

DENIS JOHNSON

PURVIS

Part Two of Three

Melvin Purvis (1903–1960) began as a Special Agent in the U.S. Justice Department. In 1932, J. Edgar Hoover placed him in charge of the Chicago office of Hoover’s new Division of Investigation, which soon became the FBI.

Over a six-month period in 1934, Purvis’s pursuit of the nation’s most famous “Public Enemies” put him in the spotlight. Apparently envious, Hoover drove him from the Bureau the following year.

After leaving law enforcement, Purvis married and raised three children, making his living as a radio broadcaster and as the head of the “Junior G-man” public relations campaign for Post Toasties cereal.

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Some important dates:

June, 1933—Under the suspected direction of Charles “Pretty Boy” Floyd, gangsters ambush police and agents transferring a prisoner in Kansas City, killing three policemen and Special Agent Ray Caffrey, the first “G-man” to die in action.

March, 1934—Bank robber John Dillinger escapes from jail in Indiana and crosses a state line, making himself a federal fugitive.

May, 1934—Under Purvis’s direction, federal agents ambush Dillinger and Lester Gillis—aka “Baby Face Nelson”—at the Little Bohemia Inn on Star Lake, Wisconsin. Both criminals escape while two bystanders are killed. Later that night in a second gunfight Nelson kills one of Purvis’s agents before escaping again.

July, 1934—Purvis heads a team of agents and local police who assassinate John Dillinger outside the Biograph Theater in Chicago.

October, 1934—Purvis participates in the killing of Pretty Boy Floyd in a cornfield near Wellsville, Ohio.

November, 1934—Baby Face Nelson dies in a shootout with federal agents on an Illinois roadside. Two agents also die.

February 29, 1960—Purvis dies of a bullet wound from a .45 he received as a gift from fellow agents when he resigned. The death is ruled a suicide, though some evidence suggests it may have been an accident.

In seven scenes, *Purvis* follows history backward from 1966 (six years after Purvis's death) to the evening of the "Bohemia Inn Shootout" in 1934.

Scenes One and Two appeared in our Spring issue; Scenes Three, Four, and Five follow.

CHARACTERS

LYNDON JOHNSON
J. EDGAR HOOVER
CLYDE TOLSON
JOHN DILLINGER
MELVIN PURVIS
JOB INTERVIEWER
PRETTY BOY FLOYD
OHIO STATE HIGHWAY PATROLMAN
BABY FACE NELSON

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A LYNCHED BLACK MAN
AN OFFICE SECRETARY
A WOMAN BOUND AND GAGGED

Scene 1: The White House Oval Office, October, 1966.

Scene 2: The home of J. Edgar Hoover, March 1, 1960.

Scene 3: A fathomless void, February 29, 1960.

Scene 4: An office at KSBC radio, Florence, South Carolina, spring, 1959.

Scene 5: An office of the U.S. Division of Investigation, Chicago, January, 1935.

Scene 6: A cornfield near Wellsville, Ohio, October 22, 1934.

Scene 7: A hotel suite on Star Lake, Wisconsin, May, 1934.

An ellipsis [...] beginning a line is meant to suggest a pause.

SCENE 3

A fathomless void.

A man, age 57, in blood-soaked robe and pajamas, his head exploded.

A visitor, age 56, in casual street attire.

February 29, 1960.

MAN: You, sir!—what do you think you’re doing here?

VISITOR: Me? Hanging around. Hovering, more like it.

34 MAN: Explain your presence, please. You’re in my home.

VISITOR: Do you refer to a “house”?

MAN: I do. This house.

VISITOR: There’s nothing here but you and me.

MAN: Again
I ask, and one last time—before I act.

VISITOR: Well, I’ll be damned! I recognize you now.

MAN: Of course you do, unless you’ve burgled us
At random. State your business, sir, at once.

VISITOR: You’re Melvin Purvis, G-man—“Senior” G-man.
Hero of cereal box and radio.
The man who collared Dillinger.

PURVIS: And you?

VISITOR: I'm Dillinger.

PURVIS: John Dillinger?

DILLINGER: The same,
The chap you collared.

PURVIS: So!—a lunatic.

DILLINGER: I'm not the one with the forty-five in his hand
Wearing his brain for a hat.

PURVIS: Am I dreaming?

DILLINGER: This is a dream, but you're not the one who's dreaming.
I am dreaming that you've shot yourself.

PURVIS: Stupid nonsense.

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DILLINGER: Take a look. That's you.

PURVIS: There's never been a mirror there before.

DILLINGER: I've never had a dream like this before.

PURVIS: I don't look well.

DILLINGER: If you ain't dead, I'd guess
You hover between the first and second worlds.

PURVIS: And you? Your gravestone says you're dead.

DILLINGER: But dreaming.

PURVIS: So—which of us is dreaming?

DILLINGER: I'm the one
Who's dreaming. You're the one who shot himself.

PURVIS: The thing was jammed, I merely tried—

DILLINGER: The automatic forty-five's beloved
Above its use and quite above its worth.

PURVIS: And where does this dreaming take place? Are you in heaven,
Or hell, or some such afterworld, and dreaming?

DILLINGER: No, I'm in Portland, Oregon.

PURVIS: I see.

36 DILLINGER: On Revolution Drive, west of the seventh
Tee of the Curtis Forest Country Club.
Do you golf?—I mean, when you have a head?
I'm not a member, but I love the greens.
Magenta in the twilight, silvery
And silken in the dew of dawn. Two cocktails
Down the hatch at three each afternoon,
Chuckling at the cavalcade of duffers
Whanging their pikes a while, and then I nap;
And visit the dead in my dreams, apparently.

PURVIS: You're the one who's dead!

DILLINGER: Oh no, not I.
On July twenty-second, nineteen thirty-four,
You and your agents, at the Biograph
Theater on Lincoln in Chicago,
Ambushed Jimmy Lawrence.

PURVIS: Jimmy Lawrence.

DILLINGER: Sort of a guy I kind of knew but didn't
Like. My Anna fed him to you. Me?
I was already in Portland.

PURVIS: Jimmy Lawrence.

DILLINGER: You asked for Johnny and she brought you Jimmy.

PURVIS: Oh yes, the whore, the madam, Anna—

DILLINGER: Sage.

PURVIS: Your Judas paramour. I *thought* I smelled a rat.

DILLINGER: You wanted a rat. She brought you the cheese.
Remember: Judas is always working for Jesus.

PURVIS: And I assume you go by—

37

DILLINGER: Jimmy Lawrence!

PURVIS: Balderdash! I saw John Dillinger
Lying in the grease. I saw him jerking
Like a frog and then I saw him stop.

DILLINGER: Portland's nice. It has a kind of rainy
Charm and not a lot of auto traffic.
I found a lovely lady there I've lived with
Almost twenty-five years. She's got two kids—
That is, they're grown now, out of the house,
But I was pretty well the dad who raised them
Since they were tots. And do you know, one day
In 1936 I watched the younger boy
Rip the top from his box of Post Toasties
And dump them in a mixing bowl and comb
His fingers through the flakes and come up with
—What do you imagine he came up with?

PURVIS: A Melvin Purvis Junior G-man badge.

DILLINGER: The head of your own Division! Thanks to me
Your name shines on.

PURVIS: I wasn't seeking fame
Or power. Only to steer our youngsters toward
The love of right.

DILLINGER: I could have revealed myself—
Letters to the press, mailed in the dead of night—
I could have grimed you with humiliation.

PURVIS: And why didn't you?

38 DILLINGER: Well, the legend.
Jimmy Lawrence possessed a larger-than-life
Quality shall we say which history
Has tattooed with the name—"John Dillinger."

PURVIS: Oh. The outsized...legend.

DILLINGER: How's the noggin?

PURVIS: Gives no discomfort at all. Damn this pistol!

DILLINGER: Legend will have it it's the very gun
You shot me with.

PURVIS: It was a gift. I just received it.
In any case, the night you died I never
Fired once.

DILLINGER: With all those barrels blazing
It's a wonder they didn't drill some innocent.
Other than Jimmy, of course.

DILLINGER: The floor of what?

PURVIS: My home. Upstairs. That is—

DILLINGER: This isn't a floor. It's just a more substantial
Darkness underfoot. If we were breathing,
I'd say we were sucking on a vacuum.
But we're not breathing. Airless dream.

PURVIS: Assassin!

DILLINGER: Excuse me? What did the pot just call the kettle?

PURVIS: I fought on the side of the law.

40 DILLINGER: The law is a whore.
You chased men down and killed them in the streets
And you and I were brothers in our fame.

PURVIS: Fame and infamy are different things.

DILLINGER: They're different words.

PURVIS: A bad man's mind
Troubles itself to slice at the semantics.

DILLINGER: I was a killer and you were a killer too.
I look at your exploded head and think:
Now there is the face of justice.

PURVIS: What do you mean?

DILLINGER: Come now. I've studied very carefully
The accounts of the death of Pretty Boy Floyd.

PURVIS: ...I agree life's not what I thought it was.
I saw a world divided into shining light

And stinking darkness, saw it as a clash
Of hammer on rock, clash of army on army.
But it's much more beautiful than that.
I've used many years to think on this, I—
Stand back! What are you doing in my house?

DILLINGER: I told you. And I told you that I told you.
You don't recall, because we're moving backwards
Swiftly as you head away from your death.

PURVIS: Why would I be hurtling backward, sir?

DILLINGER: That's what happens at the end of it all.
A kind of boomerang effect. You slam
Against your finish, carom back toward the start.
Does the name John Dillinger mean anything?

PURVIS: Mean anything! I might as well have married him.
Our names are certainly joined....Who might you be?

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DILLINGER: As a matter of fact, I am John Dillinger.

PURVIS: Poppycock! Where are we, incidentally?

DILLINGER: Baby Face, Machine Gun, Pretty Boy,
You got 'em all. All but Dillinger.

PURVIS: You don't impress me as the gangster sort.
You hardly seem insane or stupid enough.
It takes a kind of hideous idiocy
To make an outlaw.

DILLINGER: What it takes is jizz.

PURVIS: My wife is in this house, sir. Bring your tongue
To heel.

DILLINGER: Above all what it takes is youth.
Young blood blazing up like gasoline
And a mind that marches in a pounding swoon
To the anthem of its own bubbles.
I knew I wasn't cut out to be a crook.
I knew from the night of my first and only gunfight.

PURVIS: Star Lake.

DILLINGER: Star Lake, Wisconsin, at the inn.
The place surrounded, bullets in the air,
Corpses hanging out the windows—
For Baby Face it was an opera.

PURVIS: He was a special kind of psychopath.

42 DILLINGER: Not to say I'd wash my history
Entirely spotless. After the fireworks
An uneventful life feels full to burst.
The front porch swing swings sweeter underneath
A man who's swum through blood to get to it.
Baby Face was how old when he died?

PURVIS: He died young.

DILLINGER: And lucky he wasn't younger.
Now—tell me how you murdered Pretty Boy.

PURVIS: ...If you actually happen to be John Dillinger,
If this is an actual conversation in my house,
If this is something other than a dark
Senility I've wandered into dying,
Do you dream I'd come here carrying my sins
To lay at your feet? In any case, I'm clean.

DILLINGER: You ambushed Jimmy Lawrence in an alley
And Pretty Boy was stretched out wounded when

You told a cop to blow his brains away.

PURVIS: I'm satisfied I've chosen the good and the right
In essence.

DILLINGER: Essence! Now who takes his razor
To the words?

PURVIS: In my most human essence, in
My freedom, where my human gist resides,
In that freedom God put out of reach
Even of his own fingertips,
There is where I choose and where I'm judged.
I am not a mystery to myself.
...But I seem to have gotten turned around in all
This darkness....Have I committed suicide?

DILLINGER: No. You've had an accident.
Do you know who you are?

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PURVIS: I'm Melvin Purvis.

DILLINGER: Correct. The man who collared Dillinger.
Before you ask: I'm Dillinger, I'm quite
Alive, this is a dream, it's not your dream,
It's my dream, you have blown your head off,
And you're following it into the afterworld.

PURVIS: And I'm meeting you on the road to the afterworld
Because I had a hand in your dying?
Do you offer to guide me down? Or do you stand as obstacle?

DILLINGER: You weren't responsible for my death.
I'm very much alive.
I'm napping on my porch in Portland, Oregon.

PURVIS: I have a headache!

DILLINGER: You just shot yourself.

PURVIS: Ah! Yes!—And have I committed suicide?

DILLINGER: No. You've had an accident.

PURVIS: You see!

It isn't what I do that counts; it's why.
It isn't what I've done; it's what I meant.
It isn't how I act, but only how
I'm thinking while I'm acting—Yes, I know,
It terrifies the heart to learn that good
And bad come down to infinitely
Subtle motions of the will, but I've
Used many years to think on this, I, I—
...WE JUST COLLARED DILLINGER!
This puts our Division on the map!
We had him in the alley. I said,
"Drop it, Johnny," I said, "We've got you covered."
He turned, unfurled his coat, went for his gun.
Hollis opened fire, the others too.
I never even flicked my safety off.
He dropped like a puppet with his strings cut.
Dead before he hit the grease!
I have a headache!
Get out of my dream!
Last night I saw Director Hoover
Gloating over my death, dressed as a woman,
Perched like a black crow above my grave.

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DILLINGER: And did you read your epitaph on the stone?

PURVIS: Who are you?

DILLINGER: I told you. You forgot.

PURVIS: I've used centuries to think on this—

SCENE 4

A small office at KSBC Radio in Florence, South Carolina, spring, 1959.

Purvis and job interviewer, both in business attire.

Occasionally we hear the mooing of cows outside.

PURVIS: Coffee...

INT: I'm sorry! I'll pour you—

PURVIS: Don't bother, it's fine—

46 INT: No bother a-tall! I'm just a little—

PURVIS: Oops.

INT: I'll wipe that—God!—here—

PURVIS: Not your handkerchief!

INT: That's what it's for!

PURVIS: All right, I'll have another—

INT: I'm just a little nervous, shall we say.

PURVIS: But I'm the one who's seeking the position.

INT: Mr. Purvis, you're a man of character.

PURVIS: Thank you, sir.

For me to use, and so I lug some home,
 Because I work at home, you see, sometimes,
 So it's not who or where but *how* you use
 A stapler or—you see how it gets tricky
 Just by being stuff don't hardly count,
 Just nickels from the coffee fund to plink
 For Coca-Cola, which is practically
 The *same* as coffee, only colder, till
 A three-cent stamp grows complicated and
 This feeling grabs you that you're *doing* something,
 Something, yes, murky.—Come to murk:
 My daddy used to give this lecture where
 He'd talk of cleaning up our insides, pouring
 The clarity of goodness over the bilge
 And swill—well, *you* know, kind of like you'd lavish
 Good water into a glass of dirty water?—
 Until we're filling up and spilling over?—
 And just keep pouring till we stand there clean?
 And then God lifts us to his lips, I guess...

PURVIS: I'm sorry—your daddy was a lecturer?

INT: At almost every opportunity!
 He doesn't lecture quite so much these days.

PURVIS: He's still living?

INT: Bless his soul, I think
 He is, barely!...How'd we get on *this*?
 —At least the ice is busted anyways!
 Soun' like time to crack this li'l ol' flask!

PURVIS: Would that reflect too wisely on my efforts
 To land employment here at—

INT: Efforts? Heck,
 As far as I'm concerned, the job is yours.

INT: Back when I was a—yep, in thirty-seven.
Must be—twenty-some-odd—twenty-what—

PURVIS: Delivered from the dark, devouring—

INT: I
Was quite an admirer or something.

PURVIS: The swarm of days.
A Melvin Purvis Junior G-man badge.

INT [*British accent*]: “Against the gangs of thugs who terrorize
America’s prairie states in the nineteen-thirties—
Blood-blind murder-mongers with a thirst
For roadhouse hootch and hungering for cash,
Writing their names in America’s headlines
50 With bullets from their tommy guns—against
These outlaw cutthroats ONE MAN STANDS TALL—
A G-man’s G-man and a he-man’s he-man,
Melvin Purvis, dedicated agent
Of Uncle Sam’s new law enforcement army,
The Federal Division of Investigation,
Later to become the FBI.”

PURVIS: Remarkable.

INT: Remarkable...indeed.
They showed a rousing good short subject all
About you in a theater in London—
Or, anyways, about the FBI.

PURVIS: ...And you saw London.

INT: I saw France. I saw
Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower, also watched
Bavaria from a train after the war.
Snapshots of a land defeated passing...

Yep. I fished it from the cereal.
“Melvin Purvis Junior G-man Corps.”
I was quite an admirer of—you.
I didn’t know who Melvin Purvis was,
Or what he *did*, I just assumed you were
The emperor of all the G-men—well,
I found out later on—the history,
You wouldn’t even call it history,
I mean it seems so fresh and so alive,
And even to this day, John Dillinger
And Legs and Dutch and Bugsy, names
Like Pretty Boy, Machine Gun, Baby Face...
And I was a Junior G-man and believed
That Melvin Purvis was our king.

PURVIS: Oh, no,
Not king. The king was Hoover. Was and is.
The King of the G-men, Lord of the Junior G-men,
Generalissimo of All the Girls
In the Special Junior G-man Girls’ Division;
We all were the trembling subjects of J. Edgar,
Immortal Emperor of Is and Was.

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INT: And, Mr. Purvis, what of Babyface?
Didn’t I read somewhere you caught him, too?

PURVIS: I wasn’t present at his capture.

INT: Was he
Captured?

PURVIS: He was killed. He fought it out.

INT: I’d be honored if I could work with you.
I’ll do everything I can. I’ll go to bat
With all my might and see what we can do.

PURVIS: I'll be pleased and grateful if
With all your might you'll see what you can do.

INT: I rose no higher than the junior echelon.
...ONE MAN STANDS TALL.

PURVIS: Remarkable.
...You went to war?

INT: Yes. No. I *went*, I mean—
The European theater—but never
Witnessed or experienced actual—
Participated in *hostilities*—
I have a marksman's badge. It's not a medal,
Just a, just a badge. For hitting targets.

52

PURVIS: I never went to war but there:
In Illinois...Wisconsin...In Ohio
Pretty Boy Floyd lay down in a field and died,
Not like an outlaw monster but like any
Baffled youngster with a punctured belly,
Died as I imagine he might have died
In service of his country, that's to say
I saw the same expression in his eyes
I would have seen if we two had enlisted
And shipped for France together at eighteen
Like some of the boys I went to high school with,
And he'd got shot beside me, and I'd held
His fingers and talked happy while the mud
Engrossed him. No, I never saw a war,
But I saw something real.

INT: Good God.

PURVIS: ... You read the account?

INT: I didn't read—

PURVIS: Recently the officer present says
At my behest he dispatched Charles A. Floyd
With a bullet to the head while Floyd lay helpless.
At my express command.

INT: That's damnable!

PURVIS: It would have been if I had done.

INT: I mean
To *say* a thing like that! It's scandalous.

PURVIS: So long as what he claims is false.

INT: But say!
He stains your name!

PURVIS: Unless, of course,
He tells the truth.

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INT: He tells a goddamn lie!
Excuse the color of my speech! But say!
—But coming back to black and white: the notion
This one inhabits goodness, *that* one's veins
Beat with Satan's blood, I mean—

PURVIS: All right,
Of course the certainty drains slowly away.
It's as if the battleground surfaces from the ocean
Of gore and the droplets drain from the faces and then
What you have are silly Midwestern boys
And arrogant men with badges on our breasts.
...My qualifications as a broadcaster—

INT: You pick it up in two-three weeks. I did.
Fact is I studied with an eye on law.

Went to the local college, just three years.
That college right there...

PURVIS: Oh! Right there! Ah—

INT: A feller couldn't get more local than that!

PURVIS: I thought it was a—sanitarium,
A lunatic's retreat, or lazar-house.

INT: Ha-ha-ha-ha isn't that a place
For pestilential leper sorts of folks?
A lazar-house?

PURVIS: Yes. That is, it looks—

54

INT: No, a college—well, it *used* to be
A mental hospital, but ever since
I've known of it, it's been the Baptist college.
Say now, what on earth's the difference?
Either one, you'd have to be crazy to go there.

PURVIS: Oh, now—

INT: Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.
...You wonder about the kids: how do they choose—
I didn't know where to head for, so one day
I walked in through that door and interviewed,
Right like you right now. That was a turn in the road.
Pre-law...I almost tried philosophy...
I nearly majored in theology.
I was drawn to it because...I feel a lack.
I missed my call, I reckon. Yes, right there
I reached a turn in the road. Do you have children?

PURVIS: Children?

INT: Yes.

PURVIS: —For goodness sake, of course,
You got me thinking. Yes. I have three sons,
All grown up and on their own. And you?
...Oh, yes, the—Sorry, yes, the...lunchbox.

INT: I swore I wouldn't do this, Mr. Purvis,
But I have actually brought the original—
Would you do me the honor of an autograph?

PURVIS: "Official Bulletin from Melvin Purvis!"
Thanks—I've got a—sure—I'll—thanks—

INT: Use mine!
"A special greeting to all Junior G-men!"
..."Purvis"—that's like "Elvis."

PURVIS: I'm not Elvis.

INT: Elvis Presley.

PURVIS: Yes. I know, the—

INT: the—

PURVIS: Hillbilly singer.

INT: Gosh. I'm talking crazy.
I'm just so nervous. Right—I do have kids.
..."In the days when I was a Junior G-man..."
"Confidential from Melvin Purvis." Well—
It's sort of an intoxicating honor,
I mean to me you're big, as big as Elvis
Would be to my—I have a son, a daughter...

PURVIS: Elvis Purvis!

PURVIS: Are you describing a dream?

INT: Is this a dream?

In the daylight my blood feels watery.
All my vows and all my fine resolves
Dissolve into corruption.
I walk around the town and everything
Feels silent no matter how much noise we make,
Like we aren't *people*, we haven't been *informed*,
We're walking around but we have no names.
I used to enjoy the moving picture shows.
But now I sit there in the crowd and I just
Smell my fellow Americans stinking and
I hear the breath ride in and out of their mouths
So loudly it mutes the spectacle.
Do you remember *Frankenstein* with Boris
Karloff?

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PURVIS: Ennervation, lassitude—

INT: I feel like fate has played me for a sucker,
Sold me a ticket printed on a cobweb—
Where's the glorious circus? It's dark. I hear the wind.
It was only a noise in a dream that woke me up.
There isn't any Heaven. There isn't any Hell.
I smell the ashtrays in the rooms ...And then
I rise from bed. I go into the morning.
My children embrace me vaguely and politely,
My daughter comes to kiss me and her face
And fingers smell like the puppy she's been petting.
And in this world the spring is turning green
And I see how I'm beginning to disappoint
My son. Just as I disappointed my father.
What pleased me once no longer pleases me,
And the bright things pale in my sight,
And meanwhile, things that never could have failed—

My little daughter's little hand, her kisses—
They give out. Give way. And now my daughter
Stands level with my shoulder, and she wears
Those peasant blouses, and her friends...are pretty.
And I go to see my father at his house.
He sits in a wicker chair beside a weeping
Willow and the chair is chipped and sets
Askew and he tips a little and his hands
Are tiny and his fly is down and his eyes
Are wet and red-rimmed; and the way they shine
While something works the corners of his mouth,
he looks as if he's trying not to laugh
At something terrifying coming up
Behind me. "Dad," I say, and he says, "What,
What is it?"—but the point is gone in saying
Dad, I'm someone you might pride yourself
To call your son. For all the hope of reaching
Him who was my father, I might as well
Be speaking to his headstone. "Father, Father,
It's raining on us both, on me and on
Your wicker chair beside the weeping willow."
One afternoon when I was a child the sky
Blackened and bits of trash whirled up and around
And the rain ripped down like knives and at the window
Of the house my father held me in the crook
Of his arm, I was that small, and we both watched
That willow twisting till a lash of lightning
Tore a third of it away from the trunk
And pitched it across the yard—and, sir, no storm,
No wind, no dark, no violence
Could possibly have touched me in the fortress
Of my father's arm.
...Oh well...Oh well...Ah, shit. Ah, shit.
Mr. Purvis, I can stride right now
Right into that pasture right out there
And tickle fresh, warm milk from out the teats
Of the great-grandchildren of the very cows

Who gave us milk to pour on our Post Toasties!
...I mean when I was a child. When I was a child.

PURVIS: ...Yes. The cows out there look very healthy...

INT: ...I spoke too much. I always do. I always—

PURVIS: Let me tell you of the death of Baby Face.

...Remember, now, this scene of violence
Unfolds within a natural splendor, within
The natural silence of the countryside,
Forty miles outside Chicago proper,
Near Lake Como, where the mallard ducks
Had not yet left, though late November had come,
And they sailed on its glass... All right:
Two of my agents, Ryan and McDade,
60 Passing a Ford on the Northwest Highway, matched
Three numbers on its plates with those of Nelson,
Now America's number one Most Wanted.
They quickly turned around, but so did Nelson,
Absolutely ready for a fight,
And when they crossed again, again he turned,
And chased them north, firing his tommy gun,
Chewing up their car, and they fired back,
Neither drawing blood as yet. With Nelson
Traveled his woman Helen and John Paul Chase,
A red-mouthed harlot and a no-good punk,
And now, as they fell behind, leaking
Water from a punctured radiator,
Two more agents in another car
Closed with Nelson's Ford V-8—Sam Cowley
And Herman Hollis—Nelson chasing agents
And agents chasing Nelson—until Ryan
Sped away, quite unaware that help
Had come. As Nelson's engine quit, he turned
Into the Northside Park in Barrington
And bumped to a halt. Helen ran for a drainage

Ditch and Chase and Nelson grabbed their guns
And ducked behind the Ford and fired at Sam
And Hollis as their car went by. The agents
Bailed, neither wounded, Hollis taking
Cover from his car and Cowley rolling
Into a second ditch, both firing back.
Now, Cowley headed our Chicago office,
And Hollis was with me at the Biograph
When we took Dillinger. Hollis was among
The men who actually shot and killed the varlet.
Crack shots both, firing from good cover,
They gave no quarter in this battle until,
Quite beyond my comprehension to this day,
Nelson simply stood up, steadying
His Thompson at his hip, and strode toward them,
Firing rapid bursts and cursing. Cowley
Hit him in the side, yet he kept coming.
He took another in the belly, still came on,
Rounded the car and slaughtered Hollis as
The agent ran for different cover, and,
Turning to Cowley—who'd been filling him
All the while with bullets— stood above him
There at the ditch's edge and made his wife
A widow with the tommy gun. He then
Managed to get in the federal car and start it,
And then those bastards sped away and left
Two agents, good men both, dead in their wake.
Next morning, in a cemetery close
To Nelson's hometown, Fox Grove, Illinois,
They found his naked corpse wrapped in a blanket.
The coroner counted seventeen bullet holes.
His name was Lester Joseph Gillis. He
Was one week shy of twenty-six years old.

61

INT: Seventeen, you—seventeen, you say.

PURVIS: No mere human could have lived beyond
The impact of the first four or five.
I thought, Now that is what we're up against:
Psychosis of a power to hold a man
Aright and marching like some—

INT: Lazarus!—

PURVIS: Indeed, some revenant, some Frankenstein—

INT: Old Boris Karloff!—or The Mummy—

PURVIS: Yes,
As the bullets fill him—

INT: Saint Sebastian martyred
By the arrows!—

62

PURVIS: Well, you get the point.

INT: I'm sorry. What a picture, though! Excuse.

PURVIS: His dead flesh animated by the lava
Of anti-authoritarian disrespect.
...I don't care whose side that man was on,
In 1918 they'd have borne his coffin
Draped with glory through the streets of home.

INT: You shouldn't say such things.

PURVIS: It's all
A mystery.

INT: But never say it is.

PURVIS: I never shall again. You have my word.

INT: And you, sir, have a job.

PURVIS: I'll strive in it.

BLACKOUT

SCENE 5

An office of the U.S. Division of Investigation; Chicago; January, 1935.

During the scene we sometimes hear the commotion of a nearby elevator.

Hoover behind the desk, dressed in a business suit.

He makes faces and clenches his fists and wrings his hands, screams and laughs and weeps—all silently.

HOOVER [*into intercom*]: ...Blanche.

BLANCHE'S VOICE: Yes, sir.

64

HOOVER: Is he still in the anteroom?

BLANCHE'S VOICE: Yes. Mr. Purvis is standing in the anteroom.

HOOVER: What is he doing now?

BLANCHE'S VOICE: He's—standing in the anteroom.

HOOVER: Have you got him by the window? Left side?

BLANCHE'S VOICE: No, sir.

HOOVER: No, sir?

BLANCHE'S VOICE: I told him to stand by the window, but he moved.

HOOVER: All right. [*On phone:*] Hello.

I wish to place a person-to-person call—

Excuse me. Later. I'll—goodbye ... [*Into intercom:*] Now, Blanche,

Who is ascending? I hear someone ascending.

That whirring again. That whir and thunk. I hear it.

BLANCHE'S VOICE: They went to another floor.

HOOVER:

Quite right. All right.

Goodbye. [*On phone:*] Hello. Hello. Person-to-person, please,
To the Hoover residence in Washington DC.

Temple-six, eight seven seven eight.

I beg your pardon?—Mrs. Hoover. Sorry.

...Mother, how are you? ...Mother, put your mouth
Nearer the mouthpiece; that's why they call it that.

Mother, I miss you ...It's cold, the rivers are frozen.

This wind will whirl you around and slap your face.

...O, I love you too ...O, I miss you sorely.

How are you doing? ...How are you doing, Mother?

How are the cats? ...How are the cats? The—

How does Snooky Snooker snuggle without me?

Oh, that's sweet! ...He's precious. So are you.

...Mother, I want your prayers today, especially

Today. Go on your knees, dear Mother, and pray

That I find the strength to go about my work.

...I know you do, I know you do, but now

As much as ever, Mother ...Thank you.

...There isn't any danger, Mother. I'm just—

...O, O, no no no. The telephone—

The telephone can't hurt you ...No no no,

Chicago telephones are harmless, too.

...All right, but never fear. And pray for me.

All right, all right—hello? Hello?—Goodbye.

[*Leaps to his feet.*]

...What's this, my man—a hooligan's switchblade knife?

But I am a servant of the law. And yet

I hold this blade, how sharp, and to what purpose?

Huuuuu! Hrrrrrrh! Haah! Hhm-Hhm! Hrrraaggghhh!

They said you had a lot of guts! Quite so!

Let me introduce you to your bowels.

Here's the large, and here the small intestine.

My! What have you been eating?— Eat it again!
Hah-HAH hrrr-hrrr HLLL HLLL haaghr AAH.
How do you look in this year's very latest
Fashionable scarf, the tripe-of-traitor
From deep in the interiors of you?
There! Now I'm the man who collared Purvis!
You're trembling, trembling, let me snug your cravat.
How you blush! Too much? O no, I mustn't
Strangle you, no. No, you're going to spend
Seven long days begging to be strangled!
HAAARGH HUUUH huh huh huh huh huh...
[Resumes his seat.]
...Send him in...Hhhhrrrr. Hrrrrhh. Hrrrh. Hrrrh. Hrrrh.
[Melvin Purvis enters.]
Here's our man, "the man of the hour!" Sit.

66

PURVIS: Welcome to Chicago, sir.

HOOVER: Director.

PURVIS: Welcome to Chicago, Director.

HOOVER: Hoover.
Director Hoover.

PURVIS: Welcome to Chicago—

HOOVER: Title and name, Special Agent Purvis.

PURVIS: Welcome to Chi—

HOOVER: Thought I'd better see
First-hand how things are done in the Windy City.

PURVIS: Well, you're most—

PURVIS: Of course, Director Hoover.

HOOVER: I'm composing a letter of termination.

PURVIS: Termination? Do you refer to a death?

HOOVER: I don't. I mean the ending of employment.

...We moderns author a language suited to
Our work: the work of faceless entities.
The modern age boils slowly forward on
The inauspicious labors of a multitude,
Comings and goings, routes and dates and times,
Bits and pieces, instruments and engines,
A monstrous undergrowth of pipes and wires,
And, Marvin, what do you suppose prevents
The behemoth from strangling on itself?
Order: tables, lists, charts, graphs
Indices, appendices
Inventories, catalogues.
And who shall keep these treasures holy?
The men of the bureaus; we, the Bureaucrats!
We who stalk our shadows in the halls,
We who strum the blades of pages with
The ridges of our fingerprints. In battle
We unsheath the alphabet and drive deep
The Dewey decimal. Quite right—small stuff.
Yet we accomplish in the aggregate
What Hercules and Theseus would've—
Theseus married, as I think you know,
The Queen of the Amazons. I shall never marry.
I am wife and husband to this work.
"Bureaucrat." The word makes music.
I am having our branch redesignated:
No more "Division of Investigation."
Is this a division?—Are we, then, dividers?
No! "Bureau" is the French for "desk":
Our steed, our tank, our Howitzer.

Our battleship! dreadnought! gunboat! bastard schooner!
“The Federal Bureau of Investigation.”
Yes. A bureau. We’ll be Bureaucrats!

PURVIS: Like Jason and the Argonauts.

HOOVER: Somewhat.

PURVIS: Hoover and the Bureaucrats.

HOOVER: Just so.

[Hoover gathers both their meals together and lunch is over.]

70 ...I am holding in my mind the text
Of a lacerating letter to demand
The resignation of a renegade.
Demand, did I say? No. I shall command.
I’ll reduce our Mr.—“P”— to pabulum.
But, sir, whereas I taste the very words
Like blood on my tongue, I can’t quite redden the page.
O, would you help?
I want somehow to remonstrate and also
Devastate, you see. He must be wounded.
He’s grown to quite the prideful peacock,
Fanning and strutting and shimmying, grinding
Under his spurs the faces of his betters.
He’s slimy with adulation. It’s ungrateful.
—There’s the crux, he’s just ungrateful, there
You have its full and quivering extent.

PURVIS: You ask me to help you phrase
The letter of my so-called “termination”?

HOOVER: I’ll settle for a writ of resignation.

PURVIS: You won't get one. Fire me. Put it on paper
Above your name for all the world to see.

HOOVER: ...Perhaps I spoke too vigorously just now.
The hurt of having been outshone, you see,
The piercing of a beneficiary's
Ingratitude, you see—that corkscrew works
Deeper and deeper—you see.

PURVIS: How can I not?

HOOVER: Vigor of tongue is for the politician.
We are the new, soft, strong, gray men, in whom
A kind of soapy equanimity
Is not entirely uncalled for.
The proper bureaucrat must keep
Alert but noncommittal.

PURVIS: Like a dog.

HOOVER: ...Have you visited the pyramids of Egypt?
—But you've seen photos. We could raise a hundred
In twenty months. A pyramid was called
"The place where men are turned to gods."
...How do you find Chicago, Agent Purvis?
Isn't winter like a thousand razors?

PURVIS: It's still autumn.

HOOVER: And down near zero!
A million miles from sunny Carolina.
[Sings:] I'd walk a million miles
For one of your smiles—

PURVIS:—And just last month we had a solid week
Of days that broke a hundred.

HOOVER:

Brutal stuff!—

Brutal.

PURVIS: I can't tell you what it is,
But think of all the killers bred from here:
The Daltons; Frank and Jessie James;

HOOVER: The Youngers;

PURVIS: Johnny Ringo,

HOOVER: Ringo, really—
Wyatt Earp grew up in Pella, Iowa
As I remember reading—

PURVIS: Yes, quite right,
And Katie Elder came from Davenport.

72

HOOVER: The vagaries of climate,

PURVIS: or the diet,
All this dust, the hopeless distances,

HOOVER: The vertigo of horizontal vastness—

PURVIS: The sweet, mild Carolinas don't conduce
This bloody tommy-gun-style criminal
Department. The hypnotic wheat
Of Kansas, Illinois, that's where these boys
Rise out of, and they're mean. They come for blood
With the innocence of sucklings. Charles A. Floyd
Hardly blinked, so say the witnesses,
When he and his accomplices gunned down
Four noble cops, including one of ours,
That day at the Kansas City Station.
Killing suited him.

HOOVER: Well, killing's what you gave him.

PURVIS: Charles A. Floyd was struck down in the throes
Of violent resistance to arrest.
The same for Gillis—alias Baby Face—
The same for Dillinger.

HOOVER: Alias Jimmy Lawrence.

PURVIS: That is not an alias known to me.

HOOVER: I was a guest at city hall last week.
Had my photo snapped with Mayor Kelly;
And he—that is, the Mayor—raised the name
Of Michael Green, the officer on hand
With you when Dillinger was shot. Mike Green?
Chicago cop?

PURVIS: I think it rings a bell.

HOOVER: O you hear a *bell* ring, do you, Purvis.
Officer Green, in turn, has raised the name
Of Jimmy Lawrence—ding dong!—Jimmy Lawrence?

PURVIS: I repeat: the name is not familiar.

HOOVER: ...All day long I gaze at the faces of liars,
And to my practiced eye the difference
Between your face and that of a liar is vast,
So vast I might be staring into the face
Of Boris Karloff playing Frankenstein,
That's how monstrously rare a face you have.
It's not the face of a liar. I believe the name
Of Jimmy Lawrence is not familiar to you.

PURVIS: Will you tell me who he is?

Don't you see that we shall minister for gods
That we create? We'll don the heads of beasts
And speak with new tongues, dancing in the smoke
Of sacrificial fires!—while outside
The glowing pyramid the multitude
Feels the pull and trembles and bows down.
I curse you, sir. I raise you high above
The flames and break your body!

*[Silhouetted in a purple light,
To the rhythms of a sexual, melting jazz
Composed in an exotic scale,
Hoover enacts a private rite, making
Supplication to the numina
Who animate his trembling desires.*

*Purvis looks on, utterly motionless.
And while the light transforms itself around him,
He, despite the onslaught of these powers,
Undergoes, himself, no transformation.]*

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BLACKOUT