

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,

14

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 ac-

15

tion. 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.

16

"Lord Bryon, were you named after him?"

The poor kid had *Bryon* 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 *lim-erick* 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 Bryon tradition in one way. Sometimes I'd get to feeling bad thinking about how rotten I treated some of these

17

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 it 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.

20

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

21

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 swift 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. "Thanks, 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.

2

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