

Charlotta

IN THE HOUSE, up the scant rise from the river, an alarm clock rings. Daylight seeps through the weeping willows with their breathy leaf curtains and strikes. Charlotta inches her head into a finger of sun. The ringing alarm, alarm, then Avery in her bedroom with the window open, shuts the ringing off and wrenches the radio to loud. Morning light etches dark amber against the back of the house. The song from the radio ignites the air.

In the outdoor pen, Charlotta stamps her hoof into the pile of straw. Her hefty, heated-up belly keeps her anchored with the fat piglets squiggling inside. The air has a smell. Rocky cold. Stiff mud. When the radio starts up, Charlotta turns her stubbly rump to the river and whatever might be floating by. The parade: several dog-eared maple leaves behind a Dairyland milk carton and a forked willow branch. Charlotta's ears twitch at the slight percussive groan. The river riffs bank to bank. She waits. Watches the house. The song plays from the radio, then another. The songs break into skittering singing, guitars barking, and shaking sounds like acorns falling.

From this distance, through the windows of the house, Avery is like fog billowing up from the ground. Avery appears, Avery vanishes. Charlotta waits, watches—the same thing, every day. Her tiny, intent eyes combine the misty shape of Avery into a solidified Avery, into Avery getting closer, arriving with breakfast.

But, as is Avery's custom, there are distractions first. The phone rings, and Avery turns down the radio before answering. Charlotta starts to sway. Avery pushes open the top of the Dutch door in the kitchen, leans out, and talks into the phone.

She says, Sammy, you're up early. No, don't even think about coming over right now. Last night, remember how it went?

Charlotta waits, and stops swaying.

Smart-ass, Avery says, you know it's any day and Charlotta's due? Plus, the garage sale. I've got to go, Sammy. Come by, love, but later.

The cloud that is Avery has changed direction and turns from the door to stare at the kitchen wall where the clock waves its hands. It must tell Avery something. Avery looks out. Charlotta is rooted to the front corner of her pen. Doesn't Avery see her? Maybe, but Avery walks out of the kitchen, past the bank of windows in the living room and into the bedroom, then back again to the kitchen. Charlotta snorts, but the sound travels nowhere. Avery turns up the music, piano racing down the burrow of notes.

Whatever Avery does Charlotta sees the outline, the busyness of Avery's hands over the counter. Watch. Watch. Watch. There is no telling why Avery doesn't heed the waving of the clock hands. Charlotta sways again, inches side to side, faster. Wait. Wait. Sway. Again, Charlotta snorts. It would be better if it were a bark, like the dog down river, sharp and ear-wringing. But the snort only tickles the roof of her mouth. Charlotta shakes her head. Avery isn't budging.

Charlotta paces to the gate and back. The dirt and straw and chips of wood tamped down hard. To the corner post, turn around, to the gate, turn around; to the corner post, turn around.

The top of the Dutch door is pulled closed from the inside, and the music dims. Charlotta goes about her pacing. She keeps one ear tuned to the Dutch door, listening for it open, for Avery to step out and down the stone steps. She smells the air for the weather report. Frost in the well of last night's sky, clouds arriving like rowboats. Charlotta's other ear turns towards the river, the insistence of the current. A large bouquet of white and pink roses held together by a blue yarn floats by in the water.

Avery

THE VESTS HANG in the closet, and Avery moves them back and forth. The vest is one of her trademarks, same with the Amish work hat—worn in spring and summer; replaced by a black cowboy hat in fall—and the small notebook bound in leather she nearly always keeps in her back pocket. These objects—vest, notebook, hat—have combined over the years into something identifiable beyond the objects themselves. Not only for those looking at Avery, but for Avery herself. They anchor her, and in her mind, she often needs anchoring, as if (like an image in one of her poems) she could float off anywhere.

Choosing the most worn vest—rust-colored leather, flat black buttons, and two narrow angled pockets—Avery pulls it over a white shirt with thin, blue stripes almost unseen. It is that very quality of *almost* that is ascribed to Avery. *Almost* shy, *almost* organized, *almost* saw what she wrote in that notebook. That notebook. She picks it up from her nightstand and writes the day's date on a blank page. Several words lurch like a blown apart dandelion across the paper: *dig, smell, wound me, then leave*. It is not always words she jots down. Sometimes it's drawings, sometimes addition and subtraction. *Almost* got her number.

Friends wonder what is in the notebook she carries. And they imagine wearing the straw hat, those who have put it on always squint and laugh as if they were laying and bumping along in a hay wagon. No one has worn the cowboy hat, except that time Av-

ery offered it to Sammy, who went in the bathroom and closed the door, and Avery had to wonder, just like everyone wondered about her, what Sammy thought or felt or *was* while wearing that hat.

She turns the radio down and walks through the house as the DJ calls out the station's letters: WBUU. *It's nine AM folks, Saturday, if you can't remember, that's October 19th, 1985—time for the morning blues, I mean news.* In the kitchen, she fills the kettle, sets it on the stove, pulls on her peacoat, lifts her cowboy hat from the counter, and goes out the Dutch door. She heads towards the shed she built and adorned not only with the paint job, striped like a candy cane, but also a fragment by Sappho cemented to the wall—*stir not the pebbles*—put together with printing press letters and spray painted a high gloss black. Fastened onto the shed's door is a porcelain doll's head that washed up from the river. A yellow-haired, tight-lipped dolly with eyelids that open and close separately and at different speeds, revealing the silver, iridescent eyes with tiny constricted pupils just off-center.

Pollyanna, Avery calls to her, Pollyanna time to wake.

With her hip, Avery shoves the door open. Pollyanna's eyelids flutter: one wide open, the other, a third of the way. Inside the shed are the hooks and shelves and drawers that hold the arrangements of tools, gardening gear, fishing poles, croquet mallets, chicken wire, two bales of straw, jars of nails, screws, bolts, tacks, hinges, and the bin of feed. She fills a bowl halfway with the feed and drops in the carrots she took from the refrigerator.

All for Charlotta, who is standing at the gate in her pen, her tail twitching.

Charlotta, a pregnant Vietnamese pot-bellied pig is another fine idea of Avery's for cobbling together ways to make extra money since she didn't get the grant. It was substantial, the grant, earmarked for the development of a new body of work. She could be nothing but a poet for a year, maybe more. Such sweet enticement, then the reality. They gave it to some guy with a string of names meant to impress by their lengths: L. Christopher Brightenton Revere. She knew the type of poems he'd write (words doused with

an underlying genteel brutality, whining entitlements of love lost and obtained).

She decided: why not earn enough herself to be nothing but a poet? It fell together. She'd supplement her bread-and-butter job of reading depthless manuscripts with predictable plotlines and overly voluptuous aliens and ingénues for pulp publishers of science fiction and romance. Supplement, with piglets.

What isn't clear to Avery is how much extra money the piglets would fetch. Is there really a clamoring for pot-bellied pigs? She's heard so, but she doesn't know to what degree that rumor is true or not. Someone said she saw an ad for a pot-bellied pig for the price of \$12,000. Not that she believed it. Who would pay that much? On the other hand, who would buy a pet rock for \$1.99? Fads are nothing more than glorified pyramid schemes. Not that Avery wants to take advantage of anyone.

She loves Charlotta. And that was a surprise, to take to her utterly. A pig. It was like having a pet monkey, a little bit suspect. They were different from cats and dogs, much closer to a coarse wildness. A whim brought her to Charlotta. Months ago, when she was at the feed store picking up potting soil and bone meal, she read a notice tacked up on the plank wall: *Must sell miniature pig. CHEAP. Call Mrs. Mandy Gallagher 212-5873.* It wasn't the word *cheap* that drew Avery, but the combination of *miniature* and *pig*. How small was it? Avery called the number and asked, how small was the pig? Mandy Gallagher told her all about Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs and that the three she had were not fitting in with the rest of the hog operation she and her husband ran, and since they were a trade anyway, it was no big deal to sell them. She also cautioned Avery that, while the pot-bellies were remarkable animals, they weren't that miniature, and as truth be told, that would be their downfall. So Avery asked, how much? It turned out that \$200 bought Avery the smallest of the three pigs.

*How small can a pig be?
Smaller than an ottoman?*

A tea pot?

A fleeting thought?

When Avery purchased Charlotta, she was, as Avery calls it, already pregnified. It was clear to Avery that the pig farmer was absolutely right: the pot-belly, while smaller than a hog, was no cupcake. But Charlotta was remarkable. The idea took shape in Avery's mind: just the one litter and then get Charlotta fixed. She would have no qualms about offering each piglet as a pet of unparalleled qualities. Miniature, pot-bellied pigs don't smell, don't bark, don't scratch the furniture, and inside or outside, they are contemplative as Buddha with a peppy personality.

A thin light pierces through the clouds. For the length of time it takes Avery to walk from the shed to the pen, Charlotta scratches the side of her head against the gatepost, then steps away from the fence: two steps and back. Avery thinks of it as a mealtime ritual, a slow shuffle to hasten the food's arrival. And why not? It works for Charlotta every time.

Hi girl, Avery says.

She opens the gate. Squats down. Charlotta lays her head on Avery's knee. Avery rubs her head starting at the forehead with the waves of wrinkles to Charlotta's ears and under her chin until there is that slight curling up of her mouth. The condition of the pen is always pristine, as if Charlotta spends most of her time in there tidying up. She roots in the one corner where the ground is softest. Short furrows in rows like for planting potatoes. Charlotta rubs her haunch against Avery, the smallest of pressures. Even if its intention is to push Avery into putting down the bowl of food, which she does, that tender nudge charms Avery every time.

Charlotta's belly is nearly as big as Charlotta herself. Stretched out from the gray hide, a tinge of pink where the hair thins, her nipples protrude. Each time Avery starts counting and gets to eleven, she has to stop as the possibility that eleven nipples, or more, means eleven, or more, piglets is unthinkable. Or undoable. How would Avery help Charlotta through it?

It took Avery six days to rearrange the garage. It had been a dumping ground for Avery's many migratory friends for over five years. Boxes shoved and stacked into ever-taller towers. Pathways narrowed between the boxes and furniture and grocery bags of things. Until Charlotta came along, Avery didn't care. But the garage had a functioning wood stove, and electricity, and Charlotta was going to need an indoor place to birth her litter. The litter required a particular type of pen with warmth and privacy and several safety features to protect the newborn piglets from Charlotta. That's what Mandy Gallagher had told her. The garage fit the bill. The agreement Avery had made with her friends when they left their junk with her was that she could choose if and when to get rid of it. No one had objected. She tried to phone everyone but only reached three, and no one wanted to come get their things.

Avery built the pen and planned to sell all the stuff in the garage sale today.

Charlotta, don't let those babies out yet. We don't have your place completely ready. Keep them in there, will you?

Avery holds the pieces of carrots in her hand, and Charlotta delicately snatches each one.

Helen

IT WILL HAVE to be at dusk or just after. This much Helen has decided. The leaves will accompany her. Today. Perfect. When Sammy is at Avery's garage sale. But it is hours before dusk; Helen grinds into the late morning restlessness of pain, her breath sparse, a fractured sound coming from her lungs, like steam from a pot when the water is about to evaporate. Painkillers in neutral shades of beige, and every once in while, Sammy brews a concoction of cocaine or marijuana. Pain be gone, Helen thinks, gone, a bubble bursting. Through the bedroom window, the colors stew, green into yellow. The clouds bed her, wed her. Why does death need to be prolonged?

She questioned Sammy about this, and before long they were naming all the ways it could be done. The Do-Me-In Rag, they called it. Sammy thought it was a game and played along. They read all they could on Niagara Falls—who went over, who bobbed up after that roaring void and survived, who didn't . . . that's when she told Sammy to read quickly, hurry through the calamity. Those who didn't.

It's to take her mind off of her pain, that's what Sammy related to Avery that day Avery came over and heard them.

Maybe she's serious, Avery had said outside Helen's bedroom, but Helen heard them.

Not on your life, Sammy said, she's not the reckless type. Did you ever once see her do something rash? No, she's too deliberate. That's the way she is.

But cancer changes everything, Avery had said.

Cancer, dancer, take me away. These are the kind of thoughts Helen has: words connecting, galloping with chaos. Requests that echo inside her. But words have also been hijacked. She's been reduced to the language of cancer's invasion, and as such it is forever intruding with words that hurt. The sounds of those words . . . *metastasis, radiation, efficacy* . . . are breathy embellishments to the medical world, like a dog rolling on dead fish to scent his coat and alert everything to his whereabouts. Here-I-am-words as if that's all it takes to rid the body of cancer. *We're going to defeat this disease.* An elephant stands a better chance at a graceful ending.

The nightstand holds her medicines. Only she calls them her potions. There is the half-empty glass of water flanked by the pill bottles. Surrounded. Give up. Take me now. Who cares about the order of things? Is her body paying any attention? It only has one thing on its scorecard, and that is the grand slam of the cancer again in her breast and now her bones and lungs.

She is agitated. Where did Sammy go?