Chapter One

Two Worlds Begin Moving

The first world is the world of loss. It contains the phone calls, the family arriving from out of town, the service, the stories, the food, and the silence that settles after everybody leaves. It contains questions no form can answer. Who will call on Sunday now? What happens to the holiday everyone gathered at her house to celebrate? Why does his jacket still hanging by the door feel more important than almost anything else in the room?

The second world is the world of administration. It contains certificates, notices, accounts, property, insurance, passwords, mail, bills, taxes, and court procedures. This world begins moving whether the family feels ready or not. The lights remain on. The dog still needs breakfast. A mortgage payment does not pause because everyone spent the previous week at a funeral home. The practical world can seem rude that way, although it is not trying to be. It simply keeps time differently.

A practical question can catch you off guard. Somebody wants to know about the car, somebody else has found a bill, and a third person is asking whether anyone has fed the dog. You may be startled by how ordinary it all sounds when nothing feels ordinary to you.

People sometimes feel guilty discussing insurance two days after a funeral. It can seem too soon to be thinking about the house when you're still trying to understand that the person

who lived there is gone. Yet you want the place looked after. Checking the locks or making sure the dog is fed may be one thing you can manage that afternoon.

You might expect to have some time to grieve before the estate needs your attention. Instead, you're choosing a photograph for the memorial program when the insurance agent asks whether the house is occupied. Your brother is cleaning out the refrigerator while somebody texts him about the will. Even looking for a utility statement can take longer than you expected. You open a drawer and find birthday cards, eyeglasses and a note written twenty years ago. A few minutes later you're sitting on the floor, still holding the note. The account number can be hard to remember just then.

One family we will call the Harrisons arrived at their mother’s home with a sensible plan. They would spend Saturday finding important papers and making a list of the property. By ten in the morning, the kitchen counter held six casseroles, three flower arrangements, a pharmacy bag, twelve sympathy cards, and a folder labeled IMPORTANT. The folder contained appliance warranties from 1998, a recipe for lemon bars, and an expired coupon for pudding. The useful documents were later found inside a sewing basket. Nobody had failed. Their mother had organized her life according to a system that made sense to her, which is another way of saying that it made no sense to anybody else. The family adjusted. One person preserved the unopened mail for the authorized representative. Another took notes. A third made sure everyone ate something that had not arrived in a foil pan.

By the end of the day, they had found the homeowner's insurance information, located the car title, and learned that the cat would eat only one very specific brand of food. The inventory wasn't finished. They did, however, know where to find some of the papers they would need next.

At first, “How are we going to finish all this?” is almost too much to ask. Start with what needs attention today. Has somebody fed the animals? Is there an urgent problem at the house that needs the lawful owner, occupant or appropriate professional? Are the important papers somewhere they won't be thrown out with the grocery circulars? Bigger decisions can wait until the right person has authority and enough information to make them. The legal steps depend on the estate and local law. Your cousin's insistence that something be done before lunch doesn't, by itself, make it urgent.

You may find that a person who cannot face the closet can help with something else. Sorting a mother's clothes and photographing a room are different afternoons, even when they happen in the same house. Someone else may be willing to keep unopened mail safe for the authorized representative but unable to talk about selling the house. Ask what each person can manage. There may be useful work they can share without taking over decisions that belong to the executor.

Keep important papers together, and make a note of anything moved and why. If something at the house needs attention, get it to the person who can properly arrange the work. Write down the questions you can't answer yet. And accept the casserole, even if the refrigerator already looks like a lasagna museum.

The First Weekend

The Harrison family did not call what they were doing probate. Not that first weekend. They called it getting through Saturday. Their mother had died late Thursday, and by Friday afternoon the refrigerator contained three casseroles, two fruit trays, and one bowl of potato salad nobody could identify. Her son Daniel kept answering the door. Her daughter Renee sat at the dining-room table with a notebook, writing down names because she

knew thank-you notes would eventually matter to somebody. Their niece Tasha moved between rooms taking photographs of flower cards before the cards became separated from the flowers.

At some point Daniel found an insurance notice beneath a grocery advertisement. He held it up and asked whether it was important. Nobody knew. Renee placed it in the notebook and wrote “house” beside it. That small act did not settle the insurance, but it kept the notice from returning to the pile. Tasha asked whether she should photograph the thermostat setting and the food in the freezer before people began carrying things home. Daniel almost laughed at the idea. Then he remembered his mother had a freezer in the garage too.

By Sunday evening they had not opened an estate, identified every account, or decided what would happen to the house. They had fed the cat, found both freezers, collected the mail, and agreed that nobody would take anything from the house without telling the others. They had also learned that their mother owned fourteen serving spoons and apparently distrusted matching food-storage lids. For a little while they could talk about that, while Renee made another page in the notebook.

Your first weekend may look much like that. You start a list, stop to greet a neighbor, answer a question about the service, and notice the porch light has been on since Thursday. The list is still there when you come back. Deal with immediate care and safety needs through the people who are authorized to handle them. Larger decisions need the right authority and enough information. You don't have to decide what happens to the dining room while people are still eating in it.

Renee went home Sunday night and discovered that her own house had continued operating without her cooperation. Laundry filled a chair. Her son needed a signed school form.

Her husband had bought milk twice and forgotten bread. She set her mother's notebook beside the school form. Both needed her attention, and she still had work in the morning.

The following morning, estate papers went into one portable file box and family questions went into a note on Renee's phone. Daniel agreed to keep track of immediate concerns at their mother's house and report back instead of trying to solve unfamiliar problems himself. Tasha had permission to save the flower-card photographs. Renee could leave for work without putting every loose paper in her purse.

At lunch, she opened the notebook and found a sentence Tasha had written beneath the list of visitors: “Grandma would be mad about all this potato salad.” Renee laughed loudly enough that a coworker looked over the cubicle wall. She explained, and the coworker told her about the seven hams that had arrived when his father died. They spent the next ten minutes comparing what people had brought. Neither had planned to talk about their parents over lunch.

After the Visitors Go Home

For the first few days, somebody is usually coming through the door. They bring dinner, take out the trash or answer the phone while you finish another call. Then the suitcases go back into the cars. The house gets quiet, and whoever lives closest discovers that the cat, the mail and Thursday's repair appointment are all still there. Everybody has been grateful for the help. They may not have talked about when it ends.

Imagine a daughter who has been sleeping at her father's house while relatives visit. On Sunday, her brother thanks her for keeping an eye on things. She hears thanks for the weekend. He believes they have agreed that she will continue staying there. By Wednesday, both are irritated. He asks whether the repair company has called. She asks why he thinks she would

know. They are arguing about an agreement neither one remembers making because neither one actually made it.

It helps to have that conversation while everybody is still there. Before your brother puts the last suitcase in the car, ask who is coming back tomorrow and what they've actually agreed to do. You may discover that nobody has agreed to Thursday's appointment. At least you can bring that to the person responsible and work out an arrangement. Otherwise Thursday arrives with a repair company on the porch and two relatives waiting for each other to answer the phone.

If you can stay until Tuesday, say Tuesday. If you can feed the cat for two evenings, don't let that quietly become an offer to take the cat home. This can be surprisingly hard to correct once people have begun thanking you. You don't want to sound unkind just when everyone is telling you how wonderful you are. Explain what you meant while there's still time to make another plan.

Going back to work can make these conversations awkward. Your coworkers may think the difficult part ended with the funeral. Your relatives may think you can make a few calls at lunch. By noon you've eaten half a sandwich and used the rest of the break trying to reach someone who is also at lunch. Tell the family when you can take a call and what needs to go straight to the authorized person. You don't owe everyone a minute-by-minute account of your workday before you're allowed to be busy.

Remember the relatives whose days are harder to see. Someone at home may be caring for a child or an ill spouse. Someone who has retired may have medical appointments they haven't discussed with the family. You can ask whether they're free on Thursday without first deciding that they ought to be. Let them tell you what they can do.

Even a clear arrangement can fall apart. A child wakes up with a fever, a shift changes, or the airline cancels the flight everybody was counting on. First find out what still needs doing and who can cover it. If you're the person who can't come, tell the others as soon as you know. They may be disappointed, but they have a better chance of finding help on Tuesday than ten minutes before the appointment.

And give the next helper enough information to be helpful. If your sister is meeting an approved repair company, she needs the time, the company's number and an explanation of what has been authorized. She also needs to know whom to call if the person at the door suggests more work, and what paperwork to bring back. Being there to open the door doesn't necessarily authorize her to approve a repair. Don't leave her to discover that from the driveway while she tries four relatives who aren't answering.

Sometimes the person going back to the house would just like company. Last Saturday the kitchen was full of voices. This Saturday they can hear the refrigerator running. There may be no heavy work to do, but they don't want to go in alone yet. You can offer to come along without offering to manage the house. Half an hour together may be all they're asking for.

Children notice when everyone leaves too. They may wonder whether they're still allowed to visit or talk about the person who died. The adults keep discussing bills; perhaps the child thinks the time for stories has ended. Tell them they can still ask about a photograph or mention something they remember. They don't need the private estate details. They may need to hear that you are tired, and that they haven't done anything wrong.

Before the cars leave, take a little care with the things piled by the door. Visitors' bags, borrowed bedding and food containers can get mixed up with belongings that haven't been

reviewed. Someone can pick up the wrong bag quite honestly. The authorized person can help sort out what belongs to whom while everybody is there. That's easier than trying to describe a blue bag to three people who have already driven home with one.

There will probably still be things on the list when people leave. Write down what remains, who has agreed to help and when that help ends. Then let your relatives say goodbye and get on the road. Someone has a long drive, someone has an early shift, and the person staying behind would like to know when you're coming back. That last answer may matter more than one more hurried job before you leave.

Monday Still Arrives

The first business day after a death often surprises families. The weekend may have been filled with visitors, food, phone calls, and decisions that felt immediate. Then Monday arrives carrying ordinary obligations. Somebody has a staff meeting. A child needs to be picked up from school. A prescription is ready. The electric bill is still set to draft from an account nobody yet understands.

Renee drove to work with her mother’s notebook on the passenger seat. At the first red light, she remembered the funeral-home form she had promised to return. At the second, she remembered that Daniel was supposed to check the garage freezer. At the third, she decided she would remember both without writing them down. By the time she reached the parking lot, she remembered only that she had forgotten something.

Those are the thoughts that turn up when you're buying groceries or trying to get back to sleep. You remember a question for the attorney just as another conversation begins. Later, when you have the notebook open, you can't remember

the question. It's frustrating, especially if you're usually the person who remembers things for everybody else. Give yourself somewhere to write them down without expecting to solve each one as it arrives.

Renee used one page in her notebook for whatever she was afraid she'd forget. The car title went on it, along with a reminder to find the cemetery receipt. She came back to the page when she had time to look at the records and decide what needed doing. It wasn't the estate's final record, and it didn't have to be tidy. She just needed to stop relying on her memory at red lights.

Daniel used a different method. He left himself voice notes while walking through the house. His first three were useful. The fourth was seven minutes of pocket noise and a conversation with the cat. Tasha showed him how to add a short label before he saved each note. He complained that the system required more technology than the moon landing. She reminded him that the astronauts also used checklists.

A birthday or anniversary can undo a plan that seemed manageable last week. You agreed to go through a drawer on Tuesday and then remembered Tuesday would have been your mother's birthday. Tell the person coordinating the work. Perhaps someone can come with you, or that particular job can wait. An actual deadline still needs proper attention; an ordinary household errand may allow more choice. Ask before trying to get through the afternoon without letting anyone know why it's hard.

With the questions written down, Renee could look at what needed attention that day. A leaking pipe couldn't wait. A question about the dining table usually could. Notices with deadlines needed to reach the appropriate adviser promptly. She could come back to the notebook instead of trying to remember every concern while doing something else.