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**Opening Extract from...**

# Pigs in Heaven

Written by Barbara Kingsolver

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# Pigs in Heaven

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From 'Falling For Me,' by Barbara Kingsolver and Spencer Gorin © 1992



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FOR CAMILLE

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The legal dispute described in *Pigs in Heaven* is not based on a single case history, but was constructed from the materials of existing law and historical fact, insofar as I understand them. The specifics of legal process vary among tribes. Other people would tell this story differently, and none of them would be wrong.

# SPRING

# QUEEN OF NOTHING

WOMEN ON THEIR OWN run in Alice's family. This dawns on her with the unkindness of a heart attack and she sits up in bed to get a closer look at her thoughts, which have collected above her in the dark.

It's early morning, April, windless, unreasonably hot even at this sun-forsaken hour. Alice is sixty-one. Her husband, Harland, is sleeping like a brick and snoring. To all appearances they're a satisfied couple sliding home free into their golden years, but Alice knows that's not how it's going to go. She married him two years ago for love, or so she thought, and he's a good enough man but a devotee of household silence. His idea of marriage is to spray WD-40 on anything that squeaks. Even on the nights when he turns over and holds her, Harland has no words for Alice—nothing to contradict all the years she lay alone, feeling the cold seep through her like cave air, turning her breasts to limestone from the inside out. This marriage has failed to warm her. The quiet only subsides when Harland sleeps and his tonsils make up for lost time. She can't stand the

sight of him there on his back, driving his hogs to market. She's about to let herself out the door.

She leaves the bed quietly and switches on the lamp in the living room, where his Naugahyde recliner confronts her, smug as a catcher's mitt, with a long, deep impression of Harland running down its center. On weekends he watches cable TV with perfect vigilance, as if he's afraid he'll miss the end of the world—though he doesn't bother with CNN, which, if the world did end, is where the taped footage would run. Harland prefers the Home Shopping Channel because he can follow it with the sound turned off.

She has an edgy sense of being watched because of his collection of antique headlights, which stare from the china cabinet. Harland runs El-Jay's Paint and Body and his junk is taking over her house. She hardly has the energy to claim it back. Old people might marry gracefully once in a while, but their houses rarely do. She snaps on the light in the kitchen and shades her eyes against the bright light and all those ready appliances.

Her impulse is to call Taylor, her daughter. Taylor is taller than Alice now and pretty and living far away, in Tucson. Alice wants to warn her that a defect runs in the family, like flat feet or diabetes: they're all in danger of ending up alone by their own stubborn choice. The ugly kitchen clock says four-fifteen. No time-zone differences could make that into a reasonable hour in Tucson; Taylor would answer with her heart pounding, wanting to know who'd dropped dead. Alice rubs the back of her head, where her cropped gray hair lies flat in several wrong directions, prickly with sweat and sleeplessness. The cluttered kitchen irritates her. The Formica countertop is patterned with pink and black loops like rubber bands lying against each other, getting on her nerves, all cocked and ready to spring like hail across the kitchen. Alice wonders if other women in the middle of the night have begun to resent their Formica. She stares hard at the telephone on the counter, wishing it would ring. She needs some proof that she isn't the last woman left on earth, the surviving queen of nothing. The clock gulps softly, eating seconds whole while she waits; she receives no proof.

She stands on a chair and rummages in the cupboard over the refrigerator for a bottle of Jim Beam that's been in the house since before she mar-

ried Harland. There are Mason jars up there she ought to get rid of. In her time Alice has canned tomatoes enough for a hundred bomb shelters, but now she couldn't care less, nobody does. If they drop the bomb now, the world will end without the benefit of tomato aspic. She climbs down and pours half an inch of Jim Beam into a Bengals mug that came free with a tank of gas. Alice would just as soon get her teeth cleaned as watch the Bengals. That's the price of staying around when your heart's not in it, she thinks. You get to be cheerleader for a sport you never chose. She unlatches the screen door and steps barefoot onto the porch.

The sky is a perfect black. A leftover smile of moon hides in the bottom branches of the sugar maple, teasing her to smile back. The air isn't any cooler outside the house, but being outdoors in her sheer nightgown arouses Alice with the possibility of freedom. She could walk away from this house carrying nothing. How those glass eyeballs in the china cabinet would blink, to see her go. She leans back in the porch swing, missing the squeak of its chains that once sang her baby to sleep, but which have been oppressed into silence now by Harland's WD-40. Putting her nose deep into the mug of bourbon, she draws in sweet, caustic fumes, just as she used to inhale tobacco smoke until Taylor made her quit.

She raised a daughter in this house and planted all the flowers in the yard, but that's nothing to hold her here. Flowers you can get tired of. In the record heat of this particular Kentucky spring the peonies have blown open their globes a month ahead of Memorial Day. Their face-powder scent reminds her of old women she knew in childhood, and the graveyard. She stops swinging a minute to listen: a huffling sound is coming from the garden. Hester Biddle's pigs. Hester lives a short walk down the road and has taken up raising Vietnamese miniature potbellied pigs for a new lease on life after her stroke. She claims they're worth two thousand per pig, but Alice can't imagine on what market. They're ugly as sin and run away for a hobby, to root in Alice's peony beds. "Go on home," Alice says in a persuasive voice. The pigs look up.

"I mean it," she says, rising from the porch swing, her hands on her hips. "I'm not above turning you all into bacon."

In the dim light from the kitchen their eyes glow red. Pigs are turning out to be the family curse: Alice's mother, a tall, fierce woman named Min-

erva Stamper, ran a hog farm alone for fifty years. Alice picks up an empty flowerpot from the porch step and throws it at the pigs. The darkness absorbs it. She throws a dirt clod and a pair of pruning shears, which also vanish. Then a medium-sized aluminum bowl. Harland ordered the Cornucopia Of Bowls from the shopping channel for their wedding anniversary, so now their home has a bowl for every purpose. She picks up another one and gives it a fling. She'll have to pick them up in the morning, in front of God and the Biddles, but she wants those pigs out of her life. She finds a galvanized watering can and lifts herself on the balls of her feet, testing her calves. Alice is in good shape, despite her age; when she concentrates she can still find all her muscles from the inside. When her first husband left her the house fell apart but she and her daughter held up well, she thinks, everything considered.

She heaves the watering can but can't tell where it's gone. It lands with a ding—possibly it struck a member of the Cornucopia. The red pig eyes don't even blink. Alice feels defeated. She returns to the porch to collect her losses.

She's not walking away from here. Who would take her in? She knows most of the well-to-do women in town, from cleaning their houses all the years she was raising Taylor, but their respect for Alice is based on what she could tell the world about their basements. On Fridays, Alice plays poker with Fay Richey and Lee Shanks—cheerful, husky-voiced women who smoke a lot and are so thankful to still be married, if she left Harland they'd treat her like she had a virus. Minerva and the hog farm are both gone, of course, the one simply dead and buried, the other sold to pay its own debts. It depresses Alice deeply to think how people's lives and all other enterprises, like life insurance, can last long enough to cancel themselves out.

A mockingbird lands on the tip of a volunteer mulberry that has grown up through the hedge. Flapping to stay balanced, he makes the long branch bob and sway like a carnival ride. His little profile flails against a horizon the color of rising dough. In the few minutes it took Alice to make an accounting of her life, dawn was delivered to this address and the automatic spotlight on Biddles' barn winked off. No matter what kind of night you're having, morning always wins.

The mockingbird springs off his mulberry branch into darkness and then materializes up on the roof, crowing to this section of the county that her TV antenna is his and his alone. Something about the male outlook, Alice thinks, you have got to appreciate. She stands with her arms crossed against her chest and observes the dark universe of the garden, which is twinkling now with aluminum meteorites. She hears the pigs again. It's no wonder they like to come here; they get terrified down at Biddles' when Henry uses more machinery than he needs. Yesterday he was using the hay mower to cut his front yard, which is typical. The poor things are just looking for a home, like the Boat People. She has a soft spot for refugees and decides to let them stay. It will aggravate Hester, who claims that every time they eat Alice's peonies they come home with diarrhea.

The neighborhood tomcat, all muscle and slide, is creeping along the top of the trellis where Alice's sweet peas have spent themselves all spring. She's seen him up there before, getting high on the night perfume, or imagining the taste of mockingbird. The garden Alice wishes she could abandon is crowded with bird music and border disputes and other people's hungry animals. She feels like the queen of some pitiful, festive land.

Welcome to Heaven.

For the first time in years she thinks of Sugar Boss: her family tie. Sugar is a second cousin and the most famous citizen of Heaven, Oklahoma. Alice has her picture put away in the scrapbook with Taylor's high school diploma and whatever else there is in the way of family papers. It's an old picture cut out of *Life* magazine, summer of '55. Sugar posed for a photographer with a pop bottle raised to her lips and a crown of daisies in her hair, leaning against the WELCOME TO HEAVEN sign, and was seen all over everywhere in the advertisement. Alice saw her at the grocery checkout and couldn't believe her eyes. She sent a letter, needing no more address than "Sugar Marie Boss, Heaven, Okla.," and it got there, even though by then she was no longer technically a Boss but a Hornbuckle. Sugar wrote back.

They'd spent their last years of childhood together on the farm during the Depression, along with dozens of other people who showed up at Minerva's door once they'd run out of everything but relatives. Of all the cousins, Alice and Sugar were closest, born a mere month apart. At nine

they could pass for twelve and got jobs at the mattress factory, where it was all young girls, sewing up the ticking and stuffing in feathers. Their arms grew muscled and the down stuck on their hair, making them look like duck girls. Those times made bonds among people. The clotheslines ran from house to house and the wash ran between families like the same drab flag repeated over and over, uniting them all in the nation of washtubs and rough knuckles. There was love in that life, a kind of solid hope. Children ran heedless under the flapping laundry in a nation of their own. But it's Alice's impression that most of them grew up with hungry hearts, feeling sure that one day they would run out of everything again.

After their chance reconnection, she and Sugar shared their memories in long letters pressed into fat envelopes, but once they'd finished with the past, neither one had it in her to sustain the correspondence. Alice suspects Sugar's life never reached the same elevation again; in her letters there was mention of daughters prone to pregnancy. Alice pictures a rattletrap house and flowerbeds gone to jimson weed.

But Sugar once put Heaven on the map, and that has to carry some weight still. Alice stretches her legs into the pale orange morning that is taking hold around her, and it dawns on her with a strange shock that she is still the same person she was as a nine-year-old. Even her body is mostly unchanged. Her breasts are of a small, sound architecture and her waist is limber and strong; she feels like one of those California buildings designed for an earthquake. As surely as her organs are in the right places, she feels Sugar is still there in Heaven. She could write her today. She's kept feelings for Sugar, her long-lost relative who came home to her one day in the checkout line. Something like that is as bad or as good as a telephone ringing in the night: either way, you're not as alone as you think.

# 2

# A MEAN EYE

"LOOK UP, TURTLE. ANGELS."

Taylor stoops to her daughter's eye level and points up at the giant granite angels guarding the entrance to the Hoover Dam: a straight-backed team, eyes on the horizon, their dark, polished arms raised toward the sky.

"They look like Danny," Turtle observes.

"Biceps to die for," Taylor agrees. Danny, their garbage man, is a body builder on his days off.

"What do angels need muscles for?"

Taylor laughs at the thought of some saint having to tote around the overfilled garbage bags of heaven. "They made this back in the thirties," she says. "Ask Grandma about the Depression sometime. Nobody could get a job, so they had this WPA thing where people made bridges and sidewalks and statues that look like they could sweat."

"Let's take a picture." Turtle's tone warns off argument; she means Taylor will stand under the angels and *she* will take the photo. Taylor stands where she's placed and prepares to smile

for as long as it takes. Turtle concentrates through the rectangular eye, her black eyebrows stranded above it in her high forehead. Turtle's photos tend to come out fairly hopeless in terms of composition: cut-off legs or all sky, or sometimes something Taylor never even saw at the time. When the pictures come back from the drugstore she often gets the feeling she's gone on someone else's vacation. She watches Turtle's snub-nosed sneakers and deliberately planted legs, wondering where all that persistence comes from and where it will go. Since she found Turtle in her car and adopted her three years ago, she has had many moments of not believing she's Turtle's mother. This child is the miracle Taylor wouldn't have let in the door if it had knocked. But that's what miracles are, she supposes. The things nobody saw coming.

Her eyes wander while Turtle fiddles. The sun is hot, hot. Taylor twists her dark hair up off her neck.

"Mom!"

"Sorry." She drops her arms to her sides, carefully, like a dancer, and tries to move nothing but her eyes. A man in a wheelchair rolls toward them and winks. He's noticeably handsome from the waist up, with WPA arms. He moves fast, his dark mane flying, and turns his chair smoothly before the angels' marble pedestal. If she strains her peripheral vision Taylor can read the marble slab: it's a monument to the men who died building the dam. It doesn't say who they were, in particular. Another panel across the way lists the names of all the directors of the dam project, but this one says only that many who labored here found their final rest. There is a fairly disturbing bronze plaque showing men in work clothes calmly slipping underwater. "Poor guys," she says aloud. "Tomb of the unknown concrete pourer."

"Working for fifty cents an hour," the wheelchair man says. "A bunch of them were Navajo boys from the reservation."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah." He smiles in a one-sided way that suggests he knows his way around big rip-offs like this, a fancy low-paying job that bought these Navajo boys a piece of the farm.

The shutter clicks, releasing Taylor. She stretches the muscles in her face.

"Are you the trip photographer?" he asks Turtle.

Turtle presses her face into her mother's stomach. "She's shy," Taylor says. "Like most major artists."

"Want me to take one of the two of you?"

"Sure. One to send Grandma." Taylor hands him the camera and he does the job, requiring only seconds.

"You two on a world tour?" he asks.

"A small world tour. We're trying to see the Grand Canyon all the way around. Yesterday we made it from Tucson to the Bright Angel overlook." Taylor doesn't say that they got manic on junk food in the car, or that when they jumped out at the overlook exactly at sunset, Turtle took one look down and wet her pants. Taylor couldn't blame her. It's a lot to take in.

"I'm on a tour of monuments to the unlucky." He nods at the marble slab.

Taylor is curious about his hobby but decides not to push it. They leave him to the angels and head for the museum. "Do not sit on wail," Turtle says, stopping to point at the wall. She's learning to read, in kindergarten and the world at large.

"On wall," Taylor says. "Do not sit on wall."

The warning is stenciled along a waist-high parapet that runs across the top of the dam, but the words are mostly obscured by the legs of all the people sitting on the wall. Turtle looks up at her mother with the beautiful bewilderment children wear on their faces till the day they wake up knowing everything.

"Words mean different things to different people," Taylor explains. "You could read it as 'Don't sit on the wall.' But other people, like Jax for instance, would think it means 'Go ahead and break your neck, but don't say we didn't warn you.'"

"I wish Jax was here," Turtle says solemnly. Jax is Taylor's boyfriend, a keyboard player in a band called the Irascible Babies. Taylor sometimes feels she could take Jax or leave him, but it's true he's an asset on trips. He sings in the car and is good at making up boredom games for Turtle.

"I know," Taylor says. "But he'd just want to sit on the wall. You'd have to read him his rights."

For Taylor, looking over the edge is enough, hundreds of feet down that curved, white wing of concrete to the canyon bottom. The boulders below look tiny and distant like a dream of your own death. She grips her daughter's arm so protectively the child might later have marks. Turtle says nothing. She's been marked in life by a great many things, and Taylor's odd brand of maternal love is by far the kindest among them.

Turtle's cotton shorts with one red leg and one white one flap like a pair of signal flags as she walks, though what message she's sending is beyond Taylor's guess. Her thin, dark limbs and anxious eyebrows give her a pleading look, like a child in the magazine ads that tell how your twenty cents a day can give little Maria or Omar a real chance at life. Taylor has wondered if Turtle will ever outgrow the poster-child look. She would give years off her own life to know the story of Turtle's first three, in eastern Oklahoma, where she's presumed to have been born. Her grip on Turtle is redundant, since Turtle always has a fist clamped onto Taylor's hand or sleeve. They cross through the chaotic traffic to the museum.

Inside, old photos line the walls, showing great expanses of scaffolded concrete and bushy-browed men in overalls standing inside huge turbines. The tourists are being shuffled into a small theater. Turtle tugs her in for the show, but Taylor regrets it as soon as the projector rolls. The film describes the amazing achievement of a dam that tamed the Colorado River. In the old days it ran wild, flooding out everyone downstream, burying their crops in mud. "There was only one solution—the dam!" exclaims the narrator, who reminds Taylor of a boy in a high school play, drumming up self-importance to conquer embarrassment. Mr. Hoover's engineers prevailed in the end, providing Arizona with irrigation and L.A. with electricity and the Mexicans with the leftover salty trickle.

"Another solution is they didn't need to grow their cotton right on the riverbank," Taylor points out.

"Mom!" hisses Turtle. At home Turtle whines when Taylor talks back to the TV. Jax sides with Turtle on the television subject, citing the importance of fantasy. Taylor sides with her mother, who claims over the phone that TV has supernatural powers over her husband. "Just don't believe everything on there is true," Taylor warns often, but she knows this war is

a lost cause in general. As far as her daughter is concerned, Mutant Ninja Turtles live in the sewers and that is that.

Outside the museum, a foil gum wrapper skates along the sidewalk on a surprise gust of wind. A herd of paper cups and soda straws rolls eastward in unison. Lucky Buster sits on the ramparts of the Hoover Dam, trying to figure out how to save the day. People will throw anything in the world on the ground, or even in the water. Like pennies. They end up down there with the catfish. There could be a million dollars at the bottom of the lake right now, but everybody thinks there's just one red cent—the one they threw.

Lucky sits very still. He has his eye on a bright red soda-pop can. His friend Otis is an engineer for the Southern Pacific, and he's warned Lucky about pop cans. They catch the sun just right and they'll look like a red signal flare on the tracks. When you see that, you've got to stop the whole train, and then it turns out it's just a pop can. Bad news.

The people are all up above him. One girl is looking. Her round face like a sweet brown pie can see him over the wall. He waves, but she bobs behind the mother and they go away. Nobody else is looking. He could go down there now. The water is too close, though, and scares him: water is black, blue, pink, every color. It gets in your eyes there's so much light. He looks away at the nicer camel hump desert. Now: *go.*

Lucky drops down and scoots along the gray wall that runs along the edge. One side is water, fish-colored; on the other side you fall into the hole. He is as careful as the circus girls in silver bathing suits on TV, walking on wires. One foot, another foot.

A white bird with scabbed yellow feet lands in front of Lucky. "Ssss," he says to the bird, shaking his hands at it. The bird walks away fast, one spread foot and then the other one. Lucky is two steps away from the pop can. Now one step away. Now he's got it.

The bird turns its head and looks straight at Lucky with a mean eye.

The sun has dropped into the Nevada hills and rung up a sunset the color of cherries and lemons. Turtle and Taylor take one last stroll across Mr.

Hoover's concrete dream. Turtle is holding on so tightly that Taylor's knuckles ache. Their hypochondriac friend Lou Ann has warned Taylor about arthritis, but this snap-jawed grip is a principle of their relationship; it won Turtle a nickname, and then a mother. She hasn't deliberately let go of Taylor since they met.

The water in the shadow of the dam is musky green and captivating to Turtle. She yanks on Taylor's fingers to point out huge catfish moving in moss-colored darkness. Taylor doesn't really look. She's trying to take in the whole of Lake Mead, the great depth and weight of water that formerly ran free and made life miserable for the downstream farmers. It stretches far back into the brown hills, but there is no vegetation along the water's edge, just one surface meeting another, a counterfeit lake in the desert that can't claim its own shoreline. In the distance someone is riding a kind of small water vehicle that seems pesty and loud for its size, like a mosquito.

Storm clouds with high pompadours have congregated on the western horizon, offering the hope of cooler weather, but only the hope. The Dodge when they get back to it is firecracker hot and stinks of melted plastic upholstery. Taylor opens both front doors and tries to fan cooler air onto the seat. The ice-cream cone she bought Turtle was a mistake, she sees, but she's not an overly meticulous parent. She's had to learn motherhood on a wing and a prayer in the last three years, and right now her main philosophy is that everything truly important is washable. She hands Turtle a fistful of fast-food napkins from the glove compartment, but has to keep her eyes on the road once they get going. The Dodge Corona drives like a barge and the road is narrow and crooked, as bad as the roads she grew up risking her neck on in Kentucky.

Eventually they level out on the Nevada plain, which looks clinically dead. Behind them the lake stretches out its long green fingers, begging the sky for something, probably rain.

Turtle asks, "How will he get out?"

"Will who get out?"

"That man."

"Which man is that, sweetheart?" Turtle isn't a big talker; she didn't complete a sentence until she was four, and even now it can take days to

get the whole story. "Is this something you saw on TV?" Taylor prompts. "Like the Ninja Turtles?"

"No." She looks mournfully at the waffled corpse of her ice cream cone. "He picked up a pop can and fell down the hole by the water."

Taylor narrows her eyes at the road. "At the dam? You saw somebody fall?"

"Yes."

"Where people were sitting, on that wall?"

"No, the other side. The water side."

Taylor takes a breath to find her patience. "That man out on the lake, riding around on that boat thing?"

"No," Turtle says. "The man that fell in the hole by the water."

Taylor can make no sense of this. "It wasn't on TV?"

"No!"

They're both quiet. They pass a casino where a giant illuminated billboard advertises the idea of cashing your paycheck and turning it into slot-machine tokens.

Turtle asks, "How will he get out?"

"Honey, I really don't know what you mean. You saw somebody fall down a hole by the dam. But not into the water?"

"Not the water. The big hole. He didn't cry."

Taylor realizes what she could mean, and rejects the possibility, but for the half second between those two thoughts her heart drops. There was a round spillway where the water could bypass the dam during floods. "You don't mean that spillway, do you? The big hole between the water and the parking lot?"

"Yes." Turtle's black eyes are luminous. "I don't think he can get out."

"There was a big high fence around that." Taylor has slowed to about fifteen miles an hour. She ignores the line of traffic behind her, although the drivers are making noise, impatient to get to Las Vegas and throw away their money.

"Turtle, are you telling me the absolute truth?"

Before she can manage an answer, Taylor U-turns the Dodge, furious at herself. She'll never ask Turtle that question again.

* * *