The Flight of Hamilton Smith

John Coyne

Western Michigan University

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Recommended Citation
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JOHN COYNE

Paul Darnell first heard about Hamilton’s death on the radio while driving to the country club, and for a few minutes there on the superhighway he had a hard time of it. At one point he thought of pulling off to the side of the road until he settled down. But he managed to control himself until he pulled into the club’s parking lot and saw the last of the police cars leaving the scene of the killing. Then all the tense emotions which he had held in check since the hunt began two weeks before broke through his control, and he suddenly felt old and useless.

He stepped slowly out of the car and started up toward the club house. Usually when he came out to the club he would enter by the front door, but this evening he did not want to meet all the members who congregated in the main lounge. They would, he knew, be talking about the shooting, and he did not want to talk this particular evening about Hamilton Smith. So instead he followed the brick path around the building and entered the locker room. The room was empty. He walked quickly over the sourdine rug to his locker, slid off his coat, and began to remove his tie. He was doing this when Warren, the locker room man, came over to see if he wanted anything.

“No, I don’t think so; I’m just going to shave.” He smiled warmly at the heavyset colored man.

Warren nodded and then asked, “Did ya hear about Hamilton?”

“Yes . . . on the radio.” He turned toward Warren. “Did you see it?”
“Yes, sir, I was walkin’ out to the scoreboard to see how many foursomes were still on the course when I heard all this shootin’ down by the reservoir. We all looked that way; it sounded just like cars backfirin’ or something, and then Hamilton he came a runnin’ out of the bushes just like a rabbit. Well we sees him cuttin’ across number one fairway, cross the sandtraps and everything, and right behind him all these cops start comin’ out of the woods, shootin’ and yellin’ for him to stop. And then Hamilton he got hit and tumbled over in the sand, and then he tried to get up again and someone else shot him, and he fell flat on his face in that long rough next to nine green.”

He stopped then, abruptly. Paul watched the old man for a moment, and then finding nothing to say that might console him, touched his shoulder.

Warren looked up, attempted a smile, and asked, “What makes a person do such a thing, Mr. Darnell? Hamilton was such a good boy! Always comin’ around to say hello to me, jokin’ and carryin’ on . . . why I can still remember when you two were boys carryin’ bags as big as yourselves. Oh, Hamilton he never did grow much bigger, now did he?”

“No, I guess he never did.”

“I never believed he killed her!” Warren stated firmly. “Even when they found his gun, I never thought it was our Hamilton.”

“Neither did I, but I guess he was a different person than the one we knew.”

“I guess ya’re right; I guess ya know.” Warren answered softly as he walked away.

Paul picked up his shaving equipment and went into the bathroom. Standing before the huge mirror he looked critically at himself. He was tall, slightly built, with an angular brooding face that was clean, handsome and unmarked.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a comb. As he did a quarter fell onto the floor, raced around in a diminishing circle and finally spun to a stop across a seam in the tile. A line, Paul thought.

It had been a liner that day, too, when he was twelve and pitching quarters at a hastily drawn line in the dirt of the caddy yard. Paul had jumped excitedly at the toss, his face lighting with pleasure as he examined the position of the coin.
Hamilton fingered his quarter for a moment and then pocked it abruptly saying, "I don't feel like pitchin'."

"Whad'ya mean?" Paul grabbed hold of Hamilton's arm.

"I gotta go home."

"Then give me that damn money!"

"Come on, Paul; it's my last one. I need it for the show."

"I don't give a damn . . . you lost it." Paul grabbed Hamilton by the shoulders and glared down at him.

"It's my last quarter, Paul, please!"

One of the caddies who was watching them pitch called over. "You should've thought about that before you pitched, Smith."

"Yeah," Paul added shaking Hamilton's shoulders as if to pry the quarter loose. "Give me a break, Paul; I'll let ya play with my guns."

"Your old lady won't let us play anyway. Give me the quarter!" He started to wrestle with Hamilton. A circle of anxious caddies formed about them. Hamilton broke loose from Paul's grasp, picked a stone off the ground, and with one quick motion threw it at Paul. The stone caught him over his right eye breaking the skin. Paul fell back and covered his forehead with his hands, blood trickled out between his fingers.

For a moment everyone was quiet while Paul bent over crying and holding his head. Then they began to shout. One caddy shoved Hamilton and swore at him while two others ran to help Paul. Hamilton glanced at the confusion. Someone yelled to get the caddy master, to call a doctor. Two more came up and swore at Hamilton for throwing the quarter. He backed away frightened as they followed him. Finally he bolted and raced toward the protection of the woods that boarded the caddy yard. A pack of caddies chased him. As they yelled to cut him off before he reached the woods, he turned, outflanked them and raced up the hill. His short legs pumped across the yard. He reached the water tower, grabbed one of the legs, and started to climb toward the top.

When the caddies reached the tower they began throwing stones at him. Paul got off the ground holding a blood soaked handkerchief against his cut and hurried to the tower.

"Here's Darnell," a caddy called, "give him a try. He deserves it." A small boy grabbed a stone and delivered it to Paul.

"Go ahead, Darnell, hit him," a caddy said.
Paul glanced up at the tower. Hamilton had almost reached the small platform that surrounded the tank. When he reached that, he'd be safe, Paul thought, and leaning back gathered strength to throw the stone. He hoped he wouldn't miss.

"Oh, here you are, Darnell." The door of the bathroom banged open. Jeff Donnelly, the president of the club, came charging in. "I've been searching all over hell for you, Paul."

"How are you, Jeff?" Paul wiped the last traces of shaving cream off his face.

"Not too damn well; it's this Smith business."

"What Smith business?"

"Why they killed him right out there on the eighteenth hole. They say he was hiding on this course for the past two weeks."

"I can't help that, Jeff," Paul answered, starting to leave. "Goddamn it! I know you can't help that, but I want a board meeting about it before dinner."

"What for? You want to establish a monument?"

"Hell no! I just want to forget he ever was on this course. And that's what I want to see you about. Several of the board members were talking and we decided to draw up a letter for the press saying Smith never caddied here at all. I want you to get started on a first draft right away. . . ."

"But Smith did caddy here. In fact I caddied with him."

"Well forget you ever did, forget you ever heard about Hamilton Smith. We can't have the club's name connected with any lunatic killer. . . ."

"Hamilton wasn't a killer."

"What are you talking about? He killed his old lady and shot it out with the cops . . ."

Paul started to object, but realizing the futility of his protest, turned and left Donnelly standing in the bathroom. When he had finished dressing he walked out into the cool evening. He was thinking of Hamilton again, as he had been for the last two weeks, ever since the body of Hamilton's mother was found. Even then everyone was talking about Hamilton in terms of the killer; he had been the only one who had defended him.

"Hamilton's no killer," Paul had stated to the police.

"Why are you so positive?" the detective had asked.

They were standing on the first tee of the club the Saturday
after the body was found. Paul was waiting to tee off when Captain Dennis, the detective in charge of the case, had come to question him.

“I caddied with him,” Paul had answered. “We were close friends.”

“When did you see him last?”

“There were two weeks ago; he was hitchhiking on the club road.”

Paul remembered he was coming out to the club for dinner and had just turned onto the club’s road when the fierce beam of his car’s headlights had picked out Hamilton standing at the edge of the road. He looked ragged and unkept; his face, in the one quick glance Paul had of it, was unshaven and strange looking.

“Did you ever meet Hamilton’s mother?” the detective asked then.

“Just once, during the first year I was caddying, Hamilton and I went over to his house to see his guns.”

“Smith liked guns?”

“Not in the way you’re thinking! We all liked guns. It wasn’t anything at all.”

“Well, what about his mother? How did they get along?”

“I can’t really remember; it’s been a long time.”

“Tell me then what you do remember.”

“It had been raining,” Paul began slowly, “Hamilton and I were inside the caddy house, watching it rain, and trying to think of something to do.”

He told Dennis how he had suggested their going over to Hamilton’s house, getting his guns, and shooting birds in the field behind the club. At first Hamilton had been against it, but Paul finally convinced him that it would be a lot of fun.

Hamilton’s home wasn’t far from the club. They cut through the woods behind the caddy yard and came out at the back of the housing unit for the nearby defense plant. The rows of small battleship-gray buildings were ugly and uninviting under the leaden sky of the late afternoon.

When they reached his home they walked around to the back porch, following a skinny concrete sidewalk that acted as a bridge over the rain water which was flooding the yard, and entered the house looking like two alley cats coming in out of the rain.
“I’ll get the guns,” Hamilton had said, “You wait here.”

Paul sat down cautiously on an old couch and looked around at the unheated room filled with broken furniture and piles of old clothes. Through the open door he could see dirty dishes stacked dangerously high in the sink. There was a radio playing in the other room; its blaring tunes acted as a companion to the uncivilized rooms.

Hamilton came hurrying back with the guns.

“Come on,” he said rushing toward the door.

Paul stood up and started to follow; it was then that he saw Mrs. Smith.

“What the hell ya doing, Hamilton? Who told ya to take those guns?” She charged forward, a towering person with a blunt, masculine face. Grabbing the guns away from him she shouted, “I told ya to leave them alone.” Then with a quick, chopping motion she slapped him across the face. He cowered away from her crying.

“I was just goin’ to show him the guns, Mom.”

She turned toward Paul.

“Well . . . yeah . . .” And then fearing she might find out the truth, he said quickly, “We were also going to shoot birds out in the fields.”

“Lying to me weren’t you, Hamilton?” She turned back to her son and slapped him again. “Now get in that house.” She shoved him toward the door, and then turned back to Paul. “You better get home.” And without waiting to see if he obeyed, followed her son into the kitchen, slamming the door behind her.

“That was the only time I saw her.” Paul told Dennis.

The first tee was empty now; the detective and Paul stood alone under the shade of a wide tree, as if they were a twosome waiting to play.

It was empty again when Paul came out of the locker room escaping from Jeff Donnelly into the privacy of the darkness. He stood there for a few minutes and then aimlessly started down the brick path, through the parking lot, until he stood in the deserted caddy yard next to the water tower. He glanced up at the hovering water tank silhouetted against the empty dull sky. Then subconsciously he felt the scar over his right eye. It was hardly noticeable now, a slight impression that could only be seen when he frowned; but that afternoon seven-
teen years before when he had thrown the stone at Hamilton the blood had flowed freely.

His stone had not hit Hamilton; he had scurried to safety through the small hole onto the platform.

“You’ll have to go get him,” one of the caddies stated.

Paul glanced around. Several others nodded agreement.

“What do ya mean?”

“Smith... you’ll have to go up and get him.”

“Why?”

“He hit ya... ya’ve gotta pay him back. You ain’t chicken to climb that tower?”

“Hell no!” He answered weakly. “I ain’t chicken.”

“Go ahead then... the bleeding’s stopped.”

Paul tenderly felt the cut.

“What should I do with him?”

“I don’t know,” one of them said, “Hit him maybe, pretend you’re goin’ throw him over the side, anything; it’s up to you.”

Paul started up the tower holding tightly to the steel rings that served as a ladder. When he reached the top of the leg he stopped and looked through the hole in the platform for Hamilton. The wind was strong at the top of the tower; he hugged the ladder, half afraid to move.

Paul could not see Hamilton. So securing a hold on the platform he pulled himself up. As he did his foot slid off the steel ring and wedged between the rods that braced the leg to the tower. He was unable to move. Stranded in the opening of the platform with his arms holding him in place and his leg caught he could not go up or down.

“Hamilton,” he called. “Hamilton come here, please!”

At the corner of the huge tank he could see the shadow of Hamilton; the small, blunt image waited. “Hamilton, please!” he called again, panicking at his failure to act. Then slowly, with frightening casualness the shadow moved and Hamilton came in sight. Paul labored to hold his position. “Hamilton, it’s my foot; it’s caught in the ladder.”

Hamilton stepped forward slowly as if expecting a trap. He had been crying; tears washed clean streaks through the dirt on his face. Cautiously he bent over and looked at Paul’s leg twisted in the rods; then, without comment, he reached toward Paul.

For some insane reason, perhaps because of Hamilton’s
silence and the dull stare of his eyes, or because the way his small hand moved forward, Paul thought Hamilton was going to push him through the hole. He jerked back, lost his hold on the platform and began to slide. Hamilton dived forward, grabbed his shirt, and held him while Paul, dangling through the hole, reached again for safety.

Seventeen years later as Paul looked up at the tower he shuddered at the thought of what could have happened if Hamilton had not been there to help. But then, he reasoned, trying to explain away the indebtedness—if it hadn’t been for Hamilton and the quarter he wouldn’t have been up on the tower.

He turned from the tower and the caddy yard and started to walk back toward the club, realizing his walk had not solved anything, but only stirred up all the unresolved questions from his past.

“But the past is important,” the detective had said when Paul asked why he was being questioned about Hamilton’s life.

“Why don’t you just find Smith?” Paul asked angrily.

“We’ll find him, but we also want to know what he was like, what he did, where he hung out, and who were his friends.”

“I told you I knew him a long, long time ago, when we were kids. Since then we haven’t moved in the same social group.”

“Did you ever see him?”

“Yes... occasionally, when I would be driving through town, and he did caddy here.”

“He ever caddy for you?”

“No.”

“Why not? Too proud?”

“No, that wasn’t it. I told the caddy master not to send him out with me.”

The detective studied Paul for a moment and then asked what were his reasons.

“About two years ago,” Paul answered, “I was driving home on Route 45, and my car broke down by Mills Tavern. It was about midnight. I pulled into the gas station next to the tavern and had them look at it. There was something wrong with the generator, I can’t remember now, but anyway I told them to fix it.”

He told the detective how he had crossed the highway and gone into the tavern to have a beer. The place had been crowded. He couldn’t find a stool at the bar, so he walked
toward the back of the building, where they had small tables. It was there that he saw Hamilton.

"Hi, Darnell, you old son-of-a-bitch."

"Hello, Hamilton, how are you?" Paul said and pulled a chair up to his table.

"I'm doing O.K., you know, workin' steady at the foundry. Can't complain." He took a huge swallow of beer and wiped his hand across his mouth. His face was broad and uninteresting with a wide, flat nose, and large, coarse lips. "You're doin' all right . . . member of the club and everything."

"I can't complain either; it's taken a long time."

Hamilton nodded dully and stared ahead for a moment.

"I've been meanin' to go up and see ya sometime. I'd like ya to do me a favor, you know for old times sake."

Paul glanced up and watched Hamilton.

"What is it?" he asked cautiously.

"My old lady is an alcoholic and I'm trying to get her admitted to a state hospital," he stated unemotionally.

"That shouldn't be a problem."

"Yeah, but ya got to have a doctor's approval or something; that's what I want to talk to you about."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know all those doctors at the club really good, right?"

Paul nodded slowly.

"I was thinkin' maybe you could get one of them to write up a letter of admittance or whatever it is. I could save a little scratch, you know."

"Hamilton, I really don't think I can. I'm a new member at the club; it just won't look right. I'm sorry but . . . ."

"Hell, Paul, for old times sakes, you know . . . on the side maybe you ask one . . . ."

"I'm sorry, Hamilton, but the answer has to be no."

"Paul, come on, ya got to. This old drunk is driving me nuts. All day long that's all she does! I can't afford to have all those doctor bills and everything. What'dya say, pal? It'll save me a little bread."

"Hamilton, I'd like to, but the members won't go for me asking any favor like that. The answer is no."

Hamilton sat back in the chair. His face was slightly flushed; his eyes blurred a little.
“And you never did anything about his mother?” the detective asked.

“No,” Paul answered softly.

Paul reached the front entrance and walked into the club. The members were filing into dinner. Throughout the building he could hear gay laughter and the sounds of tinkling glassware. As he crossed the lounge walking toward the dining room, Jeff Donnelly called to him from the bar, and asked if he had done anything about the letter.

Paul stopped and looked toward him. Several board members who were there turned and waited for his answer.

“I was on my way to do it now,” Paul said. Then he turned and walked alone toward the office.

Washington D.C.

Awaited dawn is yet five hundred miles at sea;
In Union Station there are few but me to watch
The little gnomes come out and clean the urinals.

Beneath a bright orange skirt a shapely pair of legs
Squeeze into heels that echo far across the vast
Concourse, reminding me of you, my answer to their
chocolate question.

_SAM PIPE_