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Righteous, Dapper, Famous

Us boys stood in a semi-circle on the wooden stage they had built for the ceremony, squinting into the sun, as the man with the camera checked his film. The paint was still sticky around our feet, the American flag bunting freshly strewn across the front. We were a restless bunch, not used to waiting. A crowd of people coming in for the Easter egg hunt after the ceremony. Little girls in Taffeta dresses and little boys dressed in miniature suits, straining against their parent's grips, wanting to join us on stage. Us boys had never been so famous, standing there in the shadow of the limestone courthouse, to receive a certificate and a handshake, hoping for some money for helping to stop or report a crime. Timmy Thompson with his crooked eyes and big as horse teeth informed on his cousins and their brash uprooting of several stop signs three miles out of town. Bart Hamilton, his red hair cut down to the length of comb bristles, saved a couple of cats from a rotted-out tree, though no one's sure he didn't put them there himself. The rest of us did similar good deeds, mowing and sweeping dust for nickels and dimes we donated to the church or the Salvation Army. Except for me, it was all pretty normal off the cob, Bible school kind of good deeds.

"Must want to be politicians," our fathers said when we told them about the ceremony. The metal from the buckle and the leather strap of their belts have all been sold for a half a week's worth of produce. Before we left for the center of town, they swirled the smoke from their cigarettes in our faces, hoping it would shield us from catching the smarmy-doughboy, do-gooder bug that was sure to follow us once we had shaken that politician's hand. F.B.I. we said slowly, our breath catching on each letter. We thought we knew the difference between us and the law, that we'd be a part of something new, that standing on that stage would elevate us above the scrapping and scraping for the meager leftovers from callous men.

On stage, perched atop a hidden milk crate, stood a short, knife-blade thin man named Purvis, with a toggled to the bricks freshly pressed suit, his smile as fake as the bank's insurance. A live microphone was set-up to our left, and we were all dying to shout into it, convinced our voices would travel through time and space to radios all over the country. The camera was flashing and us boys smiled, hands pumping as the FBI man gripped our sticky fingers. I was standing last in line, next to a couple of tough looking men, also in suits and clean-shaven. There was the smell of danger swirling around them, a tinge of gun oil, that reminded me of my own Daddy's shotgun. With tight lips, they gave the FBI man advice. "Smile, Little Mel. Old Hoover is watching. Take a knee why don't you? You're in the spotlight now, Purvis. The face of the entire department."

He ignored them, but when I stood next to him, the sun blocked for a second by his wide-brimmed hat, I could see the strain on his face. I didn't know those men, but I was proud to stand there with someone so calm, so focused. This was what us boys hoped to be when we got older. Righteous. Dapper. Famous. He leaned in close, his aftershave smelling like coconuts, the rest of him like sweat from one of my wrung-out shirts after chores, "Son, remind me what you did?"

I don't lie much, but I'd been around adults enough to know a good opportunity when I saw one.

"I stopped a Coyote from stealing some chickens," I said.

The camera flashed.

"Boy, is that all you've got? All these people out here to hear some farm boy and his nighttime hallucinations?"

"You want a better story? Is that what you's saying?"

The cameraman stepped in front of his camera, wiping his brow with a handkerchief. "That's all I need from you boys."

"Last chance, Son. The world is watching."

On tip-toe, my head bobbed below the microphone. All those people looking at me, shading their eyes from the sun, expecting something.

"I stopped that John Dillinger from robbing Bloom's IGA. Held him up with my slingshot, I did. Told him next time, I'd put a rock right between his eyes."

A swell of sound comes from the crowd, my Daddy standing in the middle shaking his head. I'm smiling because I've got the whole world listening. Surely, they're broadcasting my voice across the country.

Before I could say another word, that small man was yanking me away, turning me toward the sight of the rest of them boys jumping off the stage. Scattering like corn seed, not a one of them looking back as they dispersed into the crowd. The larger men stepped forward, suits creaking like sun-cracked leather, arms reaching out, murder written all over their faces. I ducked behind Purvis and knocked over the microphone, static crackling from the speakers like gunfire over the radio. The crowd recoiled, kicking up dust, backing away from the beating I surely had coming.

Purvis held up his hands, and the suits stopped just out of reach from my bobbing head. In the confusion, a pair of hands gripped my arms and hauled me off the stage. My fear mellowed as I caught a whiff of my father's smoked skin, the familiar scratch of his sideburns against my cheek. The camera flashed behind us, the light winking out like a snuffed candle.

Daddy planted me on the ground, before lurching onto the stage. He started swinging his fists while he was still on his knees. Purvis hollering, "Now wait just a minute. Wait."

But it was too late as those large men were piling on Daddy like he had stolen a loaf of bread from the IGA. Daddy didn't give in so easily and the whole mess of men rolled around that stage cussing and carrying on. People in the crowd, men mostly, cheering like it was a cock fight. Until finally they rolled off the edge, feet and arms catching in that bunting, ripping it as they fell in a heap on the dusty ground. They looked like a pregnant heifer laying on its side, breathing heavily, its stomach knotted in pain.

Purvis stood above them, his arms crossed. "I hope you're happy, son."

And strangely I was. I didn't have any idea of what I had set in motion, but my Daddy was willing to throw a punch for me, and I couldn't wait to hear my own voice coming through the radio later that night.

The two men scooted away from my father, the lapels of their suits ripped and sagging, their breath whistling through their teeth, some blood dripping from their noses.

"Arrest him, already, Melvin."

Daddy got to his feet, head stuck between his knees, but his clothes already dusty and ragged before the fight didn't look any worse than when he put them on this morning.

"Yeah, Pervis. The crazy son-of-a-bitch about broke my tooth."

"And make things worse? Both of you shake this man's hand, before these people get any ideas."

Instead of heading home, my father led us toward the center of town, ducking through the crowd, his right eye swelling. My feet skipping over the dirt-patched road as I tried to keep up with the lurching rhythm of his strides. We stopped on the sidewalk outside of Tiffany's Diner, and he put his arm around my shoulders.

"Goddamn, I didn't think you had it in you. Standing up to the law like that."

"I was just trying to get on the radio," I said, staring at my streaked reflection in the storefront glass. Next to my face on yellowed paper, one end curling inward, was the wanted poster. \$5,000 Reward. I hadn't known much about money back then, because it was rarely in my possession, but I knew what those zeros would mean for our farm.

"Doesn't matter the reason. You gave 'em hell, son. Something people won't soon forget."

"I hope he does come. That Dillinger. I'm ready for him."

My father held open the door to the diner, and a whiff of cooler air waved against my face. The lights were off, but people were talking softly, raising sandwiches and coffee mugs to their faces.

He directed me toward a booth in the back, people turning their heads as I passed, whispering my name, a few older gentlemen stopping me to shake my hand, their eyes holding mine, before glancing back to their coffee mugs. My little lie had done more than stir up a little dust, a thing like that moved through town faster than a traveling Bible salesman.

While I waited, I watched my Daddy talk to the cook at the counter. He was negotiating something, his body in motion, hands cutting through the air like fan blades. He did everything but spit on the floor.

After a few minutes he came back with two plates, piled high with French fries and burgers that were still sizzling from the grill. I couldn't

remember the last time we'd ate anywhere outside of our house, my mother bent over a pot of boiling potato skins.

"Here's your reward, son." He handed me the plate, the dirt from my hands soiling the white glass. "And by God, I hope you meet him someday. You could learn a thing or two from a man like that."

My father with his bruised lip, and a small cut above his eye, chewed his burger and smiled.

"Dig in. Dig in," he said, but I couldn't look away. His face was a spectacle of satisfaction as the ketchup and mustard ran down his chin in glistening globs. I waited until he pushed his plate away from his chest and wiped his mouth. I took a bite, and though it was no longer hot, it was just as good as I imagined. My father watched me eat as if I were a gathering storm with enough rain to last the summer.