

I begged and pleaded and nagged, and eventually my mother gave in and allowed me to travel to away games. Back then I was jubilant; now I'm indignant. What did she think she was doing? Didn't she ever read the papers or watch TV? Hadn't she heard of hooligans? Was she really unaware of what Football Specials, the infamous trains that carried fans all over the country, were like? I could have been killed. [...]

In those days there were no restrictions on travelling in the way there are now (British Rail eventually abandoned the Football Specials, and the clubs make their own travel arrangements): we could roll up at St Pancras, buy a dirt-cheap train ticket, and pile on to a dilapidated train, the corridors of which were patrolled by police with guard dogs. Much of the journey took place in darkness—light bulbs were shattered at wearily brief intervals—which made reading difficult, although I always, always took a book with me and spent ages finding the carriages which contained middle-aged men who would have no interest in attracting the attention of the alsatians.

At our destination we were met by hundreds and hundreds of police, who then escorted us to the ground by a circuitous route away from the city centre; it was during these walks that my urban hooligan fantasies were given free rein. I was completely safe, protected not only by the law but by my fellow supporters, and I had therefore been liberated to bellow along in my still-unbroken voice with the chanted threats of the others. I didn't look terribly hard, in truth: I was as yet nowhere near as big as I should have been, and wore black-framed Brains-style National Health reading glasses, although these I hid away for the duration of the route marches, presumably to make myself just that little bit more terrifying. But those who mumble about the loss of identity football fans must endure miss the point: this loss of identity can be a paradoxically enriching process. Who wants to be stuck with who they are the whole time? I for one wanted time out from being a jug-eared, bespectacled, suburban twerp once in a while; I loved being able to frighten the shoppers in Derby or Norwich or Southampton (and they were frightened—you could see it). My opportunities for intimidating people had been limited hitherto, though I knew it wasn't me that made people hurry to the other side of the road, hauling their children after them; it was us, and I was a part of us, an organ in the hooligan body. The fact that I was the appendix—small, useless, hidden out of the way somewhere in the middle—didn't matter in the slightest.

Nick Hornby, *Fever Pitch*, 1992.