The Hero

James Thoreen*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

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THE HERO

Bob Brandinger waited outside his brother's grocery store while Eugene was inside getting a loaf of bread. He wondered why the lights were on in the courthouse across the street on a Sunday evening.

Eugene came out of the store and locked the door behind him. The two started walking towards Eugene's car parked on the square. Bob asked, "What do you suppose the lights are on over there for?"

Eugene poked one hand in a pocket and adjusted the groceries under his other arm. "Must be the Sheriff's office. Those two men are still loose around here."

"The men that escaped from the prison farm?"
"Yeah, I heard over the radio that the law was hot after them."
"I'll bet Sheriff Miflin sure likes that. Doesn't he have a brother from California visiting him?"
"They came in last night."

When they reached the car, Eugene handed the groceries to Bob while he opened the door.
"Did you get pickles?" Bob asked, peeking into the sack, "Mary said we needed some for supper."
"Yeah, they're in there. Got some olives, too." Eugene
looked up. "Oh, oh, look here, comin' from the courthouse—it's Miflin."

The Sheriff was walking rapidly across the courthouse yard towards them. He waved and yelled, "Hey boys, wait up!"

"I wonder what he wants," Bob said. He had an idea, but he kept it to himself. "Hi, Bert," he called, shifting the groceries in his arms.

Bert Miflin puffed up to the Brandinger brothers standing in the street by Eugene's car. "Boys," he said, "we need you."

"Oh, fine," Bob said.

"What for?" Eugene asked.

"Them convicts. They swiped a car at a filling station. Shot the man there."

Bob watched his breath. "So?"

"So we found the car by Spring Creek bridge a half-hour ago. They're up in the woods, or somewhere around there. We gotta look for 'em."

"Do you need us?" Eugene asked.

"It would be a lot easier."

"They're killers," Bob said.

"Yeah, reports say they're armed and dangerous."

"Are you sure they're out in the woods?"

"They can't be far from there now. If we hear of another car swiped we can give up, but there's been no reports yet."

"We'd better help," Eugene said to Bob.

"We might get hurt . . . ," Bob started, but Miflin interrupted.

"I doubt it. If you find them, just yell or something. We'll go after them. There's some state police here."

"Aren't we all going together?" Eugene asked.

"We'll have to fan out, since it's about dark."

Bob and Eugene looked at each other for a minute. "We'd better go," Eugene said.

"O.K.," Bob said, "but I . . . ."

"How long will it take, Bert?"

"I don't know. But if there are enough of us, we should flush them in a couple of hours or so."

"We'd better take these groceries home and tell Mary
and Beth where we're headed," Bob climbed into the car.

Eugene crawled under the steering wheel and slammed his door. "We'll be back in a minute, Bert," he said.

"O.K., but hurry, will ya? We gotta get goin." Come by the office before you go out."

"All right." Eugene started backing into the street. He stopped and leaned out of his window. "Say, Bert, how many have you got to go?"

"You two will make twenty, besides me and my men and a car full of state police."

Eugene turned on his car lights and drove off. "Hurry," the Sheriff called after them.

So they drove quickly to Eugene's house, three blocks west and one south of the square. By the time they got there, a yellow moon had begun to rise in the east. When they turned south, Eugene pointed at it and said, "That may be a help."

Bob only glanced at it. "To whom? I hope they can swipe another car."

Before Eugene could reply, they pulled up in front of his house. He picked up the groceries and climbed out of the car.

"I'll tell the girls," he said. "Is there anything you suppose I ought to bring?"

"I guess not," Bob said.

Eugene disappeared in the front door and in a moment or two reappeared. He tossed a scarf in Bob's lap as he climbed back into the car. "Its getting kinda chilly, you may want that. It's an old one of mine."

"What did Mary and Beth say?"

"Nothing much. I could tell they were worried, but you know they'd rather die than show it. I told them we might be back in time to make the late show. They'll wait supper for us." He turned the car around.

"You can't very well take the kids to the late show, can you?"

Beth said she'd take them over to the folks for tonight."

"Think we'll get back in time?"

"I don't know. We could, easily."

"If they get another car. I hope they do."
"I guess I do too, Bob."
You don’t like this either, do you, Gene?"

"No."

They were both silent as they turned back towards the moon and drove to the courthouse. They parked in the cement yard behind the old building in a stall plainly marked "Clerk of Court." They got out, walked quickly to a back door, entered, descending a flight of stairs, went down a corridor to a door with a frosted glass window marked "Sheriff." There was light flooding through the glass that silhouetted Eugene as he passed before it. Bob sucked a breath and they went in.

The Sheriff was in the corner by an old hat rack. He was pulling on a big khaki coat with a half-moon collar. Two deputies were taking pistols from a case in another corner.

"Get a pistol and then I'll show you what to do," Miflin said as the brothers shut the door behind them.

"Will we need them?" Eugene asked.

"I doubt it."

"You said we wouldn’t have to mess with them," Bob said. "You said we could just yell or something."

"That's right, but you can take the .38's anyhow. You can't be sure—it's dark."

"I'm not planning on getting within shooting distance of them," Bob said. The deputies turned and looked at him.

"That's all right, Bob, but ... well, you feel safer with a gun, and maybe it would make a better signal." The Sheriff pulled a scarf out of his pocket and draped it around his neck. "Just take one and carry it."

"O.K., but I don't want it." Bob went over to the gun cabinet and picked up the first pistol he saw. He glanced at it for a second.

"There's holsters in the drawer," Miflin said.

Bob picked up a leather holster with a big steel clip on the back. He hoisted up his coat, clipped the holster to his belt, dropped the gun in it and smoothed the coat back down.

"Atta boy, Tex," Eugene said as he went over and lifted another pistol from the case. He smiled with his mouth.

"Yeah," Bob said, and went over to the Sheriff's desk over
which was spread a county map, dated 1925. Two boxes of Remington shells kept the map from curling.

"Here's what I want you to do," Miflin said. He pointed to a jagged blue line that ran across the paper above the criss-cross marked "Mannington." Eugene stepped back from the case and watched. "We know that they're up here north of town somewhere, either in the woods by Spring Creek or on one of these farms. You boys can start out here at the bridge where they left the car and go east along the south bank of the creek till you get to Miller's house." His finger traced a line that roughly represented a mile walk. "If you see anything that looks like a trace of them, sound off. The boys here and I will be on the north side of the woods going in the same direction. We're going to stop at farm houses along the way."

"We're going to be mighty alone, aren't we?" Bob asked.

"Not very. There'll be others less than a quarter a mile from you in each direction.

"Your dragnet has big holes in it," Eugene said.

"It's the best we can do now."

"It'll be mighty dark up there," Bob said.

"Yeah, but that's one reason we don't think we'll find anyone in those woods—too dark, too close to the abandoned car. They'll probably try to make tracks outa' there. Swipe a car, if they can."

"I sure hope they do," Bob said.

"I wouldn't mind myself," Miflin confided. "There aren't too many of us."

"Why not let it go?" Bob asked.

The Sheriff didn't answer. He picked up one of the boxes and poured out a handful of shells. The map rolled up. He handed some to each of the brothers. Eugene broke his gun and loaded it. Bob dropped his shells in his pocket.

"Let's go," Miflin said. "Pete," he said to one of the deputies, "you stay here and mind the calls. If anyone else comes, you can tell them what to do."

The Brandinger brothers, Bert Miflin and his deputy went out the frosted glass door, down the corridor, up the flight of stairs and out the back door. The early night air was chilly to Bob Brandinger, and the moon was now higher,
brighter and smaller. The Sheriff and his deputy climbed into their car and pulled away. Bob and Eugene got into theirs and followed. The two cars turned onto the highway north and sped towards the Spring Creek bridge.

Bob stared at the bouncing tail-lights of the car ahead. He wanted to say something to break the silence, to keep from thinking about what might happen. He thought about asking how far yet to go. Silly question; he said nothing. He thought about mentioning Spring Creek, to get to thinking about the terrain and everything. He and Eugene had both done a lot of hunting along in there. Maybe ... well, ... again he said nothing. He felt the heavy lump on his hip. You feel safer with a gun, Bert had said. Safer with a gun, safer with a gun, the words echoed.

He considered a suggestion that they walk fast; hurry, so they'd get back in time to eat and go to the late show. Pickles. Pickles and olives. His mouth watered, but he said nothing. He smelled an acid odor. Strange. He looked over at Eugene, driving silently, eyes on the road. He was smoking.

"Here's the bridge," Eugene said. Bob had a pang of nausea that passed and changed into a throb in his neck.

"I think I'd like a cigarette," Bob said.

"Here, finish mine. They told us that you can smell cigarette smoke a long way off." He pulled off the road onto the shoulder and snapped off the lights. The tail lights of the Sheriff's car disappeared over a hill on the other side of the bridge.

Bob and Eugene climbed out of the car. Bob took a couple of dry, stinging puffs on the cigarette, dropped it and mashed it under his heel while Eugene locked the car and dropped the key in his pocket.

"No use letting them swipe this car," he said. "Let's hurry so we can get back early for supper."

They walked carefully down the grassy bank to the edge of the creek. A path ran along the side of it between the water and the overhanging trees. They picked their way along this path, Eugene in the lead. Bob wondered why it was called a creek; it was wider than some rivers he'd seen, even though it was, for the most part, only ankle deep. The moon cast its milky light and murky shadows over the
creek and in the woods. As their eyes became better accustomed, the brothers walked faster and less carefully. Occasionally they heard a car speed by on the highway, leaving silence behind it. They listened and watched as they walked for the sound or sight they dreaded. A rabbit started and ran, and they froze, tensed, until they recognized the sound. They took a deep breath and walked on.

They rounded the first bend in Spring Creek after about ten minutes. The creek turned sharply on itself for fifty yards or so and then curved back west again. It widened considerably after the second turn as the water, running west, backed upstream. Bob and Eugene were nearly around the second turn when they heard another rabbit-rustling sound across the quiet water. They froze. In a second Bob relaxed and straightened up again, ready to continue. He took a step toward Eugene and stopped. He saw that Eugene, still crouched and tense, was staring hard at the opposite bank.

"What is it?" Bob whispered anxiously.

Eugene answered by holding up his hand. He did not look away from the other side. Bob tensed again. He stared across but could see nothing except the dim shadows dancing. There was no sound.

"Only another rabbit, I think," Eugene said, standing up, "but it seemed too loud." He started to walk ahead, but he tip-toed, picking his way more carefully. Bob followed after. The brothers watched the other bank more than their own.

The woods sloped on a hill from the north side, and the brothers could distinguish the outline of the moon-lit hump against the black sky. It was too dark to make out more than that outline and the north bank.

"Do you think it could have been someone?" Bob whispered.

"I don’t think so."

"You sure?"

"No."

"Should we look and see?"

"Let’s stay here and listen," Eugene said.

They stopped again and listened. For minutes they almost
held their breath. Not even the rabbits made a sound. All they could hear was the minute creak of their jackets when they moved a little.

“Bob,” Eugene carefully broke the silence, “there’s a cabin up that hill, isn’t there?”

“Yes—empty. I think it’s up there.” Bob pointed at the top of the hill opposite him.

“Could they be up there?”

“They could be anywhere.”

“We ought to look.”

“Yeah,” Bob said almost inaudibly.

The two stood on the south bank of the creek facing the hill and did not move. Bob shook at the pit of his stomach. He thought of turning back and getting help, but they hadn’t seen anything or heard anything except rabbits.

“Let’s go,” Eugene said, and stepped into the creek. The water gurgled around his ankles. He walked across and Bob was an arm’s length behind him. Eugene stepped up on the north bank and Bob came up beside him. Their shoes squished wetly—and there was another sound—a rustling.

“DOWN, BOB!” Eugene yelled and grabbed at Bob’s arm as he dived. Bang! an explosion rent the air and Bang! Bang! two more followed right after. Bob dived aside, aware only of a great fear and the vicious spattering of something through the leaves and two thunking sounds like a splitting pumpkin and the crashing of something running away. Then it was quiet again except for a small scratching.

Bob could not feel or think. The sounds he had heard meant nothing to him except that he had to get away from them. Only when they stopped did he crawl back to where he thought Eugene was.

“Eugene!” he whispered sharply, and a hand grabbed his fist in front of him. He gasped and shuddered and the hand clawed at his, violently at first and a second later with no force at all, until it finally fell aside. It was Eugene. Bob stuck his fist in his mouth and choked a scream. He looked closer. In the dim light he could see Eugene, lying face up, twisted, arms outstretched. Something was wrong with his
face—it looked like a black blob instead of Eugene. He reached out and touched it. It was warm and sticky.

A mass of shock exploded in Bob's throat and dropped away through his chest leaving him sick, cold and trembling. He crouched there, staring at his brother.

Suddenly he got up and ran, afraid. He stumbled up the hill through the underbrush in the dark until he bumped into a tree. He fell, gasping. Run—the idea repeated in his mind—run, run, run! He tried to move, but his cold legs would not flex. He wanted to run and he wanted to prostrate himself on the ground.

He heard the rustling sound again, further up the hill, coming towards him. He crawled to his knees and held on to a tree trunk. The sound came nearer and he tried to get away. One of the killers, after him. Where could he run? Were they in the woods around him? Run! Not back—not back to where Eugene lay without his face, but run! The rustling came closer.

He got to his feet and staggered drunkenly on up the hill. A heavy weight bumped against his hip. The gun! As he went he fumbled at the holster. His fingers were like ballons and he didn't seem to be able to get a hold of more than his coat. He tore at the gun, pulled it out, almost dropped it, and then held it in his shaking hand. He dropped beside another tree and tried to listen.

The noise, the killer, was still chasing him. He crammed his gun-free hand in his pocket and . . . My Christ! the shells! His gun was empty! Feverishly, he pulled the pin and turned down the cylinder. He groped for shells in his pocket and poked them at the cylinder and the noise came closer and he dropped half the shells on the ground. He screamed inaudibly at the gun—"Hold still, damn you!" and at the shells—"Get in there! Get in there!"

The killer had heard the clicking of the gun and bore down on the spot. Bob slammed the cylinder back, poked the pin in, and listened. He held his breath and was very quiet. The killer became doubtful when the faint noise stopped; he walked hesitantly, much more softly. Bob groaned inwardly. He was going to shoot at the sound, but
now it was too faint to fix. He felt that in a moment he was going to die and he ground his forehead into the tree trunk and sobbed noiselessly and gritted his teeth... his fear-staring eyes sought vainly for the killer. He begged God for relief in the cold trees and damp ground and he got none. He cried desperately for warm comfort and he knew he would not get it. Mother! Oh, Mother! he wished he were a baby at his mother's breast again. The noise came closer. The killer was a step on the other side of his tree: he could sense the exact spot. He could hear the man's heavy breathing.

He jumped up and aside and pointed his shaking gun at the spot. He pulled the trigger. Click! He saw the ominous bulk move and he pulled again. Bang! In the instant flash he saw two frightened eyes like an animal's. He pulled again. Bang! This time the eyes were closed and the mouth was open screaming. Bang! again, and this time it was a black figure on the ground in front of him. He ran.

He ran on up the hill, stumbling, groping, staggering, seeing only the faceless Eugene and the two frightened eyes. He broke into an open space and there was the cabin, a formless hulk in the woods. He fell on his face and sucked a racking breath and another. He heard another crashing in the woods, someone running hard, very hard, but he could not move and he did not care.

Then, down the hill on the other side, he heard more commotion, more running and thrashing.

"Stop!" a voice cried, and a shot.
"There he goes!" Another voice, more noise.
"Stop, you sonofabitch! Now, hands up." The voice became quieter. "Frisk him, Bill." Bob recognized Miflin's voice. "Hold him, shoot him if you have to." The voice came to Bob up the hill. "Eugene!" he yelled, "Bob."

Bob rolled up on his side. "Here!" he gasped. His voice sounded like fingernails on slate.

Two flashlights and three figures walked into the clearing. The lights flashed on Bob and the figures hurried to him. Miflin bent over him.

"Bob, you're hurt!" he said.

Intense fever welled all over Bob and he shuddered. Just
as intense a chill followed, and he grew colder and shivered.

"I'm . . ." he fought to speak, "I'm . . . not hurt. Eugene . . . down at the creek . . . no face!"

"Where's the other man?" Miflin asked.

Bob motioned weakly at where he had been. "Down there . . . dead, I think . . . Let's find Eugene." He struggled to his feet.

There was more noise in the woods and two more men, with flashlights, entered the clearing. The sheriff recognized them.

"Did you get them?" one of them asked, "We heard shots and came running. Anybody hurt?"

Miflin helped Bob stand. "We have them. One's down there, shot. Go get him, will you? We're going down to the creek. Eugene's down there . . ." Bob's knees buckled, and the sheriff braced himself to hold the trembling man up.

"They give you much trouble?"

"Gave me no trouble," Miflin said. "Bob had it all. Bob and Eugene . . . Bob shot the other one. Go see if he's dead."

The two men turned and rustled into the woods.

"Let's go get Eugene," Bob said. Miflin got a better hold on Bob's arm and they walked slowly off into the woods towards the creek. They passed within a few yard of the place where Bob had shot the killer.

The two men had discovered the killer only a moment before, and they stood over him, studying him. Bob could see their two flashlights playing down, but he could not see the body for the underbrush. He turned his eyes away, but he couldn't help hearing their talk.

"Yeah, he's dead all right. One in the chest and one in the stomach. Look at that face . . ."

"Miflin said Bob Brandinger did it. Christ, that boy has more guts than I would have allowed him."

"Guts? Yeah, guts—I guess that's what you'd have to call it."

"Sure you would. Sheer guts to stand up here and blast it out with this bastard."

"But did he have to? He could have been killed. He should have gone and got some help."

"Look, his brother was hurt. Did you see the way he
keeled when Miflin started to tell us? The boy was mad. He had to get this guy."

"Even if he had to revenge his brother, don’t you think he was maybe a little foolish?"

"No, by God, I think he had guts. He . . . he was just plain . . . brave!"

Bob felt a blackness creep around his eyes. For an instant he saw the face in the gun-flash, and his flesh crawled.

The two men began rustling about.

"Here, gimme a hand with this bastard . . . grab his legs. The boy was brave . . . a hero, by God!"

"I guess I can’t argue that. But I wonder if Eugene . . ."

Bob lost the last words as the giddy dizziness closed in on him. He clung to Miflin and was very sick. He sobbed quietly, and the two walked on through the moon-dim woods to the creek.


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QUEBEC

With the sun leaning heavily
over narrow streets
Quiet French voices
following us down the cobblestones
A laugh from nowhere
Houses peering narrowly at us
as they crowd each other down a narrow hill
Quebec with the shadows of France in the dusk.

Quebec—

With arched English eyebrows
saying how do you do.

—Margret Wallace, H. Ec. Sr.