Row

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Susan drew a handful of change from a dish on the counter. A little glass boat whose specific purpose she forgot and instead stored coins in.

Maybe a boyfriend gave it to her. Or her mother. Or his mother, a boyfriend's mother.

Clinking. Nothing exact, just enough to get a load done.

Walking down the boulevard, her knuckles whitened wrapped around the drawstring of the duffel bag. The lumpy mountain range of dirty things she had worn throughout the week. To work. To bed. Out. If she went out. To a bar, a movie, then back home. It had been worn whether or not it came in contact with any germ of dirt. Whether or not her use of it could constitute real usage.

Wouldn't some amount of dust be drawn to it even if all it did were hang in the closet forever?

Perhaps grease molecules wafting in from the kitchen, or the sticky seam of a spider web in the corner of the bedroom would find its way onto the collar. Perched like an empty, one hundred percent cotton crucifixion.

Some people had plastic coverings.

She hated what she had on. A beige parachute blouse, which made her look ten pounds heavier. She did her best to hide it, but what could her best do to hide it? As if for the two blocks from her building to the Laundromat all eyes were on her.

Her cheeks reddened, embarrassed by her thoughts, embarrassed about why she'd bought the top in the first place. How obviously oversized it was. That she liked the design, but wanted a size smaller. Then again, why it remained, week in week out, the only clean article of clothing was because she liked the design, but it was too big. Winning the chance to be seen by default.

Inside the Laundromat she found a machine near the back.

If she gained ten pounds, would she have a whole, under-sized, laundry wardrobe?

Who had the money to buy a whole new regular wardrobe?

She worked on Wednesday. Thursday was her laundry day. If she switched shifts with Amanda, if Amanda took her tables on Wednesday, Wednesday could become her new laundry day. A day earlier. A day with one fresh option remaining. Was her arithmetic right?

If she kept the small wardrobe she most assuredly would get better tips from the male customers. But she would have to gain ten pounds to fit into her tight, skimpy, tip-conjuring clothes. Then what would the men see? A bulky midriff is what they would see, Susan said, as she undid the duffel bag.

A milk-eyed old man sat in the seat beside where she heaved her bag.

If her stomach grew fat, would her rear end join in, too? In ten pounds time.

In ten pounds Standard Time.

A pillar of magazines rose from the man's lap. Currently he flipped the page of a food magazine. Something of a gourmet variety. Airbrushed spreads. Desserts on one side, sweetening the paper, recipes for the pictorial cakes on the opposite. The results, then the ingredients.

Opening her detergent, she noticed the man smile hungrily. At the layers of raspberry and whip cream? At finding out that underneath the bronze rum soaked bun, under its skin, were pecans. Finding out there were pecans from the ingredients side. The written recipes, she wondered? He was salivating for a word: pecan?

Behind him a washer of whites spun. So apparitional.

Susan dropped the coins in the machine and sat. Her eyes wandered. She hadn't drooled, but she had eaten breakfast. She'd been to the café on her day off. This morning. Thursday morning. She had been by; she left a book she was reading on break. She saw Amanda and could do it. Could do it with
Amanda. Switch.

But Amanda, could Amanda switch? When did she do laundry? Or did she have dance lessons, or did she need to visit the grocery market? Did she need to spend her time in some way, that day, or all those days for an extensive time into the future?

Did she owe her time to something? What wanted her so badly?

She'd been reading a good book, she thought, as good as the last, and better than the one before that. It wasn't in her purse today. Someone had stolen her paperback. A customer, probably. Typical waitress phenomenon. Her eyes roamed, looking for a magazine to read.

Amanda, did she kill time in the things she had to do, or not do? On Thursdays. Possibly.

Filling it, or being filled?

Susan's grandmother called her inquisitive as a child, in church, at the public pool, everywhere. She was the little devil in the details.

Do you have to have a reason for everything? she was asked.

There was usually a selection of magazines brought by people, then abandoned. Address tags were still on them. If time were cyclical, if things came round again, August 1997 could come again, and it could be delivered once more.

Sheila Sharpe's subscription, alive and kicking, to Sheila Sharpe's surprise.

Sheila Sharpe's subscription ten times fast.

These articles would be fresh again.

Today Marks Thirty-Fifth Anniversary of Marilyn Monroe's Death. It's been thirty-five years, our sweet honey-breathed Norma Jeane, but we still remember her rays of seduction cast across the silver screen in roles like *The Seven Year Itch* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

See photo of Monroe at twenty-one years old on Zuma beach in a pearly white two-piece bathing suit. A young goddess in the making. Remaking. Remembering.

Summer Heat Hits Record Heights. We've checked the records, she thought.

Page Twelve: Text Book Shortage on College Campuses, La Partie Deux.

Go Back: Napoleon crossing the Rubicon, Rubicon, Rubicon.

Encore, Encore, Encore! If it reciprocated in fluent French. Or Russian, could be in Russian.

You could think second thoughts four times, Susan teased, teased herself.

Machine lids and wire baskets were bare. No refugee magazines. The old man had caroused them all into a nest at the gates of his tuning knee caps. He worked at them with specious fingertips and attentive solitude.

Susan thought, if she could have just one. I. I and the Roman numeral I at the same instant on the gray tether of her frontal lobe, fighting like gladiators.

Instead, she stood and checked her machine, determined to wait the old-fashioned way. Quickly her thoughts jumped to her pockets. Thinking her thoughts jumping to her pockets, clinging to the hemmed ledge. Call for help from the keys inside. The lint. Save me! If there was anything there – a rewrapped wad of gum or bill receipt – she could mull over idly as if it were her whole world.

No luck, though.

No temporary whole world.

The morning was golden which reminded her of her sister. Last week, her sister, a stenographer in Hollywood, invited her to stay with her and her husband in California. The letter named a slew of beaches perfect this time of year.

Five years ago, she went swimming, not since then, now. At the Radisson hotel the urge had suddenly struck. She was with her sister and her friend, Tom. They were not guests. They were visiting a cemetery across the freeway. The hotel was new. It was Susan's grandfather, hers and her sister's. The grave. Tom drove. And they all swam, somehow. Unregistered.

Nice. Succinctly cool and ordained, she told her sister. They built a hotel here, can you believe it? A pool. I am in a pool, six feet underwater. You could use histrionics to whatever
n'th degree your heart desired.

There are also orange groves. In the letter. Orange groves and movie stars and the family's favorite restaurant on the shore, where the waves crashed on the windows while you ate. Sucking mussels. Like the young hipster boy eating a granola bar in front of his washing machine. He was thin, with no muscle muscles.

He should have muscles. He's almost a young man.

The letter closed with gentle coaxing, "Keep your mind off of everything—your sister."

Everything at the Center, where her father couldn't remember he was there. Or boyfriends at separate Centers conversely trying to forget how they did what they did. Do it this way, they had counselors tell them. Works for me. I was you. I've been there. Susan hadn't. She had sometimes gone to show support. But she wasn't there in that there. It was a helpless there. She didn't understand. She wasn't sure how the psychology would affect them psychologically.

She saw people who had milestones and couldn't get past those milestones.

Then there were those that disappeared like how you'd think God would disappear. How social liberties might. They didn't go to Centers and they didn't have anything, yet, the boyfriends at least. Susan and them didn't work out. There are rabbit holes for each one.

Her parents had their favorites and had suggestions, too.

Imbroglios of all colors.
How so? How so?
But.

The couple was fresh, vitriolic. Her sister and her husband Tom. A new Tom. Susan envied the healthy blood in their twin hearts.

She wasn't going to visit Becca at all. The immediate rush of life's many faculties is enough to cataclysmically close out all beauty and happiness with all beauty and happiness. Black it out. Too much on too much, you see, she thought.

You could be a pessimist and it plays out the same.

The thought was merely another thing on the list, she saw.

A young man coughed, he'd just come in five minutes ago and was coughing to get the old man's attention. He wore an olive green corduroy jacket and faded jeans. It all seemed to fit him well enough. The old man, too, in his maroon vest and flannel undershirt.

Susan had seen the young man curse after pulling a pen from his breast pocket. He patted a second pocket and felt its flatness, then cursed. Was he an avid puzzle solver, from the newspaper puzzle solver section? At the back of the newspaper, the games people play. Sometimes they fold them for when they're on the go, minus the news. The recipes without the lemon drizzled tarts. Oh, going in their pockets, Susan thought.

Gooing Marilyn Monroe's controversial bow-out thirty-five years unresolved. The sugars have caramelized.

He didn't have it in there. The man and his pen. Maybe it was work related work, general material expenditures or a client's fax number on a scrap of yellow legal paper.

Wasn't he in a Laundromat, though? Susan thought. Did he want to be reminded of work? Maybe he wanted to be reminded later, or, for later. His clothes were in the machine. He would make a direct line to the fax machine when he finished. Could he have wanted to be reminded of a game to play afterwards?

He was coughing at the old man, standing so close their boots nearly touched. Their feet looked like a dividing leather bridge.

The old man ignored him. His right leg reflexively lifted, guarding the tower of magazines he had acquired.

He was thumbing through a sculpture magazine. Modern Sculpture, read the cover. What kind of sculptures were people making today? Susan didn't know today's or yesterday's. She knew a few from books or pictures. Sculptures were in-person things though, weren't they? she asked herself. How would she know, she thought, she thought some art critic would judge her, she's never stood before a real masterpiece. Only books and pictures.
California has world-renowned beaches. Rome is the place for in-person statues and mosques. Did the magazine detail any mosques? Cathedrals, she meant. All of Europe, really, she imagined. Travelers say that, people back from trips, at the restaurant.

You have to see it, sometime. Wednesdays are the best days, less busy. More radiant. Middle of the week. Susan can't Wednesday. Unless they talked with Amanda and formed a strong united front. Please. Don't tell me that, she wants to tell them, coquettishly with the usual traces of desperation. She likes to hear it. What else is there to hear?

The young man's fake coughing had turned into a full-fledged pardon.

Excuse me, he said. Would you excuse me?

The old man was awakened like melting snow.

Excuse me? The old man said, still half-gloomily eyeing the magazine.

Yes, the young man said. His feet retreated and his hands clasped. Mind if I take one of these magazines. I'm about to go out of my mind with boredom, he said. His back was bent in anticipation, leaning for a copy. The top layer was a wedding magazine.

Mind if I shuffle them a bit, I'm not planning any weddings soon, the young man said.

No, sorry, the old man replied. He paused.

The young man's fingers wilted back.

Susan sat replying a hundred times more than either one did, inside her head. Her legs were crossed and toes were tapping. The young man's arms were crossed, squeezing sweat from his armpits.

Is he going to forget his work game amidst all of this? He'd be reminded with the solemn pen in his jacket, poking, scratching his nipple. Unless the pen wasn't necessary in the work game, if it was an outside tool. An object he could use without using up his work game. An away tool, away from performing and playing. Then would the pen have any significance? And if it was lost, or hung for a decade in a closet, hermetically sealed?

No, sorry, the old man said again. Time had returned to the same point. It was true, Susan thought, about time. It was a game in which she didn't need a pen.

I can't have one? The young man inquired. Then politely he said, there's no way you can read them all.

There's no way you can either.

Did you bring them? The young man asked.

Were you loved twenty years ago, truly loved? Susan asked him. Did you wear down your will from decades of manual labor? How about a disappointing son? What did your son do that you can't forgive him? He's your son. She wanted to know what made him this specific old man in a Laundromat. She could supply all the answers she wanted without knowing a thing. Without even an essence. You could give life. Give it.

Asking him everything, every living question would only bring out an essence. Not knowledge. Would you tell me the truth? she asked.

Would I think it was the truth, she asked.

No, the man said. To the young man, no. He hadn't brought all the magazines. All the address tags were still on them. They belonged to people that weren't him, and who knows what else did, here. Belongings, belonging to other people. When August 1997 came around again they wouldn't be his. Don't ask him if he brought them all, she begged the young man. Too late, he asked. Next time it comes around she can beg beforehand. Still in her head. Time's vectors will let her in. Or he could ask sooner.

Let's split them. I just need one, the young man said.

No, the old man said. I can't.

Susan could understand that. She didn't know if she could do it, say, if it were a bowl of soup and she were starving. Or if it was old baby pictures of her and her sister playing with a dollhouse. She could understand the attachment and the need to have every morsel of it. Then, thought Susan, was the man starving for magazines? Did he birth them with a wife? Was he an editor? She didn't know if she could do it. Could we find a cure then give it up for hopefulness?

She also wanted to be a good human to other humans.

If it came around again then the story would...
undoubtedly change. Or, the change would occur, but the result may not.

Susan pulled down the coin dish and carefully selected twelve quarters and five dimes. She could do that. Susan slapped the dish down and the glass shattered on the kitchen tile. On all fours, being cut by ghost bodies of glass, she swam in an ocean of shining coins.

But who knows if it came around again.

The old man was bunkered in. The vacuum sound of his clothes washing behind him muffled his words, made them incoherent. And if there were no clothes rolling around, soaping up, there would be words, but there would be no man, not here.

Would this happen on a pair of benches in the park? Is there a core place where this all happens, is all rehearsed? The Center where dad is, she thought. The place where her sister says you can forget about everything. Senseless death. Not immoral, Susan thought, but without empirical senses: death.

You don’t feel it, you never felt, it’s in you, you’re in it, you don’t know the depths, thank God and how terrible.

Come on, man, the young man said. He wasn’t going to beat him, but I don’t think, Susan thought, the old man is going to win either.

You can have it all when this wash is done, the old man said. Not long, the old man said. There was a moment of silence.

Crazy old bastard, the young man said. Jerk. He did not say it viciously. He said it and seemingly felt empty. He went back to his machine and slouched in his chair, swiping his jacket, like a cape, across his torso.

Susan watched the old man set down the wedding magazine. His eyes were moist and weary. There was a woodworker’s forum next, but then his buzzer went off. He collected his clothes and didn’t glance at the stack of magazines he’d obsessively hoarded.

Susan thought she saw a tear roll down his cheek as he left. He went out the door and onto the sunny street. The blinding street. Amanda, she asked herself, could you cover every shift of mine, for every month on the calendar, and every niche on the rotunda of repeating time?

Waiting for her clothes to ding, the machine to ding. Her weight might come eventually. Ten easy pounds. She wouldn’t be light anymore. Her sister’s husband called her a lightweight when they drank beer.

Waiting for her clothes. The old man’s tear would be there over and over. The one true river of the soul, was that a line of poetry, she wondered? The same sad thing. No, definitely not, she thought, not to explain it correctly.

Then she’d be out on the bright street. And if she had been crying she would’ve known why.