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Booklist

PRAISE FOR *LIFE: AN EXPLODED DIAGRAM* AND *TAMAR*:

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Daniel Hahn,
The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature

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Adèle Geras

"Beautifully crafted, with a finale that took my breath away, this is simply unforgettable."
Publishing News

"Readers will be torn: they'll want to slow down and savor the gorgeously detailed prose, but speed up to find out what happens next. Simply superb."
Kirkus Reviews, starred review

MAL PEET KEEPER



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First published 2003 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

This edition published 2016

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2003 Mal Peet

Cover illustration © 2016 Walker Books Ltd

Cover illustration by Bobby Evans, Telegramme Paper Co

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This book has been typeset in Fairfield

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-6774-4

www.walker.co.uk

For my children
and other supporters

PAUL FAUSTINO SLID A blank into the tape recorder and stabbed at a couple of buttons. Then he slapped the machine and said, "Who is the top football writer in South America? Who is the number one football writer in South America?"

The man looking out of the window didn't turn round. There was a smile in his voice when he said, "I don't know, Paul. Who?"

"Me. I am. And will the boss buy me a decent tape recorder? No, she will not." He slapped the machine again and a green light came up on the display. Faustino immediately sat down in front of the small microphone and spoke into it.

"Testing. Date August second. Tape one. Interview: Paul Faustino of *La Nación* talks to the greatest goalkeeper in the history of the world, the man who two days ago took in his

hands the World Cup in front of eighty thousand fans and two hundred and twenty million TV viewers.”

He jabbed buttons, rewound the tape and played it back.

Faustino’s office was on the seventh floor of a block perched on one of the hills that looked down on the city. The big man standing at the window found it easy enough to imagine himself a hawk coasting over the grid of buildings and the drifting white and red lights of the traffic. Somewhere beyond that carpet of lights and just below the edge of the stars was the forest.

He was tall, exactly six feet four inches, and heavy with it. But when he turned from the window and went to the table where Faustino was sitting, his movements were light and quick, and it seemed to the football writer that the big man had somehow glided across the room and into the chair opposite his.

“Are you ready to begin, Gato?” Faustino had his finger on the *pause* button. On the table between them there was a desk lamp that threw hard shadows onto the faces of the two men; also, two bottles of water, a jug filled with ice, Faustino’s packet of cigarettes. And a not very tall chunk of gold. It was in the shape of two figures, wearing what looked like nightdresses, supporting a globe. It was not very beautiful. From where Faustino was sitting, it looked rather like an alien with an oversized bald head. And every footballer in the world wanted it.

The World Cup. It burned in the lamplight.

The big man folded his huge hands together on the table-top. "So. Where shall we begin?" he said.

"With some background stuff, if that's all right with you," said Faustino. He lifted his finger from the button and the tape began to run. "Tell me about where you grew up."

"At the edge of the world. That's how it seemed to me. A red dusty road came from somewhere and passed through our town. Then it went on to the edge of the forest, where the men were cutting down the trees. Beyond the edge of the forest there was nothing, or that is what my father told me. He meant that the forest seemed to go on for ever from there. Each day, at dawn, a number of trucks stopped at the top of the town where the men were waiting. My father was one of them, and he climbed up into a truck and went off to work, cutting down the trees. He sometimes came home and told us stories, like how his team had cut down a really big one, and how the monkeys who lived in it had stayed clinging onto the top branches almost until they hit the ground, and how they then ran howling into the deeper forest with babies hanging off their bellies. I didn't know if that or any of the other stuff he told me was true or not. But I grew up listening to his stories and loving them. So perhaps, in spite of everything he did to try to stop me, it was my father who set me on the path that brought me to where I am today.

During the day, the big yellow tractors that hauled the logs back down the road growled past the town in clouds of red dust which drifted into the square, the plaza, where we played football. It was just a big patch of ground between the tin church and the café. No grass. We had games that started as soon as we were let out of school and didn't end until our fathers came back in the trucks and darkness was falling. We were all football crazy, of course.

Actually, it was not just us kids who were obsessed with football. The whole place was. The café had TV, and everyone squeezed in there to watch the big matches. The walls were covered with posters and photos – our players, German, Spanish and English players, great players and teams from the past. And after a big match, even if it was dark, even if it was raining, we would run into the plaza to replay the action, calling ourselves by the names and nicknames of the great stars: Pelé, the Grey Ghost, Little Bird, Maradona, whatever.”

“And you were El Gato, the Cat,” said Paul Faustino.

The big goalkeeper smiled. “Oh no. Not then,” he said. “You see, I was useless. I couldn't play. The other kids could do great things with the ball. Take it out of the air on the top of the foot. Run and keep it in the air with the head, score goals with bicycle kicks, stuff like that. I could do none of this. When the ball came to me – which wasn't often, the other kids made sure of that – it always seemed to get stuck between my ankles or bounce off my knees.

I had no balance – a soft tackle from a smaller kid would send me staggering like a drunken goat. I was too tall. I had long skinny arms and legs, and big clumsy hands. They called me La Cigüeña – the Stork. Which was fair enough.”

Faustino was a little puzzled. “But you played in goal, surely,” he said.

“No. It never occurred to me. I dreamt of being a striker, of slamming in perfect shots that brought imaginary crowds roaring to their feet. We all did. Besides, there were two big strong kids who were always the goalies. So I just got pushed further and further out to the edge of the game. And even then, if the ball happened to come towards me, the nearest player on my side would yell ‘Leave it!’ and collect the ball instead. One day I played for two hours and didn’t touch the ball once, except for when it hit me on the backside by chance. That was the day I decided to give up football. I was thirteen.”

“All the same,” Faustino said dryly, “you’ve played a game or two since.”

The goalkeeper smiled again. “Yes, my retirement was a bit premature, as it turned out. But I never played in the plaza again. And it was giving up football that made me a footballer.”

“You’ve lost me,” Faustino said. “What does that mean, ‘giving up football made me a footballer’?”

“I was learning nothing in the plaza. If I hadn’t quit,

I wouldn't have gone into the forest, which is where I learnt everything."

"I get the feeling," Faustino sighed, "that I'm not going to get answers by asking questions. OK, so tell me the story. Tell me how a non-player passes the time in a football-crazy jungle town."

"At first I didn't know what to do with myself. Without the game, the afternoons seemed to last for ever, and there was nothing, absolutely *nothing*, to do. My mother and grandmother didn't want me hanging around, and in those days there was no way that a teenage boy could be seen doing work around the house. I could read, of course, but the only books in town were in the school. Somehow I had to fill my afternoons for the two long years before I could climb onto the truck with my father and go to work."

Faustino leant towards the microphone and said, "Tell me a little about your family, Gato. What was your house like?"

"Like all the others. No, a bit bigger, because we had Nana, Father's mother, living with us, and Father built a kind of extension sticking out from the back wall. He always called it 'the new rooms', even though he had made it when I was five years old and Mother was expecting the next child, my sister. Really, those rooms were just little cubicles. My mother and father slept in one of them. Nana and my sister slept in another, and I had the third, smallest

one. My grandmother snored very loudly, and the walls were just sheets of board. It sometimes drove us crazy. Except for my sister, strangely enough. Even though she slept just across the room from Nana, the snoring didn't bother her. She used to say that if Nana stopped snoring, she would never be able to sleep. My grandmother's snores were the rhythm of my sister's rest.

But our house was the same as all the others, basically. White-painted concrete blocks and a tin roof. The whole town had been built very quickly – overnight, Nana used to say. They bulldozed the road into the forest then hacked out a space and put up these houses for the tree-cutters. The main part of our house was one room with a makeshift kitchen at one end. Some families cooked on a wood stove like a barbecue, but we had a cooker with bottled gas. We got water from a pipe which we shared with five other families. My father covered our tin roof with leaves and branches to reduce the heat, but in the hot season it was still like living under a grill. In those months we lived and ate out of doors. My father slept in a hammock slung between a pepper tree and a hook driven into the wall of the house.”

El Gato stopped speaking. He was staring at the gold trophy in front of him, and Paul Faustino could see two reflections of it glittering in the goalie's eyes.

“I used to have this fantasy,” Gato said next. “May I tell you?”

Faustino smiled and made a willing gesture. "Of course."

"I used to imagine winning this." Gato circled a fingertip on the top of the globe. "And taking it home with me. At night, secretly. Unannounced. My father would be asleep in his hammock. I would lay the Cup gently on his chest and put his hands around it. So that when he woke up he would find himself holding the greatest prize in the world. And I would watch his face."

"And now that you have the Cup," said Faustino, "you can make this fantasy come true. Is that what you will do? Can I come with you? Would you mind if we took photographs?"

"Unfortunately," Gato said, "my father is dead."

Faustino was silent for several moments – out of respect or, perhaps, disappointment. Then the keeper removed his hand and his gaze from the gold trophy and said, "What were we talking about?"

Gently, Faustino reminded him. "About what you did when you gave up football."

EL GATO TOOK A sip of water and said, “When I gave up football I realized something. I realized that the world I had been living in was *low*.”

“Low?” Faustino repeated. “What does that mean, Gato?”

“I was tall, as I said. I could stand in my bedroom and touch the timbers that held up the roof. In the schoolroom, we looked down – down at our books, down at the tips of our pencils, down at the page of the atlas that showed our country and the empty space where our town was. And in the plaza, in the games, I watched feet. I was always looking down. I think it is true to say that I hardly ever looked up until I stopped playing football.”

“And when you stopped playing football and looked up, what did you see?”

“Sky and trees. Sky and trees. Very simple. You find this

hard to believe, perhaps, but I had never thought about this before. I'd never really thought about the fact that I was living in a small space hacked from the jungle. I hadn't realized that if the trees had not been cleared to make room for our town, I would never have seen the stars. The forest trees climb and occupy the whole sky, you know. In the forest, the sky is a rare thing.

Because I no longer played the game, I found myself lying on my back looking up at the sky and watching how the clouds and then the stars disappeared into the forest, how the forest covered and swallowed everything. I understood that I was *surrounded*. And I wanted to get out. I think I began wandering into the forest to see if there was a way out of it. And because there was nothing else to do.

You need to understand that the forest, or the jungle, call it what you like, was always trying to remove our little town. It would send long green fingers across the cleared spaces to climb up walls and lift the roofs off our houses. On Sundays, after church, my father would walk around the walls of our house with a machete, chopping off the jungle's fingers to keep it safe in its leafless space. At least once a month something would sneak out of the jungle and take one of our chickens. Before we went to sleep at night, Father would carry a torch and a heavy stick around the house, checking for snakes. And because my father and the other men and women of the town spent so much time beating back the jungle, there was a small belt of

half-tamed land around the houses, a strip of struggling bushes with paths pushed through them, paths our neighbours walked. But only in the daylight.

One day, I decided to walk through the safe area around the houses and go into the dark high forest. I was not particularly brave. I was bored, and I was lonely. That is why I went. I walked along the paths where the chickens and the pigs scratched around for food until I came to the gloomy wall of the forest.

There were paths that went in there. I was only a child, of course, so I didn't understand that these paths had been made by animals, not people. I would follow them until they disappeared, until they vanished among the complicated roots of trees and the thick carpet of leaves and ferns. I met glittering insects, and glistening frogs, and sometimes brilliant-feathered parrots; and I learnt the difference between the harmless screaming of these animals and the dark silence that crept into the jungle when a jaguar was near by. And when I lay down to sleep in the black heat of my room, my dreams were of this new and fascinating darkness.

As I said, I was not brave. I was just as scared of the forest as everyone else was. Things I could not see would scuttle away from my feet. Things would crash through the leaves above my head. Sometimes I would cry aloud in fright. And the forest has a smell, too – a sort of thick, sweet, rotten smell that makes the air difficult to breathe.

The light is dim and green. Where the sun does break through, its light is broken up by the leaves into patches and freckles of brightness and shadow so that it's often hard to make out the shape of things."

Paul Faustino shuddered theatrically. "Not my kind of place," he said.

"No," Gato said, trying to imagine his elegant friend coping with the discomforts of the jungle. "And there were plenty of people who thought it was no place for me, either. Our town was small and talkative, and it was not long before my family heard of my little expeditions into the wilderness. My father was stern. He knew how dangerous the jungle was, he said, because it was his job to fight it. He told me of plants that scratch and fill the scratches with a poison that spreads through your body and kills you in an hour. He told me of how a man working with him had stepped into the forest to pee and never been seen again. He told me of secret tribes of wild, painted forest people who stole children away and ate them. My mother cried and prayed aloud while he told me these things.

But when it came to horror stories about the jungle, no one could compete with Nana. Ah, the things she told me! In the rivers and pools there were anacondas, giant snakes. If you looked into the water, Nana said, they would hypnotize you with the cold blue fire in their eyes, then rise up out of the water, crush you to death and swallow you whole. She told me, shuddering, about the *ya-te-veo*

tree, which had long, living, evil roots covered in thorns bigger than knife blades. If you walked anywhere near them these roots would seize you and nail you to the tree-trunk, and there you would die a long and terrible death while the tree drank the blood that flowed from your wounds. There were giant spiders, she said, that leapt onto your face and suffocated you with their thick hairy bodies. There were worms, she said, that burrowed into your toes and worked up through your body until they reached your brains and ate them, so that you went crazy before you died. She had a great imagination, my grandmother. She should have been a writer for the American movies. But the *worst* thing, she said – and she crossed herself – was that the Waiting Dead lived in the darkness of the forest. I was puzzled. And also interested.

‘Do you mean ghosts, Nana?’

She shrugged. ‘Ghosts, zombies, they are called many things.’

‘Why do you say they are waiting, Nana? What are they waiting for?’

‘They are waiting for the thing that can make them truly dead, so that their hungry spirits can be peaceful. Until they get it, they have to go on waiting, searching. Maybe for ever. A terrible thing.’ She shivered dramatically.

‘I still don’t understand,’ I said. ‘What is this thing that the Waiting Dead are waiting for?’

‘Something they wanted very much when they were

alive, and never had. They cannot properly die because they still hunger for this thing.'

Crazy stuff, of course, but I was fascinated by it. 'But what kind of thing might this be?' I persisted.

'It could be anything,' Nana said. 'Maybe there is one waiting out there who always wanted a son. A tall handsome thirteen-year-old son.'

Then she crossed herself again and hugged me. 'No,' she said. 'God forgive me for saying such a thing.'

But, despite everything, I went into the forest again and again. Why? Well, as I said, there was nothing else to do, and nowhere else to go. And I saw wonderful things. Shimmering green humming-birds smaller than butterflies, a family of tiny emerald frogs living in less than a cupful of water, moths with wings as clear as coloured glass, like little pieces of the church window, golden millipedes longer than my arm tracking through the leaf-rubbish of the forest floor. I saw beetles that looked like flowers and flowers that looked like beetles."

El Gato caught the expression on Faustino's face and laughed. "This nature stuff really appeals to your romantic imagination, doesn't it, Paul?"

"Oh, absolutely," Faustino said, flicking unsuccessfully at his cigarette lighter. "Can't get enough of it. Us city boys just love creepy-crawlies and weird flowers. Do go on."

"OK, Paul, enough. But listen – when you write this up, you're going to have to grit your teeth and somehow get

across to the readers the magic of the forest. It's important, really important. You'll see why, I promise."

"I'll do my best," Faustino said, and, seeing the sceptical look on the footballer's face, lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender and said it again.

"OK, Paul, I trust you. Anyway, despite everything my family said, I started to go further and further in. Looking back now, I think I was looking for something *in* the forest, rather than a way *out* of it."

"And you found it, this thing you were looking for?"

It was darker now, and the city below Faustino's office was a jazzy dance of neon signs and traffic. The big footballer went to the window and looked down at it all, spreading his large hands on the glass. "No," he said. "It found me."