

Where Hamlet Went
by Virginia Macgregor

Hamlet stared at his reflection in the shop window and gulped. He was fat. A fat face and a fat neck and a fat belly and fat, stubby trotters.

Isn't he meant to be a teacup pig? everyone kept asking.

Who'd ever heard of a teacup pig?

Don't listen to them, Milo said. Hamlet belonged to Milo – and to Gran.

Hamlet had secretly been staying with Gran in Forget Me Not nursing home. *I want you to be Gran's hot-water bottle,* Milo said. One good thing about being fat was that you were always boiling.

Gran was cold because Nurse Thornhill kept the heating off. Hamlet shuddered. It was because of Nurse Thornhill that he was wandering the streets of Slipton, cold and lost – and hungry.

She'd found him in Gran's wardrobe.

A pig! A fat, dirty pig! Nurse Thornhill had yelled. *Shoo!* She'd chased him down the white corridors and out through the front door. *Shoo! Shoo! Shoo!*

Hamlet had run away from Forget Me Not as fast as his four trotters could carry him.

Dirty. Dumb. Fat. People were always saying that about pigs. When Milo was around to defend Hamlet, he'd explain that pigs were clean and clever and that they made better pets than scratchy cats and yappy dogs.

Hamlet wished that he was snuggled up with Milo in his warm duvet.

White air curled out of Hamlet's snout. It was getting colder. And he was lost.

He looked around. A white shadow stood at the end of the road. The shadow had red hair and bare feet. And its hands fluttered.

Hamlet ran up to it and squealed a *hello*.

A little girl turned round. She was younger than Milo – she shouldn't be out here alone, thought Hamlet.

Hello, Hamlet squealed again.

She jumped. Her eyes flickered. Her hands stopped fluttering.

'Hello,' she said in a sleepy voice. She hitched up her white nightie, knelt down on the wet grass and kissed the top of his head. 'What are you doing out here on your own, little piglet?'

Little – he liked that.

I'm lost. I'm trying to find my way home. He said the words really loud in his head in case the little girl could read his thoughts, like Milo.

'I'm going to take you home with me.' She lifted Hamlet off the ground.

He waited for her to stumble backwards and to drop him and to comment on how heavy he was. But she didn't. She cradled him in her arms and pulled him into her chest.

Hamlet listened to the little girl's heart beating, which was one of the things he loved to do when Milo held him.

'I'm going to introduce you to Louis. You'll be friends.'

Maybe Louis was a boy like Milo. And maybe the little girl lived close to Milo's house.

'I love you already,' the girl whispered into Hamlet's white ear.

Hamlet relaxed, dug his snout into the crook of her elbow and closed his eyes.

The little girl stopped in front of a tall, skinny, redbrick house. 'We're home.'

Hamlet squirmed out of her hands, landed with a thump on the pavement and looked around. They weren't anywhere near Milo's house.

A dog's face, a mass of shaggy, caramel fur, appeared at the window.

The little girl jumped up and down. 'Hey, Louis!'

Louis barked.

Hamlet stumbled backwards, crashed into a recycling bin and landed on his rump.

The little girl's brow creased into a frown. 'Where are you going? I want you to meet Louis.'

Meet Louis? Crazy girl. Louis's going to eat me alive.

She slipped her fingers under Hamlet's collar and tugged him up the steps, took a key from under the flowerpot and opened the front door.

Louis bounded out.

Hamlet froze. Flopped over his black ear and then his white ear. And screwed shut his eyes.

'Louis, this is Piglet; Piglet, this is Louis,' said the little girl.

Behind his closed eyes, Hamlet felt the big, shaggy dog step closer.

Please don't eat me, thought Hamlet.

A wet, slobbery tongue licked Hamlet's snout.

Hamlet opened one eye.

A furry blur.

Thanks. A gruff voice boomed into Hamlet's head.

Hamlet opened his other eye.

Thanks for getting Willa home. The voice boomed in again.

He'd never heard a dog in his head before.

Hamlet tried to talk back:

Why was she so far from home?

Willa sleepwalks. I try to keep an eye on her, but she's sneaky.

Hamlet thought of Milo, who had a problem with his eyes and had to be looked after. He was sneaky too.

Willa stood in the doorway and smiled. 'Now that you're friends, you'd better come in.'

Hamlet hesitated.

Come on, you look like you could do with some food, said Louis.

Hamlet stared at Louis's saggy tummy. Maybe he understood about being fat.

I'll put Willa to bed. You go in there and get some rest. Louis nudged his head to a door under the stairs.

In the den, Hamlet sniffed at a chewed bone and some dog biscuits and a piece of cake. He missed the pig chow Milo made for him. When Hamlet thought about how far away Milo was, he wasn't hungry any more.

He climbed onto a beanbag that looked like Louis' bed and fell fast asleep.

Another sloppy lick across his snout.

Hamlet opened his eyes. While he was asleep, Hamlet had curled into Louis' warm, shaggy body.

Louis licked him again.

Hamlet wrinkled his nose.

Then Hamlet noticed that they weren't alone in the den. Willa was here too, curled up on Louis' other side, her skinny arms thrown around his tummy.

She refused to stay in her bed. Louis sighed. She's stubborn.

She should meet Milo, said Hamlet.

The creak of a floorboard overhead.

A radio buzzed. The same voices as on Gran's radio. Gran and Milo. Hamlet had been missing for ages – they'd be worried sick.

Louis eased his furry bulk from under Willa. She rolled over but didn't wake up.

We've got to get you out of here, said Louis. You don't want you to bump into Fay.

Who's Fay?

Willa's mum. She runs the place.

Hamlet froze. He hoped Fay wasn't like Nurse Thornhill.

She's okay. She'd just freak out if she found you.

Hamlet got onto his trotters.

Louis poked his head out of the den. *The coast's clear.*

Hamlet looked at Willa. *I hope you do get to meet Milo*, he whispered and stepped out into the hallway.

The winter sun streamed in through the glass panels on the front door.

They must have been asleep for ages.

Louis bounded up, caught the front door handle in his muzzle, and yanked it down.

Hamlet stood on the pavement waiting for Louis to say goodbye. But instead, Louis put Hamlet's corkscrew tail in his mouth and gave it a tug.

Ow! yelped Hamlet.

Well, hurry up – I don't have all day, said Louis.

You're coming with me?

Thought you could do with some company on the way home.

Home. That sounded nice. Except Hamlet didn't have a clue where home was. And he didn't want to look stupid in front of Louis.

I lived in Slipton for a while, Louis said

You know I come from Slipton?

Course.

Course?

I can smell it on you, dumbo. No. 7 Crescent Way.

Wow. Louis was better than the Sat Nav in Milo's mum's car. Hamlet let out a snort of relief.

And you'll find your way back here?

Louis rolled his eyes. *You don't know much about dogs, do you?*

Hamlet shook his head. He hadn't ever wanted to find out much about dogs. Not until he met Louis.

All the way home, Hamlet wove between Louis' legs. He felt safe with him.

Do you think I'm fat? Hamlet asked.

Louis gave Hamlet a thump with his tail. *You're a pig, aren't you?*

Hamlet nodded.

Have you ever seen a skinny pig?

Hamlet shook his head.

Well, it looks to me like you're the size you're meant to be.

Hamlet blushed.

Louis stopped right in front of Number 7 Crescent Way. *Better head home – make sure Willa doesn't get up to any more mischief,* he said.

Before Hamlet had the chance to thank Louis or to say goodbye or to ask whether maybe they could meet up again, Louis was lumbering back down the pavement.

A tear fell onto Hamlet's snout. Willa was right: he wanted Louis to be his friend.

Hamlet longed to find Milo and to snuggle into his bed and to tell him all about Louis and Willa. But Milo had instructed Hamlet to look after Gran. Even if

Hamlet was scared of Nurse Thornhill – and even if he didn't like Forget Me Not – he had a job to do.

Hamlet took a breath and trotted off in the direction he thought would take him to Forget Me Not.