

Ship in a Bottle

Danny pushed open the door to the front room and was engulfed by the scent of wood and furniture polish. He knew he wasn't supposed to come in here, but his gran was distracted in the kitchen. He ran his hand over the arm of the velvet sofa as he gazed up at the rows of display racks high up on the shelves. The dim light from the old-fashioned chandelier glinted off the glass bottles laying on their sides, each containing a small ship. His grandad's prized collection.

He had crafted most of them himself. Danny remembered sitting beside him, his grandad's eyes huge behind the magnifying lens as he carefully cut and tied the minute strings to form the rigging. Each piece of wood, was diligently shaped, painted and glued, to form the body of the ship, exactly to scale. Danny loved the final moment when the model was placed inside its glass capsule and his grandfather would let him pull the sting, guiding his small, smooth hand with his rough leathery palm. He recalled the proud satisfaction on his grandfather's weather-sculpted face as the ship stood to attention. His days at sea were behind him by then.

He wondered if he put one of the bottles to his ear, it would be like a seashell and he would hear the churning of the waves painted on the inside of the glass. He dragged the footstool over to the display and after quickly glancing over his shoulder, climbed up. He took down the largest bottle, his favourite, with shaking hands. It slipped slightly in his damp palms and he steadied himself on a lower shelf causing the other bottles to jump and clink on their stands. It had a small red flag flying wild from its mast and there were tiny figures of a man and a small dog glued onto the individual planks of wood making up the deck.

He tilted the bottle and made the swooshing sounds of waves "Hey Rover, there's a big wave coming, watch out!" he called. He gave the bottle a jolt and it slipped from his fingers and fell to the carpet with a thud. He froze, half-crouched, listening for his grandmother's angry steps, as her slippers slapped the terracotta tiles in the hall, but Radio Two continued to play from the kitchen.

He jumped down onto the thick carpet and studied the bottle. The tiny red flag rattled loose against the glass and the figure was laying stark on the deck, a victim of the storm he'd created.

He was sure he could fix it, he had watched his grandad so many times, even if he had never been allowed to touch. He put the stopper between his teeth and tried to wriggle it free as his tongue coated in dust. He felt it reluctantly give. He dug his nails into the damp cork until the smell of glue and varnish was released rather than the fragrance of ropes and the briny air he had expected.

He pushed his finger into the opening, straining to hook the red flag with his fingertip. There was a pulling sensation on his finger like a vacuum, he tried to release it, but the sensation grew and with a flash, the neck of the bottle widened. He felt the force pulling at his whole body and screamed as everything went black.

He could feel the ground moving below him and he felt nauseous. A seagull's screech made him open his eyes as it was the sound of holidays and not of his grandmother's house in the Lincolnshire countryside. He felt wood splinters under his fingertips as he pushed himself to kneeling. He was on the deck of a ship, rolling and rocking on the waves below. A small terrier ran towards him barking, its tail blurred. Across the wooden planks, a figure lay still. From its form and the boots on its feet, he recognised him as his grandad...