

Vindictive

First Saturday in February, 1986; as usual, I was high up in the North Stand, face numbed by a bitter wind. My team, all too predictably, was losing heavily. Relegation, even with a quarter of the season remaining, seemed inevitable. Duty, act of faith, unavoidable burden, call it what you will, there was no escape from this ninety-minute torture session. Phil, my friend since schooldays, was next to me, shouting obscenities at, well, just about everything. He used football as an outlet for a river full of anger and frustration. Afterwards, win or lose, he was as quiet as a mouse. That day I couldn't concentrate on the corrosive intricacies of sporting defeat. I had another two-way conflict on my mind.

'I tried to speak to her this morning, but she slammed the door in my face.'

'Did you see that? Blatant hand ball. The referee is a blind twat.'

'I might try again on my way home, but it could be a disaster. What do you think?'

'Offside? Offside? How the fuck can that be offside?'

'I think she's seeing someone else, and I don't know what to do about it.'

'Get back, you lazy bastard!'

'Phil! Listen to me, for Christ's sake. This is important. I need your advice about Maria.'

‘Maria is a vindictive woman.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘What does what mean?’

‘Vindictive. The word, vindictive. What does it mean?’

‘You know what vindictive means.’

‘No, I don’t. I use it occasionally, but I couldn’t tell you its exact definition.’

‘Who cares about the exact definition? It’s perfectly clear what I’m talking about.’

‘You’re talking about the woman I love. People use words in all sorts of harmful ways. Vindictive is a serious word to describe Maria.’

‘Okay, calm down, it was just a passing remark.’

‘Passing remarks can do the most damage. The Tories were vindictive to the miners. Maria may be many things, but she isn’t a Tory.’

‘Some of her views are pretty right wing.’

‘Such as?’

‘Such as capital punishment. She wants the death penalty brought back.’

‘Millions of people want the death penalty brought back. It doesn’t make her a Tory.’

‘Maria hates me, you know that. She’s always blamed me for your problems. She told me last week that I was an ‘unhealthy influence’; that your separation was ‘mainly my fault’. Apparently, I’m also responsible for your ‘lack of emotional maturity’ *and* your ‘head in the sand’ attitude to money. She said it with such a fierce loathing in her eyes. There’s definitely a dark side to Maria.’

‘You’re talking as though you know her intimately.’

‘I’ve seen what she’s done to you ... intimately.’

‘I’m going to look it up.’

‘Look what up?’

‘Vindictive.’

‘What here? Now?’

‘Yes now. Here.’

‘Listen, I’m sorry, let’s just forget about it. You take me too seriously sometimes. Relax, watch the game.’

I stood up and began to excuse and apologize my way towards the concrete stairs. There was still twenty minutes left to play, but already a stream of grey faced spectators was shuffling morosely out of the ground. The solitary phone

booth on the ground floor was in use, so I waited until a reporter had droned his way through the usual football clichés before dialling the first number that came into my head.

‘Mike, it’s me. Can you do me a favour?’

‘Yeah, sure. What is it?’

‘Look up the word vindictive for me, will you?’

‘What? Vindictive? Why?’

‘I’m at the match with Phil and I need to know the definition of vindictive.’

‘Must be a bloody boring match.’

‘Just do it for me, will you Mike?’

‘Okay, okay, hang on a minute.’

Muffled laughter, banging doors, the turning of pages.

‘Which dictionary are you using?’

‘Collins Pocket.’

‘Collins Pocket! Is that the best you can do?’

‘The OED is out on loan. Do you want to try somewhere else?’

‘Okay, sorry, what does it say?’

‘Vain ... venomous ... here it is, vindictive ... tendency to seek revenge.’

‘Is that all it says?’

‘Yeah, that’s all it says. What did you expect, a whole page on vindictiveness?’

‘No, I was just hoping for a bit more. Not to worry. Thanks for that Mike. See you soon mate. Bye.’

The reporter’s pencil was on the shelf, so I used it to write ‘tendency to seek revenge’ on my match ticket. I didn’t want to go back and sit with Phil again. His attack on Maria was a typically crude attempt to make me feel better about an impossible marriage. It all seemed so shallow and pointless. I wanted to phone Maria and tell her that she wasn’t vindictive. The necessary explanation was absurd, so instead I stepped out into the dark corridor with its metallic smell, somewhere between stale urine, pukka pies and Bovril. In the far corner, a young couple sat entwined and motionless beneath a spray-painted swastika.

Someone in the crowd was screaming. The home centre forward had probably succeeded in his final attempt to cripple the opposition goalkeeper. I hurried back towards the grey sky, pushing my way through a knot of stewards and First Aid men. Phil was lying in the gangway with blood oozing from his mouth and ears. A policeman said that he had fallen from the upper tier during a disturbance. I knelt down, took off my scarf, and held it against his face. Blue and white rapidly turned into deep crimson.

‘Did you look it up?’

‘Yes,’ I said, fumbling for the match ticket.

‘What does it mean?’

‘Tendency to seek revenge.’

‘I was right then.’

There was muted, ironic applause from a handful of loyal home fans. My team had scored a lucky consolation goal in the last minute. Phil half raised his arm, as if trying to point, and then closed his eyes on football and everything else. I looked up, just in time to glimpse the profile of a woman I still loved but would never touch again.