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Arthur's bath

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Arthur's bath

Abstract

Arthur's mother spent most of her days waiting near the dark bathtub. The basement flat was always in shadows, even with its small windows at the ceiling that met the footpath outside. All evening she listened to the traffic and watched feet streaking past the windows, and with every car horn she thought of Arthur. Arthur! she'd yell, Arthur? Are you here yet? and she would run to check the tub as the landlord pounded on the ceiling.

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ARTHUR'S BATH

[Tara Goedjen](#)

Arthur's mother spent most of her days waiting near the dark bathtub. The basement flat was always in shadows, even with its small windows at the ceiling that met the footpath outside. All evening she listened to the traffic and watched feet streaking past the windows, and with every car horn she thought of Arthur. *Arthur!* she'd yell, *Arthur? Are you here yet?* and she would run to check the tub as the landlord pounded on the ceiling.

When Arthur was a baby she held him in the bath. She poured the pet fish into the water because it made him laugh, and they had golden fins (the shade of his hair in the sunlight), and they would float near her lap where he was sitting, their fins moving against her thighs and the roundness of her belly, while the lilac soap spun against the beige ceramic. Sometimes she forgot about them and they swirled down the drain, which made Arthur laugh. *Ah ha, Ah ha* – toothless. Twenty cents bought her more.

When she worked in the laboratory, she made Arthur stay with the landlord – the man who lived upstairs on the first floor, which opened to the street. All day she worked in the lab with shiny metal tables and white countertops where she analysed drops of blood. Cherry red blood and plum blue blood and burnt tangerine blood. All colours she would teach her Arthur. She transferred blood with what looked like Arthur's ear dropper and she squirted blood into slender glass containers that sometimes rang together like a toast. She wore gloves the colour of breast milk. Her goggles pinned down her hair that had once been auburn, but had since faded.

When she came home from work she'd pick up Arthur and bury her face in his neck, and he'd crawl out of her arms and play inside the cabinets. When looking at him, she sometimes thought of his other architect, which made her hands shake. She thought of him only as an architect, never as a father. As if she had blueprints and he had blueprints and one morning over tea they had laid the designs on top of each other and made a structure inside her body.

She fell in love for the first time when she saw him. *My Arthur*. His skin was blotchy and he opened his mouth like a yawn, only he screamed. Sometimes she loved him so much she felt her heart waver and her palms grow clammy and then he never wanted her to touch him, *Wet mummy*, but he always smiled. When Arthur smiled her lungs filled with a gasp and a sound came rushing from her throat so loud the landlord beat on the ceiling with a chair leg.

After Arthur learned his colours and was all legs and ribs she could count, he learned to throw his ball with red stitching inside the flat. It made a thud like bone against brick. Bone against the brick, all day long, Arthur throwing. Sometimes he tossed his ball against the windowpane where the feet were and once someone brought a face to the glass and stared, ogle-eyed, until Arthur laughed – *Ha ha*. That was when he was old enough to stay alone during the day and the landlord would beat on the ceiling when he threw his ball.

Oh, Arthur. She would talk to him for hours after work, the smell of blood still under her nails. *Arthur, my Arthur*.

Ha ha, Mum, ha ha.

One day when she came home from the laboratory, Arthur wasn't there. He was hiding, playing a game with her, and soon he would come out laughing – *Ha ha, Mum*. She looked everywhere and then waited and waited, but he never came. He never came and after, when she thought about what happened (his ball) and where (the concrete) she thought of feet all over his shiny blond hair. Feet trampling her Arthur. But it had been a truck.

Ha ha, Mum, ha ha.

When they told her what happened, the people who saw Arthur on the street – all their faces, ogling, and their skin pale, and their eyes wet, and the water washing away the blood on the pavement and the ball – she found out who had been driving the truck and the hospital where they had taken him. She wished he were dead instead of her Arthur. Her feet took her across floors and floors of white hallways, and then she scratched at the man's eyes and called him unspeakable things.

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This was what a friend claimed happened, because she couldn't remember herself. *It's understandable*, the friend said. *But I did what?* Arthur's mother asked, and then hung up the phone and started crying. When she couldn't cry any longer she took a bath and the water was scalding. Her skin burned and she welcomed the sharpness of pain unconcealed. Life without her boy had become one long ache, raw and red. With a gurgle like an open artery, the drain sucked down all the water as she got out of the tub and dripped dry outside of the bathroom. There she gasped when she saw Arthur standing before her – *Arthur? Arthur!* – but it was only his hazy white drawing on the wall, her outline of his body on the brick. Ha ha, Mum.

The sketch was from the day she brought the chalk home but it was raining so they couldn't do it on the sidewalk. *Stand against the wall*, she said, and he did, and her hands trembled as she drew the chalk around him, not quite touching his skin, but tracing him just the same, *My Arthur*. He took the chalk from her, colouring in his light hair, and then she held him, his cheek pressing against hers. The chalk left marks on her sleeve.

Dripping in front of the wall, Arthur's mother wanted him back. She knew his exact proportions. His head, his stomach, his eyes, his ankles. Everything – his liver, his mouth, his ribs, his heart. Did she not know his heart? *Arthur, my Arthur*.

Ha ha, Mum, ha ha.

She would make him come back, he had to come back. She consulted a friend. *It's easy to make a child*, the friend said, *you just need a place with moisture. A domestic place*. First she thought of a garden, but she lived in a building surrounded by concrete and a small row of mulch. The only soil nearby was for the potted plants in the landlord's windows. After she decided on the bathtub, she consulted the friend once more. *I don't want any child. I want Arthur, I want my Arthur*. The friend said, *It's understandable. You just need a few things. A strand of his hair. I have a book on it*.

Arthur's mother found old hair clippings underneath the sofa and on his clothes. She lined them up like lashes on a strand of tape and stuck it to the toilet bowl. Beside the toilet bowl was the bathtub, where she would make her Arthur. She found detailed instructions in her friend's book, which suggested making a skeleton from wood. She went outside and gathered all the mulch beside the footpath. She bound it together with needle and thread, in Arthur's exact proportions. When she held the body against the wall it was lacking something. Blood, she thought, I need blood. Bloodsoaked wood and then his skin would form, soft like gelatin.

She put the stopper in the drain of the bathtub and floated the body of mulch. Soon a red stain lined the rim but the friend had warned her it would take months. At work they said, *You're through with those blood samples?* They said, *That last batch already get sent back?* Her boss said, *You're working so fast, you need a holiday?*

Ha ha, ma'am, ha ha, she said. Her hands were always shaking, but still she stole without spilling a drop. The bathtub was almost full.

Every night after work she waited for Arthur's skin to grow over the wood and thread. She thought of the light freckles on his cheeks. She thought of the redness of his lips that turned purple when he was cold. She thought of how his face matched the color of the skin underneath her arms. When she couldn't remember the exact way he smiled, she grew frantic. Then she pinned photographs of him on the bathroom ceiling. There was the crooked smile, the chipped tooth. She sealed it to memory and thought more and more of Arthur and wet her washcloth in the sink and ran it over her body and then squeezed it into the red tub beside her. Arthur was coming soon, she could see his fingernails – white and curving in the water.

Standing over her boy, Arthur's mother filled the chipped sink to its brim. As she put the twenty-cent fish in the water, she imagined her Arthur rising from the tub, grown tall and dripping on the tiles beside her. He would watch the fish swimming in the sink and laugh. They would laugh together. She stuck her finger in the sink. The water was so very hot. The fish looked at her and flitted their gills. Arthur wasn't here yet. She drained the water from the basin, so that the fish spiraled down and caught in the plug. In the mirror she watched their stupid death drawing to an end – black-eyed, ogling, their soft fins, their soft fins twitching fast, their wetness (*Mummy*) her gasp (*Arthur*), before the release.

(Antique bath image on previous page via Shutterstock.)



ABOUT TARA GOEDJEN

Tara Goedjen is a PhD candidate at the University of Wollongong, where she teaches creative writing. Her recent fiction has appeared in *Meanjin* (online), *Fairy Tale Review*, *New England Review*, and is forthcoming in *KRO*. She is currently at work on a novel about ghosts.

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