

# Housekeeping

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A best-selling coming-of-age novel tells the story of a dreamy teenager who begins a new life at the lakeside home of her Aunt Sylvie, a thirty-five-year-old misfit, after losing both her parents. Reprint. NYT.

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Becket Royce narrated Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* for Macmillan Audio. She has also appeared on television in *I'll Be Home for Christmas*, *The Kennedys of Massachusetts*, *As the World Turns*, *One Life to Live*, and numerous commercials. Onstage, she has performed in New York and regionally in the plays *The Male Animal*, *Macbeth*, and many others.

My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher. Through all these generations of elders we lived in one house, my grandmother's house, built for her by her husband, Edmund Foster, an employee of the railroad, who escaped this world years before I entered it. It was he who put us down in this unlikely place. He had grown up in the Middle West, in a house dug out of the ground, with windows just at earth level and just at eye level, so that from without, the house was a mere mound, no more a human stronghold than a grave, and from within, the perfect horizontality of the world in that place foreshortened the view so severely that the horizon seemed to circumscribe the sod house and nothing more. So my grandfather began to read what he could find of travel literature, journals of expeditions to the mountains of Africa, to the Alps, the Andes, the Himalayas, the Rockies. He bought a box of colors and copied a magazine lithograph of a Japanese painting of Fujiyama. He painted many more mountains, none of them identifiable, if any of them were real. They were all suave cones or mounds, single or in heaps or clusters, green, brown, or white, depending on the season, but always snowcapped, these caps being pink, white, or gold, depending on the time of day. In one large painting he had put a bell-shaped mountain in the very foreground and covered it with meticulously painted trees, each of which stood out at right angles to the ground, where it grew exactly as the nap stands out on folded plush. Every tree bore bright fruit, and showy birds nested in the boughs, and every fruit and bird was plumb with the warp in the earth. Oversized beasts, spotted and striped, could be seen running unimpeded up the right side and un-hastened down the left. Whether the genius of this painting was ignorance or fancy I never could decide.

One spring my grandfather quit his subterranean house, walked to the railroad, and took a train west. He told the ticket agent that he wanted to go to the mountains, and the man arranged to have him put off here, which may not have been a malign joke, or a joke at all, since there are mountains, uncountable mountains, and where there are not mountains there are hills. The terrain on which the town itself is built is relatively level, having once belonged to the lake. It seems there was a time when the dimensions of things modified themselves, leaving a number of puzzling margins, as between the mountains as they must have been and the mountains as they are now, or between the lake as it once was and the

lake as it is now. Sometimes in the spring the old lake will return. One will open a cellar door to wading boots floating tallowy soles up and planks and buckets bumping at the threshold, the stairway gone from sight after the second step. The earth will brim, the soil will become mud and then silty water, and the grass will stand in chill water to its tips. Our house was at the edge of town on a little hill, so we rarely had more than a black pool in our cellar, with a few skeletal insects skidding around on it. A narrow pond would form in the orchard, water clear as air covering grass and black leaves and fallen branches, all around it black leaves and drenched grass and fallen branches, and on it, slight as an image in an eye, sky, clouds, trees, our hovering faces and our cold hands.

My grandfather had a job with the railroad by the time he reached his stop. It seems he was befriended by a conductor of more than ordinary influence. The job was not an especially good one. He was a watchman, or perhaps a signalman. At any rate, he went to work at nightfall and walked around until dawn, carrying a lamp. But he was a dutiful and industrious worker, and bound to rise. In no more than a decade he was supervising the loading and unloading of livestock and freight, and in another six years he was assistant to the stationmaster. He held this post for two years, when, as he was returning from some business in Spokane, his mortal and professional careers ended in a spectacular derailment.

Though it was reported in newspapers as far away as Denver and St. Paul, it was not, strictly speaking, spectacular, because no one saw it happen. The disaster took place midway through a moonless night. The train, which was black and sleek and elegant, and was called the Fireball, had pulled more than halfway across the bridge when the engine nosed over toward the lake and then the rest of the train slid after it into the water like a weasel sliding off a rock. A porter and a waiter who were standing at the railing at the rear of the caboose discussing personal matters (they were distantly related) survived, but they were not really witnesses in any sense, for the equally sound reasons that the darkness was impenetrable to any eye and that they had been standing at the end of the train looking back.

People came down to the water's edge, carrying lamps. Most of them stood on the shore, where in time they built a fire. But some of the taller boys and younger men walked out on the railroad bridge with ropes and lanterns. Two or three covered themselves with black grease and tied themselves up in rope harnesses, and the others lowered them down into the water at the place where the porter and the waiter thought the train must have disappeared. After two minutes timed on a stopwatch, the ropes were pulled in again and the divers walked stiff-legged up the pilings, were freed from their ropes and wrapped in blankets. The water was perilously cold.

Till it was dawn the divers swung down from the bridge and walked, or were dragged, up again. A suitcase, a seat cushion, and a lettuce were all they retrieved. Some of the divers remembered pushing past debris as they swam down into the water, but the debris must have sunk again, or drifted away in the dark. By the time they stopped hoping to find passengers, there was nothing else to be saved, no relics but three, and one of them perishable. They began to speculate that this was not after all the place where the train left the bridge. There were questions about how the train would move through the water. Would it sink like a stone despite its speed, or slide like an eel despite its weight? If it did leave the tracks here, perhaps it came to rest a hundred feet ahead. Or again it might have rolled or slid when it struck bottom, since the bridge pilings were set in the crest of a

chain of flooded hills, which on one side formed the wall of a broad valley (there was another chain of hills twenty miles north, some of them islands) and on the other side fell away in cliffs. Apparently these hills were the bank of still another lake, and were made of some brittle stone which had been mined by the water and fallen sheerly away. If the train had gone over on the south side (the testimony of the porter and the waiter was that it had, but by this time they were credited very little) and had slid or rolled once or twice, it might have fallen again, farther and much longer.

After a while some of the younger boys came out on the bridge and began to jump off, at first cautiously and then almost exuberantly, with whoops of fear. When the sun rose, clouds soaked up the light like a stain. It became colder. The sun rose higher, and the sky grew bright as tin. The surface of the lake was very still. As the boys' feet struck the water, there was a slight sound of rupture. Fragments of transparent ice wobbled on the waves they made and, when the water was calm again, knitted themselves up like bits of a reflection. One of the boys swam out forty feet from the bridge and then down to the old lake, feeling his way down the wall, down the blind, breathless stone, headfirst, and then pushing out from the foot. But the thought of where he was suddenly terrified him, and he leaped toward the air, brushing something with his leg as he did. He reached down and put his hand on a perfectly smooth surface, parallel to the bottom, but, he thought, seven or eight feet above it. A window. The train had landed on its side. He could not reach it a second time. The water bore him up. He said only that smooth surface, of all the things he touched, was not overgrown or hovered about by a cloud of something loose, like silt. This boy was an ingenious liar, a lonely boy with a boundless desire to ingratiate himself. His story was neither believed nor disbelieved.

By the time he had swum back to the bridge and was pulled up and had told the men there where he had been, the water was becoming dull and opaque, like cooling wax. Shivers flew when a swimmer surfaced, and the membrane of ice that formed where the ice was torn looked new, glassy, and black. All the swimmers came in. By evening the lake there had sealed itself over.

This catastrophe left three new widows in Fingerbone: my grandmother, and the wives of two elderly brothers who owned a dry-goods store. These two old women had lived in Fingerbone thirty years or more, but they left, one to live with a married daughter in North Dakota and the other to find any friends or kin in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, which she had left as a bride. They said they could no longer live by the lake. They said the wind smelled of it, and they could taste it in the drinking water, and they could not abide the smell, the taste, or the sight of it. They did not wait for the memorial service and rearing of the commemorative stone, when scores of mourners and sightseers, led by three officers of the railroad, walked out on the bridge between handrails mounted for the occasion, and dropped wreaths on the ice.

It is true that one is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone, or the deeps of the lake, the lightless, airless waters below. When the ground is plowed in the spring, cut and laid open, what exhales from the furrows but that same, sharp, watery smell. The wind is watery, and all the pumps and creeks and ditches smell of water unalloyed by any other element. At the foundation is the old lake, which is smothered and nameless and altogether black. Then there is Fingerbone, the lake of charts and photographs, which is permeated by sunlight and sustains green life and innumerable fish, and in which one can look down in the shadow of a dock and see stony, earthy bottom, more or less as one sees dry ground.

And above that, the lake that rises in the spring and turns the grass dark and coarse as reeds. And above that the water suspended in sunlight, sharp as the breath of an animal, which brims inside this circle of mountains.

It seems that my grandmother did not consider leaving. She had lived her whole life in Fingerbone. And though she never spoke of it, and no doubt seldom thought of it, she was a religious woman. That is to say that she conceived of life as a road down which one traveled, an easy enough road through a broad country, and that one's destination was there from the very beginning, a measured distance away, standing in the ordinary light like some plain house where one went in and was greeted by respectable people and was shown to a room where everything one had ever lost or put aside was gathered together, waiting. She accepted the idea that at some time she and my grandfather would meet and take up their lives again, without the worry of money, in a milder climate. She hoped that he would somehow have acquired a little more stability and common sense. With him this had so far not been an effect of age, and she distrusted the idea of transfiguration. The bitter thing about his death, since she had a house and a pension and the children were almost grown, was that it seemed to her a kind of defection, not altogether unanticipated. How many times had she waked in the morning to find him gone? And sometimes for whole days he would walk around singing to himself in a thin voice, and speak to her and his children as a very civil man would speak to strangers. And now he had vanished finally. When they were reunited, she hoped he would be changed, substantially changed, but she did not set her heart on it. Musing thus, she set out upon her widowhood, and became altogether as good a widow as she had been a wife. After their father's death, the girls hovered around her, watched everything she did, followed her through the house, got in her way. Molly was sixteen that winter; Helen, my mother, was fifteen; and Sylvie was thirteen. When their mother sat down with her mending, they would settle themselves around her on the floor, trying to be comfortable, with their heads propped against her knees or her chair, restless as young children. They would pull fringe off the rug, pleat her hem, pummel one another sometimes, while they talked indolently about school or worked out the endless minor complaints and accusations that arose among them. After a while they would turn on the radio and start brushing Sylvie's hair, which was light brown and heavy and hung down to her waist. The older girls were expert at building it into pompadours with ringlets at ear and nape. Sylvie crossed her legs at the ankles and read magazines. When she got sleepy she would go off to her room and take a nap, and come down to supper with her gorgeous hair ruffled and awry. Nothing could induce vanity in her. When supertime came, they would follow their mother into the kitchen, set the table, lift the lids off the pans. And then they would sit around the table and eat together, Molly and Helen fastidious, Sylvie with milk on her lip. Even then, in the bright kitchen with white curtains screening out the dark, their mother felt them leaning toward her, looking at her face and her hands. Never since they were small children had they clustered about her so, and never since then had she been so aware of the smell of their hair, their softness, breathiness, abruptness. It filled her with a strange elation, the same pleasure she had felt when any one of them, as a sucking child, had fastened her eyes on her face and reached for her other breast, her hair, her lips, hungry to touch, eager to be filled for a while and sleep. She had always known a thousand ways to circle them all around with what must have

seemed like grace. She knew a thousand songs. Her bread was tender and her jelly was tart, and on rainy days she made cookies and applesauce. In the summer she kept roses in a vase on the piano, huge, pungent roses, and when the blooms ripened and the petals fell, she put them in a tall Chinese jar, with cloves and thyme and sticks of cinnamon. Her children slept on starched sheets under layers of quilts, and in the morning her curtains filled with light the way sails fill with wind. Of course they pressed her and touched her as if she had just returned after an absence. Not because they were afraid she would vanish as their father had done, but because his sudden vanishing had made them aware of her. When she had been married a little while, she concluded that love was half a longing of a kind that possession did nothing to mitigate. Once, while they were still childless, Edmund had found a pocket watch on the shore. The case and the crystal were undamaged, but the works were nearly consumed by rust. He opened the watch and emptied it, and where the face had been he fitted a circle of paper on which he had painted two seahorses. He gave it to her as a pendant, with a chain through it, but she hardly ever wore it because the chain was too short to allow her to look at the seahorses comfortably. She worried that it would be damaged on her belt or in her pocket. For perhaps a week she carried the watch wherever she went, even across the room, and it was not because Edmund had made it for her, or because the painting was less vivid and awkward than ...

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