

Part 2

The bounty killer

Tom Miller was born sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century in the Wild West. His parents both came from the bourgeoisie in the Old World that they had left behind more than a generation ago for unclear reasons. Since they themselves had never lived in the Old World, the New World by now wasn't quite new anymore. There were already plenty of cast-iron family-traditions and principles. They owned a little farm. The father sheared the sheep and the mother peeled the potatoes. That was their life.

They hadn't had any children for a long time, and they were worried that nobody would inherit their little business. But then the woman became pregnant when she was close to forty and had given up hope. The man was already fifty by then. Tom remained an only child and was guarded like some kind of special treasure.

Their closest neighbours were the Davidsons. The whitewashed mansion of the Davidsons stood between the Millers' little farm and the nearby town.

The Davidsons owned the arms-shop in town and were very rich. They despised all small farmers. They despised weaklings in general. They liked the tall, lanky cowboys who sometimes came through town with herds of countless cows – these hard men were the Davidsons' best customers. Whoever went into the arms-shop smelling of sweat and whiskey always got much more attention than the respectable and conservative locals.

Sometimes a group of men without cows came through town. Silent men with dark faces who never took off their hats. They hardly spoke and never stayed long, but they all stopped at the arms-shop.

When a man of this kind was in his shop, Mr. Davidson whizzed around like a half-crazy bee. He was a pot-bellied little man, and in actual fact he resembled these favoured customers of his even less than his disdained neighbour, old Miller, did. Nevertheless Davidson was rich (while Miller wasn't) and he didn't need to lower himself to stupid sheep!

The contempt was mutual anyway. The Millers' stance was that firearms were something very BAD. In their eyes it was a scandal that the sheriff allowed such objects to be sold to suspicious passer-bys. Of course they stood by their beliefs publicly. Their way of despising the Davidsons was not to despise them at all but simply to count them among the BAD people.

But that was just their public stance. In reality the Millers didn't at all care if banks in other towns got robbed. Their own town was too small and unimportant for anything exciting to happen, and the Millers didn't care about anything further afield anyway. The only spices in life were the feuds between neighbours, and that, together with the Millers' bitterness at being poor, was probably the real reason for this mutual contempt.

In age, the Davidsons stood almost a whole generation below the Millers. They had a son who was two years older than Tom and a daughter who was pretty much Tom's age. The boy's name was Jack, and he was the darling of his mother. As a small child he already got fine clothes and always wore proper shoes, which wasn't usual among the kids. He wasn't allowed to play with Tom, but since he was very aware of his higher status he wouldn't have done that anyway.

The girl's name was Theresa, and since she had been a little bit fat and clumsy as a toddler, her mother was much less pleased with her than with her brother Jack, and this feeling remained even as she grew out of her baby-fat. So she was dressed quite

plainly, like a normal girl, and even though she wasn't supposed to play with Tom either, nobody especially bothered to stop her. She was Tom's friend.

Tom's parents didn't have anything against their sunny-boy playing with the children of the Davidsons, because (their public stance again) it wasn't those poor children's fault that they had such awful parents (feeling – or pretending to feel - pity for the poor kids of the Davidsons was of course another indirect way of despising them).

At the edge of the town there was a small lake which also served as a water supply in this somewhat desertic region. On their way home from school, Theresa and Tom could either walk through the main street of the town or take the way along the lake. Since Theresa's parents weren't supposed to see them together, they usually walked along the lake.

Often they walked through the deliciously cool water.

Tom would have liked to splash Theresa and himself, but then what would Theresa's mother have said if Theresa had come home with wet clothes?

Theresa would have liked to jump into the water, whole, and then let her body be carried by it. She had a tremendous urge to do it – while running along the edge of the lake, kicking up muddy fountains, she practically became dizzy with that urge to just let herself fall into it!

One day Tom told her how well he could swim. He had learned it from his father, in the pond behind the house. Theresa immediately went mad with enthusiasm and asked him, how that feels to be totally immersed in the water.

"It's as if you could fly," said Tom. "I can teach you," he added generously.

"Oh yes, please!" Theresa exclaimed. But then she looked down at her bare, wet feet. When bathing you get wet, don't you?

"Well, you have to put on a bathing suit," said Tom.

"Do you have a bathing suit?" asked Theresa.

"I don't need one at home with only my parents around," answered Tom.

"My mother should teach me to swim," Theresa pondered, "but she can't swim herself."

Theresa didn't say more that day. Soon the two kids had to go their separate ways, back to their respective homes.

The next day, on the way home from school, Theresa groaned that it was terribly hot and that she was all sweaty. Then, just before the house of her parents came in sight, she finally said:

"Today I want to take a bath. But you must only look when I'm already in the water!"

"I promise," said Tom and looked away.

A long while later he heard her voice again: "Do you think this will dry again?"

Tom didn't really know what she was talking about, so he answered laconically: "No idea."

"Do you think I can go into the water like this?"

"Like what?"

"Well," she finally said, hesitantly, "turn around, please..."

Tom turned around and saw a half-naked girl for the first time. Her body wasn't very different from the body of a little boy, but Tom still felt sort of... honoured... (was that what he felt?) to see her almost whole like this. He felt a sudden surge of tenderness (yes, he felt it was tenderness) for his little friend.

But he really had no idea whether that stuff she was still wearing would dry or not. Theresa wondered if maybe she shouldn't keep anything on at all. This forbidden thought was somehow exciting, and at the same time it also seemed to her that it wasn't really anything quite so bad either, after all.

Tom had to turn around once more and wait till she called him again. She did, and he turned around and saw her underwear lying carefully folded next to her dress. Theresa was already in the water up till the shoulders, and she stood quite still, as if she were afraid of drowning any moment.

“Now you don’t look,” said Tom.

Theresa looked away from the water’s edge. Now all she saw was the wide expanse of water in front of her, the sun sparkling on little wavelets, and she hoped her feet wouldn’t lose their grip in the soft sand.

Tom undressed and was soon standing in the water next to her. He saw her skin, nothing but her skin from head to toe, shimmering whitely under the water.

He showed her the swimming movements. Then Theresa collected all the courage she could muster and put her face under water. With her head under water she let go of the sandy ground with her feet. The water pushed her legs up.

Flying. Yes, this was like flying!

Tom put his hand against her belly and she made the swimming movements. Yes, she really advanced a little!

Tom let her body glide past his hand. He only felt smooth skin. He didn’t become aware of anything between her legs, but he still got a strange feeling, strange but good. Somehow he had guessed at her sensitivity there.

Theresa had put her feet down again. “Stop it – it’s ticklish!” she said, but not angrily. She sounded rather happy.

She made a few more swimming tries, and Tom put his hand under her belly again.

“But now we must get out of the water,” she said, “else we won’t have time to dry.”

He turned around and looked into the distance. Theresa got out of the water, sat down in the sand and pulled her legs up close to her body. Then she called “Tom, you can come!” and lowered her head into her arms.

Tom came out of the water and saw her there, without any clothes, but of course sitting in such a position that there wasn’t really anything to see. He sat down in a similar way and allowed her to look up.

For a while they sat like that on the beach.

Finally Tom said: “Like this we will never get dry!”

It was definitely necessary to stretch out a bit, or maybe they just wanted it that way.

Of course it seemed really forbidden, but at the same time so totally natural. At first they kept a hand between their legs and hardly looked at each other. They talked to each other lying on their backs and looking up into the bright sky, and they eventually allowed that hand to slip away. They promised each other solemnly that everything they were doing here was their common secret. There were a few furtive glances at each other, hoping the other one wouldn’t notice, but then their eyes met, they exchanged a little giggle or two and a long smile, and then they stopped keeping up pretences of not seeing or not wanting to see each other...

The whole thing was exotically adventurous!

Theresa and Tom were eight years old when they started swimming in the lake together. It became a daily tradition in early and late summer, while it was warm enough and school was on, and they kept it up till the age of twelve. After the school-holidays in this fateful year the tradition somehow wasn’t taken up anymore.

Somehow it just didn’t happen again. Tom didn’t dare to ask Theresa directly.

Nowadays she walked home along the street through town, and Tom couldn’t talk to her freely anymore. Either he would have run the risk of being overheard, or he would have had to make it much too obvious that he wanted to be alone with her. The very special relationship between them just dried out.

In the meantime school had become boring.

Tom was almost a man now. Men don't go to school – they concern themselves with real life.

But what is real life?