

When Bess saw Tom come towards her, she lifted her head and pointed her ears. The small boy, who was standing in front of her trying to feed her a piece of apple was forgotten immediately. Tom walked up to Bess and she rubbed her head against him. Tom patted her. With his left hand he patted her muscular cheeks and her lower jaw, and with his right hand he patted the soft fur between her ears. Bess moved her head up and down, and sometimes Tom's face completely disappeared in her mane. After a while the greeting was over. Tom laid his arm around Bess' neck and whispered little nothings in her ear. He said: "I'll never again ride anybody but you. You are my force, my propelling force. Without you I am nothing. We belong together."

Tom played with her mane. With his other hand he patted her nose.

Bess looked at Tom with her big, brown eyes and turned her head a bit, so as to blow warm air into his face from her nostrils. Tom blew air at her too, and her nostrils opened wide to receive his breath.

Suddenly she lifted her head a bit more and turned it questioningly to the side. Tom remembered too late, what this meant. She brushed over his mouth with half-open lips. She had just given him a kiss in horse-fashion!

Tom wiped his mouth against his sleeve and told himself that he probably liked these kisses on some level, since he never managed to evade them...

Jim was standing nearby, watching with an enigmatic smile. The boy with the piece of apple too.

"Where did you get the horse, mister?" the boy asked.

"From my mother," answered Tom.

"I'd like to have a horse too, but my mother doesn't give me any!"

"Well, just look around. Surely there's a horse somewhere just waiting for a nice boy like you!"

The boy gave Bess the piece of apple and left with a dreamy air.

Tom and Jim left the horses to their own affairs and went off to buy a few things for their trip to the west.

Towards evening, as it was getting cooler, the trip began. Tom sat on Bess and led the gelding by a long leash. The gelding followed Bess willingly. Horses usually like to follow each other – it's in their nature. Bess was trotting along merrily, as if the west was drawing her too, as it was drawing Tom. It seemed she liked to be underway with Tom and didn't appreciate the stops in the towns much.

Jim was riding on his old mule next to Bess and Tom.

Tom asked him: "That time in the saloon – how did you dare talk to a quiet, dangerous guy like me?"

"Well," Jim answered, "that first time I saw you with your bottle of whisky and your cigar all alone at that table in that dreary saloon, I knew straight away that you were just waiting to be talked to. Hoping for it."

"Yeah, I guess you're right..." said Tom. "But how did you know?"

Jim didn't answer straight away, and in the meantime Tom forgot all about the question he had asked. He was enjoying this moment of departure from the town with Bess, leaving the human settlement behind once again. Now there was just the lonesome prairie ahead, over which a little wind was often blowing, drawing little clouds of dust, so that the ground seemed to be flowing and floating rather than hard and firm.

It really wasn't hard and firm, because foot-prints never survived in it long. When you rode into the prairie, soon enough you were absorbed by her and the tethers binding you to your fellow human beings and their hard and cold world were loosened.

Tom let his thoughts wander dreamily. Life itself is like the prairie – always in a process of change, but still always remaining itself. Just like the surface of a lake – never quite still, always wrinkled by little wavelets, and still always true to itself. You can swim and splash in it – the surface always finds its way back to its placid but never quite immobile self.

Humans are scared of the visible surface of their soul. They don't understand it. They'd like it to be clean and flat, which it never is, never completely. There's always some movement on it – it's never completely smooth. So they build dams, trying to make the surface as small as possible. They want it as small as to be completely blank like a well-polished mirror. But one day the soul bursts through all the dams and flows freely across the prairie once again.

Tom was all absorbed by his poetic thoughts. He let Bess carry him over the prairie as though he were sitting on the tip of a wave gliding along. Bess was trotting merrily. She was rested and in a fine mood, glad to be on the way again.

Jim called out to them, tearing them both out of their expansive mood.

“Not so fast! My mule can't keep up!”

Indeed, the mule had fallen behind. Bess slowed down. Jim caught up with them and started talking. Tom wasn't so happy about it at first. But then he realized that some part of him really yearned for human warmth, for the rise and fall of a human voice. His eyes became moist as he listened to Jim, but that could have been caused by the wind. In any case it wasn't because of the content of what Jim was saying.

Jim said: “You're a cold guy. Your eyes always hidden in the shadow of your hat. Nobody sees what you feel, if indeed you have any feelings. You light your cigar with dead-steady hands when people want to kill you. Nobody can tell what you're up to, even though all your movements are slow and deliberate. You always seem to be far away, even when one is standing right in front of you. When you're close to us, we still never feel close to you, if you get my meaning. You go to people, but you don't mix with them. You seem like some kind of alien. Nobody can tell who or what you are, so we all get out of your way, as a precaution, so to speak.”

“But you didn't get out of my way, it seems,” said Tom.

“That's because I'm as peculiar as you,” said Jim.

Tom didn't ask Jim what he meant, so Jim continued: “You sit at your table, all alone, blowing smoke into the air and not looking up when you're talked to. You only react when you feel irritated. Then you throw away your cigar, which up till then had been the sole focus of your attention, you look at the other man with a cold, long stare, and then you shoot him. Your whole behaviour is like a glorification of your basic inability to solve conflicts instead of just eliminating them.”

“What's the difference?” asked Tom, surprised.

“Well, if you SOLVE conflicts, you get friends. If you just eliminate them, you stay alone.”

Tom had nothing much to say to that. He wanted to say that he liked to be alone, but that was only half true, after all.

They rode on for a while in silence, but then Tom hesitantly started talking about himself.

“It's true that I don't really have any friends,” he said. He told Jim about how jealous he had always been of Jack Davidson. Jack was Theresa's brother, and sometimes a big brother is a bit of a model-man for his younger sisters. In the sisters' eyes, that's how young men should be. Young girls know their brothers and have learned to get along with them. It's a basis for getting along with other young men too, when the time comes...

Well, Tom liked Theresa. He liked her a lot. To please her, he should have been a bit like Jack. That's why Jack became a bit of a role-model for Tom.

Tom didn't have any other role-model. His father had been a tired and bitter old man who disliked and despised everybody and hid from other people. Nobody liked him much either, so he lived in a world in which he occupied no space. He was like a piece of emptiness. Tom didn't seem to get any kind of support from him, except on rare occasions when he was some kind of silent ally against his all-to-present and at times cumbersome mother...

So you could say that Tom was looking for a kind of father. Except that you couldn't really call it "father", since his concept of "father" was tainted. He looked for a father who wouldn't be too fatherly.

And that's what he saw in Jack, in that dynamic young man. Jack was just two years older than Tom, but that was enough. Tom still felt that Jack was way ahead of him. Jack could have been a good mate for Tom, but unfortunately they hardly knew each other, or in any case pretended that they didn't know each other. Jack was a self-confident young man who was very aware of his social standing and wouldn't mix with miserable sheep-farmers.

But what would have happened if Tom had ever dared to face Jack and ask him in a friendly manner if he could try out the beautiful black stallion?

Probably Jack's eyes would have sparkled nastily, and he would have answered with a condescending smile that unfortunately this horse isn't for beginners.

Then he would have jumped into the saddle and galloped away, leaving Tom standing there in a cloud of dust.

Or maybe he would have held the horse so that Tom could mount it. Then he would have shown Tom how it all works, smiling and occasionally laughing at Tom's ignorance, and perhaps he would in the end have taught Tom to ride. Of course Tom's admiration for Jack and his splendid horse would have been boundless – all the more gratifying for Jack to explain things to him!

Unfortunately all this was just pure fantasy. In reality Tom never dared to address Jack like that, and he ended up losing touch with Theresa too.

Jim listened in silence as Tom vomited up his undigested youth. Then he asked: "But why didn't you dare to face Jack?"

"First I wanted to learn how to handle a gun," said Tom.

"And then? Then you would just have shot him or what?"

"I guess I wouldn't have shot him..." Tom hesitated. "Maybe I would just have teased him a bit with the gun, shown him that I'm good at something too, that I'm worthy of being his friend."

"So you felt unworthy of him, then?"

"Well, sure! It was fine for my parents to despise everybody and to feel, self-righteously, that whoever was richer than them was bound to be a cheat. It didn't really work for me. I had to find my own place in the world."

"Well, why didn't you, then? Why didn't you just go out there to find your place?"

That was a damn good question. Tom didn't know what to say. He thought about it for a long time as they rode on in silence.

Finally Jim said: "Maybe somewhere deep down you still despised everybody, just like your parents did. It didn't really satisfy you the same way as it seemed to satisfy them, but it was the only way to deal with the world that you knew."

"Yes," said Tom, "I guess I really despised everybody, above all the big-mouthed Davidsons!"

“And you still do,” said Jim, “I mean, just look at what you’re doing, killing people wherever you go...”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. There’s nothing but contempt in me, contempt for everybody, for the whole world! I so wish I would be able to feel something else, for someone!”

“Yeah, contempt,” said Jim, and he started to explain, in his own words, what that concept means at all.

When you overlook something willfully, that’s contempt. You see that someone else is successful with something, but you refuse to acknowledge it. You pretend to yourself and to everyone else that this person’s success is only temporary and doesn’t deserve to be acknowledged. You pretend that this person’s success is undeserved, due only to luck, and thus temporary, and thus not worthy of acknowledgement. You do that out of jealousy, perhaps, but some people will hear you. Some people will start to have doubts. In some way you undermine the success of the successful ones.

That’s contempt.

Tom agreed. His parents despised the Davidsons because of the grandiose façade of their shop, behind which the actual building was quite ordinary. They claimed loudly that the success of the Davidsons was due only to this façade. One day others would realize too, and the Davidsons’ success would collapse! The Millers, in their infinite wisdom (or rather their infinite contempt), knew this was going to happen sooner or later, so they ignored the Davidsons’ success already now. They demonstratively lived as though the Davidsons didn’t exist, because it was below them to acknowledge the Davidsons’ passing existence. That’s what you call contempt. Except that it was fake. Maybe contempt is always fake. To despise means to overlook willfully, but that’s a contradiction in terms - you cannot overlook something willfully. You can only really overlook something when you really didn’t see it...

And the Millers were forced to see that the Davidsons’ business was booming. The guns sold there were of good quality (Tom could attest to that, couldn’t he?). It was a serious business. In reality there was nothing fake about it, however beautiful the façade of the shop was. Who said that a façade should be ugly?

Contempt, that’s what’s fake!

By more or less ignoring the inhabitants of their town, the Millers locked themselves out of everything. Nobody despised them in quite the same way as they despised everybody. People didn’t need to overlook them willfully. That wasn’t necessary at all. People just really didn’t notice the Millers all that much – no need to do it willfully.

So the Millers were locked out of the town-life, and they ascribed it to their being poor, which they soon saw as a special kind of virtue. Anybody less poor had to be a cheat, especially the Davidsons! They despised the Davidsons so openly that the Davidsons had to react in some way. The reaction was to despise the Millers in return. The Davidsons lived as though the Millers and their nasty remarks didn’t exist at all. The Millers’ nastiness was meaningless because they were so poor that they would come begging for the crumbs of the family-table sooner or later anyway.

Jim had to understand that Tom could never make friends with Jack under these conditions. But Jim didn’t want to understand.

“Look, Tom,” he said, “if you didn’t despise Jack personally, then the two of you could have become friends in spite of the feud between your families.”

“Maybe I despised Jack after all,” said Tom.

Jack had tamed his horse with the whip. The big stallion obeyed under pressure. In some sense Jack had raped the proud animal.

Tom despised this kind of training. He never abased his own horse. He never forced her. Bess obeyed him out of good-willingness.

Tom was convinced that the big stallion would throw Jack off one day. And then Tom, sitting on his beloved Bess, would triumphantly overtake poor Jack sitting in the dirt!

So Tom despised Jack. He had even found his very own reason to do so! Isn't it sad when you despise your own role-model?

Tom had to despise Jack, or else he would have had to despise his own parents and the whole way of life in which he had grown up. Accepting Jack would have meant accepting Jack's contempt for all this. Tom had some contempt for all these things himself, but not so much that he could have accepted Jack's contempt.

Jack couldn't stop despising the Millers either, since they had despised him and his family first.

For all these reasons Tom was convinced – had to be convinced – that hitting a horse with a whip (as Jack did) was BAD!

Tom's softness didn't start with the whip – he was quite incapable of formulating a clear order. Luckily he had a sensitive mare who guessed her master's wishes by herself. But Tom had had to realize that you couldn't ride all horses with this gentle method. His big gelding was a point in the matter. He was quite willing, but he needed clarity. He couldn't bear gentle softies. Surely Jack's stallion was the same. When the stallion obeyed his master, it wasn't, as Tom liked to think, because he had been abased. No, it was a kind of deal. Jack was the boss. He had triumphed over the horse in a way that the horse could understand, in a way that one horse triumphs over another in wildlife too. The defeated horse can always run away, set off on its own, join another herd. Or it can give in to the victor, bow to him and in exchange enjoy the orderly life that he provides. The stallion had decided to accept Jack as his boss. When Jack hit him, it was, perhaps, because he had bucked – that's justice. If Jack had been an altogether unfair boss, perhaps the stallion would have decided, one day, to escape. Or he would have stopped being obedient, until he would have had to be gotten rid of. Such things happen to horses. It had undoubtedly happened to Bess whose previous owner had ruined her character, so much so that she had become practically useless as a horse, until Tom had tamed her again.

If the stallion had ever tried to bite Jack, the whip would have lashed out – that's all. If Bess had ever tried to bite Tom, he would have buried his head in her mane and cried. A high-spirited animal couldn't bear such a reaction. A high-spirited animal doesn't want every devilment on his part to be a huge, disruptive catastrophe. A high-spirited animal needs his limits to be shown to him in a clear and even way, with the whip when necessary. Little devilments mustn't be allowed to disrupt his whole life, else he'll end up not daring to breathe anymore, or rather he'll just rebel and escape! Little devilments must be dealt with in a stride, and that's how Jack had trained his wild stallion, successfully!

Bess was a careful and anxious horse – that's why she got along so well with Tom. A more spontaneous animal would never have got along with Tom, his overdone gentleness and his exorbitant expectations.

Both Tom and Bess had been hurt deep inside. That's why they got along. They lived in some kind of symbiosis. Someone like Jack would never understand that...

A little later, Tom asked Jim shyly: "Did you ever sleep with a girl?"

"Sure," said Jim, staring ahead.

“And how was it?”

“How should it have been?”

“I don’t know, can’t you describe it?”

Jim said: “Look, if a small kid in the crib asked you how it is to walk, what would you say? You just stand up and walk, that’s all there is to it. You can’t really describe it, can you? You can just do it!”

Tom remained silent. So now he knew what he was. He was a child in a crib who can’t walk. That’s what he had been for twenty years. Except that after twenty years you can’t be a child anymore – if you still can’t walk by then, you’re a cripple!

Yes, he was a cripple...

Tom was pondering this, sinking into sweet self-pity, the kind that usually turns into bitterness if you don’t check it in time. Tom still had to shoot many, many men before he would be able to overcome this bitterness once and for all...

He started talking again. He asked Jim: “What kind of girl was it?”

“Well, you know, she was the town-bike. All my mates started with her too.”

“How was it the first time?”

Jim started thinking. Then he said: “I don’t know. I had dreamed about it often. I had fantasized about it too, but when the time came, I wasn’t sure anymore that I really wanted to do it. But my mates cheered me on, and when I was finally there in the wagon with her, I wasn’t sure I wanted to be there. But she just smiled at me, a little bit mockingly, but not unkindly. She came up to me, lifted my chin and kissed me on the mouth. Then she whispered in my ear, so that my mates outside wouldn’t hear, that everything would be okay. After that she kissed me more loudly, and my mates cheered outside. And you know, then it was really fine.”

Tom remained silent. Somehow this was so different from his own experience with his first whore. Had the whore he had met been less kind, or less pretty? Maybe. Or maybe it was mostly the cheering mates – that’s what had been missing. The mates cheering him on, and cheering her on too!

Tom suddenly felt so damn lonely!

“Tell me more...” he said.

Jim remained quiet for a while. Then he said: “Look, I really can’t tell you more. I just can’t.”

Tom exclaimed: “But how will I ever learn if nobody explains it to me?”

“Hell,” said Jim, “you just can’t explain these things. It’s not that they’re so special or anything. It’s just that they’re not for explaining, that’s all. I don’t know how else to say it. Just find yourself a girl and do it, and you’ll see for yourself!”

“I tried...” said Tom.

Now it was Jim’s turn not to get it: “What do you mean? It... it didn’t work, or what?”

Surely it occurs to almost every boy doing it the first time that it might just, you know, suddenly not work... But Jim had never heard of such a thing happening for real.

“No, it didn’t,” said Tom.

“And when you’re alone?” asked Jim.

“Then it works,” said Tom.

“Well, then don’t worry about it! You were just nervous, that’s all. It doesn’t mean anything!”

“You think I should try again?”

Jim had to think. Finally he said: “I don’t know. I guess not just like that, because you’ll be even more nervous, knowing that it didn’t work last time, and it will be

guaranteed not to work. No, I guess you shouldn't go and try it. Rather, it should happen to you somehow, when you're not prepared, when you don't have time to be nervous. I don't know. Truth is, I don't like to think about it, about it possibly not working, I mean. Maybe no man does. It... I mean, you... you just hope it will never happen to you, and then it doesn't, but if you think about it, then it might, so you rather don't think about it. I don't know what to tell you..."

Tom had to wonder. It was interesting how Jim was speaking about this. As if he wasn't too sure about these things either. Maybe nobody is? It was the first time Tom spoke with a man this intimately.

"When you're with a girl, it's better than when you're on your own, isn't it?" asked Tom.

Strangely enough Jim didn't answer straight away. Finally he said: "Well, most things are better when you share them with someone, aren't they? But... the thing itself, well, I don't know. It's not always really so different. With some women... you have to think of something else. You imagine something that isn't there, as if you were on your own. Sometimes what you imagine is nicer than what there is... I don't know. This is a hard question."

Tom was nonplused by this answer. "Then what on Earth is the point of doing it with a girl?" he asked.

"Well," said Jim, "maybe when you're really in love it's really different. I don't know. I haven't done it with any girl with whom I was really in love... Or maybe it has nothing to do with love. Maybe it's all about knowing how to share it. I really don't know..."

"But you rather do it on your own or with a girl?" asked Tom.

"Nowadays I don't bother so much," said Jim. "But when I was younger I went to see the town-bike often. Most of my pocket money went to her."

"What for?" asked Tom.

Jim hesitated a bit, looking for words, and finally said: "I guess I needed her to be a witness to my budding sexuality. Not because the thing itself felt so much better or different with her."

Tom had always thought that the missing ingredient to be instantly released of his sexual mania was a girl. Inexplicably he had failed with the whore he had gone to see in his home town. Well, now he gradually began to realize that it's just really not that simple. Girls are easy to get (there was enough money in Tom's pockets to pay for a staggering four hundred whores) – that's not the real problem.

The beauty in Tom's mania was the new world that it promised to open up. Sharing something utterly new, utterly forbidden, and yet so natural, so basic... That's just the beginning. Then you stand in front of each other, knowing each other's every whiff, every taste, every nook and every cranny, like you've never known anybody else before, except maybe your mother when you were a baby.

Then you build a shady house in the endless prairie and raise a few kids.

When the kids are big and have moved out, you brew some coffee while she knits you a scarf, and together you look forward to the next visit of your grandchildren, and you live happily in the small, warm house in the wide, wild world.

Was that really Tom's dream?

On some level it was. Not really consciously. But it was more or less what his parents had done, wasn't it? Of course they had done it all wrong. He would do it better, much better. But he would still do it. It belongs to the natural order of things. It wasn't so much that he imagined all these things. It was rather that he didn't imagine anything else!

And all this has to be in there somewhere. In there when you sleep with someone. You can't fake it. A whore can't fake such a dream for you, because if she did, that would cost her so much emotional energy that she would be forced to make the most out of it afterwards, make it worth its while, which means she would end up wanting it for REAL. And if she wants it for real, then she's not faking it anymore, is she? So in actual fact you just can't fake it.

Tom asked Jim: "Did you ever think of getting married?"

"No," answered Jim, and his voice didn't sound very happy.

"So what are you looking for in life?" asked Tom.

"I'm trying to save up money for my mother."

"Is she poor?"

"Yes, she is poor. Her husband was shot during a bank robbery. She has two children from him, two little girls, my half-sisters."

"What about your father?" asked Tom harmlessly.

There was a long silence. Finally Jim said: "I know nothing about him."

There was another long silence, then Jim added: "My mother was seventeen when I was born. She was just a little girl, but my birth changed her life for ever."

Jim paused again, then he said: "My mother was already thirty-five or something when she finally met her husband. He was a widower. He was ...okay. He was honest and hard-working. I think my mother really loved him. They had two children. They were a family. It was... hard for me. But I love my half-sisters. It isn't their fault. Then he got killed. I... I had hoped something like that would happen to him."

Jim was silent again for a while, then he looked at Tom earnestly: "You have to be careful with what you wish, because you never know if your wish might not be granted in the end!"

"But surely it isn't your fault that your step-father got killed!" Tom called out.

"Maybe not," said Jim, "but I had hoped something like that would happen to him. I had hoped for it for years! And now I feel guilty..."

"But..." Tom began.

"I know," said Jim, "I wasn't even there when it happened. I didn't live with them. I didn't even know about it for a long time."

"So it's not your fault," concluded Tom.

"And yet... Anyway, I'd like to buy my mother a little place of her own from which she and my half-sisters could live."

"And you never thought of having children of your own?" asked Tom.

"Well," said Jim, "it is more important to me to care for my half-sisters first. I think first one should look after the already existing people before making new ones."

Tom pondered this for a while in silence.

Then Jim asked him: "What about you? Would you like to have a family?"

Tom was surprised by the question. "Me?" he asked.

"Yes, you," said Jim, "Why not?"

"Well..." Tom didn't know what to say. His life seemed so meaningless, so empty. Not long ago his biggest wish had been to become independent of his parents, to escape from their miserable sheep-herder existence. Now he had really escaped, and his pockets were full of money. So, what now?

Did he really want to start raising a family? On the long term he probably did. But in the meantime he had no idea what he was doing here in this world.

Yes, he had money. But he didn't really know what to do with it. He wasn't going to spend it on four-hundred whores, he knew that much. And yet he definitely felt the pain of not having experienced sex, of possibly not being able to experience it, ever...

Jim had experienced it. He was ahead of Tom in that sense. But he didn't have as much money as Tom. Jim would have known what to do with the money, but he didn't have it. Tom had all the money, but he didn't have the sexual experience. Each of them had something that the other badly lacked, and they were both about equally lost.

Tom was still pondering these thoughts when Jim's voice interrupted him: "My dear friend, you still have far to go before you can start raising a family!"

"What do you mean?" asked Tom, surprised.

"You can't find a woman before you've found a man," said Jim mysteriously.

"You're talking in riddles now," said Tom, disappointed.

"No, I'm not," said Jim, "all I mean is that you won't find a woman as long as you haven't been initiated into manhood. Men and women belong to each other, but no woman belongs to you as long as you don't feel like a man."

"In what sense am I not a man?" asked Tom. Perhaps he should have felt insulted, but he didn't. Jim was on to something here. Tom was honestly curious about it.

"Well," said Jim, "you behave like someone who would like to be a man, but who isn't."

"Explain," said Tom.

"Well, you challenge men until you have to shoot them. Logically one day you will meet someone who is faster than you, and then you'll die."

"Do you think deep down I wish to be shot?" asked Tom.

"No," said Jim, "I think deep down you would just like to find out what makes them men. You would like to see what they have that you lack."

"How can I find that out if I just shoot them?" asked Tom.

"Yeah, that's the problem, I guess," said Jim. "Each one you shoot is one less who has something that you lack. In the end you'll be the only man left on earth. That's a way of solving the problem too, I guess..."

"And if I get shot myself?"

"Well, then at least you'll know what he had that you didn't. Except that you won't be able to do much with that knowledge, since you'll be dead."

"I don't see any way out of this conundrum," said Tom.

"Well," said Jim, "what a man has that you don't have is not necessarily speed on the draw." Then, after a short pause he continued: "One day a man could come along who just doesn't draw his gun. You challenge him and challenge him and he just doesn't draw. What would you do then?"

"Draw first?" asked Tom.

"No," said Jim, "you wouldn't draw first. That wouldn't be your style. I think you wouldn't know what to do. There you would be standing, the two of you, face to face, and nothing happening, the two of you just staring each other down."

"And then?" asked Tom.

"Then you might see that this guy doesn't want to shoot you. That he rather wants to give you a chance. Perhaps you would end up confiding in him. He would be your mentor, a kind of a father. He would initiate you into manhood, and you would become a real man, a man who feels like a man."

Tom said: "I don't know. All this sounds a bit contrived." Then he was silent for a while, and then he added: "But maybe you're still right somewhere deep down. I'm looking for a father. All the men I've known so far just lived their lives without caring about me. When I tried to get their attention, they just turned away, brushed me off. Or indeed tried to shoot me down, except that then I shot them instead. No man was

ever patient with me. When I confront men, maybe deep down it's just a desire to be noticed by them. Maybe I'd like them to take me along on their manly ways."

"Yeah," said Jim, "I guess you're really just a fatherless boy. You're looking for a father, and nobody has time for you. You're also kind of flippant with your gun and shiny boots. Boys will be boys – they're boisterous! Without the guidance of a fatherly hand they get out of hand. They become like you and just leave dead bodies behind wherever they go. But it doesn't even make them happy. They go deeper and deeper into the West, not knowing where else to go or what else to do."

"Maybe I should never have got a gun..." said Tom sadly.

"Well," said Jim, "I guess deep down you're convinced that in principle everybody wants to destroy you. So you want to prove to everybody that they can't do that. That's why you need the revolver. Without it you wouldn't even dare to go out among people. You never experienced being dominated without being hurt at the same time. That's why you don't let yourself be guided by anybody. Nobody will guide you without a certain amount of dominance, and the problem is you can't accept dominance, since you believe that it's the same as wanting to destroy you."

"What should I do, then?" asked Tom.

"I don't know," said Jim. "I guess you just have to go on the way you're going for the time being. One day you'll be defeated, and maybe you'll die of it. But if you don't, you'll have learned something. You'll have learned that you can be dominated without being destroyed. You'll have found the guy to whom you can and must submit. He will become your mentor, your father. And then, at last, you'll learn. And you'll become a real man."

Tom and Jim didn't talk much more after this.

They were approaching the next town. They knew there was a dangerous gang of outlaws there. Maybe they would meet them in the saloon.