

Dirty Laundry
A short story by Grace Cancro

He was late. Again. Melanie paced the length the living room a few times, then walked two steps into the kitchen and stood for a moment staring at the shoebox sized space. The one-bedroom apartment that she shared with her husband of two years and three months was small but homey; there was a cushiony couch and an armchair on one side of the living room/dining room/kitchen combo, and a table big enough for two on the other. The old white appliances on the kitchen side of the main room worked well enough, although the freezer had quit working three days ago and when Melanie saw it in her peripheral vision, she made a mental note to call the landlord soon. That thought triggered one at the very front of Melanie's brain, and she pictured the basket of unfolded, clean clothes that had been sitting at the foot of the bed for nearly a week. She bit her lip to keep the frustration from spilling out just yet, tasting her new raspberry lip balm and a little blood.

Her paintings from over the years were hanging on every wall staring at her, taunting her, convincing her to go through with it and that it was the right thing to do. Melanie collected a full breath of lemon-scented air in her lungs, held it tightly for a moment, then let it go. She imagined the air floating around the room, filling the space with her breath and her molecules and her thoughts. Melanie put her shoulders back, turned with the resoluteness of a trained soldier, and walked four steps to the bedroom door, the practiced words of what she was going to say when he finally came home ricocheting violently off the walls of her brain.

Melanie sat on the bed and glanced around at the room straight out of an Ikea catalogue. She remembered putting all the furniture together when they had first moved in. Jack came home from work one day, early, with a bottle of cheap Chardonnay and a can-do attitude. They had

stayed up until 3am, drinking wine, listening to the top pop hits of their high school days, and badly attempting to understand Swedish. Their drunken laughter had turned into a queen-sized bed, two nightstands, and a small dresser, all of which were miraculously still intact. Melanie smiled a half-smile thinking about it. It felt weird, the smile, and she realized that she hadn't done that in a long time.

The sound of a key in the lock rang through the small space, then a dull thud of someone pushing hard on the old door which always stuck, then the creaking of the door opening. Jack walked through the door, and although Melanie couldn't see him, she knew exactly what he was doing. First, he would drop his keys in the dish by the front door *clink, there it was*, then he would hang up his coat and walk over to the kitchen *footsteps* where he would grab a beer from the fridge *creak and reminder to call the landlord, open it pop!*, then make his way to the bedroom *footsteps again*. The sounds of routine flooded Melanie's mind bringing back the frustration of the past year, the harsh music of it all bubbling up inside of her until she felt like she was going to explode. That's when Jack finally, finally, stood in the doorway of the second largest room in the tiny apartment.

Jack knew he was late, and he knew that Melanie would be upset. It seemed that the only thing he did these days was make her upset. He opened the door to the apartment building, then played with his keys for a second, staring at the stairs in front of him and trying to focus on the jingling instead of the shell of a wife that faced him when he finally opened that apartment door. Jack didn't know what had happened. They were so happy for so long, and then an earthquake split their relationship in two. He guessed that his job was part of it. And moving to Illinois was

part of it. And Melanie working from home now was probably part of it, too. But Jack was trying his best. He really was.

He climbed up two flights of stairs before reaching that dreaded door. Stuck his key in the lock, turned it, shoved his shoulder into the old door to persuade it to open causing a long-winded creak. Dropped his keys into the painted dish by the door that Melanie had made in a pottery class and walked through their art gallery of a living room/dining room/kitchen combo. He always loved looking at her art, although now a days it seemed to punch him in the gut, reminding him that they moved because of him. She had to give up her studio and her dream because of him. They were stuck in this unhappy place because of him. He grabbed a beer from the fridge, opened it, and walked towards the bedroom where he assumed Melanie was waiting.

The daggers coming from Melanie's eyes the minute he saw her were deadly and Jack felt their poisoned points inching closer to his heart.

"Why is this laundry still sitting here?" Melanie asked. She was standing with her arms crossed, her feet spread slightly apart, and her spine perfectly straight to give her added height and the intimidation of a linebacker.

"Honey, I told you, I've been busy. I haven't gotten to it yet. I'll get it done soon." Jack was looking at Melanie's mouth, just below the intensity of her eyes. Her lip balm was shiny, and he guessed it was where the faint raspberry smell was coming from.

"It's been five days, Jack! I need to use the basket for another load." The points of the daggers dulled slightly, as Melanie turned her gaze upward and Jack swore he saw the glisten of tears beginning to form.

"I've been—"

“Yes, you’ve been busy. You’re always busy.” The tears had arrived, and Melanie walked to the nightstand and grabbed a tissue. Jack saw her dab it lightly in the corners of her eyes, trying to catch the tears before they fell.

“Mel.” Jack made it to Melanie’s side in one stride, looking down at his wife who had lost her stance and shrunk back into her 5’4” frame. “What’s wrong?”

Suddenly the words that Melanie had rehearsed so many times, the perfect combination of nouns and verbs and prepositions, vanished from her brain. Stage fright took over and Melanie became a stumbling eight-year-old who won the starring role in the school play, who practiced and practiced, only to forget their lines when the lights came on and their dad was in the front row with the video camera; who forgot the right words once it really mattered.

Melanie stared at the drab grey carpeting under her feet and followed a tear that was released from her eyes and hit one of the pink daisies on her left sock. She thought back through the beginning of her day, with the paintings and the freezer and the laundry and the brief happy memory, then back further to two years prior when they first moved into the small apartment and Jack promised it would only be temporary while he saved money and looked for another job, then back to their wedding day with the scent of flowers and the aura of love and family and friends, then back to college graduation with smiles and future plans glowing brightly, then back the furthest to junior prom and climbing to the roof in a periwinkle dress and a rented tuxedo and talking for hours. And the thoughts kept coming and swirling up in Melanie’s brain making a poison concoction of sadness and frustration and disappointment until she couldn’t take it any longer.

She willed the thoughts to stop.

And looked up.

Into Jack's ever so familiar green eyes which were brimming with worry.

And with a steady voice she said—

“I can't do this anymore, Jack.”

The words traveled through Jack's ears to his brain where the sound waves were processed into something that Jack understood, but still he refused to believe it. Jack tried to formulate a response, tried to put the words together but found himself stumbling and tripping over the sounds coming out of his mouth.

“Melanie, Mel, how—what—I mean—,” Jack exhaled all the air in his lungs. “Why?”

“Because!” his wife said as she crossed between Jack and the bed to get to the other side of the room, resuming her linebacker stance but this time the presence of a steady stream of tears made her almost more intimidating than before. “Because I'm unhappy, Jack. Because you're unhappy. Because we live in this terrible apartment in this terrible town, and we weren't supposed to be here! Because we were supposed to travel, because we had plans! Because this was supposed to be temporary!”

Jack took a moment to breathe and to process the words his wife had said. He knew it had been bad. Knew that they had been unhappy. He hated to see her unhappy even more than he hated the job that had put them in this place. But he never thought it would come to this.

As he thought of something to say, his brain traveled back to college graduation day, almost three years before. The day played like a movie in his mind starting with a shot of graduation caps flying through the air. The caps faded into a vision of himself down on one knee

in front of Melanie asking that life-altering question, and her response, “Yes!”. Jack remembered that night they stayed up late sitting on the roof of Mel’s college house talking about plans to make and places to visit, just like their first night together years before. How they both had savings and could afford to take a gap year or two together, dipping a careful toe into the ocean of real life. They weren’t ready to dive in just yet.

Instead, Jack had gotten a job offer right after their wedding, a great offer at an accounting firm in the Midwest. He didn’t know then how miserable corporate life would be. Jack accepted the offer and made a careful swan dive into that vast expanse of reality, but he realized now that Melanie had been pushed into its depths, struggling to stay afloat for the past two years.

Jack’s eyes met Melanie’s, his green meeting her deep brown, and as he looked at her all he could think of to say was, “I know”.

Melanie heard this, the two simple words with more meaning behind them than she had ever heard before. This wasn’t what she was expecting; she was expecting to hear anger, hurt, something, anything. But instead, she saw understanding in Jack’s eyes, and as she really looked at him for the first time in a long time, she saw how broken her husband was. She saw how her unhappiness was hurting him just as much as his new job and the forceful move had hurt her. Her stomach sank with a feeling of regret at the words she had let explode from her mouth. She had caused an earthquake, maybe even bigger than the one caused by Jack’s job and their move. And now, she had to deal with the aftershocks. For the second time in a short while, Melanie was unable to speak.

“I want to fix this, Melanie, I really do,” she heard her husband say. “How do we fix this?”

Melanie knew deep down that they wouldn’t work as long as they stayed where they were. She knew that she couldn’t stay there much longer. She needed to escape. But all she said was, “I don’t know, Jack.”

As if he read her mind, her husband said, “We still have our savings from college, we can leave, we can get out of here. Let’s get out of here.”

“What about your job?”

“I hate my job.”

“What about the apartment?”

“We’ll get out of the lease.”

“Where would we go?”

“Everywhere.”

“Do you really think this would work, Jack?”

“I don’t know. But we can try.”

Two months passed.

Jack and Melanie made quick eye contact over the center console in their brand-new used Volvo station wagon and shared a smile. Melanie was the first to look away and back at the road, but not before she adjusted her oversized sunglasses in the rearview mirror. She held onto the wheel with enough freedom in her fingers to tap along to the beat of the Beach Boys song

playing from the cassette tape she had gotten years ago at her favorite vintage shop back home.

Like her fingers, she felt free. Jack hummed along next to her and gazed at his wife for an extra moment, then turned towards his open window and inhaled deeply, the salty air traveling through his nostrils to his brain and giving him that same previously unknown feeling.

Freedom.