

Life of Pi

CHAPTER 40

Richard Parker did not jump into the water after me. The oar I intended to use as a club floated. I held on to it as I reached for the lifebuoy, now vacant of its previous occupant. It was terrifying to be in the water. It was black and cold and in a rage. I felt as if I were at the bottom of a crumbling well. Water kept crashing down on me. It stung my eyes. It pulled me down. I could hardly breathe. If there hadn't been the lifebuoy I wouldn't have lasted a minute.

I saw a triangle slicing the water fifteen feet away. It was a shark's fin. An awful tingle, cold and liquid, went up and down my spine. I swam as fast as I could to one end of the lifeboat, the end still covered by the tarpaulin. I pushed myself up on the tarpaulin with my arms. I couldn't see Richard Parker. He wasn't on the tarpaulin or on a bench. He was at the bottom of the lifeboat. I pushed myself up again. All I could see, briefly, at the other end, was the zebra's head thrashing about. As I fell back into the water another shark's fin glided right before me.

The bright orange tarpaulin was held down by a strong nylon rope that wove its way between metal grommets in the tarpaulin and blunt hooks on the side of the boat. I happened to be treading water at the bow. The tarpaulin was not as securely fixed going over the stem – which had a very short prow, what in a face would be called a snub nose – as it was elsewhere around the boat. There was a little looseness in the tarpaulin as the rope went from one hook on one side of the stem to the next hook on the other side. I lifted the oar in the air and I shoved its handle into this looseness, into this lifesaving detail. I pushed the oar in as far as it would go. The lifeboat now had a prow projecting over the waves, if crookedly. I pulled myself up and wrapped my legs around the oar. The oar handle pushed up against the tarpaulin, but tarpaulin, rope and oar held. I was out of the water, if only by a fluctuating two, three feet. The crest of the larger waves kept striking me.

I was alone and orphaned, in the middle of the Pacific, hanging on to an oar, an adult tiger in front of me, sharks beneath me, a storm raging about me. Had I considered my prospects in the light of reason, I surely would have given up and let go of the oar, hoping that I might drown before being eaten. But I don't recall that I had a single thought during those first minutes of relative safety. I didn't even notice daybreak. I held on to the oar, I just held on, God only knows why.

After a while I made good use of the lifebuoy. I lifted it out of the water and put the oar through its hole. I worked it down until the ring was hugging me. Now it was only with my legs that I had to hold on. If Richard Parker appeared, it would be more awkward to drop from the oar, but one terror at a time, Pacific before tiger.

CHAPTER 41

The elements allowed me to go on living. The lifeboat did not sink. Richard Parker kept out of sight. The sharks prowled but did not lunge. The waves splashed me but did not pull me off.

I watched the ship as it disappeared with much burbling and belching. Lights flickered and went out. I looked about for my family, for survivors, for another lifeboat, for anything that might bring me hope. There was nothing. Only rain, marauding waves of black ocean and the flotsam of tragedy.

The darkness melted away from the sky. The rain stopped.

Extract from *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel

