

Lessons at the Laundromat

I have an almost psychic ability to go to the Laundromat whenever everyone else does. The time doesn't matter — it could be Wednesday morning at 10 or Sunday evening at 7 — but whenever I look in the closet and say, "Oh my God, I don't have a shirt for tomorrow!" is when America decides to wash its clothes.

But that may be fortunate; after all, there's not much to do at the Laundromat except look at the people there. And when

you're surrounded, as I am, by that great crowd of people who can't or won't buy their own Maytags, there's lots of variety.

They dress funny, for instance. People, I guess, are like me: They don't come to the Laundromat until they have to, which means they don't have anything to wear that wouldn't embarrass them to death at Lyon's. No one's embarrassed at the laundry, though; we're all equal in our old sweatpants, T-shirts and holey jeans. Occa-

sionally, you see the complete opposite, like pin-stripe suits and dry-clean-only skirts.

Sometimes there are bizarre combinations such as slacks and an Oregon Ducks sweatshirt or a silk blouse over a Catholic school tartan skirt. Everyone wears running shoes and no socks. I think there's a rule about that.

If there's no one strangely dressed and I feel some curious need to be educated, I pick up one of the ancient Time magazines lying around and try to find out what was going on in the world last year.

But who can read in the Laundromat? There's always one dryer that sounds as if someone had thrown a bucketful of small stones in with his jogging outfit, or the Max Machine ("DANGER — Do not let small children play in washer!") is warming up for its sonic-boom spin cycle.

So I crunch down in my plastic chair and turn to the world.

Mixing with the crowd is fun, but you've got to observe a few ground rules for a safe time when people watching: First, watch the children very closely; second, don't forget to keep an eye on your clothes.

The baby boomlet is in full swing at Laundromats, especially on weekends. The moms in control of these kids are pleasant but also good and harassed because small children love Laundromats the same way they love supermarkets — there are lots of things on or near the floor that can be reached by even the youngest arms.

A small, golden-haired angelic boy of maybe 22 months can wreak tremendous havoc in a place like this. Never worry about him eating a chunk of industrial-strength detergent that happened to fall on the floor; the kid's too smart for that. After one whiff, he'll throw it back and probably spit on it to make it stay.

No, trouble comes when he spots the bags and bags and bags of laundry the two mini-skirted



Illustration by Lorraine Rath

coeds have dragged in. These women never seem to notice what the young guy is up to until the kid has grabbed a handful of candy-colored panties and is making off like a demon to show mom the loot.

Mom, of course, is dressed in her crummiest, ripped-up old jeans and her husband's college sweatshirt and is about at the end of her rope. "Put those back!" she yells, as she struggles to get the sheets into the dryer without dragging them on the floor.

Then the two coeds, who by the way are dressed as if they were heading for dinner at the Excelsior rather than a date with the rinse cycle, approach giggling to retrieve the underwear. Mom sees them and sort of sags against the dryer. Out of kindness, everyone turns away and reflects on the loss of youth except the kid, of course, who is outraged that his toys have been taken away.

This is only the beginning: Real trouble is coming soon, and it happens when you don't keep watch over your clothes.

There's always a military-looking man, 40, with muscles bulging under his T-shirt, his head resembling an aircraft carrier — and he's tossed his clothes into a few dryers. Being efficient, he goes out to the nearby grocery store while his clothes revolve.

In comes the dryer vampire; it could be anyone, but it is usually another mom towing three kids.

She always strikes at Laundromats that have maybe 20 washers and nine dryers.

She sneaks in shortly after "Sarge" has gone, collects three washers full of her clothes and checks out the dryer situation. All full. She's canny, though and has been through this before; she waits until a dryer has come to a standstill. No one approaches to get the clothes or to toss in another quarter. That's her signal.

Quickly she opens the door, gives the clothes a feel, smiles and nods as if to say, "OK, these are done." Even though they're not. It's into the rolling basket with them, and her clothes slide into the dryer. Before you can blink, she's out, starts up her car and is gone.

For Sarge, there's the prospect of hanging his clothes on the line and experiencing the real joy of a surprise Oregon downpour. For the rest of us, there's the incessant vigil over our clothes in the Laundromat jungle. People watching in these places can be fun, but dryer watching can keep you from coming to school in wet jeans.

— MICHAEL JAY

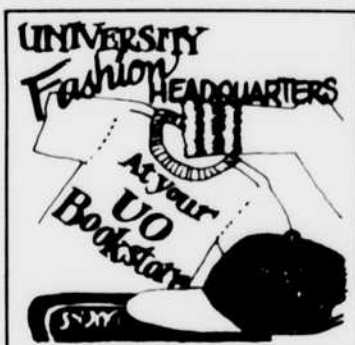
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