



**Simone Buchholz**

## **Only the Others are Immortal**

Novel

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Roman)

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Sample translation by Rachel Ward

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So, I used to go for lots of walks. For weeks, months, almost an entire year. Before that, I was just holding my breath all day long, the way I always do when everything gets too much for me. I hold my breath when I spend too long sitting at my desk, I hold my breath if I've hurt myself, or hurt you. I hold my breath if something goes wrong, if someone's crying out there somewhere; and if someone dies, I hold it for an extra-long time.

I hold my breath in the childish belief that nothing bad will happen if I just don't breathe.

My trick obviously doesn't affect world events in any way, but it affects me because if I don't breathe my left side stiffens up. It begins just under my scalp, right over my temple, and it ends just above my sole, to the left of my instep. When my left side has got so stiff that I actually notice it, I go for a walk. Relaxation exercises on the streets.

One day, I turned left down at the port, perhaps because I list in that direction, or perhaps just because I was following someone else who was out for a walk, and then I turned left again, and then again, and it grew dark, and it grew light, the summer soon came, then autumn and winter, it was a long winter with cold rain and black ice but one morning all the light showed up, spring descended upon the city just as I was walking through the tunnel under the river, had made it to the south side, to the end of the endlessly long steps back up; I turned left this one last time, and there I was, standing outside this shop.

It was small and square, clinging on over an old shipping canal. Beneath the blue-and-white awning was a metal bench on two metres of concrete right by the water. In the shop

window were a few nautical instruments in brass, and a good dozen ships-in-bottles. Someone had painted “your daily needs” over the glass in thick, white letters.

I sat on the hard bench, my left-hand side feeling pretty OK. I dangled my feet over the canal. I was exhausted, but I was breathing evenly. The shop door opened, a dainty bell jingled.

“Hello.”

Standing in front of me was a woman in jeans and a pale grey T-shirt; her thick, black curly hair was shot through with threads of silver and tied up in a firm knot; on her feet she wore clogs in pale wood and brown leather. She was about my age, maybe a few years younger, or maybe she’d just got lucky with her face. Her life stories lay around her eyes – the nice ones and the not-so-nice.

“Hello,” I said.

She looked at me and smiled.

“Can I sit here for a bit?” I asked. “Outside your shop? I’ve walked such a long way.”

“Of course,” she said, with a glance at the water. Then she looked back at me. “Would you like some coffee? I’ve just put a pot on the hob.”

“To be honest, I’d rather have a glass of water.”

“Have one with your coffee, huh?” she asked.

The canal rippled peacefully away; the sun set it glittering.

“Ah, why not,” I said.

The woman vanished through the shop door, humming some song or other; the bell rang in her wake, and a few minutes later, she was back, sitting down beside me; she placed the tray with two cups of coffee and two glasses of water between us on the bench.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Don’t mention it,” she said.

I tipped milk into my coffee. And sugar.

“So, you sell ships in bottles.”

Ever since I was little and spent a lot of time travelling with my grandfather on nautical matters, I’ve wanted one of those things, a bottle with a sailing ship living inside it, but over all those years I’d never had the opportunity to buy one, or to put it another way: something else had always been more important.

“Yes,” she said, “a ship in a bottle for your daily needs,” and she took a slurp of her coffee, she drank it black.

“Ships-in-bottles are a daily need?”

“For some people they are.”

“Interesting,” I said, “and can you make a living from them?”

“No,” she said, “it’s only a hobby. I’m actually a professor.”

She looked me in the eyes.

“Prof. Dr Schneider, Chair of Bottleshipology at the University of Kiel.”

“Kiel has a professor of bottleshipology? That’s a thing?”

“Well,” she said, “I just kind of made that up.”

“Oh, right.”

“Yeah, right.”

We drank our coffee and I thought for a moment about what an idiot I am. Professor Schneider lit a cigarette.

“You’re welcome to go in and have a look at the ships.”

“I’d love that,” I said, “thank you.”

She turned her head towards the door.

“OK then, have fun, and be careful.”

I didn’t quite know how to take that, but I put my coffee cup back down on the tray and went inside. Professor Schneider stayed outside on her bench.

The ships were tightly packed on the shelves, they were hanging from the ceiling and piled up on tables. Three-masters, four-masters, dinghies and fishing boats, junks and pirate ships, paddle steamers and ocean liners. The sepia light shimmered in all the glass and old materials. The room wasn’t large, and it smelled of wood, glue and saltwater. Everything seemed to be on the move. Standing by the rear window, which wasn’t much bigger than a porthole, was a bulbous bottle. The ship inside it looked oddly out of keeping with the rest. There was nothing historic about it – it looked more like a modern cruise ship thing, if a little more luxurious, and perhaps a little smaller overall.

I was careful, like she’d said, but picked the bottle up and lost myself there on the deck, and in everything behind the little windows, on the bridge, in the cabins, in a kind of bar. The ship was white, had a low yet long funnel which extended almost halfway over the upper deck; the funnel was dark blue and the railings glinted in a matt gold.

I hadn’t even noticed that I’d walked out again, holding the bottle with the ship in it in my hand, but now I found myself by Professor Schneider on the bench.

“You picked that one? Seriously?”

I didn’t quite understand.

She lit another cigarette.

“Would you like one?”

“No thanks,” I said, “I gave up.”

We looked each other in the eye.

“Now you can open it,” she said.

“Open it?”

“Sure. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“I have no idea why I’m here,” I said.

“My ships are for people’s daily needs,” she said. “It’s daytime and you’re clearly in need. So, go on, open the bloody thing.”

I laid the ship in a bottle in my lap and held – what else – my breath.

“But don’t down the whole bottle in one, OK?”

“OK,” I said, and drew out the cork.

## Light Fittings

They were practically alone on the road north, the rear lights of the only other car glowed in the distance. As soon as they'd crossed the Danish border, mist had crept over the landscape to either side of the motorway; now it covered everything, as if the world behind it had been swallowed up.

The weather closed around Iva's thoughts; she popped another biscuit into her mouth.

Malin was sitting beside her, gripping the steering wheel tightly with both hands, moving her head to the music. At Iva's feet was the bag of provisions. Crips, nuts, biscuits, fruit, chocolate, gummi sweets. Beer and wine for later.

Friday evening, mid-November.

"There," said Malin, "Aalborg."

For a few seconds, a sign had appeared in the fog, now it had vanished again.

"Another three quarters of an hour."

Iva looked at her friend and a warm wave flooded her belly. Malin loved dividing time up rather than just letting it run. Perhaps because it made it feel like she was the one deciding. She sang along to the radio, half a line of a song, as she drove – friendly yet firm – towards the white wall of fog.

"Here," said Iva, holding the packet of biscuits under Malin's nose. "Have another."

The blue neon sign grew out of the hotel's head; it was exactly as tall as the two-storey building itself. The thing was dousing the beach and the first few rows of waves in cold light. The mist had drawn back, the air was clear and crackled on their lips.

"*Desperate Rooms*." Iva dragged on her cigarette and tapped Malin's forehead with her middle finger. "Seriously?"

"All the other hotels in this place had such bad reviews," said Malin. "And this was the only one where nobody had written *anything* about it." She took another drag on her cigarette, stubbed it out with her foot and picked up her rucksack. "Besides, it just said *Hotel*, which I liked."

"It says *Hotel Desperate Rooms*," said Iva.

"Oh, that's just something they added on, you know," said Malin. "Come on, it looks OK, really, doesn't it?"

Iva thought it might even look more than OK. A pale grey, pragmatic square, not overly large, with two sets of four white-framed windows, four on the ground floor, four on the floor above. A warm, yellow glow from reception, just through the glass door. Then the icy writing on the roof and the starry sky.

There was seagrass lying all over the place and the wind playing about with it a bit, as if it had blown it over from the dunes in person. Iva felt the sand under her boots and dropped her cigarette.

The man on reception was the Argentinian pilot type, hard-cut face, slightly broken nose, thick, dark hair, slicked back from his brow with something that shone. His brown eyes were hugely alert, they dissected the air, yet at the same time there seemed to be a great sadness caught in his eyelashes, weighing down his eyelids. It was an A+ gaze, one that always hit home, in every heart that faced him, whether open or closed. He caught them all with his gaze, that much was obvious.

Iva and Malin paid upfront, the guy gave them the key to their room, then they walked past the small bar; his eyes on the back of Iva's neck created a build-up of pressure, but the feeling soon passed.

The bar looked makeshift. As if it had only just been built. Sitting at the counter was a middle-aged woman, her face wasn't exactly beautiful but was certainly attractive, she was drinking bottled beer and watching them walk by. She was wearing jeans, golden ankle boots, a white shirt and a trench coat. Her shoulder-length hair was chestnut coloured. She looked like the boss of everything.

The room was on the first floor, with a sea view. Iva sat at the window; outside there were the dunes and the blue light, the black North Sea reaching out to the sky. Malin lay on the bed and writhed slightly.

"I'm ovulating."

"Me too," said Iva, putting her glass of water on the windowsill. "Budge up."

Malin budged, Iva lay down behind her on the liberated half of the bed and put her arms around her friend, this scientist who was alone in the world with no parents, no siblings, no children. At first glance so fragile, yet in reality strong and robust. Malin's smooth, flaxen hair flowed over the pillow and a few strands flowed over Iva's face. Iva had worn her dark, stubborn curls up in a tight knot, an intractable knot, for ages now; she was fascinated by the way Malin just wore her hair down, had no problem just going around with it like that.

“Arseholes,” said Malin, “they’re such arseholes.”

Iva’s thoughts were still on Malin’s hair, so this confused her.

“What?”

“They are.”

“Who are?”

“Them. For pissing off like that.”

“Oh, them.”

“In the end they’ll turn out to be hanging around some fjord, smoking dope. And Tarik’ll have forgotten me.”

“That’s nonsense, Malin, you know that.”

“No I don’t.”

“We’ve been through this a thousand times – that’s definitely not true.”

Malin groaned.

“And if I have to listen to that stuff one more time,” said Iva, “I’ll pack my things and get the next train home.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Of course I won’t do that.”

She stroked her friend’s hair. Obviously, she’d rather be angry with Tarik than worried about him. But there was no way he’d jumped ship. That was bullshit. Iva didn’t know Tarik half as well as Malin did, but he wasn’t the kind of guy to just piss off. He wasn’t the type to just chuck stuff. He’d spent years fighting and slogging to get where he was, he was proud of his steady job at the newspaper. He was deputy-something-or-other now, paid his parents’ rent and, on the side, looked after his brother who found it difficult to navigate the world. There’d been so many times he’d got a phone call in the middle of the night, while they were sitting in Malin’s kitchen, or in a pub, and every time, he’d said: Sorry, I have to go. Iva had sometimes felt a little insulted, like she’d been stood up, even though it hadn’t been about her in any way.

Tarik didn’t leave anyone hanging, least of all Malin. They were like brother and sister, yet they were an item – when it just fitted, sometimes it fitted for months at a time.

They’d known each other since school, year ten or thereabouts – ages, either way.

There was a photo in Malin’s kitchen of her and Tarik in Malin’s parents’ garden, a few years before that fucking car crash, fresh-faced Malin and Tarik, teenagers, almost children still. Malin’s father in the background by the barbecue, her mother photobombing from the side, pulling a face, puffing up her cheeks and staring, saucer-eyed.

“It’s just not like him,” said Iva, “not getting in touch. Something must have happened that means he *can’t* get in touch.”

Then she realised.

“But he’s not dead, Malin.”

“I know he’s not dead,” said Malin, sitting up. “We’re two-in-one. If he was dead, seriously, I’d know about it.”

Her blonde hair tumbled over her shoulders. Iva felt like a cigarette, but not like standing by the window in the cold air. She took a deep breath in and out again.

“So would you sense it if I were dead too?”

“Hey,” said Malin, “if you were dead, my world would crumble.”

“*C’mon*,” said Iva.

“You’re all I’ve got. You and Tarik.”

Iva pulled Malin back down to the mattress and hugged her tight.

“We’ll find him.”

Perhaps she was holding her friend, who was so physically delicate, a little too tightly but that happened to her with her daughter now and then, and it didn’t really hurt, you could bear it; it was just that she was very much there in those moments. And so they fell asleep without even touching the beer or the wine.

The light was still on in the bathroom.

Around midnight, the man from reception and the chestnut-haired woman were standing by the water. They looked out at the sea, the moon lit up the sky, the sign on the roof had been switched off, all the lights in the hotel were out, even the ones in the rooms.

In any case, only one was occupied, same as ever.

The woman held the man’s left hand, his right arm hung down kind of lifelessly.



*17 October 2014*

by the light of the ship's computer  
they sleep with me  
surrounded by navigation equipment  
and lying outside is the heavy sea, and they tell me that there are three more on board now.

I say: OK, OK, I'll bear that in mind, later, but it doesn't bother me, anyone's welcome here  
as long as they're not Nazis.

oh wow  
what are you doing

whatever you like, they say, you're the captain.

and then I've got the red, glinting curls in my hands again, I've got the storm in my lungs and  
the waves in my heart  
then there's the lightning in my belly  
and at some point, as always  
there's  
a fishtail in the way

[...]

*5 August 1938*

They appear without warning out of the darkness, possibly even out of the walls of the ship, they stand in front of me, and look at me. There are so many of them that it seems pointless to try to count them, and as they're all bathed in that special light each of them blurs into the next anyway so I don't even bother trying, why should I, they don't seem all that threatening.

They're wearing strings of pearls or shells, they're wearing dresses made in shimmering fabrics, or just in foam and waves and rain, some are holding water animals by the hand or under their arms or as part of their bodies, some are naked, some are simply wrapped in their floor-length hair. They are tall, tiny, slim, voluptuous, young, old, alert, tired, delicate, angry, strong, weak, there are all shapes and colours, faces and feelings. Each of them is, in her own way, the most beautiful of all.

And so they stand there by the windows, between the ocean, the navigation equipment and me, and they look as though they want something. I sense what this is about, after all, they signalled as much that night: it's about me.

Fine, I think, let's go then, I feel safe here on the bridge, I can do this, whatever it may be, and I spread out my arms, OK, come here.

I haven't been with a woman for over ten years, I don't even know if I still can, but I rely on my physical memory, the way I always do in a storm, in case of doubt, my hands know what they have to do.

They overwhelm me and hours later, when we're finished with each other or, to be honest, they're finished with me, I smoke a cigarette on deck and look at the water; the full moon is in the sky. If that's what they want from me, I can live with that, even for an eternity.

*On deck, on the elongated, dark blue funnel, amid the thick, white smoke, amid the steam,  
facing towards the stars, among the clouds: them.*

*(some of them are smoking)*

not bad

captain

NOT BAD

that's the lovely thing about HUMANS

if you catch them by the HEART

they throw themselves, with EVERYTHING

that they ARE

with EVERYTHING

that they WANT,

into that one MOMENT

but he was a bit worked up too

wasn't he

yes

so CUTE

## Ablaze

Thick, heavy stars. Iva was standing on deck and smoking, her eyes fixed on the sky. At home there weren't stars like this, at home the city was always in the way, at home it was almost ten by now and she'd forgotten to call Lilo again. Or at least to message her quickly.

She'd been so firmly intending to, but then.

For a moment there was a hint of panic, a twitching in her head like a warning – how could she forget to call her daughter, how could she – but the pills soon let the twitching die away again. It had to be the pills. As if they hadn't just swallowed down Iva's seasickness, but all her other worries too. She sent her daughter another kiss and a heart and a *sleep tight*, even though she knew it was far too late, that Lilo would be fast asleep. The floor shuddered beneath her feet and she felt cold. The wind was flattening the white smoke out of the big, blue chimney, it was lying over the middle of the ship like a blanket of cottonwool.

“Good evening.”

Iva turned around.

Oh.

So, he was a good head and shoulders taller than her after all, he was wearing a white, coarse-knit roll-neck jumper and a naval jacket. His dark hair had freed itself from the slicking back, it was being blown around his face, he tried for a moment to get to grips with the problem, but then let it be.

“Hello. Good evening.”

“Could you spare me a cigarette? I left mine up on the bridge.”

Iva pulled the packet out of the left-hand pocket on her down jacket and held it out to him.

“Here you go.”

He took a cigarette, she gave him a light, he smoked. The glow lit up his profile. She'd have liked to photograph it, perhaps to capture it or perhaps just for something to do, because she didn't quite know where to stow the alarm swelling in her heart.

He, on the other hand, seemed content to watch the water.

She lit herself a cigarette too and tried to sort out his being here. He seemed to encounter people in a different way from usual. Not as hard, not as quick, not as challenging. Somehow old-fashioned. She noticed that he was stretching.

Too long sitting on the bridge. It was that kind of stretch.

“Are you enjoying the journey?”

How stupid of her to shatter the silence. It had been a nice silence. She looked at the water and almost hoped that he hadn't heard her question. He looked at her side on. His eyes broke her ribs.

“I ought to be asking you that question.”

The old-fashioned quiet between them held firm, it wasn't broken by those few lines, it could withstand speech.

“There's no 'ought' about anything,” she said.

He smiled and said: “That's OK, I don't mind chatting to you.”

Me either, thought Iva, and she said: “Who's steering the ship? If you're down here smoking?”

“My first mate. We split the shifts – mostly she steers by day and I steer by night.”

Iva raised her eyebrows.

“Surely it's been night for ages now?”

“She's on duty today,” he says. “Tomorrow night I'll take over again.”

“How can you sleep like that,” said Iva.

He took a step towards the railing and turned towards her. Please don't look so directly, she thought, please don't.

“Alcohol,” he said. “And memory.”

Memory.

His gaze exploded in Iva's belly and started a gallop through the almost four decades of her life. Her fatherless childhood. Her youth on the streets, in corners, in other people's houses. Her perpetually working mother who was homesick for New Zealand, her grandmothers' country, these women that Iva only knew from photos on the windowsill. Then her twenties. Drinks, men, colours, in the zone, at high speed. Her thirties. Her pregnancy, the struggles, the beds, everything so stressful and always so hideously loud. Since then, she'd made peace on a few fronts, but perhaps that was just sugar coating it and in fact there'd come some point when she'd just given up because some of the stuff was simply unbearable by then.

But this look – the captain's eyes still resting on her, in an awesome kind of way – was something she could stand. Even so, she tried to discharge at least some of the tension; she summed up the pain in his expression, the source of which she couldn't even begin to guess at: “You're not much older than me and you're a captain for God's sake.”

“You've put your finger on two sore spots in one sentence,” he said, dragging on his cigarette one last time. “Interesting.”

Iva too had only the filter left in her hand. He took it from her and disposed of both ends in a bin by the metal door.

She had briefly hoped that his hand would touch hers in the process, and she'd thought about just touching him when his fingertips wandered towards hers.

She breathed in and out again.

He tried again to smooth back his hair, but the wind was against it.

"The air is so salty today."

She nodded.

"Richard," he said, holding out his right hand.

"Iva," she said, laying her left hand in his.

And then he just didn't let go, and he opened the door with his other hand, and together they walked down the steps to the bar which Ola was filling with Sinatra songs, but the good stuff, Malin was at the bar mingling with the crew, and moving among these curiously beautiful people as if she belonged to them. The windows glittered.

Iva's fingertips were ablaze.

[...]

*four weeks earlier, on the ocean floor, in a kind of underwater amphitheatre, in a kind of sunken city, Atlantis maybe; fish swim across the scene, small, large, colourful; a few ships, or rather boats, lie scattered around on the sand, the amphitheatre galleries are packed out, and all over the stage: them*

I can't STAND it

me EITHER

I know

I don't know

I don't find it THAT bad

I do

it's an absolute LIBERTY

he must be mad

I guess he just can't know

who he's DEALING with here

well

IF it was like that

the way you say

yes

it was

it WAS like that

it was DEFINITELY like that

what even WAS that

what exactly HAPPENED

hello

could you all kindly CONCENTRATE for once

I was there too

yes

me too

but where did YOU all get to

what was that again

good GRIEF

would you synchronise PLEASE

SORRY

it's just that there's always so much to DO

sometimes you just can't QUITE

keep on top of things

I had a TSUNAMI to deal with here

which of you WAS it this time

why

a tsunami is GREAT

obviously

YOU'D be the one to say that

my crocodile's wonky

OK

gather ROUND everyone

then we can all see



## WHAT HAPPENED

Hang on

I just have to create a storm for a moment

wait

I still have to rescue the sailors

Just a second

I have to eat a child

oh no

there's Scylla coming up behind again

so

what exactly WAS that just then

and could you just STOP with all the WAVES for ONCE

it was like this:

The three men were sitting together at the bar. Outside the windows, on this umpteenth night in a row, the dark water towered up to a height of five, six, seven metres, the North Atlantic had really got going, there were white horses everyway, the ship was rolling sturdily.

Flavio and Mo were drinking Faroese beer, Tarik had one of those opaque cocktails in front of him, *Dark and* something, and was occupied with the barwoman. He'd been intrigued by her all the way, but now he was more than interested in her, he was barely able *not* to look at her.

She was so tall today.

And just yesterday her hands had been strikingly dainty and slender, but now they looked hugely strong and there were large, glittering rings on her fingers. There was a curious blue sheen to her long curls, or could it be lilac, and were her sapphire eyes actually brown? She was wearing a flame-red dress, made up of many overlaid slightly transparent layers. A complicated, disconcertingly low neckline. The dress flowed around her body.

She looked Tarik in the eyes.

There was a pop in his head, something had just burst.

Hold your breath now, he thought, as he felt the pop. Of course she's hot, but she's been hot all week, and you had no problems taking that in your stride, that's just what guys do, take it in their stride.

And there was Malin back at home, there was no need for anything to go pop there.

"Can I have another of those," he said, a little dull in the head, but he'd just wanted to say something, to see if speech was even still possible with that laceration on the brain.

He held up his glass.

She reached for the glass and as she touched it, it felt hot for a moment, it smouldered through to his fingers, then she took a fresh glass, turned to the freezer and filled the glass with ice cubes, stretched her hand effortlessly up to the topmost shelf, literally grew towards the rum. Now she was looking full frontal at Tarik.

He hadn't even noticed her turning back towards him. Her eyes were amber, her hair had a reddish shimmer. What the hell – he glanced over at Mo and Flavio, who didn't seem to have twigged to the stunt the barwoman was pulling.

Or else they didn't care. They were sunk in their beer and some party-fuck story from last summer.

There was a couple right by the door, snogging on a couch in the corner, but everybody else had left. It was just after one.

The barwoman pushed his drink over to him and smiled, or didn't, he wasn't sure, her hair was blonde.

"Who the hell are you," he said.

"That'll be ninety krónur."

Tarik laid his credit card on the bar. She touched the card, the card shone silver and liquified for a moment.

The couple stood up and headed off.

His friends talked.

The ship rolled.

Nothing was within reason anymore.

"I want to sleep with you," he said, touching the barwoman's hand.

Like reaching into a river.

She took a step back and stood a good five metres away from him, even though the aisle between the bar and the shelves was only just over a metre wide. Dancing on her brow were a couple of clouds, real, honest-to-goodness clouds.

"I want to sleep with you," he said again.

It sounded constrained, pressurised.

"Piss off," she said. "Go on, beat it."

Her voice had been made into a hole in the deep sea.

No, thought Tarik, no way. I'm not leaving here. Not unless you come with me.

"No," he said. "No. You're not shaking me off now. Not ever."

His friends had fallen quiet.

They weren't talking now, they weren't moving now, they were frozen.

The barwoman stared at him, her hair lay in shaggy blue strands on her shoulders, her dress had given way to a tatty, bright red dressing gown, she was small and tall all at once and short again and tall again and her violet eyes sparkled.

"Idiot," she said.

Then the glasses fell over.

## That's the State

There was a hole inside her, that she'd filled over time with ossified things, the harder, the tougher, the more speechless the better, just don't take any notice of the hole, but this emotion that had condensed into an anvil had now somehow disappeared.

The hole made itself known.

Iva was standing alone on the top deck, the wind had got up, the gusts were strengthening by the hour, a blizzard was forecast for the next day, a hurricane-force snowstorm. Everything imaginable was whistling around the ship, slender rows of small, white waves were dancing in the water around the bow, the moonlight put to sea, running silvery over the fjord.

What if there wasn't, she thought.

What if there really wasn't a way off the ship?

If she'd have to let everything sit forever?

But what even was everything?

Her daughter's name pushed its way into the hole.

Around it: emotions, emotions, emotions.

Something cracked in the core of her body.

And beneath her feet, she could feel this clearly, it was practically burnt into her soles, Richard William Jones was sitting on the bridge, on harbour duty, his shift had begun just after dinner. He was alone. He was more than alone. He was howlingly lonely.

She walked to the middle of the deck and down the stairs. Something was drawing her to him even more strongly than usual, as if he were holding up an Iva-magnet and the iron filings within her were oriented towards it, her heart cramped. She sped up, she took the last, slippery steel steps, she stumbled, caught herself, ran along the passageways of deck 7, the corridor towards the bridge, stopped, breathed.

Behind the closed door, something wasn't right.

She held her hand over the handle, touched the wood, there was a click, the door opened a fraction.

She went in.

The navigation equipment shone in the darkness and Iva could see the outline of a being. For a moment, she thought it was a human.

A human?

It was so thin, a skeleton with skin, although there wasn't much skin. More like a few tattered scraps. It raised its hand slightly, sank its head, crumpled very gently. When it straightened up a little more, she recognised the movement, the naturalness of the back of his neck, which was so alert, even if the necessary musculature was missing.

“Richard?”

He turned around.

The pain of seeing him like that whirled in Iva and all over the bridge, in all directions, it struck everywhere.

“Richard.”

“Now you see...”

His voice had lost all sonority, pale, thin, leaden.

“Yes, I can see you.”

“Who I am.

“This isn't you, Richard.”

He trembled.

“This is the state.”

“The state.”

“You live in.”

“It needs to stop.”

She walked towards him.

She ignored the smell and came closer, closer, and then she touched him, and then he was no longer broken.

[...]

At around midnight, they were on the bridge, the ship was swaying over the North Sea, they were sitting opposite each other on the wide bench behind the bow windows, their legs cautiously intertwined, each with a glass of whisky in their hand.

“*Happy birthday*,” said Iva in English.

“Thanks,” said Richard, “it feels kind of... well...”

“Amazing that you can just sit here like this. Aren’t you meant to be driving this damn ship?”

“I press a button every twenty minutes and that sends a signal to the crew and then everyone knows that everything’s OK.”

He takes a swig of whisky.

“Where does the signal go?”

“Not a clue, into their bellies perhaps, but it doesn’t matter anyway, I don’t even have to bother with the button because everything’s always OK either way. It’s more...” he grasped her left ankle, “a kind of love token.”

He left his hand where it was and they stopped talking, the sea took over the helm, the air moved the ice-cold rain, the hurricane raised the water on high, the ship remained stable.

Iva looked out into the black-and-white night, her eyes fell shut, she slipped into a tender semi-sleep, she felt him get up now and then and go to his navigation gear and presumably press that insanely unimportant button, but most of the time he was with her at the window, holding her ankle and pressing her buttons.

[...]

## **One Hundred and Thirty-Eight Years and Three Days**

He looked at her, he tattooed her into his memory, her face, her hair, her silhouette, the way she moved slightly in her sleep, the way she breathed. He had no idea where he was meant to take these memories, but that's just what you do when you're bidding farewell.

When the dawn came, he felt that he was growing weaker. He kissed her on her bare shoulder and touched her back, then he stood up and went to the door, he looked at her one last time. His strength was fading by the second, it was hard for him even to keep upright, so he left the room and the hotel and somehow he made it to the beach and into the water, aged one hundred and thirty-eight years and three days, Richard William Jones of Liverpool.

*On the seabed, water and sand and hilly landscapes and colourful fish everywhere. A large dragnet, holding a man in a worn-out captain's uniform, it is being pulled by: three.*

Ran

jeez, how big is your net

hey, at least you've got your green dress on

and your crown of pearls on your head

Magwayen

pull yourselves together now

This is a moment for dignity

OK Ak Ana

White Mother

that's right

but

he's so heavy

good grief

well that's

because it's so hard for us

fine

but he has to get to the kingdom of the dead somehow

so pull