

## Billie

At 4:37pm the east side tavern serving twelve different types of fish stood empty. The lack of a wait time and the fish selection were the big draws for Destiny on this, our first date. For me, the convenience. The tavern was halfway between my house in Sellwood and her place in St. Johns.

“You look your age,” Destiny said, shaking my hand.

I told her I was my age, and she laughed loudly at this before ordering a triple whiskey.

The rest of the date didn't go much better than the opening act. She ate too fast, and talked even faster, filling the muted and exposed space with words. She said things like *hellz naw* and *thanks dawg* to our server, though she was a decade my senior. A few other early diners trickled in, and I had already mentally deleted Destiny's messages when she asked if I wanted to meet her pig.

“She owns me, and she definitely doesn't look her age.” Destiny boomeranged a quick grin my way at her own joke. “She doesn't eat any fruit—that's the secret.”

I pictured a full sized, actual pig and asked if this was accurate.

“Naw. She's half kunekune and half pot belly. Only about a hundred and seventy pounds, wet.”

I looked at this woman in the backwards Dodgers cap and the sweatshirt covered in paint freckles, fully prepared to make my escape. She had been a long shot. A radical departure from the attorneys and health professionals I usually attracted online. It was a good thing I'd only shared my backup email address with her. One of Destiny's profile pictures depicted her in an Iron Maiden muscle shirt and pulling weeds along the riverbank as if she owned it. But she'd had a nice smile. And I hadn't received any other messages in weeks.

“Billie's never met another vegetarian.” She eyed my plate of shaved sprouts. “You can both check it off your bucket list.”

After dinner I followed Destiny's coughing Volvo up to her apartment, parked in front of a fire hydrant. I intended to use this as my getaway excuse in a few minutes.

“Oh no, I parked in front of a fire hydrant. I’ve really got to go.” The plan was clearly bullet proof. Inside, sheets of newspaper covered her old sofas, and an empty birdcage filled with packing peanuts rested on the ancient stereo. The place reeked of matches and mildew.

“I’ll let her in,” Destiny called from the kitchen. “Give yourself a wide berth, in case she charges.”

Before I could move, a black face appeared in the kitchen doorway. It was attached to a rigid black body, the charcoal color of torched driftwood.

I made some quick comment about her pig being big after all.

“Probably thinks the same thing about you,” Destiny said. “You know how most of us have no idea how much space we take up? You know, we creep past each other in traffic when there’s more than enough lane? Billie is nothing like that. She knows exactly how much weight she has to throw around. Girl doesn’t creep anywhere.”

Billie grunted, cocked her head. She seemed to be testing the air for supersensory information that only swine can perceive. There was something prehistoric about her, and also like clay newly formed.

“She’s not too sure about you.” Destiny kicked one foot up, leaning on the doorframe. “Whatever you do, don’t feed her. You’ll send her into a frenzy. One taste of sugar and it’s a blood bath.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off Billie’s glistening, dirty snout. The unfortunate way her eyes disappeared into the fat rolls on her face. It would have been easier if I could see her eyes, or if I could be sure she couldn’t see mine. She trotted forward, intent on my shoes. Or on my ankles. I reacted in the only appropriate way and dropped to one knee, hand out.

On our fifth date Destiny revealed that this is what had clinched things for her. That I had been warned of a blood bath and still dropped down to Billie’s level, unafraid. I didn’t tell Destiny I’d been terrified, though strangely willing to sacrifice my hand in that moment should Billie have decided I was to remain the only vegetarian among us. We’d all read *Lord of the Flies*, hadn’t we? Destiny hadn’t, and she also ate bacon at least once a day.

As it turned out, Destiny preferred silences that she could fill, and we never listened to music. This incongruous mix of the obvious and the paradoxical seemed to define her. Beyond the Iron Maiden t-shirts (she owned three), the eczema on her arms, her passion for cooking up Billie's brethren, and the crass way she wrung tea bags into her open mouth, Destiny was also one of those people whose eyes welled up at anything kind. "Thank you for a lovely evening," brought on mistiness that most of us would have reserved for something a little more remarkable. I took her to a lot of second run movies, some third run Chinese.

I didn't try with Destiny, which I regret.

We were together—if you could call it that—for three months when she stepped out into traffic. She'd been drunk, I assumed, and the first thing I did when I heard about it was to throw away the bottle of Bulleit I'd bought for the times when she would stay over and we would play cards late into the night. I didn't keep liquor in the house for good reason.

The call came from Destiny's neighbor, who had picked up Destiny's astonishingly intact phone from the gutter where it landed after the impact. No one saw Gail do this, and she kept it to herself. "It was a crime scene," Gail said to me, hushed. "I should've given it to the police. I heard something and came out. Saw the phone."

Instead of turning the phone in, Gail called me. The last number Destiny had dialed. She told me what had happened. She told me there was now no one to feed the pig. No one would go near her, she explained, and Destiny had happened to brag about my way with Billie. Something about me that Billie respected, though I wasn't particularly alpha, so far as anyone could tell.

I stopped by hours after Destiny died to feed the pig, and twice a day thereafter for almost two weeks. I hadn't been able to go and see Destiny's remains—had reserved that for her sister. Bodies left me cold. Her sister, Chastity, flew in from Chicago, taken one look at the apartment with me in it, slopping pig chow from bowl to bowl the way Destiny had shown me (achieving the perfect consistency), and written the whole thing off.

“My sister was a hopeless alcoholic,” Chastity said. She glared at the birdcage, the rotting sofas. The stacks of dusty cereal boxes on the kitchen counter behind the gathering of plastic army men, which Destiny had long ago grouped into a kind of dance party formation. “I’m sure you knew that, though. She was buried in debt, which I’ll take care of if and when that settlement ever comes through. But this stuff...”

*Hellz naw*, as Destiny would have said.

I disposed of everything. Nothing could be sold, and so it all went to donation centers or into a free pile on the sidewalk that disappeared Portland-style within the day. I kept Billie in the miniature backyard, feeding her morning and evening on schedule. Pigs liked routine almost more than food, but she wasn’t grateful for this small kindness. The creaking, grating sounds she made somewhere deep in her throat would start up around noon no matter how much I fed her at breakfast. She would beg until dinner, and then beg some more. She seemed to know the apartment was being emptied, and each day the creaking sounds grew louder.

One day, she was all that remained.

“There’s a club that will take her,” someone said when I called the hotline Destiny had posted on her fridge. It was the one thing I’d kept, that scrap of notebook paper with the phone number and the words “Pig Resources” written on it in Destiny’s short, square hand.

I asked what would happen to her in the club.

“Someone will foster her until they can find her a home, but pigs can be in foster care for a while, that’s for sure.”

Roots. The pig sanctuary. I had no choice, it seemed.

In a moment of what now looked like prescience, Destiny had mentioned the pig sanctuary about a week before she died. We’d been discussing pig companionship in a roundabout way of approaching the topic between the two of us:

“They’re herd animals,” she’d said. “There’s nothing happier than a sounder of swine.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“That’s what it’s called,” she insisted. “A sounder of swine. A group of jellyfish is called a bloom. Isn’t that great? I have a book around here somewhere with all the animal groupings in it.”

I told her the term was collective noun.

She cocked her head at me, the way Billie did. “Sure, okay. The collective noun term for a group of kangaroos is a mob, then. Anyway, I’d want Billie to find her sounder if she could. Or at least a buddy. There’s this sanctuary called Roots in Arizona. They take in pigs and give them a good life with their own. You should see the way they bond, those pigs. Pairs and packs of them all over the place.”

I asked if she’d been there.

“They send out a newsletter with pictures. I’ve got one around here somewhere...”

She’d kept talking and hadn’t found the newsletter, but it was easy enough now to look up Roots and find them in a stretch of desert between Phoenix and Tucson. No pig turned away, or so the website read. Dedicated to the proposition that all creatures are created equal... with liberty and belly rubs for all. The pig leader—a wizened boar named Abe—graced the top of every page. Their headquarters a mere 1,437 miles away.

There was Destiny’s coughing Volvo with the “K9 wives like it ruff!” sticker on the bumper, but I couldn’t trust that to get us to Arizona. There was my Miata. Laughable. No room for the both of us in there. Could I pay someone to take Billie? But that might ruin her for good. She wasn’t livestock, as Destiny had pointed out more than once. Billie allegedly possessed the emotional intelligence of a three-year-old. When I thought of locking a three-year-old up in a clanking metal cage, hauling it 1,437 miles along with a herd (correct term) of horses or a drove (also correct) of stinking cattle, I balked.

I would take her, damn it. It was the least I could do.

I borrowed a friend’s van for the task, and left out the part about a pig joining me for the trip. I told my friend I wanted to get out of the city, just drive. Camp in it. Well I *was* going to camp with Billie. The notion of trotting her into a motel room seemed absurd.

Now, how to get her into the van? She wasn't harness trained, something that Destiny had said she regretted in her rearing. "That and socializing her better, those are my big regrets." I wondered if a person had time for even bigger regrets when hit by a car, or if they were out of their body so quickly that this life was like taking in a single gulp of air before it was done.

I researched herding techniques for pigs. Learned I'd need a barricade. Something strong; cardboard wouldn't do. I bought two pieces of plywood and hinged them together, making two walls that could be opened to varying degrees. A third piece of heavier plywood as my ramp. I let Billie into the house, her first time inside for weeks. She slid on the slick wood floors and sniffed every empty corner. She was quiet, and I mistook this for reverence. I told her that her mother was gone.

My voice seemed to wake the beast, and the next thing I knew Billie charged. She tried to go through me and maybe through the closed front door. I fell over her with a thump, and she ran squealing, triumphant, out the back door. *She's faster than poison, dawg.*

On the second attempt I asked for Gail the neighbor's help. Gail agreed and brought the baby gate she kept on hand for when her granddaughter came to visit. Billie in the house, then out the front door. Gail herding her with the baby gate, and me with my hinged plywood contraption. Billie making sounds like death all up and down the street.

Somehow we got her up the ramp and into the van where she immediately began shredding the tarp I'd laid down to protect the floor. Gail gave me a good-luck-Chuck kind of pat on the arm before taking her traumatized self back home.

We hit the road within the hour. As soon as the van started up the pig stopped shredding and began chomping her gums. A few minutes of that and she was foaming at the mouth. I assumed this was stress, but looked it up to be sure. Stress, correct. I'd rigged a plywood barricade between the back of the van and the front seats so she couldn't get to me, and I dared not reach my hand back there for comfort. I talked to her instead, as Destiny might have. Facts about Arizona to help orient Billie to her life ahead.

The more I talked the louder Billie chomped, and so I stopped, turned on the radio. She chomped through top 40 and (surprisingly) through the death metal station. It wasn't until we landed on country that the chewing slowed. Halfway through Tammy Wynette's *Stand by Your Man*, and when we were stopped at a red light, Billie at last sank to the floor with a sound like a breaching hippopotamus. She slept.

We made good time that first day. All the way down to an hour out of San Francisco. I had no plan for getting Billie out of the van, but she needed somewhere appropriate to relieve herself. It turned out this wasn't so urgent as she'd already made a neat pile of excrement by the wheel well. Still, she couldn't be stuck in this van all night, and so I pulled into a Walmart parking lot, asking dead Destiny for some inspiration now that she was in a more omnipresent position to provide it.

*The corner by the garden center.*

Whether this was Destiny or good sense, it didn't matter. I parked at an odd angle to the fence, creating a kind of triangular open space between it and the van. I climbed out, retrieved my hinged plywood herding wall, and barricaded one of the gaps. I'd close the other gap with the ramp once I had Billie out of the van. I tempted her with a few chocolate covered blueberries, disregarding Destiny's voice this time.

*One taste of sugar and it will be a blood bath.*

*She doesn't eat fruit—it's what keeps her young.*

I left Billie to graze some leaves from the nearby shrubbery and made myself some kind of dinner from Walmart's deli, then back to feed. I fell asleep upright in the front seat while Billie lounged, chomping her gums. We slept all night undisturbed, and in the morning, after more blood sugar sprinkled up the ramp, we resumed the open road.

We were making excellent time when the van sputtered to a halt. The California border beckoned, still miles away, and I struck the steering wheel with open palms. Billie grunted. We'd coasted onto the shoulder just a few hundred yards from my destination, a gas station. We weren't out of gas yet, but I'd wanted to keep it above a half a tank to be safe. The needle still showed just under.

*Piece of shit van.*

Don't I know it. This is what I get for borrowing a hunk of junk from Mae who couldn't even pay her taxes most years.

*Gas station people might know of a mechanic.*

I left Billie and walked to the gas station, kicking dust as I went. This was not in the plan. None of it. Stupid piece of shit van. The guy behind the counter stared, unblinking, when I told him my story and asked about a mechanic. He knew someone named Doug, who might or might not be back from his snowboarding trip in Tahoe.

I told him I had a pig back there and I had to get her to Arizona.

"Shit, yo. Put some gas in it."

I told him I still had around a half tank. It wasn't the gas.

He grabbed his lower lip with his top teeth, considering this. "Maybe your gauge is off."

He sold me a plastic gas can and enough fuel to fill it, and I trailed back to the van. What the hell use was a gas station without a mechanic? I emptied the gas can into the tank for good measure, and climbed back into the front seat. Billie chomping, the heat mounting. I slapped the steering wheel again, defeated.

*Turn it over. Get on the road.*

Damn you, Destiny. So damn impatient. You used to drum your fingers on the table when we played canasta, waiting for me to discard. I jammed the keys into the ignition and turned them, just to show her. And the van sprang to life.

I waved going past the gas station, but I don't suppose the oddly helpful attendant noticed, being busy with his cigarette behind the dumpster. We were through California by evening, and on into the crisp edged Arizona desert. Billie was getting good and fed up with her holding cell, and had taken to chomping again. No amount of Faith Hill would soothe her, and the wet, squeaking sound of her teeth on gums filled the van. I was fascinated by those yellowed teeth. I'd been brave enough this afternoon to hold a chocolate covered blueberry aloft from the front seat as Billie tracked it, her great maw opening wide. Her teeth, clustered at angles like old tombstones at the front of her mouth. Her dark tongue flat and receptive. She waited



for me to drop the treat, and when I didn't immediately do so, began backing up with deliberate effort until her rump rested on the floor of the van.

Destiny had never said Billie could sit. The pig received two blueberries for this trick, which seemed to leave her content rather than rabid for more. She'd taken to sleeping nearer my barricade—so near I could smell her breath, which was not unlike the savory sick waft of a garbage disposal. I rolled the window down and popped a breath mint.

"You become like one," Destiny had said one night in a halted attempt to explain her passion for Billie. "She's mine. I'm her one. Well anyway, I'm the one who feeds her."

I'd told her I was sure Billie felt more bonded to her than that.

Destiny had looked at me, shifting under the weight of my leg. "You're a romantic, you know that? No, you are. You honestly think Billie loves me special for feeding her. And for giving her a home. She'd love anyone who took care of her. That's animal nature."

I asked her why keep animals at all if they weren't going to discriminate.

Her thick eyebrows drew together in genuine confusion. "You really think I keep the pig for my benefit?"

Sex with Destiny had been pretty terrible. Zero chemistry. She was the kind of woman who flung herself at you, starfish-like, all dispassionate need and eczema ravaged elbows. I was too uncomfortable to undress fully, and so we were the determined nude and the partially clothed, twined together in awkward shapes. Maybe we went to bed together for my benefit. Maybe not. Either way, those nights seemed a long time gone now. As if Destiny had happened to someone else, and I'd only heard about her. But the story still vivid enough to conjure her voice in my mind.

Billie seemed to mourn Destiny the hardest after meals. She'd finish eating and wait, listening in that eerily silent, intelligent way of hers. I learned not to speak in these moments, and so avoid her charging me. I let her listen, hearing, perhaps, her own version of Destiny's voice filling the void. Back on the road I picked up country

station after country station as we drove and the airwaves changed. Billie chomped or slept through these lullabies, and I learned the words to the same dozen hits.

“People sayin’ that I’ve hit rock bottom,

Just ‘cause I’m living on the rocks.”

*My body, my rules. Remember?*

I did remember. Destiny had often said that.

“It’s a broken hearted thinking problem...”

*I don’t need you to think about it now. Just get my pig to Arizona.*

The pig sanctuary turned out to be less impressive in person than online. We arrived mid-morning on the third day, and already the sun hung high. The matriarch, a German woman named Brunhilde, poked her head into the van to meet Billie. “Come on, you little dumpling.” Billie trotted down the ramp and practically followed Brunhilde into the makeshift pen. “I’ll give you first the tour,” Brunhilde said to me, “but it should be the other way round.” She guffawed. “Billie is the one who will stay.”

So it was official, and that easy. I hadn’t told them I was coming, and still they accepted Billie right away. No reasons needed. No hesitation. She would be one of two-hundred and ninety-seven pigs here, each carefully catalogued. The sanctuary itself was little more than some barns and smaller structures like homeless camps—tarps and tin roofs for shade. Acres of hog paneling set up into assorted fenced off sections to create smaller herds out of the milling swine. The sound of them was terrific. Sounds like a cross between donkeys and a hawk’s scream and bear’s low, guttural grunt emanated at various decibel levels from the crowd. It was like a sporting event. And also oddly peaceful. “Most of them love the sun,” Brunhilde said. Some of the pigs lolled in holes they’d dug, baking themselves into oblivion. Others found the shade, or rooted, delighting in the dust the way elephants did in documentaries. “A lot of pigs think they are elephants,” Brunhilde revealed. “They have elephant sized personalities.”

She asked for a donation from me without apology, and I admired this so much it got me to pull out my higher balance credit card. I wasn’t paying Billie’s entrance

fee so much as I was contributing to the greater good, Brunhilde explained. All of those pig bodies needed to eat.

“We have a monthly membership, if you’d like?”

I let her sign me up.

I was welcome to stay as long as I wanted, but there was Mae’s van to get back to Portland and the lengthy drive ahead. I would just say goodbye to Billie who was destroying a bowl of vegetables back in her pen. She had already made a dry wallow of her own to lie in.

“She’s right at home,” Brunhilde said. “Look at her take to it.” She slapped Billie over the fence, and a cloud of dust rose from the charcoal body. “Would you like to scratch her before you go?”

How Brunhilde knew I’d never touched this pig, I couldn’t say. Billie had nosed my hand for a split second once, a long time ago when I’d dropped to one knee. The Swedish fish feeling of her snout had been one of the most alien sensations of my life.

“Here. Come and scratch her. Piggies like different sorts of pats, you know. They’re very individual. Some of them like to be flicked. They have tough hides.”

I came nearer the fence. Billie’s face still buried in her food dish. She was licking the bowl dry with a sound like brushing.

“Others like to be smacked, or stroked. I think Billie would like to be scratched. Here—” Brunhilde dragged her blunt nails across the flaking skin at the pig’s neck. Billie lifted her head, grunted. “She does like that. Obvious pleasure.”

*Obvious.*

“There, you see? Try it.”

I reached down and put a hand on Billie’s back. The coarse hair like bristles, the muscle under the dry, gray skin like a hard cheese. I scratched her in a raking motion the way Brunhilde had, and Bille lifted her head again, grunting.

“Anytime you want to volunteer, we are here.”

Hadn’t I told Brunhilde I lived two states away? I told her instead that Billie liked country music.

“Ah, I see. Lucky, one of our handlers, listens to it all day. He’s a real cowboy. Lucky Billie,” she said, and we shared a laugh. “They will be good friends.”

Billie didn’t look up as I left, or when I called a goodbye back at her. She was sniffing the perimeter of her pen, scouting for scraps, and didn’t really know my voice. In about a month—after a vet visit for shots, a hoof trim, and a spay check—she would be integrated with a small group of her own. Maybe she would find a buddy. I would get the van back to Mae, giving it a good clean first, but for now I stood at the driver’s side door, inhaling some of that everlasting Arizona sun. I waited for Destiny’s voice, something like, *Get a good whiff of it while you can*. But she was quiet at last, perhaps content.

“I hope you’re happy,” I said before leaving.