

Laundromat

by Ulrica Hume

Who am I?

I flip through Newsweek at the laundromat
while Mrs. Brown lies on a folding table across from me,
horizontally suspended like a lady in a magic trick,
reading romance novels.

I am no one, I have never been polled, I was not abused as a child,
and I am not addicted to anything but chocolate.

Mrs. Brown has run this laundromat for thirty years.

She has a few things taped on the walls: the Pledge of Allegiance,
a prayer, a notice about putting rubber items in the dryers and a
sign that says

Stay with your dryer.

Hairdressers have been known to play tricks on her.

Today, for instance, she's missing clumps of hair
because they left the perm on too long.

She's small, she speaks in a deep voice and has a nice smile
though there are days when she's pasty-white because her
health is not good and on those days the folding table is
off-limits even to well-wishers who happen to be in the mood
to complain about things.

Mrs. Brown can only do so much.

In the window there's a big blue stuffed dog,
and a bleach bottle, cut and sewn with yarn as a sort of decoration;
there are ashtrays made of old tuna cans
and the sound of the machines steadily churning
extracting the dirt of her regular customers.

Hello, she says.

She's learned quite a lot over the years,
just by studying the way people behave in her laundromat--

stuffing in too many sheets or jamming the dollar machine,
and that is her dilemma to solve,
Why do they do it? Won't they ever learn?

Sometimes a stranger will appear in her laundromat,
like a blur of color
or a dream that keeps recurring
and she'll stop what she's doing and size him up,
though after awhile it seems to her that she has seen them all
before.

Today it's the bachelor from around the corner
and she gives me a pixie grin
as he pours too much soap in the washer,
but Mrs. Brown does not interfere.

I look up from the Newsweek magazine,
cynical about a toxic world that won't come clean.
angry about every other page I read. Yes, my life is threatened too
and yours and yours and yours...
all poisons and cures
and there's a drought in my personality too,
an inner starvation for lack of accepting the burden of
the real world.

We, Mrs. Brown and I, are two Macbethian witches,
or two wise women at the washing rock
peering through the reeds.
We watch the man touch his soiled clothes as though
they were brothers to himself,
secret identities.
Stay with your dryer, we warn him later,
as he starts the machine.
Now his world is turning, turning...
there go his favorite sox and the designer jeans
muted blues, yellows and greys.

A wild pillowcase in maniacal revolutions.
Turning, turning, the world turning,
Stay with your planet. Mrs. Brown is dreaming,
head resting on her chest and the book about to fall
from her hands.

