

Bathing Rituals

by Lindy Freeman

Hot...too hot.... We cling to the edge of the wooden tub—legs knotted, knees tucked to our chests, fetal in nature, not letting a toe dare to dangle; our faces pink from the flush of temperatures rising. So begins the nightly bathing ritual at my grandmother's home in Kyoto, Japan. Susan, because she is the youngest at age three, escapes the water first, only to be scrubbed raw by the efficient, no-nonsense hands of our mother. As the middle daughter, I anxiously await my fate, for I am next to suffer the dreaded loofah. Mingling in the heat is the smell of sandalwood mixed with the fragrance of cedar wet from the overspill of our splashes. Submerged in water, I'm dizzy from the heat, awaiting that embryonic burst that will set me free. Sandra, first in birth order, is the last to emerge from the steamy bath.

Transformed by water, clean and scrubbed, we crawl through a door built narrow and low to keep in the heat. We emerge into the night garden. Effervescent as champagne, we dance our arrival into the cool breeze and marvel at the sparkle of moonlit koi. Naked and beautiful, we are true sisters of the earth.

The wooden tub, banded by iron and heated by a wood fire, is the very same tub that served at least four generations before me. Enclosed in a cedar room, our private, family *onsen* sits at the edge of a garden filled with greenery, stepping stones, and a small koi pond. A three-story atrium brings the lush out-of-doors indoors and inhabits the center of my mother's 250-year-old ancestral home.

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The ritual of private and public bathing is both ordered and specific. Time-honored *ryokans* dot the country and inhabit the small villages of Japan. Although each *ryokan* is unique to its surroundings, the rules for bathing remain the same.

Rules for Public Bathing

First, you must kneel—here, near the water's edge

but not too close.

Take your bucket and dip.

Step away and rinse yourself well,

away from the water.

Be careful never to let the waters mix.

Look down so that your eyes

see nothing.

Do not disturb the other bathers.

Now come,

step into the *onsen*.

Try not to splash.

Sit very quietly.

Imagine a place you want to be

and go there.

But you must go alone.

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Never mix alcohol and hot tubs, so say the rules, but the bubbles of champagne tickle my nose while the bubbles from the hot tub delight my body. My sisters and I sit soaking in our

parents' backyard garden. We grew up with water, in water. We know the rules, the do's and don'ts of communal bathing. But instead of searching for the solace of silence, we laugh, we splash, we talk to one another, three winds blown home for a wedding. Is it the champagne that charges us, tempts us to misbehave? Or have our independent, married lives—truly American grown—imbue us with a new order and lure us away from our beginnings? Our husbands, byproducts of Puritans steeped in inhibitions, are palpably absent from the scene. But we are together again, using water to soothe us and tether us to each other and to the past. And though we do not break free to dance naked in the moonlight, we are still sisters of the earth, knotted together in a time-honored family tradition.