

Farrowing

By Michael Tennyson

“Well, how’s it going Dad?”

These hopeful words were spoken to a broad chequered back cross-strapped by dungarees. James stepped cautiously into the hotness and, closing the sheeted timber door behind him, sat down lightly beside him on the end of a bale of straw.

“Not so good, son.”

“When do you think it’ll happen, Dad?”

“I don’t know, son. She’s labouring hard but still can’t get them out. I think they’re breached cross-ways inside her.”

“And what about Pat Morgan?”

“Sure your mother has walked over to Donnelly’s and rung him three times already. But she couldn’t get the hold of him. And, anyway, even if you could get him on a Sunday evening, sure he’d be in no fit state.”

The heavily pregnant young gilt was lying on her side (like a big pink balloon about to burst, James thought) on a straw bed. Her eyes were closed and she was moaning steadily in distress. She lay with her coarse-haired back hard against a timber barrier. There was a gap at the bottom of this where the piglets could slip through. Beyond the barrier lay a narrow run where they could find sanctuary from her flailing bulk when they came. If they came.

An infra-red heat lamp hung down on a long flex tied with baler twine to the rafter. Dusty cobwebs pulsed in the rising waves of heat. The air in the piggery, thick with ammonia, cut into James’ eyes. He got up and walked over towards the door where some fresh air was whistling through a gap at the frame. Condensation formed a slick skin on the inside of the cold plastered walls. James stood with his back to the door as if he wasn’t even there. As if all he could do was look.

At Dad. A gentle giant sitting forward - elbows on knees. Big hands and thick fingers knitted through one another. James wondered was he praying. Those wind-weathered cheeks with their fine red-veined tracteries seemed to have sagged slightly. His breathing was slow and heavy. In the thick light he looked a bit older. James was slightly shocked when his father finally spoke - as if answering some imagined criticism.

“I’d try to get them out myself but my hands are too big and I’m afraid of hurting her. Sure it’s her first litter.”

James stared straight ahead. He was thinking too. He had always been the small one - ‘the wee man’. Weaker than his brother, he thought of himself as more hindrance than help around the farm. But still. Dad had always been patient and never passed harsh comment. Because of that very gentleness James hated to see him troubled like this. He would try to be brave.

“Could I not do it, Dad?”

“Well, are you sure about it son?” His father’s was a mixture of hope and uncertainty. “It’s not an easy job”.

But James was determined to grasp this rare opportunity out of his brother’s shadow. Soon he was standing shivering in the scullery. His old jumper sleeves were rolled up as far as they would go and his skinny hairless arms were in a zinc basin being scrubbed with warm water and being coated with an antiseptic jelly.

He knelt behind the gilt and with his dad’s steady whispered guidance, pursed his fingers like a cobra’s head and inserted them into the dilated opening. Lying on his side, James could feel the coldness of the concrete floor through a thin layer of wet straw. He

wriggled forward. As far as his wrist. As far as his elbow. His arm inched up the warm slippery canal. James considered the feeling not altogether unpleasant. He was almost up to his shoulder when his fingertip finally touched a hardness - slimy and wriggling.

“I’ve got something now, Dad,” he said, giddy that he had at least got this far. “Is it the back or the snout?” His Dad sounded almost giddy too.

“Hold on.” James willed his fingers further into the canal. The folds of his soggy jumper were now pressing hard against the gilt’s backside. This time when he spoke to his father his words rebounded off the gilt’s anus.

“It’s the snout, Dad...I think!”

“Good boy. Now hook your finger around the wee head - careful you don’t hurt its eyes - and pull it towards you. Gently now!”

Good boy. That was all that James needed to hear. Buoyed by the praise, he manoeuvred his fingers nimbly to clasp the tiny head and pulled it round to face forward. Then, pressing with his forehead down into the wet straw so that he could take the weight off his shoulder, James wriggled himself back inch by tentative inch. As his elbow emerged, the job got easier and he felt like the gilt was helping him. He got himself into a kneeling position now and drew the piglet out gently until it emerged gowned in a bloody membrane. He opened the tiny jaws and scraped the clogging mucus out of the frantic squealing mouth. The gilt gave out a loud groan soon after. Out came a rapid succession of slippery siblings, all wriggling frantically.

“She’s fair firing on all cylinders now, son”. His father’s eyes were wet with joy.

James and his father took turns, clearing out airways and drying them down with handfuls of soft straw. When they were satisfied, with the arrival of the afterbirth, that the full litter had been delivered, James’ father drew a jute bag across his knees. He grabbed each bonham in turn, snipping the tips off their sharp teeth with fine clippers so the sow would not reject them. He then handed them to James to apply a daub of iron paste onto their tongues with a wooden spatula before returning them to their mother’s exposed dugs. The little heads locked onto the engorged teats as they began to suckle, eyes firmly shut, oblivious to all else in their short stifling world.

In the heat, the slime had by now turned into a sticky, drying crust on James’ arms and the sagging sleeves of his jumper. James thought he should have felt tired and drained. But he felt none of this. His father put his hand on James’ shoulder and smiled a soft proud smile. “Good man”.

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