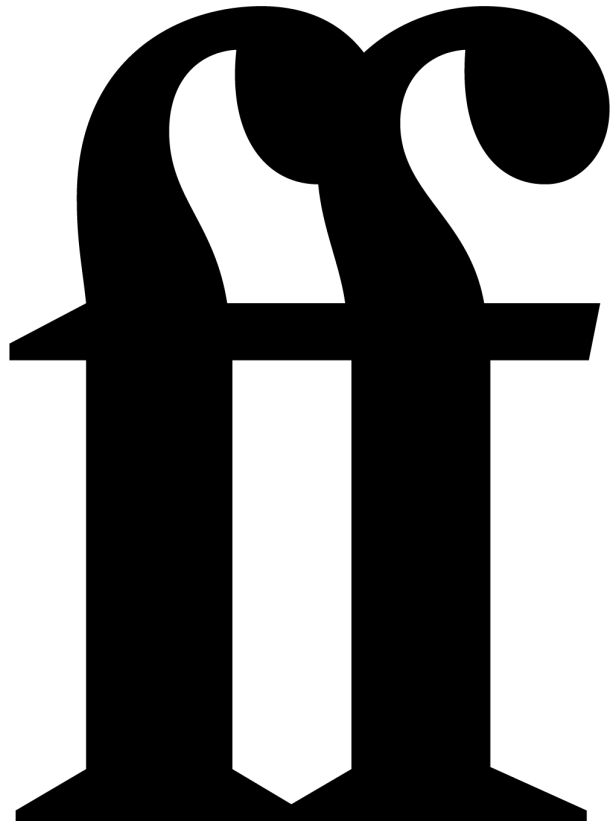


DEMON COPPERHEAD

A NOVEL

BARBARA KINGSOLVER

Oprah's
Book Club
2022



**DEMON
COPPERHEAD**

**BARBARA
KINGSOLVER**

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For the survivors.

“It’s in vain to recall the past,
unless it works some influence upon the present.”

Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

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About the Author

By the Same Author

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Demon Copperhead

1

First, I got myself born. A decent crowd was on hand to watch, and they've always given me that much: the worst of the job was up to me, my mother being let's just say out of it.

On any other day they'd have seen her outside on the deck of her trailer home, good neighbors taking notice, pestering the tit of trouble as they will. All through the dog-breath air of late summer and fall, cast an eye up the mountain and there she'd be, little bleach-blonde smoking her Pall Malls, hanging on that railing like she's captain of her ship up there and now might be the hour it's going down. This is an eighteen-year-old girl we're discussing, all on her own and as pregnant as it gets. The day she failed to show, it fell to Nance Peggot to go bang on the door, barge inside, and find her passed out on the bathroom floor with her junk all over the place and me already coming out. A slick fish-colored hostage picking up grit from the vinyl tile, worming and shoving around because I'm still inside the sack that babies float in, pre-real-life.

Mr. Peggot was outside idling his truck, headed for evening service, probably thinking about how much of his life he'd spent waiting on women. His wife would have told him the Jesusing could hold on a minute, first she needed to go see if the little pregnant gal had got herself liquored up again. Mrs. Peggot being a lady that doesn't beat around the bushes and if need be, will tell Christ Jesus to sit tight and keep his pretty hair on. She came back out yelling for him to call 911 because a poor child is in the bathroom trying to punch himself out of a bag.

Like a little blue prizefighter. Those are the words she'd use later on, being not at all shy to discuss the worst day of my mom's life. And if that's how I came across to the first people that laid eyes on me, I'll take it. To me that says I had a fighting chance. Long odds, yes I know. If a mother is lying in her own piss and pill

bottles while they're slapping the kid she's shunted out, telling him to look alive: likely the bastard is doomed. Kid born to the junkie is a junkie. He'll grow up to be everything you don't want to know, the rotten teeth and dead-zone eyes, the nuisance of locking up your tools in the garage so they don't walk off, the rent-by-the-week motel squatting well back from the scenic highway. This kid, if he wanted a shot at the finer things, should have got himself delivered to some rich or smart or Christian, nonusing type of mother. Anybody will tell you the born of this world are marked from the get-out, win or lose.

Me though, I was a born sucker for the superhero rescue. Did that line of work even exist, in our trailer-home universe? Had they all quit Smallville and gone looking for bigger action? Save or be saved, these are questions. You want to think it's not over till the last page.

It was a Wednesday this all happened, which supposedly is the bad one. Full of woe etc. Add to that, coming out still inside the fetus ziplock. But. According to Mrs. Peggot there is one good piece of luck that comes with the baggie birth: it's this promise from God that you'll never drown. Specifically. You could still OD, or get pinned to the wheel and charbroiled in your driver's seat, or for that matter blow your own brains out, but the one place where you will not suck your last breath is underwater. Thank you, Jesus.

I don't know if this is at all related, but I always had a thing for the ocean. Usually kids will get fixated on naming every make and model of dinosaur or what have you. With me it was whales and sharks. Even now I probably think more than the normal about water, floating in it, just the color blue itself and how for the fish, that blue is the whole deal. Air and noise and people and our all-important hectic nonsense, a minor irritant if even that.

I've not seen the real thing, just pictures, and this hypnotizing screen saver of waves rearing up and spilling over on a library computer. So what do I know about ocean, still yet to stand on its sandy beard and look it in the eye? Still waiting to meet the one big thing I know is not going to swallow me alive.

Dead in the heart of Lee County, between the Ruelynn coal camp and a settlement people call Right Poor, the top of a road between two steep mountains is where our single-wide was set. I wasted more hours up in those woods than you'd want to count, alongside of a boy named Maggot, wading the creek and turning over big rocks and being mighty. I could go different ways but definitely a Marvel hero as preferable to DC, Wolverine being a favorite. Whereas Maggot tended to choose Storm, which is a girl. (Excellent powers, and a mutant, but still.) Maggot was short for Matt Peggot, related obviously to the screaming lady at my birthday party, his grandmother. She was the reason Maggot and I got to be next-door-neighbor wild boys for a time, but first he'd need to get born, a little out ahead of me, plus getting pawned off on her while his mom took the extended vacay in Goochland Women's Prison. We've got story enough here to eff up more than one young life, but it is a project.

Famously, this place where we lived was known to be crawling with copperheads. People think they know a lot of things. Here's what I know. In the years I spent climbing around rocks in all the places a snake likes to lie, not one copperhead did we see. Snakes, yes, all the time. But snakes come in kinds. For one, a common spotty kind called a Water Devil that's easily pissed off and will strike fast if you make that mistake, but it's less of a bite than a dog deals out, or a bee sting. Whenever a water snake gets you, you yell all the curse words you've got stored up in your little skull closet. Then wipe off the blood, pick up your stick, and go on being an Adaptoid, thrashing on the mossy stump of evil. Where, if a copperhead gets you, that's the end of whatever you planned on doing that day, and maybe with that part of your hand or foot, period. So it matters a lot, what you're looking at.

If you care, you'll learn one thing from another. Anybody knows a sheepdog from a beagle, or a Whopper from a Big Mac. Meaning dogs matter and burgers matter but a snake is a freaking snake. Our holler was full of copperheads, said the cashiers at the grocery whenever they saw our address on Mom's food stamps envelope. Said the school bus driver, day in, day out, snapping the door shut behind me like she's slamming it on their pointy snake

faces. People love to believe in danger, as long as it's you in harm's way, and them saying bless your heart.

Years would come and go before I got to the bottom of all the heart-blessing, and it was not entirely about snakes. One of Mom's bad choices, which she learned to call them in rehab, and trust me there were many, was a guy called Copperhead. Supposedly he had the dark skin and light-green eyes of a Melungeon, and red hair that made you look twice. He wore it long and shiny as a penny, said my mother, who clearly had a bad case. A snake tattoo coiled around his right arm where he'd been bit twice: first in church, as a kid trying for manhood among his family's snake-handling men. Second time, later on, far from the sight of God. Mom said he didn't need the tattoo for a reminder, that arm aggravated him to the end. He died the summer before I was born. My messed-up birthday surprised enough people to get the ambulance called and then the monster-truck mud rally of child services. But I doubt anybody was surprised to see me grow up with these eyes, this hair. I might as well have been born with the ink.

Mom had her own version of the day I was born, which I never believed, considering she was passed out for the event. Not that I'm any witness, being a newborn infant plus inside a bag. But I knew Mrs. Peggot's story. And if you'd spent even a day in the company of her and my mom, you would know which of those two lotto tickets was going to pay out.

Mom's was this. The day I was born, her baby daddy's mother turned up out of the blue. She was nobody Mom had ever met nor wanted to, given what she'd heard about that family. Snake-handling Baptist was not the half of it. These were said to be individuals that beat the tar out of each other, husbands belting wives, mothers beating kids with whatever object fell to hand, the Holy Bible itself not out of the question. I took Mom's word on that because you hear of such things, folks so godly as to pass around snakes, also passing around black eyes. If this is a new one on you, maybe you also think a dry county is a place where there's no liquor to be found. Southwest Virginia, we're one damn thing after another.

Supposedly by the time this lady showed up, Mom was pretty far gone with the pains. The labor thing coming at her out of nowhere that day. Thinking to dull the worst of it, she hit the Seagram's before noon, with enough white crosses to stay awake for more drinking, and some Vicodin after it's all a bit too much. Looks up to see a stranger's face pressed so hard against the bathroom window her mouth looks like a butt crack. (Mom's words, take or leave the visual.) The lady marches around through the front door and tears into Mom with the hell and the brimstone. What is she doing to this innocent lamb that Almighty God has put in her womb? She's come to take her dead son's only child from this den of vice and raise her up decent.

Mom always swore that was the train I barely missed: getting whisked off to join some savage Holy Roller brood in Open Ass, Tennessee. Place name, my own touch. Mom refused to discuss my father's family at all, or even what killed him. Only that it was a bad accident at a place I was never to go called Devil's Bathtub. Keeping secrets from young ears only plants seeds in between them, and these grew in my tiny head into grislier deaths than any I was supposed to be seeing on TV at that age. To the extent of me being terrified of bathtubs, which luckily we didn't have. The Peggots did, and I steered clear. But Mom stuck to her guns. All she would ever say about Mother Copperhead was that she was a gray-headed old hag, Betsy by name. I was disappointed, wishing for a Black Widow head of kick-ass red hair, at the least. This being the only kin of my father's we were likely to see. When your parent clocks out before you clock in, you can spend way too much of your life staring into that black hole.

But Mom saw enough. She lived in fear of losing custody, and gave her all in rehab. I came out, Mom went in, and gave it a hundred percent. Gave and gave again over the years, getting to be an expert at rehab, like they say. Having done it so many times.

You can see how Mom's story just stirred up the mud. Some lady shows up (or doesn't), offers me a better home (or not), then leaves, after being called a string of juicy cusswords (knowing Mom) that would have left the lady's ears ringing. Did Mom make up her version to jerk me around? Was it true, in her scrambled

brain? Either way, she was clear about the lady coming to rescue a *little girl*. Not me. If this was Mom's fairy tale: Why a girl? Was that what she really wanted, some pink package that would make her get her act together? Like *I* wasn't breakable?

The other part, a small thing, is that in this story Mom never spoke my father's name. The woman is "the Woodall witch," that being my dad's last name, with no mention of the man that got her into the baby fix. She found plenty to say about him at other times, whenever love and all that was her last stop on the second six-pack. The adventures of him and her. But in this tale as regards my existence, he is only the bad choice.

2

My thinking here is to put everything in the order of how it happened, give or take certain intervals of a young man skunked out of his skull box, some dots duly connected. But damn. A kid is a terrible thing to be, in charge of nothing. If you get past that and grown, it's easiest to forget about the misery and pretend you knew all along what you were doing. Assuming you've ended up someplace you're proud to be. And if not, easier to forget the whole thing, period. So this is going to be option three, not proud, not forgetting. Not easy.

I remember I always liked looking at things more than talking about them. I did have questions. My problem was people. Thinking kids are not enough full-fledge humans to give them straight answers. For instance. The Peggots next door in their yard had a birdhouse on a pole that was a big mess of dangling gourds, with holes drilled for the bird doors. It was the bird version of these trailer pileups you'll see, where some couple got a family going and nobody, not kids nor grandkids, *ever* moved out. They're just going to keep shacking up and hauling in another mobile home to set on blocks, keeping it one big family with their junkass porches and raggedy flag over the original unit. One Nation Under Employed. The Peggot birdhouse was that, a bird-trailer clusterfuck. But no birds lived in it, ever. There were bird nests galore in the trees behind the house, or they'd build one in some random place like under the hood of Mr. Peggot's truck. Why not move into a house already built, free of charge? Mr. Peggot said birds were like anybody, they like living their own way. He said he'd known government housing that didn't cost much more than a birdhouse to move into, just as unpopular.

Fine, but why keep the thing up there, growing mold? Maggot told me Humvee had made it in Shop. Humvee being one of

Maggot's uncles, last seen near a schoolhouse around the time of the Bee Gees or Elvis. By now it's the nineties. The Peggots kept this reject birdhouse up its pole all those years for what, to remember their son Humvee by? I didn't buy it. The Peggots had seven kids altogether, living as far away as Ocala Florida or as close as a mile away. Cousins without number roamed through that house like packs of half-broke animals with meal privileges. Every family member got talked to or talked about on a daily basis, except two: (1) Maggot's mom, (2) Humvee. One doing time in Goochland, one dead, for undiscussed reasons.

Besides the birdless birdhouse, they had a dog pen with no dog. Mr. Peggot used to run hounds before he got too tired for it like all the old men we knew, back whenever they still had the lungs for it, and dogs had foxes or bears to chase up a tree. In fall time he'd take us to the woods to hunt ginseng or dig sassafras because those can't outrun you. But mainly just to be out there. He knew bird tunes the way people know who's on the radio. After we got old enough to handle a rifle, nine or ten, he showed us how to take a buck, and how to heft up the carcass on the tree branch over the driveway to dress it out, letting loops of guts fall out steaming on the gravel. Mrs. Peggot cooked venison roast in the crockpot. You've not eaten till you've had that.

The empty dog pen stood between our trailer and the Peggot house. Maggot and I would put a tarp over it and sleep out there, usually if falling trees someplace took out the lines and we couldn't watch TV. One summer we did that for maybe a month, after a Nintendo Duck Hunt challenge where I accidentally let fly the controller gun and busted the screen. Maggot took credit for that deed so I wouldn't get sent home and skinned alive. Mrs. Peggot pretended to take his word for it, even though she heard the whole thing. Probably everybody has had some golden patch of life like that, where everything was going to be okay thanks to the people that had your back, and sadly you wasted it, by being ticked off over some ignorant thing like a busted TV.

The Peggot house sat up at the top of the road with woods all around. They had chickens at one time, including this rooster with the mind of a serial killer that gave me bad dreams. But not

farmers proper. Likewise not the churchiest of people, but they were the ones that took me. Mom despised church, due to some of her fosters getting carried away with it, but I myself didn't mind. I liked looking at the singing women, and the rest you could sleep through. Plus that thing of being loved automatically, Jesus on your side. Not a faucet turned on or off, like with people. But some of the Bible stories I minded, definitely. The Lazarus deal got me mentally disturbed, thinking my dad could come back, and I needed to go find him. Mrs. Peggot told Mom I ought to go see Dad's grave in Tennessee, and they had a pretty huge fight. Maggot calmed me down by explaining Bible stories were a category of superhero comic. Not to be confused with real life.

As a kid you just accept different worlds with different rules, even between some houses and others. The Peggot home being a place where things got put where they went. Mr. Peggot would come home with the groceries and right away, in they'd go to the refrigerator. Maggot and I would get done having our World War III in the living room, and those Legos and crap got picked up before we went outside, or else hell would be paid. Not so at my house, where milk seemed like it had its own life to live and would sit out on the counter till it turned. Mom always said she'd lose her mind if it wasn't screwed in, and she wasn't wrong. Her work ID badge on the back of the toilet, makeup by the kitchen sink, purse outside under a chair. Shoes wherever. That was just Mom. In my room I tried to keep stuff put away, mainly my action figures and the notebooks I kept for my drawings. I asked Mom one time how to fix the bed so it was covered up like you see them on TV, which she thought was dead hilarious.

We kids roamed wide, sometimes as far as the old coal camps with the little row houses like Monopoly, except not all alike anymore due to idle mischief and the various ways a roof can cave in. We'd play king of the hill on the tippie cones and come home with white eyelids in coal-black faces like old miners we'd seen in photo albums. Or we'd mess around in creeks. Not the unmentionable one of Devil's Bathtub, which freaked Mom out, and anyway was over in Scott County. The best place by far was the little branch that ran right behind our houses, as a place for a

boy to turn invisible. Water with its own ideas, moving around under all those rocks. And underneath the water, a kind of mud that made you feel rich—leaf smelling, thick, of a color that you wanted to eat. Peggot's Branch, it was called, the Peggots being who had lived there longest. Their house was built by some previous Peggot before any other houses were up there, whenever it was one big farm where they plowed their tobacco with mules. So said Mr. Peggot. Mules being the only way you could farm on land that steep. On a tractor you'd roll it and kill yourself.

The trailer where Mom and I lived was technically a Peggot trailer, former home of Maggot's aunt June before she moved to Knoxville. Mom rented it from the Peggots, which was probably why they kept an eye and helped her out, like Mom was the second-string sub that came in off the bench after their own A-team daughter left the game. Maggot said June was still their favorite, even after she got her nursing degree and moved away. Which is saying a lot. Most families would sooner forgive you for going to prison than for moving out of Lee County.

To be clear, me and Mom were no kin of theirs, so this was not one of those family trailer pileups. Those shabby type of places show up on reality TV a lot more than reality in general, I think for the same reason people like to see copperheads where there aren't any copperheads. The Peggots just had their house and the one extra single-wide. Nine or ten other families had their places up and down our road that were kept up very decent, and again, no relation.

But the Peggots were a thundering horde, no question. I was jealous of Maggot for the wealth of cousins he totally took for granted. Even the hot older girl cousins that were all "Oooh, Matty, I'd kill you for your eyelashes! No fair God wasted a face that pretty on a boy!" Then squealing because Maggot's trying to give them arm burns, these buff cheerleader babes that honestly could kick his puny ass any day. There's no way they were scared. It was just this routine they had, the girls saying their girl shit to Maggot, and him acting like he hates it.

And I'd be like, Really man? Yes, I get that *pretty* is one of those words a guy has to treat like it's the clap and he's got his balls to protect. The whole manhood situation with Maggot being complicated, to put it mildly. But this would happen with nobody around to judge him, just the cousins. And me, the cousinless jerk that would have paid money for some girl making that kind of fuss over me, and lying halfway on top of me in a dogpile once they've all settled down on the living room floor to watch *Walker, Texas Ranger*. Me, the jerk sitting by himself on the couch looking at my friend down there in that pile, thinking: Dude. Who hates being adored?

I've been saying Mrs. Peggot this and that, so I'll go on writing it that way because the truth is embarrassing. I called her Mammaw. Maggot called her that, so I did too. I knew his cousins were not my cousins, nor was Mr. Peggot my grandpa, I called him Peg like everybody did. But I thought all kids got a mammaw, along with a caseworker and free school lunch and the canned beanie-weenies they gave you in a bag to take home for weekends. Like, assigned. Where else was I going to get one? No prospects incoming from Mom, foster-care orphan dropout. And the mother of Ghost Dad, already discussed. So I got to share with Maggot. This seemed fine with Mrs. Peggot. Other than my official sleeping place being at Mom's, and Maggot having his own room upstairs in the Peggot house, she played no favorites: same Hostess cakes, same cowboy shirts she made for us both with the fringe on the sleeves. Same little smack on the shoulder with her knuckles if you cussed or wore your ball cap to her table. Not to say she ever hit hard. But Christ Jesus, the tongue-thrashings. To look at her, this small granny-type individual with her short gray hair and mom jeans and flat yellow sandals, you're going to think: Nothing at all here to stand in my way. The little do you know. If you're going to steal or trash-talk your betters or break her tomato plants or get caught huffing her hair spray out of a paper bag, the lady could scold the hair off your head.

She was the only one to use my real name after everybody else let it go, Mom included. I didn't realize until pretty late in life, like

my twenties, that in other places people stick with the names they start out with. Who knew? I mean, Snoop Dogg, Nas, Scarface, these are not Mom-assigned names. I just assumed every place was like us, up home in Lee County, where most guys get something else on them that sticks. Shorty or Grub or Checkout. It's a good guess Humvee was not Humvee to begin with. Mr. Peggot was Peg after he got his foot crushed by one of those bolting machines they use in the coal mines. Some name finds you, and you come running to it like a dog until the day you die and it goes in the paper along with your official name that everybody's forgotten. I have looked at the obits page and thought about how most of these names are harsh. Who wants to die an old Stubby? But in life it's no big deal, you can buy a beer for your best friend Maggot without either one of you giving it a thought.

So it was not usual for Mrs. Peggot to keep my born name in the mix after others had moved on from it. It's Damon. Last name of Fields, same as Mom's. At the time of filling in the hospital forms after my action-packed birth, she evidently had her reasons for not tagging me to my dad. From what I know now, there's no question, but looking like him was something I had to grow into, along with getting hair. And in those days, with her looks still being the main item in Mom's plus column and the words "bad choice" yet to join her vocab, maybe there were other candidates. None on hand to gentleman up and sign over his name. Or drive her home from the hospital. That job, like most gentleman-up stuff in Mom's life, fell to Mr. Peg. Was he happy about it or not, another story.

As far as the Damon part, leave it to her to pop out a candy-ass boy-band singer name like that. Did she think she'd even get me off her tits before people turned that into Demon? Long before school age, I'd heard it all. Screamin' Demon, Demon Semen. But once I got my copper-wire hair and some version of attitude, I started hearing "Little Copperhead." Hearing it a lot. And look, no red-blooded boy wants to be Little Anything. Advice to anybody with the plan of naming your kid Junior: going through life as mini-you will be as thrilling as finding dried-up jizz on the carpet.

But having a famous Ghost Dad puts a different light on it, and I can't say I hated being noticed in that way. Around the same time

Maggot started his shoplifting experiments, I was starting to get known as Demon Copperhead. You can't deny, it's got a power to it.