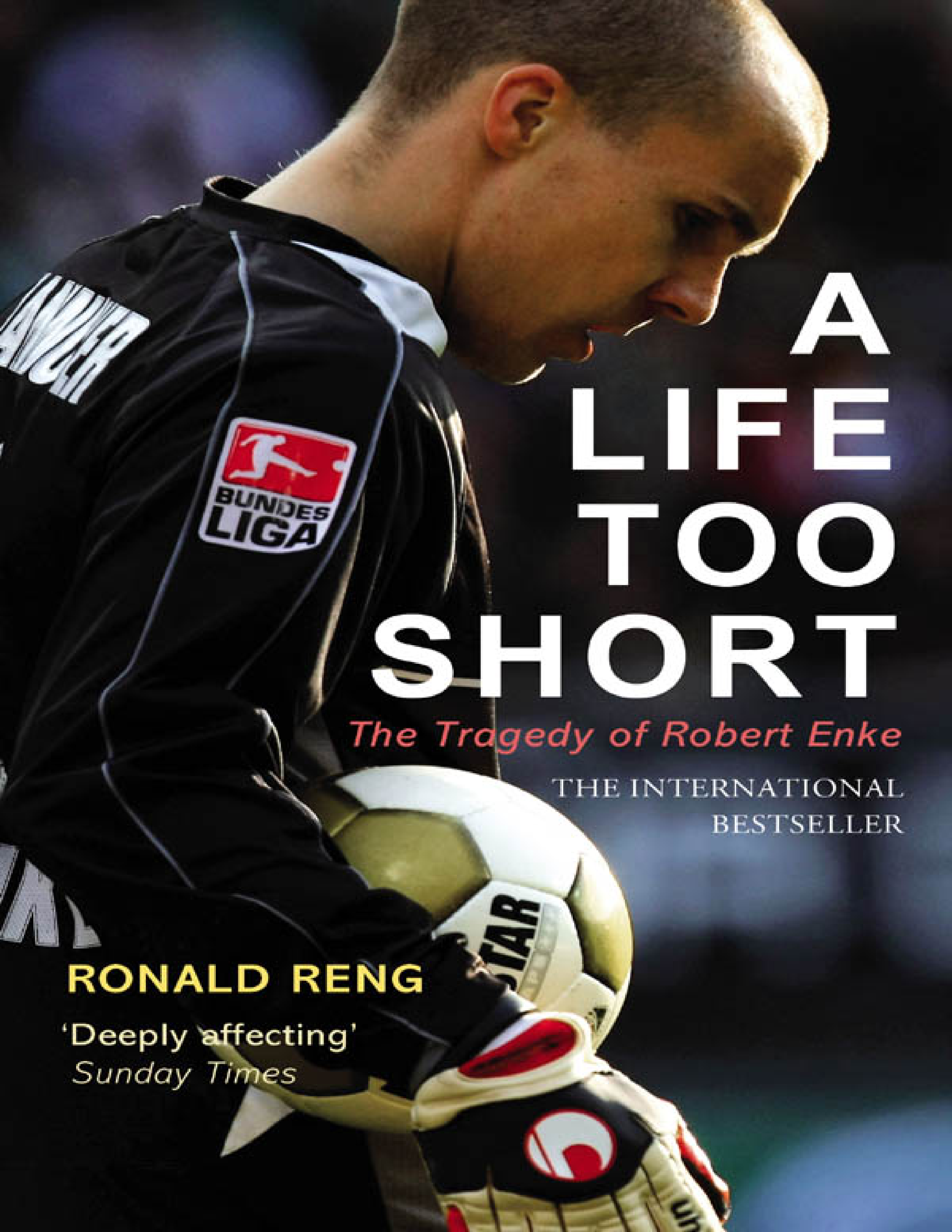

A LIFE TOO SHORT

The Tragedy of Robert Enke

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

RONALD RENG

'Deeply affecting'
Sunday Times

Contents

About the Book

Why does an international footballer with the world at his feet decide to take his own life?

On 10 November 2009 the German national goalkeeper, Robert Enke, stepped in front of a passing train. He was thirty two years old.

Viewed from the outside, Enke had it all. Here was a professional goalkeeper who had played for a string of Europe’s top clubs including Jose Mourinho’s Benfica and Louis Van Gaal’s Barcelona. Enke was destined to be his country’s first choice for years to come. But beneath the bright veneer of success lay a darker story.

In *A Life Too Short,* award-winning writer Ronald Reng pieces together the puzzle of his lost friend’s life. Reng brings into sharp relief the specific demands and fears faced by those who play top-level sport. Heartfelt, but never sentimental he tells the universal tragedy of a talented man’s struggles against his own demons.

About the Author

Ronald Reng is the highly-acclaimed author of *The Keeper of Dreams: One Man's Controversial Story of Life in the English Premiership* (Yellow Jersey Press), which won Biography of the Year at the 2004 British Sports Book Awards.

Also by Ronald Reng

The Keeper of Dreams

List of Illustrations

Ronald Reng

A LIFE TOO SHORT

The Tragedy of Robert Enke

Translated by Shaun Whiteside

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Through these balmy summer days, which seem made for ease and pleasure, the testing continues: what part is being tested he is no longer sure. Sometimes it seems he is being tested simply for testing’s sake, to see whether he will endure the test.

Youth, J. M. Coetzee

The Waning Power of Poetry

'I would like a poem,' Teresa says, and for a second that lasts an eternity the house falls silent.

Robert looks quizzically at his wife to see if she really means it. Is he supposed to give her a poem for her birthday? 'It'd be nice,' Teresa adds casually, and thinks no more about it.

But he can't get the idea out of his head.

It's a few years since he last read a poem, let alone wrote one. He tries to remember. A poem, he thinks, has to rhyme; a good poem, he believes, is like a hint of a smile, with delicate humour between the lines. With that idea in his head, Robert starts writing.

Some afternoons he lies to Teresa, saying he's going to his office for a while to go through tax documents or to complete some other paper-work. Then he sits down at his desk with a biro and a note-pad. His gaze drifts to the garden. The rear side of his office is one huge window; it gives him a feeling of wellbeing when the sunbeams fall on him in the spring. But now, in the winter, it's less pleasant at his desk. The heating in the office is unreliable. Their house in Empede, on the flat terrain of Lower Saxony, is a converted farm. His office used to be the stable.

The words he puts down on the paper look bent and rough – he hardly ever uses his valuable goalkeeper's fingers to write. But in his head the words start forming rhymes more and more quickly, and he's filled with joy – not like the flood of happiness he experiences when he steers a difficult shot over the bar, quite gentle, but so intense that Robert has to keep on writing, in the office, in the hotel the evening before a Bundesliga match, on scraps of note-paper, on the backs of bills. Sometimes, if he has no paper to hand, he taps his ideas into his mobile phone. By the time the big day, 18 February 2009, arrives he has written 104 lines.

He wishes Teresa a happy birthday while they're still in bed. When she goes to the bathroom he creeps into the hall and lets the dogs out. They have nine of them, and two cats. Teresa rescued them from the streets during their years in southern Europe. On her last birthday she'd wished for a pet pig. He'd decided to take it as a joke.

He lights candles in the living-room.

'Let's do the presents this afternoon, when we've got more peace,' says Teresa when she comes in.

He shakes his head; it won't take long. He asks her to sit down at the old farmhouse table, just for a moment. As he presses her gently into the chair by her shoulders he can't help smiling with anticipation. Then he takes his place on the other side of the table.

He sets his poem down in front of him. But he speaks by heart.

For your birthday, what will it be?
A diamond, beautiful to see?
Perhaps a watch from the jeweller's store?
It won't be cheap, of that you can be sure.

And what about having a pig for a pet?
Robbi will put down his foot about that!
Cats, then, or horses, or maybe a dog?
No, please, stop it, my head's in a fog.

So, for her birthday, what's it to be?

Oh no, what she wants is a poem from me!
It isn’t too big, or too much, or too dear
Yet the very thought of it fills me with fear.

Teresa is struck dumb with joy. Verse by verse he presents her with her whole life: the move to Empede, her love of animals, even the death of their daughter Lara, who was born with a serious heart defect and died after an operation at the age of two.

Then Lara came with her imperfect heart –
That was something that tore us apart.
But she was strong, and even in pain
She still lived up to the family name.

When he’s finished, Teresa has tears in her eyes. She says only one sentence, ‘Please read it to me again.’

He starts again, at the beginning, all twenty-six verses, all 104 lines. At the end he says:

We can’t then help wondering what’ll come next
Along life’s long journey – it’s got me perplexed.
Will Grandpa stay, or will he not?
Are we going to move house? I don’t know a jot!

I won’t let things become too much of a worry –
The days soon pass, there is no great hurry.
Only one thing is certain, and this much is true;
The one thing is this: that I need and love you.

Robert Enke is thirty-one, the German national football team’s goalkeeper, strong, good-natured and happy. It will be the last birthday that Teresa celebrates with him.

On Tuesday, 10 November 2009, he calls ‘Hallo Ela!’ from the kitchen when the housekeeper arrives at nine o’clock. He gives his second daughter, Leila, ten months old, a kiss on the forehead and says goodbye to Teresa. On the magnetic board in the kitchen he has noted in felt-tip pen all the things that need doing, including a reminder to get four tickets for the Bayern Munich game. Then he’s out of the door. He has two individual training sessions today: in the morning with the fitness coach, in the afternoon with the goalkeeping coach of Hannover 96. He’ll be back at about half-past six, as always. That was what he said to Teresa.

But there’s no training arranged for this Tuesday.

I get through to him on his mobile in the car just after half-past twelve. I’m to pass on two requests: an English journalist friend of mine wants to interview him, and the German Olympic Sport Library wants to invite him as guest speaker to their annual conference in January. Hey, am I your secretary, passing on requests to you like this, I try to joke. But he’s abrupt on the phone. Of course, I think, he’s in the car between training sessions; he probably wants to get to lunch in the Espada or at Heimweh, as always. ‘I’ll call you back tonight, Ronnie, OK?’ he says. I can’t remember how he signed off.

That evening I only get calls from other people.

Robert Enke’s suicide on that cool autumn evening brought together people who were close to him and people who had never heard his name before in that state where you feel raw inside, as if you’ve been torn apart. In the days that followed, the sympathy often bordered on hysteria: the London *Times* devoted half of its front page to Robert Enke; in China, state television included him in the main news; the news agencies announced that the number of guests at his funeral was a record (‘more than at any funeral in Germany since Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s’). That Robert’s passing had assumed such dimensions could only be explained by the fact that these days everything, even death, becomes an event.

But beyond the headlines, deep down, there was real pain, a profound paralysis. Robert's death reminded most of us how little we understand about the illness that is depression. The rest of us, in shockingly large numbers, were reminded of how difficult it is to speak about depression. Just like Robert, we had always thought we had to keep our illness or the illnesses of our families a secret.

The facts are regularly in the newspapers: more people die every day of depression-related suicide than in road accidents. But such figures don't give us anything more than a vague idea that sadness is too hard for some people to bear. And if the headlines were bigger when celebrities like Marilyn Monroe or Ernest Hemingway killed themselves, that seemed somehow – even if people didn't say it out loud – to have its own logic; artists do that kind of thing. Because isn't melancholy, the dark side, an inevitable part of art?

But Robert Enke was Germany's number one goalkeeper. The last bulwark, calm and cool in the tensest situations, able to control his stress and anxieties at the most extreme moments. Every weekend professional sportsmen like him play out the dream that everything is achievable; more than most footballers Robert gave the public the illusion that every obstacle could be overcome. At the age of twenty-nine he'd made it into the national side, having been unemployed after a first depression four years earlier and then stranded in the second division in Spain; after Lara's death in 2006 he and Teresa had managed to find a life in parallel to their pain. And at a time when, outwardly at least, he seemed finally to have rediscovered happiness – a family with a daughter, as well as the prospect of being in goal for his country at the World Cup in South Africa – early in August 2009 the depression returned, worse than ever.

What power must this illness have if it can draw a man like Robert Enke to the mistaken conclusion that death is the only solution? What darkness must have surrounded this sensitive person if he could no longer recognise what pain he would be inflicting on his loved ones with his death, and on the driver whose train he threw himself under that November evening?

How do people live with depression, or even just with the knowledge that it could envelop them at any time? With the fear of fear?

Robert wanted to provide those answers himself.

It was he who wanted to write this book, not me.

We had known each other since 2002. I'd reported on him sometimes for newspapers; then all of a sudden we were living in the same city, Barcelona. We met more and more often. I had the feeling that we thought the same things in life were important: politeness, peace, goalkeeping gloves. At some point he said, 'I read a book of yours, I thought it was great!' I blushed at the praise and gave a panicky answer, just something cheeky to put the conversation on a different course, 'One day we'll write one about you together.' My bashfulness grew when I realised he'd taken my banter as a serious suggestion. After that he reminded me repeatedly about our project. 'I've taken some notes so that I don't forget anything.'

Today I know why the biography was so close to his heart. When his goalkeeping career was over, he would finally be able to talk about his illness. In our achievement-oriented society a goalkeeper, the last bastion in defence, can't be a depressive. So Robert summoned up a huge amount of strength to keep his depression secret. He locked himself away in his illness.

So I will now have to tell his story without him.

It's hard to imagine ever coming across such unreservedly open interviewees as I did on my journey through Robert's life. Friends of his suddenly started talking about their own dark thoughts. His goalkeeping rivals, who were supposed to wear the mask of invulnerability in interviews in accordance with the law of professional sport, suddenly started airing their doubts and anxieties.

In most of us, the death of someone we love prompts the urge to be honest, to do good, to want to change things. But a public death brings one thing to the fore above all: our helplessness as human beings.

We didn't even know how to mourn him appropriately. Debates raged cruelly across Germany about whether the funeral celebration in Hanover was reverent or part of an event. Robert's mother was bothered by the fact that the coffin was laid out in the stadium. 'I thought to myself, for heaven's sake, he's not Lenin!', Gisela Enke said to me as we sat in her kitchen in Jena. Robert, sportily elegant with a velvety blue V-neck sweater under his grey suit jacket, has his arm tightly around her in one of the many photographs above the dining-table. This energetic, cordial woman gave us all a lesson in humility. She has understood that it's ridiculous to argue about how successful a funeral was. She has found her peace in the knowledge that everyone involved in the funeral service wanted the best; that even when we're inspired to do good we get lots of things wrong.

Lots of people misunderstood Robert's death. They thought he killed himself because he could no longer bear his life. There were copycat suicides, committed by people who had succumbed to the lunatic notion that then they would be like him, then they would be close to him. What a tragic misunderstanding. Most depressives who attempt suicide don't want to die, they just want the darkness that defines their thoughts to disappear once and for all. Robert was almost certainly no different. 'If you could just have my head for half an hour, you'd know why I go mad,' he once told Teresa.

But it didn't matter how many such explanations I found, the questions, the recurring, revolving questions, wouldn't be stopped by any answer. Had something happened in his childhood that made him susceptible to depression? What was going on in his head that Tuesday in November when he spent eight hours driving around in his car before stepping out on to the railway tracks? Such questions return remorselessly, even the day after Teresa's thirty-fourth birthday, which is also her first – the first without him.

We're sitting in the kitchen in Empede. Leila is playing that game so beloved of one-year-old children: clearing out the kitchen cupboards. The previous day had been bearable. (Those are Teresa's new units of measurement – bearable or unbearable.) Lots of neighbours called in with their children and brought home-made cakes, flowers, best wishes, even though Teresa hadn't said anything, no one had. A dozen friends gathered in the kitchen. I'd rather read the birthday cards later, said Teresa. And silence fell for a moment. How hollow some words can sometimes sound; birthday cards …

Now, the next morning, the emptiness in the house is tangible once more, and Teresa can't help thinking about her thirty-third birthday, which will in a sense always be her last. When Robert gave her the poem.

Teresa still believed in the power of poetry in the late summer of 2009. 'Write me another poem,' she said to him on the phone at the beginning of September, when he was lying in a hotel room in Cologne, at a training-camp with the national team, and the fear of the new day – the fear that someone would expect something from him – wouldn't allow him to get out of bed. In the evening he put a chair on the balcony of his hotel room and, with Cologne Cathedral glowing in the background, wrote another poem on his mobile.

Sitting on the balcony,
My head is a balloon.

Heavy as lead and stone.
It can’t be this way.

He no longer felt the joy that beautiful words can prompt, the contentment that comes from writing down one’s thoughts. His poem simply didn’t matter to him.

In the diary he kept during his depressive periods the entries also get more concise the more violently the illness afflicts him. On the last page there’s a single sentence in huge letters. It was presumably supposed to be a reminder to himself, but today his sentence reads like a challenge to us all:

‘Don’t forget these days.’

ONE

A Child of Fortune

ONE SUNDAY AFTERNOON in December 1995 Robert Enke went to the Western Station in Jena and started waiting. The long-distance train from Nuremberg pulled in, passengers got out, and he showed no sign of disappointment when they all walked past him and left the platform. He carried on waiting. Two hours later the early evening train from the south arrived. Again he let all the passengers drift by as if nothing was the matter. It was not the best time of year to be spending half your Sunday waiting for trains in a draughty station so he decided to go to the cinema until the next train came in. He had turned eighteen four months earlier – an age that excuses almost every kind of wilful behaviour and at which, in your opinion, it's other people who are behaving weirdly.

On Sunday, Teresa always came back to the high school sports college on the last train from Bad Windsheim. Even in her second year in Jena she still went to see her parents almost every weekend.

She was hurrying out of the icy station when she spotted him on the bench. She sat next to Robert at school. When she, a Bavarian outsider, had arrived in Year 12 at the East German sports college a year and a half earlier there had only been two seats free, one on its own at the back and one next to Robert. They got on well, she thought, though if she was him she'd give the haircut a bit of thought. He had already started training with the professional footballers of Carl Zeiss Jena and wore his fair hair the way they did, short at the sides, long at the top – 'like a bird's nest on his head'.

1. Robert with Teresa and his family after a game between Jena sports college and a Thuringian team.

'Hi, what are you doing here?' she asked him. It was after ten o'clock at night.

'I'm waiting for somebody.'

'Oh, OK. Well, have a nice evening.'

She smiled at him briefly and hurried on.

'Hey!' he cried after her. 'You're the one I'm waiting for, obviously!'

And he'd been waiting for more than five hours, he told her a bit later, when they were having a drink in a bar called the French Pub.

He was still living with his mother in the flats on Liselotte Herrmann Strasse, but he hadn't told her or anyone that he was going to go and wait for Teresa at the station. He kept his feelings, his important decisions, all to himself. For weeks afterwards, while he and Teresa were getting closer, he didn't tell his friends a thing. But they weren't surprised when the two of them became a couple – that Robert Enke could achieve that, too. 'We still often talk about it,' says one of his former school friends, Torsten Ziegner, 'about how Robert was this kid with a really sunny nature who managed to do whatever he put his mind to, who couldn't be thrown off track, who was always in a good mood.' Torsten turns his glass of water around in front of him to keep the short silence from getting too big. And for a moment everyone there in the living-room of Andy Meyer, another friend from those days, thinks the same thing: how strange that sounds today, thinking of Robert as a kid with a sunny nature. 'Although,' Andy says at last, speaking bravely into the silence, 'actually I still think that, in spite of everything, Enkus was a child of joy.'

The daylight, reflected by the snow and given a glaring quality, falls through the window of the single-family house in Zwätzen, an area of newly built houses just outside Jena. It's one in the afternoon and Andy has just got up. There's still a hint of tiredness in his eyes. He's a nurse and was on night-shift. Torsten's jeans fit loosely; the Gallagher brothers would like his jacket with its little diamonds and its stand-up collar. He's a professional footballer, a slender, wiry athlete, and at thirty-two he's back with FC Carl Zeiss Jena in the Third Liga. You see Andy and Torsten, in their early thirties, and you immediately sense the warmth, the humour, of those youthful times. 'We realised immediately that we had the same interests – or rather, the same *dis*interests,' says Torsten.

'More than anything else,' adds Andy, 'we laughed.'

It was always the four of them in those days: Torsten Ziegner, Andy Meyer, Mario Kanopa, who went off to be a teacher on the Dutch border, and Robert Enke, who they called Enkus – who they go on calling Enkus because as far as they're concerned he's still the person he used to be.

Robert grew up among clothes lines. He and his friends met in the courtyards of the flats in the afternoon. 'Over the Line' was the name of the game on the estate. He would stand in goal between two clothes props and lob the ball over to his partner who would then volley the ball at the goal.

From a distance his home, the satellite town of Lobeda, is still the first thing you see of Jena. Some forty thousand people used to live there, more than a third of the inhabitants of Jena; about seventeen thousand remain. On the side-streets between the fifteen-storey industrialised blocks on the Communist boulevards there are a few lower blocks no different from the ones you might see in a West German suburb like Frankfurt-Schwanheim or Dortmund-Nordstadt. While the two German states were constantly reminding each other of their differences, in the eighties such apartment blocks made boys' lives pretty similar in East and West. Washing props ruled the world, from Jena-Lobeda to Frankfurt-Schwanheim. They only learned about adult concerns, Andy Meyer says, after the collapse of East Germany, though perhaps as children they'd just found them boring and hence ignored them: that Andy's father couldn't become a teacher because he wasn't in the Party; that Robert's father, a 400-metre hurdler, was thrown out of high-performance sports promotion because he received postcards from a brother who had escaped to the West.

They would only interrupt their courtyard games for a special reason – when they had to go to football training. Andy Meyer, who lived a few blocks away, had been spotted by the city's big club, FC Carl Zeiss, early on. He was seven at the time, and he got used to winning with Carl Zeiss. So Andy has a particularly clear memory of one defeat. On the uneven pitch in Am Jenzig, at the foot of Jena's Hausberg mountain, FC Carl Zeiss lost 3–1 to SV Jenapharm. Big clubs have their ways of dealing with such defeats, even in children's teams: Helmut Müller, Carl Zeiss's coach, immediately walked over to the parents of Jenapharm's striker, who had scored all three goals, and told them their son should join Carl Zeiss straight away.

It was Robert Enke.

In every sportsman's biography there's a moment when some people say, 'What luck!' And others, 'So that's what they call fate.’ Muhammad Ali’s Schwinn bicycle was stolen when he was twelve, and the policeman who took his statement advised him to stop crying and become a boxer. Robert was a decent attacking player in the Under-10 youth team at FC Carl Zeiss Jena when the father of Thomas, the goalkeeper, was moved to Moscow for professional reasons. The side needed a new goalkeeper. ‘The coach had no idea,’ says Andy Meyer, ‘so everyone had to have a go in goal. The whole business was sorted out quickly. Our lucky kid saved two shots and from that point on he was number one.’

2. Robert Enke (left) at Carnival.

Without knowing how, Robert did everything right: the powerful jump, holding the hands with thumbs spread when catching, the decision to pluck one cross out of the air and not to risk it with the next one. Although ‘most of the time he didn’t do a thing’, his father says. ‘Carl Zeiss was so superior among the children’s teams that the goalkeeper got bored. But that suited him.’ A gentle smile, for a few seconds free of pain, slips across his father’s face as he holds the memory. ‘It meant he didn’t have to run so much.’

Dirk Enke has the same smile as his son. Unusually slowly, as if he were trying politely to hold it back, it spreads across his face. He was worried about the moment when he would have to talk about Robert; worried that the memories would become too strong. So at first, in his flat on Marktplatz, high above the roofs of Jena, he let the slides do the talking. Someone recently – Dirk Enke says 'afterwards' – gave him a projector so that he could take another look at the old slides from Robert's childhood in East Germany. The three children on a camping holiday on the Baltic – Anja, Gunnar and Robert, the afterthought, who was born nine years after his sister and seven years after his brother. 'You only actually got a pitch permit when you had four children,' says Robert's father, but there were things that weren't followed up all that precisely, even in a surveillance state. 'We always put down four, and no one ever checked.' The projector clicks on – Robert with his third grandma. 'My proper grandma' was what he called Frau Käthe, a pensioner from next door who often looked after him, and with whom he liked to spend time, even as an adolescent. As a child he always used to say, 'I've got a fat grandma, a thin grandma and a proper grandma.'

When Robert was eleven this sequence of lovely pictures took a break. He came back from school to Liselotte Herrmann Strasse to find his father standing by the door with a bag.

'Papi, where are you going?'

His father couldn't bring himself to reply. He walked in silence, with watery eyes, to the car.

His son ran to his mother in the flat. 'What's happened?'

His mother sobbed. 'We had a bit of an argument. Your father's moving into the shack in Cospeda for the time being.'

There was a new woman in his father's life.

Robert asked his mother every day for weeks, 'Mama, how are you?' Gisela could see in his face how much he feared a sad reply.

But his parents refused to believe that their marriage was over. They went on seeing each other, ‘and we didn’t just do it for the sake of the children. I was with Dirk for thirty years, we’d known each other as adolescents.’ That summer they went on holiday together to Lake Balaton. Robert sat in the back of the car and said, loudly but casually, as if he weren’t speaking to anyone in particular, ‘Well, if it leads to a reconciliation, let’s just go on holiday to Lake Balaton.’ Rather than joyful, he sounded hopeful.

‘The fall of the Wall brought us back together again,’ Robert’s mother reveals. The intoxication of the demonstrations and the excitement of the big approaching changes reunited the family before the Germanys could do the same. Dirk Enke moved back into the flat. For their silver wedding anniversary they went on a cycling tour on the Rhine near Koblenz.

The Enkes were among those who greeted reunification without a hint of scepticism. Robert’s father was able to greet the larger part of his family on the western side of the border. ‘My feeling was: at last!’ When the Wall came down, the boys amid the washing props were twelve or thirteen – the last generation to have consciously experienced two German states, the first to grow up in both. Andy Meyer can still remember how Robert and he paraded up and down the Löbdergraben with their Carl Zeiss youth team in honour of GDR President Erich Honecker. ‘And what we thought was great was that there were food coupons for bockwursts afterwards,’ Andy Meyer recalls. They became aware of the new age in a similarly casual manner. In fact they just went on playing, ignoring the changes. They didn’t even take a break for reunification. ‘There was nothing crucial about it for us kids,’ says Andy. He laughs. ‘The football training just went on.’

In Lobeda, however, the former socialist dream of a nicer way of living found itself faced with a new proletariat. The children had to come to terms with that. Turks from West Germany sold carpets door to door, believing that they could swindle the naive ‘Ossis’, as East Germans were known. The young people of the satellite town suddenly started ganging together and saying they were on the far right.

‘Don’t let anyone in,’ Gisela warned her son, who was regularly at home alone after school because both parents worked, she as a teacher of Russian and sport, he as a psychotherapist at the city hospital.

Robert cautiously opened the door one day when the bell rang. Great-uncle Rudi, a university Latin professor, was paying a visit.

‘Hello, are your parents at home?’

The boy looked at him through screwed-up eyes.

‘You don’t recognise me, do you? I’m Great-uncle Rudi.’

‘Anyone could say that!’ yelled Robert, pushing the baffled professor away and slamming the door shut.

Another time the right-wing thugs were waiting for him on the way home from school. They grabbed him and started shoving him around, but before he was hit one of them recognised him. ‘Stop, it’s Robert Enke!’ He was twelve. He was clearly already famous as a goalie. They let him go.

But the fear didn’t go away. He yearned for a protective skin. He begged his mother to buy him a bomber jacket, then the right-wingers would mistake him for one of their own and leave him alone. ‘At first I was horrified that he wanted to give in like that,’ says his mother, ‘but, OK, I thought, if it means he’s not scared. And he only wore the jacket for a few weeks.’

When the first wave of disillusion arrived in the united Germany, even reunification lost its power to hold the Enkes’ marriage together.

One Sunday, as the family sat in the living-room, Robert's father took a deep breath.

'I have something to tell you.'

The mother knew already. The other woman in his life had never quite disappeared from the scene.

'Gisela and I are splitting up. I'm moving out.'

Robert leapt up from the sofa and ran out of the door.

'Gunnar, run, bring the boy back!' cried his mother.

Gunnar found his brother in the road. He refused to speak. He didn't want anything to show. He'd got used to dealing with his own sadness.

To his three friends he seemed to have lost nothing of his sunny disposition. 'Enkus chucked a glass of water around, and everyone got wet except him – that's how it always was,' says Andy. A teacher caught Robert cheating during a biology exam, copying the work of the student next to him. He got an E. But when the reports were sent out he got a Satisfactory in biology. He was strikingly helpful, prudent and a gifted goalkeeper, and that combination clearly inclined his teachers to leniency. Robert knew he would do reasonably well at school without having to try too hard, and didn't strive for more.

3. The youth team of CZ Jena on a trip to Tunisia. Robert is on the left, second from the front, and second from the front on the right is his friend Mario Kanopa.

Mario Kanopa and Torsten Ziegner had come to the sports college at the age of fourteen, and the names of their home clubs still contained an echo of a villagey world far away from Jena: Mario came from the company sports team Traktor Frauenpriessnitz, Torsten from BSG Mikroelektronik Neuhaus/ Rennweg. They often squabbled in their little dormitory. If anything bothered him, Torsten immediately lost his temper. His impulsiveness infuriated Mario. Enkus got on excellently with both of them. If he was there, they all got along famously.

Newspaper cuttings about them began to be pinned to the wall of the entrance hall at the sports college. In 1993 Robert, Torsten and Mario travelled with the Thuringian state side to the traditional federal states Under-16 Youth Cup where the scouts from the professional clubs would be standing on the sidelines. It's at this annual tournament at the Wedau Sportschule in Duisburg that fifteen-year-olds first become potential professionals in the eyes of the football scene. At first the Thuringian team thought that what happened in Duisburg was a great joke; at the end 'we laughed our heads off about ourselves', Torsten Ziegner remembers. In an absurd repetition, one game was much like another. They regularly looked like the defeated team, but they never lost. 'It was,' Torsten says, 'as if Robert was playing on his own.' With every shot he caught Robert seemed more enormous to the strikers who appeared in front of him. In this tournament he attained the supreme mental state of a goalkeeper: in the midst of all the frantic activity of the game, absolute peace settles upon you. However hard the strikers shoot, you think the ball belongs only to you. An almighty sense of security fills you and makes you ever bigger. Thuringia's results in Duisburg were 0–0, 0–0, 1–0 and 4–0. No one got a shot past him.

In the same year Carl Zeiss Jena reached the final of the German Under-16 youth championship, a feat no club with similarly modest means would emulate over the next fifteen years. The club president invited the team to a bar called Sockenschuss for a round of Coca-Colas. They lost the final 5–1 to Borussia Dortmund. But even the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* sent someone to write a report about Jena's sports college. The head teacher went on the record, saying of her footballers, 'They're not particularly tidy, they eat anything, they almost always appear as a team and have a distinct sense of self-confidence.'

Later the four friends will cover the entire spectrum of what may befall a talented footballer: Robert Enke becomes his country's goalkeeper; Torsten becomes a local hero, a captain, a go-to player with Carl Zeiss Jena in the Second Bundesliga and the Third Liga; at the age of twenty-two Mario ends his professional career after a serious injury, his record one Second Bundesliga game, one goal; and at the age of fifteen Andy is told by Carl Zeiss that they're sorry, he's not good enough, from now on he'll have to play in the lower leagues, just for fun.

Unlike Andy, at fifteen Robert Enke, Torsten Ziegner and Mario Kanopa played for the national youth team against England at Wembley Stadium in front of thirty thousand schoolchildren. The game ended goalless. The *Daily Telegraph* reported, 'A combination of fantastic goalkeeping feats and pathetic shots at the goal prevented England's victory.' They were talking about Robert Enke, perhaps with one incident in particular in mind. He was still on the floor after saving a furious shot from Stephen Clemence when Jay Curtis shaped to hit a follow-up shot. He leapt up and deflected that shot too, his reaction too fast for the spectators to see where his hand had come from.

He had been discovered. German youth footballer of the month, a full page in *Kicker* magazine. In a special edition, 'The Sixteen-Year-Olds', *Stern* portrayed him as the protagonist of his generation. ‘Often I don’t think about the world,’ Robert, very much the teenager, told *Stern*, ‘but sometimes I have the feeling the Apocalypse is coming soon.’

In the terraces at Wembley Stadium, Dirk Enke sat with some of the other parents. Football became his bond with his son. After moving out, he tried to go to every game. He studied the other fathers. He saw some of them yelling at their children when they made mistakes, and if their children succeeded in doing something they yelled at them again. Shoot! For heaven’s sake, pass the ball! Faster! Shoot! Robert’s father sat quietly and attentively at the edge of the pitch. He thought he was doing the right thing. ‘Dirk was a great father,’ Gisela says. ‘But after our separation he had a hard time with the children.’

After the matches father and son would talk.

Good save.

Thanks.

The way you caught that ball from the corner.

I nearly didn’t get it. It hit the tips of my fingers, he shot so hard.

And Torsten the Goat (a play on Torsten’s surname) back on form – fantastic!

You know what he’s like.

At the end I was thinking, Goat, are you crazy? An opponent tries to get past him and Goat simply knocks him down, runs straight into the opponent. And he does that three times! Normally he’d see three red cards.

Dad, I’ve got to get back to the changing-rooms.

So many fathers and sons make a laborious effort to use sport as a way of getting close to each other; to use a conversation about football to whitewash the speechlessness between them. ‘Dirk and Robert really talked together far too rarely,’ says Robert’s mother. ‘I could never bring myself to argue in the family, to say