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Love and Soccer

“I am myself sifting my memories, the way men pan the dirt under a barroom floor for the bits of gold dust that fell between the cracks. It’s small mining– small mining. You’re too young a man to be panning memories, Adam. You should be getting yourself some new ones, so that the mining will be richer when you come to age.”

–East of Eden, by John Steinbeck

I love the idea of a life lived gathering stories and adventures. After reading this passage, I decided my guiding principal would be to live my life without holding back from any opportunity for adventure. If there was a choice between a wild adventure and taking a break and catching up, we would be off to adventure. I’m often behind on paperwork, laundry, housecleaning, seeing friends, and sleep, but I never regret the adventures we’ve shared along the road.

My first adventure with Doug’s soccer world came seven months after we met. He lived in Iowa while I spent the summer in New Jersey, and the Region II (Midwest) Youth Regional Soccer Tournament was in Canton, Ohio, or about halfway between us. I didn’t have much interest in the tournament but the opportunity to see Doug was too good to pass up. So off I went in my parent’s Chrysler E-Class, headed further west than I’d ever driven before.

I was about one and a half hours from home when I stopped at a rest area and locked my keys in my car. I was super annoyed with myself, having left for my journey later than planned. I sat by my car and stewed, thinking about each moment I could be spending with my boyfriend as I waited for AAA to arrive. I stared at the keys sitting tantalizingly close but locked behind the glass windows of my secured car. Forty-five tortured minutes later, AAA rescued my keys and I was back on the road.

A little further into Pennsylvania, my car started making a horrible noise and slowly lost speed. I got off I-80 in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania and found a service station. The mechanic said it was the catalytic converter and he wouldn't be able to get a spare one until the next afternoon. I was furious. My parents had just had the car checked by their mechanic and had asked *specifically* about the catalytic converter. Now I was not only going to lose a day with my boyfriend, but I needed to find a place to stay and pay for two hotel rooms (the one in Lewisburg and the one in Canton). I sat down on the grimy chairs at the side of the auto shop and put my head in my hands and started silently crying. I was absolutely devastated. I was not going to see Doug or the tournament. I had no idea how to reach him to tell him where I was (the days before cell phones!) I proceeded to lose it.

The mechanic, so undone by my undoing, came up with an ingenious plan. He told me he could take apart the catalytic converter, take all the junk out of it (my technical term) and weld it back on. It wouldn't be legal, but I'd be on my way in about 4 hours. Four hours sounded a whole lot better than overnight, so I signed off on the plan. A few hours later, I was on my way.

Of course, things like these always come in threes, don't they? But I was too young to pay any attention to superstition. I was speeding along trying to make up some time before nightfall when I came up over a bend on I-80 and too late to slow down, saw the state trooper hiding out behind a boulder with his radar gun. I couldn't even get upset. I was so disastrously late already, and more importantly, if you've ever driven across Pennsylvania, you know it is a VERY expensive place to get a speeding ticket. In a full-out panic I was about to triple the cost of my trip with this ticket. I began to think of ways to beg for mercy. I rolled down the window for the Trooper.

"Miss, do you know why I pulled you over?"

“Um, no officer, I don’t.”

“I clocked you doing 83 miles per hour in a 55 zone.”

“Really? Well, I kept getting boxed in by all these semis, and I was trying to pass one when you clocked me.” If you’re going to lie, at least start with the nearest thing to the truth. It was a bit terrifying doing my first major road trip on I-80.

“But ma’am, (long pause) 83 miles per hour?” Touché, officer.

I chuckled. “Well, I’m not going to tell you that I drive 55, but I don’t do more than 10 over. I live in New Jersey and I go to school at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh. I drive back and forth across Pennsylvania all the time, but I usually take the Turnpike, and there’s a lot less trucker traffic. I just got freaked out by all these trucks. You can check my record, I’ve been driving for over three years and I’ve never had a ticket.” The three years part was a bit of a stretch to include my year with a permit, but it was close to the truth.

The Trooper looked skeptical, but continued, “Well, I’ll check your record, and if you’re telling the truth, I’ll let you go with a warning.”

In a day of frustration, I’d finally caught a break, and I couldn’t believe my luck. I was hoping to get my ticket reduced to under 10 over, which still would have cost \$100 in 1992 money and who knows how much on my insurance bill, but the Trooper kept his word and I had told the truth. I had just talked my way out of my first speeding ticket.

The rest of the way to Canton was uneventful and around 11 pm, I found the referee hotel. I had no idea how to find Doug, but I didn’t have to wonder too long. Most of the referees had their doors open as they joked around with each other and it didn’t take long for someone to crack a joke about the Iowa referees. I followed the ruckus and soon was reunited with my beau.

My first glimpse at “Soccer Referee World” certainly had its highs and lows. Midwest Regionals was a huge production of the best of the Midwest soccer teams. State Champions from all over the Midwest from age Under-14 through Under-19 travel to Regionals to try to advance to the National Championships. It’s played in a different state every year in huge soccer complexes. There are soccer games as far as the eye can see, interspersed with medical, referee, and merchandise tents. It is serious business for youth soccer.

The tournament was very strict and had rigid rules of conduct and modes of behavior. Young, ambitious referees were out all day in the sun, striving to referee top flight youth games to the very best of their ability, knowing they were always under the watchful eye of assessors that could and would control their careers. Not just for the weekend but for as long as they wished to advance. After their grueling day, the refs would gather to go out every night and talk over dinner, always anticipating their assignments for the next day, which wouldn't be handed out until they were slipped under the door at four or five in the morning. Referees struck me as obsessive compulsives. Some needing to recite rules by their number in the rule book, others that would religiously prep for a game in the same order of pocketing cards, score sheet, whistle, and almost everyone shining their shoes before every game (making Canton, Ohio, temporary shoe-polish capital of the world). Games went from dawn until dark every day, but the referees did all this not for pay but for the honor of working these games. It all seemed cult-like to me, but I had to admit it was a fun atmosphere with really great people.

My second night at the tournament, we went out to the Olive Garden and sat around a huge table. The referees at the table talked about their games of the day. The banter over dinner was entertaining stories about what some crazy coach had done or a point of interest in a game. The dinner devolved into a noisy, out-of-control affair complete with a wild game of Frisbee played with restaurant coasters.

I met some of the Iowa referees such as Janet Larson, future Godmother to our daughter, and Doug's roommate, future Federation International de Football (FIFA) referee Terry Vaughn. These referees were funny, raucous, and entertaining, like a supportive sibling-esque group of people who were at the very least passionate about soccer refereeing, if not soccer itself. It was entertaining to spend tournament down time with this engaging group and nice to feel a part, however far on the fringe, of the referee family.

During the tournament, I made several new friends and became conversant with the Laws of the Game, as the soccer rule book is called. It opened my mind to just how big soccer had become in the US and how important it was to the man I loved. I wasn't a part of it yet, but watching some of the best referees and youth players of the Midwest,

I wanted to find the path from novice soccer girl to in-crowd. Casual spectator was not enough.

This was how Doug, however inadvertently, seduced me into soccer. During the long-distance phase of our relationship, we kept scheduling our visits around soccer games. First, it was Regionals. Then, in the fall of 1992, it was the Carnegie Mellon vs. Chicago college game. Doug was living and working in Des Moines, and I was chipping away at earning my degree from Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh. Chicago was as close to halfway as we got.

Being a broke college student, flying was out of the question. Driving made sense, but I had no car and 450+ miles to go. Most of my connections were East Coast based, so I posted a ride request on CMU's electronic bulletin board (think Craigslist, before Craig). Then I packed a bag, conveniently neglected to notify my parents of my whereabouts for the weekend, and made my way to Chi-town, sharing a ride with another woman going to visit her boyfriend.

I had never been to Chicago and ached to see Doug again, even for just a weekend. We walked around downtown, went out for dinner, went to museums, but most importantly, we watched Carnegie Mellon play University of Chicago. I don't even remember who won; it didn't really matter. We had a blissful weekend, and once again, soccer was involved. It was a strange pattern developing: love and soccer, always together.