

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 the first time that evening that all I had was a pair of jeans and Soda's old navy sweat shirt with the sleeves cut short. I swallowed. Two-Bit started to tuck in his shirttail, but stopped himself in time; he just flipped up the collar of his black leather jacket and lit a cigarette. The Socs didn't even seem to see us.

"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.

We walked on home, mostly in silence. I wanted to ask Johnny if those were the same Socs that had beaten him up, but I didn't mention it. Johnny never talked about it and we never said anything.

"Well, those were two good-lookin' girls if I ever saw any." Two-Bit yawned as we sat down on the curb at the vacant lot. He took a piece of paper out of his pocket and tore it up.

"What was that?"

"Marcia's number. Probably a phony one, too. I must have been outa my mind to ask for it. I think I'm a little soused."

So he had been drinking. Two-Bit was smart. He knew the score. "Y'all goin' home?" he asked.

"Not right now," I said. I wanted to have another smoke and to watch the stars. I had to be in by twelve, but I thought I had plenty of time.

"I don't know why I handed you that busted bottle," Two-Bit said, getting to his feet. "You'd never use it."

"Maybe I would have," I said. "Where you headed?"

"Gonna go play a little snooker and hunt up a poker game. Maybe get rip-roarin' drunk. I dunno. See y'all tomorrow."

Johnny and I stretched out on our backs and looked at the stars. I was freezing--- it was a cold night and all I had was that sweat shirt, but I could watch stars in sub-zero weather. I saw Johnny's cigarette glowing in the dark and wondered vaguely what it was like inside a burning ember...

"It was because we're greasers," Johnny said, and I knew he was talking about Cherry. "We could have hurt her reputation."

"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 fair for the Socs to have everything. We were as good as they were; it wasn't our fault we were greasers. I couldn't just take it or leave it, like Two-Bit, or ignore it and love life anyway, like Sodapop, or harden myself beyond caring, like Dally, or actually enjoy it, like Tim Shepard. I felt the tension growing inside of me and I knew something had to happen or I would explode.

"I can't take much more." Johnny spoke my own feelings. "I'll kill myself or something."

"Don't," I said, sitting up in alarm. "You can't kill yourself, Johnny."

"Well, I won't. But I gotta do something. It seems like there's gotta be someplace without greasers or Socs, with just people. Plain ordinary people."

"Out of the big towns," I said, lying back down. "In the country..."

In the country... I loved the country. I wanted to be out of towns and away from excitement. I only wanted to lie on my back under a tree and read a book or draw a picture, and not worry about being jumped or carrying a blade or ending up married to some scatterbrained broad with no sense. The country would be like that, I thought dreamily. I would have a yeller cur dog, like I used to, and Sodapop could get Mickey Mouse back and ride in all the rodeos he wanted to, and Darry would lose that cold, hard look and be like he used to be, eight months ago, before Mom and Dad were killed. Since I was dreaming I brought Mom and Dad back to life... Mom could bake some more chocolate cakes and Dad would drive the pickup out early to feed the cattle. He would slap Darry on the back and tell him he was getting to be a man, a regular chip off the block, and they would be as close as they used to be. Maybe Johnny could come and live

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.