NOTE IN A BOTTLE

He found it while beachcombing for shells on the east shore of Nantucket Island, near 'Sconset. It was in a green, one-liter, glass Perrier mineral water bottle, with an aluminum screw cap. The bottle must have been some time at sea, bouncing with the waves while bobbing up and down, because the brand label had long since washed off. When the man held it up to the sun, he clearly saw that something was rolled up inside. Boyhood wishes of finding a secret map leading to buried treasure somewhere immediately popped into the man's mind, but such a fantasy was just as quickly dismissed. He unscrewed the bottle cap, and carefully tipped a kind of brown paper scroll out of the waterproof container.

The neatly printed message in dark blue ink appeared to have been written on a cut out 7"x 7" square of rough, brown grocery bag paper. Here is what it said:

"I killed them, and I'm not sorry.

Nobody knows the Truth but me.

THE CHEATER \* CHARLESTON"

Wagner Ford was amused. His first reaction was that this was probably the work of bored teenagers pulling a summer vacation prank. Here it was, mid-July, with the excitement of the 4th over and the weather heating up, so naturally the adolescents grew restless. But in a snap, Wagner's mind did a double-take: What if this was an actual confession of sorts by a guilty person attempting to unburden their conscience? The document (or was it a testimony?) was now more puzzling and potentially serious in Ford's mind than merely whimsical.

Wagner Ford was a forty-eight-year-old criminal defense attorney who lived and practiced in Boston. Whenever he grew stressed or depressed, he fled Beantown and drove to Hyannis, where he hopped on the one-hour ferry to Nantucket Island. The quiet and peacefulness of this remote hamlet was a welcomed balm to his lately very troubled soul. Ford loved Nantucket's history and simplicity compared to the more exclusive neighboring island of Martha's Vineyard -- much as Oyster Bay on Long Island, New York suited him better than the fancy Hamptons further east down the Sound.

Ford had recently suffered a contentious divorce, which virtually cleaned him out financially. Stephanie turned out to be infertile, so they never had children over the course of their twenty-one years of marriage. She continually blamed Wagner, and refused to even consider adoption as a way of rebuilding their now failing relationship. The bitter divorce now left him sour towards women in general. Where did the smoldering spark of female rage come from? Why did they change from being gentle and loving and supportive before marriage, to being cold and calculating and demanding afterwards? Wagner recalled the exasperated plea quote of the famed psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud: "What do women want?" Nobody knew -- not even women themselves -- was the baffling answer.

Ford was currently trying to put the pieces of his shattered life back together. The law firm where he worked was also struggling -- too many lawyers in Boston competing for too little work -- so Wagner was fighting a dual uphill battle. Meanwhile, his chestnut brown hair was thinning and going gray, a baleful reminder every morning, as he stared back at himself in his bathroom mirror, that time was marching on. He needed to snare and win a big new case to help restore both his pride and his pocketbook. Such were his foremost nagging thoughts as he held the carefully printed, yet mysterious brown paper square in his hand.

Wagner headed back on his rental bicycle to the historic center of the island. He always chose for his lodgings the Barnacle Inn, on Fair Street, a charming classic Bed & Breakfast. He kept the green glass bottle as well as the intriguing note. After walking out a few blocks on the cobblestone streets to the wharf area for a dinner of fresh seafood, Ford returned and sat in his room, thinking...

Once back by ferry to Hyannis, Wagner found his gray Toyota Camry and drove the two hours back to Boston. He now lived in a modest, one-bedroom condominium, close to the Green Line-B station of Chestnut Hill Avenue near Boston College on the city's popular "T" -- its Mass Transit system. His downtown law firm was by the Green Line-E station of Prudential, so he rarely needed to drive in Boston's infamous, nerve-wracking, obscenity-screaming traffic snarls.

Back at his office on Monday morning, Ford decided during a break to call a veteran detective friend at the Boston Police Department for some advice. He fingered the brown note in his suit pocket while the phone connected. Jeff Garfield was intrigued when Wagner outlined the unusual circumstances and details of his discovery. He suggested that they meet for lunch. After ordering at a nearby restaurant and making small talk about the Red Sox's mediocre season, Jeff got down to business once Wagner handed him the note to read.

"Well, buddy, this note mentions the word 'Charleston.' That could either be West Virginia's capitol city, or the popular coastal town in South Carolina. It also mentions the word 'them,' suggesting that more than one person was killed. But was it two, three, ten, or even more? As for 'The Cheater,' this is obviously an a.k.a., so I would cruise the bars and nightclubs in the seedier parts of both cities, and ask around. But be careful. Dress and act casual, and spread around a few Jacksons here and there to help loosen some tongues and jar some memories. Let me know what you find, if anything. This 'note in a bottle' stuff is either a bad hoax or something legit. Maybe even a real murder."

Ford thanked his friend as they parted ways after their meal. Because there was nothing very pressing happening at the law office of Finkel & Associates at this time, Wagner asked his boss, Robert Finkel, if he could take off a week to attend to some personal matters. The request was approved.

The next day, Ford drove to Logan and boarded an American Airlines flight for Charleston, WV. It was the first time he was visiting West Virginia. He got a rental car from Budget after grabbing his luggage, and drove to the Hampton Inn. The capitol city was attractively nestled in a valley defined by two rivers. The people he interacted with thus far were relaxed and helpful. But the state was still struggling as its coal industry continued to collapse, and WV was indeed the poorest state in the nation, with an alarming poverty rate of more than 19%.

At the Hampton, Wagner asked the young, perky female desk clerk, Tammy, about what areas of the city he should avoid because they were not safe for first-time visitors.

"I would definitely stay clear of West Side, which is in the hills north of Downtown. I hear it's not too bad during the day, but it can get kinda risky after dark," she advised. "Lots of troublemakers loitering and dealing drugs around there."

Although he didn't have a concealed carry permit for a handgun, Ford always carried a fake undercover police identification badge in a second wallet. He would flash it whenever he got in a tight spot, and anyone hassling him would almost always back off. So that night after a fried chicken dinner at a local Applebee's, he headed for the West Side.

Taking Jeff Garfield's advice, Wagner hit several bars and clubs -- white, black, or mixed -- and asked if anyone knew where to find a guy who called himself The Cheater. But even after losing a few $20 bills, Ford's request turned up empty. Maybe this manhunt is just a stupid waste of time, he thought, after a four-hour crawl which ended around 1:00 a.m.

Next, it was a short drive back to the airport the following morning after breakfast for a flight to the Palmetto State -- South Carolina.

The weather here in this Charleston was warmer and more humid than in West Virginia. But the coastal air was languid and filled with the scent of tropical flowers and birdsong, its plentiful palm trees swaying gently in the salty breeze. As with the other Charleston, it was Wagner's first time in this attractive cradle of the Civil War. He drove his rental car to another Hampton Inn, this one in the historic district. Prices here were more expensive than in West Virginia, he soon learned. The antebellum mansions along the Battery facing the sea -- with Fort Sumter in the distance -- bespoke prosperity and so-called 'Old Money,' much as Beacon Hill did back in Boston.

Following the same routine -- after a pleasant grilled catfish and shrimp dinner at Hyman's Seafood -- Ford waited until dark to wander the bars and clubs located far away from the usual tourist and conventioneer haunts. Yet again, he was frustrated that nobody had any clue who The Cheater was.

Tired and disappointed, Wagner went back to his hotel room in defeat. He took a long, hot shower to relax before climbing under the crisp, cool sheets of his king bed. But after an hour, he found that he was too wound up to sleep. His mind kept turning around again and again in circles.

Suddenly, he had an idea. Maybe The Cheater was really a nickname or a moniker that was actually someone's name with the letters scrambled! Excited, Ford popped out of bed and went to the room desk, and started juggling the letters of the words 'The Cheater,' using the room's notepad and pen.

After a half-hour, Wagner came up with seven likely possibilities, with each first name being 'Chet.' Next, using his cell phone, he called directory assistance for Charleston, WV, and asked for a listing of each of the seven names. But, after ten minutes or so, the patient male telephone operator regretfully could find none. So once again, Ford was stymied.

Exhausted, the criminal defense attorney was just about ready to give up and go back to bed. But he had to at least try the same directory assistance attempt for the Charleston he was now in.

After calling and asking about the seven names, the older-sounding female operator's voice said, in a sweet Southern drawl, "Sir, I do have a listing for a Mr. Chester Tahree. Would you like the number?"

Wagner nervously gulped, and quickly replied, "Yes, please... and would you also happen to have an address to go along with that number in your listing, Ma'am? I would surely appreciate it." Ford knew that any Boston operator would immediately refuse that additional request on privacy grounds, but Wagner spoke casually -- with as much politeness and charm as he had been told Southerners admired -- and held his breath.

"Well, I don't see there's any harm in giving you that too," she replied in a friendly voice. "Got a pencil ready?" He frantically wrote down both the phone number and the address. Ford then graciously thanked her for her help. "Have a nice evening..." the operator concluded. "Y'all take care now, hon. 'Bye."

By 10 a.m. the following morning, Wagner was parked in front of 83 Cooper Street, on the East Side of Charleston. He was appalled at the many vacant, trash-strewn lots, the abandoned broken cars, and the derelict , half-standing homes -- many with boarded up windows and collapsing fences, or fire damage. How could Charleston tolerate such squalor, just a few miles from its photogenic neighborhoods of beautiful, well-tended mansions?

Ford hesitated before the heavy metal front door, with its three separate locks. Made sense in this dangerous area, he mused. He took a deep breath and knocked. No response. He knocked again with more vigor. He was beginning to sweat in the rising summer heat.

Wagner then heard the various locks unlocking. A man's face peered out through two sets of door chains.

"What do you want?" the pale face with a short, dark beard demanded. Ford took the brown paper note out of his pocket and held it to eye level. "My name is Wagner Ford. I'm from Boston. I found this note rolled up in a green bottle on Nantucket Island a few days ago. Are you by any chance the person who printed this? Would you happen be Chester or Chet Tahree, who goes by the nickname 'The Cheater?'

"Well I'll be damned...I tossed that bottle in the water more than a year ago. Wasn't sure if anyone would ever find it, let alone figure out how to unscramble the letters and discover my real name and then look me up. Come on in..." Chet allowed, unchaining his door.

The small house interior was somewhat messy but at least it was cooler than outside. The blinds and drapes were drawn, and an old box fan wheezed from the corner of the main room.

"How about some sweet tea?" Tahree offered. "As you can see, I live here alone. It ain't much, but at least it's mine." Wagner accepted the cool drink from his host a minute later as both men then sat down on a worn blue sofa. Chet was painstakingly average-looking in both height and weight. He appeared to be normal and healthy, and was probably in his early 30's, with brown hair and brown eyes. He was wearing a khaki Dickies work shirt with matching work pants, like one would buy from Wal-Mart. His bare feet were encased in cheap bedroom slippers. The only peculiarity Ford noticed was that Chet walked with a slight, shuffling limp, favoring his left side.

"Now Mr. Tahree -- or Chet, if I may -- you need to know up front that I am a criminal defense lawyer. Your note mentions you killing 'them,' which I assume is more than one person, and that you are not sorry for what you did, and that you alone know the truth of what happened and presumably why. So I must ask you just one hard question: Is this note for real, or are you selling a crazy crock of bullshit? Just level with me. Maybe I can legally help you. Or simply tell me to get lost and I'll leave right now and never bother you again." Ford looked Tahree calmly in the eye, waiting for an honest answer.

Chet looked up at his faded and drab ceiling, and thought silently for a moment, rubbing his fingers on the knees of his pants. "Look, Mr. Ford, um...Wagner...Your being in the legal profession, I'm sure you are familiar with the theory about criminals secretly wanting to be caught for their crimes and then getting their deserved punishment...You know, to relieve themselves of their lifelong torment of guilt. Well, it's true." Tahree buried his face in his hands and rubbed his eyes and eyebrows, audibly sighing. Ford knew from experience that a terrible confession was about to come pouring out.

Over the next hour, the most astonishing tale Wagner had ever heard was revealed by a visibly distraught Chester Tahree.

"I was an illegitimate child sired by Henry Tahree in Hueytown, Alabama, not far from Birmingham. My natural mother was an ordinary whore whom I never really knew. I was birthed in a back room of a flop house. When my father married Millie Townsend, he took me from my natural mother at the age of two -- who incidentally was glad to be rid of me, he later claimed -- and Millie became my new mother when we moved to Trussville. But I was never formally adopted, and I never had a valid birth certificate or any other legal documentation. My life became a secret and a lie. Everyone just assumed that Millie was my mother. My father never had another child, which was Millie's strictest wish, probably to punish him for my illegitimacy. Anyway, my life from then on was a living hell, with severe physical and even sexual abuse. Don't believe me? Here, take a look."

Chet rolled up his work shirt sleeves, and held them out for Ford to see. Both arms were covered with various scars, as well as the marks where stitches had once been used. Wagner also noticed a small tattoo with the word 'Winner,' in somewhat flowery black cursive, on Tahree's right forearm.

The heart-broken man went on. "I was worked basically as a slave around the house and on its surrounding property. I went to school under false pretences by using a fake birth certificate my father had gotten, and was beaten if it was discovered that I ever told anybody about my shameful and brutal secret home life. I was routinely denied meals on the flimsy grounds of needing punishment. I was locked against a brick wall with a chain around my ankle in our dark basement for twenty-four hour periods, with no food or water. During those ordeals, I had no choice but to piss in my pants. Over the years, both of my parents took to drinking heavily, and in their drunken condition, they would whip me with leather belts even more randomly and cruelly. As I grew older and fantasized about running away, they told me that they would find me and have me killed if I ever tried to escape. I was trapped, and they knew it."

Chet excused himself to use the toilet, then returned with the pitcher of sweet tea and a small plate of Oreo cookies for his guest. He then continued his awful saga of misery and grief.

"When I turned nineteen, I came up with a plan. I would have to kill them both. I had no other choice, don't you see? But I had to do it in a way that looked like an accident. One of my only hobbies in those days was working on cars. I even got a part-time job after dropping out of high school at a filling station which also did minor repairs. I figured out a way to have a car's speedometer disable the brake lines, so that at a certain high speed, the car wouldn't be able to stop, and its passengers would be hopefully killed in an unexpected, deadly crash," Chet explained.

"So I rigged their Oldsmobile one night while they slept. I knew my father liked to speed at about 75 m.p.h. on trips down to the Gulf Coast when the State Troopers weren't looking, so that's what got him and Millie killed. 'A terrible accident,' the authorities proclaimed, so there was no investigation or any suspicion of foul play. 'Probable brake malfunction due to faulty maintenance,' they concluded. If you don't believe me, Wagner, you can research the accident on the internet using the old newspaper reports. This all happened around twelve years ago. They were buried in Trussville. I was glad to see them lowered into the dirt, and pictured them burning in the fires of Hell. I sold the house, and moved to Charleston, and have been living off that sale and my government disability checks ever since -- on account of my bad back I got when I worked for a time in a textile mill. Now, what I need to know, Wagner, is this : If I turn myself into the police in Alabama and confess my 'crime of necessity,' as I like to think of it, will I wind up on death row? Or how many years will I likely be imprisoned for what I did? Honestly, though, you need to know that I am not sorry for what I did. And only I -- and now you -- know the truth behind my actions. And I also firmly believe that God Almighty sees my soul and knows my heart and forgives me for those killings. But He is also urging me to come clean before society and pay any penalty. So...would you -- being a lawyer -- be able to defend me in court, under these strange circumstances?"

Ford responded after a long, serious moment by saying, "That's quite a remarkable story, Chet. There are certain situations where such unusual events are deemed 'justifiable homicide.' This might be one such circumstance. Depending on the mercy of the judge and jury, you might get off with a light jail sentence of only a few years. So yes, I will take your case to court, providing my law firm back in Boston agrees that I can go to trial in Alabama."

Chet Tahree looked relieved as the men shook hands, but added in a low tone, "I can't promise to pay you much for your services, Mr. Ford. As you can see, I am a man of limited means."

"Don't worry about the money at this point, Chet. These things usually work themselves out over time. Well, I should be getting back to Boston. I'll keep in touch. Is this still your phone number? (He showed him the hotel note paper.) In the meantime, don't tell anybody about our discussion here today. Thanks for the tea and your time. Good-bye for now."

Wagner drove back to the Hampton, and used their business center for an internet search rather than his cell phone. Sure enough, he soon found the twelve-year-old fatal car wreck story of a Henry and Mildred Tahree of Trussville. Their Oldsmobile had crashed into the rear of a semi at high speed on I-65 just south of Birmingham. Both were pronounced dead at the scene.

Ford checked out of the hotel and flew back to Boston. He went directly to his law office, and told his boss, Robert , the whole sad story of Chester Tahree. After a detailed discussion with the other law partners, Robert agreed to let Wagner take the Alabama case. "Try for a big win...We need a lucky break now more than ever," Finkel encouraged, as Ford headed for home to prepare.

Four days later, back again in Charleston, Wagner rented a car and picked up Chet at his house. They drove the 450 miles via Atlanta to the capitol of Alabama -- Montgomery. Once the seven-hour trip was over, Chester Tahree surrendered to the police near the County Courthouse. He was booked but soon released on $75,000 bail, which Ford covered -- a rather low amount, given the possibility of a double homicide, but the judge agreed that Chet had voluntarily confessed and hence was deemed an unlikely 'flight' risk. The trial was fast-tracked and set for September 28, about seven weeks away. Wagner took Chet to the airport, and bought him a ticket back to Charleston, where he could comfortably wait at home until summoned for his trial. Meanwhile, Wagner would stay in Montgomery in a comfortable rooming house near the Courthouse and the State Law Library -- located inside the Judicial Center Building --researching and preparing for their case.

The trial took four days. Ford used all of his skills and legal knowledge to dodge and deflect the slick tactics used by the state's veteran prosecuting attorney, a white-suited dandy, 'good 'ol boy' by the name of Harwood Cleary. Wagner thought the Civil War had long ended, but for the constant comments by Cleary regarding "My esteemed NORTHERN colleague would have you believe that we SOUTHERNERS are simply ignorant concerning...etc." Fortunately, the Judge -- Fenton Longworth -- saw past the prosecutor's attempted theatrics and ruled fairly and reasonably. Wagner Ford, meanwhile, based his defense on simply letting Chet Tahree tell his gruesome story on the witness stand to the astonished twelve jurors. Wagner was encouraged and hopeful when he saw several jurors with tearful eyes and mournful expressions of sympathy. Chet even bared his scarred arms -- rising dramatically from his chair (as coached by Wagner) at one emotional high point, and rolling up his white shirt sleeves-- for all to see.

The "Not Guilty" verdict (after a speedy fifty-five minute deliberation) on the grounds of 'justifiable homicide' made the case leap from the local news to the national news for a day. Chet broke down in relief in the courtroom. Photos of him and his lawyer grinning together appeared on TV and in several newspapers, as well as on the internet. Public opinion seemed to concur that justice had been rightly served.

Tahree returned to Charleston, and Ford went back to Boston. The state of Alabama had paid him $8,253 for his work as a public defender in the case. But the big win in this regard was in the favorable publicity that the case brought for his law firm. Soon, the phones were ringing with clients wanting either Wagner or his team to defend them in court -- several offering large amounts of money to do so. Ford's boss, Robert Finkel, was ecstatic. He gave Wagner a substantial salary bonus in gratitude.

About a week later, his cute new office secretary, Annette, interrupted Ford at his desk, and announced that he had a call waiting from the Florida State District Attorney in Jacksonville, a Mr. Jeremy Harrison.

"Is this Wagner Ford at Finkel & Associates? Glad I caught you. Listen, I hate to burst your bubble, but I have some news that you need to hear. And you better sit down for it, because it's not good," Harrison advised. A surprised Wagner told him to go ahead and talk.

"I saw a picture of you and your bearded client in a victory pose on the nightly news the other day. The guy looked kinda familiar, so I had our trusty local police sketch artist draw up a composite, but without the facial foliage. Comparing the sketch to some clean-shaven photos I saved from two years ago, I'm afraid that you've been snookered, my friend. The guy you thought was Chester Tahree is actually a criminal by the name of Ross Hardin. He killed his wealthy parents down in St. Augustine by rigging a brake line job on their Mercedes and causing a fatal crash. But a savvy detective figured out the truth and Hardin was nabbed. He got out on $2 million bail while awaiting trial, using his parent's mansion as collateral, but then he simply vanished. Poof. Flew the coop. Further digging revealed that Ross had earlier been siphoning off tens of thousands of dollars from his parent's -- Philip and Teresa Hardin's -- checking and savings accounts, and banking the cash off-shore on Grand Cayman in the Caribbean. Our trail trying to find him went cold about fourteen months ago. Last we heard, it was said that he may have been investigating buying some real estate in Honduras."

Wagner was stunned, his mind spinning. "How can you be sure that my former client was your man on the lam?" Ford needed to know. "I mean, Chet showed me the scars on his arms from the abuse he suffered." Wagner related a concise summary of Chet's sordid upbringing, and outlined the bizarre tale of Henry and Millie Tahree, including how they were killed. "Chet even displayed his scars in court. How could he have made that up, Mr. Harrison?"

"Those scars were from a teen-aged motorcycle accident down in Florida that broke both his arms! Look, Wagner, did you happen to notice a tattoo on one of his arms? In black cursive-type script? The word 'Winner,' perhaps?" Jeremy asked.

Ford almost dropped his phone in painful, stark realization.

"Of course you did," Jeremy continued. "I can tell by your silence that you know what I'm talking about. Look -- Chet Tahree and Ross Hardin are one and the same. He's both a thief and a psychopathic killer. Here's what I think he did. My little theory, if you will, so hear me out. He writes a cryptic message in a bottle, and hopes that someone intelligent like yourself finds it and bothers to investigate. He really lucked out with you already being an attorney -- even better, a criminal defense lawyer! He makes up an incredible story for you, after finding a childless couple from a random newspaper article who get killed in a car accident, so that his story can be generally checked out. Finally, this clever little prick gets a trial. He risks everything on the hope of a 'not guilty' verdict. He gambles his very life, and... guess what...he wins! Don't you see the connection with his tattoo? Winner! And he truly is 'The Cheater' too, because he has ultimately cheated Justice itself."

"Sure, he beat the rap once, Jeremy, but we can alert law enforcement across the country, and internationally if need be, and catch him," Wagner replied with confidence. "I've got Tahree's address and phone number right here in my desk, and we can call the Charleston police immediately and have him arrested within the hour."

The Florida District Attorney then hit Wagner Ford with the bombshell. "Naturally, you and I would love to do just that. But, my friend, you are forgetting one important thing. Surely you are aware of the legal provision called Double Jeopardy? That means that Ross Hardin can't be tried for the same crime twice. He was already acquitted once of killing his parents. The courts can't do it again. He's a free man. The son-of-a-bitch screwed everybody royally."

Ford was now furious. He abruptly thanked Harrison and hung up the phone. Wagner then immediately called the Charleston, SC police headquarters and gave them an urgent explanation and Chet's address and description.

The Chief called Ford back an hour later. The house on 83 Cooper Street was deserted, he was sad to report. Its unlocked front door was left open, and all clothing and personal effects were gone...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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