

Knots
By
Joseph Devon

Alexis sat back against the wall of the tub and felt a slosh of tepid water rise up her back. Marianna was getting out; she was always the first one out. Alexis watched their mother lifting her baby sister up and noticed how Marianna appeared to frown as the baby fat hanging off of her cheeks pulled her mouth downward. Then the cheeks jiggled as she was set down and then a smile forced its way onto Marianna's face as she noticed the feeling of her wet feet on the tiled bathroom floor. This was fun for her. Everything was fun for her. Everything was new and everything was a joy. Slapping her round stomach, completely lacking in muscle, was a game. Doors were toys. The few new words she was able to say were things to be played with. Her teeth made her laugh. She stood on the floor and proudly pushed her belly out and slapped her hands against it before their mother placed a towel over her head which produced a stomping dance because now the towel over her head was a game.

Alexis watched as Marianna's head poked out from the towel. Della, the middle sister, was sitting at the far end of the tub, the bubbles she had been sculpting now forgotten; both girls unable to look away from Marianna. It was her joy that always made her turn the hardest.

Marianna made an attempt at pulling the towel back over her head, then waited until it fell off again, her smile coming into view like a sunrise. Their mother smiled back and sat down on the toilet seat next to the tub, gathering Marianna up and standing her between her legs. Their mother took a bottle of hair detangler and let Marianna help squeeze some into her hand.

Alexis unknowingly pushed further back against the wall of the tub while Della continued to stare.

Marianna's hair was short, it was barely starting to touch her shoulders and the back of her head was a constant squirrel's nest of auburn and tangles. As their mother rubbed detangler into it, Marianna made an attempt to march, arms swinging in overly energetic circles, towards the door. Their mother snagged her, accidentally smearing detangler onto her stomach as she pulled Marianna close and pinned her between her knees.

Marianna did not enjoy being held still and she began to whine, shaking her head and trying to push away from their mother's legs. Then the comb came down and began to work through her hair. The top was relatively easy but Marianna's head jerked back in a sudden spasm when the squirrel's nest in the back was caught up in the comb's teeth. Her face instantly crumbled into a chubby mask of tears and her absolute lack of any mental barriers allowed her to switch from conveying annoyance at being pinned down to abject horror as the comb crackled through more knots. Her feet began drumming on the floor, her head began whipping back and forth, both actions recognizable by Alexis and Della from the tub as dangerous and more likely to make things worse, but they admired Marianna's blustering courage nonetheless.

This admiration turned to envy for Alexis as, seemingly before it even started, Marianna's turn was through. Her short hair proved little ground for knots to form and this allowed the comb to do its work with relative ease leaving an orderly rowed helmet of hair piled on top of Marianna's head. Again Marianna's face did a u-turn and as soon as their

mother released her Marianna's face lit up in a joy too pure to bear any memories of the past few minutes and she was off to run naked up and down the hall.

Their mother went after her, laughter seeping through the open bathroom door as Marianna was chased down, diapered, dressed.

Alexis saw her red plastic car wobbling at the bottom of the tub next to her, rearing up on its back wheels due to something in its hood wanting to float. Della began to play again, the laughter of their baby sister in the hall erasing the tears from moments ago completely, wiping Della's mind as clean as a dry erase board, and Alexis felt a touch of jealousy at her little sisters; Marianna was done and Della didn't quite remember.

Alexis, though, was unable to reach out and pick up her red car like she wanted to; too much of her knew that her turn was coming soon and the memory of last time came back to her clearly. Their last bath had been unbearable. Alexis's screams had driven their mother to swear loudly and throw the comb against the wall. Alexis had turned around terrified and seen tears in her mother's eyes. She was dreading her turn. She thought she had seen similar dread on their mother's face.

Their mother returned and Della was plucked out of the tub. She stood, dripping wet while their mother fetched a towel, and her large doe eyes flashed around the room. Their mother returned and the goose pimples forming on Della's arms were covered over with cotton ample enough to cover an adult, the remains pooling at Della's feet. And now, with their mother sitting back down on the toilet seat cover and Della bundled up between her legs, the resemblance came out. Della was their mother; their mother was Della. The two looked like the same organism viewed through varying ends of a temporal telescope, one way showing the bounce of youth and unfrozen look of innocence, the other showing the sag of time and the wrinkles of knowledge. Put together the two formed bookends of attraction that Alexis had always reacted poorly to on some deeper level than she understood. Even now in the bathroom, with Della wet and mostly hidden by a towel and their mother in a t-shirt, her sweater cast off after the first few splashes of the bath had soaked her through, even now they presented a duality that provided an aesthetic appeal normally found on the cover of clothing catalogues and which made the photos of them together seem to sparkle, their mother pushing Della on the swings, their mother holding Della on the couch, their mother letting Della feed her a piece of pasta. These photos were instantly framed and put up in areas of prominence about the house; they took over desktops and hallways. There was one hanging over Alexis and Della's bunk bed.

Alexis turned away and searched about in the bathwater for her red plastic car as their mother towel dried Della's hair. Alexis's fingers closed over the car when she heard Della start to whimper and she looked up to see that duality expressed again between mother and daughter. Della's cries were always the worst and, in turn, their mother's grief as she combed through the knots was always most obvious when the sufferer was Della. And Della did suffer.

Her hair was lengths longer than Marianna's, whose laughter as she knocked over blocks continued to seep into the bathroom, and the knots in Della's curly hair came to stay. Alexis looked away again and listened to the cries bordering on screams as the teeth of the comb grappled with each new tangle, followed by the lulls of sobbing when the comb was disengaged. Alexis looked up to see the towel drop off of Della's shoulders as she gave a particularly emotional attempt to duck her head away from the comb; their mother only put her hand on her now naked shoulder to hold her still.

Della's screams were more animated than her sister's and gained power due to her ability to form words and names and pin the blame for her tears on their mother. It was difficult for Alexis to watch.

And then Della was done, her hair shiny and darker brown than usual due to the water. Their mother gave her a kiss on top of her head and then walked her out to let her pick out her pajamas for the night. Alexis listened to the sound of the closet door opening and drawer handles rattling back into place, their repetitive and diminishing clatter the loudest noise to reach back to the bathroom.

Alexis felt the plastic red car in her hands, picked it up and drove it along the edge of the tub, heard Marianna shriek with joy as Della came to join her in play, watched the plastic car leave a trail of water behind as it continued its journey along the bathtub rim, felt her hair, wet against her back, shift as she moved to continue driving the car, heard her mother's footsteps, looked up, saw her looking down at her.

Alexis picked the plastic car up and held it against her chest as her mother's fingers reached under her arms and picked her up out of the tub. The tiles were cold under her feet and the water dripping off of her splashed up against her ankles. She was enveloped in a towel, felt the cotton rubbing her skin dry, the friction from her mother's hands was warm and felt good.

Her head got lost in the towel and everything went black. Then her mother gave her a gentle pat on her bottom. "Okay, you're all set," her mother said, and Alexis heard her footsteps leaving the bathroom. Reaching a hand up, Alexis pulled at the towel and gathered it against her as it fell from her head. She was standing facing the bathroom mirror. On the counter in front of her were her brush and comb. Outside the door she heard her mother call out that she was going down to the kitchen and that she wanted everyone ready for bed by the time she came back up. Alexis listened as the thump of her mother's bare feet receded down the stairs. She looked back at the counter, picked up the comb, stared at herself in the mirror.

Alexis lay on the top bunk running a length of hair through her fingers. Underneath her, Della was flipping through a pop-up book and she could hear the thick cardboard pages being turned while their mother was saying a final goodnight to Marianna in her room down the hall. Alexis heard Marianna's door shut, then a bit later felt the bunk bed jostle as their mother sat down to say goodnight to Della. Then she felt her mother's hand on her head, felt her fingers pinch her nose as they always did at bedtime, heard the guard rails creak as her mother stood on Della's bed and pulled herself up high enough to kiss Alexis on the forehead. "That's my big girl," her mother whispered. Then she was gone, the lights were out, the door was shut, the nightlight in the corner warming up the room in a soft orange glow.

Alexis stared up at the ceiling. She pulled another lock of hair down and ran her fingers through it. Then she rolled over, closing her eyes, and tried to fall asleep. A few moments later her feet began kicking happily and uncontrollably under the covers as she rolled her body back over, her eyes opening wide to look up at the ceiling as a smile radiated across her face.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.

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