***Sounder***

***Chapter 4***

***Synopsis:***

The boy feeds his siblings before carrying in wood for the night. Then he watches out the window for his mother. Finally he sees a speck on the road and it grows larger. He had hoped she might get to bring her father home if she returned the stolen meat, but she is alone. She tells her children that she returned the meat and comforts the boy, saying Sounder is probably healing his wounds in the natural way all animals know. The boy is not consoled. Mother bought some fat meat, potatoes, and vanilla flavoring with her walnut money. She also brought a cardboard box. The boy sees the hurt in his mother’s eyes, but she says nothing about what happened in town. Tonight mother hums as she picks walnut kernels. She does not tell one of her wonderful Bible stories, even though he asks her. The next morning, the boy searches for Sounder in the woods. He comes home bedraggled and discouraged—and without the dog. Mother reminds him loss is part of living, and their family was born to lose. Weeks go by and Sounder does not return. For Christmas, Mother bakes two cakes, a small one and a large one which she places in the cardboard box from the store. The next morning, mother asks the boy to take the cake to his father. Women are not allowed in the prison, so the boy must make the troublesome trip. She watches him walk away; when he is far enough away not to see her tears, she hollers at him to “act perkish” so he will not grieve his father. The boy walks but is afraid, especially as he gets close to town. Church bells are ringing and the boy thinks about the worn-out toys people in the big houses gave his mother and wishes they would have given her an old book. He is certain he could learn to read if he had a book. 5 The boy is early and waits until the clock strikes twelve. The hateful guard frisks him and destroys the cake to ensure there is no weapon hidden inside it. Now it is a box of crumbs. The boy feels the same “hopeless hatred” he felt when the deputies took his father away and imagines the cruel death he would like the guard to experience. Finally the guard unlocks a gate and shoves the boy into a long hallway. His father is behind the fourth door down and is unchained. The boy has imagined asking his father how Sounder came to him as a pup, but now he only feels a mixture of pity and hate as he pushes the box of crumbs into his father’s cell. The boy only talks about Sounder while his father only talks about coming home soon. He tells the boy not to come here again. The boy is the last to leave the jail and refuses to let the cruel guard see him cry.

***Summary:***

The boy makes dinner for himself and the other children, and they wait for their mother. He tells the children not to ask if she brought them anything. The boy wondered if she has returned the ham in the hopes that they might let his father free. But she comes home alone and tells them that she gave everything back. She is surprised to hear that the boy has not found Sounder's body, and she thinks about what could possibly have happened to it. She guesses that Sounder suffered only a flesh wound and went into the forest to heal the wound with acid from oak leaves. She tells the boy that oak leaves draw out poison and help wounds heal into scabs. It is her guess that Sounder will return in a few days, starving and weary. It is also a possibility, she tells the boy, that the gunshot to the head made Sounder crazy and that he got lost.

The boy's mother has vanilla, some other food supplies, and a cardboard box. She says she is going to use the box for a cake. The boy wants to ask how they keep the jails warm and whether there are big fires in jail. He remembers an old biblical story that his mother told him about some people who were imprisoned and thrown into a furnace, but God blew out the fire in a second. The boy doubts that the story is true, because he has never seen a furnace that big. The next day he goes back to look for Sounder, and when he returns without the dog his mother says, "Child, child, you must not go into the woods again. Sounder might come home again. But you must learn to lose, child…. " Weeks pass and Sounder does not come home.

Around Christmastime, the boy's mother uses the bottle of vanilla to make a cake. She asks the boy to take the cake to the jail the next day, because the jail does not permit female visitors. She tells him to act happy so that he does not make his father sad. The boy goes down the road with the cake, feeling conspicuous and vulnerable. The boy knocks on the door of the jail, and a man tells him he has to wait for visiting hours. The boy waits and waits and finally is let inside. The jail guard searches his pockets and then breaks the cake into four pieces, looking for anything that might be hidden in it. The boy is terribly angry that the cake is ruined, and the man at the jail treats him as if he does not matter at all. The boy finally gets to see his father and, despite having practiced what to say, cannot think of anything. He apologizes about the cake and tells his father Sounder is not dead for sure. His father tells him that he (the father) will be home soon and to be good for his mother. He also tells the boy to relate a message to his mother not to send the boy to the jail again.

***Analysis (Ch3-4):***

Chapter 3 concentrates on the loneliness the boy feels, punctuated now by the loss of his dog and his father. His mother feels it too, but she does not say anything. She must concentrate on working with the kernels and supporting the family alone. In this chapter, the family's hopes are dashed repeatedly: Sounder does not return, and no good comes of his mother returning the stolen goods. The boy is so lost and lonely that even crying seems to fill a void.

Chapter 4 underscores the cruelty and injustice of the family's situation. The boy's mother works to bake a cake to give the boy's father for Christmas. However, the guard who works at the jail spoils that gesture. It seems as if the mother and the boy cannot find an ounce of compassion in anyone, even when it seems the situation cannot get any worse or become any more difficult. The boy is afraid of running into people on the street, of the looks he will receive, or of how mean the people might be. The man at the jail is unnecessarily cruel to the boy, first making him wait, breaking up the cake, and then yelling at the boy. One might expect the boy's encounter with his father to go better than his encounter with the guard, but in many ways it does not. His father is not overtly rude to him, but the father's reticence must hurt just as badly, if not worse. Neither the boy nor his father knows what to say to each other; the situation is so difficult that neither can pretend to be happy or optimistic.

The cake, the one symbol of the man's home and family, is broken. The boy's spirit seems broken too, as does his father's. The only remotely hopeful statement the boy can think to make is that perhaps Sounder is not dead. His mother instructs him not to "grieve" his father and make him upset, but the most hopeful thing the boy can think of to say is that there is a chance that Sounder is not dead. The scene in the jail is beyond grim: the situation is heart wrenching and unfair, and there really is no good news to share. The situation so grieves the boy's father that the father prefers the boy not to come back again. This is not because he does not want to see his boy, but because it is so hard and makes the father so sad. The father knows that the situation at home is hard and that no one is doing well, and he knows that there is little hope he will return any time soon and little hope of the family flourishing. Having those realities so close to him—having them stare him in the face in the eyes of his boy—is too much, so he dismisses his son almost coldly, leaving the boy to interpret the trip as a failure.