

In the Beginning

I had wanted to play rugby ever since I first heard Michael talk about it. I just never knew how to get started. It's not on the tube every week – at least not in this country. Every insignificant detail isn't analyzed to the n-th degree before, during and after every game. Armies of journalists, sportscasters and commentators don't come out every week to see what we're up to, hanging on our every move, on and off the pitch. We exist more on the underside of society. Not noticed because we're commonplace. Well, not commonplace, but mundane. Anyone can do it. We, and our game, are not in the forefront of public consciousness because it is something common, average people do. We're not the role models, the millionaires, the super-jocks that society fawns on. Not the stars and idols.

Everyone knows about rugby. They've seen it, once, on T.V. Or, they had a friend who played in school. There's a rugby undercurrent, just below the collective consciousness, popping up once in a while. It's there, but not in an in your face, Madison Avenue sort of way. You just don't hear about rugby often. When you do, it tends to be word-of-mouth.

That's what happened with me, anyway. Michael left high school to go to college in Colorado while I stayed in New Mexico. I saw him over the Christmas holidays and we made plans to get together at spring break.

Their break was different from ours, a week later, so he was still pounding the books while I drove up to Golden. I got there at like one in the morning, pulled Michael away from the books, and with our newfound freedom we started to drink. We weren't going to waste this weekend.

Not long after I got there, the call came down from some of Michael's friends in Wyoming, "Come on, up!"

So we did. Four or five of us, some of Michael's dorm mates went too, packed into the car and we aimed it north. We all did some windowpane, to keep us flying and improve the trip. A little mind-altering experimentation wasn't beyond us at this point in time. We were open to a lot of things – testing our wings and trying everything from this new smorgasbord of freedom and independence.

Let me tell you, northern Colorado provides am-fucking-azing visuals, while rocketing through in the pre-dawn hours on a pilgrimage north to Laramie, especially when you're in a mind-contracted, consciousness-expanded state.

There'd been a late snow and the plains glistened for miles under the blue-black sky. Here and there ebony clumps of trees and outcroppings of rock left their mark, trying to give scale to the vast expanse. The mountains and cliffs rimming the distance were mere suggestions in the dark, barely containing the immense space.

Reality seemed inverted. Light emanated from the snow-clad earth outwards, giving the night meaning, if not definition. At the same time, perception seemed to be pushed inwards from the vast expanses into the deep dark depths of my mind, or soul. I'm not sure which one. That landscape, made an impression on me.

Something else made an impression on me during that trip. Somewhere along the road that night, Michael told me about the game: Rugby. It's only a game, but coming from him, when the world was turned over, inside-out, it seemed like bedrock. Something to latch onto.

He told me he'd been playing on the rugby team at school. He told me how they tapped a keg before the game and started drinking. How they drank at half-time. How they kept on drinking after the game. "And the *parties!* They are in-(spell that with a capital 'N')-credible!"

Well, anyway, I was hooked. Michael had sewn the seed and it had taken root in my subconscious. More solidly than I knew.

You've got to understand, first of all, that I was eighteen, and beer was the forbidden nectar. Sure we could get it easily enough, but anything that increased access held primal appeal. Add the associated parties, which is what living was about then, – surviving until you could reach that next state of *mania* – and you have the kernel of the game's appeal. Throw in that I was a frustrated athlete. I'd tried most sports through high school and was basically mediocre, although I had aspirations of excellence. In college athletics, aspirations aren't enough. You need some bona fides. That left intramurals, which aren't very satisfying to a would-be jock.

So, there was the two-fold appeal of rugby to me: the manic and the athletic. It seemed to fit the new breed of athletes we were becoming, as interested in altering our mental state as we were in increasing our physical prowess. Or,

ONLY A GAME

maybe we weren't a new breed at all. Maybe there was a time before sport became a business and *everything* was sacrificed for the goal of winning. Maybe it was just the straight-laced, button-down athletic model had a better public relations program. Maybe we just never heard about the old 'new breed'. At any rate, when rugby found me, it found fertile ground.

Like I said, I never knew how to get started playing.... That is, until that day back in Texas when my path crossed again with Michael's.