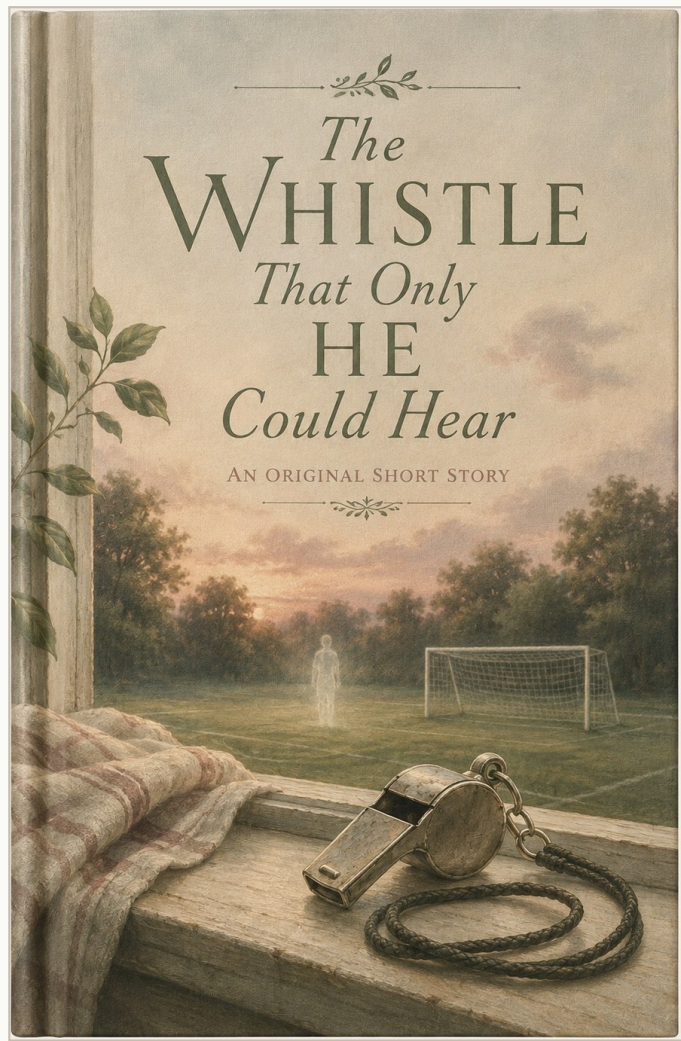


YOUR *Collected* ROOM

AN ORIGINAL SHORT STORY



The Whistle That Only He Could Hear

— • • • —
A story for the soccer bedroom

The ball rolled perfectly across the grass.

Henry was wide open.

“Pass it!” Coach called.

Eli heard him.

He just didn’t listen.

He took one more touch, pulled his foot back, and fired.

The ball sailed over the crossbar.

A long sigh drifted across the field.

Coach blew his whistle.

“Eli.”

He jogged over.

“You had two open teammates.”

“I almost scored.”

Coach smiled, but not the happy kind.

“I know.”

Practice ended a few minutes later.

While everyone else hurried toward the parking lot, Eli wandered toward the old equipment shed.

He wasn’t trying to avoid anyone.

He just wanted a minute alone.

The shed smelled like wet grass and old leather. A crooked wooden drawer stuck halfway open.

Inside sat an old metal whistle attached to a faded braided cord.

It looked older than anything else in the shed.

Eli picked it up.

It felt strangely warm.

“Find something interesting?”

Coach peeked through the doorway.

Eli held up the whistle.

Coach chuckled.

“I haven’t seen that thing in years.”

“Whose was it?”

Coach shrugged.

“No idea.”

“It still works?”

“I guess you’ll find out.”

• • •

That evening, the fields were empty.

The sun hung low, turning the grass golden.

Eli slipped the whistle around his neck.

He blew.

The note barely left the whistle.

It sounded so soft he almost wondered if he'd imagined it.

At that same moment...

A breeze brushed across the back of his neck.

Not cold.

Not warm.

Just...

different.

The leaves overhead stopped rustling for the smallest moment.

Then everything moved again.

“You found it.”

Eli turned.

A boy stood near midfield.

About his age.

Long socks.

An old-fashioned jersey with a faded number seven.

He smiled like they'd already met.

“I'm Noah.”

“I’m...Eli.”

“You play here?”

“Yeah.”

“I used to.”

Something about the way Noah said it made Eli pause.

Used to.

Not last season.

Not before I moved.

Just... used to.



“Want to play?” Noah asked.

They jogged toward the goal.

Eli dribbled around him and scored.

“One-nothing,” Eli grinned.

Noah laughed.

“You like scoring.”

“Doesn’t everybody?”

“Sure.”

Noah collected the ball.

“But let’s try something different.”

“What?”

“Tonight... you don’t get to score.”

Eli blinked.

“That makes no sense.”

“It will.”

Every time Eli found an opening, Noah stepped away.

“Pass.”

“To who?”

Noah spread out his arms.

“Pretend.”

“There isn’t anybody.”

“There could be.”

Eli rolled his eyes.

“This is weird.”

“It is.”

But after a while it became fun.

They imagined teammates making runs.

Empty spaces became players.

Invisible passes became real ones.

By sunset, Eli had forgotten to keep score.

As they walked toward the parking lot, Eli bent to retie his cleat.

“You coming?” he asked.

No answer.

He looked up.

The parking lot was empty.

The path was empty.

The field stretched quietly behind him.

Noah was gone.

So completely it was as if he’d never been there at all.



The next evening, Eli returned.

He blew the whistle.

Again the note was barely there.

Again the breeze brushed his neck.

Again Noah appeared.

“You came back.”

“You did too.”

Noah smiled.

“I usually do.”

Some nights they passed.

Some nights they laughed.

One evening Noah stole the ball three times in a row.

“You’re staring at your feet,” Noah teased.

“I’m watching the ball.”

Noah grinned.

“Exactly.”

Eli couldn’t help laughing.

Another evening Noah announced,

“Today we’re not using the goals.”

“Then what are we doing?”

“Winning.”

“Without goals?”

“You’ll see.”

They spent the next hour trying to make ten passes in a row without losing the ball.

Every time they reached nine, one of them would make a bad pass, burst out laughing, and start over.

When they finally reached ten, they cheered louder than they would have after any goal.

One night Noah stopped the ball with the bottom of his foot.

“How many players do you see?”

“One.”

“No.”

“...Two?”

Noah smiled.

“The field is bigger than one player.”

“You’re only seeing the part you’re standing in.”

He pointed across the grass.

“What else do you see?”

Eli looked farther.

The open spaces.

The passing lanes.

The places where teammates would be before they got there.

Something clicked.

Just a little.

A week later, Eli asked,

“Why can I hear the whistle?”

Noah shrugged.

“It doesn’t sound the same for everyone.”

“What does that mean?”

“I think it becomes whatever someone needs most.”

“What did it become for you?”

Noah looked across the empty field.

“I think I’m still figuring that out.”

As the weeks passed, Coach noticed something.

“You’ve changed.”

“How?”

“You see the whole field now.”

Then came the championship.

Tie game.

One last attack.

Eli dribbled toward the goal.

The shot was there.

Coach’s voice echoed in his memory.

“Henry was open.”

Then Noah’s.

“The field is bigger than one player.”

“You’re only seeing the part you’re standing in.”

Eli looked up.

A teammate sprinted into open space.

One perfect pass.

One easy tap.

Goal.

The final whistle blew.

His teammates swarmed him.

Not because he’d scored.

Because he’d seen them.

That evening, Eli returned.

He blew the whistle.

The breeze brushed his neck.

He waited.

No one came.

As he turned to leave, something caught his eye.

An old black-and-white team photograph lay beneath the bench.

In the front row stood a smiling boy wearing number seven.

Eli looked from the photograph to the empty field.

For just a moment he thought he saw someone jogging toward
midfield.

He blinked.

Only the wind moved.

He slipped the whistle over his head and started home.

Halfway across the parking lot, he looked back one last time.

The field was empty.

But somehow...

It didn't feel lonely anymore.

The End

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