

Ham on Rye, Part 11

A couple of nights later Becker walked in. I guess my parents gave him my address or he located me through the college. I had my name and address listed with the employment division at the college, under “unskilled labor.”

“I will do anything honest or otherwise,” I had written on my card. No calls.

Becker sat in a chair as I poured the wine. He had on a Marine uniform.

“I see they sucked you in,” I said.

“I lost my Western Union job. It was all that was left.” I handed him his drink. “You’re not a patriot then?”

“Hell no.”

“Why the Marines?”

“I heard about boot camp. I wanted to see if I could get through it.”

“And you did.”

“I did. There are some crazy guys there. There’s a fight almost every night. Nobody stops it. They almost kill each other.”

“I like that.”

“Why don’t you join?”

“I don’t like to get up early in the morning and I don’t like to take orders.”

“How are you going to make it?”

“I don’t know. When I get down to my last dime I’ll just walk over to skid row.”

“There are some real weirdos down there.”

“They’re everywhere.”

I poured Becker another wine.

“The problem is,” he said, “that there’s not much time to write.”

“You still want to be a writer?”

“Sure. How about you?”

“Yeah,” I said, “but it’s pretty hopeless.”

“You mean you’re not good enough?”

“No, they’re not good enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“You read the magazines? The ‘Best Short Stories of the Year’ books? There are at least a dozen of them.”

“Yeah, I read them ...”

“You read *The New Yorker*? *Harper’s*? *The Atlantic*?”

“Yeah ...”

“This is 1940. They’re still publishing 19th Century stuff, heavy, labored, pretentious. You either get a headache reading the stuff or you fall asleep.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s a trick, it’s a con, a little inside game.”

“Sounds like you’ve been rejected.”

“I knew I would be. Why waste the stamps? I need wine.”

“I’m going to break through,” said Becker. “You’ll see my books on the library shelves one day.”

“Let’s not talk about writing.”

“I’ve read your stuff,” said Becker. “You’re too bitter and you hate everything.”

“Let’s not talk about writing.”

“Now you take Thomas Wolfe ...”

“God damn Thomas Wolfe! He sounds like an old woman on the telephone!”

“O.K., who’s your boy?”

“James Thurber.”

“All that upper-middle-class folderol ...”

“He knows that everyone is crazy.”

“Thomas Wolfe is of the earth ...”

“Only #\$\$*%s talk about writing ...”

“You calling me an #\$\$*%?”

“Yes ...”

I poured him another wine and myself another wine.

“You’re a fool for getting into that uniform.”

“You call me an #\$\$*% and you call me a fool. I thought we were friends.”

“We are. I just don’t think you’re protecting yourself.”

“Every time I see you, you have a drink in your hand. You call that protecting yourself?”

“It’s the best way I know. Without drink I would have long ago cut my god-damned throat.”

“That’s bull\$#@%.”

“Nothing’s bull\$#@% that works. The Pershing Square preachers have their God. I have the blood of my god!” I raised my glass and drained it.

“You’re just hiding from reality,” Becker said.

“Why not?”

“You’ll never be a writer if you hide from reality.”

“What are you talking about? That’s what writers do!”

Becker stood up. “When you talk to me, don’t raise your voice.”

“What do you want to do, raise my #% @*?”

“You don’t have a #% @*!”

I caught him unexpectedly with a right that landed behind his ear. The glass flew out of his hand and he staggered across the room. Becker was a powerful man, much stronger than I was. He hit the edge of the dresser, turned, and I landed another straight right to the side of his face. He staggered over near the window which was open and I was afraid to hit him then because he might fall into the street.

Becker gathered himself together and shook his head to clear it.

“All right now,” I said, “let’s have a little drink. Violence nauseates me.”

“O.K.,” said Becker.

He walked over and picked up his glass. The cheap wine I drank didn't have corks, the tops just unscrewed. I unscrewed a new bottle. Becker held out his glass and I poured him one. I poured myself one, set the bottle down. Becker emptied his. I emptied mine.

"No hard feelings," I said.

"Hell, no, buddy," said Becker, putting down his glass. Then he dug a right into my gut. I doubled over and as I did he pushed down on the back of my head and brought his knee up into my face. I dropped to my knees, blood running from my nose all over my shirt.

"Pour me a drink, buddy," I said, "let's think this thing over."

"Get up," said Becker, "that was just chapter one."

I got up and moved toward Becker. I blocked his jab, caught his right on my elbow, and punched a short straight right to his nose. Becker stepped back. We both had bloody noses.

I rushed him. We were both swinging blindly. I caught some good shots. He hit me with another good right to the belly. I doubled over but came up with an uppercut. It landed. It was a beautiful shot, a lucky shot. Becker lurched backwards and fell against the dresser. The back of his head hit the mirror. The mirror shattered. He was stunned. I had him. I grabbed him by the shirt front and hit him with a hard right behind his left ear. He dropped on the rug, and knelt there on all fours. I walked over and unsteadily poured myself a drink.

"Becker," I told him, "I kick ass around here about twice a week. You just showed up on the wrong day."

I emptied my glass. Becker got up. He stood a while looking at me. Then he came forward.

"Becker," I said, "listen ..."

He started a right lead, pulled it back and slammed a left to my mouth. We started in again. There wasn't much defense. It was just punch, punch, punch. He pushed me over a chair and the chair flattened. I got up, caught him coming in. He stumbled backwards and I landed another right. He crashed backwards into the wall and the whole room shook. He bounced off and landed a right high on my forehead and I saw lights: green, yellow, red ... Then he landed a left to the ribs and a right to the face. I swung and missed.

God damn, I thought, doesn't anybody hear all this noise? Why don't they come and stop it? Why don't they call the police?

Becker rushed me again. I missed a roundhouse right and then that was it for me ...

When I regained consciousness it was dark, it was night. I was under the bed, just my head was sticking out. I must have crawled under there. I was a coward. I had puked all over myself. I crawled out from under the bed.

I looked at the smashed dresser mirror and the chair. The table was upside down. I walked over and tried to set it upright. It fell over. Two of the legs wouldn't hold. I tried to fix them as best I could. I set the table up. It stood a moment, then fell over again. The rug was wet with wine and puke. I found a wine bottle lying on its side. There was a bit left. I drank that down and then looked around for more. There was nothing. There was nothing to drink. I put the chain on the door. I found a cigarette, lit it and stood in the window, staring down at Temple Street. It was a nice night out.

Then there was a knock on the door. "Mr. Chinaski?" It was Mrs. Kansas. She wasn't alone. I heard other voices whispering. She was with her little dark friends.

"Mr. Chinaski?"

"Yes?"

"I want to come into your room."

"What for?"

"I want to change the sheets."

"I'm sick now. I can't let you in."

"I just want to change the sheets. I'll be just a few minutes."

"No, I can't let you in. Come in the morning."

I heard them whispering. Then I heard them walking down the hall. I went over and sat on the bed. I needed a drink, bad. It was a Saturday night, the whole town was drunk.

Maybe I could sneak out?

I walked to the door and opened it a crack, leaving the chain on, and I peeked out. At the top of the stairway there was a Filipino, one of Mrs. Kansas' friends. He had a hammer in his hand. He was down on his knees. He looked up at me, grinned, and then pounded a nail into the rug. He was pretending to fix the rug. I closed the door.

I really needed a drink. I paced the floor. Why could everybody in the world have a drink but me? How long was I going to have to stay in that god-damned room? I opened the door again. It was the same. He looked up at me, grinned, then hammered another nail into the floor. I closed the door.

I got out my suitcase and began throwing my few clothes in there.

I still had quite a bit of money I had won gambling but I knew that I could never pay for the damages to that room. Nor did I want to. It really hadn't been my fault. They should have stopped the fight. And Becker had broken the mirror ...

I was packed. I had the suitcase in one hand and my portable typewriter in its case in the other. I stood in front of the door for some time. I looked out again. He was still there. I slipped the chain off the door. Then I pulled the door open and burst out. I ran toward the stairway.

"HEY! Where you go?" the little guy asked. He was still down on one knee. He started to raise his hammer. I swung the portable typewriter hard against the side of his head. It made a horrible sound. I was down the steps and through the lobby and out the door.

Maybe I had killed the guy.

I started running down Temple Street. Then I saw a cab. He was empty. I leaped in.

"Bunker Hill," I said, "*fast!*"

I saw a vacancy sign in the window in front of a rooming-house, had the cabby pull up. I paid him and walked up on the front porch, rang the bell. I had one black eye from the fight, another cut eye, a swollen nose, and my lips were puffed. My left ear was bright red and every time I touched it, an electric shock ran through my body.

An old man came to the door. He was in his undershirt and it looked like he had spilled chili and beans across the front of it. His hair was grey and uncombed, he needed a shave and he was puffing on a wet cigarette that stank.

"You the landlord?" I asked.

"Yep."

"I need a room."

"You workin'?"

"I'm a writer."

"You don't look like a writer."

“What do they look like?”

He didn't answer. Then he said, “\$2.50 a week.”

“Can I see it?”

He belched, then said, “Foller me ...”

We walked down a long hall. There was no hall rug. The boards creaked and sank as we walked on them. I heard a man's voice from one of the rooms.

“The place is in back,” the guy said, “but you are allowed to use the house bathroom.”

There was a shack in back with four doors. He walked up to #3 and opened it. We walked in. There was a cot, a blanket, a small dresser and a little stand. On the stand was a hotplate.

“You got a hotplate here,” he said.

“That's nice.”

“\$2.50 in advance.”

I paid him.

“I'll give you your receipt in the morning.”

“Fine.”

“What's your name?”

“Chinaski.”

“I'm Connors.”

He slipped a key off his key ring and gave it to me.

“We run a nice quiet place here. I want to keep it that way.”

“Sure.”

I closed the door behind him. There was a single light overhead, unshaded. Actually the place was fairly clean. Not bad. I got up, went outside and locked the door behind me, walked through the back yard to an alley.

I shouldn't have given that guy my real name, I thought. I might have killed my little dark friend over on Temple Street.

There was a long wooden stairway which went down the side of a cliff and led to the street below. Quite romantic. I walked along until I saw a liquor store. I was going to get my drink. I bought two bottles of wine and I felt hungry too so I purchased a large bag of potato chips.

Back at my place, I undressed, climbed onto my cot, leaned against the wall, lit a cigarette and poured a wine. I felt good. It was quiet back there. I couldn't hear anybody in any of the other rooms in my shack. I had to take a piss, so I put on my shorts, went around the back of the shack and let go. From up there I could see the lights of the city. Los Angeles was a good place, there were many poor people, it would be easy to get lost among them. I went back inside, climbed back on the cot. As long as a man had wine and cigarettes he could make it. I finished off my glass and poured another.

Maybe I could live by my wits. The eight-hour day was impossible, yet almost everybody submitted to it. And the war, everybody was talking about the war in Europe. I wasn't interested in world history, only my own. What crap. Your parents controlled your growing-up period, they pissed all over you. Then when you got ready to go out on your own, the others wanted to stick you into a uniform so you could get your ass shot off.

The wine tasted great. I had another.

The war. Here I was a virgin. Could you imagine getting your ass blown off for the sake of history before you even knew what a woman was? Or owned an automobile? What would I be protecting? Somebody else. Somebody else who didn't give a \$#@% about me. Dying in a war never stopped wars from happening.

I could make it. I could win drinking contests, I could gamble. Maybe I could pull a few holdups. I didn't ask much, just to be left alone.

I finished the first bottle of wine and started in on the second. Halfway through the second bottle, I stopped, stretched out. My first night in my new place. It was all right. I slept.

I was awakened by the sound of a key in the door. Then the door pushed open. I sat up on the cot. A man started to step in. "GET THE @\$%# OUT OF HERE!" I screamed. He left fast. I heard him running off. I got up and slammed the door.

People did that. They rented a place, stopped paying rent and kept the key, sneaking back to sleep there if it was vacant or robbing the place if the occupant was out. Well, he wouldn't be back. He knew if he tried it again that I'd bust his sack.

I went back to my cot and had another drink.

I was a little nervous. I was going to have to pick up a knife.

I finished my drink, poured another, drank that and went back to sleep.