

D. ARTHUR

Dykes in a Tub

For some reason, it is “news” that on social media the sapphic blond supermodel posted a picture in a bathtub kissing her also-blond-girlfriend, that actress from that long-cancelled show that had too many seasons of teen girls murdering one another. Both of their hair, wet and pushed back, looks the same color, just different lengths. The model’s just past her chin. The actress’ past her shoulders. They are naked, but we can’t see much. We see heads. We see shoulders. We see one knee of the actress bent up into a smooth peak above the water. We see no toes. I imagine them dunking their heads down into the warm scented water of the deep soaking tub. I imagine their hair floating and tangling, a dark blond cloud, impossible to decipher whose hair is whose. I imagine the weight of the dark silver chain around the supermodel’s neck. I hate it when beautiful women who look like sisters kiss and are celebrated for the bright and shiny and sexy stretch of their queerness, like long tanned arms yawning out into the light of the morning sun, but I hate even more that it does stir a hunger in me. I click on every link, every headline, every blog post, each boasting the same embedded social media photo of the dykes in a tub. Toni and I are wrapped on the couch as I click link after link. I put the phone in front of her face while she watches TV, and I watch her eyes shift focus from screen to screen.

“Oh cool,” she says before her pupils flick back to watch a pink-haired lesbian run her knife down the belly of a fish in the shiny industrial kitchen of our favorite competitive cooking show.

We are sitting with our heads on opposite ends of the couch. Affectionate but non-erotic scissoring with legs wrapped up in soft and cozy sweats, so I poke Toni with my foot to call her attention back to me.

“Do you want to take a bath?”

“Maybe after this.” The pink-haired lesbian’s hands slip, the wet pink belly of the fish in front of her is tinged with blood. Toni is a chef, and I sometimes wonder if she loves these shows because they are the sparkliest side of the work that leaves her tired and sore and with feet that she soaks in the bath or if she loves it because in knowing that it is all an act she can feel hot round bubbles of pride over the grunt and groan of her real day-to-day. Or maybe, she just thinks that it is fun, maybe she just does love food that much.

We don’t take a bath. We keep watching the competitive cooking show until we fall asleep on the couch. The next morning when I wake up, my phone browser is still opened to a celebrity website talking about the dykes in a tub and my neck aches from the discomfort of a night on the couch.

I am at a coffee shop writing lines of copy for a mom and pop garden shop’s new local delivery service. I keep tilting my head to stretch my neck, and I feel my well running dry of heavy-handed puns using “leaf.” You don’t have to leaf your house. Leaf the heavy lifting to us.

If I don't stop writing these lines of copy, I feel like my soul will leave my body and fly into the espresso grinder where it will become pulverized alongside the bright and tart roasted beans.

I take a break and I cannot stop thinking about the blondes and the bathtub. I picture the image as a classic painting one day to be discovered as an artifact of lesbian love in a specific time. I think about the image in a blog post on the website of a gossip magazine, and I wonder if it also made it into the glossy print version by the checkout line where my mom buys her groceries. I wonder if my mom saw the dykes in a tub while flipping through the magazine, desperately grasping for evidence that the stars really are just like us. I think about calling her just to ask, but then I remember the time that I tried to explain to her the concept of queerbaiting through the lens of Taylor Swift, and I get tired. I also think of the way that she texts me anytime she hears of or sees anything remotely lesbian with the caption: "thought you'd like!" I remember how she texted me a photo of her TV screen because there was a Home Depot commercial with two women looking at plants and realize that if she had seen dykes in a tub, she certainly would have texted me already.

I wonder about the history of dykes in tubs but a search for "lesbians bath," unsurprisingly, yields page after page of free internet porn—xhamster.com, freebunny.tv, tubekitty.club, websites named after tiny, furry things. I shut my laptop, hoping that no one saw my screen, but also feeling a small thrill at the idea that someone did. I close my eyes and think of all of my exes as pets that need a bath.

I think of Melly from middle school band—she was first chair saxophone, and I was so far down the violin chain that the number didn't matter. I think of her as a rabbit, fluffy and white but with sharp buck teeth and bright red eyes. When I dunk Melly the bunny in a mental bath she squirms and tries to bite at my fingers. I think of the way that human Melly ignored me on the band trip to Cedar Point, the roller coaster capital of the world. She rode the Blue Streak with Calvin, first chair tuba, and everyone said they held hands. When she tried to kiss me in our shared room, I pulled the scratchy beige hotel comforter over my head and pretended to sleep. I mentally dunk Melly the rabbit one more time.

I think of Noe, the chemistry TA, as a beautiful tabby, resistant to water. Grace, the roommate, a chinchilla.

When I think of Toni, I imagine her as a sturdy dog with a job, like the dogs in the working group at the dog show that we watch every year. I think of her as a boxer, almost taller than me when it stands on its long and lean legs. When I think of giving dog Toni a bath, I wonder if there is a bath big enough. I think about dog Toni and I climbing into a tub as big as a swimming pool. I imagine scratching her behind the ears, looping my arms around the fur of her dog waist, spraying her knobby dog knees with a hose.

I call Toni while I am walking home and I can tell that she has put me on speakerphone as she does prep work in the kitchen. I like the repetitive thwack of her knife through root vegetables, the low rumble of the industrial dishwasher, the soft and broken warble of hits from the barely still living radio on the shelf that I can picture above Toni's head.

"Toni, if I were a mammal that you were giving a bath, what would I be?"

The thwack of her knife pauses for a moment. “A koala.”

I think of myself like a koala clinging to the branch of her arm as she dunks me into the water, and it feels right. I imagine a koala and a boxer splashing in a pool, and it feels like something that would go viral.

“You know what I love about baths? Especially baths with you?” Toni asks, and I hear the metronome of the knife pick back up. “It’s like making stock with my favorite meat.”

I laugh, and I wish that I was there in the kitchen, wish I was the meal she needs to prep.

We catch up on our days, and she makes my stomach grumble with the description of the restaurant’s nightly specials—a shellfish risotto, a roasted whole fish, banana pudding finished off with a torch. I like when Toni brulées things. I think she would like welding. Blacksmith dykes and chef dykes both forge their art in fire. Toni invites me for family meal at the restaurant after close.

At home, I search harder for the juicy middle of the venn diagram between the history of dykes and the history of tubs. On the Wikipedia page for the “History of Lesbianism,” there is a picture of female couple found in a series of erotic cave paintings in the baths at Pompeii. I imagine an archaeologist finding the painting and labeling them as roommates, old friends. I think of the Aegean Sea around the island of Lesbos as one big bath, Sappho soaked in ouzo and lust. I keep searching, but I don’t find enough. I know that there is a history of dykes in a tub that is hidden between lines, but sometimes it is hard to even know which lines to look between.

I watch an episode of a recent drama where a lesbian couple wades into the waters of a tub, hoping that the warm suds will wash away the tension between them, and graciously the higher powers in the writing room decide that it does. I pull out my phone to look up if the actresses playing the lesbian couple are queer themselves, but I put it facedown on the counter when I realize that I would rather not know.

I take a bath before leaving to meet Toni and as the hot lavender water laps at my body I wish I weren’t alone, but while two dykes in a tub is better than one. One dyke in a tub is better than none.

I take the long way to the restaurant down a street that I don’t normally walk along. I go out of my way to pass Billy’s Bath Bastion. I recognize it from the photos on the map on my phone. The street is dark and quiet, and there is something arresting about the way that the plate glass windows are painted to look like a medieval fort. A sign shouts in bright red bubble letters, “get off your buttress, and get your butt into one of Billy’s bath tubs.” I wonder if they are hiring a new copywriter. They need one.

Inside, the main lights of the showroom are off but each tub is on a pedestal illuminated by a spotlight. I read the names off the signs: clawfoots, deep soakers, alcoves, jacuzzis, and slippers. Each type of tub has a name that it could share with a member of a burlesque dance troupe. My eyes scan the rows and rows of tubs, each one more beautiful than the last, each one achingly empty.

When I think of who Billy must be, who is the one to look over this kingdom of tubs. I

am sure that Billy is a dyke.

Family dinner is leftover whole roasted seabass that we eat off the bone with our fingers. I sit next to Toni on a bench and lick the salt and oil off her fingers as she feeds me a chunk of flesh. It is almost two in the morning, but we do shots of espresso chased with shots of amaretto that the owner said the staff could finish. My legs are bouncing, toes tapping, energy that I cannot contain.

Nik, the sous-chef with knuckle tattoos of tiny cartoon ghosts, is telling a story about a time that they thought they were going to drown because they were too embarrassed to tell anyone at camp that they couldn't swim, and Toni squeezes my knee hard because I laugh at the wrong time. Distracted. Unfocused. Swimming makes me think of water makes me think of tubs. Makes me think of wading into a porcelain bowl with someone you love. Makes me think of groping under bubbles.

"Have you seen the photo?" I ask and Toni squeezes my knee harder, but doesn't say anything as I pass around the phone.

"Why is this such a big deal?" Nik asks their arm slung lazily around their girlfriend Beth's shoulder. "It's just two dykes in a tub."

"Exactly!" I slap the table, and the platter of fish bones and crisp skin shakes. "Dykes." I slap the table between each word. "In." *Slap*. "A." *Slap*. "Tub." *Slap*.

Toni laughs, kisses my neck.

"I prefer showers." Beth shrugs.

For a moment, I think that is that and the conversation will melt on into something about that TV show that everyone keeps recommending that they swear will get good after the first season or maybe we still start to talk about how unseasonably warm it has been and how it's nice for the day-to-day but bad for our existential dread and anxiety. Just before I am ready to volunteer something mundane to keep the conversation moving, Toni takes her hand off my leg and pushes her sleeves up. She puts her elbows on the table. The candle on the table lights up the tattoo of the butcher's knife that stretches long across her forearm. She leans in conspiratorially.

"Seriously though, there is nothing better than a tub."

And then we're off. We're talking about baths and bathing and how come there were gay bathhouses but not dyke bathhouses or maybe there were and we just don't know. We talk about the scene, you know the one, from *The Handmaid*. We drink more espresso and more amaretto and my throat is burning and my chest is hot and we are writing an oral history of dykes and tubs. Everyone's phones are facedown on the table and I have forgotten about the photo. But was it ever really about the photo, or was it about two bodies, two queer bodies, wading into a tub like a womb. And then I am not sure how it comes up, but of course it comes up, and I am telling them about Billy's Bastion, and I am telling them about the kingdom of tubs. We occasionally are sucking our fingers and eating the last bits of the fish, and everyone's eyes are wider and glowing in the candlelight, and I am not sure whose idea it even really was, but I guess it must have been mine and then suddenly all of our phones are face up and we are

sending out texts. Each text the same text.

Dykes in a Tub.

Followed by the address for Billy's.

Right now.

Grace sells soaps and candles and bath stuff on Etsy so she brings a backpack filled with bath bombs the color of cotton candy. It is sometime after 3 AM, and I am surprised but also not surprised at all to see how quickly the queers have assembled in a pack on the sidewalk outside of a bathtub store. Maybe everyone is there because it feels like art or performance or protest. Maybe everyone is there for the pleasure and the idea of all of these different dyke bodies lounging naked and soft and wet in the tubs, an orgy of relaxation. Or maybe, everyone just likes taking a bath.

The door is locked, so someone throws a backpack through the plate glass window and we hold our ears as the glass shatters, but I feel relief as the crackle of glass fades into silence. No alarm. I give thanks for Billy's shoddy security.

Toni walks up to one of the tubs, "Fuck, these obviously aren't connected to water lines," but as she turns the knob on the tub, it turns on, like magic, like luck, like maybe Billy did a little bit too much to make their showroom a good show.

"Why are they called bath bombs?" a butch vegan with a lip ring and a tattoo of a carrot curling around her left tit asks as the hot pools of water turn bright blue and bright pink and bright purple. "It's so violent right? Why not something explosive but good."

"Yeah," a girl with a soft voice and tiny hands but huge eyes pulls at the vegan's nipple ring. "Why not bath orgasms?"

We all laugh, and she blushes because she wasn't quite joking, but then she starts to laugh, and there is something so good about the way those feelings squirm across her face. Isn't that what all of this is about? Pushing so far into the curl and swirl of shame that suddenly everything feels so hot and so good?

We are climbing into the tubs in solos and duets and full orchestral medleys. We are splashing colorful water onto the pristine tile floor. We don't have towels, and our clothes are strewn along the floor in piles of denim and leather and cotton and flannel.

Toni and Nik brought containers of the banana pudding that get passed between the tubs, dykes scooping out the sweet dessert with their bare hands, yellow globs of custard dropping onto tits and into tubs, floating like sticky clouds.

I see the ghosts on Nik's knuckles smile out between the wet strands of Beth's hair. I see their neck thrown back as someone helps Beth make Nik come completely undone.

Toni smiles at me each time she pulls her mouth away from my body, and I realize that the chain around her neck looks like the one the super model is wearing, and as I run my tongue along the chain I realize that we are all the super models, and I know that if we make the news we will make it in the wrong way, but I hope that someday someone searching for a history of dykes in tubs will find some evidence of this showroom filled with fucking and splashing water and banana pudding and the big hot swell of love that I feel as Toni presses her fingers

deeper into me.

Have you ever had sex so good that it feels like a water birth?

It's so dark outside and loud inside that we see the lights of the police cars before we hear the sirens. If the phones weren't scattered on the ground facedown and we could see the time, we would be surprised that the night lasted as long as it did without interruption. As the red and blue lights of the police cars flash through the window, I grip the edge of the tub with my palms, wrap my legs tighter around the soft wet skin of Toni's waist.

If I am going down, this dyke and this tub, they're going down with me.