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The Seven Baths of Cordelia Jane

The Earliest Memory

It's early afternoon in the family bathroom. The toddler with wild hair sits in shallow, lukewarm bathwater, splashing in the deep basin with her set of zoo-themed water toys. An orange giraffe bobs its rubber neck above the water, struggling to stay afloat.

The toddler shoves a bespectacled purple hippopotamus up the faucet hole and cackles. A rush of cool water cuts her work short and sends the hippopotamus falling to his death with a slap. The toddler squeezes her eyes shut and coughs as a bit of the water drips down the now-tamed locks plastered against her forehead, but then she squeals with delight and grasps for the cup of water in her mother's hand.

"I can tell you love the water. Just like Daddy." Her mother hands her the cup, and the toddler scoops up some water. She dumps it over her own head and giggles.

She's about to fill the cup to do it all again, when she gets distracted by a group of dancing colors on the tub wall. An entire Northern Lights show performs for her alone, and she reaches out to try and catch the vivid colors in the palms of her tiny hands.

She traces the source of the light to a crystal tinkling in the awning window near the ceiling. The crystal spins around hypnotically, and the toddler presses her tongue against her bottom lip in concentration. She splashes in the water happily.

Her mother's smiling face appears in front of the crystal, almost as bright as the light from the window.

"You're doing such a good job, Cordelia!" her mother says, raking her fingers through the toddler's soaked hair, molding it gently back into place. "Of course I knew you would. Do you know why we named you Cordelia?"

Cordelia gazes at her mother through giant, curious eyes, mesmerized by her every word. Most of her mother's language is still foreign to her, which makes it all the more sacred.

"When Mommy met Daddy, he was working as a fisherman in the ocean. An ocean is like a really, really big bathtub. When we moved here, Daddy had to take a new job, and he still misses the water very much. We named you Cordelia because it means 'the daughter of the sea.' Isn't that cool?"

Cordelia coos at her mother in agreement. Her mother plucks her from the tub and Cordelia begins to whine, reaching back towards

the water. Her protests end when her mother wraps a warm towel around her tiny body and plants kisses all over her clean face.

“There, there. We can take another one tomorrow night.”

They watch as the zoo animals whirl closer and closer to the drain.

The First Date

Dim lighting hides the dingy tiled walls of a bathroom backsplash in a college suite. The bathroom is an unholy disaster, cosmetic products tossed to and fro, rumpled towels and clothes strewn across the floor, with ratty hairbrushes and fraying toothbrushes on the tiny sink counter.

Now a college freshman, Delia sits in the tub with a leg up over the edge. She’s a woman now, but girlhood still clings to her in many ways. She’s bleached her hair and chopped three letters off of her name to seem cooler. Despite the mess, this room is her sanctuary.

She grips a Nokia cell phone between her chin and shoulder as she mows a thick layer of shaving cream on her thigh with her razor, obliterating the coarse leg hair thriving beneath it. She chatters away to her childhood best friend, her Nair mustache wiggling up and down as it sets. Though they attend different universities, they still hold a weekly confessional over the phone.

“Yeah, we were in the hallway and I felt him come up behind me and zip up my backpack. And he said, ‘Delia! You forgot to zip this.’ And I said, ‘God, I’m always doing that, thanks!’ But I’m not always doing that. I left it unzipped and walked in front of him to see if he’d notice. Can you believe he knows my name? Well, yeah, but only my parents still call me Cordelia.”

Delia takes the razor to her big toe, shaving carefully around her toenail polish. It’s Big Apple Red, one of her go-to colors.

“Call me crazy all you want, but it worked, didn’t it? I was worried I’d ruin it all because my mind suddenly went a million different directions when my plan worked, and then I couldn’t speak, and he smelled so good and I noticed he has this really sweet little crooked tooth, and these gorgeous curly red locks, and I panicked.

“What does he smell like? A man. A real man.”

Three knocks at the door startle Delia, and she nicks her calf with the razor.

A shrill voice invades Delia’s sanctuary.

“I have to pee!”

“Just a minute!” Delia shouts back.

“Fuck! Yeah, I’m fine, just cut myself. Ugh, great, it looks like Jason took a whack at my leg. Hold on.”

She swishes her partially shaved leg under the water to stop the blood flow and watches as the leftover shaving cream dissipates into layers of thick, sizzling soap bubbles.

"It's my roommate. I told her I'd be in here for a while if she needed to use the bathroom first and she said, 'Oh no, I'm fine!' Now all of a sudden she has to go." Delia's eyes widen as she readjusts the receiver against her ear.

"Nuh uh, today is not Friday the thirteenth. You're a liar."

She listens, scoffs, laughs.

"You better be lying, I swear! It doesn't matter if it's real or not, it's still going to stress me out knowing it's Friday the thirteenth. You know I've never done any of this dating stuff before.

"Stop! Can I get back to my story now? Please? Even if this date is now doomed before it starts?"

She aggressively wipes her Nair mustache off with a washcloth and an inflamed red line spreads across her upper lip.

"So, I told him I always see him taking notes because he sits in front of me in the lecture hall, and that I'm the world's worst note taker and might fail the midterm. Not exactly the most creative attempt at seducing a man, but I couldn't just sit back and do nothing, then die an old maid who never tried. I figured if he likes me, he likes me, you know?"

"In *Cosmo* it said men love feeling like they can provide. Well get ready to eat your words because it turns out *Cosmo* was right, and he said, 'Oh yeah, of course, I'm actually going to the student lounge right now.' And then he asked me if I wanted to come with and review notes with him." Delia settles back in the tub, admiring her freshly shaven legs—minus the one nasty cut that ruins her look entirely.

"We're on the couch and he opens his notes, and our heads are really close, and I was so scared he could hear my heart beating. And at a few points our knees brushed but I couldn't tell if it was intentional or if he was just focused and didn't realize. He was trying to explain something about organelles, and I wasn't getting it because I never get it because I never pay attention in class because I'm too busy watching him talk to the girl beside him with the giant hoops and trying to read their lips to see if they're flirting.

"Then suddenly he stops talking and looks really embarrassed. I ask if he's okay and he tells me he's really sorry and that he doesn't know if he can help me with the midterm and—wait. Kenzo or Euphoria?"

Delia waits for her friend's answer, then reaches over the tub's edge and grabs a bottle of Kenzo perfume. She pours a heavy amount into the bath water, which develops a thin, hazy film and emits the sweet scents of violet, vanilla, along with a hint of a spicier smell that

Delia can only describe as ‘sexy.’ She swishes around like a mermaid, making sure a healthy coating of perfume absorbs into her skin and hair.

“Anyway, he looks at me and says he’s actually horrible at biology because it’s boring and because he’s always distracted in class. So here I am thinking he’s about to tell me that he and Hoops Girl are so in love and planning to get married after graduation, and that she’s going to become this successful biologist—she’s really good at biology—and he’ll be like a Calvin Klein model or a financial analyst or a museum curator who goes on dangerous expeditions on the weekends or something.”

She cups the perfumed water in her hands and pours it over her collarbones, rubbing it into her neck and chest.

Three more bangs against the door reverberate through the bathroom. They’re louder this time, more urgent. The tub water vibrates around Delia’s body as she sits up, her peace destroyed.

“Hold on!”

She leans both her arms over the tub, water dripping from her body down onto the bare floor.

“Jesus Christ. Where was I? Oh yeah, so I thought he was in love with Hoops Girl but he’s not! He said he’s always asking her for notes because he’s terrible at biology, but that part of the reason he never pays attention is because he’s trying not to risk turning around to look at me and freaking me out. And then he told me he’s noticed me in class, and he thinks I’m really cute and said he’s sorry he can’t help me with notes. I said that maybe he could make it up to me by taking me on a date or something. I know! I thought I was gonna faint because I’ve never said anything like that before in my life. And he said he’d love that. We’re going to Bertucci’s. Yeah, with the lobster tails!”

Delia laughs, playing with the pool of water on the floor.

“Ugh, I like him so much. Yeah, yeah, I know, don’t rush things.”

She frowns, half-listening to her friend’s voice on the other line.

“Okay, Dear Abby, I don’t remember asking for advice.”

One thunderous bang rattles the entire door and Delia jumps in her skin. “Get out of the bathroom or I’m getting the R.A.!”

Delia groans. “I gotta go. I’ll call you tomorrow and tell you all about it. Mmkay, bye!”

She tosses the Nokia onto the pile of clothing and grabs a towel. She stands up in the full tub as it drains, catching her reflection in the mirror above the sink. She scrutinizes her naked body, from the raw skin above her lip, to the fresh trickle of blood running down her calf. She ignores the constant banging against the door as she stares

hypnotically at her reflection.

When the trance is broken, she can't cover her body fast enough, winding the towel tightly around herself to hide her nakedness. She glances down at her pruney toes and discovers a single chip in her toenail polish.

She sighs and steps out of the water.

The Promise of Forever

There's an actual clawfoot tub in the middle of the luxury hotel bathroom, with tinted glass walls, so they can look down on the gorgeous New York cityscape. Up here, the city below is mostly neon lights and microscopic moving parts. It's oddly relaxing, looking down at the chaos below, knowing you've escaped the hustle for a brief moment, and found the person who will hold you through it all when it's time to return to the world below.

Cordelia thinks about this as she nestles deeper into her husband's warm chest, playing with the wispy bubbles that cover her most intimate areas. They had planned to forgo a honeymoon to save money for a house, but her husband surprised her with a weekend trip to the city she'd always dreamed of visiting.

Her husband brings his lips to her shoulder, the coils of his black beard bristling against her skin. The prickling sensation is familiar but still stimulating, and a small moan escapes her.

Husband. She turns the word over and over again in her head.

Her husband brings his arms up from her belly and wraps his hands softly around her taut breasts. His touch makes her feel ethereal, beautiful. She is as effervescent as the soap bubbles tingling against her skin.

As she watches him fondle her, she admires the new band of silver around his finger. She puts her hands over his, their rings rubbing together rhythmically.

She cranes her neck to kiss him as his hands slide back down her body and into the bubbly bathwater.

They whisper 'I love yous' into each other's mouths.

The Birthmark

Cordelia sits naked on the edge of the corner tub, a toothbrush hanging out of her mouth. Leftover water from a five-second shower drip-drops from the showerhead. She keeps forgetting to call the plumber. She has only a few spare moments before two tiny bulls break down the door and demand sustenance.

She uses these few extra seconds to pinch the extra skin on her

abdomen, tracing the faded striations stamped across her stomach and hips.

Some days, she feels a certain pride about them. It's a battle scar, showing the horrors she has gone through twice, by chance in the same hospital room. It's a birthmark.

It's also a death rattle. Her days as her own person have reached their end, at least temporarily. No matter how many parenthood magazines or Facebook feminist support groups say otherwise, she cannot make time to be both a mother and a human.

She always thought the follies of motherhood would come naturally to her, as she'd never been particularly extroverted (except for that brief stint in college when she changed her name and started tailgating at every football game) and never relied on the company of others for fun. Now she was having a second puberty, a new desire to go out clubbing with her single peers, to have the right to make self-destructive decisions. The other mothers she knows express the same secret desires, and while that's reassuring in ways, she still feels isolated.

Her husband tries to help where he can. Despite the changes in her body, he insists he still wants her. Yet, they're always conveniently too tired and overstimulated by the end of a long day to even hold each other, let alone make love.

He's a fabulous father and co-pilot, but she can't help but feel like they're strangers sharing the same goal. They've discussed her going back to work, and he's supportive, but she hasn't the slightest idea what to put down on a resume or an application. Toddler Slave? Indentured Mother?

Besides, were she to actually get a job, she'd need a whole new wardrobe, which means trying on clothing in a cramped, overheated dressing room with fluorescent lighting that highlights every bulge, scar, mole, and hair on her body. She's not emotionally prepared for that kind of torture.

She jiggles her stomach fat and sings one of her favorite songs, Britney Spears's "Lucky," under her breath. Making her jiggly tummy dance lightens the load of carrying it around all day every day.

Four little hands beat a new rhythm at the door.

"Open door, get on'na floor, walk dinosaur! RoarrRRR!"

Cordelia rises with a sigh, wraps herself in a towel, and throws the unrinsed toothbrush in the sink.

She throws open the door, T-Rex arms at the ready, and lets out a ferocious "ROAAAAAR."

She's met with a fit of giggles from the partially toothless mouths of her two sons.

Her crow-footed eyes crinkle as she smiles back.

The Festering

Cordelia sits with her knees to her chest in the tub, steaming water beating down her back. Where the water flogs her, it leaves streaky red burn marks across her skin. The grungy emerald tiles of the wall mosaic are stacked together like shark teeth against the wall. The old paste holding them together has grown a brown muck, a muck that never comes clean, despite being scrubbed time and time again with bleach, Comet, and vinegar until it just crackles off into the basin of the tub.

They had agreed on her fortieth birthday that it wasn't working anymore. They never fought anymore. They never expressed their resentment or bitterness. Neither of them had the energy to fight for their marriage, and so they tip-toed around each other like cordial roommates. It had all become too exhausting, and they agreed a trial separation was best. They both knew it was forever, but neither of them had the courage to admit it. Within the next two months, she had found a temporary apartment and the divorce papers were served.

It was hardly a fixer-upper so much as a "fix yourself up fast and move-r," but it had an extra bedroom for her kids and space for a couch in the combination kitchen and living room (which was more than could be said for the other places she'd toured).

The loss of the marriage wasn't the worst part. It was the loss of security. She missed hearing her kids play on the stairs of their two-story home, the way the kitchen stove always worked, her walk-in closet (which at one time held over one hundred pairs of shoes), the way her husband would always fix the watering hose when it was acting up or mow the lawn because he knew just how much she hated it. Even near the end, when he didn't like her anymore, he still kept the grass neat and tidy. Maybe he'd just been playing the part the best he knew how. She'd done the same.

Even more than the loss of convenience and a cushier lifestyle, Cordelia had lost the ability to hide from herself, to shove her listlessness, and sadness, and anger down deeper and deeper until they were hot coals in her stomach. Bad feelings were no longer easily sated with a piece of chocolate cake or a new pair of earrings. Then again, maybe she'd never known how to bury it all as well as she thought, since those feelings had grown from small seeds and festered into a disease that controlled her every waking thought. It started rearing its ugly head with snippy little comments to her husband, then grew into blow-out fights.

Cordelia still wasn't sure why she'd become so passive-aggressive, why she couldn't be honest with herself or others.

The water continues to whip against her back, but she dares not

change the temperature. Cordelia figures her actions have something to do with the fact that she doesn't know the first thing about who she is or what she wants. Her job instructing at the pottery studio pays most of the bills, but she never feels inspired by her own works anymore. She doesn't even know which unopened box in the hallway holds her pottery wheel. She hopes someday she'll have the energy to care.

She watches the water pool up in the drain until she's sitting in a small puddle of her own filth. She has yet to find the energy to pour a bottle of Drano down inside and melt whatever nastiness past tenants have left behind.

She brings her thumb up to the edge of a mosaic tile and smears it across the sharpened edge. When it returns to her, she watches a droplet of red bloom in the center of her thumb. She smears it across the tiles, releasing the tension, and hopefully some of the disease, from her body. She shoves her thumb into the water, letting the blood travel out like tentacles of smoke. She lets the tentacles surround her, then takes her hand and cuts through them until they dissipate and get sucked down the drain.

If she's lucky, her skin and bones will melt beneath the scalding hot water, and she'll disappear down the drain, too.

She knows she won't be so lucky.

The Contentedness

Cordelia likes to sit in the bath and sneak looks at her husband's wrinkly little butt. Every week, he stands stark naked in front of the bathroom mirror and gives himself a self-inspection. Though he has a touch of hypochondria, his practice is not unwarranted. He has survived testicular cancer twice and somehow managed to keep both balls, so he takes a special pride in them.

Both Cordelia and her husband have their own silly ways of trying to stay young. Her husband's way is by trying to preserve the balls he no longer needs, and her way is by soaking in the tub.

Despite her worsening arthritis, Cordelia tries to fit in one bath a week. Her husband, knowing baths are important to her, invested in a walk-in tub with a handlebar. Cordelia has always loved his considerate nature. Her husband always found baths to be slimy, but he will do anything to make her happy.

Cordelia likes to read magazines while she's in the tub. It takes her back to her teens and twenties, when she used to read lifestyle and fashion magazines in the bath and dream about what the universe had in store for her. Of course, then she was reading *Delia's* catalogs and reciting clever pick-up lines from *Teen Beat* magazine, just in case she ever ran into Josh Hartnett. She flips the page of her current read,

House Beautiful, and finds a Mrs. Butterworth's advertisement. She lifts it up to show her husband, who takes a break from pinching his ball skin to say, "Kaka syrup."

Cordelia giggles. Though they rarely consume pancakes or waffles, her husband insists on always having a bottle of Canadian syrup in the home and carrying a travel-sized bottle anytime they venture to IHOP or Waffle House. Anything other than Canadian syrup is 'kaka syrup.'

They had in fact met on a maple syrup factory tour in Ontario and struck up a conversation after he performed an impression of the syrup-obsessed Canuck leading the tour. At that time, he had no clue how syrup-obsessed he himself was going to become.

They struck up a conversation on the tour bus, and Cordelia discovered that he'd been in a happy relationship for fifty years, until his long-term partner passed away unexpectedly from pancreatic cancer five years prior. Neither of them had believed in the institution of marriage, but his partner's death had changed his perspective on being legally yoked to someone for life, as he hadn't been allowed in the hospital room during her final moments.

Cordelia was thirty years out of her divorce and finally feeling like herself again. Though she and her ex were civil, she was unsure she'd ever remarry, but she saw no issues with a little vacation romance. By the end of the bus ride back to town, they were both rolling with laughter over how pitiful and silly it was that both of them had chosen to go on a solo maple syrup tour as two lonely sixty-somethings. They had dinner that night and cancelled the rest of their scheduled tours to wander Ontario together. By the end of the week, Cordelia was ready to jump into a new life with him. They married the following year, not wanting to waste any time without each other. There was no pressure if it didn't work out and a remaining lifetime of laughter and friendship to gain if it did.

Rather than building a new life together, they simply intertwined the lives they already had. Cordelia worked on her pottery in the shed out back; he bowled three times a week with old college buddies. He didn't have children, but he loved her sons as if they were his own. He spent weeks building her granddaughters a princess castle for their dolls.

At night, they crawled into bed with their respective books. He helped her put on her psoriasis cream. She massaged his aching bony shoulders.

Cordelia's hands weaken from holding the magazine, and it slips in the tub with a plop.

"Well, shit. There I go again."

Her husband reaches in and scoops it from the water, giving

her body the once-over and raising his eyebrows seductively.

“Dirty old man.”

A page of the sopping magazine slides out from between the covers and plops back into the water.

It’s a Preparation H ad.

They both start wheezing, laughing like middle school boys.

The Final Bath

“Good morning, good morning! Are you ready for your bath?”

Cordelia’s eyes stay glued to the chalk-white ceiling. She puts her arms to her side and sighs. “I guess.”

A chipper nurse approaches the bed with a toothy smile. She’s in the prime of her youth, with thick eyebrows and full lips, and smooth tan skin. What a waste, having to spend her time with old ladies. What a slap in the face, to be so old and wrinkled and to end up with such a pretty nurse.

“I need help sitting up.”

The nurse nods. “Of course. We’ll do it on three. Ready?”

She raises Cordelia’s feeble body until she’s able to see the whole room. Not that there’s much to see. There’s a mounted television with programs she finds either perverse or redundant. There’s a small dresser with all of her clothes inside, and a few photos of her with her children, grandchildren, and her late husband on top. It’s her entire life, reduced to a few photos and children’s drawings on display, in a drab room with puke-colored walls.

It was the same story for her roommate, and the two old gals across the hall, and the old hag three doors down who tried to hoard all the sweets in the cafeteria. All of them were defined and confined by the same experiences. If she weren’t so tired, Cordelia might feel more bitter about it all.

The nurse pulls her shirt over her head, then slides her pants off. Next come the undergarments, and then she’s covered by a small towel so that the nurse can feel she’s providing some sense of privacy. The sponge is too cold and too soapy, and Cordelia shivers beneath the thin towel.

“Temperature okay?”

Cordelia nods, even though it’s not. She just wants it to be over.

The nurse works methodically, using one sponge to soap her up and another to rinse. Eventually, the cold of the sponge stings less against Cordelia’s crepey skin. She’s used to their daily routine now. The sponge baths no longer feel invasive, just boring, like everything else in this place.

“You’re doing such a good job,” the nurse says, as she dabs along Cordelia’s collarbone.

It should feel patronizing—condescending—but it doesn’t.

It feels nice to be taken care of, to be rewarded for her existence, validated that she’s made it this far and is still deserving of praise. She can do so little now, her mobility waning more and more each day. When family visits her, she can feel their pity. When she first arrived at the facility, she pitied herself too. She doesn’t pity herself anymore. She knows she’s lucky enough to have lived a thousand lives, most of which they’ve never even seen. She’s loved three men, two of whom she married, and one of whom gave her two beautiful children and five grandchildren. She’s lost herself, and found herself, and lost herself again. If only she’d discovered sooner that that was the way it was meant to be.

The sponge feels nice now.

She looks down at the nurse’s long, polished fingernails and clocks the color.

Big Apple Red.

She lies back and shuts her eyes, relaxing as she allows her mind to relive memories of a different time.

A group of colors, like the Northern Lights, flutter against the inside of her eyelids.

Her mother’s smiling face appears, her eyes warm with love.

“Do you know why we named you Cordelia?”

She focuses on the sensations of the cool water against her skin.

She coasts into a deep sleep.

