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Author: © Jesper Wung-Sung  
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Foreign rights: Stinne Hjortlund, [stinne\\_hjortlund@gyldendalgroupagency.dk](mailto:stinne_hjortlund@gyldendalgroupagency.dk)  
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**Abridged Sample: *Boot Canute* (2014) by Jesper Wung-Sung**

Translated from the Danish by Lindy Falk van Rooyen  
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**THE GAME**

Once upon a time there was a child.

There have been many children, of course, so many in fact, that you can't help wondering whether there's a plan for them all. It ought to be a fast rule: That *someone* is always there to care for each and every child in the world. This is not the case. If it were, perhaps life wouldn't be life.

For now, we'll keep an eye on just one child. This particular child is a boy named William, and in many ways, William is a lucky boy. He has two parents. He lives in a house. He gets food to eat every day.

But then there is Canute.

They are alone in William's room. William is lying on the bed. Canute is lounged at the foot of William's bed. William is sad. But now William pretends to be bored.

“I’m soooo, bored,” says William.

The back of his head is buried in the pillows, but still he hears his stomach grumbling. A bird is perched on the second-highest branch of the plum tree outside; the plum tree has four branches, William can see it through his window; the bird is grey or grayish-brown; on the lowest branch, there are three leaves, one of the leaves dropped to the ground during the course of the morning; the sky is milky-white; not so long ago, William ate seven hotdogs. He’ll have to come up with something else to do, soon.

“Let’s play a game! Anything at all! Make a suggestion!”

Canute doesn’t answer. He is sitting with his trendy galoshes up on the bed. William narrows his eyes, and thinks: He doesn’t even try hiding how mean he is. But William doesn’t give up.

“Come on, Canute,” he says. “I’m sooooo bored! Let’s play a game! COME ON!”

William keeps nagging. Or rather: He begs, he pleads, just as he’s begged and pleaded to God, for instance.

“Say something! Come on! It’s your turn! COME ON! Anything at all—as long as it’s insanely FUN!”

Canute smooths the hair down along his side-parting. William pretends to pluck the idea out of his head, as if he were plucking a plum from the tree outside:

“I know! Let’s play hide-and-seek!”

Canute doesn’t seem very keen on the idea, but William covers his eyes with his hands.

“Count to a hundred. One, two, three, four, five ...”

William is cheating; there are gaps between his fingers, but William thinks he’s allowed, since he became afraid of the dark. This is true. He wasn’t always scared of the dark, but now he sleeps with a light on.

William thinks, and counts. This he never did before either. Before, he didn’t think *and talk* at the same time. Now, he thinks it makes a big difference, if there’s a hole in a boat or a fence. And is a human being more like a fence or a boat? Then he shouts:

“Coming! Ready or not!”

The bird has flown from its perch. Perhaps William startled it when he climbed out of bed. If it had remained on its perch, the bird would now see the boy lifting the covers and carefully fish a big bundle of stainless steel roasting pins from thereunder.

William stomps to the bookcase in the corner of the room, as if this were the first place to look, rolling the elastic band off the bundle of pins as he does so. Then he turns to face the big black bag lying there in the corner.

The bag is on the floor next to the television. Packed and ready. At night, it looks like a body-bag he once saw in a computer game, but he this can't bring himself to tell Mom and Dad. The bag remains there in his room so he can play with his toys whenever he wants to. He can see that Canute has crept into the bag, but he's zipped it all the way up, the foxy little devil.

William pretends to search in the cupboard and then tiptoes over to the bag. The boy has difficulty walking on tip-toe. It hurts his hips, and he has to rest a hand on the wall several times; he leans up against it for a moment to catch his breath.

William jumps into the air and comes down hard on the bag. The impact jars up his spine in a way that still surprises him: His strength is all but gone. The breath has been knocked out of him, his chest aches, his knee hurts, but William hopes it has smashed into the back of Canute's skull. Then he gets to work: He plunges the first pin into the bag, right there, where Canute's belly surely must be. The next series of blows aims for the chest, neck, eyes, arms, and legs.

"Die! Die, you pig! Die! Scream, pig, scream! Die! Die!"

William doesn't stop till he runs out of roasting pins. Now the bag looks like a horrendous big porcupine. Completely spent, the boy stays sitting on the bag. Nothing moves under him. He's waiting for the blood to seep out of the hundreds of holes he has made. He says:

"May your blood ooze a lake around this island, where I'm the king of the castle."

William gasps for breath. There's a rush in his head, a faint ringing in one ear, and perhaps this is why it takes a while, before he hears it: The faintest of shuffles under the bed. This is not a dream, there's no mistaking it: Canute has fooled him again.

William rattles off the number times he has tried to kill Canute. The number of means:

Suffocate Canute with two large pillows from the bed.

Drown Canute by stuffing his head down the toilet.

Push Canute out of various different windows—the higher the better.

Shove Canute in front of an oncoming car (only to see him waving from the other side of the street).

Try the same again with a train.

Drop Mom's sewing machine onto Canute's head.

Stick Canute's fingers into the plug behind the bean-bag.

Crash the wardrobe down on Canute's head.

Coax Canute to look deep down into the blender.

Poison Canute in 117 different ways.

William has a headache, he feels sick. *This is a stupid, rotten game*, he thinks. He feels trapped in his room. Or rather: As if *he* were the one impaled and bloody in a bag.

"It can't be true," he whispers.

Canute never opens his mouth, never says a word, but now William can hear it clearly: Canute, under the bed, snorting with laughter. Laughter worthy of Olympic gold or the chair of a comedy club of the greatest infamy.

## THE GUEST

William had a cold on the day Canute came. He was sitting on his bed surrounded by crumpled balls of kitchen towel, he was sick and tired of being sick and tired, but then he heard a knock at the window. At first he thought a bird had flown into the pane, but the knock came again, three times. Then he saw the outline of a figure. William had never had a guest come in from the garden before. It was mysterious, exciting, and he opened the window with anticipation.

“Hi,” said William. “Who are you?”

The boy met his gaze, but made no reply. His clothes looked like they came from a charity shop—old-fashioned, too large—but they couldn’t disguise the boy’s more than average chubbiness. However, on his feet, the boy sported the latest and greatest galoshes, as if he had to be fit and ready for both a night at a disco and the running of a marathon. He unfolded a dog-eared note. William read:

*my name is Canute.*

*I am not like the others.*

*I need a place to stay.*

Even though the window was low, even though he had the latest and greatest galoshes on his feet, Canute had great difficulty getting in through the window. Perhaps his shoes slipped on the wet autumn leaves. On the third try, the boy got a grip on the window frame, but it was William who pulled with all his might and finally hauled the boy inside. Canute remained seated on the floor, his legs stretched out in front of him. He was breathing heavily, beads of sweat shone on his pale forehead.

“You’re in worse shape than I,” said William.

Was he dumb, or did he come from some poor foreign country someplace? William already regretted pulling him in.

“Okay, Mr. Mountaineer,” said William. “Wha’ d’you want?”

The boy called Canute didn't answer, just slicked down his side-parting instead. Then William got mad. He was so mad, he could feel his cheeks burning and his hands begin to shake.

"Did someone cut out your tongue and eat it?!"

Then William lost his temper. He swore and yelled at the boy for the better part of an hour.

All the greatest super-heroes have an Enemy No. 1. Now William had met his, and strangely enough, this made him feel both better and stronger. He hated Canute with all his heart.

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