

## The Bath Tub Cafe by Marie Ballard

“What would you like today?” my granddaughter asks me. Soft bright bubbles surround her in the bath. Sweet steamy air fills the room. We are here together, she and I. She’s in the warm fluffy bubbles and I’m sitting on the hard closed seat of the toilet. This is the ritual that ends our day together; she’s in the bath; I’m listening, drinking my herbal tea, both pleasantly tired, looking forward to stories and bedtime.

“Riri, What would you like today?” she asks me again. Invariably, whatever I like is not available at this bathtub café which she has been running since she was three.

“I’d like some apple pie,” I responded, hopefully.

“We’re out of apple pie. We just have smoothies, the best in the world.”

“I’ll take one of those.” After we settle on the flavor, blueberry, raspberry, and strawberry with a secret ingredient, the size and the often-exorbitant cost of the best smoothie in the world, she hands over the slick cup filled with bath water and topped off with bubbles.

I pretend to drink. “Ahh, it’s delicious.”

“Good, cause there’s snake juice in it!” she chortles, always ready to trip me up on my snake phobia. I pretend to spit, vomit, and grab my stomach in pain and disgust. She wins the café game, again.

The bath continues. A little scrubbing of sun kissed tan skin occurs slick as silk except for sandpaper knees. Water is poured over her curly hair, also sun-bronzed. Warm, soft towels are retrieved from the dryer. Out of the tub, we move on to the tooth brushing and hair brushing routine.

“Riri, if you could be any age, what age would you be?” she asks me. Taken aback by her turn towards this serious question, I think about it. She frequently reminds me how old I am, my 70 to her 7, though a young 70 I always remind her. She says there’s no such thing as a young 70, already with the rolling of her eyes.

“Sometimes, I think I would like to be younger,” I respond finally. I would be prettier and faster, and stronger. No wrinkles or gray hair. I would have more time to do things.” I’m still thinking. “But I couldn’t stand being in a world without you. If I were much younger, I wouldn’t have a granddaughter who scares me with snakes or the Bathtub Café or anyone to read stories with before bedtime. I’ll stay the age I am.”

Big hazel eyes blink and settle on my suddenly wet ones.

“Oh, Riri,” she says, gently, “I’ll always be with you, and you’ll always be with me. Don’t you know that?”

She tightens the towel around her skinny brown body and spits energetically into the sink.