

# My Beautiful Launderette

One of my favourite smells is the warm, clean scent of detergent wafting out of a launderette, out onto a city street.

Until recently, my experience of these places was largely limited to stopping outside them, sniffing appreciatively and then walking on. Any notion of the inner workings was purely romantic and based on an old Levi's ad, in which a beautiful young man strides in, strips down to his boxers and then tosses his 501s into a machine, along with a handful of pebbles.

At university—when most of us are forced, for the first time, to get to grips with our dirty clothes instead of waiting for the live-in laundress (aka “mom”) to do it—I lucked out. My brother and I, as foreign students, were assigned a host mother who, most weekends, whisked us out to her home in the woods, plied us with food and insisted on doing our washing.

In a more exciting story, the twist would be that she was actually a witch, fattening us up so she could put us in a pie; with the laundry just a ruse to lull us into a false sense of security.

Alas, I'm afraid she was simply a nice woman whose one peculiarity was that she enjoyed doing other people's washing (although the pie option must have seemed tempting on some of those smelly Sundays).

Once I got married, there was no way to avoid laundry duty. Yet still, I avoided the launderette. On weekends, I would jam my dirty washing into my bike basket and zip to my parents' Warwick Laundromat was five minutes away, but I'd have to pay to use their machines. Not to mention the fact that an acquaintance of ours was conducting a passionate affair with one of the attendants, consummated—according to the grapevine—on an ironing board. I've always hated ironing, so good on them for coming up with an alternative use for the damn things. Nonetheless, it was off-putting.

With children came a laundry of my own. I did have to visit the launderette, occasionally; but only when there was some sort of unpleasantness involving animals and duvets.

And then, we moved into a flat in London. The apartment has an ancient washer-dryer: fine if your load consists of three pairs of smalls and a hanky. For anything bigger, it's off to the laundromat, four doors down.

I'm sorry to report that—stop the presses—my launderette is nothing like the one in the Levi's ad. There are no beautiful young men stonewashing their jeans in their undercrackers, or doing anything else for that matter.

Instead, there are spindly old men, transporting their laundry in two-wheeled trollies. And gnarly geezers of indeterminate age, dragging duffle bags full of brown towels from the nearby B&Bs. I would gladly sacrifice my last pound coin if they would all promise to keep their trousers on.

Even if Nick Kamen, the original Levi's hunk, did turn up (no doubt a member of the trolley brigade these days), he'd be out of luck. All the machines carry a sign warning of dire consequences for anyone

who tries to slip a bath mat or, God forbid, a rug, into the wash. Imagine the fate of the fool who threw a bunch of stones into the drum.

The Large Laundress who lurks in the back office and dispenses change along with unhelpful advice (“Oh, I meant to say...that one is broken!”) would no doubt give him ten minutes on high in the nearest front-loader.

But rather to my surprise, I like the launderette. Not just the smell, but the fact that—crazy as it sounds—it's never dull.

Two weeks ago, having pitched up at 8 a.m. to find the joint deserted, save LL in her lair and a few tumbleweeds, I returned to discover what appeared to be a flash mob gathering inside. Despite having set the egg timer in the flat, my wash was still eight minutes away from completion (one of the great mysteries of the launderette is that a minute here is like no other on the face of the earth; save perhaps on the Circle Line).

A portly man was parked in front of my machine—the coveted whopper that takes 25 kg, not including mats, rugs or pebbles. And when I made to leave (there are many chores which can be done in eight launderette minutes, let me tell you), announced loudly that he would remove my laundry himself if I was late.

The flash mob looked uncomfortable, shuffling their feet and avoiding eye contact.

I was more concerned by the fact that only one dryer was free. But even as I watched, a Russian woman, already monopolising another machine, proceeded to remove a damp tea towel from that load and pop it into the empty drum; like a tourist reserving a sun lounger.

This was clearly too much for the mob, who began muttering their disapproval. The woman smirked and jammed her headphones in.

And then a dapper old gent approached me and said loudly, “I've got two minutes left—you can have mine.” The mob relaxed. Me too (it would have taken a week to finish that lot off in my poor old washer-dryer). Even LL looked pleased. Life's rich pageant: it's all there, at the launderette.



# All Things Bright and Bee-utiful

SO, WHAT DID YOU DO in your summer holidays?

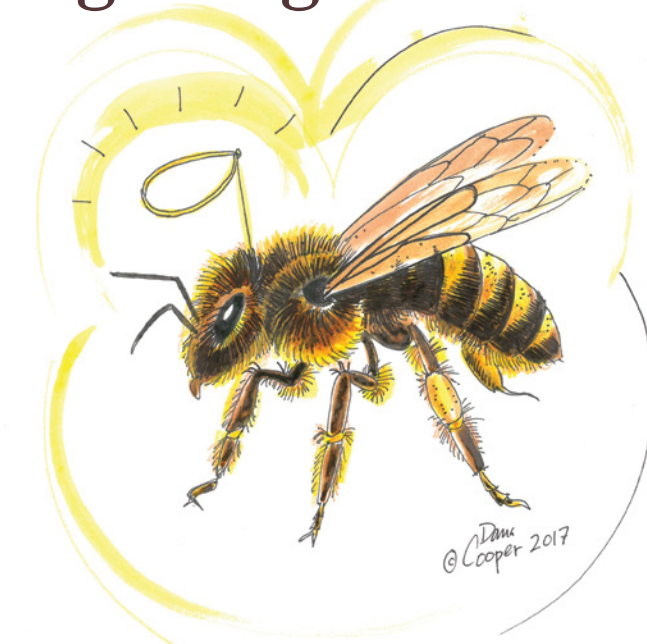
I rescued 217 bees. I was going to add “from a fate worse than death” but actually, no: just from death. Which seems bad enough, really; considering all the problems the poor things are facing these days.

I saved them in Britain. From my mother-in-law’s pool, where dozens ditched after their internal GPS’s went on the fritz (“Turn around where possible!”), and where they faced either drowning or poaching, given that the water temperature is now set at 30 degrees centigrade. Presumably so the elderly swimmers (I include myself here) can imagine that they are doing laps in their bathtub.

I’ve rescued them from my conservatory which, since an enormous spider took up residence in the rafters, has turned into Shelob’s Lair from the *Lord of the Rings* (“She’s always hungry!”). Not helped by the fact that we still have a Hurt No Living Thing rule in place in this house, which forbids the hoovering up even of ravenous eight-legged monsters.

Most of Shelob’s victims are beyond saving by the time I get to them. But I did manage to free one which, after ten minutes of surgery with a Q-tip and the turkey tweezers, was able to fly away home. The spider watched, trembling with rage, on her high wire.

I’ve been forced to hang a beaded curtain over the garden door. The “beads” look suspiciously like a load of old phalanges, and rattle in a creepy “dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones” way every time anyone passes through them. But they do at least allow some breeze in, and keep some bees out.



I’ve been doing my bit in Bermuda, too. Plucking insects from the glassy surface of Harrington Sound when out kayaking, sliding the paddle under them like a spatula under a spinning fritter. Lifting them onto the nose of the boat; letting them dry out in the sun.

My father is an entomologist, who did his Master’s and PhD work on honeybees—although he has now sadly become allergic to their sting. Growing up in a house littered with specimens in pill phials, and flasks of fruit fly bait maturing in the fridge, meant I was never likely to be squeamish about bugs. But I wasn’t all that fussed, either.

A real life bee-in-the-bonnet episode, when I was writing a feature on a local beekeeper for the *Gazette*, did nothing to add to my ardour.

He (I can’t remember his name so I will just call him Mr. B. Keeper) was checking the hives. I was standing as far away as decently possible—hiding, in other words—scribbling in my notebook and watching him move

ponderously through the clouds of smoke in his full get-up, like Neil Armstrong on the moon. One small step for man, one giant leap for bee kind.

Suddenly a lone worker, heading back to the hive, flew up under my protective headgear and got stuck in my hair.

I was hoping Mr. Keeper might have some helpful advice at this point. “Stay calm. Keep still. No sudden movements.” That kind of thing. Instead, I got: “Kill it! Kill it quickly!! Before it kills you!!!”

Unfortunately for both of us—and by us I mean me and the bee—it stung me. Painful in my case; fatal in hers.

It wasn’t really till I left home, and got a garden of my own, that my interest in bees began to become serious. It was the humble bumble wot did it.

I loved their happy pootering, the way they zigzagged from blossom to blossom. I loved the noise they made—a sort of contented droning. I loved the fact that they could achieve lift-off at all, given that they are built along the lines

of a winged hippopotamus.

I started planting pollinator-friendly plants (selected, at the garden centre, on the basis of which pots were attracting the most bees).

Nemesias and salvias. Buddleias. All the “ias”! Scabious (such a horrid name for such a pretty plant). Lavender and cranesbill.

Plenty of purple—which is lucky, since that happens to be my favourite colour, too; as well as the bees’.

At one point we had a nest, under the roots of a rose bush. But my constant lifting of the dead leaves around it with a broom handle, so I could share my excitement with friends and family—“See! There it is!” as a dazed and grumpy queen crawled out of her hole in the ground (“What time do you call this?!”)—eventually drove them away.

After that, I thought about making a nest for them myself. According to the Gardener’s World website, it’s a doddle. All you need is an old flowerpot, a bit of slate, some chicken wire and a length of garden hose. Oh, and some dry bedding material. “Ideally an old mouse nest.” Wait. What was that last thing?

My mother, as ever, was left to provide the voice of reason: pointing out that as wonderful as it would be to establish an Airbnb for bumbles—an Airbnbee!—I might want to think about the less wondrous possibility of my father going into anaphylactic shock, should one of my guests happen to sting him. And so I am left to admire them when they visit; and save as many as I can. International Bee Rescue. That’s me.

# Not the Office Christmas Party

I WATCHED a trailer for a film called *Office Christmas Party* last year when I was back on the island visiting my family. I remember it well. First, because it looked like a pretty grown-up movie: two men were sliding across the floor on their bellies as their colleagues formed a Soul Train-style guard of honour and cheered them on; a young woman was photocopying her bottom; and a reindeer was drinking from a toilet. And second, because it seemed inappropriate, given that the feature film I was waiting to see at the Speciality Cinema—with my nephews aged nine and eleven—was JK Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them*. I don't know about you, but my work parties are never like this. It saddens me that, at nearly 60, I have not once ducked into the Ladies to avoid the boss at the Christmas wingding and surprised a reindeer refreshing himself from the toilet bowl. Perhaps I've been working for the wrong people. Or maybe I'm the one who's gone a bit wrong. Why is it that the prospect of going to some swish joint, where there will be lashings of free food and gallons of free drink and my colleagues letting down their hair—and possibly their trews—makes me want to cry No, No, No! and not Ho, Ho, Ho.

Wait, what was that last thing again? Years ago, I thought I had cracked the Christmas party dilemma (namely: you must go, but you would rather infect yourself with norovirus than attend). I would turn up late...after a press performance. Of *Hamlet*. The good part of this plan was that it eliminated three hours of my ordeal (unless you count the *Hamlet*: a modern-day version set in a prison for the criminally insane). The bad part was that by the time I arrived, everyone else was so pie-eyed that nobody noticed I was there. Can I get a witness? No you can't! I might as well just have stayed at home and had an early night. After that, I tried to get myself into the spirit of things by organising a party-within-a-party: the undercard, if you will, before the



main event—ding, ding! Attendance strictly limited to other natural born party poopers. The pre-match warm-up offered us a chance to have a catch-up before the din of the disco, to line our stomachs (“because they never have enough food” as one colleague noted sadly) and acquire some vital Dutch courage before the party proper. And it worked.

Over the years, we've been to some splendid places for our sharpeners. Like celebrity hangout the Wolseley, where we were politely informed that the bar was just for those who had booked a table for supper but, what the heck, it's Christmas. Get on in there. And the American Bar at The Savoy, where the only problem is making sure you don't get so squiffy you accidentally order a vintage manhattan instead of the regular model: a slip of the tongue which will cost you £100. Finally, last year, after weeks of nagging from a persuasive friend, I found myself agreeing to host my own little Christmas do. Possibly to punish this

friend, I decided to use my allocation of funds from the managing editor's office to take myself and the other poopers to Gordon's Wine Bar—London's oldest wine bar and, coincidentally, its dampest.

Gordon's is located in Victorian Cellars, a short stagger up the hill from Embankment tube station. Despite having scurried past it hundreds of times on my way to the theatre, I'd never set foot in the place before. But the wine list was impressive—and reasonable. And my children were big fans (which should have been my first inkling of trouble). And so, ignoring the misgivings of my friend, who was hoping for something more elegant (a table at the Ritz), I chose instead to book a table in the Cage, Gordon's largest private room. Ah, the Cage. Why the funny name, you may ask? Well maybe because it looks exactly like a cage. Rusty iron bars fencing off a low-ceilinged hole in the wall; with shadows so deep and dark at the back they may well have been concealing the remains of wassailers from Gordon's first Christmas party, back in 1890. My friend—the one who'd hankered for the Ritz—lowered herself gingerly onto her rickety chair, and even by the light of flickering candles (could they be tallow? There was a faint whiff of mutton) I could see the moue of distaste. A large drop of what I hoped was condensation plopped onto her head. No wonder that wine list was so reasonable. Bah, humbug—another Christmas disaster, I thought. But then I had a second thought: not on my watch. And so I fought my way through the hordes of tourists and impecunious students to the bar. And I purchased several bottles of Gordon's finest champagne (Castelnaud Brut Reserve: “one of the rare champagnes, as it is made by a woman!”). And some chorizo. And cheese. And crusty bread. And in a little while, nobody cared that “toilet water” as my friend put it (and I don't think she meant eau de toilette) was falling on our heads. Ho, ho, ho everybody!