

Whites in Hot Water

by Garrett Socol

Her husband's white cotton T-shirt, resting in a smooth, expansive pose in the dryer, reminded Maggie Skillet of a fluffy vanilla soufflé. "You've got to see this!" she shouted to Roy. Reluctantly, Roy Skillet took his eyes away from the BlackBerry in his hand, rose from the sofa on which he was slouched, and headed to Maggie who was kneeling in front of the energy-efficient electric dryer in the laundry room. "Your T-shirt," she said in a soft, almost poetic voice. "It looks like a piping hot soufflé, don't you think?"

Roy flashed his spouse of six years a weak, placating smile. "Looks more like a snow drift," he said before strolling back to the living room. He couldn't help thinking that the notion of comparing a shirt to a dessert was as asinine as Maggie seeing a similarity between a blue flannel bed sheet and the Detroit River at dusk (which she had noticed the previous evening).

Maggie stood up, removed the crew neck shirt from the dryer and folded it with the care and precision of a seasoned salesperson. Then she removed the rest of the warm laundry: a pair of white socks, two white hand towels, and the white boxer briefs Roy seldom wore because they were snug. (His waist had expanded two inches in six months.) By conventional standards, it was a small load of laundry, but Maggie's loads had become smaller and smaller because the frequency with which she washed clothing had become higher and higher.

Having her own washing machine and dryer was more than a mere luxury to Maggie Skillet; it was an incomparable thrill. As a little girl, she and her mother traipsed seven city blocks to the Laundromat, each carrying a full load inside a pillow case. The kids played in the aisles while their mothers measured cups of detergent, sorted clothes under the fluorescent lights, and cleaned out lint trays. Once the laundry was transferred from the washer to the dryer, Maggie stared at it as it swirled with cyclone force. The

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process by which dirty clothing became clean was mesmerizing to the young girl; there was an incandescent magic to it.

One Thanksgiving, Maggie's college roommate and best friend Allison Husk invited her to her family's estate in Savannah. It wasn't the majestic white stone columns on the front porch or the William and Mary-style armoires in each bedroom that impressed Maggie; it was the laundry room. She had never been in a house with its own laundry facilities, and she couldn't help gawking at the washer/dryer combo as if it were made of 14-karat gold.

During Maggie's first four years of marriage to Roy, there was not a single comparison of fresh laundry to anything edible. Then, one ordinary day, Maggie proclaimed that a burnt umber bath towel reminded her of a pan of fudge brownies. "Don't you think so?" she asked Roy.

"Maybe if you're on some kind of hallucinogen," he replied. This comparison, as well as several subsequent ones, didn't cause Roy to question his wife's sanity; that came later. At this point he accepted the fact that she was a woman with a quirky sensibility. Maggie had few friends, fewer secrets (except for a wounded heart she feared would never heal), an extensive doll collection that a six-year-old girl would have coveted, and a plethora of poetry anthologies.

Paying the bills and moving the trash containers to the road the night before collection day were responsibilities Roy met with aplomb. Being a supportive partner was where he fell short. It seemed to Maggie that an invisible wall had been built around him, keeping compassion at a distance. When Allison Husk hung herself in the capacious closet of her father's wood-paneled den, Roy expressed little sympathy and discouraged Maggie from flying to Savannah for the funeral.

A light spring shower had turned into a veritable downpour as Roy navigated the eight miles necessary to make it home from the office. Thick raindrops hammered the sunroof of his Honda hatchback as the windshield wipers struggled to provide a decent view of the slick road. Roy had never been happier to pull

into the driveway (despite it being drenched with water and wet leaves). Once in the house, he couldn't locate his wife. After shouting her name several times, a low, muffled response came from down the hallway. To his astonishment, he discovered Maggie curled up inside the Maytag dryer, head down, shoulders hunched over.

After helping her out of the appliance, he asked why she was in there. "I wanted to see how clothing feels when it's in that claustrophobic space," she explained in a hushed tone as if some disreputable secret had been exposed.

Roy fell silent for a few moments. Comparing laundry to food was outlandish enough, but spending time inside a cramped dryer was very different. "Have you considered the possibility that you might need help?" he asked.

"I've been doing our laundry for six years without any help and I don't see why I would want it now," Maggie firmly stated. "Do you have a complaint about your clothes?"

"No," he said apologetically as the heavy rain lashed the arched windows. It was rare for Maggie to register anger or annoyance, and when she did, it rattled Roy. "My clothes are the cleanest of anyone's in the office."

"Thank you," she said. Even though Roy had been with the same company for seven years, Maggie wasn't entirely sure what he did. The job had something to do with supplying products to the electronics marketplace, but Maggie didn't know what these products were or what constituted the electronics marketplace.

"Earnings are up five per cent for the quarter," Roy announced.

"That's good," Maggie said.

"Not really. Prillwitz forecasted eight, so we actually fell short."

"Oh," she quietly responded as her attention floated away. "Still better than having your earnings go *down*, right?"

“Well,” Roy groaned, “that would have been catastrophic.”



Married life wasn't the magical, flower-filled wonderland Maggie imagined it might be. She adored Roy Skillet at the start; in fact, she was as fond of him as she was of cashmere. But the unspoken truth was that the marriage took place because the bride didn't believe anyone else would come along. Two years earlier, Padraic Brandt had declared his love for her almost daily; he'd even written poetry inspired by her eyes and her smile. Then he left, offering the cryptic excuse that he needed control of his life. Maggie never recovered from this abrupt farewell; she felt like she was living with a gaping hole in her soul. When Roy proposed at the skating rink four months after they met, Maggie thought she should take what she could get. The couple flew to Las Vegas and the nuptials were performed at the Wee Kirk O'The Heather wedding chapel. The moderately happy newlyweds honeymooned at Harrah's then embarked on their passionless future.

Maggie had majored in art history despite the fact that she wasn't terribly enthusiastic about it. Her college friends, majoring in medicine or law or political science, were passionate about their choices; they felt driven to succeed. But that fervent ambition eluded her. There was nothing she was really *good* at except caring for fabrics. Still, she studied diligently, earned a degree and eventually landed a position

at a small art gallery. Unfortunately, this new member of the work force found herself falling asleep on the job. But there was more to Maggie's malaise than apathy about art and dissatisfaction at home. She felt like she was dying a slow death of resignation with no hope on the horizon. She couldn't help wondering if Allison Husk had the right idea: to put an end to the agonizing monotony.



Maggie wasn't in the living room or the kitchen when Roy returned home on the Wednesday before Easter Sunday. Bracing himself, he approached the laundry room. When he saw that his wife wasn't in either machine, he emitted a hearty, relieved sigh. Then he called out her name, and the massive mound of clothing in the corner began to move, like an ant colony. Maggie dug her way out from under the warm, dry garments. "I must've fallen asleep," she softly said, her face beaming with the glow of a woman who had just awakened next to her beloved.

"Under the clothes?"

"They're washed and dried," Maggie said, savoring the warmth of a pair of polar fleece pajamas hanging off her head.

"When are we eating?" Roy asked, finding temporary comfort in denial.

"I didn't make dinner," she confessed. "Are you hungry?"

"Famished."

Thankfully, a frozen spinach and artichoke pizza took a mere five minutes to heat. Once Maggie and Roy had taken seats at the dining room table, Roy broached the sensitive subject at hand. "Why are you doing laundry every single day?" he asked.

"My hours were cut at the museum," she explained as she smoothed the linen napkin on her lap. "So I decided to make a little money by taking in laundry for some neighbors."

With an icy calm, Roy fidgeted in his chair. "Which neighbors?"

"The Fletchers, the Foleys, Hollis Broussard, the Landers, the Sanders, Nunnally Goodall, Donna Jean Jarvis, Lyla Newberg, Walter Black, Zoe Hecht, Ilya and Zandra Orlov," she said. "Maybe a few others."

"Don't they have their own machines?" Roy asked, trying to repress his rage. He took a much too large bite of pizza.

"Some of them do," Maggie explained. "But they work full-time and don't have enough time to devote to washing clothes."

A thick piece of dough became lodged in Roy's throat. He tried to swallow it but couldn't, tried to spit it out but couldn't. Panicked, he frantically pointed to his neck as Maggie wondered if she should rush over and perform the Heimlich maneuver. Although Roy's face was turning a shade of red very close to crimson, Maggie didn't move a muscle. (She wasn't sure if this was a conscious decision or an involuntary response that rendered her immobile.) Luckily for Roy, he managed to cough in the nick of time. The dough flew from his mouth onto the napkin in Maggie's lap like a cannonball. She picked it up and calmly placed it on the table, next to the vase of artificial flowers Roy had given her on Valentine's Day. (He told her they'd last longer than real ones.)

"Maggie," Roy sternly said as soon as oxygen resumed passing through his airways, "I want to have you evaluated."

"Like a rare coin?" she asked.

"No, not like that," he responded, glaring at Maggie and deciding to postpone this particular conversation until after Easter. Not another word was spoken for the rest of the meal but Maggie didn't care, though she did wonder if Roy realized his wife hadn't planned to save him from choking to death at the dinner table.

The following evening, Maggie stood in the laundry room, folding the blue shirt of Freddy McCann, when a comforting warmth filled her. On this night, in the cramped confines of her laundry room, Maggie came to the realization that washing clothes was her art. Nothing gave her a greater sense of satisfaction than transforming a load of filthy, foul-smelling laundry into a neatly folded display of fresh, sparkling clean clothing. Sniffing a hot bath towel straight from the dryer felt like lying in a field of lilies. The strong, clean scent of bleach aroused her in an inexplicable way. Clean, piping hot clothing was more than a mere comfort to Maggie; it was security, nourishment, sensuality. It was beginning anew with a perfectly clean slate.

When Roy entered the house dripping wet due to a brutal thirty-second thunderstorm, he instantly saw a line of a dozen

baskets overflowing with grimy, soiled garments. "Maggie?" he shouted. "Where the hell are you?"

"Right here," she said, almost magically appearing in front of him. "Roy Skillet, you're soaking wet. Give me that shirt."

"What is all this?" he asked with intensity, his eyes darting from the baskets on the floor to the face of his wife.

"Laundry, of course," Maggie replied with a chuckle. "You know what I feel like? A surrogate mother who's given birth to a warm load of cottons. Then I hand the newborns over to someone who'll wear them and care for them until it's time to do the routine all over again."

"Is there a hidden camera here?" he asked, glancing around the room.

"I'm continuing a great cultural tradition that dates back centuries, Roy. In the beginning, laundry was done in lakes and streams," she explained in her museum voice. "Women would use wooden clubs to beat the dirt out onto the rocks. Then came the Industrial Revolution which completely changed laundry technology."

"Listen carefully, Maggie." Seething with anger, Roy peered at one full basket after the next as if inspecting an enemy line-up. Maggie swept the basket closest to her into her arms like she was protecting a child. "It's either me or the laundry," he said.

"Don't make me choose, Roy." Distressing as the ultimatum was, Maggie felt oddly sure of herself. She was prepared to fight for her art, but the whoosh of the dryer reminded her that Nadine Verga's knits were revolving and would need to be removed shortly while Walter Black's whites were swirling in the washer. "I'm sorry Roy, I need a minute to check on..."

Roy didn't wait for his wife to finish. His left arm zoomed toward her face like a swinging baseball bat. But she didn't wince; there wasn't time. She allowed the attack to happen just as she had allowed herself to marry this stranger. Thankfully, the laundry basket of Donna Jean Jarvis broke her fall.

Shaken and unnerved, Roy ran to the front door as if fleeing the scene of a crime. He could hardly believe what he had done. His open hand had slammed one of Maggie's teeth, and blood was dripping from her mouth onto the gathered ruffles of Donna Jean's gingham apron. Luckily, Maggie knew that dousing in hydrogen peroxide then rinsing in cold water was a surefire way to remove blood stains.

The following afternoon, Maggie was greeting a group of Malaysian guests at the art museum when she noticed Kyle Fletcher examining an abstract painting of an elephant on a city street. The moment he turned his head in Maggie's direction, she waved to him and Kyle waved back. Instantly recognizing the pinstripe polo shirt on Kyle's wiry body, Maggie was flooded with emotion. She'd been taking in laundry for several weeks, but she'd never seen her finished product on a client's skin. Maggie was so overwhelmed that she threw her arms around one of her Malaysian guests who returned the embrace with fervor.

Word of Maggie's moonlighting gradually spread through the entire town, and before long she was inundated with business. The museum director accepted Maggie's resignation and even threw a small farewell party in her honor.

Roy moved into a nondescript one-bedroom apartment with little direct sunlight and no laundry facilities. He began to eat fast food on a daily basis and drink himself to sleep nightly.

With the profits from her burgeoning business, Maggie bought three brand new front load washers and two additional dryers. She also removed the artificial flowers from the dining room table and replaced them with fresh daffodils every few days.

As the sun began to set on an ordinary Tuesday, the doorbell rang. It came as a shock to see a forlorn, disheveled Roy standing on the welcome mat, carrying a large basket of dirty clothes. "Hello, Maggie," he quietly said.

"Roy Skillet, do you need me to do your laundry?"

"I do," he said, but it was obvious he wanted more from Maggie than her professional services. His sad, vulnerable eyes told the story.

As Maggie measured the proper amount of detergent for each load, Roy stood in the doorway of the laundry room, watching her with fascination. "I can hardly believe you started your own business," he said.

"Are you saying you're proud of me?" she asked.

"I suppose so." This was a side of Roy that Maggie had only seen once - when his younger sister survived an attack by a female grizzly bear and fought for her life in a hospital bed. Roy had been filled with so much concern that his emotions broke through the brick wall encasing him. Now, in the doorway of the laundry room, the mortar holding the bricks together was decomposing.

"It makes me happy that you're proud of me," she said.

"I'm not sure I even deserve your forgiveness," he said.

"I didn't say I forgive you," Maggie explained. "I just said I'm glad you're proud of me."

"Right," he responded, staring at the floor like a child who'd been scolded. A strained silence hung between them and Roy realized it was up to him to break it, so he suggested they head to the kitchen for something to eat. Sipping iced tea and nibbling on cherry parfait pie, they smiled at one another as the laundry progressed through its cycles. It was Roy who got up to refill their glasses. It was Roy who washed

the dishes after they finished their snack. Maggie could sense a distinct change in the air, as if a refreshing breeze began to blow in her direction.

Later, they stood side by side in the laundry room, erect and formal as strangers on a first date, and removed Roy's piping hot garments from the dryer. Maggie found her husband's shyness endearing. As she folded the green bath towels, he folded his gray boxer shorts. The clearing of Roy's throat alerted Maggie that a topic rich with importance was about to be broached. "Could you teach me the right way to fold a flannel shirt?" he asked.

