

16. A Football? But It's Not Round

****Chapter 16: A Football? But It's Not Round****

The shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, Iran, attracts millions, more than those who visit Mecca. For Aghdas Kavandi, it was a sacred site to pray for her son Kaveh, who was born profoundly deaf. Aghdas initially blamed herself for Kaveh's condition due to a fall during pregnancy, a belief later contradicted by the discovery of a genetic link to deafness in the family. She fretted over Kaveh's future, fearing he would struggle to live independently or form meaningful relationships. Her pilgrimage to the Imam Reza shrine reflected the traditional Shiite practice of seeking healing.

Born in 1963 in Tehran, Kaveh was a cheerful boy, but his life altered when peers noticed he could not hear. This led to exclusion and rejection that he still recalls years later. Despite this, Kaveh's parents sent him to a deaf school, where he faced harsh discipline and learned a method of communication that combined gestures with lip-reading called cued speech. While struggling academically, Kaveh found solace and camaraderie playing soccer in the vibrant cosmopolitan atmosphere of 1960s Tehran, where he formed friendships with German boys who introduced him to impressive soccer techniques.

Kaveh excelled in soccer, using his deafness to his advantage, which allowed him a unique focus on the game. Despite his sporting success, Aghdas remained anxious about Kaveh's future and sought medical advice in Paris, where doctors confirmed his deafness was permanent. Undeterred, she pursued sending him to the American School for the Deaf in Connecticut. This plan faced familial opposition from Kaveh's father, who expressed concerns about Kaveh's safety in America.

After a family loss financially enabled Kaveh's trip, he left for the U.S. with another deaf boy. Their first experience was a humorous struggle to understand American football from a new friend, which Kaveh found odd—but later grew to admire. At the American School for the Deaf, Kaveh felt intimidated by the advanced sign language skills of his peers but discovered his love for football, quickly adapting and excelling in the sport.

Upon graduation, Kaveh moved to California, where he worked at various jobs, eventually winning a lawsuit against an employer for discrimination. Over time, he built a life marked by success, culminating in a teaching position at the California School for the Deaf in Riverside. Aghdas visited, proud of her son's achievements, validating her sacrifices as Kaveh's success brought her peace, reinforcing her faith in her prayers for his well-being.