
HENRY'S FALL

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The problem, the way Henry Pinto saw it, began and ended with the pig. He hated the pig with the same intensity that his fiancée, Clara Brumster, loved it. Or the problem, he mused, could be that he loved Clara with the same intensity that she loved the pig. Either way, she loved the pig, and the problem was that Clara loved the pig more than she loved Henry. He wanted the pig gone from Clara's life and, subsequently, his life.

Standing in his underwear at the threshold of Clara's bedroom after a long Saturday spent accruing billable hours at work—a law firm located a mere spitting distance from Clara's house, though not too far from his either—he just wanted to climb into bed next to her and sleep, ending what had been a brutal day. He hated working on Saturdays because it made him feel like a slave, albeit a highly paid slave, but he was up for partner and Saturday hours came with the territory. He longed for a peaceful night with Clara in her bed, her pillow faintly smelling of roses, lilies of field and jasmine. Stuck at the threshold, he imagined Clara reading next to him, something she often did long into the night, her right foot gently pressing against his left calf, a way to stay connected, he thought, even if she didn't want to sleep at the same time he did. On the bed in nearly sheer black lingerie, she flipped through a magazine, oblivious to the stupid pig oinking and squealing at him, giving him the stink eyeball as if he Henry, rather than it, belonged elsewhere. It oinked and squealed

louder with each step Henry took into the room toward the bed. Henry wanted to kick the thing, kick it like a football, this black-and-white pig with an annoying giant red-bow collar, with the utterly ridiculously elevated name, King Charles, but Henry knew that at 360 plus pounds, the pig wouldn't exactly sail across the room. Why couldn't Clara have a normal pet, like a dog? A cat? Or a guinea pig? Or goldfish.

"Clara, do something about the pig," he said, sounding annoyed.

Clara glanced at him and back to her magazine. "You started this row," she said, her a sweet soprano. "He wants an apology."

"I'm not apologizing to a pig," Henry said, crossing his arms.

"Why not? You hurt his feelings."

"Since when do pigs have feelings? I smacked his snout for pissing on my rug—and that was two weeks ago," Henry said. "He can't possibly remember."

Two weeks ago, the stupid pig had pissed on his new Oriental rug. Henry, who didn't own pets or want children because chaos and mess associated with them, considered a pet pig unnatural. Never mind the stink of porcine urine still assaulting him at home. After soiling his prize Oriental rug, Henry's intolerance bloomed into outright hatred. He wanted Clara to get rid of the pig. "It has to go," he'd screamed at her while he beat the pig's nose, not expecting her to gather her things and leave in a huff. Things between them had not been the same since.

"King Charles is a smart little piggy," Clara said, baby-talking the pig.

"Nothing's little about that pig. Can't you see this is ridiculous?" His voice sounded whiney—not what he intended. Oinking, King Charles blocked his way.

Clara went to the pig, rubbed its neck. "He didn't mean it, KC. He's sorry," she baby-talked. "Come on, baby!" she cooed. Henry's stomach lurched when she began singing a Bocelli tune to the thing, leading it into its round bed. He could feel his face reddening, his neck muscles pulsate because Clara should reserve love song lyrics

for him, and not a stupid animal, especially not a pig. Once it settled in the round bed, Henry dashed to Clara's bed before the stupid pig noticed. Henry's eye twitched as he watched Clara's tiny, soft hand rubbing King Charles' belly and not his own.

"Can't you put him in another room when I'm here?" he asked.

"He's always slept in my room, Henry." Clara said, climbing back in bed.

Henry grunted, vowing that once they were married, things would change: He'd lay down the law, assuming that he'd sell his house and move into hers. The first change to go would be the towel-covered boudoir chair Clara had placed at the foot of the bed so that the pig could climb onto it and then onto her bed, an open invitation. More than a few times, the pig had edged Henry off of the bed and onto the floor because it wanted to be next to Clara, and invariably when Henry, bleary-eyed and dazed, struck his toes on the chair's leg, he staggered half asleep to the guest room. Second, he'd banish the pig first to the guest bedroom, then to the kitchen, then to the yard, and then to a farm somewhere in exurbia. King Charles had strenuously objected when he and Clara became intimate, oinking and squealing his distress, ramming the bedroom door whenever he was locked out. The once-perfect door sagged in the middle from the battering, and Henry resented having to take the pig's sensitivity into account by being extra quiet when he and Clara were intimate. When he'd first met Clara three years ago, the pig slept in her bed all the time, and the round bed under the window became a concession she'd made for Henry, a concession that would lead to others.

Henry snorted. "The pig goes in the guest room—when I'm visiting."

"He's never been alone at night."

"No time like the present," Henry believed the pig understood every word he spoke and even could read his mind because King Charles glared at him from his round bed.

“It’s giving me the hairy eyeball,” Henry said.

Clara scoffed. “You brought this on yourself. He knows you don’t like him.”

Now that Clara’s finger sported the magnificent diamond ring he gave her, it was time to assert his feelings. King Charles belonged on a farm, being prepared for his true purpose as bacon or ham. To Henry, the pig symbolized a salient reminder of Clara’s late husband Peter. She and Peter had adopted it as a piglet—naming it King Charles, raising it like their only child for one year and one month before Peter and seven others were killed in a freak beltway accident caused by a tractor-trailer hitting a pedestrian bridge. Peter and Clara had shared more than the pig. They’d shared this house and a career. Peter had been a tenor in the same opera company that still employed Clara. After Peter’s untimely death, a then smaller King Charles had moved into Clara’s bed, Clara holding it instead of Peter, Henry imagined her crying herself to sleep hugging the pig. Henry believed that the pig channeled Peter from the Great Beyond to interfere with their nuptials. The sight of the pig sitting in the front seat of Clara’s car had nauseated him, and when Clara brought the stupid beast to his house when she visited, he imagined transforming it into something useful. Like sausages. Or bacon. Or ribs. Barbequed.

“It’s like a retarded kid that pisses rivers and shits boulders, who’ll never grow up and leave,” he said, making himself comfortable on the bed. “It belongs on a farm, Clara.”

“He’s a he and he’s my pig,” Clara said. “I can’t believe you’re jealous of a pig! Go home!” She pointed to the bedroom door.

Henry refused to budge. Through her thin, black, lacy lingerie, Henry could see the silhouette of Clara’s body, the outline of her thighs, the indentation of her waist, the slope of her breasts, breasts he would be touching, if it weren’t for King Charles. Why didn’t she agree that the pig stay in another room when he visited? Why didn’t she just get rid of the thing? “It doesn’t belong here,” he said, laying down the law.

Clara pushed him off the bed. “Neither do you. Why don’t you just settle it, give him an extra treat, or do something conciliatory? Isn’t that better than going to war with a pet? You don’t have to win every battle, Henry.”

“You’re missing the point.” Henry glanced uneasily at the pig. King Charles’ hooves scratched the wood floors, and squealing and oinking, it rushed him, Henry dove back onto the bed. When the pig nearly flew onto the boudoir chair and faced Henry, oinking him off the bed, Clara began laughing. She laughed so hard, she doubled over. King Charles squealed louder, butting Henry backward away from the bed, out of the bedroom. Henry imagined bashing its head with a baseball bat. He imagined stabbing the animal in the eye with an ice pick. He imagined all sorts of ways to separate the pig from Clara. King Charles stood in between them, squealing and oinking at Henry until he backed down the hallway, down the stairs, step by step into the living room. Following his descent to the first floor, allowing the pig to humiliate him, Clara laughed uproariously.

“This is no small beer,” Henry shouted at the front door. “It’s a P-I-G.”

Clara sighed. “All he wants is to be loved.” She handed Henry his clothes, his car keys, and his shoes. Henry refused to apologize to a pig that pissed on his rug. Not now, not ever. Grabbing his things, he vowed to find another fiancée who wasn’t devoted to a pet. Damn it, he’d bested the keenest legal minds in the city, and he wasn’t going to allow a stupid pig to defeat him. He drove down Key Highway around the Baltimore Inner Harbor to his perfectly coifed Canton house. The pig had won a battle, but Henry would win the war.

At home, Henry sulked. A TV chef on the Food Network demonstrated how to prepare salmon, but Henry imagined pork chops instead. He imagined King Charles neatly roasted with an apple silencing his oinking, squealing mouth. He imagined Clara alone, minus the stupid porker channeling Peter, but awoke Sunday morning, still on the sofa, still alone, the television blaring.

All week, it irked Henry that Clara allowed the pig to oink him out of the house. It irked him that she was too busy to see him any night this week, blaming rehearsals for the new opera season, and it irked him that his boss showed disdain when Henry asked for Saturday off. He wanted to catch up with Clara to settle things. And now Saturday, Clara claimed another rehearsal would run all day. It irked him that he had to invite himself to her house for breakfast since Clara had declined his invitation to meet him at Jimmy's in Fells Point. And now sitting in her kitchen, it irked him that she poured pig chow into King Charles' purple, monogrammed bowl. She served Henry only a mug of instant coffee. No breakfast, no French toast or pancakes, no eggs, and definitely no bacon. Henry half-smiled at the thought of King Charles eating bacon and ham. Like a cannibal.

"Why couldn't you come to Jimmy's?" Henry asked. He refrained from oinking at the pig. "No breakfast?" He watched the pig chow down.

Wearing a jean skirt and a black sleeveless knit top, Clara slipped into a pair of black flip-flops. Henry admired her killer legs, legs he wanted wrapped around his like snakes on tree limbs. "I told you already. Rehearsal. You're the one who invited yourself to breakfast," she said. "Why do you think I'm supposed to serve you breakfast when you invite yourself?"

Stupid pig was a royal, all right, Henry thought. A royal pain in the ass.

"Plenty of stuff in the fridge. I have to walk KC, and then I need to leave for work."

"But I took off today," he said.

"Enjoy your day off!" she said.

Henry wanted them to sit down to a rare Saturday morning breakfast on a Saturday he didn't work, a breakfast that preferably Clara had cooked. And it irked him she tended to the pig like a disciple.

"I'll come," he said, keeping the exasperation out of his voice. He imagined their Saturday and Sunday mornings sans King Charles.

Would they linger in bed over the morning newspapers? Maybe make love again before finally starting the day? Would they stroll over to Mike's in Canton, Jimmy's in Fells Point, or to the South Street Market in Federal Hill for fresh berries and bagels? Since they have been together, the pig grew from a cute, exotic curiosity to a fat, intolerable pest. The thought of her dead husband using King Charles to interfere with their relationship occurred to him more than once. Henry wondered if he'd hate King Charles if it were a dog, or a cat—God how he hated sneaky, aloof cats—but then a dog wouldn't have held a grudge against him for a bit of disciplinary action. But dogs are labor intensive. No better. Henry wondered how much the pig would fetch in a sale, certain he could unload it for a tidy sum to Hispanics populating Fells Point. King Charles, the second main attraction to a quinceañera birthday party.

"I'm looking forward to the new season," Clara said. "Maybe you can come to a performance this year," she said as they ambled toward the Inner Harbor.

Preoccupied, Henry said nothing. Instead, he decided he could kill the pig by making it run. Death by heart attack.

"Look at that cute pig," said a woman to a man wearing a straw hat, who approached them. Obviously tourists. "How adorable is that?" she said. Baltimore's own Mr. Piggy, Henry thought, his stomach churning.

"May I?" the woman asked, extending her hand.

"Oh, sure," said Clara. "He's a lover—aren't you, boy?" Clara baby-talked the pig, and Henry clenched his fists. The pig grunted, squealed, and appeared to smile as the lady scratched its neck.

"Oh so adorable! What's his name?" the lady asked. Probably a PETA member, Henry thought.

"King Charles," Clara said with pride.

"Kaycee. Hey, your highness," the lady cooed, petting it. "Wow, solid—what does he eat?"

"Everything," Henry said. "He's a goddamn pig. What do you think pigs eat?"

Clara glared at him. “Pig chow. And treats when’s he’s a good boy.” Clara’s eyes hurled daggers at him even while she kissed the pig’s snout. The woman pulled out a camera.

“May I?”

Clara smiled at the lady and her camera. “Oh, he’s such a hambone!” she said, laughing, and the lady clicked her camera.

Henry stomped ahead. More photos of Clara and King Charles graced a mountain of travel picture books than did photos of the Constellation, a Revolutionary War ship sitting in the harbor, or any of city’s other historical landmarks. He headed for the Light Street Pavilion, conscious that, once again, this tourist, like the entire parade of others before her, neglected to include Henry in any photos—as if he were the invisible man. Obsessing over the injustice, he sat on a bench opposite the dinner-party tour boat and stared at the bobbing sailboats.

“I hate when you walk away like that,” Clara said, the pig beside her, blocking Henry’s view. “It’s rude.”

“Rude is a million people always snapping yours and the pig’s photos and never including me,” he said, pointing his index finger at her. “The pig has to go.” King Charles looked at him, grunted in a way that sounded like a laugh and fixed a porcine smile on his lips, holding it like a fixture on his snout. “And now he’s mocking me!” Henry shouted, his face flushed, furious the pig belittled him.

“Ridiculous,” Clara said, rolling her eyes. “You’re not exactly Mr. Personable. Especially lately. How will you behave with children? Let’s go, King Charles,” she said.

“Children?! Who said I want children? They’re as messy and demanding as that pig. It’s the pig or me,” Henry yelled. “I’m damned sick of Peter Pig!”

He didn’t know why, but he felt a little joy, confident that the gray look on Clara’s face indicated that she’d get rid of the pig; he was winning. He imagined comforting her when she missed the stupid pig.

“Peter Pig?” she asked. She waited for an answer. Then she began walking away.

“You’re choosing the pig?” he yelled. Henry sprang to his feet and followed them. She was ditching him for a pig!

After Clara handed him his CDs and clothes, after she thrust a bag of his miscellaneous belongings at him, after she returned the magnificent diamond, he filled Clara’s doorway, holding everything in his arms. “It doesn’t have to be this way,” Henry said. “A good farm would be best!”

“You don’t get it,” she said. “He’s my pet. King Charles has been with me four whole years longer than you have. He peed on your rug. I paid to clean it, so what’s the big fucking deal, anyway? It isn’t just the issue of the pig, Henry. It’s everything,” she said.

Clara shut the door with a thud. She didn’t say good-bye, wish him a happy life, or thank him for the wonderful times they’d shared.

“You picked a goddamn pig over me!” he shouted through the door. He heard the tumblers of the lock click into place. He walked around to the back of the house, where he heard Clara and King Charles in the yard. From the water streaming into the gutter, he knew that the Clara was filling the child-size pool she kept in the backyard for the pig to cool off in. He knew she allowed the pig to play in the water while she dressed for work. Henry clenched his teeth, his jaws, his fists. He would not suffer defeat at the hooves of a pig, especially not a pig that laughed and mocked him. Damn him, Peter Pig!

Without work to occupy him, Henry leaned against the bar in the Blue Crab Pub with its owner Rick, a burly, blond, former college football star, who’d never advanced beyond his glory days as a Terp quarterback. The Blue Crab Pub overflowed with Terp memorabilia. Steamed blue crab carapaces painted with football scenes dangled from the ceiling on fishing lines. Wanting to avoid being in an awkward position of giving Rick, actually his client, unbillable advice, Henry hardly ever stepped into the Blue Crab Pub, but now, in the pub’s dim light, he fingered the engagement ring, a good-size rock in

his estimation, repeating, "She picked that goddamn pig over me. A fucking farm animal."

"You're a free man now," Rick said, sliding a draft beer in Henry's direction. Rick pushed his aviator glasses back up his nose and ran his fingers through thinning hair. "Celebrate!" Rick signaled the bartender to bring another two beers. "On the house," he told the barkeep. "Just keep 'em coming."

They already killed a six-pack each. The TV above the bar beamed a Terps game, and Rick kept an eye on the play. Henry surmised Rick was betting on it and winning. Henry had no one else to call. His friends stopped calling him long ago, jealous of his upward trajectory at the firm.

"She dumped me for a pig," Henry slurred.

Rick laughed. "No pig shit for you, my friend!" Rick laughed, slapped him on the back. "Let's toast. To new beginnings!" Rick sounded jovial and proceeded to grow more jovial with subsequent beers, whereas Henry grew more sullen and angry. "We're both free men now. This is great news, my friend!" said Rick, whose third divorce was just final, raising his glass.

"I wish that pig were dead," Henry said.

"Meh. Think of all the babes you can test-drive now."

Henry didn't feel any better. "I hate that pig. King Fucking Charles."

"Give it up, Henry. Terps are up." Rick commandeered two bowls of peanuts. "I've been married three times already, and all three times went south faster than the New Year's Ball at Times Square. Consider yourself spared the pain and aggravation, not to mention the cost of getting divorced. Whoa, touchdown! Yeah, baaaaby!" Rick pounded the bar, yelling at the TV, pushing his glasses back with his right hand before raising it into a victory fist.

Henry didn't care about the game. Nor did he consider himself spared. He wanted Clara to agree with him: that the pig had to go, that he was more valuable than the pig, that he knew what was best for her, for them. He had to convince her.

Henry stumbled off the barstool and threw some bills on the bar. “Hey, thanks bro,” he slurred. “I gotta go.”

“Beer’s on the house, and the game’s not over. Where’re you going?” Rick said, shoving the bills back at Henry.

“I gotta convince Clara I love her and that the pig hasta go,” he slurred.

“Not a good idea, Henry,” Rick said, shaking his head. “Let her and the pig go. Plus you’re too drunk to drive.”

“Be defeated by a pig? You’re outta your mind?”

“Let’s just wait until the game’s over,” Rick said. “I’ll drive.”

Henry could live with that and lost count of the beers that kept coming. Just after midnight in Rick’s silver BMW, Henry directed him toward Clara’s house in Federal Hill. A dim light glowed in Clara’s living room, a sure sign that that she wasn’t home. Where did she go after rehearsal? he wondered. He wanted her to be home crying, but Clara always demonstrated an unsettling independence—perhaps honed after Peter’s death—with an endless list of places to go: plays, movies, art shows, literary readings, nightclubs. Where could she be late on a Saturday night?

Rick glanced at his watch. “She’s not here. Let’s roll, Romeo,” Rick said, slurring.

They both slurred. “Don’t you want to see the fucking famous King Charles?”

“Not especially,” Rick said.

“The damn pig’s probably sleeping in the back.”

“Then we gotta get outta Dodge,” Rick said, parking the car at an angle in the alley next to back of Clara’s house, an end house before an alley large enough to drive through.

Peering through the wooden fence and seeing only blackness, Henry threw himself against the fence with a crash, inspiring the neighbor’s dogs to bark.

“King Charles,” he called, certain the pig was in the yard. “He’s probably afraid of the barking dogs. Clara said dogs and pigs don’t mix.”

Henry stood on a trash can and heaved himself over the fence, landing with a thud, and opened the gate for Rick from the inside.

“It’s not in the yard,” Henry said. “Let’s go in.”

“Are you fucking nuts or something?” Rick said in a loud whisper.

“I’ll bring the pig out,” Henry said, wanting Rick to see the pig. Henry broke the basement window with his shoe, thrust his arm in, unlocked it, and shimmied in, leaving his shoe outside.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Rick asked through the broken window.

“I’ll be right back,” Henry said, disappearing into the basement’s darkness.

“Where are you, you fat fucker?” Henry called before hearing hooves on the floor upstairs. Henry grabbed the pig chow from the hallway closet and made his way upstairs. “Peter Pig!”

In Clara’s bedroom, the pig stood half on the bed and half on the boudoir chair, its beady eyes fixed on Henry. Then on the bag of pig chow.

“Come on, you fat fucker, Peter Pig,” Henry said, placing a handful of pig chow on the floor to lure the pig, bite by bite, downstairs and out into the yard, grateful the food distracted the pig from rushing him.

“What a huge fucker!” Rick said, petting King Charles behind the ears. “It’s kinda cool. Why do you hate him so fucking much?”

Henry shrugged and didn’t answer.

“OK. Let’s go now,” Rick said, opening the gate wide.

King Charles dashed out of the yard, faster than Henry had ever seen him go. “Holy shit,” Rick said as the pig charged past him into the darkness of the alley behind Clara’s house. Henry, still holding the bag of pig chow, laughed so hard, he couldn’t stand up.

“You should catch that pig now. By its toe,” Rick said, also laughing uproariously. “Clara’s going to be pissed as shit.” Rick and Henry roared with laughter, the gate swinging on its hinges.

“Fat fucker won’t be going too far. He’ll probably be eating something crappy outta a trash can at the other end of the alley or some-thing,” Henry said, heaving himself up.

“You got a pig problem,” Rick said, trying to catch his breath between guffaws. “Clara’s going to kick your ass when she finds out.”

“Find out what?” Wearing a black cocktail dress, a pearl necklace, and stud diamond earrings, Clara glared at them from the back door way. “What’re you doing here? Who’s that with you? Where’s my pig?” she asked. Henry couldn’t stop laughing. The way Clara said the word “pig” struck him as funny.

“Piiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiig,” he said, the sound of the word coming from his throat instead of his mouth. “Piiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiig,” he repeated. “Where’s my piiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiig?” he mimicked her.

“You’re wasted,” she said. The last thing Henry wanted was for that damn walking set of pork chops to be found. His head still felt blurry.

“We can get the pig tomorrow,” he said, slightly less drunk. “I mean, how hard would it be to find a fucking three hundred-pound pig in downtown Baltimore? He can’t hide anywhere, and every damn body in the neighborhood, in the city, in the whole fucking world knows it’s your pig,” he said.

Clara glowered. He either helped her find the pig now—she emphasized the word by slapping the fingers of her right hand onto the palm of her left hand, as if she were counting out a rhythm—or she’d call the police and report him for breaking and entering. He was an asshole. Pig chow in hand, Henry shuffled down Riverside Avenue, Rick following behind, both merry, calling the pig.

Clara, who switched into her sneakers, trailed behind them, checking all the alleyways, calling for King Charles in her soprano as melodic as an angel’s. They searched Riverside Avenue, William and Montgomery Street. King Charles vanished, Henry growing happier at the prospects of it being gone. They searched Federal Hill Park, and at the park’s north side, Clara began shouting.

“He’s in Rash Field!” she yelled, pointing. Clara clutched her gown and ran down steep concrete stairs toward the street, toward Key Highway, toward that damn pig. Rick, more athletic than Henry, bounded down the steps like an unsteady gazelle, and Henry, who gingerly navigated the steps individually, prayed the animal would panic and fall in the harbor. Henry ambled through Rash Field toward the Scupper Restaurant at the end of the harbor’s walkway. Ahead, Rick sprinted, making oinking sounds, and attempted to tackle the pig, inadvertently driving it closer to the walkway’s edge. Hurrying now toward the pig, Henry was determined to get to it before Clara; he wanted to give it an imperceptible push over the edge. Henry approached the pig from behind, while Rick bellowed pig calls.

“King Charles,” Clara sang out from behind, her dulcet soprano, reverberating through Rash Field like a gorgeous bell. “Come, boy, come, come, come. King Charles, come to mama!” Clara held his leash in her hand. The pig’s beady eyes searched in the darkness for Clara, avoiding Rick’s awful oinking bellows, and edging away from Henry, holding the pig chow bag, toward the walkway’s edge. Henry darted toward King Charles who had nowhere else to go except over the walkway’s edge into the harbor’s water. Henry slowed. Standing a foot in front of the squealing, oinking animal, Henry poured pig chow onto the pavement, the disgusting smell of the stuff assaulting his nostrils, while Rick continued the oinking calls. “Shut the fuck up already!” he yelled at Rick.

“Who’d believe we chased a pig all over Rash Field?” Rick said, exuberant. “This’s the best fucking night ever!”

Staring at the pig chow, the pig refused to budge. Hoping to grab the pig’s collar, Henry stepped sideways away from the pig chow. With Clara so close, he couldn’t push it over the edge and decided to drag it to Clara. Henry gingerly moved closer to the pig just as Clara stepped forward. “King Charles!” she sang, joy and love in her voice. Squealing, oinking, King Charles turned his entire piggy body toward the musical sound of his mama, and that’s when Henry felt it: King Charles’ 350-pound porcine ass pushed him over the edge

of the walkway. “Holy shit!” Rick bellowed. Startled, Henry cursed “Peter Fucking Pig,” as he fell sideways. Panic cleared his fuzzy head. King Charles’ curly black-and-white tail was the last thing Henry, who never learned to swim, saw before plunging into the dark harbor waters.