

Rugby Kisses is a savage, sharp-tongued descent into the chaos of addiction, and the grim hilarity of a life lived just this side of collapse.

Rugby Kisses

By T.C. Bettise

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RUGBY

Kisses



T.C. Bettise



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Chapter 23:

Casper Mook

I was no stranger to being underestimated by bigger opponents who thought they understood physics better than the madman known only to me.

Ten years prior to the game, I was in the eighth grade, attending middle school, and up to my finely-haired armpits in puberty. In addition to the budding breasts of the young girls that surrounded me, and the endless erections that were my constant companion, I was coming to grips with my place in a fickle caste system. The rules in that society were indistinct and unwritten; the pecking order was in a constant state of flux and prone to mutate on a pitiless whim.

The education I received in the dank and mildewed classrooms of Kafka Junior High School paled in comparison to the life lessons I learned in the hallways and parking lots. I received a gift that year, compliments of my brother Mike and a misfit with the unfortunate name of Caspar Mook.

By virtue of my athletic endeavors, I found myself close to the top of the food chain in the social stratum, for no other reason than my ability to catch and shoot a ball. In addition to those skills, I was endowed with a pernicious tongue and a wit that I believed to be devastating. In reality, I was adroit at spotting flaws in others that I recognized in myself and proficient at illuminating those shortcomings at the worst possible moment. I was a world-class smartass and proud to bear the title.

I belonged to a large group of degenerates who carefully guarded a piece of real estate in the hallway on the second floor. We chewed tobacco and commented on the bodies of the various girls who passed our way. No one was beyond our judgments, and our verdicts were harsh. We were apostles of idiocy and purveyors of pranks.

I paid no heed to the sermons from the authority figures in my life. Everyone, from my grandfather to the omnipresent nuns who haunted my life, assured me that someday my colossal mouth would overload my inconsequential ass. I took these reproaches with a grain of salt. My acerbic humor had positioned me on dangerous ground in the past, but it had also pulled me out of some bad situations.

And so it was that on one particular afternoon, I decided to take on the specter of Caspar Mook. Caspar was a “hood” and dressed accordingly. Bellbottom jeans that barely covered his butt crack and were at least four inches too long covered the tops of his size thirteen “Dingo” biker boots. The fabric that trailed behind his boots had been sufficiently stomped down to resemble an apparition’s shroud in a gothic castle. A requisite choker chain was attached to an oversized wallet that might have contained a fresh pack of Zigzag rolling papers, but little in the way of currency. A red bandanna added a splash of color to his ensemble and hung just below the faded jean jacket that covered his drooping shoulders.

Hoods despised jocks. Hoods smoked cigarettes and joints (publicly). Hoods were rumored to carry knives, but I had yet to see one gleaming anywhere other than in the overactive cluster-fuck of my imagination. Adjectives used to describe

hoods ran the gamut from slimy to skuzzy, but almost always included the word *greasy*.

Greasy was an apt description of Caspar, as he sidled down the hallway trying to look cool and, at the same time, invisible. He was painfully aware of the fact that he had stumbled into enemy territory, but he was unwilling to give us the satisfaction of an about-face.

Acne in junior high was not uncommon. It was as pervasive as the ubiquitous snuff can rings in the back pocket of Levi's jeans. Everybody had a zit now and then. To simply state that Caspar Mook suffered from acne would have been the height of understatement. Acne had seized Caspar's face like Sherman had taken Atlanta, burning his self-esteem in the process and repelling any counterattacks by products like Clearasil decisively. He was excused from gym class indefinitely, an arrangement that suited him and his fellow students to a T. It would have been cruel to subject him to the horrors that awaited him in the gymnasium's locker room. Nobody wanted to look at a person who, for all intents and purposes, was a leper.

Naturally, Caspar was a participant in numerous fights. How could he have done otherwise? The poor son of a bitch eked out his entire existence in a constant state of combat, but I was about as tuned in to that fact as I was to my studies.

I had been a spectator at one of his fights. During the struggle, his shirt was pulled over his head. When his wretched back was bared to the gathered crowd, a collective gasp could be heard, and one of the female onlookers puked all over her penny loafers and knee-high socks.

I can't remember any details about the scrap, other than the plague that held dominion on Caspar's backside.

Caspar sprouting a zit or twelve was nothing out of the ordinary, nor was it uncommon for a hood to walk by the thugs that occupied jock's corner. The best practice for those inferiors condemned to wander the halls was to simply avoid our corner completely. But if you found yourself in the lion's den, the trick was not to call any attention to yourself. Holding your breath was also advisable.

On this particular day, however, the single most hideous skin lesion that I had ever seen pulsed between the ferret-like eyes of Caspar Mook. The granddaddy of all zits throbbed of its own accord and imparted pain to those who gazed upon its malevolence. That baby was volcanic.

If my molecular makeup had included even an ounce of empathy, I might have felt sorry for the Mook. I might have experienced some kind of sympathy for a human being whose every waking moment was spent in a lower rung of hell. I might have distracted the mob in some way and allowed Caspar to pass.

I might have been kind.

As it turns out, I did none of those things because I was a pretender, a poser, and a prick. I had about as much concern with a run-of-the-mill hood as the Tonton Macoute had with search warrants. I *lived* to torment and belittle what I considered a subspecies, and it may have been in my best interest to do so, lest the whimsical attention of my so-called friends turned its malice in my direction.

"Holy shit!" I yelled. "I think it's gonna blow!"

I pointed dramatically at the tumor that threatened to split Caspar's skull.

That's the kind of fuck-head I was.

Ridicule and a flurry of slurs erupted. Caspar found himself surrounded, and a feeding frenzy ensued. Whatever life source had sustained him up to that point exited his body like the air from a youngster's balloon. Every comment appeared to visibly wound him, and he broke from the circle and walked with a stern determination. His chin rested on his chest, and his hair hung over eyes that were stinging with tears of anger. He looked up only once as he walked by, and his eyes locked with mine.

"Pioneer Park," he said.

Caspar had invoked the name of the hallowed ground where disputes were settled, noses and knuckles were broken, heroes were crowned, and cowards were exposed.

"Four-thirty," he said flatly.

He hesitated for a moment, then spat on the ground next to my feet.

With that simple act, the Mook entered my life, irrevocably, and with all the elegance of a demolition derby. The jeers emanating from the churlish mouths of my compatriots were turned in my direction as Caspar made his way down the hall. The comment I remember most clearly came from the star linebacker on our football team. Widely regarded as the toughest guy in school, his opinion on matters such as fisticuffs was held in the highest regard.

"You're gonna get killed," he said with no hint of humor.

I found no solace in those words and believed them completely.

It turned out that basketball practice conflicted with the rendezvous Caspar demanded. I sent word through one of Caspar's associates about the scheduling problem. I told his friend I would let him know of a time that was more suitable. My people would call his people. I was hoping that, in the meantime, the hoopla would die down and eventually be forgotten.

By third period the next day, the news that I was ducking a fight with a hood spread far and wide. I put on the best face possible and assured everyone that, had it not been for basketball practice, I definitely would have shown up for the showdown. I'm not sure I convinced anybody, and I certainly didn't convince myself. All I could think about was the shape I would be in once the fight was over. Slap fests and wrestling matches aside, I had never really squared off, toe-to-toe with an adversary, and my skills were questionable. I envisioned myself on crutches, lurching down the hallway, awash in the taunts of my peers. Caspar would filch my position, and I would become the pariah—I would undoubtedly contract his acne in the exchange. I was in deep shit, as they say, and wanted nothing more than to go home, pull a blanket over my head, and sleep for a week straight. I decided to visit the nurse's office.

I was rehearsing fake symptoms for a fictional illness when I saw my brother Mike waiting for me in the hallway. I could tell by his demeanor that he was pissed. He had surely heard about the incident by now, even though I made no mention of

it at our house the night before. I knew Mike would be ashamed of my actions, or lack thereof, and would be furious with me. I saw a couple of his pals behind him. They were looking in my direction and shaking their heads and looking in my direction. My luck had gone from bad to worse.

Mike was the kind of kid who was always involved in some sort of skirmish. I think it began about the time he was able to walk. My father tried to channel his aggressive behavior by enrolling him in a boxing club. Mike proved to be an exceptional boxer and made his way through the ranks of the Golden Gloves. Mike liked boxing all right, but he absolutely *loved* fighting. My brother Colin and I learned at an early age that picking a fight with Mike was futile. He appeared possessed when in the throes of battle and would die rather than concede. He had never dodged a fight in his life and was frankly not a person to be trifled with.

I said hello to him and tried to hurry past.

A heartbeat later, I found my shoulder blades at least three inches deep in a hallway locker. Mike took the collar of my shirt in both of his mitts, and his sneering mug colored my world. Most of the students in the hallway stopped whatever they were doing to take in the drama. A stern glance down the hall from Mike sent them back to their business as my brother conducted his own.

“Loud-mouthed asshole,” he spat at me.

Apparently, no explanations or formalities were going to be necessary.

“Take it easy...”

A solid right hook to my solar plexus ended any further discourse. The ground rules of this conversation were firmly established—the very definition of half-duplex communication—Mike was the transmitter, and I was the receiver. As I gasped for air, my brother articulated his disapproval.

“Now listen up,” Mike hissed between clenched teeth. “You’ve got two choices. You can either fight that grease-ball Mook, or you can fight me. What’s it gonna be?”

“I’m gonna fight that bastard,” I started. “I would have yesterday, but...”

Mike flared up once again, and I found the locker doors encompassing my shoulders like a metallic cape. I shut up immediately and looked for the floor. My brother let go of my shirt but held his stance in front of me and continued to vent.

“Are you scared?” he asked. “Well, you better be. Listen—I don’t care if he kicks your ass up and down the street—you’re going to fight that son of a bitch, and you’re going to fight him tonight.”

Mike took a step backwards. His eyes narrowed as he stared me down.

“I’m going to make damn sure you don’t chicken out again. Meet me here at three thirty. I’ll find your new buddy and let him know the fight is on.”

I nodded in agreement as Mike stormed off. I felt sick to my stomach, and it had nothing to do with the hook I’d received earlier. Only four hours remained before school let out, and the nurse’s office would not provide the cure for my

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malady. I felt dizzy and weak. I saw no way out of the mess I'd created.

I was trapped...

Chapter 31: Drugs and the Safe

CBS interrupted an afternoon game show with a special report. The banner at the top of the black and white screen read: MULTIPLE KILLINGS IN CALIFORNIA.

The TV switched to a live feed in California. This time, the banner read: 21 DEAD AND 19 WOUNDED IN SAN YSIDRO. The commentator, who, despite the somber nature of the report, could not help but flash his array of perfectly capped teeth, droned on in detail about the nature of the tragedy. A man named Huberty killed 21 people, ranging from 8 months old to 74 years old, and wounded 19 others in a 77-minute attack. The reporter went on to mention that this was the largest single-day, single-gunman massacre *ever* in the United States.

I loved it when the media made statements of this nature. In my mind, I envisioned psychotic gunmen across the country fondling their automatic weapons and promising themselves, “The new record is mine.”

The commentator was back on the camera, telling us about the perpetrator’s last words before leaving the house with an Uzi, a 9mm Browning, and a 12-gauge shotgun: “Society had its chance,” he told his wife. “I’m going hunting. Hunting humans.”

I looked out the drive-up window and observed a commotion in our parking lot. In one corner, a dilapidated truck with “SERGEI THE RASSLING BEAR” stenciled in

gold was being unloaded. But what really caught my attention was Rooker's van parked next to a ruby red Corvette. It didn't take a genius to figure out that a transaction of some sort was going down. A figure emerged from the vehicle, and when I saw Hector Del Gato, I eased my profile back from the three-by-four opening that was my window to the world. My brief encounter with The Cat was a sufficient baptism into the realm of sleaze, and all I cared to experience. I turned my attention back to the small black-and-white TV sitting on the cooler.

A few moments later, I saw the tail end of the Corvette drive past the window. The red sports car was traveling so fast that, as it passed over the air hose, the two peals of the bell sounded as one. The Cat was going somewhere in a hurry.

The bell rang again, and I saw the worried face of Rooker at the drive-up window. He was busy checking the rearview mirror and the side mirror. He was extremely nervous about something and hardly looked at me. He spoke just above a whisper.

"Look, something came up, and I need you to hold on to something for me. Can you help me out? I need you to keep something in the mini-safe for me," Abel said.

That gave me pause. In my mind, I distinctly heard the sound of a prison door slamming shut.

The mini-safe he referred to was, in reality, a massive, black, antique safe. It had been purchased at an auction, and the decrepit tumblers only worked about half the time. Phil, Butch, and I were the only ones who knew the combination, but I was the only one of the three who was ever successful with the combination. All the tills from the club and the liquor

store were stored in a newer safe in Phil's office that featured a push-button combination.

"You want me to lock it up?" I asked.

I knew this was a stupid question as soon as it came out of my mouth, but in truth, I was nervous about this on several levels, not the least of which was the next time I locked that safe might be the last time the door would open without a blowtorch or dynamite. Abel was looking at me like I was impossibly stupid.

"No, dumb fuck. I want you to haul that pig out into the parking lot and leave the door wide open in case the cops want a look at it. Of course I want the fucking thing locked up!" he growled.

This smelled to high heaven, and worse yet, none of it made any sense to me. First of all, why were these two scumbags doing business in the parking lot of the Jackpot Club? This was colossally stupid given the number of cops, undercover and otherwise, that might be snooping around. For all I knew, a camera with a telescopic lens was focusing on us as we spoke. What in the sweet name of Jesus was he getting me into this time?

The mini-safe was no stranger to drugs. Phil used to keep a stash in the safe before the tumblers became temperamental. But I had an inkling that the amount Rooker wanted me to store might be a little bit more than a gram or two.

This was fucking crazy! I thought about cops, cameras, and prison showers, and my old buddy paranoia raised his ugly head. It smelled like a set-up, and I found myself reluctant even to put my fingerprints on the bag, let alone store it.

Abel saw my apprehension and shook his head. He took out a .38 snub nose from his pocket and placed it on the seat beside him. I didn't know if this was to impress upon me that he meant business; at any rate, Rooker pressed his case.

"Look, Conor. Hector has to catch a flight to Denver, and I have to take care of some business for him. This is serious shit, and I can't have this on me if anything goes wrong."

"Okay, okay, bring it around to the front door," I said.

I looked up and down the line—yet another train wreck with Conor Sullivan as your conductor. *Could I punch your ticket, please? Burlington Northern Railroad, with stops at the County Jail and the State Penitentiary. All aboard!* I felt the presence of the big fucking bouncer behind me, and when I turned, he was white as a sheet.

"What the fuck is that?" he asked.

We watched as Sergei the Rassling Bear lumbered down a ramp from the back of the truck. The bear stood on his back legs and put his nose to the wind, as if to take a reading on his present objective. Sergei sneezed violently and shook his head like a dog. I found myself admiring the bear's excellent judgmental skills.

"Jesus Christ, why didn't you tell me that thing was out there?" Abel asked.

Unlike Rooker, I wasn't all that impressed. For one thing, the bear was tall and skinny; one expected a little more girth where bears were concerned. Maybe we were spoiled in Montana with our overwhelming abundance of Grizzlies. This was just a run-of-the-mill brown bear, and it didn't look all that well-fed.

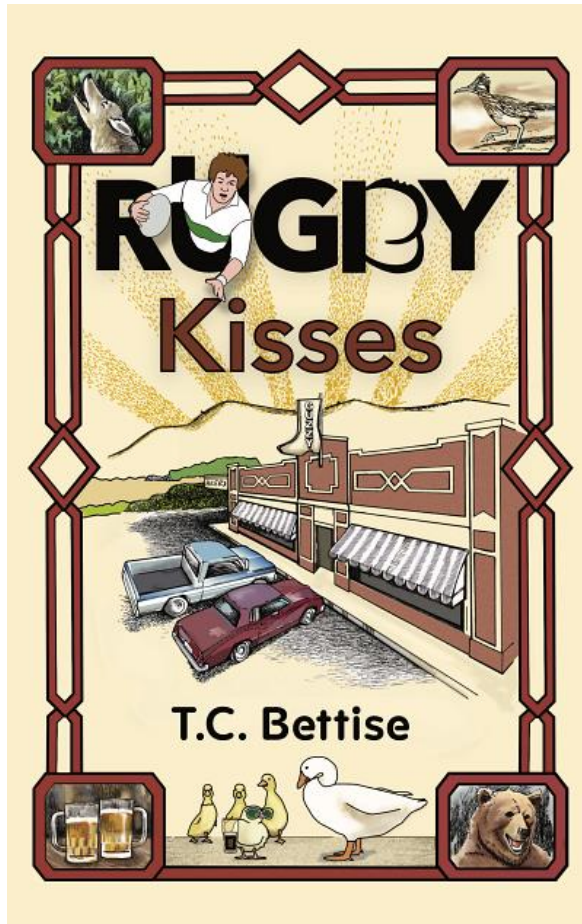
Just then, the eternal question of where a bear preferred to shit was answered decisively. Apparently, parking lots were the favored milieu, and as the act was completed, I saw Abel visibly shaking. His thoughts were probably about his uncle, and I couldn't help but feel sorry for the guy.

"Let's get this in the safe," I said, indicating the suitcase.

We walked to the small office next door. Luckily, the door to the safe was left open. I placed the suitcase on the bottom shelf, shut the door, and twirled the tumbler. I checked the handle twice to make sure it was locked.

Rooker put his hand on my shoulder and looked me square in the eye.

"Don't let me down on your little trick with the keg. I'll be back in a couple of hours," he said.



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