

Ham on Rye – Part 3

One night my father took me on his milk route. There were no longer any horsedrawn wagons. The milk trucks now had engines. After loading up at the milk company we drove off on his route. I liked being out in the very early morning. The moon was up and I could see the stars. It was cold but it was exciting. I wondered why my father had asked me to come along since he had taken to beating me with the razor strop once or twice a week and we weren't getting along.

At each stop he would jump out and deliver a bottle or two of milk. Sometimes it was cottage cheese or buttermilk or butter and now and then a bottle of orange juice. Most of the people left notes in the empty bottles explaining what they wanted.

My father drove along, stopping and starting, making deliveries.

“O.K., kid, which direction are we driving in now?”

“North.”

“You're right. We're going north.”

We went up and down streets, stopping and starting.

“O.K., which way are we going now?”

“West.”

“No, we're going south.”

We drove along in silence some more.

“Suppose I pushed you out of the truck now and left you on the sidewalk, what would you do?”

“I don't know.”

“I mean, how would you live?”

“Well, I guess I'd go back and drink the milk and orange juice you just left on the porch steps.”

“Then what would you do?”

“I'd find a policeman and tell him what you did.”

“You would, huh? And what would you tell him?”

“I'd tell him that you told me that 'west' was 'south' because you wanted me to get lost.”

It began to get light. Soon all the deliveries were made and we stopped at a cafe to have breakfast. The waitress walked over. "Hello, Henry," she said to my father.

"Hello, Betty."

"Who's the kid?" asked Betty.

"That's little Henry."

"He looks just like you."

"He doesn't have my brains, though."

"I hope not."

We ordered. We had bacon and eggs. As we ate my father said, "Now comes the hard part."

"What is that?"

"I have to collect the money people owe me. Some of them don't want to pay."

"They ought to pay."

"That's what I tell them."

We finished eating and started driving again. My father got out and knocked on doors. I could hear him complaining loudly, **HOW THE HELL DO YOU THINK I'M GOING TO EAT? YOU'VE SUCKED UP THE MILK, NOW IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO \$#@% OUT THE MONEY!**

He used a different line each time. Sometimes he came back with the money, sometimes he didn't.

Then I saw him enter a court of bungalows. A door opened and a woman stood there dressed in a loose silken kimono. She was smoking a cigarette. "Listen, baby, I've got to have the money. You're into me deeper than anybody!"

She laughed at him.

"Look, baby, just give me half, give me a payment, something to show."

She blew a smoke ring, reached out and broke it with her finger.

"Listen, you've got to pay me," my father said. "This is a desperate situation."

"Come on in. We'll talk about it," said the woman.

My father went in and the door closed. He was in there for a long time. The sun was really up. When my father came out his hair was hanging down around his face and he was pushing his shirt tail into his pants. He climbed into the truck.

“Did that woman give you the money?” I asked.

“That was the last stop,” said my father. “I can’t take it any more. We’ll return the truck and go home ...”

I was to see that woman again. One day I came home after school and she was sitting on a chair in the front room of our house. My mother and father were sitting there too and my mother was crying. When my mother saw me she stood up and ran toward me, grabbed me. She took me into the bedroom and sat me on the bed. “Henry, do you love your mother?”

I really didn’t but she looked so sad that I said, “Yes.”

She took me back into the other room.

“Your father says he loves this woman,” she said to me.

“I love both of you! Now get that kid out of here!”

I felt that my father was making my mother very unhappy.

“I’ll kill you,” I told my father.

“Get that kid out of here!”

“How can you love that woman?”

I asked my father. “Look at her nose. She has a nose like an elephant!”

“Christ!”

said the woman, “I don’t have to take this!”

She looked at my father: “Choose, Henry! One or the other! Now!”

“But I can’t! I love you both!”

“I’ll kill you!” I told my father.

He walked over and slapped me on the ear, knocking me to the floor. The woman got up and ran out of the house and my father went after her. The woman leaped into my father’s car, started it and drove off down the street. It happened very quickly. My father ran down the street after her and the car. “EDNA! EDNA, COME BACK!”

My father actually caught up with the car, reached into the front seat and grabbed Edna’s purse. Then the car speeded up and my father was left with the purse

“I knew something was going on,” my mother told me. “So I hid in the car trunk and I caught them together. Your father drove me back here with that horrible woman. Now she’s got his car.”

My father walked back with Edna's purse. "Everybody into the house!"

We went inside and my father locked me in the bedroom and my mother and father began arguing. It was loud and very ugly. Then my father began beating my mother. She screamed and he kept beating her. I climbed out a window and tried to get in the front door. It was locked. I tried the rear door, the windows. Everything was locked. I stood in the backyard and listened to the screaming and the beating.

Then the beating and the screaming stopped and all I could hear was my mother sobbing. She sobbed a long time. It gradually grew less and less and then she stopped.

[Henry gets hit by a car.]

Later in the hospital they were dabbing at my knees with pieces of cotton that had been soaked in something. It burned. My elbows burned too.

The doctor was bending over me with a nurse. I was in bed and the sun came through the window. It seemed very pleasant. The doctor smiled at me. The nurse straightened up and smiled at me. It was nice there.

"Do you have a name?" the doctor asked.

"Henry."

"Henry what?"

"Chinaski."

"Polish, eh?"

"German."

"How come nobody wants to be Polish?"

"I was born in Germany."

"Where do you live?" asked the nurse.

"With my parents."

"Really?" asked the doctor. "And where is that?"

“What happened to my elbows and knees?”

“A car ran you over. Luckily, the wheels missed you. Witnesses said he appeared to be drunk. Hit and run. But they got his license. They’ll get him.”

“You have a pretty nurse ...” I said.

“Well, thank you,” she said.

“Do you want a date with her?” asked the doctor. “What’s that?”

“Do you want to go out with her?” the doctor asked.

“I don’t know if I could do it with her. I’m too young.”

“Do what?”

“You know.”

“Well,” the nurse smiled, “come see me after your knees heal up and we’ll see what we can do.”

“Pardon me,” said the doctor, “but I have to see another accident case.” He left the room.

“Now,” said the nurse, “what street do you live on?”

“Virginia Road.”

“Give me the number, sweetie.”

I told her the house number. She asked if there was a telephone. I told her that I didn’t know the number.

“That’s all right,” she said, “we’ll get it. And don’t worry. You were lucky. You just got a bump on the head and skinned up a little.”

She was nice but I knew that after my knees healed, she wouldn’t want to see me again. “I want to stay here,” I told her.

“What? You mean, you don’t want to go home to your parents?”

“No. Let me stay here.”

“We can’t do that, sweetie. We need these beds for people who are really sick and injured.” She smiled and walked out of the room.

When my father came he walked straight into the room and without a word scooped me out of bed. He carried me out of the room and down the hallway.

“You little bastard! Didn’t I teach you to look BOTH ways before you cross the street?” He rushed me down the hall. We passed the nurse.

“Goodbye, Henry,” she said.

“Goodbye.”

We got into an elevator with an old man in a wheelchair. A nurse was standing behind him. The elevator began to descend.

“I think I’m going to die,” the old man said. “I don’t want to die. I’m afraid to die ...” “You’ve lived long enough, you old fart!” muttered my father.

The old man looked startled. The elevator stopped. The door remained closed. Then I noticed the elevator operator. He sat on a small stool. He was a dwarf dressed in a bright red uniform with a red cap.

The dwarf looked at my father. “Sir,” he said, “you are a repugnant fool!”

“Shortcake,” replied my father, “open the \$#@%ing door or it’s your ass.”

The door opened. We went out the entrance. My father carried me across the hospital lawn. I still had on a hospital gown. My father carried my clothes in a bag in one hand. The wind blew back my gown and I saw my skinned knees which were not bandaged and were painted with iodine. My father was almost running across the lawn.

“When they catch that son-of-a-b*%#,” he said, “I’ll sue him! I’ll sue him for his last penny! He’ll support me the rest of his life! I’m sick of that god-damned milk truck! Golden State Creamery! Golden State, my hairy ass! We’ll move to the South Seas. We’ll live on coconuts and pineapples!”

My father reached the car and put me in the front seat. Then he got in on his side. He started the 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!”

My father always ran the neighborhood kids away from our house. I was told not to play with them but I walked down the street and watched them anyhow.

“Hey, Heinie!” they yelled, “Why don’t you go back to Germany?”

Somehow they had found out about my birthplace. The worst thing was that they were all about my age and they not only hung together because they lived in the same neighborhood but because they went to the same Catholic school. They were tough kids, they played tackle football for hours and almost every day a couple of them got into a fist fight. The four main guys were Chuck, Eddie, Gene and Frank.

“Hey, Heinie, go back to Krautland!”

There was no getting in with them ... Then a red-headed kid moved in next door to Chuck. He went to some kind of special school. I was sitting on the curb one day when he came out of his house. He sat on the curb next to me. “Hi, my name’s Red.”

“I’m Henry.”

We sat there and watched the guys play football. I looked at Red.

“How come you got a glove on your left hand?” I asked.

“I’ve only got one arm,” he said.

“That hand looks real.”

“It’s fake. It’s a fake arm. Touch it.”

“What?”

“Touch it. It’s fake.”

I felt it. It was hard, rock hard.

“How’d that happen?”

“I was born that way. The arm’s fake all the way up to the elbow. I’ve got to strap it on. I’ve got little fingers at the end of my elbow, fingernails and all, but the fingers aren’t any good.”

“You got any friends?” I asked.

“No.”

“Me neither.”

“Those guys won’t play with you?”

“No.”

“I got a football.”

“Can you catch it?”

“Straight \$#@%,” said Red. “Go get it.”

“O.K....”

Red went back to his father’s garage and came out with a football. He tossed it to me. Then he backed across his front lawn.

“Go on, throw it ...”

I let it go. His good arm came around and his bad arm came around and he caught it. The arm made a slight squeaking sound as he caught the football.

“Nice catch,” I said. “Now wing me one!”

He cocked his arm and let it fly; it came like a bullet and I managed to hold onto it as it dug into my stomach.

“You’re standing too close,” I told him. “Step back some more.” At last, I thought, some practice catching and throwing. It felt real good.

Then I was the quarterback. I rolled back, straight-armed an invisible tackler, and let go a spiral fly. It fell short. Red ran forward, leaped, caught the ball, rolled over three or four times and still held onto it.

“You’re good, Red. How’d you get so good?”

“My father taught me. We practice a lot.”

Then Red walked back and let one sail. It looked to be over my head as I ran back for it. There was a hedge between Red’s house and Chuck’s house and I fell into the hedge going for the ball. The ball hit the top of the hedge and bounced over. I went around to Chuck’s yard to get the ball. Chuck passed the ball to me. “So you got yourself a freak friend, hey, Heinie?”

It was a couple of days later and Red and I were on his front lawn passing and kicking the football. Chuck and his friends weren’t around. Red and I were getting better and better. Practice, that’s all it took. All a guy needed was a chance. Somebody was always controlling who got a chance and who didn’t.

I caught one over the shoulder, whirled and winged it back to Red who leaped high and came down with it. Maybe some day we'd play for U.S.C. Then I saw five boys walking down the sidewalk toward us. They weren't guys from my grammar school. They were our age and looked like trouble. Red and I kept throwing the ball and they stood watching us.

Then one of the guys stepped onto the lawn. The biggest.

"Throw me the ball," he said to Red.

"Why?"

"I wanna see if I can catch it."

"I don't care if you can catch it or not."

"Throw me the ball!"

"He's got one arm," I said. "Leave him alone."

"Stay out of this, monkey-face!"

Then he looked at Red. "Throw me the ball."

"Go to hell!" said Red.

"Get the ball!" the big guy said to the others. They ran at us. Red turned and threw the ball on the roof of his house. The roof was slanted and the ball rolled back down but managed to stick behind a drain pipe. Then they were on us. Five to two, I thought, there's no chance. I caught a fist on the temple, swung and missed. Somebody kicked me in the ass. It was a good one and burned all the way up the spine. Then I heard a cracking sound, it was almost like a rifle shot and one of them was down on the ground holding his forehead.

"Oh \$#@%," he said, "my skull is crushed!"

I saw Red and he was standing in the center of the lawn. He was holding the hand of his fake arm with the hand of his good arm. It was like a club. Then he swung again. There was another loud crack and another of them was down on the lawn. I began to feel brave and I landed a punch right on a guy's mouth. I saw the lip split and the blood began to dribble down his chin. The other two ran off. Then the big guy who had gone down first got up and the other one got up. They held their heads. The guy with the bloody mouth stood there. Then they retreated down the street together. When they got quite a way down the big guy turned around and said, "We'll be back!"

Red began running toward them and I ran behind Red. They started running and Red and I stopped chasing them after they turned the corner. We walked back, found a ladder in the garage. We got the football down and began throwing it back and forth ...

One Saturday Red and I decided to go swimming at the public pool down on Bimini Street. Red was a strange guy. He didn't talk much but I didn't talk much either and we got along. There was nothing to say anyhow. The only thing I ever really asked him about was his school but he just said it was a special school and that it cost his father some money.

We arrived at the pool in the early afternoon, got our lockers, and took our clothes off. We had our swimming trunks on underneath. Then I saw Red unhitch his arm and put it in his locker. It was the first time since the fight I had seen him without his fake arm. I tried not to look at his arm which ended at the elbow. We walked to the place where you had to soak your feet in a chlorine solution. It stank but it stopped the spread of athlete's foot or something. Then we walked to the pool and got in. The water stank too and after I was in I pissed in it. There were people of all ages in the pool, men and women, boys and girls. Red really liked the water. He leaped up and down in it. Then he ducked under and came up. He spit water out of his mouth. I tried to swim.

I couldn't help noticing Red's half-arm, couldn't help looking at it. I always made sure to look at it when I thought he was occupied with something else. It ended at the elbow, sort of rounded off, and I saw the little fingers. I didn't want to stare real hard, but it seemed as if there were only three or four of them, very tiny, curled up there. They were very red and each of the tiny fingers had a little fingernail. Nothing was going to grow anymore; it had all stopped. I didn't want to think about it. I dove under. I was going to scare Red. I was going to grab his legs from behind. I came up against something soft. My face went right into it. It was a fat woman's butt. I felt her grab me by the hair and she pulled me up out of the water. She had on a blue bathing cap and the strap was tight around her chin, digging into her flesh. Her front teeth were capped with silver and her breath smelled of garlic.

"You dirty little pervert! Trying for free grabs, are you?"

I pushed away from her and backed off. As I moved backwards she followed me through the water, her sagging breasts pushing a tidal wave in front of her

I backed up further into the deeper water. I was now standing on my toes, moving backwards. I swallowed some water. She kept coming, a steamship of a woman. I couldn't retreat any further. She moved right up to me. Her eyes were pale and blank, there wasn't any color in them.

"I'm going to tell the lifeguard you molested me!" she screamed.

Then a man swam between us. "That little son-of-a-b*%#!"

I swam over to Red.

"Listen," I said, "we've got to get out of here! That fat lady is going to tell the lifeguard that I touched her."

"What'd you do that for?" Red asked.

“I wanted to see what it felt like.”

“What’d it feel like?”

We got out of the pool, showered. Red put his arm back on and we dressed. “Did you really do it?” he asked.

“A guy’s got to get started sometime.”

It was a month or so later that Red’s family moved. One day they were gone. Just like that. Red never said anything in advance to me. He was gone, the football was gone, and those tiny red fingers with fingernails, they were gone. He was a good guy.