

BOY 87

ELE FOUNTAIN

PUSHKIN CHILDREN'S

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Boat

Cold salty water stings my eyes and soaks my T-shirt. I cling to the clammy wooden edge of the boat as a huge wave swells towards me. The boat tips and I gasp as people slide against me and the air is pressed from my chest.

The sky is turning from light to dark grey; white foam tops the waves. The wind pushes relentlessly against my face, and with the next rolling wave the boat dips so low that buckets of water gush in over the side, soaking me again with freezing water. I feel it creeping above my ankles. No one cries out. Even the baby strapped to the mother beside me is quiet.

Green-grey waves make a wall around us. We rise to the top of another but there is nothing to see except spray blowing like rain in the icy wind. Europe is sprawled somewhere in front of us but I can't see land. As we slide into the trough, more water rushes over the side of the boat. It is up to my knees. My feet are numb

but I can tell that my shoes are heavy with water. I look up again and see a swirling wave bigger than the others rolling towards us in fury. The boat tips. This time we keep on tipping. The boat is full of water so it doesn't roll up on the wave—it rolls into it, and the wave crashes over us like we are on the shore, only we're in the middle of the sea. I hear screaming and then nothing as water rushes over my head.

I can't tell which way is up to sky and wind, and which way is down towards the metres of sea beneath. I open my eyes and they sting but show me nothing more than cloudy bubbling water and the legs of someone just out of reach. I kick up once, my chest burning. I kick up again, knowing that in a second I can no longer fight the desperate urge to breathe in. I kick one last time, my legs tingling. I am about to black out just as wind blasts my face; I suck in air and some spray.

Choking, I pant and gasp; the currents tug me left and right as the swell lifts me up and down. I cannot swim but instinct makes me kick my feet to stay afloat. The shoes my mother bought with three weeks' wages are so heavy I try to push them off without going under. I know I can't kick water for long. Already my thighs and arms feel tired. I see four, maybe five, other heads swirling in the waves. How can three hundred people disappear so quickly?

A yellow plastic bag washes towards me. There are clothes inside. The knot has been tied tightly so that the bag is like a floating pocket of air. I cling to it.

A boy appears next to me, bobbing up from under the waves like I did seconds before. I reach out my hand to him. He looks at me. His eyes are big and oval-shaped and he reminds me of Bini. My best friend at home. I reach my hand out to him again and he tries to grab it but instead sinks beneath the waves. He doesn't come back up.

Who will come to save me? Who knows where I am apart from the others tossing and bobbing in the waves like me? What would Bini do now?

BEFORE

Best Friend

“The square root can also be written as a fractional exponent.”

“Yes, Bini. Next time raise your hand first.”

I am pretty smart, but Bini is smarter. I can't tell if our maths teacher is proud of us or just irritated by us. Maybe both. We know as much as he does now. Ato Hayat keeps a university textbook in his drawer and copies homework questions for us from it. It came with a sheet of answers, and it's fine if we get the solutions right, but if we get them wrong he snaps at us that knowledge is a gift and we should study harder. He doesn't understand the questions or the answers.

I'm going to be an engineer. Bini has wanted to be a doctor for as long as I can remember. When we were really small he would make me lie on the floor so that he could listen to my heart beating, or my liver—he wasn't quite sure back then. As we got older, he started asking random questions, like “Where does sweat come from?”

Or “Why does your heart keep on beating and not just stop when you go to sleep?” I didn’t know the answers and I didn’t really care.

He would say, “Just think of all those things your body does which you don’t understand, but *you* want to go and learn about how to build a bridge.” Usually I’m not fast enough to think of a clever reply until it’s too late to sound clever any more. Saying “Yeah, but how would a doctor reach a patient if there was no bridge to drive over?” seems a bit lame twenty-four hours later. Still, we are best friends. Maybe because we like to argue with each other.