

Laundry Day

She pulls off the sweat-soaked sheets, pressing their blue floral pattern to her chest. She tries to cradle all her bedding, the sheet conspicuously free of red spots, when one lone pillowcase slips from between her ink-stained fingers. As she bends to reach for it, her nose touches the cotton bundle, and she is engulfed in his scent.

Warmth plays along her spine, like butterfly feet stomping across her body, fluttering from her vulva to her chest, nestling near her heart.

She breathes in deeply. An almost-smile playing across her lips. *Something is caught in her throat. She struggles to breathe as butterflies and moths create a spiral flutter up through her throat, beating around her skull. Dead dust from brown wings settle over each shiny memory, obscuring it.*

The tremble of his gentle caress no longer a sign of nervousness, but rather deep-seated loathing. Except, he knows her. He has known her too long for that to be true.

His scent, slightly like sawdust and cinnamon clings to her nose, even after she deposits the bedding into the white plastic laundry basket. Hooking her fingers around the handle she drags it from her bedroom into the hall and leaves it just outside the door to her cramped apartment bathroom. Threadbare towels join her bedding in the basket, one still damp from the mornings shower. She rests one hand on her lower stomach, as her eyes glide across the room in search of something forgotten. Laundry-detergent and a frog-shaped coin purse join the linen and towels in the basket, before she hoists the whole contraption up under one arm.

Despite his slim build, his arms were curiously strong as he cradled her.

She opens the front door with her free hand, pointedly ignoring the memory of sensation as she steps across the spot where he kissed her goodbye last night. *His lips slightly wet on hers,*

butterflies fighting to fly in her locked stomach. The basket is unreasonably heavy, and as she tries to shift its weight she almost drops it, eyes on her feet as she shuffles towards the apartment complex's laundry room.

“Hey, Doll! You up early on a Sunday.” Her neighbor's voice carries through the warm air, and as she lifts her eyes she sees him sitting on his balcony, round belly exposed to the sun, grizzled beard greedily holding onto the leftovers of his breakfast.

“Hey, Mr. Peterson. Yeah, a little. I had to do laundry.” She lifts the basket as proof, struggling under its revealing weight, spotless, but smelling of sex and sweat.

“That's good. The wife needs to wash our sheets too. Missy pissed in them. I swear, her and Plucky are a real big bag o'trouble. But what can you do? I love them cats! I guess you're lucky. Cats didn't piss on your sheets.”

“Mmh, yeah...”

“Yeah, they are great though. Real individuals. You know Plucky won't eat nothing but the tuna wet-food. Real expensive. She gotten too picky. I ever tell you how I got her?”

“I think so...”

“Found her in a trashcan. Poor thing was no bigger than my hand.” He waves a meaty palm to illustrate, his eyes closed in memory.

She shifts the weight of her basket, trying to find the words that will let her escape. *But there is a flutter in her head, and she can't think. Can barely manage the basket, weighed down by its spotlessness, by a thousand winged creatures. Moths aren't supposed to be heavy.*

“And then we took her to the vet to see what was what. Excessive, I know, but them cats are my *kids*. Anyway, it wasn't nothing but gas. Can you believe that?”

“Mmh, no.” She lifts the basket again, her breathing tight.

“Well I ought to let you go do that laundry.” He laughs, a loud rumble that starts in his round belly and settles in his beard. She nods, forcing a smile.

The laundry room is beautifully empty, a cool escape from the summer heat. She loads her bundle into the nearest empty washer, carefully measuring out the detergent before dumping it onto the laundry. It makes a *wet* sound. *His lips on hers, so insistent, soft. Rough stubble tickling her cheek, her neck, her chest. Wet kisses leaving a trail across her body. Food for flutter, as he made the butterflies sing. She feels the weight of a moth above her ear, inside her nose. Breathe.*

Her frog purse opens its mouth, quarters spilling out. She picks four and starts the machine. *Do frogs eat moths? Butterflies?* She sets a timer on her phone, thirty minutes. There is something about the thought of wash cycles that leaves a sour taste in her mouth. Her steps are a little too fast as she moves across the complex, her stomach heavy, a dull throbbing in its center. *A flutter.*

“Hey, Doll!”

She pretends not to hear. The door closes behind her, a little too hard, as it’s pushed by the breeze, *wings guiding its close. A prison cell or a safe barrier from the world?* She moves across the floor, purposefully without purpose, tidying away last night’s empty bottle and two half-filled wine glasses, her lipstick stain on one. The dishwasher nearly full, she starts it, the soap pod sticky on her fingers. *Her throat seems full, dry but fluid, filled with fluttering wings and dust and last night’s desire.* She reaches for a clean glass, filling it with water, drinking deeply, *washing away the flutter.*

She watches her feet shake, and pretends it’s a sign of a full bladder. *Was the bathroom always this small? A flutter of wings, waiting, hiding behind clean towels and almost empty shampoo bottles. Is the toilet paper covered in dust? Breathe.* She clenches her stomach, the dull

pain a throbbing companion to her budding headache. She leans forward, chest to her knees, eyes pressed shut as tightly as she presses on her bladder. Nothing, nothing... *nothing*. Then a thin stream of liquid, hardly worth the trip. *Breathe*. She folds the tissue, once, then twice. Wipes, but forgets to look. Folds, once, twice. Wipes, looks, the paper damp. *White*.

Last night she had been so grateful that she was late, so happy, because it meant she could have him. Now that same lateness is slowly strangling her. Breathe. Flutter.

Her hands shake as she washes them, the soap thick between her fingers. On the bathroom sink sits an unused sanitary pad. She steps outside the bathroom? She must have. *There is the hallway floor, but it's all made up of moth wings, and they're beating, and she can't breathe. In her throat. Were they always in her throat? She feels her hands shaking, but when she looks they are still, empty. No, now she sees the shaking, each tremble like an insect's wing, but she can't feel it. She can't even feel the wall beneath her hand, or the floor beneath her knees. If there is a floor. They are everywhere, and they are fluttering, spiraling. She wants to scream. She opens her mouth, and they enter her, fill her. She chokes as they dance down her windpipes, swim just beneath her skin. Can moths swim? They are in her stomach now. That's all she feels, the insistent beating of wings, inside. She should breathe, but she can't and they are eating her from the inside. Her mother told her that it was a beautiful thing... once it was out, but before then it feels like an alien. A parasite?*

She feels a vibration on her thigh, reaching into her pocket with shaky fingers she removes her phone, shutting off the alarm that signals the end of her wash cycle. *Cycle, a flutter*. She breathes, closing and stretching tired hands, eyelids firmly shut. *Don't be silly. Things will work out. They have to. Focus. Get the laundry.*

She uses one shaky hand to create shade above her eyes, glancing to the neighbor's balcony. A small sigh escapes her swollen lips as she finds it empty. She tries not to tremble while she walks, a sob almost escaping her lips as she walks through the laundry room door. *The flutter is filling her head, her throat. She opens her mouth to let them out, let them consume her inside and out. They are dancing in her stomach, and eyes and nostrils, burning her tear ducts with their dust, except...* There is a woman and her daughter bent over one of the washing machines. The child turns to her and narrows her eyes, before grabbing at her mother's leg.

Don't flutter.

"Now, don't you go grabbing me. Pay attention. I'm tryna show you how it's done." The woman's voice is a high-pitched squeak. The child sighs, rolling brown eyes behind her mother's back.

Don't fly. Breathe. Mouth closed.

"You put in the stuff, nothing but white, alright? I said alright?"

"Right."

"Then you put in the detergent, no more than half a cup. I mean that, don't go wasting detergent."

"Yes, Mama."

They are crawling inside her. Tired of waiting, of being tied down.

The woman straightens to look at her daughter, grabs four quarters out of her pocket and starts the machine.

"Come on now, girl. Have a nice day." The second part is thrown into the room, as she takes her daughter by the hand and walks out the door, nodding once in no particular direction.

“Yeah, you too.” The words come out crooked, *strangled in her throat by a fluttering of wings.*

She stumbles to her machine, transferring the wet bedding and wetter towels to the nearest dryer. *The sheet between her fingers is made of wet wings, unable to fly.* She clutches them closer, her stomach in *pain. A flutter, a storm of wings, and moth feet, and biting little mouths. And she can't breathe. Pain. Flutter. Breathe.*

She sits on the folding table, eyes glazed, unable or unwilling to make the walk back out into the sunshine, she simply waits. The drier rumbles, a monotone hum not unlike the little engine in her ceiling fan, *spinning, spinning, pushing cool air onto their sweaty bodies. How can bodies sweat that much? Her hand on his shoulder, his back, as he moved on top of her, came away wet. No, it lived wet, stayed wet, his skin became an ocean, and she bit into it tasting salt... And butterflies. Too wet, but not in the moment, in the moment there was nothing else but his rhythm, his breathing, his open eyes falling into her, filling her. And then after, after was even sweeter. Except... Except the moths, because butterflies can't exist in the after, not when she is too afraid to believe it's true, that he is in her arms and she is in his. And his clumsy nervousness, his newness to the endeavor becomes less adorable when he can't put the condom on properly, and she can feel the moths swimming, dancing around latex edges, filling her stomach with fluttering wings.*

She doubles over, hand clutching her lower stomach as heightened pain shoots through her, the dull beat of earlier discomfort suddenly, clearly, a physical affliction. *The pain isn't in her head, and for a second she lets the butterflies jump. Could it be? Could she be?*

She looks over her shoulder, and finding herself utterly alone she allows one trembling hand to reach inside her sweatpants, a single finger trailing her wet opening, coming away red. *Red!*

The butterflies flutter, and for a moment her relief is enough to drown out her inclination towards romantic worrying. For just a moment she lets the butterflies dance, as moths settle into the empty crevices between her toes, waiting for their turn to fly.

She pulls the warm bedding from the dryer, burying her face, hiding happy tears, his scent drowned in laundry detergent and sunshine. Her heart is as light as the summer air playing across her newly dried sheets. She brings her hand to her left arm, fingers mindlessly finding the white scar from the little metal rod, Nexplanon, that used to live beneath her skin. An old friend she may need to re-visit, despite the irritating side effect... At least if *he* plans on re-visiting her.