

Tom drove into town with his well-loaded wagon. He paid no attention to the people who were turning towards him. But soon he heard the astonished calls: "Nacho!.. He's bringing us Nacho's body!"

People streamed out of the houses onto the street and walked behind the wagon in droves. Some of them pressed forward till they could touch Nacho's boots or spit in his face.

They accompanied Tom all the way to the house of the sheriff, and as soon as they were there a dozen helpful men started unloading the bodies. Tom jumped down from the seat of the wagon and the crowd respectfully made space for him. The sheriff had already been called out of his office and was washed up to Tom by the excited crowd. The sheriff didn't like being called by his people like that. He didn't like being the last to know what's going on. He much rather wanted to be the first and to lead his people. He was quite new in Anthony and he was still fighting for his place there. So he looked at Tom - this hero who had suddenly appeared from nowhere - rather darkly. But he said "Good day, sir" very politely.

Tom wasn't used to being called „sir“, especially by a sheriff. And just now, when he was dirty and his body full of cramps, it happened for the first time!

The sheriff said: "I hear you're bringing us Nacho and his whole gang."

It wasn't a question, just an observation full of appreciation.

Tom answered: "As far as I know, they're all here."

The sheriff was led to the bodies who had all been neatly laid out by now. He saw them lying there, quite dead, unmistakably dead.

How can one believe in spirits and ghosts, he wondered? These bodies were lying here so wretchedly and helplessly and so utterly dead that Nacho's spirit, if it still existed in the ether somewhere, must feel much too humiliated to ever want to show itself again!

He turned away and asked Tom to follow him into his office. There he started adding up the money he owed Tom. Ten thousand for Nacho, five thousand for The Boy...

The sheriff named the eight other names with which Tom wasn't even familiar at all and added a few thousand dollars for each one of them. It added up to twenty-seven thousand all in all. The sheriff wrote a cheque to be cashed in at the bank as soon as the safe would be set back into its place.

Tom took the cheque, thanked him, left the office, mounted on Bess and rode away. He rode to the hotel and put Bess into the stable next to the gelding. The gelding lifted his head and pushed it over to Bess's side and gave her a friendly nudge with his nose. Then he nudged Tom as well, inviting him to give him a piece of carrot. Tom went off to fetch an apple for his two horses. He decided that he liked the big gelding after all, and that he had missed him.

In another stall nearby he found Jim's old mule. He didn't seem to recognize Tom, but he looked contented all in all - he had obviously been cared for well too, even if he didn't look very precious.

Tom brushed down Bess, patted all the horses and left the stable.

He wanted to go to his room, but he was held back at the reception desk.

"So you brought us Nacho?" asked the hotelier, and the admiration in his voice made it clear that he already knew the answer. Tom shrugged his shoulders. He didn't understand how the news could have traveled so fast, and he didn't like it much that now he wasn't a normal man anymore at all!

A man excitedly ran through the door and said out of breath: "Tom Miller, you're expected at the bank!"

The hotelier hanged the key to Tom's room back onto its hook without having given it to Tom. Tom let himself be guided through the open door and stared into the crowd that was waiting for him outside.

He had never even seen so many faces at once before. It was like a sea of faces. He couldn't make out individual features. It was unimaginable that behind each of these faces there was a thinking brain like his own. Perhaps there really wasn't. How could there be? He felt very much alone with his thinking brain all of a sudden...

The flowing crowd took hold of Tom and washed him across the street to the bank. Now Tom was standing at the entrance to the bank. He saw the imperfections of the white-washed stone-work and the splinters in the weather-worn wooden door right in front of him.

He hadn't stepped this close to the bank before, because he would have been afraid of seeming suspicious. Tom didn't like to be in places without having a clearly stated business there. There was a kind of shyness in him. Strange when you consider that he could beat just about anybody he wanted on the draw...

But being fast on the draw is just one aspect of life. In others Tom by far didn't feel so self-confident.

Today Tom was being celebrated as a great hero, and everyone expected him to know how to behave like a hero, to make speeches and such. Tom didn't really know how to deal with this sudden fame, and he felt dreadfully forlorn and alone as he was facing this tumultuous, sensation-hungry crowd.

The hay-wagon had moved up to the bank. The banker came out of the main door of his bank, rolled up his sleeves in a theatrical way and climbed onto the wagon. One of his clerks handed him a big key, and he opened the battered safe with it. The iron door of the safe was very hard to move, and the clerk jumped up on the wagon to help. The door screeched in complaint, but finally it swung open and the safe revealed its contents – many big, neatly piled up bank-notes!

Tom was astonished that the contents were still so orderly, after all the safe had gone through! The banknotes were packed so tightly that they hadn't been able to move at all...

The banker's face beamed as he plunged his arms into the safe.

"Tom Miller, please!" he called.

Tom came closer to the wagon and was handed forty thousand dollars. That was the reward offered by the bank for returning the money. Tom stuffed the huge bundle into his shirt and signed the receipt that was ceremoniously held up to him.

Then he pulled out the cheque for the twenty-seven thousand dollars the sheriff had written out for him and handed it to the banker. The banker plunged his arms into the safe once more and fished out more thousand-dollar bills. He counted them out for Tom. Finally Tom had sixty-seven of them all told. That was a LOT of money!

With his shirt almost bursting, Tom gravely marched back to the hotel through the crowd. At the reception desk he was respectfully handed the key to his room, and then he could finally go up and hide from the crowd at last.

He felt dead-tired as he washed himself with cold water. Half-naked he slipped into the clean bed. But he couldn't fall asleep, because the bed seemed to be heaved around by huge waves, as if it were floating on a billowy ocean rather than standing firmly on the floor. Tom felt a bit sick. The events of the last few days had been too much for him. Now that it was all over, Tom was too shaken to sleep. For days he had had a single goal in front of his eyes. Now he had reached it, and now he had to find his next step. In the meantime his memories were shaking him and he couldn't reach any inner peace.

His newly found fame didn't really please him all that much – it was more of a burden at this point. Of course it is nice on some level to meet awed stares wherever you go, but in times of trouble he would have to face the expectations as well. It was surely easier to be an anonymous figure who isn't exposed to all these worldly matters so much and only has himself to take care of.

Tom woke up late the next morning, and he was almost sorry for not being able to sleep longer. Even just the thought of getting up made his bones ache. But he didn't feel comfortable in bed any longer either. It was time to start something else, something new. He had defeated Nacho, but he felt restless as before. Or rather, he felt more restless because he didn't have a goal to focus on anymore.

He had to find a new goal. He was tired of his adventures. They tired him out, made him rich and ever richer, but never seemed to lead to anything beyond that.

Tom owned almost a hundred thousand dollars now, and that was surely enough to buy a nice piece of land with a water-source, a herd of cows, and a ranch...

He felt like going back to his home-town and playing the big man there. And he should certainly pay a visit to his mother... Tom felt like setting off straight away. But first he had to take care of Jim's belongings, including his trusty old mule. He somehow had to find Jim's mother and give her all Jim's money – which Jim had been saving up for her all these years. And he had to find a good home for the old mule, because he definitely didn't want to leave it in careless hands...

After a while Tom had made up his mind – he would leave Jim's money with a trustworthy lawyer, and he would just take the old mule home with him. It would perhaps slow him down a bit, but after all he wasn't in such a big hurry – it would give him time to think and sort things out in his mind.

Having made this decision, Tom got up. Once out of bed he quickly got dressed and went down to eat breakfast. Then he paid the hotel-bill and went off to find a lawyer. He managed to settle this matter to his entire satisfaction at a steadfast law firm, and then he went off to buy food for his trip. He packed up the gelding and the mule with it and finally rode out of Anthony, feeling good to be on his way again!

The atmosphere in Anthony had gradually gotten on his nerves. Indeed, he was served before anyone else in the saloon, and everybody called him "sir", and maybe this meant he was really a man now, a real one, but somehow he still hadn't imagined it like that.

Besides, being a hero means that people expect things from you. And as time goes by and you become more and more of a legend, the expectancies grow accordingly. They grow beyond what is sensible. But if you ever disappoint your believers, you will be considered a swindler. Even if it isn't your fault that they believed in you so exaggeratedly in the first place...

Tom wouldn't have that problem in his home town. Even if the rumours of his great deeds ever reached it, people would find it hard to believe them. How could the awkward little boy of those pitiful sheep-farmers have grown into such a hero? Surely there must be some mistake...

It's hard to be seen as a hero in a place where you were previously seen as a stupid little kid.

Tom might gain some respect in his home-town, the same kind of respect as the Davidsons had. The Davidsons, however respected, were still ordinary humans whom you could love or hate, admire or despise.

That's what Tom would be too. Or would he?

After a few days Tom arrived in the town where he had first met Jim. Tom rode to the saloon.

There were two other horses in front of the saloon – a big, black stallion and a rather plain, brown mare.

After Tom had tied up his horses and unloaded them, he pushed his way through the swinging doors of the saloon and...

Stopped dead in his tracks!

He discreetly turned round and looked at the horses outside. He hadn't paid them enough attention. There was no possible doubt – the black horse was Blackie, Jack Davidson's proud stallion!

Jack and Theresa were sitting at a table in the saloon. It could even have been the very same table at which Tom had sat with Jim long ago (or in any case it seemed long ago).

Tom put up an unconcerned face, walked through the empty saloon and sociably joined the two siblings at their table.

"Hallo!" he said jovially, "what are you doing here?"

The girl looked away as though she wanted to ignore Tom.

Jack's dark eyes bored into him.

Nobody spoke, but Jack's stare didn't waver. It was a silent challenge.

After a little while, shortly before the tension became truly unbearable, Jack stood up, cleared his throat and said curtly: "Excuse me!"

Then he walked out through the swinging doors, and soon afterwards his horse could be heard galloping away.

Now the girl turned to Tom: "And what are YOU doing here? You smell like a ratty buck!"

Tom felt like screaming at her that he really was a ratty buck. He was continuously and madly ratty, because he had never in his life managed to copulate with a female. When o when would he be relieved of this torment?

But all he said was: "I'm sorry."

They were both silent again.

Theresa was patting the sleeve of her blouse, and Tom scrutinized her.

She had completely lost her child-like chubbiness. She looked grown up and feminine.

Her chin was graceful but protruding in a resolute way, as it always had in her childhood too. Her face was much more elongated than before, but the cheeks were still quite full and had a healthy red colour. Her lips were rather plain and thin, but when she parted them halfway, a longing sigh seemed to escape from them inaudibly...

Her eyes were as dark as Jack's, but - unlike in Jack's case - the look in them was clear. In Jack's eyes there was a kind of murky depth and a permanently malicious sparkle which contradicted any friendly word he might ever pronounce. Theresa's eyes showed depth too, but not of the murky kind, and there was no malicious sparkle in them either. Rather, the full, dark colour of her eyes expressed the sensuality that was missing from her thin lips.

She carried her hair loose and half-long, just right for a long trip on horse-back. Her eye-brows expressed the same kind of decidedness as her small but protruding chin. Tom wasn't sure whether he really found her pretty, but the memories that stirred in him were sweet and sent a tingling shiver across his back...

As though she wanted to start an everyday conversation, Theresa said: "How about telling me of your adventures?"

But those few words seemed theatrical and her voice sounded false, disguised. It was obvious that Jack had left his sister alone with Tom so that she would sound him out. But Tom played along, and so he started talking, in an equally affected manner:

“One fine day I was being pursued. So what do I do? I go into my room and hang my poncho and my hat on the hat-stand. Then I comfortably settle in my easy-chair and wait. Soon enough my pursuer bursts into my room and pumps the hat-stand full of bullets. I casually swivel around in my chair, lazily lift my gun out of my lap and give him a bullet.”

The girl had listened with her chin leaning in her hand. Without removing her chin from her hand, her eyes shining with the faintest taint of irony, she said:

“Unbelievable. You outwitted your pursuer. With your cold, discrete thoughtfulness you defeated his brute power!”

Tom shook his head, slowly and deliberately, like someone who doesn't really need to convince his counterpart but who is still sorry to see that he was misunderstood.

“Not at all,” he said. He started explaining patiently: “When you outwit someone, that means you do something special that your opponent didn't expect. I did no such thing. I just hung up my poncho and my hat, as anyone would. I wasn't even aware of my opponent – I just ignored him. He was a great outlaw, but for me he was meaningless. I shot him with a yawn while he thought he was pumping me full of bullets.”

The girl laid her index on her brow and held her head to the side. With an amused smile she said: “You describe your contempt for this outlaw very convincingly, but I see this matter somewhat differently – either you knew that your opponent would shoot at the hat-stand or you didn't know it, right?”

Theresa smiled with false naivety. Tom nodded earnestly, and she continued:

“If you knew it, then that was because you had thought about it, and by thinking about it you acknowledged the existence of that outlaw. That means you didn't ignore him, since you thought about him.”

Theresa uttered a nervous little laugh and continued:

“The other possibility is that you didn't know your opponent would shoot at the hat-stand. In that case you were just lucky.”

Tom didn't understand anything anymore: “What?”

Theresa summarized her idea: “As I see it, you defeated that opponent either through cunning or through luck, but definitely not through some kind of inherent superiority that would allow you to despise him the way you do.”

Theresa looked at Tom in a kind of small-girlish and at the same time provocative way. Tom was speechless – he had nothing to say to this crystal-clear way of reasoning.

He tried again and started somewhere else in his story: “When I arrived in Anthony, hundreds of men were cheering me. They came out on the street and followed my wagon. Some of them felt particularly brave when they dared to touch the corpses I was transporting. Me, I hadn't just touched them as corpses. My bullets had caught them when they were still full of life, long before they lay piled up on that wagon like rotten cabbages. When I loaded them on the wagon, their bodies were still warm and pliable. On the way to Anthony, their beard-stubbles even still grew a bit!”

The girl had listened to the crazy story like a patient mother. Now she stretched her arms stifling a yawn, opening her mouth only a tiny bit and keeping her faint smile on her face.

“But Tom,” she said, “how could the people of Anthony know that it was really you who killed the outlaws?”

Tom didn't speak like someone who doesn't need to convince his counterpart anymore. On the contrary, he answered eagerly: "Nacho and his men couldn't be killed through cowardice. If that was possible, someone would have done it long ago. Nacho and his men could only be killed heroically, as I did. There wasn't any other way. Everybody knows that."

Tom paused a second, then he added: "If I bring home Nacho as my prey, then I either defeated him directly, or I defeated the man who had defeated him before me. In either case I'm better than Nacho and deserve to have him as my prey."

The girl was not impressed by these logics. She made the same slightly amused face as before, but this time some triumph was shining in her eyes: "I see a third possibility," she said. "You might have defeated Nacho together with several other gun-men. Everybody died in the gun-fight, except you. So now you're collecting all the glory and all the rewards for yourself."

Tom said quickly: "If I was the last survivor, I must at least have killed the second last survivor. Else the whole thing doesn't add up. And if we assume that Nacho..."

Theresa interrupted Tom with a cute smile: "The second last survivor that you killed might also have been one of your own men whom you then beat through cowardice to get the rewards for yourself. You can't prove to me that it wasn't like that."

Tom was startled – how could he prove that he had killed Nacho and his gang all alone?

He couldn't! And so nobody needed to believe it, even though it was really true! In despair he called out: "You have to believe me, I defeated Nacho in a fair fight!" "I believe you," Theresa assured Tom, "but you cannot prove it to me." And she turned her shoulder towards Tom.

Tom got a hold of himself again: "And you Theresa, what is your specialty? I guess it isn't shooting like for me!"

Theresa didn't answer at first, and Tom couldn't tell whether she was embarrassed because of not finding any example, or whether she had to choose from so many possibilities that it was hard to find the most striking. Tom felt it was the latter.

Finally Theresa's astonishing answer came: "I play the piano."

Tom flared up like a yapping cur feeling safe on his leash: "What can you do with a piano? Playing music is just a kind of self-sufficiency that doesn't impress anybody!" "Why don't you wait till you've heard me play?" asked Theresa bravely.

"Of course!" said Tom with a shrug. "There's a piano over there."

"No, no, not like that! You have to take it seriously, just as seriously as your revolver!" Then Theresa looked him straight in the eye and said: "Show me your revolver first, and then I'll play you something on the piano."

Tom let his right hand glide down to his hip.

Slowly, slowly he pulled out the revolver. Then he laid it on the table in front of Theresa.

"So this device," said Theresa, "comes from the shop of my father, doesn't it? How many deadly shots have been fired with it since then?"

Tom was going to count them in his mind, but Theresa didn't leave him time for that. She grabbed the revolver, weighed it in her hand, felt it all over (which made Tom's body-hair stand on end) and finally stood up and pointed it at Tom. She held it with two hands, her arms stretched out, her legs wide apart in a gun-man's stance.

Tom felt a tingling excitement in his crotch. He was being targeted, and something in him was ready to target her right back!

For so long already he had worried about maybe being impotent, about being unable to act in front of a woman. Right now, in a flash, he could tell that he was not...

He just sat there, in front of her, feeling larger than life, and finally he asked: “So, what do you want of me?”

The girl didn’t loosen her posture: “My brother asked me to disarm you so that we can arrest you.”

“Arrest? What for?” asked Tom, surprised.

Theresa answered grimly: “You know that very well – you shot two men back home. We want to bring you back, so that you can be judged.”

Bloody hell! Tom had really forgotten all about that! He was a hero now. Were they really still going to hold that old stuff against him?

He said harmlessly: “You’re forgetting your promise. You were going to play me something on the piano.”

Theresa let out a sigh and lowered the gun. She turned around and went over to the piano. Tom stood up and followed her.

She sat down at the piano, laid down the revolver and set her fingers on the keys.

Now she started playing.

The piece started with a slow trill drawing attention, then the melody melancholically went down to the lower keys.

Now the lower voice started, coming from far down and rising high up.

Then the slow trill started again, and the whole melody repeated itself, drawing Tom into its spell. It sounded vaguely familiar to him. He couldn’t quite make out where he might have heard it before. He had a vision of afternoon sun slanting in through a dusty window in a room where he was waiting for something with his mother, long ago...

In the same way as the mechanism of a steam-engine pulls a train out into the wide prairie, Tom was pulled by the simple cycle of the sentimental melody into a world of nostalgic feelings that a more complicated musical piece couldn’t have opened up for him.

Tom felt the wind of the train-ride on his face, and the trill wasn’t necessary anymore to capture his attention.

And indeed, there was no trill anymore this time. Instead, the melody drifted high up in the air, continuously supported by the rising bass.

But then it slowly sank back down nevertheless, like a long sigh finally running out of breath. The lower voice came up from very far down and swung up very high, but then it wasn’t clear what had happened, because now the slow trill started again.

Obviously the composer had taken a deep breath, but now he took up his nostalgic day-dream once again. The simple melody did another one of its rounds, supported by the rising bass with which it finally gently ended.

Now came three chords, almost hardening themselves into something dissonant, but then came a naïve little melody which, in its lighthearted gaiety, didn’t at all seem to fit with the general theme.

But then the silly little melody became more serious, swung back and forth a little moment between naïve lightheartedness and more somber feelings, and then suddenly took off in a little sprint that tore every listener out of the painful indecision through its surprising virtuosity.

The little sprint repeated itself and finally came to a standstill in the vicinity of the trill.

And so the sad trill, begging for attention, started again, and the original melancholic melody took Tom for another ride.

Tom let the music carry him and he soared in a stream of longing. It was a new kind of longing, and yet he felt it was what he had been waiting for all along. The sounds of the piano produced the longing, but the longing was directed at the pianist... For years Tom had been seeking this girl, but only now he felt properly in love. The sentimental melody came to an end, but this time the lower voice didn't rise up like before but rather stayed down there. Theresa was hammering dull notes out of the piano with her left middle finger. The upper voice played a chord, but the bass kept banging on.

A new chord, then the prolog to a third one that sounded hard and cruel until it dissolved in a fourth, friendlier chord.

The dull bass became softer and lost its insistence, then it became double but stayed friendly, and the chords in the upper voice gradually retreated, marching away majestically.

The bass became single again and turned back into a dull beat. The bitter chords in the upper voice came back. The bitterest one wasn't as bitter as last time, because an undertone was missing, but on the other hand it wouldn't dissolve as easily either.

The lower voice urged it on, and so it finally became reasonable and retreated.

The upper voice let itself drop now, but suddenly a breath of fresh energy seized the melody and it bolted like a horse gone wild. The lower voice hardly had time to support the upper one with its chords. Theresa's right hand leaped over the keys with wild ease. Tom could hardly follow its movements! Higher and higher it went!

Theresa played the piano just as deftly as Tom handled his revolver - faster than anyone could comprehend.

The speed was inebriating!

Now Theresa's right hand was running down the scale, and it was as if she were pulling a string of pearls through her hands, because every single note was so round and full and sparkly!

As her hand reached the middle of the keyboard again, it made a hint of the familiar trill, and then the sentimental melody took off for the last time. The harsh intermediate part had been overcome, and the sentimental melody was allowed to treat Beethoven's piece to a gentle and melancholic ending.

Theresa looked up at Tom. She had played a piece that never fails to impress, and she could tell it had worked on Tom too.

"Beautiful," said Tom. He didn't know what else to say.

"Oh well," said Theresa pretending to be annoyed, "you didn't even really listen. You just saw the chance to get your revolver back, that's all!"

Tom looked down at his holster. Indeed, his revolver was back in there. Tom had taken it back and put it away without even noticing.

"That's not true," said Tom. "I enjoyed it very much!"

Theresa's eyes glowed, and she said earnestly: "You can bring a mighty beast to its knees with your revolver, but only if it doesn't have body-armor. Me, I can pacify an over-mighty beast with the piano even if it has body-armor. So, you know, a piano is a mightier tool than a revolver!"

Tom didn't quite know what to say. Theresa had a point, although Tom doubted whether she could have pacified Nacho with her piano.

And yet Tom couldn't be sure it wouldn't have been possible. He remembered The Boy covering up Nacho when he was sleeping - there had been a human side to those guys, hidden somewhere deep down...

Tom asked Theresa: "What is your greatest wish?" and expected an answer having something to do with musical ambitions.

Instead of answering, Theresa asked back: “What is yours?”  
Since Tom didn’t know any answer either, Theresa finally explained: “I would like to be carried stark naked through town in an unbreakable glass-bubble!”  
Theresa stood up and left the saloon with a monosyllabic parting word. Tom just stood there, a bit stunned, then he emptied his whisky.  
After a while he felt it was time for him to find a hotel. He paid his drink and left the saloon feeling strangely self-conscious of every step he took.

Outside the last rays of sunlight were glowing above the roof-tops across the street and hit Tom straight in his face as he pushed his way through the swinging doors of the saloon.

Before Tom had time to look out for his horses, a voice called over to him from the other side of the street. Blinking in the light, Tom managed to make out his enemy Jack.

“Hey Tom! The time has come for you to face up to me!”

Tom was familiar with this kind of moments. He pulled a long cigar and a match from his shirt-pocket. He slowly pushed the cigar into the left corner of his mouth while lighting the match with his other hand. Without haste – even though the flame was greedily consuming the match – he brought it to the tip of his cigar. He breathed in, not much more deeply than a sleeping man, and the tip of the cigar began to glow. Shortly before the flame was going to reach his fingers he shook out and dropped the match. There, at his feet, it still glowed for a second and then died. As he let out his breath, it formed a visible structure in the evening air. It slowly drifted off high above the street, like a daydream made of cigar smoke, and then gradually dissipated. Tom periodically added new plumes of smoke to it.

Jack, facing Tom, knew very well that the cigar would go out one day and that the smoke would dissipate utterly in the end. But the thought that all this smoke would finally, in endlessly diluted form, cover the whole world, and that he would never be able to escape from it, was uncomfortable.

Arrogantly despising the whole world Tom was puffing out oversized spirits from his small lungs. A bullet from a revolver would be able to pierce those lungs, but the spirits it had puffed out would remain, spooky and unfathomable.

What did Tom care about his lungs while his spirits were floating above him?

Jack got the feeling there was nothing he could do against Tom. Tom could only win while he could only lose.

Jack bravely remained facing Tom and fought the feeling of unease the best he could. Tom took the cigar out of his mouth, turned it around in his hand and looked at its glowing tip. He said: “You know, Jack, if you want to arrest me, you have to draw your gun.”

Jack said nothing, and Tom stood in front of him patiently.

He put the cigar back into the left corner of his mouth. The right corner of his mouth was smiling.

Jack saw the smile. The smudgy smile of little Tom, the next-door boy. Jack had never imagined that he could possibly keep that smile into adulthood!

And yet Tom had definitely grown into a man now. He wasn’t next-door’s boy anymore – he wasn’t NEXT to Jack in any way anymore. Rather, they were facing each other as deadly opponents! He was the same person, but his meaning for Jack had changed radically!

For Tom the greatest moment in his life had come – for years he had stood in the shadow of this oversize role-model, and now he had stepped out of the shadow at last and was blinking in the stark sun-light!

Jack took the blinking for a sign from heaven and laid his hand on the grip of his revolver.

This triggered the usual epileptic attack in Tom.

Jack instantly knew his mistake. He knew he was a dead man.

The hammer clicked twice but there was no recoil, no bang, no smoke...

Tom's revolver wasn't loaded!

Tom couldn't understand it. As he tried to grasp the situation, a dirty smile appeared on Jack's face.

He finished straightening up his revolver – slowly, since there was no hurry anymore – and said: "I will be able to tell everybody with a clear conscience that I defeated you in a duel."

He laid his thumb on the hammer of his revolver.

Suddenly a lasso-loop came flying out of nowhere, seized Jack around the waist and pulled him to the ground.

Tom's left hand flew to his belt, and his fingers slipped a bullet into his hand. He pushed the bullet into a chamber of the revolver, turned the drum and pulled back the hammer.

When Jack, sitting on the ground now, had come to his senses, Tom's revolver was loaded and pointing at him with deadly accuracy.

"Stop!" called out a commanding voice, and now Tom saw the girl. She was on horseback, the other end of the lasso twisted around the saddle-knob, and she had suddenly materialized from behind the corner of the nearest house.

Jack left his revolver lying on the ground and stood up slowly. His dark eyes smoldered as he looked up at his sister, and he said ominously: "What do you think YOU're doing?"

He said it slowly enough to give Theresa time to lose her composure. But she didn't. She just yelled at her brother: "And what the hell do you think YOU're doing? You promised you would only arrest him, not shoot him!"

Jack had nothing to say. He turned to Tom.

Tom had put away his revolver and smiled sheepishly. He shrugged and showed Jack his empty palms.

After a while Jack shrugged too and said: "Forgive me, Tom."

"So, did you make peace now?" asked Theresa.

Jack and Tom nodded gravely.

The three of them set off towards the hotel together.

Theresa shook out her pocket and gave back the six bullets of the revolver to Tom.

She had quickly and neatly slipped them into her hand and then in her pocket on the way to the piano in the saloon, and Tom had never noticed...

Her hand touched Tom's as she handed them back. Tom put five of them back into his revolver and stuck the last one in his belt.

Now Theresa asked Tom: "Would you come back home with us of your own accord?"

"Why should I?" Tom asked back.

Theresa didn't answer. Jack didn't say anything either. He had a warrant to bring back Tom, and his intent had been to make himself into a hero. There was nothing in it for him if Tom came back with them of his own accord.

Then Theresa asked Tom: “Wouldn’t you perhaps like to know what became of your mother?”

Tom stopped and Theresa and Jack turned around and faced him.

Theresa was right, of course. Why hadn’t Tom even thought of asking about his mother?

He was going to now, but Theresa continued anyway: “Our father is paying her a pension and lets her live in the little house for free.”

“Why does he do that?” asked Tom, surprised.

Theresa answered: “He feels guilty because of you. You tried to challenge him, but the sheriff got in between and you had to flee. My father feels he acted like a coward towards you. He feels guilty because of that.”

Now Jack spoke, half-heartedly: „Yeah, you see, Tom, that’s why I wanted to bring you back dead... Because actually my father wants to testify that you shot the sheriff and the other man out of self-defense – if the matter is deliberated in court, you would almost certainly be acquitted.”

And then Theresa said: “Tom, come back home with us! Then you don’t need to flee from your own shadow anymore and you can start a normal life again!”

It sounded as if Theresa were actually begging him, so Tom was moved and agreed.

The next morning Theresa, Tom and Jack got under way. Jack was riding on his big black stallion, Theresa on her brown mare, and Tom was between them, like a captive, on his Bess. But he wasn’t a captive, and he carried his gun. Behind them they led Jim’s mule and the big gelding with the luggage.

Tom was going to see his mother and his home-town again soon, and he looked forward to it. He had Theresa to thank for that. He kept having to look at her as she rode next to him, leaning slightly backwards in the saddle, her chest self-confidently arched forward, and again and again he thought to himself that she was a great girl. They didn’t talk much. They enjoyed the fresh morning air and rode at a steady rate. Towards midday the heat came, the landscape became monotonous and lifeless. The ground was reflecting the heat, roasting the riders and their horses from both above and below.

The horses dreamed of a soft, juicy meadow.

Theresa dreamed of the full bathtub she had left behind at the hotel.

Jack thought of lunch with a frothy beer.

But Tom just saw the uniform, rocky desert, and he had his first doubts about whether he was acting sensibly. Was it smart to trust the two siblings and follow them home?

Tom felt more and more uncomfortable next to them. Theresa meant well, he was sure of that. What Jack thought no one could tell. But how would the marshal see the matter? Would he see it Theresa’s way? Or would Tom, after endless promises and various lawyers unrolling the case for him again and again, end up being... hanged?!?!?

It was a relief from his thoughts when he spotted three riders in the distance.

You never know what to expect when you come across another rider in the prairie.

The easiest is not to get within gunshot of each other. If you have business with each other, it will always seem safer to do it in a town.

But the three riders ignored this unwritten rule. They came towards Tom and the two siblings purposefully. The shadow of fear spread itself out over Tom and his companions.

The relief Tom had felt a minute ago was gone. Now he felt more uncomfortable than he had ever felt before. Not even in his worst times in the midst of Nacho's men had he felt quite like this, it seemed to him...

It was Theresa's presence that made all the difference. Had he been alone, he would just have waited for the three strangers stoically.

The three riders fanned out and galloped towards them from three different directions. They stopped their horses sharply when they reached Jack, Theresa and Tom.

Now they stood there, three lonesome riders surrounding three other lonesome riders. Tom cursed himself for not having told his companions that they should put some distance between themselves, just as their opponents had done when they had fanned out. Except that it would have meant leaving Theresa to face one of the strangers alone. But as things stood now, Tom and his companions were crowded together, easy to keep an eye on, while their opponents were all over the place, unmanageable even for Tom.

Tom could only see the one in the middle who was standing directly in front of him. The two others were on either side. They were so far apart that Tom could never shoot them all three before getting shot himself. He couldn't even keep an eye on all three at once!

One of them could distract him and another could shoot him in the meantime. It was that easy! Tom, who was the one who had killed Nacho and his whole gang, would now be finished off by three of the most ordinary small-time outlaws, the kind who haunted the prairie because of being too cowardly to attack a bank!

Just because he had let them get him in the middle!

Yet maybe this was fair, after all. The glorious Nacho had been shot by a snout-nosed kid who had run off from home, after all (because that's definitely what Tom must have looked like to him). You can be the greatest hero, and then death catches you where you would least have expected Him...

Tom was aware that this thought might be one of his last.

He felt Theresa's presence next to him and was afraid for her. He felt strange and his thoughts turned into colourful visions. He didn't hear anything when the stranger facing him started talking. The stranger's face was like the crust of a loaf of bread. There were two raisins that had been pushed into the dough to figure the eyes. The mouth was just a cleft that had allowed the dough to rise in the oven...

The nose was a piece of gristle with two big holes out of which long hairs were poking out. The whole rind was studded with small bristles. The smile was totally empty, as if it were cut into a pumpkin.

In broken English he said: "Well, my friends, what are you doing here? Don't you know that there are dangerous outlaws around here?"

Smirking, he turned to one and then the other of his companions: "Isn't that so?"

Then he turned his dark eyes on Tom again and said laughing: "Maybe we should accompany you to protect you? Where are you headed?"

As he talked, he snatched his hat from his head, as if in greeting, performed a hint of a bow, bringing the hand with the hat down to his hips...

When the hat covered his right hand, Tom immediately knew what it meant. He drew his gun and shot the man, turned to Theresa's side and shot the other man there and then let himself drop to the ground as he heard the heavy report of another, large-caliber gun. When he looked up, trying to aim his gun at the third man from between Bess' legs, he just saw the third man's empty horse standing there. The man was lying at its feet, motionless.

Tom slowly got up.

„Are you hurt?“ asked Theresa anxiously.

“No,” said Tom, “I let myself fall off on purpose.”

Now he saw that Jack was holding his big revolver in his hand. A thin wisp of smoke was curling up out of its barrel. Jack had shot the third outlaw and so most probably saved Tom’s life!

Theresa, Jack and Tom looked at each other in wonder.

Theresa had witnessed her first shoot-out.

For the first time, Tom had been saved by someone else. And, what’s more, someone who had once been his worst enemy!

You couldn’t tell what Jack felt, as usual. He didn’t say anything when they started off on their way again.

The rest of the way was uneventful. And then, one day, in the evening, as the sun was just going down, the three travelers came past the signboard announcing their hometown!

They came past the cemetery where Tom’s father had only recently been buried. Then came the small school-house where Tom and Theresa had sat at their little benches... Jack too, but he had been among the bigger kids.

Then they were in the main street among the town houses.

So Tom was back in the narrow confines of what had been his whole world for twenty years. Now, as he came back from his big adventures in the wide world, it all seemed to have shrunk. Everything seemed to be so small – small, but also neat and endearing!

Tom felt his heart cramp and uncramp – at last it knew what it was beating for!

Night came on fast, and the bustle in town was quickly coming to a rest. The three travelers suddenly felt sweaty and dusty from their long trip. This wasn’t how they wished to present themselves at anyone’s door!

It was Theresa who suggested: “Let’s go down to the lake to clean up first!”

Jack agreed and Tom even found it a good idea. So they went down to the lake-side, unsaddled the horses, brushed and washed them, and then it was time to wash themselves as well.

Jack said: “Men on this side, women on the other!”

Theresa replied: “It’s almost dark anyway. No need to separate!”

“As you wish,” said Jack, but he still went across the little headland over to the side he had declared to be the “men’s side”. So Theresa and Tom stayed back alone with the horses who were plucking a few stalks of grass here and there or drinking from the cool water. The surface of the lake was as smooth as glass and gleamed weakly in the dying light.

Tom had already taken off his shirt. Theresa was unbuttoning her blouse.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Tom mumbled so quietly that Theresa didn’t need to hear it if she didn’t want to.

“We always did it like that in the past too, remember?” said Theresa.

“And what about the unbreakable glass-bubble?” Tom asked with his normal voice, and Theresa called back, as she ran to the water: “I don’t need it when you’re there!”

Tom had been fussily unbuckling his belt, but now he looked up, and what he saw was Theresa, nothing but Theresa, because there was nothing on her. He dropped all his clothes and plunged into the water after her!

They played and splashed a while in the shallow water. Then they raced till the other side of the lake. They rested a bit there, sitting next to each other in the soft sand, their feet still in the water. After a while Tom laid his arm over her bare shoulders. It

seemed perfectly natural to do that. With his toes he stroked her foot. She laid a hand on his knee. Together they watched as the last traces of red disappeared in the west. It was time to swim back. They let go of each other and dived back into the coolness of the dark water. When their heads broke the surface again, they swam abreast and talked a bit about the character of their horses.

As Tom climbed out of the water behind Theresa, he mused how beautiful the human body is. It is as nicely shaped as the body of a noble steed, even though it walks upright on two legs.

It's the clothes that take away this nobility from the human body.

Tom particularly liked the transition from the back to the curvature of the buttocks – it was so elegant! Each buttock actually already belongs to the corresponding leg, and the hole between them – without which no creature can live - is discreetly hidden between the joints that couldn't be grown together without a cleft anyway.

Theresa dried herself, dressed up, and the magic spell of the common bath was over. But she was still Theresa, and Tom felt an urge to run over to her and hold and kiss her. He didn't do it. He wouldn't have known how to or whether it could possibly have been acceptable or not...

Theresa was now wearing a pretty even if a bit formal dress. Tom dressed up in some more elegant clothes too that he had bought not long ago, and then Jack came along quite elegantly dressed as well. Theresa brushed through Tom's hair with her hand, because he obviously hadn't noticed that his mop of hair looked like a haystack. After this the three of them looked neat and fresh and ready for a party!

Earlier they could have been mistaken for dangerous outlaws coming to plunder the town. Bathing and putting on nice and clean clothes was just a superficial change, but it symbolized something deeper – indeed, real outlaws wouldn't have gone to such pains. Cleaning up was a proof of the good intentions of these three travelers. It had taken the scary wildness out of them.

They took their horses by the reins and started off on their way to the mansion of the Davidsons.

The three travelers were welcomed at the door by Theresa and Jack's mother whom Tom hardly knew by sight, unlike the rest of the family, since she had always spent most of her time indoors. She was a complicated and somewhat overdrawn woman. She made surprised sounds when she saw Theresa and kissed her like a teddy-bear. When Jack came in, she became ecstatic. She embraced him like a little kid, even though he was much bigger than her. When Jack could loosen himself from her at last and introduced her to Tom, she seemed taken aback. An inconstant smile flickered on her quivering face. Tom didn't know how to behave towards her.

"Tall you've become! Beautiful you've become!" she finally exclaimed and let Tom in.

Mr. Davidson was just coming down the stairs. He affectionately rubbed the nape of Theresa's neck with one big hand and hit Jack's shoulder with the other.

"Nice to have you both back!" he said in his droll manner. His personal principle of treating everybody with a patronizing joviality didn't allow him to show any kind of embarrassment towards Tom. So, with a broad smile he said: "Good evening, Tom Miller!" Then he added with a jocularly faked bad conscience: "You forgive me, don't you?"

Jack said quickly but not very loudly: "What should he forgive you, dad?" The malicious sparkle, that Tom knew so well, was in his dark eyes again.

Mr. Davidson ignored the question. "You forgive me that bygone misunderstanding, don't you, Tom?"

Tom only nodded and said: "Good evening, Mr. Davidson."

Mr. Davidson led the children into the living room.

"You stay for supper of course, don't you, Tom?" he asked.

Tom answered he would like to see his mother first. Mr. Davidson hit himself on the brow with the flat of the hand and of course found Tom's wish completely natural and self-evident. He called for the family's coach to be made ready, so that Tom could go and fetch his mother who was of course cordially invited too.

And so Tom let himself be driven to the small house where he had lived for twenty years.

Before he had time to prepare inwardly he was already standing in front of the door of his old life, while behind him the magnificent coach of his new life was waiting for him. He knocked on the door, which felt incongruous since he had gone in and out through this very door for twenty years without ever knocking.

It was dark and he felt that his mother was perhaps afraid of nightly visitors, so he opened the door a crack and called in: "It's me, Tom!"

Now he heard running footsteps, and then his mother tore the door open. She didn't seem able to be happy straight away – it was too sudden.

"It's you!" she said, shaken, and then she asked anxiously: "Is everything okay?"

Tom was surprised how disconcertingly old his mother seemed. First he couldn't say a word, but then he bent himself over her and whispered: "Everything is fine again, for good!"

He entered the paltry home and looked about himself. Even though it was very small it also seemed very empty. The handicraft his mother had been working on was lying on the kitchen table. It was hard to believe that the atmosphere that had reigned at this very table every evening had ruled his life day after day for twenty years. It was hard to believe that his whole life had taken place in these narrow surroundings, even though it had been a life full of love, hatred, sorrow and joy like any other life!

Tom entered his room that was little bigger than a horse's stall, and in which he had lived all his wildest dreams for twenty years. The bed was freshly made, and his few belongings, toys and clothes, were neatly laid out. Tears of emotion came to his eyes when he saw that.

"I'll cook you some soup!" said his mother who couldn't keep still anymore. Tom had a hard time making her understand that Davidson's coach was waiting for them outside.

Finally he led his nervous mother out of the house, and the coachman helped her into the coach without a comment.

During the short ride Tom had to answer all the questions she asked in confusion.

Tom was afraid he didn't manage to give her a very clear picture of how things stood now and why.

The coach came to a halt at the front door of the Davidsons' mansion, and the coachman helped Tom's mother climb out. Mr. Davidson came out of the house to greet them, and she behaved towards him like a faithful employee. Tom hated to see that.

But soon he forgot about it, because the evening turned into a sparkling feast. Good wine and candle-light, Theresa's smile through the dancing flames, meant only for him, made him happier than he had ever been before.

It was already dawn when the coach finally brought Tom and his mother back home.

Tom staggered to his room and trustfully lied down in bed. He was already practically

asleep when his mother came to the side of his bed, bent over him and gave him a kiss on the brow.

Now that Tom was in love, all kisses seemed sugar-sweet to him. He effortlessly slipped into a blissful sleep.

Tom's first thought as he woke up the next morning was for Bess. He stood up and greeted his mother, just as he had done every morning for twenty years. He was surprised himself how fast one is back inside old habits. Luckily it wasn't unpleasant – there was a holidayish atmosphere to it today.

As his mother prepared breakfast, Tom went over to the Davidsons' place where he had left Bess the evening before. The morning walk reminded him of old times, when he went to school. All in all they hadn't only been unhappy times, he had to admit. The beautiful mansion of the Davidsons came in sight. Further off Tom saw the corner of the house where he had often met up with Theresa so that they could walk to school together.

Like every other morning for twenty years, a light, frizzy smoke was rising into the still air above the house of the Davidsons. It was the only sign of life. Higher up in the sky the smoke formed a wafer-thin cloud that was mixing with the smoke from all the other houses. Associated like this the plumes of smoke took on a tremendous size and sailed across the endless prairie in which the tiny houses of the little town were crouching, huddled up together at the lake-side... Tom had a vision of this, as if he could fly.

Every morning, when Tom had walked to school through the awakening town and when the day was still fresh and dewy, he felt the soul of the town, embodied by the thin but endless smoke that arose through coffee-making. The animosity between certain neighbours seemed ridiculous in the face of this bonding infinity.

Tom arrived at the stables of the Davidsons and greeted the farmhand who had been the coachman the evening before. He found Bess in the stable together with the most beautiful horses of the property, and they were all eating from the finest hay that had just been freshly spread for them.

Mr. Davidson came along with a pipe in his hand and greeted his farmhand with a nod. Then he saw Tom.

"Good morning, Tom!" he called out. "Surely you've come to get your horse?"

They shook hands and Davidson behaved as though he was delighted to see Tom.

Then he said that he would call up a meeting for the whole town at one o'clock in the afternoon in the saloon. Tom should come too, and then they, Davidson and Tom, would explain together publicly how it had happened that the previous sheriff got shot in that big misunderstanding some time ago. After that public statement Tom would be a full-fledged citizen of the town again.

Tom thanked him, and then, as Davidson made his rounds of his property, he saddled Bess. As he rode home he went over the possible form the public explanation would take in his thoughts. The small house of his mother came in sight. A thin plume of smoke was rising from its chimney into the morning sky too and Tom looked forward to breakfast. Bess went towards the house all naturally, even though it wasn't clear whether she was happy to be home or just thinking resignedly that her old life would undoubtedly start again.

In front of the house Tom jumped off Bess and led her to the stable which his mother had cleaned every day, even though it had not been in use for some time. Tom brushed her down caringly as he had always done ever since she was his, and then he went into the house to have his own breakfast.

In the early afternoon Tom harnessed Bess to the milk-wagon and drove to the saloon with his mother. The saloon was already pretty full when they arrived. The atmosphere was merry. School mates from the past came over to Tom, shook his hand, tapped him on the shoulder and wanted to hear if all that had been said about him was really true.

They were all proud that the greatest gunman of all times was one of them.

At one o'clock sharp Mr. Davidson and the new sheriff came to the saloon. The sheriff stood up on a table in front of the bar and held up his hand, asking for silence. Then he greeted all those who were present, introduced Tom and Mr. Davidson, and then followed a long speech in which he explained how his predecessor had unfairly intervened in a squabble between Mr. Miller and Mr. Davidson, how Mr. Miller was forced to defend himself and how he had to flee, fearing that he would be seen as a murderer. But in the meantime he had proven his worth, and now followed an enumeration of his heroic deeds. The whole town cheered, and Tom turned quite red. „Does anyone have anything to add to this verdict?“ the sheriff finally asked, and his pouting mouth, half covered by his drooping grey moustache, made it very clear that he didn't expect anyone to answer, and that he didn't want it either.

And yet a voice arose out of the crowd, a high and thin voice that belonged to a tall man dressed entirely in black. He wore a black tie and he hadn't taken off his black hat. He was about a head taller than the people around him and thus stood out from the crowd. In his right hand he held a short horsewhip, and he let it glide sensually through the fingers of his left hand. On either side of him a cowboy stood, each with his thumbs hooked into his belt, apparently employees of his who had accompanied him when he brought his cattle to town.

“The defendant shot my brother. All my brother did was to try to help the sheriff,” said the black man in his twangy voice. “My brother was obviously the only real man in this town,” he added and looked around himself with contempt.

The sheriff stayed calm. In his rough, deep and warm voice and his Southern accent he asked: “So what do you demand, sir?”

The black man dropped his horsewhip and his hand glided down to his belt. A beautiful black revolver appeared, turned around in his fingers a couple of times and landed in the holster again.

The sheriff hadn't even had time to bring his own hand down to the grip of his gun. This man was fast!

“I demand,” he said, “that the defendant faces me for a duel.”

This started off a commotion in the crowd. The sheriff wanted to say something, but Tom interrupted him. “Any time you want!” he called out.

“Then let us go outside!” said the black man with overdone friendliness and solemnly marched out of the saloon. Tom followed him through the crowd that was cheering and beseeching him. He didn't give it any mind and went out into the street.

They marched down the street in opposite directions. When there were about a hundred feet between them, they turned around and faced each other.

The black man slowly, deliberately pulled on white leather gloves.

Tom stuck a cigar in his mouth and slowly, deliberately lit it. The rim of his hat was covering his eyes. That was lucky, because they were a bit moist. Smoke rose from the cigar. Tom sweated a bit.

Tom had already shot many men, including the great Nacho. He shouldn't be nervous. He knew he could do it.

And yet it was different now, because he felt there was really something at stake. In the last few days Tom had become hopeful, and so now there was something he could

lose. He waited in vain for the super-natural carelessness to flood him that he had always been able to count on in similar situations in the past...

The black man's hands hovered above the two colts in the symmetrical holsters. He was grinning, and his eyes shone!

Tom's lower jaw trembled, as though he were counting tenths of seconds. The cigar started wobbling in his mouth. His cheeks glistened with sweat. His hand went closer and closer to the grip of his gun.

The white hands of the black man swung downwards, as if he were a bird taking off.

Tom's automatism took over. His revolver-hand darted forward white-knuckled.

There were three reports. Then the smoke drifted away and Tom saw the black man contorting himself in the distance, falling to his knees, staring emptily, until he finally dropped dead.

Tom walked over to his victim as if in a dream. His eyes wandered over the dead body. He held his revolver up to his nose and took a quick sniff, as if to convince himself that it had really been him firing the deadly shots.

He was talked to from behind. He lifted his head a little bit and slowly started turning round, dragging his feet through the dust.

The crowd had assembled behind him, and now they all clapped!

Tom looked down at his revolver still hanging in his hand. Then he let it sink into its holster and let it go at last.

He felt tears welling up in his eyes.

Luckily Theresa appeared out of the crowd and pulled him into her arms. He buried his face in her shoulder, and then she led him away by the hand as the crowd just cheered louder!

"Will you marry me?" he asked her, and she said: "Yes."

Later Tom became the father of many children and the owner of the largest ranch in the region. He lovingly cared for his family and the community in his home-town, and although he remained handy with a gun till practically the end of his life, with advancing age he developed an increasingly strong sense of fairness and justice.

### Part 3

#### The Nightwatchman.

As you can perhaps imagine, I was pretty sick of the Wild West by now. I went back to my big boulder just outside of town and moved forward in time once again. I didn't know exactly where I wanted to go, but in any case I wanted to find my way back to the world I knew.

I reminded myself that I was a ghost now, and as a ghost I would probably never really see the world in the usual way ever again. I could only see it the way ghosts see it, even if I went back to my time.

So what was I going to do now?

I wondered who would attend my funeral. So I flew back to Europe and back to my time. I found myself again, went through the episode of my falling through the gap between the highway-bridges once again, and soon I was hovering above my body in the morgue where I had last left it.

And now what?

Would my girlfriend turn up at my funeral? Would she shed a few tears for me? How long would it take her to find someone new? Would it be someone a bit like me? Or

someone radically different? Did I really want to know all that? Had I ever really loved that girl? Did I really want to gloat over the few tears she might cry over me now?

No, I didn't really want that.

My parents would be at the funeral. Did I want to look in their heads and see exactly what they felt about me? Wouldn't it just make me feel guilty? What kind of a son had I been for them anyway? They had made me, raised me, put up with me for all those years... I owed them everything. The least I could have done for them was to return the compliment of raising and putting up with kids and so to give them a load of healthy and boisterous grandchildren. Instead of that I just went and fell through the gap between the highway bridges! What could they possibly feel about THAT? Nothing very good, I'm afraid...

So I decided not to attend my funeral after all, or not just yet in any case.

And when the clanking of the cooling chamber door started, and that boring nightwatchman came in again, I decided rather to follow him for a while...