

Pen Pal

Pen Pal

Copyright (c) 2013 by Francesca Forrest

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Pen Pal

Francesca Forrest

I would like to offer heartfelt thanks to the friends who read and commented on the earliest version of this story—an exchange of letters that ran on Livejournal in 2009—and to those who beta read later versions and offered encouragement and wise words, especially Lisa Bradley, Caroline Ellis, Miquela Faure, Merrie Haskell, Julie Just, and Sherwood Smith. I'm also extremely grateful to Khiem Tran, who provided the cover image, and to Aubrey Rose, who created the cover. My humblest and biggest thank you goes out to my husband, who supported me through this entire process—even traveling to hot places he had never envisioned going to—and to my children, who put up with my obsession and my neglectfulness. Warmest hugs also to my father (always an inspiration) and my brother and sister, and a prayer and an offering to my mother, grandmother, and LA, who are no longer with us, but whom I think on every day.

Chapter 1. Letter in a Bottle

Dear person who finds my message,

I live in a place called Mermaid's Hands. All our houses here rest on the mud when the tide is out, but when it comes in, they rise right up and float.

They're all roped together, so we don't lose anyone. I like Mermaid's Hands, but sometimes I wish I could unrope our house and see where it might float to. But I would get in trouble if I did that, so instead I'm sticking this message in a bottle. If you find it, please write back to me at this address. Tell me what the world is like where you are.

Yours truly,

Em

June 27 (Em's diary)

Today Ma used up the last of the cough medicine on Tammy, and I rinsed out the bottle. It was a good, small size, and I decided today was the day to send out my message. Small Bill helped me row out far enough to see the free and open ocean.

“It’s probably just gonna bob around here. Least it won’t sink,” he said, examining the corks that I put all around the outside of it, held on by electrical tape. “Not until the stickum wears off the tape, anyway. Maybe the dolphins will play with it. Maybe they’ll pass it on to the seapeople. You want it to go to the seapeople, or people up here?” He waved his hand at the sea, but he was meaning the folks on the shrimp boats and the big cargo ships, and the ones out on the oil rigs, too.

“Well, either way, but I want someone to write back,” I said. “Wish I could be the message ... Go visit the seapeople, or go see some new place above-water.”

“You want to leave here?”

“Not for good! Just to look around. Just to see stuff with my own eyes. Haven’t you ever wanted to visit the seapeople?”

Small Bill shrugged. “Maybe the seapeople. Don’t think I need to meet any more dry-land people, though. You want me to throw that for you?”

“No, I want to do it myself.” I stood up real carefully, so I wouldn’t capsize the dinghy, and threw the bottle as far as I could. “Don’t say, ‘Not bad, not bad,’ like you’re the king of good throws,” I warned.

“Not sure you threw it far enough for ‘not bad,’” Small Bill said,

grinning, and then I nearly did capsize the dinghy trying to spill him out of it, but he was lodged in as good as a hermit crab in its shell. So we rowed back and played tag with everyone else for a while, and Small Bill's mom gave me a bundle of dried leaves tied with cordgrass twine. Ma only likes dry-land medicine that comes in bottles, but Dad'll make those leaves into a tea for Tammy.

And now I wait to see if anyone gets my message in a bottle.

June 28 (Loop Current Charter Fishing Tours log entry)

Nice family today; a father, two sons, and one daughter. Calm seas, plenty of fish. The family took home a couple good-sized red snapper. My own line snagged at one point on some rubbish—it was a little bottle wearing a life jacket of corks, and would you believe, it had a kid's message in it. Decided to send it to Matt. He's shipping out next week; maybe he can drop it in the Straits of Malacca or something. If someone over there finds it and writes back, the kid'll really get a thrill.

June 28 (Em's diary)

I won't go to the post office today. There couldn't be a letter for me there yet. I hope not, anyway. I don't want nobody to have found my message in a bottle yet, because if they have, they're probably from around here. Unless the bottle really does go under the waves, to the seapeople.

Things I wonder about: What would happen if the Seafather himself found it? Would he harness up a seadragon and come riding right into Mermaid's Hands, to find out how we're all doing, here? Would he give me gills and invite me to come with him and have adventures?

But if he came in this close to shore, he might make a tsunami, and that would be bad. Small Bill says he wants a tsunami to take out Sandy Neck, but if a tsunami came, it would hit our houses first. Small Bill thinks we could float through it. It's not like a hurricane, he says. There's no wind. There's no rain.

Small Bill hates Sandy Neck because a lot of folks there are mean. They don't like people from Mermaid's Hands.

"It's because they're jealous," Dad says. "Scratching away at a hard, dry life on their hard, dry ground while we live life floating. What we need comes to us."

But some of the Sandy Neck folk go shrimping and fishing, too, so I don't think Dad is one hundred percent right.

"It's because they're afraid," Mr. Ovey says. "They're afraid of people with seablood. People who came out of the water, or are called into it."

That's what people in Mermaid's Hands have: seablood.

“Especially people with marlin blood, right Dad?” Small Bill says.

Things I need to remember: Not to be jealous of Small Bill’s genealogy. Mr. Ovey’s six-greats-ago grandfather was a marlin, and Mrs. Ovey’s seven-greats-ago grandmother was a sea turtle. But all of us got seablood, even if it’s not from creatures with gills or shells. We’re either born with it or it’s sung into us. The Seafather gave it to the Choctaw and Biloxi and Pensacola people who hid out in the salt marshes, so no white folks could find them, and to runaways and other slippery folk who were happier on the sea than the land—like Vaillant, who swam from Haiti to Cuba and Cuba to here, to get away from slavery. Gran said that when he found out there was slavery here, too, he decided to give up on dry land altogether and pledged allegiance to the sea. The Seafather admired Vaillant so much he gave him fins. Whenever Small Bill starts talking about his marlin ancestor, I start bragging on Vaillant’s fins. The marlin was just born with fins, but Vaillant earned them.

Vaillant’s one of my ancestors because of Granddad. Granddad died when I was little, but Gran tells the story of how Granddad came to Mermaid’s Hands: he swam in, just like Vaillant. He never would say where from. They sang him into Vaillant’s line when him and Gran got married.

Getting sung into a genealogy proves that not everyone on dry land is bad. Some of the best seachildren started out as dry-landers.

Ma came from dry land. Dad worked away from Mermaid’s Hands in a cannery the summer he turned eighteen, and he met Ma there. She told us how he brought her bouquets of whitetop sedge and milkwort and other wildflowers each morning, and at the end of

the summer he brought her back to Mermaid's Hands to meet Gran and Granddad. When Dad married Ma, she got sung into a brand new line: red-winged blackbird. Tammy loves that, because she loves birds. And red-winged blackbirds are pretty, but they're land birds! Even if you can see them in the long grass in the water, sometimes.

It's true nobody would say Ma's one of the best seachildren. Ma don't even call herself one. Sometimes I think if only she'd of been sung into a petrel line, maybe it would of put a bigger love for Mermaid's Hands into her. I worry sometimes, that Ma don't like it here all that much. Dad and her argue a lot. But Dad says so long as he can get Ma to smile, everything'll be all right. Mostly I believe that.

July 1 (Em's diary)

There was nothing for me at the post office. There was only a letter for Ma from Aunt Brenda. Next time we go, I think it would be okay for me to get a letter. By then the bottle will of been floating long enough to reach someplace far away.

Person who gets my message, will you be a grown-up or a kid? Will you live right by the sea, or will you be visiting it? Will you be excited to find my letter?

I should of put a treasure map in my bottle, along with my note. A treasure map would of made it more exciting. But I'd need to have a treasure to do that, otherwise the map would be a lie, and I don't have a treasure.

Maybe tomorrow Small Bill will want to go looking for Sabelle Morning's treasure again. Just because we haven't found it yet don't mean it's not out there somewhere. We just need to look harder. Tammy can come too, and Skinnylegs and Clara, if she ain't busy watching her brothers.

Chapter 2. A Response

July 4 (Kaya to Em)

Dear Em,

It was a pleasure to get your message. Sumi, my pet crow, brought it to me.

You ask what it's like where I am. I'm a prisoner, actually. My prison has the poetic name "Lotus on the Ruby Lake." You mentioned in your letter that your house floats when the tide comes in. My house floats too, in a manner of speaking. It sits on a long wooden platform, which hangs from thick chains that are bolted into the sides of the crater of a volcano. If I lean over the rail at the edge of the platform, I can see the glowing lava of the Ruby Lake. It's not anyplace you'd want to swim, that's for sure.

My captors bring me supplies by helicopter once a week, and they let me send notes to my mother. I will include this message in my weekly note, and my mother will post it on to you.

Please do write again; it's very lonely here by myself.

Yours,

Kayamanira (Kaya) Matarayi

July 4 (Kaya to her mother)

Dear Mother,

You will see I am enclosing a little note in English; you will see an address in the lower corner—a wonderful-sounding place, with a name from a fairy tale, looking out on the great bowl of the Gulf of Mexico. If they hadn't confiscated my computer, you could go online and look for the place. Maybe you can go to the research station and ask Piyu (he's the friendly one) to find it for you, then write and tell me what it's like.

It's a reply to letter I've received from someone in America. Is it hard to believe? The way the letter came to me is even harder to believe. Yesterday, I was resting my elbows on the guard rail, just woolgathering. I was staring at the fires of the Ruby Lake and thinking that it's like a heart, an exposed heart. The mountain seems strangely vulnerable, when you think of the Ruby Lake that way.

I couldn't keep looking at it for long, though. It's too bright. It paints itself permanently on your eyes, the way the sun will if you stare at it. I closed my eyes and saw black spots where the lava had been especially bright, and when I opened them, one black spot remained, seeming to rise right out of the lava.

It was Sumi. Seeing her flying toward me that way put the old stories in my head, about crows being the tribute the Salu evergreens sent to the Lady of the Ruby Lake, and how they've been the Lady's messengers ever since.

But for all that Sumi seemed to be to flying up from the depths of the Ruby Lake, she must actually have been returning from a trip to

the coast, because she brought me a present from the sea. It was a little bottle, and in the bottle, all soft and damp with seawater, was a piece of paper, a letter, still legible in spite of its soaking.

A letter in a bottle, can you imagine that? I remember Tema and I talked about messages in bottles the day I found Sumi, and now, years later—and I in these circumstances—Sumi brings me one! I'm laughing as I think about it, and when I laugh, Sumi cocks her head and looks at me sideways. Maybe she's smiling? She seems pleased with herself.

And the letter is from America. The bottle somehow traveled all the way from the Gulf of Mexico to here! Ocean currents should have sent it to England and Europe, if it ever made it out of the Gulf. And yet, here it is.

The writer seems young, maybe twelve or thirteen. The letter's in pencil and the handwriting is neat but not mature. She's looking out across the sea for a friend. I hope she does write again. If she does, you will be the one to receive the letter. Could you slip it in with your letter to me, so I can keep corresponding with her? You will be our go-between.

If you do see Piyu, ask him how the tobacco is doing. Are the plants healthy? Oh—and the orange seedlings. Have the orange seedlings taken?

Also, you have not sent me any news about Ramiratam and the others for two letters now. Is it that you have no news, or there's no progress, or has there been news, but it's bad? You must tell me everything you know, even bad things.

I am so sorry to be such a fountain of ceaseless demands. I wish there were some way I could ease your burdens and make your days

happier.

*Your loving daughter,
Kayamanira*

July 4 (Kaya's memoir)

It's no good; I can't pretend any longer that I can continue my research here. I need something else to fill up the days and keep me from staring too hard and long at the Ruby Lake. So: a memoir. I will write down my thoughts on how I came to be here, what it all means. I don't expect that anyone will ever see what I write, but perhaps I can gain some certainty by writing things down, some strength.

Then, if Em should write again, if she asks questions, maybe I will be better prepared to answer her. A village of floating houses, roped together—I've never heard of such a way of life in America. Could it be that Em's people are as much outsiders in her country as mine are in mine? In which case, part of me can't help thinking that somehow the Lady of the Ruby Lake really does have a hand in Em's message coming to me. A superstitious, wishful part of me! When did that part get so strong? It must be the sulfur fumes.

July 10 (Em's diary)

I got a letter! I got a letter today—it was in with a doctor bill and ads, a letter for me! *And it came from a different country.* The stamp has a picture of flowers and mountains. Dad was talking with Ma about the bill and Tammy was looking at the picture of the hummingbirds in the ad for hummingbird feeders, and I was just turning the letter over and over in my hands, not quite believing it was real.

“What’s that you have?” Dad asked. “Something else from *Kids Speak?*” He asked that because last fall my teacher made us all write essays on Best Family Traditions and sent them in to an essay contest. After that, everyone in class kept getting letters asking if we wanted to buy a book with all the essays in it. The book was called *Kids Speak*. I think I got three letters from them, but that book was way too expensive. Really the only good thing about writing that essay was getting the idea to have this diary: What it’s like being Emlee Baptiste, living in Mermaid’s Hands. One day I’ll make a book of it that anyone can afford to buy.

“No, it’s a letter from far away,” I said, but Dad wasn’t paying attention anymore, because Ma was talking to him about the bill again.

I knew next Ma and Dad would go back out to Mermaid’s Hands to see Mr. Tiptoe to find out if there was any extra money from the sale of the last catch. If there was, then probably he’d give them some, and then they’d take it to the doctor’s office.

I wanted to go read my letter by myself, but I also didn’t want Tammy to have to tag along with Ma and Dad for all that. She can’t help it if she’s always coughing, and it’s not her fault Ma wants her

to see a dry-land doctor that costs a bunch of money instead of just using sea remedies. So I told her she could come along with me.

“We’re going to Foul Point,” I told Ma and Dad.

“Just be home before it gets dark,” Ma said.

Foul Point is called Fowl Point on maps, but we call it Foul Point because it stinks sometimes. Pretty often, really. It stinks because of all the birds that flock there, but that’s why me and Tammy like it, too, for the birds, and for the no-people. No dry-land people go there, because it’s hard to reach if you don’t want to get wet, and no fishermen go there because of the cordgrass and the rocks, and not so many fish, and not even other kids from Mermaid’s Hands go there much, because Mrs. Ovey said in the olden days it’s where we seachildren would take all the chamber pot stuff from our houses to dump. Ewww, go wading through long-ago this-and-that? No thanks! That’s what they’re thinking.

But long ago is long ago. Now it’s just bird doo that makes Foul Point foul. Mainly terns. Terns like to nest there.

We didn’t see many terns there today. Instead we saw lots of red-thread dancers, so delicate! Red-thread dancers is our name for them, because their legs are as thin as red threads, and their walking looks like dancing, but I got a bird book out of the library once, and their book name is black-necked stilt. They do look like they’re walking on stilts. And today there were also brown willet birds there. Tammy went looking for abandoned nests in the grass, and I sat on a rock and examined my letter.

There was my name on the envelope, written in thin letters and wobbly. Maybe a grandmother or a grandfather wrote it. I used my finger like a knife to get into the envelope, and then I took out the

paper inside. It was in different handwriting. Pretty writing, darker and stronger than what was on the envelope. I read the letter.

“Who is it from?” Tammy asked. I hadn’t even heard her come up. I was thinking about volcanoes. I was imagining a platform hanging from chains over a lava lake, and a house on the platform, and someone in the house, writing me a letter.

“A prisoner. It’s from a prisoner in ...” I had to look at the envelope again. The country name came at the bottom of the return address: W—. That was the word on the stamp, too, in small letters under the picture.

“A prisoner in W—,” I said, “Want to go to the library? I want to find out where W— is.”

“Can I see the letter? I’ll show you what I found.” I let her look at the letter, and she gave me two long straight feathers, one small fluffy one with speckles, and a bottle cap.

“I like the bottle cap ‘cause it’s purple,” said Tammy, leaning in to share my looking at it. She reached for it again. It was purple with a mark sort of like a butterfly on it, in white.

“It’s a good one. You don’t have many purple ones, do you?”

She shook her head.

“Those two come from the red-thread dancers, I think,” she said, pointing to the long straight feathers. They were white with black tips.

“Matching, too,” I said, holding them both up. “One for each hand. You can make wing magic.”

Tammy nodded. “I can’t read the writing,” she said, handing the letter back to me. “Will you read it?”

I read it to her. Tammy frowned.

“That’s a bad place to live. I wonder why they put her there.”

“I wonder too. I feel sorry for her,” I said. It made me think of Jiminy, since he’s a prisoner too. Dad don’t want us to feel sorry for him, but I do.

“She has a crow, though,” Tammy remarked. “Crows are witchy birds. You think maybe she’s a witch? Maybe they put her over the volcano because she’s a witch.”

“You think? I don’t think having a crow makes you a witch. Sabelle Morning had a crow, and she wasn’t a witch.”

“But she was a pirate.”

“But she was a good-guy pirate. A Mermaid’s Hands pirate.”

Tammy shrugged. “Ma says there ain’t no good-guy pirates.”

Yeah, that sounds like Ma all right, not believing there’s such a thing as good pirates. And Tammy spends too much time with Ma on account of always being sick, and so she don’t understand about good pirates versus bad ones.

“I’m just saying that having a crow don’t make you a witch,” I said. “And crows are smart, too. Were you around when Uncle Near told the story about Sabelle’s crow?”

Tammy shook her head.

“It could talk, just like a parrot. Government revenue agents—those were who chased pirates and smugglers, back in olden times—captured the crow and tried to get it to tell them where Sabelle was, but instead the crow took them up and down the coast and made their ship run aground in shallow water.”

Tammy grinned.

“Uncle Near says that the grandchildren of that crow could tell us where Sabelle’s treasure is, if we knew which crows those were.”

“Okay, so they’re smart,” said Tammy. “But they ain’t as pretty as hummingbirds, or red-thread dancers.”

Tammy loves pretty things. I think crows are kind of pretty, with their shiny feathers, but it’s hard to compare them with hummingbirds and red-thread dancers.

“So you coming along to the library with me?” I asked. She nodded.

At the library I found out that the country the letter came from, W—, is an island right mixed in with the islands that are the country of Indonesia, which is not the same place as India. India is a big diamond shape that sticks down from Asia into the ocean, but Indonesia is a long splash of islands further to the east. At first I couldn’t find W—, but the librarian showed me how one island on the map was colored blue when all the islands of Indonesia were colored orange.

Then she showed me how I could find photos of W— on the computer. There were photos of towns and villages all around the edges of the island, and there were photos of the capital city, a jumble of grand-looking buildings and patched-together ones and streets crowded with people and cars and even long-horned cattle, and then photos of mountains in the middle of the island, dark green with trees. Then she typed in a different search, and it showed people. Some were fishing, in small boats no bigger than ours, not big ones like the dry-land people use, and some were bending and planting stuff in fields, and some were selling things on the street in the city. One photo was of some girls all dressed up in fancy costumes, doing a dance.

“Ooh,” said Tammy. “I’d like a dress like that. Do you think the

lady who wrote to you wears things like that?"

"Probably not unless she's a dancer," I said. I wanted to see if I could find pictures of Kaya's volcano, but when I typed "Lotus on the Ruby Lake," the computer just gave me pictures of flowers and lakes and other things. So then I tried typing "W—" and "volcano," and this time a bunch of pictures came up, pictures of bright redness, with veins and streaks of gold across it, sitting in a dark black dish—that was the crater. None of the pictures had a hanging platform in them, though. I guess they only built Kaya's prison recently.

I switched the computer back to the library's home page. It made me feel kind of funny in the stomach to think about a house above all that lava.

"Library closes in ten minutes," the librarian said.

"Let's go," I said to Tammy.