

The First Two Pages: “Limited Liability” by Sarah Weinman
From *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, May/June 2020

An Essay by Sarah Weinman

Before I get started on the story’s first two pages, I feel obligated to trace its long trajectory to publication in the May/June issue of *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*. I wrote the first draft of “Limited Liability” over a couple of days in January 2017, and it was the first short story idea I’d had in many, many, many months that actually went anywhere. But I had a book to write, in addition to getting cancer treatment, and I think I forgot all about it until later that fall, when I sent it to *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* (a quick rejection) and then to *AHMM*, which took nine months to accept it.

I’d set up an LLC —that’s a Limited Liability Corporation—in the summer of 2016 after signing the contract for the book that became *The Real Lolita*, and being the daughter of an accountant, as well as a former book industry reporter, I have a longstanding interest in tax law and corporate finances. I think the Panama Papers had also just been published when I set up my own company, which got me thinking about offshore accounts, and hiding assets, and what worse things could be hidden. And, of course, about family secrets, always the best sort of conflicts to write about.

I had the opening line right away: “The house was never hers, but she was sorry to say goodbye nonetheless.” I knew, because it’s a technique I’ve used in short stories past, that I would repeat versions of that line in subsequent sections, and that in doing so, I would be hopping from one point of view to another. But I didn’t know *which* POVs those would be. Whose house was this? Why was she sorry to say goodbye? I had to keep writing to find out:

Audrey had spent the last four weeks getting the place in decent shape. Throwing out acres of accumulated garbage, fixing the fixtures, changing the curtains, covering the furniture, selling off what could be sold. The work didn’t irritate her. Rather, it took her mind off of what irritated her. Which was, at present, being pissed off at her siblings.

Ah, things became clear. Audrey was mourning the loss of a parent, and it was her grudging responsibility to clean out the house. I based this not on my own experience—my father died eight years ago, and the house has been cleaned out, but my mother still lives there, and my sibling and I don’t get pissed off at one another, thank goodness—but on the collective experiences of so many people I knew, who had been saddled with the enormous task when their siblings didn’t seem to care enough, or if there were issues with wills, or internecine fights.

Audrey, as I would later write, had good reason to be pissed. Her brother, Lou, wasn’t pulling his weight. Her sister, Tessa, was in the midst of a divorce from a “terrible cheating husband” and had a one-track conversational mind. Being

alone in the house would give her peace and quiet—but also a respite from something far darker, which ties into the LLC idea picking up steam in my brain.

Interestingly, the suspense engine of the story doesn't really kick into gear until page five. If I wrote the story now, I'd probably streamline the first few pages, go right to where Audrey hears from her realtor that she has a buyer for the house. But I also know why I did that. Because I wanted to give a bit of insight into Audrey's relationship with her brother and her sister, to make the reader care about them as characters. Plus I knew that Tessa, her sister, the one in mid-divorce, would figure as a key character later in the story.

To tell you how she does, however, would constitute a spoiler. But I will say that coming up with how Tessa behaves, and how she looks after Audrey, ranks among the most fun I've ever had writing fiction.

The First Two Pages of “Limited Liability”

The house was never hers, but she was sorry to say goodbye nonetheless. Audrey had spent the last four weeks getting the place in decent shape. Throwing out acres of accumulated garbage, fixing the fixtures, changing the curtains, covering the furniture, selling off what could be sold. The work didn't irritate her. Rather, it took her mind off of what irritated her. Which was, at present, being pissed off at her siblings.

“I spent a week up there,” complained her older brother Lou.

“That was before mom passed,” Audrey reminded him. “And she's been gone for three years.”

He didn't have a good answer for that. Her younger sister Tessa had a better reply, because she'd been in the process of divorcing her

terrible cheating husband. The exact wording, “terrible cheating husband” in every conversation. Audrey hadn't wanted Tessa and her bitter complaints up at the house.

So Audrey was pissed. It was just as well. These recent weeks of solitary work had helped. Audrey hadn't had a chance to mourn her mother properly. She was mired in her own problems that seemed insurmountable. They weren't, but surmounting them took time, energy, and money, none of which she had much to spare. When she finally surfaced, the house was waiting. Willed to all three of them, but Tessa and Lou let Audrey call the shots.

“Do what you want,” were Lou's words to Audrey's reminder. “I have plenty.”

“What about Tessa?”

“Take it up with her. That's what you always do.”

When Audrey did in the past there would be fights. It took her aback when this time, Tessa didn't contest. “You know why,” Tessa said.

Audrey did know why.

The house their mother lived and died in was large enough to raise a brood of children. But Audrey first set foot in the house when she was twenty, the summer after her sophomore year at Smith. She'd shared a room with Tessa her entire childhood, then shared a suite with two girls her freshman year. Audrey had a room of her own now, but at least four of them could fit into one of the five bedrooms of her mother's new place.

#

Sarah Weinman is the author of *The Real Lolita*, which won the Arthur Ellis and Macavity Awards, and the editor of *Women Crime Writers: Eight Suspense Novels of the 1940s & 50s*, and *Unspeakable Acts: True Tales of Crime, Murder, Deceit & Obsession*, publishing in July. Her short fiction has appeared in many anthologies, as well as in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, which published “Limited Liability” in its May/June 2020 issue.