

# Hoarding

BY: SARAH PILLMAN

It begins at eight a.m. on a Saturday morning—a day Trevor and I both have off. I'm in the shower when I hear it.

It sounds like a tree limb has fallen through the roof in the middle of a storm, even though it's 85 and sunny out. Suddenly it's a matter of washing the soap out of my hair as quickly as possible in order to open the door and find out what happened. When I do, I'm still dripping wet and wearing only a towel, and there is chaos before my eyes.

The boxes stacked outside Trevor's room, those that he meticulously removed one by one since he moved home three months prior, the ones I've grown used to dodging on my way through the packed hallway, have fallen over. And not just fallen, but seemingly exploded, as tops are thrown off and folds have come undone and contents are everywhere. There are books scattered across the floor; porcelain bears Mom collected years ago in a pile spilled from a box, newspaper still wrapped around some; stacks of old greeting cards; jewelry gone green with age; photograph negatives; a single shoe. What had been a tower minutes before when I'd entered the bathroom is now a carpet of destruction.

Trevor stands in his doorway, his hair grown long over the summer spent moving home, reclaiming his territory, searching for jobs, and finding nothing in either field. He is shirtless. It's obvious he's just woken up. There are creases down the side of his face from his pillow, like some kind of twisted scar. He looks less like a recent college graduate and more like a middle-aged man who woke up one day and wondered how he'd gotten here in life: moved back into his parents' house, surrounded by boxes.

At first he looks bewildered, but as we stand here in silence, a silence that grows, his face changes rapidly from bemusement to frustration to anger to straight-out rage. I hardly recognize him in the blink of an eye, and I wonder if I've ever seen him clearly before this moment, despite spending the entirety of the summer

getting reacquainted again, reconfiguring our bond as big brother and little sister, and becoming closer than we've ever been before.

"They just fell over." Even with fury on his face, his tone is still disbelieving, wondering. "I just opened the door and they fell over."

I say nothing. Water trickles down the back of my neck, steadily cooling, uncomfortable.

He backs up, and for a moment, I think he'll kick the boxes, just unleash anger on it all. He steps back into his room. He doesn't close the door and is back a second later with a shirt on. He walks toward the boxes now, but instead of kicking, he bends down with short, jerking movements and pushes a cluster of things into an upended box. It's all debris, the shattered remnants of a mirror, papers scattered across the floor. "Get dressed," he says. He disappears down the hall.

I have just enough time to scramble over the wreckage and escape into my room to pull on shorts and a T-shirt before he's back. He's pushing more things into another box as I pull my wet hair back, and Dad's office door opens. Dad's face is lost behind the scruff of the beard he's grown longer now, the hairs almost entirely gray, and his face is so eerily similar to Trevor's in that moment—the confusion before the storm—that I can do nothing but stare.

We stand in a triangle, the three of us, Dad and I watching as Trevor bends over, pushing things into boxes, settling them, and straightening them with the calmness of a madman.

"What happened?" Dad's voice sounds cracked, weary, unlike him. It's been that way since he finished his yard work—the yard barely recognizable and his hay fever likewise making his voice so. Like Trevor, he's never seemed more aged than he does in this moment, and strangely, never more dangerous. After a summer

spent hacking away at weeds, pruning trees, and transplanting flowers, there is nothing left for him to tackle outside. Suddenly it's evident: there is nothing left for him to do, nothing left for him to distract himself with, but the inside.

“Fuck this. Fuck this, Dad,” Trevor says. We've never cussed in front of Mom and Dad before. It cracks like a whip against my ears. Trevor stands, the muscles of his arms bulging as he lifts one box on top of another. “We have to do something. And I'm doing it.” His eyes are sharp as he turns to me, his face still unrecognizable. “Ally.” His voice hits like the weight of a hundred bricks. It's a command, a plea, demanding and desperate all at once. “Are you gonna help me or not?”

He waits for no answer, and I don't wait to think. Eighteen years following in his shadow, desperate to impress him, to make him proud, make my decision automatic. I grab a box, one that has fallen on its side and spilled half its contents, and follow him down the hall, across the kitchen, and out the door. My feet are bare and the pavement burns as we walk across the driveway. Since Dad cleared the yard, there are no sticks or thistles to step on. Trevor leads me across the yard, down the broken cement path toward the garage, and to the side of it, where Dad has collected his brush pile. It's full of twigs and branches and clumps of brown grass. Trevor dumps his boxes unceremoniously on top of them, turns, and walks back inside.

Mom isn't home. She's at work, and I can see her behind the counter of the doctor's office, answering phone calls in her bright, floral scrubs as clearly as I can see the sagging brown cardboard of the boxes or see Dad's face peeking out of the window of the office when I glance back to the house. I remember the joy in her eyes when Trevor moved back home earlier this summer after his graduation, and the way it quickly turned to uneasiness and finally resentment when Trevor had realized that there was no place in our home anymore for his things or for him. I can hear her choked voice, protesting when he lashed out at her for the boxes—only steadily creeping up around corners of our lives the last time he'd been home two

years ago, and suddenly now dominating our lives. I can picture every curve and line in her face just as clearly as I can my own because my face is hers. I have her long face, her freckles, and her small mouth. Some days I look in the mirror and wonder which one of us I'm seeing. It's her expression when she comes home that I can't picture.

I set the box gingerly to the side so it's touching the pile but not sitting on it and head back inside.

In minutes, before I'm on my way following Trevor back outside with another box (he carries three this time), Dad's behind me. He's wearing faded red sweatpants that gather with elastic at the ankles and an old University of Utah T-shirt. He's had the wisdom to put sandals on. “Shoes,” he tells me as he picks up shards of glass and places them into a box. When I go into my room to lace up tennis shoes, I take the time to peek through the blinds, hardly opening them more than a slit lest Trevor see, and watch as Dad, his shoulders slouched but his walk strong, follows my brother to the burn pile, box in hand. Dad hasn't walked with that much purpose since he lost his job in June. Instead, he's spent the past two months wandering around the yard, taking his meals in his office—a shell of his former self. He looks more like his former self now, more in charge and in control, even as Trevor waves an arm to gesture where Dad should put his box.

On my sixth trip out, I see that Dad has brought out the oil.

He keeps it in a plastic container in the garage—used oil from car changes—and his face shows no expression as he pours it over the massive burn pile. It drips down like black rain. “Get me a match,” he tells me, but I run to the pump and grab the hose, to soak the grass around the pile, and he seems to see the sense in it and disappears into the house instead. When he returns, he takes the hose from me and even drenches a nearby tree, its branches overhanging a few feet away.

It's a fire unlike anything I've ever seen. It is orange and

monstrous and beautiful. The boxes, covered in oil, go up first in a puff that is delicate in its power. It takes a good ten minutes—three more trips into the house—for the fire to sink down into the kindling, and this is where it really begins. It grows hot and shimmers. I start stacking boxes to the side of it, afraid to get too close, and leave them to Trevor to toss in with his superior upper body strength. It's not just my physical strength I question, but my mental. There are memories in these boxes, memories and Mom's presence, and throwing each one out feels like throwing away a piece of her. My culpability in the crime we are committing twists my stomach into knots even as I hoist another box, reminding myself that I don't want to be her, don't want to end up like this. It's a day made for burning, hardly any wind, but the boxes without lids leak things into the wind anyway, papers and envelopes and bits of tissue paper and even an old art project with my name scrawled on it. We let them all go.

The hallway is just one segment—one room in a house full of rooms with a house full of boxes. The reality of it is dizzying, but Trevor never falters as he leads us in battle. He reclaims the territory as his own, declares siege on rooms, commands Dad and I as his forces to be led into battle. We attack the living room. The boxes stacked around the couches, the end tables, some up to the ceiling, and behind the TV are all taken outside. We uncover carpet we haven't seen in years that is greener than the sun-faded green of that left uncovered. Dad takes the old computer from his office and breaks it up in the driveway with his hammer and throws the bits into the flames. Trevor chucks entire boxes, unopened, into the flames. Some hold old cans of spray paint, half-used, which burst from the fire in furious explosions when they get too hot. He breaks things on purpose, the things we come across that are not broken and needlessly saved: coffee mugs covered in dust, an old art easel, a bulletin board poked full of holes, a collage of his high school sports teams.

"It's easier this way," he tells me as he deconstructs a perfectly good box fan; I don't know if he means physically or mentally.

The work is mind-numbing. Later I will hardly remember it but in flashes. Mostly, I stand by the fire with the hose and continue to pour water over the grass and tree, which, despite my efforts, have both shriveled and gone black.

Trevor works with the strength of a dozen men, pushing himself to the edge of exertion and then further. His hands, soft before this summer's unsteady construction job, are calloused and hardened now, as is his face. When he'd first gotten the job—the only work he could get after countless hours spent sending out resumes with no response—he'd spent hours bent over the sink, scrubbing them clean every day. Now they're covered in soot.

My own nails are caked with dirt and dust and shame, and I listen to Trevor wheeze every time he passes me, tireless in his frustration and anger. Maybe it would be comforting to feel the same, to be able to face it all with fury. But I will escape this house when the summer is over, away to college and away from home for the first time in my life. When August comes, he will still be here, will be here until he can find a steady job and can leave again, like he left me for college four years ago. Now I am leaving him. My life is beginning and his is stagnant, and so his movements are ten times more deliberate, more necessary.

The basement comes next, the full two rooms I haven't seen since childhood. We discover my old kitchen set down there, but it's too big to burn, too plastic. It's around this time that Dad starts a second fire, and sets to work with a pocket knife, ripping up the old orange carpet off the basement floor, carpet that's seen better days—maybe back in the 70s—and smells like mildew and death. He rolls it up, throws it over one narrow shoulder, and carries it out to burn. The smoke it gives off is black. The nearest town is ten miles away, the nearest neighbor two. Dad's been burning brush all summer without so much as a warning, and so his lack of hesitancy is understandable. I wonder if our neighbors can see our fires, if the town can see it. I wonder what they think it is, what it means. I don't think I even know.

There is so much stuff, too much stuff. Trevor pulls apart an

entire wooden desk: first, the hutch—which has always been loose—and then the legs, and then the body. It is one of five desks in the house. After the coating goes up, the rest burns slowly with low flames. We pile boxes on top of it too. No one breaks for lunch or stops at all except to take a bathroom break or chug water to try to erase the taste of ash and grit and shame from their mouths. Trevor drinks directly from the faucet and pees into the bushes along the other side of the garage. We don't talk much. My shoulders start to ache two hours in and won't stop for days.

It's late, after four, when I finally check the time. We have been at it for eight hours and have accomplished so much with so much still left to do. The dent is significant, the workload to come daunting. "Help me with this," Trevor instructs abruptly when I come back inside to lug another load, having left Dad silently by the fires. Trevor has pushed an entire chunk of a sectional couch toward the door. He smells like fire and sweat and his shirt is soaked through. I'm abruptly reminded that he hasn't so much as showered all day. My own hair has dried and then wetted again with sweat.

My feet feel raw, my hands rawer, but I go to push a shoulder to the couch. The carpet holds it like a vise underneath us, but we shove, the two of us, until it gets to the door. "We'll have to flip it on its side," Trevor tells me. His hand has left a wet red stain on the cream fabric of the worn couch, and I realize that he's bleeding. He doesn't see it, though, and we both crouch into position to push it up. I try to lift with my knees, not my back, one of the few things Dad has said to me all day.

We have the couch upended and twisted toward the door when I hear the truck.

The sound of the engine shoots through the propped open door, or at least that's how it hits me. My grip on the couch falters, but Trevor seems to expect it, as he shoulders the weight, lowers the couch gently, and sets it down on its legs. There's sweat rolling down his face as he looks over the top toward

the driveway.

Mom's little red truck comes to a slow stop before our eyes. Her hair is bright blonde against the black leather, and her hands grip the steering wheel and do not drop. The engine rumbles on as she takes it all in, and I wonder what the scene looks like before her eyes.

Dad stands before the two fires, hose in one hand, a beer I hadn't seen him grab in the other. The air is thick with ash. I can taste it. There's black around the fires, both from the burning and from the grass. The tree is twisted, black and grotesque and misshapen, where the fire licked it.

Mom kills the engine.

Dad hasn't turned away from the fires, toward the driveway, although he had to have heard it all. He drains his beer and tosses the can into the flames.

Trevor's face is ruddy from the work, and for the first time all day, he looks tired. He looks old.

I feel old.

Mom steps out of the truck, her eyes trained on the fire. Her face is impassive. She shuts the car door. Her hand twitches at her side, as if from a movement quickly stifled. After several long moments, moments that creep by, thick with agony, she looks toward the doorway. Her eyes are like two gunshot wounds to the soul. Is it her emotions I see in them, or is it my own regret, my own guilt, my own sorrow? Her forehead creases between her brows, two thin lines deeply furrowed, into the same expression I know that I make. Suddenly it is my own face I am looking at, my face in hers, my future.

Closing her eyes, she turns back toward the fire. The lack of her stare does not abate the lump in my throat.

“What now?” I ask Trevor. It’s been running through my mind all day, and the house is so empty that my hoarse voice echoes.

Trevor rubs his wounded hand. Blood smears across his other palm. He says nothing. He steps outside.

I follow my brother out to the fire.

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