horror movie.

A beetle came out of his mouth, trekked across his fuzzless cheek, stepped onto a nettle, and was gone.

'D'joo see that?' Teddy asked in a high, strange, fainting voice. 'I bet he's fuckin' fulla bugs! I bet his brains're-

'Shut up, Teddy,' Chris said, and Teddy did, looking relieved.

Lightning forked blue across the sky, making the boy's single eye light up. You could almost believe he was glad to be found, and found by boys his own age. His torso had swelled up and there was a faint gassy odour about him, like the smell of old farts.

I turned away, sure I was going to be sick, but my stomach was dry, hard, steady. I suddenly rammed two fingers down my throat, trying to make myself heave, needing to do it, as if I could sick it up and get rid of it. But my stomach only hitched a little and then was steady again.

The roaring downpour and the accompanying thunder had completely covered the sound of cars approaching along the Back Harlow Road, which lay bare yards beyond this boggy tangle. It likewise covered the crackle-crunch of the underbrush as they blundered through it from the dead end where they had parked.

And the first we knew of them was Ace Merrill's voice raised above the tumult of the storm, saying: 'Well what the fuck do you know about this?'

26

We all jumped like we had been goosed and Vern cried out -he admitted later that he thought, for just a second, that the voice had come from the dead boy.

On the far side of the boggy patch, where the woods took up again, masking the butt end of the road, Ace Merrill and Eyeball Chambers stood together, half-obscured by a pouring grey curtain of rain. They were both wearing red nylon high school jackets, the kind you can buy in the office if you're a regular student, the same kind they give away free to varsity sports players. Their da haircuts had been plastered back against their skulls and a mixture of rainwater and Vitalis ran down their cheeks like ersatz tears.

'Sumbitch!' Eyeball said. That's my little brother!

Chris was staring at Eyeball with his mouth open. His shirt, wet, limp and dark, was still tied around his skinny middle. His pack, stained a darker green by the rain, was hanging against his naked shoulderblades.

'You get away, Rich,' he said in a trembling voice. 'We found him. We got dibs.'

'Fuck your dibs. We're gonna report 'im,'

'No you're not,' I said. I was suddenly furious with them, turning up this way at the last minute. If we'd thought about it, we'd have known something just like this was going to happen ... but this was one time, somehow, that the older, bigger kids weren't going to steal it - to take something they wanted as if by divine right, as if their easy way was the right way, the only way. They had come in cars -I think that was what made me angriest They had come in cars. 'There's four of us, Eyeball. You just try.'

'Oh, we'll try, don't worry,' Eyeball said, and the trees shook behind him and Ace, Charlie Hogan and Vern's brother Billy stepped through them, cursing and wiping water out of their eyes. I felt a lead ball drop into my belly. It grew bigger as Jack Mudgett and Fuzzy Brackowicz stepped out behind Charlie and Billy.

'Here we all are,' Ace said, grinning. 'So you just '-
'VERN!!' Billy Tessio cried in a terrible, accusing, my-justice-cometh-and-that-right-early voice. He made a pair of dripping fists. 'You little sonofawhore! You was under the porch! Cock-knocker!'

Vern flinched.

Charlie Hogan waxed positively lyrical: 'You little keyhole-peeping cunt-licking bungwipe! I ought to beat the living shit out of you!'

'Yeah? Well, try it!' Teddy brayed suddenly. His eyes were crazily alight behind his rainspotted glasses. 'Come on, fightcha for 'im! Come on! Come on, big men!'

Billy and Charlie didn't need a second invitation. They started forward together and Vern flinched again - no doubt visualizing the ghosts of Beatings Past and Beatings Yet To Come. He flinched ... but hung tough. He was with his friends, and we had been through a lot, and we hadn't got here in a couple of cars.

But Ace held Billy and Charlie back, simply by touching each of them on the shoulder.

'Now listen, you guys,' Ace said. He spoke patiently, just as if we weren't all standing in a roaring rainstorm. 'There's more of us than there are of you. We're bigger. We'll give you one chance to just blow away. I don't give a fuck where. Just make like a tree and leave.'

Chris's brother giggled and Fuzzy clapped Ace on the back in appreciation of his great wit. The Sid Caesar of the jd set.

"Cause we're takin' him.' Ace smiled gently, and you could imagine him smiling that same gentle smile just before breaking his cue over the head of some uneducated punk who had made the terrible mistake of licking off while Ace was lining up a shot. 'If you go, well take him. If you stay, well beat the piss outta you and still take him. Besides,' he added, trying to gild the thuggery with a little righteousness, 'Charlie and Billy found him, so it's their dibs anyway.'

'They was chicken!' Teddy shot back. 'Vern told us about it! They was fuckin' chicken right outta their fuckin' minds!' He screwed his face up into a terrified, snivelling parody of Charlie Hogan. "I wish we never boosted that car! I wish we never went on no Back Harlow Road to whack off a piece! Oh Billee, what are we gonna do? Oh Billee, I think I just made a pile in my Fruit of the Looms! Oh Billee -"

That's it,' Charlie said, starting forward again. His face was knotted with rage and sullen embarrassment. 'Kid, whatever your name is, get ready to reach down your fuckin' throat the next time you need to pick your nose.'

I looked wildly down at Ray Brower. He stared calmly up into the rain with his one eye, below us but above it all. The thunder was still booming steadily, but the rain had begun to slack off.

'What do you say, Gordie?' Ace asked. He was holding Charlie lightly by the arm, the way an accomplished trainer would restrain a vicious dog. 'You must have at least some of your brother's sense. Tell these guys to back off. I'll let Charlie beat up the four eyes el punko a little bit and then we all go about our business. What do you say?'

He was wrong to mention Denny. I had wanted to reason with him, to point out what Ace knew perfectly well, that we had every right to take Billy and Charlie's dibs since Vern had heard them giving said dibs away. I wanted to tell him how Vern and I had almost gotten run down by a freight train on the trestle which spans the Castle River. About Milo Pressman and his fearless - if stupid - sidekick, Chopper the Wonder-Dog. About the bloodsuckers, too. I guess all I really wanted to tell him was come on, Ace, fair is fair. You know that. But he had to bring Denny into it, and what I heard coming out of my mouth instead of sweet reason was my own death warrant: 'Suck my fat one, you cheap dime-store hood.'

Ace's mouth formed a perfect O of surprise - the expression was so unexpectedly prissy that under other circumstances it would have been a laft riot, so to speak. All of the
others - on both sides of the bog - stared at me. dumbfounded.

Then Teddy screamed gleefully: "That's telling 'im, Gordie! Oh boy! Too cool!"

I stood numbly, unable to believe it. It was like some crazed understudy had shot
onstage at the critical moment anddeclaimed lines that weren't even in the play. Telling a
guy to suck was as bad as you could get without resorting to his mother. Out of the corner
of my eye I saw that Chris had unshouldered his knapsack and was digging into it
frantically, but I didn't get it — not then, anyway.

'Okay,' Ace said softly. 'Let's take 'em. Don't hurt nobody but the Lachance kid. I'm
gonna break both his fuckin' arms.'

I went dead cold. I didn't piss myself the way I had on the railroad trestle, but it must
have been because I had nothing inside to let out. He meant it, you see: the years between
then and now have changed my mind about a lot of things, but not about that. When Ace
said he was going to break both of my arms, he absolutely meant it.

They started to walk towards us through the slackening rain. Jackie Mudgett took a
DeMano switchknife out of his pocket and hit the chrome. Six inches of steel flicked out,
dove-grey in the afternoon half-light. Vern and Teddy dropped suddenly into fighting
crouches on either side of me. Teddy did so eagerly, Vern with a desperate, cornered
grimace on his face.

The big kids advanced in a line, their feet splashing through the bog, which was now
one big sludgy puddle because of the storm. The body of Ray Brower lay at our feet like a
waterlogged barrel. I got ready to fight... and that was when Chris fired the pistol he had
hawked out of his old man's dresser.

KA-BLAM!

God, what a wonderful sound that was! Charlie Hogar jumped right up into the air.
Ace Merrill, who had been staring straight at me, now jerked around and looked at Chris.
His mouth made that O again. Eyeball looked absolutely astounded.

'Hey, Chris, that's Daddy's,' he said. 'You're gonna get the tar whaled out of you —'

"That's nothing to what you'll get," Chris said. His face was horribly pale, and all the
life in him seemed to have been sucked upward, into his eyes. They blazed out of his face.
'Gordie was right, you're nothing but a bunch of cheap hoods. Vern and Billy didn't want
their fuckin' dibs and you all know it. We wouldn't have walked way to fuck out here if
they said they did. They just went someplace and puked the story up and let Ace Merrill
do their thinkin' for them.' His voice rose to a scream. 'But you ain't gonna get him, do
you hear me?'

'Now listen,' Ace said. 'You better put that down before you take your foot off with it.
You ain't got the sack to shoot a woodchuck.' He began to walk forward again, smiling
his gentle smile as he came. 'You're just a sawed-off pint-sized pissy-assed little runt and
I'm gonna make you eat that fuckin' gun.'

'Ace, if you don't stand still I'm going to shoot you. I swear to God.'

'You'll go to jayyy-ail' Ace crooned, not even hesitating. He was still smiling. The
others watched him with horrified fascination... much the same way as Teddy and Vern
and I were looking at Chris. Ace Merrill was the hardest case for miles around and I didn't
think Chris could bluff him down. And what did that leave? Ace didn't think a twelve-
year-old punk would actually shoot him. I thought he was wrong; I thought Chris would
shoot Ace before he let Ace take his father's pistol away from him. In those few seconds I
was sure there was going to be bad trouble, the worst I'd ever known. Killing trouble,
maybe. And all of it over who got dibs on a dead body.

Chris said softly, with great regret: 'Where do you want it, Ace? Arm or leg? I can't
pick. You pick for me.'

And Ace stopped.