

FRANCESCO GUNGUI



TRY

A RUGBY STORY

il castoro



*For Federico and Luca,
who write this story with their studs
on the green page of the pitch every day.*

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Meta

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This story begins with a football match in sweltering June, at the end of school.

Yes, that's right, football.

Before, I used to play football. And I still play, to tell you the truth, but since that match, a lot has happened.

My name is Tommaso, Tommy to my friends; to everyone, actually. So, to you too.

I decided to tell you this story because according to Viola, there are loads of kids like me who might enjoy these adventures and misadventures of mine.

Or might even find them useful.

Before, I used to be angry, I still am a little now, but before, I used to be a lot more.

I had a few friends, but not like the ones that I have now.

I didn't know Achille, or Viola.

Above all, I didn't play rugby.

I.

I PUNCH AN OPPOSITION PLAYER

Everything started one morning in early June. I was with my team and we were playing the last match of the year.

The night before, there had been a storm and the whole pitch was wet. Both my mother and my father had come to see me for the occasion, something that almost never happened.

The match had started well with a goal for our team, a save by our keeper, and a first half played almost entirely in the opponents' half.

Then, another goal. Half time: 2-0 to us. Everything's grand. Shame that I was on the bench.

The reasons are hard to explain, but I'll try anyway: a month ago, during a match, a player floored me with a slide tackle.

The referee didn't blow.

Then I got back up, and I punched him.

Yeah, you heard right, punched.

His teammates intervened to defend him. And I was sent off.

Similar things had already happened to me in the past. Often, they were only fouls, they would say that I was playing too aggressively, that I was too physical, that I was aiming for the body instead of the ball.

They would say all sorts of things.

But that's because they didn't understand a thing about me. I didn't understand much myself, but I am who I am, and they, well, it would have been better if they'd just kept quiet.

Who are they? Teammates, parents, teachers, coaches... everyone had something to tell me, to teach me.

Everyone knew why I messed up, why I fouled, why I didn't try at school, why my only friends were online on Fortnite and not in real life.

Have you ever felt like this?

Have you ever felt attacked by everyone, as if you couldn't do anything right?

This is what I used to feel like.

I'll finish telling you about the match, so then we can really get started, and then you'll see how much fun awaits us. There'll be things to laugh about, and to be honest, to cry about too, if you're someone who gets emotional now and then. I'm not, but Achilles is, Viola is a little bit too. You'll get to know them shortly.

Anyway, it was 2-0 to us.

The second half began and I was still on the bench. The coach then said to me: "Tommy, I want to give you a chance, don't waste it. Play fair and keep your hands to yourself."

Halfway through the second half, he brought me on.

In the first passage of play, I managed to shoot, but the ball was saved. Then, we conceded a goal, and at that point, it was 2-1 to us. Then, we conceded another. Then, another.

Five minutes to go, we were one down.

Corner, to us. I was in position.

The ball was in my path.

I tried to jump to head it, but a defender was pulling my shirt, and he kneed me. Or at least, that's how I saw it. I wasn't able to jump, never mind head the ball.

So, to make up for it, I turned around, and I punched him.

"Again?" you'll say.

"Then you're an idiot!" you'll say. And maybe, yeah, I was a little bit.

Naturally, I was sent off. And they kicked me off the team. I mean, they didn't actually kick me off, but at that point, things had got messy. They took it out on my parents. And my teammates turned their backs on me.

I knew that I'd messed up, it's obvious.

And everyone else knew that too, but that was the problem.

What I'm trying to say is that when everyone tells you that you mess up, that you cause too much trouble, that you don't respect the rules, that you don't study enough, that you spend too much time on the computer, that you talk back, sometimes, there's a reason for that.

It's not a good reason or something that's right. It's not something that can be explained in a few words.

Not even a dozen.

It takes a story to make people understand what's going on inside our heads.

This book is that story.



THREE MONTHS LATER

2.

MY BEST FRIEND IS A ROBOT

I'm in the car, in the backseat. In the front, my father is driving with my mother next to him. It's raining. The traffic lights are reflected on the wet windows and the sound of the windscreen wipers seems to be setting the pace.

"Tommy, have you got everything?", my mother asks me. I don't respond.

She turns towards me. I ignore her.

"His bag is in the boot, and everything is already ready at the house," my father says.

"I just want to be sure that he has everything. I'm not saying anything strange."

My father turns towards her slightly. "Did I say you said anything strange?"

"You said that..."

I put my earphones in. I do this every time they start arguing. And then I watch them, without sound, their

grimaces, all the faces they make.

After a while, I close my eyes and submerge myself in the music.

I lose track of time until the car comes to a stop.

I get out of the car. It's stopped raining.

In front of me, there's an old two-floored house with peeling walls, surrounded by a garden with an upturned wheelbarrow, buckets of paint abandoned in a corner, and a wrecked car parked underneath an awning. I say goodbye to my mother, who then calls a taxi and leaves. I think she was crying, even if she was trying to hide it. We go in. My dad shows me my room.

It's big and already decorated. It has a barred window that looks over the garden. Then there's a kitchen, a living room with a fireplace, and another room.

"What's upstairs?", I ask, as soon as I see some stairs that go to another floor.

"For now, nothing. I just sorted out the ground floor.

We'll sort out the other rooms next. Well, what do you think?

"Nice," I say.

"Let's order pizza this evening, what do you reckon?"

"Okay."

"And we can talk a bit about this year."

"What do we need to talk about?"

My dad breathes in and doesn't respond straight away.

“You’re starting at a new school,” he says. “And I’d like to understand what to do... about sport.”

I nod. But I know very well that he’s actually referring to another topic, or rather, to the reason why he and I find ourselves here in this house and my mother in another.

He goes on. “There’s a football team near here, we could go and do a trial.”

I shrug.

“Look, let’s forget about what happened last year. It was an accident. I... I know that you didn’t want to cause any harm...”

I say nothing.

“Tomorrow, I’ll bring you to school. And I’ll come pick you up.

Then we’ll figure out what to do with transport.”

Later on, we eat pizza on the sofa in silence with the TV on. We watch *Star Wars*, one of the old ones we’ve already seen together. We only watch a bit of it. Usually, at the scene where Darth Vader says:

“Luke, I am your father,” my dad always used to joke and say: “Tommy, I am your mother,” but this time, he doesn’t do it.

The film finishes, and I close myself in my room. I open up my laptop and I write to Robot.

Me: Robot, remind me why parents get divorced.

Robot: Parents get divorced because of incompatibility, poor communication, being unfaithful, money problems, stress, personal change, and conflicting values.

Me: Can you explain it in fewer words?

Robot: Parents get divorced because they no longer get on with each other and they think separating is better for them and for the family.

Me: And why do you think my parents got divorced?

Robot: NI am unable to know about your parents’ situation. Every couple has unique and personal reasons for divorce.

Me: Can you make me laugh?

Robot: Here’s a joke for you: Why was the maths book sad? Because it had too many problems!

Me: What happens when we die?

Robot: The nature of life after death is a philosophical and spiritual question. Various beliefs include heaven, hell, and



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