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Creative Skills Development

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Flash Fiction: Stained Sheets

Marina slammed the passenger side door of her beat-up, rusted-red Toyota Camry with her foot and dragged two large bins of laundry to the Laundromat door. Her long, frizzled hair obstructed her vision as she opened the door, but she pressed on with her mission to wash the clothes that had been sitting untouched for three weeks on the floor in the corner of her cinnamon-scented bedroom. Still hindered by her hair, she spotted a pair of empty washers next to each other and loaded her sour-smelling clothes, handful by handful, into the machines.

"\$7.00? Are you serious?" Marina muttered. It had been \$5.50 the last time she came. She reached into the pocket of her gray running shorts and pulled out a crumpled ball of various dollar bills. As she smoothed them out to insert into the machine, she flipped her hair back to regain a clear view, glancing around the Laundromat to make sure no one was lurking to steal her money. She was alone.

Marina turned around and took a seat on the grimy bench in front of the washer, which looked as if it had never encountered the touch of a cleaning rag. As she raised an earbud to her left ear, she caught sight of three large men entering the Laundromat and walking behind her, toward another corner of the facility. The gust of their passing brushed against her head, carrying the strong scent of cologne—as if one, or all, of the men had bathed in it. Marina lost sight of the group but quickly spotted them again in the reflection of a dryer further to her left. She noticed the men had begun speaking. Curiosity overtook her, prompting her to pause her music and remove the earbud slightly, still holding it to her ear as if she were listening.

A fourth man threw the Laundromat door open with force and quickly stepped toward his companions, a large trash bag slung over his shoulder. The man, brown-haired and balding, paused as he reached the others and tossed the bag onto the dirty limestone floor. "You gonna help me or what? This ain't a one man operation, you morons. Come on," he aggressively whispered. One of the larger men, a dark-skinned man with a finely trimmed goatee, flat-top hair, and dressed to impress, opened a washer and gestured for the balding man to throw the laundry in. Marina couldn't take her eyes off the reflection of the well-dressed man, her mind drifting into daydreams of lust and wishful thinking.

One of the men, a tall, obese figure wearing a red flannel shirt and a grey John Deer cap, reached into the bag after the balding man opened it. He quickly scanned the room, checking if anyone

was nearby. For a moment, Marina felt her heart drop into her stomach as the monstrous brute—a redneck—stared at her. After what felt like an eternity to Marina, the obese man returned to his task, lifting a large bundle of sheets and tossing them into the washer. “Is that all of ’em?” the balding man whispered.

“We don’t have time to mess around. Hurry it up,” stated the well-dressed man.

“There’s a pool of...,” the obese man muttered, but Marina didn’t catch the rest. “It’s everywhere.”

The man in the black hoodie and jeans, sporting a patchy beard and a crew cut, lightly shoved the obese man and made a gesture toward the bag. The obese man paused, staring at the sunglass-wearing man with controlled anger for a moment before returning to the bag. With surprising speed for such a large man, he lifted a soaked, stained sheet and tossed it into the washer.

“See? Wasn’t that hard, was it?” the sunglassed man said.

Marina was drenched in cold sweat. *What the hell was that? Was that blood?* She couldn’t tell the color of the liquid dripping from the sheet. The reflection in the dryer glass only showed washed-out, grey shades. Marina wiped her hands on her thighs, attempting to dry the sweat that contaminated her palms.

“These won’t take too long to wash. Let’s grab a bite across the street, eh?” said the balding man. The others nodded in agreement and moved as a group toward the front door. As they passed behind Marina, her heart raced, her pulse quickening from the consuming blast of cologne that lingered in the air. When the men exited, Marina tilted her head slightly, and faked a stretch of her arm as she glanced over at them. She watched as they crossed the empty parking lot toward a dimly lit food truck across the street.

Anxiety shifted into a stronger curiosity as she quickly stood and cautiously made her way toward the mysterious washer, glancing frequently through the Windex-smeared glass of the dingy laundromat to keep track of the group. Marina stopped in front of the washer. Her chest tightened, and her lungs seemed to cease operation as she gazed at the thick, rose-red liquid smeared along the lower rim of the washer door.

Marina collapsed to the floor, her hand clutching her chest. “Blood,” she stuttered repeatedly. As she fumbled for her iPhone in her right pocket, she vomited. The rancid stench of her stomach’s contents, the birria lamb tacos from dinner, filled every inch of air in the Laundromat. She vomited again.

The front door of the Laundromat opened soon after. “Oof! What the hell is that? Did something die in here?” yelled the balding man as the group of men entered, now holding wax-paper-wrapped cheeseburgers.

“Damn, that reeks,” shouted the well-dressed man as he wafted the air in front of him. The sunglassed man covered his mouth and nose with his black sweater, while the obese man stayed outside, fanning the front door open and shut to clear the air. Three of the men returned to the washer, where the well-dressed man found himself standing in a sea of rancid vomit.

Marina had thought death was coming for her when the door opened. Out of desperation, she crawled to a hiding spot behind a row of cheap, barely working washing machines from the early 2000s. Her heart throbbed as she shakily dialed 911.

“These frickin’ bums,” cried the balding man as he crumpled his hamburger wrapper. “Harvey, just grab the damn sheet. I’ll wash it at home. Screw this.”

The well-dressed man opened the washer door and pointed aggressively, ushering the sunglassed man to grab the soaked sheet instead of him. The sunglassed man jogged over, removed the sheet, and placed it back in the garbage bag it had come from.

From Marina’s sweaty ear, the 911 operator’s voice came through, “911. Please state the nature of your emergency.”

“Brick, we’re going to my place. Open the back door, would ya?” the balding man yelled to the obese man at the front door. The group of men left the washer door open and made their way outside. The thick red liquid steadily dripped from the washer door, splattering the vomit-covered floor with small, crimson accents. As the echo of the front door closing filled the rancid-smelling laundromat, Marina quickly stood, sprinted to her laundry baskets, and took cover behind the bench where she had been sitting earlier.

“Hello? Is anyone there? Please tell me your name,” the 911 operator asked through the phone. Marina’s breathing was heavy as she cautiously peeked over the bench. Cold beads of sweat rolled down her forehead as she watched the group of men climb into a large white truck.

“My name is Maria. There was a group of men. They killed someone. There was a sheet of blood.”

“Where are you?” the 911 operator asked.

The white truck’s headlights flashed on as the driver, the obese man, backed it out of the parking space in front of the Laundromat. As it maneuvered into a horizontal position, Marina spotted a damaged logo on the side of the truck that read ‘Wesley’s Paint and Plumbing.’ As the truck left the parking lot, Marina stood frozen, the weight of guilt consuming her. In a daze, she slowly walked to the front door, hung up on the 911 operator, and opened the door of her rusted red Toyota Camry. She sat down in the torn driver’s seat, gripped the steering wheel tightly, and rested her head on the 12 o’clock position.