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Wash Your Feet!

The aluminum basin sat innocently next to a bright and worn orange picnic bench on the back patio, a concrete slab that also housed two vinyl lawn chairs and a worn green Astro turf rug. The basin was home to the small white cottage which was a beachfront property that sat on a hillside overlooking Lake Erie. More times than not, rows of shoes, lay below the picnic bench and next to the basin, keeping them dry, from morning rains that sometimes came. It was not uncommon to have to wipe the bench down of sand that collected on it from the lake winds, causing the sand to fall down into the basin that set next to it in partnership. The basin graced the outskirts of the old green Astro turf meant to protect the feet when the sun was hot and scorching in the afternoon. Above the basin was an iron faucet with a speckled black and silver cranking handle. After its use, it sometimes dripped slowly into the basin. Dropping small droplets, creating ripples in the water, quietly and serenely, creating its own beat as the waves crashed a shore rhythmically in the background. The basin had its own elements of age with tiny dents, creases and worn paint that was slowly erasing its heritage, "Gasta's Dairy". Its use had changed over the years and only it knew the history of things it carried and stored. It was usually filled with water half way up with remnants of sand and small pebbles that had sunk to its bottom. Mosquitos would sometimes dance along the surface of the water, causing innocent ripples as they dived to quench their thirst. Being ever so careful not to overindulge and suddenly end their own life. The elders were naïve to the basins many moods and tendencies and the danger of using it as a water source. The basin sat perched in its place remaining calm

even when the sounds of shrieks and screams bounced from the walls of the small white cottage, from a present clan of twelve grandchildren, aged eight to sixteen. It waited patiently for its trespassers.

After Tommy left the small hallway bathroom, encased in pine wood planks with a whiff of Listerine floating in the air, a previous sampling from his Grandpa, he looked over to see his Grandma sitting at the kitchen table drinking her evening coffee. Her face was worn of energy from a day with her grandchildren, but counting her blessings none the less. At the sink, Aunt Dee was washing the cups, plates and silverware, while his dad dried. His Aunt Gloria was busy shuffling the items into the white metal cabinets, casually and gracefully, accepting direction by her mother, who quietly told her when something was being put in the wrong place. In the living room, Grandpa had parked himself deep in the old musty green lounge chair that had a glued nickel on the end of the wicker arm. Tommy had been told it was placed there years ago by one of his uncles. By now, all the grandchildren were old enough not to be fooled by the joke. Somehow the nickel was never removed. It was just another memory attached to the cottage that no one had the heart to erase. Tommy smiled as he listened to his Grandpa's slow steady snoring, waiting for it to crescendo in its anticipated tune. His Grandpa had quickly fallen asleep after consuming dinner which was several pounds of fish that they had caught that morning topped off after his two consistent 3:00 highballs. After standing there for a few minutes watching his Grandpa snore, his Grandma walked into the room. Grandpa had reached a full booming snore at the moment.

"Chet! Chet! Wake up! You have to bathe tonight." She shook his arm insistently. "It's Wednesday." Tommy watched mesmerized as Grandpa dutifully stood up, wobbling to the

side, to stable his massive weight that ballooned over his leather belt. He only had one good leg. The bad leg was speckled with wrinkled and discolored skin. His Grandpa had been a victim years earlier from a grilling accident. It was the basin's water that he doused on his leg to remove the flames which licked and punished it. Apparently, the basin could be a hero when it wanted. As Tommy passed by his Grandpa to put his bathing trunks on, he felt an intense grip on his right arm.

"No running," Grandpa barked with his steady grip on his arm. But Tommy knew his arm was gripped to steady his Grandfather rather than a form of discipline. Never the less, while wincing under his grip, his cousins burst from the rooms in unison, dressed in their bathing suits. The waves had picked up in the late afternoon and they were all anxious on who could call dibs on the two fat, black, rubber inflated inner tubes. Tommy and his cousins exited the cottage in a fast walk out the porches screen door with their beach towels trailing along the floor. Camille led the group with purpose as she gripped her sacred green bottle of Prell as she approached her sacred routine that was not to be derailed. The back screen door swooshed and creaked as it swung open and shut in a steady cue of the ten children. Tommy heard his Grandma speak to his Grandpa who was the last of the line to exit.

"Do you want a towel?" Grandma spoke softly.

"Ergh," Grandpa grunted. Tommy glanced behind him to see his Grandpa stumble out the back door leaving a sharp slam as he worked his way toward and steadily down the steps in his bathing suit. His big fat cigar dangled from his massive hands that were weapons of destruction with his own kids when they were young. He stood dutifully close to nonchalantly help and steady his Grandpa should a need arise. He glanced over at the water basin. It sat still and

quiet. A gentle evening wind swirled around them as he and his Grandpa slowly navigated the deep hillside steps that were made of homemade timber planks and old railroad ties. Dead grass clumps and weeds sprung from the split cracks in the planks, weathered with age, and stung their delicate feet like tiny pricks of a needle. He made his way to the water where he joined his cousins as they all darted quickly into the cold lake. He and his cousin took turns climbing onto the massive inner tubes while the waves rocked them and tossed them in all directions. The water was incredibly cold but uniquely refreshing. It was their own version of a Polar plunge. His Grandpa had ventured out just far enough, waist high in the rolling waves. Tommy watched as he puffed on his cigar and barked at his cousins not to splash him. The waves rocked up and around his Grandpa's large protruding belly sometimes causing his Grandpa to wobble. His Grandpa fought back and stood still in a determined stance, while the smoke from the cigar circled around his head. It was his version of a bath.

After his skin began to change from white to blue and shivers crept upon him, Tommy knew it was time to come in. He walked up the steep steps up towards the back of the cottage leaving behind his cousins who were slowly migrating out of the water at their own pace. Although he was tired from a day of early morning fishing, playing on the beach and now sparring with the evening waves, he noticed he felt a unique sense of bliss. He looked over to see his Grandma and elders consumed in conversation on the back glassed in porch. He walked past the basin and opened the screen door as quietly as possible, hoping he could escape the command. He had not quite put his foot on the step in when Grandma spoke with insistence and urgency.....

"Wash your feet!" Tommy shuddered and looked down at his feet consumed with sand.

Damn. He looked up at his Grandma with the sweetest smile he could muster after brushing his feet with his beach towel. She smiled back but nudged her finger in the direction of the water basin. He turned slowly to look over at the innocent basin. If they only knew what they were asking him to do, Tommy thought sadly. Fear began to rise in his stomach, evidenced by a twisting sharp pain. It was only the kids that knew of its moods. Adults did not seem to see or encounter the tendencies the water basin could present. He walked slowly over to the basin, peering down, to see ice crystals slowly forming. They seemed to leer at him. He slowly dipped the big toe in first, squinting and holding his breath all at the same time. If he did it quickly enough, it would be like taking off a band aid, quick and easy. But before he could lunge the full foot in, the water had turned to a complete block of ice. *Damn.* He peered over his shoulder and saw his Grandma watching him patiently. He grabbed his towel around his back like a cape, keeping the view from her. He slowly scraped his foot along the basin's edge trying to scrape the sand from his feet while nonchalantly using his towel to brush as well. Gretchen had come up the steps, looked at Tommy and then down. He cranked the water handle in an effort to tell the basin who was the boss. Suddenly, without warning, he felt an intense hot sensation at the bottom of his foot which he had perched above the water line while he was cranking more water into the basin. He looked at Gretchen, who was looking at the basin, shaking her head. Tommy bounced away from the basin on one foot in pain and disdain. As far as he was concerned, it was Gretchen's turn. The water suddenly changed its mood. It began to bubble and steam began to rise. Tommy smiled at Gretchen and motioned her turn was upon her.

The basin was apparently angry now or purposely taunting them. Tommy watched as she jumped both feet first in a defiant plunge. He watched in horror as she could not stifle her

shriek. She jumped out as quickly as she had jumped in. Her feet reddened by the boiling water but clean of any sand. Tommy glanced over at his elders again, hoping they could finally witness the madness of this basin. But they were all in deep conversation, immune to what was happening to their children. They both took a deep breath, glad their duty was done. They continued to stand over the basin in silent prayer, mesmerized by its possessed and bizarre nature. After years of this, they had slowly become accustomed to its moods and weird disposition.

Camille strode casually up the last step of the staircase. She looked at both of them. Tommy dutifully said “cold” while Gretchen said “hot”. Camille sighed in preparation of her dip. Tommy watched her close her eyes and slowly mumble to five. She calmly stepped into the water basin. He watched as the water began to churn and stir and ripple in a fury. Tommy noticed Camille beginning to bite her lip, knowing that the water was pricking her feet in small bites. Just as calmly as she stepped in, she stepped out, completing her duty stoically. His eyes diverted quickly to her feet and watched as red pocket marks slowly began to form on her feet like tiny bites of a piranha.

“Did it hurt?” He and Gretchen asked in unison. She rolled her eyes at them and began to walk away.

“What do you think?”

Tommy hung around sitting on the picnic bench after each of his cousins washed their feet, each a victim of the basins changing moods. He watched as they all entered the cottage quickly, dismissing their encounter with the basin, realizing there was no hope to hash out the debate that the basin was indeed possessed. They had done this too many times in the past. He knew

that it had become an acceptance for all of them. There was no further need to argue about whether it was in their head or a possessed demon, nor attempt to have his elders' bare witness. All their attempts had failed in the past, as the basin would suddenly become still and serene whenever an adult approached. He waited patiently for his Grandpa. He sat on the picnic bench with the towel wrapped tightly around his tiny shoulders. Drops of water, tickled him, as they rolled down over his forehead and ears from his soaked hair. His Grandpa slowly appeared at the top of the last step, grunting and gasping for air. He watched as his Grandpa threw out the water from the basin, onto the grass and tossing the accumulated sand. Grandpa cranked the handle several times before the water slowly emerged, initially spitting out in clumps but eventually becoming a slow stream. After he filled the basin with fresh water, he stepped in innocently and without fear or care, he stood momentarily, looking out at the lake, letting the feet soak in the basin. The cigar was still dangling and being held tightly by his pressed lips. As he stepped out, Tommy kneeled down and dried his Grandpa's feet. He craved to put his finger in to test the water's temperature. But the water seemed to stare at him with intensity and as if a dare. He changed his mind and slowly stood up, slightly disappointed in his moment of cowardness.

"You're a good boy Tommy," Grandpa said as he tapped Tommy's head gently with his thick fore finger. After the duty was done, they walked into the cottage, blasted by sounds of laughter and chatter. Someone had set up the Tripoli game and everyone was posturing for a seat at the table.