

Yellow

by Marcie Beyatte

Eileen scooped up a used dryer sheet and an empty bag of Terra Chips from the laundromat floor.

“Slobs,” she muttered under her breath. Surely their mommas taught them better than this. As she stood up, she noticed the beginning of a tear in her beige canvas shoes right near her baby toe. These shoes were supposed to last six months, until it snowed. Soon she would have to buy beach shoes from the Goodwill store. Save these good shoes until the weather changed.

Why did these folks need a laundromat? Most of them lived in the neighboring condos with their billboard promises of “Double Stacked Laundry Centers! Free to new buyers.”

At the long table, two women gossiped while they folded their babies' clothes into even tinier squares. One had her newborn sleeping in a backpack. It was a wonder his neck could support the weight of his head. The other baby was nestled on a pile of clean clothes in a wicker basket on the floor. Eileen could only see the baby's orange and yellow socks pedaling like a June bug trapped on its back.

Those golden women with their fat babies got Eileen thinking about a time she was better off forgetting. “Look at me.” she could say. “I was once young and pretty, like you. Taking care of my baby, thinking about what I was going to cook for supper.” Or she could tell them, “Pay attention! Your life can change in a minute. Then you'd give everything to worry about ordinary stuff. Like affording a trip to the beauty parlor or wondering if your husband still fancied you.”

Eileen was careful not to snap. If she let her guard down, she understood that would be her ending—in assisted living, like her sister, or worse, on a street corner shaking her fists at the traffic, wearing broken shoes, covered in tin foil.

She examined other people's footwear and took special care with her own.

Slipshod shoes were the first sign of a meltdown. Sometimes she could see it coming. A prickly gentleman washing his clothes on a Thursday afternoon. One week he's fine. Nothing wrong with owning a sour face. The next Thursday, his shoes don't match. That's not against the law, but a signal that trouble's lurking. The next week, he's battling invisible foes, swatting at them like flies. By the end of the month, she recognizes him sitting in front of the drugstore, wrapped in a blanket, one bare foot exposed.

These mothers and their babies would soon leave. Better to turn away and not think about her own baby, John, who had died in '54 of polio. There were lots to do to keep her mind off the past.

Tidy magazines, empty trash, clean the washtubs, until they moved on, with their fresh laundry and happy baby smells.

She fetched her ragbag and spray bottle and began her rounds. The washers had offered her treasures over the years. Once machine # 3 yielded up a wedding ring. The band made her finger turn green after she wore it for a week. Machine # 8 once had the saddest, dampest love letter, still in its envelope. She never told a soul about its contents but the words were imprinted in her memory. *I will escape this tedium, before winter comes. Get the fire ready and warm your hands, so that when you stroke me ...*

Remembering the letter made her blush. She was now a senior citizen, but still embarrassed by a naughty letter.

Today the first three washers yielded only a black sock. Her luck changed at machine #4. Two coins waited for her, in the slot.

"Excuse me ma'am. Have you found a yellow t-shirt?"

Eileen turned around, wondering how long this skinny young man had been watching her checking the machines. He was wearing one of those bicycle riding spandex suits and his helmet dangled from a gloved hand. His shoes were not designed for moving on solid ground. He clomped around like a deep-sea diver wearing flippers on land.

"No. Haven't seen any shirts." She turned back to her work.

“Shit. I need that shirt. Can I look around?”

That was the last thing she wanted, someone interfering with her routine.

“When did this yellow shirt go missing?”

“Last night, just before closing time.”

“I’ll help you look. Don’t get your hopes up. These washers and dryers suck up clothes like you wouldn’t believe. The repairman comes ’bout once a year when a machine craps out. He finds clothes no good to anyone, wrapped around the motor like a boa constrictor.” These were the most words she had spoken today. Her voice sounded unfamiliar and gravelly.

They looked through the washers and the dryers. They found a red washcloth, three odd socks and a pair of lady’s panties that had seen better days. After poking through the lost and found box, the bicyclist rested his elbows on top of the last washer, his forehead supported by his steepled fingers.

“Why’s this shirt such a big deal? Looks like you could afford another one.”

“You don’t get it. I need to wear that shirt tomorrow for a bike race, The LIVESTRONG Challenge.”

“What’s that?” Eileen disliked young whippersnappers who tried to make her feel stupid.

“You know, the movement started by Lance Armstrong to help cancer survivors? He waved his wrist, jiggling a yellow wristband so close to her face she could smell the rubber.

“Help cancer survivors? That’s a waste of time. “ Eileen knew it for a fact. Just like she knew about Lance Armstrong from People Magazines left behind by customers.

“I’m lost without that shirt. I need to be at the Exhibition by 7:00 tomorrow morning.” He took a deep breath. “ Please, will you call me if it turns up later?” His nose was red and blotchy.

Eileen took the card he handed her. “Jeff Spiegel: 3 A’s: Accountant/Athlete/Activist.” She hoped he wasn’t going to cry. He couldn’t know that once she believed the world was a pretty nice place. After her son died, she and her husband Marty lost their

house trying to pay the doctor bills. She got lost in the world of soap operas and Marty kept pouring himself one more drink. More than twenty years passed without either one of them noticing it. Then Marty got sick. When she finally got him to a hospital, the doctor said, "Lung cancer. Incurable. Too bad he was a smoker."

Her life was like one of the stories she had watched every afternoon. Except it was boringly real and the dead didn't come back the next week with a new name.

After Marty died, came years of living alone in rented rooms, bathroom down the hall, shared with five other ladies. Yellowing lingerie draped over the tub. Walls so thin you could hear your neighbor turn over in her bed, or worse, hear her cry. Caretaker of a Laundromat that paid \$150.00 a week and any loose change she could find. Who was this kid in his designer outfit talking about raising money for cancer? Where was he and that fancy shmancy Lance Armstrong when her family was sick?

"I'll call you. If I find it. Excuse me. I got work to do." She turned back to her machines.

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It was after 7:00 p.m. and that lazy Becca hadn't shown up to take over her shift. Most people called her B.B. for Big Becca because every part of her was big, her hair, her mouth, not to mention her butt.

Eileen's hands and legs ached. She wanted to go home, crawl into bed and sleep. Tomorrow was her day off. She would visit Marty and John at the cemetery and then get ready for another work week.

At 7:30, B.B. breezed in without even so much as an "I'm sorry."

"Jeez B.B. Where have you been? I'm sick of covering for you, hanging around here waiting for you to show. Next time, I'm calling the boss."

"You sure got your knickers in a twist. What's eating you? I was only what, twenty minutes late? What's the big deal?"

"It is a big deal! I'm tired from running around here all day." Eileen didn't mean to yell at poor, dumb B.B. They usually got along

fine. She was the closest thing she could count on as a friend nowadays.

“Machine # 5 is jammed, the vending machine is out of Clorox. Some wino came in and tried to crawl into one of the dryers, said he was weary. Yes, weary. I know. I got him out by offering him my lunch. None of these hoity-toits saw him. I whisked him out so fast.”

“ I haven't had a bum come in for a long time. Not since the condos went up.”

“This gent hadn't gotten the message about the new rules.” Eileen sat down on one of the turquoise plastic chairs. “ I gave him a subway token and told him how to get to the new shelter by the lake.”

“Heart of gold you have. Here, have some of my dinner.” B.B. ripped open a party size bag of salt and vinegar potato chips.

Eileen took a handful, enjoying the salty crunch.

BB had some news to share now that Eileen was calmer.

“I noticed this t-shirt hanging like a flag from our pathetic sign out front. I took it down on my way in.” She gestured to something on the seat beside her. “How could you miss that Ms. Eileen? You know the boss gets peeved when folks mess up his entryway.” She paused, expecting a laugh.

“ So that explains it. A guy came in this morning. All upset, looking for his yellow shirt. Claims he needs it for a bike race tomorrow.”

“ I saw the posters on my way in today. That Lance Armstrong is one good-looking man. His face on all of the posters. Not to mention his body. My favorite part is his...”

“Crap B.B. He's a movie star. Think he cares about people like us?”

“Listen, he had cancer himself. The kind where they had to cut off his balls. Then he went on to win that bike race a bunch of times in France. B.B. paused to stuff more chips in her mouth. “ “Least when he's not breaking up with his girlfriends.” B.B. cackled and went on to tell Eileen about her daughter's latest no good boyfriend.

The evening crowd began trickling in. Eileen took her shopping bag and started for home. Bus tokens were expensive and she had given hers away.

Later when she opened her shopping bag she found the yellow shirt on top of her sweater. She didn't remember putting it there. It should have gone in the lost and found. * * *

Eileen couldn't sleep. That damn yellow shirt, folded over the back of her chair shone so bright, it hurt her eyes. She could still see that Jeff fellow's face as he combed the Laundromat looking for that stupid shirt.

What the hell was an activist? Accountant, that made sense, he worked with columns of numbers, probably computers too. Had to study hard for that kind of job. Even an athlete, sure, some could make a living doing gymnastics and the like, but who calls themselves an activist? What kind of joke was that?

When daylight came, she was sure she hadn't slept. She dressed, stuffed the t-shirt into her purse and hurried to the streetcar stop. It wasn't like her to skip breakfast. A cup of instant coffee. A piece of day old bread with a speck of marmalade. That was her morning routine.

The Exhibition stop was the end of the line. She took a transfer that she hoped to use for her return trip, if the driver wasn't paying attention or was soft hearted.

It was easy to find the riders; the stadium was swarming with yellow clad bicyclists. Someone handed her a yellow wristband like the one that Jeff waved in her face yesterday. She put it on to stop more people from bugging her, she told herself. She didn't want to talk to anyone here. She half-heartedly looked for a lost and found box so she could dump the shirt and get on with her day but they didn't seem to have one. She was not going to ask.

Not everyone in the crowd was on a bike. There were smiling people in wheelchairs, bald headed folks standing around wearing t-shirts that announced, "I'm a Survivor", "Cancer Survivor's Unite " or, "I kicked Cancer's Butt". Hell, there were even some of these survivors suited up on bikes as if they planned to ride.

A band came on stage. The crowd raised their yellow-circled fists to the sky. They started to sing a catchy country tune, the kind of music she and Marty had liked the best. She hoped the song would end soon. She rubbed her eyes. She needed to do what she came here for. And then leave.

The race was about to begin. The leaders lined up by the stage. Eileen moved closer, searching for a rider not dressed in yellow. She spotted him, huddled by his bike, standing out in his white shirt.

“Here! Jeff! I found it.” She quickly moved to stand in front of him, waving the shirt.

He looked at her without recognition. But then his eyes crinkled. “Wow, I can’t believe you found my shirt and came all the way here to deliver it. Thank you. I’m so grateful ...”

“Stop thanking me. Get out there and ride your bike. Before it gets any later.”

She watched him pull the shirt over his head then mount his bike. He raised his arm in a salute as he joined the others. She tracked him until he disappeared, into the sea of yellow.

The streetcar driver accepted her transfer. She took the long way home, staring out the window at the quiet Sunday morning streets. She sat back in her seat, stretched her legs and wiggled her toes. There was a hole, now the size of a dime, in her beige canvas shoes. She rubbed it with her finger, trying to make it disappear. It seemed to only get more frayed. She leaned her head against the cool glass window and closed her eyes.

