

## A Fair

Out of the corner of his eye Paul saw the sign: WORLD'S LARGEST HOG. He swerved toward it and stood for a moment staring. The sign was plywood, and the lettering was crudely stenciled in orange paint. Behind it was a makeshift hut entirely covered from the outside view.

“You know it's not *actually* the world's biggest pig,” he heard Miranda's voice just behind his ear.

Paul thought about this for a moment. He was reasonably sure they couldn't put it on the sign if it weren't true, but then, how could they know there wasn't some bigger pig somewhere?

“It could be. I mean, you can't be sure it isn't.” Paul looked at her to see how she would respond.

Miranda crinkled the space between her eyebrows and pursed one side of her mouth.

“I want to see it,” Paul declared.

“Fine. I'll wait out here.”

“Why? Just come in with me. It's only two dollars. I'll pay for you, too.”

“I don't want to see some sad, bloated animal sitting in a little pen for everyone to stare at.”

Miranda's eyes wandered off toward the blinking lights of the rides and the vendors' trucks. Paul watched her watching the fair. There was a breeze and her hair flickered about her face and the light cotton top she wore rippled. She rustled in the wind like a flower – no like a field full of wild flowers. This image made Paul feel very romantic. She reached out to him with her left hand, and Paul saw his ring on her finger. *His her.*

“I want to get a funnel cake. You go on and see the pig if you want to.”

Paul looked from her back to the sign – WORLD'S LARGEST HOG.

When Paul was very much younger, he liked to catch toads in the backyard. Once he caught one

the size of a dinner plate. He named it Big Blubber and put it in a fish tank, but the tank was too small for Big Blubber – he couldn't make two hops in any direction. Paul commandeered the wading pool from his younger sisters and set up a little habitat for the enormous toad. He caught grasshoppers for it. Once, when the family was cooking out, he put half a hot dog on the end of a stick and held it out to the toad. There was no response. Paul tried waving it back and forth. As soon as it moved, Big Blubber lunged forward and swallowed it whole. Toads will eat anything that moves in front of them. It took nearly a week to digest the hot dog. During that time Big Blubber – whose name turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy – sat in one spot unable to touch the ground with his front legs. Paul's father said he should let Big Blubber go when he could hop again. Reluctantly, Paul complied.

WORLD'S LARGEST HOG. It was impossible not to see it. “Okay, get me a funnel cake, too. I'll meet you right here in a minute.”

“Okay.”

There was rough wooden box with a hole on the top where Paul deposited two dollars. Honor system. He stepped through the entrance which was just high enough so he didn't have to duck – though he unconsciously hunched anyway. Paul stopped as he came to a painted plywood wall that forced him to turn immediately to his left. This was probably added to keep passersby from casually catching glimpses of the famous hog for free.

After the turn Paul was hit full force with the stench of soiled straw and large livestock. He saw now that he had entered a small tent. There were two fences so there was a space between the people and the animal. It was dim in the tent, there were vents in the ceiling and a little light shone through, but it took a few minutes for Paul's eyes to adjust. At first he saw only a gigantic heaving mass in the middle of the inner fenced area. Gradually its features became visible: the flopping ears, the tell-tale snout, the little tail that didn't curl. Paul wondered if any pigs' tails actually curled. The world's largest

hog lay on its side breathing heavily. It was mottled pink and brown and caked in places with a thick layer of yellow dirt. There was a spot on one side of the pen that was supposed to be a mud bath, but it was mostly dry. A large plastic drum held water in which floated straw and clumps of dirt that seemed to remain belligerently dry even in the water. There was a pile of stripped corn cobs next to the water. Paul stood up on the lower rail of the fence and leaned forward with both forearms on the upper rail. A calm smile spread across his face. The pig was asleep, breathing heavily and peacefully. Occasionally the hooves twitched in response, no doubt, to some imaginary stimuli.

Paul wondered what kinds of dreams pigs might have. He wondered how the dim tent and the mud pit and pile of corn cobs might take on new significance in some fantastical world created in the subconscious of the sleeping animal. He wondered if it was having good dreams or bad dreams. Paul tried to imagine what it might be hoping for and what it might fear.

After some moments – he couldn't be sure how long – Paul felt himself slip from the low fence and land thudding, flat-footed on the ground. He stretched, pushing against the fence with both hands and locking his elbows. He supposed it was time to go find Miranda and the funnel cakes. When he turned back to the entrance he saw another rough stenciled sign that read NO EXIT. He blinked, a little confused. He turned the other way and noticed for the first time that there was another opening at the opposite end of the tent. This was marked EXIT ONLY. Evidently they had planned on having a steady stream of people moving through. Paul headed obediently to the appropriate exit.

Outside the air was fresh and moving. As the twilight sky descended gently on the fair, the lights grew brighter and the people more festive. With the mechanical arms obscured by darkness, the rides seemed to move by magic alone. He watched the tilt o' whirl through a full ride, and when it

stopped, he looked past it to the slowly rotating Ferris wheel. There was the motion of bodies all across the grounds, couples leaning up against each other, sharing food, dressed in summer clothes and happy to be warm, happy also that the sun was no longer pressing on them. Paul liked to look at the young women with their soft smiles and soft skin. He looked for Miranda.

She wasn't there. But of course she wasn't there. She would be waiting for him at the entrance not the exit. He walked quickly around the tent back to where the sign was. He scanned the area, looking, for some reason, mostly across the ground as if Miranda would be lying somewhere like a lost set of keys. He saw dozens and dozens of the wrong feet. Sandals and flip flops, hundreds of toes, but none of them were Miranda's.

No matter, he thought, and he reached for his cell. But his pocket was empty.

*She has it.*

Paul stood stock still. The darkness, the breeze, the warmth, all suddenly took on a tangible mass. They pressed upon him like waves from every direction. The lights darted sharply at his eyes, each bulb like a needle. And the people, the people swelled to impossible proportions. Everywhere there were people – *skin*. They were in pairs and groups. They were touching each other and pressing in upon him. Elbows. Elbows jabbing at his ribs. He wrapped his arms around his torso to protect himself. He could feel his heart beating like a hammer, like the piston of an overmaxed engine. He felt it beating in his forehead and his thighs. He felt every artery and vein in his body throbbing. All around the edges of his vision a blackness, a blindness was closing in.

*Run.*

He was afraid to run. He wanted to curl up where he was and just breathe – if he still could breathe. If he ran, he would suffocate. If he ran, his heart would burst in his chest. He was more afraid

not to run. He stumbled back a step. The pounding in his chest made it difficult to control his legs. He looked left and right, seeing the world now only as small circular picture at the end of a long black tunnel. Paul clutched at his breast with one hand. He could still see well enough to walk in the direction away from the crowd and toward the cool darkness.

Paul gradually became aware of a tickling sensation all along his arms and the backs of his legs and even up his neck. There was a soft and gentle rustling sound, and still he saw only blackness. His heart was racing, but in a rhythm that was possible, survivable. He was breathing, had been breathing even when he wasn't thinking about it. Then he was alive. He closed his fists and felt what must be grass. He was alive and lying on his back in deep grass. Good.

Points of light came into view, winkingly – the light like the sound of the wind in the grass was quiet and calm. Stars, thought Paul. Good. He lay for a while listening to his breathing and the breathing of the wind in the grass. He counted stars to avoid counting his heartbeats. He smiled unconsciously.

The Big Dipper was the only constellation Paul knew, and, after he identified it, he played connect-the-dots with the brighter stars, making his own constellations just as the ancients had. He decided to make one for the World's Largest Hog. It was hard to imagine the curving lines between the stars, but Paul found a set that were close enough to oval and there was even one extra to make an eye. He wished for a little swirl of stars to make a curling tail. In drawings, pigs' tails always curl. He even found a grouping for Big Blubber and thought to himself how that sounded quite a bit like a real constellation. After a few more figures, it occurred to him to look for the moon, and he found it strange that it was nowhere to be seen, not even a sliver.

*Miranda!* He sat up slowly as though all the adrenaline in his body were already spent. He still needed to find her.

Paul sat looking down a hill on the twinkling lights of the fair below. In the grass he could see rifts – the tracks of a swiftly fleeing animal – where he must have come through, making his thrashing escape from the crowd below. The fair seemed far away and very long ago, like a memory from childhood. The lights on the rides moved slowly, tilting and spinning with the caution of a parent playing airplane with an infant child. Paul could see the people milling about, aimless and distracted moving from one attraction to the other. Why weren't they frightened? How were they so calm?

Maybe they *were* frightened, terrified. The blinking lights, the sweets, the dizzying rides, maybe they were all a dilution of the crowd, a distraction from the overwhelming presence of other people. What frightened him so terribly about other people was the magnitude of their lives. His own life must be very small compared to theirs. It was just an assortment of memories standing out against whatever was forgotten, a little shading and negative space like he learned in art school. He had hopes and dreams, too, but these were underformed, just black and white sketches, like his fears but not as shadowy. His own life was something he could fit neatly into a portfolio. But these others, who knows what colors their dreams might take? Or how to shape their memories or the shade their fears? Who could find the line where they begin or end? From far away Paul was able to think about them, but up close and with so many of them, it was just too much. He felt he would be squeezed out from them or crushed into them.

As he watched the fairgoers, he wished for his sketchpad. He could turn them into a landscape, draw them featureless like the figures in Seurat's Sunday Afternoon painting. Or... He watched a group of teenage boys standing bravely around a mechanical bull. He could not see their faces, but the lines of their backs and shoulders were all fear and bravado. Courage is only courage when you're afraid. Or he could make them a group portrait. He would imagine their features and expressions: insecure, macho.

In front of them walked two young women holding enormous paper cups of soda or cherry limeade and periodically rubbing together at the shoulders. Probably in love, Paul thought, the dream kind of love, the future kind, the kind that was all colors and no lines. He cupped his chin in his hands as he watched them disappear behind a corndog stand. He wished something beautiful for them. His eyes hopped to a middle-aged couple with their grandchildren. They must have had their kids early. And their kids must have had kids early. But the grandparents moved lightly and seemed to have springs in their knees, bending to the children's level then up again, then down, then up again. He would animate that. He wondered if having springy knees as a grandparent was worth raising children in your teens. He wondered if they had regrets. He hoped not. He hoped they were happy. He continued to watch the crowd person by person. He sketched in the features he couldn't make out. He watched people move and recorded the quirks of their animations. Protected by distance and obscurity, he could watch them, and imagine bits and pieces of who they were or might be. He could wish them well.

And then his eyes fell on a familiar figure. Miranda! He spotted her wandering through the crowd. She was the only one walking alone holding her arms out awkwardly, palms up. He couldn't see clearly from the distance, but she must still have the funnel cakes, one in each hand. She walked to and fro, stopped, turned, looked around, like a waitress with amnesia. How could she be so calm there, right in the midst of them, alone? Was she calm? Maybe she needed him. He should go back to her.

Focusing on Miranda, who moved in slow revolutions through the other, unknown bodies, Paul remained calm. Miranda was a person like himself, sketched out and sorted neatly. He knew her lines and boundaries. He knew her story and what part he played in it. If he could stay with her, together, their world would be small enough to survive in.

“Oh, Paul!” She'd spotted him. “Where *were* you?”

Paul briefly considered being angry with her for losing him, but he had neither the energy nor the will. “Hey...”

Miranda's face softened when she looked at him. She must have seen that he was pale, exhausted. "Do you want to go?"

"Okay."

"Funnel cake?"

"Yeah."

Paul and Miranda walked slowly toward the open fields where the cars were parked in rows. They were silent, pulling apart pieces of funnel cake and letting the fried dough melt in their mouths. There was still a breeze. They were walking into it now. It pressed their clothes against them and made the fabric billow in the back almost as though a force were pulling them back in the direction of the crowd and the fair.