

Chapter 1

West Wind

At night the sea is the darkest thing you will ever encounter. The moon was hidden behind heavy storm clouds, and the horizon could barely be distinguished from the black in which the wave crests towered up to draw breath time and time again, while the wind, which was churning up sea spray and foam, whipped over the crests. Far below the platform swayed on its long steel rope ends, tugged at the metre-thick pins anchored in the depths of the seabed, illuminating the billowing brown around it.

It was the eighth hour of the shift. On the narrow toe board, he hitched himself into the harness, restraining himself with both arms on the frame of the rig. The salty wetness surrounded him like an all-encompassing heavy undertow. For a while already, he had been waiting for a signal that would bring the work to an end. Pippo would have called them in a while back, but it didn't seem to matter to the new rig manager. He'd rather let them drown than suspend the drilling. Vaclav could feel the waves beat against the platform's jacket legs. They'd evacuate the platform, he had thought, but not now. Now the word was that they would have to wait while the rain lashed down almost horizontally in front of the floodlights. Meanwhile, there was pulling on the weld seams, the sea was tearing against the platform like a crazed herd, and the waves were fleeing the storm. All this was coming at them.

Far below at the rotary table he saw the men, who were shouting something. He could see their mouths moving, but all he could hear was the storm, was the sea spray, was the futile flapping of a seagull's wings, whose undersides flashed brightly a couple of times.

It was half an hour before the signal was given and the work was abandoned. He had only just held out, braced himself against the narrow toe board and waited. The other workers withdrew. Someone opened the heavy door to the cabins. He saw the chink of light as the first of them moved in. He was now frozen through and walked stiffly. His legs knew the clearances, each and every wet rung. The water had long since crept under his oilskins, and Vaclav, chilled to the bone, continued holding on after he came to a stop on the floor of the platform.

Inside, the light seemed piercing, the warmth friendly, even in the little room where they placed their boots on the racks and hung their boiler suits up to dry. It was almost somewhat jolly to come into the warmth with the others. It was a new team, and he had only known a few of them for a long time, such as Albert, who called the shots down at the rotary table. The storm had soured his mood even further. Vaclav stuck his feet into his flip flops without a word and walked along the narrow corridor to their cabin. The light was on, but Mátyás's bed was empty. Their covers were lying on the

lower bunk, and for a moment he thought that Mátyás was under them, but no one was there. The headphones were hanging down towards the floor, the Walkman lay next to the pillow. He wrapped the cable around his hand. 'Mátyás?' he said. Without waiting for an answer, he opened the door to the shower room. It was four in the morning. He turned on the hot water.

Barefooted and still soaking wet, he stood in front of their bunks. He pulled both covers over him. His skin was still damp, and the storm suddenly seemed far away. He waited. The warmth was making him tired, and he hadn't had anything to eat since the previous evening. That, too, was new. The foreman had assigned them different shifts.

As always, his skin seemed strangely pale out in the corridor, under the rows of strip lights. When he entered the canteen, the men sitting around the table right next to the bar stopped talking. Behind the sticky plastic sauce bottles he could sense them watching his every move as he looked around. Next to them, further toward the edge, sat Francis, pale and somewhat preoccupied. A sick sea bird ruffling up its feathers for the last remaining days. He didn't react to the jokes of the crane operator, who was shouting over like a fat pig from the neighbouring table. Shane was showing off in front of the new men. He barked at the floorhands to tip more chemicals into the lavatory, to bring him water or to hose down the deck repeatedly. Only when they were sitting next to him, tired out and feeble, and putting up with his crude jokes, did his face assume a faraway expression, which signalled contentedness in his case. It seemed then that his eyes were made of glass. But the swinging of the door had brought his face to life, and Vaclav heard a wooing, jeering howl. 'Aye-aye,' Shane mocked, 'who are we looking for then?' His voice sounded dull and deep, like that of a very fat man, but he was haggard and had a hawk nose in the middle of his face, with which he had been following their every move since he had first arrived two years ago. His arms, in fact everything about him, were permanently covered with a film of grease. Out on the deck he wore yellow protective gloves, which made his hands look like claws. It was his usual spiel. Vaclav never paid any heed when someone stared after them.

Francis, who was sitting alongside them, drank two glasses amid the uproar without saying a word. Vaclav was annoyed that Mátyás wasn't there. He took two scoops out of the insulated pot, dunked an almost transparent piece of toast into it and ate. The light was too bright here, too. The soup too brown, his skin too pale. Gradually the canteen filled up. When the work was suspended, they either came here to eat or went to their cabins to sleep.

In the corridor, the storm seemed almost silent, and the swaying made everything seem some distance away. He heard voices from the cinema room, as well as his own steps, which became more hurried as he passed doors with aluminium handles and bright coverings. He went along the long corridor until he reached the last door. The room was dark apart from a small electric candle in the corner, which flickered consistently in all weathers. They had sometimes met here on a couple of rugs pointing in the direction of Mecca. Almost no one came here to pray. 'Mátyás?' Would he have been surprised, if he'd been leaning against the wall laughing quietly? A beam of light fell into the darkness from the open door. The room remained silent. A surreal stillness hovered above the rugs. He made his way back to their cabin. Through the crack of a door he saw Andrei lying on his bunk, his mobile perched on his shoulder like a little bird – and beneath this, his fat belly and bright shabby trousers peeped out. He heard a song that went something like re-shooshik-shoorru and he would sing it over and over all night long.

The smell of socks and sweaty vests, the thin walls. Four thirty perhaps, in the morning. He normally still had around three hours to go on the iron frame of the rig, and these would be the final hours of sleep for Mátyás before his shift began. Maybe he had taken ill. The night was still as dark as could be, not a strip of light. Once the door up to the deck hadn't closed properly, and the water had flowed in as far as their cabins. That was a long time ago, before he knew Mátyás, before the weeks out here had assumed a temperature, something akin to a colour, which he recognised in the way that their belongings created a disorderliness that was familiar to him.

He climbed over their bags, into his bed, and stretched out on his back. He kept the lamp on for him and tried to close his eyes. You could rely on the fact that this platform could swim, that they were high enough, twelve metres above sea level, so could not simply be submerged. But what was it you could rely on? It was steel that was swimming here, the Ocean Monarch had lain in the North Sea for years before it was towed south, a semi-swimmer, a colossus, which had aged. Above Vaclav's headboard gleamed the greasy handprints of other workers. Untold nights, far afield. Mátyás analysed the drill samples, he understood the splinters and residues of the sedimentary strata, knew which primeval forests had grown on the bottom of the ocean. Never had he seen anyone laugh so much, an almost childlike way of dealing with all the weeks at sea. From the very first day, his facial expression had reminded Vaclav of old playing cards, a joker in a yellow robe. While the instructor in the large halls in which they were trained, placing his American R like the base of a rig beneath each sentence, told them of the almost limitless freedom on the world's oceans and their production areas, Mátyás just looked through his curls into the distance and bit back every word. His father was Hungarian. Some uprising or other had driven his family from the heart of Budapest into the countryside, where he was supposed to train as a blacksmith on a collective farm - hooves, steam, young mares and the whites of eyes, endless journeys over land, and the smell of his uncle in the cart, which made him sick.

They had been sharing the cabin for six years and they had left the Gulf of Mexico a year ago. What was raging outside and behaving like an irascible night was nothing other than the Atlantic, which here, near the continental shelf in front of the Moroccan coast, seemed angry and open. He reached into his bag and pulled out a pullover. Suddenly he was feeling cold. He thought of Pippo, their old foreman, whom malicious bouts of Malaria had chained to his bed for weeks. Some said he wouldn't be back to his old self anytime soon. It was because of the platforms not far from the shore, the Niger Delta and mosquitos, which came over from the swampy banks, because of the slight wind and the heat, and the fact that no one could permanently tolerate the tablets which could prevent an infection. How long had Pippo been out here? He knew that Mátyás liked him. But when they had returned to the platform, Anderson had taken Pippo's place. He didn't even introduce himself, and the glow of the couple of days that they had spent on shore was as though blown away.

He must have dreamed something, but when the alarm went off, he recalled no more than scraps, trees in a landscape, a couple of hills. It was Mátyás's alarm, since his shift was due to begin in a couple of minutes. The light was still on, the air muggy. He had forgotten to close the door to the shower room.

Mátyás wasn't there. Wind pressed against the wall of the cabin. It was quiet out in the corridor. They would suspend the work for another couple of hours. He turned onto his side and stared at his belongings. Everything was lying just as it had been, even his duffle bag with the soapstone, which he always carried with him, was lying where it always lay.

Vaclav pulled the covers around him more tightly and thought he had only closed his eyes briefly when something made him start, something dull, very far away, not the clatter of steps in the corridor, something other than the piercing signal that the work should continue. The sense of unease was unexpected and strong. It appeared to emanate from the bright wall, where the sudden daylight drew a vivid line. His warm fleece was also still hanging in the cupboard.

So, he would take the fleece to him. It was a clear morning, heavy clouds shifted as though in a hurry across the early blue. In the distance, a silver shimmer persisted. He carried the fleece for Mátyás, and he carried it like a plea, while the rumble of the machines suddenly seemed unreal to him. 'Here we are,' said Petrov, as he rounded the bright blue tank, behind which they were drawing samples.

He saw the familiar bowls with the oil slick, the stones and the slimy soil, saw everything he knew so well, the shakers, the monitors and tubes, saw Petrov with his good-natured smile, but he didn't see Mátyás. 'Where's your friend this morning?' Petrov took off his safety glasses and looked at him in exactly the same way as Vaclav was looking at him.

He had wanted to wait until Mátyás came of his own accord. Work had started only slowly after the long night. He didn't need to remind Petrov of the darkness of the sea. They searched. The realisation came only gradually, as they were looking through each room, the entire deck, every corner and every step down into the landing stages, the fitness room, the canteen several times over, and their own cabins several times too, as announcements were made, the foreman carried out routine questioning of the workers, and the sky opened up into an almost glorious midday, although nothing of the day and none of the sea birds above the water could be real. As radio messages were sent off, someone brought him a hot drink, and he scoured each jacket leg, the water shimmering crazily. They tried to rein him in and finally left him sitting among the containers, and, as a perfectly round sun sank into the water, he finally noticed that he was still holding something in his hand, which only in the evening and in front of the perfectly level horizon, evolved into something that had once been Mátyás's fleece.

That evening there didn't seem to be much of a moon, as he lay on the sway of the sea. Vaclav still had his boots on in bed, a couple of feathers were sticking out of the pillow. A giant creature had ripped away everything that had existed the previous day. He stood in his cabin and regretted having wound up Mátyás's headphones. He thought about the fact that he had removed them, that he couldn't hold on to any of it, that it was now evening and the storm was over, and it had got dark, as always. He heard steps in the corridor. The men were sauntering to the canteen in their sweaty t-shirts. They were hungry, he could smell the food and couldn't stay in the cabin. He went out. The

sea was almost calm. Every now and then they sent someone to check on him. Once Petrov came and offered him cigarettes, and Vaclav watched him smoke silently beside him.

‘That could cost you your job,’ Vaclav said, and Petrov laughed softly and took another puff, looking straight out at the sea.

‘They’ll question you, too,’ he said.

‘They won’t send anyone to look for him, will they?’

‘No,’ Petrov said. ‘They definitely won’t do that.’

They were quiet for a while. Gas was still being burned off. A seagull flew past in the spotlight. Sometimes they came over from the tankers.

‘What you going to do now?’ Petrov asked. ‘Where will you go?’

They looked down at the water as the day began to dawn, and a slight sheen swam along with them on the swell.

‘Back,’ Vaclav said.

‘Where’s that?’

He thought he saw a smile in Petrov’s eyes.

What’s with you? Vaclav asked finally.

‘A wife and child,’ said Petrov. ‘Goddammit. They think it’s easy money out here. That’s what they all think.’

The last light came from far away and landed on the grey stubble on his chin.

Drips dropped down and echoed behind them on the empty tank. The wind freshened, rushed against frames and cables. Petrov pulled up his hood.

‘I can’t leave you sitting here, Wenzel.’

‘Come in with me.’ He put his arm around Vaclav, an arm which knew that the next days, too, would taste of rain, of rain and clouds, their passing. Vaclav couldn’t go into the cabin. He said ‘dobranoc’ to Petrov and went into the canteen. Behind the counter was fat Lúkacs, who pressed his chef’s hat between his hands when he saw him, as though a shadow were walking next to him. And he heard them lower their voices, Mikael and Ray and Steve. One of them pushed back a chair.

‘Wenzel, do you want to join us?’

‘No, thanks, I’m not staying long.’

But then he sits on after all, the beanpole, in front of an instant lemon tea, which is lukewarm in his cup. Their bare forearms are sticking to the tabletop. No one is talking. Has anyone

seen these t-shirts? Bright red and green. Ray is wearing a washed-out sweatshirt with a print from a Manga film on it. A princess and a sword. Barely a metre separates his table from theirs. He sees them looking over at him, their eyes stealing glances at him, as if he were to blame for the cards not being brought out and for the fact that they can't talk across the canteen with Lúkacs, who is absentmindedly wiping the glass counter, as though he had only today noticed the thin greasy film behind which the cold burgers shone.

He wondered if it was the same room. He asked Lúkacs to fry him a couple of eggs and ate cold potatoes in their skins along with them. All of a sudden he was hungry. He avoided scratching his fork on the plate. It was no longer their canteen, but it was the same room. At some point or other a new decade had dawned, and with all the force of the burned-out fireworks they had sat here and played, Mátyás, young enough, lively. Before that Vaclav hadn't spent a night at these tables, never before had he loved the sudden sense of remoteness more.

The smell of cabbage and frying fat hung in the air.

The door opened, and Eugen stuck his head in.

'Vaclav, they're looking for you. They'll send a Super Puma for you first thing in the morning. It's coming over from the mainland. Just for you. A Puma!'

He heard their voices blend together and knew that the conversation would now turn to helicopters. They would weigh the pros and cons of the different models among which the Puma stood out. He sat there listening. Lúkacs shovelled something into himself, then his eyes caught sight of the yellow clock above the door. XI, what was that? Eleven in the evening was what it was. As he looked up at the clock, he noticed something rise up within him. He could still hear their voices, made it as far as the corridor and into the cabin, over to the metal toilet pan, which he threw up in, and it was night, simply night, and he sat there and watched his hands shake, as if they belonged to someone else, like this night, in which he didn't belong.

Everything that followed seemed overly clear and yet blurred, images, frayed, not graspable at the edges. After an hour's discussion, Anderson, the big-hearted rig manager, had exempted him from the remaining four days of the trip. As he spoke, Vaclav thought about birds that imitate rain in order to draw worms out of the earth.

He didn't have the strength to ask him. From the window of Anderson's office, Vaclav saw the men resume their work, saw the rotary table, the colourful boiler suits and the dazzlingly white helmets. The water had calmed down, it lay flat, and no one had come and thrown a wreath into it. There was no speech, nothing. In his head he couldn't conceive of a send-off that didn't involve dark pubs with brown sauce. He thought about the steelworks in the Ruhr district, men he had heard about as a boy who had disappeared in broad daylight. A white-hot heat after years between carnival and corn schnapps. The misery of the war years was followed by the silence of the oak consoles, the

narrowness of the colliery estate. Life histories reduced to less than ashes in the piping hot steel of the furnaces. As a child he was left with the image of changing rooms and of brown shoes, which were no longer worn in the evening. He saw the church choir of St. Cyriac, widows in heavy suits taking their positions in rows. A parish hall full of flan cases, fruits from endless allotments, the black shoes as shiny as polished plates. Children who sang Polish and German songs, whose collars had been stiffened. The waves had subsided. Not even the colours were right: t-shirts, brightly coloured helmets, hairy calves. The sea lay bright all around.

Anderson asked him several times if he wanted to go home. Several times he told him that the address which the company held for emergencies had not existed for some time.

Anderson said it would be good if he went ashore soon, and without hesitation he reported the loss to the head office. He held the receiver to his ear. He said Mátyás's name in the middle of sentences which sounded like a list of things that were no longer needed. Perhaps he didn't understand what he was saying, maybe he was trying to be business-like. On the wall shone the photo of an unknown crew. It had been taken with a flash, and on the red boiler suits the reflective stripes on the upper arms and legs shone more clearly than any face. Vaclav tried to estimate how old Anderson was, certainly fifteen years younger than himself, perhaps in his mid-thirties. Anderson's checked shirt rode up a little and revealed a pale, almost bacon-like hand. Everything about him was pale and hairless, and his voice had the energy of a stick being stirred around in a lukewarm pond.

Anderson knew nothing of the tears spilled by Alexei, who missed the birth and short life of his son out here. He knew nothing of the languages in which each of them dreamed. He spoke in a steady manner, nodded a couple of times and then hung up. He reached for a yellow leather pencil case, pulled out a fountain pen, noted down a couple of words, then looked over at Vaclav, as though he had done something important.

He would do everything to get him transferred to another platform after a few weeks on land, Anderson said.

'That would be a relief for you, wouldn't it?'

His smile.

'What about him?' said Vaclav.

Anderson looked at him in astonishment.

'Him?'

He shook his head slowly and then pointed at the sea chart on the wall.

'Mr. Groszak. You do know what this shading means?'

For a moment they both stared at the bas-relief on which the sample drillings and the platform were marked.

‘Yes,’ he said, as if his mind were elsewhere.

‘Either the swell pressed him up against a steel pontoon,’ and he balled the fingers of his right hand into a fist briefly, ‘or the undercurrent below deck swept him off.’

Anderson looked into the distance. His mouth was soft as well, and he avoided catching Vaclav’s eye. Vaclav missed Pippo. He wondered what he would have done right now. Pippo had hairy hands, and they could smoke together when problems arose. Pippo knew his men. When the others roared with laughter, a subtle smile just swept over his face, but then his voice could become as firm as the dorsal fin of a bass. You could cut yourself on him. He would never have telephoned a secretary like a young pup.

Anderson nodded toward the door.

‘The men let me know if they see anything unusual out there.’

He tilted back in his chair.

‘We’ll be in touch. Your shuttle’s coming around three.’

It was only sudden anger that got him onto his feet, the arch of the back of the chair, which his thumbs were boring into, and the fact that Anderson suddenly fell silent when he saw him standing like that, indeed, startled, but more in the way that one is startled by vermin or an unfamiliar noise, as though he might suddenly jump on him. Vaclav just stood there and looked at him.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Anderson said quietly, and bit his lip. ‘I mean it.’

On the way into the cabin he suddenly felt heavy, as though he hadn’t slept for weeks. He tore open their cupboards and gathered their things together, stuffed them into their bags, then he carried them out, both bags, onto the deck, into the sudden sea air.

He climbed up to the helipad. The drilling was still going on. They were pumping more drilling fluid into the depths to maintain the pressure. The Puma wasn’t there yet. He was weighed down by the luggage. Only Petrov accompanied him up to the landing pad, where he stood as crooked as an oak and didn’t say much.

Vaclav leaned against a wall and watched the others get on with their work. The crane swivelled around, the wind was cold. His face felt hot, his eyes swollen. He heard steps on the stairs behind him, saw Francis, still filthy dirty in his boiler suit.

‘Wenzel,’ he said, and then drew breath. ‘What did they say, where are you off to now?’

Francis pulled off his gloves and let them fall at his sides like two dead fish. Vaclav could make out the edge of his boots beneath his trouser legs. Everything seemed too large to him, the clothing, the helmet. Francis reminded him of an animal whose coat had got wet and which suddenly just looked pitiful and sick.

‘What are they doing now?’ he asked. ‘What are they doing now with –’, he faltered, as though he didn’t dare carry on.

‘With Mátyás, that’s still his name,’ Vaclav said quietly.

It felt wrong playing this role. As he continued speaking, he listened with curiosity almost to his own voice, which sounded unusually firm.

‘They won’t do a thing.’

He could see Francis pressing his lips together. His skin had an oily sheen, as though he hadn’t washed for days. ‘Do you remember that boat a couple of years back? Near Mehdiya? They were very near land. Three of them were never found. And divers – ‘

Vaclav cut him off with a wave of his hand.

‘Are you coming back?’ Francis asked hurriedly.

He was nervous. The shift was going to start again soon and he had to get back. Although so much time had passed, he still had the feeling that he couldn’t take any liberties with the others.

‘Sure.’ Vaclav slapped him on the shoulder. ‘Sure.’

Then he saw him climb down from the pad and cross the iron-latticed walkway over to the rig. It stung him to spot Francis among the others so very quickly.

The Puma didn’t arrive until the evening.

This isn’t Mexico.

Several times this sentence shot through his head, but he didn’t know what to make of it. This wasn’t Mexico, and the sea had calmed down, but Mátyás wasn’t there.

What remained of the platform in the evening was a dim light on the sea, a dark horizon, which was growing wider. He leaned with double hearing protection against the windowpane, in a sweaty survival suit, with the engine vibrating above him. He saw the bright spots, the gas flares and the illuminated superstructure, which were all growing increasingly hazy far below.

And as he observed these bright spots, he couldn’t help thinking about his father, the attic room and the oval window. The quaking of his dust-ridden lungs, as Vaclav sat with him, and a fear in his eyes that did not want to take comfort from the hand stroking his arm. He asked Vaclav to describe another sea to him, a different one from the Baltic with its dim cutters and cabins. He asked to hear about the sand carried across the water by the Sahara winds, which gritted between their

teeth on such occasions, and Vaclav told him about coastlines and dunes of the finest sand, which bordered directly on the sea. They spoke of journeys they would take, to places no one would follow them to. 'Iść tam, dokąd nikt nie idzie za tobą,' his father whispered, and Vaclav nodded. To go where no one would follow you. He tried to be strong, as he had been all along, and then they sat for a while in the fading light of the room, which was so small that from the bed at one side of it, he was able to touch the opposite wall with his hand. His father fell into a light sleep a number of times, then he opened his eyes and called for Vaclav.

The helicopter careened through the sky. It would find a coast and land at a spot from which a boat would then ferry him to the night harbour of Tangiers.

Running crouched beneath the rotor blades with two duffel bags, which then lay next to one another on the backseat of the taxi, when they set off for the cutter. A light rain ran in red smears through the dust on the windscreen. They drove. Low barracks with wire fences, occasionally the barred windows of workshops with lifting platforms behind them in a cold nocturnal light, a few well-secured warehouses. It was one of those industrial estates near the coast, which look as though they are only used for scrap and car dealerships. He was tired. Next to him, the driver was chewing away on something, and he could hear the noise of the windscreen wipers, which were forming stripes on the glass. And there were raindrops, which lit up in these foreign streets. You wiped them away, and no one noticed. New ones would come.