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## Havoc and I, We Have a Deal



by **Marni Jameson**

First, I had to make a deal with havoc.

I accepted that havoc is a much larger force than I would ever be—and that’s saying something. But, we agreed, if havoc would grant me the illusion of household control, I would stop trying to abolish it. I would let it live and play at the periphery of my home—in check. I would stop deluding myself into believing that I could conquer it, and instead would follow the advice in that prayer, “Accept the things I cannot change.” This meant finding an honest place between reality and that ideal that home design and organizing experts perpetuate.

First, I tried their way. When I started taking my house back, I bought a passel of home design and organizing books. (Wrong! Only buy one book. Buying a dozen creates clutter!) Just buying them made me feel virtuous, the

way buying a diet book does, like I was doing something about the problem. Next, rather than incorporate their advice seamlessly into my life, I did what journalists do when they don't want to deal with their problems firsthand. I interviewed the authors and experts, and dispatched the best nuggets of wisdom in my weekly column. When I actually test-drove the advice to see what stuck, I felt guilty when it didn't.

Although I did uncover a lot of useful advice that really worked, I also uncovered many pieces of advice that didn't. Some were outright preposterous. I started this journey of learning to live beautifully with *Them!* and with havoc by putting some of those wrongheaded notions up front, so you know what this book won't be about. Here are my major findings about what's wrong with the advice out there, and a bit about what's right:

***Major Finding #1: The more you read organizing and household management books, the more you wonder why there hasn't been a public outcry against these experts.***

Here's just a sampling of what they dictate: Grocery shop only once a week—with coupons and a list. Have a place for everything and put it there. Handle every paper only once. Make your kids think housework is fun. Do a little laundry each day. Keep closets neat and pared to only items you have worn over the past year. Whenever you buy something, get rid of something. Have a streamlined filing system so you can put your hands on every family member's birth certificate, Social Security number, passport, and first-grade report card in under three minutes. See what I mean about an outcry? Either these experts are lying about the fact that they really do all this, or their families have run from their houses screaming.

***Major Finding #2: Organizing rules sound great for those who are single and celibate, which, trust me, you will be if you practice them.***

For those of us who live with others, havoc is a constant. Households have havoc raisers. At my house, we have the sprawler: My oldest daughter, Paige, has never encountered a piece of unclaimed real estate she didn't overtake. She has at least one garment in every room, and her schoolbooks can be found everywhere this side of the Mississippi. My younger daughter, Marissa, is the creator. She likes projects, the stickier the better. She cooks. She crafts. She does not clean up. She cries artistic freedom, which explains why there's cookie dough on my ceiling. And we have Mr. Oblivious. My husband, Dan, was one of five kids, born within seven years. Forced to choose between sanity and decorum, his mother chose the former, so the house became a sort of functional bedlam. Not only is Dan used to chaos, but he also thrives in it.

I, meanwhile, find comfort in order, unlike anyone I live with. My mother was an army nurse, so you get the picture. Beds will have hospital corners! All this

proves that, like most families, we have no more in common than a few strands of DNA and an address. But, because I yearn for a clean, tranquil, well-organized home where I can artfully coexist with *Them!* I continue to look for that sweet spot between what experts recommend and behaviors that won't give everyone I live with facial tics. For example, although I advocate for a clean home, I would never tell you that your floor needs to be clean enough to eat off, because, seriously, who is going to eat off your floor, except maybe the dogs, who, frankly, lick a lot worse by choice?

***Major Finding #3: If you're the resident neatnik living with slob who maintain that they are okay with dirt and disorder ("Mess? What mess? We don't care if the house is a mess."), you have these choices:***

- ***Crack the whip.*** At the risk of inviting a mutiny, tell everyone to step it up or you will cut off food and Internet access. 6 House of Havoc
- ***Be a martyr.*** Silently (I'm so not good at silent) and slavishly clean up after everyone, so you get the house your way.
- ***Live and let live.*** Adopt a can't-beat-them-so-join-them attitude. Let the house go to heck, and get used to it. (I have a friend who has a sign on her front door: "Before you come in, let me explain. I have two dogs, three cats, four kids, and a job." Understood.)
- ***Hire help.*** Weigh the costs of a housekeeper against the pluses of less arguing, less stress, and lower family-therapy bills.
- ***Do a little of all the above.*** That's what I do. I kick my family into action occasionally and do more chores myself because having a nice home, apparently, is my own quirk. I let some standards slide, and periodically ignore unmade beds, buried closet floors, and sinks I could write my name in. And I have housekeepers come once every two weeks, bless them. These compromises work for my havoc-raising brood.

***Major Finding #4: To keep havoc respectfully in its place, you don't need to obsess to the point of being a fun-sucking domestic dictator, but you do need a plan for taming the following five areas in your home, areas we'll discuss in detail in the chapters ahead.***

- ***Time:*** Every family member can have a planner, but you also need a master family calendar. This way everyone can see that the trombone recital lands the same night as the soccer play-off, which falls the same evening as your annual business meeting.
- ***Stuff:*** We all deserve a public flogging for our consumption habits. Having too much stuff is bad for our cupboards, wallets, planet, and peace of mind. Figure out why you acquire, accumulate, and can't let go, then deal with it.

(We have ways of making you purge.)

- **Space:** Manage it wisely. Decide what should go where and what doesn't belong at all. I'm not saying all your drawers need pristine dividers separating pens from paper clips. I am saying don't put your toothbrush in your underwear drawer with the screwdrivers.

- **Meals:** Creating a menu plan and stocking items you need for the week makes a sickening amount of sense. It saves time, stress, and money. At my house, I make daily store runs, and Dan does the occasional big shopping, buying stuff that doesn't add up to a meal. However, we know there's a better way, and are working on this.

- **Housekeeping:** Tomorrow really doesn't have any more time than today. (Isn't that rude?) So invest time daily to keep housework from growing like the monster under the bed. Every day bust some clutter and some dirt. Then commit a couple hours a week to deep clean. Most days I try the nightly sweep. Before bed, I blitz the house, toss the newspaper (there will be one tomorrow), put remotes in their bin, clear dishes, wipe counters, put kid stuff in kid spaces, and clear my desk. So tomorrow I start the next day with a jump on havoc.

Marni Jameson is the the author of *The House Always Wins* and *House of Havoc* , as well as a journalist and nationally syndicated home columnist who writes regularly for the *Los Angeles Times*, *Woman's Day*, *Family Circle* and other national magazines. She lives with her family in Denver, Colorado. From the book *House of Havoc* by [Marni Jameson](#). Excerpted by arrangement with Da Capo Lifelong, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Copyright © 2010.

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