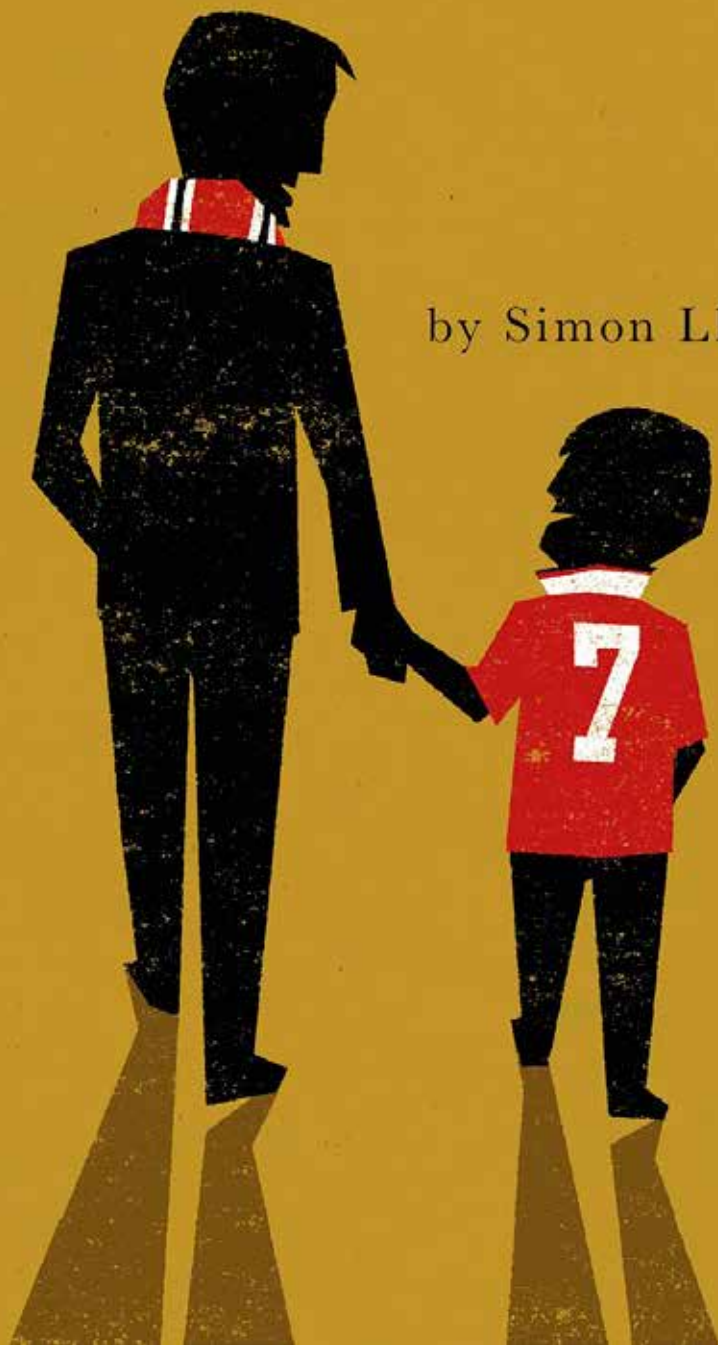


UNITED

with DAD

by Simon Lloyd



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Chapter 1

Looking for Wayne

ON A rain-sodden Wednesday evening a couple of weeks before Christmas 2017, Dad and I watched Manchester United labour to an unconvincing 1-0 home win over Bournemouth – a game so unremarkable I would almost certainly have forgotten it quite quickly were it not for what happened.

The first drops of rain had fallen in the hour before kick-off as we crossed the footbridge over Salford Quays and we'd briefly contemplated nipping back to the car to get the knackered old golf umbrella, which stayed in the boot for emergencies. We decided to push on, quickly regretting the decision. As we reached the first of the street vendor stalls and heart-attack burger vans lining Wharfside Way, it was pissing it down, billowing in hard at near-sideways angles.

Old Trafford was in sight by then, rising up above the roof of the last of the warehouses on the fringes of Trafford Park, red neon lettering running across the top of the stands like a harbour lighthouse to ships seeking shelter from the squall. We pressed on towards it, heads down, hoods up – passing the besieged fanzine sellers and hi-viz-clad security staff, weaving between the crawling queues of traffic filtering into the car parks at the back of the Stretford End.

Dad hobbled along and I sympathetically kept to his pace, resisting the urge to break away from him and burst into a run

for the last couple of hundred yards. Finally, we reached the large foyer at the foot of the Sir Alex Ferguson Stand, where we scanned our tickets and silently queued for the lift, small puddles forming on the tiled floor around our feet as we waited.

The conditions outside had perfectly captured the mood of the place. Only three days had passed since the last home game: a derby against City. United had lost it 2-1, allowing City to open up an 11-point lead at the top of the table. Even with over half a season still to play, the margin had felt depressingly unassailable. Losing to *them* was never enjoyable, but this one had been particularly chastening given how well the season had started.

After spluttering through much of José Mourinho's first year as manager, United, buoyed by their Europa League Final win over Ajax in Stockholm before the summer, had been consistently good in their first few domestic and Champions League games. City had matched their early form in the league, but that was something to worry about later. A sense of cautious optimism had grown among even the most grounded and sensible of United supporters – particularly after a cluster of 4-0 wins in August and September. For the first time since Fergie, they actually *looked* like a side capable of mounting a title challenge. And after the turbulence of the four years that had passed since his retirement, quelling the excitement was proving difficult.

It didn't last long. After their promising start, United stuttered after the first international break of the season. A draw with Liverpool at Anfield wasn't a terrible result, but a week later they turned in a wretched performance at newly promoted Huddersfield Town and were deservedly on the wrong end of a 2-1 scoreline. Another defeat had come away at Chelsea in early November.

On each of these three occasions City, hitting their stride in their second season under Pep Guardiola, won

their games, suddenly opening up an ominous lead at the top of the table. The derby, then, had been must-win, a final chance to stop them slipping out of reach. Defeat had been a crushing, almost-certainly terminal blow as far as the title was concerned. The hope of those balmy late-summer afternoons at the start of the season felt far longer ago than just a matter of weeks.

Out of the lift, the weather and lingering disappointment from the weekend had sapped the concourse of the usual buzz of anticipation that comes with a midweek game under the floodlights. It was unmistakably flat – the kind of night when many in attendance might have quietly wondered if stopping in and watching from the couch might have been the better option.

Dad wiped his misted-up glasses with a crumpled tissue and made for the usual kiosk, digging out enough coins for a programme, which he rolled up and wedged into one of the pockets of his sensible waterproof coat. As he did, I said hello to Frank and Nigel and the other regulars, whose names I was never certain of, who gathered in the usual spot opposite the steps up to our seats.

Nigel, as usual, was at the centre of the pre-match discussion, questioning Mourinho's tactical approach in the derby. Nige came down to Manchester on a coach from somewhere up near Carlisle or Penrith for every game, sinking a few beers in a nearby pub in the hours before kick-off. He was a big bloke – easily over six feet – and probably in his late 50s. Nige was a popular figure in our block: funny, intelligent. For years, he'd sat in the row in front of us, always seeming to wear the same sun-faded baseball cap and heckling referees with an impressively wide range of expletive-laden insults. Frank was a bit older, probably just into his 70s, and more reserved. Like Dad, he'd first attended Old Trafford as a boy in the 1950s. Frank lived somewhere between Salford and

Bolton and, if I remember rightly, had used to come to games with his daughter for years before she had grown up and got married to someone who didn't support United. He was more reserved and not as vocal as Nige. Few were.

'Is he avoiding us again?' Frank had joked, nodding in the direction of the steps. I turned to see Dad making his way up, the only person in the ground who appeared in a hurry to take his seat 20 minutes before kick-off. I shrugged, relieved most of the group were too engrossed with Nige's Mourinho rant to notice.

By then, the feeling that something wasn't quite right had already been nagging me. Dad had been acting strangely for a while. How long, exactly, I couldn't be sure. Save for the odd birthday or Christmas dinner, going to the football was the only quality time we now spent together, so naturally it was on matchdays that I had gradually noticed the changes. I suspected others were also becoming aware of them, as Frank's quip suggested.

Avoiding the concourse chats with the others was only a part of it. I'd first become aware of it – whatever *it* was – during the run of 4-0 wins early in the season. He'd been unusually subdued in the immediate aftermath of the goals, remaining seated when everyone else instinctively leapt to their feet in celebration. Against Everton in September, when United scored three times in the last ten minutes, he'd barely stirred at all and even seemed mildly irritated by the fuss being made of the late glut of goals.

Whatever it was, I was fairly certain it wasn't the cancer. They'd said at his last hospital appointment that all was under control in that department, and so I convinced myself it was probably something not quite so serious. His arthritic right knee had bothered him for years and badly needed replacing. It had slowed what was once a 20-minute walk from car park to turnstile to a 45-minute hobble. On top of that, he'd had

a mild heart attack 18 months earlier, meaning the stairs up to the second tier were now completely out of the question. Matchday and the physical toll it took for him just to reach the ground was becoming an obvious problem. Perhaps, I told myself, whatever was behind it was related to that in some way.

In an ideal world, I could have just asked him, but it wasn't so straightforward. A mix of pride and stereotypically bloke-ish stubbornness meant discussing these things openly with him was akin to drawing blood from a stone. As a young man, he'd played cricket and football at decent levels, continuing to do the latter at semi-pro until well into his 30s. He'd been a PE teacher, played golf regularly, hiked up God knows how many mountains in the Lake District and Swiss Alps. He prided himself on being physically fit. Admitting his body no longer worked in the way it once did was something he found difficult, even when he reached an age where it was expected.

A few months earlier, shortly after his season ticket renewal letter had landed on the doormat in the spring, my mum had gently put it to him that going to games so often might be unwise. Choosing her words carefully, she suggested the time had come to take it a bit easier and at least *consider* giving it up. He was having none of it and shut down the conversation before it became one. His renewal form was completed that same night and in the post the very next morning, as if to make a point.

Weeks later, as we walked along the quayside after the final home game of the 2016/17 season, sun on our faces, water beside us mirror-smooth, he'd assured me that matchdays weren't becoming too much. His knee, he insisted, was manageable and he suggested we left home earlier to allow for any extra time he needed to walk to the ground from the car. He assured me the steps up to our seats in the second tier of the Sir Alex Ferguson Stand wouldn't be an issue either; we'd be able to get the lift. Going to the football

was something he'd always done; he wasn't yet ready to stay at home watching United from his comfy chair, dog snoozing at his feet. Crumbling knee joints and a dodgy ticker might have denied him the active lifestyle he'd once led, but he was determined to at least cling to that.

We'd broken up the walk back that day by stopping off for our traditional end-of-season pint at one of the bars near Media City. Taking a seat at a table outside, he had asked after my son, Ethan, who was four months old at the time and at home with my wife, Lauren. I took out my phone and showed him some of the latest pictures.

'When I've taken my grandson to his first game,' he said, smiling as I flicked my thumb across the screen, 'then I'll think about giving it up'.

'Not before then.'

I reached my seat just as the intro riff for 'This Is the One' by the Stone Roses rumbled through the stadium speakers. Dad was sitting down already, rolled-up programme still poking out from the top of his coat pocket. The players emerged from the tunnel, sheets of rain continuing to sweep in as they completed the obligatory pre-kick-off handshakes. Dad stood but opted not to join in the half-arsed cheers as the starting XIs were read out.

The match, much like the atmosphere, was predictably dull in the opening minutes. United were lethargic, looking every inch a team who'd just lost a crucial derby and felt a bit sorry for themselves. The schedule had afforded Bournemouth an extra day's rest since their last game – a point Mourinho would almost certainly have noted in his post-match press conference later on that night – and were sharper and more dangerous for it. They should have scored at least once early on but were thwarted by David de Gea.

Then, just as the crowd was beginning to grow restless midway through the half, Anthony Martial carried the ball

down United's left, cut back and fed it infield to Juan Mata, 25 yards from goal. He glanced up, quickly shifted the ball on to his left foot and arced a cross towards the back post, where Romelu Lukaku had pulled into space between two defenders. Lukaku guided his header into the corner of the goal; United took an undeserved lead.

I don't think Dad cheered the goal but he did at least manage to stand and applaud on this occasion, albeit a couple of seconds after everyone else. After muttering something about the quality of the cross, he took his seat again.

He'd been quiet nearly all game, chipping in with the occasional tut or exasperated groan when a pass went astray. Then, in the lull which followed the brief spike in excitement for the Lukaku goal, he cleared his throat and leaned towards me, preparing to say something.

'Why's Rooney not playing tonight?' he asked, voice barely more than a whisper.

'What?' I replied, not sure if I'd misheard him or if this was an attempted joke that didn't land. 'Why isn't Rooney playing?' he repeated, slightly louder this time, irritated at having to ask again.

I froze, not really knowing how to react, conscious of a slight fluttering sensation somewhere in my stomach. Wayne Rooney *was* playing that night, just not at Old Trafford. Instead, as I would find out later, he was at St James' Park, where he scored a winning goal against Newcastle for Everton.

An awkward silence hung between us. Had anyone else heard him, I wondered. Nige, I suspected, had. I was aware that his head had half turned around – probably about to take the piss – before he abruptly stopped himself and spun back towards the pitch. Seconds passed. Consciously keeping my voice low so as not to draw extra attention, I reminded Dad that Rooney had returned to Everton in the summer. There was no response. His eyes remained fixed

on the pitch, not really following the movement of the ball, and the game drifted on uneventfully towards the end of the first half.

Dad had loved watching Rooney, especially the unpredictable, streetfighter version he'd been when he first joined United – just as likely to chin someone or tell a referee to fuck off as he was smash a volley into the top corner. That unpredictability was part of the thrill in those early days.

Dad was always drawn to the players who could look after themselves physically: Duncan, Robson, Hughes, Keane. Rooney, even at a young age, fell into that bracket and quickly became the player he looked for first during the pre-match warm-ups to make sure he was playing.

Years ago, on the night of Rooney's debut – the Fenerbahçe game, where he scored the hat-trick – a work commitment had forced Dad to pass on his ticket to my younger brother, Chris. He'd watched most of the game on TV. After full time, as we queued at the back of the South Stand for a train away from the ground, Dad called my phone unexpectedly. He was nearby, he said, and could give us a lift home. This proved to be only half true. After we got into the car it emerged he hadn't been nearby at all, but had been so childishly excited by what he'd seen that he'd felt the need to make a special journey to pick us up, just so he could talk to us about Rooney for an extra half an hour before bed. 'What a player, eh?' had been his first words as I opened the passenger door. 'What a bloody player that lad is.'

The strange, uneasy feeling I experienced in the pit of my stomach when Dad had asked why Rooney wasn't playing slowly subsided. By the time he shuffled off down our row to beat the queues for the toilets just before half-time, I was satisfied it was probably nothing more than the sort of minor lapse plenty of people his age were occasionally prone to. It wasn't, of course, and I would realise this soon enough, but I

was guilty of the kind of delusional thinking all football fans are cursed with. As a sport, it conditions us to hang on to a hope that things will turn out better than expected – even when all the evidence suggests that won't be the case. It's the same reason very few supporters head for the exits when they see their team go 3-0 down inside the first 20 minutes, or why people ever bother deciding to support Tottenham.

At half-time I remained in my seat as most in our block headed down below for a piss or to buy an overpriced plastic bottle of beer. The TV screens dotted around the concourse played the highlights for the first half on loop, but the football on show didn't really merit a second viewing. Dad had left his programme under his seat, so I flicked through it, then chatted to Frank about his plans for Christmas with the grandkids and a reasonably priced Mediterranean cruise he and his wife had booked for sometime the next year. Dave and his grandson Matty, who sat immediately behind us and came across from Wrexham for every home game, had explained how heavy snow had forced them to abandon their attempts to make the derby at the weekend. Dad returned just as the players reappeared from the tunnel and the second half begun.

United were marginally better to begin with but struggled to convert possession into decent chances. Marcus Rashford cracked a shot from distance against the crossbar, which was as close as they came to a second. Inevitably, having failed to kill Bournemouth off, United began to look more vulnerable as time ticked on. Jermain Defoe came on with 20 minutes remaining, glided past Phil Jones and drilled a shot into De Gea's shins from a tight angle. Bournemouth ran out of steam after that. United seemed to settle and find a measure of composure as the game entered the final ten minutes.

With Christmas on the horizon, a burst of '12 Cantonas' had floated over from the Stretford End and was taken up

by a few of those in K Stand. And then, as the chant faded away, it happened.

Owed partly to the dreariness of the game, I assumed, Dad had been even quieter throughout the second half than he had in the first. He'd spent it hunched forward, elbows resting on his thighs, gloved fingers loosely interlocked. Slowly, he began to sit up, easing himself back in his seat.

Again, he cleared his throat. Again he leaned his head towards mine. And again, he asked, 'Why's Rooney not playing tonight?'

Oh shit, I thought.