

Piglet Gets A New Job

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Chapter 1: The Circus

The piglet did not get paid for her job, which was very unfair considering how dangerous it was. She did get a certain satisfaction from carrying out her duties, but this was not the main reason that she never once complained about her lack of pay. The fact was that she had no idea about money. You might say that a more intelligent piglet would have figured it out by her age. Everyone who came to see the circus paid for their tickets in coins - silver or copper, depending on their circumstances. For the circus folk, money, or rather the lack of it, was one of their favourite topics of conversation. Certainly the man who fed the piglet never failed to mention money during his visits to her.

"You'll eat us out of house and home, you will," he said as he poured the slops into the trough, but to the piglet this sounded no different to 'enjoy your meal' or 'bon appetit'.

Thinking about it afterwards, with the benefit of old age and wisdom, the piglet concluded that she had just not needed to know about money at that stage in her life. She was fed daily. She had clean straw to sleep on. She had plenty of free time to play with the circus children. In return, she allowed herself to be fired from a cannon three times daily. Until one day.

It was their last show on the last day in a small place that they only visited once every year or two. Up until then, everything had gone as normal, and the piglet could not think what she must have done in between the second and third shows in order to have delivered such a dramatically different result. The lively crowd had watched with expectation as the piglet was loaded into the cannon. For some, this was the second or even third time that they had seen the performance, but even so their attention never wandered. They closely followed each elaborate step in the process of preparing the cannon. The setting of the cannon. The checking of the safety net. The fixing of the fuse. Finally the operator lit the fuse and ran for safety, tripping over – as he always did – just before he made it to the little sandbag wall he had built in the centre of the ring.

BOOM went the cannon. With their eyes, the audience followed the curved path that the piglet ought to have taken through the air, between the cannon and the net. Right on cue, the operator staggered to his feet. His face was blackened with soot, and he wobbled about, knocking on his ears as if trying to get the ringing out of them. Then he stopped. The audience was laughing, just as they always did, but this time there was something wrong with the laughter. It was too loud and a little more ... cruel than usual. The operator looked at the net, and he was shocked to find that the piglet was not there. Maybe she missed the net, he thought in panic. Maybe she's hurt. Then he realised that the audience were all looking at the cannon. He turned that way too,

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slowly, not sure that he wanted to see. There was the piglet, halfway in and halfway out of the cannon. Her front trotters thrashed wildly in the air as she tried to free herself from this embarrassing prison, but it was no good and her squeals of distress could be clearly heard, even above the laughter.

The operator ran to try and help her get out, while the ringmaster rushed forward to distract the crowd.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, now I think we all understand the meaning of that phrase 'squealing like a stuck pig'."

Everybody laughed, and the ringmaster went on to introduce the next act. Meanwhile the cannon, piglet and all, were quietly wheeled out of the tent.

It had taken a while to free the piglet. They had pulled, and she had wriggled. They had poured oil onto her, and she had tried to suck in her tummy. Eventually she had come unstuck with a little 'pop', and everyone had fallen, panting, to the grass. The piglet was unharmed, apart from a red ring around her middle, and even this had gone by the time she woke up the next morning. In fact, even the memory of being stuck had started to fade, so it was a bit of a surprise when the ringmaster turned up at her sty. Even without his top hat and red jacket, the ringmaster was a figure to be respected. The piglet could not remember any time when he had come to see her before, and so she was quite terrified – especially as he was accompanied by a crowd of circus folk.

"So, little piglet," he said, looking down at her, "it seems that you are too big to fire from the cannon."

The piglet suddenly felt that the situation had been caused by some wilful action on her part and that getting larger was due to more than just the natural process of getting older.

"Well," continued the ringmaster, "we don't have room in this circus for people who can't pull their weight."

He looked at the piglet. The piglet looked blankly back. "Maybe you can juggle?" suggested the ringmaster. The piglet shook her head. "Or walk on two legs?" The ringmaster tried.

Again a shake of the head.

"Is there nothing you can do to earn your keep?"

This time there was no shake of the head. Instead a single, solitary tear rolled down the piglet's cheek and dropped onto the straw below.

"She could make us a lovely lot of bacon rashers for our breakfast," called out the clown.

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"This piglet has been a member of the circus since she was born," said the ringmaster, "and we all know that the circus is a family."

He looked the clown in the eye as he continued slowly, pausing between each word. "We ... do ... not ... eat ... family!" "Why don't we sell her then," replied the clown, cheekily.

"I'll sell you, if you're not careful," snapped the ringmaster, the tone of his voice making it clear that there were to be no further suggestions from the clown.

Unfortunately, nobody else could think of anything that the piglet could do in the circus, now that she would no longer fit in the cannon. The ringmaster sighed a big sigh and knelt down in order to speak to the piglet more directly. The other circus folk began to drift away.

"I'm afraid, my friend, that we circus people are not rich," he said, as if he were revealing a great secret to the piglet alone, "in fact, we are so poor that if we are not all able to work – if one single member of our family were to stop contributing – the whole circus would fall apart."

He paused, to let the piglet imagine how terrible a thing that would be.

"So you see how it must be? It's time for us to go our separate ways. You do understand, don't you?"

The piglet was suddenly aware that the circus had now been almost entirely dismantled and packed up. She felt sad and frightened about being sent off alone. She also felt sure that in a real family you wouldn't be thrown out simply because you were no longer useful. She almost said this to the ringmaster, but then she remembered the clown. It seemed a good idea not to make the ringmaster angry, as he had just stopped her from being eaten, so she simply nodded.

"That's the spirit," said the ringmaster.

He stood up and looked around. Seeing one of the acrobats nearby, he called out.

"Billy, let's make sure this brave little pig gets a good meal before she starts her journey."

Then he thought of something else and bent down again.

"You should remember that not all people are like us circus folk. There are many out there who would do you harm. We'll be heading to the next town."

He pointed down the road.

"You should head into the countryside."

He pointed in the other direction.

"Be sure to stick to the quieter tracks. Lose yourself in the woods and always –

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always – hide yourself from people."

The ringmaster stood up, patted her on the head and started to walk away. There were so many questions running around in the piglet's mind that she called out to stop him – or she would have done if, at that moment, Billy hadn't arrived back and dumped a big heap of apples and peelings in front of her. Hungrily the piglet tucked into the food. She stopped eating only when she felt two little arms being flung around her neck. It was one of the children, who gave her a big hug and then ran to join his family on their caravan. The circus was now moving off in a long convoy of horse-drawn vehicles, and all that the piglet could do was stand and watch, as the only life she had ever known disappeared into the distance. Suddenly she lost her appetite, lay down on the ground and waited, unable to decide what to do next.

Chapter 2: The Wood

The piglet was woken by the sound of children's voices. Lazily she opened her eyes and saw, a little way off, a group of boys and girls who had come from the nearby village to search for anything the circus might have left behind. Because she was small and lying still, the children had not seen her yet, and the words of the ringmaster sounded in her head – “always, always, hide yourself from people”. Slowly the piglet started to crawl away. Everything went well at first, but pigs are not built for stealth, and it wasn't long before one of the children spotted her.

"Look! There's the little pig who got stuck in the cannon," he shouted.

Knowing that there was no more point trying to hide, the piglet jumped to her feet and ran as fast as she could in the direction the ringmaster had pointed.

"Get it!" shouted one of the children.

The shout seemed so close behind her that the piglet felt a jolt of fear, which gave extra strength to her legs, and she rocketed forwards. Once she reached the road, the children, who were only half serious about the chase, gave up and returned to searching the field. The piglet, however, did not stop and did not even look back until she was quite exhausted. Even then she still found the energy to hide herself in a ditch by the road before she fell asleep.

When she woke, the day was drawing on, and she was feeling very hungry. Unfortunately, this stretch of the road was crossing open grassland, and there wasn't much that was good for pigs to eat. She tried nibbling on a bit of grass, but her teeth weren't suited to the job - and it tasted awful. In the end, it got dark while she was still searching, so she hid herself away from the road and went to sleep with a rumbling tummy.

Over the next few days things got easier. Following the advice she had been given, the piglet stuck to the quieter roads and tracks until she was about as far from any village or town as it was possible to be. Here she found an enormous wood. There was plenty to eat, lots of good places to hide and absolutely no people. The piglet might have been quite happy living here for the rest of her life, except that she was lonely. She missed the circus very much, and after only a few days, she had come up with a plan that would allow her to go back. It was very simple really. All she needed to do was to develop a skill that would make her useful again. But what?

First she practised standing on two legs. It was very difficult to balance on her little trotters, but she kept at it and worked hard until she could stand quite well, and even take a few steps. This might have been enough to send any other piglet scurrying off to catch up with the circus, but not this one. She had seen so many performances that she knew every act had to be spectacular. A little pig walking on its hind legs was

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unusual, but certainly not what you would call spectacular. There had to be more. So she taught herself how to juggle – with acorns. She wasn't bad, but she couldn't keep going for long because, somehow, the acorns kept ending up in her mouth. Also, in her heart of hearts, she knew that even the juggling would not be enough. People didn't say 'pigs might juggle' when they heard of something highly unlikely, it was always

'pigs might fly'. This was why the cannon had been spectacular. Flying was the only thing that would do.

Trying to fly in the middle of the wood seemed like a bad idea - too easy to hit a tree. So the piglet travelled further than she ever had before. She found a place at the edge of the wood, where a huge meadow sloped gently downwards from the treeline. There was nothing to hit here and it would be a nice soft landing on the thick, long grass. Still, the piglet was nothing if not safety conscious. She made herself a little crash helmet, woven from twigs and packed on the inside with moss. Then she set her mind to figuring out how she would launch herself.

First she found an old hollow log, which looked very much like her cannon. With great difficulty she rolled it to the edge of the wood, pointed it towards the meadow and raised up the end with some stones. When all was prepared, she clambered inside - bottom first - and wriggled her way down. She was very excited, waiting there in the gloom for the cannon to fire. Of course, nothing happened. She tried counting down - “three ... two ... one ...”. Nothing happened.

“BOOM!” she shouted.

Nothing happened.

After nothing had been happening for quite a long time, the piglet wriggled back out of the log and stood, staring at her failed creation. It had always been the operator who had made the cannon fire, and the piglet had always been inside while he did his work. She had no idea what she might be missing. Looking up to the heavens in despair, she saw a squirrel running along a branch. As it got close to the end, the branch bent slightly. Then the squirrel jumped to the next tree and the branch sprang back. The piglet had an idea.

It took ages for her to build her catapult. There were so many things to figure out - a surprising number of things for something so simple. Then there was the testing. Obviously she didn't try it out herself. No, she found a log that was about her weight and shape, and she tried it with that instead. The first few tests were not good. Enough to say that the first log did not survive. In fact, it was the third log that made the first successful flight, and that was many days later. The piglet now desperately wanted to try the device herself, but it was late in the day, and she sensibly decided to have a good night's sleep before the first 'live' test.

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The next morning she was up at dawn, checking all the different bits of her creation. Finally, satisfied that everything was in order, she hauled back the branch that formed the main part of the catapult until she heard the click of the catch that would hold it in place while she got into position. On went the crash helmet, and then she climbed aboard, settling into the cradle she had made at the end of the branch. With everything ready, it would just take a swipe of her trotter to release the catch. Now, however, she hesitated, suddenly afraid. She thought of how much she wanted to go back to the circus, closed her eyes, counted down, knocked the catch open and ... she was flying. The piglet opened her eyes, saw the ground rushing up to meet her, and closed them again. Seconds later she crashed down into the meadow grass. A little winded, maybe a little bruised, but not badly hurt ... yet. Because the ride was not over. Although the piglet had landed, she had not stopped moving. She was rolling down the grassy slope, unable to stop herself and beginning to feel quite sick. With a huge effort, she twisted round so that now she wasn't rolling, she was skidding on her bottom, but she was still going too fast. She felt herself tipping forwards, lost her balance, flipped over in a cartwheel of trotters and - BANG - her head hit something hard.

Now she had come to a complete stop, a little more than halfway down the slope. Her helmet, which had been smashed into pieces, fell to the ground around her. Yet when her vision had cleared, she found herself looking down at an empty meadow. She looked all around, but could see no obstacles of any sort, only grass. What had she hit that was so hard? The piglet stared down the slope again and blinked hard. There, less than a foot away from her snout, was a crack. A little, jagged crack just hanging in the air. A crack where there was nothing to be cracked. As the piglet watched, the crack grew, it branched, it spread. Very soon there was a whole section of the air, about half a meter wide and reaching from the piglet's snout to the ground, that was criss-crossed with cracks. Then, suddenly, it shattered, all the little bits landing on the grass. The piglet went to touch one, but before she could, it - and all the others - seemed to melt away into the ground. All that was left was a small, square hole. A hole that stood, impossibly, in nothing but air.

Chapter 3: The Tunnel

The piglet, of course, was frightened. It was also true to say that she was not a very brave piglet. However, something like this could not simply be ignored. It could not go uninvestigated. The question of what might be found on the other side of this hole had to be answered. Knowing that sooner or later she would have to find the courage to go through the hole, the piglet decided that it would be best done now. She might not have been very brave, but she was certainly no coward, and she could be quite determined when it was necessary. Taking a deep breath, and ignoring all the excuses she had already dreamt up for delaying her exploration, she stuck her head into the hole.

It was dark on the other side, but not pitch black. Once the piglet's eyes had adjusted from the bright sunlight of the meadow, she found that she could see perfectly well. She was looking into a large tunnel – a wide corridor, almost - that seemed to be made out of iron. The hole she had made was in one side of the tunnel, close to the floor. The other side was opposite her, about an acorn's throw away. To her left and right, the tunnel stretched out, curving slightly, so that the ends could not be seen. The light, she now realised, came from a number of glowing ovals, which were fixed at regular intervals to the ceiling. The piglet pulled her head out of the hole and looked down the slope. There was the meadow. She put her head into the hole again. There was the tunnel. The tunnel and the meadow seemed to be in exactly the same place, except that the meadow was sloping while the tunnel was flat. It was all very confusing. Taking her head back out of the hole, the piglet reached out carefully with her trotter, waving it through the air just to one side of the hole. It didn't look as though anything was there, but nevertheless her trotter touched something hard. She tried in several more places, each time with the same result. There was some kind of invisible barrier across the meadow. It felt smooth, like glass, and there was no way of knowing how far it stretched. Once again it was clear what must be done. The piglet summoned up her courage for a second time and stepped through the hole.

The tunnel seemed larger, now that she was in the middle of it. The floor was very flat and, aside from a thin layer of dust, seemed quite clear and clean. The walls rose straight up on either side, before curving over to meet in an arch - high above her head. In the circus there had been a man who walked on stilts, and the piglet thought that even he could have walked upright in here, so high was the ceiling. Pausing for a moment, the piglet considered which way she would go. She also, briefly, thought about how she would find her way back, but the tunnel only went one way and the hole, through which light was streaming, was quite obvious. So off she went, turning to the right and trotting down the middle of the tunnel, her bright little eyes scanning the way ahead for anything of interest and her heart beating only slightly faster than it should have done.

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It wasn't long before she started to find interesting things. First there was an empty glass bottle, just like the circus people had, but of a much higher quality – with thinner, smoother and more transparent glass. Then there was a metal can. Then some kind of metal tool, like the big spanners the workmen used when putting up the big top. Although these things suggested that

there had once been people here – and there might still be – this didn't worry the piglet as much as it should have done. Maybe it was the long-disused feel of the place, but the further she went, the more confident she grew ... and then she saw the door.

As she had walked, the tunnel had continued to curve round, always to the left, so she had started to think of the left hand wall as the 'inside'. The other wall, the one in which she had made the hole, was the 'outside' wall. This door, then, was doubly interesting because it stood in the inside wall. Otherwise it was quite unremarkable. About the right size for a normal person, it was made of metal and had a handle about half way up. The dust around the door was just as thick as everywhere else, so it looked like it hadn't been used recently. Putting her head against it, the piglet gave a little shove. The door felt quite solid and immovable. She stood on her hind legs to try and reach the handle, but it was too high. She sat down and gave the door a hard stare. Then she looked further on down the tunnel, which continued to curve away out of sight. Opening the door would need tools, exploring further would require provisions, and for both of these she would have to return to the wood.

As she had not gone far, it did not take long to return to the hole. The fact that her trotters had made such an obvious track in the dust made her more confident still, and she decided to investigate the tunnel fully before trying to open the door. It was clearly a very long time since anyone had been in the tunnel because, apart from where she had been, the carpet of dust was quite undisturbed.

An hour or so later, after a big lunch and with a pouch full of acorns hung around her neck, the piglet arrived back at the tunnel. The hole was quite difficult to see from the outside, but not impossible, and the little pig decided that she would have to do something to hide it properly. Although she had seen no people around here, it was always better to be safe than sorry. However, this would have to wait until after her full exploration of the tunnel. So, full of excitement and expectation, she headed in.

Unfortunately - or fortunately, depending on your viewpoint - the tunnel turned out to be rather dull. It was only the fact that it was exceptionally long that gave the piglet any difficulties at all. When she first set off, she was very alert and inquisitive, making note of every new thing that she found or passed. It soon became clear, however, that the features of the tunnel were very repetitive. There were no branches or turnings. The curve continued, always exactly the same in front as it was behind. There were even other doors, identical to the first one, none of which could be

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opened. The only things that were not regular were the occasional items abandoned on the floor - bottles, cans, packages (empty), bits of string or rope, odd looking materials and even some pieces of clothing. The piglet concluded that the workmen who had built the tunnel had simply not cleaned up properly after themselves, and that no one else had ever bothered to come here. Why they had built such an immense tunnel in the first place was another question. By the time she reached the fifth door, it seemed to the piglet that she had been travelling for hours, and she was very tired. Sitting down, she ate a few acorns and then fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

How long she slept was impossible to tell. The lamps on the ceiling shone with the same yellow light as they had when she had closed her eyes. Only her hunger made her think that she had slept for a long time. Eating some more acorns, she noted that there was, perhaps, one more meal left in her pouch. Now there was a decision to make. Whether to turn around and leave the rest of the tunnel unexplored, or to press on and risk running out of food. Cautious by nature, the

piglet would have turned back, but she had become convinced that the tunnel went round in an enormous circle. So she carried on, finishing the last of her acorns when she reached the tenth door. This made her a little nervous, but at least it meant that she could use her pouch for carrying some of the more useful bits and pieces she found along the way.

By the time she passed the twelfth door, she was getting hungry again, and very tired. The thought of the long journey back the way she had come, with no food, was an alarming one. So it was a greatly relieved piglet who saw sunlight shining into the tunnel ahead. It had taken well over a day, but she had completed her exploration. Next she would have to find a way to get through that first door.

The following day, however, the piglet was too tired and sore to attempt the door. When she wasn't dozing, she spent her time stocking up on acorns and making it harder for any passers-by to see the hole. By banking up some earth and carefully replanting some tall grasses, she managed to cover the hole, while still making it easy to get in and out. Having determined that the tunnel was deserted, she now felt even safer in there than in the wood. So much so that she chose to sleep in the tunnel overnight. True, it was annoying that the lights never went out, but they were dim enough to be ignored and safety came first in the little pig's opinion. She had always been worried, on the outside, that she might be surprised in her sleep and, therefore, captured. Now she had found the best hiding place of all and so, despite the light, she slept soundly.

Chapter 4: The Town

The opening of the door had gone well. Not perfectly, because her first idea - to loop a piece of string around the handle and pull it down – had been a frustrating failure. First, she spent ages trying to throw the string over the handle. Then, when she pulled down, she found that the string always slipped off before the handle moved enough to open the door. After a few attempts she gave up in favour of a much simpler plan. Bringing stones, logs and earth from outside, she built a platform beside the door. It took a long time, but once it was done the platform looked very solid, and the piglet was proud of the results of her hard work. Wasting no time, she hopped onto the new platform, stood up on her hind legs and pulled down on the door handle with her trotter. At first it was very stiff, then suddenly, the handle moved. There was a soft click and the door swung partly open, almost causing the piglet to fall off her platform. Instead she dropped back onto all fours, hopped down to the dusty floor and pushed her snout through the gap in the door.

Rather surprisingly, she found herself facing a bush. Pushing forward, and widening the gap in the door so it was big enough for her whole body, the piglet tried to see what was beyond the bush. Without going all the way through and risking the door swinging shut, trapping her, it was difficult to guess anything about her surroundings. Some things, however, were clear. On this side of the door, the sun was shining - just as it had been in the meadow - and the air smelt fresh after the closed air of the tunnel, which had a metallic taint to it. Also, as the breeze ruffled the leaves of the bush, glimpses of a wide open space, and of buildings beyond that, could be seen. The piglet felt no fear, peering into this new and strange place. Quite the opposite in fact. As she stood, half in and half out of the doorway, a feeling of great calm and, yes, almost happiness had come over her. However, buildings meant people, and people meant danger. So, cautious as ever, she retreated through the door, closing it behind her, so she could plan her next move.

The planning did not take long. Just like the tunnel, this new oddity had to be explored and similar preparations were required. There was one major change. This time the piglet judged that the exploration should be done at night, when she would have the best chance of hiding from any people she might meet. So, having had an afternoon nap, she found herself back at the door - or rather, halfway through it. There was a pouch of acorns round her neck and she also carried a small branch. She waited until the twilight faded and, with the landscape bathed in the silvery light of a crescent moon, she squeezed through the door - leaving it, prudently, wedged open with one of the metal tools from the tunnel. Now she crept round to the front of the bush, dropping the branch there as a marker for when she came back, and turned to have her first proper look at this new place.

It really was quite beautiful. Immediately in front of her lay a stretch of parkland, the

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like of which she had never seen before. There were trees and bushes, patches of flowers and large stretches of immaculately kept lawn. The colours of the flowers were hidden by the moonlight, but their scent was not, seeming all the more powerful in the stillness of the night. Beyond the park lay what looked like a town. The buildings were neat and pretty, and they stood in an orderly fashion along wide streets. The town, but not the parkland, was lit by the same glowing

ovals that lit the tunnel. Except here there was no ceiling, so they were fixed, instead, high up on the buildings. The piglet trotted carefully across the grass towards the town. As an afterthought, she turned to see if the door was well hidden by the bush. To her amazement, looking back the way she had come, all she could see was the parkland continuing into the distance. It must be the same illusion that was used to hide the outside, she thought. Fortunately, she was able to identify the right bush because of the branch she had dropped in front of it. In the darkness, there was no sign of the open door, so she turned back to the town and continued onwards.

The town was very large. The piglet walked down many streets, gazing at the elegant and colourful buildings, trying to guess what they all were. Some were obviously shops, the things they had for sale being prominently displayed in big glass windows. Some seemed to be houses, but even the smallest ones looked grand compared to the poshest homes in the towns that the circus had visited. Finally there were some buildings on such an enormous scale that the piglet could not begin to guess what they might be used for. There was a collection of these larger buildings around a spacious square, which might have been at the centre of the town. In the middle of the square was a tree that dripped sparkling silvery light from its many branches. It was quite the most beautiful thing that the piglet had ever seen, and she stared at the tree for a long time before turning and heading back to the park. The town had been amazing, but also a disappointment.

While the piglet still felt a deep distrust of people, following the clown's harsh words and the children's attempt to catch her, she also had a need for companionship. Until yesterday she had thought that the only place she could be truly happy was the circus, but when she first glimpsed the secret town, and felt the wave of calmness and contentment wash over her, she began to hope for something even better. If only there were people here who were as kind as the parkland was beautiful, as gentle as the buildings were impressive. Maybe, and here the piglet showed that her imagination still suffered from some limits, maybe, she had thought, they might even have a slightly larger cannon.

Her nocturnal search, however, had dashed these young hopes. There was not a sign of a person anywhere in the town. Sniffing the air with her sensitive nose, the piglet could not catch the scent of any other creature in the streets she visited. Despite the seeming order of the place and the strange impression it gave of being well looked after, the only conclusion that the piglet could draw was that the town was as deserted

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as the tunnel. Yet she did not despair. Although there was no one around at night, there was a slim possibility that she would find someone if she returned during the day. So she headed back to the tunnel, carefully securing the door behind her, intent on catching a few hours' sleep before resuming her explorations in the morning.

Of course the town was not deserted, and the streets of a big town are never entirely quiet, even at night. Several people saw the little pig as she wandered along on her exploration. They smiled to themselves, or winked at one another as she trotted past, but otherwise they left her alone. There was even a little boy, awake long after his bedtime, who saw her from his bedroom window. He hoped that she would come back so that they could play together, and with these pleasant thoughts going round in his head, he fell asleep.

Chapter 5: The People

It was late in the morning by the time the piglet woke up, following her long night of exploration. Everything in the town was hustle and bustle. Shops were open, people were going about their business and some, like the little boy and his mother, were lucky enough to have time to spend in the beautiful park. The boy saw the piglet as soon as she emerged from behind the bush, and he let out a squeal of delight.

"Mama, Mama, look! It's the pig I saw last night," he said, "do you think he's come back to play with me?"

His mother looked up from her reading and cast a practiced eye over the object of her son's attention.

"That is a piglet, not a pig," she said, kindly but sternly, "and it is a little girl, not a 'he'."

"Why won't she play with me, Mama?" persisted the boy, tottering along beside the trotting piglet.

"She doesn't see you, darling," replied his mother, "now come back here and leave her alone, please."

The little boy toddled back to his mother, a tiny bit disappointed, but still excited and full of questions.

"Why can't she see me, Mama? Have I gone invisible?"

"It's not that she can't see us," explained the mother, "it's more that she's just not ready to see us yet. And it's not just you, it's everyone. Look, see how she walks down the street like she's the only person in town."

Sure enough, from the piglet's point of view, the town seemed just as deserted as it had been the night before. How it was that she didn't bump into anyone, or notice the doors of the shops opening and closing, or smell any of the delicious food in the cafés was a mystery. Except to the townspeople. They had seen people arrive from the outside before – very infrequently – and it always happened the same. At first they could see nothing. Sometimes they would simply turn around and leave, never to return. Sometimes they were the 'wrong sort' and had to be made to forget. Sometimes, but not often at all, they would see for themselves and for the right reasons, then they were allowed to stay.

"That one seems like one of the good ones," said the mother, "I'm sure she will see us when she really needs to."

But by this time the little boy had grown bored by the conversation. He was far away, chasing a butterfly across the lawn.

Piglet Gets A New Job

While the little boy played, the piglet searched all around the town. Long after the boy had been taken home for his nap, she returned to the park, foot-sore and miserable. A few times she

was sure that she had seen someone, and her heart had leapt, but when she turned it had just been shadows. If it hadn't been for the oddly calming effect of the place, she might well have burst into tears there and then. As it was, the tears didn't come until she had passed through the tunnel and emerged back into the meadow. It was so unfair to have made such an amazing discovery and yet not to have benefited from it. Now there was no hope. No way back to the circus and no miracle to save her. She would be alone forever, just her and the wood.

It was in this same mood of self-pity and despair that the piglet spent the next few days. Each morning she would go out into the wood to root around for food, or just to mope about and curse her bad luck. Each evening she would return to the tunnel to sleep. Sometimes, in the night, she would get up and go into the park to smell the flowers, or go to the town square to gaze at the beautiful tree. These things would always make her feel a little better, but then she would remind herself of all her bad luck - all the injustice she had suffered - and her heart would harden. On one of these trips, the little boy's mother almost tripped over her. The mother had been visiting a friend and was in a happy mood, but that changed when she saw the piglet. 'Oh dear,' she thought, 'that one was so close to seeing when she first arrived, but now she is further away than ever. My son will be very sad.'

A couple of days after this, as had become inevitable because of her sullen mood, the piglet made a mistake. Foraging in the wood, her sensitive nose picked up a most delicious scent. It was the smell of every pig's favourite of favourite foods - a truffle. Unmindful of anything else, she hunted round and round for the right place, then began to dig with her trotters and snout - delving down towards this rare delicacy. She was so absorbed in this task that she didn't notice the two men until they were almost upon her. If one of them hadn't stepped on a twig she might have ended up in a cooking pot, but the loud snap brought her back to full alertness. In less than half a second, realising her terrible peril, she was off and running.

"Get it!" shouted one of the men, and she heard the sound of heavy footfalls as the two pursued her.

"Shoot, before it gets away," shouted the other.

The piglet sped on, weaving through the trees as an arrow whizzed past, an inch above her head. Now she was heading for the meadow and for the safest place she knew. Breaking clear of the trees, she rocketed down the slope. It was so close that she was sure she was going to make it, but then there was a terrible pain in her haunch. Bright lights of agony blocked her vision and she tumbled, snout over trotters, through the hole.

Piglet Gets A New Job

Lying there, in the dull yellow light, she could see the arrow sticking out just above her right hind leg. She tried to stand and almost squealed out loud in pain. She was glad she didn't because the next thing she heard was a man's voice, right outside the hole.

"I'm sure I hit her, she can't have gone far."

"The only shot I saw went wide," said the other man, breathing heavily.

"That's because you were so far behind, you fat fool," said the first, "if you hadn't trodden on that twig we'd have had it with no fuss. Now help me look, I'm sure it's hiding here somewhere."

With the search so close, the piglet couldn't stay where she was. Gritting her teeth, she hobbled along the tunnel on her three good legs. It seemed to take an age to get to the door and

an impossible effort to get it open. Yet, somehow, she found herself crawling across the park, dimly aware that she was leaving an ugly streak of red blood on the manicured lawn. She was so tired, but before she slept, she badly wanted to see the beautiful tree again. Now the piglet realised how foolish she had been, to have had something so marvellous in her life and still to have thought herself unlucky. So, on she crawled. She was very determined, but it was such a long way and she was so tired. Maybe a little sleep would give her the strength to finish the journey.

Just before her eyes closed, the piglet was jolted awake. Gentle hands were lifting her and kind faces were all around. She looked down and saw a little boy staring up at her with a solemn, concerned expression.

"Is she going to be okay, Mama?" he asked. "Yes, dear. They're going to take her to a doctor. She'll be fine," came the reply.

Chapter 6: The New Job

And so it was that, in her most desperate need, the piglet was able to see the friends who had been hidden from her for so long ... but what of her new job?

After a few days, when the doctor had said it was alright to be up and about, the town's mayor came to see the piglet. They went for a little walk - a good thing to do, the doctor said, as long as they didn't go too far - and as they walked, they talked.

"We shall find you somewhere to live, of course," the mayor had said, "and have you had time to think about what you might like to do for work?"

The piglet stopped dead in her tracks.

"I can walk on two legs, and I can juggle a little," she said in a small voice, not daring to look at the mayor.

"Well, those sound like excellent skills," said the mayor, "but not what I'd really call work."

The piglet felt her stomach twist into a hard knot.

"If I'm not able to find something useful to do, will I have to leave?" she asked, looking up at the mayor.

The expression on her face - such a mixture of concern, fear, sadness and resignation - was so comical in its exaggeration that the mayor burst out laughing. Then he realised how serious the piglet was being.

"You never have to leave," he said, gently and sincerely, "you're part of the town now. I just asked because most people round here like to work, and it's good to do work that you enjoy."

A wave of relief flooded over the piglet, and she smiled up at the mayor. Then she grew more serious as she thought about what he had said.

"I've never really done work before," she said, thinking now that being fired out of a cannon probably didn't count, "I'm not sure what I'd enjoy."

"There's no rush," said the mayor, smiling back at her, "take your time. Find out what other people do. Try a few things. My only advice is that people often enjoy doing something that they're good at."

"Okay," said the piglet, solemnly, "I'll think about it."

They walked on in silence for a while, each with their own thoughts, then the piglet came to a sudden halt outside a bakery.

"I do have a very good nose," said the piglet, thoughtfully. "Really," said the mayor, "tell me, what can you smell right now?"

Piglet Gets A New Job

The piglet sniffed the air. Once, twice, three times. She sniffed high. She sniffed low. She sniffed left and right.

“I can smell the flowers in the park,” she said, “and I can smell some strawberries in the bakery - the baker should use them today because they will go bad tomorrow. Then there’s a smell I don’t know, but it seems ... wrong ... evil, almost.”

She dropped her snout and sniffed her way along the street. When she got to a certain spot, she turned in a little circle, her snout brushing the ground. When she was satisfied, she looked up at the mayor.

“I don’t know exactly what it is,” she said, “but I’m absolutely certain that there’s something broken right under this very spot.”

Men were called. They arrived with all sorts of impressive looking instruments, and they wore blue overalls. Lifting a manhole cover a little way down the street, they disappeared inside. Emerging a little while later, they gathered in a group, talking excitedly and, every now and then, glancing at the piglet. The town’s chief engineer then arrived. He was not wearing blue overalls, but he went down under the street nevertheless. When he came back up, the other men gathered around him, and they seemed to be arguing. Eventually the mayor decided to interrupt. Telling the piglet to follow, he strode up to the group of engineers.

“What is it?” he asked, “What have you found?”

“There was a fault in the power grid,” said the chief engineer, “It was only a minor fault, but if it hadn’t been found, it could have been dangerous - there could even have been an explosion.”

“Could you have detected it with your instruments?” asked the mayor. The engineers shuffled their feet a little. “No, not from the surface,” admitted the chief engineer. “So how was this little pig able to find it?”

“That’s what we were arguing about,” said one of the engineers, “we don’t think that the power grid even has a smell.”

“It does,” broke in the piglet, “it smells like hot metal on a cold day.”

Everyone stared at her.

“Little pig,” said the chief engineer, after a few seconds, “do you think you could help me and my team find other faults?”

From that day on, the piglet worked as one of the town’s engineers. She toured the streets, sniffing out faults, and sometimes her sensitive nose would sniff out other things as well - like lost belongings. She was good at her work, and she enjoyed it. She also made lots of friends, but none better than the little boy, and they played together every day.

THE END ...

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... but keep reading, for a sample of ‘The Twelve Labours of Hercules’

The Twelve Labours of Hercules (sample)

On top of Mount Olympus sits the beautiful palace of the gods of Ancient Greece. The slender columns that reach high into the sky are made of the finest, whitest marble. On a sunny day, they shine so brightly that any man who dared approach would be dazzled by their beauty. This day, however, they reflected nothing but the blood red light of countless fires. The smell of smoke invaded every room in the palace, and the sounds of battle echoed through the great halls. The palace of the gods was under siege. An army of giants was attacking, and looking up from where he stood on the mountainside, Hercules made a silent vow that he would not let this beautiful building fall to such barbarians. Squaring his shoulders, he started downwards - calculating where best to join the fight. He saw Zeus, the leader of the gods, knock down one of the attacking giants with a thunderbolt. Zeus’ brothers, Hades and Poseidon, lords of the underworld and the sea, fought back to back - together keeping four more giants at bay. Artemis, the huntress, ran lightly over the rocks, skewering another giant with no less than five arrows. The gods did not lack in skill, strength or courage, but they were still losing this battle. The problem was that these were magical giants, protected by a sacred prophesy, and they simply could not be killed.

The giants came from a time long before the age of man - and even before the gods. In those days a different kind of being, the Titans, ruled the universe. Although some of the Titans were noble and just, their ruler, Cronus, was nothing but evil. It was even said that he ate his own children. Zeus and his brothers defeated Cronus, but with his dying breath, the king of the Titans set a terrible curse on them.

“The giants shall rise and destroy you, Zeus, and all your brothers,” he said, “Even with all your might combined, you will not be able to stop them. They will have only one weakness, and you will never find it. I also make this unbreakable prophesy. It will take the strength of a god to defeat the giants, but only one with the heart of a man can conquer them.”

Piglet Gets A New Job

Zeus did the only thing that he could, faced with this prophesy that foretold his certain death, he cheated. In disguise, he made his way to the palace of the king and queen of Thebes, one of the great cities of Ancient Greece. On the very night he arrived, the queen gave birth. A prince, it was said, who would be heir to his father's throne. Waiting until the celebrations had died down and the palace was quiet, Zeus crept into the nursery. To his dismay, he found that there was not one, but two babies. Both baby boys. How would he decide between the two? Which one would grow up to be his champion? While he was stood looking in confusion from one cradle to the other, there was a noise from outside – a crow cawing in the night. The babies woke, and while one set up a wailing fit to wake the palace, the other smiled at Zeus and reached out his little arms towards the god. This was enough. Moving quickly but calmly, Zeus placed his hand on the baby's head and chanted several powerful spells. Then he fed to the baby a spoonful of ambrosia, the special food of the gods. By the time the nurse, woken by the wailing, had entered the nursery, Zeus had disappeared out of the window and was on his way back to Olympus.

Hercules was the son of a king and queen, raised as a prince and trained to rule over the people when the time came for him to take the throne, but Zeus also looked on him as a son, watched over him and visited often – always in disguise. By the time news of the giants' revolt reached the palace high on Olympus, Hercules had grown into a fine young man, skilled in the use of all the weapons of war – especially the bow – but equally at home plucking the strings of a lyre. It was true that some found him proud, with a quick temper that often burst like a storm over some unlucky servant, but he was a prince – this kind of behaviour was to be expected. Naturally, the young Hercules felt himself destined for greater things than merely ruling a Greek city state. So, when Zeus finally revealed himself and asked for help in defeating the giants, Hercules did not think to consider himself lucky to have been chosen. Rather he considered that this was the natural order of things – that it was inevitable.

During the years of Hercules' childhood, Zeus had not been idle. Cronos had mentioned that the giants would have only one weakness, so Zeus had searched far and wide for anyone who might know what this was. Finally, from the far north, whispered stories came to Zeus' ear. Stories about a special herb that, used in the right way, would stop the giants in their tracks. He dispatched sharp-eyed eagles, swift winged swallows and birds of all types to search the air and the earth for any sign of this herb. Poseidon sent his subjects to search all the corners of his kingdom under the waves, and Hades released the demons of Tartarus to travel all the passageways of the underworld. All this activity brought no result, and the giants came ever closer to Olympus. When it became clear that the mountain would soon be surrounded, Zeus knew he must fetch Hercules, his champion, before it was too late. When they returned together to Olympus, there was no word – the herb had not been found – and the giants were approaching.

Piglet Gets A New Job

Zeus and Hercules entered the palace just as Ares, the god of war, was addressing the other gods, who had gathered in a disorderly council.

“The enemy is at our walls,” he said, “Even now they gather on the hilltops around, preparing to hurl fire and rock against us. We must go out to meet them in battle.”

Now he drew his sword and raised his shield, his voice ringing in the large hall.

“Let us show these giants what it is to suffer the anger of the gods!”

Hercules was greatly impressed by this speech and by the fine figure of Ares in his full battle armour. Zeus, however, had a wiser head on his shoulders.

“The giants cannot hurt us with their sticks and stones,” said Zeus, “you will see that the walls of Olympus are stronger than they look. Yet, as we stand today, we cannot harm the giants. We have one half of the cure, but not the other.”

Now all eyes were on Hercules. He was no stranger to the members of the council, they had each visited him many times during his childhood with lessons, or help in time of need. Now, each of them hoped that they had done enough to prepare this man for the superhuman task he must perform. Hercules, for his part, showed no surprise at seeing childhood teachers and friends now revealed as gods – for, of course, they had always made their visits to him in disguise. He simply unslung his bow and his club, and prepare to speak.

“Even though we do not have the herb,” he said, addressing the room, “I cannot believe that such a company as this will ever know defeat, but if I am wrong, I can think of no greater honour than to fight and die as one of your number.”

The gods cheered this noble speech, raising such a noise that no-one noticed the eagle until it landed on Zeus’ arm.

So it was that Hercules was sent to harvest the herb. Hermes, the messenger of the gods, lent him winged sandals, so that he could fly. Then, the eagle guided him to the desolate island where the herb grew. There was such a small amount, but Hercules harvested every last morsel, before heading back. Although it seemed to Hercules that he had not been away for long, when he returned to Olympus the situation had changed dramatically for the worse. So, he was faced with his choice – where to join the fight. How to help the gods, who were slowly but surely being pressed back towards their palace, and how to use the herb.

First he tried rubbing the herb on his weapons, but although he scored many direct hits on the giants, any he knocked down were soon up again to rejoin the fight. After this, he tried everything else he could think of. He rubbed the herb on himself, on the giants and on one or two of the gods. No effect. He tried chewing a tiny piece, then he knocked down a giant and put some in its mouth. Nothing. He even tried wearing some in his hair. The only thing that changed was that he had less and less of the precious herb left, and there was no way to get more. His patience was exhausted.

Piglet Gets A New Job

The gods were fighting in a tight ring around the top of Mount Olympus, and they were tiring. Hercules saw Ares smashed to the ground by one giant, barely scrambling away in time to avoid its clutches. He glowered at a piece of the herb, which he held between his thumb and forefinger, as if it were deliberately trying to trick him.

“What use are you?” he shouted at the small green stalk, “Why was I sent to the ends of the earth for you when you do nothing?”

As Hercules shouted, his knuckles grew white and his hand shook as his tremendous strength was applied to this one tiny thing he held. It was too much, and with a popping sound that seemed too loud for the size of the leaf, the herb was crushed to dust. Hercules recoiled as a thin trail of smoke curled up from between his fingers, where the herb had been moments earlier. Even at arm’s length, the smell of this was overpowering. Hercules felt his head spin and his limbs lock in place. Clamping his mouth shut, he held his breath, watching the smoke waver and dissolve into the air. Now he knew the secret, but there was so little of the herb left – he wondered if it would be enough.

The sound of cruel laughter from nearby made him put these thoughts aside. One of the giants had grabbed the goddess Athene and was crushing her in a bear hug. The other gods would have rushed to her aid, but they were too busy fighting for their own lives. Hercules realised that this was now down to him, that he would have to beat this giant – and many more like it – but not a flicker of doubt crossed his mind. He raced over and, jumping high into the air, landed a terrific blow on the side of the giant’s head. Surprised and dizzy, the giant dropped Athene, who fell to the ground and stood gasping for breath. Now Hercules swept his club at the giant’s legs, catching it just above the ankles and sending it crashing to the ground. Running up the giant’s body, Hercules grasped a morsel of the herb, as before, between his thumb and forefinger. With all his might he squeezed, popping the herb right under the giant’s nose, while being careful to hold his own breath. The giant’s face registered a moment of surprise, then of disgust at the vile stench, then it froze. A milky greyness flowed along its enormous body, from the head to the toes and fingers. When it was finished, Hercules found himself standing, not on a giant, but on a piece of rock. The giant had been turned to stone and would, now and forever, be a part of the mountain.

Athene, who had seen the transformation, directed Hercules to other parts of the fight. One by one, and working with the other gods and goddesses, they disabled the giants long enough for Hercules to use the herb and turn them to stone. With each giant that was defeated the work grew easier, until all the gods together faced just one remaining enemy, the leader of the giants – Alcyoneus. Although he was outnumbered, he was in no mood to give in. Twice as big as any of the other giants, Alcyoneus fought ferociously - sometimes even driving the gods back. Finally Hercules and Artemis, working together, pinned him down with a shower of arrows.

Piglet Gets A New Job

Then Zeus blasted Alcyoneus to the ground with a thunderbolt. Victory in sight, Hercules ran up to the giant's huge head and ... nothing. The herb had run out. There was none left, and now there was no way on earth to defeat Alcyoneus.

About the Author

Joe Corcoran was born in Sheffield, grew up in Manchester, was educated in Cambridge and now works in London. He is a devoted husband to Mickey and proud father of Toby, who is the patient recipient of many stories in the making. They live in a nice little house in Twickenham, home of English rugby and match day traffic congestion. Together, Joe and Toby wage an eternal battle against urban foxes - especially their droppings.

The income from his writing being negative, Joe pays the rent by working for a big multi-national. He is an expert in supply chain, which is the art of getting the things that people want to sell to the place where people want to buy them, and he travels the world dispensing advice on the subject. When he is not travelling, Joe works in an office in central London. He commutes every day by train, which provides his main opportunity for writing stories.

You can find out more about Joe and keep up to date with his other books and stories at <https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/corcorelli>.

Other Books by the Author

Further books by Joe Corcoran, available at your favourite ebook retailer:

The Twelve Labours of Hercules

With triumph after triumph in his past, Hercules has become proud and boastful, believing himself to be almost a god. Unless he can rediscover what it means to be a man, the king of the giants will break free and destroy the world. Twelve challenges must be completed, and the clock is ticking. Monsters must be fought, puzzles solved and gods confronted, but this time strength will not be enough, it will take honour, wisdom, perseverance and, above all, friendship to win the day.

A book where the adventure never stops, set in the time when heroes and gods still walked the earth, it will enthral children of all ages.

Bad Brad Saves Christmas

Brad doesn't believe in Father Christmas, and he doesn't want anyone else to believe that nonsense either. In fact, he's happiest when he's making everyone else miserable. He doesn't know it, but on Christmas Eve he'll have to decide whether to stay being Bad Brad, or whether he'll get on his bike and save Christmas. Deck the halls, turn on the fairy lights and read this magical Christmas story.

Bunnies from the Future

Calling all dads! It's time for you to become the hero of your own exciting adventure. The Bunnies from the Future need your help, and the fate of all mankind depends on your success. An evil force has taken over the world - a force that only you can defeat. It won't be easy. You'll have to learn space swimming, fight killer carrots, outsmart a super computer and make friends with some Giant Redwoods – but don't worry, you'll be back in time to read bedtime story.

This book is packed with enough excitement to keep any child pleading for 'two more pages', but the best thing is that this is a story about how their Daddy saved the world. Just replace a few names, and hey presto, the adventure is yours ... although I'm sure you'll be too modest to take all the credit.

Piglet Gets A New Job



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