

Stephanie Mark

The Shallow End

I sit in the bath and watch my left contact lens float toward the drain. It moves slowly, sometimes looking like a drop of water. Most of the time it looks like my lens. There it goes. Now it's gone.

Twice I felt like reaching for it, but I didn't. The first time it caught on some strands of red hair. I don't like hair in my eyes so I let it go. The second time I grabbed it, I let it go when I realized the juicy conversation Norman and I would have.

"You should be more careful with things that go in and around your eye, Nordis," he would say. "An eye is a precious thing." Norman is an optometrist.

"You should check on your wife when she's in a tub for so long." Hold it! I would never say that. I can never let him know I'm in here waiting for him to show some concern. Let him get the water bill.

I pour more bubbles and the water foams up to my neck. It's the bubble bath I got for Mother's Day, the pink kind that comes in a champagne-shaped bottle with gold foil around the neck. Paris Nights. It sits on the wicker shelf above the toilet next to a can of Raid Ant Spray.

If I were Katie, he would have checked on me in five minutes. Never leave a small child alone in a bath. When we first moved here, he insisted I buy those non-slip decals you put on the bottom of tubs. They were on my list of things to do, but we still had sheets hanging on the windows.

"Did you get them yet? I'm concerned about her slipping."

"I've looked for them," I lied, "but it's not exactly the kind of thing you find on a sale table."

Ten minutes later, he returned with a package of Donald Duck tub decals.

That night he shot a whole roll of film on Katie in this tub. He took pictures of her holding a blue plastic fish, some with her hair all bubbled up with shampoo, and one full body shot which is now pinned on the refrigerator with a magnet. It fell in the sink once while I was washing dishes so now it's kind of discolored. You can still tell she has blond hair.

"I don't understand how it could fall in the sink?" Norman said one day. "The sink and refrigerator are far apart."

It was the same tone of voice he used when I had to tell him I drove off with my purse on top of my car.

"How could you drive away with something that big on top of your car?" he asked. Then when he saw I was going to cry, he got that other kind of tone. "Okay, make a list of everything that was in your purse. Each credit card number and I'll call the banks."

At the top of my list I wrote "tampons." Norman stood fluttering the paper in his hands. "I don't get it, I just don't get it. Why is that more important than Visa?"

I watch an ant crawl out of a crack in the porcelain. It crawls toward the bar of soap. I really should call back that exterminator but I don't want to leave the house for a whole day. Last time, I went to the movies. Nobody ever speaks to me in the movies. But that day I was spoken to twice. I was asked to move my head.

I pour out the last of the bubbles so there's enough to cover my breasts. I hold the empty champagne bottle and think of New Year's Eve with Norman.

Black velvet and rhinestones. How often do I dress like that? Only to one of his office parties. Black velvet never lays flat on me. It protrudes, sticks out--doesn't seem soft anymore. And my necklace hung funny, sat on my chest like a trinket on a shelf. Suzanne, Norm's secretary had a dress that cooperated with her body. Hugged her flat on top. My body repelled the velvet like two opposite ends of a magnet. Twelve o'clock. Come on everybody, it's time. I struggled with my dress in a corner of the room. By the guacamole. Midnight. A horn blew, I turned my head. My dress tried to leap from my body. Dick Clark smiled, some glitter came

off my shoe, and Norman hugged Suzanne on the other side of the room. Happy New Year. I reached for a chip and the green dip stained the elbow of my black velvet dress. The next day I had it dry-cleaned and gave it to my sister to give to her maid.

That was a noise! Norman has finally come to check on me. Quietly I try to arrange my body in a nice position. How was Marilyn Monroe found? I settle for on my side with one arm flung over my breasts. I glance down to see how I look. One arm doesn't even begin to cover my breasts. They float to the surface like buoys. I try to drown them but they will not have it. I hold perfectly still and wait. I have left the door unlocked so Norman will have no problem bursting in with a look of concern in his eyes.

"Nordis! My god honey. You scared me. I was afraid you had slipped or something."

"How about a tuna sandwich but without any of that yucky celery that mommy puts on?" Norman says.

I realize the noise is only Norman opening the pantry. He must be in the kitchen with Katie. I have never heard him say "yucky" before. I don't like it. The ant crawls inside a bottle of shampoo. No More Tears Baby Shampoo. I put the cap back on. Norman is not going to come in here, I conclude. Then I conclude that Norman has a strong bladder. This is the only bathroom in the apartment.

Norman will have to come in here sometime, and when he does, he will find me sprawled out naked with everything drowned. Everything except my breasts. I slowly peel off a Donald Duck decal. I think about my pores being open from the steam and wonder if ants can crawl into open pores? My fingers are wrinkled like they used to get when I was little and never got out of the pool when my mother called.

My contactlens could be anywhere now. Anywhere in the New York sewer system. Katie will never need glasses or contacts. I'm certain of it. She has Norman's eyes. It's something they have in common, goodeyes. She's too young to have them tested, but there won't be any problem. By four, I was already complaining of terrible headaches.

Katie and Norman. "Such a good father," my mother said after she was born. "You're lucky. Most men won't do things like that.

Things with diapers.”

I yank off another duck decal. It is hard to yank underwater. It’s a gentle yank in slow motion.

The bubbles are melted now which means I’m left looking at my breasts. This makes me uncomfortable, but at least they obstruct my stomach. That’s one thing to be glad about.

“You look great, Nordis, you really do. But there’s still a few things you can try. I’ll get you that book, *A Flatter Stomach in Thirty Days*. Would you like that? I’ll even diet with you if it will help. One way or another, we’ll get those ten pounds off your stomach,” Norman said after Katie was born.

“What happens after thirty days?” I had asked but Norman had bent over funny and put out his back. Norman is always putting out his back.

The next day I went to the market to get some fruits for a new diet I had read about. I wore the black boots that made my legs look slim. Pregnancy doesn’t affect your legs. Two men kept looking at the cantaloupes and then over at me. I left immediately and went to the catfood section.

As I loaded cans of catfood into my cart I thought I heard someone say Puss n’ Boots was a good brand. When I looked up, they were both staring at my legs. I turned sharply on my boot-heel and held up a can of Raid.

“Please repeat exactly what was said to you, Miss Spect,” the store manager said and glanced at my wedding ring. His pen was poised as he fingered his tie.

I thought about it. “Cancel my complaint,” I said politely and walked out.

“We can’t help people like that if they won’t cooperate,” I thought I heard him whisper to the clerk-in-training.

On the way home, I honked at the car in front of me because it wouldn’t go faster than 35 mph. When I sped past, I looked to see an elderly woman hunched over her steering wheel.

It was the first thing I told Norman when I got home. I felt my eyes go wet when I got to the part where I honked.

“So?” Norman asked when I reached the end of the story and described the woman’s condition. “Then what happened?”

“That’s it.” I sobbed.

Norman shook his head, "Why are you always telling stories where nothing happens?"

I look at the waterproof clock that sits on the toilet to make sure I really have been in here for three hours. Time can be funny when you're immersed in an activity you enjoy. I'll give Norman another half hour to muster up his husbandly concern. I could moan. Do people moan when they're unconscious? I practice a moan silently in my head. If he's in the kitchen he'll never hear a moan. Especially a silent one.

I rub my eye and wonder whether my vision is cloudy from the steam or from losing my contact. I decide it's the steam and switch the tap from hot to cool. My legs are cramping but I know it can't be much longer. Any minute now he will look around and notice something is different, not quite right, missing. My stomach. Missing.

He will look at his watch with a start, leaving the mayonnaise uncapped and the tuna draining. "Nordis. Bath. Water. My god!" Katie will trail after him, complaining of sudden terrible headaches. Everyone in the building will be visibly shaken. Husbands will set egg-timers when their wives take baths. Just to be safe.

I pull off a third Donald Duck sticker and toss it in the toilet. It is a good shot from the tub. Norman and Katie play a similar game with a red sponge ball and a basket. I never play because I'm not a good shot.

I hear giggling and strain to listen over the running water. I turn the tap off so I can hear better.

"Another horsie ride for Katie Milady?" Norman speaks with a proper English accent. More giggles. I've never heard Norman use an accent before. I don't like it.

I picture Norman down on all fours, his wallet slipped from his shirt pocket, his hair sticking up because that's the first thing Katie grabs when she loses her balance.

I hear footsteps and realize I'm lying in an unattractive position. Somehow my thigh is twisted, causing it to bulge at the top. Not at all how Marilyn was found. I hope that Norman doesn't decide to bring in his camera. I imagine a picture of me hanging on the refrigerator with a magnet.

There is shy tapping. Norman would not tap shyly.

"Mommy, come here mommy! Daddy stopped going giddyup and I didn't even fall off yet. Come here mommy," she says through the closed door.

She is really putting sentences together well since I last talked to her.

It's only now I realize the water level has dropped to well below my knees. I think about Katie who is frightened and Norman whose back has gone out for the third time this month. I picture his sheepish smile. A hot bath is something that always soothes his back. Katie and I can shoot some baskets while we wait for him to feel better, I think, because I really am a pretty good shot. I look at my white terry cloth robe hanging on the hook. I will get up and tie it flatly against my chest. Then I will walk out of here toward Norman on the floor. I might even tousle Katie's hair. I will smile down at him, a cracked, chapped smile from three hours of water.

But before I do anything like that I remove my other contact, my right one, with a wrinkled finger. I watch it get caught in the whirlpool by the drain. It slides down with the last of the water, a loud gurgle. This is good because things that come in pairs should stay together.