Sad-Iron, Glad-Iron

*Woman Ironing*, Edgar Degas. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
I kneel beneath the ironing board, a linen tablecloth draped to the floor, my mother’s house-slippered feet the only evidence that this is not a beautiful dream, this moment of white, domestic enclosure. I hear the spritz of the Niagara spray can, smell its starchy fragrance. Now a tiny huff of steam. A sizzle too quiet to be a sizzle, but *sizzle* is a new word in one of my picture books and I am practicing thinking it. It must be a Saturday. When Mother is finished, she will spread the cloth on the long table so it will be ready for Sunday dinner.

The linen shifts, then rises. Light enters my dream. The long tail of the iron moves back and forth, making a shape like the *z* in the middle of *sizzle*. Mother’s slippers hush against the linoleum. If I hold my breath, she won’t know I’m here. But if I don’t crawl out right now, I won’t get to see the rest; she will finish the ironing without me. Finish the tablecloth with its satiny sheen. Finish the linen napkins she’s rolled into a damp bundle. Finish my father’s handkerchiefs, even the fancy one with his initials—**PGM**—stitched onto the top. All the white, flat things I love. The things she will one day let me iron. “When you start school,” she has promised. “Then, we’ll see.”

Had it not been for our church youth group, our paths might never have crossed. Sheila lived on the other side of our Southern California town, with all the connotations “other side” suggests. Not that our family was wealthy; my father supported a wife, six kids, and our sometime-resident Great Aunt Bessie on a Marine Corps salary. Even so, I sensed a vast difference between Sheila’s life and mine. Never mind that her brother had his own room (my brothers shared a room, as did my sisters and I, sometimes with Bessie) or that their family of five had a new three-bedroom house while our family...
of eight, sometimes nine, managed in an aging four-bedroom. Still, their house seemed, I know no other word to describe it, *insubstantial*. The walls were thin, the door jambs not quite square, the carpet worn down in places.

Especially that spot right off the kitchen, in the alcove that served as their dining area. The spot where Sheila’s young, very substantial mother (*zaftig* comes to mind) stood at the ironing board, several baskets of laundry on the carpet beside her. The radio on the counter was tuned to the local AM station—The Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, The Surfaris—but her mother didn’t sing along or acknowledge the music. She just ironed. No matter when I visited, the radio was on and Sheila’s mother was standing barefoot at the ironing board, her hair done up in pin curls, a scowl across her face. The laundry baskets were always full.

“She takes in ironing,” Sheila said with a shrug, when I asked. Sheila was not a big talker.

When she noticed that I required more information, Sheila offered, “For other people.”

I nodded, still not sure what this was adding up to.

“For money,” Sheila said.

I’d never considered this, that a mother would have to take in laundry. Other people’s laundry, to help pay the household bills. Or that ironing could be a hated and hateful task. My mother ironed, of course—whose mother didn’t back then? But not every day. And certainly not to pay our bills. Ironing was just one of many things my mother did—effortlessly, it seemed, and not without occasional gestures of pleasure; she sometimes hummed while she worked. She ironed my younger sisters’ dresses, my younger brother’s cowboy shirts, and my father’s civilian shirts when he was stateside. She never ironed his uniforms, not even his khakis. This was the early 1960s, and the break-starch tradition still ruled. No easy task, meeting such razor-creased standards, and my father never asked this of her; he had his uniforms sent out.

I’d taken over the Sunday-dinner tablecloth privilege years before, along with the linen napkins, my own dresses and blouses, and any other wrinkled thing I could lay my hands on. As I ironed, I hummed, recited
poems I’d memorized, and often broke into song. I love that you can break into song, gain entry into its gates—and that it can break you, break into you, like a wave crashing. Iron and sing, iron and sing, the world falls away, placket and pleat, collar and yoke, ruffle and pocket, bodice and sleeve. Steam, release.

My older brother ironed too. Tom was a jock, but also a clotheshorse, particularly meticulous about the yoke pleats in his Oxford shirts. Yokes weren’t my forte; I was better at button plackets, a skill I’d practiced on doll clothes years before. Sometimes, when Tom was running late, he’d pay me a quarter to iron his shirt. I never let on that I would gladly pay him. I needed the practice, especially on the Gant shirts with that tricky locker loop on the back. I never grabbed one off a boy’s shirt, but lots of girls at school did, to get a cute boy’s attention. What a waste of a perfectly good shirt, I’d think.

_Sadism:_ directly follows sad-iron in my _Oxford English Dictionary._

This alphabetical quirk has not escaped my notice. Nor the photos I’ve seen of Victorian screw presses, or napkin presses, linen cupboards that resemble medieval torture racks. Tightening the screws to press the life out of something, it appears, serves not only to flatten it and emphasize its folds, but also to impart a subtle luster to impress your dinner guests. Nothing new under the sun, or beneath the earth for that matter. Case in point: the depiction of a single-screw clothing press on a wall in Pompeii. Send your toga out to the local _fullonica_, the _fullo_ would return it brightened and freshened from its chemical-soaked, foot-trampled, thistle-brushed, screw-pressed journey, polished to an admirable sheen. Most likely your _fullo_ was a man. Or a young boy training to join the highly respected guild of _fullones_ in ancient Rome, though at times male slaves were engaged, and females, too. Against their will, I imagine.

How would it feel to be forced to do work I had not chosen? To stand for hours in a Roman treading stall, my feet in a tub of chemically treated
water, trampling out the soil of someone else’s garments? Or, for that matter, to stand all day at an ironing board behind the window of a Columbus Avenue dry cleaner’s, steaming out the collars of clients who demand hand-pressed shirts no matter the cost. Not that the cost will be reflected in your minimum-wage paycheck, laundry work being one of the worst-paying jobs on the planet. Each day, passing one such dry cleaning establishment as I walked with Donald to his downtown office, I’d avert my eyes at the sight of the lovely, dark-eyed woman, young enough to pass for a girl, whose delicate hands grasped a heavy, industrial-sized iron, its electrical cord suspended above her like one of those snakes that hang from jungle trees. She would still be there when I returned from my walk in Central Park. Still there when I pulled my rolling cart home from the grocery store late afternoons. Who knows, she may still be there at her ironing station, four years since we moved from the city. It’s late afternoon now, so I imagine the orange sun is just beginning to set over the Hudson, a sight she will probably never have a chance to see.

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May 12, 1897. “Pa came in and asked us if we wanted to go fishing … we just unhitched and went.” Great Aunt Bessie was sixteen when she recorded this event in her diary, and though she would one day become what her nieces described as “an artist when it came to ironing,” in this moment the young Bessie seems delighted to be released from her duties at the ironing table to join the men and boys along Wildcat Creek. Seems she didn’t waste any time getting out of the kitchen, either; she just “unhitched” her sad-iron “and went.” Out the screen door, down the path, and into the May morning.

The sad-irons that Bessie and her mother used were heated on the wood stove, irons that they maintained between uses by sandpapering, polishing, greasing, or rubbing with beeswax. The irons might have had detachable wooden handles (the detachable handle was patented by Mrs. Mary Florence Potts in 1871) or the women might have wrapped the hot handles in flannel. I imagine the tiny kitchen where mother and daughter worked side by side, the warm woolen smell of the irons heating on the
wood stove, the brief sizzle as Bessie touched a moistened index finger to the iron to test for just the right amount of heat. Too hot, and the clothes would scorch. Too cold, and the iron wouldn’t do its job. The last job of their long laundry days, the tail end of the seemingly endless tasks of soaking, scrubbing, bluing, rinsing, hauling, drying on racks, bushes, makeshift clotheslines, or on boards balanced between two chairs. Finally, for this moment at least, their work was done.

There’s something to be said for finishing a job, for having something to show for your labor: the men’s Sunday dress shirts with starched, upright collars; the women’s shirtwaists creased to perfection—or as close to perfection as human hands could manage. Stacks of sheets, dishtowels, hand-embroidered pillowcases, and the satiny linens that a great-niece would one day retrieve from a trunk, running her hands over the history of her foremothers’ lives, her mother’s life, her own.

*Mangle board: a classic Scandinavian betrothal gift, one half of a pair, the roller being the other half.*

Imagine receiving from your beloved a hand-fashioned mangle board. Carved with a horse-shaped handle, perhaps, along with your initials and his, and the dates of your forthcoming wedding, to mark the yoking together of two lives. With this board, I thee wed. And with its companion the roller, our union is complete, two made one. Dampen the linen, wind it tightly around the roller, press the roller with as much force as possible against the mangle board. To smooth the linen that will line our days and nights: kitchen, bath, closet, bed, winding sheet.

Peter was of Scandinavian stock. Had we married four hundred years ago, or even one hundred years ago, he might have presented me with a mangle board, carved by his own hands. Hands that, as I recall all these decades later, were wide-palmed, blunt-fingered. Wind-chapped and sun-freckled, too, from his days building patio covers; Southern California sun is not kind to the skin of Norwegians.
The patio-cover job was before our wedding and before he joined up—not to serve in Vietnam, but rather to escape it by spending the next several months, then years, in army training schools, mastering one foreign language after another. Tonal languages, mostly. Despite my musical training, I could not make my voice rise and fall as his did. He tried to teach me more than once—Bao, in Mandarin, for example. Depending on your intonation, bao can mean any number of things: precious jewel, bag, placenta, the calyx of a flower, a stronghold, a position of defense. A pot, a saucepan, a bundle, a newspaper, a contract. To praise, to embrace, to eat until full, to level or smooth. To hold, to keep.

Had Peter fashioned a mangle board with his own sun-freckled hands, would our life together have run a different course? Or even had he presented the Sunbeam Ironmaster that provided me such pleasure those first married years? I know, I know, what woman wants a steam iron as a gift from her lover? But, see, that’s my point exactly: What woman? This woman. I wish he would have known me better and deeper. And I, him. So much was never spoken, all those secrets folded in the creases, jewels in a bag, precious, placental.

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Instead, I opened the Sunbeam Ironmaster at my December 1970 wedding shower, hosted by one of my mother’s friends. No men were present. After punch and sugar cookies and a few rounds of Bride Bingo, we sat in a circle, caressing the monogrammed dishtowels and silver-plated relish trays and burping the lids of the pastel Tupperware bowls as we passed them hand to hand. Lest you think I am exaggerating, that I am poking fun, that given the fact that this was 1970, I must have bit my lip and seethed inside—wanting this to be over so that I could, what? Join the antiwar march at the junior college where I was taking night classes after working days at my minimum wage job? Pass out flyers? Burn my bra? Truth be told, the Tupperware game was my idea, delighted as I was with the circle of women who had gathered, bestowing gifts upon me, showing me the way.

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In my favorite Tillie Olsen short story, a narrator addresses an imagined audience, most likely a guidance counselor, who has requested a conference regarding the narrator’s troubled daughter. “I stand here ironing,” the story begins, “and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron.” As the story progresses, we learn that Emily’s childhood has always been troubled, and that the narrator/mother both blames and forgives herself for her part in Emily’s trouble. The story, celebrated by decades of writers, readers, and critics, is revered as a brilliant meditation on motherhood, difficult love, survival, and the crushing power of cultural, historical, social, and economic forces on the lives of women. Yes, I nod. Yes. The story is all these things, and more.

But what about the iron? Why does no one discuss it? Despite the fact that the iron appears in the title, in the first line and last lines, and twice in between—quite a few references in such a short story—its role in the story is rarely mentioned. Yet it is the iron that makes the narrator's journey possible. “And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total?” she asks herself as she guides the iron across the dresses, ransacking memory to find a response to the counselor’s request.

When is there time? The answer lies in the iron, in its heavy, substantial necessity. The way it keeps her standing in place, so that everything that is swirling around her—the care of the household, the baby boy who is crying because his diaper is wet, the torment of her own mind—is for this moment, at least, stilled. Back and forth, back and forth, the motion not mindless after all, finally, given the back-and-forth motion of her mind leading to the resolution at the end of the story. Not a perfect resolution, of course. No happy, movie-of-the-week ending. But a resolution all the same.

When do you know, how long does it take to recognize that something has ended? We were young; we were poor. I worked at Sears, minimum wage, and Peter was in language class all day. Evenings, he studied vocabulary and tonal inflections. Sometimes he left for several hours, to meet some buddies, he said; it would be months before the truth came out, before
I encountered our divorced neighbor in the Laundromat and read the expression on her face.

Friday mornings, Peter stood inspection with the other enlisted men. Never mind that Vietnam was in full throttle and even stateside soldiers had tougher things to concern them, appearances still mattered. Kiwi-waxed, spit-polished shoes; Brassoed belt buckles and insignia. Razor edges on cuffs and trousers. Peter labored so hard over the shoes and brass, the least I could do was to steam-press his shirts and crease his trousers. To save money so we could go out to eat twice a month, or buy a bottle of Lambrusco for our second wedding anniversary, coming up any day now. No, I told him when he offered to send the uniform out. No, no need. I'm happy to do it. By then, I was master of my Ironmaster. I knew each steam vent intimately and could guess within a millisecond when a dangerous leak might occur.

No one warned me about trouser creases. How to hold the pants upside down and center the crease precisely between the seams before reaching for the Niagara. Or, more serious, the nearly impossible challenge of the double crease. How difficult it is to erase it. To start fresh.

An early Friday morning, December 1972. Peter is upstairs. He's running late, afraid he won't make the 7:00 inspection. I'm downstairs in the kitchen, already dressed for Sears, wearing one of the new bell-bottom pantsuits I've sewn on the Singer my mother has loaned me. The coffee pot is rinsed, the breakfast dishes draining in the dish rack, when I hear, from the top of the stairs, a growl. Animal in its fierceness, what is it?, I think. It grows and grows, deeper, huskier, then rises higher, like a teakettle approaching its steamy peak. Another tonal rise, another, and then the eruption. Wordless. And the trousers thrown from the top of the steps, sailing in midair as I watch the slow-motion descent and then the crumpled landing, inches from my feet.

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Red-letter, blue-letter, black-letter days. How to survive the deepest pains and joys? Some women shoot heroin; some shop for $300 shoes. Some jog or punch the air or curse or dance barefoot alone in their apartments or
drink too much scotch or drop to their knees in supplication or praise. I don’t do heroin or shoes, but everything else, sure, of course, why not, you have to do something with the fullness.

Mostly, though, I iron. I ironed the day Peter walked out the door, the day I signed the divorce papers, the day Aunt Bessie died, the day I met Donald, the day we bought our first home, the day my first niece was born, the day I received the cancer diagnosis, the day the towers fell, the day I won the fellowship, the day the surgeon cut me free, the day the book came out, the intensive-care day when my mother couldn’t call my name or read my face. The day when, recovered, she could.

**Sad-iron:** derived not from sad, as in unhappy, but sad as in solid, heavy, compact, complete.

After the divorce, after I’d pieced together what was left of myself and kicking and screaming reentered the world, I started taking writing workshops and publishing poems, including one about the tyranny of bridal showers. The details came easily, but the emotion was trumped-up: the comic absurdity of Bride Bingo cards; of dimpled, stocking-covered knees pressed together; of all the mythic, howling initiation rites of passage I had craved but not received.

The poem is still in print, which shames me now, given the cowardice from which I know it sprang. Oh, how far I was from that Tupperware moment, I imagined. Or rather, pretended to imagine as I met with the other female poets—we allowed no men inside—to share our poems. It was the mid-1970s. I knew I was supposed to be roaring against male oppression, domestic servitude, my own internal censor. I was supposed to be writing my Mother Poem. Every woman must write the Mother Poem, our workshop leader announced, staring over her half-glasses in my direction. I’d written plenty of mother poems, but after sharing one and receiving lukewarm response, I knew the leader meant something else entirely. Never mind the truth—that I’d lucked out, won the mother lottery, that I honestly
Rebecca McClanahan

had nothing to roar against in the mother department—I would never move “Into My Own As a Woman” until this task was done.

I nodded mutely and swallowed back the rest. My reluctance to relinquish the furnishings of my former life: my long hair, the manicured nails, the pantyhose and eyebrow tweezers, and all the shower gifts I’d received. The Tupperware that practically burped itself, the Harvest Gold matching towels, and the iron, oh the iron, my Sunbeam Ironmaster! On and on the arguments steamed, the women’s voices rising until here it comes, I’d think—meals, dishwashing, laundry, the inherent evils of all domestic arts, and do I have the energy for this, no I don’t, and so, silently and not without a taste of guilt, I’d swallow it back again—my passion for sewing, cooking, scrubbing, polishing. And the pièce de résistance—my secret, fiery affair with my Ironmaster, its thumb-tip control, stainless-steel water tank, its cushion of graduated, rolling steam.

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I never wrote the Mother Poem, a fact of which I am proud. And I kept my Ironmaster. I understand now that oppression can take many forms. That moving into your own as a woman doesn’t always have to be a bitter, bloody journey. Sometimes it means accepting what is given to you without asking, and letting the rest fall away.

Donald: (1) divorced father who owns his own G.E. Black Chrome Spray Steam & Dry; (2) a man who insists, “No need, I can do my own shirts” until, once you finally convince him that the task gives you joy, never questions you again.

I’d expected that the G.E. Steam & Dry would carry us into old age. It might have, except that a year after we’d moved to New York, our ancient vacuum cleaner expired. After we’d tried out every model in the Oreck store on Broadway, we decided on a lightweight upright that could handle both floors and carpets. The fact that I don’t know its make or model tells you
something about the division of labor in our household; Donald usually
does the vacuuming. After we'd finalized the delivery details, the salesman
said, “I forgot to mention that you get a free gift.”

“Oh?” I said, imagining extra vacuum cleaner bags, or some of that
white powder you sprinkle on your carpets to make them smell good.

“The Oreck 850,” he answered.

I took a deep breath, no reason to get excited. “An iron?”

“A very popular model.”

“Is it,” I began, hoping against hope, it was a free gift after all, “cordless?”

He nodded. “Has its own charging station. Hold on,” he said, turning
from the counter and walking toward the back room. “I'll get it. You can
take it with you today.”

A few years later, I attended a reading at a radical feminist bookstore on
the Lower East Side. During the reading, I noticed that the woman seated
next to me was staring at my feet. It was summer, and I was wearing sandals
that revealed my freshly pedicured Love That Red nails. Afterwards, as I
gathered with others to congratulate the poets, the woman joined us, and
once again began staring at my feet.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, turning to address her.

She raised her head and looked sternly at me, her brow creased. “Why
do you do that?” she said.

I was flummoxed. “Do what?”

“Paint your toenails.”

Warmth rose in my chest. My mind began reeling, the years spinning
dizzily backward, two decades, three, four, and the endless discussions—
empowerment, male oppression, patriarchy, female servitude, the tyranny
of bras and skirts and high heels, not to mention nail polish, and how Jo
was the only acceptable March sister to present to our daughters. “But what
about Meg and Beth and Amy?” I'd offer timidly, thinking, don’t the other
sisters count? Why does every woman have to be Jo; what kind of world
would that be?
I looked down at my feet, then back up into the woman’s face.

“Why do I paint my toenails?” I said, drawing the question out slowly while I auditioned the perfect answer. Isn’t it anti-feminist to suggest that a woman can’t celebrate every part of herself, including her toenails? Doesn’t a woman’s body belong only to her? And her history, as well? And her days, what she chooses to do with them? I thought of my padded ironing board, opened proudly beside the Murphy bed in our apartment, my Oreck 850 resting patiently on its charging station. I thought of my freshly laundered blouses hanging on the shower rod beside Donald’s collared shirts—still slightly damp, I hoped, to encourage that satisfying steam.

The espresso machine was sputtering, the crowd humming around us. A short walk to the subway, two transfers to the 1/9, another short block to our apartment, and I’d be home. I took a deep, cleansing breath. Counted two beats, three.

“I paint my toenails because I can. Because I am a feminist.”

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We are all captives of time, place, situation, fate. One woman’s joy is another’s sorrow; her sorrow, another woman’s joy. I know how it feels to move with the iron, tormented. To want to press the life out of something. And then, in the next breath, smooth and smooth its ruffled self until something else emerges. Name it order. As in “Be Still My Soul,” my favorite ironing hymn lately: “Leave to thy God to order and provide.” Sometimes, of course, he doesn’t provide. Or she, depending on the history of your roaring.

But sometimes he does. Last night, I plugged in the charging station on the Oreck 850 and ironed away: our linen tea towels, Donald’s handkerchiefs, pillowcases his mother had embroidered the year she died. One thumb opens the Oreck’s mouth, and the distilled water settles languidly down into the reservoir tank, which is a clear, dreamlike turquoise. The color of the water at Trunk Bay, St. John, where we celebrated our thirtieth anniversary. Water so tranquil and warm, I floated effortlessly on my back, Donald just inches from me, and for once I did not hold back when the tears started, did not try to make a joke or deflect. This was pure, ordinary joy,
and I was a lucky, lucky woman who had never let herself believe—perhaps until this very moment—that a moment like this could come, that I could pass three decades with this man, that the turquoise water could hold me up, that I could let it have its way with me. My Oreck 850 has it all—a sleek, white body, smoothly gliding soleplate, dial-operated fabric guide, and stable charging station. Until something better comes along, and I can’t imagine that it ever will, I plan to keep it.