

Ham on Rye, Part 6

Jr. high went by quickly enough. About the 8th grade, going into the 9th, I broke out with acne. Many of the guys had it but not like mine. Mine was really terrible. I was the worst case in town. I had pimples and boils all over my face, back, neck, and some on my chest. It happened just as I was beginning to be accepted as a tough guy and a leader. I was still tough but it wasn't the same. I had to withdraw.

I watched people from afar, it was like a stage play. Only they were on stage and I was an audience of one. I'd always had trouble with the girls but with acne it was impossible. The girls were further away than ever. Some of them were truly beautiful—their dresses, their hair, their eyes, the way they stood around. Just to walk down the street during an afternoon with one, you know, talking about everything and anything, I think that would have made me feel very good.

Also, there was still something about me that continually got me into trouble. Most teachers didn't trust or like me, especially the lady teachers. I never said anything out of the way but they claimed it was my "attitude." It was something about the way I sat slouched in my seat and my "voice tone." I was usually accused of "sneering" although I wasn't conscious of it. I was often made to stand outside in the hall during class or I was sent to the principal's office.

The principal always did the same thing. He had a phone booth in his office. He made me stand in the phone booth with the door closed. I spent many hours in that phone booth. The only reading material in there was the *Ladies Home Journal*. It was deliberate torture. I read the *Ladies Home Journal* anyhow. I got to read each new issue. I hoped that maybe I could learn something about women.

I must have had 5,000 demerits by graduation time but it didn't seem to matter. They wanted to get rid of me. I was standing outside in the line that was filing into the auditorium one by one. We each had on our cheap little cap and gown that had been passed down again and again to the next graduating group. We could hear each person's name as they walked across the stage. They were making one big god-damned deal out of graduating from jr. high. The band played our school song:

Oh, Mt. Justin, Oh, Mt. Justin

We will be true,

Our hearts are singing wildly

All our skies are blue ...

We stood in line, each of us waiting to march across the stage. In the audience were our parents and friends.

“I’m about to puke,” said one of the guys.

“We only go from crap to more crap,” said another.

The girls seemed to be more serious about it. That’s why I didn’t really trust them. They seemed to be part of the wrong things. They and the school seemed to have the same song.

“This stuff brings me down,” said one of the guys. “I wish I had a smoke.”

“Here you are ...” Another of the guys handed him a cigarette. We passed it around between four or five of us. I took a hit and exhaled through my nostrils. Then I saw Curly Wagner walking in.

“Ditch it!” I said. “Here comes vomit-head!”

Wagner walked right up to me. He was dressed in his grey gym suit, including sweatshirt, just as he had been the first time I saw him and all the other times afterward. He stood in front of me.

“Listen,” he said, “you think you’re getting away from me because you’re getting out of here, but you’re not! I’m going to follow you the rest of your life. I’m going to follow you to the ends of the earth and I’m going to get you!”

I just glanced at him without comment and he walked off. Wagner’s little graduation speech only made me that much bigger with the guys. They thought I must have done some big god-damned thing to rile him. But it wasn’t true. Wagner was just simple-crazy.

We got nearer and nearer to the doorway of the auditorium. Not only could we hear each name being announced, and the applause, but we could see the audience.

Then it was my turn.

“Henry Chinaski,” the principal said over the microphone. And I walked forward. There was no applause. Then one kindly soul in the audience gave two or three claps.

There were rows of seats set up on the stage for the graduating class. We sat there and waited. The principal gave his speech about opportunity and success in America. Then it was all over. The band struck up the Mt. Justin school song. The students and their parents and friends rose and mingled together. I walked around, looking. My parents weren't there. I made sure. I walked around and gave it a good look-see.

It was just as well. A tough guy didn't need that. I took off my ancient cap and gown and handed it to the guy at the end of the aisle—the janitor. He folded the pieces up for the next time.

I walked outside. The first one out. But where could I go? I had eleven cents in my pocket. I walked back to where I lived.

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. And my boils got worse, they were unbelievably large.

That September I was scheduled to go to Woodhaven High but my father insisted I go to Chelsey High.

“Look,” I told him, “Chelsey is out of this district. It's too far away.”

“You'll do as I tell you. You'll register at Chelsey High.”

I knew why he wanted me to go to Chelsey. The rich kids went there. My father was crazy. He still thought about being rich. When Baldy found out I was going to Chelsey he decided to go there too. I couldn't get rid of him or my boils.

The first day we rode our bikes to Chelsey and parked them. It was a terrible feeling. Most of those kids, at least all the older ones, had their own automobiles, many of them new convertibles, and they weren't black or dark blue like most cars, they were bright yellow, green, orange and red. The guys sat in them outside of the school and the girls gathered around and went for rides. Everybody was nicely dressed, the guys and the girls, they had pullover sweaters, wrist watches and the latest in shoes. They seemed very adult and poised and superior.

And there I was in my homemade shirt, my one ragged pair of pants, my rundown shoes, and I was covered with boils. The guys with the cars didn't worry about acne. They were very handsome, they were tall and clean with bright teeth and they didn't wash their hair with hand soap. They seemed to know something I didn't know. I was at the bottom again.

Since all the guys had cars Baldy and I were ashamed of our bicycles. We left them home and walked to school and back, two-and-one-half miles each way. We carried brown bag lunches. But most of the other students didn't even eat in the school cafeteria. They drove to malt shops with the girls, played the juke boxes and laughed. They were on their way to U.S.C.

I was ashamed of my boils. At Chelsey you had a choice between gym and R.O.T.C. I took R.O.T.C. because then I didn't have to wear a gym suit and nobody could see the boils on my body. But I hated the uniform. The shirt was made of wool and it irritated my boils. The uniform was worn from Monday to Thursday. On Friday we were allowed to wear regular clothes.

We studied the Manual of Arms. It was about warfare and \$#@% like that. We had to pass exams. We marched around the field. We practiced the Manual of Arms. Handling the rifle during various drills was bad for me. I had boils on my shoulders. Sometimes when I slammed the rifle against my shoulder a boil would break and leak through my shirt. The blood would come through but because the shirt was thick and made of wool the spot wasn't obvious and didn't look like blood.

I told my mother what was happening. She lined the shoulders of my shirts with white patches of cloth, but it only helped a little.

Once an officer came through on inspection. He grabbed the rifle out of my hands and held it up, peering through the barrel, for dust in the bore. He slammed the rifle back at me, then looked at a blood spot on my right shoulder.

“Chinaski!” he snapped, “your rifle is leaking oil!”

“Yes, sir.”

I got through the term but the boils got worse and worse. They were as large as walnuts and covered my face. I was very ashamed. Sometimes at home I would stand before the bathroom mirror and break one of the boils. Yellow pus would spurt and splatter on the mirror. And little white hard pits. In a horrible way it was fascinating that all that stuff was in there. But I knew how hard it was for other people to look at me.

The school must have advised my father. At the end of that term I was withdrawn from school. I went to bed and my parents covered me with ointments. There was a brown salve that stank. My father preferred that one for me. It burned. He insisted that I keep it on longer, much longer than the instructions advised. One night he insisted that I leave it on for hours. I began screaming. I ran to the

tub, filled it with water and washed the salve off, with difficulty. I was burned, on my face, my back and chest. That night I sat on the edge of the bed. I couldn't lay down.

My father came into the room.

“I thought I told you to leave that stuff on!”

“Look what happened,” I told him.

My mother came into the room.

“The son-of-a-#@*\$ doesn't *want* to get well,” my father told her. “Why did I have to have a son like this?”

My mother lost her job. My father kept leaving in his car every morning as if he were going to work. “I'm an engineer,” he told people. He had always wanted to be an engineer.

It was arranged for me to go to the L.A. County General Hospital. I was given a long white card. I took the white card and got on the #7 streetcar. The fare was seven cents (or four tokens for a quarter). I dropped in my token and walked to the back of the streetcar. I had an 8:30 a.m. appointment.

A few blocks later a young boy and a woman got on the streetcar. The woman was fat and the boy was about four years old. They sat in the seat behind me. I looked out the window. We rolled along. I liked that #7 streetcar. It went really fast and rocked back and forth as the sun shone outside.

“Mommy,” I heard the young boy say, “What's wrong with that man's face?”

The woman didn't answer.

The boy asked her the same question again.

She didn't answer.

Then the boy screamed it out, “Mommy! What's wrong with that man's face?”

“Shut up! I don't know what's wrong with his face!”

I went to Admissions at the hospital and they instructed me to report to the fourth floor. There the nurse at the desk took my name and told me to be seated. We sat in two long rows of green metal chairs facing one another. Mexicans, whites and blacks. There were no Orientals. There was nothing to read. Some of the patients had day-old newspapers. The people were of all ages, thin and fat, short and

tall, old and young. Nobody talked. Everybody seemed very tired. Orderlies walked back and forth, sometimes you saw a nurse, but never a doctor. An hour went by, two hours. Nobody's name was called. I got up to look for a water fountain. I looked in the little rooms where people were to be examined. There wasn't anybody in any of the rooms, neither doctors or patients.

I went to the desk. The nurse was staring down into a big fat book with names written in it. The phone rang. She answered it.

“Dr. Menen isn't here yet.” She hung up.

“Pardon me,” I said.

“Yes?” the nurse asked.

“The doctors aren't here yet. Can I come back later?”

“No.”

“But there's nobody here.”

“The doctors are on call.”

“But I have an 8:30 appointment.”

“Everybody here has an 8:30 appointment.”

There were 45 or 50 people waiting.

“Since I'm on the waiting list, suppose I come back in a couple of hours, maybe there will be some doctors here then.”

“If you leave now, you will automatically lose your appointment. You will have to return tomorrow if you still wish treatment.”

I walked back and sat in a chair. The others didn't protest.

There was very little movement. Sometimes two or three nurses would walk by laughing. Once they pushed a man past in a wheelchair. Both of his legs were heavily bandaged and his ear on the side of his head toward me had been sliced off. There was a black hole divided into little sections, and it looked like a spider had gone in there and made a spider web. Hours passed. Noon came and went. Another hour. Two hours. We sat and waited. Then somebody said, “There's a doctor!”

The doctor walked into one of the examination rooms and closed the door. We all watched. Nothing. A nurse went in. We heard her laughing. Then she walked out. Five minutes. Ten minutes. The doctor walked out with a clipboard in his hand.

“Martinez?” the doctor asked. “José Martinez?”

An old thin Mexican man stood up and began walking toward the doctor.

“Martinez? Martinez, old boy, how are you?”

“Sick, doctor ... I think I die ...”

“Well, now ... Step in here ...” Martinez was in there a long time. I picked up a discarded newspaper and tried to read it. But we were all thinking about Martinez. If Martinez ever got out of there, someone would be next.

Then Martinez screamed. “AHHHHH! AHHHHH! STOP! STOP! AHHHH! MERCY! GOD! PLEASE STOP!”

“Now, now, that doesn’t hurt ...” said the doctor.

Martinez screamed again. A nurse ran into the examination room. There was silence. All we could see was the black shadow of the half-open doorway. Then an orderly ran into the examination room. Martinez made a gurgling sound. He was taken out of there on a rolling stretcher. The nurse and the orderly pushed him down the hall and through some swinging doors. Martinez was under a sheet but he wasn’t dead because the sheet wasn’t pulled over his face.

The doctor stayed in the examination room for another ten minutes. Then he came out with the clipboard.

“Jefferson Williams?” he asked.

There was no answer.

“Is Jefferson Williams here?”

There was no response.

“Mary Blackthorne?”

There was no answer.

“Harry Lewis?”

“Yes, doctor?”

“Step forward, please ...”

It was very slow. The doctor saw five more patients. Then he left the examination room, stopped at the desk, lit a cigarette and talked to the nurse for fifteen minutes. He looked like a very intelligent man. He had a twitch on the right side of his face, which kept jumping, and he had red hair with streaks of grey. He wore glasses and kept taking them off and putting them back on. Another nurse came in and gave him a cup of coffee. He took a sip, then holding the coffee in one hand he pushed the swinging doors open with the other and was gone.

The office nurse came out from behind the desk with our long white cards and she called our names. As we answered, she handed each of us our card back. "This ward is closed for the day. Please return tomorrow if you wish. Your appointment time is stamped on your card."

I looked down at my card. It was stamped 8:30 a.m.

I got lucky the next day. They called my name. It was a different doctor. I stripped down. He turned a hot white light on me and looked me over. I was sitting on the edge of the examination table.

"Hmmm, hmmm," he said, "uh huh ..."

I sat there.

"How long have you had this?"

"A couple of years. It keeps getting worse and worse."

"Ah hah."

He kept looking.

"Now, you just stretch out there on your stomach. I'll be right back."

Some moments passed and suddenly there were many people in the room. They were all doctors. At least they looked and talked like doctors. Where had they come from? I had thought there were hardly any doctors at L.A. County General Hospital.

"Acne vulgaris. The worst case I've seen in all my years of practice!"

"Fantastic!"

"Incredible!"

“Look at the face!”

“The neck!”

“I just finished examining a young girl with acne vulgaris. Her back was covered. She cried. She told me, ‘How will I ever get a man? My back will be scarred forever. I want to kill myself!’ And now look at this fellow! If she could see him, she’d know that she really had nothing to complain about!”

You dumb @\$%, I thought, don’t you realize that I can hear what you’re saying?

How did a man get to be a doctor? Did they take anybody?

“Is he asleep?”

“Why?”

“He seems very calm.”

“No, I don’t think he’s asleep. Are you asleep, my boy?”

“Yes.”

They kept moving the hot white light about on various parts of my body. “Turn over.”

I turned over.

“Look, there’s a lesion inside of his mouth!”

“Well, how will we treat it?”

“The electric needle, I think ...”

“Yes, of course, the electric needle.”

“Yes, the needle.”

It was decided.