

Mortimer is simple yet ambitious. While he is generally content with nothing more than a tweed jacket, a hot bath, and all the cornmeal he can stomach, give him riveting political discourse and you won't hear the end of it.

Mortimer was born an extraordinary pig, although his parents were disappointed when he emerged with curly tail and wet snout. They had been hoping for a bouncing baby boy rather than a target for next year's Christmas dinner. Mortimer Sr. caught one glance of his progeny's furry hide and stalked to the other side of the pen, thankful that at least he wouldn't have to pay college expenses for a child who was on the pudgy side of swine. Mauve, with her big heart and feminine instinct, nuzzled closer to her newborn and shed a single tear that he would never travel further than the signpost at the end of the dirt road. There would be no silver screen for a boy with hooves for hands and a penchant for rooting around in mud.

At the age of two Mortimer realized he possessed slightly greater intelligence than your average farm animal. While dozing in the sun with a young calf he pointed at a dandelion and wondered aloud, "It's a wonder something so beautiful can exist with no thought or consideration of itself." The calf promptly ate the bud, and it was then Mortimer realized he needed a less bovine conversation partner.

His mother taught him to read that year using street signs and license plates for reference. He quickly advanced to receipts, love letters, and anything fallen from the pocket of an unwary farm hand, and developed an appetite for knowledge rivaled only by his appetite for lasagna alla bolognese. What joy befell when the farm master's daughter left her schoolbooks beneath a tree where she studied! By the time Mortimer was six he could recite all European countries and their capitals, and his favorite book was *Charlotte's Web*: an interspecies classic.

His father, on the other hoof, bestowed a taste for the finer things in life. Although the evening kitchen slop consisted of an adequate array of vegetables, Mortimer Sr. taught his son to sniff out leftover pate and aged cheese rinds, and he practically squealed when he uncovered unspoiled crème fraîche. Mortimer Sr. taught his son to walk upright and proud (still on four feet; Mortimer Jr. could never master two), and taught him to be kind to his mother. He was a harsh disciplinarian whenever Mortimer Jr. rolled in the mud, because you never knew who would be watching. "Never lose control," he chided, and commanded that Junior contemplate the meaning of his words in respectful silence.

Nothing could prevent the young pig from devouring information, and he accumulated a pile of reading materials from *The Encyclopedia of Country Living* to *Animal Farm*. When he got his hooves on a copy of *The Last Lion* he decided there was no finer aspiration than to stand at the head of an army with a cigar and a glass of whiskey toasting the downfall of enemy troops. He learned to read lips so he could understand commentary on late night news channels in the farmhouse, and he passionately discussed Herodotus with his father and Modigliani with his mother. The golden road paved with knowledge seemed to glisten on the way to a bright

new future. Pigs need not simply accept their lot in life; they could rise up to demand equality for all bacon! Oink from the fields, my brothers, and wrinkle your snout at the smell of indecency!

But everything changed when Mortimer Sr. passed from the living realm into Heaven. Junior felt he had lost his anchor, and with the deteriorating situation of world politics he saw the dark side of knowing too much. All those kids staring blankly at screens and the vultures in the Capitol cawing over so many bits of society's flesh. Where was the respect, the civility? He imagined the whole world had stopped standing up when a woman entered the room.

It seemed futile for a pig from a small town in western Vermont to change the world when he couldn't convince the farm master to keep eggplant out of the slop (he never did like the texture). Despondently he wandered about the pen, wondering what his father would have said. "Stand up for yourself, son," Mortimer Jr. heard, "Never sit down when injustice reigns in the world. When an intelligent man fails to act in the face of adversity he has already surrendered."

Mortimer Jr. chewed his lip for a moment, then sprinted to the far side of the field where he kept a stash of two-legged trinkets: a baseball cap, a cigar box (half full), and a cracked touchscreen device. He swiped left with his snout, then right, and saw the path through his piggy silence. The universe of human conversation lay open before him, and he strode boldly into the fray.

He'd just have to make sure the household cat stole one of those white cords next time she went inside.