

Floating, not Sinking

A message in a bottle

Bognor Regis pier, high tide, 31st December

“Go on! Chuck it,” urged Kenny, leaning out of his wheelchair onto the rail. The fairy lights from the pier arcade danced behind, sparkling off the bottle in Sara’s hand.

“Have you any idea how much shit lands in our oceans every day?” asked Sara.

Kenny frowned, “Dunno. What ‘ave Thames Water got to do wiv y’ beer bottle?”

“I’m talking about *all* the rubbish we dump in the sea, not just sewage,” said Sara, clutching the rail with her good hand for support. The last bottle of Hells had gone straight to her head. The old pier felt as if it was rising and falling with the black waves washing the beach behind them, making sounds like the distant avalanche of pebbles.

“I don’t dump stuff,” countered Kenny, defensively. “Y’ always make me recycle.”

“That’s because you’d leave it all over our floor like a hog in a sty if I didn’t. I mean *we* human beings dump stuff. Eight million pieces of plastic every day.”

“Y’ bottle ‘s glass.”

“It’s still rubbish,” sighed Sara. She felt tired. Taking the train to the south coast had seemed like a hoot at the time, but now it was a long wait for the next one home.

“Go on,” Kenny lowered his voice, the demon of temptation. “Y’ know y’ want to. Luz it in the water.”

“Why?”

“See how far it goes.”

“What for?”

“For fun.”

“Then what?”

“Drink another then see if y’ can chuck it further.”

“Well that’s hardly likely to work. I’ll be even more pissed by then and I might fall in after it.”

“I’d save you.”

“Hm.”

“I would,” he insisted.

Sara smiled and patted Kenny’s hand.

“Don’t patronise me. Y’ know I hate it.”

“I... Sorry. I know you’d try.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Just ‘cause I’m in this wheelchair, don’t mean I can’t swim. Y’ know I can.”

“I don’t doubt your swimming, Kenny. It’s...” Sara paused. She loved Kenny and didn’t want to hurt his feelings, yet she knew he needed the truth occasionally. “It’s getting into and out of the water.”

Kenny looked away, watching the lights from the arcade reflecting off the waves. “Let’s go back,” he said, his voice flat.

“It’s almost midnight. You know the next train isn’t until half past seven tomorrow morning.” She felt guilty now. Kenny hated being forced to admit his dependence.

He carried on staring out to sea.

Sara could hear the voices in the arcade getting louder.

People were shouting out the countdown to New Year. Ten. Nine. Eight ...

Sara looked at the bottle clutched in her prosthetic left hand. She always used her left hand to hold bottles so she couldn’t feel the cold glass. She tried to consider it a silver lining after her incident. Like the police, she refused to call it an accident because the bastard in the four-by-four had been over the limit. Kenny was much better at silver linings; that was why she loved him. Maybe it was because he had been born with his condition. Maybe he was just a beer bottle half-full kind of person.

... Four. Three. Two. One. HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Kenny put his hand out.

Sara dropped the bottle into his open palm.

Kenny pushed himself up until he was in a standing crouch, as straight as he could get, then swung the bottle in a wide arc, into the darkness.

Sara watched it flicker in the fairy lights. She thought she heard a faint splosh but couldn’t see where from. “Good shot. Past the ninth wave.”

“Y’ guessing.”

“Yes,” admitted Sara. “But at the end of the pier and high tide, we’re at least six waves out. Reckon you threw it far enough to skip the next three.”

“Past the shoreward pull of the ninth wave,” mused Kenny. “Maybe it’ll float away from old Bognor and into the channel.”

“If it doesn’t sink.”

Kenny ignored her pessimism, “Maybe the current will take it. Maybe it’ll float all the way to Africa and wash up on the shores of Sierra Leone at high tide.”

“Apt,” mused Sara. “Most of our detritus ends up in developing countries or shoved down some poor sea creature’s gullet.”

“I was trying to conjure a romantic picture. Like a kid picking up y’ bottle and wondering who sent it... what it meant.”

“What do you think a bottle of Hells lager made in Camden might conjure for a six-year-old in Sierra Leone?”

“Well,” he pondered thoughtfully. “They might wonder why it didn’t sink.”

Kenny had an annoying habit of making Sara smile. She held his hand in her good one and imagined the bottle floating. Not sinking.