Hampton Baths, 1927

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Sadness folds into the bath water in the old marble tub like drips of soap, sunk, spread with a kick, the gray a gift for the last bather, the water well-used after six, cool with its slide over many skins, tired like his mother’s arm sloshing the cloth on backs, her dress careless with wetness left like muddy handprints. Youngest of eleven, born on this farm in ’22, he is last on Sunday nights, huddled naked in the old brown sofa to watch the parade, elbowing, indifferent voices slapping the air—the oldest three too proud for the kitchen tub, door slamming on mysterious voyages. His goosebumps are a rash of trembles as drops cluster her forehead, her gray curls damp, stuck to skin. Obedient in the kerosene light, he feels his toes so oddly angular, his own skin somehow inadequate. He is moon-white, jug-eared and freckled. The windowpanes are yellowed, muted with mist, the feet a tattoo on air, the scurry of towels, and he slipped in like an afterthought, the rub over back a long caress, the soap trickling just around his eyes, his head fit with a warm hat of rubbing.

He felt his skin tingling again with the rough hug of towel, her elbow crooked around him, leaving the surest imprint he’d ever known.