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## **Aeons of Ironing A Sequel to "Loads of Laundry"**

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After Winifred Motherwell read my "LOADS OF LAUNDRY" piece in "Ruth's Neighborhood" last year, she pointed out that an additional piece needed to be written about the "more or less permanent chore of ironing."

Then she told me an ironing tale that made me gasp in admiration while my blood ran cold. When she and her husband were both teaching, she wrote, and their two daughters were in kindergarten and preschool, "my Sundays were spent ironing six dress shirts and eighteen dresses, all cotton, all needing to be dampened." *Eighteen dresses!*

My mind went back to the Keene Teachers' College married students' barracks, where on Sundays in our apartment I first tackled this part of domestic bliss, ironing the week's worth of clothes for Don and me, his shirts and khakis, my blouses and cotton dresses and skirts. To keep from going mad, I listened to LP record albums and even found a radio station that played old programs I'd listened to in my childhood, "The Lone Ranger" and such.

Winifred wrote, "By cold weather I could switch to sweaters and skirts but there were still the shirts and all those smocked, puffed sleeve dresses beloved by grandparents. I actually rather enjoy ironing now that I only have to do it every two months or so but back then my life was chaotic enough without having to devote a whole day to the ironing board. I'd play Clancy Brothers records as background because I'd speed up with the jigs."

My mother grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts, so of course she was a Red Sox fan, but she had never really paid attention to the games until she found herself married, on a farm in New Hampshire, listening to the radio while doing the ironing. Baseball games were her favorite distraction from the chore. She became a real authority on them and began listening even when she didn't have ironing to do. A predominant sound of summer in my memory and my sister's is a radio sports-announcer's voice and the whoop of the crowds.

In "Loads of Laundry" I recounted how in junior high school my sister and I would spend Sundays starching and ironing our outfits for the week ahead. Winifred reminded me of an extra challenge, "those popular full-skirted shirt dresses of the 50s and early 60s. I think the skirts were two yards around at the hem and they were so long the skirts had to be ironed in two circuits, one for the gathers at the waist and then back around for the rest of it."

This in turn reminded me of "circle skirts," which I seem to recall I even made in home-ec class as well as under the direction of my grandmother; you cut a great big circle out of the cloth, with the waist in the middle. When I mentioned them to Winifred, she wrote, "Circle skirts, and they were circles, were fairly easy to iron, except for keeping the freshly ironed part off the floor. They probably could even be done on a mangle, but the full skirts worn over crinolines had tiny gathers that needed the iron's point. There was a ghastly concoction called Permastarch that was applied somehow, and then they had to be dampened to a perfect and nearly unobtainable state between too wet and too dry, like practically everything else."

Winifred had told me earlier that her mother and mother-in-law had mangles; "I could use them but it never seemed worth the effort and they took up an awful lot of room." In "Loads of Laundry" I'd written how Don's mother had ironed his khakis on her mangle. My mother used pant stretchers for my father's. Winifred said, "Even with a mangle and after having been wrestled on and off pants stretchers those khakis of the 50s were torture to iron. They were made of either canvas or concrete, it seemed, and were totally unwieldy."

Tom, her husband, known to us as the Real Tom to differentiate him from Snowy's Tom, "usually wore oxford cloth buttndowns

but still had some broadcloth dress shirts, like the ones my father wore, when we were first married. They had to be starched at least occasionally, and dampened, of course, and scorching the last front side was inevitable. Table linens from holiday dinners always scorched easily too. And my school gym tunics defied description."

Winifred added, "As you can tell, I've spent an awful lot of time ironing. But I've never had a good place to do it, it's always had to be the kitchen or dining room. When the girls were little the ironing board was such a permanent feature in the dining area I started referring to it as the room divider."

I learned to iron in the bathroom. My mother kept the ironing board set up in the downstairs bathroom off the kitchen, where the washing machine also resided (most people didn't have dryers then) so there was some logic to the location. I later realized how convenient it was, for never afterward did I live anyplace where there was room to leave the ironing board open, so I've always wrestled it out of broom closets or, in this present house that doesn't have such a closet (and only two regular closets, one of which Don built), out of a space beside the refrigerator.

My mother's first steam iron was temperamental, apt to spit water. This didn't cause too much trouble with cotton, but with delicate fabrics it could cause stains. I can still hear my mother's cry of dismay when the iron erupted while she was pressing the skirt of the outfit I was to wear that evening to the seventh-grade reception. Because of the trickiness of its fabric, she was doing the ironing, not me. I'd been much influenced by Leslie Caron's clothes in *An American in Paris*, which I'd seen and loved that year (and ever after), so instead of a party dress I had chosen a deep pink skirt in some sort of taffeta and a sheer white blouse with long puffy sleeves and a black velvet vest that my grandmother made. Now my mother was crying over the line of water stains at the bottom of the skirt, perpendicular to the hem. She wasn't a person who usually lost her head over such disasters, but I was the president of the seventh grade and had to give a little welcoming speech at the beginning of the reception in the high-school gym, so even though I was just a kid my outfit would really be noticed; I couldn't hide at the back of the gym. She wept and exclaimed, and for the first time that I can remember I remained calm during a crisis, maybe because all my worries were concentrated on giving that damn speech. I

suggested a solution: sewing a seam to hide the stains and decorating the seam with black velvet bows, as if it was meant. I had black velvet ribbon on hand because I was going to wear a piece around my neck as a choker. (I really *had* planned this outfit, right down to the black ballet flats in which I could dance with Gene Kelly to "Our Love Is Here to Stay"!) The solution worked. My boyfriend Roger Thibodeau, known as Tibby, and I were driven to the school by my father, with my mother, who were chaperones, and I got through the speech, and afterward while Tibby and I danced I thought as much about the treachery of steam irons as I did about romance.



Steam irons did improve. Another great leap forward were no-iron clothes, even the polyester ones. Eventually there were some afternoon programs besides soap operas to watch while doing the ironing and then, hooray, came audiobooks! Nowadays I do a lot less ironing than in days of yore and I actually look forward to it as a time when I

can listen to a book on my Walkman or CD player.

Days of yore. From my grandmother's house I still have a couple of the old iron flatirons that women had to heat on stoves. One I use as a doorstop, and the other is a bookend on my desk. My gaze falls upon the latter more often than the former, but I'm usually not really seeing either, and then suddenly at my



desk I realize with a jolt what the bookend is, its history, and I see women through the ages working at what Winifred so aptly called this more or less permanent chore.

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