

## Ham on Rye, Part 7

The next day I sat in the hall in my green tin chair, waiting to be called. Across from me sat a man who had something wrong with his nose. It was very red and very raw and very fat and long and it was growing upon itself. You could see where section had grown upon section. Something had irritated the man's nose and it had just started growing.

I looked at the nose and then tried not to look. I didn't want the man to see me looking, I knew how he felt. But the man seemed very comfortable. He was fat and sat there almost asleep.

They called him first: "Mr. Sleeth?"

He moved forward a bit in his chair.

"Sleeth? Richard Sleeth?"

"Uh? Yes, I'm here ..."

He stood up and moved toward the doctor.

"How are you today, Mr. Sleeth?"

"Fine ... I'm all right ..." He followed the doctor into the examination room.

I got my call an hour later. I followed the doctor through some swinging doors and into another room. It was larger than the examination room. I was told to disrobe and to sit on a table. The doctor looked at me.

"You really have a case there, haven't you?"

"Yeah."

He poked at a boil on my back.

"That hurt?"

"Yeah."

"Well," he said, "we're going to try to get some drainage." I heard him turn on the machinery. It made a whirring sound. I could smell oil getting hot.

"Ready?" he asked.

“Yeah.”

He pushed the electric needle into my back. I was being drilled. The pain was immense. It filled the room. I felt the blood run down my back. Then he pulled the needle out.

“Now we’re going to get another one,” said the doctor.

He jammed the needle into me. Then he pulled it out and jammed it into a third boil. Two other men had walked in and were standing there watching. They were probably doctors. The needle went into me again.

“I never saw anybody go under the needle like that,” said one of the men.

“He gives no sign at all,” said the other man.

“Why don’t you guys go out and pinch some nurse’s ass?” I asked them.

“Look, son, you can’t talk to us like that!”

The needle dug into me. I didn’t answer.

“The boy is evidently very bitter ...”

“Yes, of course, that’s it.”

The men walked out.

“Those are fine professional men,” said my doctor. “It’s not good of you to abuse them.”

“Just go ahead and drill,” I told him.

He did. The needle got very hot but he went on and on. He drilled my entire back, then he got my chest. Then I stretched out and he drilled my neck and my face.

A nurse came in and she got her instructions. “Now, Miss Ackerman, I want these ... pustules ... thoroughly drained. And when you get to the blood, keep squeezing. I want thorough drainage.”

“Yes, Dr. Grundy.”

“And afterwards, the ultra-violet ray machine. Two minutes on each side to begin with ...”

“Yes, Dr. Grundy.”

I followed Miss Ackerman into another room. She told me to lay down on the table. She got a tissue and started on the first boil.

“Does this hurt?”

“It’s all right.”

“You poor boy ...”

“Don’t worry. I’m just sorry you have to do this.”

“You poor boy ...”

Miss Ackerman was the first person to give me any sympathy. It felt strange. She was a chubby little nurse in her early thirties.

“Are you going to school?” she asked.

“No, they had to take me out.”

Miss Ackerman kept squeezing as she talked.

“What do you do all day?”

“I just stay in bed.”

“That’s awful.”

“No, it’s nice. I like it.”

“Does this hurt?”

“Go ahead. It’s all right.”

“What’s so nice about laying in bed all day?”

“I don’t have to see anybody.”

“You like that?”

“Oh, yes.”

“What do you do all day?”

“Some of the day I listen to the radio.”

“What do you listen to?”

“Music. And people talking.”

“Do you think of girls?”

“Sure. But that’s out.”

“You don’t want to think that way.”

“I make charts of airplanes going overhead. They come over at the same time each day. I have them timed. Say that I know that one of them is going to pass over at 11:15 a.m. Around 11:10, I start

listening for the sound of the motor. I try to hear the first sound. Sometimes I imagine I hear it and sometimes I'm not sure and then I begin to hear it, 'way off, for sure. And the sound gets stronger. Then at 11:15 a.m. it passes overhead and the sound is as loud as it's going to get."

"You do that every day?"

"Not when I'm here."

"Turn over," said Miss Ackerman.

I did. Then in the ward next to us a man started screaming. We were next to the disturbed ward. He was really loud.

"What are they doing to him?" I asked Miss Ackerman.

"He's in the shower."

"And it makes him scream like that?"

"Yes."

"I'm worse off than he is."

"No, you're not."

I liked Miss Ackerman. I sneaked a look at her. Her face was round, she wasn't very pretty but she wore her nurse's cap in a perky manner and she had large dark brown eyes. It was the eyes. As she balled up some tissue to throw into the dispenser I watched her walk. Well, she was no Miss Gredis, and I had seen many other women with better figures, but there was something warm about her. She wasn't constantly thinking about being a woman.

"As soon as I finish your face," she said, "I will put you under the ultra-violet ray machine. Your next appointment will be the day after tomorrow at 8:30 a.m."

We didn't talk any more after that.

Then she was finished. I put on goggles and Miss Ackerman turned on the ultra-violet ray machine.

There was a ticking sound. It was peaceful. It might have been the automatic timer, or the metal reflector on the lamp heating up. It was comforting and relaxing, but when I began to think about it, I decided that everything that they were doing for me was useless. I figured that at best the needle would leave scars on me for the remainder of my life. That was bad enough but it wasn't what I really minded. What I minded was that they didn't know how to deal with me. I sensed this in their discussions and in their manner. They were hesitant, uneasy, yet also somehow disinterested and bored. Finally it didn't matter what they did. They just had to do something—anything—because to do nothing would be unprofessional.

They experimented on the poor and if that worked they used the treatment on the rich. And if it didn't work, there would still be more poor left over to experiment upon.

The machine signaled its warning that two minutes were up. Miss Ackerman came in, told me to turn over, re-set the machine, then left. She was the kindest person I had met in eight years.

The drilling and squeezing continued for weeks but there was little result. When one boil vanished another would appear. I often stood in front of the mirror alone, wondering how ugly a person could get. I would look at my face in disbelief, then turn to examine all the boils on my back. I was horrified. No wonder people stared, no wonder they said unkind things. It was not simply a case of teen-age acne. These were inflamed, relentless, large, swollen boils filled with pus. I felt singled out, as if I had been selected to be this way.

My parents never spoke to me about my condition. They were still on relief. My mother left each morning to look for work and my father drove off as if he were working. On Saturdays people on relief got free foodstuffs from the markets, mostly canned goods, almost always cans of hash for some reason. We ate a great deal of hash. And bologna sandwiches. And potatoes. My mother learned to make potato pancakes.

Each Saturday when my parents went for their free food they didn't go to the nearest market because they were afraid some of the neighbors might see them and then know that they were on the dole. So they walked two miles down Washington Boulevard, to a store a couple of blocks past Crenshaw. It was a long walk. They walked the two miles back, sweating, carrying their shopping bags full of canned hash and potatoes and bologna and carrots. My father didn't drive because he wanted to save gas. He needed the gas to drive to and from his invisible job. The other fathers weren't like that. They just sat quietly on their front porches or played horseshoes in the vacant lot.

The doctor gave me a white substance to apply to my face. It hardened and caked on the boils, giving me a plaster-like look. The substance didn't seem to help. I was home alone one afternoon, applying this substance to my face and body. I was standing in my shorts trying to reach the infected areas of my back with my hand when I heard voices. It was Baldy and his friend Jimmy Hatcher. Jimmy Hatcher was a good looking fellow and he was a wise-ass.

"Henry!" I heard Baldy calling. I heard him talking to Jimmy. Then he walked up on the porch and beat on the door. "Hey, Hank, it's Baldy! Open up!"

You damn fool, I thought, don't you understand that I don't want to see anybody?

"Hank! Hank! It's Baldy and Jim!"

He beat on the front door.

I heard him talking to Jim. "Listen, I saw him! I saw him walking around in there!"

"He doesn't answer."

"We better go in. He might be in trouble."

You fool, I thought, I befriended you. I befriended you when nobody else could stand you. Now, look at this!

I couldn't believe it. I ran into the hall and hid in a closet, leaving the door slightly open. I was sure they wouldn't come into the house. But they did. I had left the back door open. I heard them walking around in the house.

"He's got to be here," said Baldy. "I saw something moving in here ..."

Jesus Christ, I thought, can't I move around in here? I live in this house.

I was crouched in the dark closet. I knew I couldn't let them find me in there.

I swung the closet door open and leaped out. I saw them both standing in the front room. I ran in there. "GET OUT OF HERE, YOU SONS-OF-#@\*\$ES!" They looked at me.

"GET OUT OF HERE! YOU'VE GOT NO RIGHT TO BE IN HERE! GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE I KILL YOU!"

They started running toward the back porch.

"GO ON! GO ON, OR I'LL KILL YOU!"

I heard them run up the driveway and out onto the sidewalk. I didn't want to watch them. I went into my bedroom and stretched out on the bed. Why did they want to see me? What could they do? There was nothing to be done. There was nothing to talk about.

A couple of days later my mother didn't leave to go job hunting, and it wasn't my day to go to the L. A. County General Hospital. So we were in the house together. I didn't like it. I liked the place to myself. I heard her moving about the house and I stayed in my bedroom. The boils were worse than ever. I checked my airplane chart. The 1:20 p.m. flight was due. I began listening. He was late. It was 1:20 and he was still approaching. As he passed over I timed him as being three minutes late. Then I heard the doorbell ring. I heard my mother open the door.

“Emily, how are you?”

“Hello, Katy, how are you?”

It was my grandmother, now very old. I heard them talking but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I was thankful for that. They talked for five or ten minutes and then I heard them walking down the hall to my bedroom.

“I will bury all of you,” I heard my grandmother say. “Where is the boy?”

The door opened and my grandmother and mother stood there.

“Hello, Henry,” my grandmother said.

“Your grandmother is here to help you,” my mother said.

My grandmother had a large purse. She set it down on the dresser and pulled a huge silver crucifix out of it.

“Your grandmother is here to help you, Henry ...” Grandmother had more warts on her than ever before and she was fatter. She looked invincible, she looked as if she would never die. She had gotten so old that it was almost senseless for her to die.

“Henry,” said my mother, “turn over on your stomach.”

I turned over and my grandmother leaned over me. From the corner of my eye I saw her dangling the huge crucifix over me. I had decided against religion a couple of years back. If it were true, it made fools out of people, or it drew fools. And if it weren't true, the fools were all the more foolish.

But it was my grandmother and my mother. I decided to let them have their way. The crucifix swung back and forth above my back, over my boils, over me.

“God,” prayed my grandmother, “purge the devil from this poor boy's body! Just look at all those sores! They make me sick, God! Look at them! It's the devil, God, dwelling in this boy's body. Purge the devil from his body, Lord!”

“Purge the devil from his body, Lord!” said my mother.

What I need is a good doctor, I thought. What is wrong with these women? Why don't they leave me alone?

“God,” said my grandmother, “why do you allow the devil to dwell inside this body's body? Don't you see how the devil is enjoying this? Look at these sores, O Lord, I am about to vomit just looking at them! They are red and big and full!”

“Purge the devil from my boy's body!” screamed my mother.

“May God save us from this evil!” screamed my grandmother.

She took the crucifix and poked it into the center of my back, dug it in. The blood spurted out, I could feel it, at first warm, then suddenly cold. I turned over and sat up in the bed.

“What the @\$# are you doing?”

“I am making a hole for the devil to be pushed out by God!” said my grandmother.

“All right,” I said, “I want you both to get out of here, and fast! Do you understand me?”

“He is still possessed!” said my grandmother.

“GET THE @\$#ING HELL OUT OF HERE!” I screamed.

They left, shocked and disappointed, closing the door behind them.

I went into the bathroom, wadded up some toilet paper and tried to stop the bleeding. I pulled the toilet paper away and looked at it. It was soaked. I got a new batch of toilet paper and held it to my back awhile. Then I got the iodine. I made passes at my back, trying to reach the wound with the iodine. It was difficult. I finally gave up. Who ever heard of an infected back, anyhow? You either lived or died. The back was something the assholes had never figured out how to amputate.

I walked back into the bedroom and got into bed and pulled the covers to my throat. I looked up at the ceiling as I talked to myself.

All right, God, say that You are really there. You have put me in this fix. You want to test me. Suppose I test You? Suppose I say that You are not there? You’ve given me a supreme test with my parents and with these boils. I think that I have passed Your test. I am tougher than You. If You will come down here right now, I will spit into Your face, if You have a face. And do You @\$#@%? The priest never answered that question. He told us not to doubt. Doubt what? I think that You have been picking on me too much so I am asking You to come down here so I can put You to the test!

I waited. Nothing. I waited for God. I waited and waited. I believe I slept.

I never slept on my back. But when I awakened I was on my back and it surprised me. My legs were bent at the knees in front of me, making a mountain-like effect with the blankets. And as I looked at the blanket-mountain before me I saw two eyes staring at me. Only the eyes were dark, black, blank ... looking at me from underneath a hood, a black hood with a sharp tall peak, like a ku-klux-klanman. They kept staring at me, dark blank eyes, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was truly terrified. I thought, it’s God but God isn’t supposed to look like that.

I couldn’t stare it down. I couldn’t move. It just stayed there looking at me over the mound of my knees and the blanket. I wanted to get away. I wanted it to leave. It was powerful and black and threatening.

It seemed to remain there for hours, just staring at me.

Then it was gone ...I stayed in bed thinking about it.

I couldn't believe that it had been God. Dressed like that. That would be a cheap trick.

It had been an illusion, of course.

I thought about it for ten or fifteen minutes, then I got up and went to get the little brown box my grandmother had given me many years ago. Inside of it were tiny rolls of paper with quotations from the Bible. Each tiny roll was held in a cubicle of its own. One was supposed to ask a question and the little roll of paper one pulled out was supposed to answer that question. I had tried it before and found it useless. Now I tried it again. I asked the brown box, "What did that mean? What did those eyes mean?"

I pulled out a paper and unrolled it. It was a tiny stiff white piece of paper. I unrolled and read it.

GOD HAS FORSAKEN YOU.

I rolled the paper up and stuck it back into its cubicle in the brown box. I didn't believe it. I went back to bed and thought about it. It was too simple, too direct. I didn't believe it. I considered masturbating to bring me back to reality. I still didn't believe it. I got back up and started unrolling all the little papers inside the brown box. I was looking for the one that said, GOD HAS FORSAKEN YOU. I unrolled them all. None of them said that. I read them all and none of them said that. I rolled them up and put them carefully back into their cubicles in the little brown box.

Meanwhile, the boils got worse. I kept getting onto streetcar #7 and going to L. A. County General Hospital and I began to fall in love with Miss Ackerman, my nurse of the squeezings. She would never know how each stab of pain caused courage to well up in me. Despite the horror of the blood and the pus, she was always humane and kind. My love-feeling for her wasn't sexual. I just wished that she would enfold me in her starched whiteness and that together we could vanish forever from the world. But she never did that. She was too practical. She would only remind me of my next appointment.

The ultra-violet ray machine clicked off. I had been treated on both sides. I took off the goggles and began to dress. Miss Ackerman walked in.

"Not yet," she said, "keep your clothes off."

What is she going to do to me, I thought?"

Sit up on the edge of the table.”

I sat there and she began rubbing salve over my face. It was a thick buttery substance.

“The doctors have decided on a new approach. We’re going to bandage your face to effect drainage.”

“Miss Ackerman, what ever happened to that man with the big nose? The nose that kept growing?”

“Mr. Sleeth?”

“The man with the big nose.”

“That was Mr. Sleeth.”

“I don’t see him anymore. Did he get cured?”

“He’s dead.”

“You mean he died from that big nose?”

“Suicide.” Miss Ackerman continued to apply the salve.

Then I heard a man scream from the next ward, “Joe, where are you? Joe, you said you’d come back! Joe, where are you?”

The voice was loud and so sad, so agonized.

“He’s done that every afternoon this week,” said Miss Ackerman, “and Joe’s not going to come get him.”

“Can’t they help him?”

“I don’t know. They all quiet down, finally. Now take your finger and hold this pad while I bandage you. There. Yes. That’s it. Now let go. Fine.”

“Joe! Joe, you said you’d come back! Where are you, Joe?”

“Now, hold your finger on this pad. There. Hold it there. I’m going to wrap you up good! There. Now I’ll secure the dressings.”

Then she was finished.

“O.K., put on your clothes. See you the day after tomorrow. Goodbye, Henry.”

“Goodbye, Miss Ackerman.”

I got dressed, left the room and walked down the hall. There was a mirror on a cigarette machine in the lobby. I looked into the mirror. It was great. My whole head was bandaged. I was all white.

Nothing could be seen but my eyes, my mouth and my ears, and some tufts of hair sticking up at the top of my head. I was hidden. It was wonderful. I stood and lit a cigarette and glanced about the lobby. Some in-patients were sitting about reading magazines and newspapers. I felt very exceptional and a bit evil. Nobody had any idea of what had happened to me. Car crash. A fight to the death. A murder. Fire. Nobody knew.

I walked out of the lobby and out of the building and I stood on the sidewalk. I could still hear him. "Joe! Joe! Where are you, Joe!"

Joe wasn't coming. It didn't pay to trust another human being. Humans didn't have it, whatever it took.

On the streetcar ride back I sat in the back smoking cigarettes out of my bandaged head. People stared but I didn't care. There was more fear than horror in their eyes now. I hoped I could stay this way forever.

I rode to the end of the line and got off. The afternoon was going into evening and I stood on the corner of Washington Boulevard and Westview Avenue watching the people. Those few who had jobs were coming home from work. My father would soon be driving home from his fake job. I didn't have a job, I didn't go to school. I didn't do anything. I was bandaged, I was standing on the corner smoking a cigarette. I was a tough man, I was a dangerous man. I knew things. Sleeth had suicided. I wasn't going to suicide. I'd rather kill some of them. I'd take four or five of them with me. I'd show them what it meant to play around with me.

A woman walked down the street toward me. She had fine legs. First I stared right into her eyes and then I looked down at her legs, and as she passed I watched her. I drank her in. I memorized her and the seams of her silk stockings.

I never could have done that without my bandages.