

Pork Chops

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As soon as I reach the town centre, a wall of heat hits me through the car window. I could have hired one with air conditioning but I would only have been able to keep it until tomorrow. I drive onto the roundabout, past the primary school and Bermuda's, the laundrette. I lost all my summer clothes in there yesterday. Maybe 'lost' isn't the right word. I know exactly where they are: in the far recesses of the shop, inside the second to last washing machine.

There are few things sadder than a laundrette. It's the perfect place to cry your eyes out without anyone disturbing you. When I went in yesterday, there was an old man there. He was wearing a white vest with a brown stain, and watching the flat screen TV above the washing machines from an uninviting sofa. I suspected it was gravy, the mark on his vest, and wondered why he hadn't put it in the wash. He looked at me as if he'd heard me thinking.

'Customers doing their washing have priority over the dryer', he said. He pointed to a sign on the wall that said exactly the same thing.

'I know,' I said. 'I'm here for the washer too.'

I smiled but he didn't. Instead, he tilted his chin back up towards the television, a gesture of disdain rather than necessity, and kept his eyes locked on the screen from then on. On it, people on mute were kissing. I went over to the second machine from the back, heaved a knot of fusty clothes from my cardboard moving box, extricated the underwear, T-shirts and dresses and stuffed them into the drum. Maybe I should have divvied them up between two machines, but I had just enough change for one wash and one drying cycle. I could feel the old man's eyes drilling into my back. His arms were probably folded over his big belly in contempt, the stain on his vest still visible.

'It's quiet in here today,' I called over my shoulder but he didn't answer so I gave up, walked back to the front of the shop in silence, bought soap and fabric softener from the vending machine, then dropped my coins into the slot on the washer and slid my box in front of it.

I crossed the street to the supermarket, headed for the instant food aisle, and picked out five packets of freeze-dried pasta with cheese sauce, followed by a packet of crisps, then two packets of biscuits and finally a jar of olives. Maybe after this I can drive out to a camping shop for a gas stove and a pan, I thought. The woman at the checkout gave me a friendly nod and her bangles tinkled as she scanned my pastas.

'Busy week coming up?' She smiled, looking from me to the packets.

'Yep,' I said. I tried to smile back. She smiled as she told me how much I owed her, and kept on smiling as I pulled my card back out of the chip and pin machine that had just beeped in protest. Insufficient funds. Of course, I thought. Our shared account probably stopped being shared the moment I closed the front door behind me. I fumbled for the twenty euro note that was loose in my jeans and gave it to the cashier.

'I'll leave the pasta,' I said. 'No, I don't need a bag. No, I'm not collecting tokens.'

If the incident back at the launderette had looked the way it felt, then gushing, foaming water would have sent me reeling the moment I opened the door and the old man would have had to climb atop the washing machine so he could keep watching his film as the launderette flooded. But that's not how it went. The door of my machine had simply got stuck halfway open and the floor was all wet. The old man called over from his sofa that I probably hadn't shut it properly and that I had probably put too much in for that matter.

'Good luck with that!' he said. 'At least your box has soaked up most of the water.'

He only came shuffling over once I had body slammed the machine. Twice.

'Watch out, it's slippy.'

'Yeah, yeah,' he said. 'Step aside.' He pushed me away from the washing machine, pulled twice on the door, hard, then said: 'It's stuck.'

I nodded.

'You packed too much in, girly,' he said. His voice seemed softer. Maybe he was feeling sorry for me. I wanted to say: it's fine, mister, I wouldn't want your slippers getting wet, you go back and watch your film, I'll sort this out, but I didn't say anything. I just gazed at my inaccessible clothes.

'You give it another go,' he said, and I pushed and pulled and pushed.

'All my summer stuff's in there,' I said. I gestured to the thick jeans I was wearing, understanding now why he hadn't taken off his vest. A broken washing machine was no reason to run around in your birthday suit. Not in this town.

'You overloaded it.'

'It was cheaper that way.'

'I know.'

I sighed.

'Wait here 'til they shut. Someone always comes then.'

'Wait here 'til eleven at night?'

At the front of the shop, a washing machine beeped.

'Mine's done,' he said. He shuffled away, pulled his clothes out of the machine, said 'good luck' again and left.

'Don't you need to dry them?' I shouted after him.

'No. I hang them out at home, it's cheaper.'

So there I was. I tried not to think about the fact that it had been thirty-two degrees for days at this point or about how the heat was melting the tarmac as if we were living in an advert for a soft drink. I shuffled through the puddle of water to the front of the shop just as the old man had and sat down where he had been sitting. There was a sign hanging below the television.

BERMUDA LAUNDERETTE ACCEPTS NO LIABILITY FOR THEFTS

BERMUDA LAUNDERETTE ACCEPTS NO LIABILITY FOR ACCIDENTS

BERMUDA LAUNDERETTE ACCEPTS NO LIABILITY FOR LOSS OR DAMAGE

And underneath, in red biro, in small letters that wanted to escape unnoticed: *Call Nancy*, and a number. I called Nancy.

'I'm on holiday,' Nancy said.

'Oh,' I said. 'My clothes are stuck in a -'

'It'll have to wait, because I'm in Spain, and anyway, we aren't liable for loss or -'

'But -'

'... or accidents.'

'Is someone coming to lock up?'

'They can't open machines. Only I can do that.'

'But surely.'

'I'm back in three weeks.'

'Surely,' I tried again. But Nancy's voice was already back in Spain. I called her back. It went straight to voicemail.

'Nancy!' I wanted to shout after the beep, 'you witch! Come back here and open my machine!' But it would have brought me no closer to my underwear and summer dresses. Maybe then she'd never come and open the machine. I leaned back on the sofa, defeated, and the same film must have been playing on repeat because the couple was kissing again just as I looked up and I wondered whether this was the rock bottom people sometimes spoke about, whether I was in it now, and maybe I could shut the door to the launderette, barricade it with this sofa and not come out until Nancy was back from Spain. I could take all the little packets of washing powder out of the vending machine, drop my last bit of change into the washers and shut all of the doors wrong and watch the water come, watch it foam, until it reached my ankles, my knees, until I was up to my eyeballs in it, until the foam crept into my ears and nose, until it was washing my lungs, until I was floating in the pristine water, bobbing against the shop window, until the letters peeled off the window and stuck to my body and I just keep revolving, until everything was white. The most pristine of protests. Woman dies due to blocked washing machine, that's the headline the newspapers would go with. The way I felt then, I could have done it.
