Tom Hanks plays the part of Chuck Noland, a very organized and time oriented and driven individual. He finds himself suddenly jerked out of the safety of his world, and thrust into a survival situation when a plane he is traveling on crashes into the ocean and he is washed ashore on a remote island. The movie starts with a FedEx truck stopping by a farm house picking up a package to be delivered overseas. The woman in the barn is listening to Elvis Presley when the truck leaves, carrying a box that has an insignia of angelic type wings on it. The package is delivered to her husband who is being unfaithful to her in Russia, and is also where Noland happens to be getting a FedEx warehouse into ship-shape. As you get to know Chuck Noland, you find out he is a big Elvis Presley fan, and though he and his girlfriend (played by Helen Hunt) seem to be deeply in love, he is often taken away due to his busy schedule. When he gives her an engagement ring in the car before his fateful plane leaves, she goes white and confesses to him that she is "terrified". He kisses her, telling her to wait until he returns...taking her gift with him which is a family heirloom pocket watch with her picture inside. He wakes up to some turbulence on the plane later, and as he is in the bathroom taking a band aid off of his thumb, the plane suddenly starts careening down to the water.

After a harrowing plane crash in the water which he is able to survive, he wakes up the next morning on a beach, finding FedEx packages washing up as well. In some of these packages, he finds means to live (for example: Ice Skates he uses as axes, video tape which he uses as rope, and a Wilson volleyball which he befriends and actually carries on conversations with to help him keep his sanity). After he finds out that he is indeed on an island, he learns how to keep track of time, gather fresh water, find food to eat, and make fire. After 4 years, he finally has all the items he needs to build a raft, and he leaves the island for good. After being discovered by a ship, he is meet again with his friends and co-workers and finds out that his girlfriend has married someone else. He is finally meeting her, and he finds his married is happy, with a daughter, a home and a new life. On impulse as he is leaving she runs out to him and after they kiss, she gets into the car with him. As he goes to shift the car into Drive, she stops him...and he realizes that he has indeed lost her, because she wants to go home. He is next seen talking to his friend in whom he explains that while he was on the island, she was there with him...and he knew that he had to keep breathing and keep hoping because he never knew what the tide would bring into the shore. And now, he has to do that again, having lost her for the 2nd time. He needs to keep breathing, keep hoping, because he does not know what the tide will bring each day.