

Delicates

There was nothing natural about it. The chrome and enamel and melamine were too bright for the hour and too clean for the neighborhood. All-Nite Kennedy Launderette pink neon tubing looped in enthusiastic cursive. A black kid with jawbreaker-size plastic hair baubles peered in the washer windows as if ogling pies in an automat, and her braids clattered against the glass. *Launderette*, it makes a better name for a girl than a coin-op.

The girl relished her one-night pass to stay up so late, unlike the adult patrons who merely had a temporary respite from someplace worse. The homeless from JFK Park. The blonde who, last month, tried to manage folding shirts with one arm in a hard cast. And me, who can't sleep. And, after giving most everything I had away after Nora left, well, I've got to run a load every night anyway.

The blonde has a soft sling now. I can tell she's still in pain. She gingerly removes her boots and places them on top of the machine. She smiles as her bare toes meet the cold linoleum.

It's the first time I've seen her smile. Her mouth is as plump and tender as a bruised plum. There's a black seam of dried blood on her bottom lip.

"This isn't your usual night," I say. And right away I realize how wrong it is, how stalker-like I sound.

"Ah have a lawt of lawndery," she drawls softly. Laundry is three syllables.

I'm making her uncomfortable. She drums her fingers on the washer lid. The clink of her ring startles us both. She looks down at it as if she doesn't quite know how it got there in the first place. And, wordlessly, she slips it off and drops into a bottle of bluing.

Washers rumble overstuffed, sneakers thump in dryers, quarters jangle in the change machine tray. I want to stay in this place. In this quiet eye. The air around her is honeysuckle, salt, and soil, and if I step away I'm lost in the sizing, bleach, and canned fragrance of soap flakes. I try to think of something to say. I want to justify my nearness.

Her hair is pale and her skin is pale and freckles are spangled across her nose and shoulders and everywhere. Wonderful. Her ears are pink and perfect as a conch shell. Her dress is old-fashioned, a thin calico that clings to her in places as though it were damp. It's spattered a bit with mud or something at the edges.

My buzzer goes. I'm rescued to a purpose. I can empty the dryer slowly, fold slowly. When I drop the warm bundle on the folding table, she's eating laundry powder.

She cups it from the box the way a child would scoop snow, and eats it with the same novelty and pleasure.

"Pica," she says.

"Pete," I correct, and stick out my hand. She laughs and shakes it. I can feel the detergent grains on her wet fingertips.

"Pica," she repeats. "Theh's something wrong with me."

"The soap?"

"Ah jes crave it. I thank it's a deficiency.... You know, if you cahn't git what you need nat-ural-ly, you go about the wrong places for gittin it..."

Yeah.

"So, would you like to grab a cup of coffee? You could wash the soap out of your mouth.

There's a diner down the..." I stop myself. There's someone on the other end of that ring in the bluing. He isn't one for messing with.

"I'm sorry," I sputter. "You don't know me and.... And I'm sure you need to finish your washing and go home."

She white-knuckle wrings a shirt over the industrial sink and pink water bleeds out.

"Pete," she looks me in the eye. "Ah am nawt goin' back."

The water is pink and the laundry suds are pink and the dryer windows have a faint pink film. And for a moment, it's as if I'm seeing the launderette through rose-colored lenses. I take a step closer to her, but the plastic laundry basket still separates us. When I kick it to the side, the hammer topples out. Its claw is still sticky with brain and blood, bits of bone.

All I can think is that she's safe now.

I take a tee-shirt and wipe a few burgundy speckles from her cheek. "Let me buy you a cup of coffee for the road," I say.

I have this deficiency. And when you're missing something naturally, you tend to fill it with something that isn't good for you at all.