

The House That Cleans Itself

Mindy Starns Clark



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To protect the privacy of individuals who completed the author's housekeeping surveys and/or shared their stories, names have been changed throughout this book.

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THE HOUSE THAT CLEANS ITSELF

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*Dedicated with much love to my dear friend
Kay Justus.*

*Thanks for putting up with me as a roommate all those years ago,
in college and beyond,
when housekeeping was a vague intention,
the vacuum cleaner mostly served as a coatrack,
and the oven was for hiding dirty dishes.*

That was then, this is now...

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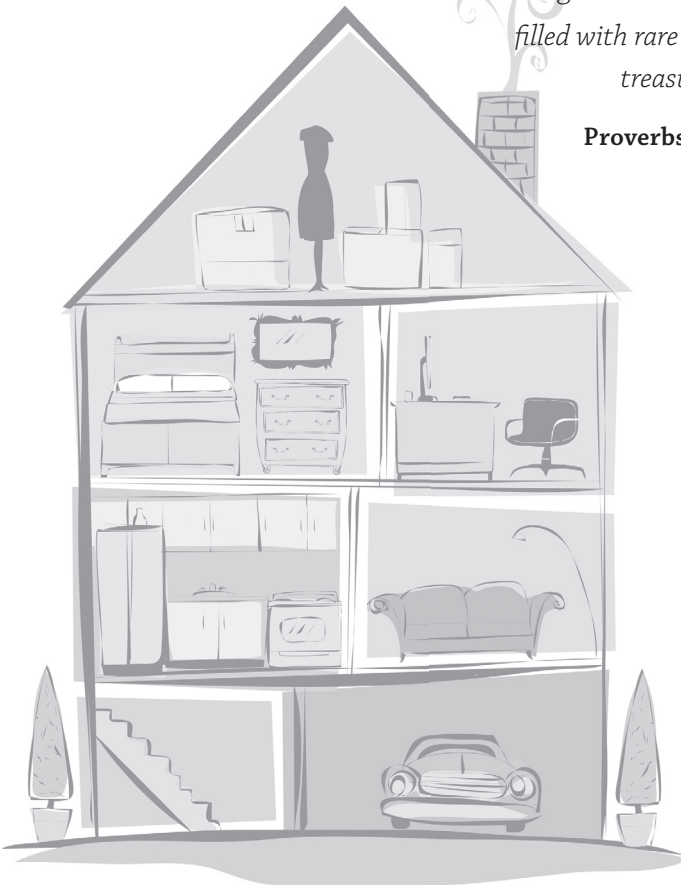
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Part 1

Stop and Consider

*By wisdom a house is built,
and through understanding
it is established;
through knowledge its rooms are
filled with rare and beautiful
treasures.*

Proverbs 24:3-4



What to Expect from This Book

The House That Cleans Itself is a how-to guide that reveals, step-by-step, a unique and creative system that will:

- ◆ take a house that *tends to be messy* and turn it into a house that *tends to be neat*
- ◆ take a cleaning routine that takes up *far too much time* and turn it into a cleaning routine that is *shockingly fast*
- ◆ turn family members' *mess-inducing behaviors* into *naturally tidy behaviors*, often without them even realizing it
- ◆ take a life where *the minutes are eaten away* by ordinary household tasks and turn it into a life with *time to spare* for things that really count
- ◆ take a person who *feels like a failure* in caring for his or her home and change that person into someone who is *unburdened, unashamed, and successful* in caring for the home

As you can see, the House That Cleans Itself System is designed to make your home easier to keep clean, easier to manage, and easier to enjoy than ever before.

A Better Way

*Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story...
Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind.*

PSALM 107:2,8

To say I've struggled with housekeeping my whole life would be an understatement. As a child I had to carve paths through my toys just to get into bed at night. Later, as a young woman on my own, I was still carving paths, ones that wound throughout my apartment. It's not that I liked living that way, but I just couldn't seem to get a handle on all of my stuff, even as an adult.

In my late twenties, once I was engaged to be married, I decided it was time to get my act together. I naively assumed the mere resolve to change was all it would take. With enough willpower and determination I really would be able to keep a neat and orderly home for the first time in my life.

Oh, boy. Was I in for a surprise.

Let's just say that once I was married and settled into my first home, I really did try. I tried as hard as I could, in fact, and of course my sweet husband pitched in as he was able. But with law school each day and work each night, he was juggling more than I was, so the bulk of the cleaning fell to me. It didn't take long to see that the battle, once again, was going to be lost. Somehow I managed to keep things from getting to the path-carving level, but keeping our home clean remained a daily struggle

between the mess and me. As it turned out, willpower and determination were no match for my innate tendency toward clutter and chaos.

Adding two children into the mix over the next few years only made a bad situation worse. I loved being a wife and mother, and I wanted our home to be a place of peace and rest, not disarray and disorder. But when it came to housekeeping, the children's added mess turned out to be the straw that broke the camel's back, especially because I was also working a part-time job and trying to become a writer on the side. With no spare time, no energy, and no cleaning skills, I would have raised a white flag if I could, but staying home with the kids meant forgoing certain luxuries such as maids or cleaning services. Besides, despite my past failures and my limited homemaking skills, I persisted in the notion that I could do better if only I tried harder.

So I tried harder.

Yet chaos and disorder continued to reign. Oh, there were a few successes along the way—the occasional spring cleaning that was actually finished before the following winter, the rare party or gathering where we didn't have to lock half the doors for fear our guests might see the messes behind them—and these small victories offered us glimpses of hope amidst the failure. But there were still more failures than successes.

Time Marches On

Fortunately, homemaking became somewhat easier as the kids grew older and started school, but I never did get a handle on how to keep a house consistently clean and organized. The truth was, no matter how hard I tried, the place was messy far more often than it was neat. We were always losing things, stepping on things, or having to buy new things because we couldn't find the things we already had.

At least I was finding success in other areas. Chief among them was when my lifelong dream came true and I sold my first novel to a publisher. They wanted an entire series, in fact, so practically overnight I went from being an at-home mom with a little part-time job and a big

dream to an at-home mom working 50 to 60 hours per week at that dream as a professional author. If things had been messy before, my wonderful new career turned our world into an even bigger nightmare of disorganization, clutter, sticky cabinets, and laundry mountains.

We managed to muddle through for a few years until I was contracted for even more books. When we saw that my schedule wasn't going to clear up any time soon, we knew the time had come, at long last, to get a housekeeper. Finally, relief was in sight! Rescue was here! After years of struggle, our troubles were over...or so I assumed.

With visions of my own House Beautiful dancing in my head, I promptly hired an expert to come clean for me once a week. (Of course, that meant clearing mountains of stuff out of the way every time before she got there, but it was worth it.) She was indeed a veritable tornado of clean and never failed to make our home shiny and sparkly and smelling of lemons and freshness. Once she was gone, the place always looked beautiful.

After just a few hours, however, it would begin to fall apart again. By the next day, I would look around and find it hard to believe that a housekeeper had ever been there. Week after week after week, our home would become a disaster—*within 24 hours of having been cleaned!*—almost as if the stuff I'd put away before she came simply waited in hiding until she was gone to explode back out again.

I consoled myself that thanks to her efforts, at least there wasn't much dirt under all that clutter, but that thought was little comfort when faced with the chaos that stretched from one end of our home to the other, despite having weekly help.

What were we doing wrong?

Why couldn't we keep our house neat?

Housekeeping-wise, I felt as though I'd hit rock bottom. Tormented by what I saw as my ultimate failure as a woman, wife, and mother, I kept wondering what was the matter with me, where I'd gone wrong.

Why was this thing that seemed so easy for other people so difficult for us? For me?

Believe it or not, the answers to those questions—indeed, the solutions to my entire, lifelong housekeeping problem—were already beginning to fall into place, right under my own nose. I just hadn't realized it yet.

I Saw the Light

The change began with my sixth book. First in a new mystery series, *The Trouble with Tulip* features the adventures of Jo Tulip, a household hints expert who uses her unique knowledge of cleaning to solve crime. Despite my own messy world, I'd always had a strange fascination with household hints, and I thought this would be a clever and story-rich setup for a resourceful sleuth.

That series was great fun to write but also a real challenge because I wanted to derive key plot elements from my heroine's line of work. Doing the research required me to read numerous books on cleaning and organization, trolling for ideas on clever plot twists that could come from actual tricks and techniques of housekeeping. By the time I was halfway through researching the second novel in the series, *Blind Dates Can Be Murder*, I had read more than 40 books on housekeeping. In a sense, all that reading turned me into a veritable expert on everything from stain removal to household filing systems. Yet my own home was still as messy as ever.

As I continued to write adventures for my housecleaning-savvy heroine, I kept thinking about the irony of that. How could so much head knowledge *not* translate into the reality of a clean home for me? Ruminating on that paradox, I suddenly had an epiphany, followed by even more epiphanies, some of them quite shocking. Like a series of mental dynamite, it was as if a steel door blew open in my mind and the answers I'd been seeking my entire life revealed themselves at last. Finally, I understood truths that had eluded me all those years.

With these truths in hand, I began to figure out how someone like me—someone really, really bad at housekeeping—could get a house clean and keep it that way regardless of his or her own shortcomings.

At first it was just a theory, one I quietly tested in my home in a few small ways. When those attempts proved successful, I expanded this approach throughout my house and could see by the proof of victory that I was onto something big. For the first time in my life, my house was *staying* clean and organized—without much effort from me. Ecstatic, I foisted my plan on a few messier-than-average friends, who were astounded to find my ideas worked in their homes too.

After that I took things online. I asked questions, took polls, formed Internet groups. Word spread. More houses got clean and stayed that way. More people who had always thought of themselves as housekeeping failures slowly became housekeeping successes. Their homes were staying clean. We were all overjoyed.

Somehow, by the grace of God, I knew I had come up with a brand-new method for getting a house clean and keeping it that way, a method I had not run across *in more than 40 books on housekeeping*. Best of all, my unconventional new method worked for people who struggled in this area, perhaps for their entire lives. Naturally messy or naturally neat, it didn't matter. My plan simply worked. Our house was clean. Our struggle was over at last.

Summoning my nerve, I decided to take my plan even bigger and write a book about it. Fortunately, my publisher loved the idea. The original version of *The House That Cleans Itself* came out in 2007, an unassuming little book with a nifty cover and a catchy title and the most unlikely of authors ever to pen a housekeeping guide.

The Little Book with a Big Impact

My first book signing for *The House That Cleans Itself* was in a mall, and I can still remember the people who passed by, spotted the poster featuring the book's title, and burst out laughing.

"A house that cleans itself? Yeah, right. I'll take one of those!"

Most of them were being sarcastic. Yet over the next year enough people gave my concepts a chance that the book quietly became a best-seller. It was a mainstay on racks in grocery aisles and general stores

around the world. It was translated into other languages, used for Bible studies and book club selections, and wait-listed at libraries across the country. To my delight, devotees of the plan started popping up across the web, ordinary people who had discovered the book and decided to write blogs and track their progress online with commentary, descriptions, and plenty of before-and-after photos.

I found myself being interviewed for articles about cleaning and organization, quoted in magazines such as *Family Circle*, *Woman's Day*, and *Parents*. Can you imagine? Me, of all people? It was both surreal and deeply gratifying.

Even more gratifying were the letters and e-mails I received from readers—hundreds of readers who wanted to ask questions or let me know the plan was working for them or simply thank me for helping them get their homes in order after a lifetime of failure and guilt and shame. Most of those letters were thrilling, though some were also quite sad—marriages strained to the breaking point by battles over mess. Hoarders desperate for release from their bondage of stuff. Clutterers who battled depression and were terrified to get their hopes up yet again just because they had found a new plan that sounded good. Time after time, I could feel the anguish coming through their words. I recognized that anguish.

It was my anguish. It was all our anguish, all of us who had spent years burdened by this problem that finally had a solution. And to think it all started with one small series of mental epiphanies. In the next chapter, I'll tell you all about those epiphanies and how they led to this life-changing plan. I'll explain what a House That Cleans Itself is, how it works, and how you can make it work for you.

Whether you struggle with housekeeping or not, this book will be a real eye-opener for you. In fact, what you hold in your hand is probably unlike any other cleaning book you've ever seen. Unique as it is, I think you'll find that my ideas make sense—perhaps in a way no other cleaning advice ever has before. And that's the point, as you'll learn in the next chapter. If you struggle with cleaning, or even if you have a handle

on cleaning but sometimes find yourself thinking, *There must be an easier way*, I'm here to tell you there is. You're holding it in your hand. So...

Are you ready to conquer your mess once and for all?

Do you want to get your home twice as neat in half the time?

Believe it or not, you *can* break free from the bondage of your own chaos and clutter, even after a lifetime of struggle. The system works for me. It's working for tens of thousands of others as well. Now it's your turn.

Keep reading to find out how you, too, can have a House That Cleans Itself.

My Most Embarrassing Messy House Story —Why Else Would You Bother?—

BY MARLEE S.

One morning when I was feeling particularly energetic and ambitious, I smiled at my four-year-old daughter across the breakfast table and announced, "Today I'm going to clean this place, top to bottom."

"Yay!" she replied, eyes lit with excitement. "Who's coming over?"