



The Black Beauty

by Joseph Ditta

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He was shooting baskets at the street corner, where he and his older brother and two friends had hoisted a half sheet of plywood up onto the telephone pole and screwed it on, then screwed on the basketball hoop with its first of many nets. They chose that pole because it had the street lamp, and they could shoot baskets at night. It was a Friday afternoon, after school, and he was shooting baskets by himself. He went out there whenever he found himself alone with nothing else to do. His brother had a job now and worked all day, and his friends were doing other things. They had jobs, too, but they also had parents who kept close eyes on them. His parents weren't clinging. But then, he was one of six and old enough for them to regard as on his own, within limits. He was seventeen, a senior in high school, a month from his birthday, and two months from graduating. He had given no thought to what would come next in his life. His horizons were barely five feet from his brain, unless Eileen was there. Then the horizon melted, and only her face was visible, her face and the rest of her. It was the rest of her that caused him so much agony. The only part of her she would let him touch was her hand, which he held onto greedily when they walked together.

She would be at the bowling alley tonight. She came once in a while when he worked and sat at the counter and listened to music and sipped an ice cream soda or a malt, and he would join her whenever things slowed up in the back, where he tended the machines and kept the lanes running smoothly. Once in a while, if the place was almost empty, he would light up a lane and bowl with her, there being no charge for him to bowl, and she enjoyed the privilege. He thought of her as he dribbled the basketball. "*I'd like to know that your love is love I can be sure of,*" he half hummed and sang the words, and sunk an overhand set shot. "*So tell me now, and I won't ask again, Will you love me tomorrow?*" He didn't start work until 9 p.m., and he worked until the manager locked up the place at 2 a.m. He worked every Friday and Saturday nights. That was all his parents would let him work those hours. They said no, only those nights. He couldn't get through the school day, they insisted, if he got to bed after two in the morning and had to get up at six. He thought the money he might earn would override their better judgment, but it didn't. So he worked only those two nights each week, and he met Eileen there when she could get away to come.

He did another overhand shot, and the ball swished the hoop, hit the curb and shot back at him at the precise angle to hit his hands on one bounce without his having to move. If he didn't swish it, he'd have to chase the ball. Mostly, he swished it. He did it again, then again, all the while Eileen's face smiled at

him and he closed his eyes so he could feel her

body heat. As he positioned himself for another shot, he hummed, "Dedicated to the one I love."

He opened his eyes ready to take the shot when his father rounded the corner and honked the horn, smiling at him as he drove by and turned into the driveway. He ran up to the drive and said, "How come you're home?"

"I could get away. Maybe we can barbecue later. I brought a nice big steak," he said, holding up the package so he could see how big it was. "I'll go tell mom. Shooting baskets?"

"Yea," he said half-heartedly and dribbled the ball a couple of times on the driveway concrete.

"Nobody around today?" his father asked sympathetically as he rounded the front of the car.

"Nah," he said, hanging his head. He was lonely, and he could see his father saw it and it made him feel bad.

"Cheer up," he said. "You can help me later on with the barbecuing."

"Ok," he said, bouncing the ball again.

He had no sense of a future. He lived sensuously in the moment of whatever activity occupied him or dreamily in the fantasy of Eileen. His uncle had given him his old 1952 Ford, a black two-door coup with a sun visor, when he and his wife decided to buy their new 1961 Ford. Everyone in the family owned Fords because one of the uncles, his father's brother, worked as a salesman at a Ford dealership. He appreciated having that old car. It was a stick shift, and he learned how to clutch and up and down shift, and brake to a stop without bucking. But, as his father rounded the side of the house heading to the back door cradling the steak in his left arm, he held the basketball on his hip, his right arm curved over it, and looked at his father's car. This is the dream car. This is the car he wished he had, the car that moved in his dreams. The car in which he saw himself and Eileen floating down the highway, her red-blond hair flowing out behind her, a scarlet scarf of pure silk round her throat, its ends flapping under her hair behind her neck, as they glided on the cloud he knew was the only foundation his dream could have.

It was an all-black Ford Fairlane 500 hardtop convertible with a red vinyl interior and red leather upholstery and red carpets. It gleamed with a beauty that overwhelmed him when he contemplated it. It's chrome bumpers contrasted with the blackness of its steel body, and the gold band, beginning at the front of the fender and sliding across the car to the front

door, where it gently arced down under the door handle, then arced up over the back door and continued on to a narrow strip along the top of the rear fin, ending in the tubular tail section with its red rear light lens. This car had a 357 cubic inch V-8 engine with a four-barrel carburetor and dual exhausts. It was literally a rocket on wheels. His father would not let him drive it. He wouldn't let his older brother drive it either, so he didn't feel left out, but he dreamed of driving it, of driving it with the top tucked away and Eileen next to him.

He would like to drive it, even just once, around the block, or back it out of the driveway and pull it up again. His father laughed at him when he said such things at the dinner table, his mother's eyes getting large with her mother's worry, and told him that it was good for him to have dreams like that, they gave him something to work towards. His older brother would elbow him in the side and snicker. He didn't ever think, though, of working to buy such a car. Owning it didn't form a part of his consciousness. Owning things in general didn't. He didn't see himself in terms of owning things. He lived in the house he grew up in. That living shaped his sense of place. It never occurred to him that he would one day very soon leave this place, that he would set out on a journey that would have no end, that would take him to places he couldn't imagine. His imagination was locked to the car he stood beside. He touched it. Touching it made him feel less lonely, made him feel a certain thrill. He smiled, dribbled the ball back to the telephone pole, and overhanded a shot that swished the basket.

He continued to shoot baskets, only seldom having to chase the ball, until his father came round the side of the house and hollered at him to come and help with the steak. They had a patio behind the house, and his father had taken the bag of charcoal and the lighter fluid out of the shed and put them on the picnic table where he had wheeled the grill. So he took the grate off the grill, dumped in a heap of coals, poured lighter fluid on them, then dropped a lit stick match on them from the box his father had also put on the picnic table.

His father was a hard worker. He owned a painting and decorating company and was its main employee, though he did have two helpers. There was a lot of building going on these last years, and his father had no end of work. There were times when he himself worked for his father, but only in the summer, and his father gave him a good wage. His father would say, "It's all in the family, hey? Do a good job, and make me proud." So he did. He worked hard, and he put money in the bank. He had a bank account. He had that since he was fifteen years old. He watched the fire blaze until the fluid burned off, then he went inside to tell his mother the coals would be ready in ten minutes.

His mother was a ruler. She didn't live amid the family, she governed it. She governed it with a wooden spoon, mostly, though the broom also came to hand in times of need. She had a shrill scream that one of his younger sisters or brother

was always provoking, and her scream was always followed by the sound of a whack or a hollow thunk and the moan that followed it. His older brother used to wrestle him to the floor of the bedroom they shared, forcing him to shout, which would bring his mother in with the broom or the spoon, and then his brother contrived to maneuver him on top so he would receive the blows. His mother always thought him to be the troublemaker and never believed that his brother contrived to make that happen.

But now she gave him the big platter with the steak cut into pieces for each of them and seasoned with salt and pepper. He came down the steps from the kitchen to the patio behind the house, put the platter on the picnic table, and then tended to the grill. After spreading the coals and putting the grate back on, he took the tongs that hung on the grill's hook and gently began placing the pieces of steak on, making sure to keep them spread out enough so that the drippings didn't cause a surge of flames that would blacken the meat. That happened once to his father during a family gathering, and all the meat on the grill that time was inedible. He learned that lesson.

While he was tending the meat, his father came out to join him. He had a beer, and when he neared the picnic table, he put it down and lit a cigarette.

"Can I have a sip," he asked his father, gesturing at the beer.

"Sure," his father said. "How's it going?"

"Fine," he replied, lifting the can of Schaeffer's and taking a sip, then putting it back down.

His father took the tongs from him and began to lift the pieces to see how they were doing.

"A little longer," he said.

"Dad," he said, screwing himself up to ask for what he knew his father wouldn't allow. "When I go to work tonight," he said as his father put the tongs down and picked up the beer, "do you think I could take the 57 Ford to the bowling alley? I mean, I can get to the alley going up the back roads. I'd never have to get out on the highway. Eileen's going to be there tonight, and when I'm on break, you know, I would love to just sit in the parking lot with me and her in it, you know, listening to the radio. We'd keep the top up. Nothing fancy, you know. What do you think, dad? Could I?"

His father looked at him, sipped the beer, looked at him again and said, "Let me think about it, ok? You're nearing your eighteenth birthday. Maybe. I'll talk with mom."

He brightened and felt elated. His father could see how much it meant to him and smiled. He handed him the beer and

thinking the gesture meant a yes, he took it and sipped in the manliest way he knew how and handed the can back to his father saying, "Thanks, dad."

He was so excited he could hardly contain himself. "*My little runaway, My run, run, run, run, runaway,*" he hummed.

His mother cautioned him with a smile, "Don't take advantage of the privilege," and "Make sure you stay off the highway." But when his father gave him the keys, he looked him straight in the eyes and said, "Don't disappoint me, son. Do as you promised." He had no intention of disappointing his father. Abusing this privilege had no place in his consciousness. He was so excited about being able to drive the dream car and about sitting in it with Eileen, perhaps even driving around the bowling alley parking lot with her, that he could hardly contain himself. He parked the black beauty just to the left of the double glass doors to the bowling alley, looking all about as he got out to see if there was anybody around to see him. There were some people leaving for the night, but they were not minding him at all. He put the keys in his jeans pocket and went inside. It was not 9 p.m. yet, and he had time to go to his rooms in the back and change into his work clothes, a white two-piece uniform with the logo of the bowling alley on the left pocket of the shirt, which he put on clean every night before starting work. Once he was dressed, he had to go to the front desk and talk to the night manager, who would tell him which machines were acting up, and what the guy on the shift before him had left undone. A men's league had begun at eight, an hour before he started work, and he listened to the sounds of the machines as he made his way back to his rooms. There was not much to do. The machines were all in good working order and he just needed to keep his eyes on things.

Eileen would come in around 9:30. She would go to the fountain and put coins in the jukebox and wait for him to come up. If all went well, he should be able to go up front around ten. He could sit with her for a few minutes, but usually not much longer than that. Someone'd have a ball get stuck on a pin at the ball return, or a table would lower and jam on a pin, or the pin feeder would drop a pin on the deck, or some other glitch would call him back. But around ten the men's league would begin to wind up, and then he could go outside with Eileen and sit in the car, and they could talk and listen to the radio for fifteen or twenty minutes. He hoped she would stay until quitting time so he could drive her home, but he knew she wouldn't. She'd stay until 11:30. He'd get to bowl a couple of games with her maybe. But then she'd leave. She lived only two blocks from the bowling alley and walked to and from. It was not a dark two-block walk at 11:30 at night. There were street lamps at the corners, and the main highway the bowling alley faced was lit up like Broadway, so that it lighted most of her way home.

The time passed slowly. He walked the catwalk behind the machines, watching them operate, keeping an eye on the balls as they were rolled by the conveyor belts to the chutes, where they would sometimes jam on a pin if one got caught at just the right angle. He carried a long pole as he walked to push the pin out of the way. But on this night hardly anything was going wrong, the warning bells never rang and the lights didn't come on behind the machines to call him. But he knew if he left his station everything would go wrong at once, and the night manager would get on the mike and start yelling at him. That hardly ever happened, but if things got bad, and he couldn't clear problems fast enough, the night manager would get on the mike. Sometimes, when things got really bad, the night manager would have to come back himself and help. But nothing was happening tonight, so the time passed slowly.

Finally, machines started going dark, and the noise level started going down, and though many machines were still working, and he could still hear the sound of balls splashing pins into their pits, this was his time to take a break. So he leaped off the catwalk onto the floor at the end of the long row of machines and trotted up the aisle to the door. Coming out into the bowling alley, he had a clear view of the soda fountain and saw Eileen sitting at the end, pushing dimes into the juke box. She turned, saw him coming up to the front, and waved. He waved back, a big smile on his face. She was wearing jeans and a light blue blouse with a dark blue cardigan sweater. He could see as he neared that she wore red lipstick and had put rouge on her cheeks and mascara on her eyelashes. He preferred that she didn't make herself up like that, mostly because he didn't like the smell of those things, and the lipstick always made a mess when they kissed. Which didn't happen often enough to please him.

He could hear Patsy Cline singing "I Fall to Pieces" as he rounded the end of the service aisle up from the back and came into the front of the big hall. The soda fountain was on this side of the bowling alley. The bar was on the other side, and in the middle, just to the left of the main doors and across from the big desk, was the café, where bowlers could get sandwiches and hamburgers and fries. She was alone at the counter, the girl who worked there probably in the back or waitressing in the café. She was sipping a malt through a straw as he came close, her eyes peering at him over the rim of the glass. He sat next to her, glad as hell to see her.

"Hi," he said, barely able to contain his excitement.

"Hi," she replied, and smiled, looking at him. "How's it going back there? I've hardly heard any bells going off."

"Yeah," he said, "it's pretty slow. Nothing much happening."

"That's good, isn't it?" she said.

“That’s great!” he said. “Hey, guess what,” he added, getting hunched with expectation.

“What?” she responded.

“I got the black beauty tonight.”

“What’s the black beauty?” she asked, puzzled by the image that came into her mind.

“My dad’s 57 Ford. It’s, like, you know, just about the hottest thing on wheels, like, man, it’s just about got wings.”

“So?” she said, her brows knit up, “Like, are we going somewhere?”

She just doesn’t get it, he thought. It doesn’t mean anything to her. But why should it, he realized. She doesn’t drive, doesn’t even have a license.

“I wish we could,” he said, frowning, an image of them breezing down the highway, top down, hair blowing in the sunshine coming unbidden to him. “No. But when a few more lanes get empty, I can go on break, and we can go outside and sit in it together, listen to the radio, talk, where it’s private, you know?”

“I Fall to Pieces” ended and Neil Sedaka’s “Calendar Girl” began to play.

“Talk? You really mean that?” She had other ideas about what he wanted to do out there, and she already was feeling the alarm go off.

“Yeah, talk. Why, what do you think I want to do? I’m not like that, Eileen,” he lied woundedly, “you know that. Besides, this is the first time my dad has let me even touch his car, no less take it to work with me. Man, Eileen, this car is so neat, that’s all I want to do.”

She looked at him skeptically, but then she smiled at his earnestness and said ok, and when could they leave, and he paused and listened to the sounds of the alleys, and said, “Things are slowing up pretty steadily. I think we can leave right now.”

He walked with her beside him towards the front desk, where the night manager was checking in shoes from those who didn’t have their own, taking the score sheets from the teams, and working the cash register. He told him he was going on break and gestured with his chin at the doors. The manager nodded, and they stepped around the crowd of men who were checking out, and pushed through the doors. He couldn’t wait to show her the black beauty. When they neared it, he stopped and touched her arm, saying, “Look at her, Eileen. Isn’t she a beauty? You can just feel her speed in your

bones.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said, knowing that she really didn’t love these sorts of things like he did. He loved his own black Ford, which he tried to teach her to drive, and which all she could do was make it buck a few feet before the engine died. She could understand his loving that car. It was his own. To her, that was a real thing. But she couldn’t understand the sort of mystical emotion he expressed towards this car. It was just a car. It was nice and all. But it was just a car.

It was nearing quitting time. After midnight there were always a couple of men who had had too many beers and who continued to bowl, keeping him pinned to the back. Sometimes, like tonight, if there were anyone else in the alley, he would sit up front at a table, sip a Coke, and shoot the breeze. If anything happened in a pit, he would just run down the alley next to it and climb under the pin table and fix whatever needed fixing, then climb out again and go back to sipping his Coke. After so many beers, these men continued to bowl, as though their bodies did it without their cooperation. They could barely pick up their bowling balls, but once they went into motion, splash, the ball would curve in just where it had to to score a strike. He was amazed. “Damn,” he said to himself. He didn’t know if he admired these men or was ashamed of them. A little of both, he thought. “My father would never do these things,” he said to himself. He tried to imagine his father bowling. He laughed. No way.

“Whaddaya laughing at?” Tommy, the shorter of the two guys he was sitting with at the table, asked.

“Just thinking,” he responded.

“The thinker,” the other guy, Richy, said, laughing too and sipping his Coke.

They had been bragging about Tommy’s 54 Oldsmobile. Tommy had raked and decked it, put skirts in the rear wheel wells, and had put a fiberglass muffler in it just that night, and the Olds rumbled. It was a dark green emblem and image of speed. It was the sound of speed. He needed to come out and look at it, listen to it.

“Na,” he said, “ain’t nuthin to that piece a scrap. Junk it.”

His father’s Ford could kill that Olds like it was a trike. Flatten it on the road. He was exulting in the idea of it.

The two guys had come in just as Eileen was leaving. They weren’t friends, just guys he knew from high school. They knew him. They had settled at a table and ordered Cokes from the girl at the soda fountain. He motioned hello to them as he and Eileen walked by heading to the front doors. He

held tightly to her hand as they ambled slowly to the edge of the parking lot behind the bowling alley. On a telephone pole at that corner of the lot beside the street there was a street lamp. They stopped under the lamp, and he still held her hand. They talked about when they would next see each other. He wanted her to come to the alley Saturday night, but she said she couldn't. She said Sunday after church might be the only time, and it would be best if he came to her house. He said he would, after lunch, and she said no, come for lunch, and so that was how he left it with her. He watched her walk up the block for a long time. They had a good time tonight. She was, finally, impressed with the black beauty. He didn't know if she was just saying it to please him or if she really was. She seemed to be, and that pleased him. As he walked back to the front doors, he passed the car and looked longingly at it.

Once inside, he had to go back to his rooms behind the machines, where he had been welding a broken track on which the arm ran to feed pins to the cups in the table. One of those rooms was a shop, with welding equipment and all the tools the machines required for maintenance. The other was a supply and storage room, but it also had a space for furniture, where the man on duty could relax with a coke or a cup of coffee when things were slow. He had left the welding job to come up front and spend the last twenty minutes with Eileen before she went home. He came up to the two guys, chatted a minute, and then went back to work. It was just after 11:30. As he opened the door to the back, he saw them get up from the table and head for the doors. He didn't expect to see them again that night. But they had come back at 1:30 looking for him, and the manager paged him on the mike. So he came up front and sat with the guys and watched the drunks bowl. They were throwing their last frames, and the night manager had signaled to him to go back and close up everything. He told the guys he'd be right back.

He had a reputation with his 52 Ford. He could and did peel fifty feet of rubber with that old car, and everybody knew about it. One afternoon, in the high school parking lot, after school had let out, with a crowd of kids watching, he backed out of his spot, angled his front end towards the parking lot exit, which he had a straight shot at, and did it. He had his left foot down on the clutch, the gear shift in first, and his right foot on the gas pedal, revving and revving the engine, till he had it racing at 4000 RPMs. Then he popped the clutch and pushed the pedal to the floor. His rear tires smoked the pavement, and for a fraction of a second he held still amid the squealing. Then, he caught traction, and with the smell of burning rubber in his nose, he was gone. He just caught the needle on the speedometer before he hit his brakes as hard as he could, nearly standing on them, as he reached the road. He had hit 65 mph! Incredible, he thought. He turned the car around and slowly returned to the crowd. He shouted out the window, "Sixty-five! Sixty-five!" and a roar went up.

That's why these guys were here.

He came out from the back in his jeans and green crewneck sweater, fishing in his pocket for the keys to the black beauty. It was almost two. The manager didn't mind if he left five or ten minutes early because by then the alley was empty. Tommy and Richy, seeing him coming, got up and waited for him to come round to the front. Everything was dark now, the soda fountain, café, and bar having been shut down for a while already. As he approached, Tommy said,

"Whaddaya driving tonight?"

"Why do ya wanna know?" he answered, his interest suddenly aroused.

"Well, I've a twenty says your Ford's gonna eat my dust. Whaddaya think? Wanna try me?"

"I'm not drivin' my ole Ford tonight."

"Whatever you're in, same twenty."

"You don't wanna do that. Baby guy. Less you got more twenties than y'know what to do with."

"Ha!" Tommy laughed, and elbowed Richy in the gut, making Richy double over in his own laugh.

"See me outside. At the light. It's a perfect night. No wind, no rain, dead calm. Unless you're just scared, hey?"

"Yeah, you scare me. Look at me shake."

As they taunted each other, they strolled toward the doors. He waved at the manager, and the manager nodded good night to him, flipping switches on the panel in the desk, shutting down the lights in the alley one bank at a time. It was dead silent at his back and dark as he opened the door.

In front of the alley there were three cars parked. One, the black beauty, a few spaces down from the doors, facing the building, another, the Buick, across the lot facing the highway. The manager's car was parked on the side of the building, a 55 Chevy, pink and gray. The manager came out behind him, locked the door, and said good night as he walked towards his car. He looked at Tommy and Richy, motioned to the black beauty, and said,

"That's what I'm drivin' tonight."

Tommy paused, looked at the Ford, looked at Richy, and

cracked up.

“You think those chrome bumpers can scream off the line faster than my Buick? Hey, man, I’m not sure I want to take your night’s wages. Like pluckin’ the ole candy from the baby. Hey, Richy? Should we call it a night? Whaddaya think?”

To this he didn’t respond. He walked over to the driver’s side of the black beauty, opened the door, slid into the seat, and started her up. He backed her slowly out of her spot, and then he sat for a while. If he went left, toward the highway, he would be taking up the challenge. If he turned right, toward the parking lot exit where he said goodnight to Eileen, he would be going home as he promised his father he would. He paused only long enough to allow Tommy and Richy to get into the Buick, then he turned the wheels toward the highway and rolled slowly out of the parking lot.

There was no traffic on the highway, and the traffic light up the block from the bowling alley was blinking yellow. He pulled up to it in the left lane and Tommy pulled up in the right. They stood nose to nose. He looked across at Tommy, who looked at him. Tommy was revving his engine, pumping up the RPMs, but he had an automatic transmission, so he just sat, his nerves coiled, waiting. Then, Tommy popped his clutch, and his rear wheels began to screech on the concrete. He pushed the pedal to the floor. The acceleration was immense. The pavement in front of him blurred. In less than thirty seconds he was hitting 50, in sixty seconds he was topping a 100 mph. He didn’t dare take his eyes from the road, but he peeked quickly in the rearview mirror. He saw the Buick half a mile behind. In another ten seconds the needle on his speedometer pressed on 120, then pressed down as far as it could go. He estimated he was going above 130 mph and still accelerating. Then it happened.

As he peeked again in the rearview mirror and saw the Buick turning off the highway, he passed two patrol cars sitting darkly on the shoulder, lights off but engines running. His own headlights lit them up so briefly they almost seemed an illusion. Suddenly their lights flicked on and as they pulled together onto the highway, their sirens began to blare. His heart fluttered as he tapped his breaks, but he was going too fast to break hard, and it took him almost a mile to slow down enough to pull off the road. The cops entrapped him, one backing into his front bumper and the other nosing into his back bumper.

He rolled down his window as the two cops approached, and when they saw him, they both cracked up laughing.

“I don’t believe it,” the one said.

“Hey, look who it is,” the other said. They both began to laugh.

"I didn't know he was stupid," the first said.

"Too bad, kid," the other laughingly said, "you gotta give me the license."

Both cops knew him from the bowling alley, stopping by every Friday and Saturday night for coffee and a donut. They sympathized but did what they had to do, all the time remarking how dumb he was.

"Dumb, dumb, dumb," kid.

"Yeah," he said, as he took his license back and then took the ticket the one cop made out to him. "What's going to happen?" he asked them.

"You'll get a notice from the Police Department telling you when the court date will be. You gotta go to court, kid. The judge will decide what to do with you. Driving at night with a junior license? That's bad. But drag racing at two in the morning on the state highway? With a junior license? Why, kid, I think the judge might throw the book at you. I mean, he just might think you ain't got enough sense to let live. It's gonna be the ovens for *you*, kid. Better prepare. Now, follow us, and we'll lead you home."

The two cops laughed and laughed as they headed back to their cars. He followed the one in front, and the one behind followed him, till they reached his house. Then they watched him put the car in the garage, and when the door closed, they rolled away.

Everyone was sleeping when he got home. It was so late that it wouldn't be long before his mother and father rose for the day. It was Saturday. There was no avoiding telling them what he did. He thought seriously about packing a bag, waiting till sunrise, and leaving a note explaining what had happened and why he was going away. He lifted his bank book out of the drawer where he kept it, tapped it a couple of times on the edge of the drawer as he thought what to do, then he put it back, thinking how hard he worked with his father. No. He couldn't. He had to face his father. He brought his father's face up close, but he couldn't imagine how he would react, nor could he imagine how his mother would react. He could not see how his whole life had been changed, how an entirely new future suddenly laid itself out before him. All he *could* see, as he lay in bed, were the laughing cops and the judge, Eileen's red lips, and his father.

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