

Wash-O-Rama

Marie got everything ready and went back to the kitchen to finish what was left of her tea, then washed her mug and spoon and set them in the drying rack. Telling herself it was okay to look nice once a while, she wore a sundress and sandals, and the hat with the wide brim that she used to wear every Sunday, back when she went to church.

Marie left her apartment with her red wagon clattering behind her, and turned from her tree-lined street onto a sunny and busy road that she wouldn't mind so much if it had sidewalks. When a pickup truck slowed and its driver called, "Hey, hot mama, what's a pretty thing like—" and then sped off after Marie picked up a rock, Marie felt briefly triumphant before dropping her arms to her side, telling herself not to cry. She cried a little and pulled the cart a while before dropping the rock.

Wash-O-Rama's air conditioning felt good on Marie's face and neck, and the fabric softener and mildew swirling together soothed her, like the first drops of rain on asphalt in summer. A few machines were humming despite there being no customers. Marie thought nasty things about people who left their laundry unguarded, at this early hour or any other. Several times during just the past week, she thought about teaching them a lesson, but her wagon was barely big enough as it was.

She loaded the washer with clothes and detergent, and turned the temperature dial to COLD. Patting her pockets filled her with dread that worsened as she rummaged through her shoulder bag. She bleated into her hands, then pounded the washer three times before returning her hands to her face, where they remained until a door opened in the distance. When a worker appeared, Marie sat down in a plastic chair, wiped her eyes and pretended to read *Good Housekeeping*.

After the worker was done watching her and returned to the back room, Marie set the magazine aside. She knew of a cash machine a few blocks away, but the Wash-O-Rama's change machine had been out of order for a while. To remove everything from the washer, load the wagon,

pull it all the way home to get the roll of quarters she had forgotten, and then drag it all back to Wash-O-Rama would take an hour or more.

Then, remembering something she had seen yesterday, or maybe the day before, Marie went to the counter by the vending machines, cluttered with magazines and coupon booklets. She turned the pages of *Parents* absently while looking at one of those cardboard charity displays with coin slots. She hadn't donated to one in a long time, questioning the accountability of convenience stores, delicatessens or other businesses where these displays were normally found.

Marie peered through a small window into the back room where the worker had gone, then at the display again. The vignettted photograph at the top, a boy with a big smile and a smooth, white head, looked like the same kid on every display Marie had ever seen. She directed her sudden anger at the makers of these displays, at herself for not donating to them, at those who did (this one only had two empty slots), at the boy's family, and even at the boy himself, even while telling him it wasn't his fault, then back to the display-makers, herself, then, instead of going all the way around again, Marie did a quick calculation and extracted fifteen quarters and hurried back to the machines.

The clothes were a satisfying blur of suds and color by the time the Wash-O-Rama's front door opened. A woman carrying a basket under one arm and dragging two bags was struggling to hold the door open with her hip, which, when paired with the other, Marie thought, should be sturdy enough to prop open a barn door.

The woman, who Marie hoped didn't speak English, dumped everything on the floor, pulled her hair into a ponytail, wiped sweat from her neck and began picking through the pile. She held up a pair of khakis, the kind boys wear to parochial school, and examined them front and back.

"They wear it one time and that's it," the woman complained. "Then onto the floor. Don't know what's clean, what's dirty. God help me if they're not back in the drawer when they want them." She held a pair of jeans up to the light coming through the window. "I don't even know what this is! Chocolate? *Blood?*" She pressed them to her nose before dropping them on a table. "At least they weren't wrestling in dog shit again." She sprayed stain remover from a can and began scrubbing with the built-in brush. "Doesn't even matter, does it."

“Sorry, what?” Marie said.

“They grow out of everything so fast, I don’t know why I bother. Ingrates. Animals.”

Marie imagined, with that much laundry and those hips of hers, three, maybe four boys. Probably not done, either; they never are. The woman turned dials and pressed buttons, and then fell heavily into a plastic chair and picked up the magazine Marie had tossed aside.

After moving her clothes to a dryer and dropping quarters into the slot, Marie touched the one still lingering in her pocket. She must have miscounted. She thought about returning it, but getting caught might draw attention to all the missing ones. She reached for the START button when the woman shouted, “Wait!”

Startled, Marie turned around to find the woman nearing the washers in a crouch. The woman rose, holding Elise’s pink-and-yellow striped sock with both hands. Marie reached for it but the woman pulled it to her chest as if were hers. “*Abh*,” she said sweetly, holding it out for both of them to see, and then said in a squeaky voice, “so *teensy-weensy*.”

Marie snatched it away.

“Just trying to help, lady. *Jeez*.”

Marie was waiting at the dryer as the final seconds elapsed. The buzzer sounded and she scooped the clothes into a cart.

“Do you wash everything in cold?” the woman asked, looking at Marie’s cart. Marie looked at it too, not having noticed how quickly everything had faded, even in cold. “Probably should.”

Pulling her loaded wagon toward the exit, Marie said, “You think you know everything. But you don’t know anything.”

The woman grimaced without moving her eyes from the magazine. Holding the door open, feeling the heat seep in, Marie said softly, “Peroxide and dish detergent.”

A bus was going by, and the woman said, “What?”

“Hydrogen peroxide and dish detergent. It works for chocolate at least. Blood, I don’t know.”

The woman made a face like she was taking note of it. Marie was halfway through the door when she stopped and said, "Tootsie Rolls? You know...the little ones?"

"What?"

"She used to do that. I forgot to check all her pockets sometimes. Too rushed. Too distracted, I guess."

The woman lowered the magazine and raised her eyes.

"I don't know where she got them all," Marie continued, looking down, smiling thinly. "School, I guess. They probably gave them out for good behavior. For spelling tests and things."

"Oh," the woman said, searching for something to say. "I guess it's good she finally stopped, then."

Marie looked at her for a long time. "What did you mean by that?"

"I don't know..." the woman stammered, "I thought you said she *used*—"

"No, no," Marie said, once again more inside Wash-O-Rama than out. "Still does it. Just yesterday, in fact. And, I do believe ..." Marie eyes brightened, darting to each corner of the room, "the day before that, too."

"Well," the woman said, "thanks for the tip. I'll try it next time."

"Will you?"

"Yes, definitely."

Marie was again mostly out the door when she said, "Try not to get too upset with them. They're just kids."

"*I'm* not upset," the woman said.

"Oh. I thought...okay, goodbye, then."

Marie emptied the laundry bags on her apartment floor. The sun that had shone on her and her wagon the whole way home had kept everything warm. She sat cross-legged, pairing socks and rolling them into tiny balls, smiling each time she tossed one into a wicker basket. Neatly folded T-shirts, pants and dresses went in next. On top was a layered underwear cake with cartoon frosting and strawberry toppings. Marie sprung to her feet and sighed on her way to kitchen, and turned on the burner beneath the kettle.

In Elise's room, Marie flipped the basket upside down and shook it. She picked up a small T-shirt and threw it. She unpaired socks and flung

them in opposite directions. She went hard at a yellow dress, not meaning to rip it like she did, then went after something else while shrieking loudly enough to alarm any neighbor who wasn't used to it by now. She kicked at what was left of the pile with muted rage until she heard the kettle whistling.

By the kitchen window, Marie drank her tea hurriedly despite it being too hot. She washed her mug and spoon and put them in the drying rack.

Around noon, Marie loaded up her wagon with the clothing from Elise's floor, including the torn yellow dress, and stepped out into the sun. She patted her own dress pocket, the roll of quarters solid against her thigh. There would be enough left over to repay the leukemia kid, but Marie doubted she would because it doesn't make any difference.