

Ham on Rye, Part 4

I didn't know exactly why but Chuck, Eddie, Gene and Frank let me join them in some of their games. I think it started when another guy showed up and they needed three on a side. I still required more practice to get really good but I was getting better. Saturday was the best day. That's when we had our big games, other guys joined in, and we played football in the street. We played tackle on the lawns but when we played in the street we played touch. There was more passing then because you couldn't get far with a run in touch.

There was trouble at the house, much fighting between my mother and my father, and as a consequence, they kind of forgot about me. I got to play football each Saturday. During one game I broke into the open behind the last pass defender and I saw Chuck wing the ball. It was a long high spiral and I kept running. I looked back over my shoulder, I saw it coming, it fell right into my hands and I held it and was in for the touchdown.

Then I heard my father's voice yell "HENRY!" He was standing in front of his house. I lobbed the ball to one of the guys on my team so they could kick off and I walked down to where my father stood. He looked angry. I could almost feel his anger. He always stood with one foot a little bit forward, his face flushed, and I could see his pot belly going up and down with his breathing. He was six feet two and like I said, he looked to be all ears, mouth and nose when angry. I couldn't look at his eyes.

"All right," he said, "you're old enough to mow the lawn now. You're big enough to mow it, edge it, water it, and water the flowers. It's time you did something around here. It's time you got off your dead ass!"

"But I'm playing football with the guys. Saturday is the only real chance I have."

"Are you talking back to me?"

"No."

I could see my mother watching from behind a curtain. Every Saturday they cleaned the whole house. They vacuumed the rugs and polished the furniture. They took up the rugs and waxed the hardwood floors and then covered the floors with the rugs again. You couldn't even see where they had been waxed.

The lawn mower and edger were in the driveway. He showed them to me. "Now, you take this mower and go up and down the lawn and don't miss any places. Dump the grass catcher here whenever it gets full. Now, when you've mowed the lawn in one direction and finished, take the mower and mow

the lawn in the other direction, get it? First, you mow it north and south, then you mow it east and west. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“And don’t look so god-damned unhappy or I’ll really give you something to be *unhappy* about! After you’ve finished mowing, then you take the edger. You trim the edges of the lawn with the little mower on the edger. Get under the hedge, get every blade of grass! Then ... you take this circular blade on the edger and you cut along the edge of the lawn. It must be absolutely straight along the edge of the lawn! Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Now when you’re done with that, you take these ...”

My father showed me some shears.

“... and you get down on your knees and you go around cutting off any *hairs* that are still sticking up. Then you take the hose and you water the hedges and the flower beds. Then you turn on the sprinkler and you let it run fifteen minutes on each part of the lawn. You do all this on the front lawn and in the flower garden, and then you repeat it on the rear lawn and in the flower garden there. Are there any questions?”

“No.”

“All right, now I want to tell you this. I am going to come out and check everything when you’re finished, and when you’re done I DONT WANT TO SEE ONE HAIR STICKING UP IN EITHER THE FRONT OR BACK LAWN! NOT ONE HAIR! IF THERE IS ...!”

He turned, walked up the driveway, across his porch, opened the door, slammed it, and he was gone inside of his house. I took the mower, rolled it up the drive and began pushing it on its first run, north and south. I could hear the guys down the street playing football ...I finished mowing, edging and clipping the front lawn. I watered the flower beds, set the sprinkler going and began working my way toward the backyard. There was a stretch of lawn in the center of the driveway leading to the back. I got that too. I didn’t know if I was unhappy. I felt too miserable to be unhappy. It was like everything in the world had turned to lawn and I was just pushing my way through it all. I kept pushing and working but then suddenly I gave up. It would take hours, all day, and the game would be over. The guys would go in to eat dinner, Saturday would be finished, and I’d still be mowing.

As I began mowing the back lawn I noticed my mother and my father standing on the back porch watching me. They just stood there silently, not moving. Once as I pushed the mower past I heard my mother say to my father, “Look, he doesn’t sweat like you do when you mow the lawn. Look how calm he looks.”

“CALM? HE’S NOT CALM, HE’S DEAD!”

When I came by again, I heard him:

“PUSH THAT THING FASTER! YOU MOVE LIKE A SNAIL!”

I pushed it faster. It was hard to do but it felt good. I pushed it faster and faster. I was almost running with the mower. The grass flew back so hard that much of it flew over the grass catcher. I knew that would anger him.

“YOU SON-OF-A-#@*\$!” he screamed.

I saw him run off the back porch and into the garage. He came out with a two-by-four about a foot long. From the corner of my eye I saw him throw it. I saw it coming but made no attempt to avoid it. It hit me on the back of my right leg. The pain was terrible. The leg knotted up and I had to force myself to walk. I kept pushing the mower, trying not to limp. When I swung around to cut another section of the lawn the two-by-four was in the way. I picked it up, moved it aside and kept mowing. The pain was getting worse. Then my father was standing beside me.

“STOP!”

I stopped.

“I want you to go back and mow the lawn over again where you didn’t catch the grass in the catcher! Do you *understand* me?”

“Yes.”

My father walked back into the house. I saw him and my mother standing on the back porch watching me.

The end of the job was to sweep up all the grass that had fallen on the sidewalk, and then wash the sidewalk down. I was finally finished except for sprinkling each section of the lawn in the back yard for fifteen minutes. I dragged the hose back to set up the sprinkler when my father stepped out of the house.

“Before you start sprinkling I want to check this lawn for hairs.”

My father walked to the center of the lawn, got down on his hands and knees and placed the side of his head low against the lawn looking for any blade of grass that might be sticking up. He kept looking, twisting his neck, peering around. I waited.

“AH HAH!”

He leaped up and ran toward the house.

“MAMA! MAMA!”

He ran into the house.

“What is it?”

“I found a *hair!*”

“You did?”

“Come, I’ll show you!”

He came out of the house quickly with my mother following.

“Here! Here! I’ll show you!”

He got down on his hands and knees.

“I can see it! I can see *two* of them!”

My mother got down with him. I wondered if they were crazy. “See them?” he asked her. “*Two* hairs. See them?”

“Yes, Daddy, I see them ...”

They both got up. My mother walked into the house. My father looked at me.

“Inside ...”

I walked to the porch and inside the house. My father followed me.

“Into the bathroom.” My father closed the door. “Take your pants down.”

I heard him get down the razor strop. My right leg still ached. It didn’t help, having felt the strop many times before. The whole world was out there indifferent to it all, but that didn’t help. Millions of people were out there, dogs and cats and gophers, buildings, streets, but it didn’t matter. There was only father and the razor strop and the bathroom and me. He used that strop to sharpen his razor, and early in the mornings I used to hate him with his face white with lather, standing before the mirror shaving himself.

Then the first blow of the strop hit me. The sound of the strop was flat and loud, the sound itself was almost as bad as the pain. The strop landed again. It was as if my father was a machine, swinging that strop. There was the feeling of being in a tomb. The strop landed again and I thought, that is surely the last one. But it wasn’t. It landed again. I didn’t hate him. He was just unbelievable, I just wanted to get away from him. I couldn’t cry. I was too sick to cry, too confused. The strop landed once again. Then he stopped. I stood and waited. I heard him hanging up the strop.

“Next time,” he said, “I don’t want to find any hairs.”

I heard him walk out of the bathroom. He closed the bathroom door. The walls were beautiful, the bathtub was beautiful, the wash basin and the shower curtain were beautiful, and even the toilet was beautiful. My father was gone.

Of all the guys left in the neighborhood, Frank was the nicest. We got to be friends, we got to going around together, we didn't need the other guys much. They had more or less kicked Frank out of the group, anyway, so he became friends with me. He wasn't like David, who had walked home from school with me. Frank had a lot more going for him than David had.

I even joined the Catholic church because Frank went there. My parents liked me going to church. The Sunday masses were very boring. And we had to go to Catechism classes. We had to study the Catechism book. It was just boring questions and answers.

One afternoon we were sitting on my front porch and I was reading the Catechism out loud to Frank. I read the line, "God has bodily eyes and sees all things."

"Bodily eyes?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

"You mean like this?" he asked.

He clenched his hands into fists and placed them over his eyes.

"He has milk bottles for eyes," Frank said, pushing his fists against his eyes and turning toward me. Then he began laughing. I began laughing too. We laughed a long time. Then Frank stopped.

"You think He heard us?"

"I guess so. If He can see everything He can probably hear everything too."

"I'm scared," said Frank. "He might kill us. Do you think He'll kill us?"

"I don't know."

"We better sit here and wait. Don't move. Sit still."

We sat on the steps and waited. We waited a long time.

"Maybe He isn't going to do it now," I said.

"He's going to take His time," said Frank.

We waited another hour, then we walked down to Frank's place. He was building a model airplane and I wanted to take a look at it ...

The afternoon came when we decided to go to our first confession. We walked to the church. We knew one of the priests, the main man. We had met him in an ice cream parlor and he had spoken to us. We had even gone to his house once. He lived in a place next to the church with an old woman. We stayed quite a while and asked all sorts of questions about God. Like, how tall was He? And did He just sit in a chair all day? And did He go to the bathroom like everybody else? The priest never did answer our questions directly but still he seemed like a nice guy, he had a nice smile.

We walked to the church thinking about confession, thinking about what it would be like. As we got near the church a stray dog began walking along with us. He looked very thin and hungry. We stopped and petted him, scratched his back.

“It’s too bad dogs can’t go to heaven,” said Frank.

“Why can’t they?”

“You gotta be baptized to go to heaven.”

“We ought to baptize him.”

“Think we should?”

“He deserves a chance to go to heaven.”

I picked him up and we walked into the church. We took him to the bowl of holy water and I held him there as Frank sprinkled the water on his forehead.

“I hereby baptize you,” said Frank.

We took him outside and put him back on the sidewalk again. “He even looks different,” I said.

The dog lost interest and walked off down the sidewalk. We went back into the church, stopping first at the holy water, dipping our fingers into it and making the sign of the cross. We both kneeled at a pew near the confessional booth and waited.

A fat woman came out from behind the curtain. She had body odor. I could smell her strong odor as she walked past. Her smell was mixed with the smell of the church, which smelled like piss. Every Sunday people came to mass and smelled that piss-smell and nobody said anything. I was going to tell the priest about it but I couldn’t. Maybe it was the candles.

“I’m going in,” said Frank.

Then he got up, walked behind the curtain and was gone. He was in there a long time. When he came out he was grinning.

“It was great, just great! You go in there now!”

I got up, pulled the curtain back and walked in. It was dark. I kneeled down. All I could see in front of me was a screen. Frank said God was back in there. I kneeled and tried to think of something bad that I had done, but I couldn't think of anything. I just knelt there and tried and tried to think of something but I couldn't. I didn't know what to do.

“Go ahead” said a voice. *“Say something!”*

The voice sounded angry. I didn't think there would be any voice. I thought God had plenty of time. I was frightened. I decided to lie.

“All right,” I said. “I ... kicked my father. I ... cursed my mother ... I stole money from my mother's purse. I spent it on candy bars. I let the air out of Chuck's football. I looked up a little girl's dress. I kicked my mother. I ate some of my snot. That's about all. Except today I baptized a dog.”

“You baptized a dog?”

I was finished. A Mortal Sin. No use going on. I got up to leave. I didn't know if the voice recommended my saying some Hail Marys or if the voice didn't say anything at all. I pulled the curtain back and there was Frank waiting. We walked out of the church and were back on the street.

“I feel cleansed,” said Frank, “don't you?”

“No.”

I never went to confession again. It was worse than ten o'clock mass.