HOME GROUND

ALAN GIBBONS

With illustrations by
Chris Chalik

Barrington Stoke

First published in 2019 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

Text © 2019 Alan Gibbons
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-856-5

Printed in China by Leo

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Chapter 1
Hasan

He was there again – the boy Sam had seen before. He was standing by the fence. Sam had seen him every week at the sports centre. He came with some older boys and played on the next pitch. He was fast and skilful. Because he was younger and smaller than the rest of his team, he got knocked over a lot, but he always picked himself up. Sam didn't know why he played in a team with kids that were older than him. One thing stuck out. It was the boy's hair. It made him look a bit like Mo Salah.

Suddenly, Sam heard a shout to his left.

"Wake up!" Jordan yelled.

It was too late. The striker Sam was meant to mark was powering past him, and Sam was on the back foot. Sam tried to get back, but he was too late. He swung a leg to cut off the attack, but he couldn't get in a tackle. The striker left Sam behind, ran wide and crossed the ball, leaving the keeper in no man's land. Another player was waiting in the goalmouth.



He tapped the ball into the empty net. “Goal!” shouted the players on the other team.

Sam’s team captain, Jordan, was really angry. His face was hard. His eyes were popping.

“What’s wrong with you?” he yelled, and came right up close to Sam. “You’re not here to day-dream. You’re here to defend.”

Sam felt sick – he’d given a goal away. His team, West Park Celtic, was second from bottom in the league and the boys couldn’t afford another defeat. There were two divisions in their league and they didn’t want to get relegated.

Jordan was still yelling. His eyes were hard like stones.

“All you need is a big red nose and floppy shoes,” Jordan shouted, “and you’d be the biggest clown on the pitch.”

Sam could feel his eyes sting. But he wasn't going to show he was upset. "I didn't do it on purpose," he said. "I switched off for a moment, that's all."

"Yes," Jordan snapped, "and that's all it takes. Your day-dreaming cost us a goal." He shoved Sam in the chest. "You're useless."

Jordan shook his head and stomped off.

Sam didn't want to look at his team-mates. It was so unfair. He knew he'd been one of Celtic's best players over the season. Jordan was a big mouth. He was always shouting for the ball, but he wasn't half as good as he thought he was. He lost possession most of the time and wasted chances. He always took the free kicks and penalties, but he missed them way too often. *How does he get away with it?* Sam thought.

Jordan planted the ball on the centre spot and clapped his hands.

"We're only one goal down," he told the rest of the team. "Concentrate."

Sam knew what was coming next. Jordan turned to Sam and tapped his own forehead. "That means you, idiot."

That was too much for Jack Rigby, their manager.

"Knock it off, Jordan," he shouted. "Show the other boys some respect. You're not helping."

Jordan scowled. He didn't like getting told off.

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Celtic played better for the rest of the half, but they were still 2–1 down and heading for their third defeat in a row.

"Well, at least you didn't give another goal away," Jordan said softly, so that Jack couldn't hear.

That made Sam angry.

"Say that again and I'll thump you," he warned. "We should stick up for each other. You missed a pen last week and I didn't say a word about it."

Jordan didn't like Sam talking about his missed penalty.

"That's because you wouldn't dare," Jordan sneered. "You're a coward."

Sam shoved Jordan in the chest. Then Jordan pushed him back. They had hold of each other's shirts, ready to fight.

"Stop right there!" Jack said, and stood between them. "Who started this?"



Jordan pointed at Sam.

"He did. He attacked me for nothing. He's off his head," Jordan said.

"Did anyone else see what happened?" Jack asked.

Another boy, Kai, stepped up.

"Sam started it," Kai said.

"OK, Sam," Jack said. "I'm subbing you."

Sam couldn't believe it.

"That's not fair," he shouted. "Jordan was winding me up."

"Then you need to get better at taking the banter," Jack said. "You're always going to get insults. It's part of being a footballer."

Sam dropped onto the grass and watched the rest of the team jog back onto the pitch. That's when he remembered the boy by the fence. Sam turned round to see if he was still there. The boy was in goal now, but he saw Sam looking. When his game finished, the boy came over to talk.

"The manager was wrong to take you off," he said to Sam. "You didn't start the fight." He pointed at Jordan. "He did."

Sam nodded. "I know. Jordan's crafty like that. You're not from round here, are you?"

"I am," the boy said. "I live in the flats over there."

"You know what I mean," Sam said. "That isn't a Liverpool accent."

The boy grinned. "I'm from Iraq," he said. "I came here with my family. We're refugees."

He waved his hand in the direction of the team on the next pitch. "My whole team is refugees. See those guys?" He pointed out two men standing by the goal. "They are from a local football club. They raised money for our kit and boots."

"Nice one," Sam said. "So what's your name?"

"I'm Hasan." He put out his hand and Sam shook it.



"You're lucky to be in a team with boys the same age as you," Hasan said. "Everybody in my team is older. They don't give me the ball and they make me play in goal – even my brother." He pointed to the tallest player on the team. "I wish I was in a team like yours."

Sam didn't feel very lucky to be playing for West Park Celtic. They got beaten more often than an egg.

"We're second from bottom," Sam said. "We're rubbish."

“So get some new players,” Hasan said.

That gave Sam an idea.

“Do you want to play for us?” he said. “I can talk to Jack. We play five-a-side here every Wednesday to train.”

“That sounds good,” Hasan said.

Just then they heard a lot of shouts and groans. Celtic had given another goal away.

“That’s done it,” Sam said. “We’re going to be bottom of the league after this result.”

Hasan laughed. “Then you definitely need me.”

WHAT IS A REFUGEE?

Refugees are ordinary people like you and me. They have to leave their home country because they are in danger. This could be because of war or a natural disaster. Or they could be at risk of being badly treated by their own government.

There are about 60 million people in the world who have had to flee their homes. Many of them live in camps. Refugee camps are not good places to live. People often have to sleep in tents or even steel containers that are hot and stuffy.

The biggest refugee camp in the world is currently in Kutupalong in Bangladesh. Turkey is home to more refugees than any other country – over 3 million. Less than 1 per cent of the world's refugees come to the UK.

Many refugees make long, dangerous journeys to escape war and fighting in their own countries. Some pay to get on a boat to cross the sea, but many of the boats are leaky and not good enough for the crossing. Thousands of refugees have drowned on their journeys.

Other people get on lorries or trains. Often they have to hide. It can be very dangerous, and some have been hurt or killed. Sometimes there is no food or water. People have even suffocated because there was no air in the back of the lorry.

When refugees do manage to reach another country safely, they aren't always welcome. When they are waiting to see if a new country will take them in, they are called asylum seekers.