Nick Hornby

 Penguin 1992

than argued pompously for the return of National Service. If you did slip the ref something, then thanks, Dad. Brilliant idea. Would Leeds have lost at home to West Brom if it hadn't been my birthday? Would the game at Arsenal have finished nil–nil, as Arsenal *v* Newcastle games had always done before? Would we then have gone on to win the League? I doubt it.

ANOTHER CITY

CHELSEA v TOTTENHAM
January 1972

It is true to say that while I made a natural Arsenal supporter – I too was often dour, defensive, argumentative, repressed – my father belonged at Stamford Bridge. Chelsea were flamboyant, unpredictable and, it has to be said, not the most reliable of teams; my father had a taste for pink shirts and theatrical ties, and, stern moralist that I was, I think I felt that he could have done with a little more consistency. (Parenthood, George Graham would say, is a marathon, not a sprint.) Whatever the reason, Dad patently enjoyed going to Chelsea more than our trips to Highbury, and it was easy to see why. We once spotted Tommy Steele (or maybe it was John Alderton) coming out of the Gents in Chelsea's North Stand, and before the games we ate in one of the Italian restaurants on the King's Road. Once we went to look around the Chelsea Drugstore, where I bought the second Led Zeppelin album and sniffed the cigarette smoke in the air suspiciously. (I was as literal-minded as any Arsenal centre-half.)

Chelsea had Osgood and Cooke and Hudson, all flash and flair, and their version of football was bewilderingly different from Arsenal's (this League Cup semi-final, one of the best games I had ever seen, finished 2–2). But more importantly, the Bridge and its environs presented me with a different but

still familiar version of *London*: familiar because the middle-class suburban boy has always been aware of it. It was not dissimilar to the London we already knew from trips to see pantomimes and films and museums, a busy, bright-lights-big-city London supremely aware that it was the centre of the world; and the people that I saw at Chelsea in those days were centre-of-the-world people. Football was a fashionable game, and Chelsea were a fashionable team; the models and actors and young executives who were cheering the Blues on were beautiful to look at and made the Bridge (the seats, anyway) an exquisitely exotic place.

But this wasn't what I came to football for. Arsenal and its neighbourhood was for me much more exotic than anything I would ever see around the King's Road, which was full of an old-hat ho-hum glitz; football had gripped me because of its *otherness*. All those quiet terraced streets around Highbury and Finsbury Park, all those embittered but still peculiarly loyal used-car salesmen . . . now that was *real* exoticism; the London that a grammar school boy from the Thames Valley could never have seen for himself no matter how many times he went to the Casino cinema to see films in Cinerama. We wanted different things, my dad and I. Just as he was starting to want a part of what Chelsea was all about (and just as he was, for the first time in his life, able to afford it), I wanted to go tearing off in the other direction.

ISLINGTON BOY

READING v ARSENAL
5.2.72

The white south of England middle-class Englishman and woman is the most rootless creature on earth; we would rather belong to any other community in the world. Yorkshiremen,

Lancastrians, Scots, the Irish, blacks, the rich, the poor, even Americans and Australians have something they can sit in pubs and bars and weep about, songs to sing, things they can grab for and squeeze hard when they feel like it, but we have nothing, or at least nothing we want. Hence the phenomenon of mock-belonging, whereby pasts and backgrounds are manufactured and massaged in order to provide some kind of acceptable cultural identity. Who was it that sang 'I Wanna Be Black'? The title says it all, and everybody has met people who really do: in the mid-seventies, young, intelligent and otherwise self-aware white men and women in London began to adopt a Jamaican patois that frankly didn't suit them at all. How we all wished we came from the Chicago Projects, or the Kingston ghettos, or the mean streets of north London or Glasgow! All those aitch-dropping, vowel-mangling punk rockers with a public school education! All those Hampshire girls with grand-parents in Liverpool or Brum! All those Pogues fans from Hertfordshire singing Irish rebel songs! All those Europhiles who will tell you that though their mothers live in Reigate, their sensibilities reside in Rome!

Ever since I have been old enough to understand what it means to be suburban I have wanted to come from somewhere else, preferably north London. I have already dropped as many aitches as I can – the only ones left in my diction have dug themselves too far into definite articles to be winkled out – and I use plural verb forms with singular subjects whenever possible. This was a process that began shortly after my first visits to Highbury, continued throughout my suburban grammar school career, and escalated alarmingly when I arrived at university. My sister, on the other hand, who also has problems with her suburban roots, went the other way when she went to college, and suddenly started to speak like the Duchess of Devonshire; when we introduced each other to our respective sets of friends they found the experience perplexing in the extreme. Which of us, they seemed to be wondering, had been adopted? Had she

fallen on hard times or had I struck lucky? Our mother, born and bred in south-east London but a Home Counties resident for nearly forty years, cuts the accents neatly down the middle.

In a way nobody can blame any of us, the Mockneys or the cod Irish, the black wannabees or the pseudo Sloanes. The 1944 Education Act, the first Labour Government, Elvis, beatniks, the Beatles and the Stones, the sixties . . . we never stood a chance. I blame the eleven-plus. Before the war, maybe, our parents could have scraped the money together to send us to minor public schools, and we would have received our pisspoor cheapskate third-hand classical educations and gone to work in a bank; the eleven-plus, designed to create a meritocracy, made state schools safe for nice families again. Post-war grammar school boys and girls stepped into a void; none of the available cultures seemed to belong to us, and we had to pinch one quick. And what is suburban post-war middle-class English culture anyway? Jeffrey Archer and *Evita*, Flanders and Swann and the Goons, Adrian Mole and Merchant–Ivory, *Francis Durbridge Presents* . . . and John Cleese's silly walk? It's no wonder we all wanted to be Muddy Waters or Charlie George.

The Reading–Arsenal fourth-round Cup-tie in 1972 was the first and most painful of the many exposures to come. Reading was my nearest League team, an unhappy geographical accident that I would have done anything to change; Highbury was thirty-odd miles away, Elm Park a mere eight. Reading fans had Berkshire accents, and incredibly they didn't seem to mind; they didn't even *try* to speak like Londoners. I stood with the home supporters – the match was all-ticket, and it was much easier to go to Reading than to north London to get one – and while I waited my still customary ninety minutes for the game to begin, a whole family (a family!), mother, father and son, all kitted up in blue-and-white scarves and rosettes (rosettes!), started talking to me.

They asked me questions about my team and the stadium, made jokes – peasants! – about Charlie George's hair, offered

me biscuits, lent me their programmes and newspapers. I was beginning to enjoy the conversation. My assumed Cockney sounded to my ears flawless against their loathsome burr, and our relationship was beginning to take on a gratifying city-slicker-meets-hicks-from-the-sticks hue.

It was when they asked me about schools that it all went terribly wrong: they had heard about London comprehensives, and wanted to know whether it was all true, and for what seemed like hours I weaved an elaborate fantasy based on the exploits of the half-dozen small-time thugs at the grammar. I can only presume that I had managed to convince myself, and that by this stage my town had, in my head, transmuted into a north London village somewhere between Holloway and Islington; because when the father asked where I lived, I told him the truth.

'Maidenhead?' the father repeated, incredulous. 'Maidenhead? But that's four miles down the road!'

'Nearer ten,' I replied, but he seemed unconvinced that the extra six miles made much difference, and I could see his point. I was blushing.

Then he finished me off. '*You shouldn't be supporting Arsenal this afternoon*,' he said. '*You should be supporting your local team.*'

It was the most humiliating moment of my teenage years. A complete, elaborate and perfectly imagined world came crashing down around me and fell in chunks at my feet. I wanted Arsenal to avenge me, to beat the Third Division team and their pedantic, dull-witted fans into a pulp; but we won 2–1 with a second-half Pat Rice deflection, and at the end of the game the Reading father ruffled my hair and told me that at least it wouldn't take me long to get home.

It didn't stop me, though, and it only took a couple of weeks to rebuild the London Borough of Maidenhead. But I made sure that the next time I went to an away game it was precisely that – far away, where people might believe that my Thames

Valley hometown had its own tube station and West Indian community and terrible, insoluble social problems.

HAPPY

ARSENAL v DERBY
12.2.72

For a match to be really, truly memorable back then, the kind of game that sent me home buzzing inside with the fulfilment of it all, these conditions had to be met: I had to go with my dad; we had to eat lunch in the chip shop (sitting down, no sharing of tables); we had to have seats in the Upper West Stand (the West Stand because you can see down the players' tunnel from there and so can greet the arrival of the team on the pitch before anyone in the ground), between the half-way line and the North Bank; Arsenal had to play well and win by two clear goals; the stadium had to be full, or nearly full, which usually implied an opposing team of some significance; the game had to be filmed, by ITV for *The Big Match* on Sunday afternoon rather than by the BBC for *Match of the Day* (I liked the anticipation, I guess); and Dad had to be wearing warm clothes. He often travelled over from France without an overcoat, forgetting that his Saturday afternoon was likely to be spent in sub-zero temperatures, and his discomfort was so violent that I felt guilty insisting that we stayed right until the final whistle. (I always did insist, however, and when we reached the car he was often so cold that he could hardly speak; I felt bad about it, but not bad enough to risk missing a goal.)

These were enormous demands, and it is hardly surprising that everything came together just the once, as far as I am aware, for this game against Derby in 1972, when an Alan Ball-inspired Arsenal beat the eventual League Champions 2–0 with two Charlie George goals, one a penalty and the other

immediately asleep, protected by his solidity.

For Tommy it took a long time. His cock went stiff. The little girl. He thought of masturbating, listened to the deep rhythms of Soo-Ling's sleep, but embarrassment stopped him. He thought of work, of Pathis, thought of rent. The little girl. He thought of work. He thought of work and Pathis and thought of rent. He felt the pleasant roughness of Soo-Ling's nipple. She squirmed in her sleep. He heard bass in his head. *Chocolate City*. He hummed, he breathed, he let the smoke and the drink do its work. He heard music in his head, forgot the girl, and he eventually fell asleep.

Christos Tsiolkas
The Jesus Man
Vintage 1999.

5
Fitzroy vs Collingwood at Victoria Park

The Stefano family all supported the Collingwood Football Club, all except Tommy. He barracked for Fitzroy. This difference caused an isolation Tommy felt keenly even from the very borders of his memory. The choice was now impossible to decipher. He had always barracked for Fitzroy; whether from defiance or simply because he had liked the colours on the guernseys, he did not know. It had happened and it marked his difference.

—C'arn the Pies.

And he hated Collingwood with a murderous passion. He had been born not far from Victoria Park, Collingwood's home ground. It seemed that his childhood years had always been punctured with the raucous ferocious screams of supporters. Collingwood, Collingwood forever. And it followed that between himself and Dominic a rivalry had grown, a violence over football that erupted in savage moments of bickering and hate.

—The fucking Fitzroy Lions are all poofters. They're a fucking disgrace.

Tommy would leap at his brother, screaming, and batter him with his fists. Dominic would laugh, push back, and Tommy would fall crying to the floor.

—See. Told ya. You're all a pack of poofters.

His father, laughing, would pick up the shaking hysterical child. It's only footy, mate, it's only footy. He would turn to his older son. Leave him alone, all right. Don't upset him.

His mother would get angry at their obsession with the sport. Bloody football. But she too, when pressed, would

admit her preference for the black and white of the Collingwood Football Club.

—We live here, she would argue, it's a working class team, it's our team.

—It's not, it's not my fucking team, yelled Tommy.

—This is Susan McIntyre, she'll be with us for a few weeks. She's a consultant.

Pathis had introduced her and from that moment Tommy became aware that the world was spinning in directions far from his control. She was young, possibly younger even than himself. She was blonde, smart and spoke good English and she spoke it tough. She was thin, no meat on her at all.

The anorexic bitch. That's what everyone called her. Nadia was the most contemptuous.

—She'll be the one, you'll see, she's come in to do the hatchet job.

The company was to shut down the print shop. That decision had already been made though it had not yet been communicated to staff. But the threat of closure had been a strong rumour for months and the unease and fear had begun to accentuate the petty differences among the staff. For a long time the print shop and the mail room had been divided. Among the printers, the five men reaching retirement age, there was one hundred per cent union membership. They were old school, tradespeople who had assumed the rightness and inevitability of unions. They had also seen the results. For the administrative staff and among the mail clerks—young, some straight out of school—the union did not exist.

Tommy had paid union dues from the day he started work. It had been a familial obligation.

Nadia, too, was union.

—Those fucking stupid bitches, she spat through her cigarette, referring to the women she typed with. They don't know a thing.

Tommy looked at her long legs, shivering behind the nylon. She doesn't shave them enough, he thought, and looked across the roof down to the city. He was falling; he knew it. He was going to lose this job and he had no idea and no inclination for future work.

—What are you going to do?

Tommy didn't answer. He was watching skyscrapers.

—Hey, I'm talking to you.

He turned around, beckoned for a cigarette. He'd give up again tomorrow.

—Fuck, I hate botters. She handed him a fag. What you thinking about?

—Wondering if Fitzroy will beat Collingwood on Saturday.

Nadia laughed and stamped out her cigarette.

—Bullshit. They're a pack of losers.

This was the first time in the five years Tommy had worked in the print shop that no-one had organised a footy tipping competition. Whatever factions and animosities, the weekly tipping had been a cement for the workplace. The rushed marking off of teams on a Friday night. Largely it had been organised by the brash Richmond-supporting Sue. She collected the money at the beginning of the year, organised the pre-finals evening bash. Chips and dips, salami and kabana. The wine and the beer. They'd all get drunk. Secretaries and printers, designers and clerks. Even the manager came along. But the football season had been hushed this year. Tommy and John would exchange opinions, team colours worn on a Monday after a successful weekend. But no-one else really bothered.

McIntyre was conducting interviews with staff. John had already gone up.

—What's she asking?

—Stuff. John said little more. It was likely he would keep

his job. He had done his best to impress the stiff Somers and the arrogant Pathis. With McIntyre he was attentive and a little flirtatious. He was also studying the new computer graphics in his own time and with his own money. That put him ahead.

—Yeah, but we don't all live at home and have Mummy to wipe our arses for us, snarled Nadia.

—What she asking?

—Nothing, Tom, nothing. She's just asking about our work.

—She say anything about me?

—Nothing, Tom, I told you. They're just simple questions.

Tommy watched McIntyre talking to Pathis through the glass partition. He had no attention for the flyer he was working on. She was laughing at something Pathis had said. Her tits were quivering. Pathis was laughing, mild, standing above her, black suit.

Fuck her.

McIntyre had asked John Karthidis simple questions. She wanted to know his plans, his ambitions, the nature of his studies. And John gave quick and humorous answers but impressed on her the strength of his aspirations, the tenacity of his will and the loyalty of his greed. She noticed that his pants were fine linen and fitted neatly around his arse.

She likes a good fast root, thought John. And he smiled at her again.

John Karthidis was going to keep his job. He was making sure of it. Studying computers, Pagemaker and Photoshop. Quark Express. He was getting into it, paving the future. This is what John Karthidis wanted.

Money.

John Karthidis was sniffing the change, it was all in the air. His mother would iron his shirts, press the trousers. Mama, Mama, there's still a crease on this sleeve. I told you, Jesus,

they notice everything. You don't want me to lose my job, do you?

—Jesus, Mama, you want to ruin it for me?

So he flirted with McIntyre, he was a pal to Somers, he was respectful with the arrogant Pathis. He knew what he was doing. John sat across the desk from McIntyre.

You've hardly got tits at all, you ugly bitch.

He nodded his head in agreement.

—I agree, Susan. Can I call you Susan?

I'll lick your clit, I'll suck his cock, I'll lick all your arses. I'll keep my job, I'll keep a future.

John stepped out into the mail room. Nadia was at her desk, her arms folded, her computer quiet. She was glaring at him.

—Weak bastard, she mouthed.

John ignored her. I'm going to keep my job, bitch. He walked over to his desk and sat down. Tommy walked over.

—What she asking?

—Nothing, Tom, nothing. She's just asking about our work.

—She say anything about me?

—Nothing, Tom, I told you. They're just simple questions.

Tommy nodded and walked back to the layout table, picked up the scalpel and began work again. John punched some buttons on the keyboard and looked over at his workmate.

John could not understand Tommy. The lack of ambition, the Asian girlfriend. And that old fashioned loyalty to the union! John's parents too had been union, but they had to be, he would argue to himself. But his was a different kind of work. His was a *career*.

Tommy slid the scalpel down the length of the steel ruler. He cut the bromide and pasted it on the shining sheet.

See, thought John, pushing a button on the brand new keyboard. Control X. *Cut*. Then Control V. *Paste*. Tommy, my man Tommy, you're behind the times.

—I want to see *Field of Dreams*.

—We'll do it after the football.

—I don't want to go to the football. Soo-Ling was sulking, the silence was heavy.

—Okay then, don't come.

—I won't.

The line went dead. Tommy put down the receiver.

—Who was that?

Tommy spun around. McIntyre, smiling.

—One of the buyers. Asking after the leaflet.

McIntyre continued her rounds.

Soo-Ling hated the football, not the game itself, but the way the rites excluded her. Tommy had managed to take her to a few matches but she sat still, bored, patiently waiting for the game to finish, and as soon as it did she would begin to walk away, in a hurry, determined. Her face stone.

At the football everyone looked at her face. There was white and there was black, there was Latin and there was European. There was everyone at the football. Except Asian.

She hated the football. Everyone looked at her. As if she was handicapped. As if she was crippled.

Tommy did not see any of this. He thought she was disinterested and it exasperated him. Football became one of those topics they refused to speak about, a language they did not share.

But though she had never liked the game, she had begun to barrack for Fitzroy.

Tommy quickly rang the number.

—Simpsons and Jakovitch. Please hold the line.

Tommy glanced around. Pathis was in deep conversation with Somers in the mail room front office. McIntyre was nowhere to be seen.

—Sorry to keep you waiting.

Tommy interrupted. Karen, it's Tom Stefano. Is Soo-Ling there?

—Hi, Tommy. I'll connect you.

McIntyre was walking along the ramp, up from the printing presses, walking towards the main offices.

—Sorry. I won't go to the footy this weekend. I'll call you later.

Tommy put down the phone. McIntyre walked past the desk. She said nothing.

That weekend Fitzroy lost to Collingwood by ten goals. Tommy and Soo-Ling went to see *Field of Dreams* and he hated it and she did not mind it. They smoked a joint walking back to the car in the Shoppingtown car park. Tommy turned on the radio in the car, searched for the footy results, listened, and banged his fist on the dashboard.

—See, isn't it better we didn't go?

—No! he screamed at her and she cowered in the passenger seat. They drove along home in silence, the rain falling on the car beating a cruel and erratic tattoo.