

IS THAT YOU, MR PIGGLES?

Ever since I woke with only two-and-a-half memories and my feet dangling in a grinder, I've had a few surprises.

263 surprises to be exact.

Here are some of them:

Surprise number 34: The first time I noticed human eyebrows. It's like you've glued furry caterpillars over your eyes.

Surprise number 56: The first time I saw a child sneeze and their head *didn't* shoot off like a rocket.

Surprise 109: *Everything* about human feet.

Most of all, I am surprised that there are always things left to surprise me.

Every time I think I've had *all* the surprises, something comes along that I didn't expect.

Sometimes it makes everything in me freeze or my screen just becomes two giant eyes trying to take it all in.

So, here is number 264 on my list of Things That Have Surprised Me Since I Woke With Only Two-and-a-Half Memories and My Feet Dangling in a Grinder: Mr Piggles trotting right past a side door of Dr Twitchy's Emporium of Amusements.

Mr Piggles was a robot pig I had met when I was looking for my friend Beth. Its owner brought me to their home to join her robot pets, but I climbed out of a window and escaped because her son wanted to turn me into a leprechaun.

I did *not* want to be a leprechaun.

I didn't want to be any kind of pretend creature with a silly hat and little red beard.

I just wanted to be Boot. I wanted to be *me*.

So I ran away.

I left behind that horrible boy.

I left behind the pretend pets.

I left behind Mr Piggles.

And I hoped never to see them ever again.

But here was Mr Piggles, metal trotters splashing through the puddles left by morning rain.

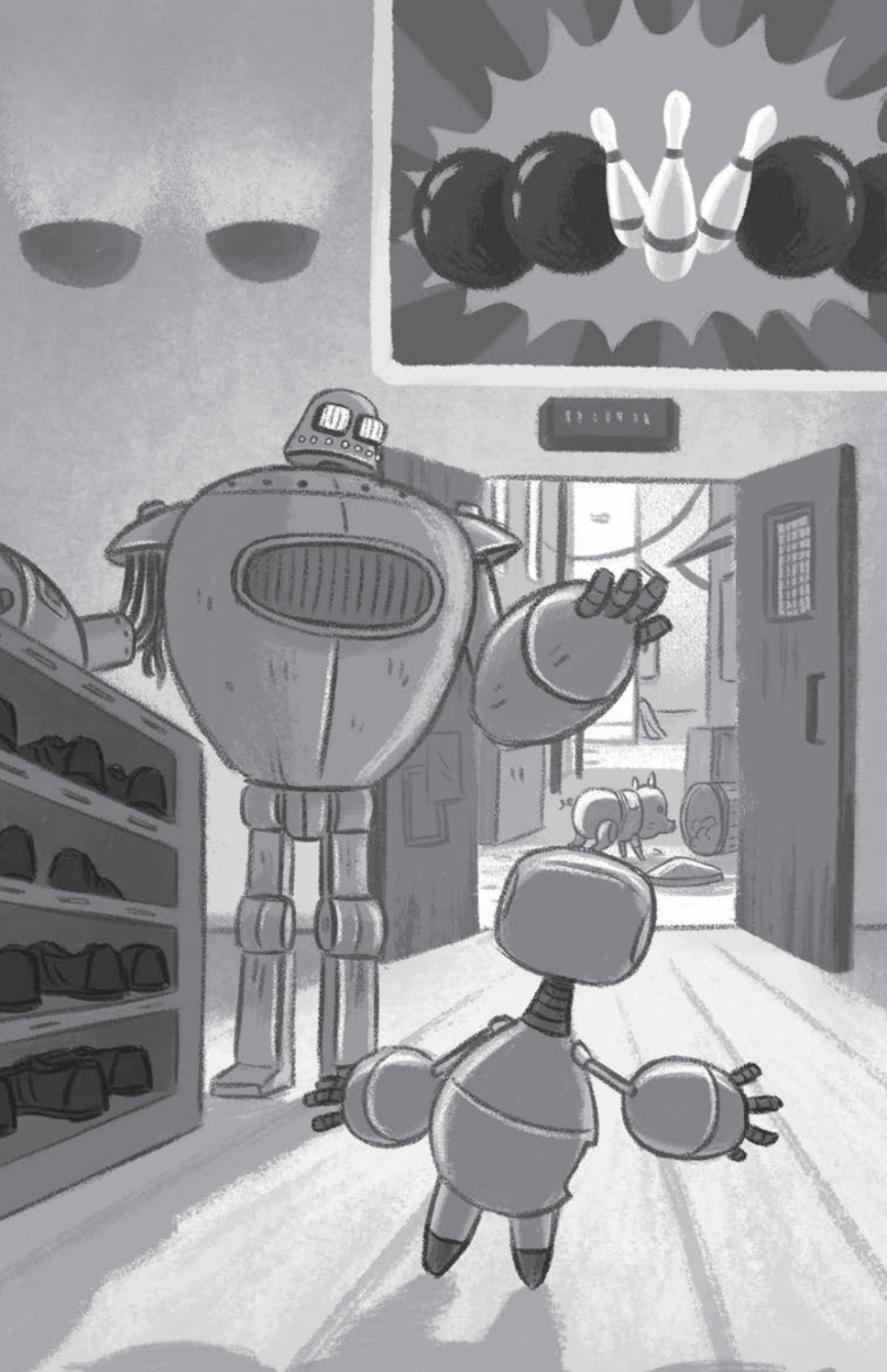
While talking to my newest, biggest and rustiest friend Rusty, I had spotted the robot pig passing the open door at the edge of Dr Twitchy's bowling alley.

"Is that you, Mr Piggles?" I asked in a low voice, half-talking to myself.

"Is that *who* Mr Piggles?" asked Rusty, whose long, broken arm rested on the top of a rack of dusty bowling shoes.

"That little pink pig robot outside," I said. "I know it. I met it before."

I was very surprised, but there was another feeling inside me. I felt a strange fizzing through my tummy wires. My head felt like it was as sloshy as a bowl of water.



I tried to push away the strange sensation and walked to the door for a look outside.

Rusty leaned over me to get a glance too. “A pig? Never saw a pig before.” Rusty had spent a long time trapped in a Testing Lab, not allowed out. “I thought pigs had wings.”

Mr Piggles didn’t have wings, but it was different to how I remembered. There was a dent in its snout, just like when we met the first time, but it was worse than before – so bad that its nostrils were sideways, one on top of the other. And Mr Piggles was dirtier and had more dents and scratches than ever before.

Mr Piggles was quite broken. Just like I was broken, thanks to my cracked screen and the hole in my hip where a drawer used to be.

I heard Poochy bark behind me.

“RUFF. RUFFZZZZPPPPTTT.”

My robot dog friend bounced out of control into the bowling alley. It did forward flips one

after another, with its hair flying around and one eye flashing different colours.

Noke stormed in after Poochy. “Have you seen the mechanical mutt’s control switch? It must have got knocked off when Poochy accidentally got hit by the pins in the bowling alley.”

“When you used Poochy as a bowling ball? When you threw Poochy into the pins?” asked Rusty seriously, mouth of lightbulbs pulsing with each word.

“This is *not* the time to worry about silly little details,” said Noke, on hands and knees, searching the long bowling lanes.

“Boot saw a pig,” said Rusty. “A pig without wings.”

From the door I watched Mr Piggles zigzag along the alley’s walls, stopping every now



and again to push its dented snout into the damp gutters or small piles of rubbish.

“It’s Mr Piggles,” I said over my shoulder to Noke. “A robot pig I met before I met you. It’s all alone.”

“Are you sure it’s the same pretend pig?” asked Noke, looking for Poochy’s switch under a pile of knocked-over bowling pins. “All those things look the same. Like, when I first ended up on the streets it took me a while to realise all traffic lights were not the same ones, but different ones that just look the same. Although *all* traffic lights are very rude.”

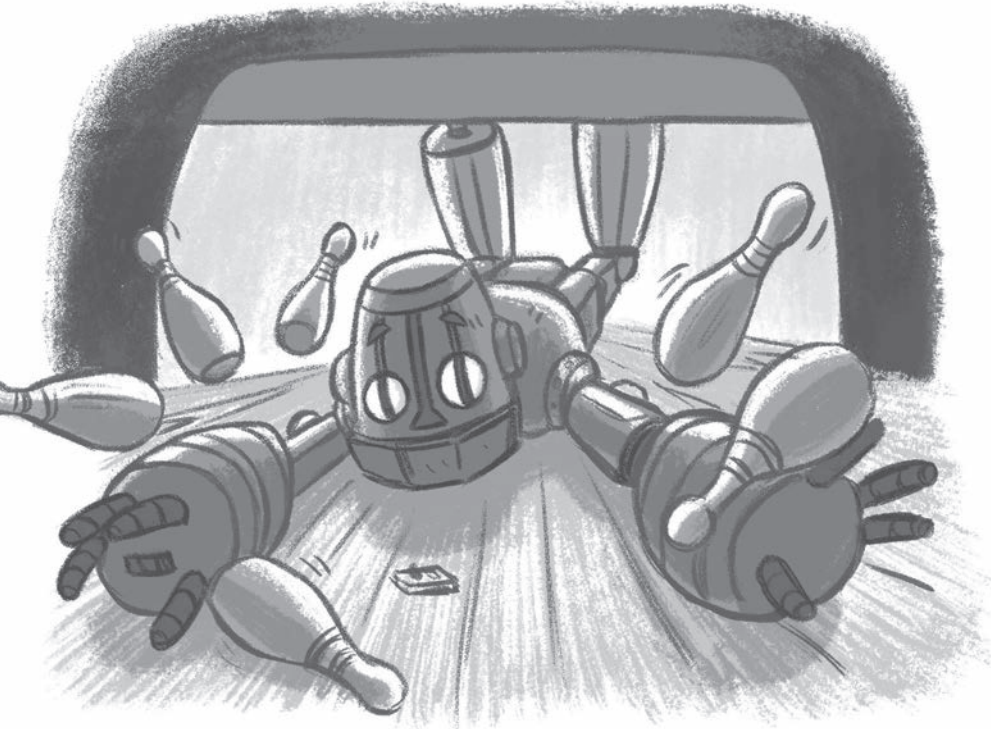
Poochy did another somersault. And yet another.

“No, it’s definitely Mr Piggles,” I said, my child-like voice rising because I did not like Noke telling me I might be wrong. “It had a dent in its snout, but it’s worse now.

And it didn't have so many bumps and scrapes.
And it was cleaner. But it's the same pretend pig."

Poochy somersaulted behind me, bouncing off the wall and floor.

My head still felt a bit swimmy and my tummy a bit fizzy. Maybe I had to recharge my solar batteries. I had been indoors all morning, hiding from the early rain. My batteries only had 30 per cent power left.



"There it is!" said Noke, sliding into a triangle of pins with a clatter.

Believing Noke had got a strike, the bowling lane trumpeted a triumphant tune. From among the scattered pins, Noke held Poochy's switch high, before ducking under the machine that swung down to sweep the pins away.

"Rusty, would you mind helping me?" asked Noke.

Poochy somersaulted once, twice and then – on the third somersault – Rusty whipped the loose, broken arm towards Poochy, catching the dog.

While Noke fixed the control switch to a bare patch on Poochy's belly, I watched Mr Piggles and tried to calculate what I should do.

Mr Piggles *oinked* an electronic *oink* and trotted down the alleyway. There was no sign of any owner. It did not look like following Mr Piggles would lead to me having a green hat stuck to my head and a little red beard glued to my face.

I still had that strange sensation that made my head feel funny. But not funny in a way that made me want to burp a giggle.

Yet, for some reason I *needed* to know if the bent-nosed pig was lost – or had been thrown away.

I followed Mr Piggles.