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# Messages, Bottles & Dreams

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Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

Upon a gently swaying ferry deck beneath a black starry night sky I sat. Before me a beautiful adventure, beside me a beautiful soul. Straight from the bottle we drank. The possibilities as endless as the Tasman waves upon which we rode, but another lifetime now. The idea was hers. The wine and years passed have long since blurred the words, but the essence remains engraved: *We hope, like us, you are having the time of your lives, wherever in the world that may be.* Rolled, bottled and tossed it overboard. I wonder what became of our script? I dream it washed ashore some far flung island paradise to be found by two young lovers embarking on their own magical quest.

The first documented message in a bottle was cast to the swell by Greek philosopher Theophrastus in the fourth century BC. Perhaps the most famous ocean-going adventurer of them all, Christopher Columbus, is known to have sought help through such means during a particularly punishing storm. He made it back before his message did. Countless travellers, shipwrecked or love-struck souls have since cast their words and prayers to the mercy of the waves. Nearly 20 years ago local businessman, Stuart Mitchell, 62, found such a note.

"It was a glorious summer day," he tells me. "I'd just finished loading up my car at the end of the beach in Mercury Bay in the Coromandel when I saw a Coca-Cola bottle. I always pick up the rubbish, and when I did, I noticed that there was a note inside. The message was dated around two months prior and it read, 'If anyone finds this bottle, my name is Louise Tharp and I have thrown this from a merchant vessel.'"

Mrs Tharp gave her address and phone number and asked the recipient to contact her, which Stuart did. He learned she had flung her words into the seas of Fiji. She owned a large grain

farm south of Chicago, Illinois, and regularly travelled the globe by boat. Three years later they shared a couple of dry Martinis in a swanky Auckland bar. For the best of two decades they exchanged Christmas cards and letters until Louise's death in 2008. She threw around 500 bottles into the sea, only Stuart and a family in Argentina ever made contact. Stuart has a son in New York and intends to pay a visit to the Tharp family when he's over later in the year. "She was such a lovely a woman," he says. "Here we are now, all these years later, sat discussing her on the other side of the world."

Auckland was also the setting of a most bittersweet ending to a message in a bottle tale that spanned nearly ninety years and half the world. In 1999, while fishing off the River Thames' estuary, in the UK, Steve Gowan discovered a bottle in his nets. In it was a note written by a First World War soldier as he headed across the English Channel in 1914. "Dear Wife," wrote Private Thomas Hughes, 26. "I am writing this note on this boat and dropping it into the sea just to see if it will reach you. If it does, sign this envelope on the right hand bottom corner where it says receipt. Put the date and hour of receipt and your name where it says signature and look after it well. Ta ta sweet, for the present. Your Hubby." Two days after, he died on the battlefields of France.

Hughes had a young daughter with his wife, Elizabeth, and after the war they emigrated to Aotearoa. Elizabeth died in 1979. 20 years later, at the grand old age of 86, their daughter, Emily Crowhurst, received a visit from a British family flown over as guests of New Zealand Post. Steve Gowan presented the elderly lady with a battered green ginger beer bottle, sealed with a rubber stopper and cradling that 85 year-old love letter from her father's pen.

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