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Pretending to Know the Words

Luis had not moved in a while. He was slumped on a wide leather sofa, gazing at his reflection in a blank plasma screen. He imagined phoning his mother, all those miles away, and saying something strange. Something like, this giant house hates me.

She would say, don't talk crazy. Has that English air sent you mad?

5 He would say, my feet are cold on the glossy floorboards. The bed makes me feel as if I'm drowning. I am a speck in this shiny house. And it hates me for being ungrateful.

He jolted as he realised he was about to hit the floor. The slippery sofa was rejecting him, sliding him off. He hauled himself back, but now that his trance was broken, the silence pressed. He jabbed at the remote control to wake the television, and winced at the fierce colours of *Match of the Day*.

10 Vague ideas of changing the channel lolled around his brain. But when a scarlet number 17 shirt flooded the picture, his eyes locked on. Recoba was written beneath the number. Luis' lips twitched with the name, while, onscreen, the striker weaved across a vivid green pitch. The ball seemed to hover at his feet, until it rocketed through the air to balloon the back of the net.

15 Recoba's celebration was shown close up, in slow motion. His mouth inched into a roar, his lips shrank back, his dark eyes glittered. He seemed to be experiencing something so pure and primitive that Luis felt a burn of envy. His vision began to fuzz. The commentator's voice hummed through the sound system. "One day of fixtures left... four points separate the top three teams... next weekend is going to be one of the most exciting ends to a season we've seen..."

20 In the studio, the pundits argued about who would win the League. Every time they mentioned Recoba, the leather grew colder against Luis' spine. He thought again of his mother. Imagined pressing the phone to his ear, listening to her voice, her language. But she would be angry with him for not calling in so long. He couldn't cope with it tonight.

25 Instead he dragged himself off the sofa and into his kitchen. The room winked black and chrome. He floundered for a moment, then strode to the corner and wrenched a knife from a silver holder. He rested the point on the back of his hand; let it tremble there before he made a small gasp of a cut. The sharp pain was just what he'd wanted. He watched scarlet blood leak onto the worktop.

30 It was time. Recoba flexed his fists as he waited in the tunnel, feeling the clench and release of the muscles in his arms. From above came the thumping anticipation of the crowd. In front were the restless outlines of his teammates, rolling their shoulders and shifting from foot to foot. Recoba should have felt connected to them in these charged final moments. He had clashed skulls with them as they'd leapt for headers; pressed shoulders in free kick walls; seen them pale and naked in the shower. But still they felt like aliens.

35 He looked away from them, stripping his mind of everything but the game. If they won, and their nearest rivals didn't, they would be champions. Champions of the English Premier League. It was what he had dreamed of when he was young, playing on a breezy pitch in Uruguay with his brother and their friends.

The signal came. As he and his teammates streamed onto the pitch, Recoba braced himself. Sometimes he worried he wouldn't be able to cope with the surge of energy and desire that swept him during a match. He feared the crash would come too early. But when the starting whistle shrieked, there was only his body,

and the ball, and the dancing formations of the other players. Recoba leapt for overhead shots, feet scissoring the sky, the ball pounding against the crossbar. He took curving, near-perfect free kicks, grinding his jaw as the goalkeeper's fingertips denied him.

When his real chance came, he felt it. He knew that Wade wanted to pass to him; knew that a small but perfect space was opening up ahead. He slipped into the gap, turning to meet the ball, foot connecting, ball soaring, slamming into the net. The crowd rose to its feet in a scarlet blur. Recoba stormed the length of the pitch, roaring and pounding his chest, while his team mates fell into an ecstatic tangle somewhere behind.

As play re-started, he glanced at the clock. Seven minutes to go. Coach was yelling from the sidelines that their challengers for the League were only drawing. Recoba tossed his head and wiped sweat from his eyes. He'd once overheard a team mate say, Recoba gets a right scary look towards the end of a game. Recoba didn't care. They just had to hold on, hold on.

When the final whistle trilled, it took him a few moments to stop moving; to collect in the parts of himself that seemed to have scattered across the pitch. He became conscious of a rising chant from the crowd. RecoBA RecoBA RecoBA. An image of Luis burst into his mind. Sitting on a leather sofa, looking as blank as the walls of his house. Recoba shook it away and steamed down the pitch, arms flung wide, fleeing the other players as they tailed him like excited muggers.

The dressing room fizzed. Players flicked towels at one another and hollered songs Recoba had never heard. He sat on a bench and looked at his shaking hands, balling his fists to contain the adrenaline that seemed to be oozing from him.

"Hey Reco, you coming into town?"

Recoba lifted his head. Summerfield, the freckled centreback, was standing with a towel around his waist, grinning at him. Recoba struggled to translate the smile. Sometimes he suspected that even facial expressions meant something different here.

"I... I'm not sure..."

"Come on, Reco. We've won the league! You're the hero!"

Recoba shook his head. "Not me."

"So fuckin' modest! Get dressed! We're champioooooons!"

Recoba slackened with exhaustion. His body was beginning to feel like a sack of sand he would have to drag around. But maybe he could go with them. For once, perhaps he should go.

"Well... maybe one drink."

They marched out of the back door as a singing, clapping army. Recoba trailed behind. Panic jumped into his throat when he saw the queue of black limousines. He found himself jostled into one, trapped in a leather-lined space with squad members he'd never spoken to. They rocked the car and doused its seats with champagne. Recoba moved his lips to give the impression he knew their tuneless songs...

When the car pulled up, he scrambled out, gulping in air as if hauling himself out of a river. But he slipped into a rushing current of designer suits; was swept down a cobbled street. He didn't recognise this part of the city. He allowed himself to be guided to a black door studded with white lights. A bouncer swung it open, nodding at the players as they streamed in. "Blindin' goal today, Mr. Recoba."

RecoBA RecoBA RecoBA. He tried to recall how the stadium had vibrated with that name not so long ago. But Luis' warning voice filled his head, hissing that he had no business in a place like this. Recoba stalled in the doorway. Somebody nudged him in the back, and he spilled into the room.

The bar was low-lit and noisy. A fountain spat champagne. Women were perched on stools, wearing backless dresses, skin like hard, gleaming caramel. In one corner people lurched to the music. The air was tinged with sweat, but it smelt alcoholic and vaguely perfumed.

85 Recoba's teammates were led into a shadowy, roped-off area. He hung back, watching them slide into red booths, watching a waitress with a sweep of black hair pour champagne. He knew he would leave. His teammates had made it too easy; they were tipping fizz into each other's mouths and wouldn't notice him creep away.

90 The footage of the league winners' celebrations was being shown again. Luis watched Recoba leaping up and down sandwiched between two teammates, the silver cup shining above. His expression was different to the one he'd worn in earlier scenes, when they'd shown him tearing along the pitch by himself. Luis couldn't stir his brain enough to analyse the distinction. Nor could he feel even a spark of excitement. Recoba had earned him this house, this furniture the car in the drive. Yet Luis couldn't summon anything close to gratitude.

95 He ran his eyes over the row of painkillers on the coffee table. He had been collecting them over the past week, buying two packets a day. Their presence in his cupboard had felt comforting. A possibility.

Tonight he had got them out and lined them up.

Recoba watched the ball sail towards him, arcing through the air. It glowed as if it was on fire. He bent his knees, pushed from his calves, felt his feet leave Earth. His head connected with the ball, but he didn't tumble back down. He kept soaring until the sky was bleached of colour.

100 Luis jolted with the sensation of falling. Fragments of a dream cascaded away, and his eyes flickered, catching glimpses of a white room.

"Reco," said a voice.

Luis swam up through hazy layers. His head swirled.

There was a clawing pain in his stomach, and a fluorescent light trying to burn his retinas. "I... "

105 "Take it easy, man. Just rest."

Luis turned his head, pain shooting through. He could tell now that he was in hospital. Next to his bed, in a black suit and crumpled pink shirt, was Summerfield.

He tried to focus. "What... "

"You took some pills."

110 Snatches of memory floated back. A door twinkling with cold stars. Champagne frothing aggressively. A calming wall of aspirin boxes. Tears stung in Luis' eyes.

Summerfield leaned forward. "After you left the bar without saying anything, the others just reckoned you were being your usual mysterious self. But I had this feeling... I recognised the signs... "

"Signs?"

115 "It's more common than you think"

"I... what is?"

"I know what you've been telling yourself. How can you be depressed, when you're a rich footballer in the Prem? Well... ", Summerfield shrugged and seemed awkward for a moment, "you can. And you probably feel guilty for not being deliriously fuckin' happy. But it happens. Only nobody talks about it... "

120 Luis blinked, struggling to absorb Summerfield's words. Everything felt slow, dream-like.

“Is there somebody I can call for you?” Summerfield asked, “Family in Uruguay?”

Summerfield knew his country. Luis had always imagined the other players calling him “the South American.” He swiped at his eyes. “No. Thank you. I’ll call them.”

125 Summerfield stood up. “I’ll leave you to rest, then. Doc should be coming soon. But when you get out of here, we’ll talk. You’ve got to talk about it. Otherwise it just gets... you know...”

As the door closed behind his teammate, Luis stared up at the white ceiling. His thoughts slipped and slid, moments of clarity blaring out of the fog. He saw Recoba pounding a ball into a net, making a stadium riot into life. He saw Luis, off the pitch, senses deadened, with no idea who he was supposed to be.

130 As the images bled into one another, his eyes drooped closed. Now he brought his mother’s face to mind, blurred at first, but sharpening, brightening, filling him with longing. He would phone her when he woke. And he would say, I don’t know how to be a real person in this country.

And she would say, don’t talk crazy.

And he would say, remind me who I am.

And she would say, in her telling-off voice, Luis Recoba, I haven’t got time for riddles.

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