

Naples, 2018

My grandfather had Di Stefano, my father had Sivori, and I had Maradona. If I make a chart of what went good or bad to my family predecessors, and me in a social sense, these Argentines went downhill but they achieved progressive greatness as idols. My predecessors have had guaranteed work and no problems with life choices, while I got for myself and my education the greatest footballers of all time. Too much? Too less? I don't know. All of this is drenched with some sense of resignation: my grandfather would never have seen Di Stéfano playing in Naples, my father, although Sívori had then come to the city, had not seen his team win the Scudetto, while I was resigned to the fact that two championships and a Uefa Cup can suffice as compensation for a failed social revolution and my life without a certainty of work.

Football sometimes becomes destiny, as well as social physiology. While my grandfather listened to it on the radio, my father wanted to become the protagonist, and then I ended up writing about it. In the three of us there was and there is the irresponsibility of a right forward player, dribbling down the right wing and then crossing to the centre, in a constant strive to be useful for the glory of the team; an obsession to be accurate in reaching the head or foot of the attacker, that before Maradona would come to stage and show that no longer in or around the penalty area it's where the greatest stories of football would be celebrated. I still did not know that I would be among those lucky ones, among those invested in his alluring style that rendered the whole field the penalty area. Vujadin Bošković would have said: football is where Maradona stands. He pushed boundaries, rewrote rules or he was an exception when major causes would occur - just like the circumstance of the "hand of God" - to realise the design of his life, destined for Argentine TV with the naturalness that only children have. When he said he wanted to play in the world cup and win it, he was the same age as I was when he arrived in Naples.

I too would score and I played well, but I never thought about winning a world cup. Instead, I thought that I wanted to be a doctor like my grandfather, not a clinical one, but one in a world different from his. I blame that on my uncle, who would send postcards from absurd places like Saigon, Kabul and Mumbai, where he was a doctor. Football dominated the rhythm of my younger days, every place was an improvised field and the weather was of fundamental importance; I lived in a distant world where only those postcards were able to show me the rest of the world, and therefore to push me to the choice of having a profession. Yes, I wanted to be a doctor, but in the mean time I was playing football. I confess with much shame that before the arrival of Maradona I had an emotional enthusiasm for Marco Tardelli - between the tormenting and the fatal- more for his celebration than for the goal itself, more for the fact of him having shown me a stylistic modernity to celebrating scoring a goal, which I had first imagined as a raised arm and a smile. As Maradona would have said, it's the style with which you reach the goal. The dismay that led to happiness was a road for all of us, but then we fell into fierce rivalries with different hopes.

Tardelli was from Juventus, which to this day remains a condition of stability in football and an anthropological constancy, an elitist condition that placed him far away, in a foreign galaxy and above all made him an enemy, despite the world cup in '82, the victory and the dream. In those years Naples had a dim slowness, to put it in the best possible way, in the sense that it trudged in the dark while struggling to produce light, at least according to the magical realism that has always been practiced in my family and which I would later find reflected in the pages of Gabriel García Márquez, recognizing him as a cultured relative who wrote what was only sung in my grandmother's kitchen. In those years, the world was an exercise of irreparable wickedness, with no

Neapolitan footballers in the national team, a decision made according to unwritten rules: it was first based on a geographical radius that stopped in Gaeta for obvious historical reasons. Then it was based on skill and maybe sympathy in Juventus' favour. Only later would I have discovered that in those years Naples had a three-way attack that would have gone beyond space and time even more so than Jurij Alekseevic Gagarin - another acquired relative, a Ciriello born abroad -, a trident of Eduardo De Filippo, Massimo Troisi and Pino Daniele, who all played and scored in other fields of work, and to which Diego Armando Maradona would be added, in a slightly deeper position, but with greater freedom. Only later I would have been aware of the impact of the eighties on the rest of the decades. Only later would I have known that this pre-Maradonian condition, before joy, was a burning fire between two nights. Only later I would have discovered that football, besides being a social physiology, is a distraction, above all from the pain and irrepressible pre-dominance of the irreversibility of time. Footballers who quit, who hang up their boots, tell us that we have a limited number of games to play, and that having a losing team helps approach the lexicon of life, with more defeats than victories; and if in the middle, as in every self-respecting faith, a prophet also arrives to subvert everything that seemed insubstantial, in a structure that had its normality in the dominion of the Northern hemisphere over the Southern in pretty much everything that counts in our culture and society. In that case, I can say that it was worth the living and suffering. And swap security for imagination.

Naples, 1991

I was born and raised in a big house overlooking the sea, with a large terrace that for me and my sister acted as a football pitch, a tennis court, a basketball court, a garden, and then to become a place to relax, perhaps because the view of the city required a distraction or a loud voice to mask the stares. Years later, when we lost that house, a friend pointed out to me that I was so used to that view that I did not get excited by looking at Naples. It was a great lesson because I understood how we could get tired of beauty, or at least we can get used to it.

From that terrace nothing was depressing, not even the winter; it was on that terrace that one morning, I found my grandmother watching the dawn in a nightgown. She was preserving an aristocracy, a turn of elegance so high that it still moves me, which I would then look for in the women that I became intimate with. It is the basis of my aesthetic values, built through her gestures and my grandfather's classical music. That morning, my grandmother did not ask me where I was, nor with whom. Instead, she smiled at me and began to prepare me coffee – the terrace acted as the living area, where everything took place. It opened out from the large kitchen and was where my grandmother would shout her requests and my mother would have her tantrums and rants, and while and preparing the coffee she said to me: they've left.

I remember the uncertainty of how the light shone on her back, and her cheekbones rising with a bitter smile, an unforgettable expression given only when looking at precious things that could get lost.

After that smile, nothing else needed to be said, I knew what she was talking about and I did not answer, I shrugged. Then I joined her to watch the sun rise as we waited for the coffee to come out.

It was a June morning, I was sixteen. The news was about the Maradona family, which we could see from the terrace and which we would greet with joy on those days following to big matches, cheered back by Claudia more than by Diego. According to my grandfather, to bother them with cheers was a vulgar habit, but for my grandmother and I it was a necessary act from considering what Maradona was achieving, also with the silent constant help from Claudia. Years later, thanks to Emir Kusturica, it became appreciated and valued again. Our cheers were mere whispers in comparison to what would go on under their balcony, but my Grandfather would continue to see it as a mistake, as he would continue to support the supremacy of Don Alfredo Di Stéfano, even though he thought highly of Diego. So much so that when we told him about the closure of the house and the inevitable departure of the player and his family, he had a bout of annoyance that I would see only twice more with his contempt for certain news. It was a facial exclamation that did not need words. Yes, my grandparents could be two mimes, and they would not have stood out in a European court in the presence of the royals. The protests of dissent had another language that, although by derogating the voice of the emotions, was not of someone keeping his distance nor any Northern cultural habit, no; it was a polite habit that cheated geography and shuffled the cards. Of course, I shared my grandfather's irritation. Without Maradona, nothing made sense, and that gesture was the signal: I could be disappointed, it was devastating news and almost matched how I felt when my father died.

Absent to their first league title, and forever condemned to the void that preceded the years prior to the victory.

Buenos Aires, 1973-1976

Maradona is not sold

Maradona does not go

Maradona is from my neighbourhood

From La Paternal neighbourhood.

It was immediately understood that Diego and football would meet for the rest of their lives. A phenomenal talent for dribbling that anticipates the ball movements even before planning the strike action on the field. A passage worth Borges' description, even though he wouldn't be aware of that. For this hermeneutic exercise that he will make the best of gestures: raising the enthusiasm of the dusty and casual improvisation of Villa Fiorito - a shanty town - to heavenly sporting inspiration, which has always marked the game of football. In practice, the real great Maradona games are those which are unseen, unaware and perfectly random, that aimed not to win the world cup, but to pass the time, dribbling the sun in a paradise of improvised football that is almost another world where the young Diego would always feel out of place, to the point of having to transform. Every match, every victory, every goal is not only part of Villa Fiorito's emotional grammar, but they are only a pale impression of what Diego had already done, played and lived. It was not by chance those games took place in clouds and clouds of dust raised by the actions of children, and for this entrust the imagination and memories of a time that exists only in Diego's thoughts and of which he, every time he is called to evoke it, adjusts it slightly, and the further you move away the more the story changes. A search to return to where he will not be able to walk fleetingly because of TV and newspapers. So much so that the productive part, the one that will then lead him to be like Muhammad Ali as being known by everyone and to become perhaps more famous than Jesus Christ. It is the re-match of those lost games, the "beauty" added to social decency, clean shirts and sponsors. The mocking, the tunnels, the longshots, all his cinematographic inventions accomplished with Mozart's naturalness, and which so much impression and admiration still inspire in those who see them for the first time or in those who have a physical need to see him win, to be like him. Villa Fiorito is the place that led to the humiliation of Peter Shilton and of England; Villa Fiorito is the place where the Scudetti of Naples and the triumphs of Argentina in Mexico City were born; and every single keepie uppie done on the pitch or in the television studios, looked to him. Maradona had seen everything at Villa Fiorito and he announced this on television.

The sound of his keepie-uppies with his left foot, as if it were raining like a divine illustration, with the order that moved from his muscles to the ball and then back to the muscles with the precision of the central nave of a Gothic cathedral that rises to seek the link with the Universe in a sacrament that is transmitted from architecture to those who walk through the aisle. His sound, the sound that the young Maradona produced with a badly sewn football, a worn t-shirt that was stretched across his chest and abdomen, with the glimpse of battered shoes. This was a thrill, and this thrill was the future. The loss of place and condition, which we know to be inconvenient, was perfection for him. There were no privileges, just dreams. There was nothing but football pitches, which were gradually cleaned and surrounded by ever-increasing audiences. Diego left behind the dirt and rotteness for a first-class lifestyle dominated by hotels, cars, villas, helicopters and yachts in thousands of languages and cities.

The question that he has been asked is not “are you coming to play for us?” but rather “are we sure you’re from the 1960’s?” Because nobody could believe what they saw. And before it was written in the newspapers and magazines, everyone – including coaches, directors, presidents, prosecutors and middlemen – wanted to know the answer. Maradona represented Luciferian corruption, where he changed everything. At work, he turned average players into decent players because he could see the flaws and iron them out with ease. You just had to return the ball to Maradona. His strength is not so much in the goals or in the way they’re made, but in the way he elevates others. Every game he seems to increase his worth. He comes into the team and suddenly they are all better than before, with a precocious awareness of the football that he plays. Everyone wants to give their best by seeing how he plays for them, it’s a type of transitive Maradonian ownership.

He would seize the day with his friend Negro and his cousin Beto, starting from the school of Remedios de Escalada de San Martín, near Fiorito station. Maradona learnt to lie to his mother, doña Tota, from shopping to schedules: he would say little lies so he could play football. The first penalty area was his home: three rooms for eight brothers plus their parents. He was already in the team. He dodged the raindrops when it rained, which was a gift to say the least. At the age of three, he received a gift from Beto Zárate, his first leather ball, which he was inseparable from. On the first night he slept hugging it, practically treating it like another world. The ball represented his travels. It doesn’t make sense in the discussion of him saying goodbye to football, crying, not distracted by cleanliness but embracing the dirt. A discussion of Barba, from God: I am guilty, but the world is clean. Today, we can say that Maradona is an anomaly of football, politics and even Argentine culture. The best footballer in the world, and one of the strongest Argentinians. A paradox, at least to hear my friend Fernando, a volleyball coach, a pupil of Julio Velasco, who took me to Villa Fiorito for the first time. There, Maradona is also considered the best Argentinean, and everyone had an anecdote about him: from doing keepie uppies down the street with an orange (so that he could eat it for free) to other terrible facts pointing to his character resembling him once like an eel, then like a wildcat or a puma, a tiger: there was a story from each one of those who knew him. Some people added specific details to the story, involving hunger and then forgetfulness. Others, however, kept a smile on their face from the moment that his name was mentioned. It was almost like a Dickensian gradation, which is indeed ironic, since we are in Argentina and all that is English and does not stay at Borges is not received well. Diego was the boy who had avoided the conviction; he escaped the automatism of the class system, through a corridor that had allowed him to leave the conditions in which he grew up. That corridor was more than winning the lottery. It meant not having to wait any longer, never having to beg. Even getting ill meant having better conditions than having a healthy life at Villa Fiorito.

When Diego and "El Goyo" - who asked him to go and try out for the Argentinos Junior football team - crossed the Alsina bridge to get to Las Malvinas, at that precise moment the ‘Once Upon a Time in America’ of Maradona was made; and in fact it would take director Sergio Leone and musician Ennio Morricone, besides the prose of Stephen King in *Different Seasons* (where "The body" stands alone, or in *Stand by me*) to properly portray that moment. Three kids and one shot at roulette. Maradona is already a complete player, the other two are good. It is only a question of codification. Suddenly, crossing that bridge, the dullness of their lives disappeared: they were going to wear the Argentinos Junior red shirt, they were – despite setbacks - going to play a real game, and Diego, since touching his first ball has become a fundamental part of football. It is likely that at that exact moment, Pele

began to feel a pain in his legs, a small pain, one of those which passes immediately but that leaves a strange feeling. Maybe it was just the wind changing and the arrival of a storm. In that case, everything was changing and he began to abdicate. On a coach, there is a kid who is going to take football and capture our imagination. He is going to turn everyone's attention away from the past dominated by Pele, making him suspicious to everyone, even to those who, like me, were yet to be born.

Maradona's idol was Ricardo Enrique Bochini, an aggressive player. You could not imagine seeing a punk with so much ability with a ball in between his feet. He did not have the look of a footballer, with a deep receding hairline. Yet he was devilish. He wasn't fast, but he was elegant. Not passionate, but intelligent. A great herald of football happiness. He used the outer foot side effectively: he always aimed the ball at the corners of the goals with great accuracy. Those like Bochini consciously do their work in the background, and yet, without them, there would be no Maradona. The things that Bochini attempts provided Maradona with his imagination. And it is this imagination that Diego will always be remembered for and which gave him the title of world champion, even if in that world cup of Mexico '86, Bochini and Maradona only played together for a few minutes against Belgium. But this didn't matter. The gaps that appear when Maradona sees Bochini play with Independiente team - to the point that he has an emotional connection with the team and dreams of playing for them for the sole fact that Bochini is there- with his ability to dribble and his natural talent. He was a level below Sívori, even if like him, he managed to dribble between tight gaps in the defence. Maradona's playing time with his idol ended on June 25, 1986 at the Azteca stadium in Mexico City. It was enough for Maradona to be coeval with him. It would sound strange if this was said today, but only to those who do not follow Argentine football. Bochini at times looked like Mariolino Corso with his cat-like assist precision and dribbling agility. Bochini oscillates with a contained animation. With every touch he brought the indolence of those who would like to be elsewhere despite being amused. But it was his nature: in his detachment there is strength, in his hesitation there is waste. The serpentine vocation, his skills are prevailing over physicality, he is the authorized individualist and with fury. The owner of the hypnotic charm and the builder of parables, the stranger, the dictator of the game with generosity - but only at the right time - if we exclude his right foot and the sober rhythm of his stride. This description was Maradona in a nutshell. Without Bochini and without his deep throws or his dangerous dribbles, little Diego would not have had his story as one of a pirate portrayed by Emilio Salgari. Bochini prepared the pitch for him. He showed him triangulation - which Maradona could easily do without - with Bertoni, and how he gives an order to the midfield maestros, providing the concrete proof that the true footballer need a marginal use of tactics, because those belong indeed to the teamwork concept behind football. Where Maradona went on to become a tiger, puma, eel, at least according to the lively testimonies of Villa Fiorito, Bochini was a snake as much as Sívori was a viper (In the words of Edmondo Berselli). He had less insolence and anger, and compared to Cabezón Sívori, he was much more alert about the possibility of wasting his talent. By comparing them, you can understand the beauty of the forward midfield striking action, by directing the ball to your chosen place: this may seem today some acknowledged matter in football, but it truly was everything in their time. Bochini was a lunatic in the penalty area, you never knew if he was going to turn or if he was going to pass: the one thing you knew, he'd be epic at looking for scoring a goal. And that epic quest would raise Maradona a footballer.

For me "the Cebollitas" will never be Maradona and his friends, but a creased bed sheet, behind which a bunch of kids were screaming and praying for Diego. It was April 2004 and Maradona had been admitted to Suizo Argentina clinic, in intensive care. Below, in the street there was the whole population of Buenos Aires. I was the youngest of Italian journalists and also the only one who did not want Maradona to die. Tired of his life out of football, others followed him for years, whereas I was just beginning journalism, and I had a love and patience that I still have not lost, even when I saw him as a seal on TV. I chose them, those kids among the many Argentineans who prayed and hoped for him - only would you have seen something similar in St. Peter's Square for Karol Wojtyła, a great pastor and pope. The next day I went to see the pitch where Diego used to play and I found his former team mates: Ojeda, Trotta, Chaile, Chammah, Montaña, Lucero, Dalla Buona, Duré, Carrizo and Delgado. That team, a work of Francisco Gregorio Cornejo, won 136 games in a row and not just because of Diego. He says it himself. It was in those games that he missed a penalty and became the man who scored in every way, yes, even with his hand. It was a youth league, so the most serious of championships, he played with a cut hand, under a false name, entering the last minute and overturning it anyway, whether playing as a striker or as a forward midfielder, or in any other way coming to your mind. And everyone, being kids, understood that he would become the best in the world, while the best of the country there was still undecided. In fact there was Gregorio, the number nine. Gregorio Carrizo, whom Maradona called 'El Goyo', the one who told him to come and try, to cross the Alsina bridge and to go and join a professional team. Every great footballer has a friend, who gets lost, and that usually, from that moment on, harbours only resentment and hatred for what happened. But not El Goyo. In Argentina, football is a world apart. I found him easily as he still lived in Villa Fiorito, with six children and a precise memory of that championship for Evita Perón, as well as his injury, the one that separated him from Diego, forever. He swapped football pitches for construction sites to be a mason. It was like a film story: two talents, one gets lost and the other continues his journey. What was in the way, a single knee. If I were a journalist when Maradona injured his ankle in Barcelona, I would have run to El Goyo. I had even searched in the archives, but I did not have much time and did not find interviews from those years. Instead I found El Goy pacified, a cheerful heart without repentance; on the contrary, he exhibited his laziness, a form of slow anarchy: He said that Diego waited for him. He paid for his rehabilitation in the gym and that he should have continued with the exercises for six months, but after two weeks he was already bored. He says he never had patience, nor predisposition to discipline. It seems like a story by Osvaldo Soriano, like everything has to do with football in South America. El Goyo returned to the pitch but he was not fully fit. His swollen knee constantly needed ice, and the opponent team's goal seemed to shrink on and on. He changed from team to team and moved further and further away from big opportunities, while Diego grew and grew to the point that he sealed a transfer to Barcelona. Adiós. El Goyo saw him on TV and in his dreams. For a paradoxical Soriano, his story is bigger than Diego's, because it includes the failure and because in his renunciation, there is the story that was not written. The goals that were not scored, the chances missed, the flights which never landed. He has broken cars, rusty buses, worn out tee shirts and the story: that here, at Villa Fiorito, lies the greatest of riches.

One of the Cebollitas who was holding the banner under the hospital is Diego Armando and he is one of Goyo's sons. He was aware that his father was on the same team as Maradona for 136 games. The number 9 and the number 10. El Goyo has a story that TV can't buy, instead it must be imagined. He could only contextualize his sighs, the gleam of his eyes and his smile as he lowered his head and thought. It's a similar moment to when he had the injury. El Goyo stayed with his children.

He was attached to an old blurry photo, and on the back, Mister Don Francis wrote: «The best group of strikers I've ever trained: Silvano, Claudio, Goyo, Diego and Polvora: the Cebollitas». That's enough for him.

Then there was another friend of Diego: Jorge Cyterszpiller. He was two years older but he followed the Argentinos youths because his brother Juan Eduardo was a prospect there. He had stopped following them when his brother died, but after hearing the hype about Maradona, he returned once again. He was so impressed to the point that he let Diego sleep in his brother's bed. Goals and matches. Days and nights. Games and transfers. They became inseparable. In two and a half years, Diego's career moved so fast that it looked like a hurricane, so much so that off the pitch, he was very confused. He moved uncertainly in his life outside of the football fields, like a sleepwalker who is being torn by all sides; and Jorge, who is not from Villa Fiorito but lives in Calle San Blas, La Paternal, appears to the player as a Christopher Columbus who has seen the world. Really Diego at the time was a sort of Forrest Gump: scoring more goals, having more meetings, proposals and possibilities. It was more difficult at that time than later on in his life, because in those years he was just a lost boy. And Jorge was all he could afford. For this reason, he became his procurator. Now that he is gone, after he jumped from the seventh floor of a hotel in Buenos Aires in May 2017 while Diego began training in the B-Series of the United Arab Emirates, Al-Fujairah Sports Club, it can be said that Jorge was essential when everything took off, if we take apart the financial mistakes and some money stealing from Maradona's pockets. But Jorge was a restless boy, the son of pain and recrimination (he had a lame leg caused by polio), and unlike Gregory, he did not want to break away, he did not want to live on short stories, instead he wanted to be a witness, always present, from the pitch to hotels to airplanes. His biography was about Maradona, because he perceived it as compensation for his lost brother. And nothing was enough.

The t-shirt was that of Argentinos Junior, red with a white band, the inverted River Plate colours. The number on its back is the number 16 and he was ten days from his sixteenth birthday. It is October 20, 1976, the day of his debut for the first team in the old stadium of La Paternal. In that game he could not mesmerize his opponent and virtually hide the ball under the grass, but he embarrassed his marker, Juan Domingo Patricio Cabrera, by passing the ball under his legs and run beyond defence line. Until then for a few months, the "Golden Boy", a title given to one of the great Argentine footballers, was another player, Ernesto Lazzati, whom Osvaldo Soriano called the best centre-back Boca Juniors had ever had. And it is likely that for many Argentinians, particularly those who come from Ingeniero White, Lazzati's city, that remains the case today. They will say to journalists, "Maradona is the best footballer in the world, but the best Argentinian player, as well as the Golden Boy, in truth, is Lazzati from there the very detailed oral reports of his games, his goals and his correctness, and maybe even his articles for "El Gráfico." And Lazzati in turn, if he were still alive, would repeat what he already told Soriano: that the best player he ever played with was Daniel Pícaro, who played for Lanús. In this paradox you understand how difficult it is to become Maradona, in particular how hard it is to tame the beasts in his head which were constantly changing, much more than any stockmarkets' value. A constant contrast between generations and geography, in a continuous search of the chosen ones like in the Matrix movie. And how difficult it is to dispose of the first *Pibe de Oro*, the Golden Boy, then maybe there was another one or others. I have not found them because of a lack of coverage of pitches in Cordoba, Rosario or Patagonia. It is interesting the time that is close to the passage between a Golden Boy and the other. A gentle



shadow that is attached to the name, one that we will all soon know. The definition is set on one side of the pitch and rises on another, like a sun that illuminates gestures, actions and goals.