

Gen Del Raye

## **My Mother Takes Me to a Public Bath**

Because it is summer. Because it is late. Because my father has been gone for weeks now, and will be gone for weeks more still, and it is a late summer evening, that time of dusk when the sky seems to burn brighter than it has all day, the cicadas winding down the springs on their music box, the sun shining from behind stained glass above the dark silver of the trees. I am young, still young enough to be led away by the hand from the frayed, navy curtain that says Men to the one the exact color of clay in the creases of my palms. Three coins to the woman at the window in exchange for white towels the size of dinner plates, and a slotted wooden locker key the size and shape of a stack of my father's unsold Gakken workbooks rotting under the cracked plastic of the potted basil in the kitchen at home. The woman at the window leans over her counter until I can see her missing teeth beneath the prune of her lips, and she winks at me and calls me cute, and I, a child who expects nothing less, squeeze my mother's fingers, twist from the anchor of her hand like a chime.

On to the creaking wooden platform of the changing room, then through the sliding glass doors, frosted by steam, into the blue-tiled world of the bath. I am freed here from my mother's grasp while she takes a seat by a row of faucets to rinse off her tired and neglected body and I carry out an inspection of every tub—their cloudy depths, their peeling mirrors, the centipede seams of the silver duct tape sealing their edges against the walls. I stand in front of the ice bath, which I hate, and then the grass-colored, scented bath, which I am not yet ready to chance. The simple, main bath, which is a wind-blown lagoon under the blue arms of a painted Mt. Fuji, is beautiful and absurd to my eyes, but it is nearly full, so I turn to the last tub, from which a lone woman, soaking in water up to her neck, raises a pink hand, and beckons me. Her fingers still pearly with water are thin and flawless, with eggshell knuckles and porcelain nails,

and I, a child who confuses kindness with beauty, will remember those perfect fingers in two year's time when I overhear my father, just back from a trip to Kyushu, tell my mother about how poor Yukari was found by her husband hanging from the beams of their shed.

You're Kazu's boy, aren't you? she says to me now, narrowing her teardrop eyes, her one raised hand fluttering aimlessly from her cheek, to her neck, to the water. You ever try an electric bath? she wants to know.

The tub is small and deep and perfectly square, and the water is clear enough that I can see the woman's rose-colored thighs stretching under the pebbled surface like railroad ties bleached by the sun. There is nothing odd about this tub, nothing out of place, nothing that makes it seem like anything more than a simple bath of warm water except a sign carved in white plastic grayed by time and steam.

I shake my head. I am too young to read more than a few simple written words.

Well, come on in then, she says, and she turns her legs to the side to make room, but I stand on the wide, flat rim, unsure.

You afraid? she says, and smiles. She reaches her perfect fingers out for mine, and I watch her shoulders lift out of the water and then the cushioned branches of her collarbones and the closed eyelids of the folds beneath her armpits pointing inward toward her chest. And I am watching these things rise toward me until I am suddenly in the water, my world turning gray, and there are invisible beetles with hard, delicate mandibles pricking at my elbows, at the webbing between my fingers, jogging down the knuckles of my spine. It is warm and dark in this swirling water where the beetles carry off my body piece by piece until there is nothing of me left, my five-year old body unraveling, turned to soup, drifting away, and it is a shock how, after the initial surprise, it seems like the gentlest of dreams, this untying of my skin, this peeling away of the petals of my bones.

Later, when I tell her this, she spins me in the water until I am facing away from her. In the clouded distance I glimpse my mother twisting in her seat, scanning the room, but the woman behind me passes her hand over my eyes and I am alone again

with her whispers in my ear.

Like a sugar cube, she says. Easy. *Poof*.