

The Pig

The Hills dates from a time when pigs were pigs and swine were swine. Or so the Maître D' likes to say. In other words, from the mid nineteenth century. And here I stand, straight-backed in my waiter's uniform, just as I might have done a hundred years ago or more. People do extreme things every day. But not me. No. I wait. I aim to please. I move around the room taking orders, pouring drinks and clearing away. At The Hills, people can gorge themselves in surroundings that are rich in tradition. They should feel welcome, but not so comfortable that they forget where they are. There are a few notable exceptions; some of the diners use the place like their own parlour.

Apropos pigs: one of our regulars, The Pig (Mr Graham went grey during his twenties while he was pursuing his career in Paris, and was nicknamed *Le Gris*, which immediately became *Grisen* – The Pig – on his return to Norway) sits by the window at table 10 from half past one every weekday. He tends to be punctual, but it's now 13.41 and he hasn't made an appearance. I do a loop of the entrance: no Pig. The cloakroom attendant, Pedersen, glances up from his paper. Pedersen is distinguished-looking, as they say. It seems he's seen it all. The guests trade their possessions – jackets, coats, bags, umbrellas – for a tag which later, accompanied by a coin or two, they swap back for the same possessions when they leave. He has carried out these transactions with composure and pride all these years; he does his job well. We're all diligent here at The Hills. It's a diligent place. Diligence and anxiety go hand in hand, I'm convinced of that.

Lunch is under way, and the main room has filled up with the upper-middle class: silky-skinned, softly spoken, elegantly clothed. There is a row of smaller café tables with classic marble tops by the entrance. There, the acoustics are sharper. Deeper into the room, tablecloths have been draped over the tables. There is clinking, but the noise is muted. Cutlery is moved around porcelain and up to mouths. Teeth chew, throats rise, fall and swallow. It's all about eating in here, and I'm a facilitator. I never take part in the eating myself, rather I observe the consumption. There's a considerable distance between the experience of ingesting a strong Picodon goat's cheese – the gastronomic explosion in one's mouth – and watching the lips of someone else doing it. I set the tables as densely as possible, continental style. There's not quite enough room, but I find space and squeeze in extra glasses, side plates, another bottle. It all feels rich and full.

The chandelier isn't especially big, no bigger than a horse's nosebag, but it is heavy, and hangs like a crystal sack from the low vaulted ceiling above the round table in the middle of the room. Lining the floor are concentric circles of well-trampled mosaic tiles. All the woodwork is solid, dark and worn. The two large mirrors are impressive. The reflective coating on the back of the glass has cracked here and there. It lends a nice patina. The art nouveau-esque oak frames around the mirrors were added in 1901. Or so the Bar Manager told me, elaborating with details about how

the wood was dragged down from Ekeberg by the landscape painter Frits Thaulow's very own horse. The Bar Manager is the restaurant's memory; her face looks learned like an academic's, but she's a bit too cheerful to be an academic. She sees everything.

The Hills might resemble a Viennese coffee house, but this isn't Vienna. It may look like an institution in keeping with the *Grand European* tradition, but it's too worn, too grimy to match the grandeur you would find on the continent. The establishment, the premises, has been called The Hills for almost 150 years now. The name comes from the Hill family, who ran an outfitter's shop here from 1846. The Bar Manager knows all about that. Benjamin Hill, the scion of the family, was a legendary but tragic dandy, originally from Windsor in England, who gambled away two-thirds of the family fortune and stumbled into a painful bankruptcy; after a failed suicide attempt, he lived out the rest of his life as an invalid. The entrepreneur who took over the space opened a restaurant called La Grenade, but the original stained-glass sign covering parts of the façade was so lavish and elaborate, not to mention well-mounted, that he left it there, and the place became known popularly as The Hills. Benjamin Hill's energetic son eventually bought back the premises, took over the business and resurrected the family name. The Hills remains under family control to this day.

From a curved brass rod installed above the entrance hang two thick drapes – to keep the heat in – each with calfskin sewn on to the edge to prevent wear and tear. In through this stage curtain, if you like, enters The Pig at last, smiling and nodding. It's almost ten to two, just about tolerable. I neither nod nor smile back. I'm fundamentally neither a smiler nor a nodder. It's a blank but obliging face I assume for the guests. A poker face is all part of the craft.

'Sorry I'm late,' The Pig says, laughing apologetically, not with a grunt but with some kind of neigh.

'How many today?'

'Four, myself included.'

'And the others are on their way?'

'I expect so.'

There are many ways to dress. The Pig has chosen the only acceptable one: impeccably. He constantly has new suits, and judging by the cut, the stitching and the quality of the fabric, they must be from tailors on Savile Row or thereabouts. He keeps his thick, greyish-white hair short with a weekly trim. His eyebrows are still dark, giving him an intelligent look, like Leo Castelli, or a canine air, like Scorsese. With an age of just over three score years, and dressed in such a wardrobe on a daily basis, he is in every sense an elegant man and a model guest. The Pig fits The Hills like a glove. That's why we give him some leeway with the number of guests, late arrivals, fussing over the table, and so on. Not that it happens often. The Pig is wealthy, that much is clear, but he is also some kind of introvert. Steadily, quietly, he brings new contacts and acquaintances to The Hills, primarily for lunch, occasionally for dinner, always polite and always with his impeccable attire and

manners.

‘We’ve held the usual window table for you,’ I say, holding out my hand as I take four menus and lead him through the room. With perfect timing, I pull out his chair and repeat the set phrase: ‘Some mineral water while you wait?’

‘Yes, please.’

He turns around and allows me to gently push the chair into the hollows of his knees.

Blaise

Old Johansen, the house pianist, is sitting at the grand piano on the mezzanine, looking at the vaulted ceiling or, to his left, into thin air. His stubby, pope-like fingers dance over the keys with a light touch and considerable experience, producing seamless, barely audible music. Is this muzak? He chooses the great composers, Johansen does, but it's still muzak.

Occasionally, his eyes close as the notes trill in all directions, down into the restaurant. Old, stuffed-shirt Johansen. His head droops, and it looks like he's nodded off for a moment, but then it rolls back into position and his eyes snap open. He carries on like that for hours. For a generation and a half now, he's been there, for endless stretches at a time, his head bobbing away, every day, on the mezzanine, that mid-ceiling, playing pleasant tunes in succession for the guests. Since we arrive at different times, we rarely speak, but people say he has a sharp sense of humour.

The neatly folded napkins are stacked on a low shelf between two pillars in the middle of the room. A glass screen with pale art nouveau lines stands on top of the shelf, acting as a buffer between tables 12 and 8. If I find myself empty-handed, I often go over to that shelf, where I stand behind the screen and straighten the napkins with an extra crease. The new girl, Vanessa, is a bit careless in this respect. I make sure that the Hills logo is in the top right-hand corner.

'Do you have the white burgundy today?' says The Pig.

'Of course.'

I wait two tasteful beats before I ask the next question, to which I already know the answer.

'By the glass? Or are we having a bottle?'

The Pig considers this.

'Listen, let's have a bottle.'

He suddenly gets up – I barely manage to pull out the chair for him in time. He extends his hands to a handsome couple approaching between the tables.

'Blaise!' The Pig says enthusiastically, pronouncing the name as 'Blez!'. And then, affectionately: 'Katharina.'

Blaise Engelbert is Katharina's husband, Katharina is Blaise's wife. They socialize with The Pig quite often, particularly Blaise. Blaise and his wife have married the mature versions of one another, the Bar Manager likes to say ('the old version' being a little

unkind, she qualifies). After their respective detours around Oslo society, they found one another, and are now, the Bar Manager further informs me, the oldest person the other has ever been with.

Katharina is in front, and puts one foot before the other in such a way that her well-maintained mid-forties figure is propelled with determination in the direction of The Pig. Right behind her is Blaise, some seven years older, wearing a grey suit with attractive stitching on a par with The Pig's, possibly even a notch superior. Blaise has an excellent tie around his neck and a spring in his step. 'Finesse' is the word that always hangs in the air around this man. I tiptoe in their wake, and pull out their chairs as they confirm that they would both like water and wine.

The menu looks French and is delicately typeset in a softly spaced Bodoni. These are some of the words that appear on its two densely printed pages: crackling, plaice, kid, blue cheese, cumin, profiteroles, Jerusalem artichoke, tart, bouillabaisse, squid, vendace roe, dates, brisket, rillettes and minke. To all this and more, the customers can point and have it prepared – with knowledge and flair – by the Chef and his assistants. In due course I (or Vanessa, for example) bring out the dishes, which they then raise to their mouths bit by bit. Truffles are also available. The truffle is key.

Vanessa, the new waitress with a gentle face, a short, boyish hairstyle, and a talent hampered by ambition, straightens the tablecloths while I do a lap of the room, topping up a glass here and being pleasant to somebody else there. The poor actor who was recently convicted of fraud gets a refill; he's already starting to go slack-eyed. After The Pig's companions have looked at the menu for a minute or two, I'm there pouring them water. Blaise brusquely rejects the white burgundy before I even have time to ask. He takes several large gulps of water, and I immediately refill his glass. Then he gives the sign that I can pour the wine. I turn the bottle clockwise after each pour, to catch the last drop. Tactfully, I lean over The Pig's shoulder and gently ask whether we are waiting for a fourth and final person. The Pig looks at his watch.

'Has anyone heard from her? It's three minutes past two. She's over half an hour late.'

Blaise and his wife shake their heads.

'She did confirm?' Blaise says.

'Of course,' says The Pig. 'Absolutely.'

The back of Blaise's head is oblong and youthful. He cranes his neck and peers towards the entrance. His hairline is classic and clean and complements his jawline. The

angle of his nose and brow, and the curve of his cheekbones, are also repeated with pleasing symmetry by his hairline, as it runs from his temple down to his ear. His neck is boyish, despite his age, his eyes alert. The collar of his shirt sits a comfortable six to seven millimetres away from the skin of his neck, in a beautiful fold. Blaise is fit, but it's not overdone; he's sharp, but not severe. Katharina and The Pig lean forward when he speaks, almost in a whisper. Blaise's voice is unusual. Where you might expect a bombastic tone, like so often with handsome, almost pompous men, he produces a firm, authoritative, but friendly –even verging on sensual – voice.

‘Would you like to wait a while longer?’ I say, not a trace of pushiness in my voice.

The Pig checks the time again, as Blaise raises his left arm to shake out his watch. It turns out to be an impressive A. Lange & Söhne. It couldn't be a Grand Lange I, could it? There's a hint of braggadocio in him.

‘You can take our orders now, and the latecomer can...’ The Pig says, gesturing, first with one hand and then with the other, that the latecomer can order when she arrives.

I turn my attention to Blaise's wife to indicate that she can begin. Katharina chooses a mixed salad with Monte Enebro goat's cheese, nuts, seeds and passion fruit vinaigrette.

‘Could I have extra nuts and seeds?’ she asks.

‘Extra nuts and seeds,’ I say.

Blaise changes his mind twice before he plumps for the creamy orzo with shallots. It's obvious that his indecision grates slightly with The Pig – obvious to me, not the Blaises. I turn to The Pig. It's his turn. He takes his time.

‘The brown Valdres trout,’ he says.

‘Yes?’

‘What kind of crispbread comes with it?’

‘We have a crispbread from Hemsedal.’

‘Right.’

‘We have a wonderful soured cream dip to go with it,’ I say, with a hooked index finger pointing downwards to illustrate ‘dip’. What am I doing?

‘Thanks, but no. No dip for me. I'll try the trout.’

‘Wonderful.’