—or at least a botanist or herbalist or someone who had some idea of what all those fucking tropical plants were good for. And maybe, eventually, to your own great surprise, you might find yourself wishing for the clergy. When the time comes, when at last the time you always knew had to come, finally comes, will you have the heart to wish--however fleetingly--for a replacement? Remember, the rules allow you to pick three. When the time comes that it is just you and two, will lust or loneliness or conversation or companionship bring you to contemplate closing the circle? Maybe. But probably not.

From then on, all contact will be quieter, sadder, sweeter. There will be less words to be said, less reason to touch. All you will wish for, and grant, is the acceptance of one another's sun-baked, emaciated bodies as items no more or less remarkable than the wind-scoured tree trunks. And as the days wind down as they must, will you pause to think who will be left to pat down the last burial mound, to scratch a name in the last makeshift cross, before settling down in the sand nearby to simply wait alone. And, if you are fortunate enough not to be that one, who will you want beside you as the light fades before your eyes? At that moment, the thought of who's absence is unbearable to you?

Someday, when a single ship wanders off course and a rowboat of curious adventurers scuffs into your lagoon to find three graves and a skeleton, what thoughts or prayers might you want silently offered to your memory. And when they push off again toward their waiting freighter, what stories would you have them tell to their shipmates, their sweethearts, their children, of what they saw on the desolate, windswept beach of your desert island.

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