

CATHERINE AUSTEN

DOWN THE DRAIN

SEVEN DAYS ALONE IN THE HOUSE. Laura had booked off the time to visit her mother-in-law, but then she thought, *Why do I have to go? Why can't Henry take Sean while I stay home and write my book?* She proposed the idea to Henry, who said, "I guess."

She tried not to be giddy as they shared their last meal. "Why aren't you coming, Mom?" Sean asked.

"Mommy's going to stay home, take care of Ranger, and paint the downstairs," Henry said.

"And I'm going to do some writing," Laura added. Her husband smiled. It had been three years since her last story was published and twelve since her first, with only five stories in between. She was always getting back to her writing.

She was nervous as they packed the car, and when they left she felt abandoned. She played music and sang to the dog, who ignored her. A whisper of dialogue rose and fell beneath the lyrics, and she thought, *There's a ghostwriter whose shop is next to a footbridge, with overturned garbage cans by the door and a pair of crows ripping guts from the bin bags. If you pay, he'll write you a song with the voice of your dead beloved in it.* An image of a customer, hunched in the wind, hands in pockets, on his way . . .

The phone rang. "I meant to tell you," Henry said. "They had a paint sale at Canadian Tire, so I got three gallons of shimmering sandstone."

"Oh." Laura asked, "How's the driving?"

"Fine. Paint's on top of the basement stairs."

The music shuffled to a new song, and she decided to wash the walls.

Laura pulled the bookcase away from the office wall and discovered a small rectangular hole in the hardwood floor. *What were we thinking placing a bookcase over a vent?* She peered into the hole and cringed at its dust and grime.

She shoved the bookcase to the centre of the room, with the desk and armchair, and covered them with sheets. She lifted pictures off hooks and pried nails from the walls, her hips swaying in time with a pop tune on the kitchen radio. *Beige*. That's what Henry had bought. *Always beige*. She set a bucket of suds beside the hole in the floor and heard, beneath the music, a woman crying.

She'd suffered from auditory hallucinations for years. In the shower, running the vacuum, anywhere with noise, her mind would invent noises beneath it, mostly guttural—screams, murmurs, laughter—but sometimes words softly enunciated. She'd been frightened by it when her son was small. She'd rush from the shower calling, "Sean? What's wrong?" He'd be on the couch watching television. He wouldn't even glance at her. Five-year-olds don't gaslight their mothers, she knew. It was her mind that played tricks.

She made a cup of tea with the intention of writing while the walls dried. She'd start a new story about a diabolical child. His parents are dead. His grandmother narrates. "*I've always been afraid of children, and so it was with some relief that I faced an empty nest.*" The grandmother sits on a porch watching neighbourhood teens play basketball. "*Children cannot be trusted,*" she whispers to her lapdog, *its warm white fur shaved close to the skin. "We know this because they lie, all of them, they lie continually. And some of them—not often, but surely more often than dogs—turn on their owners."* A taxicab honks at the teens as it pulls to the curb. Her grandson emerges, black-suited, scowling . . .

"How's the painting going?" Henry asked when she answered the phone on the fourth ring.

"Fine. I washed the walls."

"Great. You do the Polyfill?"

After the phone call, she poured a glass of wine and switched on the television. She found a movie about a possessed child in the American midwest and called it research. Beneath the soundtrack, she heard people chuckling in the office—teenage boys, their voices punctuated by the soft thud of a ball on the hardwood. She knew she'd imagined it, but she tiptoed down the hall and turned on the office light. Nothing was there but sheets with sharp corners and her own reflection in the bare window that separated her from the night. She trailed a finger along the clean wall as she approached the hole in the floor. Someone screamed in the movie. She had a hard time pinpointing its source.

She woke to a gorgeous image of two girls on a journey with their dogs—a dream fragment, soon lost. She rose and wrote the day’s to-do list: walk the dog, make granola, buy wine, call her friend with cancer, patch and sand the walls, write for at least three hours. She decided to do the walls first so she’d have time to prime them tonight.

Protected by a dust mask, she moved the electric sander back and forth around the office. Beneath the whirring motor, she heard whimpers from the dogs of her dream. “We’ll get there,” a girl whispered. Laura stopped the sander and asked the floor, “When?”

She hurried home from the dog park with a story simmering in her head about three sisters visiting their mother on Thanksgiving. The middle sister picks up the youngest from university, and they’re on their way to pick up the oldest from a plastic surgery clinic. They don’t talk much in the car. The youngest doesn’t like to share because she worries the middle sister is . . .

“What’s up?” Henry asked from his mother’s house five hours away. No one else had called in the past three days, Laura realized. No one from work, no sisters, no friends.

Her husband swore softly, and his mother exclaimed in the background. Sean had knocked over a glass and spilled cola on something expensive. “Clean that up. Right now!” Henry said. Into the phone he added, “I wish you were here.”

Laura heard her story swirl down the drain.

She sipped a glass of wine, sitting cross-legged on the office floor. *The drain was willful and hungry*, she wrote. She propped her journal on her lap and waited for words. She’d left the radio playing in the kitchen, and its voices tugged at her earlobes. A whispery wind rose like a sigh from the floorboards. She envisioned a creature in the cellar beneath her, its chin lifted toward a hole in its ceiling. She said aloud as she wrote, *The creature had lived in the hidden spaces of the house for years, emerging at night and dragging the souls of small animals back to its lair*. In a haze of wine and loneliness, she saw her words pour from her mouth and spill down the drain, one by one, each word a spark obliterated in the darkness.

I’ll never finish anything, she thought. She reached for her wine and knocked her journal off her thigh. It was swallowed by the floor. She plunged her hand after it.

It was cool and cushiony in the dirty hole, not slimy like she'd feared. The debris was soft and dry like dead skin. She found her journal with dust bunnies and cobwebs clinging to its cover. As she brushed them off, she heard bits of stories in muffled speech, as if people in the next room were reading aloud from multiple texts. Flakes of dust evoked fragments of dialogue, opening lines, characters waiting in corners, unformed, a tilted smile, a satisfied nod.

Laura opened her journal to record this experience, but her pen slipped off the page straight down the drain. "You can't have that," she said as she reached in to rescue it.

The hole seemed larger than it had a moment ago. Her pen hung in a cluster of multicoloured threads and human hair. Stories unravelled as she pulled it free. Broken sentences, bloated metaphors, limp paragraphs—they all fell to pieces when they emerged into the light.

The house did not want to be at the end of the world, but a house doesn't have much choice in its location.

He wore a suit of confidence, pinstripes of grace, pleats of generosity. "But why?" she shouted at her husband's soiled back.

Laura stroked the walls of the drain with a tender hand. Airy ideas floated at the top like foam on coffee, dissipating as she skimmed them.

A twenty-three-year-old dropout comes home from a party to a "Sold" sign on the front lawn. His parents have moved out from under him. They're in a hotel, eating the bar nuts, howling like teenagers.

Thickened plots lay deeper and rose reluctantly, their settings mired and viscous, their moods heavy and wretched.

The men found them at sunset—naked, mute, and starving after four weeks in the dank basement.

"It's a metaphorical coffee pot that's been brewing for decades," she said aloud, to the dog, who did not raise his head from the couch. It was 2:37am. "On the back burner," she added with a giggle. Her entire forearm rooted through the floor, grasping at dependent clauses. She poked something muddly, and a smell both inviting and repulsive entered her nostrils. She leaned in to listen.

The dog had his first accident on the fifth day, after whining at the back door for hours. Laura was locked in the office with an assortment of serving spoons, scraping the sides of the drain, chipping off the stuck bits.

She'd forgotten all her mysteries!

A naïve young woman gets pregnant by a man she's been infatuated with for years. He moves in with her, but once the baby's born, he begins to poison her. He and his girlfriend planned to kill her all along, to get the baby and the life insurance.

"Why would they want a baby?" she asked her wine glass.

The poetry required a plunger. Blank verse vomited up and bathed her feet. The room reeked of its decomposition.

A stubborn clog turned out to be an autobiographical coming-of-age story she'd started at sixteen. God, it stank.

She sifted through a layer of incoherent tales where monsters crept under beds and murderers fingered trophies. She didn't remember any of those. Love stories bubbled up and broke the tension. She finished the wine and licked her lips. *So many love stories! How could they all be mine?* She wondered if these were the fantasies of prior homeowners, ancestors, pioneers. So many grim heroes and garbled endings. An image of buffalo. Grunts and yearnings. *Why would anyone bother to write this down?*

The phone rang, and she sighed in answer.

On the sixth day, she let the cell-phone battery deplete. She took the landline off the hook and unplugged the modem. She was consumed by one question: *What is at the bottom of the drain?*

The dog whined for supper, but Laura just sat on the floor in the office, fingering the—the what? What exactly was this? *Shit*. It was all shit.

She needed to enlarge the drain so she could hear properly. She found a box cutter, two knives, a hammer and chisel, a power drill, and a handsaw. She shoved the sheeted furniture into a corner, up against the door and the unpainted wall, and she carved out space. She slashed, stabbed, scraped, and clawed until the hole was a foot and a half in diameter. She cut herself multiple times, slicing the insides of her arms. Her blood dripped down the drain. It made no difference.

She muttered as she cleared the way. To the dog, to the radio, to the characters she met, she muttered in a soft low drone, and every word was a cliché.

She found her childhood resting in the curve of a U-bend. She couldn't reach it or make it out clearly, but she knew that's what it must be, for she heard it reading aloud. Its voice was pure and authentic, compelled to speak.

It was the voice she'd been searching for.

Headlights flashed through the window as her husband and child pulled into the driveway. They will want to know how her week had gone, if she'd done any writing, if she'd made any progress. *Good God.*

She could answer, maybe, if she could access her authentic voice. If she could get herself unstuck, one way or another. If she could make the hole bigger.

She slashed and hit and then slashed and missed.

She hung upside down, halfway through the floor, scratching at the heaps of bloody muck below her. She was certain that a beautiful story glittered in the garbage—something that would *really make a difference*—spoken in her own true voice.

Henry called her name in the living room. *Life is more important than fiction*, she thought briefly. *I guess.* She thought she might be bleeding to death. She recognized this chance to crawl out and save something of herself, her life, her *real* life. *But what is life, really? So much of it is in our heads.*

She wanted to pick herself up, but Henry said to Sean, “It doesn't look like she did much painting.”

Her voice laughed hysterically. Her true voice. The laughter swirled deeper down the drain. She couldn't let it get away this time.

They banged on the office door, but she'd blocked it with the furniture. She wouldn't get distracted—that had always been her problem in the past.

She cut frantically at the drain, enlarging it until it could hold her and everything she had to say. It was almost big enough now.

One last stab, and the whole thing opened up around her. She was surprised to find it so accommodating after years of struggle. *Isn't that the way?*

Her voice called to her in the distance, “Catch up! Catch up!” It sounded so happy. She swam toward it. She would find her voice if it was the last thing she ever did.