New Fiction: "The Hoard" by Katrina Coltun

written by Guest Contributor | December 1, 2014

THE HOARD

Every town of a certain size has a strange house. The smaller, the better; that is, the smaller the town, the stranger the house. There's a threshold on either end, defining a neat bell- curve of peculiarity. A population under 500 and nearly every house is odd in its own way. That's how you number your neighbors: the Crosses, who never fix their porch so it lists desperately toward the driveway; the Douglas family with their bad dogs; the Swedish couple with their brightly-painted shutters, so garish, shouldn't they at least try to act decent? But that's a really small town, the exception.

The higher end of population size gives birth to same-ness, repetition. Those suburbs verging on urbanization, those almost-cities, puffed up and proud over their dignified color palettes of beige, eggshell, Irish and Swiss coffee, where the mailboxes are expressive: the Smiths like dogs, slip the mail into the waiting mouth of the Cocker Spaniel. The Whites like America. The Franklins chose a miniature version of their actual home, which makes them clever. Novelty letterboxes are occasionally subject to vandalism or an unfortunate attack from a new driver, but that's the extent to which a town that ends in –Vale or –Valley will tolerate deviance.

Fillmore is right in the middle, a perfect size for its strange house. Small enough that even children are recognized at the hardware store. Big enough for a chain restaurant, but only one. There are only three trick-or-treat circuits, one for the poor kids in their shabby ghost- sheets, the other two divided by the old bridge. All three intersect at the end of the cul-de-sac on North Cedar Lane, where costumed children peer at the obstinately dark windows of Anna's patchwork Victorian. Some hold their noses, elbows high and fingers splayed, while the braver ones shove each other toward the walkway, choking on their giggles, huffing the air to catch the bizarre odors that issue from poorly-sealed windows. "Cat vomit!" they shriek at each other. "Broccoli and fart stew!" "Fish head sandwiches!" I was a pusher, a bold teenaged boy by the time the mythology of Anna's house was truly taking hold in Fillmore.. My sister was a squealer, a nose-holder. The parents would indulge the tradition, feign impatience.

"It does smell weird, doesn't it?" one might say, idly, waiting for the hysteria to pass.

"Like when Hank's mother used to make stuffed cabbage. Like she made that gawrsh- awful cabbage, then left it here, then died right on top of it." The mothers would laugh, shake their heads, shuffle the children on to finish collecting sweets.

Rumors of a pungent, overcrowded, extremely dark foyer leaked out into the community by way of the mailman who serviced the street. When that bone of gossip had been gnawed flavorless, a neighbor revived the mystery by calling in a complaint to the police, citing fire hazards, concern for the resident, and a plain weird smell. After trying unsuccessfully to peer into windows entirely blocked by the contents within, the officer knocked at the front door and was admitted, witnessed numerous folks, suddenly inspired to weed or mow. The spare details generated by the visit were reviewed and dissected:

“I heard she’s filled her coat closet with gallons of milk. Not even refrigerated. Just settin’ there.”

“He tried to throw out some of the fruit that had gone bad. She wouldn’t let him touch it, just said she was still organizing things.”

“It’s all food, they said, nothin’ else.”

“Something’s wrong with her, in her head. They should make her give up that place, go into a home, somewhere that can help her.”

“He couldn’t even get to the bedrooms. He couldn’t get up the stairs.”

Anna showed up occasionally in town, for church or grocery shopping, several times to see a movie by herself. Her shoulders were always pulled up tight, defensive, overshadowing her clavicles and deepening the translucent hollows in her long neck. Her skin was rice-papery, making her look both older than her middle-age and somehow antiqued or preserved. A few brash people would say hello, hoping to be let in on the mystery, titillated and a little frightened. They occasionally waved, and she would wave absently back, her hands strangely pink, obscenely plump on her brittle, twiggy frame, her eyes constantly scanning, never settling. An adding machine tabulating behind those quick eyes, I remember thinking the few times I saw her. I remember pulling apart fall leaves along their ribs, crushing them, wondering if her skin felt like that.

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I met Anna, met her properly as an adult, shortly after my divorce. I abandoned my failing marriage to return home to my ailing mother, taking up residence in her partially-finished basement. I was regressing, my adulthood jettisoned for something more familiar, something more comforting, and the sliding-glass doors of my small town Michiganian youth attracted me; it seemed a suitable setting for wallowing in my own malaise.

“I’ve met a woman from church. From my class.” my mother tells me. She attends a weekly bible study with other older ladies. She is often returned home with tidbits of secreted gossip or strange factlets about world religion. They consider their group very forward-thinking, very progressive. They have just finished a section on what she refers to as “Jew Easter,” otherwise known on the Coasts as Passover. She doesn’t think herself unkind to refer to Jew Easter. It makes her feel sophisticated. I don’t argue, just nod. My ex-wife was Jewish, a trait that allowed her to somehow seem entitled

and persecuted simultaneously. My mother's interest in the Jews apparently has more tenacity than my own.

The woman she has met is a younger lady, so she says, but not so young as me. Younger to my aging mother usually runs somewhere between her oldest child's age (me, 41) and her own, a forgetful 64. She has aged badly; I've seen the pictures of her, a creamy teen with a toothy, pageant smile. Now she's all folds and cushions, a lampoon of that zaftig babette so well documented by her proud parents. She's hardly mobile lately, with a trundling gait on neuropathic feet. Her complexion has turned gauzy, constellated by the red marks of broken blood vessels high on her invisible cheekbones, a pointillist rouge. As she talks, she absently tugs the front of her tent-y rayon dress out and down over her stomach.

She suggests that I might like to visit this younger lady some day, and it takes a bit of discussion before I realize that she's talking about Anna, the witch-woman of my youth. It surprises me to find out she's only ten years older than I am. I ask my mother if she knows she's trying to set me up with the stink-house lady. She makes a "pthhhh" sound with her lips, tells me that's old news, why do I have to live in the past?

She says I should meet her, and to not judge lest ye be judged. She reminds me that it wasn't so long ago that everyone wanted to talk about her son and his big-time divorce. So it couldn't hurt to go for a visit, certainly. She seems to be grasping at straws: my mother is concerned that I don't get out enough. I lack hobbies, the backbone of any good rust-belt boy. I do not four-wheel or tractor. I do not air-soft or paint-ball. And, most distressingly, I do not church.

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I sift through Anna's cupboards, cataloguing, planning. We don't speak, though I muster a false bravado that shepherds me through the ungainly newness of the situation, the feel of my mother's eyes on me. Anna has a barely perceptible personal gravity, and it begins to feel easy to orbit in casual ellipses around her. All I have to do is give up, give in to the pull. As I pass Anna in the small and crowded space, I touch her: a few fingers on her vellum elbow, a gentle knuckle at her hip. I retrieve industrial hunks of butter from the freezer, leaving them to soften in a garden of chard, and brush the small of her back with experimental fingers, curiously. She flinches every time and touches the food like totems. I touch the back of her neck, she touches orange juice concentrate. I reach for her shoulder, she goes for a stack of frozen pie crust. I avoid her voluptuous hands, as they somehow seem pornographic in the narrow alley of the kitchen. And around we go, revolving.

The stove is sandbagged by canvas sacks of rices, white and brown, and other assorted grain. I work like a fireman to unearth it. I start to perspire. I find quinoa. Black beans. Pinto beans, black-eyed peas, split peas (green and yellow). A litany of legumes. I move to preheat the oven, grasping the old-

fashioned dial, and it occurs to me that I'd better check the interior first. I restack the thicket of squashes that block the boiler over to one side, clearing enough space to open the door. From inside I retrieve thirty-seven boxes of fruit leather, seven family- sized flats of dinner rolls, and eighteen milky pounds of forgotten ground veal. I do not clean; I marvel at the mighty mess. I shoulder myself into her grotesquerie.

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"She seems lonely," my mother says about Anna. "You seem lonely. So she's a little strange. It's not like you're Mr. Perfect. What's the worst that could happen?" The list that flashes through my head is long and ends in an uncomfortable yet amicable divorce. My loneliness is at least a still sort of solitude, undisrupted by expectation, aspiration, or emotional negotiation.

"I have friends," I say, though this is untrue.

I might have friends if I could rally the strength to negotiate the recalibrating that comes with dissolving a marriage – the repetitive platitudes, the awkward reassurances, the obligation to assert my genuine respect and great love for my ex-wife, though not in that way anymore. I don't want to worry about who kept which ally and who met so-and-so first, so I left everyone to her, the same approach that I took with the furniture. Serendipitously, my mother and I are practiced in self-deception. She lets me lie extravagantly about my place in the world, and I don't recommend diets or forward articles about diabetes, like my sister does. It's much like respect, if there was a way to have respect without the traditional dose of dignity.

Unfortunately, dignity and solitude are hard to come by in the house I grew up in. As much as my mother encourages it, I resist her suggestions of sleeping in my own bedroom, the museum of my childhood, and return nightly to the uncomfortable pullout downstairs. While the mattress may be thin and the faux-wood paneling poorly insulated, at least I avoid falling asleep under the watchful gaze of a corps of Pez dispensers, assembled by a guileless childhood version of myself.

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I am inclined to make messy foods for Anna, dishes in thick, saucy sauces or canapés that are easily two-handers. I start a boeuf bourguignon, a dish I learned from a television program, rendering bacon in a heavy casserole while I search for pearl onions. When I find a few bags buried under a pyramid of turnips, their husks are slimy, desiccated. I stand at the sink and begin peeling off layers, the skin disintegrating into my nail-beds, trying to nurse a healthy center out of these almost-edible nesting dolls. I pare a basketful of artichokes, depositing them in the lemony water simmering on the stove. As I settle them into the pot, I realize that I have trimmed several too close to the heart as I watch the outer leaves swim away. I know they'll dissolve further as they continue to soften, but there isn't a remedy I know of for a bisected choke. Anna gathers the offal, sorting it fastidiously into drawers and cabinets. I haven't seen a trash can in this house. I don't know

that there is one.

I open two bottles of dusty Cab, dosing and de-glazing the cast-iron casserole, then pouring some for myself. I offer a glass to Anna but she shakes her head at me.
“I don’t drink,” she says, and her voice sounds so loud after this silence.

“Why not?”

“I don’t like to lose control,” she says.

I am speechless.

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My mother is a collector, like any other good Christian mother, a controller of miniature, finite universes. She keeps ceramic birds nested in curio cabinets around the perimeter of the house, frozen in moments of perching or soaring or preening. Her grandkids, my nieces and nephews, the products of my sister’s less solvent union, provide her with a steady income of fake finches and sparrows. She loves the hummingbirds best of all, and treats them with the most care. She says that they make her think of freedom.

She liked to tell my wife (when she was my wife) that she would inherit the flock when my mother passed on.

Now she only says, “Well, I’m glad that she never took those birds.”

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We eat supper on Anna’s bed. It is the last outpost of uncovered expanse in her home. It isn’t clean by any stretch of the imagination, but the contents are somehow mattress-suitable, grossly poetic. The headboard is framed by boxes of After Eights, those pillow mints I remember from nicer hotels. Cans of peas are wedged between the wall and the bed like a satire of a fairytale or the wheels of a tank. Hot dogs sealed in plastic snuggle in the nest of blankets between us.

There is room, just barely, for both of us to sit, with newspapers spread between our thighs for a tablecloth. Her knobby kneecaps peek out from beneath her blue voile skirt, sensuous as quartz and about as soft-looking. Anna folds and twists the sports section nearest her. I expect at any moment for a napkin-swan to emerge from the newsprint.

“Tell me what this is.”
“Coq au vin,” I say. “Candied yams…”
“No, tell me. Tell me what’s in it. Be specific.”

I understand from her soft, gravely, untried voice that she’s hungry for exactitude, that she needs to know where everything went. I endeavor fill her up with numbers, recite recipes, get explicit about ingredients. Her

anxiousness over the impending lack seems tempered by the meal that has emerged through the crucible, and I reassure her that nothing's gone, just moved around. She measures the volume of the feast with quick eyes. I nearly hear the carriage return of her mind.

Her mouth softens as she listens to me monologue about her food.

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Anna's house is simultaneously claustrophobic and expansive. Once the initial shock of odor normalizes, I began to perceive an organizing principal within the midden. It was like an upscale market gone feral. While cupboards had given up on restraining the glut, nationalities tended to be grouped together. Lethargic cilantro and masa crowd the screened-in porch. Corn husks hug cans of pozole. A cheerful array of Abuelitas offering Mexican chocolate from the Nestle box challenge the Ibarra logo opposite, a hexagonal stand-off. At first I thought the stacked Goya beans were structural, keeping the roof up, but closer inspection revealed them to be purely ornamental.

Second floor. An oil-slick of salty olives fill the tub in the master bath, and blocks of ripe-smelling feta weep down the sink's drain. A spare bedroom stands in for Szechuan Province, where crates of chicken feet mingle with vibrant, ferocious-looking peppers. The kitchen, of course, is stolidly French in persuasion. The basement is a clownish emergency kit, although kit itself is too little a word for this storage. Where a normal person might lay in gallons of water, a few, Anna's are in barrels like the ones at the end of a runaway truck barricade. Calorically-rich protein bars come by the pallet, one stack of high fiber, another low in fat, a third in chocolate peanut-butter (essentially a candy bar), and the fourth claiming to be engineered specifically for women's nutritional need. I wondered for a moment how these mammoth stacks made their way into the cellar in the first place. The only possibility, I concluded, was they had been patiently ferried down the mossy stairs, an armload of boxes at a time. Several apocalypses could be survived down here, although there didn't appear to be a single flashlight, candle, or hand-cranked radio. I looked back down the stairs as I headed out with my several pilfered cartons of chicken stock, thinking that it might be a lonely panic room, but at least you wouldn't starve.

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A teenager from church springs my mother from her house-bound prison once a week. Rebecca Grace ("call me Becks") drives an aging Plymouth Horizon that strains to support Mom's heft, proudly displaying an adhesive silver fish and a grotesque bumper-sticker of what appears to be an aborted fetus. The girl defines corn-fed, from her peach-fuzzed cheeks to her tender proto-cankles. I'm grateful to anyone willing to shuttle my mother between the Meijer and the Wal-Mart, though the pluck she seems to main-line directly from Christ rubs me the wrong way. She refers to herself as a warrior, and I'm attracted to the juxtaposition.

I despise shopping with Mom. She has the commensurate consumer’s vigor. She reads packages out loud. She examines everything and comments genially on it’s quantity, quality, or price. She points out exotic foods that are never exotic, always pedestrian. She crows over basil and buys French-sounding jug wine from the Carolinas as a treat. She acquires too much of anything on sale only to discard it, wasted, weeks after she’s forgotten about it.

My mother returns home with groceries and gossip. Her cheerful putterings drag me from the pullout couch downstairs.

“I guess I was wrong about that Anna thing being old news,” she tells me in a secretive tone. “I’m glad you never met up with her. She’s even stranger than you remembered.”

I know that she wants me to seduce the gory details out of her, and I oblige half- heartedly. I haven’t had any coffee yet, so a murmured grunt of interest has to suffice.

“Jeannie told me, you know Jeannie? The one that’s married to Paul who works for the UPS? Well Jeannie told me that Paul told her that she gets all these Oriental-type packages all the time. But she never lets Paul in the house, she always comes out and meets him at the truck. Dunnit make you wonder what she’s doing in there? Jeannie think she’s maybe a Communist or something, with all that China stuff. And you don’t need to get mixed up in all that. Especially after. Well.” I know that she’s referring to my ex-wife, because somewhere in my mother’s mind, communists and Jews and basil and all things unfamiliar are both dangerous and titillating, a dark duo of hysteria that I am, clearly, in no state to address. This provokes some childish antagonism in me, makes me instantly rebellious. I am the suddenly the great Communist sympathizer, the Jew-lover, the fearless Caprese salad-maker. “I’m sure that she just prefers her privacy,” I say, “though there’s nothing wrong with being a Communist. And no one says Oriental anymore. It’s rude.”

She fakes petulance, but she knows her needling will put me on the scent like a hound, and satisfy her curiosity by means of a more direct investigation and reportage. The manipulation is elegant, and I think that in another life she would have made an excellent detective.

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Anna doesn’t eat at first. She is hesitant, and I can feel her withdrawing, folding in on herself like timid origami. I open my mouth wide when I bite, an exaggerated show of chewing as if I could entice her to eat with the raw power of my jaw. She mimics gamely, a circus performance, until she is feeding herself without my prodding. By the time we’re picking flexible bones off the duck, the mood in the bedroom has gentled, anxiety replaced by the sluggish percussion of our blood moving nutrients through the highways of our guts. We still don’t speak, but she’s long since stopped flinching when I touch her. She lets me dab her mouth where something oily glistens.

“Have you ever had a century egg?” Anna asks me eventually, her voice

mellowed and fat. I haven’t, and I tell her as much.

“They’re a delicacy,” she says, “in China. They bury eggs coated with ash for months, sometimes even years.”

“Sometimes a thousand years?”

“So the story goes.”
There’s a pause while I mull over this idea. It makes me think of my mother’s thousand-year birds. Anna’s lids are half-closed, which softens her face surprisingly. Her eyes for once move slowly, as if she’s filled up.

“They’re my favorite thing,” she says. She pauses with her mouth half open, and we both wait for her next words. “Would you like one?” she says.

I can tell that she’s offering me something precious, and though the idea makes my stomach turn, I can’t think of a way to decline without splintering this fragile symbiosis. I nod, meeting her half-moon eyes with my own, and I feel brave. She takes my hand in her plump one, and it is soft and cool.

“I make them myself,” she says as she navigates me toward her quartz knees and under the tent of the newspaper in her lap. I am jolted momentarily out of time, reading an un-funny Marmaduke cartoon propped against her tummy as my fingers scrabble up her thigh, a leashed and obedient dog. The Great Dane tumbles energetically into an unsuspecting pedestrian, his outsized zeal overwhelming the trench-coated man’s defenses. The tag line reads “This is the last time I stop at the butcher on the way home!” and I read and re-read it, searching for the joke.

Her legs under her flimsy skirt are warm but not hot, and desert-dry, arid. I can feel the marbles of varicosed veins like knots in birch bark. She doesn’t make a sound as she slips my fingers inside of her, but she cocks her head, looking sideways at the ceiling. I think suddenly of a robin in my mother’s collection with the same avian tilt. My hand doesn’t feel like my own any more as it travels this alien landscape, and I only have the sense of sensation, no agency. I can’t look directly at Anna, for shame perhaps in the face of this horrific intimacy, or maybe because she is the sun and would burn out my irises. Over her shoulder, cereal boxes are shelved like novels, and I notice they are alphabetized. Seven copies of Cheerios, seven Corn Flakes, eight Fruit Loops, four Grape Nuts, five Raisin Bran, two Rice Krispies, and fifteen of the clear favorite, Shredded Mini-Wheat.

I am drawn back suddenly as I feel a curvature clutched tightly inside of her, the close, filled incubator. I understand that Anna is showing me her nest, the center of her hoard, what I touch with my fingers right now. This is where the gravity emanates from.

I fall into her.

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When I return home my mother is still awake, perched on the couch, lit by the blue-hued glow of late-night evangelism. She looks like a great pink pigeon, fluffing her nubbled terry- cloth feathers to keep warm. The hue matches the toilet seat cover in her bathroom, a misunderstanding of monochrome. The gap in her robe runs too high up her legs, the panels unable to marshal themselves to the task of full coverage, but my sense of propriety is exhausted and I don't turn away. I feel the birds' eyes on me as I settle myself into the recliner adjacent to the sofa.

"Now that wasn't too weird, was it?" she asks, her voice lilting high and childish, expectant.

"No." I answer. "Not weird."

And we sit in silence.

"Are you hungry?" she says finally, and extends a bowl of tortilla chips in my direction. "No." I say, and wave the bowl away.

Katrina Coltun has managed theatrical productions all over the world and has written in rooms all over Los Angeles. Her most recent projects include the story you've just read, a play you liked, and building a tiny house with her partner.

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