

The Red Stick

The season is getting on now. It starts with a friendly in Baton Rouge. The Gents and the Baton Rouge club have a history of home and away matches with each other. Baton Rouge play in the Deep South local union, we play in Texas. It makes a good warm-up match for each of us, playing someone outside of our local cup competition. We can each test ourselves in a good, challenging match, without the redundancy of additional matches against our cup competitors. We already play those guys twice in the cup season as it is.

The trip to Baton Rouge starts with a meeting, if you can call it that, at O'Malley's. Each of us drives there to drop cars and then caravan to the game. As usual, there are a lot of people late. Michael T and I drive up at the stroke of seven, the designated meeting time. This, of course, was interpreted as rugby time – the time you tell everybody so they have a reasonable chance they will all show up when you really want them. There are only three or four people in the parking lot.

Hawkins is one of them. As we get out of the car, he says, "I've had enough of this goddamn rugby time. We need to be hitting the road *now*. We won't have any time to warm-up."

"Yeah, who's here?" Michael says, stretching his back and yawning.

"Dodgen's here, and that FNG that came out Tuesday. And me," Geoff replies. He has been doing the roster calculations in his head – something to keep him busy as he waits for the rest of the team. Geoff isn't dense, just thorough. He should have been an accountant.

FNG, by the way, is "fucking-new-guy" in rugby speak. You're an FNG until you stick around long enough for the veterans to learn your name. That can be quite awhile for the more brain-addled vets. Sometimes, we have two or three FNGs on the team at once. It can get pretty confusing.

"Cream went over last night, with Darryl," Michael is aiding in Geoff's calculations. "They don't like these early morning drives."

What they really wanted was a chance to drink and carouse a bit, then have the morning to sleep in. Ah, to be young and carefree. More importantly, to not have those work commitments that keep you in town until late on a Friday evening. I was jealous.

As Michael and Geoff talk, more players are arriving. I think it is just the principle of the thing. It must be uncool on some scale to be on time, shows subservience to the clock. We're ruggers, after all – which places us outside the constraints of normal human existence. Yeah, right.

Finally, Dopey and Denny are the last to show up. They, of course, had stayed until the bitter end at O'Malley's last night. They felt they were honor bound to be the last one's out the door. It isn't unusual to be waiting on them before starting out on a road trip.

Denny has brought a penance offering, though – two dozen donuts. The offering is accepted and the donuts inhaled immediately. Geoff is the only one still fuming. We are a half-hour late, or, as you might have it, right on rugby-time.

Ben and Michael are riding with me. I told them that they may have to find another ride home, "You see there's this girl I know in Baton Rouge..."

Mayra Landry – fairly tall, big in all the right places – she is perfection in my eyes and all Louisiana gentility. Auburn hair and dusky, perpetually tanned skin. She has that smile. You know the one. The one that just makes you melt. We have carried on a long distance romance, of sorts, for a couple of years. We'd get together a few times a year at rugby events. Occasionally we'd meet outside of rugby, but that was rare. She liked it this way. She couldn't stand to be away from Louisiana, and the distance let her keep control. I, for my part, couldn't leave Houston and the club. I was committed to the Caballeros. Maybe some day, after my playing days are over, I'd try to turn this more serious.

"Yeah, we know." They weren't new on this block. "No problem."

The drive to Baton Rouge is fairly long, about five hours by car, depending on how heavy your foot is. The "caravan" dissipates almost instantly. It is as if everyone has their own drummer beating a slightly different time for the journey. For our part, we have to stop for gas and coffee.

Then back on the road. No one else was in sight. Well, they all have maps or know where the pitch is. We'll reassemble in Baton Rouge before the 2:00 pm game time.

It's a beeline down I-10 towards Louisiana. Ben is talking gridiron. He is a fanatic. He follows all the pro and college teams. I don't know how he keeps up with all that ephemera. I think he did it to compensate.

Before his rugby enlightenment, Ben "Lug" Lugan had played college

football for Vanderbilt. He was a middle-linebacker, and, to hear him tell it, a pretty good one. I believed him. He had the size, athletic ability and temperament. I guess he had visions of going pro. Those visions, and his whole football career, ended with a cracked vertebra in a game against Tennessee. He stayed in school and graduated with a political science degree. He went on to law school and even finished. He never sat for the Bar, though. From the time of his injury he was just drifting. He'd lost focus.

He drifted down to Houston where he found rugby. Or, more accurately, he found us in that Friday night Houston drunk tank, and rugby followed. Broken neck or not, he needed some physical outlet. He found that rugby filled that void, at least the need for action. His vertebra had been fused and wasn't much of a danger to him anymore. Even so, no professional gridiron team, or college for that matter, would take a chance on damaged goods. It left him aching. Nothing, not even rugby, could erase the yearning for what might have been. That desire, in my unprofessional opinion, manifested itself in the obsessive need to keep up with all things gridiron. This year he was on the Chicago Bears bandwagon, "Refrigerator" Perry, Walter Payton, Jim McMahon, et al. "Look," he'd say, "McMahon's really a linebacker playing quarterback. Awesome!"

By the time we get to Beaumont, we are all hungry. We stop at a truck stop for a sit-down breakfast. I had let Michael drive and he always makes good time. The Doc puts the hammer down on a road trip. No drive-by meal for us.

On the way out after breakfast, Michael T is handing me the car-keys, "Here, you drive. I need to catch up on some sleep."

"Okay. No worries."

During this discourse, a skinny kid comes up to us and asks, "You guys heading east? I sure could use a ride, if you don't mind?"

The kid is young, eighteen to twenty, dirty, with longish, dark-brown hair, a wispy attempt at a mustache and hollow eyes. He must have been all of a hundred and thirty pounds.

"Do you play rugby?" Michael asks him.

"Play what?" the kid isn't sure he heard right, or what it meant if he had.

"Rugby. You know. It's a sport. Kinda like football. You ever played?"

"No. Why? I think I saw it once..."

"Everyone riding in this car is going to play rugby. I think we may need some second side players. Are you up for a game?"

The kid considers this information. He obviously isn't an athlete, nor interested in sports, but he also looks desperate for a ride.

"I guess I could try. What will I have to do? And, where's the game?"

Michael tells him, "Baton Rouge. You'll just have to tackle anybody with the ball. Anybody on the other team, that is."

"Okay, I guess" the kid replies. His need for a ride won out over his fear of the unknown and of violence in general. But, that fear doesn't dissipate. He has just sublimated it, momentarily. Eyeing us, all of considerable more bulk than himself, he asks, "Am I big enough to play?"

"Of course, there's a place for everyone in rugby. It's an egalitarian sport. We'll find a spot for you. I'm Doc, that's Lug." Then, indicating me and using a nickname I'd picked up some time ago, "That's the Enforcer."

The kid, looking like he's just met a trio of Satan's apprentices, gets an, "I'm Jeremy," out of his mouth

"Where you from, Jere?" Ben asks.

"Baton Rouge. I'm trying to get back there. I just hitched out to California to see my girlfriend at school. I've been on the road three days coming back. A trucker brought me all the way from Ft. Stockton but had to stop here."

"Well, you lucked out. We'll take you the rest of the way home. What do you know about rugby?"

"Nothing."

"We'll fill in some gaps for you."

Ben and Jeremy get in the backseat, Michael T and I in the front. Michael T is out immediately. I am concentrating on driving. Lug is in the back assailing Jeremy with the wonders of rugby. He tells him about all the great hits he'd had, about the bones he'd broken, both his own and his opponents'. Jeremy listens and, in the rearview mirror, I can see his eyes get bigger and bigger.

It's about one-fifteen when we make it to Baton Rouge and the pitch – plenty of time to get kitted-up and still do a little warm-up before kick-off. Getting out of the car, we stretch. That's the thing about these road trips. You get stiff and tight and lazy. Your body starts to go into hibernation, or something like it. After sitting for so long, you lose the desire to move at all. Your limbs and muscles just want to vegetate. A little stretching starts to get the blood flowing.

The Baton Rouge RFC are lucky. Their pitch is at a city park. In the park the

city has a recreational facility. No showers, but restrooms with real plumbing, and enough space to change in semi-private, as opposed to doing a strip on the sideline in front of god and country and everyone.

Lug and I head for the building with the restrooms. Michael tells Jeremy, “I’ll go borrow some gear for you. Go with Tom and Lug. I’ll meet you in the changing room in a minute.”

“Okay,” He says as he starts to follow us. Agreeable sort, isn’t he?

About ten minutes later, Michael comes in to the changing room with his own kit bag over his shoulder and a wad of other stuff under his arm. He’s borrowed some tattered shorts from Bryan and a worn-out pair of boots from Dopey. He has managed to find an extra pair of club socks, too. Jeremy could use one of the team jerseys, of course it will be well broken in during the first side game. We only have one set, you see, and the second side always gets the hand me downs, unless they ponied up the cash to buy their own.

Lug and I are just finishing – strapping on boots, taping socks, etc.

“Where’s the kid?” Michael asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I thought he went with you to scrounge up some kit?”

“No. He was supposed to wait in here for me. Son of a bitch! That little rat! He’s cut out on us, has he?”

Michael goes outside to look for him. He comes back in a minute.

“Damn! He’s gone. And he didn’t even say thanks for the ride. Talk about ungrateful. I guess I’m going to have to play the second game too, now. I was looking forward to the break. Son of a bitch!”

And Jeremy has slipped the trap. He didn’t know, of course, that we were only kidding him about having to play rugby for the ride. We would have given him a ride anyway. We’re just always recruiting, for the sport in general, if not for our club. We want everyone to have the chance to experience it, to get to know what we love about it.

Turns out that rugby isn’t everyone’s cup of tea. Anyone will be accepted into the fraternity. There’s a place for everyone that wants to find one. Just not everyone does. Take Jeremy as a case in point. He bailed rather than take his chances at finding a spot in something new. That’s okay. We don’t mind. It’s his loss.

The game starts and went pretty much the way these early season games

always do: lots of knock-ons, poor passing, players heaving on the sideline, etc. Plus, September is still hot down here in the South. The added fry factor contributes to muddled brains that by extension reduce the aesthetic beauty of the game, as if there was any beauty at this point in the season.

In spite of the poor performance, we have taken a fairly handy two-try lead midway through the second-half. One of the B.R. second rows has been coming offside in the rucks and mauls. He would work himself through, around, under or whatever and end up at the back of our maul preventing the ball from coming out. I am getting frustrated by this tactic and decide it is time to put a stop to it.

He works himself around to the back of our maul again. I set my sights on the big number five on his back. With a ten yard running start I plant my right shoulder in the small of his back with all the force I could muster. His neck snaps back at the impact, so hard I thought his bobble head was going to fall off. On the recoil forward, though, he wound up a tremendous swing of his left elbow and plants it in the center of my gut. As the big, beefy elbow is applied, it collapses my diaphragm. The breath comes whooshing out of my mouth. Reflexively, my left arm swings back up and lands my fist on the side of his head.

He turns to face me and square off. Then, somewhere behind the raspy sound of me gasping for breath, I hear the ref's whistle blowing, "Twwweeeeet!"

We both know what this means and freeze.

"All right! Both of you! Off! You've been going at each other all day," yells the ref.

Going at each other? All day? This was the first incident that I can remember. Regardless, we have to obey the ref's edict. We both hang our heads, caught with our whole arms in the cookie-jar, and walk to the sideline.

Once to the sideline, we start chatting, old friends.

"What was that about? That was the first time I did anything," I say.

"Me, too. I don't know what he's talking about. It's not the first thing he's got wrong, either," the big lock answers.

"That's the problem with just the one ref for the thirty of us. He thinks he's god and won't admit to mistakes," I opine.

"Looks like he's got the power over us today."

“That’s true,” I agree, and then go on, “Sorry about the punch. It was just a reflex when you got me with the elbow.”

“Yeah, no worries, I’m sorry too. I wasn’t ready for you to hit me like that. The elbow was just instinct.”

“You *were* offsid¹, you know.”

“No. I was the original tackler. I was still holding on to the ball. I’d just gotten wrenched around to there.”

I have to grant him the point, technically. It’s something I’d done many times myself. Most refs will blow you up for offsid¹es though, no matter how technically correct you are. It looks bad.

“Well, you looked offsid¹es. I was trying to clear you out so we could get the ball out.”

“No worries. I’d have done the same. What’s the deal on getting ejected now? Is it an automatic suspension?”

“I don’t think so, since we’re in separate unions. I don’t think the refs report to each other. And, besides, it’s a social match. We should be okay.”

“I hope you’re right. We start cup matches next week.”

“Us, too. I can’t afford to miss that game.”

“I guess we’re done for the day, though. You want a beer?” the big lock asks.

“I wouldn’t mind if I do,” I answer. By the time the game is over, we’re fast friends, with a mutual enemy, the ref. Funny how that works.

In the mean time, Michael has had to pick up my slack. Since I had been sent off, the team was down to fourteen. Luckily, B.R. has the same problem. Michael picks his game up a notch or two to compensate. He scores two tries in the remaining time.

The first one is out of creativity and it is a thing of beauty. He picks up the ball at the back of a ruck on the twenty-two and went right. Normally a forward – he is a hooker after all – will just drive into the first defender and set the ball for the next phase. Michael has a different idea. He pop-kicks the ball over the defending scrumhalf’s head, catches it on the fly at about the fifteen,

¹ Like most field sports, rugby has its offsid¹es rules. Generally speaking it is the ball that should be the point of attack and everyone should be behind it. If you are in front of your teammate who last played the ball, you are offsid¹es. In rucks and mauls it is the hindmost foot of your teammate who is part of the loose piece (ruck or maul). Once you are *in* the maul, you are allowed to work your way through to find the ball. Then, of course, there are different offsid¹es variations for scrums, lineouts and kicks. It all gets very confusing.

dummies the fullback at the ten, side-steps left and dives across for a try under the furniture.

The other try is sheer determination. He gets the ball and three defenders at the same time on the five meter line. He just drives his legs, dragging all three to the line, where he falls over on the ball to score. That's Michael. A combination of beauty, grace and power on the pitch. He is the whole package. I love to watch him play.

Good thing for us he scored the two tries. B.R. ends up scoring three in the remaining time. That left us up by a try at the end of the game. Looks like our fitness needs a little work. If we were match fit, we would have been a little stronger in defense during that second half.

Having been kicked out of the first game, by rule, I can't play anymore that day. I'm sitting on the sidelines watching the second game, when Mayra arrives. She comes up behind me, reaches around and gives me a hug. She whispers, "Welcome back to Louisiana."

I almost moan, it feels so good, her chest pressed against my back. I did feel welcome. "Ah, thanks. *Now*, it's good to be back."

"And, how've you been?" she continues, drawing out this moment for me.

"Not this good. Otherwise great. Except the game today, that is. I got thrown out."

"Uh-oh. You naughty boy. What'd you do?"

"Nothing special. Just a little punch up. The ref was just exercising his influence."

"Those guys just don't like you, do they?" she answers.

"Yeah, I don't know what it is. I think it's a plot." Now she comes around to where I can see her, orange top and beige shorts, setting off her tan skin. I hold her at arms' length. She looks as good as she felt. "Wow. You look better every time I see you."

"You're just saying that," her smile melting me, again.

Mayra and I had met on one of the rugby trips here. She'd been working in the Baton Rouge club's bar, the Blue Gator, and we just hit it off that night. She was a psychology major at LSU. Older than most students, she was working on the extended degree plan – kind of like I did, a few courses a year, gradually getting there. It was one of the things we had in common. No real urge to hurry on with life. Relishing the experience, so to speak. We each

preferred to take it slow and get it right.

“I’ve got to go and work out some details for the party,” she says. “Then I’ve got to go back to the bar and set up. I’ll see you there.”

“Okay,” I say, lying. It isn’t okay. I am crushed she is leaving so soon.

She gives me a quick good-bye hug, and walks on down the sideline. That was it for our public displays of affection. A couple of quick hugs and she was gone. Publicly, she kept me at a distance. I wasn’t sure if that was just her general reserved nature, or if she had some other reason. I always hoped that since she was around the B.R. guys so much, she just wanted to keep our thing on the down-low. Avoid the extra ribbing. My fear, of course, was that she had a regular squeeze and I was just a fling for her. Whatever it was, we never got around to talking about it. When we were together, we had other things on our mind.

Lord, it made me ache to watch her walk away. In a good way though. I’d see her later that night. It was just anticipation – part of the spice.

No one remembers the score of the second-side game, but true to his prediction, Michael T ends up playing the full eighty minutes of this game, too. It finally ends and we head for the Blue Gator. One of the beautiful things about rugby is that after a day of pounding your heads against each other, as if you were mortal enemies, and you are during that eighty minutes, everything is forgiven. The two clubs go have a meal together and friendly drink or two.

The Gator is in a two-story building near the LSU campus. Downstairs is the public bar, upstairs is the party room. Michael, Lug and I go up the narrow back stairs to the party room. Most of the two teams have already congregated. Some of the B.R. players are still assembling the chow line on a couple of heavy, wooden tables set in the middle of the big room. The rest of the crowd is milling around, cups in hand, reliving recent and past glory.

Our first order of business is to find the keg, which we do rather quickly. You develop a nose for these kinds of things. Cups filled, we move on. By now, the food’s ready to serve. Tradition has it that the visiting club eats first, then the home side and supporters. We just happened to be at the head of the line when the B.R. president calls out, “Chow’s on!”

And it was Mayra serving. I gave her a look and, ever loquacious, say, “Hey.”

She just smiles back. I can feel the energy exchange between us, the tingle on the back of my neck, little hairs standing on end. There’s a definite connection,

physical and beyond.

Mayra ladles huge amounts of red-beans and rice into our bowls. I love the food they serve when we come to B.R. I know it's just simple fare, but I could eat this three times a day, seven days a week. I love the other cajun/creole specialties, too: jambalaya, étouffée.... I like crawfish, but have never got good at shelling them. It was too much work for me. I'd peter-out after a few and go back to something more substantial, like red-beans and rice. I went back three times on this evening, and would have again, except we'd reached the bottom of the pot.

With appetites whetted and the beer flowing, it's on to the rest of the evening's entertainment. It usually starts off with singing and tonight was no different. We begin with some simple, relatively innocent ditties:

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan,
And, what did I see,
Coming for to carry me home.
A band of Angels coming after me.
Coming for to carry me home...²

To really appreciate this one you have to see it accompanied by the pantomime. Forty or fifty mostly grown men singing and pantomiming this tune is something not to be missed. The chorus and verse repeat with the pantomime holding steady, while the voice and language change with each repetition, usually ending in Chinese and finally the silent version. Amazing to witness.

I have never understood how the next tune made it into the repertoire. It's always done fairly straight. Maybe it's because, Jimmie Davis, a former governor of Louisiana wrote it, that it found itself in tonight's program. But

² Anon., Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, historic African-American spiritual.

then, it's a staple with the Caballeros. We sing it a lot.

You are my sunshine,
My only sunshine.
You make me happy,
When skies are grey.
When skies are grey.

You'll never know, dear,
How much I love you,
So please don't take
My sunshine away.
My sunshine away.³

As the songs progress, so does the level of inebriation.

This assemblage being competitive by nature, some competitions have to be organized as well. The first is the old boat race: five teammates in a line, five pints and a sprint of sequential consumption. The first team to drain the five pints wins great manly recognition. Spillage is seriously frowned on. The whole of each pint must go down the respective esophageal tube or the team will be disqualified. For this reason, I was never asked to participate. I somehow couldn't keep my throat open. Inevitably, some primal instinct of self-preservation, some gag reflex, would cause my throat to close before the glass was empty, resulting in me spewing beer on the teammate in front of me and anyone else nearby. Needless to say, this was not looked on with any sort of affection. I was solely a spectator for this event.

Michael, on the other hand, is a master. He invariably anchors the Gents team. Tonight's lineup consists of Denny, another master at downing pints, leading off, followed by Lug, then Dopey, then believe it or not, Geoff Hawkins himself, and, as usual anchored by Mike "Scrum Doc" Kelly. The B.R. team is to be led off by their tight-head prop, a wizened, old veteran and anchored by none other than my new, good friend, the big lock from today's earlier dust-up. His name is Randy and he's turning out to be a real jovial sort.

³ Davis, Jimmie, [You are My Sunshine](#), 1939.

In the background, as the two teams go through their warm-up routines, the singing continues, getting more and more ribald with each song and each verse:

Four and twenty virgins came down from Inverness
And when the ball was over, there were four and twenty less.
Singing balls to your partner, ass against the wall,
You never get laid on Saturday night; you never get laid at all.⁴

The two teams are ready. Mayra is given the honor of starting the race. She stands before the two teams.

“Ready!”

Cups are raised to lips. She raises her arm, shoulder, breast, torso.

“Set!” she says as her hand reached its zenith and her body taut.

“Go!” she screams with a smile looking like delight while dropping her hand to the floor and jiggling free of the tension.

The pints begin to disappear, faster than instantly. Denny gets the Gents off to a good lead, slapping the empty cup on his head a couple of seconds before the B.R. prop. Lug holds his own at the first turn, taking us into the back stretch with the lead. Then Dopey begins to falter. He has a little trouble getting the pint down. He double pumps. By this time B.R. have caught us. Geoff gives it his best in the final turn, but can only keep pace, not close the gap. We are a full second behind when Geoff tops off. Michael, the usual determination in his eye, tilts the cup up and sucks it dry in record time. He and the B.R. number five, Randy, turn their cups up on their heads at the same instant.

Michael, Randy, Mayra leap, fists pumping, shouting, “Yea!”

The photo review shows the race to be, in fact, an exact tie. There must be a rematch.

I’ve had enough of spectating. I head downstairs to the bar. It is time for action.

“Ten shots of Jager,” I order, “For all my new best friends.”

The bartender doesn’t raise an eyebrow. There’d been rugby parties here before. He sets them up on a tray for me and I carry it back upstairs to share

⁴ Anon., Four and Twenty Virgins (a.k.a. The Ball of Kerrymuir), sung to the tune of Four and Twenty Blackbirds.

with those new friends. Clearing the last step, I head across the crowded room to the table where Michael T, Mayra and Ben are now sitting. I make it to the table with six shots left, the trek up the stairs only costing me four shots paid in tolls to those other friends encountered on the way. The last six are distributed to the three at the table, one for myself and luckily there happen to be two B.R. guys standing nearby, my second-row punch-up buddy, Randy and their old, greying prop. They are immediately inducted into the best-friends clique. I never did find out who won the boat race run-off.

“Hoka Hey!” I say as we all down the Jaeger. It’s a good day to die. The old Sioux war chant and now the Gents’ huddle breaker and game starter. Not quite the “Haka”, but we like it.

We’d adopted “Hoka Hey” by way of Denny who had been transferred to Houston from the north country. They’d used it at his club up in Minnesota. Funny that an Irishman has to bring this bit of native Americana to Houston. We thought it was pretty fitting, though, for a group of guys who put life and limb on the line every week. So, we put it to work.

“So you guys start your cup season next week. Who do you play?” Michael asks the two B.R. ruggers.

The prop, moustache and three-day beard peppered with grey, everyone called him Bayou Bob, answers, “New Orleans. We start with them every year. How about you?”

“We’re going to San Antonio next Saturday. Then it’s cup season from there on out.”

“Yeah, you guys have a tough schedule,” Randy chips in. “It’s only us and New Orleans in the Deep South. We play each other twice, home and away. Then it’s on to the tournament.”

“That’s right. You guys have your championship in the fall, don’t you?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah. The Eastern territorial picks a champion at the end of October, before it gets too cold.”

“Have you heard about the World Cup coming this summer?” I ask the B.R. guys. The IRB is instituting a world championship for rugby union, the World Cup. It will be played in New Zealand next summer. After that, they’ll have it in a different country every four years, sort of like the soccer, er, football world cup.

“You bet we have,” the prop, Bayou, says. “We’re looking forward to that. It’s the biggest thing since William Webb Ellis first picked up the ball and ran with it.”

He was referring, of course, to that day in 1823 when a schoolboy at Rugby School in England took the act that separated rugby’s path from soccer. The story is almost certainly apocryphal, but we like to pass it on anyway.

“I hope ESPN carries it,” he goes on. “It’d be nice to actually see some of these international games.”

There is no venue or outlet in the U.S. for viewing world-class rugby. It just isn’t covered here. There’s no interest from the general public, so rugby is categorically ignored by the sports media. Occasionally we will get a tape that someone’s relative has sent from overseas. Then it has to be transferred from the original PAL to NTSC before we can watch it. The chances of actually seeing a top-level game are few and far between.

“Do you guys play select-side? Texas is supposed to play the Deep South in November,” Michael asks.

Mayra has had enough. “Rugby, rugby rugby! Don’t you guys ever talk about anything else? What about music? Or art? Religion? Politics? Or even some other sport? My god, give me a break.”

“Mayra, Mayra. Sure we talk about other things – sometimes. But, this is a rugby party,” I try to soothe her. “We can talk about other stuff, later. Or, not.”

She rolls her eyes, “Oh my god!”

Someone has gone for more shots, and beer. We take the moment to down the drinks and let the steam off.

In the background, the party is going on, frenetic – reaching that peak crescendo before the ruggers start moving on to the rest of their lives. The Gents are starting our theme song. Michael and I have to get up and join in:

Would you like to sit on my face?
It’s a very comfortable place....⁵

It goes down from there. And, so does the party. The Caballeros begin leaving for the five-hour drive back to Houston. A few, Denny, Darryl and

⁵ Anon., Sit on My Face, sung to the tune of Swinging on a Star.

Derrick, are heading on for New Orleans. They can't get this close without paying a visit to Bourbon Street.

Ben and Michael sit down to have another beer. Mayra starts to clean up the party room. When I offer to help she emphatically says no.

"Sit down and have a beer with your friends." And, pointedly, "It's a rugby party."

When I sit down, Lug gets out a quarter. I have to make the universal sign of "nix", putting my forefingers together in a cross, "No way."

"Not up for a little friendly competition to pass the time?"

"Uh-uh. I've got to keep some semblance of sobriety. I've got a long night ahead of me. Speaking of which, weren't you guys supposed to get a ride back to Houston?"

They look around. The only people left in the room were a few B.R. ruggers and the bar staff.

"Oops. Sorry. Should we start hitching now?"

"Jesus, fuck no. We're going to another club though. You'll have to come with us." Punishment worse than death for the two of them. They both smile.

After a bit, Mayra comes back over.

"All done," she says.

"Um, Mayra," I say, broaching the delicate subject, "Ben and Michael don't have a ride back. Can they stay at your place tonight?"

She skewers me with a quick look. This is supposed to be our time together. What little we get. But then she says, ever gentle and still smiling, "Of course. Are they coming with us to Hebert's?"

"We promise we'll be good," Michael says, sensing more than seeing the look Mayra gave me.

"You better be," she replies, still smiling. Always polite and courteous, she still carries a velvet hammer that she puts to good use if you make her mad.

Hebert's turns out to be another little bar not far from LSU. They had a zydeco band playing. Lug and Michael propped up the bar. Mayra and I found a cozy table off out of the way. We danced – at least my interpretation of dancing, which I only do after getting a little lubricated. I'd had enough to drink by now that I was well oiled, maybe even time for an oil change. Then, Mayra inspires me, too. If she wants to dance, I am going to find a way to make it happen.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Ben and Michael T drank. It wasn't long before they were fading, heads leaning down on the bar. The bartender was having none of this and tells Mayra – he seems to know her – they have to go.

This pisses Mayra off no end. She'd finally gotten away from the rugby crowd, gotten a chance to be alone with me and these useless tag-alongs ruin it.

I stand up for them. There is nothing I can do. I have to take care of my mates. Under protest, we take them back to Mayra's apartment. Ben dives on the couch. Michael flops in a chair. They are snoring before we hit the bedroom.

Next morning, I awake to a pounding in my head. Mixing hard-liquor and beer always gives me a headache. Then I sense Mayra next to me. Her scent wends its way into my nostrils and head, easing, or just erasing, the pain. I put my arm around her and pull her close, spooning. She, half asleep still, wriggles in closer to me. No space between.

Michael T and Ben are snoring when I come out to the living room. They don't look too comfortable. Ben is too big for the couch, legs dangling over the arm rest. Michael is still stretched out in the chair, legs and feet out front, back straight from his buns at the edge of the seat all the way to the nape of his neck at the top of the chair back, creating a long, hollow sound chamber of his diaphragm and lungs and amplifying the grinding snores. And, the man-stench. Two guys, sleeping in a room, after playing rugby, partying and not having seen a shower. They leave a powerful presence. I open the window to let some air, and a little light, in.

I wake the guys up. They wobble into consciousness – heads unsteady on their necks, hair whacked, arms and legs not quite responding to what their aching brains ask them to do.

“Let's go get some breakfast, then I think we should start back. It's a long drive to Houston,” I tell them.

All they can do is nod in response.

I can hear Mayra running the shower in the back. Michael gets up and goes to the kitchen. He puts his head under the tap, turns the cold water on and stays there for a couple of minutes. Lug follows, splashing cold water on his face. The two are instantly revived, refreshed, but not quite vibrant. Amazing, the regenerative power of a little cold water. No magic sponge, but it's all they've got.

When Mayra comes out we tell her we are going to breakfast, and take her with us. Ben and Michael offer to buy, as payback for the hospitality. Mayra takes a moral stand against breakfast. She's not ready to let me go. She just has coffee. The three of us eat: bacon, eggs, pancakes, hash browns, grits (yeah, it is the south), coffee, juice. We need to fuel up after the previous day's exertions.

We drive Mayra back to her apartment. I get out and hold her close, arms around her waist. I can see she is still upset about our time together being diluted by Michael and Ben's presence. I am, too. It was supposed to be more than this, and it didn't quite happen. In an effort to make up for it, I offer, "You know, the Deep South Selects are coming to play in Houston in November. Why don't you come for a visit then?"

"Sure. I know. I don't know. It depends on class. If I can, I will."

Decisively indecisive. She is disappointed at the way the weekend went and not sure how she feels about the whole thing with me now. I'll have to give her some time. Let things settle. I hope she will work it out. We leave it at that.

I hug her one more time, kiss her and turn to go. We have to get on the road.