

From the Refugee Women

By Don Zolidis

MERCY, 15, a Nigerian refugee.

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We set out from Tripoli in a boat. Some hulking rusted mess – forty years old. Crossing back and forth. They crowded us on. Packed in. You couldn't turn around. We stood on the edge and heard the seagulls and the lifting of the waves, we bucked and bucked and bucked. The engine gave out somewhere in the middle. You could feel it. The whole ship shook, and then the noise of the engine vanished and it was silent on the water. People said nothing. We were listening for the engine. But we couldn't hear it, all we could hear was the waves slapping against the side of the ship and the seagulls.

They men running the boat sent out a distress call. We stood, what else could we do? There were hundreds of us on a ship meant for fifty. What do you do? With each minute, you know, you know what's going to happen. You may die here. The longer this takes. The longer this takes more of us will die. We looked around at each other. Who are the strongest swimmers? What do we do with the babies? We kept looking out at the water – there were babies crying, women trying to stand, the sun on our heads – the breeze coming off the water. Seagulls circling. There was nothing out there. Just the flat line of horizon.

How long would we float? How long before we sank?

Of course we knew there was risk. We knew people before us who had died. Most people made it across. Why not us?

I don't know how long the boat drifted. They kept trying to fix the engine, but it didn't start.

A lot of us had never been out in the ocean before. Every direction you looked – water. The whole world was water. The sky blended in with the sea and we were a tiny point on a huge planet, and we were tiny people about to die and no one would know.

The sun was going down when we saw the rescue ship. We must've been there ten hours, maybe, people started shouting. They started moving towards the side of our little boat – pushing – there were too many people pushing – someone was shouting that were we going to capsize – but you couldn't stop them, there was nothing to hold on to except other people, and they were falling too. You felt the whole ground beneath you drop, and the water rush over your feet and up over your knees.

And then I was in the water. My mother was next to me. My brothers. People were trying to get hold of anything – a man grabbed me and pushed me under the water to keep himself afloat. I could feel the legs around me in the water, kicking me, pushing off of me.

I don't know how I got my head up. The water stung my eyes and then I felt someone's hands grab me and pull me out of the sea.

There were lights all over the water now and the men on the rescue ship were throwing out life preservers.

There was a moment when I didn't know if my family was alive or dead. When I thought I was alone in the world, now. They had all been near me when we went into the water and there were so many people still in the sea.

They were alive. My mother found me. She saw me go under the water, she didn't want to come out until she found me, but they pulled her out anyway.