

The
G  **alkeeper**



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By

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So this was it! The finals of the World Cup! And he was playing in it! This was the culmination of everything he had striven for through the years. All the training, all the excitement, all the bumps, the bent fingers, the bruised ribs and hips, the confusing choices of career, study, love and friendship — this is what it was all about, this is what it all came to. This was the end and purpose of it all. Some might think that he was exaggerating, but if they did, it was because they didn't play soccer. If you played, you *knew* that this was it.

It hadn't always been as exciting as this. When he had started playing soccer in high school, the World Cup had been the farthest thing from his mind. He didn't even know there was a World Cup, and even if he had known, it would not have made a bit of difference in his life. He played because he enjoyed it, not because he was going to get somewhere. Surely he wanted to be noticed; he wanted to be talked about, but it was enough if it happened in school, or in town. He wasn't looking at the world at large, nor was he searching for ultimate meaning; the local tournaments were uppermost in his mind, the Intramurals, and the State Championships. In fact, if the secret of life had flashed then before his very eyes, probably he would have failed to notice it.

In his younger days it had been a matter of helping his teammates win whatever tournament they entered. His allegiances would change from season to season. Loyalty was not a virtue to be treasured; playing was, and had he had money he would have paid to play, that's how important the game was for him.

He had started playing for intramural teams in high school, and these changed every year. Then he had played for the school team; later, for local amateur teams. One time he had played for "The Eagles," a team made up of former professionals; another season for a team of old men, the name of which he couldn't even remember. He got great insights into time, playing for such teams; into what it meant to grow old, and how aging was the price we paid for living. Then he had been "discovered," and eventually he had played goalie for the State team. He was very young then, but he was good, though he lacked the experience that could come only with a lot more playing and the passage of years. And how easy it was to say that, that he could only get better as the years passed, for everyone knew that, at the same time, he would be getting older, and therefore nearing the time when he would not be able to play any more. Funny thing, that the young looked to the future as if they would never age, as if they could be frozen in time, and thus congealed they could be swallowed up by time and transferred, as through a worm hole, entire and unchanged, to another region of space, to another life.

He had represented his State almost every year since he was eighteen, except for the time when he was a university student. That was eight years ago. Then he had embarked on a professional career. Now, at twenty-six, he was said to be in his prime; he was at the peak of his career, as they said; but as far as he was concerned, what mattered was that he felt good about himself.

He had acquired experience slowly and painfully. Lots of errors at first, humiliating incidents; like letting the ball go between his legs — before he learned to close them; or diving to one side only to find the ball going in at the other end — before he learned to keep his eyes on the ball. He could remember a lot of clapping and cheering when he saved a goal, and a lot of boos and hissing when he made a mistake. All that was in the past now. He had climbed to the top — *this* was the top: the World Cup finals.

His State team had won the National Championship three years before. It had been a tough tournament. Every match had been won or lost by a goal or two. His team had shut out the

opposition. They hadn't lost a game, and he had been given credit for outstanding saves and voted the tournament's MVP. That performance had led to his being chosen to the National Team. Then had come the international matches, and slowly, by elimination, his team had emerged at the top of its zone. Then had come the group elimination matches. These had been hotly contested. They hadn't won every game, but they had done extraordinarily well. There had been several shut-outs, and again he had been credited in large measure for them. Almost before he knew what was happening, they had reached the finals. And this was it!



The President was now in the center of the playing field. The loudspeakers were blaring the introductions. The flags of the competing nations were raised and so was that of the host nation; and now the national anthems were being played, the players and spectators standing impatiently but respectfully. It was almost eerie, that one could contain oneself and go through ceremonies of stillness while all the time one's heart thundered in one's chest and one's hands and legs twitched with nervous anticipation.

There was an air of expectancy hanging over the stadium; he could almost breathe it. He felt the tension in himself, and he could sense it in the nervous movements of the players and from the rapid, high-pitched talk of the spectators. On the stands, the crowd looked like an enormous swarm of bees, buzzing with excitement. As if that were not enough, the radio and TV announcers, with their excited voices and exaggerated inflections, kept up the general enthusiasm and even added to it.

The shining morning sun was almost blinding against the blue sky. Looking down at the green grass gave your eyes a feeling of relief from squinting. Everything was all right in the heavens, and on earth there reigned a bright peace unawares of the impending storm.

The President had given the ceremonial kick-off. Everybody had applauded. Then the President and his entourage had marched off the field.

The coin had been tossed. The referee had introduced the linesmen to the captains and had spoken to them briefly about the spirit of the game.



He had walked to the goal just as he had done hundreds of times during his career from high school days. He had looked at the posts as he approached, estimating their height and the length between them. Every goal is different, however slightly. Every one has a distinct feel to it, and you have to judge it as you come to it much as you judge a person you meet for the first time. You have to make its acquaintance; you must establish a relationship with it. He wasn't superstitious, but he knew that a connection had to be set between the goal and himself, so that he could function in it. Deep within him he understood why ancient shamans labored, by rituals and prayers, to appease the guardian spirits of the place before they ventured into it; if you didn't, they might turn against you when you least expected it, and that might entail failure, or defeat. For him it might mean a goal. He couldn't afford that.

He had looked at the ground and tapped it lightly with his boot. It was all right. Grounds vary from field to field. He always preferred the ones where some sand had been mixed with the harder soil, for then they retained a certain softness after rain or watering, and they were kinder to his body when he fell. The white chalk line between the posts often made the ground hard, but it was narrow, anyway, and most of the time you didn't play that deep into the arch. The grass was clipped short and it felt comfortable to his step. It was dry: there would be no skidding. The ball would bounce true; he could rely on it.

He had walked from one post to the other, all the time going through the motions he had performed a hundred times before. Funny, that all the things you had been taught about the game

did not matter as much as the actual feel of the surface, the touch of the posts, the walking under the arch. Taking stock of the goal was not an intellectual exercise, something you could deduce from some set of rules. It had to be experienced bodily. His body had to feel the distance between the posts, the height of the upright from the ground (which he had measured both with his eyes and with a slight jump as he extended his arm to touch it lightly). His feet had to walk on the grass to get the measure of its softness, of its evenness, and nothing the grounds keepers could have told him could substitute for this bodily measuring of the terrain, this taking stock of his place in the field.

This was what other people did in their trades, guitar players and pianists, typists, drivers, money lenders. You had to feel things with your body. You couldn't carry your favorite playing field with you, so you had to try out every new one. Why, he had seen friends strum on a new guitar before they played anything, as if letting their fingers sense the precise tension of the strings and the space between the frets were the only way to get acquainted with the instrument. Indeed, that *was* the only way. When you dealt with these matters, your body had to feel everything, and only in this way could you "know" where you were, what you were going to do, what the distances were, how much you were going to have to strain to reach a high shot in the corner of the goal, how much punishment your body would bear if you had to dive for a low shot by the post. All these things your body had to know, but you couldn't tell it by reason and by talk. It had to find out by itself, in its own way, through sight and touch, through measuring itself out, as it were, on the breadth and length of this little bit of its space on earth. Snakes did that, too, as they prepared themselves to swallow their prey after a kill: they slithered their bodies over the inert animal, taking stock of its length, its thickness, its texture, preparing to open their mouths as much as required by the size of the prey. In the same way he was taking stock of his place, his stage, his ground, his field, his goal.



The captains had shaken hands. The players were moving nervously in their positions, wriggling their feet and arms loosely, as if trying to shake off the tension. They did bends and kept looking around. Some sprinted briefly in one place, while others turned their heads slowly this way and that, ending with a slight jerk, trying to loosen the muscles of the neck.

The crowd was restless with anticipation. It roared occasionally at some of the announcements. You could tell there were favorites, and you could tell where his own partisans were sitting by the increased noise and applause coming from certain sections when his team was mentioned, or when the name of any of the players in his team came up for special recognition.

It was an odd feeling, being in a field surrounded by some one hundred thousand spectators, and knowing that millions more were watching the game over TV, or listening to the radio broadcasts. He had played in large stadiums before, but this was different. It was not just the numbers, but the enormity of the occasion.

Of the spectators, only a minority had come from his own country. They were expected to be rooting for his team. But there were thousands of others who also had favorites, even though they were not his compatriots. Their allegiance was based on something other than blood and language. Perhaps it was a matter of style; they liked his team's style of playing. Or perhaps they had their favorite players, and they shaped their commitment around that one predilection. People did that sort of thing. They fantasized about the exploits of one player, or they identified with him, and they gave allegiance to the whole team based on that one bias. Back at home it was different. Some favored you and your team because of ties that were more personal: they had met you, or had met someone who had met you; or they were distant relatives; or they came from your village or your town, and therefore felt a kinship with you they did not feel for other players in other teams. And, of course, there were the businessmen who favored you because

they had placed a bet on you to win. They really didn't care for you personally; their feelings were not involved at all. All they cared for was their money. He remembered how once, during a match in the State tournament, he had congratulated an opponent for a shot he had, however, been able to stop. Someone from the crowd had guessed his words and had yelled, "I got money riding on you, kid! Cut the friendship shit!"

Playing soccer is a strange experience, he thought. It is the game most widely played in the world. Millions played it, or had played it at some point in their lives, and so their acquaintance with the game went far beyond mere knowledge of the rules, of strategy, and of style. When they went wild over a good play or mad over a bad one, their reactions went beyond mere appreciation of skill or awareness of the lack of it. Most of them had played soccer, and they had experienced in their own bodies the difficulties of bringing about a successful save, of accomplishing a deceptive dribble, of executing a controlled volley. The inexperienced, the ignorant, the *mere* spectators, appreciated the play for its effect, for the accomplishment of the intended result. But most soccer enthusiasts also noted the execution. The reference was to their own bodily experiences. They knew what was going on because they had done it themselves — or had tried to. They were not armchair fans, just less accomplished players.

That must be one reason for the popularity of the game. Sure, soccer is cheap to play — all you need is your feet. Even the ball is secondary. He remembered playing with a stone when he was a kid. And for a field, the street sufficed. You could get as excited over it all as if you were playing a championship match. No doubt, this was a factor in the popularity of the game the world over. But there was more to it. He thought of his own experiences. He had played in high school and in local teams that mushroomed during weekends wherever there was a vacant field. He had also played in local tournaments. Then in the State tournament, and eventually in the Nationals. He was now a professional player. He had played while studying at the university, but not for a university team. The route to the top had no preordained sequences. Everyone played in the village teams, and from among them a few players emerged to represent the town against other towns. And that's the way it went all over the world. Slowly the best emerged. The professional teams from larger towns were only slightly better than the village teams. Talent abounded because everybody played, and many played very well. Even if they did not climb to the top they remained avid players and committed fans. They were all amateurs, lovers of the game.

There is a difference between merely watching a game and watching a game you have played. If you have played the game you do not just watch: your feet move, your toes curl inside your shoes, your fingers clinch into a fist, your body strains almost as much as the bodies of the players on the field. You sweat. You want to play. You'd rather be playing than sitting up there in the stands. And you know you are good enough — almost good enough to be playing instead of some of the players. Your excitement, therefore, is double.

There is something else peculiar about soccer: most soccer players are workers, or children of workers. They are lower middle class ordinary Joe's. No aristocrats; no blue-bloods. No millionaires — not *before* they started playing.

Take tennis; or cricket; or golf; or ice skating. You have to be rich to play tennis. You have to buy expensive rackets and expensive balls, and belong to expensive clubs. If you don't have the money, you can't play the game. At least, you can't play it with those who play it well.

Now, soccer is different. Anyone can play. You need no expensive equipment, and you need no fancy club turf to play on. You are born with your equipment, and you are born into your club, this solid earth.

Sure, other sports also are inexpensive: basketball, for instance; and swimming. But they require special facilities. You can't swim competitively in just any old water hole. And for basketball you need a decent hoop. But soccer, you play it on the street, on any meadow, anywhere. You don't even need goal posts; you can imagine them. That's what he used to do

when he practiced in the playing field, on the grass, to avoid getting hurt. You knew where the goal posts would have had to be, if there had been any goal posts, and so did your kicker. That was all that was needed. As for the ball, good grief, he had played with everything, from stones to crumpled paper to balloons to softballs. It made no difference so long as you could play with it.

True, you could also jog anywhere. All you needed was your legs and space — any space. You could even jog in one place. But jogging was an individual thing. It was not a team sport. It was different. Soccer was still unique in that anyone could play it, rich or poor. Except it was mostly the poor who played it. The rich played tennis, or racket ball, or squash, or golf; or flew gliders, went yachting, raced cars and motorcycles. Or they paid a lot of money to see people do all those things. No question about it, soccer was unique as a team sport. It was the people's sport, both to play and to watch. It was a proletarian sport, and it had remained so even in most capitalist countries.

Strange, how things always ran into each other. If you were born poor, you played soccer, or you played nothing. If you were born rich, you played any of the fancy games. And you made a lot of money, too.



“Ladies and gentlemen,” a commentator was saying, “we are seconds away from the kick-off. We are ready to enter this special time, this game, the finals of the World tournament. Put on your magic caps! Switch on your magic sets! Let your imaginations run wild!”

“Right on,” another was answering, “and don't forget the players. You need a lot of imagination to psyche yourself up and chase a ball all over the field for ninety minutes while pushing, shoving, screaming, kicking, and puffing. By the time it's all over you have run yourself down to exhaustion, you have lost six pounds or so, you are dirty and smelly, and you may have a broken leg or a bruised shin.”

“Precisely,” the first one had added; “you have made a fool of yourself running around in shorts, like a ragamuffin, showing off your hairy legs, wearing socks of the most ridiculous colors, and getting all worked up over seemingly ludicrous things such as off-sides, penalties, and corner kicks. Had you done any of this outside the soccer field, you would have been locked up. Yet here you are. You have conjured up a world, and you have lived and acted in it at least for a while. Twenty-one other guys have done the same, and so have the spectators, however few or many.”

“And *we* have been a part of it, too.”

“Right. Whenever the game is played, everyone conspires to create this world on a sunny Sunday morning or afternoon. Everyone gets caught up in it and strains to live and act in it with more earnestness, perhaps, than will be spent the next morning at work. And what do you get out of it? Nothing save sheer exhaustion.”

“At least *we* get paid!”

“Right. But in the end, the game's just a chance for pure waste!”

“Hey, who said there was no money in waste?”



What was mind-boggling, he thought, was that millions of people managed to join this make-believe. There they were, glued to their TV sets and radios, or freaking out on the stands, all participating in this collective pretense, this universal illusion!



The referee had placed the ball in the center of the field and had signaled the forwards to

come to it. The game was about to start, a brand new game, as if no game had ever been played before. The ball was new. Their uniforms were new (except for his old sweater. He always wore it, no matter where the game might be). The whole moment seemed pristine and unsoiled, like a fresh snowfall.

The thought then had come to him that perhaps people crowded the stadiums in order to feel innocent, just as they went to church on Sundays to cleanse themselves of sin. When you play a morning game there is a certain crispness in the air, like that of the first day of Spring. In the afternoon, the sunny air feels balmy, and the warmth is soothing; and night games are played in the kind of light that makes you feel as if something unearthly and fantastic were about to happen. Similarly, going to church on Sunday always has a feel of newness, what with everybody dressed up in their best suits and finery, and everybody's faces cheery and happy. It doesn't matter where you are — church, synagogue, or stadium. There is newness all around. It's as if we jumped to this other dimension of illusion, of the imaginative, in order to be transformed. Here we can begin life again every time. The referee's whistle is like a magician's wand or a priest's blessing; it conjures up a new, different world, a new one every time; and so, by joining in, we can be innocent once again, every time we play or join the game.

We are born again every Sunday, he thought; we live and sin and die by the week's end. We pay the ticket price, we are absolved, and the referee's whistle calls us back to life once more, like the Angel's trumpet on the Last Day.

Thinking of the billions watching the game, joining the illusion, he had remembered a poem from his school days:

A game is life, a game we all must play.
He couldn't remember the words. Wait, they were coming back to him now:
. The skill's in us inborn
Wherewith to shuffle, cut, deal out, and play;
And yet we may misplay the hand when borne
Away by wrath, or sadness, or drunk gay.
A game is life, indeed, but such a game
As ne'er could one devise or dream to play.
.
So play therefore that you may always win.

That was all he could remember, no more. And there was no time to keep searching the memory; the present was crowding out every past and forestalling every future. The present was overwhelming. That was it. There was nothing but the present, and the present was the game.

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