



**The boat is her last hope of escape. But
they're heading for a storm.**

THERE ARE NO WARS THERE

Sara comes out of her dream with a jolt, as if she has just broken the surface of deep water. She can feel Adil's reassuring weight against her chest. She keeps her eyes closed and listens; people are talking, their voices soft alongside the sound of the waves lapping against the side of the boat.

'...when you were in the garden you could hear the children playing in the school yard. Such a nice sound, laughter, and screaming – but happy screaming, you know, not like...'

'I had planted so much this year: tomatoes, onions, carrots, peppers...'

A third voice joins in, barely above a whisper. 'I wonder if our gardens are even there anymore.'

Sara keeps her eyes closed, trying to imagine that she has just fallen asleep on a chair at home; that any moment now she must get up and head to the kitchen to make dinner. She might even need to walk the dog and go to the market to get a few things. But however hard she tries she cannot maintain the conceit. She knows full well that the chair, the kitchen, the market are gone; the dog, too, caught by a bit of shrapnel. They hadn't even had time to bury him. Her home is now a burnt-out shell, the streets ruptured and blasted beyond all recognition.

Like every morning now she wakes to a feeling of crushing despair. The *things she cannot bear to think about* crowd her thoughts. What has happened to her husband? Did he make it to the beach in time to get on a boat? She heard the boss-man say that they only had enough water for one more day, what if they run out? What if Adil doesn't make it? And worse, what if *she* doesn't make it? Who will look after him then? She decides she must pick someone in the boat, and ask them to take Adil if she dies.

She opens her eyes a fraction and looks around at the other people on the boat. There are fifteen of them as well as her and Adil. Quiet eruptions of conversation start up but as quickly recede again. Everyone is as desperate and lost as she is. Can she trust any of them? Fear has spread across her country like a disease, and people react in different ways. Some keep their humanity, and will still help you. Others became cruel and calculating; survival the only engine that drives them now.

Her eyes settle on a middle-aged couple near the front of the boat. She knows them, they used to live on the same road as her, and they had a son, who died in the civil war. If they'd known loss, hopefully they could feel compassion too?

She feels Adil stir and forces her eyes open and looks at him. His little head is nestled in the crook of her arm and his forehead is jewelled with sweat. His eyelids flutter then open. His big dark eyes search blearily, as if looking for something they recognise, then they find her face and settle. There's no reproach in his gaze, but she can't help but feel it. *I didn't ask to be born into this; his eyes say to her. I didn't ask to suffer so much.* She reaches deep inside of herself and pulls out a smile.

'Good morning little one.'

'Mama, I'm hungry.'

'I know.'

'Mama I'm thirsty.'

'We'll get you some water in a bit.'

'Mama, where's Papa?'

'We'll find him soon.'

'Mama, will people be kind where we're going?'

'Yes, of course.'

'How do you know?'

'Because they are rich and there are no wars there.'

'You promise?'

'I promise.'

Sara guesses that it's the middle of the afternoon because the sun is high in the sky, and the shadow of the mast has become little more than a pencil-line of darkness against the pale wood of the boat's floor. Some kind of large sea bird flies overhead, its cry piercing the hot silence. For a moment Sara's mind soars with it, if only she and Adil were birds, they could simply rise up from the boat and escape this horror, it would be so simple.

'Here, it is time for water.'

Sara looks up and squints against the sun. The boss-man is standing above her, his face glossy with sweat.

'You can have one gulp, the boy can have two.' He thrusts the bottle towards her and she takes it.

'Thank you so much.' She tips the bottle back and the water feels like liquid gold as it travels down her raw dry throat. She passes it to Adil, her hand hovers by the bottom, ready to snatch it away if he tries to take too much, but he doesn't. As he drinks he looks cautiously down the length of the bottle at the boss-man's inscrutable face.

When Adil has finished the boss-man takes the bottle and moves over to a sleeping old woman. 'Water, time for water.' She doesn't respond. He shakes her and her body moves limply as if she's a doll. He grunts and puts down the bottle, pushes her headscarf back from her face then prises the old woman's eyes open and peers in.

Sara instinctively pulls Adil's face against her chest.

The boss-man stands up and looks round. 'She's dead.' He picks her up as easily as if she was a child and tips her unceremoniously over the side of the boat. Sara cries out as she hears the body hit the water. Adil squirms slightly but she just holds him tighter.

A young man gets up unsteadily against the rocking of the boat. 'She was a doctor.' His voice trails off. 'She used to look after me when I was a child.' He sits down again, his forehead is deeply creased as if he is trying to understand something that keeps eluding him.

Adil finally manages to get free of her grip and before she can stop him he is at the side of the boat and looking over. He comes back to her and climbs onto her lap. 'She's gone now.' He says quietly.

If only the pain got less, if only there was some kind of numbing over time; but the skin has been removed from Sara's emotions and now the slightest touch sends her nerves screaming.

The boss-man moves back up the boat, throwing cereal bars into their laps as he goes. 'Eat now, and then sleep. Tomorrow we will be there.'

The world is pitch-black and full of screaming. It plummets and lurches and tips; flinging stinging water into her face and down her throat; slamming bodies against her then tossing them away. They are in the heart of a vortex of howling wind and all she is aware of is hanging on; of the small body gripping her tightly, fingers grabbing at the soaking mess of her clothes – of her own arm clamped around the solidity of the mast, her other tight against the jut of Adil's ribs. Time and space have lost all meaning; they are reduced to atoms, crashing around in desperate nothingness.

It takes Sara a while to understand that she is still alive. She can feel the warmth of the sun on her face and there are new aches and sore areas that define the boundaries of her body. She can hear groaning and whimpering. A surge of adrenalin flings her into full consciousness with a cry.

'Adil! Where are you Adil?!'

'Mama.' She feels a small hand on her ankle.

She falls to the floor of the boat and scoops him up. 'Adil, thank God!'

He cries out when she touches him. 'It hurts Mama!'

She looks down and sees the blood oozing from a deep gash on his thigh. She tears some of the ragged sail away from the broken mast and bandages his wound. She looks up and sees the boss-man peering keenly at the horizon.

'Are we still on course?'

He looks around at her, his expression stony. 'I do not know. I lost the sat-nav in the storm. We have a little fuel left but I must save it till the end to get to shore.'

Panic tightens around her, she feels the urgent need to be sick but knows there's nothing inside her to reject. What if they are now heading out into the wasteland of the Atlantic? Can she stand to watch her son die? Maybe it would be kinder to simply go over the side with him and join the old lady in the dark water.

'Land! I see land!'

Sara looks up. The young man is bobbing up and down and gesturing wildly. Suddenly, all the people that she thought had been reduced to bodies, start to stir. Their eyes are bright with expectation in their skinny sun-burned faces.

What had just been a hazy line on the horizon has now become recognisable as a long line of beach crowned by a distant dark mountain range. As they get closer Sara sees sand-dunes and feathery-topped palm trees. There are even some people on the beach. Hope and relief blooms out of her heart, leaving her breathless.

Everyone moves towards the bow of the boat to get a better look. The boss-man starts up the engine and the boat lurches towards the shore, Sara can feel the vibration of the engine through the soles of her bare feet. Adil holds her hand tightly, his fingers judder occasionally, she guesses through pain. She looks down at him and strokes his hair and he leans against her hip.

They're close enough now that Sara can make out the figures on the beach. They are in dark uniforms, their chests crossed with rifle straps. Behind the sand dunes too, she can see a high barbed-wire fence. Her heart shrinks.

As the boat grounds itself on the beach the soldiers stride into the water and surround them. The couple that used to live on the same road as her immediately move forward, the boss watches, impassive and narrow eyed.

The man steps nearer to the soldiers, smiles and gestures placatingly. 'My name is David Hunter, and this is my wife Joan. We are from a town called Yarmouth and we have travelled a very long way. I can't tell you how happy we are to finally be here -'

'Step back!' One of the soldiers lifts his rifle and points it at David. 'You cannot get off your boat. We don't want you English pigs here, you come over in your thousands, like cockroaches. This is our country.'

The colour has drained from David's face. He reaches back for his wife's hand, she takes it and steps beside him. 'Please, you don't understand. We've lost everything, our home, our friends and family. We have nothing!'

The soldier spits into the sea. 'Your war is not our problem. You cannot look after your own country, you think we will let you into ours?' Two of the soldiers move forward and start to push the boat back into

the water. Another throws bottles of water and bits of food into the boat. All the while the first soldier keeps his gun pointed at them.

Sara's heart is pounding and words tumble out of her mouth, she is almost screaming: 'I had a house, a garden, a job. In just a few years, it's gone. All gone. Please, you don't understand!' The soldiers don't look up and keep pushing at the boat, shoving it out. She picks up Adil and thrusts him towards them. 'My son, please, look, he is hurt! Please help us!'

The boat is suddenly buoyant again, the movement throws Sara backwards and Adil falls on to her with a cry. 'Please!' she struggles to get up, 'I had a house, I had a garden I...' But the soldiers aren't listening and have already turned and started to make their way back up the beach.

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