

Chabot: The Complicated Family Reunion

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## The Complicated Family Reunion

*Plastic has a complicated beginning and an even more complicated future. It is made from substances called polymers and while some can be made from plant cellulose, many now are synthetic polymers made up of petroleum and other fossil fuels. Most fossil fuels are formed from the fossilized, buried remains of plants and animals that lived millions of years ago, so it is quite disturbing that they are being used for plastics that get thrown away after one use. This story follows a six pack of bottles (The Cola Family) and their different journeys around the world after being discarded.*

Our journey begins with a seemingly harmful purchase of a six pack of cola bottles. A young suburban family of five wanted to treat their children to a delicious refreshing drink that goes well with almost every meal. But what if a six pack of cola bottles had a mind of their own and even thought of themselves as a little family? The bottles in this story do and instead of names, they just go by numbers One to Six. As the bottles' journeys begin and they are consumed by this family of three boys, the first few find themselves in sticky situations. The youngest brother is in elementary school where he is just beginning a new science project. For this project he needs a bottle to cut in half to create a mini pot for a plant experiment and the first one he could find was bottle One. So unfortunately, this is where we depart from the first member of the Cola family, at least for now. The rest of the family patiently awaits their future in the garage fridge of this suburban family.

As the week goes by two of the boys, who are in high school, decide to have a little get together with their buddies. They take bottles Two and Three out to the backyard and

instead of drinking them they create their own sort of science experiment by loading the bottles up with mentos and watching the chaos ensue. The boys have their fun and the bottles believe it is finally over and that it is time for recycling. However, the boys don't know much about the harms of plastic waste, so they decide to toss the



bottles into the bonfire they created. So, while I may have said that bottle One's journey was over for the time being, bottles Two and Three have met the actual end of their plastic existence as they are turned into harmful chemicals such as hydrochloric acid, sulfur dioxide, dioxins, furans, and heavy metals that evaporate into the airways and trickle into the nearby water wells. These harmful particulates affect both the ozone layer as well as human respiratory systems.

The contents of bottles Four, Five, and Six are all consumed, and the empty containers are thrown in the garbage. At the end of the week their bag is tossed on the side of the road where they await the stinky and treacherous journey from the garbage truck to the landfill. Once they arrive at the landfill the three remaining bottles sit for a few weeks as they remain hard and intact (just a little dirty), when suddenly, they recognize a familiar label. Bottle One was finally retired from its duty as a science project and now joins them in the landfill! The bottle is cut in half, but still has high spirits and tells the rest of the Cola family about his journey and how he watched the school children's amazement

as plants grew inside the bottle. As the Cola family remembers and honors their fallen family members Two and Three, they are excited for what their future has in store! But for now, they wait...and wait...and wait...and wait.

It has been five years in the landfill now. The Cola family still waiting for something to change. However, the only thing that has changed is that their labels have been ripped off and they look slightly more weathered down than they were when they first arrived at the boring hellhole the humans call a landfill. Nothing exciting happens other than them watching the new plastics and cans being dumped into the never-ending pile. One detail that must be addressed is that this landfill is not far from the ocean. This is important because the weather calls for a record size hurricane that is supposed to sweep up and down the coast. This hurricane thrashes the landfill with high winds and raging flood waters, the likes of which these bottles have never seen before. This crazy turn of events washes a large portion of the landfill into the ocean, along with all of the cola bottles. I guess you can say it beats waiting.

This brings us to a very important part of our story: the separation and the ocean currents. All four remaining bottles are split up after the hurricane and they end up in different currents in the ocean. Bottle One is separated first and ends up swirling around the ocean being ripped apart by various ocean animals that confuse it for food. Bottles Four and Five make a few pit-stops along various islands, only to be quickly swept away and wrapped up in other major currents. Bottle Six however has the most interesting and tragic story.



Bottle Six finds itself on the beautiful island of Midway, located west of Hawaii. Midway is home to magnificent birds like the Albatross and they do not have any human contact. This would make you think that these birds are safe from any human waste or problems. However, that is far from the case. If you somehow get to visit Midway island, you will see many albatrosses flying around freely. However, you will also see many of them wallowing in pain or the many others that are already dead. And what do you see when these birds start to decompose? Bunches of small plastics spilling out of their once healthy stomachs. This is where bottle Six ends up, but it is not just in the stomach of one bird. Over the years, Bottle Six gets broken apart but it does not seem to mind as its plastic seems to stay in the same spot now. A curious albatross will pick away at the plastic, then dies, then decomposes, just to have that same plastic reintroduced to another bird that repeats the cycle.

However, plastics tend to move around over time if they are broken apart and exposed to the elements. Where you may ask? To a garbage patch in the middle of the Pacific Ocean that is more than double the size of Texas. Most of this plastic has been broken down into tiny little fragments after years of being thrashed about by the sea. This is

exactly what has happened to what is left of the Cola family. Bits and pieces of them were chewed, swallowed, and spit out in a repeated cycle until the day of reunion finally arrived. The Cola family has finally met up for their should-be joyous event of seeing each other again.

But why does this reunion not feel as sought after as most? Why does this feel so depressing? It is because, plastic bottles are not sentient and they have no feelings or emotions as they wreak havoc all over the world during their lifetime (which can last hundreds of years). This is through no fault of their own: there would be no plastic without a human desire for disposable packaging. So, what is the answer? How do we keep plastic out of our oceans and our animals? There is no concrete answer as of right now, but if we keep raising awareness with stories like this, we might be able to work together, as science evolves, to find a long-lasting solution that saves the world.

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