

ONLY A GAME

Saturday

So there *was* a fence, a high one, too, easily three metres, and made of strong cyclone wire. 'Told you,' Andy said behind him. 'Nobody can get out.'

'They can't get in either,' Lan said, pointing out the window of the mini-bus to the open paddocks on the other side of the road. 'Maybe that's why they built the fence.'

'Yeah, right,' Andy said. 'And that's why there are guards with walkie-talkies. To stop the cows getting in.'

Lan grinned. He loved winding Andy up. Andy was always so sure he was right about everything. He studied the fence as they drew closer. You could probably scale it if you were determined, he decided. He couldn't see any sentry posts manned by armed guards, so it wasn't a prison camp like the ones in movies. No Alsations straining on the leash, either. And inside, instead of barracks, there were houses which looked remarkably like the houses he and his friends lived in, and grass and gumtrees and clothes lines. In one backyard a woman in a headscarf was unpegging some sheets while a toddler attempted to navigate a red-and-yellow

plastic tricycle along a pathway. Lan's little sister Lien had one just like it.

There were men in blue shirts at the front gate, and beyond that a boom gate like the ones for private car parks. Their driver opened the door of the mini-bus and spoke to one of the guards, who consulted a clipboard then stuck his head inside and scrutinised every face.

'We probably all look like asylum seekers to him,' Andy muttered into Lan's ear. 'Except Mr Thistleton, of course.'

The guard stepped back and waved them through as the barrier was raised.

'Doesn't look like I thought it would,' said Izram, who was sitting next to Lan.

'Is not like the place we stay when we arrive Australia,' Tomas observed. 'Better, nicer.'

'My dad reckons they've got swimming pools,' Akram said.

Lan couldn't see any swimming pools. But up ahead, on a grassed area, he saw a tent and trestle tables, a crowd of adults and children, and more men in blue shirts. Eleven boys of different sizes and colours were lined up under a banner that said, 'Welcome to Braeburn.' They wore shorts and a variety of blue T-shirts.

'Well, lads, there's your opposition,' said Mr Thistleton jovially.

'Reckon they speak any English?' Hiroki asked, as they filed off the bus.

Four weeks ago

'So how would you describe your team?' the man from the Good Neighbour Council asked. 'Just so I get an idea.'

Lan shifted the telephone to his other ear and hesitated. Was he asking about their ethnic backgrounds, or about their skills? This was the coach of a potential opposition team; could he afford to be completely open and honest?

He *could* say: 'Some of us had never played cricket at all a year ago. We've got a couple of opening batsmen who aren't too bad, but Tomas Nunez and Satto Basalama are weak links. Andy Chen's our opening bowler and he's pretty fast, and I'm a leg-spinner and getting better all the time, but Hiroki Yoshida doesn't always see too well and Phon Phimo loses his nerve. Only Andy and David Ho can reach the stump from the boundary and Izram Hussein's a better wicketkeeper than a batsman.'

What he *did* say was: 'Um, I guess we're all pretty different. Our coach, Spinner, calls us battlers. But we've got some good players. We always try to win, and we play fair.' He added, 'We like to have

a good time, too. Spinner keeps reminding us that cricket oughta be fun.'

The Good Neighbour laughed. 'Glad to hear it. A few of these youngsters have played cricket before, in Sri Lanka or on Christmas Island, but most are newcomers to the game. What with one thing and another, they've had a pretty tough time of it getting here, so if this match gets the green light I hope you'll cut them some slack, son.'

What did he mean, *cut them some slacks*? Was he referring to uniforms?

'My mother made our cricket whites,' Lan said hesitantly.

'Is that right?' said the Good Neighbour. 'Well, these kids haven't got anything like that.'

'Maybe we can just wear shorts and T-shirts.'

'Good-o. We've got plenty of those.'

So that was all right then. Lan didn't fancy asking his hardworking mother if she'd mind sewing eleven cricket uniforms.

Saturday

The Good Neighbour introduced the Braeburn team by their first names. He didn't say which countries they came from but, like the Nips, they looked a mixed bunch. Mr Kabiri, a detainee father who apparently

knew something about cricket, was one umpire and Mr Thistleton would be the other.

Lan wondered when Mr Thistleton had last umpired a cricket match. Did he know the rules?

Mr Thistleton assured him he did, or at least enough to umpire this match. 'I don't expect we'll be worrying about the likes of the "front foot no ball" rule, do you?'

'I guess not,' Lan said, having no idea what that was.

'Some of these boys don't look strong enough to lift a cricket bat,' Ms Trad observed with a little frown.

Lan thought they didn't look very happy either. But after everything they'd been through, he could understand that.

Ms Trad patted him on the arm. 'Good luck, Lan. I will go and watch from the side. There are a lot of people here to cheer for Braeburn and not many for the Nips, so I will try to clap very loudly when you score.'

Lan grinned. Ms Trad was like his mother, clueless about cricket.

Several of the players spoke some English, and the captain, a thin boy with a gap-toothed grin, was one of them. His name was Agi.

'Your team is called Nips?' he asked Lan as they tossed a coin.

Lan explained about the name of their school.

'We all go to different schools,' Agi said. 'So we will call ourselves Apods.'

'Good name,' Lan said.

Agi won the toss and elected to bat. Lan was disappointed – the first duty of a captain was to win the toss – but it probably didn't matter much in a limited-over match. He set his field. The Apods' opening batsman stood at the crease. Andy marked out his run-up for the first ball.

'Play!' called Mr Thistleton.

Andy dismissed the first two batsmen in the first over.

Three weeks ago

Mr Drummond, the principal of North Illaba Primary School, frowned at the piece of paper in his hand and then frowned even more sternly at the boy standing in front of his desk.

'What is it about your team, Lan, that seems to attract these government-funded invitations?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'What are they called again – your cricket team?'

'Nips, sir. NIPS XI. The initials stand for North Illaba Primary –'

'Yes, yes, I remember.' It was the cultural diversity issue again. He consulted the paper in his hand. *Positive*

community interaction . . . 'Well, a bus will be provided, as will lunch; parents are welcome to attend, but names must be submitted in advance. I'm sending Mr Thistleton to represent the school and keep an eye on things. Oh, and Ms Trad. She's keen to go, for some reason.'

'Yes, sir.'

Lan knew his parents, and the parents of most of the other players in the team, would be working as usual; they couldn't take most of the day off to go trekking into the countryside to watch a cricket match.

'You do realise who you'll be playing?'

'Refugees, sir. Those in the detention centre.'

'Apparently it's not a detention centre. It's an APOD, an Alternative Place of Detention. I'm not sure I appreciate the difference. Anyway, I'm sure you'll give the unfortunate youngsters there a good game and uphold the finest traditions of Australian sportsmanship.'

'Yes, sir. We always do, sir.'

'This is not about winning, Lan.' Mr Drummond looked at him sternly. 'Don't lose your moral compass. Close the door on your way out.'

Lan made his way back to his classroom, his mind turning over. Was Mr Drummond saying that he didn't mind if the Nips didn't win, or that he thought they couldn't? And what was a moral compass?

Saturday

Clearly, Andy was thrilled. He threw up his arms in triumph at each of the quick dismissals and accepted pats on the back from his team-mates who ran in to congratulate him. Lan was one of them, but he noticed that not many of the spectators looked thrilled. Even as he clapped politely, the Good Neighbour, the man who had arranged the match, had an expression on his face that said all too clearly *Have I Made a Big Mistake?* Next to him, Ms Trad was biting her thumb.

Mr Thistleton beckoned him over. 'Not a good start, Lan.'

'Not for them, no,' Lan agreed. For the Nips, it was the best possible start, a captain's dream start.

'If they chalked up some runs it would boost their confidence.'

Well, of course it would; Lan knew that. But it was hardly his job to help boost the confidence of the other side. What sort of captain would he be if he did that?

Agi, the third batsman, stepped up to the crease with a look of fierce determination on his face. Lan, who was the next to bowl, walked back for his run-up. He launched into his run and then, a split second before the ball left his hand, a sudden clamour coming from off-side made him lose concentration. His delivery was short and wide, and Agi smashed it for six.

From behind the wicket, Izram threw him a puzzled look as the spectators whistled and applauded and Agi, grinning broadly, raised his bat.

Annoyed with himself, Lan searched for the source of the commotion. On the edge of the field, a group was enthusiastically banging cooking pots together.

He congratulated Agi and trudged back to deliver the second ball.

'Good show,' said Mr Thistleton.

'Yeah, he's a good hitter,' Lan said. He just wished his first delivery hadn't been the one to make that clear.

Agi played some copybook cover drives until he was finally caught out thanks to a great save by Sal Catano. His innings had boosted his team's run score into double figures, but their luck didn't hold. A succession of boys trooped onto the field and almost as quickly exited. By lunchtime, which was called early, the Apods were all out for fifty-five.

One week ago

Ms Trad, North Illaba's multicultural teacher, knew very little about cricket but she knew what a big role sport played in Australia, and she appreciated how for new arrivals it could be a fast track to assimilation and acceptance. She had observed how young Tomas Nunez from El Salvador had flourished since joining the Nips'

cricket team, and how Akram Rajavi's self-esteem had improved. She noted the new degree of respect the students had for Lan Nguyen. Well, most of them. There were always a few like Ryan West.

'The government shouldn't be spending money on illegal immigrants, giving them free houses and paying for them to play stupid games of cricket,' Ryan said, as soon as Ms Trad had opened the discussion on asylum seekers.

Izram, who was seated behind Ryan, thumped him on the head. 'Cricket isn't a stupid game!' he countered.

Ryan turned and hit him back. 'It's stupid *and* boring!'

It had taken Ms Trad a good five minutes to restore order in the classroom. 'Rather than arguing about cricket, can we talk instead about who the team is going to play against next week. The asylum seekers at Braeburn.' She hurried on before Ryan West could interrupt again.

'These people, including, of course, the children, have come from places of war. They have seen their friends and family die. They have starved, they have been persecuted and rounded up by men with guns; they have been in and out of different crowded refugee camps. They have few possessions. Think how stressful it is to be in another strange place of detention where

they hardly speak the language and know nobody.'

Lan didn't need to think very long. His own parents had been boat people from Vietnam. He had heard their story many times. 'But now the asylum seekers are safe in Australia,' he said.

'I don't think they will feel safe anywhere for a very long time,' Ms Trad said. 'But perhaps this cricket game will help them feel a little more welcome.'

Saturday

'You know what this team get if they win today?' Izram asked, joining Lan at the lunch table. The Good Neighbour people had put on a barbecue, and the tantalising aroma of sizzling meat and onions drifted over the playing field.

Lan took a bite of his hamburger and shook his head. Mr Thistleton had said it was a friendly match. You didn't win prizes in friendlies.

'Points,' Izram said.

'Points?'

'To buy food.' He looked around and lowered his voice. 'Nobody here has any money. You get fifty points a week to exchange for food. A point's worth about a dollar. If the team wins this match, every player gets twenty-five points.'

'How do you know?'

'See that kid over there?' Izram indicated a boy at the other end of the table. 'His name's Omro. His mum was sitting next to Ms Trad and she told her about the extra points and how it was his birthday next week and she was going to cook a special feast if the team won.'

'So what are you saying?' Akram, who was seated next to Lan, spoke through a mouthful of sausage. 'That we lose the match so he can have a party?'

'Everybody on the team gets extra food,' Izram said. He turned to Lan. 'How does it hurt us if they win? We're not getting any prizes. We've got nothing to lose, but it'll be a big deal for them.'

Lan could see the logic of this, but the idea of deliberately throwing the match, even if it was for a good cause, bothered him.

'Everyone will know if we suddenly lose form,' Akram objected. 'It'll look suspicious.'

'Everyone wants us to lose!' Izram replied. 'Nobody will care. They'll be happy.'

Lan realised, with a small shock, that he was right. It was surely what Mr Drummond, the Good Neighbour and Mr Thistleton had been hinting at, and why else had Ms Trad told Izram about the points? He knew now what it meant to cut a person some slack: it had nothing to do with uniforms. And it wasn't necessarily for extra food points. It was to boost the rookie team's confidence and

give the whole Braeburn community a lift. How could he deny them that? On the other hand, how did you ensure that your team didn't win?

'I think we'd better have a quick team meeting,' he said.

The opening batsman for the Nips, for the first time in his life, was Tomas. Lan had tried to explain the reason for this strategy, but Tomas had been too alarmed to properly take it in. He knew he was the weakest player in the team, but if Lan wanted him to go first he would do his best. He gripped the bat, wondering if his hands were too close together on the handle. Did he have time to adjust them? Up or down?

The approach to the wicket by the Apods' opening bowler was, to say the least, weird. He skipped rather than ran, his arms spinning like a windmill, and the ball came out of the back of his hand, short and a little wide.

Tomas slashed at it and sent it straight into the hands of cover point.

'Sorry,' he muttered to Lan as he trudged off the field, his face red with embarrassment.

'Don't worry about it,' Lan said. He noticed Ms Trad on her feet and applauding as if hitting the ball for the fielders to catch was the whole point of the game.

Satto was in next. Like Tomas, he had been

unexpectedly promoted in the batting order, but unlike Tomas he understood the reason for it. At the other end of the pitch, Hiroki screwed up his eyes to see who it was, and gave Satto a thumbs up.

Their partnership made six runs before Satto was bowled out. Hiroki battled on but was dismissed a few minutes later. Both of them had trailed back to the bench looking dejected.

In terms of cutting the Apods some slack, Lan had done a good job. But he didn't feel good; it had meant putting pressure on three of his lower order players and exposing them to potential humiliation. Surely a captain shouldn't ever do that? Jemal and Izram were in now but after them, in almost any order, came the best batsmen. He glanced at the scoreboard. In order for the Apods to win, they would have to bag some fast wickets – which was unlikely, given the expertise of their bowling attack – or the Nips would have to restrict their runs to no more than two per over.

There was a loud clattering of saucepans and Lan switched his attention back to the game. On the last ball of the over, Izram gloved the ball to the wicket-keeper, who looked as bewildered as if a bag of gold had unexpectedly dropped from the sky.

'Losing sucks,' Izram muttered to Lan as he walked off.

Before Lan could remind him that it had been his idea, Agi came up and tapped him on the shoulder. 'What's going on?' he demanded angrily. 'Why are you handing us a win?'

'I'm not . . . we're just . . . making things more . . . even,' Lan stammered.

'Please don't. It is insulting to us. The best team should win. How will we know who the best team is if the match is not fair?'

Lan stared at his retreating back. *To throw a game for whatever reason . . .*

How could he have forgotten?

Five months ago

Lan could hardly believe what he was reading. But there it was, stretched across the width of the morning newspaper under a huge headline. He went back to the beginning and started reading the story again.

Mr Nguyen came into the kitchen and saw him at the table. He nodded his head in approval. 'Very wise of me to get newspaper delivery. One, it gets you out of bed early, even in holidays. Second, it makes you read more. Schoolwork can only improve.'

Lan could have reminded him that it was *his* idea to get a daily paper delivery, that he'd been the one to argue that it would help his English, that he'd had to

beg for weeks before his father reluctantly agreed.

He said none of these things because he wasn't listening; his mind was still on the astounding story in the paper.

His father brought his steaming cup of green tea to the table and peered over his shoulder at the newspaper. 'Cricket match-fixing scandal,' he said, reading the headline. 'What was wrong with match? How you fix it?'

'It means the match was rigged, that some of the players cheated in order to lose,' Lan said.

'Why they want to lose?' his father asked.

'For money. Some of the players accepted bribes to throw – lose – the match.'

'So the other side would win? I don't understand.'

'It's to do with gambling and betting.' He read from the newspaper account. 'It says here that over two million dollars was made from the fixing of the fourth Test.'

Mr Nguyen whistled. 'That's a lot of money to win on a funny game. Well, off to work. Another day, another dollar.' He'd overheard this phrase somewhere at the market, and had embraced it with delight since it exactly expressed his work ethic. He put his empty cup on the sink. 'See you tonight. Be good. Help your mother.'

'Bye, Dad.' Lan barely looked up as his father headed out the door. Cricket might be a funny game with funny rules, but it was an honourable game too. He and the others had only been playing for a short time, but Spinner had taught them that much.

He ripped the page from the newspaper. He'd take it to practice this morning and ask the old man about it.

'What's that you've got in your pocket?' Practice was over and Clarice 'Spinner' McGinty, former Test cricketer and volunteer coach, sat down next to Lan on the bench under the trees at the Denby Reserve and wiped his face with a rather grubby handkerchief. Larri, his small fox terrier, settled down at his feet.

Lan pulled out the newspaper page and unfolded it. 'Did you read about this match fixing business?' he asked.

Spinner nodded.

'How could they do it?'

'Didn't happen in my day. Professional cricket's all about money these days. Don't get me started.'

Spinner's yarns about the old days could go on for so long that birds fell out of trees, but Lan wanted to get certain things straight in his mind. 'It's wrong for bookies to fix matches and it's wrong for players to accept bribes to throw the game. But is it cheating? You know,

like claiming a catch when it bounced or not walking when you've edged a ball?'

Spinner scratched Larri's head. 'Remember your match against King's?'

Lan nodded. Every detail of that game was permanently etched on his memory.

'Their captain - what was his name?'

'Macmillan. Matthew Macmillan.'

'That's the joker. Remember when he was on 38 and didn't walk, and went on to get his half-century? Got a big hand, didn't he? Whaddya reckon he was feeling at that moment?'

Lan shrugged.

'What were you thinking?'

'That he didn't deserve it.'

'Me too, matey. And every player on the field who heard the snick, and everyone watching who heard it. And you can bet that inside himself MacMillan was feeling the same way. In my book that's the best reason for walking. Where's the pride in a dishonourable win?'

Lan recalled the look of shame in Matthew Macmillan's eyes after the game, when the captains had shaken hands. Spinner was right.

'There's different ways to cheat,' Spinner continued. 'And deliberately throwing the game, for whatever reason, is cheatin'. You're cheatin' the other side of an

honourable win. You're cheatin' the spectators of a fair match. And you're cheatin' your team mates.'

Lan nodded. When he played for Australia, he would remember that.

Monday

'You didn't feel the need to consider the bigger picture?' Mr Drummond inquired.

Lan wasn't sure what he meant. In his mind, the bigger picture was cricket and the honour of the game. 'The other side wanted a fair match,' he said. 'They wanted to test themselves against us. We went easy on them at first, but then we went for it.'

Mr Drummond clicked his teeth in disapproval. Hadn't he told the boy that it hadn't been about winning?

'Well, it must have been a disappointing day for the internees,' he said.

'Um, no, sir. Everybody had a good time. They said it was a terrific match.'

'Really? I'm surprised.'

'Mr Kabiri said we were inspirational, and so did Agi, the captain. They asked us to come and play again.'

'Did they?' Mr Drummond peered over his glasses. 'Well, I can only hope that next time you give them a sporting chance. All right, you may go to class now.'

Lan closed the door behind him. Mr Drummond didn't seem to understand that cricket was a game full of sporting chances. It had been his mistake at Braeburn to try to limit them. It had nearly ruined everything.

At his desk, Mr Drummond stood up and cracked his knuckles. Lan Nguyen still didn't quite appreciate the concept of good sportsmanship. Ms Trad would be useless at trying to explain it; perhaps he should ask Mr Thistleton to have a go. On the other hand – he opened the door and yelled for Mrs Moody to bring him a cup of tea – why bother? It was only a game.



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