

S.E. HINTON

**that was then,
this is now**



BONUS MATERIAL INSIDE

THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

I looked across the street, watching some little twelve- and thirteen-year-old teenyboppers make fools of themselves—smoking, trying to act cool, pushing each other, screaming and swearing so loud I could hear them. I had a sudden recollection of Mark and me at twelve, smoking our heads off, clowning around, hoping someone—usually some little long-haired chick—would notice us and see how cool we were. All of a sudden it seemed like I was a hundred years old, or thirty at least. I wondered if, when I got to be twenty, I would think how stupid I was at sixteen. When I remembered us, it didn't seem possible that we had looked as silly as these teenyboppers, but I guess we had. At least then we weren't worried about looking silly. We were sure of ourselves, so sure we were the coolest things to hit town. Now I wasn't so sure.

“This one will be popular with *The Outsiders*' many fans.”

—*Kirkus Review*

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—*Publishers Weekly*

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The Outsiders

The Puppy Sister

Rumble Fish

Some of Tim's Stories

Tex

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Speak

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SPEAK

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1

Mark and me went down to the bar/pool hall about two or three blocks from where we lived with the sole intention of making some money. We'd done that before. I was a really good pool player, especially for being just sixteen years old, and, what's more, I look like a baby-faced kid who wouldn't know one ball from another. This, and the way Mark set me up, helped me hustle a lot of pool games. The bad deal is, it's against the law to be in this pool hall if you're under age, because of the adjoining bar. The good deal is, the bartender and owner was a good friend of mine, being the older brother of this chick I used to like. When this chick and me broke up, I still stayed friends with her brother, which is unusual in cases like that. Charlie, the bartender, was just twenty-two, but he had a tough reputation and kept order real good. We lived in kind of a rough part of town and some pretty wild things went on in Charlie's Bar.

I looked around for a plainclothes cop when we went in—I can always tell a cop—but didn't find one, so I went up to the bar and hopped on a barstool

"Give me a beer," I said, and Charlie, who was cleaning glasses just like every bartender you ever see, gave me a dirty look instead. "O.K.," I said brightly, "a Coke."

"Your credit ain't so hot, Bryon," Charlie said. "You got cash?"

"A dime—for cryin' out loud! Can't you let me charge a dime Coke?"

"Cokes are fifteen cents, and you already got three dollars worth of Cokes charged here, and if you don't pay up this month I'll have to beat it out of you." He said this real friendly-like, but he meant it. We were friends, but Charlie was a businessman too.

"I'll pay up," I assured him. "Don't worry."

Charlie gave me a lopsided grin. "I ain't worried, kid. You're the one who should be worried."

I was, to tell the truth. Charlie was a big, tough guy so a three-dollar beating up was something to worry about.

"Hey, Mark," Charlie called, "there ain't nobody here to hustle."

Mark, who had been scouting out the two guys playing pool, came up and sat down next to me. "Yeah, that's the truth."

"It's just as well," Charlie said. "You guys are going to get in real bad trouble one of these days. Some guy's going to get hacked off when he finds out what you're doin', and you're gonna get a pool stick rammed down your throats."

"No we ain't," Mark said. "Give me a Coke, Charlie."

"We don't have any credit," I said glumly.

Mark stared at Charlie disbelievingly. "You got to be kiddin'. Man, when did we ever not pay our bill?"

"Last month."

"You said you'd add it on to this month's. That's what you said. So I don't see why you can't add twenty cents to that."

"Thirty cents," corrected Charlie. "And, like I just told Bryon, if I don't get that money pretty

soon, I'm going to take it out of a couple of hides."

"I'll get you the money tomorrow if you give us the Cokes right now."

"O.K." Charlie gave in to Mark. Almost everybody does. It was a gift he had, a gift for getting away with things. He could talk anyone into anything. "But if I don't get the money by tomorrow, I'll come looking for you."

I got chilled. I had heard Charlie say that to another guy once. I also saw the guy after Charlie found him. But if Mark said he'd have three dollars by tomorrow, he'd have it.

"Speaking of looking for you," Charlie continued, "the true flower child was in here asking for you."

"M&M?" Mark asked. "What did he want?"

"How would I know? Man, that is a weird kid. Nice guy, but weird."

"Yeah," Mark said. "I guess it would be hard to be a hippie in a hood's part of town."

"Speak for yourself, man," Charlie said. "This part of town don't make nobody a hood."

"You're right," Mark said. "But I really sounded profound there for a minute, huh?"

Charlie just gave him a funny look and got us the Cokes. It was later in the evening now, and some more customers came in, so Charlie quit talking to us. It got pretty busy.

"Where are you gonna get three dollars?" I asked Mark.

He finished off his Coke. "I don't know."

That bugged the heck out of me. Mark was always pulling stunts like that. I ought to know; Mark had lived at my house ever since I was ten and he was nine and his parents shot each other in a drunken argument and my old lady felt sorry for him and took him home to live with us. My mother wanted a hundred kids and could have only one, so until she got hold of Mark she had to be content feeding every stray cat that came along. There was no telling how many kids she might have picked up along the line if she could have afforded more than two—me and Mark.

I had been friends with Mark long before he came to live with us. He had lived down the street and it seemed to me that we had always been together. We had never had a fight. We had never even had an argument. In looks, we were complete opposites: I'm a big guy, dark hair and eyes—the kind who looks like a Saint Bernard puppy, which I don't mind as most chicks cannot resist a Saint Bernard puppy. Mark was small and compact, with strange golden eyes and hair to match and a grin like a friendly lion. He was much stronger than he looked—he could tie me in arm wrestling. He was my best friend and we were like brothers.

"Let's go look for M&M," Mark said abruptly and we left. It was dark outside and seemed a little chilly. This was probably because school had just started, and it always seems like fall when school starts, even if it's hot. Charlie's Bar was on a real crummy street with a lot of other bars whose bartenders kicked us out when we strolled in, a movie house, a drugstore, and a second-hand clothes store that always had a sign in the window saying "We Buy Almost Anything"—and from the looks of their clothes, they did. When my old lady went into the hospital, we got so low on money that I bought some clothes there. It's pretty lousy, buying used clothes.

We found M&M in the drugstore reading *Newsweek*, which shows what a weird kid he was since there were plenty of skin mags and things to read. A little kid like him shouldn't be reading that junk I know, but he should at least want to.

"Hey, Charlie said you was lookin' for us," Mark greeted him.

M&M looked up at him. "Yeah. How you guys doin'?"

M&M was the most serious guy I knew. He always had this wide-eyed, intent, trusting look on his face, but sometimes he smiled, and when he did it was really great. He was an awful nice kid even if

he was a little strange. He had big gray eyes—the kind you see on war-orphan posters—and charcoal-colored hair down past his ears and down to his eyebrows. He probably would have grown a beard except thirteen was too young for it. He always wore an old Army jacket that was too big for him and went barefoot even after it started getting cold. Then his father got fed up with it and M&M got a pair of moccasins. He had a metal peace symbol hanging around his neck on a piece of rawhide string, and he got his nickname from his addiction to M&M's, the kind of chocolate candy that melts in your mouth and not in your hand. For years I'd never seen M&M without a bag of that candy. I don't know how he ate those things all day long, day after day. If I did that, my face would break out like nothing you've ever seen.

“You want an M&M?” He held out a bag toward us. I shook my head, but Mark took one, just to be polite, since he didn't like sweet stuff. “You wanted to see us for something?” Mark reminded him.

“Yeah, I did, but I forgot what for.” He was like that. Real absent-minded. “My sister's home,” he added as an afterthought.

“No kiddin'?” asked Mark tactfully, thumbing through a *Playboy*. “Which one?”

M&M had a million brothers and sisters, most of them younger. They all looked alike and it was really funny to see him out somewhere with four or five little carbon copies—with dark hair and big serious eyes—hanging all over him. If I had to be a baby-sitter day and night, I'd lose my temper and kill one of those brats, but then, M&M never lost his temper.

“My older sister, Cathy. You know.”

“Yeah, I remember,” I said, only I didn't remember too well. “Where's she been?”

“She went to a private school last year and this summer. She's been staying with my aunt. She had to come home, though, because she ran out of money. She paid for it all with her own bread.”

“Must be smart,” I said. I couldn't remember what she looked like; I had never paid any attention to her. “She as smart as you?”

“No,” M&M said, still reading. He wasn't bragging, he was telling the truth. He was a very honest kid.

“Let's go over to the bowling alley,” Mark suggested. The drugstore wasn't exactly jumping with action. It was a school night and nobody was hanging around. “You come too, M&M.”

It was a long walk to the bowling alley, and I wished for the hundredth time I had a car. I had to walk everywhere I went. As if he'd read my mind, which he was in the habit of doing, Mark said, “I could hot-wire us a car.”

“That's a bad thing to do,” M&M said. “Taking something that doesn't belong to you.”

“It ain't stealin',” Mark said. “It's borrowin'.”

“Yeah, well, you're on probation now for 'borrowing,' so I don't think it's such a great idea,” I said.

Mark could hot-wire anything, and ever since he was twelve years old he had hot-wired cars and driven them. He had never had an accident, but he finally got caught at it, so now once a week he had to go downtown on his school lunch hour to see his probation officer and tell him how he was never going to steal cars any more. I had been worried at first, afraid they were going to take Mark and put him in a boys' home since he wasn't really my brother and didn't have a family. I was worried about Mark being locked up. I didn't need to. Mark always came through everything untouched, unworried, unaffected.

“O.K.” Mark shrugged. “Don't get shook, Bryon.”

“Bryon,” M&M said suddenly, “were you named after the lord?”

“What?” I said, stunned. For a minute I thought he meant God.

“Lord Bryon, were you named after him?”

The poor kid had *Byron* and *Bryon* mixed up. I decided to string him along. “Yeah, I was.”

“Was there a Lord Bryon?” Mark said. “Hey, that’s cool.” He paused. “I guess it’s cool. What’d this guy do, anyway?”

“Can’t tell you in front of the kid,” I answered.

M&M shook his head. “He wrote poetry. He wrote long, old poems. You ought to write poetry, just to keep up the tradition of the Bryons.”

“You ought to keep your mouth shut,” I replied, “before I keep up the tradition of punching wise guys in the mouth.”

M&M looked up at me, and I realized from his hurt, puzzled look that he hadn’t been trying to be smart. So I punched him on the shoulder and said, “O.K., I’ll write poetry. How’s this?”—and I recited a dirty limerick I’d heard somewhere. It made him laugh and turn red at the same time. Mark thought I had made it up, and said, “Hey, that was pretty good. Can you just pop them off like that?”

I only shrugged and said, “Sometimes,” because then I’d take credit whether or not it was really due me. I was like that. I’d also lie if I really thought I could get away with it, especially to girls. Like telling them I loved them and junk, when I didn’t. I had a rep as a lady-killer—a hustler. I kept up the old Lord Byron tradition in one way. Sometimes I’d get to feeling bad thinking about how rotten I treated some of these chicks, but most of the time it didn’t even bother me.

“M&M, old buddy,” Mark was saying, putting his arm across M&M’s shoulders, “I was wondering if you might be able to loan your best friend some money.”

“You ain’t my best friend,” M&M said with that disarming honesty, “but how much do you want?”

“Three bucks.”

“I got fifty cents.” M&M reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a couple of quarters. “Here.”

“Forget it,” I said. Me and Mark looked at each other and shook our heads. M&M was unbelievable.

“It’s O.K. I’ll get fifty cents again next week, for baby-sitting.”

“Is that all you get paid for watching all those kids? Fifty cents?” I couldn’t get over it. Fifty cents a week?

“I think it’s enough. I don’t mind taking care of the kids. Who’s going to do it if I don’t. Both my parents work, so they can’t do it. Anyway, I like my family. When I get married I’m going to have at least nine or ten kids.”

“There goes the population explosion,” Mark said.

“Well, now that your sister’s home she can do a lot of the baby-sitting,” I said, trying to be helpful. M&M could tell we thought he was crazy.

“Cathy’s got a job after school; she can’t help. I don’t know what I have to do to convince you that I don’t mind it.”

“O.K., O.K., I’m convinced.” I was also tired of the subject and I had got to worrying about how we were going to get three dollars before tomorrow. Charlie didn’t get his rough rep or his bar by being nice to people, especially ones who couldn’t pay their bills.

By the time we got to the bowling alley it was ten o’clock. There weren’t many people there. Mark and I watched a few games while M&M stared into a package of M&M’s. I finally got bugged about and asked him what in the Sam Hill was he doing.

“Take a look.” He handed me the package, which was open at the top. “Put it right up to your eye. I did, and all I saw was a bunch of candy.

“It’s beautiful, ain’t it?” asked M&M. “I mean, look at all the different colors.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, thinking, If I didn’t know this kid better I’d say he was high.

“Let me look,” said Mark, so I handed him the package. “Hey, this is groovy. Look at all the colors.” He gave the candy back to M&M, looked at me, and shrugged.

M&M got up. “I gotta go home now. I’ll see you guys later.”

“We just got here,” Mark objected.

“Yeah, well, I just came along for the walk, and now I gotta go home.”

I watched him leave. “The kid’s weird,” I said. “That’s all there is to it.”

Mark lit up a cigarette, our last one, so we had to pass it back and forth. “I know, but I still get a kick out of him. Come on, let’s go catch up with him. There ain’t nothin’ to do around here.”

Outside I spotted M&M at the corner. There were three guys trailing him. When you see something like that around here you know right away somebody is about to get jumped. In this case, it was M&M.

“Come on,” Mark said, and we cut through an alley so as to come up behind those guys.

Three against three. The odds would have been even except that M&M was one of those nonviolent types who practiced what he preached, and me and Mark weren’t carrying weapons. We slowed down to a walk when we came to the end of the alley. I could hear the voices of the three guys who were following M&M, and I recognized one of them.

“Hey, flower child, turn around.” They were taunting him, but M&M just kept right on moving.

“It’s Shepard,” Mark whispered to me. We were waiting at the end of the alley for them to come by. They didn’t. They must have had M&M up against the wall. We could hear them.

“Hey, hippie, don’t you answer when you’re spoken to? That ain’t nice.”

“Curly, why don’t you leave me alone?” M&M sounded very patient. I moved over to the other side of the alley just in time to see Curly pull out a switchblade and reach over and cut through the rawhide string on M&M’s peace medal. It fell to the ground. M&M reached down to pick it up, and Curly brought his knee up sharply and hit M&M in the face.

Me and Mark looked at each other, and Mark flashed me a grin. We both liked fights. We ran out and jumped on them, and the one we didn’t get took off, which was a wise thing for him to do. Since we had surprised them, it wasn’t too hard to get them pinned. I had Curly Shepard in a stranglehold with one arm twisted behind his back, while Mark had the other guy pinned on the ground.

“How’d you like a broken arm, Shepard?” I said through gritted teeth, careful not to loosen my grip. His switchblade had fallen on the sidewalk, but I didn’t know what all he might be carrying. He liked to play rough.

“O.K., you proved your point. Let us go, Douglas.” Curly said a few more things that I’m not going to repeat. He must have figured out who it was twisting his arm when he saw Mark. Me and Mark were always together. Curly had a special grudge against me anyway. I used to go with his sister; she says she broke up with me, which was the truth, but I was spreading it around that I broke up with her and was giving all kinds of cool reasons. Curly was a little dumb—he belonged to a gang led by his brother Tim and known as the Shepard Gang. Really original. Tim was all right—at least he had a few brains—but I considered Curly a dumb hood. “Look, we didn’t hurt him.”

That was a lie, because M&M was sitting there against the wall and already his cheek was swelling up and turning purple. He was trying to tie the ends of the rawhide string together and his hands were shaking.

“Let them go,” said M&M. “I’m O.K.”

I gave Curly’s arm an extra twist for good measure and then gave him a shove that almost sent him sprawling. Mark let the other guy up, but when he was almost to his feet, Mark gave him a good swif

kick. They left, cussing us out, partly in English and partly in sign language.

Mark was helping M&M up. "Come on, kid," he said easily. "Let's get you home."

The whole side of M&M's face was bruised, but he gave us one of his rare, wistful grins. "Thank you guys."

Mark suddenly laughed. "Hey, look what I got." He waved three one-dollar bills at me.

"Where did you get that?" I asked, although I knew good and well where he got it. Mark was very quick; nobody had to teach him how to hot-wire a car—or to pick a pocket.

"It was a donation," Mark said seriously, "for the Cause."

This was an old joke, but M&M fell for it. "What cause?"

"Cause we owe it to Charlie," Mark said, and M&M almost laughed, but instead winced with pain. I was really feeling good. I could quit worrying about Charlie's beating us up.

Mark suddenly poked me. "You still in the mood for a little action?"

"Sure," I said. Mark motioned toward the next intersection. There was a black guy standing there waiting for the light to change. "We could jump him," Mark said, but suddenly M&M spoke up.

"You make me sick! You just rescued me from some guys who were going to beat me up because I'm different from them, and now you're going to beat up someone because he's different from you. You think I'm weird—well, you're the weird ones."

Both Mark and I had stopped walking and were staring at M&M. He was really shook up. He was crying. I couldn't have been more stunned if he had begun to dissolve. You don't see guys crying around here, not unless they have a lot better reason than M&M had. He suddenly took off, running, not looking back. I started to take a few steps after him, but Mark caught me by the arm. "Leave him alone," Mark said. "He's just all uptight from getting jumped."

"Yeah," I said. That made sense. That had happened to me before, and I could remember how scared it could get you. Besides, M&M was only a kid, just turned thirteen.

Mark picked something up off the ground. It was M&M's peace medal. It must have dropped off when M&M started running. He hadn't tied the ends of the string together very well.

"Remind me to tell him I have this," Mark said, stuffing the medal and the string in his pocket. "Let's stop by and give this three bucks to Charlie before I buy some cigarettes with it."

"O.K.," I said. I didn't feel quite as good as I had before. I was thinking about what M&M had said about beating up people because they were different. There was a lot of truth to that. The rich kids in town used to drive around over in our part of the city and look for people to beat up. Then a year or so ago a couple of kids got killed in that mess and the fad slowly died out. But there were still gang fights around here and social-club rumbles, and things like Shepard's jumping M&M happened every day. I didn't mind it much, unless I was the one getting mugged. I liked fights.

"Come on," Mark called, "maybe there's somebody to hustle in Charlie's." I grinned and ran to catch up with him. Mark was my best buddy and I loved him like a brother.

The next afternoon after school Mark and me went downtown to the hospital to see my mother. She had just had a big operation, one that cost a lot of money. We had sold our car, an old Chevy—our TV, a little black-and-white job—and anything else we could find to sell, but we were still short of money. I had been trying for weeks to find a job. Mark scrounged around and came up with some money—I didn't ask him where he got it, and he didn't tell me, so I figured he stole it somewhere. Mark was really bad about stealing things. He stole things and sold them, or stole them and kept them, or stole things and gave them away. It didn't bother me. He was too smart to get caught. He had been stealing things since he was six years old. I wasn't above taking a pack of cigarettes from a drugstore, but that was about it. I was the hustler and Mark was the thief. We were a great pair. One thing about it, though, Mark couldn't see anything wrong with stealing stuff. I could. It didn't much matter to me whether or not Mark was a thief, but I still felt that stealing was wrong—at least it's against the law. I think Mark was only dimly aware of that fact. Stealing was a game to him, something to do for fun and profit, and he was careful not to get caught because that was one of the rules.

So that was how we lived, stealing stuff and selling stuff, trying to save money and eat at the same time. I never thought about it then, but I can see now that it was a pretty rough time for us.

Anyway, Mark and I hitched a ride almost all the way to the hospital. The guy who gave us a ride was a hippie with long hair and a beard and a Volkswagen bus. Those buses are very big with hippies. I don't know why. The guy said his name was Randy and that he went to college in town, majoring in English. I figure he was a pretty brave guy. Mark and I looked like tough guys—the kind who go around jumping hippies, which we had done once before. We had gone over to the city park where the hippies hang out, just to beat up somebody. I wouldn't do it again though. I hadn't realized those guys refuse to fight back, and what happened to the one we got hold of, it made me sick. Mark felt the same way. So after that we left them alone.

Randy was telling us about this really cool house where a bunch of his friends lived, an old house they all rented and everybody who wanted to could live there and groove in peace and good will. I didn't much believe him—there had to be a few sponges in a setup like that—and living with a bunch of people would get on my nerves, especially if they were hairy and dirty. But I was polite and said, “Sounds cool,” even though it didn't particularly appeal to me. Mark was interested, though, and asked Randy all kinds of questions about where this place was and who all lived there and if he knew about any other places like that. Mark was interested in lots of things—he knew all about the Old West and was nutty about Warner Brothers' cartoons—so it didn't bug me when he got all excited about hippie living.

When we got out of the bus Randy held up two fingers and said, “Peace,” and Mark held up M&M's peace medal, which he was wearing around his neck as a joke, and made a wisecrack. Then we looked at each other and cracked up laughing. But we weren't being hateful; it was just funny.

Mom was glad to see us, but she hadn't been lacking company. We had the kind of neighborhood where everyone knew everybody else's business, and all the ladies came up to see her, at least two a

day. They also brought me and Mark junk like pies and potato salad. I got the pies and Mark took whatever else there was, since he couldn't stand sweet stuff. Cokes and an occasional M&M, just to be polite to M&M, was as much sweet stuff as he'd take. As a result, I was putting on weight—I wasn't in much danger of getting fat since it seemed like I was growing an inch taller a week—and Mark was staying as slight and slender as ever. You'd never guess Mark was as strong as he was by looking at him, but I knew from our wrestling matches that he was as tough as a piece of leather.

As usual, the last thing on Mom's mind was herself. We had no more than got there and got hugged when she started telling us about this poor kid across the hall who never had anybody visiting him.

"How do you know that?" I asked. "There's so many people comin' and goin' around here. How do you know about some kid across the hall?"

"The nurse told me. Poor kid, he's not any older than you and Mark—"

It figured—I mean her finding out about it. If there was a lame dog within three miles, she'd find it. It didn't bug me much though. Thanks to her, I had a brother.

"Bryon, promise me you'll go over and see him."

I frowned. "Look, I don't know the guy. I'm not going to just walk in and say, 'Hi there. Want a visitor? My mother tells me you don't have any.'"

"Bryon," Mom said, "just go talk to him. He won't talk much to the nurses. He's been hurt pretty badly, poor thing."

"I'll go see him," Mark said. "Bryon'll come with me." I gave him a dirty look but he continued, "Who knows, maybe one of us'll end up in the hospital sometime with nobody to come and see us."

That was just the kind of junk my mother eats up, and Mark knew it. When we left I stopped him in the hall. "What's the idea of telling her you were going to go see that kid?"

Mark shrugged. "I am going to. Why not?"

This was typical of Mark as it wasn't typical of anyone else. "Well, *I'm* not going. I'm going down to the snack bar here and get a hamburger. Ain't you hungry?"

Mark shook his head. "Naw. I'll meet you down there later."

I took the elevator to the basement, where the snack bar was. I sat on a stool at the counter—after sitting at the bar at Charlie's I had got used to it—reading the menu over and over, thinking about all the food I'd get if I could. I loved to eat. I could put away more food than anyone I knew. I was five-ten at sixteen and still growing, but I went through my lanky period at fourteen and I had a good build of which I was proud. I should have gone out for football, I guess, but it didn't much appeal to me. I liked neighborhood football games, but all that practice for the real thing seemed like a bore to me. Besides, I knew I couldn't put up with a coach telling me how to play. I never have been able to accept authority. I don't know why. I figure it was because of this cop—these two cops—who beat me up once when I was thirteen years old. I had gone to the movies with these other guys—I forget where Mark was—and we drank a fifth of cherry vodka in Coke and got drunk. That stuff tasted terrible, but I was a dumb kid and I drank it just to show I was as super-tuff as the rest of them. When the movie was over and I was staggering around alone on the streets in the dark, these two cops picked me up, drove me out to a hill on the other side of town, slapped me around, and left me there. I never forgot it. It didn't stop me from drinking, but it sure ruined any respect I ever had for cops. Yeah, sure there are good cops somewhere. I just never met any. Ever since then I've made it a point to mouth off to cops. That's probably why I never met any good ones.

So I was sitting there, reading the menu, when I heard a voice say, "Can I take your order?" and I looked up at this really cute chick. She gave me a big smile and said, "Hi, Bryon! What are you doing

here?" I was racking my brain trying to think where I knew her from; she did seem kind of familiar, so I decided to stall for time I said, "I'm here to see my old lady. She's just getting over an operation. I didn't know you worked here."

"I just started this week. But you knew I just got back, didn't you?"

"Oh, yeah," I said, about to go crazy trying to remember who she was. She had this groovy long dark hair with a sheen to it like charcoal—long hair with bangs just drives me crazy. There aren't too many chicks who can wear their hair like that and still look good. And she had these big, beautiful gray eyes, dark gray with black eyelashes and the eyelashes were really long, but they weren't fake. I am a long-practiced studier of girls, and I can tell about things like that.

"Gosh, you've grown," she said. "You must be a foot taller than when I saw you last."

"Yeah, well, it's been a long time," I said. If I had grown a foot it must have been. "How you been doing?"

"Oh, pretty good. I was lucky to get this job. Listen, give me your order. I'm not supposed to stand around talking to the customers."

"Sure. I'll have a hamburger and a Pepsi."

She took my order and left, and I was about to lose my mind. She couldn't have been someone I had dated—I date a lot of girls, but I was sure I could remember them if I saw them again. Anyway, she seemed friendly, and, after you break up with someone, she's not usually friendly. She seemed so familiar I could have sworn I'd seen her recently. Whoever she was, I wanted to see her again. I had already noted that she wasn't wearing a boy's ring around her neck, or any other sign that she was somebody's personal property—I'm in the habit of looking for things like that. I have gotten into some tight spots with boyfriends I didn't even know existed.

"Here's your hamburger."

I looked up at her and she gave me this really great smile, a smile that lit up her face. I knew I'd seen that smile recently, and then it struck me who it was, and I was so surprised that I said it out loud: "Cathy!"

"Yeah," she said, almost as surprised as I was, "who'd you think it was?"

"The last time I saw you you had short hair and braces," I said, forgetting that a lady-killer should never remind a girl of her gawky age when she was skinny and ugly, or fat and ugly, or short-haired with a mouth full of metal.

"Yeah, that's the truth. Bryon, you mean you didn't recognize me?"

"No, I didn't." I couldn't see why that should shock her so much. Even back in the days of braces and short hair we weren't exactly best friends. I had never paid any attention to her. "I just recognize you because you look so much like M&M when you smile."

"I am going to take that as a compliment," she said, giving me my check. "M&M is a beautiful child and he has a beautiful smile to match his mind."

"He's a good kid," I agreed. She turned to go, and I said, "Wait!" without thinking, so when she turned, I stuttered a little. "I mean—I haven't seen you in a while—I'd like to talk to you sometime —" I really wasn't living up to my self-image. I never stutter.

"All right," she said, "we'll talk sometime."

I wanted to ask when, but didn't. You should never be too eager with chicks. It gives them ideas.

I waited around for Mark, but he didn't show up so I took the elevator back to Mom's floor. I went up and looked in the room across from Mom's where that kid was supposed to be. I saw him all right, but no sign of Mark. That kid had been hurt bad. He had bandages around his head and across one eye, both arms in slings, and stitches in his lower lip.

“Hey, are you Bryon?” He looked at me out of his good eye. “Mark said to wait for him here; he’ll be right back. He went across the street to the drugstore to buy me some comics.”

I could tell from the way he talked that he came from a neighborhood like mine. This was likely—it was a charity hospital. “Come on in,” he said. “Pull up a chair.”

I did. I didn’t know what to say to him.

“You’re Mark’s brother? You don’t look much alike.”

For a minute I really felt good about Mark’s telling this guy we were brothers. Of course, we didn’t look alike—Mark with his gold hair and strange gold eyes and slight, tense body, and me, big and husky with dark brown hair and eyes—so I said, “No, I guess we don’t.”

“I got a brother—older—we don’t look much alike either.”

I looked around for a No Smoking sign. “Can I smoke in here?”

“Sure, as long as you don’t get caught. Would you mind giving me a few puffs?”

“O.K.,” I said. I lit up a cigarette and put it between his lips. When I took it back he said, “Thanks. I haven’t had a cigarette in a week. My name’s Mike Chambers.”

“Mine’s Bryon Douglas. Man, you look awful. What happened?” I asked. I was beginning to be glad I had come in after all. It must have been rough, being kept in a hospital that gave you the creep with nobody to talk to.

“I got beat up,” he said with a wry smile.

I couldn’t believe it. I thought he’d been in a car wreck or something. “What does the other guy look like?” I said finally.

“It’s a long story,” Mike said. “You got time for a long story?”

“Sure,” I said. I really do like listening to stuff that’s happened to other people. I guess that’s why I like to read.

“Well, if it seems like I’m never going to shut up, just tell me. You and Mark are the first people I’ve talked to in a long time. There ain’t much to say to these nurses.” I could see that. What can you say to nurses?

“Well,” Mike began, “I always had this soft spot for chicks. I was always making like Sir Galahad opening doors for them and complimenting even the homely ones, and I beat out a lot of guys better looking than me and they never could figure out why. But it wasn’t just a line with me. I guess I’m a sucker—I’ve been taken a few times, like ‘loaning’ money to chicks who came on with a sob story—but I’ll always believe the best about a girl until I’m proved wrong, which is my own hang up.

“That explains the way I acted that night the gang and me was hanging around the drugstore and this black chick came in to buy some cigarettes. Me, I just see a nice-looking chick with really beautiful eyes, all black and inky-soft. I guess I’m a little funny that way, because Negroes just don’t get me all upset. I mean, I can see a black guy and a white chick together, and it sure don’t bother me while most white guys can’t stand to see that. Like the gang—the minute she walks in, they get all tensed up because black anyone, chick or otherwise, just don’t happen to come around much where I live. I guess she worked downtown and got off late and just stopped in on her way to the bus stop. I think she told me that later. I don’t remember too good now.

“So she gets her cigarettes and starts for the door, when a couple of guys block her way. Now the gang I hang with is a pretty good bunch of guys—a lot of heart and only a couple of wise apples in the group—but see, nothin’ much had been happenin’ and they were bored so they start picking on the chick, calling her Black Beauty and some other choice things. They were really getting rude, and I was feeling sorry for the girl. She kept her eyes down and just said, ‘Let me by, please,’ real soft-like. The guys started pushing her around, not enough to hurt her but enough to scare her plenty. She just

gripped her purse with both hands and tensed all over like she was trying to keep from running, which was pretty smart. Running is just an invitation to be chased, and if she got caught it wouldn't be in a lighted drugstore. The old guy who runs the drugstore had disappeared. He was scared silly of the gang. I don't know why. We never done anything to him.

"When one of the guys grabbed hold of her and really got crude, I got fed up. I went over and said 'Let her go,' like I meant it. They all looked at me for a while, like they were trying to make up their minds whether or not to jump me. We don't usually go around beating each other up, but it has happened. They finally decided not to. My big brother, he's got a pretty big rep as a tough guy in our neighborhood. He's in jail now, that's why he don't come to see me. It was his rep and not mine that stopped them, because I ain't never been known as a tough guy.

"So they turned her loose and went back to reading comics, and I followed the girl outside. She was looking up and down the street kind of desperate-like, and I knew she'd missed her bus. I said, 'Hey, uh, girl, if you've missed your bus I can give you a ride home.'

"She just kept her eyes down. Finally she said something—but, brother, I'm not going to repeat it. I saw then and there she thought I had evil intentions. I don't blame her. Hell, if I'd had to take what she just did, I'd be sore and suspicious too.

"I said, 'Look, I don't want a pick-up or anything . . .' She gave me a funny look so I added quick 'Not that you're not real cute or anything—I mean, you'll have to stay here another hour to catch the next bus and I'll be leaving and I don't know what those other guys might do.'

"She saw the logic in that, because it was getting dark. Not too many cops come around that area; it's kind of a deserted street. You know how cops are; there's a million over on the Ribbon, making sure the nice kids don't kill each other or run each other down, while we can cut each other's throats and they don't give a damn.

"Finally she said she'd let me drive her home. I had my old Ford parked in the drugstore parking lot. It was really my brother's car but he said I could drive it any time he got busted, which is often. He's a pretty good guy, but if you've got a rep for fighting, somebody's always trying to take you on. The last time that happened, my brother busted a bottle over the guy's head and got charged with assault with a dangerous weapon. He never used weapons before, but he had finally got fed up with the whole routine. It wasn't his first offense, so they sat on him kind of hard.

"Anyway, we get into my Ford, and I can see the poor kid is still scared—she sits hugging the door on her side like she's going to jump out any second. I got a couple of good looks at her; she was real slender, looked like she'd sort of sway in the wind, and her hair was down to her shoulders and it must have been straightened. She had on a yellow dress and yellow shoes and she had her straw purse sitting on her lap. She held onto it with one hand and the door handle with the other. She really was cute.

"I started talking to her about just everything. Would her old lady chew her out because she was late? My old lady did. Man, they never liked anything you did, did they? But still, sometimes you couldn't get along without them. Did she go to school? I did but, boy, it was really a hell of a place to spend all day. I wanted to drop out but the old lady said she'd kill me if I did.

"I kept talking because that's what I do with animals when they're hurt and scared, and pretty soon they get over being scared. I've got a hang up with animals, too.

"I could tell she was beginning to calm down a little, at least she let go of the door handle. I even got her to smile once, I forget what I'd been saying. And then I said, 'I'm sorry about what happened to you back there,' and suddenly she started to cry.

"Man, that got me so shook. Nothing gets me shook like chicks crying." Mike stopped here, and I gave him another drag on my cigarette.

“That’s funny,” I said. “Chicks crying bore me. Go on, Mike, finish your story.”

~~“Well, I didn’t know what to say to her. I finally said, ‘Hey, don’t cry,’ which never does any good. She kept on sobbing and now and then I’d catch a word or two. I got the idea that she was fed up with getting walked all over by white people. I could see that. I get fed up with getting walked over by the fuzz, teachers, my old man, and the upper-class kids at school. So I could see that. Bryon, do you know that my old man keeps my mother from coming to see me? Said I was a dumb kid for ever gettin’ into this hospital. So anyway, this chick, she tells me about her problems, and she uses some pretty bad language but nothing I ain’t heard before from white chicks. I finally pulled the car over to the curb and reached into my pocket. She sat up straight and got all uptight.~~

~~“‘What we stoppin’ for?’ she says, and I said, ‘I thought I had a handkerchief, but I guess I don’t.’ I pulled back out on the street. She looked at me for a minute—I kept staring straight ahead but I could tell she was watching me—and she said, ‘Thank you.’~~

~~“I drove her home. She lived way out on the north side where most of the blacks live; you know where. It is a pretty lousy neighborhood, about as bad as mine. As I pulled up in front of her house, I could see a bunch of kids hanging around on her porch and in her yard.~~

~~“‘Well, here you are,’ I said, a little nervous. For somebody who’d been practicing in her mind how to get the door open, she was pretty slow about getting out. That’s how it seemed to me, anyway. I think she was tired out from crying so much.~~

~~“Then there was all these black kids around my car. Some big guy opened the girl’s door and pulled her out and said, ‘What’s the matter, Connie? What happened?’ You could tell she’d been crying.~~

~~“Then they opened my door and dragged me out. It seemed like there was a hundred black faces staring at me. I guess it was really just about a dozen, but it seemed like a hundred. I just stood there, backed up against the car. Talk about scared—man, was I scared. To top it off, the chick had started crying again so she couldn’t talk.”~~

~~Mike paused here for a minute. He was staring off in the distance, and when he started talking again, it was slowly, like he was living the whole thing over again.~~

~~“The big guy came around to my side of the car. ‘You hurt her, white boy?’~~

~~“‘No,’ I said, and it didn’t sound very loud so I cleared my throat and said, ‘No, I didn’t,’ so loud that it sounded like I was shouting. It was real quiet; you could hear somebody’s TV from down the street and a dog barking a block away and Connie’s soft sobbing. I could even hear my heart pounding in my ears. Then the big guy said, really quiet-like, ‘What if we don’t believe you?’ And I got so scared I was about to cry and said, ‘Ask her, huh, just ask her!’ The guy called across the car, ‘Connie, what you want me to do with this white cat?’~~

~~“And real soft—her voice was so soft, just like her eyes—she said, ‘Kill the white bastard.’~~

~~“And sure enough, they almost did.”~~

* * *

There was a long silence. I think Mike had forgotten I was listening to him. Then he took a long breath. “That’s how I got here. I must be a dumb kid like the old man says though, because I still don’t hate Negroes, least of all Connie. I mean, I can almost see why she did it. Almost.”

I shook my head. “That’s a rotten thing to happen to anybody.”

“It sure is.” Mark’s voice came from behind me. He had been standing in the doorway, I don’t know how long. “Come on, Bryon,” he said. “Here’s your comics.” He tossed a couple of monster

comics on the bed.

As we got into the elevator Mark said, “I’m inclined to agree with his old man. That is one stupid guy.”

“You mean it?” I said. I had been thinking about Mike’s story, and I could see his point about not hating the people who beat him up.

“Yeah, I mean it. Man, if anybody ever hurt me like that I’d hate them for the rest of my life.”

I didn’t think much about that statement then. But later I would—I still do. I think about it and think about it until I think I’m going crazy.

I had been hunting all over town for a job. I really needed one, but they're not easy to come by if you're sixteen years old with no experience, no contacts. I finally hit upon a great idea: I would ask Charlie for a job. After all, we were friends. He thought I was a smart kid, and having been one himself, he appreciated them. Besides, I figured I would really dig working in a bar.

Charlie's answer was short and to the point: No.

I was sitting at the bar, smoking a cigarette and trying to fight down my anger and disappointment. I had been hitchhiking all over town for a week trying to get a job. "Well, why not?" I asked, as soon as I thought I could talk without blowing my stack.

"For one thing, you know how often the plainclothes cops stop in. Do you think they'd let a minor work here? You're lucky you can just come in and sit down. Besides, Bryon, it gets rough in here late at night—Yeah, yeah, you're a rough kid, they all think that, but you'd better just take my word for it that you'd be better off someplace else."

"Like where? There ain't no jobs in this town. I been all over. Don't think this crummy joint ain't last on my list." I was mad.

Charlie didn't get upset though, he just grinned. "Bryon, you're an honest kid in most ways, but you lie like a dog. Take Mark—I wouldn't trust him around anything that wasn't nailed down, but I'd believe anything he said. I'd trust you with my wife, if I had one. I trust your actions, but I double-check most of your statements. You just think about it, and I think you'll come up with the reason why you haven't got a job before now. You just think about it."

I was too mad to think about it right then, but I promised myself I would later. I listened to everything Charlie said, because he was really smart. He had been a high school dropout, but he could subtract and add in his head quicker than a machine, and he had also read almost everything I had, which was quite a bit of reading. Besides, he'd had it even rougher than me when he was a kid, and now he had his own business and was respected by the cops and the rough guys equally.

"O.K.," I said. "If you trust me so much why don't you let me borrow your car Saturday night?" This was a shot in the dark. I really never expected Charlie to let me borrow his car. But I had been thinking about Cathy quite a bit. I had even called her a couple of times—from a pay phone since we couldn't pay phone bills any more—and there was a dance coming up on Saturday night that I wanted to go to. But I didn't have a car.

"O.K., Bryon, you can borrow my car Saturday. Just bring it back with as much gas in the tank as there was when you took it."

I almost fell off the barstool. "You mean it? Really?"

Charlie gave a short laugh. "Yeah, I mean it. But you get into a wreck, and I'll swear you stole it. And I don't care if you let Mark drive it either. Any kid who's been hot-wiring cars and driving them for as long as he has without an accident, I'll trust with my car."

I didn't know how to say thanks. I've always had trouble thanking people, I don't know why. But Charlie just gave me one of those twisted grins of his, like he knew what my problem was and

couldn't care less.

"I'll come by and get it Saturday," I said finally. ~~Charlie said O.K., and I could tell he meant, "Get outa here before I change my mind,"~~ so I got. I wanted to get to a phone and call Cathy. For all I knew she already had a date.

She didn't, thank God. But she did ask me where I was going to get a car.

"A friend's loaning me his," I said. "We may be double-dating with Mark. You remember Mark, don't you?"

"Who could forget him?" she said, and something gave me a funny feeling, something about the way she said it. It gave me a funny feeling. "Is this a dressy dance or a dance dance or what?" she asked.

"Casual," I said. "Pants would be O.K. It's just at the school gym. Maybe we could go get a Coke afterward"—but I was thinking, Maybe we'll stop by the park afterward, which is just the way I think

Mark was surprised when I told him who I had a date with.

"Cathy! M&M's sister? How old is she?"

"Fifteen or sixteen, I guess. You want to double-date? Charlie's loaning me his car." I said this casually, like Charlie loaned me his car every day of the week, but Mark wasn't fooled. He never was by me. "No kiddin'? How'd you manage that?"

I just shrugged. The truth was, I still didn't know how I had managed that.

"Well," Mark said, "I can't double with you. I already told some guys I'd go stag with them. I thought you would, too. Shoot, you haven't taken out a girl since you broke up with Angela Shepard."

"Yeah, well, if you'd gone with Angela for a while you'd be sour on girls, too. Man, I hate that chick."

"Too bad she can look so good and be so rotten," Mark said sympathetically. He never once said "I told you so." He had tried to tell me a long time ago that Angela was no good, but I hadn't paid any attention. It always seemed like Mark knew the score before I did—but it didn't do me any good. I wouldn't listen to him. I had to find out things for myself.

"Who all you going with?" I asked. We were in the kitchen doing dishes. Mark didn't particularly care for washing dishes, but I just couldn't stand a bunch of dirty dishes piled up in the sink.

"Terry Jones, Williamson, and Curtis."

"Then I'm glad I'm not going with you. I can't stand that Curtis kid."

"Come on, Bryon," Mark said easily. "He's a real nice guy. What'd he ever do to you?"

"He thinks he's so good-looking. That whole family's conceited."

Mark was trying to hide a grin. He was laughing at me. "You know good and well he's not conceited. He can't help it if he's good-looking; to tell the truth, I don't think he knows he is. You're jealous, Bryon, because Angela dumped you to make a play for Curtis, and he was smart enough to leave her alone."

"You can think what you want," I said, but I was almost laughing myself. Mark knew me pretty well. Sometimes that could be irritating, but most of the time it was funny.

* * *

I thought Saturday would never come, but it finally did. I hadn't looked forward to a date in a long time. With Angela, after a while our dates either ended in a make-out session or a fight. Both got boring.

I was kind of bothered about what to wear. It was a casual dance, so about anything would be all

right, but I was bugged anyway.

I was in the bathroom shaving when Mark popped in. He had been down to Charlie's to pick up the car for me.

"Hey, hey, hey!" He leaned in the doorway, grinning at me. "Take it all off."

"You're just jealous 'cause you only have to shave once every two weeks."

Mark refused to be bugged. "You think I *want* to scrape my face every day? Thanks, but no thanks."

I glanced at him just to check out what he was wearing. Mark never paid any attention to how he dressed—I wouldn't be surprised if someday he completely forgot he was supposed to have something on and walked out into the street naked—but somehow he was always dressed right for the occasion. He had on a gold sweat shirt and wheat-colored jeans and tennis shoes.

"What are you wearin'?" Mark asked. His voice sounded funny.

I shrugged. "I don't know yet."

Mark turned to leave. "I gotta go now. I'm supposed to meet Terry over at his house. I left the key in Charlie's car." As he was leaving he called over his shoulder, "I found this shirt out in the street, and it's lying on the bed if you want to see it." I heard the door slam and the sound of his light running steps on the porch.

I finished washing off my face and went into our room. Mark and I shared a bedroom which was pretty small—we have a small house—and it seemed even smaller with our twin beds. One was against each wall and that left only a path about three-feet wide to the closet. I wanted to get a look at this shirt Mark had "found out in the street."

It was real funny—that shirt happened to be just my size and dark blue, which happens to be a good color for me. For a minute I wondered whether he had bought it or stolen it—they were the same thing to Mark—but I decided to forget about it. After all, it's the thought that counts. Mark's clothes were almost all things I had outgrown. I grinned as I buttoned up the shirt. If Mark really cared about clothes he would steal some, but he didn't. But he knew me well enough to know what I would be thinking about.

If you have two friends in your lifetime, you're lucky. If you have one *good* friend, you're more than lucky.

Charlie's car wasn't anything you'd stop and stare at, but it was decent-looking. I felt funny when I stopped in front of Cathy's house. I had always thought of it as M&M's house, and now I thought of it as Cathy's house. I had never paid any attention to M&M's parents and I was about to go crazy trying to remember if I had ever said anything rude or had got smart with them, but I couldn't remember. If I had, I hoped they wouldn't remember.

Cathy's father opened the door. He said, "Hi, Bryon" friendly enough—I guess as friendly as any father ever greets the kid who's taking out his daughter—so I figured I was safe. M&M was lying on his stomach on the floor reading a book with a little sister sitting on his back pulling his hair. I stepped over him. When M&M was reading you could blow up the house around him and he'd never notice. I'm that way myself.

Cathy's mother came from the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron, and in the kitchen some more little kids were fighting over who was going to rinse and who was going to dry.

"Cathy will be ready in a minute," Mrs. Carlson said. "Please sit down, Bryon. We haven't seen you in a while."

"I've been out looking for a job," I said, sitting down on a rubber duck. "Mark and I run into M&M every now and then."

“How can you tell him and Cathy apart?” Mr. Carlson said dryly. “I can’t any more.”

“Now, Jim . . .” Mrs. Carlson began nervously. “We agreed not to say any more about M&M’s hair.”

Even his own family called him M&M. I tried to remember for a second what his real name was, but I couldn’t think of it. In the silence Cathy screeched, “You give me that brush, you brat!” I stifled a laugh.

“How have you been doing in school, Bryon?” Mrs. Carlson asked. She was pretending she hadn’t heard Cathy.

This was the usual routine questioning you go through when you have to talk to your date’s parents, but I didn’t mind. At Angela’s house her mother and her stepfather were always fighting and screaming and throwing things, and sometimes her brothers Tim and Curly would get in on it, and I’d sort of duck flying objects until Angela came out of her room, cussing and throwing things along with the rest of them. So you can see why sitting in the Carlson’s front room answering questions wasn’t really bothering me.

“I’m doing pretty well in school,” I answered. “Mostly A’s and B’s.” I decided I wouldn’t say anything about flunking chemistry. The teacher and I had a personality conflict—and when I want to cause a teacher trouble, you’d better believe I can do it.

“M&M is flunking math and gym,” Mr. Carlson said in the same tone he had used when talking about M&M’s hair. “How anyone can flunk gym is beyond me.”

I could tell that M&M was listening to the conversation but was staring at his book, pretending he wasn’t. I understood what he was doing. I have stared at a book pretending I couldn’t hear what was going on around me, too. If people think you can’t hear them, they talk as if you couldn’t. You can hear some pretty neat stuff that way.

“It’s not as if M&M was an invalid,” Mr. Carlson was saying when Cathy came out of her room.

“I’m ready,” she said. She had on a yellow pants outfit that looked real cute on her.

I got up. “O.K., let’s go.” On the way out she gave M&M a friendly kick.

When we were in the car she said, “I wish Daddy would leave M&M alone. He’s so sensitive, it hurts him for Dad to tease him about his hair or bawl him out for his grades. It seems to me they should be glad about his other grades—his English teacher says M&M has the most brilliant mind she’s come across in five years of teaching—and be glad he’s never gotten into any kind of trouble, instead of picking at him because of his hair.” She sighed. “I guess since M&M and I are the oldest, we’re the closest. I guess you know about that though. I forgot you have a brother too.”

“Yeah, I know about that,” I said. Of course, I never heard Mom gripe about anything Mark did—he could get away with things I wouldn’t dare try. I never resented Mark for this. I took it as a matter of fact that Mark was different from other people and was therefore treated differently.

Cathy sighed, “Well, I’m not going to worry about it now. I want to have a good time tonight.” She gave me a quick, shy smile. She was sitting close enough for me to put my arm around her, which I did. I was intending to have a good time too.

* * *

We could hear the music even before we got there. The band was supposed to be a good one—it was loud enough, which with a dance is at least half the way to being good. I was really proud of having such a cute date, and I was hoping Angela would be there. I wanted to show her up. I’d gone with Angela for months, longer than I’d ever gone with anyone. I wanted to show her that I had no

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