

# [Canada's baby boomers are leaving behind tons of stuff. Are their kids ready for the Great Junk Transfer?](#)

The Globe and Mail

May 21, 2022 Saturday

Ontario Edition

Copyright 2022 Factiva®, from Dow Jones  
All Rights Reserved

## FACTIVA®

©2022 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.

### THE GLOBE AND MAIL\*

**Section:** NEWS; Pg. A12

**Length:** 2520 words

**Byline:** By ERIN ANDERSSON, Staff

## Body

---

Last fall, Kevin Cameron stood in the doorway of his parents' two-storey saltbox home in the woods on the South Shore of Nova Scotia, the place he'd built with his dad when he was a teenager and woken up to during snowy family Christmases with his own kids. The silence felt like a punch in his gut. For the first time, his mother was not coming around the corner to greet him. His father was not in the basement, tinkering with an engine. He had died that summer after a stroke at the age of 87, and his mom, 81, was now in a nursing home, losing her memory of the house. Yet the rooms of the place were just as they'd always been, as if his parents were only running errands in town.

Wandering through the house, he saw the kitchen shelves loaded with bowls and dishes, rooms crowded with furniture, books and knickknacks, closets packed with clothes, drawers stuffed with toothpicks and razors, a full set of mouldy encyclopedias on a shelf. His dad's workshop was filled with tools, machine parts, cardboard boxes of greasy washers. There were sheds in the backyard cluttered with chainsaws and bikes and broken microwaves, along with a 1950s backhoe his father had insisted he inherit, even though Mr. Cameron, an artist, has absolutely no use for it.

This was only the beginning. After a long search, Mr. Cameron would eventually find the registration for his parents' car - which he now had to sell - inexplicably buried in a plastic bag stuffed with unused Christmas cards, the kind that charities send in the mail. There were keys that matched no locks. Sales receipts that went back to 1948. His parents had kept everything and thrown out nothing.

How could a house that felt sorrowfully empty also be so overwhelmingly full?

"And then it hits you," Mr. Cameron says, "all the work ahead." He saw the months of lost weekends, the five-hour round trips he would have to make from his own home in Greenwich, in the Annapolis Valley. This was the

Canada's baby boomers are leaving behind tons of stuff. Are their kids ready for the Great Junk Transfer?

inheritance he never wanted: a burden that would rob him of time, just when his dad's death was reminding him, at 58, of his own mortality.

Anger and resentment sliced through his grief.

Why had his parents left him with all this mess?

Over the next 10 years, Canadians will inherit an estimated \$1-trillion - the largest transfer of wealth in history. But all those investment portfolios and real estate assets being passed on by aging parents will also come with piles and piles of stuff with nowhere to go.

The parents of baby boomers, the oldest generation alive today, were savers, having learned in the lean times of war and the Great Depression to treasure what they owned. Their children were consumers. Together, they will leave behind houses jammed with mahogany dining room sets, silver platters, crystal figurines and all manner of tchotchkes that their kids don't want. And, even if they did want them, this Great Intergenerational Dump is happening just as millennials are facing a housing crisis, which will leave many of them either renting or living in much smaller homes.

Grandma's massive china cabinet is not going to fit.

So what's the result? A booming business for junk companies willing to take it all away. An exponential growth in storage lockers that are never emptied. Endless Saturdays of garage sales and trips to the landfill. An exhausting cycle of cluttering and decluttering. For every painting you'd fight your siblings for, there's a Hummel collection - the one your parents said, "would be worth something someday" - that's going in the garbage. Because, let's be honest, we all already have too much stuff as it is.

Sorting, culling, and tossing all that "accumulation of life," as the junk experts call it, makes for lucrative business. According to an investor presentation this month, Storage Vault, the country's largest publicly traded storage business, went from owning 10 locations in 2014 to 197 in 2022 - with a combined capacity of 10.8 million square feet of space. The company's share price has soared from 50 cents to more than \$6. The association of Professional Organizers in Canada, which started in 1999 with 30 people, now has 600 members ready to help with the handwringing over those cherished Royal Doultons.

Five years ago, Deb Darbyshire, co-owner of the Calgary franchise of Just Junk, estimates that she'd get a call once a month from adult children looking for help cleaning out their parents' home. Now, she picks up a new job roughly once a week. About one-quarter of the families tell her: "We don't want

any of it. Take it all."

But as Kevin Cameron discovered, there's an emotional challenge to dealing with the treasure and trash that your parents leave behind. It's not easy to throw away these pieces of them.

"What if, once they died, and we got rid of their stuff, I could never find my parents again?" worries Julia Ridley Smith in *The Sum of Trifles*, a collection of essays about cleaning out her parental home.

Sons and daughters who have faced the chore describe wrestling with how to do it properly, respectfully and fairly (also cheaply and quickly) while ghosts hover. The whole process shakes awake buried sorrows, sibling rivalries, family dysfunction. It is never just about the the stuff.

"It's just so easy to be immobilized by what to do with some stupid thing you wouldn't even give a second thought to if you saw it on the side of the road," says Lori Walker, who cleaned out her parents' home with her sister in 2019. Now when her friends mention the same task lies ahead for them, "I feel my stomach turn over."

If it was just junk, it would not be so hard. But possessions have meaning; they tell stories and reinforce our memories.

Canada's baby boomers are leaving behind tons of stuff. Are their kids ready for the Great Junk Transfer?

How we treat the stuff of past generations - and how we divest our own belongings to the people we love - offers a lesson in what we value too much and perhaps don't value enough. What matters in the end? What endures? That's the challenge: what to take - and what to leave behind - when you close the door on your parents' home for the last time.

One afternoon, in Perth, Ont., Danielle Robichaud and her mom, Donna, sat on the floor of Donna's home, trying to sort through a pile of her late father's possessions, when they came across the award plaque.

Donna, planning a move closer to her daughter, was determined to downsize properly; when her husband died in 2013, she had moved most of his belongings from British Columbia to Ontario. It had been too hard to part with them then, but now she was ready to let them go - with Danielle's permission. Danielle, an archivist at the University of Waterloo, would drive up on weekends to help her mother keep what mattered and discard what did not.

The wooden plaque - bestowed on Danielle's father at a car show - was unexpectedly complicated.

She didn't want it, but she felt torn: Her dad had cared enough to save it. Donna, having already carried around a box of bowling trophies for more than 30 years, wanted her daughter to decide its fate.

As an archivist, Danielle is an expert on stuff.

She thinks like a curator who, faced with only so much space, has to be cutthroat about what will hold its future value. Letters and diaries are golden because they reveal a person's thoughts and character. But a trophy is a title without a story, unable to say what made someone a good bowler or why they loved cars. Its value peaks at the moment of delivery, then steadily diminishes, gathering dust in the back of a closet, until a decade after the recipient's death, it's dead weight in your daughter's hands, headed for the trash. "It just becomes this thing filled with a lot of guilt." Danielle knows it wasn't rational. But "I felt badly throwing it out."

What was the most precious item that she brought home from her father's stuff? His favourite mug that she now uses for her morning coffee.

"There is something deeply comforting about drinking from it," she says.

That's another common theme that emerges: what your loved ones will save of you may be the last thing you imagine. Not the china tea pot or the crystal bowls, but the scratched-up cooking tray you used to make their favourite squares, the Corningware the family took camping; the twist of driftwood you found together on the beach one summer - items that fall into the categories of useful, portable, original and wrapped in nostalgia.

But dividing up objects isn't easy, unless siblings can work together. "I said many times that when mom and dad go, it's gonna be a bloodbath," says Lori Walker, who worked for five months with her sister, Sandy, to clean out their parents' home in Victoria. "As it turned out we were a spectacular team."

Sandy, a retired therapist, credits that to the two sisters working on their relationship before their mom died. Otherwise, she says, "it just takes one person to say, 'I'm going to back off. I'm going to let go of this.' " The pair also tried to respect their different emotional responses. Lori saw that it was painful work for her sister, who compared the job to disturbing a memorial. When the owner of a local consignment store came to the house to assess their mom's beloved antiques, Sandy wept with relief that they'd found someone to treat the furniture with reverence and care. But Sandy also made room for Lori's frustration - like when her sister needed to vent about why their mother had left them to deal with the dusty collection of PetroCanada drinking glasses, or their dad's work shed cluttered with lidless plastic containers and old spoons.

Since Lori, an instructor at Capilano University, had to travel from the mainland, the larger load fell to Sandy, who lived in Victoria. She found people to take the jigsaw puzzle collection, donated the freezer to the food bank and arranged for a charity to send their father's tools to El Salvador.

Over the weeks that they worked on the house, they created piles for recycling, for garbage, an entire room for the stuff that was TBD. When they both wanted an item, such as a vase, they would put it on the floor and collect all the

Canada's baby boomers are leaving behind tons of stuff. Are their kids ready for the Great Junk Transfer?

vases, then take turns choosing. For the most part, their contrasting tastes worked in their favour. In the end, they agreed to share one item: a plastic plate filled with coloured sand that looked like ocean waves when tilted, which had fascinated them both as little girls. It was not, Sandy notes, one of the items her mother had stamped with a sticky note that read: "This might be valuable."

Both Lori and Sandy understand why families get a junk company to just take the stuff, especially when you live far away, when the job is too overwhelming. But Sandy also says that sorting through your parents' things, if you have time and energy, can result in special moments - bonding with your sister, or finding a card you once gave your mom, scrunched in the bathroom cabinet, on a day when you are especially missing her. (That card is one of the possessions Sandy describes when asked for a special item she saved from the house.) Meanwhile, Lori came home with duffle bags of coins and stamp albums, now stored in her basement, saved for the prospect of a buried treasure. She will go through them, she says. Someday.

For both sisters, finally closing the house felt like freedom. "It didn't finish the grief," says Sandy, "but it was like, oh, now I can breathe differently."

Donna Robichaud, 65, has begun to feel that same lightness, as more stuff leaves her house. It's amazing how quickly you forget the very item you hemmed and hawed about giving up. Still, culling your own life isn't easy. "It does take a few steps to get there," she admits. When considering an item's fate, she asks: how does this fit in with who I want to be - what I want to do - during the time I have left?

She also cringes when she hears her friends say they are leaving the job to their kids. "I think that's selfish. I look at my own house, and if somebody told me I had to pack it all up because someone died, it would be exhausting and I would be angry."

It can also make an old grief painfully fresh.

Rachel Berman's parents had been planning to downsize when her mom became ill and died. Her father refused to leave the house after her death or change anything inside it. So, years later, Dr. Berman, a professor at Toronto Metropolitan University, and her brother were left to sort through their family possessions when her dad died in late 2020.

Packing up her mom's things felt like losing her a second time. "The wound was ripped open for me, like boom, here we go again."

Life is unpredictable - parents need to move into a home sooner than they think, an illness takes its terrible course, a pandemic complicates the usual business of grieving and settling affairs.

For Brenda Thompson, a writer and publisher in Perrotte, N.S., cleaning out her parents' trailer was hindered by leaky pipes and an ice storm. She started in March - she remembers stepping into the cluttered home and feeling physically sick - and has been going nearly every day since. "It feels like we are in an ultra marathon; one problem gets fixed, another one pops up."

She's already thinking about all the "crap" she is hanging on to for no reason. "When I finish with Mom and Dad's house, I might as well keep right on going, and start in the attic of my own home," Ms. Thompson says.

The hardest of offspring will persevere, whatever the mess. Nine months after his father died, Mr. Cameron figures that he and his wife, Beth, are about one-third finished.

The house pulls at him, like a heavy chain.

"Compared to what is going on in the world, this is nothing," he says. But if his parents had settled their own affairs better, "it would have made my grief easier." And protected his memories of them.

Canada's baby boomers are leaving behind tons of stuff. Are their kids ready for the Great Junk Transfer?

He has a ritual now, each time he leaves the house in the woods - a way, he explains, "of detaching myself from the resentment, the sorrow, the questioning." He puts on the security system and locks the door on the stuff that still needs sorting. "See you, Dad," he whispers. "I miss you."

So sit your parents down, Mr. Cameron advises, and have The Talk before it is too late. Giving away your worldly possessions isn't easy: it means living in a universe that is shrinking, not expanding. But there can be meaning and purpose in that awareness, suggests Laura Gilbert, author of *The Stories We Leave Behind*.

She wrote the book after cleaning out her parents' home forced her to consider her own possessions in a different light: Were they treasures or burdens? More importantly, when her kids opened the door to her house when she was gone, what story will she have left them? She began to think of her belongings as auditioning for a part in the movie version of her life, and at workshops, she coached people to wander through their homes, like members of a film crew, and think about the narrative their possessions tell. "If you think about the themes you leave behind, you get to shape those memories," she says. "By not leaving a disaster, the kids walk in knowing what was important to you." Also, she points out, children who can wander through a carefully curated home are less likely to crumble on the doorstep and call the dumpster company.

## Notes

---

PUBLISHER: The Globe and Mail Inc.

**Load-Date:** July 12, 2022