

## And the Tide Turns: Musings on Laundry and on Love

Cheer. Wisk. Gain.

Tonight is Laundry Night, I decide. Lighten my load by lightening my colors, “washing off the stink,” some call it, brightening my whites, and cleaning my grimy apparel. The task is onerous, comprised of sorting and piling and green garbage-bagging one Hefty load at a time. Serviceable bags for a dirty job that somebody has to do.

“When I’m rich, I’m hiring a maid,” I mutter to myself. In the meantime, I’m hauling garbage bags full of old clothes that I probably couldn’t get fifteen cents for if I sold them at a yard sale. Grumble, grumble, grumble. Trek through my apartment. Out the door, and down thirteen steps. Out the front door, and across the porch to my cousin’s house. Baby, it’s cold outside, and dark already. In ‘Chele’s door, across the length of her house, and down her steps to the cluttered laundry room with its trusty free washer-dryer combination. I am already pooped, but am now committed to doing the task I loathe. Flip on the wall switches to awaken any dust bunnies that may have escaped being trampled by my canvas sneakers and Hefty bags. Quickly turn on the overhead light bulb by twisting it so that light appears, and stop just before I burn my fingers on the fast-heating bulb. Illuminate the dirty job so the washing machine can see to do its whirling and whining and Wisking.

Sweatshirts, turtlenecks, knee socks, blouses, towels, and what-have-you, all sit bunched together in silent, filthy indifference as I douse the washer’s gray interior with creamy blue cleansing goo and swiftly stuff the clothes around the washer’s agitator. Whoever described doing laundry as “agitation” had the right idea. Dial the magic codes that turn on the machine, and let it beat my clothes into submission, and into some semblance of cleanliness. Twist the light bulb so that it goes dark, turn off the wall switches, and venture back upstairs.

Retrace my steps, and pause to do battle with Big Black Dog Mr. T, who sees me as a potential playmate, and pounces gleefully upon me. “Down, Mr. T! Off, Mr. T!”

I think, but do not say, *Go away, Mr. T*. That would not be friendly. Mr. T is my cousin’s dog, my godson’s buddy. According to the logic of my dog-loving family, Mr. T is family. He must be greeted, and must be embraced and greeted as warmly as I would greet my Aunt Jane. For all intents and purposes, this makes him a relative. As a dutiful family member, I must obey the ancient adage, “Love me, love my dog.” He is not, however, a particularly useful dog. Mr. T does not offer me a nip from a flask of brandy, as befitting a weary traveler, or assist with the laundry, which would make me willing, nay, eager to pull on his grimy, drool-saturated chew toy that appears to be permanently attached to his powerful jaws. Mr. T simply impedes my progress by expecting me to play with him. But he’s Mr. T, not Mel Gibson, so I can’t get too excited about his ventures. Life is not play, dog. Life is one long ever-spinning, never-ending load of laundry. If you were something other than a dog, you might understand this dismal truth. Since you can’t understand this dismal truth, get down. If you won’t scam, let me be.

I make it to the front door, and out onto my front porch. I could swear that it has gotten colder in the space of time that it took me to play my weary Washer Woman and phony Dog Aficionado roles. I retreat back into my cozy cave as my laundry spins and cavorts or does whatever it does as I sulk and moan. What goes in must come out. I will have to retrace my trek several times before I can consider my laundry, and myself, done for the night. Correction: I am already done for the night. The laundry, however, is not. I set my trusty blue long-ringing timer so I can remember to venture back down into the cold and damp to confront the cold and damp laundry, and to transfer it from the washer to the dryer. I listen to the timer's loud ticking, and heave a long-suffering sigh. Others are out sipping Sex on the Beach in bars, or prospering, or falling in love, or plotting the perfect crime to get the perfect revenge, and here I sit, prisoner to my sopping blue jeans and my soggy flannel shirts. *There is no justice in the world*, I muse.

No justice, only laundry. No love, only Cheer and Gain to be spilled—but not to be enjoyed. I glance down at my fingers, and notice my bare, ringless left hand. The white mark has long since worn off the finger that I gave to my husband twenty-six years ago today.

Well, okay, I didn't give him the finger—then. And I didn't really give him my hand, either, except in marriage. He gave me the ring that he put on my finger, and I wore it proudly for a while. It was a charmed circle. All the charm wore off when he embraced other charms, and the other charms of the other woman. I stare at my naked finger, and recall my wedding day, twenty-six years ago today. White dress, wedding jitters, insane optimism, a union that was simultaneously the worst mistake I ever made, and the best. It was an icy cold day, and no way would I wear that long lacy wedding veil now, or get married in January, or commit so blindly to two decades worth of loving a stranger who became stranger, yet more familiar, with the passage of time.

Strange pictures fill my mind. Tom, the usher whose brown shoes clashed with his black tuxedo. Charlie, my young cousin who served as altar boy for our Catholic wedding. My father, whose glum expression plainly showed both his discomfort with people, and his grief at my leaving him. My naiveté. My groom's innocence. I was twenty, moving thousands of miles away from home to wed a stranger, and no one could stop me. If our marriage was doomed to be a romantic *faux pas* as inappropriate as brown shoes with a black tuxedo, we kept our uncertainties to ourselves. The wedding invitations had gone out, and if doubt was neatly tucked inside each folded invitation inside each thick envelope, I never let on. I wanted a wedding. I wanted a new life. I wanted, more than anything, to know that someone, anyone, wanted me. I would never have to be alone again on a Friday night. That was what it boiled down to, really. I wanted to be a long cool woman in a white dress, and to be Queen for a Day, and to have a forever friend on Fridays.

The laundry bell sounds its plaintive peal, and it's back to work for the Washer Women of the World. Back to the dark and the cold and the reality of the shirts and the dungarees and the life that is mine. Back to recalling the laundry I used to loathe doing. Filthy, sweaty, smelly exercise clothes

that would make your eyes water from the stench. That was how he spent his Fridays, creating dirty laundry for me to cleanse and purify.

Cheer. Wisk. Gain. Era. Ending.

Twenty-four years of marriage went down the drain in May of 1995. When we began the slow process of physical and psychological separation, he briefly continued to remain with me in the home we owned together. Our love was long gone, but his laundry remained. It was a happy day when I realized that divorcing him meant that his dirty duds were no longer my problem. I can still remember my secret joy when I heard him complain to his mother that I had stopped washing his clothes.

"Today you are a man, my son," I sneered silently to myself.

Now, as I prepare to venture down the stairs to tend to my own dirty laundry, I silently rejoice that it is mine, all mine, and mine only. I rejoice that being alone on a Friday night holds no terror, only joy and contentment, and, okay, tons of homework to resolutely ignore.

I recall the lovely, layered wedding cake with its cascade of sugary pink roses, and the trembling hands that held the knife. Marriages begin at knife-point, I think, no wonder half of them are doomed. No wonder they become a stabbing pain, or end in murderous rage. Not that I'm bitter, mind you, just reflective, and postponing the moment when I have to confront the damned cold and the damned dog and the damned laundry again.

If I ever marry again, I think I'd serve pizza and hot fudge sundaes at my wedding. Cheese, tomato sauce, pepperoni, chocolate, ice cream, whipped cream, nuts, and a cherry on top. There'd be no knives, pretense, or formality. Nuts for the nuts who marry! I'd require a book by every paper plate place setting, and make everyone read something that they think would be useful for newlyweds to know. Someone would quote Martha Stewart, some jokester professor would quote John Milton's Satan, someone else would quote Cookie Monster from Sesame Street, and the bridal couple would leave with an assortment of useful phrases to take with them into the future. And somewhere between Satan and Sesame Street would be truth and wisdom and laughter. Just a little something to hang on to when the pizza boxes are empty and the ice cream headache subsides. Something to get us through the days when our shoes don't match our suits, and illness claims our loved ones, and dogs pounce upon us with ridiculous drooling adoration that we know we don't deserve. For that matter, I could use a wise word to ponder now that I am filled with bittersweet recollections of the day I expected would be the best day of my life, the man I shared it with, and all the joy and heartache of the twenty-six years since then. Since I don't know how to commemorate that day or its significance, I gather up my energy and gather up my laundry, recall sharing sugary wedding cake, and think about ordering a hot pizza pie for myself. Earth hath no sorrow that Donatos cannot heal with double toppings and extra cheese. And Breyer's Mint Chocolate Chip Ice Cream for dessert.

Now that's a marriage to remember.