

"The Shower"
By Kasie Whitener

The tile wall is small squares, blue with white grout. The curtain is white, too, and hangs, limp and bunched against the wall. Should it spread, it would reduce by half the space we occupy. The water pours down, the spout pushing, straining, streaming and the air steamy and cloudy and sizzling with the pressure and the heat. It's the shower I remember easiest. The lockers on the wall, closed without locks, wait for people to come and store their things. The toilet in the corner is tall and flanked by a brushed silver railing. Then the sink, hanging like a shelf below the mirror. The mirror that reflects us. That reveals us. That knows us. That knows.

It is dim in the bathroom, a single muted light over the sink and darkness on the edges of the tiled floor, blue squares and white grout, floor to ceiling. All these years later, it's the bathroom I remember though I sometimes strain for the memory of your body, the rich brown color of your skin, the tight muscles, sharp hips, sinewy length. Usually, it's just the bathroom I can conjure. The rest is fantasy. That's what it was, wasn't it? Real fantasy. And the two terms, contradicting one another, betray what we were doing there. It was opportunity.

Sometimes I think about opportunity like a bathroom after swim team with two unsupervised teenagers knowing what they did was a secret they must keep. Opportunity is not a knock on the door, it's a closed door and a shared space and the allure of something being offered that maybe hadn't been before.

Sometimes I try to conjure that feeling again, but all I get is the bathroom.

I wonder sometimes who you told about that. Who did you finally admit those morning trysts to? Who finally got the brag? Who has the privilege of envying us our weeks upon weeks of easy, morning liaisons? Those instant hook-ups we kept just between us? Like fervent kissing in the cloak room in decades prior, like seven minutes in the closet in a bad 80s film, like all those stolen moments we wish belonged to us. And those did. Whom did you tell?

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The icing on the cake is pink and orange. The ribbons and plates and balloons and confetti are all pink and orange. When you get married they ask you for colors. Same with babies. *What are your colors?* And I want orange. Tigers, specifically. So, we did pink and orange because the baby tiger is a baby girl. The cake is thick and creamy and sugary, and I eat a bigger piece than I ever would have before I was 200 pounds and seven months pregnant. And I want a mimosa. They all have one. But it's frowned upon even though my mom wouldn't say so, and my Nana would pour the damn thing herself. It's one of those showers where everyone knows my mother-in-law but no one knows me. Fortunately, I managed to veto the belly-measuring games.

When I excuse myself to the bathroom, our hostess, a distant cousin, directs me to her own master bathroom, and it's there, in all my seven-months pregnancy pink-and-orange maternity top no-mimosa-having misery that I see the tiles, small and square and blue, and have an epic flashback. The kind that would drop me to my knees if I knew I could get back up again.

The flashback isn't grief. It's not dignified loss or pain like a death, a miscarriage, a tragedy. It's not a horrific secret like abuse or violence. This flashback makes my panties a little wet. Makes me grin and turn away from the image of who I am and close my eyes looking for who I was. This flashback is one of those memories I knew, even at the time, I would carry with me. It's us in the bathroom. It's a secret. And it was a long time ago.

Nothing about now resembles then. Now has an audience.

I unwrap an awkward monstrosity: it's a plastic tub with soap and washcloths and towels and a net to hold the baby. I rub my belly. There's a baby in there.

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I unwrap a music box that plays "You are My Sunshine." It reminds me of a gift I got once from a high school boyfriend. Not you. A different one. Except that music box was a globe with a wizard inside and glittery dust that floated around and it played "Music of the Night." It had moons and stars painted on the base, like the ones on my tattoo, the tattoo I got after you.

I unwrap a rectangle: it's a frame. Inside is a picture of my mom holding a baby, probably me. I look up, and she's smiling at me, tears glistening in her eyes. Emotions surge within me, and I smile back and put the frame aside.

Blankets and towels and washcloths and tiny pink dresses and onesies and pacifiers and bottles, lots of bottles, and nipples, lots of nipples. I unwrap and smile and thank the room. I read cards and spell names for my aunt who is recording all of the "from whoms" and "whats gives."

When I say, "Thank you!" the announced lady raises her mimosa so I can identify her.

I want a mimosa.

Another thank you, another raised glass, and I smile.

I would give anything to be somewhere else.

At first, I only told my college roommate. She confessed she hadn't been with anyone, she'd had a long-time boyfriend and they never felt ready. I told her I'd gotten past that with my sophomore-year boyfriend. Not you. Music box guy. By the time senior year came around, I'd had half a dozen lovers, each one better than the last as I learned what I liked. There's a fervency and secrecy to high school trysts that cannot be replicated. Certainly not in college where everyone can and does get laid. When I told my roommate about you, she was scandalized by the publicness of those mornings. But they weren't public, were they? The door locked with a click, and the guard office was usually empty. Then the water provided noise and we were quiet, weren't we?

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My swim suit zipped up the back to my neck, and you'd pull that zipper down slowly, your breath on my shoulder. Push your hands under the material and shove it down my shoulders, pinning my arms to my side. Kiss my neck, my wet hair and that chlorinated water. Press yourself against me, your suit too small to contain you.

"Libby?"

"Hm?"

"Are you listening? Mrs. James asked you a question."

"I'm sorry, Mother."

"I wondered what you plan to name the baby?" Mrs. James has a pinched look of disapproval, and I smirk thinking what her expression would be if she had seen what I was remembering.

"Hannah Grace," I say. "We plan to name her after our grandmothers, Hannah and Grace." I glance over at Nana who smiles appreciatively from the kitchen.

"I just love double names," my mother-in-law gushes. "I tried to get them to name the child Kerry Anne, wouldn't that just be darling?" She's wearing pink, and I think she must have wished one of her baby showers had been for a girl, but she only had boys.

"Will you call her Hannah Grace?" Mrs. James asks.

"Yes, ma'am," I say. "Well, sort of. I don't want her to be that girl that gets annoyed when people don't use both names, you know? So, we'll just be casual about it."

High maintenance girls. That's what we called them. I was always the opposite of them and I felt determined that my daughter would be, too, beginning with her name.

Baby showers are good for that: making declarations for how you plan to raise the baby. Talking like you have a clue about discipline, language, or screen time. Showers are a good place

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to be certain of things like joy and gratitude and to be indulgent of things like birth stories from every woman in the room and clichés that don't make the listener feel any better but make the speaker feel like she's helped in some way.

Bathroom showers are a good place to forgive the indentions in skin from snug seams and the spike of unshaved legs. A good place to forget about the odor and taste of intimate parts and to employ the water to titillate and intoxicate. After a long workout, four thousand meters of pulling and kicking, core muscles clenching, turning, and engaging, a shower is the perfect place to stretch and relax. Peel the swim suit down, fingers pushing over hips and down thighs. Breasts piquing in the hot water stream. Bare the throat to slow, open-mouth kisses. Feel the length of you against me. Hands slide up the blue tile wall, flatten out, contract.

Showers are a good place to feel slick and fitted perfectly to one another.

Outdoor showers with the sky above, the shady privacy belying the public exposure.

Dual-stream showers bathing backs as fronts meld together.

Tiny stand-up showers with barely room for one where two must embrace to fit.

Showers are a good place to feel vulnerable and available, fused and physical.

When I think about those mornings, I remember the relief of climax; the conclusion of that physical engagement that began with 600 meters warm-up ninety minutes before. I sometimes wonder where the adult supervision was and then remember that we were adults by then.

Who I am as I sit in the living room of a distant relative is someone who cannot really believe she's here. I rub my belly and think about the child inside. Hannah Grace. A new person. Half me and half my wonderful husband. The one who came along after a dozen lovers. The one who wouldn't recognize the shower story as something I would ever do.

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After the gifts have been opened, people have circled back into the kitchen for refills and more cake. Nana slides into the seat beside me and presses a pink plastic cup into my hand. I take a sip. It's a mimosa. She smiles conspiratorially.

"Why do they call them 'showers'?" I ask.

"I suppose it's a verb for attention and well-wishes and gift-giving."

"More like question asking and disapproval tsking."

"Family gossiping and what-I'd-do-differentlies."

We giggle a little into our cups.

"I feel grateful," I say to her. "But I miss my old self. And I know she's gone forever."

"Yes." Nana's gaze is wistful. "And maybe it's better that she is."

I didn't have the butterfly tattoo when you and I were earning pre-dawn carnal knowledge in that community center bathroom. I didn't have the crescent moon or the tiny blue star, either. Those came later. I didn't have smooth skin between my legs, just an untamed thatch of pubic fur. I didn't have two college degrees or a job with health insurance. I didn't have any idea what I wanted to be or where I might end up. And my boobs were smaller.

Those mornings are sacred to me now. Not just for the smile they invoke, but for the nostalgia of that time when the moment was all that mattered. Six, maybe eight minutes in the public bathroom. The moment we stopped being high school seniors or swimmers or someone else's boyfriend or girlfriend or a summer league coach or a lifeguard, the moment we were just human. Naked and free and sharing ourselves with one another.

I know, logically, such a place in time no longer exists for me.

There will not ever be such a casual, basic existence for me again.

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Except, somehow in being rounded with child, I am fully physical again. In between times, when I'm just sitting and feeling, I am corporeal and breathing and building something amazing inside of me.

For all the discomfort and the humiliation, being pregnant has brought me back in touch with my body in a way I have not been since high school swimming. Even now when I swim I am about fitness and strength and weight loss, it's not the pure self-worship it was back then. It's more self-loathing, really. Especially lately when I'm so slow and have been moved from my center practice lane with our 1:20 splits, to the end lane with the wall and the ladder so I can stop and rest and climb out safely.

There's an absence of worship in my life and, as I contemplate it, I think of all the places I've reveled in it:

The front stoop of a small chapel in the Italian countryside.

Kneeling below a candle in Notre Dame.

Wading into the Pacific Ocean at sunset.

Perched on a rock overlooking the Shenandoah Valley.

Listening to Bach in my earphones on the train in New York City.

And with you, in the shower at the Community Center during that 10-week affair at the end of our senior year of high school.

I sip my mimosa and close my eyes.

"What's making you sad?" Nana says quietly. "It's not just the sobriety."

I flush for a second and then remember she doesn't know what I've been thinking about. Maybe I could tell her the blue tiles in the master bathroom made me nostalgic for casual sex with a high school teammate, but probably not.

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"Who were you before you were Nana?"

"I was Momma of three naughty little boys and a serious little girl, your mother."

"And before that?"

"I was Mrs. Bartholomew Newcomb, happily married to your Papa."

"And before that?"

"I was Grace, daughter of Russ and Eunice, sister to William and Polly."

"And before that?"

She smiles. "I was what I have always been. What I still am. A moment in God's great drama. A fragment of the mosaic He constructs."

"Of all of us."

She nods, "Yes."

My mother calls out to me from across the room. Some guests are leaving, and I should thank them again and say goodbye.

I stand, squeezing Nana's hand as I go, leaving the pink plastic cup with half of the mimosa still in it.

"Libby?" Nana says.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"There will be new moments, you know, to replace those old ones."

I smile. "It's what's being replaced that's making me sad."

"You'll remember what you need to."

"I know."

"And the things you forget are probably better left anyway."

I lean down and kiss her cheek.

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My mother calls my name again, a little bit impatiently.

"Elizabeth, now, please."

I thank the Mrs. Jameses and Thompsons and Clearys and Wrights. They offer lean-in hugs, press their pudgy cheeks against my face, smear makeup on my skin, leave lipstick on my cheek. My mother's thumb wipes it away between departures, and she yanks my shoulders back to force my posture correction and smiles at our hostess and begins to help with clean-up.

I excuse myself to the master bathroom and run my fingertips over the blue square shower tiles, the memory irresistible. Clutching my belly, I feel substantial, try to breathe slowly like in prenatal yoga, try to center myself in this experience, but the ridges of the grout make me want to claw at them and the smile I cannot fight has very little to do with slow exhales.

Maybe two sips of mimosa have given me a buzz. Maybe I'm seeing my real self, my original self, my one-moment-in-God's-Mosaic self in the mirror over the sink.

So instead I laugh.

"Hannah Grace," I say, "Your mommy was a happy slut some time ago. But that time is over now. It's long over."

I feel a kick within me and laugh again.

You wouldn't recognize the lines of me now, and I can't really remember yours either. Just the bathroom. The shower, really, just that. And a sense that opportunity, like possibility, is both finite and infinite.