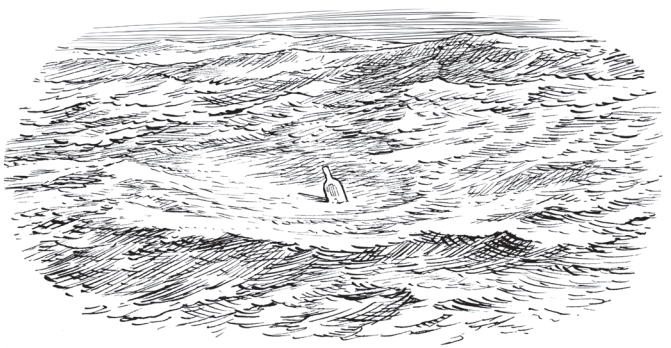
The Lucky Bottle



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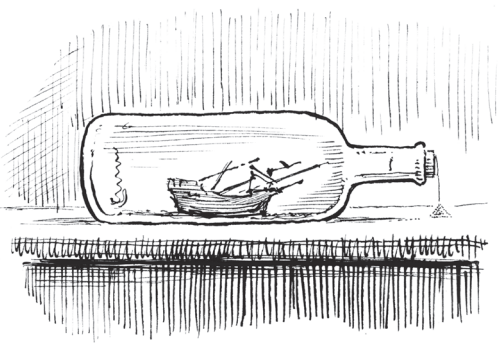
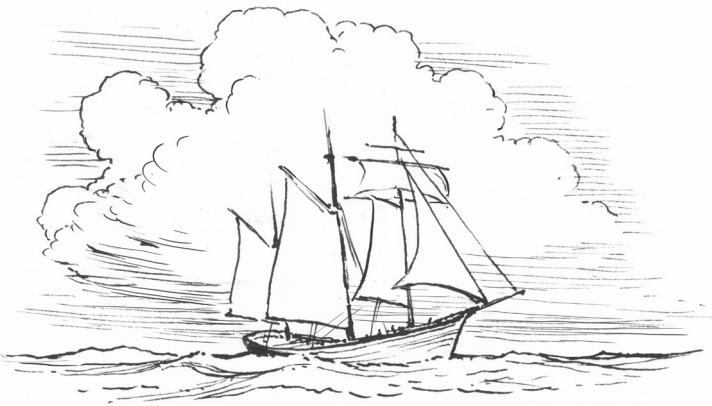
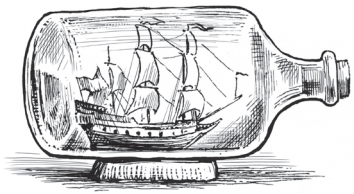
For Eliza, Daisy and Jack,
whose ship in a bottle was the germ of this story.







Chapter One

Storm

Have you ever seen a model sailing ship inside a bottle? Yes? Well, did you know that such an object is called an 'impossible bottle'? Because, of course, *how* would one get a little ship, with masts and sails, in through the narrow neck of a bottle?

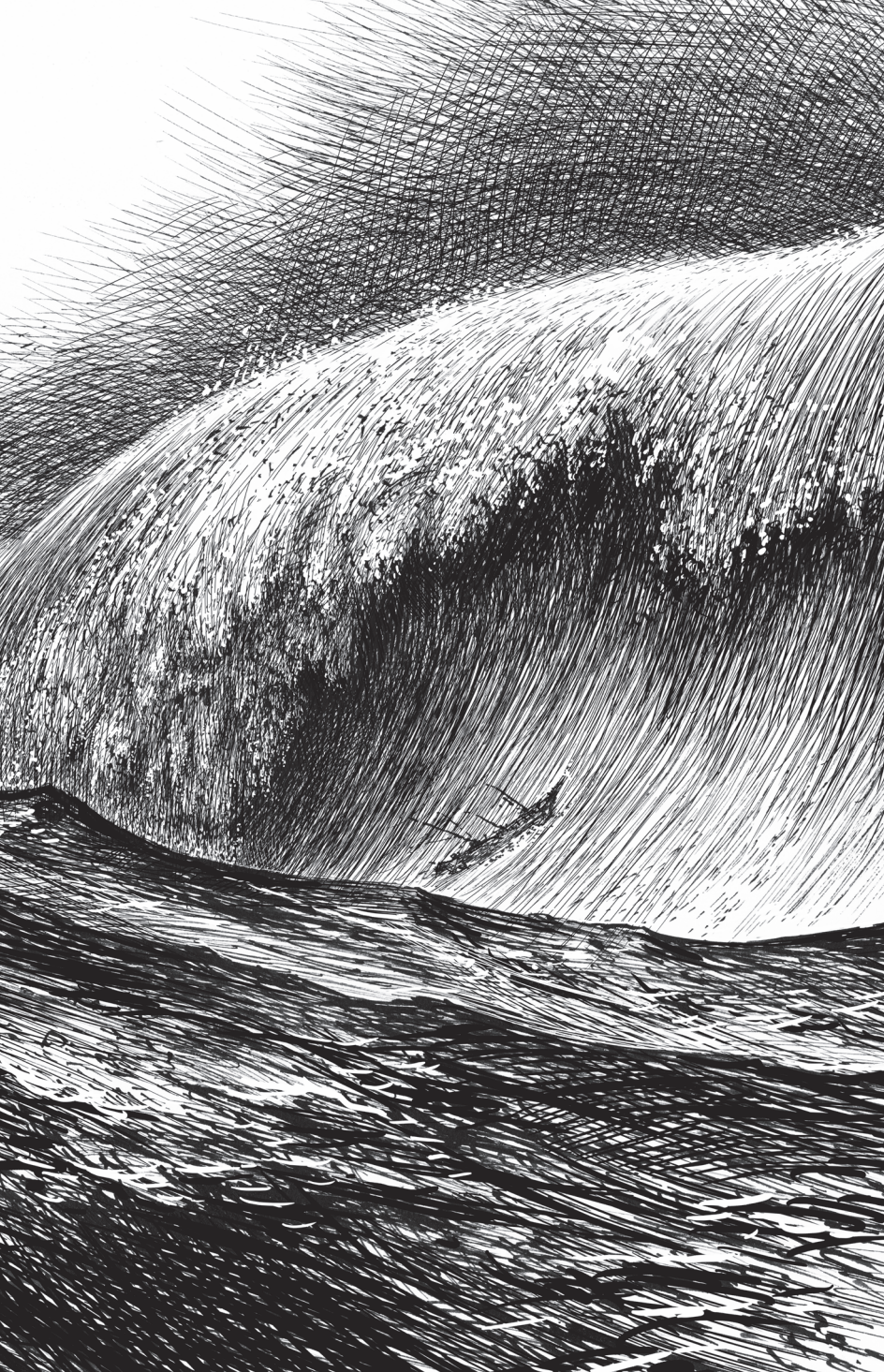
I don't know, do you?

This is the story of how the very first little ship got inside a bottle, and the person who put it there. It begins, however, not with a model but with a real, full-sized ship long ago on a faraway ocean, and on a wild night of tempest with waves so tall the ship looks almost as though it *were* a little model.

Decks awash, masts snapped, the ship tilts to this side and that, bow rising steeply high above the stern, as a vast

mountain ridge of ocean climbs into the sky, then tips and folds, and crashes down upon the ship . . .

And it is gone.



A barrel bobs up to the surface . . .

A splintered fragment of mast; the broken bowsprit; the ship's wheel; shards of plank . . .

Then a hand . . .

Clutching, grasping, gripping the rope-ringed fragment of mast – *a head*, an arm: a young boy, spluttering, spitting, coughing, retching the salt sea, gasping in the wind and rain, clinging, clinging to the mast, white as a ghost amid the vast ink-black ocean . . .

Clinging, clinging, rising and falling with the waves.

Hours pass and the boy begins to slip in and out of consciousness. His body is numb with cold, frozen fingers loosening their grip, then . . .

'Jack!'

A voice calling his name, faint and distant amid the roar of the wind.

It comes again.

'Jack!'

Urgent, insistent. Wild hope flares in the boy's heart and he tries to call out but can only croak a cracked whisper. He seems to see his father splashing through the surf towards him, arms reaching out to rescue him as the foaming white breakers engulf him . . .

'Jack!'

And now he knows the voice is just a memory. The voice of his father from a long-ago sunny afternoon, on a distant beach.

There is no one to rescue him. He grips the rope-lashed mast, rising and falling with the hill-sized humpbacked swell.

Face down, cheek pressed into wet sand, Jack lay on a beach. A fly settled on the back of his neck. He opened an eye, and lifting his head, coughed, and spat out sand and sea. Then, sitting up, he raised a hand, shading his eyes against the glare, looking along the beach to right and left. Then out across the blue-green ocean. For a moment, he'd thought it might have been that other beach of long ago – that his father would be there, and his mother and sister. But no; he was alone with a few fragments of the broken ship scattered across the white sand.

Away to his right, Jack saw rocks rippling in the heat shimmer and, standing up, he walked towards them. On top of the rocks, he could now see a little of what lay behind the beach; an uneven stony land of sand and low-growing bushes and, farther off, a jumble of larger boulders rising up to form a small hill. All around was evidence of the storm: bushes, torn from the ground and tossed here and there, and others adorned with seaweed, shells and the broken bodies of small crabs. He could see no sign of any house or building. He tried to call out, but so dry and parched were his throat and mouth, his thin, cracked '*Hello!*' was lost to the wind.

Below him, the beach veered sharply to the right and on to where more rocks shimmered in the heat. He climbed down, and as he walked, he called out – as best he could – the names of his shipmates: 'Captain Trelawney! . . . Mister Scobey! . . . Billy Braddock!' and so on and so on. But he

heard no answer, and the thought gradually grew in Jack's mind that perhaps only he had survived the wreck, and that he was all alone on that strange shore. He blocked the thought; that was something he dared not think about. *There must be someone else, there must be!*

He began to run. But weak with exhaustion and hunger, he stumbled and fell, and lay sprawled on the sand, panting hard.

His outstretched right hand had come to rest on something smooth, hard and rounded. He lifted his head to look at the thing; a kind of bleached white dome, rising a little above the sand. A stone perhaps. Yet it did not *feel* like a stone. He sat up, curious, and began to dig around the thing . . . then jumped away in shock.

Staring up at him with eyeless sockets, was a human skull.