

Abdullah Abu Snaineh

ARMBAND
OF
BEING



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dedicated to Chapecoense Football Club and

those who fall but

never stay down

I usually try to write funny and smart acknowledgments, but I failed to do so here, so I'm just going to be honest.

Thank you Hebron University.

September 17 – 2013

I love scoring goals and I am very good at that but my new coach is always telling me to play as a winger. By ‘always’ I mean only the past few days as it was my second week at my new high school, the place where you find your first real love, or not.

It was nice to be good at a hobby in a new high school. This way I won’t be the lonely boy with neither a girlfriend nor a hobby. Rather, I will be the lonely boy without a girlfriend but with a hobby. Mine was soccer.

Soccer was one of the things I can’t remember when I started doing. All I knew was that I grew up playing it, not always with a ball though as cans and stones were enough for me. Another thing that I recalled very well was that I have never played in a position besides forward until the third day of training.

On the third day of the high school soccer team training I had to change my playing position for the first time in my life. I used to play in front my whole life but on that day something extraordinary happened as coach J.D. approached me and said, “Boy, you are good as a striker but so is he,” pointing at Jess, my friend and teammate, “but you have the prowess to play as a winger and he doesn’t.” he was still pointing at Jess. “My plan is that he scores and you help him. We need goals but to do that we need ass—” he sneezed, “Not the perfect place to stop in a sentence. Anyway, we need assists.” he continued.

I was new to the team and I didn’t want to protest despite that I was disappointed. The coach actually made sense in his point of view. Besides, the coach considering me as a player who can play well in more than one position was flattering. The thing was that I

loved scoring goals. Many considered it a matter of ego but I saw it as a matter of self-fulfillment.

“You see boy,” he began again, “possessing the ball and not scoring is like, like not finishing a sentence, like I just did minutes ago when I halted at ass. And we don’t want to stop at the ass, do we?” I would love to stop there, I thought. “No, sir,” I said. “What we are going to do is take the ball and get to the V. Do you know what the V stands for?” he asked me. “I think I do, sir.” I sheepishly answered. “So tell me!” he required. “V stands for vagina. We have the balls and we should get to... the vagina.” I unnecessarily explained. “Oh! What an exposition! But V stands for victory.” Man, was I embarrassed. “Go and practice with Jess.” the coach finally said.

September 23 - 2013

Jess told me that Mike will drive us home. Mike has been saying that he wanted to drop out of school so he can be a fulltime car mechanic. I have known Mike closely for only few months now but he and Jess were friends for years. I mean Mike and I talked many times before. Almost 76% of our talk was only exchanging greetings. On the other hand, only in the last days we got to know each other better. Moreover, he later gave me rides in his car.

His car was the thing we were going to as Jess and I were walking toward the parking lot where Mike was waiting for us. Mike was wearing black pants and a red hoodie. His car was burgundy except for the rims and the spoiler which were black. It was a Volkswagen Golf but Mike made it more appealing to the eye and noisier to the ear.

Before any word was spoken Mike had opened his car and we got in. Jess and I took the backseats. The strawberry car air freshener tree wasn't useful that day as the inside of the car smelled like rotten tomatoes eaten by a zombie and then thrown up.

"Oh, man!" exclaimed Jess.

"It's the garbage. I didn't throw it." replied Mike.

"It was nice of you to offer us a ride." I said.

"I'll give you rides and you teach me some stuff for school... to drop out of it with my head held high. Cool?" he asked me.

"Yeah, sure!" I answered.

"But first," he said, "we have to pick Martin up."

“Maybe we should throw the garbage first!” suggested Jess. “Besides,” he continued, “Why didn’t you pick him up from school?”

“He wanted to bring something to program my car navigator.”

I looked at Jess in astonishment.

“You could’ve driven him home! Tha...” I didn’t finish my suggestion as we were in front of Martin’s home.

Martin was waiting in front of a dumpster but he didn’t look like one. He actually looked so handsome and immaculately dressed. Some players spent more time taking care of their appearance than they did warming up before a match. And since they were athletes, their bodies always looked gorgeous, regardless of the faces of some players, the abs were enough to attract attention. And those who had sexy bodies and pretty

faces were cheered not only by the girls from our school but also by the girls from the other schools too. Point made that some of the players were really attractive and all, Martin looked even more handsome than these players. Mike stopped to let Martin in.

“Throw the garbage!” cried Jess.

“No!” whispered Mike. “I have to buy a catback exhaust and I don’t have much money.”

“I don’t see the correlation!” said Jess.

“Stolen parts Jess. Stolen parts.” explained Mike. He then continued, “We’re going to the Northern Bay. The garbage is just a guarantee. Just in case if the cops show up. We’re there just to throw some garbage!”

“With such smell cops won’t have a doubt!” said Martin, looking back at Jess. He saw me too but didn’t say anything.

“So you kept the garbage in your car on purpose?!” I demanded.

“You have to be careful!” said Mike. “You have to be careful.”

“I know that. Maybe we shouldn’t have accepted to get in the car in the first place!” I said.

“We?” required Mike.

“Jess and I,” I replied. Then Mike looked at Jess who looked at me and said nothing. I wanted to dodge total embarrassment so I fibbed, “Maybe we should have told our parents that we were with you. I don’t want my mother to be worried if I didn’t get to my house early.”

Why would my drunken mother worry about me being late? In truth, I always thought she wished if I didn't get back to the house on time. And there I was, fulfilling one of her wishes.

"Do you race?" I asked Mike. Both Mike and Martin had exchanged bewildered looks between them before Mike responded, "No. Do you?"

"I prefer physical sports."

"Are you good at that?" Martin asked me.

I didn't answer as Jess quickly said to Martin, "I'm the second best soccer player in this car." Mike adjusted the rearview mirror and looked at me in amazement, and Martin only shrugged. I looked at Jess and gave him a thank-you smile.

There was a huge scrapyard at the entrance of the Northern Bay. I looked if I could spot a place to throw the garbage but there wasn't and that alarmed me.

Mike slowly drove to the middle of the scrapyard and looked around.

We waited.

"It seems your man is not here!" said Jess.

"Of course he is not. It's a woman." replied Mike and then honked twice.

A middle aged woman appeared from behind a pile of scrap carrying the catback exhaust and approached us.

"What's that smell?" she asked while her fingers were closing her nostrils when she was at the car window.

“Guarantee.” said Mike and handed her the money. She gave him the catback exhaust which didn’t look like the back of a cat by the way. He nodded in appreciation and she went to where she came from, or any other place behind the big pile of scrap.

“What about the garbage?” asked Jess.

“Oh, there’s a dumpster near here somewhere. We’ll throw it there!” answered Mike.

The door was ajar when I returned to the house. It was what I expected as I’ve already seen my mother’s Buick parked outside the house. I could smell that she was drinking and smoking in the kitchen. Few steps more and I was able to *see* her doing so. My mother didn’t like to drink in front of me so she protested immediately when she saw me, “You could’ve said you were coming! Now, what should I do with this glass?” she told me, holding a glass of whiskey while sitting on

a stool and leaning on a table. Her veins were bulged on her fingers, and her nails were bitten, almost bleeding.

“You could throw it! Or pour it down the gutter.” I suggested.

She put the glass down but went on smoking. “You are late!” she said.

“For what?”

“You are late,” she raised her cigarette to her mouth. Her lips were dry, “and that’s bad my son.”

Then she told me what she had already said a thousand times, “If your father were late he wouldn’t have had that accident. He wanted to be there before you were born. He didn’t want to miss a thing.” she said. She took another drag on her cigarette and continued, “It

turned out he missed everything.” Before heading to my room I stood there silently for a moment, thinking about the contradiction of the fact that being late was bad, but that also being late would’ve saved my father.

I was born on the same day my father died, same hour even. And that is one of the three reasons I don’t celebrate my birthday: 1- already mentioned. 2- I don’t have many close friends to celebrate with. 3- Why would I celebrate getting older?

Number 3 was one of many questions I’ve been thinking about. A very recent one was, “What am I going to do in Spanish class?”

My favorite team was Spanish and I’ve always dreamed of playing for it. Supporting a Spanish club was another reason for me to learn Spanish. Being motivated to learn a new language didn’t mean it would be easy. And to be honest, learning Spanish was

hard. I pulled my course book and notebook to study, or try to. I opened the course book and oh, mi dios! I should take a shower instead, I thought.

While I was in the bathroom trying to get rid of the smell of the garbage, I heard someone honking in front of the house. At first I thought it was Mike but why would've he wanted me? Besides, that car wasn't noisy. Two minutes later I heard the front door opened then shut. When I was done I went to check who came or if my mother had left.

She did.

There was a note written on a blue note slip stuck to the fridge. It read, "I'm out. Won't be late. Love."

Then I had an idea.

Find alcohols and throw them.

For a minute, I wondered where to begin then I started thinking like an alcoholic widow who doesn't drink in front of her son and that excluded the fridge.

I looked everywhere else but I couldn't find anything. A part of me was happy that there were no drinks or cigarettes in the house but the other part told the first part that there were drinks and cigarettes but they were well hidden. However, I found a closed metal box but it was too small and too light to hide drinks in it, maybe there were only cigarettes in the box but not drinks. One thing I knew for sure was that I didn't know how to fold clothes like my mother did.

When she returned hours after sunset she headed directly to her room. Seconds later and she shouted at me, "Come here!" I went to her room knowing that she knew I've searched her room.

“What were you looking for?” she asked me while pointing to creased clothes in her closet.

I kept silent.

“I don’t suppose you need money.” she continued.

“I was looking for a dictionary... Spanish.” I lied. “I remember you had one!” I continued.

“You have the internet!” she suggested.

“I prefer paperback dictionaries. I get distracted when I use the internet.”

That was true. I usually get distracted when I’m on the internet. I open one or two tabs to look something up for school but it turns out that I open more than 30 tabs, most of them irrelevant to my research. It’s funny because it reminds me of getting to know people in my life. I have a goal and spending time with too many

people might delay me from achieving it. I see it as if people were internet browser tabs.

“Well, I have one. It’s in the second drawer.” she said.

I pretended that I was excited and all about it but she stopped me short, “It’s on top of the crumpled clothes in the second drawer.” she specified.

“I might have missed it!”

“Or not!” she accusingly said, “If your father were alive he would’ve taught you not to touch anyone else’s things.”

“If he were alive you wouldn’t drink, therefore I wouldn’t do this.” I confessed.

“Don’t touch my things again!” she ordered.

“You are my mother and I like to take good care of anything and anyone I care about!”

“Son, taking good care of someone doesn’t include lying to them.”

“Are you taking care of me? Are you taking care of yourself?!”

“I know where you are going with this so just stop!”

“Why?!”

“You’re so stubborn! Okay, I love you son! I’m willing to die for you.”

“But you are dying! My father died for me, or because of me! I don’t want anybody to die for me. I want someone who would live for me. Besides, the note slip told me that and I would really appreciate it if you act as you mean it.” I said before I walked toward the door.

There I stopped for a bit and called, “Mom!” my face in the opposite direction. “Yeah?” she responded.

“I...” I started before turning my face to see hers. She had just lit a cigarette. “I might need that dictionary.” I said before I left. I didn’t really need a dictionary to translate a language into another. What I really needed was something that was capable of changing my temper.

September 26 - 2013

“I need your help!” Mike told me while holding his lunch tray in the school cafeteria. At first I thought that he needed my help to teach him something for school but he looked so anxious, and he wasn’t a guy who bothered himself much about school so I asked, “What’s wrong?!”

“It’s Jess!”

“Where’s he?!” I worriedly asked.

He pointed with his head toward the table where Jess was sitting. We walked there and before I sat down I tried to cheer Jess up. “It’s the champ. It’s Jess. He crushes you in soccer and beats you easily in chess!”

A fact about me: I have never joined the cheerleading team, not that I wasn’t good enough, but because I

preferred to be cheered over cheering someone else up, but Jess wasn't just someone else.

"He doesn't play chess. It requires intelligence!" elucidated Mike.

We sat.

Jess sighed and said, "I might also not play soccer!"

"You had an injury?!" I asked. I was worried sick that he was really injured. An injury is the worst enemy an athlete could have and speaking from personal experience, it truly is, but it also shows who you really are and what kind of people you have in your life.

"No!" Jess answered. I waited for an explanation but Jess didn't mouth a word. "It's the coach," started Mike, "He said that if Jess gets less than C in any test he's out of the team. I suppose you know that."

“I didn’t know there were questions on the back of the paper. I didn’t!” complained Jess. “There is nothing to do to avoid this disaster!” he finished.

“Yes, there is.” said a voice. It was Martin who was walking toward us. One can easily mix up between Martin and any male model, but Martin was really clever, cleverer than to walk in front of hundreds of strange people wearing only boxers, he was even cleverer than to walk in front of familiar people while wearing only his underwear, too.

“I could hack the system and edit your score!” he casually said like hacking the system for him was as easy as scoring a goal from inside the box for me.

“He will ask the teacher.” said Jess.

“Why don’t you tell the teacher you didn’t know there were questions on the back?” asked Mike.

“Because the answers on the front don’t particularly stand in my defense!” replied Jess. “I couldn’t sleep last night thinking about this!”

“Wait!” demanded Mike, “When did you have the test?” he asked Jess.

“Yesterday, but I didn’t want you to panic.” answered Jess.

“We are not panicking.” said Martin, shifting his eyes between Mike and me. “You are!” he told Jess.

“I’m not panicking!” Jess panickingly disagreed, biting his lips.

“Panic won’t get you a good score!” I unnecessarily commented. The three of them looked at me waiting for an idea to help Jess.

I thought and thought but nothing came.

“You said you had the test yesterday?” asked Martin.

“Yes.”

“But the teacher didn’t give you your results?”

“No.”

“The tests may be in his office then!” suggested Martin.

“No.” Jess shook his head in refusal. “I saw him taking them to his car yesterday.”

“That’s it!” The idea finally came to my head. They looked at me again. “I know the teacher’s car.” I started.

“So does half of the school! It’s the most recognizable car around.” interrupted Martin.

“I know the teacher’s car and so does half of the school but what they don’t know is this...”

“And that?” interrupted Jess.

“My idea is that Jess goes to the teacher’s office just after the school ends today... to walk with him to the car. Meanwhile, I do something bad... not so bad but bad... to the car. When Jess sees the car he pretends that he’s surprised but quickly tells the teacher that a friend of his, that’s you Mike...”

“But I have to deliver a car I fixed. I have to do it at around 3:10 so I’m not sure I could make it.” interrupted Mike.

“It’s not a big deal!” I said, “Anyway, we get you the car to fix it and then you take the tests!” I told Mike.

“Sounds reasonable!” said Martin, and Jess nodded in agreement and appreciation.

At 3:02 I was at the faculty and staff parking lot but the teacher’s car wasn’t there. I waited for only few minutes for Jess before I saw him coming out of the school building alone. I waved to him. He rushed to me and worriedly started, “They said the teacher had left already!”

“But I was here and I didn’t see him!”

“Maybe he was faster than us!”

“The two of us are the fastest soccer players at school!”

“Are you sure you know his car?!”

“Yes, it’s a pink Cadillac Deville.”

It wasn't necessary to specify the manufacturer and the model of the car since it was the only pink one there. Its color was something that a lot of students laughed at, but when we noticed the pink ribbon painting on the car we felt guilty.

Guilt was one of many contradictory and mixed feelings I've had while plotting to retrieve the tests. But my feeling of obligation to help Jess was stronger.

"I'm gonna call Mike and tell him not to wait." said Jess after a while.

He put his cell phone on his ear and after wordless seconds he put the cell phone down and said, "I don't have enough credit!"

"I don't have his number. Give it to me and I'll call him." I suggested. Jess agreed and gave me Mike's

number. I called the number and put the cell phone on my ear.

“Hello?” answered Mike over the phone.

“It’s me. Jess gave me your number. Did that man take his car?”

“He did. It’s the first time I mend a pink car. When ar...?”

“What did you say?!”

“When are you going to br...”

“No, no, before that. The pink car?”

“Yeah, it’s a strange col...”

“Was it a pink Cadillac Deville?”

“Yes, it was... does the teacher wear glasses?!”

“Yes!”

“Was there a pink ribbon painting on the side of the car?”

“Yes. Was there a dent on the same side too?”

“Yes, but I fixed it. Were the tests in an envelope?”

“I don’t know. Let me ask Jess.”

I asked Jess and he told me they were.

“Yes, they were.” I told Mike.

“Ops!” he murmured.

September 27 - 2013

I was surprised to see Jess in training next day. But it was a pleasant surprise.

“It turned out that many students didn’t know there were questions on the back of the paper so the teacher gave us the grades based on the front.” he told me.

“But you said the question you’ve answered weren’t so good. What did you get?”

“C”

“I hope I can manage this in Spanish!”

“I have an excellent idea that could help you pass it easily.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

Before Jess told me his idea coach J.D. started talking, “One thing you should know about me is that I’ve worked as a stonemason for years. I told you that already but I wanted to remind you. When I was a stonemason I built houses, malls, factories, walls... and one important lesson I’ve learned while working as a stonemason is that... a wall is not made of bricks of the exact same size. A wall consists small bricks, smaller bricks, big bricks, bigger bricks than the big bricks and so on... and in this team we have talented players, we also have talented and skilful players, we have the ambitious ones... in short, you are bricks of different sizes but together... with the right cement that brings you together... you are an unbreakable wall!”

“It’s the first time someone calls me ‘brick’ and I’m not mad about it!” Jess told me.

“Are you used to being called ‘brick’?” I teasingly asked him.

“Okay, bricks,” continued the coach. “Next week is our first competitive match and today I’m appointing the team C and vice-captain. Many of you are wondering ‘what the team C is.’ Obviously it’s the team captain but what the C stands for is much more than the word captain. The letter C stands for the word *see* too. The captain should be able to see everything on and off pitch. To see, observe, feel, manage, and change. He should be an influence of positive change for the team.”

The players waited for a minute. Then the coach threw the captain armband to Jess and declared, “You are our captain, Jess.”

Jess wore the armband with the word captain inward. “I think you are wearing it wrong!” I told him.

“Wrong to who?” he responded.

Then the coach looked at Aaron Abraham and told him he was the vice-captain. “See you on match day.” finished the coach.

“Our performance must be better than C.” said Jess. “Mike’s car is not working properly. He won’t give us a ride today.” he notified me while we were on our way to the showers and dressing room.

After having a shower and changing my clothes I waited for several minutes for Jess to finish his. He used to take a long time taking a shower. Not only that, but I have never seen him use a towel. He just used to stand and wait until his skin dried out.

When he was standing I asked him again about the upside down armband but he didn’t answer. He was

still standing and doing funny moves. “What are you doing?!” I asked him.

“Sometimes it’s not about what I’m doing. It’s what I’m being, beyond the name and face.”

I wanted to change the subject so I asked him another question, “What would you... How would you be a positive factor for your team if you were five goals down?”

“Not thinking I’m going to be down.” he simply replied.

On my way to the house I remembered that Jess didn’t tell me his idea regarding the Spanish class, so I intended to send him a message about it.

My mother was sitting on the kitchen table, not drinking nor smoking. There was a pack of gum on the

table. “In a couple of years,” she started, “you’ll be legally able to control your father’s shares in the company.”

My father had founded a marketing company before he died. I had always believed that marketing companies are totally full of deception. I thought they lied to customers in order to sell them products. However, on the day of the high school soccer team tryouts, the coach told us something which changed my point of view about such companies, maybe not a change in the opposite direction but I stopped looking at them as cunning in general. The coach told us, “Only few people know the reason why people usually call me J.D., including my dearest friends. Maybe they know when it started but most of them think that the letter J stands for Jake and the D stands for Donald. The true reason behind it is that I’ve worked as a stonemason for years... always covered with dust and dirt. One day

however, there was an accident at work and I saved my co-worker. Then this worker's mom, who came right after the accident, told me I was so precious to her because I saved her son, 'more precious than a jewel.' she said. Then she looked at my dirty clothes and corrected herself, 'a jewel covered with dirt.' And you boys, some of you might be just like jewels which are covered with dirt, valuable, but not yet visible." The coach showed me that these companies might only show the real value of something, honestly.

"It's time to inherit his legacy." I said to my mother.

"No, your father's legacy to you is more than shares. Or at least, it should be."

I could see that; my father's absence turned my mother into an alcoholic, and that fact has always been a burden on my shoulders. I thought that my existence should have been a reason for my mother to quit

drinking in the same degree that my father's absence was the reason she started in the first place. And I know she has always loved me but it wasn't enough to make her stop being an avid drinker and a heavy smoker. That assured me that her love for my father was greater.

"I know, but I don't really know anything about him." I said.

"Even if I tell you how he was it won't be enough. Getting to know someone closely is almost impossible to be done by being told something about that person. It's done through personal experience with the person in question."

"I know you worry about me and that's why you stay at home, but you can do what you love or you can work if you want to!" I said after a minute of silence. I was hoping that working would help in overcoming her

ordeal. What I said made me realize that I have never asked about my mother's talents and hobbies before.

She took a piece of gum from the pack and offered it to me. "No, I'm fine." I said. She tossed the piece of gum into her mouth. She was loudly chewing and I knew her brain wasn't any calmer but the words in her mind kept unspoken.

I quietly went to my room.

There was one message in my inbox. It was from Jess:

I've forgotten to tell you how to practice languages. I write what happens to me in my native language in a notebook and then translate it into the target language. In your case, you can type what happens to you because your hand writing looks like graffiti done by a blind illiterate. This is a good way but probably what you write, or type, won't include 'my girlfriend' so here it is in Spanish: mi compañera.

“Grusies!” I replied.

“I suggest you start today!” he replied after two minutes even though he wasn’t online.

I took his advice. I grabbed a notebook and looked for something to write. Of course I wasn’t going to write every little detail in my life. After several minutes I started writing, “I love scoring goals and I am very good at that but my new coach...”

CONFESSION: I’ve edited many things after finishing writing these memoirs and this note was the last thing I’ve written in this notebook just to make clear that there wasn’t ‘my girlfriend’ here (besides the ones in Jess’s message and this confession.) Jess was right.

October 2 - 2013

Match day.

Since it was our first match you would have probably thought we would lose, or at least, make a comeback, if so, you were wrong. We trounced the other team 7-0, and I scored a perfect hat-trick.

Perfect hat-trick in soccer, aka football in more than 173 countries, is when a player scores three goals with the right foot, left foot and the head.

The head.

Mine was injured in the last minutes of the first half during which I've scored two goals with my feet. It was a high ball and when I jumped to pass it to a teammate with my head, a player from the other team challenged me to get the ball. Mid-air I thought about

the reasons that make a football player challenge another football player over a ball when the first is losing by a wide margin. Anyway, I got the ball but when I landed the other player's elbow hit my head and caused a cut in the front. It wasn't a deep cut but it required the paramedic to attend to it for the last minutes of the first half and the first minutes of the break.

When the paramedic was done with taking care of my cut the coach approached me and asked, "Does it hurt?"

"Yes!"

"Can you still play?"

"Yes!"

“Good! Jess seems sick. I might substitute him in the second half.”

I nodded.

After only few minutes of the second half Jess was taken off. He gave the captain armband to Aaron. When Jess, who was the striker in the first half, was substituted with a winger, I, who played as a winger in the first half, changed my position to play as a striker.

It was a secured win as the score was 6-0 and we were playing in the stoppage time of the match. Having scored two goals, I wanted to score the hat-trick.

I was at the center of the box when my teammate sent a high ball and I scored with my injured head. As soon as I hit the ball my scalp wound was opened again, but I’ve scored the hat-trick.

Mike and Martin were waiting for Jess and me. “It was a nice match!” started Mike.

“I didn’t know you were a soccer fan!” I replied.

“He is a soccer fan. Not.” Jess said jokingly, “He once thought that Manchester United were a band because I’ve mentioned that they had Giggs.”

I laughed.

“You can laugh as much as you want because I still don’t get it.” said Mike.

“By the way, we won today!” I said.

“I’ve seen that, you two were quite adept at handling balls.” he replied.

“Speaking about balls, Steve is throwing a party tonight.” said Martin.

“Condescending son of a bitch!” Jess aggressively said.

“He’s not condescending!” defended Martin.

“So tell me why he doesn’t attend his own parties!” demanded Jess.

“Party.” corrected Martin. “He didn’t attend his last party a month ago.”

“He had a party last month?!” I asked, full of surprise.

“His father owns a liquor store.” explained Mike.

“And Steve invites everyone and gives them drinks to promote the drinks his father sells in his store.” Martin explained Mike’s explanation.

“Promotes alcohols to minors?!” I inquired.

The three of them nodded as if they have forgotten how to say ‘yes.’

“And his father knows about it?!” I continued.

“Fake IDs.” clarified Martin.

“But this Steve is in high school, how could he possibly have an ID?!” I furiously asked.

“Don’t worry!” Jess told me, “I’ve heard that he was in juvy for some years. He’s legally old.”

“Is that supposed to comfort me?!” I asked again. I ask a lot of questions when I’m worried.

“Don’t denigrate his acts of generosity!” requested Martin.

“Martin,” I said, obviously to Martin, “You are clever!”

“And we’re stupid?!” interrupted Mike.

“The true clever man wouldn’t question his cleverness, would he?” quipped Martin.

“Guys,” said Jess, “we are not drinking anything there!”

“Do we have to go?” I asked again.

“Yes, you are a star. You have to shine.” Jess tried to convince me. “It would be a nice party with very attractive girls. Do you want to come?”

“You mean do I want to go to the party?”

“I just said that!”

“I wanted to be sure!”

“Of what?”

“That you are all going.”

“Of course! And you are coming with us tonight!”

Martin snickered. We all got into Mike’s Golf.

As soon as I fastened my seatbelt, my father’s car accident crossed my mind. I shook the idea by telling a joke, a lame one, “Why can’t a short police officer arrest a drunk driver?” I asked. The moment I was finished with telling it I remembered my mother being drunk most of the time. I also remembered my father’s death, because from all the jokes in the English language, I picked the one with the word ‘drunk’ which comes just before the word ‘driver.’ The first symbolised my mother’s affliction and the second made me remember the car accident. Furthermore, I told that joke while I was in a car heading to a party where alcohols were available for free.

“Because he doesn’t have his badge!” guessed Jess.

“Why did you suppose that the police officer was a man?” Martin asked Jess. Before Jess could reply, Mike said, “We’re here!”

Mike parked away from the house. The house looked enormous from the outside, neatly contrasted too. It seemed that someone worked long hours on designing half of the facade and then copied it and pasted it to form a full front visage to the house.

“Why was he sent to jail?” I asked before going into the house.

“He broke the law.” Martin simply answered.

Steve’s house smelled like mine as the stench of alcohol was filling it. But Steve’s was sweaty too. I was delighted that there were people I knew at the party.

One third of the people I knew told me, “I want you to meet someone.”

“Is it a girl, Jess?” I nonchalantly asked, pretending that I wasn’t interested if it was a girl. Jess answered me by introducing me to a curvy girl. I forgot how good the design of the house was when I saw her. “He scored three goals tonight. He’s the best soccer player.”

Before I said any word someone mockingly commented from feet away while walking toward us, “Uh, you are a sucker fan!” The guy was then close to the girl, holding his right hand out and carrying a plastic cup in the other, he introduced himself to her, “I’m Bill.”

I was nauseated with his interruption so I returned the blow, “The electricity bill or the gas bill?”

The girl shook her head in distaste, “Boys will be boys!” was the only thing she said before she went on alone and started chatting with another good looking guy holding a plastic cup.

A plastic cup was the thing that almost hit my face as Bill tried to punch me. (I think he was left handed.) Jess quickly dispersed us before both Mike and Martin showed up. The host came around to check if everything was under control. He was talking on the phone, “Yes, there is... the one you always buy... Okay, later!” he hung up and looked at our faces. He turned his back and returned to his guests.

Those guests avoided talking with us after the brawl (they didn’t talk with us before it too.) after few minutes we left the party. While I was standing on the porch I looked at the face of the house one last time. It

didn't seem as attractive as it looked to me before I went in earlier that night.

NIGHT! I knew I was in trouble because I was late without telling my mother. I started thinking about an alibi as soon as we left Steve's house.

The four of us were in Mike's car. Martin occupied the front seat. Jess and I took the backseats. It felt nice to breathe strawberry scented air after being in a crowded house. Mike, Martin and Jess were arguing about something. I fastened the seatbelt while thinking about a story to tell my mother when I get to the house. For a moment, I didn't worry much because she hadn't called me.

A second before Mike started the engine, I glanced my mother's Buick parking in front of Steve's house.

Worry grew in me as I knew that my mother was dealing with a person with a criminal past. I didn't know why Steve was sent to jail but I considered telling the police about his parties. However, doing this might have implicated my mother in legal problems. And with a possible, probably probable investigation my mother would have been compelled to losing her right of custody. That disturbed me a lot because I knew that she preferred not to drink when I was around, so being away from her could encourage her to drink more.

I had to find a way, or ways, to be around her more without arousing any suspicions.

“Don't worry about it. It was a boring party anyway.”
Jess told me.

Eureka!

“Guys,” I started, “tomorrow’s party is in my house.” Three pairs of eyes darted toward me, “Who’s invited?” asked Martin.

“You are.” I replied, looking at the three of them.

My idea was simple: invite my friends to my house and before their arrival I burst one of the tires of my mother’s car so she could not go out. I knew that with us around she would not drink.

“By ‘you’ you mean me, Jess and Martin?” Mike asked me while looking at the rearview mirror.

“Sure! And you might want to concentrate on the road.”

“Mike is the best driver I’ve known.” Jess comforted me.

“You know,” I started again, “Mike is a great mechanic, Martin seems brilliant with electronic devices, and Jess and I are wonderful players. I wonder what future awaits us!”

We were then driving on a street with several faulty street lights. The lights of the car lit the way in front of us.

“In hindsight, we shouldn’t have gone to the party.” suggested Jess, “We were trying to impress people whose names we barely know. At least I don’t. It’s a lesson for the future.”

“There’s no future. It’s merely constant present.” said Martin.

“A present which does not wait.” proposed Jess, “It’s our mission to find it, maybe shape it too.”

Mike looked at Jess suspiciously through the rearview mirror then said, “Why don’t you sound this smart in your tests?”

“It’s better if you keep your eyes on the road!” replied Jess.

“You said I was the best driver!” Mike instantly replied.

“I don’t know many drivers.” said Jess.

“You’ll be one in weeks.” replied Mike.

I reached the house before my mother. I waited for her to tell her that I’ve invited my friends, and to be sure if she was the one whom I saw in front of Steve’s house, possibly being one of his costumers.

I didn't wait for long until she came carrying a big, seemingly heavy paper bag. "Do you want me to carry it for you?" I quickly suggested.

"No!" she decisively replied.

I told her that I have invited my friends over. She just nodded in acceptance and headed hastily to her room.

October 3 - 2013

That day I intended to use more air freshener in the house. I didn't want it to smell of alcohol. I used the strawberry scent so that the house would smell like Mike's car, not like it smelled the first time Mike gave me a ride obviously.

I haven't known Mike and Martin for long but I liked them, and since Jess trusted them, I did too. However, Jess was the only person whom I told I trusted. I never considered the fact of confessing to just one person about my trust in them as lack of trustworthy people in my life. Rather, I saw it as a sign that I should cherish the presence of that person in my life.

The three came by Mike's car. My mother greeted them at the door then I escorted them to my room. Our grandmothers would be noisier than we were. Playing

FIFA on moderate sound volume was not a thing I mostly describe as high-schoolish. Mike and Martin just watched at the beginning.

“You wanna try?” Jess offered to Mike.

Mike inquisitively looked at Martin who shrugged his shoulders in acceptance of the offer. Mike and Martin did things in the game that I didn't know were even possible. They played unimaginably horrible. Jess and I loved that. After several minutes of playing, they both couldn't create a single scoring opportunity so they decided to turn the match into a royal rumble: the first one to get four of his players sent off wins. After the most violent match in the history of video games (not only soccer games.) Mike lost the match due to shortage of the legal number of players on the pitch, but by their rules he was the winner.

“We are sadists.” declared Martin and put the controller down.

“Being in control is crazy!” said Mike, “Another match?” he proposed to Martin who shook his head in refusal.

“Mess with the best, lose like the rest!” Mike started singing, trying to vex Martin who was unmoved by the insulting chant. Jess and I joined Mike in singing just a moment before my mother entered the room through the open door. She was wearing oven gloves and carrying a hot tray. “You sound awful!” she said, “I wanted to buy you pizza but there’s a puncture in one of the car wheels so I made you these cookies.”

We thanked her, but before she left she raised her finger and told us to wait for a minute. After a minute she came back with a Polaroid camera which I wasn’t sure I saw before, even when I searched the house for

alcohols. “Fortunately, these cameras don’t record your singing.” she said and took a picture of the four of us.

The cookies felt warm.

October 22 - 2013

“I’m taking driving lessons.” said Jess while we were sitting at a table in the school cafeteria during lunch time.

“I can get you a good deal if you want to buy a car!” Mike offered his help to Jess.

“Well, I think I will look for a cheap car.” replied Jess.

“I can get it cheaper.” said Mike, “I can also give you some lessons.”

Jess nodded his head appreciatively and said, “And I can teach you how to play soccer video games properly.”

“And who’s going to teach me?!” Martin protestingly asked.

“I will!” I offered.

“Thanks. But unfortunately I don’t have anything that I can teach you.” replied Martin.

“You can teach me how to hac...” I stopped midsentence.

“So,” Mike started again, addressing Jess. “Do you have anything after school?”

“No.” answered Jess.

“What about you guys?” asked Mike, looking at Martin and me.

“No.” we said simultaneously.

“After school it is then!” affirmed Mike. He rapped on the table and was the first one to stand up before going back to our classes.

At my geography class, which I was trying to maintain a C score at, our new lesson was about the provinces of Spain and their traditions. The teacher started with asking if one of the students could name some of the Spanish cities. I raised my hand and the teacher gave me the permission to speak. I started, “Madrid, Bilbao, Valencia, Barcelona, Gijon, Sevilla, Malaga...” The teacher was impressed, not knowing that I was only saying the names of some Spanish clubs.

“Interesting!” the teacher said, “How do you know all of that?”

“Sports.” I answered.

“Good. Actually, we are going to talk about this in this class because sport is a part of the traditions of any culture and Spain has one of the most controversial sports. Can you guess what it is?”

I raised my hand again and answered, “Bullfighting.”

“Exactly! And does anyone know how many bulls get killed each year in Spain?”

I raised my hand again. I was the only student who knew the answer. The teacher nodded at me. “About seventy thousand.” I said. Several students showed surprise and resentment.

“Why don’t they stop it?!” a student asked, bewildered by the fact that people still practice such traditions.

“Some regions illegalized bullfighting.” clarified the teacher.

“It’s not a matter of law. It’s a matter of humanity.” another student gave her opinion.

“So why didn’t people stop it?” asked the teacher, “It’s wrong, obviously, but why didn’t they stop it?”

There was silence in the classroom.

I thought about my mother and why she didn't stop drinking. She knew it was wrong but she drank anyway. In my point of view, matadors and bullfighting fans, and on the other hand, my mother, didn't stop what they were doing for the same reason.

I raised my hand.

“You may answer!” the teacher told me.

“Maybe... they are afraid of change!” I loudly assumed.

I was the first one to wait for the others. I sent my mother a text message telling her that I was going to be late. I was next to Mike's car when three girls walked in front of me. One of them commented under her breath, “Nice car!”

Final score: (Mike's car: 1 – Me: 0)

Mike came after two or three minutes. And only a minute later we saw Martin and Jess walking together toward us. Mike opened his car. I sat in the backseat. When Jess and Martin were close to the car, Mike told Jess, “Maybe you want to sit in front!”

Jess put his backpack in the backseat and sat in the passenger seat in front. Martin sat beside me at the back.

“Smells good!” said Jess, pointing at the strawberry air freshener tree.” “It does!” I said, “Not like the first time you gave me a ride!” I told Mike. “It was worth it,” defended Mike, “Because that catback exhaust is amazing!”

Mike started the engine.

“Where are you going to give me these lessons?” Jess asked Mike.

“On a barren piece of land. Not asphalt but it’s big and safe.” replied Mike.

“Do you go there often?” I asked Mike.

“Not really!” he answered.

“Is it far?” Jess asked Mike.

“Kind of,” said Mike, “It’s in the suburbs.”

“I wonder how you found that place!” said Jess.

“I didn’t. Someone told me about it.” explained Mike.

Martin was busy with one of his cell phones. Jess and Mike kept talking and I was looking at the buildings as Mike was driving. The buildings varied in size. Mike then accelerated as the traffic was lighter. The facades

of the houses seemed as they were running in a blurry line in front of me. Following the edges of the roofs of the houses reminded me of electrocardiogram.

“Alive!” I murmured, looking outside the car through the car window. “What?!” asked Martin.

“It’s the differences that make us alive. Monotony on the other hand...” I had said before Martin interrupted me, “Who are you talking to?!”

I looked at him. He was holding a cell phone with both of his hands. “Were you talking to me?” he asked again.

“No, never mind!” I replied and turned my eyes to the streets again. The streets then looked familiar to me.

“I think I know this place!” said Jess.

I looked at him but he didn't see me looking at him because he was sitting in front and I was looking at the back of his head in which he didn't have eyes to see me.

"Jess!" I said, "I think I remember this place too!"

"We're seconds away." said Mike, "It's on our left..."

"It's on your right!" Jess corrected Mike.

I looked to my right but several houses blocked my sight. After seconds I saw it.

It was an old soccer stadium. The goals were netless and the concrete bleachers were filled with cracks. There were patches of yellowish grass at the four corners of the field but the rest was soil with tire prints on. The scoreboard was covered with a huge banner that read, "For a green and prosperous city, elect Eric

Fligmann.” Beside it was a worn our billboard with faint words, ‘Go for it!’

“We played here!” Jess said nostalgically as he was standing on the place where used to be a touchline.

“We both scored.” I reminded Jess, who was then walking toward the center of the field. He looked at the left goal and said, “I scored a goal from here. I still can’t believe I had the strength to kick the ball this far! I just saw the ‘Go for it!’ billboard and I did.”

“It’s not a big stadium.” said Mike.

“It was then.” said Jess, “To us, it was gigantic. We were losing by one goal and there were only minutes left. At the start of the match our formation was four-four-two, but in the last minutes we inverted the formation. We played two-four-four-four...”

“That’s fourteen players! Maybe you mean two-four-four!” said Mike.

“I’m not good at arithmetic, but I felt we played like we were fifteen players, you forgot to count the goalkeeper, and we won. It was an inspiring rise in our performance. I scored the equalizer.” replied Jess before looking at me and asking, “Do you remember your goal?”

I stood beside Jess at the center of the pitch and said, “It was the winning goal. I was here when I received the ball. I wanted to score it from where you did but it was a long shot, especially that their goalkeeper was standing only a couple of yards away from the goal line. He learned his lesson.” then I moved closer to the goal, “Here I passed the first opponent player.” I took few steps more toward the goal, “Here I passed two defenders with one trick. The crowd stood on their feet.

My colleagues shouted at me to pass the ball, instead, I passed the last defender and it was only me and the goalkeeper then.” I was standing close to the goal then. “How did you score?!” Martin asked me, yelling as he was at midfield, still holding a cell phone. “Brilliantly!” I answered.

Mike returned to his car and drove it onto the pitch close to Jess. He got out again and asked Jess, “When do you want to start?”

“It’s so sad.” said Jess, looking at remaining threads of a net of one of the goals dangling from the crossbar.

“Now we have bigger stadiums.” said Martin.

“I know. It’s just the few good moments I had here that tie me to this place.” replied Jess.

“If you really liked this place, why haven’t you come here before?” asked Mike.

“I don’t know.” answered Jess.

“Or are you starting to like it because it’s abandoned now?!”

“I’m not sure!” said Jess, “But I’m sure I don’t want to drive here. Sorry!” he finished. He then walked to Mike’s car.

We silently followed him.

I entered the house quietly. I heard some music coming out of my mother’s room, a male voice was singing along with guitar music, “...*If I don’t get it now*

I’ll chase it forever...

till it’s mine...

till it's mine."

The voice was little off at some points but it sounded warm. I didn't want to disturb my mother and I wasn't ready to face the possibility that she was drinking so I just got closer to the room quietly. I could then recognize the voice. It was my father's. I have seen some videos of him, and in two or three he was singing, and sometimes the songs were original. He played the guitar too. Truth be told, I have always believed his playing was better than his singing. Nevertheless, his voice was tender. After I've recognized that it was him who was singing, I thought that my mother wouldn't drink in his presence, at least the presence of his voice. Still, I didn't want to go into the room so I just moved away from it and said, "I'm here!" The song immediately stopped playing. I headed to my room.

When I took my shoes and socks off I saw some soil stuck on my black socks. I prefer black socks or dark colors in general because they don't get dirty very quickly. Anyway, I took the socks to the washing machine but on the way there my mother called me from the hallway, "Honey! I'm out! I won't be late!"

At least he didn't honk, I thought.

My second thought was to conduct another raid searching for drinks. I thought about that for more than nine seconds. Finally, I've decided to only look for alcohol but not thoroughly search for it.

The first thing that I saw when I entered my mother's room was the small metal box. The cover was on the bed sheet. From the first time I knew it wouldn't have contained alcohols as it was very light.

I looked into the box and all I saw were prizes and certificates of appreciation won by mother in several photography contests. Her last name on the certificates has changed as she had won some of them before marriage and others after. The last prize was dated one year before my birth. The prizes reminded me of the Polaroid camera which my mother has taken a picture of my friends and me with. I carefully looked for the camera in her room, considering that I might not find it because I had searched the room before and didn't see it. Then I figured out that the camera also might have been in the box before. The camera wasn't too heavy. "Maybe she put it somewhere else after she had taken the photo!" I thought loudly.

I didn't have time for other clear thoughts as I heard a car stopping in front of the house. I quickly closed the metal box and hurried out of the room. In the hallway I remembered that the box didn't have the cover on

when I entered the room. “Oh (insert the F word here.)” I murmured as the door handle was being moved.

My coaches have always praised my speed and agility, and then was a time I really needed them. Alas, my feet were fast but my brain wasn't. The seconds I consumed to think about going back to my mother's room were enough for her to open the door.

My mother entered the house.

I returned to my room hoping that my mother wouldn't notice that I closed the box. Minutes later and my mother called me. I carried a book and went to her room.

“What are you reading?” she asked.

“A book.”

“Ah, I noticed.”

Okay, okay, say what you need to say fast, I thought.

“I just wanted to ask you,” she started, “if you’re hungry!”

I waited for seconds so she could reprimand me but nothing came.

“So?” she asked.

“No, no. I’m not hungry.” I nervously said.

She gave me a look, a look that a mother gives her son when he discretely searches her room for liquor and finds an open metal box and when he leaves the room he closes the box making it obvious that someone has touched it.

“Okay, good night!” she said.

“Good night!”

I went back to my room.

October 23 - 2013

The next morning I woke up and did what I do every morning: look for a matching pair of socks. That morning it took me longer than usual. I finally found one sock under the bed and held it with my left hand. After four or five minutes I found the other sock crumbled inside one of my shoes. As I held the second sock with my right hand three questions occurred to me:

- 1- Is it necessary for a couple of people to be like socks regarding being the same to be fine to be together?
- 2- Is it necessary for people to be like socks regarding being stinky sometimes?
- 3- Am I late for school?

At school which I wasn't late for that day, I wished that the school ended at 12 pm.

"I wish the school ends at 12." I said at break.

"Why?" asked Mike.

"There's an important match that we would like to see." explained Jess, interrupting.

"And they're playing now?!" asked Mike again.

"It's in few hours. It would be evening in Spain." I said.

"Are you going to see it in El Mejor Café and Bar?" Jess asked me.

"Yes, but we should hurry!"

"I don't know where it is." said Mike.

“I know!” said Jess.

“After school,” Mike told Jess, “you’re driving us.”

Just right after school I sent my mother a message telling her that I would be late for two or three hours. I was glad that there was 6% charge left in the battery.

Jess drove us accidentlessly to El Mejor where the café bouncer stood in front of us and said with harsh voice, “No teens allowed.”

“But we always watch big matches here!” protested Jess.

“But not the ones that are played early.” I corrected.

“No teens allowed.” the bouncer repeated himself.

“We’re here for the match, not the drinks. I swear.” said Jess.

“I risked my life just to come here!” I begged.

The man didn’t seem to let us in so we went away.

“Maybe we should wait across the street. Maybe he’ll go away. Or better yet, maybe you should forget about this... it’s just a game.” suggested Martin who was uninterested in the match.

That café was the only place that aired the match in the vicinity so we tried our luck. We waited in Mike’s car across the street with our eyes fixed on the big guy. Martin started to get irritated so he blurted, “I hope they lose!” “Which side?” asked Jess. “Both sides!” replied Martin.

Several minutes later we all were surprised to see the mayor, who was running for a second term entering the café.

Jess and I sat silently, saddened by the fact that we weren't going to watch the match.

Martin heaved a sigh and asked me, "Is your internet connection fast?"

I instantly knew what he was going to do.

"You drive!" Mike told Jess.

Jess, not wanting to miss much of the match, drove recklessly to get to my house fast.

"Jess, you shifted to fourth gear early this time." mentored Mike, "Wait for the perfect time before shifting to the fifth!"

"Wait, what?! Fifth?!" cried Martin. Both Jess and Mike ignored him entirely.

The tires of the Golf skidded for several yards before it completely stopped in front of the house. I rushed through the door of the house and my friends followed me.

My mother welcomed us, while she was drinking whiskey, right from the bottle.

“Oh. Hi!” she greeted us, she was still tipsy yet.

“Hey!” Jess greeted back after seconds of awkward silence.

No warm cookies were given to us while we watched the match.

“It’s late. We should go.” said Jess right after the referee blew the final whistle.

I escorted them to the door of the house. When they left I returned inside, a bit worried because I haven’t seen

or even heard my mother. I looked in every room and also yelled but no one responded. I ran to the street to see if her car was there.

It wasn't.

I quickly returned to my room to call her. I looked for my phone for a minute before I remembered that it was in my pocket the whole time. Little did I know that my cell phone battery was dead.

My first thought was that she went to Steve's to buy drinks. Before I got out of the house there was knocking on the door. I opened it as soon as I reached it. There were two police officers at the door. My heart started beating even faster than it was before I answered. Two police officers at the door of your house, minutes after finding out that your mother was driving under the influence of alcohol, was ominous

enough for me to worriedly ask the police, “How is she?!”

“She’s alright. She’s not even at the hospital! She just drove over a lawn and hit a hydrant.” said one of the officers.

“Where’s she now?!”

“At the police station.”

That moment was the biggest disappointment in my life. Disappointments are worse when they are caused by the people who should be your role models. But I was not only disappointed in my mother but also with myself; for I wasn’t an acceptable reason for my mother to stop drinking.

“She wants to see you.” said the same police officer.

I checked my pockets for the house keys but I didn't find them.

“Let me get the keys first!” I said.

“Take your time!”

I went back to my room and brought the keys. I locked the door and went with the police.

I didn't ask them where the accident has happened but I tried to see if the accident scene was in our way. I didn't see where the accident has taken place but the thing that caused it was clear all along and I didn't do much to change it.

The police officer that had spoken with me in front of the door of my house ushered me to an office when we reached the police station, “She's expecting you!” said the officer.

The few steps between the office door and where I was standing felt like miles. Many things popped up in my mind to say to my mother, from nice things like, “Oh. Mom! I’m glad you are fine!” to resentful things such as, “I wish you were the one who died in the accident, not my father!”

I said none.

“Hey!” started my mother who was sitting on a chair, a metal table between us, “Did your team win the match today?”

“Yes. 2-1” I replied while I was standing.

“Do you want to stay standing?” she asked.

I sat.

“So,” she started again, “I’m facing trial.”

If my mother went to prison that meant I should stay with someone old. I didn't really like anyone whom I could stay with.

"But," she auspiciously said, "the complainant said he was willing to drop the charge." she stopped.

"If...?"

"If I immediately go to a rehabilitation center."

"And?"

"And... I'm about forty minutes sober. It shouldn't be that hard."

"For how long?"

"They said about a month. You can visit me of course, to interrogate me, obviously!"

"It would be the best for you."

“I want the best for us. I promise!”

She reached her hand out over the metal table and caught mine.

“I promise!” she said again.

Her promise sounded sincere.

“Where do I stay during this month?” I asked again.

She roamed her eyes. “Okay, detective,” she teased me then she looked right and left and lowered her voice, “Home.” still holding my hands.

“It wouldn’t be home without you, mom!”

She smiled and took my hands and kissed them.

“See you soon!” she said.

I left.

I honestly thought that I was going to stay under the guardianship of some of my relatives during my mom's rehabilitation period, but not being forced to be in that position was a relief.

October 24 - 2013

It was advisable not to visit my mother in the first week, but only on the second day of her rehabilitation program she sent someone to check on me. I was studying in my room when I heard knocking on the house door. The knocks of the police came back to my mind. "I have to fix the doorbell!" I told myself and headed to answer the door. It was a woman whom I straightaway recognized as one of my mother's friends. I opened the door.

"Good morning!" she started.

"Good morning ma'am."

"Your mother asked me to drive by and see if you need anything. She is still worried and wants someone to see if you were alright."

“Thanks, but I’m really fine!”

“Well,” she said after a pause, “your mother is a good woman... I’ve been going out with her lately and...”

So that woman was the one whom my mother went out with recently, I thought, feeling ashamed to think ill of my mother.

“If you need anything just say. Don’t be shy. Well, shyness is a virtue but not in this situation.” she said. I responded with a grateful nod.

“Take care of yourself.” she finally said.

October 28 - 2013

One of the myriad problems I faced when I was home alone was the disgusting food I usually had. We were having such food in the school cafeteria when Jess started, “I might get my driving licence tomorrow.”

“I’ll miss our rides together... the four of us.” said Martin.

“But you are always on your phones!” protested Mike.

“And that’s not all,” Jess dramatically added, “my father offered to pay half of the price of the car if I hang some pictures supporting Omar Martinez on the car.”

Everyone looked at Jess waiting for an explanation.

“Well, my father supports him.” he sort of explained.

“So? Is he an athlete or what?” asked Mike.

“What?! Are you living under a rock? Don’t you live in this city? He’s running for the mayoral seat!” clarified Jess.

“Yeah! Every high school student must know about the elections.” mocked Mike.

“I know what verbal irony is.” said Jess indignantly.

“Sorry! I’ll compensate this for you by finding you a cheap car.” responded Mike.

“Don’t be such drama queens!” said Martin to Jess and Mike. “More like drama kings,” I said, “because they are males.” I explained.

“Wow! I did not understand that before you explained it!” said Mike.

“Jess is not the only one here who knows what verbal irony is.” I told Mike.

“I would’ve bought you a car if you could drive,” Mike told me, “but I could buy you something else.”

“You can buy him a lollipop... because he sucks!” said Jess.

“That’s a good one!” I admitted.

“That’s the sportsmanship I like!” Jess praised me.
“You can start looking for a car today.” Jess said to Mike before we left to our classes.

October 31 - 2013

I didn't visit my mother until the ninth day of her rehabilitation program at the center. My friends were very supportive. They usually came to my house and spent some time, a lot of time actually, like, really, really a lot of time. The time they spent with me in my house was even enough for Mike and Martin to learn how to play FIFA properly. Jess also celebrated his success in the driving test at my place.

On the ninth day of my mother's rehabilitation program, which was the first time I visited my mother at the center, I had a feeling that I have abandoned my friends when they wanted to go to buy Jess a car. I wished I could be at the two places at the same time. Visiting hours were specified and not many. The car dealer who sold Jess the car also had other matters to take care of so she told them to meet her at the same

time I went to visit my mother. I was then happy that Jess got a working cheap car.

Jess sent me a text message before I went to the rehabilitation center.

I can drive you to your home after visiting your mother. If that's ok, call me 20 minutes before you leave the center.

My mother and I sat outdoors. The rehabilitation center had a vast garden filled with trees and flowers. There were several tables haphazardly placed in the garden. We sat at one of them.

Only two or three minutes later, a young guy came to the table and gave my mother a cup of tea. He asked me if I wanted anything, "No, thank you." I coyly replied.

"I think you would like to try the tea here!" suggested my mother.

“It’s okay. Thanks anyway.” I told the guy who nodded with a smile and then went away.

“You could’ve tried it.” said my mother while infusing the tea bag in her cup. Her nails were well trimmed.

“I’m not a tea guy.” I said.

“So you are a coffee guy? I’ve never seen you drinking coffee!”

“Well, I’m... a cup guy.”

She squinted for a while then said, “Oh. I get it! Because you win a lot of cups.”

I nodded my head, smiling.

She finally put the tea bag in an ashtray beside the cup and said, “Many things are like a cup of tea.”

I didn't think much of what she has said. However, it was a change to see her using the ashtray for something besides stubbing out cigarettes so I just guessed, "Hot?"

"No, I didn't say that the girls you wouldn't dare talk to are like a cup of tea."

"Thanks for the encouragement."

"You are welcome. Anyway, it's the tea bag."

"But it's not hot!"

She looked at the tea bag in the ashtray, steam coming out of it.

"Okay, it's hot." I changed my mind.

"It's the time you infuse it in the cup."

"So if you put it for a long time it would become hot?"

“No, the cup of tea would become impotable.”

I could never argue with my mother about drinks so I asked for an explanation.

“How’s that? I’m not sure I’m following!” I said.

“It’s the balance, you know? You put it for only a second and the cup would be just hot water, and if you stir the tea bag in the cup for minutes you would not be able to drink it. It’s the balance.” she hurriedly said, probably trying to avoid any interruptions. She continued, “I drank because I was sad... too sad. I put the tea bag longer than accepted.”

I processed what she had said for a moment then got it. “You should drink coffee!” I said. Well, obviously I did not get it immediately but I did, eventually.

The same guy came back and whispered something in my mother's ear. He got away after only two seconds.

“Well, this was painfully fun... I can't believe I'm this strong!” she cheerfully said.

“You are!”

“I am! I gave birth to a brick and still intact!”

“Being a brick is not so bad.” I remembered what the coach had told us, “I think I should call Jess... to pick me up!”

“I thought his name was Mike!”

“Jess got a car.”

“That's nice. Maybe one day you'll get one. But be careful on the road.” she finally said, less cheerfully.

“Bye!”

I waited for Jess on the street for about ten minutes. I intended to call him, but then I spotted an old car with pictures and electoral slogans supporting a politician on it. If I were running for a political position I would hang pictures of my opposition on such car, not my pictures. The car didn't have a specific color, unless rust was an actual color. The weight of the car might have changed if the car moved for a hundred yards as some of its parts fell off to the asphalt.

I wondered if he actually meant to go to school in that car or not. Anyway, at that moment, I was glad that he bought it, but only then.

He stopped in front of me and started, "Don't say anything. I'm happy I got it."

"For how much?" I asked before I got into the car for the first time, and the last.

The sun touched the horizon and the sky was getting darker. Jess drove away from the center without answering my question. As we were on the road we saw a police car. “Hey,” he said, “you remember that riddle? The one about the cop and the pothead.”

It took me a moment to recall it, “What about it?”

“Why can’t the officer arrest the man?”

“The *short* officer,” I emphasized.

“Yeah, why?”

“Because the man is high.”

He didn’t get it. He looked at me.

“Look at the road. The night has fallen.” I said while I was looking at him.

When we looked at the road there was a big truck at the end of it.

In a blink of an eye there was light.

Then it was dark.

November 1 - 2013

It wasn't a good sign to wake up seeing the ceiling of a hospital room and hearing the beeping of the heart rate monitor and feeling many tubes attached to your body.

The first thought that came to my mind was my father's accident and how it affected my mother. Would she go back to drinking? I thought. However, the first thing I said was, "Jess!" in a frail voice.

From the moment I said his name until I had a response I thought of the series of events that led to the accident: if I didn't visit my mother he wouldn't have given me a ride, thus, not being a part of the accident. But if my mother had not been an alcoholic she wouldn't have needed to go to the rehabilitation center in the first place. Another person I thought about was Mike who encouraged Jess to drive, and Jess's father too. I could

trace the people and the incidents that led to the accident back to the creation of the Earth. Nevertheless, it was impossible to judge actions regardless of the intentions of the doer.

“He is in another room.” a doctor finally said, “It’s good to have you back!”

“Did my mother come to see me?” I asked.

“Of course, she was here this morning.”

I felt agony in every part of my body, and mind.

“We will give her a call.” finished the doctor then left the room.

I tried to look to my right and left but my neck didn’t move. It just hurt. I looked at the ceiling for a couple of seconds before I went to sleep again. My eyelids ached me as they closed.

I woke up about an hour later when I heard my mother gasping, “Is he in a coma?!”

“No, I’m not.” I feebly answered with closed eyes.

“It’s not safe to hug you.”

I opened my eyes and I saw that her face was pale again. I hoped it was only because she was worried.

“Well,” said mom and stopped for a while. I was certain that what would follow wouldn’t be desirable to hear. I looked for missing parts in my body but the pain in every inch of me consoled me a bit. There were no missing parts.

“We might have to implant metal rods in your leg. Sorry!” she said.

“But you will be able to walk soon!” the doctor quickly said after my mother had finished her sentence. After a

minute of silence the doctor addressed my mother, “If you need anything I’m in the corridor.”

The doctor left but I kept silent.

In less than 24 hours the situation has turned 180 degrees, a day prior I was visiting my mother but after less than a day she was at the hospital to visit me.

I thought about my injury and the upcoming surgery. Then I hoped I would be too young or too weak to undergo such an operation. Either case I believed that my leg wouldn’t be as it was before the crash. To a football player, a good leg is unsubstitutable.

I prayed that my mother would not have to infuse the tea bag for long this time, especially that she was recovering from the first time she did.

“Do you go back to the center when you leave me?” I asked her after a while.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. Anyway, your teammates came to visit...”

“Really?! Where are they? Let them in!”

“They came... this morning, but visiting wasn’t allowed at that hour.”

“It wasn’t allowed to visit me because of the time or my condition?”

My mother sighed and said, “You are here! Capable of talking... and thinking...”

“Am I capable of playing football?!”

She kept silent for a while then said, “You will be!”

“What about Jess?” I said about a minute later.

My mother looked away and replied, “I didn’t see him!”

“People don’t lie to people they care about.”

“You should try to relax!”

“Relax!” I howled, “How can I relax?”

The doctor quickly came back into the room after he’d heard me. “Is there something wrong?” he asked my mother.

“No.” she said.

“Well, there is something wrong!” I protested.

The doctor and my mother looked at me for a moment.

“What about Jess?” I huffily asked.

“Here, we protect the doctor-patient confidentiality.”
said the doctor.

“He’s my friend. I have to know!”

“I’m sorry but it is confidential.” insisted the doctor.

“He’s my team captain!”

“He’s still in a coma.” my mother finally said and that
displeased the doctor.

“You should rest for the surgery,” my mother advised
me, “and don’t worry about school, I talked to the
principal and...”

The doctor left the room again.

“How long will I have to stay here?” I asked.

“After the surgery... about two weeks.”

“Here?!”

She nodded approvingly.

“And after that?”

“You’ll have to stay at home for a while... by then I would have finished my rehabilitation program.”

The ramifications of the surgery were disappointingly unbearable. The worst thing was that I was certain I would not become a professional football player.

November 18 - 2013

19 days after the accident I moved back home. By then mom had just finished her rehabilitation program, Jess was still in a coma. I had to stay for another month at home without walking solely on my feet. My house smelled of broken dreams, but on the bright side, it didn't smell of alcohol.

November 25 - 2013

Talking about sides, my teammates and the coach were on mine when they visited me at my home. It was nice being with the team again. At that moment I was also disheartened because: 1- I believed I wouldn't be with the team on the pitch again and 2- it wouldn't be the whole team without Jess.

The circumstances made me pragmatic. Being unable to pursue my dream in becoming a football player shifted my attention to studying. I had piles of books to read and summarize. After all, I was the one who would be responsible for the company my father founded.

At first I was not sure that studying alone would be sufficient to becoming adept enough to manage the company, for marketing was something I thought I

would not excel at. Being the head of a marketing company meant that I had to have the talent of persuasion and I simply didn't. However, I became an avid reader during the time I was under physiotherapy.

Aaron held one of the books that were scattered on the side of my bed and said, "What's this?! The Catcher in th... I'm telling you, this is bad for your eyes."

"This book is old actually and I'll make sure that I eat as much carrots as possible!" I replied.

"Are you going back to the team soon?" he said after a while.

"I don't know!" I fibbed. The letters i, d, o, n, t, k, w and the apostrophe were not particularly honest in my reply to Aaron's question.

"We are waiting!" he said.

“I really miss the matches!” that reply was totally honest.

“The matches miss you too!”

“I miss Jess too!”

“We all do!”

December 6 - 2013

Days have passed but Jess was still unconscious. The doctor told me that I would be able to move my legs more within days. Would I be able to dribble the ball for 50 yards and then hit the corner of the goal? I thought to ask. Alas, the answer didn't even require thinking because it was crystal clear that I would not.

December 13 - 2013

It turned out that I was still able to score goals but only in FIFA. While Mike, Martin and I were playing FIFA in my room, my mom brought us fresh cookies. Martin and Mike munched on some cookies but I just clung to the controller. They both looked at me. Martin started, “We all...” he stopped short.

“Tomorrow’s your birthday!” Mike tried to cheer me up.

“It’s my father’s death anniversary too!” I replied.

They looked at each other for a moment.

“Is there something?!” I asked, prepared to hear all possibilities from Jess’s death to his awaking.

Jess’s death was expected more than he would wake up from the coma so there was no reason to delay such

news from me. Besides, they wouldn't have eaten the cookies the way they did if Jess was actually dead.

"He woke up yesterday morning!" Mike finally said.

"Did you see him?" I asked.

"We did... for about half a minute... but we didn't speak." said Martin.

"Did he say anything?" I asked again.

"We didn't speak... but a nurse told him you were fine!" said Martin again.

"Am I?!" I asked, and in retrospect, it was arrogant and selfish of me, "Sorry!" I finished.

"It's okay." they both replied.

I looked at Martin then at Mike. Martin also looked at Mike while I was still looking at Mike.

We looked.

We looked for a long time.

Finally, Mike spoke, “Is there something?”

Martin and I nodded our heads positively.

Mike pointed at his face and asked, “What is it? Some cookie crumbs?”

Mike’s deductive reasoning ability at that moment was not better than my skill at football then. But at least his driving skills were fine as he safely drove us to the hospital where Jess was.

Mom didn’t need to know.

Time is a valuable thing so I brought a book along. Nevertheless, I haven’t read much as we kept talking.

“But you know,” started Martin. He was addressing me, “He’s very...” he finished with a long sigh.

“He’s a very good person!” added Mike.

“I’m happy I got to know you guys!” I said.

“We are too!” said Martin.

“You don’t need to tell him.” Mike told Martin, “He can count.”

I used the skill of counting to count the tiles of the hospital from the entrance right to the room where Jess was staying in. I couldn’t comprehend a word of what I’ve read as I was thinking about seeing Jess for the first time in a while. Instead of reading, I just counted the checkered tiles.

The book was in my lap. Mike was pushing my wheelchair. Steps away from the room Martin put his

hand on Mike's shoulder and said, "Maybe we should let him go there alone!"

I curiously looked at Martin. "You were with him... maybe you have something to talk about." he explained.

I nodded in acceptance and pushed the wheels myself.

Jess looked as he was expecting me. I found it extraordinary that there was no one visiting him then. "I can't turn my neck over to see you." he said as I was in the wheelchair. I wished I could stand so he could be able to see me.

People usually wish that they had the superpower of being invisible but then I realized that the true superpower was to be noticed.

I drew closer to his side and didn't stop until the rim of my wheelchair hit the side of his bed. He slid his bruised hand and felt my hands curled over the book in my lap.

“Is that a book?!” he asked, surprised.

“It is!”

“What is it about? What is it called?”

“Advertising: A Very Short Introduction.”

He halted for a minute. I wasn't sure if it was because he was arranging his baffled thoughts or only because he was physically incapable of talking seamlessly.

“I thought it was about soccer.” he continued.

“I’m concentrating on studying now. I’m doing the school tests from home... and I’m reading more books than necessary for school.”

“I hope you still get grades better than C!”

“It doesn’t matter now, not for *that* reason at least.” I stressed.

“Have you lost a leg?!”

I didn’t answer immediately. “Who wants to have a... maimed player?!” I said after a pause.

“These scars prove you are not done! You are not finished! You have survived for a reason!”

I held the book high enough for him to see it and asserted, “I know!”

“What about football?”

“It is still my favorite hobby.”

He didn't say anything. I wanted the conversation to go on. I said, “I will be a successful businessman.”

“You know,” he said and stopped for a couple of seconds, “I have never known what ‘successful’ meant!”

“It means,” I looked for the appropriate words, “it means that someone is as good at what they are doing as you are being a captain.”

He laughed hard but stopped within a second as he was coughing a lot.

“It's true. Not!” he ironically said. He continued with the same tone, “It's obvious that I encouraged you to go pro.”

“You taught me... us... to keep going,” I showed him the book again, “and it’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“Are you?!”

“I am! It’s your turn to get well and return to the team. They need their captain. We need you. You made us believe!”

He kept silent for a minute. He was licking his dry lips before he asked me, “Do you want to know why I used to wear the captain armband upside down?”

“I have asked you many times to tell me that.”

He coughed for seconds before starting, “I used to do so... the word ‘captain’ to the inside because... that way I felt it was addressed to me. That way I believed I was a captain... a leader. There’s no point in people seeing you being the captain without *you* seeing that...”

and believing it too. And I have... I have always believed. And now... on this bed, I believe that you can... have a football under your foot and a... and a book in your hand. I have always been a believer that you can make it, and still do, my friend... I have always believed but... have you?"

A difference between playing sports video games and practicing sports in real world is the dressing rooms. There I knew that a good coach is the one who knows the game well, and a great coach is the one who knows the players well too. There, too, I knew that Jess was going to be my best captain, and friend.

I thought about the conversation we were having and I found it contradictory that he emboldened me but didn't say anything about himself returning to the pitch.

There was a long silence. A nurse stood by the door and told me, “I’m sorry but the doctor is coming...”

I understood that my visit was over.

I looked at Jess for a second and searched for something to say but didn’t find anything.

“Just in case,” he said, “happy birthday!”

Jess has always sent a happy birthday wish at 12:01 am, and one time, at 12:03. However, saying that a day earlier didn’t comfort me at all, not to mention that the wish was preceded with ‘just in case.’

The nurse helped me in pushing the wheelchair but she didn’t help with pushing away the negative thoughts that were running in my head.

At the door I saw the doctor, and with him I saw that my negative thoughts were predictions, devastatingly accurate predictions.

March 28 - 2014

It was my first competitive match since the crash. The first half ended while we were two goals down. I watched the first half from the bench. During the first minutes of the second half, Aaron had his ankle sprained. He screamed painfully while hitting the grass of the pitch with his fist. The coach came close to me, “We need you. We need someone in their box.”

I warmed up quickly and stood at the touchline waiting for Aaron, who was leaping. Aaron was out of the game but his team wasn't and he made sure he would help the team win with any possible way. With a sprained ankle he helped by not wasting any second of the match as he leaped out of the pitch without delay. It was then clearer than ever, it was a matter of team-fulfilment all along.

At the touchline he took the captain armband off and put it on my arm. I immediately took it off. Aaron doubtfully looked at me before I put it back on again, ‘captain’ on the inside.

There were 40 minutes left to the final whistle and we had to score three goals without conceding any. We started a planned attack from the right wing. I swiftly rushed into the box as I saw our right wing player about to cross the ball. When he did I jumped higher than the two defenders surrounding me. The trajectory of the ball was as I wanted. I raised my head and saw the ‘Go for it!’ billboard and then the ball was perfectly positioned in front of my head.

Goal!

We weren’t only fighting to win. We were fighters. I hurried into the net and carried the ball. I looked at the spectators. My mom was taking pictures with one of

her cameras. Mike and Martin were clapping. At their side, I could clearly see Jess smiling with a satisfied nod of the head. In my head, I heard my father's croaky voice, which sounded just perfect then singing, "*I'm*

not going to stop,

Not today, not never.

If I don't get it now,

I'll chase it forever,

till it's mine,

till it's mine."

The end

Not

