



# HOUSE KEEPING

*Marilynne Robinson*

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*For my husband,  
and for James and Joseph, Jody and Joel,  
four wonderful boys*

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The week after Sylvie arrived, Fingerbone had three days of brilliant sunshine and four of balmy rain. On the first day the icicles dripped so rapidly that the gravel under the eaves rattled and jumped. The snow was granular in the shade, and in the sun it turned soft and clung damply to whatever it covered. The second day the icicles fell and broke on the ground and snow drooped low over the eaves in a heavy mass. Lucille and I poked it down with sticks. The third day the snow was so dense and malleable that we made a sort of statue. We put one big ball of snow on top of another, and carved them down with kitchen spoons till we had made a figure of a woman in a long dress, her arms folded. It was Lucille's idea that she should look to the side, and while I knelt and whittled folds into her skirt, Lucille stood on the kitchen stool and molded her chin and her nose and her hair. It happened that I swept her skirt a little back from her hip, and that her arms were folded

high on her breasts. It was mere accident—the snow was firmer here and softer there, and in some places we had to pat clean snow over old black leaves that had been rolled up into the snowballs we made her from—but her shape became a posture. And while in any particular she seemed crude and lopsided, altogether her figure suggested a woman standing in a cold wind. It seemed that we had conjured a presence. We took off our coats and hats and worked about her in silence. That was the third day of sunshine. The sky was dark blue, there was no wind at all, but everywhere an audible seep and trickle of melting. We hoped the lady would stand long enough to freeze, but in fact while we were stamping the gray snow all smooth around her, her head pitched over and smashed on the ground. This accident cost her a forearm and a breast. We made a new snowball for a head, but it crushed her eaten neck, and under the weight of it a shoulder dropped away. We went inside for lunch, and when we came out again, she was a dog-yellowed stump in which neither of us would admit any interest.

Days of rain at just that time were a disaster. They hastened the melting of the snow but not the thawing of the ground. So at the end of three days the houses and hutches and barns and sheds of Fingerbone were like so many spilled and foundered arks. There were chickens roosting in the telephone poles and dogs swimming by in the streets. My grandmother always boasted that the floods never reached our house, but that spring, water poured over the thresholds and covered the floor to the depth of four inches, obliging us to wear boots while we did the cooking and washing up. We lived on the second floor for a number of days. Sylvie played solitaire on the

vanity while Lucille and I played Monopoly on the bed. The firewood on the porch was piled high so that most of it stayed dry enough to burn, though rather smokily. The woodpile was full of spiders and mice, and the pantry curtain rod was deeply bowed by the weight of water climbing up the curtains. If we opened or closed a door, a wave swept through the house, and chairs tottered, and bottles and pots clinked and clunked in the bottoms of the kitchen cabinets.

After four days of rain the sun appeared in a white sky, febrile and dazzling, and the people who had left for higher ground came back in rowboats. From our bedroom window we could see them patting their roofs and peering in at their attic windows. "I have never seen such a thing," Sylvie said. The water shone more brilliantly than the sky, and while we watched, a tall elm tree fell slowly across the road. From crown to root, half of it vanished in the brilliant light.

Fingerbone was never an impressive town. It was chastened by an outsized landscape and extravagant weather, and chastened again by an awareness that the whole of human history had occurred elsewhere. That flood flattened scores of headstones. More disturbing, the graves sank when the water receded, so that they looked a little like hollow sides or empty bellies. And then the library was flooded to a depth of three shelves, creating vast gaps in the Dewey decimal system. The losses in hooked and braided rugs and needlepoint footstools will never be reckoned. Fungus and mold crept into wedding dresses and photograph albums, so that the leather crumbled in our hands when we lifted the covers, and the sharp smell that rose when we opened them was as

insinuating as the smells one finds under a plank or a rock. Much of what Fingerbone had hoarded up was defaced or destroyed outright, but perhaps because the hoard was not much to begin with, the loss was not overwhelming.

The next day was very fine. The water was so calm that the sunken half of the fallen tree was replaced by the mirrored image of the half trunk and limbs that remained above the water. All day two cats prowled in the branches, pawing at little eddies and currents. The water was beginning to slide away. We could hear the lake groan under the weight of it, for the lake had not yet thawed. The ice would still be thick, but it would be the color of paraffin, with big white bubbles under it. In normal weather there would have been perhaps an inch of water on top of it in shallow places. Under all the weight of the flood water it sagged and, being fibrous rather than soft or brittle, wrenched apart, as resistant to breaching as green bones. The afternoon was loud with the giant miseries of the lake, and the sun shone on, and the flood was the almost flawless mirror of a cloudless sky, fat with brimming and very calm.

Lucille and I pulled on our boots and went downstairs. The parlor was full of light. Our walking from the stairs to the door had set off an intricate system of small currents which rolled against the floorboards. Glyphs of crimped and plaited light swung across the walls and the ceiling. The couch and the armchairs were oddly dark. The stuffing in their backs had slid, and the cushions had shallow craters in the middles of them. Water seeped out when we touched them. In the course of days the flood had made a sort of tea of hemp and horsehair and

rag paper in that room, a smell which always afterward clung to it and which I remember precisely at this minute, though I have never encountered its like.

Sylvie came down the hall in a pair of my grandmother's boots and looked in at us from the door. "Should we start dinner?" she asked.

Lucille poked a sofa cushion with her finger. "Look," she said. When she took her hand away, the suppurated water vanished, but the dent remained.

"It's a shame," Sylvie said. From the lake came the increasingly terrific sound of wrenching and ramming and slamming and upending, as a south-flowing current heaped huge shards of ice against the north side of the bridge. Sylvie pushed at the water with the side of her foot. A ribbed circle spread to the four walls and the curves of its four sides rebounded, interpenetrating, and the orderly ranks of light swept and swung about the room. Lucille stomped with her feet until the water sloshed against the walls like water carried in a bucket. There were the sounds of dull concussion from the kitchen, and the lace curtains, drawn thin and taut by their own sodden weight, shifted and turned. Sylvie took me by the hands and pulled me after her through six grand waltz steps. The house flowed around us. Lucille pulled the front door open and the displacement she caused made one end of the woodpile in the porch collapse and tipped a chair, spilling a bag of clothespins. Lucille stood at the door, looking out.

"It sounds like the bridge is breaking up," she remarked.

"That's probably just the ice," Sylvie said.

Lucille said, "I don't think Simmons's house is where it used to be."

Sylvie went to the door and peered down the street at a blackened roof. "It's so hard to tell."

"Those bushes used to be on the other side."

"Maybe the bushes have moved."

Sylvie and I started a smoldery fire and boiled water for tea and soup, and Lucille piled up the fallen wood and swept the bobbing clothespins behind the pantry curtain with a broom (it was the same broom we used to whack the woodpile before we used any wood from it, so that the spiders and mice would be warned away, and would not bite our fingers or drop into our sleeves, or perish in the stove flames). Lily and Nona, in their alarm at leaving the house to shop, and their fear of being snowed in or bedridden, had arranged to have the pantry stocked with great quantities of canned goods. We could have lived through a dozen floods without difficulty. But it was disturbing to have our aunts' fear appear as prescience.

We took our supper upstairs and sat on our bed and looked out over the town. It appeared to us that Simmons's house had indeed been lifted from its foundations. A breeze dulled the surface of the water as the sun descended amid a crying of stranded dogs and of one disoriented rooster. The clashes and groans from the lake continued unabated, dreadful at night, and the sound of the night wind in the mountains was like one long in-drawn breath. Downstairs the flood bumped and fumbled like a blind man in a strange house, but outside it hissed and trickled, like the pressure of water against your

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eardrums, and like the sounds you hear in the moment before you faint.

Sylvie lit a candle. "Let's play crazy eights."

"I don't really want to," Lucille said.

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to find some other people."

"Now?"

"Well, tomorrow. We could just wade up to higher ground and walk around until we find someone. There must be a lot of people camping in the hills."

"But we're fine here," Sylvie said. "We can cook our own food and sleep in our own beds. What could be better?" She shuffled the cards and laid them out for solitaire.

"I'm very tired of it," Lucille said.

Sylvie picked up an ace and turned over the card beneath it. "It's the loneliness," Sylvie said. "Loneliness bothers lots of people. I knew a woman once who was so lonely she married an old man with a limp and had four children in five years, and none of it helped at all. Then she got the idea that she wanted to see her mother so she scraped up some money and drove all the way to Missouri with the children. She said her mother had changed so much that she wouldn't have recognized her on the street. The old woman took a look at the children and said she didn't see a trace of the family in them, and she said, 'You've stored up sorrow for yourself, Marie.' So she just turned around and went back home. But her husband would never believe it was her mother she had gone to see. He thought she had just left with the children and gotten scared of something and come back.

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He never really showed any of them much affection after that. But he didn't live long, anyway."

"What happened to the children?" Lucille asked.

Sylvie shrugged. "The usual things, I suppose. If there really were any children."

"I thought you said she had *four*."

"Well, I don't really know that she did. I just met her on the bus. She talked about everything under the sun, so I said, 'If you're getting off at Billings, I'll treat you to a hamburger.' She said, 'I'm not getting off at Billings.' But then she did. I was looking at some magazines I saw on a bench in the station, and I glanced up, and she was standing there not ten feet away, watching me. When I looked up, she turned around and ran out to the street and that's the last I saw of her. She was probably crazy. I thought at the time, 'She doesn't have children any more than I do.'"

"What made you think she didn't have children?"

"Well, if she did, I feel sorry for them. I knew a woman once who reminded me of her a lot. She had a little girl, and it was the saddest thing. She couldn't take her eyes off her. She wouldn't let her go outside, or play with other children. When the little girl fell asleep the woman would paint the little girl's nails and comb her hair into ringlets, and then she would wake her up to play with her, and if the little girl cried the woman cried, too. If the woman on the bus was as lonely as she said she was, she'd have her children with her. Unless she didn't have any children, or the court had taken them. That's what happened to the other little girl I was talking about."

"What court?" Lucille asked.

"A probate court. A judge, you know."

"Well, if a judge did take them, what would he do with them?"

"Oh, send them to some place. I think there's a farm or something."

That was the first Lucille or I had heard of the interest of the state in the well-being of children, and we were alarmed. By the light of the candle on the vanity, Sylvie flipped and sorted through her deck of cards, plainly unaware that the black shape of judicial attention stood over us all, as enormous as our shadows. Lucille and I still doubted that Sylvie would stay. She resembled our mother, and besides that, she seldom removed her coat, and every story she told had to do with a train or a bus station. But not till then did we dream that *we* might be taken from *her*. I imagined myself feigning sleep while Sylvie brushed my short brown hair into long golden ringlets, dropping each one carefully on the pillow. I imagined her seizing my hands and pulling me after her in a wild waltz down the hall, through the kitchen, through the orchard, the night moonless and I in my nightgown, almost asleep. Just when the water in the orchard had begun to rush from us and toward us and to leap against the trunks of trees and splash against our ankles, an old man in a black robe would step from behind a tree and take me by the hand—Sylvie too stricken to weep and I too startled to resist. Such a separation, I imagined, could indeed lead to loneliness intense enough to make one conspicuous in bus stations. It occurred to me that most people in bus

stations would be conspicuous if it were not for the numbers of others there who would otherwise be conspicuous in the same way. Sylvie, at that moment, would hardly be noticed in a bus station.

"Why didn't you have children?" Lucille asked.

Sylvie lifted her shoulders. "It just wasn't in the cards," she said.

"Did you want them?"

"I always liked them."

"But, I mean, did you want to *have* them?"

"You must know, Lucille," Sylvie said, "that some questions aren't polite. I'm sure that my mother must have told you that."

"She's sorry," I said. Lucille bit her lip.

"It doesn't matter," Sylvie said. "Let's play crazy eights. I've got the deck warmed up."

We needed more chairs, and we needed to bring up the bricks that we heated on the top of the stove to hold in our laps and put under our feet, and to take down the bricks that had gone cold. Sylvie took the bricks down in a gunny sack and Lucille and I each carried a candle. When we got to the hall our candles went out. The trapdoor had been left open, admitting too strong a flow of air from below to permit a candle flame. Our matches died before we could even light the wicks. "Well," Sylvie said. She waded ahead of us to the kitchen. It was absolutely dark. We felt our way along the wall. When we came to the kitchen it was silent, except for the settling sounds of the low fire and the familiar, idle rummaging of the water in the depths of the pantry.

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"Here." Her voice came from the porch. "I'm just getting some wood. I've never seen such a dark night."

"Well, come back in!"

We heard the wash, wash, wash of her footsteps. "I really never have," she said. "It's like the end of the world!"

"Well, let's go back upstairs."

But Sylvie had fallen silent again. Guessing that she must be listening to something, we were silent, too. The lake still thundered and groaned, the flood waters still brimmed and simmered. When we did not move or speak, there was no proof that we were there at all. The wind and the water brought sounds intact from any imaginable distance. Deprived of all perspective and horizon, I found myself reduced to an intuition, and my sister and my aunt to something less than that. I was afraid to put out my hand, for fear it would touch nothing, or to speak, for fear no one would answer. We all stood there silently for a long moment.

Lucille said in a very loud voice, "I'm really tired of this."

Sylvie patted at my shoulder. "It's all right, Lucille."

"I'm not Lucille," I said.

Wash, wash, wash, Sylvie went to the stove. We heard her put the wood down on the drainboard, stack the cold bricks in the sink, put the hot bricks into the gunny sack. Then she took the handle and lifted a lid from the stove, and a dim, warm light shone on her face and hands and across the ceiling. She dropped in a stick. Embers burst and spilled and the light grew yellower and stronger. Sylvie added wood, a stick at a time, until flames leaped. We could see a miniature of the fire re-

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flected in the window. The nickel fittings on the stove glowed red, and red lights bobbed on the flooded floor. Then she put the lid back on and the room was totally dark. "Remember the chairs," Sylvie said. We could hear her arranging the cold bricks on top of the stove. We groped our way to the stairs, each feeling the way with one hand and dragging a kitchen chair with the other. We worked the chairs through the trapdoor, leaving it open, found our room, closed the door, and lit a candle. For several minutes we heard only the usual watery sounds from below.

"I suppose she went out for another walk," Lucille said. But we both knew that she had fallen silent again in the dark.

"Let's call her," I said.

"Let's wait." Lucille sat down beside the vanity and dealt us each seven cards. We played two indolent hands, and still Sylvie did not appear.

"I'll call her," I said. When I opened the door, the candle went out. I stood at the top of the stairs and shouted, "Sylvie! Sylvie! Sylvie!" I thought I heard a shuffling, a slight disarrangement of the water. I went back down the stairs again, into the kitchen. I moved the bricks around on top of the stove and opened the lid, releasing the light, but the room was empty. I went out into the parlor, walking up and down the room with my arms spread wide. Nothing. "Sylvie!" I shouted, but there was no sound. I went back through the kitchen and out to the porch, and there I stumbled over some drifting firewood and fell to my knees. I had to pull my boots off one at a time and empty them. No one was there, either. No one was in the pantry. That left my

grandmother's room, which I dreaded entering because it was three steps lower than the kitchen. "Sylvie?" I said. "Why don't you come upstairs?"

There was a silence. "I will."

"Why not now? It's cold."

She did not reply. I started down the steps. After the second, my boots were swamped again and I had to pull them off. I walked, with my arms outstretched, in the direction of her voice, and finally I brushed the canvassy folds of her coat. She was leaning against the window, I could see her barely silhouetted. I could feel the chill of the glass. "Sylvie?" She stood still as an effigy. I reached into her pocket and brought out a cold hand. I opened it and closed it and rubbed it between my hands, but she did not move or speak. I reached up and touched her cheek and her nose. A nerve jumped in the lid of her eye, but she did not move. Then I drew back my arm and hit her across the middle. The blow landed among the folds of her coat with a dull whump.

She laughed. "Why did you do that?"

"Well, why won't you talk?"

I began pulling her by her coat in the direction of the door. I continued to pull although she followed unresistingly, pausing only to lift down her bag of bricks from the dresser as we passed. I pulled her all the way up the stairs and through the bedroom door. Lucille stood bent over the candle with her hands cupped around the flame. Nevertheless it went out. "That was the last match," she said.

"It's your turn to go downstairs," I said. "Get a coal from the stove to light it with." Lucille went and stood on the stairs for a long time.

"I'll go, Lucille," Sylvie said.

Lucille almost ran down the stairs. We heard the slish and moil of her steps in the hall and kitchen, and the business at the stove. She came back upstairs holding a coal in a china cup. I held the wick against it and blew, and the room was light again. Sylvie walked over to the vanity. The cards were dealt for a third hand. "You started without me," she said. We put bricks on the floor for our feet and wrapped ourselves in quilts and played gin rummy.

During those days Fingerbone was strangely transformed. If one should be shown odd fragments arranged on a silver tray and be told, "That is a splinter from the True Cross, and that is a nail paring dropped by Barabbas, and that is a bit of lint from under the bed where Pilate's wife dreamed her dream," the very ordinariness of the things would recommend them. Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not to buy. So shoes are worn and hassocks are sat upon and finally everything is left where it was and the spirit passes on, just as the wind in the orchard picks up the leaves from the ground as if there were no other pleasure in the world but brown leaves, as if it would deck, clothe, flesh itself in flourishes of dusty brown apple leaves, and then drops them all in a heap at the side of the house and goes on. So Fingerbone, or such relics of it as showed above the mirroring waters, seemed fragments of the quotidian held up to our wondering attention, offered somehow as proof of their own significance. But then suddenly the lake and the river broke open and the water

slid away from the land, and Fingerbone was left stripped and blackened and warped and awash in mud.

The restoration of the town was an exemplary community effort in which we had no part. My grandmother had been rather isolated because she had no interest in people younger than herself. We and the paperboy were the only people under sixty to whom she was consistently polite. Lily and Nona, of course, had had little contact with local society, and Sylvie claimed not to know anybody in Fingerbone at all. Now and then she would say that someone on the street resembled So-and-so, was just the right height and the right age, but she was content simply to marvel at the resemblance. Then, too, for whatever reasons, our whole family was standoffish. This was the fairest description of our best qualities, and the kindest description of our worst faults. That we were self-sufficient, our house reminded us always. If its fenestration was random, if its corners were out of square, my grandfather had built it himself, knowing nothing whatever of carpentry. And he had had the good judgment to set it on a hill, so while others were pushing drowned mattresses out second-story windows, we simply spooled up our living-room rug and propped it on the porch steps. (The couch and chairs were imponderably heavy, so we stuffed rags under them and left them to drip for a week or so.) We had been assured by our elders that intelligence was a family trait. All my kin and forebears were people of substantial or remarkable intellect, though somehow none of them had prospered in the world. Too bookish, my grandmother said with tart pride, and Lucille and I read constantly to forestall criticism, anticipating failure. If my family were not as intelligent as

we were pleased to pretend, this was an innocent deception, for it was a matter of indifference to everybody whether we were intelligent or not. People always interpreted our slightly formal manner and our quiet tastes as a sign that we wished to stay a little apart. This was a matter of indifference, also, and we had our wish.

The neighbors satisfied themselves now that we were alive, accepted with thanks a few cans of corn and succotash, glanced with polite envy at the relative comfort and order of our household ("I would ask you to sit down," Sylvie always explained, "but the couch is full of water"), and slogged home again. An old gentleman came to our door to ask for a slip of philodendron, since his had drowned, and various women came to ask after cats and dogs that they thought might have sheltered with us. Two weeks after the water was gone people began to believe that our house had not been touched by the flood at all.