

DICK BIRD

TGE

A NEW DISEASE, or a new name for an old one. Transmissible gastro-enteritis. Reported in *Pig Farming Magazine*, which I get sent out from England. TGE has lowered the quality of life on this farm. Taken all hope and joy out of birth. No more the happy event we looked forward to with not just emotional but commercial expectation. Pigs for profit: the more babies born today, the more for the butcher six months from now. That's how it should be. That's how it was. I must keep it in mind while staring down at corpses under my spade. Strewn all around in a shallow pit. Stiff little yellow paws in the air. Stuck together in clumps with mucus. Many never drew a breath, never saw the light of day.

The present time has become so awful, I dwell in the past, brooding on it, dreaming it over as if it were real. If I can believe in it hard enough, enough to move nature, can I bring it back?

Huckleberry bushes parted. A sow with bulging tits pushes through, a sprig of leaves clamped in her mouth, intense concentration pinching her eyes, looking for a spot to make her nest.

I've been looking for Nola since her name came up on the calendar, a reminder that she's due to farrow and hasn't been seen in the barn for two days, not to breakfast, supper nor sleep. So now with the Doberman at point I've tracked her through the woods.

"Nice try, Nola. Yeah, you've found a good spot. Now I'll take you to an even nicer one, with heat-lamp, straw and all night music—"

Her slitted eyes are glazed. She knows my voice but that's all. I'm just a nuisance, in her way. She snorts at me to bugger off and shoulders me aside. She's found what she wants right here:

fresh soil to dig her snout in, sweet leaves for the nest, soft breeze and chirping birds to calm her soul. I run back up the hill for wifey and a couple of trash-can lids. With her up front waving doughnuts and apples and me behind crashing can lids, we'll coax, cajole and drive this sow back to where in our opinion she belongs: the maternity wing of the barn, otherwise known as the farrowing pens.

But Nola doesn't come easy. Avoiding the barn at all costs, she blunders and crashes into bushes. Then stops to sniff, four hoofs dug in, her great head circling till it points back the way we came. Now having found her bearings she charges, trampling me like a huckleberry bush. So I have to get nasty, be cruel to be kind. I don't want her babies farrowed outside where I can't look after them. She may be the most fanatical mother in the world right now, but soon she'll forget, lose track of her piglets, and turning over crush them in the nest.

I've washed her down with antiseptic, left her bolted in the pen grinding up clean straw in her teeth. The radio tuned to all-night classics hung from a rafter. Her nipples squeezed for the tell-tale drop of honey-like colostrum. She'll farrow tonight, bang on schedule, sixteen weeks from the date of service. No mother could be more predictable than a sow.

I've told my kids their bedtime story, tucked them up in their sheets to the chin, told them I'll be down at the barn, they can come and see the babies in the morning.

Straw in her mouth, my hand on her belly, stringy Mozart throbs in her ears. She's chewed her apple spiked with aspirin, supped on a pan of warm beer. She's heard her lullaby, grunted approval of the same story I told my kids, had her tight hot udders rubbed. But she still looks right through me, through the walls—to the nest of leaves and twigs on the ground, where the feral winds of motherhood are blowing.

Shutting her eyes she quivers. Her mind shrinks to a tiny creature gripped in ancestral jaws. Her body lies quivering in the barn, but her mind drags heavily through the woods. Her belly's so tight, her legs stretched apart by sixteen bulging nipples oozing colostrum. She gulps and slobbers like the very mother of darkness.

She clamps her jaws and slides down the gullet. Down the tunnel her babies will slide, nosing their way through mucus, guided by her throbbing heart.

I sit on the guardrail with my feet between her paws. Holding her trembling hoof in my hand. No use singing lullabies, or telling her a story. She's gone where I can't follow, into the dark ancestral swamp.

Mozart's having posthumous fun, fiddling a minuet on his grave. I shake her paw to the counterpoint, pulling her towards me. I'm jealous, and a little afraid, of that mother of the woods. She'll steal my sows if they listen to her, if they stop hearing me. That's why I keep the music playing, to override the voices of the woods.

It's such a small corner of light in this barn. The barn so dark and puny in the woods. The music Mozart gave us to separate our souls from darkness reaches only as far as the walls. I smell the wind through open doors, see a couple of stars through the vent in the roof. It's cozy and safe under rafters lit by infrared, but I have to look outside and sniff the night.

There's really only one smell in the barn, a mix of sweaty milk and milky sweat of sows and babies: and an acrid spermy reek of boar from the far end. The aromas of lime, creosote and wheat straw are all mixed up and blended in the pigs' smell. Outside the wind is fresh off the sea six miles away. But I pick up scent, trace elements of land. Scent of leaves on all kinds of trees, syrupy sap sucked up from the ground, microbes and mushrooms and worms in the soil.

The sky's perforated with stars. As many stars, and as useless to count as leaves on the trees in the woods. As many as the names we lend our children. As tiny as the microbes in the blood. Inside the barn, two stars peeped through the vent in the roof. Out here, I can't tell which. They're all the same. Distance blurs the difference. Stars like leaves, like clusters of microbes in patterns, the names deriving from their shapes, *flagella*, *spirochetes*, *coliforma*.

There's a babble of suckling inside. Squealing babies, grunting sows. Happiness, increase, wealth. I duck through the door to stand and count. A dozen here, eight or nine over there. Careful, don't get cocky. Stay humble, give thanks. That it's a concrete floor you're standing on, not thin ice.

It all seems mythical, legendary now: under the lone star winking through the roof, not truly alone but falling from heaven, urgent, winking in code: multiply, thrive in my little light. Counting the litters of plump, thrifty babies, tugging their mama's nipples, rumps pulsating under red lamps' glow. Taut-legged sows with

ample udders, slobbering jaws spilling gobs of noise. Noise and pause where Mozart's woodwinds squeak merrily away. I can hear in my head the cashbox clatter, six months from now. More stars than I can count twinkle over my walk along the passage. I take the twinkle for a sign of approval. Because I've hit on a way of doing things right, as above, so below.

Nola didn't wait for me. She's turned to face the lamp, feel the heat on her tits. The first baby out gets up on his feet, jerks his head, blows his nose and heads under the rosy glow to latch on to a nipple. The second flops out limp and still. Still wrapped in its blood-stained caul, no sign of life. I open the gate and lean over Nola to peel the membrane off its head. The face is glazed and gummy. Holding it upside down by the feet I push a finger in its mouth and pull out strands of slime. Then my breath, slow and steady through its lips, forcing open the throat to fill the lungs.

Whenever this works I don't know whether it's my breath or the heavy blood piling up in the brain that does it. So what? As long as the baby lives it doesn't matter.

After the dead one others come gushing, impatient after the blockage. I watch but don't move to interfere. When the afterbirth clears and a dozen live ones are sucking, warming their backs in the infrared glow, I put the dead one in a bag, leave the farrowing barn to its music and creep up the hill to slide between sheets with a different smell.

"Nola's got a dozen nice ones," I murmur in wifey's ear. And falling asleep, pray to the mother in the woods there will still be twelve to show the kids tomorrow.

That's how it was. How I like to think it always was, and will be when this plague of TGE is over.

Back to reality: filling a packing box with slimy yellow stiffened corpses that were either born dead or died on their first day. Music plays but nobody listens. No vociferous grunting of sows, just a whimper of babies wasting away. The floors of pens with surviving babies sticky with white diarrhea. When the last has died I scrub cement with a strong solution of lye.

Will they recover, when the plague has run its course? The magazine said there wasn't a cure. The vet didn't think so either. It takes months to develop a vaccine. Meanwhile, the immune system has to know what enemy to fight. The only way to know it is to get it. *The survivors*, the vet said, *are immune for life. And their offspring inherit the immunity.* Survivors? I've buried hundreds in

the garden. How many survive? How can you say *survive*, when they're so wasted?

On the economic front we're facing a season of no income, six months from now. The future looks so bleak that I dwell in the past.

Such depressing days, tending sick sows and dying babies, lugging the dead up the hill to the garden. I just want to sleep, to dream of the good times gone. Getting up gets harder every morning.

The latest issue of *Pig Farming* arrives in the mail. TGE is spreading over England. Infected counties are quarantined. Farm trucks stopped on the road for fumigation. Bodies burned with gasoline and bulldozed. Banks withholding loans to swine producers. Researchers hope to have a serum available by the end of the year.

Interesting, says the vet. Thank God, in Canada we've never had anything like it. You're the only one, he says. No one else. Wrinkling his nose, he folds the journal flat in my hand. *I don't think it's a good idea to show this to people.*

Just wanting to sleep and numb with despair, my mind is wrapped in fog. I called the vet for his objective scientific opinion. Why is it not a good idea to show this to people?

His eyes are just as foggy as mine. *Who else around here reads this magazine? Who else has got TGE?*

He gets back into his van. Can't wait to get home and throw his clothes in the washer, his body in a shower, scrub his fingernails. For me, that's not the case. I have to stay dirty. I can't walk away. The plague has to run its course through the breeding herd.

He doesn't want his usual cup of tea. Just waves at wifey through the glass. *Who else around here reads this magazine?*

The pregnant sows getting near to farrow are penned where I can watch them. I watch their bulging bellies heave, see them vomit, hear them cough as they kneel down on cement and shiver. The fever starts a day or two before they farrow. Then I don't wait up at night to assist the birth. I just pick up the corpses in the morning.

I watch the sows due to farrow later for signs of hope. For one to show nesting behaviour without vomiting. Then I'll know the plague has run its course.

The weather is warming. I'm going to plant tomatoes over this trench. The roots will suck up nourishment from the corpses.

Patting down soil with the spade, I see them though they're buried a foot deep: jumbled, stiff and yellow, glazed with mucus. The pigs we should be feeding up and shipping to the butcher in six months. We will be eating tomatoes, if nothing else.

I used to joke: pigs are speeded-up human beings. At six months old, they're ready to breed. Their internal organs are exactly like ours, just develop faster. A single stomach, omnivorous diet. Same appetites, same taste in music. Same dreams, same curiosity, same pig-headedness. Already we're using their livers and kidneys for transplants. The heart will be next, then the brain. At the speed of today's research, it won't be long before we have a true symbiosis. I envision the time—not mine, perhaps my children's—when all differences between our species vanish.

I have to laugh, as the southern breeze picks up, blowing the putrefaction of my garden down the clean air of the Fraser Valley. Looking down from this ridge I call the Hogsback, I imagine all the healthy, innocent pigs frolicking gaily about down there among those woods and pastures, sniffing this wind with a strange foreign taste. A wind of death from overseas? Maybe the vet was right, I should cancel my subscription. All I wanted was his scientific opinion. This is the first disease I've heard of being spread by the printed word. They talk about the power of the press? Anyhow, whatever the truth, we've got enough troubles without importing more.

Pat down the earth with the spade. Rot in peace, in your yellow mucus. It's getting late, time to tell the kids a bedtime story. But I'll wash my hands with a strong lye soap before I tuck them in.