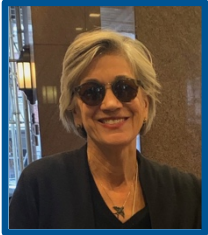


## Message from the Sea

By Jeanne Blake



During this coronavirus crisis I make a habit of walking the beach near my home in Gloucester, Massachusetts. On one recent morning a bottle rolling in the surf caught my eye. I was delighted to see it held a note – a charming throwback to a time before social media. I could only make out the words “Dear reader, if you found this bottle...”

Back at home I tried to fish out the note. No luck. Finally, I wrapped the bottle in a dish towel, and smashed it with a hammer. It shattered with a heart-piercing noise.

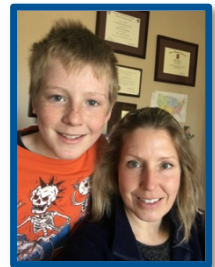
Amid the shards a message revealed the bottle’s 110-mile journey – from Maine to Massachusetts.

“If you found this bottle please contact...” the first note read, giving a phone number. “You can add something but please send it back out to sea.” It was signed “Joe and Aidan 2/20/20, Launched from Cape Elizabeth.”

Another note was from Tom, Laurie and Mike of Biddeford, Maine, dated three weeks later.

I felt lucky to be the third person in this chain – but dismayed I’d had to break the bottle: There was no way to send it onward.

But I had to text Joe and Aidan – whoever they were – to let them know their bottle had made it to Gloucester. An immediate response came from Jennifer Gray, Joe’s mother, who explained her son and Aidan Marks are fifth-grade friends. “This is fun for our family, which is on lockdown because one of us was exposed to someone who tested positive for Covid-19,” she texted.



Jennifer assured me the boys said it wouldn’t be against the rules to put the messages (along with mine) in a new bottle and continue the journey.

The only wine bottle in the house was a screw-top. That wouldn’t do, a smart friend said. Water would get in and sink it. So I called a local liquor store, Seabreeze, and asked Allison, the owner, to choose a few bottles of corked sauvignon blanc. She took my credit card and, to maintain social distance, agreed to meet me in front of the store. The handoff felt like a drug deal until she told me, “This is a great story about connection! We’re donating the wine!”

But now, the surf was too wild. The bottle would surely get smashed on the rocks.

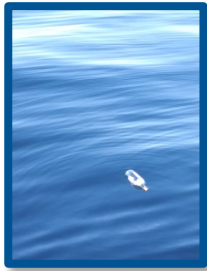
A couple of days later the sea was calm. I clambered down the rocks in front of my house and flung the bottle. My neighbor Cliff King photographed the relaunch for Joe and Aidan. The bottle drifted out 40 feet. But then the surf picked up and pushed it back toward the coast. It disappeared. Had it smashed against the rocks?



So my next dispatch to Jennifer and the boys wasn’t as cheery as I’d hoped. Would be against the rules to launch another bottle with a copy of the note? Joe green-lighted my plan.

More invested than ever, I prepared for a second launch. Then, I had a flash. This winter, a friend had introduced me to a Gloucester fisherman named Robert Porter and his wife Laurel McDonald. Robert agreed to collect the bottle from my mailbox and relaunch it at sea from the FV Bantry Bay. And he promised photos to document the event for Joe and Aidan.

A few days later, my phone lit up with Robert's texts. He and his skipper Danny Murphy were near Stellwagen Bank, 13 miles offshore. "Haven't launched the bottle yet," he wrote. "We didn't catch much fish in our first tow, so I have time to play." An accompanying photo showed a breaching whale with the bottle in the foreground. Another showed the bottle in a grey plastic tote resting on a pile of haddock.



Robert described whales fluking and gannets crashing around the boat. "Last time we were out there was not this explosion of life," he texted. He sent more pictures. In one – the very image of a Gloucester fisherman in his Grundéns overalls – he was poised to toss the bottle overboard. Another showed the GPS coordinates. And the money shot: The bottle floating on a shimmering blue sea.

I called Jennifer with the news. As we chatted, she described Joe as a social, curious kid who's always asking, "I wonder what would happen if..." The isolation required by the coronavirus has been tough on him. The bottle's journey has given him a connection to the outside world.

"It keeps my mind off the gigantic plague that's coming," Joe told me. When I told him many of my friends had been delighted by the story of his bottle, he said: "It makes me happy I can make other people happy. And I haven't even met them!"

Like Joe and Aidan, I can't help wondering where in the vast Atlantic the bottle is now. As Robert explained, it could end up anywhere, depending on the wind – back in Massachusetts, on a beach in Ireland or Cornwall or France.

Robert says relaunching the bottle in the middle of a pandemic felt like an act of hope. "The ocean, with all its power and majesty, can deliver this fragile bottle with a message to the next person who can take it forward," he told me. "Tell Joe to keep dreaming. It's all we've got."

For my part, the fifth-graders' bottle has brightened days filled with grinding uncertainty. Joe's curiosity connected a group of strangers – and gave us joy.



**Jeanne Blake is president of [Blake Works](#), a leadership communications consulting firm.**

Check out Laurel and Robert's yarn shop [Coveted Yarn](#).