

Football Daydreaming

There are some daydreams you cannot wake up from, because they are reality itself. My days at a nursery in Cairo were slow, lazy, and intoxicating. I was living the life of somebody else, another version of me. Habitually verbose and extroverted, for that trip I became quiet and pensive. I used to think of myself as someone who is painfully aware of time, yet in Cairo time lost its meaning. Only separate moments mattered. They would begin, but never end, lingering and piling in my memory. My memory became a palimpsest.

Maybe, it was this way because of how my sojourn started. When I arrived to Cairo, I realized that I had caught a cold in the airplane. The air in airplanes is cold and dry, it damages your throat, damages your lungs. You lack oxygen. Your body panics, and that is a perfect moment for all the illnesses you have been collecting to catch up with you.

I was only coughing slightly when I entered my hotel room. I blamed jet lag for feeling exhausted, and went to sleep immediately. The next morning I went directly to the nursery school. It was far, in the suburbs of the city, and I spent couple hours in a bus, feeling worse and worse with every passing kilometer. I blamed heat, and unkind, brazen sun. When I nearly fainted in the nursery's director's office I had only myself to blame.

My feverish mind quickly transported me into the surreal world of fantasies and dreams. I spent the whole working week lying flat, listening to muted voices, laughter, the sounds of a ball hitting the wall of my room. On Wednesday – I arrived on Monday – a boy came in. I remember that he had huge eyes of a waif, the color of melted gold. He asked what my name was. I told him, and asked for his in return, but he was already

gone. That was a defining moment of the trip.

On Saturday I was already feeling strong enough to go to the diner, inconveniently situated far from the living quarters, for meals. The golden-eyed boy sat next to me. He was smiling quietly while we ate and looked proud, because he scored the place next to the Newcomer, the Foreigner, the Outlander – me. They were all quiet – small, tiny even, boys and girls with curly black hair. They all had black eyes – all but one.

I learnt that his name was Rami. He was born into an affluent, but busy family. They were constantly late to pick him up, and we both enjoyed those late hours of together time when the orange twilight of Cairo was slowly approaching us. When he was about to leave, I always felt like I wanted to ask something, a simple question. He always left before I could recall it. I still can't.

I came to teach English and Arabic, but ended up teaching football. Officially I had a group of ten boys, but de facto my students were Rami, and his best friend Anas. While Rami was lanky, strong-legged, fast and adroit, Anas was plump and clumsy. Physically they could not have been more different. However, I had never seen a pair of friends so devoted as those two. They never interrupted each other. I never saw envy or anger between them. They were older than other kids. The majority were five or four, whereas Rami and Anas were six. For children one year makes a big difference. They felt that they were responsible somehow, that they had to be role models for everyone else. They scored me, and now they wanted to score a Skill. They wanted to become the best football players in history of football, and they wanted to do it together. Rami and Anas were too small and too pure to realize that Anas was not cut for football, and Rami was meant to play. They were also too small to realize that I was an amateur, someone who was passionate about the game he hadn't played professionally.

We watched videos, and we discussed them. Sometimes I would get an uncanny feeling that I was conversing with college students, so profound some of their thoughts were. Look at his face, they would say while watching a player in the video, he is thinking. You have to think when you play. You have to think. I had never thought about football so much before. During our classes, in the morning, after lunch and at the end of the day, with Anas's mother watching, we would make a few moves, and then stop and think a little.

On Sundays I read about teaching football to kids, and watched videos, endless videos. I was coming very close to some big insight. I never got it, but the feeling of the proximity of a big discovery approaching me was present throughout my whole trip. I felt that I was about to uncover something important about football, children, friendship, volunteering, life.

I didn't notice how two months passed. My time in Cairo was over, out of a sudden. I never visited the pyramids, or the Revolving Restaurant, never had breakfast at the Nile's riverbank or took advantage of vivid nightlife. I led the life of an anchorite, lost in my strange and mysterious relationship with two football souls in the desert city. A part of me is still there, trying to ask a question I cannot formulate.