Opening extract from

The Chocolate War

Written by

Robert Cormier

Published by

Penguin Books Ltd

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your

1

THEY murdered him.

As he turned to take the ball, a dam burst against the side of his head and a hand grenade shattered his stomach. Engulfed by nausea, he pitched toward the grass. His mouth encountered gravel, and he spat frantically, afraid that some of his teeth had been knocked out. Rising to his feet, he saw the field through drifting gauze but held on until everything settled into place, like a lens focusing, making the world sharp again, with edges.

The second play called for a pass. Fading back, he picked up a decent block and cocked his arm, searching for a receiver—maybe the tall kid they called The Goober. Suddenly, he was caught from behind and whirled violently, a toy boat caught in a whirlpool. Landing on his knees, hugging the ball, he urged himself to ignore the pain that gripped his groin, knowing that it was important to betray no sign of distress, remembering The Goober's advice, "Coach is testing you, testing, and he's looking for guts."

I've got guts, Jerry murmured, getting up by degrees, careful not to displace any of his bones or sinews. A telephone rang in his ears. Hello, hello, I'm still here. When he moved his lips, he tasted the acid of dirt and grass and gravel. He was aware of the other players around him,

helmeted and grotesque, creatures from an unknown world. He had never felt so lonely in his life, abandoned, defenseless.

On the third play, he was hit simultaneously by three of them: one, his knees; another, his stomach; a third, his head—the helmet no protection at all. His body seemed to telescope into itself but all the parts didn't fit, and he was stunned by the knowledge that pain isn't just one thing—it is cunning and various, sharp here and sickening there, burning here and clawing there. He clutched himself as he hit the ground. The ball squirted away. His breath went away, like the ball—a terrible stillness pervaded him—and then, at the onset of panic, his breath came back again. His lips sprayed wetness and he was grateful for the sweet cool air that filled his lungs. But when he tried to get up, his body mutinied against movement. He decided the hell with it. He'd go to sleep right here, right out on the fifty yard line, the hell with trying out for the team, screw everything, he was going to sleep, he didn't care anymore . . .

"Renault!"

Ridiculous, someone calling his name.

"Renault!"

The coach's voice scraped like sandpaper against his ears. He opened his eyes flutteringly. "I'm all right," he said to nobody in particular, or to his father maybe. Or the coach. He was unwilling to abandon this lovely lassitude but he had to, of course. He was sorry to leave the earth, and he was vaguely curious about how he was going to get up, with both legs smashed and his skull battered in. He was astonished to find himself on his feet, intact, bobbing like one of those toy novelties dangling from car windows, but erect.

"For Christ's sake," the coach bellowed, his voice juicy with contempt. A spurt of saliva hit Jerry's cheek.

Hey, coach, you spit on me, Jerry protested. Stop the spitting, coach. What he said aloud was, "I'm all right, coach," because he was a coward about stuff like that, thinking one thing and saying another, planning one thing and doing another—he had been Peter a thousand times and a thousand cocks had crowed in his lifetime.

"How tall are you, Renault?"

"Five nine," he gasped, still fighting for breath.

"Weight?"

"One forty-five," he said, looking the coach straight in the eye.

"Soaking wet, I'll bet," the coach said sourly. "What the hell you want to play football for? You need more meat on those bones. What the hell you trying to play quarterback for? You'd make a better end. Maybe."

The coach looked like an old gangster: broken nose, a scar on his cheek like a stitched shoestring. He needed a shave, his stubble like slivers of ice. He growled and swore and was merciless. But a helluva coach, they said. The coach stared at him now, the dark eyes probing, pondering. Jerry hung in there, trying not to sway, trying not to faint.

"All right," the coach said in disgust. "Show up tomorrow. Three o'clock sharp or you're through before you start."

Inhaling the sweet sharp apple air through his nostrils—he was afraid to open his mouth wide, wary of any movement that was not absolutely essential—he walked tentatively toward the sidelines, listening to the coach barking at the other guys. Suddenly, he loved that voice, "Show up tomorrow."

He trudged away from the field, blinking against the afternoon sun, toward the locker room at the gym. His knees were liquid and his body light as air, suddenly.

Know what? he asked himself, a game he played sometimes.

What?

I'm going to make the team.

Dreamer, dreamer.

Not a dream: it's the truth.

As Jerry took another deep breath, a pain appeared, distant, small—a radar signal of distress. Bleep, I'm here. Pain. His feet scuffled through crazy cornflake leaves. A strange happiness invaded him. He knew he'd been massacred by the oncoming players, capsized and dumped humiliatingly on the ground. But he'd survived—he'd gotten to his feet. "You'd make a better end." Was the Coach thinking he might try him at end? Any position, as long as he made the team. The bleep grew larger, localized now, between his ribs on the right side. He thought of his mother and how drugged she was at the end, not recognizing anyone, neither Jerry nor his father. The exhilaration of the moment vanished and he sought it in vain, like seeking ecstasy's memory an instant after jacking off and encountering only shame and guilt.

Nausea began to spread through his stomach, warm and oozy and evil.

"Hey," he called weakly. To nobody. Nobody there to listen.

He managed to make it back to the school. By the time he had sprawled himself on the floor of the lavatory, his head hanging over the lip of the toilet bowl and the smell of disinfectant stinging his eyeballs, the nausea had passed and the bleep of pain had faded. Sweat moved like small moist bugs on his forehead.

And then, without warning, he vomited.

2

OBIE was bored. Worse than bored. He was disgusted. He was also tired. It seemed he was always tired these days. He went to bed tired and he woke up tired. He found himself yawning constantly. Most of all, he was tired of Archie. Archie the bastard. The bastard that Obie alternately hated and admired. For instance, at this minute he hated Archie with a special burning hate that was part of the boredom and the weariness. Notebook in hand, pencil poised, Obie looked at Archie now with fierce anger, furious at the way Archie sat there in the bleachers, his blond hair tossing lightly in the breeze, enjoying himself, for crying out loud, even though he knew that Obie would be late for work and yet keeping him here, stalling, killing time.

"You're a real bastard," Obie said finally, his frustration erupting, like a coke exploding from a bottle after you shake it. "You know that?"

Archie turned and smiled at him benevolently, like a goddam king passing out favors.

"Jesus," Obie said, exasperated.

"Don't swear, Obie," Archie chided. "You'll have to tell it in confession."

"Look who's talking. I don't know how you had the nerve to receive communion at chapel this morning."

"It doesn't take nerve, Obie. When you march down to the rail, you're receiving The Body, man. Me, I'm just chewing a wafer they buy by the pound in Worcester."

Obie looked away in disgust.

"And when you say 'Jesus,' you're talking about your leader. But when I say 'Jesus,' I'm talking about a guy who walked the earth for thirty-three years like any other guy but caught the imagination of some *PR* cats. *PR* for Public Relations, in case you don't know, Obie."

Obie didn't bother to answer. You couldn't ever win an argument with Archie. He was too quick with the words. Especially when he fell into one of his phony hip moods. Saying *man* and *cat*, like he was a swinger, cool, instead of a senior in a lousy little high school like Trinity.

"Come on, Archie, it's getting late," Obie said, trying to appeal to Archie's better nature. "I'm going to get fired one of these days."

"Don't whine, Obie. Besides, you hate the job. You have a subconscious wish to be fired. Then you wouldn't have to stock the shelves any more or take crap from customers or work late Saturday night instead of going to the—what is it you go to?—the Teen-Age Canteen to drool over all those broads."

Archie was uncanny. How did he know Obie hated the stupid job? How did he know that Obie hated especially those Saturday nights stalking the supermarket canyons while everybody else was at the canteen?

"See? I'm doing you a favor. Enough of these late afternoons and the boss'll say, 'You're all done, Obie baby. Set free.' And you'll have one, right in front of him."

"And where'll my money come from?" Obie asked.

Archie waved his hand, signaling that he was tired of the conversation. You could see him physically withdraw although he was only a foot or two away from Obie on the

bleacher bench. The shouts of the fellows from the football field below echoed feebly in the air. Archie's lower lip dropped. That meant he was concentrating. Thinking. Obie waited in anticipation, hating the thing in him that made him look at Archie in admiration. The way Archie could turn people on. Or off. The way he could dazzle you with his brilliance—those Vigil assignments that had made him practically a legend at Trinity—and the way he could disgust you with his cruelties, those strange offbeat cruelties of his, that had nothing to do with pain or violence but were somehow even worse. It made Obie uncomfortable to think of that stuff and he shrugged the thoughts away, waiting for Archie to talk, to say the name.

"Stanton," Archie said finally, whispering the name, caressing the syllables. "I think his first name is Norman."

"Right," Obie said, scrawling the name. Only two more to go. Archie had to come up with ten names by four o'clock and eight were now listed on Obie's pad.

"The assignment?" Obie prodded.

"Sidewalk."

Obie grinned as he wrote the word. Sidewalk: such an innocent word. But what Archie could do with simple things like a sidewalk and a kid like Norman Stanton whom Obie recalled as a blustering bragging character with wild red hair and eyelids matted with yellow crap.

"Hey, Obie," Archie said.

"Yeah?" Obie asked, on guard.

"You really going to be late for work? I mean—would you really lose your job?" Archie's voice was soft with concern, his eyes gentle with compassion. That's what baffled everyone about Archie—his changes of mood, the way he could be a wise bastard one minute and a great guy the next.

"I don't think they'd actually fire me. The guy who owns

the place, he's a friend of the family. But I mean getting there late doesn't, like, help the cause. I'm overdue for a raise but he's holding it back until I get on the ball."

Archie nodded, all businesslike. "All right, we'll wrap it up. We'll get you on the ball. Maybe I ought to assign someone to the store, and make life interesting for your boss."

"Jeez, no," Obie said quickly. He shivered with dread, realizing how awesome Archie's power really was. Which is why you had to stay on the good side of the bastard. Buy him Hersheys all the time to satisfy his craving for chocolate. Thank God Archie didn't go in for pot or that stuff—Obie would have had to become a pusher, for crying out loud, to supply him. Obie was officially the secretary of The Vigils but he knew what the job really demanded. Carter, the president who was almost as big a bastard as Archie, said, "Keep him happy, when Archie's happy, we're all happy."

"Two more names," Archie mused now. He rose and stretched. He was tall and not too heavy. He moved with a subtle rhythm, languidly, the walk of an athlete although he hated all sports and had nothing but contempt for athletes. Particularly football players and boxers, which happened to be Trinity's two major sports. Usually, Archie didn't pick athletes for assignments—he claimed they were too stupid to absorb the delicate shadings, the subtle intricacies involved. Archie disliked violence—most of his assignments were exercises in the psychological rather than the physical. That's why he got away with so much. The Trinity brothers wanted peace at any price, quiet on the campus, no broken bones. Otherwise, the sky was the limit. Which was right up Archie's alley.

"The kid they call The Goober," Archie said now.

Obie wrote down "Roland Goubert."

"Brother Eugene's room."

Obie smiled in delicious malice. He liked it when Archie involved the brothers in the assignments. Those were the most daring, of course. And someday Archie would go too far and trip himself up. In the meantime, Brother Eugene would do. He was a peaceful sort, made to order for Archie, naturally.

The sun vanished behind floating clouds. Archie brooded, isolating himself again. The wind rose, kicking puffs of dust from the football field. The field needed seeding. The bleachers also needed attention—they sagged, peeling paint like leprosy on the benches. The shadows of the goal posts sprawled on the field like grotesque crosses. Obie shivered.

"What the hell do they think I am?" Archie asked.

Obie remained silent. The question didn't seem to require an answer. It was as if Archie was talking to himself.

"These goddam assignments," Archie said. "Do they think it's easy?" His voice dripped sadness. "And the black box . . ."

Obie yawned. He was tired. And uncomfortable. He always yawned and got tired and uncomfortable when he found himself in situations like this, not knowing how to proceed, surprised at the anguish in Archie's voice. Or was Archie putting him on? You never knew about Archie. Obie was grateful when Archie finally shook his head as if warding off an evil spell.

"You're not much help, Obie."

"I never thought you needed much help, Archie."

"Don't you think I'm human, too?"

I'm not sure. That's what Obie almost said.

"All right, all right. Let's finish the damn assignments. One more name."

Obie's pencil was poised.

"Who was that kid who left the field a few minutes ago? The one they wiped out?"

"Kid named Jerry Renault. Freshman," Obie said, flipping through his notebook. He searched the *R*'s for Renault. His notebook was more complete than the school's files. It contained information, carefully coded, about everyone at Trinity, the kind of stuff that couldn't be found in official records. "Here it is. Renault, Jerome E. Son of James R. Pharmacist at Blake's. The kid's a freshman, birthday—let's see, he just turned fourteen. Oh—his mother died last spring. Cancer." There was more information about courses and records in grammar school and extracurricular activities but Obie closed the notebook as if he were lowering a coffin lid.

"Poor kid," Archie said. "Mother's dead."

Again that concern, that compassion in his voice.

Obie nodded. One more name. Who else?

"Must be hard on the poor kid."

"Right," Obie agreed, impatient.

"Know what he needs, Obie?" His voice was soft, dreamy, caressing.

"What?"

"Therapy."

The terrible word shattered the tenderness in Archie's voice.

"Therapy?"

"Right. Put him down."

"For crying out loud, Archie. You saw him out there. He's just a skinny kid trying to make the Freshman team. Coach'll grind him up like hamburger. And his mother's barely cold in the grave. What the hell you putting him on the list for?"

"Don't let him fool you, Obie. He's a tough one. Didn't you see him get wiped out down there and still get to his feet? Tough. And stubborn. He should have stayed down on that turf, Obie. That would have been the smart thing

to do. Besides, he probably needs something to keep his mind off his poor dead mother."

"You're a bastard, Archie. I said it before and I'll say it again."

"Put him down." Ice in the voice, cold as polar regions.

Obie wrote down the name. Hell, it wasn't his funeral. "Assignment?"

"I'll think of something."

"You've only got till four," Obie reminded.

"The assignment must fit the kid. That's the beauty of it, Obie."

Obie waited a minute or two and couldn't resist asking, "You running out of ideas, Archie?" The great Archie Costello running dry? The possibility was staggering to contemplate.

"Just being artistic, Obie. It's an art, you know. Take a kid like this Renault. Special circumstances." He fell silent. "Put him down for the chocolates."

Obie wrote down: *Renault—Chocolates*. Archie would never run dry. The chocolates, for instance, were good for a dozen assignments.

Obie looked down at the field where the guys were skirmishing in the shadow of the goal posts. Sadness seized him. I should have gone out for football, he thought. He had wanted to—he'd been hot stuff with Pop Warner at St. Joe's. Instead, he had ended up as Secretary of The Vigils. Cool. But, hell, he couldn't even tell his parents about it.

"Know what, Archie?"

"What?"

"Life is sad, sometimes."

That was one of the great things about Archie, you could say things like that.

"Life is shit," Archie said.

The shadows of the goal posts definitely resembled a network of crosses, empty crucifixes. That's enough symbolism for one day, Obie told himself. If he hurried he could make the four o'clock bus to work.