This is excerpted from an early chapter of Among the Thugs. Bill Buford’s story begins when he witnesses soccer hooligans on a violent spree in the British trains. As an American living in England, he’s astonished to learn just how common this is. “I had read about the violence and, to the extent that I thought about it, had assumed that it was an isolated thing or mysterious in the way that crowd violence is meant to be mysterious: unpredictable, spontaneous, the mob.” This, however, was a regular part of British life, a weekly occurrence. After matches, fans tore apart trains and smashed shop windows.

Buford starts attending matches and tries to get close to the “lads,” and at first he only manages to establish a rapport with one of them, an overweight, heavy-drinking fellow named Mick. Mick is not what Buford expected from the soccer fans at all. He’d figured that the violence was a protest of some sort, and that the fans would be guys on the dole. But Mick is neither unemployed, alienated nor disenfranchised. He’s a skilled electrician with his pockets full of twenty-pound notes. Which is handy because it’s expensive, never missing a soccer match. Some fans have money.

Clayton had a number of troubles but his greatest one was his trousers. In all likelihood Clayton will have trouble with his trousers for the rest of his life. His stomach was so soft and large—no adjective seems big enough to describe its girth—that his trousers, of impressive dimensions to begin with, were not quite large enough to be pulled up high enough to prevent them from slipping down again. Clayton emerged from the airplane and waddled down the ramp, clasping his belt buckle, wrestling with it, trying to wiggle it over his considerable bulk. He was singing, “We're so proud to be British.” His eyes were closed, and his face was red, and he repeated his refrain over and over again, although nobody else was singing with him.

Mick was not far behind. He had finished his bottle of vodka and was drinking a can of Carlsberg Special Brew that he had snapped up from the drinks trolley as he bumped past it on his way out. Mick paused, started to utter something, in the puffy, considered way that characterizes the speech of a man who has consumed a liter of spirits in the span of ninety minutes. And then Mick belched. It was a spectacular belch, long and terrible, a brutal, slow bursting of innumerable noxious gastric bubbles.
BILL BUFORD

The others followed. They were also singing—on their own or arm in arm with friends—and their songs, like Clayton’s, were all about being English and what a fine thing that was. Something had happened to the group shortly after landing; there had been a definitive change. As the plane approached the terminal, someone had spotted the army: it was waiting for them, standing in formation.

The army!

They wore strange uniforms and brightly colored berets; the soldiers were not English—that was the point; the soldiers were foreign.

The effect was immediate: these were no longer supporters of Manchester United; they were now defenders of the English nation. People stood up and, as if on cue, began changing their clothes, switching their urban, weekday dress for costumes whose principal design was the Union Jack. All at once, heads and limbs began poking through Union Jack T-shirts and Union Jack swimming suits, and one pair (worn unusually around the forehead) of Union Jack boxer shorts. The moment seemed curiously prepared for, as if it had been rehearsed. Meanwhile, everyone had started singing “Rule Britannia”—sharp, loud, spontaneous—and they sang it again, louder and louder, until finally, as the terminal grew near, it was not being sung but shouted.

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A police escort is an exhilarating thing. I couldn’t deny that I was sharing the experience of those around me, who now felt themselves to be special people. After all, who is given a police escort? Prime ministers, presidents, the Pope—and English football supporters. By the time the buses reached the city—although there was little traffic, the sirens had been turned on the moment we left the parking lot—the status of their occupants had been enlarged immeasurably. Each intersection we passed was blocked with cars and onlookers. People had gathered on every street, wondering what all the fuss was about, wanting to get a look. The sound of twenty sirens is hard to miss. Who in the city of Turin could not have known that the English had arrived?

The English themselves, moved by the effect they were having,

AMONG THE THUGS

started to sing, which they managed to do more loudly than the brain-penetrating sirens that heralded their entrance into the city. To sing so powerfully was no small achievement, although to describe the noise that emerged from the bus as singing is to misrepresent it. One song was “England.” This was repeated over and over again. There were no more words. Another, more sophisticated, was based on the tune of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Its words were:

Glory, glory, Man United
Glory, glory, Man United
Glory, glory, Man United
Yours troops are marching on! on! on!

Each “on” was grunted a bit more emphatically than the one before, accompanied by a gesture involving the familiar upturned two fingers. There was an especially simple tune, “Fuck the Pope”—simple because the words consisted exclusively of the following: Fuck the Pope. “Fuck the Pope” was particularly popular, and, despite the sirens and speed, at least two buses (the one I was in and the one behind us) succeeded in chanting “Fuck the Pope” in some kind of unison.

I noticed Clayton. He was several rows in front. Somehow Clayton, like an unwieldy truck, had reversed himself into a position in which the opened window by his seat was filled by his suddenly exposed and very large buttocks—his trousers, this time, deliberately gathered around his knees, the cheeks of his suddenly exposed and very large buttocks clasped firmly in each hand and spread apart. Just behind him was a fellow who was urinating through his window. People were standing on the seats, jerking their fists up and down, while screaming profanities at pedestrians, police, children—any and all Italians.

Then someone lobbed a bottle.

It was bound to happen. There were bottles rolling around on the floor or being passed from person to person, and it was inevitable that, having tried everything else—obscène chants, abuse, peeing—someone
would go that much further and pick up one of the empty bottles and hurl it at an Italian. Even so, the use of missiles of any kind was a significant escalation, and there was the sense, initially at least, that bottle throwing was “out of order.”

“What the fuck did you do that for?” someone shouted, angry, but not without a sense of humor. “What are you, some kind of hooligan?”

A meaningful threshold had been crossed. Moments later there was the sound of another bottle breaking. And a second, and a third, and then bottles started flying out of most windows—of each of the four buses.

I wondered: if I had been a citizen of Turin, what would I have made of all this?

After all, here I’d be, at the foot of the Alps, in one of the most northern regions of Italy, surrounded by an exquisite, historic brick architecture, a city of churches and squares and arcades and cafés, a civilized city, an intellectual city, the heart of the Communist Party, the home of Primo Levi and other writers and painters, and, during my lunch hour, when perhaps I, a Juventus supporter like everyone else, had gone out to pick up my ticket for the match that evening. I heard this powerful sound, the undulating whines of multiple sirens. Were they ambulances? Had there been a disaster? All around me people would have stopped and would be craning their necks, shielding their eyes from the sun, until finally, in the distance we would have spotted the oscillating blue and white lights of the approaching police. And when they passed—one, two, three, four buses—would my response be nothing more than one of fascination, as in the window of each bus, I would see faces of such terrible aggression—remarkable aggression, intense, inexplicably vicious? Perhaps my face would be splattered by the spray of someone’s urine. Perhaps I would have to jump out of the way of a bottle being hurled at my head. And perhaps, finally, I would have responded in the manner chosen by one Italian lad, who, suddenly the target of an unforeseen missile, simply answered in kind: he hurled a stone back.

The effect on those inside the buses was immediate. To be, suddenly, the target came as a terrible shock. The incredulity was immense:

“Those bastards,” one of the supporters exclaimed, “are throwing stones at the windows,” and the look on his face conveyed such urgent dismay that you could only agree that a stone-throwing Italian was a very bad person indeed. The presumption—after all a window could get broken and someone might get hurt—was deeply offensive, and everyone became very, very angry. Looking around me, I realized that I was no longer surrounded by raving, hysterically nationalistic social deviants; I was now surrounded by raving, hysterically nationalist social deviants in a frenzy. They were wild, and anything that came to hand—bottles, jars of peanuts, fruit, cartons of juice, anything—was summarily hurled through the windows. “Those bastards,” the lad next to me said, teeth clenched, lobbing an unopened beer can at a cluster of elderly men in dark jackets. “Those bastards.”

Everyone was now very excited.

And then: a rainbow. The streets, which had been getting tighter and tighter, opened, at last, on to a square: Piazza San Carlo. Light, air, the sky, and the bus slowly, undeniably, coming to rest. We had arrived.

And so four coaches of supporters arrived to attend the match that they had been banned from attending only to discover that many people had gotten there before them. Where had they come from? The square was packed. As we pulled in, someone waved to us, one hand wild above his head, the other clinging to his penis, urinating into a fountain. There could be no doubt about his nationality, or, for that matter, any of the others’, familiar bloated examples of an island race who, sweltering under the warm Italian sun, had taken off their shirts, a great, fatty manifestation of the history of pub opening hours, of gallons and gallons of lager and incalculable quantities of bacon-flavored crisps. They were singing: “Manchester, la-la-la, Manchester, la-la-la.” They had the appearance of people who had been at the square, singing and drinking and urinating into the fountain, for many days. The pavement was covered with large empty bottles.
I spotted Mick who, ever vigilant, had discovered the place to buy cheap beer very cheaply and who, ever generous, appeared with three two-liter bottles of lager, including one for me. Then Mick made for the middle of the throng, shouting "C'mon, you Reds"—red for the red of Manchester United’s Red Devils—and he vanished, only his upturned two-liter bottle remaining visible above everyone’s heads.

I wandered around the square. I was not uncomfortable, mainly because I had decided that I wasn’t going to allow myself to be uncomfortable. If I had allowed myself to be uncomfortable then it would follow that I would start to feel ridiculous and ask myself questions like: Why am I here? Now that the journey to Turin was properly completed, I had, I realized, done little more than gawk and drink. Mick had disappeared, although I thought I could pick out his bellowing amid the noise around me. Apart from him, however, I knew nobody. Here I was, my little black notebook hidden away in my back trouser pocket, hoping to come up with a way of ingratiating myself into a group that, from what I could see, was not looking for new members. For a moment I had the unpleasant experience of seeing myself as I must have appeared: as an American who had made a long journey to Italy that he shouldn’t have known about so that he could stand alone in the middle of what was by now several hundred Manchester United supporters who all knew each other, had probably known each other for years, were accustomed to traveling many miles to meet every week and who spoke with the same thick accent, drank the same thick beer, and wore many of the same preposterous, vaguely designed, High Street clothes.

What was worse, word had got around that I was in Turin to write about the supporters—a piece of news that few had found particularly attractive. Two people came up and told me that they never read the Express (the Express?) and that when they did they found only rubbish in it. When I tried to explain that I wasn’t writing for the Express, I could see that they didn’t believe me or—a more unpleasant prospect—thought that, therefore, I must be writing for the Sun. Another, speaking sotto voce, tried to sell me his story (“The Star’s already offered me a thousand quid”). In its way this was a positive development, except that someone else appeared and started jabbing me vigorously in the chest: You don’t look like a reporter. Where was my notebook? Where was my camera? What’s an American doing here anyway?

There had been other journalists. In Valencia, a Spanish television crew had offered ten pounds to any supporter who was prepared to throw stones, while jumping up and down and shouting dirty words. At Portsmouth, someone had appeared from the Daily Mail, working “undercover,” wearing a bomber jacket and Doc Marten boots, but he was chased away by the supporters: it was pointed out that no one had worn a bomber jacket and a pair of Doc Marten boots for about ten years, except for an isolated number of confused Chelsea fans. And last year in Barcelona there was a journalist from the Star. His was the story that I found most compelling. He had been accepted by most members of the group, but had then kept asking them about the violence. This, I was told, just wasn’t done. When is it going to go off he would ask. Is it going to go off now? Will it go off tonight? No doubt he had a deadline and a features editor waiting for his copy. When the violence did occur, he ran, which was not unreasonable: he could get hurt. In the supporters’ eyes, however, he had done something very bad: he had—in their inimitable phrasing—“shitted himself.” When he returned to complete his story, he was set upon. But they didn’t stab him. He wasn’t disfigured in any lasting way.

The story about the Star journalist was not particularly reassuring—so great, they didn’t stab him; lucky reporter—and I made a mental note not to shit myself under any circumstances. Even so, the story revealed an important piece of information.

Until then, everyone I had spoken to went out of his way to establish that, while he might look like a hooligan, he was not one in fact. He was a football supporter. True: if someone was going to pick a fight, he wasn’t going to run—he was English, wasn’t he?—but he wouldn’t go looking for trouble. Everyone was there for the laugh and the trip abroad and the drink and the football.
I did not want to hear this. And when I heard it, I refused to believe it. I had to. The fact was that I had come to Italy to see trouble. It was expensive and time-consuming, and that was why I was there. I didn't encourage it—I wasn't in the position to do so—and I wasn't admitting my purpose to anyone I met. I may not have been admitting it to myself. But that was why I was there, prepared to stand on my own with five hundred people staring at me wondering what I was doing. I was waiting for them to be bad. I wanted to see violence. And the fact that the Star journalist had witnessed some, that it had finally "gone off," suggested I might be in the right spot after all.

Violence or no violence, mine was not an attractive moral position. It was, however, an easy one, and it consisted in this: not thinking. As I entered this experience, I made a point of removing moral judgment, like a coat. With all the drink and the luxurious Italian sun, I wouldn't need it. Once or twice, facing the spectacle of the square, the thought occurred to me that I should be appalled. If I had been British I might have been. I might have felt the burden of that peculiar nationalistic liability that assumes you are responsible for everyone from your own country ("I was ashamed to be British"—or French or German or American). But I'm not British. Mick and his friends and I were not of the same kind. And although I might have felt that I should be appalled, the fact was: I wasn't. I was fascinated.

And I wasn't alone.

A group of Italians had gathered near the square. I walked over to them. There were about a hundred, who, afraid of getting too close, had huddled together, staring and pointing. Their faces all had the same look of incredulity. They had never seen people act in this way. It was inconceivable that an Italian, visiting a foreign city, would spend hours in one of its principal squares, drinking and barking and peeing and shouting and sweating and slapping his belly. Could you imagine a busload from Milan parading around Trafalgar Square showing off their tattoo? "Why do you English behave like this?" one Italian asked me, believing that I was of the same nationality. "Is it something to do with being an island race? Is it because you don't feel European?" He looked confused; he looked like he wanted to help. "Is it because you lost the Empire?"

I didn't know what to say. Why were these people behaving in this way? And who were they doing it for? It would make sense to think that they were performing for the benefit of the Italians looking on—the war dance of the invading barbarians from the north and all that—but it seemed to me that they were performing solely for themselves. Over the last hour or so, I could see that the afternoon was turning into a highly patterned thing.

It looked something like this: once a supporter arrived, he wandered around, usually with a friend, periodically bellowing or bumping into things or joining in on a song. Then a mate would be spotted and they would greet each other. The greeting was achieved through an exchange of loud, incomprehensible noises. A little later they would spot another mate (more noise) and another (more noise), until finally there were enough people—five, six, sometimes ten—to form a circle. Then, as though responding to a toast, they would all drink from a very large bottle of very cheap lager or a very large bottle of very cheap red wine. This was done at an exceptional speed, and the drink spilled down their faces and on to their necks and down their chests, which, already quite sticky and beading with perspiration, glistened in the sun. A song followed. From time to time, during a particularly important refrain, each member of the circle squatted slightly, clenching his fists at his sides, as if, poised so, he was able to sing the particular refrain with the extra oomph that it required. The posture was not unlike shitting in public. And then the very large bottle with its very cheap contents was drunk again.

The circle broke up and the cycle was repeated. It was repeated again. And again. All around the square, little clusters of fat, sticky men were bellowing at each other.

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Mick reappeared and pointed to the far end of the square, where a silver Mercedes was moving slowly through a street crowded with
sponsors, Italian onlookers, and police. The driver, in a shiny purple track suit, was a black man with a round fleshy face and a succession of double chins. In the back seat were two others, both black. One, I would learn, was named Tony Roberts. The other was Roy Downes.

No one had mentioned Tony to me before, but he was impossible to forget once you saw him. He was thin and tall—he towered above everyone else—and had an elaborate, highly styled haircut. The fact was Tony looked exactly like Michael Jackson. Even the color of his skin was Michael Jackson's. For a brief electric instant—the silver Mercedes, the driver, the ceremony of the arrival—I thought Tony was Michael Jackson. What a discovery: to learn that Michael Jackson, that little red devil, was actually a fan of Manchester United. But, then, alas, yes, I could see that, no, Tony was not Michael Jackson. Tony was only someone who had spent a lot of time and money trying to look like Michael Jackson.

There was Tony’s wardrobe. This is what I saw of it during his stay in Turin (approximately thirty hours):

One: a pale yellow jump suit, light and casual and worn for comfort during the long hours in the Mercedes.

Two: a pastel-blue T-shirt (was there silk in the mix?), a straw hat, and cotton trousers, his "early summer" costume, worn when he briefly appeared on the square around four o’clock.

Three: his leather look (lots of studs), chosen for the match.

Four: a light woolen jacket (chartreuse) with complementary olive-green trousers for later in the evening, when everyone gathered at a bar.

Five: and finally, another travel outfit for the return trip (a pink cotton track suit with pink trainers).

Later, during the leather phase, I asked Tony what he did for a living, and he said only that he sometimes “played the ticket game”: large-scale touting, buying up blocks of seats for pop concerts or the sporting events at Wimbledon and Wembley and selling them on at inflated prices. I heard also that he was, from time to time, a driver for Hurri-
cane Higgins, the snooker star; that he was a jazz dancer, that he had ‘acted’ in some porn films. His profession, I suspect, was the same as that of so many of the others, a highly lucrative career of doing “this and that,” and it wasn’t worth looking too deeply into what constituted either the “this” or the “that.”

Roy Downes was different. Ever since Mick had mentioned Roy, I had been trying to find out as much about him as I could. I had learned that he had just finished a two-year prison sentence in Bulgaria, where he had been arrested before the match between Manchester United and Leviski Spartak (having just cracked the hotel safe) and that, ever since, people said he wasn’t the same: that Roy had become serious, that he never laughed, that he rarely spoke. I had heard that Roy always had money—rolls and rolls of twenty- and fifty-pound notes. That he had a flat in London, overlooking the river. That he saw his matches from the seats and never stood in the terraces with the other supporters, and that he got his tickets free from the players. That he was a lounge lizard: the best place to leave messages for Roy was Stringfellows, a basement bar and nightclub on Upper St. Martin’s Lane in London, with Bob Hoskins bouncers in dinner jackets and lots of chrome and mirrors and a small dance floor filled, on the wintry Tuesday night when I later went there (perhaps an off night), with sagging men who had had too much to drink and young secretaries in tight black skirts. (I was let in, stepping past the bouncers and into a bad black-and-white movie, having said—with a straight face—that Roy sent me.)

I couldn’t get anybody to tell me what Roy did. Maybe they didn’t know or didn’t need to know. Or maybe they all knew and didn’t want to say. After all, how many of your friends can pick a safe?

Actually I did know one other thing about Roy, but at the time I didn’t know that I knew it. I had told a friend about getting caught up in a football train in Wales, and he mentioned an incident he had witnessed that same month. He had been traveling from Manchester, in a train already filled with supporters. When it stopped at Stoke-on-Trent, more fans rushed into his carriage. They were from West Ham and, shouting, “Kill the nigger cunts,” they set upon two blacks who
were sitting nearby. My friend could see only the backs of the West Ham supporters, their arms rising in the air and then crashing down again, the two blacks somewhere in the middle, when he heard: "They've got a stick, kill the bastards"—the stick evidently referring to a table leg that one of the blacks had managed to break off to defend himself. By the time my friend ran off to find a member of the Transport Police, there was blood on the floor and the seats and some was splattered across the windows. One of the blacks had had his face cut up. But it was the other one they were after. He was stabbed repeatedly—once in the lower chest, a few inches below his heart. A finger was broken, his forehead badly slashed and several of his ribs were fractured. The list of injuries is taken from the "Statement of Witness" that my friend prepared, and on it are the victims' names, meaningful to me only when I returned from Italy. They were Anthony Roberts and Roy Downes. Roy had been the one they were after, the one who had been repeatedly stabbed.

Roy's car drove around the square, with him waving from the window like a politician, and disappeared. When I spotted him again, about an hour later, Roy was standing on one of the balconies, arms apart, leaning on the rail, surveying the supporters below. He was small but muscular—wiry, lean—and good-looking, with strong features and very black skin. He looked, as I had been led to expect, grim and serious. What he saw on the square below him seemed to make him especially grim and serious. In fact he was so grim and serious that I thought it might have been just a little overdone. He looked like he had chosen to be grim and serious in the way that you might pick out a particular article of clothing in the morning; it was what he had decided on instead of wearing red.

It was not an opportunity to miss, and I bounced up the stairs and introduced myself. I was writing a book; I would love to chat. I babbled away—friendly, Californian, with a cheerful, gosh isn't-the-world-a-wonderful-place kind of attitude, until finally Roy, who did not look up from the square, asked me to shut up, please. There was, please, no need to talk so much: he already knew all about me.

No one had told me to shut up before. How did he know whatever it was he knew? I suppose I was impressed. This was a person for whom style was no small thing.

Roy, at any rate, wasn't having a lot to do with me, despite my good efforts. These efforts, painful to recall, went something like this.

After expressing my surprise that I was a person worth knowing anything about, I, bubbling and gurgling away, suggested that Roy and I get a drink.

Roy, still surveying the square, pointed out that he didn't drink.

That was fine, I said, carrying on, cheerful to the end: then perhaps, after his long journey, he might be interested in joining me for a bite to eat.

No.

Right, I said, a little tic I had developed for responding to a situation that was not right but manifestly wrong. I pulled out a pack of cigarettes—I wanted badly to smoke—while taking in the scene below us: there was Mick, standing by himself, a large bottle of something in one hand and a large bottle of something else in the other, singing "C'mon, you Reds," bellowing it, unaccompanied, his face deeply colored, walking around and around in a circle.

I offered Roy a cigarette.

Roy didn't smoke.

Right, I said, scrutinizing the scene below us with more attention, pointing out how everyone was having such a jolly good time, to which Roy, of course, did not reply. In fact the scene below us was starting to look like a satanic Mardi Gras. There must have been about eight hundred people, and the noise they were making—the English with their songs; the Italians with their cars, horns blaring—was very loud. In normal circumstances, the noise was so loud it would have made conversation difficult. In my current circumstances, nothing could have made conversation any worse.

I carried on. Whatever came into my head found itself leaving my mouth, with or without an exclamatory Right! I talked about football, Bryan Robson, the Continental style—in fact about many things I knew...
little about—until finally, after a brief aside about something completely inconsequential, I tried to talk to Roy about Roy. I don’t recall what I said next; actually I fear I do, which is worse, because I think it was something about Roy’s being both black and short and what a fine thing that was to be. And then I paused. The pause I remember precisely because at the end of it Roy looked at me for the first time. I thought he was going to spit. But he didn’t. What he did was this: he walked away.

With a slight swagger, hands in his pockets, Clint Eastwood had just strolled off and disappeared down the stairs and walked out of my story. I wasn’t cut out to be a journalist.

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It was time I met more people. I hadn’t gotten through to Roy. Maybe I would later. Maybe it didn’t matter. I had had so many I-am-not-going-to-think-about-why-I-am-here lagers that I didn’t care if people were going to talk to me. The choices were not complicated: either I would find myself in conversation, or I would find myself not in conversation.

I found myself neither in conversation nor not in conversation but looking into a particularly ugly mouth. I can’t recall how I arrived before this mouth—zigzagging across the square—but once in its presence I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

In it, there were many gaps, the raw rim of the gums showing where once there must have been teeth. Of the teeth still intact, many were chipped or split; none was straight; they appeared to have grown up at odd, unconventional angles or (more likely) been redirected by a powerful physical influence at some point in their career. All of them were highly colored—deep brown or caked with yellow or, like a pea soup, mushy green and vegetable soft with decay. This was a mouth that had suffered many slings and arrows along with the occasional thrashing and several hundredweight of tobacco and Cadbury’s milk chocolate. This was a mouth through which a great deal of life had passed at, it would appear, an uncompromising speed.

The mouth belonged to Gurney. Mick had told me about Gurney. What he hadn’t told me about was the power of Gurney’s unmitigated ugliness. It was ugliness on a scale that elicited concern: I kept wanting to offer him things—the telephone number of my dentist or a blanket to cover his head. It was hard not to stare at Gurney. Gurney was one of the older supporters and was well into his thirties. He was looked up to, I discovered, by the younger lads. I never understood why they looked up to him or what they hoped to find when they did. Like Roy, Gurney didn’t trust me, at least initially, but I was getting used to not being trusted. His Cockney followers were less suspicious. When I came upon them, they were in the middle of singing one of those songs (squatting slightly). They were in good spirits and, straightaway, started questioning me.

No. I wasn’t from the Express—I had never read the Express.

Yes, I was here to write about football supporters.

Yes, I know you are not hooligans.

What was I doing here, then? Well, that was obvious, wasn’t it? I was here to get very, very pissed.

And, with that, I had become one of them, or enough of one of them for them to feel comfortable telling me stories. They wanted me to understand how they were organized; it was the “structure” that was important to understand.

There were, it was explained, different kinds of Manchester United supporters, and it was best to think of each kind as belonging to one of a series of concentric circles. The largest circle was very large: in it you would find all the supporters of Manchester United, which, as everyone kept telling me, was one of the best-supported teams in English football, with crowds regularly in excess of forty thousand.

Within that large circle, however, there were smaller ones. In the first were the members of the official Manchester United Supporters’ Club—at its peak more than twenty thousand. The official Manchester United Supporters’ Club, started in the seventies, hired trains from British Rail—“football specials”—for conveying fans to the matches, produced a regular magazine, required annual dues, and in general
kept the "good" supporters informed of developments in the club and tried to keep the "bad" supporters from ever learning about them.

In the second circle was the unofficial supporters' club, the "bad" supporters: the firm.

The firm was divided between those who lived in Manchester and those who did not. Those who did not come from just about everywhere in the British Isles—Newcastle, Bolton, Glasgow, Southampton, Sunderland: these people were the Inter-City Jibbers. Mick had mentioned them: they got their name from taking only the Inter-City fast commuter trains and never the football specials hired by the official supporters' club.

The Inter-City Jibbers themselves were also divided, between those who were not from London and those who were: the Cockney Reds.

I remembered Mick's account of being on the jib. I had much to learn, and most of it I would learn the next day on my return to England. But initially I was skeptical. How was it possible that so many people could travel on the jib? From what I understood about traveling on the jib, it meant not only not paying but actually making money as well.

Roars of laughter followed. Being on the jib was very simple, I was told, and involved no more than defeating the Hector. The Hector was the British Rail ticket collector, and at the mention of the Hector, everyone started singing the Hector song:

Ha ha ha
He he he
The Hector's coming
But he can't catch me.
On the racks
Under the seats
Into the bogs
The Hector's coming
But he can't catch me.
Ha ha ha

There were tricks: passing one good ticket between members of a group, making the sound of endless vomiting while hiding in the loo, pretending not to understand English. It was Gurney's ploy to engage the ticket collector in a battle of wills, giving him everything but a ticket: a sandwich, a cigarette, the ashtray, his shoe, a sock, then his other sock, bits of dirt scraped from beneath his toenails, his shirt, the darkly colored lint from his navel, his belt until—the final destination getting closer the longer the exchange went on—the ticket collector, fed up, got on with the rest of his job. The ICJ had learned two principles about human nature—especially human nature as it had evolved in Britain.

The first was that no public functionary, and certainly not one employed by British Rail or London Transport, wants a difficult confrontation—there is little pride in a job that the functionary believes to be underpaid and knows to be unrewarding and that he wants to finish so that he can go home.

The second principle was the more important: everyone—including the police—is powerless against a large number of people who have decided not to obey any rules. Or put another way: with numbers there are no laws.

It is easy to imagine the situation. You're there, working by yourself at the ticket booth of an Underground station, and two hundred supporters walk past you without paying. What do you do? Or you're working the cash register in a small food shop—one room, two refrigerators, three aisles—and you look up and see that, out of nowhere, hundreds of lads are crowding through your door, pushing and shouting and shouting, until there is no room to move, and that each one is filling his pockets with crisps, meat pies, beer, biscuits, nuts, dried fruit, eggs (for throwing), milk, sausage rolls, liter-bottles of Coke, red wine, butter (for throwing), white wine, Scotch eggs, bottles of retsina, apples,
yogurt (for throwing), oranges, chocolates, bottles of cider, sliced ham, mayonnaise (for throwing) until there is very little remaining on your shelves. What do you do? Tell them to stop? Stand in the doorway? You call the police but as the supporters pour out through the door—eggs, butter, yogurt, and mayonnaise already flying through the air, splattering against your front window, the pavement outside, the cars in the parking lot, amid chants of "Food fight! Food fight!"—they split up, some going to the left, others to the right, everybody disappearing.

Gurney and his crew had arrived in Turin by a large minibus that they had hired in London. The bus was called Eddie; the group was called Eddie and the Forty Thieves.

Forty Thieves?

They explained. Their adventures began in Calais. At the first bar they entered, the cashier was on a lunch break, and they popped open a cash register with an umbrella and came away with four thousand francs. They carried on, traveling south and then along the French coast, robbing a succession of small shops on the way, never paying for gas or food, entering and leaving restaurants en masse, always on the lookout "for a profit." I noticed that each member of the Eddie-and-the-Forty-Thieves team was wearing sunglasses—filched, I was told, from a French gas station that had a sideline in tourist goods that, it would appear, also included brightly colored Marilyn Monroe T-shirts. All of them were wearing Rolex watches.

Most of the supporters on the square had not been on the plane. How had they gotten here?
They went through a list.

Daft Donald hadn't made it. He had been arrested in Nice (stealing from a clothing shop), and, proving his nickname, was found to be in possession of one can of mace, eighteen Stanley knives (they fell out when he was searched), and a machete.

Robert the Sneak Thief had been delayed—his ferry had been turned back following a fight with Nottingham Forest fans—but he had gotten a flight to Nice and would be coming by taxi.
A taxi from Nice to Turin?

Robert, I was told, always had money (if you see what I mean), and, although I didn't entirely (see what he meant), I didn't have the chance to find out more because they were well down their list.

Sammy? ("Not here but he won't miss Juventus." "Sammy? Impossible.")

Mad Harry? ("Getting too old.")
Teapot? ("Been here since Friday.")
Berlin Red? ("Anybody seen Berlin Red?")
Scotty? ("Arrested last night.")

Barmy Bernie? ("Inside." "Barmy Bernie is inside again?") Whereupon there followed the long, moving story of Barmy Bernie, who, with twenty-seven convictions, had such a bad record that he got six months for loitering. Everyone shook his head in commiseration for the sad, sad fate of Barmy Bernie.

Someone from another group appeared, showing me a map with an inky blue line tracing the route to Turin. It began in Manchester, then continued through London, Stockholm, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Lyon, Marseilles, and finally stopped here. A great adventure, not unlike, I reflected, the Grand Tour that young men had made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it had cost them—all eleven of them—a total of seven pounds.

Seven pounds, I exclaimed, understanding the principle. What went wrong?
They assured me they would be in profit on the return.

The circle of supporters who now surrounded me had grown to a considerable size, with one or two regularly disappearing and returning with cans of lager. I had ceased to be the CIA. I was no longer the hack from the Express. I appeared to have ended my tenure as an undercover officer of the British Special Branch. And I was starting to be accepted. I would learn later that I had earned a new status; I had become a "good geezer." Yes, that's what I was: a good geezer. What a thing.

I was also someone to whom people needed to tell their stories. There was an implicit responsibility emerging. I was being asked to set
the record straight. I was the “repoyta.” I was given instructions, imperatives, admonitions. I was told:

That they weren’t hooligans.

That it was a disgrace that there were so many obstacles keeping them from supporting their team properly.

That they weren’t hooligans.

That the management of Manchester United was a disgrace.

That they weren’t hooligans.

Until finally I was telling them, yes, yes, I know, I know, I know: you’re just here for the drink and the laugh and the football, and, for the first time, despite myself, I wanted to believe it. I was starting to like them, if only because they were starting to like me (the irrational mechanism of the group at work, and I was feeling grateful just to be accepted by it). And it was true that no one had been violent. People had been loud, grotesque, disgusting, rude, uncivilized, unpleasant to look at and, in some instances, explicitly repellent—but not violent. And it was possible that they wouldn’t be. It didn’t suit my purposes that everyone here should be nothing more than a fanatical fan of the game, but it was conceivable that there really would be no violence, that this was simply how normal English males behaved. It was a terrifying notion, but not an impossible one.

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The thing about reporting is that it is meant to be objective. It is meant to record and relay the truth of things, as if truth were out there, hanging around, waiting for the reporter to show up. Such is the premise of objective journalism. What this premise excludes, as any student of modern literature will tell you, is that slippery relative fact of the person doing the reporting, the modern notion that there is no such thing as the perceived without someone to do the perceiving, and that to exclude the circumstances surrounding the story is to tell an untruth. These circumstances might include the fact that you’ve rushed to an airplane, had too much to drink on it, arrived, realized that you are dressed for the tropics when in fact it is about to snow, that you have forgotten your socks, that you have only one contact lens, that you’re not going to get the interview anyway, and then, at four-thirty, that you’ve got to file your story, having had to make most of it up. It could be argued that the circumstances have more than a casual bearing on the truth reported.

I do not want to tell an untruth and feel compelled therefore to note that at this moment, the reporter was aware that the circumstances surrounding his story had become intrusive and significant and that, if unacknowledged, his account of the events that follow would be grossly incomplete. And his circumstances were these: the reporter was very, very drunk.

He could not, therefore, recall much about the bus ride apart from a dim, watery belief that there were fewer people in the bus this time. The other thing he remembers is that he arrived.

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When the buses of United supporters pulled up into the cool evening shadow cast by the Stadio Comunale, a large crowd was already there. The fact of the crowd—that it would be waiting for the English—was hard to take in at first.

Thousands of Italian supporters converged on the bus. They surrounded it and were pounding on its sides—jeering, ugly, and angry.

The bus started to rock from side to side. The Italians were trying to push the bus, our bus—the bus that had me inside it—onto its side.

I had not appreciated the importance of the match that evening, the semifinals for the Cup-Winners Cup. It had sold out the day the tickets—seventy thousand of them—had gone on sale, and at that moment all seventy thousand ticket holders seemed to be in view. In my ignorance, I had also not expected to see the English supporters, who were meant to be the hooligans, confronted by Italians who, to my untutored eye, looked like hooligans: their conduct—rushing towards the buses, brandishing flags—was so exaggerated that it was like a
caricature of a nineteenth-century mob. Was this how they normally greeted the supporters of visiting teams?

It took a long time for the buses to empty, and fill the area set aside for them outside the stadium, enclosed by a chain-link fence. At some point, during this long wait, the Italian supporters at the very top of the stadium—the top row that could overlook the grounds outside—realized that there was a gang of English below them. I remember the moment, looking up into the evening’s pink sky, and watching the long, slow arc of an object hurled from far above as it came closer and closer, gaining speed as it approached, until finally, in those milliseconds before it disclosed its target, I could actually make out what it was—a beer bottle—and then crash: it shattered within three feet of one of the supporters.

Distant muted laughter from on high.

I feared what would follow. An English supporter went down, his forehead cut open. Eventually we all became targets, helpless underneath a barrage that consisted principally of beer bottles and oranges. There were so many bottles and so many oranges that the pavement, covered with juice and pulp and skins, was sticky to look at and sparked from the shattered glass.

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When finally we were ushered through a tunnel that led to the ground, police in front and police behind, it became apparent that, while the English supporters may have been accommodated, their accommodation wasn’t in the most salubrious part of the stadium. We were heading for the bottom steps of the terraces, directly beneath the very people who had been hurling missiles at us while we waited outside.

I did not like the look of this.

I kept thinking of the journalist from the Daily Star, the one who ran off when things got violent. He emerged in my mind now as an unequivocally sympathetic figure. He had, the supporters said, shit himself, and it was worth noting that this phrase had now entered my vocabulary.

I was not, I found myself muttering, going to shit myself.

One by one, we walked from out of the darkness of the tunnel into the blinding light of the ground—the sun, though setting, was at an angle and still shining bright—and it was hard to make out the figures around us. There were not many police—I could see that—and it appeared that Italians had spilled onto the pitch in front of the terraces where we were meant to stand, separated only by a chain-link perimeter fence. Once again things were coming at us from the air: not just bottles and pieces of fruit but also long sticks—the staffs of Juventus flags—firecrackers, and smoke bombs. The first one out of the tunnel, drunk and arrogant and singing about his English pride, was hit on the back of the head by an eight-foot flagpole and he dropped to the concrete terrace. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a Union Jack had been set alight, its flames fanned as it was swirled in the air. I saw this only out of the corner of my eye because I was determined not to look up at the Italians above me, who were hurling things down, or down to the Italians below, who were hurling things up. I had the suspicion that if I happened to make eye contact with anybody I would be rewarded with a knock on the head. Also I didn’t want to lose my concentration. Looking straight ahead, I was concentrating very hard on chanting my new refrain.

I will not shit myself. I will not shit myself.

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Somehow the match started, was played, ended. And, while it could be said that there was no single serious incident, it could also be said that there was no moment without one. Several people were hurt, and one supporter was taken away to the hospital.

It was a peculiar setting for watching a sporting event, although, oddly, it didn’t seem so at the time. The day had consisted of such a strange succession of events that, by this point in the evening, it was the most natural thing in the world to be watching a football game surrounded by policemen: there was one on my left, another on my right, two directly behind me, and five in front. It didn’t bother me; it certainly
didn’t bother the supporters, who, despite the distractions, were watching
the match with complete attentiveness. And when Manchester
United tied, the goal was witnessed, as it unfolded, by everyone there
(except me; I was looking over my shoulder for missiles), and jubilation
shot through them, their cheers and songs suddenly tinny and small in
that great cavity of the Juventus football ground, its seventy thousand
Italians now comprehensively silent. The United supporters jumped up
and down, fell over each other, embraced.

But the euphoria was brief. In the final two minutes Juventus scored
again. The exhilaration felt but minutes before by that small band of
United supporters was now felt—magnified many times—by the sev-
ety thousand Italian fans who, previously humiliated, directed their
powerful glee into our corner. The roar was deafening, invading the
senses like a bomb.

And with that explosive roar, the mood changed.

What happened next is confusing to recall. Everything started mov-
ing at great speed. Everything would continue to move at great speed
for many hours. I remember that riot police started kicking one of
the supporters who had fallen down. I remember hearing that Sammy had
arrived and then coming upon him. He was big, well-dressed, with
heavy horn-rimmed glasses that made him look like a physics student,
standing underneath the bleachers, his back to the match, an expensive
leather bag and camera hanging over his shoulder, having (like Robert)
just come from France by taxi.

And I remember some screaming: there had been a stabbing (I
didn’t see it) and, with the screaming, everyone bolted—animal speed,
instinct speed—and pushed past the police and rushed for the exit. But
the gate into the tunnel was locked, and the United supporters slammed
into it.

It was impossible to get out.

Throughout this last period of the match, I had been hearing a new
phrase: “It’s going to go off.”

“It’s going to go off,” someone said, and his eyes were glassy, as though
he had taken a drug.

If this keeps up, I heard another say, then it’s going to go off. And
the phrase recurred—it’s going to go off, it’s going to go off—spoken
softly, but each time it was repeated it gained authority.

Everyone was pressed against the locked gate, and the police ar-

rived moments later. The police pulled and pushed in one direction,
and the supporters pushed in another, wanting to get out. It was shove
and counter shove. It was crushing, uncomfortable. The supporters
were humorless and determined.

“Rit’s going to go off.”

People were whispering.

I heard: “Watch out for knives. Zip up your coat.”

I heard: “Fill up your pockets.”

I heard: “It’s going to go off. Stay together. It’s going to go off.”

I was growing nervous and slipped my notebook into my shirt, up
against my chest, and buttoned up my jacket. A chant had started:
United. United.” The word was repeated, United, and, through the rep-
tetition, its meaning started changing, pertaining less to a sporting
event or a football club and sounding instead like a chant of unity—
something political. It had become the chant of a mob.


And then it stopped.

There was a terrible screaming, a loud screaming, loud enough to
have risen above the chant. The sound was out of place; it was a woman’s
screaming.

Someone said that it was the mother of the stabbed boy.

The screaming went on. It appeared that a woman had been caught
by the rush to get away and swept along by it. I spotted her: she was
hemmed in and thrashing about, trying to find some space, some air.
She couldn’t move towards the exit and couldn’t move away from it, and
she wasn’t going to be able to: the crush was too great, and it wouldn’t
stay still, surging back and forth by its own volition, beyond the control
of anyone in it. She was very frightened. Her scream, piercing and high-
pitched, wouldn’t stop. She started hyperventilating, taking in giant
gulps of air, and her screams undulated with the relentless rhythm of her over-breathing. It was as if she were drowning in her own high-pitched oxygen, swinging her head from side to side, her eyes wild. I thought: Why hasn’t she passed out? I was waiting for her to lose consciousness, for her muscles to give up, but she didn’t pass out. The scream went on. Nobody around me was saying a word. I could tell that they were thinking what I was thinking, that she was going to have a fit, that she was going to die, there, now, pressed up against them. It went on, desperate and unintelligible and urgent.

And then someone had the sense to lift her up and raise her above his shoulders—it was so obvious—and he passed her to the person in front of him. And he passed her to the person in front of him. And in this way, she was passed, hand to hand, above everyone’s heads, still screaming, still flailing, slowly making her way to the exit, and then, once there, the gate was opened to let her out.

And it was all that was needed. Once the gate had been opened, the English supporters surged forwards, pushing her heavily to one side.

I was familiar with the practice of keeping visiting supporters locked inside at the end of a match until everyone had left and of using long lines of police, with horses and dogs, to direct the visitors to their buses. The plan in Turin had been the same, and the police were there, outside the gate, in full riot regalia, waiting for the United supporters. But they weren’t ready for what came charging out of the tunnel.

For a start, owing to the trapped woman, the supporters came out earlier than expected and when they emerged, they came out very fast, with police trailing behind, trying to keep up. They came as a mob, with everyone pressed together, hands on the shoulders of the person in front, moving quickly, almost at a sprint, racing down the line of police, helmets and shields and truncheons a peripheral blur. The line of police led to the buses, but just before the bus door someone in the front veered sharply and the mob followed. The police had anticipated this and were waiting. The group turned again, veering in another direction, and rushed out into the space between two of the buses. It came to a sudden stop, and I slammed into the person in front of me, and people slammed into me from behind: the police had been there as well. Everyone turned around. I don’t know who was in front—I was trying only to keep up—and nothing was being said. There were about two hundred people crushed together, but they seemed able to move in unison, like some giant, strangely coordinated insect. A third direction was tried. The police were not there. I looked behind: the police were not there. I looked to the left and the right: there were no police anywhere.

What was the duration of what followed? It might have been twenty minutes; it seemed longer. It was windy and dark, and the trees; blowing back and forth in front of the street lamps, cast long, moving shadows. I was never able to see clearly.

I knew to follow Sammy. The moment the group broke free, he had handed his bag and camera to someone, telling him to give them back later at the hotel. Sammy then turned and started running backwards. He appeared to be measuring the group, taking in its size.

The energy, he said, still running backwards, speaking to no one in particular, the energy is very high. He was alert, vital, moving constantly, looking in all directions. He was holding out his hands, with his fingers outstretched.

Feel the energy, he said.

There were six or seven younger supporters jogging beside him, and it would be some time before I realized that there were always six or seven younger supporters jogging beside him. When he turned in one direction, they turned with him. When he ran backwards, they ran backwards. No doubt if Sammy had suddenly become airborne there would have been the sight of six or seven younger supporters desperately flapping their arms trying to do the same. The younger supporters were in fact very young. At first I put their age at around sixteen, but they might have been younger. They might have been fourteen. They might have been nine: I take pleasure, even now, in thinking of them as nothing more than overgrown nine-year-olds. They were nasty little
nine-year-olds who, in some kind of prepubescent confusion, regarded Sammy as their dad.

Sammy had stopped running backwards and had developed a kind of walk-run, which involved moving as quickly as possible without breaking into an outright sprint. Everybody else did the same. The idea, it seemed, was to be inconspicuous—not to be seen to be actually running, thus attracting the attention of the police—but nevertheless to jet along as fast as you could. The effect was ridiculous: two hundred English supporters, tattooed torsos tilted slightly forwards, arms straight, hurrying stiffly down the sidewalk, believing that nobody was noticing them.

Everyone crossed the street, decisively, without a word spoken. A chant broke out—"United, United, United"—and Sammy waved his hands up and down, as if trying to bat down the flames of a fire, urging people to be quiet. A little later there was another one-word chant. This time it was "England." They couldn't help themselves. They wanted so badly to act like normal football supporters—they wanted to sing and behave drunkenly and carry on doing the same rude things that they had been doing all day long—and they had to be reminded that they couldn't. Why this pretense of being invisible? There was Sammy again, whispering, insistent: no singing, no singing, waving his hands up and down. The nine-year-olds made a shushing sound to enforce the message.

Sammy said to cross the street again—he had seen something—and his greasy little companions went off in different directions, fanning out, as if to hold the group in place, and then returned to their positions beside him. It was only then that I appreciated fully what I was witnessing: Sammy had taken charge of the group—moment by moment giving it specific instructions—and was using his obsequious little lads to ensure that his commands were being carried out.

I remembered, on my first night with Mick, hearing that leaders had their little lieutenants and sergeants. I had heard this and I had noted it, but I hadn't thought much of it. It sounded too much like toyland, like a war game played by schoolboys. But here, now, I could see that every-

thing Sammy said was being enforced by his entourage of little supporters. The nine-year-olds made sure that no one ran, that no one sang, that no one strayed far from the group, that everyone stayed together. At one moment, a cluster of police came rushing towards us, and Sammy, having spotted them, whispered a new command, hissing that we were to disperse, and the members of the group split up—some crossing the street, some carrying on down the center of it, some falling behind—until they had got past the policemen, whereupon Sammy turned around, running backwards again, and ordered everyone to regroup: and the little ones, like trained dogs, herded the members of the group back together.

I trotted along. Everyone was moving at such a speed that, to ensure I didn't miss anything, I concentrated on keeping up with Sammy. I could see that this was starting to irritate him. He kept having to notice me.

What are you doing here? he asked me, after he had turned around again, running backwards, doing a quick head count after everyone had regrouped.

He knew precisely what I was doing there, and he had made a point of asking his question loudly enough that the others had to hear it as well.

Just the thing, I thought.

Fuck off, one of his runts said suddenly, peering into my face. He had a knife.

"Didja hear what he said, mate? He said fuck off. What the fuck are you doing here anyway, eh? Fuck off."

It was not the time or the occasion to explain why I was there, and, having got this far, I wasn't about to turn around now.

I dropped back a bit, just outside of striking range. I looked about me. I didn't recognize anyone. I was surrounded by people I hadn't met; worse, I was surrounded by people I hadn't met who kept telling me to fuck off. I felt I had understood the drunkenness I had seen earlier in the day. But this was different. If anyone here was drunk, he was not acting as if he was. Everyone was purposeful and precise, and there was
a strong quality of aggression about them, like some kind of animal scent. Nobody was saying a word. There was a muted grunting and the sound of their feet on the pavement; every now and then, Sammy would whisper one of his commands.

I had no idea where we were, but, thinking about it now, I see that Sammy must have been leading his group around the stadium, hoping to find Italian supporters along the way. When he turned to run backwards, he must have been watching the effect his group of two hundred walk-running Frankensteinians was having on the Italian lads, who spotted the English rushing by and started following them, curious, attracted by the prospect of a fight or simply by the charisma of the group itself, unable to resist tagging along to see what might happen.

And then Sammy, having judged the moment to be right, suddenly stopped, and, abandoning all pretense of invisibility, shouted: “Stop.”

Everyone stopped.

“Turn.”

Everyone turned. They knew what to expect. I didn’t. It was only then that I saw the Italians who had been following us. In the half-light, streetlight darkness I couldn’t tell how many there were, but there were enough for me to realize—holy shit!—that I was now unexpectedly in the middle of a very big fight: having dropped back to get out of the reach of Sammy and his lieutenants I was in the rear, which, as the group turned, had suddenly become the front.

Adrenaline is one of the body’s more powerful chemicals. Seeing the English on one side of me and the Italians on the other, I remember seeming quickly to take on the properties of a small helicopter, rising several feet in the air and moving out of everybody’s way. There was a roar, everybody roaring, and the English supporters charged into the Italians.

In the next second I went down. A dark blur and then smack: I got hit on the side of the head by a beer can—a full one—thrown powerfully enough to knock me over. As I got up, two policemen, the only two I saw, came rushing past, and one of them clubbed me on the back of the head. Back down I went. I got up again, and most of the Italians had already run off, scattering in all directions. But many had been tripped up before they got away.

Directly in front of me—so close I could almost reach out to touch his face—a young Italian, a boy really, had been knocked down. As he was getting up, an English supporter pushed the boy down again, ramming his flat hand against the boy’s face. He fell back and his head hit the pavement, the back of it bouncing slightly.

Two other Manchester United supporters appeared. One kicked the boy in the ribs. It was a soft sound, which surprised me. You could hear the impact of the shoe on the fabric of the boy’s clothing. He was kicked again—this time very hard—and the sound was still soft, muted. The boy reached down to protect himself, to guard his ribs, and the other English supporter then kicked him in the face. This was a soft sound as well, but it was different: you could tell that it was his face that had been kicked and not his body and not something protected by clothing. It sounded gritty. The boy tried to get up and he was pushed back down sloppily, without much force. Another Manchester United supporter appeared and another and then a third. There were now six, and they all started kicking the boy on the ground. The boy covered his face. I was surprised that I could tell, from the sound, when someone’s shoe missed or when it struck the fingers and not the forehead or the nose.

I was transfixed. I suppose, thinking about this incident now, I was close enough to have stopped the kicking. Everyone there was off-balance—with one leg swinging back and forth—and it wouldn’t have taken much to have saved the boy. But I didn’t. I don’t think the thought occurred to me. It was as if time had dramatically slowed down, and each second had a distinct beginning and end, like a sequence of images on a roll of film, and I was mesmerized by each image I saw. Two more Manchester United supporters appeared—there must have been eight by now. It was getting crowded and difficult to get to the boy: they were bumping into each other, tussling slightly. It was hard for me to get a clear view or to say where exactly the boy was now being kicked, but it looked like there were three people kicking him in the head, and the others were kicking him in the body—mainly
the ribs but I couldn’t be sure. I am astonished by the detail I can recall. For instance, there was no speech, only that soft, yielding sound—although sometimes it was a gravelly, scraping one—of the blows, one after another. The moments between the kicks seemed to increase in duration, to stretch elastically, as each person’s leg was retracted and then released for another blow.

The thought of it: eight people kicking the boy at once. At what point is the job completed?

It went on.

The boy continued to try to cushion the blows, moving his hands around to cover the spot were he had just been struck, but he was being hit in too many places to be able to protect himself. His face was now covered with blood, which came from his nose and his mouth, and his hair was matted and wet. Blood was all over his clothing. The kicking went on. On and on and on, that terrible soft sound, with the boy saying nothing, only wriggling on the ground.

A policeman appeared, but only one. Where were the other policemen? There had been so many before. The policeman came running hard and knocked over two of the supporters, and the others fled, and then time accelerated, no longer slow motion time, but time moving very fast.

We ran off. I don’t know what happened to the boy. I then noticed that all around me there were others like him, others who had been tripped up and had their faces kicked.

In the vernacular of the supporters, it had now “gone off.” With that first violent exchange, some kind of threshold had been crossed, some notional boundary: on one side of that boundary had been a sense of limits, an ordinary understanding—even among this lot—of what you didn’t do; we were now someplace where there would be few limits, where the sense that there were things you didn’t do had ceased to exist. It became very violent.

I caught up with Sammy. Sammy was transported. He was snapping his fingers and jogging in place, his legs pumping up and down, and he was repeating the phrase, It’s going off, it’s going off. Everyone around him was excited. It was an excitement that verged on being something greater, an emotion more transcendent—joy at the very least, but more like ecstasy. There was an intense energy about it; it was impossible not to feel some of the thrill. Somebody near me said that he was happy. He said that he was very, very happy, that he could not remember ever being so happy, and I looked hard at him, wanting to memorize his face so that I might find him later and ask him what it was that made for this happiness, what it was like. It was a strange thought: here was someone who believed that, at this precise moment, following a street scuffle, he had succeeded in capturing one of life’s most elusive qualities. But then he, dazed, babbling away about his happiness, disappeared into the crowd and the darkness.

There was more going on than I could assimilate: there were violent noises constantly—something breaking or crashing—and I could never tell where they were coming from. In every direction something was happening. I have no sense of sequence.

There was a row of tables where programs were sold, along with flags, T-shirts, souvenirs, and as the group went by each table was lifted up and overturned. There were scuffles. Two English supporters grabbed an Italian and smashed his face into one of the tables. They grabbed him by the hair on the back of his head and slammed his face into the table again. They lifted his head up a third time, pulling it higher, holding it there—his face was messy and crushed—and slammed it into the table again. Once again the terrible slow motion of it all, the time, not clock time, that elapsed between one moment of violence and the next one, as they lifted his head up—were they really going to do it again?—and smashed it into the table. The English supporters were methodical and serious; no one spoke.

An ambulance drove past. Its siren made me realize that there were still no police.

The group crossed a street, a major intersection. It had long abandoned the pretense of invisibility and had reverted to the arrogant identity of the violent crowd, walking, without hesitation, straight into the congested traffic, across the hoods of the cars, knowing that they would stop. At the head of the traffic was a bus, and one of the supporters
stepped up to the front of it, and from about six feet, hurled something with great force—it wasn’t a stone; it was big and made of a metal, like the manifold of a car engine—straight into the driver’s windshield. I was just behind the one who threw this thing. I don’t know where he got it from, because it was too heavy to have been carried for any distance, but no one had helped him with it; he had stepped out of the flow of the group, and in those moments between throwing his heavy object and turning back to his mates, he had a peculiar look on his face. He knew he had done something that no one else had done yet; that it had escalated the violence, that the act had crossed another boundary of what was permissible. He had thrown a missile that was certain to cause serious physical injury. He had done something bad—extremely bad—and his face, while acknowledging the badness of it, was actually saying something more complex. It was saying that what he had done wasn’t all that bad, really; in the context of the day, it wasn’t that extreme, was it? What his face expressed, I realized—his eyes seemed to twinkle—was no more than this: I have just been naughty.

He had been naughty and he knew it and was pleased about it. He was happy. Another happy one. He was a runt, I thought. He was a little shit, I thought. I wanted to hurt him.

The sound of the shattering windshield—I realize now—was a powerful stimulant, physical and intrusive, and it had been the range of sounds, of things breaking and crashing, coming from somewhere in the darkness, unidentifiable, that was increasing steadily the strength of feeling of everyone around me. It was also what was making me so uneasy. The evening had been a series of stimulants, assaults on the senses, that succeeded, each time, in raising the pitch of excitement. And now, crossing this intersection, traffic coming from four directions, supporters trotting on top of cars, the sound of this thing going through the windshield, the crash following its impact, had the effect of increasing the heat of the feeling: I can’t describe it any other way; it was almost literally a matter of temperature. There was another moment of disorientation—the milliseconds between the sensation of the sound and knowing what accounted for it, an adrenaline moment, a chemical moment—and then there was the roar again, and someone came rushing at the bus with a pole (taken from one of the souvenir tables) and smashed a passenger’s window. A second crashing sound. Others came running over and started throwing stones and bottles with great ferocity. They were, again, in a frenzy. The stones bounced off the glass with a shuddering thud, but then a window shattered, and another shattered, and there was screaming from inside. The bus was full, and the passengers were not lads like the ones attacking them, but ordinary family supporters, dads and sons and wives heading home after the match, on their way to the suburbs or a village outside the city. Everyone inside must have been covered with glass. They were shielding their faces, ducking in their seats. There were glass splinters everywhere: they would cut across your vision suddenly. All around me people were throwing stones and bottles, and I felt afraid for my own eyes.

We moved on.

I felt weightless. I felt nothing would happen to me. I felt that anything might happen to me. I was looking straight ahead, running, trying to keep up, and things were occurring along the dark peripheries of my vision: there would be a bright light and then darkness again and the sound, constantly, of something else breaking, and of movement, of objects being thrown and of people falling.

A group of Italians appeared, suddenly stepping forward into the glare of a street lamp. They were different from the others, clearly intending to fight, full of pride and affronted dignity. They wanted confrontation and stood there waiting for it. Someone came towards us swinging a pool cue or a flag-pole, and then, confounding all sense, it was actually grabbed from out of his hands—it was Roy, Roy had appeared out of nowhere and had taken the pole out of the Italian’s hands—and broken it over his head. It was flamboyantly timed, and the next moment the other English supporters followed, that roar again, quickly overcoming the Italians, who ran off in different directions. Several, again, were tripped up. There was the sight, again, of Italians on the ground, wriggling helplessly while English supporters rushed up
to them, clustering around their heads, kicking them over and over again.

Is it possible that there were simply no police?

Again we moved on. A trash bin was thrown through a car show-
room window, and there was another loud crashing sound. A shop: its
door was smashed. A clothing shop: its window was smashed, and one
or two English supporters lingered to loot from the display.

I looked behind me and I saw that a large vehicle had been over-
turned, and that further down the street flames were issuing from a
building. I hadn't seen any of that happen: I realized that there had
been more than I had been able to take in. There was now the sound of
sirens, many sirens, different kinds, coming from several directions.

The city is ours, Sammy said, and he repeated the possessive, each
time with greater intensity: It is ours, ours, ours.

A police car appeared, its siren on—the first police car I had
seen—and it stopped in front of the group, trying to cut it off. There
was only one car. The officer threw open his door, but by the time he
had gotten out the group had crossed the street. The officer shouted
after us, helpless and angry, and then dropped back inside his car and
chased us down, again cutting us off. Once again, the group, in the
most civilized manner possible, crossed the street: well-behaved foot-
ball supporters on their way back to their hotel, flames receding be-
hind us. The officer returned to his car and drove after us, this time
accelerating dangerously, once again cutting off the group, trying, it
seemed to me, to knock down one of the supporters, who had to jump
out of the way and who was then grabbed by the police officer and
hurled against the hood, held there by his throat. The officer was very
frustrated. He knew that this group was responsible for the damage
he had seen; he knew, beyond all reasonable doubt, that the very lad
whose throat was now in his grip had been personally responsible for
mayhem of some categorically illegal kind, but the officer had not
personally seen him do anything. He hadn't personally seen the group
do anything. He had not seen anyone commit a crime. He saw only

the results. He kept the supporter pinned there, holding him by the
throat, and then in disgust he let him go.

A fire engine passed, an ambulance, and finally the police—many
police. They came from two directions. And once they started arriving,
it seemed that they would never stop. There were vans and cars and
motorcycles and paddy wagons. And still they came. The buildings
were illuminated by their flashing blue lights. But the group of support-
ers from Manchester, governed by Sammy’s whispered commands,
simply kept moving, slipping past the cars, dispersing when needing to
disperse and then regrouping, turning this way, that way, crossing the
street again, regrouping, reversing, with Sammy’s greasy little lieuten-
ants bringing up the rear, keeping everyone together. They were well-
behaved fans of the sport of football. They were once again the
law-abiding supporters they had always insisted to me that they were.