

personal history

ANIMAL HOUSE

My housemate was a pig. Literally. But it taught me plenty about the fullness of life. BY BRIAN SCHOTT '93

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN ONCE wrote, "The excellence of hogs is—fatness; of men—virtue." I think Mr. Franklin would have agreed that the pig we raised during our senior fall at Dartmouth was fat, but as to whether our virtues were in order—I'm not sure what old Ben would have thought.

It was mostly boredom that began the adventure, but a definite search for meaning surrounded it. I suppose if you dug deep enough, our virtues were mixed somewhere in the manure pile we cleaned from the pen each week as the withered leaves of autumn fell to the ground.

The pig entered my life at the end of my junior year. After my last exam, John Branda '93 and Ed Rachofsky '93 met me in our dorm to finalize our lease for an off-campus house we had decided to rent for the summer and senior year. It was one block behind the Hopkins Center and would give us a place to cook our own food and experience life outside the dorms.

"We got a pig," John announced.

"You got a what?"

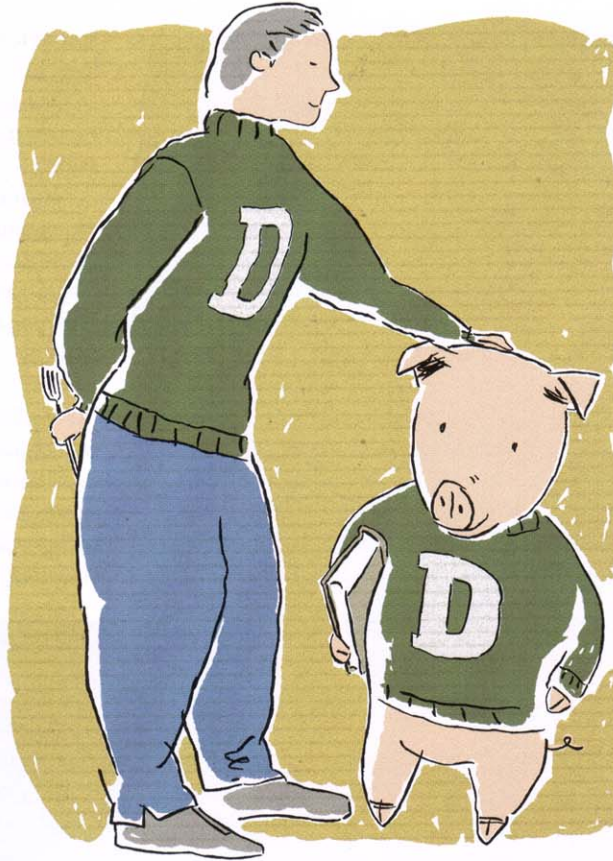
"A baby pig," John replied. "Ed and I bought a pig."

"It's upstairs," added Ed.

"In the dorm?" I began to get scared.

"We really didn't have anyplace else to bring it," John said. "Don't worry—it's really small."

I followed them upstairs to our room in Mid-Mass and immediately knew this was not a joke—a barnyard stench hit me when I opened our door.



I walked to the closed bathroom door and timidly opened it. Inside the shower stall a young pig snorted and circled. The stall was full of hay and dirt. The pig's skin was clean and pink, and its eyes were full and round. There was a water bowl at its feet. The pig looked directly at me. I looked back.

"No way," I said.

"Yes, way," said John. "I've always wanted a pig. We'll raise it outside and slaughter it before winter. It'll be an enlightening experience."

John had grown up in rural Vermont, and although destined to be a doctor, he had once expressed to me his true desire to be a farmer. "I don't think pets are allowed at the house," I said, in

an attempt at reason.

"There's nothing in the lease about owning farm animals," countered Ed, who was also on the fast track to a career in medicine. Maybe it was the long hours behind a microscope that was fueling this madness.

"How are we going to explain this to the landlord?" I asked. "She'll freak out."

"We'll think of something," said John. "Don't worry."

That afternoon we signed the lease and moved in. We converted a run-down shed outside the new house into a stable. The pig would have shelter from the weather and room enough to walk around outside and wallow in some mud. I left Hanover a few days later for summer break while my roommates remained to do lab research.

One day over break, John called to tell me that the pig had escaped, but the Hanover police had apprehended it and the pig was back in its stall, safe and sound. John and Ed were reinforcing the stable to prevent further break-outs. I expected the pig to be incarcerated by the time I returned to school in early autumn or at least find a letter from the dean's office in my Hinman box. But when I arrived, the delinquent pig was sitting quietly in its stall. It had nearly doubled in size since I had last seen it. Again, it looked at me with curious eyes.

"So did the landlord say anything?" I asked John as I unpacked.

"Yeah—she asked what was going on with the shed. I told her we were taking care of a miniature pig for a profes-

sor on sabbatical. I think she's a little suspicious though."

"A miniature pig!" I repeated, nodding my head as if this were a perfectly reasonable explanation. "So what happens when the pig gets really big?" I asked.

"We eat it."

IT WAS HARD NOT TO LIKE THE PIG. It really wasn't much trouble, although the smell became a sore subject with our neighbors a few times, and the ammonia stench that permeated my nostrils when I cleaned the pen could sometimes trigger a gag reflex. The first few times I took on cleaning duty, I had to hold my breath, dig quickly with the pitchfork, toss the heap into a trash bag, then turn away and gulp for a breath. But soon, like anything, I became used to it.

Actually, it wasn't long before just bringing the pig food and even cleaning the stall made me feel more alive. I looked forward to bringing the pig fresh grain and watching it eat, bringing it fresh hay to lie in, and its favorite—scratching it on the back with a stick. Friends would even drop by just to say hello to the pig.

The more time I spent with the pig, the more I felt part of a bigger life process. Beyond the classroom and all the books I was reading, there was this pig and a manure pile that grew each day. I began to slowly understand why a young Harry S. Truman, who took care of pigs on his farm, once wrote, "You really haven't any idea what a soul-stirring job it is, especially on a day when the mud is knee-deep." Or why he later said, "No man should be allowed to be president who does not understand hogs or hasn't been around a manure pile."

Read up on pigs and you'll find that they have been praised throughout his-

tory for their ability to adapt, their friendliness, their capacity for affection and also for their intelligence. For me, looking the pig straight in the eye was a lot like looking into the eye of a human—there seemed to be some form of understanding in there—more so than any other animal I have ever known. It always looked straight at me, as if it knew exactly what I was doing. At times

I clearly remember the day the butcher's truck arrived in front of our house. I think the pig knew exactly what was going to happen. When the truck arrived, it struggled and attempted to escape—but we captured it and clumsily loaded it onto the flatbed trailer. As the truck pulled away, I felt lonely and lost, and wondered what the hell I would be doing next year. The only thing certain

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the pig's gaze was hard for me to take, knowing that it was going to die by our hands. And although the pig seemed happy enough, content to eat and sleep and wait, it still unnerved me.

Some nights when I was awake at 3 a.m. writing papers and feeling stale, I would wander outside to the pen for a break. As always, the pig's gaze would pierce me. I started to dread the day when we would end its life and feast on its body. As a meat-eater, I rationalized that it was a healthy event to participate in—to actually see that the meat we eat was once a life. But that didn't make it any easier.

As the leaves of autumn splashed their colors across the Hanover hills, the pig continued to grow. "Your guess is as good as mine why the damn thing is growing! It's supposed to be miniature!" John tried explaining to the landlord. He promised that he would get to the bottom of the situation but that our professor had been difficult to contact. As the pig grew fatter, relations with our landlord grew thinner—and we arranged a slaughter date with the local butcher for the following weekend.

for me, I felt, was that the pig would be dead tonight.

For the next few days the empty stall was a constant reminder of the pig, but I also felt relieved that the whole experience was almost over.

Two days later, on Homecoming Weekend, we rented a large cooker, set up tables and chairs on our lawn, bought a keg of beer and invited friends and family to join us for the feast. We roasted the pig for eight hours until the meat fell off the bones and leapt down our throats. It was delicious.

I felt elated, not because this strange experience was finally over, but because we had briefly connected with a different way—an older way—of living. Pig was raised. Pig was slaughtered. As the autumn leaves fell to the ground around us, we happily and thankfully celebrated the fullness of life. ■

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