Griffon’s Laundrette

Roopa cocked her head to one side and propped her laden laundry basket on her hip. She pressed her free hand, palm flat against the glass door. A semi-circle of cheery yellow lettering feathered around her splayed fingers announcing the building’s name; *Griffon’s Laundrette.* She’d never noticed the name before.

The Laundrette was the beating heart of the community, where gossip was traded, disagreements aired, love sparked. It was where she’d met Aaron, where they’d laughed together over the old Italian man who refused to separate his wash despite his wife’s entreaties, dying her white bras varying shades of pink, blue, purple and grey. Where they’d talked late into the night about books and music and family and dreams and life. It was where they’d made the decision to move in together, where they’d had their first fight, and their second, and every one after that. It’s where she’d escaped to when the ‘stay home’ orders had come into place at the beginning of the accursed pandemic, where she’d come to cry when Aaron had lost his job, and again when her hours were cut. It was where she’d sought refuge when he’d spent endless nights on their sofa playing video games – a grown man pretending he was a marauding general in a fantasy world. It was where she’d come looking for solace and companionship when he’d moved back to Victoria, back into his parents’ home, to ‘work on himself’ because it was *me, Roops, not you* and he needed ‘space to reassess what he wanted from his life’. His parents had never approved of her, she’d been neither acceptably white, nor obediently Oriental enough for them.

Palm still pressed against the glass, Roopa wondered which of the town’s misfits she’d find inside, what secrets lay hidden amongst the whirling fabrics in the bellies of the chugging, rattling machines.

Heat and irritation bloomed up the length of her neck; the thousand small annoyances of her geriatric house that needed constant care and maintenance, her stalling career, her romantic failings. Then there was Gary, the new hire in her office that talked over her and claimed her ideas as his own. Gary who wore shirts one size too small, who winked and clicked his tongue at her before bellowing an aggressively overfriendly *‘morning, Roopa* and asking her to check his calendar like she was his secretary. There was the endless parade of opinionated, overfamiliar men that cropped up on her Tinder profile, the ones who sent unsolicited dick pics in lieu of an actual message, the ones who matched then ghosted her. Peppered amongst that were her mother’s pleadingly hopeful weekly phone calls *just to see how you’re doing* and *are you seeing anyone at the moment* and *there’s a very nice single man working at the Post Office I think you’d like* and *your younger cousin is getting married next month* and *everyone keeps asking when you are getting married*.

She ran her hand over her face, readjusted the basket and pushed open the door. Humidity and the chattering calls of loads of tumbling laundry at different points in their cycles swallowed her.

‘Roops!’ Jack flung his arms out wide, his long khaki coat spreading to reveal filthy jeans and a garish green and yellow paisley shirt, several sizes too big for his narrow frame, charred in various spots as if an insouciant dragon had spat at him in passing. Jack was alone with the industrial washing machines and dryers. Roopa was relieved. Jack was chatty, but harmless, and good at reading when she wanted to be left alone. She really couldn’t face forced politeness with random strangers today.

‘Mate. I was hoping I’d see ya today. I’ve got something for ya.’ He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his coat, fumbling determinedly around.

Roopa found an unoccupied washing machine and dropped her basket next to it. She squatted and rummaged through the basket for her small batik coin purse, and the laundry pods.

‘Hey, Jack. How’s it going? What’s with the burnt shirt? And the coat in this heat? Is that a new fashion trend? You look good, though—healthy. You been taking care of yourself?’ she shot the questions out rapid-fire without looking up.

The last time she saw him was a few weeks ago. He’d been more strung out, thinner, ravaged looking. Now he looked more confident, more powerful. She heard he got clean. She hoped it was true, but the burnt shirt signalled he was in trouble again – maybe an irate buyer looking for revenge had caught up with him, maybe a seller had caught him undercutting prices or skimming some of the profits for himself. Still, he wasn’t looking as pale and sallow as last time, and the bags under his eyes were gone. He was glowing.

She found her purse and the laundry pods and started sorting her washing into the machine.

‘Whites and lights first, ay? Then the colours, right?’ Jack fished in his pockets, watching Roopa collate her clothes. ‘You sure ya don’t have a little OCD? Most people don’t care.’

‘Yup,’ she said dropping in the laundry pods and turning the dial to a hot wash. ‘No OCD. I just don’t want my white shirts to end up tie-dyed, ya know?’

She fed coins into the machine and turned it on. She fished her phone out of her back pocket, stretched her spine, and leaned back against the agitating machine. It was a little like being in an un-cushioned massage chair—not as comfortable as the ones at the mall, but still a relief for her aching lower back.

‘Where’ve you been, Jack? I’ve missed you the last couple of weeks. Heard you’d gone up north.’ She flicked through apps on her phone, pausing occasionally to check status updates and hashtags, her brows knitting at the picture-perfect facades that hid messy, imperfect lives.

Jack’s hands stilled inside his coat pockets.

‘Yeah,’ he said, shifting his weight from leg to leg. ‘That’s right. Up north. Yeah.’ He looked around as if he was expecting someone or something behind him, as if he was expecting to be ambushed.

Roopa noticed the change in his tone and stopped her scrolling. ‘You okay, Jack?’

In one stride he covered the distance between them, grabbed her arm at the elbow, and leaned towards her ear.

‘I’ve got to show you. You can’t tell nobody,’ he hissed.

‘What the hell, Jack. You’re hurting me.’ Roopa tried to tug her arm out of his vice grip.

‘Roops. You gotta listen. Look at this.’ Jack pulled his other hand out of his pocket and held it in front of her. He opened his fingers one after the other like petals of a blooming lotus to reveal a glowing blue crystal about the size of a dollar coin, blinking like a beacon in the centre of his palm.

‘What the hell’s that? Where’d you get it?’ Roopa felt the crystal tug at her. She cupped Jack’s hand from underneath with her left hand and stretched the index finger of her right hand towards it, curling her remaining fingers into her palm. She couldn’t help herself.

As soon as she touched the stone it changed colour to magenta. ‘Woah. Why’s it doing that, Jack?’

Jack shook his head. ‘I dunno, Roops. I dunno. It’s only ever been blue for me.’

Roopa pulled her finger back before she made contact. ‘Does it hurt? Is it hot? Or cold? Where’d you get it, Jack? What is it?’

Jack released her elbow, grabbed her wrist and pulled her back to the stone. ‘Y-you gotta take it, Roops. I can’t have it no more.’

‘What? Why? Jack. Talk to me. Where’d you get this? What is it?’ Roopa couldn’t tear her eyes away from the stone. Its rhythmic glowing was mesmerising.

Jack turned her hand palm-up, and eased the stone carefully into it.

As soon as the stone touched her hand, a high-pitched shriek rent the air. Roopa was curious, but not afraid. There was power in the sound, and something else. Euphoria. Roopa felt like she’d just dropped a tab. Her skin warmed, her heart pumped faster, she had a sudden burst of energy exactly like that time Suze had convinced her to take ecstasy in the dodgy ladies’ room of an even dodgier nightclub.

As soon as the stone left his hand, Jack’s shoulders slumped. He looked suddenly weary, as if he hadn’t slept for days. All his energy and joviality evaporated. He looked sunken, hollow.

‘I’m sorry, Roops.’ His voice was a hoarse whisper. Eyes downcast, he shook his head. ‘I’m really sorry. I didn’t know what else to do.’

Jack hugged her roughly, with a sense of desperation. Then he stepped back, held her at arm’s length and, for the time it took her heart to beat twice, he watched her. The air stilled, noise faded; it was just the two of them, uninterrupted. Without a word he released her, turned on his heels and scurried out of the door as if there was something behind her that terrified him.

In her palm, the stone had stopped blinking and glowed a solid magenta.

Roopa felt calmness descend on her, as if she wouldn’t be worried or afraid again. Nipping at the heels of the calm came a rush of power—as if she was invincible, immune to even death itself. Then the first inklings of anger pricked her heart. She thought of Aaron, of Gary the new guy, of the cavalcade of inadequate Tinder dates, of her mother’s unsubtle cajoling. Fury coursed through her veins.

Heat radiated through her limbs, her chest, her head. Roopa’s legs ached, as if her muscles were expanding, stretching her skin too taut and thin. She felt hair sprouting and thickening across her calves and thighs. Her toenails stretched over the edge of her toes, the edge of her sandals, hardened and dug into the concrete floor like claws. Her vision became sharper, clearer, took in more of the room. Her eyes felt like they were drifting apart, separating from her nose like shifting tectonic plates. *But that was ridiculous*. There was a soft swishing behind her and something long and snake-like brushed the hair on her legs. She heard the shriek again. Again, she wasn’t afraid, only curious.

Her nose interrupted her vision in the way that noses sometimes do when they’re especially shiny or when there’s a protruding pimple. It grew longer, harder. It curled to a sharp point. *But that was absurd*.

A searing pain ripped through her shoulder blades. She doubled over, hands on her knees, eyes cinched closed, panting through it. Just as it abated, another bolt of pain tore up her spine, jerking her body rigid and straight. She heard the shriek again—closer this time, and louder. Whatever was screeching was also in pain. She felt a weight on her back, like a large bird of prey had sunk its talons into her and was pushing and pulling her shoulder blades. The air around her roiled, inky feathers flew in every direction. Her shirt hung, shredded, from her shoulders revealing her one clean sports bra.

Another shriek echoed through the laundromat, bouncing off the machines, accompanied this time by a loud flapping. She felt her feet lift off the ground, felt herself rise into the air. She caught a glimpse of herself in the full-length mirror on the far wall. Wings, inky black, shimmering under the fluorescent lights, loomed high above her head behind her. A beak, sharper than her uncle’s statuesque nose, curved from the middle of her face. Her legs had thickened, become muscular, covered in a thick coat of hair and ending in padded paws and razor-sharp claws. And a tail, rope thick and heavy, ending in a tuft of fur, swished curtly back and forth.

She turned her head—first over her right shoulder, then her left—to get a proper look. She admired the feathers of her wings as they flapped back and forth, pulsing like polished onyx. She examined her beak, the gold nose stud still glimmering on her left nostril, and nodded in appreciation. *That was going to do some damage*. Her legs would take getting used to, but she’d never much liked her legs before. The tail though. That was a definite plus, it made her bum look fuller and tighter. *This wasn’t so bad*.

She flapped her wings, first hard and fast, then slow and soft. She lifted further off the ground, then gently drifted back down. She tested her tail for balance, and tried holding it in different positions. She revelled in the changes and threw her head back to let out a raucous laugh.

Shrieking reverberated off the walls. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror again and saw her beak drop open in time with the sound. The shrieking had come from her. She tried it with purpose, tentatively dropping open her beak. A softer cooing call came out. She experimented with different calls at different pitches and volumes. She flapped her wings in time with her calls, and she kept them still. She tweeted and twittered and cheeped. She clucked and cawed and chirped. And she shrieked, louder and longer than she had before.

When she’d thoroughly explored her vocal repertoire, she gave a curt little nod of satisfaction, folded her wings close to her body, curled her tail up the length of her back, and strutted out of the laundromat door. Someone else could deal with her washing.

At the end of the street, she turned left towards home. She had addresses to check, flight paths to map out and vengeance to wreak.