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## Don't let them kill him

**Deirdre Fernand meets an artist trying to save the longest serving prisoner on death row**

Letters tied up with red ribbons often signify romantic love. Such billets-doux usually tell of passionate nights, stolen trysts and heartfelt yearning. Simone Sandelson, an artist from north London, has hundreds of them, all neatly bound up in scarlet. They are from a man she has never met, and perhaps never will. They are as profound as any love letter, yet they all follow the same formula. He tells her what he has been doing (not much), where he has been (nowhere) and they all sign off in the same way: "With Love, Jack." The back of the envelope is marked GDCP, Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison, Jackson.

"Jack" is 55-year-old Jack Alderman, the longest serving prisoner on America's death row, sentenced in 1974 for the murder of his wife. "He has been held in a cage measuring two by three metres for more than 32 years," says Sandelson, who has been writing to him for the past two years. "And he has spent every day protesting his innocence."

Late last year he had his final appeal denied and he is due to be executed this May. His lawyers tell him that pleading guilty would save his life but he refuses. "All they can do is kill me, they cannot break me," he has written of his jailers. "There is no juncture where it is wrong to be right . . . We must have values and I am prepared to die for mine."

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Alderman is one of 3,700 prisoners on death row, Sandelson his pen friend who writes weekly lines of comfort. But words are not all. An accomplished portrait painter, she is staging an exhibition, Exonerate Jack, at London's Somerset House that opens tomorrow. She has produced a series of pictures inspired by his incarceration that will hang beside excerpts from his poetry and prose. Proceeds from the show will go towards hiring lawyers and investigators to try to get his conviction overturned.

The actor Toby Jones will read from Alderman's letters. There may be not a dry eye in the house. "My mother and father taught honesty" Alderman writes of his refusal to cut any life-saving deals. "I must have missed the class on when you slice it and dice it so its fits conveniently into a circumstance."

If anyone can change Alderman's circumstances, it will be Sandelson. A product of Cheltenham ladies college and Manchester University, she is prepared for a brutish fight. In her early fifties with four sons, she lives in St John's Wood, north London, and is married to a businessman, Charles Rifkind, a cousin of Sir Malcolm, the Conservative MP and former foreign secretary.

"I am not your typical death row pen pal" she says. "There are all these stereotypes of weird, unhinged women. I used to go to parties and people would wonder if I was a nutter. And men would say to Charles: 'She'll fall in love and run off'."

It was on a bus journey to an exhibition that she chanced to pick up a magazine and see an advertisement for Human Writes, an organisation that twins death row inmates with correspondents. They furnished her only with a name and prisoner number; she knew nothing of his crime. It was only gradually that details emerged.

What shocked her was not only his present but his tragic past. The son of a welder, Alderman was born in 1951 in Savannah, Georgia, to a life beset by difficulty. His mother walked out when he was three and his sister just six months old. Just before his fourth birthday he went on a family fishing trip where a bait knife pierced his left eye. He later lost his sight and attended a boarding school where he learnt to read Braille. Later, some sight returned and he returned to high school, winning a scholarship to college.

He married his girlfriend, Barbara Jean, and opened a supermarket. Soon he was employing 40 staff and life was good. But there were no children. "The day of Barbara's death the couple had quarrelled," says Sandelson. "They had found out that she was infertile. She was upset and suggested they split up." Riding off on his motorbike, he left her to cool off.



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When he returned home that evening, her car was missing. He found it submerged in the river and her dead, face up in the water. He panicked and drove off. Rather than report her death, he went to a bar. On his return home police were waiting for him. "Running away from the scene of the crime was his biggest mistake," says Sandelson.

At the same time police were questioning a neighbour and a former colleague of Alderman's, John Arthur Brown, a 30-year-old car mechanic. A former drug addict and alcoholic, he confessed to killing her and then staging an accident.

He later said he and Alderman had been together. There was no evidence, just one man's word. Alderman was convicted of murder in June 1975; later that year Brown was sentenced to death. He agreed to plead guilty in return for a prison sentence and was freed 12 years later. Alderman's lawyer hoped he would then attest to Alderman's innocence, but he committed suicide.

"With Brown's death, hope died," says Sandelson. There have been several failed appeals. Alderman's lawyers have advised him to plead guilty, to save him from execution. Each time he has refused to save himself by lying.

A noble or ignoble position? Brave or barmy? As Sandelson girds herself for the fight for justice, she is also steeling herself mentally for failure. "I find myself tearful at times. But I have to keep up hope for Jack," she says. "And when you have a purpose, you become braver."

[www.exoneratejack.org](http://www.exoneratejack.org)



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