

The Laundromat at 11:47 p.m.

The laundromat smells like heat and old detergent the moment the door swings shut behind me. Not the sharp, clean kind, but something heavier that settles in the back of the throat. Fluorescent lights buzz overhead, too bright for the hour, casting a pale shine over rows of machines that never seem to rest. The floor is damp near the entrance, tiles darkened where water has splashed and never fully dried. Outside, the street has gone quiet. Inside, everything hums.

The washers move first. Their steady rotation sets the pace of the room, metal drums turning behind scratched glass. Clothes press outward, then slide back down, trapped in a slow, endless loop. A sock sticks to the window of one machine, stretching and folding again with each spin. The sound is constant. A low churn layered with a rhythmic thud, like something breathing in its sleep. Every few seconds, a machine shudders slightly, as if reminding the room that it is still working.

Dryers answer with a different rhythm. They roar, then pause, then roar again, heat rolling out each time a door cracks open. Warm air spills onto my legs as I load my clothes, heavy and faintly sweet. The metal of the drum is hot against my fingers. I pull my hand back too quickly and shake it once, more out of habit than pain. Lint coats the rim, gray and soft, collecting no matter how often it's cleared away. The dryer door shuts with a hollow clang that echoes longer than expected.

People drift in and out without much ceremony. No one greets anyone else. A man in a paint-stained jacket folds clothes with quick, practiced movements, stacking them neatly before sliding them into a bag. A woman sits against the wall, scrolling on her phone, foot tapping against the base of her chair. Someone coughs from the back corner. A machine beeps, sharp and impatient, then falls silent when no one responds. Everyone seems absorbed in their own small task, sharing the space without acknowledging it.

The chairs along the wall feel temporary. Plastic seats, slightly warped, lined up beneath a bulletin board layered with torn flyers. Half the notices advertise services that no longer exist. The rest promise quick fixes to long-standing problems. I sit anyway. The chair creaks under my weight, then settles. The floor vibrates faintly through the soles of my shoes. It feels like the room never fully stops moving, even when nothing appears to change.

Time stretches strangely here. Minutes blur together, measured by cycles and soft alarms rather than clocks. I watch my dryer through the scratched window, waiting for the clothes to fall in the right way. They never do. The light inside flickers, then steadies. Heat fogs the glass for a moment before clearing again. Outside, a car passes, its headlights sweeping briefly across the window before disappearing.

The laundromat stays the same.

When the machine finally stops, the silence feels louder than the noise did. I open the door and reach inside. The clothes are hot and dry, edges stiff with warmth. Fabric slides against fabric as I pull everything out, the pile awkward in my arms. Folding feels slower now. Each movement requires attention. Sleeves twist. Corners refuse to line up. I smooth them anyway.

As I leave, the machines resume their rhythm behind me. The door swings closed. The smell lingers on my jacket. The street feels colder than before. I walk away knowing the room will keep going without me, lights buzzing, drums turning, waiting for the next person to step inside and pick up where it never stopped.