

## Flowers and Battleships

Two boys sit on the bedroom floor with their prize between them.

“I can’t get it out. My fingers are too big.”

“Let’s smash it.”

“Naw…”

A girl appears in the doorway. “Whaddya got?”

“What’s it look like?” Her brother snaps.

“An old bottle. Where’d ya get it?”

“At the beach.”

“Can’t have glass bottles on the beach.”

“*Can’t have glass bottles on the beach,*” he parrots.

“It was in the rocks by the jetty,” his friend says.

The first boy shoots him a look of daggers.

“You’re not supposed to be on the jetty,” says the girl.

“See? This is why sisters are such a pain. You’re lucky you don’t have one.”

His friend smiles.

“I mean it! She’s always messing with my stuff. Yesterday she wrecked my Lego battleship.”

“I made a flower garden!” She bounces up and down on her toes.

The friend stifles a chuckle.

“You wouldn’t think it was so funny if it was *your* battleship,” the boy informs him. He stands up and sighs in exasperation. “Let’s go play video games.”

He shoves the bottle into his desk drawer and herds them out of his room. A “KEEP OUT” sign flaps on the door as he closes it.

Once the boys are gone, the girl tiptoes back into the room. Glancing toward the doorway, she slowly slides the desk drawer open. The bottle glows faintly. “Ooo, pretty!” Her slim finger slides into the neck of the bottle and a yellowed paper snakes its way out. Little silvery semicircles rim its edges.

Sometime later, her brother returns. “What are you doing in here?” he demands.

She looks up in alarm. She’s holding her palms together as if in prayer. Four little paper tents sit on the tips of her index fingers and thumbs.

“Is that the paper in the bottle? Who said you could touch it?”

“Look! If you open it this way, there’s a flower. And that way... there’s another flower!”

“Gimme that!” He snatches it from her. Pressing his palms together, he tries to fit his fingertips into the tiny tents. As he spreads them open, his eyes widen. The curved lines that had outlined flower petals moments before have now morphed into arrows pointing inward, like a gaping mouthful of jagged, luminous teeth.

“Whoa! Look at *that!*” He thrusts the paper at his sister’s face. She recoils. “It can *bite* you!” He jabs her arm with the paper teeth.

“Ow!” Her eyes well up with tears.

“Gotcha!” He snatches at her ponytail as she runs crying from the room. He slams the door. *Good riddance*, he thinks. *I wish she would stay away.* He shuts the paper in the desk drawer.

That night, as he bobs near the surface of sleep, he becomes aware of muted moaning and mumbling floating nearby. He sinks deeper into the bed, pulling the pillow over his head.

He wakes in the morning to a gray room. Wild rain strafes the windowpane. He swings his feet to the floor. He notices a faint glow seeping out of his desk.

He heads to the kitchen but stops short in the doorway. “Mrs. Peterson?” he says. “Where’s my mom?”

“Teddie! You must have slept soundly. Did you hear anything last night?”

“No...”

“Your parents had to take your little sister to the hospital.”

“What? Why?”

“Acute appendicitis. She had to have an operation... We’re lucky she’s still with us.”

The boy thumps down on a chair, his eyes flitting from side to side.

The back door opens and a woman enters the kitchen. The boy catches his breath on seeing his mother. Her face is pale; dark smudges outline her eyes. Her hair hangs in wet strings. She locks eyes with Mrs. Peterson.

“How’s she doing?” Mrs. Peterson asks.

“She’ll be all right, they say. Oh, Florence...” Her voice breaks. “We almost lost her!” she sobs. Mrs. Peterson steps forward to embrace her.

“I’m sorry Mom!” the boy gushes.

Startled, she turns toward him. “Oh, honey, it’s not your fault.”

“Kids think everything bad is their fault,” Mrs. Peterson says, smiling.

“It usually is...” his mother says ruefully. “Well,” she sighs, “I’m just here to change clothes. I need to get back over there.”

She strokes the boy’s head as she passes. Then she stops and turns. “It’s strange. She keeps mumbling weird things, like... ‘flowers in its teeth’...”

“Probably just the anesthesia,” Mrs. Peterson says.

“Probably so...”

A gust of wind batters the house. The boy shudders.