

Ham on Rye, Part 10

The war was going very well in Europe, for Hitler. Most of the students weren't very vocal on the matter. But the instructors were, they were almost all left-wing and anti-German. There seemed to be no right-wing faction among the instructors except for Mr. Glasglow, in Economics, and he was very discreet about it.

It was intellectually popular and proper to be for going to war with Germany, to stop the spread of fascism. As for me, I had no desire to go to war to protect the life I had or what future I might have. I had no Freedom. I had nothing. With Hitler around, maybe I'd even get a piece of ass now and then and more than a dollar a week allowance. As far as I could rationalize, I had nothing to protect. Also, having been born in Germany, there was a natural loyalty and I didn't like to see the whole German nation, the people, depicted everywhere as monsters and idiots. In the movie theatres they speeded up the newsreels to make Hitler and Mussolini look like frenetic madmen.

Also, with all the instructors being anti-German I found it personally impossible to simply agree with them. Out of sheer alienation and a natural contrariness I decided to align myself against their point of view. I had never read Mein Kampf and had no desire to do so. Hitler was just another dictator to me, only instead of lecturing me at the dinner table he'd probably blow my brains out or my balls off if I went to war to stop him.

Sometimes as the instructors talked on and on about the evils of nazism (we were told always to spell "nazi" with a small "n" even at the beginning of a sentence) and fascism I would leap to my feet and make something up: "The survival of the human race depends upon selective accountability!"

Which meant, watch out who you go to bed with, but only I knew that. It really pissed everybody off. I don't know where I got my stuff: "One of the failures of Democracy is that the common vote guarantees a common leader who then leads us to a common apathetic predictability!"

I avoided any direct reference to Jews and Blacks, who had never given me any trouble. All my troubles had come from white gentiles. Thus, I wasn't a nazi by temperament or choice; the teachers more or less forced it on me by being so much alike and thinking so much alike and with their anti-German prejudice. I had also read somewhere that if a man didn't truly believe or understand what he was espousing, somehow he could do a more convincing job, which gave me a considerable advantage over the teachers.

"Breed a plow horse to a race horse and you get an offspring that is neither swift nor strong. A new Master Race will evolve from purposeful breeding!"

“There are no good wars or bad wars. The only thing bad about a war is to lose it. All wars have been fought for a so-called good Cause on both sides. But only the victor’s Cause becomes history’s Noble Cause. It’s not a matter of who is right or who is wrong, it’s a matter of who has the best generals and the better army!”

I loved it. I could make up anything I liked.

Of course, I was talking myself further and further away from any chance with the girls. But I had never been that close anyhow. I figured because of my wild speeches I was alone on campus but it wasn’t so. Some others had been listening. One day, walking to my Current Affairs class, I heard somebody walking up behind me. I never liked anybody walking behind me, not close. So I turned as I walked. It was the student body president, Boyd Taylor. He was very popular with the students, the only man in the history of the college to have been elected president twice.

“Hey, Chinaski, I want to talk to you.”

I’d never cared too much for Boyd, he was the typical good-looking American youth with a guaranteed future, always properly dressed, casual, smooth, every hair of his black mustache trimmed. What his appeal was to the student body, I had no idea. He walked along beside me.

“Don’t you think it looks bad for you, Boyd, to be seen walking with me?”

“I’ll worry about that.”

“All right. What is it?”

“Chinaski, this is just between you and me, got it?”

“Sure.”

“Listen, I don’t believe in what guys like you stand for or what you’re trying to do.”

“So?”

“But I want you to know that if you win here and in Europe I’m willing to join your side.”

I could only look at him and laugh.

He stood there as I walked on. Never trust a man with a perfectly-trimmed mustache ...

Other people had been listening as well. Coming out of Current Affairs I ran into Baldy standing there with a guy five feet tall and three feet wide. The guy’s head was sunk down into his shoulders, he had a very round head, small ears, cropped hair, pea eyes, tiny wet round mouth.

A nut, I thought, a killer.

“HEY, HANK!” Baldy hollered.

I walked over. “I thought we were finished, LaCrosse.”

“Oh no! There are great things still to do!” Baldy was one too! Why did the Master Race movement draw nothing but mental and physical cripples?

“I want you to meet Igor Stirnov.”

I reached out and we shook hands. He squeezed mine with all his strength. It really hurt.

“Let go,” I said, “or I’ll bust your missing neck!”

Igor let go. “I don’t trust men with limp handshakes. Why do you have a limp handshake?”

“I’m weak today. They burned my toast for breakfast and at lunch I spilled my chocolate milk.”

Igor turned to Baldy. “What’s with this guy?”

“Don’t worry about him. He’s got his own ways.” Igor looked at me again.

“My grandfather was a White Russian. During the Revolution the Reds killed him. I must get even with those bastards!”

“I see.”

Then another student came walking toward us. “Hey, Fenster!” Baldy hollered.

Fenster walked up. We shook hands. I gave him a limp one. I didn’t like to shake hands. Fenster’s first name was Bob. There was to be a meeting at a house in Glendale, the Americans for America Party. Fenster was the campus representative. He walked off. Baldy leaned over and whispered into my ear, “They’re Nazis!”

Igor had a car and a gallon of rum. We met in front of Baldy’s house. Igor passed the bottle. Good stuff, it really burned the membranes of the throat. Igor drove his car like a tank, right through stop signals. People blew their horns and slammed on their brakes and he waved a fake black pistol at them.

“Hey, Igor,” said Baldy, “show Hank your pistol.”

Igor was driving. Baldy and I were in the back. Igor passed me his pistol. I looked at it.

“It’s great!” Baldy said. “He carved it out of wood and stained it with black shoe polish. Looks real, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “He’s even drilled a hole in the barrel.”

I handed the gun back to Igor. “Very nice,” I said.

He handed back the jug of rum. I took a hit and handed the bottle to Baldy. He looked at me and said, “Heil Hitler!”

We were the last to arrive. It was a large handsome house. We were met at the door by a fat smiling boy who looked like he had spent a lifetime eating chestnuts by the fire. His parents didn't seem to be about. His name was Larry Kearny. We followed him through the big house and down a long dark stairway. All I could see was Kearny's shoulders and head. He was certainly a well-fed fellow and looked to be far saner than Baldy, Igor or myself. Maybe there would be something to learn here.

Then we were in the cellar. We found some chairs. Fenster nodded to us. There were seven others there whom I didn't know. There was a desk on a raised platform. Larry walked up and stood behind the desk. Behind him on the wall was a large American flag. Larry stood very straight. "We will now pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America!"

My god, I thought, I am in the wrong place! We stood and took the pledge, but I stopped after "I pledge allegiance ..."

I didn't say to what.

We sat down. Larry started talking from behind the desk. He explained that since this was the first meeting, he would preside. After two or three meetings, after we got to know one another, a president could be elected if we wished. But meanwhile ...

"We face here, in America, two threats to our liberty. We face the communist scourge and the black takeover. Most often they work hand in hand. We true Americans will gather here in an attempt to counter this scourge, this menace. It has gotten so that no decent white girl can walk the streets anymore without being accosted by a black male!"

Igor leaped up. "We'll kill them!"

"The communists want to divide the wealth for which we have worked so long, which our fathers labored for, and their fathers before them worked for. The communists want to give our money to every black man, homo, bum, murderer and child molester who walks our streets!"

"We'll kill them!"

"They must be stopped."

"We'll arm!"

"Yes, we'll arm! And we'll meet here and formulate a master plan to save America!"

The fellows cheered. Two or three of them yelled, "Heil Hitler!" Then the get-to-know-each-other time arrived.

Larry passed out cold beers and we stood around in little groups talking, not much being said, except we reached a general agreement that we needed target practice so that we would be expert with our guns when the time came.

When we got back to Igor's house his parents didn't seem to be about, either. Igor got out a frying pan, put in four cubes of butter, and began to melt them. He took the rum, put it in a large pot and warmed it up.

"This is what men drink," he said. Then he looked at Baldy. "Are you a man, Baldy?"

Baldy was already drunk. He stood very straight, hands down at his sides. "YES, I'M A MAN!" He started to weep. The tears came rolling down. "I'M A MAN!" He stood very straight and yelled, "HEIL HITLER!" the tears rolling.

Igor looked at me. "Are you a man?"

"I don't know. Is that rum ready?"

"I'm not sure I trust you. I'm not so sure that you are one of us. Are you a counter-spy? Are you an enemy agent?"

"No."

"Are you one of us?"

"I don't know. Only one thing I'm sure of."

"What's that?"

"I don't like you. Is the rum ready?" "You see?" said Baldy. "I told you he was mean!"

"We'll see who is the meanest before the night is ended," said Igor.

Igor poured the melted butter into the boiling rum, then shut off the flame and stirred. I didn't like him but he certainly was different and I liked that. Then he found three drinking cups, large, blue, with Russian writing on them. He poured the buttered rum into the cups.

"O.K.," he said, "drink up!"

"It's about time," I said and I let it slide down. It was a little too hot and it stank.

I watched Igor drink his. I saw his little pea eyes over the rim of his cup. He managed to get it down, dribbles of golden buttered rum leaking out of the corners of his stupid mouth. He was looking at Baldy. Baldy was standing, staring down into his cup. I knew from the old days that Baldy just didn't have a natural love of drinking.

Igor stared at Baldy. "Drink up!"

"Yes, Igor, yes ..."

Baldy lifted the blue cup. He was having a difficult time. It was too hot for him and he didn't like the taste. Half of it ran out of his mouth and over his chin and onto his shirt. His empty cup fell to the kitchen floor.

Igor squared himself in front of Baldy.

"You're not a man!"

"I AM A MAN, IGOR! I AM A MAN!"

"YOU LIE!"

Igor backhanded him across the face and as Baldy's head jumped to one side, he straightened him up with a slap to the other side of his face. Baldy stood at attention with his hands rigidly at his sides.

"I'm ... a man ..."

Igor continued to stand in front of him.

"I'll make a man out of you!"

"O.K.," I said to Igor, "leave him alone."

Igor left the kitchen. I poured myself another rum. It was dreadful stuff but it was all there was.

Igor walked back in. He was holding a gun, a real one, an old six-shooter.

"We will now play Russian roulette," he announced. "Your mother's ass," I said.

"I'll play, Igor," said Baldy, "I'll play! I'm a man!"

"All right," said Igor, "there is one bullet in the gun. I will spin the chamber and hand the gun to you."

Igor spun the chamber and handed the gun to Baldy. Baldy took it and pointed it at his head. "I'm a man ... I'm a man ... I'll do it!"

He began crying again. "I'll do it ... I'm a man ..."

Baldy let the muzzle of the gun slip away from his temple. He pointed it away from his skull and pulled the trigger. There was a click.

Igor took the gun, spun the chamber and handed it to me. I handed it back. "You go first."

Igor spun the chamber, held the gun up to the light and looked through the chamber. Then he put the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger. There was a click.

"Big deal," I said. "You checked the chamber to see where the bullet was."

Igor spun the chamber and handed the gun to me. “Your turn ...”

I handed the gun back. “Stuff it,” I told him.

I walked over to pour myself another rum. As I did there was a shot. I looked down. Near my foot, in the kitchen floor, there was a bullet hole.

I turned around.

“You ever point that thing at me again and I’ll kill you, Igor.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He stood there smiling. He slowly began to raise the gun. I waited. Then he lowered the gun. That was about it for the night. We went out to the car and Igor drove us home. But we stopped first at Westlake Park and rented a boat and went out on the lake to finish off the rum. With the last drink, Igor loaded up the gun and shot holes in the bottom of the boat. We were forty yards from shore and had to swim in ...It was late when I got home. I crawled over the old berry bush and through the bedroom window. I undressed and went to bed while in the next room my father snored.

I was coming home from classes down Westview hill. I never had any books to carry. I passed my exams by listening to the class lectures and by guessing at the answers. I never had to cram for exams. I could get my “C’s.” And as I was coming down the hill I ran into a giant spider web. I was always doing that. I stood there pulling the sticky web from myself and looking for the spider. Then I saw him: a big fat black son-of-a-#@\$%. I crushed him. I had learned to hate spiders. When I went to hell I would be eaten by a spider.

All my life, in that neighborhood, I had been walking into spider webs, I had been attacked by blackbirds, I had lived with my father. Everything was eternally dreary, dismal, damned. Even the weather was insolent and #@\$%y. It was either unbearably hot for weeks on end, or it rained, and when it rained it rained for five or six days. The water came up over the lawns and poured into the houses. Who’d ever planned the drainage system had probably been well paid for his ignorance about such matters.

And my own affairs were as bad, as dismal, as the day I had been born. The only difference was that now I could drink now and then, though never often enough. Drink was the only thing that kept a man from feeling forever stunned and useless. Everything else just kept picking and picking, hacking away. And nothing was interesting, nothing. The people were restrictive and careful, all alike. And I’ve got to live with these @%\$#ers for the rest of my life, I thought. God, they all had #\$\$*%s and sexual

organs and their mouths and their armpits. They \$#@% and they chattered and they were dull as horse dung. The girls looked good from a distance, the sun shining through their dresses, their hair. But get up close and listen to their minds running out of their mouths, you felt like digging in under a hill and hiding out with a tommy-gun. I would certainly never be able to be happy, to get married, I could never have children. Hell, I couldn't even get a job as a dishwasher.

Maybe I'd be a bank robber. Some god-damned thing. Something with flare, fire. You only had one shot. Why be a window washer?

I lit a cigarette and walked further down the hill. Was I the only person who was distracted by this future without a chance?

I saw another one of those big black spiders. He was about face-high, in his web, right in my path. I took my cigarette and placed it against him. The tremendous web shook and leaped as he jumped, the branches of the bush trembled. He leaped out of the web and fell to the sidewalk. Cowardly killers, the whole bunch of them. I crushed him with my shoe. A worthwhile day, I had killed two spiders, I had upset the balance of nature—now we would all be eaten up by the bugs and the flies.

I walked further down the hill, I was near the bottom when a large bush began to shake. The King Spider was after me. I strode forward to meet it.

My mother leaped out from behind the bush. "Henry, Henry, don't go home, don't go home, your father will kill you!"

"How's he going to do that? I can whip his ass."

"No, he's furious, Henry! Don't go home, he'll kill you! I've been waiting here for hours!"

My mother's eyes were wide with fear and quite beautiful, large and brown.

"What's he doing home this early?"

"He had a headache, he got the afternoon off!"

"I thought you were working, that you'd found a new job?"

She'd gotten a job as a housekeeper.

"He came and got me! He's furious! He'll kill you!"

"Don't worry, Mom, if he messes with me I'll kick his god-damned ass, I promise you."

"Henry, he found your short stories and he read them!"

"I never asked him to read them."

"He found them in a drawer! He read them, he read all of them!"

I had written ten or twelve short stories. Give a man a typewriter and he becomes a writer. I had hidden the stories under the paper lining of my shorts-and-stockings drawer.

“Well,” I said, “the old man poked around and he got his fingers burned.”

“He said that he was going to kill you! He said that no son of his could write stories like that and live under the same roof with him!”

I took her by the arm. “Let’s go home, Mom, and see what he does ...”

“Henry, he’s thrown all your clothes out on the front lawn, all your dirty laundry, your typewriter, your suitcase and your stories!” “My stories?”

“Yes, those too ...” “I’ll kill him!”

I pulled away from her and walked across 21st Street and toward Longwood Avenue. She went after me. “Henry, Henry, don’t go in there”

The poor woman was yanking at the back of my shirt.

“Henry, listen, get yourself a room somewhere! Henry, I have ten dollars! Take this ten dollars and get yourself a room somewhere!”

I turned. She was holding out the ten. “Forget it,” I said. “I’ll just go.”

“Henry, take the money! Do it for me! Do it for your mother!”

“Well, all right ...”

I took the ten, put it in my pocket.

“Thanks, that’s a lot of money.”

“It’s all right, Henry. I love you, Henry, but you must go.”

She ran ahead of me as I walked toward the house. Then I saw it: everything was strewn across the lawn, all my dirty and clean clothes, the suitcase flung there open, socks, shirts, pajamas, an old robe, everything flung everywhere, on the lawn and into the street. And I saw my manuscripts being blown in the wind, they were in the gutter, everywhere.

My mother ran up the driveway to the house and I screamed after her so he could hear me, “TELL HIM TO COME OUT HERE AND I’LL KNOCK HIS GOD-DAMNED HEAD OFF!”

I went after my manuscripts first. That was the lowest of the blows, doing that to me. They were the one thing he had no right to touch. As I picked up each page from the gutter, from the lawn and from the street, I began to feel better. I found every page I could, placed them in the suitcase under the weight of a shoe, then rescued the typewriter. It had broken out of its case but it looked all right. I looked at my rags scattered about. I left the dirty laundry, I left the pajamas, which were only a handed-

down pair of his discards. There wasn't much else to pack. I closed the suitcase, picked it up with the typewriter and started to walk away. I could see two faces peering after me from behind the drapes. But I quickly forgot that, walked up Longwood, across 21st and up old Westview hill. I didn't feel much different than I had always felt. I was neither elated nor dejected; it all seemed to be just a continuation. I was going to take the "W" streetcar, get a transfer, and go somewhere downtown.