

The Laddy Jones Story Part One

by Ben Oswest

What was Laddy Jones thinking
as he watched his long hair dangling
down in the toilet bowl?

How nobody could shout down forty-thousand people. The noise propelled him home at night like a parade and his eyes opened to the lingering majesty of it in the mornings. People shouting for him over and over. For Laddy—*La* like a bloodfreezing war cry and *Day* like a cathedral going quiet when it was forty thousand of them. Then next day LADDY! ricocheting off the back page in the largest, thickest permissible type. He thanked God for the puppy souls of the football hacks. Let in after the match, sniffing all the corners, pissing in the same urinals as the athletes. Even before his first goal he had them calling him Laddy. Daddy. Then he left Liverpool like they were dropped out of an aeroplane in the 78th minute from twenty-two metres out and suddenly the hacks were like his wives, nagging him Laddy this, Laddy that. It was the sweetest music to his ears. He was the Godfather, delegating a crime that would never touch him. Sending out the message to the old streets—*you people are nothin' to me and you won't never be nothin' to me*. To the men with poisoned eyes who called over their pints for Jones' balls. *Lady* was their name for him, they aimed at his dainty feet with their puny minds. Trip the prima donna up no matter how far he trots, innit *Lady*? But that second little *d* hopped into the telly commentary and they jumped and pounded and swore like convicts in a riot when they heard it. Now it was their weekly sackcloth and ashes. They hunched down and filled their mouths with salted crisps. Jones jogged out on to the

bright green pitch. The cry went up: *Laddy, Laddy*. They might skin their throats damning him but nobody could shout down forty-thousand people. Going for millions.

And how it was the mother of all mornings after with that girl tapping her foot in the next room like her driver had wandered off to a pub for the second time *this week*. They had pushed her forward the night before and she had knelt before him like the tongue of his right boot had licked the sweet spot and put Arsenal up 1-nil. He had pinched her black satin choker and pulled her straight. Saying Arise. Her given name was Mia but she touched her wrists together above the rhinestones in her hair and suddenly Jasmine was there hunting him in a circle. Wriggling like a snake. To be honest he had not learned enough snake language to be charmed by it. She is so *fine* someone hissed in his ear. His last clear-headed moment dumped him at the Coventry pre-match and he had *not* taken her home. *She would've done you if you'd been covered in shit*. He didn't believe it, but still he spanned her shoulderblades with his left hand before she could slither off. And Laddy Jones and Jasmine, Jasmine and Laddy Jones waltzed to the four corners of the Earth. Her sequins dragging after him like a puff of smoke, all night, catching finally on the stainless towel rack near the sink. Now she was in his bedroom, probably sporting his home kit like a varsity tart. And it was freshly pressed. She tried it on just to *say* that she had. She had found something to wear or always greeted the Versace deliveryboy in bra and panties. Jasmine in Gunners red, sitting pretty and tight because the cameras outside the lobby were swarming by now and she was *not* about to be publicly rubbished in The Hired Limo of Shame. She was leaving *with* him, *in* his car. He was thoroughly disgusted, like his grandfather, when women put cigarettes in their mouths, and now his whole place was stinking of her Lights.

And how once again his organs and muscles talked gibberish to each other while his head floated in a one-sided shouting match. Blind recklessness blazed inside him now and then and he drank, he admitted it, past seeing double. His most important pleasures were plumb and countable as a priest's beliefs. Nailing set pieces like wrecking balls cut loose and corners like dandelion puffs, falling on stray balls, charging the keeper. And scoring. *Scoring*. The drowning of his mind, the flood of power propelling him like a god around the pitch. His talent was like billions in a vault. But spiriting dark through his mind and flesh, a delicious private pleasure too, making itself known once or twice in a year—*being weak*, the wan bliss of it, like Death had pinched his cheek but had already taken his quota for the day. Laddy drank himself into the state of a premie, then shivering blind and raw listened to the mad clanging of his body mending itself. Curled in bed, or on strong mornings trembling-swaying above the toilet. His fine smooth beloved-of-the-nation limbs feeling fresh from a crucifix. A placental unborn litter of kittens asleep in his stomach. His thoughts of faces, events, suspicions, rumours, long utterances—a stained-glass window turning like a wheel. Pressing the moisture from his brow. He was helpless, crawling and *fucked*. He gripped the porcelain rim so tightly that his thumb knuckles blanched. Preparing for the ride. It came up without a courtesy heave, a jet deflected at the back of his throat, puke spurting and dripping from his nostrils too. His heart felt like it had been stuffed down a pipe. His mouth was gagged open, his breath puffed sharply against the back of his teeth. The heaves continued long past the point where all he could muster was a slimy green juice, hanging beaded from his lower lip. The air smelled of gin and cherries. He held himself weeping against the toilet, panting, parting foul soaked locks of hair. But already he could feel strength and life in his quads again and soon it would seep like spring sunlight into the rest of him. This was the moment of greatest clarity, when he saw exactly what he was made of. And how

beautiful and precious he was, dewy like a newborn, a feast of life in front of him. He was abject and filthy and weak as a mouse, but he had life in *yards*.

Jasmine confided later on to one of the TV slags that he wasn't exactly Mr. Magneto that night, in fact it was *quite* the opposite, right honey, throwing a girl's look of giddy ownership his way like he was a raccoon on a chain. Or some kind of always-longed-for exotic pet. Because there he was too by God sitting with her under the lights, his left hand on her thigh exploring the stitches of her inseam with the middle finger, and the ring one, always a shade longer, now even more of a choice beefsteak of a conversation piece. The ring was like a fat lizard clenching him, determined in its small brain not to be shaken loose. Thick gold for skin, rubies and emeralds for stripes, twin diamond eyes throwing off spitfire. They had had the brainchild after a fast bonk before one of her *soirées*, the wedding should be *auctioned*, every detail as dearly as possible, down to the napkins. The stampede would be *rank*. Their mothers consoled each other over daily teas. Mia's father was late of a lorry crash. And Laddy's old man choked on his tongue, meaning my love for you son is winched in my heart, do what you please. Natch of an obstacle, Luv-Guv. The solicitors marched in like royal attendants and the Weds, Our Weds, she called it, was the golden time. Everything and everyone taken care of plus. Except she was a gourmet with jewels so they rejected offers and ventured to the recommended places with most of the tabloid cash. The ring which she designed for herself after doing his was like the Mount Everest of London art that he hated. It looked like a hummingbird had laid a diamond on a pile of pearls and fountain water ought to be running down it. But he kept quiet and let Mia and her ring do the dazzling. *Wall 2 Wall Post-Wedding Coverage!* She leaned into the cameras like a proper married vixen, devilish but already spoken for. That plunge down her blouse a forbidden Tunnel of Love.

She said but on their second date it was like night and *day*, she could not believe this was the same *man*. She was swept. Off. Her. Feet. He made it the very next afternoon to apologise. She was scheduled for rest but was feeling itchy so that started his run of luck. The chancer! He fetched her in his Alfa and they had such a brill time of it in that little car. Not what you think! His plan was perfect, just a bit of motoring, a good chat and laughs and she got to see *green* again. England is beautiful. And the whole time he was hiding roses in the boot. Even their mutual friends agreed, what happened to the Laddy Jones they knew? Jasmine liked to think, gazing at him like she could shut him up in her locket, that it was her influence.

That year the milk and honey was practically shipped to his door. He scored goals like a Champion of the World's KOs, ten, then twenty, twenty-five, then *thirty*, then almost *forty*. Four hat tricks, he was high for a week after those. Like the rich junkies Mia knew. He *raped* Man U on two occasions, total of four strikes. Arsenal bounded around making heifers of all the clubs. Top o' th' log! Top o' th' Log! crowed a maniac who followed them everywhere head to foot in scarlet, his face collapsing like a goof's into a dreamy smile. Telly picked him up, playing him for kicks on the promos. Then suddenly he was plastered larger than life on the double-deckers. Union Jack red, Gunners red. Top o' th' log! Couldn't be escaped, it was an anthem. Arsenal sat sixteen points clear. The other sides were blown away. Left behind. Weaving and smoking. Laddy was English Footballer of the Year. He missed the world title because of politics he heard about a thousand times.

And then there was Mia—Jasmine, Jasmine—Mia. Jazz. Jasmine Jones. JJ. Mia Jones. She took him to work sometimes, and lip-synching and strutting with a green screen behind her she was a real Cleopatra, golden and commanding, but the moves didn't begin to speak the truth about her wound-up spirit. Not everyone can go platinum, he began to see. In front of the cameras she held her

little ideas like a Mistress of the Zoo with keys to all the cages. Nothing let out unsupervised. Until she was with him, then she would unlock it all and their hours together were like Peter Pan and Wendy time. He was led into a fresh world, sweet and innocent. Almost innocent. Because one beast of course had escaped her for good, no matter whether she was looking down six telephotos or, he thanked Christ for it, puffily at her bowl of muesli. It was like a pure white leopard resting on its branch swinging its big purring head around. Slinky. Soft. Lynx-minx. She was more beautiful up close than far away. Where she wined them by the thousands, positively. Her singer friends got by on the ten foot rule and triple makeup but Mia always looked like she was chipped from ice the minute before. She laboured for her looks, to be sure her stylings and waxings and weights, her massages and cucumber masques. Plus the odd knife job. She had a few years on him, was thinking smart. But she was a natural, too. Even *it* was beautiful, when she opened up and arched it was like a bright piece of ribbon candy nestled in Easter grass. Lay off the nookie or you'll find yourself lacking he was told more than once. But that was shite and bitterness. It so happened that his daddy and mum timed their own music-making like aficionados, when all the shining things in the heavens were dancing a jig and the world was working itself up hot to want their son. *He was blest of men.* He led Mia—sometimes he made her do Jasmine—to the bedroom, the pantry, the cleared space of carpet in the movie room, or to their couch of red plush which arrived one day without warning, a gift from Elton John, and they took their fill of all the forms of loving.

So it was no surprise to find him, after the season's final match, like he'd won twice at the races and For He's a Jolly Good Fellow was pouring down his ears at the pub. What about the trade rumours, Laddy, can you see yourself sporting another kit? He played catch with the wrap-up questions, the door to freedom was letting in bright light a few steps away. Well, our sponsor's

name's a bit on the wordy side now, innit? Gives a man a rash, all those letters. What've they got at Ipswich? No, Arsenal's my home, I think I've got a real future here, wouldn't care to go, and before you ask, bollocks to quitting England, I know what you're hearing and it's not worth my salty knickers. Pardon.

The hacks were unwilling to let the postmatch die because Jasmine might make an appearance, sashaying and calling the men pet names like she was working a streetcorner, and the two of them together were angels about posing. He felt like Scrooge after the Ghost of Christmas to Come with Mia by his side. Someone leaned back and mocked the toff from Sky who'd left just then. So Mr. Jones in a voice like he was reading the highs and lows, it looked a touch rough out there. How rough was it, really? They all laughed like he'd told one about Prince William asking advice from dad on the way to a brothel. It was the kind of laugh husbands share at a wives' event and although everyone knew who had the best wife a temporary brotherhood buoyed them up. Laddy suddenly felt like he was in disguise and wanted to score a few points with these young squires. He feigned exasperation at the imaginary Sky git and said it was like Sodom and bloomin' Gomorrah, you lot should be pillars of salt by now. Or did you think it was rugby on today and was only enquiring out of courtesy? The hacks mewed like kittens trailing a saucer of milk and bent over scribbling. Laddy recognised his cue to pipe down but before the party had to be punted back to the one side of the river his mobile interrupted with Beethoven's fifth and the show was over, boys, it's the old lady ringing for a lift.

Who was Laddy fucking?

Maul and rucking?

Nobody! No one!

Mia was gyrating in a jumper in Singapore to please the authorities and make six or seven piles when Laddy sat in front of the husband's club again, wishing this time he could wade in upsetting folding chairs like a pro wrestler called The Chopper. England had just doused Croatia 3-nil in a friendly but from the whistle Laddy Jones had been a marked man. The hit was carried out inside of ten minutes. England's first chance, the ball like a little boy running ahead of him and shouting back to hurry on, the pitch free and clear as a prince's park, the Croat keeper roaring like a bear on a chain. He had already seen the net quivering like light in water taking the blow of his shot, but he never got it off, instead as he swivelled and lashed a nine-pound hammer smashed into his right knee and he rolled screaming hearing horses' thunder in his ears. On the cold metal table inside the words *career threatening* and *season ending* banged crazily in his brain like loose doors in a hard wind. He saw himself losing everything and wished he would summersault backwards into blackout. And he wanted to get to that Croat Hun with a cosh. The terminology softened after an on-site X-ray into *a week's rest or three* but that failed to stop the shakes of hopelessness and rage clawing his bones as he was wheeled into a room where the hacks were perched like vultures..

Because an important matter was due to be sorted out and he hadn't reckoned on this cripple's ride clouding his confidence. One or two in the crowd was taking tidbits from the rugby supremo, who'd not been pleased with the Sodom and Gomorrah comment. Demanded a public apology when the quote got out, considered that what the young man said sullied the game and suchlike rubbish. So Laddy rhymed rugby and buggery in his next interview and the old Irishman saw red and set the Inquisition on him. Sending new hacks who looked like weasels to the press conferences with all-knowing evil in their eyes. They turned trowels in his backyard and let him have it with questions that doubled as dirty jokes. The thugs weren't favourites with the regulars,

however, stewing beside them like lobsters in a pot. A familiar voice would ring Laddy up and say quick and low look Laddy it's rough seas ahead tomorrow they'll be fishing for X and Y so keep your guard on. And he slipped nooses like Robin Hood. But the last time the voice came down like he was standing before a judge who'd put on a black hankie. Laddy—or is it *Lady*? It *will* be after Saturday. You've been warned. And rang off without a hint of mercy. *Never con a hack* was the message, they all felt double-crossed to a man about the nickname. But he'd been like a son to them, it was only right that he be allowed to prepare himself. To be known, once again, as Lady Jones. The Irish rugger would wet his pants in happiness. Laddy felt like a half-clubbed badger, only spit and venom for mankind.

The spit and venom was still there but now he was bumped and positioned into the press room like an ancient patriarch with a blanket over his legs hating his assembled family and their mortal thoughts. He resolved he wouldn't be sentenced to life as Lady except he was glaring at the judge, The Future riding him piggyback, red-eyed and bloodthirsty, promising Hell on Earth in seasons to come with balls bursting through nets knocking men unconscious in the stands, scoring records crumpling like shot horses and hacks like they were caught masturbating fumbling for a suitable form of address for the gladiator they were tasked to approach, infinity in his eyes. One of them in the back cleared his throat and raised his hand, a man who'd taken knocks in life, practically a dwarf, thick lips and broad feathery eyebrows, and whether he was asking about the knee, the match, Mia, or Mia's uncle Charlie—or whether he was quickest draw in the bunch, asking in his double-chocolate Rumpelstiltskin voice is it true your old mates called you *Lady*, Laddy stopped him in his tracks with everyone craning like Tube wreck bystanders to see who was coming up with what. He hitched himself up in the wheelchair and swung his right fist around, and the middle finger

popped up and came to a dead halt at the man's face and stood erect for a solid five seconds like a lighthouse of divine wrath beaming out guilt and shame and undying eternal hate and damnation.

Later it turned out the dwarf was a Croat interested in his country's chances of winning the World Cup, about as good as Pakistan's middle order, but for now Laddy was in it as five cameramen rocked to like black belts, thrusting their shoulders forward and throwing the trap, the lenses twirling and his finger growing like Jack's beanstalk right out of the frame. If it was live he was smoked. But he didn't recall anyone saying so and calculated he had about five more seconds of everyone's undivided attention before a storm broke to start Noah to sweating. He held his finger higher, up like a torch, turning it in profile. Flashes went off like he'd broken Barings. He opened his mouth strafing the room, calm down ladies, let's everyone see some reason here. The Croatian was smiling like he'd been called a pygmy and the rest were thinking if it wasn't the knee drugs then it was CRACK-UP AFTER CROATIA time with high sorrowing but meat-for-readers-with-appetite front-pagers already composing themselves. A day that should have seen England covered in glory was darkened by criminal foul play, and, in a bizarre case of lightning striking twice. Had you guessing now here's his Statue of Liberty impression, right gents, Laddy said. The full plan had unfolded and settled perfectly in his mind like it was a sheet thrown open in an Ace advert. Addressing the glare, apart from this trifling matter, nodding to his knee, and your concern means a lot mates it does, thanks a million but I only just twisted it. Catch me in a month at Leeds. But apart from this trifle. And Mia could get the tape from one of her friends at the Beeb. Because this was a night for priceless memories. Dark wind rattling the windowpanes and in the bright room men gathered like it was Downing Street after the Sinn Fein prat had slung one arrow too far. Honour was now under question here and the first obligation was to defend oneself. His finger jerked birdlike

back and forth over the sea of deaf-mutes. Chief on their minds was his little spat with the rugby poobah and though it wasn't his habit to air out other people's dirty duvets it was in rugby's own interest to face its problems and perhaps be nudged to put its house in order. The finger swaying now like a tall tree in a breeze. A hypnotist's finger. The fact was. And like *that* he had them face down in the muck, in the maul and the ruck, groaning in the scrum and piled in a hot collapsed heap, stuck fast and bucking to be free. Because the terrible digit was smoothing up the back of their thighs with hard intent, unseen, nosing past wet elastic and taking opportunities. Suddenly someone had the best of them and during it they struggled for air like they were tangled up underwater. The deep muscle clenching but ceding ground to cruelty and strong exploration, finally surrendered and relaxed. Then the easy pull-out, the flat flick and smart slap, and it was over.

And the fact was it happens every week and has been going on for decades. His finger now at eye level beckoning them closer to the fire he had lit. He and Jazz had been putting nasty web searches into her laptop for a giggle when the story popped up sending them hanging over Elton's couch howling. A medical column! Some poor Scottish blighter having pains when he sat on the toilet, and might the habits of certain horsey locks and props have anything to do with it? They agreed this plum was too juicy not to be pulled out soon by some wicked what-a-good-hack-am-I. Some good little Jack-hack. But now it seemed like he had to do everyone's work for them, didn't it, or was it just him, thinking no one in the room cared to get their hands dirty? Plenty of dirty fingers in rugby and it was a right crime. This, acknowledging his own finger held out in front like a drum-major's baton, for remembering after you people've hopped it to the Lions'. Got it? Good, and he signalled and someone jumped and got behind him and he was out majestically like Churchill, back turned to the balls-up, gliding away in the passage under the fluorescent lights.

O High upon Highlands,

And down London way,

Bonny, brave Laddy

Rode out on a day.

Rode out on a *day*. Laddy's quickest lesson was people gave advice when they wanted a piece of you, in his head by the time it was going around that his mum must have got her leg over with a Brazilian milkman, her boy was never sighted without he was kicking a football. Once his dad banged home with pub wisdom tricky enough for a stare at the ceiling though, son the man said to me if my young Jones would only learn to stop *thinking* on the pitch I'll see him play for England. Don't *think*. It was like chewing tacks but Laddy's mind eventually made like a bird when the lights went out, at his bidding, no matter the time of day, and then he was on the prowl in a dreamland of boundaries and angles and a ball and bodies running with and against him.

But no man was perfect and a slip could be forgiven sometimes, such as his first goal since the knee was knocked. Home versus limping Liverpool. Someone took a dive into the clippings and the ref ran up, whistle like a hook and sinker in his mouth, and placed the ball a good longjump inside midfield. Laddy got the nod. The signal from the manager was fish for a corner. A long thin voice like a streamer in the wind was spelling it differently, however, and suddenly he held between his thumb and fingers a few blades of grass which he had bent for without knowing. A good laugh from all sides as they fluttered down, what a fucker that Jones was, checking the breeze. But the far target seemed to waver and the ball launched and cruised low on a line and obliterated it.

A minute later he got out from under the Arsenal bodies piled on the spot where he had stood taking it in like it was the sight of Kingdom Come. And as the match was being reset and he jogged

back to his position with men and women crying tears gone deaf from the moaning and bellowing of his name, *then* thoughts hustled to roll in with the euphoria, like a wave lifting him to kiss the moon, and if he didn't quite put fist to chin and stare at his bootlaces while he waited for the ball to show some promise again, still he was soaked with *feelings*. Such as close to number one the speck of irritation rubbing in the otherwise pure bliss of last month's sports soapie, episode one Irish supremo slaps him with suit for defaming national sport, episode two supremo resigns and barricades self in house, episode three a rollicking ride, rugby in chaos, supremo in court on charges of *the very thing*, queues of witnesses, proctologists famous overnight, episode four (last) hacks like maypole girls singing Laddy's tune and nary a mention of *Lady* again. But the bar to complete happiness was Laddy never locked eyes with the scrumbag, as he heard it on Talksport, washed up as he waddled down the courthouse steps preferably, Laddy there at the bottom like Satan welcoming a soul. One moment of triumph face-to-face was all he asked. Why couldn't he have it all? But they never connected and he had to get his drama through the *media* instead. Such is life someone from his past would sigh and say.

Or number one, absolutely, uncontested after his second strike, with Irishmen like bits of road dust to redlining Ferraris, because already in the press box they were saying well what do we do for goal of the century *now*, his tenderness for Mia, in her pieces and all put together. Inside his half for a Reds throw. The ball rolls over like a gosling that thinks it's found its mother. Immediately they lose five yards to his first step, then twenty in the next three, two donkeys actually *fall down* Laddy jukes them so hard, in the end it's seven men littering the field, assassinated, plus the keeper, each found wanting in their time of trial against the terrible materialised feinting phantom. The ball lay like a skull in a corner of the net. Laddy never stopped, veering from his pursuers until they caught

each other for their orgy. He was wild to find Mia in the crowd at that moment, she only was cheering beyond the mass delirium, somewhere in the centre boxes, daughter-of-a-duchess-at-a-bullfight. A fortnight ago they celebrated The Circumstances of Our Acquaintance she kept toasting, too many past her lips and still that crate of champagne outside the door. They struck bottom at 6am holding hands, groped like shipwrecked rats back to health over three days. And never got sick of the green baggy sight across the bed. She was *meant* for him, she was the only one. At last a tinted window was yanked open, she must have been struggling with it, and he saw her leaning out waving and shouting and they threw each other dozens of invisible roses over the roar.

Or somewhere coddling it all after STRIKE THREE BABY was flashing on the multicolour digiscreen over a baseball bat crushing homeruns sparking stars and comets, which was wrong he thought, a feeling like the Queen's every night when her head hit the pillow with the combination to the crown jewels' safe in it. Most of the crowd had gone like the stadium was a giant telly room for nutters, they weren't any longer watching the match but only their memories of his first and second goals, replaying in their minds somewhere midair above his new haircut. He had got the buzz Jazz wanted finally and truth of truths with it he felt like packed plastic explosive. His head was weightless, quicker-than-life, snapping forward right and left marking moves. The lucky few holding on to their faculties freezing out the afterglow for the sake of sport saw it and went stiff, the flick of Laddy's head over his shoulder as he trotted back from the Reds box. The keeper looking to dish off a saved ball, Laddy reading it in the half-glimpse of the tossed glance and invading his teammate's lane, keeper cocking for a long lob and Laddy bicycling like he was running up a wall, catching the flung ball with the tip of his boot and slinging it back, a yorker bowled by a giant, the ball smashing down into the chalk below the crossbar and bouncing elongated like a watermelon into the net's

ceiling. Yorker-corker. As he fell Laddy saw the ball resting on top of the upside-down world and he didn't bother to move, he lay on his back smelling the grass, and things came to him secure and in-the-bag as last year's highlights. The prem, the FA Cup would amount to the sweet f.a. for the rest of the league, and he and Mia would time their first for after the World Cup, which England would be bringing home. Because only then, as bodies leapt darkening the skies above him, *then* only would things begin to slow down.