

## The Brady Street Laundromat

The Shepard ran an article about the boots. The owner of the laundromat had gotten sick of accommodating every shopper and eater on Brady. He had posted a sign, but people just ignored it. He said they drove away business since no one could park and do laundry, and he didn't have time apparently, to watch 24 hours a day and a tow truck on speed dial. I thought I was immune since I actually did my laundry there.

I parked, threw in two gigantic loads. The machines were divided into three sizes: Best value was the biggest and my laundry after two weeks fitted neatly into two of those big machines including bedding at \$3.50 apiece. I walked halfway up the block to my favorite coffee shop, drank a chai and read some free local zine for half an hour. On returning, I filled five dryers, finished the zine and the chai, stuffed my clean laundry into two huge bags without folding anything and headed for my van. There it was, an orange roadblock on my right rear tire, about the size of a kid's Radio Flyer, but I assumed a lot heavier and immobile. I put the laundry away, closed and locked the van. Some skinny young man with an accent met me in the parking lot.

"You want to go," he said "You have to pay fine."

"I was doing my laundry," I said, "that's what the parking lot is for."

"You left the building," he replied, "We saw you." He pointed to a white van on the end of the lot, unmarked with the rear doors open and some guys poking their heads out.

"You're taking up a space too," I reminded him.

"We got permission."

“So do I.”

“Not to leave,” he said, “To do laundry.”

“That’s a bunch of crap,” I said.

“Maybe so, but you’re not going anywhere.”

“What was I supposed to do?” I said, “Twiddle my fucking thumbs and wait? Why can’t I get a cup of coffee?”

“Those are the rules,” he said, “And don’t swear. It’s not nice.”

I looked at the orange boot, tried to discern its inner organs, springs and levers and such. All immediate access was encased in a steel box fitted across the back and sides. There were circular attachments, like supersized metal frisbees, that fitted onto either side of the wheel of my van. It looked solid, however vulnerable to someone like myself. I said, “My tool shed is on the other side of town.”

“What?” said the man. He was very skinny. He wore a red and white checked shirt and blue jeans. His hair was short and cut sort of like a boy’s with bangs. He looked like an olive-skinned version of Ron Howard. His hands were small but he looked limber, however I knew he would be no threat.

I said, “I can take a bus to the other side of town.”

He said, “You can’t leave your van here. You have to pay \$250. Cash or charge, no check.”

“How much?”

He repeated the amount and I laughed. "I'm not paying anything," I said.

"You got no choice," he said.

"I have a choice," I said, "But it's up to you. You can take the boot off right now, or I'll take it off."

"What do you mean?"

"Are you the man in charge?" I asked.

"No."

"Is he here?"

"In the van."

"Tell him I want to talk to him."

"You talk to me."

"Alright," I said, "On the other side of town, I have my tools. In about an hour and a half I can be back here with a diamond saw and a sledge hammer. I'm saying either you take it off or I'll take it off. But if I take it off, it won't be pretty. I'll probably lose the tire, but that's ok. I can buy a used tire for \$30 installed. As for the tow, I have AAA. And you of course get your boot back in several pieces. Hope you know how to weld."

"What?" the man said.

"Do I have to repeat myself?"

"Wait here!" he said. He walked to the end of the lot and disappeared behind the opened door of the white van. I watched for a little while, and when I saw nothing happening, I went

over to the window of the laundromat and peered inside. A woman inside loaded a pair of dryers, selecting from a basket of wet clothing. She distributed between left and right, I thought, according to clothing type and drying time. Three other dryers were spinning to her left all filled with loose clothes playing Tilt-A-Whirl. A man and an old woman sat on a pair of plastic 50's style bodyform chairs set against the wall right in front of me. I saw the backs of their heads and their T-shirts. Then he turned and spoke to her. He had a black beard. She had long gray hair nicely combed. I imagined he was her son and he was taking care of her. But why did he bring her along? Couldn't he do the laundry himself? Perhaps she had insisted as older people do sometimes, or she needed something done besides the laundry and came to provide direction and input.

“Hey you!” I heard someone say behind me. I turned and saw an even taller man, standing next to the fellow I'd been talking to. “OK,” he said. “We take it off.”

Two other men were working on the boot. Removing the boot was a complicated process and took about half a minute. “There,” said the man, “You were doing your laundry.”

“I was,” I said.

“Have a good day.”

“Same to you,” I said, “Happy hunting.”

“OK,” he said. I left in my van.

About two weeks later I read in the Shepherd their company was being sued by the State of Wisconsin for extortion. They'd been issued a cease and desist order. I wondered if the owner of the laundromat lost any business from the bad press. Who, after all, wants to patronize a bully,

even if it's only \$1.25/wash? It wasn't long before the owner sold the property. The laundromat was razed and replaced with an animal hospital. It was a one story white building with its entrance facing Brady Street and three picture windows displaying the waiting room. From across the street, I looked inside one day. A man sat beside his dog in the waiting room, a brown mutt on a leash. There was a young woman sitting in a high chair at a computer behind the counter opposite. The parking lot had been eliminated and subdivided. Next door to the vet they put up a meeting place and halfway house for veteran addicts. The house was set back about 50 feet off Brady Street to keep a low profile. Trellises lining either side of the subdivision were covered in vines for privacy. The entranceway to the front yard was arched and made of lattice. Inside a gravel walk snaked up to the two story bungalow bordered on either side by a grass lawn. At the edges of the lawn stood rows of yellow tulips. I crossed the street to get a closer look. Beyond two high hedges with a gap in-between for the walk, you could barely glimpse the entrance and façade. Above the doorway was a hand cut laminated wooden sign reading DRY HOOCH. On the front porch were two rockers, and from time to time when I passed there'd be two men sitting there smoking.

My next apartment was up in Shorewood and had its own laundry room where I met an awesome woman. She'd emptied the dryer of my shirts and pants and left them in a four-wheeled basket. She was a blond baker who was nearly blind, and she called me "the guy with the big hair." I took her to dinner three weeks after we met and fucked her that night. She said, "You should have got me drunk!" She laughed, fell backward onto the couch.

"No need," I said, "I can tell I don't have to."

We spent another nice three weeks dating and having sex while she waited for her boyfriend to get out of County. "Drunk driving," she explained, "at least it's not a felony." I was

glad when she told me. I thought him less likely to get violent if he were jealous since it was just a misdemeanor. She wasn't leaving him, not for me, because her son didn't like me and there wasn't enough room in my basement apartment for her and her son both to move in. After her boyfriend came home, I ran into her by the mailboxes at the front entrance to our building. She smiled and asked how I was and her boyfriend walked past and never said anything. In fact, the two other times he saw me while I lived there he just passed by me silently in the hall. My guess is he didn't drive around drunk much anymore after that.

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A couple of years later at a meeting, I saw a man wearing a leather jacket covered in patches. The guy had a lot of hair, sat with a coffee mug in front of him, talked for half an hour in small group. He had a mechanical right arm and said he suffered from PTSD. He mentioned specifically the Brady Street halfway house and gave credit to the program for saving his life, and to the VA. "All the doctors, nurses, the volunteers," he said, "They've all been great." One patch on his left arm had an insignia of a thumbs up underscored in block letters by the phrase DRY HOOCH. The superscript on the patch read OORAH. I thought about how the land had been repurposed and had changed over time. Like the rest of Milwaukee, Brady Street had evolved. They shut down the animal hospital eventually and put up a six-story condo that had this weird modern look about it with balconies jutting out from its sides circled by railings that looked like cages. Frankly, I didn't think it fit the neighborhood. It was too tall and I missed the vet's next to the vets. I guess they did a little better caging people there instead of pets.

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