

Yes, it was a Confederate symbol on the back of a freshly printed dollar bill.
It wasn't dominant or anything, just mixed in with the rest of the cryptic symbols on currency.
But, it was there.
Printed in 2022 on top of all that.
Derrick held it up to the light to make sure.
In fact, he did it twice.
Hmmm.
He looked out of his dormitory window and saw the sign, loud and proud.
"No worries - we provide separate but equal housing facilities for students." the sign read.
Surrounded by smiling faces of all colors, Derrick found the sign confusing.

Then, it slowly began to make sense.
And, Derrick began to shudder.

Two weeks ago

The crusty old man under piles of thick stinky clothing stared at Derrick on the subway.
It was creepy.
They were the only ones in the subway car.

You know, head slightly bowed, eyes peering up and focused pupil to pupil.
It made Derrick uncomfortable.
It was almost midnight and Derrick was just finally making his way home from his job at that
Gentlemen's Club downtown.

The official tips were good. The unofficial cash tips were even better.
But, the hours were long.
Very long.
And it was cold.
And the subway was scary.

Clutching the sketch pad that was too big for his backpack, Derrick tried to escape this man's
piercing gaze.
He couldn't.
Just like Don Corleone, the gaze pulled him back in and he found himself going eye to eye with
the stranger under the piles of clothes.

The stranger's eyes moved towards Derrick's sketch pad. Derrick felt a bit worried.
He wondered if this staring, stinking, clearly homeless man was going to rob him.
It wasn't the sketchpad that worried Derrick but the iPad in his backpack.
So, Derrick sized him up.
He looked at least 60 if not 70 years old.
He wasn't exactly the picture of health either.

"Young man, what do you want to do with your art?"

Shattering the rhythmic sounds of the rumbling subway, the old man's voice cut through the tension like a knife.

Stunned, all Derrick could mumble was "Change the world?" as he broke the eye-to-eye standoff and bowed his head.

After waiting for a response, he lifted his head to an empty seat.

The old man was gone.

It was only Derrick on the subway.

He assumed it was just fatigue...that had been going around lately.

"Today's project is to create a small painting of something from your daily life, such as a bowl or a chair." stated the instructor before dismissing class.

It was twelve hours later and Derrick, having nearly forgotten the totally weird subway encounter, was leaving his Foundations of Painting Class.

Settled in his dormitory, he decided to knock out this artwork so he looked around.

Chair? Too big.

Plate? A little boring, too flat.

Then he saw it, that plain coffee cup that his grandpa gifted him for non reason whatsoever.

Derrick remembered.

It was Grandpa's last visit.

Suitcase packed, Grandpa had one last cup of joe.

And then gave the cup to Derrick, hugged and kissed him.

"I'm so proud of you, Grandson", Grandpa mumbled through his tears.

Derrick remembered those tears streaming down into the crevices of his grandfather's aged skin, around his lips, though the remnants of his beard, and then dripping on the floor.

So, Derrick painted the cup.

But, he wasn't satisfied, so he painted coffee into the cup.

Before he could put his brush down, he could smell the fresh coffee.

Looking, he saw the wisps of steam rising from the cup.

Moving closer to the cup, he could see the fresh coffee in it.

"I must be tripping...", Derrick thought.

Derrick tapped the cup, the coffee rippled.

So, Derrick the touched his finger to the coffee, it was hot and clearly not some alien life form.

Derrick took a very slow and cautious sniff of the coffee.
It smelled very good with hints of Hazelnut, Turmeric, and Cumin.
He took a sip.
It tasted every bit as good as it smelled.

“Hmmm.”, said Derrick as he put some Flemish white and painted swirls on the coffee in his painting.

Then he looked at the cup.
The swirls were there.
He took a sip.
Yes, it was a French Vanilla flavored coffee creamer he had created.

“This can’t be real.”, mused Derrick.

The possibilities were mind boggling for Derrick.
He imagined painting himself winning lottery tickets, a new wardrobe, maybe a new car, or even a girlfriend (but that did feel a bit creepy...).

Then, he remembered what he told the old man on the subway.

And, he remembered a moment in history that was still chilling, 60 years later.

So, he made a painting of Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair graduating from college, years after the Birmingham church bombing.

It took awhile for Derrick to do it.
He had to Google images, imagine how they would have looked as college seniors, tone the canvas, sketch, block in, and all the other things that well taught painters do.
But, he did it.

When it was finished, he stood back satisfied.
He just knew he had changed history for the better.

Until he decided to get a candy bar (tired of painting) and saw the Confederate symbol on the back of the dollar bill.
He knew it wasn’t there before.
And then he pulled out his laptop.
Because, even if you have supernatural artistic powers, Google is still your friend.

He googled the Birmingham Church Bombing of 1963.
Nothing came up.
Good.
And, then he saw it in the suggestions.

Derrick took a deep breath and clicked on the link to the “Birmingham Church Bombing Plot”.

“Despite insisting that he had found the bombing device under the stairs and was the one to call the police, the Pastor was convicted by an all white jury of multiple counts of attempted murder and sentenced to life in prison. The SCLC and Urban League rallied to his defense but he died in prison a few years later.

Southern legislators used this incident to convince much of the nation that the South was not as racially violent as portrayed and that most of the violence had been committed by integrationists and blamed on segregationists. “

Stunned, Derrick leaned back on his bed.

In order to undo this, he would have to recreate the very horror he wished to destroy.