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Abridged Sample: *1-2-3-GO!* (2016) by Jesper Wung-Sung

Translated from the Danish by Lindy Falk van Rooyen

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—Am I going crazy?

Cecilie was looking at me anxiously.

—No, of course you're not.

—Sometimes I imagine that there are little beings in my body. That they are ones, who are fighting. Isn't that weird?

—No, I understand what you mean.

—I've given them names!

—Who?

—The beings in my body...

She poked her finger into the blankets, those hospital blankets, which seemed to grow larger and larger, as Cecilie lost more and more weight; she looked as if she were buried under a snowdrift.

—What are their names? I asked.

She snorted, which looked bizarre, because her eyes were sad as she did so.

—Tutgilaens.

—Tutgi..

—Tut-gi-la-ens. At first they were just a small tribe with a single chief, they lived peacefully and did their work, like in all the other villages...

—Villages?

—Scattered throughout the body are little villages. The citizens of these villages are charged with the job to look after and repair various parts of the body. They spend their whole lives completing their task, and when they get old and frail, they commit collective suicide, so there'll be room for fresh recruits. But things didn't turn out this way for the Tutgilaens, she explained.—Nobody knows exactly how it happened, but that stream, where they come to fetch their water, was poisoned. The poisoned water made them grow large and aggressive. And in the end, they stopped working altogether – but refused to kill themselves. Instead they drove out to other regions, where they plundered the villages and murdered their citizens. This is what they are doing now – and that is why I am sick ... I think this is what is happening to...

She grabbed my hand.

—But you are not allowed to tell anyone.

—No, of course not.

I stroked her hair.

—Do you think I am being childish?

—No, not at all.

—Sometimes I talk to them.

—To the Tutgilaens?

—Yes, but they don't answer. Sometimes I feel like they understand at least some of what I'm saying, that may words can stop them for a while, but, as a rule, it only lasts for a couple of days. Then they start to destroy and devour others again. When I feel it happening, I start to cry. I lie awake at night and cry for hours, I cry until all my

tears have dried up. And then I hate myself. I'm such an idiot! Only the world's biggest nutter could have such ridiculous thoughts. And then I hate myself, because I'm too stupid to learn their language. I can't speak Tutgila.

—I can sleep here at night, if you want me to, I suggested.

—The doctors won't let you. And it wouldn't help. There is nothing you can do.

She smiled condescendingly at me, as if I were a little child that had promised to protect her.

—The only one who can help is Nono.

—Nono?

—One of the Tutgilaens. He is just as tall as the tallest of the Tutgilaens, but he is kind and peaceful by nature. Every day, when the others have conquered yet another village, he tries to persuade them not to go any further. He hasn't succeeded yet, but Nono is my only hope.

Nono. I didn't know what to say. But one thing was absolutely clear: Cecilie was not losing her mind. She was too beautiful, her mind was too sharp, for this to be true. But she was up against something that couldn't be controlled. It was one step forward, one and a half steps back; she was trailing by two points, and every time she managed to close the lead, the opposing team scored another goal.

But by the end of February she was allowed to go home to Thurø.

February was also the first time I scored over 20 points in the senior league.

I have certain rituals, a series of things I do before every match. I would, for example, never dream of leaving home on matchday without my L.A. Lakers cap on my head. I wear this cap come rain, snow or sunshine with 40 degrees in the shade. In the locker rooms, I always lace up my shoes twice; after having done them up once, I untie the laces, and start over – always starting with the left foot first. And when I step onto the court, I always touch the floor with the tips of the fingers of my right hand.

I started performing these rituals for Cecilie. She was fighting a war I couldn't take part in, so I found another strategy to try and help her indirectly: I played my basketball matches for her. In this way, we fought parallel battles – as if we were

standing side by side – and I told myself that if I did a good job on the court, then *her* chances on *her* battle field would be improved.

As a part of this strategy I adopted a new ritual: I put Cecilie on the spectator stands. Before the start signal rang, I searched for an empty seat, where I placed her, just like that time in Odense when I had looked up and caught sight of her in the crowd. It might sound strange, but it worked perfectly. From the first match I played with the certainty that her eyes were on me. It didn't put me off my game, on the contrary, it felt like being released from a pressure, and suddenly I could do things I would never have dared doing before. At times, her presence practically carried me through the match, and after the final signal, I always turned to face the chosen seat, and nodded discretely, like a gladiator saluting the queen after his victory.

I dedicated each and every one of my scores to Cecilie. And in the match against Åbyhøj, I scored over 20 points for the first time. 22 points, to be exact. It was one of those matches where everything just worked. We won a comfortable 101-78 victory, and we played an amazing game. 'The Chicken' laid one egg after another – like a chicken set to lay eggs in a cage. Looming large, he dominated the field below the basket as if it were his private property, scoring 32 points in total. And the 'Tornado' was in hopla-mode, delivering one assist after another with his fast, accurate passes. He might be the smallest man on the court, but this is irrelevant when you have the quickest brain. But the deciding factor was that 'Tornado' and I understood each another better than ever, and in that particular match, we worked together almost perfectly.

My best scoring came about when 'Tornado', in the middle of the final quarter, sent a hard and sharp delivery into the field. I dashed between two defenders and raked in the ball with the very tips of my fingers. It looked to be a missed opportunity, as I was fighting to get the ball under control, I had too much speed on me, skidded across the field, ending up with my back to the net, but more like a reflex, I flicked the ball over my head, as if it were tossing a paper ball into a wastebasket. Before I hit the floor, I looked over my shoulder in time to see the ball smack the board and drop into the net. A roar exploded from the crowd.

After the game my old rival, 'Arrow-Niels', came up to me and said: *The position is yours*. Harve grabbed the back of my neck and raved about my *Lucky Luke* score. This

was also the first time he had called me 'the Young Gun'. It stuck, and this is how I got my nickname. *The Young Gun*.

Folk started talking about me like the latest news for the national team. I hadn't heard anything concrete, so it could've been rumours. But one thing was certain, namely that a number of American talent scouts would be coming to Europe in May to check out the young players; the best of the bunch would be invited to a training camp in the U.S. during the summer holidays. Harve was already planning my trip.

I was proud of my *Lucky Luke* scoring, but I knew it was partly just that: luck. And it was actually the opposite, which I loved most about basketball: the perfect shot. That moment, when a shot comes together – neither hooked, hasty nor short, but perfectly balanced – is just brilliant, and those few times I've managed to swing it myself, the hairs on the back of my neck jumped up in glee! It's like the whole body swells, and you just *know* the ball is going in – because the law of gravity says so.

I realized that this was probably the main reason I fell for Cecilie, rather than her looks, or her personality: she was balanced - and this to an extent that she seemed to exist independently of the earth. It was her very *being* that was elegant. If the earth were to start spinning in the opposite direction, Cecilie would be the only one, who would remain standing where she was.

And this was why I was certain she was going to survive.

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