

## Ham on Rye, Part 8

Back at Chelsey High it was the same. One group of seniors had graduated but they were replaced by another group of seniors with sports cars and expensive clothes. I was never confronted by them. They left me alone, they ignored me. They were busy with the girls. They never spoke to the poor guys in or out of class.

About a week into my second semester I talked to my father over dinner.

“Look,” I said, “it’s hard at school. You’re giving me 50 cents a week allowance. Can’t you make it a dollar?”

“A dollar?”

“Yes.”

He put a forkful of sliced pickled beets into his mouth and chewed. Then he looked at me from under his curled-up eyebrows.

“If I gave you a dollar a week that would mean 52 dollars a year, that would mean I would have to work over a week on my job just so you could have an allowance.”

I didn’t answer. But I thought, my god, if you think like that, item by item, then you can’t buy anything: bread, watermelon, newspapers, flour, milk or shaving cream. I didn’t say any more because when you hate, you don’t beg ...

Those rich guys like to dart their cars in and out, swiftly, sliding up, burning rubber, their cars glistening in the sunlight as the girls gathered around. Classes were a joke, they were all going somewhere to college, classes were just a routine laugh, they got good grades, you seldom saw them with books, you just saw them burning more rubber, gunning from the curb with their cars full of squealing and laughing girls. I watched them with my 50 cents in my pocket. I didn’t even know how to drive a car.

Meanwhile the poor and the lost and the idiots continued to flock around me. I had a place I liked to eat under the football grandstand. I had my brown bag lunch with my two bologna sandwiches. They came around, "Hey, Hank, can I eat with you?"

"Get the @%\$# out of here! I'm not going to tell you twice!"

Enough of this kind had attached themselves to me already. I didn't much care for any of them: Baldy, Jimmy Hatcher, and a thin gangling Jewish kid, Abe Mortenson. Mortenson was a straight-A student but one of the biggest idiots in school. He had something radically wrong with him. Saliva kept forming in his mouth but instead of spitting on the ground to get rid of it he spit into his hands. I don't know why he did it and I didn't ask. I didn't like to ask. I just watched him and I was disgusted. I went home with him once and I found out how he got straight A's. His mother made him stick his nose into a book right away and she made him keep it there. She made him read all of his school books over and over, page after page. "He must pass his exams," she told me. It never occurred to her that maybe the books were wrong. Or that maybe it didn't matter. I didn't ask her.

It was like grammar school all over again. Gathered around me were the weak instead of the strong, the ugly instead of the beautiful, the losers instead of the winners. It looked like it was my destiny to travel in their company through life. That didn't bother me so much as the fact that I seemed irresistible to these dull idiot fellows. I was like a turd that drew flies instead of like a flower that butterflies and bees desired. I wanted to live alone, I felt best being alone, cleaner, yet I was not clever enough to rid myself of them. Maybe they were my masters: fathers in another form. In any event, it was hard to have them hanging around while I was eating my bologna sandwiches

But there were some good moments. My sometime friend from the neighborhood, Gene, who was a year older than I, had a buddy, Harry Gibson, who had had one professional fight (he'd lost). I was over at Gene's one afternoon smoking cigarettes with him when Harry Gibson showed up with two pairs of boxing gloves. Gene and I were smoking with his two older brothers, Larry and Dan.

Harry Gibson was cocky. "Anybody want to try me?" he asked. Nobody said anything. Gene's oldest brother, Larry, was about 22. He was the biggest, but he was kind of timid and subnormal. He had a huge head, he was short and stocky, really well-built, but everything frightened him. So we all looked at Dan who was the next oldest, since Larry said, "No, no I don't want to fight." Dan was a musical genius, he had almost won a scholarship but not quite. Anyhow, since Larry had passed up Harry's challenge, Dan put the gloves on with Harry Gibson.

Harry Gibson was a son-of-a-#@\*\$ on shining wheels. Even the sun glinted off his gloves in a certain way. He moved with precision, aplomb and grace. He pranced and danced around Dan. Dan held up his gloves and waited. Gibson's first punch streaked in. It cracked like a rifle shot. There were some chickens in a pen in the yard and two of them jumped into the air at the sound. Dan spilled backwards. He was stretched out on the grass, both of his arms spread out like some cheap Christ.

Larry looked at him and said, "I'm going into the house." He walked quickly to the screen door, opened it and was gone.

We walked over to Dan. Gibson stood over him with a little grin on his face. Gene bent down, lifted Dan's head up a bit. "Dan? You all right?"

Dan shook his head and slowly sat up.

"Jesus Christ, the guy's carrying a lethal weapon. Get these gloves off me!"

Gene unlaced one glove and I got the other. Dan stood up and walked toward the back door like an old man. "I'm gonna lay down ..." He went inside.

Harry Gibson picked up the gloves and looked at Gene. "How about it, Gene?"

Gene spit in the grass. "What the hell you trying to do, knock off the whole family?"

"I know you're the best fighter, Gene, but I'll go easy on you anyhow."

Gene nodded and I laced on his gloves for him. I was a good glove man.

They squared off. Gibson circled around Gene, getting ready. He circled to the right, then he circled to the left. He bobbed and he weaved. Then he stepped in, gave Gene a hard left jab. It landed right between Gene's eyes. Gene backpedaled and Gibson followed. When he got Gene up against the chicken pen he steadied him with a soft left to the forehead and then cracked a hard right to Gene's left temple. Gene slid along the chicken wire until he hit the fence, then he slid along the fence, covering up. He wasn't attempting to fight back. Dan came out of the house with a piece of ice wrapped in a rag. He sat on the porch steps and held the rag to his forehead.

Gene retreated along the fence. Harry got him in the corner between the fence and the garage. He looped a left to Gene's gut and when Gene bent over he straightened him with a right uppercut. I didn't like it. Gibson wasn't going easy on Gene like he'd promised. I got excited.

"Hit that @%\$#er back, Gene! He's yellow! Hit him!"

Gibson lowered his gloves, looked at me and walked over. "What did you say, punk?"

"I was rooting my man on," I said.

Dan was over getting the gloves off Gene.

"Did I hear something about being 'yellow'?"

"You said you were going to go easy on him. You didn't. You're hitting him with every shot you've got."

"You callin' me a liar?"

“I’m saying you don’t keep your word.”

“Come on over and put the gloves on this punk!”

Gene and Dan came over and began putting the gloves on me. “Take it easy on this guy, Hank,” Gene said. “Remember he’s all tired out from fighting us.”

Gene and I had fought barefisted one memorable day from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Gene had done pretty good. I had small hands and if you have small hands you’ve either got to be able to hit hard as hell or else be some kind of a boxer. I was only a little of each. The next day my entire upper body was purple with bruises and I had two fat lips and a couple of loose front teeth. Now I had to fight the guy who had just whipped the guy who had whipped me.

Gibson circled to the left, then the right, then he moved in on me. I didn’t see the left jab at all. I don’t know where it caught me but I went down from the left jab. It hadn’t hurt but I was down. I got up. If the left could do that what would the right do? I had to figure something out.

Harry Gibson began to circle to the left, my left. Instead of circling to my right like he expected, I circled to my left. He looked surprised and as we came together I looped a wild left which caught him high and hard on the head. It felt great. If you can hit a guy once, you can hit him twice.

Then we were facing each other and he came straight at me. Gibson got me with the jab but as it hit me I ducked my head down and to one side as quickly as I could. His right swung around over the top, missing. I moved into him and clinched, giving him a rabbit punch. We broke and I felt like a pro.

“You can take him, Hank!” yelled Gene.

“Go get him, Hank!” yelled Dan.

I rushed Gibson and tried a right lead. I missed and his left cross flashed on my jaw. I saw green and yellow and red lights, then he dug a right to my belly. It felt like it went through to my backbone. I grabbed him and clinched. But I wasn’t frightened, for a change, and that felt good.

“I’ll kill you, you @%\$#er!” I told him.

Then it was just head-to-head, no more boxing. His punches came fast and hard. He was more accurate, had more power, yet I was landing some hard shots too and it made me feel good. The more he hit me the less I felt it. I had my gut sucked in, I liked the action. Then Gene and Dan were between us. They pulled us apart.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Don’t stop this thing! I can take his ass!”

“Cut the \$#@%, Hank,” said Gene. “Look at yourself.”

I looked down. The front of my shirt was dark with blood and there were splotches of pus. The punches had broken open three or four boils. That hadn’t happened in my fight with Gene.

“That’s nothing,” I said. “That’s just bad luck. He hasn’t hurt me. Give me a chance and I’ll cut him down.”

“No, Hank, you’ll get an infection or something,” said Gene.

“All right, \$#@%,” I said, “cut the gloves off me!”

Gene unlaced me. When he got the gloves off I noticed that my hands were trembling, and also my arms to a lesser extent. I put my hands in my pockets. Dan took Harry’s gloves off.

Harry looked at me. “You’re pretty good, kid.”

“Thanks. Well, I’ll see you guys ...”

I walked off. As I walked away I took my hands out of my pockets. Then up the driveway, just at the sidewalk, I stopped, pulled out a cigarette and stuck it into my mouth. When I tried to strike a match my hands were trembling so much I couldn’t do it. I gave them a wave, a real nonchalant wave, and walked away.

Back at the house I looked at myself in the mirror. Pretty damn good. I was coming along.

I took off my shirt and threw it under the bed. I’d have to find a way to clean the blood off. I didn’t have many shirts and they’d notice a missing one right away. But for me, it had finally been a successful day, and I hadn’t had too many of those.

I could see the road ahead of me. I was poor and I was going to stay poor. But I didn’t particularly want money. I didn’t know what I wanted. Yes, I did. I wanted someplace to hide out, someplace where one didn’t have to do anything. The thought of being something didn’t only appall me, it sickened me. The thought of being a lawyer or a councilman or an engineer, anything like that, seemed impossible to me. To get married, to have children, to get trapped in the family structure. To go someplace to work every day and to return. It was impossible. To do things, simple things, to be part of family picnics, Christmas, the 4th of July, Labor Day, Mother’s Day ... was a man born just to endure those things and then die? I would rather be a dishwasher, return alone to a tiny room and drink myself to sleep.

My father had a master plan. He told me, “My son, each man during his lifetime should buy a house. Finally he dies and leaves that house to his son. Then his son gets his own house and dies, leaves both houses to his son. That’s two houses. That son gets his own house, that’s three houses ...”

The family structure. Victory over adversity through the family. He believed in it. Take the family, mix with God and Country, add the ten-hour day and you had what was needed.

I looked at my father, at his hands, his face, his eyebrows, and I knew that this man had nothing to do with me. He was a stranger. My mother was non-existent. I was cursed. Looking at my father I saw nothing but indecent dullness. Worse, he was even more afraid to fail than most others. Centuries

of peasant blood and peasant training. The Chinaski bloodline had been thinned by a series of peasant-servants who had surrendered their real lives for fractional and illusionary gains. Not a man in the line who said, “I don’t want a house, I want a thousand houses, now!”

He had sent me to that rich high school hoping that the ruler’s attitude would rub off on me as I watched the rich boys screech up in their cream-colored coupes and pick up the girls in bright dresses. Instead I learned that the poor usually stay poor. That the young rich smell the stink of the poor and learn to find it a bit amusing. They had to laugh, otherwise it would be too terrifying. They’d learned that, through the centuries. I would never forgive the girls for getting into those cream-colored coupes with the laughing boys. They couldn’t help it, of course, yet you always think, maybe ...

But no, there weren’t any maybes. Wealth meant victory and victory was the only reality.

What woman chooses to live with a dishwasher?

Throughout high school I tried not to think too much about how things might eventually turn out for me. It seemed better to delay thinking ...

Finally it was the day of the Senior Prom. It was held in the girls’ gym with live music, a real band. I don’t know why but I walked over that night, the two-and-one-half miles from my parents’ place. I stood outside in the dark and I looked in there, through the wire-covered window, and I was astonished. All the girls looked very grown-up, stately, lovely, they were in long dresses, and they all looked beautiful. I almost didn’t recognize them. And the boys in their tuxes, they looked great, they danced so straight, each of them holding a girl in his arms, their faces pressed against the girl’s hair. They all danced beautifully and the music was loud and clear and good, powerful.

Then I caught a glimpse of my reflection staring in at them—boils and scars on my face, my ragged shirt. I was like some jungle animal drawn to the light and looking in. Why had I come? I felt sick. But I kept watching. The dance ended. There was a pause. Couples spoke easily to each other. It was natural and civilized. Where had they learned to converse and to dance? I couldn’t converse or dance. Everybody knew something I didn’t know. The girls looked so good, the boys so handsome. I would be too terrified to even look at one of those girls, let alone be close to one. To look into her eyes or dance with her would be beyond me.

And yet I knew that what I saw wasn’t as simple and good as it appeared. There was a price to be paid for it all, a general falsity, that could be easily believed, and could be the first step down a dead-end street. The band began to play again and the boys and girls began to dance again and the lights revolved overhead throwing shades of gold, then red, then blue, then green, then gold again on the couples. As I watched them I said to myself, someday my dance will begin. When that day comes I will have something that they don’t have.

But then it got to be too much for me. I hated them. I hated their beauty, their untroubled youth, and as I watched them dance through the magic colored pools of light, holding each other, feeling so good, little unscathed children, temporarily in luck, I hated them because they had something I had not

yet had, and I said to myself, I said to myself again, someday I will be as happy as any of you, you will see.

They kept dancing, and I repeated it to them.

Then there was a sound behind me.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

It was an old man with a flashlight. He had a head like a frog’s head.

“I’m watching the dance.”

He held the flashlight right up under his nose. His eyes were round and large, they gleamed like a cat’s eyes in the moonlight. But his mouth was shriveled, collapsed, and his head was round. It had a peculiar senseless roundness that reminded me of a pumpkin trying to play pundit.

“Get your ass out of here!”

He ran the flashlight up and down all over me.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I’m the night custodian. Get your ass out of here before I call the cops!”

“What for? This is the Senior Prom and I’m a senior.” He flashed his light into my face. The band was playing “Deep Purple.”

“Bull\$#@%!” he said. “You’re at least 22 years old!”

“I’m in the yearbook, Class of 1939, graduating class, Henry Chinaski.”

“Why aren’t you in there dancing?”

“Forget it. I’m going home.” “Do that.”

I walked off. I kept walking. His flashlight leaped on the path, the light following me. I walked off campus. It was a nice warm night, almost hot. I thought I saw some fireflies but I wasn’t sure.

Graduation Day. We filed in with our caps and gowns to “Pomp and Circumstance.” I suppose that in our three years we must have learned something. Our ability to spell had probably improved and we had grown in size. I was still a virgin. “Hey, Henry, you busted your cherry yet?”

“No way,” I’d say.

Jimmy Hatcher sat next to me. The principal was giving his address and really scraping the bottom of the old \$#@% barrel. “America is the great land of Opportunity and any man or woman with a desire to do so will succeed ...”

“Dishwasher,” I said.

“Dog catcher,” said Jimmy.

“Burglar,” I said.

“Garbage collector,” said Jimmy.

“Madhouse attendant,” I said.

“America is brave, America was built by the brave ... Ours is a just society.”

“Just so much for the few,” said Jimmy.

“... a fair society and all those who search for that dream at the end of the rainbow will find ...”

“A hairy crawling turd,” I suggested.

“... and I can say, without hesitation, that this particular Class of Summer 1939, less than a decade removed from the beginning of our terrible national Depression, this class of Summer ‘39 is more ripe with courage, talent and love than any class it has been my pleasure to witness!”

The mothers, fathers, relatives applauded wildly; a few of the students joined in.

“Class of Summer 1939, I am proud of your future, I am sure of your future. I send you out now to your great adventure!”

Most of them were headed over to U.S.C. to live the non-working life for at least four more years.

“And I send my prayers and blessings with you!”

The honor students received their diplomas first. Out they came. Abe Mortenson was called. He got his. I applauded.

“Where’s he gonna end up?” Jimmy asked.

“Cost accountant in an auto parts manufacturing concern. Somewhere near Gardena, California.”

“A lifetime job ...” said Jimmy.

“A lifetime wife,” I added.

“Abe will never be miserable ...”

“Or happy.”

“An obedient man ...”

“A broom.”

“A stiff ...”

“A wimp.”

When the honor students had been taken care of they began on us. I felt uncomfortable sitting there. I felt like walking out. “Henry Chinaski!” I was called. “Public servant,” I told Jimmy.

I walked up to and across the stage, took the diploma, shook the principal’s hand. It felt slimy like the inside of a dirty fish bowl. (Two years later he would be exposed as an embezzler of school funds; he was to be tried, convicted and jailed.) I passed Mortenson and the honor group as I went back to my seat. He looked over and gave me the finger, so only I could see it. That got me. It was so unexpected.

I walked back and sat down next to Jimmy.

“Mortenson gave me the finger!”

“No, I don’t believe it!”

“Son-of-a-#@\*\$! He’s spoiled my day! Not that it was worth a @%\$# anyhow but he’s really greased it over now!”

“I can’t believe he had the guts to finger you.”

“It’s not like him. You think he’s getting some coaching?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“He knows that I can bust him in half without even inhaling!”

“Bust him!”

“But don’t you see, he’s won? It’s the way he surprised me!”

“All you gotta do is kick his ass all up and down.”

“Do you think that son-of-a-#@\*\$ learned something reading all those books? I know there’s nothing in them because I read every fourth page.”

“Jimmy Hatcher!” His name was called.

“Priest,” he said.

“Poultry farmer,” I said.

Jimmy went up and got his. I applauded loudly. Anybody who could live with a mother like his deserved some accolade. He came back and we sat watching all the golden boys and girls go up and get theirs.

“You can’t blame them for being rich,” Jimmy said. “No, I blame their @%\$#ing parents.”

“And their grandparents,” said Jimmy.

“Yes, I’d be happy to take their new cars and their pretty girlfriends and I wouldn’t give a @%\$# about anything like social justice.”

“Yeah,” said Jimmy. “I guess the only time most people think about injustice is when it happens to them.”

The golden boys and girls went on parading across the stage. I sat there wondering whether to punch Abe out or not. I could see him flopping on the sidewalk still in his cap and gown, the victim of my right cross, all the pretty girls screaming, thinking, my god, this Chinaski guy must be a bull on the springs! On the other hand, Abe wasn’t much. He was hardly there. It wouldn’t take anything to punch him out. I decided not to do it. I had already broken his arm and his parents hadn’t sued mine, finally. If I busted his head they would surely go ahead and sue. They would take my old man’s last copper. Not that I would mind. It was my mother: she would suffer in a fool’s way: senselessly and without reason.

Then, the ceremony was over. The students left their seats and filed out. Students met with parents, relatives on the front lawn. There was much hugging, embracing. I saw my parents waiting. I walked up to them, stood about four feet away.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

My mother was looking at me. “Henry, I’m so proud of you!”

Then my mother’s head turned. “Oh, there goes Abe and his parents! They’re such nice people! Oh, Mrs. Mortenson!”

They stopped. My mother ran over and threw her arms about Mrs. Mortenson. It was Mrs. Mortenson who had decided not to sue after many, many hours of conversation upon the telephone with my mother. It had been decided that I was a confused individual and that my mother had suffered enough that way.

My father shook hands with Mr. Mortenson and I walked over to Abe.

“O.K., @#%\*, what’s the idea of giving me the finger?”

“What?”

“The finger!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” “The finger!”

“Henry, I really don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“All right, Abraham, it’s time to go!” said his mother.

The Mortenson family walked off together. I stood there watching them. Then we started walking to our old car. We walked west to the corner and turned south.

“Now that Mortenson boy really knows how to apply himself!” said my father. “How are you ever going to make it? I’ve never even seen you look at a Schoolbook, let alone inside of one!”

“Some books are dull,” I said.

“Oh, they’re dull, are they? So you don’t want to study? What can you do? What good are you? What can you do? It has cost me thousands of dollars to raise you, feed you, clothe you! Suppose I left you here on the street? Then what would you do?”

“Catch butterflies.”

My mother began to cry. My father pulled her away and down the block to where their ten-year-old car was parked. As I stood there, the other families roared past in their new cars, going somewhere.

Then Jimmy Hatcher and his mother walked by. She stopped. “Hey, wait a minute,” she told Jimmy, “I want to congratulate Henry.”

Jimmy waited and Clare walked over. She put her face close to mine. She spoke softly so Jimmy wouldn’t hear. “Listen, Honey, any time you really want to graduate, I can arrange to give you your diploma.”

“Thanks, Clare, I might be seeing you.”

She went back to Jimmy and they walked away down the street.

A very old car rolled up, stopped, the engine died. I could see my mother weeping, big tears were running down her cheeks.

“Henry, get in! Please get in! Your father is right but I love you!”

“Forget it. I’ve got a place to go.”

“No, Henry, get in!” she wailed. “Get in or I’ll die!”

I walked over, opened the rear door, climbed into the rear seat. The engine started and we were off again. There I sat, Henry Chinaski, Class of Summer ‘39, driving into the bright future. No, being driven. At the first red light the car stalled. As the signal turned green my father was still trying to start the engine. Somebody behind us honked. My father got the car started and we were in motion again. My mother had stopped crying. We drove along like that, each of us silent.