

Late in October, the fog lifts from San Miguel Island. Despite this fact, it remains a desolate place. Only a few people make the trip every year, usually a small sampling of biologists, fisherman, and intrepid campers. Not long ago I found myself there, drawn by the mystery and the remoteness and by a strange sense of promise. I was hoping to find something, I think, or to be found.

My first sensation as the island hove into view was fear. Standing on the bow of the boat, I realized I was afraid of San Miguel. But that is no surprise. I am afraid of many things. For instance, I am afraid of getting lost in unfamiliar places. This is an odd fact because I am by nature deeply drawn to cities and countries and worlds where I have never been. I am also afraid of the dark, which is not odd, but rather amusing because I rarely turn on the lights in my house. I am afraid of the sea and yet I love to sail when the ocean breeze stretches the canvas tight in the rigging above my head. I am afraid of holidays, but that doesn't keep me from going home at Christmas.

Even the planning of my visit to the island had its own measure of trepidation. Maybe it was San Miguel's reputation for unpredictable, wild weather or maybe it was the distance it keeps from the mainland, like a kind of monstrous, slumbering recluse. Maybe it was the pictures I had seen of the island that showed a windswept wasteland, the last shred of earth before the boundless emptiness of the open Pacific. Whatever it was, my heart began to race as we approached the island.

I reached San Miguel on a Friday afternoon when the sun was high in the sky. Even in the broad, honest daylight, I could sense that we had crossed a border into a different place, a land where the gods walked among men, where the light of heaven shone with an unearthly brightness, the synapse where buried anxiety pours across the gap and invades the reality of flesh and blood.

We are pursued--all of us--by shadows. Each of us starts out running fast, trying to elude that thing, that being, which haunts our fragile moments. One friend of mine spoke from the back seat of the car as we drove along a brightly lit street – "Isolated? That's how I feel most of the time," she said. Another told me, "I wish I were someone else, someone the opposite of who I am." I once worked with someone who, when she was nervous, could barely speak two clear words in a row. Each of these people were of the normal, everyday sort. Each of these, looking closely in the dirt behind their feet, would swear they could see two sets of prints, the marks of their own feet and that of their pursuer.

A brisk wind was blowing cool and full of momentum from its long journey across the north Pacific. The island seemed to offer little shelter. There were no trees, except for a ratty-looking clump of palms growing at the edge of the long, crescent-shaped line of sand along the southern tip of the island. Most of the island was covered by grass and by a peculiar plant called the Giant Coreopsis that blooms in the spring with brightly colored yellow flowers and the rest of the year stands brown and dark with short, blunt branches that look like the arms of land mine victims. A unique species of Song Sparrow sits on the rounded stumps of these branches and sings its short, scraping melody.

If you arrive, as I did, in the early part of autumn, the island will present to you the long, sweeping lines of its profile. Under a blue sky, the water in the harbor will shine with a deep, cold blue mixed with the white of roiled sand and sea froth. And if you are like me, as you approach the island for the first time you will have mixed feelings. On one hand, there is a sense of solemn welcome, as if you have finally come to a place that has been waiting for you for generations and now you have arrived, like coming home. In contrast, there will also be a real and rather unsettling feeling of being an intruder, as if this is sacred ground and not meant for feet like yours.

Landfall is made by means of a small skiff. We made small circles in the water just outside the breaking waves, holding tight to our seats, until the moment of truth came and the outboard motor roared and the boat leapt forward on the back of a great, rolling breaker. In this situation, if you are lucky, in a few adrenaline charged seconds you will feel the shore scraping the bottom of the boat and know that you are close to safety. If things do not go so well, you will see the next wave in the set towering off your stern, pouring over the rail, drenching you and your backpack which is full of important things such as your sleeping bag, your warm clothing, your matches. I think that the island does this on purpose to some people. I think that this is how San Miguel begins sound your depths.

On my particular run for the shore, the landing was, in fact, wet and not very precise. But not long later, I stood, drenched and laughing at the close call, gathered with the other travelers on the beach above the waterline.

In the desert once, I climbed, without a rope, a nearly vertical wall of rock, to see if I could do it and to see if my grip would hold. I was nearly to the top, maybe one hundred fifty feet above the ground, before I ran out of ledges to stand on and the rock turned rotten and my heart began to pound in my ears. My hands still sweat when I think about it. But I discovered the secret place in the rock and slipped past the danger. Do you see? This is not about being crazy. This is about holding on. This is about turning to face the pursuer.

As I set up my tent behind the wind shelter the western sky was darkening and by nightfall the wind had picked up and was blowing strong and cold across the grassy plain. I spent the night chilled and barely sleeping as the roof of my tent flapped alarmingly above me. Just outside my door I could hear the breathing of the hunter and the brutish, sodden stamp of his feet on the rocky ground. But the sun did rise and the light came again after the night and I stumbled blinking into the morning. The ground outside my tent was covered with the footprints of something large and heavy. I began to suspect that something was up.

Late in the day the ranger came by the tent. "There's a storm coming in," he said in a level tone. "Do you have enough food to last?" "No," I said. He said he had some extra in reserve. "In any case, make sure you stake your tent down well tonight," he cautioned as he walked away. "It's going to get a little rough." Looking up from my dinner I could see a ripple of wind racing across the plain toward me.

Within an hour the cloud cover thickened and the night poured over the island, swallowing whole my wind-tossed tent. I lay back in my damp sleeping bag and in my mind evaluated each tent peg and strand of rope as the nylon dome bent and contorted above my head. This was where the contest was joined, where the pursuer and pursued finally met. After a long time I fell asleep dreaming of wind and rain and darkness closing over my head. Anxious about the cold and the north wind, I slept fitfully in my stony bed, but if you must face your shadow it is a good idea, at least, to try to get a little rest.

At two in the morning, I awoke with a start to the alarming sound of silence and utter stillness outside my tent. Scrambling through the door of the tent I emerged into a magical place. The night was heavy and dark in all directions, above and below. The distant lights of the mainland had disappeared. Instead of moon and stars and sea, it appeared I had entered into an in-between place. I have heard of pilots, caught with clouds filling the space between earth and sky, flying their planes straight into the ground, not even realizing until the ground rose to meet them like a wall of stone.

It was obvious that this moment had been predestined. I could only follow the path laid out in front of me. I stepped cautiously away from my tent, shaking the sleep from my bones, away from the security of the windbreak, and into the open space, walking every step of the way in the footprints of my pursuer. This was no place for fooling around; I kept my flashlight off. The

ocean air was cold and damp on my skin. I leaned back stiffly to look at the sky and realized that it was for this that I had come to San Miguel, this very moment of this very night. Above me in the velvety black darkness a space opened and remained clear for only a second, blown past me by fierce winds in the higher altitudes. But one holy second was enough to see the face of my pursuer. Orion the Hunter stood blazing in all his majesty and fearsome glory, holding high his sacred club and the gory trophy of his hunt. I caught my breath, from the cold and from the beauty, and turned to glance back at my tent.

When I looked up again, just a moment later, the gap had closed, like a curtain drawn across a window. But it was already too late--the cat was out of the bag, the hen had flown the coop, pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, now I knew the answer. I waited for half a minute longer, shivering, and laughing aloud in the sweetness of the moment. Then I crawled back through the door of my tent, feeling the warmth of the tiny dome around me, and slipped into a deep and lasting slumber.

--Peter Schrock, October 21, 2002