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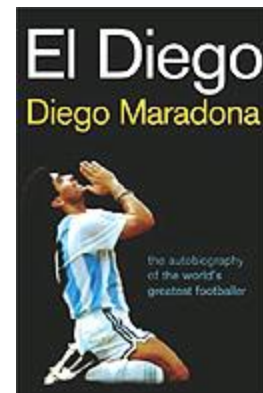
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In search of Dieguito

He rose from the slums of Buenos Aires to become the world's greatest footballer - then spectacularly self-destructed. Now, from his Cuban hospital bed, Maradona has published a remarkably frank autobiography, serialised exclusively in the Guardian from tomorrow. Martin Amis reads between the lines

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There is a truly terrifying photograph of Diego Armando Maradona, dating from 2000, the year of his first heart attack. He is wearing: a reversed baseball cap which reveals a squirt of hair, dyed the punk colour of baby shit; dark glasses; a drummer's sleeveless T-shirt, giving full play to the tattoo of Che Guevara on his right shoulder; and a defiant, slack-mouthed sneer. Then you come to the massive emplacement of the gut.



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It would be hard to exaggerate the ubiquity of the diminutive (-ito, -ita) in Latin American Spanish, which originates from the extreme reverence and indulgence accorded to the young. You are always coming across grown men with nursery names - strapping Sergitos, hefty Hugitos (and I'm friends with a 60-year-old called, simply, Ito). But it would choke you, these days, to call Maradona "Dieguito". The figure still frequently seen, on television, wobbling through airports or wedged into golfcarts, has his old hair-colour back, and is more soberly dressed; yet his bulk remains prodigious and unignorable. It visibly tortures him. And you can still glimpse Dieguito, walled up in his new carapace, pining, suffering - but unresisting. Inside every fat man, they say, there is a thin man trying to get out. In the case of Maradona, it seems, there is an even fatter man trying to get in.

Maradona's autobiography, *El Diego*, was about to be published, and there was talk, down here, of his giving an interview in Buenos Aires (I happened to be in the neighbourhood: Uruguay). When he suddenly decamped to Cuba, his second home (or sanatorium) since 2002, I blithely followed. Maradona had already had a drug-induced heart attack in April, true; but it was put out that this particular trip was routine - a dryout, or a decoking. A man describing himself as his agent, a Dieguito-shaped youngster called Gonzalo, received me at his hotel, and we seemed to be moving cautiously forward. I got my answer the next day, on the news. The doctors - Fidel's doctors - at the Centro de Salud Mental were emphatic. The patient was wired up like an astronaut, and would be seeing no one. Maradona retired in 1997. In 2001, he played (rather tubbily, I admit) in a televised football match. Now, in 2004, he needs medical permission to watch a televised football match. He is 43. Dieguito - where did he go?

In South America it is sometimes said, or alleged, that the key to the character of the Argentinians can be found in their assessment of Maradona's two goals in the 1986 World Cup. For the first goal, christened "the Hand of God"

by its scorer, Maradona dramatically levitated for a ballooned cross and punched the ball home with a cleverly concealed left fist. But the second goal, which came minutes later, was the one that [England manager] Bobby Robson called the "bloody miracle": collecting a pass from his own penalty area, Maradona, as if in expiation, put his head down and seemed to burrow his way through the entire England team before flooring Shilton with a dummy and stroking the ball into the net. Well, in Argentina, the first goal, and not the second, is the one they really like.

For the Argie macho (or so this slanderous generalisation runs) foul means are incomparably more satisfying than fair. "It's the same in government and business. They don't just tolerate corruption. They worship corruption." It is a proclivity that extends into the sexual arena, with the high value assigned, in macho circles, to heterosexual sodomy - something noticed in his travels by VS Naipaul and, more surprisingly (this was in the 1920s), by Jorge Luis Borges, who thought it the essence of the cult of "taking advantage". In Maradona's personal lexicon, the same word does duty for both goalscoring and fornication. (The word is "vaccinate": an odd choice, given that Diego was so often the pre-match recipient of the six-inch painkiller needle, driven into the inflamed kneecap, the supporating big toe.) By this logic, the second goal against England was a languid, erotic epiphany; the first was a knee-trembler in a back alley; and each has its points. More broadly, there is in this culture a humiliation, an abjectness, in always playing by the rules.

By the time we reach the England game in El Diego, the reader is in any case wholly seduced by the story and by the turbulent naivety with which Maradona tells it. To begin with, the passions involved were not merely ludic: "In the pre-match interview we had all said that football and politics shouldn't be confused, but that was a lie. We did nothing but think about that. Bollocks was it just another match!" And it wasn't just the Malvinas, either: it was the revancha of a subjugated and immiserated population. So, having exulted at length in the second goal ("I wanted to put the whole sequence in stills, blown up really big, above the headboard of my bed"), Maradona turns his attention to the first: "I got a lot of pleasure from the other goal as well. Sometimes I think I almost enjoyed that one more." And the reader can only assent, by now, to the contented urbanity of his conclusion: "They both had their own charm."

In other words, all's fair - all's sweet - in love and war. And, for some reason, that's what football is, and those are the energies it calls upon: the energies of love and war.

It was a childhood without insulation, in all senses. If the society had its sicknesses, then nothing stood between them and Dieguito. "Everyone goes on about role models. Role models my arse! In Argentina we don't have a single living role model so stop breaking my balls about it." The

beautiful game was a way out of the slums, but it was hardly a beacon of probity for the growing boy. Football was as corrupt and rapacious as everything else. Here (it was well known) was a league where players had to bribe the manager to get on the team sheet - where Patrick Vieira, say, has to slip a bung to Arsène Wenger or else languish in the reserves.

Maradona's Buenos Aires barrio was Villa Fiorita ("little bloom"), a festering wilderness in the 1960s (and, these days, a Saddam City of weaponised crime). "My parents were humble working folk," he writes, but the stock phrase is barely adequate. All 10 Maradonas occupied a three-room lean-to where the only running water was the torrent that came through the roof ("you got wetter inside than out"). The obsession with football seems utterly innate; no memories precede it, and no other interests compete with it. When the infant Diego ran errands, he did so playing keepie-uppie with an orange. When he was three a cousin gave him his first leather ball ("I slept with it hugged to my chest"). And when he went for his first trial, aged nine, he was so advanced that the coach seriously suspected that he was a midget. He made the senior side at 15, and with his first wages he bought another pair of trousers, to supplement the turquoise cords with the big turn-ups.

His ascendancy, thereafter, was perfectly designed to detach him from reality - and reality, then, included the Dirty War and the terror and the 30,000 desaparecidos [disappeared]. At the age most kids hear stories, read one headline, he hears ovations. Three months after his debut he was training with the national team, up against Daniel Passarella and Mario Kempes. At 18, after a win over US Cosmos, he swapped shirts with Franz Beckenbauer; at 19, he scored his 100th goal. He was already the face of Coca-Cola, Puma, Agfa.

Marginal and relatively impoverished, South American leagues act as a training and recruitment ground for the clubs of Europe, and in 1982 Maradona duly moved to Barcelona for \$8m (£4.4m). When he went to Napoli two years later he was on \$7m a year, plus \$3m from Italian television (there was also \$5m from Hitachi). An International Management Group poll named him "the best known person in the world", and he was offered \$100m for his "image rights"; he turned it down, for patriotic reasons (IMG wanted him to take out dual nationality). 1986 brought him his nationalist apotheosis: he captained Argentina in the World Cup, and they won it. He was 25.

El Diego is a transparent narrative, and you keep seeing in its interstices a startling inner chaos - acute and chronic flaws of character and judgment, and above all a self-knowledge that remains persistently absentee. When Maradona was 14 he fell under the sway of his first manager, an old mentor with the unencouraging name of Jorge Cytterszpiler. You can see it coming when, early on, Maradona boasts that they "handled everything on the basis of friendship, not a single piece of paper was signed". Sure

enough, when he arrives in Naples 10 years later he bewilderingly reveals that, "Cyterszpiller had had such bad luck with figures that I was down to zero". Or less than zero. Cyterszpiller's bad luck with figures, his investments in Paraguayan bingo halls and the like, additionally devoured Maradona's slice of his transfer fee together with his 10-bedroom house in Barcelona. "What's done is done," shrugs Diego, insisting that every investment (every bingo hall) was the result of his own decisions. Much later on, when Maradona undertakes a fitness drive, he hires a trainer: Ben Johnson. "Yes, Ben Johnson! The fastest man on earth, whatever anyone says."

It is the same with the Camorra - the Mob - in Naples. "They offered me things but I never wanted to accept them: because of the dictum that first they give and then they ask ... whenever I went to one of those clubs they gave me gold Rolexes, cars." He didn't "want" to accept them; but he accepted them. It is the same with fouls, and referees. When Maradona forms a judgment, you feel you are watching one his "mazy runs": "That bastard Luigi Agnolin, the Italian ref, wrongly overruled one of my goals. I never stamped on Bossio, no way. I beat him because I jumped over him. It was never an intentional stamp ... that Agnolin, he was a fucker. We tried to pressurise him from the start but the Italian wasn't a man to be intimidated ... He pushed Francescoli, he pushed him! He even elbowed Giusti. I liked Agnolin ..."

Maradona's anarchistic streak also reveals itself in his contempt - no, his disgust - for the law. On the occasions when he attracts the attention of the police he can barely bring himself to say why. "I was arrested, arrested!" he says, and briefly describes the ensuing "farce"; meanwhile, with a polite cough, a footnote steps in to divulge the charge (possession of cocaine). Later, back in Argentina, after being incessantly doorstepped, "I reacted ... I reacted in the way anyone might. It was the episode with the air rifle, yeah, that's right." And again the footnote, itself evasive, adds that this was the "affair" when Maradona fired an air rifle at congregated journalists, without adding that he hit four of them and received a suspended three-year sentence.

Then, too, there are frequent glints of what one might call exceptionalism - or low-level megalomania. Maradona routinely refers to himself in the third person, not just as Maradona ("We made him bigger than Maradona", "That's the most important thing Maradona can have", and, amusingly, "The drug trade is far too big for Maradona to stop it"), but also as El Diego: "Because I am El Diego. I too call myself that: El Diego"; "Let's see if we can get this point across once and for all: I am El Diego"; "I am the same as always. I'm me, Maradona. I am El Diego." After a while it stops sounding like self-aggrandisement, and starts sounding like self-hypnosis.

Passarella was "a good captain, yes", El Diego allows, but "the great captain, the true great captain, was, is and

always will be me". This form of words finds an echo, later on, in 1996, when Maradona launched a national anti-drugs campaign by saying, "I have been, am and always will be a drug addict." The 12-stepper's mantra, usually a mock-humble boast of hard-won continence, feels in this case more like a statement of irreducible truth. Maradona has been using drugs for 20 years: it resulted in a 15-month ban (in Italy), ejection from the 1994 World Cup ("I was given [sic] ephedrine, and ephedrine is legal, or ought to be"), and a career-ending scandal on his swansong return to Boca Juniors in 1997. The habit, after all, can no longer be described as recreational. This is a man who regularly snorts himself into a cardiac arrest. It seems that only a life-threatening debauch can recreate the intensities - the heart-bursting highs, the abysmal lows - of his vanished pomp.

This is an operatically emotional book, and also an exceptionally vivid one. The exoticisms of the Maradona idiolect are balanced by the oath-crammed clichés of football, which would appear to be universal ("the crowd went mental"; "that wanker"; "sorted"; and manager Carlos Bilardo's nicely implausible "Leave it out, Diego"). But there are intimations, too, of a stronger level of perception. Pre-match funk in the changing-room: "I felt a silence, too deep, too cold. I looked out at some faces and saw them pale, as if they were tired already." A bad injury: "I sprinted after a lost ball and I heard the unmistakable sound of a muscle tearing, like a zip opening inside my leg." As for the emotion, Maradona cries himself a river on every other page. And the prose poems to his wife and to his family are all the more affecting because you know that he is now divorced, and estranged from both his brothers; and because you know that the ties of love have not been able to hold him in his orbit.

Many sportsmen claim to be champions of the people, but Maradona's populism is underwritten by his itinerary - the proletarian strongholds of Buenos Aires, Naples, and now Havana (and the only French club he flirted with, indicatively, was Marseille). In BA, if you ask around, the response to Diego is always thoughtful, always sympathetic; and the Havanans, who have never known a non-decadent Maradona, seem to be unreserved worshippers ("I am Maradona fanatic"). Cuba is perfect for him; he can be a man of the people and a man of the president, hobnobbing with that other world-class scapegrace, Fidel Castro.

The great player Jorge Valdano said a good thing about Maradona, and in the Latin high-style: "Poor old Diego. For so many years we have told him repeatedly, 'You're a god', 'You're a star' ... that we forgot to tell him the most important thing: 'You're a man'." But we're not quite there yet. In Italy they used to tell him, "Ti amo piu che i miei figli" - I love you more than my own children. It's not as blasphemous as it sounds. With his tantrums, his self-injuries, and his unassuageable sweet tooth, Maradona has remained "El Pibe d'Oro", the child of Gold; he is still

Dieguito.

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