

# If I Wash Long Enough

by Kathleen Etchison

Tiny, rainbowed spheres fall softly on my stomach, my forearms, my thighs. Vague, herbal scents ooze from my surrounding waters. Transparently opaque mounds of foamy bubbles — my coat of a new color. I'm melting, blending with porcelain, with living water. Water. The plasma of my bath, its lifeblood. My lifeblood. The soothing suds, nutrients of my plasma-water, come to rejuvenate my body. The healing suds. Yes, they are doing their job well. Music. Balmy music seeps from my transistor radio. I am well prepared. Sing it, Billy! Great stuff, Lionel. Aaaaah, Dan, my man, Fogelberg. Shriveled. My toes are wrinkled, my fingers the inevitable prunes. I stretch to reach the stopper with my toe. I am rising, my mistake, the water is falling, draining. I am the great, white prune-whale beached forever on a whiter shore. I am beached and cannot breathe. I have died. Wafting heavenward, homeward bound. Excuse me, which way is Heaven? I climb laboriously from the tub.

The look of corn. The smell of corn. The almost taste of corn. Endless fields of endless rows of endless corn. Everywhere green and gold. Dark, dusty black-green. Heavy, pollen-laden gold. Swarms of grass-green aphids with tiny, black feet. Golden, hazy sunlight filtered through broad, black-green blades of corn. Filmy, yellow dust settled on leaves, on stalks, on aphids. . . on halter tops, on visors, on cut-off shorts. I heard voices. Faint voices. But I was alone. Voices floated on the golden, dusty air. Through the corn. Above the corn. Wafting heavenward. Female voices, male voices. (Hey Bossman, is it quittin' time?) A forest. The field was a black-green and golden forest, and I couldn't see out. I walked the forever rows, applying endless treatments to endless tassels of endless corn.

A tiny whirlpool lives in the sink. It moves about the basin, yet always returns to its favorite spot above the drain. Toothpaste foam is drifting aimlessly on the outskirts. It's pulled inward by the whirlpool. It is spinning, faster, faster. The whirlpool sucks the helpless paste down the drain. My teeth shine. I look into the vanity mirror. My prune-skin glows. My dark hair hangs in limp, immaculate strands, the part still visible from my braids. Subtle, herbal scents cling to me. I am wrapped in a thick, absorbent, terrycloth cocoon. I am clean — bright as a penny, slick as a whistle.

Sun poisoning. Corn poisoning. I was a puffy blob of itching lumps. My red, blotchy skin was covered with pollen dust. Rivers of sweat made paths in my pollen. Aphids were tickling the backs of my knees. And my braids were too tight. I had a headache. Loose, damp strands of hair kept sticking to my face. A sweatbee had stung my neck. Salty sweat had stung my eyes. The air was heavy, suffocatingly hot. There were huge, white thunderheads, with dark, grey undersides. But no breeze. Barefooted, I walked on the dry, rough clods of dirt. My feet were tough and calloused. But my hands were raw and red. They had lost their morning bandages. It was getting late. There was no air.

The phone is ringing. It's ringing and I refuse to be the one to answer it. Maybe it's Jane. Or Jay wanting to go out this weekend. Or it could be... could be... six rings, and it won't stop. It might be Cheryl calling about Susan's baby shower next week. Omigod, babies. Who would want a baby? I should answer the phone - I'm the only one home. If I don't answer, they'll just think no one's here. But it might be Mom. If I don't answer, she'll be worried. Eleven rings... Jesus, who rings anyone's house eleven times? Maybe it's... Thank God. The damned thing finally stopped. I don't want to talk to anybody.

Blue, blue sky. White, puffy clouds. Emerald green fields of corn with crisp, yellow tassels. Corn waving in the cool, morning breeze. I had felt like waving back. Wearing a garbage bag. I had cut holes out for my arms and head. It kept off the dew. Jay was wearing his yellow slicker. Voices all around. Greg, Cheryl, Jane, Mark Lett, Mark Trag. The Group. Friday, and we were making plans. (Should we go to the Shack, or Micky D's? Maybe cruise town? Hang out with the heads at the park? We can always drink beer in Carter's parking lot.) White, puffy clouds sailed like ships through the sky. Pulling tassels, row after row. Not tired. Didn't even notice the work anymore. Just an excuse to talk all day. And make some money. Don't pull the male tassels! Pollination was all-important. Every fifth row was male, the rest female. Never could tell a male from a female corn plant. No one could. Gorgeous day. (Going out with Jay tonight. I'll roll my hair, no more braids. We'll go to Kokomo to the show. Pizza afterward. Cruise Tipton after that. We'll see the Group on Saturday. Tonight just the two of us.) An iridescent dragonfly glinted in the sun. It moved at right angles, flitting from stalk to stalk. And the cool breeze had felt good on my tanning neck, the warm, summer sun on my back. I had taken off my garbage bag. The dew had dried. Jay winked at me through the corn. And the white, puffy clouds sailed the blue, blue sky. But that had been last summer.

Have to eat. Not hungry. Haven't eaten for two days. They'll eat at six when they get home from work. But what will I tell them? That work let off early so I thought I'd fix them dinner. Do they know I wasn't at work? 5:15. Food. What will I make? Really can't eat. I'll say I already ate. Warm up yesterday's barbecue. But a casserole is thawing on the counter. What is it? Smells familiar. It's that one Mom makes with croutons and mushroom soup and... corn... I'm not hungry. I'm sick. Corn everywhere. Corn casserole, corn chowder, corn on the cob... comes from cornfields... Oh, Jesus, I feel sick. I can't fix dinner. I won't. I'll never eat corn again.

I was in a black-green and golden forest, and I would never escape. The dust was thick, the aphids crawling, and I would be the first person to ever sweat to death. The endless rows of corn stretched as far as I could see. I was alone. (What time is it?) My Timex was dead, murdered by pollen dust. Trickling, tickling sweat. Sweat beaded on my forehead and trickled between my eyes. Sweat trickled between my breasts. Sweat ran down the small of my back. The golden, hazy sunlight was fading, but still hot.

White fuzz. Voices in a tin can. Canned laughter. The screen sharpens. Channel 8. Family feud, a rerun. It's over. They're waving goodbye from their faked family portrait. Commercial time. Dogfood... chuckwagon. Another

commercial. Calgon. . . take me away. Take me away. Maybe I should take a bath. Bubble bath. White, foamy suds. Clean, smooth porcelain. Shiny, chrome taps. Soothing music. I am unclean. (Don't look dirty, shouldn't feel dirty.) I am unclean.

A gaping, black-green hole had swallowed me alive. I would never get to go home. I was trapped, snared. My rows were endless, no landmarks in sight. The corn there was eight, sometimes ten feet high. I couldn't hear the voices anymore. (They must be finished. Maybe they're checking the rows.) My feet burned from walking on clods of dirt. All I wanted was to take a bath and to rid myself of those awful braids. They hurt. There was a thin, zigging track on the ground. A hole under a clod. A snakehole. Cornfields were great for snakes. Garter snakes. Blue racers. (If I step on a snake, I'll scream.) Black blades of corn reached heavenward. And there was no air. And I was suffocating. And I felt I would never escape.

A car is pulling into the drive. Mom and Dad? No, it's 5:30. They're never early. Won't go to the door. Whoever it is will go away. When it is Mom, what will I say? What will I tell Dad? I'll say I got off work early and decided to take a bubble bath. But what will I tell them? Do I look different? Maybe I will go insane — then I won't have to think about it. The doorbell is ringing. But it will stop. And the person will leave when they realize that no one's here. And is anyone here? No, not really. But how will I tell Mom and Dad? They were gone last night. Haven't seen them since yesterday morning. Haven't seen anyone today. The car is backing out. I hear crunching gravel. It's accelerating. It's gone. Oh, God, what will I tell them?

There is something on my leg. Looks like dirt. Gritty dirt. Dirty dirt. Have to wash it off. Quick. Is there any more dirt? Need to take a bath. Wash my hair. Brush my teeth. Cool, blue, cotton washcloth. Lather, lots of suds. I'll scrub that dirt from my leg. Scrub my face, scrub my arms. Is it gone? It's on my shoulder now. It's tormenting me. Won't let me wash it off. It's a reminder, a mark. I don't see it when I look into the mirror. But it's there, it's all over me. Why won't it go away? Leave me alone? I want to be clean. More than anything, to be clean. I'll take another bath.

Photos on the coffee table. The Senior Prom. The weekend at the lake. Graduation. (We were now living in the real world.) Jay and I washing my car. Has he tried to call? Mom, Dad and I on a canoe trip. How will I tell them? Jay's senior pictures. Did he look for me? Grandma's picture with the Garden Club. Great Aunt Marie. They're both dead now. Do they know? Greg, Jane, Jay and I at the Tipton park. Jarmining up the curly slide. Did they all not notice that I was gone? They are working today. In the cornfield. They are checking those same rows that I pulled. Walking on the same rough ground. In that same dark aisle. That black-green and golden tunnel. Greg and Jane. Cheryl. Mark Trag. And Mark Lett. And Jay. They are all at work, and they are wondering where I am. Will they work until seven? Eight? It's another stifling day with great grey thunderheads. It will get dark again. How will I face them? I can never go back. Never to a cornfield. Never again.

Evening was setting in. We were working eleven and twelve hour days. From eight to seven. Or eight to eight. Much too long. The corn got blacker

as the evening progressed. I couldn't see anyone. I was alone. Tassels stretched endlessly in front of me. I was pulling two rows. It took so long. I was behind. (Did they forget me? Was it quitting time?) I had to finish my rows. Endless treatments to endless tassels. A noise. Cornstalks were cracking behind me. It was dark. Someone was walking carelessly through the corn. I didn't see anyone. The cracking stopped. A voice said Hello. I did not know the voice. I turned. I did not know the man.

This white, tiled room is my world. I never want to leave. I want to be forever cleansed by the soothing water. I brush my teeth. I look once more into the vanity mirror. But I am not vain, there is an ugly girl staring back at me. I close the cool, blue Venetian blinds. They shut out the golden, hazy sunlight. I do not want to see the black-green grass of the lawn. I glance at the tub. I want that purifying liquid against my skin. I run a comb through my still-damp hair. It is loose and free. I hate braids. Braids remind me of snakes, twisted snakes with minds of their own. And they hurt when they are bound so tight. And because they hurt, I hate them. No, I hate them because they look like snakes, and snakes live in cornfields, and cornfields are where. . . . I cross the room. I run my bathwater.