



S. FISCHER VERLAGE

**Patricia Koelle**

***Message in a Bottle from Life***

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**The first volume of the new *Harbour of Happiness* series by bestselling author Patricia Koelle**



Pixie is a fantasy author. Recently she has become dissatisfied because her writing is stagnating. So she accepts an offer to research the history of an old ship in a bottle for a magazine. The search takes her to harbours on the East Frisian North Sea coast, where she meets Feeke – the granddaughter of a woman who once influenced the shipbuilder Captain Flömer with her affection and wisdom. Pixie falls in love with the historic Gulfhof farm where Feeke lives. But the farm is in trouble. To save it, Pixie researches other ships in bottles and discovers her true calling in the process.

**Patricia Koelle** is an author whose books express her everlasting amazement at life, people and our gorgeous planet. In addition to novels and story collections. Her works published by FISCHER include the [Baltic Sea trilogy](#), the [North Sea trilogy](#), the [Island Gardens series](#) and the [Forest of Longing series](#) and have sold more than 900,000 copies (September 2024).

### **Sample Translation: Charlie Wührer**

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There was a thunderstorm that night. Pixie woke and lay for a long time in bed, listening, before she got up and made herself a hot chocolate. She watched from the window as gusts of wind blew wildly at the fronds of the willow tree, watched how it made the branches sway on their boughs. Yellow leaves whirled through the air, catching the light of the lantern on the corner of the house. After a while, she sat down at the table and tried to work at her book. Perhaps it would be easier now, at the witching hour, after a few days' break?

After just a few pages, she grew restless again. She stood and looked out at the canal. The storm was over, and now the crescent moon played peekaboo behind the racing clouds. Pixie shook her head at herself. If her own book bored her, she couldn't possibly inflict it on readers. Her mind drifted to Friso, Venja, Tamani and life at the harbor. She thought about Caroline, who made sure that nothing happened to the boats, and that the spirit of the Cliner Wind, with all its open-mindedness and vibrancy, remained unchanged. Given the welcome she'd received, the spirit seemed to be happy reality rather than the stuff of legends. Perhaps she just had to keep an open enough mind, too, and then the right ideas would come to her in time. Just then, the moonlight turned the edges of a dense cloud silver. Pixie was hit once again by the curious feeling that the light of the East Frisian sky was attempting to tell her something.

She went to bed comforted, and slept well into the day, waking only when her phone vibrated and leapt across the table. It was Friso.

*I couldn't think of anything re: the butterflies, but my sister could! Which explains the vague thought that came to mind. Venja must have mentioned it. But it's only a hunch. Do you want to phone her, or come over? She said there's pumpkin soup with North Sea shrimp, horse radish and dill. From noon. Then again, it's stormy today, and it looks like it's staying that way.*

Pixie replied, *An irresistible offer. I'm coming!*

She skipped breakfast and headed straight out in the car with a cup of tea. She'd be there long before noon, but she wanted to walk along the beach first. According to the tide table, it would be high tide, and she was desperate to see real surf again.

The beach was pleasantly empty on account of the wind, which blew gustily, chasing fast flurries of sand along the shore. The beach huts were deserted, too, even though some were perched on the grass and had stayed surprisingly pristine. On Amrum, at least half of them would be buried under small sand dunes by now, or else they'd be standing askew.

Pixie laughed aloud with joy, and let herself be buffeted along with her arms outstretched. The wind was so strong that she could lean against it. Scraps of seaweed flew through the air. She bent down to pick up a particularly large sandy clam. She would put it on the window sill at the *Waterhuuske* where

she was staying, for an extra touch of North Sea-feeling. The surf was glorious, splashing and rolling and rushing, like a mighty breath. She gave herself over to its rhythm, until her own lungs expanded and her entire body tingled. The gulls drifted elatedly on the wind, forced down and then whirled up again, like red and yellow leaves, or fiery sparks dancing in the sea spray.

She couldn't tear herself away, and arrived at *Verpuusten* long after 12 p.m.

"Moin," Venja said from behind the counter as Pixie came through the door, bringing in leaves with her. "I can hear your tummy rumbling from here! I assume you went for a walk?"

It smelled divine. Only then did Pixie realise how hungry the sea air had made her, how it had chilled her.

The terrace was shut for the day because of the weather, and there was only a handful of people in the snug guest room. A fire roared in a round old stove in the corner, casting bizarre shadows that flitted across the walls.

"Take a seat." Venja nodded towards a little table near the fire. "You'll warm up there."

"Heaven. Thank you! Is it the pumpkin soup that smells so good?" Pixie had been looking forward to it since Friso's message.

"It is. I'll bring you a bowl. It comes with a chestnut bread roll."

A little later, Pixie learned that the bread had been baked with chestnut flour and walnuts. The mouth-watering pumpkin soup contained a generous helping of freshly caught North Sea shrimp, and all in all, the meal was as flavorful as fall itself. Pixie closed her eyes in delight, and savored the aromas, savored the soothing crackle of the fire. The heat of it dried her clothes and then warmed her skin, and the soup thawed her from the inside.

Why wasn't Venja working in a Michelin-starred restaurant?, she wondered, before answering her own question: *Verpuusten* belonged to Venja alone – it was her adventureland, where she could do and test whatever she wanted, however she wanted. Tamina could wander in and out without bothering a restaurant owner, and *Verpuusten* could have flexible opening hours. Venja was free to do as she liked, and freedom, as Pixie knew, had always been a top priority for East Friesians.

"That went down well." Venja sat down with Pixie just as she was finishing spooning out the very last of the soup. "I can offer you an apple-coffee crumble for dessert. But before Tamani gets back from school and sticks to you like glue, I wanted to tell you something. It's just a vague lead, no more than a theory, really, but perhaps it'll help you."

Apple-coffee crumble! At this prospect, Pixie struggled to concentrate. She pulled herself together, remembering her curiosity and her plan. "Please, tell me!"

"Okay. So I don't know how well you know the area. West from here, about ten minutes by car, there's Neuharlingersiel. It has another harbor, and Friso has a cutter there, too, which is used for excursions sometimes. He's there at the moment, making sure everything is stormproof. Ten minutes further is Bengersiel. And between Bengersiel and Neuharlingersiel, right behind the dyke, there's a Gulfhof. Hang on a minute!" Venja leapt up to show a couple who'd come in to a table. She gave them a menu, before returning.

"What's a Gulfhof?" Pixie wanted to know. Something about the word was familiar, but in a very different context. She'd often been to the Gulf Coast with Nathan, and it was tropical heat she associated with the word "gulf," not this rough North Sea climate.

"It's a Gulf house, a kind of farmhouse from the 17th and 18th centuries. There were a lot of farmyards here back then. They look like narrow houses attached to very wide ones at the front, usually separated by fire walls," Venja explained eagerly. "There were barely any load-bearing walls, and the weight of the large roof rested on an internal partition construction. Pinewood for the beams was carried oversea on rafts from Scandinavia, because for a long time there were no straight logs around here." Venja pulled a pen from her bag and sketched a rectangle on a napkin.

"The working wing was divided into three bays by these beams, see? The cattle were kept in the side bays. Here, in the large middle bay between the four central beams, is what they called the gulf, a large space where people worked and threshed, and where, most importantly, the harvest and tools

were stored. This middle section is a little lower than the rest of the barn. That's probably how it got its name. The Old Norse word *golf* meant 'hollow.'

Venja, like Friso, seemed to be in the habit of delivering little lectures to ignorant guests. Pixie made a quick mental note. She was fascinated. She saw images in her mind's eye, but she was pretty sure they were a far cry from reality. She'd have to find out more. She thought she could even smell the gulf. Hay, and the sweat of cows. Fresh bread from the kitchen... And then there were the sounds. Snuffling, grunting, the voices of farmers. The clattering of buckets, and the rustling of straw.

"The gulf was handy, because it let people in rainy East Friesland do work like threshing grain and storing hay indoors under a big roof. In warmer regions, that kind of work would be done out in the fields," continued Venja. "The barn area is much wider than the living area. The roof extends down low, which creates side bays for the stables, among other things." Venja smiled. There was no mistaking how much she loved her homeland. "The width of the Gulf houses makes them look like they're nestled snugly under the wind, hugging the ground. Nowadays, of course, cattle are no longer kept indoors, and the farms have been converted into residential buildings, often with lots of rooms for vacation guests."

"And the roof is made of reeds?"

Venja shook her head. "No. The roof over the living area and the lower part of the barn is made of red brick. But the upper part of the barn roof is thatched,

or at least it used to be. There was also a large barn door you could drive in through with a cart, of course. Often the door had a semi-circular window above it, sometimes shaped like a rising sun. There was also a small door through which manure, for example, could be taken away."

"And the walls?"

"They're made of red brick, which they could make themselves here in East Friesland." Venja looked over at the guests, who were still examining their menus. "You'll see a Gulf house soon, I think. It'll be clearer then. The Gulf house I mean is called Filapperhoff. I only know it because I went to school with the daughter of the family for a while. She was called Sika. But she was in another grade, and I barely knew her."

"*Filapperhoff*." Pixie tried out the word. "It sounds funny."

"Filapper is a Low German word for butterfly. And 'hoff' means farm. "

"Oh!" Hoff, Pixie liked that. "Hoff" brought to mind "Hoffnung," hope.

Venja raised her shoulders. "I don't know if it means anything. But could it be that there's a connection between the butterfly patterns on the ships and the Filapperhoff? Perhaps the cutter used to belong to them. You could ask, if you want. I found the address. I'll send it to you." Venja took out her phone. "If not, you'll at least have seen an old Gulf house. Perhaps you can use it for a story. The farms are special. Even just looking at them makes you feel safe. They



can withstand any storm, and because of the overhanging roof, they're so spacious. Good luck!" She rose.

"Thank you, Venja! Can I pay?" Pixie was too excited to eat dessert now. She was almost certain she'd finally found a lead.

"Oh, it's on the house. Tamani and Friso told me how much cake they devoured at yours yesterday."

Pixie was nice and warm now. She'd just bundled herself up again in her scarf and coat, and was attempting to close the door, which the wind kept pushing open, behind her, when Friso arrived from the jetty.

"Oh, hello. So, what do you think about Venja's idea?"

"I can't wait to see the Gulf house! I'm about to drive there. Is your cutter okay?"

"I think so. The *Hunnert* is fine. Only today's excursion had to be cancelled. But it means I can help Venja; she's hosting a family party here later. And I just checked the peddle boats to make sure none of them float away."

"Hunnert?"

"The cutter. I only have a small share in it. My friend Lutz is the main owner. *Hunnert* means something like 'magnificent.' He named it that because it's

how he felt when he first saw it, he said. And because it feels magnificent every time he takes it out. I wonder if you'll find out what the cutter on the old photo is called. Good luck! Let me know!"

"Of course."

On her way to the car, she stopped at the statue of Caroline. "Wish me luck," she said quietly. Something about her moved Pixie every time. Caroline hadn't been there yet when the photo had been taken, but she was ultimately responsible for protecting the ships. Her support couldn't hurt.

Hopefully some of the open-minded, tolerant Cliner Wind was blowing on the Filapperhoff, too. Not everyone liked it when strangers turned up and asked questions.