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The Mat

A steady stream of Saturday afternoon traffic sped along in opposing directions on Anaheim Street in Long Beach, California, mostly ignoring the alcoves of small businesses on each new block. Clouds hampered the sun's contribution to the day as it shone down on one of these miniature worlds at the corner of Anaheim and Redondo Avenue, bringing just enough warmth – if not optimal brilliance – to comfort those checking items off their weekend errands. A proud laundromat sat nestled here between a massage parlor and JJ Chinese Express, hidden from street view by an adjacent El Pollo Loco; henceforth referred to as “the mat,” it could hardly be called humble with its large, blocky, red sign above the arched entryway that read, “LAUNDROMAT,” in all caps; however, the atmosphere within works hard to redeem the exterior's brash welcome.

Those in the know pull around back to park their vehicles in a less claustrophobic setting, though the occupied spots rarely reflect patrons of the establishment while apartment complexes in the city starve their tenants of such luxuries. The path to the back entrance proceeds across the lot pavement, up onto a cement stoop with accompanying railing, and through the doorway into a mellow, naturally-lit sanctuary for the washer-less and dryer-less.

Expectedly, only a few entities navigate the three corridors between the accompanying columns of washers and dryers that stretch to the front of the room. Journey's “Separate Ways” provides the momentary soundtrack over the dull whirring and swishing of washers in use. The place is clean, well-maintained, and the sunlight reflects off the polished chrome doors of the stainless-steel Dexter front-loaders which line each side of the aisle leading up the middle of the mat.

Top and bottom dryers constitute most of the far-right wall, facing an accompanying folding area that customers migrate towards when their work is nearly done. A collection of 15 or so different communal detergents sit perched on a counter space above the top-load washers on the other side of the mat from the dryer wall; a Coca-Cola and snack machine sit against the same wall, and two more sit against the back wall next to an office door with a placard on it that reads, "Private Use." Rolling rack-baskets congregate towards the back entrance, when they're not in use, across from an ATM and black, leather massage chair that sit in the corner on the other side of the entryway. A small TV is mounted above the ATM near the ceiling.

An elderly woman in a white cap; puffy, orange coat; and black Ugg-like boots navigates her wire laundry cart up and down the aisles while mumbling unintelligibly into her black earbuds; they are presumably plugged into a phone. She seems to almost be moving to the rhythm of Alanis Morissette when "You Oughta Know" comes over the speakers. A father and son – judging by their age difference and similar appearance – diligently hang their shirts on one of the rolling rack-baskets by the dryers near the front entrance, seemingly bantering about technique throughout the procedure. Time passes and more people begin to drift in to either start a wash or pick up from their last laundry checkpoint. A mom and her young daughter embrace between loads of folding while The Outfield's "Your Love" plays, enjoying a moment that will be frozen in time and possibly forgotten in the future. There was love and security there, for sure, among the various stories and lives intersecting that afternoon in the mat.

Horns honk outside occasionally, a sign of a momentary traffic jam outside the El Pollo Loco. Buttons and zippers lightly clang against the metal innards of the driers, creating an uneven rhythm against the backdrop of toil occurring all around. The customers go through stages: patience is replaced by a shift into action when clothes need to be moved, added or

renegotiated between the stations of washing and drying. Some sit by themselves, contemplating any number of things; some enjoy camaraderie among others. Many languages and dialects fill the space, to be sure, melding in concert with the constant addition of radio tunes, of course.

Certain personalities thrive in the laundromat ethos. Others don't, but the landscape is surprising. Individuals who had been sitting and standing vigilantly by their washers and dryers, while their clothes agitated within, suddenly come together and join in conversation, almost as natural as covalent bonds. A lady in a purple shirt, black spandex shorts, and white tennis shoes with silver accents is one such specimen. Her dark, brown hair is probably colored based on the concentration of the hue in relation to her age and wrinkles; and she has a purse with floral print on it slung across her chest, linked by golden chains to a black strap. Her friend wears blue jeans and sandals; a dark-blue V-neck shirt; and has curly, brown hair with highlights that's put up into a ponytail. They talk next to the front door of the mat while folding their respective garments as a cool breeze continues to blow through the opening, like it presumably has since the doors first opened.

Others move through the space with all the subtlety of a locomotive, banging on machines to dislodge change, asserting themselves over their cellphones, and addressing fellow customers with oblivious authenticity. A pregnant lady in brown sandals with dual buckle-straps, dark-grey leggings, a dark-blue tank top, and glasses is one such example. Navigating work and one's personal life over the phone, all while doing laundry in a public place, can be tricky business. "... They're pissing me off; just go get the fucking pallet and load it up! ... At my mom's, I'll need your help. I bought a bunch of fruit that needs to be washed and cut up. I want to be at the park early because it will take about an hour to decorate." This conversation took place at a decibel level that showed little consideration for anyone else's peace of mind.

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Journey sounds over the speakers once again as another round of fresh faces makes their way inside to begin the business at hand. A little later in the day, the shadows cast their lot over the room at different angles and the breeze feels just a little colder. The back entrance remains the easiest avenue of escape; an old man in blue jeans, a brown leather jacket, and a black cap covering up grey hair that slips out from underneath the bill gestures to the cement stoop and asks, "Anyone sitting here?" Sit there, old-timer; it's a free country.