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Opening extract from

George's Secret Key to the Universe

Written by

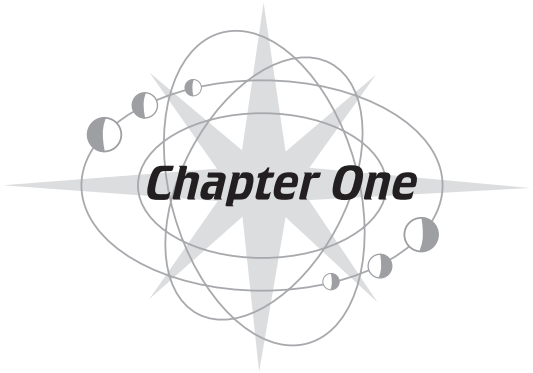
Stephen and Lucy Hawking

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Chapter One

Pigs don't just vanish, thought George to himself as he stood staring into the depths of the very obviously empty pigsty. He tried closing his eyes and then opening them again, to see if it was all some kind of horrible optical illusion. But when he looked again, the pig was still gone, his vast muddy pink bulk nowhere to be seen. In fact, when George examined the situation for a second time, it had got worse, not better. The side door of the pigsty, he noticed, was hanging open, which meant someone hadn't shut it properly. And that someone was probably him.

'Georgie!' he heard his mother call from the kitchen. 'I'm going to start supper in a minute so you've only got about an hour. Have you done your homework?'

'Yes, Mum,' he called back in a fake cheery voice.

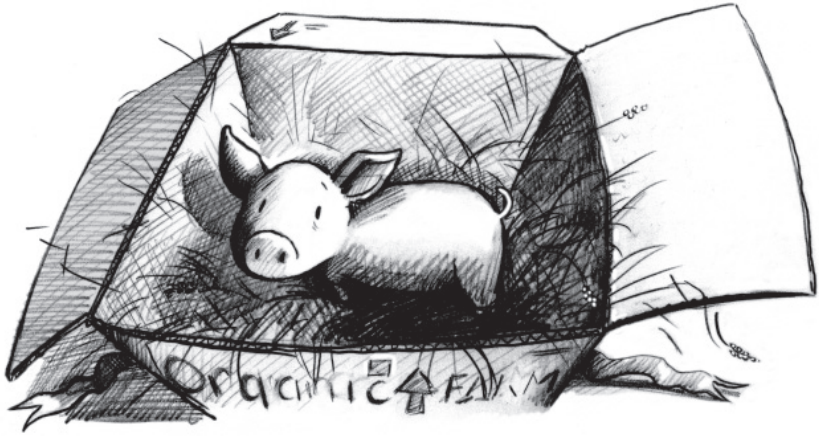
'How's your pig?'

'He's fine! Fine!' said George squeakily. He threw in a few experimental oinks, just to make it sound as though everything was business as usual, here in the small back garden that was full of many, many vegetables

and one enormous – but now mysteriously absent – pig. He grunted a few more times for effect – it was very important his mother did not come out into the garden before George had time to think up a plan. Quite how he was going to find the pig, put it back in the sty, close the door and get back in time for supper, he had no idea. But he was working on it, and the last thing he needed was for one of his parents to appear before he had all the answers.

George knew the pig was not exactly popular with his parents. His mother and father had never wanted a pig in the back garden, and his dad in particular tended to grind his teeth quite hard when he remembered who lived beyond the vegetable patch. The pig had been a present: one cold Christmas Eve a few years back, a cardboard box full of squeaks and snuffles had been delivered to their front door. When George opened it up, he found a very indignant pink piglet inside. George lifted him carefully out of the box and watched with delight as his new friend





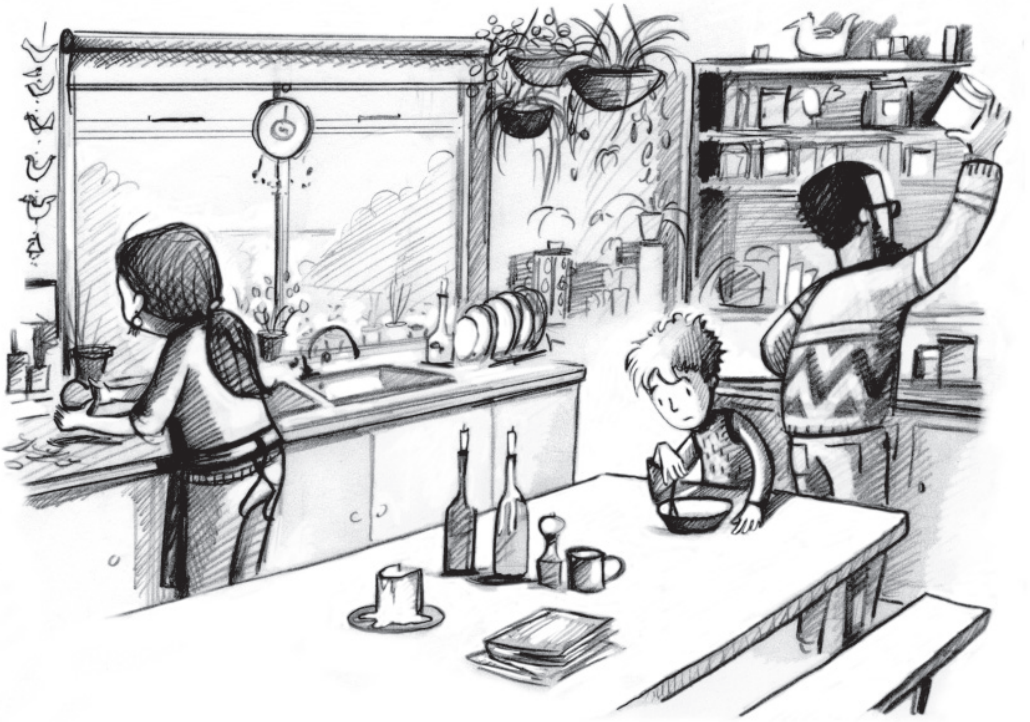
skidded around the Christmas tree on his tiny hooflets. There had been a note taped to the box. *Dear All!* it read. *Happy Christmas! This little chap needs a home – can you give him one? Love Grandma xxx.*

George's dad hadn't been delighted by the new addition to his family. Just because he was a vegetarian, it didn't mean he liked animals. Actually, he preferred plants. They were much easier to deal with: they didn't make a mess or leave muddy trotter prints on the kitchen floor or break in and eat all the biscuits left out on the table. But George was thrilled to have his very own pig. The presents he'd received from his mum and dad that year were, as usual, pretty dreadful. The home-knitted purple and orange striped jumper from his mum had sleeves which stretched right down to the floor; he had never wanted a set of panpipes and he had a hard time looking enthusiastic when he unwrapped a build-your-own-wormery kit.

What George really wanted – above all things in the

Universe – was a computer. But he knew his parents were very unlikely to buy him one. They didn't like modern inventions and tried to do without as many standard household items as they could. Wanting to live a purer, simpler life, they washed all their clothes by hand and didn't own a car and lit the house with candles in order to avoid using any electricity.

It was all designed to give George a natural and improving upbringing, free from toxins, additives, radiation and other such evil phenomena. The only problem was that in getting rid of everything that could



possibly harm George, his parents had managed to do away with lots of things that would also be fun for him. George's parents might enjoy dancing around maypoles, going on eco protest marches or grinding flour to make their own bread, but George didn't. He wanted to go to a theme park and ride on the roller coasters or play computer games or take an aeroplane somewhere far far away. Instead, for now, all he had was his pig.

And a very fine pig he was too. George named him Freddy and spent many happy hours dangling over the edge of the pigsty his father had built in the back garden, watching Freddy rootle around in the straw or snuffle in the dirt. As the seasons changed and the years turned, George's piglet got bigger . . . and bigger . . . and bigger . . . until he was so large that in dim lighting he looked like a baby elephant. The bigger Freddy grew, the more he seemed to feel cooped up in his pigsty. Whenever he got the chance, he liked to escape and rampage across the vegetable patch, trampling on the carrot tops, munching the baby cabbages and chewing up George's mum's flowers. Even though she often told George how important it was to love all living creatures, George suspected that on days when Freddy wrecked her garden, she didn't feel much love for his pig. Like George's dad, his mum was a vegetarian, but George was sure he had heard her angrily mutter 'sausages' under her breath when she was clearing up after one of Freddy's more destructive outings.