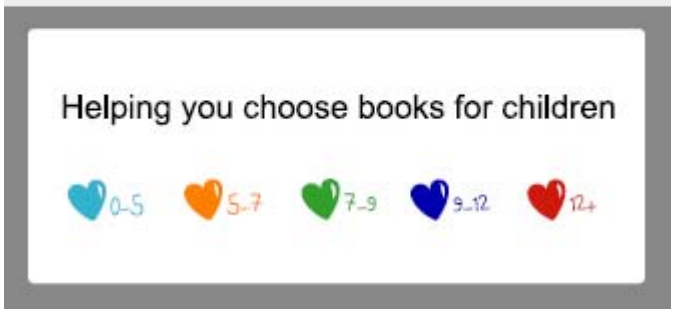
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opening extract from

Keeper

written by

Mal Peet

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PAUL FAUSTINO SLID a blank into the tape recorder and stabbed at a couple of buttons. Then he slapped the machine and said, "Who is the top football writer in South America? Who is the number one football writer in South America?"

The man looking out of the window didn't turn round. There was a smile in his voice when he said, "I don't know, Paul. Who?"

"Me. I am. And will the boss buy me a decent tape recorder? No, she will not." He slapped the machine again and a green light came up on the display. Faustino immediately sat down in front of the small microphone and spoke into it.

"Testing. Date August second. Tape one. Interview: Paul Faustino of La Nación talks to the greatest goalkeeper in the history of the world, the man who two days ago took in

his hands the World Cup in front of eighty thousand fans and two hundred and twenty million TV viewers."

He jabbed buttons, rewound the tape and played it back.

Faustino's office was on the seventh floor of a block perched on one of the hills that looked down on the city. The big man standing at the window found it easy enough to imagine himself a hawk coasting over the grid of buildings and the drifting white and red lights of the traffic. Somewhere beyond that carpet of lights and just below the edge of the stars was the forest.

He was tall, exactly six feet four inches, and heavy with it. But when he turned from the window and went to the table where Faustino was sitting, his movements were light and quick, and it seemed to the football writer that the big man had somehow glided across the room and into the chair opposite his.

"Are you ready to begin, Gato?" Faustino had his finger on the pause button. On the table between them there was a desk lamp that threw hard shadows onto the faces of the two men; also, two bottles of water, a jug filled with ice, Faustino's packet of cigarettes. And a not very tall chunk of gold. It was in the shape of two figures, wearing what looked like nightdresses, supporting a globe. It was not very beautiful. From where Faustino was sitting, it looked rather like an alien with an oversized bald head. And every footballer in the world wanted it.

The World Cup. It burned in the lamplight.

The big man folded his huge hands together on the tabletop. “So. Where shall we begin?” he said.

“With some background stuff, if that’s all right with you,” said Faustino. He lifted his finger from the button and the tape began to run. “Tell me about where you grew up.”

“At the edge of the world. That’s how it seemed to me. A red dusty road came from somewhere and passed through our town. Then it went on to the edge of the forest, where the men were cutting down the trees. Beyond the edge of the forest there was nothing, or that is what my father told me. He meant that the forest seemed to go on for ever from there. Each day, at dawn, a number of trucks stopped at the top of the town where the men were waiting. My father was one of them, and he climbed up into a truck and went off to work, cutting down the trees. He sometimes came home and told us stories, like how his team had cut down a really big one, and how the monkeys who lived in it had stayed clinging onto the top branches almost until they hit the ground, and how they then ran howling into the deeper forest with babies hanging off their bellies. I didn’t know if that or any of the other stuff he told me was true or not. But I grew up listening to his stories and loving them. So perhaps, in spite of everything he did to try to stop me, it was my father who set me on the path that brought me to where I am today.

During the day, the big yellow tractors that hauled the

logs back down the road growled past the town in clouds of red dust which drifted into the square, the plaza, where we played football. It was just a big patch of ground between the tin church and the café. No grass. We had games that started as soon as we were let out of school and didn't end until our fathers came back in the trucks and darkness was falling. We were all football crazy, of course.

Actually, it was not just us kids who were obsessed with football. The whole place was. The café had TV, and everyone squeezed in there to watch the big matches. The walls were covered with posters and photos – our players, German, Spanish and English players, great players and teams from the past. And after a big match, even if it was dark, even if it was raining, we would run into the plaza to replay the action, calling ourselves by the names and nicknames of the great stars: Pelé, the Grey Ghost, Little Bird, Maradona, whatever."

"And you were El Gato, the Cat," said Paul Faustino.

The big goalkeeper smiled. "Oh no. Not then," he said. "You see, I was useless. I couldn't play. The other kids could do great things with the ball. Take it out of the air on the top of the foot. Run and keep it in the air with the head, score goals with bicycle kicks, stuff like that. I could do none of this. When the ball came to me – which wasn't often, the other kids made sure of that – it always seemed to get stuck between my ankles or bounce off my knees. I had no balance – a soft tackle from a smaller kid would send me staggering

like a drunken goat. I was too tall. I had long skinny arms and legs, and big clumsy hands. They called me La Cigüeña – the Stork. Which was fair enough."

Faustino was a little puzzled. "But you played in goal, surely," he said.

"No. It never occurred to me. I dreamt of being a striker, of slamming in perfect shots that brought imaginary crowds roaring to their feet. We all did. Besides, there were two big strong kids who were always the goalies. So I just got pushed further and further out to the edge of the game. And even then, if the ball happened to come towards me, the nearest player on my side would yell 'Leave it!' and collect the ball instead. One day I played for two hours and didn't touch the ball once, except for when it hit me on the backside by chance. That was the day I decided to give up football. I was thirteen."

"All the same," Faustino said dryly, "you've played a game or two since."

The goalkeeper smiled again. "Yes, my retirement was a bit premature, as it turned out. But I never played in the plaza again. And it was giving up football that made me a footballer."

"You've lost me," Faustino said. "What does that mean, 'giving up football made me a footballer'?"

"I was learning nothing in the plaza. If I hadn't quit, I wouldn't have gone into the forest, which is where I learnt everything."

"I get the feeling," Faustino sighed, "that I'm not going to get answers by asking questions. OK, so tell me the story. Tell me how a non-player passes the time in a football-crazy jungle town."

"At first I didn't know what to do with myself. Without the game, the afternoons seemed to last for ever, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, to do. My mother and grandmother didn't want me hanging around, and in those days there was no way that a teenage boy could be seen doing work around the house. I could read, of course, but the only books in town were in the school. Somehow I had to fill my afternoons for the two long years before I could climb onto the truck with my father and go to work."

Faustino leant towards the microphone and said, "Tell me a little about your family, Gato. What was your house like?"

"Like all the others. No, a bit bigger, because we had Nana, Father's mother, living with us, and Father built a kind of extension sticking out from the back wall. He always called it 'the new rooms', even though he had made it when I was five years old and Mother was expecting the next child, my sister. Really, those rooms were just little cubicles. My mother and father slept in one of them. Nana and my sister slept in another, and I had the third, smallest one. My grandmother snored very loudly, and the walls were just sheets of board. It sometimes drove us crazy.

Except for my sister, strangely enough. Even though she slept just across the room from Nana, the snoring didn't bother her. She used to say that if Nana stopped snoring, she would never be able to sleep. My grandmother's snores were the rhythm of my sister's rest.

But our house was the same as all the others, basically. White-painted concrete blocks and a tin roof. The whole town had been built very quickly – overnight, Nana used to say. They bulldozed the road into the forest then hacked out a space and put up these houses for the tree-cutters. The main part of our house was one room with a makeshift kitchen at one end. Some families cooked on a wood stove like a barbecue, but we had a cooker with bottled gas. We got water from a pipe which we shared with five other families. My father covered our tin roof with leaves and branches to reduce the heat, but in the hot season it was still like living under a grill. In those months we lived and ate out of doors. My father slept in a hammock slung between a pepper tree and a hook driven into the wall of the house."

El Gato stopped speaking. He was staring at the gold trophy in front of him, and Paul Faustino could see two reflections of it glittering in the goalie's eyes.

"I used to have this fantasy," Gato said next. "May I tell you?"

Faustino smiled and made a willing gesture. "Of course."

"I used to imagine winning this." Gato circled a fingertip

on the top of the globe. “And taking it home with me. At night, secretly. Unannounced. My father would be asleep in his hammock. I would lay the Cup gently on his chest and put his hands around it. So that when he woke up he would find himself holding the greatest prize in the world. And I would watch his face.”

“And now that you have the Cup,” said Faustino, “you can make this fantasy come true. Is that what you will do? Can I come with you? Would you mind if we took photographs?”

“Unfortunately,” Gato said, “my father is dead.”

Faustino was silent for several moments – out of respect or, perhaps, disappointment. Then the keeper removed his hand and his gaze from the gold trophy and said, “What were we talking about?”

Gently, Faustino reminded him. “About what you did when you gave up football.”