

THE DEATH OF JACK HAMILTON

Stephen King

Want you to get one thing straight from the start: wasn't nobody on earth didn't like my pal Johnnie Dillinger, except Melvin Purvis of the F.B.I. Purvis was J. Edgar Hoover's right-hand man, and he hated Johnnie like poison. Everyone else—well, Johnnie had a way of making folks like him, that's all. And he had a way of making people laugh. God makes it come right in the end, that's something he used to say. And how can you not like a guy with that kind of philosophy?

But people don't want to let a man like that die. You'd be surprised how many folks still say it wasn't Johnnie the Feds knocked down in Chicago beside the Biograph Theater on July 22, 1934. After all, it was Melvin Purvis who'd been in charge of hunting Johnnie down, and, besides being mean, Purvis was a goddam fool (the sort of man who'd try to piss out a window without remembering to open it first). You won't hear no better from me, either. Little fag of a dandy, how I hated him! How we all did!

We got away from Purvis and the Gees after the shootout at Little Bohemia, Wisconsin—all of us! The biggest mystery of the year was how that goddam pansy ever kept his job. Johnnie once said, "J. Edgar probably can't get that good a blow job from a dame." How we laughed! Sure, Purvis got Johnnie in the end, but only after setting an ambush outside the Biograph and shooting him in the back while he was running down an alley. He fell down in the muck and the cat shit and said, "How's this, then?" and died.

Still folks won't believe it. Johnnie was handsome, they say, looked almost like a movie star. The fella the Gees shot outside the Biograph had a fat face, all swollen up and bloated like a cooked sausage. Johnnie was barely thirty-one, they say, and the mug the cops shot that night looked forty, easy! Also (and here they drop their voices to a whisper), everyone knows John Dillinger had a pecker the size of a Louisville Slugger. That fella Purvis ambushed outside the Biograph didn't have nothing but the standard six inches. And then there's the matter of that scar on his upper lip. You can see it clear as day in the morgue photographs (like the one where some yo-yo is holding up my old pal's head and looking all solemn, as if to

tell the world once and for all that Crime Does Not Pay). The scar cuts the side of Johnnie's mustache in two. Everyone knows John Dillinger never had a scar like that, people say; just look at any of the other pictures. God knows there's enough of them.

There's even a book that says Johnnie didn't die—that he lived on long after the rest of his running buddies, and finished up in Mexico, living in a haci and pleasing any number of senoras and señoritas with his oversized tool. The book claims that my old pal died on November 20, 1963—two days before Kennedy—at the ripe old age of sixty, and it wasn't no federal bullet that took him off but a plain old heart attack, that John Dillinger died in bed.

It's a nice story, but it ain't true.

Johnnie's face looks big in those last photos because he'd really packed on the pounds. He was the type who eats when he's nervous, and after Jack Hamilton died, in Aurora, Illinois, Johnnie felt he was next. Said as much, in that gravel pit where we took poor old Jack.

As for his tool—well, I'd known Johnnie ever since we met at Pendleton Reformatory in Indiana. I saw him dressed and undressed, and Homer Van Meter is here to tell you that he had a good one, but not an especially great one. (I'll tell you who had a great one, if you want to know: Dock Barker—the mama's boy! Ha!)

Which brings me to the scar on Johnnie's upper lip, the one you can see cutting through his mustache in those pictures where he's lying on the cooling board. The reason the scar doesn't show in any of Johnnie's other pictures is that he got it near the end. It happened in Aurora, while Jack (Red) Hamilton, our old pal, was on his deathbed. That's what I want to tell you about: how Johnnie Dillinger got the scar on his upper lip.

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Me and Johnnie and Red Hamilton got away from the Little Bohemia shootout through the kitchen windows in back, making our way down the side of the lake while Purvis and his idiots were still pouring lead into the front of the lodge. Boy, I hope the kraut who owned the place had insurance! The first car we found belonged to an elderly neighbor couple, and it wouldn't start. We had better luck with the second—a Ford coupe that belonged to a carpenter just up the road. Johnnie put him in the driver's seat, and he chauffeured us a good way back toward St. Paul. Then he was invited to step out—which he did quite willingly—and I took over.

We crossed the Mississippi about twenty miles downriver from St. Paul, and although the local cops were all on the lookout for what they called the Dillinger Gang, I think we would have been all right if Jack Hamilton hadn't lost his hat while we were making our escape. He was sweating like a pig—he always did when he was nervous—and when he found a rag on the backseat of the carpenter's car he whipped it into a kind of rope and tied it around his head, Injun style. That was what caught the eye of those cops parked on the Wisconsin side of the Spiral Bridge as we went past them, and they came after us for a closer look.

That might have been the end of us right there, but Johnnie always had the Devil's own luck—until the Biograph, anyway. He put a cattle truck right between us and them, and the cops couldn't get past.

“Step on it, Homer!” Johnnie shouts at me. He was in the backseat, and in rare good humor from the sound of him. “Make it walk!”

I did, too, and we left the cattle truck in the dust, with those cops stuck behind it. So long, Mother, I'll write when I get work. Ha!

Once it seemed we had them buried for good, Jack says, “Slow down, you damned fool—no sense getting picked up for speeding.”

So I slowed down to thirty-five and for a quarter of an hour everything was fine. We were talking about Little Bohemia, and whether or not Lester (the one they were always calling Baby Face)

might have gotten away, when all at once there's the crackle of rifles and pistols, and the sound of bullets whining off the pavement. It was those hick cops from the bridge. They'd caught up, creeping easy the last ninety or a hundred yards, and were close enough now to be shooting for the tires—they probably weren't entirely sure, even then, that it was Dillinger.

They weren't in doubt for long. Johnnie broke out the back window of the Ford with the butt of his pistol and started shooting back. I mashed the gas pedal again and got that Ford all the way up to fifty, which was a tearing rush in those days. There wasn't much traffic, but what there was I passed any way I could—on the left, on the right, in the ditch. Twice I felt the driver's-side wheels go up, but we never tipped. Nothing like a Ford when it came to a getaway. Once Johnnie wrote to Henry Ford himself. "When I'm in a Ford, I can make any car take my dust," he told Mr. Ford, and we surely dusted them that day.

We paid a price, though. There were these spink! spink! spink! noises, and a crack ran up the windshield and a slug—I'm pretty sure it was a .45—fell dead on the dashboard. It looked like a big black elm beetle.

Jack Hamilton was in the passenger seat. He got his tommy gun off the floor and was checking the drum, ready to lean out the window, I imagine, when there came another of those spink! noises. Jack says, "Oh! Bastard! I'm hit!" That bullet had to have come in the busted back window and how it missed Johnnie to hit Jack I don't know.

"Are you all right?" I shouted. I was hung over the wheel like a monkey and driving like one, too, very likely. I passed a Coulee Dairy truck on the right, honking all the time, yelling for that white-coat-farmer-son-of-a-bitch to get out of my road. "Jack, are you all right?"

"I'm okay, I'm fine!" he says, and shoves himself and his sub gun out the window, almost to his waist. Only, at first the milk truck was in the way. I could see the driver in the mirror, gawking at us from under his little hat. And when I looked over at Jack as he leaned out I could

see a hole, just as neat and round as something you'd draw with a pencil, in the middle of his overcoat. There was no blood, just that little black hole.

"Never mind Jack, just run the son of a bitch!" Johnnie shouted at me.

I ran it. We gained maybe half a mile on the milk truck, and the cops stuck behind it the whole while because there was a guardrail on one side and a line of slowpoke traffic coming the other way. We turned hard, around a sharp curve, and for a moment both the milk truck and the police car were out of sight. Suddenly, on the right, there was a gravel road all grown in with weeds.

"In there!" Jack gasps, falling back into the passenger seat, but I was already turning in.

It was an old driveway. I drove about seventy yards, over a little rise and down the other side, ending at a farmhouse that looked long empty. I killed the engine, and we all got out and stood behind the car.

"If they come, we'll give em a show," Jack says. "I ain't going to no electric chair like Harry Pierpont."

But no one came, and after ten minutes or so we got back in the car and drove out to the main road, all slow and careful. And that's when I saw something I didn't like much. "Jack," I says, "you're bleeding out your mouth. Look out or it'll be on your shirt."

Jack wiped his mouth with the big finger of his right hand, looked at the blood on it, and then gave me a smile that I still see in my dreams: big and broad and scared to death. "I just bit the inside of my cheek," says he. "I'm all right."

"You sure?" Johnnie asks. "You sound kind of funny."

“I can’t catch all my breath just yet,” Jack says. He wiped his big finger across his mouth again and there was less blood, and that seemed to satisfy him. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“Turn back toward the Spiral Bridge, Homer,” Johnnie says, and I did like he told me. Not all the stories about Johnnie Dillinger are true, but he could always find his way home, even after he didn’t have no home no more, and I always trusted him.

We were once again doing a perfectly legal parson-go-to-meeting thirty miles per, when Johnnie saw a Texaco station and told me to turn off to the right. We were soon on country gravel roads, Johnnie calling lefts and rights, even though all the roads looked the same to me: just wheel ruts running between clapped-out cornfields. The roads were muddy, and there were still scraps of snow in some of the fields. Every now and then there’d be some hick kid watching us go by. Jack was getting quieter and quieter. I asked him how he was doing and he said, “I’m all right.”

“Yes, well, we ought to get you looked at when we cool off a little,” Johnnie said. “And we have to get your coat mended, too. With that hole in it, it looks like somebody shot you!” He laughed, and so did I. Even Jack laughed. Johnnie could always cheer you up.

“I don’t think it went deep,” Jack said, just as we came out on Route 43. “I’m not bleeding out of my mouth anymore—look.” He turned to show Johnnie his finger, which now just had a maroon smear on it. But when he twisted back into his seat blood poured out of his mouth and nose.

“I think it went deep enough,” Johnnie said. “We’ll take care of you—if you can still talk, you’re likely fine.”

“Sure,” Jack said. “I’m fine.” His voice was smaller than ever.

“Fine as a fiddler’s fuck,” I said.

“Aw, shut up, you dummocks,” he said, and we all had a laugh. They laughed at me a lot. It was all in fun.

About five minutes after we got back on the main road, Jack passed out. He slumped against the window, and a thread of blood trickled from one corner of his mouth and smeared on the glass. It reminded me of swatting a mosquito that’s had its dinner—the claret everywhere. Jack still had the rag on his head, but it had gone crooked. Johnny took it off and cleaned the blood from Jack’s face with it. Jack muttered and raised his hands as if to push Johnnie away, but they dropped back into his lap.

“Those cops will have radioed ahead,” Johnnie says. “If we go to St. Paul, we’re finished. That’s what I think. How about you, Homer?”

“The same,” I says. “What does that leave? Chicago?”

“Yep,” he says. “Only first we have to ditch this motor. They’ll have the plates by now. Even if they didn’t, it’s bad luck. It’s a damn hoodoo.”

“What about Jack?” I says.

“Jack will be all right,” he says, and I knew to say no more on the subject.

We stopped about a mile down the road, and Johnnie shot out the front tire of the hoodoo Ford while Jack leaned against the hood, looking pale and sick.

When we needed a car, it was always my job to flag one down. “People who wouldn’t stop for any of the rest of us will stop for you,” Johnnie said once. “Why is that, I wonder?”

Harry Pierpont answered him. This was back in the days when it was still the Pierpont Gang instead of the Dillinger Gang. “Because he looks like a Homer,” he said. “Wasn’t ever anyone looked so much like a Homer as Homer Van Meter does.”

We all laughed at that, and now here I was again, and this time it was really important. You'd have to say life or death.

Three or four cars went by and I pretended to be fiddling with the tire. A farm truck was next, but it was too slow and waddly. Also, there were some fellas in the back. Driver slows down and says, "You need any help, amigo?"

"I'm fine," I says. "Workin' up a appetite for lunch. You go right on."

He gives me a laugh and on he went. The fellas in the back also waved.

Next up was another Ford, all by its lonesome. I waved my arms for them to stop, standing where they couldn't help but see that flat shoe. Also, I was giving them a grin. That big one that says I'm just a harmless Homer by the side of the road.

It worked. The Ford stopped. There was three folks inside, a man and a young woman and a fat baby. A family.

"Looks like you got a flat there, partner," the man says. He was wearing a suit and a topcoat, both clean but not what you'd call Grade A.

"Well, I don't know how bad it can be," I says, "when it's only flat on the bottom."

We was still laughing over that just like it was new when Johnnie and Jack come out of the trees with their guns drawn.

"Just hold still, sir," Jack says. "No one is going to get hurt."

The man looked at Jack, looked at Johnnie, looked at Jack again. Then his eyes went back to Johnnie and his mouth dropped open. I seen it a thousand times, but it always tickled me.

"You're Dillinger!" he gasps, and then shoots his hands up.

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Johnnie says, and grabs one of the man’s hands out of the air. “Get those mitts down, would you?”

Just as he did, another two or three cars came along—country-go-to-town types, sitting up straight as sticks in their old muddy sedans. We didn’t look like nothing but a bunch of folks at the side of the road getting ready for a tire-changing party.

Jack, meanwhile, went to the driver’s side of the new Ford, turned off the switch, and took the keys. The sky was white that day, as if with rain or snow, but Jack’s face was whiter.

“What’s your name, Ma’am?” Jack asks the woman. She was wearing a long gray coat and a cute sailor’s cap.

“Deelie Francis,” she says. Her eyes were as big and dark as plums. “That’s Roy. He’s my husband. Are you going to kill us?”

Johnnie give her a stern look and says, “We are the Dillinger Gang, Mrs. Francis, and we have never killed anyone.” Johnnie always made this point. Harry Pierpont used to laugh at him and ask him why he wasted his breath, but I think Johnnie was right to do that. It’s one of the reasons he’ll be remembered long after the straw-hat-wearing little pansy is forgot.

“That’s right,” Jack says. “We just rob banks, and not half as many as they say. And who is this fine little man?” He chucked the kiddo under the chin. He was fat, all right; looked like W. C. Fields.

“That’s Buster,” Deelie Francis says.

“Well, he’s a regular little bouncer, ain’t he?” Jack smiled. There was blood on his teeth. “How old is he? Three or so?”

“Just barely two and a half,” Mrs. Francis says proudly.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, but he’s big for his age. Mister, are you all right? You’re awful pale. And there’s blood on your—”

Johnnie speaks up then. “Jack, can you drive this one into the trees?” He pointed at the carpenter’s old Ford.

“Sure,” Jack says.

“Flat tire and all?”

“You just try me. It’s just that ... I’m awful thirsty. Ma’am—Missus Francis—do you have anything to drink?”

She turned around and bent over—not easy with that horse of a baby in her arms—and got a thermos from the back.

Another couple of cars went puttering by. The folks inside waved, and we waved back. I was still grinning fit to split, trying to look just as Homer as a Homer could be. I was worried about Jack and didn’t know how he could stay on his feet, let alone tip up that thermos and swig what was inside. Iced tea, she told him, but he seemed not to hear. When he handed it back to her, there were tears rolling down his cheeks. He thanked her, and she asked him again if he was all right.

“I am now,” Jack says. He got into the hoodoo Ford and drove it into the bushes, the car jouncing up and down on the tire Johnnie had shot out.

“Why couldn’t you have shot out a back one, you goddam fool?” Jack sounded angry and out of breath. Then he wrestled the car into the trees and out of sight, and came back, walking slow and looking at his feet, like an old man on ice.

“All right,” Johnnie says. He’d discovered a rabbit’s foot on Mr. Francis’s key ring, and was working it in a way that made me know that Mr. Francis wasn’t ever going to see that Ford again. “Now, we’re all friends here, and we’re going to take a little ride.”

Johnnie drove. Jack sat in the passenger seat. I squeezed in back with the Francises and tried to get the piglet to shoot me a grin.

“When we get to the next little town,” Johnnie says to the Francis family in the backseat, “we’re going to drop you off with enough for bus fare to get you where you were going. We’ll take the car. We won’t hurt it a bit, and if no one shoots any bullet holes in it you’ll get it back good as new. One of us’ll phone you where it is.”

“We haven’t got a phone yet,” Deelie says. It was really a whine. She sounded like the kind of woman who needs a smack every second week or so to keep her tits up. “We’re on the list, but those telephone people are slower than cold molasses.”

“Well, then,” Johnnie says, good-humored and not at all perplexed, “we’ll give the cops a call, and they’ll get in touch. But if you squawk, you won’t ever get it back in running shape.”

Mr. Francis nodded as if he believed every word. Probably he did. This was the Dillinger Gang, after all.

Johnnie pulled in at a Texaco, gassed up, and bought soda pops all around. Jack drank a bottle of grape like a man dying of thirst in the desert, but the woman wouldn’t let Master Piglet have his. Not so much as a swallow. The kid was holding his hands out for it and bawling.

“He can’t have pop before his lunch,” she says to Johnnie, “what’s wrong with you?”

Jack was leaning his head against the glass of the passenger window with his eyes shut. I thought he’d passed out again, but he says, “Shut that brat up, missus, or I will.”

“I think you’ve forgotten whose car you’re in,” she says, all haughty.

“Give him his pop, you bitch,” Johnnie says. He was still smiling, but now it was his other smile. She looked at him and the color in her

cheeks disappeared. And that's how Master Piglet got his Nehi, lunch or no lunch. Twenty miles farther on, we dropped them off in some little town and went on our way toward Chicago.

"A man who marries a woman like that deserves all he gets," Johnnie remarked, "and he'll get plenty."

"She'll call the law," Jack says, still without opening his eyes.

"Never will," Johnnie says, as confident as ever. "Wouldn't spare the nickel." And he was right. We saw only two blue beetles before we got into Chi, both going the other way, and neither one of them so much as slowed down to look at us. It was Johnnie's luck. As for Jack, you had only to look at him to know that his supply of luck was running out fast. By the time we got to the Loop, he was delirious and talking to his mother.

"Homer!" Johnnie says, in that wide-eyed way that always used to tickle me. Like a girl doing a flirt.

"What!" I says, giving him the glad eye right back.

"We got no place to go. This is worse than St. Paul."

"Go to Murphy's," Jack says without opening his eyes. "I want a cold beer. I'm thirsty."

"Murphy's," Johnnie says. "You know, that's not a bad idea."

Murphy's was an Irish saloon on the South Side. Sawdust, a steam table, two bartenders, three bouncers, friendly girls at the bar, and a room upstairs where you could take them. More rooms in the back, where people sometimes met, or cooled off for a day or two. We knew four places like it in St. Paul, but only a couple in Chi. I parked the Francises' Ford up in the alley. Johnnie was in the backseat with our delirious friend—we weren't yet ready to call him our dying friend—and he was holding Jack's head against the shoulder of his coat.

“Go in and get Brian Mooney off the bar,” Johnnie says.

“What if he isn’t there?”

“Then I don’t know,” Johnnie says.

“Harry!” Jack shouts, presumably calling for Harry Pierpont. “That whore you set me up with has given me the goddam clap!”

“Go on,” Johnnie says to me, soothing his hand through Jack’s hair just like a mother.

Well, Brian Mooney was there—Johnnie’s luck again—and we got a room for the night, although it cost two hundred dollars, which was pretty dear, considering the view was an alley and the toilet was at the far end of the hall.

“You boys are hotter than hell,” Brian says. “Mickey McClure would have sent you right back into the street. There’s nothing in the papers and on the radio but Little Bohemia.”

Jack sat down on a cot in the corner, and got himself a cigarette and a cold draft beer. The beer brought him back wonderful; he was almost himself again. “Did Lester get away?” he asked Mooney. I looked over at him when he spoke up and saw a terrible thing. When he took a drag off his Lucky and inhaled, a little puff come out of the hole in the back of his overcoat like a smoke signal.

“You mean Baby Face?” Mooney asked.

“You don’t want to call him that where he can hear you,” Johnnie said, grinning. He was happier now that Jack had come back around, but he hadn’t seen that puff of smoke coming out of his back. I wished I hadn’t, either.

“He shot a bunch of Gees and got away,” Mooney said. “At least one of the Gees is dead, maybe two. Anyway, it just makes it that much

worse. You can stay here tonight, but you have to be gone by tomorrow afternoon.”

He went out. Johnnie waited a few seconds, then stuck his tongue out at the door like a little kid. I got laughing—Johnnie could always make me laugh. Jack tried to laugh, too, but quit. It hurt him too much.

“Time to get you out of that coat and see how bad it is, partner,” Johnnie said.

It took us five minutes. By the time he was down to his undershirt, all three of us were soaked with sweat. Four or five times I had to put my hands over Jack’s mouth to muffle him. I got blood all over my cuffs.

There was no more than a rose on the lining of his overcoat, but his white shirt had gone half red and his undershirt was soaked right through. Sticking up on the left side, just below his shoulder blade, was a lump with a hole in the middle of it, like a little volcano.

“No more,” Jack says, crying. “Please, no more.”

“That’s all right,” Johnnie says, running the palm of his hand through Jack’s hair again. “We’re all done. You can lie down now. Go to sleep. You need your rest.”

“I can’t,” he says. “It hurts too much. Oh, God, if you only knew how it hurts! And I want another beer. I’m thirsty. Only don’t put so much salt in it this time. Where’s Harry, where’s Charlie?”

Harry Pierpont and Charlie Makley, I guessed—Charlie was the Fagin who’d turned Harry and Jack out when they weren’t no more than snotnoses.

“There he goes again,” Johnnie says. “He needs a doc, Homer, and you’re the boy who has to find one.”

“Jesus, Johnnie, this ain’t my town!”

“Doesn’t matter,” Johnnie says. “If I go out, you know what’s going to happen. I’ll write down some names and addresses.”

It ended up being just one name and one address, and when I got there it was all for nothing. The doc (a pill-roller whose mission was giving abortions and acid melts to erase fingerprints) had happied himself to death on his own laudanum two months before.

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We stayed in that cheesy room behind Murphy’s for five days. Mickey McClure showed up and tried to turn us out, but Johnnie talked to him in the way that Johnnie had—when he turned on the charm, it was almost impossible to tell Johnnie no. And, besides, we paid. By the fifth night, the rent was four hundred, and we were forbidden to so much as show our faces in the taproom for fear someone would see us. No one did, and as far as I know the cops never found out where we were during those five days in late April. I wonder how much Mickey McClure made on the deal—it was more than a grand. We pulled bank jobs where we took less.

I ended up going around to half a dozen scrape artists and hairline-changers. There wasn’t one of them who would come and look at Jack. Too hot, they said. It was the worst time of all, and even now I hate to think about it. Let’s just say that me and Johnnie found out what Jesus felt like when Peter Pilot denied Him three times in the Garden of Gethsemane.

For a while, Jack was in and out of delirium, and then he was mostly in. He talked about his mother, and Harry Pierpont, and then about Boobie Clark, a famous fag from Michigan City we’d all known.

“Boobie tried to kiss me,” Jack said one night, over and over, until I thought I’d go nuts. Johnnie never minded, though. He just sat there beside Jack on the cot, stroking his hair. He’d cut out a square of cloth in Jack’s undershirt around the bullet hole, and kept painting it

with Mercurochrome, but the skin had already turned gray-green, and a smell was coming out of the hole. Just a whiff of it was enough to make your eyes water.

“That’s gangrene,” Mickey McClure said on a trip to pick up the rent. “He’s a goner.”

“He’s no goner,” Johnnie said.

Mickey leaned forward with his fat hands on his fat knees. He smelled Jack’s breath like a cop with a drunk, then pulled back. “You better find a doc fast. Smell it in a wound, that’s bad. Smell it on a man’s breath ...” Mickey shook his head and walked out.

“Fuck him,” Johnnie said to Jack, still stroking his hair. “What does he know?”

Only, Jack didn’t say nothing. He was asleep. A few hours later, after Johnnie and I had gone to sleep ourselves, Jack was on the edge of the bunk, raving about Henry Claudy, the warden at Michigan City. I-God Claudy, we used to call him, because it was always I-God I’ll do this and I-God you’ll do that. Jack was screaming that he’d kill Claudy if he didn’t let us out. That got someone pounding on the wall and yelling for us to shut that man up.

Johnnie sat next to Jack and talked to him and got him soothed down again.

“Homer?” Jack says after a while.

“Yes, Jack,” I says.

“Won’t you do the trick with the flies?” he asks.

I was surprised he remembered it. “Well,” I says, “I’d be happy to, but there ain’t no flies in here. Around these parts, flies ain’t in season just yet.”

In a low, hoarse voice, Jack sang, "There may be flies on some of you guys but there ain't no flies on me. Right, Chummah?"

I had no idea who Chummah was, but I nodded and patted his shoulder. It was hot and sticky. "That's right, Jack."

There were big purple circles under his eyes and dried spit on his lips. He was already losing weight. I could smell him, too. The smell of piss, which wasn't so bad, and the smell of gangrene, which was. Johnnie, though, never gave no sign that he smelled anything bad at all.

"Walk on your hands for me, John," Jack said. "Like you used to."

"In a minute," Johnnie said. He poured Jack a glass of water. "Drink this first. Wet your whistle. Then I'll see if I can still get across the room upside down. Remember when I used to run on my hands in the shirt factory? After I ran all the way to the gate, they stuck me in the hole."

"I remember," Jack said.

Johnnie didn't do no walking on his hands that night. By the time he got the glass of water to Jack's lips, the poor bugger had gone back to sleep with his head on Johnnie's shoulder.

"He's gonna die," I said.

"He's not," Johnnie said.

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The next morning, I asked Johnnie what we were going to do. What we could do.

"I got one more name out of McClure. Joe Moran. McClure says he was the go-between on the Bremer kidnapping. If he'll fix Jack up, it's worth a thousand to me."

“I got six hundred,” I said. And I’d give it up, but not for Jack Hamilton. Jack had gone beyond needing a doctor; what Jack needed by then was a preacher. I did it for Johnnie Dillinger.

“Thanks, Homer,” he said. “I’ll be back in an hour. Meantime, you mind the baby.” But Johnnie looked bleak. He knew that if Moran wouldn’t help us we’d have to get out of town. It would mean taking Jack back to St. Paul and trying there. And we knew what going back in a stolen Ford would likely mean. It was the spring of 1934 and all three of us—me, Jack, and especially Johnnie—were on J. Edgar Hoover’s list of “public enemies.”

“Well, good luck,” I says. “See you in the funny pages.”

He went out. I mooned around. I was mighty sick of the room by then. It was like being back in Michigan City, only worse. Because when you were in stir they’d done the worst they could to you. Here, hiding out in the back of Murphy’s, things could always get worse.

Jack muttered, then he dropped off again.

There was a chair at the foot of the cot, with a cushion. I took the cushion and sat down beside Jack. It wouldn’t take long, I didn’t think. And when Johnnie came back I’d only have to say that poor old Jack took one final breath and just copped out. The cushion would be back on the chair. Really, it would be doing Johnnie a favor. Jack, too.

“I see you, Chummah,” Jack says suddenly. I tell you, it scared the living hell out of me.

“Jack!” I says, putting my elbows on that cushion. “How you doing?”

His eyes drifted closed. “Do the trick ... with the flies,” he says, and then he was asleep again. But he’d woken up at just the right time; if he hadn’t, Johnnie would have found a dead man on that cot.

*

When Johnnie finally did come back, he practically busted down the door. I had my gun out. He saw it and laughed. "Put away the bean shooter, pal, and pack up your troubles in your old kit bag!"

"What's up?"

"We're getting out of here, that's what." He looked five years younger. "High time, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah."

"He been all right while I was gone?"

"Yeah," I said. The cushion lying on the chair had SEE YOU IN CHICAGO written on it in needlework.

"No change?"

"No change. Where are we going?"

"Aurora," Johnnie said. "It's a little town upstate. We're going to move in with Volney Davis and his girlfriend." He leaned over the cot. Jack's red hair, thin to start with, had started falling out. It was on the pillow, and you could see the crown of his head, white as snow. "You hear that, Jack?" Johnnie shouts. "We're hot now, but we're going to cool off quick! You understand?"

"Walk on your hands like Johnnie Dillinger used to," Jack said, without opening his eyes.

Johnnie just kept smiling. He winked at me. "He understands," he said. "He's just not awake. You know?"

"Sure," I said.

*

On the ride up to Aurora, Jack sat against the window, his head flying up and then thumping against the glass every time we hit a

pothole. He was holding long, muttery conversations with folks we couldn't see. Once we were out of town, me and Johnnie had to roll down our windows. The smell was just too bad otherwise. Jack was rotting from the inside out, but he wouldn't die. I've heard it said that life is fragile and fleeting, but I don't believe it. It would be better if it was.

"That Dr. Moran was a crybaby," Johnnie said. We were in the woods by then, the city behind us. "I decided I didn't want no crybaby like him working on my partner. But I wasn't going to leave without something." Johnnie always travelled with a .38 pistol tucked into his belt. Now he pulled it out and showed it to me, the way he must have shown it to Dr. Moran. "I says, 'If I can't take away nothing else, Doc, I'll just have to take your life.' He seen I meant business, and he called someone up there. Volney Davis."

I nodded as if that name meant something to me. I found out later that Volney was another member of Ma Barker's gang. He was a pretty nice fella. So was Dock Barker. And Volney's girlfriend, the one they called Rabbits. They called her Rabbits because she dug herself out of prison a few times. She was the best of the lot. Aces. Rabbits, at least, tried to help poor old troublesome Jack. None of the others would—not the pill-rollers, the scrapers, the face artists, and certainly not Dr. Joseph (Crybaby) Moran.

The Barkers were on the run after a botched kidnapping; Dock's Ma had already left—gone all the way to Florida. The hideout in Aurora wasn't much—four rooms, no electricity, a privy out back—but it was better than Murphy's saloon. And, like I say, Volney's girlfriend at least tried to do something. That was on our second night there.

She set up kerosene lamps all around the bed, then sterilized a paring knife in a pot of boiling water. "If you boys feel pukey," she said, "you just choke it back until I'm done."

"We'll be okay," Johnnie said. "Won't we, Homer?"

I nodded, but I was queasy even before she got going. Jack was laying on his stomach, head turned to the side, muttering. It seemed he never stopped. Whatever room he happened to be in was filled with people only he could see.

“I hope so,” she says, “because once I start in, there’s no going back.” She looked up and seen Dock standing in the doorway. Volney Davis, too. “Go on, baldy,” she says to Dock, “and take-um heap big chief with you.” Volney Davis was no more a Indian than I was, but they used to rib him because he was born in the Cherokee Nation. Some judge had given him three years for stealing a pair of shoes, which was how he got into a life of crime.

Volney and Dock went out. When they were gone, Rabbits turned Jack over and then cut him open in a X, bearing down in a way I could barely stand to look at. I held Jack’s feet. Johnnie sat beside his head, trying to soothe him, but it didn’t do no good. When Jack started to scream, Johnnie put a dishtowel over his head and nodded for Rabbits to go on, all the time stroking Jack’s head and telling him not to worry, everything would be just fine.

That Rabbits. They call them frails, but there was nothing frail about her. Her hands never even shook. Blood, some of it black and clotted, come pouring out of the sunken place when she cut it. She cut deeper and then out came the pus. Some was white, but there was big green chunks which looked like boogers. That was bad. But when she got to the lung the smell was a thousand times worse. It couldn’t have been worse in France during the gas attacks.

Jack was gasping in these big whistling breaths. You could hear it in his throat, and from the hole in his back, too.

“You better hurry up,” Johnnie says. “He’s sprung a leak in his air hose.”

“You’re telling me,” she says. “The bullet’s in his lung. You just hold him down, handsome.”

In fact, Jack wasn't thrashing much. He was too weak. The sound of the air shrieking in and out of him kept getting thinner and thinner. It was hotter than hell with those lamps set up all around the bed, and the stink of the hot oil was almost as strong as the gangrene. I wish we'd thought to open a window before we got started, but it was too late by then.

Rabbits had a set of tongs, but she couldn't get them in the hole. "Fuck this!" she cried, and tossed them to one side, and then stuck her fingers into the bloody hole, reached around until she found the slug that was in there, pulled it out, and threw it to the floor. Johnnie started to bend over for it and she said, "You can get your souvenir later, handsome. For now just hold him."

She went to work packing gauze into the mess she'd made.

Johnnie lifted up the dishtowel and peeked underneath it. "Not a minute too soon," he told her with a grin. "Old Red Hamilton has turned a wee bit blue."

Outside, a car pulled into the driveway. It could have been the cops, for all we knew, but there wasn't nothing we could do about it then.

"Pinch this shut," she told me, and pointed at the hole with the gauze in it. "I ain't much of a seamstress, but I guess I can put in half a dozen."

I didn't want to get my hands anywhere near that hole, but I wasn't going to tell her no. I pinched it shut, and more watery pus ran out when I did. My midsection clenched up and I started making this gurk-gurk noise. I couldn't help it.

"Come on," she says, kind of smiling. "If you're man enough to pull the trigger, you're man enough to deal with a hole." Then she sewed him up with these big, looping overhand strokes—really punching the needle in. After the first two, I couldn't look.

“Thank you,” Johnnie told her when it was done. “I want you to know I’m going to take care of you for this.”

“Don’t go getting your hopes up,” she says. “I wouldn’t give him one chance in twenty.”

“He’ll pull through now,” Johnnie says.

Then Dock and Volney rushed back in. Behind them was another member of the gang—Buster Daggs or Draggs, I can’t remember which. Anyway, he’d been down to the phone they used at the Cities Service station in town, and he said the Gees had been busy back in Chicago, arresting anyone and everyone they thought might be connected to the Bremer kidnapping, which had been the Barker Gang’s last big job. One of the fellas they took was John J. (Boss) McLaughlin, a high mucky-muck in the Chicago political machine. Another was Dr. Joseph Moran, also known as the Crybaby.

“Moran’ll give this place up, just as sure as shit sticks to a blanket,” Volney says.

“Maybe it’s not even true,” Johnnie says. Jack was unconscious now. His red hair lay on the pillow like little pieces of wire. “Maybe it’s just a rumor.”

“You better not believe that,” Buster says. “I got it from Timmy O’Shea.”

“Who’s Timmy O’Shea? The Pope’s butt-wiper?” Johnnie says.

“He’s Moran’s nephew,” Dock says, and that kind of sealed the deal.

“I know what you’re thinking, handsome,” Rabbits says to Johnnie, “and you can stop thinking it right now. You put this fella in a car and go bumping him over those back roads between here and St. Paul, he’ll be dead by morning.”

“You could leave him,” Volney says. “The cops show up, they’ll have to take care of him.”

Johnnie sat there, sweat running down his face in streams. He looked tired, but he was smiling. Johnnie was always able to find a smile. “They’d take care of him, all right,” he says, “but they wouldn’t take him to any hospital. Stick a pillow over his face and sit down on it, most likely.” Which gave me a start, as I’m sure you’ll understand.

“Well, you better decide,” Buster says, “because they’ll have this joint surrounded by dawn. I’m getting the hell out.”

“You all go,” Johnnie says. “You, too, Homer. I’ll stay here with Jack.”

“Well, what the hell,” Dock says. “I’ll stay, too.”

“Why not?” Volney Davis says.

Buster Daggs or Draggs looked at them like they was crazy, but you know what? I wasn’t surprised a bit. That’s just the effect Johnnie had on people.

“I’ll stay, too,” I says.

“Well, I’m getting out,” Buster says.

“Fine,” Dock says. “Take Rabbits with you.”

“The hell you say,” Rabbits pipes up. “I feel like cooking.”

“Have you gone cuckoo?” Dock asks her. “It’s one o’clock in the morning, and you’re in blood right up to the elbows.”

“I don’t care what time it is, and blood washes off,” she says. “I’m making you boys the biggest breakfast you ever ate—eggs, bacon, biscuits, gravy, hash browns.”

“I love you, marry me,” Johnnie says, and we all laughed.

“Oh, hell,” Buster says. “If there’s breakfast, I’ll hang around.”

Which is how we all wound up staying put in that Aurora farmhouse, ready to die for a man who was already—whether Johnnie liked it or not—on his way out. We barricaded the front door with a sofa and some chairs, and the back door with the gas stove, which didn’t work anyway. Only the woodstove worked. Me and Johnnie got our tommy guns from the Ford, and Dock got some more from the attic. Also a crate of grenades, a mortar, and a crate of mortar shells. I bet the Army didn’t have as much stuff in those parts as we did. Ha-ha!

“Well, I don’t care how many of them we get, as long as that son of a bitch Melvin Purvis is one of them,” Dock says. By the time Rabbits actually got the grub on the table, it was almost the time farmers eat. We took it in shifts, two men always watching the long driveway. Buster raised the alarm once and we all rushed to our places, but it was only a milk truck on the main road. The Gees never came. You could call that bad info; I called it more of John Dillinger’s luck.

Jack, meanwhile, was on his not-so-merry way from bad to worse. By midafternoon of the next day, even Johnnie must have seen he couldn’t go on much longer, although he wouldn’t come right out and say so. It was the woman I felt bad for. Rabbits seen new pus oozing out between those big black stitches of hers, and she started crying. She just cried and cried. It was like she’d known Jack Hamilton her whole life.

“Never mind,” Johnnie said. “Chin up, beautiful. You did the best you could. Besides, he might still come around.”

“It’s cause I took the bullet out with my fingers,” she says. “I never should have done that. I knew better.”

“No,” I says, “it wasn’t that. It was the gangrene. The gangrene was already in there.”

“Bullshit,” Johnnie said, and looked at me hard. “An infection, maybe, but no gangrene. There isn’t any gangrene now.”

You could smell it in the pus. There wasn't nothing to say.

Johnnie was still looking at me. "Remember what Harry used to call you when we were in Pendleton?"

I nodded. Harry Pierpont and Johnnie were always the best of friends, but Harry never liked me. If not for Johnnie, he never would've taken me into the gang, which was the Pierpont Gang to begin with, remember. Harry thought I was a fool. That was another thing Johnnie would never admit, or even talk about. Johnnie wanted everyone to be friends.

"I want you to go out and wrangle up some big uns," Johnnie says, "just like you used to when you was on the Pendleton mat. Some big old buzzers." When he asked for that, I knew he finally understood Jack was finished.

Fly-Boy was what Harry Pierpont used to call me at Pendleton Reformatory, when we were all just kids and I used to cry myself to sleep with my head under my pillow so the screws wouldn't hear. Well, Harry went on and rode the lightning in Ohio State, so maybe I wasn't the only fool.

Rabbits was in the kitchen, cutting up vegetables for supper. Something was simmering on the stove. I asked her if she had thread, and she said I knew goddam well she did, hadn't I been right beside her when she sewed up my friend? You bet, I said, but that was black and I wanted white. Half a dozen pieces, about so long. And I held out my index fingers maybe eight inches apart. She wanted to know what I was going to do. I told her that if she was that curious she could watch right out the window over the sink.

"Ain't nothing out there but the privy," she says. "I got no interest in watching you do your personal business, Mr. Van Meter."

She had a bag hanging on the pantry door, and she rummaged through it and came out with a spool of white thread and cut me off six pieces. I thanked her kindly and then asked if she had a Band-

Aid. She took some out of the drawer right beside the sink—because, she said, she was always cutting her fingers. I took one, then went to the door.

*

I got in Pendleton for robbing wallets off the New York Central line with that same Charlie Makley—small world, ain't it? Ha! Anyhow, when it come to ways of keeping the bad boys busy, the reformatory at Pendleton, Indiana, was loaded. They had a laundry, a carpentry shop, and a clothes factory where the dubs made shirts and pants, mostly for the guards in the Indiana penal system. Some called it the shirt shop; some called it the shit shop. That's what I drew—and met both Johnnie and Harry Pierpont. Johnnie and Harry never had any problem “making the day,” but I was always coming up ten shirts short, or five pairs of trousers short, and being made to stand on the mat. The screws thought it was because I was always clowning around. Harry thought the same thing. The truth was that I was slow, and clumsy—which Johnnie seemed to understand. That was why I played around.

If you didn't make your day, you had to spend the next day in the guardhouse, where there was a rush mat, about two feet square. You had to take off everything but your socks and then stand there all day. If you stepped off the mat once, you got your ass paddled. If you stepped off twice, a screw held you while another worked you over. Step off a third time and it was a week in solitary. You were allowed all the water you wanted to drink, but that was a trick, because you were allowed only one toilet break in the course of the day. If you were caught standing there with piss running down your leg, you got a beating and a trip to the hole.

It was boring. Boring at Pendleton, boring at Michigan City, I-God's prison for big boys. Some fellows told themselves stories. Some fellows sang. Some made lists of all the women they were going to screw when they got out.

Me, I taught myself to rope flies.

A privy's a damned fine place for fly-roping. I took up my station outside the door, then proceeded to make loops in the pieces of thread Rabbits had given me. After that, there was nothing to it except not moving much. Those were the skills I'd learned on the mat. You don't forget them.

It didn't take long. Flies are out in early May, but they're slow flies. And anyone who thinks it's impossible to lasso a horsefly ... well, all I can say is, if you want a challenge, try mosquitoes.

I took three casts and got my first one. That was nothing; there were times on the mat when I'd spend half the morning before I got my first. Right after I snagged him, Rabbits cried out, "What in God's name are you doing? Is it magic?"

From a distance, it did look like magic. You have to imagine how it appeared to her, twenty yards away: man standing by a privy throws out a little piece of thread—at nothing, so far as you can see—but, instead of drifting to the ground, the thread hangs in midair! It was attached to a good-sized horsefly. Johnnie would have seen it, but Rabbits didn't have Johnnie's eyes.

I got the end of the thread and taped it to the handle of the privy door with the Band-Aid. Then I went after the next one. And the next. Rabbits came out to get a closer look, and I told her that she could stay if she was quiet, and she tried, but she wasn't good at being quiet and finally I had to tell her she was scaring off the game and send her back inside.

I worked the privy for an hour and a half—long enough that I couldn't smell it anymore. Then it started getting cold, and my flies were sluggish. I'd got five. By Pendleton standards, that was quite a herd, although not that many for a man standing next to a shithouse. Anyway, I had to get inside before it got too cold for them to stay airborne.

When I came walking slowly through the kitchen, Dock, Volney, and Rabbits were all laughing and clapping. Jack's bedroom was on the

other side of the house, and it was shadowy and dim. That was why I'd asked for white thread instead of black. I looked like a man with a handful of strings leading up to invisible balloons. Except that you could hear the flies buzzing—all mad and bewildered, like anything else that's been caught it don't know how.

"I be dog," Dock Barker says. "I mean it, Homer. Double dog. Where'd you learn to do that?"

"Pendleton Reformatory," I says.

"Who showed you?"

"Nobody," I said. "I just did it one day."

"Why don't they tangle the strings?" Volney asked. His eyes were as big as grapes. It tickled me, I tell you that.

"Dunno," I says. "They always fly in their own space and don't hardly ever cross. It's a mystery."

"Homer!" Johnnie yells from the other room. "If you got em, this'd be a good time to get in here with em!"

I started across the kitchen, tugging the flies along by their halters like a good fly cowboy, and Rabbits touched my arm. "Be careful," she says. "Your pal is going, and it's made your other pal crazy. He'll be better—after—but right now he's not safe."

I knew it better than she did. When Johnnie set his heart on a thing, he almost always got it. Not this time, though.

Jack was propped up on the pillows with his head in the corner, and although his face was white as paper, he was in his right mind again. He'd come around at the end, like folks sometimes do.

"Homer!" he says, just as bright as you could want. Then he sees the strings and laughs. It was a shrill, whistley laughter, not a bit right, and immediately he starts to cough. Coughing and laughing, all

mixed together. Blood comes out of his mouth—some splattered on my strings. “Just like Michigan City!” he says, and pounds his leg. More blood now, running down his chin and dripping onto his undershirt. “Just like old times!” He coughed again.

Johnnie’s face looked terrible. I could see he wanted me to get out of the bedroom before Jack tore himself apart; at the same time, he knew it didn’t matter a fiddler’s fuck, and if this was a way Jack could die happy, looking at a handful of roped shithouse flies, then so be it.

“Jack,” I says, “you got to be quiet.”

“Naw, I’m all right now,” he says, grinning and wheezing. “Bring em over here! Bring em over where I can see!” But before he could say any more he was coughing again, all bent over with his knees up, and the sheet, spattered with a spray of blood, like a trough between them.

I looked at Johnnie and he nodded. He’d passed beyond something in his mind. He beckoned me over. I went slowly, the strings in my hand, floating up, just white lines in the gloom. And Jack too tickled to know he was coughing his last.

“Let em go,” he says, in a wet and husky voice I could hardly understand. “I remember ...”

And so I did. I let the strings go. For a second or two, they stayed clumped together at the bottom—stuck together on the sweat from my palm—and then they drifted apart, hanging straight and upright in the air. I suddenly thought of Jack standing in the street after the Mason City bank job. He was firing his tommy gun and was covering me and Johnnie and Lester as we herded the hostages to the getaway car. Bullets flew all around him, and although he took a flesh wound, he looked like he’d live forever. Now he lay with his knees sticking up in a sheet filled with blood.

“Golly, look at em,” he says as the white strings rose up, all on their own.

“That ain’t all, either,” Johnnie says. “Watch this.” He then walked one step to the kitchen door, turned, and took a bow. He was grinning, but it was the saddest grin I ever saw in my life. All we did was the best we could; we couldn’t very well give him a last meal, could we? “Remember how I used to walk on my hands in the shirt shop?”

“Yeah! Don’t forget the spiel!” Jack says.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Johnnie says. “Now in the center ring for your delight and amazement, John Herbert Dillinger!” He said the “G” hard, the way his old man said it, the way he had said it himself before he got so famous. Then he clapped once and dived forward onto his hands. Buster Crabbe couldn’t have done it better. His pants slid up to his knees, showing the tops of his stockings and his shins. His change come out of his pockets and rattled away across the boards. He started walking across the floor that way, limber as ever, singing “Tra-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!” at the top of his voice. The keys from the stolen Ford fell out of his pocket, too. Jack was laughing in these big hoarse gusts—like he had the flu—and Dock Barker and Rabbits and Volney, all crowded in the doorway, were also laughing. Fit to split. Rabbits clapped her hands and called “Bravo! Encore!” Above my head the white threads were still floating on, only drifting apart a little at a time. I was laughing along with the rest, and then I saw what was going to happen and I stopped.

“Johnnie!” I shouted. “Johnnie, look out for your gun! Look out for your gun!”

It was that goddam .38 he kept tucked into the top of his pants. It was working free of his belt.

“Huh?” he said, and then it dropped onto the floor on top of the keys and went off. A .38 isn’t the world’s loudest gun, but it was loud enough in that back bedroom. And the flash was plenty bright. Dock yelled and Rabbits screamed. Johnnie didn’t say nothing, just did a complete somersault and fell flat on his face. His feet came down with a crash, almost hitting the foot of the bed Jack Hamilton was

dying in. Then he just lay there. I ran to him, brushing the white threads aside.

At first I thought he was dead, because when I turned him over there was blood all over his mouth and his cheek. Then he sat up. He wiped his face, looked at the blood, then looked at me.

“Holy shit, Homer, did I just shoot myself?” Johnnie says.

“I think you did,” I says.

“How bad is it?”

Before I could tell him I didn't know, Rabbits pushed me to the side and wiped away the blood with her apron. She looked at him hard for a second or two, and then she says, “You're all right. It's just a scrape.” Only we seen later, when she dabbled him up with the iodine, that it was actually two scrapes. The bullet cut through the skin over his lip on the right side, flew through maybe two inches of air, then it cut him again on the cheekbone, right beside his eye. After that it went into the ceiling, but before it did it plugged one of my flies. I know that's hard to believe, but it's true, I swear. The fly lay there on the floor in a little heap of white thread, nothing left of it but a couple of legs.

“Johnnie?” Dock says. “I think I got some bad news for you, partner.” He didn't have to tell us what it was. Jack was still sitting up, but now his head was bowed over so far that his hair was touching the sheet between his knees. While we were checking to see how bad Johnnie was hurt, Jack had died.

*

Dock told us to take the body to a gravel pit about two miles farther down the road, just past the Aurora town line. There was a bottle of lye under the sink, and Rabbits gave it to us. “You know what to do with this, don't you?” she asks.

“Sure,” Johnnie says. He had one of her Band-Aids stuck on his upper lip, over that place where his mustache never grew in later on. He sounded listless and he wouldn’t meet her eye.

“Make him do it, Homer,” she says, then jerked her thumb toward the bedroom, where Jack was laying wrapped up in the bloodstained sheet. “If they find that one and identify him before you get clear, it’ll make things just so much worse for you. Us, too, maybe.”

“You took us in when nobody else would,” Johnnie says, “and you won’t live to regret it.”

She gave him a smile. Women almost always fell for Johnnie. I’d thought this one was an exception because she was so businesslike, but now I seen she wasn’t. She’d just kept it all business because she knew she wasn’t much in the looks department. Also, when a bunch of men with guns are cooped up like we were, a woman in her right mind doesn’t want to make trouble among them.

“We’ll be gone when you get back,” Volney says. “Ma keeps talking about Florida, she got her eye on a place in Lake Weir—”

“Shut up, Vol,” Dock says, and gives him a hard poke in the shoulder.

“Anyway, we’re gettin’ out of here,” he says, rubbing the sore place. “You ought to get out, too. Take your luggage. Don’t even pull in on your way back. Things can change in a hurry.”

“Okay,” Johnnie says.

“At least he died happy,” Volney says. “Died laughin’.”

I didn’t say nothing. It was coming home to me that Red Hamilton—my old running buddy—was really dead. It made me awful sad. I turned my mind to how the bullet had just grazed Johnnie (and then gone on to kill a fly instead), thinking that would cheer me up. But it didn’t. It only made me feel worse.

Dock shook my hand, then Johnnie's. He looked pale and glum. "I don't know how we ended up like this, and that's the truth," he says. "When I was a boy, the only goddam thing I wanted was to be a railroad engineer."

"Well, I'll tell you something," Johnnie says. "We don't have to worry. God makes it all come right in the end."

*

We took Jack on his last ride, wrapped up in a bloodstained sheet and pushed into the back of that stolen Ford. Johnnie drove us to the far side of the pit, all bump and jounce (when it comes to rough riding, I'll take a Terraplane over a Ford any day). Then he killed the engine and touched the Band-Aid riding his upper lip. He says, "I used up the last of my luck today, Homer. They'll get me now."

"Don't talk like that," I says.

"Why not? It's true." The sky above us was white and full of rain. I reckoned we'd have a muddy splash of it between Aurora and Chicago (Johnnie had decided we should go back there because the Feds would be expecting us in St. Paul). Somewhere crows was calling. The only other sound was the ticktock of the cooling engine. I kept looking into the mirror at the wrapped-up body in the backseat. I could see the bumps of elbows and knees, the fine red spatters where he'd bent over, coughing and laughing, at the end.

"Look at this, Homer," Johnnie says, and points to the .38, which was tucked back in his belt. Then he twiddled Mr. Francis's key ring with the tips of his fingers, where the prints were growing back in spite of all his trouble. There were four or five keys on the ring besides the one to the Ford. And that lucky rabbit's foot. "Butt of the gun hit this when it come down," he says. He nodded his head. "Hit my very own lucky piece. And now my luck's gone. Help me with him."

We lugged Jack to the gravel slope. Then Johnnie got the bottle of lye. It had a big brown skull and crossbones on the label.

Johnnie knelt down and pulled the sheet back. “Get his rings,” he says, and I pulled them off. Johnnie put them in his pocket. We ended up getting forty-five dollars for them in Calumet City, although Johnnie swore up and down that the little one had a real diamond in it.

“Now hold out his hands.”

I did, and Johnnie poured a cap of lye over the tip of each finger. That was one set of prints wasn’t ever going to come back. Then he leaned over Jack’s face and kissed him on the forehead. “I hate to do this, Red, but I know you’d do the same to me if it’d gone the other way.”

He then poured the lye over Jack’s cheeks and mouth and brow. It hissed and bubbled and turned white. When it started to eat through his closed eyelids, I turned away. And of course none of it done no good; the body was found by a farmer after a load of gravel. A pack of dogs had knocked away most of the stones we covered him with and were eating what was left of his hands and face. As for the rest of him, there were enough scars for the cops to I.D. him as Jack Hamilton.

It was the end of Johnnie’s luck, all right. Every move he made after that—right up to the night Purvis and his badge-carrying gunsels got him at the Biograph—was a bad one. Could he have just thrown up his hands that night and surrendered? I’d have to say no. Purvis meant to have him dead one way or the other. That’s why the Gees never told the Chicago cops Johnnie was in town.

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I’ll never forget the way Jack laughed when I brought them flies in on their strings. He was a good fellow. They all were, mostly—good fellows who got into the wrong line of work. And Johnnie was the best of the bunch. No man ever had a truer friend. We robbed one more bank together, the Merchants National in South Bend, Indiana. Lester Nelson joined us on that caper. Getting out of town, it seemed

like every hick in Indiana was throwing lead at us, and we still got away. But for what? We'd been expecting more than a hundred grand, enough to move to Mexico and live like kings. We ended up with a lousy twenty thousand, most of it in dimes and dirty dollar bills.

God makes it all come right in the end, that's what Johnnie told Dock Barker just before we parted company. I was raised a Christian—I admit I fell away a bit along my journey—and I believe that: we're stuck with what we have, but that's all right; in God's eyes, none of us are really much more than flies on strings and all that matters is how much sunshine you can spread along the way. The last time I seen Johnnie Dillinger was in Chicago, and he was laughing at something I said. That's good enough for me.

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As a kid, I was fascinated by tales of the Depression-era outlaws, an interest that probably peaked with Arthur Penn's remarkable Bonnie and Clyde. In the spring of 2000, I re-read John Toland's history of that era, *The Dillinger Days*, and was particularly taken by his story about how Dillinger's sidekick, Homer Van Meter, taught himself how to rope flies in Pendleton Reformatory. Jack "Red" Hamilton's lingering death is a documented fact; my story of what happened in Dock Barker's hideout is, of course, pure imagination ... or myth, if you like that word better; I do.