

## Emperor Among The Pigs

It was important to the emperor that he himself was fatter than his fattest pigs, and also that his fattest pigs were very fat. These two points of concern affected the emperor's dignity greatly, as he believed they were transparently reflective of the empire's greatness on the whole. To address these concerns the emperor took to eating with the pigs. That way their rations and his rations, while originally dissimilar in content, never accidentally weighed in favor of the pigs. Moreover, as the emperor was fatter than the pigs, the pigs did not receive an amount equal to the emperor's either, lest they possibly catch up to his girth and destroy the empire's delicate equilibrium.

In all these issues of distribution and consumption an equation was employed by which the emperor received proportionally more than the pigs in accordance with exactly how much more he weighed than the fattest pig in terms of percentage. That figure, calculated obediently and three times daily on six different counting machines by rotating teams of mathematicians, was first checked and revised among its numerous outcomes, and barring any discrepancies, in which case, just to be safe, the highest percentage of the six was always used, the figure was whispered by always a new peasant girl no older than seven years into the emperor's giant, gelatinous ear, where it sometimes reverberated loudly enough, despite all contradictory laws of imperial physics, to be heard ten large rooms away by ten poised imperial chefs, who immediately responded with a flurry of painstakingly fastidious ingredient measurements and perfect, wasteless chopping. Meanwhile, the emperor thanked the young girl with the ritual action of assigning her as wife to the prince of her choosing. If she picked the oldest prince, which happened less

often than might be expected owing to the unpredictable whimsy of children, the emperor starved the fattest pig during that meal as a gesture of supplication to mysterious, transcendent forces.

Of course, children's behavior is not only whimsical; it sometimes betrays adult expectations altogether, so that one peasant girl, after quietly informing the emperor of an inauspicious 13% heaviness margin over the fattest pig, replied very thoughtfully to his benevolent offer of marrying a prince that she wanted "that one," and pointed a slim index finger across the royal pig pen not at a prince, but at a deep golden water trough, studded with emeralds, where a solitary pig gulped long draughts of crystal clear water without raising its head. At first the emperor considered this anomaly an insolence on the part of the young girl, but the innocent expression on her face suggested otherwise. It moved the emperor for some reason, and that feeling was valuable to him that day, as if resonating with a deeper awareness that moving him, both literally and figuratively, was becoming less and less likely in these years of imperial grandeur and expansion. In response, he promptly granted the girl's wish and married her to her pig husband that evening among a wide assortment of sumptuous cakes, chocolates, and truffles, both confectionary and of the earth. At the ceremony, sprawling widely upon an elevated arrangement of thick embroidered silk pillows, the emperor announced to the repressed astonishment of the royal assembly that he not only supported the wedding as a sacrosanct union, but also commended the bride as the first of his subjects to recognize the pigs as the emperor's real sons, while his sons were merely pigs! At these closing words, the shocked princes, impotent of full verbal rebellion, could do nothing but grunt, strangely confirming their condemnation.

News travels slowly in kingdoms, but slander speeds the pace. Thus, the emperor's unexpected wedding speech reached peasant families throughout the kingdom before much time had gone by, and every girl selected to whisper the emperor's weight margin into his ear began one by one, after pronouncing a number, to select a pig for a husband instead of a prince, and soon the emperor became angry. At first he laughed, sometimes riotously, at the apparent confirmation of his terrible words against his sons, touting the wisdom of children to see things as they were, and forecasting a brilliant future for the kingdom, where the youngest generation was suddenly more perceptive than its predecessors. He even boasted about this development as a function of his favorable reign. But this satisfied period ended, replaced rather abruptly with the difficult reality of pigs with countless young wives, all of whom crowded the sanctuary of the royal pig pen at meal times and other times also, coddling and praising their husbands, and loading them with food, which quickly became the sort fit more for humans than pigs, and therefore highly caloric and addictive and conducive to faster weight gain. The emperor watched these developments as if seeing time accelerate to a run. At the suggestion of his teams of mathematicians, he arranged a seventh team to work exclusively towards an algorithm for the rate of change created by three additional pig wives per day, one at each meal, and was flabbergasted to hear back that even two more pig wives per day created an exponential increase in the frenzy of attention the pigs received, so that even a thinner pig's weight, given the ways things were going, would exceed the emperor's by a factor of twenty in a matter of weeks.

At this news, the emperor stopped eating entirely, catapulting the jeopardy along a steep parabolic rise. As he sat in his chambers, distracted by the muffled groans within

him of his unattended stomach and possibly also his heart, he lapsed into deep moments of sadness that had many sources. To begin with, he knew that the kingdom was in trouble and that somehow its balance was going to have to shift or else be lost altogether. The emperor was loath to admit it, but he could not ultimately eat as much as his pigs. What confused him most about this limitation was not that it took a long time to surface after seeming not to exist, but rather that it came to his attention with such curious timing: at precisely the moment when he revealed his love for his pigs and saw love enter their lives as a consequence. Those correspondences could not be total coincidence, and the emperor seemed to know it, as one often knows best that something important is occurring precisely because one has lived without its occurrence all one's life. In this way a shadowy paradox of prior deprivation set the emperor to rights, and he saw that loving his pigs was his paramount concern and always had been. He imagined the imminent outcome of his ambition to weigh more than his pigs, and saw how their lives were at stake as they ate beyond their mortal abilities. Yet they continued to do so, and with no sign of relenting. This last fact stirred the emperor most, for he saw it as a subtle form of devotion, as the only thing the pigs could do, their own lives in the balance, to make possible for the emperor that he finally see himself. At this first enormous glimpse, the emperor was overcome with emotion, and sinking his many chins onto his rotund mountainous chest, he slowly and silently cried a river of appreciative tears.

As the emperor's sadness lifted, a firm resolution took its place, and he stood up by his own power for the first time in weeks and trudged purposefully to the royal pigpen. There, the children stroked and spoiled their pigs, but relented their attention when the emperor arrived, as if aware of a difference in his demeanor. The emperor did

not know what to say, except that somehow he was sorry, not for any one action in particular, but rather for the transcendent sum of these actions, which resulted in everyone's mistreatment, including the children's. This idea was sophisticated, and the emperor understood that expressing it in words was not exactly his desire at the time. Instead, he longed to capture the truth of the sentiment in an action of some sort, but he could not say which. As he looked around the pen, he became uncomfortable for a moment that everyone's eyes were upon him. He scratched the side of his arm, and revulsion arose within him that he was in fact hideously obese. It was his first real connection to his new body image since multiplying his diet.

Other firsts for the emperor on that momentous afternoon included his perseverance through a wide range of internal experiences that heretofore in his reign would have enraged or unnerved him. In particular, he somehow mastered the terrible dread rising in his soul that standing before the children and attendants as a fat mute, he was not so much imposing as ridiculous to behold. In fact, he *was* ridiculous to behold, and once he admitted this aspect of his appearance, it no longer owned him, but blossomed into a smile, as did the recognition of how preposterous it was for an emperor to consider his pigs as his children and his children as pigs. Nevertheless, he did feel that way, and there was no way around it. No one could talk the emperor out of that attitude, because it was sincere. It needed a different reception entirely.

Thus the emperor, catching sight of the first young girl to marry a pig, motioned to her gently that she come stand beside him, and upon her approach, squatted down so that eventually, by the girl's arrival, he was reclining on the dirt floor of the pen with his dwarfed limbs projecting feebly from his body like flippers. The peasant girl stood

beside him with a pleasant expression on her face, looking deeply into his eyes, as if expectant of something.

"Sit on the emperor," the emperor cheerfully instructed the girl, and she hopped onto his reclined body without the slightest hesitation. "I must not harm these dear pigs," the emperor continued once the girl was comfortable, "and I don't know what to do to prevent their harm. That's not something an emperor often admits," concluded the emperor, "that he doesn't know what to do."

"Then you're not an emperor," said the girl very innocently.

"And that's not something an emperor often hears," said the emperor, tickling the girl beneath the chin. "Yet it pleases me to hear it. It pleases me immensely—more than I ever dreamed possible. I am no more an emperor than you or any of these children are proper wives for pigs!"

"We're princesses," the girl corrected him with a thick lisp.

"Yes, you are," conceded the emperor, "and I will see to it you stay that way as my last official business before relinquishing the throne." At this surprising disclosure the room split cleanly into a pair of competing reactions: the adults present gasped at what they perceived to be an unmerited abandonment of them in a time of mounting crisis; the children applauded, and so thunderously and fast that the emperor suspected them of knowing his intentions before he stated them or knew them himself. This suspicion sat well with the emperor, however, and he soon understood it as a tacit confirmation he was doing the right thing. Happy at that knowledge, he squeezed the first young pig bride to his body and kissed her with great affection, as the pigs often kissed in appreciation of their excellent conditions. As promised, he later arranged for

all the girls to receive unlimited royal support throughout their lives for whatever they needed. That final business conducted, the emperor apologized to his human sons, especially the new emperor, and announced his modest plan to relocate the pigs to more appropriate surroundings, where he lived out his remaining years as their devoted caretaker and friend.