

READERS WRITE
CLEANING UP

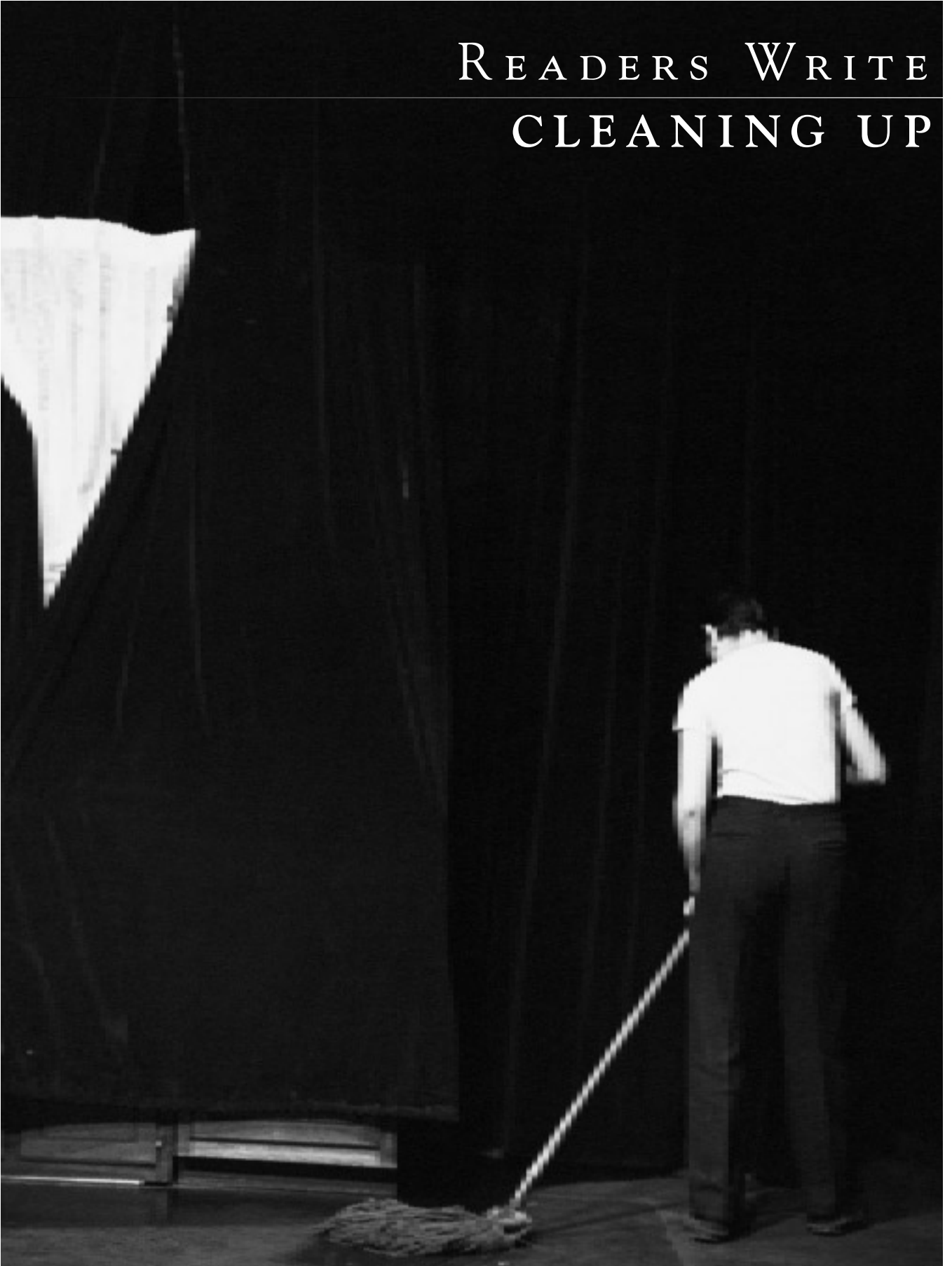


Photo: Abigail Seymour

AS A CHILD, I BECAME OBSESSED WITH straightening up. Confused and uncertain as to why things felt so wrong between my mother, my father, and myself, I started putting the house in order.

My mother never bothered to sort the utensils after washing them — she just tossed them in the drawer. At the age of seven, I stood on a phone book and meticulously sorted forks, spoons, and knives into different slots. This I could manage. This I could control.

My father was an English professor and used the dining-room table as an office: ledgers, bills, receipts, correspondence, exams, and grading sheets littered the surface, spilling over onto the floor beside his chair. (We ate a lot of dinners on our laps.) I occasionally tried to organize my father's papers. My father would stew silently, filling the room with his anger, never saying a word. Within a few days, the papers would make their way back onto the dining-room table with a vengeance.

My mother collected odds and ends in china dishes and little woven baskets, which she kept all over the house. They were filled with packages of gum or candy, bottles of hand cream, emery boards, pencil nubs, crochet hooks, newspaper clippings. She joked that you could find a jar of lip balm within a foot, no matter where you stood in the house. I tried it once: she was right.

I urged my mother to consolidate her junk. "How long have these cinnamon hearts been in here?" I'd ask her. "Why don't you throw these old Kleenexes out? None of these pens even work! Why do you do this?"

My mom would laugh at first. Then, when she saw that I was serious, she'd grow quiet, and her eyes would take on a sadness that I recognized from her bouts of depression. "I need it," she'd tell me. "I need my things."

My parents' lives were a mess, and I had somehow put myself in charge of cleaning them up. I was a young girl with shelves of books lined up alphabetically, drawers of folded underwear, and boxes of photographs in chronological order — a young girl desperately trying

to make sense of her life and her place in her family.

I still obsessively pick up and put away. I bristle if I see a stray envelope, a pen that doesn't work, a loose battery, a couple of rubber bands. Sometimes the impulse to put things in order is so strong, so panicky, it feels as if my life depends on it. I know it doesn't, though. Not anymore.

*Sarah Lucille Selecky
Victoria, British Columbia
Canada*

IN HER LATE SEVENTIES, MOM ISOLATED herself from neighbors, friends, and family. My father suffered from Parkinson's disease and lived at a nursing home. Mom's only real friends were the radio and TV talk-show hosts who kept her company. If they told a joke, gave a recipe, or offered a helpful hint she wanted to remember, she'd jot it down verbatim in a notebook or

on the back of an envelope. When she'd accumulated enough notebooks and other papers, she'd put them in a twenty-gallon garbage bag and toss it into the den or the basement.

Her split-level house was filled with those bags, and also heaps of newspapers and magazines and cartons filled with appliances and gadgets my technophobic mother would order from commercials on TV but never use.

A week after a gallbladder operation, Mom's heart simply gave out. When my wife and I came to clean up the house, the den was piled so high with bags and boxes that there was no room to walk through it. The sight of the mountains of trash was numbing. As we cleared bags and scraped the grime from the hallway to make a neat area for visitors, I suddenly understood how trapped my mother must have felt in her home, in her marriage, in her life.

Emptying out the house to put it

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

Upcoming topics and deadlines are:

ISSUE	TOPIC	DEADLINE
October 2002	Faking It	May 1
November 2002	Safety	June 1
December 2002	Against The Odds	July 1
January 2003	Scars	August 1
February 2003	Falling In Love	September 1
March 2003	Perfection	October 1

on the market, my wife and I spent weeks sifting through the heaps, each scrap of paper a muffled cry from my mother's lonely years. Most difficult was the discovery of angry letters I'd written to my mother or notes she'd made to herself about thoughtless things I'd said. Only then did I begin to feel the true pain of this needy woman who'd surrounded herself with junk as a substitute for love.

R.M. Davis
Montague, Massachusetts

MY GRANDFATHER HAD BUILT OUR GARAGE when my dad was a child, and Dad was fond of telling me how Granddad had kept everything organized in empty Prince Albert tobacco cans. My dad used peanut cans, but he was just as orderly. He taught me the proper way to sweep, how to use cat litter to clean up oil spills, and to separate nails from the rest of the trash.

My dad was particular about where he kept his tools. "Everything has a place, and it damn well better be there," he'd say. I spent the better part of my summers sweeping, sorting, and making sure that the needle-nose pliers were in the *top* drawer. I promised myself that, when I got older, I would leave everything wherever it happened to fall and learn to live with dust.

Ten years later, I had lived up to my promise — and had a string of arrests, a seven-year prison sentence, and a failed marriage to prove it. My dad was very sick with multiple sclerosis, but he stuck by me. I was beginning to realize that, if I was going to clean up the mess my life was in, I would have to sweep and sort.

Two years after I got out of prison, I had a new life, a new marriage, a new daughter, and a newfound respect for my dad. He died on December 20, 2000. I cleaned out the garage for my mom, who told me to take the toolboxes and the peanut cans.

I now live in a small apartment overflowing with toys and books. It's not always neat, but the needle-nose pliers are in the top drawer.

D.L. Moncrief
Greeley, Colorado

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I ACCIDENTALLY dropped a glass bottle of soda in a drugstore. Before we left, Mom made me apologize to the person who was mopping up the spill. I was terribly embarrassed.

Another time, I was in a drugstore looking at toys when I had to vomit. I ran down the aisles looking for Mom but couldn't find her. Remembering how she'd made me apologize for the spilled soda, I threw up into my cupped hands, rather than make a mess. Then I walked through the store, carrying my vomit in front of me, searching for my mother.

For many years, I remained self-conscious about making a mess that someone else might have to clean up. In my late twenties, I lived on a commune and often worked in the kitchen. One day, while cooking dinner for twenty people, I dropped a glass jar of dried beans on the old wooden floor. Beans and shards of glass flew everywhere.

"Don't worry," someone said, reaching for the broom and dustpan. "You already feel bad enough about spilling it; you shouldn't have to clean it up, too."

It was such a generous thing to say that I've adopted it as a rule. I try always to clean up other people's messes; they're never as difficult to take care of as my own.

Name Withheld

ON THANKSGIVING DAY, MY ELDEST brother, Michael, lay down on his bed, braced a rifle between the wall and his chest, and pulled the trigger.

My family members had drifted apart, moving to different states, but my son, Jesse, lived just a few miles from my brother, so he took on the task of cleaning up.

While I frantically called airlines to schedule a flight, my son dragged Michael's bloodstained mattress out the door. While my youngest brother prepared the eulogy, my son filled a bucket with warm, soapy water and began to scrub the blood-spattered walls, carpet, bed frame, and nightstand. While my youngest sister scrambled to pack clothes for her three small children and catch a late flight out,

Jesse covered the box spring with a clean blanket and placed pillows against the headboard. While my older sister waited at the airport for my parents to arrive, my son surveyed the room once more, making sure there was nothing he'd missed.

By the time I saw the bedroom, it looked as if Michael had merely left for vacation. A terry-cloth robe hung on the bathroom door, suede slippers waited at the foot of the bed, and a worn pair of jeans lay draped over a leather chair. There was no sign of Michael's desperation or black depression: just a room filled with the soft ticking of an antique clock and the bright white light of a winter's day.

Cathleen Francisco
Sonoma, California

I USED TO HATE COMING HOME FROM school to find my mother on her hands and knees, scrubbing the kitchen floor. It made me feel guilty. As the oldest daughter, I knew I should have helped out more around the house. But my mother didn't teach me much about housecleaning; it took less time to do it herself.

Besides doing housework, my mother taught Sunday school, led Scout troops, baked bread, sewed clothes, and canned and froze vegetables. She never hired any help. You didn't spend money on something like that, and, besides, it would have been lazy. She never said as much, but that's the message I got.

At the end of the day, my mother always put on a dress and lipstick to greet my father at the door. I adored my father. He used to tell me he'd fallen in love with my mother because of how sweet and pretty she was. He'd always finish by saying, "And you're exactly like her." I found this flattering, but discomfoting. I didn't think I could live up to his assessment.

Often, after dinner, my father would scratch my back on the TV-room couch. After a few minutes of this, he'd unfasten my bra, reach around, and fondle my breasts. Then, hearing the sounds of my mother cleaning up in the kitchen, he'd hook me back together and snap, "Now get in there and help your mother!"

I was married at a time before men would consider sharing the housework. Whenever I washed the kitchen floor, I'd leave the bucket of dirty water out where my husband would see it. Did I think he would love me more because I'd washed the floor? He never mentioned it.

Our second child was diagnosed as mentally retarded and wore diapers until he was eight. Changing diapers on a big child having a tantrum was an ordeal. One day, while cleaning my screaming son's butt, I had an epiphany. All through my marriage, I'd been trying to be like my mother. Suddenly I saw that I could not — *should* not — be like her. I started down a career path, bowed out of my volunteer work, and hired cleaning help.

Our family is much happier now that I'm not so tired, so anguished over every mess. The two women who clean for me have become great friends of mine. They fill my home with laughter and song and leave it shining. But they don't get down on their knees to clean. If anybody should get down on her knees, it's me, to them.

Name Withheld

AFTER MY PARENTS DIVORCED, MY GRANDMOTHER would clean our two-bedroom apartment to help out my mother. My sisters and I shared one bedroom, so there wasn't much space. My grandmother would throw away anything she felt wasn't necessary to survival, including cherished stuffed animals, drawings, and paintings. While moving beds, dismantling shelves, and soaking curtains, she'd shower my sisters and me with disapproval.

I'm now in my midthirties, and my grandmother continues to berate me. She's called me a "loser," told me that I am "nothing," and insisted that there is something wrong with me because I don't have a man. I have a successful career and am proud that I haven't settled for the wrong man just for the sake of marrying. Still, Grandma sees me as flawed. She has no friends, gripes constantly, and, aside from the occasional trip to the casinos, has nothing to occupy her time but cleaning

— not just her home, either, but my mother's home, my older sister's home, my home.

Over the years, we have tried to draw boundaries with Grandma, but she simply ignores us. If we tell her not to come over to clean, she shows up anyway, bearing a coffee can full of soapy water, some old rags, and a towel — all she needs to wash windows, porches, basements, pantries, refrigerators, and stoves. She sweats and grunts and says, "Well, shit," whenever she disapproves of something in our homes. She cleans from nine till five, stopping only to eat lunch and to yell at anyone else who takes a break. We've tried to convince Grandma simply to visit, offering to fix dinner, talk, or play cards. But unless there is something for her to clean, she does not want to come.

I finally put my foot down the day she accused me of using her cleaning rag. When I calmly tried to explain that I had no use for it, she called me stupid and yelled, "Screw you!" I told her to get out of my house.

It was the first time I'd ever stood up to her like that. And it worked. She left.

*Alisa G.
Denver, Colorado*

GROWING UP, I KEPT MY ROOM SO MESSY that no one could walk through it. Maybe if my room was disgusting enough, I thought, my mother would stop going through my trash and reading my journals, foraging for evidence against me. Despite my father's threats to take all my junk to the dump, I maintained my safety zone of spreading piles.

In elementary school, I would hide from my parents by climbing into my closet and burying myself beneath the clothes, toys, and papers. Sometimes it worked. Other times they would find me and yell at me. I lived in fear and shame — and a messy room.

One day, my grandmother came to our house to help me clean my room. I was scared. This was my stuff. I didn't want someone else touching it. We set up a folding chair in the middle of the room, and she sat on it all afternoon, asking where things went, which items

I wanted to keep, what we could discard. I was amazed: someone cared what I thought. We filled many garbage bags. When we finally opened the door, I ignored my mother's congratulations and my father's relieved "Finally." I had done it with my grandma. She loved me. I could trust her.

*R.B.
Portland, Oregon*

(end of excerpt)