

The crush.

Codell's mother had forgotten the Tide. But on the floor of the laundromat, she found some left-behind laundry detergent. They were nuggets of gold when you didn't have money for soap from the vending machine, enough to get a load started.

Not far from Codell and his mother, a woman in tight jeans and a loose low-cut top folded clothes. "What are you staring at, boy?" spat Codell's mother. Codell blushed.

"What ridiculous eyelashes," she sniffed, glowering at the woman in the jeans. "Spindly legs." She shook her head disapprovingly. "She took a eggbeater to her hair." The woman flicked her hair with the back of her hand the way you'd shoo a fly.

His mother started a load of clothes and left to fetch her Tide, leaving Codell to safeguard their laundry. Over the rumbling washers and dryers, a transistor radio played the Temptations' "I Can't Get Next to You:" *the things I want to do the most / I'm unable to do . . .*

A loud clang sounded from just outside, startling everyone. The woman in the low-cut top swiveled to look outside, knocking her stack of clothes to the linoleum. She frowned and bent low to pick them up.

Something quickened inside of Codell. He quickly stepped toward her and gathered up her laundry. "Why, thank you!" said the woman. For no reason that Codell could name, he stepped close to her, tongue-tied, feeling warm. She was so close, he thought she could hear his heart pounding, that she could feel the clamminess of his

hands, that she could smell some kind of aroma he exuded. But she did not move away from him. "How nice of you to help me."

"You're welcome." It was reflexive, what his mother had taught him to say, and it was all that he could say, not knowing what else to say. She dipped her chin towards him, eyes smiling. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Codell." He yearned for her to take him seriously.

The washing machines groaned. "COD - el? Like the fish?" She leaned in to him.

"Co-DELL, like co-operate."

"How old are you, Codell?"

"My birthday was last week." His voice was flat.

"Happy Birthday!" She clapped her hands. "What toys did you get?"

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Codell, lugging the clothes basket, and his mother walked home, his would-be manliness washed away with the Tide. He couldn't understand. Her words replayed in his head, "*What toys did you get?*" It came from her heart, or whatever organ occupied that place within her.

"You need to start using deodorant," said his mother. "I can smell you from here."

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