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The Railwayman and the Golden Goal

Epilogue

There is only one worse-taken penalty in the history of Italian football than when Baggio failed to score against Taffarel in the 1994 World Cup final, and it was the rocket that, two years later, Alessandro Del Piero fired directly into the blue sea of Torre Ovo on the 23rd of May.
What was going on in his head, nobody can tell - not even I, who was studying carefully his gaze while, on tiptoes, as I was holding the bar that had been knocked over by Gianluca Vialli's overly impetuous header.
Now, the question would not be whether he deliberately miskicked - of course he did, it was enough to watch his hysterical run, so that my 18 disciples and I, clinging behind the door in a single, gigantic drop of sweat, curled our heads in the back like a derailing train. The point is to understand why: why the number one number tens refused to bend the will of a 1000 number 1s (I say a thousand so, just to say), and in doing so inspire a generation of children, a group of youngsters, rebels without a future, playing soccer on the beach, who each detested the *Il Processo del Lunedì* and dribbled with the ball whenever they felt like it.
Was it the militaristic face of Sacchi that appeared to him as he placed the ball on the spot? The black and white strips of a prison window? Or was it the very idea of the ball - as he, 'Pinturicchio', always conceived it - that the sphere itself had wanted to be catapulted far away from this world of pressing play, of restarts and of offsides?
I don't know.
If you think about it, the ball is round only when it rolls, otherwise it's as volatile as fantasy. And I assure you that that ball did fly, and as it flew it was beautiful, so beautiful in fact, that everyone who looked up and looked at it — everyone, you know, that still held a dream — put their own dreams in it to be taken away with the ball.

1

When you dream of something so intensely, when you do nothing but think about it from morning to night - well, don't pretend it tells you something about who you really are, maybe, after all, it’s not even what you really want. The only real thing we can learn from what we want is that what we have sucks.
I know that by the age of sixteen I had nothing but dreams of someone or something to take me away.
To get away from the rails, from the vineyards, from a life where every day was the same.
I know that by the age of sixteen I would have liked to think of the earth as a world to conquer, rather than as a desert of rocks and daggers that I was sinking into on my journey home from school.
What did I know about the world? What did I know about how to leave? Nothing. But I knew that when sinking all hope drips away.
I was just hoping that if I continued to sink, I would eventually hit bottom, and that once there, at the bottom, something or somebody would finally come to save me.
That something turned out to be a classic car, a Simca 1000. That somebody was the drunk guy with a criminal record who drove it. Without even trying to brake, he crashed through the railroad crossing of the station and dragged everything behind him, including the traffic lights, the bar and my father. The Simca remained there for a while, on the rails, like a thought that is placed sideways in the head, like the vague presentiment of having made a serious mistake, until the 203 South-East train arrived to sweep away the plates and every possible doubt about the fate of the poor stationmaster.

I was hired in his place without even doing military service. When I was 18 years old, when I was repeating for the third time the second year of High School, and when I was still obsessed with the short skirts of Sabina Ciuffini, I found myself orphaned and dragged into public service. I had a salary of 120,000 lire and I could suddenly ride for free on all the trains in Italy. The only thing I was sorry about was that my father was not there to see this - he had never stopped preaching for a moment about how important it was, how essential it was, that I should go on with my studies. He almost threw himself under the *Espresso* train 926 (better known as the *Freccia del Levante*) the day I told him that I would rather spend my life picking and selling tomatoes than continuing to waste time at school.
Thirty years is the average life of a locomotive. If my father, the station master, had survived beyond 50 he would have taken me at my word: he would have put me into work as a farmer, that dictator. But his blue uniform was too good for me to still resent him, and the only satisfaction I had when I first

accompanied my mother to the cemetery was to rap my knuckles on his photograph (as he usually did, though much stronger, against my temples) and whisper without bitterness, perhaps paternally: do you see now that studying is not everything in life?

I was a boy, of course, but now that I am looking at his faded face, now that I have stopped drumming over his fingers, now that I have the same habit of licking my fingers before I look, page after page, at the books that I did not even want to open then, I realize that he was also a boy. And I'm astonished, because I just can't explain to myself how a boy could say certain things without laughing, and how I could be serious (and how I could cry) every time he got mad, every time he dragged me down the dock like a suitcase full of rocks, shouting that he didn't care how many sleepers I could ram down his throat. "Life is a track!" he was yelling at me, pressing my head on the cold steel. It was only when I started shaking (not because of the cold or the fear, but because of the vibrations of the rails) that he decided to let me go, checked that the interregional 2136 with compulsory extra charge was bang on time and while its wagons were rushing under our noses, he was finally shouting the last anathema: "You have to go straight all the way to your destination!"

2

According to the official State Railways Timetables, in 1973, the 22405 local train took two hours and seventeen minutes to go between Taranto and Bari. Because today's Intercity 773 takes just over half of that, I understand how Albertini might feel compared to Rivera as the game opens out all around him, the defence suffocate him, and the wingbacks rush like lampposts that there is no time to count. I understand this, and I feel I understand myself a little better when I find in my drawer the Espresso guide to the 100 most romantic hotels in Italy(full of asterisks and exclamation marks), a plan of the San Siro and the Pirelli calendar of '79.
I have been a railwayman for over 20 years.
For more than 20 years I have never gone beyond Canosa.
On the other hand, much more that never having been beyond Canosa, I have never really left behind my 20s.
My dreams, my future, my destiny, are all over and above the Mungivacca-Alberobello line, and I stamped them with my ticket clipper, and as I shouted, "Gentlemen, tickets!", I put my foot on the world with the simple check of the train tickets. My ideals, my anger, my desire to change were all linked to that train, to my train, and I didn't understand that the locomotive had long since been disengaged.
When I started to realize that, I had a reaction worthy of my father: I put my head on the tracks and stayed there until I started shaking — shaking in the cold, of course, since interregional 2136 had been abolished for a long time, as had the 7.05 train, the IR of 21.32 and any other train that had ever passed through that line.
I had spent my life checking their tickets, and now there was no one to validate mine. It was enough to climb up the station hillside to see everyone sitting in traffic along the road. Even the students in recess came and went from Bari in Fiat Punto, not to mention the workers of Ilva, those proletarians I had watched sleeping on worn out and cheap seats for years, on the 103 train that ran at 5:40.Now I was watching them through binoculars, crushed by a chronic convulsive cough, hiding behind the oleanders with Nigerian prostitutes sicker than they were.
Who controls you now, damn it? Perhaps not even the eye of God.
So, maybe because automatic ticket machines came, or because no one had a good reason to stop at my station anymore, because I had nothing to validate — no tickets, no dreams, no ideals, nothing at all.
My going and coming between the exchange signals had become such a miserable pilgrimage, so useless, so spectral, that I was less and less concerned

about compiling my reports, and let the dispatches and service communications accumulate on my desk as the goals on a mathematically relegated team door.
I mean, I looked at my tracks and I felt like they were, almost dead.
That is why, of course - because I considered everything that was going on out there to be useless - that I noticed, with considerable, delay, one rainy afternoon when I decided to finally tidy up, that those people outside, had formed the same opinion about me and about what went on here. I was surplus to requirements, it was written in a letter signed by the Directorate-General, so I was to bide my time at home.
Now, the severance pay was designed as a social shock absorber, but that shock had resonated into my bones without anything to dampen it. Any confidence in hearing the referee's whistle that would allow me to inflict on the world what, in my opinion, the world deserved (the ultimate punishment), lay shattered in the most depressed area of myself. I stood on the ground for quite a long time, waiting for that whistle. But when I realized that the game was going on and had left me out (offside, moreover, the punishment was due to them), I jumped on my bicycle and, chased by the stray dogs who came out of the fields barking behind me, I took the SS7 under a big, empty sky like a stadium on a Monday.
On the avenue leading to my brother Leone's furniture shop, There were already signs of wintriness, and it was strange to see the season arrive so early here.
The road was slippery with rain. The bike brakes are very slow, certainly slower than my gait. In order to avoid hitting the shop sign full on, I saw the door was wide open, and I went towards the store, hoping it was empty. More destructive than a Zenga exit, I felt the shadow of a closet that came towards me, and I, as I crashed through a couple of chairs, was catapulted along a kind of sofa, or an ottoman, as my brother would have insisted on calling it, just as the lights upstairs went on and, I was sure, that crazy man of my brother looked for his gun.
"Leo, don't shoot!" I shouted scrambling onto my feet, conscious that, for the sake of stopping a thief, my brother would even run the risk of damaging his fake antique trumeau mirrors.

3

To tell you what kind of shop the Leo furniture shop is, it would suffice to say that while I was standing there on the so called Ottoman trying to minimise the damage, between ugly cabinets, tripods and unfashionable sideboards, the smell that pinched my nose was not the honest and resinous smell of wood, but the chemical smell of solvents and acetylcellulose: like kneeling down on the Wembley grass and finding out it's a synthetic pitch.
"Time runs on," Leo repeats. The ideal hook to remind me that since I took away his legs, he can no longer do so.
"Blessed are you, my brother, who can still play!", he whimpers every time he sees me.
It’s pointless reminding him that I haven't touched a ball since the accident. He pretends to be surprised, rolling his eyes and asking: "Really? And why?! You shouldn’t feel guilty. Run, brother, run..."
At this point, I take him at his word: I batten down the hatches and therefore cautiously shut up. But if I never dare to object that when we stand, sitting in front of each other, his invalidity makes no difference, Leone scrutinize me, outraged as a Juventus fan would scrutinize the banner " External Temperatures: Brussels-39", and I despise him on the one hand (because those who stand in the stands speak, speak, and never miss the play), and on the other hand I am ashamed (because those who sit on the bench have always to look at the pitch and the game).
That, I never managed to actually get onto the pitch, this is another matter - something that only Giancarlo Alessandrelli and Massimo Piloni, eternal reserve of the evergreen Zoff, would understand..
"And so they made you redundant! Well, brother, take it easy, there's worse trouble in life," Leo said, shaking his huge paraplegic shoulders. At the centre of the 1200 square meters of the display area, lights as strong as those of a TV late match shone on my sadness (think of the watts of the San Siro floodlights all inside a crystal chandelier) and utterly baring the essence of it.
It was clear that the main topic was still his disability.
"I’m sorry for your greater trouble," I stuttered automatically, settling in my heart (indeed, in my belly) another dose of that deafening grudge destined to arise poisonously and brutally against my brother.
He pretended not to hear and went on: "They too need to adapt if they want a more dynamic business."
Leo squeezed his eyes, as if he was actually able to look through me and established that if I wept, crying out with crocodile tears, inside — *inside* — I became more greasy and fatter than a pig.

"I'm telling you because I love you."
I began to sink into the Danish chair, made in Taiwan, like I wanted to hide a hole in my shoe or a stain on my jacket, and the more I wiggled, the more I hunched, the more I crossed my legs to keep some dignity, the more all I had inside came out and became bigger and bigger.
"As long as you're standing," he explained, "you almost don't notice. But when you sit down, at my level, you start to run like butter in the pan. And you, let me tell you, spend too much time sitting..."
As he pointed to the plaid that covered his knees, he slowly lifted his arm off the side of his heart, until right where it might be beating, and asked the utterly superfluous question, if, in my opinion, it was better to be out of work or without any lower limbs. It seemed to me that I could finally understand what my brother meant when he encouraged me to be a smart guy: even in his wheelchair, Leone was standing upright, cold and hard, like the steel of that pan, on which my thoughts ran like butter.
For a few seconds no one said anything, then Leo asked what I expected of a poor handicapped person. Just when from the apartment upstairs a stream of water fell on my hesitation and submerged it, I said: "Help", not as a modest, fraternal request, but as the choked scream of those about to drown.
"Help. Of course. Because you know, despite everything, I love you... "
Now I regretted, how I regretted that I was thrown into that kitsch apotheosis that the bedroom of Maradona would not have had the courage to match, between mirrors, frames and china, that did not even seem to contemplate the existence of dust, as was luxury, let us say, the lacquer , which made them shiny. And yet, not even of that repentance, as sincere as it may be, I could ultimately feel master. It was like Niccolai's gaze after another own goal: "It won't happen again," the poor Comunardo seemed to say, but by miserably returning the ball to the centre of the field you knew there was no one, no opponent, no fan, no teammate, and not even himself, willing to believe in it.
"Now you ask me for help," he said, "but remember what I told you at the funeral of our father? Remember my warnings when you took his place at the station?"
The water in the bathroom now flowed happily - I imagined it sliding on Lisa's tanned skin, my beloved sister-in-law, and dreaming of being inside one (at least one) of those droplets. And I was just kind of thinking, and I really didn't have to wring my brains out. What Leo had told me then could not be too different from what he was telling me today, perhaps only a little clearer, less cumbersome, as if his legs had served to get the words out earlier. I still remember that, when I was discussing with him the first ETRs, without knowing whether the High Speed at which Leone warned me was really a railway project or the path with which the world, he said, was changing.
"Do you realize?" she said. "Do you realize that 85 out of 100 travellers are now driving?"

It was little use to argue that I, to the other fifteen, was so grateful, so attached, that abandoning them on foot, in the countryside, would seem to me a horrendous betrayal. They were just two opposing ways of thinking about life and about state railways. He suggested I ask for a transfer to Rome and that I water the geraniums at a squandered station among the *trulli.*

As for Rome, yes, we had once been together to attend the 1980 European championships, when Leone first brought along a little girlfriend hungry for novelty, emotion, life, but completely starving at the game of football. Looking at her underneath, wrapped in the Italian flag, instead of asking myself how she had never heard of Collovati and Tardelli, I was baffled as to how a girl named Lisa could be so fresh and intact.

In the end, all the sweat of our players, beer and sandwiches, Lisa's hips, which — rather than beside me— put themselves at the centre of my thoughts, had produced nothing more than a worthless nil-nil that kept us out of the final.

I was already quite used to being excluded, so –after having greeted Leone and Lisa, who alighted in Naples - I pressed my nose against the night window and thought that my brother, engaged to Lisa, had traced yet another line between me and him that I should not cross.

Even if I was dying to do it.