

DOWNSTATE STORY

Volume 6

Featuring these authors:

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Gary King

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And these artists:

Preston Jackson

Eric Bell

Brenda Hanshaw

RED LIGHT, GREEN LIGHT

He signed the painting CRY. No periods, just C--R--Y, all caps. Christopher Robert Young. Crybaby. Cry for short. Stepping back, he studied the work: blacks and grays and drizzled threads of red pulled across the underlying image, a human form, neither male nor female, with back turned. The face was turned to profile, distorted by shadows, with hooded eye, and cheek pale and hollow.

"Hey, you," a man yelled, and Chris's studio became an alley once again. The canvas turned into a brick wall and the artist to a boy -- a street-wise boy who knew to flee, paint and brushes and masterpiece left behind.

"Get back here, boy." The cry followed him into the street. "You hear me?"

That made him laugh. He turned a corner and slowed to a walk, weaving through the pedestrian flow. If he had a dollar for every "You get back here, boy."

The paint, though. Chris shook his head. He'd dredged three dumpsters before finding enough red to fill the baby food jar he'd just left behind. And God, where would he get more brushes? Jack-man maybe. Yeah, Jack-man was pretty cool for a counselor.

Chris heard the ping of the pinball machine as soon as he entered the center. Jack was in a corner of the gym, hunched over the machine, hammering the buttons like a wrestler poking out the eyes of his opponent. Ping, ping. Ping, ping, ping. The basketballs waited at his feet.

"Damn." Jack slapped the side of the machine as the metal ball escaped through the chute.

"Where is everybody?" Chris asked as he walked up.

Jack propelled the last ball up the ramp. "Moon isn't coming." Ping. Ping. Ping. "He was picked up over on Belmont Avenue last night." The ball shot between the bottom flippers and dropped out of sight.

Chris put his fists in his pockets. Belmont Avenue. That meant Sly Tolliver. After a year and a half on the streets, Moon had finally started working for Sly Tolliver. And got caught. He was 15.