

David Hill  
Two stories

### THE MESSAGE

My mother died when I was a teenager. She used to smoke a lot. After a while, she got sick, and had to go into hospital. They put her under this plastic cover called an oxygen tent, to help her breathe. I was at school the morning she died.

My Dad was great. He took over the cooking and housework, and he spent a lot of time with me, talking about Mum, showing me photos of her, and stuff.

How did I feel? Mostly, I couldn't believe she was gone. I wouldn't have been surprised if I came home from school one afternoon and she was standing at the sink, peeling potatoes for dinner like she used to. I was trying not to face it, I guess.

A few weeks after she died, the winter school holidays came. Dad still had to work, and he wasn't keen on my being at home by myself, so soon after it all happened.

Then our neighbours, the McLeans, invited me to their beach place. They'd lived next door to us all my life. Their daughter Margaret was four years younger than me.

Dad was pleased they'd invited me. I didn't care much - I just wanted to sit at home, and wait for Mum to come back. But I went.

The road to the beach was a twisty and hilly. I spent most of the time hanging out the window being car-sick, while Margaret McLean sat on the far side of the back seat, going "Yurrrk!".

The beach was awesome. I couldn't believe how big and empty and powerful it was. The waves came swelling in like great messengers from some distant country. When the weather was stormy, they slammed down on the sand like huge walls falling. I could feel the land shudder when they hit. But in calm weather, it was the most peaceful place on earth.

Mr McLean loved fishing. He had a favourite place at one end of the beach. He didn't talk much, but once he said, "Anything we can do for you and your Dad, just tell us, David. Anything." I didn't know what to say; I mumbled something.

Mrs McLean spent her time reading or visiting friends. Margaret had friends, too. Sometimes they asked if I'd like to come, but they didn't push it.

I walked on the beach, mostly. I'd climb round to the rock pools and sit

watching. I'd stay totally still, till the grey-red starfish uncoiled their arms again and began sliding over the rock walls. Sometimes I'd find I'd been there for a whole hour.

Other times, I'd lie on my back in the sandhills, and watch the clouds passing across the sky. I'd talk to my mother while I lay there, tell her what I was doing. I tried to believe I could hear her saying things back. I still couldn't admit she'd gone.

Every time I saw a figure in the distance, I'd wonder for a second if it was her. I still wouldn't have been surprised if she'd come walking towards me, waving to me and saying of course she wasn't dead; it was all a stupid mistake. But she didn't come.

I got to know all the weird things the sea left behind, and how far the currents can carry things. Bottles. Yellow or green twine. Pieces of wood shaped like animals or birds. Old shoes - always single ones; never a pair. I imagined people all over the world, hopping around on one foot, looking for their missing shoes.

A couple of bottles had messages in them. At least, I suppose one of them had been a message, but the paper was so faded from the sun, and from water leaking under the screw-top, that I couldn't read a single word.

The other bottle's message was quite clear - a girl's name, and an address in a town nearly 150 km away. I thought about writing a reply, maybe chucking my message into the ocean too, to see if it got back to her by sea-mail. But I didn't.

A couple of days before the McLeans and I were due to go home, the weather turned bad. I stayed inside, playing Monopoly with Margaret, or reading, or sitting and watching the rain slash at the windows.

On the morning before we left, Mr and Mrs McLean and Margaret went off to see some friends. They invited me, but I made some excuse. Then I put on my coat and wandered down to the beach.

The rain had almost stopped, but the waves still strode in, thumping onto the sand. The beach was littered with driftwood, a torn fishing net, more old shoes.

And a bottle. A green bottle, lying on its side and half-covered by seaweed. I gave it a kick as I walked past.

Then I stopped. Something white gleamed at me through the glass. A piece of paper, rolled into a little cylinder. Hey, maybe that girl had sent another message!

The top of the bottle was screwed on tight. There was glue covering it, keeping water out. The paper inside looked perfectly dry. I twisted at the top, but it

wouldn't move. I decided to take it back to the cottage and open it.

In the basement, on Mr McLean's workbench, I found an old knife, and chipped at the glue till it peeled off. I got a pair of pliers, and started to heave.

The top turned. In a few seconds, it was off. I tilted up the bottle, and began shaking out the paper.

My heart was thumping. Was it from that girl? Someone else? Someone I knew? Had my moth..... No. No, I had to stop thinking like that.

I unrolled the little curl of paper. There was no name, no address, just three words. Three words in black letters, faded after floating for weeks or months under the wide skies and across the seas.

I heard my breath catch as I read them. Then I heard myself make another noise, the message on the paper went all blurred, and I realised I was crying.

Finally, I managed to stop, except for a few hiccups. I felt so weird - sad and happy at the same time. Then I started searching through the drawers of the workbench.

I found a ballpoint and a scribble pad. On a page from the pad, I wrote my own message. It was just four words: one word more than the message in the bottle.

I read that first message one more time. Then I put it in my coat pocket, and slipped my own message into the bottle. I screwed the top back on hard. I found some candles on a shelf. I lit one, and melted wax from another, red candle over the bottle's top till I felt sure it was water-tight. Red wax and a green bottle; that should be easy to spot.

Back on the beach, the tide was turning. The waves broke further down the sand, drawing themselves back into the sea.

I walked to the edge of the sea. I drew back my arm, and threw the bottle as hard as I could.

It *whuff-whuff-whuffed* through the air, splashed under the water, then bobbed bright and red-topped to the surface. The ebb tide seized it, and it began drifting out towards deeper water.

I stood watching the red top dip and rise among the waves, till I couldn't see it any more. Then I turned and headed back to the McLeans' house.

Inside my head, I was saying goodbye to the bottle and the message I'd put inside it. And goodbye to my mother. Because I'd accepted it now. She was dead and she wasn't ever coming back. I'd miss her for as long as I lived, but I'd finally

started to face up to it, and that made me feel better.

So did the words I'd written. As I walked, I took the first message out of my pocket and read it again. Just those three words: **SOMEBODY LOVES YOU.**

My own message was only a few letters longer. Over the sea, maybe to some other beach and some other person who had bad times too, it was floating. **I LOVED SOMEBODY, TOO.**

You meet Kate as you start on the biggest project of your professional life so far. Kate is a child psychologist. You're a photographer, planning an exhibition on Kids Under Stress.

The idea came after you visited friends with an autistic son. The 7-year-old sat rocking silently, or pushing a toy van back and forth, back and forth. The memory of it won't leave you: the disharmony and dysfunction in those we most want to keep safe and whole. As an exhibition, it could be special.

It could also be a minefield, open to accusations of distortion, exploitation, kiddie-porn even. You're talking to a school counsellor acquaintance about it when Kate's name comes up. The best child psychologist in town, he says. Sensible and approachable. Works a lot with troubled kids. Give her a ring.

She – Dr Kate Tayler – responds enthusiastically. Sounds fascinating. She'd love to help. Come along and talk about it.....this Thursday? 2.30?

What your friend hasn't told you is that Dr Kate Tayler is also a stunner. The woman who meets you at her bright, living-room-furnished surgery is small, slim, dark hair, brown eyes, fashion magazine cheekbones. You realise your mouth is doing a goldfish gulp as you greet her.

You're helped by the fact that she's a bit flustered, too. "Oh dear, I did say 2.30, didn't I? So sorry, I'm always forgetting times these days. No problem. Jenna can do some more drawings for me, can't you, Jenna love? Want to show us the ones you've already done?"

Jenna doesn't, but you see that her crayon figures are all in black. She kneels at a little table, while you and Dr Tayler – "Kate, please" – sit and talk.

Kate Tayler is indeed sensible and approachable. And supportive. She likes the fact you want to show how childhood isn't just some adult fantasy of sweetness and light. Likes also the implicit respect, the acknowledgement of kids' resourcefulness and strength. Great. How can she help?

Over the next eight months, Kate helps in lots of ways. With making contacts, explaining to kids and parents that you're taking photographs because you want other people to see how special, how cool they are. She's professional and careful: checks who'll have access and rights to the images, asks to see some of your other work.

She helps too as you take the hundreds of pictures from which the final 30 or 35 will be chosen. You take a lot in her surgery: Jemma and her black drawings. Caleb, who's had eight foster homes in his six years, and who when you stand up suddenly, cowers away with hands over head. Tyrone, who won't speak, but who laughs when you let him use the camera to photograph you pulling a silly face.

Kate talks passionately about them all. She has this endearing habit of stumbling over a word occasionally. You'd like to take some shots of her as well, both for her contributions, and because....because she's so damn beautiful. The cheekbones and straight nose. The intelligence and life-force in those eyes.

You're at the surgery one afternoon when her husband arrives. You like Ben straight away. Kate has told you how he was a corporate lawyer, then gave it up to train as a psychiatric nurse. "He wanted to do something that was simply good with his life. Isn't that brilliant?" Yes, it's brilliant. The two of them make you feel that humanity needn't be too ashamed of itself after all.

Your exhibition is a huge success. The papers give it a major write-up. Radio and TV run reviews. Words such as "emotional power...heart-wrenching...perceptive and poetic" are used. It's the moment that sets you on the path you've dreamed of.

The only hiccup on opening night is that Kate doesn't turn up till after the speeches, in which you'd wanted to make a point of thanking her. She's flustered and apologetic, just like the first time you met her. "So sorry. Thought it was **seven**-thirty. I'm forgetting where I live these days!"

But there's time to tell the crowd that this is Dr Kate, without whom, etc, and then to guide her around the photographs. She's excited and admiring; mixes up her words once, laughs and makes those nearby laugh – except for Ben, who's a bit quiet and watchful. Maybe they've had a tiff over her getting the time wrong.

You move away soon after the exhibition. Big-city galleries are taking an interest. Assignments are lining up. You keep in touch with the Taylers. When a national magazine does a flattering article on the exhibition, you send Kate copies. You send a Xmas card too, and a return card comes. Kate's handwriting has the odd beguiling wobble in it.

The next year is flat-out. In September, there's even an exhibition in Melbourne. *Melbourne!* You don't forget Kate's part in things; you thank her in a long, friendly, Xmas card-cum-letter.

You don't get a card back, which piques you a little. But they're busy people, and so are you now. Then in mid-January, there's a letter with Ben's name at the bottom. In the first paragraph are the words "brain tumour".

Suddenly, awfully, it all fits. The little forgettings, the slips of voice and ballpoint. A cliché comes true, and you feel your breath stop.

She's in a nursing home, Ben tells you. The tumour was diagnosed over 15 months ago, but Kate hadn't wanted to trouble people with the news. It's too deep for surgery, and radiotherapy isn't an option. They tried chemo, but it made her – made everyone – so distressed, they stopped. The prognosis....it's downhill

and probably fast from here on. She was pleased to get your Xmas card, and thrilled to hear about Melbourne.

You write straight back to Ben, saying all the kind, futile things you can. You wish you'd taken that photograph of Kate, for him as well as for you.

In late February, a commission brings you just a hundred ks from where you did your Kids Under Stress pictures and it all began. You finish with a day to spare, make your mind up, and ring Ben. You try to have words ready for any eventuality.

Kate's in the hospital wing now, he says. Things are happening pretty quickly. She can't talk, can't really move body or face muscles. She knows some people; you see it in her eyes. No pain, which is great. She'd be rapt to see you. Just go to the home. He has to be at work tomorrow, unfortunately. Money's a bit short since Kate had to stop work. Sometimes he almost wishes he'd stayed a corporate lawyer. Almost.

A pause, then Ben says, "One thing you should know. She looks pretty bad. She's there inside, but you mightn't recognise her straightaway."

You drive up next morning. In the nursing home, you wait half an hour because they're still "making Kate comfortable". You try again to be ready for anything. Then a nurse with over-bright voice says you can come in now. Your heart is banging.

Kate lies on her side in bed facing you, head and shoulders propped up on pillows. You see everything at once. It's just as well Ben told you.

You do recognise her, maybe because you've been picturing her till her very bones are imprinted on your mind. She's all bones now. It's not a face; it's a skull: cheeks caved in, lips almost fleshless, lovely straight nose a thin beak. The forehead seems distended; the chin is a point. The long dark hair is a wispy fuzz.

She's appalling. She's amazing. Mummified effigy; concentration camp victim; corpse: she's all these, except her eyes are on you.

They look through you as you bend to kiss her forehead. You keep your voice as normal as you can. "Hi, Kate. It's your favourite photographer."

There's no expression, no sign of recognition. You remember what Ben said about face muscles. You carry a chair to the bedside, take one of the skeletal hands, start to tell her about the town you've just been to, and why. You're five or six sentences into your halting narrative when the idea seizes you.

It's so terrifying, so wonderful, that your body jerks and you stop talking. Kate's hand hasn't moved in yours. Her eyes gaze through you, unresponding. You try to pick up the words again, describe Melbourne, say you've been talking to Ben. But the idea is glowing and rising inside you. It may be perfect. It may be unthinkable. You have to try.

You look – really look – into the wasted face, and remember how it used to be. "Kate, dear," you say. "I want to ask you the most enormous favour."

You explain, direct and unadorned. You tell her you'll speak to Ben. When you finish, you sit silent, still holding her hand. She doesn't make a sound, doesn't move her ravaged head. But the eyes are seeing you now; you're sure of that. And from the claw of her hand, the faintest pressure comes. Ben is right. Kate Tayler is in there.

For another five minutes you sit, thinking out the logistics involved. You're opening your mouth to say something when you realise Kate's hand lies passive again, and her eyes are closed. Her breathing gently comes and goes.

You find a motel for the night and ring Ben once more. If he goes berserk at what you're about to ask, yells and swears, it'll serve you right. So you go straight into it, like you did with Kate. "Ben, I've had this crazy idea. Please just say if you don't want a bar of it...."

You begin telling him, and he listens in silence. Silence at first, anyway. It's not till you're almost finished that you identify the rasping sound on the other end of the phone as a man weeping. You give up trying to control your own voice after that.

So it's all agreed. You meet Ben at the nursing home next morning. "Asked for a couple of hours off, and they said go for it." He's older, exhausted and thinner, hanging in.

He hugs you; then you go in. Ben seats himself on the bed, beside his dying wife. And you – you take what will be the most astonishing, the most harrowing and beautiful photographs you'll ever take in your life.



