

Transcript

INTRODUCTION

00:00 Hello and welcome back to The English with Rhys Podcast.

My name is Rhys. I'm a master's level English teacher from the UK and I'm here to help you level up your English.

If this is your first time here, well, let me tell you a little bit about the podcast. Every episode is a discussion, an idea, or a story about an interesting topic. And the point of it is for you to improve your listening comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and so on by really getting interested in what I have to say.

I find that good learning happens when it happens accidentally, right?

And at the end of every episode, we also go through some key phrases. And if you want to learn more, every episode is part of a larger lesson on my website, englishwithrhys.com. I'll talk more about that later on.

MAIN PART

01:00 Our story today is about Martin Pistorius.

Martin was a normal boy in South Africa. He used to play with his friends, run around, chat, and generally have fun, do all the cool things that kids like to do.

But one day, he came home with a sore throat. You know, it's not really out of the ordinary. Kids get sick, kids get better, right? But Martin didn't.

Martin got worse day after day, and his parents took him to doctors and they couldn't quite figure out what was wrong with him.

Every day, his speech would become slower, his thoughts were slower, his movements were more difficult, and eventually he wound up not even being able to move or speak.

His mother in particular really pushed the doctors to do tests after test to find what was wrong with her son.

02:00 I can't imagine how devastating it would be for your child to be in this state and nobody able to tell you what was wrong or how to improve.

But that's what the doctors said. They couldn't find anything wrong. They said, "Well, you know, your son is in a vegetative state". And what that means is his body is alive, but his brain is more or less dead. There's not even any thoughts happening up there.

The doctors tried everything they could think of, but sadly there was nothing they could find. They could not find out why he was like this.

His parents, you know, they went a bit further when science and medicine couldn't answer their problems. They looked into mysticism and psychics and things like that.

I think it's anything with a tiny, tiny chance. You would take it, right? If your child was in this position, you would do absolutely anything for them.

03:00 I want you to think about the heartbreak, the sadness, the grief that his parents were feeling. It's nothing that I think any of us could understand unless we've been in a similar position. It's just horrifying to think of.

So, life changed, of course, for the whole family and it became about survival, looking after Martin's needs. You know, feeding him, cleaning him, and moving him around. You know, if he can't move, he's going to get bed sores, achy muscles. So, they have to move him around. His father would even wake up in the middle of the night just to turn Martin over.

I think they had a lot of hope that he would improve even if that hope was waning, you know, that hope might become less and less over time, but the hope never left them.

An average day for Martin would go like this. His father would wake up in the morning and get ready, and then he would go and wake up Martin, give him some breakfast and put him in the car. He would drive him to a care home on his way to
04:00 work. You know, his dad still had to work, right? He had two other children to feed and a house to keep. And then after work, he would come home quite late really and pick up Martin on the way. He put Martin on the sofa and they'd watch TV, and finally he'd put Martin to bed.

At the care home, people would just sort of talk around Martin like he's not even there. Sometimes they would talk about him. Maybe they would talk about their

secrets with one another. There's no way Martin could hear them. So, what's the harm?

Martin didn't speak. He didn't move. He couldn't react in any way. Everybody thought he was, you know, dead or unaware inside.

But Martin was aware.

He could hear everything. He could see everything. Every kind thing someone said, every mean thing they said, every time they overshared, he knew everything that was going on. But he could not tell anyone and he couldn't show them in any way that he understood.

05:00

I want you to imagine for a second what that's like, to sit there day after day like a piece of furniture. You hear your name, but you can't say anything. Someone tells a joke, but you can't laugh. Somebody says something terrible about you and you can't defend yourself. This was Martin's life.

And think about the absolute level of boredom he was facing. Yeah, he might have company sometimes. He might be watching TV sometimes, but a lot of the time he was just left there alone. So, what can he do?

Well, he went into his own mind a lot. He used his imagination. Sometimes we imagine ourselves as, you know, pirates and things like that, especially when we're kids. But that doesn't last very long because there's something else to do.

But his thoughts, his imagination, these stories, they went on for days and days.

06:00 Martin couldn't look at a clock, but he got to know where the light fell in the room, and he would watch the light move over the course of the day. He knew that when he had his snack, it would just be several hours until his dad came to pick him up. And this was the kind of life that he lived.

In his imagination, he could run and jump and swim and all of these things that other kids could do. But in reality, when he came back, he was still there, trapped in his own body, unable to move or speak.

The care centre where he spent most of his days doesn't sound too bad. The workers looked after him. They were gentle, kind for the most part.

But there was another care centre where he also spent time. Whenever his family went away on holiday or his dad went away on business, he would be taken to this other care centre who would also look after him overnight.

On the surface, this other care centre was quite a nice place to go. Classical music, smiling faces. But when the parents left, things took a turn.

07:00 The workers there were spiteful, horrible, even abusive towards Martin and, surely, the other patients there. For example, some of them would push Martin out into the hot South Africa sun and just leave him there for hours to burn. Sometimes they would wash him, but they wouldn't give him a towel or dress him. So, he would be sat there for hours shivering cold. They would just let him sit in his own waste for hours on end until he became sore.

They wouldn't move him. They would also call him names and say nasty things to him. They would feed him food that was too hot or too cold. And if he ever complained, then they became more angry and more abusive.

So, you can imagine. You cannot move or defend yourself. And this nurse is putting very hot food in your mouth and making you eat it. But it's so hot that it's burning your throat. And if you try to push it back out, she becomes angry and
08:00 puts more in your mouth more forcefully, maybe even hurting you.

Martin even said in his book that one time the food was so disgusting that he wanted to be sick. And he tried so hard not to be sick, but eventually he couldn't hold it and the sick came out. He vomited the food up onto the plate. The nurse picked up the spoon, through his vomit, and put it back in his mouth. And this went on until the plate was finished.

That is one of the worst things I read in that book. That is unbelievably cruel.

On top of all of this, Martin was fearful. Of course, of course you would be scared of going to a place like this. When he sat in his dad's car and he notices they take a turn towards this care centre, his heart would race and he would just become terrified because he knew he would be going into this place once more.

09:00 And he never always knew how long he would be there. One time it was for five weeks.

At home, Martin's parents were exhausted. Of course they were. They had two other children to look after, too. And this actually created a rift between his parents.

Martin's mother wanted to send Martin away full-time. They would visit him, of course, but she felt it was better for the other children if he wasn't there, if they could spend more time giving them attention.

Martin's father disagreed. He said, you know, Martin is a part of this family and he will continue looking after him in this way.

And honestly, when I read that passage, it felt like the parents wouldn't make it. You know, it's led to some really nasty, nasty arguments, including one time where they argued in front of him or maybe in the next room, and it led to his father leaving the house, you know, maybe just for a drive. But his mother comes
10:00 in and looks at Martin and says, "You must die. You have to die".

And it's very, very sad. You can imagine how Martin felt. His own mother telling him he must die. And remember, he's still just a child really, maybe a teenager at this point. So, not mature enough to put this into a different perspective to try to add some optimism. It's just horrible and depressing.

Later, Martin said he understood why his mother felt that way. Just desperation and grief, you know, she felt she had lost her son. It was as if her son had died and it'd just been dragged out for years and years. And her other children are suffering. The whole family is suffering.

So, in the end, Martin does say that he understands and, as you'll hear later, his mother does work very hard to look after Martin later on.

11:00

AD BREAK

But one day, something small but very important happened. At Martin's regular care home, there was a new carer, Vera. Vera was a bit different because she didn't talk around Martin, or about him, or as if he wasn't really there. She would talk to him.

And she had this idea that maybe Martin did understand what was going on. Maybe it was the way he looked at her. So, she started to talk to him more and try to look for more signs that he was alive in there.

Vera started to tell other people, you know, "I think Martin is aware. I think he knows what's going on". But nobody would believe her. After all, the doctors ran
12:00 all of these tests and they couldn't find anything. But Vera didn't stop and, in fact, she's the one who told Martin's parents about a test for people like Martin to see whether they are aware.

So, one day, Martin is taken into a special room. There's a researcher there and he has a big board with lots of simple pictures. Dog, cat, boat, toast, things like that. And the researcher would just ask Martin, you know, "Look at the toast, please".

So, Martin would take a while looking around trying to find the toast, but then he would find it. "Okay, Martin, find the dog". And Martin found it. "Find the boat". And he found it. And at that moment, everyone realised that Martin was aware.

I want you to just picture that moment. You could be in Martin's position or maybe one of his parents or even Vera. And imagine that realisation. It's not a fully happy one.

13:00 Yes, of course it's happy because it gives us hope. Martin can survive. Maybe he'll get better. Maybe he can learn to talk to us.

On the other hand, think about the absolute horror that he's had to endure to get to this point. Years and years of not talking to anyone, never giving a reaction. Nobody knew what he wanted. They just had to keep doing things for him, even if it's not what he needed at the time.

They would put him in front of a TV show made for little kids because they thought his brain couldn't handle anything better. He was watching these really inane kids shows for years and years. And even to this day, he hates those shows. And of course, there's the abuse, which I think only Martin knew about at that time.

But yes, the absolute horror of realising that Martin was alive all that time. But the
14:00 joy of knowing that, you know, he can communicate again. We just have to find the way.

So, that was the next step, communication.

Again, Martin can't move at all, he can't speak, but he could do a sort of small smile. So, somebody would ask him a question. "Martin, would you like a cup of tea?". He could smile a little bit. That would be yes. Or he could put his head down just slightly to say no.

So, that was a good start, right? Saying yes and no. But things had to improve. He had to be able to give his ideas.

Now, one of the challenges here was that Martin missed a lot of school and, indeed, he did forget a lot of his childhood. He didn't know how to read or write. So, letters were lost on him. He couldn't use a keyboard. He couldn't look at letters to spell something out. They had to rely on symbols, pictures.

15:00 So, they would start with these picture graphs, like we talked about already, and then they would move on to some software. Martin's family ordered software from all over the world designed to help him speak, and they got a top-of-the-line laptop, the best they could afford to help him do it.

Martin's mother worked with Martin for hours and hours every day to add vocabulary to this software. It was done in sheets. So, you would make a sheet of vocabulary and then make another sheet for another set of vocabulary. But again, we're working with pictures.

So, they would do things like asking Martin, "Will you need the word 'mouse'? ... Okay, let's put mouse in there. Let's find a picture. Okay, this one will work. Let's move on to the next one". And they would have to think of every single word he might want to use. If they don't think of it, he can't use it.

Eventually, it becomes easier because he could use a couple of pictures to describe what he wants in the new picture. But again, this is a very, very slow process.

16:00 Martin talks about one time he was describing what he wants for breakfast, right? So, he goes over to the breakfast sheet and he has to go through each one. And the way it works is each picture lights up one by one. <Beep> <beep> <beep>. And when it lands on the one you want, then you can press a switch. So, his hands could move a little bit at this point. And if he pressed something, it would stop on that picture.

So, the breakfast. You've got 'cup of tea' <beep> 'coffee' <beep> 'orange juice' <beep>. And he needs to press it when it lands on 'orange juice', but he still can't control his body very well yet.

So, maybe it gets to orange juice and he misses it. So, he needs to wait for all the pictures to go first until it comes back around and he can start again. 'Tea' <beep> 'coffee' <beep> 'orange juice' <beep>, and he needs to squeeze at that moment to get what he wants.

So, it's a very, very slow process. So, imagine having a conversation like this.

17:00 I'm sure people were nice and wanted to talk to Martin. But when he responds, it would take him a long time, minutes, to make even a short sentence. And that silence fills a room. It becomes uncomfortable. People would cut the conversation short because they feel awkward.

So, Martin finally got a voice. It wasn't perfect. It was slow, but he could say what he wanted if you just had the patience for him.

The first thing he said kind of broke my heart. So, his sister Kim had moved to the UK for her studies and she's calling the family over Christmas. They're having a nice chat, a catch up and then, you know, his mother or father says, "Uh, Martin has something to say to you". And Martin typed in his computer, you know, uses his switch and he says, "Happy Christmas, Kim".

Over time, Martin learned to read and write, but it did take some time. Of course,
18:00 you guys are learning English, you know how difficult it can be. And in the end, his software turned into a kind of keyboard with some common phrases on it. And he could get things out a little bit faster.

But still, people felt awkward talking to him. They would change the subject, they would finish his sentences, and they would leave the conversation early.

And Martin says something very interesting about language. He says that language is not just words. Language is also the timing, the stress, knowing when to pause. You know, the way you tell a joke is different to the way you say a regular sentence. So, imagine telling a joke with a computer voice that you can't really control. It doesn't sound like a joke. People don't laugh at the end of it.

And people started to make up their minds about who Martin was. Quiet, shy, reserved. But inside, Martin was frustrated, maybe even angry. Of course, he
19:00 would be. He cannot communicate.

Still, even with all of this expensive equipment and hard work, he can't communicate the same way as other people. How can he join a group? How can he make friends? How can he find love?

I'm going to move forward in Martin's story a bit now. I talked about his sister Kim earlier and how she lived in the UK. Well, Martin and Kim were having a video chat and Kim's friends were there. She had two friends, both female, and Martin noticed that one in particular was very, very beautiful to him.

So, everyone's chatting and then Kim had to leave. And Kim's friends stayed and chatted with Martin a little longer. You know, they said that he was handsome. They wanted to see his arms. You know, I guess they thought they would be muscly because he has the wheelchair. And eventually they hit it off, and one of the friends leaves, and he's left with this one friend.

And they talked the night away, and they kept talking, and kept talking, and they
20:00 exchanged email addresses, and they kept talking over email. At one point this one friend, Joanna asked Martin whether he would like to come to Disneyland with her, just the two of them, for her birthday. And so, they planned that trip together.

Unfortunately, he couldn't go due to visa reasons, but that was just the start. They then made plans to meet up in the UK and so they did. And that was really the start of a new chapter in his life.

I'm not going to give you the rest of the story, but I can tell you it does have a happy ending.

The book is called 'Ghost Boy' if you're interested. I think it's such a marvellous read. It's one of the most heart-breaking but thought-provoking things I've read in a long time. So, I highly recommend that.

IN CONCLUSION

Before we finish, let's take a look at some of the most useful phrases for you from this episode. The first one I want to talk about is 'out of the ordinary' or 'out of the ordinary'. There are two ways to pronounce this. They are both correct.

'Out of the ordinary' means 'not normal or not what usually happens'. In the podcast I said, "It's nothing out of the ordinary". Or another example, "He was late for work which was out of the ordinary for him".

The next phrase is 'as if'. 'As if' is used to say that something is not true but feels true. "They talked around him as if he wasn't really there". "She looked at her phone as if I wasn't even there".

The next one is 'wound up', which means 'ended up in a situation, often unexpectedly'. "He wound up not being able to move or speak". "We got lost and wound up walking for two hours".

The next phrase is 'dragged out', which means 'continued for much longer than it should'. "The situation was dragged out for years". "The meeting was dragged out and everyone got bored".

And our last phrase for this episode, 'took a turn', which means 'change suddenly, usually for the worse'. "Things took a turn when his parents left". "The conversation took a turn when money was mentioned".

Again, this episode and these phrases are just part of the lesson. So, be sure to check out the Podcast Course to learn even more.

If you enjoyed this episode, let me know in the comments. What was the most interesting thing about Martin's story for you? And will you be reading his full story?

I'd like to thank my dedicated members. That's Alina, Anna, Deisy, and Marcella.

23:00 And again, those dedicated members get a free conversation class every month. So, if you're interested in that, there's a link in the description.

I'll see you next time.

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