

## Fever Pitch – *Nick Hornby*

### July 1991

I wake up around ten, make two cups of tea, take them into the bedroom, place one each side of the bed. We both sip thoughtfully, so soon after waking these are long, dream-filled gaps between the occasional remark – about the rain outside, about last night, about smoking in the bedroom when I have agreed not to.

‘What are you thinking about,’ she asks. At this point I lie. But then obsessives have no choice, they have to lie on occasions like this. If we told the truth every time, then we would be unable to maintain relationships with anyone from the real world. WE would be left to rot with our Arsenal programmes, and our two-minute daydreams would become longer and longer until we lost our jobs and stopped bathing and shaving and eating and we would lie on the floor in our own filth rewinding the video of the match again and again!

My book *Fever Pitch* is an attempt to gain some kind of angle on my obsession.

### Football

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.

### Autumn 1968

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, 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, the common place but nevertheless intractable one-parent-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 of 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 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 6.30pm and 9pm on a Monday night were limited.

My father tried football with me 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. 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.

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 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, from those who feel compelled to attend them all? Why travel from London to Plymouth on a Wednesday, using up a precious days holiday, to 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's 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.

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 silences weren't oppressive), and the days had a structure, a routine. The Arsenal pitch was our lawn (and, being an English lawn, we would usually peer at it mournfully through driving rain), the Guinness Fish Bar on Blackstock Rd our kitchen, and the West Strand our home. It was a wonderful setup and changed our lives just when they needed changing most.

I don't recall much about the football that first afternoon but I do 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. 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, as the game went on, the anger turned into outrage, and then seemed to curdle into sullen, silent discontent. When I went to Chelsea and to Tottenham and to Rangers, I saw the same thing, that the natural state of the football fan is bitter disappointment, no matter what the score.

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 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 Strand of Arsenal who taught me how to get angry in this way.

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 attempt to stop the inevitable, Dad quickly took me to see 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: ARSENAL!