My Idea of Fun

The Autobiography

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Extract

CHAPTER 1

Born smiling

When I was nine or ten, playing football in the Cubs' team in Halesowen, Birmingham, before the start of every football season my mum and dad would unveil a brand-new, shiny pair of football boots and a spotless ball – awesome gifts. I used to take them tenderly up to my room at night, tuck them under the covers, settle down and sleep with them. I think it was love.

My dreams, as I grew older, were never very complicated: I was going to be a footballer. I spent secondary school playing for teams in the year above, and doodled through lessons practising my autograph. That meant I left without an O-level to my name but, I thought, with all the skills I'd need. My mum used to worry: 'What are the chances,' she'd say, 'of you really being a professional footballer?' She wanted me to have something to fall back on, in case it didn't work out. I didn't give that much thought, and my dad backed me up, which was surprising, because he was always the safe, steady one, more cautious by nature than my mum: 'Someone's got to be,' he used to say. 'Why can't Lee be one of the few? He's good enough.' She used to

shake her head, worry about her boys, lost in fantasy.

I daydreamed about stepping out for one of the big clubs at the great grounds, the stands packed with passionate fans, roaring their team on, chanting my name. I don't think I was ever stuck on the idea of 'winning things' – of hoisting a cup above my head, carrying a medal home, finishing top of the league; I'm not sure I ever gave that stuff a thought. My imagination was dazzled by the game itself: scoring goals, skipping past full-backs, using the natural pace I always had as a boy, going on mazy dribbles, breathing the joy of the crowd and celebrating with them. I'd be in awe of the games they showed on TV, wingers in full flow, strikers banging in goals, and I loved the little cameos they'd play over and over again on *Match of the Day*, those quirky moments: Alan Birchenall of Leicester and Tony Currie of Sheffield United falling in a heap, then giving each other a little kiss before they stood up; players suspending hostilities for a second to give each other piggy backs, cuddle a ref, climb on a wall to celebrate a sweet bit of play. Stealing a bit of time to laugh and enjoy themselves.

I ended up supporting Aston Villa – it was a case of siding with my granddad, my mum's dad, who supported the Villa and got me to support them too as a put-down to my dad. He was always needling my dad, starting with size, because my granddad was a huge man, a lorry driver, 6' 4", while my dad's only 5' 8". My dad's a Birmingham City fan and he did take me to a few games at St Andrews, but my granddad said: 'You're not supporting the team that duck egg supports! You'll support the Villa.'

So I thought, cool, I'll support the Villa, if Granddad does. I never went to many games, though; I was born on 25 May 1971, so when I was fourteen, fifteen, football-

supporting age, it was the mid-1980s, when there was a lot of trouble at matches, and my mum was never keen on me taking the three-bus odyssey from our house to Villa Park with mayhem and madness kicking off everywhere. I was ten when Villa won the League Championship, and eleven when they won the European Cup the following year; magical performances, so unexpected, and at that age I took it all in like a sponge. Even then, I was a Gary Shaw or Tony Morley fan, loving the trickery and skill, rather than an admirer of Ken McNaught's prowess as a stopper, or Des Bremner fetching and carrying in midfield. For me, football was Trevor Francis, not John McGovern; Kenny Dalglish, not Joey Jones; the showmen, not the workhorses. And, along with being a dazzling football superstar when I was older, I naturally thought I'd have a good standard of living, a nice house, flash car, girls fluttering around – I was never the most difficult soul to please; not then, not now.

Birmingham in the 1970s might not evoke a picture of heaven for everybody, but it was for me growing up, a happy, wonderful childhood. I had a warm, loving family, my mum and dad could not have done more for us, I always had good mates and our estate was a playground, full of laughs and endless, flowing games of football. It might not have been the same toothy grin which, for some reason I can still never work out, would later drive so many football managers to distraction, but I think I was born with a smile on my face.

My mum and dad – Gail and Leo – were school sweethearts really; they married at nineteen and had me, their oldest, at twenty-one. I was born in inner Birmingham but when I was tiny we moved out to a semi-detached three-bedroom house on a newish estate in Blackheath,

Black Country territory. My dad was – still is – a metal-spinner, an old, skilled, Brummie trade, which he's done since he left school at sixteen. He worked for years for a big company locally, then, when I was ten or eleven, made the big, brave move of setting up on his own and having a few blokes working for him. He called his company ATOL Spinnings, for A Touch of Luck, so he must have been fingers-crossed about it at the time. My mum is the more adventurous type – they reckon I take after her more than my dad with my freewheeling, what-will-be-will-be approach to life. She stayed at home when I – and my younger brother John and sister Nicola when they came along – were kids, but she always had work or her own little business ventures on the go: industrial cleaning, ironing on some incredible scale. Years later, she'd have her hands full running the Lee Sharpe fan club for thousands of besotted adolescent girls, but we'll get to that.

We weren't rich but we were reasonably well off. They always looked after us kids. We were well dressed, never had ripped clothes or shoes hanging off us. I don't remember ever going short of anything; we always had what we wanted at Christmas and birthdays. When I was still only eighteen months old we moved to a different estate, which became my stamping ground as I grew up. One of my main muckers there, Ross Hadley, is still my mate now, and by the time we were six or seven Ross and I would be roaming all over the estate. It wasn't massive, and it was safe; my mum just used to tell us to be careful as we went out to play in the morning, and she wouldn't see us again until teatime. Sometimes our mums would make us a packed lunch and we'd cycle round the estate pretending we were travelling round the world; we'd stop and say we

were in a different country, and eat a sandwich or two to celebrate our arrival, toast it with a can of Coke.

We played anywhere, sledging down a bank at the back of the estate when it snowed, leaping off a low wall on our bikes down by some garages, and I had plenty of time to act out my football dreams, in the streets or on grass verges, mammoth games, lasting hours on end, till the dark was creeping over us and our tummies were nagging us to finally take them home. We played football wherever, developing a feel for the ball, a taste for tricks, going past or beating the lad trying to stop you, smacking a goal in without a thought, having marathon skills competitions out in the park by a tree: who could keep it up longest, who could volley, shoot, score. I'm not sure tracking back or man-marking played any part in those magical sessions, but imagining ourselves performing heroics, basking in the roars of the crowds in the great grounds of the Midlands, certainly did.

I played my first proper match, for the Cubs, at eight. Couldn't wait. Could hardly sleep. So nervous beforehand, as I always would be before matches, at any level. We lost 10–1. I don't think I was too bothered about that; we played a team older and bigger than us, so we got slaughtered. More important to me was the thrill of putting my first proper team kit on: bright red top, red shorts, yellow socks, yellow numbers on the back. Quality gear, right from the start. With the kit on, I felt a foot taller, stronger, faster, a proper footballer. Within twelve months, our team had grown up, a few decent players joined us and soon we were the best in the area, beating everyone. My mum and dad shipped us everywhere; they grumbled about being a taxi service taking me and, later, John to football,

Nicola to dancing or gymnastics, but they loved it really. They were always there, always encouraging, always proud. Mostly, though, at that early age, I'd be staying with Nan and Granddad at weekends, and my granddad would take me to the Cubs football on Saturday mornings.

I idolised him, loved, worshipped him. Looked so far up to him it hurt my neck. I was a granddad's boy, as I think a lot of little boys are. I spent so much time with them when I was growing up, I've found out in recent years it caused a few rows between Mum and Dad because my dad complained he hardly saw me. It started when I was only six or seven; they were helping my mum out really. She used to take me to the edge of the estate on Fridays and put me on the bus to Halesowen, the next town along, about five miles away. Nan and Granddad would be waiting for me at the other end, standing there with a little present, a new Action Man outfit or a couple of toy cars, and we'd go up to the Labour Club or the social club where they'd play bingo, watch a cabaret, have a few pints and I'd run around and play hide-and-seek with some of the other kids outside. When I was a little bit older, we kids all used to traipse round the streets, down a gully to a chippie, get roe or fish and chips, ask for them to be wrapped in newspaper, then walk back and eat them together sitting outside the club, like a real, proper posse.

Granddad used to drive his lorry to supermarkets, delivering food around the country, so I used to go with him in the holidays sometimes, sit up in his cab like a grown-up, like his mate. Mum would get me up early and walk me to the edge of the estate. He'd roll up in his wagon at six o'clock and they'd throw me into the cabin. He had a bed made up for me in there. I'd go straight back to sleep,

then wake up hundreds of miles down the road, unloading cargo somewhere up north, or in Wales.

His nickname was the Duke – he looked a bit like John Wayne – and he had plenty of aggression to match his size; he used to get road rage before they invented the phrase. Loved a pint, too. In the days before the clampdown on drink-driving, he'd have twelve or fifteen pints in an evening, then drive home. God knows how many cigarettes he'd smoke, woodbines with no filters. He used to take me into pubs with him and sit me up on the bar, buy me a Coke and tell me to behave myself while he and his mates had a few pints. He even bought me a little suit from the market, used to dress me in that and tell landlords I wasn't a kid, I was a dwarf, so they'd let me in.

We moved nearer their flat, in Halesowen, when I was eleven, a bigger house for us in a nicer area. When I started secondary school, I had to walk past their flat to get the bus to school, so I stayed the odd night there at first, because I was knocking around with a few lads who lived down there and thought I might as well leave my uniform with my nan and kip there. I ended up pretty much living with them for eighteen months; it might seem strange, but I was so close to them, I just never went home. They used to spoil me rotten: Nan used to wake me up in the morning with a cup of tea in bed, my school uniform used to be in the airing cupboard so it was all warm when I put it on, they fussed and pampered me. It was the good life, and I never complained. My dad probably did, a lot, although I didn't know it at the time. You can understand it from his point of view – I used to see him and my mum all the time, but I never stayed at home because life was so sweet at my nan and granddad's.

I think it would be fair to say I was not the most assiduous swot ever to grace the classrooms of Hagley High School; I was in the top sets but treated all the subjects the same – did bugger all on any of them. I spent the days waiting for the time when I just knew starstruck girls would be queuing up for my autograph, then I used to go out on the sports field and make a name for myself, whatever the sport. Football, of course, but I had an eye for cricket, and loved basketball. I was quick, taller than I look at first, I loved games and I had a natural athleticism, which served me well whatever we were doing. I ended up with the archetypal footballer's reports: 'Could do better if only he tried' in every subject, but 'a pleasure to have around, excels' for PE. I can't say I had too much of a problem with that. I always enjoyed school, though, and was never in any trouble; I was a happy-go-lucky young lad. I wasn't a rebel or cheeky to the teachers; I was brought up to respect them and all my figures of authority, particularly the men: my dad, my granddad, the teachers.

When I was eleven, my Cubs side played one of the strong Sunday league junior clubs in the area, Stourbridge Falcons. They were the kind that attracts – or hoovers up, depending on how you look at it – all the best kids around and goes about hammering all the other little sides into the ground. We took them on and beat them 1–0; I was a left-winger even back then, using my pace to get past people, or playing up front behind a striker and running at defenders, which I loved. Sure enough, after the game, along comes the pushy coach, asking me and two other lads to play for them. One was Darren Goodall, a very good right-winger, who ended up on West Brom's books; the other was Mark Davey, a really tough no-nonsense left-back, a bit of a

kicker, which was great for me. I played left-wing in front of him for years, and if anybody kicked me, Mark used to seek out double portions of vengeance and kick a real lump out of them.

Stourbridge Falcons was a good club and a good standard. I used to take full-backs on and put crosses in, and I scored quite a few goals too. We had one of those really over-developed lads playing centre-forward, Craig Toy, the kind who strikes terror into lanky pubescent defenders everywhere because he's got rippling muscles and hair where they're not sure you're supposed to have it. He looked a bit like George Michael, designer stubble and everything, at twelve. He wasn't a great player but he put himself about, scared the centre-halves to death, won everything in the air, and I'd read his flick-ons, run on to them, gallop through and have plenty of one-on-ones with keepers, usually putting them away with my left foot, no problem. I always loved scoring – the elation, the joy, the ultimate football experience – although I'm not sure I followed up the goals with my own specially minted celebrations, not quite yet.

We did well, were always one of the top teams in that part of the Midlands, but I still never played much for the district, and that was my first taste of football politics: that who you know, or someone's idea of who you are, can too often determine whether you're going to be in a team, rather than how good you are and how well you're performing. The teacher who ran the district team was friendly with the manager of another Sunday league club, and everyone from that club seemed to get picked, while we didn't. I used to get on very well with the games teacher at my school, Mr Shannon – I always kept in touch with him,

throughout my professional career; he's stayed at my house in recent years the odd time he's been up watching matches in the north. He knew the teacher running the district team for the year above, so I ended up getting picked for that, when I was supposedly not good enough for the team representing my own age group. Strange, but a fair preparation for the games people play. Football's a simple game, they always say, and that's true, but the men involved in it, their egos, hang-ups, prejudices, whatever it is, can make it very complicated, and, if you're not careful, it can leave you feeling pretty sour, too.

One ordinary day, when I was twelve, I was on my way home from school to see Nan and Granddad, and was surprised to see my dad and brother waiting for me as I stepped off the bus. Dad's face was ashen: 'We've got some bad news,' he said. 'Your granddad's died.'

My world ended, right there. I'd stayed with them the night before, and in the morning, really early, three, four o'clock, Granddad had got up and gone to work. He was driving tarmac lorries at the time, moving the black stuff to where motorways were being repaired. He'd stopped smoking on doctor's orders a couple of years earlier, but he was still pretty strong, working away. That morning he hadn't felt too well; thought he had a bit of flu coming on. Nan told him to phone in and take the day off but he lived for his work and said he'd go but come home early and have a lie-down.

He was just doing a routine job, they said, bending down to undo a valve on the truck. He had some water on his heart, had a huge heart attack out of the blue and died right there, gone. It was a freak, really. He was only just sixty, and we've always wondered how much longer he'd have

been with us if he'd only taken that day off work. I was distraught. I missed him so much, couldn't believe the emptiness of life without him. I used to mope on the sofa in front of the telly at home, and moan: 'I wish I was dead too. I want to see my granddad,' and Mum used to tell me not to be so silly.

I suppose twelve might be one of the worst ages for dealing with death; you're old enough to know what's happened, but not emotionally mature enough to understand. I remember Mr Shannon saying to me: 'In five years at secondary school, I never saw you without a smile on your face – except for that little while, after your grandfather died.'

I couldn't believe he was gone. I'd have loved to knock about with him when I was a teenager or an adult, and I always regret that, while he stood, strong and silent, freezing on the touchline with a flask of tea watching me race about for the Cubs, he never saw me galloping down the line, scoring goals for Man U, at Old Trafford, or Highbury, or Villa Park. He'd have loved it. We've got on with life, of course we have, but we all still miss him, even now.

At fourteen, I met my own childhood sweetheart: Debbie Totney. Gorgeous. She started at our school in the second year. I think I was pretty much besotted the first time I saw her. We got chatting before too long, then we started going out, in a lovestruck-teenagers kind of style, kissing at the bus stop, going to each other's house after school for tea, that kind of thing. Debbie lived with her mum because her parents were divorced. On Fridays her mum would go to the pub with her boyfriend, so a few mates of mine and Debbie's friends would go round to the house for a party.

We might have a few lagers – big drinkers at fourteen, fifteen – play music, fool about, then her mum would come back at eleven, twelve o'clock and have a drink with us all. She'd go up to bed and we'd get the sleeping bags and blankets out and all sleep downstairs in the living room. In the morning, all the lads would get up early and catch the train together to go and play for the school team. Good days. My mum was convinced Debbie and I were made for each other and we'd end up getting married, and we did go out together, on and off, all the way through school and beyond, until I got to Man U where it all came to a sloppy, heartbreaking end.

At fifteen, a few of the lads who'd played together for a while formed our own team as part of another strong local outfit, Stourport Wednesday. Mark Davey's dad, John, started it; he was the manager, a real bawler and shouter, ranting and raving on the line, a great football man, bursting with fire and enthusiasm. He loved me and my pace; he used to stand there, screaming: 'Get the ball to Sharpey! Give it Sharpey!' They'd throw it over to me on the left wing and I'd try to push it past or dribble round the full-back and get crosses in, or stride through and score a few goals: tremendous. A few of us went on to play for the senior first team too, open-age football at a good Sunday league standard, and I did all right there. I was never really intimidated, I just wanted to get hold of the ball and play. Meaty blokes in opposing sides were always trying to kick me, to teach the quick, skilful kid a lesson, but it never bothered me. They'd tell me they'd break my legs, neck, kick my head in, and generally I'd shrug and say: 'Go on then, whatever.' If they whacked me I just used to get up and laugh – and that's what I've always done with kickers.

I've never been one to retaliate, but the physical side of football has never worried me either. Back then I had Mark Davey behind to look after me, who did really enjoy munching people, then in professional football I was never short of team-mates ready to mix it if the opposition were playing dirty. I used to get up, smile, say nothing, and take them on again next time – which winds up cloggers more than anything.

In the fifth year at school, I ended up playing in the sixth-form team, the Under 19s, when I was only fifteen, and Mr Shannon used to ladle responsibility on me, in a way I always remember. He'd take me to one side before a big game, and say: 'You can win this for us, Lee, with your ability. I can't say that to every boy because it would make some go under, but I know you can handle it. So you go out and win it for us.'

I'd stand there, grin, mumble: 'Well, all right, if you say so,' but inside he inspired me, filled me with confidence by showing he had belief in my ability, and telling me so. Positive motivation, I think they call it, and I used to stride out there feeling good in myself, and go and attack teams. The bigger the game, the more motivated I was. Because I mostly played for decent sides, even as a teenager we'd have top-of-the-table, end-of-season deciders, maybe with a bit of a crowd, an air of hostility and needle, and I always enjoyed those games, used to try to rise to the occasion.

I suppose a bit of fame spreads for you if you're good at sport as a kid, first in school, then in the area, a few write-ups in local papers, and at fifteen, Birmingham City decided they fancied having a look at me and signed me on schoolboy forms. A scout had watched me play for Stourbridge Falcons against another strong youth team,

North Star, from the other side of Birmingham. They gave us the full treatment, invited my dad, his brother Jack and me to watch a game, against Luton Town, I think, from an executive box at St Andrews, selling us the Blues as the place for me to build myself a future. My dad was made up, of course.

It was a different story when I got there. I went training one night a week, then every morning in the school holidays with the apprentices, but I never liked it. It was cliquey; lads who knew each other from their own clubs stuck together and I didn't particularly like them, felt on the fringes of it all. I played a few games then Kevin Reeves, the former Manchester City striker who was in charge of youth development, called my dad and me into his office to tell us he was letting me go. He said I had more skill than anybody else on their schoolboy books, but didn't believe I had the aggression to be a top-flight professional. Apparently, Dad told Mum that my face dropped so far he could have cried for me, but that's not how I remember feeling. I hadn't liked it there and didn't really want to go into full-time training, or an apprenticeship, with all these lads around who fancied themselves and weren't friendly. I think about what Kevin Reeves said now, and see it as an admission of failure on his part. I was the raw material – I loved the game, tried to play it creatively and with a bit of joy, I worked hard, gave it everything in training, stood up to physical stuff – so I think I was a player to work with. I think it's the job of the clubs to teach you the extra aggression you need in the professional game. Torquay, who'd finished bottom of the Fourth Division the year before I eventually went there, were to inject that aggression into me with cunning brutality, so I'd have thought Birmingham City might have managed.

I wasn't bothered; what will be will be – things happen for a reason, I believed that then and live by that philosophy now. The trial at Torquay popped up just a couple of days later. It was busy at school-leaving time, with clubs deciding who to take on to stock their apprenticeship schemes. Mark Davey and a couple of lads from his district team had gone down there and done well enough in trials to be invited back and he put a word in for me, said his mate had just been let go by Birmingham. Simple as that, word of mouth, which gave me my chance of a toehold at the bottom of football's ladder, a smiling lamb heading to the slaughter at the hands of two murderous taskmasters: Sean Haslegrave, the ultimate midfield terrier as a player, and a guy who would be a big man in my life, Derek Dawkins, the man they call the Dude.

Torquay, with nothing to lose, invited me down for a three-day trial. As it turned out, I played a full match on each of those three days; I was on my knees by the end. The first, on the Monday, was a trial game against another youth team. I found it no problem; soon I was flying down the wing. Mark played behind me and we got our game going, him winning it, playing it into my path, me taking people on and getting crosses in. People watching said they could tell we'd played together for a while, which was cool. He was unfortunate not to be taken on by Torquay; he'd have made a good professional – and we'd have had a great laugh together.

It seems unbelievable now, but the following day the first team had a match, a local derby against Exeter in a kind of South-West end-of-season cup they played in, and they just threw me straight into it. Most of the first team had packed up and gone away for the summer, there weren't many left-

footed players around, so they slung me in, aged sixteen, having played a game the day before. True to my forgetfulness about the detail of matches, the statistical side of football which leaves me cold, I can't remember much about it, not the score, nothing really, except that I must have done OK, showed in places I could play a bit, and there were a few pats on my back when we all trooped off.

The following day, Wednesday, there was yet another trial game on, against some other local youth team, and there was me in the starting line-up, knackered, battered, begging for mercy, but I got through it. The three days over, they called me in: yes, they would offer me an apprenticeship, two years; they'd train me up and I'd have a chance of making something of myself in the game. OK, I said, chuffed but not showing it, I'll have a chat with my dad, and let you know.

I can remember the interminable length of the train journey back from Torquay to Birmingham, me stiff, bruised, wrecked, and the following day I had a trial lined up at West Brom, who were going to have a look at me as a centre-forward. I turned up so hangdog they only put me on for the second half. As I remember it, it was a scrappy game, there was no chance to do very much, then it was over. Afterwards, Dad and I were in some dingy dressing room – it was more of a boiler room, I think, old bandages everywhere, kit drying, saggy old benches – when a West Brom bloke came up and said: 'If Torquay have offered you a contract, I'd snap it up with both hands.'

My dad said he nearly chinned him. Wolves offered me a trial soon afterwards; they'd let all their young lads go, I'd done quite well in a game there at some point, so they were asking me back. The trials, though, weren't starting until

July, and Torquay's players would be back for pre-season training by then; I'd need to be giving them an answer, starting my apprenticeship there, before I'd even had my trial at the Wolves. Dad and I sat down to talk about it. Torquay had only managed to stay in the League the year before with a last-minute goal in the last match of the season; it was miles away from home, while Wolves were a legendary club where we lived, even though they were having hard times, half the ground was condemned and only Steve Bull seemed to be keeping them alive. Dad never pushed me, he didn't even really give me advice, he just wanted to be there as a sounding board, to help me chew over the options. The clincher was this: Torquay's was a solid offer. If I waited for Wolves, it might never happen. I was leaving school and Torquay were giving me the chance to go straight down there to a two-year apprenticeship, a chance to make my way in professional football, what I always said I'd do when I left school.

So that was it, I was off to the south coast. I'm not sure I even turned up for all my exams, I certainly didn't revise, but I left school smiling and with the good wishes of the sports teacher at my back. It was only Torquay, but to borrow a phrase that would become notorious at one of the big clubs I'd play for later in my career, I was living the dream. I was off to be a footballer. Like the man said, I snapped up that Torquay contract with both hands.