

HEALTH AS A FOOTBALL

Learn to understand your body in just 2 ½ days

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Dedication

For my parents and family.
Without you I would not be who I am.
And for all people.

“We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if
humanity is to survive.”

Albert Einstein

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First Day

"Nurse, my stomach's aching again," complained John. Only 22 years old, he had just undergone an operation on his appendix, having been rushed to the hospital the previous day – pale, gasping for breath, and suffering intense pains on the right-hand side of his stomach. It was clear that he was very lucky, although he probably didn't realize it at the time. In fact, he'd only just made it – if it hadn't been for the quick reactions of the doctor and the nurses, his acute appendicitis would probably have killed him.

But today everything is different. The operation was a success, and John will be able to go home in just a few days. It'll take a little while for his body to recover fully, and he'll need to keep to a strict diet for a few weeks, but eventually he'll be fine. Will he ever be aware that the doctors in his local hospital actually saved his life? And if he does, will he appreciate it? Who knows? After all, most patients find it easier to just swallow their pills rather than to really

look after their health. Imagine if a doctor told a patient: Look after yourself and be grateful for each day of the life you have.

It sounds good, but reality is rather different, thought Margaret.

"Nurse, my stomach's aching again," came the complaint for a second time. Margaret smiled to herself, and hurried to the young man's bedside.

"What can I do for you, John?" Although she calls most patients Mr or Mrs, with John she uses his first name. John reminds Margaret of her younger brother – with his blue eyes, gentle face and pleasant, friendly voice – who can always persuade her to do whatever he asks. And he has asked a lot. When he was small, she did his homework for school, then she covered up for his truancy, then his reports for bad behaviour, and then she made sure he didn't have to repeat a school year. Now she was supporting him while he tried to set up his first business venture. There had always been something, but Margaret liked helping him. She knew he was a good young man, and although he'd had a troubled time as a teenager, he was now trying hard to finish school and make a living for himself. She couldn't be angry at him. And John reminded her of him.

"I still feel this pain in my stomach and now ... I don't know quite how to put it ... I'm actually quite hungry," he said, flashing a cheeky smile at her. It was obvious he had no idea what had happened to him, and he probably didn't even know – or couldn't remember – that he'd had a fairly major operation just yesterday.

"It's quite normal to have post-operative pains in the lower belly. That'll last a few days until it goes away completely. But don't worry – most patients get over it pretty quickly. And you're young, so your body will sort itself out almost straight away. In fact, being hungry means that you're recovering well from the operation."

"I'm glad to hear that. But what was actually wrong with me? I'm a bit confused about the whole thing."

"You had acute appendicitis, and we had to operate you as soon as they brought you in yesterday."

"Thank you very much," said John.

"Don't thank me, thank our surgeon," Margaret replied.

"I have to say though, the pain was just incredible – I thought I'd never make it here to the hospital."

"You were very lucky that you did," said Margaret with a smile. "The appendix is a very small part of your intestine, but if it gets inflamed, it can actually be life-threatening, and it has to be removed immediately."

"I'd heard about that – that's why I came here as soon as I could." He looked at Margaret, and then said, in a voice of naïve, almost childlike innocence: "But I still don't understand. Why did it happen to me? I'm young. Don't things like that happen more to older people?"

"There's no way of telling who will or won't get appendicitis. It can happen to children or adults. And there are many possible reasons for it. Most of all it depends on what a person eats," explained Margaret, with almost maternal patience.

"I'll bring you a very light lunch," she added, walking out of the door into the corridor.

The lunch was not exactly what John had hoped for. In fact, as soon as he heard the words "very light" he began to have doubts about the catering in this establishment. And the meal that Margaret brought him could hardly be called lunch – at least not as he understood the word.

Oh well, he thought to himself, it's not exactly a feast. But he decided he would try and eat a little of it, to avoid hurting the nurse's feelings.

Margaret saw him struggling with the food. "I can see you're not exactly enjoying it," she said. "But you'll have to get used to it – after an operation like this it's essential to keep to a strict diet for 4 to 6 weeks, to allow your intestine to heal and function just like it did before."

"Then I think I'm going to die," replied John without thinking about what he was saying. Then he stopped himself and gave a shy, embarrassed smile, as if trying to apologize for his remark.

"You could have died yesterday," said Margaret with a frown. "And now you need to learn to look after yourself, to eat regularly and to keep to the prescribed diet."

Margaret went off to help the patient in the neighbouring room.

This is the end, thought John to himself. It's easy for her to say that I should "look after myself and eat regularly" – her job's quite a simple one, and she's got plenty of time to surf the internet and study diet plans, or to cook and take food to work with her. If I could do that, I wouldn't complain and start telling others how to live their lives. But how am I meant to do all of that? I don't even have time to plan when I'm going to meet my parents, let alone cook food and eat at regular intervals. And in any case, I've never done that before. I've got to go to lectures at college, then I've got meetings with clients, and I can't miss the regular Monday morning meeting or I'll lose my job. One thing is clear – that's got to remain my number one priority. I can't afford to lose that job. It's a great job and I know I have the talent to do really well in it. John began to feel proud of himself. And why not? He'd survived the operation. ☺ He'd succeeded in that, just like he always succeeded in everything else. ☺ And now he was feeling a lot better. Who knows, they might let him go home tomorrow or the day after. Actually, he had to remember to ask the nurse about that the next time she came to see him. Yesterday was Wednesday. Today's Thursday, then there's Friday and then it's the weekend. I've got something arranged with some friends, and on Sunday it's my girlfriend's dad's birthday party, so I need to go to that as well. And then on Monday it's the meeting at work. I can't miss that. So it would be best to go home tomorrow if possible. I'd be able to make the two meetings I've got planned for Friday, and I mustn't forget to call the clients I should have met yesterday and today. They were such great opportunities... Oh well, hopefully they'll understand and we can reschedule the meetings for a later date.

His thoughts bounced around in the same vein for a while longer. If only the nurse knew all the things I have to do and arrange... I'd love to see how she would "look after herself" and cook "diet food" if she was in my shoes.

"If you don't stick to your diet, it may have a negative effect on the function of your intestines and on your digestion. And it may damage your other organs too," said Margaret as she took away his tray of food, which he had left almost untouched.

"How do you mean it may damage my other organs?"

"I mean that it may damage your other organs," said Margaret in a much sterner tone of voice than before. "Everything in our bodies is connected to everything else. If one part of the body doesn't work properly or is weakened, it can have a negative effect on all the other parts."

"I don't really understand," said John. "How can a weak intestine have a negative effect on the stomach or the lungs? They're not connected at all."

Margaret took a deep breath, and asked John a rather unusual question.

"Do you like football, John?"

"Well... Yes, of course I do. But please don't change the subject. I was asking you how the intestine can affect the functions of the other organs."

"Don't worry, I'm coming to that. What's your favourite team?" asked Margaret.

"I really don't see how this is relevant, but if you really want to know, I support Manchester United."

"Thank you," replied Margaret, beaming her warm smile onto John. "So if you're a football fan, you know how things work in football. Each player in the team has his own position. The goalkeeper is the goalkeeper, a defender is a defender and a forward is a forward."

"Yes, that's true – but I still don't understand how football is relevant to my organs," John insisted, though in a slightly calmer voice than before.

Margaret sat down in the armchair near the window, looked at John, and with almost maternal patience began to explain how the game works.

"I asked you about football because I think the principles of the game and the roles of its players are very similar to the functions of the organs in our body. I thought football would be a good way of explaining how our different organs are interconnected."

Margaret sat in silence for a while and looked at John to see whether or not he would warm to the idea.

John looked like he was giving the idea serious consideration. It was true that the comparison had surprised him, but on the other hand it seemed quite interesting. What did the nurse mean by it? But he was becoming rather worried about himself. If the nurse was right, and if everything was indeed as she said it was, then he really would have to take the diet seriously. He certainly wasn't planning to extend his stay in hospital unnecessarily – he simply didn't have the time to do that. And in fact he'd rather avoid hospitals altogether in the future. But having weighed up all the pros and cons and given them due consideration, his curiosity won out in the end.

In any case, he had a lot of time on his hands doing nothing very much, so he might as well use it to learn something new.

"Tell me how it works," he said.

"Imagine a game of football, with the players of your favourite team passing the ball to each other. It's exactly the same with our organs. Try to imagine what happens when you have a nice cup of coffee and a biscuit. First everything goes down into your stomach, which separates out what the body needs from what it doesn't need. What the body needs goes up into your spleen. What it doesn't need

goes down into the small intestine, which continues to digest it and separate out the various parts. The spleen¹ does its job again, and sends the cleaned part to your lungs and the uncleaned part to your kidneys. In the lungs, these cleaned and processed liquids are combined with oxygen, and the heart pumps it to all parts of your body. That's how important nutrients and water get to all the organs, tissues, muscles and other parts of the body, and help to feed them. If the body has more of these nutrients than it needs at a particular moment, it sends what it doesn't need to your liver, to be stored for later use. In the end, everything the body doesn't need, and everything that isn't clean, is excreted through your bladder and large intestine." Margaret took a deep breath, as if she'd finished talking, but then she added: "And because everything depends on everything else, we should look after our body as a whole and pay proper attention to all its parts."

John thought hard about this, and wondered why nobody had ever explained to him before how his body worked. There couldn't be anything particularly complicated about it, he thought.

Margaret saw John trying to get things straight in his head and to fit this new knowledge into what he'd thought he knew about his body.

"You're probably wondering why you've never heard about this before, aren't you?" she asked, as if she could read his mind.

"Yes, I am," he replied. "You see, my grandmother is a doctor, or rather she was a doctor – she's retired now. But I've never heard her talk about organs like that. She always said: If that hurts, then you should take this pill or drink this medicine. If our organs really did work like you say they do, surely she'd have told me. When I was little, she used to tell me all kinds of stories about illnesses, people who were ill and had to go for operations, or how people were treated – including how she was treated by her mother, my great-grandmother. I don't think she would have forgotten to tell me if all our organs were interlinked."

¹ In Eastern medicine the spleen and stomach are also linked with the pancreas. The pancreas is not viewed as a separate organ, but as part of the spleen. Some functions attributed to the spleen are actually performed by the pancreas.

“What I’m telling you is the Eastern way of viewing things,” replied Margaret. “This theory isn’t taught at schools or universities in Europe. They did teach us a lot of useful things, and actually I think that both approaches are right in their own way. The difference is that one view sees the human body in a more scientific way, and the other in a more philosophical way. But despite the difference, the end result is the same. And that’s why both Eastern and Western doctors are correct in their opinions. It only depends on the angle from which we view our health, and what we need at a particular moment.”

John remained silent for a while, lost in his own thoughts. Then he said: “So which organ would you pick as an attacking midfielder?” He gave the nurse a broad smile, knowing that he’d catch her out.

Margaret was rather surprised by his answer – in fact, she really knew nothing about attacking midfielders. She could guess that a player in this position would have something to do with attacking the opposition’s goal, but she really had no idea what such a player would actually do during a game.

“I’d have to think about that,” she said, looking at John closely. “What does an attacking midfielder actually do, and what skills does he need?”

For a moment, John felt a surge of pride that he could now teach the nurse something new, so he began from the beginning.

“A good attacking midfielder has to have a real feeling for the game. He needs to have excellent ball control, he needs to score goals, and he also needs to be able to defend. If an opponent gets the ball, the attacking midfielder is the first obstacle – his job is to make sure that the ball doesn’t get through to the defensive line. He’s a creative player, with excellent ball skills and a great instinct for passing the ball to teammates. But he also needs to be strong – not only physically but also mentally, because if the team plays badly and the opposition score, then he’ll be first to be criticized.”

Margaret listened to John’s explanation carefully. When he finished, she thought about it and decided that the ideal organ for the position of attacking midfielder would be the spleen.

“What would you say to the spleen?” she asked. “I think the spleen would be an ideal choice for the position.”

Spleen

John had been pleased that he had been able to show off his knowledge of football to the nurse, but now his feelings changed. He had nothing against the spleen particularly – he just didn't know what it actually was. How could the nurse just sit there and say that the spleen had the right qualities to be a top attacking midfielder? He didn't even know where the spleen was in his body, let alone what it actually did. It's just one more pointless organ in my body, he thought. If it did something important, like the lungs or the brain, then I'd be sure to know something about it. All in all, he was rather disappointed by the nurse's response – actually he felt rather annoyed. He couldn't accept that his favourite sport – with the best players in the world showing off their amazing skills – could be played by some bits of his body. That's just stupid, he thought.

Margaret watched John's pensive expression for a while. When she saw he was probably about to disagree with her, she decided to give him a few facts to support her decision.

"I chose the spleen because of its unique ability to help give the body its nutrition – that's the attacking side – and also to help our immune system, which is the defensive side. You already know that the first stop for whatever you eat or drink is your stomach. But the stomach isn't the only organ involved in digestion. Its closest teammate and partner is the spleen, and it also links up with the small intestine. The spleen has special abilities which help to transform food into nutrients that can be transported to the other organs. You could say that all the other organs are dependent on the spleen. Without these nutrients, our body wouldn't be able to function."

John still looked pensive, and was only half-listening to Margaret's explanation.

"Imagine," she continued, "that every organ in our body, just like every player in a team, needs energy to do its job. We call this energy qi. If this energy is in balance, the player has no problems. He performs consistently. But if he's injured or if his mental state is less than ideal, then that affects his energy out there on the field – it has a negative effect on his performance. Just like an attacking midfielder, the spleen has a lot of jobs to do, and carries a lot of responsibility. If the spleen is working well, it creates a lot of goalscoring chances, and the forward players convert them into goals. But if the spleen is exhausted or damaged, or if it has less

energy, this can have a negative effect on the performance of the whole body – above all on our digestive system. Signals that the spleen might not be in good shape include frequent stomachaches, diarrhoea or a loss of appetite, which can lead to malnutrition, tiredness and lethargy.”

“So what precisely does the spleen do?” asked John, as if waking up from a drowsy slumber.

Margaret took a deep breath and repeated what she had just said: “The spleen’s main duties include converting food into nutrients, and then converting nutrients into blood and qi energy. Besides that, the spleen also cleans the blood and decides where the blood will be sent. What the spleen does with our blood is like what an attacking midfielder does with the ball – he passes excellently, dribbles, shoots and controls the ball well.”

“Seriously, I had no idea the spleen could do all those things. So what you’re saying is that correct digestion of food and drink, their assimilation, conversion and distribution – all those things depend on our spleen working as it should?” asked John.

“Precisely. That’s why the spleen is sometimes known as a machine for making energy and blood.”

Margaret continued: “It’s very important to realize that food and drink are basic substances for creating our blood and energy. That’s why we often hear about how we should eat good, healthy food, regularly, including lots of fruit and vegetables. Everything we put inside our bodies, our bodies will eventually return to us. That’s why it’s so important to eat healthily.”

“And what if I eat a lot? Or if I don’t eat for a long time, and then I eat a huge amount? You know what I mean... I don’t always have time for a proper meal, so I tend to eat irregularly, all in one go.”

“All of that has an effect on your digestive system,” replied Margaret. “If you eat more than you need, or if you eat too often, your digestive system will eventually become exhausted and weakened. Even your muscles depend on your spleen.”

“My muscles?” said John.

“It’s quite logical. Just like our organs, our muscles depend on nutrients from the food we eat. Because the spleen controls the distribution of nutrients all around our body, it is also responsible for

making sure that the necessary amount of nutrients gets to our muscles and limbs.”

“So what else is connected with the spleen?” asked John, his curiosity growing.

“It’s linked to many things – and one of the main connections is between the spleen and our mouth or lips. Actually, you can tell how healthy your spleen is by looking at your lips. Our lips are a kind of muscle, and they’re closely connected to the spleen. If our lips are a healthy red colour, slightly moist and shiny, it means our spleen is probably doing OK. If the spleen is not OK, our lips will be weak, dry, or even slightly yellow in colour.”

Margaret fell silent for a while before adding: “You probably know that it’s not just physical fitness and ball skills that are important for footballers – they also need to be mentally fit and strong.”

“Of course,” replied John. “You can’t separate the mental and physical sides of the game – you learn that as soon as you start to play football. When I’m mentally relaxed and self-confident, I play much better than if I’m annoyed, nervous or stressed. Just look at football coaching methods. Coaches spend almost as much time developing players’ mental strength as they do on the physical side of the game. Players need to trust each other, support each other and play as a unit. The trust is essential – no team can play well without it,” explained John.

“It’s a very similar situation in the body,” replied Margaret. “The spleen is the player who controls our will, memory and ability to express ourselves. It’s a creative organ, and it knows what to do when it receives the ball. If your spleen isn’t working well, it can have a negative effect on the strength of your will. It also plays a key role in helping us to take good decisions. Just like in football, where an attacking midfielder has to react instantly and play the ball, one of the spleen’s main tasks in life is to be aware of what’s going on in any given situation and to choose the best possible option from those available.”

“And what happens if the spleen plays badly?”

“That can have various effects on our decision-making and self-confidence. We might worry too much about trifling little things, or we might just feel generally anxious. Because the spleen is a highly intelligent and creative player, if it plays badly we might lose

interest in things and feel bored. If the spleen is in good shape, our emotions are all in balance and we have a good, healthy attitude to life.

"If we want our spleen to have a good relationship with our stomach, it's essential how we give and receive love and empathy. People who have problems with those emotions and find it difficult to open themselves can unwittingly damage the relationship between their own stomach and spleen – because that relationship is all about giving and receiving. Also, eating and drinking too many sweet things can disturb the relationship between the spleen and the stomach. These organs are particularly fond of sweet food and drink."

"But if we eat too much sugar for too long, it can damage our spleen and stomach, weakening them or exhausting them completely. This leads to raised blood sugar levels – and that's called diabetes."

"Hmm," said John. "I wouldn't have expected my organs to be so interesting. Could you tell me about a different player, please?"

"OK, so we've talked about the spleen," said Margaret. "Which organ would you like to know more about?"

"I think now I'd like to know about them all," replied John. "But I'm just thinking where to start."

"I suggest we stay in the middle," said Margaret.

"I agree. So what choices do we have there?" asked John.

"There are several players there. But if we take them in order of importance, then I suggest we start with the liver," replied Margaret, trying to encourage John to think. John understood what she was driving at, and thought about which position would be best for the liver.

"If you tell me something about the liver and its characteristics, then I'll think where it should play," he said.

Liver

"The liver is the biggest laboratory in our body. Just like the spleen, the liver is closely connected with the blood and our inner energy. The liver occupies the most strategically important position in our body. It's amazingly agile and skilful, and it can shoot

accurately at goal and score when the team needs a goal most. But despite all that, it can remain flexible, full of energy, and calm.”

“Given what you’ve just said, I’d play the liver as a centre forward.”

“So what does a centre forward actually do?” asked Margaret.

“A centre forward is one of the most important and useful players on the pitch. He needs to be able to do almost everything. He has to be completely concentrated on the game right from the kick-off to the final whistle. He must be able to remain calm, but he needs to show aggression when it’s necessary. One of his most important skills is his ball control. He needs to be able to trap and control the ball, run with the ball, pass accurately, create chances, and put pressure on his opponents – with or without the ball. I’d say a good centre forward never really stops working throughout the game.”

“In that case you’ve chosen the perfect position for the liver – it fits perfectly,” replied Margaret with a smile. John blushed – he hadn’t expected to be praised. Margaret continued: “Just as a player has to do many different things during a game, the liver is also responsible for a wide range of activities. To keep things simple, I’ll divide them into two main types: working with the blood, and working with qi energy. First I’ll explain the connection between the liver and energy.

“Because the liver helps to make sure that our energy moves around the body as required, it actually helps all parts of the body to carry out their tasks as necessary. To do so, it needs to do various things. The liver makes sure that our energy isn’t too dynamic, or too tense, or too anxious. Basically, it makes sure that everything is within its natural limits, just as it should be.”

“I think I understand that now. Could you tell me more about the connection between the liver and the blood?”

“The liver is closely connected with the blood – just like the spleen is. Once blood has been made, part of it is sent into circulation to feed our entire body, and the rest of it is sent to the liver, where it is stored. Depending on the body’s needs, the liver either stores up blood or releases it as necessary. For example, when you’re asleep, your body is at rest, and it doesn’t need so much blood – so the liver automatically takes some of your blood out of circulation and stores it. But when you’re playing football or taking an exam, your body

needs more blood, and your liver releases it. It's like the ball skills you described just now. Superb ball control, running with the ball, accurate passing – that's what the liver does with the blood.

“But if the centre forward is in bad form and his ball skills are poor, it can happen that our body has less blood in circulation than it actually needs. There can be several reactions to a lack of blood – fainting, blurred vision, poor night vision, a lack of feeling in our extremities... or for women, menstruation might slow down or even stop.”

“And what if the liver works too hard and puts more blood into circulation than I actually need?”

“Unfortunately that's not very good for the body either. If the liver doesn't store the extra blood, it can cause bleeding. Basically, for our whole body to work properly including all its organs, it needs to receive just the right amount of nutrients. Any change from that ideal amount can prevent it from working properly – which is why the liver is so important.”

Margaret decided to sum things up: “The liver often passes the ball to the spleen, or the spleen passes it to the liver. Everything is to do with the blood, and the liver is the storage house for blood.

“The liver, and the blood flowing through it, is responsible for the constantly repeated cycles in our body – such as menstruation. If the liver is not working properly, menstruation can be irregular or painful.”

John didn't really know much about menstruation and wasn't too keen on going into detail on the subject, so instead he decided to ask Margaret about the connection between the liver and the emotions. He thought that the liver, like the spleen, would have an effect on some key emotions or moods, and he was curious which ones.

Margaret considered his question for a while.

“Although the liver is very strong and tough, it actually has a very gentle nature. The liver is very kind and pleasant, and to be successful it needs to feel accepted and valued by those around it. The boundary between the inner self and the outside world is also very important. If for whatever reason the liver is not decisive enough, this can lead to a lack of self-respect and pride. The liver needs a calm environment. It makes a good pairing with the spleen,

which is more direct and creative. Together they form an ideal combination, which – when it works properly – ensure that we digest our food properly and have sufficient energy. If the liver's energy is blocked in some way, we can experience not only physical syndromes, but also feelings of frustration.

“If the liver works as it should, with the energy flowing freely, we will feel good – we will experience a kind of internal calm and balance. We will be naturally optimistic and open to new ideas. If our energy is blocked, this can cause mood swings, depression, melancholy, feelings of insecurity, or worrying about unimportant things. Basically, people react to situations and stimuli much more than they really need to. We might also go to the opposite extreme – feeling uncontrollable excitement and enthusiasm, which causes a rush of blood to the head, headaches or insomnia. In short, a lack of balance on the inside is reflected on the outside as well.”

“I'd never have expected my pride and sense of self-respect to be connected with the state of my liver,” said John.

“Yes, many people don't realize the connection. But everything is hidden within us, and there are plenty of things that we can actually influence, provided we want to.”

“And which organs work closest with the liver?”

“That depends on the particular process we're talking about. But most often the liver works with the gallbladder to influence the digestion process. It's like a centre forward without the ball. The work done by a player off the ball is not as visible as when he has the ball at his feet, but it's still very important for the team and the game as a whole.

“When the liver cleans the blood, it separates out the waste substance, which is bile. But because none of our body's processes happen at random, what is unclean for one organ – one player – is perfectly fine for another player. That's the case with bile. It is sent to the gallbladder, which releases it as needed into the small intestine. For the small intestine, bile is an essential helper. Without bile, the intestine wouldn't be able to process and digest the food which reaches it.”

“That sounds incredibly well-coordinated. I never knew how precisely all the parts of the body worked together. Actually, I

always just took it for granted, and I had no idea it was so intricate. It's like a miracle."

"It certainly is. It's amazing how well our players work together – like a perfectly programmed computer."

John looked happy, and indeed he was. Suddenly he was able to appreciate all the invisible work his organs did for him, and he was grateful for it. Somewhere in the corner of his heart he decided to do more to help them.

"And not only that," continued Margaret. "Just as the spleen controls our muscles, the liver controls our tendons and nails. We can see what state our liver's in by the condition of our tendons and nails. If our liver's having problems, our nails will be thin, weak, pale and fragile, or we may suffer from muscle cramps and spasms in our limbs.

"Another indicator of the health of our liver is our eyes – which is why many problems with eyesight are connected with problems of the liver."

John looked pensive, and Margaret was quiet for a while. She was wondering whether she'd forgotten anything when John spoke.

"OK, I think we've found the perfect centre forward. So let's look at the wingers."

"The who?" asked Margaret, who wasn't sure what John meant by that.

"The players on the left and right wing," said John. "The forwards need to be supported from the wings – the sides of the pitch. You need a strong centre of the attack, but without hard-working, reliable wingers, your attacking play will always be weak, and your results will suffer."

"So we need wingers," repeated Margaret, still surprised. Although she knew plenty about the human body, football wasn't really her thing, so many of the words and phrases John used were completely new to her.

"That's right," said John with enthusiasm. "So who would you suggest?"

"I would suggest the lungs," replied Margaret. Not that she really knew much about attacking wingers, but John's description of the

wing areas on the football pitch reminded her of the shape of the lungs, so she said the first organ that came into her head.

"I thought so," said John proudly, wanting to praise her insight.

Margaret looked at John, smiling as she often did.

Lungs

"If you knew it, why didn't you say so right away?"

"I wanted to confuse you a bit, and to get you to think a bit more about football. You're teaching me about the body's organs, so I'll teach you something about football in return."

"OK," said Margaret. "So tell me something more about the players on the wings. What kind of physical skills do they need, or what kind of mentality should they have?"

"Physically, they need to have a lot of energy. They don't necessarily need to be strong – that's important for defenders, but not so much for wingers. Wingers should be able to run throughout the entire match – not only short sprints, but longer runs too. They need to be tenacious and always give 100 percent whether they have the ball at their feet or not."

"That sounds right for the lungs," said Margaret. "The lungs are a tireless organ – they're always working, whether or not we notice them or appreciate them. I would say the lungs are the ideal long-distance runners. It's like breathing in and breathing out. And if anything prevents us breathing, or if we stop breathing for any real length of time, then all the other processes in our body will stop very quickly."

Although John was well aware that people couldn't live without breathing, Margaret's words made him stop and think.

"You're also right about the strength," Margaret went on. "The lungs are not physically very strong – actually they're considered quite a subtle organ."

"Why?" asked John.

"Because they're easily damaged. Our lungs don't like cold or damp environments, so if we expose them to that, they will be the first organ to suffer. And because the lungs are connected to our nose and throat, that will soon lead to a cold, a blocked nose, a sore throat or problems with our voice."

"And what about people who have long-term problems with their lungs?" John asked.

"You mean chronic problems? Of course they are connected with the lungs, but for a health problem to become chronic, it's usually connected with another organ too."

"And what are the other characteristics of the lungs?"

Margaret thought for a while before answering: "If you remember, I told you about our energy, which flows through the body. This energy is connected with breathing, so it's controlled by the lungs. The lungs are the place where the energy from the air outside meets the energy of body. When we breathe in, the lungs receive this energy from the air. Then, working with other organs, they help to distribute the energy to the whole body. When we breathe out, our lungs expel the unclean air, which the body has used and no longer needs. Constant, rhythmic lung activity, with deep and smooth breathing, helps to ensure that there is enough qi energy in our body and that it moves around harmoniously. To achieve this harmonious flow, the lungs need to work closely with the heart, and so there's an old saying that the heart is the king and the lungs are the prime minister."

"I like that," said John.

"But the lungs have another important role to play. They play a key role in the metabolism of water and body fluids."

"What does that mean?"

"It's quite simple really. First, the lungs help condense water, which then goes to the kidneys. Second, the lungs distribute water – as steam – to the whole body, so it gets to all our organs and tissues which need it. Some of the water also goes to the skin, which is often known as the 'second lungs'."

"I still don't really understand... especially about the steam," replied John. "It sounds like I've got a steam iron in my body."

"Try to see it less literally, John. Ancient Chinese doctors said that liquid water moves downwards through the body, while water in the form of steam moves upwards and flows through the body. That's why they use the image of steam."

John started to look pensive again.

Margaret continued: "That's why we say that the lungs are responsible for the 'upper' water and the kidneys for the 'lower' water. Think about it and you'll see the logic there."

"Maybe so," said John, but it was clear his thoughts were running in a different direction.

"So what organs are most closely connected to the lungs?" he asked eventually.

"As I've said, mainly it's the skin – the lungs help the skin regulate body temperature and sweating. And they're also connected with the nose. When the lungs and nose are working well, the nose can recognize lots of different smells. (John giggled at the thought of this.) And also the throat, which is the passage for all the air we breathe in and out. Our voice also gives an indication of how well the lungs and throat are working together. If either the lungs or throat are in a poor condition, our voice might be very penetrating or very weak."

"So you could say the lungs have to play in defence and in attack at the same time."

"Exactly," replied Margaret.

"And how do these left and right wingers behave on the pitch? Do the lungs have some special characteristic features?"

"Of course," said Margaret. "Like every organ, the lungs are unique, and they're mainly connected with short-term emotions. I'm sure you've noticed that if you're under pressure or if you experience strong emotions, the rhythm of your breathing changes. The lungs may be linked with feelings of urgency in our lives.

"If the lungs are in balance, we're capable of perceiving all our emotions naturally. But sometimes the lungs aren't capable of thinking and taking decisions, because they're used to just reacting instantly. That can cause us to feel some emotions particularly intensely – such as feelings of desire or loss. If the lungs are out of balance, we may feel emotions of sadness and grief. Healthy lungs help us to understand things and people in a natural way and to avoid unnecessary suffering."

When she had finished speaking, Margaret got up and left the room. After a short while she returned carrying a tray with a teapot and a cup.

"Here's some tea for you. It's important for you to get a regular intake of fluids," she said in her typically kind, understanding voice.

John took the cup without protesting and drank it all down.

"Thank you very much."

"I need to go and check on some other patients," said Margaret and started to go.

"Please could we talk about just one more player before you go? I promise it'll be the last for today."

How could Margaret refuse? Again John reminded her so much of her younger brother, who – as she was well aware – could always persuade her to do anything. She looked at John and asked:

"So, which position would you like to talk about?"

"Well, for a while I've been thinking about who should play as our main striker. That's my favourite position, because here you get the best chances to score goals, and goalscorers, are the most famous and popular players in the world. So I would be interested to know which organ deserves to play in that position."

"Is it a unique position?" asked Margaret.

"Of course. Not only that, but it's a very difficult position to play in. If the player is on form, everything goes well – but if he loses his form, his career can be over very quickly."

"And there's only one player in that position?" asked Margaret.

"Yes, only one."

"I think I know the answer. Try and think about it."

"I said I don't know. Really."

"OK, then I'll try and give you a hint."

"Fine."

"It's a player who can decide the outcome of a game."

"Yes," said John, sighing to let the nurse know that he really had no idea.

"Wait, that's not all."

"Sorry," said John.

Margaret smiled.

"He's the only player in that position on the pitch," said Margaret, looking encouragingly at John.

"And the result of the game depends on him. So it depends whether he can convert the goalscoring chances his colleagues create for him."

Margaret stopped talking to give John another chance to think about which organ she had in mind.

After a few seconds, he replied: "I'm not sure, but could it be the heart?"

"Yes, excellent. You see, with a little help you got the right answer. And why weren't you sure?"

"Because I thought that if the striker doesn't convert a chance into a goal, it doesn't always mean that the game is over. He just tries again when he gets the next chance. But the heart probably doesn't have very many chances. Either it scores the goal or the game is over."

"That's correct, John. Not every comparison is a hundred percent perfect. But we have to choose from a set of players – our organs – and the heart is the best 'fit' for that position. Try not to see it quite so literally."

"Yes, you're right. I suppose I was getting into it too deeply," smiled John. "I'm sure next time I watch a football match with friends, I'll see a pumping heart, stomach and large intestine instead of forwards and defenders."

Both of them laughed out loud at this thought.

Heart

"So how does the heart actually work?" asked John, when he had stopped laughing.

"It's quite simple really," replied Margaret. "Imagine a pump. That's basically what the heart is. The speed with which it pumps depends on the tempo and frequency of our breathing, and also on our momentary mental state. So if you're excited, nervous or stressed, your heartbeat gets quicker and your heart starts really

pounding. But when you're calm – like when you're about to fall asleep, and nothing is disturbing you – you hardly notice your heart beating at all."

"And what about blood?"

"How do you mean?" asked Margaret.

"I don't really understand what happens to the blood once the heart has pumped it out."

"First the heart pumps the blood to the lungs, which are next to it, and the lungs put oxygen in the blood. Then the blood – which now has oxygen and all necessary nutrients – goes back to the heart, which pumps it to the rest of the body. The heart pumps the blood into all the arteries, taking it to all the organs and other parts of the body.

"This process shows quite clearly how the heart works closely with the lungs and the digestive organs. The lungs oxygenate the blood, and the digestive organs are responsible for putting the nutrients in the blood."

"It sounds like a well-oiled machine."

"Indeed it is," nodded Margaret and continued: "So that's basically what the heart does. I'll also tell you how the heart affects our perception, the way we express ourselves and achieve our goals. But then I'll really have to go."

"OK – this'll be the last thing. And we'll continue tomorrow, if we can?"

"Fine," agreed Margaret, and went on to tell him about the role played by the heart in a person's life.

"The heart shows us where we should go. Our heart always knows what's best for us, and it's a good idea to listen to our heart."

"Really?" said John. "Does so much depend on the heart? I thought it was enough just to decide to do something and get up and do it. I've never really been guided by my heart – more by logic."

"But is that how it actually works in reality?" replied Margaret. "It is really enough for you to just decide to do something and then go and do it?"

"Well, I suppose not entirely," said John. "Not with everything, but with lots of things I think it does work like that. A few times I've made wrong decisions, or I've had jobs I didn't enjoy, but now I've finally found a company where I'm happy, I'm doing well and finding new clients, and last week I started to set up a team of co-workers. I just decided what I wanted, I went for it, and I'm doing well."

"The role of the heart is to help you find what you want to do in life – what interests you, and what you have a natural talent for. Of course you then need plenty of willpower and determination to make things work and achieve success – but we'll talk about that later. Your heart is the organ that helps you to find what you're passionate about."

John said nothing, but he was clearly thinking deeply about what Margaret had said.

"We should listen to our heart, and follow its intuitions," continued Margaret. "Sooner or later, when we look back, we'll find that we've done the right thing by listening to its advice, by following our feelings. The heart guards us. It looks closely at our thoughts, plans, will and self-awareness, and it always manages to point us in the right direction when the moment comes. Although it may seem strange, our heart knows far in advance what we really want to be and do, and it's preparing us to succeed throughout our lives."

"And what if the heart has problems?"

"The heart is also the home of our thoughts," continued Margaret as if she hasn't heard John's question. "If one of the heart's functions is impaired, it can lead to problems with sleeping, anxiety attacks, or strange and inappropriate behaviour. The natural function of our heart, and the harmony between our self and our heart when things are going well, can also be seen in people who naturally enjoy life, who are open yet tactful. So I'll ask you: what other parts of the body indicate the state of our heart?"

"I really don't know. We can feel our heart beating through our chest."

"Of course – but the other parts of the body that are particularly closely connected with the heart are the tongue and the face. We can tell the state of a person's heart the first time we see them. And not only by looking – often we can tell a lot by how people express themselves, whether they react quickly and can become involved in

a dialogue or conversation. So all these things are connected with our heart.

"And besides the face, the heart is very closely connected to another organ."

"Which one?" asked John.

"I don't think you'll be able to guess. It's a player we haven't talked about yet. It's the small intestine."

"The small intestine?" asked John, surprised.

"Yes. Do you remember how I explained the special link between the stomach and the spleen? Or between the liver and the gallbladder?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, there's a similar link between the heart and the small intestine. But I'll tell you about that next time. That's enough for today. I'll bring you your dinner, and then you should rest. It's a lot of information all at once," sighed Margaret sympathetically. "I'm sure it's been plenty for one day. And I've got lots of work to do." Margaret smiled at John, got up and went to get his food.

John was feeling very excited. He'd never heard so much about organs and their functions, and he was absolutely fascinated to learn how closely interconnected they were, with one part of the body depending on all the rest.

He hardly noticed what he had for dinner. Lost in his own thoughts, he ate everything on the plate and pulled the blanket over himself contentedly. He didn't even notice the nurse come and take his tray away.

Lots of things still didn't make much sense to John. But maybe it would all become clearer tomorrow, when the nurse was going to explain the roles of all the other players in the team. He found it all incredibly fascinating, and he felt a slight regret that he'd never really looked after his body as he should.

His thoughts returned to the connection between the state of our organs and our emotional, mental state. He also thought about football. He knew plenty about it – much more than about the human body, but if he could apply some of his football knowledge to his own body, then why not? After all, who wouldn't want to have a body like Cristiano Ronaldo? :-)

Second Day

In the morning John was woken by the bright rays of the autumn sun. Winter and Christmas were approaching fast. For a while he wondered if he was dreaming and the nurse he had talked to hadn't been just a beautiful angel. But when he realized he was in a hospital room and his breakfast was on the table next to his bed, he woke up straight away.

What day is it today? Friday, he told himself.

That means that if I feel better today and if the doctor decides that my condition has improved, I'll be able to go home tomorrow. I've got lots of things to sort out and do. My clients, my parents, my girlfriend's father's birthday party, and above all the Monday morning meeting at work. I'm not sure what I'm going to tell them at the meeting. What a pain – the whole team will have moved forward, while I've not even been able to get a single contract signed because I've been lying here in bed. John soon got back into

his usual way of thinking, but then he remembered his conversation with the nurse the day before.

Football... organs... Everything started to come back to him. And he soon remembered that they'd not even managed to cover half the football team. I hope she'll remember about me, he thought – and that she'll come and tell me about the rest of the organs.

John soon stopped thinking about his everyday problems and stresses, and found he was looking forward to when Margaret would come back and continue their talk.

Around half past nine, shortly after breakfast, the door opened. John was expecting Margaret, but actually it was the consultant, accompanied by two other doctors and head nurses.

The consultant asked John how he was feeling and checked his post-op scar.

"It looks like it's healing well, young man," said the consultant. He was a man of advanced years, and despite his stern voice it was obvious that he was a good person.

John couldn't find any words, so he just nodded in agreement.

"Unless there's any change for the worse, then I think we'll be able to let you go home tomorrow."

John realized that he might be going home before he had a chance to finish the conversation with Margaret – which he was really looking forward to. Without thinking, he blurted out: "What time?"

The consultant evidently hadn't expected such a quick reaction. He frowned and raised his eyebrows, wondering whether he had been too quick to come to a judgement on the young man's health.

But then he replied: "Tomorrow morning we'll check up on you again, so you can expect to be able to go home after lunch. But no sooner than two o'clock." His voice remained calm and even, as if he was giving a lecture to a packed room.

John rather regretted his behaviour – he should have treated the consultant with rather more respect. He was a well-mannered young man, but he'd made rather a fool of himself this time. But it wasn't really his fault – it was just that he had so many things to do once he left the hospital. Actually, he thought, that was typical of the way

his mind worked – never thinking things through, always just jumping to decisions.

But the consultant's words filled John with hope – he might be able to go home as soon as 2 p.m. the next day. And so he put his self-reproach to one side.

The consultant said a few more words to the other doctors, they made some notes, and then they left the room.

So I'll be home tomorrow – great, thought John.

Buoyed by the consultant's visit and the promise of a swift return home – which John had now begun to take for granted – the morning passed quickly.

Shortly after midday, Margaret came to his room again. She brought John some lunch and asked him how he was feeling. When she returned to take his tray away, he asked her whether she would be able to make time to finish telling him about the organs and the other positions on the pitch.

"I'd love to," she replied, "but at the moment I need to see some other patients. I'll drop by, but it'll probably be a bit later."

"No problem," he said, and it was clear to see that his enthusiasm was not dampened.

"If you need anything, I'll be here," he joked, and Margaret couldn't help laughing.

Later that afternoon, Margaret brought John some tea and asked him what he still wanted to know.

"I'm not exactly sure," he replied. "I remember that the last thing we talked about yesterday was the heart."

"So let's just go over it again so we don't forget anybody," Margaret suggested, sitting down in the armchair by the window.

"So," she said, "We've done the attacking players – the heart, lungs, liver and spleen."

"But what about the defence?" asked John. "Who would you pick for those positions?"

"How many players are there in the defence?" asked Margaret.

"That depends on the tactics chosen by the coach."

"Are there some different positions in the defence that require similar skills and tasks?"

"Yes," replied John. "There's the right back and the left back, for example. They basically do the same things, but each on their own side of the pitch. One on the right and the other on the left."

"In that case I suggest we take a look at the kidneys."

"I agree – I'm all ears," said John.

Kidneys

"The kidneys are the basis for birth, childhood, adolescence, old age and death. They are the organ that is most closely connected with the presence of life and its different stages. We say that the 'essence of life' is stored in the kidneys. Just as all organs – and the whole body – need the energy to function, they also need this essence. In football terms, you might say that the kidneys make sure the defence works perfectly.

"You probably won't be surprised to learn that the kidneys are connected with water and body fluids."

"I know – I think we learned about it in school."

"OK, so I'll just recap what you know and maybe add a few more things that you didn't know."

"Good," said John.

"All organs play some role in the metabolism of water in the body. Do you remember how I told you yesterday about the function of the lungs and the water that circulates in our bodies either as liquid or as steam?"

"Yes, I remember that." John immediately remembered that he hadn't really got into that part – it had seemed rather unimportant and boring, but he hadn't wanted to interrupt Margaret straight away, and he hoped that it would be more interesting today.

"So," Margaret continued, "The kidneys have the ability to transform water into steam. The spleen can do that too, but the kidneys are the real champions at it. The lungs and liver are also involved in the metabolism of water. Once the water is cleaned, the kidneys send it to the lungs. The unclean water is sent to the bladder, which eventually expels it from the body. The kidneys also help the lungs to make sure that we breathe deeply, calmly and in a balanced way. Although the lungs control our breathing, it's the kidneys that make sure the breathing is regular. If they're prevented from doing that, we might have shallow breathing, or we might actually find it difficult to breathe."

"It sounds like the kidneys do lots of different things," said John, pouring some more tea into his cup.

"Exactly. They are involved in lots of different processes, they affect several hormones, they help form enzymes, they regulate our blood pressure, and they also help expel various chemical substances from our body fluids. They're responsible for a large part of the cleaning processes that take place within the body. Thanks to the kidneys, our bodies remain clean and balanced."

"And how can I tell if I have problems with my kidneys?" asked John.

"There are many possible problems with the kidneys. And then there are problems that don't look as if they have anything to do with the kidneys, but are actually closely connected with them."

"Such as?"

"Such as reproductive problems, suffered by many couples," Margaret replied. "Also impotence in men is often connected with the kidneys. Or various disorders in children or during adolescence."

"You can't play without a strong defensive line," observed John.

"Exactly. We need to be able to rely on our kidneys at all stages of our life. Did you know that the kidneys are also responsible for the state of our bones?"

"Our bones?" John said with surprise.

"Yes. The kidneys and their functions are linked to the production of bone marrow, which is the basic building block of our bones and teeth. When I said that some problems in children may be linked to the kidneys, one of the things I meant was that children with weak or thin bones might have problems with their kidneys, which should help the body create bone marrow."

"That sounds logical, though I'd never have guessed that the kidneys had anything to do with our bones."

"Well, we live and learn," replied Margaret. "I'm sure you'd not expect our kidneys to be connected with our ears as well."

John just smiled disbelievingly.

"Really," Margaret continued. "Centuries ago, Chinese doctors noticed that the state of our kidneys is connected with our hearing. A good example is the hearing problems that older people often experience. As we grow old, our organs do too – and one of the results of ageing kidneys is poor hearing."

"And what about our mental side?" John asked. Far more than the physiological side of the organs, he was interested in their effect on our minds and emotions.

Margaret noticed that John was keen to learn, so she decided to shift the conversation away from the physical aspects of the kidneys to concentrate on their other aspects.

"The kidneys are the home of our willpower. There are two types of will, and both reside in the kidneys. One type is energetic – it's connected with our ambition, feelings of responsibility, and our desire to achieve something in our lives. The other type is more internally focused, and it's connected with our fate. The second type is more difficult for us to perceive, and we can generally only feel it if we're completely calm and quiet. This more subtle part of our will is connected with true wisdom, which is about much more than just knowledge. If somebody lacks this type of will, or if it's hindered in

some way, then we can experience strong feelings of fear of the unknown, fear of death, and anxiety.”

John thought about this for a while, then smiled and said: “I think now I know more about it than my doctor.”

“I have to disappoint you there, John,” replied Margaret. “We’ve just talked about a few very basic things, and doctors’ medical knowledge is much more complicated than that. You’d have to study medicine at university, knowing about each organ in great detail – including the connections between them. Only then would you even begin to get close to the medical knowledge of a doctor.”

This brought John down to earth somewhat.

But Margaret decided to encourage him: “What you know now, or what you can remember from our conversation, is just a few of the basic things that every person should know about their own body. Knowledge is a great benefit to us. And if in the future you feel ill, you’ll be much more capable of guessing what might actually be wrong with your body. If you can do that, you’ll help both yourself and your doctor, who’ll be able to diagnose your problem more accurately and more quickly,” smiled Margaret.

Having uncovered all the secrets of the kidneys, the nurse asked: “Is there anything else you’d like to know, John?”

“Yes there is – we haven’t even started to talk about the central midfield. No team can play well without strong players in the middle of the pitch. Without a strong central spine, the team can’t even get out of its own half. And we’ve also forgotten about the goalkeeper – of course you can’t play without one of those. If he gets a red card and you haven’t got anybody to replace him, you’ll have real problems. Your opponents will find it very easy to score goals.”

“OK John, let’s take the positions one at a time. You said something about the central midfield.”

“Yes,” replied John.

“Well, which of your organs would you pick for that position?” asked Margaret.

“I don’t know – I’m not a surgeon,” joked John.

"In that case you need to look at it logically and consider each organ until you find the right one," Margaret replied. "I'm sure you'll get there."

"Well, it's not so clear," said John. "The central midfield seems like a simple position, but actually there are very few players who can perform well there and get the maximum benefit for the whole team."

"What's so special about that position?" asked Margaret.

"A central midfielder needs to be able to go forward and attack, but he also needs to be the first line of defence if the opponent gets the ball. His job is to stop the opposing team from penetrating through to the defensive line, but when he has the ball, his job is to launch attacks, and even – given the opportunity – to convert chances and score goals. It's a very difficult position to play in."

"It sounds like a key position," said Margaret.

"A good central midfielder will play the ball forward and create chances for the attacking players. But if he plays badly, he presents chances to the opposition and causes problems for his own team's defence."

"Well put," said Margaret.

"So who would you pick for this position?" John asked.

John had managed to avoid answering Margaret's question, but she hadn't even noticed.

"I'd pick the stomach and small intestine," she replied.

"We can do that," said John. "Two organs can play in that position. Actually it's quite common for teams to play with two central midfielders."

"So you agree?"

"I agree," John replied. He shuffled into a more comfortable position on the bed so he would be able to concentrate on Margaret's explanation.

"It's all connected with how you described the central midfielder's role," Margaret began.

Stomach

"The first player is the stomach. It's very well-equipped for this role. It can control every ball it receives, and it's always thinking ahead of the other players. It's also reliable, accurate and quite quick. It can do several different things at once. First it receives food, which it partially digests, and it sends the 'clean' part up to the spleen, while the rest of the food goes down into the small intestine. Thanks to this pre-digestion process, the body can get vital nutrients from the food, which launches all kinds of processes."

John listened carefully, and Margaret continued.

"Just like all the organs we've talked about before, the stomach also has its own energy. If the stomach's energy doesn't work very well when passing the ball to the small intestine, the food might stay in the stomach for longer than necessary – and that can lead to stomachache, indigestion, bad breath or constipation. If the stomach's energy is restless and rises upwards, people often burp, or feel nauseous and want to vomit."

"And the stomach can deal with all of that on its own?" asked John.

"Of course it needs the help of its teammates. There has to be someone to pass to if the team is going to score," explained Margaret.

"I think you're starting to understand football quite well," John said to her, smiling slyly.

"And you're starting to understand your body," she replied.

"An important teammate of the stomach is the spleen. The spleen helps the stomach by ensuring that the digestion process goes smoothly. Part of the digested food is used by the spleen, which absorbs important nutrients; it uses these nutrients to make blood, body fluids and energy. Think of it like a pass from the stomach to the spleen, allowing the spleen to launch an attack on goal.

"The functions of the stomach and the spleen are very closely connected," Margaret added. "The spleen controls the 'upward process', and the stomach controls the 'downward process'. So the directions of their energies complement each other and are in balance. Basically, a strong and healthy middle is essential for playing a good game – and it's said that the stomach is at the heart of life."

"And what happens to the rest of the food?"

Small Intestine

"That's where the small intestine comes in. The stomach passes the remaining undigested food to the small intestine, which has many specific abilities that the stomach doesn't have. It can get lots more nutrients out of the remaining food, and it then sends these nutrients to the spleen. It sends the unclean liquids into the kidneys, and the rest of the food that it can't use – the solid part – goes down into the large intestine.

"You could say that the small intestine is a typical 'receiving organ'. In order for it to supply the rest of the body with nutrients from food, it needs to have clean walls. If the walls of the intestine are clogged up, or if it works too slowly, we will not get very many vital nutrients from our food."

Finally, Margaret asked John: "Do you know what organ the small intestine is particularly connected with?"

"I'd rather not even guess – I've no chance of getting the right answer," replied John.

"Come on John," said Margaret. "Try and remember – we've already talked about this relationship once before."

John thought for a moment. He didn't just want to give up straight away, especially if he'd already heard the answer before. He was sure that he'd remembered all the information perfectly. After a while he remembered: "Of course, I know now. It's the heart. I remember I didn't really understand why the small intestine and the heart were so closely related."

"Exactly," replied Margaret. "So you see, you do remember after all."

"All the pieces are starting to fall into place now," said John with satisfaction.

"It's like in football," added Margaret. "The central midfielder supports the attacking players. If the heart is out of balance and not working very well, that can cause problems in the functions of the intestines – and vice versa. If the small intestine is too weak, or if it works too hard, that can affect the heart."

"That's very strange indeed," said John.

"Not really. Actually it's quite logical. I'll try to compare it with football. If the midfielder passes accurately, the striker has a good chance of playing well and scoring. But if the midfielder lacks concentration, or if he has problems controlling the ball, the striker will have a bad game too. Both are dependent on each other."

"So they complement each other perfectly," nodded John. "These two central midfielders divide their tasks between them equally, and cover the entire central part of the pitch. They're like the world's finest central midfielders – with a real understanding of the game, imagination, and magical ball skills."

"Exactly," replied Margaret. "And not just those two. In the next phase of digestion, it's essential for the small intestine to work closely with the gallbladder."

Then Margaret stopped herself, and said to John: "But that would make three central midfielders, and that's too many, isn't it?"

John thought for a moment and then said: "We can't really have three central midfielders, but we can have two central and one defensive midfielder, if that helps."

Gallbladder

"I think that's exactly what we need," said Margaret. "But how does a defensive midfielder differ from a central midfielder?" she asked.

"Just like the two central midfielders, a defensive midfielder operates in front of the defensive line, but his tasks are more defensive. He's a crucial player for the team, and he needs to have a strong personality. Do you understand me? He is at the centre of the entire team. Most of the opponents' attacking moves will go through his space, so he needs to give one hundred percent throughout the entire game. Often the defensive midfielder is the team captain, because he's good at motivating the team and leading by example."

"I think that's a perfect position for the gallbladder," replied Margaret. "Just like a good defensive midfielder, the gallbladder stands firm in front of the defensive line and collects the balls from the opposition attack."

"I'm not sure I really understand," said John doubtfully.

"The ball I'm talking about," explained Margaret, "the ball that's collected by the gallbladder, is the bile that comes from the liver."

The gallbladder is a crucial teammate for the liver, and its performance depends on the liver. Bile is a by-product formed by the liver. The liver can't use it, but for the gallbladder it's very useful. The gallbladder stores the bile and gradually releases it into the small intestine whenever necessary, with amazing precision. Just the right quantity, at just the right time. Without this help, the small intestine would find it impossible to digest food at all."

"So that means the gallbladder must be really strong if it's going to defend the team throughout an entire match," observed John.

"Certainly. Without the gallbladder, the whole team would fall apart. Although it's not large in size, it's incredibly strong – just like a defensive midfielder. It's always encouraging its teammates, motivating them to give outstanding performances, and it leads by example, always giving a hundred percent."

"I wouldn't have expected that from the gallbladder," said John, raising his eyebrows in surprise. "I expect the body can't afford for the gallbladder to have an off day."

"Not really," replied Margaret. "If the gallbladder were to switch off for just a short while, it would have an immediate negative effect on the functions of the small intestine, and the entire body – including all its organs – would no longer receive the nutrients it needs to work properly. That's why the gallbladder's game needs to be simple and effective – it needs to pass accurately and run with the ball if necessary."

"I think I'm really starting to understand this mechanism," said John, and then he returned to his favourite topic: "But does it all have an influence on our psyche?"

"Of course," Margaret replied. "Our psyche and emotions have quite a significant effect on the organs of our digestive system, and vice versa. For example, the stomach is one of the most sensitive organs of all. Frayed nerves, stress, anxiety or excitement can cause the food to pass through our intestines too quickly. This is called diarrhea. If that happens, our organs can't break down the food as they should, and we lose a lot of the nutrients that we'd otherwise be getting from the food. Whereas emotions such as tension, defiance, anger or 'bottling up' feelings can lead to constipation. In this case, the intestines absorb too much water and toxins, and return them to the body.

"The gallbladder and liver work together to regulate our emotions. If both organs' functions are undisturbed, it helps support cautious thinking, good judgement, determination and a lack of fear of making decisions. If the liver is out of balance, it will automatically affect the performance of the gallbladder, which may have negative effects on our courage and initiative."

"OK, so that's the midfield sorted out," said John. "But I still feel we're lacking some defensive players. We've got a right back and a left back, but that's not going to be enough."

"So who would you suggest? We've got a few organs left."

"Well, we need a solid centre back. Someone who it's difficult for the opposition forwards to get past. A wall, or a barrier."

"A wall, hmmm," said Margaret, thinking about what John had said. "Well, it might not be a complete wall, but at least part of the job could be done by the large intestine."

Large Intestine

"I think that might be enough – as long as it has enough strength and talent for the position."

"I think it does. But tell me what a central defender actually does."

"Well," said John, "I think the best central defenders are the traditional type." He'd almost forgotten he wasn't talking to a knowledgeable football fan.

"In theory, a centre back's job is quite simple. But in reality it's a hard position to play in, and it carries a lot of responsibility. The central defender's main role is to marshall the team's defence and to make sure that the ball doesn't come anywhere near the goalkeeper. He's the last line of defence before the goalkeeper, so it depends on him whether the opposition are able to create chances that might lead to goals. If a winger or a central midfielder loses the ball, it's not necessarily critical, because they know that there is a line of defence behind them that should stop the opposition from attacking the goal. But a good centre back can't take any chances. He has to take split-second decisions on how to deal with the ball and the opponent, or he'll hand the opponent an easy shot at goal."

"So it's a very important position," said Margaret.

"It certainly is. The most famous and best-loved players are usually forwards, but central defenders do just as much work out there on the pitch, and without them the game would be lost."

"I think that the large intestine would be the perfect fit for that position," said Margaret.

"Are you sure?" asked John.

"Definitely. The job of the large intestine seems to be quite simple. I could sum it up like this. First the large intestine receives the remains of the undigested food from the small intestine. It then absorbs the last of the substances that the small intestine can't deal with – some water and the remaining nutrients. Once it's clear that nothing more can be extracted from what remains of the food, the large intestine takes the final decision. It creates excrement, which is then expelled from the body. This completes the entire process of digestion, and the large intestine brings stability and balance to the whole."

"I understand," said John. "Without the large intestine as the central defender, even if all our other organs were working perfectly – the spleen, stomach, liver, gallbladder and small intestine – our bodies would still not function very well if they weren't able to expel all the useless remnants."

"Exactly. That's why it's such an important organ. Today many people have problems in that area. Eating too many refined foods, meat and dairy products puts great strain on the large intestine. It's like if the team isn't playing well and the opposing team is constantly attacking your goal from all sides," explained Margaret. "Of course, the large intestine always tries to defend its area and help the whole team, but even the best player would have trouble dealing with that kind of pressure."

"What do you mean?" asked John.

"I mean that even the large intestine gets tired after withstanding prolonged attack. Typical symptoms include stomachache, rumbling in the belly, or diarrhea. The opposite problem is when it absorbs too much liquid from food, which causes constipation. Constipation is also reflected in the state of our tongue, which becomes dry and red. Neither of these two extremes is good for us, and they both signal that something is wrong with our organism. We need to assess the situation and make the necessary changes so that our

bodies can recover from the pressure and begin working properly again.”

“And which organs is it particularly connected with?”

“Most of all with the lungs. Though of course the processes of absorption and excretion are very complex, and although the large intestine plays a key role, it really is a team effort.”

“How is that relationship with the lungs reflected in practice?” asked John.

“Well, although the connection between those two organs might seem rather strange at first, it is based on logic. Both organs are somehow involved with the metabolism of water.” Here we go again, thought John. Without suspecting it, Margaret had returned to his least favourite topic. I hope it’s going to be quick this time, he thought to himself, while Margaret continued her explanation: “The lungs are responsible for cleaning, which helps the large intestine to transport waste substances. If the large intestine works well, that helps the lungs to achieve good results in their task of cleaning.”

“I’m not sure I really understand,” said John.

“If the lungs are not good at cleaning, then the fluids can get stuck within the body – and they don’t move downwards like they should. This often leads to constipation. And vice versa: if the large intestine can’t process and excrete waste products, that can have a negative effect on the cleaning function of the lungs, which in turn leads to difficulties with breathing, such as painful breathing or coughing.

That’s why if a patient has problems with their lungs, doctors will have a look at their large intestine, and vice versa too.”

“That does sound interesting,” said John, nodding.

“I think we’re coming to the final stage,” Margaret smiled. “The only position we still haven’t filled is the goalkeeper.”

“And who is it going to be?”

“The bladder,” the nurse replied.

Bladder

John looked rather disappointed. Such an important position on the pitch, and it’s being given to the bladder? After all, the bladder

can't hold everything forever, he thought – it has to let go of it sooner or later. He had to stop himself from laughing out loud at the thought.

“Tell me something about goalkeepers,” said Margaret.

John was still trying to stop himself laughing, so he decided to keep the explanation as short as possible.

“Well, you can't play without a goalkeeper. If he gets a red card and you haven't got anybody to replace him, you have real problems. Your opponents will find it very easy to score goals.” Once again he thought of the bladder and how strange it seemed to think of it as a goalkeeper. He was curious to see how Margaret would explain her choice.

“OK, John. Let's take it step by step. The goalkeeper needs to be able to catch and hold the ball well.” John waited until she realized what a mistake she'd made in her choice. She noticed his expression, and asked: “Is there something wrong with that?”

“I'm not so sure,” replied John. “I just can't quite imagine a bladder being a good goalkeeper. It would ruin the whole team.”

“Agreed,” said Margaret, flashing her kind smile at John. “I have to admit that our body doesn't really fit with the rules of football in this case. But I still think that the bladder could be a very good goalkeeper. After all, even the best goalkeeper still has to decide whether to jump to the left or the right, before the striker has even touched the ball. So he has a fifty-fifty chance of making the right decision. But even so, there isn't a team in the world that decides to play without a goalkeeper.”

John went silent and considered what Margaret had just said. Suddenly it began to make sense to him.

“The bladder's job is to recognize precisely the right time to expel the unused liquids, and to expel precisely the right amount. During a match, lots of fluids circulate around our body, including water. We've already talked about that. Our organs gradually get rid of the unused, unclean fluids, sending them to the kidneys, which then send them to the bladder. If we didn't have a bladder, the whole process would stop working – we would lose the natural balance in our bodies.”

“I think I understand you now,” said John.

"It's an important organ, even though it's right at the end of the 'food chain'," Margaret joked, and they both laughed.

"Our emotions are also linked with the bladder," she continued. "If it doesn't work well, it creates tension in the team, which is reflected in our behaviour."

Now that they had covered all the positions on the pitch including the goalkeeper, Margaret got up from the armchair and went to work. John thought about everything she'd said and imagined all his organs working together inside his body.

By now it had begun to get dark outside, and a different nurse brought his dinner. After eating, he got up and went for a walk in the corridor. He felt much better today than the day before, but even so he quickly became tired, so he returned to his bed.

His thoughts went back to his conversations with Margaret. And suddenly he realized that they had forgotten about the most important job of all – the team's coach. We've got a goalkeeper, a defence, a midfield and an attacking line – but who's actually responsible for the whole team? How could we possibly have forgotten something so important!

Coach

It's great that I know how all the players work together, but what's the point if there's no coach to give the players guidance and advice? Not even Real Madrid or Manchester United would be successful without a good manager or coaching staff. And neither can my own body.

He was so excited at the thought of discussing this with Margaret that he could hardly sleep. What would she suggest? Had she even thought about a coach, or had she just forgotten, as John had? He reassured himself that he would ask her about that as soon as they saw each other the next day.

But it was no good – he still couldn't sleep. Despairing, he picked up the remote control and turned the TV on.

In less than a minute Margaret appeared in the doorway and hissed at him: "What are you doing watching television now, and having it on so loud? It's almost one in the morning. Do you want to wake all the other patients up?"

John immediately muted the TV. "I am sorry."

"You should get some sleep. You may be going home tomorrow, but that doesn't mean you don't need your sleep."

Suddenly he felt a deep respect for Margaret. Although her tone of voice was nowhere near as friendly as it had been that afternoon, he could still tell that she meant well. Immediately he switched off the TV and pulled the blanket over him.

Just as Margaret was about to turn off the light and go, John stopped her with an almost childlike voice: "But I don't know who the coach is," he whispered. "What did you say?" Margaret said, heading back to his bedside. "I don't know who the team coach is," repeated John. "I've been thinking about it for hours and I still can't think who it might be." Margaret gave him a broad smile. But John continued: "I've thought about all the possibilities, but there are no really good candidates for the coach's job. You know, no team can play well without a coach. It needs an experienced manager who knows the game and thinks tactically; without that, not even the best players will achieve success."

"I think you may be right," said Margaret. "Are you sure you can't think of a suitable organ?"

"I'm sure," John whispered.

Margaret gave him a few more seconds to think about it.

"The brain?" he suggested.

"We'd certainly be lost without the brain," the nurse said. "I'd say that some of the coach's job is done by the brain, the spine and the nervous system, all working together."

"And who does the rest?" asked John.

"You do," said Margaret, giving him the stern look she had given him a few moments before.

Even at one in the morning, John still had a sense of humour, so he whispered, quite loudly: "What? I can't hear you."

But Margaret wasn't going to be fooled. She replied firmly: "You heard very well. I said YOU DO."

John stared at her, almost in desperation: "What do you mean, I do? I don't know anything about the organs or medicine."

"Really? And what about all the things we talked about today and yesterday? I think you now know plenty about your body – enough to take responsibility for it and be your own coach." Margaret added: "You are your body's head coach, whether you like it or not. Many people don't know half of what you do, and yet they're excellent coaches of their own bodies."

John's expression revealed his doubts. Up to now, he'd agreed with almost everything Margaret had said. But this? Something just didn't seem right about it. After all, if I was the head coach, surely I'd know about it. And if I knew about it, I'd be doing something about it! And then he said aloud: "I don't know why, but I just can't agree. If it was all up to me, surely I'd know. Until today I used to think that all my organs worked automatically, naturally, and that I didn't have to worry about them at all."

Margaret saw that the conversation wasn't about to end any time soon, and because she was already tired, she sat down on the neighbouring bed, which was empty this week.

John didn't notice, and carried on with his monologue. "I think that this job needs a real specialist, somebody with experience. Asking me to do it is like asking me to go and be the manager of Barcelona tomorrow. I'm just not up to the job – I don't know how to do it. And anyway, you said that if I wanted to get anywhere close to the knowledge our doctors have, I'd need to do a medicine degree at least. And now you're telling me that I have to coach my own team?" Suddenly John stopped. He was surprised by what he'd just said. "I have to coach my own team." Something in it sounded logical; it made a sort of sense, even though he was still resisting the idea. A long time ago he had realized that it was best to make his own decisions – even though the people around him (his parents, grandparents, girlfriend and teachers) undoubtedly meant well. He wanted to live his own life, make his own mistakes, enjoy his own successes – and that was why he had always resisted taking advice from other people, preferring to go his own way.

Perhaps that applied to his health, too? Perhaps he didn't actually need a university degree or medical qualifications to understand that he needed to eat healthy food and get plenty of exercise if he wanted to stay fit.

John had never lacked self-confidence, so he quickly came to realize that he was intelligent enough to control a few organs.

In any case, he thought to himself, my body will do most of that work for me. Using all those processes and mechanisms which are already pre-defined, which work without me having to think about them. If all I need to do is eat well, sleep well, do enough exercise or go and get a massage from time to time – well, how hard can that be?

But then he had a different thought: What if he got ill?

"And what happens if I can't do it?" he said to Margaret. "I mean what happens if I get ill again, or if I have an injury?"

Margaret thought about this, but replied quickly.

"Then you have to seek out help and advice from experts. Just like you did a couple of days ago when you came here.

"I bet you didn't exactly look after yourself very well before, did you?" she whispered to him. "But if you do start looking after yourself, eating properly and taking regular exercise, then the

chance of us meeting again is very small indeed. If you look after your health, it will look after you."

John went quiet.

"And what's more," Margaret began to say. John looked up at her, expecting some kind of reassurance that he would manage it. "What's more, every coach has several assistants, advisors, masseurs and physiotherapists who help him look after his team and keep the players in tip-top condition."

"That's true," said John, rather more calmly.

"Nevertheless, not even the best doctor, specialist, assistant or physio can replace you as the head coach."

John nodded.

"For example," Margaret continued. "It's you who decides whether your body is fit and healthy or not. You can have a fitness coach, a yoga instructor or a subscription to your local gym, but if you don't make proper use of them, that's your fault, not theirs. And if you get high blood pressure or cholesterol, your doctor will help you solve those problems. But if you don't follow your doctor's recommendations, he won't be able to help."

John once again began to look rather helpless, so Margaret added: "Even if you feel that you don't know very much about your body, that still doesn't mean that you can't be an excellent coach. You have your whole life to learn to understand it. And the more you understand it, the more it will reward you. And you can call on all your key players, and they're all in pretty good shape."

John was slowly beginning to understand what Margaret was trying to tell him. If he hadn't eaten so much junk food and drunk so much coffee and beer, maybe he wouldn't be here today, and he wouldn't have had to undergo the operation at all. In fact, if his organs were a real football team, its results would probably be terrible. It wouldn't even be capable of playing in the lowest league, let alone dreaming of promotion to the top flight. He'd made quite a mess of his job as coach over the years. He'd neglected his team completely, so it was no wonder that his players were injured all the time. After all, even the most talented player wouldn't be able to keep up a quick tempo for 90 minutes and score goals if he spent much of the time smoking, staying out late and missing training sessions.

OK, thought John to himself. At least my players know how to stay in position and make a reasonable job of defence. But it's a shame – I've just lost part of my intestine, which is playing as a central defender, and I'm not even thirty years old. I haven't even reached half time, and my players are starting to give up.

Then something shifted in John's thoughts. Which great coach worries about the score until the match has finished? If there's still some time left, I can still win, he thought. OK, the defence has been under pressure, but with a bit more training and the right fitness plan, I'm sure I can put it right. After all, the consultant and the nurse have said that as long as I keep to a strict diet for a few weeks, my intestines will heal and work just as well as they did before.

"What are you thinking about now?" Margaret asked.

"I'm thinking that I still haven't lost the game. I mean I'm still out there playing. So there's still time to do something about it and turn the scoreline around."

"That's true. As long as you're still playing, you've got something to play for. A game is like life. As long as we're alive, we can influence and change things. But once the game's over, that's it. Unfortunately not many people are lucky enough to be able to turn the score around in extra time. Most people die after "90 minutes", and often they don't even know they could have influenced the outcome of the game."

But John's thoughts were elsewhere. He was thinking about everything he would have to do if he wanted his team to play better.

Margaret looked at her watch. It was just after two o'clock.

"So now you've nothing to worry about. The mystery is solved, and it's time to get some sleep," she said. She wished John good night, switched the light off, and left.

"Good night and thank you," John whispered to her.

John slept well after she had left. Suddenly he smiled at the feeling of victory and freedom, power and importance. He was glad that he now knew and understood how his body worked. He was happy with his new discovery – that he was the best person to look after himself. Occasionally he felt that he had an advantage over all those doctors – yes, they knew a lot of things, but it was him who was really responsible for his own body. He also enjoyed the feeling of being unique – one of a small, select group of people who knew the secret of the body’s “game”, giving him a real competitive edge. He could hardly wait to tell everybody – starting with his girlfriend, of course – about his new discovery.

Third Day

On the third day, John awoke thinking of home. He was really looking forward to it. Although he had enjoyed his conversations with Margaret, and although he knew he would miss them, he couldn't wait to return to normal life, his girlfriend and family.

His departure from the hospital was planned for two o'clock. At least that was what the consultant had said yesterday. If today's morning check-up went off without any problems, then he would be able to go home after lunch.

Perhaps he would still get the chance to say goodbye to Margaret. He really wanted to thank her for being so generous with her time and knowledge.

After breakfast the consultant came and confirmed that John would be able to go home after lunch. Everything was set. All that remained to do was to pack his things, which would take two minutes at most, and he could go. So the only thing stopping him from leaving the hospital were the hands on his wristwatch, which showed half past ten.

How annoying, thought John. If only it was at least half past twelve or half past one. What am I going to do here for three hours? It occurred to him that if Margaret was here and had time, they could talk for a while more about players and organs, and the time would fly by.

Shortly afterwards, a nurse appeared at the door. For an instant John thought it was Margaret, but he realized it was her colleague. He decided to seize the opportunity and ask if Margaret was on duty.

But he didn't know her name, so he would try to describe her to the nurse as best he could.

"Please, nurse," he blurted out rather clumsily. She looked closely at him.

"What can I do for you, Mr Smith?"

John was rather surprised; he had become used to Margaret calling him John, which was rather nicer than his surname, but after all he *was* Mr Smith, so he let the thought go.

"I wonder if I could ask whether your colleague is on duty today. She has blonde hair and blue eyes – she was here yesterday." He almost bit his tongue when he said that. What am I talking about, he thought to himself. I just described her as if I wanted to ask her out, which isn't true at all.

"Margaret's not here at the moment, she'll be here at half past eleven," the nurse smiled at him. She took his breakfast tray and went.

That's great, thought John. Apart from looking awful – messy hair, hospital pyjamas that are hardly very stylish – I've just made an

idiot of myself and that nurse thinks I want to ask her colleague out on a date. Oh well, at least I'm going home today.

One more hour. I have one more hour before Margaret arrives. It seemed like an eternity. His thoughts kept returning to Margaret. The name suited her. She was like an angel, helping him to understand the basic processes in his body. Apart from having blonde hair and blue eyes, she was quite small and had a slim figure. Who would have believed that such a small, gentle person could hold such huge wisdom and understanding. When they talked, he felt her charging him up with energy.

He thought back and tried to remember every connection and function of each organ, especially their influence on his psyche. He would never have believed that his mental state would find such a clear reflection in his physical state – and vice versa. He was full of enthusiasm at the idea, bubbling with ideas about how to strengthen his psyche, which would have a positive impact on his body. He was convinced that it would enable him to be more successful at work, to expand his client base, and to spend more quality time with his girlfriend and family. "I'm not going to lie to myself – my performance at work and home has been pretty poor in recent weeks," he whispered to himself. He was determined to change the situation immediately.

Suddenly he was woken by a knocking at the door. He must have drifted off to sleep for a while.

He sat on the bed and rubbed his eyes.

"Patient, it's twelve o'clock, lunchtime," a familiar and friendly voice rang out.

"Good morning," said John. "How are you today? I'm just going to eat this lunch and then I'll be off home." John just had to convey his joy to somebody – and who better than Margaret?

"I know," she said, smiling at him, and added: "And I think you're not only healthy, but you're well prepared to stay healthy for a long time."

"I'm convinced of it now. Or at least, I think I'll be able to," said John. "I just wanted to ask you whether there was anything else I should know. I thought that if you wanted, after lunch you could go through everything we've talked about and explain it again."

"OK. But I've got work to do now, and you need to eat your lunch. I'll call round later and we'll quickly recap what you've remembered." She smiled again, and left the room.

This time John was pleased with himself. He'd managed to explain to the nurse what he wanted, without feeling like he was half-insane.

Margaret returned after about half an hour, just as she'd promised. She looked at the empty plate. "I can see you're starting to get used to the diet," she said.

"I'd like my intestines to heal and get well again as soon as possible," John replied.

"So what would you like to know?" Margaret asked.

"I don't know precisely. Are there any more positions that we've forgotten about? Or perhaps we could just summarize everything again. I'd like to remember as much of it as possible."

Summary

"I understand," Margaret said. "Let's do it like this: I'll try to briefly summarize everything, then you can tell me what you remember about your players. If you need me to stop, then just say."

"OK," said John happily.

"The first organ we talked about was the spleen."

"Our attacking midfielder," added John.

"Exactly. The spleen is a very creative player, who has excellent ball control. The closest connection with the spleen is the stomach. It plays an important role in transforming the nutrients we get from

food into body fluids. The stomach is where the whole process of digestion and nutrition starts. And what comes then?" asked Margaret.

"Then the other players come into the game – the small intestine, the gallbladder and the large intestine," John answered.

"Excellent," said Margaret.

John didn't wait to be asked, and continued: "The rest of the food that the stomach can't deal with goes into the small intestine. The small intestine continues to absorb important nutrients, helped by the gallbladder. The bile – which is a waste product for the liver – helps the intestines digest the remains of the food, giving our bodies extra nutrients. When this process has finished, it's the turn of the large intestine. It checks the remains of the undigested food for the last time, and if possible absorbs any remaining water. When it's clear that there's nothing more of any use in there, it excretes the waste."

"Excellent," said Margaret. "I wouldn't have believed that you'd be able to remember so much – and to explain it all so clearly."

"Thank you," said John. "So who else haven't we talked about yet?" he asked, hoping to show her that he could remember the activities of the other players.

"You choose," she replied. "We can continue either with the attack or the defence."

"OK, I'll start with the attack. The main striker is the heart, with two wingers at the sides – they're the lungs. Behind them are the liver, in the centre of the attacking line, and the spleen as the attacking midfielder."

Margaret nodded. It was clear she liked John's style.

"So, now to the heart," said John. "The heart works with the lungs, just like the striker and the wingers. The job of the heart is first to pump blood to the lungs, where it gets oxygenated, and then to pump it back to the rest of the body. Thanks to this process, all the organs and parts of our body receive enough nutrients at the right time. As I've said already, the lungs are responsible for breathing and the exchange of gases. They don't need to be strong and powerful players, but they do need to be consistent and precise," said John, looking at Margaret, who all the while was

smiling at him broadly and nodding in agreement. John continued: "We should be particularly careful of the lungs, nose and throat when it's cold or windy. The lungs are quite sensitive, and it doesn't take much to cause it problems. Another key player in the breathing process is our skin, which helps us to regulate our body temperature through sweating.

"Next up is the liver, the centre forward. He embodies all the qualities a good footballer should have. A real feeling for the game, excellent concentration, great ball control, the ability to play attacking and defensive roles, and the ability to keep calm even in the most important situations. That's what the liver does. It controls the blood and other important fluids in our bodies, and according to our needs it either stores them or releases them, helping us to achieve internal balance. I also remember that the liver is connected with our tendons and nails, and that our eyesight will indicate our liver's health."

"That's absolutely correct," said Margaret, and added: "I think all we're missing now is the left and right back and the goalkeeper."

"Yes, I remember," replied John. "The left and right back – they're our kidneys. I'd say the kidneys are our foundation. They're connected with all stages of our life, from birth to death. They also do various things – absorbing water, expelling harmful substances, cleaning our bodily fluids, and helping us breathe properly. I particularly like the kidneys, because that's where our willpower and ambition is located.

"The last player on the pitch is the goalkeeper – the bladder. And although we wouldn't be very impressed with our goalkeeper at first sight ..." – he smiled at Margaret – "he's a very hard-working player. We couldn't do without him, and the entire team trusts him. He expels unwanted liquids from the body and helps to create perfect harmony and balance – which all players need. This whole process is like the perfect teamwork among all the players on the pitch."

"You've summed it up very well indeed," said Margaret.

And she was right. John had managed to remember a lot, but that wasn't the most important thing for him. His most important discovery was that he was the coach of the whole team, and he was already planning strategies to help it achieve better results.

Shortly after two o'clock, Margaret came to tell John that his parents had arrived to pick him up.

"Thank you. I'll be right there – I've already packed," he shouted to the corridor. He put the last few things in his bag, plus an apple that he hadn't eaten, and rushed to the door hoping to be able to say goodbye to Margaret before leaving.

Meanwhile, Margaret was preparing the release paperwork, and when she saw John in the corridor she called him over to pick them up. For the last time she reminded John of the importance of keeping to a strict diet, then she handed him the papers and wished him a safe journey. "I hope you're very successful – both at home and away," she smiled.

John thanked Margaret for looking after him the whole time and explaining how the human body worked.

They shook hands and Margaret accompanied him to the waiting room, where his parents were.

His mother and father were glad to have him back healthy and in one piece. His mother in particular had been worrying about him. She knew he had a lot on his plate combining his work and his studies, and hundreds of times she had tried to persuade him not to take on so many responsibilities. Now she hoped that he would learn from his experience and take better care of himself.

And she was right.

John was determined to make major changes to many aspects of his previous lifestyle. But what his mother didn't know was that it wasn't so much the operation itself that had changed John's outlook on the health. Above all it was the wisdom and patience of one nurse, who had helped him to discover a new world of knowledge about how his organs worked. And that if we want to achieve good results not only on the football field, but also to be healthy and mentally balanced, we need above all to take on the responsibility of coaching our own team.

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