

"He was there, Mama."

"My mother's farm was not far away"

"Only a few steps down the road." He smiled.

"I wonder if Brancato visited it too?"

"You will have to ask him, Mama."

They did not speak again until they reached the house. He helped her up the porch steps. It was hard going.

"I will ask him," she gasped. "That Carlotta! She is very impulsive, Giovanni. She has a mind of her own."

John Fante

from

The Big Hunger

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## The Big Hunger

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HE HEARD HIS MOTHER coming up the stairs, her feet in soft slippers. For an hour he had lain awake, reading *Crime Comics*, which were forbidden because Mother said they were bad for kids. But Dan Crane couldn't read, not really, because he was barely seven, a crummy age, two years younger than his brother Nick, who read real good, that heel.

"Up, Danny boy," Mrs. Crane said from the doorway. "Breakfast's ready."

Breakfast. Dan's stomach lurched. Every morning the same old malarkey: breakfast. He wasn't hungry. He had gone to bed with a sack of plums and had eaten them all, stowing the pits behind the radiator. Now she was after him to eat again. He lay staring at the ceiling, being very cold to his mother,

"You hear me, son?"

"Okay, Mom."

"And wash your face. And clean your nails."

The commands were so beneath him that he didn't even answer. One thing was becoming apparent: Dan Crane couldn't take much more. Breakfast. Wash your face. Clean your nails. Brush your teeth. Comb your hair. Change your shorts. Hang up your sweater. Go to sleep. Wake up. Be quiet. Speak out. Hold still. Get moving. Open your mouth. Stick out your tongue. Close your mouth. For seven long years Dan Crane had hung on grimly, seven years: his whole life, a slave.

When he tossed back the covers, it pleased him to see the blobs of dirt at the backs of his heels. Take a bath. Use the brush. And suppose he told her to go soak? Then he'd have to deal with the Old Man. Was that bad? Ho ho! He had the Old Man in his power. There was an expression he used—a mystic smile, a look of holy innocence—that melted his father's wrath every time.

His brother's bed was across the room, the covers thrown back, Nick's pajamas folded neatly under the pillow. Nick *liked* wearing pajamas! With a pretense of merely sauntering past, Dan Crane snatched the pajamas in one fist and held them out before him, a sneer on his lips.

Now he had Nick where he wanted him, within a coil of his fist, and it all came back to him—old Bright Boy with straight A's, so clever at drawing too, so helpful to his mother, so impressive when company came,

old Bright Boy in person, the pajamas dancing in the air as Dan Crane cuffed them with jabs. Then the pajamas seemed to strike back, and Crane staggered and fell to the floor, for Nick was choking him and his face purpled as he struggled to breathe. He rolled across the floor, the pajamas on top of him until, with superhuman strength, Crane broke the grip at his throat and the tide of battle turned. Now Nick was beneath him, his upturned face receiving sickening blows to the mouth and nose, blood spurting from his nostrils, his eyes flaming in terror. One final bash of Crane's fist and Nick lay very quiet, not breathing. Dan Crane prodded one of Nick's eyes with a forefinger. Nick was dead. Weakly, Crane rose to his feet, aware now of his own wounds, of his torn face, a limp arm, blood trickling from his lips. He stood reeling, panting with exhaustion, offering no word of explanation as the Sheriff came in, his eyes popping at the brutal scene.

"You killed him, Crane," the Sheriff said. "You beat your own brother to a pulp. Gad, what a beating."

"I had to do it, Sheriff," Crane gasped. "It was him or me. You know Nick. He pulled a knife on me."

The Sheriff put out his hand "He was a no-good stinker, Dan. The whole county owes you a vote of thanks."

The Sheriff evaporated, and Dan Crane strode naked toward the bathroom, his chest out, the new day taking on a cheery hue now that Nick was dead. Through the window he saw the bright morning, the sunlight bouncing off the white stucco garage and

stinging his eyes. The bathroom clock showed eight-thirty. He studied it intently. Nick always teased him for not being able to tell time. Ha—that stupe! Well, it was a quarter to twelve, and it was ten minutes to seven, and eleven o'clock; so what difference did it make?

From the staircase it came again, *her* voice: “Daniel Crane. Did you hear me? Breakfast!”

“Okay, okay, okay.”

He dipped a corner of the washrag in warm water, braced his feet, and took three light swipes at his face, across his forehead and over both cheeks. It was a revolting experience. His teeth were clenched as he wiped the stuff off with a towel. The mirror told him there was no need to comb his hair; it was fine, away from his face and eyes. Maybe it stuck out at the sides, but so what? He examined his fingernails. But Dan was a poor judge of clean fingernails. These many years of observation had finally persuaded him that his nails were two-toned: pink and grey-black. Sometimes, by sheer brute force, his mother dug out some of the grey-black substance. On these occasions Dan screamed in agony, sure that she was prying out living flesh.

There was the smell of bacon and eggs in the hall, of buttered toast and wheat germ, and for a moment it pleased him. But now he chose to have it nauseate him, and his mind conjured up the plate of bacon and eggs too gooey, the wheat germ covered with the sweet slime of honey. This wrenching of his imagination produced the desired effect. Up his gullet came the rancid juices of last night's plums. Crane forced them back. He

was sick now, too sick to eat breakfast.

Bitterly, he reflected on his miserable fate. No corn flakes in this lousy house, or puffed wheat, or Rice Krispies, or Corn Pops, or any of the delicious things shown on TV. *His* mother brought home nothing but junk from the store. This junk was supposed to give you perfect teeth. But did it? Crane grinned ironically, his tongue probing a tooth that had been filled only last week by the dentist; across the street lived David Culp, nine years old, who ate nothing but Rice Krispies for breakfast and had big, white, absolutely perfect teeth.

With sullen laziness he pulled on his clothes, being careful not to wear the clean shorts laid out for him, the freshly ironed jeans and T-shirt, the new pair of socks.

The old shorts slipped nicely into place. They were almost like his own skin, and they smelled that good personal smell of none other than Dan Crane. Yesterday's T-shirt was befouled with the pleasant memory of adventures under David's house, a secret hideaway where he and David buried seashells gathered earlier at the beach. Indeed, the preponderant odor coming off Dan Crane was of the sea, the old tired sea at low tide. His jeans clung to his legs like damp canvas, grease and tar lending them an intimate stickiness like buckskin on the thighs of Daniel Boone. His socks were coyly resilient, like a mechanic's soiled rags, with a comfortable, form-fitting hole for each big toe. He knew his mother would beef about the old tennis shoes. He put one to his nostril and sniffed. He could smell nothing

except just plain feet. With much tugging and groaning he got the shoes on, the laces snagged in a fiendish cluster of knots no mother on earth could unravel.

He wondered if he could get away with it. His mother might send him back upstairs; then again, she might not. It was worth a try. Slowly he descended the stairs, his chest sliding along the bannister. Then he saw her, his two-year-old sister Victoria, down there at the bottom, and he became alert to the danger, for she was waiting for him to come down to her, and her large brown eyes were full of mischief. She was the anguish of his life, the person in all the world he wanted to tear limb from limb.

"Okay now, Vicky," he warned. "Be careful. I'm just telling you: Watch it."

She knelt at the bottom step and smiled up at him.

"Danny," she smiled. "Danny."

Her plump pink fingers were stretched out to him lovingly, but Dan Crane knew her only as a woman of devious cunning who kissed him one moment and bit him the next. Worse, he was not permitted to defend himself. The Old Man gave a lot of orders around there, most of which could be ignored, but one he enforced always: nobody could lay a hand on Victoria—not even if she poked out your eyes, bit your finger, or banged you with a croquet mallet. In her time she had done all these things and more to Dan Crane, and his cup of bitterness overflowed.

"Danny ..."

She put her arms around his hips and he felt the

softness of her hair and he could smell her morning sweetness, and suddenly he was sorry he cherished such resentment for her. She kept repeating his name out of a rosebud mouth, adoring him with magic eyes.

"Dear Vicky," he murmured. "Dear little thing."

He sat on the bottom step and she touched his face and stroked his hand, purring with happiness at seeing him again. Her round innocence almost overwhelmed him, and now he was in her power again, hugging her tightly, kissing the soft hair of her neck.

"Kiss," he begged. "Kiss brother."

Like a wafted rose her mouth drifted to his lips, and he closed his eyes in delicious acceptance. But a demon burst within her and her bright teeth snatched his lower lip in a terrible vise. With a shriek he threw out his arms, falling back on the stairs, the little mouth hanging on. When she let go, Dan Crane lay there weeping. He covered his face with his hands and wept hard.

"Victoria!" Mother said. "Bad girl!"

It frightened the child and she began to howl. Mrs. Crane bent down to examine Dan's trembling lower lip. Now he cried with fervor, for he knew the bite had saved him, that he wouldn't have to go upstairs and change, and that he wouldn't even have to eat any breakfast. All he had to do was keep suffering, letting the anguish roar out of him, while his mother held him tenderly, sniffing suspiciously, but comforting him nevertheless.

Like a broken man he staggered into the kitchen

and flopped on the bench in the breakfast nook. Through his tears he saw the bacon and eggs, the cereal, the orange juice, the glass of milk. It was more than he could bear. Fresh cascades of misery heaved out of him, his whole body rocking.

"Please, Mother. Oh, Mother, Mother! I beg you, Mother. Don't ask me to eat!"

She ruffled his dirty hair, feeling sand and tar on her fingertips. "Of course not, Danny."

He did not rise at once and rush off. For a few moments he produced more sobs. Even Vicky, contrite now, was touched by his suffering. She slid over to him and brushed his hand with a cheek that was still wet with her own tears.

He wanted to belt her, but he remembered how useful she had been. Sighing hard, he moved out of the kitchen, reeling slightly but not overdoing it. Once on the porch, he dropped the mask of misery, and his eyes danced with the prospect of this great new day. Under his breath he made guttural sounds, turning a phrase as he thought of his mother.

"Sucker, he said, grinning. "What a sucker."

A slinking figure at the corner of the garage caught his attention. It was Johnny Stribling from next door. He was armed to the teeth, a rubber knife in his jaws, a rifle in his hands, and two Gene Autry .45s strapped to his hips. John Stribling was the sworn enemy of law and order in the West. Day and night he roamed the

plains, shooting down constables, knifing sheriffs, ambushing marshals. For two weeks, since the beginning of summer vacation, Stribling had left a trail of blood and murder in his wake, his guns going ckh! ckh! with a movement of his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

Crane had done plenty of killing on his own. It took him exactly two seconds to size up the situation. Then he sprang into action. With a spark-throwing burp gun in one hand and a gold-plated Hoppy six-shooter in the other, he jumped off the porch and saluted his neighbor.

"Who you after, Johnny?"

The greeting irritated Stribling, thumping him back to the sordid reality of a Southern California backyard, across which stretched pieces of the Crane laundry—panties, shorts and shirts.

"What's it to you?"

"Want me to play with you?"

Stribling looked him over with lynx eyes. "You wanna be the Law?"

"Nah. I'm Billy the Kid."

"No, you ain't. You gotta be the Law."

"And get killed? No chance."

"Then we got no game."

John Stribling swaggered toward the back gate, his artillery clattering

"Wait, Johnny. I'll play."

The outlaw swung around, his cruel lips smiling. "I just knocked over the bank at San Juan. Killed three

men. Shot up the place real good. Big posse out to get me. That's you. Count to a hundred, then come and get me."

"Okay."

Dan Crane couldn't count to a hundred. After nineteen he just mumbled stuff, but he knew about how long it took to get to a hundred. The sheer stupidity of the Law ground out his joy in the game. The Law was no good. The Law was old people, like his mother and father and his teacher, telling him what to do, what to eat, when to eat it. The Law put you to bed, made you get up. The Law washed your face, poked a washcloth into your ears, sent you to school and to church. The Law offended him, gave him a bellyache, insulted him. And in the end, the Law even destroyed the outlaw. With a heavy heart he stood there, wanting no part in the victory his role represented.

Then he set out to find the enemy. He knew where Stribling would be holed up, for they had played the game a hundred times. Down the alley five houses, among the big leaves of the Becker fig tree, John Stribling would be hidden. He had only to go around and enter the yard from the street, tiptoe down the Becker driveway, and Stribling would be a setup for his burp gun. But Crane was in the grip of tragedy, and the old instinct for pursuit wasn't there. On sullen feet he trudged down the alley, no stealth in his tread, his heart almost welcoming the outlaw's bullet.

"Ckh! ckh!" came the deadly fire from the fig tree.

Crane staggered, feeling the hot cutting pain of the

bullet under his heart. The burp gun dropped from his fingers as he careened drunkenly and fell. With a howl of triumph Stribling leaped from the tree and rushed over. Crane was badly hurt. The bullet had burst through his back, and plenty of blood was spurting from the wound. Feebly, he groped for his six-gun. With a grin of evil pleasure Stribling waited until Crane's hand touched the gun. Then he let him have it with the rubber knife, leaping on the broken body and jabbing away. There was a quiver as life drained from Crane's battered form: then he lay quite still. He was dead. The game was over. It was time to start all over again.

Crane died twice more that morning. As Hop-along Cassidy, his heart was cut out and thrown to the Arizona buzzards. As the Lone Ranger, his demise was even more horrible. Stribling lashed him to a tree and shot off both ears; and when he still refused to divulge the hiding place of the gold shipment, the outlaw sliced off his nose with the rubber knife. Crane collapsed in a pool of his own blood, moaning pitifully, but carrying his secret into eternity.

The killings might have gone on all morning if they hadn't found the ginger-ale bottles. There were ten empties in a gunny sack, tossed among the alley's high weeds, and they were as good as gold, worth five cents apiece. The boys loaded the booty into a wagon and hauled it to the Safeway. When they emerged, each

with a quarter, they were rich men, lavishly spending their money on bubble gum and candy bars down at the drugstore.

It was an intimate, secret orgy. Hidden on the roof of the Crane garage, they lay on their bellies and ate in silent hoggishness. The hot noon sun melted the chocolate so that they scraped it off the wrappers with their teeth and licked it from their fingers. Then they rolled on their backs and popped the warm delicious bubble gum into their jaws, chewing slowly, their eyes closed to the sun, reveling in the sweet juices trickling down their throats.

"Danny!"

It was his mother, calling him from the back porch.

"Whaddya' want?"

"Lunch is ready."

Crane moaned. The very thought of lunch turned the bubble gum to gall. He spat it out in disgust.

They climbed down from the garage, dropping to the fence and then to the lawn. Stribling went next door. Crane turned on the hose and let the water trickle across his mouth, wiping himself dry with a sleeve. He looked at the kitchen door and thought a moment. It was probably cream of tomato soup, a sandwich and a glass of milk. There was no way out, except plain revolt. He was in an ugly mood, a heaviness at his stomach. With a hard face he walked into the kitchen.

Tomato soup it was, and milk, and a sandwich.

Nick was just finishing. He downed his glass of

milk and pushed back his chair.

"That was real good, Mother. Thanks."

"Twerp," Dan sneered.

"Who you calling a twerp?"

"You, bub. *Do* something."

Mrs. Crane broke it up. "Sit down, Danny. Eat your lunch."

"I'm not hungry."

"But you didn't have any breakfast."

"I'm still not hungry."

"Don't you feel well, Danny?"

"Never felt better in my life."

Anger made her voice sharp. "Dan Crane, I won't have you defying me. Go to your room."

Crane swaggered upstairs to his room and threw himself on the bed. He stared at the ceiling and dreamed of owning a burro, just a friendly little jack-ass, so that he could pull out of L.A. and go up around Sacramento, his grandpa's country, where the hills were full of gold, where a man could strike it rich and shed his family. He smiled as he pictured himself a rich man, tossing nuggets to his weeping mother, who was sorry she had mistreated him in the old days.

At three o'clock, he heard the gurgling voice of Victoria through the wall, and he knew his sister had wakened from her afternoon nap. He pictured Vicky in her crib, pink and bright-eyed, singing to herself, and the fatal urge to see her overcame him.

She lay among dolls and teddy bears, her feet in the air, as she crooned to her toes.

Dan stood over her in mute adoration, enchanted by her sleepy eyes, her sweet red lips. As always, her beauty melted his killer instinct, and he babbled to her. "Pretty girl, pretty, pretty, pretty."

Her pink fingers explored his eyes and ears, and he sucked quick kisses when they touched his lips. Her small nails probed his nostrils. She seemed to wait until he was completely spellbound. Then she let him have it again. The nails dug. There was a fierce pain. He saw it on his fingers and down the front of his T-shirt—not the blood of Hopalong Cassidy, not the blood of the Lone Ranger—but the rich, red, priceless blood of Daniel Crane.

"Mother, help! Oh Mother!"

She found him in the bathroom, reeling with fear, holding a towel tinged with scarlet against his face. Two ice cubes wrapped in a washcloth quickly stopped the bleeding, and Mrs. Crane forgave everything and told him to go out into the world again. He did not protest when she suggested changing his clothes. Then he stood before her, in clean clothes, subdued and rather sad. Suddenly his arms went around her, and his wild kiss left her blinking in wonder, for Crane was a hard man who opposed mother-kissing.

He left her standing there bewildered, and sauntered down the stairs. The smell of liver and bacon and baked beans was coming from the kitchen. The madness of hunger seized him, and he hurried into the kitchen.

The liver and bacon sang in the frying pan, and the beans sizzled in a brown pot in the oven. But everything was too hot to handle. He opened the refrigerator, took out a half-pound block of yellow cheese and an apple and stuffed them under an armpit. He raised a bottle of milk to his lips and drank most of the quart without a pause. Then he closed the ice-box door and walked outside.

Dinner was ready an hour later, but Dan Crane could eat none of it. A leaden cheddar satiation crushed his stomach, and when Mr. Crane served up the liver and bacon, the baked beans, and salad of lettuce and cucumbers, Dan stared helplessly at his plate, while he listened to his brother saying, "Gee, Mother, I love liver and bacon, and the beans are wonderful."

"What's the matter, Danny?" Mr. Crane said.

"Not hungry, Dad."

"But you haven't even *tried* the liver and bacon," Nick said with bright impatience.

Dan lowered his chin and scowled.

"I'm so worried about that boy," Mrs. Crane said. "He has simply stopped eating altogether."

Mr. Crane studied Dan's frowning face. "He'll eat. He just isn't hungry. That right, Danny?"

Dan Crane stared across the table at his father, and waves of love and tenderness flowed from his eyes. The frown gave way to a softness around his lips, and two tears spilled on his empty plate.



"Oh, Dad," he sobbed. "You're the only one in the world who understands me."

"I try," Mr. Crane said, smiling at him. "I do the best I can. Leave the table, if you want."

"Thanks, Dad."

Dan pushed his chair and moved toward the front door. From the dining room came his mother's voice, full of concern. "Talk to the boy. I'm so worried. He hasn't eaten for days."

Sitting on the porch steps, his chin in his hands, Crane waited for his father. He thought of a better life for himself, away from all this, the life of a tramp, him and his father riding boxcars, hitchhiking rides on the highways, living like free men, traveling the whole earth together, pals to the end.

Mr. Crane opened the front door and sat down beside his son. A big geyser of self-pity was rising in Dan's throat, pushing upward, finally bringing tears. He sobbed quietly. Mr. Crane put his arm around the boy's shoulder.

"Tell me, Dan. What's wrong?"

Dan couldn't think of anything, so he kept on crying, until an idea came forth. "I'm lonesome, Dad. Nobody likes me. That's why I don't eat, Dad. Because I'm lonesome all the time."

It took Mr. Crane five minutes to knock down this excuse and convince Dan that he was not lonesome, that, in fact, he had many friends, and that he was

truly loved by his own family.

He pulled out a handkerchief and stroked away Dan's tears. Dan watched the wrinkles in his father's forehead, the concern in his eyes. He was doing a lot better than he'd ever dreamed he could, and he decided to go all the way with it.

"I miss school, too, Dad," he lied. "I want to get back so I can learn to read and write."

"That's fine, kid. And you will, but don't rush it. You've got plenty of time."

Dan's arms went around his father's neck. "Gee, Dad. You're great. No foolin'."

Mr. Crane dug a half dollar from his pocket. "Go to the drugstore and get yourself a chocolate malted, Danny boy. Good for you. Full of protein."

As in a dream, Dan Crane walked to the drugstore. He climbed up on the stool at the fountain, the fifty-cent piece in his fist. He almost ordered a chocolate malted, too, but happily his eyes fell on a luscious picture on the mirror behind the counter, a triumph of ice cream, crushed nuts, maraschino cherries, sliced bananas, whipped cream and colored syrups.

"Banana split," he ordered.

At midnight, a frantic hunger got hold of Dan Crane, a hunger for simple things like bread and meat and beans. Lying in his bed, while across the room his brother Nick snorted softly, he felt the vast emptiness of his stomach.

Quietly, he slipped out of bed and tiptoed into the hall and down the stairs. Like a naked ghost, he drifted into the kitchen. His practiced hand made no sound as the refrigerator door opened. He looked over the lighted interior. The baked beans were in one bowl, the liver and bacon in another. Dan hugged them to his chest, enduring without a murmur the shock of their coldness against his skin.

A minute later he was in bed again, the food before him as he lay on his stomach, the covers over his head. It was very cold food, but that was as it should be, for he was Dan Crane of the Northwest Mounted, living in an igloo in the Far North, and he was eating bear meat, and Nick's snores were the howls of wolves outside the igloo. Crane of the Mounties ate two pieces of cold liver and three fistfuls of iced beans before sleep laid him low. He barely got the food out of bed and behind the radiator; indeed, his hand went limp and he had no strength to pull it back under the covers before a great wave of sleep carried him away.

It was morning when he awakened, and there it was again, her voice, coming up the staircase:

"Up, Danny boy. Breakfast!"

Jeepers, what a dame. Dan Crane moaned. He wouldn't eat. He never wanted to eat again.

## ~~The First Time I Saw Paris~~

I WAS COMING along the Avenue George V about eight of an evening, wading through a river of heat, coat over my shoulder, wondering how in the hell those Frenchmen did it, all day long neat as penguins in starched collars and neckties, and their women forever chic in bell-shaped dresses, some wearing furs even in the heat. But most of the chicks in furs were Americans, the mink stoles a badge of global identification, as positive as the Stars and Stripes, meaning we're off to Maxim's and then a strip joint, absolutely naked, Darling, and when we got back to the hotel Harry was like a boy again.

Then on this corner leaning against the wall of the French Red Cross was this old woman, old as Paris, the oldest and lousiest and ugliest human being I ever saw