

DIRTY LAUNDRY

By Lauren Singer

G. thinks I am not enough of his all-encompassed lover. He makes love to me, my head into the bed-frame, the ceiling painted figures of dust-swirl kaleidoscope and I am thinking of mayonnaise, of peacock feathers, of old record smells. And I am realizing for the first time that my wallpaper is yellow and that my legs are wrapped around a body that could be anyone's, and mean nothing.

R. is everything I've always known I should stay away from. Soot-stained fingers, greasy hair, pragmatic jaw,

fifty dollar vocab. Cynical and abrupt. Striped cotton t-shirts and thick brows. He smacks my ass in an empty room and calls me 'baby girl'. Anyone else would have been bleeding. I play it back in my head like a sonnet and hate myself. In my fantasies he rapes me and I don't stop him.

S. is jealous of me. She thinks I am trying to seduce R. She says in her miffed and high-pitched voice, "You know, you can't have everything. G. already adores you," and she flips her fake-blond tendrils over her shoulder, catching mosquitoes in her high-lights as she does. She says that when he fucks her, he doesn't look at her. He won't spend the night, and his eyes betray his words; he thinks she's stupid. It's only after she asks me not to sleep with him that I can't resist entertaining it.

G. tells me that he loves me. He takes my hands into his, envelops them, and kisses my forehead. The way he says it, "I love you," I feel like it's something I'm watching and not experiencing, like we are a late-night melodrama and the female protagonist is going to mess things up for herself. I feel as though I am outside of my body, helpless to control my response. All I can think is 'say it back, say it back' but I just smile at him, look down. I watch his face pale as he gets up and puts his sneakers on, lace-tied deliberation. "I don't wanna fuck around anymore." I

hear him speed down the road without hesitating at the stop sign.

Getting into the car, I tell myself I don't know where I'm going, feign genuine surprise as I pull up to R.'s apartment and turn the engine off in the driveway. I sit there with the radio on for five minutes before getting out. A badly written ballad plays in the background of each step I take towards his door. When he opens it, I see he's already drinking. He hands me his tumbler and gestures to take a sip. We sit on the dirty sofa and he doesn't ask me what's wrong, or what I'm doing there. I see his pack of cigarettes on the coffee table; I take one out and wait for him to light it. Everything in this room looks old and tinted, there's a western on the video player, one that I should know but can't recall. I'm waiting for him to touch me and he knows it. I finish the smoke and stub it out on one of the bottle caps stuck to the newspaper on the table. Nothing about this silence is awkward. I get up and pretend like I'm leaving, throw my bag over my shoulder and nod to him. He doesn't get up and for a second I think I'll actually storm out of the place, and then all of a sudden he's on me. Forcing gentle his tongue down my throat and I'm thinking of G. and his pathetic whimper and how this would hurt him so terribly. His face like a photograph

burns like fuel and I can't stop him, won't stop him. He takes me right there on the beige carpet in front of his door, a carpet smelling of beer and sandalwood covered decay. There is one small light on, enough so I can see that he is looking at me: an unspoken triumph. When it's over it takes ten minutes for our chests to stop heave-pumping, our breaths to slow their quiver. I sit up and begin to dress; he turns to me and says, "You can stay the night if you want." I purposely leave my panties on his floor, start buttoning my coat. "No, really. I should get back."

When I get home G. is there with the television on. His mouth is open while he sleeps. He is cradling a box of crackers, one of his socks is half-off: a pool of spittle on his shoulder he keeps nodding into. He stirs--"Where were you?"

"It doesn't matter."

I turn the television off and climb into his lap on the easy chair. Throw the crackers on the floor. So predictable I can already feel him getting hard against me; I kiss his neck and his shoulders, lift his shirt, straddling him. I close my eyes and see S. digging her sparkle-red claws into my eyes--laugh out loud. The only time I can get off these days is at the expense of someone

else's pain. Men have killed their wives for lesser reasons. He is done, of course, too quickly. I get off of him with a sharp "thwuck" and fall into our unmade bed. He gets up to use the bathroom--leaves the door open so I can hear him piss. I turn the light out, and roll my eyes in the dark. He stumbles over to the bed blindly, heaves onto the mattress and puts his arm around me. His breath smells like our sex. "I love it when you don't wear panties." I pretend to be asleep--hide my smirk under the pillow.

End.