

## **Ivan the Emigrant**

### **A story about getting along**

“How strange I feel in this town,” I thought when, once we were settled in, I went out for a walk. My country, Argentina, was now very far away, on the other side of the ocean. My longtime friends weren’t here, neither was my bicycle, since it didn’t fit in the suitcase. Neither did Shark, my dog, who was now living with my grandmother. I gave him that name because he had a row of really fine teeth, really really fine, that he bared at everyone who wanted to come near him. All this when he was as small as a thrush, but as brave as a bull. Poor Shark had stayed back in Buenos Aires.

From the train station we had walked up the hill to our neighbourhood. They had told me this is where we would live. Climbing up the road, in the suffocating July heat, we came across some very lovely houses, but it wasn’t our town yet. To get there we would still have to cross a few more roads.

And then I saw the house. It was high. It had four storeys. There were no balconies and the façade was green. We entered the foyer. At the entrance in Buenos Aires there was an enormous mirror and some armchairs so that anyone waiting for someone could have a seat. Here there was nothing like that, but at least my parents would have work, they said, whereas back there we couldn’t live any longer.

When they gave me permission I went out for a walk. I found myself on what looked like a boulevard. There were rows of trees on either side and it was wider than the street our house was on. Cars couldn’t drive along it and it had benches along the side with groups of men and women talking. Small children ran from one corner to the other playing ball or on bicycles. They looked happy. I thought of my friends in Buenos Aires. I felt really sad; I would have liked to have been at home. On one corner it said: “Torrent Santa Anna”. “What does Torrent mean?” I wondered. My parents had explained to me that I would have to learn a new language. Maybe it meant “street”.

I headed uphill and found a square. There were many children playing football and others playing basketball. I drew nearer ever so slowly. I took a seat on a stone bench. I watched how they were having fun. I missed my friends in Buenos Aires.

“Do you want to play?” I heard a voice from over in the corner and it brought me back from my nostalgia.

“What’s your name,” it continued. “My name is Mohammed.”

“Ivan.”

“Do you want to play? We’re two against one and we’re missing a player,” he insisted.

“Yes, sure.”

I liked to play football. In Buenos Aires I did so every afternoon with my friends. I’m good at it, really good, and they realized straight away.

From that first day I remember that I went back to the new house feeling less sad than I felt when I had gone out. It was summer holidays for the children in this town and I had already arranged to meet for a few more shoots the very next day. That park was called La Petanca, and now I knew Mohammed and Alberto.

Three days later, I had a surprise. We were playing football when the ball went out of the field into an area where there were swings. To save myself from having to go and get it, I climbed onto the bench and shouted to a girl nearby:

“Hey! Can you throw me the ball?”

But she didn’t answer. She didn’t even move. Her back was turned and she was playing in the sand.

“Hey! Little girl! Can you throw me the ball?”

“She can’t hear you,” a voice said close by. “She’s deaf. She has to see you, so that she can read your lips.”

“Who are you?” I asked her in surprise.

“I’m a friend of hers. My name is Tània.”

Tània headed over to where Clàudia was. She tapped her on the back and Clàudia turned around. Then she made some movements with her hands and she went to get the ball. I was stunned: Clàudia was the prettiest girl I had ever seen in my life. She was tall like me, and blond, with hypnotizing green eyes. She was gorgeous.

Tània gave me the ball. But I couldn’t move. She was so pretty!

“What are you looking at?” Tània said to me.  
“Do you want to play football?” I didn’t want to leave.

Tània turned to Clàudia and with hand signs she asked her, and she said yes. My friends made strange faces, but in five minutes we were all playing football together. I found out that Clàudia and Tània were speaking in Catalan sign language. It wasn’t the language that my parents had told me I would have to learn. It was another language! “This is a very strange town,” I thought.

Fifteen days later I already knew lots of things. Mohammed had come from Morocco; and Mussa from The Gambia. Alberto had been born in town, but his family came from Andalusia. And Tània and Clàudia were from here, and their parents, too. They all spoke a ton of languages: if it wasn’t Catalan it was Castilian, or Arabic or Mandinka and English\*, plus sign language. This was a strange town!

One day, Tània suggested getting on our bicycles. She knew of a place in town where her brother often went. She explained that it was full of hills for jumping and wooden jumps, and even a foam pool. I regretted leaving my bike in Buenos Aires! But luckily, Mussa lent me his brother’s. We went to the La Poma bike park and it was better than anything I could have imagined. To start with, just beside it there were two football pitches with grass! Two pitches! I couldn’t believe it! And at the bike park, some older boys who were about fifteen, were jumping and wiggling in the air. Others were racing and looked like gazelles; and a few of them were in another area doing trials.

- Mandinka is one of the languages spoken in The Gambia, in addition to English, which is the official language.

“This town has it all!” I shouted with enthusiasm.

“Well, you haven’t seen it all yet,” Tània told me. “My brother also goes skateboarding, over there, behind the high school.”

“Skateboarding? Where?”

We ran there. I was giddy with all these new things! A group of older kids were jumping into an empty swimming pool on their skateboards. They were spinning in the air and gliding smoothly.

“It’s amazing,” I said while turning my head toward Clàudia. Tània had taught me some words in sign language. We all communicated that way. She was beautiful.

Another day we went for an afternoon snack at Alberto’s house. His grandmother made us pound cake and while we were eating it, she asked me how I was. She stroked my hair and told us that she still remembered the day that she arrived in this town, from Andalusia. They went to live in the Remei neighbourhood. There was no running water and they had to fetch it in buckets from the well in Sant Pere Avenue, which was quite far away. That was until the neighbours got together and built some water pipes to make it reach the houses. She also told us that to get to the town they had to cross the Castells

stream using a bridge that at times had been swept away by the force of the water! What times those were! Everything had changed so much!

By the end of the summer I had had so many experiences that I told my friends in Buenos Aires about when I connected to Messenger. They didn't believe it, that there were two grass football pitches, a paradise for bicycles and a skateboard park that was as fantastic as in Buenos Aires. Or that there was the prettiest girl in the world, Clàudia. They all wanted to meet her! "I miss my friends and Shark, but Premià de Dalt is pretty good," I thought.

The days went by and the time came for school to start.

"What school will you go to?" Mohammed asked me.

"They told me Santa Anna," I answered.

"Tània and I as well. We'll go together! Alberto and Mussa go to Marià Manent."

"And Clàudia?"

"No, Clàudia goes to Barcelona," Tània said. "She goes to a school where the teachers speak sign language."

The news hit me like bucket of cold water. Outside Premià? Clàudia? I couldn't believe it! I was really angry! How could Clàudia not go to our school?

"Don't worry," Clàudia told me. "We can meet on Saturdays at the Petanca. Deal?"

"Deal."

I like this town. There are people from all around. Some came many years ago. Others not long ago. Some are from here and have never left, but others have to leave to go to school. This town is really strange, but it's pretty, very pretty.