

It's nice here. I know, it smells like burning nylon and the washers are loud, but it's cozy and humid—kind of like a greenhouse without the plants. And five dollars in quarters is a fortune in my hands.

I bring my hamper to the washer, tap on the lid, and pretend to have something better to do on a Saturday—like sleeping in or nursing a hangover.

Instead, I'm washing my stained underwear and greying socks.

The washer gives one final spin and then stills. I pull out the compacted pieces and take them to the dryer. Now for a decision—two quarters or three? Better go with two—I can always add coins later. For a moment I watch the clothes toss in the dryer—sailing up, doing backflips, flopping down again—they look like they're in the circus.

I pick up my book and sit down. Down the row of seats a young woman in black tights and a round face texts with her long, painted fingernails. I look at my insignificant stubs. Across from her, a man is talking on his phone. He has dark skin and an accent, I think he probably is a graduate student but then chastise myself for making those kinds of assumptions. Over by the front-loading king-sized washers, an older couple are working together. The woman is thin but not in a healthy way. The man is tall with a bulging stomach and wears a jacket even though it's warm in here. They don't talk but they seem to know their assigned roles. She takes the clothes out of the washer and puts them in the cart. He wheels them to the dryer.

A tired-looking woman comes in with two young children.

“Can we get the toys?”

The mother nods and the kids run over to a cardboard box pulling out giant plastic blocks that look like they haven't been washed in years. They play with them on the stained carpet—legs bent, scissor kicking the air.

The dark-skinned man gets up, pockets his phone, and goes to check his washer. He doesn't look excited. He has better things to do.

Not me. This is my haven, my Shangri-la. I suppose I wouldn't come here if I owned a washer and dryer, but then what would I do with my Saturday mornings? I tuck one leg underneath me and open my book.

Then it happens.

A man with brown curly hair, a plaid shirt, and faded blue jeans comes in. He puts his jacket and book down in the chair directly across from me and carries his hamper to the washer. I watch him out of the corner of my eye. He pulls out wrinkled jeans, dark-colored cotton tees, long-sleeved plaid shirts, and some checkered boxer shorts.

I quickly look down at my book.

A few minutes later I hear, "Cold outside."

It takes me a moment to register that he's talking to me.

"What?" I say looking up.

"Cold outside."

I try to think of a clever comeback. "Yeah."

"You come here often?" he asks which is something a guy would say at a bar and not a laundromat. I smile and nod.

"This is my first time," he says. "I just moved here."

Why is he making conversation with me? Surely he notices the holes in my yoga pants and my unwashed hair.

Oh well, what do I have to lose? “Where are you from?” I ask.

“Maryland. I’m going to grad school here.”

I nod appreciatively. “What department?”

“Information technology.”

Now that’s a surprise. I would have guessed environmental science or geology or something like that but not information technology.

“I’m an English major—finishing up this year.” I feel like I have to add that because I’m pretty old for an undergrad.

“Really?” he sounds interested. “What are you doing when you graduate?”

I don’t know. I could go home and get a job but would probably end up living with my parents and working in an office. I could stay in town but that’s almost as depressing. Most of the people I know have already left.

“Hopefully editing for a book publisher.”

“That’s cool,” he says nodding and then looks at my book. “What are you reading?” I look at the pages wishing I had brought something more fitting for an editor like Tolstoy or Jane Austen—instead, it’s the latest woman-trying-to-get-over- a-bad-relationship novel.

“Oh, nothing, just dribble.” I quickly put it down in my lap. “What are you reading?”

“Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods*. Not bad so far.”

Bill Bryson. This guy might be a naturalist too.

We talk some more. He's from Bethesda, liberal and well-educated. I'm from Connecticut, liberal and sort of well-educated.

I reluctantly get up when my dryer rings. When I come back, he's still there.

"Want to get coffee next door?" he asks.

My stomach does a backflip like my socks in the dryer. "Sure."

We find out that we have a lot in common. He likes Hemmingway. I like Hemmingway. He has a dog. I like dogs. He's into human rights and goes to rallies sometimes. I want to go to human rights rallies sometimes.

We decide to meet for dinner the next day. I find out that he's smart *and* humble—a winning combination, and after a few dates, I fall in love, and he falls in love with me too. We get an apartment together, I take a desk job supporting him through grad school, and when he finally finishes, we move to California, he works for Google, I get a job at a publishing company and write novels on the side. We get married on the beach with our families, friends, and his dog all in attendance.

But that never happens. The man with brown curly hair, plaid shirt, and faded jeans doesn't come into the laundromat and doesn't talk to me. No one talks to me. I just sit there like I always do in my molded plastic chair, wearing the last of my clean pants, waiting for my clothes to dry.