**_Radio Activity_ by Karin Kalisa**
**Sample translation by Alyson Coombes**

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The first time she went on air, the foremen in the port office put down their rotas. The employees out on the tugboats stopped discussing their booking lists and gazed through the hatches at the glistening crests of the incoming waves. The drivers waiting at the lock leaned over to turn up the volume. Conversations stalled at breakfast tables across town and even the silent teenagers looked up for a moment with interest.

'Good morning, sea folk,' the radio presenter had said. 'For everyone by the sea and those out on the water, I've got a bandoneon here that will carry you out into the day on the North Sea waves. It will help you to remember why you still live here, despite the shipyard crisis and the recession, why you haven't given up and gone to find work on the inland waters, why they haven't been able to get rid of you, and why sea level is the only level for you. Stay tuned to find out the weather for the next few days and to learn what you can fit into a cup of tea, according to a certain Japanese poet. Who will be bringing you all this? Holly Gomighty. On 100.7.'

Nothing she said was extraordinary enough to bring the sleepy port town's morning routine to a standstill. It was her voice. A perfect radio voice, medium-deep in tone. A voice that reflected the cadence of the nearby water, enriched with the melody of unfamiliar coasts. And the music that came over the airwaves now, this bandoneon with its throaty seagull-tone, with at least five accordions murmuring together and a good handful of strings and basses urging each other on in their wake. Then came a voice-like sound, far off in the background, though whether it was human or electronic, from this world or another, was hard to say. All these elements came together and drew the listeners out onto the waves, down and up, down and up, pulled along restlessly by the tightly bound quavers that stumbled hurriedly into the slipstream of the next legato.

If anyone working on *Tea and Tar* had had to ask a programme director if the *Biscaya*, which was now sweeping through the bandoneon's seventy-two buttons and over the newly acquired FM frequency, was the best opening tune for a new North Sea radio station, it would probably never have been played. For God's sake, the director would have said, that's eighties music, Big Band, no one wants that now. No way, kids. James Last! He's from another century, another millennium, worse than the seventies; music for a tea dance, not the radio. Find something else. But Holly Gomighty's instinct – as clear as anyone's who had grown up by the water – told her that these instruments, played with nothing but a few puffs of air and some metal reeds, had a particular ability to unite listeners of all generations. She knew that in that moment, people would forget to call it kitschy and would crank up the volume. And she knew exactly what the piece sounded like when the volume was turned up loud, very loud. Even more so, she knew how it felt when these North Atlantic waves

spread through a large theatre auditorium with the faders up high in the red range. Where listeners suddenly found themselves in the midst of heaven, sea and sun; in water, air and light – and where the only thing missing was earth. In the end, the programme director would turn out to be just like any other well-grounded person who usually consumed music in neat categories, and who in all his uncompromising disdain for Happy Sound and Easy Listening would never have noticed that there might occasionally be room for something else amongst all that cringeworthy non-stop-dancing tripe. He may never even have noticed that the bandoneon, this minor-keyed relic from the portside pubs, was incapable of producing a Happy Sound.

The young radio presenter was clearly lacking in Happy Sound and Easy Listening too. She sat there, staring at the table, while with every passing bar the *Biscaya* transformed the good-morning-cheerfulness in her expression into forlornness, and the forlornness into a sadness so deep that anyone witnessing it would have been chilled to the core. But it never came to that. After all, it was radio, not television.

By the time Holly Gomighty had finished revisiting the radiograms of the early 1980s and had swept her seaside listeners away with four-and-a-half minutes of music, read the weather report (in which the North Atlantic mirrored almost exactly the North Sea inlet, meteorologically speaking, as both were about to be hit by gale-force winds) and by the time she had announced that in Japan a cup of tea holds seventeen syllables – 'Stay tuned to find out more' – she had her listeners hooked. Not only those listeners who, despite the slight change from Golightly to Gomighty, were imagining a delicate woman in a little black dress – who, after dancing the night away, stopped to look in a shop window with a coffee to go in one hand and a croissant in the other, gazing over her enormous sunglasses at the jewellery she could never afford – but also those listeners who had never heard of Truman Capote or Audrey Hepburn or Tiffany's jewellery. She was a woman who picked you up each morning wherever you happened to be, behind the dike – and carried you to where the fresher breezes blew, to the planks of a three-masted schooner somewhere between Bilbao and Biarritz; yes, a woman who encouraged people to look out of the window for once, as the weather may not matter when filing documents but it's crucial for those out at sea; a woman who managed to make a bad-tempered boss, a maths test, a flat tyre on the way to work or a dark-red minus sign on a bank statement melt away in the eternal movement of the waves for four-and-a-half minutes and to re-emerge after those four-and-a-half minutes looking much less menacing; a woman who helped the person stuck in the morning traffic, in an untidy kitchen, in a queue at the newsagent's to understand why they had thrown caution to the wind and refused the job centre's relocation offer and stuck it out here in the North, even if the wind had then turned against them; she was a woman whose voice could transform this wind and even the North Atlantic gales into a pleasant breeze – they wanted to hear this woman again, every morning, every day. Holly Gomighty. On 100.7.

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Nora crossed the dike and descended the gravelly slope to the water where she began to wallow in her loneliness. In the question of where a dead mother and an unexpected father could fit into such loneliness. She sat for a while in the wind as it blew the reeds back and forth in gusts and chased little bubbles of foam along the ground until they dissolved. Eventually she stood up, frozen to the bone. She ran to the theatre, slipped through the stage door and saw that all of the actors who were in the middle of *Fiddler on the Roof*, absolutely all of them – milkman and tailor and butcher, soldiers, students, daughters – were wearing a black armband. At first, she thought the director must have decided to use the black armband as a sign of the approaching pogrom, giving one to every actor as they danced and played the fiddle. But no, it was for her mother; as she looked across at the live production crew, she saw the sound recordist with the same black armband and a rose in front of him on the mixing desk. She felt waves of laughter and tears coursing through her body, which was still shaking with cold, until she could no longer tell whether the roaring and the ringing were the echoes of the wind over the dike, or if the noise was coming from the auditorium, or if it was simply the sound of her own breath and blood churning through her body. Whatever the source, she knew she had never experienced a stranger compilation of sounds. But what else could she expect on this particular evening, her first time in the theatre without her mother who, as a sound recordist in a league of her own, was the only one who would have been able to manage this mix?

Over the next few days and weeks she searched for her mother in the most likely places, a search that repeatedly took her back to the dike – not through the wrought-iron gate with the crosses, where her nostrils were filled with the musty smell of the freshly heaped earth; not to the theatre, where a new sound recordist sat at the mixer that had once been controlled by her mother, and where they had said to her on the evening of the funeral, oh, you're here again … don't you want to come back and work with us… in the ballet … or as a technician. You know there's always a place for you here … whenever you want … Inconceivable. But she couldn't deny she needed a job to pay the rent, and that she could no longer afford to go ice skating, which was the only way to fight off the dark heaviness that kept threatening to overwhelm her, and so one day she dialled the number in the window of a recording studio down by the port. 'Sound technician required, immediate start.' The post had been advertised hurriedly but not hurriedly filled – she'd had her eye on the advert for a while now. Two of the sign's four sides had come unstuck, that was all. 'Sure, come on by,' Walther Ullich said on the phone when she called. After the test recording, he asked her to stay on to record an album for a funk band that same evening. The thought of doing it himself filled him with horror. His ears were simply too old for that sort of thing, he told Nora.

Her days were an eternal loop of going-to-the-dike, going-to-the-rink, going-to-the-recording-studio and coming-home-late. And, in turn, her thoughts went around in circles at the dike, her legs made circles on the rink, and at the studio she cut circles into polycarbonate. It was as if each circular motion spurred on the next; with every passing day the feeling grew that she was caught in a powerful centrifuge – propelling her into the story that she had accepted as her inheritance, never again to release her. At night, Nora was jolted awake by the sound of her own screams, sweat beading on her forehead. And yet each day she grew colder and colder. She added a second, a third layer of clothing but still could not stop herself trembling. It became increasingly unbearable for her to live in a town without her mother and yet with him, the man whose name had been uttered late one night. But equally unbearable was the idea of leaving this town. Because he was living here unpunished. He was still sitting there, surrounded by his medicine bottles. Someone supplied him with little girls; somewhere he had ticked a box on an order form in the darkest corner of a global network, girls under ten for an extra fee. He surely paid on time – discreet, respectable, virtuous, everything you would expect from a pharmacist. But there was an old score to settle. He thought it had been forgotten. Nothing had been forgotten. And nothing forgiven, even if he did have the law on his side; it protected him, ensured his continued freedom and covered up his crime with the peaceful coldness of a legal system that was ideal for him and his kind.

If the courts would no longer help then the net must be widened, she had thought to herself. Everyone must be contacted and informed – the whole town. All of them on one wave. Then this crime would be exposed and flushed out. Or so she had thought. She had taken Grischa, Tom, Helge and Djamil out with her in the boat. Taken them out in the boat without saying where they were going; not around the coastal waters but out onto the high seas. At first, the maritime radio and the wave had worked, but then it had all gone wrong, about as wrong as could be. They had turned the boat around and thrown the anchors out and she alone had gone overboard and was stranded here, at a crossroads, her lungs too weak to take another breath. She had run out of air, the red traffic light flickered round in circles up towards the sky before toppling back down to earth, and now someone was here from the district court too – someone who had perhaps been sent to check that she wasn't going to cause any more damage, and who was now asking her why she wanted to go into the lion's den.

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'Going into the lion's den,' Simon said, when Nora didn't answer, 'is what you do once you have a good plan. You *only* do it once you have a good plan.'

Nora didn't move, didn't answer, tried to fight the dizziness in her head by staring out at the street. At the cobblestones and their sandy pores, at the fine-grained greyness. Were they all really exactly the same size?

'I have a plan,' said Simon. 'And I think it's good.'

'A plan to get inside, or a plan to get out again?' asked Nora without taking her eyes off the cobblestones, amazed to hear herself talking at all. She had spoken entirely without thinking.

'Go in, set the trap, get out,' replied Simon.

Nora sat up straight – too quickly. She was gripped once again by a sudden dizziness, and Simon's face threatened to sink into a black whirlpool before she could bring it back into focus: dark-brown hair that fell diagonally across his forehead; green-brown eyes that seemed not to look *at* her but *through* her with a sort of urgent concern, directly at the problem that was connected to her. The line of his mouth, which looked as if someone had overconfidently tried to draw it long enough that a smile would appear of its own accord, changing their mind at the very last second and achieving instead an air of childish loneliness and vulnerability. That same someone had then quickly dressed him in a run-of-the-mill leather jacket, with run-of-the-mill jeans and a run-of-the-mill shirt. That's what he looked like, this man who had sent her official letters from court. Who now claimed to be able to set a trap for the lion – after everything he had written about ex post facto, consistency and perseverance and how the law is the way to achieve peace, as much as it pains him to say…

'Set the trap,' said Nora, her monotonous voice not betraying whether that was meant to be a question, a statement or a sign of contempt.

Simon had understood the three words perfectly well, even though Nora had not said them to him but more to herself, perhaps even to the grey cobbles. But what he understood most of all was that setting a trap was not exactly what she'd had in mind when she'd imagined going into the lion's den.

'You want to go into the lion's den just for him?' he asked. 'We need to turn it into a bigger operation. He's just one of many. We need to catch *all* the lions – get it? Every last one of them.'

Nora didn't answer, but Simon saw that she was thinking about his words and that her eyes were no longer gleaming absently. He used the opportunity to point to a small bakery a few paces away, saying: 'Come on.'

Perhaps she would have followed him anywhere in that moment. Because she had lost all sense of direction. Because she didn't know where else to go. So she followed him to the bakery, where the filter coffee had been sitting in a glass pot on the hotplate since early morning, and where

for an incredible 80 cents you could get a real foretaste of hell. Simon pushed the flimsy plastic cup aside, leaned forward and said: 'We're not going to let him get away with it.'

'It's too late, the statute of limitations has expired.'

Simon fell silent, sipped his coffee and looked out of the window.

'Too late,' repeated Nora. Maybe he hadn't heard her.

'Well,' said Simon.

'Paragraph something or other, criminal code, I must have known it once, but can't quite ... Did you write all those letters yourself, or not?'

'Well,' said Simon again. That wasn't quite how he'd written it, or at least not what he'd meant.

Nora rolled her eyes.

'Well,' said Simon again. He explained that he had recently seen an intern filing the latest legal amendments in the loose-leaf collection at the district court library.

Nora took a straw from the pot that sat on the table between the sugar bowl and the 'No Smoking' sign and stirred up the greenish streaks in her coffee.

'They do that a few times each year. They sit there and file the new printouts. I spoke to one of them.'

Nora's patience was wearing visibly thin.

'It's actually only a few pages each time,' said Simon. 'Obviously it's better than printing out the whole five thousand pages again.'

Nora nodded distractedly and fumbled for the sleeves of her jacket.

'Although obviously they do that too. Every year, generally. Then the tomes stack up in the wire racks like the yellow phone books used to, only in red.'

Nora drained her coffee down to the dregs. She wouldn't stay much longer. She didn't know why she was here drinking this appalling coffee. Surely not to reflect on the disposal of old paper, whether red or yellow.

'No one checks to see if the papers have been filed correctly,' said Simon. 'Or if the correct papers have been filed.'

Nora looked up and pushed her cup aside.

Simon fiddled with his hearing aid, unsure whether she had muttered something.

'Or if they have filed anything at all, or if the papers have been filed twice, or whatever,' continued Simon. 'No one's remotely interested.'

'Doesn't everyone just look it up online anyway?'

'Yes, but that's not the point. Laws are updated, withdrawn, expanded, replaced, deleted – digitally and in print. They're never static. So people can never really be certain.'

The hot filter coffee, as awful as it was, had cleared Nora's head and she was now able to draw a simple conclusion from his words. She gave a short laugh, shrill, bitter and too fast for her trembling body to control. 'Won't work,' she said.

'That's not your style,' replied Simon. 'Won't work? Won't work is not your style.'

'No,' she said. 'But my style won't work. You can see that well enough.'

'Well,' said Simon.

Nora groaned.

Simon kept talking, unperturbed: 'The new laws come in four or five times a year as a subscription, no song and dance. Paper and electronic. All routine. No one goes through them; the papers just get filed away.'

'And you think we can simply slip something in there, right?'

'Not simply, but slip – yes. That's what I'm thinking.'

'And what would you put in there, exactly?'

'Abolition of the statute of limitations – approved and justified to the hilt.'

'Set the trap,' said Nora.

'Exactly.' Simon nodded.

Nora nodded, stood up, asked the shop assistant for a glass of tap water, sat back down, took a sip and then looked at Simon. 'Sabotage,' she said, 'is that what they'd call it?'

'Probably,' replied Simon, realising that he hadn't thought about the crime he was planning in that way at all. But he liked the idea of sabotage. It all sounded very cloak and dagger, full of drama and spectacle, abandoned investigations and closed ranks.

'What do you think we should include in our law change?' asked Simon.

'I can tell you that,' said Nora.

'I know,' said Simon, smiling for the first time.

Nora watched the smile come to life over the rim of her water glass: it started in his eyes, where various colours sparked through the brownish green, so iridescent that she struggled to look away, and she instinctively let herself be drawn into this smile. Like a colour organ, she thought. She'd never seen anything like them, those colour-organ eyes.

'We need to write it in the style of the Civil Code, whatever happens,' said Simon.

'I'll sort the content,' said Nora, 'you can do the style.'

They swapped numbers and left the bakery. Simon watched her go until she had crossed the street. At a green light. At least this time it was green.