

# Years After

by Ginnah Howard

**Years After** she can go home. While she was gone, rust stained the tub, mildew greened the wall behind the sweating toilet, cigarettes burned the sink. What she wants is white and washable, set off by plush reds and forest green. Her past decor: make-do gray set off by 3 a.m. collect calls and Emergency Room pallor. She gets a home improvement loan. The man who did the roof, guts the bathroom. She pushes her loaded Walmart cart up and down, hauls the bags into her house, decides if the stack-a-shelves should go this way or that. Every item on the list, fulfilled: a white plastic hamper, with a straight back so it fits against the wall—the first one she's ever owned; green and white shelf vinyl that wants to adhere and can be cut along the lines of the plaid; a narrow cart on casters that, once assembled, rolls between the washing machine and dryer to hold on its top shelf the Tide, the Clorox, the box of Bounces. Before and After. She likes to stand in the doorway and look at it: its silent satin walls, the gold knobs gleaming above the scarlet rug. Each morning she wakes to a blank ceiling, places her foot on a flat floor. The only sound her whispers to any gods listening or not: thank you, thank you.

