



Return
to
Wonderland





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Stories inspired by
Lewis Carroll's Alice

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Acorns, Biscuits and Treacle

by Peter Bunzl



Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was among my favourite books as a kid. It influenced one of my first stories, written aged ten, about a boy stranded on a desert island who, like Alice, encounters multiple magical creatures before he's finally able to find his way home. My dad kept that early effort for years. When he returned it to me recently, I realised it contained similar themes to this tale: a shape-shifting hero, a dollop of magic and a handful of Lewis Carroll's characters, repurposed for a new adventure. My ten-year-old self would be so proud to see my forty-three-year-old self's short Wonderland story in print. I hope you enjoy 'Acorns, Biscuits and Treacle' as much as we do!

Peter Bunzl

One morning, Pig woke to discover he had been turned into a real boy.

Of course, it wasn't obvious at first to Pig that he'd become a real boy because, in many ways, pigs and boys are quite similar. His body was still the same shade of pink it had always been, and he was still splattered in the same brown splotches of mud he rolled in every day to keep the hot sun from crackling his skin.

It was only when he tried to stand from where he'd laid his head, in a patch of shade beneath an old fig tree, that Pig first noticed something was amiss. For he found he could not get up on all fours in the usual way, as each of his joints had moved about on his body, and where his trotters used to be were two flat hands with long thin fingers that looked like – and Pig *hated* to use this word – *sausages*.

For a moment, Pig wondered if he was still dreaming.

In his last dream, he'd been sniffing around in his favourite oak grove, beneath a crescent moon as wide as the grinning Cheshire Cat, searching for acorns. Instead, he'd found an open tin of twelve delicious-looking iced biscuits, each with pink writing on that Pig couldn't read.

Naturally he'd snuffled the whole box.

Pig flexed his knuckles and found that his new fingers

were quite sensitive and moved easily. He could feel every lump and bump on the ground with them.

He put a hand up to his face and felt about to see if that had changed too.

It had.

His ears had got smaller and now stuck out from the sides of his head, and where they had previously been, on the very top of his bald patch, he now had a thick thatch of hair, scruffy as a hay stack.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Where his large flat nose had formerly sat, taking up all his view, he now found a meagre round blob. Though when he felt that new nose, it turned out to be as snub as the old one. Pig picked at the holes in it with a finger, and that felt good.

Pig looked down at his hind legs. They had grown longer and thicker and now ended in big flat rectangular lumps – feet with toes that wiggled when he concentrated on them. He found having toes a pleasant change from trotters. Somewhere, in a far-off memory, Pig had heard a children's nursery rhyme that called fingers and toes 'piggies'. It seemed an odd name for them.

Gradually he was acclimatizing to his new body. So much so that he thought he would try standing up.

He climbed slowly on to his two long legs and pushed himself off from the ground.

For a few seconds, he wobbled like a newborn runt; then his knees buckled under him, and his legs gave way, and he fell over backwards.

It hurt quite badly, and Pig decided that walking on two legs was going to be more difficult than he had imagined. As far as he could tell, standing up like a human just meant you had further to fall.

He tried again. This time, things went better as he remembered he had arms and threw them out to balance himself, placing one palm on the rough bark of the tree to keep upright.

Then he discovered he could hold on to a branch with his new grasp-y fingers, and that helped him stay on his feet even longer.

Pig looked at the ground far below and felt pretty pleased with himself. Now he was standing like a real human boy, he thought he might perhaps give walking a go.

He picked up one of his big flat feet, tipped himself forward, and promptly fell over again. Flat on his face.

It took Pig a good part of the morning to learn how to walk upright on his hind legs – or his only legs, really,

since the other two were arms now. He didn't know if his progress was quick or not, but it felt an immensely long time to him. Walking like this, Pig began to feel more human. Now that he was human, he wondered if he should change his name.

The trouble was he *liked* the name Pig. A kindly sow had given it to him when she'd adopted him. Not that it was unique; it was what the herd called everyone. Everyone except the littlest hogs, whom they christened Piglet, Runt or Oinker.

Names hadn't mattered to Pig back then, but one day he'd wandered off and got separated from the herd and hadn't known how to call them back.

Perhaps he should refer to himself as Boy, now that he was one. Maybe he could combine both names, and put the second one after the first, like humans did: Pig Boy.

Yes. That sounded good.

In the back of Pig's mind, he vaguely recalled being human once before, a long time ago. A smaller, tiny human. That's where the nursery-rhyme memory had come from. He'd had a mother who'd sung it to him, roughly. She might even have called him Pig – he had a hazy remembrance of that too.

Pig thought these things as he walked along, and the

wind blew around his skin, giving him goose bumps and making him shiver with cold. This, he surmised, was probably the reason – or was the word *raison?* – that humans wore clothes. He'd need an outfit anyway if he were to venture forth from the woods and not make everyone he encountered run away in shock at his muddy nakedness.

Pig wondered where he could possibly find clothes to fit him, since he lived deep in the wilds, far from any human settlements. But surely, he thought, if he just kept walking, chances were he'd eventually stumble across something that was good enough to wear.

Some time later, after Pig had been meandering aimlessly for a good few hours without a plan, he came upon a clearing in the woods.

In the centre of the clearing was a stone well. Beside it, Pig noticed a few items of clothing strewn about: a woollen shawl, a long coat, a dainty pair of shoes and a big floppy straw hat.

Next to these was a bucket on a rope fixed to a winch above the well.

Pig approached the bucket and was surprised to find it full of an unctuous amber-coloured liquid. He dipped a

finger in and tasted it. Delicious! Sticky, sweet and syrupy, like . . . treacle.

Pig was so hungry by this point that he scooped up big handfuls of the treacle and ate it as fast as he could. Then, since he couldn't see anyone around to whom the clothes might belong, he crouched down beside them and began putting them on.

First, he tied the shawl around his waist like a skirt; next, he climbed into the long coat. It took him a while to figure out which way up it went and whether the long skinny bits were for arms or legs, but when he finally got it on right, he buttoned it closed over his chest.

Last, he put the straw hat on top of his head, over his straw-like hair. It turned out its floppy edges excelled at shading his new side-ears from the sun.

Pig considered trying on the shoes too, even though they looked a bit on the small side and were so black and shiny, they would probably make his feet look like trotters again. He was about to attempt to push his feet into them when he heard a shout.

'HELP!' three voices yelled, reverberating around him.

Pig realized they were coming from down the well.

He peered cautiously over its edge, and there – on a

ledge in the half-light, near the bottom of the well – were three well-dressed young ladies.

‘Help us, please!’ they cried again in unison.

For some reason, Pig understood them perfectly well. He opened his mouth to reply, but since he had never spoken words before only grunts came out.

‘HGGOR GNRR,’ he said, and wasn’t even sure himself what that meant.

‘Throw down the bucket,’ the tallest of the three girls said. ‘So we can climb out.’

‘HHOORRHGGH,’ Pig said, and he threw the bucket into the well, winching it down on the rope to the three girls below.

The girls argued for some time about who should be rescued first. Finally, it was decided that the lightest and smallest of them should go.

So the littlest girl, who looked about ten years old, got into the bucket and tugged twice on the rope, and Pig wound the winch handle and pulled her up.

‘Thank heavens!’ she cried when she finally reached the top. ‘You saved our bacon!’

She climbed over the parapet and fell against the wall’s sticky stone buttress. Pig thought she looked jolly odd up close, for she was covered from head to toe in

treacle. It must, he concluded, be a treacle well.

‘Ugh,’ said the smallest girl with a shiver. ‘I feel quite ill.’

She took a few deep breaths, and then, when she was fully recovered, looked seriously at Pig.

‘You’re wearing our clothes.’

‘I found them on the ground,’ Pig replied. ‘They fit rather well.’

He put his hand to his mouth in shock for the words had come unbidden. He hadn’t intended to answer the girl in her own language, just like that.

‘So you *do* speak,’ the smallest girl said. ‘My name’s Tillie. What’s yours?’

‘Pig,’ said Pig, shortly. He left off the *Boy* part as he hadn’t quite decided on that yet.

Tillie eyed him suspiciously. ‘Pig’s a queer sort of name, especially for a boy wearing girls’ clothes.’

‘And Tillie’s a curious sort of name for a girl covered in treacle who lives down the bottom of a well,’ Pig replied indignantly.

Tillie tried to wipe the offending treacle from the arms of her dress, but it only smeared into the material and made things worse. ‘It’s very uncivil to comment on another person’s appearance,’ she said. ‘And, anyway, I

think you may have misconstrued our situation. We do not *live* down the bottom of a well. We fell down it. We live, in fact, in a house on the edge of the woods. We were merely sent here by our mother to get some treacle for the treacle tarts she wanted to make for the Queen of Hearts's annual croquet party—'

Here she was interrupted by the other two girls, whom Pig had entirely forgotten about, and who were still waiting to be rescued from the well themselves.

'I say, up there – throw down the rope!' they demanded.

Tillie's eyes went wide with shock. 'Good heavens!' she exclaimed. 'My sisters! They slipped my mind! I do tend to be a tad loquacious when I get going.'

She stood up, and she and Pig lowered the bucket again, and together they hauled up the middle-sized sister.

The middle-sized sister turned out to be called Elsie.

Then the three of them hauled up the biggest sister, whose name was revealed to be Lacie.

All three sisters stood in a line in order of size and tried to brush the treacle off one another, but this only made them stickier. Pig saw that Elsie was missing her shawl, Lacie her hat, and Tillie her coat, and realized that he was sporting an item belonging to each of them.

When they finally noticed he was wearing their clothes,

the two other sisters looked taken aback. Nonetheless, they didn't ask for their things back.

Tillie picked up her shoes and tried to put them on, but immediately treacle began seeping out of their sides, so she tied the laces together and hung them round her neck.

She would walk barefoot through the forest like Pig, she decided.

'We should be off home,' said Lacie. 'Our mother will be wondering what's kept us.'

The three of them untied the treacle bucket from the rope and set off with it out of the clearing. As they walked, they took turns to carefully carry the bucket so no treacle slopped over the sides. Lacie did most of the carrying because she was the eldest, and because the other two proclaimed themselves thoroughly sick of treacle.

Pig went along with them since he had nowhere else in particular he had to be.

'Who is your mother?' he asked, following the three treacle-dripping girls along a narrow path through the woods that they were navigating with some familiarity.

'Why, she is the cook to the Duchess, of course,' said Tillie. 'The whole of Wonderland knows that.'

'The Duchess?' said Pig, for that name sounded familiar.

'Yes,' said Elsie. 'Three-hundred-and-sixty-six days ago,