

Text Two

'Fever Pitch'

adapted from the autobiography by Nick Hornby

On Saturday, 15th March, League Cup Final Day, I went to Wembley Football Stadium for the first time. First Division Arsenal were playing Swindon Town, a Third Division team, and no one seemed to have any real doubts that Arsenal would win the game, and therefore their first cup for sixteen years. I wasn't so sure. Silent in the car all the way there, I asked Dad on the steps up to the stadium whether he was as confident as everyone else. I tried to make the question conversational sports chatter between two men on a day out – but it wasn't like that at all: what I really wanted was reassurance from an adult, a parent, my father, that what I was about to witness wasn't going to scar me for life. 'Look,' I should have said to him, 'when they're playing at home, in an ordinary League game, I'm so frightened they'll lose that I can't think or speak or even breathe, sometimes. If you think Swindon have any kind of chance at all, even a chance in a million, it's best if you take me home now, because I don't think I'd be able to cope.'

But I simply asked him, in an assumed spirit of idle curiosity, who he thought would win the game, and he said he thought Arsenal would, three or four nothing, the same as everyone else did, and so I got the reassurance I was looking for; but I was scarred for life anyway. My father's happy confidence later seemed like a betrayal.

I was so scared that the Wembley experience – a crowd of a hundred thousand, the huge pitch, the noise, the sense of anticipation – passed me by completely. If I noticed anything about the place at all it was that it wasn't Highbury (the Arsenal home ground), and my sense of alienation simply added to my unease. I sat shivering until Swindon scored shortly before half-time, and then the fear turned to misery. The goal was one of the most ridiculously stupid ever given away by a team of professionals: a clumsy pass, followed by a missed tackle, followed by a goalkeeper slipping over in the mud and allowing the ball to trickle over the line just inside the right-hand post. For the first time, suddenly, I became aware of all the Swindon fans sitting around us, with their awful accents, their absurd innocent glee, their delirious disbelief. I hadn't ever come across opposing fans before, and I loathed them in a way I had never before loathed strangers.

With one minute remaining in the game, Arsenal equalized, unexpectedly and bizarrely, a diving header from a rebound off the goalkeeper's knee. I tried not to weep with relief, but the effort was beyond me; I stood on the seat and yelled at my father, over and over again, 'We'll be all right now, won't we? We'll be all right now!' He patted me on the back, pleased that something had been rescued from the dismal and expensive afternoon, and told me that yes, now, finally, everything would be OK.

It was his second betrayal of the day. Swindon scored twice more in extra time, one a scrappy goal from a corner, the other after a magnificent sixty-yard run, and it was all too much to bear. When the final whistle went, my father betrayed me for the third time in less than three hours: he rose to his feet to applaud the extraordinary underdogs, and I ran for the exit.

When my father caught up with me he was furious. He delivered his ideas on sportsmanship with great force (what did I care about sportsmanship?), marched me to the car, and we drove home in silence. Football may have provided us with a new medium through which we could communicate, but that was not to say that we used it, or that what we chose to say was necessarily positive.