

The Unplayable

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I saw him on Wednesday, August 15th 1990, by the frozen food counter in Sainsbury's, picking things up, peering at them, and putting them back. A woman in the next aisle was gazing at him with an odd mixture of maternity and lust.

The nineteen-year-old Lex Winter, reserve team professional footballer, was as gorgeous a youth as I'd ever seen. Almost exactly six feet tall, naturally dark-skinned, with jet black short hair and disconcerting blue green eyes, he had a perfect torso fully emphasised by a thin light blue top, bare untattooed arms, and leg-hugging jogging bottoms. Never mind a punter, I thought; I'd do him for free.

Yes, at the time, I was rent. Ian Sims, twenty-one years old, failed student and failed genius of cuisine. Once the lack of academic brain had been established, it was sweating in some tyrant's kitchen for sod all or the game. The game, for the moment, won.

False modesty to hell, I was as cute as a basket of kittens, big brown hazel eyes, flashing white teeth, blondish hair I'd spend hours on, and a few other decidedly non-kittenish accoutrements as useful professional equipment. I'd lost contact with all the family except my aunt, Roz Forbes, drama lecturer, and my dad's younger sister, who called herself the black cow of the family, bohemian, chain-smoking, foul mouthed. The last time I'd visited her in her city flat, a kind of Bedouin tent with a roof on, she looked at me and said, 'Ian, darling, I do believe you're on the fucking game.' I wondered how she knew and begged for her silence. She looked me up and down.

'I don't shop people, sweetheart, even to my dear brother. Or

should that be especially? But be careful, my lovely. Be bloody careful.'

Lex's eyes flicked at me and stayed just too long.

'Too much choice?' I said, and I got the eyes full on. I had to catch my breath.

'What are you supposed to do with this stuff?' he said, as if we were already mates.

We fumbled on for a few minutes, something about the landlady of his so-called 'digs' being away on holiday and him now 'pissed off with pizza and Chinese', but it was all irrelevant flannel and we both knew it. We were in my place, a shag nest by the river, in thirty minutes and naked in forty. By then, I was pretty good at finding out soon enough what really floated a guy's boat, and often it had to be a matter of finding out. Some didn't have the words, some didn't have the nerve, and some didn't know, believe it or not. There had to be protection if needed – Aids was still at the top level of consciousness in 1990. Otherwise, whatever. The graphic details of this session with Lex would take too long to go into; it seemed, for him, to be like a dam bursting, both mentally and physically. The main surprise about it, from my point of view, was that he was mainly submissive; I say mainly for the sake of accuracy, because there are few entirely one way or the other, whatever the stereotypes, and believe me, I should know. How much that squares with the image of macho footballers, I don't know, but I could see the conflict in him between what turned him on and what he thought should. I worked carefully on him with the benefits of long experience, and his beautiful, athletic body reacted to me like a man in a desert taking a drink.

After some expenditure of time and energy, we lay together for a few minutes. He knew normal gay etiquette made it my turn and I had to remind myself that this one was pleasure, not duty; not every punter worries too much about my turn. He surprised me with his expertise and obvious enjoyment of teasing me, carefully, expertly, back and front; he teased and teased, taking me to the edge and back again, until I was gasping and begging to be allowed to come, and when I did, I closed my eyes and went wherever that place is longer and higher than I could remember having done for weeks.

So we lay together again, this time with that strange post-coital thing of two naked men realising they actually know next to nothing about each other.

‘What do you do?’ I said, for the sake of saying something, like the Queen.

‘I’m a pro footballer.’

‘Oh.’ I nodded slowly. I’d had everything, up to and including astronauts. Why they feel they need to impress their whore, I never could understand. But they do.

‘No, I am. Reserve team at the moment. Contract until twenty-one. Good money, but harder work than most people think.’

‘I suppose.’ Then I made a mistake. He’d just mentioned working for a living, reminding me that I did too, so I flicked on my answer phone to get the messages.

‘Hi – saw your ad and picture. Like it. I’m in town on Wednesday p.m.; how about something. I usually top; maybe a little CP with afters. Nothing heavy. Talk to you soon.’

‘Hello. I don’t know how happy you are topping middle-aged guys – real sub stuff, for me. Make me obey; anything, I mean anything –’

An odd choking shout sounded on my right; Lex was standing up, looking down on me, his eyes blazing. I flicked the machine off.

‘Rent. God, you’re fucking rent. This is a set-up, right? Pay up or the papers? Bastard – I thought you were just a guy –’

By this time, I’d got to my feet too and was trying to put my arms round him.

‘No, fuck off,’ he said unconvincingly, pushing distractedly against me. ‘How much do you want? I’ve got cash –’

‘Lex, no –’

The split personality, aggression and submission, wildness and gentleness, which soon became familiar, then showed itself in all its spectacular opposition. He squared up, and suddenly I could see the muscles in the shoulders and arms, the total absence of spare flesh, more vividly than ever. He punched me on the cheek, only just missing my eye, and I saw red myself. No punter, I’d decided long ago, was ever going to knock me about like that. I punched him back, hitting almost exactly the same spot. For a minute or two, we both massaged the wound, both of us, I think, surprised at the force

and pain of the blows. Then we looked at each other and dissolved into giggles like two little kids. We weren't much more, when all's said and done. I grabbed the moment.

'I didn't do you as a punter, Lex. I did you because I fancied you like hell. And I was right.'

From then on, it seemed that we were made. I'd become a cynical bastard, as indifferent to punters as most of them were to me, but he'd pressed a button which I hadn't realised was still there. I even got onto boring old football, just to sound interested.

'I want to get to be something like —————', he said, mentioning the name of a famous footballer, I assumed, though it meant nothing to me.

'The boss says that guy is unplayable.' Now there was real enthusiasm in his voice; the whole spasm of temper had faded, like a kid after a tantrum.

'Unplayable?'

'You know. Impossible to stop. He scores goals for fun. That's what I want to be. Unplayable.'

We continued to see each other off and on, precariously, Lex terrified that the media would somehow detect his regular visits; reserve team player or not, the death of Justin Fashanu in 1988 meant the subject of gay footballers was still high on the media agenda and Lex was paranoid about being followed or 'shopped'. It didn't seem to occur to him that the most obvious person to shop him would be me, and his instinctive, if mysterious, trust in me restored something of my severely battered self-belief. He didn't like the way I earned a living – understandably enough, I suppose. When I asked him what he would suggest, he would have one of his long, distracted sulks, like a kid whose game has been pinched.

'If I make the big time, the twenty grand a week stuff, that'll be that, Ian.'

Two or three months in, he started getting games in the full team rather than the reserves, and bringing me press cuttings about his matches; seeing me, he said, had improved his game. At first, the logic of this mystified me. But I think, with me, the guilt and recrimination had gone; he could allow his guilty submissive side to be satisfied. Guys whose lives often need them to be aggressive and assertive, which is most of them, can lose off the gentler side,

the desire to give and be enjoyed by someone; it becomes associated with guilt and fear, especially the fear of vulnerability, in a world where many people are more likely to find male vulnerability exploitable and contemptible than engaging. Lex came to me, had his fill, and went back out to play the game he needed to play, in more ways than one.

I began to ache for him when he wasn't there, and to resent the guys I had to deal with. Lex was incredibly athletic, fastidiously clean and fantastic looking; everyone else paled beside him. He told me sometimes about needing to tell stories about women to keep the guys happy.

'You should hear the way they talk about women,' he would say. 'In the dressing room, talking about their lays as if they're waving their cocks at each other. "I gave it one straight off. Hungry, man." "It was a woof-woof, right enough, but it blew a beautiful job." It. I fucked it. The It. The Thing. But if any guy dares to talk about making them the 'its', they're, like, "oh, gross, man, gay is so gross.'"

Then everything changed very rapidly, as it sometimes does. He arrived in a state of real excitement, his face lit up. He was going to be transferred, he said, into another club in the same division, except the manager had more or less guaranteed him first team football. And a lot more money.

'Come with me, Ian. You and me. Get out of this. I need you with me; I can't do it without you. Come with me.'

I hesitated, and he was hurt. He thought I wasn't convinced about the money and showed me the contract. Eye-stretching as the pay was, I still needed time to think, provoking another protracted sulk, which we got out of with a bathroom session – bathrooms had enormous potential, and Lex liked variety.

While he lay in my arms afterwards, I told him how difficult it had been to make myself free and independent, how he was the only person in the world I would even think about giving that up for, but I had to have a little time and space. I needed, for once, to talk to someone older, so I phoned Roz. She listened without interrupting, as she always has.

'I'm 95 per cent sure I should go for it, Roz. What do you think?'
A kind of snort sounded down the line.

'Heavens, sweetheart, I'm no reed to lean on. My relationship

history is like a battlefield after the battle, and all the corpses are me. Your dad could tell you if you asked him; in fact, he'd probably tell you even if you didn't ask him.'

'He might if he was talking to me.'

A heavy silence. 'Oh, Ian, darling.'

A vivid image came to my mind of my father staring up at me from his favourite armchair, his thin face pale and his eyes narrowed in the certainty of his utter contempt. Even now, those last few days could force tears. I tried to speak, but Roz got there first.

'Listen, Ian, you've always been a strong, determined little bugger, and if this guy isn't for you, someone will be. Get off the game, darling, because that will only ever last for a while before it starts to destroy you. How do I know, never mind how I know. Give Lex a go, sweetheart. Sometimes the chance is worth taking. I've had a few fuck up on me, yes, but while they lasted, I was having a ball.'

Roz clinched it. Lex and I put down a deposit on a flat about thirty miles from his club. He told them he was in a flat share and that's all he wanted for the moment. He was twenty years old; no-one thought much about it. We found a greater bliss and peace in that place than either of us had thought possible. It was a good deal bigger than my little shag nest, and I appointed myself in charge of décor and equipping the place. In the very centre of town, where people drifted in and out in their thousands and no-one noticed who came and who went, we lived our dream. Even the downside – Lex was an untidy sod, unused to regular meal times and not good at planning the next day, and I dare say I had my own set ways after being essentially alone for so long – was fascinating, revelatory, liberating.

By late 1992, we were a couple in every sense of the term that mattered, though even then, problems remained. Other members of the team had women who came to watch them and went to club dos with them, and Lex's youth and inexperience were wearing thin to explain his lack of a partner. He kept on with the line that he hit the town well away from the club so as not to get into the papers.

We had to have some kind of social life, and for that we relied almost entirely on my friends, some of whom remained on the game. Sex workers develop a kind of ethic of their own when it comes to the punters; even if you think you might get paid for

going to the media with a 'name', you know well enough that your business will be ruined for ever afterwards, because no one will trust you any more. Names are also likely to have squads of lawyers behind them. Discretion is practical politics as well as professional etiquette, and I wasn't too concerned about them shopping Lex. In any case, none of them could prove anything.

In mid-November 1992, we met up with Rick Pierce and his new lover Mark Southern. Rick had that elastic, high jumper's build which some guys are crazy about. He'd dipped in and out of prostitution after running from an oppressive Northern household; for a good while, he pretended the 'I only do it for money and I'm not really gay' line. Those guys do exist, yes, but he wasn't really one of them; a punter we had in common once described him to me as a 'really thirsty boy; I swear he'd do it for the hell of it'. Mark worked in a hotel restaurant, the same hotel which Rick occasionally used for picking up. Mark was quiet and dark; he smiled incessantly, if enigmatically. Their flat was very similar to ours, with a balcony and a view; we all felt at home. Both being 'foodies', Mark and I got on well enough, though something about him disturbed me, perhaps the way those little dark eyes darted about and wouldn't meet mine. He and Rick had first got it together in the hotel gents, risking Mark getting the sack; Rick described him to me as a 'sweet, uncomplicated guy who walks the wild side now and then; enough said'.

Late at night, after a drink or two, Rick looked at Lex and smiled.

'Now, tell me to butt out, Lex, but I only ever look at the sports back pages when a sexy picture catches my eye. The other day, that's what happened, and the guy with the oiled thighs on show didn't just look like you, he had the same name. How's that happen, Lex?'

We looked at each other, reaching a mutual decision; sooner or later, we thought, this had to happen, and it might as well be now with guys who were friends enough to trust. Lex had had a drink, and I thought his pleasure at relaxing his secret was mostly about that, until, only a week later, he phoned me in the mid-afternoon.

'Ian, I'm coming home with Brent Morrison.'

'Oh, God. What – to eat?'

Brent Morrison was a name I knew well enough by then, the captain of Lex's team, a guy in his mid-thirties playing out a solid

career before heading into management. I knew he was married, with three young kids. He'd been magic with Lex from the first, advising him, encouraging him, showing him around. Lex knew he helped the new young players as part of his job; he balanced the taciturn Welsh manager in the familiar hard man, soft man combination, but he appreciated Brent all the same.

'He asked if he could visit where I lived; I couldn't think how to put him off. Maybe, after Rick and Mark, we could start – you know – taking it on?'

So Brent came to dinner, and said nice things about our place and my food. Lex and I looked at each other in the kitchen, question marks on both our faces, wondering whether the guy had worked it out. He was a big man, calm-eyed and curiously graceful on his feet, relaxed with himself and others.

A big, verbal coming out proved to be unnecessary. Lex and I were very easy with each other by then; we touched a lot, kissed each other casually, exchanged looks to check on how the other felt. In our own place, it would have taken a guy a lot less sensitive to people than Brent Morrison not to work out what we were all about.

The crucial moment happened quite incidentally. I put Lex's coffee down in front of him; he was finicky about his coffee, having it just the way he liked it. He sipped it and smiled, putting his hand on the back of my neck and pulling my face down to kiss. We had, just for a second, forgotten Brent was there. We both realised simultaneously, and his eyebrows went up as two anxious faces turned suddenly in his direction.

'Don't worry,' he said, 'it's under my hat for now. It comes out – you come out – when you judge the moment and the ground's been prepared a bit. I knew Justin Fashanu; I liked him. That's not going to happen to anyone in my team.'

Lex and I were both blown away with the idea that at last, we had a friend inside football. I even listened to them both explaining more about the game, to have a better idea of what Lex actually did day by day.

So the hammer in my guts was all the greater when, less than a week later, in my nearest store, Lex's name was plastered all over the local paper.

‘Town’s Young Pro Living with Rent Boy’, it said, in big black letters. Seven words, and I had to read them again and again, eyes flickering across the page to try and make myself believe it was really happening. ‘A family friend –’ Family friend? Who the hell? ‘–describes the relationship as having lasted for some time. “Lex Winter has always been gay, as far as I know,” he said, “he hasn’t come out because football won’t let him come out.”’ Well, right enough for that, I thought. But the identity of the family friend tormented me; I wondered wildly if it could be Roz Forbes.

I dashed back to the flat and Lex was already there, sitting on the sofa, pale and bewildered. It was only just after ten in the morning. He’d seen the paper in the garage when he got his petrol and turned right back, thinking that the ground would already be swarming with reporters – as it was.

‘I can’t believe it,’ he said, in the half-strangled voice that normally precedes the long sulk. ‘Brent Morrison. I trusted the bastard, I really did. The skip. Of all people.’

I was just about to agree with him, with an enormous sense of relief that my aunt was off the hook, when I made myself reflect that, if I could jump to such rapid and devastating conclusions, perhaps he was too.

‘We don’t know, Lex. “Family friend” is hardly him, is it?’

The first knock on the door coincided almost exactly with the first ring of the phone, both of them immediately crushing any notions we might have that the media would still be working out exactly where we lived. Someone had told them that as well.

‘Lex?’ someone shouted from behind the door, and the use of his first name by a disembodied, unknown voice had a sinister edge to it. ‘If Lex Winter is in there, we’re offering the chance for you to put your side of the story. Don’t let them have it all their way, Lex. Come out and talk to us.’

‘Stay quiet,’ I whispered to him. ‘Stay very quiet.’

For a minute or so, he did, then he lost his head, for some reason, and stamped out on to the balcony to see if anyone of them were outside. The shouts, along with the whirl and clatter of cameras, started as soon as he stepped out. I saw his frame silhouetted against the increasing brightness of the morning, his back held awkwardly, frozen as if arrested by a beam of light.

I dragged him back in; we retreated to the bedroom, making sure every door that could be was locked. For over an hour, we lay beside each other on the bed, frozen, ignoring the knocks, shouts and phone buzzes. Then a different tone sounded, and I saw it was my mobile. I let it take a message, and picked it up afterwards. It was Rick, speaking as if someone had shut him in a cell.

‘Ian, it was Mark. He’s devastated. Late night at the club, blabbering to some guy he’d just met who turned out to be from the Sentinel. He’s quiet as a mouse a lot of the time, but when he takes what he takes and puts booze on top of it – Ian, mate, I’m so sorry. Come to us. At least pick up on me, Ian, for fuck’s sake...’

At that moment, I couldn’t have talked to him – I couldn’t have talked to anyone. I remember it registering that the press men can’t have had the number of my mobile, because Rick’s was the only call I’d had in the last two hours. How long it would have been before we’d taken action of some kind, I don’t know, but we noticed the noise outside the flat door dying down rapidly, and then a different kind of knock sounded, more muted, less in your face.

‘Lex and Ian? It’s Brent, Brent Morrison. I think I can help.’

We let him in and locked the door behind him.

‘OK,’ he said, settling himself into an armchair. Apart from a slightly faster pace of talking, he didn’t seem disturbed at all.

‘The manager of the apartment block is out there with a couple of policemen. Residents have been screaming blue murder. They will at least make that lot retreat out of the building, so we’ve got a little breathing space.’

He appeared to be considering something for a moment; he was the kind of man who always tended to think before he spoke.

‘Firstly, I’ll tell you what the club wants you to do. The club wants me to take Lex back with me – just Lex – for a press conference early this afternoon, where we’re going to say Ian’s your flat mate, you’ve only known him for a few weeks, you didn’t know what he was up to, their source was a young gay on the make – we’ll imply blackmail – and then the club’s lawyers will look at legal action if the papers persist.’

He looked up and saw the expressions on our faces. We were both momentarily struck dumb.

‘Now,’ and he looked straight into our faces, ‘I’ll tell you what I think you should do. You both have cars parked in that underground car park that serves the building?’

We nodded.

‘They might know what Lex drives, but they certainly won’t know what you drive, Ian. Go down in the lift while you have the chance, leave in Ian’s car with Lex’s head down on the back seat, go to some relative or friend they can’t possibly know – can you think of anyone?’

Lex still looked bewildered, shell-shocked almost, but I leaned forward and nodded vigorously; yes, I certainly could think of someone.

‘Then take a few days to think it through. It should be what you want to do, not what people can bounce you into. You need time. We’ll tell them you’ve gone to ground and we don’t know where.’

We agreed so completely and readily with Brent’s idea – we were both very young and very frightened – that we didn’t stop to worry about whether the club would take it out on Brent, though he left soon after that to take up a managerial post, and I think he’d probably already fixed that up. Big thick footballers is just one more sporting cliché.

We fled to Roz’s for a few days, and she, bless her, was delighted to have us.

‘Thank God, if She really is up there. I was going out of my mind. I didn’t dare phone in case they were tracking – they do that, you know? Now we’ll take it easy and think it over, boys.’

Two days later, Brent Morrison phoned me on my mobile, a number which he’d clearly kept strictly to himself, and he gave us the club line, hastily agreed by manager, chairman and backers. The club would buy out Lex’s contract in full, all four years of it, to prevent anything going to court; they were afraid we might sue for unfair dismissal, Brent said. The condition was that Lex and I needed to simply disappear out of their lives for ever.

That night, we mulled it over around Roz’s huge antique mahogany dining table, after Roz and I had joined forces to produce a very special meal. ‘Whatever has to be decided, we can at least do it on a pleasantly full stomach,’ she said. Lex talked hesitantly, softly, the way he does when something is really on his mind.

Roz and I watched and listened, but she had hold of my hand under the table and she squeezed it from time to time.

‘If we sell the flat as well, we’ll be fine to set up somewhere else. Maybe Ian could start a restaurant, where he can be the boss, like he’s always wanted. I just can’t face it, guys; the abuse, the spitting, the faces, every time I take a corner, every time I go near the touchline. The dressing room mocking; the turned backs. There are gay pros; I know by their eyes, every changing room I’ve ever been in has at least one set of those eyes. Mine meet theirs; I know, he knows, and neither of us do anything about it. Yes, they’ll be some on our side, but how many of them are going to be there, in the ground, when I have to go out and play?’

So the restaurant it was, and still is, twenty years on. I went into my business as the boss, which is the best way to do it. Lex had a ten-year, highly successful career as a model. When I first suggested the idea, he practically laughed himself into a fit, then I told him about the friends I had who’d said how incredible he’d be at it. He still resisted; he was adamant he wouldn’t do nude stuff or porn, and I said he wouldn’t have to. Lex, by then in his early twenties, with his dark looks and perfectly toned and proportioned body, was a clothes horse for the stuff many companies wanted to sell, and when he got more confidence with it, he did a few topless sessions for the gay papers. But the picture which almost every gay man – and quite a few women – had on their walls for a good while was the one he did for a certain underwear company. Iconic is a much over-used word, but iconic is what it was.

Lex in his early forties is a little bit beefier, but he can still kick a ball about and does charity matches occasionally. My father is no longer with us, but my mother and I have picked up the pieces and I see her from time to time.

Well over twenty-five years later, civil partnerships and same sex marriage have been made legal and discrimination against gay people has been made illegal. In almost every walk of life, including some very famous names indeed, gay people have felt able to come out to be and live as they are.

But since the suicide of persecuted Justin Fashanu in 1988, not a single solitary example yet exists of an out gay professional

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footballer. For the gay world, football, the most widely supported sport in the world, remains the unplayable, still locked in its own bigoted and anachronistic isolation.