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Most of White is Blue

Pluck from the dryer by the shoulder seam; snap, twice, like a rug; hang; press between two flat, like praying, hands. Repeat. In less than a minute, I'd racked up a colorful row of little Ts. "Some sort of laundry pixie." That's what my husband called me while watching me complete these final steps of laundering our daughter's small shirts. Keeping plain, old cotton t-shirts on hangers might seem excessive but small shirts are truly better-managed if hung rather than folded into exploding little bundles of sprung foldlines. Our daughter is seven now. I fold some of her shirts but mostly I drop them on hangers. Oh, and little underwear: Lay it flat in the drawer. Tim thinks it's too much fuss, but not me. If cotton underwear is allowed to adopt haphazard fold lines it might ride a little rougher than necessary. Nobody needs a wad of cotton in her crotch.

Tim has called me a pixie before. We were speeding down the interstate when my right hand pulled a white bra out of my left sleeve. He swerved. Luckily we were in New Mexico so, quite uneventfully, he swerved back. "What the hell are you? Some kind of underwear pixie?" he said. "I didn't even see you unhook your seat belt."

"Yes it's true," I told my new fiancé. "I am that thing you said."

A pixie is a fairy, a magical sprite. The current pixie reference reminded me of the first and, after fifteen years, I decided to look it up. By now, though, I had discovered the origin of the word's entrance into my husband's vocabulary: *The Simpsons*. Barney, resident alcoholic, discovers Bart and Milhouse, town tweens, on a sugar-crazed trip after they found a twenty-dollar bill and spent it on a super-concentrated squishy. They share their drink with Barney and he thanks them with the words, "I don't know where you pixies came from, but I like your pixie drink." So, truth: rare diction and direct quotes from movies and television make up most of my husband's communications. Over the years, I have learned this language as well but, besides Tim, I don't know anyone who speaks it.

Using a made-up dialect lost on the general audience defines my husband. I accept that. And he accepts my excessive relationship with laundry. While not magical or necessarily spiteful, I am quick and method-driven, and I absolutely delight in the process that takes fabrics from damp and twisted to fresh and folded. The highlight of my week: settling on the basement floor on Saturday mornings in sweats and a sleep-wrinkled tank top, an iced Diet Coke within reach, and the week's laundry piled high in front of me. I unroll little sleeves, separate briefs from Levis, scrub soap into chocolate milk spills, empty pockets of their booty (rocks and receipts), invert inside-out pant legs, untwist still-damp sports bras, and fill baskets according to color, texture, and purpose. A week well done is ordered by my hands. Within earshot, the machines run their cycles, switch, rev up, and reverse. There's a clicking and a stop, a sloshing and the whir of spin. This is the cat's turf, so they join in. Crush rolls in the pajamas and hug-fights the tube socks; Socrates drags off bath towels to hump in the corner.

Tim tries to save me from this ritual mountain by running a few loads during the week. I wish he wouldn't. He refuses to concede that rules exist in the world of laundry which do not exist elsewhere. For instance: Red is the darkest color. And: Most of white is blue. He insists on sorting clothes his way: one pile of stuff we're going to need in the next couple of days. One pile of stuff we're not. This method yields black turtlenecks with terrycloth fuzz, socks and briefs the color of dirty dishwater, and too-tight jeans dried as long as it took for bath towels to stop setting off the humidity detector. Tim wrinkles

rayon, turns pink sweatshirts mysteriously blue, and leaves behind half-loads that waste water. This is to say nothing of the time we moved across state and he unplugged and dollied up the washer mid-cycle.

"We can finish it when we get there," he said.

Last Spring, Iowa flooded. Half the state was under water. The home where my friend and his wife were raising three small daughters filled its basement to the brim with river. I went there a few days after he was let back in. The once-finished basement: Empty. Guttled. They dragged out his couch, his carpet, his walls. Dirt-caked appliances waited for the trash truck on the curb. Mud choked his yard and cobblestone walkway. When I called to see what to bring, what they might need, he couldn't even answer the question. Mike and his family were living in the park in a camper. They needed everything yet nothing I could provide. Driving into town with a bunch of things nobody needed—a cooler of Dasani (the Red Cross had been dropping off water) some painting masks, and a broom—I passed street after street lined with washers, chairs, carpet rolls, frames, teddy bears. We spent the day pushing flood and rinse water around Mike's basement. But as soon as we pushed it to the drain, it crept back in through the cracks in the floor. The ground below refused to swallow. We quit early and I left promising to call him in the morning. But I didn't. I didn't call him the next day either. I didn't know what to do.

About ten years ago, Tim and I spent some time in Amsterdam. We lived in room eight of the Bulldog Hotel above a hash bar in the red light district. Our room held a small bed and an even smaller table pushed up to an unscreened arch-shaped window that swung open to Holland's damp air. We sat at the table overlooking the Oudezijds Voorburgwal Canal and observed the men (and sometimes women) entering and exiting the red light rooms. Curtains opened and shut like legs. Tour boats floated by. I ate cereal out of the bottom half of a litre bottle, and Tim played songs he made up on his guitar. We wrote and talked and read and smoked and made love. And we hung drying laundry on lines zigzagging through our room.

Room eight's shower/restroom looked like a closet when the door was shut, but behind that closet-looking door was an amazing water room. It wasn't beautiful or lush; rather so utilitarian it seemed like a secret. The entire room—mirror, sink, walls, toilet—was made to be wet. In the mornings, we slipped out of our sheets and stepped into this box of rain. We shampooed and peed in the toilet at the same time. We shaved and laundered together. We held and kissed each others' wet faces as sunlight snuck in through the opaque-block windows. Here, we made plans to pick up muffins, visit the flower market, or feed the pigeons in the park. And we emerged, saturated. The same water that ran through the canal below our window and transported the Dutch through their circular city beaded up on our bodies and slipped through the fabrics that covered us or embraced us in sleep. The city washed through us. It seems like another lifetime.

Saturday, four days later, I still hadn't checked back with Mike. He was in a daze and couldn't tell me what would help. I couldn't think of anything, either—couldn't speed up the inspections process; I'm not a good cook; I could provide storage room but live two towns over. With the morning news in the background and the elliptical rotating under my feet, Tim and Carly threw jeans, shirts, pajamas,

underwear, and towels downstairs into a growing pile next to me. I looked forward to stripping off one last sports bra, grabbing a pop, and owning the work and play that made up the previous week: Carly's Tuesday jeans, muddy with footprints from playing with the neighbor's dog. Tim's black dress shirt from Saturday, our niece's wedding, still smelling softly of his cologne. My sweats—worn to my friend's house the day we pushed water in circles. They were full-length that morning but wicked up so much river water and became heavy, I had cut them with a knife about knee length. These, too, could be filed. Cleaned. Re-cut, straight, with scissors. Folded. Stacked in the closet for the next good workout. I craved this ritual re-ordering of my life—preparing for the future, acknowledging the past, measuring myself in week-size chunks of laundry. Crush and Soc were waiting for me. I could picture the sorted, sweet-smelling stacks on the made bed in mine and Tim's bedroom. But there was something else I needed to do.

"Mike? This is Kim. Hey, I know this is a little weird, but, when you get this message, give me a call. I'm coming out to get your laundry."

Last night: Tim and Carly left to run errands. I talked her into going along so I could retreat and catch up with the dress clothes. Washing dress clothes requires less divided attention than one can give with a jabberbox seven-year-old running laps around the cats nearby. Dress clothes must be retrieved immediately from the wash and either directly snapped and hung or warmed on timer and promptly removed. As I hang little dance clothes and feel the stars and black sky peeking into the basement I think this is a beginning. The story will go like this: I was just pressing the flower on Carly's leotard and the phone rang and there was this terrible accident and . . .

Thankfully, it hasn't unfolded that way.

Mike returned my call and, a couple hours later, I unloaded the trunk of my car onto our driveway. A pile of dirty clothes, towels, and blankets stared me down. The swollen river had seeped into Mike's cargo pants, his wife's skinny jeans. Mud and silt stiffened legs, tugged necklines. Among the discord: a tiny softball uniform, big and little dress clothes, crumpled princess nightgowns, pink and yellow onesies. I couldn't help but consider the intimate moments of this family's life as my fingers held each piece of fabric that clothed or cleaned them. As the chaos moved into piles, I imagined I could read the story of their week: a slide into base at a daughter's softball game; apricots for the baby's lunch; a tiny nightgown that leaped into Dad's arms after a bad dream; Superwoman underwear, torn in the fierce lovemaking couples often find in tragedy. Mud—evidence of the Cedar River's invasion of their home.

Tim hung the most soiled items on the clothesline to dry—then, later, whacked the mud-turned-dirt into a dust cloud. I sorted and scrubbed, unrolled and separated, inverted and untwisted. When we finished, eight piles of prepped laundry lay waiting on our driveway.

Around five p.m., it became clear we weren't going to finish Mike's family's laundry with our bachelor-size machines. So we loaded up the remaining piles into Carly's wagon and walked down the block to the laundromat. As we forced the river's footprints out of the last of our friends' belongings, I pulled up a chair and watched: The water, with dark brown suds of soap and dirt, splashed against the round, rubber-rimmed screen of the washer. The items vibrated as if the rinse water was too cold. And the cycle ran again and again until the water lightened and, eventually, became clear.

In the dryer, the items flung themselves in bounding circles—pixies, magical sprites—flipping and turning over and over. Cartwheeling. Catapulting. New.