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Fever Pitch

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ARSENAL v STOKE CITY
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I fell in love with football as I was later to fall in love with women: suddenly, inexplicably, uncritically, giving no thought to the pain or disruption it would bring with it.

In May '68 (a date with connotations, of course, but I am still more likely to think of Jeff Astle than of Paris), just after my eleventh birthday, my father asked me if I'd like to go with him to the FA Cup Final between West Brom and Everton; a colleague had offered him a couple of tickets. I told him that I wasn't interested in football, not even in the Cup Final – true, as far as I was aware, but perversely I watched the whole match on television anyway. A few weeks later I watched the Man Utd–Benfica game, enthralled, with my mum, and at the end of August I got up early to hear how United had got on in the final of the World Club Championship. I loved Bobby Charlton and George Best (I knew nothing about Denis Law, the third of the Holy Trinity, who had missed the Benfica match through injury) with a passion that had taken me completely by surprise; it lasted three weeks, until my dad took me to Highbury for the first time.

My parents were separated by 1968. My father had met someone else and moved out, and I lived with my mother and my sister in a small detached house in the Home Counties. This state of affairs was unremarkable enough in itself (although I cannot recall anyone else in my class with an absent parent

– the sixties took another seven or eight years to travel the twenty-odd miles down the M4 from London), but the break-up had wounded all four of us in various ways, as break-ups are wont to do.

There were, inevitably, a number of difficulties that arose from this new phase of family life, although the most crucial in this context was probably the most banal: the commonplace but nevertheless intractable one-parent Saturday-afternoon-at-the-zoo problem. Often Dad was only able to visit us midweek; no one really wanted to stay in and watch TV, for obvious reasons, but on the other hand there wasn't really anywhere else a man could take two children under twelve. Usually the three of us drove to a neighbouring town, or up to one of the airport hotels, where we sat in a cold and early-evening deserted restaurant, and where Gill and I ate steak or chicken, one or the other, in more or less complete silence (children are not great dinner conversationalists, as a rule, and in any case we were used to eating with the TV on), while Dad watched. He must have been desperate to find something else to do with us, but the options in a commuter-belt town between 6.30 and 9.00 on a Monday night were limited.

That summer, Dad and I went to a hotel near Oxford for a week, where in the evenings we sat in a deserted hotel dining room, and where I ate steak or chicken, one or the other, in more or less complete silence. After dinner we went to watch TV with the other guests, and Dad drank too much. Things had to change.

My father tried again with the football that September, and he must have been amazed when I said yes. I had never before said yes to any suggestion of his, although I rarely said no either. I just smiled politely and made a noise intended to express interest but no commitment, a maddening trait I think I invented especially for that time in my life but which has somehow remained with me ever since. For two or three years

he had been trying to take me to the theatre; every time he asked I simply shrugged and grinned idiotically, with the result that eventually Dad would get angry and tell me to forget it, which was what I wanted him to say. And it wasn't just Shakespeare, either: I was equally suspicious of rugby matches and cricket matches and boat trips and days out to Silverstone and Longleat. I didn't want to do anything at all. None of this was intended to punish my father for his absence: I really thought that I would be happy to go anywhere with him, apart from every single place he could think of.

1968 was, I suppose, the most traumatic year of my life. After my parents' separation we moved into a smaller house, but for a time, because of some sort of chain, we were homeless and had to stay with our neighbours; I became seriously ill with jaundice; and I started at the local grammar school. I would have to be extraordinarily literal to believe that the Arsenal fever about to grip me had nothing to do with all this mess. (And I wonder how many other fans, if they were to examine the circumstances that led up to their obsession, could find some sort of equivalent Freudian drama? After all, football's a great game and everything, but what is it that separates those who are happy to attend half a dozen games a season – watch the big matches, stay away from the rubbish, surely the sensible way – from those who feel compelled to attend them all? Why travel from London to Plymouth on a Wednesday, using up a precious day's holiday, to see a game whose outcome was effectively decided in the first leg at Highbury? And, if this theory of fandom as therapy is anywhere near the mark, *what the hell is buried in the subconscious of people who go to Leyland DAF Trophy games?* Perhaps it is best not to know.)

There is a short story by the American writer Andre Dubus entitled 'The Winter Father', about a man whose divorce has separated him from his two children. In the winter his relationship with them is tetchy and strained: they move from afternoon jazz club to cinema to restaurant, and stare at each other. But

in the summer, when they can go to the beach, they get on fine. 'The long beach and the sea were their lawn; the blanket their home; the ice chest and thermos their kitchen. They lived as a family again.' Sitcoms and films have long recognised this terrible tyranny of place, and depict men traipsing round parks with fractious kids and a frisbee. But 'The Winter Father' means a lot to me because it goes further than that: it manages to isolate what is valuable in the relationship between parents and children, and explains simply and precisely *why* the zoo trips are doomed.

In this country, as far as I know, Bridlington and Minehead are unable to provide the same kind of liberation as the New England beaches in Dubus's story; but my father and I were about to come up with the perfect English equivalent. Saturday afternoons in north London gave us a context in which we could be together. We could talk when we wanted, the football gave us something to talk about (and anyway the silences weren't oppressive), and the days had a structure, a routine. The Arsenal pitch was to be our lawn (and, being an English lawn, we would usually peer at it mournfully through driving rain); the Gunners' Fish Bar on Blackstock Road our kitchen; and the West Stand our home. It was a wonderful set-up, and changed our lives just when they needed changing most, but it was also exclusive: Dad and my sister never really found anywhere to live at all. Maybe now that wouldn't happen; maybe a nine-year-old girl in the nineties would feel that she had just as much right to go to a game as we did. But in 1969 in our town, this was not an idea that had much currency, and my sister had to stay at home with her mum and her dolls.

I don't recall much about the football that first afternoon. One of those tricks of memory enables me to see the only goal clearly: the referee awards a penalty (he runs into the area, points a dramatic finger, there's a roar); a hush as Terry Neill takes it, and a groan as Gordon Banks dives and pushes the

ball out; it falls conveniently at Neill's feet and this time he scores. But I am sure this picture has been built up from what I have long known about similar incidents, and actually I was aware of none of this. All I really saw on the day was a bewildering chain of incomprehensible incidents, at the end of which everyone around me stood and shouted. If I did the same, it must have been an embarrassing ten seconds after the rest of the crowd.

But I do have other, more reliable, and probably more meaningful memories. I remember the overwhelming *maleness* of it all – cigar and pipe smoke, foul language (words I had heard before, but not from adults, not at that volume), and only years later did it occur to me that this was bound to have an effect on a boy who lived with his mother and his sister; and I remember looking at the crowd more than at the players. From where I was sitting I could probably have counted twenty thousand heads; only the sports fan (or Mick Jagger or Nelson Mandela) can do that. My father told me that there were nearly as many people in the stadium as lived in my town, and I was suitably awed.

(We have forgotten that football crowds are still astonishingly large, mostly because since the war they have become progressively smaller. Managers frequently complain about local apathy, particularly when their mediocre First or Second Division team has managed to avoid a good hiding for a few weeks; but the fact that, say, Derby County managed to attract an average crowd of nearly seventeen thousand in 1990/91, the year they finished bottom of the First Division, is a miracle. Let's say that three thousand of these are away supporters; that means that among the remaining fourteen thousand from Derby, there were a number of people who went at least *eighteen times* to see the worst football of last or indeed most other seasons. Why, really, should anyone have gone at all?)

It wasn't the size of the crowd that impressed me most, however, or the way that adults were allowed to shout the word

'WANKER!' as loudly as they wanted without attracting any attention. What impressed me most was just how much most of the men around me *hated*, really *hated*, being there. As far as I could tell, nobody seemed to enjoy, in the way that I understood the word, anything that happened during the entire afternoon. Within minutes of the kick-off there was real anger ('You're a DISGRACE, Gould. He's a DISGRACE!' 'A hundred quid a week? A HUNDRED QUID A WEEK! They should give that to me for watching you.'); as the game went on, the anger turned into outrage, and then seemed to curdle into sullen, silent discontent. Yes, yes, I know all the jokes. What else could I have expected at Highbury? But I went to Chelsea and to Tottenham and to Rangers, and saw the same thing: that the natural state of the football fan is bitter disappointment, no matter what the score.

I think we Arsenal fans know, deep down, that the football at Highbury has not often been pretty, and that therefore our reputation as the most boring team in the entire history of the universe is not as mystifying as we pretend: yet when we have a successful side much is forgiven. The Arsenal team I saw on that afternoon had been spectacularly unsuccessful for some time. Indeed they had won nothing since the Coronation and this abject and unambiguous failure was simply rubbing salt into the fans' stigmata. Many of those around us had the look of men who had seen every game of every barren season. The fact that I was intruding on a marriage that had gone disastrously sour lent my afternoon a particularly thrilling prurience (if it had been a real marriage, children would have been barred from the ground): one partner was lumbering around in a pathetic attempt to please, while the other turned his face to the wall, too full of loathing even to watch. Those fans who could not remember the thirties (although at the end of the sixties a good many of them could), when the club won five Championships and two FA Cups, could remember the Comptons and Joe Mercer from just over a decade before; the

stadium itself, with its beautiful art deco stands and its Jacob Epstein busts, seemed to disapprove of the current mob even as much as my neighbours did.

I'd been to public entertainments before, of course; I'd been to the cinema and the pantomime and to see my mother sing in the chorus of the *White Horse Inn* at the Town Hall. But that was different. The audiences I had hitherto been a part of had paid to have a good time and, though occasionally one might spot a fidgety child or a yawning adult, I hadn't ever noticed faces contorted by rage or despair or frustration. Entertainment as pain was an idea entirely new to me, and it seemed to be something I'd been waiting for.

It might not be too fanciful to suggest that it was an idea which shaped my life. I have always been accused of taking the things I love – football, of course, but also books and records – much too seriously, and I do feel a kind of anger when I hear a bad record, or when someone is lukewarm about a book that means a lot to me. Perhaps it was these desperate, bitter men in the West Stand at Arsenal who taught me how to get angry in this way; and perhaps it is why I earn some of my living as a critic – maybe it's those voices I can hear when I write. 'You're a WANKER, X.' 'The Booker Prize? THE BOOKER PRIZE? They should give that to me for having to read you.'

Just this one afternoon started the whole thing off – there was no prolonged courtship – and I can see now that if I'd gone to White Hart Lane or Stamford Bridge the same thing would have happened, so overwhelming was the experience the first time. In a desperate and percipient attempt to stop the inevitable, Dad quickly took me to Spurs to see Jimmy Greaves score four against Sunderland in a 5–1 win, but the damage had been done, and the six goals and all the great players left me cold: I'd already fallen for the team that beat Stoke 1–0 from a penalty rebound.

A SPARE JIMMY HUSBAND

ARSENAL v WEST HAM
26.10.68

On this, my third visit to Highbury (a goalless draw – I'd now seen my team score three times in four and a half hours), all the kids were given a free Soccer Stars album. Each page of the album was devoted to one First Division team, and contained fourteen or fifteen spaces in which to glue stickers of the players; we were also given a little packet of the stickers to start our collection off.

Promotional offers aren't often described thus, I know, but the album proved to be the last crucial step in a socialisation process that had begun with the Stoke game. The benefits of liking football at school were simply incalculable (even though the games master was a Welshman who once memorably tried to ban us from kicking a round ball even when we got home): at least half my class, and probably a quarter of the staff, loved the game.

Unsurprisingly, I was the only Arsenal supporter in the first year. QPR, the nearest First Division team, had Rodney Marsh; Chelsea had Peter Osgood, Tottenham had Greaves, West Ham had the three World Cup heroes, Hurst, Moore and Peters. Arsenal's best-known player was probably Ian Ure, famous only for being hilariously useless and for his contributions to the television series *Quiz Ball*. But in that glorious first football-saturated term, it didn't matter that I was on my own. In our dormitory town no club had a monopoly on support and, in any case, my new best friend, a Derby County fan like his father and uncle, was similarly isolated. The main thing was that you were a believer. Before school, at breaktime and at lunchtime, we played football on the tennis courts with a tennis ball, and in between lessons we swapped Soccer Star stickers – Ian Ure for Geoff Hurst (extraordinarily, the stickers were of equal value),

Terry Venables for Ian St John, Tony Hately for Andy Lochhead.

And so transferring to secondary school was rendered unimaginably easy. I was probably the smallest boy in the first year, but my size didn't matter, although my friendship with the Derby fan, the tallest by several feet, was pretty handy; and though my performance as a student was undistinguished (I was bunged into the 'B' stream at the end of the year and stayed there throughout my entire grammar school career), the lessons were a breeze. Even the fact that I was one of only three boys wearing shorts wasn't as traumatic as it should have been. As long as you knew the name of the Burnley manager, nobody much cared that you were an eleven-year-old dressed as a six-year-old.

This pattern has repeated itself several times since then. The first and easiest friends I made at college were football fans; a studious examination of a newspaper back page during the lunch hour of the first day in a new job usually provokes some kind of response. And yes, I am aware of the downside of this wonderful facility that men have: they become repressed, they fail in their relationships with women, their conversation is trivial and boorish, they find themselves unable to express their emotional needs, they cannot relate to their children, and they die lonely and miserable. But, you know, what the hell? If you can walk into a school full of eight hundred boys, most of them older, all of them bigger, without feeling intimidated, simply because you have a spare Jimmy Husband in your blazer pocket, then it seems like a trade-off worth making.