

Two excerpts from Ham on Rye by Charles Bukowski

Excerpt one. Chapter 19. Pages 82-84

One day Mrs. Fretag gave us an assignment.

“Our distinguished President, President Herbert Hoover, is going to visit Los Angeles this Saturday to speak. I want all of you to go hear our President. And I want you to write an essay about the experience and about what you think of President Hoover’s speech.”

Saturday? There was no way I could go. I had to mow the lawn. I had to get the hairs. (I could never get all the hairs.) Almost every Saturday I got a beating with the razor strop because my father found a hair. (I also got stropped during the week, once or twice, for other things I failed to do or didn’t do right.) There was no way I could tell my father that I had to go see President Hoover.

So I didn’t go. That Sunday I took some paper and sat down to write about how I had seen the President. His open car, trailing flowing streamers, had entered the football stadium. One car, full of secret service agents, went ahead and two cars followed close behind. The agents were brave men with guns to protect our President. The crowd rose as the President’s car entered the arena. There had never been anything like it before. It was the President. It was him. He waved. We cheered. A band played. Seagulls circled overhead as if they too knew it was the President. And there were skywriting airplanes too. They wrote words in the sky like “Prosperity is just around the corner.” The President stood up in his car, and just as he did the clouds parted and the light from the sun fell across his face. It was almost as if God knew too. Then the cars stopped and our great President, surrounded by secret service agents, walked to the speaker’s platform. As he stood behind the microphone a bird flew down from the sky and landed on the speaker’s platform near him. The President waved to the bird and laughed and we all laughed with him. Then he began to speak and the people listened. I couldn’t quite hear the speech because I was sitting too near a popcorn machine which made a lot of noise popping the kernels, but I think I heard him say that the problems in Manchuria were not serious, and that at home everything was going to be all right, we shouldn’t worry, all we had to do was to believe in America. There would be enough jobs for everybody. There would be enough dentists with enough teeth to pull, enough fires and enough firemen to put them out. Mills and factories would open again. Our friends in South America would pay their debts. Soon we would all sleep peacefully, our stomachs and our hearts full. God and our great country would surround us with love and protect us from evil, from the socialists, awaken us from our national nightmare, forever...

The President listened to the applause, waved, then went back to his car, got in, and was driven off followed by carloads of secret service agents as the sun began to sink, the afternoon turning into evening, red and gold and wonderful. We had seen and heard President Herbert Hoover.

I turned in my essay on Monday. On Tuesday Mrs. Fretag faced the class.

“I’ve read all your essays about our distinguished President’s visit to Los Angeles. I was there. Some of you, I noticed, could not attend for one reason or another. For those of you who could not attend, I would like to read this essay by Henry Chinaski.”

The class was terribly silent. I was the most unpopular member of the class by far. It was like a knife slicing through all their hearts.

"This is very creative," said Mrs. Fretag, and she began to read my essay. The words sounded good to me. Everybody was listening. My words filled the room, from blackboard to blackboard, they hit the ceiling and bounced off, they covered Mrs. Fretag's shoes and piled up on the floor. Some of the prettiest girls in the class began to sneak glances at me. All the tough guys were pissed. Their essays hadn't been worth shit. I drank in my words like a thirsty man. I even began to believe them. I saw Juan sitting there like I'd punched him in the face. I stretched out my legs and leaned back. All too soon it was over.

"Upon this grand note," said Mrs. Fretag, "I hereby dismiss the class..."

They got up and began packing out.

"Not you, Henry," said Mrs. Fretag.

I sat in my chair and Mrs. Fretag stood there looking at me. Then she said, "Henry, were you there?"

I sat there trying to think of an answer. I couldn't. I said, "No, I wasn't there."

She smiled. "That makes it all the more remarkable."

"Yes, ma'am..."

"You can leave, Henry."

I got up and walked out. I began my walk home. So, that's what they wanted: lies. Beautiful lies. That's what they needed. People were fools. It was going to be easy for me. I looked around. Juan and his buddy were not following me. Things were looking up.

Excerpt two, Chapter 51, Pages 228-235

I only met one student at City College that I liked, Robert Becker. He wanted to be a writer. "I'm going to learn everything there is to learn about writing. It will be like taking a car apart and putting it back together again."

"Sounds like work," I said.

"I'm going to do it."

Becker was an inch or so shorter than I was but he was stocky, he was powerfully built, with big shoulders and arms.

"I had a childhood disease," he told me. "I had to lay in bed one time for a year squeezing two tennis balls, one in each hand. Just from doing that, I got to be like this." He had a job as a messenger boy at night and was putting himself through college.

"How'd you get your job?"

"I knew a guy who knew a guy."

"I'll bet I can kick your ass."

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm only interested in writing."

We were sitting in an alcove overlooking the lawn. Two guys were staring at me. Then one of them spoke.

"Hey," he asked me, "do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Well, you used to be a sissy in grammar school, I remember you. And now you're a tough guy. What happened?"

"I don't know."

"Are you a cynic?"

"Probably."

"Are you happy being a cynic?"

"Yes."

"Then you're not a cynic because cynics aren't happy!"

The two guys did a little vaudeville handshake act and ran off, laughing.

"They made you look bad," said Becker.

"No, they were trying too hard."

"Are you a cynic?"

"I'm unhappy. If I was a cynic it would probably make me feel better."

We hopped down from the alcove. Classes were over. Becker wanted to put his books in his locker. We walked there and he dumped them in. He handed me five or six sheets of paper.

"Here read this. It's a short story."

We walked down to my locker. I opened it and handed him a paper bag.

"Take a hit . . ."

It was a bottle of port.

Becker took a hit, then I took one.

"You always keep one of these in your locker?" he asked.

"I try to."

"Listen, tonight's my night off. Why don't you come meet some of my friends?"

"People don't do me much good."

"These are different people."

"Yeah? Where at? Your place?"

"No. Here, I'll write down the address . . ." He began writing on a piece of paper.

"Listen, Becker, what do these people do?"

"Drink," said Becker.

I put the slip into my pocket . . .

That night after dinner I read Becker's short story. It was good and I was jealous. It was about riding his bike at night and then delivering a telegram to a beautiful woman. The writing was objective and clear, there was a gentle decency about it. Becker claimed Thomas Wolfe as an influence but he didn't wail and ham it up like Wolfe did. The emotion was there but it wasn't spelled out in neon. Becker could write, he could write better than I could.

My parents had gotten me a typewriter and I had tried some short stories but they had come out very bitter and ragged. Not that that was so bad but the stories seemed to beg, they didn't have their own vitality. My stories were darker than Becker's, stranger, but they didn't work. Well, one or two of them had worked—for me—but it was more or less as if they had fallen into place instead of being guided there. Becker was clearly better. Maybe I'd try painting.

I waited until my parents were asleep. My father always snored loudly. When I heard him I opened the bedroom screen and slid out over the berry bush. That put me into the neighbor's driveway and I walked slowly in the dark. Then I walked up Longwood to 21st Street, took a right, then went up the hill along Westview to where the "W" car ended its route. I dropped my token in and walked to the rear of the car, sat down and lit a cigarette. If Becker's friends were anywhere as good as Becker's short story it was going to be one hell of a night.

Becker was already there by the time I found the Beacon Street address. His friends were in the breakfast nook. I was introduced. There was Harry, there was Lana, there was Gobbles, there was Stinky, there was Marshbird, there was Ellis, there was Dogface and finally there was The Ripper. They all sat around a large breakfast table. Harry had a legitimate job somewhere, he and Becker were the only ones employed. Lana was Harry's wife, Gobbles their baby was sitting in a highchair. Lana was the only woman there. When we were introduced she had looked right at me and smiled. They were all young, thin, and puffed at rolled cigarettes.

"Becker told us about you," said Harry. "He says you're a writer."

"I've got a typewriter."

"You gonna write about us?" asked Stinky.

"I'd rather drink."

"Fine. We're going to have a drinking contest. Got any mon-ey?" Stinky asked.

"Two dollars . . ."

"O.K., the ante is two dollars. Everybody up!" Harry said.

That made eighteen dollars. The money looked good laying there. A bottle appeared and then shot glasses.

"Becker told us you think you're a tough guy. Are you a tough guy?"

"Yeah."

"Well, we're gonna see . . ."

The kitchen light was very bright. It was straight whiskey. A dark yellow whiskey. Harry poured the drinks. Such beauty. My mouth, my throat, couldn't wait. The radio was on. Oh, Johnny, oh Johnny, how you can love! somebody sang.

"Down the hatch!" said Harry.

There was no way I could lose. I could drink for days. I had never had enough to drink.

Gobbles had a tiny shot glass of his own. As we raised ours and drank them, he raised his and drank. Everybody thought it was funny. I didn't think it was so funny for a baby to drink but I didn't say anything.

Harry poured another round.

"You read my short story, Hank?" Becker asked.

"Yeah."

"How'd you like it?"

"It was good. You're ready now. All you need is some luck."

"Down the hatch!" said Harry.

The second round was no problem, we all got it down, including Lana.

Harry looked at me. "You like to duke it, Hank?"

"No. "

"Well, in case you do, we got Dogface here."

Dogface was twice my size. It was so wearisome being in the world. Every time you looked around there was some guy ready to take you on without even inhaling. I looked at Dogface. "Hi, buddy!"

"Buddy, my ass," he said. "Just get your next drink down."

Harry poured them all around. He skipped Gobbles in the highchair, though, which I appreciated. All right, we raised them, we all got that round down. Then Lana dropped out.

"Somebody's got to clean up this mess and get Harry ready for work in the morning," she said.

The next round was poured. Just as it was the door banged open and a large good-looking kid of around 22 came running into the room. "Shit, Harry," he said, "hide me! I just held up a fucking gas station! "

"My car's in the garage," Harry said. "Get down on the floor in the back seat and stay there!"

We drank up. The next round was poured. A new bottle appeared. The eighteen dollars was still in the center of the table. We were still all hanging in there except Lana. It was going to take plenty of whiskey to do us in.

"Hey," I asked Harry, "aren't Vie going to run out of drinks?"

"Show him, Lana . . ."

Lana pulled open some upper cupboard doors. I could see bottles and bottles of whiskey lined up, all the same brand. It looked like the loot from a truck hijack and it probably was. And these were the gang members: Harry, Lana, Stinky, Marshbird, Ellis, Dogface and The Ripper, maybe Becker, and most likely the young guy now on the floor in the back seat of Harry's car. I felt honored to be drinking with such an active part of the population of Los Angeles. Becker not only knew how to v. rite, Becker knew his people. I would dedicate my first novel to Robert Becker. And it would be a better novel than of Time and the River.

Harry kept pouring the rounds and we kept drinking them down. The kitchen was blue with cigarette smoke.

Marshbird dropped out first. He had a very large nose, he just shook his head, no more, no more, and all you could see was this long nose waving "no" in the blue smoke.

Ellis was the next to drop out. He had a lot of hair on his chest but evidently not much on his balls.

Dogface was next. He just jumped up and ran to the crapper and puked. Listening to him Harry got the same idea and leaped up and puked in the sink.

That left me, Becker, Stinky and The Ripper. Becker quit next. He just folded his arms on the table, put his head down in his arms and that was it.

"The night's so young," I said. "I usually drink until the sun comes up."

"Yeah," said The Ripper, "you shit in a basket too!"

"Yeah, and it's shaped like your head."

The Ripper stood up. "You son-of-a-bitch, I'll bust your ass!"

He swung at me from across the table, missed and knocked over the bottle. Lana got a rag and mopped it up. Harry opened a bottle.

"Sit down, Rip, or you forfeit your bet," Harry said.

Harry poured a new round. We drank them down.

The Ripper stood up, walked to the rear door, opened it and looked out into the night.

"Hey, Rip, what the hell you doing?" Stinky asked.

"I'm checking to see if there's a full moon."

"Well, is there?"

There was no answer. We heard him fall through the door, down the steps and into the bushes. We left him there.

That left me and Stinky.

"I've never seen anybody take Stinky yet," said Harry.

Lana had just put Gobbles to bed. she walked back into the kitchen.

"Jesus, there are dead bodies all over the place."

"Pour'em, Harry," I said.

Harry filled Stinky's glass, then mine. I knew there was no way I could get that drink down. I did the only thing I could do. I pretended it was easy. I grabbed the shot glass and belted it down. Stinky just stared at me. "I'll be right back. I gotta go to the crapper. "

We sat and waited.

"Stinky's a nice guy," I said. "You shouldn't call him Stinky. How'd he get that name?"

"I dunno," said Harry, "somebody just laid it on him."

"That guy in the back of your car. He ever going to come out?"

"Not till morning."

We sat and waited. "I think," said Harry, "we better take a look."

We opened the bathroom door. Stinky didn't appear to be in there. Then we saw him. He had fallen into the bathtub. His feet stuck up over the edge. His eyes were closed, he was down in there, and out. We walked back to the table. "The money's yours," said Harry.

"How about letting me pay for some of those bottles of whiskey?"

"Forget it."

"You mean it?"

"Yes, of course."

I picked up the money and put it in my right front pocket. Then I looked at Stinky's drink.

"No use wasting this," I said.

"You mean you're going to drink that?" asked Lana.

"Why not? One for the road . . ."

I gulped it down.

"O.K., see you guys, it's been great!"

"Goodnight, Hank . . ."

I walked out the back door, stepping over The Ripper's body. I found a back alley and took a left. I walked along and I saw a green Chevy sedan. I staggered a bit as I approached it. I grabbed the rear door handle to steady myself. The god-damned door was unlocked and it swung open, knocking me sideways. I fell hard, skinning my left elbow on the pavement. There was a full moon. The whiskey had hit me all at once. I felt as if I couldn't get up. I had to get up. I was supposed to be a tough guy. I rose, fell against the half-open door, grabbed at it, held it. Then I had the inside handle and was steadying myself. I got myself into the back seat and then I just sat there. I sat there for some time. Then I started to puke. It really came. It came and it came, it covered the rear floorboard. Then I sat for a while. Then I managed to get out of the car. I didn't feel as dizzy. I took out my handkerchief and wiped the vomit off my pant legs and off of my shoes as best I could. I closed the car door and walked on down the alley. I had to find the "W" streetcar. I would find it.

I did. I rode it in. I made it down Westview Street, walked down 21st Street, turned south down Longwood Avenue to 2 122. I walked up the neighbor's driveway, found the berry bush, crawled over it, through the open screen and into my bedroom. I undressed and went to bed. I must have consumed over a quart of whiskey. My father was still snoring, just as he had been when I had left, only at the moment it was louder and uglier. I slept anyhow.

As usual I approached Mr. Hamilton's English class thirty minutes late. It was 7:30 a.m. I stood outside the door and listened. They were at Gilbert and Sullivan again. And it was still all about going to the sea and the Queen's Navy. Hamilton couldn't get enough of that. In high school I'd had an English teacher and it had been Poe, Poe, Edgar Allan Poe.

I opened the door. Hamilton went over and lifted the needle from the record. Then he announced to the class, "When Mr. Chinaski arrives we always know that it is 7:30 a.m. Mr. Chinaski is always on time. The only problem being that it is the wrong time."

He paused, glancing at the faces in his class. He was very, very dignified. Then he looked at me.

"Mr. Chinaski, whether you arrive at 7:30 a.m. or whether you arrive at all will not matter. I am assigning you a 'D' for English 1."

"A 'D,' Mr. Hamilton?" I asked, flashing my famous sneer. "Why not an 'F'?"

"Because 'F' at times, equates with 'Fuck.' And I don't think you're worth a 'Fuck.'"

The class cheered and roared and stomped and stamped. I turned around, walked out, closed the door behind me. I walked down the hallway, still hearing them going at it in there.