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Translated from the Danish by Martin Aitken
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1

SO WHAT AM I?

Do you know the thought: This could be a story. Do you?

It could begin like this:

I'm a boy walking along the road, on his way home from football.

Walking home from the playing fields is no big deal. Not today. In

fact, I decide to make a detour along the edge of the woods,

because even after a whole football match I've got all this energy to burn.

Do you know the feeling: I've never been this much ME in my life! So all

together. So right. Do you?

That was how I felt that day on my way home from the playing fields. Like everything was perfect! The weather. The football match. Maria. Me.

I walked briskly – I couldn't walk any other way – with my holdall slung over my shoulder. The sun was shining, birds were singing and I whistled along. Not even the dead leg I'd got just above my left knee could spoil my happy mood – it was proof I'd played a brilliant game.

Everything I did in the match was spot on. Every pass, tackle and dribble a success. I had three shots on goal – and scored from all three.

The third goal was like this: me going past three men with the ball and delivering a strike into the top corner. When I emerged from the throng of embraces, I picked out Maria on the sideline and our eyes met. She was with her mates and smiled, either from something they said or to me. Maybe both.

3.

When you play football, it's normal to have good days and off days, not to mention all those in between. But on this day my game was flawless, sheer perfection. I didn't put a foot wrong. Fouls were the only way our opponents could stop me. Pulling my jersey, stepping on my heels or sending me flying. Their captain was so frustrated he gave me that dead leg. I can still feel it ever so slightly. Weird, yeah?

But I got up and played on. And when the final whistle went I wasn't even tired. I could have played until dark.

They all said I'd played a blinder. Our trainer, my teammates and opponents, even the ref said well played. But it didn't matter who was talking to me, all I could do was keep looking where Maria

was. And as I sat on the steps of the changing rooms, taking off my boots, I sensed her approach. The way she almost glides along. Her long, dark hair. Those wide cheekbones of hers that make her eyes seem so narrow it looks like she thinks everything's funny. Her white teeth.

'Hi,' she said. 'Well done.'

'Thanks,' I said.

And then she said: 'Does it hurt?'

Does it hurt? DOES IT HURT?

She meant my dead leg, of course. I could have burst into tears. Does it hurt?!

I pull the turtle out of my pocket and think back on the time after the match when Maria took it out of her pocket and pressed it into my hand. Her eyes were big and round all of a sudden as she came on all solemn.

'A present,' she said. 'I've been saving up for it since I was five.'

It was about four centimetres in length and made of green plastic. All scuffed and grubby.

'Okay,' she said. 'I found it in the gravel about five minutes ago. Some snotty kid probably dropped it and couldn't be bothered picking it up again because it's so small and ugly and comes free with chocolate that costs next to nothing. But hey, it's the thought that counts!'

4.

She was right: it was small and ugly. The black pupils in its white, bulging eyes had almost disappeared, as though the creature had turned blind. It made me think of a joke. I can remember jokes, though normally I don't tell any. But at that point I was already so full of words that needed to get out. I held the turtle up in front of

me and said:

'This little turtle tried to climb a tree. It took one, two, three hours before it reached the top, and then it threw itself into the air, front legs flailing, and plunged to the ground.'

I dropped the turtle onto the step.

'It carried on all day. Hours of crawling up the tree, then two seconds of flight – splat! All the while, two birds sat and watched the turtle with concern. Eventually, one of them said: This really can't go on, darling! Don't you think it's time we told him he was adopted?' Maria laughed. A hearty chuckle, albeit brief. I can still hear the sound of her laughter.

Then she gave my hand a squeeze, the one in which I held the turtle.

'See you later,' she said, and glided off.

As I walked home, I couldn't keep the two things apart: the pain above my left knee, and her. Maria. The most perfect creation of all.

But my feelings of joy and boundless energy were tinged with one small regret. It was the first time neither of my parents had been there to watch me play a game. Usually, both of them came. Sometimes only one. But on this particular day, they both had things to do.

But words. All I needed was to find the right words to tell them about the match. Words as warm and bright as rays of sun. I was certain I would find them before I got home. I walked along the path by the woods, my senses as keen as never before. I could smell the flowers on the bank, and the shampoo in my hair. I could hear the birds. I could have heard a beetle scuttle through the grass. I could see like an eagle, hone in on the smallest insect – and in the

corner of my eye I caught sight of a boy! Darting into the woods from on top of the bank.

He was gone in a flash, and yet I was certain: I had seen him before. The previous week. Almost in the same place. His hair was fair, almost white beneath the hood he wore up despite the warm weather. He had looked so solemn. He was my age, but I didn't know him. He wasn't from our football club, and he didn't go to our school. Maybe he was just a boy gathering beetles, mushrooms or pine cones in the woods. But whatever he was doing, I didn't care! It would take more than some weird beetle boy to get me in bad mood!

I opened the gate in the white wooden fence with the tip of my toes, closing it behind me with an elegant flick of the heel.

The back door couldn't be opened, not with my foot, and neither by hand. It was locked. Normally it was left open, but I went round the house to the front door instead.

'It's only me!' I called out, kicking off my shoes.

I did remember to pick them up and leave them tidily on the step outside, but then my mum was standing in the door looking at me like I'd put them on top of her clean washing pile. The look on her face was so strange I was afraid there'd been an accident.

'Has something happened to Dad?' I asked.

When she failed to respond, I felt certain that was it.

Something had happened to my dad! I felt my heart begin to pound like never before. But then he appeared behind her in the hall.

Standing in the doorway of the front room, looking right as rain.

'Aunt Judith?' I asked.

I don't know what made me think of my auntie Judith. I just did, that's all.

But my mum shook her head.

I said: 'Who, then?'

And all she did was carry on shaking her head.

'It's ...'

'Who?'

'It's ... It's not good ...'

6.

'What's not good?!'

Then Dad said: 'It's best you close the door now, Sara!'

My mum said: 'Something must have gone wrong.'

Dad insisted: 'Close the door. I'll call them.'

Mum didn't even look at me, she just did what he said. She closed the door in my face.

I stood there perplexed on the doorstep in my stocking feet.

And then I heard the door lock from the inside.

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