



With the support of:

**Chalet Paradise Beach 61** Viale Europa 3,1 San Benedetto del Tronto (AP), Italy

The author is grateful to **Laura Pasternak** for her help with the English version.

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Printed in Germany on recycled paper by  
WirMachenDruck  
October 2019

ISBN 9788899050986





Max

STEFANO MONTANARI

# THE CHALLENGE

ILLUSTRATIONS: ARIANNA OPERAMOLLA



Azadi



**Karim**

To **Elisa** and **Luca**, and to all other **children**,  
in the hope that you will never stop playing.

To all **adults**, in the hope that  
you don't forget your inner child too.



**Shadow**



Lucy



Toni

## CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

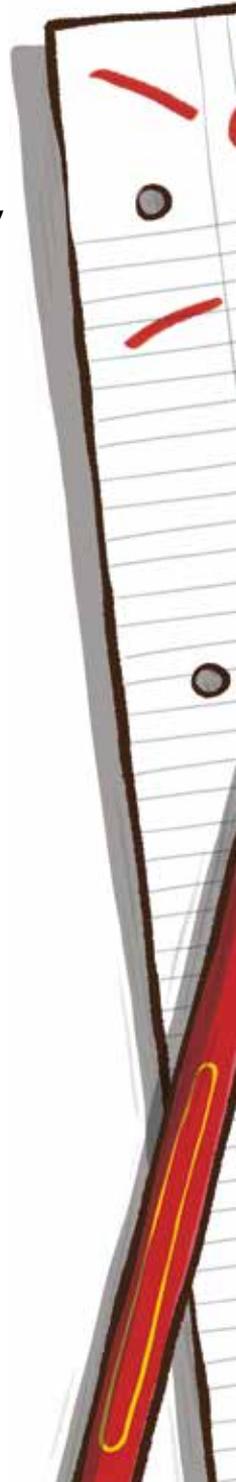
(continued on page 64)

### Article 31

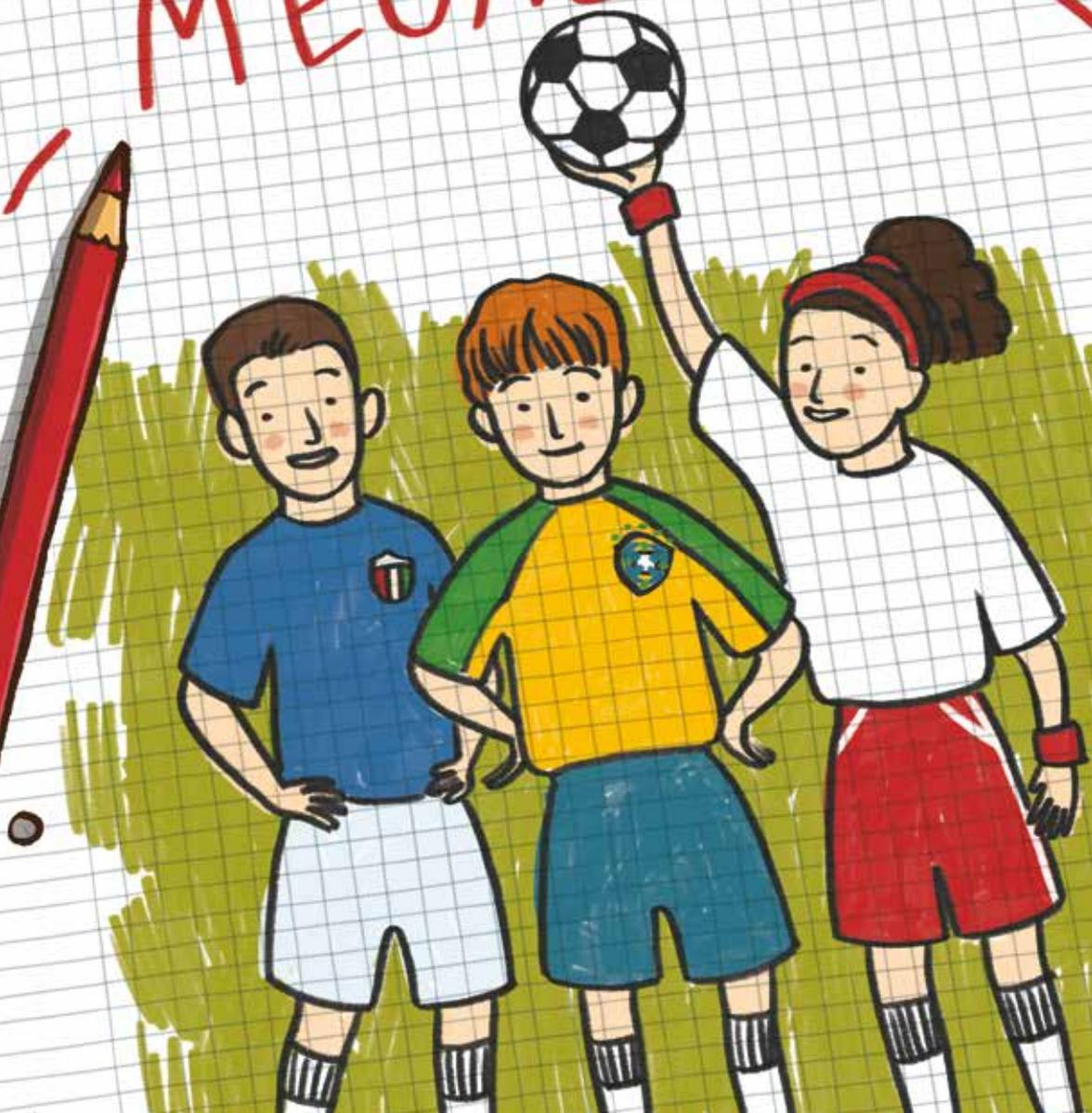
1. States Parties recognise the right of the child to **rest** and **leisure**, to engage in **play** and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. **States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life** and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

**M**y name is Max, and every afternoon after school, even on this hot Monday in late June, I meet with my friends Toni and Lucy in the city park. This is my favourite place in my city. In reality, Surembo doesn't have many other interesting places to offer, apart from Mariolino's newsstand, who always puts aside my favorite comics, and Franca's bakery, who prepares the best pizzas in the world. The park, however, beats them all: this is where I learned to ride a bike, fly kites and climb trees. From home, it takes me five minutes to get here by bike. I cross Surembo on a bike path that runs along a stream and I dart through an avenue of cherry trees to the park's entrance. When the cherry trees blossom, I feel like I'm wading through huge ice creams with whipped cream. What I like the most about the park is the football pitch that lies among the pine trees which stand as high as four-storey buildings. It's a simple clearing of soil and a few blades of grass with two dilapidated wooden goals. But for me, it's like the most beautiful stadium in the world. We play here for as long as the sun lets us see the ball. We called ourselves the "Surembo Megastars". In reality, I think that no one knows us outside of



# SUREMBO MEGASTARS





**MAX, 11!**

Surembo, and I doubt that many people know how to find my city on a map. But this name makes us feel unbeatable. We don't have official jerseys; everyone comes wearing what they like and everyone can take part. I often play with a Brazil top, Toni always wears the Italian strip, while Lucy always wears a white t-shirt. She says she just likes to play, without representing any country. The three of us form the backbone of the "Surembo Megastars", and other children join in from time to time. Yesterday, for example, we played a very long game, adults and children altogether. It was an amazing gift for my eleventh birthday! My whole class came and we played from morning until sunset. Mum had prepared a rectangular cake with green marzipan for the grass and white for the goals. On the top, she put eleven candles shaped like footballers. I blew out ten of the candles in one breath, leaving the goalie lit for a few more seconds. That's my favorite position and I wanted Dad to take a picture of me with the lit candle and the new goalkeeper gloves they had given me as a gift. It was a beautiful party and I wished it would never end. Today, however, my happiness has gone, just

like the candlelight. All because of Ballpiercer.

**“C**ome on, Max, don’t even think about it,” Lucy tells me as she puts down her bike.

“I can’t believe that in a few days, we won’t be able to play here anymore,” I say almost to myself, while I look at the trees of the park, silent spectators of so many happy days.

“That Ballpiercer... I’ll blast the ball in his face!” Toni says, miming the shot of a real striker. He never misses a shot. Whenever he touches a ball, he scores a goal, and I have never seen him miss a penalty. That’s why everyone wants to have him on their team.

But what I like most about my friend is his imagination. For example, that nickname to the Mayor, ‘Ballpiercer’, Toni invented for him when we found out that he had approved the construction of a car park right on the football pitch.

“Why on earth do we need a car park here?” I say, looking at the digger parked a few meters away. “Surembo isn’t very big, hardly any cars will park there!”



“My dad says Ballpiercer does it for money”, Lucy says. “He gets a lot of money to build it, and he will take even more when running the car park.”

Lucy always knows stuff. We call her Radio Surembo because she knows everything that’s going on in the city. Everyday, she listens to the news and brings a newspaper to school. It was her who told us that the construction of the car park would start soon.

“Guys, we have to do something,” I say.

“What do you have in mind?,” asks Toni.

“I don’t know... something... We can’t just stand here and watch as they destroy our wee pitch!”

“So why don’t we organise a protest with our parents?,” suggests Lucy.

“Great idea! Let’s go on strike from school and occupy the park!”, rejoices Toni, who is always looking for excuses to bunk off school.

“They will never listen to us!,” I say, shaking my head. “The Mayor doesn’t care if the park disappears. And our parents are too busy with their work to protest. No, we have to think up another idea. The idea of the century.”

We stay in silence for a few minutes, while we put on our boots and football tops.

When you need the idea of the century, there is no middle ground: you either win or lose.

“Why don’t you challenge the Mayor?,” says a voice behind us. We turn around and see him, the Squirrel, standing there.

He is a small, robust man with a funny nose, round like a potato. He runs on the pitch every afternoon and hangs from the branches of the trees to do gymnastics, which is why we gave him this nickname. When we miss, he goes to pick up the ball and returns it to us with incredible agility.

“I beg your pardon, Sir. What did you say?,” I ask in a whisper, a little intimidated.

“Challenge the Mayor to a football match. If you win, no more car park.”

“I like the idea!”, exclaims Lucy, always the first in line when it comes to challenges.

“Calm down, calm down”, I say, trying to curb the enthusiasm. “Ballpiercer will never accept.”

“What’s worse, out of spite, he could even build a car park on Franca’s bakery... and goodbye pizzas!”, Toni adds, throwing his arms up into the air.

“It doesn’t cost anything to ask.” Squirrel spreads his arms and shows his teeth as white as snow. “At least you’ll have tried it.”