

Yusra Mardini, Rio Olympics - 2016

Dear diary,

I awoke with a surprising sense of calm. The first light of dawn filtered through the curtains, painting my room in hues of pink and gold. The soft chirp of the birds outside my window was a gentle reminder that a new day had begun. Slowly, I open my eyes and feel a surge of nerves fluttering in my stomach. Today is the day. The day I've been training for, dreaming of, and dreading all at once. Today is the day of my Olympic swim race. Deep down, I know that the only person I need to prove myself to is me.

As anticipation bubbled inside of me, I swung my legs over the side of my bed. I took a deep breath, as I slipped into my swimsuit. The familiar feeling of the cool mesh fabric somewhat flustered me ; it almost embraced me like an old friend. At ease, I brushed my teeth, gazing out the window trying to calm the pusillanimity inside me. I knew that this was my opportunity to show how far I had come. From Damascus to Germany to Rio.

At 10:30 am, I called for a cab and as I awaited its arrival, I thought of my pool in Syria. It held so many memories. Snapping me out of my daze, I heard my cab pull up to the curb. I was ready. I had to be.

When I arrived, the familiar scent of chlorine made me smile. The roar of the crowd was a beast, a living, breathing entity that pulsed and vibrated through the stands of the Olympic Aquatics Stadium. I huddled in my warm-up suit, feeling its heat radiating off the packed arena, a tangible presence that threatened to swallow me whole.

It was the sound of expectations, of hopes, of a world that had watched my story unfold with bated breath. A world that had seen me brave the Aegean Sea, clinging to a flimsy dinghy alongside my sister, a world that had witnessed the raw, desperate will that pushed me to swim for hours on end, pulling a boat full of refugees towards safety.

Soon after 12:00, they blew their whistles and called the competitors in my race to the diving blocks. Salty sweat dripped off my upper lip.

The starting whistle pierced the air like a knife. The other swimmers launched themselves into the water, their bodies slicing through the surface with a practised grace. I almost took a moment, breathing in the chlorine-filled air, feeling the heat of the lights, the deafening roar of the crowd. Then, with a deep breath and a surge of adrenaline, I dove into the pool.

The water enveloped me, a familiar embrace. It was cold, but it was also a comfort, calming the storm within me. The noise of the crowd faded, replaced by the rhythmic sound of my own breathing, the swish of the water against my skin. I was no longer just Yusra Mardini, a refugee fleeing a war-torn country. I was a swimmer, a competitor, a woman who had defied all odds, a beacon of hope for a world in need of inspiration.

And as I surged through the water, each stroke became a testament to my journey.