

Short Story Contest

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PROMPT: Late at night, at an empty 24-hour laundromat, someone reaches into a dryer to pull the last of their clothes out. Instead, something grabs their arm and pulls them in.

Dirty Laundry

by **Emily Bargo**

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Emily Bargo Prompt #3

Motion sickness didn't even begin to describe it.

How could he have known laundromats served as interdimensional gateways at night?

Earlier, neon light had seeped through the storefront windows, staining the washers and dryers green. Catchy pop music had fought to be heard over the humming machines. Ben couldn't stand doing errands during the day when other people and their nicer belongings stirred his jealousy, so he had waited for the stillness of the night.

Warmth had spread up his arms as he pulled the laundry out.

He had reached back in to grab a stray sock.

Oily fingers had snatched his wrists.

It had pulled him headfirst into the dryer. A light had flashed. Now, Ben laid, sprawled out onto a tile floor, white-hot pain searing through his head. He waited for vertigo to pass before opening his eyes.

He was in... a laundry room?

Stacks of clothes and patterned rugs obscured the walls.

A lifelike wax sculpture of a maid stood in front of him. An unlit wick protruded from the top of her head.

Bending at the waist, she asked, "Who are you?"

He jolted upright.

"Who are you?"

"You're not Envy!"

"Sorry?"

She paced in front of him, wringing her hands and mumbling.

“Can I go now?”, he asked, counting on her not to notice him crouching down to inspect the dryer.

She pointed at him, eyes wide.

“NO!”

He held up his hands, straightening back up.

“It’s too late. The gate is closed now anyway.”

“Uh-huh.”

He thought it best not to ask her any more questions.

The maid walked over to one of the clothing piles, grabbing a handful of shirts. She threw them at him.

“Put one of these on,” she said, digging through a cabinet. “And this mask.”

“What...”

“Don’t speak unless spoken to, nod as if you understand them, and don’t look him in the eye.”

He pulled a heavy, green cloak over his head and fastened the ivory mask onto his face.

Gesturing for him to follow, she led him out of the laundry room down a long, liminal hallway.

“If they don’t believe you, we’re both dead.”

Despite the oppressive heat, goosebumps trailed up his arms.

“Great.”

The thin walls suppressed a cacophony of voices from the other side. A round penthouse living room loomed around the corner.

Dark curtains enclosed the space, blocking the windows. A static television and red lamp provided the only light. Shadowed figures sat on curved sofas and armchairs, laughing at something or another.

“Late as ever.”

The remark had come from a man with his back turned to them. Standing, he approached them, the dim, crimson light revealing the face of a hare. His raised ears twitched, glossy black eyes unblinking.

“My, aren’t you chatty tonight.”

Any hope of a reply died in his throat.

Glass shattered.

On the couch to his left, a pink woman with velvet for skin sprung up. Liquid spilled out of the surviving margarita glass in her other hand.

“Drinks, we must get.” She hiccupped. “More drinks!”

Either the shadows or absence of normal people alleviated his nerves. Ben shook his head.

“I’ll have what she’s having.”

Encouraged, she lunged out of her seat straight to the decanter tray and made him a cocktail. She shoved it in his hands and sat back down, quelled for the moment.

Sat next to her, a squat man in an oversized trench coat said, “Be a thinker, not a drinker’s what *I* always say.”

His collar covered half his face, his words muffled as if he were speaking underwater.

The hare-man vaulted over the back of his chair and sat back down.

“That’s because you don’t know the meaning of fun.”

Someone tapped his shoulder. He turned around. The pink woman took the untouched drink from his hand for herself, splashing the liquid on her face and letting the fabric soak it up.

Ben couldn't tolerate anymore on his feet, and the maid had slipped away. He moved to the far right couch occupied by a pile of blankets. Snores emanated from underneath a bowler cap nestled on top. His weight shifted the cushions, and the sleeper fell on top of him. He flinched, leaning away.

The sleeper rolled onto the floor with a thump.

"The sluggard craves and gets nothing," said a woman in a scratchy timbre. She reclined in a seat in the far back, blowing out a plume of cigarette smoke. "While the soul of the diligent is richly rewarded."

A bell rang.

Short candle men without faces and the maid entered.

"The meal is prepared," she said, gesturing to the adjoining room.

The waxy servants pulled back a section of curtains, revealing an ornate dining room beyond. A crystal chandelier reflected prismatic rays over the bare rectangular table, and the roaring maw of a fireplace crackled behind the head seat.

An insistent candle nudged the back of his knee and guided him to a chair at the far end. None of the guests chose a specific place at the table. Still, an underlying strategic power imbalance held the room in its grip.

A gale whirled through the room. The flames gasped before trailing off in plumes of smoke. Hot breath blew on the back of his neck. Someone stalked behind him, circling the table, an ashy charcoal smell following in its wake.

He blinked.

The room appeared as if nothing had happened. Ben might have believed it was a moment of delusion if not for the mounds of food and dishes cluttering the table.

The host had arrived.

Hands clasped behind his back, a gaunt man in a classy suit stood in front of the fireplace. Stepping forward into the chandelier light, the red veil wrapped tightly around his face became visible.

Bang!

The table rattled as the host slammed his hands down.

In a hushed tone, he said, "One of you is not like the others."

Ben held his breath, the tendons in his arms straining from his tight grip on the chair armrests.

The hare-man made a dismissive gesture and said, "Come now, don't be ..."

Flames erupted from the top of his veiled head. The fireplace followed his example, and a wave of hot air hit Ben in the face.

"QUIET!"

The host inhaled deeply and nodded his head in the direction of the entrance.

Two candle-men dragged the limp body of the maid into the room. Her melted head caved in. A weak fire still moved down her wick. The man in the bowler hat slumped down in his seat, and the velvet drunk pressed a hand to her throat, looking away.

"I have it on good authority that one of you means me harm."

The guests flinched as the host moved towards them. He sat down.

"Let's eat," he said, already piling food onto his plate.

“Do not love sleep, lest you become impoverished, labor so that you might be satisfied with food.”

The hare leaned forward, laying claim to a cherry pastry, and said, “Amen to that.”

Uneasiness lingered, but as conversation and dining resumed, their paralysis dissolved. Ben couldn't be sure if this was a recurrent theme in this unconventional group of acquaintances.

A clinking sound drew his attention.

The host rose from his seat. Holding up a champagne flute, he said, “A toast to unwavering friendship.” He gestured to the proverbial smoker. “And a thoughtful gift of good wine.”

Ben pushed his chair back to stand in unison with the others as they raised their glasses. The taste of alcohol made him nauseous, so he pretended to take a sip, trusting no one would pay too close attention.

The other guests unsubtly stared at the host. The room became silent for an uncomfortable amount of time.

“I'll take another if you're offering,” said the pink woman.

She opened her mouth to say more but broke into a coughing fit before collapsing face-first into the hoard of food amassed on her plate.

The host sighed and made a show of looking at his watch.

“I knew we should've gone with *my* plan,” said the trenchcoat man before toppling over on top of the hare.

Likewise, the other woman, clutching her chest, fell with style. Ben wasn't sure if the bowler hat man had been affected or if he was already asleep.

The fireplace flared up as the host splashed his full glass of champagne into the blaze.

“I’m disappointed they would stoop to poison. I suppose my bluff drove them to sloppiness.”

Ben covered his eyes with a hand and released an empty laugh. Finally, he had discovered the one thing he didn’t envy others for, their secrets.