

THE SMUGGLER, THE SHEPHERD AND THE TROPHY

“This book is essentially for those... who can read. And also those people who have ever fantasized about how good it would be to be a shepherd some of the time.”

(Unknown critic from the 21st Century)

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Reality is often more surprising than any invented or dreamt up story. Still, by some strange twist of fate, this story by no means has anything to do with reality. The characters featured and their actions are the product of unrestrained fantasy. Except for those who are not.

„Preface...”

The Trophy:

One of the most valuable trophies in the world.
The work of the famous Italian artist is hardly 15 inches tall.
It weighs more than six kilograms of which five are pure gold.
Its value? Immeasurable. And not only in the physical sense.
Throughout history maybe the Ark of the Covenant was the
last object to have had such significance, such extraordinary
power, fame and influence.
He who has the Trophy has glory!
He who has the Trophy has power!
Probably there is no person, who has not seen it being lifted
into the air at least once... who has not dreamt of lifting it
into the air themselves... or at least of touching it once in
their life.

With a big head one becomes a lord, with a big foot – a shepherd...
(old Turkish – Albanian proverb)

First...

Somewhere in Montenegro – the final

On the world's largest, made-to-order plasma TV the last minutes of the World Cup final were ticking away. 76.8% of the world were watching with excitement. Maybe one more minute and it would be over and another four years of wait would begin until the next final. The goalie had caught the ball, caressed it at length and then kicked it out quite a long distance. After this, hands flew up into the air and the colorfully dressed soccer players, like kindergarteners gone crazy, were running up and down and jumping onto each other. Something must have happened. Clearly something had happened. The referee dressed in black was waving his hands in vehement gesticulation. Yes, the big match, the 2010 Football World Cup Final, was over. Sergei had been waiting only for this. This is what he was always waiting for. This was his big moment. More precisely, it was about to come. But for it to happen the match had to end.

Sergei knew exactly what was happening and when. Therefore he did not need sound on the world cup broadcast. On the screen of the world's largest made-to-order TV the players were running around in absolute silence. But the stadium was similarly mute. The roars of the eighty thousand spectators could not be heard and of course the referee's triple whistle marking the end of the match could not be heard either.

This strange clamorous, earsplitting and sometimes completely senseless orgy of sound Sergei had completely locked out of his world. Somehow it did not befit his sublime thoughts, high-soaring desires... or even more so his goals.

In the dim theatre room Khachaturian's 3rd Symphony was blasting out as a musical accompaniment, all in high-fidelity surround sound. The music was loud so the whirring of the Blu-ray playing the match would not have been audible even if Blu-ray discs had in fact made such a sound.

This week Sergei had watched the world cup final, more precisely its last minutes ten times. Ten times only this week. In the past weeks, months, year who knows how many times.

The Blu-ray recording would have been worn down to tatters were Blu-ray discs prone to being worn down to tatters.

Sergei was visibly excited. Not without reason. His moment had come. He turned the volume up on the already frenzied Khachaturian symphony and with shaking hands and watery eyes stared at the screen.

Sergei Krasninsky was not young anymore, but you could not say he was old either. He was well past his fifties, but visibly before the big six zero. His sagging stomach was showing through his aged-look Armani t-shirt and the remote was going up and down between his long, veiny fingers with

a shaky dance. He was leaning forward tensely. It was not the heavy and horribly kitsch gold necklace around his neck that pulled him forward. No, it was something else completely. Someone had appeared on the muted video recording on the plasma TV. More precisely someone with something. The camera was focused on an elegant, older gentleman. The president of the International Federation of Association Football, FIFA, was approaching, holding in his hands, almost ceremoniously, a sparkling, golden trophy. As he held it in front of himself and slowly lifted it the trophy's radiance filling the stadium could be felt even through the TV screen. It lit up the face of the influential president and it lit up the happiness and careless, overflowing joy on the faces of the current best players of the world. And it had lit up something else. The dim theatre room with all of its nooks, including Sergei Krasninsky's emotional, downward-drooping mouth, distorted face and upset eyes.

The elegant, impeccably dressed gentleman lifted the shining wonder and in a somewhat emphatic, celebratory manner, though with a touch of relief, handed it over to the captain of the winning team.

It seemed like the extraordinary trophy was really capable of wonders. One of the world's best and most spoilt players and of course the owner of an abundance of earthly possessions burst into tears.

He looked at the object in his hands with watery eyes, slowly lifted it to head height and kissed it in awe.

Sergei turned off the music and with almost the same move turned the volume up on the TV. The contrast between the blare of Khachaturian's Symphony and the amplified silence flooding out of the TV was surprising.

However, the silence of the stadium had only lasted moments. The captain of the team with a sudden move thrust the trophy, looked on in awe, into the air. The well-deserved symbol of triumph. The World Cup Trophy. The Trophy!

This is usually when a storm of sound sweeps through the stadium and all hell breaks loose.

Fifth...

The master thief at work...

There was already a lot of bustle early in the morning at the Bellagio. There was always a lot of bustle at the Bellagio. After all the 3950-room hotel is amongst the world's largest and most famous hotels. It is no surprise that it was chosen to be the venue of the American stopover labeled to be one of the highlights of the 2014 FIFA World Cup tour. The press in the States has been pumping out information for days. The media circus has begun. The all-day event and of course the big evening show were in the headlines almost everywhere. The big show where according to promises everyone who mattered in the world of international football would be present. Pelé, Messi, Ronaldo, Neymar amongst others. And of course the mandatory great, still the most popular... David Beckham, who they even managed to convince to be one of the hosts. The host who will present the pure gold World Cup Trophy going to the winner of the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. The Trophy... in real life. The original Trophy this time rather than in a safe or a vault protected by ultra secure alarms... lifted up high in his own hands.

The day went by quickly. Press meetings, presentations, working lunch, lots of handshakes, cordial smiles, greetings and a multitude of pats on the back. The American audience was appreciative. Thousands were gathered at the stage erected in front of the hotel, thousands were watching the screenings, the sensational compilations pieced together from the most beautiful goals and the dancers. The events of the roadshow.

There were maybe 15 minutes left until the start of the show when on the VIP section of the 33rd floor a lift stopped. The door opened, so the two gorgeous hostess girls waiting in front of it in the hallway could hastily step inside. Both of them had special passes hanging from around their neck, showing off that their wearers were members of today's team, true insiders. The girls stepped into the lift, which was not wholly empty. A man was standing inside and he was just adjusting the lapels of his tuxedo in front of the ornate mirror of the lift. It was David Beckham, who had just been approached by an elegant concierge, who had stepped to him and whispered into his ear confidentially, yet with reserved courteousness:

– Your wife is asking for You on the phone, my dear Sir. She only told me that what she had to say was urgent and confidential and could not wait. She would like to talk to You undisturbed so she asked me to switch the call to your room – he added.

Beckham looked at the reserved concierge somewhat confused, but also concerned. Though he did not understand, he did not want to have to quarrel with Victoria, so after some deliberation ran back up to his suite. However, the receiver of the elegant golden phone on the large desk was quiet.

– I can't believe it. Is someone messing with me? – he asked himself and left for the stage still wondering. But now his annoyance was made up for with the appearance of the two beauties. He was surprised when the girls did not react the way he was accustomed to and did not storm him asking for his autograph or a kiss with glistening eyes and high-pitched screams. Not this time. They were decidedly angry.

– David – where have you been? We've been looking for you for minutes – said one of them snappily.

– You should be at the photo shoot. We've been looking for you all over the place – said the other.

For a second Beckham could not utter a word. He was not used to such flagrancy or having to answer to anyone.

At last he slowly said – I don't know anything about this photo shoot. I have to be on stage soon – he added confused.

– This is what we are talking about – snorted the girls almost simultaneously.

– We've already looked for you at the stage, but since you weren't there you don't know that the evening show will be delayed by about an hour... they are expecting some „top dog”. They told us to take you to this photo shoot in the meanwhile, which would be tomorrow. This way at least you'll be free the whole day tomorrow and be done with it quickly now – explained enthusiastically the hostess girl with the surprisingly see-through shirt and remarkable curves.

– Let's go, because in the end they will fire us because of you, if we don't get there in time – said nervously the other, the blonder beauty.

By now Beckham was totally confused and followed the girls with obedient resignation through the opening door of the lift, which had arrived on the eighth floor in the meantime.

The beauties led the dumbfounded star into a room, which had been set up as a professional studio. Two photographers, beautiful girls, props. David was not against it anymore. At least he would relax a bit before the stressful appearance and before hosting, which caused him stage fright. And he liked to be photographed anyway. The door of the room closed.

In the meantime, on the 36th floor of the Bellagio in suite 3610 The French was preparing feverishly. He knew that he would soon have a big appearance. A lot of people will be admiring him, he cannot let them down.

Another little adjustment to his hair and the lapel on his tuxedo. He has started for the door. He looked back from the hall towards the large mirror dominating the room. He smiled with satisfaction. He pressed down the room's heavy, gilded door handle. And David Beckham stepped out of room 3610 on the 36th floor of the Bellagio hotel in Vegas.

The lift arrived quickly and luckily it was empty. He did not want fame now. He wanted to be by himself to enjoy the view in the reflection of the lift's ornate mirror. He was proud of himself. He actually very much liked the man looking back at him in the mirror. A real David Beckham in person. Almost a real one. Almost a „spitting image of” David Beckham. Lumet was a good actor and besides this he knew a lot about masks and changing his looks. In the past years and decades using disguises and enacting others have been part of his genius and ambitious plans, more than once. He enjoyed this kind of game together with all its advantages and excitements of course. And it became the basis of his plan again. He thought it up twenty days earlier and since then he of course brought to perfection this exciting „piece

of magic”. He had analyzed the world star’s moves, gestures and his tone of voice with absolute precision. He has had the star’s famous arm and hand tattoo patterns copied onto special stickers by a real pro. A little bit of luck was needed in addition of course, as he was a similar height and build as one of the world’s best, but without a doubt, most popular football players.

The lift suddenly jolted. Only slightly, but it jolted, and almost simultaneously it came to a stop. The French admiring his own „masterpiece” in the mirror looked at the brightly-lit LED display. The lift stopped on the 13th floor. Outside the silently opening door, in the discreetly and amicably lit hallway, there stood The King. With a straight posture, with a straight look on his face, with smiling eyes... The King himself. Straight in front of him.

Everybody knows The King, or more precisely, everyone, everywhere knows who he is. And Lumet was no exception. Not to mention Beckham.

The King, in other words Pelé, with a replica of the Rimet Cup in his hand, stepped into the lift with a big smile.

– What a surprise – he looked at the dumbfounded French, or currently Beckham that is, from head to toe.

Lumet dropped his room card and his jaw, too.

– You are looking great my boy – observed Pelé and he went on – I know this feeling. Stage, hosting, spotlights, but don’t worry, I still get stomach cramps on these occasions. But you know what? Once you are on stage, pick up that gleaming golden Trophy and run... don’t even stop till you get to your room. If you want to we can swap as well – and with great laughter, he proudly tapped the statuette tucked under his arm.

Lumet let out a nervous cough, his legs became weak and no sound came out his throat. But luckily Pelé was in a particularly good mood and he kept joking.

– It's good that I've bumped into you. I wanted to ask you anyway if you could sort me out a classy underwear photoshoot? It must be great fun – he added.

Although it took Lumet a lot of effort, but slowly forming the words, he answered:

– No problem my King, no big deal, I'll sort it out next week.

At last the elevator stopped again. This time on the lobby level. Lumet has never been so happy to arrive at the ground floor of a hotel. He stepped out of the lift and nervously waved back.

Pelé, still cheerful and smiling, called after him.

– I'll take the lift for another ride, I've left the box of my precious upstairs, I'll go back for it. But don't worry, I'll definitely watch you. Oh, and it was a pleasure talking to you.

However, Beckham, or actually Lumet, could hardly hear this. He looked at his watch. The timing seemed perfect. He only had to get through the hotel's huge and busy lobby, walk down a couple of stairs, go through the hallway connecting the lobby and the theatre and the surprise show could begin. A real surprise!

He carefully peeked out from behind the cover of a big column.

The lobby seemed relatively quiet, at least as much as the lobby of a 3950-room hotel could be quiet. In the middle of the lobby in an ornate fountain a couple of Japanese tourists were taking photographs completely soaked. Their

unstoppable giggling was explained by the large amount of chips falling out of their pockets. It appeared they have won a larger sum. Four or five people were standing at the right entrance of the lobby. They must have been members of the sphere-lovers sect and they were holding two banners with quiet resignation. One of them read „Don't kick the leather sphere”, the other: „Justice to the ball”. At the other entrance of the lobby it was not so quiet. About 40-50 youngsters were jumping around and shouting. Clearly fanatic fans that two big security guards were trying to hold back with a light barrier. The French did not have any more time to look around. He had to go. He walked through the lobby with firm steps, choosing the shortest way to the entrance of the hallway connecting to the theatre. Suddenly a strong hand took him by the arm.

– Sup daddio, aren't we fancy? – whispered a merry voice into his ear, leaning so close that curly hairs were tickling his face. Lumet quickly turned his head. It was Ronaldinho smiling at him and his funny teeth up close looked even funnier. However, The French was in no mood to joke around. But Ron would not leave.

– Surprise, dawg. I came with the little one – referring to Neymar – but he is totally crazy. He wants to play at the casino all night. But we're gonna skip off and samba a bit. Awrite player? – he asked, but the question already contained the answer.

Beckham, that is Lumet, was keen to rid himself of the nimble-footed Brazilian.

He patted him on the shoulder and gave him a suggestive smile. In the meantime, a couple of members of the fanatic sect of fans got through the barrier and ran towards them

armed with papers and pens. This was what The French needed.

– Scribble them a couple of autographs for me – and with this he pushed Ronaldinho into the arms of the autograph hunters and skipped away quickly.

Luckily he was not far from the guarded door that led to the theatre. He was walking with relief on the soft carpet when a particularly sightly blond angel appeared in front of him. As she got close the girl winked at him enigmatically.

– I hope you did not forget my room number – he whispered into the ears of The French even more enigmatically. Lumet was confused and could only stammer something, which was unlike Beckham.

– I knew you would forget – said the beauty enchantingly and she slid a room key into the tuxedo's pocket.

– I'll be expecting you after midnight – she purred once more and walked away.

Lumet began to sweat. He sincerely hoped that there would be no more bonus surprises this evening. He really wanted to be done with the real surprise, the big attraction, the one... that he had planned.

He arrived behind the stage. They handed him a microphone in the advantageous dimness of the backstage area and several people have patted him on the back reassuringly. Then suddenly he heard his name, or to be precise, his new adopted name.

– And welcome probably tonight's most awaited guest, the star of stars, everyone's celebrated favorite ... David Beckham – introduced him Oprah Winfrey the other host of the show. One of America's most popular women called him onto stage. Him. One of the world's most popular sportsmen.

Every eye was glued on him. But this is what Lumet liked. He liked the game, the odds, the excitement, the risk, the deception. Like the real David Beckham,.

– Showtime – he repeated again, almost only to himself, the slogan he used in the morning after waking up.

– Showtime... and he stepped out onto the stage. The stage that was lit up by a multitude of spotlights and intelligent lights and filled with a bright glow.

Sixth...

Showtime

Two thousand six hundred and fifteen spectators. That was the capacity of the theatre at the Bellagio that day. But tonight, even if it were ten times that, it would have still filled up. After all, a World Cup gala, so many celebrated stars in one place and Oprah Winfrey and David Beckham as hosts are not a common sight even in Vegas. As it was not common either that the cup going to the winners of the World Cup finals, the fantastic golden Trophy bearing the names of all past winners and the touches of their hands, could be marveled at. In real life and almost up close. And if all this still were not enough for all the Americans, who were living amongst heaps of replicas anyway, this evening it would be the original!

Lumet was fortunate. Stepping onto the stage he did not sense the two thousand six hundred and fifteen spectators, the bewildering number of photographers and TV cameras. He only saw two things. One of them was Oprah giving him a big hug and breathing a kiss on his face. The other was the Trophy.

It has to be said that Oprah Winfrey has an amazing aura indeed. It is no surprise that she has become one of America's favorite and most popular women. But there was something on stage today that even she could not compete with.

In the middle of the large and spectacular stage stood a fancy stand and on its top, the Trophy. On top of it? No. It was floating over it and everything around it was illuminated by a heavenly glow. It suppressed Oprah's aura, hundreds and hundreds of spotlights, the breathing of two thousand six hundred and fifteen spectators and their breaths swimming towards the stage.

Lumet was enchanted too, standing like a wooden puppet turned to stone. He first saw the Trophy sitting in the dim theatre room in Montenegro and has looked at it many times in the past few months on photographs and Blu-rays. He had purchased and made replicas himself so he could study it better, memorize its dimensions and attune himself to the task. But what he saw now, what he was experiencing was completely different. Not comparable to anything else. Maybe Captain Nemo had experienced this feeling stepping through the gates of Atlantis or Indiana Jones when he first found the Lost Ark. Maybe.

Heavenly... *je l'aime* – slipped out his mouth. A little known French word, an expression of amazement and awe.

All the experience and routine of two decades and the so highly esteemed power of his acting talent was lost in a split second. He was staring at the Trophy enchanted... and he could not remember anything. The well-planned entry, the entry lines he thought up, the first few sentences.

He was just standing there as if a spell had been cast on him. But the spell had not been cast on him, but the cup.

Only now has he come to understand the Russian. He did not consider excessive the number anymore that was scribbled on the piece of paper that night in Montenegro.

The ice, or silence rather, was broken by Oprah. He caught Lumet's hand and pulled him gently towards herself. With this The French was shaken back into reality.

– Hello David, how are you tonight? – asked Winfrey, who has detected that her co-host was lost, but thought it was just stage fright.

– Thank you. Couldn't be better. – answered The French instead of Beckham in perfect English.

Thanks to the mixers, the microphone's slight natural distortion and the delicate vibration of the speakers in the theatre the small difference in their voice was not apparent and thus hardly detectable.

– Welcome. I am glad that you are here. I hope it's going well and that you are having a great time this wonderful and once-in-a-lifetime evening – he was gathering pace, he found himself again. –I promise it will be special and unforgettable for everyone – with this he winked to Oprah.

– Well said David – took over the experienced and delightful host.

– To make the evening truly unforgettable help us please. Take off your mask and show us who you really are.

Lumet's heart had stopped for a moment. An icy hand has taken him by the throat.

– This would be it? Have I been exposed? – flashed the thought through his mind. It only lasted a split second, because Oprah continued.

– Yes David. You've been so tense ever since you got on stage. That's not the way we like you. Cast off the excited

mask of the reserved host and be who you are. The cheerful and always smiling David Beckham. You know what? Let's dazzle the audience a bit. Not everyone here has necessarily seen a ball before. I've prepared and brought them one. And You. It's Your game of course. Let's show something that's Beckham on stage here and now.

With this the band played a musical flourish and with the ringing ruffles of the drum Winfrey conjured a colorful, official adidas World Cup ball from behind the curtain.

– This is really not my evening after all – it occurred to The French – I did not prepare for this – he thought, but the ball flying towards him broke his musing.

He caught it, tucked it under his arm and was grinning awkwardly. Although he has seen a ball before, football, the game, and especially such tricks were not him. Not him at all. He had to think of something!

He knew that he needed another couple of minutes according to the originally planned script.

– Ball? What ball? – he looked around with pretended incomprehension.

The audience made a rumble.

– What do I do with this? – he looked at Oprah with pretended incomprehension.

The audience was quietly smirking.

He bounced the ball a couple of times.

. Wooow. It's bouncing. – He was beginning to enjoy the situation that started off awkwardly. The audience was laughing out loud.

He threw the ball up in the air then deftly caught it.

– This is what I'd be like if I played basketball – and he winked at the front row.

The audience was delighted and crying with laughter.

He placed the leather ball on his right-hand index finger with a light and casual move of his hand, as if he were in a circus, and spun it.

– This is what I would be like if I was a seal... and he let off a wide grin towards the auditorium.

The audience was in raptures over the joke.

Then he dropped the ball onto his foot and tried to do some keepy-uppies.

One...two...the ball fell and rolled far away on the ground.

There was an awkward silence in the theatre.

– I'm not in top form today – he laughed into the microphone.

The audience got it. They were rolling all over the place laughing with abandon.

– This David is a real joker – whispered an older, elegant lady to her husband sitting in the front rows.

Lumet felt a tingle in his wrist. He looked at his watch. He knew that the time has come. The show will soon end and hopefully go on somewhere else. Far far away from Vegas.

He stepped to the Trophy. He looked at it for a while, almost as if paying his respects. Then he picked it up from the fancy stand. He could finally touch it. He felt as though it was becoming one with him. He held it, clenched it like someone who never wanted to let go of it again. And that was the case. He did not want to.

First, he held it in front of himself for a couple of seconds then he thrust the cup up into the air above his head. The wonderful, heavenly glow was filling everything even more. It filled the theatre of the Bellagio and outshone thousands of watts worth of spotlights.

It was needed, because the next second everything turned pitch black.

After the dazzling lights complete darkness. Nobody could see anything. The dazzled eyes were feeling around completely blind.

– Power cut – shouted a voice into the dark. In all the sudden alarm nobody had considered that in case of a normal power outage the emergency lights would have turned on almost instantaneously. Normally. But here right now nothing has turned on and nothing was providing any light. Of course it was no accident. This was a part of The French's audacious plan.

He was prepared for everything. The darkness did not bother him as his small night vision goggles gave him enough light for his needs. Moves planned well in advance and practiced many times followed each other.

He swapped the Trophy he was holding in his hand for a replica that looked and weighed exactly the same and which had been waiting in a sports bag hidden behind the stage. It took quite a few minutes to address the cause of the power cut. First the emergency lights came back on and not much later the original lighting, too. The audience patiently waited in their seats. They did not panic. On the stage, in its original place on the fancy stand was the Trophy, all sparkling. That its sparkle was a bit different to a couple of minutes earlier only the French would have known.

The few minutes of helpful darkness proved enough for the David Beckham seen on stage to cease to exist and for George Lumet, The French, to be reborn in his place.

Sixteen minutes have passed since the strange power cut when Stalker, a private jet, lifted up into the air. One of the

world's most expensive and also fastest private jets was flying over the ocean not much later. Lumet was comfortably stretched out on the soft cream-color leather armchair. Besides him was lying a sports bag by an unknown brand. Inside, one of the world's most valuable treasures. The original Trophy.

The French would have had reason to celebrate. However, this time instead of the clichéd and stereotypical champagne sparkling in a crystal glass, he was holding a distinctly microphone-shaped banana he got from the fruit basket on the table. He kept saying the magic word into that.

– Showtime... showtime!

Fourteenth...

In Beno's stomach

The Albanian covered his eyes. He was getting nauseous. The sight was not fit for watch smugglers. Jarko was approaching with a huge knife. A huge knife dripping with blood. And he was coming nearer and nearer. But then he suddenly stopped at the rickety, goat-legged, wooden table standing in the shade of the olive tree in the backyard. On the table lay a rather large sheep not in particularly good condition. Completely still. The sheep, whose honorable name was Beno, was for all intents and purposes dead. There was a sizeable cut on his stomach. Apart from this and his motionless state there was nothing striking about him.

But how did the sheep get on the table? – anyone could ask rightly so. The answer was simple and obvious. The shepherd had put it there. Hardly half an hour ago. Not a regular task for a shepherd. Not a common sight. A dead sheep named Beno, with a cut up stomach, lying on a goat-legged table. But this day was not about regular things. For how would it be regular that a Montenegrin shepherd, his hands dripping with his own sheep's blood, was rolling the world's

most well-known and most valuable golden statuette into a piece of oilcloth and then, after wrapping it carefully, putting it into the sheep's stomach with a firm and skillful push. Truly not a common sight.

The Albanian was slowly beginning to feel better. He opened his eyes and the color returned to his face.

– Shall I help you? – he asked the shepherd, who waved back resignedly.

– I am done, no need – he said and with one last move finished sewing up the gaping whole on the sheep's stomach. It was late in the afternoon, but the sun was still hot.

However, they could not stop for a rest. They had plenty to do. The ferry was leaving early dawn and they had to make it.

Jarko wiped his sweaty forehead and sighed deeply at the same time. If someone yesterday had said around the same time that in 24 hours he would be standing here under the olive tree in the backyard next to the goat-legged table with one of his oldest sheep lying on it dead, with a strange, sparkling, golden statuette wrapped in oil cloth in its stomach. Well. He would have probably instantly whacked the malicious, but mostly insane, bloke in the head with the handle of a pitchfork.

But nevertheless, Jarko was still standing there and what worried him even more was that he would have to leave soon. Actually, he did not have to, but it happened by fate or whoever knows what that he agreed to the Albanian's proposal. And since he had agreed once, he would not change his mind. He was not the kind of person. Even though he knew it was madness. Madness? No. It was the greatest sin that a shepherd like him could commit against his family, in this

case, his sheep. Leaving them behind with someone else and setting off into a world he knew nothing off. Where is the destination? Where is arrival? Jarko has never left the vicinity of his village more than a couple of kilometers. So for him it made actually no difference, whether he would have to travel 100, 1000 or maybe 10.000 kilometers in the next couple of days. He agreed to Tarek's proposal and there was no going back.

They were planning the great journey excitedly the whole morning. The Albanian did the planning, Jarko kept worrying rather and quite a lot at that. They did not have any other choice. According to the plan they had to get to Brazil, where during the world cup they would find the most appropriate person, who they could casually and gallantly return the Trophy to. Of course expecting the well-deserved and handsome finder's reward. This was the plan, which at first seemed self-explanatory and did not even appear that complex.

But Tarek knew exactly well, since it was „his profession”, that it would not be so easy to go halfway across the world and at the end of the journey get to Brazil with a nearly six kilogram, pure gold statuette.

Which in addition was currently the world's most well-known and perhaps most sought-after statuette. But the Albanian was not the kind of man to give up easy. He felt that he was only a stretch away from the money, the well-deserved reward. A 9000 km stretch quite precisely. They were sitting next to each other at the rough wooden table and talked, planned, calculated and drawn. Sometimes they angrily smacked the table and jumped up, but then continued exactly from where they have just left off. Roughly by noon they had

a plan. Roughly. Of course there remained questions unanswered and tasks that would require some improvisation, but Tarek knew that leaving was always the hardest. Once they are on the road, everything should be alright. The patron saint of smugglers and shepherds hopefully would not abandon them.

Planning the journey seemed to be the first and foremost thing. They weighed several options, but eventually settled for the sea. A ferry left from the port of Bar to Italy early every dawn. If they somehow got the statuette on board they would be in the home stretch – they thought. So this is how in the hot afternoon the sheep that died by no accident along with the treasure, wrapped into an oilcloth in its stomach, ended up on the goat-legged table. Of course, plenty of things were left to do. Jarko ambled over to the neighboring farm to entrust his sheep to its owner. The neighbor, the closest farmer in a 10 km radius, was a decent man. He was a bit surprised that one of Jarko's distant relatives has just turned up from somewhere far away and that the shepherd had to visit them promptly, but they quickly agreed on the daily allowance and the neighbor nodded and promised to take care of the animals. Jarko was a bit more relieved. On his way home, he was ambling lost deep in his thoughts when the sharp beep of a horn sounded behind him. Tarek was just on his way back from the nearest town, where he had bought some stuff he thought necessary and sorted out the most important thing. He got some cash for the journey. Because it seemed like they were not doing so well in that respect. Ferry tickets, flight tickets and who knows what other expenditures they had to look forward to in the next couple of days.

But Tarek knew exactly that he has probably never made a better investment in his life.

– Get on buddy – he shouted, no, howled to Jarko instead of a greeting and grinned. – I have good news, but let me tell it to you when we get back – with this he turned the accelerator handle and they chugged on with the little moped.

– Do you remember Shkodran? – asked Tarek when they got off the moped and at the same time he was looking at him suggestively like someone who has just solved the main crossword of the Podgorican weekly magazine that in the draw was potentially worth a toaster or one of two blenders.

The shepherd looked at him blankly.

– I don't remember him – he said after thinking a bit.

– You knooow, Shkodran – repeated Tarek again, slowly drawing out the words, as if this could help the other man remember. But the shepherd just kept shaking his head.

– No worries – sealed the Albanian the fate of the conundrum. – I have talked to him – he blurted out and simultaneously looked at Jarko triumphantly.

– That's good – nodded the other in agreement.

– Of course it's good, it's superb, he is our man. With your consent I have taken him on board. Okay, he is not getting an equal share, but trust me, he'll be useful. He'll help us.

The shepherd really did not understand anything anymore.

– Okay, okay, but where is this Shkodran? – he asked.

– That's just the thing. – rejoined the Albanian with sparkling eyes. He is just where we are heading. America.

– America? – looked at him Jarko, his eyes wide. – But aren't we trying to get to Brazil? – he asked a bit unsure.

Tarek waved his hand with resignation.

– You really don't understand a thing. Brazil is in America, too but down south. You knooow, the bit under – at the same time he was gesticulating with both of his hands trying to demonstrate the difference to his friend.

– Listen – he spluttered compellingly. Everything is in place, we are cool, we are the coolest. Shkodran has been in America for years. I have called him and talked to him telling him what we wanted to do. He is an old friend, believe me, we can trust him. But most importantly – he waited a little to let the shepherd sense the importance of what he had to say.

Then continued in an upraised voice, but enthusiastically.

– Do you know what he does? Of course you don't... he is in the sports industry. In the American sports industry, so he knows everyone and he is close to them. So we are in luck. Fortune favors the brave or as you would say the sheep – and he laughed.

– So what's your plan? Where are we meeting him? – asked Jarko with reserve.

– What do you mean where? Do you still not understand? – fumed the Albanian.

We go to Italy by boat, get off in Bari, get a lift to Rome, we get on a plane there and we don't stop till we get to New York. And Shkodran will be there already waiting for us... red carpet, limousine, ok, only joking, and together we race down to Brazil. And voila, we hand over the cup, the rest you can imagine anyway – he spluttered almost in one go.

– And what does Shkodran do in the sports industry? – the shepherd objected a bit.

– Well, I don't know that – hesitated Tarek, but he dismissed the thoughts interfering with his enthusiasm.

–Does it really matter? One thing is certain. Anyone who works in the sports industry in America, but especially New York is no small-timer. They know everybody who counts, but most importantly the answer to our current problem. Jarko did not feel completely reassured, but slowly the Albanian’s soaring faith and enthusiasm rubbed off on him. The enthusiasm of parachuters blindly jumping into space.

Twenty-third

Start the Roadshow

The Chevy was not an '87. Rather a model that was a year older, but in relatively good condition. There were only two problems with it, and they were back in the trunk and at the very bottom of it, too. However the three national heroes, at the moment did not really have time and, let's be honest, were not really in the mood to open up the trunk and search through it. No, they swiftly jumped into the seats of the car, pulled in the doors, Shkodran turned the key and probably giving a bit too much gas reversed out from the yard. Of course, he was unused to the 5-liter engine of the Chevy. The plan, or the continuation of the plan that has been put on hold because of the missing Trophy was very simple. In fact it was formulated in the few seconds as they got back from the rundown apartment to their starting point, the yard.

They would head to Brazil at last and immediately. They could not waste more time. They would borrow the car resting in the yard, after all the bad guys deserve as much. And anyway, once they have reached their destination and they have a lot of money, they would send it back, mainly to put

Jarko's mind at ease, but for now this appeared a vague and distant moment in time. They suspected that running to the police to report the stolen car would not be the first task in the bad guys' calendar. Especially after what happened.

So for now they did not concern themselves about this. They felt that finding the right way to Brazil could prove more risky.

The purple Chevy was trundling gracefully in the quiet nighttime street. Shkodran at the wheel was feeling the car more and more. He was beginning to like the raspy, growly purr of the huge engine. Besides him, Tarek, still under the spell of the earlier events, was firmly clutching his red Albanian passport. On the back seats Jarko was fidgeting around all by himself. Let it be said that he got the most comfortable spot. Although he was not all by himself. In his hands, in his lap, with his body warming it, protecting it and shielding it, was the Trophy that he was caressing and holding tightly. The past few minutes restored his inner peace, his solace. His simple but pure faith in the order of things, in fairness. He vowed never, but really never again, to let go of the statuette, except if he found its real owner.

On the way out of the city they stopped at a non-stop gas station and bought a map to together try and plan the best and quickest possible route to Brazil. Next to the station they found a fast-food restaurant as well where on a slightly mayonnaise-stained table – after pushing aside all the colorful and exciting sauce bottles lined up on it – they spread out the huge, blanket-sized piece of paper. The whole of America unfolded in front of them. North and south alike. They could not really interpret the distances indicated by the map, so as a secondary matter they essentially did not give it

much thought. They set out the directions and to do so they tried to find the roads that seemed the best and shortest.

With a red pen they circled Brazil and within that Rio separately and from various directions they aimed at it with crooked lines ending in arrows. They argued at length about which road was the best, the quickest and of course the safest option.

It had occurred to Shkodran – who having spent a couple years in the country was slowly beginning to grasp its distances – that they should go by plane. But this idea was abandoned quickly as getting through airport security with the gold statuette would mean taking no small risk. But in any case, after some counting they realized they would not even have the money for three plane tickets. Thus remained the original plan. The Chevy. Since Tarek could drive as well it seemed realistic that alternating between the two of them they could keep going almost continuously and throwing in smaller rests could get to their destination in a short time.

They were beginning to relax more and more. The tensions and excitements of the recent days seemed to be passing. They were replaced by hope, gratifying expectation and of course the closeness of the tangible reward, the bundles of dollars.

There were only a few people in the restaurant, so they had ordered their humble dinner almost without any queuing. Some effectively heat lamped spicy chicken wings that have long not seen a deep fryer and its oil, some thighs and to go with it some mayonnaise-soaked, but delicious coleslaw. Jarko poured from every single sauce found on the table on to the chicken pieces. But one of the world's strongest „torturing methods”, prized even by the descendants of the witches of the middle-ages was too much for him.

The sampling of the contents of the friendly little bottle labeled – to the point with its simplicity, but probably a less successful contender at a literary competition – „The Hottest Fuckin’ Sauce”, brought an identical and evil smirk to Tarek and Shkodran’s face. Not without a reason.

For Jarko required a few minutes to calm down and stop the fire breathing performance that would have made one of Grimm’s popular, yet negative protagonists, the seven-headed dragon, proud.

The televisions on the colorful walls of the restaurant were just showing the daily highlights of the World Cup, so this way despite the „hot situation”, leaning back with satisfaction, they consumed their stately, albeit late dinner in an authentic mood befitting their destination.

As soon as they were done, they walked back to the car, to get on the road as quickly as possible. They were by the entrance, when Jarko suddenly turned back and headed straight back to the not exactly baby-faced, slightly overweight waitress filing her nails blasé behind the counter. Once he was there, using his kindest shepherd’s smile at first pointed at himself, then the girl and at last the paper bags stacked into several smaller piles at one end of the counter. The waitress looked with uncomprehending eyes at the phenomenon, the rangy shepherd in a shabby, Brazilian jersey, flashing his teeth with a polite smile and holding a strangely shaped statuette like object in his hand. But since she was just in the process of filing the nail on her middle finger and did not want to make the remaining ones wait too much either she made an effort.

So she realized relatively quickly that the imbecile wayfarer of the night simply wanted to ask for a paper bag. She put

the nail file she was holding in her hand between her teeth and since her dietary consultant had not recommended her any further calorie burning activities for the day, tiptoeing in place, she tried to fish out a bag from the stack closest to her. At last, after a couple of failed attempts she managed to do this and tossed the bag toward Jarko with a smug smile.

From the simple brown paper bag, made from a rough material, a picture of the familiar sauce bottle, that had already been a source of delight at the table, was smiling back at the shepherd. Above the heroic bottle, as a way of increasing the value of the ad, was imprinted in large letters the name of the sauce. „The Hottest Fuckin’ Sauce”. This effective message somewhat justified to the others the shepherd’s earlier enactment of the seven-headed, fire breathing dragon. But Jarko did not want self-justification, just like he did not understand the bag’s relatively simple ad. He was simply happy and looked gratefully at the waitress who was absorbed again in her previous activity. But this did not bother the man at all. He hid the protectively held statuette in the brown paper bag with childish joy.

At last they could get going.

It was as if a part of one of Tarantino’s insane scripts he had written awakening after a night spent in the company of stockinged beauties had become reality.

The purple colored, ‘86, 5-liter Chevy, rolled with graceful slowness out of the parking lot dimly illuminated by the lights of the nonstop gas station and the restaurant. Each one of the three odd characters sitting inside, not the types you would expect in a 5-liter Chevy, stared rigidly ahead each firmly holding onto something with their hands. Shkodran holding the wheel with a determined look, Tarek holding the

map folded from blanket size to half-blanket size with an attentive, but slightly concerned expression and finally Jarko who in the safety of the backseat, in his increasingly shabby Brazilian jersey, was tightly hugging to himself the Trophy, perhaps the world's most valuable, but currently definitely most sought-after golden statuette. Which was in a brownish colored paper bag that had „The Hottest Fuckin' Sauce” written on it.