

Dinglehooper

Eleven year olds Ricky, Joe, and Frank, on their first week of summer vacation, were hiding behind some bushes across the street from Karl Dingler's house, waiting for him to head off to work. Dingler was known around town as Dinglehooper.

Joe's father, the owner of Joe's Filling Station, had an impressive collection of comic books and clippings—some going back to the 1920's—stacked in piles around the garage. *Dinglehooper und His Dog*, drawn by Harold H. Knerr, could be found in some of the piles. The back room had a Coca-Cola cooler that, in addition to soda bottles, contained an ample supply of beer for after closing 'social hour', during which Dingler's nickname may have originated.

The boys liked to hang out at the garage and snoop around, not to mention pester the hapless gas attendant, Walter Burns. They'd grab a coke ("Never, ever take a beer!" Joe's father warned him) and go into the office while Walter gassed up a car.

Walter always sighed when he came back in and saw them.

"Did you thieves pay for those cokes?" he would ask.

"Yup, put the money in the cash register," was Joe's standard reply. Walter was aware that Joe knew how to open the cash drawer.

"Looks like the same amount of change to me," Walter would say as he sifted through the coins.

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The boys would guzzle their cokes, slip out the side door, and take off on their bikes. Walter didn't know that Joe's father allowed the boys to help themselves to a soda anytime they wanted. And the boys knew that Walter didn't know.

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Dingler, a reclusive, sullen man, was the town enigma. Discussing him was forbidden, particularly at the dinner table:

"Mom, is it true Dinglehooper is crazy because he was shell shocked during the war?"

"His name is Mr. Dingler, and he's not to be discussed in this house, nor are you to ever go near him!"

"I heard he hid two thousand dollars in his fireplace and his wife started a fire that burned it up and that's why he killed her and buried her in the cellar."

"That's enough, young man!"

In a small, pragmatic Maine town in the mid-1960's, that meant the matter was closed. Regardless, such an abrupt shutdown of the dialog deepened the mystery and fueled the fire of curiosity in eleven-year-old boys.

Dinglehooper *was* in a war, but which one? To the boys, Dinglehooper possessed an aura of having been around forever.

"He should be coming out soon," said Joe as they waited impatiently. "Did you know he was a German soldier in World War I and was put in a prison hospital in England after he got shell shocked?"

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“I heard he was an American soldier in World War II and was put in a mental hospital in Maryland,” countered Frank.

“You guys don’t know anything,” said Ricky.

“I have *my* information on good authority,” said Joe.

“From who?” asked Frank.

“Umm, can’t remember.”

“Then you’re just making it up. Lance Sullivan’s father said he was in World War II. That’s good enough for me.”

“That’s bogus, Frank. Besides, Lance’s father is a drunk.”

“Well I believe him, not you! Explain how *you* know he was in World War II!”

“Shut up you two!” said Ricky. “He’s coming out!”

They watched bug-eyed as Dinglehooper plodded down his dirt driveway. He was in his standard garb: gray pants, long sleeve shirt, work boots, and a cap pulled tightly over his head.

Dinglehooper worked with the town’s maintenance crew, usually wielding a shovel somewhere, dutifully carrying out an assigned task. He was never, ever seen inside any establishment in town, but every Friday after work he’d pick up a box of groceries left at the rear entrance of Worley’s Market. From there he would lumber home, a mile away, regardless of the weather.

Dinglehooper turned right out of his driveway and onto Hill Street, then loped down the long hill to Main Street. Left at the intersection led to town, and right

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became Mill Road as it headed out of town. The high school and grammar school were on the opposite side of Main Street, situated at a slight elevation.

Facing Hill Street from the school complex, one would first see the ominous specter of Dinglehooper's house. Otherwise, the hillside had a typical neighborhood look, with a collection of modest homes and a few side streets. But Dinglehooper's house stood out. There were no trees or lawn. His house was surrounded by scruffy fields that once may have been house lots. To the school kids, it was a daily visual reminder of a place to avoid.

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When Dinglehooper turned left onto Main Street, the boys went into action. They darted out from behind the bushes and ran to the door. The old and weary looking Victorian style house was creepy and run down. Paint had long since weathered away, and the roof looked as if one more big storm would mercifully strip off the deteriorating shingles. A few of the windows had ragged, partially drawn curtains. Peeking inside revealed only that it was dark and barren.

Two things interested the boys—the cellar, of course, and the third floor, where a dim light from one of the rooms could occasionally be seen at night.

“Ok,” said Ricky. “Let's go in. Frank, open the door.”

“You open the door, Ricky, this was your idea.”

Ricky walked up to the door, extended his hand to the knob, then froze.

“Maybe this isn't such a good idea guys, there might be a booby trap inside.”

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Joe and Frank started the low “braaaaaawk.....brawk brawk...braaaaaawk” of a chicken. All three of them had this routine down because Frank’s father raised chickens. They would sneak into one of the hen houses, bend their knees, put the back of their hands under their armpits, take long strides, flap their arms, and repeatedly “braaawk”. This agitated the hens, much to their amusement. But Frank’s father caught them one day, and Frank paid for it behind the wood shed that evening. The hen’s existence became a bit more peaceful after that.

Ricky grabbed the knob, turned it, and burst in as if expecting to see the ghost of Dinglehooper’s wife.

“Come on in guys, I survived,” he reported.

The three of them looked around. It was dark and musty smelling. They were near the entrance to the great room which, aside from a table, chair, and sofa, was empty. The table had a kerosene lamp on it. Immediately to their left was a door. Ricky opened it and quickly turned his head away.

“Yup, this is the cellar, and the air stinks! She’s buried down there for sure, and it’s really dark.” The wooden steps near the top were narrow and rickety looking, and the descent was steep. “Well, we’re here, and I’ve got my pen light. Frank, watch me, I don’t trust these steps. Joe, go to a window and keep an eye out.”

Joe walked to a window near the door, which was wide open, and noticed a chair hidden behind it with a lunch pail on the seat. He felt a rise of panic.

“Hey guys, there’s a...oh my god! Dinglehooper is coming up the street; he forgot his lunch pail, and he’s walking really fast!”

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Ricky, on the cellar's second step, fell flat as he spun around, his chest and arms on the floor, and his legs on the steps. He sprung up and shouted, "Scatter! We'll meet under the bridge. Don't let him catch you!"

They bolted. Ricky turned right and started a mad dash in a direction parallel to Mill Road.

Frank went straight, flying directly downhill.

Joe, unfortunately, turned left and started running uphill through weeds and tangled shrubs. That meant Dinglehooper, who had transitioned from a trot to run, had him in plain sight. Joe looked back and was shocked to see Dinglehooper so close. He took a hard right, stumbled a bit, and ran toward Hill Street.

When Joe reached the street, Dinglehooper was two strides behind, with his right arm extended ("I swear his arm was four feet long!" Joe would later recount). As he streaked across the street, he could hear Dinglehooper's labored breathing.

Joe scooted past the large oak tree on Mrs. Mason's front yard and around the shed behind her small cape, hoping to make it to the Lancaster's yard. He forgot about the fence, though. When he stopped and turned, he fully expected to be grabbed by Dinglehooper, who would quickly snap his neck in the execution of a clean kill. Dinglehooper wasn't there, however, having abruptly stopped after crossing the street. He knew the reactions to being seen chasing kids through backyards—even troublemaking trespassers like these three—would be severe.

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Joe was the last to arrive at the bridge. To get there, the boys always took the 'secret path' along the river bank. The mill served by the river dumped pollutants into it that tumbled over a dam just below the bridge.

Accessing the small, sloping, dirt cubby hole underneath the north side of the bridge was a precarious endeavor. It meant stepping onto a narrow, ragged ledge, sliding sideways a few yards while desperately hanging onto outcroppings of mortar, then scrambling up and onto the dirt surface. Having P.F Flyers in good condition helped.

Nothing to it unless you fell backward. The flow under the bridge was swift, and even if you made it to the dam without being engulfed by the giant, billowing, chemical froth balls, the tumble onto the boulders below would be fatal.

Parents, had they known of it, would have had fits. It was comparable to the tentative shuffle across the river after an inch or two of ice had formed in November. Most kids only did that once because, upon reaching the opposite bank, even a daring eleven-year-old was left with the sober realization that the consequences of falling through was a trip downriver under the ice.

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"What took you so long?" Ricky asked Joe, who proceeded to tell them about his narrow escape.

"Well, at least we all made it," said Ricky. "Anyone got cigarettes?"

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Joe pulled a couple of mangled Marlboros out of a pocket, along with some matches. “Better than nothing, I guess,” he said, lighting one up. He took a drag and passed it to Frank.

“Well, now we need a new plan,” said Ricky. “We’ve got to get into that house!”

“Maybe we should wait,” said Frank as he handed the cigarette to him. “Dinglehooper’s really going to be on the lookout for us now, especially for you. I bet he hasn’t forgotten what you did during recess this spring.”

“Aw, you guys are woosies,” said Ricky as he flicked the spent butt onto the giant ash tray they were sitting on. “Let’s go back and get our bikes.”

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Back in late March, on a day that was cold but suitable for outdoor morning recess at the grammar school, Mrs. Adams—known as ‘Grease Gun Adams’ since she was also a skilled mechanic in her husband’s truck repair business—and Mrs. Stone—alias ‘Stoney’—were on duty. Much to their surprise, Dinglehooper was on Main Street and walking past the schoolyard, on his way to town.

“Well, Evelyn, that’s something you don’t see very often,” Mrs. Stone remarked.

“Certainly not, Ruth,” said Mrs. Adams. “He must be late for work; he has his lunch pail. It’s odd. I heard he is very punctual and never misses a day of work.”

“DINGLEHOOFER! DINGLEHOOFER!” That call resonated throughout the school yard, and the reaction was immediate.

Dinglehooper spun right, heading in Ricky’s direction with lunch pail in hand. The two teachers went into emergency evacuation mode.

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“Everybody into the school at once!” bellowed Mrs. Adams. The kids who first saw Dinglehooper didn’t need any prompting, and the unaware began running like mad. Girls were screeching and boys were cursing.

“Watch your language young men!” Mrs. Stone hollered.

Ricky, as if hypnotized, was hanging back. “Come on!” yelled Joe.

Mrs. Adams, in her forties, was tall, lean, and imposing, with chiseled features and dusty hair wound into a bun. She marched up to Ricky and grabbed his left bicep with a firm right hand.

“Ouch!” Ricky squealed. Her squeeze snapped Ricky back to reality.

Dinglehooper, by then just ten yards away, turned and walked back to the road. He wasn’t about to mess with Mrs. Adams.

“You are in for it, young man!” she said as she marched Ricky, who was literally off the ground, straight to the principal’s office where a stern looking Mrs. MacGregor stood in front of her desk, arms folded. She too, was imposing—nearly as tall as Mrs. Adams, stout, and a little older.

She glared at Ricky. “You went and did something foolish again, didn’t you?” Wide eyed and in shock, Ricky didn’t respond. “Well, this is the worst yet. I’m sending you over to the high school.”

“The worst yet” meant this wasn’t going to be Ricky’s first trip to the high school. The previous fall he backed the much taller Tommy Flanagan against the school and punched him in the stomach. Tommy, a missionary’s son who was only there until year’s end, had a habit of punching arms and stomachs. Until then, no one had

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retaliated, but his punch to Ricky's gut on that particular day was the last straw. Tommy went wailing into the school. Punching the missionary's son caused quite an uproar, and Ricky paid for it. His consolation was the gratitude of his school mates. Tommy never punched anyone again.

Ricky knew the drill. He walked over to the high school and into the principal's office. There, he faced his father, who was sitting at his desk.

"Well?"

"I yelled Dinglehooper."

"Have a seat over there."

Not another word was spoken. Ninety minutes later Ricky returned to the grammar school. His father was miffed that Mrs. MacGregor, rather than deal with it herself, once again sent Ricky to him because he was the high school principal's son. Ricky received his punishment that evening.

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The boys laid low through the rest of June and July, but by mid-August the subtle signs of fall were appearing. Joe and Frank straddled their bikes in the school parking lot late one afternoon while Ricky threw rocks at signs. There was a sense of urgency as they schemed.

"Dinglehooper has probably forgotten all about us," said Ricky. "We need to come up with the plan to get back into his house."

"Hey, there he is now!" Joe whispered hoarsely. Sure enough, Dinglehooper was ambling home from work.

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“DINGLEHOOFER! DINGLEHOOFER!” For some reason, Ricky’s brain seemed to misfire when he saw Dinglehooper nearby.

“Ricky, are you crazy?” screamed Joe. “Let’s get out of here!”

Frank and Joe raced off, but Ricky wasn’t near his bike. He lit out toward the grammar school with Dinglehooper, who had dropped his lunch pail, charging after him.

Ricky was in a bind. He figured the grammar school door was locked, so he continued to the area behind the schools. With the high school to the left and a tall fence to the right, his only option was to keep going, but that presented a problem.

Railroad tracks ran past the rear of the schools. The issue was the six-foot drop from the end of the school yard to the rail line. The drop was reinforced by a concrete wall, below which a dense, nightmarish cluster of shrubs and vines rose nearly as high as the wall.

Ricky heard Dinglehooper thundering behind him, and didn’t hesitate to leap into the puckerbrush. He yelled and fussed as he tried to claw his way out of the tangle, thinking Dinglehooper was going to jump in after him. Dinglehooper stopped, however, and watched Ricky’s painful attempt to extract himself from his predicament. Satisfied that Ricky was in a sufficient state of anguish, he turned around and left.

Ricky was lucky the thick stand of brush prevented a hard landing, but he came away looking as if he’d been through a jungle warfare obstacle course: pants and shirt torn, right elbow bloody, scratches everywhere, and cockle burrs stuck in his hair.

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This escapade was going to make Ricky late for supper because he had to retrieve his bike. Deciding to take the longer but safer route, he scampered down the river bank and followed the secret path to the bridge. As he suspected, Joe and Frank weren't there, having wisely gone home. Ricky continued to the schools, half expecting to find his bike mangled. But Dinglehooper again demonstrated he knew what boundaries not to cross.

When Ricky slinked into the kitchen, his mother was there waiting for him. Not showing up for dinner without a phone call from a buddie's house was a no-no. She folded her arms and gave him the once-over.

"He chased you didn't he?"

Caught off guard, Ricky struggled to conjure up any kind of reasonable answer. All he could manage was a feeble, "Yup."

"Go clean up and change, then come back; we'll put a bandage on your elbow and get those burrs out of your hair. After that, your father would like to see you."

Ricky's parents already had the scoop, though, since the high school janitor, Mr. Perry, saw the whole thing and had called to inform them. As Dinglehooper had been walking back to Main Street, Mr. Perry intercepted him and inquired about Ricky. "The boy is fine." was the response. That was good enough for Mr. Perry, a lifelong friend of Mr. Dingle.

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The August fiasco, along with school starting a few weeks after, shelved the planning effort, but now it was close to Halloween. With the boys' fertile imaginations already in overdrive, what better time to finally get into Dinglehooper's house.

"He'll be waiting for us on Halloween," said Ricky. "Since it's next Monday, we'll go into the house Saturday after he goes to work. He'll never expect it."

"How will we know if he's working Saturday?" asked Frank.

"Don't worry, the crew always works half days on Saturdays this time of year," Ricky assured them.

On Friday morning, Ricky and Joe were on the playground waiting for school to start. They wondered where Frank was.

"Maybe he's sick," said Joe just as Frank came running up to them.

"You're not going to believe this!" he said, excited and out of breath. "Dinglehooper is gone!"

"What do mean he's gone?" Joe asked.

"G-O-N-E, gone! Shipped off to the crazy ward at a Veterans hospital. The windows at his house are all boarded up and there are 'keep out' signs. You can kinda see them from here." They looked up the hill and stared in disbelief.

"Wait a minute," said Ricky. "You mean he *did* fight for us in one of the wars?"

"Yup, World War II. I overheard dad when he was on the phone, but that was all the information I got."

School that day seemed like it would never end, but when it did, they bee-lined up to Dinglehooper's house.

Ricky tried the door, despite the keep out notices from the county sheriff's office.

"Locked!" said Ricky. "Come with me."

They walked around to the side of the house.

"Just as I thought," Ricky said as he pulled up one of the bulkhead doors to the basement. "They forgot about the bulkhead. Let's go down."

"I don't know, Ricky," said Frank. "The sun's getting low and it's pitch dark down there."

"Come on, I've got my pen light!"

They gingerly stepped down the rotting wood steps leading to the dirt floor. Ricky panned the area with his light. The basement was smaller than they had anticipated, with only some old furniture, wooden crates, a wheel barrow, and dozens of Mason jars scattered about.

"I bet he chopped her into little pieces and put her in those jars," said Ricky.

A close examination, however, revealed that most were empty, the exceptions being a few that contained the dark, moldy remnants of long since perished food.

"There's the stairway to the house," said Ricky. "Let's go up and see what's on the third floor."

They crept up the steep, creaky stairs, stepped through the door, and came face to face with a large, intimidating figure. Their primal yells were quite appropriate given the time of year. They turned to run back into the basement, but a meaty hand reached over their heads and slammed the door, after which they faced the intense beam of a flashlight.

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“Ok boys, you are in serious trouble and had better start explaining things right now!”

It was Sheriff Johnson. Ricky launched into a breathless, nonstop stream of garbled details, among them the supposed buried wife in the basement and the mysterious third floor light.

It was more than Sheriff Johnson could take. “Stop! You fools couldn’t be further from the truth. Follow me.”

They wound their way through the house and up a long staircase to the third floor.

Once there, they walked down a hallway and entered a room half way down. Sheriff Johnson lit a couple of kerosene lamps. Next to a window at the rear was a long table hosting an array of radio equipment, including a telegraph key. Copper wires attached to the equipment ran along the walls just below the ceiling. Two large batteries sat under the table.

“Karl, like me, is a ham radio operator,” said Sheriff Johnson. “He stays in touch with his relatives in Germany that way. Since he doesn’t have electricity, I come over once in a while and take his batteries back to my place to charge them.

“His parents came to the states around 1910 and ended up here, but they died when Karl was in his teens. He enlisted in World War II in his thirties, and lived here alone after a long stay in a military hospital following the war.” The sheriff eyed them sternly. “And, he never married.”

By now, the dumbfounded boys had settled onto a dusty couch as Sheriff Johnson continued.

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“Karl was a radio operator during the war. See that medal on the wall? It’s a Purple Heart he was awarded after a fierce battle in France. He stayed behind with his commanding officer and maintained communications just long enough to relay critical details of their situation. Hundreds of lives were saved, but Karl was seriously injured. He was never the same after that.”

Lowering his voice, he said, “Karl now has a mental illness called dementia and will spend the rest of his life in the Veterans Home. So, you hoodlums have been harassing a war hero. I’m here because your parents called me when you didn’t show up for supper. Now get home, and don’t ever come here again.”

The boys left in complete silence. Ricky bore the countenance of shame as he walked head down into the kitchen. His parents were at the table.

“Frank and Joe’s parents were here earlier,” his mother said, “along with Sheriff Johnson. He told us about Mr. Dingler’s life, and we can tell from your expression he told you as well. He was a private man just trying to get by day to day. We are all ashamed for having prejudged him.”

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That Thanksgiving, Ricky’s parents drove Frank, Joe, and him to the Veterans Home. Sheriff Johnson and Mr. Perry were also there. Prior to going into Mr. Dingler’s room, Sheriff Johnson advised them he was in a wheelchair and hadn’t spoken in over a month.

The boys apologized to Mr. Dingler, after which Ricky placed the Purple Heart and telegraph key on his lap. He looked blankly at Ricky for a moment, then extended

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his right hand. Ricky reached out and shook it, and Frank and Joe walked up and did the same. Mr. Dingler's expression softened, and his eyes twinkled a bit.

"You're good boys," he said.

Ricky's parents hugged as the boys broke into an animated banter, and Sheriff Johnson and Mr. Perry shook hands. It was a Thanksgiving to remember.