

KINDRED SPIRIT

There are stories that rise from mysterious, unknown places, and others that are discovered, a gift from someone else. This story is one of the latter. On a cool and blustery day in the late spring of 2016, I drove to Sunset Beach, North Carolina, one of many small islands between Wilmington and the South Carolina border. I parked my truck near the pier and hiked down the beach, heading for Bird Island, an uninhabited coastal preserve. Locals had told me there was something I should see; perhaps, they'd even suggested, the site would end up in one of my novels. They told me to keep my eye out for an American flag; when I spotted it in the distance, I'd know I was getting close.

Not long after the flag came into view, I kept my eyes peeled. I was to look for a mailbox called Kindred Spirit near the dunes. The mailbox—planted on a pole of aging driftwood near a saw grass-speckled dune—has been around since 1983 and belongs to no one and everyone. Anyone can leave a letter or postcard; any passerby can read whatever has been placed inside the mailbox. Thousands of people do so every year. Over time, Kindred Spirit has been a repository of hopes and dreams in written form . . . and always, there are love stories to be found.

The beach was deserted. As I approached the isolated mailbox on its lonely stretch of shoreline, I could just make out a

wooden bench beside it. It was the perfect resting place, an outpost of reflection.

Reaching inside the mailbox, I found two postcards, several previously opened letters, a recipe for Brunswick stew, a journal that appeared to have been written in German, and a thick manila envelope. There were pens, a pad of unused paper, and envelopes—presumably for anyone who was inspired to add their own story to the contents. Taking a seat on the bench, I perused the postcards and the recipe before turning to the letters. Almost immediately, I noticed that no one used last names. Some of the letters had first names, others had only initials, and still others were completely anonymous, which only added to the sense of mystery.

But anonymity seemed to allow for candid reflection. I read about a woman who, in the aftermath of a struggle with cancer, had met the man of her dreams at a Christian bookstore, but worried that she wasn't good enough for him. I read about a child who hoped to one day become an astronaut. There was a letter from a young man who planned to propose to his sweetheart, and still another from a man who was afraid to ask his neighbor on a date for fear of rejection. There was a letter from someone recently released from prison who wanted nothing more than to start his life over. The final missive was from a man whose dog, Teddy, had recently been put to sleep. The man was still grieving and after finishing the letter, I studied the photograph of a black Labrador retriever with friendly eyes and a graying muzzle that had been tucked inside the envelope. The man had signed his name A.K., and I found myself hoping he would find a way to fill the void that Teddy's absence had left behind.

By then, the breeze was steady and the clouds had begun to

darken. A storm was rolling in. I returned the recipe, postcards, and letters to the mailbox and debated opening the manila envelope. The thickness indicated a substantial number of pages, and the last thing I wanted was to get caught in the rain as I trekked back to my truck. Flipping over the manila envelope as I debated, I saw that someone had printed on the back, The Most Amazing Story Ever!

A plea for recognition? A challenge? Written by the author or someone who'd examined the contents? I wasn't sure, but how could I resist?

I opened the clasp. Inside the envelope were a dozen or so pages, photocopies of three letters, and some photocopied drawings. I set those aside and reached for the story. The first line made me pause:

The destiny that matters most in anyone's life is the one concerning love.

The tone was unlike the previous letters, promising something grand, it seemed. I settled in to read. After a page or so, curiosity gave way to interest; after a few more pages, I couldn't put the story aside. Over the next half hour, I laughed and felt my throat tighten; I ignored the uptick in the breeze and clouds that were turning the color of charcoal. Thunder and flickers of lightning were reaching the distant edge of the island when I read the final words with a sense of wonder.

I should have left then. I could see sheets of rain marching across the waves toward me, but instead, I read the story a second time. On that reading, I was able to hear the voices of the characters with utter clarity. By the time I read the letters and examined the drawings, I could feel the idea taking shape that

I might somehow find the writer and broach the possibility of turning his story into a book.

But finding that person wouldn't be easy. Most of the events had taken place long in the past—more than a quarter century earlier—and instead of names, there were only single initials. Even in the letters, the original names had been whited-out before copying. There was nothing to indicate whom the writer or artist might have been.

A few clues remained, however. In the part of the story dating back to 1990, there was mention of a restaurant with a deck out back and a fireplace graced with a cannonball allegedly salvaged from one of Blackbeard's ships. There was also reference to a cottage on an island off the North Carolina coast, within walking distance of the restaurant. And in what seemed to be the most recently written pages, the writer spoke of a construction project currently underway on a different island altogether. I had no idea whether the project was now finished, but I had to start somewhere. Though years had passed, I hoped the drawings would eventually help me identify the subjects. And, of course, there was also the Kindred Spirit mailbox on the beach where I sat, which played a pivotal role in the story.

By then, the sky was positively threatening and I knew I was out of time. Sliding the pages back into the manila envelope, I returned it to the mailbox and hurried to my truck. I barely beat the downpour. Had I waited another few minutes, I would have been drenched, and despite having my windshield wipers on high, I could barely see through the glass. I drove home, made myself a late lunch, and stared out the window, continuing to think about the story. By evening, I knew that I wanted to return to Kindred Spirit and examine the story

again, but weather and some business travel prevented me from returning for nearly a week.

When I finally made it back, the other letters, the recipe, and the journal were there, but the manila envelope was gone. I wondered what had become of it. I wondered if a stranger had been as moved by the pages as I'd been and had taken them; or perhaps there was some sort of caretaker who occasionally purged the mailbox? Mainly, I wondered whether the author had had second thoughts about revealing the story and had come to retrieve it himself.

It made me want to talk to the writer even more, but family and work kept me busy for another month, and it wasn't until June that I found time to begin my quest. I won't bore you with all the details regarding my search for the writer—it took the better part of a week, countless phone calls, visits to various Chambers of Commerce and county offices where building permits were recorded, and hundreds of miles on the truck. Since the first part of the story was written decades ago, some of the reference points had long since disappeared. I managed to track down the location of what used to be the restaurant—it was now a chic seafood bistro with white tablecloths—and used that as a starting point for my exploratory excursions, in order to get a sense of the area. After that, following the trail of building permits, I visited one island after the next, and on one of my many walks up and down the beach, I eventually came across the sound of hammering and a power drill—not uncommon for salted and weather-beaten homes along the coast. When I saw an older man working on a ramp that led from the top of the dune to the beach, I felt a sudden jolt. I remembered the drawings, and even from a distance suspected that I had found one of the characters in the story.

*Walking over, I introduced myself. Up close, I became even more certain it was him. I noted the quiet intensity I'd read about in the story, and the same observant blue eyes referenced in one of the letters. Doing the math, I figured him to be in his late sixties, which was the right age. After a bit of small talk, I asked him point blank whether he'd written the story that ended up in *Kindred Spirit*. In response, he deliberately turned his gaze toward the ocean, saying nothing for perhaps a minute. When he turned to face me again, he said that he would answer my questions the following afternoon, but only if I was willing to lend him a hand on his construction project.*

I showed up with a tool belt early the following morning, but the tools proved unnecessary. Instead, he had me haul plywood, two-by-fours and pressure treated lumber from the front of the house to the back, up over the sandy dune, and onto the beach. The pile of lumber was enormous, and the sand made every load seem twice as heavy. It took me most of the day, and aside from telling me where to place the loads, he didn't speak to me at all. He spent the day drilling and nailing and working beneath a searing early summer sun, more interested in the quality of his work than my presence.

Shortly after I'd finished hauling the last load, he motioned for me to take a seat on the dune and opened a cooler. Filling a pair of plastic cups from a thermos he kept inside, he handed me a cup of iced tea.

"Yeah," he finally offered. "I wrote it."

"Is it true?"

He squinted, as if evaluating me.

"Some of it," he admitted, in the accent I'd heard described in the pages. "Some might dispute the facts, but memories aren't always about facts."

I told him that I thought it might make for a fascinating book and launched into a series of passionate arguments. He listened in silence, his expression unreadable. For some reason, I felt anxious, almost desperate to persuade him. After an uncomfortable silence in which he seemed to be weighing my proposition, he finally spoke: he was willing to discuss the idea further, and perhaps even agree to my request, but only on the condition that he be the first to read the story. And if he didn't like it, he wanted me to bury the pages. I hedged. Writing a book takes months, even years, of effort—but he held firm. In the end, I agreed. Truth be told, I understood his reasoning. If our positions had been reversed, I would have asked the same of him.

We went to the cottage then. I asked questions and received answers. I was provided again with a copy of the story, and I was shown the original drawings and letters that enlivened the past even more.

The conversation rolled on. He told the story well and saved the best for last. As evening fell, I was shown a remarkable item—a gift—that enabled me to visualize the events with detail and clarity, as if I'd been a witness to all that had happened. I also began to see how the words would appear on the page, as if the story were writing itself and my role was to simply transcribe it.

Before I left, he requested that real names not be used. He had no desire for fame—he considered himself a private person—but more than that, he knew that the story had the potential to open old, and new, wounds. The story, after all, hadn't taken place in isolation. There were living people involved, some of whom might be upset by the revelations. I have honored his request because I believed that the story had larger

value and meaning; the power to remind us that there are times when destiny and love collide.

I began working on the novel soon after that first evening together. In the year that followed, whenever I had questions, I called or visited. I toured the locations, or at least those that hadn't been lost to history. I went through newspaper archives and examined photographs taken more than twenty-five years earlier. To flesh out even more details, I spent a week at a bed-and-breakfast in a small coastal town in eastern North Carolina and traveled as far as Africa. I was fortunate in that time seems to move more slowly in both those regions; there were moments when I felt as if I had actually journeyed deep into the past.

My trip to Zimbabwe was especially helpful. I'd never been to that particular country and was overwhelmed by the spectacular wildlife. The country had also once been called the breadbasket of Africa, but by the time of my visit, much of the agricultural infrastructure had decayed and the economy had collapsed for largely political reasons. I walked among crumbling farmhouses and fallow fields, dependent on my imagination as to how verdant the land had been when the story first began. I also spent three weeks on various safaris, absorbing everything around me. I spoke to guides and scouts and spotters, discussing their training and their daily lives; I speculated on how challenging it must be for them to maintain families, since they spend most of their time in the bush. I confess, I found Africa utterly seductive. Since those trips, I've often felt the urge to return, and I know I will before long.

In spite of all the research, there's much that remains unknown. Twenty-seven years is a long period of time, and to recreate verbatim an ancient conversation between two people

is impossible. It's impossible to recall with accuracy each and every step a person takes, or the position of the clouds in the sky, or the rhythm of the waves as they roll up on the shore. What I can say is that what follows next is the best I can possibly do under such constraints. Since I made further alterations for the purposes of privacy, I'm comfortable describing this book as a novel and not a work of nonfiction.

The genesis, research, and creation of this book has been one of the more memorable experiences of my life. In some ways, it's transformed the way I think about love. I suspect that most people harbor a lingering sense of "What if I'd followed my heart?" and there's no way to ever really know the answer. A life, after all, is simply a series of little lives, each of them lived one day at a time, and every single one of those days has choices and consequences. Piece by piece, they form the people we become. I've captured some fragments to the best of my ability, but who is to say that the picture I've assembled is a true portrait of who they really were?

There will always be doubters when it comes to love. Falling in love is the easy part; making love last amidst life's varied challenges is an elusive dream for many. But if you read this story with the same sense of wonder that I felt when writing it, then perhaps your faith in the uncanny force that love can exert on people's lives will be renewed. You might even find your way to Kindred Spirit one day, with a story of your own to tell...one that has power to change someone else's life in ways that you never imagined possible.

Nicholas Sparks
September 2, 2017

Author's Note on *Every Breath*

Dear Reader,

While my novels generally hew to certain expected norms (they're usually set in North Carolina, feature a love story, etc.), I do try to vary the themes, characters, or devices in interesting ways with every book. I've always loved the literary device of "self-insertion," in which the author himself makes an appearance in a fictional work—sometimes as a thinly veiled autobiographical narrator, like Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse Five*, or merely incidentally, like the character of Stephen King in *The Dark Tower: Volume VI*, whose entirely fictional diary plays a role in the story (and whose death is mentioned in the novel as occurring in 1997). One of my favorite novelists, Herman Wouk, wrote a novel at age ninety-seven, *The Lawgiver*, in which he fictitiously gets involved in a disastrous attempt to make a movie in Hollywood, over the misgivings of his real-life wife, Betty. This layered, "story-within-a-story" device involving the author always felt intriguing to me—the novelistic equivalent of Renaissance painters mischievously inserting themselves into their tableaux. I hope you agree that the bookends I wrote in my own voice added an interesting dimension to what is in other ways a classic story of lovers long denied.

While my "discovery" of Tru's and Hope's story is entirely fictional, the inspiration and setting of the novel are drawn directly from my own experiences. I first traveled to Africa in 2010, and on that trip fell head over heels in love with the countries I was lucky enough to visit—the utterly spectacular landscapes, the fascinating and varied cultures, the turbulent political histories and curious sense of timelessness I experienced there. I've since

returned to Africa several more times, each time exploring different regions and visiting a rapidly disappearing natural environment. These trips were nothing short of life-changing, expanding my awareness of the places far removed from my staid existence in small-town North Carolina. On each of these trips, I met dozens of safari guides whose rich knowledge and fascinating life stories provided grist for my creative mill, and eventually inspired me to create a character whose fate was entwined with and governed by his life growing up in Africa.

Carolina Beach also holds a special place in my heart, as I have retreated to its simple, restorative pleasures on many occasions when I was in need of introspection or healing. In the off-season in particular, its windswept beaches and easygoing year-round residents provide the perfect antidote to life's stresses: long walks on deserted, sandy stretches, simple meals at unpretentious locales, and the unceasing roar of ocean waves. I recommend it to anyone looking for a quieter alternative to the typical resort vacation.

And finally, Kindred Spirit: It actually does exist on the nature reserve of Bird Island, near Sunset Beach, North Carolina. As a veteran letter-writer, I found a natural appeal in the lonely mailbox that served as a central location in my story. Perhaps one day, you too will find a way to visit this picturesque destination and share your own thoughts and stories...

Nicholas Sparks