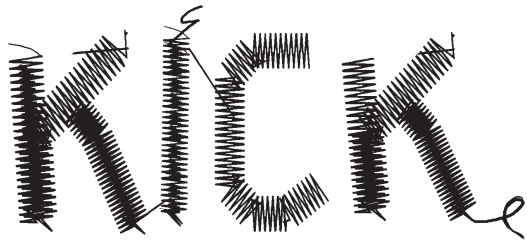

"There will always be something – or someone – stopping you from realizing your potential. Always a groundskeeper tending the fence. Always a goalkeeper guarding the goal. You've just got to see beyond him."

The groundskeeper sighs and swings the sack over his shoulder. He sprinkles some pellets on the grass between us.

"The problem with being a dreamer is that occasionally you'll have nightmares – you've just got to make sure they don't ever spook you enough to want to wake up."

For those who sweat

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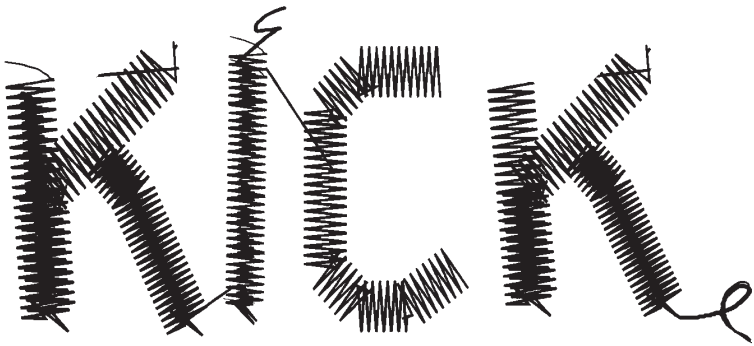

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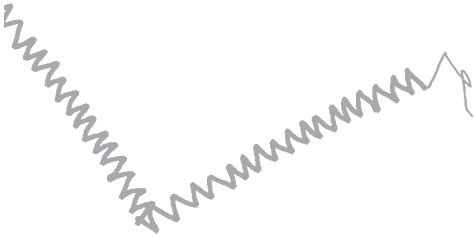

IT'S NOW OR NEVER

Two minutes left on the clock.

The crowd watch with their hands clasped on top of their heads. Scarves hang loosely around their necks. Some of them puff their cheeks out.

It's now or never.

The ball is chipped in from midfield and finds him on the edge of the box. He takes it down on his chest and sidesteps the incoming defender. He pulls his foot back to take a shot but dummies instead, cutting inside the next tackle.

The crowd rise to their feet as he surges into the box.

The defenders slide to try and stop his shot, but his touch has taken the ball beyond their reach. The goalkeeper steps forward, arms stretched wide, eyes fixed on the ball. The crowd watch through their fingers.

Then he shoots.

The ball fires past the goalkeeper's fingertips. But for a split second – a heartbeat – it looks as though it might go over the crossbar. The crowd gasp. And then, as the ball hits the back of the net, they erupt.

Real Madrid are the new champions!

I run off to celebrate and slide on my knees. The little stones on the ground scrape against my skin, and as I get up I feel blood trickling down my leg. I rattle the rusty corrugated fence so it sounds like thousands of fans jumping and cheering in the stands. The crumbling apartment blocks rise up like a stadium on every side, and I roar loud enough for even the deaf old men on the fifth floor to hear. I put my fingers and thumbs together to make the shape of a heart, and pound my chest where the Real Madrid badge should be. The Indonesian wonder kid strikes again!

The heart shape is my trademark celebration. Whenever Uston scores he crosses his chest and points to the sky, even though he's supposed to be Muslim. We keep telling him that Allah will be angry if he makes the sign of the cross, but Uston says it doesn't matter

because he's only pretending. I still don't think it's worth the risk.

Rochy comes over and puts his arm around my shoulders.

"What a goal, Budi! You left them for dead!"

I look across the square at Uston and Widodo lying on the ground. The warm, evening air is thick with dust from their sliding tackles, and it smells like money.

The square isn't technically a square, it's a quadrilateral quadrangle. I know this because Rochy told me. And Rochy is a genius. He went to school until he was thirteen so he knows pretty much everything, although a lot of it is useless stuff like quadrilateral quadrangles, ancient history and something he calls "physics". He told me recently that the universe is expanding, but I don't really understand what that means. He's tried to explain it, but I'm not a scientific genius like him, I'm a footballing genius like Kieran Wakefield. And one day I'm going to be a world-famous footballer like him, too. So normally I just nod and say cool and ask Rochy to tell me something interesting about football instead.

Fachry, the goalkeeper, leans against the corrugated fence we use as a goal, pulling a piece of plastic coating from the football. Fachry has to go in goal because he's

Catholic. Catholic is just a type of Christian – there's more than one type. They all support the same god (who isn't Allah) but still don't agree. It's like Manchester United and Manchester City. They don't agree on anything other than being from Manchester. Fachry doesn't like going in goal but it's four Muslims against one Catholic. Rochy says that's democracy, and you can't argue with democracy.

Behind the fence is where the bins are kept. On one of the balconies above the bins, a scrawny man watches us with his feet resting in a groove where the wall has crumbled away. The soles of his feet are black. He chews his nails and spits them over the wall. The smell of fried vegetables and spices wafts across the pitch. The clank of pots and pans reaches us from three sides of the square, but the far end is eerily quiet.

This is where the Dragon lives.

Some people think the Dragon is called the Dragon because he comes from Komodo, which is true but it's not the reason. Komodo is where they used to send all the criminals, so everyone who comes from there is descended from a convict. This explains a lot, but it isn't the reason why the Dragon is called the Dragon.

Other people think the Dragon is called the Dragon

because he looks like one. They say he got the nickname because of his big stomach and the jewelled rings he wears on every finger and the thick gold chains around his neck. In fact, he was called the Dragon before those things. His big belly and rings and chains are because he's rich. Mega-rich. Like a footballer. He's the main landlord and moneylender for the area, so everyone owes the Dragon something. And if you don't, it's probably because you just paid him.

The real reason why the Dragon got his nickname has got nothing to do with where he's from or how he looks. The Dragon is called the Dragon because if you cross him or betray him or bad-mouth him, he'll chew you up and spit out your bones. And he won't bother burying what's left of you, either.

As the dust settles it sticks to the sweat on my skin. Widodo is up on his feet, brushing the dirt from his shorts. When he offers to help his brother up, Uston slaps his hand away.

"Come on, Uston," Rochy says. "Don't be a sore loser."

"I want a rematch," Uston says, sitting up and hanging his head between his knees.

"It's too late now," Rochy says. "I have to get home."

"What about golden goal?"

"Forget it, Uston," I say. "You only have golden goal if the teams draw, and we beat you."

"Shut up, Budi, that goal was a fluke."

"No, it wasn't."

"Yes, it was! I bet if we play another match you won't score any. How about we play one-on-one: Barcelona versus Real Madrid? Fachry can stay in goal, and Rochy can run home to his mummy."

"What about me?" Widodo asks.

"You can referee," Uston says.

Widodo frowns and starts dusting his shorts again. You'd expect Uston to be a better loser by now – me and Rochy have given him plenty of practice – but I suppose anyone who thinks that *Barcelona* are better than Real Madrid must have a lot of problems. I really want to stay and beat him, but I know I shouldn't be late home for dinner.

"Budi!" Rochy shouts suddenly. "Your leg!"

I look down just as the trail of blood reaches my ankle. The drop spills over the plastic tongue of my boot and seeps into the laces. It's the most impressive injury I've ever had.

"Whoa! That's a nasty one," Rochy says. "You should go home and get that cleaned up."

The others gather round and admire the cut in my knee. When I bend my leg it feels sore, and a fresh dribble of blood seeps out.

"Yeah, you should go home," Fachry says.

I pick up my football and start hobbling home. It doesn't really hurt that much, but you've got to make the most of it. That's what footballers do. Above my head, washing lines droop between the buildings, and the clothes, bleached by the summer sun, are like Madrid flags. Like we've won La Liga. Like this is the homecoming.

My chest fills with pride, and I pat my T-shirt where the Real Madrid badge should be.

"I'll play you one-on-one tomorrow night, Uston," I call over my shoulder, breaking into a stiff jog. "Barca are going down!"

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

"What on earth have you done to your leg, Budi?"

Mum is always worrying. Worrying about Grandma, worrying about money, worrying about me. I'm always telling her that she shouldn't worry so much because it's bad for her health, but then she just worries about worrying. She gets especially worried whenever I cut myself, because I've got this condition where you don't stop bleeding. There's something wrong with my blood which means it doesn't clot properly. Uston says it's because my family don't pray or fast like proper Muslims, so Allah has cursed us. My grandpa had it, and my dad and his twin brother have it too, so it's kind of like a family curse. But we don't talk about my uncle. Not since he took a one-way trip to Execution Island.

What Uston doesn't realize is that having a bleeding problem makes you the best at dodging tackles, so it's actually a blessing.

"It's okay," I say. "It's just a graze."

"But there's blood everywhere!"

I look down and realize it looks a lot worse since I ran home. The blood has trickled round my shin, and there are spots of it all over my boots.

"How did it happen?"

"I got attacked by a tiger."

"Oh really?" She crosses her arms, creasing the orange fabric of her shirt. "And what was a tiger doing in the middle of Jakarta?"

"It must have swum all the way here from Sumatra. Rochy says that Sumatran tigers are really good swimmers because they've got webbed paws."

"Is that right?" Mum asks. "It must have been hungry to swim all that way."

"Very hungry."

"So why did it take such a small bite?"

"It ate Uston first."

Mum laughs, and I smile because all the worry disappears from her face. But then she looks very serious.

"I hope Uston isn't responsible for what happened to

your leg. I hope you boys are playing nicely. Doesn't Rochy look after you?"

That's the trouble with being small for your age – everyone thinks you need a bodyguard. Especially when you have a bleeding problem.

"I don't need looking after, Mum – I'm almost twelve. Anyway, you should have seen the goal I scored!"

She ruffles my hair. "You can tell me all about it over dinner. But first you need to clean up your leg before Dad gets home. Wait on the step and I'll bring you a cloth and some water."

Sitting in the doorway with my legs stretched out into the street, I pick at the crusty blood on the front of my shin. I dig out a small chunk of glass from the skin beneath my knee and flick it across the road. It lands among some rubbish in the doorway of the crumbling apartment block opposite. The block has been on the verge of collapsing for as long as I can remember – the walls have wide cracks sprouting from the floor, and the whole thing seems to lean towards the building next to it. Dad says they used the wrong type of concrete and the government has banned everyone from living there. But the Dragon still rents it out.

Mum brings the cloth and water and puts them down

next to me. The printed flowers on the hem of her *kain* swish across the ground, and she makes the dust smell like flowers too.

"Make sure you wash all the grit out. If it gets infected I don't know how we'll pay for medication."

Mum goes back into the apartment and I start washing the spots of blood from my boots because I don't want them to get stained. Mum and Dad bought them for my birthday last year and I've finally grown into them. They're fakes, obviously, but they're good fakes. Real fakes. I know they must have been expensive, and the last thing I want is to have bloodstained football boots. You never see a professional footballer in bloodstained boots, do you?

After I've finished cleaning my boots I start scrubbing at my shin. The blood comes off pretty easily, and by the time Dad arrives I've washed all the little bits of grit out of the cut.

Dad works in a factory that makes smart shirts for businessmen, and even though he doesn't have to, he always wears a short-sleeved shirt with a collar to work – either his white one or the one with yellow and blue checks. He says it's important to be proud of yourself. He's always telling me: "Budi, if you don't respect

yourself, nobody will. You must be proud of who you are." Today he's wearing the shirt with yellow and blue checks, and it sticks to a sweaty patch on his chest. As he gets closer he smiles and sits down on the step beside me.

"What's happened here then?" he asks, kissing me on the head.

"I cut my leg playing football."

Dad leans over and grimaces as I show him my knee. The cut glistens with fresh blood. "Make sure you get all the grit out. We don't want it to get infected."

I nod and keep brushing it with the cloth.

"Was it a foul?" Dad asks.

"No, but I scored an amazing goal, so it was worth it."

"Good boy! If you keep it up you'll play for Madrid one day."

"*Real* Madrid, Dad. If you just say Madrid it could mean Atlético Madrid, and I would rather never play football again than play for them."

"I know, I know. I meant Real Madrid. Just keep practising and you'll get there."

I smile and Dad pats me on the back. It's already dark but the air is still very warm. Dad looks up at the small patches of sky among the laundry.

"It's going to rain soon," he says. "The monsoon must be on its way. Can you feel it?"

"Yeah," I say, but at the moment it's hard to imagine the bone-dry streets thick with mud, rainwater dripping from the empty washing lines, and people splashing through puddles with newspapers held above their heads. Sometimes it feels like the dry season will never end, that the days will just get hotter and hotter for ever. But it's got to rain soon. The air has become sticky and heavy waiting for it. But tonight there are no clouds, just a black, starless sky, so the weather won't break yet.

The sound of people chattering over dinner reaches us from the apartments above. Every so often a scooter blares past, kicking up dust that turns red in the glow of the brake lights.

A fresh trickle of blood dribbles down my shin.

"Here," Dad says, taking a handkerchief from his pocket and twisting it. "Hold this against your knee while I knot it."

He ties the bandage tight.

"How's that?"

"Much better."

My stomach rumbles and he smiles. "Come on, let's go and see if dinner's ready."

Mum is just spooning the rice onto steel trays when we walk in, and I help her carry them from the kitchen in one corner to the table in the other. Grandma is already waiting with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

"Hello, Grandma," I say. "Aren't you going to be hot in that blanket? You know Mum's made spicy *rendang* tonight."

Mum hasn't really made spicy *rendang*, because today is Wednesday. On Wednesdays we just have rice. Wednesdays are better than Fridays because we don't have anything on Fridays. But I like to imagine there's a feast on the rickety little table and Grandma plays along. Tonight it's a tray of Mum's world-famous *rendang*.

"I'm just fine, thank you," Grandma says. "An old woman like me needs to keep warm. And I haven't tasted a *rendang* that's been too spicy for me yet!"

When Grandma smiles her wrinkly face creases even more, and her eyes become narrow slits. Grandma isn't like other old ladies, because most of them get really thin and bony the older they get, but Grandma still has plump, round cheeks. She puts this down to "maintaining a healthy appetite", which is almost as important as "being proud of who you are" and "pursuing your dreams".

Grandma is full of useful advice and interesting stories. Once a snake bit her on the arm and she sucked

the venom out. Now she is immune to venom. Another time, she fell from a third-storey window but landed in a passing cart carrying silks and soft fabrics. It's because of this, and the fact that she is the oldest person I know, that I'm beginning to think Grandma might be indestructible.

"Your mother was just telling me that you cut your leg today. I hope you washed it properly."

"Yes, Grandma. I got all the grit out."

"And I suppose I'd never be able to guess how you hurt yourself…"

"Playing football!"

"Football. Always football. Football will be the death of you, young man."

Grandma smiles at me, and for a moment I think she is going to come clean about being indestructible, but then she looks down at her tray and takes a big mouthful of rice. I know she's joking about football being the death of me, because being a footballer is probably the safest job in the world. When a footballer gets injured there are about six doctors around him in a second, even if he's just pretending. Once I waited almost six hours to see a doctor at the hospital when Mum thought I was bleeding on the inside, and even then I didn't get put on a stretcher and carried about like a prince.

Bleeding on the inside is the worst. Most people think having a bleeding problem means you're going to bleed to death from the tiniest cut, but the real problem is bleeding on the inside. At any moment I might start bleeding and not know until I fall over and die. You can't see it. You can't taste it. Some people can't even feel it, but I think I can. It's that feeling like when you've done something bad and Grandma or Rochy find out, and there's a knife in you somewhere, near your heart, and with every word they say it turns a little further, pushing in a little deeper. Bleeding on the inside is definitely the worst.

Mum turns to Dad and says, "How was work today, Elvis?"

That's another thing about Grandma: she gave Dad a crazy name. Elvis Presley was an American singer and movie star about sixty years ago, and Grandma was madly in love with him until he died on the toilet. I suppose it's hard to love someone after that. But while he was still alive Dad was born and Grandma called him Elvis. I'm not sure how Grandpa felt about the whole situation. I would ask him but I can't because he died in a big earthquake that happened when I was little. Mum says I slept through the whole thing.