Introduction

The boy put on his goggles, fitted them tightly, and tested the vacuum.

His hands were shaking.

Then he chose the biggest stone he could carry and slipped over the edge of the rock until half of him was in the cool, enclosing water and half in the hot sun.

He looked up once at the empty sky, filled his lungs twice, and sank fast to the bottom with the stone.

He let it go and began to count.

He took the edges of the hole in his hands and drew himself into it, wriggling his shoulders sideways as he remembered he must, kicking himself along with his feet.

Soon, he was clear inside.

He was in a small rock-bound hole filled with yellowish-grey water.

The water was pushing him up against the roof.

The roof was sharp, and his back was painted.

He pulled himself along with his hands, fast, fast — and used his legs as levers.

His head knocked against something; a sharp pain dizzied him.

Fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two ...

He was without light, and the water seemed to press upon him with the weight of rock.

Seventy-one, seventy-two ...

There was no strain on his lungs.

He felt like an inflated balloon.

His lungs were light and easy, but his head was pulsing.

He was being continually pressed against the sharp roof, which felt slimy as well as sharp.

Again, he thought of octopuses and wondered if the tunnel might be filled with weed that could tangle him.

He gave himself a panicky, convulsive kick forward, ducked his head, and swam.-His feet and hands moved freely, as if in open water.

The hole must have widened out.

He thought he must be swimming fast, and he was frightened of banging his head if the tunnel narrowed.

The water paled< Victory filled him.

His lungs were beginning to hurt.

A few more strokes and he would be out.

He was counting wildly; he said a hundred and fifteen, and then, a long time later, a hundred and fifteen again.

The water was a clear jewel-green all around him.

Then he saw, above his head, a crack running up through the rock.

Sunlight was falling through it, showing the clean, dark rock of the tunnel, a single mussel shell, and darkness ahead.

He was at the end of what he could do.

He looked up at the crack as if it were filled with air and not water, as if he could put his mouth to it to draw in air.

A hundred and fifteen, he heard himself say inside his head — but he had said that long ago.

He must go on into the blackness ahead, or he would drown.

His head was swelling, his lungs cracking.

A hundred and fifteen, a hundred and fifteen pounded through his head, and he feebly clutched at rocks in the dark, pulling himself forward, leaving the brief space of sunlit water behind.

He felt he was dying.

He was no longer quite conscious.

He struggled on in the darkness between lapses into unconsciousness.

An immense, swelling pain filled his head, and then the darkness cracked with an explosion of green light.

His hands, groping forward, met nothing, and his feet, kicking back, propelled him out into the open sea.

The boy was able to get to the seafloor quickly because the weight of the stone carried him down.

The boy found it difficult to swim after he was inside the tunnel because it was so narrow and because the water pushed him up against the roof.

The boy got into a panic as he swam through the tunnel because he wondered if the tunnel might be filled with weeds.

His lungs were hurting, but he went on counting.

At a hundred and fifteen, he saw a crack with sunlight coming through, but he could not swim up.

He had to go on through the tunnel although his head was aching and his lungs were cracking.

He pulled himself forward, repeating a hundred and fifteen and feeling that he was going to become unconscious.

Suddenly, there was a green light; he groped forward, felt nothing, and kicked up into the open sea.

The story of the boy swimming to the open sea through a long water-filled tunnel immediately reminded me of an experience I had a few years ago.

I was still at school at the time.

The town I lived in was situated on the coast and in a valley with hills around it, and some friends and I used to enjoy cycling up into the hills at weekends to go caving.

I must explain that the local hills had been formed from soft rock and were full of caves, which in turn had been formed over millions of years by streams and underground rivers.

One weekend, we decided to go down one cave, which was quite difficult.

We had arranged for a professional, experienced caver to act as our guide and take us down.

We cycled out and met our guide at a cavers’ hut, changed into our caving clothes, collected our equipment together—helmets and lamps, ropes, rope ladders and so on—and walked to the entrance of the cave.

At first, we had no difficulties.

Then, when we were about 30 metres below ground and were walking along in an underground stream, the roof of the tunnel dipped down in front of us, and we came to a large pool of water.

We thought that was the end of the tunnel.

Not at all.

Instead of turning back, our guide said:

The tunnel goes under the water here for two or three metres.

Just lie down on your stomach, take a deep breath, and pull yourself through.

You’ll only be underwater for a few seconds.

Just follow me.’

We were all horrified—but we did it.

That was the most frightening experience I have ever had, and I dreaded the idea of going back in order to get out of the cave again.

Fortunately, our guide then told us that there was another way out through another tunnel, which did not involve diving underwater.

We were all very pleased!