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Swift Sydney Snout

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Sample translation by Rachel Reynolds

Chapter 1

We have a pig at home. I don't mean my little sister, but a real pig who answers to the name Sydney Snout. How did we get this pig? It's

a long story.

It was two years ago. We had gone out for a Sunday drive in the country. We - that is, my Mom, my Dad, my sister Betty who is only a year younger than me, and Zuppi, my little sister. We drove out into the Lüneburg Heath, and then we did something that none of us children enjoyed - we went hiking.

Talk about terrible. We wandered around the area, while Mom and Dad kept saying: "Look over there! Isn't it pretty?" They'd stop walking every time they said this in order to point at some random hill or tree, and they expected us to be amazed. But what could you possibly say about a hill? And because we kept begging for lemonade, Mom slowly lost her temper and said that we first had to do some serious walking. But our legs were already aching, and Zuppi wouldn't stop whining that she couldn't walk anymore. So Dad picked her up on his shoulders and marched down the sandy path, sweating and no longer saying anything about the beauty of the landscape.

We eventually reached Hörpel, a small village. A festival was being held in a restaurant there. The village fire department was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. People were sitting at long wooden tables underneath the chestnut trees, drinking beer and eating bratwursts. A brass band was playing on a grandstand, and we were finally able to sit down and have our lemonade.

At some point, the band stopped playing, and a man in a fireman's uniform walked up to the microphone and said: "Now we'll start our raffle. Everyone who buys a ticket will help us purchase a new high-pressure hose. There are lots of small and one very nutritious first prize."

A man came by our table, carrying a small bucket holding the tickets. Each of us was allowed to buy one. My ticket was a dud. Betty received a consolation prize: a bike pennant with the words *Hörpel Voluntary Fire Department* on it.

Zuppi got lucky. When the tickets were called out, she ran up to the grandstand with it. The fireman took a look at the ticket and called:

"Number 33! Here is the first prize winner! How old are you?"

"Six."

"Are you already in school?"

"No. I just turned six two weeks ago."



“Do you know what you’ve won?”

“No.”

“It’s your lucky day! You’ve won a little pig.”

The man then lifted a piglet out of a box before pressing it into Zuppi’s arms. The people clapped and laughed. With a wide grin, Zuppi hauled the piglet to our table and dropped it into Mom’s lap. It was a clean, rosy animal with a fat snout, darting little eyes, and large floppy ears.

It really was cute, but Dad’s face darkened nonetheless. When a farmer sitting at our table congratulated us on the piglet, Dad smiled painfully. You need to know that Dad doesn’t like pets. He always says that animals don’t belong inside. And now Mom was holding this piglet on her lap and scratching its ears.

“Cute, right?” Zuppi exclaimed excitedly. “Look at his curly little tail.”

Dad removed his pipe from his mouth. “Very nice,” he said, “but when we leave, you’re going to give it back!”

“No!” Zuppi cried. “I won it. It’s mine.”

“We can’t take that animal with us.”

This was the point Zuppi started to sob, and whenever she cries, she gets really loud. The people at the other tables started looking our way. Why was the little girl who’d just won a lucky pig sobbing?

Already stretching his arm out to set the piglet on the floor, Dad quickly yanked his hand back. The people at the neighboring table glared darkly at him. It had looked as if he was about to slap the little pig.

“Fine, fine,” Dad said. “You may keep the animal for now.”

Dad paid, and we went back to our car. We had to walk a long time although we took the shortest way back. We were forced to carry the piglet, because if we let it run on its own, it wouldn’t just follow us. It scampered all over the place. It is amazing how heavy piglets are, much heavier than dogs of the same size.

We eventually couldn’t make it any farther, despite the fact we three kids kept trading off carrying the pig. Mom hauled it for a long stretch with the piglet tucked under her arm like a sofa cushion. When she got tired, she tried to give it to Dad to carry. But he said: “If you want to take the animal with us, then you have to carry it yourselves.”

We thought that was pretty mean, but we played it safe and didn’t say anything.

When we finally reached the car, we were exhausted. Mom took the piglet on her lap so it couldn’t get the spotless upholstery dirty.

“Pigs are always dirty,” Dad remarked. “They love filth. Why do you think we say that someone eats like a pig, or call a messy room a real pigsty?”



It was obvious he was talking about our bedroom.

We hadn't driven all that far when Mom started shouting. The piglet had peed on her dress.

"That's it!" Dad said. He stopped the car at the next farm.

"So," he declared, "now we're going to give the pig to a farmer. Pigs belong in the country, not in a city apartment."

Zuppi began to shriek. She can scream so loudly you have to put your hands over your ears.

"Silence," Dad bellowed. "Pigs get sad if all they can see is buildings and no fields or meadows.

Zuppi kept screaming.

"Let's keep the piglet for a few days at least," Mom cut in. "She just won it. We can always give it away later."

"Fine. You can keep it for three days, then it has to go. What will the people in our building think?"

Chapter 2

Where can one keep a pig in a city apartment? Luckily, we live on the ground floor, and there's a small garden behind our building. A pear tree and a lilac bush grow back there. Next to our garden sit the other garden plots, each as small as a handkerchief.

As it was, we couldn't just let the pig, which we'd named Sydney Snout, out into the garden because it had started to rain. Mom said the nights were still very cool, too. The only other option was the bathroom, since Dad forbade Zuppi from letting Sydney sleep in her bed. Sydney galloped through apartment, checking out the rooms. He seemed to be especially taken with the light gray carpet in Dad's office. He kept rolling over on his back and wriggling his feet in the air. Dad eventually shooed him away, at which point Sydney dashed into the kitchen. He knocked over several pots with a loud crash as he tried to creep into a kitchen cabinet.

"I had no idea pigs could be so lively," Mom said as she gathered up the pots.

After we'd brushed our teeth, Dad locked Sydney in the bathroom. We stretched out in our beds and listened to his quiet grunting.

The next morning, Mom was the first one in the bathroom, but she beat a hasty retreat as soon as she opened the door. Her container of face cream, which she had failed to screw firmly shut yesterday in all the excitement, was lying on the floor. The jar was empty.

"I think he ate my face cream."

In all honesty, Sydney smelled like roses. Besides that, he was very cheerful as he ran back through the apartment. Zuppi wanted to take him to a vet, but Dad said: "No way. Do you have any idea what that would cost?"



“But we have health insurance,” I said.

“It doesn’t cover pigs. Besides pigs are omnivores. They can even survive beauty products.”

We had to hurry to get to school on time. Mom always takes Betty and me after she drops Zuppi off at kindergarten. She is a teacher at our comprehensive school. Unfortunately, , there are no advantages tied to this. Quite the opposite. Our teachers can complain to her about us during recess. This happens whenever we’ve interrupted a lesson or pulled some kind of prank, like what happened recently when we stuck a white mouse in our art teacher’s purse. The woman threw a fit, and Mom chewed me out during recess. However, this isn’t really the time and place to go into all sorts of school stuff.

Anyway, that Wednesday morning, Zuppi didn’t want to go to kindergarten. She claimed she had a stomach ache. In reality, she was just afraid that Dad was going to take Sydney Snout away that morning. Dad is actually the homemaker for us. He is out of work at the moment. He has a very rare career with a complicated name, a real tongue twister. He is an Egyptologist. Egyptologists are people who study the ancient Egyptians, who left behind strange things like pyramids, mummies and hieroglyphics. These hieroglyphics are characters made up of little figures, birds, bars, and snakes. My father deciphers these hieroglyphics whenever he’s not busy cooking or dusting. I’ll write out a line of hieroglyphics here. It means something like:

Illustration: hieroglyphics]

I was on my own for three days.

Of course, we’re always hoping he’ll discover a clue to a treasure. Then we could all travel to Egypt and dig up the treasure, the treasure of the pharaohs: a whole pile of jewels, gold and silver. We kids are always imagining what all we could buy with the money. But Dad keeps saying: “The treasure would go to the museum.” It would be good if Dad could work for the museum again. That’s where he worked before he lost his job. Then we could at least admire the treasures in the cases for free. And Dad wouldn’t sit around the house all the time and be such a nag.

Chapter 3

After we got home from school that afternoon, we built a pig hut. I had gotten three crates from our vegetable seller. I took the crates apart into boards and nailed them back together into something new: three side walls and a real pitched roof. Betty had bought some peat from a flower shop, which we planned to spread inside the hut so that Sydney could stay warm. Betty and I argued about who’d get to put the peat around hut. She, just because she had bought it and carried it here, or I, because I’d gotten the crates. Then, Sydney shot out of the veranda door and ran into the garden. Zuppi had peeked into the bathroom, and he’d escaped from her. Sydney made a beeline for a puddle, threw himself into it, wallowed around in the mud, and oinked excitedly.

Covered from head to hoof with mud, he dashed happily through the garden and - oh no - back into the apartment! We ran after him in order to shoo him back out, but Sydney had already made it to Dad’s office. He leaped over the couch, knocked over the table lamp, rolled around on the light gray carpet that we kids were only allowed to walk on in socks, and then squeezed under the couch. You could clearly see the dirty



prints from his hooves across the carpet. Dad was stretched out on the floor in front of the couch, poking at Sydney with a long ruler in an effort to get him to come out. “This filthy pig,” he yelled.

Catching sight of Zuppi, Sydney shot out from his hiding place. Dad was so surprised that he hit his head on the edge of the couch. He made a grab for the piglet, but missed. Sydney jumped a little to the side, and brushed against the white wall, leaving behind a long streak of dirt. He dashed across the parchment paper spread out on the floor on which Dad had traced several hieroglyphics from a stone. Streaking into Mom’s room, he knocked over a tray holding papers on which Mom had jotted down her students’ grades and galloped into our kids’ room, before heading back out into the garden where he wallowed in the mud once more. We quickly shut the veranda door so he couldn’t get back into the apartment.

It was strangely silent in Dad’s office.

“Maybe he fainted,” Betty guessed.

We quietly made our way into Dad’s room. He was standing still, staring at the parchment paper lying on the floor, the paper that Sydney had raced across, leaving behind muddy hoofprints. They showed up between the other characters like little wedges and bars.

“Papa,” Zuppi whispered. “Are you alright?” And then she added: “Pigs are pretty funny animals, aren’t they?”

Dad just stood there silently as if he’d suddenly gone deaf, staring at his hieroglyphics and Sydney’s prints.

“Interesting,” Dad finally said. “If you read Sydney’s hoofprints into it, the inscription has a completely different meaning. It then says: The father didn’t care about those things he couldn’t change.”

“We locked him outside,” Betty said.

“Who?”

“Sydney.”

“Ah, okay. Did you finish building the hut?”

“Not completely.”

We went outside, and Zuppi had to keep Sydney from jumping up on Dad. For whatever reason, Sydney had taken Dad to heart, despite the fact Dad didn’t want him in the house. Maybe Sydney sensed that Dad didn’t like him, and wanted to endear himself to him. Dad studied the hut.

“Well,” he said, “it looks rather rickety. We need to nail some tar paper on it to keep the rain out.”

All at once, we heard barking at the fence. It was Herr Buselmeier’s bull terrier. Herr Buselmeier owns our building, and he lives two apartments above us. He is a fairly unfriendly man who resembles his bull terrier. The mutt just kept barking. He was barking at Sydney.



“Let’s go,” Dad said. “Bring the pig inside quickly before Buselmeier sees him. Shut up, you cur,” Dad snarled at the bull terrier.

Once we were inside the apartment and had shut Sydney in the bathroom, Dad said: “The pig absolutely has to go, otherwise Herr Buselmeier might kick us out with the pig.”

[...]

Chapter 5

[...]

But then came the Friday on which Sydney became an overnight hero.

Our parents had gone to an Egyptologists’ conference in Berlin. Dad was going to give a lecture there, a lecture about the hieroglyphics text that Sydney had run across.

“Maybe that pig will bring me luck,” he said, because he hoped to hear about a job opening at a museum or university while at the conference.

“Just remember: The father didn’t care about those things he couldn’t change,” Mom remarked. Dad had to laugh.

“Make sure the fridge door stays shut,” Mom said to us, “and lock everything up.”

We weren’t scared despite the fact we lived on the bottom floor, which everyone knows is easier to break into. However, several families lived in our building. And besides, Sydney was in the apartment. Dad had even given permission for Sydney to have free rein of the apartment at night. He had shut the door to his office, though.

We were in bed in our room. Betty was reading *Karlsson-on-the-Roof*. Zuppi was looking at the pigs in the picture book *Bobo, the Little Pig*, and I was reading *Treasure Island* for the third time. It’s my favorite book. Then suddenly Sydney raced into our room. Oinking excitedly, he dashed back and forth before sprinting back out of our room, as if he wanted to get our attention. His oinking had become a sustained sound, like a whistle.

“I think my pig’s whistling,” Zuppi said.

We finally got up and followed Sydney down the hall to the apartment door. He had come to a stop in front of it.

“What’s he doing?” Betty asked.

“Don’t know.”

But then we heard a scratching at the door, as if someone was trying to bore or screw something into the



lock. The next second, the door gave a jolt and sprang open, but only just a crack because we had put the chain on. Someone on the other side was pushing against the door, but the chain held. A hand appeared, feeling around for the chain. We stood there, mutely terrified, and I could feel icy goosebumps spread up my back to my neck. Sydney also stood frozen in front of the door, watching the hand as it slowly worked its way toward the chain until it reached the spot where it was screwed into the door. The hand vanished, but reappeared a moment later holding a very short screwdriver which it stuck into the screw in order to unscrew the chain.

That very second, as quick as lightning, Sydney stood up on his back legs and bit the hand. The burglar's yell echoed throughout the house. As you must already know, pigs have sharp teeth. Sydney refused to let go. He just stood there with his front legs propped against the door. The burglar yelled once more and tried to yank his hand back. Only then, when it got very uncomfortable for Sydney who was standing on his very tiptoes, did the pig let go.

Out in the staircase, the light went on, and people from upstairs came hurrying down, calling out about what had happened and how horrible the screams had been. Somebody called the police. A few minutes later, we heard the police sirens. We didn't unchain the door until the officers were standing at it. Two policemen stepped inside, looked at Sydney, and pulled out their pistols. The one officer cried: "Be careful! Rabid pig! Get out of the way."

He was talking to us and was about to shoot Sydney, but then Zuppi stood in front of Sydney and shouted: "Don't shoot! This is our pet pig. He just scared away a burglar."

Only then did the people realize that the screams hadn't come from one of us. The officers immediately started searching for the burglar. They discovered a man crouched behind a rhododendron bush in our front yard. They led him into the stairwell. The man claimed that he hadn't been in the house, but had simply been sitting very quietly behind the rhododendron, which wasn't an illegal activity.

"And what were you doing behind the rhododendron?" asked one of the officers.

"I needed to relieve myself."

"Was this the man who tried to break in?"

"We only saw the man's hand, but it must be bleeding. Sydney bit it."

The man was carrying his jacket over his arm in such a way that you couldn't see his hand. The officer ordered the man to show his hand, and when he wouldn't do that, the policeman simply took away his jacket. And then you could see the bite marks on his hand. At that moment, Sydney stepped out of the apartment. Startled and afraid, the man raised his arms over his head and said to Sydney in a trembling voice: "Be a good boy, Fido!"

The man was a little confused and seemed to think that Sydney was some kind of hairless dog.

A reporter and press photographer came by the next morning. The photographer took several pictures, mainly of Sydney Snout.



And that was the first photo of Sydney to appear in the newspaper. We three kids were standing in front of the apartment door, and in front of us, Sydney was sitting on his haunches, his head cocked up and his floppy ears at attention, as if he were keeping a close eye on the burglar. The article that was printed on Monday bore the headline: *Pig bites burglar*.