

MEGHAN ROSS
VERNON SECONDARY SCHOOL
CANADA

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ONE TOY FOR A CHILD

It's a Thursday afternoon and I'm just heading out from school, my latest creative writing assignment clutched in my hand. It's a gorgeous day in autumn, crisp and cool, my favourite kind of day. The sun shines brightly, and the leaves glow on the trees, brilliant reds and yellows and oranges. The avenue in front of the college is stunning; the rows of trees stretching down either side shine like burnished gold. I wave goodbye to some friends as they head toward the student parking lot and set off down the avenue. I'm walking today, trying to stay green as long as I possibly can before the snow sets in. Winters here are cold, and as the snow piles high the sidewalks become treacherous with ice, making it perilous to venture out. I pull my scarf tighter around my neck. Winter isn't far off, if the temperature is any indication.

The leaves crunch merrily under my feet as I make my way through the side streets. My fingertips are beginning to go numb, making me regret my lack of gloves. I go to stuff my hands in my pockets and remember my assignment. I take a quick glance at the pages as I walk along. The question is emblazoned at the top of the page, font bolded and underlined. I read the directions aloud.

'You are to write an essay on the following topic. It will be due a week from today. How long you make the essay is up to you, but I will be grading you on the amount of insight shown. Choose your words wisely.'

Choose your words wisely. I fold the papers and put them in my pocket as I turn the corner to head down my street. Fumbling my keys out my pocket, I climb the front stairs of my house and go in. I set my book bag down beside the door. Shrugging my backpack

off. I boot up my computer, open Word and then stare at the screen, willing the blank page to inspire me. It doesn't.

I reach for my phone, falling back on habit. The phone rings twice before my boyfriend answers. I can hear noise in the background, children shouting.

"What's up?" he asks.

"I've got a new assignment," I tell him, "and I'm stumped." He laughs at this, knowing what's coming. "Can I use you as a sounding board?"

"You know you can." I can hear him smiling through the receiver. "I'm at the park downtown, checking out the competition for this weekend. Why don't you come down?" My boyfriend is a Human Kinetics major, and he coaches a youth football team in his spare time.

"It'll take me about twenty minutes to get there."

"Still walking? Good for you. See you in a bit then." He hangs up and I shut my computer screen off, grabbing a notepad and pen as I head out the door.

Twenty-two minutes later I'm sitting on a hard plastic bleacher watching as two teams of teenage boys scrimmage.

"So what's your assignment?" my boyfriend asks. I hand him the paper in response. He reads it quietly, and then turns to me.

"A football," he says.

"A football?" I look at him. "Did you even read the question?" I snatch the paper from him, reading the question aloud.

"It is in your power to send one toy to a child in a third world country. You may send anything you like, but only one of it. What would you send?"

He looks at me, nonplussed. I shake the paper at him. "You can only send one toy to this child and you're going to send a football? Why not send something useful?"

In response, he turns to watch the boys scrimmaging. "Have you ever been to a football game?" he asks me.

"Of course!" I say. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I mean a real football game," he says, looking at me. "There is something magical about watching a football game. It's a feeling, an experience quite unlike any other. It's as if by passing through the gates, the crowd is suddenly reborn into a single entity. No longer are they men and women, adults and children, sitting in the stands, they are the crowd. Rising together, exclaiming together, cheering, sighing and applauding as one. To watch a game amidst

other fans, hear ten thousand voices all cry out with you at the same time. It's a powerful, exhilarating feeling. If you've never experienced it, then you've never really been to a football game."

"When did you turn into such an orator?" I ask him, but the question is really only to cover my surprise. "What is it about football that fascinates you so? I've never heard you talk about anything that way."

He smiles. "Football is the most perfect game in the world. When played well, it can be breathtaking, but it's something more than that." He pauses, looking at the boys. "There's something clean and simple and beautiful about the game. Watching a football match can set your heart on fire one moment and then cast you into despair the next. It's a lifelong obsession; a madness that can be born and bred in you, but also a contagious disease. Once you've caught it, there's no getting rid of it."

"Well it looks like you've caught it." My words sound small and lame next to this torrent of passion he's poured out and I know it. Trying to get the conversation back I say, "But sending a football to a child isn't going to get them into a football stadium. Just because they have a ball doesn't mean they can watch a game. I still don't understand."

"If they have a football," he says slowly, "they don't need to get into a stadium. Playing football can transport you from your reality. It takes you to another world where you're no longer yourself. Look at those boys out there." He points to the field. "Look at the boy with the ball, just an average kid, right? Nothing out of the ordinary. He's got school, friends, family, everything the same as everyone else. But plying football, he can be David Beckham, or Ashley Cole or Ryan Giggs. When you're playing football you can be anyone you want and do anything you can imagine, whether it's scoring on a header or winning the World Cup. A child with a football can do anything. Give a child a football and they will play and play and play. It's a way to escape from problems and it can teach you how to surmount them. Football is a dream; it's a goal, an inspiration, something to reach for. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, if you practice enough and try hard enough, you might be able to succeed." He looks back at me, and smiles at the expression on my face. "Think of all the movies and

news reports on third world countries that you've seen. Now think about how many of them show children playing football."

I sit silent for a moment, absorbing this thought. In front of me one of the boys breaks away from the others, streaking toward the net. He dodges the last defender and gets off a beautiful shot. It arcs through the air, grazing the underside of the crossbar as it drops in over the keeper. His team mates surge around him, shouting and congratulating him. The boy's face is glowing, suffused with an inner light. His expression is joyful, triumphant.

"I suppose," I say slowly, "that giving a football to one child would actually be giving it to more than one child because they could play together." My words come faster as my thoughts begin to flow. "It's like that proverb, give a man a fish – feed him for a day, teach a man to fish – feed him for a lifetime." I turn and look at my boyfriend. He's grinning at me, and I feel a smile growing on my own face. I pull out my notepad. "Do you know any background on the sport? I should probably put in a bit about its history."

He laughs and waits for me to get my pen ready. "Football," he says, "has been around for hundreds of years. It originated in the Han Dynasty in the 2nd and 3rd centuries BCE and was called Tsu' Chu. Like hopscotch it was once an exercise to improve co-ordination and fitness among soldiers." He waits for me to get this down before adding, "it also exemplifies great qualities: fair-play, sportsmanship and skill. Playing football promotes health and activity, as well as teamwork. It also promotes self-confidence and strong self-esteem. You can say you got that but from a health professional."

"You are the best." I tell him, as I cap my pen.

"I know," he says, smiling.

I give him a quick hug and then stand up; "I'm going to get home and type this up while it's still fresh in my mind."

"Good luck," He says. "Send me copy when you're done, okay?"

"Will do," I say, taking one last look at the field.

I nearly skip all the way home, feeling the creative juices flowing inside me. I fly up the stairs, unlock the door and sit at my computer. I set my fingers on the keyboard, feeling the words welling up inside me, waiting to burst out. I take a quick glance at my notepad and begin to type.

The greatest gift to give a third world country, or in any country, would be a football. Not because it is the best toy, but because it is much more than a toy. Football inspires passion the world over because it is so much more than a game. Football teaches you skills that you can use throughout your life. It teaches you how to play fair, how to work as a team, how to practice and how to work for something you want. It teaches you how to believe in yourself and in your team mates as well as how to handle stressful situations and how to gracefully accept both success and defeat. When you give a child a football, you don't give them a toy. You give them a dream to aspire to.

"History of Football- the Origins." The History of Football. Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). 12 Jan 2009 <http://www.fifa.com/classicfootball/history/game1.html> .