

Blue was the Colour

A Tale of
Tarnished Love

Andy Hamilton



FOOTBALL
SHORTS

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The Thunderbolt

ARE YOU the romantic type? Do you believe in love at first sight? A lot of people do, don't they? From time to time, you meet someone who says something like, 'The first moment I saw her I *knew* I was going to marry her,' and you try not to be disturbed by how much they sound like a stalker. It is possible, I suppose, that your future could appear before you in a split-second of revelation, but, in my experience, love is more subtle than that. I have never been struck by that thunderbolt of instant adoration. Well, apart from once.

The date was 5 November 1960. It was a Saturday. Saturday was the best day of any week because it was the holy day of football. No professional football was allowed to take place on Sundays because, according to the Bible, our

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supreme, eternal, all-powerful God got too tired if he worked a seven-day week. Consequently, the Church had decreed that, out of respect, the Sabbath should be a day of soul-draining boredom.

But Saturday was the day of magic.

I had been looking forward to this particular Saturday with growing enthusiasm because our house faced on to a Second World War bomb site and, in the weeks leading up to Guy Fawkes night, the locals would gradually construct an enormous bonfire amid the rubble and weeds, ready for the traditional festivities when the community would gather to celebrate the burning of Catholics. My mum and dad were not so keen on the massive bonfires because the heat could grow so intense that sometimes the glass in our front-room window would start to bend. Invariably, the blaze would become so fierce that someone would call out the fire brigade. Often it was my mum.

Exciting as the prospect of fireworks, fire engines and warping windows was, it would not have been the only reason for my nervous anticipation. After all, this was not going to be my first Guy Fawkes night, but I was also about

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to attend my first football match. Kick-off, three o'clock. Chelsea v Newcastle.

I cannot remember whether I wore a blue-and-white woollen bobble hat, as I did for thousands of matches afterwards. Nor can I remember whether I took the stiff, clunking, very noisy, wooden rattle that would earn me so many dirty looks in the years that followed. What I *do* know is that I was taken to the game by my big brother, Peter. He was 13 years old. I was six and a half. Imagine if that happened now, a 13-year-old taking a six-year-old to a football match. We would be taken into care immediately.

However, this is where I need to pause and interrogate my memory of that afternoon. I am certain that Pete was with me, but I find it hard to believe that our parents would have let me toddle off into a crowded stadium without an accompanying adult. Pete was a very conscientious and sensible older brother, but that does feel like an extraordinary display of trust on their part. However, Pete is adamant that it was just me and him – and possibly a few of his 13-year-old mates.

Of course, we have to bear in mind the attitudes of the time. In the early 1960s, mums and dads loved

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and nurtured their kids, but they also ignored them. The word 'parenting' had not yet been invented and children were allowed to roam free in herds, especially in Ealing comedies. At weekends and during the holidays, we got to 'play out' for most of the day, either in the nearby playground or in the middle of the road, which was huge fun. Admittedly, a few kids got knocked down, but they were the slow ones. That is called natural selection.

So perhaps, between the fuzzy recordings of our memories, Pete and I have recalled an accurate version. Our dad was definitely not with us that day. He was not especially interested in football. Although in later life he acquired a season ticket, principally, I think, because he wanted the company. Part of me cannot help wondering if we were possibly accompanied to that game by our Uncle John. He was a very kind, friendly Geordie and an ardent Newcastle fan. He would have been able to keep an eye on us because, back then, the crowds were not segregated into home and away fans. People were expected to get on or, at least, manage any disagreements without the intervention of someone wearing a tabard. There was, no doubt,

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the occasional fight, but it was unlikely to make it into the newspapers because hooliganism at football matches had not yet become a tabloid staple.

Well, who knows if we had an adult with us? Apart from Pete, obviously, because he is an older sibling and they always *know* everything. They are Google in human form.

We would have had to get to the ground reasonably early that day in order to get a good vantage point. In fact, I spent most of my youth getting to grounds early because I was a tiny child, knee-high to a hobbit. A small child on a crowded terrace stood little chance of seeing anything unless he found some high ground. Often I perched on the cold metal bar of one of the many crush barriers. I watched so many games like that, always returning home with a numbed arse. Sometimes I nagged my brother to let me sit on his shoulders. Pete's memory is that, for my first match, we stood on the raised concrete base of a floodlight pylon. That sounds right. To be honest, that whole afternoon is a bit of a blur to me.

The only part that I can picture with a startling immediacy is climbing the mountainous steps at the

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back of the towering West Terrace and then seeing, for the first time, the breathtaking panorama of the Stamford Bridge stadium laid out beneath me. I can hear the sound of that crowd – a buzzing hum, like a swarm of contented bees. I can remember being exhilarated by the sheer scale of it all. *That* was the moment when I fell in love. Bang went the thunderbolt.