

Ham on Rye Excerpts - The American Dream

Use examples from these excerpts to complete POU 4 Stages 4 and 5.

From Part 1:

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

“He has no ambition,” said my father. “I don’t see how he can hold his god-damned head up and look people in the eye.”

“I wish he wouldn’t chew tobacco,” said my mother. “He spits the stuff everywhere.”

“If this country was full of men like him the Chinks would take over and we’d be running the laundries ...”

“John never had a chance,” said my mother. “He ran away from home early. At least you got a high school education.”

“College,” said my father.

“Where?” asked my mother.

“The University of Indiana.”

...

We drove along through another warm Los Angeles day. My mother had on one of her pretty dresses and fancy hats. When my mother was dressed up she always sat straight and held her neck very stiff.

“I wish we had enough money so we could help John and his family,” said my mother.

“It’s not my fault if they don’t have a pot to piss in,” answered my father.

“Daddy, John was in the war just like you were. Don’t you think he deserves something?”

“He never rose in the ranks. I became a master sergeant.”

“Henry, all your brothers can’t be like you.”

“They don’t have any god-damned drive! They think they can live off the land!”

...

“I hear the cops are after John,” said my father.

“He didn’t do very much.”

“What did he do?”

“He made some counterfeit dimes.”

“Dimes? Jesus Christ, what kind of ambition is that?”

From Part 2:

All right, Henry. Into the bathroom.”

I walked in and he closed the door behind us. The walls were white. There was a bathroom mirror and a small window, the screen black and broken. There was the bathtub and the toilet and the tiles. He reached and took down the razor strop which hung from a hook. It was going to be the first of many such beatings, which would recur more and more often. Always, I felt, without real reason.”

All right, take down your pants.”

I took my pants down.”

Pull down your shorts.”

I pulled them down.

Then he laid on the strop. The first blow inflicted more shock than pain. The second hurt more. Each blow which followed increased the pain. At first I was aware of the walls, the toilet, the tub. Finally I couldn’t see anything. As he beat me, he berated me, but I couldn’t understand the words. I thought about his roses, how he grew roses in the yard. I thought about his automobile in the garage.

I tried not to scream. I knew that if I did scream he might stop, but knowing this, and knowing his desire for me to scream, prevented me. The tears ran from my eyes as I remained silent. After a while it all became just a whirlpool, a jumble, and there was only the deadly possibility of being there forever. Finally, like something jerked into action, I began to sob, swallowing and choking on the salt slime that ran down my throat. He stopped.

He was no longer there. I became aware of the little window again and the mirror. There was the razor strop hanging from the hook, long and brown and twisted. I couldn’t bend over to pull up my

pants or my shorts and I walked to the door, awkwardly, my clothes around my feet. I opened the bathroom door and there was my mother standing in the hall.”

It wasn’t right,” I told her. “Why didn’t you help me?”

“The father,” she said, “is always right.”

Then my mother walked away. I went to my bedroom, dragging my clothing around my feet and sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress hurt me. Outside, through the rear screen I could see my father’s roses growing. They were red and white and yellow, large and full. The sun was very low but not yet set and the last of it slanted through the rear window. I felt that even the sun belonged to my father, that I had no right to it because it was shining upon my father’s house. I was like his roses, something that belonged to him and not to me . . .

By the time they called me to dinner I was able to pull up my clothing and walk to the breakfast nook where we ate all our meals except on Sunday. There were two pillows on my chair. I sat on them but my legs and ass still burned. My father was talking about his job, as always.

“I told Sullivan to combine three routes into two and let one man go from each shift. Nobody is really pulling their weight around there ...”

“They ought to listen to you, Daddy,” said my mother.

Please,” I said, “please excuse me but I don’t feel like eating ...

“You’ll eat your FOOD!” said my father. “Your mother prepared this food!”

“Yes,” said my mother, “carrots and peas and roast beef.”

“And the mashed potatoes and gravy,” said my father.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You will eat every carrot, and pee on your plate!” said my father.

He was trying to be funny. That was one of his favorite remarks.”

“DADDY!” said my mother in shocked disbelief.

I began eating. It was terrible. I felt as if I were eating *them*, what they believed in, what they were. I didn’t chew any of it, I just swallowed it to get rid of it. Meanwhile my father was talking about how good it all tasted, how lucky we were to be eating good food when most of the people in the world, and many even in America, were starving and poor.”

What’s for dessert, Mama?” my father asked.

His face was horrible, the lips pushed out, greasy and wet with pleasure. He acted as if nothing had happened, as if he hadn't beaten me. When I was back in my bedroom I thought, these people are not my parents, they must have adopted me and now they are unhappy with what I have become.

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 4:

Then I heard my father's voice yell “HENRY!” He was standing in front of his house. I lobbed the ball to one of the guys on my team so they could kick off and I walked down to where my father stood. He looked angry. I could almost feel his anger. He always stood with one foot a little bit forward, his face flushed, and I could see his pot belly going up and down with his breathing. He was six feet two and like I said, he looked to be all ears, mouth and nose when angry. I couldn't look at his eyes.

“All right,” he said, “you're old enough to mow the lawn now. You're big enough to mow it, edge it, water it, and water the flowers. It's time you did something around here. It's time you got off your dead ass!”

“But I'm playing football with the guys. Saturday is the only real chance I have.”

“Are you talking back to me?”

“No.”

I could see my mother watching from behind a curtain. Every Saturday they cleaned the whole house. They vacuumed the rugs and polished the furniture. They took up the rugs and waxed the hardwood floors and then covered the floors with the rugs again. You couldn't even see where they had been waxed.

The lawn mower and edger were in the driveway. He showed them to me. “Now, you take this mower and go up and down the lawn and don't miss any places. Dump the grass catcher here whenever it gets full. Now, when you've mowed the lawn in one direction and finished, take the mower and mow the lawn in the other direction, get it? First, you mow it north and south, then you mow it east and west. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“And don't look so god-damned unhappy or I'll really give you something to be unhappy about! After you've finished mowing, then you take the edger. You trim the edges of the lawn with the little mower on the edger. Get under the hedge, get every blade of grass! Then ... you take this circular blade on the edger and you cut along the edge of the lawn. It must be absolutely straight along the edge of the lawn! Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Now when you're done with that, you take these ...”

My father showed me some shears.

“... and you get down on your knees and you go around cutting off any hairs that are still sticking up. Then you take the hose and you water the hedges and the flower beds. Then you turn on the sprinkler and you let it run fifteen minutes on each part of the lawn. You do all this on the front lawn and in the flower garden, and then you repeat it on the rear lawn and in the flower garden there. Are there any questions?”

“No.”

“All right, now I want to tell you this. I am going to come out and check everything when you're finished, and when you're done I DONT WANT TO SEE ONE HAIR STICKING UP IN EITHER THE FRONT OR BACK LAWN! NOT ONE HAIR! IF THERE IS ...!”

...

“Into the bathroom.” My father closed the door. “Take your pants down.”

I heard him get down the razor strop. My right leg still ached. It didn't help, having felt the strop many times before. The whole world was out there indifferent to it all, but that didn't help. Millions of people were out there, dogs and cats and gophers, buildings, streets, but it didn't matter. There was only father and the razor strop and the bathroom and me. He used that strop to sharpen his razor, and

early in the mornings I used to hate him with his face white with lather, standing before the mirror shaving himself.

Then the first blow of the strop hit me. The sound of the strop was flat and loud, the sound itself was almost as bad as the pain. The strop landed again. It was as if my father was a machine, swinging that strop. There was the feeling of being in a tomb. The strop landed again and I thought, that is surely the last one. But it wasn't. It landed again. I didn't hate him. He was just unbelievable, I just wanted to get away from him. I couldn't cry. I was too sick to cry, too confused. The strop landed once again. Then he stopped. I stood and waited. I heard him hanging up the strop.

“Next time,” he said, “I don't want to find any hairs.”

I heard him walk out of the bathroom. He closed the bathroom door. The walls were beautiful, the bathtub was beautiful, the wash basin and the shower curtain were beautiful, and even the toilet was beautiful. My father was gone.

From Part 6:

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.

From Part 7:

I walked out of the lobby and out of the building and I stood on the sidewalk. I could still hear him. "Joe! Joe! Where are you, Joe!"

Joe wasn't coming. It didn't pay to trust another human being. Humans didn't have it, whatever it took.

On the streetcar ride back I sat in the back smoking cigarettes out of my bandaged head. People stared but I didn't care. There was more fear than horror in their eyes now. I hoped I could stay this way forever.

I rode to the end of the line and got off. The afternoon was going into evening and I stood on the corner of Washington Boulevard and Westview Avenue watching the people. Those few who had jobs were coming home from work. My father would soon be driving home from his fake job. I didn't have a job, I didn't go to school. I didn't do anything. I was bandaged, I was standing on the corner smoking a cigarette. I was a tough man, I was a dangerous man. I knew things. Sleeth had suicided. I wasn't going to suicide. I'd rather kill some of them. I'd take four or five of them with me. I'd show them what it meant to play around with me.

From 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.

...

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.

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!”

...

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.”

From Part 9:

The first three or four days at Mears-Starbuck were identical. In fact, similarity was a very dependable thing at Mears-Starbuck. The caste system was an accepted fact. There wasn’t a single salesclerk who spoke to a stockclerk outside of a perfunctory word or two. And it affected me. I thought about it as I pushed my cart about. Was it possible that the salesclerks were more intelligent than the stockclerks? They certainly dressed better. It bothered me that they assumed that their station meant so much. Perhaps if I had been a salesclerk I would have felt the same way. I didn’t much care for the other stockclerks. Or the salesclerks.

Now, I thought, pushing my cart along, I have this job. Is this to be it? No wonder men robbed banks. There were too many demeaning jobs. Why the hell wasn’t I a superior court judge or a concert pianist? Because it took training and training cost money. But I didn’t want to be anything anyhow. And I was certainly succeeding.

I pushed my cart to the elevator and hit the button.

Women wanted men who made money, women wanted men of mark. How many classy women were living with skid row bums? Well, I didn’t want a woman anyhow. Not to live with. How could men live with women? What did it mean? What I wanted was a cave in Colorado with three-years’ worth of foodstuffs and drink. I’d wipe my ass with sand. Anything, anything to stop drowning in this dull, trivial and cowardly existence.

(Henry loses his job at Mears-Starbuck)

“So you couldn’t hold a job for a week?”

We were eating meatballs and spaghetti. My problems were always discussed at dinner time. Dinner time was almost always an unhappy time.

I didn't answer my father's question.

“What happened? Why did they can your ass?”

I didn't answer.

“Henry, answer your father when he speaks to you!” my mother said.

“He couldn't hack it, that's all!”

“Look at his face,” said my mother, “it's all bruised and cut. Did your boss beat you up, Henry?”

“No, Mother ...”

“Why don't you eat, Henry? You never seem to be hungry.”

“He can't eat,” said my father, “he can't work, he can't do anything, he's not worth a @%\$#!”

“You shouldn't talk that way at the dinner table, Daddy,” my mother told him.

“Well, it's true!” My father had an immense ball of spaghetti rolled on his fork. He jammed it into his mouth and started chewing and while chewing he speared a large meatball and plunged it into his mouth, then worked in a piece of French bread.

I remembered what Ivan had said in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “Who doesn't want to kill the father?”