

A Note in a Bottle

By Dawid Crouch

I must have been about six years old when I did it, but even now, sixteen years later, I remember it clearly. I was shuffling along the river's pier with my grandfather. At the time, I still remember that the river seemed much more like an ocean in its size. The morning fog did nothing to swallow the eerie song of the tugboats as they came into port. I remember being almost as afraid of them as I was of the wharf on the other side of the river. The wharf's fluid white body, with large black caverns for windows, seemed like a distant phantom ready to swallow up the air around it and, for that matter, anything else in the misty port. The green water rippled like melting glass and smelled of the silver fish which washed up dead along its edges. In the wind, only stale smoke swirled around, veiling my tiny blond locks, then sinking deeper, pouring into my nostrils. Grandfather cast his cigarette butt into the water, where it sizzled for an instant and was then swallowed by a stupid-looking fish which apparently had taken a liking to nicotine.

"Ready to head back? Had enough of the river for one day?" grandfather said.

"No," I answered.

"What do you want to do? -- Swim with the fish?"

"No," I said.

"Then, why don't we head home?"

"No. I want to write a note and put it in a bottle and throw it in the river," I explained.

"Oh, you do now? What kind of note are you going to write?"

"I don't know."

"What are you going to say?"

"I don't know. Give me a pencil and I'll think of something to say."

Grandfather pulled from his overcoat pocket a small sheet of paper with a dry-rotted eraser, and he gave them to me. I thought for a while and wrote something like this:

Dear somebody,

I hope that you get my note but I guess that if you don't then you won't be able to read this anyway. But if you get this note then come talk to me or send me another note back in a bottle and I'll be here to read it. Please don't forget me, I'm lonely.

Your friend,

Misha

I rolled the note and put it in a green soda bottle that I found at the edge of the pier. I sealed the cap, ran over to grandfather and pulled his pants-leg.

"Can I throw it out now?" I asked.

"Go ahead. Make sure you make a good throw. Throw it far so that it won't wash back to the pier."

I ran to the pier's edge and as I was about to toss the bottle, grandfather took hold of my hand and held me back.

"Let me hold on to you," he said. "I don't want you to fall in. I don't think your mommie would like that very much."

"O.K.," I said.

"Count to three, Misha."

"One. Two. Three."

He held my hand and part of the neck of the bottle. The bottle rose from our hands, nearly striking a seagull, reached the peak of its flight, lingered there for a moment, then arched downwards, falling until it splashed into the water.

"Will anybody ever get my note, grandpa?"

"I don't know Misha. Maybe."

"If they get it, will they write back?"

"Did you put your address on it?"

"No. But I wrote my name. I spelled it right, I think."

"Then maybe somebody will get your note and put their own note in the bottle and send it back to you."

"How will I know when it arrives?"

"You just have to keep looking for it."

"Grandpa, can we come here everyday to see if my bottle comes back?"

"Sure we can."

"I hope somebody finds it, grandpa."

"I hope so too, little Misha."

Even when I was a child, everything seemed lonely and I felt somehow empty. The strange thing is that I wasn't really empty. Grandfather was still with me to keep me company. I guess it was a feeling of a future emptiness. But who knows? I was just a child then, and such thoughts don't often occur to a child's mind.

"Leave me alone, Miel!"

"Why?" she asked.

"I just want you to leave me alone. I want to think," I said.

"About what?"

"Don't worry about it, Miel. Can't I have any peace and quiet?"

"Fine. Be that way. I'll leave."

"No! Wait! Miel, come back!"

Shyly, she turned her head back towards me. The chilly wind molested her curly black locks.

"I'm sorry, Miel," I said as I offered her my hand. "It's just that there's something about this pier that makes me think. It reminds me of something -- kind of disturbs me."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, honey. That's funny. Do you know that your name means 'honey' in French?"

"No, I didn't," she answered.

It was a shame that she didn't know. Miel's name was probably the best thing that her mother had ever given to her. Her mother's name was Anna and she had a reputation for being the local drunk. She was a hard-living lady who spent her money quickly on booze and woke up

every morning in the bed of a different man. She even tried to seduce me once or twice, but I like to think that I have at least a little bit of honour, so I never took her up on her offers.

She didn't spend much time with Miel, and that's why the poor, little girl followed me around the streets. I always liked to act annoyed with her, but secretly I liked her company -- seemed to make me feel a little less lonely.

"How 'bout giving me a drag of that cigarette?" she said.

"You're too young to smoke," I told her.

"Aren't you too young too?"

"Or maybe I'm too old?"

"Smoking is bad for you, Michael," she informed me with a giggle.

"I know. That's why you can't have a drag."

"Please."

"C'mon, Miel. Don't do this to me. You know I can't resist you when you look at me that way. Why do you have to be so damned cute?" I asked as I let her take a puff on the quick-filtered cancer.

And cute she was! Miel was remarkably developed for an eleven year old. Her wavy dark hair, black-pearl eyes, and faded timber-coloured skin all conspired to create an unforgettable swirling image in my mind. That image was like watercolours in the rain or oil from the street which drained into the river, spiraling into a whirlpool of colour. Funny thing -- she always knew that I thought she was cute even though I had begun to tell her so only recently.

"So, do you have a girlfriend yet?" she asked me with a coquettish look on her face.

"No. You know I don't," I replied. "Have any suggestions for me? Have anybody in mind for me?"

"Maybe," she said as her words drifted on a plume of smoke.

"Well Miel, don't keep me in suspense. Tell me, who is this girl?"

"I'm not gonna tell you unless you buy me a soda."

I always knew that Miel had a crush on me. The way she looked at me, it was impossible not to know. I always found it disappointing that few women my age -- twenty-two, that is -- looked at me in the same way. All the same, it was flattering that Miel had her little fantasies about me. Sometimes I even wished that she was about nine years older, because I thought that

we would make a good couple. I guess I was attracted to her in my own way. Still, she was only eleven years old, and I was neither a lecher nor a lunatic. If only she had been born nine years earlier -- another one got away.

"You drive a hard bargain. You want a soda, you got a soda."

"Can you get me the soda in the glass bottle?"

"Sure," I said. "As long as they still have glass bottles. Today, it's hard to find anything that's not plastic."

"What's the difference?" she asked. "They're both the same, aren't they?"

"I guess the soda's the same. But there's a difference. Somehow, I prefer the glass bottle. I'm not sure why."

"I know what you mean. So do I."

We walked into the only store that was open at that early hour of the morning and I bought the soda, making sure that it was in a glass and not a plastic bottle. The counter lady gave me a funny look. I guess she just didn't understand. I held the door open for Miel and we walked back onto the cobblestone street.

"So, you got your soda. Now, are you going to tell me who this girl is who loves me so much?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Do you want a sip?"

"No thanks. I'm not very thirsty."

I fingered a cigarette in my overcoat pocket and even before I pulled it out, Miel asked,

"Are you gonna smoke again?"

"How did you know?"

"I just did. Don't smoke!"

"Why not, Miel?"

"Because it'll make your breath taste bad."

"And why are you so concerned about my breath tasting bad?"

"Oh . . . I don't know," she said as a quizzical expression appeared on her face.

"What is it, Miel? Do you want to ask me a question?"

"Sure. What have you been up to lately?"

"Just writing," I said.

"Writing what?"

"Oh, not much. Just this and that."

"Will you write a story about me?"

"About you? What do you want me to say?"

"Anything. It would be nice to know that somebody cares enough to think about me when they're all alone."

"You know I care, Miel."

"Then write a story for me."

"Maybe I will. But not until you tell me who this girl is that likes me."

The truth is that I really did want to write a story for or about Miel. But, I didn't know exactly what to say. I liked to see her every day. It seemed like a good way to get enough information or inspiration for my story. But even if I hadn't been a writer, I would have still been glad to have her around.

"I don't know if I should tell you who she is," Miel whispered.

"Why not?"

"Because you would laugh."

"Maybe. Maybe not," I said.

"What are you gonna do now?"

"Go home to sleep."

"Can I go with you?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Never mind why not, Miel."

"Then, can we go sit on the edge of the pier?"

"O.K."

We walked over to the edge of the pier and sat down, letting our feet dangle over the edge and come dangerously close to being soaked by the green waves or splashed by the trash that had accumulated there. Miel began to play with my hair.

"Stop that!" I demanded.

"No, I'm not going to," she laughed.

"Why not?"

"Because if you didn't have me to tease you, then who else would you have?"

"Good point."

"Michael?"

"What Miel?"

"Will you marry me?"

"What?"

"I said, will you marry me?"

"If only . . ."

"If only what?" she asked.

"If only you were a little bit older. You're too young, honey. You're too young, Miel."

"Why am I too young?"

"You just are."

"Don't you care about me, Michael?"

"Of course I do, Miel."

"Then why won't you marry me?"

"You're too young."

"Don't you love me, Michael."

"Yes, in my own way I do," I answered.

"Will you ever leave me, Michael?"

"You know I won't, Miel."

"Do you promise?"

"Yes, Miel, I promise."

"Don't leave me."

"I won't, honey."

"Will you hold me?"

"Sure. Come here."

I thought that holding her was the least that I could do to comfort her. After a few minutes, I started to cry softly, the tears dropping through the wooden planks and mingling with the water below. I don't think Miel saw this. But, I noticed that tears began to form in the corners of her eyes also. In a while, she took the glass soda bottle into her hands and began to run her fingers along its mouth.

"I want to do something, Michael."

"What's that, Miel?"

"I want to write a note and put it in a bottle and throw it in the river."

"Funny, I remember doing the same thing with my grandfather when I was little."

"I'm not so little, you know."

"No, I guess you're not. I never really thought about it in that way before."

"Do you have anything to write on?" she asked.

"Sure," I said as I placed a pencil and sheet of notebook paper between her thumb and forefinger. "What are you going to write?" I asked.

"I don't know. I just hope that somebody finds my message and writes back. I'm lonely."

"Why are you so lonely, Miel? You have me."

"I don't know. Sometimes I can feel empty even when I have everything that I want. I don't know why I feel that way. I feel like there's always something missing."

"Strange, I know what you mean," I said.

I wondered if anybody ever got the note that I wrote when I was standing on the same pier so many years ago. If they did, I don't think they wrote back. At least, I never found their reply. My grandfather and I went to that pier every day. I guess he knew that I would never find a note in a bottle. Kind of him not to tell me. Now, at least I know that the my bottle was too big to be swallowed by a big stupid--looking fish. But who knows? Maybe it sank to the bottom of the river. Or maybe it just collected on the edge of the water with all of the other trash. Or maybe it made somebody's day a little bit happier -- made them feel a little less empty.

I decided to write a little note of my own to place with Miel's in the bottle. I wrote:

Miel and Michael, never to be parted, friends forever.

To Miel with Love,

Michael

I gave her my note and she rolled them both together, slid them through the mouth of the bottle, and sealed the cap.

"Are you ready to throw it?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Michael, will you at least give me a kiss?"

"I don't think that that's a good idea."

"Please."

"Why do you have to be so damned cute?"

I leaned closer to her and kissed her on the lips. Nothing much -- just a little peck, really. But it was enough to make her happy. And it was enough to give me a nice memory to add to my collection. I've never regretted kissing her. In fact, for that one brief second it made me feel happy, a little less lonely, a little less empty. I'll never forget my little Miel.

"Count to three," I said. "Remember to toss it far away from the pier."

"One. Two. Three," she giggled.

I sat behind her and held her hand as the bottle sailed into the air, rose and fell in a perfect arch, and plopped into the water.

"Do you think that anyone will ever find my note?"

"I don't know, Miel. I hope so."

"Me too. Will you stay with me a little bit longer?"

"Of course I will, Miel. Where else would I go?"

We sat on the edge of the pier and watched the early morning sun reflect off the top of Miel's bottle. We watched the bottle float out with the waves until we could see it no longer. A tugboat sang its sombre mermaid song as the fog rose from the water and began to sail over the pier. That same fog descended upon the city and enveloped it. As Miel looked out towards the river, I looked at her and seemed to lose my thoughts. The fog thickened around us and everything began to fade away, veiled by the river's lonely mist.