

RUN, RAMI, RUN

MICHAEL D'ERCOLE

Rami raised the cup, the symbol of victory, over his head. It was heavy and bulky, but he barely noticed its weight. He focused only on the cheers of his **ecstatic** schoolmates as they shouted, 'Ra-mi! Ra-mi!' The grin on his face widened and his teeth flashed under the gleaming Australian sunlight.

Rami had captained the team, urged them on at training, inspired them with tireless play until his leg muscles ached, and his right foot was numb from kicking the ball towards the hungry mouth of the goal. Now was the pay-off. At last, he tasted victory at the season's end, and nothing had ever been so **palatable** in his life.

As the team began the traditional victory lap of the school oval, Rami no longer saw the flash of school colours or heard cries of support from the grandstands. Instead, he pictured that day two years ago, when he had first stood in the schoolyard knowing no-one but watching everyone, and listening to the strange sounds of a foreign language that he'd been convinced he would never master.



It was as alien to him as the feel of his new school uniform, with its scratchy grey woollen trousers, and the stiff blue shirt with the golden school crest **emblazoned** on the chest pocket. He was grateful that there was no compulsory school tie. All the teachers wore ties, which looked confining, as if they could strangle his neck. At least the trousers were long and covered his legs, not like the shorts that many Australians wore so casually.

On his first day at the new school, he looked down at his new, shiny black lace-up shoes, the first leather shoes he had worn in his life. Even though they were **unfamiliar** and pinched his toes, he was proud of them. His mother had worked long hours in a local restaurant kitchen to buy them.

Though the uniform made him feel strange, it was nothing compared to the stares of the students around him. As he entered the schoolyard, a couple of boys with untucked shirts shoved him sideways

as they passed. Rami teetered on the edge of a garden bed before recovering his balance and his dignity. He walked on, looking straight ahead. After that, no-one approached Rami or spoke to him, but he could still feel stares upon him – stares that weren't so much **hostile** or unfriendly as curious.

But he didn't feel confident enough to try to use the few words of English that he had just recently learned, so he chose the farthest corner of the schoolyard to stand and watch the action, leaning against one of the solid brick buildings that formed a quadrangle, a sort of courtyard paved with black concrete.

Even though he didn't have a watch or a mobile phone then, he knew that it was quite early and the bell for morning classes would not ring for at least 15 minutes. Rami regretted his eagerness to get to this new school, and the way he had brushed his mother off when she had begged to accompany him.

Every minute, more students were pouring out of buses parked at the front entrance, rushing and **jostling** through the front gate. Groups of girls sat on the seats that lined the buildings and chattered and giggled together. Boys in smaller groups **lurked** on the edges, talking and occasionally play-fighting. There were a few couples too, boys and girls huddled together, whispering and even holding hands. Seeing this, Rami looked away. In his country, the girls would be in a separate school or in a secluded yard. There were no teachers in sight.

When a few boys started up a ball game in the middle of the quadrangle, Rami looked on with interest. Finally, this was something he could relate to, where words were not required and his feet knew what to do. He watched the ball weaving between the players, saw their concentration and their skills as they **manoeuvred** around the space, avoiding a group of girls who were sitting in the middle of the area, texting and taking photos of each other.

Suddenly, he realised that the ball was heading in his direction at considerable speed. Instinctively, he moved towards it, blocked it, dribbled it a few metres and kicked it with force. It flew over the heads of the seated girls, past most of the boys who tried to intercept it and bounced against the wall of the building marked 'Administration'. Then he just stood there, amazed by his own boldness. Before he knew it, the ball had been **retrieved** and kicked back to him. He looked at the tall blonde boy who had kicked it, and smiled as he booted it back towards

the makeshift goal area. The boy grinned back at him and gave him a thumbs-up. At that moment, the bell rang and Rami jumped in surprise at the high-pitched sound.

As he picked up his bag, a group of boys surrounded him, including the blonde one, who clapped him on the back. They seemed to realise that Rami couldn't understand their conversation, so they beckoned him to follow them into the nearest building.

He listened to their chatter as they pointed to themselves and told him their names.

'I am Rami,' he said, confidently.



By the time the victory lap was complete, Rami felt as if his arms would drop off. It was a relief to hand the cup – the winning trophy – to the **beaming** school principal, who shook his hand. The principal then moved toward the rest of the team, congratulating them all on the Grand Final win. Rami looked into the cheering crowd. In a far corner of the main grandstand, he saw the small figure of his mother, waving a flag in the school colours. He waved back as he led the team off the field towards their dressing room.