

# RUMBLE FISH BY S.E. HINTON

*S.E. Hinton is a writer based in Tulsa. Her first novel, The Outsiders, was published in 1967. While suffering writer's block following the book's success, Hinton was inspired by a photograph she called "The Motorcycle Man." She soon wrote the following story, which first appeared in the Nimrod International Journal of Poetry and Prose in 1968. The original story is reprinted here with permission from Nimrod.*

They called him the Motorcycle Boy because of his passion for motorcycles—he didn't have one and never would but he could ride them like a professional and often did. He had a bad habit of borrowing people's motorcycles and going for rides without informing the owner of his intentions. Which was just one of the many things he got away with. In spite of his cycle craze, he had no interest in the clubs or gangs usually associated with them. He was a loner in the first place. No one was close to him.

His younger brother, Rusty-James, idolized him and shadowed him everywhere, but not even his brother knew him. Many wished they could say the Motorcycle Boy was their friend, but no one did. He had followers, admirers, enemies, but no friends. He was not a lonely person, only an alone person. Rusty-James, too old for thirteen, was just the opposite. He had a dread fear of being alone, and surrounded himself with people; the Motorcycle Boy, his chick (a bleached-blond, tough little girl who smoked two packs a day), his gang. When Rusty-James was two years old, his mother decided to leave, taking the older boy, then six, with her. Their father went on a three-day drunk when he found out, and Rusty-James was left alone for those three days. Their mother abandoned the Motorcycle Boy eventually, and he was returned to his father, who had sobered up enough to go home. But the damage was done, and whenever Rusty-James happened to be alone, he broke out in a sweat and became very jumpy. The Motorcycle Boy knew why Rusty-James was afraid to be by himself, but didn't mention it. He didn't think it'd do Rusty-James any good to find out.

The Motorcycle Boy was six-two at seventeen and heavily muscled, but so graceful that his largeness caught you unawares—and since he used to be the leader of the neighborhood gang (gangs were out of style now, but the guys still hung around together) he was considered dangerous. He was beautiful—he had a classic profile and an expressionless, animal face. His hair was long in the Beatle style, but he'd worn it that way before there were Beatles. It was a dark, heavy, liver red, and in a neighborhood where grease-slicked hair was the style, it was surprisingly clean and shining. His eyes were so dark that they looked black, but were, on closer inspection, a chocolate color. They were frightening in sort of a non-sinister way—they gave the uncomfortable feeling of a two-way mirror. You knew there was someone on the other side watching your every move, but the only reflection you saw was your own. While he was always expressionless (except for very rare grins that flashed like distant lightning) there was a sense of laughter about him. A terrible, tragic, gallant laughter.

Rusty-James was a smaller version of his brother—he too was going to be big, he had the dark red hair and the midnight eyes, but he had a very readable face and a range of temperaments from compassion to blind rage. But, unlike the Motorcycle Boy, people didn't notice his beauty, they saw only the faded jeans and the black T-shirt and the leather jacket on a boy too big and tough for his age. Rusty-James would never have the air of a prince-in-exile that the Motorcycle Boy had. He tried his best to be like his brother, because to him, the Motorcycle Boy represented perfection. He wanted to be cool like the Motorcycle Boy, he wanted to be smart like the Motorcycle Boy, he wanted to be able to remain calm and laughing in the face of danger. He wanted people to turn and watch him stride down the street, and he wished he too had the reputation of the toughest street fighter and the most respected hood on the North Side. But Rusty-James, try as he might, couldn't control his temper, he couldn't take the time to think things out in advance, he couldn't sit still long enough to read the books his brother seemed to find fascinating, and he couldn't hold back the intensity of feeling that made it impossible for him to keep cool in a fight. When Rusty-James was being perfectly frank with himself he admitted he couldn't understand his brother anymore than anyone else could, yet he ran to catch up with him, shuffling two steps to his brother's one long stride.

And so the Motorcycle Boy's greatness was not quite lost—he should have been a knight somewhere, or a pagan prince in a time of heroes, but since he lived on the wrong side of the river in the wrong century, he was merely a neighborhood novelty; the Robin Hood, the Jesse James, the Pied Piper to a handful of blue-jeaned juvenile delinquents who loved him and followed him and admired him for all the wrong reasons.

Once the Motorcycle Boy borrowed a cycle and was gone for two weeks. He told no one he was going, or when he was coming back, if ever, and Rusty-James almost went crazy. He picked fights with his girl friend, edged his gang into a fight with a neighboring gang who had always been reasonably friendly, even back in the time of the Rumbles, and he became even more disgusted than usual with his father.

The Motorcycle Boy came back, though. The first thing Rusty-James knew about it was when he stopped in the drugstore after school and found the Motorcycle Boy reading a Newsweek magazine.

"Hey, uh, whereya been?" Rusty-James wanted to slap his brother on the back and cuss him out and hug him, but he walked the line of coolness he had been brought up on.

"California" said the Motorcycle Boy without looking up.

"No kiddin'? The ocean and everything? How was it?"

The Motorcycle Boy glanced up. "I never got to the river."

Rusty-James got that old sinking feeling that the Motorcycle Boy was laughing at something that wasn't funny. "I thought you were gone for good," he said.

"Did you know I got expelled from school?" The Motorcycle Boy didn't hear Rusty-James' last remark. At times he went stone deaf; he'd had a lot of concussions in motorcycle wrecks, or so they said.

"How come?" Rusty-James was surprised. He himself had been suspended several times—for carrying a switchblade and getting into fights, cussing out teachers and general hell-raising—but the Motorcycle Boy had always sat quietly in class, his eyes watching, his mind adrift on a distant river.

"I handed in perfect semester tests." This was one of the rare times the laughter rose to the surface and he grinned openly. "Perfect tests." The Motorcycle Boy shook his head in amusement. In a tough district school like this the teachers had to put up with enough

without having students turn in papers without mistakes. He could understand that.

Rusty-James found his voice. "But that ain't fair!"

The Motorcycle Boy went back to his magazine. "When the hell did you start expecting anything to be fair?" he said without bitterness. "Toss me a weed, willya?" He absent-mindedly reached out and punched Rusty-James on the shoulder.

They went out roaming around the city that night, across the bridge to where the lights were. The Motorcycle Boy was basically a night person. He couldn't see colors anyway, only black and white and shades of grey. Everyone thought that was normal for a color-blind person and assumed he'd been born that way—it wasn't the type of neighborhood to study up on color-blindness. The Motorcycle Boy didn't buy that theory because it seemed to him that he could dimly remember colors, way back when he was a little kid. That was quite a while ago; he stopped being a little kid at five. It didn't bother him much except when riding a cycle he tended to go sailing through red lights.

Rusty-James had bought a jug of red pete and swallowed most of it during the first hour. The wine was the favorite drink of the gang because it was cheap, and the Motorcycle Boy found a half pint of cherry vodka under their father's cot and gave it to Rusty-James to mix with the red pete. The mixture didn't taste very good but Rusty-James never bothered about the taste. He was high in no time at all. The Motorcycle Boy didn't drink because he didn't like anything clouding his mind. Rusty-James was drunk every time he got a chance because he thought it made him happy. Their father was drunk every minute and had the D.T.'s with regularity—it didn't make him happy, Rusty knew that, but he didn't know what else to do.

They had a good time that night. The Motorcycle Boy loved to watch people, and he was quietly noting every detail of the city, trying to get the feel of the night. Rusty-James, who never paid attention to anything, was talkative and loud, trying to harass by-passers, trying to pick up girls, trying to start fights. He probably would have accomplished all three except for the silent intervention of the Motorcycle Boy, who was amused but not interested.

"This is cool, ain't it?" Rusty-James was happy that the Motorcycle Boy was back, because the Motorcycle Boy was the only person Rusty-James really loved; he was glad to be out of the gray streets of the neighborhood into the lights of the strip, and he was good and high.

"What?" the Motorcycle Boy asked absentmindedly. He was watching the crowd come out of a movie theatre. It was a mixture of the slimy things that crawl out of the alley garbage heaps at night, and a group of high school kids who were laughing and snickering. The marquee said "Sin City" and, in smaller letters, "Adults Only." The Motorcycle Boy was laughing to himself.

"Everything." Rusty-James waved a cigarette at the lights and the noise of the city streets. "Everything is so cool, the lights I mean, and all the people. I dig it when there's lots of people." He stopped for a second and tried to remember why he liked lots of people, but the wine had fogged his mind. "Hey, you can't see colors can ya? What's it look like to you?"

The Motorcycle Boy made an effort to come back to the real world. "Huh? Oh yeah, it just looks like... black and white TV, that's all."

Rusty-James pondered this. He had seen black and white TV at his chick's flat and shuddered. "That's too bad, I mean, you can't see what it's really like, all nice and bright and everything. It's too bad you can't see what it's like."

The Motorcycle Boy's eyebrows went up just so slightly, but all he said was "Yeah."

The Motorcycle Boy stopped to admire a cycle parked in front of a pool hall. He searched it thoroughly for a

key, and finding none, went into the pool hall to find the owner and bully him into letting him go for a ride. He got side-tracked into a pool game while he was inside. The Motorcycle Boy was the best pool player on the block.

Rusty-James was crocked out of his mind, and he hadn't even noticed when the Motorcycle Boy stopped. He wandered around for twenty minutes before he realized his brother wasn't with him. When he did, he sobered up in a hurry.

It was four in the morning and the crowds were gone now, and the lights were out and the streets deserted. Rusty-James started getting his tense, tight feeling of being alone. The neighborhood looked slightly familiar, and he started through the alleys, going west. It was always a good idea to stay in the middle of the streets if you were alone and in a strange place, but Rusty-James was starting to get the shakes and he wanted to get home quick. He didn't wonder where the Motorcycle Boy was—he was used to his brother's absent-minded habits.

Two shapes stepped out of the shadows to block his path, one Negro and one white, and Rusty-James remembered that the gang he'd picked a fight with the week before lived in this neighborhood. He wasn't too shook. He was really kind of glad, because he didn't like being alone. "Hey you, you from the Packer's territory, ain't you?"

The Packers had been the old gang and Rusty-James' neighborhood was still known by it. Rusty-James wished he could think of some smart remark to flip at them—the Motorcycle Boy would have said something funny, and probably would have gotten them laughing, too. But they wouldn't dare try to fight the Motorcycle Boy. Rusty-James could think of nothing to say, so he stood his ground, waiting. He had what the gangs used to call "heart" and it took heart to stand there and wait for possible death.

The Negro stepped forward, and Rusty-James saw that he had a tire tool. He instinctively ducked and the tire tool glanced off the side of the alley before clipping him across the side of the head. If it had hit him straight on it would have killed him, but as it was, Rusty-James saw a flash of white light, then dropped into darkness. The Negro was raising the tire tool again when it was torn from his hands, and the Motorcycle Boy, who had already flattened the white half of the team, smashed the Negro's side in with the tool. He didn't try to go after them as they stumbled off.

He thought Rusty-James was dead. He pulled the limp body up, and sat leaning against the alley wall, holding his brother in a crushing grip. He fought down the lump in his throat, slightly puzzled because it was there at all. He finally realized that Rusty-James was still breathing, so he quit quivering and shifted his brother to one shoulder and lit a cigarette. The alley stank, and the rats moving around in the narrow shaft between the buildings sometimes stopped to sniff at the Motorcycle Boy's tennis shoes. He wondered impersonally what he was doing in a filthy alley, holding his half-dead brother, surrounded by brick and cement. It wasn't that he minded

brick and cement—there hadn't been so many walls out west, but the Motorcycle Boy was used to walls, and the openness had given him an uneasy feeling. If the silence wasn't bugging him, all that crazy air was.

California was no big deal. Sure the kids there had looked well-fed and maybe were dressed nice, but their social games had made as little sense as the old gang warfare. He'd met a girl there—she was young and had long blond hair, but they all had long blond hair, and he had moved into the beach scene with the bland ease that marked him a leader. He'd gone to the dances and the parties, welcomed because he was beautiful and it was a land of beautiful people. The girl was a nice girl, not a tramp—she just loved boys with red hair, she said. He had caught her stuffing corn chips in her mouth after every sip of beer.

"How come?"  
"I just can't stand the taste of this stuff."  
"Don't drink it then. Drink some of the hard stuff."

She shook her long mane. "I don't want to get drunk. It makes me sick."

"Well, what do you think you're doing?"  
"Everyone else is drinking beer" she smiled at him. "So me, too."

The Motorcycle Boy picked up a gold strand of hair. It was just starting to darken at the roots. Everyone's hair was blond. He had looked around at the empty room full of dancing people and then left. He didn't like oceans anyway. He liked rivers.

The Motorcycle Boy tried to use his shirttail to wipe the blood off of Rusty-James' face, but when he moved Rusty-James made a funny little animal sound, so the Motorcycle Boy sat still. He wondered how many times Rusty-James had been clipped before, when the Rumbles had been going on. He himself had a long scar across his ribs. The Motorcycle Boy never had the intensity of feeling that the rest of the gang had. Fighting over a street, he thought, when one piece of street was just like every other piece of street. When he had found himself in the boring role of gang leader, he had tried out a few battle plans just for fun, then ended the Rumbles. Gangs were out of style now, he told them. The gang was happy enough to quit when they were ahead, the neighboring gangs had no desire to fight a gang led by the Motorcycle Boy, and the Motorcycle Boy thought the whole thing was just a waste of blood and time and lives. He'd known a lot of guys who went down swinging their chains and pipes never to get up again.

The last guy to die in the Rumbles was a fifteen year old Packer, a tense, small blond-headed kid who died screaming for the Packers instead of his mother. That's how important the gang had been then. The Motorcycle Boy could still see the dark blood on that bright blond hair.

Rusty-James came to for a second. He didn't know what he was saying as he mumbled: "I thought you were gone for good."

"Huh" the Motorcycle Boy took a drag on his cigarette. "Not me. I get homesick."

It took Rusty-James a week to recover completely—he was up and around the next day but his head hurt more than he'd admit, and he was subject to dizzy spells

for a long time. He was suspended from school that week. It made him mad to look at a teacher after what they'd done to the Motorcycle Boy and he had ended up swinging on his industrial teacher. So he had nothing to do but hang around on the corner with a couple of the old gang who had dropped out and didn't have jobs. He had thought that maybe he and the Motorcycle Boy would go running around together, but the Motorcycle Boy had no interest in doing anything.

The Motorcycle Boy had started hanging around the pet store. It was a grimy little store with some scroungy kittens and sad-looking little dogs and a parrot who couldn't be sold because the gang had taught it all the bad words they knew collectively, which were quite a few. What interested the Motorcycle Boy was the new stock the owner had brought in. They were Japanese fighting fish. Each was kept in a separate bowl and each was a different flash of color. Rusty-James noticed how bright the colors were. One was a bright yellow, another a brilliant royal blue, and one was a sunset red-purple. For the first time in his life the Motorcycle Boy was sorry he couldn't see colors.

Rusty-James was puzzled and a little frightened by the way his brother had been acting lately. As for him, he couldn't stand to be in the pet store, all those mournful little animals gave him the creeps.

"Come on," he said. "We got us a poker game in the stockroom down at the drugstore. Remember how you used to take everybody, bluff them out?"

"Rumble fish" said the Motorcycle Boy, looking at the fish. "They'd kill each other if they could. Wonder if they'd act that way in the river."

"I don't know," Rusty-James said. "And I don't give a damn. Hey, why don't we go out boppin' around again tonight? I can get us some red pete—hey, we can get the chicks and have a nice time, huh?"

The Motorcycle Boy had gone deaf again, and he didn't hear. Rusty-James gave up and went back to his poker game where he and the drop-outs talked about the good old days when a gang really meant something.

The Motorcycle Boy broke into the pet store that night. Rusty-James was with him, an unwilling and uninvited partner.

"Look, you need some money? I'll get you some money." He was pleading with the Motorcycle Boy to stop. Rusty-James was scared out of his mind. Not only was the Motorcycle Boy pulling a dangerous stunt by breaking into the pet store, which was right on the street, but he wasn't even being careful about it. "Anyway, if you want money pool halls are the best bet." He stood there, zipping his jacket zipper up and down, watching the Motorcycle Boy jimmy the lock. He tried new logic. "Listen, everybody around here knows you. A million people musta seen you come around here tonight. WILL you listen to me?"

The Motorcycle Boy had the lock on the back door jimmied and went on in. He turned on the light in the back room.

"What are you doing?" Rusty-James nearly screamed. "Do you want the whole block to know?"

Rusty-James had started to shake.

Something in his brother's expressionless face terrified him, the way his dark eyes looked straight through you without seeing you at all. Rusty-James realized his brother had gone deaf again, and he was so scared that he leaned against the alley wall at the side of the store and cried for the first time since he was nine years old.

The Motorcycle Boy had let out all the animals and was on his way to the river with the Japanese fighting fish when the police came. Rusty-James was sitting in the alley, wiping his eyes, when he heard the siren. He leaped up and ran out into the street, and saw what seemed to be millions of red lights flashing. He heard the police car doors slam and he gave a small yelp and ran for the bridge. He was almost there when the police fired a warning shot in the air, but the Motorcycle Boy had gone deaf again and didn't hear, and the police had no way of knowing about that, and they shot him dead.

When they turned him over he was smiling and the little rumble fish were flipping and dying around him, still too far from the river.

Rusty-James could remember nothing from the time he heard the shot and the time they slammed him up against the police car and frisked him. He had the feeling that there was something wrong somewhere. It was too dark—too dark... he stared at the flashing light in front of him and saw that everything had gone black and white, that there wasn't any color anymore. He saw all the faces around him, and saw lips moving, but he couldn't hear a sound.

"Can you hear me?" he cried at the policeman next to him. Not being able to hear his own voice scared him more. "Huh, can you hear me?"

The policeman could but didn't bother to say so. He was busy with his report. Rusty-James thought he was mute as well as deaf, and he had a sense of sinking into aloneness. He broke out in a sweat. He was in a glass bubble and everyone else was outside of it and he'd be alone the rest of his life. He started shaking.

"I think we'd better get this kid to a hospital" said one of the cops. "I think he's in shock."

"Shock, hell," replied his partner. "He's probably on dope or something."

About that time Rusty-James slammed both fists through the police car window and slashed his wrists on the remaining glass, so they had to take him to a hospital anyway.

*Editor's note: Some limited edits have been made to the original text to correct misspellings.*