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"I AM ZLATAN"

By Zlatan Ibrahimovic as told to David Lagercrantz

This book is dedicated to my family and friends, to those who have stood by my side, on good days and bad.

I also want to dedicate it to all the kids out there, those who feel different and don't fit in.

Those who are seen for the wrong reasons. It's OK to be different. Continue being yourself. It worked out for me.

CHAPTER 1

Pep Guardiola, the coach in Barcelona, with his grey suits and troubled face, came up to me looking concerned.

I thought he was all right at that time, certainly not a Mourinho or Capello, but an ok guy. This was way before we started our war. It was the fall of 2009 and I was living my childhood dream. I was playing in the best team in the world and had been welcomed by 70 000 people at the Camp Nou. I was walking on clouds. Well maybe not entirely, there were some bullshit in the papers. I was the bad boy and all that. I was difficult dealing with. But still, I was here. Helena and the kids were also good. We had a nice house in Esplugues de Llobregat and I felt fully charged. What could go wrong?

"Hey you", Guardiola said. "Here in Barca we keep our feet down on the ground."

"Sure", I said. "Fine."

"Here we don't drive any Ferraris or Porsches to training."

I nodded, didn't go cocky on him, like how the fuck is what car I'm driving your concern? But I thought

"What does he want? What message is he giving me? Believe me, I don't need any fancy cars or parking on the sidewalk to show off anymore. That wasn't it. I love my cars. They're a passion of mine, but I sensed something else behind his words. Kind of: don't think you're so special.

I had already at that point understood that Barca is like a school. The players were all nice, nothing wrong with them, and there was Maxwell, my old friend from Ajax and Inter. But honestly, none of the guys acted like superstars, and I thought that was odd. Messi, Xavi, Iniesta, the whole gang, was like school kids.

The world's best players stood there nodding, and I couldn't understand that. It was ridiculous. If a coach in Italy says "jump", the players ask "what? Why should we jump?"

Here, everyone jumped at any command. I didn't fit in, not at all. But I was thinking: Accept the situation.

Don't confirm their thoughts about you. So I started adapting. I became too kind. It was insane. Mino Raiola, my agent, my friend, said:

"What's wrong with you Zlatan? I don't recognize you."

No one recognized me, not my buddies, no one. I became boring, bland, and you should know that even since Malmö FF I've had one philosophy: I run my own race. I don't give a damn what people think and I've never felt comfortable with authority. I like guys who run the red light, if you know what I mean.

But now... I didn't say what I wanted. I said what I thought people expected of me. It was wack. I drove the club's Audi and stood there nodding like back in school, or like I should have stood nodding,

back in school. I didn't give my team mates any crap. I was boring. Zlatan wasn't Zlatan, and that hadn't happen since back in school when I saw chicks in Ralph Lauren shirts for the first time and almost shit my pants when I was asking them out. But still, I started the season great. I scored goal after goal after goal. We won the UEFA Super Cup. I was shining. I dominated. But I was somebody else. Something had happened, nothing serious, not yet. I had been silenced, and that's dangerous, believe me. I have to be mad to play well. I have to shout and make scenes. Now I kept all that within me. Maybe it had to do with all pressure. I don't know.

I was the second most expensive transfer in history, and the papers kept saying I was a problem child and had issues with my personality, all kinds of bullshit, and unfortunately I felt the weight of it all - in Barca we don't stick out, and I guess I wanted to show that I could fit in. It was the most stupid decision of my entire life. I was still killing on the field. But it wasn't as fun anymore.

I even thought about quitting football. Not that I would break my contract, I'm a professional. But I lost the fun. And then came Christmas break. We went to Åre and I rented a snowmobile. Whenever life stands still, I want action. I always drive like a maniac. I've gone 325 km/hr in my Porsche Turbo leaving chasing cops behind. I've done so many fucked up things I barely want to think about them. And now in the mountains I was giving it my all on the snowmobile, got freeze burns and had the time of my life.

Finally some adrenaline! Finally the old, the real Zlatan, and I were thinking to myself: Why am I doing this? I have money. I don't have to feel shit with idiot coaches. I can have fun instead and take care of my family. It was a great time, but it didn't last long. When we returned to Spain disaster struck. Not immediately, but slowly. Disaster was in the air.

A light snowfall came. It was like the Spaniards had never seen snow before, and in our hood, in the hills above Barcelona, cars were smashing to the left and right, and Mino, the fat idiot - the wonderful fat idiot I should add if anyone would misunderstand me - froze like a dog in his summer shoes and light jacket and convinced me to take the Audi. It almost ended in disaster. On a downhill street we lost control of the car and smashed into a stone wall. The whole right side of the car was demolished. Many had crashed during the bad weather, but no one as badly as me. I won the crash contest too, and we laughed a lot about that.

And I was actually feeling like myself sometimes. I felt ok. But then Messi started talking. Messi is awesome. Fucking unbelievable. I don't know him very well. We are very different personalities. He came to Barca 13 years old and is brought up in their culture. He doesn't have any problems with that school shit. In the team, the play revolves around him, which is natural really. He's brilliant, but now had come, and I was scoring more than he did. He went to Guardiola and said:

"I don't want to play on the right side, on the wing, anymore. I want to be in the middle."

That was where I was. But Guardiola didn't give a shit. He changed tactics. From 4-3-3 he switched to 4-5-1 with me on top and Messi right behind, leaving me in the shadow. All balls went through Messi and I couldn't play my game. I have to be free as a bird on the field. I'm the guy who wants to make a difference on all levels. But Guardiola sacrificed me. That's the truth. He locked me in up there. OK, can understand his situation. Messi was the star.

Guardiola has to listen to him. But come on! I had scored goal after goal in Barca, I was lethal too. H

couldn't adapt the team after one single guy. I mean: why the hell did he buy me then? No one pays that kind of money just to strangle me as a player. Guardiola had to think of both of us, and of course the mood amongst the club management became nervous. I was their biggest investment ever, and I didn't feel good in the new lineup. I was too expensive not to feel good. Txiki Begiristain, the sports director, was pushing me; he said I had to speak with the coach.

"Work it out!"

I didn't like it. I'm a player who accepts the situation. But sure, fine, I did it! A friend of mine said "Zlatan, it's like if Barca bought a Ferrari but are driving it like a Fiat", and I thought, yeah, that's a good argument.

Guardiola had transformed me into a simpler, worse player. And the whole team was losing from that.

So I went to the coach. I approached him on the pitch, during training, and I was careful about one thing. I didn't want a fight, and I told him:

"I don't want to fight. I don't want a war. I just want to discuss things."

He nodded. But maybe he looked a bit frightened, so I repeated:

"If you think I want a fight, I will leave. I just want to talk."

"Good! I like talking with the players."

"Listen!" I continued. "You are not using my capacity. If it was a goal scorer you wanted, you should have bought Inzaghi or someone. I need space, and to be free. I can't run up and down constantly. I weigh 98

kilos. I don't have the physique for it."

He was thinking. He was often doing that.

"I think you can play like this."

"No, then it's better if you bench me. With all due respect, I understand you, but you are sacrificing me for other players. This isn't working. It's like you bought a Ferrari but are driving it like if it was a Fiat."

He continued thinking.

"OK, maybe it was a mistake. This is my problem. I will work it out."

I was happy. He would work it out.

But then the ice cold came. He would barely look at me, and I'm not one who really cares about such things, and despite my new position I continued to be great. I scored more goals. Not as nice ones as Italy. I was too high up on the pitch. It wasn't Ibracadabra anymore, but still... Against Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium in the Champions League we outplayed them completely. The stadium was boiling

The first twenty minutes were amazing, and I scored one goal... two goals. Beautiful goals, and I was thinking: Screw Guardiola! I'll run my own race! But then I was substituted, Arsenal came back and scored two goals. It was shit and afterwards my thigh hurt. Normally a coach cares about such things. An injured Zlatan is a serious thing for any team. But Guardiola was ice cold. He didn't say a single word, and I was out for three weeks. Not once did he face me and ask "How are you feeling, Zlatan? Can you play the next game?"

He didn't even say hello. Not a word. He avoided looking at me. If I entered a room, he would leave.

What's going on? I was thinking. Have I done something? Do I look strange? Am I speaking strange? My mind was spinning in circles. I couldn't sleep. I was thinking about it constantly. Not that I needed Guardiola's love or anything. He could hate me all he wanted. I'm triggered by hate and revenge. But now I lost focus, and I talked to the other players. No one understood what was going on. I asked Thierry Henry, who was on the bench during this time. Thierry Henry is the top scorer in the history of the French national team. He's cool. He was still amazing, and he was also having problems with Guardiola.

"He doesn't greet me. He doesn't look me in the eyes, what has happened?" I asked.

"No idea", Henry said.

We started joking about it. "Hey, Zlatan, has he looked at you today?" "No, but I saw his back!"

"Congratulations, things are improving!" Shit like that, and it helped a little bit. But it was really getting on my nerves, and I asked myself every hour: What have I done? What's wrong? But I never got any answers. Nothing more than that the ice storm must have had to do with our talk about my position. There couldn't be any other explanation. But that would be twisted. Was he psyching me out because a chat about my position? I tried confronting him, I'd walk towards him try looking him in the eyes. He turned around. He seemed scared, and sure I could have booked an appointment and asked "What is this about?" But never. I had done enough crawling for that guy.

This was his problem. Not that I knew what it was. I still don't know it. Or, well... I don't think the guy can handle strong personalities. He wants nice school boys. And worse: he runs away from his problems. He can't look them in the eye, and that made everything so much worse.

It got worse.

The ash cloud from the volcano on Iceland came. No flights at all in Europe and we were going to San Siro to face Inter. We took the bus. Some brain-dead person in Barca thought that was a good idea. I was free from injuries then. But the trip became a disaster. It took 16 hours and we were all worn out when we arrived in Milano. It was our most important game so far that season, semifinal in the Champions League, and I was prepared for mayhem, booing and whistling at my old arena, no problems, that drive me. But the situation a part from that was terrible. And I think Guardiola had a hang up on Mourinho.

José Mourinho is a big star. He had won Champions League already with Porto. He was my coach in Inter. He's cool. The first time he met Helena he whispered to her: "Helena, you only have one mission.

Feed Zlatan, let him sleep, keep him happy!" The guy says what he wants. I like him. He's the leader of an army. But he also cares. He was sending me text messages all the time in Inter asking how I was feeling. He's the opposite of Guardiola. If Mourinho lights up a room, Guardiola pulls the blinds." I guess Guardiola now tried to measure up to him.

"It's not Mourinho we are facing. It's Inter", he said, like we thought we'd play ball with the coach. And then he pulled his philosophy crap.

I was barely listening. Why would I? It was advanced crap about blood, sweat and tears, shit like that I've never heard a coach talk like that. Pure garbage. But now he finally came up to me. It was during the practice at San Siro, and people were there watching, like "Wow, Ibra is back!"

"Can you play from start" Guardiola asked.

"Definitely", I answered.

"But are you prepared?"

"Definitely. I feel fine."

"But are you ready?"

He was like a parrot, and I got some nasty vibes.

"Listen, it was a terrible trip, but I'm in good form. The injury is gone. I'll give it my everything."

Guardiola looked as though he doubted me. I didn't understand him, and afterwards I called Mino Raiola.

I call Mino all the time. Swedish journalists use to say: Mino is bad image for Zlatan. Mino is this and that.

You want the truth? Mino is a genius. I asked him:

"What does the guy mean?" None of us understood. We started losing it. But I got to play from start and we scored 1-0. Then the game turned, I was substituted after sixty minutes and we lost 3-1. It was shit. I was furious. But in the earlier days, like Ajax, I could dwell on a loss for days or even weeks. Now I have Helena and the kids. They help me forget and move on. And I was focusing on the return game at Camp Nou. The return game was incredibly important and the excitement was building up, day by day.

The pressure was incredible. It was like thunder in the air, and we had to win big to advance. But then... I don't even want to think about it, or, well, I do. It made me stronger. We won by 1-0. But that wasn't enough. We were eliminated from the Champions League, and afterwards Guardiola looked at me like it was my fault, and I was thinking: The bottle is empty now. We're out of playing cards. After that game it felt like I wasn't welcome in the club anymore, and I felt bad driving their Audi.

I felt like shit sitting in the dressing room and Guardiola would stare at me like I was a problem, some freak. It was insane. He was a wall, a stone wall. I didn't get a single sign of life from him, and I

wanted to get far away every second.

I was no longer part of the team, and when we played Villa Real he let me play five minutes. Five minutes! I was boiling inside, not because I was on the bench. I can deal with that if the coach is man enough to say: You're not good enough, Zlatan.

But Guardiola didn't say a single word, nothing, and at this point I'd had it. I could feel it in my entire body, and if I was Guardiola, I would have been scared. Not that I'm a fighter. I've done all kinds of crazy shit.

But I don't fight, well, on the pitch I've knocked one or two out. But still, when I get angry, my eyes turn black. You don't want to be anywhere near. And let me tell you in detail what happened. After the game I went into the dressing room, I hadn't exactly planned some raging attack... But I wasn't happy to use mild words, and in the dressing room my enemy stood, scratching his bald head. Few others were in there. Touré and a few others, and the big metal box where we put our clothes, and I was staring at the box. Then I kicked it. I think it flew like three meters, but I wasn't done yet. Far from it I yelled:

"You have no balls", and probably some worse things, and added:

"You shit yourself in front of Mourinho. You can go fuck yourself!"

I went insane, and maybe you'd expect Guardiola to say something, maybe: Calm down, you don't talk like that to your coach! But he's not like that. He's a weak coward. He just picked up the box, like a little cleaner, and then he left and never talked about it again, nothing at all. But of course words spread. In the bus everyone was crazy:

"What happened, what happened?!"

Nothing, I thought. Just a few words of truth. But I didn't have the energy talking about it. I was so pissed off. My coach had frozen me out week after week without explaining why. It was sick. I've had some bad fights before. But the day after we'd always sorted things out and moved on. Now the silence and terror just continued, and I thought: "I'm 28 years old. I've scored 22 goals and 15 assists only here in Barca, and still I'm treated like I don't exist, like air. Should I accept this? Should I continue adapting? No way!

When I understood I'd be on the bench against Almeria, I remembered those words: "Here, in Barca, we don't drive Ferrari or Porsche to the practice!" What bullshit was that anyway? I drive what I want at least if it pisses off some idiot. I jumped into my Enzo, floored it and parked outside the door at practice. Of course it resulted in a circus. The papers wrote that my car cost as much as the monthly salary for the entire Almeria squad. But I didn't care. Media bullshit meant nothing at this point. I had decided to give back.

I decided to fight back seriously, and you should know one thing, that's a game I can play. I've been a bad boy before, believe me. But I didn't want to mess with the preparations just because of that, so obviously I called Mino. We always plan the smart and dirty tricks together. I also called my buddies

I wanted different perspectives on the situation, and oh god, I got all kinds of advice. The Rosengård

guys wanted to come down and "trash stuff", and of course that was nice of them to offer, but it didn't feel like the right strategy at that point. And of course I discussed everything with Helena. She's from another world. She's cool. She can also be tough. But now she tried encouraging me:

"You've become a better dad. When you don't have a team where you feel good, you team up with us," she said, and that made me happy.

I played some ball with the kids and tried to make sure everyone was feeling alright, and of course I spent time with my video games. It's like a disease for me. They eat me up. But since the time in Inter Milan when I could play until four, five in the morning and go to practice after just a couple of hours sleep, I've set some rules for myself: no Xbox or Playstation after 10 at night.

I can't let time run away from me, and during these weeks in Spain I really tried to spend time with my family and just chill in our garden. I even had a Corona now and then. That was the good side of me. But at nights when I would be lying awake, or at practice when I saw Guardiola, the dark side of me woke up.

The anger was pounding inside my head and I planned my next move and my revenge.

No, I realized it more and more, there was no turning back. It was time to stand up for myself and become the real me again.

Because don't forget: You can take the kid away from the ghetto, but you can't take the ghetto away from the kid.





The feet



Ibra & Sanela on dad's blue Opel Kadett

CHAPTER 2

My brother gave me a BMX bike when I was little. I called it Fido Dido.

Fido Dido was a tough little bastard, a cartoon guy with spiky hair. I thought he was the coolest. But the bike got stolen quickly outside the Rosengård bathhouse and my dad went there, with open shirt and sleeves rolled up. He's the kind of guy who says: No one touches my kids! No one steals their stuff! But not even a tough guy like him could do anything about it. Fido Dido was gone, and I was devastated.

After that I started stealing bikes. I'd smash the locks. I became great at it. Bang, bang, bang, and the bike was mine. I was the bicycle thief. It was my first "thing". It was pretty innocent. But sometimes got out of control. Once I dressed up in all black, went out into the night like fucking Rambo and got military bike using a huge bolt cutter. And sure, that bike was cool. I loved it. But honestly, it was more the kick I got out of it than the bike. It triggered me sneaking around in the dark, and I'd throw eggs at windows and that kind of stuff and I was only caught sometimes.

One embarrassing thing happened at the Wessels department store out at Jägersro, for example. But honestly, I deserved it. Me and a friend were wearing huge winter down jackets in the middle of summer, quite fucked up, and under those jackets we had four table tennis rackets and some other crap we picked up. "You guys, aren't you paying for those" said the guard who caught us. I pulled out a few pennies from my pocket: "With these?" But the guy didn't have a sense of humor, so I decided to be more professional from then on. And I guess I became quite a skilled maniac in the end.

I was a small kid. I had a big nose and I lisped and went to a speech coach. A woman came to my school and taught me how to say S and I thought it was demeaning. I guess I wanted to assert myself somehow.

And it was like I was boiling inside. I couldn't sit still for more than a second and I was running around all the time. It was like nothing bad could happen to me if I ran fast enough. We lived in Rosengård outside of Malmö and it was full of Somalis, Turks, Yugoslavs, Poles, all kinds of immigrants, and Swedes. We were all acting cocky. The smallest thing got us fired up, and it wasn't easy at home, to say the least.

We lived on the fourth floor up on Cronmans Road, and we didn't run around hugging each other. No one asked "How was your day today little Zlatan", nothing like that. No grown-ups would assist with homework or ask if you had any problems. You were on your own, and you couldn't whine about someone being mean to you. You just had to bite the bullet, and there was chaos and fights and some punches. But sure, sometimes you'd wish for some sympathy. One day I fell off the roof at the kindergarten. I got a black eye and ran home crying expecting a pat on the head or at least some kind words. I got a slap in the face.

"What were you doing on the roof?"

It wasn't like "Poor Zlatan." It was "You fucking idiot, climbing up a roof. Here's a slap for you", and I was shocked and ran away. Mom didn't have time for comforting, not at that time. She was cleaning and struggling to make money, she was really a fighter. But she couldn't take much else. She had it

tough, and all of us had a terrible temper. It wasn't like the normal Swedish chat at home, like "Honey, can you please pass me the butter", more like: "Get the milk you jerk!" There were doors slamming and mom crying. She cried a lot. She has my love. She's had a tough life. She was cleaning like fourteen hours a day, and sometimes we'd tag along, emptying trashcans and stuff like that and got some pocket money.

But sometimes mom lost it.

She'd hit us with wooden spoons, and sometimes they broke, so I had to go buy a new one, like if it was my fault she'd hit me that hard. I remember one day in particular. I had thrown a brick at kindergarten that somehow bounced and broke a window. Mom freaked out when she heard about it. Everything that cost money freaked her out, and she hit me with spoon. Bang, boom! It hurt and maybe the spoon broke again. I don't know. Sometimes there were no spoons at home, and then she'd come after me with a rolling pin. But then I got away, and I talked with Sanela about it.

Sanela is my only full sibling. She's two years older. She's a tough girl, and she thought we should play some games with mom. Fuck, hitting us in the head! Insane! So we went to the store and bought a bunch of those spoons, really cheap ones, and gave them to mom as a Christmas present.

I don't think she got the irony. She didn't have room for that. There had to be food on the table. All her energy was consumed by that. We were quite a bunch at home, also my half-sisters who later disappeared and broke all contact with us, and my younger brother Aleksandar, we'd call him Keki, and the money wasn't enough. Nothing was enough and the older ones to care of the younger, otherwise we wouldn't have made it. There was a lot of instant macaroni and ketchup, and eating at friends' homes or at my aunt Hanife's who lived in the same building. She was the one of us who came to Sweden first.

I wasn't even two years old when my mom and dad got divorced, and I don't remember anything about it.

That's probably good. It wasn't a good marriage, I've heard. There were a lot of fighting, and they had gotten married for my dad to get a residence permit. I guess it was natural for all of us to end up living with mom. But I missed my dad. He had more going for him and there was always something fun going on with him. Me and Sanela would meet dad every other weekend and he used to come in his old blue Opel Kadett and we'd go to Pildammsparken or out on the island in Limhamn to get hamburgers and soft ice cream. One day he made a splurge and got us each a pair of Nike Air Max, the cool sneakers that were like over a thousand kronor, really expensive. Mine were green, Sanela's pink. No one in Rosengård had shoes like that, and we felt so cool. We had it nice with dad and we'd get some money for pizza and Coca-Cola. He had a decent job and only one other son, Sapko. He was our fun weekend-dad.

But things would change. Sanela was awesome at running. She was the fastest at running 60 meters in her age in all of Skåne [ed note: region of southern Sweden] and dad was proud as a peacock and used to drive her to practice. "Great, Sanela. But you can do better", he said. That was his thing, "Better, better, don't settle", and this time I was in the car. Dad remembers it like that anyway, and he noticed it immediately. Something was wrong. Sanela was quiet. She struggled not to cry.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"Nothing", she answered and then he asked again and she told.

We don't have to go into details, that's Sanela's story. But my dad, he's like a lion. If something happens to his kids he goes wild, especially when it comes to Sanela, his only daughter. And it became a huge circus, with interrogations, social welfare investigations, custody battles and shit.

I didn't understand too much of it. I was turning nine.

It was the fall of 1990 and they kept that stuff away from me. But I had my hunches of course. It was turbulent at home. Still, not the first time. One of my half-sisters did drugs, some heavy shit, and kept stashes at home. There was always chaos around her, and creepy people calling and a lot of fear that something bad would happen. Another time my mom was arrested for stashing stolen goods. Some friends had told her: "Take these necklaces!" and she did it. She didn't understand. But the stuff was stolen and the police came bombarding in and took her. I remember it vaguely like a weird feeling: Where's mom? Why is she gone?

But after that latest thing with Sanela she was crying again, and I just ran away from it. I was messing around outside or playing football. Not like I was the most balanced guy, or the greatest promise. I was just one of the kids kicking ball, or actually worse. I had some terrible outbursts. I'd headbutt people and lash out against my teammates. But I had the football. It was my thing, and I was playing all the time, in our yard, on the field, during school breaks. We went to the Värner Rydén school at that time. Sanela in fifth grade, and me in third, and no one doubted which one of us was well-behaved! Sanela had to grow up at young age and become an extra-mom for Keki and take care of the family when the sisters left. She took a huge responsibility. She behaved. She wasn't the girl who got called to the principal's office, and that's why I became worried immediately when I got the call. We were both asked in for talks, and like, if only me had been called, it'd been normal, just routine. But now it was me and Sanela. Had someone died? What was going on?

I got stomach pains, and we walked through the corridor. It must have been late fall or winter. I felt paralyzed. But when we came into the office my dad was sitting there with the principal, and I felt happy.

Dad used to mean fun stuff. But wasn't fun. Everything was stiff and formal and I felt very uncomfortable, and honestly, I didn't get much of what was said, only that it was about dad and mom and it wasn't any pleasant stuff. But now I know. Now, much later, when working on this book, the pieces of the puzzle have come in place.

In November 1990 the social services had done their investigation, and dad had gotten custody of me and Sanela. The environment at mom's place was decided bad for us, not so much because of her, I have to say that. There were other things, but it was a huge thing anyway, a major disapproval, and mom was devastated. Would she lose us as well? It was a disaster. She cried and cried and sure, she had been hitting us with spoons, given us beatings and not listened to us, and she'd had bad luck with her men and there was no money and all that. But she loved her kids. She was just raised under tough conditions, and I think my dad understood that. He went to her the same afternoon:

"I don't want you to lose them, Jurka."

But he demanded some improvement, and dad isn't to play games with in situations like that. I'm sure

there were harsh words. "If things don't improve, you'll never see the kids again", stuff like that, but I don't know exactly what happened. But Sanela lived with dad for a few weeks, and I stayed with mom despite everything. It wasn't a good solution. Sanela didn't like it at dad's. She and I found him sleeping on the floor around that time, and the table was full of beer cans and bottles. "Dad, wake up, wake up!" But he kept sleeping. It was a strange thing for me. Like, why does he do this? We didn't know what to do. But we wanted to help. Maybe he was freezing? We covered him with towels and blankets to get him warm.

But I didn't understand anything. Sanela probably understood more. She had noticed how his mood could swing and how he could explode and scream like a bear and I think that frightened her. And she missed her little brother. She wanted to go back to mom and I wanted the opposite. I missed my dad, and one of those nights I called him, probably sounding desperate. I felt lonely without Sanela.

"I don't wanna live here. I wanna be at your place."

"Come here", he said. "I'll call a cab."

There were new investigations by the social services, and in March 1991 mom got custody of Sanela and dad of me. We separated, me and sis, but we have always stayed close, or let's say, it's been up and down. But we are very close. Sanela is a hairdresser now and sometimes people come to her salon and say: "My god, you look like Zlatan!" and she always answers: "Bullshit, he looks like me." She's tough. But none of us have had an easy ride. My dad, Sefik, moved from Hårds road in Rosengård to Värnhems square in Malmö in 1991, and you have understood this - he's got a big heart, he's prepared to die for us.

But things didn't turn out the way I had expected. I knew him as weekend-dad who got us hamburgers and ice cream.

Now we were to share every day and I noticed immediately: it was empty at his place. Something was missing, maybe a woman. There was a TV set, a sofa, a book shelf, and two beds. But nothing extra, no comfort, no well-being, and there were beer cans on the tables and trash on the floor, and sometimes when he got going and started wallpapering, he'd only do one wall. "I'll do the rest tomorrow!" But it never happened, and we also moved a lot, and never really got settled anywhere. But it was also empty in another way.

Dad was a caretaker with the worst working hours and when he came home with work pants with all those pockets with screwdrivers and things he'd sit down by the phone or the TV, and didn't want to be bothered. He was in his own world, and often with headphones listening to Yugoslavian folk music. He's crazy about Yugo music. He's recorded some tapes himself. He's a showman when he's in the right mood. But most of the time he was in his own world and if my friends called he'd hiss at them:

"Don't call here!"

I couldn't take my friends there and if they had asked for me I never found out. The phone wasn't important to me, and I had no one to speak with at home really, or, well, when there was something serious, dad was there for me. Then he could do anything for me, run downtown with his cocky style trying to settle stuff.

He had a way of walking which made people go, like "Who the fuck is that?" But he didn't care about all the normal stuff, what happened in school, in football and with friends, so I had to talk to myself to get outside. Sapko, my half-brother, lived with us during the first time, and sure I must have talked with him sometimes, he must have been seventeen then. But I don't remember much of it, and soon my dad would throw him out. They had some horrible fights. That's also a sad thing of course and it was only me and dad left. We were alone on our own sides, so to say, because the strange thing was that he didn't have any friends coming visit either. He was sitting by himself drinking. There was no company. But most of all, there was no food.

I was outdoors most of the time playing football and riding stolen bikes, and I would often come home hungry as a wolf and open the fridge thinking: Please, please, let there be something! But no, nothing just the usual stuff: milk, butter, some bread, and if I was lucky some juice, Multivitamin, the 4 liter pack, bought at the Arabian store because they were the cheapest, and beer of course, Pripps Blå and Carlsberg, six-packs with that plastic wrap around them. Sometimes there was only beer, and my stomach was screaming for food. There was a pain in that which I'll never forget. Ask Helena! I always say that the fridge has to be jam-packed. That will never change. The other day my kid, Vincent, cried, because he didn't get his pasta, but it was already cooking on the stove. The guy was yelling because he didn't get his food quick enough so I wanted to scream: If you only knew how well your life is!

I could search every drawer, every corner, for one single macaroni or a meatball. I could fill my stomach with toast. I could eat a whole loaf of bread, or I'd run over to mom's place. I wasn't always welcomed with open arms. It was more like "Fuck, is Zlatan coming too? Doesn't Sefik feed him? And sometimes she'd yell at me: Are we made of money? Are you gonna eat us out on the street? But still we helped each other, and at dad's place I started a little war against the beer. I poured out some of them in the sink, not all of them, that would have been too obvious, but a few.

He rarely noticed anything. There was beer everywhere, on the tables, in the shelves, and often I'd collect the empty cans in big black plastic trash bags and went to recycle them. I'd get 50 öre per can. Still I'd sometimes collect 50 or 100 kronor [ed note: that's 100 or 200 cans]. That was a lot of cans and I was happy for the cash. But of course, it was a sad thing, and like all kids in a situation like that I'd learn to read his mood. I knew exactly when I could talk to him. The day after he'd been drinking was quite cool.

Second day was worse. In some situations he could strike like lightning. Other times he was incredibly generous. Gave me five hundred kronor just like that. At that time I was collecting football pictures. You'd get a chewing gum and three pics in a little package. Oh, oh, which guys would I get? I wondered.

Maradona? I was often disappointed, especially when I only got Swedish players I didn't know anything about. But one day he came home with a whole box. It was a blast and I tore them all open and got all kinds of cool Brazilians. Sometimes we'd watch TV together, talking. Then it was all great.

But other days he was drunk. I have some horror images in my head, and when I got older, I started facing him. I wouldn't back off, like my brother. I told him: "You're drinking to much, dad", and we'd have some insane fights, sometimes meaningless, to tell you the truth. But I wanted to prove that I could speak for myself, and then we'd have a freaking chaos at home.

But he never touched me physically, never. Well, once he lifted me two meters up in the air and dropped me in my bed, but that was because I had been mean to Sanela, his jewel. Inside he was the kindest man in the world, and I understand now that he didn't have the easiest life. "He drinks to bury his sorrow", my brother said and maybe that wasn't the whole truth. The war really affected him a lot.

The war was a strange thing. I never found out anything about it. I was being protected. Everyone really made an effort. I didn't even understand why mom and my sisters dressed in black. It was weird like some new fashion thing. But it was our grandmother who had died in a bomb attack in Croatia and everyone mourned, everyone except me, who never found out about anything and never would care if people were Serbs or Bosnians, or whatever. But it was worst for my dad.

He came from Bijeljina in Bosnia. He used to be a mason down there, and all his family and old friends lived in the city and now suddenly hell had come there. Bijeljina was more or less raped, and wasn't strange that he called himself a muslim again, not at all. The Serbs invaded the town and executed hundreds of muslims. I think he knew many of them, and all his family had to escape. The whole population in Bijeljina was replaced, and Serbs moved into all the empty houses, also in my dad's old house. Someone else just entered the house and took over, and I can really understand he didn't have much time for me, especially not at nights when he sat waiting for the news on TV or some phone call from down there. The war ate him, and he became obsessed with following the news. He sat alone, drinking and mourning, listening to his Yugo-music, and I tried to stay outdoors or went over to mom's place. It was a different world.

At my dad's it was only him and me. At mom's it was a circus. People coming and leaving, loud voices and doors slamming. My mom had moved five floors up on the same street, Cronmans road 5A, the floor above my aunt Hanife, or Hanna as I called her. Me, Keki and Sanela were really close. We made a pact.

But there was some shit going on at mom's place too. My half-sister sank deeper and deeper into the drugs and mom would twitch every time the phone rang or someone was at the door: No, no, kind of.

Haven't we had enough accidents? What now? She grew old too soon, and is rabid against all kinds of drugs. Not a long time ago, and I'm talking recently as we speak, she called me, totally freaked out:

"There are drugs in the fridge!" "My god, drugs!" I got going too. Not again, you know, so I called Keki, kind of aggressively: "What the fuck, are there drugs in mom's fridge!?" He didn't understand a thing. But then it hit us. She talked about snus [ed note: swedish chewing tobacco].

"Chill, mom, it's just snus."

"The same shit", she said.

Those years really marked her, and we should have behaved better. But we didn't know how to. We only knew the rough style. The half-sis and her drugs moved out quite soon and went to a rehab place but always came back into the shit and eventually mom cut her off, or the other way around. I don't know the details there. Anyway, it was quite tough, but we have that tendency in our family. We hold our grudges, we're dramatic and say: "I never wanna see you again!" stuff like that.

Anyway, I remember one time when I was visiting her and her drugs in her own little apartment. It

could have been on my birthday. I think so. I had bought her some gifts, and she was acting very kind. But when I was going to the bathroom, she panicked and stopped me. "No, no", she yelled and ran in there and started moving stuff around. I knew something was wrong. There was like a secret. Lots of stuff like that happened. But like I said, they kept it away from me, and I had my own stuff, my bikes and my football, and my dreams about Bruce Lee and Muhammad Ali. I wanted to be like them.

Dad had an older brother named Sabahudin in the old Yugoslavia. They called him Sapko, my older brother was named after him. Sabahudin was a boxer, a real talent. He was fighting for BK Radnicki in the city Kragujevac and became Yugoslavic Champion with his club, and a national team boxer. But in 1967, when the guy was just had gotten married, and only twenty three years old, he swam out into the Neretva river. There were some currents and stuff and I think he had a problem with his heart or his lungs. He was drawn down by the currents and drowns. You can imagine, it was quite a blow for the family, and after that my dad became sort of a fanatic. He had all the great games recorded on video and it wasn't just Sabahudin, but also Ali, Foreman and Tyson, and all the Bruce Lee- and Jackie Chan-flicks on those old tapes.

Those were the things we'd watch when we hung out in front of the telly. Swedish TV was crap. It wasn't on the map. We lived in a totally different world. I was twenty years old when I watched my first Swedish film, and I had no clue about Swedish heroes or sport guys, like Ingemar Stenmark and guys like that. But I knew Ali! What a legend! He did his own thing no matter what people said. He never apologized and that's something I'll never forget. That dude was cool. He did his thing. That was the way to be, so I copied some stuff, I'm the greatest, kind of. You needed a tough attitude in Rosengård, and if you heard some shit, the worst was being called a cunt, and then you couldn't back down.

But usually we didn't mess around. You don't take a shit in your own bed, we used to say. It was more Rosengård against everyone else. I was there watching and screaming against the racist fuckers who demonstrate on November 30th, and once, at the Malmö Festival, I saw a huge gang from Rosengård, like two hundred of them, chasing a lone guy. It didn't really look fair, honestly. But since they were guys from my neighborhood I ran along, and I don't think that guy felt too good afterwards. We were all cocky and wild. But sometimes that's not so easy.

When me and dad lived by the Stenkula School I often stayed until late at mom's, and then I had to walk home through a dark tunnel which crosses Amiral street and is across the Annelunds bridge. Once, years before, my dad had robbed and badly beaten there and gone to the hospital with a punctured lung.

Although I didn't want to, I often thought about that. The more I tried to repress it, the more often it popped up in my head, and in this neighborhood there were some railroad tracks and a street. There's also a disgusting alley and some bushes and two lamp posts, one before the tunnel and one after. A part from that it was dark, and creepy vibes. That's why those lamp posts became my beacons. Between them I'd run like crazy with a pounding heart, and all the time I was thinking: I'm sure there are some creepy dudes in there, like the ones who attacked my dad, and I thought: If I run fast enough things will be alright, and I came home breathless, and surely was no Muhammad Ali.

Another time dad took me and Sanela to go swimming in Arlöv and afterwards I was at a friend's place.

When I was going home it started to rain. It was pouring down and I biked like crazy and stumbled home all wet. ~~We lived at Zenith Street then, a bit away from Rosengård, and I was very tired. I was shaking and had stomach ache. I was in so much pain. I could barely move and lay in bed all rolled up. I threw up.~~

I had cramps. I freaked out.

Dad came in and sure, he is like he is, his fridge was empty and he drank too much. But when the shit hits the fan, there's no one like him. He called a cab and lifted me up in the only position I could be in like a little schrimp, and carried me down to the car. I was light as a feather back then. Dad was big and powerful and totally crazy, he was like a lion again a screamed at the female cab driver:

"He's my boy, he's my everything, screw all the traffic rules, I'll pay the fines, I'll take care of the cops", and the woman, she did what he asked. She ran two red lights and came to the childrens section of Malmö Hospital. The whole situation had become an emergency, I've been told. I was getting a shot in my back, and dad had heard some shit about people getting paralyzed by things like that, and he said some aggressive stuff, I'm guessing. He would tear the city upside down if something went wrong.

But he calmed down and I was lying belly down sobbing and got that shot in my spine. We found out I had meningitis, and the nurse pulled down all the blinds and turned off all lights. It should be all dark around me and I got some meds and dad was watching by my side. Five in the morning the next day I opened my eyes and the crisis was over, and still I don't know, what caused that? Maybe I wasn't taking care of myself well enough.

I didn't exactly eat well. Physically I was small and weak at that time. Still, I must have been strong in other ways. I forgot about it and moved on and instead of sitting at home dwelling on things I went looking for kicks. I was running around all the time. There was like a fire inside me, and just like my dad, I got going for nothing: Like, who the hell are you? Those were tough years, I've realized that now. My dad was on a roller coaster, often totally absent or furiously mad: "You have to be home by this or that time." "You can't fucking do that."

If you were a guy in dad's world and got in trouble, you should stand up for yourself and be a man. Not exactly some softy shit, not "I have stomach pain today. I'm a bit sad." Nothing like that!

I learned how to bite the bullet and move on, and also, don't forget that, I learned some stuff about sacrificing yourself. When we bought a new bed for me at Ikea, dad couldn't afford the transport. It was like five hundred extra or something. So what could we do? It was simple. Dad carried the bed on his back all the way from Ikea, totally insane, mile after mile, and I walked after him with the bed headboards.

Those were light, like nothing, Still I couldn't keep up with him:

"Take it easy, dad, stop."

But he just walked on. He had that macho style, and sometimes he'd turn up in school at parents meetings with his cowboy thing going on. Everyone wondered: Who is that? People noticed him. He got respect, and the teachers probably didn't dare complaining about me as much as they had planned

Kinda like, we have to be careful with that guy!

People have asked me: What would I be doing if I hadn't become a football player? I have no idea. But maybe I would have become a criminal. There were a lot of crimes at that time. Not like we were going out just to steal or rob. But some shit still happened, not just bikes. It was in and out of department stores also, and I often got a kick out of that. The thefts triggered me, and I should be so happy my dad never found out. He was drinking, sure, but there were still rules. You should do the right thing. And definitely not steal things, not a chance. Then he'd be pulling down the sky, sort of.

But the time we were caught at Wessels department store wearing our winter jackets I was lucky. We had taken stuff worth one thousand four hundred kronor. It wasn't the ordinary stealing candy thing. But my friend's dad had to come pick us up, and when the letter arrived at home, Zlatan Ibrahimovic has been arrested for theft, bla bla bla, I could tear it up before dad got to see it. I was lucky and I continued stealing, so okay, it could have ended badly.

But I can say one thing for sure, it wouldn't have had anything to do with drugs. I was obviously totally against them. I didn't just pour out dad's beer. I threw away mom's cigarettes. I hated all drugs and poisons and I was seventeen or eighteen when I got drunk the first time and threw up in some stairs like any other teenager, and after that I haven't gotten drunk many times, only one collapse in a bathtub after the first scudetto with Juventus. It was Trézéguet, the snake, who pushed me into drinking shots.

Me and Sanela also pushed Keki hard in Rosengård. He wasn't allowed to smoke or drink because then we'd be coming after him. It was a special thing, with my younger brother.

We took care of him. With sensitive stuff he'd go to Sanela. With tougher things he'd turn to me. I stood up for him. I took responsibility. But a part from that I wasn't exactly being a saint, and I haven't always been too kind to friends and teammates. I did some aggressive things, the kind of shit that would make me go insane today if someone did it to Maxi and Vincent. But there's a fact we can't forget. I was double already back then.

I was disciplined and wild, and I was figuring out philosophies about that. My thing was that I would both talk and perform. So, not just talking: I'm the best, who the fuck are you? Of course not, there's nothing more childish, but not either performing or saying chicken shit like the Swedish stars. I wanted to become the best while being cocky. Not that I thought I'd become a superstar or anything like that. Jesus, I came from Rosengård! But maybe those things made me a bit different.

I was trouble. I was crazy. But I had character. I wasn't always in time to school. I had problems getting up in the mornings, I still do, but I did my homework, at least sometimes. Math was the easiest. Bam, bam, bam and I saw the solution. It was a bit like on the football field. Images and solutions just came to me like lightning. But I sucked at writing down the solutions so the teacher thought I cheated. I wasn't exactly the guy you'd expect doing well in school. I was more like the guy you kick out of school. Still, I really studied. I read everything before the tests, and forgot everything the day after. I wasn't really a bad boy. I just had trouble sitting still, and I threw some rubbers and stuff like that. I had ants in my pants.

Those were turbulent years. We moved all the time, I don't really know why. But we rarely lived in one place for more than a year, and the teachers used that. You have to switch to a school near your

home, they said, not because rules mattered much to them, but because they saw a chance of getting rid of me.

I went to different schools all the time and had problems getting friends, and dad had was on call on his caretaker job and had his war and his drinking, and the worst thing was the tinnitus in his ears. It would be ringing in his head, and I was taking care of myself more and more, trying not to care about the chaos in my family. There was always some shit.

You know, we from the Balkan are tough. My sister and her drugs had cut off contact with mom and us, and maybe that was to expect after all the fights with the drugs and rehab centers. But also my other half-sister was struck out from our family. Mom just erased her, and then I barely knew why. It was some crap about a boyfriend, a guy from Yugoslavia. Him and my sister had a fight and mom took his side for some reason, and then my sister freaked out and she and mom yelled some terrible shit at each other, and of course that wasn't good. But still, it shouldn't have been like the end of the world.

It wasn't like it was the first time we were fighting in my family. But mom was proud, and I guess she and my sister got some kind of lock up. I recognize that. I don't forget things either. I remember a basketball tackle for years. I remember shit that has been done to me, and I can hold grudges for a long time. But this time things went too far.

We had been five siblings at mom's place, and suddenly we were only three; me, Sanela and Aleksandar, and things couldn't be repaired. They were like written in stone. The half-sis no longer belonged to us, and years went by. She was gone. But fifteen years later her son called our mom. My half-sister had a son, a grandson to mom in other words.

"Hi granny", he said, but mom didn't want to have anything to do with him.

"I'm sorry", she said and hung up.

I couldn't believe it when I heard. I felt very bad. I can't describe the feeling. I wanted to disappear. You don't act like that! Never, ever! But there is a lot of pride in my family that fucks things up for us and I'm happy I had the football.



At dad's place in Rosengård, years later

CHAPTER 3

In Rosengård we had different areas (enclosures), and no area was better or worse than the other, well the one that was called the Gipsy area had a low status. But it wasn't like all the Albanians or Turks hanged around at one place. It was the area that counted, not the country your parents where from. But you had to stay at your own area, and the area where my mom had her house was called Törnrosen. It had a swing, a playing ground, a flag pole and a football court where we played every day. Sometime they didn't let me play. I was too little. Then I flipped out in an instant.

I hated to be left outside. I hated to lose. But still, the most important thing wasn't winning. It was the tricks and the awesome stuff. There was a lot of "wow! Look at that!". You could impress the guys with tricks and flicks, and you had to practice until you were the best, and often the mom's yelled from the windows: "It's late. The food is ready. Come inside."

"Soon, soon", we said and continued playing, and it could get late and start raining and general chaos.

But we continued playing. We never got tired and it was close spaces. You had to be quick in both head and feet, especially for me since I was little and weak and could easily be get tackled, and I learned cool stuff all the time. I had to. Or else I wouldn't get any "wow's", nothing that triggered me and often I slept with the ball and thought of new tricks I would do the next day. It was like a movie that kept on going.

My first club was MBI, Malmö Boll och idrottsförening. I was six years when I started there. We played on gravel behind a couple of green barracks, and I biked to the training on stolen bikes and wasn't always that well behaved I guess. The coaches sent me home a couple of times, and I screamed and swore at them, and I heard all the time: "Pass the ball, Zlatan!". It pissed me off, and I felt awkward. In MBI you had both foreigners and Swedes, and a lot of parents whined about my tricks from the block. I told them to go to hell and changed club several times and came to FBK Balkan, and that was something else!

In MBI the Swedish dads stood and yelled: "Come on, guys. Good work!" In Balkan it was more: "I will fuck you mother up the ass". They were crazy Yugoslavs who smoked a lot and threw shoes around them and I thought: Wonderful, exactly like home. I belong here! The coach was a Bosnian. He had played on a high level down there in Yugoslavia, and he became some kind of a dad to us. He drove us home sometimes, and could give me a couple of Kronor to buy ice cream or sometime to straighten up my hunger.

I was a goalie for a while. I don't know why really. Maybe I had flipped out on the old goalie and said something like: "You suck, I can do this better myself". It was probably something like that. But one game I let in a lot of goals, and then I became furious. I screamed that everyone was shit. That football was shit.

That the whole world was shit, and that I would start playing hockey instead:

"Hockey is a lot better, you fucking idiots! I will become a hockey pro! Go drown yourselves!" It was just that: I looked hockey up, and damn, all the stuff you needed! You had to have money. The only thing I could do was to continue with that shit sport called Football. But I stopped being a goalie and

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