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About Life or Laundry or Livid stains...

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About Life or Laundry or Livid stains...

The motor on the dryer turned its last drum days ago, and because clothes just keep getting dirty and it's too cold outside to hang them, the laundromat's the way to go. But, then there's work and getting the boys to school and back, and to hockey practice and back, and trips to the grocery store and the library, not to mention all the busyness of after school, and after supper, and chores and homework, and getting ready for bed, and getting to bed, so that's not always so easy.

So, the clean, wet laundry kept piling up until Tuesday, which turned into Wednesday, because on the way to the laundromat, when she stopped at the store to get cake mix for cupcakes and liters of non-cola to send for the sixth-grade party on Thursday, the battery went completely dead, and it was 11:45 P.M.. and twenty-six dollars and fifty cents later before she got home without the still-wet laundry that was left to freeze in the car sitting in the grocery store parking lot.

She didn't get to push the still half-frozen lumps of laundry into quarter-hungry dryers until late Wednesday evening after she'd finally gotten the car started and brought home, and after she'd fought with the thirteen-year-old over table manners and rolled-up socks under the couch, over dishes and homework and bedtimes and a hundred little crises that can only be crises when you're thirteen.

When she'd finally gotten all the laundry to the laundromat and into dryers with drums that still turn, she just stood in front of the machines watching most of her family's wardrobe roll over and over, breaking the frost loose, then going limp from the inescapable heat, and all too soon she had to start folding all those clothes.

They'd been fluffing and growing lighter and looser until they seemed to almost float towards her as she opened the first dryer done with its load, and only then did she realize that many of them would actually need to be washed again, because when the thirteen-year-old put them into baskets, some of the brighter rayon blouses and team-logo T-shirts were smashed in with most of the white clothes, where they bled all over the better shares of the socks and towels and other assorted apparel.

But, there was nothing she could do about it because she had no detergent or bleach with her, and she was down to three dollars after buying cake mix and soda pop and plugging the dryers full of quarters. She'd been trying to save the rest of the meager Christmas funds she'd been squirreling away by toting piggy banks and old coffee cans of loose change to the bank, but she'd already spent too much of that too-little amount on getting her old car started, or keeping it running at all, and there weren't even any Christmas presents bought yet.

She'd been asking around about dryers only to find that a new motor would run eighty-nine dollars, and the cheapest used dryer would cost a hundred and twenty-five, and last week's paycheck was all but gone, as one would have guessed by the dip into the Christmas stash. While thoughts of dryers and cars running, or not running depending, and of presents not under the Christmas tree tumbled around in her head, tightness crept across her shoulders from shaking towels and sheets and jeans straight and smooth to fold them into piles that would have to be stacked and packed and loaded and unloaded and resorted and whined over and sighed over and rewashed and redried.

Across the long, low table where she stood folding clothes and watching her tumbling thoughts, stood a young, unmarried, still-just-dating-but-probably-sleeping-together-anyway couple who were folding their bright, trendy clothes and glancing at her splotched and stained dishtowels and socks until she felt like screaming at them for what they thought they knew about life or laundry or livid stains, or about gratitude and hate and standing at a grocery store pay phone trying to think of someone to call when she was stranded and finally just paying a teenaged tow-truck driver more than a quarter of a hundred dollars just to give her a ride home from the cold, dark parking lot, because he couldn't seem to get her car started. She wished she could just shriek at them and make them understand that she couldn't afford to have the car brought home with her, much less the laundry, and hadn't even been able to pay for the ride until she'd gotten home and climbed into her closet again to dip into the dwindling Christmas savings. She wanted to tell them about just being so cold and wanting to get home so badly that she couldn't even care anymore about tow trucks and laundry and cupcakes and cars, or about knowing that another dip into her carefully-hoarded

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cash was as unavoidable as the sun coming up on a car in a parking lot.

But the boy and girl just loaded up their pretty Rubbermaid baskets from one dryer each, while she stood silent, trying to not to see them cast looks at each other and at other people's laundry, and they left to take their freshness home, where they'd probably make love and tell each other what they know about their futures.

She felt heavy and prickly and grainy, and didn't want to look at the dryers full of the fabric of her family, still and cooling now into heaps in the bottoms of smooth, round drums, so she watched a scary-looking, just-like-weirdoes-and-perverts-look-on-TV guy in a pale, candy-striped polo shirt, grungy black slacks, and even grungier deck shoes, meticulously place his two little baskets-full of dingy-ness into three washers on different sides of the boulevard of machines and, for an instant, she wondered why the stripes weren't making him look any slimmer, because vertical stripes are supposed to be slimming, but these weren't doing anything at all for the gut shoving forward against the little candy-colored bars running up and down the dome of his belly. He came around the bank of washers and their eyes met briefly before he jerked his gaze sharply away. She wondered what she looked like to him in that moment, whether he thought she looked too angry or too tired. In a reflexive, polite response, her own eyes dropped quickly, and fell on her hands still methodically caressing clothes into orderly flatness, and she felt a sudden flutter of certainty that he was just afraid of anyone or everyone because they've seen his grunge.

The tightness in her shoulders became a white heat that stretched across her back in a wide band, like a hot scarf laid across her shoulders, and it became almost a comfort. The weariness that she'd been running just ahead of all week stepped into pace with her now, made her wrists and arms ache and throb, and settled heavily around her hips.

She looked for a clock to give her some sense of where or when she was and how long and far from a stopping place in the day, but there were only gaping holes where there had been vents or some other such things, long since removed, and small black cameras that peered at her from either end of the harshly-lit laundromat, cameras that were probably only mere tokens of suggestions—an implied

security—having never even been connected to anything or anyone that would care.

She let her arms fall and rest on a neat stack of towels on the long low table, and looked down the avenue of washing machines at the dingy-skinned man now leaning against the last machine he'd loaded, staring at the controls on the top as if in some kind of trance, held by their shapes, by the warmth and movement of the busy machine holding him upright. In her mind, she pulled at the ends of the heavy warmth across her shoulders, stretching back, as if trying to touch the wings of her shoulders together. She felt her hips slip free of the weight that threatened to anchor her there forever, and she moved quickly to keep free of it. She started stacking the laundry already folded into baskets, stuffing dishtowels and washcloths and socks down the sides around square stacks of towels and jeans. A stack of towels threatened to topple to the gritty linoleum floor, yet she did not reach for it, but simply watched as it wobbled and then righted itself, before she pulled the remaining empty baskets from beneath the table and turned away to the dryers behind her. She held them firmly at the mouth of each of the three dryers of waiting laundry and scooped and shoved the heaps into the baskets, only briefly cringing at the thought of the laundry, still vulnerable from the tumbling heat and cooling stillness of the dryer, being crowded into the small, cheap plastic baskets, shriveling and wrinkling when it reached the cold car.

She stacked the baskets on top of each other as high as her arms could reach to hold them in a column against her chest and marched them down an aisle in front of the faded, candy-striped man. Her brisk movements seemed to bring him from his contemplation of the washing machine at his groin, but he only looked down at an empty machine beside him as she strode to the cold, waiting car just outside the front door of the laundromat. It only took her two trips to get them all in the back seat of her old car, and then she was behind the wheel, holding her breath as she turned her ear, waiting to hear that glorious rolling groan of the engine firing from a charge, held, sent and received. She didn't even bother to scrape the frost from the back window, and just tried not to shiver until the car warmed up, because shivering would just make the trip seem longer.

She backed out away from the cold, drab whiteness of the laundromat, and headed the car down the

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dark, quiet streets that would take her finally home, where she would plug the car in to the long, stiff extension cord feeding out from underneath her front door. She hated the extra step of having to plug in the car, but knew that it needed that lifeline to ward off the cold that freezes whatever sits too still, too unprotected. She lifted and carried baskets of laundry and stacked them just inside the front door. Leaving them to stand as crooked sentries, she went into her warm, quiet kitchen, and stood quietly near the stove. The dishes had been done by some mysterious and precious phantom that lived within her thirteen-year-old. She stood with her back against the stove and wondered if stacks of clean laundry standing in the living room and cars tethered to power lines could make her feel brave and strong and calm. She listened to the stillness of the house and wondered if the quiet sleep of a thirteen-year-old swelled with dreams of being a grown person, full of power and potential.

Audrae Jones is (still) working on her Master's Degree in Creative Writing and Literature, and does hope to graduate sometime *this* millennium. People she'd love to be like all at once: Ursula LeGuin, Bill Bryson, Regina Barreca, Stephen Hawking, Maxine, Dave Barry, Dorothy Parker, Samuel Johnson, and Cher. Her favorite ways of procrastinating are playing computer games and hanging out with people who live, and work, in the real world.