

Chapter 12

THE HEARING WASN'T anything like I thought it would be. Besides Darry and Soda and me, nobody was there except Randy and his parents and Cherry Valance and her parents and a couple of the other guys that had jumped Johnny and me that night. I don't know what I expected the whole thing to be like--- I guess I've been watching too many Perry Mason shows. Oh, yeah, the doctor was there and he had a long talk with the judge before the hearing. I didn't know what he had to do with it then, but I do now.

First Randy was questioned. He looked a little nervous, and I wished they'd let him have a cigarette. I wished they'd let me have a cigarette; I was more than a little shaky myself. Darry had told me to keep my mouth shut no matter what Randy and everybody said, that I'd get my turn. All the Socs told the same story and stuck mainly to the truth, except they said Johnny had killed Bob; but I figured I could straighten that point out when I got my turn. Cherry told them what had happened before and after Johnny and I had been jumped--- I think I saw a couple of tears slide down her cheeks, but I'm not sure. Her voice was sure steady even if she was crying. The judge questioned everyone carefully, but nothing real emotional or exciting happened like it does on TV. He asked Darry and Soda a little bit about Dally, I think to check our background and find out what kind of guys we hung out with. Was he a real good buddy of ours? Darry said, "Yes, sir;" looking straight at the judge, not flinching; but Soda looked at me like he was sentencing me to the electric chair before he gave the same answer. I was real proud of both of them. Dally had been one of our gang and we wouldn't desert him. I thought the judge would never get around to questioning me. Man, I was scared almost stiff by the time he did. And you know what? They didn't ask me a thing about Bob's getting killed. All the judge did was ask me if I liked living with Darry, if I liked school, what kind of grades I made, and stuff like that. I couldn't figure it out then, but later I found out what the doctor had been talking to the judge about. I guess I looked as scared as I really was, because the judge grinned at me and told me to quit chewing my fingernails. That's a habit I have. Then he said I was acquitted and the whole case was closed. Just like that. Didn't even give me a chance to talk much. But that didn't bother me a lot. I didn't feel like talking anyway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

if she was scared of me, even though I'd never caused any trouble in her class. You can bet that made me feel real tuff.

"Yessir," I said, "I'll try. What's the theme supposed to be on?"

"Anything you think is important enough to write about. And it isn't a reference theme; I want your own ideas and your own experiences."

My first trip to the zoo. Oh, boy, oh, boy. "Yessir," I said, and got out of there as fast as I could.

At lunch hour I met Two-Bit and Steve out in the back parking lot and we drove over to a little neighborhood grocery store to buy cigarettes and Cokes and candy bars. The store was the grease hang-out and that was about all we ever had for lunch. The Socs were causing a lot of trouble in the school cafeteria--- throwing silverware and stuff--- and everybody tried to blame it on us greasers. We all got a big laugh out of that. Greasers rarely even eat in the cafeteria.

I was sitting on the fender of Steve's car, smoking and drinking a Pepsi while he and Two-Bit were inside talking to some girls, ywhen a car drove up and three Socs got out. I just sat there and looked at them and took another swallow of the Pepsi. I wasn't scared. It was the oddest feeling in the world. I didn't feel anything--- scared, mad, or anything. Just zero.

"You're the guy that killed Bob Sheldon," one of them said. "And he was a friend of ours. We don't like nobody killing our friends, especially greasers."

Big deal. I busted the end off my bottle and held on to the neck and tossed away my cigarette "You get back into your car or you'll get split."

They looked kind of surprised, and one of them backed up.

"I mean it" I hopped off the car. "I've had about all I can take from you guys." I started toward them, holding the bottle the way Tim Shepard holds a switch--- out and

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

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

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

"Ponyboy, listen, don't get tough. You're not like the rest of us and don't try to be..."

What was the matter with Two-Bit? I knew as well as he did that if you got tough you didn't get hurt. Get smart and nothing can touch you...

"What in the world are you doing?" Two-Bit's voice broke into my thoughts.

I looked up at him. "Picking up the glass."

He stared at me for a second, then grinned. "You little sonofagun," he said in a relieved voice. I didn't know what he was talking about, so I just went on picking up the glass from the bottle end and put it in a trash can. I didn't want anyone to get a flat tire.

I tried to write that theme when I got home. I really did, mostly because Darry told me to or else. I thought about writing about Dad, but I couldn't. It's going to be a long time before I can even think about my parents. A long time. I tried writing about Soda's horse, Mickey Mouse, but I couldn't get it right; it always came out sounding corny. So I started writing names across the paper. Darrel Shayne Curtis, Jr. Soda Patrick Curtis. Ponyboy Michael Curtis. Then I drew horses all over it. That was going to get a good grade like all git-out.

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

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

"Okay."

"Something wrong?"

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

Soda cooked dinner that night, and everything came out right. That was unusual, because he's always trying something different. One time we had green pancakes. Green. I can tell you one thing: if you've got a brother like Sodapop, you're never bored.

All through supper Soda was quiet, and he didn't eat much. That was really unusual. Most of the time you can't shut him up or fill him up. Darry didn't seem to notice, so I didn't say anything.

Then after supper me and Darry got into a fuss, about the fourth one we'd had that week. This one started because I hadn't done anything on that theme, and I wanted to go for a ride. It used to be that I'd just stand there and let Darry yell at me, but lately I'd been yelling right back.

"What's the sweat about my schoolwork?" I finally shouted. "I'll have to get a job as soon as I get out of school anyway. Look at Soda. He's doing okay, and he dropped out. You can just lay off!"

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

I went tight and cold. We never talked about Dallas or Johnny. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd like me just to get out. Well, it's not that easy, is it, Soda?" But when I looked at Soda I stopped. His face was white, and when he looked at me his eyes were wide with a pained expression. I suddenly remembered Curly Shepard's face when he slipped off a telephone pole and broke his arm.

"Don't... Oh, you guys, why can't you..." He jumped up suddenly and bolted out the door. Darry and I were struck dumb. Darry picked up the envelope that Soda had dropped.

"It's the letter he wrote Sandy," Darry said without expression. "Returned unopened."

So that was what had been bugging Soda all afternoon. And I hadn't even bothered to find out. And while I was thinking about it, I realized that I never had paid much attention to Soda's problems. Darry and I just took it for granted that he didn't have any.

"When Sandy went to Florida... it wasn't Soda, Ponyboy. He told me he loved her, but I guess she didn't love him like he thought she did, because it wasn't him."

"You don't have to draw me a picture," I said.

"He wanted to marry her anyway, but she just left." Darry was looking at me with a puzzled expression. "Why didn't he tell you? I didn't think he'd tell Steve or Two-Bit, but I thought he told you everything."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

giving up just to give you a chance he missed out on. He could have stuck you in a home somewhere and worked his way through college. Ponyboy, I'm telling you the truth. I dropped out because I'm dumb. I really did try in school, but you saw my grades. Look, I'm happy working in a gas station with cars. You'd never be happy doing something like that. And Darry, you ought to try to understand him more, and quit bugging him about every little mistake he makes. He feels things differently than you do." He gave us a pleading look. "Golly, you two, it's bad enough having to listen to it, but when you start trying to get me to take sides..." Tears welled up in his eyes. "We're all we've got left. We ought to be able to stick together against everything. If we don't have each other, we don't have anything. If you don't have anything, you end up like Dallas... and I don't mean dead, either. I mean like he was before. And that's worse than dead. Please"--- he wiped his eyes on his arm--- "don't fight anymore."

Darry looked real worried. I suddenly realized that Darry was only twenty, that he wasn't so much older that he couldn't feel scared or hurt and as lost as the rest of us. I saw that I had expected Darry to do all the understanding without even trying to understand him. And he had given up a lot for Soda and me.

"Sure, little buddy," Darry said softly. "We're not going to fight anymore."

"Hey, Ponyboy"--- Soda gave me a tearful grin--- "don't you start crying, too. One bawl-baby in the family's enough."

"I'm not crying," I said. Maybe I was. I don't remember. Soda gave me a playful punch on the shoulder.

"No more fights. Okay, Ponyboy?" Darry said.

"Okay," I said. And I meant it. Darry and I would probably still have misunderstandings--- we were too different not to--- but no more fights. We couldn't do anything to hurt Soda. Sodapop would always be the middleman, but that didn't mean he had to keep getting pulled apart. Instead of Darry and me pulling me apart, he'd be pulling us together.