

Alan In The Bathtub

It was a week since his birthday and Alan still hadn't had a bath. He had good reason; for the last one hundred and sixty-eight hours, in between the moments where his parents forced him to bed and forced him to eat, Alan had been climbing the levels of his new video game on his new, twenty-eight button, so-real-you-could-pet-the-animals-in-it, no-other-kid-he-knew-owned-it game system. It was a gift from his parents for his tenth birthday, the best birthday Alan ever had, the best there ever would be. The first touch of those buttons sent a thrill through his skin that shook Alan and made his parents and little sister laugh until they were holding their bellies and wiping their faces and had to close their eyes to calm down. That was the first day. Alan played for five and a quarter hours until the sun went down and his father gently nudged Alan to bed. On the second day, Alan woke in the dark of the morning without the help of his alarm clock and played while the sun rose and set, chancing only occasional trips to the bathroom to pee. By the time he remembered he had forgotten to brush his teeth, Alan was already in bed, on the precipice of a dream about his game. The third day, he stopped washing his hands. The fourth, he'd altogether forgotten he had hair. On the fifth, sixth, and seventh, Alan smelled like sour potatoes and his skin had grown a darkish, oily sheen that he then deposited on whatever he touched. His white teeth had gone brown and when Alan opened his mouth to speak, his mother, father, and little sister recoiled as though Alan had thrown a bucket of fish guts at them.

It was time for a bath, they told him. But Alan didn't want, didn't *need* a bath. He needed to find the last hidden diamond on level sixty-seven of his game. A bath would ruin his concentration, he told them. A bath would ruin his progress. Alan looked at his parents and told them that a bath would ruin his *life*.

That did it.

With three purposeful strides to the back of the TV, Alan's father unplugged Alan's life. A roar rose up through Alan's throat and he beat the floor at his defeat, wailing at the injustice of it all. Then Alan's father wrapped a strong arm around his son's belly and carried him to their filling, bubbling tub. Alan's arms and legs sprang out like a cat and he clung to the sides of the tub, the walls, the shower curtain, arching his body away from the water. "No! No! No!" Alan cried.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" his family insisted and threw Alan—clothes and all—into the bathtub.

"I'm bored! Let me out of here!" Alan wailed through the door. To his surprise, the door squeaked open and a book was slid across the floor. It bumped against the outside of the bathtub, and then the door was closed again. Alan slapped the water and it splashed up high onto the walls and onto the floor and over the book. Alan brooded, struggling out of his wet clothes, and dropped them onto the book. He sulked until the water ran cold, then he turned the tap and was adding more hot water when he heard a scratching sound. Little sisters were the most annoying sort, and Alan yelled at her to stop taunting him with her freedom on the other side of the door, but the scratching did not stop. Frowning, Alan looked over the side of the tub and saw that his wet shirt and pants were *moving*. Mice sometimes snuck into the house whenever the garage door was left open so Alan knew that mice were quick and cunning. Quietly, he leaned over the tub, raised his hand high, and brought it down with a smash on the pile. Pain tore through his finger and when Alan pulled it back, there was a spot of blood on the inside of

his knuckle. He washed his finger in his bathwater, spotted a shampoo bottle, and used it to nudge his wet clothes. His pants and shirt slid off the book while his underwear scampered off behind the toilet. Alan swung to the other side of the tub near the faucet and craned his neck to spy the tiniest little goat springing from the leg holes in his underwear. It had a sword, no, a *sewing needle* in its mouth.

Alan scratched his head, wondering if he were actually not in the bathtub but asleep in his bed. He sat back, flummoxed, when a melody arose from his shorts. Again, Alan inspected the curiosities on the floor, and with pinched fingers, Alan pulled a bone no bigger than his fingernail from under his wet pocket. On and on the bone sang, telling of wild boars and betrayal and of disrespectful siblings. “Shhh!” Alan told the bone. “My parents will hear you and think I’m crazy.” But the bone only sang louder so Alan dropped it in the tub, where its song bubbled up and out of the water. Alan pressed his hands over his ears, trying to shut the song out when out from one of the bubbles popped a drowned flea and drowned louse. The boy flicked them away. Then Alan removed the lid from a bottle of conditioner, picked up the bone, and stuck it inside. He was screwing the lid on tight, watching the goat sew sheets of toilet paper together, when the book started flapping. There, on the wet linoleum floor, a pair of silver hands were waving from between the pages, beckoning to Alan. First, Alan pinched himself. Then he patted his cheeks, tugged his hair, and pried his eyes wide with his fingers. Regrettably, he didn’t wake in his bed, so he yanked a towel from the bar and threw it over the flapping book.

Out rolled a golden ball and a frog. Alan peeked under the towel. A pair of shoes made of buffalo leather walked out, inside which was a golden key. Then twelve brothers carrying spinning wheels, an almond tree, six swans, a number of rabbits, foxes and wolves, and a host of kings and queens. Embarrassed by all the company, Alan covered himself with a washcloth. He blinked at his new acquaintances. They blinked at him. Finally, Alan turned the book over. It read *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*. For a time, the bathroom was quiet. The goat stopped sewing. The bone stopped singing. The silver hands stopped waving. Alan held his breath, dried his hands, and picked up the book. Then Alan opened the cover and found that he was suddenly alone, but for the magic inside his head.

From then on, Alan was the cleanest boy in the world.