

Laundry

by Matt Briggs

During the breakfast rush at Jack's Diner one early Sunday morning, Alan had asked Lydia if she wouldn't mind letting him sit at her table. All of the tables were completely full. Alan would have sat outside but a steady drizzle had coated the sidewalks with small beads of water. While he and Lydia sat at the table they started talking. They laughed and had some more coffee.

They met for coffee later that week. A couple of months later, Alan broke up with his old girlfriend and moved into Lydia's apartment. When Alan moved into her apartment, Lydia told her old boyfriend to stop coming around. Alan went to college and Lydia worked as a temporary employee. They never had money. Even so, they liked having coffee together and talking about other people sitting in the cafe or diner or wherever they were drinking coffee.

While walking past Jack's Diner, Alan noticed a sign in the window saying, "Help needed, now!" He thought he would surprise Lydia with a new job. Inside, a cook in a white uniform, splotchy with yellow drops of grease looked Alan over and set him to work washing dishes. During his first break, Alan used the pay phone at the back of the restaurant. When he had Lydia on the phone, he had to speak louder than normal because of the racket coming from the kitchen. "Guess what," he said, "I'm working at the diner!"

"You're what?" Lydia asked. And then she realized that he had started working at the diner where they had met. She thought how they sometimes liked to go there when it was raining. They would sit at the booth where they had met, hold hands, and ask for demand coffee refills. Now, Lydia knew that they would never go there again. When she suggested that they go there, Alan would say, "No, I work there."

"I'll earn all the money we need," Alan said. He didn't shout and Lydia had trouble understanding him.

"Great. Great," she said. "We can talk about it when you get home." She didn't know what to say. She knew if she said anything, she would probably hurt his feelings. However, the more she thought about what he had done, the more she wondered if he loved her. If he had loved her, he would know that getting a job at the diner would wreck it for them.

She called her old boyfriend. He sided with her completely. "I would never do something like that," he said. "Why don't you come over and talk about it?"

When Alan finally came home, Lydia smiled. She poured him a cup of coffee. Alan, tired, stripped off his dirty clothes. They smelled like soap and mashed leaves. He wadded them up and dropped them into the machine in the apartment building's washroom.

Lydia watched Alan as he drank his coffee. "Are you all right?" she asked him.

"I'm tired is all," he said. He smiled for her and grabbed her hands with his. The tips of his fingers were warm from holding the hot coffee cup.

In the morning, Alan woke with only a half hour before he had to be at work. He pulled his clothes out of the dryer and folded them on the top of the washing machine. On the side of table he noticed, in among people's old, stray socks, a button like one missing from Lydia's cardigan. Just under the button, folded into a neat triangle was a pair of underwear, smaller than Lydia's. Alan flapped them out and admired at how narrow the waist was. Then he folded it back and lay the button on top of it. On the way back to his apartment, he thought he should grab Lydia's lost button. And then in a moment

when he wasn't really thinking, when he saw he only had fifteen minutes to get to the diner, he put away his folded laundry and dropped the underwear and button into Lydia's chest-of-drawers.

Some days later, Lydia found the underwear and a button she didn't recognize in her chest-of-drawers. She held them up and knew that they did not belong to her. She knew that Alan must have found them in the laundry after some woman he was sleeping with had hurriedly thrown them off. She wondered if he had met her at the diner. She wondered if he had taken up with his old girlfriend. Waiting for Alan for to return she decided to confront him with the evidence.

While they sat down for their evening cup of coffee, Lydia kept the underwear and button rolled up into her hand. Finally, she stood up and threw them onto the table. The button bounced and rolled. "You think I don't know what's going on? I'm not foolish. I've also been sleeping around, too. I've been sleeping with Jared this entire time."

Alan picked up the button. "You lost this didn't you?"

