

**Rizzoli presents:**

**FRANCESCO TOTTI**

**UN CAPITANO**

## **EXCERPT (from chapter 14)**

Saturday. The pre-match training is early in the morning, there's a plane to catch for Berlin. The excitement around us is sky-high, the waiters who had served us the whole month say goodbye to us as though we were going off to war. We are moved. (...).

On the flight I spend some time with Nesta, who has stayed in spite of the injury that sidelined him after the third match. Well, if Buffon is a brother, then Sandro is actually a twin: we were born the same year, we went through the same stages in the national youth teams, but above all, we were not only the captains but the symbols of the two Roman teams. This means we've been facing each other all our life, and that we shook our hands in the middle of the playing field as children, as adolescents, and as men. And we've always liked each other, because we have a lot in common: calm, very reserved, at difficult times we would call each other in secret, to give each other advice without anyone knowing. Between us there's always been good air, a healthy atmosphere, and that's why I'm twice as sorry about his absence: he too would deserve to experience this waiting one hundred per cent, but Sandro on the national team has always been unlucky, he had hurt himself on other important occasions. This was fate too.

The Berlin hotel is very luxurious, truly compensation after the Dortmund dump. Time to prepare and the bus for the stadium is ready: a reconnaissance and a short run, press conference for Lippi and Cannavaro, quick and silent transition to the mixed area, the desire to talk is practically zero, it's not the right time. As time goes by, the thought of the final penetrates ever deeper, some are quieter than usual, others search for company because they don't want to be left all alone. At dinner we joke around as always, but in actual fact a bit less than usual. The tension is palpable. Lippi puts off all the tactical matters to the next day, anyhow there's little to discover, we know France by heart even if, from that damned final of the European Championship six years earlier, only Cannavaro and I remain. The manager lingers in the hall a few minutes longer than usual, he probably has his family there already while I and many of my teammates wait for our loved ones to come on the following day. Then, before going up to the bedroom, he comes over to bid us goodnight with the usual formula that's... how can I say?... rather masculine. Substantially, he urges us not to get to sleep too late, whatever entertainment we'd managed to find that evening. Which is ostentatiously a joke, the World Cup hotels are super-secure and each of us is only waiting to meet our wives and fiancées. In actual fact Lippi wants to give us a message of trust, unlike other managers he avoids inspections and surprise checks because he trusts us and our professionalism.

That evening, however, is different: and even if at eleven we shut ourselves in our bedrooms and turn off the lights, it's not long before a pattering of steps reaches us from the corridor,

and then another one, and then you hear a far-off door being opened with scarce delicacy, and then another one opening slightly is mine, and in the blade of light I catch a glimpse of the shape of Gattuso. "What are you doing, sleeping?" No way, I can't. "Do you feel like playing? A quick game of cards?" I jump down from the bed without waiting to be asked twice, I turn on the light. Rino has the pack of cards at the ready. "Cut", and the umpteenth round of cards begins. It'll help your sleep – I tell myself – half an hour, then, sweet dreams. After two rounds Perrotta peeps out as well. "What are you doing? Can I watch?" and from then on the floor that's reserved for us really starts to come alive. I go out on patrol, by now it's past midnight. The next evening we have to play the World Cup final, allow me to remind you.

The door of Materazzi's room is closed, but the sounds coming from the inside are unmistakable. I open it wide as if I wanted to catch them red-handed, but the group inside doesn't even notice. I recall Marco, De Rossi, Oddo, Pirlo, Barone and Iaquineta, but there are others too: they're playing on the PlayStation, a tournament of Fifa two against two, stadium shouts after every goal. I feel like laughing, but I tell them to quiet down a bit. Materazzi looks at me as if I were crazy. "No one is sleeping, you know", he says, and Pirlo nods as though he were the notary who has to confirm. I go back into the corridor, where all the doors to the rooms are open. Buffon is watching a recorded Wimbledon match – the tournament was being played during those same days – and as he doesn't know the result, he's supporting one of the two tennis players tirelessly. Amelia, well... Amelia's number one, because he's reading a book. I ask him what it's about. "Philosophy. A little because I'm studying it, a little because it will make me feel sleepy". In the corridor with me, the second inspector, there's Inzaghi: he too moves from one bedroom to the next chuckling. Every now and then someone remembers "but the final is tomorrow", and is immediately silenced. I go back to my card game, the hours pass, and the only one who starts to feel a bit sleepy – in any case after two hours – is Del Piero. He comes over to say hi wearing an ironic smile, "you know, I'm used to finals, so the eve of the match doesn't have much of an effect on me..." He's sent packing with a series of swear words and the throwing of a slipper or two. A great guy.

On average, we stay awake until 6 a.m. The adrenalin for the most important game of our lives flows in abundance, a bit of sleepiness comes only when we're exhausted. I can imagine that in the French sleeping quarters the same thing is happening, and in any case it's clear that the energy for a match like that, the seventh and the most emotional one in a month, lies in the mind rather than in the muscles.

I sleep about three hours, breakfast is set for 8:30, I remember waking up no earlier than two minutes before: at the buffet, we are like a host of ghosts, practically no one says anything at all, just tired, worried eyes. Five days before, the morning of the semi-final against Germany, we were a lot merrier and boisterous. But that night we'd slept. Silence on board the bus as well, a twenty minutes' journey to reach the field reserved for warming-up and there, thanks

to the fun of a game of keep away, someone starts joking around again. Soon afterwards there's laughter about the sleepless night we spent, "just think how we must be feeling", and things like that: but it lasts only five minutes because, preceded by the great commotion of the Federal staff, the Sports Minister Melandri and President Napolitano come down onto the pitch. Lippi does the honours, and in a short time escorts them to the middle of the pitch, where we're lined up in a semicircle, as we wait.

The President's speech is more or less what you would expect in circumstances like that. It's clear that football is not his main occupation, but the fact that our victories have reunited the country, pushing it to share the enthusiasm in a brotherly atmosphere, has given him a great deal of relief. He sounds very sincere, and I end up thinking that for a President of the Italian Republic there cannot be a sadder feeling than governing a divided and rancorous Italy. Napolitano finishes by saying that everyone hopes we will win, but that however things go the country will be grateful to us for this month of passion and for the results achieved ... At this point – to our initial embarrassment and then amusement – Lippi steps in. It would be exaggerated to say that he interrupted him abruptly, but our manager uses Napolitano's first pause to slip in. "Sorry, Mr. President, but it's not time for gratitude yet. These guys have done nothing, or at least that's the way I'm training them to think, because tonight I want no less than victory. No less than the world championship. Gratitude is a pillow on which to rest afterwards, as long as we're in it's better not to talk about it to avoid being affected. We've reached the final, but if we were to lose it we would spoil the work done so far. I need to apologize once more, the guys know these things, but it was important to hammer them home". And then he's silent, while the gazes go back to the President. He collects his thoughts for a moment, with a slight smile on his lips, and then turns to us directly: "Did you hear your coach? Go out there and win, we all have confidence in you. This evening I'm certain that you'll let me touch the World Cup". He shakes everyone's hand, Lippi's a little longer. He must have liked the interruption.

The manager surprises me too, that morning, because before going back to the hotel he stops me to tell me that this evening I mustn't lose sight of Makelele. That's strange: generally speaking, Lippi leaves me a lot of freedom when we're not in possession, at most he asks me to disturb the start of the opponents' action when the central defenders come forward: there has never been any talk of marking a midfielder, let alone a dynamic one like Makelele. I don't bat an eyelid, however. As I've already said, this manager has done too much for me to ever question his decisions. Once we are back at the hotel we find the table set for lunch and then, at 1:30 p.m., the doors to the sector reserved for us are opened and we can meet our families. One hour, we're told by the Football Federation staff pointing to their watches. The last time before the match: we'll see them again either as World Champions, or as losers.

It's a very special hour, which fills us all with new energy because ultimately when you say "I'm playing for Italy", you're thinking about your loved ones, your relatives, your friends. They are first of all the Italy that you want to win. Not all the beneficiaries of my one hundred tickets are taking part in the match, that would be possible, but there are still lots of people, and they're all wearing a blue shirt, including Cristian who is eight months old and, in Ilary's arms, he looks at me as though he wanted to capture those moments forever. My wife is so sweet, my mom is emotional, dad is...just dad. No hugs and kisses, it's not our style, but we look at each other at length, and I read in his eyes all his satisfaction, his affection, his closeness. One moment of absolute intensity, which I needed to get my fill. Having said goodbye to everyone with difficulty, I go up to my room and at last, like most of my companions, sleep: two hours' deep sleep, dreamless, with the phone on mute because in any case there's a world of acquaintances who are sending you their good luck wishes. Shhh! I have to rest.

(...)

We don't cross the French before the match. The entrances for the buses are separate, the changing rooms far apart, the warm-ups separate: they managed to see the pitch first, and by the time it's our turn the stadium is already full. The cup is there, on a table, I look at it in a trance until Gattuso and Vito Scala go by, repeating "don't look at it, if you look at it, it brings bad luck". They run toward the area where their relatives have found seats. Only after the match did I find out that Cristian didn't have a ticket – 8 months old! – and that the Germans didn't want to let him in for this reason. Returning to the changing room, to get into my kit, you could see how tense everyone was: at length exorcised so as not to get to the match over-excited, it gradually took control of each one of us. As is quite normal, the World Cup final is a single event that bears no comparison. In the course of time, Lippi explained our victory with the compactness of the group, and my testimony goes in the same direction: at certain moments, the encouragement that gives you the most is the one you get from the teammate who isn't playing. Here, the availability of the reserve who supports the first-team player without an afterthought is one of the main signs of a team's health, and it often happens that on the bench someone brings bad luck, or hopes that the team wins but that the person playing in his place disappoints. Instead, in that dressing room the eleven first-team players were embraced and encouraged by the possible replacements: I recall the sincerity in Del Piero's eyes when he told me "go out there and sock it to 'em, Francesco".

The siren sounds, time has slipped away. We go out, we walk along the corridor, enter the grand foyer open over the field, a few more steep steps and then we're there: the French arrive from the opposite corridor, we greet one another lightly and amicably – everyone knows everyone else – some even manage to minimize with a witty comment. Me, for

example. I'm the last one in the line, when their subs pass by, Candela walks past me and smiles, "you're going to win anyway", he says, the classic bad luck comment. "I'd be more relaxed if you were playing", I shout back at him and Vincent, without turning around, raises his thumb as a sign of amused approval. The Argentine referee Elizondo and his linesmen are the last ones out, we all shake hands with the children who gaze at us dreamily. We start. In front of me someone, passing alongside us, can't resist the temptation of brushing the Cup: Materazzi, Camoranesi, Cannavaro himself, even some Frenchmen. I avoid doing so. I think that if I touched it now I might not do so at the end, pure superstition on my part but – seeing that's the way I reason – an antidote to every negativity. The two files of players move between two armies of photographers, the teams line up, wherever you look you can see people who clench their fists, wink their eyes, blow kisses. Total involvement. We listen to the anthem with our arms on the shoulders of our neighbours, on the bench they do the same. Cannavaro points to me and Toni to go to the middle of the field, because we've won the kick-off. Elizondo waits for a long time for every tiny detail to be perfect, then he blows his whistle. Luca, who had had his foot on the ball for about half a minute, gives it a small push so it rolls toward my right foot: I trap it, turn around, see Pirlo waiting outside the midfield circle and I pass it to him. The usual chain has started working again. Even in the World Cup final.

It can never be a match like any other, and in fact I remember only a sequence of episodes: not a logical development – too much tension to organize it – but a series of situations from which to draw the utmost profit. After less than sixty seconds Henry clatters into Cannavaro and stays on the ground for a couple of minutes. There is no foul but the French wear sore expressions, of the kind that say "the usual Italians", and the referee imperceptibly slides to their side: in fact, he yellow cards Zambrotta right away for a hard tackle on Vieira, but just outside their penalty box. And as soon as Malouda goes into ours, he sees some contact with Materazzi that seen live seems clear, but that on the TV slow-motion is a lot less so: penalty, and hardly a ball has been played yet. I don't think I've ever cast a spell on a shot taken by an opponent, and for a moment I make a leap for joy inside because Zidane's chip shot – slightly high – touches the lower part of the crossbar and bounces close to the goal-line. In or out? After a moment's indecision the linesman points to the centre spot, Zizou celebrates after having waited for the decision, the replay on the giant screen dispels any doubts: the ball goes in, and well in actually. I think back to a statistic I'd read the day before: it hasn't happened since 1974, the final between West Germany and the Netherlands, that the title is won by the team that fell behind first. A good idea: as France wasn't enough, let's also beat history. I go back to midfield musing over these thoughts.

The match starts again with nothing radically different, it's too early to change the music. If we exclude my marking of Makelele, then the tactical plan is always the same: the important thing is to keep calm, and that's not easy because the balls fly over my head instead of landing

at my feet. The French lead has shaken the equilibrium, some of our guys from the back have started to hurry, and as soon as they have an open space ahead of them they kick upfield without passing it around first, which would instead be our characteristic. Fortunately, we soon get the equalizer, a great header by Materazzi from a cross by Pirlo: I was placed in my usual position for the corners, that is, on the sixteen-metre line, ready to shoot in a volley if the defence cleared the ball short. Then I was the first to meet Marco's gaze altered by incredulity, I call him with a shout but he doesn't even see me. Before abandoning himself to the embraces of his companions he wants to dedicate the goal to his mother, who had died shortly before. He raises his arms and eyes to the heavens and it's easy to understand – the same as for Grosso against Germany – that it didn't even cross his mind that he might score a goal in a World Cup final. Then, he is just a bunch of arms entwined with each other, and shouts, and encouragement, and relief for the fast match equalizer. I pull his hair from joy, Marco doesn't even notice. We start again from scratch for a match lasting 70 minutes, or at least that's what we think when we take up our positions in our half of the field.

(...)

About half an hour into the match Perrotta gets injured and stays on the ground for a couple of minutes. I go close to the bench to drink, and Lippi turns to me passionately. He doesn't want to pay me any compliments.

“Francesco, what's wrong with you? You're doing too little, this has to be your match”. I try to answer by saying that the ball flies over me, but he mimics a more fluid movement. “You have to show yourself, you're always behind a French player”. I make the all right sign – thumb upturned – throw the bottle to a masseur, go back toward the midfield. I know I'm not doing all that much, that story about Makelele broke a still delicate equilibrium, I'd only started playing again a month ago. I call Pirlo to play a one-two, I try to replay the exchange with Zambrotta that helped him score against the Ukrainians, I try to stay less far away from Toni, whom I had left abandoned to his fate. But when Elizondo blows the half-time whistle, I don't feel comfortable with my own personal expectations. And Lippi agrees. He calls me over to one side and takes me into a bathroom, closes the door, and bursts out again: “You have to give more Francesco, these matches get sorted out by champions and you're our champion. Think of what you've done to be here, think of how hard you've worked in the past few months and put onto the pitch all you've got left, because the final is a match without a tomorrow. I want the Cup Francesco, all your teammates want it, you have to want it too, with all your strength. Otherwise I'm going to substitute you”. A short talk, less than a minute, but very intense. Thinking back to it now the scenario is amusing, a bathroom complete with sanitaryware, because of course there wasn't time to search for a meeting room, and Lippi was in a hurry to talk to me. I find the decision to do so in private very proper, and I really do muster all my energy: I don't have much left – it's the moment when I'm paying the price for

three months without matches – and to bring them to fruition I need another tactical context. One that cannot be realized under those conditions. When we go back onto the pitch France continues to control the game and I continue to run aimlessly, always far from the ball. Lippi's decision to substitute me is right, like that of bolstering the midfield: for a few minutes I'd already noticed that Daniele was among the ones warming up on the side of the pitch. I'm not surprised by the fact that he's the one to replace me. Together with him Iaquineta comes on to replace Perrotta, and a whole chain of play is changed: in actual fact, if I'd already touched ten balls altogether, none of these turned out to be a deep pass for Simone. There wasn't enough room to make it, and here I suspect that Domenech – their manager – had done something to limit a development that had previously caused some bother to his fellow managers.

Having been substituted after one hour of the final, and conscious of the fact that I wouldn't be playing any others. I should at least be a little angry, disappointed, mortified. I should feel envious, also because I've already told you that my personality goes in that direction: instead, I leave the pitch with no negative feelings, convinced that seeing how things were shaping up De Rossi can make himself more useful than me. Well then, this is the thing that most of all resembles a miracle as compared with what I've talked about so far: I played in a World Cup as a first-team player praising the spirit of the reserves, and when I become a reserve all I'm interested in is that the first-team players win the match. I'm not underscoring this to hear you say 'well done', but to help you understand what makes a winning group: the 'well done' goes out to all 23, and as a consequence to the manager, because the ability to distance oneself from one's personal interest even in the most delicate moments serves to describe the value of the collective moral efforts. I collapse onto the bench exhausted, I take a long drink of water, and straight afterwards focus my attention on Daniele, who has come onto the pitch weighed down by an incredible amount of pressure: you come on as a sub in a World Cup final after having missed four matches due to suspension, and so you don't have the gamepace, but everyone will criticise you for it instead of granting it to you as an alibi. You have ten gorillas resting on your back, and I hold my breath when De Rossi receives his first ball: he controls it well, raises his head, passes it forward along a not-altogether-ordinary line. From now on it will all be less difficult for him.

(...)

After 90 minutes the score is still 1-1, so it's extra time. When Elizondo blows the whistle, I jumped to my feet, I grab a few bottles and take them to my teammates who are coming over to the bench. I smile, offer encouragement, cheer them up, and the others who aren't playing, or rather who 'play' in another way, do the same: Lippi has already used up his three substitutes, there's no more need for the subs to warm up, the eleven on the field are the ones, the others have the job of supporting them. The abrupt drop in adrenaline following my substitution is a distant memory, I'm again feeling emotional and "fired up", as though I were

playing. I think that I should be the champion of a new rule: if the substitutions in football were like those in basketball, I could go back on now. And I'd like to.

That extra-time "belongs" to Zidane. First of all, for the splendid header that no goalkeeper in the world other than Gigi could have saved, and when I think back to it my knees still shake today; secondly, for the incredible headbutt he delivers to Materazzi, and his consequent dismissal. The last act of his career. On the bench no one notices anything, because the ball had been kicked upfield, and all our heads are turned toward the attackers. There's Del Piero, who's going toward the goal but commits a foul. The French start again, Wiltord receives the ball in the midfield, and that's when everyone notices that Materazzi is on the ground: play is stopped, Elizondo runs over to the area of the incident – where blue and white shirts are confronting one another in a situation of growing nervousness – I understand that something serious has happened from Buffon's face, who had clearly seen everything and moves relentlessly between the referee and the linesman, making broad gestures to the latter, touching his eye, as if to say he can't not have seen what happened. Gattuso is also very determined in suggesting to Elizondo to get help from someone who has a monitor before him, and on the grounds of the various reconstructions that is what happens, with the red card shown to Zidane, and the anger of the French that is silenced when the giant screen shows the images of the headbutt. A compact "Oh" of wonder can be heard, because everyone had imagined a push or at most an elbow, certainly not that crazy gesture. Zidane leaves the field walking past us, and no one dares say a word to him. Let's be perfectly clear: at that precise moment in time I am happy that France is losing what is undoubtedly its top player, the star who ten minutes from the end of extra-time was still scaring us. But it's one thing to feel relief for a very important match that's become less difficult, and another to forget who the man going off is, how bitter that walk toward his last changing room must be, brushing past a cup that would not be his, how unfair it is that a champion like him should end a fantastic career with such a humiliating dismissal. There are ten minutes left to play but the game has practically stopped. The Zidane episode has shocked everyone to such an extent that all the rest is simply the wait for the penalty shoot-out.

And here they are, at last. This time Lippi hasn't told the team to finish off the game, as had happened in the semi-final. The reason is easy to figure out: Germany not being as good as we were, the penalties would have given them a chance they didn't deserve. Instead with France we're equal: forcing the situation would have exposed us to the risk of conceding a goal. The truth is that within a highly uncertain picture such as this one, we feel relatively at ease: in the team there are many club penalty-takers, and although the level of emotions is not comparable, the habit of taking them must mean something in the end. Buffon can't stand still, because he, who is seen as the best goalkeeper in the world, knows that penalties are not his forte: I take it upon myself to keep his morale up, reminding him that his name is Buffon

and that any penalty-taker will be scared stiff at the thought of having to face him. Clearly, I was exaggerating because Gigi, laughing, says “exaggerate some more, come on”, but in the meanwhile I've put the smile back on his face and this was my purpose. Lippi has a precise strategy, right away a “safe” shooter to start off the series in the best possible way: we kick first, the best situation, like starting the fifth set with the service in tennis. Pirlo goes over to the penalty spot with apparent sang froid. I enter the midfield circle, I can't stay on the bench any more. I stay in the second line with respect to the penalty-takers, I'm unable to say anything. The intensity of the moment is too high, no one manages to utter even half a word.

The shot is down the middle, but Barthez dived early. Goal. Andrea kisses his wedding ring and goes back to the midfield with the same neutral expression painted on his face. That never changes. He has played a fantastic World Cup, he has been the fulcrum of the team, the Azzurri's orchestra conductor; on the field he and I have always found each other instinctively, because class recognizes class, and I was pleased when I sent him the ball of the goal against Ghana – all his own merit, mine was just a ‘delivery’ – he told me that I had been a Federal Express courier. He goes back into the centre circle nodding briefly to everyone's congratulations. Time to turn around and Wiltord, the usual Wiltord, has equalized. Materazzi starts off fast, as though he wanted to shorten the agony. Fifteen minutes before, the French sector of the stadium, and the bench – Domenech first and foremost – submerged him with insults thinking that he had simulated, or in any case provoked Zidane's dismissal. The giant screen had done justice to these suspicions, but the feeling of antipathy lingered. A very strong character is needed to bear it, and Marco isn't short of that. While it seems that the stadium structure shakes from the intensity of the whistles, he kicks it hard into the far corner, beyond Barthez's outstretched arm. Fantastic. He comes back to the centre of the field brushing his ear with a hand, a message to the French who keep on shouting abuse at him. Since that World Cup I've become very fond of him, and to think that in the Championship he kept on hitting me as always: but the person is much sweeter than the footballer, and after having got to know him well you can't do without.

It's Trezeguet's turn, for many years Buffon's teammate at Juventus. We're all thinking about that – even if we would tell each other about it later – because it's a situation of acquaintanceship that can impact the psychological balance of the duel. The Frenchman, in fact, seeks an execution that's too difficult, high, in the top corner, and hits the crossbar instead. The burst of adrenaline has a triple strength as compared with the successful conversion of a teammate, because it is following the mistake of an opponent that you can feel the victory come closer. Now it very much depends on our third penalty shooter, and I, who can't remember the succession laid down by Lippi, look apprehensively at the line of possible penalty-takers, a few metres in front of me. I feel my heart skip a beat, when I see Daniele separate from the rest of us.

The choice is a logical one, for Roma he is the second choice after me, and his right foot is powerful and accurate. All the same I am deeply moved, also in a protective sense, by the risk that De Rossi accepts to take. And when I see the ball go in at the top corner, a sort of nice copy of Trezeguet's shot, deep down I felt more joy than for any other penalty. For a long time I was the model that Daniele took as his point of reference, and on my side it is even obvious to feel like his older brother. That is one of the many moments – probably the most famous one – when I felt proud of him. I welcome him with a hug while Abidal goes to the penalty spot, and scores. The French are snapping at our heels. Slightly behind, but right up there. Del Piero claps his hands and sets off. It's his turn now.

He can't miss. First of all, because Alex never misses (...). That's why Lippi put him in fourth spot, so as not to run the risk of wasting our main penalty-taker. And in fact Alex does not let us down, wrong-footing Barthez and clenching his fists high in our direction, standing in the centre circle. Pirlo by now watches the penalties with his arms wrapped around Cannavaro, while the player who's the most enthusiastic about Del Piero's conversion is Grosso, and why that is is soon told. From now on every penalty is a match-point, if Buffon could save the next one it would be over and Fabio wouldn't have to take the last, crucial penalty shot. The fifth one on the list is in fact him, this I do recall because it was a brave choice in any case. Sagnol sets off, he's a defender, and I think that he's probably the man who replaced Zidane in the quintet of penalty-takers. Could it be that .... No, there's no hope: Sagnol converts with confidence, and all the gazes inevitably turn to Fabio Grosso.

His wife, up in the stands, is eight months pregnant. Ilary would later tell me that three or four of them encircled her to support her – she was feeling very emotional – and that she turned around out of fear, she didn't want to see it. But Fabio didn't bat an eyelid when Lippi asked him if he felt up to taking the fifth penalty. A soldier. And now that it has become decisive, look at how straight he walks, without straying an inch from the straightest line, look at how he takes the ball into his hands and places it carefully on the penalty spot, look at how he walks back for the run-up, and stops, looks at the referee through the corner of his eye awaiting the sound of his whistle. Carefully avoiding looking at Barthez, who would like to make him feel the weight of his prior status of world champion. Grosso already got himself a half-penalty against Australia and scored the first goal against Germany. Can his shoulders bear the weight of this decisive penalty for the World Cup? At the start of the tournament, to be honest, I would have said no. As the responsibility came upon him gradually, and he seconded them more and more impressively, the feeling had grown in us teammates that Fabio was the man of providence. He was going through a purple patch, it was no accident that at that World Cup he was at the peak of his career.

Run-up. Left foot. Goal. My head is bursting. I can't remember who embraced me first, only Pirlo who went by in front of me, followed by the FIFA cameraman who had been beside us to

film us, discreetly and silently, during the taking of the penalties. In the images, which I must have seen again a million times, I appear entangled with Daniele and Vito, and that all-Roman feast – Perrotta joined us a moment later – would be etched in my mind forever. Unforgettable. Winning a World Cup is too big an event to be defined, you try but something is always left out: you're part of the history of football, you see, this is something that bounces around in my mind while I wait for Cannavaro to lift the Cup. But it's all very confused, and every time I see the films again I notice a new detail: Lippi with his cigar at the prize-giving ceremony, for example, was a recent discovery. Blatter's famous absence, that was talked about so much, no one noticed; in moments like those no one was wondering why Blatter was not around...And the whole world's inside the changing rooms. A huge crowd. And no one leaves even when bucketfuls of icy water start to fly around: I imagine that being there in that moment was a status symbol of exceptional importance. (...) Vito, who always keeps his eyes open, jumps onto an agent of the presidential security guards who was snatching a couple of shirts.

(...)

We stay up until dawn in small groups, I spend that sweetest night of all with Ilary, Cristian who's dozing, Vito and his wife Cristina. We talk, we laugh, we all have the feeling that after this victory nothing will ever be the same again. No one asks me, but at daybreak – when the sky starts to fill with colour – a thought comes to my mind: I've just played my last game in the national team. Yes, so it was. If I still had some doubts, the chance to finish at the top is alluring, because it's always better to quit when there's still someone who will miss you.

The afternoon flight from Düsseldorf is headed to Pratica di Mare. I'm fresh and clean-shaven, we're expected first at Palazzo Chigi and then at the Circo Massimo, for the big popular celebrations. I travel next to Ilary with Cristian in her arms, the World Cup is finished and I don't want to be separated from them for a second more. During the flight we Romans explain to the others what it means to be celebrating in our city, conscious of the fact that the impact will be awesome especially for the Juventus players, accustomed – it's a tease that has existed forever, our playful and meagre consolation for their large number of successes – to celebrating a League championship every twenty minutes or so. Buffon laughs out loud every time we mention the matter. Twenty minutes before the landing, the Frecce Tricolori flank the plane to escort us to the ground: the commander explains that it's an honour reserved for very few. The level of emotion rises.

The soldiers who are waiting for us down below immediately give us some measure of what to expect. They seem wild. What I mean is that they would like to be part of a ceremonial; instead, as soon as we hit the ground, the hunt for pictures and autographs starts. That's a good start, I think to myself. My first appointment is in the centre of Rome, Romano Prodi is waiting for us in the government building, in Piazza Colonna. I hadn't been in Via del Corso

for about fifteen years, and it's quite a moving experience: I have the chance to see a few sights of the Rome I love so much, and that for obvious reasons are denied to me. A further, small addition to the joyfulness that already seems to be spilling over. (...) We get to Piazza Colonna at 9 p.m., slightly behind schedule. Prodi has come into the street to greet us. Behind him there's a line of cabinet ministers, and I already know that Gigi Riva is getting all itchy. He doesn't like the politicians, especially those who, before the start of the World Cup, issued interviews in which they wondered whether it might have been a better idea to stay at home after the Calciopoli corruption scandal. The reception at Palazzo Chigi is pleasant nonetheless, Piazza Colonna is teeming with festive fans, at a certain point I take the Cup and go to a window to show it to the people: the roar that follows is worth as much as a goal in the derby game.

Despite the absolutely festive atmosphere, I can tell that something isn't quite right. I ask Vito if knows anything, and he tells me that there are some problems with Riva: when he heard that not only would the team and the World Cup staff be getting on board the open-top bus, but that there would also be other Federal officials and above all some politicians, he made a scene. I can see him at the end of the room, his face dark: they try to hold him back, but he's made up his mind. He goes down the internal staircase quickly, appears in the square next to the parked bus, gets the surprised driver to open the luggage compartment, takes out his cabin trolley and leaves, I assume to get a taxi. If I had already admired him before, for his past as a champion and for that unique willingness to always take the players' side – even when it's hard, like it was for me after spitting at Poulsen – now I feel I really adore him. I find his ability not to forgive exhilarating, not to let everything slide off us as we had done instead; in that atmosphere of general jubilation pretending for the sake of a quiet life not to remember what Tom had said, what the Dick had suggested, how much we had always been insulted by Harry. Instead Gigi had made it clear that he was willing to shake a few hands, but not to let everyone get on board the winners' bus. And with absolute coherence, once he found out that those who had attacked us would get into the photos, he upped and left.

(...)

I haven't slept for the second night running, and it's a good thing because the day after, flying out to Bora Bora, I have sweet dreams as I hold Cristian to my chest. Never again without him. When I left the pitch after one hour of the World Cup final, substituted by De Rossi, I did not just abandon a great match. I called time – luckily covered in glory – on my story with the national side. I am not even 30 years old, but feel the need to spend more time with my family: with Ilary, with Cristian, with his sisters who would be born later, and that we wanted with all our heart even then. From then on I would be divided between Roma and my family, trimming from my life all the pre-match camps, the friendlies, the qualifying matches and the big tournaments in the blue shirt: a lot of time earned at an age when time no longer seems to

you to be endless. Already on the flight back from Germany I tell the team officials about my decision, which I had taken before the World Cup anyway; and when in September Roberto Donadoni, the new national team manager, comes to see me in the hotel in Milan where I'm staying before a championship match, I repeat my no to him. Unhappy, because it's not easy to deny oneself to a manager who makes it clearly understood how much he'd love to have you in his team. Donadoni is a good guy, it's a shame we didn't travel the same path together for a while. But at that moment I had simply had enough.

On other occasions there was talk of my possible return to the national side. Everyone thought so two years later, when Lippi became manager again, considering our relationship, imagining it made sense. For precisely that reason I never gave him the chance to go beyond a simple chat every now and then: if I had let him talk to me explicitly, it would have been complicated to say no again. Finally, a few months before the 2014 World Cup, Prandelli called Vito to ask him if anything had changed: actually I did like the idea of playing in Brazil – and people around me knew that as well – if the manager had come to talk to me in person we might have come to an agreement. But it didn't happen: Prandelli didn't call a second time, and it was better that way. I would have felt uneasy at joining a group at the last minute that had shouldered the efforts to qualify, also because I would have taken the place of someone in the team who had worked his ass off to be there.

I left as World Champion, the pinnacle. It was a highly criticized decision, because by deciding to put Roma first I marked my belonging to the city in a way that left no doubts whatsoever: even today many people are surprised when I say that for me the championship title has a slightly higher value than the World Cup winner's medal. They think I'm crazy and are unable to accept it, because, of course, the World Cup is the peak of any career in football: but it's even more so for those who win every year, like the Juventus players, for example, than for those who hardly ever win. For us the maximum achievement is winning the League, and my greatest regret is not having won at least a second one. The national side, well... Every time there's a great tournament, my instinct makes me want to be there: the anthems are played, the camera moves along the line of the Italy players, I call Cristian over and we sit on the sofa to watch the match. I feel a lump in my throat, but nobody notices it.

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