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Ruth's Neighborhood

LOADS OF LAUNDRY

Ruth reflects on the ways that she's done the family laundry through the years.

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At this time of year, winter, I have to hang the laundry indoors to dry. Our indoor clothes yard is upstairs in the front part of my garret office, so I walk past it every day to get to my desk, and every day it makes me think ahead to the first time I'll hang the laundry outdoors come spring.

And that first time each spring, pinning our clothes on the line that reaches from the side of the house to a tall pine at the edge of the beaver pond, I am suddenly twenty years old again, it's the autumn of 1959, Don and I have just set up housekeeping in an apartment at the Keene Teachers' College married students' barracks, and I am blissfully hanging out our first load of laundry in the barracks' clothes yard.



Those barracks found their way into a couple of my novels. I gave our apartment to Tom and Joanne in *Snowy* and, earlier, to Polly and Brad in *The Cost of Living*. I gave Polly our washing machine too.

The married students' barracks at Avery were two long gray wooden shacks behind a cyclone fence, and Polly and Brad's apartment was at the end of the first one, so it had more light. Their windows looked out at the clothes yard

of sheets and diapers . . . Polly and Brad bought an old washing machine for fifteen dollars. It was the kind that was supposed to be bolted to the floor of a cellar, but since that was impossible here (we had no cellar underneath, just stray cats), Polly had to run and sit on it during its spin cycle so it wouldn't start walking across the kitchen floor. There you might find her when you stopped by to visit, perched on her Bendix, studying.

That Bendix was the last washing machine we owned for many years. After we graduated, we lived in an apartment in Sharon, Massachusetts, and a rented house in Lisbon, New Hampshire, and I went to laundromats. I hated laundromats, from the questionable hygiene to the coin slots that jammed as if gleefully knowing that I was a klutz with machines.

After Lisbon, we moved to England for a couple of years. We crossed the Atlantic on the *Queen Mary*, and midway during the voyage we went into its laundromat with our laundry bag and encountered a time-warp shock. Instead of automatic washers, the ship had an array of old-fashioned machines just like my mother had used in the Laconia apartment of my childhood. My mother would haul that machine alongside the kitchen sink to hook to faucets for filling, and when the washing part of the chore was finished she hoisted the clothes out into the spin basket that my sister, Penny, and I were warned never to go near or we'd get our fingers cut off. All the mothers of our friends had these machines or the ones with wringers instead of spinners; we were told that the wringers were even more dangerous.



Our first year in Brandon, England, Don and I lived in one of the two apartments in Brandon Park's old laundry cottage that I

described in fictional form in *A Lovely Time Was Had by All*:

The cottage I'd rented was in Clopton Park. A fairy-tale forest cleaved by fire roads, this estate had become a plantation of conifers and you could see far into the ranks of trees because underbrush wasn't permitted. Geese walked in the dooryard of the little stone storybook gatehouse. A gravel lane led to the manor house, which, along with the remodeled stables and laundry cottage, was rented by the U.S. Air Force Officers' Club who in turn rented its rooms and the apartments in the outbuildings to Air Force people seeking off-base housing . . . Ivy climbed the old pink walls of the laundry cottage, picturesque and enchanting.

Out our kitchen door ran a clothesline across the little backyard, but I didn't do any laundry in the laundry cottage, except hand washes, because it had no washing machine. However, several enterprising people supplied needs at Brandon Park, and I discovered that here in England (with Don getting an American salary) I could afford the luxury of sending laundry out:

. . . many products were brought right to our doors. There was the milkman who arrived every morning . . . Three times a week the breadwoman's van came honking through the forest and all of us Clopton Park womenfolk and children gathered under the trees to wait until she parked it and opened the doors in back . . . The butcher's car was a miniature station wagon, and his young helper carried to us in a big wicker basket the meat we had ordered. Kerosene was delivered once a week in a bus

that combined a grocery store and a hardware store . . .
And eventually, when I tired of going to the Base
laundromat, the laundryman came to me. I kept thinking
of my grandmother and how she would have been
perfectly at home here.

My mother would've been, also. Although she did most of the
laundry in that spinner washing machine, she did send my
father's white shirts out; that is, she and Penny and I walked
down the street to Mrs. Flack's house to deliver the shirts, and a
day or so later we walked back and got them all starched and
folded. In her busy kitchen Mrs. Flack made pies and doughnuts
to sell, and she always gave Penny and me doughnut holes.
(The memory inspired a character in *A Woman Who Loved
Lindbergh*.) Somehow the shirts didn't smell of cooking, so Mrs.
Flack must have separated her various jobs. This didn't happen
when, during our time in England, we spent six weeks in a bed-
and-breakfast in Oxford where the young woman who helped
with the cleaning also took in laundry. She must have hung the
wet clothes over her stove while doing a fry-up, for they smelled
of sausages and chips. That ended the luxury of having laundry
done during our stay in Oxford, and instead I hid myself to an
Oxford laundromat, as did *A Lovely Time's* narrator:

At Pembroke Street, Jacob gave me the laundry bag and
entered the soot-blackened old house in which his
tutorials were held, and I went on alone down the street
to the laundromat. The rain began while I was reading
there. As the sky darkened, the grimy laundromat seemed
to grow brighter and cleaner, a white world safe from the
storm. It could be anywhere at all, I thought, except for
the kind of money you put in the machines . . .

And speaking of Mrs. Flack's starched shirts, I'm reminded of
how much starch we seemed to use back then. When my
parents bought a house in 1951, they also bought an automatic
washing machine. Modern living! But as Penny and I progressed
into junior high and high school, we did lots of extra work on our
clothes, starching our blouses, rolling them up in towels and
stowing them in the refrigerator, every Sunday ironing five
blouses each for the school week ahead. We stiffened our
crinoline petticoats with gelatin or starch. Friend Molly Katz
recalls that in New York she used a sugar solution on her
crinolines and dried them on an open umbrella. Friend Gloria
Pond says, "In Illinois we used starch or sugar, ironed them
wide and stored them in a cone-shaped stack in the corner."

After England, Don and I lived for a year in a studio apartment on Boston's Beacon Street. It had a washer and dryer in a little room next to our apartment, very handy, but you had to time your laundry schedule around the schedules of the other people in the building. Then we moved to an apartment in Dover, New Hampshire, and I was back to going to a laundromat, usually on a Wednesday night to avoid the weekend rush.

In 1971 we at last bought our first house. It was a prefab log cabin (a fictional version of which I gave to Carolyn in *Wife and Mother*) in Farmington, New Hampshire. We bought our first new appliances. I loved the new washing machine and dryer almost as much as the twenty-five acres of woods around the place and the apple orchard and bog (these I gave to Bev and her parents in *The Cheerleader*, plunking down a fictional Cape and barn where our log cabin had been built on the site of the town poor farm).

When we moved here to Sandwich in 1976, the appliances came with us. During the ensuing years the washing machine has been replaced twice and the dryer once. Most of the time, though, when things go wrong with the washing machine or dryer, Don can fix them. I call him our Laundry Officer.

Don's laundry career began in his childhood when he worked for his grandmother, who owned the Green Arrow Cabins in the Weirs. I gave his job to Polly in *The Cost of Living*:

Beyond the Grange Hall was Helen's folks' boarding-house Helen had grown up in, and as we drove on, we passed the house Polly's grandparents had later moved to and the Blue Gate Cabins they had built. On the back porch of that house Polly and Sandra had worked washing sheets in the old wringer washing machine when they were still too small to reach the clotheslines to hang them up.

The sheets, when dry, were run through the Green Arrow's mangle by his grandmother or mother. His mother had her own mangle, and during his high-school years she pressed his khakis in it as well as sheets and other linens, so his crisp-pressed pants were added to the charms that we girls noticed—and no doubt they helped him be voted Best Dressed in his yearbook, an honor that delighted his mother, who by implication was also honored along with her mangle.

During his two years in the Coast Guard, Don was the laundryman on his ship, the *Escanaba*. He chose the duty

because he could be his own boss and make his own hours. I wasn't exactly thrilled about this choice when I learned that the laundry was positioned in the bow beside the five-inch gun. He preferred to work at night, alone and independent, with the ship sleeping. The early-rising cooks were very friendly to him because he made a point of doing the extra laundry their job demanded, and when he got off duty each morning he'd go to the galley, where fresh-baked bread would be waiting and a cook would toss a steak on the stove for him. Over the two years, throughout storms off Newfoundland or moored calmly in Bermuda, he became skilled at laundering the variety of uniforms, but one time he was flummoxed: A group of officers' wives and children had joined the ship for relocation and he was confronted by lingerie and baby clothes!

We had got married before he went into the Coast Guard. I was at Bennington and he was stationed in New Bedford, Massachusetts, when not at sea. (We'd meet in Lexington, Massachusetts, at my grandparents' house, which had a laundry chute that fascinated Penny and me in our childhood.) It was when he got out of the Coast Guard that we finally could start living together, in what I insisted on calling our love nest, in the married students' barracks with the clothes yard I'll be remembering this spring, outdoors at our clothesline, feeling twenty years old again.

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Photos by Don MacDougall

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