

# The Boston Globe

## Nuclear Reaction Garage Cleanup Gets Big Response

Robin Schoenthaler, MD

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For years before I moved to Massachusetts, I was a renter in California. Houses are simpler out there. You flip a switch, and electric heat comes out a vent. I had no idea how complicated homes here could be.

When my fantastic real estate agent realized how clueless I was, she said, “Girl, prepare for a steep learning curve.” She taught me everything I needed to learn about houses.

The “Nightmare House” I had been renting here taught me a lot, too. The washing machine went bad when my son was 2 weeks old. Here I am, brave enough to have a baby on my own, and now I have no washing machine? And then more bad news a week later: Friends and I sat in the kitchen looking at 10,160 pictures of my son as water from a busted dishwasher hose puddled under our shoes. We also had a lot of snow in 1996; when it finally melted, the basement flooded. My son crawled over coiled hoses as I learned how to fix a sump pump — and eventually gutters, drains, you name it.

Sometimes I liked being on the steep end of the household-management learning curve. At other times I felt like Dutch Warrior Maintenance Girl, plugging fingers in the dike. When it came time to buy a house, I wanted trouble-free. I made a list of must-haves and got them: My new house in Arlington never took on water and had updated appliances. I settled in with my now toddler and a newborn, and everything ran as it should. My learning curve days appeared to be over.

A few years later I finally took a late-afternoon moment to deep-clean the garage. I swung a broom under the old workbench. Out rolled an ancient Ping-Pong ball, a lost screwdriver, a hockey-sized disk — hints about the previous owners.

I carried the Ping-Pong ball and disk down the driveway. Halfway there I noticed the disk’s labeling: “226Ra.” On the other side there was the classic radiation-protection symbol. Slowly, very slowly, it dawned on me: The disk in my hands contained radioactive radium.

I moved down the driveway like someone in a bomb movie. I leaned over — carefully — and put the disk on the curb. I told my kids to go inside. They instantly and atypically did just as I said.

I pulled out my phone and imagined the upcoming scene. I am a radiation oncologist; I knew exactly what would happen. I would dial a disbelieving 911 dispatcher who would say, “You found what?” Dozens of people would arrive with trucks and sirens — firefighters, police, and hazardous materials experts along with some highly trained scary-radiation guys. I would have to cancel my dinner plans, my neighbors would freak out, and my kids were going to miss their bedtime.

I took a deep breath and dialed 911. Everything I pictured came true.

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*Page 2 of 2*

The Fire Department drove up with trucks ablaze, and the police cordoned off my driveway with yellow crime-scene tape anchored to my flowerpots. The Board of Health guy arrived “just in case your house needs to be quarantined.” A hazmat truck lumbered up, blinding us with klieg lights, and the Incident Command team walked the neighborhood, telling people not to panic but to stay the heck away. This is Boston: My neighbors came over anyway. One friend, bless her, whisked my kids away to her house.

Everybody changed into bright red jumpsuits, purple gloves, and red hard hats with lights. It looked, except for the color scheme, exactly like a scene from “ET.”

One of the red-jumpsuit guys must have drawn the short straw because they suited him up with an air tank, gas mask, headset, and two layers of red gloves. He ducked under the tape and walked toward the curb. We all stood in a huge circle — guys in red jumpsuits, big firemen in yellow turnouts, state officials in khakis, and me — and watched him, all alone, lean over the disk.

Eventually, the Nuclear Incident Assessment Team (who knew there was such a thing?) determined the disk was some kind of old gauge. While it was emitting a tiny bit of radiation, there was no danger an inch or two away. What it was doing under the workbench in a suburban garage is anybody’s guess, but at least it wasn’t harming my family as we cluelessly slept in our beds yards away.

So now I have added to my must-have list for my next house: great drainage, good appliances, no radioactive disks. Owning a house, it’s a learning curve.