

Runner-Up Junior Category

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From the Streets to the Pitch

Footsteps echoed through the narrow alley. The dim, flickering street lights accentuated the dark circles underneath her eyes that showed up instead of sleep. Her backpack straps dug into her shoulders, while the soles of her boots, coming apart at the seams, dragged along the rough pavement. Her knees buckled until, with noodle limbs, she collapsed to the cold concrete.

Victoria, or Tori, as she preferred, wasn't a typical 14-year-old. Her sallow skin, large, sunken, brown eyes, overgrown nails, and untamed nest of dishwater blonde hair made her stick out on the streets of Cork.

Tori was settling in for the night under a shopfront, a good deep one, when it started lashing. From experience she knew that her borrowed bedroom was about to become a damp and dreary pond so she quickly collected her scarce belongings and darted to her one safe haven. A large oak that towered over a camogie pitch, whose giant leaves provided shelter. Many mornings she had lazily and longingly gazed upon the GAA girls as they played their camogie, something she wished could become a part of, but knew that in her circumstances she never could.

"Oi!" a voice bellowed, awaking Tori from her dreams of camogie, "*You there! Whaddya think you're doin'?*"

Tori's heart leapt out of her chest. A glance below confirmed the voice came from the pot-bellied coach she has seen running Saturday practices. She slowly turned her tired and stiff body to face him, she thought of going with the innocent little girl act, but quickly tossed that thought aside.

"*None o' yer business, old man*" Tori snarled.

He raised his eyebrows and gave the oak a fine kick with sole of his boot. It didn't budge. Tori wasn't going to hang around with this guy hollering at her. She quickly climbed down and was about to run away when he cleared his throat.

With a toothy grin he began, "*You know, if ye wanna watch the training, you can sit in the stands. 'Tis comfier than the branch. You can-*"

"*Knock it off, huh!*" she interrupted, "*Knock off the do-gooder act, old geezer.*"

The coach raised his arms, no longer smiling, but smirking, with his palms facing forward showing that he meant no harm. He examined her face, when a flicker of recognition appeared.

"*I've seen you scamperin' round the place. Fast, very fast. Ever tried your hand at camogie? Wouldn't mind having you on the team...*" He rambled on, using random camogie references that were completely unbeknownst to Tori.

She pondered the thought of it, a ridiculous thought that would be impossible in her situation, but still, a thought...

Imagine! Tori's face plastered all over the front of every Irish Examiner!... But she couldn't let her guard down, not yet.

"*What's in it for me?*" Tori questioned, with a hint of suspicion lingering in her voice.

"*Well there's always fitness and...*" the loud-mouthed coach's voice faltered. "*I can see you're not buying any of that. Tell you what, why don'tcha join the girls for a training session and if you don't like it, then be on yer merry way.*" With that, he spun on his heel and returned to the pitch, leaving Tori dumbstruck. No one ever talked to her like that. People usually wanted nothing to do with her, and here he was inviting her, a bit rudely, but nonetheless inviting her, to join them.

After a moment's hesitation, Tori dragged her feet over to the stands, reluctantly, but curiosity got the best of her. She sat awestruck watching the small ball sail over head to land an impeccably clean point. The girls were high fiving one another and congratulating the shot-taker for her outstanding point when it dawned on them that they were not alone.

One girl glanced over her shoulder and spotted ragged looking Tori, gawping at the girls. One by one they turned to face the mystery girl who had appeared in the stands. Tori hastily looked down to avoid their penetrating gaze.

One of the older, bigger looking girls stepped forward, and cupped her hands around her mouth.

"Hey, you there! Why don't you come down and join us?" Tori glanced around, desperately looking for someone else sitting in the stands that this girl was shouting at. But Tori was alone.

"Yeah, you!" a smaller girl called out. With a running jump she used her hurley to vault over the barrier that separated the stands from the pitch. Within seconds, she was tugging at Tori's sleeve.

"C'mon!" she said with a laugh, *"We can't be waiting till tomorrow!"* with that she pulled Tori down to the pitch.

The girls started chattering instantly, and Tori was only hearing bits of the conversation.

"Do you pl-"

"Are you a-"

"What's you-"

With wide, alarmed eyes Tori cautiously took a step back. An older, bossy-looking girl glared at her teammates and a hush fell over the lot. She stuck out her hand, introduced herself as Clarissa, the coach's daughter, and waited for a response.

"To-or-r!" Tori mumbled.

"Sorry, say again?" Clarissa put a hand up to her ear.

"Tori!" she practically shouted, quickly covering her mouth.

Just as the girls were about to say something, it started pouring. The team sprinted across the pitch, someone yanked Tori's arm, and they rushed into a cozy looking cottage.

Inside the toasty cottage, Tori could hear the rain pounding on the roof. A delightful smell wafted throughout the house, of freshly baked bread. A fire blazed in the hearth and a small ginger cat slunk through Tori's legs. Tori spotted the coach. This must be his house, she thought. Her thoughts were confirmed when a lady appeared, laden with a tray of fresh muffins, who greeted the coach with a, *"Hey, honey"*.

"Hi Mrs Walsh!" the team chorused in unison. Smiling, Mrs Walsh set the tray on the coffee table. Everyone clambered over to grab a muffin. Tori hadn't eaten properly in ages and swiped one off the tray. She sank her teeth into the soft, moist, fluffy delicacy, then licked her lips appreciatively. Swiftly finishing the muffin, she was craving more when Mrs Walsh reappeared with another tray. This time full of steaming hot cups filled to the brim with mouthwatering hot cocoa, each topped with a mountain of whipped cream jewelled with pink marshmallows. Tori was practically drooling at the mere sight of them.

As they were passed around the team, Mrs Walsh realised she was one short.

"Looks like we have a new addition to the club! What's your name, darling?"

"Her name's Tori, but she doesn't talk much," one of the girls piped up.

"Ok then, Tori dear. I'll be back in two ticks with a lovely cup of cocoa for you, ok." Tori smiled sheepishly.

As they sipped their delicious drinks the girls asked if Tori had ever played before.

"I've watched loads, but no, I've never actually played," Tori replied.

The girls insisted on her playing on Sunday, but Tori had other plans. She shouldered her pack, thanked Mrs Walsh for the warm drinks, and was turning the doorknob when the coach realised her intentions.

"Oh no you don't! There's a perfectly good spare bed in Clarissa's room." Just on cue, Clarissa materialised at her father's side and offered to show Tori the way. Walking through the narrow hall she kept her mouth shut and smiled shyly, but she was bursting with questions.

Tori hadn't realised how sleep deprived she was until she crawled under the bed sheets wearing borrowed flannel pyjamas.

Morning came all too quickly for Tori. She squeezed her eyes shut as Clarissa opened the curtains.

"Rise and shine, girls!" Mr Walsh rapped his knuckles against the door.

By the time Tori returned from the bathroom, Clarissa had laid out a jersey and a pair of shorts on Tori's bed. It was a small gesture, but a kind one.

When they arrived at the pitch, the other girls were already there clutching their hurleys. Coach went to a small shed in the corner of the pitch that had previously gone unnoticed by Tori and brought back an old hurley.

After teaching her the basics of the game, the rest of the team stepped back to let her try to toss up the sliotar and shoot it towards the goal. Tori grasped the hurley. Using the technique they had shown her, lifted the sliotar and swung her hurley as hard as she could.

The team erupted in cheers, as the sliotar flew through the posts. Tori couldn't help but blush scarlet as she was showered with praise.

"I've gotta say, you've gotta real knack for this!" coach praised, *"guess it was a good day for the GAA when I challenged you to join us. Keep up the good work, kid!"*

This was only the start of her journey, but Tori knew she wasn't going to regret this. She couldn't wait to see what GAA had waiting in store for her.