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Opening extract from

A Pig Called Heather

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Chapter 1

Hats & Carrots

When the pig called Heather woke up after lunch, the first thing she thought was that she had absolutely nothing to do. That was good – doing nothing was one of her best things, and also one of the things she did best. So while she thought about doing nothing and how nice it was going to be, it occurred to her that doing nothing might be even

nicer if you could think about nothing while you were doing it. She went and found her best friends, Rhona the goat and Alastair the sheepdog.

'I'm off to the field.'

'What for?' asked Rhona.

'No reason,' replied the pig.

'What are you going to do?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'That's right. Nothing.'

'Can we come?'

'I'd rather you didn't. It's easier to do nothing if you're on your own. I'm going to try and think about nothing as well.'

Of course, if you've ever tried to think about nothing, you'll know it isn't really possible, mainly because the moment you think you're thinking about nothing you realise that you are in fact thinking about something, even though that something is nothing. And that's exactly what Heather was thinking when two brand new thoughts barged into her head like envelopes through a letter-box.

Isla, and the shiny thing.

Isla was her best friend. Always had been. Best two-legged friend, that is. Heather could remember when Isla's mum was walking around with a huge tummy telling them all she was going to have a baby. Then Isla was born and was soon zooming around the farmyard on her bottom, wearing nappies and eating mud. She learnt to stand by using Heather's tail to pull herself up and then wobbling, one jammy hand on Heather's back and a triumphant grin on her face. The hours she'd spent making Heather kneel down, like a camel, so that she could climb on her back and parade around the farmyard. Her first day at school, her panic when her first tooth fell out, her shout of triumph when she finally managed to climb the tree by the ruin, and her yelp of alarm as she fell off it.

There were bad memories too. In particular, the awful evening when Isla came running out of the house in floods of tears and hid in the corner of the barn with Heather, crying and crying that her mother had died. Isla stayed in the barn that night. Her dad came out to

see her, but she said she didn't want to be in the house and he seemed to understand that. She clung to Heather all night, like a very large, very sweaty piglet.

After that she'd spent more and more time with Heather. Quite often she fell asleep in the barn and then her dad would come and carry her inside, fast asleep. Heather had seen her grow into this amazing little girl – thoughtful, naughty and so chatty! From the moment she'd said her first word – 'tractor' – she hadn't stopped talking.

So why had she not come to see Heather for two whole days? Something was wrong.

The shiny thing was right in the middle of her field, and it glinted every time the sun came out from behind the clouds and shone at it. What was it?

Heather went over to investigate. It was small and round, and although it was covered in earth it still managed to twinkle at her. She sniffed at it but it didn't smell of very much. She gingerly took a bite but it was very hard and tasted like blood so she spat it out again quickly. It was annoying though – she didn't like having something in her field that she couldn't

either identify or eat. She could bury it again, but then she'd always know it was there. The answer came to her when she heard the familiar *thump, thump, thump* of Isla's skipping rope. Isla would know what it was. Isla was really clever. She always knew stuff like that. And maybe she could find out why Isla wasn't talking to her. Get rid of both thoughts at once. Then her head would be nice and empty again. Trying to avoid biting it, she put the thing in her mouth and walked over to the gate that separated the field from the back garden.

Heather spat out the shiny thing and then put her trotters onto the top of the gate and oinked loudly. No response from the garden. She oinked again, louder. Still no response. Isla must have her iPod on. Heather sighed. She didn't like squealing, but it looked like she had no choice. She checked nobody important was listening, took a deep breath and squealed, just like a pig.

Isla looked up, grinned, got her feet all tangled up in the skipping rope and fell in a heap on the floor.

She picked herself up, unplugged her headphones

and ran over. 'Heather Duroc! There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you. Where were you?'

She was called Heather Duroc because she liked eating heather, and she was a Duroc pig. Her mother had been called Eggshells Duroc, her father Potatoes Duroc, one of her sisters had been named Yogurts Duroc, and her brother, after an unfortunate incident when the back door was left open and the kitchen unattended, had always been known as Chocolate Mousse Duroc.

'I've finally got Dad to agree that you can come to school with me tomorrow. I didn't want to get our hopes up so that's why I didn't say anything before, but tomorrow's pet day at school and Dad says I can take you! Not that you're a pet or anything, I mean, you're like a proper working animal, but because we're such good friends I asked Dad if it would be okay and he said yes. So tomorrow morning we'll get the school bus together and you can spend the whole day at school with me!'

School! Heather gulped and pushed her snout into Isla's hand so the little girl wouldn't realise how nervous

she was. She didn't know what happened at school, although Isla seemed to do a lot of counting. She did say lunch was nice though, so it couldn't be all bad.

Heather remembered that she'd had something important to ask Isla, so she dropped to the ground, picked up the funny thing in her mouth and stuck out her tongue with the thing on it.

'Ooh, an old coin. That's pretty, where d'you find it?'

'Isla, come on, love – it's tea time!' shouted Farmer Wolstenholme from over by the house.

Heather waved her snout back towards the middle of the field, but she wasn't sure if Isla registered.

'I've got to go now – Dad's calling me in. I'll come out and see you later.' She leant across the fence and whispered, 'Dad's done carrots for tea so I'll try and smuggle some out to you!'

That sounded promising and Heather snuffled contentedly as her friend raced across the farmyard to where her dad was waiting for her. She watched her fondly, amazed as always at the amount of energy contained in that little body with its spindly arms and bandy legs. Always on the move, always so excited

about everything, always trying to squeeze even more juice out of the day. It made Heather feel tired just watching her. Maybe that was why they got on so well. Isla reminded Heather of one of her piglets, and as Heather couldn't answer her, Isla got to talk and talk without ever having to stop.

She was enjoying thinking about Isla, so she was extra cross when a strange van drove into the farmyard and parked a new thought in her head. The van was white and gold, and on top of it were perched three huge plastic chickens, bent over and with their wings out, looking like they were going to take off at any second.

'*Busby's Birds*. Must be a chicken farmer,' said Rhona, who had just arrived and was reading what was written on the side of the van.

A tall, angular man uncoiled himself from inside it like a snake being charmed out of a basket.

The man looked around him, nodded in a pleased fashion and reached for his mobile phone. He dialled and held it to his ear as he looked around him.

'I'm at the farm now. You were right, it's perfect.'

He listened for a bit, nodding all the time and then he smiled, his teeth were white and gleaming. 'I've not seen the cellar yet, but if it's as big as you say it'll do us just fine.'

He hung up and walked over towards the farmhouse.

Heather was curious. 'What does he want? We're not a chicken farm.'

'I don't know,' replied Rhona, 'but that's a ridiculous name. Everyone knows a busby is a hat. Soldiers wear them. Like the ones who guard Buckingham Palace, where the Queen lives.'

'Doesn't the Queen wear a crown?' asked Heather, a bit confused.

'She does. It's how you know she's the Queen. But this man's a chicken farmer. Named after a hat. I don't like it. Or him.' She turned away gloomily. 'How are you anyway?'

'Exhausted. Rhona, what exactly do you do at school?'

'Why?'

So Heather started to tell her about Isla and pet

day and together they headed off to the barn for their supper. The trough was full of delicious slops and Heather got stuck in straight away. For quite some time she was too busy eating to say anything, and then suddenly she stopped. Something very alarming had just occurred to her. She sat down on her haunches and looked so worried Rhona stopped eating and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

Heather swallowed. 'Do you think the hat man is staying for tea? Only Isla promised me carrots. If he stays there may not be any left.'