

The Runt

Ruth Dent



On a three hundred acre farm nestled in Hardy County, my grandfather raised pigs to sell at the Winchester Stockyard. Usually, all of the sows have had their litters by the middle of May. Surprisingly, one of granddaddy's sows had a litter in the second week of June in 1975. When granddaddy went to the barn, something caught his attention in the corner of the messy pen. In dread, his eyes focused on a tiny, slimy runt. He hated to see a runt. Because the other piglets would push the runt away from the milk and because the sow would likely roll over on him, grandfather knew that he would have to kill it to be merciful. With a heavy heart, he slowly picked up the dirty piglet and cleaned him. Carrying the precious runt like a newborn baby, granddad trudged up the hill to the house.

As he slowly entered the house, the aroma of fresh baked bread that floated in the air was not enough to lift granddaddy's spirits. Slowly, as if to change the fate of the little squirming piglet, he showed his wife. Granddad sadly said, "He will not survive the night in the pen with the sow and her litter. I'm going to have to kill him." Silently, with teary eyes, grandma shook her head. "No! Don't kill the piglet. In two days, all nine of our grandchildren will be staying here for two weeks without their parents. They need something to keep them out of trouble. This cute little fellow will be good for the grandkids. He will help them learn about farm. Let the grandkids take care of the runt," she said.

Grandfather started to object to what he thought was silliness. "The grandkids know absolutely nothing about raising pigs. If he survives, they'll become attached to this scrawny piglet. They'll think that he is a pet, and I won't be able to sell him at the stockyard when he is big enough, and they won't understand if I have to butcher him," reasoned Granddad.

"Remember the last time Ruth was here? She had the cats wearing bell bottom jeans and the dog wearing her new furry winter jacket. She tried to put the pioneer bonnet that you made her on the cow I was milking. They are not going to turn my farm into a petting zoo! I'm going to get the ax to kill the piglet," he added quickly.

While listening to granddaddy, grandma had warmed some milk, found a nipple, and cleaned a glass 7-up bottle. She quickly turned around with the bottle in one hand and an old ragged towel in the other. As she took the squealing little piglet out of grandfather's hands, she whispered to the runt, "You're going to be just fine. The grandchildren will love you and make sure that you live." With a fire in her eyes that grandfather had never seen before, she looked at him and said, "The grandkids WILL take care of this piglet!" So, the little piglet was saved.

When we arrived the next week, a towel-covered brown cardboard box behind the old black wood cook stove started to shake. The flimsy box squealed, then crept forward an inch as we jumped back in shock. With hesitant steps and shaky hands, Jeff, wishing he weren't the oldest cousin, attempted to pull the towel off the mysterious box. Each time he touched the box, it grunted, jumped, or leaned. Finally, the old towel was removed from the box, and the cute piglet popped its tiny pink snout out of the box.

Granddaddy carefully took the piglet out of the box and handed the piglet to Jeff. As he was leaving the room, he said to all of us, "The runt is your responsibility. Don't get attached to him. This is a working farm, not a petting zoo. When you go home, the piglet will be reunited with his litter. Understand? This pig is not a pet!"

"YES!" we screamed as Granddaddy left the room shaking his head as if he knew what was going to happen in the end, and we started to talk about naming the pig. Paula, Tracie, and I wanted to name the runt Cindy, Jan, Marcia, Laura, or Mary. Those names sounded great until Grandma told us that the piglet was a boy. Then, the boys suggested the names Greg, Ritchie, or "The Fonz." Grandma sent us outside when we started to argue. That evening, while *Green Acres* was on TV, we decided to name the runt Arnold.

Even though all of us were raised in the city, and we had no idea what to do with a pig, my cousins and I took the responsibility of Arnold the Piglet seriously. We not only made sure that he didn't go hungry, we fed him nine to eighteen bottles of milk a day. When the two weeks were up, and we had to go home, Arnold was the fattest piglet of the litter.

Each morning after breakfast, I would get Arnold ready for the day. My doll clothes were the perfect size for Arnold. He really looked cute in the red and white polka-dotted dress with white lace trim. Then, the boys would burst in screaming, "Don't put your girly doll clothes on Arnold! He is a boy pig."

"But he told me he likes wearing the frilly dresses!" I would shout back.

After a couple of days, Arnold was strong enough to go outside with us as long as we were not going to the creek. He would follow us around like grandfather's dog, Brownie, did. One day, as we were playing fetch with Brownie, Arnold just sat and watched Brownie running back and forth. After about fifteen minutes, Arnold jumped up, chased the stick, and returned with it in his mouth. I think old Brownie was relieved that Arnold could play fetch with us, so he could relax and enjoy his old age.

When our time on the farm was up, just as grandfather predicted, we were attached to the runt. We did not want Arnold in the pen with the other piglets. "Granddaddy, Arnold could share Brownie's doghouse instead of staying in the barn," I suggested. Unfortunately, he firmly declared, "No!"

Each time we would go to granddad's farm, my cousins and I dashed straight toward the barn to play with Arnold. All we had to do was call his name, and he would come running as if he remembered us. We would let the pig out of the barn so that he could play fetch and follow us around the farm again like a pup. Soon, the time came when Arnold was too big to be let out of the pen. So that we could play with him, Granddad would put Arnold in the pen with clean fresh hay.

A couple of years passed. We always played with Arnold as soon as we arrived on the farm until on one visit, Granddaddy told us we needed to come in the house instead of seeing Arnold first. All of us kept asking if we could go see him, but there was always an excuse for us not to go to the barn. We pestered Granddaddy all that evening and the next day. Grandfather was getting grouchy. Finally, he had enough of us bothering him. That evening as we were eating ham for dinner, I asked Granddaddy for what seemed like the millionth time, "Why can't we go play with Arnold?" He grumpily replied, "Because you are eating him!"

I could hear our dropping forks clinking on the table as we looked at Granddad in disbelief. "No. Tell us why we really can't see Arnold," whispered Robbie with hope in his voice that Granddad's reply was not true. Granddad did not make a sound as he looked at his own children for help. "Grandma? Mom? Dad? Is it true?" we all randomly asked. No one would answer us or look at us.

Out of fear and hope, all nine of us jumped up from the table, and knocked over our chairs as we raced to the barn to find out the answer. "Arnold! Arnold! Come here Arnold," we screamed as we searched ever nook and cranny in the barn. After a few minutes that seemed like an eternity, we realized that Granddad had told us the truth about Arnold.

In horror, we realized the fact that our fat, friendly porker pet had been butchered, and we had been eating him all day. We had devoured fresh sausage for breakfast, pork chops for lunch, and ham for dinner.

"How could Granddad do that?" asked Tracie with tears in her eyes. "Why didn't he butcher another pig?" asked David. "I can't believe he did that," whispered Brian. "My Pig! Not my pig!" wailed Paula as I sat in the empty pen with tears streaming down my face. As we mourned the lost of our dear sweet pet pig, we toyed with the idea of never coming back to the farm because it would not be the same without Arnold, but we realized that we loved and wanted to be with Grandma. Instead, we vowed to never talk to Granddad again.

For the rest of our sorrowful visit, we ignored our pet killing Granddad while savoring every minute we had with our sweet loving Grandma. None of us came to the understanding that she helped to butcher Arnold, fry him up, and serve him to us as breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Out of fear of having another dinner of Arnold, we ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for our meals for the rest of our time there and for a long time to come.

To this day, when I see a piglet, I remember the summer when I was five. In my mind, I relive the days of dressing up Arnold and playing fetch with him. After a couple of years went by, my cousins and I forgave Granddad for what happened to Arnold. However, to this very day, I still cannot eat ham.

Where I Am From

By Ruth Dent



I am from a strong loving family,
Paul and Grace,
A marriage that survived Dad being home
Only a couple days each month because of
work,
Low wages and no wages at times,
A marriage that lasted 32 years
But ended when my dad died.

I am from a simple time,
AM radios, cassette tapes,
Record players, 45's, and 33's,
Playing Red Rover, tag, and riding bikes for
hours with friends,
Making up games, never saying
"I'm bored!" or "There's nothing to do!"

I am from a strong Christian faith,
Singing in the choir,
4-H projects, camps,
Endless days of band practice,
Ballet costumes and recitals.

I am from a visit to my grandparents' house
each summer,
Playing in the creek and the cornfield with my
cousins,
Catching minnows in a can,
Helping Grandma with her chores,
Gathering eggs and making bread, butter, and
ice cream,
Helping Grandpa milk the cow, feed the pigs,
and weed the garden,
Sitting on the front porch to watch the sunset.

I am from the idea of being an old maid for life,
Meeting a wonderful man,
Becoming great friends,
Hearing that magical question,
Will you be my wife?
Saying I do on a hot June day,
Seven years ago,
Looking forward to sharing the future with my
best friend, my husband.