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GRAFFITI

It was a river town known locally for drunks and evil women, mayhem and crimes too sordid to mention in decent company. But in the 1890s, a grisly and unsolved triple murder made headlines across the country, and simple shame forced its good Christian citizens to act. Originally called Demon's Landing the town renamed itself Riverview. Corrupt law officers were replaced with a modern, professional police force. The town and county were declared dry. New schools were staffed with young women of unimpeachable character. Zoning laws and civic projects brought a sense of order, while fortuitous fires drove out the notorious families. It was even alleged that the mayor, a determined young pragmatist, hired a wandering mystic to help protect Riverview from the criminal element.

According to some, the mystic was a wild-eyed, tubercular man with a gaudy name painted on his mule-drawn wagon. Yet just a few years later, no one seemed able to recall his name or which direction he had taken as he left town. Hopefully he was never paid for his questionable work. A terrible crime wave heralded the new century's arrival. A favorite school teacher was molested in the most heinous fashion, the bank was robbed twice in one year, and both a Methodist minister and the beloved mayor were shot and killed by thieves. The only blessing was that the rejuvenated police force, led by a young man named Bethans, managed quick arrests, and under interrogation, every suspect confessed in full. The murderers were hanged with suitable fanfare, while thieves and rapists spent years in the state penitentiary; and for the first time, the river's vulgar souls began to say that if you wanted to have some fun, you'd best have it somewhere other than Riverview.

The next decades were built on small events and modest prosperity. Crime wasn't abolished, but violence seemed to always end with quick arrests and telling punishments. By the late 1960s, the little river town had grown into a tidy city of fifteen thousand, its elderly brick downtown nestled against the wide brown river, handsome older homes hidden on the wooded bluffs, and higher still, where the country opened up and flattened, there were the sketchy beginnings of urban sprawl.

There was both a public and Catholic high school. Macon Lewis played quarterback for the public school's lackluster team. Eddie Cane was his classmate and best friend. He lacked Macon's size or cookiness, but Eddie was the better athlete, one of the top cross country runners in the state, and because of it, the boys were social equals as well as friends.

Macon was six months younger, yet he played the role of older brother, introducing his introverted, somewhat artistic sibling to the larger world. Eddie's first date and first sex were both arranged by Macon. Eddie got drunk for the first time with Budweiser bought by his best friend. As a team, they had

explored the wooded bluffs, pulled monster catfish from the churning river, and when Macon heard a crazy rumor about the old storm sewer beneath Main Street, he suggested that they sneak down there and have a look.

"A look at what?" Eddie wondered aloud.

"You like to paint," Macon reminded him. "Well, there's some really strange paintings in that sewer. If what I heard is true, I mean."

They met after dark, armed with their fathers' best flashlights, Macon shouldering a heavy knapsack that rattled as they slipped into a deep, weed-choked gully. The sewer began where the gully dove into an oversized concrete tube, the tube's mouth blocked by thick steel bars aligned in a crosshatching pattern. There was a small door secured by heavy padlocks, and for no conscious reason, Eddie felt relief when he thought they could go no farther. It was just a sewer, of course. In eighteen years, he had never wondered what was beyond the barricade. But he smiled in the darkness, smiled until Macon said, "Over here. We can get inside here."

Freezes and floods had worn away a portion of the concrete wall. With the help of a crowbar, chisel and ball-peen hammer, they enlarged nature's work. Then Eddie, smaller by plenty, slipped easily into the sewer, and with a lot of grunting and twisting and breathless little curses, Macon joined him, slapping his buddy on the back, then whispering, "Follow me," with a wink that went unseen.

A trickle of water, antifreeze, and discarded oil led the way, spilling down a long slope before turning beneath Main Street, slowing and spreading until it was little more than a sheen of moisture and reflective slime. Modern concrete gave way to enduring red brick. The sewer had been built in the 1890s, arching walls frosted with an excess of mortar, and the mortar was decorated with colorful, even gaudy paintings. Holding a big Coleman flashlight in both hands, Eddie focused the beam on the nearest work. In clinical detail, it showed a man and woman making love. Except they weren't making love, he realized. The woman was struggling, and the man, taking her from behind, held a knife flush against her long and pale screaming throat.

"This is real," Macon reported. "Everything you see here happened as it's shown."

Other paintings portrayed other violent crimes. A man dressed in an old-fashioned suit was being shot in the face, pointblank. A second man was being gutted with a long blade. A third was being battered from behind with a baseball bat. And in each case, the painting looked astonishingly new, and the murderous person was shown in photographic quality.

It was a kind of gallery, Eddie realized. Utterly unexpected, and inexplicable. Yet Macon had a ready explanation. "The way I hear it, our town once made a pact with the Devil, or someone just as good." He illuminated his own face, proud of his knowing grin. "If there's violent crime anywhere in Riverview, it appears

here. As it happens. By magic." "How do you know?"

A mischievous wink, a brighter smile. "Pete Bethans told me." Pete was the police chief's son and a third-string running back. "A slow kid," was Macon's harsh assessment. "You've been around him. Slow in a lot of ways, but that's why I believed him. He couldn't invent a crazy story if his life depended on it."

Eddie nodded, slack-jawed, wandering downstream.

"Chief Bethans comes here once a day, just to check the paintings. Because if there's anything new, that means that it just happened." A pause. "Pete's dad and granddad were both Chiefs, and Mayor Smith has been mayor for thirty years. It's supposed to be their secret."

A face sprang out of the gloom. A boy's face. Distorted, in agony. Eddie hesitated, then in horror realized that they knew him. His family had moved into Riverview a few years ago, in mid-semester. The boy had sat beside Eddie in homeroom. For about two weeks, he was the quiet newcomer. Polite, but distant. Then came rumors of an unspeakable scandal, and for no clear reason, his father drove the family sedan into their garage and shut the door and let the engine run. Which was too good of a death, Eddie realized. Shining the beam past the suffering face, he saw the father, saw what he had done, and for all the horrible things that Eddie might have imagined, this was worse. A thousand times worse. How could the boy, or anyone inflicted with this kind of hell, not just die of shame?

For a long while, neither boy made the tiniest sound.

Then Macon forced himself to give a nervous little laugh.

Feeling tired and hot, Eddie started upstream again, his entire body aching as he sobbed quietly.

For his benefit, or maybe for both of theirs, Macon said, "That sort of crap happens. Every day, all around the world --"

"Not in Riverview."

"Exactly." Macon gestured at the first painting, the one of a woman being raped. "These things help the police keep law and order. And what's wrong with that?"

"You said we made a pact with the Devil," Eddie replied.

"I was teasing," Macon promised. "Nobody knows what's responsible for them."

Overhead was the rumble of a big truck rolling down Main Street. They heard it through a nearby sewer grate.

"Besides," said the quarterback, "these are just pictures."

What did that mean?

"If you can't stand looking at them, don't." Macon was talking to himself as much as to Eddie, his voice suddenly large, filling the sewer from end to end. "If they bother you too much, just shut your eyes!"

From the time he was eight, art teachers had praised Eddie for his drawings, particularly for his attention to proportions and his precise sense of detail. His doodles were well-received in study hall, and some of his work had ended up in the last two yearbooks. People with no special gift liked to tell him, without a trace of mockery, that he had a great career as an artist waiting for him. Yet Eddie had enough appreciation for art and its demands to know that he had no future, save in some narrow commercial venue. Talent was a fire, and he couldn't feel any fire, and the truth told, he wasn't even a little sorry for its absence.

Macon didn't understand about fire and talent. Eddie was an artist, and when Macon had his own inspiration, he worked hard to solicit Eddie's cooperation. It was several weeks after their secret visit to the sewer. In two more days, their school would play crosstown rival Plus. There was no bigger game every year. As always, the smaller Catholic school had recruited from across the county, and they were a virtual lock for the state's Class B championship. "They creamed us by five touchdowns last year," Macon complained. "And Haskins is even better this year. Throwing, running. He could play us without his front line, and he'd still beat us shitless."

Haskins was the enemy quarterback. Big college scouts had been coming through Riverview for two years now, the All-State senior being the prize and Notre Dame rumored to be in the lead.

Knowing his friend's crafty mind, Eddie asked, "What are you thinking? You've got a stupid idea, don't you?"

"Not stupid. Brilliant!" Macon felt deservedly proud, laughing and drumming on his belly with a happy rhythm. "Who's the heart of the Pius defense?"

A junior linebacker. A farm boy named Lystrom.

"Exactly. And suppose we make certain neither Haskins or Lystrom play Friday night. Just suppose."

"We'll lose anyway," Eddie replied.

"Maybe so," Macon allowed. "But not by five touchdowns, and I won't get the shit beat out of me."

"So what's this idea of yours?"

"First," said his best friend, "promise that you'll help me. Tonight. A couple hours' work, tops. What do you say?"

Eddie never agreed to help, but he never quite wrestled his way out of the onerous duty, either. "I'm not a good enough painter," he kept telling Macon, right down to the moment when they reached the sewer's entrance. Arms aching from carrying paint and brushes, he said, "It'll take too long, and we don't have enough light. And besides, someone's sure to find us --"

"The only ones who'd want to find us are home asleep," Macon snarled. "Put that crap down and help me. We've got bigger problems here."

Someone had blocked the way in, patching the concrete and plugging the gap between the bars with heavy hog-wire. But Macon had a thorough nature, and he'd come prepared. Bolt cutters removed the wire, and the new concrete hadn't set properly, flaking off without much fuss, leaving enough space for both of them to squeeze inside.

The graffiti hadn't changed in their absence. Eddie wondered if Chief Bethans bothered coming every day, or if once a week was enough. What if their clever work went unnoticed? He asked that reasonable question several times, and he was rebuffed, Macon finally turning to him, saying, "Paint. Now. And tell me where to point these damned lights."

Mimicking the colorful, almost photographic style wasn't simple. Making the faces lifelike and plainly recognizable seemed practically impossible. Eddie had brought a Pius yearbook and several newspaper photos, and he worked with deliberation, moving too slowly for Macon's comfort, finishing the faces by midnight. Then came portraying the crime itself. They'd decided on a rape, its victim blessed with an anonymous face. The police would be forced to hold the football stars for days, searching for a nonexistent woman. But there is no such thing as a truly anonymous face, and whenever Eddie thought he saw something familiar about the nose or jawline or eyes, he would have to retreat and make changes. Nobody was to be genuinely hurt tonight. He wouldn't be doing this if he thought there was the slenderest chance of harm.

Occasionally, Macon would say, "Hurry."

Besides the patient trickling of dirty water, the ancient brick sewer remained silent. Utterly indifferent.

Eventually, Eddie couldn't hear his friend's calls for speed. Fatigue and worry vanished. He found himself going back again, adding details that felt right. The victim was naked, on her hands and knees, twisted into a painful, unnatural position, her naked attackers buried in both ends; and he worked hard presenting the dangling breasts and the curl of varicose veins, then the fearful eyes, blue and huge, and her sweaty and matted short brown hair.

Hours passed in a moment. Nearly finished, Eddie suddenly pulled back his brush, realizing this was what the artist's fire felt like. It was past four A.M. One flashlight had died, and the big Coleman's beam was weak, trembling in Macon's tired hands. But Eddie had never felt more alert, smiling now, telling his

friend, "All that's left are Lystrom's arms, then we're finished."

Again, with force, Macon told him, "Hurry."

But before Eddie could moisten his brush, the Coleman failed. Absolute blackness descended. Macon cursed, smacking the battery pack with a flattened, angry hand, causing a flickering and very weak beam to play across the painted mortar, showing the boys what had happened.

Lystrom had his arms.

Painted in an instant, they were bare and pale and very thick. One hand gripped the victim's short hair, jerking hard. But the other hand and arm was what startled. The arm was swinging, that sense of motion captured perfectly, a linebacker's fist being driven hard into the victim's small, helpless face.

An inch short of panic, the boys gathered up their tools and paints, then fled, saying nothing and never looking back.

They reached home before five o'clock, trading mystified looks before climbing through their respective bedroom windows.

Both lay in bed for the next two hours, sleepless, trying hard to make sense of what they'd seen. Nothing had really happened, they prayed. Paint on bricks could do nothing, and the woman was nobody, and it was all in fun, and without doubt, they encouraged themselves, any true blame belonged squarely on the other guy's shoulders.

Their alarms went off just before seven. Exhausted beneath the covers, they listened to their radios, to the same limpid ballad, music fading into silence, then a shaken voice interrupting the false tranquility.

The bulletin was abrupt, and horrible, and very nearly expected.

A young nun -- Sister Mayhew, a Spanish teacher at Pius -- had been raped and savagely beaten, and the incredible crime happened inside the convent, and en route to the hospital, she had died of her injuries.

Her killers were being sought, the disc jockey promised.

And the boys closed their eyes, and wept, knowing exactly who was responsible and feeling ashamed for everything, particularly the sense of their own perfect invulnerability.

By any measure, it was a bizarre, inexplicable crime.

Haskins and Lystrom lived at opposite ends of the county, in every physical and social sense of the word, and despite playing for the same team, they were anything but friends -a competitive rivalry having blossomed into a full-scale feud. It was startling to think of them spending time together, in any capacity.

Neither had a criminal record. And while the linebacker had a genuine temper -- the kind that might kill out of miscalculation -- his alleged partner was unaffectionately called Saint Haskins.

But their guilt was undeniable. Two nuns had clearly seen them escape over the convent wall. A third witness saw Lystrom's pickup roll through a stoplight on Main Street just as Sister Mayhew was found in her room, in bed, her sweet face crushed, a plaintive voice naming her assailants before God mercifully took her. And as it happened, a sheriff's deputy pulled Lystrom over before he made it halfway home, intending to give him a warning for driving too fast. But there was fresh blood on the boy's T-shirt, and he acted confused, perhaps drunken. As a precaution, the deputy cuffed him and stuffed him into the cruiser's back seat. Then came word that the Pius stars were wanted for questioning, that they should be approached with the utmost caution; and the deputy, thinking it had to be a mistake, asked his prisoner, "What kind of prank did you pull?"

Lystrom unleashed a low wild moan, then gave a full confession, relating events with a miserable and accurate and thoroughly astonished voice.

Minutes later, Haskins was found, naked and shivering, kneeling between his mother's washer and dryer, praying so hard that he barely noticed the uniformed officers or their handcuffs.

The football game was delayed. There was talk about canceling it altogether, but both teams had an open date in two weeks, and there was hope that the noble aspects of the sport would help the community heal.

Every Catholic school closed for the funeral.

On the same day, the prisoners were taken to the old courthouse to be arraigned on murder and rape charges. Both Eddie and Macon slipped out of class, joining the angry crowd on the courthouse grounds. They hadn't spoken since the sewer. Crossing paths, Macon stepped up and told his friend, "It's your fault. If you hadn't used a real face --"

"I didn't know the woman," Eddie interrupted.

"You must have," Macon insisted. "In your subconscious, at least."

And despite saying, "No, I didn't," Eddie found some secret part of himself believing that it should be him shuffling along in chains, gazing at the ground, listening to a thousand angry people telling him that he should be roasted alive, or worse.

Daneburg was next week's opponent. Macon was in no shape to play. He threw four passes before the coach benched him, three of them intercepted and the last one launched over the goal posts. Watching from the stands, Eddie saw the quarterback sitting alone, shoulders sloping, his helmet between his feet and his eyes gazing out at nothing. Eddie felt genuine pity for his friend. But the feeling passed. By next Monday the despair and self-doubt had vanished. Once

again, Macon was strutting between classes, laughing and grinning. Except he'd been through an incredible episode, and he had survived, and the experience showed in the lean hard face and particularly in the eyes, bright and steady, incapable of anything resembling hesitation or compromise or fear.

The game against Plus began before a quiet, subdued crowd. Macon remained on the sidelines, watching the larger, swifter opponents maul his teammates. His replacement was knocked senseless by Lystrom's understudy. It took two men and a stretcher to carry him off the field. Then the coach, having no other choice, sent Macon into the war.

People in and around Riverview would talk about the game for years, with a mixture of awe and earnest gratitude.

Before the game was finished, the lead had changed nine times. Macon threw five touchdown passes and ran for two more, including the last-second game winner. He was carried from the field on his linemen's shoulders, and the image of him -- the hero of a great contest, nothing on the line but pride and poise--would linger in the public consciousness for decades.

There was a quick trial in January, the defendants found guilty of second-degree murder, both sentenced to life terms.

Eddie spoke to his boyhood friend just once before graduation.

It was May. Macon was having a beer on the school's front stoop -- the privilege of fame -- and on a whim, Eddie approached, asking him, "How can you live with yourself?"

The piercing eyes regarded him for an instant, then looked away. A slow, self-important voice remarked, "It took me a long time to see it. You've always been a cowardly little fuck."

What did he mean?

"Eddie," he said, "it happened. It's done, and it'll stay that way."

"I know," the boy whispered.

"I don't think so." Macon shook his head, speaking with an easy scorn. "Has it occurred to you that we aren't responsible? Not for any of it, I mean. Think. There's some bizarre force that paints crimes as they happen. Who knows how? But maybe the force appreciates using someone else's hands and paint, and we're not guilty of anything. Ever think in those terms?"

Never, no.

"You should," was Macon's final advice. "A lot of things come clear and easy, so long as you think about them in the right way."

A California college gave Eddie the chance to run for a degree. He left Riverview in the summer, returning just twice in the next thirty years -for Christmas, then his father's funeral that next spring. More moved back East to live with her old-maid sisters. He would think about his hometown, sometimes for hours on end, yet almost never spoke about it, even to his girlfriend. He married her after his junior year. He graduated in the bottom third of his class, then drifted from career to career, gradually eroding his wife's patience and good humor. They parted peacefully enough, with few tears. A second, less patient wife arrived some years later, and she never appreciated his long silences or far-off gazes. Not long after her departure, Eddie was sitting in his apartment, skimming through channels with the volume muted...and suddenly he saw a familiar scene, the river and far-off bluffs exactly as he remembered them, but the nearer buildings mostly new and too tall -- baby skyscrapers standing rooted on the narrow floodplain.

Riverview was growing. The reporter told him so, and the video confirmed her assessment. Good schools and a low crime rate were just two reasons why corporations liked that obscure Midwestern town, and the latest convert was easily the most impressive. A Fortune 500 computer firm was relocating to Riverview. A modern campus would grow on the nearby bluffs, a billion dollars and thousands of employees pouring into local coffers. Explaining his decision, the corporation's CEO and major stockholder used a passive voice, every word rehearsed, his praise for Riverview relentless, and unconvincing.

But what stunned Eddie, what caused him to shout at the television, was a glimpse of the third-term mayor as he shook hands with the CEO: The mayor smiling with utter joy while the other man grimaced, eyes huge and haunted, looking like a man trapped. Utterly and forever trapped.

A stranger appeared in Riverview that next spring. He registered at the new Holiday Inn, paid for his room with cash, and after two days of sightseeing, fishing, and antique shopping in the old downtown, he was seen walking beside a high chain-link fence, staring into the forbidden gully.

Security cameras monitored his progress. Videotape caught him studying the sewer's mouth, examining the newly installed titanium bars and razor wire, the various cameras and both of the electrified fences. A cruiser arrived in short order. The man was questioned at length. He claimed to be a field biologist looking for rare plants, and he apologized profusely for any inconvenience that he might have caused. Because he had made no attempt to break into the sewer, he was released. Neither the officer or his direct superiors had any reason to doubt the story. If they punished everyone who was curious, the public would surely begin to wonder what made that sewer so special.

Subsequent checks determined that the intruder had lied. He was not a biologist, and he had registered under a false name.

As a matter of policy, the intruder's file was sent upstairs to the new Chief. Something in the accompanying photographs bothered him, although he couldn't decide what was wrong. His daily meeting with the mayor was at four; he brought

the file with him, laid it down on the mayor's desk, then felt like an utter fool when Macon said, "Don't you recognize him? Even bald, I'd know him. Shit, it's got to be Eddie Cane!"

The one-time running back -- still a big slow man, but obedient and cautious -- replied with a reflexive doubt, "It can't be. Your friend lives in California. We pay that investigator to keep an eye on him --"

"Not much of an eye," Macon replied. Then he took a careful, composing breath before saying, "Find him. Now."

"And?"

The look said it all. Don't let him out of town.

Yet despite an intrusive and efficient police department, Eddie wasn't found. He didn't return to his motel room, nor was he seen again around town. As a precaution, new cameras and a third, hidden electric barrier were installed by trusted specialists, and through certain backwater avenues, a contract was put out on Eddie's life. The Chief, undistracted by imagination, felt there was nothing to worry about. But the mayor, made of more paranoid stuff, barely slept for the next few weeks, and when the call came at two on a Monday morning, he still hadn't shut his eyes.

"Your friend's back," said the Chief, his voice soft, timorous.

"Where is he?"

A long pause.

"Where the fuck is Eddie?"

"He's already inside," the Chief confessed. "The infrared sensors spotted him ... we don't know how he got in...!" A pause, then he whispered, "Macon?" For the first time in a century, a Bethans found himself honestly terrified of the future.

"He's your good friend," said the Chief. "What do you think he's doing down there?"

It had been years since Eddie painted, and he worked with a quick, unpracticed deliberation. He was dressed in a bulky rubber suit. In one hand was a brush, the other held a long flashlight with a brilliant halogen beam. Water was running through the old sewer, ankle-deep after hard spring rains. He didn't hear footfalls until the intruders were close, and he never stopped working, not pressing the pace but making sure that he had finished painting the leg before a familiar voice told him, "Step away. Back from the wall, now."

A second light came on, then others.

There were more men than he had anticipated. Trusted officers led the way, as if blocking for their mayor and chief of police. Everyone wore old clothes and bulky rubber waders.

"Eddie," said Macon. Not once, but several times.

"How did you get in here?" the Chief demanded.

Eddie spoke matter-of-factly. "When I was here last month, I noticed some kind of pumping system down by the river. Very new, very expensive. It occurred to me that you wouldn't want any harm to come to this place, and you certainly don't want to be kept out of here by floods. I checked with the engineering firm you used. I pretended to have the same need, and without knowing the importance of it, they told me that after the pumps stop, there's a two minute window where the valves are left open. Not a lot of room in there, but I haven't picked up too much weight. Have I, Macon?"

Macon had the same handsome face, the same piercing eyes, but his charm seemed a little worn, used too often and finally, after all these years, hard to conjure on command.

Stepping toward Eddie, he half-smiled and said with quiet force, "We've been watching you. Even before I won the election, I had people keeping tabs on you."

"I never guessed it," he admitted.

"If you hadn't come back, we would have left you alone."

"No doubt."

"Put down the paint brush, Eddie."

The words, equally serious and preposterous, seemed funny. He smiled, dropping the brush into the water, then threw his beam across the sewer. "A nice little business you've got here, Mayor." On the old white mortar was the corporate giant he had seen on television. He was using a fire ax to chop a man's head from his shoulders. "You invited that billionaire to come here, didn't you? You wined him and dined him, trying to sell Riverview, and when he said, 'No, thanks,' this is what happened to him. A sudden, inexplicable murder. And afterwards, favors won."

No one spoke.

"How much business comes here because of blackmail?"

Silence.

Eddie shone his light in Macon's face, without warning. "Who does your painting, you son-of-a-bitch?"

One of the nearest policemen took credit with a cocky nod.

Eddie continued. "The poor murderer wouldn't suspect, would he? How can he know that you manipulated him? Like a puppet. Which is probably what you do to your enemies too, I'm guessing."

The walls were covered with horrors, so many that they had to overlap, new blood laid over the old.

Macon came closer, glancing at Eddie's work with an insult at the ready. "You don't paint very well anymore."

"I suppose not," he agreed.

"Legs and bodies, but I don't see faces."

"Faces could wait, I thought."

His lack of urgency bothered Macon. "Without faces, the magic doesn't work. This is just ordinary ugly graffiti."

His head cocked to one side, the artist remained silent.

"Well," Macon said with finality, "you shouldn't have come back. Not once, and certainly not twice."

Eddie glanced at his watch, then with a gray and very reasonable tone, he asked, "What if painting these walls wasn't my reason for being here?"

Macon had begun to turn away, but he hesitated now.

With an angry, impatient voice, the Chief asked, "What do you mean?"

"Maybe all I wanted was to lure as many of you as possible down here." A grimace more than a smile now. "Which I've done, it seems."

No one seemed certain how to respond.

"Who's been on parole for a year and a half now?" A slow shake of the head. "Lystrom."

Nobody dared speak, or move.

"Haskins would have been out too, but he hung himself fifteen years ago. In his cell, alone. I didn't know it myself until a couple weeks ago, frankly." A long sigh, then Eddie confessed, "For all the guilt I've carried around all these years, I really didn't do much of a job keeping up with the news."

"What about Lystrom?" whispered Macon.

"Hasn't changed much. Still big, if anything even stronger -- prison does that to men -- and he still has that linebacker's temper. You should have seen his face when I told him the whole story. He didn't quite believe me, not at first, but just the idea of it made him furious."

There came a rumble, low and steady. Everyone heard it over the murmur of flowing water, and together, in the same instant, they realized it was a truck on the street directly above. They could hear it through the nearest sewer grate, then they heard its air brakes lock with a prolonged reptilian hiss.

"That would be Lystrom," Eddie announced. "I had him watching for you to come down here. We've got a big flatbed with tanks on the back, and a few thousand gallons of unleaded gasoline."

Men turned, beginning to run in their cumbersome waders, sloppy half-steps taking them nowhere.

A swift thread of crystalline petroleum fell from the nearest grate, musical and fragrant, landing on the water and too light to sink, too different to mingle, spreading like a spell across the tainted black water.

Trying to smile one last time, Eddie pointed at the wall, saying, "Look! Someone's finishing the painting for me!"

But Macon refused to look. In the end, like a child, he pretended that what he didn't see couldn't possibly be real, and what wasn't real would never want to hurt little him.