

LET YOUR SUPPORT BE HEARD

The Chantling who keeps moving



In the space between a song and the hearts that
answer it, Chantlings flicker into existence

Jan S. La Caille



During a magical moment in a match – maybe you have felt it too? In the space between a song and the hearts that answer it...

‘... something small flickered into existence...’

Every club has them - small, glowing spirits born not from trophies or league tables, but from the songs supporters sing. A chant that refuses to fade on a difficult night. A crowd finding its voice when it matters most. A child learning the words for the first time beside someone who has known them for decades.

They carry the songs. They always have.

They are why a club will always feel like home - win or lose.

This is one of their stories.



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The Chantling
who keeps moving
A Chantlings Story



CHANTLINGS
LET YOUR SUPPORT
BE HEARD

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Pilgriming's story is for football supporters everywhere. He encourages his story to travel as he does. Please share this story with fellow football supporters, readers, and friends. Distribution of the complete, unaltered PDF for non-commercial purposes is warmly encouraged.

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*A tribute to the creators of football manager in the mid
80's and for 'Tipslørdag' showing English football on
Danish Television – which got me interested in English
football.*

*And for all the fans showing your support and dedication
despite the weather and regardless of the score.*

Let Your Support be heard!

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CHAPTER ONE: THE AWAY END

Roker Park, Sunderland · Boxing Day December 1996

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It was a quiet song after the match had finished. It went almost unnoticed by anyone. But from that quiet song something small flickered into existence.

He was tiny. Even for a Chantling. He looked at himself. His glow was the amber of the Stadium floodlights. The warm amber of tungsten lights in the winter, the colour of something that doesn't quite belong anywhere specific, which turned out to be accurate in ways he couldn't know yet.

He had absolutely no idea what he was. He didn't know where he was. Didn't even know his own name.

But a Chantling is quick to learn and feel their connection to a place and the people in it.

He was born from the away end at Roker Park.

That was the first thing - the very first thing he knew about himself. Before he knew what he was or what any of this meant. He had been born from the away end. Not the famous Roker Roar that opposing managers had been warning their players about for nearly a hundred years. The away end.

Specifically: a single away supporter at the back of the Fulwell End on a Tuesday evening on Boxing Day in December 1996, watching Sunderland beat Derby County two-nil. A supporter who stayed in his seat after the final whistle and sang something quietly to himself. Not a Sunderland song, not a Derby song. Just an old tune, a hymn or a folk song, something from somewhere else entirely. The man sang it softly, looking at the pitch, not because anyone had asked him to - and not for any particular reason - except he was in a football ground he had never been in before and wanted to mark the occasion in some small way.

The new Chantling looked around.

The away supporter was leaving now, shuffling along his row toward the exit, still humming. The Sunderland supporters were going home in the other direction. Soon the ground was empty.

He floated out over the pitch as the last supporters filtered away, drifting toward the Main Stand - and stopped.

And then he felt it.

He drifted lower, hovering just above the grass, moving from the centre toward the corner flag.

The ground was sloping.

Not dramatically - not visibly, not something you would notice from your seat during the match. Just a gentle, consistent fall of about one foot from the centre of the pitch to each corner, built in during the original construction to help rainwater drain away from the surface. A practical decision made nearly a hundred years ago that probably nobody noticed.

The new Chantling floated up toward the roof of the Fulwell End and looked down at Roker Park. It was cramped and old and slightly crumbling at the edges, the capacity reduced from its peak of sixty thousand to just over twenty-two thousand by safety regulations and the slow indignities of time

The balcony ran along the upper deck of the stand in a criss-cross pattern of steel, painted a dull matt green. Most of the supporters who had stood below it for

decades had perhaps never really looked at it. It was simply the balcony, the thing above you when you stood in the lower tier, background to everything else. Some sections were half-hidden behind advertising boards. It was not something that asked to be noticed.

He stayed in front of the lattice for a long time. He didn't know yet that this same pattern appeared at Ibrox and Goodison Park and Plymouth Argyle's Home ground - Archibald Leitch's signature, carried from ground to ground across Britain through the first half of the twentieth century, at each place painted over or obscured until it became background rather than architecture. He didn't know that the pattern had come from the shipyards. He didn't know that the yards and the football club had grown up together in the same city, that the men who built the ships on the Wear had stood in this stand, that the steel above their heads carried the memory of the work they did.

He couldn't explain why it mattered to him. It simply did. That someone had thought carefully about this - not just about the function but about the form. That the balcony was beautiful in the way that only things built with genuine care are beautiful.

He went back to the roof and thought about it. The away supporter's song. The Leitch lattice. The invisible slope.

This ground has been looked after. In ways nobody noticed.

It moved him in a way he couldn't yet put into words.

He was unaware at this time that the future was not going to involve Roker Park. But for a hundred years, someone had been attending to the details.

CHAPTER TWO: ROKER

Roker Park · A few days later

He found the old one in the foundations of the Main Stand.

He had felt something there - a deep, settled warmth, the specific quality of something that has been present for a very long time and is very confident about its right to be there. He had been circling it for days, the way a new arrival circles something they're not quite sure of how to approach.

The old Chantling opened his eyes when the amber-glowing newcomer arrived.

He was - old. His red was so deep it was almost the original red of Sunderland's shirts from the 1890s, before the exact shade had been settled. He had the particular stillness of a Chantling who has seen so much that stillness has become his natural state.

'The away end one,' he said.

'Yes,' said the new Chantling.

'I felt you arrive.' He said it without judgment. 'First time we've had an away-born one down here. You're different from the others.'

'What others?'

'There are several of us,' said the old one. 'You haven't met them yet. You've been spending your time in the roof and on the pitch.' He paused. 'I don't blame you. It's a good pitch.' Another pause. 'My name is Roker. I was born from the first match on this ground. The tenth of September 1898. Liverpool. One-nil. Jim Leslie scored the only goal. Twenty-six thousand people.' He looked at the new Chantling steadily. 'I carry everything that has happened here since then.'

'That's a long time. What do we Chantlings do?' asked the new Chantling.

'We carry the songs,' said Roker. 'From the people who are singing to the people who need them. We find the corners that have gone quiet. We make sure nobody in the stand feels alone in what they feel.' He looked at the new Chantling with the particular attention of someone who has been doing this for nearly a hundred years and

can immediately identify when a situation does not quite fit his experience of it. 'You were born from the away end.'

'Yes.'

'From one person singing to themselves.'

'Yes.'

'Not from the Roker Roar. Not from a home song. Not even a Derby supporter, but a traveller just wanting to see the football and feel the atmosphere. Alone, in the Fulwell End, humming something nobody else recognised.' Roker was quiet for a moment. 'That's not a normal birth for a Chantling.'

'I suppose,' said the new Chantling. 'I guess I'm not a normal Chantling.'

'No,' said Roker. He said it with a small degree of warmth. 'I don't think you are either.'

'And you're amber,' said Roker. Not as a criticism. Just as an observation.

'Yes.'

'Not our colour.' He looked at the new Chantling carefully. 'You're also not exactly away-born in the usual sense. Away-born Chantlings go back with the

supporters - to their club's ground, to their club's songs. You don't have a club to go back to.' He paused. 'Where will you go, when this ground closes?' Roker paused thinking hard about something he had never experienced before in nearly hundred years.

The new Chantling had no idea yet that this was the right question, or how big it truly was.

'I don't know what I'm supposed to.'

'I didn't think so,' said Roker and was quiet for a moment. 'You're welcome to stay here. Until the end of the season. There is work, even for a Chantling who was born from the wrong end. The ground needs tending. The memories need carrying.'

The new Chantling stayed.

CHAPTER THREE: THE LAST SEASON

Roker Park · 1996–97

He got to know the ground properly.

The specific creak of the Main Stand in cold weather - a sound that ran along the Leitch lattice like a reply to something the wind had asked. The way the Roker Roar built - starting in the Roker End and spreading laterally toward the Fulwell End until the whole ground was vibrating. He tested whether it was amplified, one evening in March, drifting through every corner of the ground looking for hidden speakers. It was not.

He was not the first to do so. After a FA Cup match in 1973, a journalist came back the following night with a torch convinced the sound was too large to be natural. He found nothing but terraces. He had simply underestimated what could be produced by fifty-three thousand people who genuinely meant it.

The Chantling noticed the city around the ground. He had not expected to care about the city. But football grounds, he discovered, do not exist in isolation - they are embedded in their places, soaked in them, and you cannot understand the ground without understanding where it sits. Sunderland was a shipbuilding city or had been - the yards mostly gone now. The River Wear ran through it.

The people were - he spent a long time thinking about how to describe the people of Sunderland to himself. They had a particular directness about them. A pride that didn't need announcing. A relationship with loss - of industry, of standing, of what the city had once been - into something that was not quite bitterness and not quite resignation but something more complicated and more interesting.

He watched the season carefully, following the home supporters through their matches, learning the songs. Not carrying them - Roker and the other Chantlings did the carrying. But he was learning the way you learn something you're not sure of what you'll do with.

Ha'way the Lads. The great chant. Direct. Imperative. The instruction that contains the whole of the relationship: we're here, you go, we're behind you.

The black cat appeared under the Clock Stand in March and regarded him with the expression cats reserve for things they can see that nobody else can. He regarded it back. Neither of them said anything. After a few minutes the cat left. He found this satisfying in a way he couldn't fully explain.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE LAST MATCH

Roker Park · 3 May 1997

The last competitive match was a three-nil win over Everton. Sunderland needed the points for relegation safety. They got them but then lost at Wimbledon the following week and were relegated anyway.

He was not surprised. He was beginning to understand that football clubs, like cities, have a particular relationship with what is meant to happen.

The match he carried with him the most - the one that lodged permanently - was the closing ceremony. Liverpool came back, as they had come for the very first match ninety-nine years earlier. And the supporters came for the last time.

He had known it was ending. Roker had told him, in the particular way that Roker told things - plainly, without

softening, with the specific kindness of someone who believes you are capable of handling the truth.

'The ground closes after this,' Roker simply told him in April. 'We move to the Stadium of Light. The others will move with the club. You should think about what you do.'

'What do you do?' the new Chantling had asked.

'I stay,' said Roker.

He said it without drama. He was the ground - not the club, not the songs, not the supporters. The ground. And when the ground goes, the Chantling who carries the ground must make a choice between going with the memory of it into whatever comes next, or staying in the place itself, in the earth and the foundations and eventually the housing estate, keeping it present for whoever comes to stand where it used to be.

Roker had already made his choice a long time ago.

'And me?' the new Chantling had asked.

'You,' said Roker, 'are a different kind of question entirely.'

The closing ceremony crowd stayed long after the final whistle. Twenty-two thousand people who didn't want to

go home from a ground they were never going to see again, and for an hour they simply stayed, singing, looking at the pitch, saying goodbye in the way that supporters say goodbye to things - loudly, with songs, with more love than the occasion strictly required.

He felt the special resonance from all being at the stadium this night. It moved him in a way he would never forget.

Roker and the others did what they always did. He also worked the stands himself that last evening. In his own way. He went to the sections that had gone very quiet, the supporters who were sitting with their eyes closed or their heads down, and he carried the songs toward them until they lifted their heads and sang too.

When the last supporter finally left - well after midnight - the new Chantling floated to the centre circle.

Roker appeared beside him.

'You worked tonight,' Roker said.

'Yes.'

'You're good at the quiet ones,' said Roker. 'The ones who need the songs found for them rather than brought to them.' He paused. 'That's a specific thing to be good at.'

'They sat together in the empty ground for a long time without speaking.

'You should go,' said Roker finally. 'Not now. When the demolition comes. You should go and find other grounds. That's what you're for.'

'How do you know what I'm for?' said the new Chantling.

'I don't,' said Roker. 'But I know what I'm for. And it's not the same as what you're for. And I know that staying here with me is not going to tell you what that is.' He looked at the empty stands, the Leitch lattice catching the last of the floodlights. 'Go and look at things. You notice things - the slope, the steelwork, the way a city sits around its ground. Go and notice more things. More grounds. More cities. More supporters from the away end.' He paused. 'That could be a life, for a Chantling who doesn't quite fit anywhere.'

'What should I call myself?'

Roker was quiet for a long time.

'You'll know,' he said eventually. 'When the right name comes, you'll know it. Don't rush it. Some of us take longer than others.' He paused. 'I was Roker from the first ball was kicked here. You might be waiting a while.'

CHAPTER FIVE: AFTER

Sunderland and Beyond · Summer 1997 - Present

The demolition came in stages over the summer.

He stayed until the Leitch lattice came down - the criss-cross balcony, the pattern that had been here since 1929. Watching it go was the strangest thing he had yet experienced. He understood, watching it, that grounds are made of what happened in them, and when the structure goes the things that happened do not go with it - but they need somewhere to be, and he was not sure where they went.

Some fragments of the lattice were saved. He discovered this later - they were taken to the new Stadium of Light and used to separate parts of the car park. He visited once, to see them. They seemed out of place there, Leitch's elegant steelwork between painted parking spaces, but they were there, and he stood near them for a

while and felt the faint warmth of everything they had held. He would have liked Roker to be there. But Roker was true to his decision and stayed in the ground itself, in the earth under the houses, in the space under the blue plaque that eventually appeared on a wall at Roker Park Close. But the lattice carried something, and he was glad it had been saved.

He left Sunderland in August.

He had no particular direction - just following an instinct he couldn't name yet. He drifted south and stopped at the first ground he saw that had its floodlights on for an evening match and floated in through a turnstile entrance behind a supporter who had come a long way to be there.

He watched the match from just above the supporter's left shoulder.

He stayed for the exploration afterward, learning the ground the way he had learned Roker Park - the specific quality of what this space held, the way the city sat around the edges of it, the things the supporters said to each other that told him something about who they were and where they came from.

Then he moved on. He travelled from ground to ground after this. He found the peculiar architectural detail that nobody else seemed to have noticed.

He has been doing this ever since. He has visited more grounds than he can count now - old and new, enormous and tiny, famous and completely obscure. He finds an away supporter, follows them in, watches the match, explores afterward. He has an instinct for the quiet ones - the supporters who sit slightly apart from everyone else, who need the songs found for them rather than carried toward them. He is still not sure if this counts as work in the Chantling sense. To him it feels like the right kind of thing.

He is genuinely interested in the football. He is also genuinely interested in the cities - the way industry marks a place long after the industry has gone, the way football supporters carry their city with them into the away end of someone else's ground and sing it back at themselves when they're winning. He thinks about Sunderland often. He thinks about the slope of the pitch that nobody could see.

CHAPTER SIX: THE NAME

Somewhere in England · A Match Day in Autumn

He had been going for almost a year - through summer and into a new season - when the name came.

It came, as Roker had said it would, from somewhere he wasn't expecting. He was following an away supporter through a turnstile into a ground he had not visited before - a small ground, a lower-league match, a cold Tuesday evening - and the away supporter said something to the steward as he handed over his ticket.

'Long way to come,' said the steward.

'Always is,' said the away supporter. He said it not with complaint but with a certain satisfaction, the particular satisfaction of someone who has been doing something for a long time and found meaning in the difficulty itself. 'That's the thing about supporting your team away. You're always on a pilgrimage.'

The away supporter went through the turnstile. The steward took the next ticket. And the amber Chantling, floating just behind the away supporter's left shoulder, finally had a name.

Pilgrimling.

From the pilgrimage - the moving, the visiting, the following of supporters through turnstiles in grounds across the country for reasons that had nothing to do with the match and everything to do with the going. From the *-ling* many Chantlings carried - the smallness, the potential, the thing still growing into what it would become. And from something he had carried since Roker Park: the understanding that the journey is what you are, when you have no ground to stay in.

He said it quietly to himself – *Pilgrimling* - floating above the away supporter's left shoulder as the match kicked off.

He already knew it was right. He had been it since December 1996, in the Fulwell End, above a Derby supporter humming a song nobody else recognised. He had just needed someone, eventually, to say the word.

He made a note to go back to Sunderland when he had the chance. To find and tell Roker - that he had a name now.

To tell Roker that he is, so far as he knows, the only Chantling who has set out to visit as many football grounds as possible.

He has not stopped moving since.

- Pilgrimling Somewhere in England Still exploring -