

Short Story Contest

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 LIBRARIES



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.

The Dry Cycle

by **Jessica Peters**

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The bus is empty when I take my seat. I walk past rows of stained fabric expecting them to be occupied by one or two late night travelers, but I see no one. I sit towards the back. The driver seems nice enough, but I'm not in the mood for chatting. I slide my duffel bag full of dirty clothes off my shoulder into the seat next to me. Leaning my head against the cool glass of the window, I watch the streetlights move by in rhythm. There's steam coming off of manhole covers, it's just chilly enough to see it, and the neon lights of late-night signs glimmer off the traces of the rainstorm earlier.

It doesn't take long for the bus to pull up next to the shopping center right outside of town. I grab my bag, call a small "thank you" to the driver and step out into the cold night air, my shoe landing directly in a puddle. I can feel the water seeping through my sneaker and into my sock. I sigh, the sound of it mixing with the groan from the bus's engine as it pulls away. I hike the bag further up onto my shoulder, and glance to the laundromat to my left.

It's the third store in, situated right between a Chinese restaurant and a movie rental store. *This shopping center is the strangest amalgamation of stores* I thought. Most of the lights in the stores are off, understandable since it's the middle of the night, but the blinky neon sign of the laundromat draws me in. It's pink, yelling at me that it's open 24/7, but the neon is two different shades of pink, like it was broken and needed repair. There're no lights on inside, but as I walk closer, I see a handwritten sign on the door: *Yes! We are open even if the lights are off! They are motion sensor to help us save electricity when no one is around! We love our planet!* I find myself slightly annoyed at the excessive use of exclamation marks.

The door dings as I enter, the lights quickly springing to life. It takes me aback for a moment, the lights gleaming off the linoleum floor and metal machines, but I blink away the brightness and my eyes catch on a small sign on the front desk. It's supposed to say when the staff will be back to man the desk, but there's no hands on the small clock to indicate a time. It looks like someone yanked them off. I quirk an eyebrow, but I don't need any help, so it's really not of much concern to me.

I'm alone in here too. There's a slight hum in the air like the machines are just itching to be used. The rows of pastel colored washing machines and walls lined with dryers are a familiar, but slightly unnerving sight. The place is in great shape, which is not what I expected.

You get some shady people in laundromats, especially ones that are open all night, so I take a lap around the large space, glancing in corners and doorways to make sure no one is sleeping or hiding out that could surprise me later. When I've quelled the unease, when I'm sure that I'm the only one here, I pick out my washing machine- a pastel green one towards the end of the row farthest from the entrance. Against the wall is a bench that I figure I could camp out on. Nothing out of the ordinary comes with putting my laundry in the washing machine. For a second, I thought I forgot my detergent, but after rooting around in my bag, I find it. I slip my quarters into the machine, and it happily tells me I have 30 minutes to waste. I hoist my bag up onto the top of the washer, grabbing a book from it, and head to the bench.

Thirty minutes later, I'm startled by the alarm of the machine. It shrieks that it's done and the shrill sound smashes through the silence of the space. As my heart rate slows down, I make my way over. I transfer all of the clean clothes back into my duffel bag so I can move over to the dryers. I couldn't find any carts around, but I figure they don't leave them out when there isn't an attendant on duty. At

first glance, it looks like I have my choice of dryers, but upon inspection, a lot of them are actually out of order. I crinkled my brow as I try to find two together. I want to separate my laundry into two loads; I can feel exhaustion setting in and I'll do anything to make this go faster. There's a dryer within sight of my bench, and then one slightly around the corner that I won't be able to see. Normally, that would bother me, but since I'm the only one here, I figure, *what's the difference?* I grab my dryer sheets and put half of my laundry into the first dryer and start it. I then move over to the second dryer, put the rest of my clothes in, and start that one. I pray my sleep deprived brain won't forget that I separated my clothes.

I go back to reading on the uncomfortable wooden bench. It's about twenty minutes into the dry cycle when I close the cover on my book. I didn't expect to finish it, so I didn't bring another one. I glance around the laundromat, the chug of the dryers the only sound now. I sit there for a while, just looking around. A siren rolls by outside, and I can just see the red and blue lights glinting off the puddles in the parking lot. It was the only sign of life I've seen in a while.

I groan, bored out of my mind. Swinging my feet up onto the bench, I splay myself out. *I might as well get comfortable since I'll be here for a while.* There's a water stain on the ceiling tile I notice as I stare upwards. The stain eats closer to the edges of rectangle the longer I stare at it. The orangish color turns to a muddy brown and then a vague tan. As my eyes get blurry, it warps and bends. I sling my arm over my eyes tiredly. I'm not sure how long I had been laying there when the lights click out. I guess I hadn't moved recently enough to keep the sensor active. I decide against moving, somehow finding myself comfortable on the stiff bench, and just stay where I am. My mind begins to wander. I think about everything and anything as I feel myself start drifting off towards sleep. The timer would wake me up.

I'm right about to fall over the ledge into sleep when I hear a distinct *click* and the lights flash on. I cringe, the brightness hurting my slightly uncovered eyes. I stop, sitting up straight. *Why are the lights on?* I look to each side of me, but nothing is different. I stand slowly, like something must be waiting to jump out at me from beyond the rows of washing machines. I take slow, calculated steps towards the front door. Glancing behind the front desk, there's no one there. I take a further step and accidentally trigger the sliding door. It dings. I try to remember back to just a moment ago, *did the door ding when the lights came on?* I rack my brain, but in my sleepy state I can't remember if the door dinged. I make my way around the rows again, quietly checking to ensure I am alone, but I can't stop thinking. *I don't think the door dinged. It would have woken me up...right? But then how did the lights come on?* My pulse speeds up with each couple steps I take, finding no one other than me in the laundromat. *What would be worse- finding someone I wasn't expecting or finding no one?* I round the last corner and am both relieved and unsettled to find nothing there. *It had to be a malfunction in the lighting sensor.*

I take a deep breath in. My lack of sleep must be making me paranoid. I walk back slowly to the bench. My book sits partially open where it had fallen when I jerked upright. I pick it up and gently place it back down besides me as I sit. I yawn, squinting my eyes shut tightly and covering my mouth with my hand. As I open my eyes, at the end of the row of machines in front of me, standing outside the window, is a dark figure. I freeze, hand still covering my mouth.

I can't make out any details. It's simply a silhouette against the dimly lit parking lot. A pink hue from the neon sign glows around the edges of the figure. It stands perfectly still watching me. I slowly lower my hand back down to my side. My heart is beating out of my chest though absolutely nothing is happening. I feel like I'm breathing molasses air, stuck in a thick substance I can't move in. There

is nothing I can do as I watch the figure deliberately raise its hand. It moves in a strange way, like it isn't moving as smoothly as a human would. When its hand reaches shoulder level, it reaches forward, placing the palm of its hand on the glass. A shiver runs down my spine. I try to swallow, but there's a lump in my throat that just won't clear. It isn't moving any more. *Is it waiting for me to do something?* I place my feet under me, prepared to try and stand. My knees wobble a bit even without my body weight. I push myself up.

BUZZZ

The alarm of the dryer startles me completely. I fall backwards back onto the bench as I look towards the machine. I whip my head back to the window and the figure is gone. It's like the dryer has awoken me from a nightmare I was having. I stand, rattled, and make my way to the window. I look back and forth, around the parking lot, and see no one.

I head back to the dryer closest to the bench. It was the one I started first, so I start to unload it into my duffel. Normally, I would stay and fold it, but not tonight. *I would rather have wrinkled shirts than stick around here longer than I have to.* A minute or so later, my next dryer goes off. I round the corner, duffel in tow. As I'm getting closer to the dryer, I step in something. There's water leaking from the machine- *from a dryer?* My frown deepens as I open the door to the machine. I stick my hand in. My clothes are still wet. They're sopping wet. I grab a shirt out and hold it in my hands, contemplating how this happened. *Did I start the machine wrong? Is it just another broken one?* I sigh, knowing this will be almost another hour here. I reach inside the machine, sticking the shirt towards the back so it won't fall out. As the shirt leaves my grasp, five fingers curl around my wrist in an iron grip. I try to pull my hand from the dryer, but it is stronger than I am.

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The girl reaches across the front desk to remove the small sign announcing her return. It's early, the sun barely shining over the parking lot, but she likes to work the early shifts because few people want to do their laundry so early. She grabs out her checklist of cleaning tasks from under the front desk. It's the typical things: mopping, straightening, cleaning the bathroom. She doesn't mind the mundanity. She sets about her work.

As she rounds the corner towards the bathrooms, she notices a dryer is open. There are clothes strewn all over the floor, like they were thrown from the dryer. Confusion washes over her face. She reaches down to the nearest item, a pair of shorts, and they're still wet. She doesn't realize how long she had been standing there until the lights click out, the sensor not having been tripped to keep them on. She focuses on the dryer in the dark, something about it giving her reason to think twice. After another moment, she shrugs, waving her arms to trigger the lights. The lights flip on and she disappears for a second, returning with a cart. She loads the clothes into the cart and wheels them to the lost and found box beside the front desk. She transfers them to the box that contains mostly socks and a shirt or two.

She scribbles something on a sticky note with a sharpie from the front desk and heads back to the dryer. She sticks the note onto the coin slot.

Out of order.