

Jellyfish

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My country is at war. It's only been a couple years since WWII started. Mama, Papa, and the baby were shot on the night of the bombing. Only seven people in the village survived, and we haven't heard from the other five since last week.

I've never seen Sergei cry.

Sergei is my older brother. He's nineteen years old. I'm fourteen. Sergei says we are going to swim to Hokkaido to get away from the war like the other five, but he doesn't know how I'll be able to swim that far. It's forty kilometres. When I remind him I was age champion in my swimming races this year, he smiles and ruffles my hair.

The sunrise is beautiful today. It's cold, but it's always cold in Russia, especially on Sakhalin. Not a good day to be swimming, but it's either this or be shot. We have gathered ten good bottles. The lids are screwed on tight, and we've tied them to our arms with string to stop us drowning.

The LifeStraw that we will use to provide our water is in a secured bottle with two muesli bars.

They are our most prized possessions.

The plan is to enter the water while the soldiers are eating breakfast and distracted and then swim like hell out of firing range.

I'm terrified.

Sergei is standing on a bucket to peek through a hole in the roof of the cave we've been camping out in, and now he looks down and nods.

Go time.

Sergei looks so much like a jellyfish covered in plastic that I almost laugh, giving us away, but he covers my mouth before I can. I'll laugh at him later. The soldiers are eating in the big mess hall, while we sneak across the beach and run into the icy water. My body goes numb, but tremors still ripple through me after thirty seconds in the water.

We start to swim.

Stroke, breathe, pause, stroke, breathe, pause, stroke, breathe, pause.

Sometimes, Sergei puts me on his back so I can rest, but I'm growing tired—fast. The worst bit is not knowing if we're going in the right direction. We could be heading out to the open sea for all I know. That thought scares me more than anything.

After what feels like half an hour, my lungs are heaving, and I know I'm going to drown.

I
can't
make
one
more
stroke.

Now, my legs are failing me as well, and my breath is coming out in gasps. Sergei looks over his shoulder, his tired face crinkling with concern as he turns and hoists me onto his back again. I feel us sinking further underwater with every stroke.

'Nadia, I need you to swim, or we'll both drown,' he says after a while, and I roll off his back into the water. My arms and legs ache, and I know the scary truth.

This is it.

I'm going to drown.

I'm going to die.

All I see around me is blue. 'Sergei,' I croak.

He turns around and paddles back to me. 'Nadia, relax and lie on your back like a starfish,' he says, and I obey.

My body lifts in the water, and I can breathe again. We float like this for ages, the current sweeping us in what I desperately hope is the right direction. I close my eyes but retain a strong grip on Sergei.

The sun is burning; there's no shade in the middle of the ocean. Sergei looks like a red jellyfish. I try to laugh at him but saltwater pours into my mouth, and I splutter.

Sergei grins. 'Karma.'

I grimace. Yuck. I don't know how the other five villagers did this. It's impossible, which reminds me of the other possibility; they didn't make it.

The water is growing rough.

'Sergei, what about sharks?' I whisper.

He glances at me. 'You shouldn't worry. They're very rare.'

But I know he's lying, and that makes me scared.

A storm is brewing and, soon, the waves surge and crash over our heads, dunking us while our plastic bottles bob us back to the surface. As I rise for the third time, Sergei is nowhere to be seen.

‘Sergei!’ I yell, my voice cracking, as I’m shoved underwater again. Water fills my mouth. A massive wave enfolds me into its wet body and wraps me in an unwanted hug, as if it knows what’s happening to me.

The storm lasts for hours. Looking around in early afternoon light for any trace of Sergei, I see something in the distance. It could be driftwood, but it’s moving. I can see an arm and a leg.

Sergei.

I’m off in a flurry of limbs, swimming as hard as I can. A stitch stabs me in the ribs, and I shake it off, keep going. I will not stop.

Sergei could be there.

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Sergei could be there.

‘Sergei!’ I cry, paddling towards him, but then I stop. That’s not Sergei. This person is too big to be Sergei, and they have no plastic bottles. The person turns towards me.

It’s a soldier.

‘Hello?’ he says, confused. ‘Who are you?’

I know what he’s saying from my English lessons at school. Fear grips me, and I start to swim away. He’s from America. Russia’s sworn enemy.

‘Hey, wait up, I mean no harm,’ the soldier says. He raises his hands and treads water. ‘I ran away; I have no gun,’ he says

Should I trust him? I need supplies. Sergei had them, but he’s gone. Tears pool in my eyes, and salt mixes with salt.

Sergei.

He could be dead.

The soldier looks ashamed. ‘I can’t kill people. They didn’t do anything to me.’

I can see a tear on his cheek.

‘I jumped out of the helicopter,’ he admits. The soldier doesn’t seem like a threat. I decide I will trust him.

‘I’m Nadia,’ I say.

‘Joe,’ he says, turning. ‘Look over there.’ He points towards the horizon where a line indicates land, ‘that’s Japan. That’s where I’m going, Nadia.’

It’s really Japan, where there’s no war or fighting. Freedom.

‘Me too,’ I tell him.

We start swimming. The sun is beating down on me, and my aching limbs don't do anything but weigh me down. The plastic bottles are the only things keeping me afloat. The current is helping us though, and I can lay like a starfish and be swept along.

Joe is twice as red as me. He tells me how the soldiers fired shots into the water from the plane, calling him a traitor. I tell him my story, and we cry for each other.

The Japanese coast is close now, and I can see the beach. The sand squeezes through my toes as we cut off my plastic bottles with a sharp rock. I take my first steps onto foreign soil, where I shed tears for Mama, Papa, the baby, for Sergei, the villagers, and the survivors.

I will honour them all in my new life.

Japan is freedom. It will be my home until the war is over, and I can return to Russia. I can live with Joe and make new friends.

I can do anything I want.

I am safe.