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Second Prize: Short Story
THE BOTTLE SHOP
by Kirby McCraney

Ricon was ambling slowly down the wide street of the busy city. His hands were in his pockets as he strolled along in a sea of people surging along in every direction. He stopped at the corner and looked in every shop he could see from where he was standing: tall buildings made from marble and new metals and materials which made them shine in the sunlight. They were

tall buildings, and to see the tops you had to lean back and look into the sky over your head.

He looked all about him and did not find what he was looking for, an old junk shop with a lot of old bottles in the window. Three nights before he had gone to a party and a boy he had never met before had told him about the place. Ricon told him that he knew most of the shops in the city and had never heard of the one the young man was talking about. "It hasn't been there too long. Just opened up."

"Well, where it it?" Ricon had asked.

"I ain't exactly sure, but you can tell when you have found it because the bottles in the window are very strange. Look for a gold scorpion, too." And then the boy had disappeared.

So here Ricon was, looking for a place that probably did not exist. The guy had probably been stoned and made the whole thing up. But just the possibility of finding some rare old bottle for his collection was enough to keep him hunting for a long time. As it was, he had been searching for six days now. He had looked all over the central city without finding anything. He had asked shopowners and policemen, but none of them had heard of a shop with a window full of old bottles.

He did not know where to look anymore. He was tired from walking all day and took off walking in the direction of his apartment.

There was a statue standing in the center of a small plaza close to where he lived. At its base was a water fountain and he stopped to get a drink. He liked it here and sat down before he went on. His place was just a few blocks away. It was quiet here away from the noise of the city. The statue was big enough that it shaded him from the midday sun.

He rather liked the statue, a bronze figure of St. Raymond, protector of quail, standing with an arm extended to hold a tiny quail in the palm of his hand. The figure of the quail had long since disappeared.

It was then that he heard a jingling noise coming from the other side of the statue. Ricon thought it might be a couple of children playing. But when he walked around the statue to see what they were doing there were no children there. Only an old beggar shaking the few coins he had in a tin cup. He was wearing an old baseball cap and a gray coat which was much too large for him. It was the color of oatmeal and looked as if it came from the Salvation Army. The man had a slight smile on his wrinkled face and did not seem in much of a hurry to collect money. Ricon did not see how he could get any money in this part of town anyway. There was no one around.

The man acknowledged Ricon's presence with a slight bow and silent grin.

Ricon nodded.

The beggar shuffled over the cobblestones to the spot where he was standing and offered him some cards with finger arrangements for talking to deaf people. Ricon knew how to talk with his hands and said, silently, with his hands and fingers, "Hello. Good day to you."

The man's face broke out in a wide toothless grin and he quickly put the cards and the tin cup in the large pockets of the coat. "Hello to you also," said the bent figure.

"Would you possibly know of a place where there is a shop with its windows full of bottles?"

Again the silent hands fluttered. "Perhaps not far from here," came the reply.

Ricon knew this area pretty well and did not know of any shops close by. "Could you show me?" he motioned. "If it is the right place, I will pay you."

The little man smiled and assured him that payment would not be necessary. Then he did a strange thing. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his tin cup and handed one of the coins to Ricon, then quickly turned and hurried off, as if he was bending his head into the wind.

Ricon did not understand and looked at the coin. What he saw made his hair stand on end. On one side of the coin was writing which he could not decipher, and on the other was the raised outline of a gold scorpion. He looked up quickly, just in time to see the dragging coattails of the beggar scurrying around the corner.

Ricon took off after the man, who was traveling along at a pace he would not have thought possible. Once or twice the old bum looked back but did not stop. Then, suddenly, Ricon saw him disappear into one of the deserted buildings in a line of old derelict buildings. When he got to the spot where the man had disappeared he had to stop to catch his breath. And there in front of him was a huge window full of old and colorful bottles.

He almost did not go inside. What was happening to him was beginning to scare him. He looked up and down the street and saw that there was no one in sight. And then, in spite of his fear, he went into the building.

There was not much there when he closed the glass door and looked around. Just one room, the size of a small shop, with a wooden floor. Except for two chairs there was nothing here. Toward the back of the room he saw a closed door and knew the old man had disappeared behind it.

And then he gave his attention to the bottles. Some of them had strange shapes like he had never seen before. They were all delicately made. When he picked up one of them it felt as if its weight was only a few ounces. He did not know a bottle could weigh so little. And then he noticed a strange thing. The sun came out and very slowly the bottles began to change color. A few of them seemed to fill up with smoke, also changed color. He had never seen anything like it.

And then a voice behind him said, "They are very strange to you, aren't they?"

Ricon jerked around. He saw the same boy standing there that he had met at the party several nights before.

"What are you doing here?" asked Ricon.

The boy ignored the question and smirked. "We thought you would never find this place. Finally took a chance and sent Mazz out to try and find you."

"What the hell am I doing here?"

"You came of your own accord. No one forced you to come."

"It is very evident someone wanted me here."

"Yes. They are in the back." The boy saw his consternation and quickly added, "You don't have to stay if you don't want to. You can leave if you please, but I can tell you now that you are perfectly safe. We just want to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About going on an adventure." Then he walked toward the back of the room and, for some reason, Ricon looked at the bottles once again, and then followed the boy as he strode toward the door.