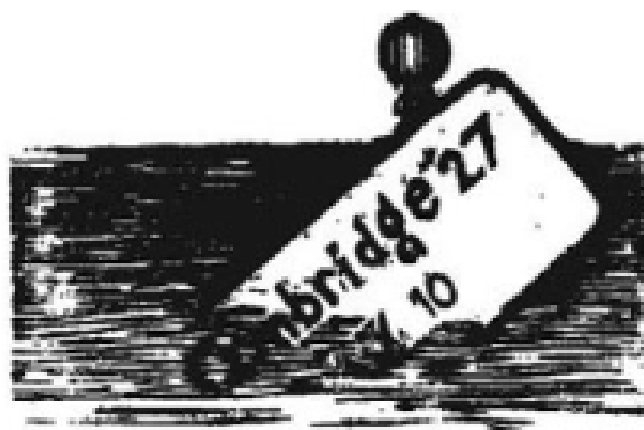




*two*

After the water came, Zoe and her parents had tried for years to stick it out on Norwich, along with another hundred or so. After a while, they realized they were fighting a losing battle, and that the sea was not going to stop rising. Zoe's mum was ill, too. She seemed to have a sickness that came and went, and had lasted for weeks. They'd had enough.

Back then, there were still fairly regular supply trips from the mainland. A big ship used to bring as much food as could be spared, and anchor half a mile offshore. After rowing in with the supplies and sharing them out, the captain would ask if anyone wanted to leave. Usually there would be one or two more people ready to go to the mainland.

But just when Zoe's parents had decided to get off the island, the boat stopped coming. Instead of the usual four or six weeks, three months went by before it reappeared. Finally it slipped into view late one night, as if the captain knew there would be trouble. By now a lot more people than usual wanted to get off the island. There was confusion; it was dark, and a terrible fight broke out to get aboard the two tiny rowing boats. Zoe helped her dad to get her mum on board one of the boats, just as it was pulling away from the shore. It was already dangerously overloaded. Two men were trying to push each other out of the boat, even as the oarsman took his first strokes. One of them succeeded in shoving the other out. There was only enough time and room for Zoe, or her dad, to jump in.

She saw her dad hesitate. She had never seen that before; he always seemed to know what to do. She could see him torn between getting in the boat with his sick wife, or putting his daughter in with her.

Zoe looked at the other boat; there was still a little room to be had. She decided to help her dad; to make the decision for him.

"You go with Mum; she needs you," she yelled.

"No!" said her dad.

"I'll get in the other one." She pointed. "I'll see you on board the ship."

"No," he said, "You get in the boat . . ."

Then the oarsman noticed them.

"Only one of you!" he shouted. "And make it quick! The ship's already full! We're leaving."

He started to pull hard now.

"Dad! It's only as far as the ship. I'll see you there . . ."

Still he hesitated. Zoe forced her decision. She backed away from the boat.

"I'm going for the other one. Get on board, Dad! Quick!"

She saw the relief in her dad's face as he climbed aboard from waist-deep water.

"Zoe . . . well, go then!" he shouted. "Get in the other boat! Hurry, Zoe!"

Zoe turned and saw with horror that the other boat was already leaving. More people were arriving from the town, too, sensing this could be the last chance to get away. They headed for the boat Zoe was making for. She ran across the slimy muddy shore, and tried to climb in over the stern of the boat, then someone hit her on the chin. She fell back dazed in the mud, and watched as the boats moved away towards the lights of the ship.

Suddenly she realized that she was being left behind. Her dad thought she was on the second rowing boat, that he would see her on the ship. She knew the captain wouldn't come back for her. With all these people there would only be another fight. She had to let her dad know now, before the rowing boats reached the ship. She tried to shout, but her voice was weak with exhaustion.

Then she thought she heard her dad call to her.

"Zoe? Are you there?" came his voice through the dark.

"Dad! I'm here! Come back! Get them to come back! Please!"

She thought she was yelling, but in reality she could only manage a whisper. There and then a numbness came to her. Her brain closed in on itself, blocking out the full impact of what had happened. She blacked out, the sea lapping at her legs.

That was a long time ago, though she had no idea whether it was six months, or even a year. It was impossible to tell. She hadn't thought to mark the days, and the weather was so weird you couldn't even be sure what season it was. After waiting a long time for her parents to come looking for her, she began to lose hope. There was no way off and the supply ship never came again. She guessed life was getting harder even on the mainland. She had been sure her parents would come and find her, but maybe they couldn't get a boat, or maybe they'd never even . . . She pushed that idea from her mind, as always, but it didn't change the fact that she was stuck.

Then she had found the boat.

She rowed and rowed, getting weaker all the time, until finally she collapsed over the oars, exhausted.

The boat drifted.

When she woke, it was dawn.

"Damn!" she yelled, for the whole wide sea to hear. Once again she fought to stop the panic rising inside.

"I could be anywhere."

She checked the compass, against the direction she was drifting in.

"South-west. Could be worse."

Even so, there was no sign of any land, in any direction. But then, turning on the thwart, she saw it for the first time. She opened her mouth in surprise, but said nothing. Far away on the horizon was a massive, ancient, stone building. It had two tall towers that stuck into the sky, one at the end and another shorter one in the middle. She couldn't see that there was any land underneath it, and it looked as if it was floating on the sea.

Turning back in her seat, she put her head down, and started to row towards the floating cathedral.

It would be somewhere to stop for a while, at least. She needed to sleep, and to find some food and water. Maybe she could find out where she was, so she would know which way to go on. Perhaps the ship that took her parents away had stopped here too. Someone might have seen them. But then, it looked to be only a little island. Zoe thought there probably wouldn't be anyone left on it.

She was wrong.