

The Bath

by

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His washing hanging on the line was visible to most of us over the low fences that separate the houses in Cotton Street, and the women told us that the orderly way it was hung out with socks at one end and shirts and so forth at the other proved Gavin Bauble was all right. 'If he missed his wife that much,' they said, 'it'd be obvious in his pegging-out.'

Margaret Bauble had been doleful and slow moving, and I'd rather liked her, but her unresponsiveness had irritated our women, 'we tried to talk to her, but you couldn't get her to tell you anything.'

'What did you want her to tell you?'

'She wouldn't join in, that's all. No one's better than anybody else in Cotton Street, and they're wrong if they think they are.'

Someone had spotted Margaret heading for the train station one August morning, switching her suitcase from hand to hand as she went, and after that, Gavin, who at one time seemed to be everywhere in the neighbourhood at once, was rarely seen outside again.

I saw him occasionally in the corner shop where he bought three copies of all the newspapers, 'to stay on top of things', he told me. I knew he liked me, and I thought with a little prodding I might be able to find something out about Margaret, but he always moved away before I could think of how to approach

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him. Margaret had been gone for around seven years when he asked if I'd feed his fish while he went on holiday. 'Key's under the stone trout next to the porch. Place's a bit of a mess, you know how it is. Busy all the time. Thank you, John.'

I used the wall for balance as I made my way to the living room; the stacks of newspaper covering the narrow hall in the Baubles' house were three feet high in some places. I stumbled on the hilly terrain and wondered if I'd have been better off crawling. The staircase to my right was piled with junk, and although there was a clear space about the width of a human foot in the centre of each step, the old carpet had split and formed lethal gaping pockets at the edge of every one of them.

Gavin had always struck me as methodical, and as I gazed into the living room from my heightened position in the hall at all the room contained, I searched for some inherent order in the chaos. In one corner I noticed a jumble of metal walking frames thrown together so they'd come to resemble a mindless sculpture in a municipal park. Close by was a row of grey and battered filing cabinets, the cast-offs from an office somewhere, many of the drawers were open and filled with electrical wiring and extension cords yellowed with age and grease. I saw rolls of wallpaper, sheets of plywood, boxes of telephone sanitiser spray, and dented tins of paint stacked on top of each other. There were a couple of flashy pinball machines, some old radios, a CD rack the height of a man, and a wheelbarrow full of coils of rope, and beside that a great tangle of broken fishing nets.

I supposed that the black glass swans artfully arranged on the shelves of a tilting bookcase must have belonged to Margaret once. Perhaps the bead curtain, an abandoned tangle of broken plastic ovals and stars lying on some dusty cushions, had been hers. I thought of going home; the room had an air of aggression and despair and smelt strongly of garbage. I noticed

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the fish tank glinting on the windowsill but could see no obvious way to get to it, except through a passageway between stacks of rubbish bags; I moved slowly through them causing a railway sleeper to thump heavily to the floor.



I reached the fish. There were no dead ones, although some were so top-heavy with frilly fins that their efforts to swim in the green water looked painful.

While I was making my way back, I glanced up, and there was Margaret standing at the door in a grey swimming suit. I could hear water dripping onto the newspaper around her feet.

‘I’m glad it’s you,’ she said, ‘I thought it was a burglar or Gavin back early. Are you coming every day?’

She turned to go, using the doorframe to keep her balance, and I had no time to think of pleasantries. ‘Margaret, I had no idea you were still here.’

‘Of course I am, but he didn’t want me to feed his fish.’

‘I mean here at all, living with Gavin still.’

‘Whatever made you think that?’ She sounded wounded.

‘I’ve only been inside this house once and you could still walk around then. I wouldn’t have blamed you for going, nobody in Cotton Street would.’

‘I don’t have to bother with it all, I live in the bathroom, there’s nothing in there.’

‘Don’t go yet, Margaret, let’s talk a bit.’

‘Where, talk where?’

It was only then it occurred to me that she had no hair. She’d turned her back to me and her head was a shiny dome, I wondered if she was ill. ‘Have you eaten anything today, can I make you something?’

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‘That would be a bit tricky. Although to be fair to Gavin, he’s left a decent alleyway in the kitchen. There are seats by the stove.’

‘Could we go there?’

‘I’d like that. Tomorrow maybe if you’re coming back.’



I thought about Margaret and Gavin Bauble all night. I pictured Margaret squatting in their tiny bathroom guarding the last empty space left in the house, and Gavin wandering happily in a long-forgotten seaside town where the waves that once embraced the shoreline had receded so far they were visible only as a glimmer on the horizon. I felt uneasily honoured by his trust in me despite my revulsion, and finally decided against calling Reverend Coons, or the police, or the fire brigade.

I was deliberately noisy the following day in my journey to the fish tank, and again, as I turned to navigate my way back between the rubbish bags, Margaret was at the door, wrapped in towels. ‘Fish all right, John?’ she asked.

‘I want to talk to you, Margaret, I’ve been thinking about you all night.’

‘I suppose we could go in the kitchen.’

She remained tense as we talked, and I was blunt. ‘None of your clothes were ever on the line, so we assumed you’d gone years ago.’

She thought that funny, and laughed a little. ‘I don’t need clothes anymore, you see?’

‘No, I don’t see, Margaret.’ I stared at the old cigarette butts scattered across the floor between us.

‘Well, it’s the way Gavin likes it and that’s fine by me.’

‘Did he take your clothes away?’

‘Yes. He took them to a charity shop about six years ago.’

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‘Why on earth didn’t you tell someone?’

She smiled. ‘Can you imagine me running out onto Cotton Street in my swimming suit? It doesn’t fit me properly.’

We were sitting opposite each other on old car seats close to the stove, and I became aware of her skin; it was spongy and discoloured, and hung from her arms and legs heavily. ‘Come off it, Margaret, this is not a joke. Look, there are ways to help people like Gavin these days. Why didn’t you tell someone what was going on?’

‘Because Gavin wouldn’t have liked it if I’d discussed our life with strange men.’

‘You could’ve said something to the women on Cotton Street, surely?’

She looked down at her toes, and I did likewise; they were rubbery-looking and I felt queasy at the sight of them. I noticed how grey her swollen legs were. ‘I didn’t feel right with those women. They asked hollow questions as if every single one of them was training to be a hairdresser. Anyhow, why are you questioning me?’

‘Has Gavin ever hit you?’

‘Now you’re just being silly, John.’

‘But what do you do here all day?’ I eased a pile of sticky magazines off the seat beside me and let them fall.

‘Well, I just dream.’

‘Dream of what?’

‘You know how it is; this and that.’ She ran her fingers over her scalp.

‘What happened to your hair, Margaret? I remember it as long and auburn, and quite beautiful.’

She laughed again and flushed slightly. ‘There was no point to it anymore, like clothes.’ She stared at me, still smiling. ‘I like talking to you. Gavin’s back soon and then I won’t see you again.’

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‘It would’ve been nice don’t you think, if you’d gone with him?’

‘You’re very charming, that’s what Gavin likes about you, John. He always said you didn’t jump to conclusions.’

‘You know what I think? Gavin wanted me to find you, wants something to change.’

‘Oh, you might think that, but he loves me the way I am.’

‘And how about you, do you love him?’

‘More than life itself.’ She looked upwards and her face shone, and I believed her. ‘Be careful on your way out,’ she said, ‘don’t touch anything, because he’ll know, and think I’ve done it.’

‘What would he do then?’

‘Oh, he’d think of something.’

She lowered her head as I looked back at her, so I could read nothing in her face. I left her there amongst the trash, and in my fury and pity for her, I had Gavin Bauble walking the long distance across the muddy sand and into the sea until he was no more. I felt ashamed that none of us in Cotton Street had known what he’d done to her.



I didn’t bother with the fish the next day; I climbed the stairs at Number Four and walked into the bathroom without knocking. She was lying in the bath with her hands crossed over her chest, the water looked greasy. The curtains were drawn together and the air was chilly, yet foetid. ‘You might’ve knocked,’ she whispered.

‘I came to ask if you’d like to go on holiday too, Margaret.’

She raised her head above the rim of the bath and gazed at me. ‘I went to the coast by myself on the train once, but I came back the same day because I missed Gavin.’

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‘I’ll take you to the coast today, straight away if you like.’

‘I haven’t got anything to wear, John. I know all women say that, but I haven’t.’

‘I’ve brought you a pair of jeans and a shirt.’ I put the plastic bag on the floor and pointed at it. ‘You get dressed, and I’ll go and feed the fish and wait for you downstairs.’ I had no precise plan, but felt that if I could get Margaret Bauble out of the house, something would occur to me.

She rose slowly from the water until she was standing, and even in my agitation, I saw the fluid grace of it. ‘I can’t go without discussing it with Gavin. I suspect you’re not married, otherwise you’d know about these things.’

‘But, Margaret, how can you bear to live in all this rubbish?’

‘I don’t see it anymore; I’m in here all the time.’

‘In the bath itself all the time?’

‘Of course in the bath.’

‘You two can’t be sharing much together as a married couple.’ I heard my voice rising.

‘Oh, we do. He thinks I’m a dolphin, and I go along with it because it pleases him. What’s wrong with that? He comes in here a lot and spends time with me. He likes to throw things into the water for me to eat.’

‘Raw fish I suppose you’re going to tell me.’

‘That’s what dolphins do eat. You might think it sickening, but the Japanese eat them that way I’m told.’ I’d upset her. She slid down again into the water, keeping her eyes on me. ‘You used to like my husband years ago when we first came here. He thinks you’re his friend, and men like him don’t have a lot of friends. I’ll only go if Gavin agrees.’

I couldn’t persuade her to change her mind and I left her there, submerged once more in the slimy water, blinking up at me.



On the day Gavin was due home, I could think of nothing else but the violence I wanted to do to him. He appeared on Cotton Street in the late afternoon. He looked vigorous and strong. ‘How was the holiday?’ I asked, and I could hear my voice trembling.

‘Highly recommended. McClaren’s Dolphinarium, down on the south coast. Fish OK?’

‘All except one,’ I answered sharply.

He took my meaning instantly, and moved back a step. ‘She came down? Wouldn’t have thought she’d show herself.’

‘Why are you making her live like that, Gavin?’

‘It’s what she wants, John. She’ll have told you already she’s a dolphin. I can scarcely get her to come out of the water, and when she does, she drips all over my property and it drives me mad. You’re not married, so you wouldn’t understand.’

‘And where would she sit, what would she do amongst all the trash in your house?’ I took a step towards him, and thought of punching him hard.

‘Look, I’d do anything to change things, but I can’t force her. Collecting objects of interest takes the pressure off; makes me feel I’m still involved in the world. I do love Margaret, you know.’

He looked at me candidly, and I could see no flicker of deceit in his face. He stood on the road with me in a creased beige suit, clutching a straw hat in his hands and waiting for me to speak again; for a while I could not, until suddenly the sad reality of his situation dawned on me. ‘I could help you with this business, Gavin. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.’

‘Ashamed?’

‘Lunacy is not such a taboo thing these days.’

‘Are you suggesting my wife is mad?’

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‘I am, yes. She thinks she’s a dolphin when clearly she is not.’

‘And you think you’re a good neighbour when clearly you are not.’ He flicked something off the sleeve of his jacket. His face had turned chalky.

‘She needs help, Gavin.’

‘It’s my job to help her, that’s why I went to the Dolphinarium.’

‘To see real dolphins, you mean?’ I prompted gently.

‘To understand them better. They’re so unearthly, John, so graceful and forgiving somehow.’

I stared at him hard and felt my pity fade suddenly. ‘You love dolphins then, Gavin?’

‘Doesn’t everybody?’

‘But you love them more than people.’

He raised his hand as if to touch me, and I moved back. ‘You’re very perceptive, John. They’re so intelligent. We could learn a lot from them. You know when I made eye contact with my first one I desperately wanted her to like me. It’s hard to explain, there wasn’t anything supernatural about it really, but when I came out of the water my body felt different, lighter somehow—yes, as if I was full of light and peace.’

‘And the world would be a better place if we were all like them?’ I led him.

‘What a question. Of course. Although the human girls at the Dolphinarium were quite lovely too.’

He grinned at me and I felt instantly nauseous. ‘Why didn’t you take Margaret with you?’

‘I couldn’t leave the house empty in case we were burgled. I’ve got some precious things in there.’ A mayfly landed on the sleeve of his jacket and he pinched it hard between his fingers and flicked the remains away. ‘Besides, she doesn’t have to study dolphins; she is one.’

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I felt something shift in my gut; I had him now. ‘Well I’m taking Margaret on holiday myself. She said she’d discuss it with you, and I strongly suggest you agree to it.’

‘It’s hopeless; she won’t come out of the bathroom.’

‘You’d better persuade her then, otherwise Cotton Street will know everything.’

‘Know what? What’s to know?’

‘Know the condition she’s in. Know what you’ve done to her.’

‘Look John, we’re modern people. She wants to live like that. You wouldn’t understand such matters.’

‘You said she was a dolphin.’

‘Well I don’t deny I said it, but she thinks so herself, and I go along with it.’ He looked quickly up and down the road as if suddenly conscious again of where we stood, and suddenly sure that the conversation had ended.

‘You’ve made her think it. She does it to please you. It’s cruel.’

‘Now you’re just being silly, John. You should get married yourself and then you’d know what you were talking about.’ I thumped him hard in the chest and his hat fell to the ground between us. ‘She’d like Scotland, in the mountains, perhaps,’ he whispered.

‘She wants to go to the coast.’

He made an odd whimpering noise, and I could see he was on the brink of tears. ‘No, she wouldn’t like that at all, John.’

‘And you go and buy her some proper clothes.’ I turned away from him abruptly and didn’t look back.



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Margaret was waiting outside the house when I went to collect her. Gavin was very upset, she told me; he didn't want to wave her goodbye. 'Do you think this skirt is all right?'

'It's lovely, Margaret; yellow suits you. And that's a clever thing you've done with the scarf, it looks very exotic.'

'It took ages, Gavin helped me. It's a turban.' I could see she was very excited, and I felt emboldened by it. I put the mountaineering magazine Gavin had left on my doorstep the night before next to the stone trout, and took her arm. 'Gavin thinks we should head inland, but if you don't mind, I'd like to go to the coast. I've got my swimming suit. Did you bring one?' she asked.

'Of course,' I lied, and led her to the car. I had no real idea of what to do still; I was hoping that getting her away from Number Four would startle her out of the mesmeric state Gavin had carefully nurtured in her over the years.

She seemed nervous in the car and I drove slowly, aware of her beside me all the time. Sometimes she put the palm of her hand on the windscreen as if to draw the countryside into her. We passed fields of rapeseed all in bloom and acid yellow, and the sky was the kind of blue that brought hope with it. 'Gavin's a bit obsessed by dolphins, isn't he, Margaret?'

'Everybody's got an obsession, haven't they?'

'What's yours, is it dolphins too?'

'No, I'm not that indulgent. I suppose it would be Gavin.'

It started to rain suddenly from nowhere, and I had a dull headache. The car smelt thick and sweet. 'Don't wind the window up, Margaret. The air's fresh and good, don't you think? You told me you met him at the seaside.'

'Yes. It all seems so long ago now. I can barely remember it.'

I glanced at her; her thumbs were clasped tightly inside her fists. 'Forgive me for saying this, Margaret, but it seems to me your life has imploded.'

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‘I don’t disagree, John. Gavin’s a possessive man. He’s childishly protective of me. He thinks I’m not coming back. He was still in the bathroom when I woke up this morning. He kept shuddering and sighing like people do when they’ve been crying too deeply and too long.’



We reached White Hole Cove in the late afternoon and drove straight to the Harlequin Tea Rooms. We couldn’t see the beach from there and Margaret wouldn’t eat anything. I could feel her agitation. ‘Could we go to the sea before the sun sets, John?’ She fingered her blouse and I noticed that she had the old grey swimming suit on underneath it, like a child might. I was touched by her strange and gentle innocence. ‘Margaret, this obsession Gavin has with dolphins isn’t healthy. It seems to me you’ve sacrificed yourself to it. Have you ever thought of leaving him?’

She made a noise that sounded like gunshot, and I was taken aback for a moment. ‘Every single day of my life. But people usually leave each other because of hatred, not because of love.’

‘So you can’t leave him?’

‘It’s terribly difficult if you love someone.’

I was beginning to think that the whole venture was foolhardy; that I’d interfered in something so queer that a couple of days by the sea would be meaningless. ‘Look, which of you thinks you’re a dolphin, tell me that.’

She shrugged. ‘Things get all blurred in a marriage, you start acting like one person I suppose, and then it doesn’t matter who thinks what.’ She looked at me steadily for the first time that day. ‘You think one of us is mad, don’t you?’

‘Yes. And I think the other one is nurturing the madness.’

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‘Well, perhaps insanity always involves more than one person.’ She tried to laugh but the sound was feeble. ‘Gavin and I should never have got together. It’s unnatural, I know.’ She turned away and covered the side of her face with her hand. I’d pushed her too far, too soon.

‘Where shall we go, the cliffs or the beach?’

She thought for a while, looking at the palms of her big hands. ‘If we go to the cliffs we could watch the sun slip into the ocean, but if we go to the beach we could paddle. The beach.’



I could feel the warm salty breeze on my neck and arms as we crossed the glistening pebbles to the shoreline. Margaret led the way, she’d taken her shoes off and as she reached the water’s edge, she wrenched the turban off her head as if she hated it and unbuttoned and dropped her skirt. I looked behind me, but could see no one in sight. ‘You’re not going in right now are you? We could swim tomorrow all day if you like.’

She stood in her baggy swimming suit, fleshy and pale. ‘I can’t wait, John. Come in too. The water’s delicious.’

She turned to beckon me and her face looked keen and beautiful in the dying light, and there was about her a gracefulness that both captivated and shocked me. I went fully clothed into the water behind her, half-afraid to lose her and thrilled by her suddenly. For a while, she dived, surfaced, and then stretched herself on the briny water, moving further out and turning frequently to wave me on. I was entranced and excited; I wanted to reach her and touch her. I swam strongly, keeping her in my sight the while. She was beautiful. The last vision I had of her has never left me; I saw her rise high out of the water, saw the elegant twist and flip of her sleek arched body as she disappeared beneath a wave, as if she’d never been.



I drove the car recklessly on the way back to Cotton Street, my hands trembling and slipping on the steering wheel. I tried repeatedly to rehearse what I would say to Gavin, and each time the words came to me they had no power to describe anything at all. I'd crouched for most of the night on the beach staring at the horizon, sometimes the dark hump of a wave gave me hope, and I got to my feet quickly and called her, yet I knew all the while that Margaret had finally gone home, and we would not see her again.

When I arrived at Gavin's door, it was open, and I knew he'd been waiting for me. I found him sitting in the kitchen. 'You don't need to say anything, John,' he whispered. His face was blotchy and swollen. 'Don't speak now.'

'It was all too fast,' I blurted out. 'I stayed until it was pointless to wait anymore.'

'Don't tell me about it, John. Don't.' He sighed deeply, and I can still remember it; soft and yielding, and very drawn out like the sound a small wave makes on a beach in fine and windless weather.