

Sliding on Rubber

by Nathaniel Hirsch

The sun was streaming in through the holes in the curtain and pierced through my eye lid tugging me away from sleep. I sat up and the realization of being in a new bed in a new country, a world away from all my friends hit me. I groggily trudged into the kitchen carelessly pouring a bowl of cheerios. I sat in the kitchen alone listening to my snoring parents and looked out the window. Spain seemed so far away from my home in rural northwest Washington.

"Hey," grunted my mom.

I had began on my schoolwork and acknowledged here greeting with a lazy grunt. After about three hours of mind numbing online schooling, my mom suggested we go out for lunch. I strolled ahead of my mom, streaking my hands across the white buildings and the curved grates. I looked down the main street and saw a hoard of citizens bustling from store to store.

"Let's try here as my mom pointed to a Pizzeria."

After what felt like a very prolonged lunch, the waiters' eyes refused to acknowledge our credit card sitting on the table. It took around 30 minutes after we had finished before we left the restaurant.

As we were strolling back home, we stopped at the "Casa Cultura" or the Culture House. This building was filled with posters of activities to do in Ronda. My mom bustled through the large room, taking frantic pictures of almost every picture. Scanning the room for other possibilities, my eyes caught on a picture of a boy about my age playing soccer. I took a picture of it with my phone and waited impatiently outside as my mom bustled at a slow pace throughout the entire building. She was so thorough at everything that it sometimes annoyed me. But I couldn't stay annoyed with her long. As we walked back across the cobblestones heading home, I glanced at the picture on my phone. It turned out that there was a soccer practice on the next day. I told my father and asked if he would take me there.

"Nate, I'll take you there the first day, but you'll have to bike there the rest of the days." I agreed, but I noticed a wave of nerves coming over me. I wondered if the practice would be hard or if I could keep up with the exercises of the team.

I let my worries go that night, and fell into a light sleep. The next day zipped by as I awaited the first practice. My dad walked into the house and shouted "time to go!" I sloppily tied on my cleats threw on my bike helmet and bolted out the door. After a short bike ride we arrived at the field. The children stood in a large circle. I took in a gulp of air and made my way into the circle.

"Hola," I said under my breath. It was almost a whisper and only an ear a foot from my mouth could hear it. I sighed and yawned nervously. The kids chatted every once in a while nodding their head in my direction. The sun seared our necks and a smell of burning rubber wafted from the turf field. Coach Herman finally finished his conversation with my father. My dad left so I assumed I could play. I had been hoping that there would be some sort of complication.

"Venga," shouted the coach as he beckoned the teammates toward the right side of the field. I followed the other kids as we jogged around the field. My eyes were tired and scared as they darted throughout the boys. I continued to follow all of the other kids as they formed a

circle, performing stretches as the coach explained a drill in lightning fast Spanish. The coaches voice rasped on and I became overwhelmed trying to understand so much at once. Coach Herman patted me on the back as I ran off with the other children to the field. I was handed a blue penny and it seemed like we were playing a game. A friendly looking player came up to me and began speaking to me in Spanish.

“we’re going to scrimmage okay,” he said.

“Thanks,” I replied enthusiastically.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Nate, and you?”

“My name is Manuel, you’re going to play left defense okay...?”

Defence wasn’t my regular position, however, I lacked the courage to tell him. I was sure that they had better strikers than me when I saw a tall muscular teen take my position. When the game began, they played nothing like I had ever seen before. Kids rarely touched the ball more than once and they sensed where each other were. They directed laser passes right by me, evading my lunging feet. The game continued and I only played a very small role. I feared the angry shouts I would get from kids whenever I made a bad pass. Kids on my team stared at me in hatred, and Manuel looked at me disappointedly. Nonetheless, Manuel helped me through these dreadful moments, always encouraging me. His encouragement helped me to accept the insults flying in my direction. After what felt like three hours, but was really only half that time, the practice was over. I briskly walked across the field, mounted my bicycle and skidded home.

For the next few months I dreaded soccer practice, skipping as many as possible. Manuel cared less and less about how I played, and by the third week I could sense he was sick of trying to support me. It was on the second month of practice, after one of my many failed passes when a kid named Robert came up to me. His face held an angry expression, and I looked at him with hopeless eyes. The sweat trickled down my forehead, and I braced myself for him, expecting the worst.

“Eres tan malo!” he yelled, telling me I was awful at soccer.

“Espero que vas a salir de nuestro equipo!”

I held back tears that were trying to force their way out of my weak eyes. He had told me that he wanted me to leave the team. I looked around the team. No one said a word. Manuel stood in disappointment, lacking the motivation to stand up for me. Coach Herman ignored the comment and continued with practice.

I ran from the field as soon as practice was over, biking as fast as I could. I was filled with emotion. Salty tears were pushed into the air by the wind in my face. The anger then hit. I doubted my life in Spain, and I despised everyone that lived here. The pedals on my bike spun furiously as I zoomed past cars. I could feel the cobblestone beneath my tires. I looked up and suddenly the car in front of me make a sharp cut to the left. I squeezed the break with all my might. My knuckles turned white. The car screeched. The young boy driving looked at me with helplessness as I plummeted towards him. I flew from the bike ramming my knee into the side of the car. Faces stared in awe at me, and the driver. I stared at the driver with a hateful glare as he continued on. I didn’t speak to him, but any man could have sensed my hatred. My knee burnt with pain which slithered through my legs. I biked through the park and sat down with my head in my lap. Why had he not put on his turn signal I thought. Why did I have to go

through all of this! Why couldn't this experience in Spain be fun, like my parents had always told me. I sat there for hours thinking. I can't remember what I thought about exactly. My mind just sifted through all the problems in my life. Finally I decided to bike home.

I layed in bed the next morning. I let my eyes close, but I was awake. The night had taken away all my troubles, but the morning had brought them back again. My mom had sensed something was wrong. We had a deep connection like that, where we could communicate without using words. She had smothered me with love, however, it wasn't her approval that I longed for. I looked out the window. I saw the kids playing in the plaza. They used the benches as goals. A smaller kid received the ball and dribbled forward. He shot the ball way over the goal and hung his head. A larger boy with black hair came up to him and grabbed him by the collar. He was yelling in his face. I could see large spit particles flying from his mouth. The small boy held a very sad expression. I jumped out of bed threw on a shirt and some sweats and sprinted outside. I walked into the plaza.

"Que bien jugado!" I said congratulating the small boy on his skillful soccer playing. The boys looked in awe. I seemed like a giant to these 5 year olds. The boy smiled at me and thanked me for the complement. A walked back inside and stared out the window. The boy suddenly picked up his energy. He played with confidence and directed laser shots between the legs of the benches. I was filled with joy. It was in that moment that I realized if no one was going to root for me on the field, I would have to do it for myself. That day at practice I walked into the field with my head held high. The boys stared at me in awe. They believed that their stubbornness they had gotten rid of me. Manuel looked happily and I grinned at him. the drills began and the coach brought the ball bag out into field. This time was different though. I stared at the ball bag with determination, and instead of waiting my turn, I raced towards the bag. The other boys were smearing through the sides of my vision. Everyone raced to claim the best ball. I opened the bag and shoving hands away, retrieved the Addi Pierre. This may seem like a small task, but for me it was the turning point. The point in which I showed them that I wasn't going to submit into the fear of failure. The day I showed them I was worthy to play on the team. Today was that day that I gained the confidence which I caried through the rest of my life.