

The Outsiders

S. E. Hinton

According to Wikipedia, *The Outsiders* is a coming-of-age novel by S. E. Hinton, first published in 1967 by Viking Press. Hinton was 15 when she started writing the novel, but did most of the work when she was sixteen and a junior in high school. Hinton was 18 when the book was published.

The book follows two rival groups, the Greasers and the Socs

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I about decided I didn't like it so much, though, when I spotted that red Corvair trailing me. I was almost two blocks from home then, so I started walking a little faster. I had never been jumped, but I had seen Johnny after four Socs got hold of him, and it wasn't pretty. Johnny was scared of his own shadow after that. Johnny was sixteen then.

I knew it wasn't any use though--- the fast walking, I mean--- even before the Corvair pulled up beside me and five Socs got out. I got pretty scared--- I'm kind of small for fourteen even though I have a good build, and those guys were bigger than me. I automatically hitched my thumbs in my jeans and slouched, wondering if I could get away if I made a break for it. I remembered Johnny--- his face all cut up and bruised, and I remembered how he had cried when we found him, half-conscious, in the comer lot. Johnny had it awful rough at home--- it took a lot to make him cry.

I was sweating something fierce, although I was cold. I could feel my palms getting clammy and the perspiration running down my back. I get like that when I'm real scared. I glanced around for a pop bottle or a stick or something--- Steve Randle, Soda's best buddy, had once held off four guys with a busted pop bottle--- but there was nothing. So I stood there like a bump on a log while they surrounded me. I don't use my head. They walked around slowly, silently, smiling.

"Hey, grease," one said in an over-friendly voice. "We're gonna do you a favor, greaser. We're gonna cut all that long greasy hair off."

He had on a madras shirt. I can still see it. Blue madras. One of them laughed, then cussed me

I remembered the voice: "Need a haircut, greaser?" The blade must have slipped while he was trying to shut me up. "Yeah."

Soda is handsomer than anyone else I know. Not like Darry--- Soda's movie-star kind of handsome, the kind that people stop on the street to watch go by. He's not as tall as Darry, and he's a little slimmer, but he has a finely drawn, sensitive face that somehow manages to be reckless and thoughtful at the same time. He's got dark-gold hair that he combs back--- long and silky and straight--- and in the summer the sun bleaches it to a shining wheat gold. His eyes are dark brown--- lively, dancing, recklessly laughing eyes that can be gentle and sympathetic one moment and blazing with anger the next. He has Dad's eyes, but Soda is one of a kind. He can get drunk in a drag race or dancing without ever getting near alcohol. In our neighborhood it's rare to find a kid who doesn't drink once in a while. But Soda never touches a drop--- he doesn't need to. He gets drunk on just plain living. And he understands everybody.

He looked at me more closely. I looked away hurriedly, because, if you want to know the truth, I was starting to bawl. I knew I was as white as I felt and I was shaking like a leaf.

Soda just put his hand on my shoulder. "Easy, Ponyboy. They ain't gonna hurt you no more."

"I know," I said, but the ground began to blur and I felt hot tears running down my cheeks. I brushed them away impatiently. "I'm just a little spooked, that's all." I drew a quivering breath and quit crying. You just don't cry in front of Darry. Not unless you're hurt like Johnny had been that day we found him in the vacant lot. Compared to Johnny I wasn't hurt at all.

Soda rubbed my hair. "You're an okay kid, Pony."

I had to grin at him--- Soda can make you grin no matter what. I guess it's because he's always grinning so much himself. "You're crazy, Soda, out of your mind."

Darry looked as if he'd like to knock our heads together. "You're both nuts."

Soda merely cocked one eyebrow, a trick he'd picked up from Two-Bit. "It seems to run in this family."

Darry stared at him for a second, then cracked a grin. Sodapop isn't afraid of him like everyone else and enjoys teasing him. I'd just as soon tease a full-grown grizzly; but for some reason, Darry seems to like being teased by Soda.

Our gang had chased the Socs to their car and heaved rocks at them. They came running toward us now--- four lean, hard guys. They were all as tough as nails and looked it. I had grown up with them, and they accepted me, even though I was younger, because I was Darry and Soda's kid brother and I kept my mouth shut good.

Steve Randle was seventeen, tall and lean, with thick greasy hair he kept combed in complicated swirls. He was tacky, smart, and Soda's best buddy since grade school. Steve's specialty was cars. He could lift a hubcap qu'

his first talent), and he was always smarting off to the cops. He really couldn't help it. Everything he said was so irresistibly funny that he just had to let the police in on it to brighten up their dull lives. (That's the way he explained it to me.) He liked fights, blondes, and for some unfathomable reason, school. He was still a junior at eighteen and a half and he never learned anything. He just went for kicks. I liked him real well because he kept us laughing at ourselves as well as at other things. He reminded me of Will Rogers--- maybe it was the grin.

If I had to pick the real character of the gang, it would be Dallas Winston--- Dally. I used to like to draw his picture when he was in a dangerous mood, for then I could get his personality down in a few lines. He had an elfish face, with high cheekbones and a pointed chin, small, sharp animal teeth, and ears like a lynx. His hair was almost white it was so blond, and he didn't like haircuts, or hair oil either, so it fell over his forehead in wisps and kicked out in the back in tufts and curled behind his ears and along the nape of his neck. His eyes were blue, blazing ice, cold with a hatred of the whole world. Dally had spent three years on the wild side of New York and had been arrested at the age of ten. He was tougher than the rest of us--- tougher, colder, meaner. The shade of difference that separates a greaser from a hood wasn't present in Dally. He was as wild as the boys in the downtown outfits, like Tim Shepard's gang.

In New York, Dally blew off steam in gang fights, but here, organized gangs are rarities--- there are just small bunches of friends who stick together, and the warfare is between the social classes. A rumble, when it's called, is usually born of a grudge fight, and the opponents just happen to bring their friends along. Oh, there are a few named gangs around, like the River Kings and the Tiber Street Tigers, but here in the Southwest there's no gang rivalry. So Dally, even though he could get into a good fight sometimes, had no specific thing to hate. No rival gang. Only Socs. And you can't win against them no matter how hard you try, because they've got all the breaks and even whipping them isn't going to change that fact. Maybe that was why Dallas was so bitter.

He had quite a reputation. They have a file on him down at the police station. He had been arrested, he got drunk, he rode in rodeos, lied, cheated, stole, rolled drunks,

Tough and tuff are two different words. Tough is the same as rough; tuff means cool, sharp--- like a tuff-looking Mustang or a tuff record. In our neighborhood both are compliments.

Steve flicked his ashes at me. "What were you doin', walkin' by your lonesome?" Leave it to good old Steve to bring up something like that.

"I was comin' home from the movies. I didn't think..."

"You don't ever think," Darry broke in, "not at home or anywhere when it counts. You must think at school, with all those good grades you bring home, and you've always got your nose in a book, but do you ever use your head for common sense? No sirree, bub. And if you did have to go by yourself, you should have carried a blade."

I just stared at the hole in the toe of my tennis shoe. Me and Darry just didn't dig each other. I never could please him. He would have hollered at me for carrying a blade if I had carried one. If I brought home B's, he wanted A's, and if I got A's, he wanted to make sure they stayed A's. If I was playing football, I should be in studying, and if I was reading, I should be out playing football. He never hollered at Sodapop--- not even when Soda dropped out of school or got tickets for speeding. He just hollered at me.

Soda was glaring at him. "Leave my kid brother alone, you hear? It ain't his fault he likes to go to the movies, and it ain't his fault the Socs like to jump us, and if he had been carrying a blade it would have been a good excuse to cut him to ribbons."

Soda always takes up for me.

Darry said impatiently, "When I want my kid brother to tell me what to do with my other kid brother, I'll ask you-- kid brother." But he laid off me. He always does when Sodapop tells him to. Most of the time.

"Next time get one of us to go with you, Ponyboy," Two-Bit said. "Any of us will."

though. Her hair was natural blond and her laugh was soft, like her china-blue eyes. She didn't have a real good home or anything and was our kind--- greaser--- but she was a real nice girl. Still, lots of times I wondered what other girls were like. The girls who were bright-eyed and had their dresses a decent length and acted as if they'd like to spit on us if given a chance. Some were afraid of us, and remembering Dallas Winston, I didn't blame them. But most looked at us like we were dirt--- gave us the same kind of look that the Socs did when they came by in their Mustangs and Corvairs and yelled "Grease!" at us. I wondered about them. The girls, I mean... Did they cry when their boys were arrested, like Evie did when Steve got hauled in, or did they run out on them the way Sylvia did Dallas? But maybe their boys didn't get arrested or beaten up or busted up in rodeos.

I was still thinking about it while I was doing my homework that night. I had to read *Great Expectations* for English, and that kid Pip, he reminded me of us--- the way he felt marked lousy because he wasn't a gentleman or anything, and the way that girl kept looking down on him. That happened to me once. One time in biology I had to dissect a worm, and the razor wouldn't cut, so I used my switchblade. The minute I flicked it out--- I forgot what I was doing or I would never have done it--- this girl right beside me kind of gasped, and said, "They are right. You are a hood." That didn't make me feel so hot. These were a lot of Socs in that class--- I get put into A classes because I'm supposed to be smart--- and most of them thought it was pretty funny. I didn't, though. She was a cute girl. She looked real good in yellow.

We deserve a lot of our trouble, I thought. Dallas deserves everything he gets, and should get worse, if you want the truth. And Two-Bit--- he doesn't really want or need half the things he swipes from stores. He just thinks it's fun to swipe everything that isn't nailed down. I can understand why Sodapop and Steve get into drag races and fights so much, though--- both of them have too much energy, too much feeling, with no way to blow it off.

"Rub harder, Soda," I heard Darry mumbling. "You're gonna put me to sleep."

I looked through the door. Sodapop was giving Darry a back-rub. Darry is always pulling muscles; he roofs houses and he's always trying to carry two bundles of roofing up the ladder. I knew Soda would put him to sleep, because Soda can put about anyone out when he sets his head to it. He thought Darry worked too hard anyway. I did, too.

Darry didn't deserve to work like an old man when he was only twenty. He had been a real popular guy in school; he was captain of the football team and he had been voted Boy of the Year. But we just didn't have the money for him to go to college, even with the athletic scholarship he won. And now he didn't have time between jobs to even think about college. So he never went anywhere and never did anything anymore, except work out at gyms and go skiing with some old friends of his sometimes.

I rubbed my cheek where it had turned purple. I had looked in the mirror, and it did make me look tough. But Darry had made me put a Band-Aid on the cut.

I remembered how awful Johnny had looked when he got beaten up. I had just as much right to use the streets as the Socs did, and Johnny had never hurt them. Why did the Socs hate us so much? We left them alone. I nearly went to sleep over my homework trying to figure it out.

Sodapop, who had jumped into bed by this time, yelled sleepily for me to turn off the light and get to bed. When I finished the chapter I was on, I did.

Lying beside Soda, staring at the wall, I kept remembering the faces of the Socs as they surrounded me, that blue madras shirt the blond was wearing, and I could still hear a thick voice: "Need a haircut, greaser?" I shivered.

"You cold, Ponyboy?"

"A little;" I lied. Soda threw one arm across my neck. He mumbled something drowsily. "Listen, kiddo, when Darry hollers at you... he don't mean nothin'. He's just got more worries than somebody his age ought to. Don't take him serious... you dig, Pony?"

Don't let him bug you. He's really proud of you 'cause you're so brainy. It's just because you're the baby--- I mean, he loves you a lot. Savvy?"

"Sure," I said, trying for Soda's sake to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"Soda?"

"Yeah?"

"How come you dropped out?" I never have gotten over that. I could hardly stand it when he left school.

" 'Cause I'm dumb. The only things I was passing anyway were auto mechanics and gym."

"You're not dumb."

"Yeah, I am. Shut up and I'll tell you something. Don't tell Darry, though."

"Okay."

"I think I'm gonna marry Sandy. After she gets out of school and I get a better job and everything. I might wait till you get out of school, though. So I can still help Darry with the bills and stuff."

"Tuff enough. Wait till I get out, though, so you can keep Darry off my back."

"Don't be like that, kid. I told you he don't mean half of what he says..."

"You in love with Sandy? What's it like?"

"Hhhmmm." He sighed happily. "It's real nice."

In a moment his breathing was light and regular. I turned my head to look at him and in the moonlight he looked like some Greek god come to earth. I wondered how he could stand being so handsome. Then I sighed. I didn't quite get what he meant about

behind them. I had a sick feeling that Dally was up to his usual tricks, and I was right. He started talking, loud enough for the two girls to hear. He started out bad and got worse. Dallas could talk awful dirty if he wanted to and I guess he wanted to then. I felt my ears get hot. Two-Bit or Steve or even Soda would have gone right along with him, just to see if they could embarrass the girls, but that kind of kicks just doesn't appeal to me. I sat there, struck dumb, and Johnny left hastily to get a Coke.

I wouldn't have felt so embarrassed if they had been greasy girls--- I might even have helped old Dallas. But those two girls weren't our kind. They were tuff-looking girls--- dressed sharp and really good-looking. They looked about sixteen or seventeen. One had short dark hair, and the other had long red hair. The redhead was getting mad, or scared. She sat up straight and she was chewing hard on her gum. The other one pretended not to hear Dally. Dally was getting impatient. He put his feet up on the back of the redhead's chair, winked at me, and beat his own record for saying something dirty. She turned around and gave him a cool stare.

"Take your feet off my chair and shut your trap."

Boy, she was good-looking. I'd seen her before; she was a cheerleader at our school. I'd always thought she was stuck-up.

Dally merely looked at her and kept his feet where they were. "Who's gonna make me?"

The other one fumed around and watched us. "That's the greaser that jockeys for the Slash J sometime," she said, as if we couldn't hear her.

I had heard the same tone a million times: "Greaser... greaser... greaser." Oh yeah, I had heard that tone before too many times. What are they doing at a drive-in without a car? I thought, and Dallas said, "I know you two. I've seen you around rodeos."

"It's a shame you can't ride bull half as good as you can talk it," the redhead said coolly and turned back around.

"My name's Sherri, but I'm called Cherry because of my hair. Cherry Valance."

"I know," I said. "You're a cheerleader. We go to the same school."

wandering the streets breaking out street lights--- it didn't fit my happy-go-lucky brother at all. It fitted Dally perfectly, but you could hardly say it about Soda.

Johnny came back then and sat down beside me. He looked around for Dally, then managed a shy "Hi" to the girls and tried to watch the movie. He was nervous, though. Johnny was always nervous around strangers. Cherry looked at him, sizing him up as she had me. Then she smiled softly, and I knew she had him sized up right.

Dally came striding back with an armful of Cokes. He handed one to each of the girls and sat down beside Cherry. "This might cool you off."

She gave him an incredulous look; and then she threw her Coke in his face. "That might cool you off, greaser. After you wash your mouth and learn to talk and act decent, I might cool off, too."

Dally wiped the Coke off his face with his sleeve and smiled dangerously. If I had been Cherry I would have beat it out of there. I knew that smile.

"Fiery, huh? Well, that's the way I like 'em." He started to put his arm around her, but Johnny reached over and stopped him.

"Leave her alone, Dally."

"Huh?" Dally was taken off guard. He stared at Johnny in disbelief. Johnny couldn't say "Boo" to a goose. Johnny gulped and got a little pale, but he said, "You heard me. Leave her alone."

Dallas scowled for a second. If it had been me, or Two-Bit, or Soda or Steve, or anyone but Johnny, Dally would have flattened him without a moment's hesitation. You just didn't tell Dally Winston what to do. One time, in a dime store, a guy told him to move over at the candy counter. Dally had turned around and belted him so hard it knocked a tooth loose. A complete stranger, too. But Johnny was the gang's pet, and Dally just couldn't hit him. He was Dally's pet, too. Dally got up and stalked off, his fists jammed in his pockets and a frown on his face. He didn't come back.

Cherry sighed in relief. "Thanks. He had me scared to death."

Johnny managed an admiring grin. "You sure didn't show it. Nobody talks to Dally like that."

She smiled, "From what I saw, you do."

Johnny's ears got red. I was still staring at him. It had taken more than nerve for him to say what he'd said to Dally--- Johnny worshiped the ground Dallas walked on, and I had never heard Johnny talk back to anyone, much less his hero.

Marcia grinned at us. She was a little smaller than Cherry. She was cute, but that Cherry Valance was a real looker. "Y'all sit up here with us. You can protect us."

Johnny and I looked at each other. He grinned suddenly, raising his eyebrows so that they disappeared under his bangs. Would we ever have something to tell the boys! his eyes said plainly. We had picked up two girls, and classy ones at that. Not any greasy broads for us, but real Socs. Soda would flip when I told him.

"Okay," I said nonchalantly, "might as well."

I sat between them, and Johnny sat next to Cherry.

"How old are y'all?" Marcia asked.

"Fourteen," I said.

"Sixteen," said Johnny.

"That's funny," Marcia said, "I thought you were both..."

"Sixteen," Cherry finished for her.

I was grateful. Johnny looked fourteen and he knew it and it bugged him something awful.

Johnny grinned. "How come y'all ain't scared of us like you were Dally?"

Cherry sighed. "You two are too sweet to scare anyone. First of all, you didn't join in Dallas's dirty talk, and you made him leave us alone. And when we asked you to sit up here with us, you didn't act like it was an invitation to make out for the night. Besides that, I've heard about Dallas Winston, and he looked as hard as nails and twice as tough. And you two don't look mean."

"Sure," I said tiredly, "we're young and innocent"

"No," Cherry said slowly, looking at me carefully, "not innocent. You've seen too much to be innocent. Just not... dirty."

"Dally's okay," Johnny said defensively, and I nodded. You take up for your buddies, no matter what they do. When you're a gang, you stick up for the members. If you don't stick up for them, stick together, make like brothers, it isn't a gang any more. It's a pack. A snarling, distrustful, bickering pack like the Socs in their social clubs or the street gangs in New York or the wolves in the timber. "He's tough, but he's a cool old guy."

"He'd leave you alone if he knew you," I said, and that was true. When Steve's cousin from Kansas came down, Dally was decent to her and watched his swearing. We all did around nice girls who were the cousinly type. I don't know how to explain it--- we try to be nice to the girls we see once in awhile, like cousins or the girls in class; but we still watch a nice girl go by on a street corner and say all kinds of lousy stuff about her. Don't ask me why. I don't know why.

"Well," Marcia said with finality, "I'm glad he doesn't know us."

"I kind of admire him," Cherry said softly, so only I heard, and then we settled down to watch the movie.

other down, which he always does when something puzzles him, or bothers him, or when he feels like saying something smart. "Shoot, you're ninety-six if you're a day."

"I'm a night," Marcia said brightly.

Two-Bit stared at her admiringly. "Brother, you're a sharp one. Where'd you two ever get to be picked up by a couple of greasy hoods like Pony and Johnny?"

"We really picked them up," Marcia said. "We're really Arabian slave traders and we're thinking about shanghaiing them. They're worth ten camels apiece at least."

"Five," Two-Bit disagreed. "They don't talk Arabian, I don't think. Say somethin' in Arabian, Johnnycake."

"Aw, cut it out!" Johnny broke in. "Dally was bothering them and when he left they wanted us to sit with them to protect them. Against wisecracking greasers like you, probably."

Two-Bit grinned, because Johnny didn't usually get sassy like that. We thought we were doing good if we could get him to talk at all. Incidentally, we don't mind being called greaser by another greaser. It's kind of playful then.

"Hey, where is of Dally, anyways?"

"He went hunting some action--- booze or dames or a fight. I hope he don't get jailed again. He just got out"

"He'll probably find the fight," Two-Bit stated cheerfully. "That's why I came over. Mr. Timothy Shepard and Co. are looking for whoever so kindly slashed their car's tires, and since Mr. Curly Shepard spotted Dallas doing it... well... Does Dally have a blade?"

"Not that I know of," I said. "I think he's got a piece of pipe, but he busted his blade this morning."

Cherry and Marcia shook their heads at his offering of cigarettes, but Johnny and I reached for one. Johnny's color was back and his breathing was regular, but his hand was shaking ever so slightly. A cigarette would steady it.

"Ponyboy, will you come with me to get some popcorn?" Cherry asked.

I jumped up. "Sure. Y'all want some?"

"I do," said Marcia. She was finishing the Coke Dally had given her. I realized then that Marcia and Cherry weren't alike. Cherry had said she wouldn't drink Dally's Coke if she was starving, and she meant it. It was the principle of the thing. But Marcia saw no reason to throw away a perfectly good, free Coke.

"Me too," said Two-Bit. He flipped me a fifty cent piece. "Get Johnny some, too. I'm buyin'," he added as Johnny started to reach into his jeans pocket.

We went to the concession stand and, as usual, there was a line a mile long, so we had to wait. Quite a few kids turned to look at us--- you didn't see a kid grease and a Socy cheerleader together often. Cherry didn't seem to notice.

"Your friend--- the one with the sideburns--- he's okay?"

"He ain't dangerous like Dallas if that's what you mean. He's okay."

She smiled and her eyes showed that her mind was on something else. "Johnny... he's been hurt bad sometime, hasn't he?" It was more of a statement than a question. "Hurt and scared."

"It was the Socs," I said nervously, because there were plenty of Socs milling around and some of them were giving me funny looks, as if I shouldn't be with Cherry or something. And I don't like to talk about it either--- Johnny getting beat up, I mean. But I started in, talking a little faster than I usually do because I don't like to think about it either.

walked by himself after that. And Johnny, who was the most law-abiding of us, now carried in his back pocket a six-inch switchblade. He'd use it, too, if he ever got jumped again. They had scared him that much. He would kill the next person who jumped him. Nobody was ever going to beat him like that again. Not over his dead body...

I HAD NEARLY forgotten that Cherry was listening to me. But when I came back to reality and looked at her, I was startled to find her as white as a sheet.

"All Socs aren't like that," she said. "You have to believe me, Ponyboy. Not all of us are like that."

"Sure," I said.

"That's like saying all you greasers are like Dallas Winston. I'll bet he's jumped a few people."

I digested that. It was true. Dally had jumped people. He had told us stories about muggings in New York that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. But not all of us were that bad.

Cherry no longer looked sick, only sad. "I'll bet you think the Socs have it made.

Chapter 3

AFTER THE MOVIE was over it suddenly came to us that Cherry and Marcia didn't have a way to get home. Two-Bit gallantly offered to walk them home--- the west side of town was only about twenty miles away--- but they wanted to call their parents and have them come and get them. Two-Bit finally talked them into letting us drive them home in his car. I think they were still half-scared of us. They were getting over it, though, as we walked to Two-Bit's house to pick up the car. It seemed funny to me that Socs--- if these girls were any example--- were just like us. They liked the Beatles and thought Elvis Presley was out, and we thought the Beatles were rank and that Elvis was tuff, but that seemed the only difference to me. Of course greasy girls would have acted a lot tougher, but there was a basic sameness. I thought maybe it was money that separated us.

"No," Cherry said slowly when I said this. "It's not just money. Part of it is, but not all. You greasers have a different set of values. You're more emotional. We're sophisticated--- cool to the point of not feeling anything. Nothing is real with us. You know, sometimes I'll catch myself talking to a girl-friend, and realize I don't mean half of what I'm saying. I don't really think a beer blast on the river bottom is super-cool, but I'll rave about one to a girl-friend just to be saying something." She smiled at me. "I never told anyone that. I think you're the first person I've ever really gotten through to."

She was coming through to me all right, probably because I was a greaser, and younger; she didn't have to keep her guard up with me.

"Rat race is a perfect name for it," she said. "We're always going and going and going, and never asking where. Did you ever hear of having more than you wanted? So that you couldn't want anything else and then started looking for something else to want? It seems like we're always searching for something to satisfy us, and never finding it. Maybe if we could lose our cool. we could."

That was the truth. Socs were always behind a wall of aloofness, careful not to let their real selves show through. I had seen a social-club rumble once. The Socs even fought coldly and practically and impersonally.

"That's why we're separated," I said. "It's not money, it's feeling--- you don't feel anything and we feel too violently."

"And"--- she was trying to hide a smile--- "that's probably why we take turns getting our names in the paper."

Two-Bit and Marcia weren't even listening to us. They were engaged in some wild conversation that made no sense to anyone but themselves.

I have quite a rep for being quiet, almost as quiet as Johnny. Two-Bit always said he wondered why Johnny and I were such good buddies. "You must make such interestin' conversation," he'd say, cocking one eyebrow, "you keepin' your mouth shut and Johnny not sayin' anything." But Johnny and I understood each other without saying anything. Nobody but Soda could really get me talking. Till I met Cherry Valance.

I don't know why I could talk to her; maybe for the same reason she could talk to me. The first thing I knew I was telling her about Mickey Mouse, Soda's horse. I had never told anyone about Soda's horse. It was personal.

Soda had this buckskin horse, only it wasn't his. It belonged to a guy who kept it at the stables where Soda used to work. Mickey Mouse was Soda's horse, though. The first day Soda saw him he said, "There's my horse," and I never doubted it. I was about ten then. Sodapop is horsecrazy. I mean it. He's always hanging around stables and rodeos, hopping on a horse every time he gets a chance. When I was ten I thought that Mickey Mouse and Soda looked alike and were alike. Mickey Mouse was a dark-gold buckskin, sassy and ornery, not much more than a colt. He'd come when Soda called him. He wouldn't come for anyone else. That horse loved Soda. He'd stand there and chew on Soda's sleeve or collar. Gosh, but Sodapop was crazy about that horse. He went down to see him every day. Mickey Mouse was a mean horse: He kicked other horses and was

always getting into trouble. "I've got me a ornery pony," Soda'd tell him, rubbing his neck. "How come you're so mean, Mickey Mouse?" Mickey Mouse would just chew on his sleeve and sometimes nip him. But not hard. He may have belonged to another guy, but he was Soda's horse.

"Does Soda still have him?" Cherry asked.

"He got sold," I said. "They came and got him one day and took him off. He was a real valuable horse. Pure quarter."

She didn't say anything else and I was glad. I couldn't tell her that Soda had bawled all night long after they came and got Mickey Mouse. I had cried, too, if you want to know the truth, because Soda never really wanted anything except a horse, and he'd lost his. Soda had been twelve then, going-on-thirteen. He never let on to Mom and Dad how he felt, though, because we never had enough money and usually we had a hard time making ends meet. When you're thirteen in our neighborhood you know the score. I kept saving my money for a year, thinking that someday I could buy Mickey Mouse back for Soda. You're not so smart at ten.

"You read a lot, don't you, Ponyboy?" Cherry asked.

I was startled. "Yeah. Why?"

She kind of shrugged. "I could just tell. I'll bet you watch sunsets, too." She was quiet for a minute after I nodded. "I used to watch them, too, before I got so busy..."

I pictured that, or tried to. Maybe Cherry stood still and watched the sun set while she was supposed to be taking the garbage out. Stood there and watched and forgot everything else until her big brother screamed at her to hurry up. I shook my head. It seemed funny to me that the sunset she saw from her patio and, the one I saw from the back steps was the same one. Maybe the two different worlds we lived in weren't so different. We saw the same sunset.

Marcia suddenly gasped. "Cherry, look what's coming."

We all looked and saw a blue Mustang coming down the street. Johnny made a small noise in his throat and when I looked at him he was white.

Marcia was shifting nervously. "What are we going to do?"

Cherry bit a fingernail. "Stand here," she said. "There isn't much else we can do."

"Who is it?" Two-Bit asked. "The F.B.I.?"

"No," Cherry said bleakly, "it's Randy and Bob."

"And," Two-Bit added grimly, "a few other of the socially elite checkered-shirt set"

"Your boyfriends?" Johnny's voice was steady, but standing as close to him as I was, I could see he was trembling. I wondered why--- Johnny was a nervous wreck, but he never was that jumpy.

Cherry started walking down the street. "Maybe they won't see us. Act normal."

"Who's acting?" Two-Bit grinned. "I'm a natural normal."

"Wish it was the other way around," I muttered, and Two-Bit said, "Don't get mouthy, Ponyboy"

The Mustang passed us slowly and went right on by. Marcia sighed in relief. "That was close."

Cherry turned to me. "Tell me about your oldest brother. You don't talk much about him."

I tried to think of something to say about Darry, and shrugged. "What's to talk about? He's big and handsome and likes to play football."

"I mean, what's he like? I feel like I know Soda from the way you talk about him; tell me about Darry." And when I was silent she urged me on. "Is he wild and reckless like Soda? Dreamy, like you?" My face got hot as I bit my lip. Darry... what was Darry like? "He's..." I started to say he was a good ol' guy but I couldn't. I burst out bitterly: "He's not like Sodapop at all and he sure ain't like me. He's hard as a rock and about as human. He's got eyes exactly like frozen ice. He thinks I'm a pain in the neck. He likes Soda--- everybody likes Soda--- but he can't stand me. I bet he wishes he could stick me in a home somewhere, and he'd do it, too, if Soda'd let him."

Two-Bit and Johnny were staring at me now. "No..." Two-Bit said, dumfounded. "No, Ponyboy, that ain't right... you got it wrong..."

"Gee," Johnny said softly, "I thought you and Darry and Soda got along real well..."

"Well, we don't," I snapped, feeling silly. I knew my ears were red by the way they were burning, and I was thankful for the darkness. I felt stupid. Compared to Johnny's home, mine was heaven. At least Darry didn't get drunk and beat me up or run me out of the house, and I had Sodapop to talk things over with. That made me mad, I mean making a fool of myself in front of everyone. "An' you can shut your trap, Johnny Cade, 'cause we all know you ain't wanted at home, either. And you can't blame them."

Johnny's eyes went round and he winced as though I'd belted him. Two-Bit slapped me a good one across the side of the head, and hard.

"Shut your mouth, kid. If you wasn't Soda's kid brother I'd beat the tar out of you. You know better than to talk to Johnny like that." He put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "He didn't mean it, Johnny."

"I'm sorry," I said miserably. Johnny was my buddy. "I was just mad."

"It's the truth," Johnny said with a bleak grin. "I don't care."

"Shut up talkin' like that," Two-Bit said fiercely, messing up Johnny's hair. "We couldn't get along without you, so you can just shut up!"

"It ain't fair!" I cried passionately. "It ain't fair that we have all the rough breaks!" I didn't know exactly what I meant, but I was thinking about Johnny's father being a drunk and his mother a selfish slob, and Two-Bit's mother being a barmaid to support him and his kid sister after their father ran out on them, and Dally--- wild, cunning Dally--- turning into a hoodlum because he'd die if he didn't, and Steve--- his hatred for his father coming out in his soft, bitter voice and the violence of his temper. Sodapop... a dropout so he could get a job and keep me in school, and Darry, getting old before his time trying to run a family and hold on to two jobs and never having any fun--- while the Socs had so much spare time and money that they jumped us and each other for kicks, had beer blasts and river-bottom parties because they didn't know what else to do. Things were rough all over, all right. All over the East Side. It just didn't seem right to me.

"I know," Two-Bit said with a good-natured grin, "the chips are always down when it's our turn, but that's the way things are. Like it or lump it."

Cherry and Marcia didn't say anything. I guess they didn't know what to say. We had forgotten they were there. Then the blue Mustang was coming down the street again, more slowly.

"Well," Cherry said resignedly, "they've spotted us."

The Mustang came to a halt beside us, and the two boys in the front seat got out. They were Socs all right. One had on a white shirt and a madras ski jacket, and the other a light yellow shirt and a wine-colored sweater. I looked at their clothes and realized for

"Cherry, Marcia, listen to us..." the handsome black-haired Soc with the dark sweater began.

Johnny was breathing heavily and I noticed he was staring at the Soc's hand. He was wearing three heavy rings. I looked quickly at Johnny, an idea dawning on me. I remembered that it was a blue Mustang that had pulled up beside the vacant lot and that Johnny's face had been cut up by someone wearing rings...

The Soc's voice broke into my thoughts: "...just because we got a little drunk last time..."

Cherry looked mad. "A little? You call reeling and passing out in the streets 'a little'? Bob, I told you, I'm never going out with you while you're drinking, and I mean it. Too many things could happen while you're drunk. It's me or the booze."

The other Soc, a tall guy with a semi-Beatle haircut, turned to Marcia. "Baby, you know we don't get drunk very often..." When she only gave him a cold stare he got angry. "And even if you are mad at us, that's no reason to go walking the streets with these bums."

Two-Bit took a long drag on his cigarette, Johnny slouched and hooked his thumbs in his pockets, and I stiffened. We can look meaner than anything when we want to--- looking tough comes in handy. Two-Bit put his elbow on Johnny's shoulder. "Who you callin' bums?"

"Listen, greasers, we got four more of us in the back seat..."

"Then pity the back seat," Two-Bit said to the sky.

"If you're looking for a fight..."

Two-Bit cocked an eyebrow, but it only made him look more cool. "You mean if I'm looking for a good jumping, you outnumber us, so you'll give it to us? Well..." He

snatched up an empty bottle, busted off the end, and gave it to me, then reached in his back pocket and flipped out his switchblade. "Try it, pal."

"No!" Cherry cried. "Stop it!" She looked at Bob. "We'll ride home with you. Just wait a minute."

"Why?" Two-Bit demanded. "We ain't scared of them."

Cherry shuddered. "I can't stand fights... I can't stand them..."

I pulled her to one side. "I couldn't use this," I said, dropping the pop bottle. "I couldn't ever cut anyone...." I had to tell her that, because I'd seen her eyes when Two-Bit flicked out his switch.

"I know," she said quietly, "but we'd better go with them. Ponyboy... I mean... if I see you in the hall at school or someplace and don't say hi, well, it's not personal or anything, but..."

"I know," I said.

"We couldn't let our parents see us with you all. You're a nice boy and everything..."

"It's okay," I said, wishing I was dead and buried somewhere. Or at least that I had on a decent shirt. "We aren't in the same class. Just don't forget that some of us watch the sunset too."

She looked at me quickly. "I could fall in love with Dallas Winston," she said. "I hope I never see him again, or I will."

She left me standing there with my mouth dropped open, and the blue Mustang vroomed off.

"I reckon," I said, wondering if I ought to tell Johnny what she had said about Dallas.

"Man, that was a tuff car. Mustangs are tuff."

"Big time Socs, all right," I said, a nervous bitterness growing inside me. It wasn't

with us, and the gang could come out on weekends, and maybe Dallas would see that there was some good in the world after all, and Mom would talk to him and make him grin in spite of himself. "You've got quite a mom," Dally used to say. "She knows the score." She could talk to Dallas and kept him from getting into a lot of trouble. My mother was golden and beautiful...

"Ponyboy"--- Johnny was shaking me--- "Hey, Pony, wake up."

I sat up, shivering. The stars had moved. "Glory, what time is it?"

"I don't know. I went to sleep, too, listening to you rattle on and on. You'd better get home. I think I'll stay all night out here." Johnny's parents didn't care if he came home or not.

"Okay." I yawned. Gosh, but it was cold. "If you get cold or something come on over to our house."

"Okay."

I ran home, trembling at the thought of facing Darry. The porch light was on. Maybe they were asleep and I could sneak in, I thought. I peeked in the window. Sodapop was stretched out on the sofa, sound asleep, but Darry was in the armchair under the lamp, reading the newspaper. I gulped, and opened the door softly. Darry looked up from his paper. He was on his feet in a second. I stood there, chewing on my fingernail.

"Where the heck have you been? Do you know what time it is?" He was madder than I'd seen him in a long time. I shook my head wordlessly.

"Well, it's two in the morning, kiddo. Another hour and I would have had the police out after you. Where were you, Ponyboy?"--- his voice was rising--- "Where in the almighty universe were you?"

It sounded dumb, even to me, when I stammered, "I... I went to sleep in the lot..."

"You what?" He was shouting, and Sodapop sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Hey, Ponyboy," he said sleepily, "where ya been?"

"I didn't mean to." I pleaded with Darry. "I was talking to Johnny and we both dropped off..."

"I reckon it never occurred to you that your brothers might be worrying their heads off and afraid to call the police because something like that could get you two thrown in a boys' home so quick it'd make your head spin. And you were asleep in the lot? Ponyboy, what on earth is the matter with you? Can't you use your head? You haven't even got a coat on."

I felt hot tears of anger and frustration rising. "I said I didn't mean to..."

"I didn't mean to!" Darry shouted, and I almost shook. "I didn't think! I forgot! That's all I hear out of you! Can't you think of anything?"

"Darry..." Sodapop began, but Darry turned on him. "You keep your trap shut! I'm sick and tired of hearin' you stick up for him."

He should never yell at Soda. Nobody should ever holler at my brother. I exploded. "You don't yell at him!" I shouted. Darry wheeled around and slapped me so hard that it knocked me against the door.

Suddenly it was deathly quiet. We had all frozen. Nobody in my family had ever hit me. Nobody. Soda was wide-eyed. Darry looked at the palm of his hand where it had turned red and then looked back at me. His eyes were huge. "Ponyboy..."

I turned and ran out the door and down the street as fast as I could. Darry screamed, "Pony, I didn't mean to!" but I was at the lot by then and pretended I couldn't hear. I was running away. It was plain to me that Darry didn't want me around. And I wouldn't stay if he did. He wasn't ever going to hit me again

"Johnny?" I called, and started when he rolled over and jumped up almost under my feet. "Come on, Johnny, we're running away."

Johnny asked no questions. We ran for several blocks until we were out of breath. Then we walked. I was crying by then. I finally just sat down on the curb and cried, burying my face in my arms. Johnny sat down beside me, one hand on my shoulder. "Easy, Ponyboy," he said softly, "we'll be okay."

I finally calmed down and wiped my eyes on my bare arm. My breath was coming in quivering sobs. "Gotta cigarette?"

He handed me one and struck a match.

"Johnny, I'm scared."

"Well, don't be. You're scarin' me. What happened? I never seen you bawl like that."

"I don't very often. It was Darry. He hit me. I don't know what happened, but I couldn't take him hollering at me and hitting me too. I don't know... sometimes we get along okay, then all of a sudden he blows up on me or else is naggin' at me all the time. He didn't use to be like that... we used to get along okay... before Mom and Dad died. Now he just can't stand me."

"I think I like it better when the old man's hittin' me." Johnny sighed. "At least then I know he knows who I am. I walk in that house, and nobody says anything. I walk out, and nobody says anything. I stay away all night, and nobody notices. At least you got Soda. I ain't got nobody."

"Shoot," I said, startled out of my misery, "you got the whole gang. Dally didn't slug you tonight 'cause you're the pet. I mean, golly, Johnny, you got the whole gang."

"It ain't the same as having your own folks care about you," Johnny said simply. "It just ain't the same."

I was beginning to relax and wonder if running away was such a great idea. I was sleepy and freezing to death and I wanted to be home in bed, safe and warm under the covers with Soda's arm across me. I decided I would go home and just not speak to Darry. It was my house as much as Darry's, and if he wanted to pretend I wasn't alive, that was just fine with me. He couldn't stop me from living in my own house.

"Let's walk to the park and back. Then maybe I'll be cooled off enough to go home."

"Okay," Johnny said easily. "Okay."

Things gotta get better, I figured. They couldn't get worse. I was wrong.

bottle. I'd sure show them I could use it if I had to. Johnny was scared to death. I mean it. He was as white as a ghost and his eyes were wild-looking, like the eyes of an animal in a trap. We backed against the fountain and the Socs surrounded us. They smelled so heavily of whiskey and English Leather that I almost choked. I wished desperately that Darry and Soda would come along hunting for me. The four of us could handle them easily. But no one was around, and I knew Johnny and I were going to have to fight it out alone. Johnny had a blank, tough look on his face--- you'd have had to know him to see the panic in his eyes. I stared at the Socs coolly. Maybe they could scare us to death, but we'd never let them have the satisfaction of knowing it.

It was Randy and Bob and three other Socs, and they recognized us. I knew Johnny recognized them; he was watching the moonlight glint off Bob's rings with huge eyes.

"Hey, whatta ya know?" Bob said a little unsteadily, "here's the little greasers that picked up our girls. Hey, greasers."

"You're outa your territory," Johnny warned in a low voice. "You'd better watch it"

Randy swore at us and they stepped in closes. Bob was eyeing Johnny. "Nup, pal, yer the ones who'd better watch it. Next time you want a broad, pick up yer own kind--- dirt."

I was getting mad. I was hating them enough to lose my head.

"You know what a greaser is?" Bob asked. "White trash with long hair."

I felt the blood draining from my face. I've been cussed out and sworn at, but nothing ever hit me like that did. Johnnycake made a kind of gasp and his eyes were smoldering.

"You know what a Soc is?" I said, my voice shaking with rage. "White trash with Mustangs and madras." And then, because I couldn't think of anything bad enough to call

"You really killed him, huh, Johnny?"

"Yeah." His voice quavered slightly. "I had to. They were drowning you, Pony. They might have killed you. And they had a blade... they were gonna beat me up...."

"Like..."--- I swallowed--- "like they did before?"

Johnny was quiet for a minute. "Yeah," he said, "like they did before."

Johnny told me what had happened: "They ran when I stabbed him. They all ran..."

A panic was rising in me as I listened to Johnny's quiet voice go on and on. "Johnny!" I nearly screamed. "What are we gonna do? They put you in the electric chair for, killing people!" I was shaking. I want a cigarette. I want a cigarette. I want a cigarette. We had smoked our last pack. "I'm scared, Johnny. What are we gonna do?"

Johnny jumped up and dragged me up by my sweat shirt. He shook me. "Calm down, Ponyboy. Get ahold of yourself."

I hadn't realized I was screaming. I shook loose. "Okay," I said, "I'm okay now."

Johnny looked around, slapping his pockets nervously. "We gotta get outa here. Get somewhere. Run away. The police'll be here soon." I was trembling, and it wasn't all from cold. But Johnny, except for the fact that his hands were twitching, looked as cool as Darry ever had. "We'll need money. And maybe a gun. And a plan."

Money. Maybe a gun? A plan. Where in the world would we get these things?

"Dally," Johnny said with finality. "Dally'll get us outa here."

I heaved a sigh. Why hadn't I thought of that? But I never thought of anything. Dallas Winston could do anything.

"Where can we find him?"

As Johnny told him the story, I studied Dally, trying to figure out what there was about this tough-looking hood that a girl like Cherry Valance could love. Towheaded and shifty-eyed, Dally was anything but handsome. Yet in his hard face there was character, pride, and a savage defiance of the world. He could never love Cherry Valance back. It would be a miracle if Dally loved anything. The fight for self-preservation had hardened him beyond caring.

He didn't bat an eye when Johnny told him what had happened, only grinned and said "Good for you" when Johnny told how he had knifed the Soc. Finally Johnny finished. "We figured you could get us out if anyone could. I'm sorry we got you away from the party."

"Oh, shoot, kid"--- Dally glanced contemptuously over his shoulder--- "I was in the bedroom."

He suddenly stared at me. "Glory, but your ears can get red, Ponyboy."

I was remembering what usually went on in the bedrooms at Buck's parties. Then Dally grinned in amused realization. "It wasn't anything like that, kid. I was asleep, or tryin' to be, with all this racket. Hank Williams"--- he rolled his eyes and added a few adjectives after 'Hank Williams.' "Me and Shepard had a run-in and I cracked some ribs. I just needed a place to lay over." He rubbed his side ruefully. "Ol' Tim sure can pack a punch. He won't be able to see outa one eye for a week." He looked us over and sighed. "Well, wait a sec and I'll see what I can do about this mess." Then he took a good look at me. "Ponyboy, are you wet?"

"Y-y-yes-s," I stammered through chattering teeth.

"Glory hallelujah!" He opened the screen door and pulled me in, motioning for Johnny to follow. "You'll die of pneumonia 'fore the cops ever get you."

He half-dragged me into an empty bedroom, swearing at me all the way. "Get that sweat shirt off." He threw a towel at me. "Dry off and wait here. At least Johnny's got his

jeans jacket. You ought to know better than to run away in just a sweat shirt, and a wet one at that. Don't you ever use your head?" He sounded so much like Darry that I stared at him. He didn't notice, and left us sitting on the bed.

Johnny lay back on it. "Wish I had me a weed."

My knees were shaking as I finished drying off, sitting there in my jeans.

Dally appeared after a minute. He carefully shut the door. "Here"-

I started buttoning up the shirt. It about swallowed me. "Hop the three-fifteen freight to Windrixville," Dally instructed. "There's an old abandoned church on top of Jay Mountain. There's a pump in back so don't worry about water. Buy a week's supply of food as soon as you get there--- this morning, before the story gets out, and then don't so much as stick your noses out the door. I'll be up there as soon as I think it's clear. Man, I thought New York was the only place I could get mixed up in a murder rap."

At the word "murder," Johnny made a small noise in his throat and shuddered.

Dally walked us back to the door, turning off the porch light before we stepped out. "Git goin'!" He messed up Johnny's hair. "Take care, kid," he said softly.

"Sure, Dally, thanks." And we ran into the darkness.

WE CROUCHED IN THE WEEDS beside the railroad tracks, listening to the whistle grow louder. The train slowed to a screaming halt. "Now," whispered Johnny. We ran and pulled ourselves into an open boxcar. We pressed against the side, trying to hold our breath while we listened to the railroad workers walk up and down outside. One poked his head inside, and we froze. But he didn't see us, and the boxcar rattled as the train started up.

"The first stop'll be Windrixville," Johnny said, laying the gun down gingerly. He shook his head. "I don't see why he gave me this. I couldn't shoot anybody."

Then for the first time, really, I realized what we were in for. Johnny had killed someone. Quiet, soft-spoken little Johnny, who wouldn't hurt a living thing on purpose, had taken a human life. We were really running away, with the police after us for murder and a loaded gun by our side. I wished we'd asked Dally for a pack of cigarettes....

my too-big shirt, and Dally's worn-out jacket. They'll know we're hoods the minute they see us, I thought.

"I'll have to stay here," Johnny said, rubbing his legs. "You go down the road and ask the first person you see where Jay Mountain is." He winced at the pain in his legs. "Then come back. And for Pete's sake, run a comb through your hair and quit slouching down like a thug."

So Johnny had noticed it too. I pulled a comb from my back pocket and combed my hair carefully. "I guess I look okay now, huh, Johnny?"

He was studying me. "You know, you look an awful lot like Sodapop, the way you've got your hair and everything. I mean, except your eyes are green."

"They ain't green, they're gray," I said, reddening. "And I look about as much like Soda as you do." I got to my feet. "He's good-looking."

"Shoot," Johnny said with a grin, "you are, too."

I climbed over the barbed-wire fence without saying anything else. I could hear Johnny laughing at me, but I didn't care. I went strolling down the red dirt road, hoping my natural color would come back before I met anyone. I wonder what Darry and Sodapop are doing now, I thought, yawning. Soda had the whole bed to himself for once. I bet Darry's sorry he ever hit me. He'll really get worried when he finds out Johnny and I killed that Soc. Then, for a moment, I pictured Sodapop's face when he heard about it. I wish I was home, I thought absently, I wish I was home and still in bed. Maybe I am. Maybe I'm just dreaming...

It was only last night that Dally and I had sat down behind those girls at the Nightly Double. Glory, I thought with a bewildering feeling of being rushed, things are happening too quick. Too fast. I figured I couldn't get into any worse trouble than murder. Johnny and I would be hiding for the rest of our lives. Nobody but Dally would know where we were, and he couldn't tell anyone because he'd get jailed again for giving

us that gun. If Johnny got caught, they'd give him the electric chair, and if they caught me, I'd be sent to a reformatory. I'd heard about reformatories from Curly Shepard and I didn't want to go to one at all., So we'd have to be hermits for the rest of our lives, and never see anyone but Dally. Maybe I'd never see Darry or Sodapop again. Or even Two-Bit or Steve. I was in the country, but I knew I wasn't going to like it as much as I'd thought I would. There are things worse than being a greaser.

I met a sunburned farmer driving a tractor down the road. I waved at him and he

Chapter 5

I WOKE UP LATE IN the afternoon. For a second I didn't know where I was. You know how it is, when you wake up in a strange place and wonder where in the world you are, until memory comes rushing over you like a wave. I half convinced myself that I had dreamed everything that had happened the night before. I'm really home in bed, I thought. It's late and both Darry and Sodapop are up. Darry's cooking breakfast, and in a minute he and Soda will come in and drag me out of bed and wrestle me down and tickle me until I think I'll die if they don't stop. It's me and Soda's turn to do the dishes after we eat, and then we'll all go outside and play football. Johnny and Two-Bit and I will get Darry on our side, since Johnny and I are so small and Darry's the best player. It'll go like the usual weekend morning. I tried telling myself that while I lay on the cold rock floor, wrapped up in Dally's jacket and listening to the wind rushing through the trees' dry leaves outside.

Finally I quit pretending and pushed myself up. I was stiff and sore from sleeping on that hard floor, but I had never slept so soundly. I was still groggy. I pushed off Johnny's jeans jacket, which had somehow got thrown across me, and blinked, scratching my head. It was awful quiet, with just the sound of rushing wind in the trees. Suddenly I realized that Johnny wasn't there.

"Johnny?" I called loudly, and that old wooden church echoed me, onny onny... I looked around wildly, almost panic-stricken, but then caught sight of some crooked lettering written in the dust of the floor. Went to get supplies. Be back soon. J.C.7vch had somehow go.Pht

I got tired of watching him do it all, so I started digging into the sack myself. "Wheee!" I sat down on a dusty chair and stared. "A paperback copy of Gone with the Wind! How'd you know I always wanted one?"

Johnny reddened. "I remembered you sayin' something about it once. And me and you went to see that movie, 'member? I thought you could maybe read it out loud and help kill time or something."

"Gee, thanks." I put the book down reluctantly. I wanted to start it right then. "Peroxide? A deck of cards..." Suddenly I realized something. "Johnny, you ain't thinking of..."

Johnny sat down and pulled out his knife. "We're gonna cut our hair, and you're gonna bleach yours." He looked at the ground carefully. "They'll have our descriptions in the paper. We can't fit 'em."

"Oh, no!" My hand flew to my hair. "No, Johnny, not my hair!"

It was my pride. It was long and silky, just like Soda's, only a little redder. Our hair was tuff--- we didn't have to use much grease on it. Our hair labeled us greasers, too-- it was our trademark. The one thing we were proud of. Maybe we couldn't have Corvairs or madras shirts, but we could have hair.

"We'd have to anyway if we got caught. You know the first thing the judge does is make you get a haircut"

"Remember how he was wisecrackin' last night?" I said. "Last night... just last night we were walkin' Cherry and Marcia over to Two-Bit's. Just last night we were layin' in the lot, lookin' up at the stars and dreaming..."

"Stop it!" Johnny gasped from between clenched teeth. "Shut up about last night! I killed a kid last night. He couldn't of been over seventeen or eighteen, and I killed him. How'd you like to live with that?" He was crying. I held him like Soda had held him the day we found him lying in the lot.

"I didn't mean to," he finally blurted out, "but they were drownin' you, and I was so scared..." He was quiet for a minute. "There sure is a lot of blood in people."

He got up suddenly and began pacing back and forth, slapping his pockets.

"Whatta we gonna do?" I was crying by then. It was getting dark and I was cold and lonesome. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back, but the tears came anyway.

"This is my fault," Johnny said in a miserable voice. He had stopped crying when I started. "For bringin' a little thirteen-year-old kid along. You ought to go home. You can't get into any trouble. You didn't kill him."

"No!" I screamed at him. "I'm fourteen! I've been fourteen for a month! And I'm in it as much as you are. I'll stop crying in a minute... I can't help it."

He slumped down beside me. "I didn't mean it like that, Ponyboy. Don't cry, Pony, we'll be okay. Don't cry..." I leaned against him and bawled until I went to sleep.

I woke up late that night. Johnny was resting against the wall and I was asleep on his shoulder. "Johnny?" I yawned. "You awake?" I was warm and sleepy.

"Yeah," he said quietly.

"We ain't gonna cry no more, are we?"

realized that these three appealed to me because they were like the heroes in the novels I read. Dally was real. I liked my books and clouds and sunsets. Dally was so real he scared me.

Johnny and I never went to the front of the church. You could see the front from the road, and sometimes farm kids rode their horses by on their way to the store. So we stayed in the very back, usually sitting on the steps and looking across the valley. We could see for miles; see the ribbon of highway and the small dots that were houses and

*"Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay."*

Johnny was staring at me. "Where'd you learn that? That was what I meant"

"Robert Frost wrote it. He meant more to it than I'm gettin' though." I was trying to find the meaning the poet had in mind, but it eluded me. "I always remembered it because I never quite got what he meant by it"

"You know," Johnny said slowly, "I never noticed colors and clouds and stuff until you kept reminding me about them. It seems like they were never there before." He thought for a minute. "Your family sure is funny."

"And what happens to be so funny about it?" I asked stiffly.

Johnny looked at me quickly. "I didn't mean nothing. I meant, well, Soda kinda looks like your mother did, but he acts just exactly like your father. And Darry is the spittin' image of your father, but he ain't wild and laughing all the time like he was. He acts like your mother. And you don't act like either one."

"I know," I said. "Well," I said, thinking this over, "you ain't like any of the gang. I mean, I couldn't tell Two-Bit or Steve or even Darry about the sunrise and clouds and stuff. I couldn't even remember that poem around them. I mean, they just don't dig. Just you and Sodapop. And maybe Cherry Valance."

Johnny shrugged. "Yeah," he said with a sigh. "I guess we're different."

"Shoot," I said, blowing a perfect smoke ring, "maybe they are."

By the fifth day I was so tired of baloney I nearly got sick every time I looked at it. We had eaten all our candy bars in the first two days. I was dying for a Pepsi. I'm what you might call a Pepsi addict. I drink them like a fiend, and going for five days without one was about to kill me. Johnny promised to get some if we ran out of supplies and had to get some more, but that didn't help me right then. I was smoking a lot more there than I usually did--- I guess ally did

Sodapop Curtis

He could improve his spelling, I thought after reading it through three or four times. "How come you got hauled in?" I asked Dally.

"Shoot, kid"--- he grinned wolfishly--- "them boys at the station know me by now. I get hauled in for everything that happens in our turf. While I was there I kinda let it slip that y'all were headin' for Texas. So that's where they're lookin'."

He took a drag on his cigarette and cussed it goodnaturedly for not being a Kool. Johnny listened in admiration. "You sure can cuss good, Dally."

"Sure can," Dally agreed wholeheartedly, proud of his vocabulary. "But don't you kids get to pickin' up my bad habits."

He gave me a hard rub on the head. "Kid, I swear it don't look like you with your hair all cut off. It used to look tuff. You and Soda had the coolest lookin' hair in town."

"I know," I said sourly. "I look lousy, but don't rub it in."

"Do y'all want somethin' to eat or not?"

Johnny and I leaped up. "You'd better believe it"

"Gee," Johnny said wistfully, "it sure will be good to get into a car again."

"Well," Dally drawled, "I'll give you a ride for your money."

Dally always did like to drive fast, as if he didn't care whether he got where he was going or not, and we came down the red dirt road off Jay Mountain doing eighty-five. I like fast driving and Johnny was crazy about drag races, but we both got a little green around the gills when Dally took a corner on two wheels with the brakes screaming. Maybe it was because we hadn't been in a car for so long.

We stopped at a Dairy Queen and the first thing I got was a Pepsi. Johnny and I gorged on barbecue sandwiches and banana splits.

"Glory," Dallas said, amazed, watching us gulp the stuff down. "You don't need to make like every mouthful's your last. I got plenty of money. Take it easy, I don't want you gettin' sick on me. And I thought I was hungry!"

Johnny merely ate faster. I didn't slow down until I got a headache.

"I didn't tell y'all something," Dally said, finishing his third hamburger. "The Socs and us are having all-out warfare all over the city. That kid you killed had plenty of friends and all over town it's Soc

Chapter

Johnny shook his head but I said, "Dad used to take us all huntin'. I've been in the country before. How'd you know about the church?"

"I got a cousin that lives around here somewheres. Tipped me off that it'd make a tuff hide-out in case of something. Hey, Ponyboy, I heard you was the best shot in the family."

"Yeah," I said. "Darry always got the most ducks, though. Him and Dad. Soda and I goofed around too much, scared most of our game away." I couldn't tell Dally that I hated to shoot things. He'd think I was soft.

"That was a good idea, I mean cuttin' your hair and bleachin' it. They printed your descriptions in the paper but you sure wouldn't fit 'em now."

Johnny had been quietly finishing his fifth barbecue sandwich, but now he announced: 'We're goin' back and turn ourselves in.'

It was Dally's turn to gag. Then he swore awhile. Then he turned to Johnny and

turn hard and tough. Johnny was a good fighter and could play it cool, but he was sensitive and that isn't a good way to be when you're a greaser.

"Blast it, Johnny," Dally growled as we flew along the red road, "why didn't you think of turning yourself in five days ago? It would have saved a lot of trouble."

"I was scared," Johnny said with conviction. "I still am." He ran his finger down one of his short black sideburns. "I guess we ruined our hair for nothing, Ponyboy."

"I guess so." I was glad we were going back. I was sick of that church. I didn't care if I was bald.

Dally was scowling, and from long and painful experience I knew better than to talk to him when his eyes were blazing like that. I'd likely as not get clobbered over the head. That had happened before, just as it had happened to all the gang at one time or another. We rarely fought among ourselves--- Darry was the unofficial leader, since he kept his head best, Soda and Steve had been best friends since grade school and never fought, and Two-Bit was just too lazy to argue with anyone. Johnny kept his mouth shut too much to get into arguments, and nobody ever fought with Johnny. I kept my mouth shut; too. But Dally was a different matter. If something beefed him, he didn't keep quiet about it, and if you rubbed him the wrong way--- look out. Not even Darry wanted to tangle with him. He was dangerous.

Johnny just sat there and stared at his feet. He hated for

I kept staring out the window at the rapidly passing scenery, but I felt my eyes getting round. Dally never talked like that. Never. Dally didn't give a Yankee dime about anyone but himself, and he was cold and hard and mean. He never talked about his past or being in jail that way--- if he talked about it at all, it was to brag. And I suddenly thought of Dally... in jail at the age of ten... Dally growing up in the streets...

"Would you rather have me living in hide-outs for the rest of my life, always on the run?" Johnny asked seriously.

If Dally had said yes, Johnny would have gone back to the church without hesitation. He figured Dally knew more than he did, and Dally's word was law. But he never heard Dally's answer, for we had reached the top of Jay Mountain and Dally suddenly slammed on the brakes and stared. "Oh, glory!" he whispered. The church was on fire!

"Let's go see what the deal is," I said, hopping out.

"What for?" Dally sounded irritated. "Get back in here before I beat your head in."

I knew Dally would have to park the car and catch me before he could carry out his threat, and Johnny was already out and following me, so I figured I was safe. We

About that time a lady came running up. "Jerry, some of the kids are missing."

"They're probably around here somewhere. You can't tell with all this excitement where they might be."

I couldn't laugh because I was scared I'd drown in the smoke. The roar and crackling was getting louder, and Johnny shouted the next question.

"Where's the kids?"

"In the back, I guess," I hollered, and we started stumbling through the church. I should be scared, I thought with an odd detached feeling, but I'm not. The cinders and embers began falling on us, stinging and smarting like ants. Suddenly, in the red glow and the haze, I remembered wondering what it was like in a burning ember, and I thought: Now I know, it's a red hell. Why aren't I scared?

We pushed open the door to the back room and found four or five little kids, about eight years old or younger, huddled in a corner. One was screaming his head off, and Johnny yelled, "Shut up! We're goin' to get you out!" The kid looked surprised and quit hollering. I blinked myself--- Johnny wasn't behaving at all like his old self. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the door was blocked by flames, then pushed open the window and tossed out the nearest kid. I caught one quick look at his face; it was red marked from falling embers and sweat streaked, but he grinned at me. He wasn't scared either. That was the only time I can think of when I saw him without that defeated, suspicious look in his eyes. He looked like he was having the time of his life.

I picked up a kid, and he promptly bit me, but I leaned out, the window and dropped him as gently as I could, being in a hurry like that. A crowd was there by that time. Dally was standing there, and when he saw me he screamed, "For Pete's sake, get outa there! That roofs gonna cave in any minute. Forget those blasted kids!"

I didn't pay any attention, although pieces of the old roof were crashing down too close for comfort. I snatched up another kid, hoping he didn't bite, and dropped him without waiting to see if he landed okay or not. I was coughing so hard I could hardly stand up, and I wished I had time to take off Dally's jacket. It was hot. We dropped the last of the kids out as the front of the church started to crumble. Johnny shoved me toward the window. "Get out!"

I leaped out the window and heard timber crashing and the flames roaring right behind me. I staggered, almost falling, coughing and sobbing for breath. Then I heard Johnny scream, and as I turned to go back for him, Dally swore at me and clubbed me across the back as hard as he could, and I went down into a peaceful darkness.

WHEN I CAME TO, I was being bounced around, and I ached and smarted, and wondered dimly where I was. I tried to think but there was a high-pitched screaming going on, and I couldn't tell whether it was inside my head or out. Then I realized it was a siren. The fuzz, I thought dully. The cops have come for us. I tried to swallow a groan and wished wildly for Soda. Someone with a cold wet rag was gently sponging off my face, and a voice said, "I think he's coming around."

I opened my eyes. It was dark. I'm moving, I thought. Are they taking me to jail?

"Where...?" I said hoarsely, not able to get anything else out of my mouth. My throat was sore. I blinked at the stranger sitting beside me. But he wasn't a stranger... I'd seen him before...

"Take it easy, kid. You're in an ambulance."

"Where's Johnny?" I cried, frightened at being in this car with strangers. "And Dallas?"

"They're in the other ambulance, right behind us. Just calm down. You're going to be okay. You just passed out"

"I didn't either," I said in the bored, tough voice we reserved for strangers and cops. "Dallas hit me. How come?"

"Because your back was in flames, that's why."

I was surprised. "It was? Golly, I didn't feel it. It don't hurt."

"We put it out before you got burned. That jacket saved you from a bad burning, maybe saved your life. You just keeled over from smoke inhalation and a little shock--- of course, that slap on the back didn't help much."

I remembered who he was then--- Jerry somebody-or-other who was too heavy to get in the window. He must be a school teacher, I thought. "Are you taking us to the police station?" I was still a little mixed up as to what was coming off.

"The police station?" It was his turn to be surprised. "What would we want to take you to the police station for? We're taking all three of you to the hospital."

I let his first remark slide by. "Are Johnny and Dally all right?"

"Which one's which?"

"Johnny has black hair. Dally's the mean-looking one."

looking one."

e"

"Greasers. You know, like hoods, JD's. Johnny is wanted for murder, and Dallas has a record with the fuzz a mile long."

"Are you kidding me?" Jerry stared at me as if he thought I was still in shock or something.

"I am not. Take me to town and you'll find out pretty quick."

"We're taking you to a hospital there anyway. The address card in your billfold said that was where you lived. Your name's really Ponyboy?"

"Yeah. Even on my birth certificate. And don't bug me about it. Are..."--- I felt weak--- "are the little kids okay?"

"Just fine. A little frightened maybe. There were some short explosions right after you all got out. Sounded just exactly like gunfire."

Gunfire. There went our gun. And Gone with the Wind. Were we sent from heaven? I started to laugh weakly. I guess that guy knew how close to hysterics I really was, for he talked to me in a low soothing voice all the way to the hospital.

I WAS SITTING in the waiting room, waiting to hear how Dally and Johnny were. I had been checked over, and except for a few burns and a big bruise across my back, I was all right. I had watched them bring Dally and Johnny in on stretchers. Dally's eyes were closed, but when I spoke he had tried to grin and had told me that if I ever did a stupid thing like that again he'd beat the tar out of me. He was still swearing at me when they took him on in. Johnny was unconscious. I had been afraid to look at him, but I was relieved to see that his face wasn't burned. He just looked very pale and still and sort of sick. I would have cried at the sight of him so still except I couldn't in front of people.

Jerry Wood had stayed with me all the time. He kept thanking me for getting the kids out. He didn't seem to mind our being hoods. I told him the whole story--- starting

when Dallas and Johnny and I had met at the corner of Pickett and Sutton. I left out the part about the gun and our hitching a ride in the freight car. He was real nice about it and said that being heroes would help get us out of trouble, especially since it was self-defense and all.

I was sitting there, smoking a cigarette, when Jerry came back in from making a phone call. He stared at me for a second. "You shouldn't be smoking."

I was startled. "How come?" I looked at my cigarette. It looked okay to me. I looked around for a "No Smoking" sign and couldn't find one. "How come?"

"Why, uh," Jerry stammered, "uh, you're too young."

"I am?" I had never thought about it. Everyone in our neighborhood, even the girls, smoked. Except for Darry, who was too proud of his athletic health to risk a cigarette, we had all started smoking at an early age. Johnny had been smoking since he was nine; Steve started at eleven. So no one thought it unusual when I started. I was the weed-fiend in my family--- Soda smokes only to steady his nerves or when he wants to look tough.

Jerry simply sighed, then grinned. "There are some people here to see you. Claim to be your brothers or something."

I leaped up and ran for the door, but it was already open and Soda had me in a bear hug and was swinging me around. I was so glad to see him I could have bawled. Finally he set me down and looked at me. He pushed my hair back. "Oh, Ponyboy, your hair... your tuff, tuff hair..."

Then I saw Darry. He was leaning in the doorway, wearing his olive jeans and black T-shirt. He was still tall, broad-shouldered Darry; but his fists were jammed in his pockets and his eyes were pleading. I simply looked at him. He swallowed and said in a husky voice, "Ponyboy..."

I let go of Soda and stood there for a minute. Darry didn't like me... he had driven me away that night... he had hit me... Darry hollered at me all the time... he didn't give a hang about me.... Suddenly I realized, horrified, that Darry was crying. He didn't make a sound, but tears were running down his cheeks. I hadn't seen him cry in years, not even when Mom and Dad had been killed. (I remembered the funeral. I had sobbed in spite of myself; Soda had broken down and bawled like a baby; but Darry had only stood there, his fists in his pockets and that look on his face, the same helpless, pleading look that he was wearing now.)

In that second what Soda and Dally and Two-Bit had been trying to tell me came through. Darry did care about me, maybe as much as he cared about Soda, and because he cared he was trying too hard to make something of me. When he yelled "Pony, where have you been all this time?" he meant "Pony, you've scared me to death. Please be careful, because I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you."

Darry looked down and turned away silently. Suddenly I broke out of my daze.

"Darry!" I screamed, and the next thing I knew I had him around the waist and was squeezing the daylights out of him.

"Darry," I said, "I'm sorry..."

He was stroking my hair and I could hear the sobs racking him as he fought to keep back the tears. "Oh, Pony, I thought we'd lost you... like we did Mom and Dad..."

That was his silent fear then--- of losing another person he loved. I remembered how close he and Dad had been, and I wondered how I could ever have thought him hard and unfeeling. I listened to his heart pounding through his T-shirt and knew everything was going to be okay now. I had taken the long way around, but I was finally home. To stay.

Chapter 7

NOW THERE WERE three of us sitting in the waiting room waiting to hear how Dally and Johnny were. Then the 59porters and the police came. They asked too many questions too fast, and got me mixed up. If you want to know the truth, I wasn't feeling real good in the first place. Kind of sick, really. And I'm scared of policemen anyway.

One of them turned and asked, "What would you do right now if you could do anything you wanted?"

I looked at him tiredly. "Take a bath."

They thought that was pretty funny, but I meant it. I felt lousy. The hospital got real quiet after they left. The only noise was the nurse's soft footsteps and Soda's light breathing. Darry looked down at him and grinned half-heartedly. "He didn't get much sleep this week," he said softly. "He hardly slept at all."

"Hhhmmmm," Soda said drowsily, "you didn't either."

The nurses wouldn't tell us anything about Johnny and Dally, so Darry got hold of the doctor. The doctor told us that he would talk only to the family, but Darry finally got it through the guy's head that we were about as much family as Dally and Johnny had.

Dally would be okay after two or three days in the hospital, he said. One arm was badly burned and would be scarred for the rest of his life, but he would have full use of it in a couple of weeks. Dally'll be okay, I thought. Dallas is always okay. He could take anything. It was Johnny I was worried about.

He was in critical condition. His back had been broken when that piece of timber fell on him. He was in severe shock and suffering from third-degree burns. They were doing everything they could to ease the pain, although since his back was broken he couldn't even feel the burns below his waist. He kept calling for Dallas and Ponyboy. If he lived... If? Please, no, I thought. Please not "if." The blood was draining from my face and Darry put an arm across my shoulder and squeezed hard.... Even if he lived he'd be crippled for the rest of his life. "You wanted it straight and you got it straight," the doctor said. "Now go home and get some rest."

I was trembling. A pain was growing in my throat and I wanted to cry, but greasers don't cry in front of strangers. Some of us never cry at all. Like Dally and Two-Bit and Tim Shepard--- they forgot how at an early age. Johnny crippled for life? I'm

dreaming, I thought in panic, I'm dreaming. I'll wake up at home or in the church and everything'll be like it used to be. But I didn't believe myself. Even if Johnny did live he'd be crippled and never play football or help us out in a rumble again. He'd have to stay in that house he hated, where he wasn't wanted, and things could never be like they used to be. I didn't trust myself to speak. If I said one word, the hard knot in my throat would swell and I'd be crying in spite of myself.

I took a deep breath and kept my mouth shut. Soda was awake by then, and although he looked stony-faced, as if he hadn't heard a word the doctor had said, his eyes were bleak and stunned. Serious reality has a hard time coming through to Soda, but when it does, it hits him hard. He looked like I felt when I had seen that black-haired Soc lying doubled up and still in the moonlight.

Darry was rubbing the back of my head softly. "We'd better go home. We can't do anything here."

In our Ford I was suddenly overcome by sleepiness. I leaned back and closed my eyes and we were home before I knew it. Soda was shaking me gently. "Hey, Ponyboy, wake up. You still got to get to the house."

"Hmmmmmm," I said sleepily, and lay down in the seat. I couldn't have gotten up to save my life. I could hear Soda and Darry, but as if from a great distance.

"Oh, come on, Ponyboy," Soda pleaded, shaking me a little harder, "we're sleepy, too."

I guess Darry was tired of fooling around, because he picked me up and carried me in.

"He's getting mighty big to be carried," Soda said. I wanted to tell him to shut up and let me sleep but I only yawned.

"He's sure lost a lot of weight," Darry said.

I thought sleepily that I should at least pull off my shoes but I didn't. I went to sleep the minute Darry tossed me on the bed. I'd forgotten how soft a bed really was.

I WAS THE FIRST ONE up the next morning. Soda must have pulled my shoes and shirt off for me; I was still wearing my jeans. He must have been too sleepy to undress himself, though; he lay stretched out beside me fully clothed. I wiggled out from under his arm and pulled the blanket up over him, then went to take a shower. Asleep, he looked a lot younger than going-on-seventeen, but I had noticed that Johnny looked younger when he was asleep, too, so I figured everyone did. Maybe people are younger when they are asleep.

After my shower, I put on some clean clothes and spent five minutes or so hunting for a hint of beard on my face and mourning over my hair. That bum haircut made my ears stick out.

Darry was still asleep when I went into the kitchen to fix breakfast. The first one up has to fix breakfast and the other two do the dishes. That's the rule around our house, and usually it's Darry who fixes breakfast and me and Soda who are left with the dishes. I hunted through the icebox and found some eggs. We all like our eggs done differently. I like them hard, Darry likes them in a bacon-and-tomato sandwich, and Sodapop eats his with grape jelly. All three of us like chocolate cake for breakfast. Mom had never allowed it with ham and eggs, but Darry let Soda and me talk him into it. We really didn't have to twist his arm; Darry loves chocolate cake as much as we do. Sodapop always makes sure there's some in the icebox every night and if there isn't he cooks one up real quick. I like Darry's cakes better; Sodapop always puts too much sugar in the icing. I don't see how he stands jelly and eggs and chocolate cake all at once, but he seems to like it. Darry drinks black coffee, and Sodapop and I drink chocolate milk. We could have coffee if we wanted it, but we like chocolate milk. All three of us are crazy about chocolate stuff. Soda says if they ever make a chocolate cigarette I'll have it made.

"Anybody home?" a familiar voice called through the front screen, and Two-Bit and Steve came in. We always just stick our heads into each other's houses and holler "Hey" and walk in. Our front door is always unlocked in case one of the boys is hacked off at his parents and needs a place to lay over and cool off. We never could tell who we'd find stretched out on the sofa in the morning. It was usually Steve, whose father told him about once a week to get out and never come back. It kind of bugs Steve, even if his old man does give him five or six bucks the next day to make up for it. Or it might be Dally, who lived anywhere he could. Once we even found Tim Shepard, leader of the Shepard gang and far from his own turf, reading the morning paper in the armchair. He merely looked up, said "Hi," and strolled out without staying for breakfast. Two-Bit's mother warned us about burglars, but Darry, flexing his muscles so that they bulged like oversized baseballs, drawled that he wasn't afraid of any burglars, and that we didn't really have anything worth taking. He'd risk a robbery, he said, if it meant keeping one of the boys from blowing up and robbing a gas station or something. So the door was never locked.

"In here!" I yelled, forgetting that Darry and Sodapop were still asleep. "Don't slam the door."

They slammed the door, of course, and Two-Bit came running into the kitchen. He caught me by the upper arms and swung me around, ignoring the fact that I had two uncooked eggs in my hand.

"Hey, Ponyboy," he cried gleefully, "long time no see."

You would have thought it had been five years instead of five days since I'd seen him last, but I didn't mind. I like of Two-Bit; he's a good buddy to have. He spun me into Steve, who gave me a playful slap on my bruised back and shoved me across the room. One of the eggs went flying. It landed on the clock and I tightened my grip on the other one, so that it crushed and ran all over my hand.

"Now look what you did," I griped. "There went our breakfast. Can't you two wait till I set the eggs down before you go shovin' me all over the country?" I really was a

little mad, because I had just realized how long it had been since I'd eaten anything. The last thing I'd eaten was a hot fudge sundae at the Dairy Queen in Windrixville, and I was hungry.

Two-Bit was walking in a slow circle around me, and I sighed because I knew what was coming.

"Man, dig baldy here!" He was staring at my head as he circled me. "I wouldn't have believed it. I thought all the wild Indians in Oklahoma had been tamed. What little squaw's got that tuff-lookin' mop of yours, Ponyboy?"

"Aw, lay off," I said. I wasn't feeling too good in the first place, kind of like I was coming down with something. Two-Bit winked at Steve, and Steve said, "Why, he had to get a haircut to get his picture in the paper. They'd never believe a greasy lookin' mug could be a hero. How do you like bein' a hero, big shot?"

"How do I like what?"

"Being a hero. You know"--- he shoved the morning paper at me impatiently--- "like a big shot, even."

I stared at the newspaper. On the front page of the second section was the headline: JUVENILE DELINQUENTS TURN HEROES.

"What I like is the 'turn' bit," Two-Bit said, cleaning the egg up off the floor. "Y'all were heroes from the beginning. You just didn't 'turn' all of a sudden."

I hardly heard him. I was reading the paper. That whole page was covered with stories about us--- the fight, the murder, the church burning, the Socs being drunk, everything. My picture was there, with Darry and Sodapop. The article told how Johnny and I had risked our lives saving those little kids, and there was a comment from one of the parents, who said that they would all have burned to death if it hadn't been for us. It told the whole story of our fight with the Socs--- only they didn't say "Socs," because most grownups don't know about the battles that go on between us. They had interviewed

Cherry Valance, and she said Bob had been drunk and that the boys had been looking for a fight when they took her home. Bob had told her he'd fix us for picking up his girl. His buddy Randy Adderson, who had helped lump us, also said it was their fault and that we'd only fought back in self-defense. But they were charging Johnny with manslaughter. Then I discovered that I was supposed to appear at juvenile court for running away, and Johnny was too, if he recovered. (Not if, I thought again. Why do they keep saying if?) For once, there weren't any charges against Dally, and I knew he'd be mad because the paper made him out a hero for saving Johnny and didn't say much about his police record, which he was kind of proud of. He'd kill those reporters if he got hold of them. There was another column about just Darry and Soda and me: how Darry worked on two jobs at once and made good at both of them, and about his outstanding record at school; it mentioned Sodapop dropping out of school so we could stay together, and that I made the honor roll at school all the time and might be a future track star. (Oh, yeah, I forgot--- I'm on the A-squad track team, the youngest one. I'm a good runner.) Then it said we shouldn't be separated after we had worked so hard to stay together.

The meaning of that last line finally hit me. "You mean..."--- I swallowed hard--- "that they're thinking about putting me and Soda in a boys' home or something?"

Steve was carefully combing back his hair in complicated swirls. "Somethin' like that"

I sat down in a daze. We couldn't get hauled off now. Not after me and Darry had finally got through to each other, and now that the big rumble was coming up and we would settle this Soc-greaser thing once and for all. Not now, when Johnny needed us and Dally was still in the hospital and wouldn't be out for the rumble.

"No," I said out loud, and Two-Bit, who was scraping the egg off the clock, turned to stare at me.

"No what?"

"No, they ain't goin' to put us in a boys' home."

"Don't worry about it," Steve said, cocksure that he and Sodapop could handle anything that came up. "They don't do things like that to heroes. Where're Soda and Superman?"

That was as far as he got, because Darry, shaved and dressed, came in behind Steve and lifted him up off the floor, then dropped him. We all call Darry "Superman" or "Muscles" at one time or another; but one time Steve made the mistake of referring to him as "all brawn and no brain," and Darry almost shattered Steve's jaw. Steve didn't call him that again, but Darry never forgave him; Darry has never really gotten over not going to college. That was the only time I've ever seen Soda mad at Steve, although Soda attaches no importance to education. School bored him. No action.

Soda came running in. "Where's that blue shirt I washed yesterday?" He took a swig of chocolate milk out of the container.

"You going to take Sandy to the party?" I asked, just to be saying something. Instant silence. I looked around. "What's the deal?"

Sodapop was staring at his feet, but his ears were reddening. "No. She went to live with her grandmother in Florida."

"How come?"

"Look," Steve said, surprisingly angry, "does he have to draw you a picture? It was either that or get married, and her parents almost hit the roof at the idea of her marryin' a sixteen-year-old kid."

"Seventeen," Soda said softly. "I'll be seventeen in a couple of weeks."

"Oh," I said, embarrassed. Soda was no innocent; I had been in on bull sessions and his bragging was as loud as anyone's. But never about Sandy. Not ever about Sandy. I remembered how her blue eyes had glowed when she looked at him, and I was sorry for her.

There was a heavy silence. Then Darry said, "We'd better get on to work, Pepsi-Cola." Darry rarely called Soda by Dad's pet nickname for him, but he did so then because he knew how miserable Sodapop was about Sandy.

"I hate to leave you here by yourself, Ponyboy," Darry said slowly. "Maybe I ought to take the day off."

"I've stayed by my lonesome before. You can't afford a day off."

"Yeah, but you just got back and I really ought to stay..."

"I'll baby-sit him," Two-Bit said, ducking as I took a swing at him. "I haven't got anything better to do."

"Why don't you get a job?" Steve said. "Ever consider working for a living?"

"Work?" Two-Bit was aghast. "And ruin my rep? I wouldn't be baby-sittin' the kid here if I knew of some good day-nursery open on Saturdays."

I pulled his chair over backward and jumped on him, but he had me down in a second. I was kind of short on wind. I've got to cut out smoking or I won't make track next year.

"Holler uncle."

"Nope," I said, struggling, but I didn't have my usual strength.

Darry was pulling on his jacket. "You two do up the dishes. You can go to the movies if you want to before you go see Dally and Johnny." He paused for a second, watching Two-Bit squash the heck out of me. "Two-Bit, lay off. He ain't lookin' so good. Ponyboy, you take a couple of aspirins and go easy. You smoke more than a pack today and I'll skin you. Understood?"

"Yeah," I said, getting to my feet. "You carry more than one bundle of roofing at a time today and me and Soda'll skin you. Understood?"

He grinned one of his rare grins. "Yeah. See y'all this afternoon."

"Bye," I said. I heard our Ford's vvrroooooom and thought: Soda's driving. And they left.

"...anyway, I was walking around downtown and started to take this short cut through an alley"--- Two-Bit was telling me about one of his many exploits while we did the dishes. I mean, while I did the dishes. He was sitting on the cabinet, sharpening that we did (Two)Tjway,artedIrin

"A judo expert?" I suggested.

"No, another social outcast!" Two-Bit yelled, and nearly fell off the cabinet from laughing so hard. I had to grin, too. He saw things straight and made them into something funny.

"We're gonna clean up the house," I said. "The reporters or police or somebody might come by, and anyway, it's time for those guys from the state to come by and check up on us."

"This house ain't messy. You oughtta see my house."

"I have. And if you had the sense of a billy goat you'd try to help around your place instead of bumming around."

"Shoot, kid, if I ever did that my mom would die of shock."

I liked Two-Bit's mother. She had the same good humor and easygoing ways that he did. She wasn't lazy like him, but she let him get away with murder. I don't know, though--- it's just about impossible to get mad at him.

When we had finished, I pulled on Dally's brown leather jacket--- the back was burned black--- and we started for Tenth Street.

"I would drive us," Two-Bit said as we walked up the street trying to thumb a ride, "but the brakes are out on my car. Almost killed me and Kathy the other night" He flipped the collar of his black leather jacket up to serve as a windbreak while he lit a cigarette. "You oughtta see Kathy's brother. Now there's a hood. He's so greasy he glides when he walks. He goes to the barber for an oil change, not a haircut"

I would have laughed, but I had a terrific headache. We stopped at the Tasty Freeze to buy Cokes and rest up, and the blue Mustang that had been trailing us for eight blocks pulled in. I almost decided to run, and Two-Bit must have guessed this, for he shook his head ever so slightly and tossed me a cigarette. As I lit up, the Socs who had

jumped Johnny and me at the park hopped out of the Mustang. I recognized Randy Adderson, Marcia's boyfriend, and the tall guy that had almost drowned me. I hated them. It was their fault Bob was dead; their fault Johnny was dying; their fault Soda and I might get put in a boys' home. I hated them as bitterly and as contemptuously as Dally Winston hated.

Two-Bit put an elbow on my shoulder and leaned against me, dragging on his cigarette. "You know the rules. No jazz before the rumble," he said to the Socs.

"We know," Randy said. He looked at me. "Come here. I want to talk to you."

I glanced at Two-Bit. He shrugged. I followed Randy over to his car, out of earshot of the rest. We sat there in his car for a second, silent. Golly, that was the tuffest car I've ever been in.

"I read about you in the paper," Randy said finally. "How come?"

I don't know. Maybe I felt like playing hero."

"I wouldn't have. I would have let those kids burn to death."

"You might not have. You might have done the same thing."

Randy pulled out a cigarette and pressed in the car lighter. "I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. I would never have believed a greaser could pull something like that."

" 'Greaser' didn't have anything to do with it. My buddy over there wouldn't have done it. Maybe you would have done the same thing, maybe a friend of yours wouldn't have. It's the individual."

"I'm not going to show at the rumble tonight," Randy said slowly.

I took a good look at him. He was seventeen or so, but he was already old. Like Dallas was old. Cherry had said her friends were too cool to feel anything, and yet she

could remember watching sunsets. Randy was supposed to be too cool to feel anything, and yet there was pain in his eyes.

"I'm sick of all this. Sick and tired. Bob was a good guy. He was the best buddy a guy ever had. I mean, he was a good fighter and tuff and everything, but he was a real person too. You dig?"

I nodded.

"He's dead--- his mother has had a nervous breakdown. They spoiled him rotten. I mean, most parents would be proud of a kid like that--- good-lookin' and smart and everything, but they gave in to him all the time. He kept trying to make someone say 'No' and they never did. They never did. That was what he wanted. For somebody to tell him 'No.' To have somebody lay down the law, set the limits, give him something solid to stand on. That's what we all want, really. One time..."--- Randy tried to grin, but I could tell he was close to tears--- "one time he came home drunker than anything. He thought sure they were gonna raise the roof. You know what they did? They thought it was something they'd done. They thought it was their fault--- that they'd failed him and driven him to it or something. They took all the blame and didn't do anything to him. If his old man had just belted him--- just once, he might still be alive. I don't know why I'm telling you this. I couldn't tell anyone else. My friends--- they'd think I was off my rocker or turning soft. Maybe I am. I just know that I'm sick of this whole mess. That kid--- your buddy, the one that got burned--- he might die?"

"Yeah," I said, trying not to think about Johnny.

"And tonight... people get hurt in rumbles, maybe killed. I'm sick of it because it doesn't do any good. You can't win, you know that, don't you?" And when I remained silent he went on: "You can't win, even if you whip us. You'll still be where you were before--- at the bottom. And we'll still be the lucky ones with all the breaks. So it doesn't

"So I'd fight if I thought it'd do any good. I think I'm going to leave town. Take my little old Mustang and all the dough I can carry and get out."

"Running away won't help."

"Oh, hell, I know it," Randy half-sobbed, "but what can I do? I'm marked chicken if I punk out at the rumble, and I'd hate myself if I didn't. I don't know what to do."

"I'd help you if I could," I said. I remembered Cherry's voice: Things are rough all over. I knew then what she meant.

He looked at me. "No, you wouldn't. I'm a Soc. You get a little money and the whole world hates you."

"No," I said, "you hate the whole world."

He just looked at me--- from the way he looked he could have been ten years older than he was. I got out of the car. "You would -3 -1gs ar4 37.dhs2e-kidsa lit of the tes you.s t of (t of (

Tim and Dallas had always been buddies.

"Did you know you got your name in the paper for being a hero?"

Johnny almost grinned as he nodded. "Tuff enough," he managed, and by the way his eyes were glowing, I figured Southern gentlemen had nothing on Johnny Cade.

I could see that even a few words were tiring him out; he was as pale as the pillow and looked awful. Two-Bit pretended not to notice.

"You want anything besides hair grease, kid?"

Johnny barely nodded. "The book"--- he looked at me---

"You'll be okay," I said with fake cheerfulness. "You gotta be. We couldn't get along without you."

The truth of that last statement hit me. We couldn't get along without him. We needed Johnny as much as he needed the gang. And for the same reason.

"I won't be able to walk again," Johnny started, then faltered. "Not even on crutches. Busted my back."

"You'll be okay," I repeated firmly. Don't start crying, I commanded myself, don't start crying, you'll scare Johnny.

"You want to know something, Ponyboy? I'm scared stiff. I used to talk about killing myself..." He drew a quivering breath. "I don't want to die now. It ain't long enough. Sixteen years ain't long enough. I wouldn't mind it so much if there wasn't so much stuff I ain't done yet--- and so many things I ain't seen. It's not fair. You know what? That time we were in Windrixville was the only time I've been away from our neighborhood."

"You ain't gonna die," I said, trying to hold my voice down. "And don't get juiced up, because the doc won't let us see you no more if you do."

Sixteen years on the streets and you can learn a lot. But all the wrong things, not the things you want to learn. Sixteen years on the streets and you see a lot. But all the wrong sights, not the sights you want to see.

Johnny closed his eyes and rested quietly for a minute. Years of living on the East Side teaches you how to shut off your emotions. If you didn't, you would explode. You learn to cool it.

A nurse appeared in the doorway. "Johnny," she said quietly, "your mother's here to see you."

Johnny opened his eyes. At first they were wide with surprise, then they darkened.
"I don't want to see her," he said firmly.

"She's your mother."

"I said I don't want to see her." His voice was rising. "She's probably come to tell me about all the trouble I'm causing her and about how glad her and the old man'll be when I'm dead. Well, tell her to leave me alone. For once" ---

Two-Bit's eyes got narrow and I was afraid he was going to start something. I don't like to hear women get sworn at, even if they deserve it. "No wonder he hates your guts," Two-Bit snapped. He was going to tell her off real good, but I shoved him along. I felt sick. No wonder Johnny didn't want to see her. No wonder he stayed overnight at Two-

much that knife meant to Two-Bit, and if he needed a blade bad enough to ask for it, well, he needed a blade. That was all there was to it. Two-Bit handed it over to Dally without a moment's hesitation.

"We gotta win that fight tonight," Dally said. His voice was hard. "We gotta get even with the Socs. For Johnny."

He put the switch under his pillow and lay back, staring at the ceiling. We left. We knew better than to talk to Dally when his eyes were blazing and he was in a mood like that.

We decided to catch a bus home. I just didn't feel much like walking or trying to hitch a ride. Two-Bit left me sitting on the bench at the bus stop while he went to a gas station to buy some cigarettes. I was kind of sick to my stomach and sort of groggy. I was nearly asleep when I felt someone's hand on my forehead. I almost jumped out of my skin. Two-Bit was looking down at me worriedly. "You feel okay? You're awful hot."

"I'm all right," I said, and when he looked at me as if he didn't believe me, I got a little panicky. "Don't tell Darry, okay? Come on, Two-Bit, be a buddy. I'll be well by tonight. I'll take a bunch of aspirins."

"All right," Two-Bit said reluctantly. "But Darry'll kill me if you're really sick and go ahead and fight anyway."

"I'm okay," I said, getting a little angry. "And if you keep your mouth shut, Darry won't know a thing."

"You know somethin'?" Two-Bit said as we were riding home on the bus. "You'd think you could get away with murder, living with your big brother and all, but Darry's stricter with you than your folks were, ain't he?"

"Yeah," I said, "but they'd raised two boys before me. Darry hasn't."

"You know, the only thing that keeps Darry from bein' a Soc is us."

"I couldn't," she said in a quiet, desperate voice. "He killed Bob. Oh, maybe Bob asked for it. I know he did. But I couldn't ever look at the person who killed him. You only knew his bad side. He could be sweet sometimes, and friendly. But when he got drunk... it was that part of him that beat up Johnny. I knew it was Bob when you told me the story. He was so proud of his rings. Why do people sell liquor to boys? Why? I know there's a law against it, but kids get it anyway. I can't go see Johnny. I know I'm too young to be in love and all that, but Bob was something special. He wasn't just any boy. He had something that made people follow him, something that marked him different, maybe a little better, than the crowd. Do you know what I mean?"

I did. Cherry saw the same things in Dallas. That was why she was afraid to see him, afraid of loving him. I knew what she meant all right. But she also meant she wouldn't go see Johnny because he had killed Bob. "That's okay," I said sharply. It wasn't Johnny's fault Bob was a booze-hound and Cherry went for boys who were bound for trouble. "I wouldn't want you to see him. You're a traitor to your own kind and not loyal

"Thanks, Ponyboy." She smiled through her tears. "You dig okay."

She had green eyes. I went on, walking home slowly.

Chapter 9

IT WAS ALMOST six-thirty when I got home. The rumble was set for seven, so I was late for supper, as usual. I always come in late. I forget what time it is. Darry had cooked dinner: baked chicken and potatoes and corn--- two chickens because all three of us eat like horses. Especially Darry. But although I love baked chicken, I could hardly swallow any. I swallowed five aspirins, though, when Darry and Soda weren't looking. I do that all the time because I can't sleep very well at night. Darry thinks I take just one, but I usually take four. I figured five would keep me going through the rumble and maybe get rid of my headache.

Then I hurried to take a shower and change clothes. Me and Soda and Darry always got spruced up before a rumble. And besides, we wanted to show those Socs we weren't trash, that we were just as good as they were.

"Soda," I called from the bathroom, "when did you start shaving?"

"When I was fifteen," he yelled back.

"When did Darry?"

"When he was thirteen. Why? You figgerin' on growing a beard for the rumble?"

"You're funny. We ought to send you in to the Reader's Digest. I hear they pay a lot for funny things."

Soda laughed and went right on playing poker with Steve in the living room. Darry had on a tight black T-shirt that showed every muscle on his chest and even the flat hard muscles of his stomach. I'd hate to be the Soc who takes a crack at him, I thought as I pulled on a clean T-shirt and a fresh pair of jeans. I wished my T-shirt was tighter--- I have a pretty good build for my size, but I'd lost a lot of weight in Windrixville and it just didn't fit right. It was a chilly night and T-shirts aren't the warmest clothes in the world, but nobody ever gets cold in a rumble, and besides, jackets interfere with your swinging ability.

Soda and Steve and I had put on more hair oil than was necessary, but we wanted to show that we were greasers. Tonight we could be proud of it. Greasers may not have much, but they have a rep. That and long hair. (What kind of world is it where all I have to be proud of is a reputation for being a hood, and greasy hair? I don't want to be a hood, but even if I don't steal things and mug people and get boozed up, I'm marked lousy. Why should I be proud of it? Why should I even pretend to be proud of it?) Darry never went in for the long hair. His was short and clean all the time.

I sat in the armchair in the living room, waiting for the rest of the outfit to show up. But of course, tonight the only one coming would be Two-Bit; Johnny and Dallas wouldn't show. Soda and Steve were playing cards and arguing as usual. Soda was keeping up a steady stream of wisecracks and clowning, and Steve had turned up the radio so loud that it almost broke my eardrums. Of course everybody listens to it loud like that, but it wasn't just the best thing for a headache.

"You like fights, don't you, Soda?" I asked suddenly.

"Yeah, sure." He shrugged. "I like fights."

"How come?"

"I don't know." He looked at me, puzzled. "It's action. It's a contest. Like a drag race or a dance or something."

"Shoot," said Steve, "I want to beat those Socs' heads in. When I get in a fight I want to stomp the other guy good. I like it, too."

"How come you like fights, Darry?" I asked, looking up at him as he stood behind me, leaning in the kitchen doorway. He gave me one of those looks that hide what he's thinking, but Soda piped up: "He likes to show off his muscles."

"I'm gonna show 'em off on you, little buddy, if you get any mouthier."

I digested what Soda had said. It was the truth. Darry liked anything that took strength, like weight lifting or playing football or roofing houses, even if he was proud of being smart too. Darry never said anything about it, but I knew he liked fights. I felt out of things. I'll fight anyone anytime, but I don't like to.

scar on my forefinger. Curly was an average downtown hood, tough and not real bright, but I liked him. He could take anything.

"He's in the cooler," Steve said, kicking the ace out of Soda's shoe. "In the reformatory."

Again? I thought, and said, "Let me fight, Darry. If it was blades or chains or something it'd be different. Nobody ever gets really hurt in a skin rumble."

"Well"--- Darry gave in--- "I guess you can. But be careful, and if you get in a jam, holler and I'll get you out."

"I'll be okay," I said wearily. "How come you never worry about Sodapop as much? I don't see you lecturin' him."

"Man"--- Darry grinned and put his arm across Soda's shoulders--- "this is one kid brother I don't have to worry about"

Soda punched him in the ribs affectionately.

"This kiddo can use his head."

Sodapop looked down at me with mock superiority, but Darry went on: "You can see he uses it for one thing--- to grow hair on." He ducked Soda's swing and took off for the door.

Two-Bit stuck his head in the door just as Darry went flying out of it. Leaping as he went off the steps, Darry turned a somersault in mid-air, hit the ground, and bounced up before Soda could catch him.

"Welup," Two-Bit said cheerfully, cocking an eyebrow, "I see we are in prime condition for a rumble. Is everybody happy?"

"Yeah!" screamed Soda as he too did a flying somersault off the steps. He flipped up to walk on his hands and then did a no-hands cartwheel across the yard to beat Darry's

weeks. But that was the last time I'd ever drink. I'd seen too much of what drinking did for you at Johnny's house.

"Hey, Two-Bit," I said, deciding to complete my survey, "how come you like to fight?"

He looked at me as if I was off my nut. "Shoot, everybody fights."

If everybody jumped in the Arkansas River, ol' Two-Bit would be right on their heels. I had it then. Soda fought for fun, Steve for hatred, Darry for pride, and Two-Bit for conformity. Why do I fight? I thought, and couldn't think of any real good reason. There isn't any real good reason for fighting except self-defense.

"Listen, Soda, you and Ponyboy," Darry said as we strode down the street, "if the fuzz show, you two beat it out of there. The rest of us can only get jailed. You two can get sent to a boys' home."

"Nobody in this neighborhood's going to call the fuzz," Steve said grimly. "They know what'd happen if they did."

"All the same, you two blow at the first sign of trouble. You hear me?"

"You sure don't need an amplifier," Soda said, and stuck out his tongue at the back of Darry's head. I stifled a giggle. If you want to see something funny, it's a tough hood sticking his tongue out at his big brother.

TIM SHEPARD AND company were already waiting when we arrived at the vacant lot, along with a gang from Brumly, one of the suburbs. Tim was a lean, catlike eighteen-year-old who looked like the model JD you see in movies and magazines. He had the right curly black hair, smoldering dark eyes, and a long scar from temple to chin where a tramp had belted him with a broken pop bottle. He had a tough, hard look to him, and his nose had been broken twice. Like Dally's, his smile was grim and bitter. He was one of those who enjoy being a hood. The rest of his bunch were the same way. The boys from Brumly, too. Young hoods--- who would grow up to be old hoods. I'd never thought

about it before, but they'd just get worse as they got older, not better. I looked at Darry. He wasn't going to be any hood when he got old. He was going to get somewhere. Living the way we do would only make him more determined to get somewhere. That's why he's better than the rest of us, I thought. He's going somewhere. And I was going to be like him. I wasn't going to live in a lousy neighborhood all my life.

Tim had the tense, hungry look of an alley cat--- that's what he's always reminded me of, an alley cat--- and he was constantly restless. His boys ranged from fifteen to nineteen, hard-

One of the Brumly guys waved me over. We mostly stuck with our own outfits, so I was a little leery of going over to him, but I shrugged. He asked to borrow a weed, then lit up. "That big guy with y'all, you know him pretty well?"

"I ought to, he's my brother," I said. I couldn't honestly say "Yes." I knew Darry as well as he knew me, and that isn't saying a whole lot.

"No kiddin'? I got a feelin' he's gonna be asked to start the fireworks around here. He a pretty good bopper?"

He meant rumbler. Those Brumly boys have weird vocabularies. I doubt if half of them can read a newspaper or spell much more than their names, and it comes out in their speech. I mean, you take a guy that calls a rumble "bop-action," and you can tell he isn't real educated.

"Yep," I said. "But why him?"

He shrugged. "Why anybody else?"

I looked our outfits over. Most greasers don't have real tuff builds or anything. They're mostly lean and kind of panther-looking in a slouchy way. This is partly because they don't eat much and partly because they're slouchy. Darry looked like he could whip anyone there. I think most of the guys were nervous because of the 'no weapons' rule. I didn't know about the Brumly boys, but I knew Shepard's gang were used to fighting with anything they could get their hands on--- bicycle chains, blades, pop bottles, pieces of pipe, pool sticks, or sometimes even heaters. I mean guns. I have a kind of lousy vocabulary, too, even if I am educated. Our gang never went in for weapons. We're just not that rough. The only weapons we ever used were knives, and shoot, we carried them mostly just for looks. Like Two-Bit with his black-handled switch. None of us had ever really hurt anybody, or wanted to. Just Johnny. And he hadn't wanted to.

"Hey, Curtis!" Tim yelled. I jumped.

"Which one?" I heard Soda yell back.

"The big one. Come on over here."

The guy from Brumly looked at me. "What did I tell ya?"

I watched Darry going toward Tim and the leader of the Brumly boys. He shouldn't be here, I thought suddenly. I shouldn't be here and Steve shouldn't be here and Soda shouldn't be here and Two-Bit shouldn't be here. We're greasers, but not hoods, and we don't belong with this bunch of future convicts. We could end up like them, I thought. We could. And the thought didn't help my headache.

I went back to stand with Soda and Steve and Two-Bit then, because the Socs were arriving. Right on time. They came in four carloads, and filed out silently. I counted twenty-two of them. There were twenty of us, so I figured the odds were as even as we could get them. Darry always liked to take on two at a time anyway. They looked like they were all cut from the same piece of cloth: clean shaven with semi-Beatle haircuts, wearing striped or checkered shirts with light red or tan-colored jackets or madras ski jackets. They could just as easily have been going to the movies as to a rumble. That's why people don't ever think to blame the Socs and are always ready to jump on us. We look hoody and they look decent. It could be just the other way around--- half of the hoods I know are pretty decent guys underneath all that grease, and from what I've heard, a lot of Socs are just cold-blooded mean--- but people usually go by looks.

They lined up silently, facing us, and we lined up facing them. I looked for Randy but didn't see him. I hoped he wasn't there. A guy with a madras shirt stepped up. "Let's get the rules straight--- nothing but our fists, and the first to run lose. Right?"

Tim flipped away his beer can. "You savvy real good."

There was an uneasy silence: Who was going to start it? Darry solved the problem. He stepped forward under the circle of light made by the street lamp. For a minute, everything looked unreal, like a scene out of a JD movie or something. Then Darry said, "I'll take on anyone."

"I was crazy, you know that, kid? Crazy for wantin' Johnny to stay outa trouble, for not wantin' him to get hard. If he'd been like me he'd never have been in this mess. If he'd got smart like me he'd never have run into that church. That's what you get for helpin' people. Editorials in the paper and a lot of trouble.... You'd better wise up, Pony... you get tough like me and you don't get hurt. You look out for yourself and nothin' can touch you..."

He said a lot more stuff, but I didn't get it all. I had a stupid feeling that Dally was out of his mind, the way he kept raving on and on, because Dallas never talked like that, but I think now I would have understood if I hadn't been sick at the time.

The cop left us at the hospital as Dally pretended to help me out of the car. The minute the cop was gone; Dally let go of me so quick I almost fell. "Hurry!"

We ran through the lobby and crowded past people into the elevator. Several people yelled at us, I think because we were pretty racked-up looking, but Dally had nothing on his mind except Johnny, and I was too mixed up to know anything but that I had to follow Dally. When we finally got to Johnny's room, the doctor stopped us. "I'm sorry, boys, but he's dying."

"We gotta see him," Dally said, and flicked out Two-Bit's switchblade. His voice was shaking. "We're gonna see him and if you give me any static you'll end up on your own operatin' table."

The doctor didn't bat an eye. "You can see him, but it's because you're his friends, not because of that knife."

Dally looked at him for a second, then put the knife back in his pocket. We both went into Johnny's room, standing there for a second, getting our breath back in heavy gulps. It was awful quiet. It was scary quiet. I looked at Johnny. He was very still, and for a moment I thought in agony: He's dead already. We're too late.

Dally swallowed, wiping the sweat off his upper lip. "Johnnycake?" he said in a hoarse voice. "Johnny?"

Johnny stirred weakly, then opened his eyes. "Hey," he managed softly.

"We won," Dally panted. "We beat the Socs. We stomped them--- chased them outa our territory."

Johnny didn't even try to grin at him. "Useless... fighting's no good...." He was awful white.

Dally licked his lips nervously. "They're still writing editorials about you in the paper. For being a hero and all." He was talking too fast and too calmly. "Yeah, they're calling you a hero now and heroizin' all the greasers. We're all proud of you, buddy."

Johnny's eyes glowed. Dally was proud of him. That was all Johnny had ever wanted.

"Ponyboy."

I barely heard him. I came closer and leaned over to hear what he was going to say.

"Stay gold, Ponyboy. Stay gold..." The pillow seemed to sink a little, and Johnny died.

You read about people looking peacefully asleep when they're dead, but they

Whirling suddenly, he slammed back against the wall. His face contracted in agony, and sweat streamed down his face.

"Damnit, Johnny..." he begged, slamming one fist against the wall, hammering it to make it obey his will. "Oh, damnit, Johnny, don't die, please don't die..."

He suddenly bolted through the door and down the hall.

Chapter 10

I WALKED DOWN THE hall in a daze. Dally had taken the car and I started the

"Don't worry about it. This wreck's been through worse. What's your address? I'm not about to dump a hurt kid out on the streets this time of night."

I told him. He drove me to my house, and I got out. "Thanks a lot."

What was left of our gang was in the living room. Steve was stretched out on the sofa, his shirt unbuttoned and his side bandaged. His eyes were closed, but when the door shut behind me he opened them, and I suddenly wondered if my own eyes looked as feverish and bewildered as his. Soda had a wide cut on his lip and a bruise across his cheek. There was a Band-Aid over Darry's forehead and he had a black eye. One side of Two-Bits face was taped up--- I found out later he had four stitches in his cheek and seven in his hand where he had busted his knuckles open over a Soc's head. They were lounging around, reading the paper and smoking.

Where's the party? I thought dully. Weren't Soda and Steve planning a party after the rumble? They all looked up when I walked in. Dairy leaped to his feet.

"Where have you been?"

Oh, let's don't start that again, I thought. He stopped suddenly.

"Ponyboy, what's the matter?"

I looked at all of them, a little frightened. "Johnny... he's dead." My voice sounded strange, even to me. But he's not dead, a voice in my head said. "We told him about beatin' the Socs and... I don't know, he just died." He told me to stay gold, I remembered. What was he talking about?

There was a stricken silence. I don't think any of us had realized how bad off Johnny really had been. Soda made a funny noise and looked like he was going to start crying. Two-Bit's eyes were closed and his teeth were clenched, and I suddenly remembered Dally.... Dally pounding on the wall.

"Dallas is gone," I said. "He ran out like the devil was after him. He's gonna blow up. He couldn't take it."

How can I take it? I wondered. Dally is tougher than I am. Why can I take it when Dally can't? And then I knew. Johnny was the only thing Dally loved. And now Johnny was gone.

"So he finally broke." Two-Bit spoke everyone's feelings. "So even Dally has a breaking point."

I started shaking. Darry said something in a low voice to Soda.

"Ponyboy," Soda said softly, like he was talking to an injured animal, "you look sick. Sit down."

I backed up, just like a frightened animal, shaking my head. "I'm okay." I felt sick. I felt as if any minute I was going to fall flat on my face, but I shook my head. "I don't want to sit down."

Darry took a step toward me, but I backed away. "Don't touch me," I said. My heart was pounding in slow thumps, throbbing at the side of my head, and I wondered if everyone else could hear it. Maybe that's why they're all looking at me, I thought, they can hear my heart beating...

The phone rang, and after a moment's hesitation, Darry turned from me to it. He said "Hello" and then listened. He hung up quickly.

"It was Dally. He phoned from a booth. He's, just robbed a grocery store and the cops are after him. We gotta hide him. He'll be at the lot in a minute."

We all left the house at a dead run, even Steve, and I wondered vaguely why no one was doing somersaults off the steps this time. Things were sliding in and out of focus, and it seemed funny to me that I couldn't run in a straight line.

WE REACHED THE vacant lot just as Dally came in, running as hard as he could, from the opposite direction. The wail of a siren grew louder and then police car pulled up across the street from the lot. Doors slammed as the policemen leaped out. Dally had reached the circle of light under the street lamp, and skidding to a halt, he turned and jerked a black object from his waistband. I remembered his voice: I been carryin' a heater. It ain't loaded, but it sure does held a bluff.

It was only yesterday that Dally had told Johnny and me that. But yesterday was years ago. A lifetime ago.

Dally raised the gun, and I thought: You blasted fool. They don't know you're only bluffing. And even as the policemen's guns spit fire into the night I knew that was what Dally wanted. He was jerked half around by the impact of the bullets, then slowly crumpled with a look of grim triumph on his face. He was dead before he hit the ground. But I knew that was what he wanted, even as the lot echoed with the cracks of shots, even as I begged silently--- Please, not him... not him and Johnny both ---I knew he would be dead, because Dally Winston wanted to be dead and he always got what he wanted.

Nobody would write editorials praising Dally. Two friends of mine had died that night: one a hero, the other a hoodlum. But I remembered Dally pulling Johnny through the window of the burning church; Dally giving us his gun, although it could mean jail for him; Dally risking his life for us, trying to keep Johnny out of trouble. And now he was a dead juvenile delinquent and there wouldn't be any editorials in his favor. Dally didn't die a hero. He died violent and young and desperate, just like we all knew he'd die someday. Just like Tim Shepard and Curly Shepard and the Brumly boys and the other guys we knew would die someday. But Johnny was right. He died gallant.

Steve stumbled forward with a sob, but Soda caught him by the shoulders.

"Easy, buddy, easy," I heard him say softly, "there's nothing we can do now."

"You got a concussion from getting kicked in the head--- Soda saw it. He landed all over that Soc. I've never seen him so mad. I think he could have whipped anyone, in the state he was in. Today's Tuesday, and you've been asleep and delirious since Saturday night. Don't you remember?"

"No," I said slowly. "Darry, I'm not ever going to be able to make up the school I've missed. And I've still got to go to court and talk to the police about Bob's getting killed. And now... with Dally..." ---I took a deep breath--- "Darry, do you think they'll split us up? Put me in a home or something?"

He was silent. "I don't know, baby. I just don't know."

I stared at the ceiling. What would it be like, I wondered, staring at a different ceiling? What would it be like in a different bed, in a different room? There was a hard painful lump in my throat that I couldn't swallow.

"Don't you even remember being in the hospital?" Darry asked. He was trying to change the subject.

I shook my head. "I don't remember."

"You kept asking for me and Soda. Sometimes for Mom and Dad, too. But mostly for Soda."

Something in his tone of voice made me look at him. Mostly for Soda. Did I ask for Darry at all, or was he just saying that?

"Darry..." I didn't know quite what I wanted to say. But I had a sick feeling that maybe I hadn't called for him while I was delirious, maybe I had only wanted Sodapop to be with me. What all had I said while I was sick? I couldn't remember. I didn't want to remember.

"Johnny left you his copy of *Gone with the Wind*. Told the nurse he wanted you to have it"

I looked at the paperback lying on the table. I didn't want to finish it. I'd never get past the part where the Southern gentlemen go riding into sure death because they are gallant. Southern gentlemen with big black eyes in blue jeans and T-shirts, Southern gentlemen crumpling under street lights. Don't remember. Don't try to decide which one died gallant. Don't remember.

"Where's Soda?" I asked, and then I could have kicked myself. Why can't you talk to Darry, you idiot? I said to myself. Why do you feel uncomfortable talking to Darry?

"Asleep, I hope. I thought he was going to go to sleep shaving this morning and cut his throat. I had to push him to bed, but he was out like a light in a second."

Darry's hopes that Soda was asleep were immediately ruined, because he came running in, clad only in a pair of blue jeans.

"Hey, Ponyboy!" he yelped, and leaped for me, but Darry caught him.

"No rough stuff, little buddy."

So Soda had to content himself with bouncing up and down on the bed and pounding on my shoulder.

"Gosh, but you were sick. You feel okay now?"

"I'm okay. Just a little hungry."

"I should think you would be," Darry said. "You wouldn't eat anything most of the time you were sick. How'd you like some mushroom soup?"

I suddenly realized just how empty I was. "Man, I'd like that just fine."

"I'll go make some. Sodapop, take it easy with him, okay?"

Soda looked back at him indignantly. "You'd think I was going to challenge him to a track meet or something right off the bat."

"You look beat," I said frankly. "I bet you ain't had three hours sleep since Saturday night."

He grinned but didn't deny it. "Scoot over." He crawled over me and flopped down and before Darry came back in with the soup we were both asleep.

Chapter

"Wanna smoke?" I offered him a weed, but he shook his head. "No, thanks. Uh, Ponyboy, one reason I came here was to see if you were okay, but you--- we--- got to go see the judge tomorrow."

"Yeah," I said, lighting a cigarette. "I know. Hey, holler if you see one of my brothers coming. I'll catch it for smoking in bed."

"My dad says for me to tell the truth and nobody can get hurt. He's kind of upset about all this. I mean, my dad's a good guy and everything, better than most, and I kind of let him down, being mixed up in all this."

I just looked at him. That was the dumbest remark I ever heard anyone make. He thought he was mixed up in this? He didn't kill anyone, he didn't get his head busted in a rumble, it wasn't his buddy that was shot down under a street light. Besides, what did he have to lose? His old man was rich, he could pay whatever fine there was for being drunk and picking a fight.

"I wouldn't mind getting fined," Randy said, "but I feel lousy about the old man. And it's the first time I've felt anything in a long time."

The only thing I'd felt in a long time was being scared. Scared stiff. I'd put off thinking about the judge and the hearing for as long as I could. Soda and Darry didn't like to talk about it either, so we were all silently counting off the days while I was sick, counting the days that we had left together. But with Randy sticking solidly to the subject it was impossible to think about anything else. My cigarette started trembling.

"I guess your folks feel kind of awful about it, too."

"My parents are dead. I live here with just Darry and Soda, my brothers." I took a long drag on my cigarette. "That's what's worrying me. If the judge decides Darry isn't a good guardian or something, I'm liable to get stuck in a home somewhere. That's the rotten part of this deal. Darry is a good guardian; he makes me study and knows where I

am and who I'm with all the time. I mean, we don't get along so great sometimes, but he keeps me out of trouble, or did. My father didn't yell at me as much as he does."

"I didn't know that" Randy looked worried, he really did. A Soc, even, worried because some kid greaser was on his way to a foster home or something. That was really funny. I don't mean funny. You know what I mean.

"Listen to me, Pony. You didn't do anything. It was your friend Johnny that had the knife..."

"I had it" I stopped him. He was looking at me strangely. "I had the knife. I killed Bob."

Randy shook his head. "I saw it. You were almost drowned. It was the black-headed guy that had the switchblade. Bob scared him into doing it. I saw it."

I was bewildered. "I killed him. I had a switchblade and I was scared they were going to beat me up."

"No, kid, it was your friend, the one who died in the hospital..."

"Johnny is not dead." M

I wish I could say that everything went back to normal, but it didn't. Especially me. I started running into things, like the door, and kept tripping over the coffee table and losing things. I always have been kind of absent-minded, but man, then, I was lucky if I got home from school with the right notebook and with both shoes on. I walked all the way home once in my stocking feet and didn't even notice it until Steve made some bright remark about it. I guess I'd left my shoes in the locker room at school, but I never did find them. And another thing, I quit eating. I used to eat like a horse, but all of a sudden I wasn't hungry. Everything tasted like baloney. I was lousing up my schoolwork, too. I didn't do too badly in math, because Darry checked over my homework in that and usually caught all my mistakes and made me do it again, but in English I really washed out. I used to make A's in English, mostly because my teacher made us do compositions all the time. I mean, I know I don't talk good English (Have you ever seen a hood that did?), but I can write it good when I try. At least, I could before. Now I was lucky to get a D on a composition.

It bothered my English teacher, the way I was goofing up, I mean. He's a real good guy, who makes us think, and you can tell he's interested in you as a person, too. One day he told me to stay in after the rest of the class left.

"Ponyboy, I'd like to talk to you about your grades."

Man, I wished I could beat it out of there. I knew I was flunking out in that class, but golly, I couldn't help it.

"There's not much to talk about, judging from your scores. Pony, I'll give it to you straight. You're failing this class right now, but taking into consideration the circumstances, if you come up with a good semester theme, I'll pass you with a C grade."

"Taking into consideration the circumstances" ---brother, was that ever a way to tell me he knew I was goofing up because I'd been in a lot of trouble. At least that was a roundabout way of putting it. The first week of school after the hearing had been awful. People I knew wouldn't talk to me, and people I didn't know would come right up and ask about the whole mess. Sometimes even teachers. And my history teacher--- she acted as

away from myself, in a loose but firm hold. I guess they knew I meant business, because they got into their car and drove off.

"You really would have used that bottle, wouldn't you?" Two-Bit had been watching from the store doorway. "Steve and me were backing you, but I guess we didn't need to. You'd have really cut them up, huh?"

"I guess so," I said with a sigh. I didn't see what Two-Bit was sweating about--- anyone else could have done the same thing and Two-Bit wouldn't have thought about it twice.

"Hey, did the mail come in yet?" Soda slammed the door and yelled for the mail, just the way he does every day when he comes home from work. I was in the bedroom, but I knew he would throw his jacket toward the sofa and miss it, take off his shoes, and go into the kitchen for a glass of chocolate milk, because that's what he does every day of his life. He always runs around in his stocking feet--- he doesn't like shoes.

Then he did a funny thing. He came in and flopped down on the bed and started smoking a cigarette. He hardly ever smokes, except when something is really bugging him or when he wants to look tough. And he doesn't have to impress us; we know he's tough. So I figured something was bothering him. "How was work?"

"Okay."

"Something wrong?"

He shook his head. I shrugged and went back to drawing horses.

"You're not going to drop out. Listen, with your brains and grades you could get a scholarship, and we could put you through college. But schoolwork's not the point. You're living in a vacuum, Pony, and you're going to have to cut it out. Johnny and Dallas were our buddies, too, but you don't just stop living because you lose someone. I thought you knew that by now. You don't quit! And anytime you don't like the way I'm running things you can get out."

"Maybe he tried," I said. How many times had Soda started to tell me something, only to find I was daydreaming or stuck in a book? He would always listen to me, no matter what he was doing.

"He cried every night that week you were gone," Darry said slowly. "Both you and Sandy in the same week." He put the envelope down. "Come on, let's go after him."

We chased him clear to the park. We were gaining on him, but he had a block's head start.

"Circle around and cut him off," Darry ordered. Even out of condition I was the best runner. "I'll stay right behind him."

I headed through the trees and cut him off halfway across the park. He veered off to the right, but I caught him in a flying tackle before he'd gone more than a couple of steps. It knocked the wind out of both of us. We lay there gasping for a minute or two, and then Soda sat up and brushed the grass off his shirt.

"You should have gone out for football instead of track."

"Where did you think you were going?" I lay flat on my back and looked at him. Darry came up and dropped down beside us.

Soda shrugged. "I don't know. It's just... I can't stand to hear y'all fight. Sometimes... I just have to get out or... it's like I'm the middleman in a tug o' war and I'm being split in half. You dig?"

Darry gave me a startled look. Neither of us had realized what it was doing to Soda to hear us fight. I was sick and cold with shame. What he said was the truth. Darry and I did play tug of war with him, with never a thought to how much it was hurting him.

Soda was fiddling with some dead grass. "I mean, I can't take sides. It'd be a lot easier if I could, but I see both sides. Darry yells too much and tries too hard and takes everything too serious, and Ponyboy, you don't think enough, you don't realize all Darry's

giving up just to give you a chance he missed out on. He could have stuck you in a home somewhere and worked his way through college. Ponyboy, I'm telling you the truth. I dropped out because I'm dumb. I really did try in school, but you saw my grades. Look, I'm happy working in a gas station with cars. You'd never be happy doing something like that. And Darry, you ought to try to understand him more, and quit bugging him about every little mistake he makes. He feels things differently than you do." He gave us a pleading look. "Golly, you two, it's bad enough having to listen to it, but when you start trying to get me to take sides..." Tears welled up in his eyes. "We're all we've got left. We

"Well," Soda said, "I'm cold. How about going home?"

"Race you," I challenged, leaping up. It was a real nice night for a race. The air was clear and cold and so clean it almost sparkled. The moon wasn't out but the stars lit up everything. It was quiet except for the sound of our feet on the cement and the dry, scraping sound of leaves blowing across the street. It was a real nice night. I guess I was still out of shape, because we all three tied. No. I guess we all just wanted to stay together.

I still didn't want to do my homework that night, though. I hunted around for a book to read, but I'd read everything in the house about fifty million times, even Darry's copy of *The Carpetbaggers*, though he'd told me I wasn't old enough to read it. I thought so too after I finished it. Finally I picked up *Gone with the Wind* and looked at it for a long time. I knew Johnny was dead. I had known it all the time, even while I was sick and pretending he wasn't. It was Johnny, not me, who had killed Bob ---I knew that too. I had just thought that maybe if I played like Johnny wasn't dead it wouldn't hurt so much. The way Two-Bit, after the police had taken Dally's body away, had griped because he had lost his switchblade when they searched Dallas,

"Is that all that's bothering you, that switchblade?" a red-eyed Steve had snapped at him.

"No," Two-Bit had said with a quivering sigh, "but that's what I'm wishing was all that's bothering me."

But it still hurt anyway. You know a guy a long time, and I mean really know him, you don't get used to the idea that he's dead just overnight. Johnny was something more than a buddy to all of us. I guess he had listened to more beefs and more problems from more people than any of us. A guy that'll really listen to you, listen and care about what you're saying, is something rare. And I couldn't forget him telling me that he hadn't done enough, hadn't been out of our neighborhood all his life--- and then it was too late. I took a deep breath and opened the book. A slip of paper fell out on the floor and I picked it up.

Ponyboy, I asked the nurse to give you this book so you could finish it. It was Johnny's handwriting. I went on reading, almost hearing Johnny's quiet voice. The doctor came in a while ago but I knew anyway. I keep getting tired and tired. Listen, I don't mind dying now. It's worth it. It's worth saving those kids. Their lives are worth more than mine, they have more to live for. Some of their parents came by to thank me and I know it was worth it. Tell Dally it's worth it. I'm just going to miss you guys. I've been thinking about it, and that poem, that guy that wrote it, he meant you're gold when you're a kid, like green. When you're a kid everything's new, dawn. It's just when you get used to everything that it's day. Like the way you dig sunsets, Pony. That's gold. Keep that way, it's a good way to be. I want you to tell Dally to look at one. He'll probably think you're crazy, but ask for me. I don't think he's ever really seen a sunset. And don't be so bugged over being a greaser. You still have a lot of time to make yourself be what you want. There's still lots of good in the world. Tell Dally. I don't think he knows. Your buddy, Johnny.

Tell Dally. It was too late to tell Dally. Would he have listened? I doubted it. Suddenly it wasn't only a personal thing to me. I could picture hundreds and hundreds of boys living on the wrong sides of cities, boys with black eyes who jumped at their own shadows. Hundreds of boys who maybe watched sunsets and looked at stars and ached for something better. I could see boys going down under street lights because they were mean and tough and hated the world, and it was too late to tell them that there was still good in it, and they wouldn't believe you if you did. It was too vast a problem to be just a personal thing. There should be some help, someone should tell them before it was too late. Someone should tell their side of the story, and maybe people would understand then and wouldn't be so quick to judge a boy by the amount of hair oil he wore. It was important to me. I picked up the phone book and called my English teacher.

"Mr. Syme, this is Ponyboy. That theme--- how long can it be?"

"Why, uh, not less than five pages." He sounded a little surprised. I'd forgotten it was late at night.

"Can it be longer?"

"Certainly, Ponyboy, as long as you want it."

"Thanks," I said and hung up.

I sat down and picked up my pen and thought for a minute. Remembering. Remembering a handsome, dark boy with a reckless grin and a hot temper. A tough, tow-headed boy with a cigarette in his mouth and a bitter grin on his hard face. Remembering-- and this time it didn't hurt--- a quiet, defeated-looking sixteen-year-old whose hair needed cutting badly and who had black eyes with a frightened expression to them. One week had taken all three of them. And I decided I could tell people, beginning with my English teacher. I wondered for a long time how to start that theme, how to start writing about something that was important to me. And I finally began like this: When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the darkness of the movie house, I had only two things on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home...