

Young Writers Award 2020 – Emily Humphreys

Runner up

This is not a happy story

Dima was never afraid of the ocean.

He can't remember splashing in the Mediterranean Sea in Latakia as a child, but can remember his mama recounting how he revelled as the blue water licked his feet. Dima clung to her melodic laugh and far-reaching stories harder than the strangers arm beside him. His mama loved the ocean enough for his whole family. So, in the summer, when baba's shoulders were tense and eyes dark, mama would smile and turn to them and say 'yawm al'ijaza!'

Farah, Dima's older sister would smile and jump. She knew that mama's proclamation meant that she would soon feel the sand beneath her feet and the sweet taste of luqaimat on her tongue. Dima didn't know where Farah was now. Dima didn't know where his mama or baba were either. He had hoped that they were in Latakia, or somewhere close by, running across the hot sand faster than it could burn their feet. But Dima was grown up now, his mama had told him so, and he didn't think the same violent waters below him touched the shores where they could be waiting. It couldn't be possible that the endless, foreboding blackness that swirled beneath the boat was the same azure water that filled the beaches of such a happy place. These two worlds couldn't exist at the same time. Dima tried to be smart like his baba. He tried to be grown up like his mama had told him to be as she ran her fingers along his cheek for the last time. Farah had shown him pictures of places he thought he knew. Places like Latakia, where nothing was familiar but the few palm trees that had survived what the sunken buildings behind them hadn't. It was impossible that the ocean touched that place, because that place didn't exist anymore.

The ghost of his mama's voice and the stories that it told, sank further into the water as waves viciously crashed against the wooden edges of the boat. Dima could hardly believe

it was the ocean at all. It snarled and growled like a beast from his nightmares. Dima didn't think his mama would like the ocean here.

Dima heard shouts from the other side of the boat. He sucked in a breath as the old man next to him was crushed against his small body, ripples of movement as frightened people cowered from the loud voices. People were crammed so tight, Dima felt like he had no space for air to fill his body. Foreign tongues spoke words faster than Dima could understand. The voices were louder than the crescendo of waves and despite the distance between Dima and the arguing pair, he could hear almost every word they said. Silence had befallen the dozens of people as their hollow stares settled on the men.

The arm Dima had clung too, a boy not much older than Farah, squeezed his shoulder back. A reassuring gesture, or just another boy, too young to be on this old fishing boat, trying to find something solid to clutch onto. The boy looked down at Dima. He said the boat was heavy and the ocean was fierce. Too many people, he had heard one of the men say. That it was better that some survive than all die. Dima tried to understand. He watched one of the men take a bag from the hands of another. He threw it into the sea. He screamed something into the crowd of people and they began following his direction. Weight. People were trying to relieve the boat of anything that could weigh it down and pin it to the sea floor. He didn't know why people were concerned until he caught the eye of an older woman close to where the men were standing, on the ledge. She looked into her small bag, picking out a small photograph with nimble fingers. She tucked it into her shoulder straps and emptied the contents of her bag into the belly of the sea. Everything she had, sinking to the muddy sand below. She took her empty bag and bent over, falling out of sight. Dima wanted to be brave. Dima wanted to be like his older sister. She had pushed Dima onto this boat. She had smiled and kissed his forehead. She had turned around, alone, and walked back through the port city he had left. She hadn't looked scared. They'd only had enough money for one passage on the boat. Farah did not hesitate and now she was alone with nowhere to go. He hoped he would see her on the other side of his journey. Dima tried to share in his sister's courage when he saw the top of the woman's head come back into view. He watched her bag, now full of dark, briny sea water, as she flung it towards the ocean. Water that should be staying in the sea and out

of their boat, clapped as it fell back towards the waves. They had been told that this was a good boat. A safe boat. This boat could take them across the sea to somewhere safe and somewhere dry. Dima tried to push the panic rising from the pit in his stomach. He tried to settle his breathing, there wasn't enough air for the speed at which his lungs were beginning to intake oxygen. People began to scream. People began to realise that this was not a good boat.

Dima wondered what they'd look like from afar. Barely floating upon the top layers of the ocean, screaming and wailing; one big sea monster flailing in collective movement as it struggled not to drown. The boat began to rock. Their frenzy was seeping into the timber of the hull and it squirmed in the water. The two men, standing on a raised ledge, collided. Their faces were pinched in anger and the man who had thrown the bag into the ocean, pushed the other over the ledge. A large wave hit the boat and cushioned his fall, swallowing him whole. Dima was afraid of the ocean now.

The boat had been barely floating across the water, edging to the middle of the world for days now. Dima didn't know exactly when he had left or how many days would remain. He prayed as the sunset over every passing day, that this would be the last time he saw the tangerine sky over an empty ocean. He thought of his prayers, he hadn't meant that he wanted to follow that man into the belly of the sea. He wanted to reach the shore. He owed it to his sister to rest his feet upon solid ground.

Half of the crowd were praying, looking up to the sky. The other looked down into the bottomless black sea, shrinking away from the sides as if a big hand would reach over from beneath them and drag them down. The older boy next to him whispered, "We will never reach the shore, we will all sink here." Dima knew he didn't want to scare him; he was not saying those words with malice. Dima didn't need to meet the boy's wide eyes or feel his firm grip on his shoulder to realise, like everyone else, he was terrified.

It hadn't taken long for the boat to sink. Some people had life jackets on, Dima could hear their soft cries as they floated in small groups. Others weren't so lucky and had sunk as easily as that women's bag. Dima was lucky. His sister had bought him a life jacket and

the few summers on the beach had taught him to tread water. The older boy, no longer next to him, had clung to the bottom of the capsized boat next to a handful of others. The first man, the one who had pushed the second into the water, had met him again. He hadn't had a jacket and the ocean had easily dragged him down, dooming the pair to their endless feud.

The sky was clear. The sun, high in the sky, shone down onto the small crowd; no more than 20. The blackness and malice of the water had retreated and left Dima floating in crystal blue waves. His lips were shrivelled and his tongue impossibly dry. Dima had almost forgotten the hunger pangs that had pierced through his body, his small stomach seeming to have accepted it wouldn't be eating soon. The infinite expanse of the ocean settled before him. He had never seen anything so big, so mighty. He felt like nothing more than a small ant, subject to the whims and throws of something so much more powerful than himself. It was hard not to feel helpless, Dima tried hard to remember whispers of bravery and hope from his family.

Dima heard cries. Piercing through the small laps of water and emptiness surrounding them. He couldn't raise his head to follow the noise. He couldn't turn around to see what was enlivening the people as more screams echoed. He felt small ripples in the water, slowly pushing him away from the crowd. Dima didn't know if it mattered, if he was to die in a crowd or if he was to die alone. The ocean would swallow him whole either way.

"A boat!" the older boy screamed, his voice course and a shadow of what it had been before. A small fire of hope lit inside Dima, he waded through the sea, slowly, towards the pointed fingers of the survivors near to him. He couldn't understand what they were looking at. He couldn't see a boat and wondered if dehydration and hunger was fooling the crowd. Dima held his breath, dizzy as he slowly pushed himself closer towards what remained of their old fishing boat. He thought he saw a small metal pole, jutting out of the ocean. He blinked the salt out of his eyes and swam closer, watching with disbelief as a small boat soared through the ocean closer and closer towards them.

Dima didn't believe the crowd and their shouts of salvation. He didn't believe the older boy when he said he was not going to drown, that they would all live and survive. A woman the same age as his mama, took Dima's cold hand and squeezed it tight. Dima couldn't feel it and struggled to believe her still. Her smile cracked her lips, but she continued shouting as a small path of blood trickled down and into her mouth.

Two hands pulled Dima up into a barge, larger than what it had looked like so far away. He was wrapped in a silver sheet and a woman crouched down, hands either side of his shoulders and guided him to a small room with other familiar faces. She spoke quiet, soothing words that he couldn't understand. The women tried to remove his life jacket. She had dry clothes in a basket nearby but Dima clutched onto the buckles that had secured him to the vest over the last two days of floating. He would not take it off. Dima was trying to be smart. He was following the orders of his sister. He was to not take that yellow vest off as long as water swirled beneath his feet. The woman nodded in acceptance and Dima's eyes followed her as she walked through the room and onto the main deck.

Cheers and screams of joy had sobered now. Muscles began to ache after floating in the water for so many days. The terror behind their eyes replayed scenes of what they had been through, as their bodies relaxed and they knew they could stop fighting. Others remained tense. They wouldn't settle until they reached land and the safety it promised. Dima hoped this boat would take them in the right direction. His sister had said he was going to Greece, that she would meet him there one day. He hoped he'd see her face when they arrived, her arms waving towards him. The smile of his parents looking up at him. He could tell them about how brave he had been and how he had survived the sinking of the boat. He would say how grown up he had been all by himself and that he'd stayed afloat. They would smile at him and nod, before placing their hand at the back of his head and guiding him somewhere he could call home. Somewhere safe. The fire that licked the back of their feet as they ran from their ancestral home couldn't pass the salty water that stood between them.

A deep rumble from beneath him sounded and Dima knew he was beginning to move again. He began to believe the woman like his mama, the older boy and the others with them. This boat was big and he was hopeful it wouldn't sink. He rested against the steady wall behind him and finally let his eyes close after so many sleepless nights.

A loud horn pulled Dima out of his sleep, jolting his eyes open. Shouts from outside ricocheted inside the small walls of this room. Everyone slowly began to lean awake and some stood up, walking towards the door to see where they had arrived. As more people began to funnel out the room, Dima realised he was the only person that remained.

He pushed himself off the floor, ignoring the pains in his body from the suffering it had endured. He crossed the threshold of the room and saw they had docked at a small port; it was busy and crowds waited for them to disembark. A smile lit up his face, images of his parents and his sister waiting for him filled his vision. Dima followed the crowd down the steps, the same lady who had helped him onto the boat offered her hand to him now. He took it and let her guide him off the boat and down the ramp.

Dima closed his eyes as his feet touched land for the first time. He conjured the picture that would be standing before him once they opened. His sister would have been able to travel in a stronger boat to Greece. A boat that wouldn't have sunk. Her passage would bring her straight here and she would be waiting. His parents would be behind her, hands on her shoulder. Dima opened his eyes, a smile on his face. He searched desperately through the crowd of people for any familiar face. He needed someone. He didn't want to be grown up like his mama had told him he was. He wanted his sister and her bravery. He wanted his baba to be smart for them. He wanted his mother and his father. He needed his family.