

SHIP IN A BOTTLE

by David Daniel

Looking out from behind the bar at the rainy night where the street, stained blue green by the neon signs in the windows, had a cellophane gleam, Maggie wondered her life might have been different. A corner tavern in the waterfront district, the Bay side was a snug little harbor where she had mastered the art of bartending and which she now co-owned. But she hadn't
5 satisfied a long-held desire to get out and explore the world that existed beyond Weybridge. She dreamed of faraway places, yet despite determinations to go, here she still was, extending hospitality to those who were free to travel while she stayed behind. It was forty minutes till closing and three patrons remained, none of them locals.

Chet sat at the bar listening to his call ring on the other end, thinking *pick up, pick up*.

10 A long-haul trucker, he'd been in town to deliver cargo and had intended to drive straight back home. Then, an hour ago, he received a text message that had stopped him dead. He'd been calling back every ten minutes since and getting no answer. He pointed to his glass. "Again, please, ma'am."

15 Aside from the bartender, the only other folks in the place were a shaggy-haired guy at a table (from England Chet guessed; when the guy had ordered a beer, he'd sounded like Paul McCartney) and the young red-haired woman who'd come in out of the rain, asked for a glass of wine, and was sitting at the other end of the bar staring glumly down into it.

The bartender brought Chet another SoCo¹ and lime. Not his usual, but tonight, yeah. He needed the comfort. She nodded at his phone. "No signal?"

20 "No, ma'am, it's... well...I guess y'all *could* say that. Her expression held a note of casual concern, an invitation not an invasion. "I'm Chet, by the way", he offered. "From Little Rock."

"Hi, Chet from Little Rock. I'm Maggie, from right here. Nice to meet you."

She was thin, fortyish, with a pretty face, her dark hair touched with gray.

"I just got a 'Dear John' message" he said.

25 "Oh, that's never fun. I'm sorry" She had sensitive eyes, probing just a little: *Did he want to talk about it?* But she did not push.

He didn't understand it. Just yesterday they'd been fine, talked on the phone for an hour. Now he couldn't get through. He scrolled back through text messages from earlier, happier times, seeking clues. When he signaled for another drink, Maggie eased nearer. "Sorry to have
30 to ask this, Chet, but .. not driving tonight, are you?"

"No, ma'am. I don't guess I will."

She smiled. "Good, I'm glad."

35 "Shoot, no. This rain and all? I wouldn't be here knocking 'em back like a cliché from a country song if I was. My rig's parked over yonder by the pier. I hauled in a big ol' load of wind turbine props. I'll be hunkered down here tonight with my confusion and a couple sad ones from Dwight Yoakam - who you'd do well to get on your jukebox, just sayin'" He managed a grin.

"Duly noted. Your girl, what's her name, if I might ask?"

¹ SoCo: Southern Comfort, a whiskey liqueur

40 He hesitated, then shrugged. What the hell. "His. Rafael." He held up the phone with a photo of the two of them.

"You both look happy."

"Things've been real good. A year next month. But...he's there in Arkansas – does landscape architecture - and I'm on the road, five six days at a whack. He says it seems like forever sometimes and he feels like..." He picked up his phone, slid a finger to read: "like a
45 boat with no place to sail to."

"Poetic."

Neither pointed out the obvious: the ship in the bottle resting on the top of the back bar.

50 The bottle had sat up there as long as Maggie could remember. When she was a child her mom would send her in here to beg her fisherman dad to come home, knowing he was likelier to leave the bar for his little girl and avoid the scene of his wife having to drag him out. Dad in his serial quest for sobriety - he and her mom, again and again coming to the end of it, then willing to try again. There was a nobility in such forgiving, but a blindness, too. He could be sweet during his dry spells, but like the fishing they never lasted.

55 The ship was a three-masted schooner under full sail in the horizontal blue-green bottle. surrounded by the vertical bottles with their elixirs and potions. The alchemy hadn't worked for her dad. Eventually, the fish stocks dwindled and the small fleet worked out of the waterfront had to fold its nets. And not long after, her father finally split. Drink wasn't Maggie's problem, never had been. Not being free to set out and see the world was. All the comings
60 and goings of ships, like the migrations of seabirds kept beckoning, but so did those who depended on her... Jimmy with special needs. Mom whose fierce grip on life slowly loosened but who took years to finally let go. Now, at forty-two, Maggie felt every bit as permanent a fixture as the ship in the dusty bottle and the Wurlitzer with its rainbow lights and too many sad songs.

65 And speaking of sad: that young woman who came in a while ago, staring at a glass of chard, all dressed up, her hair like damp flames, eyes mascara-smudged and sorrowful - those weren't just raindrops she was blotting.

70 Lily didn't venture into bars alone, wouldn't have tonight if she hadn't gotten into that stupid guy's car. Lance. His OkCupid profile had made him seem safe. "Friendly, nice-looking city guy, 30, works in IT, drives an Audi." In person, he looked fifty, and practically from the moment he'd picked her up, he'd been all in her face and talking nasty. At just about every light, he reached over and tried to push up her skirt. When he tried yet again, she straight
75 armed him hard enough to make him yell and the car lurch. He braked. As he reached for the console - to lock the doors? - she shoved open her door and bailed.

The guy hesitated, then, with a "*Fuck you, bitch!*" skidded off in the pouring rain. Across the street, the neon outline of a sailing ship caught her eye. She could call a taxi from there.

The place was mostly empty. She sat at the bar and the woman behind it smiled and said hello. Lily ordered a glass of wine. When it came, she asked if there was cab service in town.
80 "There's a stand right over there by the pier." The woman pointed. "And here," she added in a lowered voice, handing Lily some napkins. "For the mascara."

She checked herself in the bar mirror. She looked like a wet raccoon. And she'd worked so hard tonight to make herself look good for her date. She discovered now that her coat sleeve

85 had torn while making her escape. And if she hadn't been able to push that creep off, things could have been much worse. Was it too much to hope for a nice guy to come along? Suddenly, Lily was weary of her life, of her data entry job, still single at 28, weary of longing for romance, and when she felt like this, she got thinking of how her life should have been but wasn't, going nowhere like that ship in the bottle on the shelf across from where she sat.

90 "My phone died," she told the woman. "Do you happen to have a charger I can use?"
A man sitting farther down the bar, said, "Ma'am, y'all can use mine."

The young woman wanted some space, and Maggie would make sure she had a way home later. Chet from Arkansas was a gentleman, and not a worry. The raffish guy in the corner didn't send up any red flags yet. He seemed an any port-in-a-storm type. When he'd
95 exchanged greetings and ordered a pint and "soomthin" to nibble on, he sounded like a young John Lennon, and from as far away as that, she knew the two of them had the sea in common. She guessed he was off the freighter that had docked that morning. Carrying his beer, he moved over near to where the young woman sat. Maggie was wary about sailors who came in in groups and could get rowdy, but alone they generally minded themselves. She'd keep an
100 eye on him.

"My life is a hot mess, I hate my job. I'm lonely... and I'm stupid. I dare idiots and jump out of a car in the rain." *Shit*, Lily thought, *I'm spilling my guts to this Brit – and I'm crying.*

"You were smart to ditch the chancer. And how could yer know?"

105 She wiped her face. "We met on a dating site."

"Does that work? I've always wondered."

"No. It absolutely does not work."

"Maybe on account of the matchmaker is a machine? Though I've had the odd matchup by friends, and how'd that turn out, Geoff me lad?"

110 "That's your name?"

"Yeah. With a G."

She hesitated, then offered her name.

"Nice to meet you, Lily. Sorry you had a row with that bum."

"You're not from around here. England?"

115 "Righto: He hesitated. "Can I buy you another bevvy?"

At the bar sink, Maggie washed the blender. Some nights it would be crunching ice for a last round of Castaways or Margaritas, but tonight was quiet. A Tuesday. Outside rain continued, the sidewalk and street steaming toward the bay. Twenty minutes to closing. The Bayside's
120 three patrons - Arkansas Chet with his worried mind, the young woman (Lily from Adams Point, Maggie had gleaned when she'd carded her), and the Brit seaman - were arrayed along the bar. Viewed from outside, one might have thought of that painting, *Nighthawks*. Except nighthawks could fly – *would* fly soon.

Maggie found herself thinking of this little stretch of waterfront, which had been home to
125 Indians for a thousand years before the first English settlers. In the old cemetery in the Heights there were graves of folks on her mother's side – Blanchards – going back to the early 1600s. Maggie was pretty much resigned to the idea that she'd be buried here, too. She sometimes imagined a small stone with a soaring seabird carved on it, but more and more it

130 seemed ashes in a bottle tossed into the sea would be her escape. She brushed back a strand of hair with her wrist. Why not just go over to the jukebox and punch up "Cry Me a River"?

135 Chet put aside his phone, but took it right up again. It was like a wound an old hound keeps licking at. What was he expecting? An eleventh-hour pardon? "Nothing more for me, Ma'am. Just a bill, then I'll be out of your hair." He had just clipped the phone into a holster on his belt when it pinged. Maggie set down the check and moved discreetly away. He unholstered the phone, drew a careful breath, and looked at the screen for a long moment, stunned. Then he lowered his head.

140 "Everything okay?" Maggie asked.

He gathered himself and handed her the phone. She gave him a questioning glance to be sure, then, just loud enough to keep it between them, read: "Forgive me, *mi querido*²?" She looked at Chet.

"Go on."

145 She read: "I wrote in haste. All is well if you are too. Please be. Come home soon," Maggie laughed. "Well, how about that! I love a happy ending."

They talked for a few moments. She unplugged the young woman's phone and gave Chet back his charger. He put down money. "Please, a round for the house."

"That's kind, thank you. But not driving, right? Rafael wants you back safely."

150 "No, ma'am. No how. I'll run all day tomorrow, but I want to get to my rig now and make a call 'fore it gets too late."

"I've got a feeling nothing'll be too late tonight."

"Thank you, ma' - Maggie. For being good at what you do."

Her smile looked brave. "Famous for it."

Soon she announced last call.

155

The barwoman drew a pint and poured a glass of wine and set them down. "Compliments of the gentleman who just left."

"Nice chap." Geoff raised his glass. "Cheers."

"Cheers," the young red-haired woman, Lily, said.

160 They were talking about dating and how seldom it seemed to lead to romance and was it maybe easier when people met at work or in school. Lily excused herself to visit the loo, and he went to the jukebox. After brief consideration, he punched up the Police, "Message in a Bottle". When Lily returned, he said, "You've got me thinking. Sounds daft, but don't judge now..."

165 "I promise."

"I'd like to meet up with all the women I've ever romanced."

"Okay..." Her expression was that of someone waiting for a punchline.

170 "No, it ain't the beer, I know what you're thinkin': It's about what's in here." He tapped his chest. "I'd like to meet'em all one more time. The girlfriends, the true loves, or what I thought was true love. And just say... thanks."

Lily rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. "That could be tricky."

He laughed self-consciously. "Tell them I loved'em, yeah. Is that sooch a daft thing?"

² Mi querido: my dear

175 In someone else - like that jerk Lance - yes, Lily would have found such an idea juvenile, but something in this guy, with his shaggy hair and lean face, and his accent (she kept thinking of George Harrison on her mom's old Beatles' albums) made it seem okay. Innocent even. She saw his eyes were sad now, too. "*Seems I'm not alone in being alone...*" Sting sang. The bar would be closing soon. She picked up her phone. "You said there's a cab stand, ma'am?"
"Across by the pier. But he'll pick you up right here in front if you want."
180 "I don't mind a little walk. The rain's stopped."
The bartender peered out. "So it has."

Geoff insisted upon squaring the bar bill. He asked if there was a place nearby to get some food.
185 "The town closes up early, but there's Kai Wu, a few blocks down. And the Atlantic Diner." The woman regarded him closely.
"Righto."
She nodded, still watching. "I'm Maggie."
"Geoff. Nice to meet yer." They shook hands. "I fancied going into Boston tonight, but me
190 shipmate's got watch, and with the grotty weather - your sign in the window's a beacon. This is a coomf'table little spot."
"I'm glad." She leaned on the bar, her voice confidential. "I want you to do something for me, Geoff, okay? I want you to be a gentleman." Her glance flicked toward where Lily waited, then back, meeting his. "She'll get home fine, yes?"
195 "Cross me 'eart," he said, and did so.
"Good." She relaxed. "You on the freighter there by the pier, Geoff?"
"Aye. We loaded cargo today. Big wind propellers to take back across."
"Well, small world. The gentleman who just left - Chet, from Little Rock - he delivered them."
200 "Cheers to 'im. And cheers to you. To all of us."

Outside, Geoff put his coat across her shoulders. The rain was stopped now and a thin fog that smelled of the sea was feathering in. "That place was all right," Lily said, looking back through the window. The bartender was wiping down the tables. "I'm glad I went in."
205 "Me too. Kind of a harbor for a little while there. I fancied meetin' you, Lily."
And suddenly she realized she felt the same. And stronger. An hour ago, the evening had looked totally fucked. Ahead, at the corner, a cab was waiting. "The sad thing about ships passing in the night," she said, "is they never see each other. They just, you know, slip on by in the dark, taking all their history."
210 "Yeah. Well ..."
A car pulled up - silver Audi - and braked sharply in the road. The driver's door swung open and a man got out. "*Hey!*" He was rigid with anger. "I've been looking all the fuck over for you!"
"Forget it, Lance. If that's even your name."
"I'm taking you home. Get in."
215 Geoff glanced at her. "Wanker you were with tonight?"
"I'm not fooling around," the man said. "Get in the car."
"I'm fine. I'm taking a cab."

"Off you go, mate," Geoff said. "There's a good lad. The lady says she's fine."

The man ignored him. "Get in the goddamn car, Lily. *Now!*"

220 "You're not listenin', mate. Piss off."

"Who's fuckin' Ringo Starr?"

From her peripheral vision she saw Geoff take something from his pants pocket. The guy's eyes narrowed, then went wide when he saw the knife. "Hey, *fuck you!*" he said.

"Fook me?"

225 "And *you* too!" he shouted at Lily; but he got quickly back into the car. The brake lights lit briefly, and then he was gone.

Lily gave the knife a horrified look. "You'd *use* that?"

"Just did." He closed the knife and returned it to his pocket. "Let 'im think I'm a nutter."

At the corner the taxi waited. Lily took off Geoff's coat but held it. "What's that?"

230 She was looking at a glow of lights high in the fog.

"It's me ship, I was tellin' yer."

"Oh."

"What you were sayin' - about ships passing. Speakin' from me seafarin' experience, y'understand ... sometimes you got to turn on all the lights, blow the horns. I mean... you hungry at all?"

235 "Are you?"

"I'm a bit peckish. The bar lady said there's places open."
She hesitated. "Come to my place."

"Sorry?"

240 "It's close by. Next town over. Come there, I can make us something."

"Aw, now yer bein' daft."

But their gazes were direct. She drew aside a sprig of red hair, grown frizzy in the mist. "Will you?"

He scrubbed at his head. "Tomorrow afternoon, the ship... we're off."

245 "We cut out the middle part - no big machine."

"What're you on about?"

"What we said. About online dating - a big machine gets in the way. We got around it. It's just us. Just for tonight. And the morning."

He gave a "yikes" look. "All of a sudden, I'm a wee shy. A *lot* shy."

250 "You think I'm not?"

"I promised that nice bar lady I'd see you home safe."

"And you will."

He gnawed his lip, deciding. "Right, then. Aye."

255 Each slipped an arm around the other and after a few faltering steps they fell into stride toward the waiting cab.

Maggie turned off the lights, all but the jukebox in the corner, its colors cycling through rainbow hues, and the schooner, safe inside its blue bottle berth. She locked the door.

260 Outside, the air was cooling, misty and sea-scented. She set off to walk home, which was near. Jimmy would be up and wanting to tell her all about his day at the supermarket, the carriages he'd stacked and the nice people he'd helped and the crabby ones, and she'd listen and they'd both get sleepy. As she passed the pier-head she saw a tractor trailer parked there,

the murmur of its idling diesel muffed in the fog. Good, she thought; he's not on the road; tomorrow's journey would be a homecoming. Beyond was the pier, alongside lay the freighter. In the mist it seemed to float above the water. Deck lights were on and she could just read the name painted across the stern: ARGOS. *Liverpool*. She pulled up her coat collar against the damp and walked through the mostly silent town.