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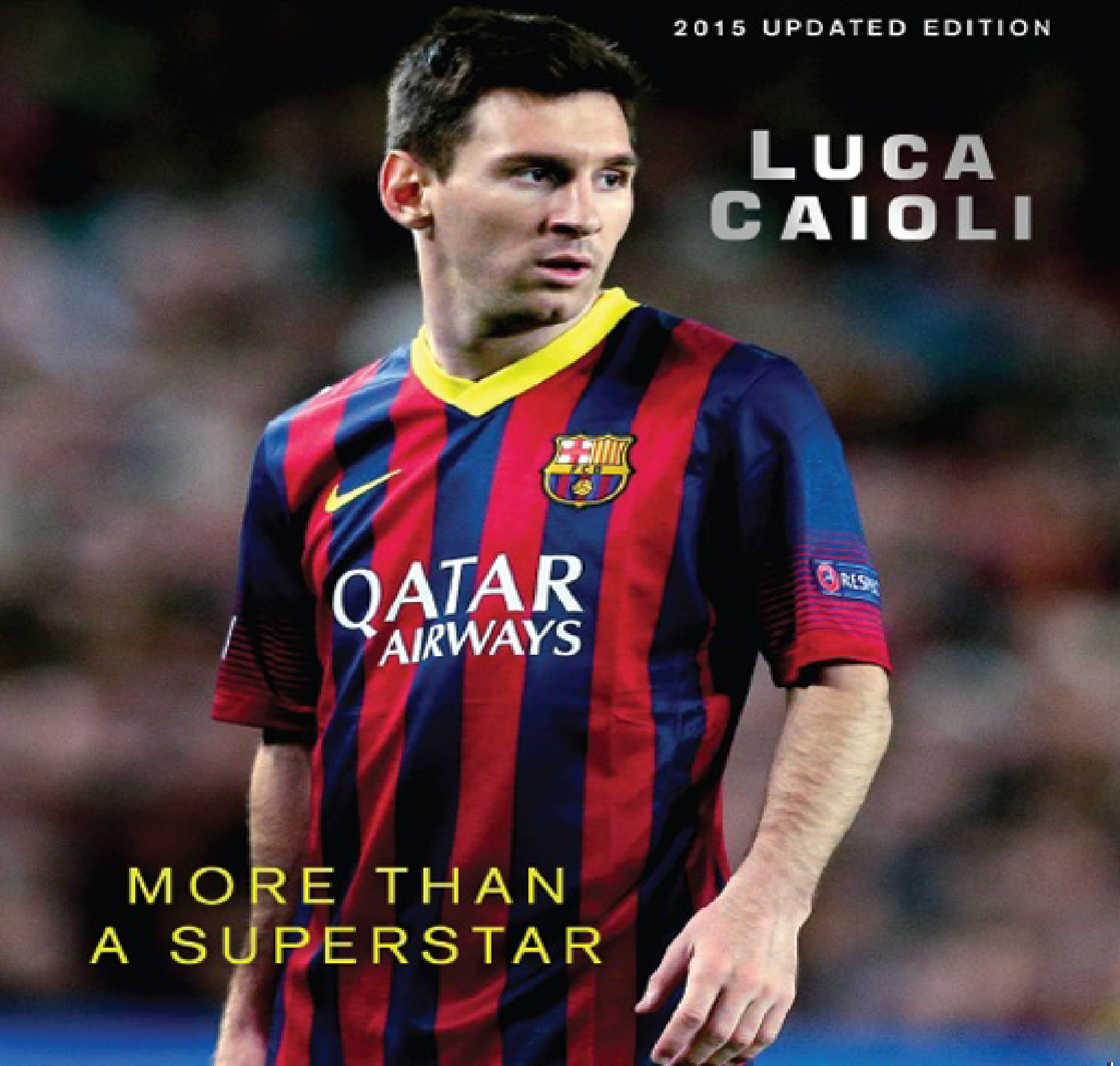
RONALDO, *NEYMAR* AND *SUÁREZ*

MESSI

2015 UPDATED EDITION



LUCA
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MORE THAN
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Updated Edition

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Chapter 1

Rosario

Conversation with Celia and Marcela Cuccittini

‘I buy the rump or a piece from the hindquarter. They’re cuts of beef I’ve also seen in Barcelona but I don’t know what they’re called. I put a bit of salt on each piece, dip them in egg and coat them in breadcrumbs. I fry them until they’re nice and golden-brown and I put them in an oven dish. I slice the onion finely and fry it over. When the onion turns white, I add chopped tomatoes, a little water, salt, oregano and a pinch of sugar. And I leave it on the heat for around twenty minutes. Once the sauce is done, I pour it on top of each piece of beef, making sure they’re well covered. I take some cream cheese or hard cheese out of the fridge and lay it on top of the beef in thin slices. I leave them in the oven until the cheese melts. All that’s left to do is fry the potatoes as a side dish and the *milanesa a la napolitana* [schnitzel napolitana] is ready to serve.’

With the passion and experience of a good cook, Celia describes her son Lionel Messi’s favourite dish.

‘When I go to Barcelona I have to make it two or three times a week. And with at least three medium-sized cuts of beef. I tousle his hair and tell him: “My schnitzel napolitana and my *mate* [traditional Argentine tea] are what make you score so many goals.”’ Lionel has simple gastronomic tastes: schnitzel, but not made with ham or horsemeat; chicken with a sauce made of pepper, onions, tomatoes and oregano. He doesn’t care much for elaborate dishes, like the ones his brother Rodrigo makes, but then, as is well known, Rodrigo is a chef and his dream is to open his own restaurant one day. It is natural for him to experiment and

try new recipes, although his younger brother doesn't always appreciate them. Does he have a sweet tooth? 'Yes, Leo loves chocolates and *alfajores* [traditional caramel-filled biscuits – a national delicacy]; when we go to Spain we have to take boxes and boxes so that he always has a good supply.' She tells the story about how, when he was little, when a coach promised him an *alfajor* for every goal he scored, he netted eight in a single match. Some feast.

Over a cup of coffee in La Tienda bar on San Martín de Rosario avenue, the mother of Barça's number 10 talks with great gusto about her world-famous son. Black hair, a delicate smile and certain facial features that remind one of Leo (although she laughs and says that he resembles his father completely), Celia María Cuccittini Oliveira de Messi has a soft, gentle voice. While she is speaking, she often glances at her sister Marcela, seated opposite. The youngest of the Cuccittini family, Marcela is also a mother of footballers: Maximiliano plays for Vitoria in Brazil; Emanuel plays for Olimpia in Paraguay; and Bruno attends the Renato Cesarini football school, which counts players such as Fernando Redondo and Santiago Solari among its alumni. Marcela Cuccittini de Biancucchi is Leo's godmother and his favourite aunt. When he returns to Rosario, he loves spending time at her house. 'We have to go and meet him or call him to see how he is, but, of course, my sister spoils him,' says Celia. 'And then there's Emanuel, they're inseparable.' From a very young age they were continually playing ball. 'There were five boys: my three, Matías, Rodrigo and Leo, and my sister's two, Maximiliano and Emanuel. On Sundays, when we would go to my mother's house, they all used to go out into the street to play before lunch,' recalls Celia. They were wild games, of football or foot-tennis and often Leo would end up returning to the house crying because he had lost or because the older ones had cheated.

‘Just the other day, Maxi was reminding me about those games,’ adds Marcela, ‘and he was telling me that when they all meet back here in Rosario he wants to play Messis against Biancucchis, just like old times.’

And the memories bring us to the grandmother, Celia: her delicious food, the pastries, the Sunday family reunions and the passion for football. ‘She was the one who accompanied the kids to their training sessions. She was the one who insisted that they let my Lionel play even though he wasn’t old enough, even though he was the youngest and he was small. Because,’ says Celia, ‘he’s always been small. They were afraid he’d get trodden on, that he’d get hurt, but she wasn’t, she insisted: “Pass it to Lionel, pass it to the little guy, he’s the one who scores goals.” She was the one who convinced us to buy him football boots. It’s a shame she can’t see him today. She died when Leo was ten years old, but who knows if, from up there, she sees what he has become and is happy for that grandson of hers whom she loved so much.’

But how did Leo begin playing football? Who taught him? Where do all his many skills come from – is it a question of genes? ‘I don’t know, from his father, from his brothers, from his cousins. We have always loved football in our family. I am also a fan. My idol? Maradona. His career, his goals, I followed them with much passion. He was a barbarian on the pitch. When I met him, I told him: “I hope one day my son will be a great footballer and you can train him.” And look what’s happened … look how far he’s come …’

A pause in the story: the mobile phone on the table starts to ring. Celia excuses herself and moves away to answer it. Meanwhile, Marcela returns to the topic of young Leo. ‘He was incredible, before he was even five years old he could control the ball like nobody else. He loved it, he never stopped. He hit every shot against the front gate, so much so that often the neighbours would ask him to cool it a bit.’

Celia has finished her phone call, she sits down and nods in agreement. ‘The worst punishment we could threaten him with was: you’re not going to practice today. “No mummy, please, I’ll be really good, don’t worry, I promise … let me go and play,” he begged and insisted until he convinced me. Leo wasn’t a temperamental child and he wasn’t lazy either, he’s always been a good boy, quiet and shy, just as he is today.’

Really? ‘Yes, really. He doesn’t take any notice of the fame. When he comes back to Rosario he always wants to come and wander around this area, along San Martín avenue, with his cousin Emanuel. When we tell him it’s not possible, that here the people of his hometown will get hysterical when they see him and not let him go two steps, he gets upset. He doesn’t understand it, he gets annoyed. In Barcelona, he goes to the Corte Inglés department store in his trainers and sports gear. Ronaldinho often used to ruffle his hair and ask him if he was crazy going out dressed like that. He hasn’t taken any notice of who he is. That’s why being famous, signing autographs or taking photos with fans doesn’t bother him. Some evenings, when he comes home after a long time and when I go to see him, I lay by his side on the bed. We chat, I ruffle his hair, I tell him things, and I say, half joking: “What all the girls wouldn’t give to be next to you like this.” He makes a weird face and says: “Don’t be silly mum.”’

On the walls of the bar hang the shirts of Argentine players. Leo’s is there too, under a window, marked with the number 30 of Barcelona. ‘They don’t know I’m his mother, although we live in this town,’ comments Celia, a woman who shies away from fame, very aware of the risks that come with celebrity, and having clear priorities for her life and those of her children. All well and good, but how does she feel being the mother of a star? ‘Proud, very proud. Opening the newspaper and seeing – here just as much as in Spain – a piece about him or seeing his shirt number, or

seeing the kids who wear it … it makes me swell with pride. That's why it hurts me to hear criticism about his playing or false information about his life. It affects you deep down in your soul and it pains you when someone calls you and says, have you seen this, have you seen that? Leo? He hardly reads what they write about him. If he notices it, it doesn't affect him that much. But that isn't to say that he hasn't been through some tough times. He has had his low moments, when he was injured, out for months, when things don't go the way he wants them to go. At times like that, I don't even think twice, I pack my bags and I go to Barcelona, to see what's happening, to be close to him, to look after him as much as I can. Leo has always been a boy who keeps all his problems inside, but at the same time, he's been very mature for his age. I remember, when we hinted at the possibility of him returning to Argentina, he said to me: "Mum, don't worry, I'm staying, you go, God will be with us." He is very strong willed.'

She returns to the topic of his success, of the people who go crazy for the 'Flea' on both sides of the Atlantic. 'The thing I like the most is that people love him,' says Celia. 'They love him, I think, because he is a simple, humble, good person. He always thinks of others and he makes sure that everyone around him is OK: his parents, his siblings, his nephews and nieces, his cousins. He's always thinking about his family. Of course, I'm his mother and a mother, when she speaks of her children, the apples of her eye, always says good things, but Leo has an enormous heart.'

How does a mother see her son's future? 'In terms of football, I hope he makes history like Pelé, like Maradona; I hope he goes far, very far. But above all, as a mother, I hope to God he will be happy, that he lives life, because he still hasn't really lived. He has dedicated himself to football, body and soul. He doesn't go out, he doesn't do many of the things that young people his age do. That's why I hope he has a wonderful life. He deserves it.'

Outside the large window, the sky has darkened. The traffic has become more chaotic: buses, rickety vans, cars leaving clouds of smoke behind them, a cart full of junk pulled by a skinny horse and a multitude of people who wend their way to the shops and the bus stops. Celia has to get home; María Sol, the youngest of the family, is waiting for her there. Marcela has to pick up Bruno from football school. It's raining and Celia insists on accompanying her guests back to the centre of town. She goes to fetch the car. At the door, a few last words with Marcela about a mother's fears – injuries, and the money that can go to one's head. 'For now, my kids, and Leo, haven't lost their sense of reality. I, my family, and my sister's family, we live in the same town in which we were born, in the same house as always, we haven't moved to a different region, we haven't wanted to leave our roots, and the kids are the same as always. I hope they never change. I hope what has happened to other footballers, who have lost themselves in all the fame, doesn't happen to them.'

A grey Volkswagen stops by the pavement. Celia drives rapidly through the streets in the southern part of Rosario. She passes Leo's old school and comments: 'He wasn't a good student. He was a little bit lazy.'

She turns right by Tiro Suizo, a sports club founded in 1889 by immigrants from the Tesino region. Two kids don't notice the car, they are too absorbed, scampering along with the ball between their feet.

'That's what Lionel was like,' says Celia.

Chapter 2

Garibaldi Hospital

24 June 1987

A cream-coloured block built in the nineteenth-century style occupies a rectangular plot at number 1249 Visasoro street. It is the Italian hospital dedicated to Giuseppe Garibaldi, who is also honoured with a statue in Rosario's Plaza de Italia. He is a popular figure, known as the 'Hero of the Two Worlds', because during his exile in South America he fought battles along the length of the Paraná river. In those parts his Red Shirts left their mark wherever they went: for example, in the names of the Rosario and Buenos Aires hospitals, which were founded by political exiles, supporters of Mazzini and Garibaldi, and their workers' unions. The Rosario hospital complex was inaugurated on 2 October 1892 in order to serve the Italian community, which at that time represented more than 70 per cent of the immigrants who had arrived from the other side of the Atlantic. Today it has one of the best maternity units in the city. It is here that the story of Lionel Messi, third child of the Messi-Cuccittini family, begins at six o'clock one winter morning.

His father, Jorge, is 29 years old and is the head of department at steelmaking company Acindar, in Villa Constitución, some 50 kilometres outside Rosario. Celia, 27, works in a magnet manufacturing workshop. They met as youngsters in the Las Heras neighbourhood, previously known as Estado de Israel and today known as the San Martín neighbourhood, in the southern area of the city, where the residents are humble and hardworking. Celia's father Antonio is a mechanic – he repairs fridges, air conditioning units and other electrical items. Her mother,

also called Celia, has worked for many years as a cleaning lady. Jorge's father Eusebio makes his living in construction; his mother, Rosa María, is also a cleaning lady. Little more than 100 metres separate their homes. Like many other local families, they have Italian and Spanish ancestors. The surname Messi comes from the Italian town of Porto Recanati, in the province of Macerata, which saw the birth of the poet Giacomo Leopardi and the tenor Beniamino Gigli. It is from there that one Angelo Messi departed on one of the many boats bound for America at the end of the nineteenth century, in search of a better life in the new world, like so many other emigrants carrying third-class tickets. The Cuccittinis also have Italian roots, on their father's side. Despite these families originating from the humid pampas, they eventually came to settle in the city.

At 305 kilometres from the capital city of Buenos Aires, and with around a million inhabitants, the city of Rosario is the largest in the Santa Fe province, extending along the banks of the Paraná river. The Costanera promenade runs alongside the river until the Nuestra Señora del Rosario bridge, which crosses the waters and the islands in the river and connects the city with Victoria. The Paraná has always been an important highway in the river trade: from here, many agricultural products are exported to the whole of the Mercosur – like soya, which, in recent times, has brought wealth to this region and transformed the area's urban fabric. New buildings, skyscrapers and incredible villas are springing up in front of a beach of fine sand deposited by the river. And yet, Rosario remains the patriotic city *par excellence*. School groups dressed in white pose for photos at the base of the monument of the flag, built in the old Soviet style and inaugurated in 1957 to mark the place where General Manuel Belgrano ordered the raising of the national flag for the first time, on 27 February 1812.

Rosario is a city of the grandchildren of immigrants, of slums and country houses. But let us leave aside the stories

of immigration, the mix of cultures, languages and traditions, which are plentiful in Argentina, and return to Jorge and Celia, who fell in love and began dating at such a young age.

On 17 June 1978 they marry in the Corazón de María church. The country is thoroughly absorbed in the World Cup – so much so that the newlyweds, honeymooning in Bariloche, still ensure that they catch the Argentina-Brazil match taking place in Rosario. The result is nil-nil. Eight days later, at River Plate's Monumental stadium in Buenos Aires, César Luis Menotti's Argentine national team, known in Argentina as the Albiceleste (literally meaning 'white and sky blue'), beats Holland 3-1 to win the World Cup. Collective mania ensues. Fillol, Olguín, Galván, Passarella, Tarantini, Ardiles, Gallego, Ortiz, Bertoni, Luque and Kempes seem to banish all memories of the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (period of military rule) – the deceased dissidents, the more than 30,000 'disappeared' citizens, and the tortures and horrors of General Jorge Rafael Videla's ferocious and bloody military dictatorship, which was instigated on 24 March 1976 with the dismissal of Isabel Perón. On the streets of Buenos Aires you can still see the words 'Inmundo mundial' – dirty world (cup) – painted beneath the green of a football pitch and the inscription '1978'.

Two years after the *coup d'état*, the country is still under a reign of terror, but life goes on. Celia and Jorge become parents: Rodrigo Martín is born on 9 February 1980, and their second son, Matías Horacio, is born in one of the darkest hours of the country's history. The date is 25 June 1982, just eleven days after the end of the Falklands War. Argentina, defeated, counts her losses (649 dead) and her casualties (more than 1,000), as well as all the men who will never forget those two and a half months under fire. Young, inexperienced and ill-equipped, volunteers convinced to enlist by a cheap patriotism in order to re-conquer the

Falklands archipelago, occupied by the British in a distant 1833. Operation Rosario, the name of the key Argentine invasion led by General Leopoldo Galtieri on 2 April 1982, was the umpteenth attempt at distraction orchestrated by the military junta, intended to divert attention from the disasters of the economic programme introduced in 1980 – policies that had led to 90 per cent inflation, recession in all areas of the economy, a rise in external debt for both private companies and the State, the devaluation of salaries, and in particular the progressive impoverishment of the middle class (a characteristic of the country's history which stands out as compared with other Latin American nations). The war should have made the country forget the dramas of the past and engulfed the people in a wave of patriotism, but Galtieri was not prepared for the Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher, nor had he taken into account the British army.

In a few weeks British forces quash the Argentine army – a disaster that will lead to the fall of the military junta and the celebration of democracy within the year. But the restoration of the Malvinas – the Argentine name for the Falklands – to Argentina remains an ongoing demand: in Rosario, in the Parque Nacional de la Bandera ('national park of the flag'), a monument has been built in honour of 'the heroes that live on the Malvinas Islands', and the 1994 Constitution lists the territory's restitution as an objective that cannot be renounced. In 1983, however, election victory belongs to Raúl Alfonsín, one of the few politicians who had kept his distance from the military, maintaining that their only objective in going to war was to reinforce the dictatorship.

Four years later, when Celia is expecting her third child, the situation is still dramatic. In Semana Santa (Holy Week) of 1987, Argentina is on the brink of civil war. The *carapintadas* (literally, painted faces) – young army officers captained by Colonel Aldo Rico – have risen up against the

government, demanding an end to the legal trials against human rights violations committed during the military regime. The military commanders are unwilling to obey the president. The people take to the streets to defend democracy. The CGT (Confederación General de Trabajo – the labour union) declares a general strike. On 30 April, Raúl Alfonsín addresses the crowd gathered in the Plaza de Mayo, saying: 'The house is in order, Happy Easter' – a phrase that will go down in history, because nothing could be further from the truth. With no power over the armed forces, the president has had to negotiate with the *carapintadas*, guaranteeing them an end to the military trials. The law of Obediencia Debida (due obedience) exculpates officers and their subordinates of the barbarities that were committed and deems them responsible only for having obeyed the orders of their superiors. It comes into force on 23 June 1987, the same day that Celia is admitted to the maternity ward at the Garibaldi hospital. Her other sons – Rodrigo, seven, and Matías, five – stay at home with their grandmother, while Jorge accompanies Celia to the hospital. After two boys he would have liked a girl, but the chromosomes dictate that they are to have another boy. The pregnancy has been uneventful, but during the final few hours complications arise. Gynaecologist Norberto Odetto diagnoses severe foetal distress and decides to induce labour in order to avoid any lasting effects on the baby. To this day, Jorge can recall the fear of those moments, the panic he felt when the doctor told him that he was going to use forceps, his plea that he do everything possible to avoid using those pincers, which, as is the case with many parents, concerned him greatly due to the horror stories he had heard regarding deformity and damage to one's baby. In the end the forceps were not needed. A few minutes before six in the morning, Lionel Andrés Messi is born, weighing three kilos and measuring 47 centimetres in length, as red as a tomato and with one ear completely

folded over due to the force of labour – anomalies which, as with many other newborns, disappear within the first few hours. After the scare comes happiness: the new arrival is a little bit pink, but healthy.

Outside the confines of the hospital, however, the situation is much less calm. A bomb has exploded in the city and another in Villa Constitución, where Jorge works. Throughout Argentina the number of blasts – in response to the due obedience law – rises to fifteen. There are no victims, only material damage. The bombs reveal a country divided, overwhelmed by military power and entrenched in a grave economic crisis. The secretary of domestic commerce has just announced the enforcement of new prices for basic goods: milk and eggs are to rise by nine per cent, sugar and corn by twelve per cent, electricity by ten per cent and gas by eight per cent – difficult increases for a working-class family like the Messi-Cuccittinis, despite being able to rely on two salaries and a property to call their own. Aided by his father Eusebio, Jorge built the house over many weekends on a 300-square-metre plot of family land. A two-storey, brick building with a backyard where the children could play, and in the Las Heras neighbourhood. Lionel arrives here on 26 June, when mother and son are discharged from the Italian hospital.

Six months later, Lionel can be seen in a family album, chubby-cheeked and smiling, on his parents' bed, dressed in little blue trousers and a white t-shirt. At ten months he begins to chase after his older brothers. And he has his first accident. He goes out of the house – no one knows why – perhaps to play with the other children in the street, which is not yet tarred, and along which cars rarely pass. Along comes a bicycle and knocks him over. He cries desperately; everyone in the house comes running out into the street. It seems it was nothing, only a fright. But throughout the night he does not stop complaining and his left arm is swollen. They take him to hospital – broken ulna. He needs a plaster

cast. Within a few weeks it has healed. His first birthday arrives and his aunts and uncles buy him a football shirt, already trying to convince him to support his future team – Newell’s Old Boys. But it is still too soon. At three years old, Leo prefers picture cards and much smaller balls – marbles. He wins multitudes of them from his playmates and his bag is always full. At nursery or at school there is always time to play with round objects. For his fourth birthday, his parents give him a white ball with red diamonds. It is then, perhaps, that the fatal attraction begins. Until one day he surprises everyone. His father and brothers are playing in the street and Leo decides to join the game for the first time. On many other occasions he had preferred to keep winning marbles – but not this time. ‘We were stunned when we saw what he could do,’ says Jorge. ‘He had never played before.’

Chapter 3

The smallest of them all

A summer afternoon in 1992

The Grandoli ground is almost bare. A lot of earth and only a few spots of green near the touchline. The goalposts are in a terrible state, as is the fence, as is the building that houses the showers and dressing rooms. The neighbourhood itself is not much better: makeshift carwashes at every junction along Gutiérrez avenue, used-tyre salesmen, signs declaring ‘metals bought here’ – in other words scrap metals; there is even a piece of cardboard advertising dog-grooming services. And in the background: the popular construction towers, which appear abandoned although they are not; low, little houses, which have lost their charm of yesteryear; vegetation growing between the cracks in the asphalt; rubbish cooking in the heat; men and old folk with nothing to do; kids on bikes that are too small for them. ‘People have changed around here,’ say the oldest of the old folk, adding: ‘At night it’s scary to walk these streets.’ The delinquents have moved in.

At three in the afternoon there is hardly a soul about. The football pitch is deserted. The kids from the neighbouring schools, who come to play sports at the Abanderado Mariano Grandoli Physical Education Centre number eight (named after a volunteer in the 1865 war who gave his life for his country), have already left and the footballers don’t arrive before five o’clock. The only person around is a teacher, in a white t-shirt, blue tracksuit and trainers. He points the way, 150 metres or so, towards the home of señor Aparicio, Lionel Messi’s first coach.

Aparicio opens the door with wet hands – he is preparing a meal for his blind wife, Claudia, but he invites his guest to enter and make himself comfortable. Four armchairs, an enormous white dog and a certain musty odour occupy a sparse lounge dominated by an old television. Salvador Ricardo Aparicio is 78 years old, with four children, eight grandchildren and four great-grandchildren; he has a worn face, with the shadow of a moustache, his body twisted like barbed wire, his voice and hands shaky. He has worked his whole life on the railways. As a youngster he wore the number 4 shirt for Club Fortín and, more than 30 years ago, he coached children on Grandoli's 7.5 by 40 metre pitch.

He has nurtured hundreds and hundreds of children, including Rodrigo and Matías. The eldest Messi was a speedy and powerful centre forward; the second played in defence. Grandmother Celia accompanied them to training every Tuesday and Thursday. And one summer afternoon, Leo came with them.

'I needed one more to complete the '86 team [of children born in 1986]. I was waiting for the final player with the shirt in my hands while the others were warming up. But he didn't show up and there was this little kid kicking the ball against the stands. The cogs were turning and I said to myself, damn … I don't know if he knows how to play but … So I went to speak to the grandmother, who was really into football, and I said to her: "Lend him to me." She wanted to see him on the pitch. She had asked me many times to let him try out. On many occasions she would tell me about all the little guy's talents. The mother, or the aunt, I can't remember which, didn't want him to play: "He's so small, the others are all huge." To reassure her I told her: "I'll stand him over here, and if they attack him I'll stop the game and take him off."'

So goes señor Aparicio's story, but the Messi-Cuccittini family have a different version of events: 'It was Celia who forced Apa to put him on when he was one short. The coach

didn’t like the idea because he was so small. But his grandmother insisted, saying: “Put him on and you’ll see how well the little boy plays.” “OK,” replied Apa, “but I’m putting him near the touchline so that when he cries you can take him off yourself.”’

Regarding what happens next there are no disagreements. Let’s return to the old coach’s narrative: ‘Well … I gave him the shirt and he put it on. The first ball came his way, he looked at it and … nothing.’

Don Apa, as he’s known around here, gets up from his chair and mimics little Messi’s surprised expression, then sits back down and explains: ‘He’s left-footed, that’s why he didn’t get to the ball.’ He continues: ‘The second it came to his left foot, he latched onto it, and went past one guy, then another and another. I was yelling at him: “Kick it, kick it.” He was terrified someone would hurt him but he kept going and going. I don’t remember if he scored the goal – I had never seen anything like it. I said to myself: “That one’s never coming off.” And I never took him off.’

Señor Aparicio disappears into the other room and returns with a plastic bag. He rummages through the memories of a lifetime. Finally he finds the photo he is looking for: a green pitch, a team of kids wearing red shirts and, standing just in front of a rather younger-looking Aparicio, the smallest of them all: the white trousers almost reaching his armpits, the shirt too large, the expression very serious, bowlegged. It’s Lionel; he looks like a little bird, like a flea, as his brother Rodrigo used to call him.

‘He was born in ’87 and he played with the ’86 team. He was the smallest in stature and the youngest, but he really stood out. And they punished him hard, but he was a distinctive player, with supernatural talent. He was born knowing how to play. When we would go to a game, people would pile in to see him. When he got the ball he destroyed it. He was unbelievable, they couldn’t stop him. He scored four or five goals a game. He scored one, against the Club

de Amanecer, which was the kind you see in adverts. I remember it well: he went past everyone, including the keeper. What was his playing style? The same as it is now – free. What was he like? He was a serious kid, he always stayed quietly by his grandmother's side. He never complained. If they hurt him he would cry sometimes but he would get up and keep running. That's why I argue with everyone, I defend him, when they say that he's too much of a soloist, or that he's nothing special, or that he's greedy.'

His wife calls him from the next room; señor Aparicio disappears and returns to recount more memories.

Like that video that he can't seem to find, with some of the child prodigy's games – 'I used to show it to the kids to teach them what you can do with a ball at your feet'. Or the first time Leo returned from Spain and he went to visit him. 'When they saw me it was madness. I went in the morning and when I returned it was one o'clock the next morning. We spent the whole time chatting about what football was like over there in Spain.' Or that time when the neighbourhood organised a party in Lionel's honour. They wanted to present him with a plaque at the Grandoli ground, but in the end Leo couldn't go. He called later to say 'Thanks, maybe next time.'

The old football teacher holds no bitterness; on the contrary, he speaks with much affection about the little boy he coached all those years ago.

'When I saw on TV the first goal he scored in a Barcelona shirt I started to cry. My daughter Genoveva, who was in the other room, asked: "What's wrong dad?" "Nothing," I said, "it's emotional."'

Aparicio pulls another gem from his plastic bag. Another photo of the little blond boy, shirt too big, legs too short; in his hand he is holding a trophy, the first he ever won. It's almost as big as he is.

Leo is not yet five years old. And in the Grandoli ground he is already starting to experience the taste of goals and

success. In the second year, he is even lucky enough to have his old man as his coach. Jorge accepts the offer from the club's directors and takes charge of the '87 team. They play against Alfi, one of their many fixtures across the city. And they win everything: 'But everything, *everything*: the championship, the tournaments, the friendlies …' recalls Jorge Messi, with more of a paternal pride than that of a coach.

Apart from football, there is school. Leo goes to school number 66, General Las Heras, at 4800 Buenos Aires street. He is accompanied by either his mother Celia, his aunt Marcela, or by the neighbour Silvia Arellano, mother of Cintia, his best friend. They go on foot, making their way across the open country or skirting the edges of the football fields on the grounds of the army barracks of the Communications Batallion 121. In little more than ten minutes they are at the door.

Today, when approaching the entrance, the youngest class can be seen absorbed in drawing. Two of them are wearing Messi shirts. In the enormous covered pavilion, some kids in white kit are playing a match with incredible concentration. There are goals – what's missing is the ball – a bundle of brown paper held together with tape serving instead. They move at a giddying pace, without taking too much notice of the harsh grey gravel – slaloming, feinting, dribbling. Among the players is Bruno Biancucchi, Leo's cousin. Sweating profusely and red from the effort, his charcoal-black hair matted against his face, wearing a white-and-pink-striped earring, his companions soon mark him out as the best. The press has already dedicated a substantial number of articles to hailing him as Leo's successor. His coaches say that he weaves really well, that he has the same talent as his cousin. And, like him, he is shy. The only thing he says is that he envies his cousin's initiative and ability to score goals. Bruno is also a striker and he would like to wear a Barça shirt one day.

A circle of children has gathered. They all want to give their opinion about the boy who until a few years ago went to their school. For Pablo, age eleven, there is no doubt whatsoever: ‘He has what it takes to be the best in the world. Better than Maradona. The thing I like best about him is his speed, he’s incredible.’ Something is worrying Agustín, age nine – something that concerns many of his fellow countrymen – ‘Maradona started out at Argentino Juniors, Messi … at Barça’. Without question, too far away from here. Even the girls, who are more embarrassed, end up joining the group. And here, opinion is divided. Some think he’s good-looking, others think he is too short.

It’s break time, and under a crooked old piece of wood – an ancient tree – the little pupils chase one another around. Leo used to dodge round the enormous trunk running after paper or plastic balls. For him, the most wonderful memories of those years are precisely those games with whatever object found its way between his feet. He has no problem admitting that he didn’t enjoy studying.

And Mónica Dómina, his teacher from first to third grade, confirms that fact: ‘No, Leo didn’t do so well in his studies, but his work was of an acceptable level. At the beginning he had difficulty reading, so I advised his mother to take him to a speech therapist. In the other subjects he managed to improve little by little, although he didn’t obtain wonderful results. He was a quiet child, sweet and shy, one of the shyest students I have seen in my entire teaching career. If you didn’t address him, he would sit silently at his desk, at the back of the classroom. The older children competed with him in order to play in Rosario’s inter-school tournaments. He was good, of course – he used to win trophies and medals; but I never heard him boast about playing well and scoring goals.’

Chapter 4

The same as always

Conversation with Cintia Arellano

She has bright blue eyes, fine facial features and a slim figure. She lives at 510 Ibañez passage, a modest house, where she receives her visitor with a friendly smile. A black dog wags its tail and studies the new arrival before leaving the bare living room and going out into the courtyard that backs onto the Messi family courtyard. Cintia has always been Leo's friend. 'Our mothers were "womb sisters",' she says. Silvia Arellano became pregnant around the same time as Celia. 'We kept each other company,' Silvia explains. 'We would go shopping together and we chatted about the future of our children. It was my first. We were good friends.' She puts a glass of soda on the table and retires, leaving the story to her eldest daughter, who is 22 years old and who went to nursery, infant school and primary school with Lionel, always going to, and coming home from, school together, as well as to birthdays, parties and matches.

What was Leo like when he was little?
'He was a typically shy child and he talked very little. He only stood out when he played ball. I remember that at break time in the school playground the captains who had to pick the teams always ended up arguing because they all wanted Leo, because he scored so many goals. With him they were sure to win. Football has always been his passion. He often used to miss birthday parties in order to go to a match or a practice.'

And what was he like at school?
‘We called him Piqui because he was the tiniest of all of us. He didn’t like languages or maths. He was good at PE and art.’

They say you used to help him …
‘Yes, sometimes … In exams he used to sit behind me and if he was unsure about something he would ask me. When the teacher wasn’t looking I would pass him my ruler or my rubber with the answers written on it. And in the afternoon we always used to do our homework together.’

Then later, in secondary school, your paths separated and Leo went to Barcelona …
‘We all cried that summer afternoon when he and his family left for Spain. I couldn’t believe it, I was losing my best friend. When we would speak on the phone we would get very emotional and it seemed to me that living over there in Europe was very hard for him. But when he returned we chatted and I realised that it was a very important experience for him, it helped him to mature a lot. It put a strain on his family, so much so that Celia and María Sol came back. He told me that he integrated because there were kids his age who played football. And for him that was fundamental. He wanted to be a footballer and he’s made it.’

Cintia gets up, and returns with a folder full of photos and newspaper cuttings. There the two of them are as babies: Leo with a dummy and a blue bib; behind them, an enormous doll dressed as a bride; next to him, Cintia, in nappies and pigtails. And there, at infant school in 1992, in the class photo, all of them dressed in blue uniform. Dressed up for the carnival, him in a policeman’s helmet with a fake moustache, her made up, with huge glasses and a white dress. And then there are numerous newspaper cuttings: ‘The new Maradona’, ‘Waiting for the Messiah’, ‘What planet