

The Great Escape by *Lolita Chakrabarti*

Nelson Gladstone walked along the sandy beach and felt relieved to feel the strong wind on his face. It was six a.m. and there was no one to be seen but him. This was a morning of reflection and he had a lot to think about. Trouble had struck at home and he'd just got in the car and run away, as he always did. His beautiful wife, Elaine, had found out about the pointless affair he had been having with Marcie from the office. In one fell swoop he had lost his wife, three kids and all self-esteem. And the worst of it was that Nelson knew he had no one to blame but himself and that was the hardest pill of all to swallow.

No one could have been more disappointed in Nelson than himself. He could hear his Dad's disapproving voice crossing the seas from Barbados. 'You never learn do you Nelson? You spoil everything good in your life. You are so terribly predictable.' He could imagine his Mum in her flat in London apologising to Elaine for what an awful job she did raising her pointless son. But he already knew he didn't deserve to be happy. He was the empty space his Dad always called him.

So he'd driven through the night away from all he truly loved to a desolate beach somewhere in Scotland. He was tired by sleep was the last thing he could do. He kicked the sodden sand with his foot. He looked up and felt the wind greet him with a deliciously cold slap. It was no more than he deserved. He looked out to sea and the vastness of it made him feel small, perhaps his problems weren't so big after all.

As he looked out across the water he saw bobbing not too far from the shore what he thought was an orange dinghy. Nelson strained to see it because it looked as if it had someone in it. But surely with these winds, in this cold, no one in their right mind would go out in a dinghy? He focused as hard as he could on the little boat and sure enough, there was a person in it and they were trying to attract his attention.

Nelson looked around for someone else who could help but there was no one. The only thing that could be of remote assistance was an orange life belt strapped to a wooden hut at one end of the beach. Nelson panicked. He wasn't a strong swimmer but he could see the winds were rising fast and the waves were getting bigger. The dinghy looked like a paddling dinghy not something that would withstand the angry lashes of the sea. He looked for his mobile phone but realised that he'd run out of the house with nothing but the clothes on his back and the car keys. He couldn't phone for help. Nelson had no choice.

He ran to the wooden hut and wrenched the life belt off. It was heavier than he thought. He dragged it to the edge of the sea and removed his shoes, socks and shirt. He took one final look around for help but there was no one and clutching the life belt he ran into the water. It was freezing and it sent a shiver through his whole body. 'What am I doing?' he thought. 'This is suicide.' But once he'd said that word he realised that he was a loser, a low life, things would probably be better without him. He tried to push the life belt against the waves but the force of the sea was strong and it pushed him back. Nevertheless he made some headway and soon he was floating far from the shore. He could see the dinghy clearly now and the person inside it was a child, a little boy of about ten. Nelson was overcome with anger. This little kid, no bigger than his own son, out here alone, where were his parents for goodness sake?

Nelson pulled the life belt over his head and found it reassuring to have its solidity around him. He could feel the cold in his bones now but there was no going back. He swam hard against the water but when he looked up to gauge his progress he was no nearer the dinghy. He was exhausted. He looked back to the shore and saw that he was further out than he'd ever been in his life. He started to feel a blind panic rising inside him, he was not in control, the sea was so vast and frightening. He decided to focus on the dinghy, it was the only way of maintaining his calm, he had to focus. He looked over and saw the boy watching him expectantly, gripping onto the side of his dinghy, willing him to get there, terrified. Suddenly, totally out of the blue, a giant wave hit him and knocked all the air out of his lungs. He spluttered and coughed and thanks only to the life belt he managed to stay afloat.

He felt as if he'd swallowed a gallon of water. He looked up and saw the wave breaking against the shore and a couple of distant figures on the beach looking out. He was too exhausted to try and attract their attention. It was no use anyway, what could they do? He turned round to see if the boy was still in the dinghy and realised that the killer wave had pushed him closer to it. But he couldn't see the boy. He called out in vain against the sound of the water and thought the boy had been washed overboard but then suddenly he saw the boy peeping out from the dinghy where he had curled up on the floor and held on for dear life. The dinghy was a few metres away. Seeing the boy gave Nelson a new burst of energy. He was determined to make it. He didn't wait to catch his breath he just kicked and paddled as hard as he could.

The water was an awesome but terrifying opponent. Every stroke forward felt like ten. Each time Nelson looked up he could see the boy, calling, willing him to reach the dinghy. He swam hard and finally, thank god, he reached the dinghy and clung on. He was exhausted but he knew that the journey back to shore was going to be tiring if they made it at all. He looked back to the shore and could hardly see it. He tried to clear the water from his face to see better but this was no trick of the light, the wind had blown them both much further out to sea. Nelson didn't know what to do.

A wave was building up behind them and surprised them both overturning the dinghy on it's way to the shore. By the time Nelson surfaced, the boy was gone. Nelson plunged down under the water, grabbing wildly for whatever he could. He felt clothing in his closed fist. He pulled upwards with strength he didn't know he had and the boy landed spluttering onto the upturned dinghy.

'I'm sorry,' cried the boy. 'I was running away because they were being horrible but I didn't mean to get this far.'

'Who's they?' asked Nelson feeling strangely calmed by the sound of a human voice.

'Mum and Dad found out that I stole some money and we had a big row and I ran away,' overcome with his own shame he burst into tears.

Nelson wanted to hug him but the dinghy would never hold them both. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'I ran away too. I know how you feel.'

'What do we do now?' the boy asked plainly.

Good question thought Nelson.

'Can you hear that buzzing?' asked the boy.

Nelson could hear nothing but the swish of the water in this ears.

'It's getting louder,' said the boy.

Nelson looked around and suddenly as if out of nowhere a helicopter zoomed over their heads and away.

‘Come back!’ shouted Nelson, ‘We’re over here!’

The helicopter turned as if it heard him and came to hover just above them. A rope ladder dropped from the sky and a man scampered down it, strapped the boy into a harness and helped him to climb up the ladder. Nelson waited clinging to the dinghy, almost crying with relief. The man came back and hooked Nelson onto the ladder and together they climbed up. Only when he was in the safety of the helicopter and wrapped up in a blanket did he allow himself to let go. He had never been so glad to be alive.

The little boy looked at Nelson and said ‘thank you’.

Nelson replied, ‘That was a very silly thing to do, on your own like that.’

‘I know,’ said the boy and his top lip started to tremble.

‘Why did you steal?’ asked Nelson with his stern father face on.

‘Because I wanted to buy a snorkel and Mum said no.’ The boy reflected on his misdeeds before asking, ‘Why did you run away?’

Nelson was surprised by the question and searched for the right words before he blurted out. ‘Upset my wife. Not proud of myself at all.’

‘My Mum says ‘sorry goes a long way’,’ said the boy briefly.

Nelson pulled the blanket tightly round himself, he looked down at the steep drop from the helicopter to the sea and glanced at the little face of this young boy that he had just saved and he didn’t feel so worthless after all. He had risked his life and survived. Nothing could be as frightening as that. Perhaps if he went home and faced the music and fought for what he really wanted then he would be being more of a man after all. ‘Running gets you nowhere,’ said Nelson and the little boy nodded his head sagely in agreement. They both looked down at the sea and prepared to face the music.