

# THE TIMES

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## Clearing a house after a parent's death

**It's one of the hardest tasks that you will ever have to tackle but with a little help you can cope**



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It is a truth universally acknowledged that a middle-aged person still in possession of her parents, at some point, will be forced to confront the death of said parents — and will then have to empty a house.

No point pussyfooting around it: this may well be the hardest job you ever do. The trick is to keep moving. Pause as little as possible; your brain has to be engaged, but for the most part keep the setting on low. Do not examine every object, piece of paper and fragment of your past as if it contains the secrets of the Universe. That way madness lies.

“If you wouldn't rush back into a burning building to save it, you can probably get rid of it,” Jen Doman, my new best friend and a professional organiser, said to me more than once.

My dad died about 18 months ago, of a brain tumour, six months after it was diagnosed; at the end he was able to be at home, which was a source of comfort. That home was the two-bedroom Manhattan apartment into which he moved with my mother in 1965, two years before I was born; it's where I grew up and was a place I always loved.

I went back there a lot, since my parents had acquired the little studio flat next door. When we went back to visit my husband, Francis, and son, Theo, and I had our own cosy nest in the city, a big improvement on camping out in my old bedroom. It also meant that after my father died, and the larger apartment became a bit too much for my mother to manage, there was a simple solution available.

Sorry. Did I just type in “simple”? How foolish of me. Logical, I meant to say; the move was not simple, not least because the process had to be begun from an ocean's distance away. And no, since you ask, I don't have any brothers or sisters. What I do have, however, is a bevy of good friends — and certainly I have learnt more about the power of friendship in the time since my father's death than I ever expected to.

One of those friends is Maxwell Gillingham-Ryan, the founder of a stylish, helpful website called [apartmenttherapy.com](http://apartmenttherapy.com); when I told him that I was going to have exactly one month — from March 8 to April 8 — to clear everything out of our old apartment in preparation for selling it and also to move my mum to the studio next door, he gave me the best advice anyone has ever given me. Hire Jen M. R. Doman, he said. She's an organiser. She will help.

Now, I wouldn't normally think of myself as the sort of person who would need to hire an organiser. In the first place, I'm organised. Next, the idea of hiring an organiser seemed extravagant. I imagined that Paris Hilton might have an organiser. Or Ivana Trump. But me? Surely not. And yet the scale of the task confronting me was causing me sleepless nights.

My mum is not in good health; her ability to help with the job would be strictly limited. Furthermore, there are a great many practical details of Manhattan life that I no longer have a handle on at all.

How do I discard furniture that we don't want? How can I find a good painter? A good moving company? An electrician? How on earth would I hold all the things I had to remember in my poor little head? Enter Jen Doman, founder and proprietor of the aptly named Brooklyn-based company Get It Together!

Doman, a former journalist who is the daughter of an architect, brought a range of practical skills, New York City know-how and emotional smarts — the latter including prescribing gin-and-tonics at crucial moments and recommending a superb spa — to this scary job that somehow, miraculously, made it seem manageable.

She broke it down into daily goals; she sourced outside help; she dealt with the management of my mum's building; on days when she wasn't working with me she e-mailed reminders; on the days she was working with me she kept the pedal to the metal, as they say.

Motivated by Doman I was able to pack boxes and clear out closets from dawn till dusk; there were even times when I had fun. If she caught me lost in an indecisive reverie she'd gently chivvy me on; and she was as good at handling my mum as she was at handling me.

"But what about the expense?" I hear you cry. A fair question, if you're not Hilton or Trump. Doman charges \$650 (£425) a day, and if you think that sounds pricey, think about what an hour in the beauty salon or with a personal trainer costs. Think about your own time, and how valuable it is to you; having left my job and my family behind in London, I could not afford to extend my trip to New York. Without Doman I would have had to. Apart from all practical help, I was glad, too, to have someone sympathetic and yet objective for what was an unsettling and difficult task.

At the end of the month, my mother was cosily settled in what had once been my Manhattan pad and was now her home. The apartment I grew up in had been emptied, cleaned and painted. I had got through a bottle of gin and several quarts of tonic. I'd found the letters my dad wrote to me when I was miserable at summer camp; the pack of cigarettes he'd saved, his last pack, when he quit smoking — I'd been 7. I found the pictures my dad had taken of his new bride when they moved into their apartment more than 40 years ago, my mother on the terrace overlooking the Hudson River, gazing adoringly at my dad before I'd even been imagined.

In taking on this task I mourned my father as I had not done when he'd died. I'd grown closer to old friends — who also lent unstinting aid — and made a new one, in Jen. I'd found the time to see the sun rise through the cables of the Brooklyn Bridge, to hear Philip Glass play live with Suzanne Vega and be reminded why I love the glittering city in which I grew up. I pined for my husband and my son, and knew the joy of a spring reunion.

So, if such a job faces you? Well — hire Doman. Yes, she travels. However, help is available closer to home: the Association of Professional Declutterers & Organisers UK. Sue Kay, who runs No More Clutter and is one of the founders of the association, says that there are now more than 120 members of the organisation, from Scotland to Cornwall.

Keep your sense of humour — or try to, at least. You won't always succeed. Be kind to yourself, pause to do things other than work, or soon you won't be able to work. Go to the movies. Treat yourself to a massage.

Eat well. Have a book to hand to whisk you off into another world. Remember that your true store of treasure is not the stuff you hang on to but the memories you keep in your head and in your heart. They will never break, or get lost, or tarnish. They are always yours to keep.

Get It Together!, [getit-together.com](http://getit-together.com)  
Declutterers & Organisers UK, [apdo-uk.co.uk](http://apdo-uk.co.uk)  
[nomoreclutter.co.uk](http://nomoreclutter.co.uk);

*No More Clutter* by Sue Kay (Hodder, £8.99). To order it for £8.54 inc p&p call 0845 2712134 or visit [timesonline.co.uk/booksfirst](http://timesonline.co.uk/booksfirst)

#### **Dos and don'ts for movers:**

Do recognise that a move is a new beginning.

Break old household habits in your new space.

Do understand that you can't pack up years of items in days. Four months before your move, spend 30 minutes once a week discarding items that you no longer need.

Do create a moving timetable two months in advance. For free advice visit [getit-together.com](http://getit-together.com) Do get estimates and references from at least three moving companies before selecting one.

Don't underestimate how emotionally and physically taxing moving can be.

Don't let the movers place all the boxes in the largest room. You will end up transporting them to the appropriate rooms.

Don't feel pressure to unpack it all at once. Start with the kitchen, bathroom and any child's room.

Don't assume that children and pets will acclimatise quickly to their new environment . Spend extra time with them.