The stuff in our lives

Elaine and Susie Beaupit live in a large house with a white picket fence in a typical New Jersey suburb.

They enjoy shopping, texting their friends and watching sitcoms on cable TV. Being sisters, they also argue a lot! In fact, Elaine and Susie appear to be normal American teenagers, although appearances can be deceptive. The truth is that everyday life for the sisters is far from normal: things which we might take for granted, like cooking a meal or (1) picking out an outfit, are incredibly difficult for the girls. Why? Because their mum, Sharon, is a compulsive hoarder. ‘We spend most of our time in a small area in the living room, just in front of the TV,’ complains Susie. ‘Mum’s stuff has (2) spread out everywhere. It’s taken over our lives.’

In Sharon’s house, every room is crammed with piles of records and CDs, mountains of laundry and stacks of magazines. The kitchen is impossible to use, so meals are cooked in a microwave in the garage and dishes are washed in the shower. Compulsive hoarding can be an extreme condition and this family has (3) run out of space. But while it’s true that most of us would never hoard to this extent, the fact is that many of us buy more things than we need and, once we have them, we’re reluctant to throw them away.
According to anthropologists, people have been collecting stuff for centuries. About 15,000 years ago, primitive communities began to lose their nomadic ways and rely on stored food, resulting in a change in our material culture. Permanent homes were built as people amassed more objects, and these things soon became impossible to carry around. The loss of nomadic ways was not just thanks to agriculture, but also to the number of possessions people had.

Back in New Jersey, Elaine is feeling increasingly frustrated by her mother’s junk as she searches for a place to do her homework. In the end, she uses a heap of laundry as a temporary desk. ‘After a while you just put up with it,’ she sighs. ‘You start thinking it’s normal.’ In some ways it is normal, because unfortunately our modern consumer culture actively encourages us to accumulate. Advertisements convince us that we can’t live without certain products and imply that these things can change our lives. It’s very difficult to resist this culture, to opt out and buy less. In the USA, the amount of stuff people own has doubled since 1947 and, according to a recent study, when the average American family moves house, an incredible eight tonnes of belongings moves with them.

So why is it so difficult to get rid of things? One explanation is that people are naturally resistant to change and prefer things the way they are; the end result is loads of clutter, taking up valuable space. Psychologists also talk about the ‘endowment effect’, or the way we attach more value to things once we own them. For example, you might not use your old MP3 player, but it still has ‘value’ because it belongs to you. Ownership is as important as usefulness. But as Elaine says, ‘Mum needs to ask herself: if I didn’t have it, would I go out and buy it? If the answer is ‘no’, then she should bin it.’
‘Sentimental value’ is another reason for not junking things. Many of the objects we keep have connections to a place, an event or a person in our past, such as birthday cards from a grandparent or an old football shirt from an important match. These objects, like Sharon’s record collection, have emotional currency, which is why we never (5) throw them out.

Luckily, Elaine and Susie’s story has a happy ending. Sharon has finally got help with her hoarding and has slowly started to (6) clear out their home. ‘She had to,’ says Elaine, ‘or our family would have fallen apart.’ It’s been a few months, but the girls are (7) helping out and things are gradually getting better. ‘When I walk through the house now, I can find the things I need … . They’re not hidden by junk any more,’ smiles Elaine. ‘The next stage is to invite my friends round,’ she adds. ‘I’m really looking forward to that. I just hope they don’t bring much stuff.’