

Generation Game

by Charlie Morris

EXTRACT

I could not resist the temptation that arose with every woman I became involved with - I wanted to take Naomi to see Crewe Alexandra play. Each one had tolerated it for a couple of matches at most and thereafter showed no inclination to go again. My blinkered naivety failed to see that a football match was a million miles away from their idea of a hot date. It's often as cold as hell, the tea, coffee and food are lousy, the toilets barely tolerable, and the on-field entertainment rarely enthralling in their eyes.

Just once I thought I might have overcome these obstacles. Early the previous year I had taken my then girlfriend for a romantic weekend to Barcelona, and self-indulgently included in the itinerary a trip to see the city's best-known team play. The scene was set for the perfect footballing experience. Despite it being January, it was a warm sunny day, the blue of the Mediterranean almost matched that of the sky, and the mountains surrounding the city provided a spectacular horizon in the opposite direction. We lunched outdoors near the harbour before making our way to the Camp Nou stadium. The Barcelona team, who were facing nearby rivals Valencia, included the Dutch stars Patrick Kluivert, Frank de Boer and Marc Overmars, as well as Spain's then youthful future World Cup winners Xavi and Andres Iniesta. What could possibly go wrong? Ten minutes after kick-off I found out.

Unbeknown to me my lady friend suffered from vertigo, and the steepness of the towering stadium was too much for her. By half-time, perched in our high seats, she was a nervous wreck, tensely leaning as far back as possible, hands gripped tightly to the seat's rim like a nervous aircraft passenger when coming in to land. The game could not end quickly enough for her. The match, in which Barcelona disappointed as Valencia stormed to a 4-2 victory, turned into a trial for both of us as she aired her discomfort and scolded me.

“You cheapskate, you should have got seats lower down!”

Not for the first, or last time, I was paying for a habitual thriftiness, a reluctance to splash the cash on romance.

I should have got the message after this, yet the urge for a woman to share my footballing passion remained because I thought it would be the ultimate consummation of a relationship. From the age of 16 my fantasy woman had been a reasonably intelligent sex goddess who was nuts about Crewe Alexandra. Come middle-age and this had morphed into a version of Delia Smith, the celebrity chef and Norwich City owner - very rich, a great cook and mad about football.

Although reality had rubbished these notions as every woman I had taken to a match found it an almighty turn-off, there had been one minor success, one example of Crewe Alexandra enhancing my love life, and perhaps this had kept my optimism flickering. It was all down to Ashley Ward, the team’s striker during the early 1990s, who was blessed with attributes desired by many a man: good looks and a footballing talent that eventually took him to the Premier League. Claire, the woman I was then living with, accompanied me to a match at Gresty Road, a pretty lifeless 1-1 draw against Rochdale in March 1993, and halfway through it I could see she was bored. To try to ease her tedium I asked which of the Crewe players she thought was the best looking. After studying the 11, she said: “The number seven’s [Ward] not bad, he’s got nice thighs.”

Later that weekend, my lifelong habit of taking the match programme home and reading it almost cover to cover at last gave some tangible reward. (It is only in recent years that I have come to recognise that devouring features along the lines of “Luke Murphy’s Dream Team selection” and the musical and food favourites of players, is a little bit sad.) My eye fell on the page that lists the kit sponsor of each player. Fans or local companies could fund either the whole kit, or its various parts: the shirt, shorts, socks and boots. I noticed that the only unsponsored part of Ward’s kit was his shorts - an omission quickly rectified the following day when a telephone call to the club and a credit card payment secured the sponsorship in my girlfriend’s name, which would be printed in the programme for the remainder of the season. I

subsequently bought a copy of the next programme and put it in gift wrapping, with an accompanying card to Claire inserted at the sponsorship page. The card's note read: "You'll be keeping Ashley's thighs warm every Saturday from now until May."

The present went down a storm. She was amused and touched to see her name in the programme, and I suppose it was, in a weird way, a public display of my feelings for her. But this one success was the exception that proves the rule. And the top marks I earned in her heart were probably struck off the next time we went for a drink at the pub, and instead of really listening to what she was saying I was distracted by football on the television in the corner of the bar.

Naomi's turn to sample being a Crewe fan came on Easter Saturday 2004, when the team were playing at Watford. I chose it deliberately - it was not far to travel and the weather had turned spring-like so she would not be cold. We drove north from London and in under an hour were parked within sight of the Vicarage Road stands, before taking our seats in the away end among Crewe supporters. Both teams were teetering near the relegation zone, so it was a crucial game.

The travelling support was strong in numbers and noise, the club having attracted a wider following in recent years during which it had enjoyed six out of seven seasons in England's second tier under Dario Gradi's management. Over 20 years Gradi had transformed a rock-bottom club, developing outstanding young players who had lifted the team from its seemingly inevitable place of propping up the fourth division. These newer fans were lured by us playing and sometimes beating the likes of West Ham, Manchester City, Sunderland, Leeds United and nearby big-time boys Stoke City. Veterans such as myself tended to be a bit sniffy about these Johnny Come Latelys, since for decades the most glamorous away trips we had enjoyed had been to the likes of Aldershot, Bury and Scunthorpe.

My two hopes that day were for a win that would move my team away from the relegation places, and a less confident one that Naomi might, just possibly, fall for the men in red. Both were dashed.

Watford looked the stronger outfit from kick-off and led after 30 minutes. Their Icelandic striker Heidar Helguson, who was sporting a naff dyed-blond haircut, was particularly menacing. My spirits rose early in the second half when Crewe posed more of a threat, thanks mainly to Steve Jones, the red-haired Northern Ireland international forward who had come on as a substitute and begun to use his speed and trickery. Gradi's change looked even more inspired when Jones was tripped in the box and young striker Dean Ashton thumped home the penalty to equalise. Crewe fans around us, who until this point had been mainly voicing disgruntlement at the team's performance, were suddenly in raptures, myself included, standing up with arms aloft, cheering and clapping, much to Naomi's amusement. The euphoria and chant of "Deano, Deano", however, was to last less than 60 seconds.

Straight from the restart Watford launched an attack down the left, and although the cross into Crewe's penalty area was intercepted by centre-back Steve Foster, his clearance smashed into fellow defender David Wright and rebounded into the net. To a non-partisan watcher, this was pure comedy. To Crewe fans, it was an unlucky and sickening goal to concede so soon after equalising. Given Watford's control of the remainder of the game, however, they were worthy 2-1 winners.

On the slow drive home down the A41 through Easter holiday traffic, nervously I questioned Naomi about her reaction to the match, which had neither been particularly thrilling nor of great quality, and therefore unlikely to convert her to the cause. I had noticed her looking around at the crowd during the game - as a psychotherapist she tended to observe people more closely than most - but her answer still surprised me.

"I've never seen such rapid mood swings in people," she said in a professional tone, as if putting the entire crowd on the psychoanalyst's couch. "One minute someone's shouting angrily at the referee or a player, the next he's cheering and happy."

The remark stayed with me because she had hit on something I had not registered before: the vast range of emotions felt and expressed by fans during a game. How we quickly switch from anger to exultation, from laughter to nervous contemplation, and from frustrated tedium when play is poor to sudden edge-of-the-seat captivation.

This was normal fan behaviour to me, which I had never thought about. I considered myself to be a fairly unemotional person, but this was the first inkling that football was the one thing that sprung the trap on my emotions and let them run free.

Perhaps the same can be said about the English as a whole. We tend to keep calm and carry on - until our team scores and then craziness bursts forth.

As for the game itself, however, Naomi had little to say because it had not captured her imagination. She sensed my disappointment but did not make any pretence.

“To be honest, it’s not for me. I find the game a bit dull.”

The day had been another instance of my inability to get inside a woman’s head. Because I was incapable of analysing my own motivations or feelings, I had no hope of understanding Naomi’s. I was focused on the Watford match as a “six-pointer”, a vital one to win in the relegation struggle. She, of course, felt none of this. For her this new and strange game carried no emotional baggage, and it turned out to have no appeal either. Deep down I had expected this, so was not too downcast that my obsession was again to remain a lone one.

Over the ensuing months, however, this seemed the least of my problems in maintaining the relationship. Habits I had long exhibited with women resurfaced, and seemed magnified with Naomi because of her interest in what made people tick. She was attracted to me and therefore wanted me to reveal more of myself, but I was incapable of opening up. Her frustration surfaced during a car journey home from a visit to Crewe early the following season. I’d persuaded her to watch the team just once more because we were playing Leeds United, hoping she would be impressed, but again the game, a 2-2 draw, had left her cold. She was so bored that she even nipped out during the first half to see if there was anything of interest in the club shop, eventually returning to the stand clutching a plastic bag. “Here you are!” she beamed, and I was touched, for the bag contained gifts of a Crewe Alexandra coffee mug and wine glass.

On the drive back to London I was letting her make virtually all the conversation while I was lost in thought, probably about rumours that Premier League clubs were

interested in buying Dean Ashton and wondering how we would cope without the goalscorer. He did indeed move during the January transfer window, to Norwich City, netting Crewe a record £3 million sale. And as for coping without him, we barely did, the team failing to register a win after his departure until a nail-biting 2-1 win over Coventry on the season's final day that averted relegation on goal difference. So in the car I could only distractedly come up with meaningless chit-chat, nothing of depth or interest, and she became exasperated as we progressed down the M6.

"Please talk to me," she remonstrated. "You have to learn to talk to me, we have three hours of this ahead!"

The more she complained, the more blank my panic-stricken mind became, and I hoped desperately she would turn the radio on to let me off the hook. Again, I knew I was failing to meet a woman's expectations and I feared another parting of the ways. History seemed to be repeating itself.

It was not just the stark fact of my relationship failures either, there were deeper, more mysterious issues surrounding them. I had suffered strange and disturbing emotions in separate incidents relating to women over the years, which I had pushed to the back of my mind, incurious about their meaning.

The first occurred in 1983 when my then girlfriend Maggie and I went to the cinema to see the latest hit film, *Terms of Endearment*, starring Shirley MacLaine, Debra Winger and Jack Nicholson. Towards the end of the movie Debra Winger's character, a young mother of two sons, is dying of cancer and is about to have a last bedside visit from her boys.

At that point I began to feel light-headed and nauseous, and promptly fainted. I then had a fit, my body twitching uncontrollably. As I came round, Maggie managed to get me to the foyer, and the first thing I remember is lying on the floor and vomiting in front of the cinema manager. An ambulance rushed me to hospital, sirens blaring. I recovered overnight, but was referred a couple of weeks later to a specialist who, after testing me for epilepsy, gave the all-clear. He said I had suffered a fit because I was seated after fainting, rather than prone, and as a result blood could not return to

my brain. As for the cause of the faint, he concluded that something in the film had upset me.

“In future, just watch films with Doris Day on a donkey, riding off into the sunset,” was his jocular parting advice.

I had an almost identical experience years later, in 1997, watching a film called *Nil By Mouth*. In it an abusive husband, played by Ray Winstone, beats up his pregnant wife, causing her to lose the baby. At the point of the attack, I again fainted. And at a play I attended at a London fringe theatre, a pregnant woman was about to be attacked, causing the same symptoms to commence and I had to run out to avoid fainting again, to the consternation of friends accompanying me. There was clearly something going on here, something related to my emotions regarding vulnerable women and mothers. But I did not examine it - it was a lid I was unconsciously terrified to lift because what lay beneath was too painful.

Yet as I floundered in the shallows of my relationship with Naomi during that first year, her questions about my personality nevertheless began to chip away at the defensive wall I had built around my inner self. And two incidents fuelled my initial mental stirrings about my family and the person I had become.

Naomi's love of comedy prompted the first. She told me about one of her favourite TV sitcoms, an American show called *Everybody Loves Raymond*, saying intriguingly: “You've got to watch it, you are just like Raymond.”

Raymond, it turned out, was also a sports journalist, and married to Debra, whom he constantly fails to understand. They live on Long Island, near New York, over the road from his overbearing and interfering parents and older brother. Questions from Debra on emotional matters panic Ray, and he refers to them as “man traps”. The three men generally connect only through sport, and annoy the women by always wanting to watch it on television. Ray's greatest marital *faux pas* was accidentally to record an American football game over his and Debra's wedding video.

I certainly saw Ray playing out some of my traits: his one-track sports mind and aggrieved bemusement over his wife's needs and demands. Yet I was not ready to act on these faults because I didn't realise how damaging they could be. I just laughed at the show, and one episode contained what has become a favourite sitcom line. Debra mistakenly believes Ray is having an affair, and eventually confronts him with the accusation. He is momentarily dumbstruck, but then stammers out: "Me, have an affair? And disappoint ANOTHER woman?"

While *Everybody Loves Raymond* offered me a shaft of insight, the other more significant event came one day when Naomi was telling me about sad times in her past, including her parents' divorce when she was in her early twenties, and how they had affected her. It was a couple of months or so after we had first met, and we were walking from her flat towards West Hampstead. I suddenly told her, in a matter-of-fact manner, about something sad that had happened to me as a child, and added: "I think I got over it fairly quickly though, and I don't think it has affected me in the long term."

Because of her reaction I remember the moment clearly, even where we were - on the pavement outside a tyre repair workshop. She stopped walking, turned and looked at me askance, eyes wide and mouth slightly open. She repeated what I had told her, adding: "You think you weren't affected by that? Are you crazy?!"