

**Fabrizio Gabrielli**

# **Cristiano Ronaldo**

**Talent of Determination**

## Prologue: All the things that Cristiano Ronaldo taught me

When the wall lamps on the headboard above the bed are backlit, accompanied by the slight hum of neon, the one that takes life is a kind of cosmogony for novices of Cristiano Ronaldo. In eleven squares, each the size of an *azulejo*, the birth, growth and celebration of the Portuguese player are performed as if in a Chinese shadow theatre. It's the central frieze of the tympanum of an Arc de Triomphe, a Via Crucis without the inconvenience of the Passion.

The sketched features represent the most important stages, the most glorious mysteries of the troubling life of Cristiano Ronaldo: sleeping under such a thunderous vault, instils a sense of admiration fragmented with anguish, a worry accentuated by the faltering presence of mirrors - mirrors everywhere, forcing me to come to terms with the imperfection of my silhouette in my pyjamas, not so much, and with my own guilt. Outside the window, from the sculpted profile of the rock on which the Pestana Casino stands, in the garden is a Bomarzo Monster Park made of gym equipment, exercise bikes that I will never use, and other impromptu installations of a great museum celebrating The Cult of the Physical.

Of course, there is Madeira, in the backlit azulejos, this luxurious and dazzling point in the middle of the blue Atlantic, closer to the Moroccan coast than to the Portuguese coast, to which it belongs. His houses are there with the gable roofs and the leeks of the Church of Saint Anthony in the capital Funchal, the volcanic beaches in the background, the point of origin and convergence of his parable. Then there is the *Clube de Futebol Andorinhade Santo Antonio*, the first amateur neighbourhood team of Cristian. A young boy, engaged in stretching his muscles, a serious expression on his face, an image that has become famous because it epitomises his attitude and approach to training: zealous, full of loneliness, without the enthusiasm of a young boy. His posture reminds me of a poem by Edgar Allan Poe, "Alone", which begins:

From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were, -I have not seen  
As others saw, -I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring  
From the same source I have not taken  
My sorrow; I could not awaken  
My heart to joy at the same tone;  
And all I loved, I loved alone.

. Unlike the decorations on the Arc de Triomphe, in the narrative of the myth of Cristiano Ronaldo - splashed the appliques on the headboard of this upper room in the CR7 Pestana Hotel in Funchal, on the island of Madeira, the archipelago of the Azores, and the place where Cristiano Ronaldo was born - there are no prostrate slaves and deported or ancient cultures devastated but only the rising devotion for a cult of personality that is made - from stage to stage, from station to station - from intimate to bully: there is the massive family portrait in the style of the 17th century

courts and the monumental tapestry of the moment when he was awarded the Gran Oficial de la Orden del Infante Don Henrique de Portugal, the highest Portuguese honour. But then there are snapshots of the most important sporting awards - the Ballon d'Or, the Golden Boots - and, above all, the hugs - first empathically, then suffocating, almost demolishing - of the cities where his talent, his determination, the mystical union of the two, have been tested and refined, namely Manchester and Madrid.

The final embrace, that of the last station, is for the Manhattan skyline, and it's as if it were the final scene of an alternate history which CR7 also conquered the United States of America. But it is now clear that at this point the object of magnification is no longer the *player* Cristiano Ronaldo, but the icon, and perhaps even more significantly, the *brand*.

When I took up the challenge of somehow stepping out of my comfort zone and writing this book about a character I've never loved completely, unreservedly — perhaps because I always felt like there was a *disturbing* charming Cristiano — I immediately realized that the first place I wanted to go was the island of Madeira. That seemed the obvious starting point of observation for exploring his figure, not only because, trivially, it was the starting point for his existence. Rather, it is because of its *convergence*.

Cristiano's bond with his origins is in fact contradictory. It is deeply felt, never hidden, perhaps excessively mythical yet real, tangible, permanent. As it is evident that Cristiano Ronaldo became Cristiano Ronaldo when he left the island, the role that these places have played in his romantic education is undeniable not only for what he learned to do with a ball, but - more generally - for his existence, and the perpetuation of his myth, the cult of his myth.

What fascinated me more than anything was this particular angle of the relationship between Cristiano and Funchal. The relationship with the (proper) past of a man entirely projected into the future. More than the places where his childhood ghost still appears, more than the fancy tables in the outskirts where his yellowing pictures are hung, I was fascinated by this rosé parallel, which stands on the seaside, a boutique hotel with a museum attached, a place where the synthetic grass corridors bring to mind the pitch of a football field. Where the signed shirts hanging on the walls are concrete symbols - relics - rather than its passage, its presence: if Funchal is the vaulted apse of a large cathedral erected to the cult of CR7, the square named Praça CR7 is the altar on which the transubstantiation of Cristiano is carried out, in which the bronze becomes body and blood offered for veneration.

At the beginning of the corridor that leads to the rooms, hanging on a cord tied to the wall, there is a pair of binoculars on a bar that says, "Where's Cristiano Ronaldo?" A dadaist work, a provocation, a style exercise that raises a question at the end of rhetoric, because the true answer, the most plausible, is *everywhere*. *Around here, everywhere*.

More prosaically, however, if you look with binoculars towards the exit point of the corridor, you are returned to the image of exultant Cristiano, with his finger pointing to the sky, wearing a Real Madrid shirt, which decorates the entrance door of the suite. The room in which he, sometimes ("every time he is in Madeira" in the words of those who work at CR7 Pestana) stays.

As a broken clock marks the exact time twice a day, the answer to the oracle of the binoculars is actually down there, down the corridor.

"The New York branch is the next hotel due to open," Hugo tells me, making sense of the design on the head of the bed, an embrace with Cristiano Ronaldo in Lower Manhattan. Hugo is the Guest Relationship Manager of the CR7 Pestana Hotel, and when he talks about the deeper sense of the brand he works for, his mission, he never seems to be reciting a business booklet, but seems genuinely excited about it. "But it is not the only one. There will soon be a CR7 Hotel in Marrakech, and one in Madrid."

Marrakech, New York and Madrid are very distant cities, and not at all equidistant from the epicentre of the Cristiano Ronaldo phenomenon. If the Spanish capital has been the seat of power for years, the stage for his greatest successes, what does CR7 represent for New York, and vice versa? Are we facing the greatest exaltation of the most glamorous aspects? Or perhaps, as I see it more convincingly, the perfect coincidence between the parable of Cristiano and that particular New York spirit captured by Jay-Z in the refrain of Empire State of Mind that NY is the concrete jungle in which dreams are shaped by the spirit of the infinitely possible?

One story that never emerges, when it comes to the CR7 Pestana Lifestyle Hotel, is that of the entrepreneur who had the intuition to propose to Cristiano this branding operation, Dionisio Pestana, the CEO of a leading Portuguese luxury tourism holding company, capable of offering nearly 11,000 rooms worldwide. An interesting story for the many points of contact with Cristiano's career, where hardship, misery, a hunger for revenge, success, hard work, are constants.

Like Cristiano, Dionisio is a son of Madeira. His father Manuel, who grew up without a chance to attend school, and had no ambition to aim for, so he fled the island in the 1950s to emigrate to South Africa, where he worked in diamond quarries. He first invested in a vegetable shop, then in a canning factory. With the adventurous perseverance of those who rode unscrupulously the last coups of colonialism, Manuel first bought small apartments in Maputo, then Lourenço Marques, Mozambique, and then restaurants. He discovered a vocation for the world of hospitality, and decided to buy the Hotel Residence Atlantico in Madeira. This rock in the middle of the Atlantic, a place that was hated and abandoned, would instead become his salvation: in 1974, with the fall of Salazar and the beginning of the process of independence of the former colonies, the Pestana family lost all of its properties in Mozambique, and suffer recession and the nationalization of the national economy. It was then that he learned the value of having a home not only to leave, but to return to, to rediscover old traces, find a way back, find a way to relearn. And make money.

It can be said that Dionisio, like Cristiano, loves Madeira to the extent that the island, with its physical and sentimental morphology, provided him with the cultural tools to design a plan that was at the same time of escape and of permanence. Dionisio and Cristiano are the product of the same environment, of the same *genius loci*, and the CR7 Pestana is the monument that celebrates this state of mind.

Living there is an alienating experience. Sitting at the bar tables are the elderly Germans, who spend hours staring at their *culaccino* under the lukewarm beers and pilgrims from Southeast Asia. Entire tables full of football strips - from Portugal, Real Madrid and Manchester United - with the number seven printed on their backs, taking selfies in front of the framed shirt near the elevator. In the pier in front of the hotel, the transatlantic big players are routinely drawn in Funchal, that is an

intermediate stop before arriving in Faro, or at the other end, enter the Atlantic. From the holds, armies of sailors and machinists from Bangladesh, the Philippines, Sri Lanka pour onto the pavement connecting to the hotel's Wi-Fi to send the photo shaking hands to the Ronaldo's bronze statue to Dhaka or Manila.

The Asian market, Hugo explains to me, is one of the new markets created by CR7 Pestana, which lie entirely outside of the identity of those who have traditionally visited the island of Madeira, namely northern Europeans who are attracted by mild weather, palm trees, a landscape which is not already European, although it is not entirely tropical. Those who come to Madeira from Asia, with money, do so for Ronaldo. Or because they work as a seaman on a transatlantic liner.

When I arrived, just after asking me to choose my welcome drink from a Madeira soda cocktail with liqueur wine or an energizing spin - because every choice is one between the traditional spirit and the health-conscious one inspired by Ronaldo - Hugo told me that he recently hosted a Pakistani cardiac surgeon as host who candidly confessed that he had gone there to see if the difficult context from which Ronaldo had grown up in, as he had read, was a bit like that he himself was immersed in before he committed himself wholeheartedly in the apparently impossible process of emancipation. "Think about how it affects people? What is the global impact?"

To be honest, the story of the Pakistani cardiac surgeon seems unbelievable to me: useful when used in a motivational workshop, but far too perfect to be true. Even though I was there, after all, in one way or another, because of Cristiano Ronaldo, it made me very difficult to believe that someone could actually engage in a pilgrimage over ten thousand kilometres to Madeira.

But then I met Luo.

"Do you like, Ronaldo?" he asked me on the way down with the elevator of CR7 Pestana. It seemed to me to be a completely absurd question, however consistent it was: it was like he was looking for reassurance for both of us about being there together in an elevator, with a picture of paparazzi photographing you, as if you were Cristiano Ronaldo.

Luo comes from Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, and is an installer of technology equipment. He says he has had a great career in his work, thanks to his self-discipline, perseverance and tenacity.

"All the things that Cristiano Ronaldo taught me," he adds, looking seriously at me. Then he invites me to get something at the CR7 Corner, the hotel bar, where a giant screen projects continuous clips of matches. Luo orders a CR7 salad, a poke with mango, rice, salad, shrimp. When from the kitchen, with the affability that the "FanCReators" are capable of - anyone who works at CR7 Pestana takes pride in this position that is first and foremost ambassador - they return to say that there are no shrimps, he does not feel so disappointed. Although for a moment I thought he'd dive into the sea to catch it himself.

Funchal is the penultimate leg of his trip to Europe, he tells me. The next one, he tells me, is in Italy: Luo has already purchased a ticket for Juventus-Milan, which is scheduled to take place a couple of days after our meeting. I don't have heart to tell him that Cristiano won't be playing in that match, because he is injured. Luo has already visited Manchester, Madrid and Lisbon. He shows me some photos on his smartphone, and he's giving explanations. "See this pose? Now look at this!" He has at least 20 photos that are the exact reproduction of photos that capture Cristiano

Ronaldo: hands behind the back of the head, in a bathrobe, on the terrace of the CR7 Pestana Lisbon suite, posing just like his idol. "This cost me a lot of money," he smiles. I see Luo with his thumbs up inside Santiago Bernabeu. And then in a corner of the Bairro Alto of Lisbon, which is exactly the same as when Cristiano was photographed for a report during his time at Sporting.

Luo opened a Facebook account as soon as he arrived in Europe - Facebook cannot be used in China. He only has friends known on this trip. Only people with whom, he confesses to me, speak about Cristiano all day long. When you say someone is in the bubble.

After adding me to his contacts, he asks if I can take a photo of him next to the bronze statue that rises up in front of the Museu entrance. The bronze statue has lighter, almost golden stains, at the height of the hands, and of the pubis, the parts most affected by wear and rubbing. He approaches it shyly, then shakes the hand of the metallic Cristiano, looking at him with tenderness.

A few weeks later, shortly before the start of the Champions League quarterfinals' away match in Amsterdam, against Ajax, the cameras will capture a sweet scene as the Champions' anthem resonates. The young lad in front of Bonucci, who is right on the side of Cristiano, turns towards the Portuguese with a gaze that goes beyond admiration to become something akin to veneration. He stares at him, but he doesn't believe he is so close to his idol. Cristiano catches his gaze, and for a moment there is a tension, a sense of awe that leads the boy to turn his away, to retreat. At that very instant, though, Cristiano smiles, and the ecstatic relief I saw in that young boy who went viral on social media, I had seen a few days earlier in Luo's eyes, taking a photo with his mobile phone that would end up being the most artistic picture I've ever taken in my life. At that moment I felt something that in Japan expresses itself with a specific, untranslatable word in other languages, *aware*: the feeling that you feel when you notice that you are experiencing a moment of extreme beauty, sweet and melancholic at the same time. Because behind Luo's back, after raining all day, just as I was shooting, a rainbow chose to frame the entire scene, the heavenly triumph of Cristiano.