

SO HARD IT HURTS

by Anne-Julia Price

June 2008

Here I am, in my Lafayette apartment, staring catatonically at opened boxes. Piles of clothes, memory-drunken bottles, stuffed animals, books, and more overwhelm me. It's the first time I've ever had to filter through these boxes in any room except my old one at Nana's house in Oakdale. That front room that lodged everyone: me, Mom, Uncle Johnny, various uncles, and cousins. The room that invited uneasy ghosts, palmetto bugs, an occasional rat, mothballs, and clinging dust bunnies from windowsills covered in crispy sheets of aged plastic blocking the whistling winter wind. Old postcards of my dream city, Paris; faded Veterans' poppies in honor of Pawpaw; laminated puzzles of cats and dogs playing with hot pink yarn; and torn-out pictures of beautiful models and actresses I once aspired to become covered the cracks in the walls, stamping my mark. I was there last. And the familiar discomfort was normal, our kind of normal. Our family home.

Now all of the boxes that were in that room are here in this apartment, wrenching me back to the past, mites tickling my throat and eyes. The room in the house is nearly empty. Every stitch of personality has been ripped from those bedroom walls. The removal of the thread-splitting spiral rug and slate orange tile flaked in off-white revealed a hardwood floor no one ever knew existed. Only the black sofa Nana and I purchased together. Her emptied dresser. My old stereo, the stereo I never said he could have. His power tools. A bookcase. All sit in a room aching to be personalized. A room that has been raped of its individuality and love, no matter how codependent or bipolar or full of spirits or apparitions or hallucinations it might have been. Staring at it all in this apartment, I realize that everything is different. That this is now home,

but not really. That something strange is about to happen. Something I need to be strong for. Something I'm not prepared for. Dragging me by the feet. Sucking me in. And I cry. And I mourn. For this impending change. In everyone and everything.

May - July 2008

Nana is diagnosed with pneumonia. My mother, uncle, and I are afraid, feel helpless. She's in and out of the hospital, the nursing home, her house, and then yet another hospital. The doctor's strong antibiotics give her C-Diff and wipe out her system. They don't realize it, and give her more. Mom takes off work to help her. The vulnerability in Nana's eyes is blinding. I wipe away the diarrhea when the nurses don't come after she's repeatedly called them. Uncle Johnny retreats into a mad world, becomes furious, powerless. In the house, he takes everything from the old bedroom, the dining room, living room, and Nana's bedroom and stacks it in the den. The shag carpet from the living room floor is ripped up to reveal neglected hardwood. He paints the rooms white, "healthy like a hospital," he says. He thinks we're responsible for her being sick. He threatens to kill us. Mom and I beg the doctors, the nurses, the police, the Council On Aging, the city council neighbor, all of them, to help us. We need someone to listen. No one does.

One night around 1978

There's a Cajun superstition about the *rougarou*, hairy with a human body and the head of a wolf. When I was a little girl, about 7 years old, I dreamed about him:

The twisted rug, permeated with sooted memories, coils around and around beneath my legs. In front of me, a TV is perched atop a rolling metal stand. The music gets louder, and I think it's the scary music coming from the TV, but it's not. I turn my head toward the back room. I can hear him coming for me. My feet, like weights, push me up and drag me into Nana's room, the safe place, the safe room, the room where nothing and no one can get us. I jump onto Nana's bed. He follows me. He grabs my feet. My kicking only excites him. His long, stringy, black hair slimes

down and around his furry bearded face. He is big, ravenous. I scream and scream, but no words come out. I wake up, lying on a cot in Nana's room, still trying to make a sound. Paralyzed.

August 29, 2008

ALERT: Tornado WARNING / For S. and E. Rapides Parish and Allen Parish until 8:15PM. Stay indoors away from windows.

Nana, although still sick, returns to her house, to keep the peace. There's a hurricane approaching. But Johnny won't evacuate and won't, can't, give her the care she needs. When we call, he either screams into the phone or hangs up on us. Mom, living 45 minutes away, and I, within an hour and a half, meet up, go to the house hoping to reason with him, and bring a police officer with us. Nana tells the officer she's fine, and he leaves. He doesn't check with Johnny. He doesn't ask us if we're ok. He. Just. Leaves. To escort someone to a ballgame.

Approximately 10 minutes later

Johnny, at nearly 300 pounds, lumbers from the back room into Nana's white bedroom. When Mom, half his size, pleads with him that we are there to help Nana, he beats her in the face. He pushes her down. She crawls to the living room. He shoots her in the head. She falls into a coma. Six days later, she dies. I somehow get away. My uncle, this monster, has long, stringy black hair and a furry bearded face. He is the rougaru.

May 2013

Johnny is sentenced to life plus 30 and moves from the parish jail to the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola. It's been five years since my last visit to the house, but it is time for me to return. I hate it for its horrid memory. I hate it. I don't want to go inside. But I have

responsibilities. Nana wants the bookcase. I grab it and race out. Tears stream down my face as I jump back in the car. I silently scream. She doesn't need to hear it. We drive away.

September 2014

We are back at the house to try again. It's hard to breathe. Chills down my spine. Dust in my lungs. Sorrow in my throat. But sometimes you just have to suck it up and do it. Friends tell me it's a choice. They're proud of me. But this is no choice, nor is it an obligation. It is what it is. If I could choose, things would be different. None of this would have ever happened.

Even though the house is cold, lonely, sad, sweat drips from the end of my nose. I manage, alone, to separate everything in piles and sort each bag into sheets and blankets here, accessories there, large men's clothing to the right, stuffed animals The worst is his room. It is chaos. It feels like things are crawling on me, or will if I walk deeper inside. But it's just me shedding my skin. And as if it understands, his room is slowly detaching itself from the rest of the house. There's no need for it to be here. No time for sentimentality. There is no going back.

August 5, 2016

It takes me two years to finish cleaning out the house. I am exhausted, broken. Six loads go to the dump. Some things have been sold. A preacher takes about 3/4 for his church flea market. We keep some, but not all. What's left, I bag up and drop off at thrift stores.

Today, is the closing date of the sale. I thought it would sell for more. But it's a small, depressed town, like too many in the U.S. My former babysitter and her husband buy it, for about the same price that Nana and Pawpaw bought it in the 1960s. It's sad. We feel it's worth more. Look at all the memories that come with it. But then again, look at all the memories that come with it. And if it hangs over my head anymore, it just may kill me. So we give in.

Nana is sad to see it go. Our home. I don't want it. I hate it. I miss it. I love it. It is family too. But like Mom, like the back room, like Johnny in prison, like the image of our dysfunctionally normal family, it's gone. Enter more tears.

February 2019

From a butterfly chair, I sip a cup of my favorite tea, Mariages Frères Earl Grey French Blue. I escape in a book; it doesn't matter which one. Votives are lit. Incense is burning. Miles Davis mixes with Paris café sounds via YouTube. Something I read makes me laugh, or cry.

It is a new apartment, again in Louisiana, multiple moves and over ten years later. I am again surrounded by everything I own. Nothing in storage. Nothing boxed and stacked at Nana's. The house is no longer ours. No cobwebs to sweep. No family home to visit, or fear. Everything of mine is here. If these traces of my past produce melancholy, I could hide them or give them away. But I don't. This is home now. My sanctuary. Nana, now 92, still lives in the same town, Oakdale, now in her own new apartment.

I close my eyes. I am seven years old. Nana's in the kitchen baking biscuits. I am back on the living room's scratchy shag carpet, wearing my favorite pink nightgown with matching robe. The Road Runner is on. Pawpaw comes in from sitting outside on the front porch swing. Uncle Johnny bets that he can eat more biscuits than me. Mom and Johnny joke about something, and soon we are all laughing so hard it hurts.