

Dirty Laundry

Hot and frazzled, we bickered. Yesterday, too, and the day before. We had argued since our vacation trekking the Canadian Rockies began: what trail to hike, what distance to scramble, who carried the bear spray and snacks, how much sunscreen to use at high altitude. Efficient college-aged Older Daughter, food-focused teen Younger Daughter—both thought they were right. Now, all of our clothing dirty, we squabbled over the route to the town of Jasper's lone laundromat. Older insisted on the direct route from our rental cottage; younger via the ice cream shop, two blocks out of our way.

A single parent, I rarely dictated. Since we were all we had, I'd learned to navigate the razor-thin line that separated button-pushing sibling squabbling from emotionally crushing trash talk. But I was wearing my last pair of clean underwear. So I beelined to Patricia Street, in my wake a pissed-off Younger because there would be no ice cream and an exasperated Older because I'd forgotten the laundromat's address and had to backtrack—a sow with two rowdy cubs.

A charter bus with Ohio plates, expansive tinted windows, reclining cushy seats, and an underbody compartment for suitcases rested at the curb. It was the type of bus that would be filled with the tourists I had complained about for the past three weeks.

"They're like no-see-ums," I said. "There's no escaping them. Even on this side street." Exploring, we'd navigated our rental SUV around bus after bus. They clogged backcountry lanes, hogged turnarounds so passengers could comfortably snap pictures of black bears and moose foraging on roadside berries.

"It's a behemoth," Younger said, pausing her constant singing as we walked toward the parked bus.

"The pollution they spew is horrendous." Older was studying marine ecology.

"At least they're here to look at nature." Younger envisioned herself a lawyer. "Like us."

"We're always looking at nature," Older said. "Mom's a wildlife biologist, so it's not like we're going someplace where there isn't nature." I thought for a moment she might say how she appreciated yesterday's hike into the wilderness to sit on a rock among a herd of bighorn sheep. But she turned to me and asked, "Why didn't you rent something fuel-efficient instead of a gas-guzzling SUV?"

"I wanted the windows and luggage space," I said. It would have been here that my own mom would have added, "If you don't like it, stay at the cottage."

"We're worse polluters than the bus riders," Younger said. "There's fifty of them and only three of us, so if you divide . . ."

"Your math is incomplete," Older corrected. "You left out the plastic we have on board."

"Mom, you failed," Younger said. "Next time, an economy car." Judgement rendered, she resumed singing.

"Total failure," Older added, flipping her russet ponytail over a tanned shoulder.

I didn't respond. Doing so would be lighter fluid on our family dynamics, as one daughter would passionately disagree with me or with the other.

I pushed open the laundromat's opaque door, expecting to have the pick of washers and dryers and quickly complete our utilitarian task so we could eat. But the place was packed, busload-packed. The room smelled of burnt cotton, air scorched like the afternoon. By the coin machine, three men sipped coffee from Styrofoam cups. In black trousers, white long-sleeve shirts, ebony suspenders, and dark felt broad-rim hats, the bearded men leaned into their circle, murmured among themselves. About forty women fed slots and folded clothing. In their sturdy black shoes, they pushed bins from washer to dryer to table. In long, plain dresses of solid Easter-egg pinks, blues, and greens, their hair twined into buns and tucked under starched white caps, the women were as orderly and efficient as the rolls of quarters in their matching apron pockets.

We wilted into orange plastic chairs abutting whitewashed, floor-to-ceiling windowpanes. I sat between two seething daughters, their irritability amplified because neither had eaten for hours.

"Let's do pizza for dinner," Younger said, flicking through a restaurant app on her phone.

"You're lactose intolerant, remember?" Older said, tugging down her polka-dotted shirt to cover a lionfish tattooed on the side of her belly. Seeing her efforts fall short, she rearranged her striped shorts and crossed mismatched floral socks, an outfit she'd curated. "I want salad," she added.

With a daypack stuffed with soiled clothing straddling my knees, I searched for the strength to keep us from shredding each other. I never had a voice growing up, so I usually let the girls spar. But I

didn't want our scramble through the Canadian Rockies to be the trip where we unraveled.

"The pizza place has salads," Younger said, before she jumped back into a tune, swinging pale, freckled legs with the song's rhythm, adding a tennis-shoe-kicking bass note.

"The pizza place has ice cream, which is what you really want," Older said in the "you're-such-a-dumbass" tone only older sisters use. "You'll be farting all night," Older added. "Besides, your socks stink. You should have packed more."

"Mom packed them."

"You're too old to have *mommy* pack your clothes."

"What does it matter?" I interrupted, hoping to silence both from punting words back and forth like ravens fighting over scraps. I wanted my daughters to find their voices but felt uncomfortable when they quarreled in public.

"Mom likes packing my clothes,"

"Will you shut up and stop kicking the effing chair!"

"You're just jealous I have perfect pitch."

"It's obnoxious."

"You're both obnoxious," I said loudly.

Then I scanned the room for judgy eyes, my mother's eyes. She taught me that a woman avoided conflict; I had learned to be small. But no one glanced our way.

A black-hatted man refilled his Styrofoam cup with coffee. A woman in pink retied her apron bow and smoothed the immaculate white fabric.

"The restaurants will have lines out their doors by the time we finish," Older said, twisting a crystal stud earring. "It'll be hours before we eat."

"Call our order in and ask them to hold a table," I said, handing Older my wallet. "Pay for our meal up front."

"Look at you," Younger said to me in a voice she used with the dog. "Using your PhD."

"Oooh, spicy!" I said, making light of her backtalk.

I was done with my daughters. A machine emptied, and I plunged into the workforce alongside the industrious women. I upended our pack and pushed coins into the machine's slots.

I said hello to a woman wearing blue next to me. She startled, as if only now noticing me.

"Where you from?" I asked.

"Amish communities in Indiana, Ohio, and Kansas," She said in an accent as flat as the Midwest. "We're teachers."

My daughters had joined me. Younger was silent, and Older's fingers, usually twisting an earring, stilled.

"We're on vacation," the woman added. They, like us, were exploring the Canadian Rockies. They, like us, stopped at bear-jams, ogled crimson fireweed and craggy-topped mountains.

But they were not like us. These women cooperated with each other.

A woman in pink laid out a man's white shirt on the table, and another woman, in green, buttoned, folded sleeves onto the torso, straightened cuffs and collar. A third, also in green, packed the folded shirt into a suitcase. No slackers. No complainers. No arguers.

As the water sloshed soil and sweat from our clothes, I wondered. Did the women talk back, disagree, reveal opposing feelings? Or, chafed by repression, did some simply leave like my sister had two decades ago, never to speak to the family again? A daughter leaving was my biggest fear, an unease as massive and jagged as the peaks we climbed.

The women spoke in hushed tones. Mom, who had always "put on her face" before leaving the house, who wore only navy and camel, who never ran out of clean undies, whose daughters wore matching socks, would have approved of these women's comportment.

Bam. Bam. Bam. Our washer clanged and thumped. The black-hatted men stopped talking. Women eyed the shimmying machine.

"We broke it," Younger said.

"Geez," Older commented. "We'll never get out of here."

My mother would have been mortified, the improperly balanced washer a reflection on her. She would have apologized profusely, dramatically repositioned wet clothes so that the cycle finished without further notice, much like she modeled living.

We watched our machine dance until its spinning tango abruptly stilled.

"What a relief," Younger said.

The women resumed folding. The men resumed talking.

Younger sleuthed out a dryer. Older called in a pizza order: figs, arugula, light on gorgonzola. Younger stuffed wet clothes inside the machine and fed it quarters. We huddled and figured out how to set its timer.

My mother muzzled her contrary offspring with a sharp "We don't argue in this family; we love each other." Doing so produced, to

onlookers, conviviality. But for my sister and me, doing so produced belly-up submission, a going-along-to-get-along brimming with contempt and distance. Me letting my daughters sort it out taught my girls to be comfortable voicing their opinion. We needed more women who would not kowtow.

Thirty minutes later, our pack full of clean clothes, I pushed open the door. The driver was loading the bus's underbelly with the last of the women's suitcases.

We walked along Patricia Street.

"Let's hike the Athabasca River bank trail tomorrow," Older suggested. "It's flat."

"Sounds good," Younger responded.

Older reached the end of the block. "This way," she said, pointing right. "The pizza place is around the corner."

My mom produced well-behaved daughters who valued clean underwear. The cost, estrangement of her first born—my sister who never returned phone calls about mom's declining health or attended her subsequent service—had been an acceptable price.

Younger stopped. "No." She pointed left. "This way."

"That's the long way around." Older studied her phone. "You only want to go left because there's a candy store. Walking that way's a waste of time."

"Only one block waste," Younger countered.

My noisy, opinionated daughters would continue to jangle my nerves. But rather than shut them down, I'd learned to be comfortable with the stress I felt from their arguing. Heel-toeing this razor-thin line created space for them to disagree with each other and with me so any need for independence wouldn't lead to rebelliously leaving the family, like my sister had. Or like Amish women sometimes did. My daughters valued being true to themselves. That mattered more to me than my discomfort, a small price to pay for raising two badass women.

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**Exploring Literature
and the Arts**

FEATURING

The Timeless Ceramic Art of Stefani Threet

and Interviews with Ada Limón, Bruce Levitt and Isaac Scott

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