

## The Sparkling Heat I Found in the Bathtub

Delaney Otto

I found it wriggling around like a freshly born worm when I pulled aside the shower curtain. It was a chilly Sunday morning and I could hear the church bells ringing, an accompaniment for the ball of light and crackling burning's dance. It didn't singe the tub as it writhed, even though I felt like I would be burnt if I made contact.

"What are you?" I whispered under my breath.

"What are *you*?" it replied in a voice shrill and raspy, like I imagined a crow might speak with. I was startled at its response, though the sound surprised me more than the fact it could talk for some reason.

"I...am a human," I said. "Um, flesh, blood, bones."

"Ah, carbon condensation," the wriggling starlight mused. "Space dust from the cough of a supernova."

At the moment, standing there in pajamas stained from last night's spaghetti, I felt the comparison was a bit too grand.

"So, you know what I am. But what're you?"

"Hm, hm," the hum made my teeth buzz. "To tell you would be too much. Your soul would pour out your ears."

"Well, do you have some simpler explanation? You're in my bathtub, I'd at least like a name, or, y'know, a reason as to why you're in my bathtub."

"You know of angels and demons, yes?"

"Yes."

"Cast those out of your mind entirely."

"Ah." Being raised with religious imagery, I found that impossible.

"I may appear like the burning bush, or Hellfire, or starlight, but I come from something else."

"And that is...?"

The light coiled and rolled like thunder and smoke, shifting what could be yellow to what could be blue. Perhaps it was amused.

"Why do you think I sit at the bottom of your tub, where you wash away pain and sorrow and dirt? Do you recall what happens to the grit and grime that slips its way between the lips of a clam?"

"It makes a pearl."

"Correct! So, what do you make of me?"

"You're... a pearl that I made?"

"Oh, yes, yes. So clever you are, though you think otherwise so often. I am your pearl."

"But pearls are supposed to protect the clam from stuff that gets *inside* it. I wash off dead skin and dirt—that's on the outside. You don't come from inside me."

"No, but also yes. I was born in the pipes beneath the drain, and I wriggled up through the mess and rust. Therefore, I was born within something. But, I come from what you have washed off, what you have let run down the drain, things you have shed. Therefore, I come from outside. However, not all you wash off is external. Do you not wash off your anger, your sadness? Do you not enter the hot water to soothe internal, emotional aches? Do you not scrub off the hatred you are so ashamed of? Do you not let your tears slip down the rusted drain?"

"...Oh, I guess that's right."

"Therefore, I come from within."

The light that might be blue rippled into colors new and newer, as if it was showing off.

"Look at what you have created. Am I not beautiful?"

"You are, you are," I assured it. "But why do you exist? I'm not a clam, I don't need protection. So, what were you created for?"

"Bah, so often do humans question the reason for their births! For their lives! It is a pity, thinking you need to earn your right to exist. Such a sad state humanity is in." It gurgled and spasmed in distaste. "What does your kind think pearls symbolize?"

"I guess, in poetry and stuff, they give value to pain. Even if you go

through something difficult, it might result in something beautiful.”

“Yes, yes, good. And you have agreed that I am beautiful.”

“Well, yeah. But my struggles aren’t very significant. I’m just a regular person, with an average life. Other people have it way worse than me.”

“Again with this! Humans are so ignorant of the improbability of their existence, they seek to find reason for it, and seek to compare theirs to others. Your birth was a raindrop in an ocean, a fallen petal in a field of flowers. You, but a speck of stardust in this wide, black universe! Your woes are as unique as your soul! Do not diminish them so. I sit here before you, a dazzling display of your mind and heart, and yet you still insult me.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“You are forgiven, my home and creator. But, please, never speak so ill of your own emotions ever again. It is unhealthy.”

“But, some of my emotions are really dumb and...shameful. I can’t just start loving them.”

“Perhaps you do not have to. Not yet, at least. But look upon me, look upon this drop of stardust, born from the supernova of your soul, and know that each moment you live, each thought you think, is a miraculous happenstance in the cosmic pot of probability. Your existence is a highly unlikely occurrence. Do not mar it with self-hatred.”

I bent down, in the cold bathroom on a colder Sunday morning, and wrapped my arms around the ball of light and heat. Its warmth sank into my embrace, and as I lifted it out of the bathtub, I held it close, feeling its wobbling surface tension push and pull. In an instant, I was not cold. I cannot say all my negative feelings were quelled. I cannot say I felt much better about myself. But, I was warm, and I felt a little more full in my heart. No, not fuller. A light shone on the corner of my soul that I thought was empty. I found there was no emptiness at all, but all the little things I had stowed away in the darkness. Perhaps it was time to wash them off.

**Delaney Otto** is a senior at UND pursuing a major in Communication and a minor in English. She enjoys horror, magical realism, fantasy, and happy endings. Along with writing, she enjoys music and art, and thinks that everyone should try creating something, no matter how small or simple. She has a growing pile of books she really needs to start reading.