

Boston 'til I die

In the corner of Burger King the table is orange and the burger is warm, but the bread is cold and the salad is cold, and the bread sticks to the hard palate and crumbs catch in my teeth.

The light is also orange except for the taller table directly in front which has a red-filtered strip light attached to it, a sort of hell-on-burger-outlet quasi-bar for eating burgers at. I'm only really in here because I've got to the football two hours early and now I need somewhere warm to sit. It was Costa or Burger King in the retail complex outside the new-build football ground in Boston, and Burger King felt more adjacent to a Proper Football Meal.

The Diet Coke had better be good, because it needs to wash away the breadcrumbs and the breadfeel. The Diet Coke is promising because it feels cold, even though I didn't put ice in. Burger King lets you draw your own Diet Coke, so you can avoid half the cup being filled up with ice. When I drew it I could see the syrup and the fizz only half-mixed as they came out of the dispenser, like blood and water, and I watched it thinking about the crucifixion and wondering how compatible that was with eating burgers in the corner of Burger King in Lincolnshire suburbia before Boston United 0 – 0 Forest Green Rovers.

It turns out the Diet Coke in the paper chalice is transcendent. I try for one of the French fries, but unlike the bread and the burger it's scaldingly hot and burns the back of my tongue and I have to resort to the Diet Coke again.

About two-thirds of the way across the room there's a male kid in a Boston United shirt with three male friends, probably about fourteen (none of them needs to shave yet but they are at a football match unsupervised). Presumably they're plotting acts of football hooliganism circa 2029. But this is entirely unfair because I have this very strong conviction that football, and particularly men's football, is a genuinely important service in the provision of male community. And yet observing the phenomenon in action I'm imputing to people enacting said community precisely the hoodiethink that gives it bad rep.

Poor form. Especially since I'm enacting its possibilities by meditating on the Passion of Our Lord in front of a soda dispenser and writing in my book with headphones in in the corner of Burger King on the greasy orange table with the cold bread and warm burger and) painfully hot French fries.

Another kid sits down next to me with a tray of food and his dad who is holding mobile phone and car keys. This kid is ten maybe (I don't actually know this but in volume, degree of prepossession and apparent nascence of conspiratorial hooliganistic disposition he looks about halfway between my five-year-old and the Male Community Group two-thirds of the way across the room) and has a burger and fries and his own paper Cup and is wearing full Boston United kit underneath a black hoodie. Dad is wearing black tracksuit and over the last fifteen years has consumed more fast food than an elite athlete, but has a surprisingly thin face.

Father-son is the core dynamic of male-male bonding catalysed by football. My scepticism of this culturally settled fact resulting from the nature of my own introduction to football has recently been outweighed by the discovery that an acquaintance – a classics teacher at a grammar school with no apparent interest in the sport – has since childhood had season ticket at AFC Wimbledon beside his father's. Sometimes rules prove their exceptions.

Anyway, what providence that I should be presented with another specimen of the importance of Football to male relationships, even as the uncertain symbolism of the Male Community Group dissipates (their meeting is adjourning, although it is too early to go to the ground surely). I imagine taking my son to Burger King before Cambridge United 1 – 3 Dagenham and Redbridge circa 2031 (or realistically McDonald's, unless something about the geography of Cambridge fast food changes before then). I am briefly transfixed by a vision of myself having consumed more fast food than an elite athlete in the intervening period and holding a phone and car keys and having to spend twice as much on fast food and football.

The presence of the dad and son is oddly heart-warming: shared prospective nostalgia. I suddenly feel self-conscious that this paradigmatic instantiation of the phenomenon outlined above is taking place so close to the man sitting in the corner of Burger King with the headphones and writing in a notebook with the yellow fountain pen matching the Boston United kit. Ten-years-old picks up a fry and dips it into the cup, and scoops some milkshake onto it and puts it into his mouth without flinching. Perhaps the intinction is a safeguard against the scalding and I should make a note of it. Dad does not appear to be eating, perhaps to preserve his thin face.

When dad gets up to go to the toilet the heart is cooled somewhat by the alacrity with which ten-years-old grabs the iPhone from the other side of the table and has a couple of attempts at punching in the passcode. Astonishingly, he doesn't appear to know it, so the phone soon returns to the other side of the table and attention returns to fries and chicken nuggets. Dad's absence begins to stretch out to the extent that it is no longer clear whether Proper Football Meal is communion or childcare.

Football's status as relational axis is complicated further when dad returns and ten-years-old asks about whether he'll know where to walk around the pitch, and dad tells him he'll actually be walking on the pitch and ten-years-old looks surprised. Apparently the full kit is neutral on the question of unstinting loyalty to The Pilgrims and is in fact a corollary of the U11 team's function as mascots for Boston United 0 – 0 Forest Green Rovers.

I'm looking out of the window towards Greggs, which I hadn't spotted as an option earlier, and Costa, and wonder what colour the tables are in there. The car parks to both outlets are full now and there is a line of cars parked with two wheels on the pavement on the street outside, a trickle now of male and female and male supporters wandering towards the ground through the retail park and the gloaming. The floodlight on the corner of the east stand is just visible like a star in the desert. Oversized yellow shirts protrude from a sizeable minority of midriffs, a parish of not-quite-selfhoods crystallising in sunset and carbonated polyester. It's still a long time until the game and I didn't get ice so the end of the Diet Coke is warm.