

A Day No Pigs Would Die

A farmer's heart is rabbit soft, and farmer eyes are blue.
But farmers' eyes are eagle fierce and look a man right through.

Based on the novel by Robert Newton Peck • Adapted by Bryon Cahill
Illustrations by Ryan Price

CHARACTERS

(main characters in **boldface**)

Narrators 1, 2, 3

Author, voice of Robert Peck
as an adult, telling his story

Robert Peck

Haven Peck, Robert's father,
a pig butcher

Benjamin Tanner, the Pecks'
neighbor

Lucy Peck, Robert's mother

Aunt Matty, a friend of the
family

SCENE 1

Narrator 1: It is a bright April day in the town of Learning, Vermont. A 13-year-old boy named Robert Peck is walking up on the ridge near his farm, whipping the gray trunk of a rock maple tree with a dead stick and hating Edward Thatcher.

Author: I should of been in school that day. But Edward Thatcher had made fun of my clothes, and instead of tying into him, I turned tail and run off.

Narrator 2: Robert picks up a stone and throws it as hard and as far as he can.

Author: I imagined that someday, that was how hard I was going to light into Edward

Thatcher. I was going to make him bleed like a stuck pig.

Narrator 3: Robert comes upon his neighbor's cow, which is obviously in bad trouble.

Author: Her name was Apron, and she was in the middle of giving birth. But I could tell it was not going well and she was going to need my help.

Narr 1: Robert plays nurse for the cow and delivers her calf. As he does so, Apron, scared and hurt, kicks out her hoof, and it lands on Robert's shin. The baby calf gives a loud bawl, and despite his own pain, Robert knows the calf is OK.

Narr 2: After the birth, Apron begins howling in pain.

Author: She was having trouble breathing and making an awful



noise. It sounded like something was stuck in her throat.

Narr 3: Apron sways and then falls to her knees. Her head swings around and hits Robert in the chest, knocking him to the ground.

Author: She had stopped breathing! With her newborn calf looking on, I reached my arm into her mouth and grabbed hold of something that felt like a tennis ball stuck in her gullet. Shutting my eyes, I ripped it out of her. And as soon as I did, Apron woke up, bit down hard on my arm, jumped up, and ran away—with her mouth still holding on to me!

Narr 1: Apron drags Robert through the woods at a fast pace. Prickly bushes and branches scrape them both as the cow continues to hold Robert with her strong teeth.

Author: It should have been broad daylight, but it was night. Black night. As black and as bloody and as bad as getting hurt again and again could ever be. It just went on and on. It didn't quit.

SCENE 2

Narr 2: Robert wakes up to voices. He is wrapped in a wool blanket, and someone is carrying him.

Narr 3: He is groggy, but he can make out the voices of his father and his mother.

**As black and
as bloody and
as bad as
getting hurt
again and
again could
ever be.**

Haven Peck: We're beholden to you, Benjamin Tanner, for fetching our son home to us. Whatever he done, I'll make it right.

Narr 1: Benjamin Tanner is the man carrying Robert in his arms. He is the Pecks' neighbor.

Benjamin Tanner: Better look to his arm. It got tore up worse than proper. May be broke.



Narr 2: Robert tries to speak but cannot. His mother notices something.

Lucy Peck: Haven, the boy's holding something in his hand.

Benjamin: I know what that is. It's a goiter.

Haven: It's an evil thing. But for now let's tend to his arm.

Narr 3: Lucy takes her son from Benjamin and carries him to the sink where she washes the dirt and caked blood from Robert's body.

Lucy: The poor lamb.

Author: After I was good and washed, I felt the first stitches go into my arm. I didn't yell out. I didn't have the will for it.

Narr 1: When Lucy is finished stitching Robert's arm, his father carries the boy upstairs to his room and lays him on his bed.

Narr 2: Robert is extremely tired, but he manages a few words.

Robert: Tell Mr. Tanner ... that he'll find a calf up on the ridge. I helped it get born. Afterward, old Apron was choking so I had to rip the ball out of her throat.

Haven: Well, I'll be.

Author: He bent down and pulled the crazy quilt up around my throat. I could tell by the smell of his hand that he'd killed pigs. There was a strong smell to it, like stale death. That smell was always on him, morning and night. He smelled the best on Sunday mornings when I sat next to him at

Shaker meetings. He smelled just like the big brown bar of soap that he used. But when you kill pigs for a living, you can't always smell like Sunday morning. You just smell like hard work.

SCENE 3

Narr 3: Robert stays in bed for almost a week. On Saturday morning, he hobbles his way down to the kitchen.

Haven: Good. You're up. I can use a hand today.

Narr 1: After breakfast, Robert and his father go outside to repair their fences.

Robert: Fences sure are funny, aren't they Papa?

Haven: How so?

Robert: Well, you be friends with Mr. Tanner. Neighbors and all. But we keep this fence up like it was a war. I guess that humans are the only things on Earth that take everything they own and fence it off.

Haven: Not true. In the spring, a female robin won't fly to a male until he owns a piece of the woods. He's got to fence it off. Lots of times when you hear that old robin sing, what he's singing about is ... keep off my

* vocab

BEHOLDEN: under a moral obligation to owe something

GOITER: an enlargement of the thyroid gland

SHAKER: refers to a sect of Protestant Christianity relying heavily on hard work and simple living to achieve spiritual purity

tree. That whistle you hear is his fence.

Robert: Gee.

Haven: Ever see a fox?

Robert: Sure. Lots of times.

Haven: I mean really watch him. He walks around his land every day and wets on a tree here and on a rock there. That's his fence.

Robert: Then it isn't like war.

Haven: It's a peaceable war. If I know Benjamin Tanner, he'd fret more than me if his cows found my corn.

Robert: He's a good neighbor, Papa.

Haven: And he wants a fence to divide what's his and mine. He knows this. A fence sets men together, not apart.

Robert: I never looked at it that way.

Haven: Time you did.

Narr 2: Robert and his father continue to mend the fence. Soon, Benjamin Tanner comes walking toward them. He is carrying something in his coat.

Benjamin: Morning, Haven.

Haven: Morning.

Benjamin: Morning, young Robert. It was a fine job you did of birthing that calf for me. She had another one shortly after. Twins! I named them Bob and Bib. Bob's named after you.

Haven: Well, isn't that something?

Benjamin: I wanted to thank you proper, Robert.

Author: That's when he pulled out a small white ball of piglet from under his coat.

Robert: You mean ... this pig is mine? Gosh! Thanks, Mr. Tanner!

Author: I held her close to my chest with both arms, and she settled in and licked my face. Her spit was a bad smell, but I didn't care. She was mine. And I named her Pinky. She was the prettiest thing I ever did see.

SCENE 4

Narr 3: Robert's new pig takes an instant liking to him and follows him wherever he goes.

Author: All the time I was working, Pinky was smelling around my heels, keeping her little pink nose to the ground as all pigs do.

Narr 1: Robert and his father work on the fence throughout the day and again after supper. They work and sweat and talk with Pinky by their side.

Robert: Miz Malcolm says we should be proud to be Vermonters.

Haven: Your teacher, Ms. Malcolm?

Robert: Yeah. She says that 'cuz we're all Vermonters, we have to be proud of our yesterday just like today.

Haven: What's that mean?

Robert: I think it means to be proud of our past as well as today. She goes on and on about that man in a white house—Calvin Coolidge. She

says that every working soul in Vermont voted for him.

Haven: Not all.

Robert: You didn't vote for Coolidge, Pa? Aren't you a Republican? Just about everybody is in Learning.

Haven: No, I'm not a Republican. And I'm not a Democrat. I'm not nothing.

Robert: Why not?

Haven: Because I'm not allowed to vote.

Narr 2: Pinky walks a few feet away from Robert to eat a patch of grass.

Robert: Why can't you vote, Papa?

Haven: It's on account of I can't read or write. When a man cannot do those things, people think his head is weak. Even

when he's proved his back is strong.

Robert: Who decides?

Haven: Men who look at me and do not take me for what I be. They can't see how I can build a barn with my bare hands or see my rows of corn and straight fences here. They only see me make my mark with an X when I sign my name to something.

Robert: Is that why you can't vote, Papa?

Haven: Yes, boy. That's the reason.

Robert: Doesn't it make you heartsick?

Haven: No. I take what I am. We are Plain People, your mother, your aunt, your sisters, you, and me. We live by the Book of Shaker. We are not worldly people, and we suffer all the less for not paining with worldly

wants and wishes. I am not heartsick. I am rich.

Robert: But we're not rich, Papa. We're ...

Haven: Yes we are, boy. We have one another to fend for and this land to tend. And one day we'll own it outright. We have cows for warm milk and rains for washing off our daily grime. We can look at the sundown and see it all, so that it wets the eye and hastens the heart.

Robert: Maybe so, Papa. But it seems to me what we have most is dirt and work.

Haven: True enough. But it be our dirt, Rob. This land will be all ours ... soon enough.

Author: I looked down at Pinky. She was rolling around on her back in the dirt. Our dirt. That night, I fell asleep smiling. I figured I must have been the luckiest boy in all of Vermont.

SCENE 5

Narr 3: Ten weeks go by, and Pinky grows a considerable amount in size.

Narr 1: On the last day of school, Robert runs all the way home. When he arrives, there is a visitor sitting in the kitchen with his mother.

Lucy: Rob, look who's here.

Robert: Hello, Aunt Matty.

Author: She wasn't my real aunt, like Aunt Carrie. Just a friend of Mama's. I guess she was a distant cousin twice removed. But I called her Aunt Matty.

Aunt Matty: Well, look at the size of you! You're growing like a weed.

Robert: Thank you.

Author: I should have excused myself right then and there and changed my clothes for chores. But instead I made my big mistake of the day. Like a fool, I pulled out my report card.

Aunt Matty: You got a D in English?

Author: I got straight A's otherwise. But all Aunt Matty could see was the D. The way she carried on, it seemed like it was the first D anybody had ever got. I thought she was going to die from the shock of it.

Aunt Matty: Of course it's not the end of the world. There is a **remedy**.

Author: Remedy! There was a word that struck a fever. Mama had given me a spoonful of remedy for one thing or another almost every winter and spring.

Aunt Matty: All he needs is a tutor. There's no time to lose. I'll start tutoring him today. Come along, Robert.

Narr 2: Aunt Matty grabs Robert by the shirt and drags him into the parlor. She sits him down in a chair and begins delivering a lesson.

Aunt Matty: Before I married your Uncle Hume, I was an English teacher. And that's where we're going to start. Living in this house and all its Shaker ways, it's a wonder you can talk at all.

Narr 3: Robert stares up at her and wishes he had waited until his mother was alone to show his report card.

I made my big mistake of the day. Like a fool, I pulled out my report card.

Aunt Matty: Now then. We're going to have a little test in grammar. You tell me, Robert, which sentence is correct? It was I who he called. It was me who he called. It was I whom he called. And, it was me whom he called.

Author: I just sat there, dumb as a post. I guess I didn't have

* vocab

REMEDY: a medicine or treatment to cure illness or disease

brains enough to dump sand out of a boot.

Aunt Matty: Well?

Robert: I don't know, Aunt Matty. They all sound fair enough to me.

Aunt Matty: It's just as I expected. You don't know how to diagram a sentence.

Narr 1: Aunt Matty pulls out a pad and pencil from her big pocket and hands them to Robert.

Aunt Matty: There now. Write this sentence down: Jack hit the ball hard with Joe's yellow bat. OK. Diagram that. First off, what's the subject?

Robert: English.

Aunt Matty: What?

Robert: English is the subject I got a D in.

Narr 2: Aunt Matty gently wipes her brow with a handkerchief.

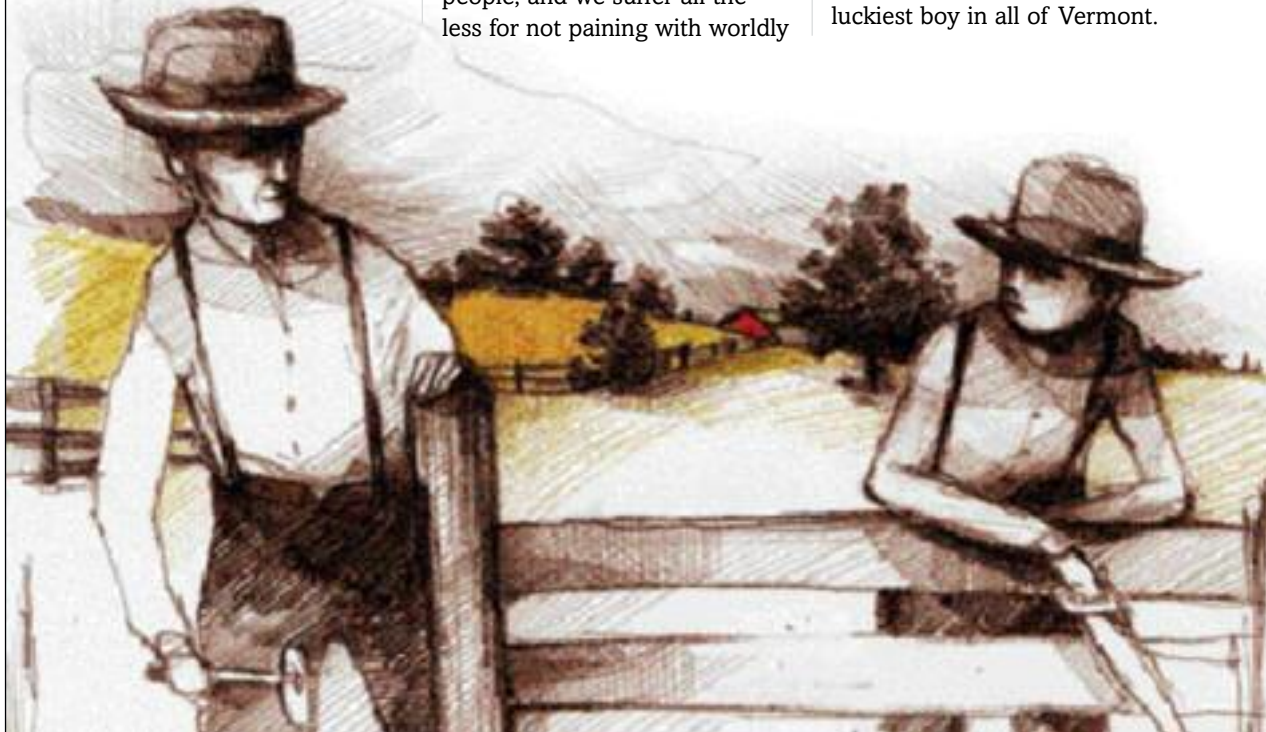
Aunt Matty: A good teacher does not lose her temper, no matter how stupid her pupils are.

Robert: That's good. Because in our school there are some pretty dull ones.

Author: It went on like that for nearly an hour more. Aunt Matty trying to teach me all kinds of things and me just not understanding.

Narr 3: When the time to do evening chores comes, Robert thanks Aunt Matty for the lesson and runs outside to help his father.

Narr 1: Robert's mother enters the parlor to find her old friend somewhat exhausted.





Lucy: How was the lesson?

Aunt Matty: Next time I'll teach the pig.

SCENE 6

Narr 2: More weeks go by, and Pinky continues to grow. She is now more than five times the size she was when Robert first met her.

Author: When I first got her, washing Pinky was no trouble on account of her being so tiny and all. But now! She was getting bigger than any pig I'd ever seen!

Narr 3: Robert has his hands full of soapy pig when he sees his father.

Haven: You'll wash that pig away. There won't be anything left of Pinky 'cept a lump of lard.

Robert: I'm getting her clean, so I can put a ribbon on her neck and pretend I'm taking her to the Rutland Fair.

Author: Papa hunkered down on his heels and watched me wash Pinky. She was as clean as an archangel.

Haven: Rob?

Robert: Yes, sir.

Haven: Do you think you could keep both your feet out of trouble if you was to go to the Rutland Fair?

Narr 1: Robert is speechless. He figures his father must be teasing him.

Haven: Ben Tanner stopped by and offered to take you to the fair with him. He said he wants to show off his oxen and needs a boy to show 'em in the ring.

Robert: Papa, is this a joke? 'Cuz if it is, I don't think I can take it.

Haven: Ain't no joke. He says you can bring Pinky and show her too.

Robert: Oh, Papa!

Author: It was too much. I'd always dreamed of going to the fair. I just never actually believed the dream would come true.

Narr 2: When the day comes, Benjamin Tanner and his wife drive their oxcart to the Peck farm. He picks up Robert and Pinky, and off they go to Rutland.

Narr 3: At the fair, Robert does an excellent job of showing Benjamin's **Holsteins**. He walks Bob and Bib around the ring five times to the delight of the judges.

Narr 1: Next, Robert shows Pinky in a ring, and she wins the blue ribbon for "Best Behaved Pig."

Author: It was the proudest moment of my young life.

Narr 2: When Robert returns home from the fair, his mother runs to meet him. They hug and Robert tells her all about his fantastic experience.

Narr 3: Later that night, the Peck family enjoys blackberry pie.

'You'll wash that pig away. There won't be anything left of Pinky 'cept a lump of lard.'

Author: I went on and on telling them my story 'til I was nearly blue in the face. I even marched around the kitchen in a circle to show exactly how I showed them oxen and Pinky.

Haven: Rutland. I never went there, boy or man. And here you go, all that way by your lonesome with the neighbors.

Robert: It's not so big. What sets you back is the noise. It was as noisy at night as it was in the morning. I guess it's like a big brass band that can't stop playing. It just goes all the while.

Haven: Sounds like a mouth I

*** vocab**
HOLSTEINS: dairy cows

know ... that's got blackberry all over it.

Author: Mama laughed. So did I. So did Papa. Then I went over to the sink to wash it off. It sure was good to be home.

SCENE 7

Narr 1: A few weeks go by. Robert and his father are once again working on their fence.

Author: Papa had just got home from butchering. His clothes were a real mess.

Robert: Papa, after a whole day of rendering pork, don't you start to hate your clothes?

Haven: Like I could burn 'em and bury 'em.

Robert: I want to grow up to be just like you, Papa.

Haven: I wouldn't wish that on a dead cat.

Robert: I do, Papa. And I will. I'll be just like you.

Haven: No boy, you won't. You have your schooling. You'll read and write and you won't have to leave your land to kill another man's hogs like me.

Robert: But you're a good butcher, Papa. Even Mr. Tanner says so. He told me when we went to Rutland.

Haven: Well, I'm sure glad to be famed for something.

Author: I didn't like the way Papa was speaking to me. He seemed down.

Robert: How come you get so dirty when you kill them pigs, Papa?

Haven: Dying is a dirty business. Like getting born.

Robert: I never thought of it that way. But I'm sure glad that nobody'll ever kill Pinky. She's going to be a brood sow, isn't she, Papa?

Haven: She should've had her first heat by now. I'm afraid Pinky may be **barren**.

Robert: No!

Author: My fists hit the top rail of the fence. I hit it harder and harder. Until my hands started to hurt.

Haven: Rob, that won't change nothing. You got to face what is.

Author: Being barren meant that Pinky was not worth anything to us but meat. I hoped and prayed that wasn't the case. Papa must've been praying too. We were both so silent.

Narr 2: Later that night, after dinner, Robert and his father sit in the parlor by a fire.

Haven: I reckon this is my last winter.

Robert: What?

Haven: I said this is my last winter. I got an **affliction**. I know it.

Robert: You seen Doc Knapp?

Haven: No need. All things end, and so it goes.

Robert: No, Papa. Don't say that.

Haven: Listen, Rob. I tell you true. You got to face up to it. You can't be a boy about it.

Robert: Papa, Papa ...

Haven: You are not to say this to your mother. But from now on,

you got to listen how to run this farm. We got five years to go on it and the land is ours. Lock and stock. Five years to pay off. And you'll be through with school by then.

Robert: I'll quit school and run the farm.

Haven: No you won't. You stay and get schooled. Get all the teaching you can hold.

'Come next spring, you aren't the boy of the place. You're the man. A man of 13, but no less a man.'

Author: I got up from my chair so I could be near him. I touched the sleeve of his shirt and felt his whole body stiffen. He looked away as he spoke.

Haven: Come next spring, you aren't the boy of the place. You're the man. A man of 13 but no less a man. And whatever has to be done on this land, it's got to be done by you, Rob. Because there will be nobody else, boy. Just you. Your sisters are gone, all four wedded. Your two brothers are dead. Born dead and grounded in our orchard. So it's got to be you, Rob.

Robert: Papa, no.

Haven: And you'll have to take care of your mother too. I feel

like it's over for me soon. Animals know when. And I reckon I'm more beast than man.

Author: I didn't believe it, and I couldn't say anything. I just hoped he'd reach out and touch me or kiss me or something. But he just got up from his chair and went upstairs to bed. The parlor was still hot and dark. I sat watching the red cinders turn gray. I stayed there until the fire died. So it would not have to die alone.

SCENE 8

Narr 3: In the fall, it seems even more likely that Pinky is barren.

Narr 1: Mr. Tanner brings a boar to mate with Pinky. In the weeks that follow, Pinky shows no signs of producing any offspring. Robert's fears become real.

Narr 2: The morning of the first snowfall, Robert and his father are standing in the kitchen. Haven is staring out the window with his back to his son.

Haven: Rob, let's get it done.

Author: I didn't ask what. I just knew. I followed Papa out to where we kept the tools, and I stood there watching as he sharpened the knives on the wheel. I followed him out to Pinky's pen.

Robert: Come on, Pinky. It's morning.

Author: I tried to speak in a cheerful tone, but my throat seemed to catch, and the words

vocab

BARREN: unable to reproduce

AFFLICTION: the cause of great pain or distress

had trouble coming out. Pinky's curly tail was moving about like it was glad the day had started. People say pigs don't feel. And they don't wag their tails. All I know is that Pinky sure knew who I was, and her tail did too.

Narr 3: Pinky follows Robert. Robert follows his father.

Author: If only Papa had got a deer that fall. If only there was another way.

Haven: Help me, boy. It's time.

Robert: Papa, I don't think I can.

Haven: That ain't the issue, Rob. We have to.

Author: When it was over, Papa was breathing the way no man or beast should breathe. I had never seen any man work as fast. His whole body was steaming with work. I couldn't help it. I started thinking about Pinky. My sweet, big, clean white Pinky who followed me all over. She was the only thing I ever really owned. The only thing I could point to and say ... mine. But now there was no Pinky. Just a sopping wet lake of red slush. So I cried.

Robert: Oh, Papa. My heart's broke.

Haven: So's mine.

Author: I broke down.

Haven: But I'm thankful you're a man.

Author: Papa let me cry it all out. I felt his big hand touch my face. His knuckles were covered in pig blood. It was the hand that had just butchered Pinky. He did it. Because he had to. Hated to and had to. And he knew that he'd never have to say to me that he

was sorry. His hand against my face, trying to wipe away my tears, said it all.

I couldn't help it. I took his hand to my mouth and I kissed it. Pig blood and all. He looked down at me, and then he looked away. With his free arm he raked the sleeve of his work shirt across his eyes. It was the first time I ever seen him do it.

The only time.

SCENE 9

Author: Papa lived through the winter. He died in his sleep out in the barn on the third of May. He was always up before I was. And when I went out to the barn that morning, all was still. He was lying on the straw bed that he rigged for himself, and I knew before I got to him that he was dead.

Robert: Papa, it's all right. You can sleep this morning. I'll do the chores. There's no need to work anymore. You just rest.

Narr 1: Robert does all of his father's chores and then tells his mother the sad news.

Narr 2: Haven is buried in the orchard on the hill, next to Robert's two brothers. After the funeral, Robert remains at his father's grave until the sun goes down.

Author: Somewhere down under all that Vermont clay was my father, Haven Peck. Buried deep in the land he sweated so hard on and longed to own so much. And now it owned him.

Robert: Goodnight, Papa. We had 13 good years.

Author: That was all I could say, so I just turned and walked away from a patch of grassless land. ■

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