

Chelsey Clammer

Home Is Where the Hoard Is

Courtney's fixin' to burn the cat. Right after she's done weed-eating the jungle of a driveway. The cat's already dead. Courtney put it in a trash bag the day after she shot it. That's just how things work around here. Be an asshole and pick fights with our cats and you'll get shot.

It was an orange cat that Courtney shot. A different one than the orange cat she shot last month. I don't know if the cats were related, but I do know they were both beating up and generally terrorizing Courtney's two outdoor cats. Thus, the bulleting.

The first orange cat was shot in the lower pasture, basically doing cartwheels when the bullet hit it. Then it started dragging its body away and we lost sight of it and haven't seen it since. So it's either dead or injured or smart enough not to return.

The recent orange cat was shot down from the tree my dog had chased it up. Three bullets: one to drop it down from the tall branch, another to make sure it was dead, and one more just in case it wasn't. After the cat thunked on the ground but before the second bullet, its body undulated. Wave-like. Fluidier than I thought possible for a solid, non-liquid entity. Then it became a dead cat in our yard for twenty-four hours until Courtney got the nerve to scoop it up—guts and all—into the trash bag and haul it over to the burn bin where it stayed for a week because Courtney didn't want to deal with it. After enough of my complaints about the escalating stench, Courtney finally chucked the cat in the burn bin and torched it. "Kitty BBQ" was the I-shit-you-not, word-for-word task on her to-do list that day. This morning, I peeked inside the burn bin. Heaps of ash. A charred ribcage rising up from them.



My life is a process of organizing various levels of chaos. Most of which is not mine. First there's the words. My job. Editor. *Extinguishing dumpster fires*, as some of my clients have described what it is I do for their manuscripts-in-progress. Taking a mess of sentences and shaping them into something coherent. Hopefully.

Then there's the chaos of this house. A double-wide mobile

home, actually. It's in a Texas town you've never heard of that is on the outskirts of two other Texas towns you've never heard of that are on the outskirts of Austin. I've been living in this house rent-free for over a year now and my roommate, Courtney, is my ex-girlfriend from twenty-and-then-some years ago and she doesn't charge me anything for staying here because I keep her company, which is what she needs right now. Plus, I nursed her malnourished dog back to health and I help to feed her horses. Though really I assume she doesn't ask for rent because of the literal shit I have to put up with by living here. Because this kinda-sorta farm consists of unlivable living conditions—the chaos of clutter and disarray of dirtiness. The mayhem of this mess.

Last year, Courtney's mom died in this house they shared for almost twenty years, died right in her daughter's arms. Right here. And since then I've kept the ex-girlfriend company so she doesn't go insane out here from loneliness and her newly-established PTSD.

One nifty side effect of trauma can be hoarding.

Thus, heaps. Sprawling out. The breadcrumb trail of everywhere Courtney has ever stepped. The front walkway is an obstacle course of hoses and ropes and propane tanks and extension cords and metal bits of I-don't-even-know-what-they-ares and piles of trash that have yet to make it over to the official Pile of Trash near the front gate, the Pile that hasn't been picked up in months because the trash man stopped stopping at the house to pick up our Pile because, hi, lack of payment.

That's reasonable.

What's not reasonable is the number of hockey sticks and piles of ripped and tangled kites lying around this seven-acres-big property where no one plays hockey and you can't fly holey things.

There are wagons and carts and trailers parked in the asphalted driveway that looks more like a weed forest than a parking spot, and these carts and whatnots are spilling over with more empty cans of wasp spray and tent stakes and a broken BMX bike and more nails and tools and rusted bits of whatever all those things are.

And that's just the front of the house, just the view the neighbors see as they shake their heads at this disaster of a property with the muddy horses and American flags (yes, multiple) hanging on the fence out front and all that trash. And all that stuff. And, yeah, I feel like a stereotype. We might as well go get us some cinder blocks. Oh wait. We have some. And, yeah, I too would shake my head if I were able to drive by instead of stopping to pull open the

gate and parking my car in the place I guess is my home.



Here's the complexity of hoarding: it soothes and it overwhelms. The acquisition brings with it a sense of peace, but then eventually the accumulation prompts more anxiety. Storage containers are purchased to help organize the superfluous-ness, but the actual organization never really gets done. Big tubs and daily planners and calendars and label makers all become further instances of stuff stockpiling up. A gradual gathering of everything—cats included.



I mention the cats because Courtney's in the kitchen right now talking to her cats. I do that, have continuous conversations with Callie about her own foot that she always grabs while rolling around on the floor, and Skyler with his lack of a hearty meow, that Courtney always responds to with, "I know, Son. That's what I'm saying."

Skyler is Courtney's favorite cat of the ten that live here. He gives another throaty half-meow, to which Courtney replies, "I know, Son. You have to learn how to really meow."

And then there's Ashes the loner and Cricket the fat chatty one. Lardo the asshole, though he can be pretty sweet, even though he sounds like a dying child as he stalks around the house at night, looking for something to hump. His deep meow is full of lonely desire. Goose-Goose never comes out of Courtney's room because Lardo-the-asshat-cat beats her up. And then there's Sissy who plays with scorpions, Ty who doesn't have any knee caps, Clyde who's an awesome outdoor barn cat though he kills baby bunnies, and Dini whose meow sounds more like a pejorative than a sliver of feline conversation.

These are the beings who keep us company.

These are the beings who shit and piss everywhere except for in the litter boxes because they were filled to the max long ago and Courtney rarely cleans them out. Just one more instance of shit—literally—piling up in this house.

Outside this house is where you'll find the duck, who we call Duckers, or The Duck, or occasionally Regina (after Courtney's dead mother, who used to bitch at her a lot about her messy bedroom),

and who starts her throaty honk if she hears you cough. Or talk. Or move. Or always. She doesn't stop quacking.

Neither of the chickens—Faith and Willow—lay eggs. Their sister Buffy died when the neighbor's huskies killed her. The huskies also got to the goat, Ottie, who they mauled to death, which happened a few weeks after the goat named Bar-B-Q had died from a heat stroke. Bar-B-Q was kept in a small barn so the neighbor's huskies wouldn't maul her to death.

Courtney surrounds herself with animals. Connects with them instead of connecting with life. Even with all their frustration-inciting behavior, cats are better at keeping you company than no cats.

Skyler half-meows again at Courtney.

"I know, Son," she says. "That's what I said."



I don't do much out here but work and when I'm not working, I'm working. Freelance editing is a bitch, but I love the freedom it brings. Working from home, establishing my own hours, no bosses, and how jeans and hoodies are perfectly acceptable work attire.

It's taken this past year to really embrace that term, work from home. Because this "home" is composed of pandemonium. When I walk around the house, making my work commutes from dining-room-table office to front-porch-porch-swing office, I just have to trust that there's floor underneath all this trash and never-used used items found at the Goodwill because "This stainless steel ice chest on wheels was only \$4!" Regardless that my roommate has never needed nor will ever need a stainless steel ice chest on wheels, the price was a steal so of course my ex had to buy it. I frequently remind her, "Just because it's on sale doesn't mean you need it." The concept has yet to settle into her brain that only functions in hoarder mode now. Thanks, PTSD.

So basically, when I'm not putting out word-fueled dumpster fires, I'm trying to clean and wade through this double-wide mobile home that resembles a landfill.

A lot of it is because of the tools. Lots of tools. Multiple versions for multiple uses. The just-in-case occurrences. Most of these were acquired during one of her "Walmart Walks," as Courtney dubbed them. Strolls throughout that store last for hours, four being the record. Collecting cheap "I might need this one day" items. I never know what she's going to come home with. We don't

need any more wind chimes.

And so I internally wince when she says she's Walmart-bound. Which of course is right next to Goodwill and all its treasures. Great deals on electronics and containers and a flag for the abandoned garden because there's a cardinal on this one and her mother would have loved it. But your mother is dead, I want to say. Like your garden.



I get it, though. It's hard to let go. And gathering things that make you feel prepared for anything that could happen gives you a sense of safety. But it doesn't work like that. Objects can't always help us survive certain situations.

There is not enough hoarding that Courtney could have ever done that would have helped her mother stay alive that night. Tools may make Courtney feel like she can do anything—fix, build, improve—but an impressive collection of drill bits can't stop bleeding. Crowbars can't call an ambulance. And no matter how many flashlights and headlamps Courtney can own, they will never help her see the reality of life: things happen and we will never be fully prepared for them.

I want to tell her that this shit needs to be cleared out. That the hoarding has created havoc on this once-clean and spacious property, and it's making a mess of our lives.

I want to tell Courtney that her mother wouldn't want her to live like this. But the bedlam of Courtney's bedroom was always a source of argument. She knows her mother wouldn't want her to live like this. But with her mother now dead, what else does she have to hold onto?

I also get how she can't let go. I hoard memories and mementos. Objects that once gave me hope or that made me feel settled. Eventually, it all becomes about being sentimental. Most of it is focused on an intense friendship that eventually exploded and made me feel like I didn't know how to go on without that friend. And so I collected letters and saved texts. Keep my journals about the situation nearby. The objects that remind me of this or that, as if stuff will one day bring the friendship back. I hold onto these tangible memories because I don't know how to let go.

And so it makes sense to me why Courtney hasn't thrown away one thing of her mother's in this past year following her death. This isn't just about moving on. This has to do with acceptance.

And I suspect that for a long time, Courtney won't be able to accept her mother's death. Won't succumb to the truth of what her mother said as Courtney held her and she bled to death. Her last words: "I'm going now." And then life left her. I suspect that in Courtney's mind, she replays those memories, that moment when her mother died, when everything that Courtney knew about life and living fissured with her mother's last words.

"I'm going now."

But Courtney won't let her leave. And so everything in the house stays. More placemats and digital scales and computer parts stacking up. She can't fix the past but she can get that false sense of safety, of preparedness, with each new item she adds to every pile.

Still, they need to go now.



There's a dead, rotting baby chicken in a clear plastic tub on the front porch. There's also a dead, rotting baby bunny in one of these empty cat litter buckets. Just two more instances of not letting go of the dead.



How do we navigate other people's spaces? Exist within their context? Or, better question: Why do I stay? It'd be easy enough to pack up and leave, head to greener and less cluttered pastures. I stay because, oddly enough, it's comfortable out here. It's like living in a space outside the standard, expected life. Like how this town is on the outskirts of Austin, life out here feels like it's on the outskirts of expected "normalcy." Courtney lives off her inheritance and my work necessitates me going nowhere, so we just live by our own rules. No one to answer to but ourselves, no expectations about regular sleeping hours and washing cars and making plans and going to a job you hate. That doesn't exist out here. In an odd way, it feels like a vacation from the demands of "normal" life. Plus, with the mess having heaped up to impressive levels, I don't worry too much about whether I need to dust. There's a certain level of comfort here. Solace in the hot mess.

But then I look around me and observe how absurd my new normal has become. Not a surface area in sight. Hoarding has made Courtney's habitat uninhabitable. She has three bedrooms,

all practically unusable. Too full. All this *stuff* functions as pillows, as a boundary between her and the outside world. Superfluous stuff. Avoidable accumulation. Futile attempts to freshen everything up. Gratuitous gathering. Irresponsible irrelevance. The needless knick-knacks. Redundant re-organization that is forever never done.

I sift through synonyms and definitions and all sorts of words to try and cope with the complexities of this situation because words are what I hoard. It's a catch-22, though: stuff quelling anxiety is stuff spurring concern.



Here's something concerning:

Scorpion infestation. Two words that just shouldn't go together because that's just wrong. But that's just exactly what we have going on. How can I write now that I've seen a scorpion take flight? Soar inches away from my brain. I've been editing a lot of bad poetry lately. Thus the rhyming. In clearer terms: two nights ago Sissy was pawing at a scorpion on the living room floor. The scorpion wasn't trying to play with her like she was with it. The next night, there was a scorpion knocking on the door—well, clinging to the front door. I didn't know scorpions could go vertical like that. Then, most recently, that flying scorpion. I was just sitting outside editing bad poetry in my outdoor-patio-furniture office when—*whabam!*—fucking scorpion flies by my head and lands on the table. I smooshed it good and proper with my flip-flop, but now any twinge of a feeling on my exposed flesh or curly leaf scuttering by is obviously a scorpion coming to get me. I'm on the verge of taking this infestation personally. Though I don't think they mean direct harm, I do fully believe they're like, "Get the fuck away from me."

Likewise.

So why the sudden infestation? My assumption: scorpions eat insects and insects eat smelly things like trash and trash builds up here and so together this all eats away at the safety of our homestead. The stinging reality of truth. Circle of life. We have our own little ecosystem going on over here.



Alright. I'm doing it. Flying scorpions are apparently my limit.

I'm cleaning the mess that isn't mine, cleaning up her house like I'm helping her sort through her trauma. None of this clutter, physical or emotional, is mine to clear out. But I'm doing the deep-cleaning because I, too, have to live here. Regardless that there's a bit of freedom in living without standard social rules, the chaos—her PTSD, the trash—is getting to be too much for me. Feeling stuck in the muck of Courtney's tragedy and subsequent hoarder behavior, someone needs to gain some agency around here. And since Courtney won't budge from her self-destructive cycle, I've decided to do two years' worth of her dirty laundry. Not an exaggeration. In the past two years, Courtney has bought new clothes instead of cleaning the ones she has. This two-year-old mountain of dirty laundry, though, might not be directly related to her PTSD, just her inability to do responsible things.

Either way, I want somewhere to sit. Underneath two years of dirty laundry is a blue loveseat. I begin to sort and dig. Cleaning up Courtney's mess so I can rest.



Clyde lies on the porch's railing. Tail and right arm hanging. Balanced on a two-by-four even when he's sleeping. Eyes slanted, whiskers relaxed. I'd love to be a cat living in this havoc palace (though not an orange one).

Sitting outside with the settling-down sun. Wrapping up another day here on the farm that is no farm, just seven acres of neglected land. Overgrown pasture, knee-high grass in the dog yard. Perfect length for hosting fleas. Chiggers. Other things that sting and bite like the rat snake now hanging dead on the front yard fence. That's what happens, bro, when you swallow duck eggs. Courtney puts her gun to use again.

I want to drag the sunset out. Relish each remaining shade of pink. The blue purpling, wind dancing slowly. A time when the night has slunk away from sweltering, and still just enough light to see this page as I witness my surroundings.

Here, in the space of considering, I feel the wind gust along my skin in that refreshing fall way. I think of what it is to be winded. Not shortness of breath, but the movement of life. My ex-girlfriend is steps away from me, sewing together a porch swing set seat. She often feels a shortness of breath and I wonder whether that's because her life resists the wind. She can go with the breeze, but when gusts of capital-R Reality hit her, she retreats. Resists. Instead

of allowing the movement of life to be something she works with, she stays planted like a deep T-post. Keeps to the ground she has always known. Don't change anything. Just add to it.

It makes me wonder about survival skills and the point at which they stop serving us.

Courtney spoke with me today about PTSD. How its first step is avoiding. This tells me two things: 1) She's interested enough in her misery to research her PTSD, and b) she's self-aware enough to know that she's avoiding. Now if only she could see the hoarding.

I wonder what step of PTSD is about movement and healing and cleaning. How long it will take her to start living a life outside of her hoarded homebound isolation. When she'll see that avoiding trauma only intensifies it in the long run.

I worry that she'll forever be winded from her resistance. That she'll never let the gust of her mother's death at least nudge her toward another way of existence. Memories will forever haunt her, but the present tense is the best time to navigate them, to lessen the fright, to stop fighting life.



Living nowhere, or at least in the middle of it, is a different experience. There's the expected quiet and the wild animals and hordes of insects and orange feral cats. There's no real reason to leave the house if it's not in the context of food or cigarettes. With so much space, you don't feel the need to get out as much. Now that the house is getting cleaned up a bit, there are a number of places for me to sit. I migrate from table to table, sofa to chair. My commute to different offices lasting no longer than a few—finally—hazard-free steps.

Improvement.

There are times when the environment doesn't inspire anxiety and cooped-up-ness. Where I can just relax into the mess and navigate around the clutter and trash, mindlessly.

If you look beyond the mess, it's beautiful out here. I saw this house a few times before Regina died. It was nice, spacious. Wide open spaces. Country living. Then the matriarch died and now this place and every living thing in it are scrambling.

At times it feels like we're all in this together. The dogs on the lookout, alerting us when something's not right. The horses and chickens and duck assuring us we're living the country life. I don't really know what purpose the cats serve, though. Moving

decorations? Companionship, perhaps. We all do our part as we try not to perish from our host's approach to life, pitching in to sort through the chaos, surviving in solidarity.

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