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CLÉMENTINE BEAUVAIS (born 1989) is a French author living in the UK. She writes books in both French and English, for a variety of ages, and is a lecturer at the University of York. *Piglettes* won four prizes in France, including the biggest book prize for young adult fiction, the Prix Sorcières. Film and stage versions are also in production. Now Clémentine has translated her book into English!



Piglettes

Clémentine Beauvais

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PIGLETTES

To my favourite dwellers of
Bourg-en-Bresse, who fleetingly
appear throughout this novel

PART I

Bourg-en-Bresse

I

Here we go: the Pig Pageant results have just come out on Facebook. I'm in third place: bronze medal.

How perplexing. After winning gold for two years in a row, I thought I'd never lose the top spot. I was wrong.

I check who's won the grand title. She's a new girl, in Year 11—I've never met her. Her name is Astrid Blomvall. She's blonde, pimply, and squints so much that you can only see half of her left pupil; the rest is tucked under her eyelid. The jury's choice is perfectly understandable.

A little Year 8 has won silver: Hakima Idriss. She is, indeed, very ugly too, with her black moustache and her triple chin; she looks like a pug.

Our dear friend Malo has left comments on each of the eighteen shortlisted girls' pictures. He paid special tribute to me:

> Competition was fierce, but Mireille Laplanche, whatever the final results, will always be to me the most legendary Pig Pageant winner. Her fat blubbery bum, her droopy breasts, her potato-shaped chin and her tiny porcine eyes will remain imprinted in our memories for ever.

There were already lots of likes (78).

I added mine (79).

Then I tumbled downstairs into the living room and told Mum, "I won bronze this year!"

"Right. And what should I do, congratulate you?"

"I don't know. Would you rather I'd kept my gold medal?"

"I'd rather you'd never won the Pig Pageant at all."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have slept with an ugly old man."

"Don't speak ill of your father."

"Maybe he'd be proud of me!"

"He wouldn't be proud."

"I'm going to send him a letter."

"Don't send him a letter."

"'Dear Daddy darling, as yet another lovely school year draws to a close, your beloved daughter has won the bronze medal in the Pig Pageant organized annually at the Marie Darrieussecq High School in Bourg-en-Bresse. It is a happy disappointment, for she usually claims the top spot in that competition.'"

"Mireille, you're getting on my nerves." She rolls her eyes, and confides in the Habitat ceiling lamp: "I don't like teenagers."

My father is half French, half German. For confidentiality purposes, I shall call him here Klaus Von Strudel. A professor at the Sorbonne University in Paris, Klaus writes philosophy books. He was also my mother's supervisor for her doctoral thesis, and supervised her so well that she

ended up pregnant with me. Alas, their relationship was to remain forever secret! For Klaus was at the time—and still is—the husband of someone with a lot of potential. The proof: that someone has now been the president of our beautiful country of France for the past two years. I will call her, to keep things simple, Barack Obamette.

Barack Obamette and Klaus Von Strudel have three sons, who are therefore my half-brothers, and who have moronic Greek-hero names, but I shall refer to them here under the friendlier pseudonyms of Huey, Dewey and Louie.

For reasons beyond my understanding, Mum left Paris when she found out she was pregnant; she decided to become a philosophy teacher in Bourg-en-Bresse, which is the capital of the department of Ain (pronounced, not coincidentally, like that noise you make when you get a painful surprise). She has married a Monsieur Philippe Dumont, who is as bland as his name indicates. The three of us live together in a cosy detached house with a garden, in the pleasant company of the dog Kittycat and the cat Fluffles.

Am I in touch with Klaus? I am not, because he's never replied to any of my letters. Instead of replying to his secret daughter, he gives interviews to *Philosophy Magazine*. He also produces, roughly once every three years, a metaphysical treatise. Mum buys it and reads it, and I read it too. She says, *You won't understand, Mireille, it's complicated*, but I read it anyway and I understand sometimes.

Klaus writes things like:

> Speculative realism has helped *lubricate the way* towards a post-Kantian metaphysics...

> Quentin Meillassoux's thought grabs contemporary metaphysics and gives it an *orgasmic shake-up*...

> I reject, however, the possibility of a philosophy *castrated of* Plato and Descartes...

Me: "Klaus is a dirty old man, isn't he?"

Mum: "Stop it. For one, he isn't called Klaus, and secondly, you don't understand anything—his thinking is revolutionary, but you can't understand that; you just don't."

"Mum, he's comparing Plato and Descartes to a pair of balls."

"Fifteen!" Mum sighs. "Fifteen! The stupidest age in the world."

"Fifteen and a half, if you please."

Aged eight, I sent my first letter to Klaus:

> *Hello Sir,*
> *My mother (Patricia Laplanche) told me that you we're my father. I woud like to meet you in Paris and also meet [Huey and Dewey*]. I am*

* Louie hadn't been born yet.

at Laurent Gerra Primary Schol. I have good mark's and I learnt to read at four year old.

Goodbye,

Mireille Laplanche.

Aged twelve, I sent a second letter:

Dear Sir,

You never replied to the letter I sent you some time ago. It would have been nice of you, but whatever. I'm in Year 8 at Marie Darrieussecq High School. I'm top of my class. I'd still like to meet you, in Paris or elsewhere. My mobile number is […]

Sincerely,

Mireille.

I sent the third one a few months ago.

[Klaus],

You are my father. You know it, because you must have received my first two letters. I see you all the time on TV with [Barack Obamette] and [Huey, Dewey and Louie]. To be honest I think it's pretty shameful that you're not replying to me. I'm fifteen, I'm not an idiot. In case you're worried, my mother isn't "making me do this". I've read all your books. Call me.

Mireille.

Still no reply. Mum knows perfectly well about that last letter, since I left the envelope casually resting on the kitchen table before posting it, with the following address:

[Klaus Von Strudel]
Presidential Palace of the Élysée
Paris
Hurry up, Mr Postman, Daddy's waiting!

"Hilarious," said Mum. "Hilarious; how funny you are, my child! I'm crying with laughter."

"Do you think we should let her post it?" asked Philippe Dumont, looking worried (= pursed lip + fiddling with his cufflinks).

"Let her do whatever she likes, she just wants attention," said Mum. "He won't reply, anyway, so it absolutely doesn't matter."

Philippe Dumont's intensely sad that he's never filled the gap Klaus Von Strudel left in my life. He takes me to the cinema, to the museum and bowling. He lets me eat chestnut spread directly from the pot. He says, "You must see me as your father, Mireille! I am your father!" I put my hands around my mouth and I go, "*Khoooo… khaaaa…* I am your faaaaather..." Then he gets annoyed: "This is my house, Mireille! That's my sofa! You live in my home, I'll have you know." That's only partly true, since Mum owns half the house, but she hasn't finished paying back the mortgage because of her teeny teacher's

salary, whereas Philippe is a solicitor and a member of the Rotary club.

"What's the Rotary club, Mum?"

"It's a club with members like Philippe, people with various jobs; they meet up, they talk about things, they introduce their children to one another."

Philippe tries to introduce me to people. "Let me introduce you to Patricia's daughter, Mireille."

Rotary club members are ab-so-lute-ly de-lighted to shake hands with Quasimodo above taramasalata canapés at the Christmas party. One day, I must have been around nine years old, an extraordinarily shrewd person remarked, "This little girl looks strangely like that philosopher, you know, erm?"

I had a sudden flash of hope; I stared at that rosy-cheeked, flabby man and prayed, *Come on, say it, say I look like Klaus Von Strudel, sow the seeds of suspicion, let people think about the dates…Maybe if the whole of Bourg-en-Bresse petitions Klaus, he'll publicly recognize I'm his daughter!*

Instead of that, a lady suggested, "Jean-Paul Sartre?"

The man nodded vigorously, "That's it! Jean-Paul Sartre!"

"That's not exactly flattering!" the lady laughed.

"No," said the man candidly.

Google → Jean-Paul Sartre → squinty old man, atrociously ugly. Perhaps even uglier than Klaus.

I told Mum the next morning: "If you'd met Jean-Paul Sartre, I bet you'd have ended up in bed with him."

"Do you want a slap?"

"I'm just saying he's your type, that's all! A philosopher, revolutionary theory, blah blah... It's a compliment, Mummy! Why do you always take things the wrong way?"

"Don't be obnoxious. I don't spend my time sleeping around, with philosophers or anyone else."

"Well anyway, listen, he's dead," I said. "He died in 1980, Jean-Paul Sartre. And I was born hundreds of years later, so there's no doubt here—he's not my dad."

"Indeed he is not," Mum groaned.

I sang the Funeral March (taaah-taah-tadaahh-taaah-tadaaah-tadaah-tadaah) for a very long time to pay tribute to the memory of Jean-Paul Sartre. Mum started getting a bit twitchy about it: "Shut up, Mireille, you're giving everyone a headache," etc.

Then I said something I shouldn't have. "You know what we learnt in History, Mummy? After the Second World War, the French women who'd slept with Germans all had their hair shaved off as punishment. So imagine, just a few years earlier, you could have..."

She stared at me, looking like she was trying to process what I was saying, in utter disbelief. It unsettled me a bit, but I finished, as a joke:

"...lost your pretty curls!"

Slap.

"Go to your room. I don't want to see you here."

I don't know why I like to wind my mother up like that. I don't know why I poured the contents of that bottle of Flower by Kenzo perfume, which Philippe Dumont had so thoughtfully picked for my birthday

("Mireille, have you thanked Philippe for the perfume he so thoughtfully picked for your birthday?") down the toilet. And I made sure not to flush, so as to make it very clear that his fifty-four euros of fragrance had ended up down the drain.

I don't know why, but that's how it is.