

Yusra Mardini, *Butterfly*, 2018

The boat

I dive into the glinting water.

“Yusra! What the hell are you doing?”

I ignore my sister and duck unto the waves. The ocean roars over the drum beat of my pulse. The lifejackets tugs upwards on my chest. I break the surface. Desperate prayers ring out from the boat above.

I grab the rope and glimpse the shore. Europe is in sight. The sun inches down towards the island. The wind is up. The passengers cry and shriek as the boat spins in the swell. The Afghan pulls desperately on the engine cord. It splutters but doesn't catch. The engine is dead. We are alone, at the mercy of the raging sea.

The boy's face appears between the huddled passengers on the boat. He grins. It's a game. He knows nothing about the desperate people who died here. Mothers and their babies, old men and women, strong young men. The thousands who never made it to the shore, who battled for hours in vain until the sea took them. I screw my eyes shut and fight the rising panic. Swim. I can swim. I can save the boy.

I see my mother, my father, my little sister. A parade of half-remembered triumphs, defeats, and embarrassments. Things I'd rather forget. Dad throws me into the water. A man hangs a medal around my neck. A tank takes aim. Glass shatters onto a pavement. A bomb rips through a roof.

My eyes flick open. Beside me, my sister stares grimly up at the next towering peak of angry water. The rope cuts into my palms. The sea drags and sucks at my clothes. My limbs ache under the weight. Just hold on. Stay alive.

Another wave rises, the dark water looms behind the boat. I brace as we rise and fall, drift and spin. The sea is not a swimming pool. There are no sides, no bottom. This water is unlimited, wild, and unknowable. The waves march on, relentless, an advancing army.

The sun sinks faster now down to meet the island's peaks. The shore looks further away than ever. The water glints dark purple, the wave's crests shine creamy yellow in the dying light. How did it get this far? When did our lives become so cheap? Risking it all, paying a fortune to climb onto an overcrowded dinghy and take our chances on the sea. Is this really the only way out? The only way to escape the bombs at home?

The surf rolls and surges. Choppy peaks of water knock my head against the side of the boat. The salt water stings my eyes, fills my mouth, my nose. The wind whips my hair around my head. The cold creeps down my body, working into my feet, my calves, and my thigh muscles. I can feel my legs beginning to seize up.

“Yusra! Get back on the boat!”

I grip the rope moprore tightly. I'm not letting my sister do this alone. No one is going to die on our watch. We're Mardinis. And we swim.