



BACK IN TIME

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Dirty Laundry

One day the washing machine gave up. Water gushing out of the back all over the kitchen floor. Big mess. Not welcome at any time, and certainly not during a pandemic, when we've been confined to quarters for five months. There are routines and there are necessities and being in isolation helps to prioritize them more precisely than ever before. Clean clothes are a necessity.

The warranty repair shop was a little backed up and couldn't send someone until the end of the following week, so we were in for about a dozen days without a machine. That's a long time for someone who is used to washing clothes at the drop of a hat.

One of the things I noticed about Lillian once we started living together was her attitude to laundry. She actually seemed to enjoy washing garments and folding sheets and towels. My bath towels were suddenly soft and fluffy after being stiff and abrasive for years. When Lillian saw how I did my washing she announced that she was taking charge. She noticed that my whites were a uniform shade of grey and asked if I'd ever heard about washing lights and darks separately. I had to admit I had not.

In my bachelor days a long time ago I shared a house that was exactly a block from a laundromat. Back then, when I was almost out of clean clothes, I'd empty my laundry bag onto my bed. Then I'd sprinkle detergent powder over the pile of clothes and gather up the corners of the sheets to make a bundle. I'd walk to the laundromat with the bundle over my shoulder and stuff it into a machine just as it was. After inserting the coins and setting the machine in motion I'd walk around the corner to the Hyde Park Bar & Grill and enjoy a tall glass of cold beer. While the bartender was pouring a second round, I'd duck back into the washateria to transfer my dense wad of damp clothes into the dryer. After the second beer I'd pick up my clothes and take them home. Lillian was horrified by this routine and as mentioned above, took matters into her own hands. Or, as my mother would have said, "put her foot down with both hands."

Now, as we counted the days till the washing machine repairman was due, the main problem seemed to be dish towels—what some call tea towels. All other categories of clothing and linen were under control, but we seem to get through a lot of kitchen towels and Lillian has always kept us supplied with fresh ones. A tense inventory revealed

that we were going to make it until the repairman arrived but were cutting it awfully close. By mid-afternoon on the eve of the arrival we had still not received the promised text confirming our appointment, so we called. The young lady on the phone could not have been friendlier or more helpful. She checked her computer and said, "Your appointment is *next* Friday." It was a long, anxious week.

The repairman arrived at about nine o'clock this morning, wearing a mask and gloves and keeping his distance. He took no time at all to discover that the problem is not with the washing machine. It is a plumbing problem. Wilson Plumbing—who are very good, they replaced our sewer line last year—are a little busy but promise to be here on Monday.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. Maybe we could ask our neighbors if we could use their machine, which lives on their screened-in porch around the back, well ventilated and out of the way. These are good friends we've known for ages; we've cat-sat for each other for thirty years. If we were ever going to borrow a cup of sugar, that's where we'd go. But these are strange times. We're in a pandemic that has the upper hand right now and, one way or another, we're all scared of this unseen monster that came barging in earlier this year, forcing us to think twice about so many things we used to take for granted.

We're also completely out of kitchen towels. We picked up the phone, then hesitated; it somehow seemed so much to ask. Would we be willing to do it? We called and explained that we had to be sure they were comfortable with this plan and insisted that they were under no obligation. If they felt even the slightest twinge of doubt we'd understand and no hard feelings. She thought for a moment, then said, "I'm afraid I am a little uncomfortable about it, so I'll have to pass." Yes, of course, perfectly understandable, no problem. We hung up feeling strangely relieved. A minute later she called to say that she had talked to her husband and he thought it would be fine. So Lillian went over, masked and gloved and armed with alcohol wipes, and put in a load. She went back forty-five minutes later and returned with a basket of damp towels, which made me think back to my laundromat days. As at any time of loss or separation, memories can provide solace as we adjust to a new reality.