

Ham on Rye, Part 5

The 5th grade was a little better. The other students seemed less hostile and I was growing larger physically. I still wasn't chosen for the homeroom teams but I was threatened less. David and his violin had gone away. The family had moved. I walked home alone. I was often trailed by one or two guys, of whom Juan was the worst, but they didn't start anything. Juan smoked cigarettes. He'd walk behind me smoking a cigarette and he always had a different buddy with him. He never followed me alone. It scared me. I wished they'd go away. Yet, in another way, I didn't care.

I didn't like Juan. I didn't like anybody in that school. I think they knew that. I think that's why they disliked me. I didn't like the way they walked or looked or talked, but I didn't like my father or mother either. I still had the feeling of being surrounded by white empty space. There was always a slight nausea in my stomach. Juan was dark-skinned and he wore a brass chain instead of a belt. The girls were afraid of him, and the boys too. He and one of his buddies followed me home almost every day. I'd walk into the house and they'd stand outside. Juan would smoke his cigarette, looking tough, and his buddy would stand there. I'd watch them through the curtain. Finally, they would walk off.

Mrs. Fretag was our English teacher. The first day in class she asked us each our names.

"I want to get to know all of you," she said.

She smiled.

"Now, each of you has a father, I'm sure. I think it would be interesting if we found out what each of your fathers does for a living. We'll start with seat number one and we will go around the class. Now, Marie, what does your father do for a living?"

"He's a gardener."

"Ah, that's nice! Seat number two ... Andrew, what does your father do?"

It was terrible. All the fathers in my immediate neighborhood had lost their jobs. My father had lost his job. Gene's father sat on his front porch all day. All the fathers were without jobs except Chuck's who worked in a meat plant. He drove a red car with the meat company's name on the side.

"My father is a fireman," said seat number two.

"Ah, that's interesting," said Mrs. Fretag. "Seat number three."

"My father is a lawyer."

“Seat number four.”

“My father is a ... policeman ...” What was I going to say? Maybe only the fathers in my neighborhood were without jobs. I’d heard of the stock market crash. It meant something bad. Maybe the stock market had only crashed in our neighborhood.

“Seat number eighteen.”

“My father is a movie actor ...”

“Nineteen ...”

“My father is a concert violinist ...”

“Twenty ...”

“My father works in the circus ...”

“Twenty-one ...”

“My father is a bus driver ...”

“Twenty-two ...”

“My father sings in the opera ...”

“Twenty-three ...”

Twenty-three. That was me.

“My father is a dentist,” I said.

Mrs. Fretag went right on through the class until she reached number thirty-three.

“My father doesn’t have a job,” said number thirty-three. \$#@%, I thought, I wish I had thought of that.

One day Mrs. Fretag gave us an assignment.

“Our distinguished President, President Herbert Hoover, is going to visit Los Angeles this Saturday to speak. I want all of you to go hear our President. And I want you to write an essay about the experience and about what you think of President Hoover’s speech.”

Saturday? There was no way I could go. I had to mow the lawn. I had to get the hairs. (I could never get all the hairs.) Almost every Saturday I got a beating with the razor strop because my father found a hair. (I also got stropped during the week, once or twice, for other things I failed to do or didn’t do right.) There was no way I could tell my father that I had to go see President Hoover.

So, I didn’t go. That Sunday I took some paper and sat down to write about how I had seen the President. His open car, trailing flowing streamers, had entered the football stadium. One car,

full of secret service agents went ahead and two cars followed close behind. The agents were brave men with guns to protect our President. The crowd rose as the President's car entered the arena. There had never been anything like it before. It was the President. It was him. He waved. We cheered. A band played.

Seagulls circled overhead as if they too knew it was the President. And there were skywriting airplanes too. They wrote words in the sky like "Prosperity is just around the corner." The President stood up in his car, and just as he did the clouds parted and the light from the sun fell across his face. It was almost as if God knew too. Then the cars stopped and our great President, surrounded by secret service agents, walked to the speaker's platform. As he stood behind the microphone a bird flew down from the sky and landed on the speaker's platform near him.

The President waved to the bird and laughed and we all laughed with him. Then he began to speak and the people listened. I couldn't quite hear the speech because I was sitting too near a popcorn machine which made a lot of noise popping the kernels, but I think I heard him say that the problems in Manchuria were not serious, and that at home everything was going to be all right, we shouldn't worry, all we had to do was to believe in America. There would be enough jobs for everybody. There would be enough dentists with enough teeth to pull, enough fires and enough firemen to put them out. Mills and factories would open again. Our friends in South America would pay their debts.

Soon we would all sleep peacefully, our stomachs and our hearts full. God and our great country would surround us with love and protect us from evil, from the socialists, awaken us from our national nightmare, forever ...

The President listened to the applause, waved, then went back to his car, got in, and was driven off followed by carloads of secret service agents as the sun began to sink, the afternoon turning into evening, red and gold and wonderful. We had seen and heard President Herbert Hoover.

I turned in my essay on Monday. On Tuesday Mrs. Fretag faced the class.

"I've read all your essays about our distinguished President's visit to Los Angeles. I was there. Some of you, I noticed, could not attend for one reason or another. For those of you who could not attend, I would like to read this essay by Henry Chinaski."

The class was terribly silent. I was the most unpopular member of the class by far. It was like a knife slicing through all their hearts.

"This is very creative," said Mrs. Fretag, and she began to read my essay. The words sounded good to me. Everybody was listening. My words filled the room, from blackboard to blackboard, they hit the ceiling and bounced off, they covered Mrs. Fretag's shoes and piled up on the floor. Some of the prettiest girls in the class began to sneak glances at me. All the tough guys were pissed. Their essays hadn't been worth \$#@%. I drank in my words like a thirsty man. I even began to believe them. I saw

Juan sitting there like I'd punched him in the face. I stretched out my legs and leaned back. All too soon it was over.

"Upon this grand note," said Mrs. Fretag, "I hereby dismiss the class ..."

They got up and began packing out.

"Not you, Henry," said Mrs. Fretag.

I sat in my chair and Mrs. Fretag stood there looking at me.

Then she said, "Henry, were you there?"

I sat there trying to think of an answer. I couldn't. I said, "No, I wasn't there."

She smiled. "That makes it all the more remarkable."

"Yes, ma'am ..."

"You can leave, Henry."

I got up and walked out. I began my walk home. So, that's what they wanted: lies. Beautiful lies. That's what they needed. People were fools. It was going to be easy for me. I looked around. Juan and his buddy were not following me. Things were looking up.

There were times when Frank and I were friendly with Chuck, Eddie and Gene. But something would always happen (usually I caused it) and then I would be out, and Frank would be partly out because he was my friend. It was good hanging out with Frank. We hitch-hiked everywhere. One of our favorite places was this movie studio. We crawled under a fence surrounded by tall weeds to get in. We saw the huge wall and steps they used in the King Kong movie. We saw the fake streets and the fake buildings. The buildings were just fronts with nothing behind them. We walked all over that movie lot many times until the guard would chase us out.

We hitch-hiked down to the beach to the Fun House. We would stay in the Fun House three or four hours. We memorized that place. It really wasn't that good. People \$#@% and pissed in there and the place was littered with empty bottles. And there were rubbers in the crapper, hardened and wrinkled. Bums slept in the Fun House after it closed. There really wasn't anything funny about the Fun House. The House of Mirrors was good at first. We stayed in there until we had memorized how to walk through the maze of mirrors and then it wasn't any good any more. Frank and I never got into fights. We were curious about things.

There was a movie featuring a Caesarean operation on the pier and we went in and saw it. It was bloody. Each time they cut into the woman blood squirted out, gushers of it, and then they pulled out the baby. We went fishing off the pier and when we caught something we would sell it to the old

Jewish ladies who sat on the benches. I got some beatings from my father for running off with Frank but I figured I was going to get the beatings anyhow so I might as well have the fun.

But I continued to have trouble with the other kids in the neighborhood. My father didn't help. For example he bought me an Indian suit and a bow and arrow when all the other kids had cowboy outfits. It was the same then as in the schoolyard—I was ganged-up on. They'd circle me with their cowboy outfits and their guns, but when it got bad I'd just put an arrow into the bow, pull it back and wait. That always moved them off. I never wore that Indian suit unless my father made me put it on.

I kept falling out with Chuck, Eddie and Gene and then we'd get back together and then we'd fall out all over again.

One afternoon I was just standing around. I wasn't exactly in good or in bad with the gang, I was just waiting around for them to forget the last thing I had done that had made them angry. There wasn't anything else to do. Just white air and waiting. I got tired of standing around and decided to walk up the hill to Washington Boulevard, east to the movie house and then back down to West Adams Boulevard. Maybe I'd walk past the church. I started walking. Then I heard Eddie:

“Hey, Henry, come here!”

The guys were standing in a driveway between two houses. Eddie, Frank, Chuck and Gene. They were watching something. They were bent over a large bush watching something.

“Come here, Henry!”

“What is it?”

I walked up to where they were bending over.

“It's a spider getting ready to eat a fly!” said Eddie.

I looked. The spider had spun a web between the branches of a bush and a fly had gotten caught in there. The spider was very excited. The fly shook the whole web as it tried to pull free. It was buzzing wildly and helplessly as the spider wound the fly's wings and body in more and more spider web. The spider went around and around, webbing the fly completely as it buzzed. The spider was very big and ugly.

“It's going to close in now!” yelled Chuck. “It's going to sink its fangs!”

I pushed in between the guys, kicked out and knocked the spider and the fly out of the web with my foot.

“What the hell have you done?” asked Chuck.

“You son-of-a-#@*\$!” yelled Eddie. “You've *spoiled* it!”

I backed off. Even Frank stared at me strangely.

“Let’s get his ass!” yelled Gene.

They were between me and the street. I ran down the driveway into the backyard of a strange house. They were after me. I ran through the backyard and behind the garage. There was a six-foot lattice fence covered with vines. I went straight up the fence and over the top. I ran through the next backyard and up the driveway and as I ran up the driveway I looked back and saw Chuck just reaching the top of the fence. Then he slipped and fell into the yard landing on his back.

“\$#@%!” he said. I took a right and kept running. I ran for seven or eight blocks and then sat down on somebody’s lawn and rested. There was nobody around. I wondered if Frank would forgive me. I wondered if the others would forgive me. I decided to stay out of sight for a week or so ...

And so they forgot. Not much happened for a while. There were many days of nothing. Then Frank’s father committed suicide. Nobody knew why. Frank told me he and his mother would have to move to a smaller place in another neighborhood. He said he would write. And he did. Only we didn’t write. We drew cartoons. About cannibals. His cartoons were about troubles with cannibals and then I’d continue the cartoon story where his left off, about the troubles with the cannibals. My mother found one of Frank’s cartoons and showed it to my father and our letter writing was over.

5th grade became 6th grade and I began to think about running away from home but I decided that if most of our fathers couldn’t get jobs how in the hell could a guy under five feet tall get one? John Dillinger was everybody’s hero, adults and kids alike. He took the money from the banks. And there was Pretty Boy Floyd and Ma Barker and Machine Gun Kelly.

People began going to vacant lots where weeds grew. They had learned that some of the weeds could be cooked and eaten. There were fist fights between men in the vacant lots and on street corners. Everybody was angry. The men smoked Bull Durham and didn’t take any \$#@% from anybody.

They let the little round Bull Durham tags hang out of their front shirt pockets and they could all roll a cigarette with one hand. When you saw a man with a Bull Durham tag dangling, that meant look out. People went around talking about 2nd and 3rd mortgages.

My father came home one night with a broken arm and two black eyes. My mother had a low paying job somewhere. And each boy in the neighborhood had one pair of Sunday pants and one pair of daily pants. When shoes wore out there weren’t any new ones. The department stores had soles and heels they sold for 15 or 20 cents along with the glue, and these were glued to the bottoms of the worn out shoes. Gene’s parents had one rooster and some chickens in their backyard, and if some chicken didn’t lay enough eggs they ate it.

As for me, it was the same—at school, and with Chuck, Gene and Eddie. Not only did the grownups get mean, the kids got mean, and even the animals got mean. It was like they took their cue from the people.

One day I was standing around, waiting as usual, not friendly with the gang, no longer really wanting to be, when Gene rushed up to me, “Hey, Henry, come on!”

“What is it?”

“COME ON!”

Gene started running and I ran after him. We ran down the driveway and into the Gibsons’ backyard. The Gibsons had a large brick wall all around their backyard.

“LOOK! HE’S GOT THE CAT CORNERED! HE’S GOING TO KILL IT!”

There was a small white cat backed into a corner of the wall. It couldn’t go up and it couldn’t go in one direction or the other. Its back was arched and it was spitting, its claws ready. But it was very small and Chuck’s bulldog, Barney, was growling and moving closer and closer. I got the feeling that the cat had been put there by the guys and then the bulldog had been brought in. I felt it strongly because of the way Chuck and Eddie and Gene were watching: they had a guilty look.

“You guys did this,” I said.

“No,” said Chuck, “it’s the cat’s fault. It came in here. Let it fight its way out.”

“I hate you bastards,” I said.

“Barney’s going to kill that cat,” said Gene.

“Barney will rip it to pieces,” said Eddie. “He’s afraid of the claws but when he moves in it will be all over.”

Barney was a large brown bulldog with slobbering jaws. He was dumb and fat with senseless brown eyes. His growl was steady and he kept inching forward, the hairs standing up on his neck and along his back. I felt like kicking him in his stupid ass but I figured he would rip my leg off. He was entirely intent upon the kill. The white cat wasn’t even fully grown. It hissed and waited, pressed against the wall, a beautiful creature, so clean.

The dog moved slowly forward. Why did the guys need this? This wasn’t a matter of courage, it was just dirty play. Where were the grownups? Where were the authorities? They were always around accusing me. Now where were they?

I thought of rushing in, grabbing the cat and running, but I didn’t have the nerve. I was afraid that the bulldog would attack me. The knowledge that I didn’t have the courage to do what was necessary made me feel terrible. I began to feel physically sick. I was weak. I didn’t want it to happen yet I couldn’t think of any way to stop it.

“Chuck,” I said, “let the cat go, please. Call your dog off.”

Chuck didn’t answer. He just kept watching.

Then he said, “Barney, go get him! *Get* that cat!”

Barney moved forward and suddenly the cat leaped. It was a furious blur of white and hissing, claws and teeth. Barney backed off and the cat retreated to the wall again.

“Go get him, Barney,” Chuck said again.

“God damn you, shut up!” I told him.

“Don’t talk to me that way,” Chuck said.

Barney began to move in again.

“You guys set this up,” I said.

I heard a slight sound behind us and looked around. I saw old Mr. Gibson watching from behind his bedroom window. He wanted the cat to get killed too, just like the guys. Why?

Old Mr. Gibson was our mailman with the false teeth. He had a wife who stayed in the house all the time. She only came out to empty the garbage. Mrs. Gibson always wore a net over her hair and she was always dressed in a nightgown, bathrobe and slippers.

Then as I watched, Mrs. Gibson, dressed as always came and stood next to her husband, waiting for the kill. Old Mr. Gibson was one of the few men in the neighborhood with a job but he still needed to see the cat killed. Gibson was just like Chuck, Eddie and Gene.

There were too many of them.

The bulldog moved closer. I couldn’t watch the kill. I felt a great shame at leaving the cat like that. There was always the chance that the cat might try to escape, but I knew that they would prevent it. That cat wasn’t only facing the bulldog, it was facing Humanity.

I turned and walked away, out of the yard, up the driveway and to the sidewalk. I walked along the sidewalk toward where I lived and there in the front yard of his home, my father stood waiting.

“Where have you been?” he asked.

I didn’t answer.

“Get inside,” he said, “and stop looking so unhappy or I’ll give you something that will *really* make you unhappy!”