

Tom had such strange thoughts lately, and he also somehow felt lonesome. When you're alone you can't feel good for too long. Even when you've exposed the very last patch of your skin to let the wind touch it, even then you don't want to be alone.

To feel as if you were flying – to perceive your surroundings from all sides, unimpeded by any piece of clothing, as if you were submerged in them, like a fish in the water or a bird in the air.

The ground - which holds on to your feet and stops the soles from feeling the air - also takes away the feeling of being a wholeness. In everyday life there is always some part of your body that feels something different than the rest of your body. You feel your clothes, or in any case the ground you are standing on, unless you dive into the water naked, or plunge into the emptiness from the edge of a cliff.

But you can't stay like that for very long, floating freely in the air or in the water (either because you fall down or because you need to breathe).

So you must take another person into the water with you, and when the fabulous experience is over, you can hold on to her, because she was there too, and she will take you there again another time.

Lying naked on his bed, his bed-sheet covering him from head to toe, Tom wriggled like a worm, and that's how he reached the elusive feeling of floating freely within a continuous medium. But this feeling never lasted long – suddenly Tom felt something peculiar, something like a twitch going through his whole body. Then it was all over. The excitement that had felt like joy waned, and usually Tom easily fell asleep after that.

And this nightly experience too had this special exotic fragrance, mysterious and adventurous, of something forbidden.

One fine day Tom asked himself where his name, Tom, came from. His mother explained to him that one of his great-grandmothers had never been married. She had been the governess in the household of a French nobleman, a count. This count's name had been Thomas, and he had conceived Tom's maternal grandmother who had sworn that her first male descendant should be named after this count, her father. That was Tom Miller.

Tom wasn't going to tell this wonderful story to any of his friends, of course. They were liable to start calling him "count Miller", or even better: "Count of the mill"! So it seems that somewhere deep down Tom's parents had a romantic disposition, and the story of their son's name was actually just as ridiculous as the grand façade of the Davidsons' gun-shop, behind which the actual building was little more than a roomy shed.

You wouldn't need to be so critical, of course – all the houses in town showed towards the street with a stunning façade, and that's what made the street colourful. The problem with the Millers was that they despised such fake masks and always pointed out that the Davidsons were hoodwinking their customers with the grand appearance of their shop.

But what about their own sappy perception of being related to a count? Wasn't that the same kind of façade behind which there wasn't much substance?

Tom had become critical. For his own good it would surely have been better to accept the sentimental story about his name with joy, just as one should be happy about the colourful façades of the town, without feeling cheated by them!

The Millers only had one horse, a mare named Bess who had to pull a small wagon to town every day. You couldn't ride her, because her former owner had hit her so badly that she had become scared and unpredictable. She twitched and kicked when you tried to touch her. Old Miller always kept the whip within reach when he went into the stable. She was always tied up in there, and she was only ever let off that string when she was already fully harnessed. She wasn't ever led to pasture, because then you couldn't have caught her again. Needless to say, nobody ever brushed her either. Tom got a bit older, and he wished he had a riding-horse. Many of his class-mates could ride, and some of them already had their own horses.

When Tom told his parents about his wish, they answered they didn't have money for that, and besides they weren't the kind of parents who totally spoil their children by giving them everything they want right from the crib onwards. "You must learn to earn your own keep, as well as any extras, with honest, hard work, just like your father did."

Tom understood the argument about the money, but that his parents would want to make their poverty into a virtue, that just made him sick.

He asked himself angrily how he would ever have time to learn to ride, if he had to work to get his own horse. And how would he find work in the first place if he couldn't even ride?

How could the Miller-family ever work its way out of poverty if every generation started from nothing?

The ideal of the self-made man is temptingly heroic, but it's wrong. Human beings are born as helpless babies, and for a start everything they have comes from their parents. First they need to get an education (and learning to ride a horse is part of that). Only then can they go out and conquer the world.

How did the Davidsons get where they were now? The grandfather had worked hard and introduced his son to the business, which he then left him. The next in line was Jack. One day he would be an important man in town, while Tom would forever have to be contented with the sheep on the humble farm of his parents.

Couldn't you go as far as saying that Tom's ancestors had been too lazy and had thus condemned him to live in poverty?

Only Tom's sons – if he ever had any – might perhaps have a better life thanks to Tom's hard work. Tom knew that he would give his children everything he could, if he ever had any.

He cursed the "honour of the self-made man", something in which his ancestors seemed to have believed for countless generations. He would very much rather have had the money of the Davidsons than the honour of the Millers.

Such were the musings of this young teenager as he walked into the stable, imagining how it would be if his very own horse lived here. He couldn't avoid seeing the stupid mule of his parents in there. Actually, if you took a closer look you could see it wasn't even a mule at all. It was a mare. She could have been a good horse, but they got her cheap because her character was ruined. Her coat was white with light-brown spots, like the skin of an Irish girl. Altogether she really made the impression of a bullied, shy and snot-nosed girl. Her unkempt hair partly covered her milky, freckled face with the big, brown eyes. Besides she was skinny, as if she suffered of anorexia. "Just go into the stall with her!"

Tom turned around in surprise, to see who had spoken to him. There was no one. There was silence. Just the buzzing of a fly somewhere in the back of the stable.

Had he really heard someone speak? It wasn't possible, was it? The voice had been right there in his ear. Someone could have been around here somewhere without him noticing, but surely not that close to his ear.

He looked at the horse and wondered whether she had spoken, like in a fairy tale? But only her buttocks would have been close enough. Besides he had heard the voice of a man – he was sure of that much.

Just go into the stall with her, that's what he had said. And why not? Of course his parents didn't allow him to do that, but he was gradually becoming a man now. A man shouldn't always do only what his parents allow him.

He opened the little door to her stall and stepped in. The horse immediately squeezed into the far corner as much as was possible, held up her head, pushed back her ears, bared her teeth, opened and wobbled her nostrils fearfully. The brown eyes looked panicky.

A perfect picture of a girl about to be raped (Tom had never seen a girl about to be raped – where on Earth did this image come from?).

Tom came closer, then he stretched out his hand. The horse's head flew at it, but before she could bite she had already pulled it back again with a jerk to avoid the whip. But today there was no whip. The outstretched hand was still there – it hadn't moved. The horse scrutinized the hand and the boy to which it belonged warily from the side. After a while she cautiously brought her head closer. She sniffed at the hand. There wasn't just the smell of the boy, but also of something else, something from a previous life, long ago – the smell of sugar. There was a pinch of sugar in Tom's hand. Since he was such a fan of horses, whenever he could get his hands on some sugar he always took some with him to give to the horses he met on his way to school. Memories of forgotten times floated through the horse's mind. She reacted as she would have reacted in those by-gone days – she laid her soft muzzle in Tom's hand and took the sugar.

When the sugar was gone, Tom tried to pat her nose. She was immediately back in the present. She pulled her head away with a jerk. She pulled it back so far that she looked twice as tall as before. Tom retreated from the startled animal and sat down in the straw. He sat there daydreaming for quite a while.

Then he got up, talked to the horse soothingly for a moment, wished her a good night and left the stable.

The next day Tom went back to the horse. This time he went closer to her to give her the sugar. While she was eating the sugar, he carefully stroked her side with the other hand. The day after she accepted to be touched by him so easily that he took out a brush and brushed her and combed her mane and her tail. She even obediently lifted her feet so that he could scratch out the hooves. Long ago she had learned to eat sugar from a human hand and to let herself be groomed by human hands. The hooves had been badly neglected – they were foul and without horseshoes. Tom was a bit shocked, but whatever else had he expected?

How strange that he had never before taken interest in this horse living under the same roof as him! But his parents had always warned him not to go too close to this big, vicious animal. Besides, little Tom had only ever seen the horse as she was being handled, or rather mishandled, by his father, and then she had really only ever been a fearful monster. But now she was tame, brushed and clean and looked quite neat.

In the afternoon Tom's dad took the horse, and when he came back from town with the cart in the evening, Tom hoped he would comment on the surprising cleanness of the horse. Then Tom would proudly tell him how he had made friends with her.

Dad came home, took the horse to the stable, and suddenly wild neighing and a loud knocking sound could be heard, then a scream and finally loud swearing. Soon after that, dad came into the house.

“Fucking mule!” he mumbled between clenched teeth. He was supporting himself with a stick. His right leg hurt terribly. The horse had kicked out and hit him. The doctor was called for to look at the leg – it was broken. He tied it in between two wooden planks.

At supper dad said: “We can’t keep that mule. Tomorrow I’ll get rid of it!”

“You can’t do that!” Tom called out, alarmed.

“Shut up, I’m talking to your mother,” answered dad.

Tom had never been able to withstand his father’s gaze, but now he still gave it a try. He looked straight into his father’s eyes and said, fast but distinctly: “I’ll saddle and ride Bess!”

Mom quickly interrupted: “But that’s much too dangerous!”

Dad hit the table with his fist, just once, hard: “How dare you say something like that, son?! Off to bed with you!”

He grabbed Tom by the arm, pushed him into his room and locked the door.

Tom couldn’t sleep for a long time. He was thinking of Bess, who was supposed to be gotten rid of the next day. He thought about what he could do. The only idea that came to him was to flee with the horse. He knew where the old saddle and the reins were kept. But the door was locked, and if he tried to flee through the window, his parents would hear. Besides, he didn’t know how to saddle a horse, let alone how to ride...

He fell asleep in despair.

When he came home from school the next day, Bess was still in her stable, alive and well. Later he heard from his school-mates that dad had tried to sell her. But nobody had wanted to buy the randy mule of the Millers. Dad had been laughed at and was thus in a very bad mood. He couldn’t afford to just shoot the fucking animal, because he didn’t know how he would ever get the money for a new horse.

So Bess stayed with the Millers. Now Tom looked after her, but she still wasn’t allowed out to graze, and dad treated her more cautiously but still just as badly as ever. Nobody ever rode her, because nobody showed Tom how to saddle a horse. One day a group of cowboys passed through town with several wild horses. The horses were put in a paddock belonging to the Davidsons and offered for sale. The paddock became a market place. People were discussing prices and making deals with the cowboys.

Tom went there often to watch. Normally the Davidsons didn’t want him on their land, but nobody noticed him in that crowd.

Among the horses there was a huge, pitch-black stallion with broad, muscular shoulders and fiery eyes. But he wasn’t for sale anymore – the Davidsons wanted him for themselves.

Tom got sick with jealousy when he heard one day that the stallion had become Jack’s personal horse. Jack, who was already an excellent rider, was breaking in the wild animal himself.

When Tom told a classmate that he too had a horse of his own, the classmate didn’t believe him. Everybody in town knew how poor the Millers were. They were at one end of the scale while the Davidsons were at the other.

When Tom was a small boy, he hadn’t known that yet. The older he got, the more he was made to feel that his family was the poorest in town.

Tom's classmate came home with him to see his horse. Tom's parents didn't like their boy to bring home friends, but on this particular day they were both away, exceptionally without having taken the cart. So Tom was free to show Bess to his classmate.

"But this has always been your horse!" exclaimed the classmate. He sure had a quick mind.

"Of course," said Tom, "but she has never been ridden before. I want to show you that she's a real riding-horse!"

Tom fetched the saddle and the reins. With his sleeve he brushed the thick layer of dust from the back of the old saddle which hadn't been used for years.

"Would you saddle her please?" asked Tom.

"Are you crazy? Everybody knows why your father limps."

"How would they know that?"

"Well, it started on the day when he tried to sell the horse."

Tom was about to answer that this was a lie spread by malevolent people. But he knew it wasn't a lie. Bess had kicked out and hit his father's right shin. It wasn't Tom's business to defend his parents against lies that weren't lies. They always went on about how they hated falseness and deceitfulness – well then, that meant the fact that old Miller had been kicked by his own horse shouldn't be disguised either! Besides, Tom felt bitter towards his father for treating Bess so badly. It was a just punishment that now he had to limp for the rest of his life.

Perhaps Tom was partly to blame for the accident, because Bess had got part of her self-confidence back through him... But Tom didn't feel guilty. Rather, he was proud that he had overtaken his father in this respect.

Nevertheless he still hated to be the son of the man who had made himself ridiculous in the whole town.

Tom went into Bess' stall. Bess had been looking at her visitors nervously all the while. She trusted Tom, but the other human was a stranger. She was startled when she saw Tom come staggering into the stall with the heavy saddle in his arms. Her whole body started twitching, she was prancing around, pulling up her head, tearing at her lead. Tom saw the whites of her eyes as she was looking over to him from the side.

But Tom moved very slowly, like a sleepwalker. Bess calmed down. She knew Tom. The object he was carrying wasn't familiar, but the stranger had stayed outside of her stall. In a stranger's hands such a strange object would have made her panic, but she had some trust in Tom.

Tom held the saddle under her nose as though he were a polite waiter showing an exquisite roast to a guest before cutting it up. Bess sniffed at it for a long time.

Then, with a slow, almost drowsy movement, Tom pulled the saddle back towards himself, lifted it up and gently let it sink on the back of the horse.

Bess had quieted down. The stranger obviously had no intention of coming into her stall, and she wasn't afraid of Tom. The feeling of being saddled was vaguely familiar to her, and so she let it happen, a bit as if she were in a dream.

"Does this look okay?" asked Tom.

"Much too far back!" answered his classmate.

Under his supervision, Tom managed to saddle Bess. He hesitated a bit when he was supposed to tighten the belt as fast as he could, but Bess didn't seem to mind. She let the reins be pulled over her head and willingly took the bit into her mouth.

Now Tom untied the lead and led the horse out of the stall and out of the stable!

Bess sniffed at the fresh air with her head held up high and was about to run off. Tom talked to her soothingly while at the same time putting some weight into the reins, and she calmed down. She even made the impression (to Tom, at least) of being a bit embarrassed. Tom pulled down the left-side stirrup, put his left foot into it, held on to Bess' mane and swung himself into the saddle.

Wow, this sure was far off the ground!

He set the length of the stirrups so that his classmate felt it looked right.

Now he gently pushed his heels into the horse's tummy. Bess went off at a trot. Tom got shaken in the saddle like a bag of potatoes. He held on to the saddle-button and to the mane of the horse. He was going to fall off any moment.

"Pull on the reins!" his mate called out to him from afar.

Tom grabbed the reins and pulled on them a bit, but he had to let them go again immediately because he was losing his balance entirely and had to cling on to the neck of the horse.

But Bess had reacted to the pressure in her mouth straight away and was now going at a leisurely walk. Tom straight away felt better. He managed to sit upright and took the reins in his hand. He felt the movements of the mighty muscles of the horse's back working under him. He tried to catch the rhythm and let his pelvis move along with the horse, and soon he had a marvelous sensation of drifting or floating high above the ground quite effortlessly.

Bess was walking into town. The Davidsons' mansion was already gliding past them. Bess went on calmly. They reached the houses of the actual town. The imposing façades appeared on both sides of the street, although of course they looked a bit smaller than usual from up on a horse. To Tom they all looked as if they had been freshly painted today, because he was so thrilled about everything! There was a fresh little wind going through his hair, and it felt so invigorating! The sky was bluer than it had ever been before! The whole world was crisp, shiny and cheerful like a young girl on her wedding day!

Tom was weightlessly gliding over this world. They came to the end of the town. A little pull to one side on the reins, a little shift of his body in the saddle, a little bit of asymmetrical pushing with his heels into the belly of the horse, and Bess was obediently going around the last house.

Riding wasn't all that hard, after all!

They were going home along the lake. How nice it would have been if Theresa could have seen him right now! Anyway, how nice it would be to do this walk with her again, like in the good old days...

He turned a bit melancholic for a while. He looked out across the wide, sparkling expanse of the lake and felt, for the first time, that he could sense the meaning of a free life.

When he got back home, his mate was already there. Obviously he hadn't followed him all the way. He was sitting on his own horse and waiting. In the midst of his euphoria Tom had forgotten all about him.

"Come on, let's do another round together!" he said.

Tom agreed enthusiastically.

Tom's mate went first. Bess willingly followed the other horse. Tom's mate slowed down, so that Tom could catch up and they could walk side by side. They went through town once again.

Tom and his mate chatted happily. They came past Tom's parents who were on their way home, but who didn't seem to recognize the two riders. Old Miller just nodded when Tom's mate greeted them. When they were out of hearing, Tom and his mate

had a good laugh about it. Then they talked more generally about their respective parents, their teacher and the people in town.

And now they were already out of town and passing the board with the town's name. Tom's mate made his horse trot lightly. Bess followed the example of the other horse. Tom immediately started losing his balance again. Instinctively he bent forward. "Just lean back!" his mate called to him.

Tom tried to do that, all the while feeling more and more insecure. But really, leaning well back he suddenly felt much better! Instead of just being shaken, his body started moving with the horse. The trot accelerated imperceptibly, until they were going quite fast, and Tom was still feeling okay in the saddle!

After a while Tom and his mate turned back. It was dusk, and there was a reddish glow on everything. The way home seemed much longer than the way out. The last bit they even cantered! Tom had to hold on to the saddle, so that he wouldn't fall off. He felt he was sitting on the boiler of an out-of-control steam-engine!

But after a while he had to admit to himself that cantering was rather more comfortable for the rider than trotting. Of course it was scarier, but he was shaken much less.

Shortly before reaching the Millers' house, Tom's mate changed over to a walking pace once again. Bess followed the example of the other horse. Tom's mate threw an apple for Tom to catch.

"A treat for your horse!" he cried out. "See you tomorrow!", then he rode off.

Tom had some difficulty making it clear to Bess that she shouldn't follow the other horse this time. But finally Bess' urge to go home proved stronger after all.

Tom rode up to the house. Dad was standing in the doorway with the horse-whip.

Tom got off the horse in front of his father, and then he led Bess to the stable, took off the saddle and the reins and brushed her down with big handfuls of straw. He couldn't resist the temptation of taking a bite of the apple himself. But then he gave it to Bess and wished her a good night.

"Do you have anything to tell me, son?" his father asked as he stepped into the house.

"Nothing," Tom answered with conviction and looked his father straight in the eyes.

Dad put away the whip without a word and sat down at the table where mum was serving dinner.