

The first time Mom knew anything about Mark being hurt was when we visited her in the hospital and she saw the stitches in his head. They were real noticeable against his gold hair. She just said, “How did that happen?” And Mark answered, “Fight,” and the subject was dropped. That was a good thing about Mom—she’d cry over a dog with a piece of glass in his paw but remained unhysterical when we came home clobbered. About fights, she’d say, “Don’t fight at school, you’ll get expelled.” About drinking, “I’d rather you didn’t,” so around her we didn’t. She didn’t know about some of the rest of the stuff we did—the pool games, the poker, the gang fights, the dry river-bed parties—but in that respect she wasn’t any different from any other mother. Parents never know what all their kids do. Not in the old days, not now, not tomorrow. It’s a law.

We stopped in to see that kid Mike, the one who’d been beaten up so bad. He looked worse than he had before; he said his old man had been in and chewed him out. The doctor had promised him that his father wouldn’t be allowed to come to see him any more, but he was still shook.

He looked like a nervous wreck as well as a physical one. “I wish I was dead—or somebody else,” he said. You just don’t say things like that. I didn’t

stay long; things like that depress me. Mark stayed on to see if he could cheer up Mike. I wanted to go to the snack bar and see Cathy anyway.

She looked as cute as ever. She said, “Hi, Bryon,” not too eager but friendly enough. I had called her a few times in the last couple of weeks and walked to her house to see her, but we hadn’t been out. I didn’t have a car and Charlie was still so mad about getting his draft notice that I didn’t have the nerve to ask him for his car again. As a matter of fact, he was in such a rotten mood that I stayed away from his place altogether. We were friends, and I didn’t think he’d ever take his temper out on me, but with big guys, it’s safer to be careful.

“I’m on my break now,” Cathy said, looking at the clock. This was an invitation for me to buy her a soda, so I said obligingly, “Want a Coke?”

“I knew you’d say that,” Cathy said. She came around to my side of the counter and sat down next to me. I never could get over her honesty. Girls are usually careful not to let you know what they’re thinking. Cathy hadn’t dated before, maybe that was why she was so open. She didn’t tell me that about not dating, of course. I found out from M&M. I found out a lot of things from M&M. I have never known anyone so unsuspicious as that little kid. He’d trust Jack the Ripper. He was a believer.

I kept comparing Cathy to Angela, I guess because out of all the girls I’ve dated—I started at thirteen—they were the two I liked best. I don’t know if “like” is the right word for how I felt about Angela. I had been wrapped up in her, I had to see her every day, I had to talk to her ten times a day on the phone; but now, looking back on it, I don’t remember ever liking her. Cathy was smart, but Angela knew more. That was strange. They both had guts—I can’t stand

chicken girls—but in different ways. Cathy wasn't afraid to say what she thought; Angela wasn't afraid to do what she wanted. Angela wasn't afraid of any boy on earth; Cathy wasn't afraid of any other girl. They were both gutsy in different ways.

My main problem with Cathy was that she liked me—and I wanted her to be crazy about me. I'm like that. I have a very bad ego hang up.

"Guess who called me?" Cathy said. "Ponyboy Curtis. He wanted to go out Friday night."

"No kiddin'," I said, while thinking, I'll murder that guy. "What'd you tell him?"

"I said I was busy. Am I?"

I was stunned again but didn't show it. "You are. I'll pick you up at seven." I had no idea what I was going to pick her up in, or where we'd go after I did pick her up, but I figured I could work that out later.

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"We're goin' hustlin'," I told Mark as we walked home, trying to hitch a ride. This time no friendly hippie showed up to give us a lift.

"O.K."

"Tonight—for money."

"You'll need some money to get started with," Mark said, lighting a cigarette.

"I'll get it."

We ran into M&M at the drugstore, and as usual he was chomping on that crazy candy. At least he wasn't staring into the bag like it contained the eighth wonder of the world.

"I need some money," I said, deciding not to beat around the bush. "You got any?"

He looked at me with those serious, war-orphan eyes. "I got five dollars," he said. "I raked some lawns to get it."

I used to think he and Cathy looked an awful lot alike, but not any more. Sure, they both had those big charcoal eyes and matching hair, but Cathy laughed more, her expression usually twinkled with humor. M&M rarely smiled, and he always looked puzzled, serious, and trusting.

"That's a good deal. Can you loan it to me? Just for tonight. I'll pay you back tomorrow."

He pulled out his billfold and took all the money out of it. "Be sure not to forget to give it back tomorrow. I need it. O.K.?"

"Kid, have I ever given you a dirty deal?" I said, winking at Mark.

"No," M&M said, and went back to his magazine. I never could figure that kid out. I liked him though, partly because he was Cathy's brother, partly because he was a good kid, and partly because he had lived to a nice old age in our neighborhood—for a sucker.

Mark had given him back his peace symbol. It hung around his neck on the rawhide string, and M&M kept twisting it absent-mindedly. I wondered if his father still gave him a bad time because of his hair.

We decided to hit Charlie's place first. Charlie grinned and waved at us when we came in, so I figured he was over his bad mood about being drafted.

"Guess what?" he said, just like a kid. It was the first time I'd ever seen him act like a kid. "They're not goin' to take me."

"How come?" Mark asked, plopping down at the bar. "Bad knee from playing football?"

Charlie shook his head. "Naw, because of my police record."

"You got a record?" I said. "I didn't know that. What'dya do?"

"When I was twelve years old I cut a guy's throat. You in here to play pool?"

I still don't know if Charlie was telling the truth or just kidding us, sort of telling us that it was none of our business what his police record was for. Either was possible.

"Yeah, we're here to play pool. Any possibilities?"

Charlie nodded toward the poolroom. "There's a couple of guys in there. I watched them a little; you can take them."

"Good enough," I said, sliding off the stool.

"Hey, wait a minute," Charlie said. We turned. "Would it do any good to tell you to be careful?"

"Nope," said Mark bluntly.

Charlie kind of laughed and sighed at the same time. "I didn't think so."

We played pool until twelve o'clock that night. The two guys we played against were tough characters, out-of-towners from Texas. At first we played partners, me and Mark losing by a couple of balls. Then Mark started his routine

about wanting to go home—"Come on, Bryon, you lost all the money you can spare"—while I played the eager kid—"I know I can win the next game." Then we played singles. I played the better of the two, a weather-beaten guy in his twenties who looked like an ex-con; for all I know he was. I don't know where else he could have picked up his lingo, because he used the worst language I've ever heard, and I've heard plenty.

I was careful not to win at first, and then, when I did start winning, I only made it by a few balls so it'd look like an accident. But once I started winning I didn't quit. By midnight I had twenty-five dollars and fifty cents.

"You're a darn good pool player," Dirty Dave said—he'd told us that was his name—or words to that effect. His friend, who had been standing around drinking beer for the last three hours, mumbled something about being "too good for his own good," but Dirty Dave shut him up.

"Closing time," Charlie said. He didn't have any other customers but us by that time; he had been watching the game for the last hour and a half.

"We're leavin'." Mark was sitting on the table of a booth and drinking a beer. I don't know where he got it, and from the surprised look Charlie gave him, Charlie didn't know where he got it either.

"See ya 'round, kids," the Texans said as they sauntered out. I was busy counting my money and Mark was stretching his legs.

"So the hustler strikes again," Charlie said. "How much did ya get?"

"Enough. Can I borrow your car again some time?"

"I guess so, just as long as you buy gas. Come on, beat it. I got some work to do. Next time you sneak a beer, Golden Boy, you're going to get stomped on."

"I didn't sneak nothing. I simply walked over and drew a beer. I can't help it if you didn't see it. I left a quarter on the cash register."

"You are good at bein' invisible, man, because anybody gets within ten feet of that cash register, I know it."

"You're gettin' blind in your old age," Mark said, apparently not caring if he got stomped on or not. I gave him a warning look, and he obediently shut up. I wasn't taking any chances—we left as soon as we could.

We didn't get far. Two dark shapes stepped out of the alley next to Charlie's and a voice drawled, "Step right into the alley, kiddies."

I froze, because the voice was Dirty Dave's. I thought about making a run for it, but the voice said, "I gotta gun," so I decided not to. I still didn't move. Mark suddenly said, "We don't want to see the alley, we seen it before," and he sounded like he was trying not to laugh.

"We're gonna give you a lesson on why not to hustle pool. Just step into the alley. Now."

I glanced at Mark over my shoulder. He shrugged, like he was saying "What else can we do?" So we walked past the Texans into the alley. I was beginning to shake. I was having visions of my thumbs being chopped off or my arms being broken—things like that happen to hustlers. When we reached the dead end of the alley, we turned and faced the Texans—the one guy was holding a gun on us while Dirty Dave was putting on some brass knuckles. I could just picture what my face was going to look like when he got through with me. I suddenly remembered Mark, who hadn't done anything but get me started. "Let

Mark go," I said, and my voice was steady. I was surprised—I thought it would be shaking as bad as I was. "He didn't do nothin'."

Mark said quietly, "I'm not goin' anywhere," and Dave said, "You'd better believe it. You were settin' him up, and when I get through with hustler here, I'm goin' to give you a lesson too."

"Brass knuckles, guns, or whatever," Mark said in a voice I couldn't even recognize as Mark's, "you'll know you been in a fight if you tangle with me."

"I'm really scared, kid," he said. My eyes were used to the dim light by now; I could see past the Texans into the street. I was praying for a police car, something I never thought I'd ever do. Dave took a step toward me. I backed up against the alley wall. I was afraid that if I moved to grab up something to fight with, the other guy would shoot me.

Just at that moment somebody stepped into the other end of the alley and a voice said, "Drop the gun and freeze—I got a sawed-off shotgun here and I'd hate to scatter dirt all over this nice clean alley."

It was Charlie. I never thought I'd be so glad to see anyone.

"Bryon, Mark, come on out of there."

We couldn't resist smirking a little as we walked past the Texans. Even in the dark I could see the anger contorting their faces. It should have warned me, but it didn't.

"Thanks, Charlie," Mark said as we reached him. "You're a real pal."

"I hope you two learned something from this," Charlie began, but before we knew what was happening one of the Texans made a dive for the gun and fired at us. Charlie slammed both of us to the ground, but in an instant Mark freed

himself, grabbed up the shotgun Charlie had dropped, and fired back at the Texans, who were scrambling over the alley wall. It all happened so quickly that I was trying to figure out what I was doing on the ground with my ears ringing from the blast before I realized what had taken place.

Mark was swearing and in the dim light he didn't even look like Mark. He looked perfectly capable of murder; his only regret was that he had missed. I didn't have any similar regrets; if he had missed, well, so had they. You can't feel too bad when you could have been dead but aren't.

"You can get off me now, Charlie," I said. Charlie didn't move. I rolled out from under him. "Hey, man, come on," I said. Then, in the white, sickly light from the street lights I saw that there was a neat, perfect hole above Charlie's left eye. He was dead.

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I wouldn't talk about what had happened to anyone but Cathy and Mark. The next few weeks it seemed as if I was moving in slow motion while other people were speeded up. Mom came home from the hospital and I flunked chemistry and Angela got married to some creep friend of her brother's. I called Cathy every day. Mark was the one who explained everything to the police. The police were very impressed with Charlie's having saved our lives and all that. They were local cops who had known and liked him anyway. They told us we could have his car. I took it because I figured he would have given it to us if he had had the time.

I guess I was acting pretty strange during those weeks because one day Mark said, "Lookit, man, Charlie knew what kind of people came into his bar—why do you think he kept a shotgun handy? He knew those cowboys had a gun, he knew what kind of a chance he was taking."

"He told us to be careful," I said. I couldn't get it out of my mind, Charlie's warning us about hustling. "He didn't have to try to get us off the hook. Mark—can't you see? This ain't some story, some TV show, bang! you're dead, big deal. This is the real thing. Charlie is dead! He was all set for life, he wasn't gonna get drafted, he had his business, he was all set, and then we blew it for him."

"We didn't blow nothing, Bryon. Things happen, that's all there is to it."

"Not things like that," I said.

Mark didn't understand and Cathy did. I started spending more and more time with Cathy. Since I had the car, we went for a lot of drives and got a lot of Cokes together. We were always talking to each other about the way we felt—I tried telling her how I felt about Charlie, about how shook the whole thing had me. She told me about herself, about how she wanted to go to college more than anything, about how she worried about M&M, and about life in a big family, something I wasn't familiar with. She was so smart, yet she didn't know a lot of things. She was one of the few really innocent chicks I had ever run into. But I could talk to her about anything, talk to her better than I could anyone, even Mark.

After a few weeks we'd drive by the park and make out for a little while. It was different for me though, because I had quit thinking only about myself, quit pushing for all I could get.

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Mark was acting strange these days, too. He would stare at me for long periods of time when he thought I wasn't watching, like he was trying to find the old Bryon in this stranger, like he was trying to figure out who I was. One night he even almost lost his temper with me when I told him I was going goofing around with Cathy instead of with him. It was as if he felt something slipping and was trying to hang on. I couldn't help him; I was trying to hang on myself.

He even acted like he was jealous of Cathy. In all the years I'd known him, in all the years I'd gone with different girls, he had never acted like that.

I was changing and he wasn't.