

The Derby Winner

Football's changed. The racists have pretty much gone, even the sexists have been reduced to a few spiteful old men, but there's one prejudice I cannot shake. Maybe I should be old enough to let it go, maybe we all should. But maybe I don't want to. Because even if the penny-pinching billionaire sells all our best players, if we lose every game for the rest of the season, we've got to beat the Mackems.

I'm in the bar, and we're one-nil up with twenty minutes to play. But we're clinging on. If the back four drop any deeper they'll be playing in the Gallowgate. The timer clicks round to 72 minutes. It's torture. A good drink spoiled. I'm only on the Coke but there's no holding on any longer.

The toilets are empty, or seems like it. I'm zipping up when I see that 'wash your hands' sign over the boarded up window. That's not what I'm looking at.

There's this kid hunched up under the sink, rocking back and forward, with his head down and his arms crossed tight against his chest. There's no blood on him or anything, but he's tiny, maybe five years old.

Christ. I look around for help, but the cubicle doors are open. There's no one here.

'You alright, son?'

The rocking stops.

'Where's your mam?'

His head lifts. He looks at me with the light reflecting in his wide blue eyes, and his lips shut tight.

That's when this shout goes up from the bar. Not a roar, just scattered, angry voices through the silence. Something's happened. Maybe a sending off. Please, let it be that.

It isn't.

I practically pull the door off its hinges in time to see a load of Mackems jumping around the corner flag. I stare dully at the replay and stomp towards the bar.

I'm three steps in when I swear at the big screen and turn back.

The kid's standing up, with one hand on the sink.

'Haway, son. You want some juice?'

He still doesn't answer, but the tightness has gone from his mouth and he follows me into the bar.

I get a real pint and an orange juice, and look down at the kid. Two dimples, like little chisel marks cut into his cheeks.

'Alright, you scrawny get.' I tell him. The chisel marks dig deeper. 'Two packets of cheese 'n' onion,' I say to the barman, and then I get back over to the lads.

We got in early to get the seats, but Lee never turned up, sign of the times, so there's a spare stool. I pick the kid up and put him on it. The lads give me a 'what the hell' look. I shrug, and they turn their faces back to the screen.

I watch our centre-half belt the ball into row Z, and I wonder, what the hell am I doing? And I can't help thinking of my own little boy, getting bigger, over in Los Angeles with his new, rich Dad. The L.A. Galaxy, he supports now.

'But it's alright,' he told me on our Saturday morning Skype, 'I still like soccer.'

I take a mouthful of beer, like that's going to help, and feel the skin prickle along my arm. There's this lass sitting over by the wall, watching me. I sneak a glance. She's not a beauty, but she's not bad. A blond pony-tail, and a hint of something sad around her eyes.

Don't kid yourself mate. There's more chance of us winning the cup.

Sunderland get another corner. We're hanging on for a draw, but I know, from that ache in the pit of my stomach, and from all the decades of this. We're not going to make it.

And what the hell am I going to do with this kid?

It's almost a relief to have something else to worry about.

'What's your name, son?'

The kid doesn't answer, just stuffs the crisps in and stares at the screen.

I shrug. There's only five minutes to go, and maybe, just maybe, we can hang on.

Someone goes down injured.

'Get up,' the kid says, daft little bugger.

'Stay down,' I shout, and I feel those eyes on me again, that lass across the bar. She looks away, but doesn't that only prove she was looking?

Something weird must be going on, because Newcastle put half a dozen passes together. Our striker's through on the edge of the box. His foot goes back. I'm half-way out of my seat when this defender comes piling in.

'You dirty...'

'Tackle.'

I look to see who said it, but I already know.

'You're a Mackem?'

The kid looks at me over the top of his juice and gives me this lopsided grin.

I shake my head. 'It was a bloody foul.'

'Nah,' the kid says, and of course, the ref. doesn't give it.

We're pressing on, putting some passes together. The board goes up for two minutes injury time. Typical, that we only start playing now. But I can't stop the hope rising up through my chest.

Do I never bloody learn?

Every player is in their half. We're knocking it around, getting nowhere fast, and the clock's ticking. That's why we get edgy. Give it away.

Their full-back belts it over the top.

'Yesss,' the kid says, but it's a ragged, anywhere ball, halfway to the clouds.

'That's it. Times up,' I tell him, but the words catch in my throat.

Our centre-half can play, but he's thirty-three. Their striker's nineteen. He gets a step ahead. Our keeper charges out, and they all come together on the edge of the box.

The ball drops out of the sky.

'Keeper's ball.' Got to be. His gloved hands come up.

'Catch it, man, catch it.'

He doesn't catch it.

This ginger head pops up between his hands, and sends the ball looping into the air.

All three of them land in a heap.

I look to the ref but his hands are down by his sides.

The ball bounces on the penalty spot.

'Yesss.' Orange juice spills across the table.

'No.' I jump back, too late to stop the sticky wetness from soaking through my jeans.

The ball bounces again, and dribbles about six inches over the line.

The kid's going mental. He's up off his stool, shouting his head off with crisps and juice all over the floor.

I don't look at him, but I can feel the rest of the bar staring daggers at the pair of us.

'Sit down, man,' I hiss, but he just stands there with his fists in the air.

There isn't even time to kick-off again before the ref. blows for full-time.

'We're away to the town,' the lads tell me, and the bar empties out in about ten seething, angry seconds.

I'd go too, just to get away, but I know I'm going to feel sick for the rest of the night, and no amount of beer's going to change that, and anyway, I've got this kid to sort out.

I don't even know what makes me look, but that lass is still there. She gives me a little nod, and this edgy, tight-lipped smile. I smile back, and like magic, the world changes. All that bitterness washes away.

I think of my empty flat, and the way her hair falls across her shoulders. I should go over, say something, but the fear's still aching in my stomach, left over from the bloody football, and anyway, what am I supposed to do with this kid?

Leave him, this little voice whispers in my head. He's not your problem.

I look at him, legs crossed, feet swinging nowhere near the floor.

Three years on my own, and a few seedy one night stands to show for it. This is different. I can feel it. And how many chances are there going to be?

The lass stands up. Her shirt falls loose over her jeans.

My heart thumps in my chest.

Her eyes lock onto mine.

I blink, and swear, and turn away.

'Where'd you live, son?'

'Kingston Street,' he tells me, dabbing the last crumbs off the silver paper. 'In Roker.'

'Roker?' Jesus Christ.

'Alright. Aye, I'll drop you home. You're mam'll be frantic.'

'It's okay,' he says, and gives me another grin. 'She's just there.'

The lass is standing above us with the sun in the window behind her, so I can see the shape of her through that red and white shirt.

'Thanks for looking after Jimmy,' she says. He gets a bit upset when their losing, and she must see the penny drop, because they both give me that same silly grin.

‘He’s coming back to ours,’ Jimmy says, and we laugh together at the daft things that kids say, except this time I don’t look away.