# Cleaning Up, Dragging Under

**by Iris Monod**

‘Do you care about this?’

Mum doesn’t look up from the dining room table where she’s sitting with a Corona and a cigarette, watching the cars and people speed by on the street outside. I’m holding one of my sister Andie’s old dolls, a *Rainbow Magic* plush that used to sit watchfully on the TV stand. It’s covered in dust and insulation but not unsalvageable. Ten years ago, it would’ve been the kind of thing Mum would jump through hoops to save, instead of staring desolately out the window like the mess in here will just go away if she ignores it long enough.

‘You have to help me here, otherwise I’m just going to throw everything away,’ I say, as I pick up a water-logged copy of *Gumnut Babies* and chuck it in the overflowing bin bag next to me.

Mum gave up on looking after this place a long time ago, years before Andie died. It was like the second Andie went to the psychiatric hospital, Mum lost the only thing she was living for and promptly turned to the bottle to give her life meaning.

The house is an 80s disaster and has needed a new roof and new pipes and new *everything* since I was about fifteen. Two days ago, the ceiling collapsed from a build-up of water in the roof. Apparently, there’s been a massive gaping hole in the roof tiles that Mum never thought to get checked out, even as water started dripping down the walls and through the ceiling during thunderstorms. Now, there’s a mess of insulation, drywall, and indeterminate rubble coating the living room in a thick layer. I stand in the middle of the wreckage, trying to sort trash from treasure.

Mum used to be a collector of all things sentimental, so it’s an Andie memorial in here – old toys and books, the macaroni art she made in grade one. Andie gazes down at us from her school photos, hung in a row to show her deterioration as the Autism progressed and the *other,* the disorder we’ll never know, took hold.

‘It’s a complex situation,’ her psychiatrist said, as her symptoms evolved from social isolation to bouts of paranoia and bursts of unbridled anger. ‘It could be a myriad of things. Her Autism makes it difficult to diagnose.’

This was what split my parents apart – Mum wanted answers, hard facts, a diagnosis and a strategy to tackle the *other* and save her precious daughter. Dad was tired and angry all the time, past the point of caring and just wanting the problem to go away. They would have screaming matches in this room, not caring or probably even noticing that I was right there, watching them over the bowl of cereal I made myself for dinner.

Dad left before the idea of inpatient treatment was even contemplated. The last time I saw him, standing in the driveway on my fourteenth birthday because Mum refused to let him in the house, he promised that he'd always be there for me. But it's hard to make a promise based on something you never did in the first place, so thirteen years later I can safely assume he's never going to come through on that front.

'Just get rid of it all,' Mum says, her first words to me since I got here an hour ago. Even now, she doesn't say it to me, just to some spot over my shoulder where she's staring.

'Are you sure? You kept this stuff for a reason.'

'The reason killed herself. Just get rid of it.'

I've noticed that she never refers to Andie by name anymore – it's always 'your sister', or 'her'. It's a weird kind of disconnect for me; my whole life I was the 'sister', the 'her', the 'other one'. Mum never saw one of my band concerts or swimming competitions, because Andie always had an appointment, or was too upset to be alone, or mum was just too tired from it all to be bothered with the trivialities of her other daughter's life. It's not like she cares about me now, but the Andie of it all has died down to a background hum, so starkly different from the blaring siren that drowned out everything else for so many years.

'You might regret it later.'

'Don't tell me what I'll regret.'

I'm not sure if it's her or the alcohol talking, screaming from the mausoleum of grief she's got inside of her. She's already on her third beer since I got here and seems to be moving steadily from 'dissociated and tipsy' to 'furious and drunk'.

'Can you at least help me carry these bags to the car?'

'No.'

'Mum.' It takes everything in me to not throw a fucking *LeapFrog* tablet at her head – the same one I desperately wanted but was never allowed to use. The alcohol makes her impossible and inconvincible, even when you're trying to help her. 'The tradies are going to be here in two days, so we need to get this place cleaned up.'

‘Your fault,’ she mumbles, or I think she does, into the bottle.

‘What?’

‘I said it’s *your* fault.’ She’s well into the ‘furious and drunk’ category now as she stands unsteadily and waves the bottle at me. ‘I didn’t *ask* for you to be here. You should have just left me alone.’

‘You can’t live in a house without a ceiling.’

She scoffs and propels her body towards me in fitful movements.

‘I never asked you for *anything* your whole life, but you can’t just let me live in peace, can you?’

‘*This,*’ I say, pointing at the rubbish spilling out around us, ‘is not peace.’

‘It was until you got here!’

She braces herself on the back of the couch that separates us, less my mother in this moment than she ever has been. Unfortunately for her, she made me too clingy to keep a relationship and too wary to let any friend get too close, so there’s no-one to stop me from waltzing back into my own destruction and trying to fix something that’s been smashed up so many times that the broken pieces are just more rubble to coat the good memories with.

‘You can’t let your life fall apart just because Andie died.’

It’s the wrong thing to say, I realise as I watch her face contort into something evil.

‘How would *you* know?’ She hisses, spit and alcohol flying from her mouth and darkening the brown suede of the couch in small dots. ‘You never loved her, you never *cared.’*

‘You didn’t give me a chance! I might as well have been fucking invisible!’

‘You’re just like your father,’ she scoffs. ‘It’s always *my* fault, something *I* did.’ She leans back from the couch and starts towards the hallway in unsteady strides, sparing a longing glance for Andie’s photos on the wall. ‘You have no idea what I sacrificed to give you a good life.’

‘You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.’

She doesn’t look back at me as she walks away, and I’m glad. I couldn’t bear to look her in the eye and realise how different her perception of our lives is. To realise that we lived in this same house, saw the same things, and somehow, she thinks that at the end of it all she can wash her hands and take my walking away as a sign of getting better.

‘You think I have a good life?’

She turns from the hallway entrance, looking back not at me, but at the mess I stand in the middle of, the memories and the things to be forgotten.

'Do what you want. I don't care.'

She's gone in the next moment, disappeared to the end of the hall. Her voice echoes back to me before she cocoons herself in her bedroom.

'There's nothing here that matters anymore.'

In the middle of the night, the house is even quieter than usual. It used to be loud while I was growing up, filled with support workers and innumerable therapists who would spend hours with Andie, trying to make sense of her and how to make things better. At night, when they all went home, Andie was so tired that 'emotional regulation' wasn't a phrase in her vocabulary. The crying and yelling would start up, and the *other* would emerge with bared teeth. Before Dad left, these outbursts would lead to arguments between him and Mum and sometimes me, until one of us admitted defeat and finally went to bed.

Since Andie left, and especially since she died, Mum's life here has gotten quieter and quieter, like she's living in an Andie museum she doesn't dare disturb. It's eerie being in this house when it's so silent, so empty of everything it once was. I haven't spent enough time here in the years since Andie moved out to get used to it.

The moon casts a beam of light through the gauzy, moth-bitten curtains on the guest bedroom window. This used to be my room, but when I moved out, Mum quickly stripped the walls of their posters and the drawers of their clutter so she could turn it into a gym for Andie to use for physio on home visits. The only reason it made it to the guest room stage of life was because I cleaned out the equipment and chucked a single-bed mattress in here.

My footsteps are muffled by the worn, matted carpet as I creep down the hallway. The living room is still a mess, piled high with bin bags and debris swept into piles.

There's movement in the kitchen, a soft whining sound from the fridge's old hinges. I walk carefully through the living and dining room and peer into the kitchen, trying to catch a ghost.

In the harsh light of the refrigerator, Mum looks as tired as I feel. Deep wrinkles line her forehead and surround her eyes, cruel and unyielding. She closes the fridge door as I

get closer, and the night envelopes her so she's just a silhouette in the dark, entirely indecipherable to me.

'What are you doing?' she asks.

'Just needed a glass of water.'

There's a cold beer bottle in her hand, and three more sitting discarded on the counter. Clearly, she hasn't gotten much sleep either.

I feel her eyes on me as I move through the kitchen, fetching a glass and filling it up from the sink.

'Did you think she would kill herself?' she asks suddenly, piercing me with the question like a bullseye, even in the dark.

I turn and lean against the sink so I can look at her silhouette. 'I hadn't really considered it.'

'Hmm,' she mumbles, crouching so she can sit on the floor, her back against the cabinets, tears glinting on her cheeks in the moonlight. 'I just don't understand it.'

We've reached the 'emotional and completely wasted' stage of her drunkenness, when she spouts hysterical nonsense over sobs and the beer dribbling down her chin.

'It was too much for her, Mum. She was trapped in her brain and nobody could fix it.'

'But she left me. She left me all alone.' The words are riddled with her cries as she melts into a mess on the linoleum.

I've tried explaining many times to many people what it's like to be invisible to your own mother. It's like we're living in a simultaneous manic episode – her, so obsessed with the minutiae of Andie's life she forgets there's a world outside of it, and me, giving up and trying again a million times over for just one moment where I feel like she cares. It's a wound that time just rubs raw – I go to work and the supermarket and out for drinks with my friends. I talk about the weather and the fuel prices like everyone else, and then I go home and I'm alone and the pain claws its way back to the front of my eyes so all I can see is what I lost and what I never had. All the years I've lived like this and all the years I've still got left. I'm the one cleaning up the literal mess Andie left behind, the one paying to fix the ceiling because Mum can't keep a job and is living off benefits and my prayers. I'm the one who got her into an alcohol rehab centre and got her out of it when she called me sobbing at two am. I could do everything for her, and it would still amount to nothing. I'm not Andie, and I can't bring her back, and I couldn't fix what was wrong when she was alive. I wasn't an interesting enough child to capture

her attention, and I'm not tortured enough now to force her to care. I'm nothing to my own mother, just a girl with an annoying habit of showing up and telling her what to do.

'I'm sorry, Mum.'

I mean it, even though I don't want to. I have my own mausoleum of grief inside of me, a messy mixture of Andie, my parents, and the longing to be wanted. Of the jobs, houses and states I've moved, the friends and opportunities and things I wanted that I gave up, all to chase down a woman who just stretches that longing like an elastic that never breaks.

'Mum?'

She either can't hear me or doesn't want to – she's curled her knees up and is resting her head on them. Even though she's facing me, her watery eyes just stare into nothingness.

'Just leave me alone,' she says after a few minutes have passed, punctuated by the thick ticking of the clock on the wall behind me.

I will leave her alone, but only for tonight. By noon tomorrow, we'll be standing just a few feet away, replaying this afternoon over and over again until the living room is empty and we're both chock-full of resentment. I wonder when I take the last load to the tip, vacuum up the dust, restock the cabinets with real food, close the front door and leave it all behind, how long it will take Andie to start screaming and digging up the grave again. It could be three months before I'm back here, or I could just reach the motorway when Mum calls me with the next crisis. And even if she never speaks to me again, when I get back to my apartment, she and Andie will be there. Whether holograms, memories, or just shadows in the background, they'll watch as I send my bones out to be in the real world and wait to meet me where blood is thicker than regret and cleaning up is just a form of dragging under.