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Martyn Pig

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Extract

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Wednesday

It's hard to know where to start with this. I suppose I could tell you all about where I was born, what it was like when Mum was still around, what happened when I was a little kid, all that kind of stuff, but it's not really relevant. Or maybe it is. I don't know. Most of it I can't remember, anyway. It's all just bits and pieces of things, things that may or may not have happened – scraps of images, vague feelings, faded photographs of nameless people and forgotten places – that kind of thing.

Anyway, let's get the name out of the way first.

Martyn Pig.

Martyn with a Y, Pig with an I and one G.

Martyn Pig.

Yeah, I know. Don't worry about it. It doesn't bother me any more. I'm used to it. Mind you, there was a time when nothing else seemed to matter. My name made my life unbearable. Martyn Pig. Why? Why did I have to put up with it? The startled looks, the sneers and sniggers, the snorts, the never-ending pig jokes, day in, day out, over and over again. Why? Why me? Why couldn't I have a *normal* name? Keith Watson, Darren Jones – something like that. Why was I lumbered with a name that turned heads, a name that got me noticed? A *funny* name. Why?

And it wasn't just the name-calling I had to worry about, either, it was everything. Every time I had to tell someone

my name I'd start to feel ill. Physically ill. Sweaty hands, the shakes, bellyache. I lived for years with the constant dread of having to announce myself.

'Name?'

'Martyn Pig.'

'Pardon?'

'Martyn Pig.'

'Pig?'

'Yes.'

'Martyn Pig?'

'Yes. Martyn with a Y, Pig with an I and one G.'

Unless you've got an odd name yourself you wouldn't know what it's like. You wouldn't understand. They say that sticks and stones may break your bones but words will never hurt you. Oh yeah? Well, whoever thought that one up was an idiot. An idiot with an ordinary name, probably. Words *hurt.* Porky, Piggy, Pigman, Oink, Bacon, Stinky, Snorter, Porker, Grunt ...

I blamed my dad. It was his name. I asked him once if he'd ever thought of changing it.

'Changing what?' he'd muttered, without looking up from his newspaper.

'Our name. Pig.'

He reached for his beer and said nothing.

'Dad?'

'What?'

'Nothing. It doesn't matter.'

It took me a long time to realise that the best way to deal with name-calling is to simply ignore it. It's not easy, but I've found that if you let people do or think what they want and don't let your feelings get too mixed up in it, then after a while they usually get bored and leave you alone.

It worked for me, anyway. I still have to put up with

curious looks whenever I give my name. New teachers, librarians, doctors, dentists, newsagents, they all do it: narrow their eyes, frown, look to one side – is he joking? And then the embarrassment when they realise I'm not. But I can cope with that. Like I said, I'm used to it. You can get used to just about anything given enough time.

At least I don't get called Porky any more. Well ... not very often.

This – what I'm going to tell you about – it all happened just over a year ago. It was the week before Christmas. Or Xmas, as Dad called it. Exmas. It was the week before Exmas. A Wednesday.

I was in the kitchen filling a plastic bin-liner with empty beer bottles and Dad was leaning in the doorway, smoking a cigarette, watching me through bloodshot eyes.

'Don't you go takin' 'em to the bottle bank,' he said.

'No, Dad.'

'Bloody emviroment this, emviroment that ... if anyone wants to use my empty bottles again they'll have to pay for 'em. I don't get 'em for nothing, you know.'

'No.'

'Why should I give 'em away? What's the emviroment ever done for me?'

'Mmm.'

'Bloody bottle banks ...'

He paused to puff on his cigarette. I thought of telling him that there's no such thing as the *emviroment*, but I couldn't be bothered. I filled the bin-liner, tied it, and started on another. Dad was gazing at his reflection in the glass door, rubbing at the bags under his eyes. He could have been quite a handsome man if it wasn't for the drink. Handsome in a short, thuggish kind of way. Five foot seven,

tough-guy mouth, squarish jaw, oily black hair. He could have looked like one of those bad guys in films – the ones the ladies can't help falling in love with, even though they know they're bad – but he didn't. He looked like what he was: a drunk. Fat little belly, florid skin, yellowed eyes, sagging cheeks and a big fat neck. Old and worn out at forty.

He leaned over the sink, coughed, spat, and flicked ash down the plughole. 'That bloody woman's coming Friday.'

'That bloody woman' was my Aunty Jean. Dad's older sister. A terrible woman. Think of the worst person you know, then double it, and you'll be halfway to Aunty Jean. I can hardly bear to describe her, to tell you the truth. Furious is the first word that comes to mind. Mad, ugly and furious. An angular woman, cold and hard, with crispy blue hair and a face that makes you shudder. I don't know what colour her eyes are, but they look as if they never close. They have about as much warmth as two depthless pools. Her mouth is thin and pillar-box red, like something drawn by a disturbed child. And she walks faster than most people run. She moves like a huntress, quick and quiet, homing in on her prey. I used to have nightmares about her. I still do.

She always came over the week before Christmas. I don't know what for. All she ever did was sit around moaning about everything for about three hours. And when she wasn't moaning about everything she was swishing around the house running her fingers through the dust, checking in the cupboards, frowning at the state of the windows, tutting at everything.

'My *God*, William, how can you *live* like this.'

Everyone else called my dad Billy, but Aunty Jean always called him by his full name, pronouncing it with a wover-wemphasis on the first syllable – *Will*-yam – that made him flinch whenever she said it. He detested her. Hated her. He

was scared stiff of the woman. What he'd do, he'd hide all his bottles before she came round. Up in the loft, mostly. It took him ages. Up and down the ladder, arms full of clinking bottles, his face getting redder and redder by the minute, muttering under his breath all the time, 'Bloody woman, bloody woman, bloody woman, bloody woman ...'

Normally he didn't care what anyone thought about his drinking, but with Aunty Jean it was different. You see, when Mum left us – this was years ago – Aunty Jean tried to get custody of me. She wanted me to live with her, not with Dad. God knows why, she never liked me. But then she liked Dad even less, blamed him for the divorce and everything, said that he'd driven Mum to the 'brink of despair' and that she wasn't going to 'stand by and let him ruin an innocent young boy's life too'. Which was all a load of rubbish. She didn't give a hoot for my innocent life, she just wanted to kick Dad while he was down, kick him where it hurts, leave him with nothing. She despised him as much as he despised her. I don't know why. Some kind of brother/sister thing, I suppose. Anyway, her plan was to expose Dad as a drunkard. She reckoned the authorities would decide in her favour once they knew of Dad's wicked, drunken ways. They'd never allow me to live with a boozer. But she reckoned without Dad. His need for me was greater than hers. Without me, he was just a drunk. But with me, he was a drunk with responsibilities, a drunk with child benefit, a drunk with someone to clear up the sick.

After he was given notice that Aunty Jean had applied for custody he didn't so much as look at a bottle for two months or more. Not a drop. Not a sniff. It was remarkable. He shaved, washed, wore a suit, he even smiled now and then. I almost grew to like him. Aunty Jean's custody case was dead in the water. She didn't stand a chance. As far as

the rest of the world was concerned, Mr William Pig was the *ideal father.*

The day I was officially assigned to Dad's loving care, he went out drinking and didn't come back for three days. When he did come back – unshaven, white-eyed, stinking – he slouched into the kitchen where I was making some tea, leaned down at me, grinning like a madman, and slurred right into my face: 'Remember me?'

Then he stumbled over to the sink and threw up.

So that's why he hid the bottles. He didn't want to give Aunty Jean any excuse for re-opening the custody debate. It wasn't so much the thought of losing me that worried him, it was the thought of staying off the drink for another two months.

'Bloody woman,' he muttered again as I started on the empty beer cans, stamping them down into flattened discs, filling up another bin-liner. 'She's coming at four,' he went on, 'day after tomorrow, so make sure the place is cleaned up.'

'Yeah,' I said, wiping stale beer from the palms of my hands and reaching for another black bag. Dad watched for a while longer, then turned and slouched off into the front room.

Christmas meant nothing to us. It was just a couple of weeks off school for me and a good excuse for Dad to drink, not that he ever needed one. There was no festive spirit, no goodwill to all men, no robins, no holly – just cold, rainy days with nothing much to do.

I spent most of that Wednesday afternoon in town. Dad had given me some money – four dirty fivers – and told me to 'get some stuff in for Exmas: turkey, spuds, presents ...

sprouts, stuff like that'. It was too early to get the food in, Christmas was still a week away, but I wasn't going to argue. If he wanted me to go shopping, I'd go shopping. It gave me something to do.

Halfway down the street I heard a shout – *'Mar'n!'* – and turned to see Dad leaning out of the bedroom window, bare-chested, a cigarette dangling from his lip.

'Don't forget the bloody whasnames,' he yelled, making a yanking movement with both hands, tugging on two invisible ropes.

'What?' I called back.

He took the cigarette from his mouth, gazed blankly into the distance for a moment, then blurted out, 'Crackers! Get some bloody Exmas crackers. Big ones, mind, not them tiny buggers.'

In town, outside Sainsbury's, the scariest Father Christmas I'd ever seen was slumped in the back of a plywood sleigh. He was thin and short. So thin that his big black Santa's belt wound twice around his waist. Stiff black stubble showed on his chin beneath an ill-fitting, off-white Santa beard and – strangest of all, I thought – a pair of brand new trainers gleamed on his feet. When he *Ho-ho-ho'd* he sounded like a serial killer. Six plywood reindeer pulled his plywood sleigh. They were painted a shiny chocolate brown, with glittery red eyes and coat-hanger antlers entwined with plastic holly.

It was raining.

I watched the skinny Santa for a while – thirty seconds and a Lucky Bag per kid – then headed off towards the other end of town. As I walked I got to thinking about the whole Father Christmas thing. I was trying to remember if I'd ever really believed that a fat man in a fat red suit could squeeze down a million different chimneys all in one night. I

suppose I must have believed it at some point. I have a very vague memory of sitting on a Santa's knee when I was about three or four years old. I can still remember the nasty, scratchy feel of his red nylon trousers, the stickiness of his beard, and a strange fruity smell. When I asked him where he lived a familiar slurred voice answered, 'Poland ... uh ... North Poland ... in an underground igloo with twenty-two dwarves – *hic* – and a sleigh-deer.'

It was still raining when I got to The Bargain Bin. It's one of those cheap shops that sell all kinds of rubbishy stuff – cups, towels, bean bags, pencil cases. Upstairs, there's a toy department full of weedy footballs and plastic machine guns that make noises. You can test them. There's an arrow pointing to the trigger that says *Press* and when you pull the trigger they go *kakakakakakaka* or *dugga-dugga-dugga-dugga-peow-peow.* Ricochets. I was just looking around, looking at the racks of little toys – plastic animals, cows, sheep, crocodiles, rubber snakes, water pistols. I thought I might find something there for Alex, a present. Nothing serious, just a little something, you know, a token. The year before I'd bought her a box of plastic ants. I don't remember what she gave me.

Anyway, I was just standing there staring at the toys on the wall, trying to find something I thought she'd like, something I could afford, when I suddenly realised that I wasn't really looking at anything at all. I was looking, but not seeing. It was the noise. I couldn't concentrate because of the noise. Horrible tinny Christmas musak blaring out from speakers in the ceiling, synthesised sleigh bells and chirpy pianos, groany old singers trying too hard to be happy – it was unbearable. A great swirling mess of sound searing its way into my head. I tried to ignore it, but it just seemed to get louder and louder. And it was too hot in there, too. It

was boiling. There was no air. I couldn't breathe. The sound was paralysing – chattering machine guns, talking animals, wailing police car sirens, *dee-dur dee-dur dee-dur*, parents shouting at their kids, whacking them on the arm, the kids screaming and crying, the constant *beep beep beep* of the tills, the music ... it was like something out of a nightmare.

I had to get out.

I went and sat in the square for a while. The rain had stopped but the air was moist and cold. The sweat running down my neck felt clammy and foreign. I sat on a low brick wall and watched limping pigeons peck at food scabs while the slurred whine of a beardy old busker drifted across from the nearby shopping arcade. He's always there, always playing the same depressing song. *When I'm old with only one eye, I'll do nothing but look at the sky* ... Two screaming children clutching bits of bread were chasing pigeons across the square, and in the background I could hear the constant sound of thousands of people shuffling around the crowded streets, all talking, jabbering away, yammering rubbish to each other – *scuffle scuffle scuffle, blah blah blah, scuffle scuffle scuffle*. From distant streets the discordant sounds of other buskers mingled awkwardly with the hubbub – a hurdy-gurdy, the plink-plonk of a banjo, Peruvian pipes, the screaming whistle of a flute ...

It all sounded like madness to me. Too many people, too many buildings, too much noise, too much everything.

It's there all the time, the sound of too much everything, but no one ever listens to it. Because once you start to listen, you can never stop, and in the end it'll drive you crazy.

A wild-haired loony munching a greasy pasty sat down next to me and grinned in my direction. Bits of wet potato clung to his teeth. I decided to move on. My bum was cold and wet from sitting on the damp wall and it was starting to

rain again. I walked up through the backstreets then cut down through the multi-storey car park, across the road bridge, then down past the library to the street market where dodgy-looking men in long nylon overcoats and fingerless gloves were standing at their stalls drinking steaming coffee from styrofoam cups. More noise – crappy rock 'n' roll music, loud Christmas carols, marketmen shouting out above the clamour: *Getchur luvverly turkeys 'ere! ... Plenny a luvverly turkeys! ... Wrappin' papah! Ten sheets a paand! ... Getchur luvverly wrappin' papah 'ere!*

I bought the first turkey I came across. A wet-looking white thing in a bag. In a week's time it would probably taste even worse than it looked, but it didn't matter. Dad would be so drunk on Christmas Day he'd eat anything. He'd eat a seagull if I dished one up. Raw.

I got sprouts and potatoes, a fruitcake, crisps, a box of cheap crackers and a bargain pack of Christmas decorations. Then I lugged it all home.

It was dark when I got back. My arms ached from carrying the shopping, my hands and feet were frozen and I had a stiff neck. And I was getting a cold. Snot dripped from the end of my nose and I had to keep stopping to put down the shopping bags so I could wipe it.

Alex was waiting at the bus stop. She waved and I crossed over.

'Your nose is running,' she said.

'Yeah, I know,' I said, wiping it on my sleeve. 'Where're you going?'

'Dean's.'

'Oh.'

'What's in the bags?' she asked.

'Christmas stuff.'

'Anything for me?'

'Maybe.'

'More ants?' she grinned.

'You never know.'

When she smiled I'd sometimes get this sick feeling in my stomach, like ... I don't know what it was like. One of those feelings when you don't know if it's good or if it's bad. One of those.

I rested the shopping bags on the ground and watched cars droning up and down the road. Metal, rubber, fumes, people, all moving from place to place, going somewhere, doing something. The inside of the concrete bus shelter was depressingly familiar: a glassless timetable poster, torn and defaced, bits of wet muck all over the place, mindless scribbles on the walls – *Dec + Lee ... YEAAH MAN! ... Duffy is nob* ... I sat down on the folding seat beside Alex.

'Fed up?' she asked.

'I'm all right.'

She leaned over and peered into the carrier bags, nudging one with a foot. 'Nice looking chicken,' she said, smiling.

'It's a turkey,' I said.

'Bit small for a turkey.'

'It's a *small* turkey.'

'I think you'll find that's a chicken, Martyn.'

She grinned at me and I grinned back. Her eyes shone like marbles, clear and round and perfect.

'Did you see the Rolf Harrises?' she asked.

'What?'

'In town, at the precinct. There was a load of people all dressed up as Rolf Harris. You know, with the glasses and the beard, the curly hair. Didn't you see them?'

'No.'

'They had didgeridoos and everything.'

'Why were they dressed up as Rolf Harris?'

'I don't know. For Christmas, I suppose.'

'What's Rolf Harris got to do with Christmas?'

'They were singing carols.'

I looked at her. 'A *choir* of Rolf Harrises?'

She shook her head, laughing. 'It's for charity.'

'Oh *well*, that's all right then.'

She looked away and waved at a girl across the street. I didn't know who it was, just a girl. I rubbed the back of my neck. I was still sweating, but not so bad any more. The bus shelter stank. My sleeve was caked with frozen snot and my feet were getting more numb by the second. But despite all that, I felt OK. Just sitting there, chatting, doing nothing, watching the world go by—

'Here's the bus,' Alex said, digging in her bag for her purse. 'I've got to go. I'll see you later.'

'OK.'

The bus pulled in, the doors pished open and Alex stepped on. 'About ten?' she called out over her shoulder.

'OK.'

I watched her pay. I watched the bus driver click buttons on his ticket machine and I watched the bus ticket snicker out. I watched the way her eyes blinked slowly and I watched her mouth say *Thank you* and I watched the coal-black shine of her hair as she took the bus ticket and rolled it into a tube and stuck it in the corner of her mouth. I watched her hitch up the collar of her combat jacket and I saw the bright white flash of her T-shirt beneath the open folds of her jacket as she strolled gracefully to the back of the bus. And I watched and waited in vain for her to turn her head as the bus lurched out into the street, juddered up the road and disappeared around the corner.

She never looked back.

I first met Alex about two years ago when she and her mum moved into a rented house just down the road from us. I remember watching from my bedroom window as they unloaded all their stuff from a removal van, and I remember thinking to myself how nice she looked. Nice. She looked nice. Pretty. Kind of scruffy, with straggly black hair sticking out from a shapeless black hat. She wore battered old jeans and a long red jumper. I liked the way she walked, too. An easy lope.

What if ... I'd thought to myself. What if I went over and said hello? Hello, I'm Martyn, welcome to the street. Something like that. I could do that, couldn't I? It wouldn't be too hard. Hi! My name's Martyn, how's it going ...

Don't be ridiculous. Not in a million years.

She was fifteen then, and I was fourteen. Nearly fourteen, anyway. All right, I was thirteen. She was a young woman, I was just a gawky-looking kid.

It was a ridiculous idea.

So I just watched from the window. I watched her as she climbed up into the back of the van. I watched her as she lugged the stuff out and passed it to her mum. I watched her jump down from the van and slap the dust from her jeans. I watched her as she bounced up the path carrying a big green vase in both hands, and I watched as she stumbled over a loose paving stone and the vase went flying into the air and landed on the doorstep with a big hollow smash. Now she's going to get it, I thought. But when her mum came out they just stared at each other for a second, looked down at the shards of green glass strewn all over the place, and then started laughing. Just stood there giggling and hooting like a couple of mad people. I couldn't believe it. If that was me, Dad would have screamed blue murder and thumped me on the back of the head.

When they eventually stopped laughing Alex's mum started clearing up the broken glass, carefully picking up the big bits and putting them into a box. She was quite tall, for a woman. Sort of dumpy, too. Medium-tall and dumpy, if that makes any sense. Her hair was black, like Alex's, but short. And her face was sort of grey and tired-looking, like her skin needed watering. She wore faded dungarees and a black T-shirt, long beady earrings, and bracelets on her wrists. As she hefted the box of broken glass and turned to go back into the house she glanced up in my direction. I looked away. When she came back out, carrying a dustpan and brush, she sneaked another look up at my window, then stooped down and started to sweep up the rest of the broken vase. She must have said something because, just as I was about to disappear from the window, Alex turned and flashed a big grin at me and waved.

'Hey!'

I gave an embarrassed half-wave.

'Are you busy?' she shouted.

'What?'

'Are you busy?' she repeated. 'Come and give us a hand if you're not.'

I stuck my thumb up and immediately regretted it. Dumb thing to do.

Forget it.

I quickly changed into a clean T-shirt then tiptoed down the stairs so as not to wake Dad, who was sleeping off his lunch in the front room, and went out into the street. Walking across the road towards the removal van my legs felt like rubber bands. I'd forgotten how to walk. I was a wobbling fool.

Alex smiled at me and my legs almost gave up.

'Hello,' she said.

'Hello.'

'Alexandra Freeman,' she said, 'Alex.'

'Martyn,' I said, nodding my head up and down like an imbecile. 'Uh ... Martyn.'

'This is my mum.'

'Hello, Martyn,' her mum said. 'Pleased to meet you.'

'Ditto,' I said.

Alex giggled.

It felt all right.

Now, after Alex had left on the bus, I trudged across the road feeling even worse than I'd felt before. The OK feeling from the bus shelter had evaporated. Glum. That's how I felt. I felt glum. Glum as a ... whatever. Something glum. I always felt bad when she was seeing Dean. Dean was her boyfriend. Dean West. He was eighteen, he worked in the Gadget Shop in town – computers, sound systems, electronic stuff. He was an idiot. Ponytail, long fingernails, bad skin. His face was all the same colour – lips, cheeks, eyes, nose – all rotten and white. He rode a motorbike and liked to think he was some kind of biker, but he wasn't. He was just a pale white idiot.

I bumped into them once in town, Alex and Dean. In Boots. I was waiting for Dad's prescription when I spotted them over by the *Photo-Me* machine. Dean in his usual black biker gear, pale face ugly and even whiter than usual beneath the cold shop lights, flicking his ponytail from side to side like a cow flicking at flies with its tail. Alex wore a leather jacket, too, which I'd never seen before. She looked good in it. She also looked a bit bored. When she smiled at Dean I could tell she didn't really mean it. I liked that. They were waiting for their photos to come out. Dumb, jokey

photos, no doubt. Funny faces, ha ha ha. I turned away, pretending to study packets of medicine in the pharmacy counter, hoping Dad's prescription would hurry up so I could leave.

'Martyn!' It was Alex's voice.

I turned and said hello with mock surprise. Dean had his arm around Alex's shoulder.

'This is Dean,' Alex said.

I nodded.

'Well,' he drawled, looking me up and down, 'the Pigman. At last we meet. I've heard all about you.'

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

'Got the shits, have you?' he said.

'What?'

He nodded his head at the pharmacy counter. I looked at the packets I'd been studying: diarrhoea remedies.

I tried a smile. 'No ... no, a prescription. I'm waiting for my dad's prescription.'

'Yeah,' sneered Dean.

I looked at Alex, hoping for support. She looked away, embarrassed.

'Come on,' Dean said to Alex, pulling on her shoulder.

I'm sure she stiffened slightly at his touch, but they moved off anyway.

'See you, Martyn,' Alex called over her shoulder.

Dean, idiotically, winked at me.

It wasn't that I was jealous. Well, I suppose I was a bit jealous. But not in a namby kind of way, you know, not in a snotty, pouty kind of way. No, that wasn't it. Not really. That wasn't the reason I was glum. All right, it was *partly* the reason. But the main thing was – it was just *wrong*. All of it. Alex and Dean. Wrong. It stank. It was wrong for her

to spend time with him. It was a waste. He was nothing. It was wrong. Wrong. Wrong. *Wrong*. She was too good for him.

The rain was turning to sleet as I pushed open the back gate and shuffled down the alleyway that led to the back of our house, stepping over dog turds and squashed cigarette ends and bin-liners full of empty beer cans.

What's it got to do with you, anyway, I was thinking to myself. She can see who she wants. *What's it got to do with you what it's got to do with me?*

What?

I paused for a moment, wondering just who the hell I was arguing with, then shrugged and went in through the kitchen door.

'About bloody time, too.'

Dad was standing at the back window in his multi-stained vest, swigging beer and smoking a cigarette and spraying shaving foam onto the kitchen window. I looked at him, said nothing, and put the shopping bags on the top of the fridge.

'Change?' he said, holding out his hand. I gave him whatever was left of the money. He sniffed at it, then put it in his pocket and went over to the shopping. 'Did you get it all?'

'I think so.'

'You'd better more than bloody well think so,' he said, dipping into one of the bags.

I didn't have a clue what he meant. Neither did he, I expect. He grunted through a shopping bag, poking this and poking that, cigarette ash dropping all over the place, then he stopped and looked up at me and said, 'Where's the crackers?'

'In the other bag,' I told him.