

Ham on Rye, Part 12

I made practice runs down to skid row to get ready for my future. I didn't like what I saw down there. Those men and women had no special daring or brilliance. They wanted what everybody else wanted. There were also some obvious mental cases down there who were allowed to walk the streets undisturbed. I had noticed that both in the very poor and very rich extremes of society the mad were often allowed to mingle freely. I knew that I wasn't entirely sane. I still knew, as I had as a child, that there was something strange about myself. I felt as if I were destined to be a murderer, a bank robber, a saint, a rapist, a monk, a hermit. I needed an isolated place to hide.

Skid row was disgusting. The life of the sane, average man was dull, worse than death. There seemed to be no possible alternative. Education also seemed to be a trap. The little education I had allowed myself had made me more suspicious. What were doctors, lawyers, scientists? They were just men who allowed themselves to be deprived of their freedom to think and act as individuals. I went back to my shack and drank ...

Sitting there drinking, I considered suicide, but I felt a strange fondness for my body, my life. Scarred as they were, they were mine. I would look into the dresser mirror and grin: if you're going to go, you might as well take eight, or ten or twenty of them with you ...

I sat down and poured a glass of wine. I left my door open. The moonlight came in with the sounds of the city: juke boxes, automobiles, curses, dogs barking, radios ... We were all in it together. We were all in one big \$#@% pot together. There was no escape. We were all going to be flushed away.

A small cat walked by, stopped at my door and looked in. The eyes were lit by the moon: pure red like fire. Such wonderful eyes.

“Come on, kitty ...” I held my hand out as if there were food in it. “Kitty, kitty ...”

The cat walked on by.

I heard the radio in the next room shut off.

I finished my wine and went outside. I was in my shorts as before. I pulled them up and tucked in my parts. I stood before the other door. I had broken the lock. I could see the light from the candle inside. They had the door wedged closed with something, probably a chair.

I awakened with one of my worst hangovers. I usually slept until noon. This day I couldn't. I dressed and went to the bathroom in the main house and made my toilet. I came back out, went up the alley and then down the stairway, down the cliff and into the street below.

Sunday, the worst god-damned day of them all.

I walked over to Main Street, past the bars. The B-girls sat near the doorways, their skirts pulled high, swinging their legs, wearing high heels.

“Hey, honey, come on in!”

Main Street, East 5th, Bunker Hill. \$#@%holes of America.

There was no place to go. I walked into a Penny Arcade. I walked around looking at the games but had no desire to play any of them. Then I saw a Marine at a pinball machine. Both his hands gripped the sides of the machine, as he tried to guide the ball with body-English. I walked up and grabbed him by the back of his collar and his belt.

“Becker, I demand a god-damned rematch!”

I let go of him and he turned.

“No, nothing doing,” he said.

“Two out of three.”

“Balls,” he said, “I’ll buy you a drink.”

We walked out of the Penny Arcade and down Main Street. A B-girl hollered out from one of the bars, “Hey, Marine, come on in!”

Becker stopped. “I’m going in,” he said. “Don’t,” I said, “they are human roaches.”

“I just got paid.”

“The girls drink tea and they water your drinks. The prices are double and you never see the girl afterwards.”

“I’m going in.”

Becker walked in. One of the best unpublished writers in America, dressed to kill and to die. I followed him. He walked up to one of the girls and spoke to her. She pulled her skirt up, swung her high heels and laughed. They walked over to a booth in a corner. The bartender came around the bar to take their order. The other girl at the bar looked at me.

“Hey, honey, don’t you wanna play?”

“Yeah, but only when it’s my game.”

“You scared or queer?”

“Both,” I said, sitting at the far end of the bar.

There was a guy between us, his head on the bar. His wallet was gone. When he awakened and complained, he’d either be thrown out by the bartender or handed over to the police.

After serving Becker and the B-girl the bartender came back behind the bar and walked over to me.

“Yeh?”

“Nothing.”

“Yeh? What ya want in here?”

“I’m waiting for my friend,” I nodded at the corner booth. “You sit here, you gotta drink.”

“O.K. Water.”

The bartender went off, came back, set down a glass of water. “Two bits.” I paid him.

The girl at the bar said to the bartender, “He’s queer or scared.” The bartender didn’t say anything. Then Becker waved to him and he went to take their order.

The girl looked at me. “How come you ain’t in uniform?”

“I don’t like to dress like everybody else.”

“Are there any other reasons?”

“The other reasons are my own business.”

The bartender came back. “You need another drink.”

“O.K.,” I said, slipping another quarter toward him.

Outside, Becker and I walked down Main Street.

“How’d it go?” I asked.

“There was a table charge, plus the two drinks. It came to \$32.”

“Christ, I could stay drunk for two weeks on that.”

“But she was so beautiful.”

“God damn, man, I’m walking along in step with a perfect idiot.”

“Someday I’m going to write all this down. I’ll be on the library shelves: BECKER. The ‘B’s’ are very weak, they need help.”

“You talk too much about writing,” I said.

We found another bar near the bus depot. It wasn’t a hustle joint. There was just a barkeep and five or six travelers, all men. Becker and I sat down.

“It’s on me,” said Becker.

“Eastside in the bottle.”

Becker ordered two. He looked at me.

“Come on, be a man, join up. Be a Marine.”

“I don’t get any thrill trying to be a man.”

“Seems to me you’re always beating up on somebody.”

“That’s just for entertainment.”

“Join up. It’ll give you something to write about.”

“Becker, there’s always something to write about.”

“What are you gonna do, then?”

I pointed at my bottle, picked it up.

“How are ya gonna make it?” Becker asked.

“Seems like I’ve heard that question all my life.”

“Well, I don’t know about you but I’m going to try everything! War, women, travel, marriage, children, the works. The first car I own I’m going to take it completely apart! Then I’m going to put it

back together again! I want to know about things, what makes them work! I'd like to be a correspondent in Washington, D.C. I'd like to be where big things are happening."

"Washington's crap, Becker."

"And women? Marriage? Children?"

"Crap."

"Yeah? Well, what do you want?"

"To hide."

"You need another beer."

"All right."

The beer arrived.

We sat quietly. I could sense that Becker was off on his own, thinking about being a Marine, about being a writer, about getting laid. He'd probably make a good writer. He was bursting with enthusiasms. He probably loved many things: the hawk in flight, the god-damned ocean, full moon, Balzac, bridges, stage plays, the Pulitzer Prize, the piano, the god-damned Bible.

There was a small radio in the bar. There was a popular song playing. Then in the middle of the song there was an interruption. The announcer said, "A bulletin has just come in. The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor. I repeat: The Japanese have just bombed Pearl Harbor. All military personnel are requested to return immediately to their bases!"

We looked at each other, hardly able to understand what we'd just heard.

"Well," said Becker quietly, "that's it."

"Finish your beer," I told him.

Becker took a hit.

"Jesus, suppose some stupid son-of-a-#@*\$ points a machine gun at me and pulls the trigger?"

"That could well happen."

"Hank ..."

"What?"

"Will you ride back to the base with me on the bus?"

"I can't do that."

The bartender, a man about 45 with a watermelon gut and fuzzy eyes walked over to us. He looked at Becker. “Well, Marine, it looks like you gotta go back to your base, huh?”

That pissed me. “Hey, fat boy, let him finish his drink, O. K.?”

“Sure, sure ... Want a drink on the house, Marine? How about a shot of good whiskey?”

“No,” said Becker, “it’s all right.”

“Go ahead,” I told Becker, “take the drink. He figures you’re going to die to save his bar.”

“All right,” said Becker, “I’ll take the drink.”

The barkeep looked at Becker.

“You got a nasty friend ...”

“Just give him his drink,” I said.

The other few customers were babbling wildly about Pearl Harbor. Before, they wouldn’t speak to each other. Now they were mobilized. The Tribe was in danger.

Becker got his drink. It was a double shot of whiskey. He drank it down.

“I never told you this,” he said, “but I’m an orphan.”

“God damn,” I said.

“Will you at least come to the bus depot with me?”

“Sure.”

We got up and walked toward the door.

The barkeep was rubbing his hands all over his apron. He had his apron all bunched up and was excitedly rubbing his hands on it.

“Good luck, Marine!” he hollered.

Becker walked out. I paused inside the door and looked back at the barkeep.

“World War I, eh?”

“Yeh, yeh ...” he said happily.

I caught up with Becker. We half-ran to the bus depot together. Servicemen in uniform were already beginning to arrive. The whole place had an air of excitement. A sailor ran past.

“I’M GOING TO KILL ME A JAP!” he screamed.

Becker stood in the ticket line. One of the servicemen had his girlfriend with him. The girl was talking, crying, holding onto him, kissing him. Poor Becker only had me. I stood to one side, waiting. It was a long wait. The same sailor who had screamed earlier came up to me. “Hey, fellow, aren’t you going to help us? What’re you standing there for? Why don’t you go down and sign up?”

There was whiskey on his breath. He had freckles and a very large nose.

“You’re going to miss your bus,” I told him. He went off toward the bus departure point. “@%\$# the god-damned Japs!” he said.

Becker finally had his ticket. I walked him to his bus. He stood in another line.

“Any advice?” he asked. “No.”

The line was filing slowly into the bus. The girl was weeping and talking rapidly and quietly to her soldier.

Becker was at the door. I punched him on the shoulder. “You’re the best I’ve known.”

“Thanks, Hank ...”

“Goodbye ...”

I walked out of there. Suddenly there was traffic on the street. People were driving badly, running stoplights, screaming at each other. I walked back over to Main Street. America was at war. I looked into my wallet: I had a dollar. I counted my change: 67¢.

I walked along Main Street. There wouldn’t be much for the B-girls today. I walked along. Then I came to the Penny Arcade. There wasn’t anybody in there. Just the owner standing in his high-perched booth. It was dark in that place and it stank of piss.

I walked along in the dark aisles among the broken machines. They called it a Penny Arcade but most of the games cost a nickel and some a dime. I stopped at the boxing machine, my favorite. Two little steel men stood in a glass cage with buttons on their chins. There were two hand grips, like pistol grips, with triggers, and when you squeezed the triggers the arms of your fighter would uppercut wildly.

You could move your fighter back and forth and from side to side. When you hit the button on the chin of the other fighter he would go down hard on his back, K.O.’d. When I was a kid and Max Schmeling K.O.’d Joe Louis, I had run out into the street looking for my buddies, yelling “Hey, Max Schmeling K.O.’d Joe Louis!” And nobody answered me, nobody said anything, they had just walked away with their heads down.

It took two to play the boxing game and I wasn't going to play with the pervert who owned the place. Then I saw a little Mexican boy, eight or nine years old. He came walking down the aisle. A nice-looking, intelligent Mexican boy.

"Hey, kid?"

"Yes, Mister?"

"Wanna play this boxing game with me?"

"Free?"

"Sure. I'm paying. Pick your fighter."

He circled around, peering through the glass. He looked very serious. Then he said, "O.K., I'll take the guy in the red trunks. He looks best."

"All right."

The kid got on his side of the game and stared through the glass. He looked at his fighter, then he looked up at me.

"Mister, don't you know that there's a war on?"

"Yes."

We stood there.

"You gotta put the coin in," said the kid.

"What are you doing in this place?" I asked him. "How come you're not in school?"

"It's Sunday."

I put the dime in. The kid started squeezing his triggers and I started squeezing mine. The kid had made a bad choice. The left arm of his fighter was broken and only reached up halfway. It could never hit the button on my fighter's chin. All the kid had was a right hand. I decided to take my time. My guy had blue trunks. I moved him in and out, making sudden flurries.

The Mexican kid was great, he kept trying. He gave up on the left arm and just squeezed the trigger for the right arm. I rushed blue trunks in for the kill, squeezing both triggers. The kid kept pumping the right arm of red trunks. Suddenly blue trunks dropped. He went down hard, making a clanking sound.

"I got ya, Mister," said the kid.

"You won," I said.

The kid was excited. He kept looking at blue trunks flat on his ass.

“You wanna fight again, Mister?”

I paused, I don't know why.

“You out of money, Mister?”

“Oh, no.”

“O.K., then, we'll fight.”

I put in another dime and blue trunks sprang to his feet. The kid started squeezing his one trigger and the right arm of red trunks pumped and pumped. I let blue trunks stand back for a while and contemplate. Then I nodded at the kid. I moved blue trunks in, both arms flailing. I felt I had to win. It seemed very important. I didn't know why it was important and I kept thinking, why do I think this is so important?

And another part of me answered, just because it is.

Then blue trunks dropped again, hard, making the same iron clanking sound. I looked at him laying on his back down there on his little green velvet mat.

Then I turned around and walked out.

The End