

BATHROOMS REMEMBERED

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An Aunt of mine had a haunted linen closet. The door would be found half opened, and inside a lady with a little shawl over her head would be peacefully examining the shelves - a natural rendezvous with its mortal coil for any spirit with a domestic turn of mind, I think. Yet I have never heard of a haunted bathroom. This strikes me as very odd, since in no apartment is one more securely, expandedly, unaffectedly oneself. If I have to haunt at all, I shall hope to haunt a bathroom and there continue to expand.

The first bathroom that made a distinct impression on me was at my grandfather's rectory in Surrey. Three things combined to make it memorable: the soap, the outlook over the churchyard, my dauntless courage in exposing my toe. The bath had a very powerful runaway, and it was my custom to stand with my right big toe over the hole, feeling the water deliciously swirling past it and waiting for the moment when with a final resounding gurgle the last of the bath water was sucked away and my toe sharply jerked downward, no longer a toe I could call my own but a thing imperilled, at the mercy of forces far beyond its control and poised above a mysterious pit.

I must have had my baths at very odd times - to fit in with the claims of my elders, I suppose - for I remember one occasion when, standing with my toe above the pit, I watched from the bathroom window another, equally abrupt descent -

a coffin being lowered into a grave. But in fact weddings made more impression on me, because of seeing how the village brides were dressed. There was a fawn-coloured tailor-made bride trimmed with pink who still remains with me as an apprehension of elegance - most children have bad taste; mine was excruciating. As for the soap, it was a ravishing lettuce green, and called White Rose and Cucumber - an intimation of poetry. I expect it was supplied by the Army and Navy - a store my grandmother thought well of. My father chose to buy soap from Italy. It came assorted in crates from a place called Pontelagoscuro - a romantic name, though not, I believe, a romantic place - and was a soul-stirring experience to unpack, for some of the cakes were purple, others bottle green, some even navy blue. Hard as Parmesan, it kept its scent down to the last wafer. Except for the Italian soaps, I mainly remember the family bathroom as a place where I did a great deal of reading, occasionally rousing to turn on more hot water, occasionally roused by my mother banging on the door with invidious comments on whatever author was engaging my attention at the time. 'Still soaking in Zola? No wonder you fall asleep.' My mother disapproved of me reading in the bath. It was bad for the books. So when I set up in London with a job and a bathroom of my own, I furnished it with a bookcase.

But I never got much reading done there. It lacked repose. There was a gas water heater of a kind called a geyser - after something volcanic in Iceland. Roaring, rattling, spitting out blue flames, on winter mornings my geyser fully bore out that attribution, and at no time of year could I trust it, since when it was functioning it threatened to explode and when it was quiescent it leaked. If for a time I managed to forget about the geyser and settled down to do some reading, my peace of mind would be rent by a sudden uneasiness as to whether I had brought along my latchkey. In this imperfectly adapted flat a common landing and a short flight of stairs separated my bathroom from the rest, so that if while remembering to slam my front door I forgot to bring my latchkey, I had to get out of the passage window, traverse a wall above a glass skylight by clinging to a drainpipe, and squirm in at my

bedroom window - a feasible route, but so smutty that I then had to have another bath.

After a while I gave way to a bourgeois craving to be self-contained, and moved. The new flat pandered to every bourgeois gene in my being; not only was it self contained, it was positively genteel, in a residential terrace instead of a shopping street, and looking down on a small back garden with several trees and a fine assortment of hardy weeds. The agent who showed me over it seemed rather reserved about its bathroom, giving me his words that it was structurally sound, and otherwise preferring to dwell on a marble mantelpiece and what a bargain I should get in the fittings. But it was the bathroom that caught my fancy. It had glass walls and a glass roof - lid, perhaps, would be a truer term, considering its dimensions; it clung to the outside of the back wall like a snail, and was entered by a French window. It was, in fact, one of those small conservatories that embellished Victorian back drawing rooms, with a pony-sized bath in it. I liked it so much that I consented to the outrageous price for the fittings (two lugubrious curtain poles and a piece of dirty carpet), and felt myself a match for Semiramis. Semiramis might have thought it rather small, and if it had fallen off while I was in it I might well have been killed. But the agent said it was structurally sound, and I had no reason to disbelieve him. (I could see for myself that the mantelpiece was marble to the core.) The decency arabesques on the glass walls were the worse for wear, and a scrupulously modest person might have judged them insufficient, but I was not obsessed by modesty, and at that time there really wasn't enough of me to make a fuss about. Besides, there would be steam; and in summer trees.

The trees were sycamores, as thick-tressed as if they had been transplanted from the Greek Anthology. One summer evenings I bathed with the windows open, watching cats and sparrows, looking into those gently moving recesses of green; while at all seasons the garden beneath exhaled breathings of lilies and violets whenever a surge of bath water went down the overflow. It was a most amiable bathroom - trustworthy, too, for it never fell off. If I should have to haunt, I daresay it

would be the one I should choose, if the house had not afterward been destroyed in an air raid.

The same air raid damaged the house further down the terrace in which, my lease having run out, I set up with my newly married cousin and his wife. By this time I was over thirty, and beginning to feel rather frail, so I chose to inhabit the lower half rather than be forever carrying groceries upstairs. This gave me a magnificent Victorian kitchen and two period coal cellars. One of these I converted to a bathroom. I had it painted rose colour to wipe out its past, I trimmed it with the rosiest-posiest chintz I could find, I lavished rose-geranium soaps and essences on it, and in summer I bought it tight bunches of Anne Boleyn pinks from the flower seller at the corner of the street. But it never became a successful bathroom. It always had an oddly cavernous smell, black beetles roamed there, and coal dust seeped through its rosy walls. Looking back on it with a maturer judgement of conversions, I think I was too total with my Ethiop. It would probably have settled down better if I had respected its prejudices and made a trifling acknowledgement of its former way of life; I could have kept some coal in it, for instance.

Then in a whisk I went off to live in the country, in a cottage so small that it barely afforded foothold for a collapsible rubber bath. In this I reflected on the adjacency of cleanliness to godliness - a truth I had not realized before - until my charwoman came down from London on a visit, bringing her little girl, and was glad to see I had a copper, Miss. The copper in its sturdy brick casing took up one corner of the kitchen and looked like an altar dedicated to some minor Molloch. Coppers, I knew, were used for boiling a family wash, or Dickensian plum puddings. I had not had the imagination to see my altar to Molloch as a potential Baden-Baden. My charwoman was too polite to intimate that I needed a good wash. Instead, she said that young Ivy could do with one, if I had no objection. And while the copper was being got ready for young Ivy, she taught me the method and its niceties. In filling the copper, you have to allow for displacement if you don't want a splosh all over the place; and

as the water must heat gradual - otherwise it will go off as soon as you're in it - the fire underneath has to be kept in bounds. There is a right moment to throw in the soap, there is a right moment to draw away the fire. When you judge that the metal has cooled while the water is still hot, you lift off the lid. A gush of steam arises, you plunge your arm through the suds, test the heat, and, if all is as it should be, mount on a chair and step in. Then, moving discreetly, you sit down, your toes drawn in, your knees drawn up, your arms embracing your shins, in the posture of ancient British pit burials. And if you have estimated your displacement rightly, the suds and the steam will do the rest.

One would think that such a very small and inoffensive dwelling might have been left to end its days in peace, but here, too, was to be no haunting place for me. One May night in 1944, the young woman who was my tenant woke with such an acute premonition of danger that she got the household up and out of the cottage before they had time to be reasonable. They were standing in the lane, in the gentle moonlight, and one of them was saying, 'Listen! Isn't that - ' when the single, irrational bomb was loosed. When they recovered their senses, the air was choking with dust and they were netted like fish in the branches of an uprooted tree.

So many of the houses I have lived in have afterward come to violent ends that I wonder my friends still invite me under their roofs. For there is yet another: it died by the act of God, and a wave was its winding sheet.

It stood on the north coast of Norfolk - a coast always under menace from the sea. I remember a man's pointing to a long-shore fishing boat and telling me that precisely beneath it there had been a bridge over a stream, and that his grandfather as a boy had seen wagons loaded with corn driven over it. Further out, there was a submerged market town, larger than the market town inland, and the bells in its church tower could be heard ringing in a ground swell. The usual Ys legend, in fact, only distinguished by an insistence that all this was pretty recent, was almost still something being talked about. The house was called the Folly, and it had

a legend, too. It had been built by a lady in the market town (the visible one), who had loved a sea captain. Every night, she drove out to it along the causeway over the sea marsh to a light in a beaconing lamp in its window. After her day, it was used by coast guards, and it was they, so I was told, who put the battlements on its roof. When the coast guards moved to a new station further along the coast, the Folly was abandoned, and stood empty till a family from London bought it as a holiday house and put in two bathrooms.

The lady of the lamp, the battlements, the two bathrooms, the schoolteacher on the roof - they were known far and wide; they were part of the story, part of the legend. And we, by renting the Folly for the winter, excited local interest much as though we were the first page of another chapter. Even if we did not prove so notable as the schoolteacher - also a winter tenant, who, when the house was cut off by a series of high tides flooding the marsh, was seen walking on the roof and believed to be signalling, though as it was impossible to get to her no one could learn what she meant, till the flood withdrew and she explained to enquiring visitors that she had been admiring the spectacle - even if we did not prove so notable as she, we were at least notable in going there at all that time of year.

'You aren't afraid of the old waves, then?' shouted the man who was delivering coal. Waiting for a pause between one wave and another, I said we hadn't been afraid so far. He stared at me as if I were something a long way out to sea.

It was a two-storey house, stockily built and looking assertively bolt upright on its little hillock, a residue of rabbit turf and crouched gorse bushes on the eroded beach. On either side of the hillock the pebble ridge stretched featurelessly away. In front the beach sloped sharply downward; at low tide it was quite difficult to clamber up its subsiding lower terraces. Behind was a wide stretch of sea marsh, and a causeway connecting us with the real land, where people lived and vegetables grew and where we went for supplies of drinking water. On a calm day, we could hear the sounds of real land - a cock crowing, a car hooting; for the rest, we heard nothing but wind and sea and sometimes

snatches of conversation from passing boats. I was several times terrified during that winter; never, I think, frightened. The boom and explosion of the waves breaking along the wide stretch of beach, the snarl of the pebbles dragged back and forth, was so compulsive, so hallucinating, that by dint of always being aware of it I scarcely noticed it. It was only when the sea broke its own spell, perhaps by some exceptionally ringing rattle of spray against the windowpanes, perhaps by one of those silences that presage a wave much larger than the others, that I was tossed into terror. It was a stormy winter. We grew accustomed to being shouted down by waves, we grew accustomed to being flayed by winds. It soon seemed natural to me that if I wanted to empty the trash basket into the rubbish pit I should cross the hillock on all fours. It was much harder to grow accustomed to the indoor inclemencies: to an unheated kitchen that faced east; to the boldness of famishing rats; to oil lamps that flared and candles that guttered; to so much being poised on the edge of going wrong, like the petrol engine that raised or didn't raise the water supply from a brackish well; to the taste of coffee made with semi-salt water; to having to fetch whatever one needed from inland, often from quite a long way inland, and in a gale, and finding the fire out when one got back. Yet, in the main, we were intensely happy; the game dealer in the market town sold the best pheasants I have ever cooked, and we had two bathrooms. At the end of a day of vicissitudes it was a queer Elysium to lie soaking in that brackish water, listening to the assault of the waves and to the steadily screeching wind, and to reflect that the water one lay in (for even the pools on the marsh were whipped into waves by the force of the gale) was the one unvexed surface for miles.

It seemed that the end of such a house must have been laid with its foundations. Sooner or later, it was agreed, the sea would get the Folly; and because its isolation and its battlements gave it a particular air of bulldog panache, it was assumed that the close of the story would be dramatic. There was this much drama. When the people on the real land had struggled out of their share in the general calamity - the tidal inundation of 1953 that swept along the east coast, up the

Thames estuary, on over Holland, everywhere drowning and destroying - and found time to look seaward beyond the sea at their doors, the Folly appeared to be still there. They saw what they had always seen - the landward aspect of the house. But the tide, tugging away the northern slope of the hillock, had brought down half the structure. The solid-seeming house was a shell.

That autumn we went to look at it. The marsh was marsh again, the causeway passable; but where it formerly ran out in the fishermen's path down to the beach a mass of heaped-up pebbles blocked it, and we had to clamber over this to get to the house. The door was gone, the windows were gone. Part of the stairway remained. One of the baths had come to rest across the stair foot. What was left of the front of the house stood leaning above its downfall, with the unsupported floor of the upper room dangling like a crazy shelf. Light poured in from above and was reflected upward from the water below. The sea was so still that one would have thought it motionless if the light reflected from it had not danced on the rent walls and the dangling ceiling. Another winter would finish it.

I choose to hope that my current bathroom - which, with a few interims such as the Folly, has been my bathroom for over twenty years - will peacefully survive me. It is a trifle too small - but it holds everything I want it to hold, including Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which I intend to finish in time, and then I shall probably go on to Lemprière's Classical dictionary; it faces west, and ideally a bathroom should face east - but I can see herons fly past the window and listen to moorhens squabbling like the church workers they so closely resemble; it is quite undistinguished - but happy is the bathroom that has no history. Having said that I immediately recollect that it contains a particle of history - a minute gem, but authentic. During the war, we had two American soldiers billeted on us. They were young Irishmen, of gigantic strength, and between them, they intimated that it was a joint effort - they broke off the knob of the basin cold-water tap. There was a kind of Ombudsman with the detachment, and to him I went, and represented that it was inconvenient to have

no means, short of a spanner, of turning cold water on and off. At first he inclined to the view that in times of war one must accept trifling inconveniences. I put it home to him that everyone knew that the U.S.A. forces had brought enormous stores with them, and were self-supporting as no army had ever been, and complete with every amenity except washing machines and mothers. Touched in his pride, he said it should be seen to. Seen to it was. A tap was supplied and fixed, a gem of history was incorporated. On one side of the washbasin is the original tap, lettered 'HOT' in black capitals on a white enamel ground. On the other is the replacement - a plain, soldierly affair, stamped with a capital 'H.'

To me, of course, the distinction is perfectly clear.



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