

UNDER MY SKIN

By Nick Fieldhouse.

The boys queued into the changing rooms, muddied and exhausted. It had been raining during rugby and the handling had been poor. The game was reduced to a series of knock-ons, desperate tackles and running mauls. Accurate kicking and passing was out. It had been a frustrating shambles. The schoolmaster had turned out casually in gumboots with a large black umbrella and a tweed jacket, shambling after the action, shouting disapproval. They had played 80 minutes with little break when he called time. Mike was looking forward to a hot bath and a sticky bun with tea. As fullback he had had to sweep along the line making tackle after tackle, and he was knackered.

There was a sharp stench of sulphur in the underground changing rooms. Someone had launched a stink bomb under the boot racks and the smell was eye-watering. Mike decided to ignore it and get on with changing, to go for tea. The other boys were standing in a line waiting for him as he came through the door. They closed around him in a circle. A small muscled boy stepped forward and pushed Mike in the chest.

“He who smelled it dealt it,” he said loudly in Mike’s face. It was Doug Bevan. The boy had been needling Mike for weeks now, he had no idea why. Mike was a quiet studious day-boy, tall for his age, he was shy, and rather a loner. Doug was a boarder and thought he was tough. He wanted a “wet” day-boy to bully, and he thought Mike was it.

“Why’d you drop the stink bomb baby boy?” he demanded in a loud voice. It was calculated to get the attention of the schoolmaster, who had arrived with a net of balls at that moment. The master ignored the smell studiously and went off to the games cupboard to stow the balls. He didn’t want to get involved.

Doug was going to have his fight. Mike was turning away, but his path was blocked by the circle of boys gathered for the fun. Hands pushed him back at Doug.

“Yeah, why the stink bomb baby Mike?” someone said. The chanting started.

“Fight, fight, fight...” the boys half whispered all round Mike. Mike recalled Doug’s fist in the maule. He remembered his satchel thrown on the roof. He thought of his lunch plate thrown on the floor. The ink pellets from the back of the class. He had walked away from Doug, day after day, time after time. The set ups were more and more aggressive. Once again he tried to turn away. There was no point in it. Doug grabbed Mike’s sleeve and pulled him round to face him.

“What you going to do baby Mike, run away again?” It was ridiculous. Doug was almost a head shorter than Mike but he was going off like a fire-cracker. Suddenly Mike broke. He’d had enough. Who did this stupid little shit think he was? As Doug pulled him round again, Mike bunched his right fist behind him and swung blindly at Doug with all his weight. Given Doug’s height, the blow hit him on the forehead. He crumpled silently to the floor, unconscious, with a large round bruise growing from the strike.

“Jesus Wept, you’ve only bloody killed him,” someone whispered. Mike’s hand was agony, he thought he’d broken it. The master arrived and the other boys melted away to get changed. He knelt over Doug who was coming round now. Bevan held his head in his hands, bent over between his knees as he sat on a bench. The master sent a boy for matron in the school house.

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“Let’s have a look at that hand,” he said to Mike. Mike held it out. The index finger had led the punch and broken the bone above the knuckle. The hand was red and swollen.

“We’ll have to get that set in hospital,” the master said.

“I’ll call your mother, boy. You’d better go to matron’s office, and wait. We’ll sort Bevan out in his House at school. We’ll need to talk about this later.”

Mike was more scared about Doug’s injury than his own. Would he get expelled? He never wanted to hurt the boy that badly. He sat shivering with shock in the sanitary ward, waiting for his mother. At last he could see the green Morris Traveller by the gates.

“It’s O.K.,” he said to the matron. “I’ll go and meet her, I’m alright.” He walked down to meet his fussing mother, and they drove to the accident and emergency clinic. It was a long wait, and they played noughts and crosses on a handkerchief with her lip-stick. She didn’t ask any questions though. A locum set the hand after an x-ray, and a nurse put plaster of paris on it. They gave him some pain killers and sent him home.

Mike lay in bed agonising about school the next day. You got beaten for sneezing at that place. He couldn’t begin to imagine what would happen to him when he was brought to book for this. He would probably get the cane and then be expelled. That would ruin everything. He would have to go to a reform school and then work at some menial job on a farm or something for the rest of his life. He hoped to God that Bevan recovered. What if he died? Mike would be a murderer and would go to the gallows! Mike fell into a troubled sleep, wracked with the pain of his hand and the fear of what would come.

He came down to breakfast in the morning. His dad was sitting behind the Times, eating toast and marmalade.

“I don’t feel very well.” Mike muttered.

“You’re going to school to face the music, young man,” his father said, firmly, peering over the paper. “Get it over with, always the best policy. Eat your cereal and get in the car.” They travelled in silence. Finally his father said:

“I don’t think you’ll find it’s too bad...” and winked at him, leaving Mike under the school clock, by the playground.

School was strangely normal. Mike went from registration to assembly and then on to double latin. The grammar seemed strangely soothing, with the inevitable bad puns and jokes from his form master, “Topsy” spicing the usual mix. Someone failed to produce his home-work. The punishment was translating a chapter of Caesar’s Gallic Wars. Poor sod!

The door opened and Topsy went outside to talk to the visitor. It seemed he needed Mike. It was “Sparky” the day boy master. He was in charge of “pastoral” issues.

“Let’s take a walk, Mike.” He said. They walked together across the playground to the school fields, which were heavy with frost. As they drew away from the buildings, Sparky turned to Mike in a fatherly way.

“Tell me all about it, Mike,” he said. It was cold and clear. Mike could see the line of willows near the stages at the bottom of the fields. He didn’t know what to say. Telling tales might be worse than just

taking his punishment in silence. There was a code of honour, but where did you draw a line? Sparky read his thoughts.

“I’m not interested in playing games here,” he said. “I want it straight, I want it honest, and I want it now, back from the beginning. There must be something between you and Bevan, or you wouldn’t have hit him like that. I’ve talked to Bevan and I’ve talked to some of the other boys. Now I want it from you. We can only be fair if we get it out straight.” Mike looked up at him curiously. Sparky was a funny, balding little man in half moon glasses and a pipe in his mouth. He was hardly much taller than the twelve year old. He was a kindly bachelor with a twinkle in his eye. He seemed alright, Mike thought.

They reached the barge by the river and sat on a bench looking at a brown swollen torrent rushing by in spate. Mike kept looking at the water as he spilled the beans. There was the poking and jeering, then the cat calls, the constant humiliations in front of the other boys. Bevan was always trying to cause a fight, rile him up, get him going. There was the satchel, the dinner plate, the pellets, the day-boy jibes, notes in class, picking on him in rigger. Finally he was being framed for a stink bomb he hadn’t planted. It had gone on all term. Bevan was seeing how far he could push him. Then, instinctively he lashed out. He didn’t think. They wouldn’t let him out of the ring. He exploded.

He had finished. He couldn’t think what else to say. They sat for a moment watching a branch being swept down-stream.

“Thank you, Mike. “ Sparky said, looking into Mike’s eyes. “I want you to know that I have the same story from others, Bevan included. I think he got what was coming to him. I have suspended him for a week to think about his bully-boy behaviour. If he does that again I will throw him out. As it is, you punished him a bit yourself.” Sparky’s lips twitched in the ghost of a smile.

“But then you came off pretty bad yourself, I see.” Sparky looked at the broken hand. Mike couldn’t help smiling.

“There will be nothing more about this, Mike.” Sparky said.

“But you keep away from Bevan now, and I don’t want to find you’ve hit anyone else, or you’re out on your ear young man, do you hear?”

“Yes Sir!” Mike said.

That weekend Mike’s grandfather called round.

“I hear you knocked someone out with a single blow!” he said to Mike. Mike looked down, blushing and embarrassed.

“That’s my grandson!” his grandpa said, sliding a sovereign into Mike’s hand.

