

INTRODUCTION

by Roddy Doyle

‘This is presented as a work of fiction and dedicated to nobody.’ These are the first words I ever read by Charles Bukowski. I’d just picked up a second-hand copy of *Post Office*, his first novel. I’d never heard of the man, and the cover, a bad drawing of a postman, wasn’t promising. But the words on that empty dedication page had grabbed me. ‘Presented as a work of fiction’ suggested that there was more than story-telling going on inside, that there was real living behind the disclaimer, and ‘dedicated to nobody’ yelled anger, frankness, desolation and a sense of humour that was right down my alley. I forked out the 50p and started it on the bus home.

‘It began as a mistake.’

That was the first sentence, and paragraph. It was plain, yet intriguing, a good start to a crime novel perhaps, or a story of love gone wrong. I liked it, and read on.

‘It was Christmas season and I learned from the drunk up the hill, who did the trick every Christmas, that they would hire damned near anybody, and so I went and the next thing I knew I had this leather sack on my back and was hiking around at my leisure. What a job, I thought.’

What writing, *I* thought. It wasn’t just the words that made

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this a tough, real world. It was the awkwardness of the writing, its closeness to speech. ‘. . . and so I went and the next thing I knew I had this leather sack on my back.’ So you went *where*? And what happened then? And *then*? It was the absence of this information that appealed to me. It reminded me of kids telling me about a video, charging through the plot of a ninety-minute film in less than thirty seconds; arms, head and shoulders supplying the action and special effects. It had the same rush, the same fight for attention. It was the men I’d listened to when I’d worked as a sweeper for Westminster Council, every lunch-time in the depot canteen. Men from Scotland, Galway, Jamaica, men who lived in hostels, council flats or nowhere, who wore their uniforms to and from work, who stood up in the canteen to describe last night’s sex, who took their brown envelopes on pay-day and never came back. The book’s narrator, Hank Chinaski, was one of these men. The city, Los Angeles, was different but the world was the same. Bukowski’s writing was inarticulate, but deliberately so. Each word clung tight to the next; there was no room for any more. It was a tightly choreographed clumsiness. And it was great.

Fifteen or more years later, *Post Office* still seems great. Published first in 1971 when Bukowski was fifty-one, it is a book about work, ‘the sweat dripping, the hangover, the impossibility of the schedule’. It is ugly – very, very ugly in places – and hilarious and more genuinely shocking than it seemed back then. The writing is relentless in its refusal to relax or sentimentalise. The boredom, pain and stress of the working day are carved into every page, and the crazy attempts at escape are carved even deeper.

And the next novel, *Factotum* (1975), was great, too. It came

four years after *Post Office* and the narrator was still Hank Chinaski. But it's a younger Hank this time, falling from city to city, woman to woman. It's a fuller, more sophisticated book than *Post Office* – Hank's restlessness is brilliantly captured in the chapter breaks and jumps that fling him around America, and in and out of work. And there's a well managed, less blunt humour that the Hank of *Post Office* wouldn't have managed: 'I always started a job with the feeling that I'd soon quit or be fired, and this gave me a relaxed manner that was mistaken for intelligence or some secret power.' But it is still Bukowski, still crude, still funny, never comfortable. It's a hard, mean world he's describing. The sex is ugly and shocking but the biggest shock, when I read *Factotum* again recently, came when I read this sentence: 'At some point during one of our hellish nights World War II ended.' It's the first reference to the war, exactly halfway through the book. Hank wanders from New Orleans to Los Angeles to New York to St Louis, through the great cities of our favourite songs, at a time when the world was sneering at their naïveté. It was a time for huge, searching books but Hank's is the small, desperate world of the next drink or meal, and the book captures it brilliantly.

Then I read *Women* (1978). The women in Bukowski's books are mean and devious, sex-mad and lazy, just like the men. They are often just parts of the body. Betty, Hank's girlfriend, or 'shackjob', in *Post Office*, is 'nice legs' and 'that ass' until page fifty when we're given her name. The first attempt at a full description comes even later: 'Betty had gotten old, fast. Heavier. The lines had come in. Flesh hung under the throat. It was sad. But I had gotten old too.' Less than twenty pages later, she's dying: 'Yellow spittle had caked at the left corner of

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her mouth. I took the cloth and washed it away. I cleaned her face, hands and throat.' It isn't pleasant but it's good. Hank notes the signs of age under Betty's throat and feels sorry for himself, then washes the same throat as she dies. It's a scrambling mix of selfishness and tenderness, brutality and the blackest humour that makes one want to fling the book away but is, at the same time, very, very compelling. But *Women* didn't have the mix. The tenderness, what there was of it, was gone. What was left was just a list of ugly encounters. It was boring, and I read no more Bukowski for a long time.

Until *Ham on Rye*.

It was published in 1982, when Bukowski was sixty-two, and I read it ten years after I'd last read anything by Bukowski. And the shock this time was in the newness of the world and the writing that made it. The narrator was still Chinaski but, on the evidence of the first few pages, that was all that *Ham on Rye* had in common with the earlier books.

'The first thing I remember is being under something. It was a table, I saw a table leg, I saw the legs of the people, and a portion of tablecloth hanging down. It was dark under there.' I was immediately reminded of my own book, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, a story told in the language of a child. In that book there is an episode where Paddy watches the world from under a table – his father's crossed legs, the socks, his mother's movements, the dust, its beauty. He's secure in there, happy. Little Chinaski, Henry, not yet Hank, also feels good under his table. 'I liked being under there. It must have been in Germany. I must have been between one and two years old. It was 1922.' The surprise delighted me. I'd never have guessed that the Chinaski of *Post Office* had once been a child, but here he was

under the table – his world, his height, his priorities. ‘The legs of the people were not interesting, not like the tablecloth which hung down, not like the table, not like the sunlight.’ What impressed me most was the ability to splice the language of the small child – ‘It was a table . . .’ – and the language of the adult: ‘It was 1922.’ The words were the same; it was the commas and slight shifts that put the years between them. I loved this first paragraph, and I sat back to enjoy the second one.

‘Two large people fighting, screaming. People eating, always people eating.’ It was a Bukowski book, after all. It was Hank explaining how he became Hank, Bukowski explaining how he became Bukowski. And it was brilliant. Not the sunny story the first paragraph had dangled in front of me, but a scorching account of a childhood, an adolescence, a life of ugliness, pain, escape, alcohol, loneliness. It is a book about writing, finding a voice – ‘Everybody was listening. My words filled the room, from blackboard to blackboard . . .’ – searching the books of others for help and solidarity; D.H. Lawrence, Dos Passos, Hemingway: ‘. . . these men who had come into my life from nowhere were my only chance. They were the only voice that spoke to me.’ It is a book about history – ‘Hitler was acting up in Europe and creating jobs for the unemployed’ – and ignoring it.

It’s often very funny:

“I was laid when I was seven years old.”

“That’s nothing. I was laid when I was four.”

More often it’s disturbing. But, always, it’s good. At the start of the second chapter the narrator remembers his father’s Model-T. He remembers Sunday rides to the orange groves a drive away from Los Angeles, ‘miles and miles of orange trees’. He remembers a picnic basket, cans of fruit on dry ice, liverwurst

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and salami sandwiches, potato chips, bananas and soda-pop. He remembers counting the pyramids on his father's packet of Camels: 'Camel cigarettes were magic cigarettes.' He recalls one particular Sunday, the drive through the groves. And, suddenly, that one Sunday sneers at the rest of the Sundays, at the Sundays we've been fooled into expecting. 'Then my father kicked the door open and got out.' The picnic basket is empty. His father goes through the groves in a fury. 'He seemed angry, yanking oranges from the trees, and the branches seemed angry, leaping up and down.' This is an adult writing – 'yanking oranges from the trees' – but only a child sees angry branches, only a frightened child sees them. Yet 'frightened' and 'scared' aren't there, not in the sentence, paragraph or on the page. They're not needed. We *know*. The repetition of one word, the absence of others, the childlike observation, the dreamy detachment – this is writing by someone who remembers being terrified and can still feel it. This is Bukowski's best writing, and *Ham on Rye* is full of it. At the end of the chapter, after a humiliating encounter with the grove's owner and his shotgun, the father is driving away:

"Daddy, we'll have a nice dinner tonight. What would you like?" my mother asked.

"Pork chops," he answered.

I had never seen him drive that fast.'

Not so fast, *that* fast. 'I had never seen him drive that fast.' Less drama, more power. *Ham on Rye* is a powerful book. *Post Office* was dedicated to nobody; *Ham on Rye* is dedicated to 'all the fathers'. They should all read it.

1

The first thing I remember is being under something. It was a table, I saw a table leg, I saw the legs of the people, and a portion of the tablecloth hanging down. It was dark under there, I liked being under there. It must have been in Germany. I must have been between one and two years old. It was 1922. I felt good under the table. Nobody seemed to know that I was there. There was sunlight upon the rug and on the legs of the people. I liked the sunlight. The legs of the people were not interesting, not like the tablecloth which hung down, not like the table leg, not like the sunlight.

Then there is nothing . . . then a Christmas tree. Candles. Bird ornaments: birds with small berry branches in their beaks. A star. Two large people fighting, screaming. People eating, always people eating. I ate too. My spoon was bent so that if I wanted to eat I had to pick the spoon up with my right hand. If I picked it up with my left hand, the spoon bent away from my mouth. I wanted to pick the spoon up with my left hand.

Two people: one larger with curly hair, a big nose, a big mouth, much eyebrow; the larger person always seeming to be angry, often screaming; the smaller person quiet, round of

face, paler, with large eyes. I was afraid of both of them. Sometimes there was a third, a fat one who wore dresses with lace at the throat. She wore a large brooch, and had many warts on her face with little hairs growing out of them. 'Emily,' they called her. These people didn't seem happy together. Emily was the grandmother, my father's mother. My father's name was 'Henry'. My mother's name was 'Katherine'. I never spoke to them by name. I was 'Henry, Jr.' These people spoke German most of the time and in the beginning I did too.

The first thing I remember my grandmother saying was, 'I will bury *all* of you!' She said this the first time just before we began eating a meal, and she was to say it many times after that, just before we began to eat. Eating seemed very important. We ate mashed potatoes and gravy, especially on Sundays. We also ate roast beef, knockwurst and sauerkraut, green peas, rhubarb, carrots, spinach, string beans, chicken, meatballs and spaghetti, sometimes mixed with ravioli; there were boiled onions, asparagus, and every Sunday there was strawberry shortcake with vanilla ice cream. For breakfasts we had french toast and sausages, or there were hotcakes or waffles with bacon and scrambled eggs on the side. And there was always coffee. But what I remember best is all the mashed potatoes and gravy and my grandmother, Emily, saying, 'I will bury *all* of you!'

She visited us often after we came to America, taking the red trolley in from Pasadena to Los Angeles. We only went to see her occasionally, driving out in the Model-T Ford.

I liked my grandmother's house. It was a small house under an overhanging mass of pepper trees. Emily had all her canaries in different cages. I remember one visit best. That evening

she went about covering the cages with white hoods so that the birds could sleep. The people sat in chairs and talked. There was a piano and I sat at the piano and hit the keys and listened to the sounds as the people talked. I liked the sound of the keys best up at one end of the piano where there was hardly any sound at all – the sound the keys made was like chips of ice striking against one another.

‘Will you stop that?’ my father said loudly.

‘Let the boy play the piano,’ said my grandmother.

My mother smiled.

‘That boy,’ said my grandmother, ‘when I tried to pick him up out of the cradle to kiss him, he reached up and hit me in the nose!’

They talked some more and I went on playing the piano.

‘Why don’t you get that thing tuned?’ asked my father.

Then I was told that we were going to see my grandfather. My grandfather and grandmother were not living together. I was told that my grandfather was a bad man, that his breath stank.

‘Why does his breath stink?’

They didn’t answer.

‘Why does his breath stink?’

‘He drinks.’

We got into the Model-T and drove over to see my Grandfather Leonard. As we drove up and stopped he was standing on the porch of his house. He was old but he stood very straight. He had been an army officer in Germany and had come to America when he heard that the streets were paved with gold. They weren’t, so he became the head of a construction firm.

The other people didn’t get out of the car. Grandfather

wiggled a finger at me. Somebody opened a door and I climbed out and walked toward him. His hair was pure white and long and his beard was pure white and long, and as I got closer I saw that his eyes were brilliant, like blue lights watching me. I stopped a little distance away from him.

'Henry,' he said, 'you and I, we know each other. Come into the house.'

He held out his hand. As I got closer I could smell the stink of his breath. It was very strong but he was the most beautiful man I had ever seen and I wasn't afraid.

I went into his house with him. He led me to a chair.

'Sit down, please. I'm very happy to see you.'

He went into another room. Then he came out with a little tin box.

'It's for you. Open it.'

I had trouble with the lid, I couldn't open the box.

'Here,' he said, 'let me have it.'

He loosened the lid and handed the tin box back to me. I lifted the lid and here was this cross, a German cross with a ribbon.

'Oh no,' I said, 'you keep it.'

'It's yours,' he said, 'it's just a gummy badge.'

'Thank you.'

'You better go now. They will be worried.'

'All right. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye, Henry. No, wait . . .'

I stopped. He reached into a small front pocket of his pants with a couple of fingers, and tugged at a long gold chain with his other hand. Then he handed me his gold pocket watch, with the chain.

‘Thank you, Grandfather . . .’

They were waiting outside and I got into the Model-T and we drove off. They all talked about many things as we drove along. They were always talking, and they talked all the way back to my grandmother’s house. They spoke of many things but never, once, of my grandfather.

2

I remember the Model-T. Sitting high, the running boards seemed friendly, and on cold days, in the mornings, and often at other times, my father had to fit the hand-crank into the front of the engine and crank it many times in order to start the car.

‘A man can get a broken arm doing this. It kicks back like a horse.’

We went for Sunday rides in the Model-T when grandmother didn’t visit. My parents liked the orange groves, miles and miles of orange trees always either in blossom or full of oranges. My parents had a picnic basket and a metal chest. In the metal chest were frozen cans of fruit on dry ice, and in the picnic basket were weenies and liverwurst and salami sandwiches, potato chips, bananas and soda-pop. The soda-pop was shifted continually back and forth between the metal box and the picnic basket. It froze quickly, and then had to be thawed.

My father smoked Camel cigarettes and he knew many tricks and games which he showed us with the packages of Camel cigarettes. How many pyramids were there? Count them. We would count them and then he would show us more of them.

There were also tricks about the humps on the camels and about the written words on the package. Camel cigarettes were magic cigarettes.

There was a particular Sunday I can recall. The picnic basket was empty. Yet we still drove along through the orange groves, further and further away from where we lived.

‘Daddy,’ my mother asked, ‘aren’t we going to run out of gas?’

‘No, there’s plenty of god-damned gas.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘I’m going to get me some god-damned oranges!’

My mother sat very still as we drove along. My father pulled up alongside the road, parked near a wire fence and we sat there, listening. Then my father kicked the door open and got out.

‘Bring the basket.’

We all climbed through the strands of the fence.

‘Follow me,’ said my father.

Then we were between two rows of orange trees, shaded from the sun by the branches and the leaves. My father stopped and reaching up began yanking oranges from the lower branches of the nearest tree. He seemed angry, yanking the oranges from the tree, and the branches seemed angry, leaping up and down. He threw the oranges into the picnic basket which my mother held. Sometimes he missed and I chased the oranges and put them into the basket. My father went from tree to tree, yanking at the lower branches, throwing the oranges into the picnic basket.

‘Daddy, we have enough,’ said my mother.

'Like hell.'

He kept yanking.

Then a man stepped forward, a very tall man. He held a shotgun.

'All right, buddy, what do you think you're doing?'

'I'm picking oranges. There are plenty of oranges.'

'These are my oranges. Now, listen to me, tell your woman to dump them.'

'There are plenty of god-damned oranges. You're not going to miss a few god-damned oranges.'

'I'm not going to miss *any* oranges. Tell your woman to dump them.'

The man pointed his shotgun at my father.

'Dump them,' my father told my mother.

The oranges rolled to the ground.

'Now,' said the man, 'get out of my orchard.'

'You don't need all these oranges.'

'I know what I need. Now get out of here.'

'Guys like you ought to be hung!'

'I'm the law here. Now move!'

The man raised his shotgun again. My father turned and began walking out of the orange grove. We followed him and the man trailed us. Then we got into the car but it was one of those times when it wouldn't start. My father got out of the car to crank it. He cranked it twice and it wouldn't start. My father was beginning to sweat. The man stood at the edge of the road.

'Get that god-damned cracker box started!' he said.

My father got ready to twist the crank again. 'We're not on your property! We can stay here as long as we damn well please!'

‘Like hell! Get that thing *out* of here, and fast!’

My father cranked the engine again. It sputtered, then stopped. My mother sat with the empty picnic box on her lap. I was afraid to look at the man. My father whirled the crank again and the engine started. He leaped into the car and began working the levers on the steering wheel.

‘Don’t come back,’ said the man, ‘or next time it might not go so easy for you.’

My father drove the Model-T off. The man was still standing near the road. My father was driving very fast. Then he slowed the car and made a U-turn. He drove back to where the man had stood. The man was gone. We speeded back on the way out of the orange groves.

‘I’m coming back some day and get that bastard,’ said my father.

‘Daddy, we’ll have a nice dinner tonight. What would you like?’ my mother asked.

‘Pork chops,’ he answered.

I had never seen him drive the car that fast.

3

My father had two brothers. The younger was named Ben and the older was named John. Both were alcoholics and ne'er-do-wells. My parents often spoke of them.

'Neither of them amount to anything,' said my father.

'You just come from a bad family, Daddy,' said my mother.

'And *your* brother doesn't amount to a damn either!'

My mother's brother was in Germany. My father often spoke badly of him.

I had another uncle, Jack, who was married to my father's sister, Elinore. I had never seen my Uncle Jack or my Aunt Elinore because there were bad feelings between them and my father.

'See this scar on my hand?' asked my father. 'Well, that's where Elinore stuck me with a sharp pencil when I was very young. That scar has never gone away.'

My father didn't like people. He didn't like me. 'Children should be seen and not heard,' he told me.

It was an early Sunday afternoon without Grandma Emily.

'We should go see Ben,' said my mother. 'He's dying.'

'He borrowed all that money from Emily. He pissed it away on gambling and women and booze.'

'I know, Daddy.'

'Emily won't have any money left when she dies.'

'We should still go see Ben. They say he has only two weeks left.'

'All right, all right! We'll go!'

So we went and got into the Model-T and started driving. It took some time, and my mother had to stop for flowers. It was a long drive toward the mountains. We reached the foothills and took the little winding mountain road upwards. Uncle Ben was in a sanitarium up there, dying of TB.

'It must cost Emily a lot of money to keep Ben up here,' said my father.

'Maybe Leonard is helping.'

'Leonard doesn't have anything. He drank it up and he gave it away.'

'I like Grandpa Leonard,' I said.

'Children should be seen and not heard,' said my father. Then he continued, 'Ah, that Leonard, the only time he was good to us children was when he was drunk. He'd joke with us and give us money. But the next day when he was sober he was the meanest man in the world.'

The Model-T was climbing the mountain road nicely. The air was clear and sunny.

'Here it is,' said my father. He guided the car into the parking lot of the sanitarium and we got out. I followed my mother and father into the building. As we entered his room, my Uncle Ben was sitting upright in bed, staring out the window. He turned and looked at us as we entered. He was

a very handsome man, thin, with black hair, and he had dark eyes which glittered, were brilliant with glittering light.

'Hello, Ben,' said my mother.

'Hello, Katy.' Then he looked at me. 'Is this Henry?'

'Yes.'

'Sit down.'

My father and I sat down.

My mother stood there. 'These flowers, Ben. I don't see a vase.'

'They're nice flowers, thanks, Katy. No, there isn't a vase.'

'I'll go get a vase,' said my mother.

She left the room, holding the flowers.

'Where are all your girlfriends now, Ben?' asked my father.

'They come around.'

'I'll bet.'

'They come around.'

'We're here because Katherine wanted to see you.'

'I know.'

'I wanted to see you too, Uncle Ben. I think you're a real pretty man.'

'Pretty like my ass,' said my father.

My mother entered the room with the flowers in a vase.

'Here, I'll put them on this table by the window.'

'They're nice flowers, Katy.'

My mother sat down.

'We can't stay too long,' said my father.

Uncle Ben reached under the mattress and his hand came out holding a pack of cigarettes. He took one out, struck a match and lit it. He took a long drag and exhaled.

'You know you're not allowed cigarettes,' said my father. 'I know how you get them. Those prostitutes bring them to you.'

Well, I'm going to tell the doctors about it and I'm going to get them to stop letting those prostitutes in here!

'You're not going to do shit,' said my uncle.

'I got a good mind to rip that cigarette out of your mouth!' said my father.

'You never had a good mind,' said my uncle.

'Ben,' my mother said, 'you shouldn't smoke, it will kill you.'

'I've had a good life,' said my uncle.

'You never had a good life,' said my father. 'Lying, boozing, borrowing, whoring, drinking. You never worked a day in your life! And now you're dying at the age of twenty-four!'

'It's been all right,' said my uncle. He took another heavy drag on the Camel, then exhaled.

'Let's get out of here,' said my father. 'This man is insane!'

My father stood up. Then my mother stood up. Then I stood up.

'Goodbye, Katy,' said my uncle, 'and goodbye, Henry.' He looked at me to indicate which Henry.

We followed my father through the sanitarium halls and out into the parking lot to the Model-T. We got in, it started, and we began down the winding road out of the mountains.

'We should have stayed longer,' said my mother.

'Don't you know that TB is catching?' asked my father.

'I think he was a very pretty man,' I said.

'It's the disease,' said my father. 'It makes them look like that. And besides the TB, he's caught many other things too.'

'What kind of things?' I asked.

'I can't tell you,' my father answered. He steered the Model-T down the winding mountain road as I wondered about that.

It was another Sunday that we got into the Model-T in search of my Uncle John.

‘He has no ambition,’ said my father. ‘I don’t see how he can hold his god-damned head up and look people in the eye.’

‘I wish he wouldn’t chew tobacco,’ said my mother. ‘He spits the stuff everywhere.’

‘If this country was full of men like him the Chinks would take over and *we’d* be running the laundries . . .’

‘John never had a chance,’ said my mother. ‘He ran away from home early. At least you got a high-school education.’

‘College,’ said my father.

‘Where?’ asked my mother.

‘The University of Indiana.’

‘Jack said you only went to high school.’

‘*Jack* only went to high school. That’s why he gardens for the rich.’

‘Am I ever going to see my Uncle Jack?’ I asked.

‘First let’s see if we can find your Uncle John,’ said my father.

‘Do the Chinks really want to take over this country?’ I asked.

'Those yellow devils have been waiting for centuries to do it. What's stopped them is that they have been kept busy fighting the Japs.'

'Who are the best fighters, the Chinks or the Japs?'

'The Japs. The trouble is that there are too many Chinks. When you kill a Chink he splits in half and becomes two Chinks.'

'How come their skin is yellow?'

'Because instead of drinking water they drink their own pee-pee.'

'Daddy, *don't* tell the boy that!'

'Then tell him to stop asking questions.'

We drove along through another warm Los Angeles day. My mother had on one of her pretty dresses and fancy hats. When my mother was dressed up she always sat straight and held her neck very stiff.

'I wish we had enough money so we could help John and his family,' said my mother.

'It's not my fault if they don't have a pot to piss in,' answered my father.

'Daddy, John was in the war just like you were. Don't you think he deserves something?'

'He never rose in the ranks. I became a master sergeant.'

'Henry, all your brothers can't be like you.'

'They don't have any god-damned *drive*! They think they can live off the land!'

We drove along a bit further. Uncle John and his family lived in a small court. We went up the cracked sidewalk to a sagging porch and my father pushed the bell. The bell didn't ring. He knocked, loudly.

'Open up! It's the cops!' my father yelled.

'Daddy, stop it!' said my mother.

After what seemed a long time, the door opened a crack. Then it opened further. And we could see my Aunt Anna. She was very thin, her cheeks were hollow and her eyes had pouches, dark pouches. Her voice was thin, too.

'Oh, Henry . . . Katherine . . . come in, please . . .'

We followed her in. There was very little furniture. There was a breakfast nook with a table and four chairs and there were two beds. My mother and father sat in the chairs. Two girls, Katherine and Betsy (I learned their names later) were at the sink taking turns trying to scrape peanut butter out of a nearly empty peanut butter jar.

'We were just having lunch,' said my Aunt Anna.

The girls came over with tiny smears of peanut butter which they spread on dry pieces of bread. They kept looking into the jar and scraping with the knife.

'Where's John?' asked my father.

My aunt sat down wearily. She looked very weak, very pale. Her dress was dirty, her hair uncombed, tired, sad.

'We've been waiting for him. We haven't seen him for quite some time.'

'Where did he go?'

'I don't know. He just left on his motorcycle.'

'All he does,' said my father, 'is think about his motorcycle.'

'Is this Henry, Jr?'

'Yes.'

'He just stares. He's so quiet.'

'That's the way we want him.'

'Still water runs deep.'

'Not with this one. The only thing that runs deep with him are the holes in his ears.'

The two girls took their slices of bread and walked outside and sat on the stoop to eat them. They hadn't spoken to us. I thought they were quite nice. They were thin like their mother but they were still quite pretty.

'How are you, Anna?' asked my mother.

'I'm all right.'

'Anna, you don't look well. I think you need food.'

'Why doesn't your boy sit down? Sit down, Henry.'

'He likes to stand,' said my father. 'It makes him strong. He's getting ready to fight the Chinks.'

'Don't you like the Chinese?' my aunt asked me.

'No,' I answered.

'Well, Anna,' my father asked, 'how are things going?'

'Awful, really . . . The landlord keeps asking for the rent. He gets very nasty. He frightens me. I don't know what to do.'

'I hear the cops are after John,' said my father.

'He didn't do very much.'

'What did he do?'

'He made some counterfeit dimes.'

'Dimes? Jesus Christ, what kind of ambition is *that*?'

'John really doesn't want to be bad.'

'Seems to me he doesn't want to be *anything*.'

'He would if he could.'

'Yeah. And if a frog had wings he wouldn't wear his ass out a-hoppin'!'

There was silence then and they sat there. I turned and looked outside. The girls were gone from the porch, they had gone off somewhere.

'Come, sit down, Henry,' said my Aunt Anna.

I stood there. 'Thank you, it's all right.'

'Anna,' my mother asked, 'are you sure that John will come back?'

'He'll come back when he gets tired of the hens,' said my father.

'John loves his children . . .' said Anna.

'I hear the cops are after him for something else.'

'What?'

'Rape.'

'Rape?'

'Yes, Anna, I heard about it. He was riding his motorcycle one day. This young girl was hitch-hiking. She got onto the back of his motorcycle and as they rode along all of a sudden John saw an empty garage. He drove in there, closed the door and raped the girl.'

'How did you find out?'

'Find out? The cops came and told me, they asked me where he was.'

'Did you tell them?'

'What for? To have him go to jail and evade his responsibilities? That's just what he'd want.'

'I never thought of it that way.'

'Not that I'm for rape . . .'

'Sometimes a man can't help what he does.'

'What?'

'I mean, after having the children, and with this type of life, the worry and all . . . I don't look so good anymore. He saw a young girl, she looked good to him . . . she got on his bike, you know, she put her arms around him . . .'

‘What?’ asked my father. ‘How would *you* like to be raped?’

‘I guess I wouldn’t like it.’

‘Well, I’m sure the young girl didn’t like it either.’

A fly appeared and whirled around and around the table. We watched it.

‘There’s nothing to eat here,’ said my father. ‘The fly has come to the wrong place.’

The fly became more and more bold. It circled closer and made buzzing sounds. The closer it circled the louder the buzzing became.

‘You’re not going to tell the cops that John might come home?’ my aunt asked my father.

‘I am not going to let him off the hook so easily,’ said my father.

My mother’s hand leaped quickly. It closed and she brought her hand back down to the table.

‘I got him,’ she said.

‘Got what?’ asked my father.

‘The fly,’ she smiled.

‘I don’t believe you . . .’

‘You see the fly anywhere? The fly is gone.’

‘It flew off.’

‘No, I have it in my hand.’

‘Nobody is that quick.’

‘I have it in my hand.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘You don’t believe me?’

‘No.’

‘Open your mouth.’

‘All right.’

My father opened his mouth and my mother cupped her hand over it. My father leaped up, grabbing at his throat.

‘JESUS CHRIST!’

The fly came out of his mouth and began circling the table again.

‘That’s enough,’ said my father, ‘we’re going home!’

He got up and walked out the door and down the walk and got into the Model-T and just sat there very stiffly, looking dangerous.

‘We brought you a few cans of food,’ my mother said to my aunt. ‘I’m sorry it can’t be money but Henry is afraid John will use it for gin, or for gasoline for his motorcycle. It isn’t much: soup, hash, peas . . .’

‘Oh, Katherine, thank you! Thank you, both . . .’

My mother got up and I followed her. There were two boxes of canned food in the car. I saw my father sitting there rigidly. He was still angry.

My mother handed me the smaller box of cans and she took the large box and I followed her back into the court. We set the boxes down in the breakfast nook. Aunt Anna came over and picked up a can. It was a can of peas, the label on it covered with little round green peas.

‘This is lovely,’ said my aunt.

‘Anna, we have to go. Henry’s dignity is upset.’

My aunt threw her arms around my mother. ‘Everything has been so awful. But this is like a dream. Wait until the girls come home. Wait until the girls see all these cans of food!’

My mother hugged my aunt back. Then they separated.

‘John is not a bad man,’ my aunt said.

'I know,' my mother answered. 'Goodbye, Anna.'

'Goodbye, Katherine. Goodbye, Henry.'

My mother turned and walked out the door. I followed her. We walked to the car and got in. My father started the car.

As we were driving off I saw my aunt at the door waving. My mother waved back. My father didn't wave back. I didn't either.

I had begun to dislike my father. He was always angry about something. Wherever we went he got into arguments with people. But he didn't appear to frighten most people; they often just stared at him, calmly, and he became more furious. If we ate out, which was seldom, he always found something wrong with the food and sometimes refused to pay. 'There's flyshit in this whipped cream! What the hell kind of a place is this?'

'I'm sorry, sir, you needn't pay. Just leave.'

'I'll leave, all right! But I'll be back! I'll burn this god-damned place down!'

Once we were in a drug store and my mother and I were standing to one side while my father yelled at a clerk. Another clerk asked my mother, 'Who is that horrible man? Every time he comes in here there's an argument.'

'That's my husband,' my mother told the clerk.

Yet, I remember another time. He was working as a milkman and made early morning deliveries. One morning he awakened me. 'Come on, I want to show you something.' I walked outside with him. I was wearing my pajamas and slippers. It was still dark, the moon was still up. We walked to the milk wagon

which was horse-drawn. The horse stood very still. 'Watch,' said my father. He took a sugar cube, put it in his hand and held it out to the horse. The horse ate it out of his palm. 'Now you try it . . .' He put a sugar cube in my hand. It was a very large horse. 'Get closer! Hold out your hand!' I was afraid the horse would bite my hand off. The head came down; I saw the nostrils; the lips pulled back, I saw the tongue and the teeth, and then the sugar cube was gone. 'Here. Try it again . . .' I tried it again. The horse took the sugar cube and wagged his head. 'Now,' said my father, 'I'll take you back inside before the horse shits on you.'

I was not allowed to play with other children. 'They are bad children,' said my father, 'their parents are poor.' 'Yes,' agreed my mother. My parents wanted to be rich so they imagined themselves rich.

The first children of my age that I knew were in kindergarten. They seemed very strange, they laughed and talked and seemed happy. I didn't like them. I always felt as if I was going to be sick, to vomit, and the air seemed strangely still and white. We painted with watercolors. We planted radish seeds in a garden and some weeks later we ate them with salt. I liked the lady who taught kindergarten, I liked her better than my parents. One problem I had was going to the bathroom. I always needed to go to the bathroom, but I was ashamed to let the others know that I had to go, so I held it. It was really terrible to hold it. And the air was white, I felt like vomiting, I felt like shitting and pissing, but I didn't say anything. And when some of the others came back from the bathroom I'd think, you're dirty, you did something in there . . .

The little girls were nice in their short dresses, with their long hair and their beautiful eyes, but I thought, they do things in there too, even though they pretend they don't.

Kindergarten was mostly white air . . .

Grammar school was different, first grade to sixth grade, some of the kids were twelve years old, and we all came from poor neighborhoods. I began to go to the bathroom, but only to piss. Coming out once I saw a small boy drinking at a water fountain. A larger boy walked up behind him and jammed his face down into the water jet. When the small boy raised his head, some of his teeth were broken and blood came out of his mouth, there was blood in the fountain. 'You tell anyone about this,' the older boy told him, 'and I'll really get you.' The boy took out a handkerchief and held it to his mouth. I walked back to class where the teacher was telling us about George Washington and Valley Forge. She wore an elaborate white wig. She often slapped the palms of our hands with a ruler when she thought we were being disobedient. I don't think she ever went to the bathroom. I hated her.

Each afternoon after school there would be a fight between two of the older boys. It was always out by the back fence where there was never a teacher about. And the fights were never even; it was always a larger boy against a smaller boy and the larger boy would beat the smaller boy with his fists, backing him into the fence. The smaller boy would attempt to fight back but it was useless. Soon his face was bloody, the blood running down into his shirt. The smaller boys took their beatings wordlessly, never begging, never asking for mercy.

Finally, the larger boy would back off and it would be over and all the other boys would walk home with the winner. I'd walk home quickly, alone, after holding my shit all through school and all through the fight. Usually by the time I got home I would have lost the urge to relieve myself. I used to worry about that.