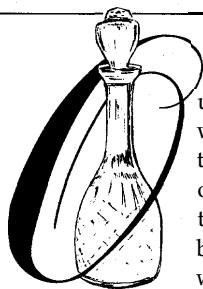




Walt Disney



outside, I feel the bottle tumble in the waves. If I had a body, I would be sick to my stomach. Instead, I form an eye out of the dust and watch the black turn to gray to sparkling blue. The bottle comes to rest on the sand, and I wait.

I've lost track of the years since my bottle was last washed ashore. All I remember is the emptiness of those years. Counting them seems pointless. Instead, I try to remember the palace of the caliph of Baghdad or the glittering wonders of the Cave of Winds. I paint them in detail in my mind's eye and live in those places while I wait to be found once again.

Now I have my chance, and time seems to be moving slower than when I was under the waves. I wonder what it will be like to see actual sky and land again, to talk to somebody besides myself again. I just hope I'm not found by some fool who uses all his wishes in three minutes and banishes me back here.

So I wait and feel the bottle grow hot under the sun. I poke a bit of my energies at the seal, but the Binding of Solomon holds fast. I feel like sighing, but it's not worth the effort of forming lips and lungs to do it. I just hope that someone comes along before high tide returns to claim me and deny me this chance.

I sense the light becoming brighter through the glass and can feel the heat increase. It must be close to midday. Surely someone will find me soon. Or have I washed up on a deserted isle? By Solomon's ring, that would be my fate.

I try not to think of that, but instead remember the last time I was let loose. His name had been Omar, a poor fisherman. (But then, weren't they all?) He dragged my prison up from the depths in his nets. He pulled out the stopper and stood in awe as I formed myself from the mists and dust.

But in the end he had been as boring as the rest. "I want a ton of gold", he said. "I want the most beautiful woman in the world", he said. "I want a boat to sail the seven seas", he said. At least that last part had been somewhat original. But after I had granted his wishes, it was back into the bottle to be washed overboard during a storm. Occasionally, I wonder what happened to Omar.

Now I feel a slight tremor through the glass. I create an ear and press it up to the side of the bottle. I'm almost sure I hear footsteps. I dissolve the ear and whirl my energies near the stopper. I plan to impress whoever opens it.

I wait at the mouth of the bottle and I can't believe how long it takes. The centuries at the sea bottom never seemed as long as this.

Finally, I feel the bottle rise as someone lifts it. I press against the Binding, and the stopper starts to move. The Binding starts to bend, then it is gone, and I know the hole is there. I burst out in a swirl of energy and light.

I soar into the sky, feeling the heat of the sun, the green energies of plants, the cool blues of the ocean behind me, and I swirl in tune to it all. Then I feel the power of the Binding close in upon me, and I reach out a tendril to the mind of the person who found me—a young man—to see what he wants me to be.

Time in A Bottle

by P. Andrew Miller

Illustrations by David O. Miller

With that image in mind, I gather what I need from the air about me, pulling in dust and moisture, finding the elements I need to form a whole body!

I start with the head, and hair black as the ocean's bottom. Then I build my face and shoulders that slide into round breasts. I swirl about and create a flat stomach and narrow waist. Finally, I pull in enough dust to give me curved legs that end in small, dainty feet.

From the outer air, I pull in sparkling motes to form my blue eyes. Then I open them and see the awestricken stare on the lad's face. I almost smile, then realize I forgot my teeth and tongue. Oh, it has been too long. Once my face is complete, I do smile down at him.

"Greetings to the Master of the Bottle, from Nijtal, of the Sixth Tier of the Third House of Djinn. By the power of the Binding of Solomon the Wise, King of Kings, I am yours to command for three tasks."

I fall silent and wait for his response. Please, O Lords of Air and Fire, don't let him be too quick about it.

I don't think I have to worry about this one, though. I stare at him through my new eyes, and he stares back at me with eyes the color of tea. He has black wavy hair and the dark skin of the men of this region. He wears a loose shirt and baggy pantaloons. His feet are strapped in by sandals. His hands are smooth, and though he is muscular, he does not have the heavy muscles of a working man. This is no poor fisherman, thank Ormazd for that.

"A djinni?" he says.

I keep smiling and nod.

"I don't believe it", he says, shaking his head.

"I could prove it to you, but that would take one of your wishes. Isn't it enough that I appeared when you opened the bottle, and now stand on the air before you?"

He doesn't say anything, but turns his gaze to the bottle in his hand.

"I've heard the old stories, of course, such as the tale of Omar the fisherman, but I . . ." He looks up at me again.

"So what should I wish for?" he asks.

"You know your mind better than I", I answer.

"Yes, I guess I do." He finally returns my smile, and I wonder where I will find a ton of gold to bring to him.

"I guess it's traditional to ask for gold or gems at this point?"

I nod my head, relishing the feel of that gesture again. "Most people do."

"Yes, I guess most would."

"Is that what you'd like?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No, I don't think so. Not yet. First, take me someplace no other man has ever seen before."

I blink. That's the first time in all my centuries of servitude that I've been asked that one.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

I try to think of where to take him. The Cave of Winds crosses my mind, because I've not been there for nearly a millennium, but I know that at least one man has been there. The Well at the World's Edge has also been visited before. There is only one place I can think of.

"Prepare yourself", I say, and call forth more particles from the air to increase my size. I let my bottom half grow

fuzzy as my arms and hands grow. Then I reach down and pick him up.

"What?" he starts to say, but I wrap him in a bubble of air and then dive into the sea. I swim out past the point where the shelf drops off into the depths of the ocean. I carry him down past fishes that flash like little jewels in the sun, past sharks that look at us with hungry eyes. I carry him from the blue to the gray to the black, where the sun does not probe with its golden fingers.

Finally I stand on the bottom and place him next to me, keeping a tight hold on the air that surrounds him. Then I hold up my hand and release some of my own energies as light.

I hear him gasp as the monstrous bulk of the kraken is revealed to him. A white mountain of flesh, it raises one chalky tentacle the size of a cedar tree, and fish with big eyes and glowing balls dangling from their heads swim out of the way. It reaches toward us, and I snuff the light and grab the man. I shoot toward the surface and break the waves in a spout of water. Then I carry him back to the shore and place him where he stood before.

He blinks a few times, staring down at his feet, then looks up at me. "Thank you," he says.

"You have two more wishes," I say, "and be glad I am not a malicious efril, or I could have taken you there without air or left you for the kraken."

His face turns gray, like paper after it is burnt.

"I'll remember to be more careful."

I feel the Binding reaching out for me. "What is your second wish, O Master?"

He shakes his head. "I don't think I'm ready for that yet. And my name is Mustaph."

"Yes, Master," I answer.

"Well, let's go back to my cottage and I'll think about this."

I smile at him. This may turn out to be a good experience yet. But I still feel the Binding upon me, pulling me back.

"I must go back into the bottle," I say. "But you can summon me once more when we reach our destination."

"Do you have to?" he asks and now I know I like him.

"Yes, I have to," I say.

He sighs. "Very well." He holds the bottle up toward me, and I close my eyes. Then I relax my concentration and let my fires swirl, casting the dust and mist back into the air. Finally nothing is left but my true energies and the Binding sucks me back into captivity.

Inside, I can still feel the heat of the day, and I realize that Mustaph has not put the stopper back in. I pull in some matter and form an eye to stare up at him. He is attractive with the way his hair brushes against his neck as he walks. And he is definitely not a fisherman. No fisherman had ever wished for what he did. I wonder what he does for a living.

The walk is not a long one, or at least not to me. It's so nice to stare at something that doesn't have scales. But we finally reach his house and enter. Mustaph is no longer framed by blue sky but by tan walls. He puts the bottle down somewhere and walks off. I wish that he would come back, because I find the ceiling boring to look at. I almost dissolve the eye, but he comes back.

He looks down into the bottle and his brown eye widens as he peers into mine. Then he leans back, coughs, and says, "Er, I summon thee, O djinni of the bottle."

The Binding loosens at those words, and I can once more force my way through into the air. Quickly, I pull what I need from the surroundings to form a body, though this time it is much smaller, and I stand on the table in front of him. In this form, I can resist the Binding a little longer.

"Have you decided on a second wish yet, O Master of the Bottle?" I ask.

He folds his arms on the table top and looks into my face.

"No, not really. I would like you to talk to me though. Does that count as a wish?"

I'm not sure how to answer him. No one ever wanted to talk to me beyond telling me to fetch their gold or make them king.

"I guess not," I answer.

"Good," he nods.

I nod back and we lapse into silence. He drums on the table with his fingers. I cock my head to the side and gaze into his eyes.

"Well?" he said.

"Yes?" I reply.

"Aren't you going to talk?"

I feel a faint heat rise to my cheeks and realize that I'm blushing. I can't remember if I've ever done that before. That realization makes it worse.

"I'm sorry," he says, "I didn't mean to embarrass you".

I finally get control of my emotions and look back at him. "What would you like me to talk about?"

"I don't know. What's it like being a djinni?"

I stare at him. What's it like? It's horrible. Trapped in a bottle for eons. No one to talk to. Nothing to see but shades of light through dark glass. Wanting to be free and combining your energies with those of the sun and the land and the water.

"It's boring and lonely," I answer.

I can tell he expected a different answer. "Oh," he says, and once more we lapse into silence.

Something he said earlier nags at the back of my mind, and I finally have to ask him.

"Master? You said you knew the story of Omar the Fisherman. Can you tell it to me?"

He blinks and leans back. "You want me to tell you a story?" I nod.

"Well, the story goes that Omar found a djinni in a bottle much like I found you. He released the djinni and asked for a ton of gold. The djinni brought it to him. Then he asked for the most beautiful woman in the world. And the djinni flew off and then brought back the most beautiful woman in the world to be his wife. Then he asked for a wondrous boat to sail the seven seas, and the djinni built him a boat. Then the djinni returned to its bottle after fulfilling the three wishes. However, Omar kept the bottle, thinking one day he might be able to call upon the djinni again. Then he had all his gold put on his boat, and he took his new wife and set sail. However, he did not ask the djinni to make the woman love him. In

truth, she despised Omar and fought with him on the boat. He finally abandoned her on a small island. Then he sailed off again, but a terrible storm blew up. The boat would have done fine except that it sat low in the water because of all the gold aboard. Finally, it took on so much water that it sank, and Omar and the boat vanished beneath the waves."

He stops his tale, and I shake myself out of my reverie when I realize he has stopped speaking.

"So that's what happened."

His eyes grow wider. "That was you?" he asks.

I nod.

"I guess I better watch what I wish for."

I feel the old fires surge forward, and I hold them in check. "I didn't know what would happen to him," I said.

Mustaph leans closer. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that you had anything to do with it."

I let the fires subside and nod once. I don't want to make him angry at me. I enjoy this freedom.

Mustaph moves even closer. "I bet you know a lot of stories as well," he says. "Even more than are in my books." He waves his hand behind him, and I notice the leather-bound volumes on the shelves. So he is a scholar.

"I suppose," I answer.

"Good. Then I now want my second wish."

A lump appears in my chest, and I think about dissolving my heart. I don't, though. I just nod again.

"Then, O Nijtal of the bottle, tell me all the stories you know."

This time my eyes grow wide. *All* the stories? Does he know how long that will take? My energies sing within me. This is wonderful.

"When would you like me to start, Master?"

"Wait a minute," he says. He leaves the table and comes back with a quill pen and some parchment. "You can start now, but speak slowly so I can get it all."

I stand near his hand and start in on the first battle between Ahriman and Ormazd. He writes as I talk, putting my words into loops and squiggles I don't recognize. I am glad I kept my heart for I am happy.

I finish my last story. It took Mustaph longer than usual to write these last few down. The arthritis in his hands kept him from writing faster. But finally he scrolls the last word from my mouth and puts his quill down. Then he stretches and yawns.

"Well, Nijtal, I'll have to get more parchment before we begin again. But I'm sure these stories will bring an even better price than the others."

I walk across the table top and place a wrinkled hand on his. (I decided long ago to make my body reflect his.)

"There will be no need, old friend. That was the last of my stories."

He blinks wrinkled lids over those eyes that now look like strong coffee. They brim over with surprise.

"The last?"

I nod.

"My second wish is finished?"

"Yes," I say.

"Oh," is his only reply.

I too feel the sadness. But even I knew that one day my

stories would come to end. I knew one day that I would have to return to my bottle. The binding has long been denied and grows stronger each day. Mustaph's wish and love for me has given me the strength to resist. But it won't last much longer.

I squeeze his hand. "It's time to make your third and last wish, my master."

Mustaph stares out the window and strokes his gray beard. "I don't want you to go, Nij."

"I don't want to go. But I must."

A silver tear slides down his cheek, and I feel like crying myself.

"Think of all these years we've had together. I thank you for them, Mustaph. I have never been free for this long and I have you to thank for that. These memories will keep me sane for centuries once I am back in my bottle."

He still stares out at the horizon.

"Mustaph?"

Finally, he looks down at me. "I know my third wish, Nijtal of the Djinn."

I back away. He hasn't been this formal in decades.

"What is your wish, O Master?"

He smiles and leans closer to me. "I wish to spend eternity with you in your bottle."

At his statement, not only does my jaw drop, it dis-

solves with a large part of my body. I recover and pull the dust back to me.

"I don't know if it can be done," I say.

"It is my wish."

"But . . ." I don't know how to finish. Can it be done? Can I bring him into the bottle with me? There is only one way to find out.

I cast away my physical form and let my energies swirl free. Then I reach out a thin tendril, searching for Mustaph's own fires. I don't have far to search before I see his own energies pulsing red and blue and yellow like my own. I reach for them and touch them. I feel a tingle and then I feel *Mustaph*. I pull his fires into my own. We merge, become one. Then I surge out, pulling him with me.

I form a quick eye for both of us to see through. His body stands before us, then it slowly falls to ashes. I dissolve the eye.

The Binding grabs for me, pulling me back into the bottle, but I hold onto Mustaph and the Binding siphons us both in. Such is Its strength, it sucks the stopper in behind it. Once more I am trapped, but not alone.

I sense his voice come through the energies.

"So tell me, Nij. Tell me again of the first battle between Ahriman and Ormazd."

Ω



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