

“An Open Letter to Charlotte A. Cavatica,” by Elisabeth Dahl

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Dear Charlotte,

Like the rest of us arachnids, when I was a baby spider, I looked up to you. Before I could even embalm a fly on my own, I'd heard about your barnyard heroics.

Until you came into the world, the highest achievement of our species—at least as far as humans were concerned—was spinning silk. Don't get me wrong—silk's amazing. But you showed that we could be artists and humanitarians too. If spiders could qualify for a MacArthur or a Nobel Peace Prize, you would have been sitting pretty—and not just on your legendary web.

Once, as a spiderling, I begged to spare the life of a weeping house fly that had gotten stuck in our family web. My mother patted one of my eight legs with one of her eight legs and said, “Fiona, sometimes you remind me of Charlotte.” All my hairs stood on end. That's when I knew: When I grew up, I wanted to be you. I would find my own pig to save!

Then, one night a few weeks ago, I dropped a thread from my family web, which hangs in the corner of a grad student's kitchen. Suspended halfway between the ceiling and the floor, rotating slowly in the blue glow cast by the microwave clock, I thought things over. It was time to grow up, to set off on my own. But I'd have to do some major traveling to find a pig. I'd never heard oinks and grunts in Queens—not on our block, anyway.

Then it came to me: I'd recently heard the man and woman next door discussing what to do with their chicken coop's only resident, now that she had basically stopped laying eggs. Let me tell you, the hen's future did not sound bright. I wouldn't swear to it, but I may have heard the word “spatchcocked.” This was my chance!

The next morning, I said goodbye to my family. Mom cried, but I said I'd be just next door—she and my siblings could visit anytime. I made tracks over the deck, then threaded my way through the green forest of grass and under the metal fencing between the yards. Soon, I'd made it to the coop. I scrambled up one of the posts until I could see the whole neighborhood stretched out in front of me.

“Hello!” I called out to the chicken. “Bonjour! Hola? Guten Morgen?” But whatever I said, the brown puff of a hen stared off at a distant point. No matter. Our time was yet to come!

Soon, the man and woman came into the coop, coffee mugs pressed against their flannel shirts. The woman started scattering feed. “Don't be stingy,” said the man. The woman laughed.

Oh God, I thought. Time was short. I needed to hustle. What would my first spun word be? Why hadn't I already thought this through? Just as I was weighing the relative merits of *loyal* and *dandy*, the woman looked up toward the corner of the coop where the beginnings of my web hung—embroidered delicately, like a bride's mantilla. “Can you get that spider?” she said to the man.
Get? I thought. *Me?*

While the woman twirled a braid, the man stroked his spindly beard. “That spider's not doing anyone any harm.”

“Geez, it's not like it's Charlotte or something.” She made a hideous, high-pitched laugh.

Not like it's Charlotte or something?

When the man reached for the broom, I dropped a thread faster than I've ever dropped a thread in my life. As I skittered home, back through the grass, I nearly cried. If I didn't work on my speed, I might never have the chance to save anything. Until I produced some sort of artisanal, customized creation—something the woman and man would Instagram till the end of their days, I was just another spider. A common pest, not a humanitarian.

For the past week, I've been sulking in the corner of my family web. I don't even feel like starting up with another chicken.

My mother says to take heart, work on my spinning speed, and have another go at lifesaving. I probably will. But right now, the only thing I feel like writing on a web is *disheartened*.

Sincerely,

Fiona, AKA "That Spider"