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Ships that Pass in the Night

By Sarah Repp

She thumbed the handful of quarters though her palm and rounded the row of washing machines searching for an empty one. The fingers of her free hand slipped over the curvature of the doors, round windows warm from the wet tumble of color just beyond. This washer was full of denims. This one, ripe with towels. The next had clothes. Usually all the washers were empty at night. Nora pattered along with the tip money she'd made at the diner tonight, towing along her cart of laundry behind her. The cart had a bum wheel that made it ungainly and it battered her legs as she coaxed it along. She came upon an empty washer and popped the door open. The stale smell of somebody else's clothes, of somebody else in general, rolled hot across her face. She sniffled a little but didn't wrinkle her nose. That was just how the laundromat always smelled. It stank of other people's lives, of their sweat, of their perfumes, their dirt, their soap. Nora couldn't say it was a bad smell. Just the way people smelled.

She loaded her clothes into the utilitarian washer, added the soap, and slammed the door; she knew if you didn't slam the old off-set door it wouldn't close right. She opened her palm to the dollar of quarters. One by one, Nora relinquished her tip money with a sigh and then retreated to a set of tables for the long wait. She settled down and soon realized that she wasn't the only one in *Stan's 24-Hour Laundry* at this late hour. Across the large room, tucked against the wall was a young man, had to be about her age, sitting at one of the benches that buttressed up against the snack machine. From what she could see his eyes were closed in the shadow his tow-headed curls, napping perhaps. He had a baby face. Round cheeks and a snubbed-up pixie nose. Nora watched him for a moment and then suddenly dark eyes met hers. She turned her gaze away and went to digging through her purse for nothing. She could feel him watching her, but had no idea that he'd been stealing glances at her from the moment she walked in.

He'd been there since about ten. He'd expected to be alone, but when the bell on the door rang, Sam looked up to see a young woman. A tired sagging thing, a blue waitressing apron tied around her tiny

waist, her work shoes scuffing along as she thumbed over the three machines his laundry occupied. She looked like a living tragedy and something about that had him watching her even closer. She was beautiful no doubt, even in exhaustion. He was careful not to stare at first, but now that he'd caught her staring at him it began to feel like a game.

Taking turns, they would catch each other's eyes and look away. She'd let the hint of a smile play across her lips and he'd blow his bangs out of his eyes and turn away like he'd not known where he was looking at all. They ignored each other for a bit. They took turns checking their laundry. They brushed by each other at one point and their shoulders meeting and Nora couldn't help but bite back a grin as she almost spoke up.

She wondered why he was here this late. If she'd have asked, he'd have told her that he was new in town and that all of his things smelled like they'd been boxed up for over a month, or that he'd been wearing them for equally as long. Both were true, and she'd have laughed at the embarrassed look that washed over his freckled cheeks. He'd have asked her something stupid, like 'where was the best place in town to grab a sandwich?' and her face would have lit up. He'd think to himself, he'd never seen anything half as pretty, even if her hair was falling out of its bun and she had a scratch of ink on her cheek, no doubt from taking orders and tucking that ink pen up behind her ear. She'd have explained that the place by the lake was probably the best in town. Not much to look at, but the food was good, the prices fair, and after you finished your meal, you could sit on the docks and watch the sun set on the water. He'd have attempted to be coy now and he'd ask her to go with him the next night she was off work. Nora would agree. They'd go together and have a wonderful dinner. They'd realize that they both grew up in small towns, that they both played the trumpet in middle school, and that they were both very much unsure about where the future might take them. She'd steal small lingering looks at him, and not know that he knew she was looking. They'd bump one another's shoulders and threaten to push each other in until the restaurant was closed, the moon was high, and they were both beyond itchy and bumped with mosquito

bites. He'd rise, only to hold out a hand and help her from the swaying deck, and he'd start to lead away, but she'd catch him by the shoulder and –

Nora didn't turn to talk to him. She simply checked on her laundry and found that it was not done. She considered sitting closer to him, so that maybe he'd talk to her first, but decided against it. Instead they went back to their game of stolen glances and lingering eyes. The laundromat hummed with the rolling sounds of the washing machines and the fluorescent lights. The checkered tiles stretched out across the floor and Nora put both of her feet in a black tile and glanced up a few moments later to see that Sam, though she'd never know he was named Sam, had done the same. Sam would spend a few minutes playing at this. He'd watch her for the slightest change in position or posture and then he'd emulate it from where he sat on his bench. He could see the smile peeking through those pursed baby-doll lips and wondered what she'd do if he said something, anything? He could ask her, 'hey, come here often?' and she'd give him a coy grin in trade for that cheesy pickup line.

She'd say, 'Often enough.' from across the room. Sam would rise from the bench, shove his hands deep into his jean pockets and stroll across the room, making sure his feet only hit the black tiles on the floor, just deliberate enough for her to notice and laugh at him. He'd sit beside her at her table and introduce himself. She'd give him her name in reply and there would be an awkward silence for a moment. Neither of them would know how to continue. It would be Nora who brushed her hair out of her face and finally broke the silence with a sigh. 'You come pretty unprepared to picking up a girl.' she'd tease. He'd chuckle in that low, embarrassed way he did, and he'd glance over at her and find her watching him. Nora would smile and continue, 'I don't suppose you wanted to ask anything of me? Like a bit of change? A date? A colonoscopy?' she'd laugh at her own joke and then laugh at the fact that the joke had flustered him. He'd apologize, and she'd ease them into conversation because she was better at that than he was. The conversation would be light at first, pleasant, and easy. But as is the way with strangers and secrets, things would not stay that way. They're conversation would make its rounds bringing forth old hurts to be soothed by a stranger's words. They'd touch upon dreams and aspirations,

and they'd encourage one another in the face of the fact that they both knew most of those things would never come true. Hours would pass. They're laundry would sit wet and untouched as they moved so that they're knees pressed together. When the conversation stalled, Sam would be brave for just a moment and he'd turn to look at Nora and she'd turn to look at him. They'd study each other's faces for a long time. Memorizing the ink pen stain on her cheek. The scar that ran just through his lip to the base of his nose. The greener green of her left eye. The fact that he was more freckled up close. He'd put his palm on the side of her face, he'd lean in and –

He rose from his seat and went to the washing machine to begin pulling his clothes into their basket. He didn't say anything to her and she didn't say anything at all to him. He rolled his cart of wet clothes over to the dryer and tossed them in unceremoniously. He slammed the door; he knew if you didn't slam the old off-set door it wouldn't close right. On his way back to his seat he watched Nora pretend to rifle around in her bag again. A pack of Marlboro reds spilled over the edge in her messy shuffling and hit the tile floor with a twack. She looked to him and then to the smokes, and her face grew serious and red. He raised a brow and hesitated mid-step.

Nora thought about offering him a smoke just then. Just one so that they might have to share it. They'd sit side by side, dragging off the same cigarette, intimately close as she tried to light it and not the sandy curls that hung down in his face. Unthinking, she'd sweep the hair out of his face as she held the lighter out for him. He'd look surprised at first, but never again after that... and there *would* be after that's. They'd have been dating for a year and it would become their thing. She'd hold his hair out of the way as she'd light the smoke and he'd take that first burning drag before kissing the smoke into her mouth with a grin. He'd let her have the cigarette after that because he actually was more a Virginia Slim man, if he did say so himself. She'd tease him for smoking a women's brand but would never fail to repeat the ritual whatever the case. Later in life it would make their kids roll their eyes as mom and dad shared their smokes, but Sam and Nora would just laugh and carry on like that had since that first night at the laundromat all those years ago. Nora would wave their children off as they sat together on their back

porch pressed into one another, smoking, thinking, and reminiscing about just how wonderful it was that—

Nora swiped up the Marlboro Reds and crammed them wordlessly into her purse. Sam shrugged and kept walking, now steeling himself for the true waiting game that was the drying of denim and towels. Nora went and pulled her own single load of clothes a few minutes later and tossed it unceremoniously in the dryer beside Sam's. That one light in the corner of the laundromat that always flickered had a pair of moths fluttering around it. Sam watched them from where he sat and Nora did the same. The stupid dusty bugs thumped against the plastic cover, somehow managing to hit every inch of it at least once, but never crashing into one another. If power of will could have forced them together than they should have touched at least twice because both Sam and Nora wanted them to crash into one another. Nothing so hard as to hurt them, just enough that they might decide that they inevitable liked each other's company than that of the cold quivering fluorescent. The bugs never met for the whole hour that Sam and Nora watched them. Sometimes Nora would feel Sam's rich brown eyes on her and when she'd look they'd be gone. Sam would curse himself in his head for not just staying his course, for not just smiling at her. They'd return to their willful ignorance of one another though, and that would be that.

Eventually, they found themselves across from one another at the folding table. It was the closest they'd been for any length of time. Nora watched him huff as his grappled with his towels and then his jeans and then his clothes. She wanted to ask him if she might help him fold but held her tongue. He started in on the towels, and Sam sighed resignedly into the warmth radiating off the towels. Nora dug into her own cozy pile and began to silently fold, the constant soft thunk of the moths hitting the light being the only noise in the laundromat now. After a while, Sam looked up and his eyes went wide.

He jerked his head away and tried not to blush as she produced a pair of black lace underwear from the pile and folded them into a small triangle. He couldn't know that she'd pulled them out like that just for him to see. To let him know that these underwear only existed to accentuate her soft curves and

that if he'd only talk to her, ask her to dinner tonight, then he might get to see for himself how good they looked slipping down her legs at night. He went back to folding his towels.

He couldn't know that the blue towel in his hands, stained from years of use and wear, would have been the towel she'd have used the morning after, when she stepped from the shower, her bleary blue eyes meeting his as he propped himself in the doorway, trying his hardest to look calm, because he really, really wanted her to like him. She of course would have wrapped the towel tighter around herself in mocking self-consciousness and shouldered by him to retrieve those black lace panties from the night before. He'd stand there for a moment, basking in the after image of her wrapped in that blue towel and he'd know right then that this was the woman he was going to marry. Not because she was a beauty, but because she felt right wearing his towel in his house, stepping out of his shower. She'd of course have known that she would take some convincing. They'd spend weekends together, tangled in the sheets of his bed. They'd spend hours together, she'd taste the coffee he liked to drink on his lips and he'd laugh at her for telling him that he tasted terrible as she pressed into another kiss.

Slowly her things would migrate into his apartment. First, a lost sock. Panties might be next. Then more domestic things. Her toothbrush. That favorite pen that liked to leave ink stains on her cheek, where she tucked it behind her ear. Her slippers. Her many books. A pillow or two. Her cast iron skillet that she liked to cook him breakfast in. Things upon things would all make their way into his apartment until finally her own lease would be up and there would be no problem because there was nothing in her original apartment anyway. All of *their* things would be in *their* apartment, as they should be. They wouldn't make much money, her being a waitress, him being a student at the nearby college, but they'd make do. They'd be satisfied with nothing, knowing they had everything as they laid face to face, breathing in the warm smell of one another.

Nora would find him sitting on the bedside crying one morning gripping a sheet of paper to himself. She'd slip it from his hands and read it, assuming the worst, and it would be his acceptance to med-school. She'd ask why he was crying, and he'd say he was afraid that she wouldn't want to follow

him across the country for school. She'd take his face in her hands and turn him to look at her. He'd look as bad as she looked the night they first met. She'd push the curls from his face and press her forehead to his. She'd whisper a promise to him. She'd never leave him—

Standing across the table from her, Sam watched as Nora grabbed her basket and headed for the door. He thought for a moment that he might say, 'Have a good night!' because maybe, just maybe she might smile at him. He held his tongue though, and they passed each other like ships in the night.

The End.