

The Softening Cycle

by T. C. Washington

No matter how dirty and unkept it may look, the laundromat always smells fresh and clean. Industrial washers and dryers thunder and churn and vibrate and tumble and I cannot wait to get my filthy bedspread in one of them. Women of all ages are there, also a few men, and I cannot help but think that they are poor.

Twelve quarters—I have twelve quarters to put in this miserable machine. There, they're in. The first red light goes on and I put half of the little box of ALL detergent in the chute. The thick blue spread turns in its mushy sudsy wetness and I am leaning against a row of upright gold washing machines waiting for the second damn red light to come on . . .

"Excuse my interruption, but may I borrow your fabric softener?" I looked around me. I did not see any fabric softener—mine or anyone else's.

"No—I mean I don't have any." He was looking at my puzzled face with his high eyebrows and bony cheeks when I realized it was time to put the rest of the detergent in my washer. I turned around; he was still looking at me and he was smiling as if he did not hear what I said. "I'm sorry, I don't have any."

"You mean you don't have any WITH you." His gaze was beginning to make me uncomfortable. I glanced down at his washer. There weren't any clothes in it—just water. His reply didn't make sense to me.

"No. I don't have any fabric softener at all. I don't use it."

"Not at all?"

"No." I shook my head and looked down at his washer again. "Why do you need some? I don't see any laundry." I folded my arms in front of me, tightly clutching my purse.

"I've come to the softening cycle and I've used all of my OWN softener. For the past three months I've been coming here hoping to find someone with some extra softener."

"And you haven't found anyone?"

"No. Not yet."

"Why don't you just buy some?"

"No," he said. "You don't understand." He looked down at the water in the washer. "I've come to cleanse my thoughts."

"Oh. What?" The thought of talking to a crazy person scared me.

"My thoughts—I've come to wash and soften them again. If you wait too long and get too old, your thoughts that were once naturally soft begin to thicken. When they finally become hard, it's too late."

"Too late?"

"Too late to soften them again—to make them good and keep them creative. When thoughts become solid inside and rough around the edges—when they get edges—they can be fatal." His face dropped. He reached down to touch the water with both hands. Droplets trickled from his finger tips when he raised his hands in front of him. "It's not enough to clean them; you have to soften them before they puncture your mind, your soul. Do you understand?"

I turned to look back at my washer. It had stopped. At that moment I wanted to grab my wet bedspread and run out of the laundromat. "I don't know," I said. I went over to my washer and removed the blue spread and put it in a large air dryer across the room. From there I watched him. I watched

everybody: children with chocolate-stained faces and holes in the knees of their jeans, grey-faced housewives in outdated pantsuits, high school drop-outs in faded jeans and t-shirts—I studied all of them. There was an elderly couple putting their laundry in one of the dryers next to mine. The old woman reached down to pick up a towel she had dropped, but her body stiffened when her hand went below her knees. The old man, steadying himself with a black cane, tried to reach for the towel on the floor, but could not bend over far enough. The old woman laughed at him and tapped his arm. Without looking up, the man lifted the towel from the floor with the tip of his cane and poked it in the dryer. They both laughed. The old woman kissed his arm.

I looked back at him. He was still standing over the open washer full of clean water. He began to shake his head slowly. He looked paler and thinner from a distance as I noticed tears run down his face into the wash water. I drew my knees closer to my body. I looked at the children again, the housewives, the teenagers. The old couple was watching their laundry dry. My throat knotted. I flew out of the chair and grabbed my tumbling bedspread from out of the dryer. When I reached the parking lot, my heart was pounding. I couldn't bear to look back. I got behind the steering wheel and turned on the ignition while thanking God that I wasn't poor. I pulled out of the lot and glanced in my rear-view mirror. He was watching me from behind the glass. So were all of them. I started to choke.

"I'll never be poor! I'll never be poor!" I screamed. My hands trembled at the wheel. I looked at the limp and still damp bedspread beside me. It smelled fresh and clean. I looked at it and sobbed, fearing that I would never grow old or insane.

Mrs. Rudolph

by Anne Voegele

Mrs. Rudolph was the witchy old lady who lived next door.
 She kept my brothers' baseball when it rolled in her yard.
 Beyond the wooden fence, beyond the privacy she crept,
 Waiting to pounce on the sphere of rawhide when it trespassed.
 Her old black-framed glasses concentrated her stare at us
 As we pedaled our bicycles past the back of her garden.
 My brothers used to say that she practiced witchcraft.
 I didn't believe them, but I kept my eyes open for flying brooms.
 I always wondered what her backyard looked like.
 No one had ever seen it but her—that's a scary thought.
 She was not the type of woman you'd sell Girl Scout cookies to.