The passages that follow are taken from a sea journal which was later made into a book called *Survive the Savage Sea*. On June 15, 1972, the sailing ship *Lacette* was attacked by killer whales in the Pacific Ocean. The boat sank in sixty seconds. The *Lacette* was sailed by Douglas Robertson, an ex-sailor, and his family: his wife Lyn, their eighteen-year-old son Douglas, their twelve-year-old twin sons Neil and Sandy, and a young family friend, Robin. Set adrift with a rubber raft and a fiberglass dinghy, their three crew members had to set about their struggle to survive. They are without maps, compass, or instruments of any kind. They have emergency rations of food and water for only three days. Steering their course by the sun and stars, they make for the coast of Costa Rica, a thousand miles away.

The narrator is Robertson himself. He wrote his journal on bits of paper from the instruction booklet and on pieces of sail. As you read, see if you can't help wondering whether you could have survived this conflict against the savage sea.

**Jargon.** Jargon is made up of specialized words relating to a particular activity or group of people. Baseball jargon, for instance, includes words and phrases like steel, force out, and double play. This story contains jargon relating to boating and the sea. As you read, make a list of such words. The first example of jargon—*flotsam—is in the first sentence of the story.

**First Day**

I sat on the salvaged pieces of flotsam1 lying on the raft floor, our faces a pale, bilious color under the bright yellow canopy, and stared at each other, the shock of the last few minutes gradually seeping through to our consciousness. Neil, his teddy bears gone, sobbed in accompaniment to Sandy's hiccup cry, while Lyn repeated the Lord's Prayer; then, comforting them, sang the hymn "For Those in Peril on the Sea." Douglas and Robin watched at the door of the canopy to retrieve any useful pieces of debris which might float within reach and gazed with dumb longing at the distant five-gallon water container, bobbing its polystyrene lightness over further away from us in the steady trade wind. The dinghy *Edumair* wallowed, swamped, nearby with a line attached to it from the raft, and our eyes traveled over and beyond to the heaving undulations of the horizon, already searching for a rescue ship even while knowing there would not be one. Our eyes traveled fruitlessly across the limitless waste of sea and sky, then once more ranged over the scattering debris. Of the killer whales which had so recently scattered our very existence, there was no sign. Lyn's sewing basket floated close and it was brought aboard followed by a couple of empty boxes, the canvas raft cover, and a plastic cup.

I leaned across to Neil and put my arm round him. "It's all right now, son, we're safe and the whales have gone." He looked at me reproachfully. "We're not crying cos we're frightened," he sobbed, "we're crying cos Lucy's gone." Lyn gazed at me over their heads, her eyes filling with tears. "Me too," she said, and after a moment added, "I suppose we'd better find out how we stand . . . "

We cleaned a space on the floor and opened the survival kit, which was part of the raft's equipment, and was contained in a three-foot-long polyethylene cylinder; slowly we took stock:

- Vitamin fortified bread and glucose2 for ten men for two days
- Eighteen pints of water, eight flares (two parachute, six hand)
- One boiler, two large fishhooks, two small, one spinnaker and truce, and a twenty-five-pound breaking strain fishing line
- A patent knife which would not puncture the raft (or anything else for that matter), a signal mirror, torch, first aid box, two sea anchors, instruction book, bellows, and three paddles.

In addition to this there was the bag of a dozen oranges which I bought from Sandy, to which Lyn had added a one-pound tin of biscuits and a bottle containing about half a pound of glucose sweets, ten oranges, and six lemons. How long would this have to last us? As I looked around our meager stores my heart sank and it must have shown on my face for Lyn put her hand on mine; "We must get these boys to land," she said quietly. "If we do nothing else with our lives, we must get them to land!" I looked at her and nodded. "Of course, we will; we'll make it!" The answer came from my heart but my head was telling me a different story. . . .

In the next twelve weeks, the family survives on a small amount of water collected from rain showers, on the meager food supplies found on the raft, and on the few fish they catch. They battle sickness and skin boils, which develop from over-exposure to the seawater. They catch sight of one ship a few miles from the raft, but they cannot catch its attention.

**Fourthteen Day**

The beautiful starlit night shone sparkles of stars on the quiet swells of the now distant trade winds, and seemed to mock our feeble struggle for existence in the raft; to become one with the night would be so easy. We blew, and bailed the forward section continually, and when Sandy found the hole which leaked into the after section, surrounded by transparent thin fabric, I felt that this was the beginning of the end of the raft. I knew that it was unlikely that I would be able to plug this one, and yet if I left it, it would certainly split open in the next heavy sea. I made a plug and inserted it into the hole, tape ready to bind it if it held. The hole split across and water flooded into the after compartment; I rammed the plug home in disgust and stopped enough of the water to bail the compartment dry but the raft would now need constant bailing at both ends. Apart from discomfort, my only real opposition to abandoning the raft was because it would mean abandoning the shelter afforded by the canopy, so I decided to think of a way of fastening the canopy on the dinghy to give us continuing shelter from the sun if we had to abandon.

We had a sip of water for breakfast with no dried food to detract from its value, after which I crossed to the dinghy to try for a dorado. The heat of the sun's rays beat on my head like a club and my mouth, dry like lizard skin, felt full of my tongue; the slightest exertion left me breathless. I picked up the spear; the dorado were all deep down as if they knew I was looking for them. A bump at the stern of the raft attracted Sandy's attention. "Turtle," she yelled. This one was much smaller than the first, and with great care it was caught and passed through the raft—with Douglas guarding its back, and the others its claws, from damaging the fabric—to me on the dinghy where I lifted it without much breath burned and a piece of tape around the broken knife blade and made the incision into its throat. "Catch the blood," Lyn called from the raft. "It should be all right to drink a little." I held the plastic cup under the copious flow of blood, the cup filled quickly and I stuck another under as soon as it was full, then raising the full cup to my lips, tested it cautiously. It wasn't salty at all; I lifted the cup and drained it. "Good stuff!" I shouted. I felt as if I had just consumed the elixir of life.2 "Here, take this," I said, and I passed the haller full of blood, about a pint, into the raft for the others to drink. Lyn said afterward she had imagined that she would have to force it down us and the sight of me, draining the cup, my mustache dripping blood, was quite revolting. I don't know what I looked like, but it certainly tasted good, and as the others followed my example it seemed they thought so too. I passed another pint across and though some of this congealed before it could be drunk, the jelly was cut up and the released serum collected and used as a gravy with the dried turtle and fish.

I set to cutting up the turtle. It was so much refreshed, and even with the broken knife, made faster work of it than the first one, both because it was smaller, and being younger the shell was not so tough; the fact that I now knew my way around inside a turtle helped a lot too.

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1. flotsam: wreckage of a ship and its cargo.
2. dinghy: small boat carried on a larger boat, often as a lifeboat.
3. glucose: kind of sugar providing quick energy.
4. dorado: the dorado: brightly colored fish.
5. elixir: (of life): mythical substance said to allow a person to live forever.
The sky was serenely blue that afternoon and with our position worked out at 5° 00' north, 250 miles west of Espinosa, we had arrived at the official limits of the Doldrums. Was this, then, the Doldrums? Was "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" right with its "Nor any drop to drink?" We had four tons of water left, one of them half sea water, and if any of the other three contained short measure, well, there might come another turtle. I looked around the raft at the remnants of Robin and the Robertson family, water-wrinkled skin covered with salt-water boils and raw red patches of rash, lying in the bottom of the raft unmoving except to scratch occasionally, and then only halfheartedly, for the water was cooling in the heat of the day. Our bones showed clearly through our scanty flesh; we had become much thinner these last few days and our condition was deteriorating faster. The raft was killing us with its demands on our energy. Douglas looked across at me, "Do you think it'll rain tonight, Dad?" I looked at him and shrugged, looked at the sky, not a cloud, "I suppose it could," I said, "Do you think it will?" he insisted, "For heaven's sake, Douglas, I'm not a prophet," I said testily, "We'll just have to wait it out." His eyes looked hopeless at the blue of the sea from the deep cavities under his brow, how could I comfort him when he knew as well as I that it might not rain for a week and that we'd be dead by then. I said, "Fresh turtle for tea, we can suck something out of that." We could live on turtles, maybe.

We took no water that evening, only a little for the twins. We talked of the dinners we'd like to eat in the gathering twilight and I chose fresh fruit salad and ice cream; Lyn, a tin of apricots; Robin, strawberries and ice cream with milk; Douglas, the same as me; Neil, chocolate chip ice cream; Sandy, fresh fruit, ice cream, and milk—gallons of ice-cool milk. Later that night as I took the watch over from Douglas, he described in detail the dish he had dreamed up during his watch. "You take a honeydew melon," he said, "Cut the top off and take out the seeds; that's the dish. Chill it and drop a knob of ice cream in, then pile in strawberries, raspberries, pieces of apple, pear, orange, peach, and grapefruit, the sweet sort, then cherries and grapes until the melon is full; pour a lemon syrup over it and decorate it with chips of chocolate and nuts. Then," he said with a dreamy expression on his face, "you eat it!" "I'll have one too," I said, taking the bailer from his boil-covered hand. I looked at the sky: to the northeast a faint film of cirrostratus cloud dimmed the stars; "You know, I think it might rain by morning."

I could feel him relax in the darkness; his voice came slowly, "I'll be all right if it doesn't, Dad." he said.

I started to bail mechanically. We would have to abandon the raft, soon, I thought, and that meant fetching all the unnecessary stuff overboard; in the dinghy there was only room for food, water, flares, and us. We'd start to sort things out in the morning.

Fifteenth Day

I watched the cloud develop slowly and drift across the night sky, blotting out the stars one by one, and I watched the rainbow in the cross drift. I watched the fish surge out from under the raft, touched one as I tried to grab it; then, the memory of the shark strong in my mind, drew back. I bailed and bled until Lyn took over; I pointed to the thickening cloud: "Maybe we'll get something to drink out of that."

It rained at dawn, beautiful, gorgeous rain. We saved three and a half gallons and drank our fill besides; the wind, from the south, freshened a little and as the weather cleared we lay back and enjoyed the sensation of being without thirst, bailing and blowing unheeded for the moment. We talked of the ship that didn't see us, for that had happened after the last rain, and argued whether it would have seen us better if it had been night time. The twins were talking when Douglas, of watch, his voice desperate with dismay, called, "Dad, the dinghy's gone!" I was across the raft in an instant. I looked at the broken end of wire trailing in the water, the broken line beside it. The dinghy was sixty yards away, sailing still and our lives were sailing away with it. I was the fastest swimmer, no time for goodbyes, to the devil with sharks; the thoughts ran through my head as I was driving through the door, my arms flailing into a racing crawl even as I hit the water. I heard Lyn cry out but there was no time for talk. I could swim faster than the dinghy could sail, that was the point. I glanced at it as I lifted my head to breathe, the sail had collapsed as the dinghy yawed, I moved my arms faster, kicked harder, would the sharks let me, that was another point. My belly crawled as I thought of the sharks, my arms moved faster still; I glanced again, only thirty yards to go but she was sailing again, I felt no fatigue, no cramped muscles, my body felt like a machine as I thrashed my way through the sea only one thought now in mind, the dinghy or us. Then I was there; with a quick heave I flipped over the stern of the dinghy to safety, reached up and tore down the sail before my knees buckled and I lay across the thwart trembling and gasping for breath, my heart pounding like a hammer. I lifted my arm and waved to the raft, now two hundred yards away; then slowly I untied the paddle from the sail and paddled back to the raft; it took nearly half an hour. The long shapes of two sharks circled curiously twenty feet down; they must have had breakfast... 

Sixteenth Day

The rain continued all night long, and as we built the warm sea water out of the raft we were glad not to be spending this night in the dinghy at least. I went over to the dinghy twice in the night to bail out, for the rain was filling her quite quickly, and I shivered at the low temperature of the rain water.
The raft canopy offered grateful warmth when I returned, and the puddles of salt water in the bottom of the raft seemed less hostile after the chill of the dinghy. We all huddled together on top of the flotation chambers, our legs and bottoms in the water, and although we did not sleep, we rested, for the work of blowing all the tarpaulin now went around the clock, the bailer passing back and forth between the two compartments. Our sores stung as we scratched them against the raft and each other, our eyes were sparkling, our limbs permanently wrinkled and lumpy with boils. My backside was badly blistered from sunburn acquired on my turtle-dressing expeditions, which made it necessary for me to lie on my stomach all the time, a painful piece of business.

The rain continued to beat on the calm sea till midmorning, when after a few desultory bursts of sunshine, the weather closed in again and it drizzled for the rest of the day. I had decided to postpone the evacuation of the raft until the weather improved a little and I detected a feeling of relief among the others. (It wasn’t until much later that I learned that my propaganda about trim had been so effective that they were frightened to go into the dinghy at all.) We had enough problems without adding cold to them so we ate our dried turtle and fish, drinking plenty of water with it and feeling much better for it.

We had made no progress in the windless weather so I entered our noon position the same as the day before and during the afternoon we talked at length about what we should have to do when the time came to get into the dinghy, which pieces of the raft we would cut out and which pieces of essential equipment we would take, and where they would be stowed. As evening closed in the drizzle eased a little and the air became much warmer. We baled and blew in the darkness until Douglas suddenly said, "Quiet!" We listened, holding our breath. "Engine," he whispered. I could hear the faint beat of what might have been a propeller blade; it grew louder. I climbed into the dinghy with a torch and could neither see nor hear anything from there. I flashed SOS around the horizon in all directions for a couple of minutes but there was no answering light, and after a further round of flashes returned to the raft. We speculated on the possibility of its being a submarine bound for the atomic testing grounds at Tahiti where a test was short to take place, and then took it a little further and wondered what spay submarine would pick up survivors if it did, what then?

The twins talked quietly in a corner about the sort of cat they were going to have when we returned to England, where they could keep it and what they would feed it on, and how they would house train it. Neil loved furry animals and could talk for hours on the subject. Douglas was back on roast rabbit and Robin was in rhapsodies over oatmeal porridge and milk. Lyn and I thanked our destines for water; it was so good!

That night we decided to have some fish and prawn stew. Our mouths were raw with the rough surface of the bellows tube; our lungs and cheeks ached with the effort of keeping the raft inflated. Because of the sea water on the floor of the raft we tried to lie with our bodies on top of the flotation chambers, and because we lay on the flotation chambers we squeezed the air out of them more quickly. Lyn was terrified in case one of the twins should fall asleep face downward in the after compartment and drown, for we now bailed only in the forward section, and even then we could not bail quickly enough to keep it dry; the after section was flooded to a depth of three inches. I estimated that we could probably keep the raft afloat for a few days more, but the effort involved was depleting us of all bodily stamina; our limbs, almost hourly, suffered extensions of boil-infected areas, and we were pouring our lives away in this struggle to keep afloat. Our evacuation to the dinghy had to come, and soon. Death in the dinghy would come as a result of an error of judgment, a capsize perhaps, or through being swamped in heavy weather; either of these in my estimate was preferable to the deterioration of our physical and mental state, through sheer exhaustion, into submission and death.

The next day, the family is forced to move into the dinghy. They sing and tell stories to keep up their spirits. But even so, arguments and quarrels of temper clouded the strain they are under. Once, they come close to death as they battle a fierce twelve-hour thunder and lightning storm. However, after surviving thirty-seven days at sea, they feel that they will be able to survive until they reach land—which the narrator estimates is fifteen days away.

24 Conflicts

Thirty-Eighth Day

Lyn bathed the twins that afternoon and after their daily exercises and a half-hour space on the center thwart to move around a bit, they retreated under the canopy again as a heavy shower threatened. The dorado, caught in the morning, now hung in wet strips from the forestay while the drowsing turtle fasted from the stays and cross lines which had been rigged to carry the extra load of meat from two turtles. We worked a little on the thole pins, binding canvas on them to save wear on the rope, then realizing that we were neglecting the most important job of making a flotation piece, took the unused piece of sleeve and started to bind one end with fishing line. The clouds grew thicker as the afternoon advanced; it was going to be a wet night again and perhaps we would be able to fill the water sleeve. Seven gallons of water seemed like wealth beyond measure in our altered sense of values.

I chopped up some dried turtle meat for tea, and Lyn put it with a little wet fish to soak in meat juice. She spread the dry sheets for the twins under the canopy, then prepared their "little sup" as we started to talk of Dougall's Kitchen and if it should be steamed or boiled. As we parted on the delights of Gaelic coffee, my eye, looking past the sail, caught sight of something that wasn’t sea. I stopped talking and started; the others all looked at me, "A ship," I said. "There’s a ship and it’s coming toward us!" I could hardly believe it but it seemed solid enough. "Keep still now!" In the sudden surge of excitement, everyone wanted to see. "Trim her! We mustn’t capsize now!" All sank back to their places.

I felt my voice tremble as I told them that I was going to stand on the thwart and hold a flare above the sail. They trimmed the dinghy as I stood on the thwart. "Right, hand me a flare, and remember what happened to the last ship we saw?" They suddenly fell silent in memory of that terrible despondency when our signals had been unnoticed. "O God!" prayed Lyn, "please let them see us." I could see the ship quite clearly now, a Japanese tuna fisher. Her gray and white paint stood out clearly against the dark cross swell. "Like a great
white bird," Lyn said to the twins, and she would pass within about a mile of us at her nearest approach. I relayed the information as they listened excitedly, the tension of not knowing, or imminent rescue, building like a tangible, touchable, unbearable unreality around me. My eye caught the outlines of two sharks, a hundred yards to starboard. "Watch the trim," I warned. "We have two man-eating sharks waiting if we capsize!"

Then, "I'm going to light the flare now, have the torch ready in case it doesn't work."

I ripped the caps off, pulled out the striker and struck the primer. The flare smoked then sparked into life, the red glare illuminating Ednamair and the sea around us in the twilight. I could feel my index finger roasting under the heat of the flare and waved it to and fro to escape the searing heat radiating outward in the calm air; then unable to bear the heat any longer, I dropped my arm, nearly scorching Lyn's face, and threw the flare high in the air. It curved in a brilliant arc and dropped into the sea. "Hand me another, I think she's altered course!" My voice was hoarse with pain and excitement and I felt sick with apprehension that it might only be the ship cork-screwing in the swell, for she had made no signal that she had seen us. The second flare didn't work. I cursed it in frustrated anguish as the priming substance chipped off instead of lighting. "The torch!" I shouted, but it wasn't needed, she had seen us, and was coming toward us.

I flopped down on the thwart. "Our ordeal is over;" I said quietly. Lyn and the twins were crying with happiness; Douglas with tears of joy in his eyes, hugged his mother. Robin laughed and cried at the same time, slumped on the back and shouted "Wonderful! We've done it! Oh! Wonderful!" I put my arms about Lyn feeling the tears stinging my own eyes: "We'll get these boys to land after all." As we shared our happiness and watched the fishing boat close with us, death could have taken me quite easily just then, for I knew that I would never experience another such pinnacle of contentment.

### Responding to the Journal

#### Analyzing the Journal

**Identifying Facts**

1. When the Robertsons' ship sinks, they are left with a limited supply of food and other bare necessities for survival. List the items they are able to salvage from their sinking boat.
2. What does the family eat and drink to stay alive for thirty-eight days?
3. The inflatable raft is leaking, yet the family is reluctant to abandon it until the last possible moment. Why don't they want to transfer to the dinghy?
4. One way the family members keep up their spirits is by thinking and talking about some of the pleasures they will enjoy when they are back on land. What are some of these pleasures?
5. Describe how, on the thirty-eighth day of their ordeal, the family is rescued.

**Interpreting Meanings**

6. The main conflict, or struggle, in this story is the most basic conflict of all—between people and nature. Explain what animals and natural forces present dangers. Describe the physical needs and discomforts that also threaten the Robertsons.
7. Even though the odds are against them, the family wins its struggle at sea. Their survival is partly due to Mr. Robertson's exceptional personal qualities. For example, his comments to his son and his wife just after theshipwreck show cheerfulness in the face of disaster. Describe some other personal qualities Mr. Robertson displays during the struggle.

**Applying Meanings**

8. This story and "Three Skeleton Key" (page 7) involve struggles between people and nature. Did you enjoy one more than the other, or did you enjoy them equally? Did you perhaps not enjoy either one? Give several reasons for your opinion.

**Writing About the Journal**

A Creative Response

**Writing from Another Point of View.** The Robertsons' story is told by Mr. Robertson. Therefore, you don't learn much about the other characters' thoughts. Write a paragraph in which you tell what one of the other characters in the raft is thinking during the first hours after the boat was wrecked. Use the first-person pronoun I.