

PIG DID IT

Once upon a time there was a story told to make things better. Does your family have a similar story? My father had an unhappy life. He was married four times and drowned his anger and pain with alcohol. Before World War II, he married his childhood sweetheart. I was their first and only child. My mother died in a car accident the day before my father was sent to the Pacific ocean theater as a B25 bomber pilot. That was 1942. I was two years old. He was given 10 days leave to attend my mother's funeral before he began piloting the most lethal killing machine of the world war. In the remaining 20 years of his life after the war, I never heard him mention my mother or the war. He told stories, though, like this one-

Our household includes three highly satisfactory cats- Hodge, Hercules, and Squeak- and an ebullient Labrador retriever named Shamrock because she was born on my birthday, which is March 17 and is widely celebrated. All four animals rate top marks for the performance of their chores. The cats work in shifts around the clock to insure that our pantry is never without a dead field mouse or mole. The Labrador retriever retrieves laundered-shirt cardboards from wastebaskets and rends them into small fragments for easy handling. Much as I love and admire the cats and dog, I reserve my ultimate plaudits for Pig.

Pig materialized quite spontaneously one night, soon after Ann and I were married. Rummaging through my desk the previous day, with a tingle of rich discovery, I had come upon a document of my commission as a Kentucky Colonel, yellowed a score of years or more, in a forgotten drawer, but all the more impressive for its patina. Just the thing for a wall in my den, I thought, resolving to have it framed at the earliest opportunity. I placed it in my "action" basket. When I arrived home the next evening- woe to behold!- the precious scroll looked as though it had been used in a Rorschach test. From the proud Commonwealth seal at the top to the bold signature of Governor Lawrence Wetherby below, it was obscured by an eccentric ink blot.

"Who," I cried, "has defiled my Kentucky Colonelcy?"

"Pig did it," Ann said lightly. "He's sorry."

"Pig," I growled. "Who in blazes is Pig." Ann smiled prettily, and my scowl began to thaw.

From that moment to this, Pig has careened around the house on cloven hooves, committing a prodigious number of small sins of commission and omission.

Were half a dozen of our best new glasses unaccountably demolished?

"Pig did it."

Was the living room rug charred by cigarette ash?

"Pig did it."

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Pig, of course, doesn't exist in the sense that he must be fed like our other pets, which is all to the good. But he is almost as real to us as Hodge, Hercules, Squeak, and Shamrock- and even more useful. Pig is a buffer state, a compulsory cooling-off period, an automatic counting-to-ten, usually with a smile by ten. Additionally, Pig is a disarming acknowledgement of fault and apology by whoever is actually Pig at the time; and as such, heads off recriminations and their frightful cumulative power to fire petty annoyance into consuming rage.

Admittedly, Pig is on the whimsical side, which is why our sophisticated friends such as Tony and Isabelle, who display Latin translations of "Winnie the Pooh" and "Alice in Wonderland" on their coffee table, can't abide him. Tony simply shows his scorn whenever the subject comes up, but Isabelle is voluble. "It's perfectly disgusting," she told us not long ago. "Grown people pretending that an imaginary pig is responsible for all their shortcomings! I mean, really! My psychiatrist says it's an obvious case of arrested maturity, a compulsive escapism that spells absolute, utter catastrophe in important things." Our reply was that we didn't need a psychiatrist because we had Pig!

Just the other day we got a letter from Isabelle that said, "I trust the cats and dog are well, but I DO hope you've grown up and rid yourselves of that ridiculous, degrading pig." The letter was postmarked Las Vegas where Isabelle is getting a divorce. It seems that Tony struck her during an argument over who failed to put anti-freeze in the station wagon.

I wondered if perhaps that family story was one of apology and redemption by an alcoholic father who had himself struck his second wife after returning from the war. He told this story later, while married to his fourth wife. He died of a massive heart attack at age 47, twenty- three years after my mother died.