

**CHARLES
BUKOWSKI**



HAM ON RYE

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 weenie 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.

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'd 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 24!"

"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* he 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. I here was very little furniture. I here 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. "Clot 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! I 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.