

Ham on Rye, 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.”

“Jack said you only went to high school.”

“Jack only went to high school. That’s why he gardens for the rich.”

“Am I ever going to see my Uncle Jack?” I asked.

“First let’s see if we can find your Uncle John,” said my father.

“Do the Chinks really want to take over this country?” I asked.

“Those yellow devils have been waiting for centuries to do it. What’s stopped them is that they have been kept busy fighting the Japs.”

“Who are the best fighters, the Chinks or the Japs?”

“The Japs. The trouble is that there are too many Chinks. When you kill a Chink he splits in half and becomes two Chinks.”

“How come their skin is yellow?”

“Because instead of drinking water they drink their own pee-pee.”

“Daddy, don’t tell the boy that!”

“Then tell him to stop asking questions.”

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!”

We drove along a bit further. Uncle John and his family lived in a small court. We went up the cracked sidewalk to a sagging porch and my father pushed the bell. The bell didn’t ring. He knocked, loudly.

“Open up! It’s the cops!” my father yelled. “Daddy, stop it!” said my mother.

After what seemed a long time, the door opened a crack. Then it opened further. And we could see my Aunt Anna. She was very thin, her cheeks were hollow and her eyes had pouches, dark pouches. Her voice was thin, too.

“Oh, Henry ... Katherine ... come in, please ...” We followed her in. There was very little furniture. There was a breakfast nook with a table and four chairs and there were two beds. My mother and father sat in the chairs. Two girls, Katherine and Betsy (I learned their names later) were at the sink taking turns trying to scrape peanut butter out of a nearly empty peanut butter jar.

“We were just having lunch,” said my Aunt Anna.

The girls came over with tiny smears of peanut butter which they spread on dry pieces of bread. They kept looking into the jar and scraping with the knife.

“Where’s John?” asked my father.

My aunt sat down wearily. She looked very weak, very pale. Her dress was dirty, her hair uncombed, tired, sad.

“We’ve been waiting for him. We haven’t seen him for quite some time.”

“Where did he go?”

“I don’t know. He just left on his motorcycle.”

“All he does,” said my father, “is think about his motorcycle.”

“Is this Henry, Jr.?”

“Yes.”

“He just stares. He’s so quiet.”

“That’s the way we want him.”

“Still water runs deep.”

“Not with this one. The only thing that runs deep with him are the holes in his ears.”

The two girls took their slices of bread and walked outside and sat on the stoop to eat them. They hadn’t spoken to us. I thought they were quite nice. They were thin like their mother but they were still quite pretty.

“How are you, Anna?” asked my mother.

“I’m all right.”

“Anna, you don’t look well. I think you need food.”

“Why doesn’t your boy sit down? Sit down, Henry.”

“He likes to stand,” said my father. “It makes him strong. He’s getting ready to fight the Chinks.”

“Don’t you like the Chinese?” my aunt asked me.

“No,” I answered.

“Well, Anna,” my father asked, “how are things going?”

“Awful, really ... The landlord keeps asking for the rent. He gets very nasty. He frightens me. I don’t know what to do.”

“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?”

“John really doesn’t want to be bad.”

“Seems to me he doesn’t want to be anything.”

“He would if he could.”

“Yeah. And if a frog had wings he wouldn’t wear his ass out a-hoppin’!”

There was silence then and they sat there. I turned and looked outside. The girls were gone from the porch, they had gone off somewhere.

“Come, sit down, Henry,” said my Aunt Anna.

I stood there. “Thank you, it’s all right.”

“Anna,” my mother asked, “are you sure that John will come back?”

“He’ll come back when he gets tired of the hens,” said my father.

“John loves his children ...” said Anna.

“I hear the cops are after him for something else.”

“What?”

“Rape.”

“Rape?”

“Yes, Anna, I heard about it. He was riding his motorcycle one day. This young girl was hitchhiking. She got onto the back of his motorcycle and as they rode along all of a sudden John saw an empty garage. He drove in there, closed the door and raped the girl.”

“How did you find out?”

“Find out? The cops came and told me, they asked me where he was.”

“Did you tell them?”

“What for? To have him go to jail and evade his responsibilities? That’s just what he’d want.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“Not that I’m for rape ...”

“Sometimes a man can’t help what he does.”

“What?”

“I mean, after having the children, and with this type of life, the worry and all ... I don’t look so good anymore. He saw a young girl, she looked good to him ... she got on his bike, you know, she put her arms around him ...”

“What?” asked my father. “How would you like to be raped?”

“I guess I wouldn’t like it.”

“Well, I’m sure the young girl didn’t like it either.”

A fly appeared and whirled around and around the table. We watched it.

“There’s nothing to eat here,” said my father. “The fly has come to the wrong place.”

The fly became more and more bold. It circled closer and made buzzing sounds. The closer it circled the louder the buzzing became.

“You’re not going to tell the cops that John might come home?” my aunt asked my father.

“I am not going to let him off the hook so easily,” said my father.

My mother’s hand leaped quickly. It closed and she brought her hand back down to the table.

“I got him,” she said.

“Got what?” asked my father.

“The fly,” she smiled.

“I don’t believe you ...”

“You see the fly anywhere? The fly is gone.”

“It flew off.”

“No, I have it in my hand.”

“Nobody is that quick.”

“I have it in my hand.”

“Bull\$#@%.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“No.”

“Open your mouth.”

“All right.”

My father opened his mouth and my mother cupped her hand over it. My father leaped up, grabbing at his throat. “JESUS CHRIST!”

The fly came out of his mouth and began circling the table again.

“That’s enough,” said my father, “we’re going home!”

He got up and walked out the door and down the walk and got into the Model-T and just sat there very stiffly, looking dangerous.

“We brought you a few cans of food,” my mother said to my aunt. “I’m sorry it can’t be money but Henry is afraid John will use it for gin, or for gasoline for his motorcycle. It isn’t much: soup, hash, peas ...”

“Oh, Katherine, thank you! Thank you, both ...” My mother got up and I followed her. There were two boxes of canned food in the car. I saw my father sitting there rigidly. He was still angry.

My mother handed me the smaller box of cans and she took the large box and I followed her back into the court. We set the boxes down in the breakfast nook. Aunt Anna came over and picked up a can. It was a can of peas, the label on it covered with little round green peas.

“This is lovely,” said my aunt.

“Anna, we have to go. Henry’s dignity is upset.”

My aunt threw her arms around my mother. “Everything has been so awful. But this is like a dream. Wait until the girls come home. Wait until the girls see all these cans of food!”

My mother hugged my aunt back. Then they separated.

“John is not a bad man,” my aunt said.

“I know,” my mother answered. “Goodbye, Anna.”

“Goodbye, Katherine. Goodbye, Henry.”

My mother turned and walked out the door. I followed her. We walked to the car and got in. My father started the car.

As we were driving off I saw my aunt at the door waving. My mother waved back. My father didn’t wave back. I didn’t either.

I had begun to dislike my father. He was always angry about something. Wherever we went he got into arguments with people. But he didn't appear to frighten most people; they often just stared at him, calmly, and he became more furious. If we ate out, which was seldom, he always found something wrong with the food and sometimes refused to pay. "There's fly\$#@% in this whipped cream! What the hell kind of a place is this?"

"I'm sorry, sir, you needn't pay. Just leave."

"I'll leave, all right! But I'll be back! I'll burn this god-damned place down!"

Once we were in a drug store and my mother and I were standing to one side while my father yelled at a clerk. Another clerk asked my mother, "Who is that horrible man? Every time he comes in here there's an argument."

"That's my husband," my mother told the clerk.

Yet, I remember another time. He was working as a milkman and made early morning deliveries. One morning he awakened me. "Come on, I want to show you something." I walked outside with him. I was wearing my pajamas and slippers. It was still dark, the moon was still up. We walked to the milk wagon which was horsedrawn. The horse stood very still. "Watch," said my father. He took a sugar cube, put it in his hand and held it out to the horse. The horse ate it out of his palm. "Now you try it ..." He put a sugar cube in my hand. It was a very large horse. "Get closer! Hold out your hand!" I was afraid the horse would bite my hand off. The head came down; I saw the nostrils; the lips pulled back, I saw the tongue and the teeth, and then the sugar cube was gone.

"Here. Try it again ..." I tried it again. The horse took the sugar cube and wagged his head. "Now," said my father, "I'll take you back inside before the horse \$#@%s on you."

I was not allowed to play with other children. "They are bad children," said my father, "their parents are poor."

"Yes," agreed my mother. My parents wanted to be rich so they imagined themselves rich.

The first children of my age that I knew were in kindergarten. They seemed very strange, they laughed and talked and seemed happy. I didn't like them. I always felt as if I was going to be sick, to vomit, and the air seemed strangely still and white. We painted with watercolors. We planted radish seeds in a garden and some weeks later we ate them with salt. I liked the lady who taught kindergarten, I liked her better than my parents. One problem I had was going to the bathroom. I always needed to go to the bathroom, but I was ashamed to let the others know that I had to go, so I held it. It was really terrible to hold it. And the air was white, I felt like vomiting, I felt like \$#@%ting and pissing, but I

didn't say anything. And when some of the others came back from the bathroom I'd think, you're dirty, you did something in there ... The little girls were nice in their short dresses, with their long hair and their beautiful eyes, but I thought, they do things in there too, even though they pretend they don't.

Kindergarten was mostly white air ... Grammar school was different, first grade to sixth grade, some of the kids were twelve years old, and we all came from poor neighborhoods. I began to go to the bathroom, but only to piss. Coming out once I saw a small boy drinking at a water fountain. A larger boy walked up behind him and jammed his face down into the water jet. When the small boy raised his head, some of his teeth were broken and blood came out of his mouth, there was blood in the fountain.

"You tell anyone about this," the older boy told him, "and I'll really get you." The boy took out a handkerchief and held it to his mouth. I walked back to class where the teacher was telling us about George Washington and Valley Forge. She wore an elaborate white wig. She often slapped the palms of our hands with a ruler when she thought we were being disobedient. I don't think she ever went to the bathroom. I hated her.

Each afternoon after school there would be a fight between two of the older boys. It was always out by the back fence where there was never a teacher about. And the fights were never even; it was always a larger boy against a smaller boy and the larger boy would beat the smaller boy with his fists, backing him into the fence. The smaller boy would attempt to fight back but it was useless. Soon his face was bloody, the blood running down into his shirt.

The smaller boys took their beatings wordlessly, never begging, never asking mercy. Finally, the larger boy would back off and it would be over and all the other boys would walk home with the winner. I'd walk home quickly, alone, after holding my \$#@% all through school and all through the fight. Usually by the time I got home I would have lost the urge to relieve myself. I used to worry about that.

I didn't have any friends at school, didn't want any. I felt better being alone. I sat on a bench and watched the others play and they looked foolish to me. During lunch one day I was approached by a new boy. He wore knickers, was cross-eyed and pigeon-toed. I didn't like him, he didn't look good. He sat on the bench next to me.

"Hello, my name's David." I didn't answer.

He opened his lunch bag. "I've got peanut butter sandwiches," he said. "What do you have?"

"Peanut butter sandwiches."

"I've got a banana, too. And some potato chips. Want some potato chips?"

I took some. He had plenty, they were crisp and salty, the sun shone right through them. They were good. "Can I have some more?"

"All right."

I took some more. He even had jelly on his peanut butter sandwiches. It dripped out and ran over his fingers. David didn't seem to notice.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"Virginia Road."

"I live on Pickford. We can walk home together after school. Take some more potato chips. Who's your teacher?"

"Mrs. Columbine."

"I have Mrs. Reed. I'll see you after class, we'll walk home together."

Why did he wear those knickers? What did he want? I really didn't like him. I took some more of his potato chips.

That afternoon, after school, he found me and began walking along beside me. "You never told me your name," he said. "Henry," I answered.

As we walked along I noticed a whole gang of boys, first graders, following us. At first they were half a block behind us, then they closed the gap to several yards behind us.

"What do they want?" I asked David.

He didn't answer, just kept walking.

"Hey, knicker-~~#\$@%ter!~~" one of them yelled. "Your mother make you ~~#\$@%~~ in your knickers?"

"Pigeon-toe, ho-ho, pigeon-toe!"

"Cross-eye! Get ready to die!" Then they circled us.

"Who's your friend? Does he kiss your rear end?"

One of them had David by the collar. He threw him onto a lawn. David stood up. A boy got down behind him on his hands and knees. The other boy shoved him and David fell over backwards. Another boy rolled him over and rubbed his face in the grass. Then they stepped back. David got up again. He didn't make a sound but the tears were rolling down his face. The largest boy walked up to him. "We don't want you in our school, sissy. Get out of our school!" He punched David in the stomach. David bent over and as he did, the boy brought his knee up into David's face. David fell. He had a bloody nose.

Then the boys circled me. “Your turn now!” They kept circling and as they did I kept turning. There were always some of them behind me. Here I was loaded with \$#@% and I had to fight. I was terrified and calm at the same time. I didn’t understand their motive. They kept circling and I kept turning. It went on and on. They screamed things at me but I didn’t hear what they said.

Finally they backed off and went away down the street. David was waiting for me. We walked down the sidewalk toward his place on Pickford Street.

Then we were in front of his house.

“I’ve got to go in now. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, David.”

He went in and then I heard his mother’s voice. “David! Look at your knickers and shirt! They’re torn and full of grass stains! You do this almost every day! Tell me, why do you do it?”

David didn’t answer.

“I asked you a question! Why do you do this to your clothes?”

“I can’t help it, Mom ...”

“You can’t help it? You stupid boy!”

I heard her beating him. David began to cry and she beat him harder. I stood on the front lawn and listened. After a while the beating stopped. I could hear David sobbing. Then he stopped.

His mother said, “Now, I want you to practice your violin lesson.”

I sat down on the lawn and waited. Then I heard the violin. It was a very sad violin. I didn’t like the way David played. I sat and listened for some time but the music didn’t get any better. The \$#@% had hardened inside of me. I no longer felt like \$#@%ting. The afternoon light hurt my eyes. I felt like vomiting. I got up and walked home.