

Marta Mboka Tveit
University of Oslo, Norway

Why the Rooster is in the Bottle



One morning Henry woke up with a question. He didn't recognize it for what it was at first. He thought he might be ill. It started in his belly and then spread to his arms and legs and face, sort of clogging him up. Then it burst into his brain and Henry realized he was down with a question, not the flu. The question sat in him and wouldn't move, no matter how much he tossed and turned. He opened his eyes.

He had fallen asleep clutching his rooster in a bottle. The rooster was already awake and staring at him. It cocked its head. The size of a mouse, it was in other respects very similar to other roosters, with red, electric-green and golden plumage, and with a proud, red comb on top of its head. It was a very friendly sort of rooster. It seemed to know that Henry had a question sitting inside him, and wanted to show that it

knew how he felt. “Good morning rooster,” whispered Henry, fogging up the glass. The rooster cocked its head.

“BATH!” Mariam’s voice pierced his room. Henry lived in a big house in the middle of the island in the middle of the world, with his parents, his little sister Ida, Tuesday the gardener, and Al-Bashil, Mary, Mbot’-Juan and Fatmah, who all worked on their small plantation. And then of course there was Mariam.

Before he knew it, Henry and his rooster (he insisted on bringing it) were sitting in the *bath Kroken*, with Mariam scrubbing his ears furiously, chatting away. Mariam had a big booming voice and an even bigger laugh that seemed to come from all the way down in her belly. She always wore a dotted blue servant’s dress and a headscarf. What Henry saw most of Mariam were her arms: two thick logs that dragged Henry downstairs, carried him up to bed, fussed about his clothes, wrapped themselves around him when something hurt, and, occasionally, when he had been bad and mother and the Governor were out, came down upon him like the wrath of the Gods. He loved and hated those arms and he thought sometimes they loved him back.

Now the arms were scrubbing and scrubbing with a hard sponge, while the bottle bobbed merrily in the water, the rooster inside struggling to stay upright. Outside the window, the sun had just begun to poke her long feelers over the horizon, to see if the world was ready for a new day.

“Mariam?” said Henry, taking advantage of Mariam having to stop the scrubbing to dip the sponge in water.

“Mmm.”

“May I ask you a question?” Mariam eyed him suspiciously but said nothing so he went on. “Mariam, why is the rooster in the bottle?”

Mariam stopped dead with the sponge raised like a dagger and stared at him with a brow so furrowed she seemed to have one long eyebrow. Then she sucked her teeth briefly like she always did when displeased. “Why is the rooster in the bottle?”

“Yes, why,” said Henry.

“The rooster is in a bottle because the rooster is in the bottle, *Tsihke Matandowo*.”

The last part was something in Mariam’s language, something about insolent children that Henry pretended not to understand. “Alright,” Henry pressed on, “but – I mean – couldn’t I just open the bottle – ”

“No! Not in this world child!” Mariam said, her eyes flashing. Her fury took him completely by surprise and he recoiled as far as he could in the water. He wanted to say something more, but he caught sight of Mariam’s thick log-arms. They were wobbling dangerously.

The question wouldn't leave Henry alone. After breakfast he thought about joining Ida outside where she was playing Box with the servant children. He usually liked Box. It didn't really bother him that Ida always cheated her way to victory either. But today was different.

He sat on the stairs and watched Mariam bustling around in the kitchen, baking *tongue-bread* for lunch. The rooster had settled down for its after-breakfast nap. Why, he wondered, had he never wondered why the rooster was in the bottle before? Why had he never asked himself or anyone else such an obvious question?

The rooster in a bottle had been a gift from the Governor on his, Henry's, eleventh birthday. Before the party, before any of the guests had even arrived, the Governor had beckoned for Henry to follow him out into the garden. Together they had walked down past the pool, past the servants' quarters where everything lay silent in the blazing heat of midday. To the very end of the garden they had gone, where the servants kept their shrine. Henry hadn't imagined the Governor knew about the shrine. As if in answer to his thoughts the Governor said, "You see I hid your special gift here since I thought it was the only place you would not stick that prying little nose of yours." Henry had bowed his head, but when he deigned to raise it again, he saw that the Governor was smiling.

The Governor had leant behind the shrine, knocking over several of the soap stone statues in the process. When he stood up he was holding a bottle-shaped package wrapped in glittering silver paper. A funny squawking issued from it. "It used to be my mother's when she was your age," he said. "Then it was mine. Now it is yours. It will be your friend and protector. Keep it with you until you start feeling like a proper man, Henry!"

It had been the best birthday Henry had ever had. The party had been excellent, he had stuffed himself with birthday cake, and all his school-friends had clearly been envious of the rooster in a bottle. Now, sitting on the stairs and listening to the rooster's steady nap-time breathing, he felt a stab of guilt. It felt somehow wrong of him to ask why the rooster was in the bottle. Suddenly he got up, sending the rooster squawking indignantly. He tiptoed down the stairs. Mariam had stopped clanking in the kitchen, not a good sign, but Henry was too quick for her; in a flash he was through the hall and out the front door. It couldn't be helped. He had to find out. Now.

The marketplace was loud, hot and busy as usual. Street vendors droned out goods and prices in long monotone strings; saltfish, perryfruits, mangos, domehalos and other toys, parrotfish, spiced eggs and rainberries. Wooden wheels banged over the hardened earth,

drawn by ill-looking mules carrying loads of coconuts or melons. The air was heavy with saffron, and housemaids stood around, fanning themselves and laughing with their friends, or flirtatiously haggling with vendors. Arabs floated through the market like dignified ghosts, followed closely by their harassed-looking shopping boys. A dust-covered woman with a headscarf had clearly been doused by a passing cart; she was spitting and shouting furiously at everyone in sight. She reminded Henry of the rooster at its most incensed.

“Psst.”

Henry jumped. Something had tugged hard on the bottom hem of his shorts. He looked down and all around him on the dusty ground, but there was no-one there.

“Psssst.” There it went again. Still there was no-one there. An indifferent dog sauntered past him. Henry found himself standing in front of an overladen stall, selling spices. The vendor had his back turned, he was listening to a girl who had stuck her face in behind the curtain in his stall and was whispering to him, urgently. Henry squatted down. “*Oyela* my friend.”

“Billy!”

In the shade underneath the table sat Billy the one-toothed beggar, with his huge grin, colorless rags and a half-eaten apple. Billy was well-known by all the children on the island as he was the local quack. He travelled around from town to town, knocking on doors and offering items from his collection. He would carry a piece of cardboard around his neck. It read:

Billy's Miracle Arts and Medicine Boutique

Local Driftwood sculpture

Authentic bottled ocean water – make memories!

Voodoo

Driftwood toy train

Beaded necklace

Beaded Belt

Beaded anklet

Beaded Bracelet

Hurting?? Billy's Miracle Cures for: Stomach ache, head ache, lazy woman, jealous family, no money, red eye, cough cough, snake bite, no child, bad child, floppy man.

Among the children Billy was also known for his story-telling. When Billy came by Henry's house, Mariam would shoo him away, peppering him with curses and threats of what would happen to him if he did not hobble away sharpish. But she would usually wait for a while, pretending she hadn't noticed him hovering around the backdoor, long enough to allow him to finish telling his outrageous stories to Ida and Henry.

All of the children told each other that Billy's stories were a load of bullsocks. And yet, one couldn't help but shiver as Billy weaved worlds full of gruesome murders, the fair and generous goddess of the sea, the ghosts of doomed Arabian princesses calling for their lovers on the other side of the ocean, angry ancestral spirits haunting the cliffs, mangrove-demons in the shape of beautiful translucent women that drove fishermen wild with lust and made them steer right into the mouths of waiting sea-monsters.

Under the spice-table Billy had taken the sign off and was having his lunch. Holding the apple between his teeth, he reached out two gnarled hands and pulled Henry gently into the shade underneath the table with him. It was cooler in the shade, but the stench of Billy at such close quarters was unbelievable. Billy grinned his one-toothed grin. "You run away from Mariam *again*, youngler," Billy chuckled.

"No," protested Henry. "Well...yes. But I had good reason this time."

Billy chuckled some more. Then suddenly his face changed: his smile vanished and his eyes popped, almost comically. Then he leaned in conspiringly, sending another waft of bad smell over Henry. "You are not going to the *Omani graveyard*, youngler? Not... today of all days??"

Henry realized Billy was about to launch into a story. The man would take any excuse. Henry didn't mind, he let Billy go on for a while about the buried yet horrifying secrets of the Omani Prince. Yet somehow Billy's story did not seem as interesting today. It was not Billy's fault, the story was truly bloodcurdling, one of his best. No, it was the question, the cursed question that sat in Henry, that wouldn't let him pay attention to anything else at all. "Billy, Henry interrupted suddenly. "Billy, why is the rooster in the bottle?"

For a few seconds Billy looked a little offended that Henry had not been riveted by the part where the Omani Prince beheads his entire family whilst sleepwalking on a moonlight night. But, being the easy-going fellow that he was, he soon relaxed back into a one-toothed grin. "Oho," said Billy, "so that why the youngler run away."

"Yes, I had to ask someone. Why is the rooster in the bottle? Why was it put in there in the first place?"

Billy, like everyone else, was so used to seeing Henry with the rooster in a bottle clutched to his chest or sticking out of the pockets in his shorts that he thought little of it. Now he was chewing his apple thoughtfully with a curious expression Henry had not seen him wear before. "Why the rooster is in the bottle."

"Yes why," said Henry. More chewing.

"I'LL TELL YOU WHY!" bellowed Billy without warning, way too loud. "BECAUSE OF *MAN* THAT'S WHY! BECAUSE THE WORLD IS UNFAIR! EVIL I SAY! THE ROOSTER MUST BE FREE! FREE THE ROOSTER! FREE THE ROOSTER! FREE THE

– OUCH!”

Several things happened in quick succession. In his sudden fervor Billy had tried to get to his feet and had banged his head hard under the table. There were running footsteps and a second later the table cloth had been whisked away, and the bloated, purple face of the spice-vendor bore down on them. There was a confused pause. Then the spice-vendor seemed to suck all the rancid air under the table into his lungs and thundered “THIEEEVES!”

In the mad scramble that followed Henry lost Billy, somebody’s hand clamped onto Henry’s collar but he wriggled like a worm, desperate for freedom. Finally the hand slipped and he took off. He dodged and swerved, until finally he sensed that his pursuers had given up and threw himself, gasping for air, into the shade of a large, ornate doorway. He was not worried that Billy would be alright. He had got himself out of worse scrapes than this before, at least according to his stories.

Henry lay there, panting, for a long time. That had been too close. What would mother and Mariam say if he had been brought home by the police? Or worse, by the Governor? And all because of that cursed question. Inside Henry, the question still jingled around like loose change, up and down, up and down with every nervous heartbeat.

A while later Henry had calmed down considerably. The situation with Billy had only been a misunderstanding, a small hiccup. Maybe he would even tell Ida about it later. But why had Billy been so angry, simply because Henry had asked a question? On his bare feet Henry stole through the backstreets of *Coralein*, the smallish centre of town, dodging and swerving expertly, and carefully avoiding the market. He had decided to continue on his mission, just for a little bit longer, and then he would go home to Mariam. He needed a proper answer. Preferably from someone that did not lunch under a table and wear advertisement as jewelry.

Finally he found himself outside the familiar white-washed building with pillars painted sky-blue. Inside it was cool, the stone floor was almost cold underfoot. He stole past Mrs. Lankshire the secretary, who hadn’t seemed to notice his arrival, and burst, without a second thought, into the Governor’s office. The Governor was standing by the window when he came in. He wheeled around and looked ready to bark out a reprimand or an order when he realized who it was. Generally the Governor only ever had one facial expression. It was an effective expression. Innumerable times it had made Henry, and many other people, promise never to do it again and mean it, whilst at the same time walking away feeling as if they had gotten the best of the bargain.

However, a lifetime of experience together with certain family likenesses had taught Henry to tell the Governor's *real* mood by his bottom lip. When the Governor was happy with him the lip pouted slightly, like a Madonna. When he was not the lip was drawn in, nearly disappearing into his mouth. Now the lip was hardly visible. The Governor strode over and closed the door behind Henry. The Governor turned to take in Henry's appearance: his bare feet, his filthy shorts and shirt, his collar turned up and sticking out. Red in the face Henry struggled helplessly to stuff his shirt in to his shorts and pull up his socks, which weren't where they should be.

He seemed to have forgotten why he was there. The second hand on the clock on his father's desk seemed so loud it could have drowned out all the sounds from the market, even the dusty woman shouting.

"Shoes and socks, Henry."

"I know sir –"

"Collar, Henry."

"Yes –"

"Running away from Mariam *again*, Henry." Henry looked down at his mud-crusts feet. "Sit down. You have seven minutes."

Henry sat down in one of the hard guest chairs. It took the Governor a moment to arrange himself comfortably in his chair behind his large mahogany desk. The clock ticked on. "I thought of a question, sir," Henry burst out, unexpectedly.

"Oh did you, I see. And did you also think to ask Mariam this question? Or Ida? Or to write said question down and ask me when I returned from my work? Or do anything at all but take off by yourself, sending your mother into hysterics?"

"No, sir."

Henry looked down at his feet again. He scratched the caked mud off of his left shin with his right toenails. A small pile of dried mud formed on the scrubbed floor beneath him. This had really been the most terrible idea. When was he ever going to start thinking before he did things? The Governor always thought before *he* did things. He fingered the bottle in his pocket. He could feel the rooster moving around in there, which gave him a little more courage.

"Right then. What was your question."

The bottom lip had become a little more visible now. Henry launched into his story at once, explaining about the feeling he had had when he woke up, about the question spreading all over him, about Mariam's refusal to answer. He left out the incident with Billy at the market. At last he came to his question. "So I thought I'd come and ask you, Sir. Why the ... why the rooster is in the bottle."

There was silence. Then the Governor rose, went to a switch near the door and switched on the low-hanging ceiling fan. It whipped up Henry's blond hair immediately. The Governor began strolling back

and forth. To his dismay Henry could see the bottom lip retreating. Yet the Governor did not seem to be angry. There was something else...

He stopped abruptly.

"You know when I was your age I never asked myself that question. My mother... It wasn't done in those days. The thing is... you see..."

He began pacing again. Henry was slightly alarmed; the Governor detested stuttering in others.

"Let me explain it like this Henry," the Governor said, stopping again. "Why not let the rooster out of the bottle, you may ask. Why does it *need* to be in a bottle? The rooster may as well be out of the bottle. The bottle may be somewhere else, far away from the rooster. The bottle and the rooster may never even have encountered one another."

He slung his arms behind his back and began pacing again.

"*But* that is not the state of things. There is no purpose in meditating over *how* the rooster came to be in the bottle – that is neither here nor there. The fact is that the rooster *is* in the bottle. What we must do now is maintain the status quo, maintain order. These are dark days after all. And to be frank, is the rooster not happier being in the bottle? Should not those with superior faculties and a superior understanding of both roosters and bottles be the ones to decide? What we take from the rooster we give back manifold. And yes, we might have *deprived* the rooster of its freedom ..."

The Governor was in his element now. The wings of the fan dipped into the room, sending great gushes of air around and around.

"But that freedom was *wasted* on the rooster! Clucking around without a care, a savage, as if the world hadn't gone to the dogs, and without a friend ... the way things have gone I would even say the rooster *needs* to be in the bottle now. And it needs people that look and think like us Henry, to keep it there. Or at least, like you are going to be when you grow up."

The Governor smiled. Henry smiled back up at him.

"Am I making myself clear Henry?"

"Yes Sir," said Henry at once. "I understand now sir, thank you."

Henry did not understand.

The sun was setting now. In town the fishermen and vendors were packing up. The coconut-man passed right in front of Henry with his cart, bringing with him the delicious scent of fresh coconut milk, but Henry hardly noticed. He had been told to go straight home, with a message to Mariam, unnecessary Henry thought, that he was to be sent straight to bed without any supper.

He felt more miserable than ever. The Governor usually had the answer to everything, and if he did not, whatever he said was still somehow right. But this did not *feel* right. The question was still lodged in him, as powerful as it had been when he'd woken up that morning.

Without paying much attention to where he was going Henry drifted slowly out of town and down to the shore. He had some idea of taking the long way back. He was not keen to get within the reach of Mariam's arms.

He meandered along under the steep cliff-face. The waves lapped gently but firmly up onto the soft sand. The sky was lit up in a brilliant pink that reflected on the water and up into the mouths of the citrus caves. Out in the ocean stood the solitary *Morozov*-rock. It looked like a frozen wave, going in the wrong direction.

The rooster had laid itself to rest inside the bottle inside his pocket. Henry splashed some water on his legs and arms, trying to wash off the worst before he got home. He was hungry, he was tired and he wanted this whole meaningless day to end. "But *why*," said a voice inside him. "*Why*..."

One last try. Just one; one more pointless attempt in the string of pointless attempts that had been Today. Then he would go home, gladly accept whatever punishment he was given and pretend none of this had ever happened.

He faced the endless plains of the ocean. He felt very small. He cleared his throat.

"Err...why is the rooster in the bottle?" he said to the open sea.

He felt very foolish. Next, instead of speaking, he squeezed his eyes tight shut and thought hard. Why. Is the rooster. In. The bottle. *Why is the rooster in the bottle.*

He didn't know what he'd been expecting. He didn't expect anything really, except that he was so tired and so hungry that he'd probably taken leave of his senses and would have to be sent to a mental asylum.

And yet, there she was.

Without pomp and ceremony. She was just there. As if she had been lingering just out of sight, waiting for Henry to finish thinking about other things. She stood in the waves and was still somehow part of the waves, glowing silver and *Octarine*, flickering as though projections of her were travelling very fast to him from somewhere else.

"Err ...," he said at last, "... Are you ... the goddess of the sea?" She nodded.

"I'm Henry. Sorry ... sorry to disturb you. But err ... I just have a question."

The goddess of the sea looked down on him kindly. A smile flickered over her face like sunlight rippling over water. He felt oddly

calm.

"I just wanted to ask," Henry went on. "Why is the rooster in the bottle?"

Henry could feel the rooster standing up to listen. The bottle in his pocket was glowing slightly, and warm against his skin. The goddess of the sea had stopped smiling now. Instead she looked wistful and sad, endlessly sad.

"N... no ... don't go!" The goddess of the sea was slowly revolving, turning away from him. Suddenly, horribly, Henry was blinking back tears. "No, wait! Come back! I'm sorry I asked! I'm sorry the rooster is in the bottle! I'm so sorry for everything!"

But in a slash of foam she was gone. It was getting darker.

Henry had no idea how long he had been standing there. He hadn't seemed to have moved for hours. The goddess of the sea had vanished. All of it had vanished. There was a distant wailing which grew louder and louder. It grew to an unbearable pitch, and with a flash he realized that it was he, Henry, who was making the noise. He was wailing madly. He reached up and touched his mouth - it was wide open, too open - the sound was coming from him and yet not from Henry. His face turned up to the blank night sky and he stood there and screamed and screamed and screamed with everything he had in him. It was horrible - he couldn't stop. With a sudden effort he shut his mouth tight. The wailing stopped abruptly. He wiped his sopping face angrily on his t-shirt sleeve and shivered slightly. Everything was horrible.

In his pocket he could feel the rooster moving about, trapped in its bottle. Was this what it was like to be grown-up? Suddenly he felt very grown-up, and very sad. He turned slowly to go home.