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You Have Me to Love

Translated from the Dutch
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My tongue felt like it was crawling with ants. My feet were heavy. I was standing at the back door in my swimming trunks, towel around my neck. Mum had come into the kitchen, but she hadn't looked at me yet. 'There you are,' she said without raising her head as she lifted the lid off the pot. She ladled my bowl full of soup, then hers.

She dipped a finger into my soup and stirred. 'Just right. Tuck in.' I sat down on my chair and stared at the steam rising sluggishly from my bowl. 'Don't leave too much for Dad. If he'd wanted a decent helping, he should've been back on time.' Spooning soup into her mouth, she returned to her sewing machine in the living room. 'Just finishing this off. Won't be long.'

My hands lay motionless on the table. Inside they were shaking. I could hear the scraping of gulls sharpening their beaks on the gutter above the window. I knew I should be eating my soup, but it was all I could do to take hold of the spoon.

I took a gulp of water from my glass. It felt like I was choking. I gagged and a little of what I sicked up disappeared into my soup. I wiped away what had landed next to the bowl with a furtive sweep of my hand. Mum hadn't noticed. She was leaning forward in her chair, staring intently at the rattling needle of her sewing machine, only letting up to see if she was still going in a straight line.

After a few minutes, Mum came back into the kitchen to fetch the Worcester sauce from the spice rack. She rested her hips against the sink and leaned toward the window.

‘Taking his own sweet time again.’ My heart wanted to leap out of my chest. I stuck the empty spoon in my mouth. ‘Don’t take after your father,’ she smiled. ‘You can never count on a man like that.’ Before I could answer, the sewing machine had started rattling again.

The harder I bit down on my tongue, the more the ants prickled. Dusk made a mirror of the window. I knew it held my reflection, but I couldn’t bring myself to look. Mum went over to the bin, trod on the pedal, and let a few scraps of material fall from her hand.

‘Aren’t you going to eat anything?’

I gave a jerky shrug.

‘Nothing to say for yourself?’

‘I’ve had enough,’ I said.

‘Well, that wasn’t much.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Don’t come crying like a baby that you want something else later.’ She tipped my soup back into the pot, placed my bowl next to hers by the sink, and left the pot and one bowl on the table for Dad. She caught me looking at them. ‘That father of yours can heat up his own soup.’ When she called him ‘that father of yours,’ it meant he’d done something he needed to make up for. She rubbed dark-brown stripes across the table with a damp cloth.

‘He swam away.’ The words stumbled out of my mouth.

‘Hmm?’

‘Dad swam away.’

“Swam away”?’

‘Yes.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Dunno.’

She looked at me, puzzled. ‘Where to?’

I shrugged.

‘Didn’t he tell you?’

Again, I shrugged.

‘But you must know if he said something.’

‘I don’t think he said anything.’

She cupped her hands around her eyes and put her face to the window.

‘Did you two have a row?’

‘No.’

She tossed her head as if to shake loose a couple of strange thoughts.

‘That waster does whatever he likes.’ She turned the tap on full, put the plug in the sink, and squirted in some washing-up liquid. I heard the muffled clunk of plates and mugs, the scrape of knives, forks, and spoons. The boiler hummed away in the cupboard below.

At the slightest sound, Mum looked up and turned her head toward the front door, though they were only the noises the house makes. When she was finished, she draped a tea towel over the clean dishes on the draining board.

‘He was underwater.’

‘What?’

‘All of a sudden.’

‘What was all of a sudden?’

I shrugged.

‘Stop shrugging your shoulders every time I ask you a question.’

‘He wanted to climb out of the water after me.’

‘Did you two go swimming?’

‘No.’

‘You *knew* that wasn’t allowed.’

I shook my head.

‘What happened? Tell me.’

‘I looked round and all of a sudden Dad was swimming underwater.’

‘Underwater? Just like that?’

I tried my best not to shrug, but I couldn’t help myself.

‘He must have said something?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Well, where did he go?’

‘I don’t know that, either.’

‘Dunno, dunno, dunno... Where was he heading?’

‘I couldn’t see.’

‘But you just said he climbed out of the water after you.’

‘Didn’t.’

‘What do you mean, “didn’t”?’

‘I didn’t go for a swim.’

Her hand shot out and felt at my swimming trunks. ‘Are you telling me lies?’

My head wouldn’t stop shaking.

‘Where were you?’

‘On the sand.’

‘And that’s where he went swimming?’

I shook my head. ‘Over by the rocks.’

She looked deep into my eyes. Then she rushed into the

hall, yanked open the dresser drawer, and took out a torch. She flashed it on and off three times and went outside. By the time the light on the outside wall flickered on, she had disappeared round the side of the house. Quick as I could, I pulled one of Dad's jumpers from the drying rack and put it on. It was way too big for me. I wormed my feet into my boots and had to run to keep up with her.

2

The red light of a buoy appeared in the distant dusk. We scrambled down the path to the beach, curled like a half-moon around the cove. I kept trying to take hold of Mum's hand, but she was walking too fast.

Dad's sunglasses, his towel, and our flip-flops lay waiting on the sand, but not where we'd left them. I felt a surge of relief. Dad must have climbed out of the water and moved our things further from the breaking waves. Seconds later, my legs turned weak and wobbly again as I realized the tide had gone out.

Mum shoved the torch into my hands and turned over the things on the sand, as if he might be hiding under them. 'Birk!' she shouted across the water. 'Where are you?'

When no answer came, she turned to me. I accidentally shone the light in her face.

'Where did you see him last?'

I pointed the torch at the rocks.

‘There?’

I was close to tears.

‘Are you sure?’ She didn’t see me nod. She was staring out to sea again. ‘Birk!’ she shouted. ‘Birk!’

Unbroken silence. Not even the gulls were squawking.

As soon as Mum started walking, I followed her with the torch so she could see where she was putting her feet. Without hesitation, her shoes walked into the sea. The water was soon up to her knees. She seemed to be in shock as she took in all that dark water tugging at her shoes, growing wider with every step.

I tried to shine the torch in the direction she was looking. Any second now, Dad would surface, coughing and choking, and here she was, ready to grab hold of him and haul him up onto the beach. Any second now, he would emerge from the water. He had to. Especially now that Mum was here. We’d see his head above the waves, like a football floating toward us. ‘Look! Look over there,’ I’d shout, jumping onto Mum’s back and catching him in the torchlight. We’d wade further into the sea, put his arms around our shoulders the way they do in films, and help him ashore. After that he’d probably belt me one across the face, but I wouldn’t care. At least he’d be back.

‘Tell me.’ Mum gripped my chin between her thumb and forefinger. ‘Tell me what happened here.’

‘He was swimming, I think. That’s what it looked like. And all of a sudden he was underwater and further and further away.’

‘And what did you do?’

I fell silent.

‘Why didn’t you tell me right away?’

‘But I did tell you.’

She snatched the torch from my hands and we rounded the cove till we reached the rocks. We balanced on the boulders and tore open our hands on the barnacles. Normally she’d be nagging me to be careful up here, but now she kept climbing on ahead and calling out his name.

Suddenly I caught sight of something in a small inlet. A dark object was floating in the water a few feet below me, thumping and splashing. I wanted to jump in, but I wasn’t brave enough. I shouted to Mum a few yards up ahead. ‘I’ve found something!’

She slipped and dropped the torch. It rolled away but came to rest in a crevice between two rocks. She scrambled to her feet, picked up the torch, and lunged toward me. ‘Where? Where?’ Anxiously, she aimed the torch at the dark water beneath us. A tree trunk covered in seaweed was slamming into the rocks. ‘Oh Christ,’ she shouted. ‘Jesus fucking Christ.’

We clambered on. At the highest point she stopped and sent a beam of light skimming across the water. Her shouting had turned to pleading. I yelled out, ‘Dad-dad-daaaaad!’

Half walking, half running, we headed back home, torchlight bouncing over the path. I wanted to say something to help us catch our breath. Maybe Dad was already home. Maybe he’d taken another path. We’d probably just missed him along the way. Or maybe he’d swum right round the island, and now he was sitting at the kitchen table, wolfing down a bowl of soup.

The silence hit us in the face. Everything in the kitchen was just as we’d left it. The big pot of soup, his bowl, the spoon

beside it. I almost forgot to breathe.

Mum moved like a restless animal that's sensed a change in the weather. 'Karl,' she said. 'I have to get Karl.' The door handle rammed into the wall. Grains of plaster crumbled to the floor. I went to follow her, but she jabbed a pointed finger toward the kitchen. 'Stay here, you.'

3

Now that I was alone, the cupboards around me seemed to grow taller. The bright kitchen light left dark specks floating in my eyes. I couldn't bring myself to look at anything, didn't dare sit down. It felt like I was being stared at from all sides. I switched off the big light and then the light in the hood above the cooker. I waited till my eyes got used to the dark, and crept upstairs.

Still wearing my boots, swimming trunks, and Dad's jumper, I hid under the blanket. My breathing was ragged. When I closed my eyes, a pale shape appeared. I could see gulls circling around me, terns sitting on the rocks or diving for fish, and all the while that same pale shape. I switched on the bedside lamp, but that only scared me more, crushing any doubt that I might not be awake. I turned the lamp off and the shape returned. Other things, too: the towel that seemed further from the sea, a hand that would not break the surface. The pale shape blurred, grew vaguer. I pressed my fingers against my eyes till all I could see were flashes of light.