

## Ham on Rye – Part 2

There were continual fights. The teachers didn't seem to know anything about them. And there was always trouble when it rained. Any boy who brought an umbrella to school or wore a raincoat was singled out. Most of our parents were too poor to buy us such things. And when they did, we hid them in the bushes. Anybody seen carrying an umbrella or wearing a raincoat was considered a sissy. They were beaten after school. David's mother had him carry an umbrella whenever it was the least bit cloudy.

There were two recess periods. The first graders gathered at their own baseball diamond and the teams were chosen. David and I stood together. It was always the same. I was chosen next to last and David was chosen last, so we always played on different teams.

David was worse than I was. With his crossed eyes, he couldn't even see the ball. I needed lots of practice. I had never played with the kids in the neighborhood. I didn't know how to catch a ball or how to hit one. But I wanted to, I liked it. David was afraid of the ball, I wasn't. I swung hard, I swung harder than anybody but I could never hit the ball. I always struck out.

Once I fouled a ball off. That felt good. Another time I drew a walk. When I got to first, the first baseman said, "That's the only way you'll ever get here."

I stood and looked at him. He was chewing gum and he had long black hairs coming out of his nostrils. His hair was thick with vaseline. He wore a perpetual sneer.

"What are you looking at?" he asked me.

I didn't know what to say. I wasn't used to conversation.

"The guys say you're crazy," he told me, "but you don't scare me. I'll be waiting for you after school some day."

I kept looking at him. He had a terrible face. Then the pitcher wound up and I broke for second. I ran like crazy and slid into second. The ball arrived late. The tag was late.

"You're *out!*"

screamed the boy whose turn it was to umpire. I got up, not believing it.

"I said, 'YOU'RE OUT!'" the umpire screamed.

Then I knew that I was not accepted. David and I were not accepted. The others wanted me “out” because I was *supposed to be* “out.” They knew David and I were friends. It was because of David that I wasn’t wanted.

As I walked off the diamond I saw David playing third base in his knickers. His blue and yellow stockings had fallen down around his feet. Why had he chosen me? I was a marked man.

That afternoon after school I quickly left class and walked home alone, without David. I didn’t want to watch him beaten again by our classmates or by his mother. I didn’t want to listen to his sad violin. But the next day at lunch time, when he sat down next to me I ate his potato chips.

My day came. I was tall and I felt very powerful at the plate. I couldn’t believe that I was as bad as they wished me to be. I swung wildly but with force. I knew I was strong, and maybe like they said, “crazy.” But I had this feeling inside of me that something real was there. Just hardened, maybe, but that was more than they had.

I was up at bat. “Hey, it’s the STRIKEOUT KING! MR. WINDMILL!”

The ball arrived. I swung and I felt the bat connect like I had wanted it to do for so long. The ball went up, up and HIGH, into left field, ‘way OVER the left fielder’s head. His name was Don Brubaker and he stood and watched it fly over his head. It looked like it was never going to come down. Then Brubaker started running after the ball. He wanted to throw me out. He would never do it. The ball landed and rolled onto a diamond where some 5th graders were playing.

I ran slowly to first, hit the bag, looked at the guy on first, ran slowly to second, touched it, ran to third where David stood, ignored him, tagged third and walked to home plate. Never such a day. Never such a home run by a first grader!

As I stepped on home plate I heard one of the players, Irving Bone, say to the team captain, Stanley Greenberg, “Let’s put him on the regular team.” (The regular team played teams from other schools.) “No,” said Stanley Greenberg.

Stanley was right. I never hit another home run. I struck out most of the time. But they always remembered that home run and while they still hated me, it was a better kind of hatred, like they weren’t quite sure *why*.

Football season was worse. We played touch football. I couldn’t catch the football or throw it but I got into one game. When the runner came through I grabbed him by the shirt collar and threw him

on the ground. When he started to get up, I kicked him. I didn't like him. It was the first baseman with vaseline in his hair and the hair in his nostrils.

Stanley Greenberg came over. He was larger than any of us. He could have killed me if he'd wanted to. He was our leader. Whatever he said, that was it. He told me, "You don't understand the rules. No more football for you."

I was moved into volleyball. I played volleyball with David and the others. It wasn't any good. They yelled and screamed and got excited, but the *others* were playing football. I wanted to play football. All I needed was a little practice.

Volleyball was shameful. Girls played volleyball. After a while I wouldn't play. I just stood in the center of the field where nobody was playing. I was the only one who would not play anything. I stood there each day and waited through the two recess sessions, until they were over.

One day while I was standing there, more trouble came. A football sailed from high behind me and hit me on the head. It knocked me to the ground. I was very dizzy. They stood around snickering and laughing.

"Oh, look, Henry fainted! Henry fainted like a lady! Oh, look at Henry!"

"I got up while the sun spun around. Then it stood still. The sky moved closer and flattened out. It was like being in a cage. They stood around me, faces, noses, mouths and eyes. Because they were taunting me I thought they had deliberately hit me with the football. It was unfair.

"Who kicked that ball?" I asked.

"You wanna know who kicked the ball?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do when you find out?"

I didn't answer.

"It was Billy Sherril," somebody said.

Billy was a round fat boy, really nicer than most, but he was one of them. I began walking toward Billy. He stood there. When I got close he swung. I almost didn't feel it. I hit him behind his left ear and when he grabbed his ear I hit him in the stomach. He fell to the ground. He stayed down. "Get up and fight him, Billy," said Stanley Greenberg. Stanley lifted Billy up and pushed him toward me. I punched Billy in the mouth and he grabbed his mouth with both hands.

"O.K.," said Stanley, "I'll take his place!"

The boys cheered. I decided to run, I didn't want to die. But then a teacher came up. "What's going on here?" It was Mr. Hall.

"Henry picked on Billy," said Stanley Greenberg.

"Is that right, boys?" asked Mr. Hall.

"Yes," they said.

Mr. Hall took me by the ear all the way to the principal's office. He pushed me into a chair in front of an empty desk and then knocked on the principal's door. He was in there for some time and when he came out he left without looking at me.

I sat there five or ten minutes before the principal came out and sat behind the desk. He was a very dignified man with a mass of white hair and a blue bow tie. He looked like a real gentleman. His name was Mr. Knox.

Mr. Knox folded his hands and looked at me without speaking. When he did that I was not so sure that he was a gentleman. He seemed to want to humble me, treat me like the others.

"Well," he said at last, "tell me what happened."

"Nothing happened."

"You hurt that boy, Billy Sherril. His parents are going to want to know why." I didn't answer.

"Do you think you can take matters into your own hands when something happens you don't like?"

"No."

"Then why did you do it?" I didn't answer.

"Do you think you're better than other people?"

"No."

Mr. Knox sat there. He had a long letter opener and he slid it back and forth on the green felt padding of the desk. He had a large bottle of green ink on his desk and a pen holder with four pens. I wondered if he would beat me.

"Then why did you do what you did?"

I didn't answer. Mr. Knox slid the letter opener back and forth. The phone rang. He picked it up.

“Hello? Oh, Mrs. Kirby? He what? What? Listen, can’t *you* administer the discipline? I’m busy now. All right, I’ll phone you when I’m done with this one ...” He hung up. He brushed his fine white hair back out of his eyes with one hand and looked at me.

“Why do you cause me all this trouble?”

I didn’t answer him.

“You think you’re tough, huh?”

I kept silent.

“Tough kid, huh?”

There was a fly circling Mr. Knox’s desk. It hovered over his green ink bottle. Then it landed on the black cap of the ink bottle and sat there rubbing its wings.

“O.K., kid, you’re tough and I’m tough. Let’s shake hands on that.”

I didn’t think I was tough so I didn’t give him my hand. “Come on, give me your hand.”

I stretched my hand out and he took it and began shaking it. Then he stopped shaking it and looked at me. He had blue clear eyes lighter than the blue of his bow tie. His eyes were almost beautiful. He kept looking at me and holding my hand. His grip began to tighten.

“I want to congratulate you for being a tough guy.”

His grip tightened some more.

“Do you think I’m a tough guy?”

I didn’t answer.

He crushed the bones of my fingers together. I could feel the bone of each finger cutting like a blade into the flesh of the finger next to it. Shots of red flashed before my eyes.

“Do you think I’m a tough guy?” he asked.

“I’ll kill you,” I said.

“You’ll what?”

Mr. Knox tightened his grip. He had a hand like a vise. I could see every pore in his face.

“Tough guys don’t scream, do they?”

I couldn’t look at his face anymore. I put my face down on the desk.

“Am I a tough guy?” asked Mr. Knox.

He squeezed harder. I had to scream, but I kept it as quiet as possible so no one in the classes could hear me.”

Now, am I a tough guy?”

I waited. I hated to say it. Then I said, “Yes.”

Mr. Knox let go of my hand. I was afraid to look at it. I let it hang by my side. I noticed that the fly was gone and I thought, it’s not so bad to be a fly. Mr. Knox was writing on a piece of paper.”

Now, Henry, I’m writing a little note to your parents and I want you to deliver it to them. And you *will* deliver it to them, won’t you?”

“Yes.”

He folded the note into an envelope and handed it to me. The envelope was sealed and I had no desire to open it.

I took the envelope home to my mother and handed it to her and walked into the bedroom. My bedroom. The best thing about the bedroom was the bed. I liked to stay in bed for hours, even during the day with the covers pulled up to my chin. It was good in there, nothing ever occurred in there, no people, nothing. My mother often found me in bed in the daytime.”

Henry, get up! It’s not good for a young boy to lay in bed all day! Now, get up! *Do* something!”

But there was nothing to do.

I didn’t go to bed that day. My mother was reading the note. Soon I heard her crying. Then she was wailing. “Oh, my god! You’ve disgraced your father and myself! It’s a disgrace! Suppose the neighbors find out? What will the neighbors think?”

They never spoke to their neighbors.

Then the door opened and my mother came running into the room:

*“How could you have done this to your mother?”*

The tears were running down her face. I felt guilty.

*“Wait until your father gets home!”*

She slammed the bedroom door and I sat in the chair and waited. Somehow I felt guilty ...

I heard my father come in. He always slammed the door, walked heavily, and talked loudly. He was home. After a few moments the bedroom door opened. He was six feet two, a large man. Everything vanished, the chair I was sitting in, the wallpaper, the walls, all of my thoughts. He was the dark covering the sun, the violence of him made everything else utterly disappear. He was all ears, nose, mouth, I couldn't look at his eyes, there was only his red angry face.”

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.