



The bottle

Force the weird stuff down.

Tom D. Schneider

He discovered that his teacher didn't know much about survival without high-tech backup systems. He almost died several times from bad food and exposure. But he learned and he survived.

One day, many years later, he found a glass vial on the shore, surprisingly unbroken, tangled in seaweed. It was only three or four centimetres long, with corks on both ends and green growth under the glass on one cork. The liquid inside was gold and glittered with purple speckles. On the glass was etched "DRINK ME".

He vaguely remembered his mother urging him to "swallow your nanos" while a doctor looked on. He had thrown a screaming tantrum and, to the horror of his mother, one vial had spilled on the floor. Finally his mother said "When you swallow your nanos we'll go get ice cream!" and he forced the weird stuff down.

He realized that the vial in his hand contained a child's level of power because it had two openable ends. This had been a fad to keep the kids intrigued because it gave them a 'choice'. It was not as powerful as he would have liked, but it would have to do.

He took the bottle to the stream, rinsed it off, then opened it and swallowed the contents. They tasted of sand and apricots.

He sat down and watched the stream calmly meet its dispersion into the sea. He imagined the gritty particles attaching to his throat and stomach. Other tiny machines migrated into his blood and dispersed

around his body, integrating themselves into his systems and awaiting his commands.

He decided to build a shelter again. The last one had been swept out to sea in a monsoon. So he had the machines put him into a dream-filled sleep.

He awoke with a start at sunset when the birds became silent. A green flash marked the last rays and the stars blossomed. In his hand was another vial. It was the same as the first, but new and the inscription read "INTO THE POND". The machines had answered his wish for shelter!

He carried the vial inward to the one fresh water pond on the island, opened it, and poured the swirling contents into the emerald waters. He ate some figs and lay down to watch the stars and the passing satellites.

Hot sun on his face awoke him. The pond was purple and sparkled with gold. For the first time in many years he grinned. Then he laughed, rolling on the sand until tears came to his eyes.

He knelt at the edge and inspected the pond, which was now an industrial fluid. Purple bacteriorhodopsin was absorbing sunlight and pumping hydrogen ions into nanotube fuel containers. The gold-silicon computer chips floating in the pond were under his direct mental radio control, but the pond needed time to absorb enough sunlight to do its work.

He walked down to the sea to catch some fish with his woven reed net. He built a fire, starting it with the ancient bow method, and cooked the fish. The carcinogens in the fried meal were no longer going to be a problem.

One evening a few days later he returned

to the pond. A quaint wooden cottage stood next to it; polished wood floors and furniture gleamed through the open door. There were wooden bookshelves and cotton sheets with a quilt on the bed. He sat on the bed and cried in loneliness.

I am male, he thought. Take a cell, remove the Y, duplicate the X. He lay on the bed and slept.

The next day he set about filling his house. He sculpted sand into glasses and wind chimes, he pulled silver, iron and gold from the sea to make utensils. At a whim, he downloaded books by growing paper on a tree with the words already printed on it, and filled the empty shelves.

He didn't dare make a boat. They would not welcome him back.

One morning a squall awoke him. It was raining lightly outside and he ran to the pond's edge. A beach ball sized egg had rolled out of the pond onto the shore and had cracked open. A baby tangled in goo cried inside. He cleaned the child in the purple glittering pond water and fed her milk from the dripping pods of a new plant that grew at the pond's edge.

But the child did not breathe well and died by the third day.

In his grief he sat by the sea and watched the bottlenose dolphins play, leaping in the surf. He longed to be with them. He walked into the sea and sat in the shallow water to wait. He slept in the hot sun. ■

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