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The Most Memorable Annual Pig Parade of Kharagpur

(https://catapult.co/nicholasrixon) Nicholas Rixon htt s: cata ult.co nicholasrixon)

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"Devilish," said all of Kharagpur, after the Rosarios and their pig walked in the annual parade. "No pig's supposed to jump backwards. Or laugh."

In the slow-moving railway town of Kharagpur—where a clipped-moustache, suit-wearing sahib of the Leftover Raj, Old Rosario, once roamed with a tiger cub on a leash and winked at ayahs when the missus wasn't looking—the most exciting event of the year took place in December.

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The Annual Pig Parade, two days before Christmas, was more than just an outdoor carnival for families of Sacred Heart parish to mingle, drink ginger wine, and listen to the Earthly Cherubs sing. It was, above all else, a competition. One the Anglo-Indian pig-owners (Indians didn't own pigs back then) took very seriously. The prize was a sheet metal trophy of a pig, plated in silver, its snout in the air; and a certificate bearing official seals of the Archdiocese, and the Bacon & Sausage Co-operative—primary sponsor of the event.

The family that won kept the trophy for eleven months before returning it to the parish priest. The Meades won twelve years ago with their prize sow, Caroline, and when time came to return the trophy they informed the church it had gone missing.

"It's just not there," Mrs. Meade told members of her knitting circle, but the truth was out the following Sunday. The youngest of the Meade daughters blurted it out in Catechism class when the nun was on the subject of Moses destroying the Golden Calf.

"Daddy hid the pig trophy in his box," said little Aileen, in-between sobs. "Please don't send daddy to hell."

Unlike the fire-and-brimstone punishment so effortlessly meted out in the Old Testament, the Meades got off easy. The husband returned the trophy and donated a substantial sum of money towards the new convent on Second Avenue. The one good thing about being Roman Catholic was you could always be forgiven.

Basil Rosario never forgot the incident. For the last decade, it so happened the Rosario pigs always came in a close second. It wasn't because the Rosarios neglected their hogs. Basil fed them a mix of apples, walnuts, and spinach for weeks. It was just that Mr. Meade was better with pigs. Every morning, as the milkman ricketly cycled by, Mr. Meade got out of bed, and before taking a piss, walked to the sty at the back of his house. The pigs, like children abandoned at night, cooed as they heard his footsteps squelch on the dew-soaked grass.

One Sunday, a piglet followed him to church, waddling all the way to the altar during the Second Reading. Father Vincent jumped from his high chair when he saw the piglet chewing on the lace altar cloth. Service was interrupted for half an hour as Mr. Meade coaxed the chubby animal from under the altar. He was undisputedly the best pig-whisperer Kharagpur had seen.

But this year Basil had a plan.

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"Come to sleep," said Phyllis. "It's late."

He ignored his wife and kept pacing the bedroom, muttering. "I'm going to win if it's the last thing I do."

When he finally climbed into bed and whispered his plan to Phyllis, she knew the trophy was coming to the Rosario household.

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The hangover of the Leftover Raj meant all the best posts in the Railways were held by Anglo-Indians. The Railways owned everything in Kharagpur, including the red-brick-green-door bungalows where all the Anglo-Indian families cocooned. The bigger the family, bigger the house.

The Meades had eight children and a fourteen-room bungalow on Fourth Avenue. Basil was a Carriage Inspector and the Rosarios had a two-storied bungalow, 229House, not too far from the Meades. They tried, but Phyllis had her tubes tied up after the third stillborn.

Their house was on the edge of the jungle, separated by a wooden fence long since mingled in with the branches of trees, heavy with fruit in the summer, orange and scraggly in the winter. From the higher terraces on Fourth Avenue, the trees were ripples of green all the way to the station-horizon.

When April evenings stretched long, Basil would take his old rifle to the jungle. He'd come back with quail, partridge, and—if he were lucky—a rabbit. One day, Basil tracked a pair of black-naped hares all the way to the old banyan tree near the jungle-vein stream. This was the farthest he'd ever gone and was about to give up when he saw a tiny leg sticking out from under a cock-flower bush, shining in the shivelight.

"I found her under the leaves," he said, laying her out on the table.

Phyllis stood over the filthy, naked child with spiders and leaves in her hair. "Put up the hot water," she said, and carried the child to the bathroom.

Basil heard a scream and ran from the kitchen. Phyllis had the broom in her hand and the naked girl, on all fours, was barking from under the marble sink.

They named the girl Edwina.

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Phyllis took it upon herself to teach this girl from under the leaves how to behave like a lady. “Only then can we introduce her to others,” said Phyllis.

“We’ll say she’s a niece from the hills. People are different there,” said Basil. “First teach her to walk. Can’t have her on all fours like an animal.”

So they kept her in the room upstairs and every day Phyllis spent time trying to get her to stand up, eat with a spoon, and pick up simple words and phrases—thank you, amen, ma, and pa. Edwina picked up words and their meaning quicker than she learned to walk. She couldn’t string the words together, but she got her point across.

The room had a single round window facing the trees and sometimes Edwina tried to peep out. Her small hands cupped around her eyes. All she could see, through dust and grime collected on the pane, were lazy shape-shadows floating by.

The months went by in Kharagpur with the whistle of trains and Phyllis spent them trying to make Edwina walk. In two months, the girl was stooping around her room.

“You look like an old hag,” laughed Phyllis, as Edwina tried to maintain her balance and walk from one wall to the next, shoulders facing the floor. “Stand up straight, sweetheart,” said Phyllis, with her hand on Edwina’s back.

“Mama food,” said Edwina, and Phyllis hugged her close.

One evening, Basil peeped through the keyhole and saw Edwina crawling across the room. As soon as Edwina heard the key turn in the lock, she stood up straight, resting against the far wall.

“Don’t worry I won’t tell mama,” said Basil. Edwina smiled at him, baring her gums and remaining milk teeth. The ones in front had fallen out last week. Phyllis had strung them up on a black cord and made her a necklace. After feeding Edwina and trying to teach her not to bite down on the spoon, Basil went out to his sty.

In the middle of all the muck sat Judy. “Hi sweetheart,” whispered Basil, “look what I have.” He held out two apples and the sow got up slowly, farted, and walked towards him. She knocked the apples out of his hand and ate them from the mud.

“Such a good-looking girl you’ve become,” whispered Basil, scratching her behind the ears. She loved when he did that and grunted. Basil knelt down and kept stroking her belly and gave her another apple. He then filled her water trough, took a bath by the tube-well, and went inside the house.

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Basil's father, Old Rosario, besides being the head foreman at the car-shed, had also been a skilled taxidermist.

As a boy, Basil helped him stuff eagles, deer, flying fox, mongoose, and one of his fondest childhood memories was stuffing the tiger cub. The zoo didn't want him and, one day, as Old Rosario sat in the cane-chair in the garden sipping cardamom tea, he felt a prickling sensation on the back of his hand. The cub was licking his fingers and had drawn blood.

There was nothing else to do, and the job took three months from gutting to stuffing to putting it up in the living room, where the stench of arsenic soap and naphthalene balls hung heavy. Old Rosario hadn't managed to get the right-sized glass eyes. The cub looked wide-eyed and a little sad, at the flying fox on the opposite wall, hung upside down, claws permanently tied to an old hockey stick made to look like a branch.

The days of walking the tiger cub were over. Old Rosario died the following week in the bathroom, where he slipped and banged his head against the marble sink.

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The December shower that announced winter came down like bubblewrap in the afternoon, and continued through owl-time. Judy was brought into the living room, so that snakes wouldn't get to her in the sty. The house smelled of mud and rain, but not in a bad way.

"You love that pig too much," said Phyllis, in the cane-chair, going through the missal. "Tomorrow is the feast of St. John of the Cross."

"Finally, it's time," said Basil, on his knees, whispering to Judy as she lay on her side.

With the big day less than a week away, Basil had been feeding Judy more apples and walnuts than usual. He was spending more time in the sty than in the house. The night before he had to do it, he insulated a wooden crate with jute bags and lined it with egg boards and hay.

Next morning, Judy was waiting in the garden. He didn't need to drag her to the back. She came willingly. He bound her mouth with rope, slit her neck, and held her down. By the time she kicked her trotters and wiggled her tail for the last time, Basil was covered in blood. His eyelids had flecks of blood and his scalp, through the scanty black-turning-grey hair, was a deep red.

He gutted her and washed her out with arsenic soap. He put the skin in the wooden crate with blocks of ice and heaps of salt.

In seven hours, he took the pigskin out, dried her down, and lined her stomach with wooden slats, cut to size. He had a wooden cup to put into the hollowed out snout. Perfectly sized wooden stilts, shaped like hooves and painted dull-black, for the short legs.

The afternoon before the parade, while everyone was in that fragile yet comfortable stage of half-sleep, Phyllis tried and failed to explain to Edwina what needed to be done. When the girl saw the pig, she wanted to sit on its back and take it for a ride.

"No no," said Basil, trying to keep his voice down. "You have to go *inside*." He held the flaps of the incision open. Edwina took off her maroon tablecloth-tunic and blinked at Phyllis who nodded. Basil tried to appear patient without looking so.

Edwina laughed and went head first through Judy's neck. She turned around inside and was back to how she had grown up walking. "All that practice to make her normal like us," said Phyllis, looking away.

"Don't worry," said Basil, "it's just for a day. Few hours really."

Judy waddled around the backyard as Phyllis and Basil sat on an upturned basket. She came to a halt, flipped onto her back and jumped up straight again.

"Well done, Edwina," shouted Phyllis. Basil laughed and squeezed his wife's fat wrist.

They heard the crunch of cycle wheels on the gravel road. Phyllis went to see who it was, while Basil guided Judy behind a bedsheet on the clothesline. He lifted the flap of the incision and pulled Edwina out. Shh, he said, putting a finger to his lips. Shh, said Edwina, mimicking the gesture and smiling her nearly-toothless grin.

"Thank your mother," said Phyllis from the front gate. Basil and Edwina came out from behind the sheet and Phyllis walked up to them with a note, "The Meades invited us for dinner. The Bishop'll be there too."

"Nothing doing," said Basil, "we'll see them tomorrow with the trophy in our hands."

Edwina crawled into Judy and ran from under the clothesline. Basil chased her around the living room. She jumped over the chest of drawers, grunting with happiness, knocked over the flying fox, and ran circles around Phyllis in the kitchen.

On the day of the Pig Parade, Basil and Phyllis were up earlier than usual. Edwina had spent the night in Judy, tied to a leg of the dressing table in the bedroom. Basil was whistling "White Christmas," making tea in the kitchen.

"Can you hear me sweetheart?" Phyllis was on her knees whispering to Edwina. "Hope it's not too hot in there, Ed."

"Stop calling her 'Ed,'" said Basil, bringing the kettle in. "People'll know something's fishy. Judy's the name on the competition form and that's what you call her today."

Phyllis looked up at her husband and saw a man determined not to fail. "I hope nothing goes wrong," said Phyllis, stroking Judy under the snout.

"Stop worrying, woman," said Basil. "Just a few hours and she'll be out of there." At that moment, Judy jumped over the bed and Basil clapped.

After lunch, Basil opened up Judy's neck incision and stuffed the wooden skeleton with hay and cotton.

"She'll suffocate," said Phyllis.

"Are you mad?" said Basil. "It's like a bed in there."

Phyllis had a bottle of foundation in her vanity box for special occasions. She applied the mixture to parts of Judy's skin that had begun to grey.

"There you go," she whispered to Edwina. "Mama'll get you out of there before you can say sausages."

Edwina laughed and mumbled something, but the cotton and hay made it hard to hear.

Basil brought the Bible from the bedroom. "Swear you won't tell a soul about this," he said, staring at his wife, who put her hand on the tome and swore.

Basil tied a rope around Judy's neck and they looked a pretty sight walking down Fourth Avenue—Phyllis in her frilly dress with green bougainvilleas, Basil in his brown chequered suit, and the pig in-between.

The carnival was held in the stadium opposite Sacred Heart Church. The Bishop was attending and everyone was excited to kiss his ring. A raised platform was constructed in front of a goal-post. The Bishop sat on a high chair in the centre with Father Vincent and Mr. Vanjour, chairman of the Bacon & Sausage Co-operative, on either side.[0]

The altar-boy choir, lovingly called the Earthly Cherubs, began with a shrill rendition of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," moving on to "Great Day in Bethlehem," and ending with a raucous, sweet-banshee-like delivery of "Jingle Bells." The parishioners joined in and clapped at the end of it all. The Bishop said a short prayer, threw blessings around, and finally it was time for the Pig Parade.

Five owners stood in single-file with their pigs in front of them. One by one, as their names were called, they walked in a circle round the enclosed area and stopped in front of the three judges. Everyone went quiet when they saw Mr. Meade and his pig, Patrick, a gleaming white balloon. He was not on a leash and followed Mr. Meade to the raised platform. Mr. Meade clicked his tongue and Patrick plonked back on his hind trotters.

"What a beautiful, obedient creature," said Mr. Vanjour. The Bishop and Father Vincent nodded.

Basil knelt down next to Edwina and whispered, "You've got this, Judy. Remember, no laughing, and when you hear this sound—" he clicked his fingers, "—do that jump you showed mama."

Basil was the last to walk. The parishioners had lost interest by then. Everyone knew Mr. Meade would take it again. The mason jars of ginger wine had been opened to breathe and people were stealing glances at the food tables—pork croquettes and plum cake.

The master of ceremonies announced their names and Basil began walking towards the podium. Halfway there, he clicked his fingers and Judy somersaulted. The parishioners distracted by the food tables missed it, but those who didn't oohed and aahed. The Bishop stood up from the comfortably-cushioned chair, rubbing his eyes. Basil smiled and clicked his fingers again. Judy rolled in the grass, ran ahead, and somersaulted twice.

This time everyone in the crowd saw the pirouetting pig and broke into loud applause. Mr. Vanjour's mouth hung open. The decision, wordlessly unanimous, was reached then and there, amidst all the cheering. Father Vincent handed the silver-plated pig trophy to the Bishop, and Basil, hands outstretched, climbed the steps of the podium.

Judy was left behind at the bottom, rolling in the grass. She turned to the crowd and saw Phyllis sitting pretty in her green bougainvillea dress. She began trotting towards her, but her path was blocked by a fat, bearded man holding a long rod with a noose at the end. Phyllis took one look at him and screamed.

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"Run, Edwina, run!" Judy somersaulted backwards and took off towards a gap in the crowd. Basil looked at the commotion from above and tried to stop it all before someone caught the pig.

"Mr. Vanjour," he said. "Don't trouble your butcher. I'll deliver the pig tomorrow morning."

Mr. Vanjour put his arm around Basil. "No trouble at all, Mr. Rosario. Abdul'll take care of it. I'll have your share delivered first thing tomorrow. As you know, the Bacon & Sausage Co-operative take half the meat and the rest goes to the family that wins. Congratulations, Basil. You've raised a truly remarkable sow."

Below, Abdul was having a tough time cornering Judy. She ran like no other pig before, darting between legs, around tables and through chairs. At one point she jumped over Abdul's outstretched hairy arms, over the low stadium wall, and into the jungle.

Phyllis fell to her knees crying, "My Edwina, my Edwina…"

"Who's Edwina?" asked Father Vincent.

"Oh nobody," said Basil, laughing it off. "I told her to take it easy with that ginger wine.'

Abdul ran after Judy into the jungle and Phyllis was staggering after them. Basil hurried over to his wife.

"It's all your fault," screamed Phyllis. "My daughter. My Edwina. I should never have listened to—"

"Will you shut up," he said softly, squeezing her wrist. "I'll find her."

The women of the parish gathered around Phyllis as Basil and a few other men followed Abdul into the jungle. An hour went by before they came back, huffing and dirty. Mr. Meade was part of the group and he recounted the chase as everyone gathered round the podium.

"It's some black magic, father," he said, breathing heavily. His words came in bursts. "Judy's faster than a hyena…never seen a *pig* go that fast…cornered her…the old banyan tree… tell me, Your Excellency," and he turned to the Bishop. "Have you seen a pig climb a tree?"

"My God," said the Bishop, settling his purple cap and crossing himself. "Go on."

"I could see her tail poking out…I threw a stone and—"

"You hurt my Edwina!" screamed Phyllis and charged at Mr. Meade.

"Basil, please control your wife," said Father Vincent.

Basil grabbed Phyllis round the waist and they sat down on the podium together.

"This fell out of the tree," said Mr. Meade. He threw down Judy's skin with cotton and hay poking out. The wooden slats were broken. The neck incision was torn all the way down to the legs.

"And this too," said Mr. Meade. He took out the milk teeth necklace from his shirt pocket and held it in front of the Bishop's face.

The Bishop turned to Basil and Phyllis sitting on the podium. "Care to explain this Mr. Rosario?"

"Witchcraft," whispered someone from the crowd.

Basil handed the trophy to Mr. Meade, picked up Judy's skin and walked towards the stadium entrance. Phyllis ran behind him screaming, "Did you find her? You *have* to go back…oh mummy darling…my Edwina…"

He shook her off and kept walking as the parishioners stood in a semi-circle, silent, and the heady aroma, of ginger wine and pork croquettes, hung forgotten in the dusty winter air.

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The truth in a rumour is like Jesus walking on water. How'd he do it? By putting one foot in front of the other, all the parishioners would say.

The up-country tale of Judy, the somersaulting pig, has a number of adaptations depending on who you hear it from, and more importantly, what you choose to believe.

Mrs. Meade told the knitting circle her husband heard a child laugh when he threw the stone at Judy's backside in the banyan tree.

"I just knew it was wrong. Devilish. No pig's supposed to jump backwards or *laugh*," said Mrs. Meade. "Poor Phyllis…if she only had a child of her own…and who's this Edwina she keeps mumbling about…"

That fanned the rumour about how the Rosarios conjured up a spirit, forced it to possess Judy, making the dead pig somersault. Others say Basil sold his soul to the Devil to become a better pig-whisperer than Mr. Meade.

The truth, like Jesus walking on water, is not important if you already believe.

The silver-plated pig trophy found a permanent home with the Meades.

Father Vincent and the Bishop, after much deliberation, decided the Annual Pig Parade would not take place again. “Highly misfortunate,” said the Bishop. “They need to forget in order to forgive.”

They reckoned why worry about one family when the majority came to mass and the collection bag grew heavier. Father Vincent made a mental note to say a prayer for the Rosarios as he stared out at his parishioners crowding around the church entrance, forcing Phyllis and Basil to turn back.

That Sunday afternoon, the Earthly Cherubs cornered Phyllis on Fourth Avenue and sang:

Fat little witch,

Hump hump hump!

Let’s see your pig,

Jump jump jump!

They pelted her with stones, howling with the pariah dogs, and raced away on their rickety cycles, kicking up dust and leaves.

Basil was at the car-shed working overtime. As the clouds pocketed the sun and tree-shadows formed black giants looming over the Kharagpur bungalows, Phyllis went into Edwina’s room and bolted the door. A lizard, on the round window, stared sideways. Phyllis cut long strips from her green bougainvillea dress, knotting them into a rope. She tied one end to the fifty-pound ceiling fan, made a noose around her neck, and kicked the cane-chair from under her.

A funeral mass was denied by the Bishop, who in his letter cited St. Paul, the Catechism, and ready-made solace. *You have been purchased and at a price. So glorify God in your body…We are stewards, not owners of the life of God…Our condolences go out to you at*

this moment...

The burial was attended by Basil and Abdul, the butcher, who was also Kharagpur's only gravedigger.

Basil didn't go back to work in the car-shed. He spent his days making long trips to the banyan tree with a tent, a bottle of toddy, and his rifle.

The ayah found him, one May afternoon, in the sty.

It was one of those summer days when the dust from the road never settled. The pariah dogs were dozing under the tamarind tree when the ayah's scream cut through the sleepy haze. They ran to the sound, past a honey vendor standing his ground on a bargain, and saw Basil Rosario lying face down in the muck.

They were three items near the body, arranged like a halo around his head. A half-empty bottle of toddy (soaking Naphthalene balls and slivers of arsenic soap); the tiger cub's glass eyes; and Judy's deflated skin, pink and fresh as if she were cut only yesterday.

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Nicholas Rixon is a writer and editor from Calcutta, India. He is a 2022 South Asia Speaks fellow, currently working on his debut novella.

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