

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.

At Night Some Spin Forever

by **Alexandra DeMarco**

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Here where the mothers meet the students, meet those seeking shelter from the cold, where the children make monkey bars from silvery drying racks in these unholy hours, Elaine gripped the metal handle of the laundromat's door. Its cool, jagged edges pulled at her skin, simultaneously begging her to turn away and coercing her in.

She wondered why laundry only seemed fit to finish at night, when the tasks of the day were completed and anything incomplete was delegated to the following day, to the lucidity of sunrise -- except, of course, for the laundry. That could be finished.

She jostled her canvas laundry bags, ripping at their seams, onto a linoleum table at the head of a row of washers. Neighbors lingered at the end of the row -- unusually, without children.

With the contents of her bags in side-by-side washers, her hands, their winter skin cracked like a thawing spring lake, emptied the last of her detergent into the machines and inserted quarter after quarter into silver mouths. In a flash of two buttons, the neighboring machines jolted to life, thrusting her clothes into a whirling circle of soap, water, and fabric.

At the linoleum table, she resolved to read a book as best she could for the half hour washing period, ignoring *Wheel of Fortune* droning in the background from a remote-less TV.

Five minutes in, a man sat at the opposite end of the room, shadowed by the row of washers, wandered toward Elaine and swayed near two vending machines, rubbing a battered dollar through his fingers.

That dollar won't take, she thought to herself. She could feel his eyes, as hers dried on black-and-white paper words. Alone in a city, a woman grows accustomed to undesired stares, but it was the peculiar close distance of this uninterrupted gaze that was so unnerving

"Ma'am? Could you trade a dollar? Mine's bust," he said in a hoarse, hushed tone.

Elaine hesitated, and in her instant of doubt he leaned in, and in a voice entirely opposite from the one he'd used just moments earlier, demanded, "What are you doing here?" His tone, just seconds before, had been gravelly, but now it was silky smooth, like he'd downed a cup of tea between sentences.

Appalled and afraid, she stared at him.

"What do you mean? Do I know you?"

“We know that it’s you. We recognized you the second you walked in. We could recognize you from across the world.”

“*What?* Recognize me from where?”

He backed up and eyed Elaine through drooping blue marbles, first with contempt, then with danger, then with lunacy. His gravelly voice returned as he called to friends at the back of the mat.

“Shirley! Are you ready to go? Let’s go!”

He stood, left hand crutched in his hip, eyeing Elaine with uncertainty, almost provokingly, before thrusting his head over his shoulder to complete the glare as he marched out of the mat.

After a moment’s shock, Elaine moved her chair to face the laundromat’s entrance, taking watch for his return. When the washer beeped in completion, she dashed to relocate her clothes to the dryer -- until a voice from the back of the room, of a small elderly woman in a metal chair screeching over *Wheel of Fortune*, stopped her.

“Don’t use that one!” she yelled, with eyes bulging from their sockets like bloody teeth from a punched gum.

Elaine paused.

“It’s broken?”

“No. Not broken.”

“Well, what’s the problem?”

“Everyone uses that one.”

Elaine chuckled.

“Well, then I imagine it works quite well.” She bent to resume urgently shoving her clothes into the dryer.

The old woman impossibly widened her deep-set eyes, rose with difficulty implied by the creak in her knees, and edged closer.

“You misunderstand me. Every long-lost traveler used that one.”

Elaine’s bones were suddenly cold. A chill crescendoed through her neck. Something in the building was deftly wrong.

“Please leave me alone.”

With the last of her clothes in the machine, she frantically threw quarters after them, leaving silver misfires on the tile, and ferociously pressed start, before running to her car to wait out this round. Something odd was copulating here, she thought, a pathogen fed by detergent, and she was not about to chance another exposure for her clothing. When her laundry finished in 45 minutes, she would run and retrieve it without a word to the old woman, who had hovered as she loaded the machine and was again sitting in the chair at the back of the room, staring straight ahead to the street, unblinking.

The seconds trickled by as Elaine hunkered in the nipping cold, reading by the streetlight. When her watch vibrated, and she finally plunged her arms into her warm fabric abyss, hands submerged in the cotton submarine, her right arm inexplicably snagged on something -- or rather, snagged *in* something. She tried to pull away but couldn't. In desperation, she yanked harder and harder, but the more she pulled, the tighter the grip of the snag, and the more her arm was encapsulated, until the machine devoured her shoulder.

Paralyzed with, yes, terror, but first confusion, she began screaming.

“Help! Help me!”

Elaine could barely move her face but a bit to the side, where she was shocked to see an apparition of the old woman hovering above her. They were alone in the laundromat.

“Aren't you going to pull me out? I'm stuck! Something's sucking me in! Help me!”

The old woman was unfeeling, her voice abruptly deeper than Elaine recalled.

“I told you not to use that machine.”

There was a yank, and everything went dark.

She opened her eyes to a figure leaning over her. In a navy suit adorned with bronze buttons, he was the pinnacle of fashion. Observing his face, she was confused to realize he was the vending machine man.

The laundromat. She was at the laundromat. Where was she now? The dryer. The grip. The hand. The old woman. Sudden panic overtook Elaine with the rushing recall of the night's events, and she moved to scream but nothing came out. In fact, she could barely feel the strain of her vocal cords.

Her eyes traced the man's outline and his surroundings. She was subtly aware that her eyes, but no other parts of her body, were capable of movement. The man turned and called to someone outside of her limited peripheral vision.

"She's here."

"Took her long enough. She'll realize quickly that we don't allow duty denial around here."

The second voice rang familiar, but Elaine's present situation and dense brain fog clouded its distinguishing tonality. She heard two pairs of footsteps approaching her left temple, until she could sense their bodies beginning to again lean over, until their shallow breath was audible.

Though she could not convey surprise except with the slightest eye movement, Elaine was shocked to gaze back at the face of the elderly woman from the back of the laundromat. *How did she get stuck in the dryer, too?* Elaine wondered.

The woman smirked.

"I don't know if you heard me before we got you. I warned you not to use that dryer. We're required to warn you."

From a distance, the man spoke.

"Your days of shirking your duty are over. You're stuck here now. You'll be starting immediately."

Elaine tried to respond but her lips were solid lead seared together by metallurgy.

"She's still paralyzed. Do you want her to respond to that?" the woman said.

There were hurried footsteps, then the subtle feeling of a grip on Elaine's arm, which she knew was there but barely detectable.

"This won't hurt. Obviously," the woman said.

As the woman leaned over, watching her apprentice work, the man injected Elaine with a fast-acting antidote. In a matter of minutes, she regained access to her lips, arms, legs, and muscles. With unsteady wrists, Elaine pushed herself onto her wrists to see a room that looked just like the ceiling -- shiny white, with an exception for the cracks around the door.

"Where am I? What did I do?"

She was too weak to run or make sudden movements.

“Wait a moment,” the man said as he handed her a newspaper. “The memories will return.”

There, on the cover of the paper for a place she’d never heard of, Elaine’s face stared back at her, from the grim confines of a black-and-white mugshot. The headline read, “Woman who escaped from Sacramento prison first to be sentenced to loophole ‘eternal damnation.’”

Her hands began vigorously shaking.

“Wh-what is this? Is this some kind of a sick joke? You have to let me out!”

She turned her face from the paper to look at the man and the woman, and the horror of undeniable recognition shattered her bones. There, in the pearl room, stood the most senior prosecutor and judge from Sacramento County -- the two who sentenced her to life, and then some.

At her look of realization, the man laughed maniacally.

“By failing to recognize us in the laundromat, you threw away your last chance at a reduced sentence. We told you at the last trial that this was the final opportunity.”

When was the trial? Was it years ago? Suddenly, Elaine realized that she couldn’t actually remember *anything* since the trial; she couldn’t remember leaving the courthouse for the prison, she couldn’t remember what she might have done to occupy her time in her cell, and she couldn’t remember her day before she walked through the door of the laundromat. Was the laundromat even in Sacramento?

The judge smiled, her wrinkles abounding.

“We let you dream. We let you forget. The dream may be over now, but the punishment isn’t. This is where your punishment will be. In the dream.”

“What?”

“Allow us to show you,” the prosecutor said.

He gestured for the judge and Elaine to follow, and the three of them walked through the door at the end of the blindingly white room, into a tunnel with a white floor periodically interrupted by clear squares.

“Look down,” he said.

Elaine peered through one translucent spot at the hunched figure of a man, rapidly steering a metal wheel through fabric and water swirling inside a metal box – a washing machine.

“What is that? Don’t those run on electricity?”

“You can’t tell?” the prosecutor said.

“Why is he doing that?”

“Elaine, these are the washers and dryers,” the judge said. “Here, you will find your job for the rest of eternity -- here, within the dreamworld where we pulled you from. Here, you will spend forever spinning a wheel to fix this world that you have damaged by your crimes against humanity.”

Her eyes widened. Her lips dried. Her breaths were paralyzed contrails in her throat.

“What are you talking about? Is this a joke? You’re sick!”

The judge smirked.

“Unfortunately, this is the hand you’ve been dealt. Forever begins -- now.”

The white floor beneath Elaine’s feet turned translucent, then disappeared entirely, until she fell into the depths where eternity awaited her attention.