

# Regeneration

Jennine Baughman

I used the white bedsheet, thinned by excessive bleach washes, to wrap Tucker to my chest, freeing my hands to balance as we thrashed in the turbulent waters. I lost my footing and hit my head, and then I woke up here with Tucker still tied to my chest.

I sat up and checked on him; he seemed content and peaceful in his bosom nap; the left side of his face glued to my chest by sweat. I absorbed the severity of my situation: the thick, heavy air, the waves tearing into a large rock just off the shore, the intensity of the sun, and the eerie placidity of the beach. I used to imagine what life would be like on a white sand beach, dreaming of the days I could spend every morning waking up to gentle waves just like this, but looking around, the endless ocean and pure wilderness didn't feel like a paradise at all. I could feel my heartbeat quicken and my thoughts were stacking atop each other, but I needed to keep composure for Tucker. He can always tell when I start to stress.

I ran my fingers through his hair, coarse with sand and salt.

I whispered to him, "Good morning, Tuckster. How are you feeling?" but he was still. I began patting his back and continued my gentle, one-sided conversation. "Wake up, Tucker, look where we are." Nothing. Panic set in then and I could no longer keep myself calm. I felt my heart knocking against my chest and the salty taste of sweat as it ran down my face. I hastily tried to untie the bed sheet, but the knot was set hard with salt. I gave up on the knot and frantically ripped the sheet from my body. One hand on Tucker, one yanking it down my legs. I was shaking him now, cradled in my arm as though he was the tiny newborn from seventeen months ago. Still not a flinch. I feared the worst. I lay him down in the sand, both afraid of how hot it would be on his callow skin and simultaneously hoping the sting would evoke a reaction. But it did not. I pressed my ear, ringing with panic, up to his chest and when it rose to meet my cheek, a sigh of relief left my lips. He wasn't dead. I calmed slightly then. I was still shaking, my focus still blurry but I could feel the colour return to my cheeks and my pulse starting to settle. As the adrenaline-fueled rush of fear passed, it made room for the horror of my current situation. I had no clue what to do from here. I was a city girl who spent four years' worth of savings on a luxury cruise to escape my confined life of tightly controlling relationships, grey cubical spaces, cramped condos, and packed subways, only to end up more imprisoned than ever.

I racked my brain for every piece of survival information I'd heard throughout my sheltered life and suddenly my head was flooded with Paula. In her belted muumuu and oversized glasses that I'd never seen on her face, only tangled in her grey hair, piled on top of her head. I had tried so hard to block out her nasally voice, piercing its way through the crepe paper cubical walls, and after eight months of hearing her replay every episode of every reality TV show. I thought I'd gotten pretty good at it, but as strings of *Survivor Man* and *Alone* played in my mind, I realized how much I absorbed. *Thank you, Paula.* I hurried to busy myself with something productive. I used my glasses to start a fire, which took way longer than Paula's replay made it seem. Once that was burning steadily, I explored to look for fresh water and anything that resembled edible food. I would have expected a tropical beach to be full of coconuts and bananas, pineapples, and guava, but I saw nothing familiar. There were things that appeared to be the fruits of plants, but nothing I'd ever seen on the shelves of the grocery store or even the exotic fruits in the buffet on the cruise ship. *Are all fruits safe to eat?* At some point, hunger got the best of me, and I did try a bite of one that resembled an oversized, prickly kiwi. It was bitter and slimy, but it was food, and I just hoped these qualities were not an indication of poison. I tucked as many as I could in my nightgown pockets for later. I found a small trickle of water, running down a jagged rock face. I dipped my fingers in to ensure it was fresh and then pressed my lips to the stone to suck up as much as I could. I didn't realize how thirsty I was until the cool water coated my tongue, teeth, and throat. I transferred some of the water from my mouth to Tucker's and made sure it ran down his throat before giving him more. I took out the prickly kiwi-like fruit and chewed it in my own mouth before delivering it to Tucker the same way as the water. I wasn't going to let us die of starvation out here. After collecting an assortment of other odd fruit, I made my way back to our fire. My instincts told me that we needed to stay in the open to watch for boats and planes, and I wanted to make sure the fire stayed lit for overnight heat and to signal anybody that might pass the island, even though my hopes for that were minimal.

There were no signs of visiting humans; not a bottle or chip bag, a piece of rope or fishing net, nothing. Even the seagulls that flew over in flocks didn't land on the beach with the expectation of gutted fish scraps, French fries, or ice cream drippings.

A few hours after resting by the fire, my stomach began to send sharp pangs burning through my abdomen. I considered everything that could have caused this; contaminated water,

strange fruits, God knows how much sea water, heat stroke, but thinking of it all only made it worse, and I heaved up everything I'd ingested and continued even after every drop of sticky, yellow bile had been emptied from my stomach. I knew how badly dehydration could set in after puking but I didn't have the strength to walk back to the water or the focus to remember exactly where it was.

For the remainder of the day, and the entirety of the one following, I did little more than try to ignore the stomach cramps. I did make it back to the water trickle once to soak my nightgown and bring it back for Tucker, but any sips I took myself came right back up before they finished hitting my stomach. I lay down in the shaded sand and let my mind wander to the life I had been so excited to escape. I thought back to the day Tucker took his first steps, shaky, but confident. His proud grin spanned from one curly ringlet of hair to the next. His fearlessness had him walking early, and his determination had him speaking short sentences a couple of months ago. He had so much attitude to get out. I wanted so badly to watch him toddle down the hall of our cozy home and hear his mishappen words do their best to get out whatever innocent thoughts he had tumbling around in his busy, little boy brain. I realized how many things I had that I didn't want to escape, that I never wanted to let go of.

As much as I hoped that Tucker would show more life again than the soft breaths that passed through his nose, I was grateful that he didn't have to experience the relentless heat and biting sand flees, or whatever cause the exhausting knotting of my stomach. It wasn't long before his peace was disturbed though. His tiny body was suddenly convulsing; thrashing more violently than the waves that I'd watched make bath toys out of fishing boats just days earlier. I put him in the sand and tried to hold him still, the instinct to restrain him stronger than the knowledge that I shouldn't. I was grasping his fragile chest as firmly as I dared. Fluids were coming from his mouth and nose, his eyes were now open, but the blue was hidden in the back of his head and only the stark whites of them showed. This episode lasted no more than a few seconds and when he relaxed, I again felt grateful that he was back in his own calm world. But something was off. His soft breathing wasn't there, and this time his chest did not rise to my ear when I pressed it to him. I spent the next hour in a daze, attempting to revive him with what little CPR knowledge I had and screaming until my throat was as chafed as my sand-scraped knees. Each minute felt like an hour and every ounce of energy I had left was channelled to him. Nothing else at this moment had any relevance. The burning in my stomach went numb, the heat didn't seem to matter and the island

around me melted into nothing more than time and space. The only thing that mattered now was Tucker, but it was too late. My efforts couldn't him back. I didn't have enough life left in me to pass to him. I shouldn't have drunk that water; I shouldn't have eaten that fruit. Maybe if I hadn't been sick, I'd have had the strength and focus to help him.

I collapsed into a depressed exhaustion. Sleep was tugging at me. I didn't want it, but it was relentless and demanding. I felt wrong escaping while Tucker lay lifeless beside me, but I had no control and forced me to obey. I told myself I'd bury Tucker the moment I awoke.

I dreamed. A mother crow was fending off ravens that were trying to eat one of her eggs which had fallen from the nest and cracked open, spilling onto the ground. Once the protective mother succeeded in forcing away the ravens, she herself feasted on her egg. I watched in wonder.

"Why would you waste your energy on defending your deceased, unborn baby, if you are going to ingest it rather than mourn it?" I asked the crow.

"Because I poured my heart, soul and energy into this egg. I produced it with my nutrients, I laid it with my energy, and I tended to it every moment until now. It will do it more justice to recycle the efforts I have put into this life and reuse them again in myself. My efforts were not to feed the ravens, they were to grow my species, so of course, I will use his death to my own benefit. His body will not go to waste, it will go to its intended use by nourishing myself, an animal of familial ties."

I awoke and retched again. A dream so sick, I must have been going mad, but my mind was instantly pulled back to Tucker. I turned to him and saw a swarm of flies that were already feasting on his body. I swatted at them, uncontrolled and angry; disgusted that they were regarding my beautiful baby boy as nothing more than flesh and decay, as food. I couldn't bare to see them heartlessly devouring him. I began wrapping him in large, green leaves, preparing him for burial, but my mind would not leave the flies. He was *mine*. I spent nine months nourishing him and growing him inside of me, giving every bit of strength I had to bring him into this world. I dedicated every moment of those first few months to him, I bathed him, fed, him, and cuddled him, even more than I did myself. I grew to love every habit of his, like the way he silently giggled for a few seconds before any sound came out, the fact that he hated his hands to be dirty but even more so hated for them to be washed, the way he slept with one hand free to knead his blanket and the other tucked under his cheek. No one loved him like I did. No one on this earth deserves him more than me. It was at that exact moment that I flashed back to my dream. I suddenly understood the crow.

I could not put him in the ground for the insects and the bacteria to feast on. I couldn't allow my efforts to go to anyone else but me. So, I fed the dwindling fire so that it burned high and hot. I gave it beautiful palm fronds and hibiscus flowers, monstera leaves and the juices of the fruits I gathered earlier. I collected any shells and pebbles from the shore that shimmered more than the others and decorated the red-hot coals with luxury, and once my body gave to the fire all the efforts it had left, I allowed the flames to die down at their own pace. I watched for hours as the orange ribbons slowly shrank and when only the glowing embers remained, I nestled Tucker's perfect body into them and watched as the flames took up again. I left him there, wrapped in burning fronds for a very long time. I did not count the hours; I did not check his status. I only waited. And when a crow appeared on the horizon and perched on the lonely rock just off the shore, I knew he was ready. I carefully unwrapped him, breaking off pieces of the charred leaf until I reached a layer of green. I unravelled his shrivelled body. He smelled as sweet and savoury as the day he was born. I cleared a patch of sand and laid him in the center, mouth, and eyes both watering. I took one of the shells I had collected for the fire and ran the sharp edge down the length of his chest, then gently spread his ribs. I reached in and I scooped out the most precious piece of him. The piece of him that I loved most, and without hesitation, took it directly from his body and put it into mine. The texture was much more pleasant than I would have thought. It tasted of all the flavours of him, bold and adventurous, sweet, and tender and lovely. I cried as I swallowed. Again, the wonderfulness of him was gone too soon. I craved more of his heart, but part of what makes something special is rarity. So, I moved on to the other parts of him: his muscles, his crispy flesh, his fatty and flavourful lips. Not a single bite of him caused my stomach to turn, and for the first time in days, I was full.

I gathered some scraps of him and headed down to the shore. I found the crow still perched on the rock, and I tossed the scraps out to her. She collected them out of the waves and flew back into the horizon. I watched as her black wings became only a speck in the sky, as the tide rose to my toes. I let Tucker feel the tickle of the soft water. He'd never played on the beach before, never waded in the waves. I laid back and closed my eyes, head in the sand, feet in the ocean, and let Tucker play.