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# **This Little Pig**

## **by Mary Robinette Kowal**

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Aage Llievang tried explaining to his mother, but she shook her head. "Now, Aage. Really. Your own car? A car? What would the other co-op members think?"

"Mom, this is a classic! 1952 MG-TD. It's even--"

"British Racing green... yes, Aage. I know. Your father knows. Your grandmother knows. We all know about the car."

"But Mom, look." He waved his Handy at her. The MG glowed on its small screen. "There's one up for auction on carsforsale.com and I'm too young to bid. You've got to help me."

"Aage!" She put her hands on her hips and shook her head. "Your age is not the problem. You can't even afford it."

"I'd pay you back." How could he explain his fascination with the Vehicular Age to her? The seductive sheen, the rumble, the combustive power of automobiles called to him like a siren at sea. He coveted the sense of possibility inherent in the turn of a key.

And the MG-TD held a place high in his list of hope. British Racing Green, wood dashboard and a four-stroke engine. He had only seen one MG-TD, when he'd gone on holiday with his folks to the U.K. They had been walking down the street in downtown London. Most of the traffic had been pedestrian or cyclist. The occasional fuel-cell car glided by like a ghostly leftover from the Vehicular Age. Double-decker biodiesel buses roared past regularly, trailing the odor of fish and chips after them.

And then *it* came down the street toward them. A car that purred as its rounded lines soaked up the sun with a green so deep it was almost black. It pulled into the valet parking of a grand hotel and two people got out. Aage barely noticed them. He stared inside the car, where chrome and brass gleamed against a burled wood dashboard. The doors of the car shut with the heavy thunk of real metal. A valet pulled the car out of the parking circle and Aage never saw it again.

The rest of that afternoon, while his family went through museums, Aage had surfed his Handy through the Web until he found it. The MG-TD. British Racing Green.

But trying to buy a private car meant filling out forms on actual paper. Heck, just trying to buy gas for a combustion engine involved more essays than a world civ. exam. "Please, Mom. It would mean a lot to me."

"The answer is no."

Aage changed tack. "What about my driver's license? Can I get that?"

She sighed and massaged the bridge of her nose. "Why?"

"So--so I can drive."

His mother pursed her lips. "Drive what, Aage? Do you expect us to rent a car so you can practice? Who would teach you? What would you even do with a car?"

"Drive it. Go places"

"No one drives. That's what buses and bikes are for."

"Some people do. Truckers and bus drivers and--"

"That's their job." She held up her hand, cutting off his next protest. "Do you know anyone personally, anyone at all who drives a private car?"

"Concetta Dumas-Chan."

"Who?"

"She graduated last year. She drove."

"Is she the American?"

Aage stared at his mom, disheartened. He was about to get The Speech. "Her parents moved here before she was born."

"I don't care! Everyone else on Samsø signed the energy covenant. If they want to be part of the island they can start acting like decent citizens."

He had no answer for the Speech.

She shook her head. "We bought you a very good bike, now stop griping and show a little gratitude."

She stalked out of the kitchen, leaving Aage to stare at the MG-TD on his Handy. He grimaced. "Fine. I'll do it myself."

That night he surfed through the classifieds until he found a job he could do after school.

#

*The Samsø Energiselskab Biogas Plant needs bright, enthusiastic young men and women who enjoy outdoor work. Help power your island's energy plant and enjoy a close relationship with animals.*

#

Aage bicycled to the biogas plant for his first shift, excited by the idea that he was going to start earning money. The MG-TD on the website would be long gone, but he could at least earn enough to take driving lessons and get a license.

"Hey, Llievang!" His new boss, Erik "the Red" Jorgensen, yelled at him across the plant. "You're late."

Aage glanced at the clock. The hands made a crisp right angle across the face, touching twelve and three. "Sorry, Mr. Jorgensen. I thought I had a three o'clock shift?"

Mr. Jorgensen scowled. "In uniform. Not getting *into* uniform on company time. Van is waiting." He jerked his bearlike body around and strode off past the humming generators.

Aage pulled his coveralls on over his school clothes, without bothering to change into the shorts and t-shirt he had brought to wear. He slammed his feet into his boots and ran down to the loading dock at the end.

The van waited silently next to the loading dock, in between trailers of pig feces. Aage jumped off the dock, nearly slipping on an escaped pig turd when he landed. He threw open the van door.

"Hi, Aage." Concetta Dumas-Chan half-turned in the driver's seat so he had a glimpse of her exotic almond eyes. Aage nearly fell down at the sight of her.

Aage used to sit behind Concetta, in anatomy. Whenever she laughed, she tilted her head back; he had watched her dark curls tumble around her shoulders while he sat in the rear of the class. Once. Just once, he wanted to sit beside her and watch her cheeks curve with her smile.

"Coming with us?" Lasse Birkmand, one of the guys from school, punched Aage on the shoulder. He outweighed Aage by about ten kilos and out-thought him by twenty IQ points.

"Sorry." He rubbed his shoulder and climbed into the van. "I thought we were supposed to show up at three, not be dressed and ready to go at three."

"Geez, Aage. Don't you ever read?" Lasse shook his head. "It's page seven in the employee handbook."

The other boys laughed. One of them said, "Aage reads, if it's about a car." He hit Aage on the back of the head. "Right, Aage?"

"Yeah. He knows at least four letters." Lasse said.

"M. G. T. D." They chimed together, like it was rehearsed.

Aage's face turned red. He had thought the teasing would stay behind at school. He slouched down in his seat and turned his face to the window.

"It's a nice car." Concetta said.

Silence fell over the van. The boys looked at each other. Aage sat up and leaned forward. "You've seen one?"

"Driven one."

The skies opened and angels came out to sing hosannas. Aage looked at the back of Concetta's dark head and it glowed with the light of glory.

"Dr- driven one?" His voice cracked. "A real one?"

She nodded. "Yep." She pulled the van into a driveway and down past the pigpens to the tool shed. "First stop."

"Come on, Aage." Lasse pushed Aage in front of him. "This is us."

"But--." There was so much he needed to ask her. Where had she driven one? How? What color was it? Were the seats real leather? What year was it? Did it still have a real combustion engine? Did it--?

Aage looked around. The van was gone. He and Lasse were standing outside the toolshed. Lasse held two shovels in his hand. "Earth to Aage. Come in, Aage."

"Where?" He turned a full circle, but there were only pigs and Lasse in sight.

"Gone." Lasse handed him a shovel. "You're drooling."

Aage wiped his mouth with his hand. It came away dry. "Am not."

"Made ya check." Lasse headed for the gate of the nearest pen.

Aage trotted after him. "Did you hear? Concetta's driven an MG-TD. I mean. Wow. I--. Wow, I mean, wow."

Lasse looked down at him. "Tell it to the pigs, huh, Aage?" And he walked through the gate, shutting it behind him.

Aage headed for the pigpen next to Lasse's. In theory, they could've used sweeper bots to collect the manure, but pigs didn't like bots. Some frequency they put out or something interfered with the pigs' right to a "natural life", as if they weren't going to get slaughtered later.

The island's energy compact meant everything had multiple purposes. The pigs were raised for food, and their waste was recycled for energy. Reduce, reuse, recycle. Aage had heard the slogan ad nauseum since he was born.

The pigs teemed around Aage and the stench of their feces crawled into his nose and took up residence in his sinuses. He dragged a wheel-barrow next to him, trying to fill it as mechanically as if he were a bot himself.

He slowly eased into a rhythm till he was working on autopilot.

He thought about Concetta. They were riding down the open road. The British racing green hood glistened in the noonday sun. Bicyclists threw their pathetic two-wheelers into the ditches by the side of the road in a desperate attempt to get out of the way. The MG-TD's top was down and Concetta's long black hair blew back from the wind. The four-stroke engine hummed with promises. Aage gripped the stickshift and shifted gears smoothly.

"Aage!"

He blinked and turned quickly, almost slipping on the pig turds. Lasse leaned on the fence separating their two pens.

"You gonna make love to that shovel or use it?"

Aage looked down at the shovel in his hands. He held the shaft of it tightly in one hand, but the other lay lightly on the end. He felt a flush of color up to his hairline. Lasse must have been watching him act out driving the MG. His ears burned. Had he made noises too?

Lasse shook his head and returned to his work. His broad back dipped and rotated with the regular rhythm of his shoveling. Aage winced when he realized Lasse had nearly finished mucking out his pen.

He growled to himself, and started shoveling furiously. Sweat rolled down the back of his neck, and soaked into the collar of his school clothes.

Lasse moved on to the next pen. His golden hair still gleamed, as if he'd never worked at all.

Shoveling faster, Aage tried to ignore the way his clothes stuck to the sweat on his back. He tugged at the closure of his coveralls, regretting that he hadn't taken the time to change out of his school clothes. A slight breeze came through his open collar to relieve some of the heat.

The stupid pigs kept getting in his way. They were supposed to be smart animals. Why didn't they have enough sense to move? They kept standing right where he needed to put the shovel. And they were big. Most of them outweighed him. Their constant squealing was worse than bad brake pads.

Aage loosened the front of his coveralls farther and focused on his shovel, on trying to find a rhythm. Like a four-stroke engine.

Then his wheel-barrow was full. Aage blinked and realized he'd finished this pen. He grinned as he pushed the wheel-barrow back across the pen, dodging pigs. Their heavy bodies pushed against him as if he were just one more pig destined for the ham factory. When he got to the gate, a black and white sow lay in front of it.

He put the wheel-barrow down and sighed. "Oh, for crying out loud." He clapped his hands. "C'mon pig. Let's move it."

The sow blinked at him at him with long dark lashes. She lay completely still.

Aage took off his gloves and wiped his forehead. Why were pigs so stubborn? "Let's go." He prodded her with his foot. It was like prodding a rock.

The sow flicked an ear.

Aage rolled up his sleeves, and bent over to push her. Her skin felt warm and bristly. He wrinkled his nose and pushed harder.

The sow did nothing.

Aage stood up and looked at the sky. The MG gleamed in his mind and he was not about to let a pig keep him from his car. He let his breath out explosively. "Fine. You asked for it."

Grabbing the shovel off the wheel-barrow, he aimed it at the big, fat, hairy bottom and paddled her. The shovel met the sow's backside with a meaty slap. Her eyes widened and she squealed, surging to her feet. Aage had time to grin before the sow bolted past his wheelbarrow and the world went into slow motion.

Her heavy shoulder caught the handle and tipped it. Aage saw it tilt away from him. He yelled "No!" and heard his voice echo through the pigpens.

He lunged for the wheel-barrow. It hung for a moment, balanced on the wheel and one leg, the other leg posed almost gracefully in the air. Then gravity caught it.

The wheel-barrow fell, emptying manure all over the ground. Pigs scrambled to get out of the way, surging against Aage and knocking him off-balance. His foot came down on a pig turd and slid away from him. He staggered. Tripped. Fell.

Manure from the wheel-barrow cushioned his fall. It squished through his bare fingers, clinging to his arms and spattering his face and his clothes. It worked its way inside his coveralls. He knelt with his arms buried deep in the warm mound. As he pushed himself away from the stool, a pig smacked into him from behind.

Aage fell face forward into the manure.

"Shit!" Aage jumped to his feet and held his arms as far away from the rest of his body as possible. He screwed his eyes shut and spat. Gasping, he shook his head. Spat again, working his tongue around his mouth, retching at the taste of offal.

He opened his eyes to see Lasse standing in the middle of the next pen with his mouth open and his shovel was raised in mid-swing, manure balanced delicately on the end of it.

Aage had never seen Lasse without some smart remark. Aage took in a breath to comment, but the breath lodged inside him. There was nothing to say.

He turned around. The sow was nowhere in sight. Aage shoved open the gate and trudged down to the tool shed to hose off.

At the tool shed, he stared at the faucet and the hose. Then at the brown encrusting his hands. Flies buzzed around him. Footsteps chased him down the driveway.

"Hey." Lasse caught up with him. "Are you okay?"

Aage nodded.

His Handy rang in his pocket. Its cheerful melody grabbed his nerves and shook them. He looked at his hands again. The Handy's tune played on. Aage choked on his own breath.

"Call 'em back." Lasse reached past him and turned on the water. The Handy stopped, and the clean sound of

water played in his ears. The water got colder as it came from farther underground. Despite the numbing chill, Aage scrubbed his hands under the water and wiped at his face.

He started shaking. Aage shoved off his boots and stripped the coveralls from his body. He threw them aside but a mixture of sweat and pig crap still covered his school clothes. He tore at them and stood shivering, in just his briefs, as he frantically scrubbed his skin trying to get all traces of manure off himself.

He could hear the pigs squealing in mockery. The sound came in waves almost as if they were telling jokes about him. Aage let the water sluice over his head, squinting against the dirty brown stream that poured onto the ground.

Lasse was mercifully silent. He simply held the water for Aage as if it were a normal part of the day.

"Why are you being nice to me?"

"Geez, Aage." Lasse shifted the hose. "You don't hit a guy when he's down." Suddenly, his hand lowered. "What the-- "

A pig ran past. Aage spun. The black and white sow gamboled in the driveway.

All of the blood drained out of Aage's face. His breath sucked out of him in an empty cry. He hadn't shut the gate.

He sprinted down the driveway, Lasse beside him.

"What do we do? What do we do?" Aage slammed the gate shut trapping the rest of the pigs inside.

Lasse ran his hand through his faultless hair. "We'll herd her."

"Herd her. Good." Aage nodded.

They went after the sow and chased her, one boy on each side. The sow dodged and circled. They jumped around, waving their hands and hollering, forcing her step by painful step closer to the pen.

She grunted and huffed at them, shaking her head. Her beady eyes glared at them behind her black and white mask. They forced her back to the gate, until Lasse stood between the sow and freedom. Aage put his hand on the gate.

"Now, Aage!" Lasse lunged at the sow. She wriggled back from him.

Aage held the gate open and the sow danced back through it. He shut the gate. The click of the gate's latch was sweeter than the sound of an MG's door.

"Hi, guys." Concetta leaned out the window of the van, smiling as she pulled up beside them.

The sweat dried on Aage's skin and he began to shiver as the air sucked the warmth from his body. Not Concetta. He was half-naked! Aage closed his eyes and held onto the fence, as if that would make her go away.

The van door opened and he heard footsteps and laughter.

"Hey, Aage," Lasse held a towel and a coverall. "Let's hose you off again."

Aage frowned. "Where's Concetta?"

"She's round the other side of the van." He smirked. "Want me to call her?"

Aage's eyes widened and he waved his hands. "No! No, no, no. I just didn't see her." He looked at the towels and coveralls again. "Where'd you get those?"

"Concetta brought them."

Every time Aage stepped, his wet underwear shifted and clung to his body. The briefs slowly tried to climb up the crack between his buttocks, aiming to be the world's worst wedgie. With the van behind them, there was no way Aage was going to reach back to free his briefs.

Concetta was behind him. The only girl he knew that had seen an MG-TD. Heck, the only girl he knew who could drive. She had driven one. This goddess of the road was behind him, watching his scrawny legs pick their way down the driveway. Aage wrapped his arms around himself and shivered again.

Not that she'd be watching him. He looked out of the corner of his eye at Lasse. The guy was so big he could play American-style football if he wanted. Guys like that were the ones girls paid attention to, not shit-faced idiots like him.

When they got to the toolshed, Aage took the hose and waved Lasse away. He felt a little squeamish about accepting help...something about being mostly naked when Concetta was there. He didn't want to think about it too much. Lasse left the towel and the coveralls folded on the bench next to the shed.

Aage hosed off again. At least Concetta hadn't been there to see him land in the manure, although Lasse was sure to tell her. That wasn't as bad as if she had actually seen it happen. Aage grinned. Lasse had the dumbest look on his face when Aage crawled out of the pile of manure. It was pretty funny, when he thought about it. If it had happened to someone else, it would have been hysterical.

The towel was thick and white, and soft against his skin. It smelled fresh. Like Concetta. He toweled vigorously, chafing his skin, rubbing all trace of filth away.

He put on the coveralls and felt a sense of relief that he hadn't felt since he still carried a blankie. When his mother used to bring it in from the clothesline, he'd clutch it, and feel safe and protected. Clothing, even with wet underwear, made all the difference in the world. He picked up his boots and hosed them off, inside and out, until the water ran clear. He dumped out the last of the water, turned the boots upside down to drain, and shut off the faucet. He was clean again.

Things were starting to look up. He pulled on the damp boots; they felt great. Aage picked up Concetta's towel and headed back to the van.

Aage looked down, folding the towel as he walked. He tried rehearsing what he'd say to her. "Thanks," seemed too simple. But he didn't want to make a big production out of it either, didn't want to go into the reason he'd been half-naked, chasing a pig.

Concetta was talking on her Handy when he got to her. She smiled at him and waved that she'd just be a little longer. He nodded and leaned against the van, trying to be nonchalant. His heart raced like he was still chasing the sow.

Concetta laughed. Her head tilted back, showing the curve of her long, tawny neck. "All right. We'll see you soon. Bye." She closed her Handy and turned to him. Her smile sparkled in the evening sun.



Aage felt his knees go weak.

"Here." He held the damp towel out. "Thanks."

God. He was an idiot. *Here? Thanks?* A pig could have made better conversation.

Concetta accepted the towel with another smile and tossed it in the back of the van. "Feel better?"

Aage nodded. "Oh, yeah. You've got no idea. I'm glad these were in the van."

"Oh, Mr. Jorgensen sent me over with them."

Aage blinked. "Mr. Jorgensen?"

"He saw you on the Webcam. Thought you needed help."

A roaring began in Aage's ears. "Webcam?" His voice broke.

The day he had applied for the job, Mr. Jorgensen took him and the other boys through the factory. They dutifully admired the covered tanks of pig slurry and learned about the enzyme action that turned them into concentrated methane. Mr. Jorgensen had shown them the control room, and then showed them streamers of people mucking out the pigpens. Except it hadn't been streamers, it had been a live feed from Webcams at the various pig farms. Webcams that were available, live, 24/7 on the biogas plant's site.

"We tried calling your Handy to let you know the pig was out."

"My--my hands were dirty."

"Oh, I know." Concetta shook her head, dark curls tumbling around her face. "I felt terrible for you when you fell in the pig pen. It must have been awful."

She'd seen. Aage closed his eyes. She'd seen everything. He'd been so focused on her towel and what to say to her, it had not occurred to him to wonder why she had arrived.

Lasse walked up with a garbage bag. "Do you want to salvage these, or should I just toss 'em?"

Aage stared at the bag helplessly. "What is it?"

In answer, Lasse opened the bag releasing an odorous wave from the bundle of clothes inside. Aage swallowed against the gorge that rose in his throat.

"Take them home," Concetta said, "A little enzyme action will have them like new."

"Thanks." Aage took the heavy, reeking bag. His stomach churned.

"Do you want me to take you home?" She put her hand on his back. It was light, and delicate but burned like fire.

Aage nodded.

She loosened his hand from the bag of clothes and carried it to the back of the van. Aage still stared at the ground. Numb.

Concetta opened the passenger door, and Aage climbed in. He felt ancient. She backed the van out of the driveway, past Lasse who waved as they left.

Concetta lowered the windows once they were on the road. Fresh air whipped through the van and beat against Aage's temples. He kept seeing the moment when he hit the sow. Why hadn't he just waited?

"Mr Jorgensen's going to fire me. Isn't he?"

She was silent a long moment. "I don't know."

The sow ran through his mind, trampling his MG beneath a trail of feces. Aage stared out the window at nothing. The feel of filth crawled over his skin as a physical memory of the manure.

Concetta took a breath as if she was going to speak. And then sighed. She took another breath. "My parents came to Denmark before I was born. They fled during the Oil Wars, like a lot of Americans. I grew up here, but when I was twelve they started taking me to visit my grandparents in the U.S."

Her words rolled over him like water, without meaning, but somehow taking the filth with them. The calm, cool promise of her voice supported him.

"Grandmama had an MG-TD. It had been her father's first car. It was beautiful."

Aage turned his head slowly. Concetta stared straight ahead as she drove. Her face shone with the memory.

"It was a green so dark it was almost black."

Through dry lips, Aage said, "British Racing Green."

Her cheek curved with a smile. She nodded. "Grandmama loved that car. Her parents had brought her home from the hospital in it. She kept it in the garage and every day when we came or went from the house we passed its shining curves. But we never drove it."

"Why?" Aage frowned. "I thought the U.S. still used fossil fuels."

"They do. Or at least, they aren't outlawed, but it's still expensive. Grandmama drove the car on her birthday and Easter." Her smile deepened, and she turned her voice into a quavery old woman's. "Ah'd drive it Christmas, but the family comes to me. Got no where to go." She sniffed. "Sides, the snow's as deep as flour in a pastry shop." Concetta threw her head back, laughing.

"The year I turned sixteen, Grandmama invited me to spend the summer with her. She taught me to drive her fuelcell car and took me to get a driver's license. And everyday, I walked past the MG." She grinned. "Sometimes I'd go out to the garage and sit in it, and imagine I was in a movie. I even practiced shifting gears..."

The van seemed to melt around them. Aage was riding down the road with Concetta, listening to the purr of the four-stroke engine. Only the warm leather bench seat and the gearshift separated them.

"Then we had a fight. And like an idiot in a movie I took the MG."

"Wow."

She looked at him and raised one perfect eyebrow. "I told you I drove one."

"You are so amazing."

"And then I wrecked it before I'd gone five meters."

Aage gasped. His hand went to his mouth.

"No power steering." She shrugged and gripped the wheel tighter. "Grandmama stood on the porch and watched the whole thing."

"What'd she do?"

"She came out to the car, opened the door and helped me out. I was sobbing. She wrapped her arms around me." Concetta focused on the road and swallowed. "She wrapped her arms around me and took me inside. Didn't say a word. She got a cold cloth and wiped my face. Kissed me once on the forehead and told me to go to sleep. It would all seem better in the morning."

She pulled up in front of Aage's house and turned to him. Her dark eyes were large and serious. He looked down at the floor. "Hey." She took his hand. "Go in, tell your folks what happened and go to bed. It'll all seem better in the morning."

He nodded. Her soft, dry fingers squeezed his hand. All the things he wanted to say stuck in his throat. So he squeezed her hand back.

Then he was outside the van, holding the plastic bag of his clothes, not sure how he got there.

Concetta looked through the window at him. She hesitated. "Do you want me to teach you to drive, sometime?"

The roaring of blood in his ears drowned out the sound of his own voice. Aage nodded and thought he said, "Yes."

"Good." She smiled again. "You'll be okay."

"Thanks."

Aage headed into his home. Behind him, the most beautiful girl in the world drove away in a 1952 MG-TD. British Racing Green. He grinned as the purr faded into the night.

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END

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