

The Final

Stephen Foster

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By

Stephen Foster

Cover Design: James Shepherd

For Mum

Notes on the pre-match

I cannot type. Ten books in to my work as a writer I refuse to learn, in case improving my keyboard technique produces a side-effect. My fear is that if I get faster, I'll get worse. My inability comes in various guises. I can never put a y in everything, I always reverse the au in because, but at the moment my most oft-repeated mistake is that every time I try 'years' I get 'tears' (t is next to y on the qwerty keyboard).

After 148 tears in existence as a football club...'

...is my first effort at an opening sentence. I'm tempted to leave it, it reminds me of this poem by Dylan Thomas when he shifts a word from one paradigm to another and uses an emotion to measure time; the poem is called *A Grief Ago*.

I've seen it in the past and I'll see it again but I doubt if I'll see it quite this way again: at the end of this match I turn round to see grown men sobbing like babies, one fat man behind me wipes away his years on the tattoos of his forearms then rests his arms on his belly while the next batch roll down his cheeks. Perhaps when he tells his grandchildren about this match will describe it in emotions: Once upon a time, many tears ago...

When I was a kid I used to be fascinated by the (often, blank) space at the foot of the back page of the local paper, the North Staffordshire Evening Sentinel. It was the STOP PRESS column.

STOP PRESS After 148 years in existence Stoke City make it to their first ever FA Cup Final!

First ever is a tautology, perhaps, but I'll have to let it stand because 'first' isn't strong enough on its own, not after a century and a half of not getting here.

STOP PRESS Stoke City were formed in 1863. On Saturday 14th May 2011 they will play in their first ever FA Cup Final.

While we believed that this day could come to pass for more or less everybody else, it seemed to be a simple matter of fate that it could *never* happen to us. This had become accepted as something quite near to a fact. And then we got to a semi-final.

This is rare, but not unprecedented. It happened in 1899, and it's happened twice in my lifetime (1971 and 1972). On each of those latter occasions we were beaten by Arsenal, each time in contentious circumstances, as a consequence of extraordinarily poor decisions from officials. But on April 17th, 2011 Stoke City, established in 1863, beat Bolton Wanderers in the semi-final of the FA Cup five-nil [Etherington (11) Huth (17) Jones (30) Walters (68, 81)]

Five-nil.

Five.

The record books had to come out to see how long it was since such a margin of victory was recorded in an FA Cup semi-final. It last happened a generation back, it took place a grief ago.

And so, finally, eventually, *enfin*, at the end of the day, in the fullness of time and at long, long last, it has happened. To us. Our opponents in the Football Association Challenge Cup FA Cup final sponsored by e-on (one of the UK's leading integrated power and gas companies) are Manchester City. Man City are only thirty-odd miles up the road from Stoke-on-Trent and in theory I am not so fond of them. They are a brash tribe with a high opinion of themselves; they are Liam Gallagher monkey walking down the pavement asking for it. I live in Norwich, about two hundred miles from either Stoke-on-Trent or Manchester but if I don't feel the presence of the more northern city bearing down on myself as a local physical presence, I know the sense of that oppressive feeling only too well. It's embedded in my psycho-geographical memory: we used to get taken to Manchester on a school trip when I was a kid growing up in the Potteries. We'd be shown about the Corn Exchange (we did not have a corn exchange of our own) and later we would go round the Arndale shopping centre, the very size of it, or Kendals department store, the Harrods of the North, how grand. And all the while looking over your shoulder and speaking out of the side of your mouth to keep your accent down, a scrap waiting to happen round every corner, roughhouses with names that seemed somehow designed to arouse fear: Ardwick, Moss Side, Strangeways. Population of Stoke: three hundred thousand; population of Greater Manchester: over two million. The bustle of it. And then back home - what a scruffy city it is that you live in, isn't it, shabby, really, and how much more beautiful for all that because home is home and Stoke is equally tough, is, in fact, tougher than Manchester, and better than Manchester too, and has its own names to arouse fear, names that are less famous, maybe, but we know them alright.

In the thirty years or so since my school trips, as much as it has changed between us and them then equally as much as it has stayed the same (small wonder we use French to express this idea: *Plus ça change*): they are still a richer, bigger city and that will always be the case and now it is worse because oil money is pouring in to Manchester City from the middle east (Eastlands, their new stadium, so easily

translates to Middle Eastlands; how very comedy-Manchester City that is, how very *like them*) because someone, somewhere wants to buy prestige through the global brand that is football. As my father likes to say: *To those that have: more.* Manchester City are owned by HH Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. His Highness runs the United Arab Emirates' leading integrated power and wealth company; the estimates say that he has put £750 million into Manchester City. If that makes them considerably richer than almost anybody, and it does, we ourselves are not as poor as we used to be, not by a good stretch. Our chairman, a local man, has been associated with the club for twenty or thirty years, through good and through bad, and at the moment it is very good indeed: he and his family own Bet365, an internet gambling operation. It might not be black gold gushing out of the ground, but it is a version of it, mining money from desperate, sad, lonely and even some happy souls who are sat at home in front of the television and the computer screen, gambling-in-play on twenty four markets! Clicking the mouse twenty-four-seven, 3-6-5. Place Bet Now! And another score flushes into the arms of Stoke City FC thanks very much. Premiership Football is very expensive to run; if it cannot be supported by majesty or oligarch, or both, then it needs to be funded by a business that turns over as many units as possible. It's difficult to dream of a revenue stream that is more apt than online punting.

But for all the stakes that go south on the 2.20 at Doncaster, oil & royalty is richer and Manchester City can flash the cash all they like. Some of their players - the Argentinian Carlos Tevez, the Spaniard David Silva - were purchased on deals that would equate to the re-sale value of our entire first team. On this basis, our feelings (as fans) as we go into this match might be antipathy-verging-on-loathing fuelled by regional resentment and exacerbated by the green-eyed monster. And maybe there is some of that about it. But as to hatred, which you do get, against certain teams, of this I think there is nothing. It would be that way if we were playing Manchester United, but not with their nouveau riche neighbours. I was in a bar in Turin when United beat Bayern Munich with the two late goals in the 1999 Champions League final. United had knocked Juventus out in the semi, so the bar owner was quite clear in his mind who he didn't want to win, but, on the other hand, that would require him to support ze Germans which was an equally unappealing outlook. But in the end he discovered that this was where his emotions lay: he cheered when the Bavarians scored. Not loudly, but still, a little...

I shared the bar owner's pre-match dilemma but in my own case, I found I could not cheer for Bayern either which meant that all I was left with was to dream of a world in which both teams could lose but in which the reds lost worse. So, if we were playing United in the final my feelings would be clear cut and pure. Like the Conservative Party, Manchester United will always be there and they will always have their 'legion' of 'followers' but though we walk the same streets and breathe the same air we live in separate worlds. Give me the slightest opening (an enamel lapel badge the size of a button will do it) and I'll talk football to any stranger on a train, but I *never* engage in conversation with Manchester United fans, firstly, for all the

same reasons I do not wish to break bread with David Cameron or his cabinet - they are smug, they are arrogant, they are cosseted, they have a repulsive sense of entitlement - and secondly, because they are *so boring*. In order for the United fans to feel like any other football fan (s)he has to *invent* a problem:

He's playing Rooney out of position.

He's lost the plot!

Manchester United are not me and they are not you either.

Manchester City are not Manchester United, not yet; it will take at least two decades of more-or-less unbroken dominance for them to even begin to think about thinking about it, and for the rest of us to begin to feel about them as we do about United. Perhaps it will happen, perhaps it will not. It's of no particular matter here anyway because the pertinent hinterland so far as this match is concerned is that City are an outfit with a reputation for providing unintentional moments of comedy and have had little enough to boast about recently for all that they might regard themselves as 'a massive club.' It's thirty-five years since they've won a major trophy, a matter that their neighbours are happy to remind them about anytime. They are underdogs who have a habit of losing to underdogs, are deadly when it comes to aiming guns at their feet, and are not even the biggest fish in their own bowl (we can claim that much, at least). As they enter this FA Cup final, then, for me their identity consists of a charming clownishness blessed with a recent windfall and the sense that it is more than likely to go wrong in the end. In short, they're as close to ideal opponents as you could get, unless you wanted someone you felt sure you could beat. They are not dull and dreary without a song or a personality as would have been the case if, for instance, we were playing Middlesboro. Neither are we dull, we never have been, and in the past three years since joining the Premiership our fans have acquired an enhanced reputation of a very particular kind - for being loud, for being ferocious, and for being worth something to the team, especially at home where opposition fans will note an atmosphere of menace and intimidation even when we are being quite laid back. The loudest and most ferocious we have ever been during these Premiership years was in fact against Manchester City when one of ours was sent off and one of theirs - who should have gone with him - was not. In a throwback caldron of racket the crowd roared our ten men to victory while their lot mocked us for losing our longthrow (it was Rory Delap who was sent off). So, as far as the supporter groups on either side are concerned, there's a certain kind of pre-final equality; if you belong to a normally-bonded set of fans like most of us do, Manchester City *are* me and they *are* you.

On top of that I like their lot for specific reasons, even though I remember them well, from tears gone by.

Three matches between our two clubs:

One: February, 1975

I am a twelve year-old standing on the vast wide pungent terrace of the Boothern End at the old Victoria Ground. I don't know it, but Stoke are entering the endgame of their greatest years to date. The Potters play in shirts of plain red and white stripes in bands of two inch width and are a team with flair and style. At the end of the season they will finish fifth in the top division; three years earlier they won the League Cup, the only significant silverware the club has ever collected. The pitch is a bog, the weather is nasty. Alan Hudson, a seventies playboy who has found his way from the King's Road to the Potteries, runs the match, taking liberties and the piss by turns and we beat Manchester City 4-0. At some point, perhaps fifteen minutes from time, the entire away end decamps. Half an hour later I see what they have been up to. They have rampaged through Stoke town centre and they have smashed the place up. Bourne Sports, my favourite shop, has had its picture window put through. This sort of hooliganism is routine in the seventies, but all the same this is epic, they have turned Stoke into Beirut. This is imagery that puts a scar into my brain. I am just old enough to be embarking upon awaydays with Stoke. But not to Maine Road (originally: Dog Kennel Lane), Moss Side. Never go to their place, I say to myself. *Never*. It must be dangerous up there. Very, very dangerous.

Two: Boxing Day, 1988

A traditional day for a big crowd and Manchester City travel down in their thousands. Almost to a man they are all carrying inflatable bananas, the big ones, three or four feet long. Their fans have recently instigated a craze for inflatables which has spread to other football clubs - in Norwich (I am just about to move there) the locals have taken to carrying blow-up yellow Canaries, the club emblem. This is to get the concept wholly wrong. The beauty of the Man City inflatable is that bananas have nothing to do with their club, the whole thing is simply absurd, possibly absurdist, maybe even situationist: these are the post-post punk years after all and certain working-class punters such as myself have heard about such concepts through the Sex Pistols and Malcolm McClaren, or through Tony Wilson and Joy Division. It's not impossible that there may even be something in these bananas that goes beyond football, which has political intent: perhaps they represent an air-filled ironic corrective to those racists who used to throw actual bananas at black players. My preferred theory on them though is one that I hear the writer Paul Morley mention on *Late Review* one night many years later when the banana army somehow re-emerges (no doubt they are reviewing *another* book or *another* film about the madforitness of 'Madchester').

'Some mentalist fan was off his head, picked one up from a fruit and veg stall on a

Saturday afternoon, took it to the ground, and it caught on like wildfire.’

This is Morley’s explanation and it’s one I’m happy with, not just because it seems most likely, but because it encapsulates the improvisational nature of football supporting in what I’ll have to call the old days; you can imagine for yourself the detail of the internet discipline and the protocols that were put in place in order for punters to acquire tickets for this FA Cup final without my going into it in minute detail, or in any detail whatsoever. This is football these days: just before the match kicked off an army of stewards confiscated a giant flag that was being passed over our crowd, by the crowd, because of the ‘danger’ it represented.

Anyway, whatever the inflatable etymology of the Banana Army really is, the scene that confronted me as I parked my old Saab in the streets beside the Victoria Ground and double-locked all the doors to secure the vehicle from whatever it was that Manchester City fans would do to it was as follows.

I walked round a corner and I walked straight into this:

C’mon then c’mon let’s av it let’s av it then. Av it!

Two gangs of lads fronting each other up. Each faction goading the other in the familiar one-foot-forward two-step-backwards quickstep that precipitates the ruck. The thing, though, was this: the Manchester City gang were carrying the inflatable bananas. They were jousting them as if they were weapons of war or otherwise (on the backstep) they were wanking them off as though they might be exceptional pricks. Between trying to pop them with the burning ends of their cigarettes, our lot swore violently at the bananas. Though I circled the scene with caution (I did not wish to become a casualty of a one-sided parthenocarpic war) I continued to watch because I was learning something, which was this: it is impossible to be genuinely violent and aggressive if you are carrying an inflatable banana; equally it is impossible to be genuinely violent and aggressive towards the holder of an inflatable banana. The rumble never got going, it simply petered out into an episode of threats to ‘see you later you banana wanker.’ Once you have called someone a banana wanker, you are half way down the road to reconciliation and friendship.

At half-time we were a goal down. A mashed up Mancunian invaded the playing area fellating his banana. ‘Get that fucking queer off the pitch,’ a voice called out behind me. It might have been a voice filled with the usual aggression, but actually the message was delivered with festive goodwill. In the second half the Manchester City defenders invited the Stoke strikers to a ten-minute episode of shooting-in during which we scored three times. Final score: Stoke 3-1 Manchester City.

Everything ties together through football. I have another memory seared into this day. My son is six months’ old at the time and he has a chest infection (or what GPs liked to call ‘a virus’ in the vogue of the day). We have been given doctor’s instructions to hold Jack over steaming water morning and night to help ‘ventilate his chest’. The water from the tap at my mum’s house (where we are staying) isn’t hot

enough to create steam (everyone has used the shower) so I half-fill it and top it up from the kettle and then I hold Jack too close over the wash hand basin and in so doing I manage to dangle his foot into the water. I can still hear him scream. Up at Casualty they rush him through the adult wounded (pub drunks and domestics - Christmas is a difficult time, they say) and they bandage him expertly, lightly, delicately, and quickly and they fuss and coo over him. Ah the poor little dab. Afterwards I phone a friend who is in social work. I have developed an acute anxiety that he'll be taken away from me for this act of child abuse. The friend says that this is highly, highly unlikely and that anyway it was a pretty stupid thing for a doctor to suggest, wasn't it: in all likelihood it was an accident waiting to happen. Her reassuring words make me feel a bit better but they do not prevent me from throwing up some while later, several times. Inflatable bananas, scalded toes, vomit, football all linked in my mind.

Three: May 1998

It is the last round of fixtures. As the match kicks off both Manchester City and Stoke are in the bottom three of the second tier and that is where each remains ninety minutes later at the conclusion of the League season. The Sky Blues win the game 5-2 but the result isn't enough to save them from relegation because they are relying on other teams to help them out and none of those other teams oblige. They have put the Sold Out signs up on their four thousand official ticket allocation but plenty of them have got their hands on tickets for the home areas and aggravation breaks out all over the place. A decade on, inflatable bananas are a distant memory and the fighting is mainly for real and is unpleasant. The result and the accompanying crowd scenes are described as a 'lowest ebb' for both teams, though I believe we discovered some lower ebbs over the subsequent years. Stoke were in that wretched (old third) division for four seasons. Manchester City bounced straight back out with a Wembley play-off final win over Gillingham: Gillingham were 2-0 up going into the ninetieth minute. City scored twice in injury time and then won 3-1 on penalties. Tony Pulis, our current manager, was the manager of Gillingham that day. Perhaps he has got his extraordinary episode of bad luck out of the way so far as games between teams managed by himself playing against Manchester City at Wembley are concerned. Pulis is in his second period in charge at Stoke; the fans didn't want him the first time (a couple of years year prior to his engagement he had turned us down for Bristol City, which did nothing to endear him) and they didn't want him the second time either because they had already seen more than enough of his footballing philosophy, a reductive and basic brand of attritional football that bore as much relation to Alan Hudson running the show as a cat does to a herring. Pulis' version of the beautiful game consisted of a variant of gridiron: static, reliant on set plays and muscle, devoid of poetry. I took the Magic Bus down to Greece when I was a twenty year-old. A thirty quid ticket bought me a three-day road trip on a non-stop ride from Camden

Town to a dirt car park next to the Acropolis. The journey included a twenty-four hour crawl through the single-carriageway of the old Yugoslavia. There was no air-con, the sun was burning, and all you could buy at a petrol station to slake your thirst was warm peach juice. Don't drink the water, said the sign in the toilets, but you wouldn't anyway because no water ran. When I finally alighted in Athens I had everything that nobody wants: greasy hair, body odour, bad breath, zits, constipation, a headache and a line of sweat on my brow. Many a time paying to watch Pulisball has been as attractive a proposition as kissing me would have been in that moment. But, like the long, hot and unexpectedly powerful shower that lay waiting in the youth hostel in Athens, and the sleep on the roof under the stars that followed, there have been great and unexpected days too, and, to be accurate about the matter, the trajectory since Pulis has been grinding away on the Stoke City training ground and directing operations from the technical area on match days has seen the club go in one direction and one direction only: upwards.

Now he has taken us to a place we have never been in one-hundred and forty-eight tears. It remains true to say that he is only ever one brainwave away from playing a striker on the left wing, but all gaffers have their foibles and there are no arguments anymore about whether Pulis is any good as a football manager or not. He is excellent and he is getting better. This year, on occasion, we have even played something that looks like football.

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In that single season they spent with us down in the old third division Manchester City filled their own ground with thirty thousand fans and travelled away in huge numbers. We remember them for that with huge respect. On the road, for use at places like Northampton and Walsall and Wrexham, their fans came up with a song that I particularly admired and that lodged itself into my mind.

Not really here; we're not really here...

It was a lovely, surreal coping mechanism - a lyric related through their supporter DNA to the carrying of an inflatable banana - and a song that we Stoke supporters could sing now, should we so wish, *not* as coping mechanism, but as an expression of genuine disbelief.

Are we really where we are?

The Preparation

Technically speaking, and with six league matches remaining (two of which were to be played after the FA Cup final, since the fixture now no longer carries enough cachet to close the season out), Stoke were not entirely safe from relegation. Though the threat was mainly mathematical - and in truth it would involve some odd goings on for us to get sucked in, and there were definitely worse teams than us down there - fans do still tend to fret if they can find something to fret about. The fear was soon put to bed: in league matches between the semi-final and the final we accumulated enough points via a pair of draws away to Villa and Blackpool as well as a facile 3-0 victory over a very poor Wolves team to pull clear of danger. And then our old nemesis from those semi-finals in the seventies came to visit us on the weekend before the final. A huge swelling of renewed animosity has sprung up between ourselves and Arsenal over the past eighteen months or so. Our captain, the young centre-back Ryan Shawcross, went in on a challenge with the young Arsenal player Aaron Ramsey in the corresponding fixture last year and Shawcross inadvertently broke Ramsey's leg. It was a traumatic moment that saw the Arsenal man's limb snapped out of all natural form as both tibia and fibula were snapped. Shawcross was in tears as he left the field (he was sent off for the challenge). Stoke did everything right in the moments that followed: while the Arsenal players, including their captain Cesc Fabregas, surrounded the referee to make sure that he dismissed Shawcross, it was our own midfielder Glenn Whelan who tended to Ramsey, cradling his head and shielding him from the sight of his injury. Afterwards all the words from Stoke were of conciliation and apology while Arsène Wenger went out of his way to accuse Shawcross of malice aforethought and of a thuggish brutality that is simply not in his make up. I have watched him week in and week out for years; he is talked of as future England material, he is not even all that clumsy, and he is certainly not malicious. The tackle took place at speed and was badly timed, but that was the extent of it. Ramsey himself refused Shawcross' subsequent apology, but that's his prerogative. It took Wenger days to become calm enough so that in his more considered afterwords he could merely accuse Stoke City of being a rugby team; I have alluded to set pieces already myself, but that is not what he meant. I used to have a great deal of respect for Wenger and for all the delight he has bought to the pitch through the metre of the football his teams produce, for the abstract geometry of it, but he has been falling short of expectations for too long and the strain is telling. For six years Arsenal have won nothing and Wenger has become an ungracious individual with an unattractive, one-eyed way of seeing the world.

It is this local context on top of the historical legacy that puts me into a very good mood as we score goals and songs rain down on the French manager's head. He was serenaded in crude terms which were a bit basic for my liking, even if he was asking for it, but after this warm up the crowd developed a new lively repertoire that exuded

a certain *je ne sais quoi* and va va voom. After our striker Kenwyne Jones headed in the first from a free-kick (he is six-foot two but he did not even need to jump so lethargic was the Arsenal defending) it was, *One-nil to the rugby team*. For every foul that Arsenal committed a commentary was provided on Wenger's famous partial vision: *He didn't see that, he didn't see that, Arsène Wenger, he didn't see that*, and the corollary was also aired, as appropriate, when our own players were penalised: *I bet he saw that, I bet he saw that...etc*. After the second goal, a beautiful swerving shot into the top corner unleashed on the run by Arsenal cast-off Jermaine Pennant (signed from Real Zaragoza this season, Pennant is a superb winger, whose free-kick set up the first for Jones), it was a quick *Score from a throw in, we only score from a throw in...* followed by a rapid-fire *Two-nil to the rugby team...* followed by a rendition of a song I have never heard sung at the Britannia Stadium before, the rugby union anthem that England fans use: *Swing low, sweet chariot...*

There was irony, there was wit, there were a couple of rounds of our terrace anthem, Delilah; there was joy there was fun we had Arsenal on the run.

In the second half, on the seventieth minute, the mood changed. A cold white panic swept through the crowd as the excellent young Arsenal prospect Jack Wilshere went in on Pennant with his studs up. Our winger took exception to this by shoving his forehead into Wilshere's face. It was not exactly a headbutt, but these moments are judgement calls, and it could easily be interpreted as such. It was not a certainty for a sending off, but that was a definite possibility and if the possibility came to pass then Pennant would be suspended for the final. Here was a disaster in the making, a turn of events that would strip us of half of our available width and flair. And, as things stood, we could be without the other half anyway: Matthew Etherington was on the treatment table where he'd been for twelve days since picking up an injury in the facile win over Wolves; there was nothing in Stoke-on-Trent that was causing more concern than the state of the left winger's hamstring. The confrontation between Wilshere and Pennant took place on the touchline directly in front of us; Shawcross came over to speak to the referee. We could not hear what he said, but anyone could guess. 'It's the FA Cup final you'll be putting him out of ref, please (hands together, gesture of prayer), please don't do that.' As he awaited his fate and the crowd held its breath Pennant put on a virtuoso performance along the touchline. He is slight, he has many tattoos, including a selection that rise from his neck, he is rather beautiful and he is very cool. He is so rich that he forgot he owned a Porsche which he had left behind him down in Spain. Give him one change of outfit into a sequined bodysuit and a time machine and he could step directly into seventies soul outfit Tavares. His cameo consisted of an exasperated mime along the touchline. Head bobbing, shoulders dropped, no eye contact with anyone. Awaiting his fate. He was being persecuted here, for sure, for being ex-Arsenal, for the goal he had already scored, for the one he had set up, for having the nattiest hair. But, be that as it may, most crucially, and beyond any reasonable doubt, he was innocent. The ref fingered his card pocket and went walkabout. Eventually he flashed yellow to each of the protagonists and awarded the free-kick to us. Pennant fired the dead ball across the

goalmouth and as soon as it went into touch he was called off with a level of urgency that suggested his wife was about to give birth. He left the field to a standing ovation. He had had a very good match but it was not that; it was because once he was in the dugout no further damage could occur and he would be available to play next week. We scored once more - a bullet hit from journeyman striker Jon Walters, who Pulis picked up from Ipswich Town for a figure that passes as next to nothing these days, three million. Walters has the look of the boxing ring about him, is completely tireless, and makes the iconic gesture of the signing of the cross when he scores, which, for my money, is the most taking of celebrations, invoking any number of deities and honouring the memories of the dead. Walters attracted flak from the terraces at the outset of the season when he joined Stoke because he was regarded as 'not good enough' but he has grown on everybody, and has been in scintillating form for a couple of months now since his confidence grew exponentially after he scored a marvellous individual goal against Chelsea; he ran the ball from the half-way line and went by about seventy million rubles of defender, midfielder and goalkeeper in so doing. This was the moment in which he came to believe that he belonged in the company he was keeping. He is an excellent soldier to have on your side. Walters' goal was scored immediately after Arsenal had pulled one back. They went from 2-0 down to 2-1 to 3-1 behind in a matter of a minute. At full time any impartial assessor would report that we had out-battled, out-sung, outplayed and outclassed the Londoners throughout, but the biggest cheer of the afternoon was not for any of the three goals nor for any other moment of skill nor for the outcome at the final whistle; it was for the substitution of Pennant. Our prospects at Wembley would look very different without him in the team; if anyone needed reminding of that, the roar of the crowd as he crossed the field towards the dugouts left the matter in no doubt.

We beat Arsenal and we beat them hollow. Pulverising the Gunners was as exceptional a preparation for an FA Cup final as could be devised; thrilling in itself and with the added effect of getting the long-standing 'but for that lot we should have been in the Cup Final years ago' monkey off our backs.

You could not dream it better.

The Final Journey

My normal travelling companions from Norwich to the midlands (and to all points) are fellow Stoke fans Graham - who I met on the road on the way to Peterborough United for a night match ten years ago - and his stepson Matty. Graham is a few years younger than me, Matty is thirteen: Graham has done a straight-up job of

indoctrinating the boy. Matty's mother supports Sutton United for reasons to do with being born down that way (there could be no other reason could there?) and Norwich City have been in the doldrums for several of the past few years so perhaps his task has been easier than mine when I converted my own son to the Potters, when Norwich were a division higher than us some while ago. Jack is now a music-industry Mogul who manages Manchester United-supporting Tinchy Stryder. He was vaguely hoping that United would beat Manchester City in the other semi-final (the day before we beat Bolton) as that would have inevitably led to a hospitality box and all that goes with it. But he is more than happy enough at the way things have turned out because we feel we have better prospect of winning the match the way things have turned out. As the cup run developed and as the quarter-final loomed, Graham asked me an effectively rhetorical question given all known history: Would I take Matty to Wembley should the unthinkable happen? By this he meant *should Stoke make it to the final* because if that came to pass then the unhappy facts were that Graham would be in America on a work conference (about human genomes) and that most specifically, in terms of the ninety minutes of the match itself, he was scheduled to be on a flight from New York to the mid-west for that exact ninety minutes of all eternity. Poor timing by any measure; he would not even be able to make it to a bar to drink Budweiser while watching the soccer game on a plasma screen in the company of indifferent men wearing checked shirts and baseball caps.

I had slept badly all week and especially badly on the eve of the match. This is untypical. I am an eight-hours-a-night man and am far too old and far too experienced to be getting excited and nervous about football matches; still, neither of these considerations altered the fact that the birds were only just getting started with their singing when I opened my eyes. I wondered how our players were sleeping. Better than me probably; they are only passing through, it's not a life sentence like it is for fans. I watched breakfast television where I saw Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini talk about what it would mean to deliver silverware to a club that had been starved of success for so long. The Italian has been in English football for eighteen months or so. He said that it 'would be big to win the FA Final.' The FA Final, eh,' I said to myself with a shake of the head as I assembled a couple of organic sausage and scrambled egg sandwiches for the road as I sipped my third espresso of the morning and as I put together a further thermos of coffee to keep me going.

It was just after nine as I set off to get Matty. It felt as though I had been up all night but I felt good, fit for whatever lay ahead. I had been making preparations to stay in shape for the match: I had lain off the booze all week. My car was parked round the corner in a very quiet street. There's only one house beside the bay in which I'd left the rusting banger. As I opened the hatchback to drape a scarf over the rear headrests a builder with a Black Country accent manifested himself at the gates of the single house to wish me well. 'I think you'll do it,' he said. The airwaves of the sports radio stations had been full of pundits all week long declaring the competition ruined

and devalued because there were Premiership fixtures being played earlier in the day (before our 15.00 kick-off), fixtures in which, on an under-card with the apparent potential to upstage the main event, Manchester United could secure the title for an excessive nineteenth time. But even in a silent side street in Norwich where nothing whatsoever was at stake the first stranger I came across knew what this day was actually about. It had nothing whatsoever to do with Manchester United. The business of football might have changed, but the business of football has also stayed the same. It was FA Cup Final Day.

And a lovely morning it was too, blue sky, sun shining. I turned out of the side street and a van driver honked at me, not because I got in his way, but because of the scarf on the headrests. ‘Your team are in the FA Cup final,’ the honk said, ‘Good luck to you.’ All roads south from the midlands and from the north-west would become a caravan of coaches and cars and mini-buses, but even those travelling in from odd angles like ours could have their journey acknowledged and recognised by neutral observers. I imagined those van drivers watching the match later on television - they would remember seeing us and they would support Stoke too: the slightest angle in is all it takes to get a fix on a sporting contest. But the wider public would support the Potters anyway, unlovable though our image may sometimes be (because of the Pulisball), because in this encounter we are underdogs and supporting the underdog is so hardwired into the national psyche that if there isn’t one available we will construct one anyway, as happened, for instance, with Ivan Lendl twenty-five years ago. The Czech tennis robot could win anywhere except at Wimbledon because he couldn’t serve-and-volley and had decided that he loathed grass and was constantly trying to tap blades out of the treads of his trainers as if it clagged in them like clay. Lendl was initially unpopular at Wimbledon for all of these reasons, as well as for the tedium of his baseline game, but once it became apparent that he could never win in SW19 the crowd began to love him, managing to convert him into an underdog when he was actually the number one player in the world. To pile on the pathos, in the two consecutive finals he managed to claw himself into he lost abjectly in straight sets to grass court naturals (Boris Becker and Pat Cash).

As it was for Ivan Lendl in 1987, so it is for us today. It’s unusual to walk about in a Stoke City replica shirt and feel popular; it’s unusual for me to walk about in a Stoke City replica shirt at all because I am a middle-class faerie, as my fellow Stoke-based Stokies frequently remind me, and as such I have stripped pine floorboards underfoot at home and attend matches wearing a black polo neck and a cravat. But not today; today I am wearing the shirt (one of Graham’s, last season’s, he has them all). I slung a black Nicole Farhi blouson over it in order to feel like my normal self and a white t-shirt underneath to negate the strange sensation of nylon-to-flesh. Or is it neoprene? None of the several labels inside actually say what it is made of, but there is small black tag that you *must not cut out*, a tag that says:

‘Love is authentique - Do Not Fake - my LE COQ BRAND - produit garanti.’

Garanti, eh? In combination with the Nicole Farhi, it’s an *ensemble authentique*.

Matty is home alone: his mum is out on a training run. Graham is not here, but neither is he in NYC; he is about to touch down at Heathrow. He called me up one afternoon just before the tickets went on sale and asked how much I would consider paying for a flight back to England for the game.

‘How much would I pay to see Stoke in a final which all history tells will be the first and last time it will ever happen? Is that what you mean?’ I said.

‘Yes.’

I was driving. I pulled up and leaned on the car near a butcher’s shop. I picked blisters of rust off the roof rails. I am not so flush at the moment, but I have been flush in the past, so I cast my mind back to those days.

‘Two-and-a-half, three grand,’ I said. ‘Three-and-a-half grand, at a push. Maybe four.’

‘Oh, Ahah!’ said Graham. He’d only shelled six hundred-and-fifty for his flight; now he could regard this as a bargain.

*

‘Just the boring old Cup Final today then, mate,’ I said as Matty jumped into the passenger seat.

‘Yep,’ he replied.

I was carrying six tickets: Matty’s, Mine, Jack’s, Graham’s, Graham’s sister Lesley’s and Graham’s brother-in-law David’s. I had somehow become responsible for the block-booking, I did not know where to put them best for safety. They started off in my bag (they were still in the envelope in which they had not been delivered when the postman arrived in the *only five minutes I was out of the house* on Thursday morning) and then I nearly forgot to pick them up from the Post Office Collection Office the day before. This is the kind of person I am; I was once talking on my mobile phone when I suddenly started checking my pockets to see where my mobile phone was; the more I checked the pockets - where the phone wasn’t - the more frantic I became that I’d lost the bloody thing. It wasn’t until I told the person I was speaking to what it was that I was worried about that they put me in the picture.

Our plan was to drive to Watford and from there to get the tube into Wembley. That meant I had to transfer the tickets from car to train and *look after them on public transport*.

‘Do you want to take care of these tickets?’ I asked Matty.

‘No,’ he replied.

We pulled in for fuel at the petrol station at the Fiveways roundabout at the foot of Thetford Forest. A man rolled down his window. ‘Good luck,’ he said. ‘I (obscenity) hate Man City,’ he said.

Our next stop was at the services on the M25 at South Mimms. The man walking through the entrance doors beside me was wearing Manchester City colours. I was on my phone, he was on his. We did not speak to each other; instead we shook hands as if we were the managers of our respective teams before taking to our technical areas. There were many more Manchester City fans than Stoke fans in the place. In fact, the more I looked around, the more I noticed that we were the *only* two which seemed odd, and unfair.

At a Burger King outlet Matty purchased his first fast food of the day. ‘What is that?’ I asked.

‘It’s a chicken burger,’ he replied.

‘Did you have breakfast?’

‘Sausages,’ he said. ‘Oh, and beans.’

I fingered my back pocket, my blood ran cold. I fingered the other back pocket. The tickets were still there.

The phone call had been from Sky Sports. A runner had emailed me earlier in the week asking if I would say a few words in the pre-match build up. I’d emailed back to say Sure, no problem, but I had heard no more so I assumed they had found someone better, more interesting, famous. But no, they were simply as disorganised as I am. How long would it be until I could get to the roof of the Premier Inn hotel right by the Wembley Park tube station, where they were set up, the runner asked. It was half-eleven. One o’clock, I said. I have a friend’s son with me. Is it alright?

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘But the security are heavy down there: give us a call when you get in if you can’t get past.’

‘D’you want to be on television?’ I said to Matty as we rolled out of the services. He removed the repulsive-looking chicken item from his mouth long enough to say, ‘No way, I hate publicity.’

Watford tube station is hard to find, set in the very heart of Metroland itself. On an A4 google map that I printed out at too big a scale to be of any particular use - these fragments I have shored against navigating the day - I find that I’ve managed to scribble ‘the building is typical red-brick and was designed by C. W. Clark.’ I must have been to wikipedia first. The station designed by Mr Clark is just as described, has that lovely dead atmosphere of the end of the line, and the station staff have a languorous air: you may have football colours on but it’s of no matter to them; there’s an FA Cup final every year, is there not?

If the carriages are not rammed full of football fans, football fans seem to be the only kind of people that there *are* on the train; there are no other civilians. The banks of seats in front of us are taken by eight Stoke supporters who strike me as particularly nervous. One woman looks as if she is about to vomit. A small kid asks if he can go to Madame Tussauds and his dad says, No, not today mate ... because it's the Cup Final and we haven't got time, that's why not. I begin a mental count-down of the teams we beat on the way to the final in case the Sky guy asks me about it: Cardiff (2-0 away in extra time of a replay, one of the worst matches in history); Brighton (comfortable 3-0 home win); West Ham in the last eight (2-1, could have been a draw, possibly, I watched it in Stoke-on-Trent on the sofa at home, holding the hand of my Mother, who used to take us down to the matches when we were kids: she is very unwell). The Hammers had beaten us easily in the League the week before and there were rumblings against Pulis before the cup tie. But in the two months between that quarter-final and today he has been elevated to 'possibly the best manager we've ever had'. Bolton in the semi (5-0). I count the matches out on my fingers, there's one missing. I ask the other Stokies what it is. They cannot remember it either, until one of them does.

'Wolves in the fourth round, 1-0. Huth with his head and then Sorensen saved the penalty late on, remember.'

These are the knowledges we keep in our heads, this is the psychic trivia that rattles along in the caravan of football. I was not at the Wolves game, and I was not the only one. It was late January and nobody cared. The attendance was 11,967, quite, quite dismal. I picked up on a Stoke win bet though, not knowing til later that I owed my luck to a low dive to his left from a thirty-four year-old Dane. Sorensen is our second choice keeper so far as the Premiership is concerned but he has played in every round of the Cup and his reward is that he will be in the starting eleven today.

Eventually I did lose that phone, the one that I thought I had lost when I was, in fact, using it, and now I have a new one. Text messages and bbms and emails pop in, each to a different ping. Where r u? / We're at Ealing / Having a fry up / Just seen a Ford Focus hand-painted red and white in matt emulsion! / Ey up duck / Wish I could be there with you / Love and kisses / Good luck.

I check my back pocket for the nineteenth time. They're still there. Matty is counting the stops on his tube map: Croxley; Moor Park; Northwood; Northwood Hills; Pinner; North Harrow; Harrow-on-the-Hill (a British Rail interchange where hundreds of Manchester City fans pile on singing their terrace anthem *Blue Moon*, a Rogers and Hart ballad from 1934; why? - a full moon, a night match, the colour of their shirts...); Preston Road; Wembley Park. Matty's grandparents are from Hong Kong, his birth father is English, I think, and lives in America (he rarely gets a mention). Today, with Graham absent, Matty will refer to my friend, who I think of as his step-father, as 'my Dad' and it takes me a moment to work out who he means. I will mention this to Graham later. He does not have children of his own but he has done a proper job with the difficult task of stepping in; I know it will make him proud.

Matty gazes out of the window. He has a shock of black hair and an aura of insouciance; it's as if the Cup Final is an everyday event. It crosses my mind to realise that this is what he will believe the world is like, because this *is* what his world is like, his memories of today will be real memories and they will be better memories than getting knocked out by Arsenal in the semi-finals, whatever the outcome.

12.50. Just over two hours to kick off and the security at the Premier Inn, *Rooms from £29 a Night* let us pass without a murmur. There's a marquee out front and inside that marquee it's Bacchanalian. Bacchus is another name for Dionysus who was the god of the grape harvest, winemaking and wine, and of ritual madness and ecstasy in Greek mythology. Bacchus is exactly the sort of Stokie who would have a BAC 4US personal registration plate on a Porsche he had forgotten about that he'd left parked up at the Acropolis. How do people drink so much and still manage to watch football? That is what I am thinking as I navigate my way through the weaving bodies. 'Stay there,' I say to Matty while I use the toilet. As I enter, one of the two latrines begins to flood. Someone has put toilet paper into the drain holes. Why? I step aside, sharply. I am on the phone. 'What?' I am saying, to nobody. There is no signal. I have the phone held in the crook of my neck and I back out of the place taking care to touch nothing. I phone the runner again but there is still no contact. Now it's 13.00. Matty and I take the lift to the top where communication is better. 'I will be with you in four seconds,' the runner says. I count him down, three-two-one and here he is, coming through the double doors, shaking hands. 'Just in time, live in five,' he says, leading us out onto the flat roof of the hotel while saying what he has to say about Health and Safety. Don't jump or anything. The day before, I heard a pop psychologist on the radio saying that the human brain can take in eleven million pieces of information at any one moment but, even by generous estimates, we are consciously aware of maybe 40 of these.

Forty from the Rooftop

1. The view is beautiful
2. The stadium is beautiful
3. The arc seems profound
4. The soundman's skin is bad skin
5. He has the intonation of a Manc
6. But I immediately like him
7. He looks knackered

8. He takes a Nicorette
9. A steel band is playing
10. I'm introduced to the camera girl
11. Her hair is in a bob
12. There is beer on my shoes, from the foyer
13. The camera girl, I can't remember her name
14. The sky is dramatic
15. And the roof of the tube station
16. There is more blue than red
17. Pigeon shit everywhere
18. Do I still have the tickets?
19. Feel my pocket
20. The sound of a song
21. It is *Delilah* rising from below
22. I must take a picture
23. An aerial shot of the singing crowd
24. It is starting to rain
25. This phone has a camera but how does it work?
26. We are in the Cup Final
27. Matty is reading a newspaper
28. Can you close up your jacket?
29. What for no colours?
30. No for the flapping, for the wind, for the sound
31. Everything is temporary
32. The presenter arrives
33. He looks knackered
34. His tie is purple
35. His shoes are scuffed

36. His name is Nick
37. Man United are losing; Blackpool are up
38. We go live in three
39. And now to Stephen Foster
40. He has written a book

I tell Nick about Graham and his flight from New York.

‘That is what it means...’ says Nick, ‘...Isn’t it? It’s a big, big day.’

‘Indeed it is,’ I say. ‘The biggest I have known.’

I am not normally emotional (I hear myself say as much) but today is different; I am nervous; it’s the Cup Final, I say, and I gesture with my arm, backwards - look, there’s the stadium - as if to prove it. Later when I watch this footage I see that I look at least as knackered as Nick; I am the poor man’s Alan Pardew. I look like I have suffered a long, dark, punishing night of the soul. And I have not even had a drink. Out in the street we find Graham and his family mobbed up by a red brick wall near the underpass beside the tube station. Graham’s Mum is in a wheelchair because she has dodgy knees. I lean down to kiss her. Her granddaughter, Emily, is taking her to a different part of the ground from where we will be, where the wheelchairs can go. Graham, having crossed the Atlantic twice in six days, and having picked up a cold while he was at it, looks more knackered than the Manc soundman, Nick the presenter, myself and Alan Pardew combined but seeing him greet Matty after their week apart is lovely, and then Jack the Mogul, my own son, who is coming in from Norwich, on a different timescale to me, for reasons that no one could ever understand, from a book that nobody could write, randomly bumps into me in the road.

Oh! I say, Hello!

Oh! He replies, Hello back!

I kiss the boy on his cheeks, and, with a proper sense of relief and an absurd sense of achievement, I hand over the fifth of the six tickets; so far as that trauma goes I can call it mission accomplished. We walk up Wembley Way and the day begins again. By the statue of Bobby Moore we meet our dear friends Old Stokie, Swiss Tony and all the other legends and we wish each other well and we say we will reassemble here afterwards whatever the outcome.

Our seats are five rows back, just to the right of the goal. Someone I know is sitting immediately in front of us, the old message-board legend MCF74, real name

Merkin, a big lump who accidentally broke Jack's arm in a 5-a-side ten years ago, a matter about which there always has to be mention. The few drops of rain have gone and the sun is shining right into our faces. Graham hands me his phone, asks me to take a picture of him against the red and white ocean.

A pastel hue is no colour for a football shirt but I have to concede that their lot look good in the other half of the stadium; the one-colour top constructs a solid block of crowd. They are in solid voice too, matching each *Delilah* with a *Blue Moon*. I had offered Mum to watch the match in Stoke, in front of the television. 'Don't be silly,' she said, 'Now go away now before you make me cry.' I call her up while *Abide With Me* is being sung so she can hear it and be here. Just before kick-off the Manchester City fans in the lower tier turn their backs to the pitch, link arms, and jump up and down in a gesture called the Poznan, a terrace antic they've picked up from Polish side Lech Poznan they played in the Europa League earlier in the season. Our lot ask them what the fucking hell is that. Myself, I find it strangely moving.

The Final

Manchester City

25 Hart

02 Richards

04 Kompany

13 Kolarov

19 Lescott

18 Barry (Johnson 73)

21 Silva (Vieira 90+2)

34 De Jong

42 Y Touré

32 Tevez (Zabaleta 87)

45 Balotelli

Stoke City

29 Sorensen

04 Huth

17 Shawcross

28 Wilkinson

06 Whelan (Pugh 84)

12 Wilson

16 Pennant

24 Delap (Carew 80)

26 Etherington (Whitehead 62)

09 Jones

19 Walters

0-5 minutes

Etherington and Huth, our two fitness doubts make the line up, as, to no one's surprise, does Tevez (50/50 hamstring) for them. Huth has been down in Spain receiving specialist attention to a knee injury since a knock last week against Arsenal.

Our 19 knocks it forward to our 6 and the crowd roars. I wish they'd have shirts numbered 1-11. We are attacking their end. Walters gets onto a long ball; is it a corner? Apparently not. From row five the opposite goalmouth is an enigma. A long ball comes over the top and Huth knocks it away. It comes back and we concede the first corner.

Walters trots in to mark Mario Balotelli, a twenty-year-old who might well be the new Nicolas Anelka as far as sulking goes. Balotelli was born in Palermo to

impoverished immigrant Ghanaian parents who allowed him to be adopted by an Italian family and who then wanted him back when it became clear what was going to become of him. He has apparently described his birth parents as 'glory hunters' for this. That is one story about Balotelli, and there are many. When he played at Internazionale under Jose Mourinho, the Portuguese described him as unmanageable and as having 'only one brain cell'. Balotelli seems to have a relationship with Mancini though (from his time under him at the same club). Perhaps he is some sort of father figure. Walters leans into Balotelli. They are both big units. Walters is six-one, Balotelli six-two. Balotelli shrugs Walters off as if he were a flea, dismissing him with undisguised disdain as our forward seeks to block him off from the corner kick. Walters notes it and does not look too happy about it. If he has to be up and down the pitch looking after Balotelli at set pieces for ninety minutes then he is in for a long afternoon. Huth, the centre-back, boots it away, into touch, unconvincingly. It goes out in our own half, he would usually shift it twenty more yards at least. He is not properly fit.

Pennant gathers the ball and goes by four of them in the centre circle before Nigel de Jong cuts him out. The most untypical Nigel in history, de Jong achieved notoriety in the World Cup Final ten months earlier - he was the principal enforcer in the Dutch side that went out with the intention of smashing up the dilettantes of Spain; de Jong kung-fu kicked Xabi Alonso smack in the centre of the solar plexus to leave the midfielder in no doubt that he was there. There was nothing accidental about it, nothing whatsoever, and in slow-motion you can see that de Jong creates such a force that he bounces backwards off the Spanish player as if he has drop-kicked a wall. It was a miracle that either of them stayed on the pitch to play the ninety minutes out. Now de Jong wins the ball clean from Pennant. Both ends of the ground are strangely silent as each set of supporters settles in to see how the match will shape up. De Jong is at it again dispossessing Walters and suddenly the ball is out on the left wing pinging off the heel of our left back, local boy, skinhead hero Andy Wilkinson, and falling into the path of Carlos Tevez who lets one fly from the edge of the box to have Sorensen stretching full and low to his left to beat it away. Our end has remained quieter than theirs; the opening exchanges have looked a little ominous for us and this shot has added to the sense of unease but now there is sustained applause for the keeper. 'Well played big man!' It is shown again on the big screen; Tevez was covered by a defender and Sorensen saw it late. It is even better work in replay than it looked in real time.

5-10 minutes

Pennant is up in their half, tackling. He is working; Pulis, who has quick-changed from his Cup Final suit to his trademark tracksuit and baseball cap, is yelling from the

touchline, urging everyone else to follow Pennant's example or something. 'Oh when the reds, go marching in...' rises from twenty-five thousand throats. Left back Marc Wilson clears the ball into touch. Every team has a player you don't understand and Wilson is him for me. I've heard Avram Grant say that he wanted to sign Wilson to be a midfield enforcer for the West Ham United side he has just got relegated. I like Avram; tremendous jowls such as you don't get anymore, and a thinker, but perhaps not always about football. To be fair to Wilson he is being played as an improvised left back, he is a better midfielder, his more natural position, but he would not make an enforcer in any team, not at this level. De Jong would have him for breakfast.

Singing displaces nervous energy. *Delilah* follows *the Reds*. C'mon lads, they are beginning to say around me, Let's get started.

Jones goes to ground in their half; nothing given. On the Manchester City bench Mancini offers his assistant a sweet, it looks like a fruit pastille. They are playing Balotelli on the left wing rather than as an out-and-out striker and now here he is again, gathering a pass on the dead ball line right in front of us, jinking, stroking it back to a team mate. He has mesmerising balance and - from this close range, you really notice it - an imperious sang froid. His hair is a narrow rectangular Mohawk, he is sweating up already, but that means nothing. Another corner to them and he and Walters are at it again, this time Balotelli getting a little rattled as Walters makes a stronger effort to let him know he's there, in his face. Balotelli turns on him, tells him words to effect of 'fuck off'. The ball is cleared to the half way line but the relief is temporary, here they come again, they are developing a slow wave of attacks. Now it is the turn of their left back Kolorov, a Serb in the 13 shirt (my lucky number - a horse in the 13 cloth in green silks at a big price in Ireland will often help you out) to surge forward and to skid the ball low into our six-yard box where Shawcross dives in late and deflects it into the side netting with an outstretched leg. Ooooh. The moan is low; from many angles it looked an own goal. Another corner to them; Balotelli and Walters getting to know each other better and better. The ball falls to the edge of the box where de Jong lashes at it - wasteful, high. But it was a free shot and Shawcross has a go at his colleagues. *Who is supposed to be picking him up?*

I joined in with, *I believed in*, the most popular line of conjecture before the game: that they are nothing more than an expensive mosaic of individuals but that *we are a team* and that *that* would be how we would win. The collective will can triumph over an assemblage of monads. Ten minutes in and I'm not so sure: they are holding the ball, they are controlling possession, but I am beginning to think there is more to it. Are they playing for each other? Is it that?

10-15 minutes

The ball works its way out of our defence and back into the Manchester City midfield where Gareth Barry strokes it forward to Yaya Touré, twenty-five yards out. Touré is six-two; the majority of players on the pitch are in this height range. Touré scored City's winner against United in the semi. He is a rampaging midfielder, the Ivorian, he is ex-Barcelona, and no Stoke player is anywhere near him. He lets rip a shot that is flying into the top corner except that the ball carries a fraction wide only by dint of the slice with which his boot has laced it. Sorensen was beaten. I can actually hear air being sucked in through twenty-five thousand sets of teeth. 'Ooohargh,' says Jack, beside me. Sorensen boots it up-field: *get this thing away from me*. A brief passage of skirmishing and the ball goes into touch near their eighteen-yard box. Rory Delap takes his first long throw of the game and it is not a bad effort but at the same time it causes no danger. The Wembley pitch is five metres wider than ours and he must struggle to create the same impact with that extra distance: two and a half metres from either touchline to the ideal delivery spot on the edge of the six yard box. The ball pings back out to Delap and now he is using his feet to spread it out wide to Etherington. He skids it too far into the channel; our long thrower can have those days when he is not so accurate with his feet. In any case, Etherington gives up on it. He is not right, it's obvious. With Huth, that makes two of them. Do they kid the manager that they're fit to play or is it the other way round? But we are short of alternatives. The two benches bear little comparison. Where they can hold Patrick Viera back in case of emergency, our equivalent is Dean Whitehead; the former is a World Cup and European Championship winner with one-hundred and seven appearances for France, the latter is an honest pro. Pulis has had to take the fitness gamble with the best players he has available to him and I'd have done the same. He'd have helped himself in this particular situation by *not* getting rid of the flair of Tuncay Şanlı in the January transfer window, that's for sure, but Tuncay is my private obsession and another story.

A roar of approval rattles through our support as Wilkinson upends Kolorov on the wing with a good, old-fashioned midlands-bred tackle. This is more like it. The ball works its way upfield where Pennant chips a cross to the far post, standing it up nicely, but there's no Stoke shirt anywhere near it. Their right-back picks it up and plays it forward to Balotelli who flicks it out to the advancing left back Kolorov. Balotelli bombs on through the middle. Kolorov is starting to take my eye: he is a dynamo. While he prepares to sling the ball in, Balotelli stumbles and falls into our box, looking for a foul or a penalty. A dive ref a dive! But actually it is not. I missed it, and so did the ref but replays will show that Huth slung his forearm deliberately into the Italian's throat. It would have knocked me out. Huth has form at this sort of thing. He is German; he is tall, he is a sort of light-brown-to-blondish, in moments of this kind any number of stereotypical images of the Waffen-SS will flood to mind. He is also the highest scoring full-back in the Premier League (nine goals). He is deadly at set pieces, and he will win both our supporters' and players' Player of the Year Awards by a comfortable margin. Perhaps he is quietly admired for his nefarious off-the-ball ability as well as for his more obvious abilities as a defender. He is accomplished in the dark arts, that's for sure: he gets away with it more often than

not. And he has selected his victim here; he has targeted the one that comes with the reputation for being a hothead, he is needling the suspect temperament. It's more than possible in these situations that by inflaming the guy then *he* will get himself booked when he comes back in for the inevitable retaliation. 'Get up Balotelli you cheating little shitbag,' someone shouts out. 'You're a wanker, you're a wanker,' the crowd sing. While the Italian is receiving treatment, Huth takes a slug of Lucozade and shakes his head at the ref. 'You wanna watch that one with the Mohawk,' the headshake says, 'He is trying to hoodwink you.'

15-20 minutes

It's as if there's only one wing on this pitch; everything that is happening is taking place in the sunlight, up our right, down their left, until Tevez misdirects a pass cross-field into the shade where Etherington is lurking and which he intercepts. He tries to move forward but immediately he finds himself doubled up on, de Jong coming over to provide full-back Micah Richards with a cover he may not even need. Etherington is relatively slight, a welterweight confronted with a couple of super middleweights; twenty-five stone of Manchester City stopping power sees him quickly bundled out of it. There is a long story about Etherington and a gambling addiction; £1.5million he says he got rid of: the irony of him playing for a team bankrolled by an online bookies should be lost on nobody but I never hear it mentioned. I read a piece in which Etherington says that he used to own greyhounds and that he liked the dogs, it was the gambling that was the trouble. I like greyhounds too, they are moody, like the player himself: Etherington has dark, sunken eyes under a heavy brow, he is a troubled soul. The wings attract them, they are isolated there and can weave their own patterns, up and down, up and down, up and down.

Once more now the ball has found its way into the channel of perpetual motion but this time it is us who are going forward as Pennant shimmies by his man, lovely nimble feet. Pennant has his own tales of difficult days to tell, he has been inside for drink-driving, but he appears to be the mirror image of Etherington, happy go lucky: where one loses twenty grand on a nag, the other forgets he owns a sports car. Pennant slides it down the line to Walters who turns to play a one-two which is badly misdirected. I am beginning to wonder if Walters is discovering his glass ceiling, whether he is overwhelmed to be playing in Mancini's 'FA Final'. He has not been at his best so far, that's for sure, albeit that his opportunities to see the ball have been limited.

The whole of the stadium falls into a curious pocket of silence. I get the sense that this match may not make great watching. But still, for me, time is flying as if it were a tremendous and absorbing spectacle. If you asked me how long they had been playing

here I would say five minutes. A goal-kick from Sorensen and Kenwyne takes the ball down on his chest, nicely, and finds Walters who now plays a perfect one-two with the Trinidadian. He is not overawed, not in the slightest. I was wrong. Kenwyne is in their box, he wriggles past one challenge and he buys himself just enough space to pull the trigger...

20-25 minutes

Vincent Kompany closes him down, blocking the shot off. Kompany is a brilliant Belgian centre-back, assured, fast, vocal and imposing. He is Manchester City's Huth - he will win their supporters' and players' Player of the Year awards. Here is an illustration of football mentality: fans are a cross section of society and the majority like an honest grafter who stops the other lot from scoring. On a pitch full of Globetrotters, Kompany appears to be the tallest, the centre. He doesn't make Kenwyne Jones look small, exactly, but still: he *is* a touch taller and he *is* dominating him. And now he is fouling him, coming in late from behind; the free kick is given away thirty yards out. Wilson shapes up to take it. I expect him to chip it in to the mixer but he goes for glory sending the ball high and wide. He was never going to score from there, it was moronic. He holds his hand up: Sorry lads. The ball works its way through their midfield, the diminutive Spaniard David Silva (five-foot six) threads it to Touré who finds Balotelli on the edge of our area. The hothead curls a shot at our top corner which Sorensen saves with his wrong hand: diving high to his left he palms it round the post with his right. A brilliant shot which was definitely going in and a brilliant save to prevent it, the highlight of the match so far. It's shown again on the big screen - boom boom - an almost-goal - and the crowd gasps and sighs as one. The jockeying before the resultant the corner provokes the referee to speak to Walters and Balotelli. 'You two: cut it out.' Silva flights the ball in and Sorensen picks it out of the air with ease. If we are going to being battered, and I am beginning to think we are, here is the silver lining: Sorensen will be by far the warmer keeper, if, that is, we can hold them out and take it to penalties. *The reds* from us, another Poznan from them; a vast wide ripple of connected humanity, like a giant pale blue caterpillar on the job; it really is something to see.

25-30 minutes

Tevez to Kolorov and another shot goes wide. They must have identified Wilkinson

as the weak link, they never stop coming down our right flank; it's relentless.

Wilson wastes another free kick for us.

For three minutes nothing happens.

It occurs to me to wonder what our other midfielder is doing. If Glenn Whelan has even touched the ball yet I have not noticed it.

Cries for a 'Handball' in their area. It hit Kompany somewhere along his arm but only from a foot away and it will never be given, and now, suddenly, in the same move, here Kompany comes again shooting at our goal. He seems to have covered the pitch in three strides. That would have been a contentious goal. Sorensen gets down low to stop it. A keeper should not look knackered on thirty minutes but he does. He is on the sharp end of the relentlessness and is feeling it. Manchester City are better than I thought they might be, much better. They could be three up by now and we could be Bolton Wanderers in our semi-final.

I spot Whelan; he is on the floor after a collision with Touré. Perhaps that's where he has been spending his time.

30-35 minutes

Pennant earns himself a free kick up near their area on the right touchline, the only touchline in active service. He floats it in nicely, a picture book cross, but Hart takes it no bother. Rory gets a throw from the same range. This time Shawcross goes up to block Hart off. He stands directly in front of the keeper and grabs him, drawing him into himself with his arms behind his back. Delap's throw is good, causing panic and confusion. The ball breaks to the edge of the area where Whelan finally gets a touch: he knocks it to Etherington but sells him short. This is nowhere near good enough and from the loose ball they are breaking at us again, weaving it through the midfield, de Jong to Silva to Tevez who is suddenly out wide in the Kolorov role. Tevez steps inside a challenge from Pennant, utilising his greatest asset, his extraordinary balance, and he moves a stride or two nearer the eighteen yard line where he dinks it over the top, perfectly into Balotelli who is onside and one-on-one with Sorensen. How they contrive to do it you simply cannot explain but between them striker and keeper lose sight of the ball. It falls to David Silva who has an open goal at his mercy. He snatches at the opportunity, hitting it into the ground from six yards out. It pings up and over the cross bar. It has been criticised plenty and has cut up terribly in the past but the surface at Wembley is very good now, a fan on the train who was into turf told me it was a blend of real and artificial grass, it plays true and it plays fast and it has helped us out here. With a divot anything could have happened. Four. It could be four.

For fuck's sake Stoke! Wake up! This is the man behind me. Don't get into an FA Cup final and not fucking turn up! This is his mate. I look at Graham who has on his face a look of sick jet-lagged terrorised relief, an expression no one could ever describe.

35-40 minutes

The ball is circulating in open play and it is Manchester City who are circulating it. They hold it for a minute, lose it briefly, and then repeat the previous minute. Without the ball you can do nothing, that's how Barcelona kill teams. Manchester City are not Barcelona, not by a long stretch, but they have built a rhythm and a tempo that we cannot replicate because we have so little possession: I would hate to see the stat for it, it must be 70:30 in their favour. Now, in the developing pattern, Barry plays it out wide to the overlapping Kolorov, but Pennant, an intelligent player, is reading the pattern of the game and has anticipated this. He intercepts the ball, runs three quarters of the pitch and slips it inside to Kenwyne on the edge of the area who is in position to shoot and does so, horribly wide. He is in a good run of form, five goals in six matches coming into this, but he is always capable of one of those and the blue fans mock him for it. More Manchester, more possession, more shifting it about until Tevez once again surges through utilising his other greatest asset, his strength, to power past several red and white shirts to the byline where he cuts it back and for a bagatelle between Balotelli and Silva before it is booted out for yet another corner. There doesn't seem to be much wrong with Tevez, that's for sure. As he tracks back my eye wanders to the scar tissue on his neck which he got when he was ten months old when he accidentally poured a kettle of boiling water over himself. It caused third degree burns, putting him in hospital for two months. Imagine it. His legend says that he declined to have plastic surgery when he was growing up as it would have kept him out of the playground for four months and that he later refused an offer from Boca Juniors to have the scars cosmetically improved, saying that they were a part of who he was in the past and who he is now. He is a proper tough and fans in general like him for that, I think, even though our lot will occasionally taunt him with the accusation that he is 'just a fat Maradona,' during the course of this match.

While Tevez motors himself about looking for the space that will allow him to run into the other space that he's looking for Balotelli simply allows Walters to hold him down at the near post; he has seen the corner-taker's hand signal, it is not coming to him, he can simply stand his ground and take Walters out of the game. It is flighted to the penalty spot where their other centre-back, Joleon Lescott (six-foot-two) rises and heads it harmlessly to nowhere. This is the first I have seen of Lescott. He is having an easy afternoon: for one thing we are causing him no particular trouble and for another thing his colleague Vincent Kompany does the work of two.

Please let us get to half-time at nil-nil and then perhaps we can re-group, though how I don't know. Something has to change because we will never get to a penalty shoot out like this. Here we go again, them weaving their patterns, us sitting back deeper and now right-back Micah Richards surges forward, about to go past Huth, who does the only thing he can sensibly do. He scythes him down. There is nothing sly about this one. The first yellow of the match; some would say Huth was lucky to still be on the pitch, because this could easily be a second card if the ref had seen the arm across Balotelli's throat. The free kick is square on, about twenty yards out, a little to the right of our goal.

40-45 minutes

Kolarov shapes to take it. He blasts it high and wide, quite hopeless. For two minutes nothing happens. I watch the camera sliding on a steel wire over the pitch. Now Kolarov takes another shot, from open play, from forty yards out. It is even worse than the hopeless free kick for which he must have been trying to atone. His manager taps his temple: Think!

Now we get a free kick which comes to nothing. Everyone is looking at their watch. C'mon ref, blow it up.

One minute added in which Pennant manages to twist his ankle or something like it to give us a little more to worry about at half-time; by the time the winger is fixed up the first period is over. If you asked me how long I had been here I would still answer: five minutes.

Half-Time

I walk down the row of seats.

'Well that couldn't come soon enough,' says Graham.

'What d'you reckon?' I ask Matty.

'Boring,' he replies.

'This FA Cup final is boring,' I say to Graham, over my shoulder.

‘Jack?’

‘We’re still in it,’ he replies.

Graham’s sister Lesley makes a face like she often does. ‘Oooh it’s all a bit of a panic but I expect it’ll be alright in the end,’ the face says.

Graham’s brother-in-law David is at the end of the row. ‘I wouldn’t like to see the possession stat for that,’ I say.

‘They might have had more, but we had the quality,’ he says in an analysis so one-eyed it casts Arsène Wenger into the light of the most objective observer of matches involving Arsenal.

There is a heavy smoking going on in amongst the pissoirs. At the sinks I see a man who sits along from me at the Britannia puffing away thoughtfully from under his Bushman’s hat where a little cloud has formed.

When I return I find Matty finishing off the organic breakfast sandwich. He has a good appetite that lad; I have not eaten a thing all day.

45-50 minutes

We must come out stronger; if I heard this once on the concourses I heard it a hundred times.

But within the first minute of the restart de Jong has slid a perfectly weighted pass behind our back line and Kolorov has run onto it with only the keeper to beat and then gone and stuck it into the side netting. I am warming to Kolorov, give him a sight of goal and he is absolutely profligate.

Over in the shade now Pennant comes forward and slings a cross in that Huth heads wide. Keeper Hart raises his hand only slightly: I had it covered, the hand says, it was nowhere near. Now we have a throw, Delap’s first effort in the crucible of his own fans. The roar is immense, Richards heads it clear, presents Pennant with a free shot, and every Manchester City defender puts his arms behind his back as our winger pulls the trigger - whatever happens there will be no penalty given. The shot is totally misdirected and it flirts away to safety from the shin of Balotelli. And now, suddenly, here is Etherington running into their box, slipping it through to Shawcross, but Lescott intervenes and whacks it away for a throw. Another chance for Rory but no, the ref gives the decision to them as if it had nicked off Shawcross on the way out. I’m certain it didn’t, but look down their line of defenders on the replay on the big screen – it’s the old Arsenal back four, every arm raised in simultaneous appeal.

‘Ours ref.’

50-55 minutes

Huth slyly handballs on the touchline, preventing the ball from running on to Tevez. The German must be starting to test the referee’s patience. Tevez mutters a few words at the official, clueing him up to what he ought to be doing, before taking the free kick himself, guiding it dangerously into our penalty box where Richards attempts to get his head on it by taking a piggy-back ride on the self-same Huth. The decision goes our way. From the goal kick Pennant finds himself running free on the wing where Lescott upends him. *Book him ref, book him.* But nothing is given. Pennant fizzes round on one leg, his left, before collapsing and fussing at his ankle. It doesn’t look good. Etherington comes over to deal with the dead ball and Lescott leaps to thump it away with his head. Suddenly, now he is defending the goal immediately in my view, I see that Lescott works plenty. He has a scar on his forehead and is another with a story to tell: he was struck by a car as he stepped into the road outside his primary school in the Midlands. His mother, sitting in the family car opposite, could only look on as her child was dragged along the road and suffered such severe head injuries that his survival was in doubt. Major surgery and numerous operations followed, leaving the scar that is still visible on Lescott’s forehead and which has left a permanent reminder of that dreadful afternoon. ‘I was lucky,’ he has said, and in a sport that can discuss fortune, tragedy and triumph rather glibly, the defender knows better than most.

There is an improvement from us, now, we are retaining the ball a bit better, prompting their fans into a full-throated *Blue Moon* to keep their own team on their mettle, to try and sing us out of securing a foothold. Wilkinson, of all people, steps in to nick the ball off Tevez in the centre circle and comes away with it before Touré cuts him off with a calculated body check. Our end roars its disapproval. But still there is no booking. *How many more times, ref?* And now here is Pennant again, once more running free like a deer (the miracle cure - a ball and space beckoning). There is nothing wrong with that bloody ankle and once more Pennant finds himself clattered, this time by Balotelli. There is fury steaming off our terraces, this is twice in two minutes, yet *still* the ref keeps his cards in his pocket. *For pity’s sake man.* Etherington takes again, leaving Lescott out of it, this time trying a low one to feet on the eighteen yard line. The ball travels round the edge of their area until Micah Richards dispossesses Marc Wilson and the ball falls to Lescott who finds a little space and who has composure and who launches it into the channel where Tevez is hunting. The Argentinian glances up, he is one man against two defenders but that

don't bother him much and now here comes Silva sprinting through the middle totally unmarked. It's an alarming sight and in our end we are all hands on heads in anticipation of the worst.

55-60 minutes

Tevez cuts back from his markers and puts the ball on a plate. The Spaniard is right on the edge of the area with only Sorensen to beat and he simply must score but instead he ties himself up in knots, allowing Wilkinson to cut across from the left back hole and to do just enough to harass him out of it for a microsecond until Shawcross, sprinting in diagonally from behind, turfs it off Silva's boot and out of play.

A text jangles my phone: £30 million and he looked like a rabbit caught in headlights there!

Out it comes again into midfield and now the blue shirts are running at our box once more, de Jong hits a shot which rebounds clear off his own man, Tevez, and then Tevez himself is teed up by Balotelli who gets better and better as the game wears on. He really takes the eye, he is everywhere. Tevez puts it wide but it's a deflection and *another* corner to them. Have we had even one? I believe the answer to this is No. A few minutes of scrappy play in which we tip it forward to little effect; Lescott heads it away, Lescott clears it with his feet. He is much busier this half and he is a decent player too, very decent. The fact is, all their lot are decent players. A notion starts to infiltrate my mind during the scrappy few minutes and the notion is this: man for man our opponents are superior to us. I scroll each position rapidly through my mind and I reach this conclusion: I would swap every single one of theirs for every single one of ours, up to and including Sorensen who even now is racing out to the edge of his area to snuff out another half-chance, to scoop the ball away from a pair of blue boots. Their keeper Joe Hart has had no work to do, he is England's No1, a position we all expect him to keep for years to come.

I had no real sense of how Manchester City played before this match; they weren't up to all that in the Premier League at our place (a 1-1 draw, I was there) and from what I've seen of them on television I simply haven't been able to work them out. Are they just well-organised, are they a flair team, or what? They are both of these by turns, and they are very disciplined. The way I am coming round to thinking about them is this: they are an effective side and they are an excellent side. If I put it straight into the vernacular then I would say they are fucking good.

Now Wilkinson fouls Balotelli, going in over the top. It's up on the halfway line but even from here you can see that Balotelli is advising our fullback what he can do

with himself. Perhaps we are taking it in turns to needle the hothead, on a version of the circulation system that Leeds perfected in the seventies: I once heard Jack Charlton describe it, they took it in turns to harangue the ref about their opponents or to commit fouls so that he could never really work out who to caution on their side.

60-65 minutes

Another altercation between Wilkinson and Balotelli prompts the Italian to display his fingers to the referee one-by-one-two-three, in the international gesture that says ‘when will enough be enough: how many more of these do I have to put up with?’

They are at us again. And then a passage in which neither side has it under control. Now the ball falls to Etherington who picks it up deep on the wing down in our own half. He takes a stride forward, glances up and flights a perfect ball that arcs into the path of Kenwyne Jones who muscles Lescott off it and finds himself in their penalty box one-on-one with Hart. Though the ball seems every so slightly too loose, not one hundred percent within his complete close control, nevertheless it is there to be buried. The striker takes one more stride and toe pokes it at the England keeper who spreads himself and stops the shot with his elbows, with his chest, with his stomach. Jones’ momentum continues to take him forward and the ball rattles between them, a bagatelle between their shinpads until finally it flirts loose towards the edge of the area where the keeper dives on it to smother it and make it safe.

It has been our cleanest chance and it has gone begging. Kenwyne is flat out on the turf, forlorn. Hart boots the ball away. As the keeper jogs backwards to his goal line Kenwyne picks himself up and offers his hand flat-out behind him and Hart taps it with his glove. They each did everything they possibly could with that ball and in this gesture they recognise the fact. It was a heightened moment of sport that took place within yards of me and I will never forget it. It’s impossible to describe the sound of the crowd in this moment, a collective-teeth-grinding-sigh or something. I don’t know. So near, yet so far. So close, but still the score on the big screen remains the same, the match locked at 0-0. Is this good for us? In light of the first half and the pattern of play, you’d have to say, yes. Because the hour is up now and still we have not established any real rhythm.

Down the other end Tevez is on the loose once more; Delap harries him into shooting wide. It seems as though the Argentinian’s hamstring has recovered far better than poor Etherington’s; effectively a passenger, now he is limping out of the FA Cup final. The ball through to Kenwyne was the winger’s last touch; he has never been right and now he is making way for the honest pro, Dean Whitehead. *C’mon Deano*. He is a popular lad, a grafter, but we know well enough that on a like-for-like

basis this is a downgrade so far as crosses and goal-scoring threats and menaces are concerned.

Suddenly Wilkinson is in the middle of the park in miles of free space with the ball at his feet. I would love for Wilkinson to do it more than anything in the world (he has never scored for us). STOP PRESS: Local boy scores winner as City triumph 1-0 in Cup Final! Wilko tests his luck from thirty-five yards with a high, wide and tame paper dart. 'Perhaps that's how he dreamt it last night,' the commentator says of this effort when I am watching it back home much later with a drink in my hand. I hope he dreamt it better than that.

Rory slingshots another throw-in and our lot sing *Sweet Chariot*.

A one-off song for Arsenal-baiting, yes, but I am not joining in with this, it's untraditional and, well, just too, too bizarre to bring it to Wembley.

65-70 minutes

We are still in this.

This is what I am thinking as I watch them passing it round in a circle through midfield: Barry-de Jong-Kolorov-Kompany-Touré-Barry-again-Balotelli. Balotelli steams through the middle and Shawcross upends him. Balotelli strikes the free kick right into our wall, perhaps he was even aiming for that little irritant, the one who has been fouling him all afternoon. We defend it well but here it comes again and now they are circulating it round our box. It goes out wide to Touré who may have had enough of being unable to find a way through these red and white shirts of perpetual resistance and who seeks instead a different way of scoring, throwing himself down, looking for the penalty. *The Reds* is being sung, the song is interrupted as we vent our disgust at this transparent effort to *cheat, cheat, cheat*.

The ball is back in the shade on the wing, into touch, and for Delap another opportunity. Once more Shawcross is using all six foot and two inches of himself in an effort to blind Hart's view. Hart shoves him in the back as the ball flies in and Lescott heads it away. Do they do a half each, him and Kompany? Is that how they divide the labour? Rory chips it back in and Balotelli stoops low to head it away on the edge of the D. Balotelli. Again. He is starting to look Man of the Match to me.

Pennant has switched wings, he is dancing down the left, drawing Richards, tempting him into trouble, and he gets what he's looking for, the foul just wide of the area. Cool, rich, handsome, cunning, forgot he owned a Porsche.

We are still in this.

70-75 minutes

Cool, rich, handsome, cunning, forgot he owned a Porsche: just the man for the job but now he takes a quite terrible free kick, effectively passing it to Silva, their first blocker, ten yards in front of him. On the touchline Pulis turns his back in disgust. I wonder how his blood is pumping. It must be something to stand there with one-hundred-and-forty-eight years of history hanging on your name and with the whole thing out of your hands.

Mancini makes his first substitution, an England winger for an England midfielder: Adam Johnson comes on to replace Gareth Barry. Perhaps it's the reorganisation of the Manchester City formation, the moment it takes for our players to register it, but almost as soon as the substitution is made we are in trouble. From out on the right wing Tevez plays the ball backwards a little deeper into the midfield where Silva picks it up and slides the ball into Balotelli on the edge of the box. Silva continues his run into our penalty area, Balotelli waits, our defenders don't want to be drawn, and in a flash he drags a back-heel into the Spaniard's path quite perfectly. It is the genius touch that will unlock the door. Huth tries to stop Silva from benefiting but he can't. Silva cuts it back to Balotelli who lashes a shot which Shawcross blocks but the ball spins to Tevez who has arrived on the scene and who cannot quite get hold of it but who contrives to tee-up the oncoming Touré who lashes it left footed straight down the middle and no keeper in the world was going to save it. It must have been horrible to be a Bolton fan at the semi, I think, as their end explodes; they would have heard this awful cacophony five times. It is thoroughly, thoroughly unpleasant to be on the receiving end. And now they're doing another sodding Poznan, this one I find considerably less moving. The goal is scored in the 74th minute. We've got twenty-odd left with added-on time: just long enough to get back into it, though in truth we have not threatened since Kenwyne's one-on-one ten minutes since. In the midweek before the FA Cup final Manchester City beat Spurs to secure third spot in the Premier League which means they will play in the Champions League next season; let's face it, they were never going to be patsies.

The replay on the big screen shows Mancini clenching his fists in celebration before helping himself to another fruit pastille.

75-80 minutes

Not really here, we're not really here...

This is what they are singing. You can't even tell whether it's ironic or un-ironic but it's certainly a nice touch and one I didn't expect. Wilkinson is fouling Balotelli in the centre circle again and finally he has earned his booking. David Silva boots the ball at him in disgust while Balotelli nods as if to say, 'You are angry now you are a goal down and losing, are you not: finally you have got your rewards for your constant petty harassment of my person.'

A passage of post-goal raggedy play for a minute or two and then Delap weights a nice ball for Walters to chase into the channel where de Jong upends him and yet the free kick is given their way. Our end wails: time is ticking away and we need to make use of every opportunity and those not given that should be are only wholly iniquitous.

Now the ball breaks to their substitute, Johnson, whose fresh legs carry him down the left wing to the dead ball line where he cuts it back to Silva who is becoming increasingly involved in everything, who is no longer a rabbit in the headlights. His snap shot is blocked point blank by Whitehead. *Deano!* But too close and really: if they score another we've absolutely had it.

Just like the team that's gonna win the FA Cup, we shall not be moved...

It is not nice to listen to, not nice at all.

80-85 minutes

The benches are making their final throws of the dice: the on-loan-from-Villa Norwegian striker John Carew comes on for Delap. At six-foot-four Carew does nothing whatsoever to lower the average height. He has scored some great goals in his time including a perfect chipped volley against us that we always remember but he has not been that hot lately and really it ought to have been the Jamaican legend Ricardo Fuller coming on. He would have been bought on for the last half hour, in fact, under the normal system, to run at tiring players and to torture defenders with his mesmerising close control, but Fuller has an Achilles injury and is out of this match, a matter of huge regret for all concerned. With the addition of Carew we will be playing it three up front now, I guess, shit or bust, though here comes Walters apparently playing as a left winger and squaring it to Whelan whose last contribution to a poor performance is to lose control of the ball and to commit a foul on, who else but Balotelli. Free kick to them on the edge of their own penalty box. We launch into a huge full-throated Delilah, attempting to sing ourselves a goal. It has worked before.

Now, down their end, a Manchester City corner; this is no good to us, no good at

all. As it breaks loose Wilkinson hoofs a long pass into Carew, thirty yards out, but the ball somehow bounces off him and a defender clears it back to keeper Hart who takes aim while Carew runs at him, jumping in the air arms-spread-wide hoping for a misplaced clearance to create a goal from a rebound. It's a one in a thousand chance, but this is what we're reduced to. Danny Pugh, who can only be described as a utility player, comes on for Whelan. Given a whole match Pugh can contribute something, as an impact sub it's impossible to imagine he will bring much, but his name is sung loudly because it's in the nature of Stokies to buoy up their lads. Down on the left flank, deep into our half, Balotelli back-heels it onto Whitehead's shins quite deliberately to contrive a throw-in. Once the ball is back in play here he is again, Balotelli, linking with Silva who finds space at the edge of the wide edge of the box and shoots across the face of goal forcing Sorensen to dive down low and tip it away for his defenders to clear. Close, dangerous, and all the while time is ticking, ticking, ticking away and the ball is at the wrong end of the pitch.

85-90 minutes

Down by our corner flag Balotelli begins to rub Wilkinson's nose in it, inviting him to come and have a go, then nutmegging him when he accepts the invite. Balotelli zips by the right-back and slips it across to Silva in the penalty area where Wilko, incensed by the ball through his legs, has already got back to cover and to rob it back from the Spaniard. Four or five minutes remain. The ball goes back to Sorensen who boots it long into the left channel where Carew squirms past Kompany and heads into the box where de Jong dispossess him with the minimum of fuss. Carew is just not warm enough to create any trouble. There is no hope of us scoring through him. Once more the ball finds its way back to Sorensen and upfield to Wilson who tips it into Walters whose cross goes nowhere and now they are taking Tevez off. His fifty-fifty hamstring held out for 87 minutes of excellent strong running. One Argentinian in for another as Pablo Zabaleta comes on to make a five-man back line. They are seeing the game out now, packing the defence. This is all they need to do to lift the cup.

But in any event they have possession in our half. The final stat will be 60:40 in their favour. Up on the right wing Silva plays it into Balotelli and now Manchester City begin to play keep-ball, the perfect technique, running the clock down, until Balotelli thinks he sights a good enough chance and cracks off a shot off which appears to go wide but which has taken a deflection. Corner given. Minutes remaining. There is only one thing they will do here and that's play it short to waste time which is exactly what they do, until Pugh finally wrestles it back for us. Their fans must know who they support and that this could still go disastrously wrong but they cannot stop themselves, the vapours of their very breath are as champagne bubbles in the air as the fizz of celebration begins to kick off them.

Added time: 3 minutes

Down by our corner flag Touré fouls Huth. Sorensen runs over to take the free kick: he punts it into their left-back channel where it is hooked straight back out. Once more Sorensen deals with the returned ball. This time he fires it down the centre where Micah Richards heads it away. Most of the blue shirts are back defending now; they are being careful not to make the same mistake Arsenal did in this season's Carling Cup when a combination of lackadaisical defending and dire communication between the keeper and the outfield contrived to present a gift-wrapped winner to Birmingham City. From the Richard's clearance the ball finds its way to Whitehead on the flank who makes the best possible fist he can of behaving like a winger, cutting inside a challenge and then tipping the ball across the face where it glances off a couple of heads before falling to the feet of Pennant. Oh please let it be! But it's no more than a half-chance and his cross-cum-shot is blocked by Kolarov and flirts off into touch. In this way, in the 92nd minute, we win our first corner of the match. The roar is immense. *C'mon Stoke! This is it!* They bring Viera on for Silva to provide an extra foot of height in the way of defensive cover for the set piece. Sorensen arrives on the scene to create confusion, and to score the equaliser. My God that would be a proper STOP PRESS and wouldn't the big man be so deserving; he has played a blinder today; he could do nothing about the goal, nothing at all. Pennant takes, it looks good, but de Jong gets to it first, heading it clear to Pugh who knocks it straight back in where Hart flaps at it and then it is bobbling about in the air until between the two of them Kolarov and Viera guide it out to the other side of the post. Pennant trots over, disguising his weariness, to take the corner from the other flag, to knock the ball for the last of all last chances, for us to level it up and to force extra time.

Pennant

takes;

Shawcross

flicks it

wide

93.36 minutes; the referee blows his whistle

O well.

The first person my eyes are drawn to is Pennant, sitting on the turf, removing his boots, massaging his ankle, spirit gone, shoulders dropped. I turn to Graham who looks totally spent, and equally hollow.

‘You couldn’t not travel over,’ I say, ‘Imagine how you’d feel if and we’d won you hadn’t been here.’

‘I know,’ he says, but I can tell that my words offer no consolation in this moment, none whatsoever.

‘Matty’ I say, ruffling his hair in a single word of no particular use.

‘Rubbish,’ he replies in the simple, straightforward analysis of youth, as if his name were a question. (That Matty analysis in full: First half boring; second half rubbish. This cup final simply wasn’t good enough.)

The Manchester City players are hugging each other all over the pitch and a quiet settles over their own fans as they drink it in. From the very bowels of our stand a huge *Delilah* swells up, providing a signal for the players to make their way towards the people of Stoke-on-Trent. They parade sadly in front of us, clapping deliberately and slowly, hands in the air, each and every body language delivering the same message: We wish it could have been different. In their midst the manager raises his hands together as *Delilah* fades out and *One Tony Pulis* fades in. You’ve done well mate, the song says, You’re the first man ever to bring us to this and don’t you forget it. Television people are busying themselves with microphones and on the halfway line a platform for the winning celebrations is being set up. Jack, in the manner of Moguls across the planet, had no time to hang around and needed to dash off elsewhere, but he’s about the only one that’s gone and it suddenly hits me that, more often than not, one end of the stadium is empty by this point in a cup final, but that in our case almost no one has left. Our fans are waiting to see the team collect their runners-up medals and when that moment arrives they are lauded as winners. I turn round to look at us - this great family - and it’s now that I see my fat man wiping away the tracks of his tears on the tattoos of his arm, that I imagine the day he will cradle his grandchildren and tell them about the Once Upon a Time that Stoke City made it to the FA Cup final, what a lovely day it was, the sun shining, and how we all stayed to the end and how everybody said what brilliant fans we were, that we had made new friends across the world, that we had done our club proud, that he had tears in his eyes, that it happened a grief ago.

Back outside by the statue of Bobby Moore I meet up with the legends as we had arranged, win lose or draw. Swiss Tony has ‘little ‘un’ Sam, with him. ‘He was in tears when they scored,’ he said, indicating the boy, ‘And so was I.’

But Sam has recovered his composure quickly enough because now he's trying to sell flags to passing supporters - there was one provided on every seat, and he has collected a few of the abandoned items together. 'Get you flags, one pound each,' he is shouting. You could hardly say trade was brisk. There's a song that's recently been added to our repertoire. *We'll play how we want, we'll play how we want, we're Stoke City, we'll play how we want*, a terrace answer to the media critics of Pulisball. Now a couple of fans go by, regard Sam, and begin to sing, *We'll flog what we want, we'll flog what we want...*

A quick recovery from the match itself; that's what you need.

'There was no disgrace in that,' I say to Old Stokie.

'No,' he replies, 'But I'm *really* disappointed, aren't you?'

'Oh yes of course for sure bloody hell.'

Old Stokie is seventy, has wispy white hairs growing out of his ears and his nostrils, hairs that are turned yellow by nicotine, and today his cheeks, his chin and his forehead are dragged through in red and white stripes on the oldest face-painted canvas in town. He's a sort of living, walking Cup Final Picasso.

'I thought we'd bloody win it,' he says. 'I really did.'

You're never too old to be disappointed: Old Stokie will tell me has not remotely got over the game several weeks later. We lean on the wall and we gaze down Wembley Way, a stream of red and white to the right, a river of pale blue to the left, fans filtering away with their contrasting emotions, with their shared oppositional memories of exactly the same day, Graham kissing Matty goodbye, Sam abandoning his flag-selling; the crunch of plastic bottles underfoot. The crowd around the Bobby Moore is thinning now and two Manchester City fans turn up in front of us, a well-padded pair of men who have had enough to drink, wanting to shake our hands, telling us how classy we were for staying on to the end to watch them take the cup and to acknowledge their success.

'We didn't do that,' we say, making the matter plain. 'We just stayed to see our boys get their medals.'

'Plenty did stay and they applauded us too,' they advise. 'We saw it with our own eyes.'

'Good for them that did,' says Old Stokie. 'I couldn't.'

'I'll tell you what though,' I say experiencing the blinding flash. 'They just didn't want the day to end. That's why they stayed, because you know, it could be 148 years 'til it comes to pass again.'

The Mancs go on a bit more about how classy our fans are until finally we are forced to dismiss them. 'We have had enough of being patronised, be on your way,'

we say.

*

The train back to Watford is packed with Manchester City fans. I'm on my phone as I get into the carriage. 'O dear,' I say, 'I am surrounded by Manchester City fans.'

Without even pausing to think, the nearest one says, 'It could be worse, it could be Manchester United fans.'

This doesn't require a reply, but all the same, 'How true.'

If their banter is not as sharp as it's always cracked up to be, I'm magnanimous enough, even in defeat, to put this down to fatigue - attending the Cup Final is a wearing and draining experience. As the carriage thins out stop-by-stop I end up slumped on a seat opposite a young man wearing a blue and white jester's hat. He only has one topic of conversation and that is 'all things Manchester City,' he can rattle on about his team for ever, but when I introduce Fascinating and Connected Facts about Stoke into the exchange he tends to glaze over. Football fans; at the end of the day they are quite self absorbed and wholly one-dimensional.

On the drive home I manage to take a wrong fork and end up heading up the M1. Luton? I am thinking: that's not on our way, is it? Matty is pleased with this turn of events as it lands us into a service station at Toddington, where he can top up on fast food. A few hours have elapsed now since he's had any sugar or fat. The place is rammed with both sets of supporters though once more it's the blues who are in the majority. On my way through the place Manchester City fans are keen to spread the love.

'Class you lot today, mate, sheer class,' one especially short, drunken individual says to me as he stands swaying near the toilet door holding out an insanitary-looking hand for me to shake. The more their victory sinks in, the more tiresome they are starting to become with their endless largesse. Matty returns from Burger King with a vat of ice-cream and we begin our final leg back to Norwich via Bedford. We listen to the end of the football phone-in; the main thrust of opinion regarding the match seems to be that both sets of supporters were a credit, *an absolute credit*. As the journey unwinds Matty begins to ask me a series of questions about post-war reconstruction in Europe, post-war reconstruction in the Far East, the political situation in China, the Olympics in China, pollution in China. I am no expert on any of these matters but I tell him as much as I can and as I am answering his arcane queries it occurs to me what his subtext is - he is examining his identity, he lives in Norwich, he supports Stoke City because of his step father, his roots are Cantonese. How does all this fit together? We count the nationalities that started in this match, we make it thirteen. The Football Association Challenge Cup, England's major domestic trophy, is a

snapshot of the globe; that's one way it all fits together. We wonder how many nationalities watched it from the terraces: hundreds? Only hours have passed but it seems like a grief ago, still at the end of the day, as another poet nearly said, all that is left of us is football and love. We roll into Norwich in quiet contemplation. Perhaps next time we'll win it, eh Matty, I say, as I drop him off home.

Finally

Three or four weeks later I bump into a friend who I have not seen since the match. The friend supports Norwich City.

'You weren't very good, were you,' he says, 'You just *didn't take the form of the semi-final into the final itself.*'

'Perhaps not,' I reply, 'But they weren't Bolton either, they're a right decent side.'

'Oh?' he says, 'Is that right?'

'I reckon,' I reply. 'We weren't that great on the day, but equally we were beaten by the better team.'

A thread emerges on the Oatcake messageboard around the same time after the match. The thread title is: The FA Cup Final – 25 days on. The instigator of the thread (Gods) says:

Now the dust has settled how do you feel about it? I still haven't brought myself to watch a replay or read a single report: way too disappointed.

It was a strange game for me. I actually got more nervous as it wore on. My impression was that we hardly had a kick and generally got muscled out of it all over the pitch. But despite that were still in with a puncher's chance with 15 minutes to go hence my increasing unease until the Man City goal which almost came as a kindness, I couldn't see any way back from there.

Hope we don't have to wait another 148 years.

Plenty agree with Gods' general sense of gloom, though others don't.

My personal selection from these is this optimistic contribution from one Potterlog (who out-Graham-ed Graham by travelling 9000 miles to see the match):

Game was overall shit but I had a truly memorable day. What will stay in my memory is walking down Wembley Way after the match– if you'd not seen any of the game you could only have come to the conclusion that Stoke had won the cup – Stoke songs the whole way down and not a peep from Man C, culminating in a, 'Are you sure you won the cup?' as we climbed the steps to the tube.

That's what it's all about. We lost the battle but we're always winning the war.

And this, from Jo in Oz, who travelled in from Australia.

For me the most important part of the day is that were all there. Standing by Wembley Park tube station and looking up Wembley Way was a special moment in my life. When were very little kids me and Hoppy used to play nogger and pretend to be Stoke in the FA Cup final. Seeing him outside the ground was very poignant indeed. For those moments alone it was all worth it.

Stats

Possession

Man City 59%

Stoke 41%

Attempts on target

Man City 14

Stoke 1

Attempts off target

Man City 9

Stoke 8

Corners

Man City 8

Stoke 2

Fouls

Man City 14

Stoke 9

Ref: Martin Atkinson

Att: 88,643

The End

