Year of the Pig

Februdry 9, 2019

When you see a pig trotting along
with a straw in its mouth

you can be sure it's gonna rain.

Father

"What does it look like to you?" asked Father. "Write down your answers on a piece of paper, and we'll see who gets the prize."

I looked hard at the piece of wood he had stood on the table, then looked even harder at Basil. Basil was a clever boy and my first cousin (I mean to say he was Father's younger brother's son), a year behind me in life and school, and (I hoped and almost knew for a fact) in perceptiveness as well. He was a dexterous person, too (something I couldn't say of myself), and had an experiment-bent mind, as proven at least once in his precocious career by his surreptitious placing of a common garden worm between Auntie's dress and the skin on her back. I say precocious, for he couldn't have been more than six or seven at the time of the deed.

Now I was in my thirteenth year of life, he in his twelfth, this was our Christmas break, and we were supposed to engage in competition to come up with the correct description of a boring wood splinter.

At the time our house was heated with wood, which Father and Mother purchased every fall from sources unknown to me. Not that I ever cared to find out, for it wasn't anything as important as the yearly coming of St. Nicholas and Santa Claus, and the slaughtering of the pig. The wood was cut by Gâta bácsi, who was old as time, unshaven, and dressed in rags; Gâta bácsi ate pork rinds and bacon and onions, smoked stinky tobacco, drank plum brandy, and owned a hand-held circular saw mounted on a donkey-drawn cart. When the donkey was not available by reason of some sickness such as donkey cough (which could also become manifest in children our own age), Gâta bácsi would pull the cart all by himself. He sawed the big logs in our backyard, and once splintered, the pieces of wood were neatly arranged on top of each other in the shed, which was made of wood planks for the purpose of sheltering nothing but wood. I always thought that was a clever use of both wood and words.

Every morning of the cold season one of us and sometimes even two of us (I mean one or two of the family, not Gâta bácsi) would load a large wicker basket full of splinters and take it into the house. From the basket, the wood was distributed to the rooms and the kitchen, and Father would go from terracotta heater to terracotta heater to light the fire.

Starting a fire required special technique, Father said, and it appeared to be some sort of a ritual, too, handed down from great-grandfather to grandfather to father to son and so on, world without end. You really had to know how to do it, otherwise you could be kneeling in front of the stove, short of breath from so much air blowing, your lips and cheeks all red and swollen,

the wood neatly piled up inside the stove waiting for the match, the match already expiring an ignominious death in mid-flight—and in the end the fire wouldn't start.

"Shouldn't you be saying a prayer to God or one of his angels?" I once said, watching Father go through the ritual. "You know grandma is always encouraging me to do that when the task seems too big for me."

Father just gave me one of his looks of deeply felt spite and disapproval. Surely it was from repressed anger at my shameless assumption that grandma was in any position to offer him advice, albeit indirectly. "Here is a man who really knows how to express his emotions in wordless ways," I thought. Then, "oh," I remembered, "also, he doesn't talk to God anymore. That's why he won't take grandma's advice. Which is why grandma calls him an atheist."

Anyway, that wasn't the issue this afternoon, for Basil and I were now seated at the kitchen table, contemplating the wood splinter. The grain had a spiraled design, so I wrote down the words SNAIL SHELL, then folded the piece of paper and handed it to Father. Basil did the same. I don't mean he wrote down the same words, as I didn't see what he was writing because we were expected to shelter the sheets from each other's view; I mean he was writing words on paper just like I did.

Father took both leaves, unfolded them, smiled a little, and looked at Basil:

"You won."

I couldn't believe it. My own father handed the prize to someone other than his own daughter. That was beyond comprehension: surely parents are supposed to be partial to their children. There is something wrong here, I thought: either there was a secret agreement between Father and Basil, or else Father, although an intelligent man by any standards, didn't have the capacity of understanding that his own child was the more brilliant of the two. Besides, we didn't even know what the prize was.

"Let me see," I said.

Father showed me the paper, on which Basil had written in large, irregular block letters: PIG'S YEAR.

"Pig's year?" I said. "How do you mean, pig's year? There is no such thing."

"Yes, there is," cried Basil. "We just ate one earlier this afternoon, when they slaughtered the pig out there by the wood shed."

"Oh my God, we didn't eat the pig's year! We ate the pig's ear! E-A-R!"

"It doesn't matter how you spell it," Basil retorted. "The thing is, I beat you, and that's enough."

"Well," Father said, "you're right and wrong: the thing does resemble a pig's ear, and that's exactly what I was after; but you should know the word is spelled E-A-R, not Y-E-A-R. So to oblige me, make the necessary correction. And know that, on account of your mistake, you only earned a B+."

Basil picked up his pencil, turned it upside down, stuck out his tongue, erased the letter Y, retracted his tongue, and showed us the paper. He was glowing all over with pride, and I thought well, he was basically a good guy and a generous person who had done good by me on more

than one occasion. Why he once gave me one of his film actors' cards to trade as if it were my own, so I could get a card of my choice in exchange for his, and that, from his best friend, too! It was a great thing to do: film actors' cards were like baseball cards in America, small pieces of shiny cardboard with actors' pictures printed on them. You could buy them at the store; you could collect, trade, and sell them, too. But Basil gave me one for free from his own collection. In other words, he gave me a gift, and that made him a real generous individual.

Besides, I thought, wasn't he nice to me last summer when on our return from the pool every day he walked with me to that little pink house where the seven dwarfs and Snow White herself were basking in the sun in the front garden? Yes he was. And how many times did he and I visit that what's-her-name old lady's house across the street so I could look at her beautiful large dolls with porcelain faces and eyes that opened and closed when you turned the dolls upside down? And he having no interest in dolls whatsoever, doing it just for my sake. In fact, he had been the one to inform me about the dolls and introduce me to the lady. You couldn't beat that.

So now, pig's year or no pig's year, I conceded: I'd lost and he'd won. I gave him the gift of moral victory and that made me a generous individual, too.

Meanwhile out there in our backyard people were still working on cutting up the deceased pig. Basil and I had gotten the ears and tail, but as far as the butcher was concerned, it was still work in progress: he'd go on to clean the animal's intestines, separate fat from meat, and take all these to his house to make sausage and smoked ham and head cheese.

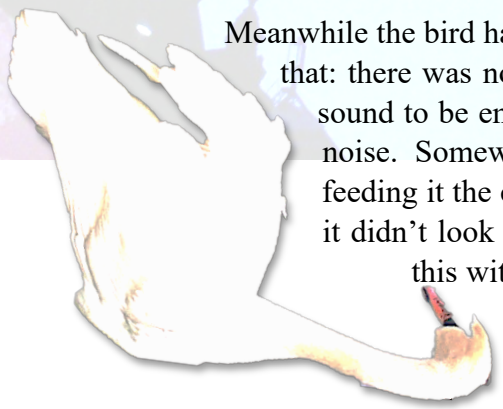
Father pushed his chair aside, got up, and went to the wood shed to get the goose he'd purchased from the Farmers' Market a few days back. Christmas without goose roast is no Christmas at all. I mean, yeah, you can have pork roast and *salade de boeuf* and stuffed cabbage and cakes, but really a fattened goose is the crown jewel of any decent Christmas dinner.

Father reappeared at the kitchen door, holding the goose in his arms. He seated himself on the kitchen steps, put the goose's head between his knees, cranked its beak open and kept it that way. He did this with his gloved left hand, using his right hand to extract something from his trousers' pocket. Then he handed Basil a semi-transparent membrane:

"This is your prize. Now go on and fill it with air. It's a balloon."

"Hurray!" Basil gave me a triumphant look, inhaled deeply, put his lips to the limp, shapeless thing, and started blowing. The thing grew larger and larger, till it got to be the size of his own head, and then we understood: it wasn't a balloon.

It was the pig's bladder.



Meanwhile the bird had been keeping mum, and I could well see the reason for that: there was no way it could close its beak, let alone cause intelligible sound to be emitted; truth told, though, it did make some unarticulated noise. Somewhat oblivious to the bird's discomfort, Father started feeding it the corn meal dumplings he had cooked that morning. To me it didn't look like the goose was too appreciative, although Father did this with heart-felt delicacy, all the way talking to the goose in a soft voice, the way you do when you tell fairy tales to children. Perhaps the goose wasn't used to the speed, I thought: it had to gulp down the dumplings fast, like

there was no tomorrow (and indeed, from the goose's perspective there weren't too many tomorrows to look forward to—but then again, it didn't know that, and Father wasn't about to tell).

"Good girl," Father was murmuring into the bird's ear, stroking its neck as he pushed the dumplings down its throat. "Have some more. Grow fatter."

"We're gonna cook you with wine and eat you with sautéed red cabbage," whispered Basil.

"Quiet," I said. "You won your prize. There's no need to be mean. She may hear you."

"It's just a statement of facts," he said. "And don't call it a 'she;' it's just a bird. A mean one, too: geese have sharp teeth, like saws, and it really hurts when they pinch you. It happened to me once. Besides, it doesn't understand Romanian. You can have a piece of it, if you want; I don't like goose meat, anyway, it's not tender enough. Moreover, look at what this bird is eating: corn meal dumplings. Well really, I'd rather just have polenta without the bird."

"You may think it's a gander," I said. "But it's a she-goose. A female. And Father told me goose meat is much tenderer than gander's meat. Right, Father?

"True. You heard me, that's why I'm calling her 'girl'."

"Anyway," Basil said, "I prefer pork."

"Yeah, I know that. You seem to be partial to pigs," I said. "Truth be told, I am not adverse to them, either; piglets are adorable little things. Then, of course, there is *The Pig's Tale.*"

"You mean the one where the Princess marries a pig and cries her eyes out afterwards?"

"Yes."

"Well everybody knows she deserved it; I mean, she was stupid enough to marry a pig, right?"

"I don't know how you can say such mindless things: everybody knows the pig turned out to be Prince Charming. But there seems to be an even stronger connection between you and pigs. Remember last summer?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well you know, last summer when Good Mama took us to visit Aunt Victoria in the country."

"What about it?"

"C'mon now, you know exactly what I have in mind."

"I swear I don't. Tell me."

"You remember one afternoon after lunch you and I were supposed to be napping, and you sneaked out of the house to go play with the piglets?"

"No I don't." He seemed somewhat annoyed, and I knew why.

"Don't deny it. You'd better admit it happened."

"Nothing happened. I just went out to admire the vegetable garden."

“Liar! You did no such thing. You don’t care zilch about carrots and such. You sneaked out to go to the pig sty because the sow had just delivered and you wanted to see the piglets.”

“And so what? Even if I did that, it was no business of yours to follow me. I didn’t follow you when you sneaked into Aunt Victoria’s kitchen and ate half of the sweets on the table. And I didn’t tell on you, either.”

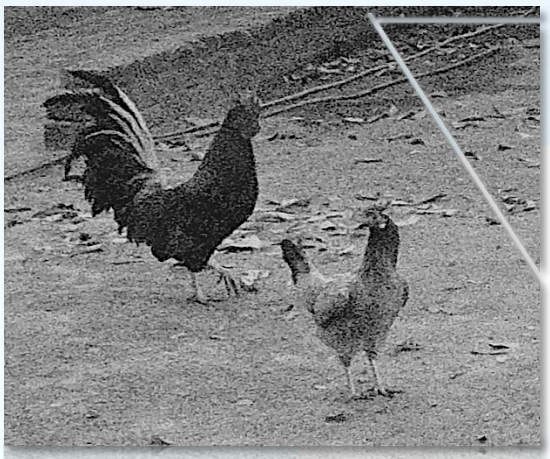
“Not true. I only ate about a third of them. And I didn’t tell on you, you impudent little rascal. I just noticed you weren’t where you were supposed to be, in your bed.”

“Yeah, and you ran straight to Aunt Victoria to tell her the news. By the way, why weren’t you sleeping, like you were supposed to?”

This was untrue: first of all, I hadn’t informed Aunt Victoria of Basil’s escape; second of all, I couldn’t be expected to fall asleep on command. As to my telling on him, it happened just the other way around: he made himself known to Auntie and the entire world when he started howling and calling Good Mama from somewhere in the backyard:

“Grandma! Grandma! Graandmaaa! Help! Come here quick! Come heeeere!”

In a second the whole household was in an uproar: doors and windows were opened, steps could be heard on the verandah, Aunt Victoria’s goats started bleating, the ever-placid cows went moo, moo in the stable. The two big dogs by the gate barked like crazy, cocks went cock-a-doodle-do, and all the pigeons flew out of their pen and started circling above the roof.



“Surely something bad happened to that child,” shouted Good Mama, putting on her black head kerchief without which she wouldn’t ever go out, crossing herself and raising her blue eyes to the skies above. “I can’t keep an eye on him at all times; he just roams around and does what he pleases; as God is my witness, it’s useless to tell him don’t do this, don’t do that till I get blue in the face. And now he must have come to harm; or harm came to him. It wouldn’t be for the first time.”

“Nor the last,” said Aunt Victoria.

I agreed.

I put on my tennis shoes and ran down the verandah steps, following Good Mama and Aunt Victoria. And there he was: holding his right hand palm up, crying his eyes out. He was red in the face like a ripe tomato, but I couldn’t see any wounds on his body: he was all right whichever way you looked at him (I thought the word was *intact*, as explained in *The Dictionary of Modern Romanian Language*), except for that beautifully vibrant color in his cheeks. It was a great sight, I said to myself, not to be missed.

“What’s the matter, child?” asked Good Mama, somewhat calmer.

Meanwhile the sow was squealing like the Municipal Fanfare trumpet, giving us dirty looks and breathing heavily like a grayish-pink locomotive, all the piglets gathered behind her.

“Be quiet!” Good Mama said to the sow; then turning to Basil:

“You couldn’t mind your own business, could you? You chased after the sow, right? I told you not to do it! I told you it’s unsafe to mess about with her: she thinks you may harm the piglets, and she’ll retaliate. What did she do to you?”

“Oh, oh!” sobbed Basil in sheer misery. “Look, grandma, look here, the sow peed in my hand!”

“Oh well,” said Good Mama. “That’s such a relief. Here’s a hand kerchief, wipe your eyes and clean your nose. Easy now. God by your grace please save us of naughty boys and ignorant people. She peed in your hand, you say? Don’t you know it’s a sign of good luck?”

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Basil would never, ever admit this was the absolute truth.

But ever since last summer I firmly believed there was some sort of a secret affinity between him and pigs. Clearly pigs bring good luck. Why else would he write the words PIG’S YEAR on that piece of paper—and win the prize?