

Chapter 1: The Sink That Beat You

The water in the left basin has not moved in ninety seconds. You watched it. You stood there with a dish towel over your shoulder and waited for the small whirlpool that used to happen, and it did not happen. The surface just sat there, grey, with a crescent of soap foam against the stainless steel, sinking so slowly that you could not honestly say it was sinking at all.

I have stood in front of that same basin. In my own kitchen, about eleven years ago, I timed it with the microwave clock because I wanted to know whether I was imagining things. Two minutes and ten seconds to clear four inches of dishwater. I was not imagining things.

Here is the part nobody says out loud: that sink is not broken. Nothing has cracked, nothing has failed, no part has worn out. The pipe is exactly the pipe the builder installed. It is simply narrower on the inside than it used to be, and it got that way one dinner at a time, over years, in a process so slow that you never once noticed the day it began.

The two-minute drain and what it costs you every day

Two minutes does not sound like a problem. It sounds like a nuisance.

But a slow drain is not a single event. It is a tax you pay every time you use the room. You rinse a pan and wait. You stand back from the sink so your sleeve does not dip into the standing water. You start doing dishes in two shifts because the basin cannot take a full load at once. You stop running the disposal when guests are over because of the smell that comes up when the water finally goes.

Professional drain cleaning in 2026 runs roughly **\$147–\$352** per visit, with a typical job around **\$246** (Thumbtack, 2026-06; HomeGuide, 2026-01).

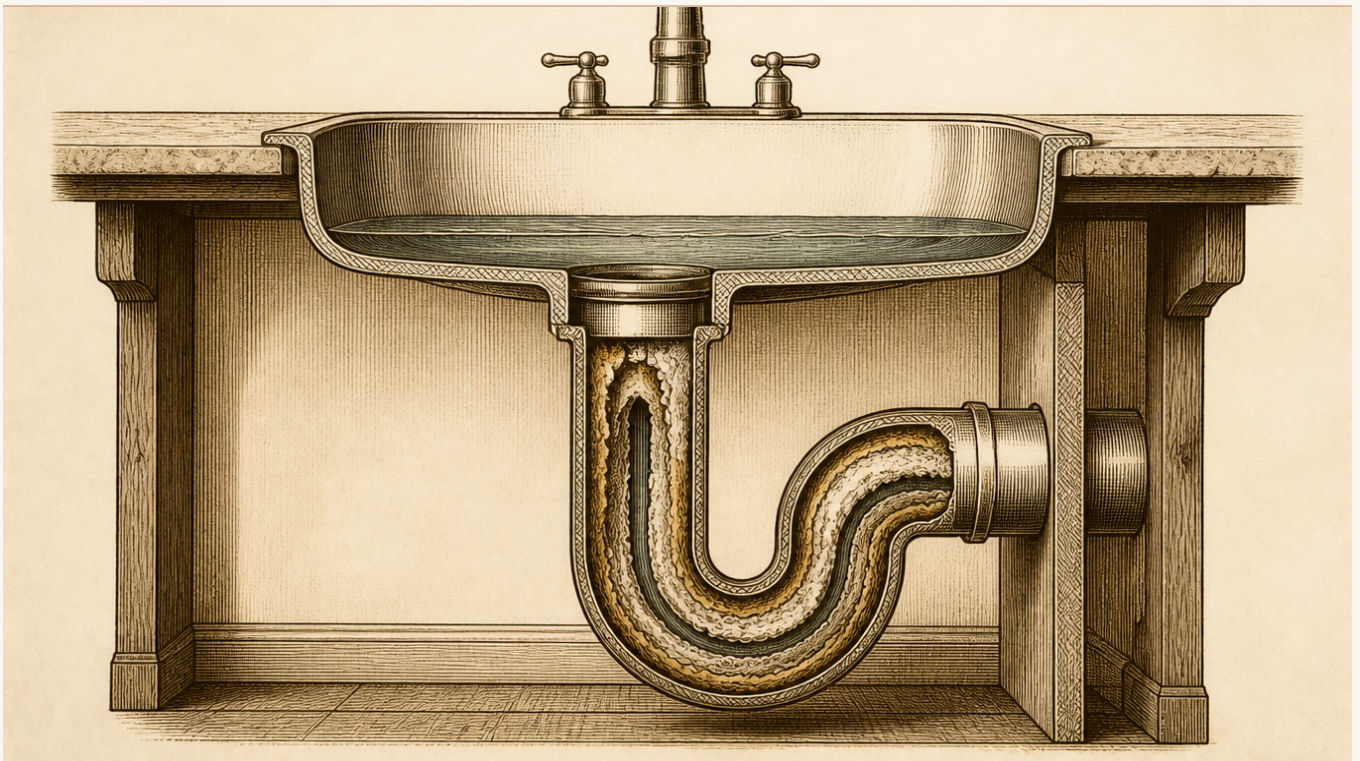
Then one evening the water does not go down at all, and you make the call, and a man arrives with a bucket. That is the invoice we will take apart in Chapter 2, minute by minute.

There is a second cost, and I think it is the heavier one. Every slow drain is a small daily message that your house is winning. You owned this place for thirty years. You raised children in it. And now a two-inch pipe under the counter has you rescheduling your evening around it.

Do this now

Fill your kitchen basin with four inches of water. Pull the stopper. Time it on your phone or the stove clock. Write the number on a scrap of paper and tape it inside the cupboard door under the sink.

That number is your baseline. Everything in this book gets measured against it. A healthy kitchen drain clears four inches in well under thirty seconds. If yours takes two minutes, you are not being fussy. You are reading an instrument.



Why the last four bottles failed

Open the cupboard under your sink and count. Most people I talk to have between three and six part-used containers down there. A gel drain opener with a warning label you did not really read. A box of baking soda gone hard at the corners. A jug of white vinegar. Maybe an enzyme powder somebody recommended.

Each one of those bottles failed for its own specific reason, and the reasons are worth knowing, because they explain the whole book.

The fizz did nothing because it cancelled itself out. Baking soda and vinegar neutralize each other in the drain, producing carbon dioxide, water and a dilute salt solution rather than anything that cuts grease (Balkan Plumbing, 2024-01; Chemistry Cachet, 2023-05). The bubbling is real. It is also, for a real clog, mostly theatre. We will spend Chapter 3 on this, because it is the single most believed piece of bad advice in the American kitchen.

The boiling kettle moved your problem instead of solving it. Hot water can soften a grease plug, then the fat re-solidifies further down the cooler run of pipe, which can make the blockage worse rather than clear it (Tom's Guide, 2026-01; Homes & Gardens, 2026-01).

The caustic gel worked once and then attacked your plumbing. Sodium-hydroxide and sulfuric-acid openers are corrosive to PVC, galvanized steel, copper and iron, and are most damaging when poured into a fully blocked drain where they sit still against the pipe wall (A.J. Perri, 2023; NBC News Select, 2025). They are also genuinely dangerous to you. The CDC's toxic-substances guidance is blunt about sodium hydroxide: "Direct contact with the solid or with concentrated solutions causes thermal and chemical burns leading to deep-tissue injuries"⁸. If you have one of those bottles under there right now, leave it closed, do not pour it, and do not open it near your face. Chapter 20 covers getting rid of it safely.

The enzyme powder was used wrong. On DIY forums, people asking about enzyme cleaners are told repeatedly that the product needs warm, standing contact time overnight with no water use afterward, which is exactly why most first attempts appear to fail (DoItYourself.com Community Forums).

Notice the pattern. Three of those four failures are not really failures of the product. They are failures of **contact**. Something was poured in, and it left before it had time to do any work.

A drain remedy does not fail because it is too weak. It fails because it did not stay in the trap long enough to touch the deposit.

That principle has a name in this book, and you will see it again in Chapter 10: **the Contact-Time Rule**. Strength is what the label sells you. Time is what actually removes grease.

What this book will and will not promise

Let me be exact, because the bottles under your sink were not.

What is actually in your pipe is mostly fat. The U.S. EPA has estimated that roughly 47% of sewer blockages and overflows are attributable to grease from restaurants, homes and industry⁵⁵, and peer-reviewed reviews put FOG deposits behind roughly 30–40% of sewer clogs (Science of the Total Environment, 2023-11). New York City's water utility puts it in plain domestic language: "Grease poured down kitchen sinks can cling to the inside of household plumbing, and over time, can build up and clog pipes completely"³⁵.

Fat is a solvable problem. That is the good news, and it is the reason this book exists.

What a clogged drain costs in 2026



What a clogged drain costs in 2026

Here is my promise. This book will give you exact amounts, exact temperatures, exact waiting times, and the plain reason each one works. Four common items do nearly all of the work. Their cost per use is measured in cents. Washing soda, the workhorse, runs about \$3 to \$5 a retail box (LowFodmapEating, 2025).

Here is what this book will not promise.

It will not promise that a powder dissolves hair. Hair is keratin, a tough structural protein, and household peroxide only bubbles at the surface of a compacted hair-and-soap plug (Hockers Home Services, 2025). One homeowner on DIY Chatroom described trying baking soda and vinegar on an annual hair clog and summed up the result in three words: "That did nothing." The replies all pointed the same direction — physical removal.

It will not promise that pouring anything replaces a plunger or a hand tool. It will not promise that a single night fixes a pipe that has been closing for twenty years. And it will not promise that you never call a plumber again. Chapter 25 tells you exactly when to pick up the phone, and what to say so you are not oversold.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ Time your kitchen drain tonight and write the number inside the cupboard door; that baseline is how you will judge every method in this book.
- ▶ Grease, not mystery, is the main blockage: the EPA attributes about 47% of sewer blockages to fats, oils and grease⁵⁵.
- ▶ The fizz of baking soda and vinegar neutralizes itself into salt water and does not cut grease³.
- ▶ Do not pour caustic openers into a standing blockage; they sit against the pipe wall and corrode PVC, copper and steel (A.J. Perri, 2023).
- ▶ Judge every remedy by contact time, not by how dramatic it looks in the sink.

On the AnandTech forums, one long thread on a clogged kitchen sink reads like a diary of relapse: the drain clears for a week or two after a home remedy, then slows again, because the grease film on the pipe wall was never removed. That relapse is not bad luck. It is the clue.

Which raises the question I want you holding as you turn the page. If the clog always comes back on roughly the same schedule, what exactly did the man with the bucket remove for \$150 in twenty-two minutes?