

0.1 Chapter 4: self: Calm

0.2 Calm

1 The Consolations of a Bath

It is easy, recklessly easy, to get ambitious about happiness; to imagine more fulfilling work, a more satisfying relationship, greater wealth, kinder friends. And then to get sad, because none of that is easy.

But there is one source of solace, delight and satisfaction that is available in almost every household across the developed world; something we have unproblematic and immediate access to, at minimal cost.



Its best when, at first, the water is almost too hot. You venture a foot, then dare yourself to go further and, wincing at the pain, gradually let the water take your whole weight. For the first time today, you don't have to support yourself anymore, you can at last escape the oppressive force of gravity.

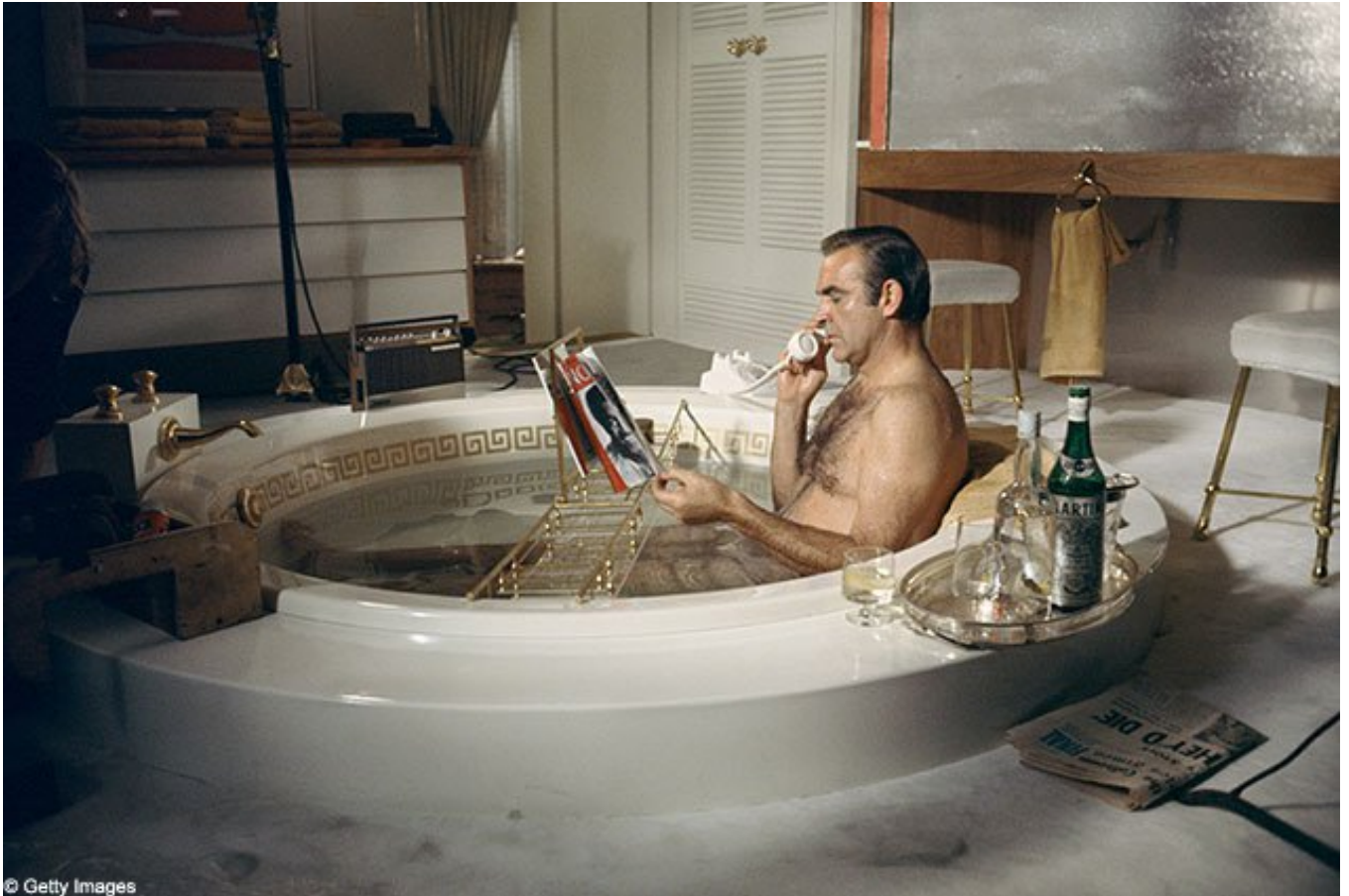
Behind this apparently simple moment, there lie the unheralded efforts of hundreds of thousands of unseen, and now mostly dead, others. Reservoirs were built for this and perhaps dams too, high upstream, stemming the rebellious force of wayward rivers. Gnarled hands laboured to lay the pipes that run like a vascular system underneath the skin of streets to reach the tap that now drips an occasional haunting tear into the steaming water.

The pleasure is in part psychological. What is outside is normally dispiritingly hostile. We have to swaddle our skin in careful layers of wool and cotton and at night, encase ourselves within sheets and duvets.



Then, suddenly, in the bath, like on a very warm summers day, none of that is necessary any longer: the outside environment loses its bite. We feel at home in the world, able to take on the outside and win. We can be out there, naked, open, exposed and yet still at ease and warm. The bath emboldens us. There must be echoes in all this of those early quiet months when we first floated in warm water, kicking our legs this way and that, without too many cares. The bath offers a brief instance of reprieve for the pain that must have set in that notorious, traumatic, now-forgotten day (which later on, were brave about and celebrate as our birthday) when, with a frightening swoosh and a draining of that reassuring liquid, we first emerged into the world and nothing was ever quite as comfortable again.

Baths are ideal places to think. If we measured them simply on the basis of how many productive ideas we have there, theyd have more right to be called our offices than our offices. Our thoughts generally dont come when commanded. They run out only when were not quite looking, like shy deer and so they make a dash when were daydreaming in a train or letting our minds go fallow in the clear water.



Religions have long understood the significance of bathing: they send us into water for the big moments, the so-called watersheds, to turn over a new leaf, to start afresh, to have another chance. There often remains an echo of those grand ambitions behind our decision to go up and have a bath at the end of an evening. We're not just looking to get clean. We're trying to move on from the painful, offensive aspects of the day. We're hoping the trauma will dissolve and gently loosen itself from us in the water.

Most of our problems require awkwardly large solutions to stand any chance of being put right. Too often, that then leads us to overlook the passing vital consoling force of more modest consolations that lie to hand, like a hug, or its aquatic sibling, a bath.

