



Morten on a Ship of Fools

Text and Illustrations by Kaspar Jancis

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Morten Viks is an ordinary seven-year-old boy who hates playing the piano, collects cockroaches and wasps in his pencil case, and dreams of becoming a sea captain like his father. One fine spring day, Morten's toy sailboat casts off, manned by a company of insects. From there forward, the events take an almost Kafkaesque turn. The stream turns into a sea, the toy boat becomes a real sailboat, and the insects transform into repulsive, yet strangely familiar human-like creatures. Morten Viks himself is the captain of this vessel, but unfortunately holds no authority over his crew. The reader will find Morten's fight for survival rather comical, but certainly would not want to be in the protagonist's shoes. Morten, in turn, will find his experiences very useful in the future.

This quirkily designed book is supplemented by a CD with songs by Kaspar Jancis, performed by the band Kriminaalne Elevant ("Criminal Elephant").

Awards:

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Reading sample

Magic potion

Morten suddenly noticed the vial that the cockroach-man had left behind. It still held a teensy drop of height-reducing elixir.

Morten had a brilliant idea. His heart pounded from excitement. He was finally able to fulfill his longest dream of actually standing on the bridge of the Salamander: his gaze set towards the horizon, his spirit readied for mind-boggling adventures. All he needed was a pipe and a parrot. But forget the pipe and the parrot!

Without much further thought, Morten picked up the maestro's vial from the ground. The bubbles in the custard-like liquid that smelled like ink went "Plink! Plonk!" as Morten raised the neck of the mysteriously glowing glass vial to his lips.

He squeezed his eyes firmly shut and poured the entire contents down his throat in a single gulp. The drink tasted good, almost like raspberry-flavored cough syrup. Morten felt how the peculiar liquid seeped down his gullet and bubbled away in his liver.

"Plink! Plonk!" The fizzing in his stomach grew ever louder and rose up to his head, as if oatmeal was spluttering there instead of his brain.

The clamorous bubbling between Morten's ears strongly brought to mind the piano piece that he had just performed during his music lesson.

"Plink-plonkady-plink-plonk, plink-plink-plink-plooonk!"

The sounds were so funny that Morten burst out laughing heartily.

Seeing his reflection in the glass vial, he discovered with amazement that he was actually crying inconsolably, but doing so in a hysterical laughing voice.

It was such an awful sight that he immediately broke out into unstoppable tears. The face reflected in the vial alternately smiled from ear to ear.

Try to laugh with a crying face or cry with a laughing face in the mirror: it's not at all easy!

Morten's pitiful grin was soon replaced with a look of astonishment, for the vial suddenly began to bloat oddly in his hand. Soon enough, he had to employ his other hand to keep it aloft. After a few moments more, the vial was already so large that the boy was

unable to hold it up. The glass slipped between his hands and landed with a clink.

Only now did Morten notice that not only the vial, but also the entire world around him had become gigantic. Man-sized dandelion seeds hovered in the air, the reeds were as high as palm trees, and pebbles were as large as massive boulders.

Along the shore, however, stood a large two-masted ship in all its glory.

Rigged with red sails and a crow's mast. The Salamander.

Morten realized that the world had not grown to gigantic proportions around him, but rather he himself had become miniscule. He was now smaller than a bug. Finally!



Captain of the Salamander?

The reed, with which Cucaracha had descended onto the ship, lay like a bridge suspended between the bank and the deck of the Salamander. Exhilarated, Morten stepped onto the reed – which was as thick as a decent-sized log –, and walked onto the deck. It was just in time as well, for two indistinguishable wasps – whose faces very much resembled the Hornet brothers – had removed a cattail leaf that was wedged before the bow of the ship and kept it from sailing away. The voyage could begin.

“Ahoy! Full speed ahead!” Captain Morten Viks shouted to the crew. Everyone turned their heads in surprise. Only now did Morten realize that he had slightly overdone it with Cucaracha’s magic elixir. He was a dwarf next to the insects.

It is very difficult if not impossible for an elf-sized captain to command authority on a ship of giants. A special sort of mental capacity is required to earn the respect of those several times larger than you. One has to think oneself large and may not become afraid under any circumstances.

Confidence must also be maintained in situations that are difficult and appear to be outright impossible. Morten’s confidence held out – at first.

“Ahoy! Full speed ahead!” he repeated.

The deck remained quiet for a moment, followed by a thunderous burst of laughter. “What sort of circus creature are you? Do you even have a ticket?” one of the twins asked.

His condescending grin revealed a row of sparse, gold-encrusted teeth. Both of the wasp helmsmen, who were clad in black-and-yellow-striped seaman’s shirts, climbed onto the wheel of the Salamander and rocked back and forth on it like a see-saw. Right. Left. See! Saw!

The ship drifted from one bank of the stream to the other like a drunkard lurching across a nighttime street. It was a miracle that it didn’t crash against the sharp side of any stone in the water.

“Choose your words wisely! I’m no creature. I am Captain Morgan Viks of the ship Salamander, and a captain needs no ticket on his own ship! Steady the rudder before there is an accident!” the knee-high redheaded dwarf retorted to the insolent wasps.

The ship’s crew gathered around Morten – from the two helmsmen all the way down to the sailors – and broke into the nastiest snickers imaginable upon hearing this.



“Listen, is this some of your hocus-pocus again?” one helmsman hiccupping with laughter asked the black magician Cucaracha, who had just stowed his suitcases in his cabin and emerged on deck after hearing the ruckus.

“I haven’t the honor to be of acquaintance, monsieur Zig, haven’t the honor... Better if we throw him overboard at once. Kerplank! Kerplunk! Before it becomes a greater fiasco...” he stuttered in reply, casting a fearful glance towards the cabin.

The crew shuddered. Some thought came to everyone’s mind, and they peered out of the corners of their eyes towards the captain’s cabin, as if some kind of danger lay there in wait.

“You speak the truth, maestro,” Zig spoke, breaking the silence. He slipped a dark green bottle with a colorful label out of the pocket of his canvas pants, and took a good long swig from it. Then he handed it to his brother, who greedily guzzled it dry and lobbed it overboard.

“Zag, you rascal! Let’s take this ticketless dummy and throw him into the briny deep! We’ll see whether stowaways can swim, too! Have to pay for a trip, my dear! Otherwise – adieu, monsieur!”

The brothers Zig and Zag grabbed Morten by his scruff to the sound of the crew’s jeering, and hoisted him onto the railing. They paid no attention to the boy’s attempts to resist.

“Well, ducky – go and count the fishies!” helmsman Zag bellowed, and was already ready to fling the frightened boy into the waves when a honey-sweet voice suddenly sounded from the cabin.

“Attention, gentlemen! Observing this from a purely aesthetic aspect, the given action is absolutely vulgar!” A gallant gentleman in a glimmering green tailcoat appeared on deck, strutting quickly across the creaking boards in his ballroom shoes just like a ballerina on a potato field.

“So, in other words – let us please free that ticketless traveler without delay, convey him to the hold predetermined for such an individual and wait until our Highness’ nap has finished. Then, just as the rules stipulate, we may discuss the given disciplinary issue and, if needed, employ such measures.”

Zig and Zag stood staring numbly at the fine-mannered orator, who moved suavely and wore a golden hat. It seemed that they hadn’t understood a word of what the lackey said.

“Throw that miscreant into the hold, or else you will soon be on the other side of the railings as well!” the grasshopper Alfonso shouted, transitioning unexpectedly from courteousness to extreme irritation.

“Kerplank! Kerplunk!” the maestro Cucaracha added quickly, and vanished from the crowd. He didn’t want to become involved in affairs among the crew members. Furthermore, he needed to get himself ready for his evening performance.

Zig and Zag set Morten, who had meanwhile stopped squirming, onto the deck crossly. The boy’s initial confident elation had been replaced by vague uneasiness. He comprehended that no one on the ship believed he was the Salamander’s captain. Otherwise they wouldn’t demand he have a ticket. And who were those mysterious Highnesses that punish ticketless travelers?

As if in response to his question, six well-preened lady’s hands appeared through the round copper-framed window of the captain’s chambers. The lackey Alfonso rushed over in a split second to kiss them.

“Mmuah... Mmmuah... Kiss-kiss... How did you sleep?”

“Allow me to rest just a while longer, dear Alf. I just had a nightmare that a giant attacked our ship,” a sleepy woman’s voice said through a yawn on the other side of the window. Where indeed had Morten heard that voice? And those hands with painted red fingernails... Where indeed had he seen them before?

The other ladies in the cabin were silent and had likely fallen back to sleep.

Morten felt the helmsmen Zig and Zag tighten their grip and drag him towards the hatch that led down to the cargo hold. The boy realized that the only way to restore his authority on the ship was to allow events to unfold at their own pace at first. What else could he really do? An overweight brute can only be overpowered through cleverness; the main thing is to keep your nerve. Having a clear plan is important.

“Let them think I’ve resigned myself to the situation – they’ll drop their guard, and then...” Morten thought as the heavy hatch opened up. A threatening blackness yawned from the cargo hold.

Zig and Zag had regained their spirited mood; no doubt the frothy liquid in their dark green bottle played its own part in the change.

“Make yourself at home. See you soon, buddy!” Morten heard one say, and the wasps laughed tauntingly as the hatch slammed shut. Thud!

Imprisoned

Thump! Morten landed in the dark cargo hold.

His eyes accustomed to the darkness after a few moments. A bit of light filtered in through the ceiling, across which ran a sewage pipe channeling wastewater out of the ship. Visible in the rays of light cast from between the pipe and the ceiling boards was an oak barrel with rusted steel hoops, and next to it lay a firefighter’s axe and a faucet head.

Pitch-black darkness enveloped the rest of the room. The space had a musty stench and the walls gave off an unpleasant clamminess. The whole ship creaked and shuddered menacingly. Morten was covered in sweat. “So now I know how bugs felt when I stuffed them into my pencil box,” the boy sighed.

Morten started talking to himself loudly to drive away the feeling of dread that was stealthily creeping in.

“How many ladies were there in the captain’s cabin, anyway? I could see six hands in the window. If every lady stuck one hand out, then there were six there, of course. If every lady held out both hands for Alfonso to kiss, then there were four. No – six divided by two is three. But if one lady stuck two hands out and the others stuck out one, then...” Math wasn’t exactly Morten’s strongest suit.

“Nothing simpler, my unfortunate companion – there were twelve fat women and a rabies-infested

hedgehog in the cabin,” someone suddenly said in a beleaguered voice. “Although, my dear fellow sufferer, what difference does any of that make anymore...”

Peering back at Morten from over the edge of the barrel was a creature with large, sad eyes and a lovely coat of golden fur. The kind of thing that you’d want to pick up in your arms right away and bury your nose in its fluffy coat.

“I’m extremely sorry to meet you here! My name is, I mean – was – Saskia. I’ve been cursed to this place. I’m carrying out my endless punishment here because of jam donuts and too much curiosity. But why indeed have you, a young boy, ended up here? Were you sent to hell only because you didn’t feel like going to math class? Or do you have some dreadful killing that weighs upon your soul instead?”

“To hell?” Morten said in amazement.

“Oh! You poor, newly-departed little soul – of course you don’t know yet that after death, there’s nothing other than this stuffy, dark place, where you have to serve out a grave punishment for the error of your ways for all of eternity. Forever!” the caterpillar Saskia continued in a trembling voice.

“I, for example, am languishing here in this damp, hellish cask, and can never move ever again. As soon as I stand up straight, an awful underground geyser erupts below it and would quickly fill this entire circle of hell with cold, stinky water. There’s nothing more dreadful for a caterpillar than drenched fur. We fear water like a thumb fears a hammer, or an egg fears a steamroller. But here... You see?!” Saskia rose up to the edge of the barrel, and a wild plume of water immediately elevated the cask – lifting them both into the air. There was a hole in the ship!

Saskia quickly jumped back into the barrel and plugged the fountain with the weight of her body. There was a hole in the ship! What else could go wrong? Morten realized that the already measly situation was becoming more and more abysmal. What could he do?

How did a hole form in the bottom of the Salamander? And who was the creature inhabiting the barrel?

“Oh, woe is me! Why, oh why didn’t I listen to mamma’s scolding?” the caterpillar continued in exasperation while Morten tried to feel around in the darkness to find something to patch the leak. Hopeless!

The miserable barrel inhabitant began to tell her sad tale, whimpering loudly every now and then.

Above and below

Morten was long since fed up with the caterpillar’s depressing babbling. The entire time that Saskia spilled out her confession, he had been feeling around the full length of the dark cargo hold and become convinced that it didn’t contain a single item, with which he could save the ship from imminent ruin.

“I’m not dead in any sense of the word at all, but rather I’m Captain Morten Viks and have been imprisoned by mutineers. This place isn’t any kind of hell, but is the hold of a ship that I must escape at once,” Morten replied, and a glimmering spark of freedom flickered in his eyes.

“You’re far from having kicked the bucket, too. You fell into that barrel and accidentally ended up on the ship together with it. You came to only after the cask had been rolled into the Salamander’s cargo hold. Not knowing where you were, you chopped a hole into the bottom of the ship and because of that, it nearly sank.

Anything’s possible! Since your layer of fat and coat of fur are thick and soft, your bones weren’t broken when you fell. You only got a good, hard bump on the head. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be telling that half-witted hell story.

Help me think instead of how we might save the Salamander.”

Saskia looked at Morten in amazement. Something seemed to flash for a brief moment in her large, watery eyes.

“So it’s actually a ship. How didn’t I realize it before! Every sinner sent to hell perceives the netherworld according to his or her greatest fear: the person sees the place through their own eyes tainted by evildoing. For a captain, that naturally can’t be anything other than a sinking ship. This is all extremely interesting and exceedingly tragic.

I must admit – now that I’ve found myself a companion on the journey along this eternal thorny trail, it is all much easier to bear.

If you wish to cry, my distressed brother, then do so, please, without shame. It’ll make things easier.” The caterpillar then rolled up into a ball in the bottom of the barrel and started to wail pitifully: “Mammaaaa...”

Morten grasped that falling from a great height had knocked his cellmate’s wits soundly out of whack.

He sat on the damp floor next to the barrel, sighing

and staring at the ceiling with a futile look in his eyes. The only opening to the outside was situated on the ceiling of the hold, next to the sewage pipe. Despite the fact that he was as miniscule as an elf, he wouldn't have fit through the crack that spilled weak, dusty light into the hold. And on top of that, it wasn't in any way possible to climb up to the ceiling.

As if to confirm the fact that the law of gravity can't be broken, Morten jumped against the wall of the hold. Bam!

And behold! Morten's legs supported him against the wall, just as if he was standing on the floor.

The wall had suddenly become the floor, while the floor and the ceiling had become walls.

Morten took a couple of cautious steps forward. Creeak! Squeeak! To his great surprise, he moved just a bit farther away from the floor again. Oh-ho!

Morten stepped forwards more confidently. A few moments later, he was up against the ceiling. How cool was that – to walk on the wall like on the floor! He was soon clumping across the ceiling, then the wall, then the floor again, wall, ceiling, floor... Around and around.

Woo-hoo! It felt unspeakably exciting.

The boy, exhilarated by his unbelievable powers, nearly forgot that he was an imprisoned captain on a ship in danger of sinking.

"There's obviously nothing supernatural about walking on the ceiling and the walls," Morten thought after he had finally grown tired of dashing around in circles.

"I'm smaller than a fly right now, and flies – just like all other bugs – can move around on the ceiling, the walls as well as the floor in the very same way." He sat down on the sewage pipe to catch his breath and rest.

(upside down page)

Illuminated by the beam of light rising up from beneath the boy's legs, the hold looked like a lampshade hung above his head. The chubby young caterpillar-girl Saskia continued sobbing in her barrel: "Mammaaaa..."

It was so strange, as if in a dream. Above, below, to the right, to the left – everything usually taken for granted became inapplicable in that ghostly ship. Anyone that has imagined him- or herself in an upside-down world when playing in front of a mirror

can just about understand what Morten felt as he sat on a cracked pipe with his head upside down, swinging his legs back and forth.

Morten put his hands into the crack in the ceiling – or rather the floor – and tugged with all his might. The boards wouldn't budge. The caterpillar's axe! Why didn't he think of that right away? Now that climbing onto the ceiling was no longer an obstacle, it would take little effort for him to pry open the boards. Morten was gripped by a burst of motivation.

"When I free myself of imprisonment, I'll firstly warn the crew, fix the leak and then heroic glory will shine around my head. The entire crew will burst into tears out of regret and beg their captain for forgiveness. They'll realize that without my wise and determined guidance... Wait! But what'll become of Saskia? They'll hardly forgive her for chopping a hole in the bottom of the ship. Overboard! Kerplank! Kerplunk! Just as the black magician loves to say.

Yes, I'll still have to keep quiet and act in secret at first. I can't give the caterpillar away.

Regardless of her odd nature, Saskia is still my friend and certainly hasn't earned such cruel treatment. Rather, she needs to be treated so that some sense might come back to her head."

Discussing these things with himself in his head, Morten made his way back onto the ceiling with the axe. He placed the blade between the boards and pried one end up. Snap! The board fell down to the floor.

The beam of light shining into the middle of the cargo hold grew visibly broader. Just one more little board now, and...

Creeeeak! The hatch opened, and through it entered Zig and Zag.

The startled Morten quickly cast the axe down next to the barrel, where the caterpillar continued to sob, separated from world around her behind a wall of tears.

Both helmsmen marched across the ceiling of the hold towards Morten, fully aware of what they were doing.

Walking on the ceiling isn't strange for wasps, of course.

They swaggered forwards. Apparently, the pair had emptied quite a few more colorfully labeled bottles.

"Alright, so, froggy – hic! – you can go a swimmin'



Kaspar Jancis. Morten on a Ship of Fools . Translated by Adam Cullen

soon. Swish-swash, haha-hahaha!”

The wasps didn't express the slightest bit of surprise that Morten was on the ceiling upside down, too.

It was just a regular, everyday thing on the Salamander, of course.

Morten was greatly tempted to come forward with his secret; however, he still managed to keep his mouth shut.

Not noticing the caterpillar weeping in the barrel, the twins grabbed the unresisting Martin from beneath both arms and led him up onto the deck.

The crew sat along the mast just like chickens roosting on a chicken coop, while the ship crested a frothing wall of seawater. Yes, there were truly unusual laws of physics on the Salamander – and because of this, the entire world seemed to be flipped head over heels every now and then.

Imagine sitting on a tiny beam and swinging your legs over a bottomless abyss. On your right is the endless expanse of the sky and on your left is a churning wall of water.

The light breeze blowing beneath your sneakers lifts you and the beam up along the swell. From time to time, a seagull flies straight upwards out of the depths of the abyss and lands for a moment on the end of the beam, then flaps off to continue on its way into the heavens.

Raindrops fall from right to left in the air. If you don't want to get wet, you have to hold an umbrella next to you and not above your head.

That's what sailing feels like if you turn the horizon sideways. In the Salamander's case, one also had to take account of the fact that the ship was barely the size of an iron. For that reason, gnats would play the part of seagulls. Raindrops would have the proportions of a good-sized melon.

Nevertheless, I must admit that even bugs prefer the view of the world that we do; at least for the most part.

The vertical horizon was used for special occasions. One such event was undoubtedly the trial of a person traveling on the ship without travel documents and who, on top of it all, unashamedly claimed to be the ship's captain.