

Post-Training

When practice is over, we hop in our cars and make a beeline to O'Malley's. I park a couple of blocks away. There is never any convenient parking on a Thursday night. As I walk to the bar, I catch up with Michael and Lug.

Still a block away, we can hear, or more accurately, feel, the bass line of the music playing on O'Malley's sound system. The low throbbing beat is shaking the shingles on the old roof. The whole building is expanding and contracting with each pulse, seemingly breathing. I am always afraid that the place is going to fall down, or maybe just burst, but I don't really care. I just want to get inside.

O'Malley's isn't much, but it's our bar. Home away from home. Rugby central in Houston. The building had been a house at some point in its history, but now was remodeled to be one long room with a bar running down one side. The kitchen and restrooms are in the back. There are front and rear patios for al fresco entertainment. The exterior is painted Kelly green. The interior is "decorated" with rugby paraphernalia, sports memorabilia and all manner of other crap hanging from the walls and ceiling. The floor is bare two-by-six, tongue-in-groove planking. Basically, O'Malley didn't spend any money on the bar. He just took money out. Except, that is, the sound system. There he had the good sense to invest and it is outstanding.

Denny joins us as we reach the gate in the fence around the front patio. He is already wobbly in the knees. I swear he must have shot a six-pack on the drive from practice. Then, that's normal for him.

Dennis "Denny" Houlihan. Irish. Getting into his late twenties. Denny is an accountant for one of the big oil patch firms in Houston. He'd actually already worked his way up pretty high in the company's financial organization, hence his transfer to the Houston headquarters. And, he likes to drink. If you ask him, it's not a problem. He drinks, gets drunk, no problem. If he isn't at work, or on the pitch, he is probably drunk or getting there. We called him the "Eraser". I was never sure if that was for his play on the field, or the way he tried to erase his brain cells with alcohol. Regardless, if you ever got in a spat on the pitch, with his Irish combativeness, Denny was the man you wanted

watching your back.

Getting close to the bar, the outside air is really pulsating with the rhythm. We head to the door, past the few people smoking on the patio.

Somehow, O'Malley's has become the "it" place in Houston for twenty-somethings to hang out. It is always packed, but especially on Thursday nights after rugby practice. I'm not sure why, but I think it is something about vicariously experiencing the life blood flowing through the veins of the rugby club. The Caballeros, that's us, are alive and everyone wants a piece of it. No problem. There's plenty to go around. We make it by the drum.

I reach out and open the door. It is packed as usual by this time on a Thursday. People start spilling out of the door when the internal pressure is released. Lug, who's a big guy, and I bind up with Michael, rugby scrum style, with Denny behind. Like Japanese elevator minders, we ruck the bodies and ourselves back in the door. It doesn't hit us in the butt, either, as we continue pushing, parting the Red Sea, all the way to the bar and the promised land. We are thirsty.

Michael's girlfriend, Ana, works the bar at O'Malley's. She is dark, Cuban and gorgeous. We catch her eye immediately and get a wink and then two pitchers almost instantly. It pays to know people on the inside. Pitchers and mugs in hand, Lug, Denny and I start heading for the back corner where we hold court. Michael stays behind to get reacquainted with Ana. They haven't seen each other for a couple of hours.

The trail to the back is a little more precarious than our path to the bar. O'Malley's has some wooden tables set up in the far end of the bar past the juke box and the open area that serves as a dance floor. That's the problem. The dance floor is a body-to-body undulating mass moving in rhythm with the music. We still have to traverse this human sea, only this time more carefully than our entry ruck. We are carrying the liquid manna – spillage is frowned upon. Lug leads the way, me next with the two pitchers held high, then Denny following with the mugs. We squirm. We slide. We hip-fake and side-step through spaces that aren't there.

Eventually, we pop out on the other side of the dance floor and head for the table, nary a drop spilled. There is relative calm around the tables. It is still early and the revelers haven't tired enough to want to sit just yet.

We are the first there, as usual and slide onto the benches. Lug starts pouring

the beers.

Drinking, for us, usually means drinking games. The game of the moment is “Quarter Toss”. It’s a simple game. You bounce a quarter into a cup. The quarter lands on the table, it’s the next player’s turn. The quarter lands in the cup, some one gets to drink its contents. He who tosses picks who drinks. The drinker refills the cup. The tosser goes again. Around and around until there’s only one, or no one, left upright.

Lug is bent on starting a game. I know better than to get into this so early. Lug is galactic champion. Not only is he a huge man who can consume immense amounts of beer, he’s perfected the art of bouncing the quarter. He often explains to anyone who will listen, the Lug-hold, used for ninety-nine percent accuracy. Place the quarter between the tips of the thumb and index finger and the edge of the last phalange of the middle finger. This hold causes a definite slice in the flight of the quarter, but it’s consistent, so adjust your strike point. Now you know the secret to competing on the professional circuit.

Some more of the team are winding their way back to the table so I take my chance to duck out. There’ll be plenty of victims to keep Lug occupied.

I’d seen Genie standing over by the dance floor with her back to us. She is friendly, hot and not interested in me – at least not that way. She is dating some construction worker. He and his brother have a remodeling business, a real job, not like me. I’d been let go from my sales job a while ago and have been working as a bartender, right here at O’Malley’s. No future in me. But we are still friends, and apparently the boyfriend isn’t here yet.

“Let’s dance.”

She turns around to look at me, “Sure.”

Michael T is just coming back from the bar. I pointed at Genie’s friend Sharon and motion to him to bring her out on the dance floor. He turns to her. She nods, “Okay.”

They are all smitten with Michael, the Doc, captain of the rugby team, man among men. He never gets turned down. She is ecstatic that he’s noticed her, even though she knows that he is practically married to Ana.

Dancing at O’Malley’s is more like grinding. We are packed so tightly together, I can’t really move my feet, much less strut my stuff. We just move our hips and shoulders, necks and head, back and forth to the rhythm – one mass of quivering humanity.

After a couple of songs, Michael T somehow has Sharon up on his shoulders, swaying with the beat. He is smiling. She is smiling. I am watching him as his evil twin takes over. I see his face change: eyes narrow, corners of his smile turn at an even more acute angle.... I can even hear, over the din of the music, the trademark, “Heh, heh, heh”, he always lets out when he is about to do something he knows he shouldn’t.

Michael grabs Sharon on the backs of her legs, between thigh and buttock, lifts her straight up, spins her one-hundred-and-eighty degrees and drops her back down on his shoulders. His face is now muff-deep between her Levi-clad thighs. Sharon is laughing and squealing in a combination of delight and embarrassment. She is pounding him on the head to stop. I can’t see it but I can feel Michael T smiling so big his face is breaking.

The current song ends and Michael T hoists Sharon back up and places her on the floor. She has turned about six shades of red and smacks him on the shoulder in mock anger. With that, she spins on her heel and exits the dance floor with Genie close in tow. Left alone, Michael T and I head back to the bar for a refill.

We get a couple more pitchers and return to the corner. Lug is picking on Denny in quarter toss. Denny’s eyes are already glazing over. He must have downed twenty or thirty pints by now.

Hawkins and Dodgen are there too, talking about the game this weekend. It’s the first match of the season and important we start off with a win. The game is in Baton Rouge. We’ll be traveling to Louisiana to play. They are a good side and good competition for the build-up to the cup season. For me, though, it isn’t about the talk. It’s about the playing. Leave it for Saturday is my thinking. As ee cummings wrote:

all is merely talk which isn’t singing
and all talking’s to oneself alone¹

He puts that so sweetly. If it’s not “singing”, that is, if it’s not your particular thing, your art, it’s a waste of time. I’m not saying that talking can’t be art. For some people it is. For me, however, rugby has become art, and talking..., well

¹ cummings, ee; [73 Poems](#), 1963, “32”, (“all which isn’t singing is mere talking”).

you know what they say about people who talk to themselves.

I sit down with the quarter toss crowd.

The good thing about coming to a quarter toss game late, is they have all had a lot to drink already. Bad thing is, they know it and want me to catch up, quick. With their help, I do.

The night goes on, drink, dance; dance, drink. Sometime after midnight things start to thin out and quiet down.

Dodgen and Hawkins are still talking about the upcoming game.

Bryan Dodgen is saying, “We just have to control their flyhalf. Put a little pressure on him and he breaks down. The whole team will follow.”

Geoff Hawkins replies, “No problems there. We’ll sick the back-row on him. Have the Eraser nail him late a few times and he’ll be so off his nut mad at Denny he won’t want to do anything but retaliate. That’s assuming, of course, that Denny comes out of his stupor by Saturday.”

Denny is head down on the table. The evening’s competition has been too much for him. In spite of his penchant for drink, he is an exceptional open-side flanker. Great pace, quick off the scrum or lineout, and he always delivers a blow when he gets to the ball carrier. He is fantastic at breaking down the opposition’s attack and turning over possession. A real fetcher.

Michael and I snigger at Geoff’s joke, partly because we are still upright and feeling superior and partly because in our condition, anything seems funny. We have been Lug’s victims, too. When it comes to rugby though, everything stays crystal clear, even when falling-down drunk.

“Once you take their flyhalf out,” I say, lips loosened by the amount of alcohol, “They’ll switch to a nine-man game. Keep everything in the forwards and just run it at us. They’re big, but we can handle them.”

“Oh, yeah,” Michael T chimes in, “Not only are we quicker, we’re smarter, too. Just deny them possession and they’ll crater. We know how to handle these guys.”

“Rugby, still!?” interjects Ana. She’s just finished her shift and come over to join us. “Don’t you guys ever talk about anything else?”

“What else is there?” Michael asks.

Ana’s look skewers Michael T, pinning him squirming to the wooden bench where he sits. She’d been seeing him for nearly two years now and is way past the new-to-rugby stage, yet not quite to the accepting stage. The sport is taking

too much of Michael's time, energy and focus, and she doesn't like it. Naturally, she wants him to spend more of his thought and effort on her. She is only begrudgingly accepting of rugby as somehow entwined in his character. Tonight she is tired, and less accepting.

"It's just a damn game."

We all roll our eyes at the uninitiated. She just doesn't know. After two years she still hasn't felt the life-blood pulse. How could she? She is still technically on the outside. Not a player, but only a spectator looking in. As an outsider, she can get that vicarious taste by osmosis, but never the real thing.

Ana goes on, "There are more important things in life, like a career, family, a future. What are you going to be doing twenty years from now?"

"Playing rugby?" Michael answers. Probably not the most diplomatic answer at the moment. I can see the red rise in her face. Her Latin blood boils easy. But, she fights it back. She doesn't explode. Instead, she changes the subject.

"I saw that damned stunt with Sharon on the dance floor! What the hell was that about? Are you trying to embarrass me? What the hell were you thinking about? Can't you control yourself?"

Michael T goes pale. In truth, he can't. When something occurs to him, he does it. The action is key. Thinking just muddies the neural landscape, slows everything down. Action is his god and pole star.

She is still standing at the table. He looks up at her. "Sorry, honey. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I just didn't think about it."

"No you didn't, did you?" But, the edge is coming off. The sad, puppy-dog eyes worked every time. Ana knows that Michael is going to pull some stunts, some worse than others. She doesn't like it and will fight it constantly. On the other hand, she loves the ride with Michael and the Caballeros. She isn't going to give that up.

Ana lets out an audible sigh and sits down next to him.