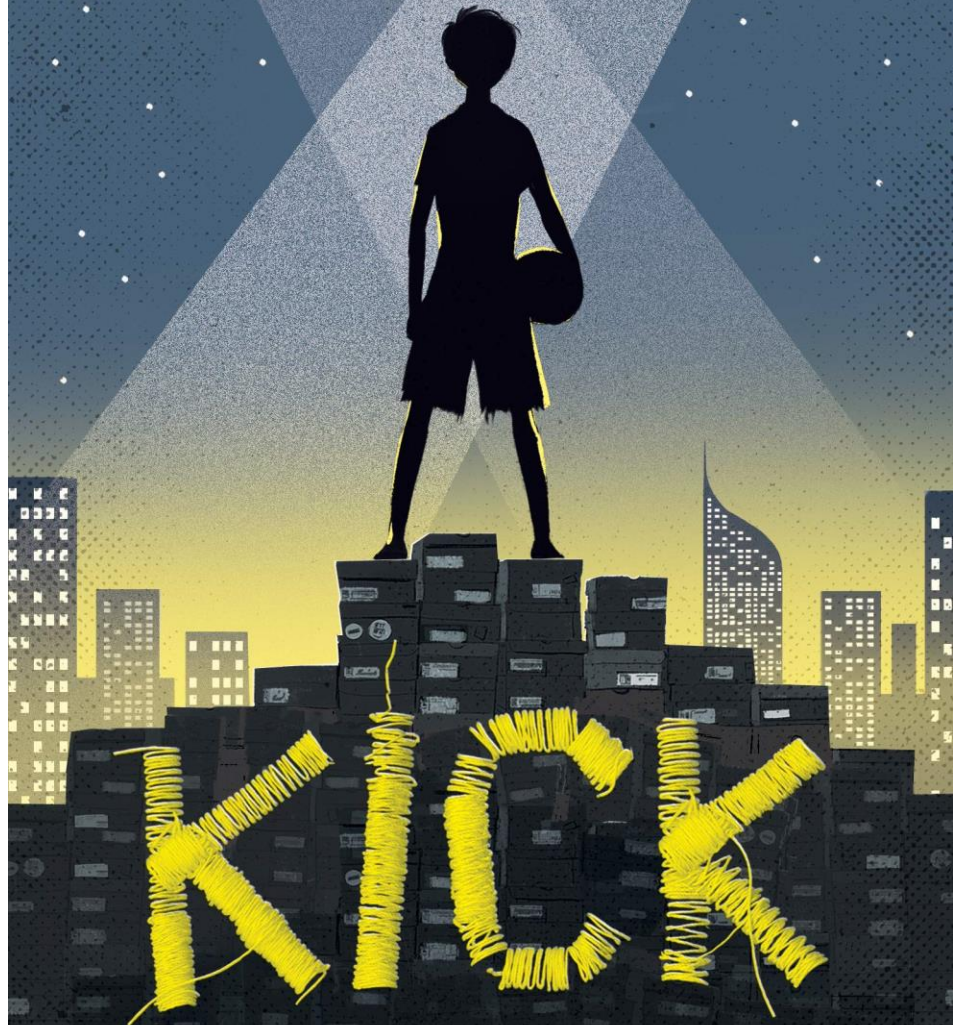


MITCH JOHNSON

"A brilliant debut."

John Boyne, author of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*



Winner of the **BRANFORD BOASE AWARD**

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. Rocky 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," Rocky 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," Rocky 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.

Tuesday

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.

It suddenly hits me that I don't know what Grandma called my uncle. If she had twins and named one of them Elvis, what did she call the other one? Presley? Without thinking, I interrupt Dad telling us about his day and ask Grandma.

"Grandma, what name did you give to Uncle?"

I should have remembered this silence from the last time I mentioned Uncle in front of my family. I should have remembered the stern look on Grandma's face. The coolness in her eyes. That feeling like her hand is gripping the knife on the inside. Slowly, she turns her head to face me.

"Budi," she says, "you don't have an uncle. Not any more."

I swallow, even though there's nothing in my mouth.

"Yes, Grandma," I mutter, but I still don't understand. I mean, obviously they call Nusa Kambangan "Execution Island" for a reason. I know what happens there. I know no one comes back. I know when you do something wrong, something bad, they take you there and lock you up in a tiny cell for years and years until you're sure everyone has forgotten about you. Then one night, while you're asleep on your flea-ridden bed, they drag you out to a quiet place, kicking and screaming and confused,

and they give you a choice: kneeling or standing?

And then they shoot you.

No matter how much you beg and cry and plead – no matter how blurry your vision gets, or how much your nose runs – they aim their rifles at your heart and shoot you.

I know all that. I have nightmares about it.

What I don't know is whether Uncle has been there long enough yet.

And my family aren't going to tell me.

I stare into my tray and chew a mouthful of rice for as long as it takes for someone to break the silence.

"Sorry," Mum says, talking to Dad but looking at me, "you were telling us about your day, Elvis."

"You know how frustrating it is," Dad says. "I asked Supardi when we'll be getting last month's wages, and he said it should be any day now. But I know he's too scared to confront the boss about it. I don't blame him – he knows if he makes a fuss it will probably delay the payment even more. He might even lose his job if he upsets the wrong people. But it's annoying, especially because I'm still waiting for overtime from the month before that."

Mum reaches across to Dad and strokes his arm.

"It'll be a lot easier when the minimum wage goes up," she says.

"If it ever goes up!" says Grandma. "They talk about these things all the time but nothing seems to happen. And those people protesting in the streets will only make things worse, no matter what they say."

Dad takes a deep breath and his face breaks into a smile. "Come now, *Ibu*. Change is coming. Things will get easier. Besides, we'll be rich when Budi plays for Real Madrid."

Dad winks at me and Grandma shakes her head, muttering something about football.

"Tell us about the goal you scored today, Budi," Mum says.

"I'll have to stand up to explain it properly."

"Don't get indigestion," Mum says.

"I won't."

I do them an action replay. I show them how Rochy chipped the ball to me, how I took it down on my chest, dodged Widodo's tackle, dummied the shot, stepped inside Uston, and scored past Fachry. It's hard to do the goal justice in such a small space, but my family clap as I run round the table celebrating. I have to stop to squeeze between Dad's chair and the wall, but when I get through

I put my fingers and thumbs together to make the shape of a heart, and pat my chest where the Real Madrid badge should be.

"I wish I could have seen it," Grandma says, smiling.

"When I'm a professional I'll buy you a television so you can watch me play without leaving your armchair."

They all laugh, but suddenly Grandma starts coughing horribly. It sounds like rocks are being grated inside her throat, and bits of rice fly from her mouth. Mum gets up and pats her on the back, but Grandma holds up a hand to make her stop.

I try to ignore Grandma's coughing fit by scraping the last of my rice into a pile. I hate looking at Grandma when she's coughing. Her eyes become all bloodshot and tears roll over her cheeks. It's like she becomes a different person. Someone who is not indestructible. But after a minute or so she always recovers and tries to pretend nothing has happened, even though her eyes are red and watery, and the squiggly vein on her forehead bulges beneath her skin.

"I'll watch every match you play in," she says, as Mum lifts a cup of water to her lips.

We finish dinner and I help Mum clear the trays away. Dad gives Grandma his arm so she can get back to her

armchair. I don't like watching Grandma on the move because she always looks so weak. When she is sitting in her big cosy armchair with a blanket across her lap, smiling at everything and telling stories about her youth, she doesn't seem that old. But when she shuffles across the room with her back hunched over, she starts to look like the old beggar women who roam the streets. It's only a couple of metres from the table to her chair, but she makes it seem like a marathon. That's why I'm always so keen to help with the washing-up after dinner: by the time I turn round again, Grandma is tucked up in her chair.

"Will you tell me a story, Grandma, before I go to bed?"

"Of course, come and sit on the rug and I'll tell you about the time I found a tiger in the yard."

"No, Grandma, tell me a story that I haven't heard before."

"Okay, let me see. Have I told you about the time it rained so hard the roof collapsed?"

"Yes."

"How about the man I knew with six fingers and six toes?"

"Yes."

She scratches her neck and puts a finger to her lips.

Mum and Dad sit at the table, watching Grandma with smiling eyes.

"How about the boy I knew who wanted to be an actor?"

"No, you've never told me that one before. What happened?"

"Well, when I was a girl I knew a boy who wanted desperately to be an actor. He was a few years older than me – very good looking – and all he could think about was acting. When you talked to him, you would think nothing else existed. He said he wanted to be a famous actor in the Hollywood movies. Everyone laughed at him, of course, because he worked in his father's paddy fields, didn't speak any English, and no one in the village had ever left the island, let alone been to America.

"But he didn't let that bother him. He used to save every rupiah he could, and when he had enough he would take the bus to the nearest town with a cinema and watch whatever was showing. He would come back full of energy and renewed ambition, determined to become a star. He could remember lines from the films, and would act them out if you asked him politely. I must say, he was very good. Then he would begin saving his money to do it all over again."

Grandma clasps her hands together and rests them on her lap. While she talks, I wind the tassels at the edge of the rug around my fingers. Apparently the rug was given to Grandma as a wedding gift, so it must be ancient. The patch in front of her chair is threadbare and not as soft as the rest, but it's still my favourite place to sit.

"And then what happened?" I ask.

"Well, one morning the boy's father went out into the fields to check the oxen had been rigged up to the plough for the day's work, but his son was nowhere to be seen. At first everyone thought he had taken an early bus to watch a film, and the farmer was furious at his son's negligence. But he still hadn't returned by mid-afternoon. When nightfall came the farmer remained adamant that his son would be back soon. He thought the boy was hiding nearby, planning to sneak back home after everyone had gone to bed to avoid being beaten. But night came and went, and gradually we came to realize he wasn't coming back."

Grandma stops to smooth the blanket across her lap. She always pauses at the worst moments.

"And then what happened?"

"The village never heard of him again – at least as far as I know, because I moved away a few years later.

Everyone assumed he had been kidnapped. People went missing all the time back then, more so than today. But then one day – it must have been about twenty years after he went missing – I was on a bus and I went past one of those big billboards just outside the city that was advertising a new American film. I couldn't be certain, because I only saw it for a few seconds before we drove by, but one of the actors looked just like an older version of the boy I knew! Well, I thought, that settles it. He did make it after all. I just hope he went back to visit his poor father once in a while."

"Are you sure it was him, Grandma?"

"Quite sure," she says, adjusting herself in her armchair. "I never forget a face."

"What was his name?"

"Don't ask me that! I might not forget a face, but I can certainly forget a name. Now, I can feel my eyelids drooping, and you've got an early start in the morning, so off you go to bed."

I get up and kiss Grandma on the cheek. Despite how wrinkled her face is, her skin is really soft.

"You'd better let your mother take a look at that cut," Grandma says, glancing down at the bloody bandage around my knee.

Mum gets up from the table and unties the handkerchief. It's soaked and hangs like a dead animal in her hand.

"It still looks fresh," she says. "Elvis, can you pass me the coconut butter?"

Dad retrieves a tin from the kitchen cupboard and passes it to Mum. She scoops out a dollop of butter and smears it across the cut with her fingertips. The coolness of it makes my knee twitch, and it's almost worth getting injured just for the sweet, delicious smell. Sometimes, when no one is looking, I eat the butter straight out of the tin to heal any cuts on the inside.

"There," she says, standing up and giving me a hug. "That should do the trick."

"We'll see you in the morning, superstar," Dad says, ruffling my hair. "Sleep well, son."

I go to my room and get undressed. The light bulb has gone so I have to do it in the dark, but it isn't difficult to find my mattress because it takes up most of the room.

When I'm in bed I listen to the hum of different generators, until one by one they're switched off, and I fall asleep to the distant sounds of the city.

Wednesday

BIG BOSS MAN

Kieran Wakefield is my favourite player of all time. He is also the best player in the world. You can tell he is the best because Real Madrid paid more money for him than any club has paid for anyone else, ever. My dream is to see him play at the Bernabéu. That's where Real Madrid play their home matches. It can hold over 80,000 people and one day I want to be one of them.

I dream about Kieran Wakefield most days at the factory. My job is fairly repetitive so sometimes I go into a trance and think about how amazing he is at football, and what he might be doing while I'm sewing boots together. He's probably playing football, I know, but it's still nice to imagine. Rochy moans that he can't get through to me when I'm daydreaming, but I think he's

just jealous because his favourite player, León Belmonte, isn't as good as Kieran Wakefield. They're both *Galácticos* but Wakefield cost more. Rochy says *Galácticos* just means superstars.

Rochy always wears a pink Manchester United shirt to work with BELMONTE on the back. Manchester United shirts should be red, but Rochy's is so old it's faded to pink. He doesn't actually support Manchester United any more because Belmonte plays for Real Madrid now, but it's his best shirt. Some people think you have to support the same team for ever, and that if you change teams you're a "glory supporter", but following your favourite player is different. Glory supporting is probably the ugliest thing about the beautiful game. Or maybe that's diving. Uston has started diving because his favourite player, Jesus Puga, does a lot of it. It's really disgraceful. But because we don't have a referee, he normally just gets kicked by whoever is nearest and told to get up.

"Budi!" Rochy shouts. "Hey, I'm going to start throwing things at you if you keep ignoring me!"

"I didn't hear you!" I shout back. The sewing machines are really loud sometimes. "What do you want?"

Rochy looks over both shoulders before shouting, "Did you hear that Wakefield is injured?"

"No, he isn't! Stop lying!"

"I'm not lying! I saw it on the television this morning!"

It's true that Rocky has a television – his dad bought it a long time ago. There's a crack that runs right down the middle of the screen so they can't sell it, but it still works. I'm supposed to be watching the Real Madrid v. Valencia match at his apartment tonight. It's also true that Rocky knows a lot about football. He's a few years older than me so he knows stuff that I'm too young to remember. I don't believe that Kieran Wakefield is injured though. I don't want to.

"I still think you're lying!"

"Whatever! You'll see later!"

The foreman approaches our row and we put our heads down. All I can think of is Kieran Wakefield rolling around on the floor holding his ankle. It's probably broken in three places and he'll never play again. It's a tragedy. Everyone will be wearing black armbands at the game tonight in honour of the best player in the world...

The foreman stops at my station and taps his *rotan* on the workbench.

"Faster, Budi! Faster!"

I can smell coffee and cigarettes on his breath. I work faster. Even though I don't look round I can sense him

waiting behind me, and the skin on the back of my arms tingles in anticipation of the *rotan*.

The foreman doesn't know about my bleeding problem. I think maybe it's not just words that can make you bleed on the inside. And I think the foreman knows that too.

Slow beads of sweat roll down the sides of my face, gathering beneath my chin and dripping into my lap. My shirt sticks to my back. His presence is distracting, so I try to think of something else.

Kieran Wakefield hobbles to the side of the pitch and shakes his head. He makes the sign for a substitution. The bench look worried. Everyone in the crowd acts like Real Madrid are about to be relegated...

My fingertips are sweaty and the plastic upper slips every time I push it towards the needle. It's normally only when I'm really tired at the end of a shift that I start making mistakes, but we haven't even reached our lunch break yet. Another stale gust of coffee and cigarette smoke fills my nostrils. I wonder whether the foreman was just sighing, or whether the air stirred because he moved his hand, aiming the *rotan* at the soft flesh on the back of my arm. I can't even tell whether he's still standing behind me, the air is so thick with the buzzing

of machines. My fingers slip again, but I manage to keep the stitches straight.

I try to imagine the foreman isn't there. I tell myself that this pair of boots is the pair that Kieran Wakefield will make his comeback in. I really concentrate on making them the best boots I've ever made and focus on every stitch.

As well as making boots for Kieran Wakefield, we also make boots for Lazaro Celestino, who is probably the most overrated player of all time. He plays for Barcelona, which says it all really. Sometimes when I'm making his boots I deliberately miss a few stitches just to annoy him.

Stitching the upper is the most important job in the factory because that's the part you use to kick the ball. If there's a crease in the material the consequences could be disastrous. Someone might end up missing a penalty in the World Cup Final. It could literally change the course of history. The upper is also the part you see most on television, and it would look pretty bad if a professional footballer kept tripping over loose thread.

The upper arrives in different pieces that are cut out by a big blue machine standing against the far wall. These pieces are all different colours: red, green, pink, yellow,

orange. Rochy swears that once upon a time all football boots were black, which must have been really boring. We then sew all these pieces together in a particular order. The foreman gets really angry if we make a mistake, so we have to be careful. He also gets really angry if we're too slow, so we have to be fast. He's kind of like a referee who can't stand late tackles or time-wasting, but instead of yellow cards he uses the *rotan*, and instead of red cards he throws people out on the street. The strictest referee in the world. The Referee of Doom.

Another stale breath reminds me that the strictest referee in the world is watching my every move, and so I think of something else before I make a mistake.

After we've stitched the upper, another section of workers glues the upper to the sole unit. If the boot has studs, a machine screws them in. If the machine is broken, a person screws them in. Once I took too long on a toilet break (I had diarrhoea) and the foreman made me screw studs into boots for the rest of the afternoon. It's the second worst job in the factory, and it's made even worse when your stomach hurts so much that you think you might *berak* at any moment.

After that the boots have insoles put in and labels attached. Then they're laced up by a section of girl ninjas.

I call them ninjas because they're silent and lightning fast and most of them wear black headscarves.

Finally, the boots are inspected before being wrapped in paper and boxed up. Boxing shoes is the worst job in the factory. It's also the easiest job in the world, and only the real idiots work on that section. Being moved from sewing to boxing is like being substituted at half-time. And not because you've already scored a hat-trick and need to be rested for the midweek cup fixture, but because you're rubbish. Once I was late because I had to help Mum with Grandma in the morning, and the foreman put me on boxing for a week as punishment. It was so boring. I haven't been late since.

The buzzer suddenly goes for break and makes me jump. Luckily I don't mess up the stitching. The slight shadow over my station disappears, and from the corner of my eye I watch the foreman stroll along the row. Every few steps he leans over someone's shoulder, readjusting his grip on the *rotan*, before nodding and moving on.

Because Rochy and I work on the same section we don't normally get the same break, which is really annoying because I want to know if he is joking or whether Kieran Wakefield actually is injured. I tell myself that he probably isn't injured, and if he is it's probably

something minor. He can't be seriously injured because everything seems too normal. If something terrible had happened, I'd feel it. I'd just know.

I place the finished upper on the pile next to my machine and head upstairs to the canteen. The canteen is a stuffy little room that overlooks the factory, where a scrawny lady in an apron serves mushy rice and "Sauce of the Day".

"Sauce of the Day" is the same every day, and I think it tastes like cabbage and coconut. Some people say it tastes like beansprouts and coconut. Other people say it tastes like cigarette ash and coconut, which would make sense because it's grey and the serving lady always has a cigarette hanging from her lip. Whatever it is, it's definitely coconut-based.

Everyone in the canteen seems interested in only one thing: the pay rise. At the next table, a group of women talk excitedly about the extra money they'll earn when the minimum wage goes up. One of them says that she'll be able to afford more food for her children. Another says that she might be able to start paying off her brother's debts. A younger girl says she might be able to afford to go to school again.

That's another thing I don't like about the canteen –

everyone suffers from a total lack of imagination. Maybe if you eat enough "Sauce of the Day" it goes to your brain. When I get the pay rise, I'm going to the Bernabéu, not wasting it on the boring stuff people spend money on every day.

One of the women tells the others not to get so excited.

"This money will never materialize," she says, looking into her tray of grey rice. "It's all just talk and nonsense."

"But it's been agreed by the government," one of the others says.

"So what? The government says it's going to do lots of things, but do they ever get done? They always talk about new hospitals and schools and jobs, but that's all it is – talk. I haven't seen anything change for years. This is just a new tactic to make the protestors go back to work. Even if there is an increase in the minimum wage, it'll be years before we get it, and by that time everything will have gone up in price so we won't be any better off."

The rest of the women look pretty unhappy when she finally stops talking, but I know she's got it wrong. After all, Dad reads the newspaper every day, so he knows what's going on. The women look so miserable that I feel like telling them not to worry, but then something catches my eye outside the window.

Thursday

On the walkway above the factory, one of the Dragon's brothers approaches the foreman's office. The last time I counted, the Dragon had three brothers, although new ones are always turning up from Komodo and old ones are always disappearing. They all look the same – fat and rich and mean. Once the Dragon found out that one of his brothers was taking an extra cut from the rent collections. So the Dragon killed him. Well, he cut his fingers off first. Then he killed him and dumped the body in one of the bins in the square, about thirty metres from where he lives. Everyone knows the Dragon did it, but no one went to the police because one of the Dragon's other brothers is the Chief Inspector. And only an idiot would arrest his brother for being a brother murderer.

The brother that's on the walkway goes straight into the foreman's office without knocking, and he emerges a few minutes later with a thick brown envelope. Rocky says that even though the factory is outside the Dragon's territory, he's always threatening to burn it to the ground, so the foreman has to pay him protection money. The Dragon's brother flicks through the contents of the envelope before tucking it into his back pocket. As he turns to leave he catches my eye, and before I have the sense to stare down into my tray of grey rice he winks

at me and smiles, showing off the gaps between his stained teeth.

I don't look up from my tray for the rest of my break. I just scrape the stodgy rice into my mouth and force it down. Only someone with a death wish looks one of the Dragon's Clan in the eye.

When the buzzer goes I return to my station and find Rochy hunched over his machine. There is a dark patch around the number seven on his back. Some of the curved lettering at the top of the shirt is beginning to peel away. He looks up as I start sewing, and the beads of sweat glisten on his forehead.

"It's too hot today!" he shouts, rubbing a hand over his face.

"And too loud!" I say.

The foreman comes out of his office and stands on the walkway overlooking the factory floor. Rochy and I both concentrate on our work until he goes back inside.

"Hey, Budi!"

"What?"

"Did you know that top footballers only wear a pair of boots three times?"

"No! Is that true?"

"Yeah, they wear them for two training sessions to get

used to them, and then wear them for one match!"

"Then what do they do with them?"

"I don't know – probably throw them away!"

Now, Rochy knows a lot about football, but that is definitely not true. If that were true it would hardly be worth the effort of making them. I imagine there are probably fans like me who collect them, or the players in lower leagues get to use them, or there is a big boot-shaped museum that displays them all. If I manage to save enough money I would like to visit that museum, as well as seeing Kieran Wakefield play at the Bernabéu. I'll probably take my whole family, including Grandma.

"Maybe that's why they get paid so much money!" I say.

Rochy looks up from the boot he's stitching. "What?"

"Maybe footballers get paid a lot because they have to buy a new pair of boots every week!"

Rochy shakes his head. "Footballers don't buy their own boots!"

I'm pretty sure that is wrong too. If footballers don't buy their own boots, then who does? Their parents? I want to ask Rochy who pays for footballers' boots, but I don't want to look stupid, so I just keep stitching. I also want to ask him how much it would cost to see Kieran

Wakefield play at the Bernabéu, but then the foreman comes out of his office and starts pacing along the walkway, tapping his *rotan* against the railing...

11 REASONS WHY KIERAN WAKEFIELD IS BETTER THAN LAZARO CELESTINO

1. No one has ever paid 150 million euros for Lazaro Celestino.
2. Kieran Wakefield is taller, which means he is better at headers.
3. Being bigger also means he is better at tackling.
4. And shielding the ball.
5. Being taller means that if the goalkeeper gets sent off and the manager has already made all three substitutions, Kieran Wakefield would be a good stand-in goalkeeper.
6. Kieran Wakefield is really quick – probably quicker than Lazaro Celestino.
7. Kieran Wakefield is stronger.
8. Kieran Wakefield is younger.
9. Kieran Wakefield plays for a team who have won more Champions League titles than Lazaro Celestino's team.
10. Kieran Wakefield plays for a team who have won more La Liga titles than Lazaro Celestino's team.

11. Kieran Wakefield wears the number 11 shirt, which is my favourite number and one better than Lazaro Celestino's number 10.

Friday

FROM RAGS TO RICHES

At the end of the day I have to shield my eyes from the sun when I leave. There aren't any windows in the factory, only long electric strip lights, so it always seems really bright when you step outside, even just before sunset. It doesn't help that everything in the factory (apart from the multicoloured boots) is grey, or made greyish by a layer of dust, and it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust to all the colours of the street.

The road outside the factory is always busy with scooters and cars. People beep their horns for no reason. The air above the traffic is blurred by pollution, and the distant skyscrapers sparkle and shimmer through the haze as though they're made of water. When the pollution gets really bad the lights of the city form a kind of halo in

the evening, as though there are two setting suns – one in the west and one in the south.

Even though Rochy lives to the north, near the slums, he walks back with me, weaving in and out of the masses of people going to and from work. Some of them crowd around stalls, scooping delicious street food into their mouths. The spicy, salty smell is enough to make me stop and breathe it in, but Rochy grabs my arm and pulls me along. We take a shortcut down an alleyway and stop at the building where Uston and Widodo live.

“Hey, Barca scum!” I shout at the top-floor window. “We’re ready for that rematch!”

Almost immediately their mum puts her head out of the window, and from the expression on her face I think she might be a Barcelona fan.

“Who do you think you are,” she says, “coming here and hollering abuse in the street? I should come down there and teach you some manners!” She disappears but is back at the window in an instant. We have to duck out of the way as a heavy vegetable root flies towards us.

“We’re sorry, *Ibu*,” Rochy says. “We just want to know if Uston and Widodo are there?”

“No,” she says. “They must have been kept late. Now get going before I find something else to throw at you!”

Rochy and I walk away. Uston and Widodo work at another factory with Fachry. Sometimes if the factory is behind or has a big order, everyone has to work overtime to catch up. It’s the same at the factory where Rochy and I work, although the foreman has a way of making sure everything is done on time.

“I might go home if the others aren’t around,” Rochy says. “See you for the match tonight?”

“I’ll be there.”

Rochy turns down the next alley and I start dribbling a stone along the street, imagining that every passer-by is a Valencia defender trying to stop me as I race towards goal. I’m almost home when I remember to stop at a stall to buy Grandma’s medicine and cigarettes. Then I carry on, kicking the stone into the centre of the road and firing it into the littered doorway of the apartment building opposite.

I make the shape of a heart with my fingers and pat my chest where the Real Madrid badge should be.

When I get home Grandma is asleep in her armchair, snoring quietly. Mum is cooking in the corner, and she looks over her shoulder as I walk into the room.

“Did you get the cigarettes and medicine?” she asks.

I lift up the blue plastic bag and put it on the table.

Even though Mum has to shout over the sizzling vegetables in the pan, Grandma doesn't wake up. This is another of her secrets for indestructibility: "Sleep as much as you can." I know cats that don't sleep as much as Grandma. She can even sleep through the calls to prayer that blare out from the nearby mosque five times a day.

"Can you wake Grandma up?" Mum says, stirring the vegetables. "Dinner is almost ready and she needs to take her tablets."

The best way to wake Grandma up is to shake her gently by the shoulder. She doesn't like it if you make a sudden loud noise, or squirt water in her face, or pinch her nose so she can't breathe. I've tried all those once before.

"Wake up, Grandma," I whisper. "Time for your tablets."

Gradually she lifts her head and blinks a few times.

"Hello, Budi," she says. Her breath is always really sour just after she's woken up. "Is it that time already? Will you get them out of the packet for me? They're ever so fiddly."

I fetch a cup of water and push two of the tablets out into Grandma's palm.

"Thank you." She gulps the tablets down and hands the cup back to me. "Could you pass me a cigarette too?"

"We're about to eat," Mum calls. "Are you sure you want to smoke now?"

"What are we having?" Grandma asks.

"Just vegetables and rice – we can't really afford to buy meat until Elvis gets paid."

Grandma shakes her head. "Shouldn't he be home by now?"

"Yes," Mum says, scraping rice onto separate trays. "But he said this morning the factory might be kept open for longer. Something about a new contract."

Grandma is still shaking her head. "He already works too much. Can't he turn the overtime down?"

"I don't know," Mum says, topping the rice with vegetables. "But we could really use the extra cash."

"That's if they pay him for it," Grandma says, rolling her eyes.

Mum shrugs and carries the trays to the table. "Budi, can you help Grandma, please?"

Grandma grips my wrist as she stands, and I guide her to the table. It's not as bad as watching Dad help her because I can't really tell how hunched over she is, and I can feel the strength in her hands.

"We'll have to start without your father," Mum says as I sit down next to her. "I'm sure he'll be back soon."

But he still hasn't come home four hours later. His untouched tray of cold, wet vegetables and rice sits on the rickety table. Grandma is smoking her third cigarette since dinner in her armchair, and the room is hazy with smoke. Mum sews a button onto Dad's white shirt, but she keeps glancing at the empty doorway.

"I don't like not knowing where he is," she says.

"Don't worry," Grandma says, exhaling two jets of smoke from her nostrils. "He'll be at the factory."

"Grandma," I say, "why do you smoke?"

She takes another drag and taps her cigarette over the chipped ashtray.

"Back when I started, they used to think smoking was good for you. Everyone I knew smoked, even though none of us could really afford it. And Elvis smoked too – the singer, I mean, not your father. He used to smoke cigars, but they've always been too expensive, so I smoked cigarettes instead."

"But doesn't smoking make your cough worse?"

Grandma blows a long cloud of smoke – like she's trying to whistle – before crushing the cigarette in the ashtray.