

Message From a Bottle

She is sitting in the semi-darkness, pen raised expectantly above the paper, as if at any moment the ink will run out on its own to form magic pictures in words there. Music flutters soft and light from the stereo in the corner and hovers over her shoulder to watch. She always fights writer's block with Enya and candlelight.

I am stationed precariously at the edge of the dresser, a primitive beacon. A light-bearer, I hold aloft the candle which illuminates the blank page before her. She scratches her head, puts down the pen, and holds out her hand to catch the river of liquid wax which is dribbling down my neck. Purposely distracting herself from the task of writing, she lets the wax begin to collect and settle into a solid mass, then smashes it between her thumb and forefinger. She twists it into a delicate curlicue and lays it down on the desk beside several others.

I don't mind the heat. Heat has always been a part of who I am. In my last lifetime, I was the peak of a dune in the Arizona desert. The sun beat down on me by day, and the moon cooled me by night. Humans complained about me. I rose in the wind and filled their lungs, making it hard to breathe. I settled heavy over anything they left outside. I filled their shoes and the cuffs of their pants. When they tried to walk over me, I let them sink.

Then one day, I was leveled off, poured into the back of a truck, and taken off to a large factory, where they cast me right into the heart of the fire. I melted, and I died.

I rose up out of the fire in a new incarnation, glass. They had blown me into the shape of a bottle. I had many brothers and sisters. Some were clear and heavy like myself. Some were tinted green and light. The sun shining through them made spots on the cardboard boxes of the factory warehouse that reminded me of the desert lizards

and cacti of my past life. The clear bottles, they packed in crates and shipped out. I don't know what happened to the greens.

When the light of the sun hit me again, I found myself in a new place. Lush with vegetation and just as warm as my desert had been, the sounds and smells in this new place were different. Instead of the rattle of the snake or the shrieks of the vultures, I experienced, for the first time, the roar and crash of the ocean, the scent of brine, moisture. Spots of perspiration appeared across my base. I was taken out of the crate and deposited in the lap of a dark woman. She began to weave straw around me. I noticed several other of my brethren already seated and clothed on the grass beside her. When she had finished with twelve of us, we were put back in new cartons and driven away.

In the next place, over a dark, sawdusted floor, men poured a dark burning liquid into me. I glanced down at myself to see if I was in the fire again, but I saw no flames. Gradually, I grew accustomed to the strength of this liquor and enjoyed this new full feeling. They packed us into crates again and loaded us onto ships. On the first night of our voyage, the sailors, who knew their cargo well, decided to have a party. One reached into the crate and grabbed me by my neck. He uncorked my mouth and began taking long gulps from me. I had only been filled a few days, but I resented this loss. The liquid, (he called it rum) had been warm and comforting. I felt as if my life's blood were being drained, as if his abrasive whiskers had put cuts in me and I were bleeding from them. When I was almost dry, he noticed a stray seagull in the night sky. He bragged to his friends that he could peg it off, recorked me, and flung me into the air. He missed, and I landed in the sea, a lucky thing. As I bobbed further and further away from the ship, I saw many of my brothers and sisters smashed against its sides.

I bobbed for what must have been several days,

enjoying the sun and the warm salt water. If I looked down through myself, I sometimes saw a shark below, a dark ominous shadow. One curious fish took an interest and swam closer to investigate, but upon finding me inedible and harmless, did no more than butt me gently to change my direction. It didn't matter. I didn't care where I was going, since I didn't know where I'd been.

One afternoon, I was up on the shore of a white sandy beach. Since I was reeling with *deja vu*, I hardly noticed a white-haired woman approaching until she called out, "Hey Harold! Whadda ya know? An old bottle—too bad there ain't no message in it." One moment, whom was she calling old? She picked me up and carried me over to where an elderly white man in striped swim trunks was sunning himself on a worn beach towel.

"Ah, geez, Bea," he whined, "can't we leave here just once without someone else's garbage?"

"Whadda ya mean garbage?" she protested. Yeah, Harold, whadda ya mean garbage, I thought. "This is a perfectly good bottle. We can still get a lot of use out of this. We'll fill it up with good old Florida sand and have a memento of our last trip here." They argued. Harold lost, and I got filled again, this time with memories of my last life.

Harold and Bea had been traveling to St. Augustine every winter for years. They had owned a trailer, but recently, upon the advent of Harold's seventy-eighth birthday, they had decided to sell it and begin wintering permanently in Indiana. Bea hated the idea, but she couldn't drive, and she wouldn't be able to make the trip by herself if anything happened to her husband. This was to be their last trip to the beach before heading home. The trunk was already loaded. I became part of the baggage.

Indiana is cold, especially in the winter, and I was not prepared for the shock. When Harold flung open the trunk and, for the first time, the frigid air held me up for examina-

tion, I turned to ice and lost consciousness. When I came to, I was a semi-permanent fixture on Bea's nightstand.

What can I say about my life there? Bea and Harold spent so little time in the bedroom. From my perch, I often heard sounds of the television in the next room. I knew when the grandkids had come to visit because the table I sat upon shook with the fury of their clomping. One evening, little Laura entered the room. The window was open and the air, which I had by then grown barely tolerant of, was taunting me with predictions. She picked me up and waved me in the air. I was her club. "She-Ra! Princess of Power!" she sang with zeal. The cork came loose, and all the sand poured over her brown bowl of a head and into her eyes. I was empty again. She flung me onto the bed and ran screaming for Grandma Bea, who cleaned her up, promptly vacuumed the bedroom carpet, and set me in a box in the closet. I was dropped off at the local high school's trash and treasure sale with some old costume jewelry and neck scarves the next week.

That's where this one found me, the summer before we went to boarding school. We've been together now for three and a half years. I must admit I was rather surprised the first time she corked me with a candle, but I've grown used to it now, and since she uses me only for writing and for special occasions, I've come to view it as a sort of spiritual calling. I've seen her through four roommates, two schools, five relationships, twelve English classes, and eighty-seven candles.

Oh, she must have made some headway in her story. She is shutting her notebook. She is clicking off the radio. She is climbing into bed. She must have decided to let this candle burn all the way down. She sleeps.

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