

Ham on Rye, Part 9

Times were still hard. Nobody was any more surprised than I when Mears-Starbuck phoned and asked me to report to work the next Monday. I had gone all around town putting in dozens of applications. There was nothing else to do. I didn't want a job but I didn't want to live with my parents either. Mears-Starbuck must have had thousands of applications on hand. I couldn't believe they had chosen me. It was a department store with branches in many cities.

The next Monday, there I was walking to work with my lunch in a brown paper bag. The department store was only a few blocks away from my former high school.

I still didn't understand why I had been selected. After filling out the application, the interview had lasted only a few minutes. I must have given all the right answers.

First paycheck I get, I thought, I'm going to get myself a room near the downtown L.A. Public Library.

As I walked along I didn't feel so alone and I wasn't. I noticed a starving mongrel dog following me. The poor creature was terribly thin; I could see his ribs poking through his skin. Most of his fur had fallen off. What remained clung in dry, twisted patches. The dog was beaten, cowed, deserted, frightened, a victim of Homo sapiens.

I stopped and knelt, put out my hand. He backed off.

“Come here, fellow, I'm your friend ... Come on, come on ...”

He came closer. He had such sad eyes. “What have they done to you, boy?”

He came still closer, creeping along the sidewalk, trembling, wagging his tail quite rapidly. Then he leaped at me. He was large, what was left of him. His forelegs pushed me backwards and I was flat on the sidewalk and he was licking my face, mouth, ears, forehead, everywhere. I pushed him off, got up and wiped my face.

“Easy now! You need something to eat! FOOD!”

I reached into my bag and took out a sandwich. I unwrapped it and broke off a portion.

“Some for you and some for me, old boy!”

I put his part of the sandwich on the sidewalk. He came up, sniffed at it, then walked off, slinking, staring back at me over his shoulder as he walked down the street away from me.

“Hey, wait, buddy! That was peanut butter! Come here, have some bologna! Hey, boy, come here! Come back!”

The dog approached again, cautiously. I found the bologna sandwich, ripped off a chunk, wiped the cheap watery mustard off, then placed it on the sidewalk.

The dog walked up to the bit of sandwich, put his nose to it, sniffed, then turned and walked off. This time he didn't look back. He accelerated down the street.

No wonder I had been depressed all my life. I wasn't getting proper nourishment.

I walked on toward the department store. It was the same street I had walked along to go to high school.

I arrived. I found the employees' entrance, pushed the door open and walked in. I went from bright sunlight into semi-darkness. As my eyes adjusted I could make out a man standing several feet away in front of me. Half of his left ear had been sliced off at some point in the past. He was a tall, very thin man with needlepoint grey pupils centered in otherwise colorless eyes. A very tall thin man, yet right above his belt, sticking out over his belt—suddenly—was a sad and hideous and strange pot belly. All his fat had settled there while the remainder of him had wasted away.

“I'm Superintendent Ferris,” he said. “I presume that you're Mr. Chinaski?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You're five minutes late.”

“I was delayed by ... Well, I stopped to try to feed a starving dog,” I grinned.

“That's one of the lousiest excuses I've ever heard and I've been here thirty-five years. Couldn't you come up with a better one than that?”

“I'm just starting, Mr. Ferris.”

“And you're almost finished. Now,” he pointed, “the timeclock is over there and the card rack is over there. Find your card and punch in.”

I found my card. Henry Chinaski, employee #68754. Then I walked up to the timeclock but I didn't know what to do.

Ferris walked over and stood behind me, staring at the timeclock.

“You're now six minutes late. When you are ten minutes late we dock you an hour.”

“I guess it's better to be an hour late.”

“Don’t be funny. If I want a comedian I listen to Jack Benny. If you’re an hour late you’re docked your whole god-damned job.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know how to use a timeclock. I mean, how do I punch in?”

Ferris grabbed the card out of my hand. He pointed at it.

“See this slot?”

“Yeah.”

“What?”

“I mean, ‘yes.’”

“O. K., that slot is for the first day of the week. Today.”

“Ah.”

“You slip the timecard into here like this ...” He slipped it in, then pulled it out.

“Then when your timecard is in there you hit this lever.” Ferris hit the lever but the timecard wasn’t in there.

“I understand. Let’s begin.”

“No, wait.”

He held the timecard in front of me.

“Now, when you punch out for lunch, you hit this slot.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Then when you punch back in, you hit the next slot. Lunch is thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes, I’ve got it.”

“Now, when you punch out, you hit the last slot. That’s four punches a day. Then you go home, or to your room or wherever, sleep, come back and hit it four more times each working day until you get fired, quit, die or retire.”

“I’ve got it.”

“And I want you to know that you’ve delayed my indoctrination speech to our new employees, of which you, at the moment, are one. I am in charge here. My word is law and your wishes mean nothing. If I dislike anything about you—the way you tie your shoes, comb your hair or fart, you’re back on the streets, get it?”

“Yes, sir!”

A young girl came flouncing in, running on her high heels, long brown hair flowing behind her. She was dressed in a tight red dress. Her lips were large and expressive with excessive lipstick. She theatrically pulled her card out of the rack, punched in, and breathing with minor excitement, she put her card back in the rack.

She glanced over at Ferris. “Hi, Eddie!”

“Hi, Diana!”

Diana was obviously a salesgirl. Ferris walked over to her. They stood talking. I couldn’t hear the conversation but I could hear them laughing. Then they broke off. Diana walked over and waited for the elevator to take her to her work. Ferris walked back toward me holding my timecard.

“I’ll punch in now, Mr. Ferris,” I told him.

“I’ll do it for you. I want to start you out right.”

Ferris inserted my timecard into the clock and stood there. He waited. I heard the clock tick, then he hit it. He put my card in the rack.

“How late was I, Mr. Ferris?”

“Ten minutes. Now follow me.” I followed along behind him. I saw the group waiting.

Four men and three women. They were all old. They seemed to have salivary problems. Little clumps of spittle had formed at the corners of their mouths; the spittle had dried and turned white and then been coated by new wet spittle. Some of them were too thin, others too fat. Some were near-sighted; others trembled. One old fellow in a brightly colored shirt had a hump on his back. They all smiled and coughed, puffing at cigarettes. Then I got it. The message.

Mears-Starbuck was looking for stayers. The company didn’t care for employee turnover (although these new recruits obviously weren’t going anywhere but to the grave—until then they’d remain grateful and loyal employees). And I had been chosen to work alongside of them. The lady in the employment office had evaluated me as belonging with this pathetic group of losers.

What would the guys in high school think if they saw me? Me, one of the toughest guys in the graduating class.

I walked over and stood with my group. Ferris sat on a table facing us. A shaft of light fell upon him from an overhead transom. He inhaled his cigarette and smiled at us.

“Welcome to Mears-Starbuck ...”

Then he seemed to fall into a reverie. Perhaps he was thinking about when he had first joined the department store thirty-five years ago. He blew a few smoke rings and watched them rise into the air. His half-sliced ear looked impressive in the light from above.

The guy next to me, a little pretzel of a man, knifed his sharp little elbow into my side. He was one of those individuals whose glasses always seem ready to fall off. He was uglier than I was.

“Hi!” he whispered. “I’m Mewks. Odell Mewks.”

“Hello, Mewks.”

“Listen, kid, after work let’s you and me make the bars. Maybe we can pick up some girls.”

“I can’t, Mewks.”

“Afraid of girls?”

“It’s my brother, he’s sick. I’ve got to watch over him.”

“Sick?”

“Worse. Cancer. He has to piss through a tube into a bottle strapped to his leg.”

Then Ferris began again. “Your starting salary is forty-four-and-a-half cents an hour. We are non-union here. Management believes that what is fair for the company is fair for you. We are like a family, dedicated to serve and to profit. You will each receive a ten-percent discount on all merchandise you purchase from Mears-Starbuck ...”

“OH, BOY!” Mewks said in a loud voice.

“Yes, Mr. Mewks, it’s a good deal. You take care of us, we’ll take care of you.”

I could stay with Mears-Starbuck for forty-seven years, I thought. I could live with a crazy girlfriend, get my left ear sliced off and maybe inherit Ferris’ job when he retired.

Ferris talked about which holidays we could look forward to and then the speech was over. We were issued our smocks and our lockers and then we were directed to the underground storage facilities.

Ferris worked down there too. He manned the phones. Whenever he answered the phone he would hold it to his sliced left ear with his left hand and clamp his right hand under his left armpit. “Yes? Yes? Yes. Coming right up!”

“Chinaski!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Lingerie department ...”

Then he would pick up the order pad, list the items needed and how many of each. He never did this while on the phone, always afterwards.

“Locate these items, deliver them to the lingerie department, obtain a signature and return.” His speech never varied.

My first delivery *was* to lingerie. I located the items, placed them in my little green cart with its four rubber wheels and pushed it toward the elevator. The elevator was at an upper floor and I pressed the button and waited. After some time I could see the bottom of the elevator as it came down. It was very slow. Then it was at basement level. The doors opened and an albino with one eye stood at the controls. Jesus.

He looked at me.

“New guy, huh?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“What do you think of Ferris?”

“I think he’s a great guy.”

They probably lived together in the same room and took turns manning the hotplate. “I can’t take you up.”

“Why not?”

“I gotta take a \$#@%.” He left the elevator and walked off.

There I stood in my smock. This was the way things usually worked. You were a governor or a garbageman, you were a tight-rope walker or a bank robber, you were a dentist or a fruit picker, you were this or you were that. You wanted to do a good job. You manned your station and then you stood and waited for some #\$\$*%. I stood there in my smock next to my green cart while the elevator man took a \$#@%.

It came to me then, clearly, why the rich, golden boys and girls were always laughing. They knew.

The albino returned.

“It was great. I feel thirty pounds lighter.”

“Good. Can we go now?”

He closed the doors and we rose to the sales floor. He opened the doors.

“Good luck,” said the albino.

I pushed my green cart down through the aisles looking for the lingerie department, a Miss Meadows.

Miss Meadows was waiting. She was slender and classy-looking. She looked like a model. Her arms were folded. As I approached her I noticed her eyes. They were an emerald green, there was depth, a knowledge there. I should know somebody like that. Such eyes, such class. I stopped my cart in front of her counter.

“Hello, Miss Meadows,” I smiled. “Where the hell have you been?” she asked. “It just took this long.”

“Do you realize I have customers waiting? Do you realize that I’m attempting to run an efficient department here?”

The salesclerks got ten cents an hour more than we did, plus commissions. I was to discover that they never spoke to us in a friendly way. Male or female, the clerks were the same. They took any familiarity as an affront.

“I’ve got a good mind to phone Mr. Ferris.”

“I’ll do better next time, Miss Meadows.”

I placed the goods on her counter and then handed her the form to sign. She scratched her signature furiously on the paper, then instead of handing it back to me she threw it into my green cart.

“Christ, I don’t know where they find people like you!”

I pushed my cart over to the elevator, hit the button and waited. The doors opened and I rolled on in.

“How’d it go?” the albino asked me.

“I feel thirty pounds heavier,” I told him.

He grinned, the doors closed and we descended.

Over dinner that night my mother said, “Henry, I’m so proud of you that you have a job!” I didn’t answer.

My father said, “Well, aren’t you glad to have a job?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah? Is that all you can say? Do you realize how many men are unemployed in this nation now?”

“Plenty, I guess.”

“Then you should be grateful.”

“Look, can’t we just eat our food?”

“You should be grateful for your food, too. Do you know how much this meal cost?”

I shoved my plate away. “\$#@%! I can’t eat this stuff!” I got up and walked to my bedroom.

“I’ve got a good mind to come back there and teach you what is what!”

I stopped. “I’ll be waiting, old man.”

Then I walked away. I went in and waited. But I knew he wasn’t coming. I set the alarm to get ready for Mears-Starbuck. It was only 7:30 p.m. but I undressed and went to bed. I switched off the light and was in the dark. There was nothing else to do, nowhere to go. My parents would soon be in bed with the lights out.

My father liked the slogan, “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.”

But it hadn’t done any of that for him. I decided that I might try to reverse the process.

I couldn’t sleep.

I wallowed there in the dark, waiting for something.

The first three or four days at Mears-Starbuck were identical. In fact, similarity was a very dependable thing at Mears-Starbuck. The caste system was an accepted fact. There wasn’t a single salesclerk who spoke to a stockclerk outside of a perfunctory word or two. And it affected me. I thought about it as I pushed my cart about. Was it possible that the salesclerks were more intelligent than the stockclerks? They certainly dressed better. It bothered me that they assumed that their station meant so much. Perhaps if I had been a salesclerk I would have felt the same way. I didn’t much care for the other stockclerks. Or the salesclerks.

Now, I thought, pushing my cart along, I have this job. Is this to be it? No wonder men robbed banks. There were too many demeaning jobs. Why the hell wasn’t I a superior court judge or a concert pianist? Because it took training and training cost money. But I didn’t want to be anything anyhow. And I was certainly succeeding.

I pushed my cart to the elevator and hit the button.

Women wanted men who made money, women wanted men of mark. How many classy women were living with skid row bums? Well, I didn’t want a woman anyhow. Not to live with. How could men live with women? What did it mean? What I wanted was a cave in Colorado with three-years’ worth of foodstuffs and drink. I’d wipe my ass with sand. Anything, anything to stop drowning in this dull, trivial and cowardly existence.

The elevator came up. The albino was still at the controls. “Hey, I hear you and Mewks made the bars last night!”

Ferris was waiting for me. “Where the hell you been?”

“Home gardening.”

“What did you do, fertilize the fuchsias?”

“Yeah, I drop one turd in each pot.”

“Listen, Chinaski ...”

“Yes?”

“The punchlines around here belong to me. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Well, get this. I’ve got an order here for Men’s Wear.” He handed me the order slip.

“Locate these items, deliver them, obtain a signature and return.”

Men’s Wear was run by Mr. Justin Phillips, Jr. He was well-bred, he was polite, around twenty-two. He stood very straight, had dark hair, dark eyes, brooding lips. There was an unfortunate absence of cheekbones but it was hardly noticeable. He was pale and wore dark clothing with beautifully starched shirts. The salesgirls loved him. He was sensitive, intelligent, clever. He was also just a bit nasty as if some forebear had passed down that right to him. He had only broken with tradition once to speak to me. “It’s a shame, isn’t it, those rather ugly scars on your face?”

As I rolled my cart up to Men’s Wear, Justin Phillips was standing very straight, head tilted a bit, staring, as he did most of the time, looking off and up as if he was seeing things we were not. He saw things out there. Maybe I just didn’t recognize breeding when I saw it. He certainly appeared to be above his surroundings. It was a good trick if you could do it and get paid at the same time. Maybe that’s what management and the salesgirls liked. Here was a man truly too good for what he was doing, but he was doing it anyhow.

I rolled up. “Here’s your order, Mr. Phillips.”

He appeared not to notice me, which hurt in a sense, and was a good thing in another. I stacked the goods on the counter as he stared off into space, just above the elevator door.

Then I heard golden laughter and I looked. It was a gang of guys who had graduated with me from Chelsey High. They were trying on sweaters, hiking shorts, various items. I knew them by sight only, as we had never spoken during our four years of high school. The leader was Jimmy Newhall. He had been the halfback on our football team, undefeated for three years. His hair was a beautiful yellow, the sun always seemed to be highlighting parts of it, the sun or the lights in the schoolroom. He had a thick, powerful neck and above it sat the face of a perfect boy sculpted by some master sculptor.

Everything was exactly as it should be: nose, forehead, chin, the works. And the body likewise, perfectly formed. The others with Newhall were not exactly as perfect as he was, but they were close. They stood around and tried on sweaters and laughed, waiting to go to U.S.C. or Stanford.

Justin Phillips signed my receipt. I was on my way back to the elevator when I heard a voice:

“HEY, SKI! SKI, YOU LOOK GREAT IN YOUR LITTLE OUTFIT!”

I stopped, turned, gave them a casual wave of the left hand.

“Look at him! Toughest guy in town since Tommy Dorsey!”

“Makes Gable look like a toilet plunger.”

I left my wagon and walked back. I didn't know what I was going to do. I stood there and looked at them. I didn't like them, never had. They might look glorious to others but not to me. There was something about their bodies that was like a woman's body. They were soft, they had never faced any fire. They were beautiful nothings. They made me sick. I hated them. They were part of the nightmare that always haunted me in one form or another.

Jimmy Newhall smiled at me. “Hey, stockboy, how come you never tried out for the team?”

“It wasn't what I wanted.”

“No guts, eh?”

“You know where the parking lot on the roof is?”

“Sure.”

“See you there ...”

They strolled out toward the parking lot as I took my smock off and threw it into the cart. Justin Phillips, Jr. smiled at me, “My dear boy, you are going to get your ass whipped.”

Jimmy Newhall was waiting, surrounded by his buddies.

“Hey, look, the stockboy!”

“You think he's wearing ladies' underwear?”

Newhall was standing in the sun. He had his shirt off and his undershirt too. He had his gut sucked in and his chest pushed out. He looked good. What the hell had I gotten into? I felt my underlip trembling. Up there on the roof, I felt fear. I looked at Newhall, the golden sun highlighting his golden

hair. I had watched him many times on the football field. I had seen him break off many 50 and 60 yard runs while I rooted for the other team.

Now we stood looking at each other. I left my shirt on. We kept standing. I kept standing.

Newhall finally said, "O.K., I'm going to take you now." He started to move forward. Just then a little old lady dressed in black came by with many packages. She had on a tiny green felt hat.

"Hello, boys!" she said.

"Hello, ma'am."

"Lovely day ..."

The little old lady opened her car door and loaded in the packages. Then she turned to Jimmy Newhall.

"Oh, what a fine body you have, my boy! I'll bet you could be Tarzan of the Apes!"

"No, ma'am," I said. "Pardon me, but he's the ape and those with him are his tribe."

"Oh," she said. She got into her car, started it and we waited as she backed out and drove off.

"O.K., Chinaski," said Newhall, "all through school you were famous for your sneer and your big god-damned mouth. And now I'm going to put the cure on you!"

Newhall bounded forward. He was ready. I wasn't quite ready. All I saw was a backdrop of blue sky and a flash of body and fists. He was quicker than an ape, and bigger. I couldn't seem to throw a punch, I only felt his fists and they were rock hard. Squinting through punched eyes I could see his fists, swinging, landing, my god, he had power, it seemed endless and there was no place to go. I began to think, maybe you are a sissy, maybe you should be, maybe you should quit.

But as he continued to punch, my fear vanished. I felt only astonishment at his strength and energy. Where did he get it? A swine like him? He was loaded. I couldn't see anymore—my eyes were blinded by flashes of yellow and green light, purple light—then a terrific shot of RED ... I felt myself going down.

Is this the way it happens?

I fell to one knee. I heard an airplane passing overhead. I wished I was on it. I felt something run over my mouth and chin ... it was warm blood running from my nose.

"Let him go, Jimmy, he's finished ..."

I looked at Newhall. "Your mother @\$%#" I told him.

"I'LL KILL YOU!"

Newhall rushed me before I could quite get up. He had me by the throat and we rolled over and over, under a Dodge. I heard his head hit something. I didn't know what it hit but I heard the sound. It happened quite quickly and the others were not as aware of it as I was.

I got up and then Newhall got up.

"I'm going to kill you," he said.

Newhall windmilled in. This time it wasn't nearly so bad. He punched with the same fury, but something was missing. He was weaker. When he hit me I didn't see flashes of color, I could see the sky, the parked cars, the faces of his friends, and him. I had always been a slow starter. Newhall was still trying but he was definitely weaker. And I had my small hands, I was blessed with small hands, lousy weapons.

What a weary time those years were—to have the desire and the need to live but not the ability.

I dug a hard right to his belly and I heard him gasp so I grabbed him behind the neck with my left and dug another right to his belly. Then I pushed him off and cracked him with a one-two, right into that sculpted face. I saw his eyes and it was great. I was bringing something to him that he had never felt before. He was terrified. Terrified because he didn't know how to handle defeat. I decided to finish him slowly.

Then someone slugged me on the back of the head. It was a good hard shot. I turned and looked.

It was his red-headed friend, Cal Evans.

I yelled, pointing at him. "Stay the @%\$# away from me! I'll take all of you one at a time! As soon as I'm done with this guy, you're next!"

Ferris of the sliced ear was waiting.

"You just don't go around beating the \$#@% out of our customers.

"It was only one."

"We have no way of knowing when you might start in on the others."

"This guy baited me."

"We don't give a damn about that. That's what happens. All we know is that you were out of line."

"How about my check?"

"It'll be mailed."

“O.K., see you ...”

“Wait, I’ll need your locker key.”

I got out my key chain which only had one other key on it, pulled off the locker key and handed it to Ferris.

Then I walked to the employees’ door, pulled it open. It was a heavy steel door which worked awkwardly. As it opened, letting in the daylight, I turned and gave Ferris a small wave. He didn’t respond. He just looked straight at me. Then the door closed on him. I liked him, somehow.

“So you couldn’t hold a job for a week?”

We were eating meatballs and spaghetti. My problems were always discussed at dinner time. Dinner time was almost always an unhappy time.

I didn’t answer my father’s question.

“What happened? Why did they can your ass?”

I didn’t answer.

“Henry, answer your father when he speaks to you!” my mother said.

“He couldn’t hack it, that’s all!”

“Look at his face,” said my mother, “it’s all bruised and cut. Did your boss beat you up, Henry?”

“No, Mother ...”

“Why don’t you eat, Henry? You never seem to be hungry.”

“He can’t eat,” said my father, “he can’t work, he can’t do anything, he’s not worth a @%\$#!”

“You shouldn’t talk that way at the dinner table, Daddy,” my mother told him.

“Well, it’s true!” My father had an immense ball of spaghetti rolled on his fork. He jammed it into his mouth and started chewing and while chewing he speared a large meatball and plunged it into his mouth, then worked in a piece of French bread.

I remembered what Ivan had said in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “Who doesn’t want to kill the father?”