

Athens Adventure – Day 6

‘He smiled at us. He’s gonna do it! Stevie G’s gonna win it for Liverpool!’ ***** ‘I SAID... Kaka’s going to win it for Milan’, said Michael as they drifted down to breakfast on the day after the match. ‘No you did not, you thought Liverpool were going to win’, said Wil indignantly, ‘I said it was going to be 2?1...and it was!’ said Michael, hopefully. ‘Nah, you were wrong!’ Wil said again, smiling. They sat down to breakfast, tucking into the sort of feast only a hotel can provide. Loads of different cereals. Hundreds of different types of fruit. Millions of different drinks. And zillions of those little packets of jam and honey and stuff. At the back of the room, Hardy. Late. They hadn’t spoken to him for twelve hours. Wearing a black and white striped shirt, black shorts, red socks, and dragging behind him the largest Milan flag you’ve ever seen. One of those ones they drape across the whole crowd and move along like a kind of flying carpet, floating over the heads of the crowd. They had got talking to some Italian fans after the game on the walk back to the hotel. Lots of friendly banter, lots of teasing and laughing. Congratulations and commiserations. One of the Milan supporters had said, ‘Bad luck, Liverpool, but we got our revenge for 2005!’ Hardy had replied, ‘Yes...well...I always knew you would win. Right from when Inzaghi scored that first goal. Brilliant goal that was, the way he dipped his shoulder just at the right time to divert it past Reina’, then, as if to confirm something in his mind, he turned back to the group and said, ‘actually, I’ve always supported Milan, myself’. ‘What!’ said Michael, looking unbelievably at Hardy. ‘Ah ‘Ardy, you are our friend’, said Giuseppe, the Milan fan, ‘Ere, you can ‘ave my shirt and my kit. You are very welcome’. Giuseppe had then taken off most of his clothes and handed them to Hardy, who reciprocated by giving Giuseppe the Chelsea kit he was hiding under his regular clothes. ***** ‘You can’t just change teams like that! If you’re supporting a team, you have to support it, through thick and thin, through wind and rain, Mondays to Fridays, and weekends too...you can’t just jump horses in mid stream!’ Michael was clearly feeling poetic. ‘I can do what I like’, said Hardy, tripping over his enormous flag, and sliding the rest of the way to join them at the breakfast table. As he slid to a graceful stop beside the table where they were sitting, several hundred little pots of jam flew out of the flag where he had been hiding them. ‘Oops! I was hoping to take them home...’ he said with a sly grin. ‘Anyway, Milan won didn’t they, and did you see Kaka?’ ‘He was good, that’s true’ said Michael quietly. ‘He is skilful...’ added Wil. ‘Yes look!’ said Hardy, picking up an orange from the fruit stand beside their table, ‘did you see that skill in the second half, running forward, dragged the ball across with his right foot, span round then dragged it forward with his left...then carried on...like this...’ Hardy ran forward, slipped on the orange with his right foot, span round, dragged the leg of the table with his left foot, then carried on into a heap on the floor, splatted across his flag.

‘It wasn’t like that, it was like this...’ said Wil, picking up an apple from the bowl. He dropped the apple down in front of him and it smashed into five hundred pieces on the floor. He kicked at it angrily. ‘Actually, this is what happened’, said Clara, picking up a raspberry and placing it on the floor in front of her. She stepped back five or six paces, then approached the raspberry at some speed. ‘He rolled it with his left, then onto his right, then chipped it forward...’ ‘Where’s the ball?’ asked Wil. ‘What...well...it was here...?’ Clara examined the underside of her shoe to find a slippery wet red mush, where the ball had been. ‘I can do it!’ said Jaz, picking up a watermelon from the table. He placed the watermelon on the ground, and took ten paces backwards. He bent his head slightly, like a bull about to charge. ‘I’m not sure that’s a good idea...’ said Freddy quietly, as Jaz started to move forward... ‘See, he ran up to the ball like this...’ said Jaz, about five paces from the ball. ‘I wouldn’t do that, if I were you’, said Freddy, louder, covering his eyes. ‘And then he smashed it like this!’ said Jaz triumphantly, taking a huge swipe at the ball with his right foot. The ball stayed still. Three kilos of watermelon wasn’t going to budge. Jaz’s foot also seemed to stay still momentarily as it hit the immovable object. Jaz himself...flew. And flew. And flew. Right into Hardy, the flag, the oranges, the wall. Ouch! What a mess. Michael got up from the table and picked up a grapefruit. ‘THIS is what he

did!’ The Lancaster Road players went silent as Michael placed the ball at one end of the room. Several of the other tourists having their breakfast stood up to get a better look. Michael started forward, dribbling the bright yellow fruit along the polished floor, picking up speed. Then, his arms slightly away from his body to help balance himself, he rolled his right foot over the ball, pulling it left. As he did so, he turned his body round, almost dancing or skipping backwards, at the same time pulling the ball after him with his left foot. He skipped forwards, ball still at his feet, looked up and slightly to his right, then scooped the ball with his left foot so that it nestled with all the other grapefruit back in its bowl. The crowd roared! The tourists clapped! Hardy said, ‘that’s what I meant!’ Everyone laughed. ***** Later that day, as they boarded the plane at Athens airport, their Greek friends were waiting for them again at the steps of the plane. ‘We bid you farewell, English friends’, said Zeus, the tall one, ‘we play you a song!’ At some invisible signal, all the Greek children produced musical instruments – lyres, zithers, lutes, flutes, and drums. They started playing – not music exactly, but the most incredible cacophany of sound. As the Lancaster Road players climbed wearily up the steps to the plane, the noise fading below, Freddy turned to his brother, ‘Well, football’s over for a while, but that music gives me an idea!’ *****