

# ***Catfish***

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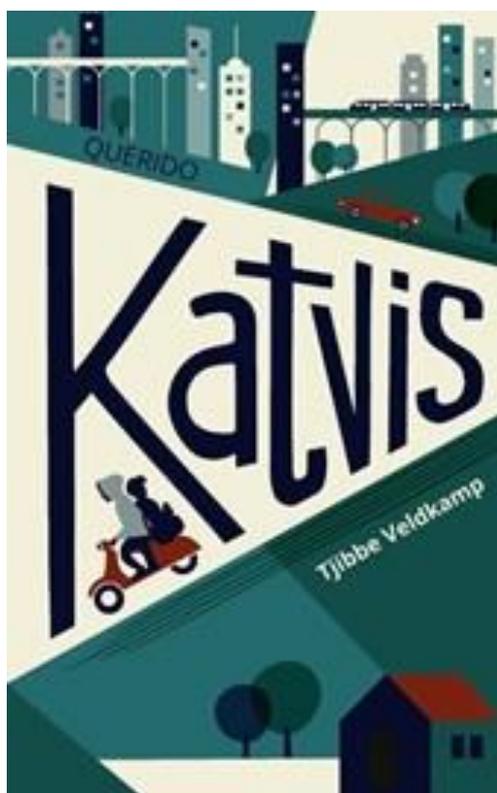
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About ***Catfish***:

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pages 5–10

It was dark in the bedroom, but the telephone on his pillow was happily shining away. ‘Baptiste is typing’ said the screen.

Ate was lying on his stomach on his bed. He tapped Baptiste’s new profile pic. Baptiste’s face was just one big smile. Everything else was joining in with the smile, not just his mouth and eyes, but even his chin and his curly hair. Ate tried to imagine Baptiste looking worried. He couldn’t. Baptiste’s face wasn’t made for worry.

His message arrived.

*Bad news... 22:31*

Ate wasn’t shocked. He’d previously received ‘annoying’, ‘disastrous’ and ‘sad’ news, and so far it had always turned out fine.

*Yeah? What’s up? 22:31*

They’d been WhatsApping each other for almost six months now. About five minutes twice a day, so not all that long really. They didn’t usually send messages about anything special. But still Ate spent all day looking forward to four in the afternoon and half ten at night.

He liked it that they were similar. Apart from the fact that Baptiste was black and illegally in Belgium, and he was white and legally in the Netherlands. And Baptiste was always broke, but Ate sometimes didn’t even manage to spend all of his pocket money and clothing allowance. But none of that mattered. They watched the same YouTube channels, and their favourite one was Geoff and Jack. Not the funniest or craziest YouTubers on the planet, but definitely the nicest. And there was always something to say about Geoff and Jack: about their videos, about reactions to their posts, about their clothes, their hair, their house...

Ate’s phone buzzed.

*I'm in debt 22:32*

*Need to sell my phone 22:32*

Now Ate actually was shocked.

*How we going to send msgs? 22:33*

Baptiste was typing for ages, but finally he sent just one word.

*Désolé... 22:34*

Ate had translated that word before. 'Sorry.'

So they weren't going to be able to send each other messages anymore?

He sat down on the edge of his bed. He was going to miss Baptiste. Really, really miss him. Sending messages to each other made *everything* better – school, home, everything. He could even put up with the kids he shared a table with at break time now. If he didn't have Baptiste anymore, he was going to start hating everything again, not just all those long arms and legs in his class, but also the PE lessons with apparatus and the PE lessons without apparatus and toast for breakfast and... everything.

The telephone on his pillow shone again, just as happily as before. Showed how dumb smartphones could be.

What could he do? Transferring money was pointless. He'd done that before, four or five times, and it had never helped for more than a few days. And it wasn't like he had that much money left himself now. But what if he sent him his old Samsung? Tricky, because Baptiste didn't have a fixed address. But if he *took* him his old Samsung...

*You still there? 22:35*

*Thinking... 22:35*

If he took his old phone to Baptiste, then Baptiste could sell his own phone, no problem. Because he'd have the Samsung!

Ate needed to move, so he jumped up and walked, in just his boxers, over to the curtains at the front and then to the curtains at the back – carefully, so as not to trip over the clothes, schoolbooks and mugs on the floor. His mum sometimes went out into the garden to check if the light in his bedroom was actually off, so he couldn't turn on the lamp.

He couldn't leave tomorrow, but he could go on Friday – that was his mum's 'Love Day'. She left as soon as he went to school, and usually she didn't get back home until about five on the Saturday. He could go up and down to Brussels at least twice in that time, without her noticing.

Ate clicked on the international train travel planner. If he left the main railway station in Groningen at quarter past nine, he'd be at Brussels Central Station by ten past one.

He sent a message, still carefully pacing his bedroom.

*Come to Muntpunt, Fri 1.30 22:38*

Baptiste often went online at the Muntpunt library in the afternoon. Ate had already looked it up on Maps a few times. You could walk there from Brussels Central in a couple of minutes or so.

*What's there? 22:38*

*Me. 22:38*

*With a phone for you. 22:38*

His telephone said nothing and did nothing. The time changed – that was all. The screen went black, but Ate tapped it back to life. Finally a reaction from Baptiste:

:) :) :) 22:39

Footsteps on the stairs: his mum was on her way to bed! As silently as he could, Ate sprinted back to bed, bashing his toe against something hard but managing not to yelp, and slid under the covers. He was just back in bed when his mum quietly opened his bedroom door. Light from the landing fell onto the carpet.

‘Sleep tight,’ she whispered.

Sleep tight? That was a good one. How was he ever going to be able to sleep?

As his mum creaked across the floor above his head, he bought a return ticket to Brussels. Couldn’t have been easier. A couple of clicks and he had an email with a ticket attached. He’d often fantasised about buying that ticket and often fantasised about meeting Baptiste. But he’d never been seriously planning to do it. Now he was. He was going to do it. He was going to Brussels.

It was a brilliant plan, but there was just one downside: that *he* was going to have to do it. What he liked best was sitting at home with his computer, wasn’t it? Wasn’t he the boy who just went from home to school and then school to home? And now he – of all people! – was supposed to be going in secret to Brussels to take someone a phone? That really wasn’t his kind of thing, was it?

No, it wasn’t, but it had to be done. And anyway, what could possibly go wrong?

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pages 17–27

From the platform, he took the up escalator. A woman in a grey hoodie, carrying a sports bag, came and stood beside him.

‘Ate?’

He jumped. How did she know his name? He moved up a step, away from her.

She put her hood down. She wasn't actually an adult woman, he saw now, but a tall girl, with tight plaits running back across her scalp. Although 'girl' sounded too small for her. She was more than two escalator steps taller than him, because even though she was standing a step lower, he still had to look up at her.

'Yes?'

'*Attention!*' She said it in French: 'Atonshon!' She took hold of his arm and it was just as well, because otherwise he'd have stumbled over the end of the escalator. At the top, she pulled him to one side, so that people could pass. Her eyes were as black as could be.

'I've got a message from Baptiste.' Her Dutch had a Flemish sound to it.

'What is it?'

'I'll tell you soon. First we need to get away from here.' She took him by the arm again and wanted to pull him away, but he shook off her hand and stayed where he was. She was too different. Tall and female and black – everything that he was not. He didn't even know any black people, except for Baptiste, of course.

She put down her bag, laid her hands on his shoulders and looked into his eyes. In a game she would have had laser eyes that could make the skulls of her enemies explode. Boom! Splash! Brains dripping down the wall. He tried not to let her shoot his thoughts to pieces.

'Baptiste needs your help. Come with me!'

She let go of his shoulders, picked up her bag and walked off down a wide tunnel. He still didn't want to go with her. But Baptiste needed his help. He followed her down a corridor to the main concourse. What was up with Baptiste? Was it something to do with those debts of his?

Outside, next to the entrance to the station, a man was lying on a pile of filthy rags. Ate stopped. On a tatty piece of card, two words were written in black felt-tip pen: SPECIES – HUMAN. Lasergirl had walked on. He trotted after her. Maybe Baptiste was in worse trouble than he'd realised. Was he sleeping on dirty rags too?

The streets were wide, with lines of slowly moving cars, and the buildings were big blocks of beige stone. He wanted to stop for a moment and take a look at Maps to see which way they were

going, but he had no time. Lasergirl was walking so quickly that it was all he could do to keep up with her.

After about ten minutes, she slowed down and paused at a gate – by then they were in a narrow street with one-way traffic. When no one else was around, she pushed the gate open. He followed her into a neglected garden. At the end, there was a building that must once have been grand, but now just looked grubby. The high windows had been boarded up, but not very well, as Lasergirl pulled the wood away from one of the windows with no problem. She climbed inside.

She held out her hand to him. He hesitated. It was dark in there.

‘Don’t be scared,’ she said.

That didn’t help. In fact, her words made him think that maybe he *was* scared. And that, if not, then maybe being scared might be a good idea. But Baptiste needed his help. Ate took hold of her hand and climbed inside after her.

He’d been hoping she was taking him to Baptiste, but there was no one there. They were standing in a big room with a high ceiling. It was empty except for a folding chair made of orange plastic. The ceiling was decorated with those curly rosettes that are supposed to have chandeliers hanging from them, but the chandeliers were missing today. The room reminded him of an old bank building. Not that he’d ever been inside an old bank, but he’d seen them being robbed in films.

Lasergirl pulled the wood back into place, and the room instantly went dark. She lit two candles that were waiting in wine bottles on the wide window ledge. A little sunlight was coming in through the gaps in the planks, but it refused to get properly light.

She pointed at the chair.

‘Sit down.’

He took off his rucksack and sat down. She kneeled beside her sports bag and unzipped it. She was talking quietly, in a language he didn’t know, and then, with both hands, she took a chicken out of the bag, a real, live, brown chicken, which began strutting about. Lasergirl scattered a handful of corn. The chicken pecked around in circles, followed by two shadows on the floor. Two candles, two shadows – that made sense.

There was something unreal about it, the semi-darkness, the chicken with the double shadow, and the strange language that was still lingering inside his head. It was hard to imagine that the ordinary world with its ordinary daylight was so close.

Lasergirl produced a bowl from her sports bag, filled it with water from a bottle and put it down for the chicken. Then she fetched an empty crate that had been pushed up against the wall beneath the window and put it on its side, just in front of Ate. She sat down opposite him, her sneakers on either side of his sneakers. She took his hands in her hands.

He saw now that the floor was a mosaic of coloured stones.

‘Ate.’

He looked up. They looked into each other’s eyes – her on the attack, him defending.

‘I’m Baptiste,’ she said.

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Of course she wasn’t.

‘You don’t look anything like him,’ he said.

‘Not in the photos you’ve seen, no. But it was me who sent you the messages.’

She was still holding his hands, as if they were BFFs. But it felt like they might start fighting at any moment.

‘Can I have a look at your phone?’ Her WhatsApp history would prove she was lying.

‘I don’t have it with me.’

‘Why not?’

‘Check if you like!’ She stood up and put his hand first on her left jeans pocket and then on the right. There was obviously nothing in there. She turned around and was about to put his hand on her back pockets, but he didn’t want to touch her bum, so he pulled his hand away.

‘Believe me!’ She sat back down. ‘I’ve been messaging with you. For six months.’

‘So who’s the boy in the profile photos?’

‘Does that matter? He doesn’t know you. He never sent you any messages.’

She was lying. She had to be. He'd have realised if it had been her, wouldn't he?

'You like watching Geoff and Jack,' she said. 'You ordered their book before it even came out. You think Geoff sometimes deliberately lets Jack win when they're playing games, because Geoff's so much better and everyone would feel sorry for Jack otherwise.'

All of it was right. What if she was actually telling the truth? If she was Baptiste, then Baptiste didn't exist, not the Baptiste he'd imagined. If she was Baptiste, he didn't have a friend after all.

And meanwhile the girl just went on talking.

'You know the Q&As by heart. Your favourite clips are the ones where Geoff and Jack put on pigs' ears and...'

'Shut up!' He jumped to his feet and was about to give her a shove, but she saw him coming and quickly stepped back, sending the crate flying. The chicken flew off, cackling.

Calmly, she put the crate back on its side and sat down again.

'Sit down,' she said.

No way. He was leaving.

'Why?' he asked.

'Why what?'

'Why did you pretend to be Baptiste?'

'You remember in the chatroom? You answered him, not me.'

'Well, maybe there was a good reason for that! Maybe I wanted to talk to him and not to you!'

'Yes... but I had to earn money.'

Money. Now he was starting to get it. She'd pretended to be a poor, homeless, illegal immigrant boy, so that she could con some money out of him. The truth was simple: he'd been ripped off. Catfished.

He put his rucksack on, jumped up at the window and bashed the wood with his elbow. It fell to the floor with a crash. He swung one leg over the window ledge and was about to climb out when Lasergirl wrapped her arms around him from behind. He tried to struggle out of her grip, but she was much stronger than he was. She lifted him up as if he were a toddler. She carried him back, deposited him on the orange chair, took off his rucksack and put it next to the chair. Then she sat back down

across from him, took his hands and attacked him again with those bright laser eyes of hers. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and closed his eyes tight. He couldn't see her anymore and he couldn't feel her anymore, but he could still smell her. She smelled like his mother's wardrobe. Lavender. He took a hand out of his pocket and pinched his nose shut.

His life had been okay, because he'd had a friend. But it turned out that he didn't have one after all. Those smileys that Baptiste had sent? He hadn't sent them at all.

Ate didn't want to open his eyes ever again.

After a while, though, he did. He let go of his nose. Lasergirl was sitting there patiently, with her arms crossed.

'All right,' he said. 'So you're Baptiste, are you? Fine. Can I go now?'

She didn't answer at first. He started to feel uneasy. So he couldn't go?

'There's a problem,' she said.

'What?'

'I wasn't working for myself. I was working for Joseph.' She pronounced it with a zh- sound at the beginning: Zhosef. 'He knows you were coming to Brussels. I think he's looking for you. Someone's waiting for you at the Muntpunt.'

'But why? What does this... Joseph want?'

'Money.'

'I don't have any money left. And my mum's not rich either.'

She stood up. With one swift movement, she picked up the chicken and held it to her chest.

The bird disappeared almost completely in her hands.

'Oh really?' she said. 'Don't you both live in a brick house?'

What did that have to do with anything?

'Have you got electricity? The internet maybe? A full frigo?'

He wasn't going to answer stupid questions like that. And he wasn't going to ask what a frigo was either.

'Sorry,' she said. 'It doesn't matter anyway. What matters is that Joseph *thinks* you have money.'

‘Why would he think that?’

‘Because you sent him money. I didn’t even have to ask for it and – whoosh! – the money just came. A hundred, two hundred, three hundred euros, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!’

Ate still didn’t see the problem.

‘Then maybe someone’s waiting for me at the Muntpunt. But so what? I’m going back to the station.’

Lasergirl sat down opposite him on the crate again, but now with the chicken on her lap. She stroked her brown wings. The chicken seemed to approve.

‘Joseph is a gangster.’ She said the word ‘gangster’ in English. ‘He has friends here, lots of friends. Maybe they’re already on the lookout for you.’

Was there really a bunch of gangsters here in Brussels who were after him? Because of money he didn’t have? It didn’t sound very likely. And if it was true, why was she telling him? Even though he’d only thought the question, she still answered it.

‘I’ll help you. You’ll help me.’

‘How?’

‘I’ll help you to get out of Brussels. You’ll take me to the Netherlands and help me when we get there.’

He couldn’t think clearly when she looked at him with her laser eyes, so he stood up, walked away from her into the dark room and stood there, with his back towards her.

She’d been lying to him for months. She’d fooled him into thinking he had a friend. And maybe a gangster and his gangster pals were after him now – and it was all her fault. She was the last person on Earth he wanted to help.

He turned around, walked up to her and held out his hand. She lifted up the chicken a bit and held out her hand to him under the chicken. They shook hands. For the first time since he’d met her at the station, a little smile appeared on her face – an almost invisible one, admittedly, any smaller and it wouldn’t have counted as a smile.

He smiled back. She could help him as much as she wanted. But as soon as he was safely inside a train back home, he’d dump her. He couldn’t wait to get her back for her lies.

They were still shaking hands, like smiling world leaders on the TV news.

'I'm Emeraude,' she said.

Just for a second, he thought her name was pretty. Emma-road. But then he decided that he wasn't interested in her name and that he was going to do his very best to forget it.

'You already know my name.' He stopped smiling and let go of her hand.

