

AUNT CHLOE

2020 ISSUE YEAR

Charla Johnson

A Bend in the River

The water along this curve of the river is quiet, shallow and easy-going. In some places, the water is as still as a looking glass, a silver screen reflecting beams of sunlight and floating-by clouds. Ships of various sizes and functions make their way up and down the Mississippi, as egrets, ducks, and gulls mind their business along the banks. When the stage is high enough, fishing poles dangle from the hands of folks sitting atop turned-over gallon buckets. The path along the levee attracts all kinds of people, for instance, those who come to workout, some who come to smoke out,

and others who come to check-out from the madness of the world. Ava was one of the people who went to the river to do all three, typically in the morning or evening to avoid the heavy heat of a New Orleans summer. There was just something about the river's accessible majesty, due to man's intervention, and the juxtaposition of the factories hovering along the horizon. This place reflected her contradictions, it seemed to her, and put them on display.

On this particular day, Ava, sitting bankside watching dragonflies skim the water, is three days late according to the app that tracks her cycle. Three going on four, depending on what the night may bring. "Sometimes your 'Auntie' will visit you overnight. You'll need to be ready," her momma said a long time ago, placing a pack of large overnight pads in 11 year-old Ava's lap. Twenty years and several cycles later, Ava awoke yesterday morning and checked to see if her "Auntie" had dropped by, while chuckling at the euphemism. Her momma, rest in power, was usually blunt to a fault.

There was no sign. Throughout the day, she checked. Last night in the shower, she had checked. Her religion had increased over the last 72 hours, as she looked for signs in wads of toilet paper. When religion failed Ava, or, rather, when she failed it (she didn't even know what she prayed for), she appealed to reason. Reasonable women know that cycles can vary, hormones fluctuate, the body responds to even subtle changes in the environment... Oh! And stress. Certainly, she'd been stressed. It was a latent stress, the kind that induces naps, ice cream cravings, and the bingeing of true crime mystery series.

Anyway, one night, she and her lover—they'd decided that "lovers" more accurately represented the nature of their not-explicitly-exclusive relationship than "boyfriend and girlfriend"—split a bag of crawfish and a bottle of wine under a moonless sky. This little impromptu date along the riverside was quite the relief. Months had passed since the mayor issued stay-at-home orders and shuttered businesses in the interest of public health; Ava was single and lived alone. Her days passed with an unfamiliar, if relatively comfortable, solitude. A social introvert, video conferences, text messages, and social media mostly satisfied her need for human contact. Vick filled the gap and was a frequent quarantine

companion. On their visits, Vick and Ava ate a little, played board games, watched movies...that kind of thing. And they made love. A few weeks ago, Vick had showed up at her front door with crawfish, Riesling, and more sweet charm than any one man should have.

“Put ‘cha shoes on,” he said with a six-foot tall smile.

“Where we going?”

Ava asked, though she didn’t really care. She was already slipping on a pair of red Chuck Taylors. They’d often go on rides that led them down into cutoffs or under bridges where they’d park the car, listen to music, and grin at each other.

“Didn’t you say you found a spot on the levee? Let’s see if you know where you going.”

“Oh, yes, indeed,” she led him out the door.

Ava and Vick made the quick drive to the river, where the road is disturbed by the bulging roots of live oaks whose branches form a romantic canopy. Along the riverside trail, they might’ve held hands here and there. Wasn’t long before they arrived at a wide tree trunk worn smooth by the weather. It made for a good seat and had a pretty view: every surface, sky and water, was a shimmering black playing with glints of light. Across the river, a factory loomed, and flames burned on the tops of towers like giant candles. Ava laid out the blanket. Vick set up the food and drinks. Ava selected a playlist on her phone. Vick squirted hand sanitizer into their palms. They ate and drank and laughed and flirted. He pointed out the good meat she was wasting by not eating the claws. She made up a drinking game. Both tried their damndest to avoid talking about the Coronavirus. It was a lovely evening; it wasn’t even that hot. And, as it turned out, the fallen tree trunk facilitated lovemaking in not a few positions. They were creative. Once sated, mellow and lusty, they silently soaked in the summer noises. Eventually, the shimmering effect dulled a little and the mosquitoes were relentless. “Well, alright...,” Vick stretched out this southern phrase indicating his readiness to depart. Ava was already putting her shoes back on.

That was, what, about four weeks ago? Ava checked her app, for the umpteenth time, to confirm the date, count the days, and recount the days. Next, she opened the text message thread with Vick, scrolled to those dates, and read their conversation. Vick sent a message early the next morning.

GM! So....about last night....

Why the man refused to use ellipses correctly remained a mystery to her. Also, there simply is no good reason to abbreviate “good morning.”

Good morning. How are you? And, yes. About last night...

I’m good. You make me feel some type of way. Can you talk?

Talk. Of course, she could talk. She ain’t want to talk. Her eyes hadn’t even opened good, and here he was ready to process feelings and to bring nighttime actions into morning light. Fair enough. Certain delicate conversations called for actual talking. Admittedly, a tug in her gut indicated Ava was slightly more uncomfortable discussing the emotions

of the night than the lack of a condom. Updating her app, she noted that she'd ovulated two days prior to the riverside tryst and felt pretty confident in that.

Sure. I'll call you in 10.

She brewed coffee, brushed her teeth, and called Vick. They recounted the night before and acknowledged getting caught up, agreeing that it wouldn't happen again. They moved on. A spirited debate about the upcoming Verzuz battle followed, allowing them to retreat from that moment of near-vulnerability. Delicate conversation, indeed.

Over the next few weeks, they maintained their usual pattern, seeing each other every handful of days or so. Everything was cool.

Currently, Ava's attention is pulled away from her phone. The sky, purpling and pinking, is stunning. The air, sensing the shifting mood, cooled ever so slightly by a subtle breeze. She decides to relax. "Ain't nobody pregnant," she resolves to herself. "But what if I am?" she thinks. Ava tries to get a sense of her body: Where is she tender? Didn't she feel cramps earlier? Hadn't she been craving ice cream? Inconclusive. Minutes later, Ava is fully engaged in a, "How do I know I'm pregnant?" Internet search. "Signs and symptoms of pregnancy." "Difference between early pregnancy and PMS." "Why is my period late?" "Am I pregnant?" According to her research, there is a 50/50 chance of pregnancy. If she starts her period, then she is not pregnant. If she is pregnant, she won't start her period. Enlightenment.

A text from Vick comes through.

Hey how are you haven't heard from you today

Who needs punctuation, anyway? It's superfluous and so 20th-century. Ava's snarkiness is a direct result of her inability to say, "I'm lowkey freaking out because I might be pregnant, but I'm not freaking out fully because I may not be. And, if I am, then what? And, if I am not, then what, as well?" Instead, she replies,

I'm good. You? Just a little occupied.

Oh ok. I'm coolin

Cool

That ends that, for now. Ava is going back and forth between social media apps, absentmindedly scrolling and clicking while her mind whirls. She sees without truly looking. This person eats quinoa for the first time. Black Lives Matter. This dog splashes in a kiddie pool while a confused toddler cries. Police attack protesters; protesters continue to protest. Many have taken up gardening in kitchens or backyards. Police officers who murdered a Black woman while she slept remain free. A person shares a post betting no one will share the post, effectively guaranteeing not a single share.

Donald Trump is president. Apple cider vinegar gummies. A weight loss journey. A fertility ad.

They got that data quick, didn't they? She continues scrolling until a post stops her in her tracks. A high school classmate who is now a labor and delivery nurse relates her day. A new mother had a suspected case of COVID-19. She was temporarily separated from her baby. She was advised not to breastfeed her

child. The woman was distraught and frightened. “Wear a mask, damn it! Stay home!” the post implored. Well, Ava, for one, is shook. There is a disturbance in her gut, and a rush of blood cold as cold runs through her. She faces the worry that is right in front of her: could she be pregnant during a pandemic? Could her single, motherless, Black girl self be pregnant during a pandemic while that man is president and police are murdering sleeping Black women and there’s such a thing as murder hornets? She sweats like a Black woman in America.

Becoming keenly aware of her heart’s fears, she grows further disconnected from what her heart wants. She doesn’t know. There will be time enough for knowing. To settle her anxiety, she opens a word game app. This rarely fails, however temporary. She is calmer. Dusk settles heavily around her, and the lights of boats passing by glow. Ava rises to her feet and stretches her hands upward to the sky. Now reaching her palms outward, she says to the river, “You take it wherever you think is good for me.”

During the walk back to her car, her phone dings. It is a message from Vick.

WYD? You eat yet?

Charla Johnson is an Atlanta native and Spelman College alumna (2005). She is an educator, writer, and artist-activist. Charla currently resides in New Orleans.