

The Field That Remembered Me - Homa Zaland

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I don't know exactly when I stopped running. I think it happened slowly, the way the sun sets, you don't notice until it's already dark.

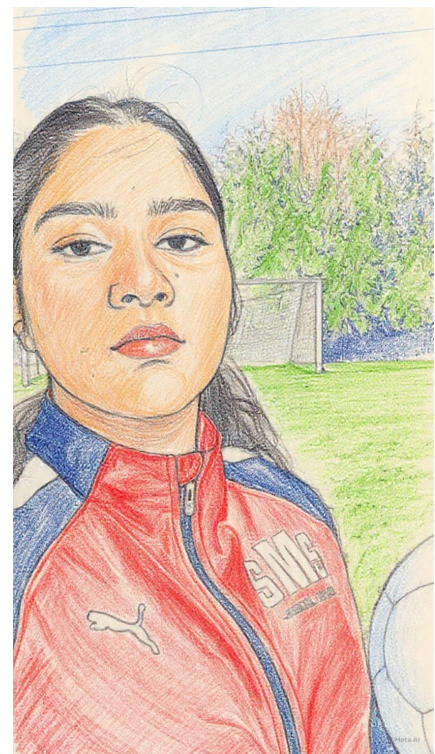
Soccer taught me something that took me a long time to understand. It's not about the game. It's about who you discover you are when you're playing it: Stubborn, alive, and still here.

I was born in Herat. If you don't know Herat, it's beautiful in a way that hurts a little. Old walls, old streets, the kind of city that feels like it has been holding its breath for centuries. But I didn't grow up there, not really. My family moved to Turkey when I was very small, and Turkey is where I learned what it felt like to just *be*: To run in a schoolyard without anyone watching to make sure I was doing it correctly; To sweat and laugh and fall down and get back up and not have any of that mean something it wasn't supposed to mean.

When we moved back to Afghanistan I was almost nine. Nobody sat me down and explained the new rules: I just felt them. The way the air changed when I walked outside, the way my relatives looked at my hair before they looked at my face. My cousin, who was perhaps eleven years old, told me: "*you are not in Turkey anymore.*" He didn't say it to be cruel. He was trying to help me. Somehow, that made it worse.

Soccer came from my cousins, boys. They played in the backyard almost every afternoon, a tiny, rough patch of ground. I started joining them and for a little while nobody said anything. I was fast. I didn't know I was fast until I was running and suddenly I was ahead. And that feeling of speed... I still don't have the right word for it. It was as though the ground was agreeing with me.

Then people started talking. There was a word they used for me, which meant: "*you are playing the wrong game for your body.*" What it felt like was a door closing. By the time I was twelve or thirteen, I wasn't allowed on that little patch of ground anymore. And then



the Taliban came and the door didn't just close, it disappeared. Like it had never, ever been there.

For years I watched soccer the way you watch something through glass: Present, but not touching.

I applied for the scholarship I unsure of it's likelihood. Girls like me, where I'm from, we learn to want things quietly so it hurts less when they don't happen. It was the *Women Leaders of Tomorrow* programme that I wanted to apply to. I filled out the application very late at night, alone, and I didn't tell anyone until the interview was already over. A few months later I was sitting with a letter that said I had a full scholarship to study in Canada. I read it three times because I thought I had misunderstood those English words, but they were true.

Before the visa came through, I was already in Pakistan, and I started training again for the first time in years. I want to be honest: it was tough. My body had forgotten things. I was training mostly with boys and I was slower than I remembered being. Sometimes I wanted to stop and go inside, and not come back. But I kept going. Not because I was brave, but because stopping felt like agreeing with everyone who said I shouldn't be there.

Now I play at St. Margaret's School in Canada. I'm still finding my pace, honing my skills. I'm learning on the field and everywhere else too: new country, new language (well, more English now), discovering a new version of myself that I'm still figuring out.

I want to study software engineering. I know that sounds like a different story but for me it's the same one. Building something, creating something that other people can use and grow from. It's the same feeling as being fast on a rough backyard field in Herat. Making something out of little, and proving the ground can agree with you.

I think about Afghanistan a lot. I think about the girls who are still there, who maybe have a cousin with a rough patch of grass in the backyard, who maybe felt fast once and then had a door close on them. I want to go back one day. Not to fix things, I'm not that arrogant. Just to build a field somewhere. A real one, or close to it. A place where a girl can find out that's she's fast.

I never stopped running. I just had to wait long enough for the ground in the field to agree again.