

## **Rashers**

*By Alexander Saxton*

“Mom, why do we eat pigs?”

Anne’s mom hesitated at the stove. The sound of bacon crackling in its own grease. Aerosolized lipids on the air. The smell rich & throaty.

“It’s just the way things are, honey.”

“But why?”

“Well Anne, if we didn’t eat animals, we’d be hungry.”

“What about vegetarians, they don’t eat meat.”

“Not everyone can be a vegetarian honey.”

“Why not?”

A resigned sigh. A furrow of the brow.

“They just can’t, okay?”

Anne folded her arms and sat back. She wasn’t satisfied with the answer, but like all children she knew there wasn’t much point in trying to have a reasonable discussion with adults. Her mom, grateful for the silence, plated bacon, eggs and toast, dropping the plate down on the table in front of her daughter.

Anne poked at the bacon. Conflicted. It smelled good, but she needed an argument for why it was okay to eat.

“Don’t pigs have feelings?” She offered.

“No they don’t.”

“Hmm. But Mr Shulman says they have feelings.” Mr Shulman was the science teacher. Masters in biology. Lot of overqualified teachers out there. Anne’s mom knew there was no sense saying Mr. Shulman was wrong, because if she did then three days later Anne would just come home with his counterarguments. Better, as all good parents know, to bullshit than to lie outright.

“Not like we do, honey, it’s different.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means it’s okay for you to eat your bacon, okay? And stop bugging mommy with philosophy on a Sunday.”

“What’s philosophy?”

A deep sigh.

“You’ll find out when you’re older.”

Ann frowned at the bacon. It did smell really good.

“Eat up, honey,” her mother said.

And despite all misgivings Ann did eat up.

#

The coolest girl in class, in Anne’s opinion, was Marcy M. Marcy was intense & smart. She wore weird earrings and striped t-shirts with too-long sleeves that came down over her thumbs. Anne’s parents complained that Marcy dressed like a slob. But Anne and the girls in her class were pretty certain: the coolest way a human being could dress was in striped long-sleeved t-shirts with chewed sleeves that came down over your thumbs.

The same Monday that Ann had argued with her mother over breakfast, she felt a tapping at her shoulder during first period. She glanced back. Marcy, staring intently, oversized horseshoe earrings jangling vaguely as she leaned forward to whisper.

“Hey! Sleepover. Friday night. My house. You in?”

Marcy’s house was even cooler, if possible, than Marcy was. Marcy’s parents weren’t like normal parents. They hiked & did yoga & stuff. They wore thick-framed glasses like when movie stars play scientists in a film. Their house was a rambling three-storey covered in ivy and crowned with about fifteen different weather-vanes. Marcy’s bedroom was in a tower. A *tower*. They had a big rambling backyard that backed onto a ravine, and Marcy’s dad had built a treehouse in the crook of a weeping willow. It was like asking if you wanted to go for a sleepover at Howl’s Moving Castle. Forget vegetarian: Marcy’s parents didn’t even drink *milk*. Anne didn’t think twice. She said,

“I’m in.”

#

The week crawled past. Friday couldn't come soon enough. Monday night: beef casserole. Tuesday: leftover beef casserole. Wednesday night: chicken. Thursday: pork chops & applesauce, glistening, wheezing fatty vapour on the kitchen air.

Anne frowned.

"Mr. Shulman says pigs can use a computer cursor with their nose."

"Not these ones, honey." Anne's mother sat down at her own plate of pork chops with an exhausted sigh.

"And Marcie M's family has a pet pig instead of a dog."

"It's a different kind of pig, Anne."

"Are you *sure*? Are you *sure* it's okay to eat this?"

"Ask your father."

"Oh yeah." Anne's dad spoke through a mouthful of pork fat, withdrawing perfectly clean bones from his lips like a cartoon cat. "Totally fine."

He emphasized his argument with a mild belch. Anne ate tentatively. But she couldn't bring herself to finish. Every bite she ate, she couldn't help but imagine it had come straight off the flank of Marcie's pet.

Friday night: a different house and different kind of meal. Mr. and Mrs. M served Chickpea fritters with a fresh slaw of bean sprouts, shredded kale & mango & cilantro, all topped with creamy, lightly curried sauce. The girls devoured it, even Jenna S, who mostly lived off chicken & potatoes.

"Mr M, this is amazing!"

Smiling, he shrugged off the compliment.

"Ah, just a little something I made up."

"And there's... no chicken in this?" Jenna S. prodded doubtfully at her third fritter. "Like at all?"

"No animal products whatsoever."

He cracked a nonalcoholic beer on his way out of the room.

"Even the sauce is made with coconut."

He made it sound like a catchphrase.

“After dinner,” Marcy leaned forward. “We can all go out and play with Suey.”

Suey, of course, was the famous pig.

“Wow!” “Yes!” “Cool!” said Jenna, Erin, Emma.

“It’s so cool you have a pet pig,” Anne sighed

“Suey’s more than a pet.” Marcy was serious. “She’s a part of the *family*.”

After dinner, the girls found Sue all curled up in the shade beneath that willow tree out back. Frankly, she... wasn’t what Ann had expected. No pink & pretty slender thing of snuffling snout and bright eyes, but a big grey hog: 200 pounds at least, with low squat legs & upturned hooves. The eyes not bright with curiosity, but glittering with a kind of bitter intelligence. Yet, at the sight of her, the girls all squealed and rushed forward to rub her meaty flanks & pet her furrowed, piggy brow.

All except Anne, who held back feeling somehow suddenly embarrassed, ill-at-ease. The memory of last night’s porkchops at the forefront of her mind. Slowly, the pig raised its heavy head and stared at her. Looked her directly in the eyes.

“Anne! Come say hi!” Marcy was playing with the pig’s big heavy cheeks. “*Come say hi to Suey!*”

And Anne, trying to get over the sudden discomfort, the sudden taste of pork-fat in her mouth, took a halting step forward. But only one, because Sue immediately drew back black lips, letting forth a low sound of threat.

“*Hwaaee.*”

Anne froze in her tracks.

“I don’t think... I don’t think she wants me to come say hi.”

“Oh don’t be scared, Anne! Suey wouldn’t hurt a fly, *would you Sue?*”

“*Hwaaee.*”

And so Ann took another slow step forward: but before she could place a tentative pat on Suey’s head, the pig *lunged*, jaws snapping, yellow teeth clacking heavy on the evening wind.

Anne shrieked and fell backwards, landing hard. Sue snorted. Contemptuous, she rooted back into her patch of dirt, settling with a baleful eye in Ann's direction

"A-anne!" Marcy sounded disappointed. "Sue just wanted to give you a little kiss!"

But Ann wasn't sure that's what the pig had wanted. She wasn't sure of that at all.

#

As night was already falling, the girls went back inside. They made popcorn with margarine & nutritional yeast, and watched an old movie that felt too grown-up for them but which Marcy's parents said was okay. *Notting Hill*. They stayed up late talking about the movie and decided in the end that it was 'good, but problematic.'

They all slept in and Mrs. M. made huge & fluffy pancakes for their breakfast. Altogether it was the most fun Anne had ever had at a sleepover, and she didn't think an unhappy thought until her father came to pick her up at lunch.

On her way to the car she turned back to wave at Marcy & her parents.

And there, waiting in the dimness behind the diamond-paned front-room window: Sue. A pale vagueness staring out with malice in her small black eyes.

#

Six weeks later. Thursday. Porkchop night at home: a tap on her shoulder in first period. Marcy M, in chunky peacock-feather earrings.

"Hey! I know it's late notice, but my parents say I can have you guys for a sleepover again tomorrow. You wanna come?"

And the first thing that jumped into Anne's head was the sight of Sue's yawning jaws lunging toward her at the willow tree. The heavy yellow teeth within, the pale ridges of the upper palate. She could taste the pig-fat in her mouth, and almost answered 'No'.

"Anne? You okay?"

But she caught herself.

"Yes. Yes of course I want to come!" She was letting her imagination run away with her. Sue couldn't know that she ate pork. Sue wasn't out to get revenge. Sue was just a pig, that's all; her friend's pet pig, who was part of what made Marcie's sleepovers so fun. Anne pushed the sight of yellow teeth as far from her mind as she could, and told her friend: "I can't wait!"

#

The next night was just as fun as the sleepover before. Vegan pizza, made by Mrs. M this time, and even though it wasn't quite as good without the cheese, Mrs. M made up for it with fun toppings like pineapple and veggie burger-bits with big mac sauce.

By now it was late fall, so instead of running outside to play with Sue, the girls found her in the living room, and spent a half-hour prodding at her chubby hams and playing with her floppy ears while she sighed contentedly at the attention. Even Anne, to her surprise, was welcome, and as she gently petted Sue's head, the hog squinted up at her with benediction.

"See?" said Marcy. "Suey wasn't trying to *bite* you last time! She was just trying to say hi!"

As if to illustrate this point, the pig lunged forward and planted a snuffling kiss on Anne's cheek. It actually hurt a little bit, because Sue was so big and heavy, but it was such a fun gesture that Anne laughed along with the other girls and felt like a part of the group at last.

After that, the girls left Sue nestled on the ground floor couch and ran down to the basement den, where they played hide & seek, and drank sugary drinks and watched 'Never Have I Ever', which Emma K. declared 'the best show ever made, even though it's old.' It was almost midnight by the time they went to sleep, and Ann fell instantly into dreams as sweet as real life.

Sometime in the night, a low thud woke her.

Then another, then another.

All the girls were lying in their sleeping bags on the thick-carpeted floor of Marcy's basement. Jenna S. was snoring lightly. Emma K. had her arms around the teddy bear she'd smuggled in. All the house was quiet, except for the faint rattle of dry leaves on the driveway outside, and for the steady thump of someone coming slowly down the stairs.

Ann sat up, squinting through the darkness. The glossy stairwell bannister barely standing out from the darkness.

"Hello?" She whispered. "Someone there?"

The quiet answer came:

"*Hwae.*"

"Oh. Suey, it's just you." Ann relaxed a little. She wasn't sure who she'd thought it would be. Some shapeless, ominous force: some basement monster. "You scared me a bit."

"*Hwae.*"

Now her eyes were a little used to the darkness. She could make out the round bulk of Sue's body on the stairs; the faint reflected glimmer of beady eyes as the pig watched her.

And suddenly she felt uneasy again. The moment was stretching out and the pig was still staring at her. Like from the front window before. Like just before she'd lunged at the Willow tree. Anne told herself to stop being crazy: she turned over and rolled over and plumped her pillow and tried to go back to sleep. But she could still feel the twin stars of the pig's eyes shining down from the stairwell, their dim light hard and uncomfortable, digging into her back like iron bolts loose from the back of a chair.

*"Hwae."*

*Thud. Thud. Thud-thud.*

Then the heavy, upturned hooves were muffled by the basement carpet. Anne could still feel the pig's hard stare, but now she wasn't sure where in the darkness it was coming from. There was a concrete floor beneath the heavy carpet. No vibration could pass through it: not even from Sue's heavy tread. It wasn't until she felt the humid breath that Anne realized the hog was right beside her.

*"Hwae."*

She opened her eyes.

Baleful stars leering mere inches from her face. The reeking darkness of a panting, open maw.

"S-Sue, I-leave me alone. I'm trying to sleep."

The hog only pressed in closer. Nose to nose, black eyes boring through her skull, into her secret thoughts and fears and shames. The taste of pork fat in her mouth.

Then the pig slammed its head into her.

"Ow!"

She drew the sleeping bag up around her and scrambled back. The other girls shifted in their sleep but did not wake. She dropped her voice.

"Suey," she pleaded. "Leave me alone!"

But the pig only advanced: hooves silent, eyes bright, chest heaving.

"Suey *stop*,"

And for a moment the pig did, once more mere inches from Anne's face. Then raised her heavy head and slammed into the girl. It was like being hit by an adult. No sooner had the blow landed than another one followed, and Ann was pushing & kicking with all her might to get the pig away from her, but the pig was pushing forward and its weight was on top of her legs and it was heavy and she punched it in the side of the head and hurt her knuckles, and then its full weight was right on top of her, crushing, clammy, irresistible.

Trying to smother her to death beneath its weight.

Panicking and unable to breathe, Anne jabbed at the pig's eyes, and the pig bashed her with its snout, and she kicked and thrashed and was lucky the outside of her sleeping bag was made from slippery rayon, because she was able to slither out from underneath that weight and scramble to her hands and knees and scuttle halfway up the stairs before she even knew what her body was doing.

Sue followed, but only to the bottom of the stairs. With her bulk & stubby legs she couldn't catch Anne up there. The girl took a moment to catch her wild breath. The pig just stared with hard accusing eyes.

"What's *wrong* with you?" said Anne.

The pig would only answer, "*Hwae.*"

#

The next morning she awakened to the sound of the other girls calling her name.

"I'm up here!"

They all came a-clamber up the steps.

"Oh my god Anne," Marcie was saying. "You should have seen Suey this morning! She was so cute, all curled up in your sleeping bag, snoring!"

"So cute," Emma confirmed.

"Like a giant baby! Oh, you should've seen it! Hey, what are you doing up here, anyway?"

Ann had spent the rest of the night sleeping coldly on a sofa in the living room. The room had a wooden single-door on one side, glass french doors on the other. She'd been able to lock and barricade both. At some point in the night, Suey had lumbered up the steps and tried to push her way through into the room. Ann had lain frozen still on the sofa, waiting for her to go away.



At last she did, lumbering back down the steps to nuzzle up with the other girls. But Anne hadn't gone back to sleep.

"Oh, um, Suey sort of woke me up in the night," Ann said. "Just uh, you know rooting around and stuff. I had to sort of shut myself in here."

"Oh did she? Man, I didn't hear a thing. Sorry about that. Bad Suey! Oh well, at least you were able to get some shuteye in here, right? Well, you still look pretty tired Ann! Next time we'll have to camp out up here."

Anne said that sounded great. They ate a big breakfast of cereal & smoothies & yogurt and gossiped about the teachers at their school. Then they went their separate ways.

Ann conveniently forgot her sleeping bag downstairs. She didn't want to get trapped down there again. Marcie brought it for her on Monday.

Later that week, Anne's parents tried to serve her pork, and for the first few bites, Anne ate viciously, picturing the great grey hog who had tried to smother her. But after that she felt sick and pushed the plate away. And that night she was haunted by evil dreams: of vast factories; of pigs in pens and men hitting them in the head with hammers; of pigs still breathing as the buzzsaws cleaved their flesh. Or piglets drowning in their mothers' blood.

#

Nine weeks passed. The bottom of the year, and coldest, deadest stretch of all. A tap on the shoulder in first period.

"Hosting a sleepover this weekend," Marcie said. "We're gonna roast marshmallows in the fireplace: you in?"

And even though that sounded like the best thing in the world, Anne hesitated.

"Can we... stay in the living room this time? I just don't want... I just don't want to get woken up by Suey again."

The bitter, staring eyes. The crushing grey bulk of that body. The taste of blood-drowned piglets in her mouth.

"Of *course*," said Marcie, understandingly. "Sleep is so important. We always try to get eight hours at our house."

Anne accepted the invitation, but it was with a hollow feeling of dread. She knew by now she wasn't crazy: that the pig *was* out to get her. But she also knew she couldn't say that without *sounding* crazy; without alienating her new friends, especially Marcie. She thought she would

just have to stay up the whole night to keep watch. Then, on her way out of the classroom she came up with an idea.

#

Once again, and of course, and as ever before, the evening of the sleepover turned out to be one of the best of her life. Mr. M. cooked another amazing meal. They roasted vegan marshmallows and watched a movie and fell asleep together in the living room, that room still redolent of woodsmoke.

Anne waited until after everyone had fallen asleep to put her plan in motion. She crept out of her sleeping bag and checked the doors. Made sure they were latched. Found a lock on one and threw it. And for the french doors she dug into the bottom of her backpack and produced a half-dozen rubber door-stops, stolen from the school over the previous week. She'd never stolen anything before. Stealing was wrong. It was also wrong to shoot terrified animals in the skull with a bolt gun, but she was complicit in that, too. She shifted furniture as best and as quietly as she could, so that it would block the path of an opening door. Then she moved her sleeping bag to the couch and tried to fall asleep. Secure for now. But beyond those barricaded doors, the slow, clicking footstep of Suey, circling the living room like a shark. The shadow of her at the french doors, rising up improbably on rear legs to try the knob. The knob turning slightly, but the doors refusing to give. That shadow fell back to all fours and resumed its pacing. Slowly, slowly, slowly. Ann shuddered and huddled up in the sleeping bag. Tried to fall asleep.

And then lay there awake, thinking of pigs. Each time a car went past outside and its curtain-dimmed lights strobed across the ceiling, she imagined a cattle truck packed with swine for the slaughterhouse. The factories of death. Mothers taken from their children, piglets from their mothers' teats. She pictured great whirling machines like bladed wind-mills or tunnel-turbines filled with knives. Killing-machines as tall as the Statue of Liberty, standing blue within the vast blue-darkness of the slaughterhouse, and all the thousands of pigs, dwarfed, minuscule against the size of those massive whirling blades, all squealing mournfully as they were drove en masse, into the steel oblivion.

At some point these imaginings faded into dreams, dreams where it was her own huge jaws and ridged white palate and yellow teeth the pigs were herded into. Grease & pigs' blood spiralled like a whirlpool down her throat and she followed the flood into ever deeper dreams & ever deeper, deeper into darkest, squeal-haunted sleep.

She awoke again to warm gold light and the sound of cooking bacon.

Rolled over in her sleeping bag and yawned and stretched, feeling rested, feeling content despite the dreams.

For she'd made it through to morning, and Sue hadn't managed to get in.

She climbed out of her sleeping bag.

Marcie, Jenna & Emma were still all curled up nearby, and Anne felt a little shock as she looked to the window, for it was dark-frozen and still nighttime beyond the spidered panes. That golden light was only streaming through the frosted glass of the french doors that led into the kitchen. The smell of bacon, welcoming and rich. Like Sunday morning. Of course Marcy's parents were early risers. They were always hiking, doing things like that. It only made sense.

Bleary-eyed & still half-asleep, she stumbled to the kitchen door and kicked away the stops. That click of the latch, letting in the warm smell, the golden light, the pleasant, homey sizzle of bacon in the pan.

"M-morning Mrs. M." Mumbling, she closed the doors gently behind her so as not to wake the others. Still rubbing her eyes she wandered to the table and climbed into an old chair. Chrome legs & beige-upholstered vinyl seats and backs. Comfortable. A plate & fork & napkin were already waiting for her at the table.

Mrs M. responded with a single word.

*"Hwae."*

Anne's drowsy eyes suddenly snapped wide, and as they focused on the figure at the stove they saw, not Marcy's mother standing there, but Sue, braced with two rear legs on a kitchen chair pushed up against the oven, and one front leg against the front edge of the stove. With her other hoof she was using the dew-claw as a kind of crude thumb, and had a little spatula clasped between it and the heel of her hoof. She was pushing strips of sizzling meat around the pan, and it was something she must have done before, because she wasn't even looking as she did it.

She had her eyes fixed on Anne.

*"HWaeeee."*

Anne clenched up, frozen cold solid, like a deer in the headlights, like a pig staring down the bolt gun.

Even as Sue flicked the burner off, and took the hot pan-handle between both hooves in a towel, and somehow contrived to waddle off the chair without spilling even a drop of grease. Even as the pig clopped with painful, and unnatural & slow bipedal steps toward the table, and shoved the pan up onto a makeshift folded-towel trivet.

And even when the pig dropped back to all fours and leaped onto a chair across the table from Anne and sat across from her, like a grotesque parent, staring across the expanse of table with hate horrid in her eyes.

Even then, Anne just sat there. Helpless. No better than an animal.

*“Hwae.”*

Anne could recognize some of her tones by now. Some pleading, some aggressive. This one imperative. A command. Eat.

“Wh-what... what kind of meat is it?”

*“Hwae.”* Eat. No other answer given.

She looked down at the pan. The meat looked like bacon. But she had a sudden sick feeling that maybe it wasn't. Maybe after all the pigs Anne had eaten, Sue was trying to even out the score. Maybe this was *human* meat. Maybe the pig had killed and chopped up Marcy's parents, and maybe he was feeding them to her now. Maybe after that he'd chop her up as well, and feed her to Marcy and Emma, before eating them too.

Or maybe it was just bacon, and maybe that wasn't any better: because Sue was a pig, and if Sue cooked pig and fed it to her then that was a form of cannibalism too. Anne could only imagine what it would take to cook the meat of your own kind and feed it to someone. But when she looked into those round black eyes, and saw the hatred there, the righteousness, she knew Sue was up to it. Was capable of anything.

Before Sue, there sat no plate, no fork or napkin. Only a kitchen knife, deliberately placed.

*“Hwae.”* A finality in Sue's tone. ‘This is the last time I'm going to tell you.’

“I... I don't want to eat this,” Anne said.

“Hwae?” Bitterly ironic. “Hwae.”

“Please.” Anne was on the brink of tears. “Please, I don't want to eat this.”

*“Hwae. HWAE.”*

The pig reached awkwardly. Seized the kitchen knife awkwardly between the dew-claws and the hoof. Clumsily but firmly, and stared across the table. She didn't even need the knife. She was more than twice Anne's size.

Anne began to cry. The pig just watched her. Without passion but perhaps with a parched amusement. At the self-loathing, the hypocritical fear.

When Anne's tears had run out, Sue was still waiting patient. She leaned over the table and nudged the handle of the frying pan. The pan cool by now, the mysterious rashers congealing.

"*Hwae*," Quieter now. Almost sympathetic. As if to say, 'just get it over with. You'll feel better when it's done.'

But Anne only softly, tearfully shook her head.

The pig looked at her in silence for a long, long moment. Then out a heavy sigh.

And raised the knife.

And brought it down.

Not on Anne. But on herself.

Razor edge sliced through bristles & thick hide, into the tender flesh beneath. Blood spurted: dark and unbearably bright in the yellow kitchen light as the Pig's eyes went wide and she screamed and fell from the chair with a crash.

Anne screamed as well; louder than she'd ever screamed before, for now the vinyl floors were awash with thick dark blood, as rich and dark as buckwheat honey, and Sue was writhing and struggling in this pool, her kicking trotters carving pale streaks in the liquid, but even as she shrieked and screeled with the agony, still Sue worked at the knife until it broke through, and a whole rasher of bristling, crimson bacon sloughed off of her side. No sooner had it fallen than she'd plunged the knife into herself again, sawing and working until the blade would stand up straight inside her on its own, and then she fell to his side and began to spasm in the gore, shrieking all the while while Anne screamed, and the pig's blood fountained against the wallpaper and a moment later Marcie and Emma and Jenna appeared at the kitchen door and began to scream and scream as well.

Then Marcie's parents were there, and Marcie's mom was screaming, and Marcie's dad was calling the police and Marcie was on her knees in the blood beside her pig, sobbing and cradling Sue as she looked up at Anne with sick terror on her face.

"What's the matter with you?" She screamed. "You *cooked* her? How could you do it? How could you eat my Sue?"

And all the while the pig's black eyes stared up at Anne, all dark with pain & loss & lonely hate.