ALLERGIC TO FOOTBALL

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When **Rainer** was 10, he wanted to be a footballer. He wanted to see England win the World Cup and Luton Town to win the First Division (now Premier League). He's still waiting for any of these things to happen. He lives in London with his football-hating wife, two children, a dog and a cat. This is his first novel.

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For Rudi and Tia

PROLOGUE

After French footballing pioneer Jules Rimet had invented the football World Cup, he asked one of his sculptor friends to create a dazzlingly beautiful trophy to symbolize the glory of winning what he hoped would become sport's greatest achievement.

A few months later, he was presented with a small, slender, solid gold statuette of Nike, the Greek Goddess of Victory. Sat on a yellow gold marble base, its gold wings were splayed out like sun rays at either side to give the trophy an elegant shape and make it look like it could take off at any time.

Grinning from ear to ear, Jules slapped his friend on the back, popped his shiny new trophy in his suitcase and set sail for Uruguay, who were to be the World Cup's first hosts. By 1938 the trophy had captivated the world's imagination. People wanted to know where it shopped, where it went on holiday and how it stayed so fresh looking. There was also speculation that it contained mystical powers and if you touched it, you'd become immortal. Others, who had touched it but later died, dismissed this myth as nonsense.

The first person to try to steal the trophy was Adolf Hitler. A great art lover and all-round evil Nazi, he sent a troupe of heavily armed soldiers to pinch the coveted cup

from the Italian football team. They searched everywhere except under the bed of the manager, who had hidden the World Cup in a shoe box.

Following many other failed attempts, it was finally stolen while on display in London in 1966. The nasty robbers held the world to ransom, demanding a huge sum of money to give the trophy back. Luckily, a little black and white dog called Pickles came to the rescue. While taking his owner out for a walk one morning, he discovered the World Cup wrapped in newspaper under a bush in his local park. Well done, Pickles! As a reward, he got to sit on the Queen's lap during the final at Wembley Stadium, where he barked with glee after watching Bobby Moore lift the trophy for England.

Aside from that brief interruption, the most dominant team in World Football were Brazil. After claiming their first title in 1958, they went on to win the cup again in 1962 and 1970, where they were given the Jules Rimet trophy to keep. A new World Cup trophy was designed for the 1974 tournament, and that's the one still played for today.

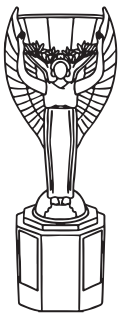
But what happened to the gleaming Jules Rimet Trophy? Well, it was placed in a bullet proof cabinet and stored deep down in the underbelly of the Brazilian FA's offices. There was no way anyone was going to take the trophy from Brazil!

How wrong they were. On the 19 December 1983, just 6 days before Christmas, two thieves, posing as cleaners, put down their mops and lifted their crowbars. Within seconds they had prized the cabinet away from the wall and ran off with the trophy sending the world's media once again into a

frenzy. This time, the trophy wasn't found. The most famous trophy in the whole wide world vanished from the face of the earth and it has never been seen since that day.

All that was true.

All that follows is almost nearly true.



'The first World Cup I remember was in 1950 when
I was nine or ten years old. My father was a soccer player,
and there was a big party and when Brazil lost to Uruguay,
I saw my father crying. I said, 'Don't cry Papa,
I will bring you the cup one day'.'
PELE

'I've never known anything like the feeling of
holding that trophy in my hands.'
BOBBY MOORE

Chapter 1

James Eligus sat on the low wall at the back of the buzzing playground with his head buried inside his green polo t-shirt and fingers jammed into his ears. He was trying desperately not to hear cheering noises from the absurdly green playing field. Not only cheers, but shouts of 'goal!', or 'shoot!' or 'pass it, you doughnut.' They could all spell disaster. He concentrated on the thud of his heartbeat and tried putting a melody to it. Something fast, like a Ferrari. '*Quick, think, or I'll hear it again.*' Too late. Hot tingles flushed down his spine as a goal-scoring cheer wafted past his defences and switched on a bright neon sign shouting…

FLEURBLER!

He squeezed his eyes shut. *Fleurbler* was James' word for his unusual allergy, an allergy which, according to the doctor's letter might kill him. This is what the letter said**:**

> **Patient: James Eligus, age 8**
> **Dear James,**
> **I regret to inform you that, following our recent random tests, you have contracted an allergy to football.**

Under no circumstances must you participate, view, touch, or listen to any form of this sport, as the consequences could be fatal.
Yours sincerely,
Dr A Percival

Pretty serious, eh? For two years James had managed to avoid most footballing sounds: cheers, conversations, commentaries and kicks, by sticking his fingers in his ears. He closed his eyes or looked down whenever he knew people were playing football. He averted his gaze at football adverts on tv, scarves, replica shirts and merchandise of all shapes and sizes. It was a full-time job and meant he was constantly on high alert, especially as almost everyone else in his class loved it and played it and talked about football all the time.

He'd only told one other person about his allergy and that was Margot, from his class, who was sworn to eternal secrecy. He didn't want anyone else to know because it was just too embarrassing, and if school bully Shane Splatter ever found out, he'd never hear the end of it. But, with only two weeks to go 'til the end of his school life at St Mark's Primary, James was cautiously optimistic that his secret might stay a secret. All he needed to do was keep focussed.

The noise dissolved into a regular playground din, and he let out a little sigh of relief. Only a little one though because the threat was always there, like wasps at a picnic. He slowly removed his fingers and, like a slightly curious

tortoise, popped his head out of his bottle green polo t-shirt into the harsh bright sunlight.

Two tall boys with short, cropped hair wandered past, giggling. These were the Buzzcut brothers. They were in the other Year Six class, and he wasn't sure of their real names, but they were big and strong and very good friends with Shane Splatter, which made them creatures to avoid.

'Look, it's the poor little boy who doesn't like noise!', sneered blonde Buzzcut.

Brown Buzzcut leaned in and shouted 'LOOZA!' Making 'L' shapes with their fingers to their foreheads and kicking their legs out from side to side, the boys peeled away in hysterics back into the crowd.

Stuff like that was bound to happen today, he figured. It had rained consistently for the last thirty-five days, meaning the whole school had been stuck indoors at lunchtimes. Great news for James because it meant no ball games. And it meant he could hang out in the library in a nice quiet little corner which was a guaranteed *Fleurbler*-free zone. Today, it was sunny and hot, and it felt as though all the kids in the playground had been set free, such was the zany excitement bouncing all around him.

Back went the fingers in his ears as another cheer wafted up from the playing field. He shifted position and looked above the weird, grassy roof of the new infants eco building. The sky was perfectly clear. All he could make out was wall to wall beautiful blue. Definitely no *Fleurblers* up there, although weren't the sun and moon and planets all round like…?

He screamed silently. *'Death words! Death words!'* He clawed at his tongue, slid off the wall and fell on his bum.

'Goal!'

He stumbled to his feet, shoved fingers in ears and looked up to the sky once again. *Planets can't be fleurblers,* he reasoned*, way too heavy. And the sun is too hot to kick.* His pulse slowed. He imagined himself in space, having all that space. No mean people. He could just float blissfully for eternity. Then, he spotted something hovering like a bird of prey over the playing field. It was a tiny object, glistening silver in the afternoon sun. It couldn't have been an aeroplane, he decided. It was way too tiny. A satellite then? Too small and too close to be one of them, and it was hovering. A UFO then. A mini-UFO?

He started walking across the playground, his head tilted skyward, like a sun worshipping zombie. Would it come down and say hello? Was it planning on lasering the school to smithereens? He hoped for the first thought but concluded that if it did want to zap anyone then they should set the lasers for Shane Splatter and his massive Lego brick head.

Chapter 2

Down on the playing field, Margot jogged back for the restart after scoring her ninth goal this lunchtime. She was easily the best player at St Mark's and the main reason the Year Six team had reached their first West London cup final coming up in two weeks' time. Margot could play anywhere; she was strong in the tackle, could land the ball on a crisp packet from fifty metres, and could out skill the trickiest of foxes, but her favourite position was attacking midfielder because there she could set up and score loads of goals. Born and raised in Glasgow, Margot had only joined St Mark's earlier this spring. Before then the team was rubbish. Now, they were on the verge of a first ever cup final win and every match was lined with scouts from right across Europe.

The only scouts Omar knew were the ones who met in a hut by the canal and seemed to go camping when it rained. He liked football, but mainly because everyone else liked it. He wasn't a bad player either. He was lightning fast and great at crossing, but just found it hard to stay focussed for longer than twenty seconds. He high-fived Margot and did a little jig while singing '9-2, 9-2, 9-2, 9-2!'.

'It's 10-1 Omar, but never mind. Let's see if we can get fifteen before the bell goes!', said Margot with a smile, scraping her hair back into a long ponytail.

Shane Splatter wasn't happy at all. In fact, he was fuming. So fuming it looked as though his Amazon box shaped head was about to erupt. Having grabbed the ball from behind the makeshift goal, he pointed an angry finger at his goalie. 'Are you blind, Banksy?'

Poor Banksy shielded his eyes and squinted. 'The sun's too bright. I can't see properly. I need sunglasses.'

Shane snarled. 'Sunglasses? You on holiday or summing?'

'No. But...'

Shane interrupted him. 'Shall I get you an inflatable unicorn? A sun lounger? Maybe a nice mocktail?

'No, Shane. It's just the glare.'

He grabbed the goalie's top and lifted him off the ground. 'It's just shut up and try saving the ball next time. Otherwise, the next thing you'll be trying to save will be your teeth!' Banksy whimpered. Shane growled, turned, and directed his anger across the pitch at his celebrating opponents. 'I'm gonna show you allllllll!' he roared, dropping the ball at his feet, and charging at them like a hungry rhino.

Omar wanted to tackle him but at the same time didn't want to get hurt. Plus, there was a boy sat on the bank with an ice-cream and he wanted to know where he'd got it, so he ran off towards the touchline.

Margot shook her head. 'Come back Omar!' But it was too late. Shane was almost upon her. 'Concentrate on the ball, not the boulder.' The fearless girl told herself.

'SPLATTERRRR!' cried the hungry rhino. Margot braced herself, but as he went to shoot, his standing foot slipped on the turf, his balance gave way and he fell backwards. His ferociously swung right foot scooped the ball vertically skywards like a rocket. 'HOYERGH!!!' He said, landing on his back with a mighty DOOOF! The players gathered around him like a gaggle of junior doctors.

'In FIFA, he might score 80 for strength but he'd be in the low teens for shooting.' said Banksy.

'Is he dead?' said Omar, leaning over the patient. 'If you are, and you can hear me, can I have your quad bike?'

'Isn't Shane too big for a quad bike?' said Banksy.

'He's too big for a tank', said Margot.

'I heard that!' said Shane, groggily rising to his feet. 'Did I score?'

'You've got to be joking!' said Margot. 'That was the worst shot in the history of shots.'

'Shut up, Scotland', said Shane, rubbing the back of his head. 'So, where's my ball?' The players looked around scratching their heads. 'That's my favourite Champions League ball! If someone's nicked it, they're gonna be sorry!'

'Is that it, up there?' said Omar, pointing skywards. The others tilted their heads.

'YEAH!' said Shane, proudly. 'And look, it's still going up! I bet you Ronaldo couldn't hit it that high!'

The players watched, mouths gaping as the ball rose to a tiny spec in the sky. A few seconds later they could

make out a faint whistle as the ball began falling. A few moments after that the whistle had grown to steam train levels as the ball plummeted down at alarming speed.

'It's heading for the playground!' cried Margot. 'We need to clear the area!'

The players, except for Shane – who had spotted a tiny silver shiny object in a different part of the sky - rushed up the grassy bank shouting and pointing at the missile ball. Confused, the playground pupils looked up to the sky. Five seconds later, the area was clear, the kids having retreated with excited screeches to the outer edges. All, that is, except for one small boy who seemed oblivious to the chaos. He too was gazing up at the sky but, crucially, he was facing away from the plummeting pink ball and looking at the same thing as Shane.

Margot raced up the bank onto the playground. 'Hey, little one, GET OUT THE WAY!' she cried, waving her hands around. The boy turned to face her, smiling innocently. She recognised his face instantly, but before she could do anything, the pink football crashed down and landed on James' head.