

# A Pig's Tale

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After he escaped from Alice's clutches, the first thing the piglet did was to rub that annoying baby bonnet off his head against the bole of a tree. Free at last, he clipped through the dark woodland as fast as four trim little trotters would carry him. He was not a very big piglet at first, but the Wonderland wood was as full of acorns and beech mast as any other, and the piglet had an inherent knack for knowing which mushrooms were good to eat and which were someone's idea of a joke.

Time means nothing to a pig, as the old rouser goes, so it was no wonder (even for Wonderland) that for this little piggie the years did not pass but the meals did. At length there came a time when acorns were at a premium, and the woodland did not seem either so dark or so cozy. This was disquieting, to be sure. The misshapen birds and uncanny cats who haunted the leaf-strewn forest alleyways seemed—to a pig's perception, at least—to be fewer and farther between and occasionally beside themselves. Not good.

It was all rather sad, really. Pigs are as subject to free-floating anxiety attacks as humans, and since this pig had been human once (or as human as one could get, considering his environment) one fine afternoon he found himself plunged into the murkiest depths of Byronic *angst* and melancholia.

Byron really should have been a pig. (Lady Caroline Lamb said that he was, the minx.) It would have perked him up no end. For pigs possess a certain native intelligence and common sense by and large missing from our greater poets. When despair lays its clammy paws across their fevered porcine brows, they do not slump about composing sonnets; they take action.

The only action the pig could think of taking was to go home and see about things.

It was the first time in years he'd thought of Home and Hearth and Mother. He recalled the sounds of crashing crockery and clanging pots, the voices of women raised in strident quarrel. Pigs lack the proper dentition to pronounce the word "dysfunctional," so he went home anyhow.

Home was gone.

The pig stood in a little clearing, gazing at the ruins of what must have been a fairly pleasant little cottage in its day. He snorted and stamped his hoof, much put out by the thoughtless nature of Circumstance, which had so dared to discommode him. Then he decided to investigate more closely. Snuffling and rooting around the ruins filled his snout with the lingering odor of woodsmoke. Charred timbers protruding from a mishmash mess of broken furniture and other domestic effects were another surefire (indeed) indication that someone had not closed cover before striking.

Accidents happen. The pig was not unhappy, merely disappointed. It would have been nice to see his mother again, he fancied, for *nice* belonged to the same class of words as *interesting* and *we'll be in touch* and *your child has great potential*. It carries little meaning other than the vague sense that no one is going to be hit with anything heavy.

There being nothing else to do, he turned himself back into a boy.

It was in this state that the Mad Hatter found him. Or rather, he found the Hatter, who was, as ever, ensconced at the tea table. "Have some tea!" that worthy cried when the boy stepped out of the bushes.

The pig in boy's form—if not boy's clothing—said, "I'd rather have some britches."

It was a good thing that the Mad Hatter also dealt in miscellaneous haberdashery on the side. This revelation might have boggled Alice, but the pig accepted it as Q.E. very D. How else to explain the neatly tailored accoutrements of Wonderland's ill-sorted mob of zanies, beast and human? It wants a job of custom tailoring to fit a rabbit with a waistcoat or a frog with footman's livery. Accidents happen; clothing does not. Some people just don't stop to *think*; they're too busy swallowing nightmares whole.

Before long, the Hatter had the pig turned out in a dapper schoolboy style that would be the envy of

any Eton scholar. "There!" he said, tying the lad's tie. "Now you're ready to leave."

"Leave?" the pig echoed. "But I just got here."

"Then it's past time you got out," the Hatter replied. "Save yourself, lad! It's too late for me, but save yourself while you can."

"Save myself from what?" the pig asked. A vase sailed across the sitting room of his memory and smashed against the far wall.

"Times," said the Hatter ponderously, "change."

"Am I to save myself from times or from change?" the pig inquired.

"Neither," the Hatter replied. "Both. Though always keeping a bit of change on hand to buy the *Times* is never a bad notion, Oh, bother it, lad, don't you see? They're *here*."

The pig glanced up and down the length of the Hatter's tea table, taking in a panorama of stale cakes, crumbled crumpets, a shambles of old scones. "Roaches?" he suggested. "Ants?"

The Hatter clucked his tongue. "Don't waste your time talking, but *listen*." He then lapsed into silence.

No one practices patience better than a pig, but even so there are limits to the length of time one can sit at a cluttered tea table in company with an attested loony and listen to nothing. Pigs could not care less about Zen. The question needs must at last arise: "Listen to *what*?"

"To me, of course," said the Hatter.

"But you haven't said anything," the pig objected.

"Of course I've said *something*" the Hatter countered.

The pig sighed and picked up the largest cake knife he could get his hands on. He held this to the Hatter's throat and said, "Mother used to complain about you. If this is going to turn into another one of those word-swaps where you go on to say that you have, in the past, said something, I'm not the one to put up with it."

"Children today," the Hatter grumbled. But he eyed the cake knife askance and added, "Fine. I'll speak plainly. But it's not going to endear either one of us to generations of children yet to come."

The pig merely snorted. Then he snorted again, put out no end to learn that a boy's nose is physically unable to produce as loud and satisfying a snort as a pig's snout.

"You said *they're* here," said the pig. "Tell me who *they* are and you won't have to whistle through your windpipe."

"Analysts," said the Hatter.

"What?" The cake knife insistently pressed the wattled skin just above the Hatter's high collar and cravat.

"Analysts," the Hatter repeated. "Diggers after *meaning*, blast them all to an eternity of moldy jam and rancid butter. D'you remember Alice?"

"We met," the pig admitted.

"Well, she woke up, told tales out of school, bent the ear of a *mathematician*, no less. A nice young man, scared witless of women. He was devoted to the girl; most girls, until they reached the age of imperilment. Next thing anyone knew"—the Hatter shuddered—"text."

"I don't understand," said the pig, but he was courteous enough to set aside the cake knife and pour the Hatter a fresh cup of tea.

"I am a poet," the Hatter said, pressing a hand to his well-starched shirt bosom. "I don't get out much, nor keep up with any books other than the slim volume of verse I am even as we speak preparing for the printer's. But some folks rush their scribblings into print with indecent haste, as if they were brides already eight months gone with child. Alice's adventures were common fodder long before you took it into your head to walk on two legs again."

"You know who I am?" The pig cast a weather eye behind him, as best he was able, to see if perhaps his transformation had been incomplete. No corkscrew tail distorted the seat of his trousers. All

was well.

It was the Hatter's turn to snort, and very well he did, too, even lacking a snout. "Of course I know, you clod! How could I avoid knowing?" He reached under a pile of dusty Banbury tarts and excavated a floury copy of Mr. Carroll's most beloved work. "It's all in the book."

The pig helped himself to the relic, paging through Alice's dream with the proper mixture of reverence and resentment that he had not merited longer mention. While he consulted the text, the Hatter grumbled on.

"The havoc he's wrought! The simple, homespun pandemonium! Oh, it was fine, at first—a book for children, harmless, charming. But then—*meddlers*! Not enough to occupy them, turning over every rock in their heads to see what hideous crawlies haunt the undersides, no! They must invade the nursery bookshelf and read, and read *into* everything they find."

The pig looked up from the book. He didn't understand much of what the Hatter was saying, but he dismissed it as madness. After all—! No need to have recourse to the cake knife. "Scone?" he suggested, passing the plate and pronouncing the word to almost rhyme with *done*.

"Yes, it is," said the Hatter, glancing at the plate. "Although I prefer to pronounce it so it rhymes more nearly with *alone*, which is what I have been ever since *they* invaded." He helped himself to sugar.

"The hare was the first to go," he told the swirling depths of his tea. "They called him a rampant pagan fertility symbol and he never got over it. So much to live up to, and he a Methodist bachelor! The dormouse, on the other hand, was a dream of the womb. How clearly I recall his words of farewell: 'When they can't tell Assam tea from amniotic fluid, it's time to move on,' he said."

"Have they all gone, then?" asked the pig. His gaze weighed the all-surrounding woodland. At the Hatter's words it seemed to have put on the bleak aspect of a deserted house, dust on the oak leaves, cobwebs veiling the bark of the walnut trees.

"The Queen of Hearts is still around," the Hatter said. "I see her sometimes when she stops by to drop off a platter of tarts and to ask me whether I've yet been able to find out what, precisely, a symbol of Woman as Castrating Bitch (capital w, capital c, capital b, no less) is supposed to *do* all day. *Noblesse oblige* and all that. She feels the responsibility. Responsibility for *what* remains the question. The King tells her it was just an idle compliment, but she's a stickler. The distraction has sweetened her temper no end. She's no fun anymore."

"At least it doesn't seem to have affected you," the pig offered by way of consolation.

"That's because I may be mad, but I'm not a weathercock. I've steadfastly refused to let them make me *mean* anything at all. Oh, they tried to have at me, lad, don't doubt it for a moment!" He waved a teaspoon in the pig's face. "I've been called everything from an icon of the ultimate tragedy of the Industrial Revolution to a fragment of embedded Masonic code. Do you know what you get when you rearrange the letters in the words *Mad Hatter*?"

"Nnnno," the pig admitted with some reluctance.

"You get *Rhatemtad*, which some idiot decided was the name of a heretical Egyptian pharaoh of the Old Kingdom who did odd, un-Christian things with trowels and whose monuments were therefor suppressed." The Hatter's head fell forward heavily. "Get out, boy. There's nothing left for anyone here. They've stripped the flesh from the bones, sucked the blood and licked out the marrow."

"But where shall I get out *to*?" the pig asked.

"Their world. What else is there?" The Hatter sipped his tea morosely, then suddenly demanded, "Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

"Who cares?" the pig replied. "How do I get there from here?"

"With an answer like that, you're halfway there," said the Hatter. "Although the usual method of transportation is to wake up."

"Wake up? But I'm not even asleep," the pig said, pinching himself to make sure.

"Then *fall* asleep, you tollywug," the Hatter snapped. "And wake up in a better world than this. That's how the rest of 'em did it."

The pig thanked the Hatter and took his leave. "And whatever you do," the Hatter shouted after him, "don't mean more than you are!" He backed up this advice by flinging a teacup at the pig's head. This caused the pig to feel the prickle of nostalgic tears in the corner of one eye (the left one) and the rise of a lump in his throat that turned out to be a poorly chewed piece of scone (pronounced however you damn well like). He returned to the forest, retreated to the shade of an ancient sycamore, curled up at the roots, and went to sleep.

He awoke in the shade of an ancient sycamore, but that was as far as Coincidence was willing to carry him without a supplemental fare being paid. Wonderland had vanished.

He was on the grounds of an impressive, imposing, implicitly British boys' school. Instead of the tender hand of an older sister to brush away the leaves that had fallen on his face while he drowsed, he met the stern gaze of a Master who instructed him to get his lazy carcass into chapel for Evensong or expect six of the best across his backside afterwards.

The years that followed there—and at Cambridge after—are of little interest to the general reader and less to the pig. No one on the faculty, staff, or student body at his first school ever remarked upon the fact that there was an extra mouth to feed, a new bed to be made up, a fresh face to be recognized. The bills were paid in timely fashion; that sufficed.

The pig went home with his friends during the school holidays, where he was duly presented to this or that brace of beaming parents as the son of a duchess. (True enough.) On the school records, he rejoiced in the name of Anthony Piperade, Lord DuCoeur. He grew up straight and tall and honest, with a healthy pink complexion and an appetite that made fond mothers admonish their own chicks to emulate him.

He did not get fat. He did not see anything wrong with eating bacon.

When he attained his majority, he was summoned to the Inns of Court where he was solemnly invested with full control over his inheritance. Documents were pushed back and forth across the table. Thus did young Lord Anthony learn that the Mad Hatter's mercury-induced insanity had not left him blind to the advantages of investing (heavily) in textile interests. A sealed letter was placed in the pig's hands. *It's too late for me, my boy, it read. They have brought up the big guns. By the time this reaches you, I will have succumbed to being an Orphic archetype. Madness and poetry supposedly sleep in one bed. Fools that they are, they willfully overlook the fact that some poets manage to earn a living at it. Adieu and toadies. Destroy this before reading.*

"There was also this," said the man of law, giving the pig a small pasteboard box. It held the fragments of a broken teacup.

The pig looked up. "Why is a raven like a writing desk?" he asked.

The man of law chuckled and said that his lordship was pleased to be jocular.

Now that the mystery had been removed from his finances, he was his own pig. It was a very good feeling. He read Law at Cambridge and came to be a barrister with rooms in town and a fine place in the country. He continued to keep up his public school and university friendships. He traveled abroad and was enriched without becoming unduly aesthetic.

One drizzly day he encountered his mother in a Paris sidewalk cafe. The Duchess was sipping absinthe and reading a copy of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. (Time had passed. It will, given half the chance.) "Mother?" the pig inquired.

The Duchess looked up from her reading. "Oh, it's you," she said in an affable manner. "Join me, won't you?"

The pig was rather nonplussed by his mother's casual attitude. After all, he'd thought her dead, and what she'd thought *his* fate had been—

Or had she given that matter any thought at all? Women who thrust their infants into the care of other children—total strangers—cannot possibly have more on their minds than whether they've left themselves enough time to get good seats at the theater.

So the pig ordered a glass of gin-and-bitters when the waiter came, and made small talk until the

drink was brought, and in general made himself as agreeable a companion as his social reputation always painted him. ("Good old Tony! He's a safe guest to make up your dinner party, Mavis. Pleasant-looking, wellborn, rich, nowhere near as witty as me, eats what's put in front of him, and he goes with any decor.")

But eventually the demon of Meaning would have his day, and the pig heard himself telling the Duchess that she was looking quite well for someone who had ostensibly burned to death in a conflagration lo, these many years ago.

"Oh, that," said the Duchess. She snapped her fingers and the waiter brought her another absinthe, although the fashion for the drink of Decadents has passed with the turning of the century and the introduction of mustard gas victims to polite society.

"Yes, that," said the pig as his mother imbibed. "I found the ruins. What happened?"

"Dejaneira set fire to the place," the Duchess informed him. She drank more absinthe.

"I see." He nursed his gin. "And who is or was or might be Dejaneira?"

"Why, the Cook, of course!" The Duchess regarded her son as if he had dropped out from beneath the tail of a pig rather than merely being one. "What else could she do? We were the embodiment of a fiery Sapphic romance gone awry under the merciless strictures of Victorian society. Her servile status was a galling reminder that even though she was the dominant partner, I would still have to be the one giving the orders. No wonder she threw things. As for the pepper—"

"*Must I know?*" the pig pleaded.

"It's all part and parcel, and you *did* ask," the Duchess reminded him. "Considering the shape of the peppercorn, my darling Dejaneira was grinding up the withered testicles of our enemies every time she employed that condiment. I don't even want to think about what significance the pepper mill's shape conveys." She smiled happily and patted the pig's hand. "My dear boy, it's been *eons* since anyone's asked to know all that. You can't imagine what a treat it's been to be able to get it out in the open one more time."

The pig shifted in his chair. "Where *is* Cook?" he asked. "She's not—she won't—will she be joining us?"

The Duchess's smile collapsed upon itself. She sighed.

"She won't. It's over between us. I blame this post-War morality. Raise the hems and anything can happen. Everyone's gone all Sapphic now, even in the best homes, the finest families. Even in print, no less!" She wagged *Orlando* high, which the waiter took to mean an order for more drinks. "One can't *epater le bourgeoisie* if *les bourgeois* are looking at you over their milk-white shoulders and waiting for you to catch up. Some days I don't know what to do with myself."

The pig rose from his seat and laid a hand on his mother's shoulder. "Whatever you are, don't do more than you mean," he told her. It was advice given with the kindest of intentions. It was also the last time he saw the Duchess under those circumstances.

The Depression left him undepressed and as happily bereft of meaning as ever. During the bombardment of London by the Nazi forces he opened the doors of his country seat, *Gadara*, to several shipments of East End youth. Nothing was filched or broken or made to smell worse than before, and the experience left him curiously attracted to the thought of fatherhood.

Unfortunately, the practicalities intruded. Every morning he studied his reflection in the mirror and tacitly accepted the fact that he had aged, but nowhere near enough to account for all the years he'd seen pass by. To marry implied the inclusion of a more observant, less objective witness than the looking glass. From what he knew of women, not one of them would not consider it a privilege to be wed to a partner whose looks remained essentially unchanged while her own were diligently nibbled away by the mice of the minutes, the weasels of the weeks, the stoats of the seasons, and so on, until he ran out of measures of time and metaphoric animals with which to couple them.

Therefore he himself remained uncoupled, although he did engage in love affairs. Knowing himself to be what he was, he took pains to please his partners. When the dawn of the Women's Movement found

him, no lady could point the finger at him and justly name him swine. (For the same reason, he had avoided a career in law enforcement when he came to the States in the '60s.) He remained in the States until all his old school chums were tidily dead or so senile they assumed he was his own grandson. Here he safely built up and improved upon the Hatter's textile empire.

A century had come and gone since the first publication of *Alice's Adventures Underground*. There had been some moments of dread, among the fluttering years, when he came dangerously close to meaning something. For a time he feared that *they* might view his slow, almost imperceptible aging process as symbolic of Man's Dream of Eternal Youth. Then he read about the Peter Pan syndrome and breathed easier. That slot was already occupied by Barrie's bonnie flying boy. His own peculiar loitering on the shady side of forty meant nothing, in and of itself. It was merely the halo effect of having first seen the light in an immortal work of fiction, a Chernobyl of the spirit.

The pig sat behind his desk and gazed out over the towers of Manhattan. The polished rosewood surface was only broken by the leatherette ticket folder his secretary had handed him a minute since. A one-way passage, First Class, would convey him back to Britain in three days' time. It would be good to see the old homestead—now a tourist mecca famous for its topiary display, damn the Inland Revenue to hell.

His telephone buzzed. He pushed a button and asked his secretary what she desired.

The woman was weeping. He could hear the great, shuddery sobs, could imagine how they must be shaking her slender body. Had she lost a loved one? Received some discouraging medical report? Merciful heavens, it sounded like the end of the world!

Which it was. Someone else had chosen to push a button not too long before the pig had taken similar action. The news was blaring through the streets even as the missiles were shrieking through the sky. He was able to cast one last, fond lingering look over his ticket-folder before the bowl of heaven shattered like a teacup against a wall of light.

For a time afterwards, he clung to life by threads of pain that twisted themselves into hawsers before finally fraying and letting him plummet into a pit of oblivion (as viewed from Survivor's Point). The panorama, like most, was breathtaking. This was unfortunate, since want of breath precludes a wail of heartsick pity getting any farther than the teeth.

Not blinded by the blast, the pig was forced to see what had become of other beings and all their scattered toys. For a time he did, until his intelligence told him he had the option of will—that basic I-don't-give-a-shit-about-you-I'm-doing-this-*my*-way attitude that is the principle of all survival outside of beehives and ant colonies and certain family reunions. He did not *have* to look at the devastation surrounding him if that was not his—wrong word, but still—pleasure. And if he did look, he did not have to *see*. As the few miserable remnants of humankind (How kind? How human? How dangerously close to the forced extraction of *meaning* it is to hold a word accountable for its syllables!) straggled their way back onto the burnt and gutted stage, the pig kept to himself and pretended they were not there.

In part, this was the meat and not the intellect at work. Even in human form, even with his flesh frizzled by the bomb, he knew he was still edible. Prudence preached retirement, both for the purposes of healing and survival. No matter what the speculative bards had sung about the tedium of immortality, the pig knew they plucked their tunes from a lute strung with sour grapevines. What the hell was wrong with living forever? Losing your loved ones all the time? It was just an Army brat's life writ large. You'd adjust. You'd make new friends, dear. If you're bored, you must be boring. Snap out of it.

The pig wanted to live. Maybe not like this, he thought, casting a wary look over yet another scorched cityscape, but things would get better. Or if they didn't, he'd get used to them. He wanted to live.

And whether it was his faith or his philosophy or just the fact that the world grew weary of supporting so much evidence that her top-of-the-foodchain children couldn't be left alone for two cosmic blinks without someone clobbering someone else (*Don't make Me stop this universe, kids, I'm warning you!*), the Earth kissed the nuclear boo-boo and made it all better.

Trees returned. Rough chunks of pavement not scavenged for cottage walls were worn away by the roots of new green things. The cockroaches decided to try for a better press this time around and evolved shimmering, iridescent wings and a lilting song that left the flash-fried nightingale spinning in her sepulchre.

And there were children. Babies were born hale and well, with the old-fashioned number of fingers and toes. The pig didn't see too many of them all at once, but he had lived through a time of not seeing too many automobiles, either. He saw his first when he left his hovel and went down to the riverbank to fetch some water.

The child was not dirty or scabby, nor did it look like a hunted animal. Its long yellow hair was clubbed back and there was a distinct pong of sweat and grease wafting from it, but the pig knew he was no bed of vanished roses either. He had some food with him—a dry but filling cake he made from acorns—and he offered it as a lure. The child carried mushrooms in a pouch and declined the lure in favor of a trade.

They did not speak the same language, but gestures helped and pigs learn fast. It also helped that they did not have much to talk about, which let them come to grasp the basics of each other's tongues. The pig still spoke English as he recalled it, the child an evolved offshoot of the same. It was a language linked to the mother tongue in the same way English was blood-kin to the lingo of *Beowulf*. It also helped that the pig was willing to play the fool to win a child's heart and that the child still knew laughter.

So the pig returned into a world that had recaptured its laughter and its joy in childhood and its sense that occasionally there would be times of no sense (which is as different from nonsense as chalk from most kinds of cheese except Romano). He had gone gray by this time, and wrinkly, although he still had most of his hair and teeth and a peeling leatherette case that held crisp, crumbly yellow scraps of magic. And he knew where to find the best acorns.

The tribe took him in and sat him down with the other old men and told them to keep an eye on the children. The children tumbled around in the sun when it shone and sopped up the rain when it fell and loudly told one another that the real meaning of life was that they were to keep an eye on the old men.

The pig heard the M-word and shuddered. *Even here?* he thought. *Even now?* And he touched his leatherette ticket-folder and dreamed of topiary clipped into the shape of March Hares and Mad Hatters, of frogs in footman's livery and strident queens.

And one day, he began to talk of such things in his sleep—a sleep that is an old man's dozing compromise between slumber and death. He murmured of riverbanks and rabbit holes, of luckless lizards named Bill and flamingos coerced into service as croquet mallets. Asleep, awake, eyes open or closed, he spoke of these solemn matters, and like a tribe of wary dormice the children crept near to listen.

He knew the story, start to end. How could he not? It was his essence more than any double helix or stately manor now drowned beneath the waves that had devoured distant England. He spoke it slowly, neglecting not a word, and the children who did not speak the language of his tale still gathered close and cocked their heads and listened to the melodies of enchantment.

Most of what he told them was a barrage of names like autumn leaves, fluttering about wildly, detached from the objects they had once defined. It had been ages since anyone touched a teacup, let alone tea. But how much of Alice's world ever did follow her back up the rabbit hole, and for how long did it linger in the rolling world of daylight, leisure suits, and bombs? Her story did not deal in artifacts, but in wonders. In lands where men of law never wore wigs and climes where Cheshire Cats were never seen except as supper, Alice endured.

There are always miracles where there are children, and fascination for any tale that opens their eyes to marvels, whether or not they are sensible marvels. Even a pig knows that.

Soon the children were speaking a language closer to his own, and repeating long selections of the story. Soon the other old men waxed envious of the pig's ascendancy and dredged up other tales their own grandsires had told them when age made ancients babble nonsense: sweet nonsense of wolves who dressed up in granny's clothing, and maidens whose taste for pomegranate seeds deprived the world of

spring, and babies whose birth brought winged beings down from the heavens, riding the tail of a splendid star.

And no one ever thought to tack a shred of *meaning* to a single one of those tales. Not one of all.

When the pig saw that the yellow-haired child he'd first met by the river had grown to have children of her own, he knew the time had come for him to go his ways. The old men's corner hummed with tales of many tellings, the old women joining in with stories of their own in the winter-times. Some of the striplings had taken to the road with only a burden of stories on their backs and returned with tales garnered and traded and fresh-made from among the other peoples they encountered in their wanderings. The world-heart beat strong with the blood of *Once upon a time*.

Yes, it was time to go.

He made a last batch of acorn cake and crumbled the last of the first class airline tickets into the mix. "Well," he said, "I'm going." The other old men nodded. Sometimes a man preferred to meet his death where the leaves would look after his burial.

He was on his way out of the settlement when he heard a rip-trip-trip behind him, like the ghost of a piglet long gone but never dead. He turned and saw that he was being followed by the daughter of his first child-friend. Her name was nothing like Alice.

"What is it, my dear?" he asked as she caught up to him and solemnly took his hand. "You should go back. Your mother will be worried."

"You never told," she said.

"Told what?"

"Why *is a* raven like a writing desk?"

He smiled. "Have you ever seen a raven, child? Or a writing desk?"

To his surprise she replied, "Yes, I have."

"What? But where—?"

"Over there," she said, pointing with one hand as she used the other to smooth the wrinkles from her pinafore. "By the riverbank." She took his hand and said, "This way. Hurry. We're late."

He was dragged after her as easily as if he were made of paper. Leaves were falling from the trees, riffling across his eyes, bewildering him with their fluttering pips of black and red, diamonds and clubs, hearts and spades. A church bell sounded somewhere far away. The child ran faster, so fast that he cried out for her to have a care, she'd tear her stockings on the brambles shielding the mouth of the rabbit hole. She ducked her golden head and pulled him through. His pouch of traveler's fare spilled in the root-hung darkness. She waited impatiently for him to gather up the fallen acorn cakes while she tapped her paw and frequently consulted a large gold pocketwatch. The last cake he retrieved was adorned with the words "EAT ME" picked out in currants.

"No time!" she cried, clapping a furry paw on his forearm. "She'll be furious! We're late!"

Past roses white and dripping red they ran, past the Queen, who flailed at her hedgehog-ball with her flamingo-mallet, past an ocean of human tears where all manner of curiouser and curiouser creatures ran heedlessly round and round in circles on the strand. It meant everything. It meant nothing. The pig went stumbling on, after a white-furred dream-child.

He hardly recognized the clearing. The Hatter and the mad March Hare laughed and sang and hailed him merrily. He drank a cup of tea that tasted suspiciously of dormouse and reached for a crumplet that filled his mouth with memory.

"Ah, no!" the Hatter cautioned, raising a finger. "Don't you start that old business all over again, my lad. It's only a story, you know. The troubles come when they try to make it mean things."

"Doesn't it?" asked the pig. "Does none of it mean anything?"

"It's a story," said the Hare. "It's a dream."

"You know, speaking of that dream, if you rearrange the letters in the words *Mad Hatter*, you do get something sensible," the pig said.



"And what do you do with that sensible thing after you've got it?" the Hatter asked. "Stick it in your writing desk? Leave it out for the ravens?"

The dormouse popped out of the teapot. "Whatever you mean," he said sleepily, "don't be more than you do."

"Here," said the Hatter. "This one should fit you." He pulled a tiny, white embroidered baby bonnet from his sleeve and tied it around the pig's head. It fit precisely.

The infant in his cradle screwed up his red, wrinkled face and cried. His mother picked him up herself and began to rock him, singing a lullaby while thunder scoured the heavens with a sound like kitchenware and crockery being flung by an irate Cook.

Some of *them* would say it was all a dream. Some of *them* would insist his crying meant an anguish for the womb's Wonderland lost. Some of them might have the presence of mind to check his diaper and see if what they found in there *meant* anything.

Only an eternal story. Only a glimmering dream.

Only a child.

And for some, through all the ages of uncounted lives that yearn for wonder more than meaning, that would always mean enough.