



*I am alarmed how easily* my opinions can shift. I'm thirty-two years old. And while thirty-two is not an age regularly associated with geezer-caliber pigheadedness, most thirty-somethings are, by now, equipped with that experience-fortified exoskeleton that repels, among other things, the temptation for any sort of heavy vacillation. Not me, though. I'm not equipped with one of those. I'm as permeable as a loaf of pumpernickel. And I'm baffled, too. Maybe even a little worried. I list here a few of the reasons why:

One: My lifelong affinity for strawberry jelly has recently given way to that of grape (a practical flip-flop, I admit, as it was strawberry jelly that provided Hollywood with its ectoplasmic goo in the film *Poltergeist*, a factoid that's quick to cameo as soon as I break out the butter knife).

Two: I've developed a newfound camaraderie with users of spray deodorant, a menacing bunch whose miasmatic presence in the locker-room I once detested.

Three: My favorite bird, for many years the elusive and noble red-headed woodpecker, is now the puffin, a Muppet-like, flightless parody of a bird.

Four: I no longer believe seawater to be the best remedy for boo-boos.

Five: I no longer require the ceiling fan to be on to fall asleep.

Six: I no longer find bubble baths to be Girly.

None of these reversals-of-opinion could've prepared me for the accusations of lunacy and idiocy that my latest about-face has brought upon me. This concerning the benefits of a hardy concussion.

Concussions are underrated. I now believe this to be true. Let me put it another way. Concussions possess more merit than they're given credit for. No doubt, this situation exists due to the general public's lopsided disfavor of head injuries, a consensus that prohibits the benefit of the doubt, as far as your average concussion is concerned (have you ever heard mention of a fine or decent concussion?). Mind you, I don't really fault the naysayers. The benefits of concussions are reported infrequently at best and I suspect that the much heavier publicized negative aspects of concussions (the comas, headaches, memory loss, and all that jazz) aren't going

to oust the current state of public opinion, any time soon. In short, I'm aware I represent a very marginal minority. And my experience has led me to be cautious about the matter, as vocalizing one's merriment for anything so proportionally disliked is a surefire way to end up on the receiving end of some severe ostracism.

As you might expect, I had one recently. A Concussion. It was my first (and thus far, only) concussion and I have to say it was an interesting, if not delightful experience. I couldn't tell you much at all about the actual event, that slim second of action when my head and brain introduced themselves to the sidewalk along P Street, but I do remember what happened just before that moment. And I have tiny vague memories of the aftermath (memories whose status as nonfiction I'll admit I find difficult to gauge). I do remember the medics arriving. Two guys and a girl. They were a youthful trio that looked like they'd never skipped their vitamins. I recall looking at the ground and being bummed that I had broken my bottle of spaghetti sauce (it hadn't occurred to me then that I had not bought any spaghetti sauce). But everything that happened after that is a bit of a blur. I do, however, possess one very intact reel of memory. *The Events That Took Place Inside My Traumatized Head.*

I had just left the subterranean Blockbuster Video (empty handed of course). I trudged up a sinister flight of damp stairs, whose conquest produced some chunk of relief, and then I turned the corner and began to walk in the direction of Logan Circle. The sky was the blue of a sky blue Crayola. A bus made a sound like a dog yawning. The homeless guy with huge swollen legs asked me for a schilling, so I gave him a dollar. And then (according to witnesses) I encountered a rogue patch of ice and went airborne. A Grade Four Concussion, they told me later. I was out less than ten minutes.

Yet in those ten minutes, I witnessed ninety minutes of some of the finest soccer I've ever seen. My beloved Tottenham Hotspur was visiting the Stadium of Light to take on Sunderland. Spurs took the field to a fusillade of boos from the home fans (the two teams took the field separately, as they do with American football). I countered by hooting and clapping boisterously (a high-profile event, as my hands had grown quite large). My fourth-grade teacher, Miss Harrison, was sitting a couple of seats down. She displayed her allegiance for the opposing team by pointing a water pistol at me. I cut out with the clapping and sheepishly tucked my huge hands under my bottom.

For some reason, Spurs had on their old brown away uniforms instead of sporting their usual lily white kits. Sunderland's squad was also not in their usual attire. Instead of wearing their trademarked candy-cane jerseys, they were all decked out (for some mysterious reason withheld by the organization) in scuba gear.

The players started up their pre-game routines. They were bouncing up and down, stretching, and running in circles. Some of the Sunderland players already had their flippers on. Spurs Captain Robbie Keane appeared to be having problems with an inflatable life raft. A seal or walrus in the stands began to heckle him wildly.

I was a little wary of Spurs skipper Martin Jol's decision to replace England's number one keeper Paul Robinson with the aging and perpetually injured Miami Heat point guard, Penny Hardaway. I saw no reason to deny the Dutchman the benefit of the doubt, though. After all, he'd been hired largely because of his innovativeness.

My seats offered a fantastic view. Not so much of the match, but rather of the waterfalls outside of the stadium. The Stadium of Light was situated right smack in the middle of the Orinoco River. At times we seemed to be floating, and at other times stationary. A foot-long dragonfly landed on my shoulder. I looked up into the ever-changing hue of the Venezuelan sky and counted the zeppelins.

Spurs had opportunities from the get-go. Robbie Keane connected with Dimitar Berbatov in the second minute, but the Bulgarian international was denied by the crossbar. Minutes later, Daffy Duck, who was starting for the benched speedster Aaron Lennon, had only Craig Gordon to beat, but punched it well wide, hardly prompting a reaction from the Scottish keeper.

Much of the first half's tempo remained sedate, with neither side seemingly able to take control. Daryl Murphy almost found the net for Sunderland in stoppage time when Hardaway bobbled what should have been a routine save. Gareth Bale's superb clearance, however, denied Sunderland striker Indiana Jones an opportunity for an easy chip shot.

The halftime show was very impressive. Both the Thunderbirds and the Blue Angels were there. They did a nice routine for us that featured actual combat. Suddenly, for just a moment, I was in a parachute above Berlin (a Berlin that had the verticality of Hong Kong).

Sunderland came out of the half looking very impressive (and very feminine in their pink tutus and white tights). Tottenham had also changed uniforms, now opting for the plaid and navy solemnity of the Trinity Heights Christian Academy uniform.

Spurs had a big break when Steed Malbranque (who'd come on for the injured Daffy Duck) fed the ball swiftly and precisely to an inside Berbatov.

'Good *ball!*' I said aloud. Someone somewhere shushed me.

The Bulgarian's effort fell short, though and he covered his face in despair after watching what should have been an easy goal go flying above the crossbar.

'Come on, Berbs! What are you *doing?*'

'Just relax, sir. Breathe normal', said someone in the stands behind me (no doubt a Sunderland fan).

My view of the game had gotten much better. I was now allowed to watch from the actual pitch. Spurs made a couple of subs. Jermaine Defoe took Robbie Keane's place up front and my brother Justin came on for Didier Zokora. Suddenly, all the Spurs were wearing their normal white jerseys, except the cockerel insignia had been replaced by a silhouette of a Pac-Man ghost.

Sunderland made a couple of changes, as well. The Czech international, Pavel Nedved (who I suspect was on loan from Juventus) took the field to a chorus of applause from the home fans, his chiseled confidence glowing from underneath his dirty blond grunge-hair as he trotted out to his position. And not actually taking the place of anyone but hoping to supplement the thus far largely lackluster Sunderland offense was a chimpanzee in an oversized tux named (according to the announcer) Karl Marx.

It didn't take long for Marx to stir things up a bit. He got Michael Dawson to see yellow for contact just outside the box. However, the replay suggested the chimp went down rather easily.

'Are you *kidding* me? That chimp tripped over his damn pants! Terrible call! Terrible!'

More shushing and a siren, somewhere.

The theatrics were all in vain for Marx, though, as Nedved's free kick sailed into the crowd. The Czech's ineptness quickly replaced Marx's chicanery as Tottenham fans' focal point. The indignant chatter that emanated from the south stands morphed into mordant glee. I took an enthusiastic sip from my plastic bottle of Carlsberg. It had the mercurial taste of a bloody lip.

Sunderland, to my consternation, would secure the full three points, though, when moments later a strong challenge inside the box from Ricardo Rocha would send Pavel Nedved to the line. Once again, the replay showed the referee's decision was questionable, at best. But the call had been made and Nedved easily put it in the back of the net, prompting an explosion of cheer from the home fans.

'Peace of shit, Nedved!'

'Shhh. Just relax, sir', replied the lady medic, who was now peering at me intently from the immensity of the JumboTron.

As a fan of the losing side, I wished to get out of the Stadium of Light as quickly and discreetly as possible. I inched into a lumpy herd of Englishmen and began ascending the stairs. Huge drops of rain began to pour from the sky. Angry thunder boomed above me and *then* the sky veined with a frenzy of lightning. The

stadium began to teeter-totter in the river. Huge grey waves smashed into the side of it and swept onto the pitch, transforming the stadium into a theatre of sodden pandemonium. Catfish as big as surfboards wriggled confusedly in the stands. The water on the pitch had grown maybe six to eight feet deep, and it had a supernatural transparency to it (so clear that it was hardly visible). The grass on the pitch beneath it swayed sexily in synchronization. From my left came a blast of collective Hooray. A trio of river dolphins had debuted beneath the south stands. They zipped aerodynamically through the water, putting on a show for the crowd. They flung themselves into the air. They did half-flips and belly-flops, grinning like idiots all the way. How these stubby self-absorbed exhibitionists were ever mistaken for mermaids, I'll never know.

I spotted my girlfriend, Sarah, in the stands beneath me. She was standing in the front row, near the water's edge. She was turned backward, facing the crowd. Her lips moved in silent speech, addressing some unseen companion. I pushed my way through the now quite slippery crowd, pardoning myself in Spanish, French, and German. I walked down the stairs at a snail's pace, usurping whatever space I was able to, managing all the while to keep an eye on Sarah. Suddenly, there was a commotion in front of me. A giant catfish loomed in the way, having taken up residence on the stairway. It was surrounded by a ring of grimacing Englishmen. They were calling it names and nervously poking at it. The catfish's eyes were huge and animated. It didn't look too happy about its current predicament. I leapt over the whole lot of them with a trampoline-caliber spring. A severe miscalculation, however, placed me at sinister heights above the stadium. I shot between the zeppelins like flak, moving with incredible speed. I shattered cumulus clouds like a shotgun blast through feather pillows. I feared what would happen if I reached the ozone. Eventually, I came to a rest and floated ever-so-briefly among a flock of curious gulls. I waved at them (they declined to wave back) and then I fell back to earth with enormous speed. I tucked myself into a cannonball and splashed mightily into the water. I remember thinking *Great, there goes my cell phone* (in retrospect, I wonder if there's any sphere, real or imagined, that these self-important devices haven't infiltrated). Then I opened my eyes and (with delight) realized I could see with the clarity of swimming goggles. Portals of intensely bright light ran along the wall, illuminating the translucent water. Huge shadows crept along the now sandy pitch beneath me. I rolled over on my back. Enormous sturgeons, gar, arapaima, and other extinct-looking behemoths floated in the water above and around me. They eyed me with indifference and a sort of evolutionary superiority. *Two words, pal. Paleozoic Era*, they were probably thinking. *Come see us in about five-hundred-million years.*

I swam down and rested on the bottom. I was gratefully surprised that the pressure didn't hurt my ears. I was also grateful for my newfound breath-holding skills, which would've impressed the most championed of Polynesian pearl divers. The water had grown frighteningly deep. The surface above was probably a good thirty feet away. I curled up into a spring, made my hands into a steeple, and then kicked off the bottom, rocketing through the water toward the light above. The surface was choppy and seemingly endless. I was now in some barren stretch of black seas and grey skies. I heard a horn and then sirens. A boat pulled up alongside me. It was a tug or something, with a boxy design and a Fisher-Price color-coordination to it. I climbed up a ladder and plopped onto the ship's deck with the grace of a loose mackerel. The ship seemed vacant. It occurred to me then that I'd lost Sarah (or, really, had never found her). I felt my ears perk. Jazz music was rising up from somewhere below deck. I walked into the ship's innards and entered a labyrinthine system of hallways. The carpet was an endearingly tacky flux of simple shapes and primary colors. Rectangular, professional-looking paintings of various soccer stadiums hung on the walls. Martin Jol was there, standing in front of one of the doors. He was taller than he appeared to be on television and his bulldog cheeks were a caricaturist's dream come true. He knocked on the door and patiently waited for a response. I waved at him and he gave me a bonhomous little nod in return. *Ab, Marty! You poor boy, I can't believe you lost another opener!* The door opened and closed, snatching Jol with alarming speed. I walked over to it and drummed out *Shave-And-A-Haircut*. Wafts of smoke poured from underneath it. The door opened and I was greeted by Tottenham wingers, Aaron Lennon and Steed Malbranque. They were both still dressed for match time. However, they were now accessorized by dangling cigars and patches of red lipstick upon their cheeks. Both were clutching tumblers. They looked genuinely happy to see me and told me as much. Steed offered me a vodka tonic. I accepted and then I took a look around. The place was packed out with a bohemian-looking bunch, draped all over mountains and valleys of plush couches and double-wide recliners. A piano trio was snookered in the corner on a tiny triangular stage. They were hurling out some smiley standard, limbs in motion, their heads bobbing like pigeons. A towering phalanx of brutalist-looking lampposts sprouted from the center of the room, emitting a red glow that teamed up with the smoke in the air to create a stratus of red cloud coverage, and surreally illuminating the entirety of this bizarre new development. The couch dwellers greeted me with Slo-Motion waves and mumbled hellos. My

ex-girlfriend, Isabel, was among them. She was sprawled out in a recliner as big as a Volvo. A duo of Spurs fans flanked her.

Steed returned with my drink. 'Grey Goose!' he exclaimed before darting away. I thanked his vapor trail and approached Isabel.

'Rotten luck today', I said, making sure I was out of ear's reach of Steed and the others. 'Can you believe it? *Sunderland*. That's just embarrassing.'

'What?' Isabel asked. She wore a long tight-fitting silk dress. Her hair was matte black and had the sharp geometry of a burlesque superstar.

'Poor Marty. He's totally gonna get canned.'

'Jim, what are you talking about? Who's Marty? Where are you?'

Someone stepped between us. It was that lady medic, again. She seemed to be following me. She confiscated my drink, and then she swiveled around and struck up a conversation with Isabel. I couldn't hear what they were talking about, nor did I really care to. I yawned and sprawled out on a sea of purple paisley carpet. It was deceptively uncomfortable but deep sleep found me anyway.

***I awoke in a tiny*** room that looked straight off the set of a Terry Gilliam movie. A haggard looking fern was the only oasis of color in its black and white austerity. Dabs of science fiction metal clung to my periphery. I had a terrific headache.

'Hello, sleepyhead.'

Isabel.

She sat motionless under a dusty television, its screen black with silence.

I stared at this impossible beauty for long seconds. Deep slumber had bestowed me with a Zen-like clarity. I wondered how long I had been asleep. I tongued dry spittle at the corners of my mouth. I contemplated taunting gravity, but decided against it.

'Izzy', I said, finally. 'Come here, Izzy.'

She had always hated this nickname, this lopping off of a single syllable in the name of familiarity and affection. I hoped the circumstances (whatever the hell they were) would override this tiny faux pas.

'You hit your head. You slipped on some ice in front of a CVS. You're in a hospital. You'll be okay.' She said the words dully, as if she was telling me how to get to the National Cathedral by bus.

My eyes wondered to the television, as eyes will do. 'How did you know I was here?' I said after some time.

'You called me', she said with the same matter-of-fact tone. 'You called me after you hit your head.'

'I called you?'

'Uh-huh.'

'What did I say?'

'I don't know. You were talking gibberish. I thought you were drunk.'

'How'd you know to come here?'

'Molly told me.'

'Molly?'

'Yeah. One of the medics. She took the phone away from you and gave me the scoop.'

As if on cue, a nurse opened the door and glided over to my bed. She hovered over me for a while, checking me out with a dull annoyance in her eyes (it was a look you'd give an overturned garbage can or a clogged toilet).

'This is Molly's sister, Holly.'

Holly and I exchanged Hellos, her half of the deal decidedly more obligatory.

Holly was young, but homely looking. She could have been a looker with the right conditioning. Instead, she had frizzled cat-lady hair and the charm of an underpaid mortician.

'Awake, huh?'

Isabel answered for me. 'I guess so'.

Holly's face loomed inches away from me. For a second, I thought she was going to give me a kiss. Instead, she blasted me in the right eye with the world's smallest and most powerful flashlight. Then she shined it in my left eye and frowned for a little while. Holly snorted, flashed Isabel a nano-smile, and then walked over to the television and began dusting the screen off. Then she glided through the door, shutting it soundlessly behind her.

Isabel uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. She was dressed in an exaggerated casualness. Jeans, sweatshirt, pony-tail, all very polar from her usual cosmo-sleekness.

'So, what made you decide to call me? Why didn't you call Sarah?'

'I don't know.' This was true. I didn't know. I had no idea why I had called her. I didn't even have a recollection of calling her. 'I don't really know', I repeated, for emphasis.

'Sure, sure', she said.

I leaned up slowly. 'How long', I said 'do you think I have to stay in this joint?'

'Not long. They have to do a couple of more tests and then you're free to go.' Isabel smirked. 'Why were you wearing cowboy boots in this weather? Are you crazy? I'm surprised you made it as far as you did.'

'I like my boots', I said, proudly. I looked around for them. There they were, moored at the base of the open bathroom door, relegated to the role of doorstep.

Isabel offered to go and get me a soda from the vending machine. I took her up on it. Some caffeine would probably be a good idea. My cell phone sat inert on a table next to me. It looked like it belonged there, like it had found a new home among the other gadgets and whatzits of a Twenty-First Century hospital. I checked my outgoing calls. Apparently, I had called Sarah. In fact, I'd called her six times. I checked my missed calls. She had not called back.

Isabel returned with a Sprite. Maybe the most useless beverage in the world. Sprite. And no doubt the only soda in the vending machine that was caffeine-free. Not once had I ever drunk a Sprite in Isabel's company. I didn't hesitate to question the rationale behind her decision.

'Fine', she said. 'You don't have to drink it, you know?'

Isabel had always had a knack for instilling guilt in others. I sighed and took a sip. It tasted like a Seven n' Seven missing one of the Sevens (the more important of the two). 'Look, I'm not mad', I said. 'I'm just baffled, is all.'

'Why would you be baffled?' Her hands started up with the spastic charades. 'Jim, I haven't seen you or even talked to you in what? Two years? You know how many guys I've dated since you?'

I did actually have a rough estimate.

'What do you want? A Coke? Would that be better? I'll go get you a Coke.'

She dashed out the door before I could protest. Just as well. She would have gone, anyway. A whiff of her perfume wafted past me, leaving an ephemeral surge of nostalgia in its wake.

Isabel returned with the Coke. She handed it to me but remained standing. I took a sip of it and stifled a burp.

'You're welcome', she said.

It's true. Love is blind. Love is also deaf, dumb, stupid, and crazy. This is the only explanation I could come up with for having spent two years living with this amateur psychopath. Isabel was like a Celine novel, all question marks and exclamation points. I did not regret leaving her (or, rather, passively providing her with the encouragement to leave me).

'Better?'

'Very much so. Thanks', I said, somewhat untruthfully. Wow. Long time, no Coke. I'd seemingly lost any tolerance I ever had for mega-carbonated syrup. My belly sounded like the keyboard section of a Radio Shack. What the hell was going *on* in there?

Isabel began to stir. 'Who's Marty?' she asked.

'Huh?'

'Who's Marty?'

'Marty?'

'Yeah. You kept talking about someone named Marty. You said Marty's going to get canned.'

I knotted my brow. 'I said that? When did I say that?'

'Earlier. On the phone. When I thought you were drunk.' Isabel did something here that surprised me. She sat down on the bed next to me and began to massage the top of my head.

'Marty? Are you sure I said Marty? I don't know any Marty.'

'You said Marty. You said Marty's Gonna Get Canned. Just like that. Actually, you said Marty's *Totally* Gonna Get Canned. Just like that.'

'Did I?'

'Uh-huh.'

Isabel was making little figure eights just north of my hairline. My body language proclaimed nothing more than confident indifference.

'Oh! I know what Marty, I said suddenly. *Martin Jol*.'

'Who?'

'Martin Jol. That's the Marty I was talking about.'

'Who's he?'

I told Isabel about the Tottenham/Sunderland match that took place in my head. I gave her the full scoop from beginning to end. She listened with the hurry-up disposition of someone stuck on the receiving end of dream talk, nodding here and there, grunting, sighing, yawning. No doubt, I had dished out this very same disposition when listening to her carry on about her Nyquil dreams, desperately searching for symbolism among the talking carrots, stratospheric family reunions, outdoor bowling alleys, and rattlesnake farms. I recalled Isabel's lone expeditions to the *New age/Occult* section of Barnes and Noble, and her trigger-happy paraphrasing of Carl Jung.

'Strange', she said, for probably the sixth or seventh time.

Holly came back in the room. She moved about noisily with an air of either reckless confidence or feigned abandon. Her movements were quick, but imprecise. Her actions were loud, but unnecessarily so. She was beginning to scare the hell out of me.

'Yeah. Strange', I offered up to the room.

Holly began to dig in what looked like a tackle box. Is this a proper time to go fishing? One would think not. Then, maybe it's some form of therapy. Weird, nonetheless. I was about to begin questioning the integrity of this hospital when Holly pulled not a beetle-spin or a rubber worm from the tackle box, but a stethoscope. *Oh, those things belong here! I'm safe after all.*

'Do you think it means anything?' said Isabel.

What was she talking about? 'What are you talking about?' I asked.

Isabel and Holly exchanged sorry attempts for smiles.

'Your dream', Isabel said. 'The Football Match.'

'Don't call it that. Just call it soccer.'

'The Soccer Match', she continued. 'So you think it means anything?'

I sat up and crossed my legs, realizing for the first time that I was wearing a robe. I looked at the both of them for about ten seconds. Ten seconds is not a long time. There are, however, plenty of circumstances out there that can sure make ten seconds *seem* like a long time. Have you ever been disoriented underwater for ten seconds? Or on fire for ten seconds? Or have you ever heard a prime minister pause for ten seconds during a resignation speech? It can be a dreadful amount of time. Ten wordless seconds between three people in a hospital is actually a very, very long time.

So I eradicated the silence.

'Do I think it means anything? Do I think that nonsense means anything? Absolutely, I do! It means Martin Jol *should* be fired. It means they need to get rid of his ass! The sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned. They're already looking at Ramos. It's no secret. Hell, I'd be surprised if Jol even makes it through the week. I mean, come on! The man started Daffy Duck instead of Aaron Lennon. *Daffy Duck*. Over Aaron Lennon? Is he crazy? Aaron Lennon's one of the fastest, one of the most dynamic players in the league! In *any* league! And why the hell would he bench Paul Robinson for a basketball player? Long arms don't necessarily equate to good goalkeeping. I doubt Penny Hardaway's ever even *seen* a soccer ball. Martin Jol should know this! And

I'm sorry. I love my brother, but he has no business whatsoever being out on the pitch. Especially not at left wing!

This went on for a while. The girls just stood there, watching my lips move with dull surprise. When I petered out, they offered me nothing but cold silence. So I began to sing

*Glory, glory, Tottenham Hooootspur!*  
*Glory, glory, Tottenham Hooootspur!*

And continued to sing.

*And the Spurs go marching on!*  
*Tottenham is the greatest thing the world has ever seen!*  
*Tottenham is the greatest thing the world has ever seen...*

Apparently, this also went on for a while. Or at least until Holly decided that she'd had enough. Nurses aren't inherently equipped with maliciousness. You've got to work real hard to bring it out in them. *Damn* hard. I mean you've really got to give it your best. The contents of the syringe Holly jabbed me with reduced my melodious jubilee to a folksy ballad and then to some cathartic spoken-word business, full of discordant howls and irregular rhyme, and then (finally) to a sludge of heavy-lipped slurs, followed by an encore of dreamless sleep that worked its way into a double-digit's worth of hours. How was I to know that Holly was an Arsenal fan? I mean *really*.

***The four to six weeks*** have passed. Word around the house is I'm doing much better. Contrary to their performance that day in the Stadium of Light (in *my* Stadium of Light) Spurs are also doing alright. They did get rid of Martin Jol. And they did bring in Juande Ramos. Hopefully, he'll turn things around for us (maybe even get us a spot in the top four). Hell, I think we might even take Arsenal this year. That is, overcome Arsene Wenger and his band of acrobatic Francophones. Well, maybe not this year. *But next year, for sure!*