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Opening extract from

The Penalty

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Prologue: Devotion

YOU WOULD THINK the boy is alone but he is not. Facing him is the Brazilian defence. That plastic beer crate is Michel. The little heap of stones is Luisao, who today is holding the centre. The almost leafless sapling that grows magically out of nothing is the magisterial Cafu. The ancient bicycle frame propped up with bricks is Maicon, whose ferocious tackling is legendary. Beyond them, between the two thin timbers the boy has somehow uprighted in the hard earth, lurks the keeper, Rubinho. He will be substituted for Cesar at half-time, but that will make no difference. The boy knows he can beat them both. He can drive the ball in a powerful curve that will take it a finger's breadth inside the post. He can send in a long-distance shot that seems destined to fly over the invisible bar, but which will dip horribly at the last possible moment. He can do these things, and more; but often does

not bother. He is less interested in the final shot than in the move that leads up to it. In the beauty of the move, in its speed and complexity.

And the boy is not alone, because – as always – his head is full of spirits with whom he talks, and in whom he confides.

Nor is he lonely. He practises in solitude because the other boys are not as good as he is. Their failure to understand what he intends to do frustrates him. They are slow to read the game. They fail to predict what the Brazilians will do. And they are not serious. They want only to score goals so that they can celebrate with their ridiculous gymnastics, revelling in the silent roar of eighty thousand imaginary spectators.

The ball the boy bounces from knee to knee is old, cheap and scuffed. In places the plastic coating is peeling away. He knows that soon, somehow, he will have to get another one. But in the meantime the sad condition of the ball makes the game a little more unpredictable, and he likes that.

The boy's pitch is a large patch of bare, uneven ground where once, long ago, a church stood. He has set up the goal where the altar used to be, although he does not know this. Since the destruction of the church nothing has been built here because the place is considered unlucky. He is aware of this, feels the wrongness that lingers in the air; but he welcomes it because ill luck is part of any game. It is something else to test himself against.

He catches the ball on his instep, holds it there for five seconds, and begins another attack. After a burst of extremely sudden acceleration that takes Michel by surprise, he plays a one-two with a low chunk of broken masonry, the stump of a wall. The return pass is perfectly weighted; it evades Luisao's desperate attempt at interception and the ball drops into a space that Michel will not reach in time. The boy takes it on the outside of his right foot and sets off on a direct run towards the centre of the penalty area; and, as he had intended, the Brazilians funnel in towards the goal, their eyes on the ball. But he does not continue the run. Instead he brakes, comes to a dead stop. The ball is, tantalizingly, a pace in front of his right foot; it tempts Maicon, who closes in, his face almost blank with determination. And the boy, with outrageous insolence, plays it through the defender's legs. There is only just enough room between the V of the bicycle frame and its crossbar for the ball to pass through; but it does pass through and runs out wide to where the boy's fullback is making an overlapping run. When the cross comes in it is sweetly hit, with some inswing, and the boy meets it with his head.

Or would have done.

His name is Ricardo Gomes de Barros and he is fourteen years old. His aunt, with whom he lives – he has no parents, although he sometimes hears their voices in his head – calls him Rico. So does his sister. The other kids, the ones who

call him anything at all, call him El Brujito. The Little Magician. The Little Sorcerer. Because he can do impossible things, such as disappear. Turn the wrong way on to a ball, dummy you, and be gone. A minute later, he will reappear in a place where he cannot possibly be. He can take the ball on his chest with his back to you, and even if you charge into him and knock him down you will not find the ball. You will look around for it only to discover that it has somehow found its way to another attacker who has outflanked your entire defence. There is perhaps something supernatural about Brujito's ability to do these things. And he himself would not deny it. Not out of arrogance, but out of modesty.

He is wearing a Deportivo San Juan football shirt. Its red and black quarters have faded, and it is ripped at the seam below both armpits. One of his imitation Adidas trainers is splitting along the join of the upper and the sole, and the lace of the other has been replaced by green nylon string. The sky above him is pearl white, already pinkish above the tree line. Soon other boys will drift by, and some will call out to him.

"Hey, Brujito! Chill, man! Come on down to the boat shed!"

"Yeah, c'mon, freak! Jaco's got some wicked smoke!"

He will lift a thumb and say, "Cool. See you later maybe."

But he won't go, even though it is rumoured that Rafael's sister will be there tonight, and they say she will do anything.

And in a vague and troubling way he is curious to discover what *anything* is.

The broken-down, patched-up and doorless building where the kids gather at night is still called the boat shed because in over two hundred years no one has bothered to think of anything else to call it. The lower, original parts of its walls are built of massive blocks of chiselled stone that are now green with hairy moss; thick-rooted ferns grow in their joins. It faces onto the roughly tarmacked dockside; beyond that, the jetty steps out into the river, its stout old legs gartered with weed.

The kids will rig up a sound system and play American hip hop. They'll maybe light a trash fire in a cut-down oil barrel. They'll open cans of Coke, swig from them, then top them up with rough cheap *cachaza*. They'll pass round joints, exclaiming theatrically when they exhale. Lately, some of the older boys have been bringing crack down from the city, impressing the younger ones with the dexterity with which they fashion pipes out of tinfoil.

But he won't go. There are several reasons for this.

He is not disliked, but he is not popular. Most of the boys share his fanaticism about football, but they cannot share his devotion to its arts. It's too much. They've all watched the soap operas, the ones where some dirt-poor, screwed-up kid who happens to be a soccer genius is discovered in some crappy little town like this one and goes on to win the World Cup, or something stupid like that. And they know it's just

TV. Another kind of dope. But El Brujito *believes* in it, man. Like he's actually *getting ready for it to happen*. Crazy. Weird. He's okay, but okay like that sorry kid Paolo whose brain is wrong. Harmless, but not someone you want to get homey with. And then there's all that religious stuff he's into. Same as his kid sister. It comes from being brought up by that loco aunt of his, with her back-to-Africa Veneration thing. Dressing up in that old-style Looney Tunes white kit, speaking in tongues, the rest of that crap. Not his fault, but...

The girls don't fancy him. He's a bit on the short side, and stocky. He has this set to his face that makes him look sort of angry, even when he isn't. Or like he's concentrating on something that no one else knows about. His skin has a reddish undertone to it, like mahogany. It's not the beautiful rich black Rigo has that sometimes looks blue in certain kinds of light. Nor is it the burnt honey colour that Nelson has, which is gorgeous. He doesn't know what to say to you if you don't want to talk about football. He sweats. He doesn't take any trouble with his hair. He isn't cool; and the thing is, it's like he doesn't want to be.

So although the other kids call to him, ask him down to the session, it's more of a wind-up than an invitation. They know he won't come. And he knows they know.

There is one reason above all others that he will not go down to the boat shed: his spirits are against it. His spirit ancestor is Achache, the Magician, the Dancer. Achache does not want him to use the stuff they use down there.

Achache speaks frequently of what happened to Diego Maradona: how the greatest football genius in the world killed his spirit with pleasurable poisons and turned himself into a toad. The boy does not dare offend Achache because he knows it is from him that he derives his skill.

And behind Achache, greater than Achache, is Maco, the Judge. The boy has never seen Maco clearly. Very few people have. He has caught glimpses, as if through darkened glass; as far as the boy can tell he doesn't much resemble the image at the centre of the shrine in his aunt's best room. He knows, though, that if Maco judges you offside there is no appeal. Maco cannot be appeased. If he is against you, you can never win. He will separate you from your soul and turn you ghost. Brujito therefore avoids anything that Maco might disapprove of. He wears a DSJ shirt because they are the local team, the team he will one day play for; but by a coincidence that cannot be a coincidence, red and black are Maco's colours.

He begins again. There is a move, a stop and turn, he needs to perfect. He's got it down, more or less, but he's not breaking out of it fast enough. He pushes the ball ahead of him with the underside of his foot and glances up at the opposition. This time he'll try it against Cafu, yes. As he begins his run he hears the first beats of the boom box sounding over the slow green river that winds through a forest he doesn't know the limits of.

One: Carrying Fire

WE WERE RIVER people, fishermen. People of the river spirit, Loma, who is slow and green and clever. We were not warriors, so when the fierce people from beyond the forest attacked our village we did not know what to do. They came out of the trees, howling, at the time of light-but-no-sun-yet, when my mother and the other women were waking the first fires.

I picked up my young sister who was playing at the front of our house and ran with the others towards our boats. Some of us fell with spears in our backs. I looked for my mother and saw her go down broken beneath the feet of the fierce people who swept over her like water. And when we reached the sands we saw two great war canoes on the river, and in them there were terrible No-Skins who killed more of us with their fire sticks. My father was one who died there. He went onto his knees with his hands on his chest

full of blood and then he fell with his face in the water. The air was so full of screaming that I could hardly breathe it. We were trapped, and I thought we would all die, and I tried to make myself ready. But they did not kill us. Not there, not then.

The war canoes came onto the beach, breaking our boats. The fierce people and the No-Skins used their spears and their fire sticks to beat the women and children back towards the houses. They tore my sister from me. She did not cry out even when they threw her down, but her eyes were huge and her mouth was open like a person found drowned.

I was kneeling beside my father, chanting for his spirit, when I looked up and saw a No-Skin looking down at me. His face was the colour of a peeled animal with the fat still on it, but there was yellow fur around his mouth.

That was how I thought, then: peeled animal, yellow fur, fire sticks. Because I had never seen white men before, or their guns.

I was terribly afraid. I thought the one standing over me was Lord Death from our stories. He kept his raw-looking eyes on me and shouted in his language. Hands seized me and forced me to where our other men had been gathered. Our hands were tied together and our necks fastened to a long chain of iron.

That is how I was stolen. Even though I was fourteen years old and would not be a man for another three parts of a year.

* * *

We walked for many days, many days. Four white men and some fierce people came with us. If we fell they beat us. Once a day they fed us a terrible porridge like vomit. At night they made us sleep without coverings on the ground, so we woke up cold and wet. Three of us died of the shivering sickness. The white men cut them free of the chain and left them alone in the forest without any ceremonies, and this filled the rest of us with so much fear that we tried very hard not to die.

Then at last we came to the top of a hill made of sand and I saw ahead of me that the sky was cut in two, the lower half darker and full of small white running clouds. It was the sea, and in my ignorance I thought it was beautiful.

When we saw the white men's ship we were struck with terror, not knowing what it was. My thought was, This is their object of worship. Because huge skeletons stood on it, hung with sheets the colour of death. And I thought I knew why we had been brought here. To be sacrifice. To be fed to this god of theirs. And in a way I was right.

Sometimes in my village when the men pulled in the nets there would be many small fish as well as the good fat ones. These small fish we called *panga usha*, babies' fingers. We did not throw them away. When the catch had been sorted, the women packed the panga usha into tubs made of tree bark. There was a way of doing it. First, a circle of fish

around the bottom of the tub with their noses against the side. Then another circle, noses against the tails of the first circle of fish. And so on, fish nose to tail, smaller and smaller circles, until the bottom was covered. Then the women would cover this layer with sweet-smelling leaves, and start again. Another layer of fish, nose to tail, more leaves. Many layers. When the barrel was full, heavy pieces of wood went on top, then it was buried in the sand. On ancestor days, the barrels were dug up and we would eat the fish. Now their bones were soft and their flesh was sweet.

That was how the whites packed us into their ship, head to toe. We lay there with our mouths open and eyes wide in the darkness, like panga usha, waiting to be eaten. But the layers between us were not sweet leaves. They were floors of wood that smelled of human filth.

I do not know how many we were. There were some that we knew, from other villages along the river. There were also many Other People, who had very dark skins and did not speak our language. We were all mixed up together. There were some women too, but they were packed into another part of the ship.

We lay in fearful silence for a long time. There was no light to reckon the day by. Then there was shouting, and many hard feet passing above our heads, and a terrible clatter like rocks being tumbled down a stream in flood. The wood walls all around and above groaned and screeched

and everything tilted one way. Our bodies rolled onto each other. The darkness was full of clutching hands and flying chains and limbs all mixed together with howls of pain and terror. I thought that if this violent burial lasted an hour, half an hour, we would all be dead.

It lasted fifty-two days.