

first person

Sea of Love



Forget the personals and online dating. Searching for a perfect love story, one woman resorts to an ancient method of communication. by Maxine Paetro



If it worked for Robinson Crusoe: Each night, the author launched a bottle into the ship's wake, hoping a lonely fisherman would find it and write to her of love.

I'm in a taxi, hurtling toward a rendezvous at the Eiffel Tower. I speak no French, the driver speaks no English. As I lean forward into the silence, I think about how this extraordinary journey began with heartache—and a letter in a bottle.

More than a year earlier, I'd fallen unexpectedly in love with an unhappily married seaman. When the affair collapsed under the weight of reality, I booked a transatlantic crossing on a graceful sailing vessel, sure that the exotic passage and the cradle of the waves would comfort me.

I was wrong. Far from home, surrounded by strangers, I felt acutely alone. And so I invented an evening ritual that entertained my fellow travelers and gave me something to look forward to. Each night I took an empty wine bottle from the dinner table and stuffed it with a letter. "Hello," I wrote. "I am traveling on the *Star Flyer*, a tall, four-masted ship, on a journey from St. Maarten in the Caribbean to Málaga, Spain. I am a writer, and I like to tell stories. I also like to hear stories others have to tell, especially about love. If you write to me, I promise to write to you."

Then I went to the stern and launched that night's bottle into the churning wake. The ship's captain guessed that because of the direction of the current, all the bottles would end up in Norway. I envisioned a lonely Norwegian fisherman finding one of my bottles and writing to me of love.

By midpoint in the crossing, I found that the sea had calmed me after all. I'd formed fond friendships with a military officer on leave and others among the 150 passengers and crew. And when the cruise came to an end, it was wrenching to leave this insulated, pampered existence for the realities of home. But waiting for me at home, buried in the heap of bills and sheaves of catalogs, was an intriguing blue envelope with a foreign postmark. I eagerly ripped it open.

"Dear Maxime," I read. "We are French girls who found your bottle on holiday. Are you really a writer? Do you have a girlfriend? You seem dreamy and romantic to us. Please tell us about your life."

The girls were named Aurelie and Deborah. They were 16

years old and, while on a school outing, had found my message on a littered beach in Spain. It was clear my new correspondents had mistaken my gender.

Dismayed that my bait had caught girls, I took awhile to write back. "Dear Aurelie and Deborah, I've got a surprise for you. I'm a woman."

I sketched in the details of my existence and told Aurelie and Deborah about my shipwrecked love affair and my restorative Atlantic crossing. I sent them photos of myself and my cats; they soon responded with another letter including photos of their own pets and families.

And they asked me questions about romantic love. "What does it mean," wrote Aurelie, who'd just fallen for a boy who went to school with her, "when Toni Braxton sings 'Unbreak My Heart?'"

Then another alien letter arrived.

a schoolteacher on a small island in the Bahamas. He had come upon my bottle while walking at sunset on a beach of pink sand.

"I am in love at last at the ripe old age of forty-eight," Henry wrote, "and it is a love beyond my wildest dreams. I am trying hard to cope with it."

I wrote back, telling him a mild version of my current circumstances (out of respect for Henry's apparent nervousness about intense emotions). "Why," I asked, "do you say you are trying to cope with your feelings of love? Is she married? Do you love her more than she loves you? Do you feel that by loving another you are losing something of yourself?"

While I waited in vain for Henry's reply, I told Aurelie and Deborah that I'd begun to date a man, a frequent world traveler with two children in different countries and offices on three continents. I wasn't in love with Jonathan, I > 106

ANDREW SHAPTER

11/15/96

Dear Maxine,

I'm very enco
nice to tell us yo
feelings.
I'd like to tel
but my life is ev
and I don't th
But I can ex
lonely because
I'll find one
besides on the
me and few fr

The author (left) embarked on her journey aboard the *Star Flyer* feeling heartbroken and lonely; she returned home to far-flung replies to her sea-mail.



When two French teens, Aurelie (center) and Deborah, found a bottle on a Spanish beach, they began a friendship with the author, whom they finally met in Paris.



Colonel Hill Crooked Island 14th, Dec.

the other day I came
d bottle. The basic mess
nice and interesting to
n the sea:
e was not very clean but i
pen pal in the Bahamas, I
e about my experiences and
international world.
you were interested in the views



Hel
My name is Jane
recently I was on a
Bahamas with three
We were staying on
sail boat. One of my
things to do is to go
sea shells on the be
Feb. 21, 1997, we we
along the beach at

SEA OF LOVE

continued from page 89

told them, but I hoped he would stop moving long enough for me to get to know him.

The girls wrote back. Deborah told me she was determined to become a doctor someday, and Aurelie thought she might like to be a journalist. And there was news on the romance front: Aurelie had met a boy named Xavier, and she was crazy about him. "I feel I can talk to you about love because you are always looking for this marvelous feeling. I, too, have looked, only now I have found it. It may surprise you," she wrote, "but this is the first time I really love a boy."

I told them my five-month-long relationship with Jonathan had petered out and I asked them if, given their young ages, their parents minded that I wrote about my personal life.

Their next letter contained assurances that their parents didn't mind my candor ("They speak little English... tell us everything!"), and their thoughts regarding Jonathan: "You are right," wrote Aurelie. "You must not put up with such behavior."

Nine months had passed since I'd mailed my first letter by sea when, again, an envelope with an unfamiliar return address found its way to my mailbox.

The author was a man named Stephen who'd recently been in the Abaco Islands in the Bahamas with his daughter, visiting his parents on their hand-built catamaran. Stephen's father had spied the bottle on the beach and let the little girl make the discovery.

"Thank you," wrote Stephen. "Finding your letter made our vacation more special."

I turned the envelope inside out, but there was nothing more from Stephen. No photos, no business card, no thoughts about love.

Meanwhile, I'd heard from the seaman I had loved: a phone call, then a fax from his ship at sea. "Darling," he wrote, "What we had was a great moment and I still feel the sweetness of it. I have never forgotten you, and I never will." His sentiment stirred me but, as before, there was nothing left for me to say or do.

More news came in from my French friends: Deborah reported that she'd been seeing a boy named Kevin, but that

she didn't like the way he was treating her. "He does not seem to care for me. I want to be with a kind, considerate boy who knows me and loves me and whom I know and love."

Aurelie commiserated with my continued single status and cheered me on. "I want you to find love with another marvelous man," she wrote. "If I am not too prying, even indiscreet, why are you not married like other adults?"

As we say in America, "How much time have you got?"

I'd asked myself the same question about a million times and had finally concluded that I like both drama and solitude too much to be happy in a conventional marriage. But I could still hope for romantic love.

It had been a year since my last vacation, so I booked passage on the elegant twin sister ship to the *Star Flyer*, the *Star Clipper*. It would be departing from Cannes, so I knew I could stop off in Paris on the way to meet my two pen pals, who would train in from Rennes.

My reverie is broken as the taxi screeches to a stop under the upstretched arms of the Eiffel Tower. I'm late for our appointment and anxiously search the crowd until at last I see my two friends.

We shriek our recognition, kiss, and take our first real looks at one another. Aurelie has wild blond hair and blue eyes; Deborah is trim as a flute, with dark hair and a bashful but irrepressible smile. Shooting shy glances, we three girlfriends take an elevator high above the world's most romantic city for lunch at the Jules Verne, a magnificent restaurant filled with tourists and businessmen. Aurelie, so eloquent in her letters, is suddenly quiet. "Where has your English gone?" I tease her.

She laughs, then tells me, "No teenagers have ever eaten here before!" A flock of handsome waiters in black suits serve us our meals as we exchange news. Aurelie has broken up with Xavier, and Kevin has beaten Deborah to the punch by leaving her. I tell them an American expression, "Men are like buses; there will be another one along in a minute." When they work out what this means, they find the expression hilarious.

Deborah earnestly tells me she wants to get married and have children though she knows she is too young. Aurelie is thinking first about a successful career. "I

want marriage and children later, but I want to be free, too. I want a job that pleases me, and excitement. It is complicated, perhaps impossible, but these are my dreams..."

I assure Deborah that she'll find a good husband when she is ready. As for Aurelie, I know her dreams well—they are mine. And I wish that the desires of both these young women will be entirely fulfilled.

I take a deep breath, then share the astonishing news I've just learned: "The seaman who broke my heart is going to be on my ship." I tell them I'm worried because it is hard to be both open to the possibilities and invulnerable to pain. "But meeting up again with him is destiny," they insist. With gestures and rapid flipping through a French-English dictionary, we try to guess what's going to happen.

Once our lunch is finished, we join the girls' mothers, who have been waiting for us. I love watching Deborah and Aurelie animatedly describe every detail and morsel we have enjoyed. They are amused by my pronunciation of French; four hours after meeting her, I still cannot pronounce Aurelie's name properly—"Oh-reh-lee."

Now a group of five, we shop for "invisible" plastic shoes to go with a sexy pink dress I've bought for the cruise and pose for silly pictures. I wonder how Aurelie and Deborah's mothers feel about my unusual friendship with their girls, and I thank them for allowing me to share their daughters' companionship. I find it a particularly sweet female quality that there is no age difference when it comes to our romantic dreams.

Too soon, Deborah, Aurelie, and I hug our good-byes. I tell them that when I cast my bottled letters into the sea, I'd been wishing for love but found unexpected friendship instead. "We will never forget this day," they tell me. I feel the same way, and we make promises to write, which we will surely keep.

They all disappear into the underground transit line heading toward fathers and husbands and home. I hail a cab that will take me to a plane, then a ship, and a week-long journey. Clasp my invisible shoes, I spring toward the adventure that awaits me. □

Maxine Paetro is a freelance writer in New York.