

Waterworld

I crossed the ocean once and did not die. Four years ago, on a small fishing boat with 34 lifejackets. There were 92 of us on the boat and 41 arrived safely in Australia. For someone who had quietly pushed a pregnant woman into the water, crossing the ocean a second time is unnerving—even if you are sitting lightheartedly on a seat in a big boat with your wife and daughter, looking into the clear water, with colorful fish circling underneath among the coral. On a boat that left a small town heading towards the Great Barrier Reef—a place that looks like a forest, the reef extending under the water for miles.

The weather is good and from the bow of the boat a cool breeze caresses the skin. I motion towards my mouth to ask Forough for some water. I am thirsty. In the past four years, all the water I drank tasted like water from this ocean. Dorsa takes my hand to show me the spherical ensemble of fluorescent fish that swim next to the hull.

She says it's good that the boat has no propeller, otherwise they would be cut to pieces. Forough gives her a stern look. She is afraid of Dorsa becoming too boyish. Dorsa likes to play soccer and makes fun of other girls. Sometimes she even bullies her friends and classmates. She pushes to the front during games and stays in her seat after a ride on the Ferris wheel; she will not wait in the queue for another ride. Or for the slide. Or any other game that you can find here in parks and schools. Some time ago, her teacher had called home to say that Dorsa had forced one of her classmates to give up her spot in the classroom. Forough was very angry. That night she said several times, quietly, *Dorsa is not like other children of her age*. I answered, *Such behaviors are normal*. Forough turned her back on me and drew the blanket up to her shoulders, but in the dark I could see the light of her mobile on her pillow.

It was Safa's idea that we come to the coral reef. Safa is tall and large. He claims that he was a weightlifter once. The first time we met was in Indonesia, in a small and dingy hostel near the ocean. A thief had stolen his phone and he used mine to speak to his wife and son in Iran. The second time I saw him, we had already been on the water in that boat for two days. A storm was

approaching and powerful waves threw the boat around. Then I saw Safa, who appeared from behind the captain's cabin. He was like a tree that had pulled out its own roots and headed for the sky. He was sitting between Arabs and Afghans. Downstairs. Near the cabin, towards the bow. Safa waved to me, several times. Then he lost his balance and fell on the men.

Now, together, we have opened an Iranian supermarket, in the Iranian district of Sydney. Safa had a shop in Iran. He knows the job. He has the connections and brings in the items cheaply from Iran. A month ago, he was arranging the Afghan bread in front of the shop and looking at the children coming out of St Peter's private school. With their clean and proper uniforms, and caps with the insignia of their school embroidered on them.

Safa said, *The school logo on these caps. . . .* He pointed at one of the schoolkids' caps. He said, *They're hand-stitched. Did you know that?* Safa left his wife and his eleven-year-old child in Iran to come to Australia alone. One year after we were released from detention on Christmas Island, he arranged for their travel by boat. They were supposed to reach Christmas Island two weeks later. They didn't. Or at least there was no news of them. There was no indication that they had ever boarded the boat in Indonesia. A few months later, in a smoky cafe in south Sydney, an Iraqi refugee told Safa that his wife had been on the boat. He couldn't remember whether there had been a boy with her. But he remembered there was a man who spoke to Safa's wife in Turkish. The Iraqi told Safa that the man and Safa's wife were in each other's arms during the two-week journey. During the stormy weather, on the turbulent seas.

Safa said Ghazal's mother is a Turk from Tabriz. But Ghazal never spoke Turkish. She hadn't spoken Turkish since she was a girl. He then took a piece of paper out of his pocket and showed it to me. He had folded the paper neatly. On the blank side there was a black pen drawing of an eight-petal flower. On the other side was an advertisement for the Great Barrier Reef. *It's a place in North Queensland.* Safa said, *I wanted to take Ghazal and Sazan there for a holiday. But that's not possible now. Take Forough and Dorsa instead.*

The tour guide looks like a child. He can't be more than fifteen, sixteen, but says he's twenty-two. He takes an old woman by the hand and helps her over a narrow gangplank between the boat and the pier. He tells the old woman that the rainforest here is totally safe. There are no snakes or scorpions. But there are many

insects. He says it's home to many species of birds, from parrots with huge beaks to a kind of bird that makes a scary noise like the howl of a wolf. He then laughs and puts both his hands very gently on the old woman's shoulder. He says the bird is only this big. He cups the palms of his hands to indicate something the size of a newborn baby.

They've built ten to twenty small villas next to each other in the middle of the rainforest. You have to go past the buildings and through the forest to get to the reef. Dorsa lets go of my hand and runs into the water. The boy says the water here is no deeper than half a meter when the tide is out. Dorsa kneels and puts her hands in the water. Forough has rolled up her jeans and is also cautiously walking into the water. She calls out to Dorsa from time to time to tell her not to go in any farther. She's a little scared. I know she's scared when she anxiously tucks her hair behind her ears. She gives me the drink bottle and says, *What if the rocks give way under our feet? Or if there's suddenly nothing under our feet?* I drink from the bottle. My thirst remains. I say, *They would've told us if something like that could happen.* She's not convinced and shakes her head. She asks the guide if it's safe to walk here without a lifejacket. The boy points to a place further away and says that no one should go into the water past that point at night—because there's no light there. The dark nights here are very dark.

The villas seem very clean and adequate from the outside, but they're not that good. They're old. Here and there the paint on the walls has peeled off. There's no air conditioner. Just a ceiling fan, and it's broken; it doesn't spin. Dorsa throws herself on one of the beds and rolls the sheet around her body. She yells out, *I'm dead!* Forough has a headache and looks for Panadols in her purse. We can see the front of another house through our window. There's a man sitting on a chair, smoking a cigarette. He's wearing a large wide-brimmed hat that covers his face. Smoke rings waft from under the hat and expand into the sky. I lie on the bed and open the Great Barrier Reef brochure. There's a tour tomorrow morning called "Life Underwater." The tour boat has a glass bottom through which to view the underwater world.

I say to Forough, *You should go and see this with Dorsa. I'm not coming.* Forough draws back the handkerchief that she has put on her face and looks out the corner of her eye. She asks, *What do you think is underneath?* She does not seem to be referring to the

fish. Or to coral. I know perfectly well that the woman has been dead for a long time and is now part of life underneath. Part of this very coral and colorful fluorescent fish under the water. But this is not important. What is important is the spirit who, that day, in the humidity and thirst, came out of my body and floated away into the sky. It was a kind of sea creature. It had a long nose like a shark and fins for wings that gave it the freedom to float away. It also had a shell on its back, the color of coral. Like a turtle. It was a crustacean, suspended between flesh and bone. It took off a little, into the sky, then forcefully flapped its wings towards the lifejacket that was loosely attached to the body of a thin woman. This woman had been in a bad state since we had boarded in Indonesia. She was pale and hanging on her husband's arm. They both sat right in front of me, suspended on the siderails. Her husband was young and tanned with a long black moustache and beard.

He wore large, thick glasses that were secured around his head with an elastic band. The woman had a red scarf around her neck, a silken scarf that did not match the rest of her clothes. It looked like a last-minute gift that a loved one would have put around her neck. We all thought that we would spend one week at sea and then reach Christmas Island. One week on the water and that was it. But after two days, the waves became bigger and Safa lost his balance and fell among some men. Several were complaining when the next wave sent the boat into the sky. Safa pushed clear of the pack of men and made his way towards me.

Forough says, *Let's go and see the baby turtles tonight. The three of us.* Dorsa jumps on the bed and exclaims, *We have to free the baby turtles from the sand, otherwise they stay there and suffocate.* I say that I need a nap first. I'm fading. I roll over in bed and put the pillow on my head. Then I slowly gather my fins and hide my head inside the shell.

When I wake up it's dark. My whole body is covered in sweat and my clothes stick to my skin. The TV is on, but instead of a program there is a blue screen with no noise. I half sit up and call out a few times for Forough and Dorsa. There's no answer. I put on my shoes and look out the window. The neighbor is still lounging on his chair in front of his house. He takes off his hat with one hand and waves to me with the other. He's really old. Probably around 70 or 80. He's wearing an old striped t-shirt stuffed into his dark-gray trousers. A long Mongolian moustache, the color of

henna, hangs down the sides of his mouth. I wave and go back inside. Forough has left my mobile phone on the TV with a note under it. She's written, *We went to see the turtles*. She is upset that I fell asleep. If she hadn't been upset, she would have woken me. Or she would have written, *We went to see the turtles, darling*. My head is heavy. I'm thirsty and have a bitter taste in my mouth. I turn on the tap and put my head under the spout. Loud whistles resonate a few times outside, then suddenly stop. There is no water. I open the door a bit to let in some air, but it's still and humid. There is no wind or breeze swirling between the trees to cool us down or ease the humidity. My neighbor says, *They left an hour ago*. He then points in the direction of the beach and adds, *The baby turtles*. Then he laughs. *April is hell here. The humidity, there's no difference between the sea and the forest*. I ask, *Is it far from here to the turtles?* He answers, *You have to walk through the forest to get to the beach. It's about twenty minutes*.

I sit on the chair and call Forough's number. Her phone rings but there's no answer. My neighbor stands up and comes over. He shakes my hand and gives me a large can, White Rabbit beer. The can is very cold, icy, with condensation. He says, *This will revive you. You get very thirsty very quickly in humidity. Drink this first, then go find some turtles*. I shake his hand firmly and press the can against my forehead. The cold spreads through my skin and I can smell something like mint. I say, *Are you new to this place? Did you arrive on the boat today?*

He laughs and returns to his own straw chair. I realise that he has a limp. It looks like his left leg might be shorter, and he drags the other foot on the ground as he walks. He says, *I've been here for twenty years. I've built most of the houses in this place*. He then turns around and points to something behind me. He says, *Last year someone tried to swim across the ocean. Without a lifejacket. He jumped in right here*.

I ask, *Did he make it?* He stares at me. Then he smiles, as though he's just remembered something. He says, *He lost his water container while he was swimming. Then it started to rain. The sea became dangerous. He didn't last a day*.

Then he takes off his hat and strokes his white hair. He says that he'd wanted a new beginning. On this beach. But he couldn't do it.

My world began with the water. The waves drew the rest of

the world into their fluid, changing shapes. The water, the salt and the thick mist all make it difficult to breathe, and drive us mad with thirst. To survive in this humidity you need gills like a fish. Like a whale. Safa said he couldn't find his lifejacket. He then pointed at the Arabs and the Afghans sitting near the bow of the boat. He said, *We have to take one of their jackets.* Without a lifejacket we'd be done for. He then pointed at a couple who were sitting lifelessly against the termite-eaten siderails on the deck. The man was sitting on a couple of folded lifejackets. The couple weren't wearing the jackets because there was no wind and the air was hot and humid, just like it is now. The boat's engine made a spluttering noise. Safa said, *It's because of the heat. I wouldn't be surprised if it stops working. We won't survive the next storm if it stops.* The man had taken off his shirt and was holding it over his wife like a beach umbrella. The woman looked frail and had rested her head on the man's arm, then pulled her scarf over her eyes. The man was observing me and Safa from behind his glasses. He had heard what Safa had said—it was obvious from the way he looked at us. I took Dorsa's photo out of my pocket and showed it to him. I said, *This is my daughter.* He didn't look at it. He lowered his head and whispered something into his wife's ear. I said, *We won't bother you. Don't worry.*

I scull the White Rabbit and say, *This weather is revolting. It makes me sick.* I hear the howl of a wolf. It howls again and then falls silent. No more noise at all. It's very quiet. I'm on the edge of my seat, staring at the rainforest. He tells me: *Don't be scared. It's not a wolf.* I shake my head. I haven't settled back into my chair when it howls again. It's much louder this time. Much closer. I say, *Its howl is more real than a real wolf's howl.* He shakes his head and picks up a rock and hurls it at the trees. He says, *These birds don't always come to these parts. Sometimes they make it all the way to the island, make a racket, and fly away. They have big bodies too, the size of a newborn, maybe just a tiny bit smaller.*

Then he clears his throat and vigorously spits into the dark. He says, *Sometimes they do weird things, don't expect them to behave like birds. Some even come to the window, knock on it and howl. The kids get scared.* I ask him, *Are you alone here?*, nodding toward his house.

He says, *There's my son. He takes the tourists to the reef. I'm sure you've seen him. He does a good job, really good.* He flattens his striped t-shirt with his hand and adds, *One of the water pumps broke, he went to see to it, he'll sort it out, quickly, he does a good job.*

Hands were reaching into the air for some water. Someone behind gave me a bottle. I put it on my forehead. It wasn't cold enough to cool my burning skin. A man put his shirt on the deck and stretched out his hand for a bottle. He said, *My wife doesn't feel well. She's thirsty.* His Kurdish accent did not match his tanned skin and curly hair. He looked more like an Iranian from the south than an Iranian Kurd. When he got the water bottle, he lifted his wife's scarf a little and poured some water on her face. Someone said, *What are you doing? You're taking a shower with spring water?* A few people who were closer to the man tried to take the bottle out of his hand. But he wouldn't let them. He fell back onto the wooden siderail and tried to kick away the hands grabbing at his wife and himself. The siderail broke and he was thrown from his spot, falling like an anchor into the water.

Sometimes I wonder how much suffering human beings can stand. Or how much fear. Is there a limit to their tolerance? I try to call Forough again but it still doesn't work. There's no signal. I hear the steps of someone running in the dark forest. A little later I see torchlight flashing on the leaves of the trees. It's an old man like the other one. He's bent over and is breathing heavily. The neighbor gives him his beer and then adjusts his own trousers. The old man is Maori. His skin is black and he has long black and white hair plaited at the back of his head. He looks at me out of the corner of his eye and puts his untouched beer on the ground. Then he moves closer to the ear of the neighbor and whispers something that I don't hear. The howling starts again and the old men turn their attention back to the forest for a while. The neighbor says, *Turn on the floodlights.* The old man shakes his head and, just like that, runs back to the forest. The neighbor strokes his moustache and looks at me, hesitating. I ask, *Is there bad news?* He answers, *One of the kids has gone missing on the beach. On the reef.* My heart starts pounding in my chest. In a corner of my brain, I make the connection between Forough and Dorsa on the beach and the lost child, and between the humidity and the howl of the bird that you can't see in the dark. I ask, *Which kid? How old?* Then unconsciously I reach for my mobile to call Forough. He answers, *I don't know which kid it is yet. I have to go.* I answer, *I'm coming too.* He shakes his head and closes the door of his house. He says, *There's no need. We'll soon light up the whole beach. We'll find the kid.* When I follow him, he doesn't protest. He directs the beam of his torch so that both of us

can see the path. I call Forough again. It rings once and cuts out straight away. He says, *Don't worry. We'll find the kid. It's happened before.* My head is hot and heavy. The mosquitoes whirr around my head. They're everywhere. On the bark of the trees. Between the branches. At each step I take. My throat is dry and I breathe heavily. I rest my hand on a tree and wave away the mosquitoes with my other hand. It feels like there is no air around me, nothing to fill my lungs and exhale. Again nothing; and again. My neighbor says, *Are you OK?* then bangs me on the back with his fist, gently. I say, *I can't breathe. I'm suffocating.*

A few people leaned over the edge of the boat to look for the man who had fallen overboard. They couldn't find him. The rotten siderail had ripped away from the boat and he had disappeared with it into the water. Into the realm of the coral reef. The woman was sobbing, bent over the side of the boat. All I could hear was the shouting and screaming of people telling others to look for the man on the other side. He had probably been washed away by the waves. Then the boat was shaken and the woman's body was drawn further over the side. She was suddenly quiet. I thought something had caught hold of her arms and was pulling her into the water. I couldn't see anything, but it looked like weights were attached to her invisible hands. I jumped up without thinking, grabbed her around the waist, and pulled her up. It was as though she was weightless; she somersaulted backwards and fell on the deck. Her scarf had come off and was twisted around her neck. As though someone had tried to strangle her. A little while later, she unwrapped the scarf and scrunched it into a ball and used it to dry her eyes. She was silent but breathed restlessly. People had returned to their places and were staring quietly at the sea. Safa was calm and quiet, pulling a lifejacket towards himself. The woman was gripping her scarf tightly and watching Safa put the lifejacket on and fasten its straps round his body. Despite the heat, he enveloped his fat body completely in the plastic jacket.

I tell the neighbor, *She had a beauty spot next to her lips.* He doesn't understand me. He shakes his head and gives me an electric torch. He says, *I'm going after the child. Come with me if you like, or go back home.* I say, *I didn't know she was pregnant. She hadn't told me.* He pats me on the shoulder and says, *Don't be scared. It's nothing.* He then limps away and disappears into the forest. I sit on the ground and wonder if I'm actually scared, after four years on this

island. I take a few deep breaths. I have to suck whatever oxygen there is in this air into my lungs. I don't get much. My chest feels heavy and I'm wheezing. I point the torch in the direction the man has gone. I can see a few meters ahead. It looks as though branches and leaves and roots have become entangled because I've disturbed them with my light. I shout, *Where are you?* Birds circle above my head. They screech in a cacophony and then one of them howls. This one is not in the trees or among the leaves. It's on the ground. It's only a few meters away in the dark. The sound of the waves comes from nearby; the sound of water that has covered the coral reefs and is now rising and rising.

I saw the beauty spot next to her lips when she pulled a lifejacket towards herself on that boat. The lifejacket that her husband had put aside. She glanced at me furtively while trying to strap the jacket around her body. She couldn't. Her hands were lifeless and she let the buckles and straps hang loose on her body. She would occasionally, uncontrollably, lick the spot next to her mouth. As though she wanted to make sure the spot was still there.

She said, *I'm pregnant. If I die, two people die.* She said this after giving up on the straps of the lifejacket. She dropped her head and stopped looking at me. She said, *Are you waiting for me to die?* Her voice broke and she had to take a breath before speaking again. Then the boat shook. I remember that I had wanted to show the picture of Dorsa to her again. Or maybe I didn't. Maybe I was looking at Safa, who was angrily cursing the ocean; the rocks along the coastline of an island that was now coming into view.

Then it started to rain. Just like it is now, when, in an instant, the humidity in the air becomes liquid, forming big drops of rain. The shower falls on my head and water drips onto my face. I get up and escape from the trees, the leaves and the mosquitoes, all drenched with rain. As soon as my feet touch the sand on the beach, I call Forough. This time I get through, and it hasn't rung twice before Forough answers and asks, *But where are you?* I say, *Where is Dorsa?* She answers, *She got scared, there's lots of howling here, like a real wolf.* Ahead of me, the beams of the floodlights swing across the water and the reef underneath. Several people are walking in the water in the beams of the lights. Maybe 10 or 15 people. I say, *A child went missing, on the reef.* She asks, *Which child?* And the howling resonates through the phone. As if it was in the same room as her. Forough says, *They want to come inside. They've*

gathered at the door. Then she lets out a small cry and says, *Let's go back tonight, my child is gonna have a heart attack.* I wipe away the drops of rain that have fallen on my face and walk into the water. I say, *Don't be scared, we're in the middle of the ocean here. It's not a real wolf.* Then the line cuts out. At the same time, the beam of light falls on me and on the surrounding water. I can see the coral under my feet. Clean and transparent, the water is no deeper than half a meter. Exactly at my knee. The light moves on. As if an invisible being had taken the big light in its hand and wanted to show people the way. A safe path through the clear water and the rain and the coral. Not what Safa had said, when the boat was going up and down in the rain and the waves, when we got close to the sharp and jagged reef sticking out of the water. The boat rolled to one side and a big wave submerged it. When the boat stabilized, several people had disappeared. They had gone into the water with the wave. The water created a small whirlpool. The boat started to spin. Safa said, *Take the lifejacket. It was yours.* The woman was hanging onto the deck of the boat. She had her face towards me and looked at me with her half-opened eyes. Several people were bent over the sides of the boat trying to save those who had fallen into the water. They shouted and slipped with each movement of the boat from one side to the other. Safa shouted, *But she's dead, look for yourself.* The eyes of the woman were lifeless. There was no movement in her body to prove that she was still breathing. Then Safa shook me violently. He pointed to the island with an outstretched arm. From that distance, even with the rain, I could see people standing on top of the cliff, looking down at us and the boat and the waves. Safa said, *Look, that close, do you want to die like that?*

The top of this coral is my home. The top of this coral is my home. Nearby, those standing above were looking at us. They aimed the trembling floodlights at the water and the coral. I extended my hand and grabbed the corners of the woman's lifejacket. Then with one brisk movement, I pulled her body towards mine. Her face was stuck to the deck and her lips closed. I put my head down to listen, right near the beauty spot next to her lip. Her lips quivered as I pulled the jacket off her. As if saying the word "baby" or something similar with a "b" sound where the lips are pressed together.

Her body then shivered, rolled towards the water and fell off

the deck. Safa said, *I don't think she blinked her eyes once before falling in. She didn't move her lips either.* He said, *She must have been dead. She must've died a long time ago.*

Someone shouted from the distance, *Not that way!*

The tide has risen and comes up to my waist. I turn my head towards the floodlight that shines on the water from the beach. Light twirls in the sky aimlessly and then plunges into the water. Away from me. The floodlights combine at one spot and I hear the splashing of feet in the direction of the lights.

In the darkness something moves on the surface of the water. Away from the light and the human commotion. At first I think it's drops of rain falling lazily on the ocean. But I'm wrong. I see the movement of the water and I hear an indiscernible sound. Something comes to the surface and then goes under again. I shout out. I yell a few times. They don't hear me. They've found something in the light and jump around like children. I swim in the direction of the unsettled water. Small waves roll towards me and go over my head. I taste the water's saltiness and take in a few mouthfuls. The salt touches the wound in my throat. First at the back of my tongue, then it makes its way to my stomach. My hands swish from one side to the other. Swift and flexible, like the fins of a shark. *What the fuck is that person doing there?* I hear the sound of feet running towards me. Suddenly something moves under my arms. Its body touches the tips of my fingers. It's cold and sluggish. It rubs against my hands and then gets washed away by a wave. I scream, *It's here. Light! Over here!* Then I lose my footing. I shudder and the water overwhelms me. I spin in the waves. I swallow water and scream again, *Over here.* The beach seems to be drifting farther away, and it's getting darker. Another wave comes and a shaft of light flies over my head, pointing away from me. Then beams of light rising from the rocks, one by one illuminating the ocean. White lights connect the rocks to the ocean. A little ahead, in the waves and the quivering lights, I see a newborn baby. Its body moving in the water, its arms flapping like the fins of a fish. It's tiny. Its eyes are closed and its mouth opens and shuts frantically. The lights swing onto it and I see the coral-pink umbilical cord attached to its body, following it from the depths of the ocean. From a place obscured in darkness.

*Translated from the Persian by
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