



Dead Letter

By Norman Thomas Hood

“Stop it, baby! It’s a public beach and there’s kids around,” she teased.

John swam under her raft and resurfaced on the other side, pressing his lips against hers for another quick kiss. Afterwards, he shook his head from side to side, slinging a deluge of cold water onto Tina’s back.

“Quit it! You’re getting me all wet, John. Do you want my body to tan or not?”

“I just *want* it, babe. I don’t care if it’s tan or pale. Besides, it’s H₂O, baby!” he said, kissing her waist.

“Wow... you figured that out all by yourself? Of course, it’s H₂O. We’re in the ocean, Einstein!”

He swam under her again, this time sneaking his hand up to glide it across the back of her thigh. She grabbed his wrist to stop his groping, then pointed toward the children again. He grabbed her hand, pulling himself around the raft until they were nose to nose.

“H₂o,” he explained. “It’s our (H)oneymoon, we have (2) days left, then we have to get the hell (O)ut of here! So, I’m not censoring my ass just for some rich tourists’ kids we’ll never see again. They can watch and learn for all I care. In two more days, our honeymoon will be nothing but a memory for us. We’ll be driving north, back to our shitty, little apartment in Ohio... and our jobs.”

“Oh, God. Don’t remind me. Well, at least pull me over behind those rocks, so we’ll have a little privacy. I don’t want to destroy their innocent little minds, rich or not.”

He eagerly complied, and soon they were busy exploring two of the most important parts of any honeymoon; each other.

“What’s that? It’s glistening, babe,” he tried to say with her bikini top clinched between his teeth.

“Well, I’m covered in suntan oil, babe. They’re *supposed* to glisten,” she said, pulling him closer.

“Maybe you just need to rub it in some more.”

He ignored her suggestion and handed the top back to her, leaving her confused.

“Tina... seriously. There’s something shiny floating over there, between those rocks.”

“Probably just trash, John. Leave it alone or you’re gonna put me out of the mood, Mister. The water’s friggin’ cold!”

Ignoring her threat, he carefully made his way through an opening in the rocks. When he’d fished the object out, he held it up for her to see. It was a sealed bottle with something inside.

“It’s a message in a bottle!” he said, wading over to her. “It’s one of those you buy, though... plastic, not glass. Someone on the beach probably threw it in the water this morning.”

“Well, open it up and read it to me!” she said. “Just don’t get the letter wet.”

He uncorked the bottle and gently pulled out the contents. The papers crackled as he unrolled them.

“Damn, babe, there’s like, three full pages in here. Someone wrote a damn book!” he laughed. “The paper’s all dried out, too. It wasn’t put out here today, that’s for sure.”

“Well, read it to me! I hope it’s romantic. If it is, we’re keeping it forever.”

John carefully finished unrolling the papers.

“There’s a date on it. It’s like fifteen years old. Some of it’s almost too faded to read.”

“Really? Well, hurry up and try,” she said, getting impatient.

“Fine, but if it gets too mushy, *you* can read it.”

John worked his elbows up onto the side of her raft, then read the letter aloud.

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Whoever finds this bottle, please contact these people: Frederick and Victoria Jensen, 329 Blossom Park, Concord, New Hampshire. If they've passed by the time this message is found, please contact my brother, Noah Jensen, 532 Crimson Circle, Bedford, New Hampshire. He's the city administrator there.

Mom, Dad or Noah, if you're reading this, then Sandy and I are dead. This is not a prank. I wish to God it was. I think I told you last week we were planning to cruise up the coast this weekend? We chartered a boat out of Portsmouth. The name of the captain is Joseph Williams. The boat is called the Swordfish III. From the moment we cast off, the captain took an unsettling interest in Sandy. I caught him staring at her several times. He was acting really weird, talking to her like he knew her. The man could hardly take his eyes off of her. I was getting pissed, and it made Sandy uncomfortable, too. He noticed, and quickly apologized, saying she'd reminded him of his wife. He'd lost her a year ago to cancer and admitted to having some rough days this week thinking about her. He showed us a picture of her and was right... they could pass for sisters. He said he felt terrible for staring at her like that, and offered to take us back to shore immediately and refund our money. After hearing his explanation, we said we understood and decided to continue on with the trip. That was our big mistake. The man

shook my hand in thanks and asked me to have a drink of Scotch with him at the helm. Said it was his way of making up for his behavior, man to man. He went below, and came back holding two bottles. He poured the last of one bottle into my glass, then opened the other to pour his. You know I don't drink alcohol anymore, so I pretended to take a drink, then quietly passed it behind my back to Sandy. I figured she'd pour it out. I didn't know she'd taste it. She only took a small drink, but immediately felt sick. I thought she might have been a little sea sick, and the Scotch had just made it worse. I walked her down to the cabin so she could rest for a few minutes. The captain followed me halfway down the stairs and started yelling at me! He said the Scotch was intended for me, not her. When he told us why, it changed everything from that moment on. He said the Scotch was poisoned! Sandy and I were scared to death hearing that! We realized then that we were on a boat with a murderer! I ran up after him, but he pulled out a pistol, backed me down the steps and took our phones! I listened to him rant from the top of the steps about me having ruined everything. He said he'd been saving the poisoned Scotch to end his life one day when he felt ready to join his wife, but when he saw Sandy, he remembered what his wife made him promise before she died. She'd said if he ever found a girl like her, he'd better make her his own and not let anything stop him from being happy again. So, when he saw how much Sandy looked like his dead wife, he decided she was that girl! In his sick mind, he thought she'd become his after getting

rid of me. I begged him to calm down and think rationally. I pleaded with him to take us back to shore, swearing we wouldn't say anything about the Scotch. I told him the only way to make things right was to get Sandy to a hospital. He thought about it, then flipped out even more! Said the doctors would know she'd been poisoned and we'd tell them he did it. I promised again we wouldn't say anything and begged him to let us go. I even said I'd sign something saying I poisoned her myself, if he'd just set us free. I thought he was going to agree, but then, without any emotion, he said, "Sorry, I just can't take that chance." So, I asked him what he planned to do with us. He said he was going to cruise about a hundred miles offshore, shoot us, then throw our bodies overboard! Before I could react, he backed up a step and shut the door, locking us down here! I yelled and screamed through the door for over an hour, begging him to change his mind. I told him his wife wouldn't want him to do this... that he'd be dishonoring her. He screamed at me to shut up, then fired his pistol through the door! The bullet barely missed me! If it hadn't lodged in the bedpost, we'd be taking on water right now. We've been stuck down here for several hours. Sandy's still alive, but she's really sick. I don't know what to do. There's some bottled water down here. I tried to give her some, but she threw it up. I have no idea what I'm doing! I've sat here, watching her slip further and further away. I want you to know, gun or no gun, I tried everything to break out of here. The door is too thick. I can't bust it or get the hinges loose. The bed and the nightstand are

fixed to the floor. There's nothing down here I can use as a weapon. There's literally no way out of here until he opens that door again. And then what? He'll shoot me before I can get close to him! When he locked the door, I knew then he was really going to kill us, and no one would ever know what happened to us. Then I remembered this message in a bottle kit Sandy bought at the port's gift shop. So, I've been trying to write down everything that's happened in this letter, hoping someone will find it if we don't live through this. I'm going to push the bottle through one of the ventilation holes and pray it finds its way to you. She bought the thing thinking it'd be a fun thing for us to do on the trip. Who'd have thought I'd be using it to explain our deaths. I hope to God it finds you someday. I don't want you or Noah wondering what happened to us for the rest of your lives. This is so damn hard to write. I don't know what to say or what not to say, so I'm just writing. My head's jumbled up right now. I know our time's running out. I'm too scared to think straight. Sandy's dying right next to me and I'm helpless to save her! Dad, I know you'd tell me to keep my head together for her sake, but I feel like I'm stuck in a nightmare I can't wake up from. This is all just so crazy! I can hear him whistling up there... like he's happy! I have to think.

Okay, I have a plan now... it might work. I broke the bathroom mirror and picked out two large pieces of glass. I put the bed pillows beside Sandy and draped the bedspread over them to make it look like I'm in bed with her. I'm going to hide under the stairs until the bastard comes back. Hopefully, he'll

think I'm in the bed and walk down the steps. When he does, I'm going to stab him and try to get his gun. If you're reading this, I failed, but at least I tried. Mom and Dad, I love you both so much! Thanks for always being there for me and Sandy. Please tell her family how much she loves them. Noah, I love you, too, brother. Take care of Mom and Dad. Be stronger than I am. Make them remember the good things about me, not what happened here today. Shit! The engine just stopped! I can hear him up there. He's talking to his dead wife like she's standing there, with him! I'm telling you, he's lost his damn mind! He just yelled down that we have two minutes to make our peace with God. We're out of time! I'm sealing this up before he comes down. I hope and pray it finds you.

- Stephen

When John finished reading the letter, he looked at Tina, who appeared just as shaken as he was.

"I mean, is this shit real?" he asked. "Did this really happen? It has to be a joke, right?"

"Does it sound like a joke to you? You said yourself it's fifteen years old, John! The paper's all cracked and yellow. And do you really think anyone would write all of that, just for a joke? A joke that no one may ever see? What are we going to do?"

"Let's take it back to our room. We can google the names and see if anything ever got reported about them. Then we'll know for sure if this is real. If it is, they probably lived in New Hampshire, like their parents."

"I'm scared, John. What if it is true? What if they really *did* die out there, all alone?"

"Then it happened fifteen years ago, Tina, and the family doesn't know about it! We'd have to tell them. But first, let's find out if it's even true."

Inside their condo, both quietly typed away on their cell phones, hoping nothing about the couple came up. Tina was the first to break the silence.

“Oh, my God, John... it’s true! It was in the news for weeks! ‘Three people missing: Captain Joseph R. Williams and two passengers, Stephen and Sandra Jensen, lost at sea, all presumed dead.’ So the captain never returned, either! They all died!”

“Search the names again,” John said, “with ‘found’ or ‘recovered’.”

She continued her search, adding the new tag words.

“There’s nothing else, John... just— oh, no! The family had a funeral for them.” Her hands were shaking now.

John held his phone up in the air. “Babe! I found his parents’ phone number. They still live in New Hampshire!”

“No. We can’t *do* that, John! We have to give the letter to the police. Let *them* call them.”

“We could, but wouldn’t *you* want to know what happened as soon as possible? He even said so in his letter... to give it to his family if it was found. It’s what he *wanted*, Tina, and it’s our responsibility to make it happen. We’ll be in Ohio in two days. We can meet them somewhere then.”

“Like they’ll even *believe* you? What are you going to say?” she asked.

“The truth! And babe... the letter’s in his own handwriting, so it can be verified. We need to give the letter to his family so they can get some closure.”

“John, *please* don’t call them. It’s been fifteen years since the letter was written. They have to be really old now. What if they have a heart attack or something while you’re telling them? If you’re really going to do it, just call the brother!”

John searched for the brother’s phone number and eventually held up his phone again. Tina sat nervously on the couch as he dialed the number and set his phone to *speaker*.

“Hello?” a voice on the other end answered.

John cleared his throat before speaking. “Yes, hello. Is this Noah Jensen?”

“Yes it is. Who’s this?”

“My name’s John. Sir, you don’t know me. Listen, I don’t really know how to say this, but we need to meet somewhere this weekend. I mean, we *have* to meet somewhere. I have a message I need to give to you; in person. An *old* message that explains things... things you might not know. It’s from your brother, Stephen. He wrote it the day he disappeared. I have the letter in my hand right now.”

There was a long pause. John saw Tina on the couch, shaking her head. He began to regret making the call. Finally, the man spoke again.

“You’re saying you have a letter... from Stephen? That’s not possible. Stephen and Sandy would never abandon our family, leaving nothing but a letter to explain why. They wouldn’t put us through that kind of pain. Listen, John, if that’s even your real name... I don’t know you, but I have your number now. So, play your sick games with someone else. You know, you’re a real piece of shit to call someone with a story like this!”

The call ended. John looked at his new wife, speechless now.

“I told you it wasn’t a good idea, John. Just call the police like I asked you,” she pleaded.

John shook his head no, then dialed the number again. No one answered. He waited a few seconds and tried one more time. This time, he heard someone pick up. Immediately, a woman’s voice spoke.

“Stop calling us or we’re giving the police your phone number right now! Just leave us alone!”

“Ma’am! This isn’t a prank, I swear. Please, just listen. My wife and I got married a few days ago in Florida, on the east coast. We found one of those message in a bottle things floating in some rocks on the beach. There was a letter inside, so we opened the bottle and read it. Stephen and Sandy had gone on a boat trip up the coast. The captain... well, he... look, I really don’t want to say any of this over the phone. He meant for you to read it yourself. My wife and I will be back in northern Ohio this weekend and can meet you somewhere. Or, maybe we could just send the letter to you... if you want to chance it being mailed. It’s in Stephen’s handwriting and explains what probably happened to both of them.”

When he’d finished speaking, he listened closely for a response. There was only silence on the other end. He waited a few more seconds, then looked at Tina, who shrugged her shoulders. John knew the woman had hung up while he was

talking. It wasn't what he'd hoped for, but he was at peace with it. He knew he'd done everything he could to explain the call. Now he'd take Tina's advice and call the police. He was about to press '*end*' on his phone when he heard someone clearing their throat over the small speaker.

Tina heard it as well and hurried to his side. Noah's voice broke as he quietly uttered his response.

"Okay, John. We believe you."

"Let's meet."

The End