Magnificent Pigs

by Cat Rambo

The spring before it happened, I went upstairs and found my ten-year-old sister Jilly crying. Charlotte's Web, which we'd been reading together at bedtime all that week, lay splayed broken-backed on the floor where she'd thrown it.

"What's wrong?" I said, hovering in the doorway. As Jilly kept getting sicker, I tried to offer her the illusion of her own space, but remained ready.

"I was reading ahead because I liked it so much—and Charlotte dies!" she managed to gasp between sobs.

The big brass bed creaked in protest as I sat down beside her. Gathering her into my arms, I rocked her back and forth. It was well past sunset and the full-faced moon washed into the room, spilling across the blue rag rug like milk, and gleaming on the bed knobs so that they looked like balls of icy light, brighter than the dim glow of Jilly's bedside lamp.

"It's a book, Jilly, just a book," I said.

She shook her head, cheeks blotched red and wet with tears. "But, Aaron, Charlotte's dead!" she choked out again.

I retrieved the book from the middle of the room and set it in front of her. "Look," I said. "If we open the book up again at the beginning, Charlotte's alive. She'll always be alive in the book."

The sobs quieted to hiccups and she reached for the book, looking dubious. When she opened it to the first chapter, I began to read.

"'Where's Papa going with that ax?' said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast. 'Out to the hoghouse,' replied Mrs. Arable. 'Some pigs were born last night.'"

Curling against me, she let me read the first two chapters. After she slipped away to sleep, I tucked the blanket around her then went downstairs to cry my own tears.

My father and mother were farmers. They had been raised by farmers who had themselves been raised by farmers and so on back to Biblical days. They saw my talent for drawing only as a hobby

until the age of seventeen, when I proposed that my major in college be an uneasy mixture of art and agriculture. They were dubious, but they were also good-natured sorts (Jilly takes after them) who only wanted the best for me. So they sent me, eldest of their two children, off to Indiana University.

Jilly, a late arrival to the family, was almost six years old at that point and consumed most of their attention, which I did not begrudge her. From the day she was born, she was a tiny, perfect addition to our household, and I loved her.

Three years later, on a rainy September afternoon, my parents died in a car accident and I returned home to the farm to take care of Jilly. A few townfolk felt I shouldn't be allowed to raise her by myself, but when I hit twenty-one a year later, that magic number at which you apparently become an adult, they stopped fussing.

The insurance settlement provided enough to live on. It wasn't a lot, but I supplemented it by raising pigs and apples in the way my parents always had and taking them to Indianapolis. There the pigs were purchased by a plant that makes organic bacon, pork, and sausage, and the apples by a cider mill.

I didn't mind the farm work. I'd get up in the morning, take care of things, and find myself a few hours in the afternoon to work in my barn-stall studio.

A year ago Jilly started getting stomach aches so bad they had her doubled over and crying. When I first took her to the hospital, they diagnosed it as Crohn's disease. Six months later, after I'd learned the vocabulary of aminosalicylates and corticosteroids and immunomodulators, they switched to a simpler word: cancer.

Insurance covered the medical bills. It didn't cover much else so I laid aside my art and bought some more pigs. I had to hire a nurse to take care of Jilly whenever I couldn't—I wanted someone with her all the time. I didn't want her lonely or unable to help herself.

At first I hired a chilly but competent woman, Miss Andersen. She was expensive, but I figured she was worth it. I had a crazy idea that I'd use my talent to become a tattoo artist and make enough extra cash to pay her. A Superior mobile tattoo set from eBay cost me a

hundred bucks and got me started. I named my enterprise Magnificent Pigs, in honor of Wilbur.

But tattoos aren't a high demand item in Traversville, and you need to practice a lot to get any good at it. Once I'd run out of old high school friends who were willing to let me work on them in the name of a free tattoo, I turned to the pigs.

It's not as cruel as it sounds, I swear. According to the vet, pig skin is tough as nails and doesn't have a lot of nerve endings. He sells me cartons of a topical anesthetic lotion that I use beforehand, just in case.

And the pigs have never objected. They're placid beasts—give them a bowl of mash and they don't care what you do. My dad believed in playing classical music to calm the animals, so I crank Beethoven cello suites to hide the buzz of the needle, and go to town. The first time I took a tattooed pig to the slaughterhouse, they gave me odd looks when they saw where I'd inscribed "Mother," "Semper Fi," and "Tattooing gets pretty boring after a while" in blue and red and black on the leathery white skin, but as long as it didn't mark the meat, it was okay.

I didn't realize my dreams of becoming a brand-name tattoo artist, no matter how many coiling koi and serpents I covered the pigs with. Southern Indiana is a conservative place and very few people came out for tattoos. I liked the business because it made me feel like an artist, but I didn't really have any customers.

Eventually I had to let Miss Andersen go, promising I'd have her back wages for her within six months. She wasn't happy about it but had a good contract with the nursing home waiting for her so she let it slide. Jilly was glad to see her depart, but didn't tell me till weeks later about the meanness that had revealed itself when tending a hapless ten-year-old.

"She was just mean," Jilly said.

"She never touched you, did she?" I asked cautiously.

"No, not like that. She pinched me a few times but mostly she just said mean things. Like what a shame it was that I was an orphan and how you'd probably get rid of me when you got married."

I looked at her, but her face was clear and unworried.

"That didn't bother you, Jilly?" I asked.

"I knew you'd always take care of me."

Which was all fine and well, but even so Miss Andersen's departure made it feel as though things were pressing in on all sides. Nightmares lapped at my sleep all that night.

The next day, strung out on caffeine and weariness, I stood in the cramped grocery store aisle looking at a vista of jams and sandwich spreads and couldn't decide between crunchy and smooth, because I literally couldn't remember which Jilly or I preferred. I must have stood there for ten minutes.

See, one of the side effects of the disease is nausea and loss of appetite. Peanut butter's one of the few things Jilly will eat, and it's high in protein. So it's important to bring home the right one.

There's a wide variety of peanut-butter labels. I stood there, looking at Jif and Skippy and Peter Pan and Kroger brand, going through the same loop in my head over and over: "No I think I like crunchy and Jilly likes smooth, but maybe it's the other way around, and what other groceries do we need, but first—crunchy or smooth?" While this frenzied loop continued, I became aware that a woman and her cart had been circling me, going back and forth in the aisle and warding off other shoppers. The muzak on the store intercom switched from one piano piece to another.

Finally she stopped beside me. "Buy them both," she advised, and it broke the spell that had held me there helpless.

I turned and looked at her. She was an elderly woman dressed in black, a blue and white scarf bound around her hair to hold it in place. She had an enormous beaklike nose and bright black eyes that glittered at me as though daring me to rebuff her. It was Mrs. Huber, whose husband had died a few years before. I don't know why she stuck in Bedford. She had, and was an object of some curiosity, being the town's only Jew. Jilly and I were doubly outsiders—not only the children of the town misfits but also the family of an invalid.

"Thank you," I said, and took down two jars. She stood beside me, and it didn't feel awkward at all. Like we were family who had just happened to meet there and would see each other again at dinner.

She said, "The little girl needs a nurse, no?"

"Yeah, she does," I said. I gestured at the shelves of peanut butter. "It's okay, though. I just got a little side-tracked, that's all."

We stared at each other for a while. My only other encounter with Mrs. Huber had been selling her peanut brittle when I was in sixth grade and trying to win a trip to Washington in the school candy drive. I found out later she bought candy from every kid that approached her. With three grades selling, ten to fifteen kids in each class, that must have been a substantial pile of peanut brittle.

She didn't look too much older now. The lines around her eyes were more defined and her lips drooped at a harsher angle. Finally she said, simply, "You need nurse too maybe?" and after that we came to an arrangement.

Jilly loved her like a mother. I got fond of her myself. There was a certain irony to a Jew living on a pig farm, particularly with a tattoo artist. She didn't keep kosher, so she ate with us each night, although she'd never touch pork. I cooked any pork chops, or sausage, or bacon, or other variants of pig meat. But most of the time I left it to her to cook. She coaxed Jilly's tender appetite with blintzes and rugelach, kugel and kreplach. The kitchen took on a constant simmer of cinnamon that was a pleasant change from TV dinners.

After supper we'd sit in the parlor, Jilly watching TV or reading while I studied up on farming or tattooing methods and Mrs. H. knitted. She turned out shawls, scarves, baby blankets, and a multitude of sweaters for Jilly, with patterns of pigs or flowers. Jilly's favorite was the one with her name knitted into the front. She'd scold me for working too hard, and when I came in bone weary from a day of fretting about pig vaccines or Jilly's latest set of tests, she'd say in her harsh accent, "Worries go down better with soup."

Sometimes I thought that God had sent her by way of apology.

I don't want to make it sound like everything was fine. But it wasn't as bad as it could be, at least for a while.

I was practicing on one of the pigs, writing out words, when Jilly came into the barn and leaned on the bench near me. It was early spring warm. By now we were long past recognizing the smell of pig shit—sometimes I forgot that it clung like an invisible film to my clothing until I noticed people edging away from me in stores.

The other smells weren't hidden by the omnipresent odor: the sour redolence of corn mash, the fresh tang of the straw underfoot, the distant sweetness of apple blossom coming in through the window.

"What are you doing?" Jilly asked.

"Practicing writing words," I said.

"What's that?" she said, pointing to a passage of text on the pig's rounded back.

"It's the first verse of 'Stairway to Heaven.'"

"Nice."

"It was the only poetry I could remember off the top of my head," I said.

She sat there watching me, so I started tattooing the words that Charlotte uses to describe Wilbur onto the pig's broad back. When I reached "Magnificent," she giggled, just as Mrs. H. called us to dinner. She went ahead while I cleaned off my needles.

She asked me at dinner, "Don't we have runts that we could keep? Like Wilbur?"

"Jilly, we can't afford to keep them as pets," I said. She couldn't have a cat or dog because of allergies, not to mention my own fears about compromising her immune system. She started to protest and I cut her off. "That's final."

But that night, after Jilly was asleep, Mrs. H. said to me, "Maybe you should give her pig for a pet."

"We can't afford it."

She looked at me, her eyes sad. "I think she might be gone before the pig get sent off."

"She's getting better," I said. "Look at how she chattered all through dinner."

But she was right, and we both knew it.

"When one must, one can," she said in a gentle voice.

The next morning dawned hard and bright, and it seemed inevitable that after a long night's birthing, one of the pregnant sows had six perfect piglets surrounding her in the straw. I took Jilly out to look at them and told her to pick one.

"It has to be the runt," she said. And then, "But they're all the same size!"

I looked at her, leaning on the railing with her gawky bird-like arms, so thin that she could wear rubber bands for bracelets, and felt a hard lump in my throat.

"Take them all, Jilly," I said. "They'll all be your pigs."

She named them Celeste, Patience, Rutabaga, Bill, Princess Splendid, and (predictably) Wilbur. Mrs. H. professed to hate them. "Trafe!" she said, and spat whenever they were mentioned, but I noticed her assembling leftovers for Jilly to feed them.

Jilly spent hours by the pen, wrapped in a blanket and watching the piglets with an expression of beatific joy. They came to know her as well, and would come when she called. She spent enough time petting them that I got in the habit of spraying them down with a hose in the mornings and evenings, to cut down on the amount of pig smell that ended up clinging to her. The mother pig remained unmoved by Jilly's appreciation of her young, but when the piglets were napping, piled on each other like puppies, tiny tails swishing like sporadic windshield wipers, both she and Jilly beamed down at them with identical expressions.

The piglets grew fast, prancing around the yard like women in high heels, stealing bits of food from Jilly's hand . . . and all the while my baby sister diminished, curled in on herself as though she were becoming a little old woman, as though each day the cancer claimed another morsel of her frail form, making her lighter and lighter. At some point soon, it would win and take her away from us.

Jilly's pigs were fat and fine, sleek as colts and almost full grown when I came home one day to find her weeping even harder than she had for Charlotte, while Mrs. H. fussed around her.

"What happened?" I demanded. "Is she in pain?"

"That very bad woman," Mrs. H. said. "She came by to speak to you, Mr. Aaron, about her money. Such a tongue in her head should rot."

"What did she say?"

"It was Miss Andersen. I told her that I was going to school next year," Jilly said. She clung to me, and hot tears soaked my neck. "Because by then I would be better, and she laughed and said I'd be better when pigs grow wings and fly. Is it true, Aaron? Am I not going to get better? Am I going to die?"

"No, no," I said, clutching her to me. "No, Jilly, you are going to school next year."

Mrs. H. regarded me. We'd had this argument before. She thought I should tell Jilly, but I wouldn't. I wouldn't let her know she was dying. That would make it too real.

"No," I said, and pressed a kiss onto the top of her head. "It's all right, Jilly. It will be all right."

She let herself be comforted, but all through that evening, I felt myself angrier and angrier at Miss Andersen's words. Going outside, I looked at Jilly's pigs. Fat and happy, while my sister lay inside wasting away.

I went inside and fetched my tattoo kit. I was tired, but too angry to sleep, and I could tell I'd be up for hours. Mrs. H. came out and waved goodbye to me as she revved her tiny Civic and drove away, her headlights cutting swaths in the darkness of the farm road. Overhead, the stars were bright and distinct in the fathomless sky. I opened the door to the pen and Jilly's tame pigs followed me into the barn.

I set up shop in an abandoned stall, and when I was finished with one pig, it would walk out to the others to be inspected proprietarily while another one came in.

I gave them wings.

It was the finest work I'd ever done. For Celeste, there were a phoenix's wings, flame bright and coiling with red and yellow. A dove's wings fluttered on Patience's skin, muted in browns and grays that showed like bruises against the white hide. A blue jay's wings for Rutabaga, a vivid iridescent blue striped with black. Bill got green wings like a parrot's, touched with scarlet and indigo at the tips. Princess Splendid's were gold and silver, a metallic sheen that reflected light and cast it across the pen. And Wilbur had black wings, black as night. Black as death.

It took hours as they stood patiently beneath the buzzing needle, letting me etch the lines into their skin, wiping away the blood that welled up beneath the needle. And when I was done, I was so tired I couldn't even stand. Instead, I sat there on my stool, looking at them.

One by one, they circled in front of me. The Inspection of the Pigs by the Artist, I thought, half asleep. I debated going to sleep where I sat or somehow, impossibly, hauling myself up the stairs and into my own bed. I watched the pigs shuffle around each other, and admired my bright-inked creations on their backs. And I found myself dreaming. I dreamed that I sat there watching while Wilbur went to the door and nosed it open, the pigs slipping out into the yard and making their way to the house, where Wilbur repeated his performance and one by one they slipped inside the door.

And then I shook myself awake, and stumbled to my feet. The door was wide open and the pigs were gone, so I scrambled out to the yard to see it empty as well. Up on Jilly's balcony, movement caught my eye and the French doors shuddered open. A shadow lifted from the balcony, an impossible boxy shadow that floated across the sky, blocking out the clouds that outlined it in pearly tones.

As the moonlight struck it, I saw what it was. Jilly's brass bed, the frame supported on either side by three flying pigs. Their wings beat the air in tandem while she sat upright, her face filled with wonder and delight as she gazed forward.

Did she wave? I'm not sure, because clouds obscured the view as she rose higher and higher into the sky. I'd like to think she didn't—that she knew Mrs. H. and I would take care of each other, and that she didn't need to look back. I like to think that every inch of her attention was focused on the journey, on that marvelous moment when we both learned that pigs could fly.