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Is This The Other Side, Asks Pig

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Translated from the German by Rob Myatt

Episode One

In which Pig calls in to a radio station, Badger invents a machine, Roe swims lengths and God thinks about upping sticks.

There is a silence in Pig's flat, as if after snowfall.

Lying in bed, Pig looks over to the window. The sky hasn't managed to muster up any colour today. Pig shifts a leg. If there's one thing that really matters when times are tough, it's light.

Pig could head into town and buy a lamp. Pig sits up, putting on their overalls without getting up from bed.

Pig used to wear silvery eyeshadow sometimes, red lipstick too. Those days have passed. And yet outside, the wind of winter keeps on blowing.

There was snow when Beaver left. Dragging the suitcase behind him through the white blanket. Pig stood outside in a pair of pyjamas, waiting for Beaver to turn back one more time and wave.

Pig is waiting for the bus. There's no-one about, save for a rabbit. Wrapped up in scarves, the rabbit is pacing in circles, smoking.

With the bus still some way away, the rabbit starts to walk a more sweeping circle, prowling around Pig. Pig presses their hooves against the pockets of their overalls. Pig has

heard of rabbits who pinch your wallet from you in broad daylight, eyeballing you so unashamedly that it's too late for any sort of outrage.

'Want to know the future?' whispers the rabbit.

'No.'

'Do a reading for you?'

'No, thank you!' says Pig.

At a tearoom, Pig orders an Ovaltine. The wolf serving is so friendly it brings Pig to tears. The fact that the Ovaltine comes in a polka-dot mug with a dry white biscuit next to it doesn't help matters.

There is a clock above the coffee machine. Beaver is somewhere half a world away, discussing things Pig doesn't know, with animals Pig doesn't know, in a language Pig doesn't know.

Ever since Beaver moved out, Pig's evening menu has consisted mostly of pasta dishes. Sometimes with a ready-made salad on the side. Draining the spaghetti, Pig glances over at the door. No-one there. No-one will ever be there. Pig turns on the radio.

'Call in now,' says the DJ, rattling off a phone number. Pig calls the number, not knowing why. There is a beeping tone on the line. Then, a blaring a voice in Pig's ear, the same voice that is blaring from the radio speaker. In sync, the two voices say, 'Hey-o! Who do we have on the line?'

'Pig.'

'Hello, Pig!' The DJ seems to be having fun; a bit too much fun. Pig can't tell why.

'You've won! Now that's what I call luck,' says the double DJ, and, 'You excited about what I've got waiting for you here in the studio?'

Pig nods. The radio doesn't say anything more so Pig adds, 'I'm excited.'

'Too right you are,' says the DJ, 'what we have for you here is a b-e-a-utiful little oil can. Here, in the studio—'

'Oh,' says Pig.

'Kidding!' the DJ interjects, laughing from both speakers. 'What I have here in my hand, no jokes this time, is a voucher for a seven-day tour through the Halakari Desert.'

'Oh God.'

Pig doesn't pay any attention to where they are going, until suddenly they find themselves stood in front of Roe's block of flats. Pig pushes the buzzer, holding it down until Roe appears from behind the curtains on the third floor.

'I won a trip,' says Pig.

Roe opens the window.

'What?' Roe calls down.

'Can you open the door?' Pig calls up.

Roe can't take time off in April.

'So then quit already,' says Pig.

But Pig knows Roe has no reason to quit. Roe is content with the job at the tailor's. With sewing eight hours a day, with swimming lengths at the pool, with going to the cinema once a month.

'What about calling in sick?'

Roe says no. Can't leave the country right now anyway, what with Mum.

It's a familiar excuse, thinks Pig, but before they can broach the subject Roe suggests, 'And what about swapping it for something else?'

'Like what?'

'Beats me. Like a 3D TV or something.'

Pig attempts a smile.

'I could also just not go,' says Pig. But then what will Pig tell their little ones (and their little ones' little ones) if they ever have any?

'I called in to a radio station on a whim and won a desert safari. But I didn't want to go on my own so I turned it down?'

It doesn't make sense, thinks Pig, as they stir in the middle of the night in a patch of moonlight; it doesn't make sense. I'd have to be going to Las Vegas or some other hustling-bustling metropolis where I could happily and no-one would bat an eye.

If only Pig believed in fate, then this trip would be a gift, an adventure to dive into headfirst. Pig can see the moon out the window. They say the night sky in the desert is completely clear and more beautiful than anywhere else.

Badger isn't sure he has the ability to think straight anymore.

He covers up the machine and its filter carefully, putting down the safety goggles.

It'll be a good few days since Badger has eaten anything.

Badger finds a sachet of tomato soup in the kitchen. While the soup warms up, Badger surveys the carnage. The workshop looks as if it has been ransacked. While hunting for suitable materials to make the filter, Badger had yanked all the bits and pieces out of their drawers; equipment, materials, even previous inventions, all lie scattered across the floor. Behind the cogs, Badger spots the memory recorder. It hasn't even been a year since Badger invented it, here in the workshop, getting worked up into almost as much of a frenzy as today, a frenzy that made Badger forget about sleeping, about eating.

In the kitchen, the soup has burnt. Badger scratches around the bottom of the pan with a fork. At the time, Badger had decided not to unleash the memory recorder on the world. It would displace space and time, and the preordained order the animals exist in would be no more.

If there even is a preordained order, thinks Badger. Something somewhere inside is trembling, but Badger can't put a paw on where.

'Bon appetit,' Badger says to himself, drinking down the soup.

Before he knows it, Badger finds himself back by the workbench, standing over his invention like an open heart.

Anyone want to join me, writes Pig in an online travel forum, for seven days travelling through the Halakari Desert?

Pig gets four responses.

The first says: *Hare since '82. I went to the Savannah with my partner once. I really liked it. The scenery is great, food is great. It'll be great. P.S. I have life insurance.*

The second says: *I've been suffering from chronic headaches for three years. I've tried everything, nothing works. Please take me with you! Maybe the peace and quiet of the desert and the vast expanse could be my salvation!*

Pig deletes both messages and responds to the third one, from a bison whose interests include minerals and astronomy.

Pig and Bison decide to have a chat over the phone to get to know each other better. Pig dials his overseas number.

‘Could you send me a pic of yourself?’ asks Bison. For a moment, Pig feels rather offended.

‘Sure,’ says Pig but what difference is a picture going to make to Bison’s decision? Pig can confess that they wanted the same from Bison later. Pig decides to write as much on the back of the picture.

Pig in a photo booth. A set of photos costs eight francs. Pig takes a set of photos, four of them, each in a different pose. In the first photo, there is something mean about Pig’s smile, in the second there is a forlorn look in Pig’s eyes, in the third the machine has cut off too much of Pig’s neck, while the fourth shows a pig that Pig does not recognise in the slightest.

Sitting on the bus home with the four portraits, Pig witnesses an unfortunate accident. A wild boar, in shabby attire and reeking something foul, clatters into a spindly weasel who to that point had been staring out the bus window, eating chips from a takeaway box. In the collision, the contents of the box soar up and over the edges of the cardboard container. A couple dozen chips land on the floor and the ketchup goes everywhere.

The boar offers up a scarcely audible apology and disappears towards the front of the bus. The weasel looks like they are taking a moment to weigh up their options, then begins scooping up the chips, one by one, checking them from every angle.

Pig gets off at the next stop. A peculiar sense of unease had come over them as they watched the weasel. The glum precision, with which the weasel scooped up each and every chip, the disappointment that this rescue effort was meant to remedy –

Pig huddles against the ticket machine to get out of the wind. ‘It doesn’t take much to burst your dam,’ Beaver would always say.

Of all the things you can do at the pool – walk around the edge of the water, throw your towel over your shoulders, spread your towel out on a sun lounger, lie on the sun lounger, put your shower sandals back on, climb into the pool, jump into the pool – Roe’s favourite is getting out of the water. Holding onto the ladder and hauling yourself out. The water cascading off your body, plunging back into the pool with the force of the exit. The sense of weightlessness that comes after, the lack of resistance Roe feels while swinging an arm up.

Roe goes to the showers. Roe never takes off their swimming costume, just rubs soap all over and stretches the material to let the water rush in. Someone in the next cubicle over is whistling a happy tune.

Roe is using the hairdryer in front of the mirror. In their reflection, Roe can see the marks of someone born prematurely. Their eyes – which are brown – bulge out of their sockets. Roe came out a strange colour. It took a week for Roe to look like a regular newborn, a week during which a small tube served as an artificial lifeline. Roe's father made use of the time and went to work, Roe's mother sat by the incubator, twiddling her wedding ring. Roe's mother never recovered from the birth and still talks about how exhausted she is, even now.

Outside, Roe pulls up their hood. Sometimes the spring is weak and feeble and lets the winter get under its skin.

Stag is waiting underneath a billboard advertising a company that makes reins. Stag is in a bad mood, Roe can tell from the hug, which is short and sweet, and from the words that remain unsaid.

'I wish I had more faith,' says Roe, verbalising a thought that came along as it struck Roe just how grey the city is.

'Why?' Stag almost walks in front of a bus and Roe pulls him back by his jacket. As if he hadn't just been almost run over, Stag says to Roe, in an unkind voice, 'That's almost like saying you wish you were more blind or you wish you were greener. What's so desirable about faith?'

'The rules.'

'The rules come with religion, not faith. Let's face it, faith is primarily doubt.'

'I guess,' says Roe. Roe didn't need to meet up with Stag only to have him sour their mood.

'And if there's anything worth doubting, then surely it's a god, right?'

'Yes, alright, I was just making conversation. What is it people say: I'm in a real funk.'

'You're in a funk?'

Roe shakes their head.

'Where are we going, by the way?' asks Stag.

'Don't know, we're just taking a walk.'

And now they come to a stop, in two minds.

'I'm hungry,' says Stag, 'haven't had anything to eat yet.'

'Yeah, that'll do it,' says Roe.

Stag doesn't give the sparrows even a crumb of his sandwich. Just chews.

'I go swimming every Thursday,' says Roe.

Stag turns to look at Roe. Stag is listening and there is a twitch in his eye, in which Roe manages to make out a well-intentioned wink.

'There are animals who look like they're just keeping their head above water or trying not to drown when they go swimming. But when I go swimming—'

'When you go swimming, you look regal.' Now Stag laughs.

In the garden, a tall pine tree sways in the wind, robbing the flat of light. Stag says he's going to get it chopped down.

Where Stag suddenly had plenty to say on the bus, now he has gone all quiet again. It is a different type of quiet. Stag is sat on the edge of the bed, perfectly upright. His antlers look as if they were stuck on as an afterthought.

Roe slumps down onto the edge of the bed next to Stag. The only sound is the water pumping through the heating pipe. On the wall is the picture of the sea.

Stag rested a hoof on Roe's back. Roe brushed Stag's shoulder with their lips. Stag turned his body to Roe and looked at them like never before.

They kissed and tossed their clothes off the bed. The picture of the sea still hangs on the wall, undisturbed.

Now, Stag and Roe are lying next to one another, breathing, disjointed, until eventually Roe gets up and puts on their underwear. Roe has an urge to say thank you but makes a point of leaving it be – probably best for Roe to let sleeping stags lie without saying her farewells.

In Stag's kitchen, Roe drinks water from a tall glass. There are postcards stuck to the boiler, a few landscapes and some inspirational quotes.

Roe would like to say something grand. Stag walks into the kitchen. He has collected up his clothes. His smile passes Roe by.

Roe picks up their scarf from the back of the chair and puts on their waterproof, kisses Stag on the cheek and says, 'Au revoir.'

Roe won't put their hood up outside. The wind will whoosh into their ears. While the other animals will keep their heads bowed, shielding themselves, Roe will cross the street on a red light, graceful, head held high.

Roe will buy cigarettes with the money they find in their wallet. It will be like Roe has had a new haircut. The animals will look at Roe, something will catch their eye, but none of them will be able to say what it was later.

There's something in the air, has been since yesterday. Something warm that has squirmed its way in. God is standing next to his post box. He takes off his jumper, stretches his arms up towards the heavens. It feels a bit like he's in that advert for fresh air or something. He lowers his arms again.

A letter arrives on Wednesday, a glitzy-looking one. God reaches for his letter opener. He's entered plenty of competitions in his time but apart from the little consolation prizes – tap-dancing shoes, a vegetable knife, chocolate eggs – he's never won anything. No trips, no cars, no vast sums of money.

God fell asleep in front of the earth. He'd spent the whole morning poring over landscapes, islands, beaches; nothing exciting.

A sunbeam tumbled through the living room window as God slept, splitting him in two; his top half in shadow, his legs in the light that glints off his tracksuit trousers like a riverbank.

Minute by minute, the sun shuffles along, and soon all of God is bathed in light. The dust twirls around him as if disturbed by the rays of sunshine.

Later, when God opens one eye, he sees green.

'Do you nap every day?'

It's God's sister, standing with her back to him, bent over the system.

Her coat has the slightly haughty green of clover.

'I dreamt I got married,' says the sister, her back to God still.

He rubs his eyes.

'Hm?' he asks.

'I said I got married.'

'Oh, I see.'

'In my dream.' Standing in front of God, she pokes him on the nose.

'Who did you marry?'

'You,' says the sister.

'I dreamt about a dog,' says God. 'He was hibernating in my fridge.'

God gets up and even though he assumes there isn't a dog sleeping in the fridge, he readies himself for any eventuality as he opens it.

'You hungry?'

'I already had breakfast,' says his sister, sitting down at the kitchen table.

It's not the same kitchen when his sister is there. God couldn't really say what it is. Something about the light is different and something about the size of the room seems off.

'What about you?' asks his sister, 'What do you get up to all day long? Knit?'

'I stopped knitting ages ago,' says God, gazing out the window towards the post box.

'No-one's coming for you,' says the sister.

'I know that.'

'But what you do get is me coming over and asking you: Fancy a jog?'

On the list of things God categorically does not enjoy doing, jogging is right up there. God can never get his breathing quite right when he jogs. He can't find a thought to think, and he flings his legs out in front of him reluctantly.

'I'd rather not,' he says, shaking a few vitamin supplements into the palm of his hand and chucking them back as if they were prescription pills.

'You feeling a bit off?' asks God's sister.

God says, 'No, no. I'm fine. Just tired.'

'Bad night's sleep?'

God shakes his head. He mentions how he suspects that it's all connected, in some mysterious way. That maybe there's a link between his tiredness and the weather on his earth ... And between the weather on his earth and the mess in his kitchen.

The sister slides a cup of tea over.

'Better now?' She winks. 'If you ask me, you're just depressed because you've holed yourself up in your attic. Meanwhile, out there, spring has sprung, in case you hadn't noticed?'

God has indeed seen the delicate buds on the linden trees that have just hatched their first blossoms. He can smell the spring when he opens the window.

But when the day casts off its light, and the bird strikes up the first bars of its twilight melody, God isn't sure he wants to stay.

It strikes him that he has lived here ever since he has existed. In the attic of that old house in the clearing.

Once his sister leaves, it only takes the kitchen half an hour to get back its old self again.