

“You No Close Door Right”

By Allison A. Mosier

It was supposed to be a Spring Day, but the New York weather made it feel more like winter, boasting a blustering 40 degrees. My laundry bag, purchased by my Canadian roommate when I first moved to New York, had broken the week before. So, in I walked to the Kleener King with my large duffle bag suitcase, with the patches sewn on it from all the places I had performed in Europe. The Kleener King had 20 washing machines and 17 dryers. Above all the machines were signs politely requesting that the user kindly remove any bullets in his or her pockets before placing their pants in the machine. Only about half of the machines worked properly. The rest of them all had signs saying “Averiado...Mashene Brokin.”

At the Kleener King you had to get your quarters from an attendant. This attendant usually did not speak English, and was far more interested in doing laundry from the drop-off service, or watching her Spanish Soap Operas than she was in helping you. On this particular day, the attendant was a woman I had not yet seen before. She was about 35 years old, and had snacked on one too many of the chimichungas that were cluttering the counter. Her T-shirt barely covered the flab that garnished the waist of her sweatpants.

I had two loads of laundry to do, lights and darks. I loaded my lights into one machine and my darks into another. I put the correct amount of detergent, fabric softener, and quarters in, and I returned home. I had lived in Harlem for almost two years at this point, and except for an incident of stolen neon green Lycra panties when I first moved in, I had never had any problems with anyone stealing my laundry. And I figured if someone was desperate enough to steal a pair of used, neon green Lycra panties, then they obviously needed them more than me. I returned 20 minutes later, took my dark clothes out of the machine and placed them in the dryer. I opened the door to take the light clothes out only to discover that they were still dry. So, I went to the attendant and told her my plight. She rolled her eyes, muttered something in Spanish and then waddled over to my machine. She took one look at it then turned to me and said “You no close door right.”

Now I could have given her a long explanation about how I had closed the door correctly, and that I had just then opened the door to discover that my clothes were dry. But, given the language barrier and her complete lack of interest, I opted for the simple route and said, “Can you fix it?” Begrudgingly, she slammed the door shut, pried open the top of the machine, flipped some magic switch, and Voila! My clothes were on the path to cleanliness once again. I did a quick time check of my dark clothes in the dryer, and went home.

I returned, yet again 20 minutes later, added some more quarters to the dark load already in the dryer, and then I went to check on the lights. I started pulling the clothes out of the washing machine only to uncover that they were all covered in soapsuds. I reluctantly went to Lazy Laundry Woman and told her the predicament. Engrossed in conversation with another woman, she was less than thrilled to shuffle a mere ten feet to look at my machine.

LLW took once glance into the machine and said “Other machine flood into yours” then walked away. I stood there in my PJ bottoms and T-shirt slightly confused. Almost afraid of what the answer would be, I called out to LLW across the room “Well, what are you going to do about it?” By this point she had shuffled back to her own laundry and was showing way too much interest in folding it. She looked up from her basket and shrugged, then went back to her work as if nothing had happened. I bravely approached her side and asked if she could kindly supply me with more quarters, seeing as her machine had just ruined my clothes. She pretended to ignore me, then after seven “Excuse Me’s” on my part, she turned to me and said “You no close door right” and went back to work. I stood there baffled by what had just happened. Was this woman really going to stand there and pretend that she had no responsibility in fixing this problem? Was I completely out of hand asking to rewash my clothes that her machine had messed up? I tried again...”Excuse me, your machine just ruined my clothes, can you please reimburse me so I can wash them again?” “...You no close door right” she said again, this time not even bothering to look up from her pile of clothes. Now I knew that she wasn’t that dumb, and she was doing this more out of spite. But, nonetheless I tried reasoning with her. “No, I didn’t close the door right the first time. This time the machine flooded, you said it yourself. Now can you please reimburse me for the load?...Hello?...Excuse me!...Hello...Can you please reimburse me?” By this point she wouldn’t even recognize my presence.

Now, I am not one for causing a scene, but I had put up with lousy, racist customer service from this place for two years, and I was tired of backing down. So I tried a different approach. I figured if I stood directly over her, leaving her no personal space, she would have to acknowledge me. “Excuse me, excuse me...excuse me...” Still nothing. She dug further into her laundry basket and spoke in Spanish to the woman standing next to her. It seemed that nothing was going to pry her away from her precious laundry basket. “I should sit in her laundry basket, *that* would get her attention!” I thought to myself. Hey! Why not sit in her laundry basket? I did some quick mental calculations to assess whether or not I would be breaking any laws, and if there was someone there who could potentially kill me for sitting in a laundry basket... then I made the leap. I crossed around the large mass that was the Lazy Laundry Woman, swiveled the cart around and climbed in. LLW looked at me, yelled something in Spanish, then grabbed another cart nearby and started folding, as if nothing had happened.

While the other customers were busy pretending to be engrossed in their own laundry, I sat there in what I thought was the height of the most dramatic action I could take, and *still* LLW continued to ignore the problem. I could have taken the whole Eye for an Eye approach, and damaged something of hers, to repay for what she damaged of mine. But I figured that would just leave us with two messed up loads of laundry, my clothes would still be soapy and I would still be the one who ended up paying for the damage. So, I compromised. I did some minor damage to LLW’s clothes. I stuck my smelly and slightly dirty pair of Merrell covered feet into the other laundry basket from which she was folding. This got her attention. She started screaming at me, none of which I understood because it was all in Spanish. “What are you trying to tell me?” I answered back. More Spanish. “What are you trying to tell me? I don’t understand what you are saying.” She had miraculously forgotten what little bit of English she knew and was boldly waging war against me.

By this point, the rest of the room had forgotten any social pretenses and they were all watching the drama intently. I decided to invite them in on the action. “Can anyone here translate what she is trying to tell me?” I asked. There was a mixture of sympathetic laughter and murmurs throughout the room. “Does anyone here speak Spanish?” I asked innocently. More muffled laughter, and silently, I laughed too. After all, I was in the middle of Spanish Harlem. The woman standing next to me who had a front row seat to the battle timidly offered to help. I explained the entire situation to her, the first attempt at washing, the door, the second attempt, the soap. She conversed with Lazy Laundry Woman. More Spanish. Finally, Timid Woman spoke to me. “She said something about you not closing the door right.”

AHHHHHHHHH!!! I wanted to scream, but I chose to remain calm. I retold the story to Timid Woman *again*, emphasizing the second load, the soap, the flooding machine. Timid Woman spoke to LLW *again*, emphasizing the second load, the soap, the flooding machine. It was a battle of will, and I was wearing Lady Laundry Woman down! Justice never felt so good! “Go get clothes and put in machine,” she barked at me. Of course she wasn’t going down silently. I went and got the sad soap soaked clothes out of the machine. “Which one should I put them in?” I asked. She pointed at a nearby machine. “And you will rewash them?” She grunted what I interpreted as a yes, and I put my clothes in the new machine. I closed the door, LLW flipped the magic switch, and we were back in business!

My instincts told me to stay and guard my clothes as if my very life depended on it, but having had my fill of attention for the day, I decided to trust that they would be safe. I returned 20 minutes later, took them out of the washer and decided to skip the drying process. I gathered up the dark load from the dryer and headed home.

That following week, as I went to get dressed, I couldn’t find a majority of my sweaters. Apparently, after the battle had been fought, and I left my clothes to be rewash, someone (take a big guess) had stolen six of my sweaters from the dark load in the dryer. I was angry. I briefly contemplated a vicious revenge involving Jell-O. However, after much consideration, I decided to count my losses and took the same attitude that I had with the stolen neon green Lycra panties. If Lazy Laundry Woman was petty enough to steal my sweaters, then she obviously needed them more than me.