

# THE LAUNDRESS

Anabelle Kang

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The Laundress lived too far away from her job, but too close all the same. Too far to walk, too close for any bus to connect them. Besides, buses didn't go to the neighborhoods she worked in. The streets were too clean, too evenly paved, and if the bus tires didn't cross a pothole or mis-fit brick every other minute, the Laundress reckoned they probably couldn't run. The Laundress' normal trip to work consisted of a short bus ride to the edge of town where the roads became nice. During that trip, she typically had just enough time to finish writing her To-Dos.

- ☐ *Clean the oven*
- ☐ *Mail the check for water bill*
- ☐ *Finish mending Mrs. Nelson's stockings*
- ☐ *Fix the wheel on David's toy truck*
- ☐ *Go to Eric's parent-teacher conference*
- ☐ *Ask landlord to look at humming  
noise from radiator*

They were meant to be just the extra tasks that she could do in one day, the things she had to do besides the standard day-to-day affairs. The Laundress had started the lists after seeing the technique in a self-help program on late night TV. It was supposed to be a way to stay organized and give herself a "sense of accomplishment" but at some point years ago, the daily tasks had started spilling over into the next day and then into the next. And her organizational habit of lists became a never-ending reminder of the countless things she had To-Do.

After the bus, it was a fifty minute walk over a bridge that was built too low for buses to pass and into the neighborhood where she worked, with all its neatly trimmed lawns and well-kept sidewalks. According to Mrs. Hall, the so-called “homeowners association” in the area was keen on keeping the walkways clear of dead leaves and un-broken by any tree roots. The Laundress’ walk was always treeless and sweltering.

So the commute to Mr. Dunst’s remote cabin was none too big a deal. An hour on the commuter train and a twenty minute walk through the shady oaks of Point Park was a welcome relief to the Laundress.

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She’d heard about the job from another client.

“My cousin is coming into town,” Mrs. Sitwell had said, fanning herself by the open window to fend off the summer heat. “He’s one of those poetic types. From the city. You know how it is.”

Mrs. Sitwell rolled her eyes to the Laundress, who was standing by the sink scrubbing a blouse against the washboard. The Laundress *hmm’d* in agreement, even though she did not, in fact, ‘know how it is’. She was also from the city, but she reckoned that Mrs. Sitwell was speaking about a city that was different from hers. Besides, the Laundress knew that all the clients who chatted at her while she worked were never really looking for another half of a conversation, just an ear to deliver it to.

“Anyways, he’s apparently conducting some kind of new age experiment, so he’ll be living out on the family estate— I told you about that one, right? That crummy little cabin out in the middle of nowhere? The one I thought we sold off ages ago? I told you about that. Well, come to find out it’s still under the family name! So he’ll be living out there until Who-Knows-How-Long and as it should

happen, he's looking for a laundress. Well I told his Momma that I already had a girl," at this, Mrs.

Sitwell used her fan to point towards the Laundress, "who could do his washing for him!" She paused then, which was unnatural for her, and the Laundress turned her head to look.

"So you'll do it, won't you?"

The Laundress had told Mrs. Sitwell that she'd have to ask her husband and would get back to her by Tuesday when she returned with the delicates. And the Laundress had fully intended on asking, but that evening she caught a glimpse from the kitchen of Michael returning home. The Wife noticed the soot pressed into the creases of her husband's leathery skin and listened to the groan of the armchair when he sagged into it. And so the Wife decided then that she would let her husband rest and that she take the job on Tuesday.

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Mr. Dunst was a lot more average-looking than the Laundress had expected. Dark hair in a neat middle part, clean fingernails, and about five or so years younger than her. The only thing that stood out about him was his peculiar clothing. When he opened the door for her, Mr. Dunst was wearing a straw hat and a white linen shirt tucked into dark slacks. The pants were held up by a pair of suspenders on one end and stuffed into rubber-soled workers' boots on the other. Around his neck was a red kerchief.

He looked like he was fixing to be Amish but forgot halfway.

The Laundress would've scolded her children for laughing at someone's choice of clothing, but she couldn't help the snort that escaped her when the door first swung open. The Laundress coughed, hoping to disguise her moment of rudeness.

“You must be the girl that Ivy sent for.”

The Laundress nodded her head, remarking to herself that she’d never learned Mrs. Sitwell’s given name til now.

“Well come on in, there’s no point in standing there in the muck.” He held the door open wider so that she could enter. She frowned at the mud that she’d tracked in, realizing that it had caked her loafers.

□ *Wash and polish shoes*

“You can go ahead and sit your bag on that table over there,” he pointed vaguely towards a kitchen table and sank into an armchair in the lounge. It let out a silent puff of dust as he sat. He gestured to the other armchair that was opposite it, turned at an awkward angle that the Laundress supposed was meant to be stylish.

“I suppose Ivy already told you about my investigation?” Mr. Dunst said as she took the seat.

“Your investigation, sir?”

The turn of the armchair made it so that she had to twist her neck at a rather unnatural angle to face him.

“Oh that won’t do at all,” Mr. Dunst snapped with a *tsk*. “I refuse to allow you calling me ‘sir’ or anything of the sort. It’s a ridiculous thing, class divisions. I should be superior to you just because— what? Because of my wealth? Because I am a man? Ridiculous. We’re all human, after all.”

The Laundress didn’t know what to say to that, so she simply nodded at him and he continued talking.

“Where was I? Ah yes, my investigation. I’m not from the area, you see. I’m a philosopher, and I own a flat in the city, it’s very modern. And for a while I thought that sort of indulgence was making me happy, but one day I came to a sudden epiphany— that’s a sort of brilliant realization, ‘epiphany’— that all my luxuries were actually *shackles*. I was being held back by my high-paced way of life. I needed to experience simplicity to fully understand myself, and so I made the trek down to this rustic spot to get away from the modern world.”

He paused to take a sip of the iced tea, carefully adjusting the coaster as he set it back down.

“You see, I’ll be roughing it out here for awhile. Perhaps forever, who knows. Maybe I’ll return to the real world once I’ve discovered something about myself, but until then, all I know is that the Point Park estate is to be my home.”

The cramp in the Laundress’ neck made it difficult to concentrate on what Mr. Dunst was saying. She shifted slightly in her chair to try and relieve some of the pain as he talked, but found it only worsened.

“Maybe I won’t ever find it— the answer I’m looking for. After all, there are hardly any *real* answers out there waiting for us. But I believe that if I am to find it anywhere, it will be in the silence of this simple life. In fact, in the time I’ve been here I’ve been able to do so much more contemplation than the city ever allowed for. Already, the fresh country air has revealed so many answers to questions I’d never thought to- er, question. So do you have any questions for me?”

The Laundress wondered if chattiness was a family trait.

“Do you have a washboard here that I can use? Or would you rather I just use mine at home and bring the clothes back when I’m done?”

Mr. Dunst pursed his lips, clearly disappointed at the question. He took another sip of his tea.

“I have a washboard you can use. I’m quite grateful you’re here as I’ve never even handled one before. I actually have a Maytag back home that my usual girl uses.” He shifted his weight against the creaky floorboards, waiting for her to respond.

“Would you like me to start now?” the Laundress asked.

“Oh!” Mr. Dunst exclaimed. “No, I apologize for the misunderstanding. I only got here this morning, so I don’t have any laundry for you yet. I simply wanted to assess you and make sure you were fit for the job.”

This gave her pause. She held her tongue for a beat and let the flash of indignation pass.

“Did Mrs. Sitwell not think I’d done a good job?” she asked.

Mr. Dunst let out a sharp and reedy laugh at this.

“No no, nothing of the sort. I simply wanted to know if you’d be a good fit for my investigation, see.” His chest trembled as another chuckle took him over. He tucked a thumb under each suspender and snapped them as he settled down. It was a clumsy gesture, and he winced as they made contact. “As I said before, I have a girl back home who normally does my laundry. It’s only a forty minute train from the city, but I decided against having her do it while I’m here. She’s got that stench of modernity on her and I can’t have that stinking up this place, can I? She’s too much of a city-rat, like me. Unlike you. You’re a part of the countryside, like the trees or the lake outside. You live and breathe the air here. Now I’ll see you on Wednesday in three weeks, alright? You don’t need to bring anything, just an open mind!” He paused. “Ah and also some laundry powder. The estate manager forgot to stock some when he was preparing the place.”

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The Laundress walked home from the train station that night with the peculiar gait that many considered characteristic of her. The Laundress' mother had walked in that same way— shuffling forward with the right hip jutting up and out, almost as if she was perpetually balancing something against the bone that made a shelf there. Back in the day, plenty of women had walked in that shuffle as they went to-and-from the wash house, but it was a dying practice. The Laundress had never noticed that her walk was strange until her husband had pointed it out to her one day, commenting that it made her hips look wide. She was rather conscious of it now, but still unable to do anything about it.

Shoving open the rusty lock of her apartment door, the Laundress took in the scene of her home as her door swung open. The Laundress' home was clean, but never tidy. The Laundress wondered sometimes if perhaps her building was built on uneven ground, because any time she put anything away, something on the other side of the apartment seemed to fall out of place. The things in the Laundress' house were plain, as was the furniture—just like every other apartment here, which likely bought their furnishings from the same stores that she did. She thought to herself that if she went into any of the neighbor's units on accident one day, it wouldn't be until she was kissing somebody else's husband that she'd recognize she wasn't in her own home. Even so, every husband on her block returned home wearing the same coal-dusted coveralls and leaving the same grimy fingerprints on the wallpaper to be cleaned off later. Perhaps she'd never notice at all.

Her children were already at home when she arrived. One was at the kitchen table, dutifully working on his arithmetic. The other one was sat in front of the living room TV, playing with a toy car that his Mother didn't recognize.

"David, you know your father's gonna want that seat when he gets home," she said, pressing a kiss into his sweaty forehead. "And where'd you get that toy?"

"He stole it from Mickey in 2B!" The younger one crowed from his place at the table.

His Mother inhaled sharply, turning to look at him.

□ *Apologize to Mrs. Santoro in 2B*

"You said you wouldn't tell!" David screeched, leaping up from the chair as the other one yelped and threw his notebook up in defense. His Mother put a hand on David's shoulder.

"Eric, don't tattle on your brother."

"But *Mama*," Eric whined, stretching out the second 'a' in her name. "He *did* steal it! And you *said* we shouldn't be stealin things."

"That's right, and when you told on your brother just now you stole his chance to fess up to what he did." She turned to look at David. "And David, he's right. You know good and well that you shouldn't be taking things that aren't yours. Now what are you going to do tomorrow morning?"

David hung his head, avoiding his Mother's gaze.

"I'm gonna give Mickey his car back." He paused, then muttered under his breath "...and kick the seat of Eric's pants in."

Eric let out a screech as he overheard his brother's threat, launching himself out of the table chair as David lunged for him. The two tumbled around the apartment in their brawl but were careful



not to knock anything over. Their mother watched them, a weary fondness tugging at her heart. They would tire themselves out before their father got home. She set to fixing supper.

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Mr. Dunst had laundry ready for her when she returned on Wednesday, three weeks after their first encounter.

The trip there had been nice, a welcome break from her busy schedule. She took the time on the train to cross some To-Dos off her list. First she finished the mending jobs she'd collected the week before. Then she set to balancing the checkbook, and though looking at their finances was never relaxing, the Laundress found the usual stress alleviated by the scenic countryside rushing by her window. *The country sunlight must have something different in it from the city one*, she'd thought to herself, admiring the golden light that painted her hands and checkbook.

- ☐ ~~*Mend Mr. Warlowe's suit jacket*~~
- ☐ ~~*Darn Mrs. Kindson's socks*~~
- ☐ ~~*Balance checkbook*~~

As she sorted through Mr. Dunst's meager pile of laundry, she realized that his entire wardrobe was as strange as the ensemble he'd worn when they'd first met. More linen shirts— some plain white, others in neutral tones and a few in plaid— dark slacks, woolen socks. Even a pair of overalls. The Laundress noted that, in spite of their rather forced plainness, the stitching was meticulous and the fabric was always of fine quality— never polyester.

“I see you’ve noticed my particular choice in wardrobe,” Mr. Dunst commented from behind her, causing her to jump. Today he was wearing another pair of overalls on top of a gingham shirt. His head was topped by a different straw hat.

“It’s not my business to-” the Laundress began, but was cut off.

“I’m sure it’s not at all what you’d expect a modern philosopher to wear. You see, I realized while preparing for my trip that I couldn’t fully immerse myself in this environment in my usual clothes, I’d have to adopt a new costume entirely. I have some colleagues who sometimes put on productions of Shakespeare— he’s a famous playwright— and they explained that donning the appropriate regalia fully transforms them into the character they’re meant to be. So you see— my wardrobe reflects this simpler way of life.” He stood back, holding his arms up in a *voila* sort of gesture, displaying his simple way of life.

The Laundress nodded silently, hoping he’d let her get to the washing so she could get back on the train before dark. Mr. Dunst continued talking.

“It was the most ridiculous thing. When I went to get these made, my seamstress couldn’t understand why I’d want my clothes done in this particular way, saying ‘*They don’t make them like this now.*’” Mr. Dunst whipped around, waving his arms and taking on a high voice in his imitation. The Laundress took it as an opportunity to move over to the sink and start her washing.

“At first I thought she was remarking on the long-forgotten quality of this old fashion, but then I realized she was instead complaining at how my designs were ‘out of style’. And listen to what she said— ‘*They don’t make them like this.*’ Isn’t that horrible?”

The Laundress *hmm*’d in the moment of silence he gave for her response.

“She said it so casually too! *‘They’* As if she had already accepted *them* as an authority of life. Who are *they*, why do *they* decide what is made now and what is not! It horrified me so much I could hardly speak. It took hours of convincing to get her to fulfill my requests and only under the condition that I not wear it around the city, out of fear that her other clients would see and associate it with her label. Isn’t that dreadful? We’re so caged by the fears of modern life. Of course, you wouldn’t understand anything like that, I’m sure your local seamstresses aren’t swayed by the inanities of high fashion.”

“I wouldn’t know, sir. I get my family’s clothes from the big box stores,” the Laundress replied, scrubbing a wine stain from the scratchy white linen shirt.

“What did I tell you about calling me ‘sir’, now?” Mr. Dunst chided before letting out another chuckle. Like before, he punctuated his laugh with a snap of his suspenders and the Laundress was strangely relieved to see that he didn’t wince this time.

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If there was anything that the Laundress felt was truly unique to her home, it was the clock that hung on the wall of her kitchen above the pantry. The frame was carved into the shape of an apple by her uncle who once went to prison for holding up a corner store for a pint of prune juice and a thing of chewing tobacco. The wood was stained into a lovely deep red which caught the thin sliver of sunlight that poked over her neighbor’s building and through the kitchen window. The Laundress looked at that clock every day. Of course, the clock had stopped running ages ago, even before David was born.

As she made supper that night, she stared at that clock above the pantry and thought that if she mistakenly walked into her neighbor's apartment, she might know that she wasn't at home from the sound of a ticking clock.

After Michael had finished making love to her later that night, he rolled out of bed and shuffled over to the bathroom to take a piss. His Wife continued staring up at the ceiling. It was stucco textured, like every other apartment in her building. Her brother had worked in construction, and she knew that the stucco was added on top of smooth surfaces. She didn't know why they did it, though. She thought it was a shame to add that popcorn texture to formerly simple ceilings, since the jagged edges tended to collect dust and needed to be cleaned often.

*Why would anyone put active effort into making things needlessly complicated?* she thought. She looked at the tobacco stains and grime that was crammed into the pocks of texture. She sighed and rolled onto her side, pulling the covers tighter over her shoulder.

□ *Clean the ceiling*

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The ride to Point Park had been uneventful. In fact, every trip the Laundress had taken out to Mr. Dunst's estate since her first few months had been as such. She'd noticed it the sixth or seventh time that she'd made her way out there. As usual, she'd taken the travel sewing kit out of her purse and set about mending that week's load when a gust of wind rustled the Sears catalogue she'd been marking up earlier. A passenger several rows up had opened their window, letting the cool Autumn breeze sweep through the train car. At first, the Laundress had gone to fish her cardigan out of her bag, but something gave her pause. The air felt good against her skin, different from the box fan that sat

propped against her bedroom window frame. It felt silly to describe air as ‘light’ but it was true— that breeze was delicate and thin as it caressed her face, soft like her children’s hands. The wind back home was always heavy and rare between the bulky concrete buildings. The Laundress closed her eyes and sat back in her seat, savoring the fragrant breeze on her face. From that point on, the Laundress only worked while waiting for the train to arrive. The ride itself was a break from the noise, a time to sit and take in the light that never seemed to breach her dusty apartment windows.

“It’s such a shame.” Mr. Dunst paused, waiting for the Laundress to ask the question that he needed in order to continue. Unfortunately, she was preoccupied with measuring her bleach to detergent ratio and didn’t respond in time before he continued on unprompted. “It’s such a shame that so much of our life is spent working. We toil away all the daylight hours only to squander our evenings in the throes of material pleasure. It hardly leaves any time at all to actually consider the life we’re living, if you can call it that.”

“I hear you, sir,” the Laundress said. Perhaps her genuinely responding for once spurred on Mr. Dunst because he pushed further.

“I mean, why do you do this to yourself?” Mr. Dunst gestured to the bucket of wash in front of her. “Don’t you feel your time could be better spent away from your work? Wouldn’t it be nice to simply *exist*, free from all this?” The Laundress simply hummed in agreement this time. “Say!” Mr. Dunst exclaimed, grinning as if a brilliant idea had just hit him. “Why don’t you take a vacation?”

The Laundress paused. It had been years since she’d had a true vacation. Even in school she’d spent her summers helping out her mother with the work she’d eventually taken over. She considered

pointing out that taking a vacation from a job that only took one day of the month was hardly a holiday, especially considering the other clients she still had to serve. Besides, this job *was* something of a vacation for her.

Instead, she told him, “I appreciate the thought, sir, but I can’t afford to take time off from work at the moment.” It was the truth. David’s birthday was coming up and she’d taken on extra hours to save up for the cleats he’d asked for.

Mr. Dunst stayed quiet. The Laundress realized he might have taken it as rude, her turning down what she supposed was meant to be something of a charitable act.

“I do appreciate the offer, I’ll consider it and let you know next time,” she offered, knowing that by their next meeting he’d have forgotten the whole thing.

“Yes, please do. A bit of consideration never hurts.” Dunst replied, returning to his book.

On the ride home, a sharp baby’s cry startled the Laundress out of her usual calm. Her immediate thought was to jump up and soothe the baby, thinking it sounded so much like how Eric once sounded not too long ago. At realizing where she was, the Laundress sat back down, somewhat embarrassed, as the young mother soothed her child. In those days, she would’ve traded anything for a moment’s rest from the constant crying, but now on the train, she felt sad. Her boys were so grown now, and they rarely cried for nothing anymore. She closed her eyes and listened to the baby cry, thinking of the times she’d never realized she would grow to miss. By the time she’d gotten home and taken in the mess of her apartment, the very concept of a vacation had vanished from her mind.

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“It isn’t actually so silent, is it?” Mr. Dunst commented, running a hand through the scratchy beard that he’d grown out. The Laundress dunked a dinner knife in the soapy water and continued scrubbing at it. Though it wasn’t technically in her job description, Mr. Dunst had offered her time-and-a-half to wash his dishes in addition to his laundry.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“The countryside. It’s not actually very quiet at all, is it?” Mr. Dunst was seated at the window, as he usually was when she came by. It was tightly shut now to keep the bitter winter chill out, unlike the ones back home.

☐ *Call landlord to fix broken seal*

Mr. Dunst was still talking.

“There’s actually quite a bit of complexity out there. Much more than I had expected. The birds start chirping *well* before the sun rises and they never seem to stop. And when the sun *does* come up, it’s blinding! It’s nothing like the light in the city. Do you ever notice that? Sorry that was rude of me, of course not. But see, when I closed the blinds in my flat, nothing got through. Here, it doesn’t matter how tightly I shutter them, that damned light still gets in. I thought rural folk were supposed to sleep in, but I’ve never been so short on rest.”

The Laundress *had* noticed how haggard Mr. Dunst had been lately. She was tempted to question why he bothered staying at all, but she selfishly stayed silent. The Laundress had come to enjoy the peace that these monthly trips brought her. Before, her closest encounter with nature had been a class trip she’d taken in the second grade to a small national park nearby, but now she felt

comfortable in these woods, despite her company. She didn't want Mr. Dunst to leave along with her one slot of scheduled peace. She watched through the kitchen window as a pair of squirrels chased each other around the width of a tree. She thought of herself and Michael, once upon a time.

"Do you have any thoughts on this at all?" Mr. Dunst demanded, slamming his glass down on the coaster-less side table. The Laundress bristled at his tone, but she minded her tongue. "Of course not." Dunst knocked the glass over, watching the tea spill over the table edge.

The Laundress came over and sopped up the mess with a dishrag.

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She heard from Mrs. Sitwell on Tuesday a few weeks later: Mr. Dunst had decided to return to the city.

The Laundress had been bracing to hear it since their last meeting, but she found herself disappointed all the same. As she got on the bus that night, she watched the commuter train pulling out of the station across from her and wondered to herself if she'd ever ride it again. It wasn't until she noticed the droplets smearing the ink of her bus ticket that the Laundress realized she was crying.

*Silly*, she thought, *crying over a job*. It'd been years since she'd last cried, and the first thing to do it was some self-important client? Ridiculous. But she was still crying when she got home.

She pushed open the door and stood in the entryway, her vision clouded by the tears. The Laundress paused for a moment, letting the emotion run down her face, listening.

Silence.

She was at home.



Michael didn't remark on the fact that she'd been crying when he came home from the boys' baseball practice. Neither did David and Eric, but she found a stuffed animal placed on her bed when she turned in for the night.

"They saw you'd been crying earlier," Michael said, not looking up from the sports section.

"They care about you, yknow."

She sniffled, smiling softly at the well-worn bear.

"Thank you, Cuddles," she said.

It smiled softly back at her, its singular button-eye winking cordially.

□ *Fix up Cuddles' eye*

After finishing Mr. Warlowe's wash that next day, the Laundress got on the commuter train like she had every fourth Wednesday for the past year and a half. She took it past her usual stop and all the way to the county library. She weaved through the stacks of the Reference section and marveled at how remarkably dustless the shelves were, even the ones she doubted saw much action. Clearly somebody cared about these books.

Before leaving that morning, she'd called ahead to ask a question and the librarian had been very courteous, giving her the exact stack and shelf where she'd find her answer. Once she'd found it, the Laundress sat at a table with her book. She took out the notepad where she'd written down her To-Dos and flipped to a fresh page. For the next few hours, she sat in the library and pored over the book, jotting down notes as she read. Every once in a while, she'd look up and listen to the ticking of the ornate grandfather clock that was tucked into the fiction section. She'd watch the particles of dust dance down in the sunlight that streamed in through the big glass windows.

The next time she looked up, the grandfather clock was belching out six resounding tolls. The sunlight had long since fallen away from the windows and the little green lamps set into each table were turned on. The Laundress swept her notepad and pen into her purse, set the book on a nearby cart marked 'RETURN' and waved goodbye to the librarian as she left.

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"There's a man on the phone for you," Michael said when she returned. He held the handset out to her, the coil twisting across the kitchen counter like the lines that wiggled across his forehead as he frowned.

"Who is it?"

"He says he's a client of yours. A Richard Dunst. He also says he never realized you were married."

"He never asked," she replied pointedly, covering the receiver with her hand.

Michael *bmph*'d and returned to his armchair, which groaned in agreement.

"Hello? Mr. Dunst?"

"Hello there, I've been calling here for quite some time. I figured you wouldn't be busy since you'd normally be seeing me." His voice sounded strange on the phone. Younger, less sure of itself.

"I had to fill your timeslot, Mr. Dunst."

"Right. That makes sense." He paused for a moment. She listened to the crackling static of the line. "I suppose you're wondering why I'm calling you."

"Actually I'm wondering how you got my phone number, Mr. Dunst."

“You see I’ve- oh. I asked Ivy for your number and she conveniently had it stored in her Rolodex. What a ridiculous invention, the Rolodex. I believe that if there is a person worth calling then you should have their phone number committed to memory. We’ve become too dependent on technology, our society-”

“Is there something I can help you with, Mr. Dunst?” she asked, glad for the freedom to cut him off.

“Right. Well I’m calling you to explain why I left so suddenly. I realized I had never communicated the findings of my investigation and I thought you might be interested to hear.” He waited for her response this time.

The Laundress thought about it. She didn’t need him to tell her that he’d gotten tired of living in the countryside and wanted his glamorous city life back. Still, she figured she could humor him one more time.

“What did you discover, Mr. Dunst?”

He chirped enthusiastically at her prompt and began with his typical ‘*You see*’ before delving into a long-winded ramble. The Laundress tucked the phone into the crook of her shoulder and walked over to her bag as he spoke, pulling out the package she’d picked up from the hardware store on her way home. She worked as he talked, explaining the observations that he’d made while living at Point Park. At some point, Michael came in, carefully dodging her workstation on the counter as he heated up leftovers for supper. He gave her a look as he spooned the lasagna into bowls, but didn’t say anything, and she continued working.

“-so I’m thinking of compiling some selections from my journal and having it published. I’ve got some friends at a firm in the city that can get my foot in the door. Except I’m not sure it’ll be very popular.”

The Laundress nodded absently, still absorbed in her work, as she normally did at the end of his rants. When she realized that he wouldn’t see it, she said into the receiver:

“Why not, Mr. Dunst?”

“Well it’s not exactly a popular take, is it? I spent a year and a half in the wild, chasing after a simplicity that wasn’t there. So I know it personally when I say this: life has no meaning. We are simply here to drift aimlessly, to live without purpose. But they haven’t been through what I have. They may not get it, and if they do they certainly won’t like it; they hate anything but a happy ending.” He laughed that reedy little chuckle which sounded strange now without the snap of suspenders to finish it. “Needless to say, the Christians won’t be happy with this one.”

“I’m a Christian, Mr. Dunst.”

“Oh. Well then I won’t ask you to tell me what you think, since I already know.” He paused for a moment just as she gave the screwdriver a final twist. He asked, “Do you want to know something funny?”

“One second.”

She put the phone down for a moment to walk over to the pantry and hang up her handiwork. Then she picked up the handset again.

“What’s that, Mr. Dunst?”

“What’s what?”

“What’s the something funny that I wanted to know.”

“Right, yes. It’s that—say is your husband in the room?”

“No, Mr. Dunst.”

“Good. That’s good. See, yesterday I was feeling rather sad out of nowhere, and I couldn’t figure it out til just now, as I was calling you: I missed the Point Park estate. It had become a home to me, for a brief moment. And you were part of it.” He was silent, then.

“Thank you Mr. Dunst, that’s very kind of you. Now if you don’t mind, I’ve gotta go. My boys are expecting me to tuck them in.”

“Ah. Right. Well it was good talking to you, then. Maybe we’ll see each other again.”

“I doubt that, Mr. Dunst,” she paused, taking pity on him. “But maybe.”

“Maybe.”

The line clicked on the other end and she hung up the phone.

“So what did your client have to say? You all talked for a while, I already put the boys to bed.”

Michael called from the living room.

“Nothing much. He just wanted to talk about a theory of his, he’s a philosopher,” she explained. “He told me that life was meaningless.”

Michael nodded, watching his Wife slip into the boys’ room to kiss them goodnight.

“I get that, sometimes,” Michael said, flipping to another channel. “They’re playing reruns again.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” his Wife said as she softly closed the door, resting a hand on his shoulder as she swept past him again.

She stood in the kitchen then, staring up at the ticking clock. She smiled as the minute hand *tok*’d forward. If she wanted to know that she was home, she’d have to find a new way.

“You fix that clock?” Michael called to her after a few more minutes of uninterrupted ticking.

“Yup.” Flipping her notepad back to the list of To-Dos, she wrote down *‘Fix clock’* and crossed it off with a gratifying *swoosh* of her ballpoint pen.

“Well don’t forget to clean up afterwards. You left all your doo-dads laying around in there.”

She stared at the clock for another moment, then turned back to her list feeling very tired all of a sudden.

☐ *Clean up mess from clock*

“I’ll do it tomorrow morning.”

“Well do it before the boys get up. We don’t want them thinking it’s alright to leave a mess just laying about.”

She frowned and added *‘EARLY!’*

The Laundress looked at her list, seeing all the To-Dos that still had to be Done. She glanced up at the clock, which seemed quieter now.

*What a luxury it must be, she thought to herself, to live without purpose.*