



# THE SWINES

Anecdotes Of A Piggly Family



HM SO



Sam is a twelve-year-old boy from a family of pigs. His mom is a prize sow, a British Lop of very high breeding. His dad is a warthog, the pedigree, no one is quite sure. Sam's parents are swine, but he's perfectly *normal*.

Sam and his family live in a medium sized town called Suidae Valley somewhere in the middle of California between Porterville and Salinas. His mom enjoys gardening and mud baths. His dad is a booming, retired plumber. He's a little rough around the edges. The family is piggly, but they fit right in with everyone in town, who call themselves *Suids*.

Told in first person, episodic format, Sam is a precocious kid with a talent for imagination, observation, and occasionally, even curious profundity. The narrative is eccentric, novel, and original, ranging from the orthodox to stream of consciousness and reverse chronology.

*The Swines – Anecdotes Of A Piggly Family*, is at times thoughtful, at times absurd, but most of the time compelling, as the author takes readers on a journey into an unconventional world at the intersection of humans, pigs, and boy.

**"Irreverent, precocious, and self-mocking, the Swines are compelling, and Suidae Valley's native son sparkles with humor." — *Suidae Valley Times***

**"Cheeky, original, and witty. Wickedly fun!" — *Bacon Daily News***

**"Written in the first person, twelve-year-old Sam dazzles with inquisitive observations and keen philosophical meanderings sure to delight adults and precocious kids of every age. A page-turner." — *Porcine Book Review***

**"Satirical, ludicrous and bold. Animal Farm meets Aesop's Fables. An incisive lesson in every chapter." — *Weekly Porker***

**"Eclectic, eccentric, and original. Fast-paced. Absurd. Whimsical."  
— *Suidae Gazette***

**"A smorgasbord of subjects, from Law of Attraction to North Korea. A topical tour de force!" — *Suidae Globe***

**"A crossover novel that will appeal to everyone regardless of age, sex, background or genus." — *Bovine Society***

**"Politically incorrect. Genius!" — *Young Hogs***

Inkonpages Press

<https://hms0.inkonpages.com>





# THE SWINES

ANECDOTES OF A PIGGLY FAMILY

A Novel

H. M. So

The characters and events in this book are  
fictitious. Any similarity to real persons,  
living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2018 by H. M. So | Inkonpages Press

All rights reserved  
December 2018

If you would like to use material from this book  
(other than for review purposes), please contact  
the publisher at: [media@inkonpages.com](mailto:media@inkonpages.com).

Website: <https://hmso.inkonpages.com>  
Email: [hmso@inkonpages.com](mailto:hmso@inkonpages.com)

**ISBN-10: 1791708676**  
**ISBN-13: 978-1791708672**



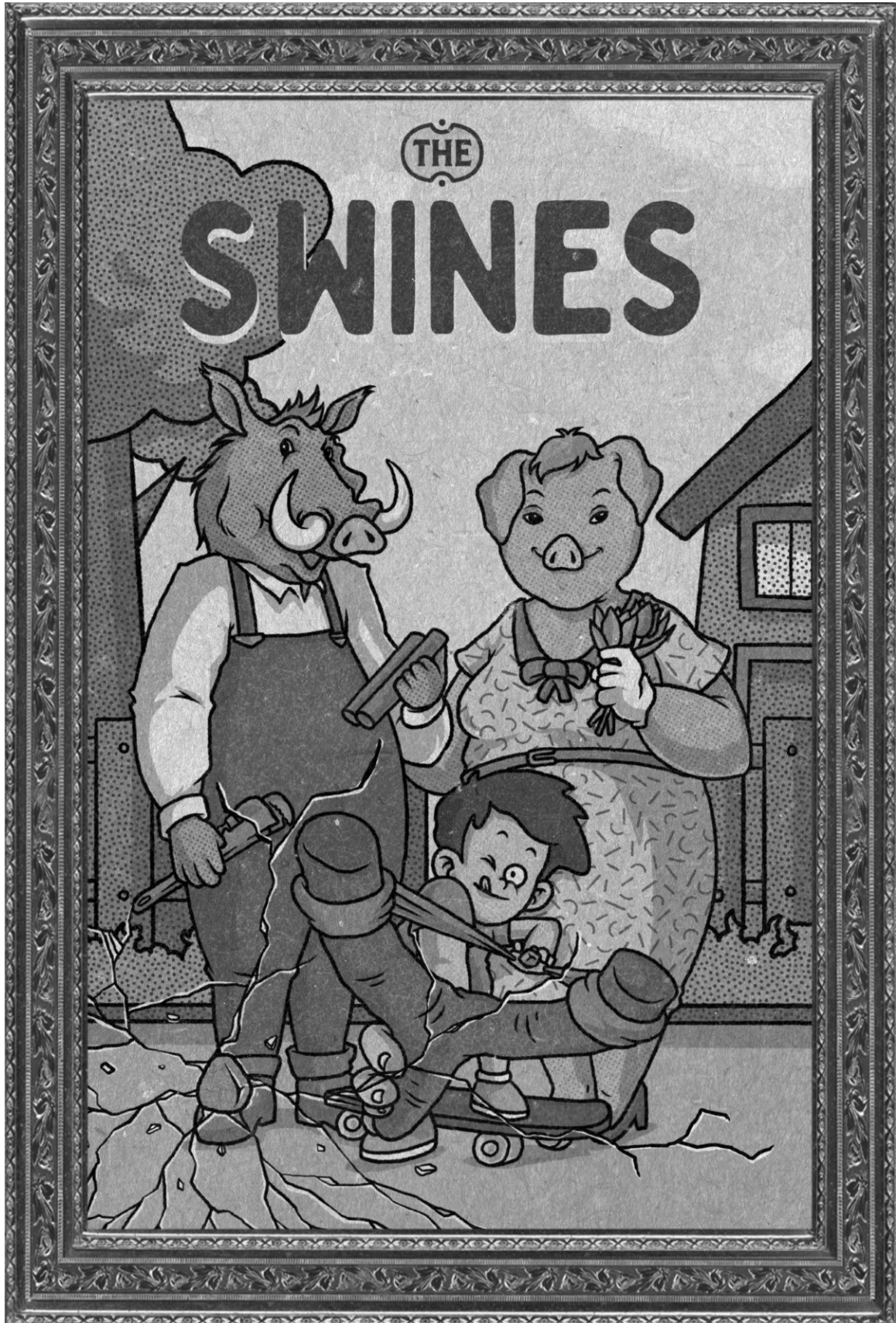
“When you stop and think about what you are,  
it’s like trying to catch a flowing stream.”

# CONTENTS

	Portrait Of A Family	vii
1	Meet The Swines	1
2	Vegetable Assignment	5
3	Openers & Closers	13
4	Spiderboy	20
5	Green Cows & Lottery Tickets	
6	Pig Sty	
7	The Irascible Neighbor	
8	Street Fighter	
9	Mommy Pork Chops	
10	Fair Weather Friend	
11	The Law Of Attraction	
12	The Bicycle Ride	
13	Bad Hair Day	
	About the Author	24



# PORTRAIT OF A FAMILY



# The Swines



## MEET THE SWINES

*"If you need a dictionary, you're trying too hard."*

### ANECDOTES OF A PIGGLY FAMILY

I come from a family of pigs. My mom is a British Lop, of which she is quite proud. Though only of piggly stock, she's British through and through with the same concomitant air of imperial pride known only among the English. Her great-great-great-great-grandmother was once the main course for the queen herself. To this day her side of the family in Cornwall speak of it with intumescent pride and hoity-toity superiority. The local British papers reported the pork was the finest to be ever served the royal family. "Soft, moist and delicious white and dark meat," it said. "And glazed with a fusion of honey, brown sugar, cumin, basil, and secret royal herbs." Personally, I don't care much for British royalty. I just wish my mom showered and cleaned the house like the rest of the hoi polloi.

"Do you think I smell funny?" she sometimes asks.

It's hard to tell your mom that she smells like a *pig* and not in a good way.

"Of course I smell like a pig! I am a pig!" she



declares.

Hearts are frangible.

My father is a warthog, the pedigree, I'm not quite sure. I think his family originally comes from the sweltering plains of the African savannas. I don't think he knows either or really cares. He's a bit rough around the edges. He's a boar through and through, and boorish from hoof to tusk, my mom says, when she's not in the nicest mood. He can be a philistine.

His mornings start with guttural noises and proceeds through the day with various kinds of somatic disturbances no child should learn about until he gets married. He grunts in the hallway just outside my room, coughs up phlegm, and drools like a busted faucet. And when he's not quite the center of attention he thinks he ought to be, he howls like a batshoot crazy hog. When I complain about the noise, Mom always comes to his support. She's his number one excuse attorney.

"He's not yelling. He's just loud," she asserts in his defense. "That's his normal voice. He's always a few decibels too high. *You know that.*"

My parents get into arguments sometimes about some silly thing or another. They're never too bad but voices are raised, snorts turn to hollering, and neighbors sometimes peek through the windows. My hirsute father has tusks that could split open an elephant (he claims) but his booms are generally louder than his bite. He says his grandfather once impaled a lion. My mom's snout is pretty formidable as well. You don't want her breathing down your neck. The viscous liquid that dribbles from her nostrils can suffocate a large fish.

Me? I'm Sam. And I'm twelve. I started middle school and I'm a straight A student. Or at least I used to be. Middle school is a new adventure and I'm not quite sure how I'll do. I've heard anecdotes of kids going from hero to

sub-zero because they couldn't handle teachers and prepubescent peer pressure. I have a few friends, but girls give me the heebie-jeebies. My mom and dad also don't make the best first impressions at PTA and parent-to-parent back slapping shindigs. My friends tell me that I'm so different from my parents. But I'm not adopted. Really. My family is swine but I'm perfectly normal.

\* \* \*

My favorite subjects are math, history, and English. I think math is important because it impels the mind to the logical. "There are no wishy washy, opinionated answers to math problems," Mr. McCoy, my teacher, says. You're either right or wrong and he'll be the final arbiter of that, he proclaims.

History, on the other hand, is arguably a lot more subjective. Dates may be factual but exactly what happened on that day is another story. According to Mr. Johnson, "history is the opinion of historians, professors, and nerds who spend a lot of time at the library." But in the end, it's just a point of view. Or as Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "history is full of lies people agree on to believe."

Of course, history isn't always so dubious. According to the Eastern sage, Confucius, the best way to "determine the future is to learn from the past." But which lessons are we meant to learn? If only we were smart enough to know. Or is the past meant to be retold differently every time in service of the present? That seems so cynical!

Maybe English, like all languages, is a bridge between make believe and truth. It helps communicate what we think and feel. It may be

true or not true in the opinion of some, but if you're honest with yourself, then it's at least true for you at this moment. Unfortunately, my English teacher is a shrew named Ms. Fearstein and everything I say seems to be untrue for her. I once brought her an apple and she hit me on the head with it.

"What did you do that for?" I cried.

"Sorry, kiddo. I thought it was a tennis ball," she answered without remorse. "Now, take a seat before I serve you another one."

On the classroom wall there are posters of Shakespeare's famous plays. The English poet wrote about comedy, tragedy and tragicomedy.

I think she hates me.

\* \* \*

My best friends are Danny and Scott. We're almost two months into the new school year and except for assault and battery by the not-to-be-named English teacher, things are going pretty well. It's nice to have friends in a sea of anxious prepubescent teens. A kid could get swallowed up in the ocean.

I've known Danny since the second grade. And Scott was the new boy in school in the fourth. He lives in a white house on the other side of town. His Dad is a dentist. Danny lives down the street in a beige condominium. His father works for a delivery company. According to kid years, we've been friends a long time. Of course, to adults, it's just a handful of seasons. A blip in the calendar. My mom has underpants older than all of our ages combined.

I hope middle school will be fun. Maybe there's a naive anticipation for something that's unrealistic. But so far, so good. We have our own personal lockers, and change classes after

each period. Kids crowd into the halls like morning subway commuters except there are no trains and we have nowhere to go except down the hall. From a vertical distance we must resemble lost ants trudging back and forth.

\* \* \*

My parents are blue collar folks who speak plainly. Dad says, if you need a dictionary, you're trying too hard. My mom likes literature in theory, but she says it makes her drowsy. She thinks it might be allergies.

According to his calculations, Dad says we're middle class. That means our family makes an yearly income that's about average, although I'm guessing average, like history, can be very subjective while pretending to convey a precision closer to math. My friend, Scott, says his family is average, but they live in a large six bedroom house with a pool, own four motorcycles, a boat, three cars, and travel to Europe every summer. We have one car and vacation by driving endlessly on barren, dirt roads. Extended arms out open windows imitating the flight of wings count as entertainment.

My dad used to be a plumber and ran his own small business. He's semi-retired now and gets work occasionally from previous customers. He charges half rate and receives payments in cash. My dad doesn't believe in cryptocurrencies or credit cards. He believes in precious metals, cold green cash, and grain storage silos. We have a mini grain silo in the backyard next to the buried gold bars and dried meats.

Mom is retired, too, but keeps herself busy in the garden. She used to be a florist and had a small shop she rented from Mr. Sosa, an old



man originally from Brazil. “We love our barbecue in Brazil,” he used to say, licking his lips and firmly but gently pulling her thick hands toward his mouth. He said his favorite Brazilian BBQ was Costela de Porco Assada. My mother thought he was a little too friendly and strange, but he was a nice man and gave her a good deal on the rent until he passed away. When the new owner brought it up to market rates, she retired.

My dad bought our three bedroom house in Suidae Valley about eleven years ago when I was a baby. Suidae Valley had a nice ring to it, Mom said, and they decided to make their home here. It’s a medium sized town somewhere in the middle of California between Porterville and Salinas. We have cows, horses, and other livestock in the area. But we might be the only pigs. Dad added an extra room downstairs a few years ago to make into a play pen for Mom. It’s literally a pig pen now.

We fit right in with everyone here. *Suids* are nice, friendly people. The town mascot is a *Chester White*, but Mom says *Lops* are more tender cuts of meat and better mannered.

Sometimes they ask us where we’re from. Mom proudly tells them she’s from Cornwall, England. Dad grunts and says his ancestors fought in the Civil War—for the right side. I assume he means the Union? I don’t know if that’s true but it’s quite a pedigree for a sub-Saharan wild African boar. I think we have relatives back in Texas.

Dad moved out to California when he was younger and dreamed of settling the West. He thought Los Angeles was too show business and San Francisco was overrun with vegan hippies. So he chose a quiet town in between where he could avoid the paparazzi and enjoy red, juicy steak. Mom says she wouldn’t mind being a movie star or joining a commune. She thinks she

has a face for television and the perfect body for manual labor. She claims she can outwork a horse. Dad’s not sure if she can work harder than a horse, but she can eat as much.

\* \* \*

I haven’t decided what I want to be when I grow up. When you’re a kid, everything seems possible. I took a month of piano lessons and people said I was a musician. I wrote a short story in the sixth grade that won a second place blue ribbon for best fiction and I was celebrated as an up and coming writer by the contest organizers. After a month of Spanish lessons the teacher said we were bilingual. But all I could say was “si,” “que?” and “como te llamas?” It seems a kid could qualify to be almost anything with a little effort.

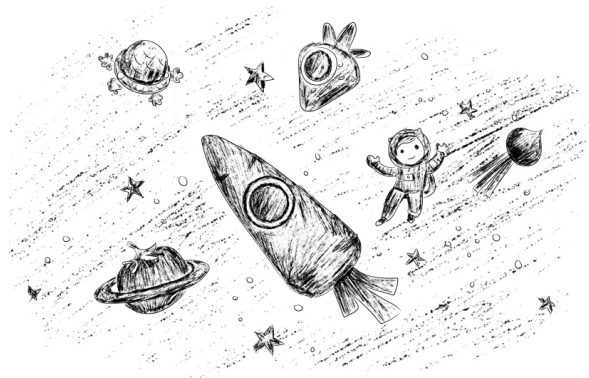
But adulthood is different. You can’t pass yourself off as a pianist because you play a few bars of chopsticks. Genuine expertise requires a lot of time and skill, which means ten thousand hours of practice according to conventional wisdom. Ten thousand hours of practice is more than a year without sleep and food or ten years practicing three hours a day. My dad says it took him many years to go from apprentice to master plumber. He says it’s a lot harder than it looks. It’s not just throwing Liquid Draymo down pipes and collecting forty bucks. Sometimes you have to stick your head under the sink and get water splashed on your face. That means dedication and commitment to a craft. I’m just not sure what that is yet. A year is a long time for a kid to go without sleep and food.

Mr. McCoy thinks I have a binary future in mathematics. It could go positively. Or negatively. The unknown variable is whether I

can ace next week's algebra exam on polynomial functions. Mr. Johnson says my preternatural talent for dates, narrative, and revisionist interpretation bends the arc of history toward justice. Or maybe fiction. My answers to yesterday's pop quiz on Columbus are sure to offend everyone on all sides of the historical debate. But Ms. Fearstein says I should give up now. No point in the pretension that I have any future at all. She says that as a student, I'm not half bad, but that doesn't mean the other half is any good.

I think a kid should be allowed to be a kid without so many adult hands trying to shape it. We're flesh, blood, and sticky sweat, after all, not modeling clay. Except, there's an interregnum between childhood and adulthood that can really throw things for a loop if it goes off the rails, Mom says. I'm entering that phase now and have to be careful. The age between twelve and twenty-one are the most unpredictable and treacherous. But Dad says I should do what I want. Have fun! Let the devil take tomorrow.

## 2



## VEGETABLE ASSIGNMENT

*"The idea of vegetables agitated him  
like sticky rice in his pants."*

Friday morning began with the usual early raucous of sounds, noises, grunts, and somatic explosions. Coughs and the cacophony of phlegm from Dad and a loud random *yaaawwwaaahhhh!* just because.

From the kitchen emerged the rackety sounds of clacking dishes, utensils, pots (*bang!*), and mixers (*vroooooom!*). Though she seemed extremely busy, what Mom was exactly doing, no one really knew for sure.

Then there was the dissonant reminder from the alarm clock that signaled the conclusion of my dreams and the commencement of another school day. While not quite a nightmare and gulag for children, school isn't something one chooses to get up for on a cold morning day in lieu of a warm, soft bed, especially in the middle of something important. No one likes being interrupted during a fierce battle with zombies in the grisly bosom of the Apocalypse. "I'll be back tonight after school and homework!" I



promise the undead. I don't want to miss the end of the world.

I went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, and washed my face. I put on old pants I hadn't worn yesterday and then noticed crumpled paper in my back pocket. I opened it up: SCHOOL ASSIGNMENT — VEGETABLES. I had forgotten. I was supposed to give it to Mom.

We're learning about vegetables at school but I didn't think my parents would be too keen on it. It doesn't resemble even remotely what we eat +at home, which are mostly slaughtered bovine carcasses and poultry. And starches like potatoes and rice.

Mom was a *binivore*. Strictly starches and meats. Dad, on the other hand, was somewhat more selective with his diet: meats only. Only meats. Just meats. Red blooded meats. Nothing but meats. If it wasn't slain, it's not edible, was his credo. Of course, pigs are supposed to eat everything, but we weren't ordinary pigs.

"What's all this about vegetables?!" Dad bellowed.

He was in a particularly foul mood today and the idea of vegetables agitated him like sticky rice in his pants. He did not approve and his booming orifice was ejecting slobber rockets like B-52 bombers.

"Is this America or some third world country that we have to eat barks and leaves?!" he growled, drooling and driveling, forcing me to take cover on the other side of the room. It was like napalm in the morning except the smell was worse.

"Don't mind Dad," Mom said. "He hasn't been able to poop in seventeen days. He's very backed up. I love veggies. Plantains, sweet potatoes and raviolis . . ."

"That's all commie and hippie food!" Dad hollered with more spittles of yellow phlegm.

"And don't talk about my poop! That's personal."

"No, Mom. Potatoes aren't really vegetables," I tried to explain. I was like a desperate Vietnamese villager dodging aerial bombs. "That's a starch. And plantains and raviolis too."

"Starch is in the laundry room," Mom countered.

"No, no . . . a starch is a carbohydron," Dad thundered, dropping more saliva napalm. "It's what they ate during the war. Along with grass. There ain't no dang war! I'm a red-blooded hog. I need my proteins or I get allergies. *Acchhhooooooooo!*"

Dad's allergies were acting up again along with a bevy of other ailments. Sometimes it gets so bad he calls the ambulance and goes to the hospital emergency room. He thinks it's some kind of first class medical service for VIPs because he doesn't have to queue for three hours like others in the waiting area.

"Well, here are some recipes from Sam's teacher, Ms. Jones. Maybe we should give it a try?" Mom said. "Let's see here . . . BROCCOLI. The instructions say to STEAM FOR TWENTY MINUTES. SALT. BUTTER. OLIVE OIL. Sounds easy."

"Good grief! Ms. Jones can steam me some steak! You can steam whatever you want, including broccocrap." Dad was heaving now. Allergies, backed up plumbing, and unwelcome jungle vegetation were aggravating his emotional ecosystem.

"Sit on the toilet, dear. Maybe you'll feel better," Mom exhorted.

"I'm sitting on the sofa and watching the game!" Dad barked. "Poop will come out when it's ready to come out! If it takes another year, fine. It's not something I'm waiting around for. There's no hurry."

In between bites of my cereal, I wondered how I was going to escape my assignment and the rhetorical fusillade disturbing my own personal homeostasis. My emotional ecosystem was being tested, too, and it wouldn't take much to turn over a twelve-year-old's sensitive equilibrium.

"You're upset because you're constipated."

"Your nagging is constipating!"

Thankfully, the school bus had arrived and demanded my attention. The din of the blaring horn exceeded the ruckus of two squabbling middle-aged parents in the middle of matrimonial bliss. But the bus would mean being greeted to another kind of bedlam.

"Off to school!" I yelled, grabbing my backpack. I waved goodbye and ran out the house like an escaping refugee.

"Have a good day at school, Sam!" Mom shouted.

Inside the belly of the yellow tin can, I was ambushed by another melee. Crumpled papers showered down like miniature asteroids. Erasers bounced off the ceiling like ricocheting bullets. Wet projectiles resembling tiny cannon balls ejected from hollow tubes—formerly writing instruments—splattered on vinyl seats and startled fresh-faced victims.

And I was almost blinded by a paper plane that hit me straight between the eyes. *That should be illegal!* But I was too tired to join the mayhem. I was an escapee looking for asylum.

\* \* \*

In health class, lessons on vegetables continued. Ms. Jones distributed graphs, fact sheets, and factoids. She entertained us with slide presentations and short video clips. Who

knew that spinach originated in Persia and really did make you strong like Popeye? Well, almost.

"Scientific studies have shown that vegetables are essential for good health," Ms. Jones told the class. "Veggies contain important minerals, amino acids, micronutrients, and phytonutrients."

Our teacher was a slim thirty-something and adhered to a strictly vegan diet. She was popular with the male faculty at school but with women it was a more complicated relation. Maybe she was too skinny for her own good? Ms. Jones was an avid yoga practitioner and taught classes three times a week.

"Vegetables also help you avoid upset stomach, keep you regular, and are more gentle to the land and ecosystem," she said.

In fact, we learned that more people could be fed if we reduced our proportional intake of animal products and replaced it with plant based foods. Plants are good for ourselves and the environment.

"Fewer people in hospital beds mean more active people jogging in the park, exercising and doing yoga," she added.

Some of the biggest and most powerful animals in the world, like elephants, rhinos and gorillas, are also plant eaters. Notwithstanding what Dad says, energy and strength doesn't just come from steak. Carbs, essential for endurance, and proteins, the building blocks of muscles, are abundant in plant based foods.

\* \* \*

When I came home from school, I was pooped. Our PE teacher made us run a whole mile. I was feeling bushed. Hungry. And despondent about my assignment. How will I

make some vegetables? Dad was ideologically against it like a *#NeverVeggie* activist. And Mom hadn't a clue about anything green. She only knew white and brown, which she consumed like a pig. She stopped growing vertically a long time ago but her ankles resembled tree trunks.

When dinner was ready I rushed down like a famished beast propelling my homework papers flying into the air. I was probably the fastest runner in school. Some students and teachers speculated I had animal genes.

Dad sat at the front of the table with a big slab of steak. "*Ahooooo!*" he yelled, signaling his readiness to devour it.

"Yikes! You scared the living daylights out of me," Mom complained, busily getting the rest of the food served. "How many times do I have to ask you not to yell?"

"I'm just expressing myself! I'm being a *natural* warthog. That's what we do! We *HOOOLLLLLLERRRRR!*"

I asked for vegetables but it was steak and rice for me, too, with a little side of garnish. Parsley growing wild in the garden seemed to be the best Mom could muster up.

Mom resigned herself to yesterday's leftovers. Some old chicken. And potatoes to clean it down. Someone had to finish off the old chow. Mom didn't like things going to waste. It would be very un-porcine of her.

"How's the assignment going?" Mom asked.

"Nowhere. DOA. Dead on arrival. I need to have some vegetables and learn what green stuff feels like in my mouth. You know, like food."

"There's some parsley on your plate. Chew on that."

"That's not enough, Mom! I need a plate of real, big vegetables. All kinds of vegetables."

"Rice is a vegetable."

"Not really. It's a starch."

"Are you sure? I always thought rice was a

veggie."

"No . . ."

"For sure potatoes are veggies. Here, have some of mine."

"No, Mom! Potatoes are also a starch."

Nonstop talk about green food was giving Dad upset stomach. He was feeling queasy. He was up to his hairy ears with vegetables. It was fouling his mood and spoiling his medium rare, juicy steak dinner.

"Stop, stop!" he shouted. "Honey, why don't you take Sam to the supermarket and get him some of that broccolat. But if you get sick, Sam, it's not our fault!"

"Sick? Why would I get sick?" I demanded. "You can't get sick with vegetables. Ms. Jones says it's good for you."

"I've seen it happen! A friend of mine ate a bucket of coleslop and got sick. Don't think it can't happen. You don't know what's in that green stuff. It could be slime or puke!"

Unexpectedly, Dad's stomach began to suddenly cramp. He's been stuffing his face all day but nothing was coming out the exit.

"*Uggghhh* . . . my stomach," Dad moaned, clutching his over-sized midsection. "I really need to *poooo* . . ."

"Oh, dear," Mom muttered.

\* \* \*

The drive to the supermarket was uneventful except Mom was the slowest poke on the poky road.

"Mom, you're going too slow. Go faster. Everyone is passing us!" I whined like a nine-year-old.

"Now, now . . . you make me nervous when you shout," Mom said timidly, clutching the

steering wheel. “Passengers are not supposed to disturb the driver. It’s against the criminal law of this country.”

Mom was not confident behind the wheel but she was never involved in an accident or ever got a ticket in her thirty years of driving. Dad, on the other hand, was the most confident driver in the galaxy but his collection of moving vehicle citations could fill up moon craters.

I continued to whine and complain as car after car zipped past us. For a second I even thought I saw a classmate and tried to hide. The supermarket was probably no more than six miles away but it might take half an hour to get there. *Do the math!*

\* \* \*

I had never spent much time in the grocery section of the supermarket. Our family was primarily an aisle and back shopper—boxed goods, canned goods, cereals, and meats.

The variety of natural colors from all kinds of fruits and vegetables was a novel experience. And for Mom too. But she poked and pinched like she was some kind of picky pro with exacting standards when actually she hadn’t a clue. Potatoes she knew, but kale was a different kind of animal. No mass and body to it. Leaves? What do you do with that? Nibble?

She recalled the old days when her family used to chow down on pretty much everything, including green, red, yellow, orange, and purple vegetables, roots, and fruits. Cruciferous vegetables. Spinach. Swiss chard. Savoy cabbage. Celery. Basil leaves. But that was a long time ago when she was a little piglet in Cornwall.

I wanted to try them all. The funny looking things called artichokes. The red, squishy things

called tomatoes. The pungent, white bulbs called garlic. Mom recoiled with confusion. She knew garlic bread. But just plain bulbs of garlic were something new.

Mom and I together carried a basket of all kinds of leafy greens and fruits to the checkout counter.

“My, my . . . are we having a big family get together?” the clerk asked. She was plump with a maternal silhouette.

“Ummmm, no. Just food . . . for dinner,” Mom said haltingly.

“You guys eat really healthy! Good for you!”

“Oh, yes. We always try to eat the best,” Mom said, lying shamelessly through her snout. She was at least seventy pounds overweight, even for a pig. She says she can’t help it she has thick ankles.

“Mom, what do you mean?!” I asked, very confused.

“Hush!” she interrupted.

“But this is our first—” I was whisked away before I could finish elaborating.

“I have a school project! We normally never eat like this!—” I shouted outside the entrance like a boy being taken hostage.

\* \* \*

About thirty minutes later, Mom and I arrived back home.

“What took you so long?!” Dad shouted between belches. He hadn’t pooped yet and his body felt like an overfilled septic tank.

“Mom drives slow!” I said, stating the obvious. Redolence from Dad’s internal plumbing was starting to overtake the room.

“Oh, we were shopping. It takes time when you’re shopping for more than boneless rib-eye,”



Mom explained. She tried opening some windows to break up the strong incense. No use.

Anxious about the project, I wondered how the other kids were getting along. Did they have a big veggie meal planned like me? I wanted to go upstairs for fresh oxygen and get in touch with my classmates.

"I'll clean the veggies and cook up something tomorrow!" Mom shouted as she spotted me running up to my room.

"Thanks Mom!" I yelled.

Minutes later, the responses I got from my classmates were a little puzzling. It seemed no one was doing anything special at all.

*"Having roast with cesar salad. Soft karots potatose. Mum also got bock choy,"* posted Mason on Snapshaft.

*"Were going to soup nation and have all you can eat buffet. Will try some veggies for the report. They have delish ice cream!"* wrote Asha on her Facebark page.

*"Nothing special. Spageti. Tomatoes. Spinich. brocolini. Same junk!"* tweezed Tim on Twizzer.

Aside from a few marginal additions to the menu, it was just the same old for most children. No one seemed to be unfamiliar with plant foods except me. *That stinks!* I thought. It didn't seem fair.

\* \* \*

The next morning I found a kitchen full of greens, reds, oranges, and yellows.

*"AAAhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"* Dad roared randomly.

My eyes feasted on the colors while my brain tried to interpret its meaning.

"What is all this in the kitchen? Are we turning into a giant stinkin' forest? It's smelling

up the house!" he belched.

"I can't wait to eat!" I exulted.

Genetics is weird. Sometimes I wonder how I could be related. My science teacher, Mrs. Porter, says chromosomal recombination can have unexpected results. For instance, Dad has tusks. I have pink, rosy cheeks. He's rough and shaggy. I'm soft and hairless. He's all boar. The school nurse says I'm perfectly boy—and cute. He hates veggies. I can't wait to try them. Maybe Mom . . . ? Perish the thought!

"Calm down! It's just for a day or two," Mom said.

Mom used some of the recipes from my teacher but looked up a few more from the internet as well. She started to remember some of the dishes she had as an infant. She prepared tomato sauce. Salad with Italian dressing. Spinach pot pie. Steamed carrots and broccoli. Fried rice with pineapples.

Mom was a relatively bad cook but somehow she managed to whip up all kinds of dishes. But its authenticity was a different matter. None of us knew what it was supposed to taste like because recipe books don't come with flavor and smell. No one could tell whether she did a poor job or the dish was just bad from the start, confirming Dad's suspicions that *"if it ain't meat, it ain't fit to eat!"*

\* \* \*

At dinner Dad was still in his usual foul, truculent mood.

"Gang dangit . . . *Gggggoooooooooddd!*" he yelled.

His personal septic tank was becoming more and more uncomfortable.

"Achooooo!

Achoooooo!

*ACHHOOOOOOOOOO!*" His allergies were starting up again too.

A dinner of mostly vegetables was served for the first time in the Swine household and Dad was not very happy. There was some meats on the table, but it was paltry compared to what he was used to. Certainly, not enough to satisfy a full grown, four hundred pound warthog.

“It’s just this one time, honey. Try some pumpkin and spinach. And sautéed cauliflower in sweet and sour sauce,” Mom implored.

“Ahhh . . . alright. But you’re to blame if I get sick!”

“You’re not going to get sick, dear.”

“I told you about my friend. He almost died from a bucket of coleslop.”

I came down from my room and was amazed by the cornucopia of colors and vegetables of all kinds. While I didn't have the stomach size to eat it all, I wanted to have a taste of everything.

The broccoli was ticklish against the roof of my mouth. The zucchini was soft and mushy. Pumpkin was sweet, almost like candy. And the carrots were soft and squishy. But sometimes hard. Mom was inconsistent. She also baked up some kale and they were crispy like potato chip treats. *MMmmmm . . .*

“Yummmmyyy!” I exclaimed.

“Thanks, sweetie. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten a compliment on my cooking.”

“Ain’t it good, Dad?” I asked. He was all frowns.

“*Arrggghhhhhhhhhh!*” he shouted. “I’ll manage. But I’d love a barrel of fried chicken right now.”

Slowly but surely, the Swine family scarfed down the tableful of vegetables from arugula to zucchini. I flitted from plate to plate, biting a little bit here, a taste there, and a portion of something new and delicious in another part of the table.

“You’re running around like a fox!” Mom

said to me. “Foxes make me nervous.”

"I'm trying to taste everything, Mom. I have to do a report."

Soon, the table was almost bare. And Dad, despite all his protestations, had finished almost the entire meal on his own.

*“BUUUURRRRPPPPP.*

*BEEEEELCHHHHHHHH!*” Dad excreted. It sounded like he was finished. “I think I’m done. I can’t have another bite. I probably weigh a ton.”

“Did you have a favorite, dear?” Mom asked.

“Hard to say. It all tasted grassy! Mushrooms bring back memories of the time I was lost in the Piney Woods of East Texas when I was a baby. I had to scavenge for food. The tofu with black sauce was alright. I can almost taste protein. Sort of has a meaty flavor. Lentils with cumin and refried beans were okay, too.”

Dad was obviously keen on protein and essential amino acids. “Maybe we’ll make lentils and refried beans a regular thing,” Mom said.

“But nothing compares to  
*STTTTEEEEAAAAAKKKK!* I want steak  
 TOMORROWWWWW,” Dad roared. “None  
 of this SALAD  
 CRAPALALALALALALALALALA!

*Burrrrrpppp!*"

But unexpectedly, in the middle of his outburst and earsplitting screamologue, something began to transpire . . . Like a volcanic eruption, from a dormant septic tank long assumed dead.

*"Grrrrrrrrrrrrr!"*

“What’s that terrible sound?” Mom wondered aloud.

*“Booooong. Biiiiiing. Bbrrrrruuuuuuuuhiiii!”*

“What the heck?! That’s more disgusting than usual! Mom, are you sure I’m not adopted?” I asked. I had to know.

"Of course, dear. Don't be silly. You're all

pig, just like your dad and me," she replied. That wasn't the answer I was hoping for.

*"Guugugugugu!                      Guguguguguggu!*  
*Gaaagaaagaaagaa!"*

“Yuck,” I yelped, with a scowl I couldn’t help evince, utterly disgusted with whatever it was, whoever it was, obviously Dad. Vainly, I tried to pinch my olfactory glands, but the miasma was like tear gas. My eyes were forming pools of sad water.

Abruptly, Dad jumped from his chair and began to run. He ran like the warthog of old. Almost as if an African lion was chasing him. He ran. And ran. On all fours. Straight to the bathroom on the other side of the living room.

Mom and I looked at each other with amazement, amusement, and aversion. What had just happened? Is it possible? After nineteen days, could this be the breakthrough Dad was waiting for?

And from the most unlikely—actually likely—source. VEGETABLES! Full of fiber and other good stuff.

“Waaaahhhhhh!”

*Flush!*

“AAGGGHHHHHHH!”

*Flush!*

“EEEEGGGGHHHHHHH!”

*Flush!*

“RELIEEEEEEEEEEEEEFFFF!”

*Flush!*

“HOOOOORAYYYYYYYYYY!”

*Flush!*

Fifteen flushes in total but it felt like infinity and forever. Dad was making poo mountains in the toilet and pushing the outer limits of modern plumbing. I was afraid the sudden rearrangement of mass could put the earth's natural rotation at risk.

Almost twenty minutes later, Dad emerged from the bathroom with a big smile of relief on

his face from tusk to tusk.

*“Yaahooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”*

“Feeling better, dear?” Mom asked rhetorically. Of course he was feeling better.

“Sure am . . . finally got it done,” Dad announced proudly.

“It was probably those vegetables,” I remarked.

“No, I did it!” Dad refuted strongly. “I pushed it down! My body had enough of the *krayola* and pushed it all out!”

Privately, however, Dad knew the vegetables had worked its magic, as they usually do. The fiber in the carrots, kale, spinach, broccoli, asparagus, and a myriad of other greens, yellows, and reds acted like a sewer snake in Dad's very bloated, distended, and jammed intestinal plumbing system.

He was pleased as well even if he wouldn't admit it openly. His septic tank was cleaned out. And that should mean fewer unwelcome eruptions throughout the house.

“You want me to make more vegetables for dinner?” Mom asked.

“Let’s not get carried away, but I’m okay . . . with an occasional lettuce leaf,” Dad answered reticently.

In coming days Dad adopted changes, albeit small, on the heels of the gastronomic miracle that will probably go down in Swine family lore.

A bit of veggies were added in between mammoth slabs of steak. He wasn't going to cut back on meat—no chance of that—but he was willing to help wash it down with some kale and asparagus from time to time. Just to clean out the plumbing, he said. A precautionary, safety measure. Plumbers do it all the time, he explained.

\* \* \*

## 3

I presented my school report and it was one of the best in class. I was rewarded with applause and ovations from the other kids punctuated by burps from a couple smart alecks, which I didn't appreciate. More importantly, I earned an A+ for content, creativity, and effort. Ms. Jones was impressed with my exuberance for something as mundane as plain squash.

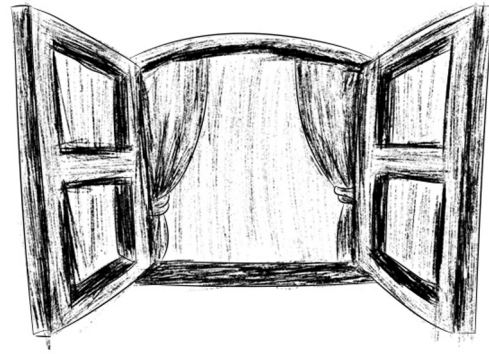
She said I helped the class see vegetables like it was for the very first time. For me, it really was. "Plant shapes and colors erupted from Sam's presentation, reminding us of exotic candies, distant stars and crazy monsters," praised Ms. Jones. Her lofty encomium almost made me turn radish red.

Speaking before the class was a little nerve-racking but I ate my greens and got through it. It didn't give me superhuman strength but downing a can of spinach in one gulp like Popeye was a funny ice breaker.

"Cherry tomatoes exploded in my mouth like warm grenades," I told the class in my oral presentation. And "asparagus resemble spears that could lance aliens from cauliflower planets." I probably went a little over the top. My imagination can be bananas.

My classmates also learned valuable lessons from Dad's experience as well. Vegetables are not just tasty, but important for overall good health and feelings of wellness

As the ancient Greek doctor Hippocrates once said, "All disease begins in the gut." What goes into your stomach inevitably redounds back to you. That might be in the form of a healthy, sound physical body. Or like my dad, clogged plumbing that leaves you stuffed and feeling irritated.



## OPENERS & CLOSERS

*"Idiosyncrasies can seem charming in the beginning. Eventually, it's just annoying."*

Mom is what you might call an *opener*. She likes to leave everything open—lids, boxes, doors, windows, cabinets, bags . . . Everything must be in the ajar and unclosed position.

Our kitchen, for instance, swings with open cabinet doors and pulled out drawers. Plastic lids are never quite locked in tight. Bags of chips are unsealed. Our refrigerator is full of open cartons and half closed containers. The result is stale chips and a very stinky frig. *Yuck!*

When it's warm, she doesn't just open a few windows. She opens every window in the house. Even her private moments are shared publicly. When she goes to the bathroom, the door is unclosed. Agape. Oftentimes open all the way. She doesn't seem to mind that she's sitting on the toilet in full view. Maybe it's claustrophobia. Or it helps her to feel connected to the entire world. I'm just a kid. It's hard to figure out these things. But Dad says he doesn't have the

answers, either. I imagine that when she was younger she was more modest. I can't be sure.

Curiously, Dad is the exact opposite. He's what you might call a *closer*. Everything must be tightly shut—windows, doors, lids, cabinets, and boxes. When he enters a room, he shuts the door behind him. When he leaves a room, he locks the door after him. Not shut? Half closed? It's one of the worst things you could possibly do. It drives him crazy. Because of Mom, he's always running through the kitchen shutting drawers and cabinet doors. He wants them "closed!" he squawks. "*Bbbuuuuurrrppp!*"

As for me, I seem to have gotten a little of both from Mom and Dad. Sometimes I leave things open. Sometimes I close them. And many times that gets me into trouble depending on who's hovering over me.

"You left the cabinet door open!" Dad once reprimanded. "Close it! Pronto, buster!"

"But I'm still using it, Dad!" I demurred.

"No! Close it NOW!" he ordered.

In the winter, the windows had to be completely shut. That's good when it's chilly outside, but that habit also carries over into the warm summers as well which drives Mom insane. She wants to feel the breeze traveling through the living room. It reminds her of open prairies and bucolic hills, she says. For Dad, the only breeze he wants to feel seems to be the warm gale of his belches and booms rushing through the halls.

\* \* \*

The weather has been very strange lately. In the day, it feels like the Mojave Desert. By evening, it's Siberian winter. Dad said the thermostat varied as much as forty degrees.

Intemperate, barbarian weather was laying siege to the house. Fluctuations from day to night had become so drastic we were facing a domestic crisis. Mom and Dad are bickering like two enemy piglets because someone left the windows open or shut. It makes you wonder how the two ever got married. Do opposites really attract? Or just get into endless arguments?

While the feud, on the surface, might seem like a simple difference of opinion, in reality, it was the age old clash of the *openers* and *closers*. Like sectarian rivals, Mom and Dad were each convinced that their way was the orthodox truth and the other side was heresy.

"*Achooo!*" I think I might be catching a cold. Children aren't meant for extreme weather. I'm not a feral animal, after all. I'm as domesticated as little kids come.

"Honey, I'm freezing! You left all the windows open. Again!" Dad yelled. "*Arrggghhhhhh!*"

Idiosyncrasies can seem charming in the beginning. I imagine that's the way it was with Mom and Dad when they first met. One said *tomato*. The other said *tomato*. Eventually, it's just annoying.

"Then close them, dear" Mom quipped. Of course, she'd open it as soon as he closed it.

It was 8 p.m. and the house felt like the outside of an igloo. I was freezing, too, but I saw the cold as a savage force of nature, not the consequence of an eccentric mother that had all the windows open in the house. I did my best to manage with extra socks, sweats, and shirts. But by now, my nose was beginning to run like the Mississippi in summer and mosquitoes were buzzing in my head.

"*Yaaaaaaaagggghhhh!*" arose a frustrated scream.

The new Swine ritual seemed to be that Dad shut the windows at night, which meant every



window in the house. And by 7 a.m. following morning, every window was opened again. Dad was freezing. Mom was hot. I was both and stuck in between. It's not easy being in a mixed family.

"Mom, can't you and Dad be reasonable about this? Do you have to open and close every window?" I asked.

"I like the cool breeze," she replied. "I like the windows open. I'm a pig. We're pigs. We have extra fat around the bones. We need natural cooling."

But I was a skinny kid. I didn't inherit mom's corpulent genes. I had no extra protection. My bones were exposed.

"Your dad is crazy!" she complained. "He wants everything closed even when it's hot. Maybe savanna warthogs are built a little differently from the English. I don't know. But I don't like my neck all hot and sweaty."

"Mom, I think I might be catching a cold. I'm not used to extreme weather. It's so hot during the day. And so cold at night. I'm not a wild animal."

"Blame your father, dear. Fresh air is good for you. Warm, stuffy air will make anyone sick."

"*Achooo!*" I think I was getting really sick. "*Achooo! Achooo!*"

"Geez, Sam. You're almost as loud as your father," Mom groused.

"*YAAAHHHH!*" Dad yelled from the safety of his hermetically sealed room. "Did someone say something?!" Dad was in retreat, immured in his chamber. He could make sure the windows in his room were closed, but not the windows throughout the house. That was a question of perseverance. And Mom was more determined.

"No, dear!" Mom shouted. "Now, sit next to the window, honey, and get some fresh air," she exhorted. "That should clear up your stuffiness.

Always works for me!"

\* \* \*

By the following day, I had a full blown cold. The temperature in my ear was 105 degrees. The doctor said I had a high-grade fever.

"Is that really bad?" I squeaked.

"Well, son. Not so good. But you'll get better with lots of soup and rest."

Privately, the good doctor told my mom and dad that the temperature in the house was too erratic. It should be around seventy-eight degrees, he recommended. No extreme temperatures. No radical changes. It's not good for a child, he said. It shouldn't be too cold. Nor too hot. Moderation was important.

"My wife, she's the darnedest woman, Doc!" Dad moaned. "She opens all the windows. And you know how cold it gets in the evenings these days. It's freezing!"

"No, that's not true, Doctor!" Mom countered. "He closes all the windows. And you know how hot it gets during the day. It's no wonder Sam is sick. A boy needs fresh air."

"You can't open all the windows!"

"You can't close all the windows!"

"It's cold! The windows have to be closed!"

"Too cold for you is anything below eighty degrees. You should try wearing a sweater!"

"Now, here, here!" the doctor interrupted, struggling to calm the situation. "Let's try to be reasonable. We're talking about your child's well-being. He's not a farm animal, you know."

Mom and Dad stared at each other and exchanged quizzical looks. They weren't sure what to make of that.

"I mean, he's not a lion or bear," the doc

restated.

"No, he sure ain't!" they blurted out.

"He's a little boy. He's domesticated," continued the doctor. "He could never survive in the wild. The ambient temperature indoor should be moderate and comfortable. Please . . . If you two don't settle this, he'll only get more sick."

"Okay. Sorry, Doctor," Dad said. "I'll make sure *Mrs. Swine* doesn't open all the windows."

"Yes, Doctor. And I'll make sure *Mr. Swine* doesn't close all the windows!"

"Very good. Now, I'll be back in a few days to check up on Sam. I hope you two keep to your promises. Or else Sam will really get sick," the doctor warned. "And you know what happens to sick children . . ."

*What?*

\* \* \*

Promises were easier made than kept. Partisan squabbling continued over the next couple days. Each side accused the other of apostasy and heterodoxy. They were like religious zealots firmly holding to canon. Maybe I was being punished for their sins?

"The doctor said we have to be reasonable. I left a handful of windows open!" Dad snorted.

"Just a handful? We need at least a baker's dozen!" Mom sneered.

"It's too cold for Sam!"

"No, it wasn't too cold. The thermostat was seventy-eight on the dot!"

"Yes, after I closed the windows you had opened!"

"That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard!"

"You're the most ridiculous woman!"

"That's so rude! And you think you're a gentleman? You lout!"

The arguing continued to spiral down. Ecumenical understanding seemed impossible. Eventually they huffed and puffed and withdrew to their private quarters. If they could, they would have built separation barriers between them.

*BANG!* Dad shut the door behind him. "*Meshugana!*" he roared.

Mom went into her room and left her door wide open. Her windows, too, because she needed the fresh air. "*Majnoon!*" she yelled.

\* \* \*

A few neighbors came to visit. Ms. Murphy from across the street brought cookies and chicken soup. She visited with her six-year-old daughter named Molly. Her face was dotted with brown freckles and her red hair was braided on either side of her head. She looked like Pippi Longstocking. We played retro games like Chutes N' Ladders and Connect Four. I let her win sometimes and she was very happy.

"Yay! I won!" she shouted, jumping around the room.

"Yes, you did, Molly. You're so smart!" I said.

"What kind of game is this?" she asked. Physical board games and tactile objects were foreign to her. She only knew *apps*.

"Old games our parents used to play in the Paleolithic." Artifacts of an ancient past.

"Paleo—*what?*"

We also watched some videos of cats and puppies on WeTube. It's amazing how many videos there are of cats and puppies. Pets peddle in cute like stores offloading shoes at ninety

percent off. There's no way kids can compete. If animals could talk, parents wouldn't have children.

Mrs. Chao from the PTA dropped by as well to see if I was strong enough to do some homework in bed. She thought I was a good student and didn't want to see me falling behind. "University is just around the corner," she would say.

She has a son named Billy in the eighth grade who already takes college level math. He passed two high school AP exams and scored perfectly on the PSAT. Still, she's afraid Harvard won't accept him because of his background notwithstanding the stellar record and extracurriculars up the wazoo.

"No, no . . . I'm too sick . . . I can't do any homework," I weakly murmured, pretending to be super uber ill.

Last summer Billy helped Burmese farmers turn salt water into fresh. The summer before that, he helped Peruvian peasants in the Andes capture sunlight for electricity. This year, the plan is to help refugees in Yemen, Syria or Libya. There's no guarantee he'll come back.

"My, my . . . you are a sick little boy. I hope there will be a renascent interest in your studies soon. I can't believe your parents can be so pococurante," she said, peppering her sentences intentionally with words no one understood.

The vocabulary was above my grade, but I think I got the gist of it through tone and context. My parents were still fighting tooth and hoof and couldn't figure out how to compromise. Interfaith dialog isn't easy. We could hear them shouting down the hall.

"No, it's your fault! You're the bad one!" Mom squealed.

"No, it's not my fault. It's your fault! You're bad!" Dad hollered back.

"You think more about yourself than your

own child!"

"You care more about your flowers than your husband!"

"Your yelling drives people crazy!"

"Your mud baths stink up the house!"

"I'm British! What are you?"

"I'm warthog! My family fought in the civil war!"

"Americans are uncouth and pushy!"

I wasn't just sick anymore. By now, buzzing mosquitoes had moved to my ear and were giving me an ear ache.

"Compromise is important if we want to get along," Mrs. Chao quietly shared. "Fanaticism leads to acrimony. There's a place for dogmatism—doing well in school—but in most cases, we should be flexible. Forbearance is a virtue. We ought to pursue a broadminded *Weltanschauung*."

"Aren't you afraid Billy could be captured?" I asked.

"There's a one in 221,839 chance."

My chums, Danny and Scott, also came by to tell me what was going on at school. Danny said the algebra test was hard but he'd clue me in on the questions. Scott said the kids were getting together to form a basketball team. When I get better, I could join in.

The guys and I talked a while, threw some football in the room and played with darts and other kinds of throwing weapons. I had toy shurikens, knives, and miniature spears. However, Danny missed the board a couple times and darts flew out the open window. They almost hit Mrs. Chao and Ms. Murphy on the head who were chatting outside.

"*Agggghhhhhhhhhhhhh!*" they screamed.

"You kids almost impaled us with spears!" scolded Mrs. Chao.

*Wow! That should be illegal,* I thought to myself.

“Close that window! And you shouldn’t play with knives!” Ms. Murphy yelled.

“Sorry!” Danny shouted. “We didn’t mean to skewer you!”

Almost killing someone was frightening but sort of funny too. It’s a strange paradox. Are humor and horror the inverse of each other like reflections in a distorted mirror? The terrifying and humorous often feel equally unreal but for opposite reasons.

“In a different dimension of the multiverse, we’re being hauled off in handcuffs,” Scott hypothesized.

“Ms. Murphy would have a dart in her ear,” said Danny.

“How come all the interesting stuff only happens in other dimensions?” I asked.

They shrugged their shoulders. It was one of those universal mysteries. Other worlds always seemed more interesting than this one.

\* \* \*

Missing school has its benefits but lying in bed alone wasn’t that much fun. But with everything at your fingertips, I wasn’t missing too much. Internet in Suidae Valley was still on the slower side, but it was faster than old fashioned dial up.

Scott sent videos of well-wishers from school. They goofed and asked if I had the Bubonic plague. Danny told them that we impaled Mrs. Chao with darts and she had to go to the hospital. Scott said we were almost hauled off to prison but he talked the police out of it. The past was the multiverse.

Teachers messaged me as well. Ms. Jones, my health class teacher, reminded me to get plenty of lemon juice and water. She said

electrolytes are important for a sickly child. I asked if I could substitute lemon juice with soda. Sodas have a lot of fizz that appear charged with electricity. She said sodas are charged with sugars and acids like phosphate that will rot my mouth. I should stay away if I still want teeth at sixty. But sixty seemed like a long time away. I wanted to enjoy my cold glass of soda *now!*

My history teacher, Mr. Johnson, said I was missing his best lectures yet—the great Julius Caesar. He said Caesar conquered the world before the age of thirty. I told him I still had lots of time left. But time flies, he warned. His childhood feels like yesterday. Where had it all gone? Life is fugacious. Maybe time is just an illusion of the mind, I offered. Perhaps there’s no time at all? We invented time to explain *change*. He said I might be on to something. I wasn’t sure what I was on to, but I tried holding my breath and walking backwards, but no luck turning back the clock.

Ms. Fearstein said I was failing English. She said that if I wanted academic reprieve, I’d have to bring a notarized medical note from my doctor. She said she didn’t believe I was really sick. She wasn’t sure if I was even human. I sent her pictures of me lying in bed and video clips of the doctor examining me. But she can’t be fooled, she jeered. She’s familiar with every trick in the book. It’s a dusty old book.

Mr. McCoy, my math teacher, congratulated me on my successful abstention. He said that in the real world more of something is not always additive. More could actually be deductive. That’s why people take vacations. He asked if I was enjoying my vacation. I told him being forced to lie in the supine position with a 105 degree temperature was ruining my holiday. He messaged me back and said people sometimes die on vacations.

\* \* \*

Over the next several days, my cold gradually improved, thankfully, though the theological discord between my parents continued to simmer. They learned to compromise a little, but they often tried to cheat when they thought the *other* wasn't looking. Trickery, artifice, and ruse abounded, both sides apparently cohering to the credo, "*By way of deception.*" They didn't seem to think integrity was important when the other side was unequivocally wrong.

"Honey, I see you trying to open that window," Dad said. "You can't fool me!"

"No . . . I was just checking to see if it was stuck. Besides, I saw you try to close the window in Sam's room and it was over eighty-two degrees in there!"

"The weather was turning cold. I was just being cautious."

"You're trying to cheat! Hoodwinker!"

"Don't call me a cheat. You dubious trickster!"

The weather also improved unexpectedly, which probably deserves the most credit. Sometimes, when headstrong parents can't agree, Mother Nature intervenes. The temperature turned salutary and with it my fever as well. After a week, I was back to my salubrious self again and the doctor gave me a clean bill of health. All was forgiven.

"You're as fit as a guitar," the doctor said.

"Is that anything like a fiddle?" I asked.

"Oh yes, even better. Guitars are more versatile."

"Thanks, Doc!" Dad interjected. "You're even better than the family vet we used to have when I was a kid."

"I do try my best to take care of everyone," the doctor said.

"I know it's all our fault," Mom declared. "Sometimes I wonder how Sam survives in this house. It can feel like a barn."

"You have—ahem—a *lovely* home, Mrs. Swine"

"Can I get a notarized medical note?" I begged, remembering that I needed to get an excuse for school.

"Why in the world for?" the doctor asked.

"My teacher, Ms. Fearstein, thinks I'm not sick. She's not even sure I'm human. She says she's going to fail me!"

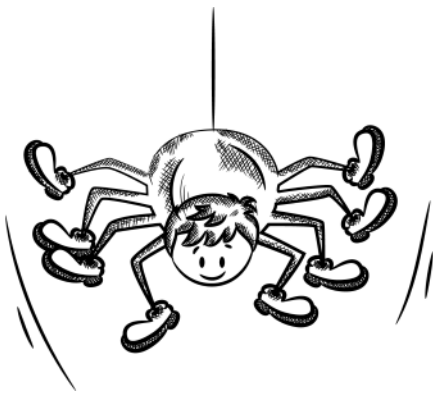
"Don't worry, Sam. I'll take care of her."

Things in the Swine household soon returned to normal. Windows in the house were inappropriately open or closed. The refrigerator reeked of yesterday's dinner, lunch, and breakfast, and a sundry other left-overs. Random bags of cookies and chips were torn open or sealed tightly shut. The windows in my room mysteriously opened and closed on their own depending on which parent came in to check.

And despite the temporary truce between the *openers* and *closers*, I saw no lasting detente between opposing sides. Perhaps these differences are irreconcilable? Manichean worldviews can be hard to resolve. Creeds weren't meant to be negotiable. Or maybe they get along better in other dimensions of the multiverse where Mrs. Chao and Ms. Murphy are impaled and recovering in hospital beds. I hope they get better soon.



4



## SPIDERBOY

*"The liquor is sweet like fermented nectar. Wine of the gods."*

There was nothing but vast, pale landscape. In the corner emanated light. I scrambled forward. To the left. Back. To the right. Diagonally. I paused to rest. *Where am I?* I scrambled back. To the left. Forward. To the right. I was frantic. *Where to go?* Everything was upside down. More than half a dozen spindly legs extended out from underneath me.

I was dreaming I was a spider.

Instinctively, I ejected a silk-like rope from behind and plunged downward. The world was right-side up again.

A gentle breeze rocked me to and fro, and the world seemed to move. I hung from my line like an expert trapeze artist. Over to the side was a dark figure near the glowing light. It was a large, hairy creature. I wasn't sure what it was, but it frightened me.

Suddenly it moved and two bulging eyes seemed to look straight at me. Uh oh! I've been found out! Somehow I knew.

Quickly I tried to scramble up my line but a

horrible boom from the beast shook the earth and me with it.

I swung like a space monkey in the air and then my line unexpectedly snapped! Down . . . down . . . down I went . . . *CRASH!* I hit the floor with a thump. Strange. It didn't hurt.

I scrambled. Run! Run! Run! The ground quaked as the beast jumped about in search of its prey. I presume, little ol' me!

I found a black crevice underneath an obstruction and squeezed myself in. Safety. For now. The beast bellowed! "*Arrggghhhh!*" The sound was horrible. It picked up an ominous red canister and began to spray everywhere. The air became toxic. I couldn't breathe. It was a chemical attack. Gas. Sarin. Weapons of mass destruction. Why isn't this illegal? I was on the verge of dying. Vertigo. Consciousness *fading* . . .

\* \* \*

Luckily, the nerve gas didn't kill me. I recovered. My lungs were powerful. I was safe for now. The beast had retreated. Illumination filled the room. I couldn't see exactly what was around me, but there seemed to be an instinctive sense for my surroundings. The enclosure was ginormous. I wasn't alone. It belonged to someone. It did not welcome my presence.

Hungry. I felt so hungry. But what do I eat? I wanted to eat anything. Alive. Juicy. Moths. Flies. Ants. Mosquitoes. Worms. *Gross!* But there was a craving that was undeniable. Inevitable. I was famished. Irresistible.

I began to climb. Higher ground. Had to get to higher ground. And a corner. Need some kind of nook. An angle. Need to make a web. A snare. And my home. Need to build. Weave a

web.

I worked hard and tirelessly. Assiduously. Round and round I went. I jumped and climbed. I crawled and ran. My eight spindly legs worked in perfect unison. From behind, I released a viscid line that was the raw material for my trap and my new home. Around and around I continued to go. I was exhausted. It felt like hours. But eventually, I was finished. My masterpiece. My beautiful web. My creation. Poetry. Heaven. Marvelous.

I inspected every millimeter. And from my new outpost, I gazed out into the world. I sensed the breeze. Odd smells. Vibrations. Indistinct. Sounds. Noises. Insects buzzing from afar. Exotic creatures moving about. Space teeming with life. And I waited. I had time. I wanted to rest. I was so tired.

\* \* \*

Suddenly, the lines shook. Intruder! It was a fly! I think. It buzzed like a desperate lunatic. It was stuck. My meal. Food! Grub! Finally. So hungry. Starved. I quickly attacked and spun my web around and around my victim. It struggled maniacally. It looked at me with its thousand eyes. Forlorn. What a strange creature. Bizarre. Freakish. It wanted to live. I wanted it *dead!* Still. Lifeless. Soon, it became nearly quiet. It was rolled in a cocoon of web. I inserted my teeth into its leathery skin, puncturing it. *Yum . . .* I drank. Drank. Drank. *Mmmmmmm . . .* The fountain of life. Elixir. I was gorged. Satiated. I felt myself growing stronger.

Now it was time to rest. My abdomen was full. Life was good. It was perfect. Everything

was *just as it should be*. Wonderful!

Then the lights came on. The beast had returned!

*"Buuuurrrrp!"* it announced shamelessly. Effulgent light invaded the room. Everything radiated like the moon and sun. Brilliant. Resplendent. The sound of fizz. Soda. Beer. Then the television. Men swinging sticks. Balls flying. Cheers. *"RRRAAAHHHHHWW!"* A riot of sounds.

The tumult was terrifying. Petrifying. What is it? Where did it come from? The noise? They seemed both familiar and unfamiliar. But I think I'm safe here. I hope I'm safe here. This is my domain. My sphere. My world. My territory. If the beast comes for me again, he'll be entrapped in my web! I hope. No, it's too big. I need a bigger web. I need a matrix of hemp and steel.

I dozed off.

\* \* \*

In the background, there was chatter between the beast and a pig. Arguments. Oinks. Squeals. Grunts. Foul odor. Effluvium. Eccentric smells. Stench. Oh no! Where was I? What sort of hell is this? Why was I reborn here? The gods are cruel!

*Ahaahh!* Another victim! This time an ant. This critter thought he could trespass through my territory. But now it was trapped. I swiftly ran towards it. It was a worker ant. Maybe a scout. Sad little thing. Morose. It looked exhausted. Maybe it had been in search of food for hours? Now it was food. It seemed to beg for mercy. But no mercy for thee! It shook its mandibles in mock attack. I put it in chains. It was secure. But I was still full from my last meal. I would save this one for later. The ant was still

alive. Fresh meat. Kosher. Halaal.

Now back to sleep. Why was I so sleepy? Spiders sleep a lot. Or maybe it remains in an unconscious state to conserve energy. I don't know. It's just a dream. I'm imagining all of this. It's not real. I think it's a dream, right? *Who am I? Where did I come from?* Why am I putting insects in bondage and liking it? Why am I eating bugs? Why am I so hungry? Was I born this way?

\* \* \*

Most times are uneventful. I sit for hours in *pseudo* meditation. If I were human I would be *ersatz* bodhisattva, except I don't want to save all beings. I want to eat them. I'm nearly comatose but fully awake. Just waiting. Biding my time. Perfectly happy to be still. No thinking. No wanting. No craving. Sometimes I go out to inspect my terrain. I clean up debris and push aside dried discard. Old cargo must go. There's no room for dated meat.

I travel far beyond my domain. I explore the vast frontier. I've been to the kitchen. I've traveled into the darkness. The damp basement underneath. The dusty garage on the other side of the world. It's fecund with activity. The remains of the dead are everywhere. Fossils. Skeletons. Mass graves. Danger lurks all around.

My honeycomb of silk and rope resonate with the motion of the room. I read it like a telegraph. I collect information like a news reporter. It's a radar. A stethoscope. My palace of web is an extension of my body. A byzantine bridge between the world and my self.

At sunrise when the light shines softly on the delicate silky lattice still moist from the morning dew, the view on the horizon is a thing of

sublime beauty. At that moment there is a still, quiet peace that descends on everything in the universe. In the distant corner is the silhouette of an animal, the head of a desiccated ant. It's my Mona Lisa.

\* \* \*

There was a flurry of activity in the kitchen. It's the pig. Raw bovine carcass burned on the grill. A jumbo roast. She lumbered hither and thither leaving muddy tracks on the ground. She gave out a snort. It was a call to the beast. It barreled into the room. It demanded meat. Steak. Food. It's gruff. Gauche. Crude. Truculent. "*Noowwww!*" it roared. A fusillade of mad oinks and grunts followed. Barrage of noisy exchanges. And then it took a seat at the table. It's heaving. Agitated. Restless.

The pig has forgotten something. In search, she plods in my direction. Uh oh! I retreat into my barrack. My organic cockpit. My latticework of web shook violently as she passed. Seismic activity. She leaves behind a bouquet of stink that hangs in the air. She finds plates buried under laundry and turns back for the kitchen. But she spots me. She knows I'm here. Discovered. She shakes her head. Oinks. Curious for a moment. But then disinterested. Forgotten. She has bigger meat to spear.

The roast is ready and grilled bovine carcass is served on over-sized plates. The air is redolent with the aroma of charcoal and burned flesh. The beast assaults the dead animal. He tears it into pieces. Poor cow. It's a hyenic feeding frenzy. It seems to go on for hours.

Many minutes pass. Quiet settled the room. Repose. Calm. It's dark outside. Night penetrated the interior. Occupants have

retreated to their separate chambers. Peace. Stillness. I'm safe. I return to my leftover kill. The liquor is sweet like fermented nectar. Wine of the gods. I offer a swig to Bacchus.

\* \* \*

THANK YOU FOR READING!

\* \* \*

Oh no! The beast is on the move again. Why can't it stay still? Or go away?! His two bulging eyes have spotted me. I'm found again. It appears upset. Very upset. It's angry! Enraged!

It's looking for something. Chemical weapons? Nerve gas? A big stick? It's frantic.

It lifted a newspaper from the table and rolls it into a cudgel. No! Have mercy, ugly beast! I'm just a tiny spider. I don't take up much space!

Run! Run! I must run! I ran across the vast, great, white plain as fast as I can. My legs carry me furiously like limbs *allegro concerto*.

The beast swings . . .

*Thump!* It missed me.

*Thump!* It missed me, again.

Then, *thump!* It got me!

I fall. Fall. Fall. Fall . . .

“Oh no!”

*KABOOM!* I landed on the hard floor. My limbs allegro couldn't move. They're crooked. Misshapen. Octaplegic. Cruel world.

Why? Was I meant to end up like this? Was it destiny? Fate? Kismet? Or poor decision making? *Who* is dreaming this?

Then a giant, hairy hoof began to come down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down . . .

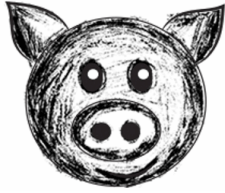
“No, Dad! . . . Don’t squish me!” I cried.  
“Mom, help!”

Bbblllllaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaatttt!

I was dead. Flattened like pancakes.

If you enjoyed the book, you can continue reading by [ordering from Amazon today](#). Available on Kindle and paperback.

Buy on Amazon



## About the Author

H.M. So is a Korean-American writer and native of Los Angeles. This is his debut novel.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider a review on Amazon, Goodreads, and other venues. Please share with your family, friends, and on social media.

You can connect with H.M. So on his website at: <https://hmso.inkonpages.com>.

Or email him directly at:  
[hmso@inkonpages.com](mailto:hmso@inkonpages.com)