

THE BOTTLE:

AN ODYSSEY FOR CHILDREN

story outline by

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*This story is an 'experiential' descent into
intoxication.*

*From a child's point of view,
we look through the distorted prism of alcohol,
then journey back to clarity.*

*It can emerge as an animated film, or an
illustrated book*

POP GOES THE CORK!

The night Uncle Bob came to visit, was a night young Matt (age eleven) would not easily forget. Unlike his mom and dad, for whom FUN had four letters, not three, Uncle Bob knew how to party. And besides, he hadn't seen his sister, Maria, in ages, so why not - just this once.

With the family gathered around the kitchen table after supper, Uncle Bob takes a large liquor bottle out of his bag, and parks it on the table. Matt's "What's that?" question ignored, the adults exchange glances, silently negotiating. The outcome is clear, once three fancy shot glasses ceremoniously come down from the top shelf in the cupboard. Matt asks his dad, Joe, why he doesn't get one. "Cause little kids don't drink, that's why!" This illogical answer only peaks Matt's interest.

BUBBLES RISING...

The boy watches, from his vantage point on his uncle's knee, and sees the behavior of the adults change with each shot they drink. Gradually, the voices get louder, as wild emotions set off rounds of hysterical laughter. Their actions get careless, as more and more is spilled or falls on the floor without anyone but Matt noticing. But worst of all, Matt finds himself quite alone as his parents and uncle fail to respond to his questions, and if he persists in trying to get their attention, they react with hostile impatience.

A knock at the door. Dad goes to answer. It is Mr. Beagan, the superintendent of the building. The soft spoken, gray-haired old man comments on the noise, neighbors complaining, you know. His eyes scan the place ... the bottles, and Matt, looking sad. Matt and Mr. Beagan exchange a meaningful glance before the super leaves.

After he's gone, Uncle Bob and Matt's parents whisper to each other, taking it all as a joke, then finding it all just **too** funny, they crack up again. His mother laughs so hard, she falls to the floor. She cuts her hand - but no one notices. Matt tries to tell her, but she pushes him away impatiently. "I know, I know, go to bed now ... why are you still up?" Finally, unnoticed, the boy backs out of the kitchen and with a lonely sigh, gets in his bed.

LET THE ADVENTURE BEGIN

As he settles under the covers, Matt is the picture of worry. The inebriated voices coming from the next room are a far cry from a soothing lullaby. Through the crack in the door, he can still see the rowdy antics. Despite his anxiety, sleep starts to overtake him, and his eyelids draw shut.

Matt wakes up hearing a loud bang as the liquor bottle, now empty, falls to the floor. The apartment is silent - not a single creak, not a sigh, just a strange rumbling noise, growing louder. As the door to the bedroom creaks open, the bottle rolls into the boy's room. As it approaches the bed, it grows in size - the rumbling now an overwhelming roar. Finally, when the bottle opening is large enough for Matt to crawl through, the massive glass cylinder comes to a grinding halt.

Matt remains in his bed, mesmerized, unable to move. Suddenly, an enticing voice comes from inside the bottle - calling him ... "Pssst! Matt! Hey ... come here ...". Swirling colors mysteriously appear inside the bottle, their movement hypnotic. The voice keeps calling. Curious, despite himself, Matt can't resist. He climbs out of bed, onto the floor, and in through the mouth of the bottle.

W O W !

Matt emerges in a field of rye, sunlit, the golden stalks gently swaying in the breeze - akin to the field of poppies in The Wizard of Oz. Once inside the bottle, it vanishes from around him, and whatever he could see of his room beyond the glass wall, with it! The mesmerizing voice continues to seduce him. "Isn't this great! Can you smell it? Mmmm ... so goood!"

Matt starts to feel strangely lightheaded. He floats up off the ground, then comes down again. The voice calls ... "Come on! There's so much I have to show you! Just **you** Matt, cause you're **special**! There's no one as important and special as you!" Half flying, half running, Matt seeks and follows the voice.

Across the field, a city appears. It sparkles like a glittering gem ... beckoning. But other voices interrupt. Matt turns, only to see his parents behind him, trying to catch up, looking worried. They call out ... "Don't go there Matt! Come back! Come home ..." But the voice hisses beside him ... "Forget'em ... they just don't want you to have any fun! They had fun! Right? Well, what about you! You deserve some too! Come on ... who needs'em anyway! You're a big boy ... you should have more freedom to do what you want ..." Matt gives his parents a final appraising glance, then laughing, bounds towards the city. His parents remain behind, back in the dust, too weak to follow.

GO AHEAD, HAVE ANOTHER!

Matt emerges on 'main street' - a virtual Las Vegas, gleaming with promise. A gang of rowdy kids runs by, one of them, Joe, calls out ... "Hey, man, are you with THE VOICE?" "Yeah!" cries Matt, as he hurries to join the herd. One of the gang members hands Matt a bottle - a full one just for him, nice, eh? - full of that swirling, magical fire water.

The gang storms down the street, knocking everything over in their path ... **everything**, from garbage bins, to street signs, to a little old grandmother ... Matt is not too sure about this. He lags behind and helps grandma up. She fights him ... "Shoo, you bad, bad boy! Shoo!" Matt protests ... "But I'm only trying to help ..." "So you can steal my purse?" she replies! "Shoo!" Matt takes off to catch up to his friends, yelling back to grandma ... "Fine! Who needs you, anyway, you old bag!"

Suddenly, he feels a sharp pain in his heart ... but then, in a second, it's gone. Incredibly thirsty, Matt takes a good long swig of magic from his bottle. The tantalizing voice purrs its approval - promising even more wonders, adventures, rewards, and irresponsible pleasures for him and only him ... "I mean who else is important! No one, no one but you Matt, you're the one! You deserve everything you want, and don't let **anyone** stand in your way!".

ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?

Now Matt is as much the vandal as the others. The gang parties their way into a kids playground. As the little guys scatter in fear, the gang takes over their turf. One of the gang members, Maria, in genuine friendship, pushes a little boy on a swing. But her judgment impaired, she pushes too hard. The boy screams in fear as he flies up in the air. Then, unable to hold on, he falls, face down in the sand. Maria is stunned. Her first instinct is to help, but then hearing the screams, she runs away.

The gang runs out of the playground, leaving a whole mess of crying kids behind. Matt looks back - again, his conscience beckons, with that strange pain in his heart. But Joe grabs him by the shoulders ... "Don't worry ... it's not our responsibility ... somebody else will take care of them ... trust me!" Joe's voice merges with that of the bottle's ...

"Trust me ... trust me ..." The gang now runs down a hill, and into a school. Storming through the halls, they knock things over, pulling things off the wall. Matt notices one of his own drawings on the floor ... "Hey! I made that!" One of the other kids answers ... "So?" Matt looks at his drawing again ... "Yeah, so? It stinks, anyway!" and he rips it up.

The gang runs into the school gym, and starts dancing, playing around, laughing at each other's and their own jokes. Joe does some incredible acrobatic feat - he's thrilled. So is everyone else. He tries it again. This time, he falls. He screams in pain, while everyone laughs. So he starts laughing too ... bloody elbow and all, he gets up only to fall again, and again, and again. Matt laughs, but he's not sure. Should he?

Matt notices someone looking at them from behind the door to the gym ... it is Mr. Beagan. He shakes his head in dismay. From the quiet old man's perspective, the jokes are lame, the skits are tame, and the kids are **plain old drunk!** Matt catches Mr. Beagan's eye for a moment. But then, uncomfortable, embarrassed, he looks away. He takes another long swig from his bottle, and hurries to join the fun - to forget, forget the other little voice inside his heart, screaming to be heard.

HEY! WHO DRANK THE LAST BOTTLE?

Slowly, the party grinds to a halt. Some kids fall asleep - right on the floor. Others get restless, start asking each other for money. No one has any.

Maria sees Mr. Beagan down the hall ... "Hey! What about him?" The gang catches up as Maria does her little begging routine. "Please, I

need to buy food, no, milk, milk for the baby ... for my baby ... my baby brother ... see, Mama's sick!" Mr. Beagan does not fall for this. Joe breaks in ... "Okay, so hand it over then ...". Mr. Beagan resists. The kids push him to the ground and rob him, then take off, out of school, into town. Matt follows, still turning to look at Mr. Beagan on the floor ... **really** not sure about this. The soothing voice hisses in his ear ... "What do you expect, Matt! I'm getting weaker ... if you want me to entertain you like this, you have to get me something to drink!"; while the voice from his heart pleads, gentle and sad ... "Matt! What are you doing? Wake up!" But the vicious hiss from the bottle interrupts ... "Aw, **shut up**, and gimme, gimme some more!"

SHUT UP AND GIMME, GIMME!

The kids tear across a red light, nearly killing themselves in the process, but causing a car crash instead. As the car goes up in flames, they laugh, scream, continue. "Come on Matt! You owe me - get me the booze!" yells the voice from the bottle, now getting really aggressive and loud.

But where, Matt asks? And besides, Matt wants to stay with his new friends. But he notices - they've all changed! They have this vacant look in their eyes. They don't even look at him when he talks to them. "That's nice Matt, did you find any liquor yet?" They all buzz around ... "Anyone got any?" A few fights break out. Friends are no longer friends. And then, this thick paranoia sets in, like a fog, isolating everyone, scaring them, and only the voice remains for guidance ... calling out ... "Help me ... I'm so thirsty!"

It's a nightmare! Moans, groans, discomfort and pain, and all in this thick, dark fog, where everyone is scared and alone, and no one can reach or help the other. And then the guilt ... "I wonder if that kid's

okay! Maybe we shouldn't have pushed the old lady! Oh! I don't want to think about this!"

The voice pleads with Matt ... "Doesn't your mother hide any bottles anywhere? Think! Come on! I'm weak. I don't know how much longer I can go on ... "

Magically transported back to the kitchen at home, Matt searches the cupboards, throwing everything on the ground and not caring. The fog persists, coloring everything in depressing shades of gray. His parents try to stop him but he pushes them away with surprising strength.

ON THE LEDGE OF DESPAIR ...

Suddenly, Matt notices a bottle, just there, outside, on the window ledge. His judgment clearly impaired, the boy climbs out onto the ledge. He is reckless, feeling invincible. But as he reaches for the bottle, it moves away, by itself! He laughs hysterically as he barely manages to retain his balance and keep from falling, then follows the bottle along the ledge. He talks to the bottle. But the soothing voice doesn't answer! Matt stops, realizing he is totally alone. The guiding voice is gone.

"Hey! come back! Don't leave me! ... " cries Matt as his voice grows deeper, more manly, until it becomes indistinguishable from that of his Uncle Bob, Uncle Bob crying ... "Don't leave me! I'm so alone! **God**, I'm so alone!"

Hearing his uncle yelling, Matt awakens and sits up in bed. Realizing he was dreaming, he jumps out of bed and runs to the kitchen. The window is open. Out on the ledge is Uncle Bob - drunk. The boy helps him inside. The uncle mumbles something about being all alone. Matt tells him ... "You're not alone Uncle Bob ... you're alone only when you

listen to the voice inside the bottle!" "You **know** about the voice Mattieu? You **heard** it?" asks Uncle Bob in disbelief. Just then, the bottle's voice calls out again, now feeble and faint, bargaining with pity ... "I'm dying of thirst, you have to help me! Please! I'll give you strength, courage, anything, just get me something to drink!" Matt and his uncle lock eyes. "I hear it uncle, and it lies!" whispers Matt.

JUST PUT A CORK IN IT, BROTHER!

Uncle Bob pleads ... "But it's so strong!" Matt laughs ... "You don't have to fight it Uncle Bob, just put a cork in it! Like this!" And Matt puts the cork back in the bottle.

Suddenly, the roar, the fog, the voice are gone, swirling into nothing. The flushed color that drains from Uncle Bob's face, fills and warms the space. Matt helps his uncle onto the couch, where in an instant, he falls asleep. Once the man is asleep, the boy goes to the kitchen and opens the bottle over the sink. The voice rings out ... "Psst! Matt!" But the boy pours the liquid down the drain, the voice with it ... "Matt! Maaattt!" ... growing fainter and fainter. Matt goes back to bed. Now, finally, falling asleep peacefully.

THE DAY AFTER.

The next morning, a tense breakfast. Uncle Bob, Maria and Joe all have headaches. Every noise brings groans of protest from the three. Maria stumbles to the sink ... "Where did the glasses from last night go? Did someone wash them?" She checks the cupboard ... "They're gone, Joe!"

Matt crunches down on a piece of toast, and has another helping of eggs. The adults watch him eat, their faces grimace at the thought of it. Between bites, Matt mumbles ... "I threw them out, Mom". "You

what?" she asks. "You heard'im, Maria ... the boy threw them out, after I broke them!." Uncle Bob and Matt exchange a look. Uncle Bob winks, then grimaces ... owww, can even a wink worsen a headache?

Mom sits, and sighs. "Oh well, I guess that's okay ... it's about time we got rid of them anyway, eh Joe?" "You got that right!" says Joe, with a sad knowing smile.

T H E R E ' S A L W A Y S A D A Y A F T E R . N O ?

They all laugh. Matt too, but not for long. "But isn't that what you all said last time, and the time before, and the time before that?" Silence. Mom and dad exchange furtive glances. "So ... ?" asks Matt. "What about the bottle in the medicine cabinet behind the shavers, dad. And the one under the sink with the plungers, mom". Silence. Then, without a word, each disappears, returning with their precious stash. Down the sink it goes, the voice a faint whisper ... "nooo! nooo".

A G L O W I N G N E W D A W N .

And then, the confessions begin - the hugs, the consolations, and of course, the tears of guilt washing away denial. While the 'big guys' pat each other on the back, offer a shoulder to cry on, and wipe their noses, the 'little guy' takes the pile of empty bottles down to the garbage chute.

He runs into Mr. Beagan. "You know, Matt, they're not a bad lot, your family" he says. "I know ..." says Matt with a sigh. "They're just weak. See, I'll let you in on a secret." whispers the man to the boy.

And then, as the wise old man starts to speak, it's as if he's surrounded by a warm glow ... "Inside each of us is this kid, like you ... both innocent and wise. But you have to listen, and listen hard,

cause if you stop, he goes away. The world's troubles drown him out! And then you're alone. And no one can help you So you see, it's not all that complicated. Don't listen to those BIG LOUD voices, Matt, with those BIG LOUD promises. They're all empty, full of air, like a balloon. All the guidance you need is right there, quiet and gentle, in your own heart."

Matt sighs. "Thanks, Mr. Beagan. But how come you know all this?" ... he asks. "Now that's a whole other story!" says the old man with a wink and a smile.

And then, as the super walks away down the hall, just there, just before he turns the corner ... can it be? Are those Mr. Beagan's feet? Lifting, lifting, like those of an angel? Right up, off the ground?

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