

Ham on Rye Excerpts - The Great Depression

From Part 1:

It was another Sunday that we got into the Model-T in search of my Uncle John.

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We drove along a bit further. Uncle John and his family lived in a small court. We went up the cracked sidewalk to a sagging porch and my father pushed the bell. The bell didn't ring. He knocked, loudly.

“Open up! It's the cops!” my father yelled. “Daddy, stop it!” said my mother.

After what seemed a long time, the door opened a crack. Then it opened further. And we could see my Aunt Anna. She was very thin, her cheeks were hollow and her eyes had pouches, dark pouches. Her voice was thin, too.

“Oh, Henry ... Katherine ... come in, please ...” We followed her in. There was very little furniture. There was a breakfast nook with a table and four chairs and there were two beds. My mother and father sat in the chairs. Two girls, Katherine and Betsy (I learned their names later) were at the sink taking turns trying to scrape peanut butter out of a nearly empty peanut butter jar.

“We were just having lunch,” said my Aunt Anna.

The girls came over with tiny smears of peanut butter which they spread on dry pieces of bread. They kept looking into the jar and scraping with the knife.

From Part 3:

[Henry gets hit by a car.]

“I hate drunks! My father was a drunk. My brothers are drunks. Drunks are weak. Drunks are cowards. And hit-and-run drunks should be jailed for the rest of their lives!”

As we drove toward home he continued to talk to me. “Do you know that in the South Seas the natives live in grass shacks? They get up in the morning and the food falls from the trees to the ground. They just pick it up and eat it, coconuts and pineapple. And the natives think that white men are gods! They catch fish and roast boar, and their girls dance and wear grass skirts and rub their men behind the ears. Golden State Creamery, my hairy ass!”

But my father’s dream was not to be. They caught the man who hit me and put him in jail. He had a wife and three children and didn’t have a job. He was a penniless drunkard. The man sat in jail for some time but my father didn’t press charges. As he said, “You can’t get blood out of a \$#@%ing turnip!”

From Part 5:

Mrs. Fretag was our English teacher. The first day in class she asked us each our names.

“I want to get to know all of you,” she said.

She smiled.

“Now, each of you has a father, I’m sure. I think it would be interesting if we found out what each of your fathers does for a living. We’ll start with seat number one and we will go around the class. Now, Marie, what does your father do for a living?”

“He’s a gardener.”

“Ah, that’s nice! Seat number two ... Andrew, what does your father do?”

It was terrible. All the fathers in my immediate neighborhood had lost their jobs. My father had lost his job. Gene’s father sat on his front porch all day. All the fathers were without jobs except Chuck’s who worked in a meat plant. He drove a red car with the meat company’s name on the side.

“My father is a fireman,” said seat number two.

“Ah, that’s interesting,” said Mrs. Fretag. “Seat number three.”

“My father is a lawyer.”

“Seat number four.”

“My father is a ... policeman ...” What was I going to say? Maybe only the fathers in my neighborhood were without jobs. I’d heard of the stock market crash. It meant something bad. Maybe the stock market had only crashed in our neighborhood.

“Seat number eighteen.”

“My father is a movie actor ...”

“Nineteen ...”

“My father is a concert violinist ...”

“Twenty ...”

“My father works in the circus ...”

“Twenty-one ...”

“My father is a bus driver ...”

“Twenty-two ...”

“My father sings in the opera ...”

“Twenty-three ...”

Twenty-three. That was me.

“My father is a dentist,” I said.

Mrs. Fretag went right on through the class until she reached number thirty-three.

“My father doesn’t have a job,” said number thirty-three. \$#@%, I thought, I wish I had thought of that.

One day Mrs. Fretag gave us an assignment.

“Our distinguished President, President Herbert Hoover, is going to visit Los Angeles this Saturday to speak. I want all of you to go hear our President. And I want you to write an essay about the experience and about what you think of President Hoover’s speech.”

Saturday? There was no way I could go. I had to mow the lawn. I had to get the hairs. (I could never get all the hairs.) Almost every Saturday I got a beating with the razor strop because my father found a hair. (I also got stropped during the week, once or twice, for other things I failed to do or didn’t do right.) There was no way I could tell my father that I had to go see President Hoover.

So, I didn’t go. That Sunday I took some paper and sat down to write about how I had seen the President. His open car, trailing flowing streamers, had entered the football stadium. One car, full of secret service agents went ahead and two cars followed close behind. The agents were brave men with guns to protect our President. The crowd rose as the President’s car entered the arena. There

had never been anything like it before. It was the President. It was him. He waved. We cheered. A band played.

Seagulls circled overhead as if they too knew it was the President. And there were skywriting airplanes too. They wrote words in the sky like “Prosperity is just around the corner.” The President stood up in his car, and just as he did the clouds parted and the light from the sun fell across his face. It was almost as if God knew too. Then the cars stopped and our great President, surrounded by secret service agents, walked to the speaker’s platform. As he stood behind the microphone a bird flew down from the sky and landed on the speaker’s platform near him.

The President waved to the bird and laughed and we all laughed with him. Then he began to speak and the people listened. I couldn’t quite hear the speech because I was sitting too near a popcorn machine which made a lot of noise popping the kernels, but I think I heard him say that the problems in Manchuria were not serious, and that at home everything was going to be all right, we shouldn’t worry, all we had to do was to believe in America. There would be enough jobs for everybody. There would be enough dentists with enough teeth to pull, enough fires and enough firemen to put them out. Mills and factories would open again. Our friends in South America would pay their debts.

Soon we would all sleep peacefully, our stomachs and our hearts full. God and our great country would surround us with love and protect us from evil, from the socialists, awaken us from our national nightmare, forever ...

The President listened to the applause, waved, then went back to his car, got in, and was driven off followed by carloads of secret service agents as the sun began to sink, the afternoon turning into evening, red and gold and wonderful. We had seen and heard President Herbert Hoover.

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5th grade became 6th grade and I began to think about running away from home but I decided that if most of our fathers couldn’t get jobs how in the hell could a guy under five feet tall get one? John Dillinger was everybody’s hero, adults and kids alike. He took the money from the banks. And there was Pretty Boy Floyd and Ma Barker and Machine Gun Kelly.

People began going to vacant lots where weeds grew. They had learned that some of the weeds could be cooked and eaten. There were fist fights between men in the vacant lots and on street corners. Everybody was angry. The men smoked Bull Durham and didn’t take any \$#@% from anybody.

They let the little round Bull Durham tags hang out of their front shirt pockets and they could all roll a cigarette with one hand. When you saw a man with a Bull Durham tag dangling, that meant look out. People went around talking about 2nd and 3rd mortgages.

My father came home one night with a broken arm and two black eyes. My mother had a low paying job somewhere. And each boy in the neighborhood had one pair of Sunday pants and one pair of daily pants. When shoes wore out there weren't any new ones. The department stores had soles and heels they sold for 15 or 20 cents along with the glue, and these were glued to the bottoms of the worn out shoes. Gene's parents had one rooster and some chickens in their backyard, and if some chicken didn't lay enough eggs they ate it.

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"You guys set this up," I said.

I heard a slight sound behind us and looked around. I saw old Mr. Gibson watching from behind his bedroom window. He wanted the cat to get killed too, just like the guys. Why?

Old Mr. Gibson was our mailman with the false teeth. He had a wife who stayed in the house all the time. She only came out to empty the garbage. Mrs. Gibson always wore a net over her hair and she was always dressed in a nightgown, bathrobe and slippers.

Then as I watched, Mrs. Gibson, dressed as always came and stood next to her husband, waiting for the kill. Old Mr. Gibson was one of the few men in the neighborhood with a job but he still needed to see the cat killed. Gibson was just like Chuck, Eddie and Gene.

There were too many of them.

The bulldog moved closer. I couldn't watch the kill. I felt a great shame at leaving the cat like that. There was always the chance that the cat might try to escape, but I knew that they would prevent it. That cat wasn't only facing the bulldog, it was facing Humanity.

From Part 6:

That summer, July 1934, they gunned down John Dillinger outside the movie house in Chicago. He never had a chance. The Lady in Red had fingered him. More than a year earlier the banks had collapsed. Prohibition was repealed and my father drank Eastside beer again. But the worst thing was Dillinger getting it. A lot of people admired Dillinger and it made everybody feel terrible. Roosevelt was President. He gave Fireside Chats over the radio and everybody listened. He could really talk. And he began to enact programs to put people to work. But things were still very bad.