

Translated extract from

**Mathias Jeschke / Katja Gehrman  
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**Mathias Jeschke / Katja Gehrman (Illustration)  
Message in a bottle**

**Translated by Helena Ragg-Kirkby**



On the River Ilmenau with my grandpa. Okay, so it wasn't exactly a proper sea journey - but it certainly beat sitting at Granny's coffee table with cream puffs and eclairs.



On the jetty with my father.  
Winds from all the seven seas were whistling around my ears.



*The sharp end of a boat is called the bow; the bit at the back is the stern. The right-hand side is starboard; the left-hand side is port.*

*It's easy to remember:  
"Star light, star bright, starboard to the right"  
and "no port left in the bottle" .*

Once I'd left school, I shouldered my kitbag and boarded a big ship.



*It was Samuel Morse who invented the signalling system that ultimately gave rise to Morse code. It consists of two signals: a short one and a long one. For every number and every letter of the alphabet there is a Morse code signal consisting of long and short flashes.*

*An Aldis lamp is a powerful lamp which enables sailors to send messages from one ship to another over considerable distances.*

At night I flashed messages through the dark with an Aldis lamp. By day, I signalled by hoisting code flags. We sailed from Hammerfest to Casablanca, the Outer Hebrides to Bornholm.

I stood, exhilarated, at the ship's bow.  
The strong wind whipped my breath away.  
But my heart rejoiced.

One day in May, more than twenty years ago, we left Bergen harbour in southern Norway and sailed out into the sea.

A school of dolphins was always just ahead of us.



I wrote a cheerful little letter. I included my address, put it into the small Coke bottle I'd just finished, screwed the top on, and sealed it with hot candle wax.

I took the bottle and threw it overboard. It was pure high spirits: I wasn't in distress or sitting on some lonely island waiting to be rescued.

An epic journey began right there.

*SOS stands for Save Our Souls! In other words: come and save our lives! The Morse code signal for SOS is three short flashes, three long flashes, then three more short ones; or if you do it over the radio: ditditdit dahdahdah ditditdit.*

S.O.S. ist die Abkürzung für das englische  
Save our souls! Das heißt: Rettet unser Leben!  
Die Morsezeichen für S.O.S. sind: drei kurze  
Blinks, drei lange und dann wieder drei kurze.  
Oder als hörbares Signal per Funk:  
Dididi daadaadaa dididi.

S.O.S.!



Soon after, I left the ship and went to university.

There's a tiny island off the coast of northern Norway called Bolga.  
It's beyond the Arctic Circle.



*In the Arctic the sun never sets during the summer, and there is continuous daylight. This is the polar day. In winter, in the polar night, the sun barely rises.*

Two years after the message in the bottle had been flung into the sea, the wife of the fisherman Bjarne Laurids Johansen gave birth to their fifth child on the island of Bolga. It was a boy, and his parents named him Marius Alexander.

I, meanwhile, was swotting away at dead languages.



*Latin, Ancient Greek and biblical Hebrew are languages that are no longer spoken anywhere in the world. That's why people call them dead languages. However, there are people who learn them so that they can read ancient texts.*

150 people now lived on the island of Bolga.  
Little Marius was one of them.



Day in, day out, Marius's father went out to sea in his fishing boat.



When Marius turned six, his parents gave him a boat. A boat with a real outboard motor!



It was fantastic, sailing across the sea.  
The waves slapped against the boat and the seagulls screeched overhead.



Ein Außenbordmotor ist ein kleiner, tragbarer Motor, den man am Heck eines Bootes anbringen kann. Wenn der Motor gestartet ist, treibt die Schraube das Boot vorwärts. Mit der Pinne, an der sich der Gashebel befindet, kann man die Geschwindigkeit bestimmen und das Boot steuern.

*An outboard motor is a small, portable motor which can be attached to the stern of a boat. When the motor is started, the propeller moves the boat forwards. The tiller, which also has the throttle on it, controls both the direction and the speed of the boat.*

When Marius wasn't out in his boat, he spent his time beach-combing at low tide.

This is what he was doing one cold February morning.  
He was now nine years old.



The sea washes up the most marvellous things: fossils and treasure from shipwrecks and such like.



"I've found something!" thought Marius.

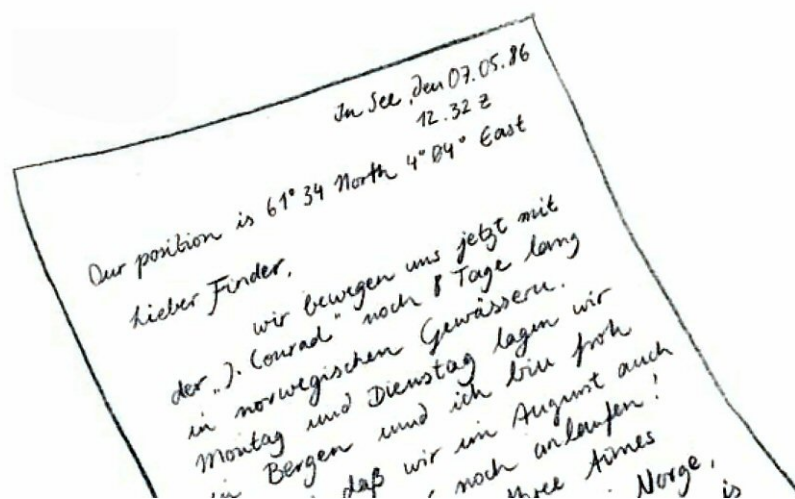
As soon as he reached out to pick up the bottle, he saw the rolled-up piece of paper inside it.

Marius smashed the bottle on the rocks. He unrolled the message and looked at it, wide-eyed.

*The moon determines the tides: ebb and flood. On the ebb, the water level falls and the sea moves away from the coast. On the flood, the water rises again and washes over the beaches and rocks.*

Marius ran like the wind to find his best friend, John Erik.

"Look at this!" he cried as he ran.



At sea, 7.5.86  
12.32

Our position is 61°34 north, 4°04° east

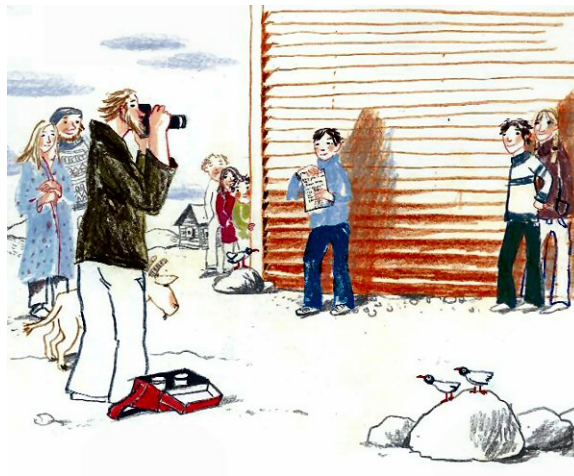
Dear Finder,

We're on the "J. Conrad" and we'll be in Norwegian waters for another week yet. On Monday and Tuesday we were in Bergen, and I am glad that in August we'll also be tying up in [...]  
[...] three times  
[...] Norge  
[...] is

John Erik could hardly believe his eyes.  
Marius jabbed his finger at the date. "If that's really true, then this letter was written eleven years ago!"

"I have to show my parents!" cried Marius.

They raced into the house. When they tried to tell Marius's parents what had happened, their words tumbled over one another like waves rolling onto the beach.  
His father kept slapping his thighs, saying: "I don't believe it!"  
And his mother rang the local newspaper that very evening.



Two days later, there was a story in the paper:  
"Boy Finds Ancient Message in a Bottle!"  
Accompanying it was a photo of Marius. He was smiling and holding my letter up to the camera.

The other island fishermen - Marius's father's friends - were beside themselves. For days afterwards, they talked non-stop about the boy's fantastic catch.

About two weeks later, I received a letter from the German Embassy in Oslo, the capital of Norway.

I wondered whether I'd done something wrong.  
Had I trodden on a Norwegian's toes?

I'd moved house countless times over the years. But the embassy in Oslo had managed to track me down at my new address by the old harbour in Rostock.

When I opened the envelope I found a postcard from Marius. He wrote that he had found the message in the bottle. A copy of my eleven-year-old letter was enclosed.





It took me about seven and a half hours to understand what I was reading.

My little bottle had made its way up the long Norwegian coast. All on its own!  
The gulf stream had carried it along. It had taken eleven years!

When the bottle began its wanderings in the waves, I wasn't small but I was still very young.  
But Marius hadn't even been born.

*The gulf stream is rather like a gigantic long river in the middle of the sea. It comes from South America and finds its way through the Atlantic Ocean to us in Europe. Right at the end, just before it loses strength, it flows up the Norwegian coast.*

In my letter of 7th May 1986 I had noted the position of the ship: 61 degrees 34 minutes north, 4 degrees 4 minutes east. Marius had written to me on 9th February 1997 and had told me where he had found my letter: 66 degrees 48 minutes north, 13 degrees 14 minutes east.

*So that sailors always know where they are, the whole globe is divided up into degrees of latitude and longitude. This is of course particularly useful at sea, as there are no visible points of reference which sailors could use to orientate themselves.*

I had thrown a message in a bottle into the sea. Marius had found it and had written back to me. A good few years had passed meanwhile.

Perhaps you'll say: so what?

But everyone who has heard the story thus far has been amazed.



Marius is grown up now.  
He still has the boat with the outboard motor.