

SCORE!

“Aye. Ye’ll sure be a-needin’ His help out there, lad.”

The kindly voice caused 11-year-old Christopher Crosse to raise his head and open his eyes. Smiling down at him was dear old Pat Brady, the wise and wizened school caretaker.

Chris blushed. He had been muttering a prayer while fingering his tiny gold crucifix. It was only fifteen minutes before the game, but the changing room was still empty; the rest of the boys on St. Declan’s school soccer team were across the field in the pavilion enjoying the encouragement of friends and relatives. Chris had few friends amongst his classmates and, being an orphan, no known relatives.

“And comin’ from Him is the darn best encouragement indeed,” Pat continued as if reading the boy’s mind.

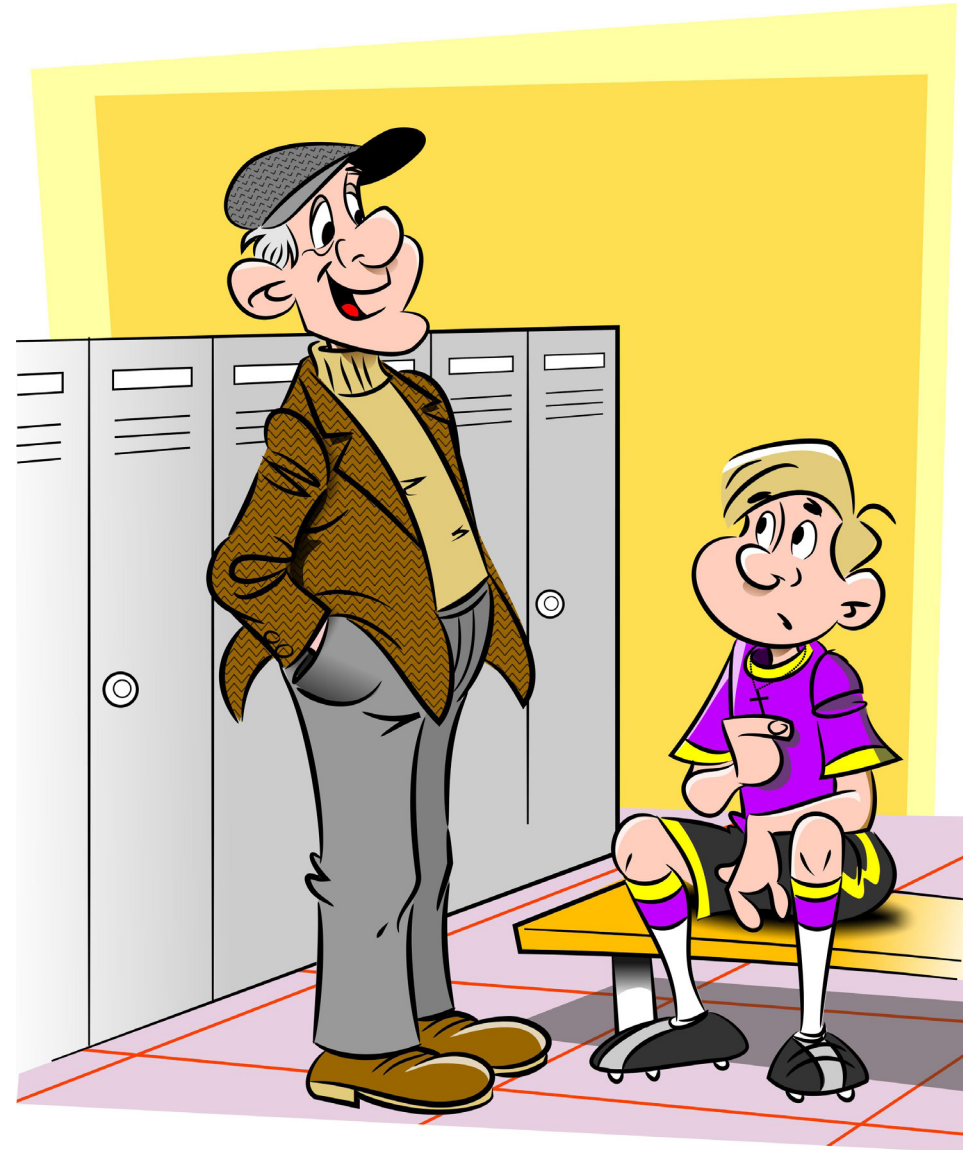
With a shy smile, Chris mumbled an affirmative.

“So don’t be a-lettin’ me interrupt yer contemplation. I’ll jes’ be doin’ a quick mop o’ the locker room and I’m out.”

The moment Pat slipped quietly through the side exit, the main door burst open, letting in a whirlwind of clatter and chatter, headed by a tall, dark-haired 12-year-old boy. He stood over Chris with a benign grin and winked.

Pete Langley. Chris liked him and looked up to him, and it seemed Pete liked him too, but any attempt on either side to develop a close friendship was fraught with concern for opinion. Pete was everything Chris was not: tall, good looking, and popular. Chris, being short, reticent and plain, was out of the running for membership in the Pete Langley “club.” The wink was enough reassurance, however, and Chris stood up, drew a deep breath, and smiled.

“Ready to take on the Ravenscroft Comprehensive bunch, Pete?” one of the boys asked.



“With the help o’ Chris here!” he said, and some of the boys snickered.

“I’m serious,” Pete said. He turned to Chris. “Ye’ll be sure to set me up, right?” he whispered.

Chris smiled. “I’ll try.”



“Okay, lads! It’s the day we’ve all been waitin’ for,” a husky voice announced, silencing the hub-bub. “Me and that crowd out there are expectin’ the best!”

Standing in the doorway, sporting a gleaming new jogger suit and tennis shoes, was 40-year-old Mr. Dermot McCluskey, the wiry, weather-beaten coach for St. Declan’s soccer team. He ran his fingers through his sandy, freshly styled hair, sauntered up to Pete and threw an arm over his shoulder.

“Especially from *you*, my boy. Ye’ve never let us down yet.

“And if it’s any added incentive, my daughter’ll be right there in the front row watchin’ ye,” he whispered to Pete before addressing the rest of the team. “All righty! Get out there and gi’ it all ye got, lads!”

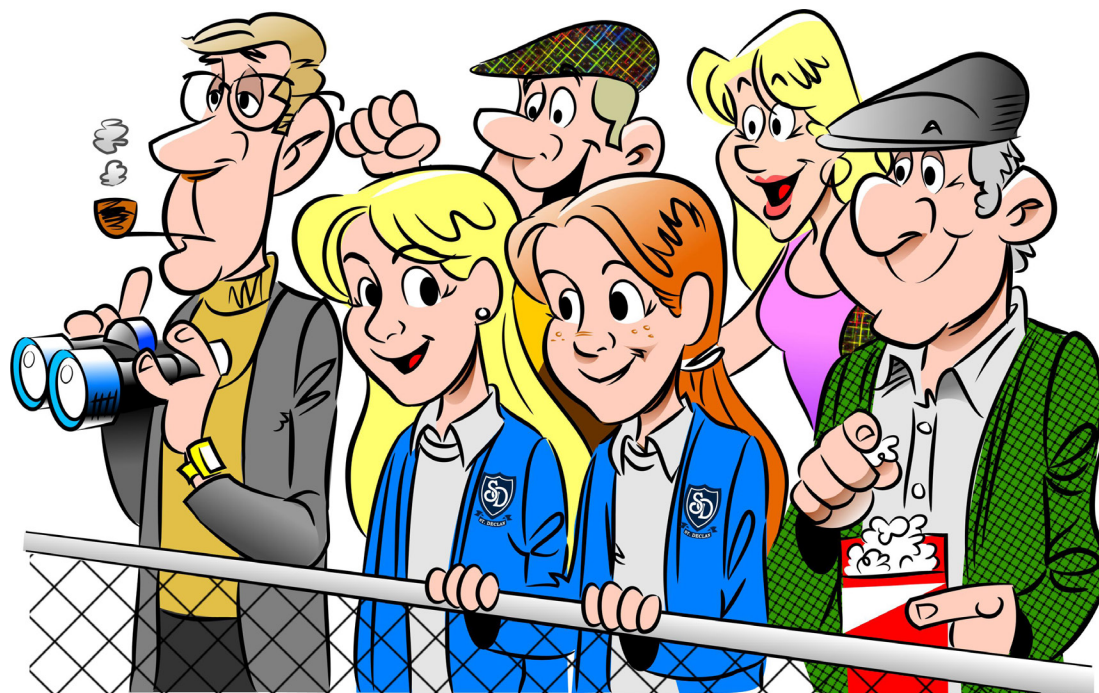


As seemed to be the norm for a weekend soccer game in Ireland, grey clouds had gathered and were emptying themselves onto the pitch, turning it into a foot-beaten mixture of mud and dislodged turf. The conditions did nothing to dampen the participants’ enthusiasm for the hallowed game, however, which manifested itself through tumultuous roars from the onlookers and guttural exclamations of approval or disgust from the players for every successful dribble or missed pass.

Is she there?

It was five minutes into the game and Chris was scanning the jubilant crowd.

Yes! Front row at the fence.



He had just made a nifty pass to Pete Langley, who had shot the ball into the goal. Pete was enjoying demonstrative approval from the team members, while Chris was seeking out the approval of 12-year-old Alyson McCluskey, a pale and diminutive red-haired girl from St. Declan's Second Form.

She mustn't have seen it, Chris assumed, seeing that her attention was neither on him nor even Pete Langley, but on a friend, a girl with whom she appeared to be enjoying a lively conversation.

But I can't let that keep me from giving this game everything I've got, Chris resolved in his mind, and for the rest of the game, he focused on setting up Pete Langley for the best shots, resulting in a resounding victory of St. Declan's over Ravenscroft Comprehensive.



"Terrific, Langley!"

"Aye, Pete. Fantastic. Thinkin' about making soccer a career?"

"Should do, Pete. That shot after what's-his-name passed you the ball at the beginning of the second half—a stroke of *genius*."

"I saw that too, Russ. I told my wife here that we have the next Bobby Phelan in young Pete here!"

"It's true, you were awesome, Peter."

"Thanks," Pete mumbled, as he awkwardly basked in the adulation that bombarded him in the pavilion, where the teams had gathered with parents, relatives, and friends, and of course, Coach Dermot McCluskey.

"My daughter here took mental note of every shot!" McCluskey said with a wink.

"And every pass, Dad," Alyson added.

"Pass?"

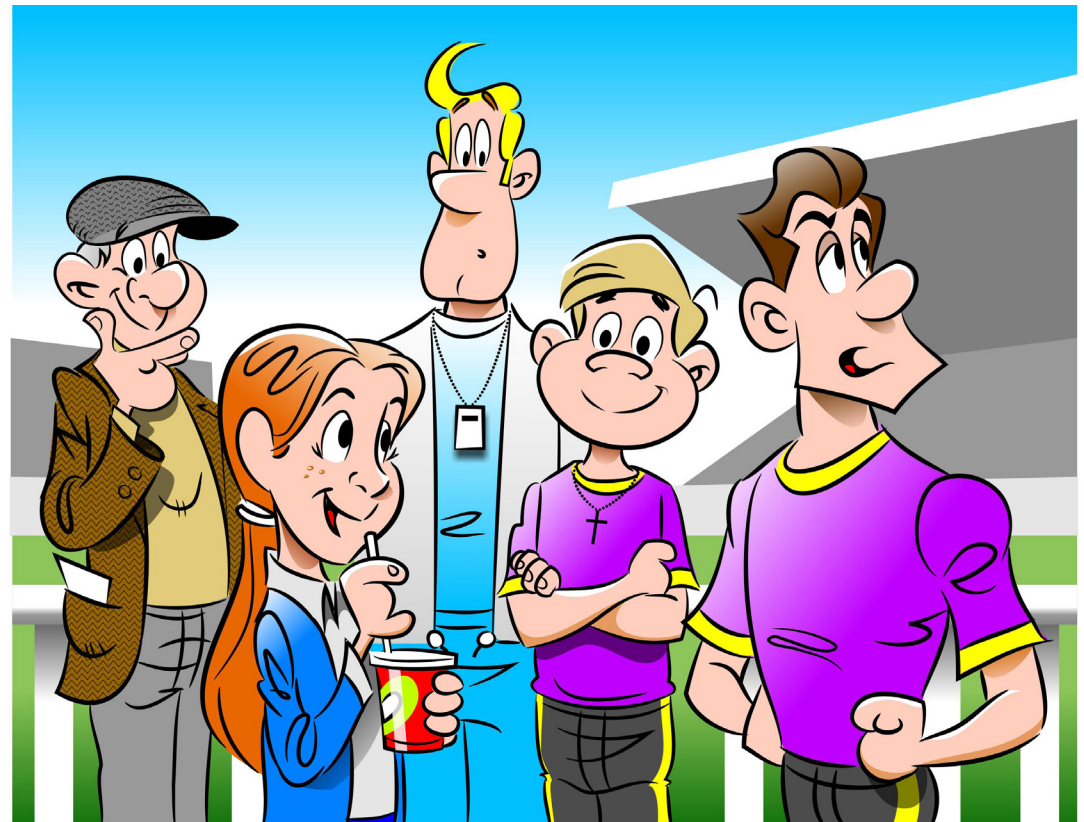
Alyson McCluskey sipped her soda and smiled bashfully. "Soccer's not exactly me thing. Ye know that."

"I'm well aware, lass," said her father. He lowered his voice and grinned at Pete. "A bookworm, like her mother. But I'm hopin' she'll get interested someday."

"What do you mean, Alyson," Pete asked. "Every *pass*?"

"I don't know much about the game," she replied. "But from an outsider's point o' view, it seems like what's-his-name here..."

She glanced questioningly at Chris who was dithering at the edge of the entourage.





"It seems like Christopher here was the one responsible for most o' the goals," Alyson went on.

"Ye noticed?" Chris asked, surprised at how she, apparently knowing little about soccer, could take note of that.

"Aye. I kept mentioning it to my friend, Mary, whenever it happened."

"It didn't happen *that* much," Pete said. "I took the ball myself and scored most of the time."

Alyson shrugged. "Dunno. All's I saw was that if it weren't for Christopher, your team would have lost," she blushinglly stated with a tone of finality.

Seeing Pete Langley's dumbfounded response, Dermot McCluskey put his hand on his daughter's shoulder and invited everyone for complimentary sodas in the pavilion's canteen.

"Be that as it may," he said, with a condescending chuckle. "We have to make sure Pete and everyone's ready for the county finals! We play against Dunham's Secondary."



Three weeks later, that day arrived, along with the participants' grateful acknowledgment of the sunshine.

"Must be the good Lord's blessin'!" said Pat Brady, carrying his trusty mop as he accompanied Pete Langley and the team to the changing rooms.

"I guess," said Pete.

"Bit down in t'mouth, me boy?"

Pete huffed and rolled his eyes. "I'll show 'em."

"Show 'em?"

"Nothin'."

Chris, who was already there in the changing room, having had his customary pre-game vigil, was tying the laces of his cleats when the team entered. He glanced expectantly up at Pete. There was no acknowledgment.

Although they were uncomfortable with Pete's dour silence, the boys dressed for the game, knowing better than to approach him about his disposition. Even Coach McCluskey kept his usual pre-game pitch to a mere pat on Pete's back and a whispered urge to "give it your best shot" as the players ambled onto the field.

"You bet," Pete snapped.



With a blast of the referee's whistle, the game was underway. Chris had taken his place as midfielder, but he felt inexplicably distracted. Alyson was there in the front row watching him, but that knowledge wasn't the cause of his uneasiness. Something was awry; he felt it in the air.

Suddenly, the ball was at his feet. Chris blinked; it was as though his mind was slowly catching up with his eyes. He drew back his foot, but the ball was gone, and the crowd who had turned out for the opposing team erupted into a cheer. The other team had scored a goal. Chris caught McCluskey's reproachful eye and shrugged apologetically.



Sending up a silent prayer, Chris bit his lip and with darting eyes, fiercely monitored the manoeuvres around him. Suddenly, he glimpsed an opening and ran for the ball.

“I’ll take this one!” barked a player who blocked his path. It was Pete Langley. He dashed his foot into the bouncing orb, sending it into the opponents’ goal.

“Need to be quick,” he said, turning and flashing Chris a triumphant leer.

“Nice one, Pete,” said Chris, surprised at his own reaction.

“Getting sarky now, are we?”

“No. I meant it.”

The whistle blew and the game continued for about ten minutes with no further goals scored for either side. Pete Langley was visibly testy, and Dermot McCluskey’s bellowed admonitions from the sidelines for the team to “get on the stick” were doing little to ease his mood.

“Okay, this is it,” said Pete, dashing for the ball that was speeding towards Chris.

It’s possible, Chris thought, lifting his foot. *Should I risk it?*

With a swift side kick, Chris sent the ball skimming into the goal. He felt a flush of satisfaction as the team looked at him in astonishment and cheers went up from the crowd.

“Beginner’s luck,” Pete Langley muttered.

“Good one, lad. But don’t be a-tryin’ a stunt like that too often,” McCluskey said. “Ye left it way open back there.”

Chris looked towards the crowd. In spite of the distance, he could see that although Alyson was watching him, she appeared puzzled. He turned his attention back to the game, wondering how it could be



possible to sense someone’s feelings and even their thoughts from so far away.

At that moment, the ball was soaring in his direction. It would reach him at the perfect height for him to head it to Pete. A piece of cake.

Should I?

In a split second, seeing Pete Langley heading towards him, Chris decisively answered his own question by stepping back and attempting to kick the ball into the goal. To his dismay, it landed between the feet of an opposing team member, and after a short series of passes, landed in the goal of St. Declan’s team.

“What’s wrong with you, Crosse?” McCluskey shouted amid the team’s denunciations. “You left it wide open for ’em again. Why?”

Chris’ hands fell to his side. “I ... I dunno, sir.”

The whistle blew, the game recommenced, and it wasn’t long before the ball was again in Chris’ court, this time spinning along the ground towards him. He trapped it with his foot and glanced at the goal. Deciding against another attempt to score, he looked around for Pete, who, to Chris’ surprise was suddenly at his side to take the ball from him. The ball flew out from under Chris’ foot and he lost his balance and fell.

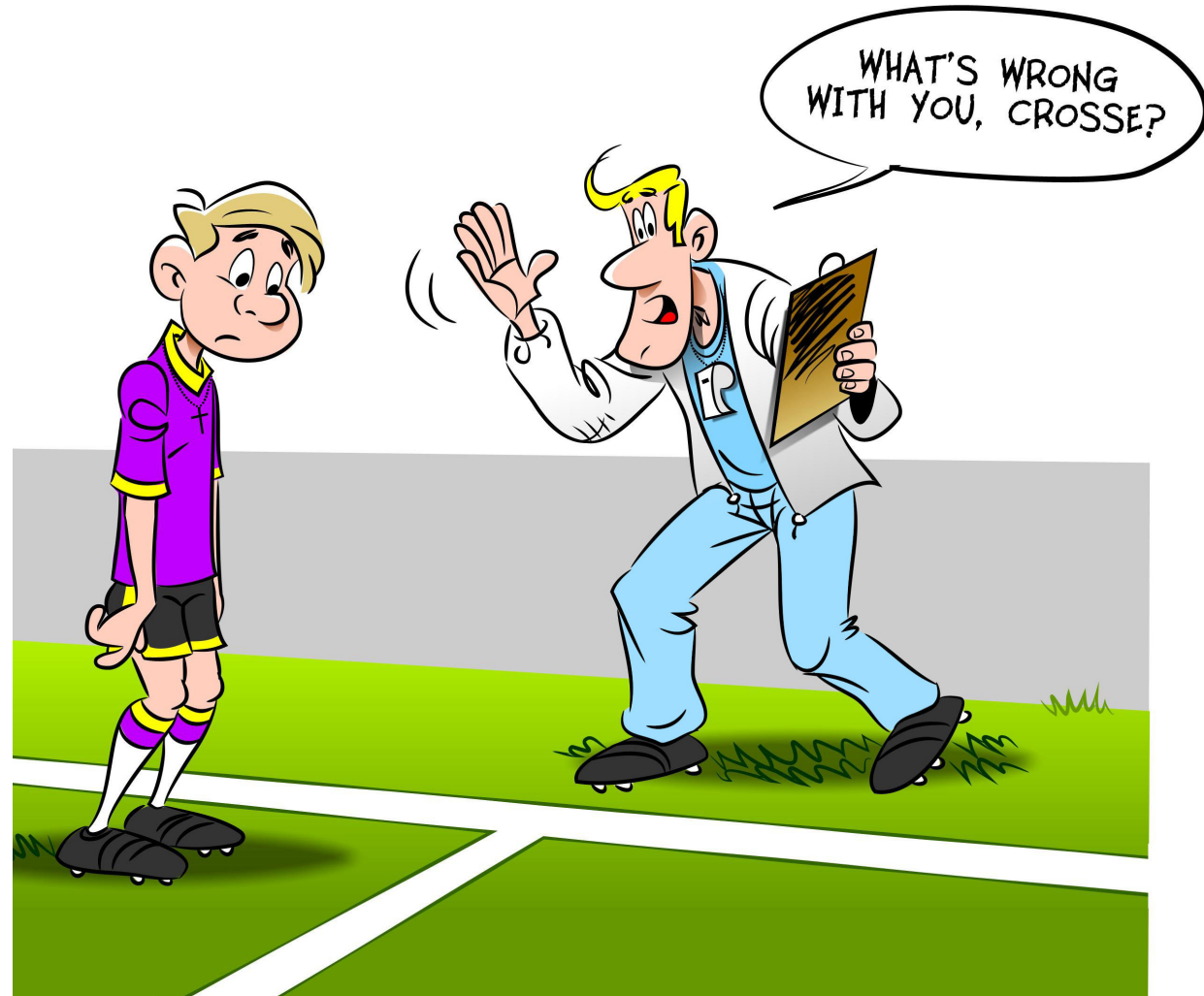
Picking himself up, he watched Pete Langley, egged on by the cheers of the crowd, elatedly dribbling the ball down the field and almost dancing through his opponents’ attempts to thwart him until he was squarely in front of their goal. He took aim with his foot and sent the ball right into the hands of the goalkeeper, who drop-kicked it to his team’s midfielder at the other end of the field, who in turn shot it into St. Declan’s goal at a remarkable curve.

It was halftime and the score was three to two in favour of Dunham’s Secondary School.



“I wouldn’t advise that if I were you, Dermot, my friend,” said Pat Brady, as he and McCluskey made their way to the changing room.

“Why not?” screamed the irate coach. “They deserve it! Botched the whole first half, they did.”



“Aye. But givin’ them a piece o’ yer mind in front of the others will be detrimental, I might say, at this point o’ the game.”

“Have a better idea?”

Pat pursed his lips. “Somethin’ to humble ’em without humiliatin’ ’em,” he pensively muttered. “Let me see. ...”

Inside the changing room, humiliation at the merciless tongues of their team members had already begun for Pete Langley and Christopher Crosse.

"You let us all down, Langley," said one.

"Aye," another chimed in as he sauntered out of the toilet stalls.

"The next Bobby Phelan ... pah!"

"We'd better not end up a laughin' stock because o' you," said another.

"It was as much my fault as Pete's," said Chris, to Pete's astonishment.

"Aye! Chris Crosse got his wires crisscrossed!" one of the boys jeered, throwing the team into a snickering fit.

"Lay off, Connelly," said Pete, clenching his fist.

"It's true, I should've stayed in my place," Chris added.

"That's fine fer you to say, 'saint' Christopher," another boy said.

"Your gaffes didn't surprise us. But *Langley*—he was a total letdown."

Chris shrugged. "Whatever, Fintan. I still think that Pete is the finest striker we have. ..."

The door flew open, and in walked Pat Brady and...

"*Alyson!*" Chris exclaimed.

A boy sniggered. "This happens to be a boy's changin' room, darlin'. Ye might get a bit more'n ye bargained fer!"

Pat smiled. "She's well aware o' the dangers, Connelly! But I do believe she has a wee word of advice for the second half."

"Where's Coach?" one of the boys asked.

"He decided to simmer down a wee tad and send a spokeswoman in the person of his own dear daughter to do the ... shall we say ... exhortin'."

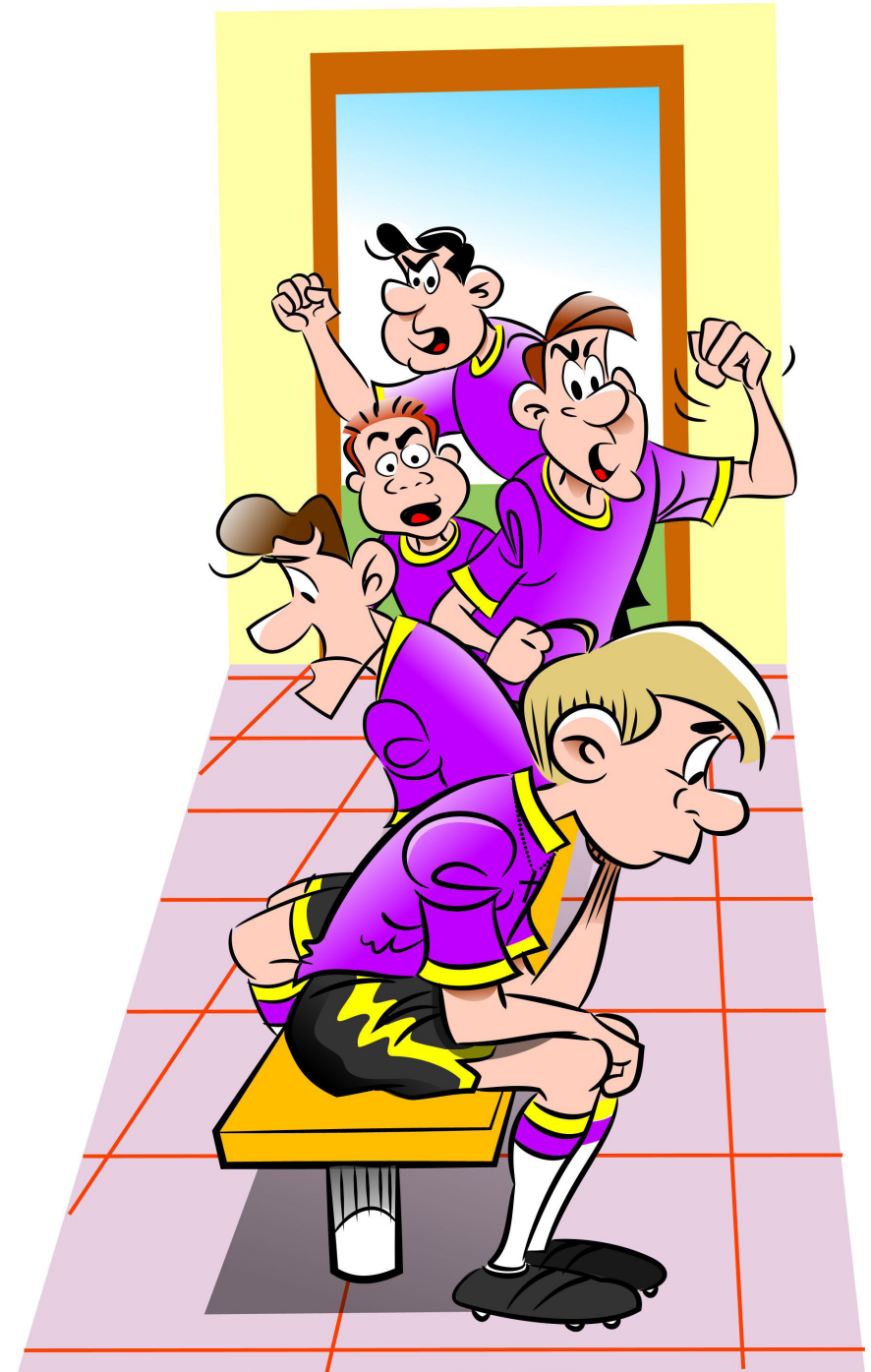
"What does *she* know?"

Alyson cleared her throat and drew herself up to her full height. "Nothin', Donegan. At least, not up until I watched the semi-final match last month. Now I ain't a soccer expert by any means, but I do think I learned a wee somethin' about the secret of a team's success."

A ripple of laughter followed and Pete Langley spoke up.

"Listen, you lot. We've got some catchin' up to do, and beggars can't be choosers at this point. We could use a little advice, right, Chris?"

Chris nodded.



“Okey dokey, for what it’s worth,” Alyson began, “not bein’—as I said before—a soccer fan, I thoroughly enjoyed the semi-final. Had a whale of a time, actually. The Ravenscroft boys were a bunch of ego-trippers—doomed from the start—so it weren’t surprisin’ you won. But even if you’da lost, it would’ve hardly made any difference to me.”

“And why’s that?” Pete asked.

“‘Cos it was a pleasure just to watch the way you as a team worked together, lookin’ out for each other an’ all. Like ye all had eyes in the back of yer heads. And Christopher, I loved the way you like, bided your time for the right moment to set Pete up for those incredible shots. Good goin’.”

“But ye said that if it wasn’t for Chris we’d have lost the game,” Pete said somewhat glumly.

Alyson giggled. “That I did. But it was more to tip the scale, ye might say, from all the praise ‘n’ glory that was bein’ heaped on *you*. Thought I’d save ye from the big head.”

Pete blushed. “Okay. Your point?”

“Well, Pete, I wasn’t gettin’ off on this game today, and I wondered why. It came to me that it was because some o’ ye—I won’t mention any names—were tryin’ to *prove* somethin’. There wasn’t that, you know, thing that was almost ... *choreographic* like the previous game.”

“Excuse me, Lady Alyson,” came a sniggering response. “Are you insinuat’in’ we should be doin’ ballet out there?”

“Save it, Connelly,” said Pete. “I get what she’s saying.”



“Me too,” said another boy. “This game is turnin’ out more like a circus.”

“With us as the clowns,” another added.

“Ye are right there, Fintan,” Alyson continued. “Some o’ ye was actin’ like the Ravenscroft bunch. No wonder ye’re losin’!”

“So, all that to say?” Pete awkwardly inquired.

Alyson lowered her head and turned to Pat. “I think I said me piece.”

“But her point?”

“I believe the dear girl has left her point for all ye big boys to figure out, Langley,” said Pat. “To me it’s as plain as day. But ye’d better get it quick—ye’re back out there in two minutes.”

Pete put his hand on Chris’ shoulder.

“Teamwork,” he finally said over the reflective silence. “I can’t shoot the ball into the goal without my friend here passin’ it to me.”

“And I can’t pass it to him without you all passin’ it to *me*,” said Chris, addressing the sheepishly smiling team.

“So we’re all going to work together, right?” said Pete, and the team nodded in agreement.

“Thank ye, Alyson,” Chris said as she and Pat walked towards the door. She smiled, blew him a kiss, and his heart skipped.



“Looked pretty grim fer awhile back there,” said Dermot McCluskey and clinked his glass of dark brown Irish stout with Pat Brady’s. “But they bounced back to bein’ the team I always knew! Beat them seven to three. I don’t know how they did it.”

Pat winked a twinkling eye, and a grin played on his rosy cheeks. “Ye daughter’s a-walkin’ in ye footsteps, Dermot.”




“And how d’ye come to that conclusion, Paddy? There’s not an ounce of ... er ... sportswoman’s blood in ’er. ... I always regretted that Brigid and me didn’t have a boy,” he added in a mutter. “After Alyson was born there was complications, and Brigid can’t have no more children.”

Pat Brady said nothing and pensively stared at his stout.

“What d’ye mean, she’s ‘walkin’ in my footsteps?” McCluskey asked after some silence.

“Maybe not in sports, mind ye,” said Pat before taking a sip of creamy foam. “But in gettin’ a team to work together. She’s got an eye, that girl. A mover and a shaker, that she is.”

“What? My Alyson?”



“Aye. In a quiet sorta way, without a lot of bluff ’n’ bluster she had that team of boys rootin’ to win by the end o’ her little pep talk. And not just rootin’ to win, but workin’ as a team. That’s more important. Take care o’ the pennies, ye know.”

Dermot nodded in amazement. “My Alyson. I never woulda believed it.”


“Strange ways of the Almighty,” said Pat. “By the way, ye said ye’d always wanted a boy?”

“Aye. And by saying that, I’m not sayin’ that my daughter isn’t a prized possession, mind ye—she’s a wonderful lass. But...”

“Dermot,” said Pat, putting a slightly inebriated hand on the coach’s shoulder, “today’s been a great one fer ideas, thank the good Lord, and I have another one!”



While the parents and relatives of St. Declan’s soccer team celebrated inside McClennan’s Inn, outside, where the evening sun bathed the rustic pub’s ivy-covered walls, the boys themselves sat at green wooden tables munching potato crisps and sipping their various choices of beverage.



Christopher Crosse was the toast of his fellow players, especially Pete Langley. “A better midfielder would be hard to find,” he was saying when Chris glanced over at Alyson McCluskey, who was discreetly eyeing him from the far end of the bench. Chancing some ribbing from the team, which fortunately did not transpire, Chris rose from his seat and walked over to her.

“I want to say thanks again for being our, you know, coach this afternoon,” he softly said with a shy grin.

“My pleasure; don’t mention it.”

“Okay ... well then...”

“Er, Christopher...,” Alyson began, seeing Chris was awkwardly starting back for his seat, “ye live in an orphanage, right?”

“Aye.”

“The one on Lisburn Road?”

“Uh-huh.”


“That’s close to where we live, but it’s a ways away from here.”

“Uh-huh,” Chris said again. “I’ll have to take the bus.”

“When’s your watchamacallit ... *curfew*?” Alyson asked with a giggle.

Chris looked at his watch. “Oh gosh! In half an hour. I need to go.”

“Wait,” said Alyson, standing up from her seat. “It’s close to where we live. Let me ask me dad. Maybe we can drop ye off.”



A few minutes later, Dermot McCluskey staggered merrily out of the pub accompanied by his wife, Brigid, a vivacious redhead with sparkling green eyes and ruddy complexion.

“Don’t worry,” Alyson whispered to Chris. “Mam’s got the keys to the car.”

“I heard that, Alyson, me girl,” slurred Dermot. “But remember I’ve got the keys to her heart.”

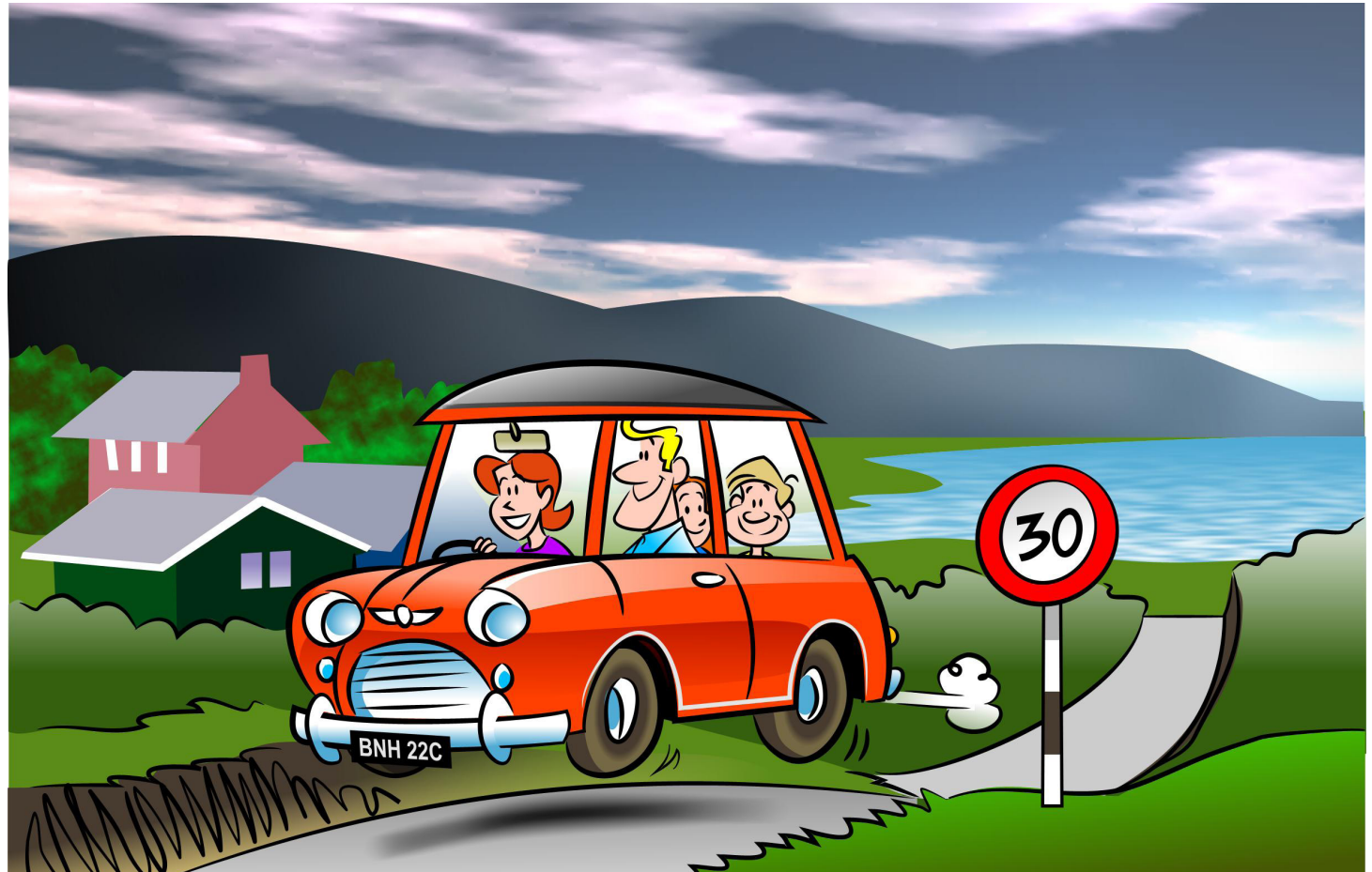
“Hope we get you there on time, Christopher,” said Brigid as she revved up the car. “It’s at least a twenty-minute drive.”

“That’s okay, Mrs. McCluskey,” said Chris, who was sitting in petrified bliss with Alyson in the back as the Mini began the winding journey through the narrow country lanes of Kilderry. “I just appreciate not having to take the bus there.”

“And soon ye may never have to again,” Dermot blurted out.

“*Darlin’!*” protested Brigid.

“*Tell* the boy, sweetheart! Might as well find out now if he’s game.”



Chris glanced questioningly at Alyson, who smiled knowingly.

“Very well then, Christopher,” Brigid continued, “we ... meaning my husband, Alyson, and meself—were a-wonderin’ if ye’d like...”

“...To get to know our family better,” Dermot blurted out again.

“Not so fast, honey, we don’t want to pressure the dear boy.”

Chris’ face lit up and Alyson smiled as she slipped her arm into his.

THE END