

# In the same boat



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*For Sandeep*





There is a storm coming, the man in the red cap said.

Everyone looked up and across the ocean to where he was pointing. It was true. The sky in the distance was filling with dark clouds, not rapidly but steadily enough to suggest the approach of a storm in a short time.

Doesn't look too bad, a voice from the crowd said. Maybe it will blow over.

Several people nodded. But as if to show that they were not convinced, they all kept gazing at the gathering clouds.

They had been only a few hours at sea. Most of the dozens of other boats that had taken to the sea with their little vessel had disappeared out of view by now. A few still hung about in the distance,

bobbing up and down gently on the benign waves, appearing and disappearing. Occasionally someone from another boat waved and the people in the boat waved back. Some tried yelling across the water but the wind carried their words away into the distance.

The land was completely out of sight now. They had left before dawn hoping to cover some distance before daylight; creeping out of the dark, crowded shed near the coast they had inhabited for the last two days, following the man in the red cap, blindly, uncertainly. In the early days of people leaving in boats the navy had started stopping them and rounding them up and taking them back. But now, with so many people leaving they had all but given up; it was almost as if everybody in the country who could afford it were leaving in boats. The sea was too vast and the boats too many for a handful of navy boats to make a difference. The boat operators had also learned how to avoid trouble. Still, it was thought prudent to leave before dawn, when nobody could see them. So in silence and in the darkness broken only by the glow of a small torch they had boarded the boat, ready to enter the ocean that spread like a dark sheet before them. When the engine started a few of them had looked about apprehensively, as if the sound would alert somebody. But there was only darkness behind them and the sound of the waves ahead.

Then they were out on the sea, the boat ploughing through the waves, its hull parting the surf with

ease. The engine rattled noisily and monotonously, shaking the fibre glass hull. And as the morning light crawled across the sky from the east they could make out the coastline, like a dark, blurry strip over the sea, receding gently. As the sky brightened, the mountaintops in the distance peered through the clouds, like vast, feathery sketches made in the heavens. It looked beautiful and breathtaking. It was not a secret that some of them had misty eyes as they gazed back at the splendour etched in the sky.

But they knew they were not leaving the beauty above but the tragedy below. War, hunger and death. Calamities that had gnawed away at their will to endure. Miseries that haunted their lives and tortured their souls. Everybody had a breaking point and they had reached theirs. They were leaving that misery, like many others before them and many others will after them. In a boat, across the ocean, heading for lands they had only heard of.

The wind is beginning to pick up, Red Cap said, as if speaking to himself. Maybe the storm will be here sooner than we think.

The others kept looking at the clouds. They too felt the wind beginning to tug at their hair and flutter against their cheeks.

Maybe it will blow over, someone said again. Hope so, another intoned. This is not a big, strong boat.

Red Cap frowned at the observation. He knew it was true. It was just an ordinary fishing trawler. The peeling paint on the hull, which must have

been bright red once, and the rickety little cabin at the back that rattled with the engine proclaimed its age. The deck, scratched and bruised on every inch of its once creamy surface, creaked and groaned with the movement of the scores of feet that now stood on it. It was evidently used to weathering storms but probably not with nearly fifty people on board.

Don't be so pessimistic, Red Cap said and frowned again. I would not have taken you if I was not sure. I have taken hundreds of people in this very boat.

He looked around him. Dark, expectant faces, young and old, male and female, stared back at him, wanting to believe him. Faces of people who had left everything they had except hope and the bundles and boxes they had carried in to the boat in the darkness of the dawn. His eyes moved from face to face and lingered on that of a little girl. She must have been about twelve and stood next to a woman who was probably her mother. She held a little grey kitten in her arms and with one hand stroked its head.

What are you doing with that kitten on this boat? Red Cap asked and the girl looked up, hugging the kitten even tighter. Don't you know that you can't take a kitten on a trip like this? He raised his gaze to the crowd. Who let her bring the kitten? He looked around and waited but received no answers. People seem to be avoiding his eyes, faces turned towards the sea.

Just let her be, a female voice said. We have bigger things to worry about than a kitten. There were

approving nods all around and Red Cap retreated into his frown.

He looked up at the sky again. The clouds were continuing to bulge with a brooding, ominous darkness. He turned his eyes back to the deck, his face reflecting the growing gloom in the sky.

Put those bags and boxes in the hold, he ordered pointing to some boxes on the deck. What are we going to eat when the food gets wet? He turned to the little girl.

There is some dry fish in a sack in the hold, he said. Give some to your kitten. The girl smiled and looked up at the woman next to her who stroked her head approvingly. She carried the kitten and went down in to the hold, placing her little feet gingerly on the ladder.

Some of the younger men in the crowd moved towards the boxes and began to carry them towards the hatch. Red Cap returned to his vigil, looking at the clouds.

How much longer before we get there? a man asked in a thin voice. Red Cap shrugged.

Depends, he said. Depends. On the weather, the sea, the navy.

But you said you have taken care of everything. Another voice, strident, joined. Red Cap smirked. I did, he said, looking up at the sky. But I can't control everything.

Someone in the crowd snorted. Red Cap