

Tom was on his way again. On his way into the West. Yesterday at around the same time he had set out from home with his horse and his loaded gun. Six bullets had been in the revolver. He had fired each one of them, and each one of them had been deadly. In the old days Tom had earned his ammunition by working on the little farm of his parents. The money had paid for the ammunition. Today it was the other way around: the bullets had earned him money, amazingly much money.

Now Tom was hundreds of miles from his home-town that he had never left before. His pockets were filled with money, his belt was full of revolver bullets, and his dear horse was carrying a new saddle smelling of fresh, new leather. The saddle had many side-bags filled with food and yet more ammunition.

A long gun was hanging sideways from the saddle. So – Tom was armed, and so was Bess! Tom was also wearing new boots that had cost him several hundred dollars all by themselves.

A rich rancher had got them made, but then he got killed and left nothing but debts. His property had been auctioned, but nobody had bought the boots which were set with real diamonds. The shoemaker had to take them back.

When Tom came by in a generous mood, the shoemaker had tried to sell him those boots, and he had managed. Tom happily gave up his old shoes, that he had inherited from his father, in exchange for those good boots which, as it turned out, fit him perfectly.

They were ordinary cowboy-boots with high heels that would get stuck in the ground like hooks when it came to holding back a wild bull by the lasso. But they were made of the finest leather and richly decorated with real diamonds. They were a rich man's accessories. No harm in having some of those, thought Tom, now that he could afford them.

Tom had pushed his trouser-legs into the boots, so that the diamonds glittered in the sunlight. He looked like a circus-artist. But unlike a circus artist, the glitter of his boots made an expensive and classy impression, the kind only true diamonds can make.

Tom and Bess were leading a pack-horse on a long string. The pack-horse was carrying bulky bags with several days worth of grain, hay and water. Tom's intention was to travel the several hundreds of miles till the next village. An outlaw worth quite a bit of money had been seen there last, and Tom wanted to go and get him.

The outlaw wasn't the only reason that Tom was on his way again. He was fleeing. He imagined that his home-town was sending out a message to the world that he was a murderer. He had murdered the sheriff! Tom wanted to travel faster than this message, be ahead of it.

Tom was also fleeing from himself. Staying on the move was a way not to get caught up by his own thoughts. He couldn't quite get over it that he had killed the sheriff.

Tom had never had a tremendously high opinion of that sheriff, so it wasn't even really bad conscience that was plaguing him now. Rather, he felt it was an absurd murder, and he was ashamed of it. Killing the sheriff didn't fit into the image he was trying to build up of himself.

Tom wanted to be a quiet kind of guy. The kind who only gets active when he needs to. He didn't want to be a boasting kind of guy, the kind who actively looks for trouble. He had always hated that kind of bully. Now that he had at last found something that he could do well, he didn't want to become one of those.

Besides, loud-mouthed bullies are stupid. They show their strength, sure enough. They boast with it. Thus you can be sure they show ALL of it, all they have. Once you know about it, you can work out a way to outwit them.

The quiet guys are different. If you're naïve, you might even mistake them for softies. But when some strength is needed, it suddenly turns out they have it. And when some other strength is needed, they have that too. You don't know what to expect. You can never be sure of anything. So in the end you respect them.

The quiet guys are more dangerous than the loud-mouthed ones.

Tom wanted to be one of the quiet ones.

Killing the sheriff hadn't been sensible. It was a disproportionate reaction, the kind of thing a stupid bully would do. Sure, the sheriff had been standing in his way. Was that a reason to kill him, to waste a bullet and to become an outlaw? Definitely not!

It was stupid. And he had missed his chance to take revenge on that son of a bitch, Davidson. He should have challenged Davidson in the open, not in the saloon, then he wouldn't have got away by hiding behind the sheriff!

Well, maybe Tom would change enough in one or two years to become unrecognizable. A beard would grow, and he would gain in maturity. He had left his home-town as a boy, and he would come back as a man, and then he would have his revenge!

But it still bothered Tom that he had shot the sheriff. He tried to explain it to himself in various ways.

First of all, killing the sheriff had been a precious experience. It was easy. He hadn't needed to wonder whether he was capable of it. It just sort of ...happened. The result had been somewhat shocking, but now he had got over the shock. And later, when he had those four outlaws in front of himself, he already knew how it is to kill a man. He knew he could do it because he had already done it. There was no hesitation. He saw them as targets and gave each one a bullet.

If he had suddenly wondered how it is to kill a man he would have hesitated just one split second too many and would have been shot himself.

Secondly, murdering the sheriff was the only way to demonstrate his independence from his parents. If he hadn't done it, and survived it, he would never have left the town. It was necessary to do this impossible thing to cut himself loose.

Thirdly, Tom wouldn't have been able to bear being the laughing stock of the whole town and to spend a night in the sheriff's jail. After that he would never have got the courage to seek out Davidson and to kill him. It would have set him back by several years, surely.

To knock down the sheriff instead of killing him would have been a possibility too, of course. But what if Tom had failed and ended up just grappling with him?

The revolver was the only way to be dead sure.

So there was no other way Tom could have behaved. He had done the right thing.

The three reasons were in actual fact just one single reason. But the fact remained that Tom should have killed that awful Davidson rather than the harmless old sheriff.

It took Tom a week till he got to the next town. He was quite tired when he arrived, but not sleepy yet.

So he tied up his horses in front of the saloon and went in to have a drink. He sat down at an empty table and let himself be served. Half a bottle of whisky, a glass and a cigar. He never had any cigars on him because he never smoked when he was alone. For a while Tom just sat there, played with the smoke and sipped from his whisky. The glowing tip of the cigar poured out copious amounts of smoke, and this pleased Tom, this generous outpouring. It was like infinite sexual potency.

Tom pondered this. It was once again one of these thoughts that wasn't really his own, that just somehow slipped into his mind from another source, from his inner

voice that was sometimes like a real voice, sometimes not, but always there, accompanying him somehow...

But then he heard another voice, a really real voice this time, and he turned around. It belonged to a small, dirty-looking man who was obviously traveling, just like Tom. The man asked Tom if he cared for a game of poker. Tom wasn't really an expert at that game – he barely knew the rules. But he had lots of money on him. He could afford to play and lose for a long time. The other man looked harmless enough. Tom would learn from him – this was his chance. So Tom consented to a game.

The small man laid down his hat and sat down opposite Tom.

The bar-maid brought the cards and the game began. Coins and notes started piling up on the table.

There were several hundred dollars on the table now. The other men in the saloon started crowding round. These two tramps obviously meant business. One of them was going to make a fortune and the other one was going to lose one, the fortune of a life-time no doubt. Perhaps this was literally going to be a matter of life or death in the end...

Tom's opponent looked up into the eager faces as though he was looking for help. But then he looked straight into Tom's eyes, forcing Tom to give up his vacant look and his easy-going attitude. The small man forced Tom to acknowledge him.

So Tom's eyes focused. The two men looked each other in the eyes. There was a hint of sadness in the small man's eyes. They were deep eyes in a wizened face with a fleshy nose.

Tom was reminded of his father, and he felt sorry for the small man. Apart from his small body-size and his dirty looks he also seemed old and tired. He had surely chosen Tom as a partner for this game because Tom looked just as much like a tramp as he did himself (he obviously hadn't seen Tom's boots...). Surely he just wanted a quiet, friendly game, but Tom had driven the stakes higher and higher.

"I have to opt out" he said. "I've run out of money."

Tom felt a hint of pity stir in his heart, but his expression became hard: "We're in the midst of a deal here!"

"It's too much for me," said the man. "I want to take it back."

"You can't do that!" said Tom.

The man looked deeply into Tom's eyes again, hoping..., hoping to stir up a hidden hint of humaneness there. Tom didn't know how to react. Perhaps he would have taken the other man's money, perhaps even shot him if he was desperate enough to suddenly attack Tom. And then perhaps he would have felt guilty about it for the rest of his life.

But it didn't come to that, because suddenly a voice said: "Let me take his place!"

A new man had appeared, with a dark hat, a dark, elegant vest and a mean glint in his eyes above a smartly twisted moustache that made his grin look permanently ironic.

"How much money in that deal, shorty?" he asked the small man. The small man told him and the new man gave him the money. Then he sat down in the small man's chair and said: "Okay, let's go!"

Now it was Tom's turn to feel uncomfortable. It was a fast game, and more and more money was piling up on the table. Luckily there was no need for Tom to opt out. He still had lots in his pockets. For a while he lost and had to take out more and more of his money, but then he won again. His opponent didn't like losing. The less money he had, the more willing he seemed to be to bet it.

Then suddenly he snarled under his breath: "You damn ... cheat!!!"

Tom felt flooded by a wave of relief. The game was over! They weren't playing poker anymore. They were back in the real world. His opponent wasn't a fancy card-sharp anymore. Now he was just a man, or rather a snake to be crushed. Dangerous but perfectly manageable when you know how to go about it.

Tom calmly exhaled the smoke from his cigar.

"You damn cheat! You smelly son-of-a-whore!" said the man.

Tom's eyes became slits. He pushed his chair away from the table ever so slightly. His hands lifted off the table.

"Please say that again" he said, speaking slowly and distinctly.

"You – smelly – son-of-a-WHORE!" said the man. His voice had risen to a roar by the time he said the last word, and he stood up.

Tom didn't move.

The man's hand moved to his belt. Like a crab it started crawling along the belt towards the holster where the big mother-of-pearl grip of a large revolver was waiting. It was just a question of seconds now.

Tom was still sitting. His right hand came up to his mouth. He took his cigar with his index and thumb. There was a hint of puzzlement on the other man's face. Which one was Tom's gun-hand? His right hand was holding the cigar, and yet there was no holster on the left side of his belt.

Suddenly Tom threw away his cigar and sent it flying into the crowd surrounding them. For a split second his hand stayed there in mid-air where it had let go of the cigar.

The other man didn't know what to expect and his hand flew the last few inches towards the beautiful grip of his revolver.

The outline of Tom's right pectoral muscle became clearly visible under his shirt as his arm came flying back to his side. Then his gun was in his hand and fired upwards twice into the face of the standing man.

No two holes appeared, just one big one at the root of the man's nose. He toppled over slowly. Blood was oozing out of the wound and flowed into the eyes, and the eyes remained open.

Tom stood up and let the hammer of his revolver click back in place. It was a reflex to pull it back after each shot so that the next shot, if one was needed, could be fired more quickly.

Tom put his revolver back in its holster and started packing up the money lying on the table. He demonstratively left behind a little pile. When the small man reappeared to see what exactly had happened, Tom said: "This is the money I took off you today."

"You won it" said the small man.

"Well, I'm giving it back" said Tom. "Take it while I'm feeling generous."

The small man hesitated. He looked around at the other men, trying to figure out if anyone thought this was some kind of dirty trick. It looked as though no one really knew. Everyone seemed a bit stunned.

Finally the small man shyly came forward and started packing up the money Tom had left on the table for him. It was hard-earned money, not just bounty collected after firing a few shots. It really meant something to the small man to get it back.

Tom poured himself another glass of whisky and knocked it back. He was happy.

Today's adventure had ended well. He had made quite a bit of money once again and confirmed that he really deserved it by killing the other man. He was The Best.

Nobody could take that from him – it was a fact!

He ordered a round of drinks and tried to relax. But it wasn't successful – nobody drank to his health. Someone even said: "You're just paying this with your victim's money." And nobody thanked him.

Tom explained that he had won this money in an honest poker-game and that it wasn't his fault if he had to defend himself against bad losers.

"That you acted out of self-defense depends on the testimony of your witnesses, which means us" said the man who had already spoken before, and he got a few approving nods from the crowd. Tom gave him an angry look. When he had shot the outlaws in the other town, everybody had congratulated him. Why not this time? Now the sheriff came into the saloon. "Who did the shooting?" he asked.

Tom turned around and stood in front of him. Everybody quickly moved out of the space between them.

Tom had a good look at the sheriff. He was a tall, gaunt man with a narrow, hook-shaped head like a vulture. His features were thinly drawn and shadowy and betrayed no emotion. Two big revolvers were dangling at the narrow hips of the man. One had to wonder how the crooked, wiry legs could support that weight.

"Why did you shoot, stranger?"

"Self-defense."

"Did the man have any reason to threaten you?"

"I took two thousand dollars off him in a game of poker."

The onion-like eyes of the sheriff bulged, almost popping out of their sockets. Then he said: "You can't go that high in poker."

"Here it says: no limit poker. He didn't have to follow me so far if he didn't want to."

"You're under arrest!"

Tom sucked on his cigar. If the sheriff had been his boss or his teacher, he would have been afraid of him. He wouldn't have dared to look him in the eye. But this was different. He didn't have a boss. He was on his own, and he had his gun.

A little cloud of smoke came out of his mouth with every word: "Sheriff, are you challenging me?"

It became dead-quiet in the saloon till the sheriff answered at last, after swallowing noisily: "I am not alone. Even you can't win against twenty men."

"Before I die, I will have shot at least you, and perhaps a few others as well" Tom mumbled, his cigar moving up and down in his mouth.

These words just hung in the room. Like the smoke, the ominous stillness only dissipated slowly. Tom's words were reverberating through the heads of those present. Some were already discreetly leaving the saloon.

Then the sheriff took up their dialogue again: "You really want to sacrifice your life, before your guilt has even been proven? Before you've even appeared before court?"

"I'm above the court. So are you at this very moment. We're above the court, and the court can't help us. We're above worldly matters and can't appeal to them now.

We're just two men, facing each other. The rest of the world is meaningless for us right now. There is just one way to solve the problem between us, so that each one of us can return to his normal life - we let each other live. Or else we both die."

A bitter-sweet smile appeared on Tom's face. "You choose" he added as an afterthought.

The thin, pale mouth of the sheriff twisted itself into the shape of a fake smile. He said: "You leave me the choice, then? Either I give in, or we both die? You're younger than me, you know. You have more to lose..."

Tom knew that the sheriff was just trying to win time. And then he read in his eyes that something was obviously brewing behind his back.

Tom barked: "Barman, keep still or I'll shoot the sheriff!"

The barman dropped something which clattered to the floor. Tom didn't move.

All the men were in full view, except the barman. "Come out to the front" said Tom. "No sudden movements, or the sheriff dies."

Tom's right hand was waiting. Its fingers were moving ever so slightly, gently, like the tender leaves of a young plant in the wind.

There was nothing for the sheriff to do but to draw his gun or to say something else. He said something else: "You're a bit young to die already..."

There was no reaction from Tom.

For a long time Tom didn't say anything. He wasn't even looking at the sheriff's face. He had a kind of faraway look because he was looking at nothing in particular, or rather at everything at once. At the slightest movement anywhere in his visual field, his gun hand would pounce. This gave him a cold expressionlessness that was hard for the sheriff to bear.

The big cigar sticking out provocatively from his unshaved face poured out smoke endlessly. Its tip had an evil glow.

With a monstrously indifferent tone of voice Tom finally said: "If you want to shoot, shoot."

The sheriff felt paralyzed. If only someone had called out: "Sheriff, give up. That man will kill you!" If only someone had released him from this situation! He almost felt as though he were floating above his own body. If only someone had called him back down!

No one said anything. It seemed clear that the sheriff would die. The men were getting ready to shoot Tom as soon as the sheriff drew his gun. While Tom shot the sheriff, the threat his gun hand represented for everybody right now would be lifted for a split-second. Within that split-second, ten or twenty guns would be drawn, point at him and fire. Tom would die right after the sheriff.

The sheriff was supposed to sacrifice himself. But he couldn't. He felt paralyzed.

Finally he slowly brought his hand to the buckle of his belt and unbuckled it. The belt with the holsters containing the two revolvers clattered to the floor.

Now the sheriff felt relieved. He dared to move freely once again. The paralyzing feeling was over. He went over to Tom and said: "I gave in. I believe you that you killed the man out of self-defense."

Tom was still a bit suspicious. It was strange that the sheriff wouldn't be more dejected after this defeat. He didn't see that the sheriff was relieved, that he was simply happy still to be alive. The sheriff seemed to behave as though Tom's victory had been quite ordinary, as if his defeat didn't bother him. In reality the sheriff had lived through a kind of rebirth, and this experience had been more important to him than his defeat.

Tom laid his hand on the grip of his revolver.

The sheriff said: "Let's sit down. I have something to discuss with you."

Tom heard the euphoria in his voice. Did the sheriff still have a last trick up his sleeve?

Tom slowly lifted his revolver out of its holster and held it against the sheriff's stomach. Then he called out: "All you men, go home. I have something to discuss with the sheriff."

The men left the saloon disappointed. The barman had to go too and lock up the saloon.

The sheriff met Tom's suspicious stare with childlike guilelessness and stood in front of Tom's gun with a childlike trust that he couldn't have been faking. The sheriff knew that Tom wouldn't kill a weakling, and that's why he wasn't afraid.

At last Tom understood that the sheriff's behaviour wasn't at all challenging his victory. Rather, it was underlining the absoluteness of Tom's victory. Tom's victory was so absolute that it had turned the sheriff into a faithful toady.

Tom put his revolver back into its holster. He took his glass of whisky and sat down at a table with the sheriff.

The sheriff told Tom of an outlaw who was staying at the hotel. Nobody dared to approach him. The sheriff begged Tom for help.

"There's thousand dollars on his head that I'm willing to share with you."

Tom said: "I want them for myself. I don't need any help."

The sheriff said: "Well, I'm sorry. I'll bring flowers to your grave."

But Tom didn't listen.

The sheriff put his belt back on and left the saloon. Once again Tom wondered how the spindly legs could bear the weight of the two huge revolvers dangling from that belt.

Tom had taken a hotel room. It was the first time since his departure from home that he could sleep in a real bed once again. He gratefully slipped in between the soft and clean sheets.

But then he somehow just couldn't fall asleep. He was in the midst of a human settlement in which he had surely made enemies. True enemies, the kind who want to see you dead. In the last few days Tom had slept under the open sky, far from any human presence. Now he was in the midst of people, and it made him restless.

He laid his revolver under the pillow. The touch of hard, cold metal calmed him down somewhat, but not enough. He took out the revolver from under the pillow and laid it on his chest, his right hand on the grip. The weight of the gun on his chest calmed him down yet more, just like a teddy bear can calm down a child. Tom felt he would be able to sleep now. He let his thoughts wander.

Of course they wandered back to the saloon, to the duel. Not to the duel he had won against the rich rancher with whom he had played poker. There was no way he could have lost that one. When you've already killed six men, one more is just one more. No, he was thinking of the duel with the sheriff. Tom would have won, if the sheriff had drawn his gun, but not survived it. There was no way he could have shot all twenty men, and the twenty men knew that.

And yet Tom had won and survived. That was because none of the twenty men was prepared to sacrifice his life. Tom had made use of that fact, and that's how he had won, all alone against twenty.

Logically, since Tom was the same kind of creature as the other men, he should have had a will to survive just as strong as theirs. The men should have been able to make use of his will to survive just as he had made use of theirs. How come it hadn't happened that way? How come they ended up giving in rather than him? How come they all fell for his bluff?

A cold shiver rushed over Tom's back as he suddenly realized he hadn't bluffed. He would have fired his gun. Things had gone so far he wouldn't have had a choice. He would have fired his remaining shots (two were in the dead man, one was lost because the drum would have gone past it when he pulled back the hammer again, so it would only have been three!). So he would have fired his three shots and then he would have been hit by twenty bullets at once!

Did he really despise his own life that much? How was that possible?

Tom thought of the cigar that was poking out from the midst of his stubbles, pouring out its endless clouds of smoke. It was clear what it represented. The power of rape. A power that is infinitely much stronger than the will to survive...

Without love, satisfaction is only temporary. The resulting disappointment leads to anger, and through this anger the victim of rape finally gets killed sadistically.

As Tom stood in front of the sheriff, the implicit threat of this mechanism, symbolized by the phallic cigar, was clear.

But the disrespect for your own life still needs to be explained somewhat more.

There was all that smoke coming out of his cigar, huge swaths of it billowing out continuously.

Wasn't that like an orgasm without end? Didn't it represent oversized sexual potency?

A potency that overshadows even the will to survive?

Tom couldn't believe that a stupid cigar was all it took to be seen as a suicidal psychopath! There had to be something more.

Tom had assured everybody that he would shoot whoever moved. And all the while he had smoked, inhaling the smoke deeply, filling himself with it, then letting it out again... and longingly watching it drift away, getting diluted in the air, flowing away and disappearing.

As if he wanted to be carried away by the smoke. He didn't manage, so he always had to take another lungful and try again...

He seemed like a man who expects nothing more of life. A man who wants to fly away, volatilize and doesn't want to be disturbed in the process. A man who wants to disintegrate in the ambient air like smoke.

Or maybe a man who wants to cover the land as an infinity of snowflakes, or to blow across the prairie as a sand-storm, or to lick the beach like a wave stretching from one horizon to the other...

And why? Why this need for homogeneity?

Isn't it the same wish as to float up from the ground and be surrounded, all naked, by nothing but air? To feel but one touch all around oneself?

Isn't it the same one seeks in sex? This one, single, all-encompassing touch?

The whole body feeling only that one, soothing touch, either because it dissolved in the medium, or because the medium itself is so structureless that there is no up or down, left or right, north or south. Structure has no meaning anymore.

But what's the point of this wish to dissolve?

Maybe we all need this calmness, this utter relief of tension, from time to time.

The structure of your body and your mind becomes meaningless. For a while, it isn't maintained by any conscious effort anymore – it becomes soft, malleable.

In this soft state a sudden impulse from the outside can shape you. It can leave a mark, like a stamp in liquid wax. When the wax solidifies, the mark stays, imprinted in the wax.

A human being who rises up to heaven through caresses and heavy petting becomes like molten wax. Whatever happens to him now, whatever he experiences, he will bear the mark – love or hatred, hope or despair, embedded in the depth of his mind for ever.

Whenever a couple of lovers leaves the real world, rising up to float aimlessly in the ether, a vague doubt gradually, insidiously sneaks into the most wakeful part of the brain – do we really want to dissolve into each other for good? It's the last warning before the final, definitive loss of the structure that has led you through your life successfully up till now.

If you do not heed this warning, you will dissolve in your partner altogether. You will have reached nirvana, and there is no way back from there.

When this ultimate warning reaches you, your brain is already so much switched off that it is unable to produce any logical, sensible kind of arousal. But this doesn't matter. Any kind of arousal, however senseless, disturbs the narcotic state you are in and brings you back to life. It just needs to be violent.

And that's exactly the kind of arousal that suddenly comes over you. It's like an epileptic attack. Your whole body starts twitching spasmodically, all the muscles contract and relax rhythmically. All this without any clearly visible reason and without any plainly apparent goal.

And yet it fulfills one simple goal – it disrupts the narcotic state. It brings you back to reality, with a jerk that almost resembles pain.

And whatever your partner gave you while you were floating in the ether, it is now burnt into the deepest recesses of your mind for ever.

Tom, the smoking Tom, was like someone who has given up on his structure, be it the structure of his mind or his body or both. Someone who couldn't bear life and who simply gave up. Someone who is floating in the ether.

But something might still suddenly wake up the narcotic brain again. Something might yet trigger the epileptic attack.

The revolver would jump into his hand, the hammer would click back and smash forwards, and the bullets would come flying with little wisps of smoke and the acrid smell of gun-powder. All this was automatic in Tom. So automatic that an epileptic attack couldn't even express itself in any other way in him.

As long as the sheriff carried his two revolvers at his hips, any movement could prove fatal to him. Any movement might trigger the epileptic attack in Tom!

So he unbuckled his belt and let it fall to the floor.

And Tom had won!

That's how easy it was!

Tom finally fell asleep, as though he was really carried away by the smoke of his cigar...