

Afternoon Chores

by Trace Sheridan

She trips over the plastic red wagon in the middle of the floor, catches herself before she falls, averts spilling the over-sized basket in her hands stuffed with whites.

Who put that there? She screams into the void.

Her question is returned by giggles and the sound of three pairs of feet—all under age 7—running in the opposite direction of her voice. She sighs and stumbles toward the washroom.

Sophie get the kids, she says, making her way to the laundry room.

I got—em! Sophie yells back in reply.

Her sister's daughter, Sophie, lives with them after her mother can no longer control the trouble at school or tolerate the trouble at home. Incredibly, the teenager quickly adjusts with them. The girl calls her auntie instead of by her name, even though she tries to reassure her niece, tells her repeatedly it's all right, her name is enough.

Sophie helps with the hellions. And this seems to help the teen, gives her something to do. The arrangement is good for her too, since it gives her a few moments alone to think.

Its nap time, she says over the spray of the water as it rushes into the open tub.

Sophie's muffled reply floats in from some place in the house; from the muted quality of her niece's voice, she guesses from the children's room.

The sound of the water is a welcome respite. She makes the two or three steps from the machines to the windows across from them. She opens the windows and returns to the clothes. She shakes them, checks for stains of grape juice or chocolate milk or pureed carrots that might need treating, yanking them from the basket so any little crumbles of food won't end up in the wash, and stuffs them into the washer.

She pours in the bleach—whites aren't white without it—throws the remaining stray socks and underwear into the washer. She takes her hand, oblivious to the hot water streaming in, and pushes the clothes down beneath the soapy water line. She closes the lid with a bump from her hip. The metal crashes loudly.

Then she remembers why she is there, the real purpose for her being there at this time of the day in the middle of the afternoon.

In one movement, she places the fabric softener and the detergent on the shelf above the machines. As she pushes the last bottle into place, she pulls out a pack of cigarettes wedged between the two, between the detergent and the softener and behind the Shout-It-Out bottle.

Some things can't be shouted out. She smiles at the irony of this. But wait, is it irony? She tries to remember the freshman comp definition of irony she memorized years ago.

Slowly, she takes the pack of cigarettes cups it in her palm and then she takes one cigarette from the box. She holds it in her hand and for those few moments admires its unlit form, the way it looks, its round cylindrical shape, how it feels long against her fingers, the contrast of its whiteness to her skin, the tiny gold stripe that circles the place where the filter begins...

She lights it, takes a drag and slowly exhales, blowing her smoke toward the open windows.

Yes, having Sophie stay with them is good.

She is trying to quit—nasty habit this smoking. Still, this is the only time she lets herself smoke these days: Laundry day.

And not all day, no.

There are parameters around her smoking—just when the wash is going and only the wash, not the dryer. This is how she rations herself down to one.

It started off with more, of course. No matter what they say on those TV commercials, no one quits the first time they try. The patches didn't work either. All she wanted to do was smoke more and she felt jittery and they made the place where she stuck them on her arm burn and itch.

First, she'd only smoke after she'd done the dishes. Well, in a house with children there are always dishes.

Then, she whittled it down to when she had to run to the supermarket. She would smoke on the way there, as opposed to on the way home, with all the windows wide open no matter how cold or how hot it was and the air conditioner blasting MAX. Then she'd only smoke on the days the boys played sports. Oh, it was tough, but the boys had lots of activities. You know little boys—they're active. After that, she only smoked on the days that the boys had soccer practice, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

The smoke is a reward, something that makes what ever task less mundane, less menial, and instead when finished, perfect. She likes to think it makes the completion of her household chores like the moments after sex when time stops and she feels utter contentment. Not that she knows what that is anymore—with three kids who has time or energy for that? She thinks about this a lot, about her neighbors, even her parents and the cafeteria lady at her eldest son's preschool, the librarian who leads the story time that she takes her youngest to on Thursdays and the man from the gas company who comes around once a month to read their meter, and the girl at the grocery store who talks to her about her divorce every time she checks her out, no matter what time it is or how many people are waiting in line, tells her how she's found a new man and she thinks that maybe this time it will work for her, flashing her new smile devoid of braces that her future ex didn't want to pay for, are all of them having sex? When do people find the time? In her case sex is just another word on her mental list of things to do that she ticks off, scratches out, but more likely carries over to the next day, day after day after day postponed and put off to do another time. They are busy people, she and her husband; a necessary busy-ness, which over time takes the place of any intimacy they could share.

She watches the smoke as it travels across small room, drawn to the open window and is sucked out. And her eyes follow the wispy white trails, follow the puffs as they leave her mouth and venture outside.

She can just see her neighbor's windows. They don't use blinds, but these cream colored sheers, kept open just enough for you to look.

She could point out the houses on their block where children lived based on this —those with closed curtains and those with opened ones. Well, actually two things, the varying degree of openness of the curtains and of course toys in the yard. Toys in the yard was always the give-away.

She leans a bit and she can just see the outline of a woman in the house next door. She immediately recognizes her neighbor, Lucy.

Strange.

She glances at her wrist, only 2:30 pm. She frowns, takes another puff. What's she doing home at 2:30 in the middle of the afternoon?

And then she see's—a man—Lucy isn't alone.

She takes a couple of steps to the window, careful not to let them see her. She sees them clearly, just across her driveway over the fence (a fraction lower on either side per her Lucy's specs) into the flawlessly landscaped yard adjacent to hers. She watches as they embrace—Lucy and this man—their arms reaching as if their lives depend on their bodies touching.

But it's 2:30! She leans into the window, straining to see them.

They are oblivious to her. Then they kiss—and when they do, it is slow, not one of these movie-style open mouth kisses, no...they just press their lips together and let them linger. And there is so much passion, desire, and want in this one moment that she holds her breath hoping it will continue, hoping that if she holds her breath this moment will not stop and they will remain where she can watch them like this.

Then they open their eyes, look at one another...just a look, no words, no movement, just look.

What's happening? Are they whispering? They don't speak, they just look at each other, as if they are looking into each other's souls—and then—they are gone. They disappear beyond the cream sheers into the house that is like hers, but not exactly since hers is never completely clean or quiet.

And she now can't see them—she sees nothing.

She strains more, presses her index finger against the blind, bending it some trying to see more.

But it's too late—they're gone.

She tries to imagine where they are, somewhere in that house that is the reflection of her own, but flipped and painted a lighter shade of canary yellow, the palest and almost white. Where are they in that mirror-opposite house? She imagines Lucy with her lover in the master bedroom in the bed that her husband sleeps in on the weekends and the days that they are both in town, or on the floor of the guest bedroom, or in the family room that in her house is a play room but at Lucy's is a theater room or in the room that the builder labeled STUDY but that is Sophie's room, sees them in her mind in that organized study, Lucy and her lover with the double doors thrown open wide and the curtains open and the lights streaming into the room since there is nothing to hide, no flattened breasts or cesarean scars, and no one to see them.

She loses track of time for a moment caught up in her thoughts about her neighbor and this mysterious man.

She notices the phone is within reach. This is what she does; she takes the phone with her into the laundry room, so if anyone calls while the kiddos are napping, they'll continue napping. The washing machine is loud, but not so loud that she can't hear. So she usually just checks messages. And sometimes when she feeling industrious and efficient, she makes calls to the folks she's put off earlier in the day.

But looking at the scene in front of her, there is only one person she can think of, one person she wants to call. She dials his number. His answering machine picks up—she doesn't leave a message, she just listens to his voice, to the sound of the words as he speaks, to the inflection of his tone, to what might have been.

She hangs up when she hears the beep.

There are choices one makes and she has made hers. She looks down at the cigarette in her hand, burned down more than half way, capped with a long ashy head, almost to the filter. I must stop

smoking, she says aloud, as she takes one last drag and snuffs out the last bit in the sink next to the washing machine.

