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Cigarettes and Sardines

It was the World Football Cup. The final game: Uruguay vs England. We were playing on a gleaming wooden pitch lit up for the cameras because, of course, we were being televised for the whole universe to see. (The stands, packed full under the glass ceiling, palpitated in the darkness). The truth was that we weren't playing with a size 5 ball, but with a gold coin. It was difficult to see it when it flew from one set of feet to another, and even when it was shot across the goal lines. A giant screen was able to follow that dollar far better than our poor eyes could, eyes that would be "eaten and washed"; a giant, full-colour screen which I would glance at, which we all glanced at to see where the ball was.

In the second half, when we were losing three-two, I saw the coin in front of me and flung myself at it to protect it with my chest. It was close to our goal post; I was going to have to drag myself (and not lose the sphere) over an infinite distance... Snaking my way through kicks, trodden on by our rivals I advanced, centimetre by centimetre. Millimetre by millimetre, kicked around as if I myself were the coin. Shit. I'd always had to suffer trying to get hold of every single coin. True, I'd got used to suffering for the Ideal; it appeared that it was one of the rules, that the others could beat you up if you tried to drag the little coin away. Drag it really close to the opposite goal, so that when you were losing consciousness the best striker in your team could grab it and kick it into the rival goal mouth. I wouldn't ever be a striker; I was skilful, true, that's why I was on the national team, but basically I'd always been, and would always be, a football "labourer": one of the stoical, long-suffering guys, who give their all for the national team to be able to wear the sky-blue national team shirt. We drew thanks to my "chest" move and a bullet-shot from our striker, our hero. Three-all. There would be a second final the following Sunday.

I got back home, in some pain but not too much (I've already said I'm used to suffering, it's a second nature to me) and the family had already finished lunch. No-one spoke of the match (though I did see that TV commentators were discussing the repercussions of the first final) and I looked in the fridge for something to eat. Mum was washing the dishes and talking to my sister. Dad read the newspaper and my nephews played

football on the living-room floor, not dragging themselves on imaginary coins, but scoring spectacular, almost dreamlike, goals. I was a little annoyed by their lack of interest, though I was used to suffering. Also, players like me weren't paid that much, just a little over the minimum wage. Dad had already told me I'd have to get a real job. As if I weren't spending 10 to 14 hours a day training, and being kicked till I fainted. But the truth was, I wasn't earning enough money. Dad said I'd do better trying to sell obelisks or being an artist.

Or a ballet-dancer.

Strikers, on the other hand, were paid real fortunes per match and got million-dollar prizes for each goal they scored. On black days I would think that those strikers didn't do much more than stand near the rival goal and take advantage of the efforts made by "draggers" like myself. But, I repeat, that ridiculous thought only crossed my mind on the sad, sombre days when I was depressed and almost suicidal; but it was a life that I considered was worth living. Even our "kickers", those who kicked our adversaries (and without meaning to, me), were millionaires several times over and owned the latest-model cars.

Well, I would give my Dad my whole salary, and for the rest of the month, I had to enjoy myself on an empty pocket. True, sometimes Dad would give me a coin to buy an ice-cream, or sweets, or he'd give me a cigarette. My old man thought that sportsmen shouldn't smoke, but in my case... Anyway, I had a deal with the newsagent: for every seven cigarettes he'd give me a sports magazine's back issue, several months old, where it wouldn't come as a surprise to see me in a photograph with the team, and, even, alone (diving on the pitch, or dragging myself up near the striker), or almost.

Anyway, my sporting life is about to end. I'm 32 years old, I'm a so-called old-trouper who's allowed to play on the national team for his commitment and devotion to football. When I retire, I'll devote myself to writing my memoirs for a couple of years, painful, almost agonizing years (because this elite sport, and especially for "draggers" like me, destroys you, physically and mentally), and die for once and for all.

That was how I discovered my other vocation: Art. I wrote *Memories of a Dragger*, with my healthy hand, and this little book was followed by 14 novels. Art, when compared to football, is infinite ecstasy. One suffers, of course. Poorer than before and more helpless (although my former national team-mates had a whip-round and bought me this modern wheelchair), an artist's life is no bed of roses. But at my age one is hardly ever hungry, and one's needs, on the whole, are reduced to a minimum: a cigarette, a few sweets. I write all day long (at night Dad removes my kerosene lamp, "no need for squandering to ruin your eyesight") and at night I lock myself up in

the nightmares I'll write about the next day. Women, even if I'd ever had a girlfriend, aren't interested in a dirty old man, paralysed from the waist down. Only the girlfriend of my youth, Paulita, whose parents didn't allow her to fall in love with a useless guy like me, comes to see me now and again to tell me about her husband the newsagent who cheats on her and beats her up. For other matters I have an old porn magazine (many years ago I got it from the newsagent in exchange for 40 cigarettes), with which I uselessly attempt to bring back to life the little dead-and-buried worm hanging there between my legs which are as skinny as corner flagpoles.

Nevertheless, I am a highly valued artist in some intellectual circles, and, abroad, weighty tomes on my work are published every day. The only photograph to appear in the thick books, theses and monographs, is very quaint: it shows an old man in a tiny room no bigger than a cupboard, semi-paralysed, sitting in a wheelchair wearing a mouse-coloured, dirty dressing-gown, his hands like a crocodile's claws, fine white hair framing a horribly wrinkled face, not a single tooth in his head, a huge chancre eating up half his nose, etc. etc. This legendary photograph – it's the only one – was taken by Dad, urged to do so by learned scholars. He's been selling and re-selling it at an astronomical price for years. The said learned scholars and interpreters of my work are never led to my little room; Dad is rude to them at the front door and after thousands of insults and haggling over the price, he'll sell the famous photograph thanks to which the family now own a brand-new holiday home and travel to Europe every year. I'm not complaining: Dad certainly kept me in my childhood and football-player years. I do regret, though, that I'm left alone in the house for such long stretches of time with nothing but two or three cigarettes and a couple of tins of sardines.

If it weren't for Paulita, whom they put up with because her fondness for me means that she comes and washes me once every fortnight and cleans the house every day even when she is in great pain as a result of the newsagent's beatings, I should starve to death. Paulita cleans most of the houses in the neighbourhood, and, behind her husband's back, spends part of her meagre earnings on buying me single cigarettes and three or four tins of sardines every month. But do I have any right to complain when Paulita has never forgotten me, and, especially, when I regularly write a sentence of such beauty that the whole world is amazed? Of course Paulita is not the same girl she once was, what with the beatings she gets from the newsagent and the miscarriages she's had as a result, the lost years, overwork, etc. etc., all of which have transformed her into an "old hag" as Dad calls her.

Dad says that when Paulita and I are together it's impossible to tell which one of us is a man and which a woman, who's the old man and who's

the old woman; although the only old son of a bitch is Dad and one of these days I'm going to pour the kerosene from the lamp over him before he can snatch it away, and set fire to him in my filthy, freezing hole of a room. Paulita, who's a devout Catholic says we must forgive. But even if I look like an old woman and Paulita looks like an old man, I'm the man, and a man doesn't forgive as easily as a Catholic woman. A man's role is to protect and defend the woman, and that's what I'm going to do sooner or later: both Dad and the newsagent will get their due because when I saw Paulita on crutches, well, that really was going too far...