

Part 1
Me

As I was once driving home from my girlfriend's place late at night, I had no idea that I had only minutes more to live. Of course, dying in a car-accident is always a possibility in this modern world, but this wasn't even going to be a car-accident. Looking back, if I had survived it, what was going to happen to me in a moment could almost have seemed comic...

My girlfriend had called me in the evening, asking me to come straight away. She wouldn't say why, just that it was important. Of course I immediately suspected that she was pregnant, the stupid bitch, although I couldn't imagine how that could have happened, since we had always been careful. As it turned out, she almost certainly wasn't (what a relief!), but she was wondering what would happen if she still was, or if she ever was. In other words, this whole matter was just an excuse so that we would talk about this most dreary and dreaded topics of all: is our relationship a serious one?

It's always the same. I've gone through this kind of thing countless times...

I guess it's natural. The desire to have a child is hidden away in every woman, sometimes deeper, sometimes less deeply. When the time comes to have a child, she likes to have a man by her side who will take care of her and her child. And sometimes she wants to secure that man for herself even long before she's even aware of possibly ever wanting a child. That's because the whole thing is instinctual, and that means it just follows its course, whether you're aware of it or not.

Just why a man would ever want to go for it, that has always been a mystery to me! Maybe if he thinks the coming child is really his own, that motivates him. But in actual fact, what difference does that really make? Children are interchangeable.

Okay, okay, I know that a genetic trait can only survive if it somehow bolsters its own survival. The same applies to an instinctual program. An instinctual program that makes you take care of your own children (who will have inherited that very same instinctual program) will obviously bolster its own survival. On the other hand, an instinctual program that would make us neglect our own children would eventually die out, because the mechanism to make it survive in the next generation is missing.

Of course this is completely clear to me. It's completely logical that we would have an instinctual mechanism that makes us want to produce lots of our own children, and that our ancestors certainly had it too, else we wouldn't be here.

But the funny thing is that this instinctual program, being so successful at spreading itself, is now shared by virtually everybody. All children have it, never mind whether they're our own or not. And this applies to all other instinctual programs too. It applies to all genetic traits. We all have virtually the same genome, with just a tiny bit of variation here and there, because for some (rare) genes there are several possible alleles. We can have blood-group A, B, AB or O. We can be black, white, yellow or brown or something in between. But deep down we are all exactly the same!

So why bother to have children? There are so many children everywhere already, and so many people looking after them. Why should I join that crowd? And why should I take care of any one particular child rather than any other, since they're all the same anyway? Come to that, why should I fall in love with one particular woman?

Okay, okay, if I run after all women at once instead of concentrating on one particular one, I might end up never catching any. It's probably sensible to choose one from among the crowd and run her down methodically. Maybe that's why we fall in love (it's just another of those instinctual programs that survives because it bolsters its own survival). But deep down, of course, all women are interchangeable, and all relationships evolve exactly the same way. First you feel high, then you feel less high, then you start wondering whether it's serious or not, and then you break up.

Some are skinnier, some are rounder, some are fast, some are slow, but when you finally get down to it, they all taste the same, all the movements are the same, and the whole thing is just a program unwinding itself.

My problem is that I don't see the point in the whole fucking business!

Although right now I seem to be having some other kind of problem. The needle of the fuel-gauge has been standing steadily on zero for many kilometers already. The warning diode has been flashing ever since I left home. I knew I should take petrol, but when my girlfriend called, saying that it's so urgent, I just drove there straight away without stopping at a petrol station. After having talked and talked and talked, and when I finally managed to dismiss her with fake half-promises and sat back into my car at last (we hadn't even fucked, so I really don't know why this whole matter couldn't just have been settled over the phone), I was already much too annoyed to remember that I should stop at a petrol station. Just when I entered the highway I became aware of that stupid flashing diode once again. There aren't so many petrol stations along the highway, and they're more expensive than the ones in town. I just had to hope that I would make it till the next one.

You've already guessed what happened next. The engine started sputtering, I pushed the gas harder but it didn't respond, I pushed the clutch, and then there I was, rolling along in silence – the engine had died.

How could I let this happen? How could I be this fucking stupid? It was all my fucking girlfriend's fault, of course, the stupid bitch!

I was on a bridge, there was no breakdown-lane. I switched on all four blinkers to warn the other cars. I let the car roll as far as it would go, then I pulled the hand-brake, had a quick look in the rearview-mirror (there was no other car nearby, luckily) and got out, dug out the luminescent triangle from the boot while nervously looking at the road behind me every few seconds, ran with it to a fair distance behind the car and set it up.

Now I just had to wait for some nice guy to stop and give me a lift. Luckily this happened almost immediately. A car stopped in front of mine, a fattish, moon-faced young bloke got out and asked if he could help. I felt so ashamed to have to admit that I had run out of petrol! But he didn't laugh. He asked me if I had a hose to pump some petrol from his car into mine. I answered that I didn't, and he said he didn't have one either, unfortunately. He offered me a ride till the next petrol station, and I accepted gratefully. I got into his car which somehow smelled of old socks, and he drove off.

"This never happened to me before!" I offered with an embarrassed smile.

"Oh, you know, things like this can happen," he answered philosophically, peering into the dark ahead of him while he seemed to be leaning over his steering wheel. I made no further effort at conversation, and neither did he.

He let me out at the next petrol station (which wasn't even that far away), I thanked him and he drove off with a wave of one big paw.

I bought a canister, filled it with petrol and hitched a ride back to my car. This was easy, I just explained the problem to a young couple who were filling up their car, and they couldn't really refuse. I sat behind the girl who strongly smelled of perfume, and nobody said a word. I just called out when I saw my car with the blinking indicators on the other side of the highway, but the guy had already seen it and slowed down. He stopped, I jumped out with my canister, and he quickly drove off again, since this really wasn't a place to stop a car.

As I ran across to the middle of the highway, I saw a car stopping right behind mine on the other side, switching on brightly flashing blue lights. Fucking hell! The fucking police! Couldn't they have just driven past a minute or so later, when I would already be safely on my way again? Now I would have to give them huge explanations, perhaps pay a fine... Fucking hell!

By this time I only had seconds more to live, but of course I didn't know that yet.

I jumped over the plank in the middle of the highway with my canister. It must have been quite funny for the policemen on the other side to see – one second I was there, the next I was gone!

You see, as I told you before, this part of the highway was on a bridge, an enormous bridge set up on tall, square, concrete pillars, very ugly - but you're not really aware of any of that while driving on it, especially at night. The problem, in my case, was that actually there were TWO bridges, one for each direction, with a narrow gap between them. I fell right through that gap!

I can't recall what I was thinking while flying through the air into the utter darkness below me, although I do remember holding on to that stupid petrol canister with all my might. I guess my last thoughts as a living human being must have been very trivial. Perhaps I was just thinking that this was the bad ending to a bad day. I guess I couldn't really believe that I was really going to die. I mean, the whole thing was just really much too silly!

I lost consciousness on impact, but I regained it soon enough, it seemed to me. At first everything was dark, but by and by I could make out the outlines of some trees nearby, and then I saw myself as well, from above, as if I was hovering a meter or two above my own body...

Of course I had read about these out-of-body experiences that people supposedly have when they are close to death, and of course I didn't believe they were in any way REAL – just some crazy images synthesized by the brain when it is deprived of an adequate supply of oxygen. And since we all have the same kind of brain, we also produce the same kind of images when we're dying – there's really nothing miraculous in this.

Just it seemed to last a really long time, this out-of-body experience. I told myself that this might be because I was experiencing time differently. Maybe I was living through the last few seconds of my life as if they were an eternity.

Just how was it possible that I could still think so clearly? Maybe my brain wasn't in such a bad state after all. Maybe I was going to survive.

But what about the rest of my body? I tried to feel my body, tried to "find" my toes, "feel" into them, but I couldn't, as if I didn't have any toes. I didn't "find" any other parts

of my body either. That meant I must have broken my neck – my brain wasn't connected to the rest of the body anymore...

But then I should still have had fathom-sensations at least. Isn't that what you're supposed to feel? Don't people go on "feeling" their arms and legs long after they were amputated?

How could I just not feel anything?

So now I looked at my body, which was sprawled out below me. It looked normal enough. I couldn't really see where the damage was. Just the eyes were strange – wide open and staring. If I had seen anything through them, it should have been the tall highway bridge from underneath, and a bit of the night-sky, surely...

I wanted to blink, but nothing happened, as if I had forgotten how to do that. I just went on seeing that body below me, no change.

Eventually I still started seeing what I thought I should be seeing through those eyes – the highway above me, a bit of the night-sky covered by some twigs from the trees nearby.

But in spite of that I didn't stop seeing the body lying on the ground as well. It seemed I could see all the way around. All the way around a spot a meter or two above my body. It was very strange.

Eventually I started seeing people with flash-lights coming towards me through the underbrush. I tried to call out to them: "Here I am!" But of course no sound came. They bent over my body. One of them took my pulse and shook his head. As I was watching from above, they shone a flashlight straight into one of my eyes, but nothing happened. The man who had taken my pulse turned away, took a few steps away from my body and lit a cigarette.

This made me angry – weren't they going to reanimate me or something?

It seemed not.

After a while I was lifted onto a stretcher by two men wearing see-through plastic gloves, and I was carried off none too ceremoniously, down a slope through the bushes to a waiting ambulance.

The man with the cigarette had plenty of time to finish it before the ambulance drove off – they weren't in any kind of hurry, it seemed. This infuriated me! I was obviously alive (else how could I see all this, and how could I think so clearly) and yet nobody seemed to care!

I was hovering above my body in the ambulance. Nobody had put an oxygen mask over my face or stuck any needles into me or whatever else they usually do to people in ambulances. Nobody was even looking at my body except me. The fucking shitters! After quite a drive the ambulance stopped at the rear entrance of a dark building, I was carried out on the stretcher by the same two men with the gloved hands, into the building, down a brightly-lit corridor towards a metallic door that looked like the entrance to a submarine or a space-capsule to me. The door was opened, I was carried inside and half dragged, half rolled from the stretcher onto a shiny metallic table inside a metallic chamber. I was left there and the submarine-door was shut behind me.

It was pitch dark, but somehow this didn't stop me from "feeling" the shapes nearby.

There was another body on a similar table further off. Else the chamber was empty.

I didn't feel the cold, but I knew this was a fridge for dead people.

So I was dead!

Of course I didn't believe this for too long. If I could think, I must have had a functioning brain to think with, thus I couldn't be dead. Surely I was just dreaming. The man shaking his head after taking my pulse, the trip in the ambulance without an oxygen mask, the brightly-lit corridor and the cold chamber at the end, all this wasn't real. In a minute I would wake up in a freshly made hospital bed in a sparkingly clean hospital room and be greeted by the anxious faces of some selected relatives sitting around my bed, waiting for me to open my eyes at last! And I would tell them: "Poooooh, what a dream I had!"

Or maybe even the fall from the highway-bridge was part of the dream. Then of course the whole drive home from my girlfriend's place had to be part of the dream too. Maybe I hadn't left her that night, after all, and any minute now I would wake up to the agreeable sensation of getting my penis massaged!

But somehow I knew it wasn't so.

A more ominous explanation came to my mind. Maybe everything was real, and it was taken for granted that I was dead, just I wasn't! My brain was still working, and I would be dissected, then buried, alive!!!

I didn't believe in this for very long either. I'm too realistic for such a belief. If my brain could produce such complex thoughts, then it must be properly oxygenated, which means that my heart must be pumping blood at a suitable rate and that my body must be breathing properly. These sturdy outward signs of life just couldn't have remained undetected by the team who brought me here. It might be possible that someone would seem dead while he isn't, but not while being fully conscious. That's just absurd!

So it was all a dream. It had to be. In a minute I would wake up, either in a hospital bed or in the arms of my girlfriend!

My thoughts were going back and forth like this when the door to the chamber was unlocked, then slowly, almost reluctantly, opened. Someone with a torch was coming in. He shone the beam of the torch around in the chamber, scratched his nose and was about to turn back when he suddenly hesitated.

Ah, ah! Maybe he could hear someone breathing! Maybe he could sense that my body (which was still a meter or two below me, as if I was hovering above it) was still alive. Hey, this would be fodder for a horror-story – the night-watchman suddenly realizing that he was not alone in the morgue!

He walked past me. He was a night-watchman alright, in a heavy, uncomfortable-looking uniform, a bag full of keys and other equipment hanging at his waist. He didn't pay the slightest attention to my body. I was quite offended! Where on earth was he going?

Aha, he was going to look at the other body, the body of a young woman...

That would be something if you suddenly found someone in the morgue whom you thought was still alive! Could be his sister, or his girlfriend, who got run-over and brought here while he was doing his rounds!

No, his interest in that body was of a completely different nature. Inwardly I groaned. He couldn't know that someone was watching his every move. He thought he was alone.

Come on, he still wasn't going to fuck that dead body, was he? I mean, what if they found some sperm-samples from him on it afterwards?

I suddenly realized I could sense his thoughts, somehow, or perhaps just his moods. In any case I suddenly felt something of what he was probably feeling. It was indistinct, but it was there. Vague feelings about which I was sure that they weren't my own...

Admiration. There was something like admiration in him as he moved his torch up and down that naked body. Admiration and even something like awe. Was he awed because she was dead, by the mystery of death? No, he was awed because in his eyes she was beautiful, a beautiful young woman...

For a split second there was something like pure innocence radiating from this bulky man in his bulky uniform with the bulky bags at his waist. Then his thoughts turned somewhat dirtier.

Hey, I felt like telling him, you've never seen a woman before, or what?

He was shining his torch straight at her pussy and staring at it, as if he was trying to memorize the look of it. But hey, there really wasn't much to see! He would have had to open her legs for that.

I was getting a really awkward feeling with this guy. I would have preferred if he had just taken that dead body and fucked it. Maybe it would have sort of excited me to see that. Something new for a change!

I tried to read into his thoughts some more. Perhaps I could even influence them? I was seeing the body of the woman from his point of view now. Without really noticing how it had happened I obviously wasn't hovering above my own body anymore. It seemed I was somewhere in the head of that night-watchman now.

There, I seemed to have found a clear thought of his. It was a thought of a few minutes ago, not a fresh one, but it was the closest coherent one I could find. Something about winter-tyres, how he would get them fitted on his car next week. I tried to find something else, but there wasn't really anything else, just a jumble of loosely associated fragments. It felt mostly like static noise.

Well, I must say, if I had been a night-watchman, having the whole night to myself like this, I would have had many interesting thoughts. Perhaps I would have gone over mathematical theorems in my mind. I would have run through thought-experiments like Einstein. Perhaps I would have eventually made a new breakthrough in General Relativity, what about that? Einstein wasn't exactly a night-watchman, but he did have a rather boring job at the time when he invented his greatest theories!

But this particular night-watchman sure wasn't any kind of Einstein. The only clear thought he had had all night was whether the time was right to get the winter-tyres fitted to his car. I guess you need to have a certain level of education to be able to run thought experiments in your mind. And if you have that kind of education, you don't become a night-watchman.

Except that right now he was looking at that pussy.

Frankly, I don't remember ever having looked at a pussy in quite this way before. I don't even really remember when I saw a pussy in real life for the first time. I guess I had seen many in porno magazines before that, and I didn't even bother to look properly when I was finally confronted with the real thing. I just pushed my dick into it and went in and out till I came, and it really wasn't so special. Frankly, I don't find pussies so exciting, nor girls for that matter. I must have found them exciting at some point, but that was really, really long ago. I keep having to make up fantasy-stories so that I would be able to fuck them, else I get bored and perhaps in the end I couldn't even do it anymore (though this has never happened so far...). For example, I imagine that I'm a little boy again, and that she's my teacher, that stiff little lady who was my teacher once, and that it's her pert

little mouth I'm pushing my dick into. Or the little neighbour girl, once again when I was a little boy, the one who always had glossy little shoes and wouldn't ever talk to me... I have a hard time inventing all these fantasies, and the real girl I'm working on becomes utterly meaningless to me in this process. But I always thought this was normal. Once you've had a selection of girls, you've had them all. Nothing is really new and exciting anymore, how could it be? But of course you still keep going at it, because what else could you do? You still have to empty those balls, it's a physiological need! So you fall back on those old fantasies from the time when the world was still a big and mysterious place...

This night-watchman, uneducated, stupid and dull though he was, still had something I had lost long ago – for him a pussy, and indeed the whole body of a woman, was still a grand, indeed an almost sacred, thing! I would have liked to find out how this was possible. I would have stayed in his head longer if it had been bearable – just I really didn't feel like analyzing the best time to fit winter tyres onto a car in more depth!

But he was still important to me, this night-watchman. After meeting him, I was convinced that I wasn't dreaming. I couldn't have invented such a guy all by myself, not even in my wildest dreams – he had to be real!

If he was real, then surely all the rest was real too. I wasn't going to wake up in any hospital bed or in anybody's loving arms. I was dead, and if I could still think, that's because I had become a ghost!

And even if it wasn't really true – I mean, perhaps my life beforehand as a living person hadn't been really true either – it was still true enough that I had to deal with it somehow, make something out of it. The only other thing I could have done was to stay right here and go insane with disbelief. I didn't see that as an option, so I...

I just flew backwards in time! I can't really say how I did it – I just did it! The night-watchman went walking out of the chamber backwards, the chamber-door was shut, but with the wrong noises, a bit like the softly squeaking opening noises, but not quite that either, since they were played back in reverse... It was really like watching a film backwards! I found I could accelerate or slow down the process at will. The men who had brought me in came back to fetch me again, walking backwards, brought me back to the ambulance, which drove backwards to the place where I had been found...

I suddenly had a wild hope – maybe I would live through my death in reverse! Maybe I would be re-united with my body!

I would live again, and this time I would know about the gap between the two highway-bridges – I wouldn't fall through it again!

But then it occurred to me that if I was to be re-united with my body in the instant before death, that would be the instant before the impact, when I was flying through the air, utterly unable to do anything to save myself. Since I would surely lose the ability to move backwards in time as soon as I stopped being a ghost, I would just die again straight away...

I almost shied away from trying at all. But then I still did. I saw myself flying upwards (I mean falling in reverse), I saw the terrified, stupid grin on my face, but I didn't dare to look into my mind to see what thoughts I had at that very moment. Anyway, soon enough I saw myself pop out through the gap between the two highways and fall back on my feet

on the other side of the security plank. There was the police-car with the flashing blue lights standing on the other side of the highway, right behind my car.

So I hadn't re-united with my body, after all. I was just a spectator.

The rest was pretty boring, so I flew over it faster. Soon I was watching myself driving the car and muttering curses under my breath about the fuel-gauge. Once again it was like watching a video of myself, but actually it was even worse, because I could go so close to myself as to see every wrinkle, the dirt-flakes in the corner of my eyes, the hairs inside my nose... It occurred to me that this is how my girlfriends had seen me, from this close and in this much detail. All these years all these various girlfriends had seen me like this, and I had never thought about it, had never been aware of it...

Then I started feeling for my thoughts, the thoughts in that head in front of me. There wasn't so much there, or in any case nothing terribly interesting.

Perhaps I had half expected that now, as a ghost, I could probe into my sub-consciousness and discover great secrets in there that I had never been able to access through ordinary introspection before. But it seemed I couldn't, or maybe there just wasn't really anything interesting there that I hadn't known of before.

So perhaps, after all, I had judged the night-watchman and his winter tyres too harshly.

I raised myself above that body of mine driving the car. I went right through the windshield, without feeling anything. For a while I hovered above the car, then hopped over to another car, lowered myself into it, inspected the driver, to see if he was more interesting than myself (which he wasn't).

I didn't really know what to do next.

For a start I started thinking. What was I? I always thought that thinking is what happens in the brain, and the brain is made of cells which are made of molecules. Now it seems I wasn't made of molecules anymore, but I was still thinking. How could this be? Maybe my mind was somehow imbedded directly in the fabric of space-time, or in the fluctuations of virtual particles popping in and out of existence? What utter bullshit!

Furthermore, even if it was true, how did my mind get there? If it was in my brain first, how did it suddenly go elsewhere? I mean, if you transfer things from one computer to another, you need all kinds of compatible hardware and software. There are "hand-shaking" protocols and such. In my case, my brain got shattered, but in that very instant all the information from it suddenly appeared elsewhere (where exactly?) in perfect working order. How can that be?

Or maybe thinking doesn't even happen in the brain to start with, just like good old Descartes thought. But then how could neurotransmitter-like molecules in pill-form affect our moods, our feelings and our thoughts?

Or maybe it's a special feature of the brain to be able to transmit its information content elsewhere, wirelessly. You know, telepathy!

Maybe, in the instant of death, my whole mind just got sent out of my brain, and now it's elsewhere, imbedded in the fabric of the universe, still working, still thinking...

Does this always happen when someone dies? If it does, where are all the other ghosts like me? Maybe they eventually all went insane from not being able to deal with the new situation, so they all degenerated and finally dissolved into nothing?

And what about my ability to travel through time? Since I could read other people's thoughts, maybe I could influence them as well. What if I went back to myself, to the instant before I fell through the gap between the highways, and flashed some images of

the gap to myself? Maybe that other me, the living me before I died, would look over the plank, see the gap and abstain from jumping into it? Then I wouldn't die, which means I wouldn't become a ghost capable of time-travel, which means I wouldn't be able to warn myself about the gap, which means I would still fall through it and die. Which in turn would mean that I would become a ghost capable of time-travel and warning myself!

It's the time-traveler's paradox!

I guess this paradox simply gets resolved by parallel universes. In one of them I die and become a ghost. By traveling back in time and saving myself, I create a new universe in which I don't die. And so then there are two me's, the me who didn't die and goes on living normally, and the ghost from the parallel universe where I did die.

Yeah, that's how it must be...

You don't like this idea of parallel universes? Well, let me tell you something! In Quantum Mechanics there is this interesting property called superposition. A particle can be in a certain state and its opposite at the SAME TIME, until you measure it, and then it suddenly clearly becomes one or the other. Well, you might say, who cares about particles?

A guy called Schrödinger put it this way: you have a device that measures the state of a particle, and depending on the outcome it triggers a gun that shoots an imprisoned cat or not. You put the whole thing (cat included) in a box that isolates it from the rest of the universe. As long as you don't measure the state of the particle, it may be in a superposition of two states. Does this also mean that as long as you don't look into the box, the cat is both alive and dead at the same time, in some kind of superposition of both these states?

Of course, as soon as you look into the box, the cat is either dead or alive, but what is it before you open the box?

Anyway, what is it that decides whether the cat should live or die?

For me, the answer is simple. Each time there is such a dilemma (each time you open that box) the universe separates into two parallel universes – in one of them the cat is alive, in the other dead.

You don't like this idea? You don't think you have any alter egos in parallel universes? Well, even if you forget all about Schrödinger's cat, you still must have many alter egos. If the universe is infinite, then at some point it will have used up all possible arrangements of matter, and things will necessarily start repeating themselves. If it is truly infinite, which means that it goes on for ever, ever and ever, then all the possible arrangements of matter won't just be repeated once or twice, but an infinite number of times, which means you have an infinite number of alter egos...

Or what if the universe isn't infinite after all? What if it's just a tiny bubble within a MULTI-verse?

Well, once all possible bubble-structures have been used up, they are bound to repeat themselves. You will find the same universes over and over and over again, infinitely. This makes you sick?

Wait, it gets even better: as I just said, there are infinitely many universes exactly like this one, with an alter ego of yourself in it doing and thinking exactly what you are doing and thinking right now. But there is also any number of universes where things are almost the same as here, but not quite. For every decision you make, there is an alter ego somewhere

who had the same life as you up till now, except that now he makes exactly the opposite decision...

You are proud because today, out of a sudden impetus of friendliness, you helped the old neighbour lady carry home her heavy shopping bags?

Well, don't be so proud, because in some parallel universe you brushed past her impatiently!

You just miraculously escaped from a major accident? Don't worry, in a parallel universe you happily died of it!

Whatever is happening, there are infinitely many universes in which the very same thing is happening too, and there are also infinitely many universes in which something different is happening. In some the cat is dead when you open the box, in others it's alive. Whatever you decide, there are infinitely many universes in which you decided exactly the opposite.

So whatever you do, it doesn't really matter, because - whatever it is - it must obviously happen somewhere. All the other options must happen too, so they just happen elsewhere. You say you don't care about what happens elsewhere, you only care about what happens here? Well, that's fine for you, because you have a body, so you always know what you mean by HERE (namely where your body happens to be). Me, I'm a ghost. I can travel through time. I can play with all the parallel universes. I can arrange for everybody to be killed, then I can go back in time and undo what I just did, knowing of course that the first option still goes on happening in the parallel universe I just left, and that it would still have happened even if I hadn't intervened, because some parallel ghost would have done it in my place, somewhere in this multiverse of infinite possibilities...

Yes, really, maybe everybody becomes a ghost like me when they die, and they all see what I'm seeing now, and it drives them insane. They go so completely insane that they just disintegrate, and that's why I haven't met any fellow-ghosts yet, even though all human minds that ever existed should be around somewhere around here...

On the other hand, what if I can't influence other people's thoughts after all? What if I can just read them? What if I'm just a spectator?

According to General Relativity, time is just a dimension of "space-time". A fourth dimension in addition to the three spatial ones that we all know. Every particle in the universe can be plotted on a four-dimensional graph - three of the dimensions indicate where it is, and the fourth indicates at what time it is there. All particles of the universe can be plotted like that, and you get an infinite four-dimensional landscape of dots...

In this landscape nothing moves - it's frozen solid, unchangeable, spread out to all sides of you once and for all.

Imagine a foot-ball flying through the air. In actual fact it isn't flying at all. It's just standing there in mid-air. You can look at it from all sides by moving through the spatial dimensions. You can also look at where it was a moment before and where it will be a moment later by moving along the time-dimension. Like this you can get an idea of the shape of its trajectory. It's as if you were in some kind of museum - you can look at the paintings in chronological order to get an idea of the evolution of painting-styles and techniques, but you can also look at the paintings in any other order. The point is - nothing moves and the past, the future and the present are all there at once. In fact there isn't any past, present or future. The flow of time is just an illusion you get by looking at the pictures in chronological order and by flipping from one to the next at a steady rate.

So is this it? Is this how I'm going to spend the rest of my existence? Looking at pictures in this endless picture gallery, seeing happy faces, sad faces, knowing that they're all frozen solid and that they've been there for ever and will remain there for ever in this eternally dusty museum called space-time?

Hey, you sure don't need to think about such things when you're not a ghost, do you? While I was thinking all this I was speeding along on the dashboard of a car. I was experiencing the flow of time because I had chosen to move forward in time at a steady rate. In the meantime my body must have fallen through the gap, died and been brought to the morgue all over again.

Well, the time had come to find out if I had any influence over anything or not. Was I able to create parallel universes (or move into them, which amounts to the same thing since they all exist anyway) or was I trapped in this particular "space-time" for ever? In other words – this car speeding along steadily on the highway, could I make it crash if I wanted to?

I "felt" myself into the mind of the driver, and then I suddenly said as loudly as I could: "Hey you!"

The eyes of the driver almost popped out of their sockets. "What? What?" he stuttered, as if he had just woken up from a bad dream. "Is... is anyone there?" He looked around himself, at all the empty seats in his car.

"Right!" I said to myself. I withdrew from the driver's mind and didn't talk to him anymore. There wasn't any need to make this car crash, after all. What had just happened was proof enough that I could influence things!

So I could do things. The question now was what should I do? Just have fun? But even in fun-games there is always a goal (in football it's even quite literal – people almost fall off their seats yelling "Goaoaoaoaallllll!!!").

So what should be my goal in this existence of mine as a ghost? I knew I needed to have one, else I'd go insane in no time at all...

Somehow this question about the goal rang familiar to me, like an echo from my previous life as a human being made of flesh and blood. It's kind of a religious question, isn't it? Maybe, now, as a ghost, I could find the answer at last. I could find God. I could fly through outer space, into alternative universes, see black holes and supernovae from close, explore the infinitely big and the infinitely small, find out if space is made of space quanta or if it's continuous, translate it all into scientific terms and inspire the next Einstein with it so that he could develop the ultimate grand unified theory of Everything...

And I would also find out what I myself, as a ghost, was made of.

There was just one thing I would never be able to find out, a nagging little detail, namely whether all this was real or just a dream I was dreaming. The question was surely meaningless, since there was no way it could ever be answered. But if it was meaningless, then why could I ask it at all? Why could I wonder about it, be bothered by it, maybe to the point of going insane?

Because if everything was just a dream of mine, which means that everything was created by me, then obviously I must be God. And if I was God, then how come I didn't have all the answers?

Or what if God was a silly little boy (or girl) from a higher-degree universe? In between throwing around his toys, he somehow creates a world or two. If you ask him why he did it like this and that, he just looks at you the way children do, and tells you something mystifying that you'll never be able to make sense of.

The goals, the question is about the goals. But what if God told you to just make your own? Somehow this answer wouldn't really satisfy you, would it?

You want to know the point of the whole thing, don't you?

But what if God just looked at you and said: "Point, what kind of point? What do you mean?"

There are all kinds of things in a world. That's what being a world really means, that there would be all kinds of things. It's not just a point. What kind of point do you want? Yeah, really, what's the point of this question about a point?

And that's the REAL question!

There's no point in looking for God among the supernovae, black holes and parallel universes. You'll see all kinds of marvelous things, of course, but you'll still never know what the point of it all might be, simply because you can't really define what kind of a point you would want there to be... You don't really know what you're looking for!

So if you want to find that point, you must first think about what it actually is you're looking for. And since other people seem to be looking for the same, you can try to find out what THEY are looking for.

And this means staying among people.

I was suddenly afraid of flying out to outer space. What if I never found my way back to Earth, to all those little Earthlings looking for a point?

So I decided to stay here.

I could hop from the mind of one person to the mind of another, sort of zapping through mankind, but somehow this didn't seem appealing. I'd rather concentrate on a single human being for a while, but which one? It should be an interesting one...

Instead of switching between the TV-channels all evening you'd rather watch an interesting film from beginning to end, wouldn't you? It's the same thing!

Then, talking about films, I suddenly remembered that I had always loved Westerns. Well, now was my chance to go and explore the Wild West, for REAL!

I jumped over to a car that was driving towards the airport, and I jumped from person to person till I was in a queue for a flight to New York. I got into the plane with a group of people, and most of the flight I stayed with them. At some point I went out of the plane to witness the air rushing past the fuselage, the blinking lights on the wings, but then I went back inside. I could have flown on to America on my own, alongside the airplane, or higher up or lower down (even skimming above the ocean-waves if that's what I had wanted), or faster or slower, but somehow I was scared of getting lost (even though I would have had all the time in the world to find my way again), so I stayed with the plane, had a look in the cockpit and in other hidden places where passengers can't normally go...

After landing in New York I joined the traffic going west. It took a while till I got onto a highway that seemed promising, but then I just stayed in a car with some people and relaxed. When that became too boring, I jumped out of that car and hopped from car to

car along the highway. When that became too boring too, I just flew above the highway at my own speed.

I spent many hours like that.

Then, at some point I decided the landscape looked suitable enough (I sort of wanted it to look like the setting for a Western-film, you see). There were rolling hills in the distance, a pleasant river merging into a small lake, some farm-houses with old cars and other miscellaneous equipment rusting in their backyards...

It was perfect!

I left the highway, flew around a bit till I found a big boulder which must have rested in this very same position for ages and sat myself onto it. Then I started going backwards in time, faster and faster and faster. The days flicking past gave an unpleasant, stroboscopic effect, but as I accelerated further the light started smoothing out to some kind of uniform grey. For a while I couldn't tell anymore how fast I was going, but then I began to sense the differences in temperature as the seasons flew past. I even felt the snow cover up the boulder (and thus me) at quick intervals, like a gentle pat.

Snow-cover was perhaps not the most reliable sign of winter, but the lower temperature was. I chose a speed at which I could clearly feel the regular temperature-fluctuations of the passing years, and I started counting the peaks of cold.

I counted till hundred-fifty. It took a while, because I didn't dare to go so fast that the temperature-fluctuations would become blurred. But it didn't take so terribly long either. Anybody can count till hundred-fifty – it's really not that much! This just shows you that the wild, wild West really isn't all that terribly far away.

I slowed down the time-travel and finally stopped one early morning at some point in the middle of the nineteenth century...

It was perfect! Where I had seen the farm-houses there was a whole little town, a Western town! Many small buildings with disproportionate fronts showing towards the one street (nothing more than a dirt-strip, actually) going through the town. Wooden porches, pegs to tie the horses, and there was even a saloon with those typical swing-doors you see in all the westerns!

This was my dream-place! It was still early in the morning, and the place seemed very quiet and peaceful. There was some smoke rising from the chimney of one or two houses, and I could hear a cow mooing somewhere, quite insistently, to be milked, I guess. Else there was nobody about.

I started checking out the houses, seeing what kind of people were living here, and some vague suspicion started dawning in me – what if nothing exciting was ever going to happen in this place? All these people were just doing their best to put bread on the table and raise their kids if they had any. That's all I could see. Maybe the Wild West wasn't the exciting place it was made out to be in the films, after all?

The top-cat in town, the gun-smith, seemed to have more ambitions – he was rich and planning to get even richer. He had a handsome son with burning dark eyes (a gun-slinger to be, maybe?) and a lovely daughter. Promising? Who knows...

At the other extreme of the social scale of this town there were a sheep-farmer and his wife with just one son. There was lots of bitterness here, and as far as I could tell the boy was mostly at the receiving end of all this bitterness.

Some intuition told me that this might be what I was looking for – a young boy, gradually turning into a man, with a lot of frustrations to deal with, piled onto him by his parents.

There were signs already that he was rather introverted, a bit of a dreamer, not especially popular with his school-mates. He might end up a drinker, looking old and worn before his time. Or he might one day rebel against his destiny and become a fighter! Having a spirit like me to look after him might make all the difference! So I nest led myself in his forehead and started looking at the world how he saw it.

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 desertsic 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?

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 soppy 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.

Schooltime was over. Tom could read and write, count and do his sums. Not much else was being taught. Tom had the irksome feeling that he had learned all there was to learn in the first two years and that the rest had just been practicing and practicing without really learning anything new. In spite of this, school had been tiresome and burdensome – after all, boredom is a burden too. Continuously doing the same sums isn't very fruitful, but it still burdens the brain.

Pain doesn't always help you grow, even if his mother liked to think that it did.

In another place and in another time Tom might have gone to University, and it surely wouldn't have made him any more tired than his little school in the Wild West did, but it would definitely have been more fruitful.

Anyway, the tiresome school-days were over now – he just wasn't so much more scholarly or mature than he had been when he had started.

Now Tom had to help his parents work the small farm. The work wasn't very varied, and it was especially un motivating for Tom to know that you could only ever earn just enough to get by.

It was inhuman in the sense that humanness precisely consists of doing things that don't fulfill only basic, immediate needs. Humanness includes science and art, things that may or may not one day prove to have survival-value...

Primitive animals rely on the shuffling of traits and the chance-occurrences of heredity to adapt to new circumstances. More advanced animals have some learning abilities, and the most advanced animals of all have an urge to explore new things, just like that, because you never know what may or may not be useful to you one day...

Like any other highly evolved creature, Tom had an urge to explore, not just the world around him, but also the possibilities of his own body and mind.

The prospect of shearing sheep for the rest of his life made him want to throw up. He tried to tell his mother, but she answered that he was being childish. "At your age one doesn't think of playing around anymore. At your age one has to work and stand on one's own feet."

Tom said: "Then give me money for my work, so that I can stand on my own feet."

Mum threw up her hands in the air: "I don't have any money! You get to eat, you have a roof above your head. I can't give you more," and as an afterthought she added: "and you don't need more either!"

"I don't like your cooking. I don't like to live under your care. If you don't pay me money, I'll go and work somewhere else!"

"Then go, you ungrateful son!"

But Tom didn't go. He wouldn't really have known how to go about it.

One day dad gave him a little bit of money. "From now on I'll give you some pocket money every week. Use it wisely and don't tell your mum about it. She doesn't want you to have pocket money. She says she can't allow herself any extras either, and in her eyes it would be unfair that you would have money just for yourself..."

Instead of being pleased by this new complicity with his father, all Tom could feel was his teenager's anger against his mother: "She doesn't have any money just for herself, sure enough, but she manages this business how SHE likes, not how I like. She is free in a way I could only be if I had my own money. As long as I don't have my own money, I am a prisoner of her motherly care!"

Tom wondered why his father was giving him money. He was too young to have any idea of the ambiguous feelings a father may have for his son, so he just made up a completely rational explanation: "My father is dependent on me, because I'm the only one who knows how to handle the horse. He wants to pay me so that he wouldn't feel in my debt. He wants to degrade me by making me into an employee rather than an equal partner!"

Tom didn't at all feel the inconsistency in his way of thinking – without money he felt trapped in his mother's care, but with money he felt he was being degraded. How should his parents have behaved?

Tom saved up his money till he had several dollars. Then he went into the Davidsons' arms-shop.

Old Davidson was surprised when he saw the little Miller-boy step into his shop. Tom didn't know how to greet him. Davidson returned the silence, but he nevertheless lifted his eyebrows with polite interest. Of course he wasn't as obliging as he would have been towards one of those dangerous-looking cowboys who sometimes passed through town, but he still felt inclined to be helpful towards little Miller. After all, it would be a triumph for him to sell a weapon from his stock to the well-guarded sunny-boy of those weapon-hating, feuding neighbours!

Tom said, rather shyly: "I would like a revolver that isn't too expensive."

Davidson showed him several models. He started with the heaviest and most expensive one to give Tom a little fright. When Tom tried it out in the backyard, the recoil almost broke his wrist. Who knows where the bullet went. Davidson encouraged him to take another shot. This time the bullet kicked up a load of dirt – Tom had been so scared of the recoil that he had convulsively lowered his hand while pulling the trigger, completely spoiling his aim, of course. Davidson had a good laugh.

Tom felt downhearted. But now Davidson took out the smaller models. Tom eventually chose a handy six-shot revolver with a rough-looking but comfortable wooden grip. He bought several boxes of ammunition with it and left the gun-shop feeling rather pleased with himself.

In the afternoon he built himself a target with some boards. In the evening he went off with his target and his gun to practice in a paddock behind the house. His parents were shocked when they heard the shots and then saw their son with a gun. His mother called out to him, but he didn't hear her, because he had plugged up his ears with wet cotton wool. He sent off one bullet after the other in the general direction of the target, till the drum was empty. Then he reloaded it and emptied it again. He pushed back the hammer with his left hand after each shot. He started paying more attention to where the bullets went.

His mother had always taught him not to point at people, because supposedly that was impolite. With a gun you do point, decidedly, and then you pull the trigger. Tom pointed at the center of the target and fired off the six shots he had in quick succession, his left hand pushing back the hammer after each one. This time Tom had really hit the target. The bullet holes were scattered across it almost in a line. Tom loaded the gun once again. Now he fired the shots individually, paying attention to his aim. A cloud of bullet holes started covering the target, but he only paid attention to those that hit the center. Gradually there were so many of them that he needed to patch in up.

Tom practiced till dusk forced him to stop. Then he went home feeling pleased, his hands smelling of gun-powder, the barrel of his gun too hot to touch.

Mum was quite hysterical, but dad didn't say a word. Tom went to bed feeling confident – as long as only mum got her fits, everything was fine. He knew he could handle her.

From now on Tom practiced with his gun for about an hour every evening. He burnt up tons of ammunition and kept needing new boards to fix up his target when it was so full of holes that you couldn't see which one had been the last one.

But dad was paying. He was secretly proud of the ostentatiously manly new hobby of his son. Mum didn't know about it. When she asked Tom where the gun came from, he answered he had borrowed it from a friend. She didn't even stop to wonder where the ammunition came from. Maybe the dear old lady thought that guns work all by themselves.

One fine day as Tom rode to town on Bess to buy something, he came across Jack sitting on Blackie, the big, black stallion. He was happy to see that the mighty stallion wasn't even all that much bigger than Bess, just broader. The black monster started puffing and stomping when it saw the mare. Jack gave it a quick whip-lash on the shoulder and then on the behind and promptly got carried away at a wild gallop.

Tom saw flashes of sunlight reflecting off an impressive belt buckle. Now he saw that a holster was hanging from the broad belt, and a big, black, long-barreled revolver was sticking in it. Surely this was a revolver of exactly the same kind as the one Tom had first tried out in the gun-shop.

Jealously he thought that he would surely be advanced enough by now to hold such a powerful weapon too. But then he told himself that such a heavy gun wasn't very well suited to quick drawing and was good for hunting, rather.

In a duel Tom, with his handy little revolver, would win over Jack – but he should have a belt with a holster...

Tom worked hard on the little farm of his parents so that his father would go on giving him pocket money regularly. He didn't burn up quite as much ammunition as in the beginning, because he was already a much better shot. He was satisfied when he hit the centre of the target six times in a row, and soon enough he just needed six bullets to do

that. He regularly increased the distance between himself and the target, and then it sometimes took him longer (and more bullets) to hit the centre those six times in a row which meant that his practice run of the day was over.

Thanks to his more economical use of ammunition he soon got together enough money to buy himself a holster with an appropriate belt.

Now he could go out with his gun, carrying it in the holster. But he realized that the gun couldn't really offer him any protection if he couldn't get it in his hands fast enough. He looked good carrying that revolver in its holster, though – like a real man! The revolver hung at his side like an extension of his body, only waiting to be lifted up to be dangerous. The big, metallic belt-buckle marked the spot from which Tom's shots would come from. Tom had looked at himself in the big mirror in the shop (he didn't have such a big mirror at home), and he had liked what he saw. Only now it occurred to him that the image was deceptive...

If Tom carried a weapon, a villain might shoot him just to protect himself. If Tom was unarmed, the villain certainly wouldn't bother, because Tom would obviously be harmless.

There's always a temptation to wear badges of authority – not just literal badges - without really being entitled to them, but it can be dangerous. If you're a kid and behave like one, you won't have your word to say, but you most likely won't be shot at either. If you want to be part of adult schemes before being sure that you're really an adult, you might have to pay a steep price for that.

Once Tom realized that, he didn't for a second think of dropping his newly-found manliness. Rather, he decided to become as competent as he looked with the new outfit as soon as possible.

So he started practicing drawing the revolver out of its new holster. Every evening he stood in front of his target, tore the revolver out of the holster, fired one shot and put the revolver back. Sometimes he hit the target and was happy. Sometimes he missed it and got annoyed with himself. In any case he felt too slow on the draw, and it was hard to see progress in the daily exercises he did. He didn't go to bed with the same satisfaction anymore as he used to when he was just concentrating on his aim.

So nowadays he took the tension that he accumulated throughout the day to bed with him in the evening. Earlier he used to be able to get relief of this tension through shooting, and then, after his customary wriggling before sleep he would get rid of it altogether and drift off easily.

But now he was such a good shot that he practically always hit the centre of the target, even at great distance.

Actually he should have been happy with himself. But he wasn't. He had hoped for something to arise from his good aim, some new form of freedom, perhaps. But all those practice runs had only made him a better shot, nothing else. He was disappointed.

Luckily he already had this new hope – he had to learn to draw the gun faster, and then... Then he would surely become free!

As soon as he would see some progress in his practice runs, he would be able to go to bed happily in the evening once again, looking forward to a bright future. But while he was standing still he had ample opportunity to brood over his sad destiny.

Namely that mother and father were keeping him a prisoner.

He didn't feel much of the presence of his father, actually. Dad hardly ever spoke. When you stood in front of him, you had a feeling of emptiness, of a hole that should have been filled by a human being, but that human being was never really there.

Mum was exactly the opposite – she was really THERE, too much so, making lots of remarks all the time, and when she wasn't bickering, then she talked in bursts, putting extra emphasis onto every second word or so, as if she was astonished by everything she saw. When Tom dropped something, then she would cry out, so much so that Tom would be more startled by her cry than by what he had dropped. In short – at least every second word uttered by his mother was a word too many, and there was nowhere he could let out his aggravation. To protect himself he developed a kind of depressed lethargy and thus started resembling his silent father.

Always to be subordinated, always having to guess the intentions of a higher authority, ends up causing feelings of hatred. Tom would have liked to free himself of all this. Just to float away weightlessly, leaving behind the feelings of hatred on Earth, that's what he wanted! To feel just a single, gentle touch all over his body, the touch of a little breeze, that's what he wanted. No more feet would trample his own feet!

But maybe he would feel kind of lonely up there, floating above the Earth. Maybe he should take someone with him, just one single person.

And because no one else is up there, all his gregarious instincts, his whole sociability, and ultimately his whole love, would all be directed towards that one single person.

Stark naked, surrounded by a single, all-encompassing touch, the two of them would form such a strong twosomeness that they would then be able to return to Earth together and give each other so much support that they would never again feel crushed by hatred. But first you needed to be naked, completely naked, then you could feel that all-encompassing touch. Completely naked, but not alone, and then everything would be possible!

Tom couldn't quite explain all this to himself, but his longing and his lust were colossal - he felt that something was stirring in him that was much bigger than he was himself...

One day Tom saw two young men having a fist-fight in front of the Saloon. Both had laid down their weapons – obviously neither of them was prepared to risk death. Nevertheless it was a hard fight, and it was over only when one of the men lied in the street, unable to get up. Tom suddenly understood that there are important things in life besides being able to handle a revolver.

He decided that very day to do daily push-ups in addition to his shooting exercises that had progressed so little lately.

Tom started working on those push-ups with iron willpower. Twenty in a row, then his arms wouldn't obey him anymore, so he did those twenty every single day. As the months went by, Tom made great progress. Now he was happy again when he went to bed in the evening. His despair that had made him so restless and had brought about such strange fantasies vanished as progress resumed.

When Tom turned twenty he was able to do more than a hundred push-ups, and he was able to pull his weight up to a tree-branch twenty times in a row. And as if by magic his right arm had learned to tear the revolver out of its holster in no time at all.

As his right hand leaped up and forward with the gun, it would slap into the waiting left hand and be held in place for shooting. Tom could fire his six shots in quick succession.

Tom practiced by first turning his back to the target. He would count till three, turn around while pulling the gun and fire six bull's eyes, all in flash. Tom Miller had become a great gunman! Now, when he went out, he always carried his gun, plainly visible to anyone. It sure wasn't a fake badge of authority anymore!

One day, as Tom was walking home quietly through town, a former class-mate stopped him.

"You've got a beautiful revolver! Can you shoot with it too?"

"Of course!"

The boy pointed out an old Whiskey-bottle lying on the street some distance away.

"I bet you twenty dollars you won't hit that bottle there!"

Tom answered: "I don't even have that much money."

The boy said: "If you lose, you give me your horse."

Tom didn't answer. The bottle was larger than the centre of his usual target at home. It was impossible that Tom would miss it. And yet... the tiniest deviation of his fingers from their usual position on the gun could mean that he would lose his best friend, Bess. On the other hand there were the twenty dollars. That was a lot of money that he could get in one blow.

His hand itched with wanting to shoot. Without saying whether he agreed to the bet, he pulled the gun and shot the bottle in two.

"Amazing!" said the boy. "Can you do that again any time?"

Tom wanted to shoot up the broken halves of the bottle, but the boy held him back.

"Wait."

Tom slipped his gun back into its holster.

The boy picked up a middle-sized shingle, said "This stone" and threw it up into the air. Tom's gun jumped out of its holster and fired five times. The boy saw how the shingle was hurled back up into the air on its way down and finally fell down in two pieces.

"Unbelievable!" he said in wonder.

Tom was pleased with himself too – at least one of his five bullets had hit the stone in the air!

"I'll go and get the twenty dollars!" said the boy, helpful like a toady, and ran away.

He really came back a moment later with a bundle of banknotes, exactly twenty dollars, true to his word.

"What will you do with the money?" he asked.

Tom thought of his dreams of naked flesh exposed to the wind...

The adult thing that adults do when nobody is watching - it has to be that. Tom had to do it too, see what it's like.

He swallowed even though there was nothing to swallow, then he said: "I'd like to sleep with a girl."

The boy looked at Tom quizzically. He obviously knew about these things. "Above the saloon there's a girl who does these things for money." He paused. "For a small fee, I can get you an appointment, then all you need to do is knock on her door, and she'll let you in."

So the boy got back some of his twenty dollars, and one fine Saturday afternoon Tom went off to the Saloon.

“Today you’ll do it!” he told himself, and he felt himself getting weak in the knees. Then he felt somewhat ridiculous as well. After all he wasn’t going to do anything heroic, just try out his manliness. Every young man has to do that at some point. Nobody ever dies from it. By and by Tom started looking at the whole thing as a kind of necessary chore rather than an adventure. He walked down the street like a child on his first school-day – a bit scared, a bit excited, but unfortunately not really excited in an erotic way... After all, this path he was treading had already been trodden many times before, by every single boy turning into a man. There was nothing special or great about it.

Tom came to the Saloon, pushed his way through the swinging doors, looked around in the room in a rather lost and undecided way, but then, luckily, he saw the staircase leading up to the rooms above, and he walked there purposefully like a businessman. He walked up the creaking stairs and, when he reached the landing, he stood there a moment. A strange moment. A moment can always be prolonged by another moment, and yet another, because a moment is just a moment, so you can always add another one to it. You have all the time in the world, you take in every detail of your surroundings, every crack in the wall, the dark wood under your feet, above your head...

But whatever you do, the moment is still just a moment, and it’s over before you had a chance to really take it in. His heart was beating fast and hard. He saw the door number 4 and knocked.

Another one of these moments that are endless and yet never seem to last long enough, and the door opened a crack. A big round face with dark eyes and fat lips, grinning broadly, appeared in the crack.

“Ah, it’s you! Come in! Come in!”

From the first moment he heard it, Tom hated that voice. It was a friendly voice, of course, much too friendly actually, but without real warmth. And in spite of this lack of warmth there was a soft undertone, kind of a confidential undertone, as if there were no barriers between them. There wasn’t the slightest trace of reserved politeness that would have befitted two people who don’t know anything about each other yet.

And in spite of this total lack of reserved caution, there was no warmth in it. That’s what put off Tom.

The door opened wide and Tom stepped in. As soon as he was inside, the girl closed the door. Her hand got between his legs as if by chance and gave his genitals a little squeeze. The soft undertone in her voice was quite tendentious by now.

“Put yourself at ease.”

Tom looked around in the room. It was dark, stuffy and small. Dirty curtains shut out the light. Apart from a little wooden stool, a wardrobe that seemed to lean dangerously forward and a big bed that covered most of the floor-space there was no other furniture. The girl was in underwear and already busily taking it off. Her breasts turned loose and floated freely through the space in front of Tom’s nose.

Tom didn’t feel well. A feeling of claustrophobia started closing in on him.

But he was brave, so he started taking off his clothes too and laying them down on the stool in an orderly pile. He bared his chest and the sight of his own muscular body calmed him down somewhat – he was a strong man, and he was the one who paid here. What could he possibly be afraid of?

The girl was already quite naked, but somehow she didn’t look very appetizing. Just lots of bare flesh, like a chicken that has lost all its feathers.

As Tom let his pants slip down along his thighs, he felt his penis stretch out. For the moment he was alone with his thoughts, thoughts of bygone times, of walks along the lake. As he straightened up and put down his last piece of clothing, his penis had become limp again – he was back in the small unpleasant room.

“What about my little present?”

“Little present?”

The girl’s voice lost its soft undertone for a split second: “The ten dollars!” she said coarsely.

“Ah, yes...” said Tom and bent down over his pile of clothes to look through his pockets. He pulled out the ten dollars and gave them to the girl. The girl put away the money and tumbled onto the bed.

“Come, come...” she said.

Tom couldn’t have stood around naked much longer – he felt he was getting weak. He joined the girl on the bed, and she immediately had her warm hands all over him. Tom relaxed, and his genitals became as soft as butter. The touch of her hands was so warm that Tom stopped feeling it. His genitals might as well have been safely tucked up inside his clothes once again. Tom forgot all about being naked.

“It isn’t getting stiff“ observed the girl after kneading his balls for a while.

“You have to come closer to me” said Tom without real conviction. He hadn’t imagined it would be like this. Precisely, when he imagined things, his penis would stretch uncontrollably and let go its juice in no time at all! Well, he was glad this hadn’t happened here, before he even had time to do anything.

But actually, to be honest, he really didn’t feel like doing anything at all right now – not with this woman! And yet he knew that he should, because that’s what becoming a man is all about. Except that his penis had shriveled up to nothing in her much too warm hands. These hands excited him about as much as the hands of a dentist in his mouth! The girl pressed herself against him. Her body was as warm as her hands and smelled strongly of some cheap perfume. The girl lied down on top of him and moved back and forth. Her bad breath blew into his face, and he could also smell his own acid sweat when he lifted his arms. His muscular chest became ice-cold. Sweat-drops fell from his arm-pits, but his genitals didn’t react.

The girl whispered in his left ear: “You’re my dream-man... Come, come into me!”

She spoke softly, then harshly, but it was to no avail.

She stood up, got her own underwear and pulled it over Tom’s legs, over his genitals, but this perverse little gesture didn’t change anything either. Tom had reached a point where nothing in the world could have excited him anymore.

The girl got up once again and said: “You are thirsty.”

She got him a glass of whiskey mixed with some fruit-juice, a glass that had probably never been washed, and she drank a mouthful before handing it over to Tom. This wasn’t a time to be prudish, so Tom took the glass and drank all the mixture in big gulps till the glass was empty.

As he gave it back, he scrutinized the tummy of the girl, as she was bent over him. In this position it was rather egg-shaped, and he could see the pores in the skin like thousands of little craters. The big, deep belly-button was right in front of his nose, like a dark cave in which you could get lost.

When the girl wanted to start working on him again, he pushed her back, stood up, dressed up quickly and left the small, stuffy room without another word. Back down in the saloon he felt like running off. He didn't. He walked to the exit gravely and solemnly, pushed his way through the double-doors and was back outside in the sunshine. He felt immeasurably relieved. He walked to the middle of the street and just stood there a moment, glad to feel his body held up by his own two legs. So, what had all this been about, then?

An inner voice was telling him that he was a bloody idiot. Maybe it was the same inner voice that had once told him to go into the stable with Bess, long before he had managed to tame her. Now that he thought about it, he vaguely seemed to remember being influenced by this same inner voice when he had asked his former class-mate about sleeping with a girl...

Maybe he shouldn't listen to this inner voice so much?

Now the inner voice was groaning! Maybe it would leave him now, give up on him...

"No, no," it said, and now Tom could hear it literally as though someone was speaking inside his skull: "I'm not giving up on you just yet."

Tom couldn't tell whether he was relieved or scared. This inner voice was obviously just part of himself. Or was it? It said such strange things sometimes, such alien things! Tom wondered whether he was really a bloody idiot or not. Of course he knew that he had been supposed to go in there to that woman with an enormous erection and to explode inside her in a glorious climax!

But why would that have been so great if everybody ended up doing it at some point in their life anyway?

Bloody fool, said the voice, everybody gets born too, at some crucial point in their life, but that doesn't make it any less glorious or miraculous!

Tom still couldn't imagine that what he had missed out on right now would really have been so glorious. So he should have gone in there, loaded with energy bursting at the tip of his dick, and then come out pleasantly drunk with post-orgasmic drowsiness? In the meantime the girl, not being involved emotionally, would have lost nothing of her strength. A professional whore makes even the stiffest dick soft again. It's a special power over men that she has. In the end she's the one who wins over her clients and not the other way around.

Well, it hadn't worked with Tom. His dick hadn't even become stiff to start with.

Whatever potency was hidden in him, she hadn't been able to take it from him, because it hadn't expressed itself in the first place.

"Yeah, yeah," said the inner voice with obvious resignation, "you can look at it like that as well..."

Tom realized, and perhaps his inner voice realized it together with him, that it isn't always enough to get in touch with the body of just any girl in order to be rid of the tremendous inner tension. Sex is a means of escape from everyday life. But the sweetness of such an escape lies in the hope that it will lead into a new life, a new world. If it leads back into the old one, then it was useless.

What Tom expected from sex, deep down, was the promise of love. Without this promise it was an escape into emptiness, perhaps ultimately even death...

"Sure, sure," said the inner voice, exasperated.

When winter came, things went badly for the Millers. An illness broke out among the sheep that seemed to take epidemic proportions. It was like a wild fire – each sheep in turn blazed up and died...

Old Miller had called on the doctor as soon as the first sheep got ill, but all the doctor did was to declare the meat unfit to eat. He couldn't tell whether the illness was infectious or not. In spite of this old Miller took all the precautions he could think of. He swept and brushed the stable of the sheep like never before, changed all the straw and burned the old straw. Nevertheless every single one of his sheep got ill and died. He had to burn the body of a sheep almost daily. When the last sheep had died, he got ill himself. The doctor had to come again. He looked at poor Miller for a few minutes, gave him a powder to mix in water and swallow daily (that he had to pay straight away). He said: "It's just a bit of fever."

But as he left he mumbled: "Looks like he caught the illness of his sheep himself...!" The Millers had no money and no income anymore. Mother would have liked to talk about it with Father, but all he said was: "Leave me alone!"

He slept the whole day and didn't want to eat or talk. He just wanted to drink water. That's all he ever wanted, and about every three hours he had to be helped to the latrines. Whichever of these two things he wanted, he would call Mother impatiently, till she hurried to his bed. Later he started vomiting as well, and even though there was little more than water in his stomach, Mother had to work hard to keep his bed clean. She didn't think of mealtimes anymore, and Tom often felt hungry. He strolled through town looking for any kind of work just to earn a few dollars. Apart from occasional little jobs that he was given more out of pity than need he couldn't find anything to do. Nobody had much use for him. In the evening he went home and gave these measly earnings to his mother. Each time she looked at him with deep gratitude, and he saw that the furrows in her round face, that he knew so well, had grown deeper.

Then one evening, as Mother and Tom stood around Father's bed, Father said: "I feel better. I think I may be healing. Surely tomorrow I can get up again."

Tom felt tears coming to his eyes, which took him by surprise.

Mother smiled a little, for the first time in many days.

Father looked up at them. The wild anger had disappeared from his eyes. His voice was little more than a sigh. The times of hoarse shouting were over.

That night he didn't wake up his family. In the morning they found him dead in his bed. He lied there, peacefully embedded in his blankets, his hands on his chest and his eyes shut, ready for the coffin. The doctor was called to ascertain what was certain anyway. Then came the undertaker. He looked at the body and called out delightedly: "How peacefully he's lying there!"

Then he commented: "We don't need to change him. He can be buried in his night-shirt."

Tom had to help the undertaker to lift Father into the coffin. The undertaker held him under the arms, and Tom couldn't do anything but grab the legs of his dead father. Then he had to help to carry the open coffin out of the house. Father crossed the threshold of his humble little house for the last time. Then the coffin was shoved into the hearse. Now the way through town to the cemetery began. Tom was in a kind of dream-state from which he only awoke when the coffin, from which his father would never come out again, was nailed shut.

The coffin hit the bottom of the grave, which wasn't even all that deep, with a dull thud, the priest was there to say a few empty words, and then soil was shoveled on top of it. Finally a wooden cross was hammered into the earth, and with that it was all over. The hearse drove away empty, and Tom walked home with his mother. They didn't talk. The whole evening they sat in front of the fire in silence. But when Tom went to bed, Mother came into his room for a moment, said "Good night" and gave him a kiss on the brow. Then she left his room and went to bed herself. After all she was still his mother. The next morning Tom left the house early. He really had to find work now, else he didn't know what would happen to him and his mother. Nobody had anything for him to do today either, but people were strangely quiet towards him as well, almost as if they felt ashamed. Nobody had been at the funeral. The Millers weren't especially popular in town.

Tom went home in the early afternoon. His mother was sitting at the dining table. Tom could tell that she had been crying. In her hand she held a short letter. The grey envelope lay open on the table – it wasn't a letter of condolence from the looks of it...

"Just what we needed..." she said bitterly.

"What's the matter, Mother?" asked Tom.

"We've been evicted."

"Evicted from what? I don't understand."

Mother looked up at Tom. "This land on which we live doesn't belong to us. We've only been renting it. A few days ago the rent was due, and we didn't pay."

"But we couldn't pay!"

"We couldn't."

"Who owns the land?"

Mother hesitated. Finally she said very softly: "The Davidsons."

"The Davidsons!" Tom called out and overturned his chair as he jumped up. "I'll make them pay for this!"

He left the house and ran to the stable. He saddled Bess. Mother rushed after him.

"What are you going to do, Tom? Please don't do it, please!"

"I must!" said Tom resolutely.

"Stay here, Tom, I beg you! Please stay here!"

"I'm going!"

"Tom, stay here! Come back!"

But Tom was galloping down the street to the town. Bess was wearing her saddle and he was wearing his holster with the gun.

Old mother Miller saw him disappearing in a cloud of dust and knew that she might never see her son again.

Tom rode to the saloon. He knew that he would meet old Davidson there. At this time of the day he was always sitting there with a game of cards. Tom wanted to challenge and shoot him.

On the way he got more and more convinced that Davidson was a dirty son of a bitch. It was his fault that Tom's father had died. Father had died out of despair, it was quite clear – when his last sheep had died, he knew that he couldn't pay Davidson anymore and that Davidson would never give him a chance.

Tom also remembered the conversations about the conflicts between North and South. The town hadn't been directly implicated. The Davidsons sympathized with the North,

and the Millers (how could it be otherwise in this case?) with the South. In secret Tom had felt more attracted to the North. The northerners were more modern somehow. They were the harbingers of a new industrial world and they wanted to end slavery.

But right now Tom thought bitterly that it had finally become clear what the northerners really wanted – they only thought about money, they didn't care about poor people like the Millers who were just an obstacle in the path of progress when they couldn't pay up anymore.

Soon Tom saw a confrontation between two worlds, between humaneness and the cold power of industry, in his upcoming fight with old Davidson.

Tom rode up to the saloon. He dismounted and stroked Bess between the ears, where she liked it. He tied her to a post and walked into the saloon, head held high. He had a momentary thought for the whore up in room number four, undoubtedly waiting for her next customer, and shuddered, but today he hadn't come for her. He walked straight to the table where the poker game was taking place. The sheriff, old Davidson and two other men Tom didn't know were sitting there.

"Get up, Davidson!" said Tom.

Old Davidson looked up in surprise. He was going to laugh, but he saw the dangerous sparkle in Tom's eyes and held it back.

"Up I said!" Tom tried to hook Davidson's chair with his foot to pull it away from under him.

Slowly the sheriff got up. "Listen, little one..."

Tom's eyes were on Davidson, but he saw the sheriff too, in the periphery of his field of vision.

He spoke to the sheriff: "Don't move! Sit back down!"

But the sheriff slowly moved in front of Davidson, till he practically covered him.

Davidson discreetly set out to disappear through the back door.

Tom noticed this and got blindingly mad.

His right hand was resting right next to the grip of his revolver. The palm of his hand was already in the shape of the grip. Each finger had taken up its appointed position, ready to wrap itself around the grip with the index curling itself round the trigger. Just a tiny movement more, and it would all be done.

Tom's inner voice was talking again. Did other people have such inner voices too? No, it wasn't just talking, it was SCREAMING at him! But somehow Tom couldn't tell what it was saying. Was it urging him on or telling him to leave it? Who knows? Tom wasn't really in the right state of mind to pay attention to it.

In any case he wasn't a scared little boy anymore. His left hand grabbed the sheriff by the collar to push him aside.

The sheriff snarled: "That's enough!..." He reached for his revolver.

He shouldn't have done that, though. Tom's right hand - that had been resting by his hip so casually - suddenly leaped up, clasping the gun, and fired. Tom's other hand swiftly came on top of the gun and pushed back the hammer, all in one flow of a motion, readying the gun for the next shot.

The sheriff's eyes turned up in their sockets till only the whites were visible, and Tom was so close that he could see the meandering pathways of the tiny veins within the white surfaces as the man collapsed like a heavy bag of potatoes, crashing onto Davidson's

empty chair which was right behind him. Davidson, who had been sitting there a moment before, had vanished.

Tom's revolver was pointing at one of the other men in the room. The gun was cocked – at the slightest twitch of his trigger finger, the gun would go off. Tom walked backwards slowly. His gun never stopped aiming at that one man. The bullet was waiting in front of the hammer. Whoever moved, for whatever reason, that one man in front of Tom's gun would die...

Tom was approaching the swinging doors backwards. Now he felt them behind himself. One last look at the people in the saloon – nobody was moving. Tom leaped backwards and was outside!

Keeping an eye on the entrance of the saloon, he went over to Bess. He tied her loose and wanted to mount when it occurred to him that everybody would come charging out of the saloon as soon as they heard a horse galloping off. They would all aim at Tom's back and shoot him off the horse.

Tom led Bess to the middle of the street, stroking her soft muzzle, then he stood behind her and gave her a little clap on the behind.

"Go!" he told her.

She trotted off. Indeed, one of the men in the saloon had obviously been waiting for exactly that sound, because he appeared in the entrance of the saloon with a gun in his hand. He had no time to regret it, because Tom put a bullet between his eyes.

Bess just went on trotting. Gun shots didn't startle her – she was used to them. She went on in the direction of the cemetery. At the end of the row of houses she would turn and take the path homewards along the lake, because that was the usual walk she did with Tom.

Tom's idea was to go through the row of houses and to wait for her on the other side. For this he chose the house of the sheriff which stood right across the street from the saloon. He knew that nobody was in the sheriff's office, because the sheriff was lying dead in the saloon. He also knew that there was a back door.

Tom walked backwards to the sheriff's house, opened the door behind himself and entered the office. Then he silently closed the door.

Only now he dared to turn around. His heart was beating so hard he could hear it! He was feeling his way through the dusky half-dark when he heard a voice from the jail: "Who are you?"

"I just shot the sheriff" answered Tom. That seemed like the only sensible answer he could give. He wasn't sure that he was still Tom Miller, and besides, his life would be shaped by this deed from now on – from now on he was the man who had shot the sheriff. Perhaps this man had grown out of Tom Miller somehow, but it definitely wasn't Tom Miller anymore.

The man in the jail said: "Won't you let me out? The key's on the sheriff's desk."

Tom hesitated for just a moment – maybe the prisoner wanted to redeem himself by being the one to catch the dangerous outlaw Tom Miller!

But Tom wanted to keep out of further trouble, so he left the prisoner where he was. He left the office of the sheriff through the back door.

And there was Bess coming towards him. He stroked her nose and mounted. He gently but decidedly steered her around, back in the direction where she had just come from.

"Today we don't go home" he told her, "today we go far, far away. Canter, Bess, canter!"

Bess was a bit reluctant, since this was so unusual, but Tom was very decided, so she gave in and cantered off in the direction she had come from, past the school and the cemetery, on and on, out of town and far, far away.

His horse Bess, the clothes he was wearing, five dollars he had on him and the gun with four more bullets, that was all Tom was taking with him. He had to flee and start a new life elsewhere. He had murdered the sheriff. Why oh why hadn't he just knocked him down instead of shooting him? The sheriff was an honest, elderly man, and all he had wanted to do was probably to lock Tom up for the night. He hadn't meant any harm.

Of course he couldn't have known what had happened between Tom and Davidson... Tom's anger came straight back – the sheriff had no right to interfere like that! Tom had only been seeking justice!

The sheriff had tried to pull a gun.

That had been his big mistake. It had set in motion a series of well-practiced reflexes within Tom, and that's what had killed him. Tom had had no intention of killing the sheriff, but once his reflexes had been set in motion, it was too late! The sheriff had only himself to blame!

With these thoughts in his mind, Tom raced along the dusty road and was unable to make any kinds of plans for his future.

What was to become of him? He was an outlaw now, bound to be hunted down! Anyone was surely allowed to kill him!

Throughout the night Tom rode west, trotting a good part of the way. A light trot that Bess could maintain for a long time.

Towards morning, when he could barely keep his eyes open, he gave up trotting. In the milky light of dawn he could see that they were still on the road, even though they could easily have lost it in the prairie at night.

Tom didn't remember how he had managed to keep to the road. He didn't remember how long he had been sitting on Bess either, or how long he had walked next to her in the dead of the night. Bess set down one hoof in front of the other like a sleep-walker and followed the sparse hints of the edge of the road of her own accord. Tom passively let himself be shaken from side to side on her back.

In his thoughts, or perhaps it was more of a dream than a thought, he saw the funeral procession once again, the open coffin in which his father was lying comfortably embedded, too dead to notice what was going to be done to him.

Tom had a sudden intuition of deep wisdom: your own funeral is the last one you have to attend!

Tom saw how the lid of the coffin was closed on him. It was Tom himself lying in the coffin now. The world became dark, he didn't see anything. Above himself he felt the lid of the coffin. He scratched at it. Dirt got under his fingernails. Under the dirt there was soft, yielding fur. Tom cuddled up to the fur and his mouth searched for the nipple.

Now he felt himself sliding away. The fur was escaping from him.

He grabbed the mane of his horse and awoke. He was practically hanging from Bess' neck and had almost fallen off!

He was wide-awake now – the sleepiness was shaken off.

Behind him the sun was rising. In front of him, in the pink morning light, a small town was awaiting him, a little nest in the endless prairie. Little wisps of mist were rising up

from the ground, as if the earth itself were cooking coffee. With the thought of coffee Tom's spirits rose. He spurred Bess on a bit. Bess' spirits seemed to rise too – she started trotting eagerly towards the new town.

The sun was already standing higher when Tom and Bess got onto the main street of the small town. The first impression of the town, which had been so friendly a moment ago, was gone. The walls of the houses didn't glow in delicate pink hues anymore – from up close and in harsher light they looked grey and run-down.

The streets were still empty.

Tom rode towards the centre of the town, hoping to find the saloon and a guest-room where he could rest. The faces of the houses were still quite cheerful, if you didn't look from too close (the façades were imposing here too, and just like everywhere else the actual buildings behind those splendid façades were little more than sheds), and as he was riding past he saw a curtain move behind a window here and there.

Behind those windows there were people, the inhabitants of this town. Tom reasoned that there was surely a very rich and a very poor family in this town too. Surely the rich man was a cheerful fat guy whom everybody greeted while the poor one had to be an embittered, self-righteous man whom nobody liked, just like Tom's father had been. Surely there was an old sheriff here too who spent his days playing cards in the saloon. Tom wondered what the townsfolk at home were saying about old Miller and his son Tom. Did they have a bad conscience for not having helped the Millers and thus having forced their son to become a murderer? But how could you possibly have helped the Millers? They were self-righteous and couldn't accept anything from other people, least of all help. Did the townsfolk back home talk about the Millers with hatred, because their son had shot two men? What were they going to do with Tom's mother who was a lonely widow now? What did Tom's mother herself think of Tom? She would surely become the bitter old widow of the town and not tell anybody what she thought, pretending not to hear what was being whispered behind her back.

Tom got in a gloomy mood, but luckily he was torn out of his fruitless thoughts. A man standing at the corner of a house hailed him: "What are you doing up and about this early? Who are you?"

Tom answered: „My name is Tom Miller and I'm going west to find work.“

There wasn't much point in giving a false name, Tom thought. When the news got here that an outlaw named Miller was wanted, he would be suspected anyway.

The man took a closer look at Tom and obviously decided he didn't look dangerous. He said: "Sorry that I'm a bit suspicious. Yesterday a group of men came to town. They live in the hotel over there. Later a mail carrier brought this placard to the sheriff..."

The man unrolled a piece of paper. It was a drawing of a broadly grinning face. The caption said: "Wanted (dead or alive)". Underneath it said: "1'000 \$".

"This man is the leader of the group that rode to town yesterday. I'm sure you understand that I get a panicky feeling about having to nail this placard to the wall."

Tom looked at the face on the drawing, making an effort to memorize the rough, square features, and then he looked at the man who was holding up the drawing. He was young, chewing on a stalk of grass and wearing a small metallic star on his shirt. He was undoubtedly an assistant to the sheriff. He looked friendly.

Tom felt he ought to comment on the outlaw on the picture. But he didn't know what to say. The number under the picture, the one with its three zeroes, fascinated him a lot more than the picture itself.

An unpleasant thought came to him, namely that there might very soon be some money on his head too, but probably not this much.

"A thousand dollars!" he said dreamily.

The sheriff's deputy said: "They're yours if you shoot this man! But don't forget he's not alone!"

Tom answered: „Well, he's probably still sleeping... I'd like to take a nap too, before the day begins. But first I need to rub down my mare and give her some grain. But I don't have much money with me."

"Come with me to the sheriff. There you can sleep in a prison cell for free. I'll feed your horse. You can pay when you've earned some money."

"I'd be grateful" said Tom and got off his horse.

He helped the young man nail the placard to the saloon-wall, holding it up while he used the grip of his gun as a hammer. When it was done, they went to the house of the sheriff together.

The sheriff was sitting at his table, sipping coffee. He was haggard and his eyes looked extinct. It was obvious that he had barely slept all night. Tom greeted him politely. The sheriff didn't stand up. He scrutinized Tom suspiciously. He looked just like any middle-aged man who had spent half his life occupying a responsible position, but without ever really getting into his own because nothing interesting had ever happened. A true peacetime soldier! He had got used to this quiet life and didn't want it to be any different anymore. His days of aspiring to glory were long over. The arrival of a group of outlaws in his town hadn't done his disposition any good.

"This young man just arrived. He's looking for work" said the sheriff's deputy.

"What's your name?" asked the sheriff.

"Tom Miller" said Tom. "I'd like to give my horse a rub-down, some grain, and then rest a bit. Your deputy offered..."

"No problem with me" mumbled the sheriff. "But leave your gun with me."

"Eh, my gun?" To Tom this sounded as if he had been asked to undress naked.

"Come on! Leave him his gun" said the deputy to his boss.

The sheriff ignored him. He asked Tom: "Why are you riding at night?"

Tom answered straight out without a wink: "Because it's cooler at night."

The sheriff seemed to accept this. "You can keep your gun" he said and turned back to his mug of coffee.

The deputy helped Tom brush and feed Bess. Tom whispered some niceties into Bess' ear, then he left her and went back into the house where he got a mug of steaming tea. Then he went to lie down on the board in the prison cell. He couldn't really sleep, but time still somehow went by. In the early afternoon he got up and felt hungry. He strolled over to the saloon. In front of the saloon he paused, because he saw that four unshaved, rough-looking men were coming out of the hotel. He took out a cigarette and started lighting it fastidiously. He was wondering how to kill them. Should he talk to them first and let them pull their guns? The sun was in his back and would perhaps blind them a bit. He had a chance to shoot them all down before they could even aim at him. But the men weren't coming any closer to Tom.

They were going to the saloon. Their leader, the one with the square head, saw his face on the placard that Tom and the sheriff's deputy had nailed to the wall there, and he laughed so exaggeratedly that his head almost got split in two. The laughing sounded like the barking of a large, angry dog, deep and mean. The three others laughed too, thin, cowardly and cruel little laughs.

The leader suddenly stopped laughing and signaled to his companions to go away. Obviously he had an errand for them. He himself stepped into the saloon. The three accomplices walked past Tom without paying attention to him. He let them by without undertaking anything.

For Tom this was another of these moments that you can always prolong by another moment, but which still never becomes longer than a moment.

An angel flew by, or who knows what exactly happened. Tom's feet started to move. He walked over to the saloon, tore the placard from the wall, rolled it up, and then he just pushed his body through the swing-doors with the placard still in his hand.

The man with the square face was standing at the bar, a glass of whisky in front of him. Not so many people were at the bar yet, but there were enough to make it seem natural when Tom put himself quite close to the outlaw. He started fussing with his cigarette again.

He put down the paper roll in front of the outlaw who slowly looked up, mildly surprised. "Have a light?" Tom asked.

The square face looked slightly puzzled. Who was this careless youth who just addressed him like this? Didn't he know whom he was dealing with?

Tom's look was vacant, somehow. His mouth slowly twisted into a kind of grin. But his look stayed vacant.

That youth didn't just behave insanely – he looked it too!

Tom's look was vacant all right, but he was aware of the other man's hands. He wasn't looking at them directly, but he was aware of them. He was paying attention to his entire visual field.

Interestingly he didn't feel bashful or scared in front of the big man with the square face. He knew he was in mortal danger, but that also somehow made him feel wonderfully detached of the whole thing. There was no need to confer or negotiate with this man. He wasn't even a man at all. He was just a mortal danger. A poisonous snake or something. There's a technique to kill it. If you master that technique, then you just do it. You kill the snake. That's all. No need to think. No need to feel bashful.

Tom's hand reached out to the face of the man. Without altering his vacant gaze, Tom carefully pulled the man's cigarette out of his mouth. It came with a small "Plop!", as though you were pulling the cork of a bottle. In the perfect silence between the two men you could hear it clearly.

He pushed the glowing tip of the man's cigarette against his own. He pulled hard on his cigarette, drawing the fire into it, then gently let out the smoke so that it enveloped the face of his adversary, which by now was so close that it seemed huge, filling the whole world.

It was one of these timeless moments again. Then Tom saw how the pupils in the eyes of his adversary suddenly contracted. He also registered movement at the bottom of his visual field. His opponent was obviously grabbing his revolver.

Tom lifted his leg and felt his knee make contact with the soft genitals of the man.

The outlaw's gun fell to the wooden floor with a thud. The square face strained itself with the effort of a yell that just wouldn't come out.

At last a sound found its way out of the wind-pipe – loud and shrill, like the shriek of a wounded rabbit. It was a short scream, because the man had to catch his breath.

His whole body collapsed and fell to the ground. He writhed and twisted himself there, uttering short shrieks. Tom kicked away the revolver that was lying on the ground. He inhaled the smoke from his cigarette deeply and slowly let it out again.

“Dead or alive?” he asked generously. “You choose!”

„Alive, you fool!“ said a voice behind him.

Behind the bar there was a long mirror. Tom saw in it that three men were standing at the entrance. The three companions of the great outlaw who was at this very moment writhing on the floor. Three men and Tom still had four bullets in his gun. One to spare. Should be okay.

Tom took note of the casual posture of the three men. They weren't afraid. Fine – they wouldn't be prepared. One of them hadn't buttoned up his shirt, and his chest and tummy looked all knotty and hairy. The men didn't credit Tom with the slightest chance. Their arms hung loosely at their sides.

Tom concentrated. The muscles in his right arm tautened imperceptibly. His fingers put themselves in position. A moment went by.

Now!!

A twitch of Tom's arm, and his gun was in his hand while his body twirled on the heels of his boots. His gun hand slapped into the palm of his left hand where it was held fast and fired three times.

Tom lived through the next few tenths of seconds in slow motion.

The first man was hit without expecting it. The bullet went right into his bare chest. The second man already seemed to have wild eyes, and his gun hand was in the vicinity of the grip of his revolver. Tom's bullet shattered the lower jaw of his half-open mouth with a little shower of drool. The third man was already pulling his gun out of its holster when Tom's bullet opened a little key-hole in his brow, right at the bridge of his nose.

The third man's gun fired harmlessly into the ground, then all three of them toppled over each other and through the swinging doors where they cluttered up the entrance to the saloon.

The swinging doors opened and closed, squeaking plaintively...

Tom heard the great outlaw crawling on the floor behind him. He was probably looking for his gun that was still lying nearby somewhere.

He must have found it, because the noise stopped. Tom turned halfway round and shot him. Right into the eye. Some kind of bloody jelly spilled out.

Tom found his holster with the tip of his gun. He dropped the gun into it.

There was silence. Then the barman said:

“Bravo!”

All the other people in the saloon seemed to wake up from their spell, and they started agreeing loudly: “Bravo! Bravo!”

Tom ordered a whisky and poured it down his throat.

He was happy – at last he had found a way of life. He wasn't mummy's sunny-boy anymore. He had just become notorious Old Tom, hadn't he?

His cigarette was still in his mouth, but it had gone out. Tom took a match, rubbed it against the bar and took pleasure in the flame that immediately flared up. He brought the flame to the tip of his cigarette and drew it in. The tip of the cigarette began to glow. Such an ambiguous thing, this little glow. If you don't attend to it with loving care, it just goes out. On the other hand, all it needs is to find enough inflammable objects, and it can turn into a roaring fire.

Tom nursed and cherished the little light, exhaling big clouds of smoke. All this smoke was good to see. It wrapped the world into a gentle haze and calmed his nerves. He sipped from his second whisky that the barman had thoughtfully poured him.

The roll of paper was still lying on the bar. It was the placard that Tom had torn from the wall and on which he had seen the square face for the first time. At that time the man had still been alive, and Tom had torn off the placard as a sign that he was taking charge of this case. Tom unrolled the piece of paper to check how much he had earned today. A thousand dollars. Surely there would be a tip for the three others as well.

Tom compared the head on the placard with the head of the corpse. The square features of the face were so characteristic that the similarity was striking.

Tom would keep this placard, as a souvenir. It definitely belonged to him now. If he ever got to own a house, he would hang it up above the mantle-piece.

Tom was on his way again. On his way into the West. Yesterday at around the same time he had set out from home with his horse and his loaded gun. Six bullets had been in the revolver. He had fired each one of them, and each one of them had been deadly.

In the old days Tom had earned his ammunition by working on the little farm of his parents. The money had paid for the ammunition. Today it was the other way around: the bullets had earned him money, amazingly much money.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tom wanted to be one of the quiet ones.

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

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

Well, maybe Tom would change enough in one or two years to become unrecognizable.

A beard would grow, and he would gain in maturity. He had left his home-town as a boy, and he would come back as a man, and then he would have his revenge!

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

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

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

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

Thirdly, Tom wouldn't have been able to bear being the laughing stock of the whole town and to spend a night in the sheriff's jail. After that he would never have got the courage to seek out Davidson and to kill him. It would have set him back by several years, surely. To knock down the sheriff instead of killing him would have been a possibility too, of course. But what if Tom had failed and ended up just grappling with him?

The revolver was the only way to be dead sure.

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

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

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

So he tied up his horses in front of the saloon and went in to have a drink. He sat down at an empty table and let himself be served. Half a bottle of whisky, a glass and a cigar. He never had any cigars on him because he never smoked when he was alone.

For a while Tom just sat there, played with the smoke and sipped from his whisky. The glowing tip of the cigar poured out copious amounts of smoke, and this pleased Tom, this generous outpouring. It was like infinite sexual potency.

Tom pondered this. It was once again one of these thoughts that wasn't really his own, that just somehow slipped into his mind from another source, from his inner voice that was sometimes like a real voice, sometimes not, but always there, accompanying him somehow...

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tom was reminded of his father, and he felt sorry for the small man. Apart from his small body-size and his dirty looks he also seemed old and tired. He had surely chosen Tom as a partner for this game because Tom looked just as much like a tramp as he did himself

(he obviously hadn't seen Tom's boots...). Surely he just wanted a quiet, friendly game, but Tom had driven the stakes higher and higher.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tom calmly exhaled the smoke from his cigar.

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

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

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

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

Tom didn't move.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You won it" said the small man.

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

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

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

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

Today's adventure had ended well. He had made quite a bit of money once again and confirmed that he really deserved it by killing the other man. He was The Best. Nobody could take that from him – it was a fact!

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

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

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

Now the sheriff came into the saloon. "Who did the shooting?" he asked.

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

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

"Why did you shoot, stranger?"

"Self-defense."

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

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

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

“Here it says: no limit poker. He didn’t have to follow me so far if he didn’t want to.”
“You’re under arrest!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m above the court. So are you at this very moment. We’re above the court, and the court can’t help us. We’re above worldly matters and can’t appeal to them now. We’re just two men, facing each other. The rest of the world is meaningless for us right now. There is just one way to solve the problem between us, so that each one of us can return to his normal life - we let each other live. Or else we both die.”

A bitter-sweet smile appeared on Tom’s face. “You choose” he added as an afterthought.

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

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

Tom barked: “Barman, keep still or I’ll shoot the sheriff!”

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

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

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

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

There was no reaction from Tom.

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

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

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

The sheriff felt paralyzed. If only someone had called out: "Sheriff, give up. That man will kill you!" If only someone had released him from this situation! He almost felt as though he were floating above his own body. If only someone had called him back down! No one said anything. It seemed clear that the sheriff would die. The men were getting ready to shoot Tom as soon as the sheriff drew his gun. While Tom shot the sheriff, the threat his gun hand represented for everybody right now would be lifted for a split-second. Within that split-second, ten or twenty guns would be drawn, point at him and fire. Tom would die right after the sheriff.

The sheriff was supposed to sacrifice himself. But he couldn't. He felt paralyzed. Finally he slowly brought his hand to the buckle of his belt and unbuckled it. The belt with the holsters containing the two revolvers clattered to the floor.

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

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

Tom laid his hand on the grip of his revolver.

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

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

Tom slowly lifted his revolver out of its holster and held it against the sheriff's stomach.

Then he called out: "All you men, go home. I have something to discuss with the sheriff."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Tom didn't listen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wasn't that like an orgasm without end? Didn't it represent oversized sexual potency? A potency that overshadows even the will to survive?

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

Tom had assured everybody that he would shoot whoever moved. And all the while he had smoked, inhaling the smoke deeply, filling himself with it, then letting it out again...

and longingly watching it drift away, getting diluted in the air, flowing away and disappearing.

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

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

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

And why? Why this need for homogeneity?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And Tom had won!

That's how easy it was!

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

Tom woke up the next morning feeling relaxed and rested, in spite of all the thoughts that had coursed through his mind the evening before. He dressed up quickly, buckled the belt with the holster and slid his revolver into it.

Now he was ready. If he wanted to, he could leave the hotel-room now.

But something still disturbed him: it was his glittering feet. The sparkle of the diamonds on his boots didn't fit in with the general image he wanted to convey. He looked like a big, glistening angel of death, like the glorious avenger of God. Tom didn't want to be that. He wanted to be the lonely cowboy who doesn't want anything from anybody, who goes his own way and only kills you if you stop him from lighting his cigarette.

And yet it would be quite chic if sparkling diamonds suddenly and fleetingly appeared when the lonesome cowboy crosses his legs. People would see that there's more to this guy than meets the eye at first. They wouldn't know what else to expect and would thus treat Tom with respect.

On the other hand, if Tom showed his diamonds openly, everybody would see what there is to see. Everybody would guess that this man shows what he's got, which obviously also means that there isn't more to him than what he shows. In the end effect such a man gains LESS respect.

Whatever you show can never be as impressive as all the things people imagine when you leave them in doubt...

Tom started pulling his trousers out of the boots with the idea of covering the diamonds with the trouser legs. Then they would only show fleetingly when he crossed his legs.

But then he thought something else. Today he wasn't going to play the lonesome cowboy! Today he was going to seek out and kill a dangerous criminal! That doesn't fit in with the cowboy who goes his own way and only kills you if you disturb him. Today Tom was going to CHALLENGE another man. To do that you have to play with open cards. Making use of hidden weapons is not fair game, and your victory will never be truly respected in that case. Everybody knows that you couldn't play the same trick a second time, so they don't need to give you proper credit for it. They know it doesn't concern them anymore, and so in the end effect you're just a coward.

If you want to be impressive when you challenge someone, you have to play with open cards. Winning while playing with open cards, that's impressive!

So you see, you have to be careful – depending on whether you're the challenger or the challenged one, to maximize the respect you get you have to play with intentionally open cards or seemingly unintentionally hidden cards. It all depends.

And since Tom was going to be the challenger today, he had to show everything he had openly, including his sparkling boots. Sparkling boots mean that you're rich, meaning that you know how to get money, meaning that you're competent, meaning that you're a big-shot.

So Tom stuffed his trouser-legs back into the boots, leaving the sparkling diamonds exposed for everyone to see.

Now Tom was ready to leave the hotel-room.

He went down to the reception-desk. He showed the door-man the placard with the drawing of the man he was looking for. The door-man averted his eyes.

“Where does this man live?”

The door-man looked pained: “Please, sir...”

Tom blew smoke in his face and said: “Just tell me where he lives.”

The door-man looked upwards with scared eyes. “Number four...” he whispered.

Tom rolled up the placard and went back up the stairs. He knocked on door Nr. 4 and stepped aside, so as not to be filled with holes, just in case. It wouldn't have been necessary. The door opened. A girl appeared. A girl who did her best to look younger than she was, and Tom couldn't help being reminded of the whore back home. Tom didn't say anything, but smoke kept pouring from his cigar. He looked down at the girl and noticed that she wasn't wearing terribly much.

The girl just said “Sorry, the master isn't in” and tried to shut the door.

But just before the door fell to it was suddenly held back. A boot was trapped in it. The girl saw the glittering diamonds and froze with fright.

Now the door smashed open and the girl fell over. Tom was standing in the room, gun in hand.

It was too late: the outlaw was out of the window and running away on the roof. Tom heard the running steps on the shingles. Only the girl was in the room with him, sitting on the floor with a bleeding nose and sniffing.

Tom left the room and ran down the stairs and out into the street. The outlaw was jumping from roof to roof and was just landing on the street next to a horse. He mounted it in a hurry and galloped away.

The distance was too big for Tom's revolver.

Tom untied Bess and led her out into the street. He pulled out the long gun from under the saddle. He leaned the gun on the saddle and aimed very carefully.

The rider and his horse were far away and receding fast. But Tom aligned the sights with care. He wasn't going to miss. The dark silhouette of the rider and the horse were getting smaller and smaller, but they weren't moving to either side. They were moving in the exact same direction as Tom's gun was pointing. Tom's bullet would catch up with them. Tom gently squeezed the trigger.

The boom was tremendous, then there was utter stillness. The gun let out a thin column of smoke, just like Tom's cigar.

The receding silhouette of the rider on his horse hadn't moved, and yet Tom knew that he hadn't missed.

Ah, but now some movement could be perceived. The shape of the silhouette seemed to be shifting vaguely. The rider was obviously slipping off his horse. Then a dust-cloud rose up from the ground next to the horse. The rider had fallen off.

The horse slowed down and stopped.

Nothing moved where the dust-cloud had risen. The rider must be dead.

Wow! Tom was proud! One single shot!

He sucked on his cigar and was happy. He put away the long gun and kissed Bess on the nose. Then he mounted her and trotted to the body. He was prepared to draw his revolver in case it was necessary.

The bullet had hit the man exactly between the shoulder-blades. Excellent!

Tom lifted the body and dumped it on the horse with which the man had tried to flee and which was just standing near-by, all lost. Holding its reins he mounted on Bess again and rode to the sheriff's place, leading the other horse by the reins.

As the sheriff handed over the thousand dollars to Tom, he said: "That's what I earn in three years, you know. I would be a rich man now if you had shared the job with me!"

Tom answered coldly: "This guy was just waiting for someone who would dare to face him. You had plenty of time to do it before I arrived!"

Tom had never ridden any horse but Bess. It was an old dream of his to ride on a real big one. And, as things stood, he owned a really big horse, a good-natured gelding that he used as a pack-horse. He had a plodding gait and an easy-going manner, although the previous owner had warned him that he could get excited unexpectedly and bolt, so it was better not to let him unattended without tying him up.

Tom found him a bit dull, by far not as intelligent and sensitive as Bess. But he had noticed that even though he seemed so heavy and slow at a walking pace, he was quite a fast trotter. Surely he was comfortable for riding longer distances.

Tom wanted to try riding him today, so he put Bess' saddle on him. In spite of all the saddle bags, it looked small on the back of that big horse. Tom pulled down the left stirrup as far as it went, and yet he still barely managed to put in his left foot. He grabbed a tuft of the gelding's mane and pulled himself up. He didn't manage to throw his right leg over the bum of the horse at the first try and had to start again. The second time he energetically swung himself right into the saddle. Sitting up there he noticed that his foot didn't even touch the stirrup anymore. God, this was a tall horse!

Tom set the length of the stirrup, thinking to himself that he was really far off the ground. Then Tom tightened the saddle-belt. Not much tightening was needed. It had already been very tight when he put the saddle on in the first place, because Bess' belt barely fit around this big horse's chest.

Tom felt the large body of the horse between his legs. It gave him a strange sense of power, but also a bit of insecurity – it was a very different feeling from sitting on Bess' slim back!

Now he was ready to go. He pushed his heels into the belly of the horse and steered him onto the street. The gelding plodded along slowly.

Tom wanted to go faster. Tom wanted him to trot. He let his feet slip backwards along the body of the horse and pushed. The horse didn't react – he hadn't even felt anything.

Tom was slithering back and forth on the saddle and rubbing with his heels all over the belly of the horse. At the same time he was urgently lipping: "Trot! Trot now!" The horse didn't understand this. When he was ridden, he just did what he was forced to do. He wasn't used to having to decide things for himself, or to "guess" the intentions of his rider.

Tom should have worn spores. Then a quick, decided kick of his heels would have done the trick – the gelding would have started trotting automatically.

But Tom had taken off the silver spurs from his expensive boots right after buying them. He didn't want to snub his Bess, not even in a life or death situation. He was convinced he didn't need spores.

The gelding on which Tom was sitting now didn't understand his sloppy rider. Why was this human messing around so nervously? What the hell did he want?

Tom was gradually getting angry. He was jumping up and down in the saddle and hitting the bum of the horse with the flat of his hand.

The horse was getting irritated. He laid his ears back and suddenly reached back with his big head, as if he wanted to catch Tom's leg that was continuously working on his tummy. Tom tore the head back by the reins, which the horse didn't like either, having quite a tough mouth-piece.

Rider and horse were both getting nervous. The big gelding pranced about like an English thoroughbred, and Tom was hitting him with arms and legs like a drunkard warding off a swarm of angry bees.

Then the gelding rose up on his hind legs neighing loudly. Tom felt as though a volcano was erupting under him. He just barely managed to stay in the saddle by holding on desperately to the knob.

The gelding heavily fell back on his front legs and went off at a gallop. Tom tried to catch the rhythm of the gallop and to calm down the horse. But he didn't manage. The horse was changing from one gallop into the other continuously, zigzagging through the country-side. Tom lost his grip. He was bouncing around in the saddle. He pulled on the reins in despair, and the gelding didn't like that at all: he rose up on his hind legs once again, and this time Tom soared through the air.

He fell on the ground heavily and almost lost consciousness. He painfully started raising himself up again, hoping to catch the reins of the gelding before he ran away. He tried to talk to him soothingly, but no sound came. Besides the horse was gone.

Tom was staggering around undecidedly among the bushes, when he noticed a man on a horse behind himself. He turned around and recognized the small tramp from the saloon, the one with whom he had played poker. He was sitting on an old mule.

"I was just going to leave town when I saw you. Obviously you're having some trouble with your horse."

"Leave me alone!" said Tom and was surprised to hear his own voice.

"I can help you catch it again," said the tramp.

"How could you catch my expensive horse with your cheap mule?" said Tom, feeling stupid even as he said it.

"My mule's a good friend," the tramp assured him. "You don't express that in dollars, you know." Then, as an afterthought he added: "If your horse just means money to you, then what do you care? You've got tons more of it in your pocket!"

“That’s not the problem,” said Tom. “I’ve just been dishonoured and defeated by that damn horse. It threw me off!”

“I guess it doesn’t like you much,” said the tramp.

“I don’t think it even ever wondered about that,” said Tom, “It just doesn’t understand me. I guess I’m not clear enough!”

“Well,” said the tramp, “you were pretty clear the other day in the saloon.”

“Yeah, well the other day it wasn’t about working together or co-la-bo-rating, as they say. It was just about clearing the way, that’s all.”

“Clearing the way? What way? Are you going anywhere in particular?”

“I’m going west.”

“What do you want there?”

“I want to find the ocean. I want to dive in there.”

“Well, to get there you need a horse. But if you don’t get along with people, you won’t get along with horses either.”

“Who said I don’t get along with people?”

“Why, you just said something like that yourself. All people are good for is to clear the way for you.”

Tom looked down at his feet. For the second time today he was defeated. Why had he let himself be dragged into this silly conversation?

“Okay, you’re right,” he said. “I don’t get along with people. But I have another horse. She’s a shy mare. She’s nothing without me. And obviously I’m nothing without her. We’re friends like you and your mule.”

The tramp smiled and said: “Well, that’s fine then. You go west together. She carries you, and you lead her.”

He went on smiling quietly for himself and then added: “Well, I’ll go and get your other horse for you, the one with whom you don’t have such an intimate love-affair.”

And with these words he galloped off light-footedly.

Tom sat down on a grass-tuft and felt sick.

Soon the tramp came back, leading the now good-natured gelding by the reins.

“Here’s your runaway. Get back up on him. I’ll hold him for you, so that he won’t bolt again.”

Tom painfully clambered into the saddle once again. All his bones hurt him. Back in the saddle he shivered a little with dread. The tramp handed him the reins.

“What’s your name?” asked Tom.

“Just call me Jim,” said the tramp, “and yours?”

“Tom,” said Tom.

They rode back to town in silence. The big gelding willingly followed the mule. He had always been a good-natured, obedient horse. It had never been his intention to annoy Tom. But there were certain things he couldn’t bear, and somewhere in his placid field-horse brain he felt quite entitled not to have to bear them. He was good-natured and fair, and his master had to have those same qualities. That’s all he asked for.

When Bess saw Tom come towards her, she lifted her head and pointed her ears. The small boy, who was standing in front of her trying to feed her a piece of apple was forgotten immediately. Tom walked up to Bess and she rubbed her head against him. Tom patted her. With his left hand he patted her muscular cheeks and her lower jaw, and

with his right hand he patted the soft fur between her ears. Bess moved her head up and down, and sometimes Tom's face completely disappeared in her mane.

After a while the greeting was over. Tom laid his arm around Bess' neck and whispered little nothings in her ear. He said: "I'll never again ride anybody but you. You are my force, my propelling force. Without you I am nothing. We belong together."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"From my mother," answered Tom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tom let his thoughts wander dreamily. Life itself is like the prairie – always in a process of change, but still always remaining itself. Just like the surface of a lake – never quite

still, always wrinkled by little wavelets, and still always true to itself. You can swim and splash in it – the surface always finds its way back to its placid but never quite immobile self.

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

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

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

“Not so fast! My mule can't keep up!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So you felt unworthy of him, then?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When you overlook something willfully, that’s contempt. You see that someone else is successful with something, but you refuse to acknowledge it. You pretend to yourself and to everyone else that this person’s success is only temporary and doesn’t deserve to be acknowledged. You pretend that this person’s success is undeserved, due only to luck, and thus temporary, and thus not worthy of acknowledgement.

You do that out of jealousy, perhaps, but some people will hear you. Some people will start to have doubts. In some way you undermine the success of the successful ones.

That’s contempt.

Tom agreed. His parents despised the Davidsons because of the grandiose façade of their shop, behind which the actual building was quite ordinary. They claimed loudly that the success of the Davidsons was due only to this façade. One day others would realize too, and the Davidsons’ success would collapse! The Millers, in their infinite wisdom (or rather their infinite contempt), knew this was going to happen sooner or later, so they ignored the Davidsons’ success already now. They demonstratively lived as though the Davidsons didn’t exist, because it was below them to acknowledge the Davidsons’ passing existence. That’s what you call contempt.

Except that it was fake. Maybe contempt is always fake. To despise means to overlook willfully, but that’s a contradiction in terms - you cannot overlook something willfully. You can only really overlook something when you really didn’t see it...

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

Contempt, that’s what’s fake!

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

So the Millers were locked out of the town-life, and they ascribed it to their being poor, which they soon saw as a special kind of virtue. Anybody less poor had to be a cheat, especially the Davidsons! They despised the Davidsons so openly that the Davidsons had to react in some way. The reaction was to despise the Millers in return.

The Davidsons lived as though the Millers and their nasty remarks didn't exist at all. The Millers' nastiness was meaningless because they were so poor that they would come begging for the crumbs of the family-table sooner or later anyway.

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

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

"Maybe I despised Jack after all," said Tom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tom's softness didn't start with the whip – he was quite incapable of formulating a clear order. Luckily he had a sensitive mare who guessed her master's wishes by herself. But Tom had had to realize that you couldn't ride all horses with this gentle method. His big gelding was a point in the matter. He was quite willing, but he needed clarity. He couldn't bear gentle softies. Surely Jack's stallion was the same.

When the stallion obeyed his master, it wasn't, as Tom liked to think, because he had been abased. No, it was a kind of deal. Jack was the boss. He had triumphed over the horse in a way that the horse could understand, in a way that one horse triumphs over another in wildlife too. The defeated horse can always run away, set off on its own, join another herd. Or it can give in to the victor, bow to him and in exchange enjoy the orderly life that he provides. The stallion had decided to accept Jack as his boss. When Jack hit him, it was, perhaps, because he had bucked – that's justice. If Jack had been an altogether unfair boss, perhaps the stallion would have decided, one day, to escape. Or he would have stopped being obedient, until he would have had to be gotten rid of. Such things happen to horses. It had undoubtedly happened to Bess whose previous owner had ruined her character, so much so that she had become practically useless as a horse, until Tom had tamed her again.

If the stallion had ever tried to bite Jack, the whip would have lashed out – that's all. If Bess had ever tried to bite Tom, he would have buried his head in her mane and cried. A high-spirited animal couldn't bear such a reaction. A high-spirited animal doesn't want every devilment on his part to be a huge, disruptive catastrophe. A high-spirited animal needs his limits to be shown to him in a clear and even way, with the whip when

necessary. Little devilments mustn't be allowed to disrupt his whole life, else he'll end up not daring to breathe anymore, or rather he'll just rebel and escape! Little devilments must be dealt with in a stride, and that's how Jack had trained his wild stallion, successfully!

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

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

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

"Sure," said Jim, staring ahead.

"And how was it?"

"How should it have been?"

"I don't know, can't you describe it?"

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

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

Yes, he was a cripple...

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

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

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

"How was it the first time?"

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

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

Tom suddenly felt so damn lonely!

"Tell me more..." he said.

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

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

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

“I tried...” said Tom.

Now it was Jim’s turn not to get it: “What do you mean? It... it didn’t work, or what?” Surely it occurs to almost every boy doing it the first time that it might just, you know, suddenly not work... But Jim had never heard of such a thing happening for real.

“No, it didn’t,” said Tom.

“And when you’re alone?” asked Jim.

“Then it works,” said Tom.

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

“You think I should try again?”

Jim had to think. Finally he said: “I don’t know. I guess not just like that, because you’ll be even more nervous, knowing that it didn’t work last time, and it will be guaranteed not to work. No, I guess you shouldn’t go and try it. Rather, it should happen to you somehow, when you’re not prepared, when you don’t have time to be nervous. I don’t know. Truth is, I don’t like to think about it, about it possibly not working, I mean. Maybe no man does. It... I mean, you... you just hope it will never happen to you, and then it doesn’t, but if you think about it, then it might, so you rather don’t think about it. I don’t know what to tell you...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What for?” asked Tom.

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

Tom had always thought that the missing ingredient to be instantly released of his sexual mania was a girl. Inexplicably he had failed with the whore he had gone to see in his home town. Well, now he gradually began to realize that it’s just really not that simple.

Girls are easy to get (there was enough money in Tom's pockets to pay for a staggering four hundred whores) – that's not the real problem.

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

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

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

Was that really Tom's dream?

On some level it was. Not really consciously. But it was more or less what his parents had done, wasn't it? Of course they had done it all wrong. He would do it better, much better. But he would still do it. It belongs to the natural order of things. It wasn't so much that he imagined all these things. It was rather that he didn't imagine anything else! And all this has to be in there somewhere. In there when you sleep with someone. You can't fake it. A whore can't fake such a dream for you, because if she did, that would cost her so much emotional energy that she would be forced to make the most out of it afterwards, make it worth its while, which means she would end up wanting it for REAL. And if she wants it for real, then she's not faking it anymore, is she? So in actual fact you just can't fake it.

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

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

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

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

"Is she poor?"

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

"What about your father?" asked Tom harmlessly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But..." Tom began.

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

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

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

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

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

Tom pondered this for a while in silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Explain," said Tom.

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

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

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

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

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

“And if I get shot myself?”

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

“I don’t see any way out of this conundrum,” said Tom.

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

“Draw first?” asked Tom.

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

“And then?” asked Tom.

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

Tom said: “I don’t know. All this sounds a bit contrived.” Then he was silent for a while, and then he added: “But maybe you’re still right somewhere deep down. I’m looking for a father. All the men I’ve known so far just lived their lives without caring about me. When I tried to get their attention, they just turned away, brushed me off. Or indeed tried to shoot me down, except that then I shot them instead. No man was ever patient with me. When I confront men, maybe deep down it’s just a desire to be noticed by them. Maybe I’d like them to take me along on their manly ways.”

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

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

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

“What should I do, then?” asked Tom.

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

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

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

You can't just shoot a whole gang of killers. Not in one go anyway. But you can join the gang and destroy it from within. And maybe learn a lot of things in the process.

Tom and Jim reached the town in the evening. Tom went straight to the sheriff's office and asked where he could find some outlaws to shoot. The sheriff answered matter-of-factly that Nacho and three of his men were in the saloon. Nacho was worth ten thousand dollars.

Ten thousand!

Tom and Jim walked to the saloon, leading their horses by the reins.

"I'll get him!" said Tom.

"Hey," said Jim, "but he's worth ten thousand – he has to be a really great outlaw!"

"He won't be my first!" said Tom with conviction.

"But other times they were on their own," said Jim.

"No, they weren't," said Tom.

Jim didn't know what to say anymore. Under a thousand dollars an outlaw is still an ordinary man, even if he keeps a whole town under his spell. If your head is worth more than a thousand dollars, you've got to be a legendary figure. But ten thousand! That's only for historic outlaws, the kind you would learn about in history books a hundred years from now!

And Tom thought he was just going to wipe out such a historic figure! If he managed, he would make it into the history books himself! And if he failed he would just be one of the countless, anonymous victims of the famous ten-thousand-dollar outlaw...

As Tom came to the saloon, he made a plan. The saloon stood at the end of a row of houses and had two big windows on one side. Tom would try to talk to one of the outlaws in front of one of those windows, away from the others. As soon as he had shot the outlaw, he would flee through the window. If nobody recognized him after that, he could repeat the maneuver, and that's how he would kill one outlaw after the other, till he had shot the whole gang.

His idea was that Jim would stand at the entrance with the long gun and intervene if necessary.

Tom led Bess to the first of the big windows. Bess had to stand with her bum against the wall. Instead of tying her up, Tom rolled the reins around the saddle-knob. He stayed with her a little while and patted her spotted nose. She pushed her soft, warm snout against his hand.

When Tom left she knew that something was still going to happen, else he would have loosened the saddle. She knew he would be back in a little moment and that they would ride on. Probably he would bring her a carrot. That's what he usually did when he went into a shop. So Bess stayed there with her bum pointing to the window and waited for her carrot.

Tom pushed his way through the swinging doors of the saloon. Jim waited a little moment and then followed him. Jim didn't feel comfortable. He was afraid of what he might have to do. He told himself that he just felt awkward because he had come into the saloon carrying a long gun and was now standing at the entrance like an idiot, as if he didn't dare to go to sit at one of the tables. He put himself in a corner holding the gun

behind himself. Luckily nobody noticed him in the smoky room. He could watch what Tom was doing and told himself that Tom was really very courageous!

Tom spotted the four outlaws straight away. Two of them were standing at the bar, and they had much more space for their elbows than any of the other drinkers, even though the saloon was pretty crowded at this time of day. Two more were sitting at a table next to one of the two side-windows, the one behind which Bess was waiting.

Those two sitting at the table looked like pirates. One of them, the “captain”, had a glass of whisky in front of himself, the other, his body-guard maybe, was drinking from a big jug of beer. Why did Tom think of pirates? Because of the extravagant clothes, of course! Pirates, spending most of their time amongst each other unless they happen to be attacking another ship, can allow themselves to dress as they like.

The “captain” was surely Nacho in person. He had an unkempt beard like all his other men too, but he wore the nicest clothes, like a sumptuous uniform. As Tom got closer, he saw that they were worn and dirty. But they still had a theatrical effect.

Nacho’s eyes were extraordinary– deep and dark and piercing. His mouth was twisted into the most absurd shape, the shape of a shy, expectant smile. Otherwise the authority radiating from him was like a sour stench, and his brow showed fierce determination.

The child-like twist of his mouth under his piercing, pitiless eyes, was scary. Something as moody as a small child, and yet with the power and authority of a grown man – what can be scarier than that?

Tom walked up to the table with a few quick strides and neatly spat right into the jug of beer.

Nacho’s body-guard stood up violently, upsetting the chair on which he had been sitting. His hands were at the buckle of his belt, but he hadn’t drawn his revolver. He was a big rock of a man, wearing a long, heavy coat that gave him the shape of a bell. He wore the belt with his revolver over the coat. His face was stone-hard and scarred.

Tom was ready to shoot him. He estimated the angle his gun would have to travel to hit the second man, Nacho.

Nacho vaguely lifted up his head and ever so slightly shook it in his body-guard’s direction. The body-guard obediently stayed still.

Now Nacho turned to Tom. He laid down his cards and said: „Would you like to play?“ There was fake embarrassment in his voice, thinly, very thinly veiling the sinister threat contained in the question.

To his horror Tom saw that the body-guard was slowly pulling out knives and guns from his belt and putting them on the table.

Nacho comfortably leaned back in his chair and said with fake friendliness: “Well, my friend, let’s see how well you do in the continuation of this game. Take off your belt!”

Tom heard his inner voice saying: just draw your gun and shoot them! It’s dead-easy, only Nacho is armed!

But somehow he couldn’t.

He had the same indescribable feeling as that time long ago, when he was standing in underwear in front of the whore. It was the same kind of situation as then. He had somehow got entangled in something, and although he felt it wasn’t going the way he wanted, he still kept going forward instead of trying to disentangle himself.

All he would have had to do then was to tell the whore that she wasn't quite how he had imagined her and leave. All he had to do now was draw the gun and shoot the two outlaws!

His hand went to the buckle of his belt.

"Draw the gun! Draw the gun, damn you!" his inner voice screamed.

And yet he didn't.

He loosened the buckle and the belt with the revolver fell to the floor.

Exactly the same action as the one he had performed in the stuffy room of the whore, when he had taken off his underwear.

What for? What the hell for? He wasn't really going to beat up Nacho's body-guard, was he? He was just going to get beaten up himself!

The bell-shaped body-guard was standing in front of him, looking huge in his heavy coat. His face was rather expressionless, but his eyes shone with a kind of greed.

Tom felt tiny and fragile.

The big man came closer. A kind of smile was starting to twist his mouth.

Tom felt his knees getting soft. He looked desperately around himself. There was the big man coming closer and Nacho, calmly smoking a cigarette, watching.

Perhaps Tom could have dived to the floor, grabbed his gun and shot Nacho, who wasn't ready for that, and then the body-guard whose gun was on the table – he wouldn't get it into his hand fast enough either.

But Tom didn't try it. This was supposed to be a fist-fight, not a gun-fight. He strongly felt he couldn't just break the rules.

Now the big man was standing directly in front of Tom and was going to slam into him.

But Tom quickly dodged him and hurled himself towards the window.

He threw himself into it with all his might, closing his eyes and pulling his arms against his body.

There was an explosion-like clink of glass, so that his ears almost burst, but he got through and landed on Bess' back.

He threw his arms around her neck and she galloped off in a fright. But soon she felt Tom's body adapting to the rhythm of hers, and she relaxed.

Tom wanted to leave the town, just like this, in the middle of the night, leaving behind his new friend Jim, his pack-horse with all the stuff it carried, and above all his gun that he had left in the saloon!

The thought of not even having his revolver with him made him slow down.

He wasn't just going to flee, like that previous time when he had left his home-town in a big hurry, was he? Not without his revolver!

Tom turned Bess around and rode back into town.

He met Jim in front of the hotel. Jim said: "Ah, here you are! You really gave me a fright! Why didn't you just shoot those guys? What the hell were you thinking when you dropped your gun?"

"I don't know," said Tom.

"Surely you weren't going to beat up The Boy!" said Jim.

"The Boy?" asked Tom.

"That's what they call him. Nacho's first lieutenant or whatever he is."

"He doesn't much look like a boy to me," said Tom.

“Yeah,” said Jim, “so why didn’t you just shoot him?”

“I couldn’t,” said Tom, “I couldn’t just do it in cold blood.”

“Come on, it would hardly have been cold blood!” said Jim.

“Yes it would,” said Tom, “Boy was unarmed.”

“The hell he was,” said Jim.

“Maybe it has something to do with what we discussed on our ride here,” said Tom.

“Yes, I see... Maybe...” said Jim. “Anyway, now you know in what sense some people are stronger than you!”

“Where are the outlaws now?” asked Tom.

“They left town,” said Jim, “and they left behind your revolver. I got it for you.”

“Thanks,” said Tom, and they led the horses into the stable.

So Tom could sleep tonight – the outlaws were gone!

But Tom still didn’t understand why they hadn’t just tried to shoot him. Why this whole matter of dropping guns? He asked Jim what he thought about it.

Jim said: “Obviously they don’t want to draw too much attention. That means they’re planning something important, something concerning this town. If we stay here, we’ll surely see more of them!”

After having brushed down their horses, Tom and Jim went to their rooms.

Tom didn’t sleep very well. He had crazy dreams. He woke up early in the morning for no particular reason. He had been dreaming something, something uncomfortable. The atmosphere of the dream was still all around him. He tried to remember what it was, but he couldn’t. Thinking about it just seemed to have erased it!

With a vague feeling of dissatisfaction at having left something unfinished, he stood up and drank a mouthful of water from the jug in his room.

It was dawn outside. Tom saw the milky light behind the curtains. He pulled them aside and looked out into the quiet street. He saw the saloon, a group of miscellaneous houses and the bank. The bank was a flat building made of stone, standing all alone on a kind of platform that was also made of stone. Two guards were walking around on the platform. Tom counted the number of seconds they needed to walk around the whole building.

About thirty. Tom wondered if they really just walked round and round the whole night. Surely they would sit down to smoke a cigarette in the small hours, when it wasn’t so likely anymore that their boss would turn up to see what they were doing!

Tom was just wondering how best to rob such a bank, when the door to his room suddenly opened!

Tom’s hand shot down to his hip, where his revolver should have been, and he turned around. Jim came into the room.

He was all dressed and didn’t even look sleepy. “Aren’t you sleeping?” Tom asked, surprised.

“I was watching the street from my window,” answered Jim. Without waiting for Tom’s answer he continued: “Get dressed quickly and go out. Your good friend The Boy is out there, hiding in the shadow at the corner of the hotel. Talk to him. Behave naïvely. If necessary, shoot him. But I think it won’t be necessary. He will behave himself. He’s on a kind of mission for the gang and can’t afford to get involved in a gun-fight with you! Try to tag along with him. Perhaps he’ll take you to their hide-out!”

“But...” said Tom as Jim was already pushing him out of the room.

Tom quietly opened the hotel-door and slipped out into the dark street. He saw a horse standing in the shadows. Behind it there was a man. Yes, it was The Boy all right! Tom cautiously sneaked up to him. Then he gathered up all the courage he could muster, stepped into the light and walked up to the outlaw openly. The man was lost in thought, it seemed. Actually he was counting.

“... twenty-one, twenty-two...” he mumbled. He was probably counting the steps of the patrol, just as Tom had done a little while ago!

Tom walked right up to him and said: “Good evening!”

The man just said “Thanks” and went on counting. It had almost sounded friendly.

When he had finished, he suddenly lowered his eyes and looked down at Tom.

“Who are you? What do you want?” His voice had turned nasty, especially compared to the almost sympathetic mumble of a moment ago.

Tom answered straight out: “I wanted to say sorry. For the beer I spat into.”

“How did you know I’d be here?” asked The Boy.

“Well, you’re preparing the bank-robbery, aren’t you?” said Tom.

The man’s eyes became wild. Perhaps he was going to knock down Tom. But this time Tom was ready to shoot him. There wasn’t going to be any game of taking off the belts this time! This man was worth about a thousand, dead or alive.

Finally the colossus calmed down.

“You wana take part?” he asked matter-of-factly.

“Oh yes!” said Tom with conviction.

“Then get your horse and come along!” said the man and got on his own horse.

Tom went to fetch Bess in the stable, quickly saddled her and led her out. He gave her a little bit of sugar to wake her up and mounted her.

He followed The Boy till the end of the town. There The Boy turned around and said: “Go ahead!”

Tom knew perfectly well what that meant. As soon as they were far enough from the town he would be shot in the back.

Naïvely he said: “But I don’t know the way!”

The fat giant had to accept this argument and led the way in silence. He obviously didn’t consider Tom especially dangerous. He would be gotten rid of later. Just as long as he wasn’t left loose – he sure knew too much!

After a long ride the two men arrived at a ruined church standing all forlorn in the landscape. Not much could be seen of the remains of the settling it had once belonged to. Just some stone-walls here and there forming partitions which must once have been the foundations of houses. The Boy drew his revolver and shot at the bell in the church-tower. Tom was surprised that the bell had been left hanging when the church was abandoned... It was surreal, somehow. The shot echoed in the heavy midday-air and the bell clanged sadly.

The heavy door of the church opened up and a man - quite an ordinary one it seemed to Tom, not at all an extravagantly dressed pirate like the ones who had been in the saloon - waved to The Boy and to Tom to come closer. They got off their horses and led them right into the church!

As Tom’s eyes got used to the dim light inside, he saw that a corner of the church had been laid out with straw for the horses. In another corner Nacho and his men were

dozing, or rather had been dozing, because now they were awake, leaning their heads on their elbows.

Tom and The Boy left their horses at the feeding trough and walked up to the men.

“I’m bringing a new recruit,” said The Boy.

“I see,” said Nacho and didn’t seem especially interested. “What about the patrol?”

“I counted till thirty,” said The Boy. “Should be possible.”

Nacho stood up and theatrically looked around at his men, like a spoilt child expecting to be patted on the head. As if by chance his glistening dark eyes reached Tom. And as if they were surprised to see him here, they stayed stuck on him.

“What does our new friend say?” he asked sweetly.

Tom was nervous. But he had his gun with him. Yes, it was there in its holster at his hip! Nacho was just a wild animal. There are ways to deal with those. There’s a technique. No need to be nervous!

So Tom forced himself to stare right back at Nacho. He imagined the little hole a bullet from his gun would open up in Nacho’s brow. A little hole that would be smeared shut with blood straight away. Then Nacho’s eyes turning upwards till you would see only the whites of them, and then Nacho falling over backwards...

Tom saw all this clearly in front of his inner eye, and he became dead-calm.

He got a cigar and a match from his breast-pocket. He took his time. He put the cigar in his mouth and lit the match by rubbing it against his thumb, holding it between his index and his middle finger. He held the flame against the tip of his cigar with great care.

Holding the match dead-still, he sucked the flame into the cigar. When he had finally exhaled the first swaths of smoke, he answered: “Any bank can be robbed if you go about it methodically.”

Nacho gave him a slow, timid smile like a small child who has just been praised, but none of his men would have wanted to be in Tom’s place!

“That’s just how it is!” he said in a self-pleased tone, but then his voice and expression changed abruptly.

“Tomorrow we rob the bank in Anthony,” he said to all present, and it wasn’t a proposition. It was an order.

“We hit them in the early morning hours. You all know your jobs. Furthermore, three of you will leave tonight and attack the small bank in Earlham, drawing away the posse from Anthony. Ned, Ted...” (he spat out the two names) “and...”

Nacho turned to Tom. His voice became sugar-sweet, and he smiled with swollen lips, as if he were dying for a kiss.

“...and you, my little friend!”

Tom lifted his eyes from his cigar and mumbled: “Name’s Tom.”

The fun was over. Nacho was serious again.

“The three of you are leaving tonight to attack the bank of Earlham. Shoot, kill, as much as you can!”

Tom found a spot for himself at the wall from which he could keep an eye on all the others. They were quiet. It was still too early for lunch. They were talking softly or dozing. Tom watched the horses sniffing at each other. They were calm and seemed contented. It was soothing to watch them.

The horses knew that even a brute wouldn't just suddenly start tormenting them if they did their work as was expected of them. In the same sense, Tom knew he wouldn't suddenly be murdered either. Nacho had found some use for him, even if just as some kind of dummy. As long as he didn't try to escape or do some other crazy thing, he would be left to live.

One of the horses lifted its tail and dropped big balls, in which some straw-stalks were still clearly visible, onto the church-floor. Tom wondered how it was possible that these elegant, high-legged animals with their long, slender heads, their wise eyes and their shiny fur could be nothing more than digesting machines like he was one himself. Even these proud animals had to admit, from time to time, that they couldn't just keep everything inside them that they had eaten up so matter-of-factly. The biggest part of what they had swallowed, seemingly so irrevocably, had to be given back to nature. Even these noble steeds had no real sway over matter. Behind their long, beautiful tail there was a hole – an asshole, to be precise – out of which stuff kept falling that they hadn't been able neither to keep nor to destroy. It had to be given back.

Tom looked at the outlaws and thought to himself that every single one of them had an asshole too, and that each one had to give back to nature most of what he devoured during their undoubtedly gruesome feasts. But unlike the horses, the outlaws surely went to hide when they had to stool. They were human, after all. They ate together, but they didn't stool together. That was a weakness that each one more or less kept hidden from the others.

Tom's eyes wandered on to the many statues of clay that were still standing around in the abandoned church. Some of them were being used as hat-stands. There were pious shepherds dressed in long robes, with sandals and a shepherd's crook. There were female angels too, with beautiful and sad faces.

You would have liked to embrace them, to hold their head against your chest. But you couldn't do that, because they had mighty wings on their back. There was no way your arms could have reached all the way around them.

Their hands were joined together in prayer, and their face was looking up into the sky, begging and yearning simultaneously. Unfortunately you couldn't see the eyes, because they were hidden under a cowboy-hat...

The angel had come to the bad men to save their souls. But the bad men didn't understand. They thought it was a hat-stand. They pretended not to see any other use in these angels. They put their hats on them to show their contempt.

Contempt means willfully overlooking certain facts whose meaning you refuse to acknowledge. If the bad men had REALLY overlooked the facts (rather than doing it willfully), they would have put their hats somewhere else. There were certainly other, more obvious places where hats could have been put in this church.

Tom thought to himself that these outlaws couldn't be as strong as they wanted to seem if they couldn't even bear the sight of the pious eyes of an angel and felt the need to cover them with a hat.

Tom was just thinking that the angel, if she has a mouth, must surely have an anus as well. But the big wings on her back would hinder you from ever getting close enough to find out. The anus of an angel can't have any meaning for you, because you're never going to approach it.

Now Tom's eyes found a small, genderless cherub with short wings. He was short-limbed like a small child and had curly hair. He was holding some kind of cloth in front of himself, conveniently hiding his genitals. But his behind wasn't hidden, and the two rounded buttocks had been modeled quite distinctly.

This one definitely must have an anus between those buttocks of his, mustn't he? So angels definitely have anuses too, but either they are too young, or they have such big wings, that it becomes meaningless to us human beings.

But they are sufficiently similar to us mortals to be able to understand us. Surely that's the point of angels.

It got time for lunch. A big fire was lit in front of a window without glass. Half a pig was skewered over it. After a while the still somewhat reddish meat was shared out. Nacho in person threw Tom a piece of ham and a piece of old bread. Wine was served in old beer-jugs. It had a rotten smell. Tom later got a headache from it.

The tough, smoke-laden meat wasn't appetizing, and the dry bread stayed stuck in his throat. The others seemed to enjoy their meal, though. Since Nacho was laughing and seemed in a good mood, they allowed themselves to become pretty loud too. The meal turned into a feast, and the wine was passed around generously.

The feast was still in full swing when Nacho suddenly turned silent. The men around him turned silent too, because when Nacho was quiet, everybody had to be quiet. Not everyone noticed the change, though, and Nacho had to call out: "Silence!"

The laughter and talking died off instantly. A whole minute passed in utter silence. Nacho looked at his men, one after the other, his chin thrust forward and his eyes full of fake pity and sorrow. His men knew that look – it meant he could turn sadistic in the blink of an eye.

After a long while he turned to his jug and took a rather loud gulp.

Hereby he had broken the silence at last – he would get to the point now.

With the jug still touching his lips he said: "Ned, Ted and Tom, it's time for you to head to Earlham!"

Ned and Ted stood up and saddled their horses. Tom took a bit longer to stand up from the corner where he had been sitting or lying for the last few hours. He lifted up his saddle that he had used as a pillow and carried it over to Bess. Ned and Ted had practically thrown their saddles onto their horses. Tom put his on Bess gently and shifted it into position with care, as he had learned from his school-mate long ago. Ted and Ned jumped on their horses and rode out of the church. Tom followed them.

After a few hours of trotting, Ned decided it was time for a break. They stopped, unsaddled the horses, found some wood and lit a small fire. Tom filled the rusty pot with fresh water and placed it onto the fire.

Then he stopped caring about the two men and their coffee. He rather watched the horses who were grazing in their usual carefree manner.

Tom wasn't carefree. He was wondering what the day held in store for him. He didn't have any clear idea yet how he would finish off Nacho and his gang. He had even less of an idea how he would stop the two bank-robberies, and whether he really wanted to stop them. He had heard that the bank of Anthony held more than half a million dollars. How would it feel to plunge his hands into half a million dollars?

On the other hand, what could he have done with that much money? He couldn't have spent it all in one go. That would have been more than suspicious – it would have been a

glaring confession to the robbery! So he would have had to spend it in small amounts, but he wondered whether the life of a human being was really long enough to spend half a million dollars unsuspectingly...

For the first time Tom also wondered what Nacho and his gang might want to do with the money. Nacho's face was known to everyone – how would he ever get a chance to pay for anything honestly, except maybe occasionally for whisky in a saloon?

Besides, Tom couldn't picture Nacho as a rich rancher and father of a large family.

Nacho was an outlaw all the way through. He would never want to live on a farm with countless helping hands, a pretty wife and many nice children – that just wouldn't fit his style. He would always have other dreams, criminal dreams. Money, money, money... - just what could possibly be the point of it in Nacho's case Tom couldn't imagine!

Maybe it wasn't really about the money. Maybe it was about rising to the challenge and demonstrating power!

And then what? What the hell do you do with all that power? Power, just like money, allows you to reach goals. But if you don't have any goals, then it all becomes rather useless.

Maybe Nacho had once had the same dreams of a fulfilled life as everyone else. A good job from which to make a decent living and a nice family. Deep down that's all there is to a fulfilled life. It's just strange that for some people it seems so hard to get.

Nacho hadn't been able to get it, obviously. Maybe he didn't even know that it would have been the right thing for him. Maybe he was lost.

Power is always a good thing, because it allows you to do other things that you really want. So when Nacho got some power he was happy. Except that he didn't know what to do with it, since he didn't know what the other things were that he really wanted.

Since gaining power had once given him some satisfaction, he went on to gain some more. It was better than doing nothing anyway. So then he went on to gain yet more. It was never enough, since he still never got as far as to know what to do with it. So he just went on getting more of it! For ever! It had become an addiction!

Until one day someone like Tom would come along and kill him.

Deep down this life couldn't be very fulfilling for poor Nacho. But standing still would have been no option either. As long as there's movement in your life, there's at least a hope of change (and thus of betterment). Standing still means that either you've accepted the situation as it is, or you've given up hope.

Maybe Nacho knew, deep down, that he was never going to get anywhere. He was a great outlaw, and all he could do was to become a yet greater outlaw, or go to prison or be hanged. It wasn't really an option anymore that he would ever become a decent, honest farmer or anything like that, was it? But the wilder his life was, the less chance there was of thinking about it too much. And wildness means continuous movement, continuous change, and thus continuous hope, even if it's not really a real hope in this case...

Maybe Tom was just as lost as Nacho, but he decided here and now never to fall in the same trap as Nacho. He would keep his hands off the money of the bank of Anthony!

If you invest too much in a certain path, you end up becoming unable to follow any other. Tom didn't want to make that mistake.

He was just wondering whether maybe his parents had made exactly this mistake by seeing their poverty as a kind of virtue ("at least we're honest, not like certain other people!") instead of fighting it, when he heard Ted's voice behind himself:

“Don’t you want any coffee?”

Tom turned around slowly. “Sure I want some!” he mumbled.

He sullenly sat down with his two comrades. Ted handed him a hot tin-cup. Tom took a few sips with long pauses in between.

Nobody spoke.

After a little while Ned stood up and walked away a few steps into the bushes. He left behind his belt with his guns. He undoubtedly had a little private business to attend to. But his absence seemed to have a magical effect on Ted. He became talkative.

“How did you join up with Nacho’s gang?” he asked Tom.

“Well,” said Tom, “I challenged The Boy. But he didn’t want to draw attention, so we didn’t fight it out. He took me along instead.”

Ted was flabbergasted.

“And you?” asked Tom. “What are you doing with these guys?”

Ted didn’t feel like answering. He was quite new to the gang himself, and he wasn’t really sure he wanted to stay part of it. But he didn’t know an easy way out.

Instead of answering Tom’s question, he called out: “You challenged The Boy?! I don’t think you’ll live long! Why on Earth did you do that?”

“Well,” said Tom and scratched his elbow, “I wanted to shoot him and Nacho and cash in. They’re worth a fair amount of money, I’m told.”

“If that were so easy, someone would have done it before you,” said Ted.

“Someone has to be first,” said Tom. “You’ll see, I’ll turn you all in, the whole lot of you.”

Tom said this so matter-of-factly that Ted didn’t quite understand what he meant. It wasn’t much of a joke, and yet, what else could it be?

In the end Ted pretended to take Tom seriously and said: “Nacho is kind of famous, you know. Not like you. Nobody ever heard of you.”

“They will, in time,” said Tom calmly.

“Why would they?” asked Ted.

“Because,” said Tom, “turning in a whole gang of killers, one as famous as Nacho and his friends, isn’t an everyday thing.”

He said this so damn calmly once again. If it was all a joke, it really wasn’t all that entertaining. What’s the point of a joke that isn’t entertaining? Ted was getting a bit tired of this, and slightly annoyed too.

“Look,” Ted finally said, “you wouldn’t even be able to beat me in a duel, let alone The Boy or Nacho!”

“Let’s bet on it,” said Tom.

“What do you want to bet with?” asked Ted, “what do I get if I kill you?”

Tom put his hand in his saddle-bag and got out a fistful of dollars.

“You get this,” he said dryly.

Ted’s pupils became huge, then they contracted and became very small.

Tom heard some rustling sound behind Ted. Ned was coming back.

Tom quickly put away his money.

Ned appeared from between the bushes and Ted pulled his gun. Tom’s left hand was still in the saddle-bag, but his right sprang forward with his own gun, cocked and ready to shoot.

But that wouldn't have been necessary, because Ted had turned around and shot Ned rather than Tom.

The sudden bang was still ringing in Tom's ears when Ned's lifeless body came crashing down almost on top of them, the head plunging into the glowing embers of the fire.

Ted looked over to Tom and was a bit surprised to see that Tom was holding his gun in hand firmly pointed at Ted's chest.

Tom said quite calmly, even though there was unmistakably some reproach in his voice: "You just shot an unarmed man!"

"In a fair fight even the two of us together would never have been able to beat him," said Ted.

"Now I won't ever be able to prove you wrong, will I? Why did you do that?" said Tom. "I've just decided, here and now, to leave Nacho's gang," said Ted, "I'll be satisfied with half of your dollars!"

Tom didn't answer at first. Then he said: "You can't have half – either the whole lot or nothing!"

"Look," said Ted, "I just did you a good turn – now you're free! There's no other way you could've gotten away alive from this adventure!"

Tom said: "Look Ted, I can see that you think I'm dreadfully naïve. I guess you need a practical demonstration. So let's cut through the bullshit, okay?"

"What do you mean?" asked Ted, and now a glimmer of doubt came up in his mind.

"How much are you worth?" asked Tom.

"I don't have any money on me," said Ted.

"If I turn you in, I mean," said Tom.

"I don't know whether I'm even wanted yet..." said Ted.

"Do you want to find out, or should I rather turn you in dead?" asked Tom.

Ted said: "Look Tom, enough is enough. I guess you were right about one thing – let's cut through the bullshit!"

They both stood up. Tom slowly lowered his hand with the gun. Ted's gun-hand did the same, slowly.

Tom's eyes weren't looking into Ted's eyes anymore. He was not looking at Ted as a person anymore, but rather as an object to be looked at whole. A fleeting thought crossed Ted's mind: being stared at like this, that's how a strip-tease dancer must feel...

Tom dropped his gun into its holster. Ted did the same.

Tom's right hand was hanging next to the holster, relaxed.

Ted began to understand that he had probably badly underestimated Tom. Tom had seemed like such an ordinary young lad. Ted had thought that Tom was badly out of his depth in Nacho's gang and that he was just hoping to bluff his way through, as inexperienced young men sometimes try to do.

Now he saw that perhaps he had been wrong. Very wrong. Tom was a killer. Maybe he would really beat The Boy, and Nacho, and all the others...

Ted's arm was tense, his hand nervously hovering above the holster. Ted's eyes were looking at Tom's face, hoping to see a glimmer of weakness there, but there was none.

Ted's tongue was sticking out between his teeth, but it wasn't funny. It was pathetic.

Tom's outline seemed more and more like a shadowy threat and less and less like a tangible opponent.

Ted had the feeling he was losing his footing. His knees became weak. He felt he was in an impossible situation.

Maybe he should call out, while there was still time: "I give up! Let me live!"

But then he remembered that he had shot men before, men who had seemed much more formidable than Tom. Tom was just a kid. A careless kid not knowing what he was doing, bluffing beyond reason out of inexperience.

So Ted pulled himself together, bit his tongue and drew his gun with a sudden burst of courage!

A quick spasm flicked through Tom's arm, that was all. Else he stayed as immobile as before. The report of the gun echoed in Ted's mind.

Ted's gun fell back into its holster, from which he had barely started lifting it, as he clutched the wound in his chest. His last living impression was of the slim wisp of smoke rising from Tom's gun.

Then he fell over.

Tom came over to the dead body and turned it round with his foot. The body was bleeding worse from the mouth than from the deadly wound in the chest. The silly bugger had almost bit off his tongue!

"Conceited little guy," thought Tom to himself as he hauled him onto the horse. He tied him to the saddle.

Then he got Ned's horse and hauled Ned's body onto it and tied it on too. He tied the reins of one horse to the saddle-knob of the other. Then he saddled his own horse and mounted, holding the reins of Ted's horse in one hand.

Finally he rode off, leading the other two horses behind himself.

And he continued on the way to Earlham.

So, he had stopped going west! For the first time since escaping from home he was purposefully going in another direction!

All this just for Nacho. Was Nacho worth it? Nacho wouldn't be the first one Tom shot to get some money. The others he had done in just in passing. Why was he going to so many pains over Nacho? What was different about Nacho?

Well, Nacho wasn't just Nacho. He had a whole gang of killers. If you didn't kill them all, they would just find a new boss and come after you. They would find new members for their gang too. As long as you hadn't killed every single member of the gang, the gang would survive.

So it would never do to just shoot Nacho and a few of his close mates. You had to wait for a chance to kill all the others too. You had to wait for a chance to kill all of them TOGETHER. It was the only way to uproot the gang, and that was Tom's goal.

Tom inwardly tapped himself on the shoulder for finding such a logical explanation.

But actually he didn't really believe in it, he had to admit to himself.

Nacho was the boss of the gang, and without such a boss the gang can't survive. You can't just find a new one just like that. His mocking, sadistic ways, combined with his fake childishness, made him unique.

Children are weak, but they don't bear responsibilities. Nacho showed himself in a child-like way, BUT HE WASN'T WEAK, and that made his child-like unpredictability and moodiness extremely dangerous.

It was the continuous, complicated and unpredictable show of Nacho's emotions that held the gang together. The members of the gang had no time to fuss or squabble among

themselves, because they were all under the spell of Nacho's every move. They all had to pay attention to Nacho and had no time for anything else – that's what held them together!

If Nacho disappeared, the gang would collapse. They would probably finish each other off without any need for outside intervention. You don't find a gifted charlatan like Nacho every day.

So it was quite useless to want to kill the whole gang – all you needed to do was to kill Nacho. The rest was trivial. And Tom should have done that the very first time he met Nacho. It would all be over by now. Tom would be on his way west again, with lots of fresh money in his pockets, instead of shuttling between Earlham and Anthony on some crazy mission!

There was but one other possible motive for Tom's behavior – he hadn't killed Nacho, because in principle he didn't want to kill at all. He wanted to experience what makes you into a MAN. He challenged men so that they would "show the man". So that he would see at last what made them into men. It was just an accident that he kept having to kill them. But it hadn't happened with Nacho yet, so maybe there was still hope...

And yet, did Tom really believe that a sadistic outlaw was going to make a good father-figure for him? Was he totally crazy or what?

Well yeah, he was undoubtedly crazy. Else he would be leading a normal life, wouldn't he? He would have a proper job and he would be dancing with pretty girls in the town-square...

But what is it really about, this whole matter of becoming a real man? Is it a question of power?

In terms of power, Tom had already reached the highest possible level, hadn't he? The power to take another man's life. Is there anything beyond that?

Power... Is that what power really is, to be able to kill other people?

What can power mean if not the ability to head for your own, personal goals? If you don't have a goal, having power becomes pretty meaningless.

Killing people can help you reach some goals. So it's a form of power. But wouldn't it be much more powerful to get people on your side rather than killing them?

Every living human being is a potential power, and whoever makes this power work for himself quickly becomes much more powerful than a lonely gun-man.

Maybe a big part of the power residing in the ability to kill is more about threatening to kill rather than actually doing it. But threatened people will never be as faithful as true friends, and they never help you with ideas and motivation of their own. Extorting people through your power to kill is powerful, but not as powerful as having friends.

So it seems the power to kill is not the greatest of all powers after all. The power to make friends is far greater.

But it's still all a questions of goals. Before you can say what you mean by "power" at all you need to have a goal. Whatever brings you closer to that goal is power. And whatever stops you from reaching it is weakness. But first you need to know your goal, else the concepts of "power" and "weakness" are meaningless.

If your goal is to kill outlaws to make money, then the ability to kill is definitely powerful!

Killing outlaws to make money. Yes, money. But money is just a means. When you have money, that means you have the means to... to do something else. To do whatever. It's up to you.

You need to have a goal, else money is meaningless.

So the question is: what was Tom going to do with his money?

What's it all for?

If you don't know what it's all for, then how can you say you have power? If you don't know what you're doing, then you're just a chance-occurrence in the world. Then you're just a piece of wood drifting on the river. A piece of wood which has no power to make decisions for itself.

If you don't know what you're doing, then you don't have real power.

Tom wanted to be taken seriously. That's why he wanted to make money. He had the power to kill in order to make money. It was a beginning. Ultimately he would have to find out what to do with that money, what to do with his LIFE!

Tom looked back at the two horses following him, carrying their gruesome loads.

Ted - who was being carried along like a bag of potatoes - could perhaps have become Tom's friend. Together they would have been stronger than just one. But neither Ted nor Tom had any proper goal in their life, and their combined strength would have been a sick joke!

Every man Tom killed could possibly have been his friend, but Tom didn't know what to do with friends. His endless killings were nothing more than an indication of his clumsiness in life - it was a way of drawing attention, of calling for help!

Tom proudly trotted into the town of Earlham. People watched him coming. He led the horses straight to the sheriff.

The sheriff came out of his office and grabbed Ted by the hair to see his face. He raised an eyebrow and nodded. But when he saw Ned's face he said: "Oh!" with something like awe.

Tom got a thousand dollars for Ned, and a hundred for Ted. He also managed to sell the two horses of the outlaws for hundred apiece. So Ted hadn't been worth more than the horse on which he had been riding. It's really the peak of contempt to sell a human being for hundred dollars. There are lots of reasons to kill a human being, but hundred dollars are simply too little. Even outside of philosophical considerations, a human life is definitely worth more than that.

If Ted had worked for Tom, they would have made much more than a measly hundred dollars. You don't even need to take into consideration the emotional value. Selling a human being for a hundred dollars means willfully overlooking this fact, thus it's contempt.

Tom left the sheriff's office and was glad not to have to lead the two other horses behind himself anymore. He was alone with Bess once again.

And he had a thousand and three hundred dollars more in his pockets than before. But the money didn't mean so much to him. He had earned more with less effort previously. And he was used to earning his money in a more satisfactory way.

Things you do are satisfactory when you do them purposefully, which also means you could do them again, which means they're not just down to luck.

Tom had defeated Ted. He could do it again anytime (in case Ted was resurrected), simply because he was faster than Ted. But Tom hadn't defeated Ned, because it was Ted who had shot Ned.

If Ted had defeated Ned in a fair shoot-out, Tom would have felt okay about the whole thing. If Ted had been faster than Ned - and since Tom was yet faster than Ted -, that would automatically have meant that Tom was faster than Ned as well. This is basic logics. So Tom would have felt good about cashing in on Ned's body.

But Ted had shot Ned while Ned was unarmed. If Ned was to be resurrected, Ted couldn't have done that again, because Ned wouldn't have gone into the bushes without his gun anymore. Ted hadn't defeated Ned in a fair shoot-out, and so, even though Tom had easily defeated Ted, this meant nothing about him deserving to cash in on Ned's body. Tom didn't really deserve the victory over Ned.

What did it matter?

Well, it DID matter.

Wanting to win only in a fair way is called chivalrous, isn't it? And why would anybody want to be chivalrous?

Winning in a fair way means you could repeat the heroic deed anytime. But winning unfairly can only be done once. If Ned was resurrected, he wouldn't go back into the bushes without his gun anymore. He would be warned. So Ted couldn't shoot him again. The unfair way Ted had defeated Ned couldn't be repeated. And since it couldn't be repeated anyway, it doesn't command respect either. Bystanders wouldn't admire Ted for what he had done. They wouldn't be scared that Ted could do it to them next. They would be warned. The trick only works once. So they are not awed by it.

The victory of the unfair winner doesn't need to be taken into account so much, because he couldn't repeat it anyway. Not taking something into account, in other words overlooking something willfully, that's called contempt.

Contempt is what you feel towards an unfair winner.

Tom had a thousand dollars in his pockets that he had earned in a despicable way, by selling Ned's body that he hadn't deserved...

He knew that he would have defeated Ned anyway, but anybody can claim that.

Now he just had to defeat Nacho. Nacho was Ned's boss, so surely he was faster than Ned. If Tom defeated Nacho fairly, that would mean he would have defeated Ned as well, and then he would truly deserve the thousand dollars he had got for Ned's body. And then he would be morally entitled to use those thousand dollars as well. For the time being he mustn't touch them. He mustn't even throw them away, because that would look as though he despised them. He had no right to despise that money, and he had no right to use it either. It was there in his pocket, dirty money, and there was no other way to get rid of it than to defeat Nacho.

On the other hand, nobody had witnessed the scene around the fire during the coffee-break. Nobody still alive, except Tom himself, knew how Ned had been killed. Nobody could blame Tom for this unfairly earned money.

And yet Tom still had a feeling that some kind of invisible moral power had seen everything. Was it his own conscience?

To pacify this invisible power, Tom had to become the moral owner of these doubtful thousand dollars. He could only do that by defeating Nacho. It was like a secret link to

his mission, his mission to defeat Nacho. He had to defeat Nacho to feel worthy. There was no way back anymore.

Tom needed to feel worthy, because in actual fact he just wished to be acknowledged by his fellow human beings and to find his place in the world. Deep down what he aspired to was nothing more than that...

Tom had accomplished great deeds – he had shot some of the greatest outlaws of his time. Unfortunately it didn't really bring him any closer to fulfilling his dream.

As he rode past the houses, people followed him with their eyes suspiciously.

Tom had become a taciturn gunman. It began to show in his bearing. No feelings for others, no regard for living or dead things, no emotional responsiveness. He just went his way, calmly, and shot whoever had deserved it.

Tom was the archangel who purges mankind with holy thunderbolts, without even getting out of breath. He should have been highly respected. But it wasn't truly respect that he commanded – it was rather fear that people felt for him. Anyone could suddenly, at a moment's notice, deserve death at the hands of the archangel, and the archangel's thunderbolt would slam into him mercilessly.

Perhaps Tom was even worse than Nacho.

Nacho was just an outlaw. An outlaw kills for money. An outlaw is still human, and he still has feelings like greed for money. These feelings make him predictable, perhaps even impressionable. In short they make him human.

But what about Tom? Does he have any feelings?

It's impossible to tell...

Why does he only shoot outlaws when he could get a lot more money by robbing a bank? He has no reason to spare banks, since he isn't part of any community. Perhaps money is not the real issue in his case. But then what is?

A sense of justice? Justice for whom? He doesn't even belong anywhere. So what is he killing the outlaws for?

For revenge? Revenge for what? How can he take revenge on people he doesn't even know? It's impossible!

Unless of course he is the vengeful angel of God Himself!

Tom, the quiet, mysterious gunman...

While all he wanted in reality was to be a normal guy, to be part of things in his hometown, to be greeted like an equal by his mates. NOT to be the poorest and most self-righteous small-scale sheep-farmer despised by everybody and despising everybody in return!

Was that so damn hard? How had this made him into the vengeful angel of God? It was crazy!

If cruel Nacho was a lost soul, maybe Tom was even more lost than that!

It's paradoxical that evil is adorned with feelings while goodness is so detached from humanity that it is feelingless and cold!

It's probably due to evil being tangible while goodness is just a bit of foam crowning the swell of evil. Tom had become the representative of this foam crown!

Tom rode through town, not quite sure what to do next.

In a few hours Nacho would attack the bank in Anthony. And then he would realize that Tom was a traitor because Anthony would still be fully manned since nobody would have attacked the bank in Earlham to draw away a posse from Anthony.

Unless, of course, Tom attacked the bank here in Earlham right now.

If Tom robbed the bank here, Anthony would be warned by telegraph. This gave Tom an idea. He would just find the telegraph office and send a telegram himself. No need to attack the bank for real! Anthony would send out its men to help, and they would only realize that they had been cheated upon their arrival here in Earlham! After that they would ride back to Anthony in a hurry, no doubt, but they still wouldn't be back soon enough to stop Nacho and his men, and Nacho wouldn't guess that no attack had taken place in Earlham at all. Tom would meet up with him and his gang again, and he would have a sad story ready about how Ned and Ted got killed in the attack.

Okay, this would mean facilitating the bank robbery for Nacho and his men in Anthony.

On the other hand, a big massacre would also be avoided that way.

So Tom rode through town till he saw the shield saying "telegraph office". He led Bess to the front of the house, got off, tied her up and entered the office like any ordinary customer. A smell of frying eggs wafted towards him.

The telegrapher was standing in front of the stove preparing fried eggs. As Tom came in he turned around.

He was a small man, well past the middle of his life. His sparse hair was graying. He was wearing the typical kind of sun-shade above his eyes which seems to be the badge of trustworthiness for state officials. The skin of his face was deeply furrowed and colourless. But there was still a sparkle of life in his clear eyes. His nose was small and dainty, with small holes into which no finger would fit, Tom felt sure about that.

When the man spoke, Tom had the feeling the dainty nose must be a bit congested. The rosy lips were moist, and the little mouth sprayed small droplets of spittle around as he spoke.

"Good day, sir, can I do something for you?"

Tom didn't answer at first. He looked around in the room.

In a corner in the back stood a wooden rocking-chair, next to it a small table with a cup of coffee. In the middle of the room the stove stood with the pan on the fire and the eggs in it. Next to it a few spoons were lying around, and a battered coffee-pot that wasn't in use right now.

Tom had a vision: he saw himself stretched out in the rocking-chair, the coffee-pot on the fire, and straw-bales blowing past outside the window. Then it started to rain. Big, warm drops splattered on the empty, dusty street which soon turned into a torrent. Tom lolled about in the rocking-chair and was glad to have a roof above his head. He heard the rain-drops drumming on it. The coffee-pot started whistling...

The vision passed. Unfortunately reality was quite different. When it rained, Tom was mostly somewhere in the prairie, and there was nothing else to do but to cower under his coat and wait for it to pass.

Sometimes he burned under the merciless sun, sometimes he shivered in his wet clothes when the rain hadn't stopped before nightfall...

It was seldom enough that Tom had the chance to rest in a room, and he never felt completely safe in a room, in a town, among people.

The small-scale official here in this office led a totally different life, even though he and Tom were both human and surely had the same basic needs. Tom sometimes yearned for this kind of quiet life. But didn't it ever get too boring?

Surely not! This man experienced other things that were exciting in another way. One day he had probably fallen in love and had had to fight for the one his heart had chosen. By and by he had evoked the favours of his loved one. The tenderness of the first kiss, the excitement of the first night, the birth of the first child...

All these are quite ordinary things. But Tom's brilliant shoot-outs, were they in any way less ordinary?

This evening the rosy little mouth would kiss a woman, and the sparkling eyes would appraise the little handicrafts of the enthusiastic grandchildren.

Tom, on the other hand, would be on his way somewhere with his horse, seeking out an outlaw worth ten thousand dollars.

Right here and now Tom stood above this small-scale state official. Tom was stronger. The reason for this was mainly that Tom had burst into a peaceful world that he could destroy. The threat wasn't mutual, because Tom had no world of his own that anyone could come and destroy...

"Can I do something for you, sir?" the official asked once again.

Tom said: "Nacho and his gang have robbed the bank. You should warn all the other towns around here."

"But sir, I didn't hear any shots!"

"Wanna hear some?" asked Tom and held his revolver under the nose of the man and pulled back the hammer.

"B...but...?"

„Just do what I say,“ said Tom and pushed the man down on a stool.

The equipment stood on a desk in the other corner of the room. Tom pushed the stool towards it.

There was a big box with wires coming out. Two wires went to a little device on which you could press with your finger, making contact, letting through the electrical current, pushing electrical charge to another, similar office far away, making a buzzer sound there.

After a little more encouragement the official got down to work: he put his middle finger on the small device and tapped the message.

The finger on the device almost had a life of its own. The steady tapping impressed Tom. He wouldn't have expected this dexterity from the little old man.

Tom didn't know the Morse-alphabet, but the man couldn't know that, so Tom trusted him to tap the right message. After a few moments he stopped tapping and looked up at Tom.

Tom pulled the stool away from the desk and tied the man to it. He also tied up his mouth with a kerchief. Then he went to the box on the desk and pulled out the wires. He had a last look around, took the pan with the eggs off the fire and put it on the table to cool. Then he walked out of the office like an ordinary customer.

Bess was waiting outside. Tom gave her a piece of bread and mounted. He rode out of town without haste.

He rode off in the direction of Anthony. He was aware of his crime – he had overpowered a state official on duty, and he had just facilitated a bank robbery for the worst outlaw of the country. But it was the only way to stay in touch with the gang.

Tom was on his way to Anthony. He was alone with Bess, just like on the day of his escape from home. It was evening like it had been then. The sky embellished itself with deep, passionate colours.

Two fat clouds were coloured a deep red by the sun, like two swollen lips. The sky behind was of the deepest blue. The two lone clouds drifted apart, and Tom had a feeling the lips were parting to receive him.

Tom breathed in deeply to prepare himself for the heavenly kiss.

Unfortunately Tom didn't really feel relaxed tonight – he was on a mission. He was riding to Anthony to meet an outlaw, not to get lost beyond the horizon. He wasn't free, and whoever isn't free can't expect to kiss the sky. This sudden realization made him melancholic.

How had it been on the day of his departure from home? Had he felt free then?

Surely not. At that time he had been fleeing into the unknown.

Freedom means personal choices. You cannot make choices in the unknown, because you don't know what there is to choose. You have to take things as they come.

Today Tom was much freer than he had been then, because today he had money, lots of it. Enough to live for many years.

Even before getting to know Jim, and before meeting Nacho, he had had money. But he hadn't had a mission yet.

He had been free, free to let his horse carry him into the setting sun for ever.

But he had lacked this kind of passionate revival that he was yearning for today. Today it looked as though his mission was hindering him from keeping his appointment with the heavenly kiss. But yesterday he had lacked a signpost telling him where to go.

Every evening Tom could see the last rays of sunlight on the horizon, and yet he still never caught up with the sun. Of course the sun came back every morning, but Tom wouldn't live for ever, after all. One day the sun would rise without Tom being there to see Her anymore... unless he had somehow managed to catch up with Her by then.

Maybe one needs a mission to be happy. A mission that somehow entails catching up with the sun.

Any task you undertake restricts your freedom. But what we're yearning for isn't just freedom as such. We want our freedom so that we may be free to reach out for the sun before She sinks for ever. Once we have found a mission taking us closer to the sun, we don't need freedom anymore – we just need the mission.

Tom had taken on a mission because he felt lost. Now he wondered if it was the right mission. If not, it would just be an obstacle to his true yearning. But if it was the right mission, then he wouldn't need any freedom anymore, except for the freedom to accomplish that mission.

And yet, what Tom really wanted was such an ordinary thing – to be someone. This included eventually raising a family. One day the sun would shine on his grave and he wouldn't see Her anymore, but lots of little Toms would go on seeing Her in his place. No morning would ever appear without some descendant of his seeing the sun – Tom would have dissolved in the heavenly kiss.

If that was the true goal, if that was what he needed his freedom for, if that was supposed to be his mission, then what on Earth was he chasing after an outlaw named Nacho for? Tom was still watching the sky as it was losing its reddishness. Even if Tom hadn't had a mission today, supper still wouldn't have waited for him. Tom felt melancholic. Even

without his crazy mission he would still have felt melancholic. It was that kind of melancholic evening, that's all there was to it.

At least, thanks to his mission, he wasn't lost in the void – he had this self-appointed task to fulfill before he could even think of doing anything else. This fact was almost a consolation, because, as long as you can feel yourself moving forwards, there is hope. You cannot know what's coming next. It's only once you've come to a standstill that hope gets lost.

So Tom looked upon his mission as an intermediate goal, and within this framework he moved forwards with fresh hope.

It was still dusk when Tom saw a group of about twenty riders on the horizon.

Of course, it was the reinforcement from Anthony. They were coming to Earlham because of the telegraphic message!

Tom hoped they wouldn't search him, because he carried a lot of money. They could mistake him for one of the fleeing robbers!

Tom made Bess slow down. The riders approached at great speed.

As Bess saw the other horses come towards her at a gallop, she changed from trotting to walking and finally stopped.

The leader of the group of riders, a tall, gaunt man with a well-combed, silver-grey moustache, spurred his horse on till the last. It was a splendid white horse that had evidently been masterfully trained. Its every slightest move was dictated by its rider. Tom thought to himself that in actual fact this wasn't true obedience. The horse was being steered through its reflexes, like a machine. This wasn't a horse to be trusted with making decisions. Not like Bess.

True obedience also entails some insight. One has to understand what the master wants, and then one tries to reach this goal in the best possible way.

But this horse had no insight – it just obeyed its rider because he didn't leave it any time to have ideas of its own. Besides, it probably didn't even matter to this horse who the rider was, and if it ever lost him, it definitely wouldn't go looking for him. Without its rider this horse was just a horse, well-trained though it may be.

Bess was different. Tom could ride Bess even if he were blind, deaf and paralyzed, because Bess would take care of him. Bess was more than just a horse – she was a friend. In any case that's definitely what Tom liked to think.

The rider of the white horse spurred the horse on for one more stride and then pulled it to a sudden stop right in front of Tom.

The gaunt man asked Tom: "Did you see or hear anything?"

"Like what?" asked Tom harmlessly.

"The bank in Earlham was robbed."

"I must have left town before that. I didn't know..." said Tom.

"Will you join us?" asked the man.

"No, I have an appointment in Anthony."

The gaunt man looked at Tom contemptfully with colourless eyes, spurred his horse and disappeared at a full gallop, just as he had come. His twenty followers started off behind him once again, though not as elegantly as he just had.

Tom turned his head and looked after them for a moment. They obviously hadn't seen through him. They were looking for Nacho and his gang, and Tom seemed too insignificant for wasting time on.

The leader hadn't even had time to halt progressively. He had stopped his horse in the midst of a canter and blasted off again at a full gallop without a single step of walk or trot. It had been masterfully done. A well-trained horse indeed!

Well, Tom hadn't joined the posse, and he was glad to have nothing to do with such people as those!

He said: "Okay Bess, let's go on." Bess obediently set herself in motion.

When Tom arrived in Anthony, it was night and the half-moon hung in the sky with a silvery glow. Tom got off Bess and walked next to her. He led her to the hotel that they had left early in the morning.

When he had brushed and fed Bess, he quickly went up to Jim's room and knocked.

"Who's there?"

"Tom."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Come in."

Up till now Jim's voice had been dry, but when Tom had opened the door, Jim asked excitedly: "How was it? What did you do?"

"The gang took me on. The robbery takes place tonight."

"Then what are you doing here? I thought you would attack the gang from the inside. But now you're obviously not with them."

"I was sent to Earlham to attack the bank there as a diversion."

"YOU attacked the bank in Earlham?"

"I just sent a false telegram."

"But what are we to do now? The two of us alone cannot confront Nacho's whole gang!"

"Why couldn't we? We shoot from up here with the long guns. There are fourteen of them. If we are cold-blooded enough, each of us can shoot down seven of them before they can save themselves."

"How could we possibly do that?"

"They will stand on the moonlit street while we lurk up here in our dark rooms."

Jim was only half convinced, but he was ready to try.

Tom went into his own room to get ready. He shoved the bed to the window and with pillows and covers he built some kind of embankment reaching till the window-sill. He lied down and boxed the embankment into shape till it felt comfortable enough.

Then he shouldered the long gun and looked out of the open window down into the street.

The position was strategically just right for a sniper, and Tom felt proud of himself.

He stood up once more and went into the room next door to give some advice to Jim about setting himself up in a similar way.

When he came back he lied down with his gun, intending not to move until he saw Nacho's men.

Time seemed long. The big bank lied still on the other side of the street. The masonry shimmered whitely in the cold moon-light.

The watchful guards appeared at the corner, walked along the building till the other corner and disappeared again. Probably for the fortieth time, which means Tom had been waiting for more than twenty minutes already.

If Nacho didn't hurry, the posse that went to Earham would be back! Every few seconds Tom peered along the empty street into the distance and then quickly fastened his eyes onto the bank again, which was just lying there like a ship on a windless sea.

But now Tom had seen something at the other end of the street.

He strained his eyes – there were four riders. The horses came along with measured steps. Broad figures were squatting on the horses, wearing their hats even at night. They had already come a good deal closer when Tom could be sure at last that they were really four of Nacho's men. Tom had seen them in the old church. One of them in particular Tom remembered well because he was a stout hunchback and his silhouette was unmistakable. The four men parked their horses in front of the hotel, right under Tom's window. They sneaked towards the bank on foot.

The bank stood somewhat apart from the other buildings – an empty, moonlit expanse separated the last wooden house from the bank made of stones and bricks and mortar. The guards were just disappearing behind the far-off corner when two of Nacho's men ran over to the closer corner where the guards would reappear in about twenty seconds. And so the four men waited, two of them at the corner where the guards would reappear and the other two in the shadow of the last house of the row of houses across the street from Tom.

Tom watched, feeling tense. In front of his eyes a series of events was unfolding in which he wasn't involved (yet). If Tom decided to be content with just watching without intervening, he would witness the whole thing, and nobody would ever know. Nobody would ever hold it against him that he hadn't intervened (but what about Jim? – he had completely forgotten about him!).

Watching from this first-class seat, Tom might even get a chance to analyze and grasp Nacho's genius! Tom felt strangely detached from what was going to happen down there. The scene of the bank-robbery fascinated him, but he felt just fine as a spectator, comfortably embedded in his cozy hotel room. He had quite forgotten that he was breathing the same air as the four bad men down there.

But then Tom was suddenly torn out of his meditative mood and drawn right into the harshness of the adventure in front of his window as a shot rang out all close to him. And he saw one of the men at the corner of the bank twitch with his whole body and then fall from the darkness into the moonlit street.

The other man from the corner of the bank stepped forward, raised his revolver out of his holster with lightening speed and fired a few shots in Tom's general direction, or rather in the direction from which the rifle shot had come from. The man must have seen the flash from Jim's rifle and was aiming at it (because it had of course been Jim who had fired the first shot). Since Jim didn't shoot back, Tom had to assume he had been hit.

Tom shouldered his gun and aimed at Jim's murderer who was standing at the corner of the bank. But he didn't shoot straight away. He didn't want to give himself away to the other men who were still lurking in the shadow of the last house from the row of wooden houses. He didn't want to make the same deadly mistake as Jim. He knew that the flash from his rifle would be enough for Nacho's men to target and hit him.

Since nothing more was happening the men assumed that the danger from the hotel had been successfully dealt with. They had to concentrate on something else anyway, because the guards came running around the corner – they had heard the shots too!

The two men who had been waiting in the shadow of the house jumped out into the moonlight while Tom pulled the trigger. As his first victim was staggering at the corner of the bank he turned his gun towards the two men who had just jumped out of the shadows – and who were turning towards him now - and shot once more and yet once more.

All three men fell dead.

Only the guards who had come around the corner of the bank were still standing, and since they hadn't understood what had happened, they shot in the direction of the hotel where Tom's shots had come from. But Tom had nothing to fear from them – their bullets went wide off the mark.

Tom was already wondering whether this was the end of the story when a mighty explosion taught him otherwise. For a split second the sky behind the bank lit up as in broad daylight.

The guards stood there like dummies that had taken root.

Tom felt as if he was glued to his bed, his eyes staring wide.

Several men seemed to be busying themselves at the back of the bank – one could hear them call out to each other. Then there was the sound of horses galloping away and then silence. The bank robbery had succeeded!

Tom was dismayed! It had never occurred to him that the bank could be robbed from BEHIND! Four of Nacho's men were dead, but the ten others had undoubtedly disappeared with the safe!

Tom pushed his bed back into its usual place and got ready for a nap before morning. The next day he would meet Nacho's gang as had been agreed. Till then he wanted to sleep a bit.

Only now did he think of Jim. He went over to Jim's room.

Jim was lying on his bed facing the window with the gun in front of him. Tom came closer. Jim wasn't moving. Tom bent down over him to see his face. Jim's eyes were staring at the corner of the bank where his victim had stood. Jim had been petrified in the midst of action.

Tom saw the dark hole on his forehead.

Tom remembered that one normally shuts the eyes of a deceased person and smoothes the lines in his face. Then he has to be laid out as though he were peacefully sleeping.

But Tom didn't feel like performing this ultimate duty on his friend's body. Not yet anyway. As Jim was lying there right now he just seemed frozen solid, not dead.

Tom would be able to accept Jim's death and come to terms with it once he had killed Nacho and his whole gang.

For the time being he didn't even feel the slightest premonition of sorrow yet. On the contrary, he almost felt relieved. Jim had been a good comrade, but Tom had to finish the job on his own. He needed to do this alone, alone with Bess.

Tom went back to his room, lied down in bed and even managed to sleep.

When Tom woke up the next morning, the sun was already shining with all its might through the yellowish curtains in front of the window from which Tom had lived through a whole adventure last night.

Tom stood up slowly, sat on the edge of the bed for a while to give his blood time to rise up to his head, then stood up for good and went over to the window.

He pulled the curtains to the side and looked down into the street. Here and there a rider was trotting by, a group of cowboys was strolling to the saloon and a hay wagon was leisurely being drawn along the street – it all seemed unhurried and normal. The bank was standing there on the other side of the street as always. What Tom had been part of at night belonged to another world that didn't fit into the usual way of life of this one. And yet it had all happened right here, and surely there were traces of the alien staging production to be found all over the place – the four dead bodies were surely lying on some boards on top of trestles in the shop of the undertaker somewhere, and the bank must have a great big hole at the back, and of course the money was gone!

But nobody seemed to care. None of this seemed to bother the inhabitants of Anthony all that much. They were events from another world, and although they were strangely bound to this one, they still didn't touch any of the inhabitants personally. Perhaps they didn't keep their money in the bank anyway, or only the very rich ones did. So they weren't concerned.

Tom moved away from the window and got dressed. He slipped into his richly decorated boots and buckled his belt with the holster hanging from it. Then he felt ready for the new day.

He left his room and briskly walked to the stairs, but as he passed Jim's door he slowed down, sighed imperceptibly and sped up again. He ate a quick breakfast in the dining room, paid for his room for the next few days in advance and went on to the stable. He gave the stable-boy a big tip so that he would take good care of the gelding and of Jim's mule. Then he saddled Bess, led her out of the stable and mounted her. As always when he got ready to be on his way, he felt a tingle of excitement in his belly. A bit of fear was there too, of course. Bess set herself in motion, and Tom left the town in which he had lost his friend Jim.

After an hour-long ride through the heat, he reached the old lonesome church. As soon as he was within reach he pulled his gun and shot at the big bell. The aggressive bark of his revolver made a strange contrast to the sad clang of the old bell which reminded Tom of good old times in his home-town.

The big door at the front of the church opened up, and The Boy appeared in the entrance. Tom dismounted and led Bess into the church. As his eyes got used to the dimness, he tied Bess to the trough and loosened her saddle-belt. The Boy stood next to him, waiting. When he had finished with Bess, Tom followed The Boy who led him through the church to Nacho.

Nacho was sitting in a corner, his legs spread out in front of him, smoking a cigar. He held the cigar between his ring finger and his pinkie, and when he brought it to his lips his hand almost covered his whole face.

The rest of the gang was nearby, crouching or sitting around their boss.

"Well," said Nacho, "where are the other two?"

"Dead."

Nacho took a long draw on his cigar, and when he finally pulled it away from his mouth his fingers caressed his face as though they were reluctant to leave it.

"Dead?" he repeated without showing much surprise, and the smoke poured out of his mouth.

Then his eyes lifted to stare straight at Tom. A warning glowered in them. It was the kind of look you wouldn't ever forget.

“Nobody followed you?” he asked.

“No,” answered Tom with conviction.

“Okay, then let’s go,” said Nacho and stood up. All the others immediately followed suit. A hay wagon was waiting outside behind the church. Two big horses were harnessed to it. A big safe was lying on it, looking incongruous there, a big box of iron. Two of Nacho’s men jumped into the seat and set the vehicle in motion. Tom and the other eight men escorted the wagon on horseback.

The wagon left deep tracks behind. The tracks led all the way from Anthony to the ruined church. The twenty men of the posse that had ridden to Earlham were now back in Anthony looking at the hole in the bank. They saw the wooden ramp that Nacho’s men had left behind. The ramp led from the hole in the wall over the platform to where the deep tracks began in the sand. The safe had been dragged over the ramp right onto the hay wagon.

They got fresh horses, and now all they needed to do was follow the tracks. They had to lead to Nacho and his gang and the stolen safe sooner or later.

Nacho’s gang had no idea that they were already being followed. They were leisurely riding towards a small Mexican village where they intended to hole up for a while till the bank-robbery would be less fresh on everybody’s mind. They weren’t very fast with the hay wagon and its heavy load. But they didn’t expect the posse to be back from Earlham yet, and they counted on the wind to eventually wipe out the tracks.

Nacho had personally destroyed the telegraph wires before he and his gang had arrived in Anthony, so that nobody could warn Earlham about what was happening in Anthony. He couldn’t guess that the posse would find out that there had been foul-play as soon as they arrived in Earlham where the bank had never even been robbed at all!

It all started with the two last members of the troop somehow feeling they weren’t the last. When they looked back, they really seemed to see a cloud of dust in the distance. They told the men in front of them, and soon the rumour reached Nacho’s ears: we’re being followed!

First Nacho got angry with his men for spreading such a rumour. It occurred to Tom that he might be a bit superstitious, believing that such rumours attract bad luck – just a moment ago they had all been riding along happily and Nacho had been delighting himself with the thought of having robbed the bank in Anthony, while now they were all agitated and nervous, just because two idiots believed they had seen a damn dust cloud. But the dust-cloud became more and more distinct, and Nacho’s anger gradually directed itself against Tom.

Tom had claimed that nobody had followed him. But the pursuers must have picked up his trail in Earlham, since there wasn’t anybody left in Anthony who could compete with his gang, Nacho was sure of that.

But now wasn’t the time to work on Tom – even if he was guilty all by himself, it was still a fact that they were ALL being followed now. Nacho urged them on, but even so, the pursuers kept coming closer. Unlike Nacho’s gang they weren’t slowed down by a heavy cart – they only had their guns with them!

The way they were going became rougher and rougher. It was no problem for the horses, but it was getting harder and harder to pull along the wagon.

Now the way winded through a group of rock-formations. This was an ideal place for an ambush. The driver of the cart wanted to park it behind a big outcropping of rocks, but Nacho suddenly stopped him: "Leave the wagon with its load out in the open!"

The man obeyed, not quite managing to hide his surprise. Nacho made him pull the wagon back part of the way and started piling up the remaining dynamite under it. He explained his idea: "Our pursuers will think we abandoned the loot. As soon as they assemble around it to check if the safe is still whole, I'll shoot on the dynamite. The explosion will kill some of them, and we'll shoot down the others from behind these rocks in the general mayhem that will follow the explosion."

Some dummy asked if the safe couldn't be damaged by the explosion. Nacho didn't take the time to make a show of child-like expressions disguising his sadism but just answered frankly for once: "The worst that can happen to the safe is that it will open up."

So Nacho and his men left behind their loot as bait and hid behind the rock-formations. They saw how the silhouettes of riders gradually materialized out of the dust-cloud. After a while that was rather shorter than expected the pursuers were standing there in front of them as living beings of flesh and blood. But they were distrustful of the bait. They just sat on their horses, at a safe distance, and waited to see if something would happen.

The minutes that passed now seemed very slow.

The boss of the pursuers, the man with the moustaches whom Tom had already met, finally reached a decision: he sent one of his men forward to the abandoned cart.

The man who had been sent was forced to go if he didn't want to be accused of cowardice. But he wondered, quite legitimately, if it could really be called cowardice to avoid a hidden enemy. If the enemy was hidden nearby, the man would just be shot without having had a chance to defend himself. And if the enemy wasn't around, nothing at all would happen, and his deed wouldn't even be considered heroic. It was a game in which you could lose (your life), but you couldn't win...

The man wasn't thinking of death too much. He was still very young. He just thought of the injustice of having been chosen for this invidious mission for no other reason than because he was the most inexperienced member of the posse.

The young man spurred his horse. It wouldn't go. It advanced a few hesitant steps and stood still again. The man dug his heels into the horse's belly. The horse unwillingly advanced some more. The man spurred it ruthlessly. He hid his own indecision behind the ruthlessness towards his horse. The poor animal could feel the indecision and fear of its rider very well, and that's why it was so unwilling. It also felt the spurs – two contradicting messages. It wondered once again, as it often did, about the inconsistency of human beings.

After several laborious seconds the rider and his horse arrived at the abandoned cart at last. The man got off his horse and clambered onto the wagon. There was no movement anywhere, but the man hardly dared to breathe.

He checked out the safe which seemed completely intact. He could hardly believe it – in this safe, directly beneath his hands, almost a million dollars were waiting!

The team of horses harnessed to the wagon were unsuspectingly chasing away flies with their tails. The man climbed into the seat and took the reins. Now all he needed to do was to steer the wagon away from these sinister rock-formations, and his task would be completed and he would be safe!

He lifted the reins and called out: "Yaaah!"

And that's when Nacho pulled the trigger. The bullet went into the midst of the pile of dynamite concealed under the wagon. The brunt of the explosion lifted the wagon up into the air. The horses bolted off, dragging the man by the reins. The remains of the wagon flew around like angry wasps and the safe fell back down with a dull thud, quite intact, into the sand.

The two horses of the team were still galloping away, dragging the young man behind them. The other horse with which the man had come was lying dead on the ground. Before the dust had time to settle, the shooting from the rock-formations started. The pursuers were escaping to all sides, but Nacho's men shot them off their horses. It was easy – their horses had all gone wild and so they couldn't shoot back. They fell like rotten apples.

The man with the grey moustaches had managed to calm his horse, dismounted and stood behind it. He tried to assemble his men around him. With some difficulty he finally managed to get ten men to position themselves behind their horses in front of the evil rock-formations.

Nacho's men now unscrupulously started shooting down the horses. Apart from one horse that bolted off and exposed the man behind it who promptly got shot, this wasn't so easy at all, because the horses could bear several shots before sinking to the ground, and the men standing behind them were smart enough to make them turn their heads away from the rock-formations where the shots came from.

Furthermore the pursuers were now shooting back. One of Nacho's men lost his index and screamed his head off.

Several of the pursuers were now lying behind their dead horses, but they were tenaciously defending their positions. The battle wasn't evolving much anymore, and Nacho was afraid that one of the pursuers would escape to get reinforcements while the others would stay put and stop Nacho's gang from moving on.

Nacho didn't like this whole situation. He would much rather have finished off all the pursuers with the explosion rather than having to shoot them one by one. Why oh why were people so suspicious nowadays that they wouldn't even approach an obviously abandoned cart?

Nacho worked his way over to Tom who had hardly fired any bullets yet.

"Get yourself a horse and ride out towards the enemy!"

"What??" Tom called out startled, but Nacho didn't repeat his order. Three men came and lifted him up on a horse, and the horse was driven out from among the rock-formations. He heard a heartening voice calling out behind him: "Go! We're covering you!"

The horse galloped towards the pursuers in suicidal fear. Tom felt uncomfortable on this alien horse – the stirrups were far too long for him and he was losing the reins which weren't tied together in the middle. He was badly shaken. He held on to the neck of the horse. The poor horse must have felt that a bob-cat was clinging to its neck.

The desperate mood of the horse had gotten totally out of control and Tom lost all power over his mount.

He felt he was slipping out of the saddle.

He didn't hear the shots anymore. He only heard the thrumming of the hooves. He saw the ground swishing past under him, and he saw the hooves flying over sand and stones.

Now he saw an angular structure in the corner of his eye. It was coming closer– of course, it was the safe lying in the middle of the battle-field!

He felt how the body of the horse slipped away from him for good and he fell to the ground heavily. He rolled over on the ground once or twice and came to rest against some kind of wall with a thud. When he opened his eyes he saw that he was lying behind the big safe. He quickly pulled in his legs so that they would be protected too.

Now he lifted up his head and risked a quick peak over the edge of the safe. His half-crazy horse had been caught by the pursuers. Tom saw the unprotected legs of the men standing behind it. Some other horses were still on their feet too, and the legs of the men standing behind them were just as unprotected. Tom's current position was actually very good for a sniper – since he was close to the ground while Nacho's men were higher up among the rocks, as well as being much further away, he really represented an additional threat to the pursuers!

Whenever the shooting from Nacho's side got the most intensive, Tom quickly lifted his head and his revolver over the edge of the safe and fired a few shots at the legs of the pursuers whose position was now getting untenable.

Tom didn't get properly aware of what he was actually doing here – helping the gang! All he was thinking of was how to get rid of those pursuers.

All of a sudden the following happened: the man with the grey moustaches called out "Chaaarge!" and jumped on his horse. The others – those who were still able to - followed his example. In a narrow formation they came galloping, heading towards the path through the rock-formations. First it seemed they were going to overrun the safe and Tom. The first horse made a small sideways jump to avoid it. Tom quickly stood up and shot the rider. All he saw of him was a gaping mouth and two staring eyes.

The next two horses galloped past the safe on either side. Tom shot down the two riders, twisted his body like a snake and jumped up at the horses, catching a saddle-knob with each hand. He was now half hanging, half stuck between the bodies of the two galloping horses. Other horses were galloping all around them, but their riders were too busy shooting at the rock-formations to have time to aim at Tom (who didn't represent an immediate threat at this very moment anyway).

Stuck between the two horses, Tom was carried through the narrow passage between the rock-formations. Bullets were whizzing past, but he was well protected between the bodies of the two horses.

A few seconds later he was on the other side of the rock-formations. The shooting had quieted down. Exhausted, his cramped hands finally let go of the saddle-knobs. He fell on the coarse, sandy ground and the two horses galloped past him.

There was sand in his mouth and his face was covered with sores and wounds. He felt so sick that he was going to vomit. But Nacho's men were already running towards him.

"Bravo!" they cried out. „That was great!“

They lifted him onto his feet and held him up. They brought him to a horse and helped him mount. It wasn't Bess, but he was too weak to ask for Bess. For a while he fell into a kind of dreamy senselessness.

When he got back to his senses somewhat, he saw that all of Nacho's men were sitting on horses. Not a single one had died. The pursuers, however, were lying all over the place, and their horses were scattered in the landscape.

Nacho's men had rounded up the two big heavy horses that had pulled the wagon with the safe. They stood side by side and the safe was now secured across their backs. The arrangement didn't look very stable, but it was the best that could be done under the circumstances.

The troop got on its way. Nacho in person was leading the big horses carrying the safe. Tom saw that Bess was being ridden by a small man with a black beard and dark, shifting, dishonest eyes. Bess was chewing on her mouth-piece. The man pulled on the reins with a jerk and simultaneously pushed his heels into her belly. Bess stopped chewing, lifted her head fearfully and sprang forwards. She contorted her eyes so that Tom could see the whites in them. She was nervous and fearful, but she didn't throw off her rider – she was under his control.

Tom was upset that his faithful Bess would just let herself be submitted so easily. But he himself was sitting on a stranger too. A stranger whose unprejudiced indifference towards its rider seemed almost friendly. This horse wasn't in the least bad-willed towards him, and all he needed to do was to let himself be carried along...

There was no need for Tom to be irritated by Bess' lack of faithfulness – after all, he was just as unfaithful, sitting on someone else's horse.

In the evening Nacho and his gang arrived in the small Mexican village. On the way there Tom had admired the multicoloured, well-tended fields. This was the land of simple farmers. Stocky, brown people in white clothes and large-rimmed sun-hats.

Nacho led his men through the middle of the village. He seemed to know where he was going. Squat, white buildings of stone with small holes as windows. All the shutters were being closed loudly as they passed. The street was empty. The only movement to be seen anywhere were the thin plumes of smoke rising from some of the flat roofs. Under these white cubes that were lying around everywhere, forming a village, there was obviously some kind of humble life going on.

A cat on heat, meowing in that typical plaintive and demanding way, suddenly ran across the street in front of the horses – it was the first creature here in this village which obviously didn't mind being seen by Nacho and his men. The poor animal was plagued by its sexual instinct – else it wouldn't have let itself be seen either.

Nacho led his men to a "taberna". At first Tom didn't realize that it was some kind of restaurant, because it was a square white house like all the others. But all the men dismounted from their horses and walked through the open door, and so Tom followed them.

Inside there was a long table with many chairs and a kind of bar. The men went to the bar first for a drink, then they sat at the table to eat. The host, a small fat man with scared eyes, didn't speak. He just served the food. When the men had eaten enough, they left the "taberna" in a rather boisterous mood.

Some of them had got rather drunk and were hiccupping loudly. They had lost the sinister dignity they otherwise had, and Tom lost the last of his doubts that he could finish them off, every single one of them.

Except maybe for Nacho. He had drunk a bit too much too, but the effect was different on him. His eyes protruded, the pupils dilated, and his mouth opened a slit. His tongue stuck out a bit in a not very conscious way and lecherously moistened his lips. Tom felt he saw some unfathomable depth of horror in those eyes. The state of intoxication showed more

of this man than was visible otherwise, and it was just more of the same, more horror, more danger...

Alcohol reveals hidden feelings. In Nacho's men it was just coarse humour tainted with undifferentiated sexual lust that rose to the surface. But in Nacho himself it was a new kind of threat that started dangerously glistening in his swollen eyes behind half-shut lids. As always, Nacho demanded absolute obedience. He sat on his horse, which meant for everybody that they had to mount too. Tom tried to get to Bess, but the other man who had been riding her was there first. Tom quickly had to mount the horse he had been riding earlier, because Nacho wouldn't tolerate any delays.

Nacho's gang left the village now and went off to squat in a farm-house nearby. As the men brought their horses into the stables, Nacho knocked at the door of the main part of the building.

The door opened and a scared farmer with a long gun in his arms appeared in the entrance. Nacho brushed the gun aside and entered the house. His men who had finished providing for their horses flowed into the house after him. They made themselves comfortable in the living area and totally ignored the farmer and his wife – the two of them had no chance against ten revolver-toting, tough men, and they knew it.

The Boy and a few others brought the safe into the room. The rest of the evening Nacho and his men spent working out how to break it open. They were all crowded around it, and as some of them were hammering and heaving, others were giving good advice. Tom was happy just to watch.

After several hours they gave up even though the safe didn't appear to have suffered much damage yet. In the end they would still need to dynamite it. The problem was that the explosion might destroy a good part of the bank-notes too.

A fire was kindled in the fire-place and the men threw on wood generously. Tom thought of the farmer who had felled the trees, cut up all that wood and carried it home.

The men laid down to sleep. Tom settled in a corner too. Under himself he felt his saddle with the side-bag full of dollars. His own saddle from Bess' back. He had gotten it back. He felt wonderfully at ease. He was snuggling up into his own intimacy. He experienced himself, his own bodily smell and touching the skin of his forearm with his lips in an almost passionate way. He wondered why that was so.

Is one happier in danger than in familiar surroundings? Why is it that you get alienated from yourself in the all too familiar surroundings? Why do you need danger to feel and enjoy your own existence once again?

Tom just had to start philosophizing a bit.

Familiar surroundings also mean static surroundings, because things can only be familiar if we already know them, which means they were there before, hence static.

When the static surroundings provide all we need, then we are happy. But when they don't, while at the same time keeping us imprisoned, then we end up losing our will to live. Since static surroundings by definition don't change, we have no hope of ever becoming happy.

But it's different when you live in uncertainty. Even if nothing especially positive has happened yet, you still always have hope, since uncertainty precisely means that nothing is certain which also means that everything is possible.

Uncertainty is very dynamic. You experience yourself with a whole new feeling. A feeling almost like being in love, because it's so full of youthful hope!

Maybe Tom would die, but maybe he would appear triumphantly in Anthony with Nacho's corpse and the undamaged safe! In this adventure everything was possible. With the reward-money Tom would buy himself a nice ranch, then find a wife and start raising a family. And he would provide for his children. He would give them all those things his own parents had failed to give him. He would have a peaceful life, but this time peace wouldn't mean despair, because it would be a happy peace! The danger-zone in which Tom was now was a bridge to a new life, and that's why he paradoxically felt so hopeful in it.

Tom forgot his sweet feeling of self-love for a second, because he saw something truly astonishing.

Nacho was slumbering in front of the fire with half-closed eye-lids. In the lower corner of his mouth a cigarette was still dangling, but it had long gone out. The Boy, that huge, bell-shaped giant, in whose beer-mug Tom had once spat, went over to Nacho, bent down over him and looked at him. Something like a smile went over his hard, scarred face. The Boy pulled the cigarette out from between Nacho's limp lips and covered him with a coat.

Like a mother!

Even a morose being like The Boy was obviously capable of some kind of solicitousness when he wasn't aware of being watched. Or was it actually some kind of ...love?

Unbelievable!

Maybe Tom should study the social life of these outlaws rather than just shooting them all down and selling their hides...

The Boy lied down too and yawned. Tom turned over on his other side and fell asleep. He slept peacefully for several hours until he suddenly felt some pressure on his chest. He fought against that pressure, tried to push it away so that he could sleep some more. He felt leather in the shape of a boot. Somebody was stepping on him!

Tom's heart-rate accelerated and he woke up. But for a while he pretended still to be half asleep. With the left hand he stroked the boot that was crushing his chest, while the right hand went down to his hip. For an anxious split-second he feared his revolver wouldn't be there, but it was. It felt good to touch its wooden grip.

Now the revolver was in his hand and pointing straight up. Above himself he saw the leg sticking out from the boot, and above the leg the wide coat was hanging down, and yet much higher up, sticking out of the collar of the coat was The Boy's head whose face looked as worn and expressionless as the face of a water-logged corpse.

Tom's gun was aiming straight at that leaden face, but The Boy ignored it completely. He just whispered: "Nacho wants to talk to you. He's waiting for you in the court-yard."

The whispering tone somehow made The Boy seem trustworthy. Tom lowered his revolver, then he slowly stood up. He put the revolver back in the holster and walked to the door to the court-yard. He opened the old, creaky door and stepped out into the night. The sky was already lightening with the first hints of dawn, but the moon was still gleaming brightly, hanging there like a big, silent, silver gong.

Tom noticed some movement in the dark shadows of a low wall. His eyes turned towards it and he saw the barrel of a revolver waving at him!

Nacho was sitting on the ground, leaning against the wall. In his left hand he held a cigar, in his right the gun. The barrel was pointing at Tom's belly.

Now Tom felt more than saw some movement behind himself – The Boy’s hand came round and pulled Tom’s gun out of the holster.

Practically simultaneously The Boy shoved Tom further into the court-yard and closed the door behind himself. He threw Tom’s revolver behind the wall against which Nacho was leaning. Tom stood before Nacho unarmed, and The Boy was standing next to him as a guard.

Tom felt damn stupid – this was the second time he faced these two men unarmed! Why did he let this happen again? Why hadn’t he just shot them long ago? He knew he could do it, didn’t he? And instead of that he kept standing in front of them without his gun! Why? It was like a bad dream!

Nacho brought his left hand up to his face, sucked air through the cigar, so that it sounded like a kiss, while caressing his nose and chin with his fingers. It was as if he was making love to his hand and to the cigar stuck between his fingers.

After a while his left hand drifted away from his face again, exposing the half-open mouth. Nacho’s eyes longingly followed its movement as it floated away, as if it wasn’t really part of his own body.

But then Nacho’s eyes turned to Tom. They stared at him penetratingly and darkly.

“Do you have anything to tell me?” he asked, but the tone of the voice showed it was no real question.

Tom answered back, trying to keep his voice under control: “I have nothing to tell you.”

Nacho’s eyes slipped away from Tom’s fearfully expectant stare. They focused inwards. Dreamily Nacho waited for his left hand that was coming back towards his face with the cigar. He pressed his face into the hand, suckled on the cigar and snuggled against the fingers.

“That’s what I feared,” he whispered as if to himself. He nodded towards The Boy and looked up at Tom with deep pity in his eyes.

Tom got a mighty punch in his belly. As he bent over in pain, the callous edge of The Boy’s huge hand came smashing into the nape of his neck. Tom felt his whole personality inside himself come crashing down and crumbling to dust.

He was lifted up by the collar, and Nacho asked once again, with a somewhat sweeter voice: “Don’t you have anything to tell me?”

Tom didn’t answer and was hit once again.

Then the question came again in the same tone of voice.

Tom just said: “No.”

He was hit again and again, but he only said no, no, no, no, without even being asked. He didn’t feel the blows anymore, and he didn’t hear Nacho’s voice either.

Finally he was left lying on his back on the ground.

“He is obdurate,” said Nacho, “we must try something else.”

Now The Boy knelt down beside Tom. Tom saw the leaden face with the evil eyes right in front of him.

“You still don’t have anything to tell us?” The Boy himself asked this time. The voice was deep, grainy and without melody.

Tom heard the voice and saw the dirty strands of hair in The Boy’s face. But he didn’t answer.

The Boy’s hands came over Tom’s face. Slowly The Boy pressed his thumbs onto Tom’s eye-lids.

Tom saw blinding flames in front of himself and he had to scream. The pressure eased, and the flames transformed themselves into flickering, dark-red spots.

“I’ll tell you everything... everything...” whimpered Tom. And then he started telling a messy story that he himself didn’t remember later on. Anyway, what was there really to tell? That he had shot Ned and Ted? But that wasn’t even true, he had only shot Ted. Then why was Ned killed? Who killed him? Ted. And why did Ted kill him? And then why did Tom kill Ted? Because Ted had killed Ned? Tom had wanted to protect Ned, maybe? It all didn’t make sense. What about the posse? Did Tom warn the authorities in Anthony? No, of course not. But where did the pursuers suddenly come from? From Earlham where no robbery had ever taken place. But if no robbery had even taken place there, why had they gone to Earlham to start with? The whole thing made strictly no sense, but Tom was talking freely.

Nacho kept interrupting Tom, urged him with questions and slapped him. Tom felt the ash from Nacho’s cigar under his nose. He was being held down by The Boy while Nacho was working on him. Nacho’s voice was not falsely mild or sweet anymore, and his affected child-like ways had turned to eager sadism.

At some point Tom’s eyes cleared, and he saw the wide-open eyes and quivering lips of a totally out-of-control Nacho right above himself.

Next to Nacho’s face there was The Boy’s head, coarsely carved out of rock, unmoved as always.

Tom was just babbling non-sense that he didn’t even understand himself, and he hardly felt how he was being slapped. He knew that Nacho would give up soon. Tom would be shot, probably with more than one bullet, but it would all be over with the first.

Indeed, Nacho gave up. He stood up and made Tom, who was still babbling, shut up with a kick in the temple.

Tom lost consciousness.

Eventually he saw many stars above himself. They were blinking at him in a friendly way from a moist sky. He felt the dew-wet grass on his swollen cheeks. The grass-blades were ticklish but their touch was pleasant. Tom felt that all his surroundings were distinctly kind and friendly. He was undoubtedly inclined to find everything quite friendly that happened not to be punching him...

It took a while till Tom became aware of his returned awareness and started wondering where he was and why. The beating he had taken came back to him straight away – Nacho’s face floated in front of his inner eye and darkened the peacefully star-lit sky.

Tom tried to chase away the evil image and to clear his thoughts. He tensed some of his muscles to discover the position his body was lying in. He managed to turn onto his tummy. The weight of his body shifted from his right arm, on which it had been lying, onto his tummy. The blood circulation in the arm started up again, and Tom felt an excruciating pain, as if of a thousand prickling ants. Tom wanted to stretch his arms and move them, but he couldn’t, because they were tied together across his back.

Tom wanted to stand up, but without the help of his arms his weakened body wouldn’t do it. Exhausted he fell asleep again in the new position he was in. He had confused dreams and woke up again a few hours later with a strange humming in his head. This time he managed to get to his knees. The humming in his head became stronger, and he felt sick. He vomited, and a sparse, nauseous liquid foamed at the edges of his mouth. The stomach-acid hurt on his sore lips. Tom licked his lips clean and spat out the awful juice.

Now he really felt a bit better. He deeply breathed in the night-air and tried to stand up once again, still without managing. At least he could think clearly again.

Why had Nacho left Tom alive? There was just one sensible answer – there was still a role for him to play. The role of a dummy, undoubtedly. Perhaps the idea was that Tom should dehydrate and starve, and then his body would be left outside of Anthony, its pockets stuffed full of money. After finding his body, the sheriff would undoubtedly start looking for the rest of the gang nearby...

A hint of a smile came over Tom's face, a grim smile, but his skin hurt too much for the smile to take shape completely. Nacho had thought it out real nicely, but he had been mistaken about Tom. Tom was going to escape. He would wear out the rope against the edge of some rock somewhere and then he would get back his revolver. And then Nacho would be sorry for having let him live!

Tom couldn't stand up yet, but he was sure it was only a matter of time.

It still seemed odd to him that his escape would be made so easy. But now he saw, in the dim light of dawn, that he was locked up in a pasture surrounded by a fence of thick barbed wire. A man with both hands free would have had a hard time climbing over it. Tom had a sickly feeling when he imagined getting stuck in those barbs!

The sky became lighter by the minute. In the distance Tom saw a few horses waking up and plucking some grass in the pasture. They were Nacho's horses, and Bess was among them too.

Tom wondered why the morning was starting only now, even though he remembered clearly having been beaten up till dawn. The thought startled him that he must have lain unconscious for a whole day and a night, or perhaps even several of them.

Tom must have been in a really critical state. But now he was fully conscious again, and all his wounds would heal. And even if he had lost many millions of brain-cells, he still had enough of them left to finish off Nacho and his gang!

The grazing horses came in his direction by chance. Tom didn't move, so as not to startle them. When Bess was within hearing, he started talking to her. His voice was hoarse, but Bess recognized it. She went on grazing contentedly, but she sharpened her ears and steered somewhat towards Tom. After a little while she stood right in front of him. She lifted her head from the grass and blew warm air from her wide nostrils into his face. Tom, still on his knees, bent forwards and gave her a kiss on her soft snout. Bess rubbed her brow against Tom's chest till he fell over. When that happened, she sniffed at him a bit surprised. Tom talked to her soothingly, and she lost her concern. She turned away and started plucking grass again nearby.

Tom wondered if there was a way for him to mount Bess. He was sure he would be saved if only he managed to get on her back. But Bess wasn't wearing any saddle and thus no stirrups either, and Tom couldn't use his hands and he couldn't even stand on his feet. Horses aren't ruminants, but they still lie down sometimes, for relaxing or sleeping. Tom had found Bess lying down in the early morning more than once. He dearly hoped she would lie down now!

Bess seemed to want to eat endlessly, but she didn't go far from her master. As the day got lighter, the juicy grass became less interesting, though. Bess lifted her head a few times, sniffed the air and listened. Suddenly she trotted away, but she soon came back close to Tom. The fresh, new day, breaking anew every day as if it were always the first, fresh and innocent morning of this corrupt world, gave the horses high spirits. Bess lied

down and rolled in the grass like a little dog. Her long, muscular legs thrashed about clumsily in the air.

Now Bess was lying on her side, listening. Her back was turned towards Tom. Tom waddled over to her on his knees and laid himself halfway over her. He put one leg across her tummy and let the other one lie on the ground next to her back. He laid his chest and head onto her neck, took a bushel of her mane into his mouth and bit on it hard. Bess didn't quite understand what this was supposed to mean, and in a slight fit of panic she tried to get up. Which she managed, pulling Tom up with her.

Tom was now sitting astride the horse, and even though he was badly bent forward, he felt he would be able to ride a short distance. He held on to Bess' mane with his teeth. He had a strange feeling in his stomach, but he also felt a tingle of excitement in his testicles.

He still felt a bit dizzy, but he didn't want to postpone his plan too much. He pressed his heels gently into Bess' tummy. She walked off all naturally, without surprise. She hadn't quite understood how Tom had gotten onto her back, but obviously he was there now, so she obeyed him like usual.

Tom was riding across the pasture at a leisurely walk. He pushed his heels back into the ticklish part of her tummy. She started trotting. Tom was badly shaken on her bare back. He couldn't straighten himself up to catch the rhythm of her movements. Grimly and hoarsely he whispered: "Gallop! Gallop!"

Bess laid back her ears, stretched her neck forward and... blasted off!

A fair distance ahead of them Tom could see the fence of the pasture. Behind the fence there was the open horizon. Tom hoped Bess understood that they were leaving now, and that he meant her to jump over the fence.

Tom had never ridden Bess round and round in a paddock. Surely she must know that their goal lay straight ahead, mustn't she?

But would she be able to clear that high fence with her lame rider? After all it was high enough to discourage such behaviour, since it was precisely meant to pen in the horses! But it is common knowledge that a well-trained horse will jump much higher with its rider than it ever would left to its own devices (unless it was escaping from something in a panic).

Tom and his horse swept over the grass of the pasture like a gun-bullet. The landscape opened up in front of them, swished past on either side and closed itself again seamlessly behind them.

But the fence still dominated the whole breadth of the view in front of them. Instead of opening up, it just became threateningly bigger, till Tom saw individual spikes in the barbed wire.

Bess was aware of the fence too, and she measured her paces and then sped up to an all-out sprint.

Tom's legs clamped her tightly.

Now they were there – Bess pulled her hind legs far under her rump and gave a tremendous shove. At the same moment, with a superhuman effort, Tom pushed himself up from her back, holding on to her only with his knees and his teeth, and saw the fence flying by underneath.

They landed, Bess lifted up her head and Tom was flung back into a sitting position. His teeth had to let go of her mane. Bess gradually slowed from the all-out gallop to a canter.

And when the ground became rocky, Tom managed to slow her down to a walk with his voice. They went on between some boulders till they were out of sight from the pasture, and Tom stopped her with his voice. He bent forward and caught her mane with his teeth once more, and then he slipped off her back. The bristly strands of hair hurt in his mouth, but when he was standing next to her he let go. At first he thought his legs wouldn't support him, but they did. He even managed to set down one foot in front of the other and to walk a few wobbly steps.

With a sigh he sank down next to a big rock and started with the long job of wearing off the rope.

Tom felt life boiling and bubbling within himself – he felt more alive than ever! Slowly, almost with awe, he brought his hands - now that they were free - up to his eyes and moved each finger individually.

Tom stood up (yes, he could stand up!) and went over to Bess. He called Bess to a small rock from which he could climb on her back and mounted her.

Well now, where should he go? Nacho and his men had surely discovered his disappearance by now. They would be looking for him by now. But Tom didn't have a weapon yet. At night he would creep up to the wall of the court and get his revolver back, provided it was still lying where Nacho had thrown it so casually on the night of the beating. But there was a long while to go till then, since the day was all fresh – it was morning!

Tom should find something to eat. The strange feeling in his stomach (a feeling of emptiness and queasiness) wasn't exactly hunger, but Tom knew he had to eat in order to survive. So he rode towards the village. There he would eat and hide till the evening. He wanted to make use of today to get back into shape. In the evening he would go and get back his revolver, and the next day he would show himself, so that Nacho's men would come to hunt for him. He would shoot them all, and then the great moment would come when Nacho turned up in person. And then they would be face to face at last!

Tom arrived in the village. He was back among the squat houses once again. Those white cubes out of which a slender plume of smoke was rising into the morning air here and there. It was peaceful and quiet. No one was to be seen anywhere. What should he do? Knock at the nicest-looking door? Did he have any money at all to pay for some food? He put his hand in his pocket – yes, there were some coins there...

Nacho obviously hadn't found it necessary to search his unconscious body and to put his hands into Tom's dirty pockets.

Of course the biggest part of Tom's money had stayed in the saddle-bags, and the saddle was lying in the hide-out of Nacho's gang. Tom's skin cringed at the thought of Nacho laying hands on his dollars. But having a few cents was decidedly better than nothing at all, and Tom by far hadn't lost all his possessions – he was conscious and he had his horse!

Nearby there was a door that looked like the entrance to a stable. The door was ajar. A smell of frying eggs and bacon wafted out from the door right into Tom's nostrils, and he felt he could really do with some food. He got off his horse and went over to the door and pushed it open. In front of himself he saw a full manger, and on the other side of the room, without being separated from the stable, there was a table, behind it a comfortable chair, and in the corner there was a fire-place over which the bacon and eggs were

bathing in a frying pan in the cheerfully bubbling fat. Else the room was empty. Nobody was around anywhere. A hat stand was standing all forlorn at the door. A poncho was hanging on it, and a hat, so that the hat stand looked just like a person seen from behind. Tom called Bess into the stable and led her to the manger. Then he approached the fire-place to take the frying pan off the fire. An inconspicuous movement in the corner of his eye made him turn around as if struck by lightening, and his right hand clapped against his right hip where the revolver should have been.

Sunk deep into the chair a small human form was sitting. Tom hadn't noticed it before. Tom could make out the features of an old man with a white beard.

"Good morning," said Tom.

The man answered something that Tom couldn't understand and pointed at the pan with a skinny hand. Tom took the pan off the fire and decidedly put it down next to a wooden spoon on the table. The old man pointed at the pan and then at Tom. If Tom wasn't mistaken, he was being invited to eat.

The eggs were still much too hot to be eaten since the fat was still bubbling. Tom bent over the pan and blew on the eggs. The old man nodded, stood up slowly and tottered to the door. He went out and disappeared.

Tom shook his head because he couldn't understand all this. But then he pulled the chair to the table and started eating.

After a while he wondered what the behaviour of the old man might mean. Tom obviously belonged to the undoubtedly unpopular gang of outlaws. So why was he being shown such hospitality? Or was the old man going to return with three young men to beat him up once more? Tom discarded this distasteful possibility.

It was much more likely, he told himself, that the old man had seen his wounds and blue marks and thus knew that Tom had been rejected by the gang. For the inhabitants of this village, Tom thought to himself, he was the enemy of the enemy. Tom convinced himself so much of the support of the village people that he soon felt quite homely on the comfortable chair.

It was a swivel chair, worthy of a president. Or maybe it was, in actual fact, just a hair-dresser's or a dentist's chair. In any case it was comfortable, and Tom soon started slumbering in it.

A bit later the old man came back. He said something, but Tom didn't understand. Tom couldn't even make out whether he was speaking English or Spanish. The old man's mumbling didn't seem to form any clearly defined sounds. The old man gave Tom some bread and ham, and Tom slowly ate it, sinking back into his drowse.

The flames in the fire-place were licking at the wood and nibbling at it. The air-draft caused by the fire was roaring like a distant waterfall. Tom let it fill his mind.

Tom spent most of the day in the chair in front of the fire-place. He only stood up a couple of times to go out and urinate or refresh himself at the well. In those cases he always put on the poncho and the hat, so that Nacho's men wouldn't recognize him straight away if any of them were hanging around.

But nothing could be seen or heard of Nacho's band. Tom was suddenly afraid they might all have left. Maybe Nacho thought Tom had gone to denounce them. But Tom discarded this thought straight away – Nacho wouldn't run away from him. That wouldn't be his style. And if it had to come to a fight once more, he was better off here, in this village full of potential hostages, rather than out in the open.

In the evening the old man brought some olives and other fruit. Tom ate them all, even though he didn't like all of them so much. He didn't feel sleepy anymore. Soon he would set out to get his revolver back. And then he would kill off Nacho's gang, laboriously or swiftly, that still remained to be seen...

Tom waited another few hours which seemed very long with respect to the lazy day he had had. His heart was pounding hard as he wondered what the night might hold in store for him!

At about midnight Tom started off on foot. He went slowly, since he had plenty of time. He went the same way as the day when he had first arrived in the village. He wanted to make sure he wouldn't miss the farm where Nacho and his men had set up their headquarters. He found it easily enough, even in the dark. He saw the pasture in which he had lain unconscious, who knows for how long. The cool moonlight shimmered on the wet grass. In the distance Tom saw the dark shapes of the horses which had been Bess' colleagues for a time. Tom looked for the small court in which he had been beaten up so badly. He followed a well-trodden path leading away from the gate of the pasture, and was thinking how his lifeless body must have been dragged along this very same path in the other direction not so long ago. The thought made him shudder.

At last he reached the wall near which his revolver must be lying. It was a low wall, and Tom saw that it was lit up on its inner side by a flickering yellowish glow. A fire was obviously burning in the court.

Tom slowly raised his eyes above the wall, and quickly lowered his head again – two men were sitting next to the fire in the court and were obviously keeping watch. Tom had to be very quiet!

But how would he ever find the revolver without betraying himself with rustling sounds? Which alternative would rouse less suspicions – continuous, light rustling, or just a quick, careless rustle every once in a while? Tom decided he just mustn't rustle at all and to check out the ground really, really slowly. He could take all night if necessary. After all his life was in the balance.

Tom lied down flat on the ground and started with the job. He couldn't avoid making a crackling sound here and there when his hand moved or broke a twig.

One of the men in the court stood up and started walking up and down. Suddenly he stopped and looked directly in Tom's direction. His right hand went down to his hip. Tom didn't move. His heart was beating so hard that he thought the whole world should hear it.

The right hand of the man came up again, and the face of the man was suddenly lit up by the flare of a match. Then the light went out and the man blew a long cloud of smoke towards the moon and turned away again.

Hissing, but not too loudly, the breath he had held back came out between Tom's clenched teeth.

Tom went on with his job. The man in the court had finally sat down again.

Tom's heart skipped a beat when his little finger grazed something ice-cold. Tom groped for it, trying to keep his excitement under control. It was the revolver!

The matter-of-fact coldness of the metal cooled down Tom's overheated feelings. His fear left him. Tom slowly raised himself and looked over the wall.

The two men were sitting on either side of the fire which was flickering happily. Tom wondered whether he should shoot them. But they were too far apart.

While Tom would shoot one of them, the other one might have time to react. Tom didn't want to make the same mistake as his friend Jim had made. So Tom slipped away soundlessly. He would save up his grand revenge for tomorrow.

Early the next morning Tom woke up on the comfortable chair and didn't feel sleepy anymore at all. He stood up and put on the poncho and the hat and left the room to refresh himself outside at the well. The hat and the poncho weren't really necessary as a disguise anymore, since Tom had his gun in his holster now. But the day before he had always put them on before leaving the stable, and now he felt it was like some kind of luck-bringing ceremony.

Anyway, he wanted to eat breakfast before hunting down Nacho's men.

As he came back into the room, he hanged up the poncho carefully and set the hat on top, exactly according to the ceremony. Then he settled on the chair once more and waited for breakfast.

Inwardly he smiled about his own superstition, but he also had a strong feeling that he needed to be at peace with himself today, and this feeling wasn't to be laughed at. Tom hadn't waited long when the door of the stable suddenly burst open and a man hurled himself into the room. He had a revolver in hand and started pumping bullets into the hat-stand.

Tom leaned forward in his chair, his mouth gaping. He couldn't believe it! But then he swiveled round in the chair till he faced the man and gave him a single bullet into his chest.

The man's eyes stared in surprise as he collapsed and died.

Tom stood up and went over to the hat-stand. It stood there unmoved and was not at all deader than before. Tom felt the poncho that he had started to like. He found one of the holes, but else the material was as nicely woolly as before – not much harm done.

Tom went to the door, and as he walked past the body he savoured for a moment his contempt towards this man whom he had tricked without even intending to!

Then he was outside and had to pay attention.

Slowly he walked down the street. He looked neither to the right nor to the left. He stared straight ahead, keeping his eyes still, while paying attention to his peripheral vision.

When you do that, your stare looks empty and emotionless – it's the dangerous stare of the gun-slinger.

Tom suspected that Nacho's men would try to shoot him from a window or a roof-top.

He was right – suddenly he felt more than saw a movement on his right.

The suspicious spot was about to move out of his field of vision. Tom took a step back while turning right and drawing his gun.

Under the dark opening of a window there was a long, narrow shadow. Some kind of shaft or handle was sticking out of the window, and its shadow had moved a tiny bit over the white-washed wall. That's what had drawn Tom's attention. That thing sticking out must be the barrel of a gun!

Tom didn't stop to think about it – he fired a bullet into the dark hole right above the suspicious, moving shadow.

The man hidden in the shade from the white-washed walls had just straightened himself up to shoot Tom.

He fell forward and his body spilled out of the dark hole that he had wanted to use as an embrasure.

Tom left the body hanging there over the window-sill and walked onwards.

No danger seemed to be lurking anywhere, but a few hundred steps ahead he saw three men step into the middle of the street and block it. They stood there stoutly with their arms crossed. Tom walked onwards unflustered, directly towards them. He stared ahead with his vacant stare as before.

The distance between Tom and the three men became smaller and smaller. When Tom started feeling close enough for shooting, he put half a cigar in his mouth and lit it with a miraculously intact match he had found in his chest pocket.

The three men just stood there. Tom was attentive to the movement of his hips as he walked. They moved back and forth and to either side ever so slightly. His arms swung back and forth casually. Back and forth, back and forth. Another five steps, Tom decided, and he would be able to shoot right on target.

He started counting from five downwards. His hips moved from side to side and his arms swung back and forth.

“Go!” said Tom without moving his lips.

His right hip moved forward and to the right just as his right arm was swinging past. It picked up the revolver in passing.

He hit the first man while his arms were still crossed over his chest. He fell over like a doll.

The second man’s arms were already hovering tautly above his revolvers in the symmetrical holsters. The man seemed to want to leap forward, but he missed and landed head-first in the dirt.

The third man tore his arms right above his head as he was hit. The revolver which was already in his hand went flying. He too ended up in the dirt quite unceremoniously.

Tom lifted the barrel of his revolver to his nose and took a quick sniff of the pungent smell of death.

But the intoxicating feeling of triumph subsided rather quickly and Tom felt low. He dragged his feet through the dust towards his victims. He sucked in the smoke from his cigar and bent over one of the bodies so that he could steal some ammunition. He reloaded his gun and stepped over the bodies.

Now he was walking down the street again. The revolver was in its holster again, fully loaded, and he had put on his gun-slinger stare again. He was inescapably getting closer to Nacho’s headquarters. Soon the main building was right in front of him. He saw the main entrance through which Nacho had penetrated into the farm-house so shamelessly a few days ago. Tom unerringly steered towards it. He was already crossing the plastered surface in front of the door.

Now the door-handle was within reach of his hand.

It was one of these timeless moments again. Tom half expected his inner voice to say something. It didn’t, but he felt its approval.

These thoughts just crossed his mind in a blink. Without a pause he tore the door open and penetrated into the house.

Revolver in hand he burst into a lovely family-scene - Nacho and four of his men were sitting on the ground, peacefully assembled around the safe. Obviously they had been working on it, trying to find a way to pry it open. Tom pointed his revolver at Nacho’s

brow, and Nacho's face turned white. Even his dark-red lips lost their sheen. Tom hadn't imagined he would ever get to see such a thing.

Nacho knew he would be the first to die if anybody moved. He just wondered how it was possible that Tom suddenly appeared here. He had sent out five of his men to get him!

And yet Tom had got through!

Nacho swallowed noisily and thus interrupted the deadly silence. He lifted his eyes to Tom and started talking, his voice barely shaking at all: "What are you going to do, Tom? You stand no chance against the five of us."

Tom answered casually, chewing on his cigar: "If your men care about you enough, then I have a chance."

Nacho asked: "How?"

His voice was steady, but the affected child-likeness was absolutely missing. Tom had already won over that.

Tom answered: "If your men lay down their weapons, I'll drop mine in its holster."

Nacho was about to agree, but The Boy, who normally hardly ever spoke, interrupted him with his deep, colourless voice: "I'll only lay down my gun if Tom unloads his own down to one bullet."

Tom had to admit this was a perfectly sensible suggestion. Once he had shot Nacho with his one bullet, he would be on equal footing with the four remaining members of the gang.

Nacho lowered his head and nodded slowly. It was sensible all right. He just wished nobody had thought of it. It meant that The Boy, his most faithful man, considered it possible that he could lose...

Tom let one bullet after the other glide out of his revolver and drop on the floor, so that all the men could keep count. In the meantime the four men unbuckled their belts and laid them down in a corner of the room.

Tom had let out five bullets from his revolver and so everyone knew there could only be one more left. The one that would kill Nacho unless Nacho killed Tom first.

The Boy was the last to unbuckle his belt, and as he did so, Tom slipped his gun into its holster and let it go. Nacho stood up and his men formed a half-circle around him.

Now Tom was standing with a single bullet in his revolver in front of five men of whom only one was armed.

Tom and Nacho were facing each other. They were going to fight it out now. The big moment of which Tom had dreamed so often was here at last!

Nacho held his head to one side. His eyes were rather wide open and very much alive. For the first time Tom noticed that Nacho had quite long eye-lashes. Nacho blinked a few times. His eyes were a bit moist. His big nostrils opened slightly, and quivered, like the nostrils of a horse catching a scent. Tom had never noticed Nacho's big nose before. Nacho's lips were resting silently one against the other. They were old, leathery lips with a few cracks. Wind and weather had worked on them. Tom had never paid attention to these things before.

Nacho laid his right hand across his belly, as if he had a stomach-ache. It was resting only inches from the flat shoulder-holster from which the wooden grip of the big gun was sticking out.

That wooden grip was the only thing Nacho had ever held in his hand lovingly. Nacho stretched out his index and gently caressed the rough, worn wood. But his hand wasn't ready for its leap yet. Perhaps its last.

Tom just stood there like someone filing a just claim.

Nacho stood in front of Tom and looked a bit like a sick child.

How was it possible, Nacho wondered? How was it possible that he should be standing in front of this ordinary-looking kid like this?

He retracted his index, and his hand didn't move anymore, not yet.

His lips separated, and for a while a thin, transparent veil of saliva hung between them.

When the tension became too big, the veil popped soundlessly, and then Nacho's voice rang out, melodiously like in his best times, but this time the sentences weren't cut off in the middle of their melody. Each one faded away gently. That seems to be the difference between real and ironic melancholy.

"Will you tell me now who you are and why you seeked me out?"

The same question again as in that dreadful night, just asked in a different tone. Tom thought up all kinds of stupid excuses – he hadn't seeked out Nacho at all. It was him who had seeked out Tom. But what had happened to Ned and Ted? Why did the posse come back from Earlham so quickly? Who had been shooting on Nacho's men from the hotel? And above all – WHY?

Nacho deserved a proper answer now.

"All I want is to sell your skin."

It was a devastating answer, but it was also the only honest one, and Nacho had deserved it.

After all the terrible things he had done in his life, all the people he had hurt and who had a thousand reasons to want him dead, he was finally going to die for nothing more glorious than a stupid handful of dollars!

Nacho laid his lips one onto the other and said nothing more.

His hand awoke to fresh life. It started moving back and forth across his dirty shirt, preparing to leap.

Tom's eyes narrowed to slits, and now Tom couldn't see the expression on Nacho's face anymore.

Nacho's hand jumped at the grip of his revolver!

Tom's arm twitched.

Nacho's hand was on the grip of the revolver.

Tom's single bullet flew upwards from the region of his hips and broke through Nacho's brow.

Blood spewed from the hole in Nacho's brow. He jerked back as if he had been hit by a fist.

The Boy was counting on Tom being appalled and sprang towards the corner where all the guns were lying. But Tom forestalled him by diving to the floor and skidding into the heap of guns on his tummy. He drew one of the revolvers from its holster and shot The Boy who was still standing and bending over the guns.

Tom rolled to the side to avoid being squashed under The Boy's huge collapsing body and fired three more shots.

The last three of Nacho's men who were in the midst of hurling themselves at Tom and the pile of guns were held up in mid-flight. They stumbled and fell over each other with open mouths.

Tom delighted in the authority a loaded gun gave him – he decided “Stop!”, and all he needed to do was to pull a little trigger, and the men immediately stopped in their tracks. They stopped with whatever they were doing, even the most emotional, intensive stuff! But unlike a faithful slave who stands to attention, dead bodies aren't receptive for new orders. You might indeed have the power to make them stop in their tracks, but that's the last order they'll ever obey. After that you can sell their skin, but beyond that they're useless...

So a revolver just gives you the power to clear the way. But once the way is cleared, you have to follow it on your own. If you kill everybody you meet, you'll never be accompanied anywhere by anybody. That's the fundamental loneliness of the gun-slinger. Tom felt this loneliness very clearly as he started collecting the bodies and piling them up on a hay wagon he had found in the barn. Then he tied a solid rope around the safe and made Bess lug it up a ramp onto the wagon. He shoved the metallic box - that had so stubbornly resisted all attempts to open it and so was still intact - against the dead bodies. Then he fetched the two big horses from the pasture and harnessed them to the wagon, and he tied Bess to the back of it.

He climbed onto the seat and set the horses into motion. He was quite aware of stealing the wagon, but after all he left ten of Nacho's horses behind, and that was surely more than enough to compensate.

He stopped for a moment at the house with the hat-stand. The hat-stand looked like an empty skeleton. Tom quickly dressed it up with the poncho and hat again. He stole some food that had materialized in the room adjoining the stable as if by magic, and then he set off again.

Soon he had left behind the quiet Mexican village with its white houses and brown inhabitants. He reached the ominous canyon where ten outlaws had massacred their twenty pursuers. The bodies on the path looked like old piles of rags. Soon only bones and tatters of clothing would be lying here. Tom led his precious cargo of fresh bodies past the old ones and then through the canyon.

He clearly felt the lonesomeness of the gun-slinger once again – he was in the middle of the traces of worldly occurrences that he alone had survived because he somehow hadn't really belonged into them at all.

He wandered back to Anthony where he would take up his life with Bess and the fat gelding once again.

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 handed 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 ruddy buck!"

Tom felt like screaming at her that he really was a ruddy buck. He was continuously and madly ruddy, because he had never in his life managed to copulate with a female. When or 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 eyebrows 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 ad 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 home-town!

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...

Fred was a nightwatchman, and now that he came to thinking about it, he realized that he had done this job for at least ten years. It had started as a summertime occupation back in his student-days and then, as everything else he tried to undertake failed, it gradually filled his whole life, never to be replaced by anything more rewarding.

Fred walked around the buildings, checking all the windows, shuffling his feet through the high, uncut grass on the backside of the block, where nobody except fools of his kind ever set their feet. It was bitter cold and he felt like pulling his neck into his collar, lowering his head away from the biting wind and proceeding without looking either to the right or to the left.

No windows would be left open in this weather, except if they had been forcefully opened by a burglar of course, but Fred knew that these things never happened, not here anyway. Fred's only purpose was to get bar-codes read into the control-watch he carried at his belt. At the end of the night, the data from his control-watch would be transferred into a computer which would then check if he had passed all the points in his nightly round-trip where a sticker with such a bar-code had been placed.

Sometimes, when Fred felt really bad, he just went from one sticker to the next, without bothering to check anything. Yet he didn't usually allow himself to do that, because it was common knowledge that a nightwatchman might occasionally be watched by one of his superiors.

Somebody might be hidden in those dark bushes back there, and so Fred had to at least pretend to be watchful.

In all those past years Fred had been checked out by a superior only half a dozen times, but if he ever got caught unawares, dreamingly and blindly walking from one sticker to the next, he would probably lose his job immediately (and he needed it).

So approaching any building he would use his heavy high-beam torch along the facade, and the window-panes would reflect back at him. If the reflection ever missed out, the window seeming just like a dark hole, then that would mean it was open. He would then try to remember on which floor and which room it was, so that he could close it later on, when he finally entered the building.

It wasn't enough just to shine upon the ground-floor row of windows -they could look closed and yet yield under pressure, so they had to be mechanically tested. Fred would therefore briskly walk along the bottom of the building, giving a little push against each window-pane, and if one of the windows unsuspectingly yielded he would almost get his arm caught in the window-frame while he walked past. Usually he would mumble "bloody idiot!" when this happened, and since he was always alone this curse could only be directed at himself.

One day, when one of the windows opened as he smacked his hand against it, he heard a big bang. When he came up to the window from the inside to close it, he saw a big flower-pot lying broken on the carpet. Loose earth was scattered everywhere. He felt like leaving the mess as it was, but he took pity on the flower, which was in full bloom, lying pathetically on the floor, the colourful, passionate petals crushed beneath it, and so he set it back onto the window-sill, carefully leaning the long stalk against the wall. Having done this he felt he couldn't leave the rest of the mess as it was and cleaned it away as best he could, quietly cursing to himself.

After having walked around the whole block, checked all the windows, Fred would finally be allowed to go inside the building. Once inside he would have to continue walking, and at an irregular, tiring rate too, unlocking each door, having a quick look inside, swishing the beam of his torch along the floor and the desktop, carefully trying to avoid letting it fall upon the windows so that it couldn't be seen from the outside, then locking the door behind him to walk a few paces to the next.

Sometimes Fred would walk through several corridors without checking a single room, since no superiors could follow him into the buildings without being seen. But then there was always the risk of complaints going to the main office in the morning because some forgotten machine hadn't been switched off during the night and the nightwatchman was obviously not doing his job.

Usually the rooms would look the same every night. There would be the same posters on the walls, the same kind of mess on the desks, and even the individual smells of the rooms would remain the same.

Many years ago Fred had entertained himself by imagining what kind of person might have been working in each deserted room, and he felt the thrill almost of a paleontologist coming upon a promising discovery, looking at the remains of a life that he could picture without it being aware of him in any way.

Nowadays Fred simply felt jealous of these people who came with their cars straight to the building (not having to leave it hidden somewhere), went straight inside through the doors (without walking around the whole place first) and made straight for the door of their office which they opened with a familiar key they needn't select among a huge, heavy bundle like the one the nightwatchman was carrying. Then they shamelessly switched on the light, not caring if anybody could see it from the outside, and comfortably settled themselves at their desk to remain seated for as long as they liked... It's no use dreaming about these things. Besides, those guys might have problems too, right? Maybe, if they ever met a nightwatchman when they stayed at their office late, overloaded with bureaucratic work, they would enviously watch him merely walking along, just opening and closing doors, his thoughts free to wander, and finally going home with an empty head, unstressed, his job finished and nothing to worry about... But then, Fred's thoughts weren't free to wander. Suppose he was quietly whistling a little melody, and every now and then he would get annoyed at some door improperly closed, at some key that would remain stuck in the keyhole, at some button that had to be pushed at the other end of a huge, messy table over which it was hard to reach, specially with all the bundles of keys hanging from his waist... Of course he would have to interrupt his whistling on all these occasions, and when he resumed it, he would take it up at the beginning of the unfinished movement. Then he would get annoyed again before finishing this movement and have to start all over, so that in the end there would be just a few notes, endlessly repeated till it got so boring that he had to give up whistling. Maybe he would try playing with some pleasant thoughts instead; but whenever he managed to collect his thoughts, they would be disturbed by some random and unforeseen annoyance, so that he would have to collect them again, again and again without actually ever getting past this point.

Boredom was thus inescapable. And while boredom in ordinary life is something that can usually be tackled with some effort of will, inventing little games, dreaming or in the worst case by just letting the mind go to sleep, this enforced boredom Fred was subjected

to just get deeper and deeper every day until he had his weekly holiday, a momentary relief that kept him alive.

An occupation which keeps the mind busy without ever using all its resources is more boring than no occupation at all.

It is hard to remain watchful when this watchfulness is never rewarded by the discovery of something new, stimulating and interesting. Fred had actually told one of his superiors as much, asking to be put on a new job so that he wouldn't have to walk around and through the same buildings every night. But the answer was sort of futile and not very much to the point, so that Fred didn't even remember it. Of course he knew why he wasn't taught another round-trip -that would mean accompanying a colleague and being paid for learning while one man was really enough for the job.

When Fred had first started working for "Securitas", as this nightwatching business was called, it was for a particular and straight-forward reason -he wanted to own a car. It didn't take him long to spot an old, American car that was for sale. It was a '78 Ford Mustang with a huge bonnet, low, worn-out bucket seats, big, tough-looking wheels with five-spoked wheel-caps and an engine with a healthy, throaty growl sending vibrations up Fred's spine when he first test-drove the car, making him crazy for it.

Needless to say, the car was rather unpractical, taking a lot of space on the road while offering little loading-space, using up too much petrol and easily getting stuck in the snow. Besides, it wasn't all that powerful -little Japanese hatch-back cars with fuel-injection and multi valves ran a good deal faster than its stolid, carburetor-fed V8 would ever allow it to go.

It didn't take Fred long to feel regretful about the lack of power. His car wasn't such a runner after all. He would get upset when he was overtaken (which was seldom enough since he was a ruthless driver) by a real sports-car, forgetting that this other car must have cost from five up to ten times as much as he paid for his old Mustang, which, considered in this light, wasn't such a bad performer at all.

Some day Fred decided that performance wasn't so important and that it was all in the looks. He loved the shallow lines of the car, swelling up from behind, running fluently along the roof, towards and along the broad, low-slung windscreen, suggesting a wave, and then merging into the bonnet, running along it till they suddenly ended, forming a fierce brow to the rounded head-lights. Between the head-lights the grill looked just like the foam-crown of the wave, and upon it was the emblem of a galloping horse, its mane and tail trailing majestically behind it...

The car was kept in shiny, metallic blue, a deep, marine blue. When speeding on the highway Fred felt like the part of a natural, awe-inspiring phenomenon, like a wave rushing along the surface between earth and sky, ready to engulf and submerge anything wanting to check its progress.

While walking across a parking-lot as a nightwatchman, Fred would look at all the dew-wet cars, wondering if any of them were as beautiful as his own. Then he would eventually come past his Mustang, wetly glistening in the dim light of the lamps across the street, standing there as if it had merged out of the world at this spot and was still growing, unmoving and yet seeming to surge forward with relentless power, then Fred would know that this was his car and that there couldn't be another car for him.

For the next few minutes after that he would feel happy.

Of course the doubts would come up later on. Had he really bought the car best suited for him? Had he paid a fair price for it? Was it really the uttermost beautiful car possibly imaginable? Walking along endless dark corridors, the beam of his torch swinging in front of him, opening and closing doors as he went, those thoughts would haunt him painfully, and the images of brand new cars, far from affordable anyway, would mockingly flash past his inner eye, reducing his poor old Mustang to an outdated rust-bucket which of course it really was.

And yet all modern cars look virtually the same, licked to a blank, unemotional blob-shape by today's aerodynamic standards. They have power, they have safety and comfort...

Ah, but it is a very different feeling to be sitting at the wheel of an old Mustang, behind a bonnet that extends all the way to the horizon, feeling the vibrations coming from eight cylinders under the tough, sweat-drenched leather-covering...

Working with strong hands along the steering-wheel, whose diameter comes very close to the width of female hips, the car slashing through the curves, the far-off end of the bonnet, far ahead of the front wheels, seeming to drift sideways across the road, as if the car were floating above the bitumen...

Then easing the pressure of the hands on the wheel, the steering self-adjusting after the curve, feeling the leather running through his hands...

All of this is very different in a modern car. The steering-wheel offers no resistance at all, feeling just like a dead branch, a cut-off limb, responding so easily, so passively, to any forces with which you act upon it, that it is almost disgusting, like having sex with a corpse. The bonnet is so short, ending in front of your nose, that when looking downwards from your sitting position, you see the road in front of you, so that while driving you almost feel threatened by it, coming towards you without being first swallowed by the car.

So Fred should be happy -there couldn't be another car for him.

Yet every winter there came the problem of snow. The Mustang would act like a heavy, slithering, uncontrollable mass where small, front-wheel driven cars rode along just like wagons on rails. Besides, snow means salt on the roads, which means splotchy patches on the bitumen, which means that the underside of the car passing over them gets sprinkled with that ghastly mixture of salt and blackened water, which means rusting -rust, the most deadly threat to any old car...

Every year, when winter came, Fred would wonder how he could possibly spare his car. He had a small motor-bike for which he cared less than for his car. Another advantage of the motor-bike was that it wouldn't ever get stuck for good, since it was always possible to pull it out from snow-drifts by hand.

The obvious problem with motor-bikes, besides the discomfort in rain and snow, is of course that slithering usually means falling over and accidents more often have worse consequences than just material damages, even at comparatively low speeds.

So Fred often wondered if he should buy a second car just for the winter. And yet, if he was going to buy a second car, it would have to be something really powerful, something he couldn't afford just now. So in the meantime he kept wondering and suffering.

The buildings Fred had to watch belonged to the hospital, among them the morgue, and it was no big deal to walk across from one to the next. In fact most of them were connected by subterranean tunnels with air-flow tubes passing overhead. The air-flow tubes were

used to send all kinds of samples from one lab to another, sometimes even at night. Fred would hear them banging around corners and then swishing past above his head, if ever he went into the tunnels.

But some of the buildings Fred had to watch didn't belong to the hospital-complex and were a bit further off, though of course in the same region.

In the Securitas-business, those nightwatchmen who had to drive around a lot during their round-trip were given a car for the night. The others were given a motor-cycle. Fred would have been entitled to a motor-cycle, but none of his colleagues ever went on this round-trip with a motor-cycle because the hospital-complex was quite far away from the main office where the keys, radio and the rest of the stuff were handed out in the evening and had to be handed back in the morning. Everybody took his own private car.

So did Fred. Thus in the middle of the night he had to take his car to drive a few blocks, and just when the engine was beginning to warm up a bit, to let it stand in the cold again. It is not so good for the engine to be set to work while it is still cold. Ideally it should be left to idle until it is warm before driving away. Fred usually did this or, if he didn't have time, would drive very slowly for the first few minutes. He made it a point of honour never to take the car for distances of less than ten kilometers, so that the engine ran at its best temperature for most of the time.

As a nightwatchman Fred was forced to use his car for small distances, forced to forget about his point of honour. In the middle of the night he would come up to his car and painfully, due to his inadequate attire, scramble into the low bucket-seat, arranging all his bags and equipment on his lap. He was always scared of marking the seat-covers by rubbing the fancy brass-buttons and shoulder-straps of his uniform against them while he settled himself.

Then he would turn the key. He would listen to the high-pitched whine of the self-starter, a shrill, horrible noise like the alarm of a clock calling to duty. He would wobble his foot on the gas, sending little spurts of fuel into the engine till it finally, uneasily awakened, coughing and growling.

He would loosen the hand-brake, setting his huge beast free, loosen the clutch, stir up the beast by pushing the gas, and lead it away, muttering and mumbling.

He would drive away as slowly as he could, the engine on the verge of dying, the whole car shuddering from time to time. Eight cylinders take a bloody long time to warm up.

And yet, after several minutes of running, the noise and vibrations would become smoother. The needle of the temperature gauge would have risen past the blue mark.

Slowly, but certainly, life would be dawning inside the huge steel structure; it would be making itself ready for hard driving, ruthless acceleration, swallowing the distances...

And just when this was happening, Fred would park the car, switch off the lights and the engine, pull the hand-brake (tying up his beast, like) and leave it there, letting it down after awakening it, for another half a dozen hours in the cold.

Of course Fred was worried because of the inappropriate use of his car, which would eventually lead to shortened life-time. This might mean he would have to get the engine replaced if by then the body hadn't rusted away. Maybe by replacing it with something more powerful..?

This was an excellent topic to be wondering about for half the night.

Whenever Fred sat at the wheel of his car he forgot all about these intellectual thoughts. He just plainly and simply felt guilty of stirring up the car's desires when it was

peacefully asleep -kicking it to life, promising a fun-ride and then, as soon as it was going along with it, letting it down.

What about leaving the car at the main Securitas-office and taking the motor-cycle for the round-trip?

But then the car would be cold for the way home at the end of the night.

Usually, when it was time to head back to the office, the car would already be half warm having driven a little bit through town just before. Fred would cruise along slowly for a little while longer, and then he would hit the gas, roar through the dark, deserted streets and arrive at the office with the tinge of excitement still echoing in his crotch, hand in the keys and all the other stuff with a feeling of elation, walk back to his car all lightly and free, then race home with a careless, drowsy smile on his face.

While if he headed back to the office on the motor-cycle, he would be roosting on top of the narrow seat for many minutes, the sharp whine of the small motor all around him, the cold wind hissing past his ears, and advancing at a depressingly low speed...

Fred rarely had any bad dreams, but he had many unpleasant ones. In one of them he was sitting on such a motor-cycle, the motor screaming at him, revving at its highest, and yet the cycle hardly moving at all, slowing down continually, till Fred had to jump off, the speed being insufficient for him to maintain his balance. Then Fred looked up and saw an endless stretch of wide road before him. The cycle had disappeared and he was alone with his heavy nightwatchman-attire...

All these painful preoccupations about the car were of course, as one might say, just the tip of the iceberg. Fred's unhappiness was far deeper.

Long ago he had had dreams, and he had looked upon his future as a wide landscape, the mist of dawn still hanging over it, and he had looked upon it for the first time from a high mountain he had climbed from the other side. All had looked promising. The land was asleep, but ready to be awoken by a magnificent sunrise. Fred had taken a deep breath and made ready to climb down into this promising future.

Then he had sunken into the mist, which became denser and denser. At first he hadn't worried too much -the sun would shortly clear it away. To his right and left bright corridors would occasionally open, but he wasn't too eager to follow them because he wanted the whole thing and still believed in the sun.

Now he knew that he had passed all the bright corridors, and the mist had become a heavy, opaque, filthy, smoke-laden vapour that no rising sun would ever clear away. The sun might actually have risen already, it might be past midday -he wouldn't know, he couldn't see...

Fred had had the usual dreams of a fulfilled life - he had started studying Medicine with some vague idea of helping people, and he hoped he would some day find a person with whom he would build up a family.

Then the years had flown past, studying had become more and more tedious while nothing else seemed to happen, the smoke had become so thick that it not only blinded and irritated his eyes but actually offered resistance to his movements. At some stage he had tripped into his nightwatchman job and never got up again. He was lying there in the mud and wondering about his car.

Whatever the real problem was, it was floating so far above Fred's present day-to-day experiences that he couldn't address it. To bring it within his reach again he would have to solve some minor difficulties first -collect his thoughts, clear his mind of the

overwhelming boredom, escape from his present situation that was holding him a prisoner.

In order to change anything, to be able to evolve in any way, Fred must first free himself from whatever was holding him down

The only means of escape and freedom Fred knew about and which had ever brought him anywhere close to a feeling of satisfaction was, of course, ...his car.

So while Fred intellectually knew that his problem lay further off, that his unhappiness was rooted far more deeply, he was nevertheless genuinely and sincerely worried about his car.

There was this red lamp glowing on the control-panel. Fred had already seen it the night before and rang up one of the numbers for technical problems. The bored voice at the other end had said that he would further the information.

Tonight the little red light was still there.

There were two possible scenarios. Either the problem was meaningless and would be taken care of in its own good time, in which case Fred would simply mention the disturbance in his notes or even ignore it completely having already furthered the information yesterday. Or, in the other possible scenario, the problem was very meaningful, had been fixed yesterday thanks to Fred's vigilance and had reoccurred today, in which case he would have to ring up the bored voice again. When in doubt that was what a nightwatchman was supposed to do - in a polite and correct manner further the information. Be it the same piece of information every night, he had to further it without the least signs of impatience and without feeling offended by the disagreeable manners of people woken in their sleep.

Yet Fred didn't feel at all like writing a clear note, finding a phone, piling out his bag to find the number for technical emergencies for this particular building and selecting the number with one hand while holding up the torch with the other. Halfway through the number the booklet would shut itself because he didn't have a third hand to hold it open. When all these problems were overcome he would read out to the tired guy at the other end from his note-pad which lamp was glowing and on which panel it was doing so. Then the tired guy at the other end would answer that he would further the information and thank-you-very-much.

The prospect of all this was so boring that Fred decided against it. With a sour smile on his face he pictured himself being accused of overlooking important disturbances. He would answer that the red light hadn't struck his mind as unusual since it had already glowed the night before. He would even go before court to make the office see that it was bad for a man to have to do the same thing all the time.

Of course he would simply lose his job, his explanation accepted as an admittance that he wasn't suited for such a responsible position.

All of this swirled through Fred's mind, while he really knew that the lamp would still be glowing tomorrow, possibly even the day after, that nobody cared about it and that it would somehow disappear as suddenly as it had appeared.

So Fred didn't even mention the lamp in his notes and felt pretty sure that he would never hear of it again.

He shut the door behind himself and locked it, trying to forget about the control-panel with that one red glow where there should only have been green lights.

This winter he would have to put snow-tyres on his car.
At this very moment the red lamp would still be glowing.
Last winter he had waited so long to get them fitted that there hadn't been any snow left to use them for their rightful purpose.
This damned lock always stuck! The key must be totally worn! Why didn't anybody complain? Maybe he should complain himself...
The red lamp would still be accusingly glowing back there behind that door.
Besides, the winter before that there hadn't been any snow at all, and since he was going to avoid...
To the right, to the left, nothing special here. The special thing was back there -that damned red light.
This winter he would avoid driving in the snow.
Open the door -the whine of machinery- close the door.
So he wouldn't need any snow-tyres.
End of the corridor, shut the door, select the new key.
One winter the snow had taken him by surprise and he had to leave the car at the bottom of the hill, because his summer-tyres had no grip till the road was thoroughly salted.
Now that he needed the former key again, he could just select it by touch, because it still felt warm. There is nothing worse than holding the torch in the armpit, turning over keys in your hands looking for the distinctive marks and usually finding those you don't want over and over again...
Salt makes cars rusty and dries out slugs by osmotic pressure if you sprinkle it over them.
Poor slugs, all wrinkled and shriveling up...
Fred saw tiny sparks in the dark when he punched the key into the key-hole. Thank God the lock turned easily -it was the right key.
What about a healthy, swelled up and athletic slug, glistening all over, crawling up a girl's vagina?
Fred was climbing up some stairs. He knew the number of steps and never stumbled except when he started to think about it.
If salt was all that was needed, girls needn't feel threatened by men any longer. Besides, salt also burns in the eyes. So it not only finishes off old cars but also men.
Fred came to the top of the stairs and was selecting the next key.
Maybe a man can still rape a girl even with salt in his eyes. His slug, all he really needs, can't be affected much by salt, since it's not a real slug anyway. Besides the girl wouldn't get a chance of sprinkling it there, unless her vagina was able to secrete it.
Here we are, the door is open.
Salt is very good on meat. Wouldn't do to eat meat without salt.
Talking about meat -there must be some fresh meat in the fridges here. There usually is on Sunday-nights -car-accidents during the week-end, when people are less sensible...
Maybe they had gotten their snow-tyres fitted the day before and today they were lying in this fridge...
Snow-tyres aren't a life insurance.
Fred would get his fitted next week.
And all this while the red lamp would still be glowing down there in the basement.
Fred always hesitated before this door. A big, glistening metal-door it was, too. It had a lock to which the usual key fitted and a great big handle. Once the handle had been

pushed down, the door could be pulled open. The door would resist a bit, the isolating rubber-bands reluctant to separate, like lips joined in a farewell kiss. It would let go with a little smack and then, the resistance overcome, yawn open freely, sighing like an awakening creature.

Inside it would be dark and cold. The intruding warm air would condense and make the beam of Fred's torch visible as he scanned the shiny, empty tables (or should they be called beds?). Further off there might be a bundle lying on one of the tables, something strangely irregular lying in this square and sterile place, covered by a blanket.

Fred would walk into the fridge, driven by curiosity. Maybe the feet would be sticking out from the bundle, just a pair of ordinary, naked feet, perhaps a bit unnatural in colour (too yellow) and with a waxy quality that was slightly disturbing, not like feet on a beach. Fred would walk up to the bundle and take hold of the sheet with his finger-tips, then without hesitating any longer, he would uncover the head of whoever was lying here. A pair of cold eyes would be staring up at him. He would be taken aback for a split second, then he would examine the face, unshaven, wrinkled, expressionless, a shocking face maybe, but with nothing to say. Perhaps the mouth would be open, and Fred would see the tongue lolling in there, grey and dried-out, still securely resting in its nest, but dead like its surroundings.

Only the eyes would still be conveying some intensity, a frozen intensity that could be blotted out with one blow. The eyes could have been pecked out without altering their gaze, as if they were still desperately holding on to something. Something that might have been before them a while ago, and that would never reappear to break the spell. So the spell would never be broken. It would just lose its significance and merge into the more general mystery of the past.

Sometimes the bodies in there would still be uncovered, brought in during the night perhaps, and left there just as they had been found.

One night Fred had entered the fridge to find a man lying on one of the tables. He was wearing jeans and a worn-out jumper. His curly, dark hair was in a mess around his tough-looking face, his unclean mouth gaping wide-open and his eyes staring into the ceiling. Fred bent over him and was inspecting the gashing wound across his forehead. In the profound silence, perfect save for the soft whine of the ventilation overhead, he could distinctly hear the man's wrist-watch ticking off the seconds.

There was no need to go inside the fridge. If there was an anomaly it would show up on some control-panel somewhere. Fred had proven to himself many times that he could bear the sight of cadavers, and it hadn't done him any good. Why should he go in there now?

Then Fred remembered the red light that would still, at this very moment, be glowing on a control-panel somewhere in the basement. Fred had no idea what the red lamp meant and what the control-panel was generally monitoring. It might possibly have something to do with this fridge. Since he was here in front of this door now, he might as well check it out.

So he turned the master-key in the lock, pushed the handle down and pulled the door open.

There were two people in the fridge, but Fred had eyes only for one of them – indeed, she was uncovered, completely naked and lying on a glistening, spotlessly clean metallic table in the middle of the room.

The air was cool and there was the usual soft whine of machinery. Fred was about to close the door and resume his lonely walk when he felt that since he was here he might as well have a look at the woman. He entered the fridge and half-closed the door behind him in order not to waste too much of the cold.

He walked over to the corpse, wondering why she had been undressed but not packed up. Maybe she had been found naked.

She was a beauty with long, smooth legs merging into strong hips, the stream-lines moving unbroken from there over a flat belly, slightly less in width than the hips, flowing over firm, small breasts and converging towards the neck. Fred positioned himself at the foot-end of the table and held up his torch, let the light-beam glide up and down along the body, his view extending from her toes to the tip of her chin.

Fred had never before had a woman like this for himself, and he guessed that she wouldn't have let him come up so closely in her lifetime. Only yesterday the chances of getting close to this woman would have been approximately zero. She would have walked past the slow-moving nightwatchman very swiftly indeed, having better things to do, and if he ever made a move on her, she would have sneered at him, then brushed past him with a polite and icy "excuse me...".

Now she was lying here motionless and unprotected and Fred could admire her for as long as he wished, study her body as closely as he liked.

Her eyes were staring up into the ceiling, as these corpse's eyes always did. Fred had seen this before and was used to it. Her lips were parted as if she had been panting. Fred had moved up between the rows of tables and was looking down at her. She was inert, paying no attention to him. In that sense she was as far away as ever.

He saw that she had a stabbing wound above her left breast. Else her body was flawless. He felt like finishing the job, taking a knife and punching it into every part of her body, teaching the world that whatever he couldn't understand and get for himself he would destroy.

He looked at the wound more closely and suddenly had a strange feeling of familiarity. The wound itself wasn't familiar - it was just another disgusting stabbing wound. Fred had seen them before, but they never struck him as particularly familiar.

There was something else, half chopped up by the wound, a birthmark, and Fred knew that he had seen it before.

He left the fridge feeling very thoughtful. He felt strangely reluctant to close and lock the door behind himself. He was about to walk away when he turned back.

There was a little anti-chamber next to the fridge. It contained a desk and a swivel-chair, and recent records were kept there. Usually some delivery-notice concerning fresh entries would be lying on the desk. Fred decided to go and have a look. He unlocked the door and stepped into the small room.

As expected the usual form was lying on the desk, hurriedly filled out by some guy with a miserable hand-writing - name and address of the victim, date of entry and a list of belongings (even underpants and socks would usually be listed). The list was empty so presumably the corpse had been found naked.

Fred looked at the name and it told him nothing. The address seemed just as unfamiliar - some street in town Fred had never heard of before.

Fred left the room and walked away, trying to mind his own business and empty his head of the thoughts which were beginning to churn in there, gaining momentum.

He remembered a day many years ago, just after he had moved out of his parents' home into a flat of his own. He had had great expectations - having no mother to fuss over him any more he saw himself becoming a daring and dashing young man. He now had a stable home-environment that wouldn't be affected by his undertakings in the outside-world. No one would be trying to read information off his face inside these four walls of his own. Whatever happened he would now be able to come home and forget about it. He was sitting at his window watching the people coming and going in the street. It was not quite two o'clock in the afternoon and he had to go to work at six in the evening. He had plenty of time.

There was this girl outside, a school-girl, somewhere between ten and twelve years old, doubtlessly on her way to school. She was walking along not very quickly, dreamingly playing with the shoulder-straps of her bag. Fred had an immediate craving for her. Following his impulse he went out to meet her. There she was, innocently walking along, playfully and unconsciously showing off her sensitivity, quite unaware of the effect she had on Fred.

Fred walked up to her and said hello. She smiled up at him and confidently greeted him as an adult. Possibly this girl had had no major bad experiences with adults and believed that they did whatever they did because it was the right thing. She didn't realize that Fred might have addressed her for reasons of his very own.

So she was a great believer in adults! And she obviously saw Fred as an adult, his being in his early twenties making no difference.

Fred asked her: "Do you have a minute?"

She was plainly a bit puzzled by that: "Yes..., but a minute for what?"

Fred made an earnest face: "You see, I make advertisement photos for a big company. I have to find a young girl like you to wear a pair of brand-new jeans. I think you might be just the person I need. Posters of you will be hanging all over town."

He was playing a very dirty trick on her, but he had plainly got her interested. She flushed a little, forcefully swallowed down the saliva accumulating in her mouth and tried to say something.

"But..., but I have to go to school now..."

Fred nodded thoughtfully. "I know" he said, "but this is really important, you see. I will write out an excuse for you to hand over to your teacher."

This settled the matter. Fred didn't even need to say that other girls would be glad to be in her place. She was plainly going along with him.

"And where..?" she asked, suddenly a little scared.

"Oh, just up there." said Fred, successfully dismissing the very last of her reluctance.

He took her up into his flat. In the stairways she became very eager to talk. "All over town!" she said.

"Yes," he said, "and you'll have an impertinent little smile on your face, standing there in a pair of brand-new jeans that nobody has ever worn before!"

She could hardly wait for him to unlock the door of his flat.

He took her into the flat, shut the door and told her she would have to take a shower first. She was a little surprised by that, but he showed her the bathroom and gave her a fresh towel out of the cupboard. Then he left her and went into the living-room.

He let himself fall into his one comfortable chair and a moment later he heard the water turned on in the bathroom. He knew that she was naked in there, standing under the gushing water in his home.

He was plainly doing something that he couldn't have allowed himself to do at his parents' place. Nobody would come and see what was happening. As long as he kept her from yelling he could do whatever he liked to the girl.

And yet he felt strangely at loss about what to do next.

After a while he heard the water was turned off. On impulse he stood up and walked to the bathroom, entered without thinking and saw her standing there, all wrapped up in the towel, her wet hair glued to her face and shivering a little. She looked up at him, not at all suspiciously, but questioningly. He smiled reassuringly, went up to her and rubbed her down.

He told her he would have to feel her vertebrae to see if she was suited for the photos. He gently lifted the towel a bit and confidently let his fingers find their way down her spine, pressing a little here and there, as if he were playing the piano. His face was very close to her face, and she was looking at him with big, hopeful eyes.

He reached the bottom. His hand brushed past her buttocks. He didn't look at her. Her front was still covered by the towel and he had only felt her back without seeing it.

He gently closed the towel round her back again. "Come now," he told her and led her out of the bathroom. He led her into the living-room and, drawing the curtains, told her to lie down on the couch.

She was lying on her back, still wrapped up in the towel, trying to relax but shivering again.

He went up to her, kneeled down next to the couch and told her to close her eyes. She did as she was told and he uncovered her, pulled the towel away completely and flung it away.

Surely she must realize that something was wrong by now. She was shuddering uncontrollably and holding her eyes tightly, almost desperately, shut.

In a very calm and kindly tone he asked her if she felt cold. She only nodded. He laid his hands upon her belly and started to knead her slender body, softly but purposely. He felt the shuddering subside under his strong, warm hands.

Then he lovingly followed the slight curve of her hips and worked his way down along her legs. She was completely relaxed now, almost hypnotized.

"Do you feel better now?" he asked warmly.

"Yes..." said a sleepy, tender voice.

He stroked her legs absent mindedly, then decided that he could have a good look at her unashamedly, since she had completely abandoned herself to him. He touched the spot between her legs, where the first tufts of pubic hairs were appearing, and, asking her if it hurt, gently parted the folds of her skin.

"No..." she said dreamingly, and he put his fingers here and there, exploring the nooks and crannies, pausing and asking her again, waiting for her answer and then going a bit further.

Gently pressing and stroking, squeezing and kneading, he was having a wonderful time, but then, as if some realization had suddenly hit him, he became self-aware and ashamed of himself. He felt the heat mounting into his face and knew that he couldn't go on.

He stood up quite suddenly and almost ran to the bathroom, but then his steps faltered and he felt weak. He sipped a few drops of water at the tap (his mouth was feeling very dry), and looked at himself in the mirror, barely recognizing himself.

He saw the neat pile of clothes she had left lying on the washing-machine, took them up and brought them into the living-room, flung them onto the couch next to her feet and told her in a voice that was surprisingly matter-of-fact and unaffected, that she wasn't suited for the photos and that she'd better get dressed.

Then he left her and went into the kitchen where he sat down at the small table. Now it was he who was shivering.

He heard her walking around in the living room. He stood up with a jerk and rushed out to her. She was looking very upset and bewildered. He gave her some money, said he was sorry and led her to the door. She stepped out, he again said he was sorry and closed the door on her, even locked it.

That was all that ever happened between him and that girl. He never saw her again and never even heard of her. He knew her name was Maria because she had told him, and he remembered the birthmark on her left breast.

Fred drove up to the courthouse lying in the midst of a peaceful park with many trees. He parked the car inconspicuously next to the Japanese four-wheel-drive of the caretaker. He scrambled out of the seat, banged the door shut, and while he stood there, rearranging the bundles around his waist, he approvingly admired his low-slung Mustang behind which the caretaker's car looked extremely crude and bulky.

A soft rain was dribbling down, and though Fred couldn't feel the wet through his cap and his uniform, he could smell the dampness, and when he held up the torch to illuminate the facade, shining little droplets started to dance in the light-beam.

Fred illuminated the top-row of windows, and when he looked up, feeling the water on his face, some droplets stinging in his eyes, looking through a corridor of light in which myriads of shining little blobs were drifting towards him, he felt for a fleeting moment that he was moving upwards, rushing through a narrow galaxy of small, dazzlingly twinkling stars.

Then his eyes automatically focused on the grey, imposing facade of the elderly building with its tall windows sunk deeply into its thick walls.

He was walking now, his torch scanning the facade. The windows were all closed (of course they would be) and there wasn't any light in any of the rooms.

He walked up the broad stairway to the main entrance and checked the three doors between the two massive pillars. He didn't check them too harshly, because they were of course under alarm and it would be rather embarrassing if the nightwatchman set off the alarm.

He walked back down the stairs and resumed his tour around the building.

The big parking-lot occupying the whole space in front of the building was empty save for the Mustang and the box-like car of the caretaker. If there were any cars, Fred would have to take down the number of their plates and leave a note for the caretaker. One night Fred had come up behind a car that was parked in the shadowy far-side of the big entrance stairs. He was just about to write down the number when he realized that the front-seats were occupied. Now of course formal identification was unavoidable. He walked up alongside of the car and shone the light straight through the driver's side-

window. The occupants had bent down, obviously hoping that he wouldn't see them and move on. Fred came up to the car, holding his torch at a progressively steeper angle, till it shone down into the thus blinded eyes of the young man at the wheel. Fred bent down and knocked at the window. The man, his face all white in the dazzling bundle of light which held it fast, meekly opened the window. There was a girl next to him, but Fred didn't care to have a proper look at her. He kept his torch well-aimed at the man's face. Then he said, in a tenebrous, dry voice, fully aware that he must appear to them as an indefinable, shadowy presence behind the blazing light:

"Good evening... Do you have any business here?" As though he didn't know what they had come to this dark, hidden spot for.

The guy was trying to evade the light with his eyes. "No..." he said shyly.

"This place must be considered as a private property." said Fred. "I have orders to take down your names and the number of your car. Naturally you will get a fine shortly."

"But..." said the guy, hopelessly blinking in the light, "I didn't know..."

"If you leave now, I will let you go." said Fred.

The guy immediately sat up straight, started the car saying thank-you and, while Fred said "Good-bye, sir", he drove off with his girl-friend who hadn't uttered a sound all the while.

Fred had been bull-shitting about the fine. He had no idea what was being done with the numbers and names he collected. Possibly they were just filed away for future reference if anything turned out to have gone wrong during the night.

And yet he shouldn't have allowed himself to let these people go. If a superior had seen him talking to somebody and he had no names to show, he would be in trouble.

Today there was nobody. The parking-lot was deserted.

Fred came to the corner of the building, where he could hear the water gurgling through the drain-pipe coming from the roof. It always struck him as a most lonely sound, possibly because it could sometimes be confused with the babble of human speech in a foreign tongue. Fred did feel lonely and would have liked to join such a pleasant sounding conversation.

At the foot of the building there was a trench, about five meters deep and two meters wide. Fred didn't know its exact purpose - perhaps to give some light to the basement (there were windows down there) and possibly to make all windows on the ground-floor inaccessible. Fred had orders to check out the trenches, because there might be bombs lying in there. So he would shine his light along the bottom of the trenches and look for some suspicious object.

Naturally heaps of rubbish and dead leaves would have accumulated down there, and besides Fred had never seen a bomb and had no idea what it would look like. So basically he just looked down into the trenches with unseeing eyes, his thoughts elsewhere.

Fred was about to turn around the corner. He had a last look at the mighty stairs leading over the trench to the main entrance.

Some winter there had been a thin pellicle of ice, formed during the night, on some of the steps, and Fred had almost slipped. He recalled thinking of taking a few corpses from the morgue, naked corpses with bruises and gashing wounds, and realistically, artistically, laying them out across the stairs...

And what would have been the sense in doing that, Fred now wondered? Surely it was not very funny. It was pure maliciousness.

Of course nobody believed that Fred would do a thing like that. He didn't believe it himself.

Corpses were often the only mates he met within nine hours of work, and though he needn't worry about how to present himself to them, they still somehow managed to upset him. He had believed that by having close looks at them he would harden himself against his emotions, but somehow that wasn't the way it worked, and instead of becoming insensitive to them he became more and more reluctant to go and see them. And yet they had become very much part of his life.

That woman for instance...

Maria being just a school-girl ten years ago, it was quite plausible that she would be in her early twenties now. The birth-mark definitely had looked familiar and it was in the right spot too.

The name on the delivery-notice wasn't Maria...

The woman was Maria, there could be no doubt about it. Possibly Fred was the only living man to know that she wasn't who she was supposed to be.

Possibly Fred was the only living man to know that Maria was dead...

Somehow this realisation was scary. And yet, what business of his was this whole thing? He hardly knew Maria and he didn't know the other woman she was supposed to be at all. Plausibly Maria was visiting that other woman and got killed in her flat. The other woman then disappeared and when Maria was found it was automatically assumed that she must be the owner of the flat.

As soon as tomorrow some relatives would be invited for a formal identification of the corpse and the mistake would become evident.

From then on the problem would be to put a label on the unidentified corpse. Fred couldn't be a great help there, because all he knew about Maria was her first name. The more he thought about it, the more he managed to convince himself that he could in no way contribute to the whole business. Whatever information he held was completely useless and futile.

He was at the back of the building now, checking a couple of doors. Behind him there were some large trees, and although there hardly was any wind he could hear their leaves rustling. It was a confident sound, like the deep breathing of a fearless giant in his untroubled sleep. Fred felt tired. He would have liked to stop walking, lie down next to the giant and let his mind drift off into peaceful realms of oblivion.

But he was the nightwatchman. He had the noble task of watching over other people's property and the fruits of their efforts while they were taking a well-earned rest. His watchfulness allowed them to confidently close their eyes and let themselves be carried away into the land of sweet dreams, knowing that he was, for the time being, taking care of the harsh realities of life for them...

He had taken over. For the next few hours he was the legal representative of the place. Fred walked on.

The woman in the fridge.

It was Maria.

"Do something about it!"

Fred actually turned around, it sounded so real. He had definitely heard a voice. It was inside his head. He wasn't altogether surprised. He had finally gone insane. It had to

happen. It was almost a relief. He half expected to hear more of it, but everything remained quiet for now...

Some other night he had heard a strange, squeaking noise, endlessly but not too regularly repeated. It seemed to come from somewhere further off in the dark. It sounded like a squeaking door being opened over and over again, but that didn't make sense. Or was it the agonizing voice of some wounded man or beast lying under a bush? After a while Fred concluded that it must be a pump of some sort, but what was being pumped at this time of the night he couldn't imagine. He had left the place without solving the mystery. A few nights later he had heard the noise again. This time it was clearly coming from the trees overhead. It must be a bird of some sort! Fred had excitedly shone the light up into the branches of the trees, trying to find the spot where the noise came from. And suddenly he had found it, a stout little fellow sitting on a branch. It looked like an owl. It was turning its head from right to left and walked a few steps along the branch, trying to move out of the light, but Fred followed it with the beam of his torch.

It opened its small beak and uttered its harsh little scream.

From then on Fred knew what the noises were.

That was in summer. Today there were no more noises except for the gurgling of the water down the drain-pipes.

Fred walked across a patch of grass.

Last summer he had tripped over something on this spot. The thing had made hissing noises. It was a hedgehog.

Some other night the beam of his torch had also randomly fallen upon a hedgehog. It seemed to be totally untroubled by the light. Fred had softly approached it and taken a close look. It was feeding on a huge slug, making deep breathing noises as it was doing so. The front part of the slug was still moving, its antennae feeling their way along the grass-blades, while its rear-end was being chewed to pieces by the cute little snout of the hedgehog. Fred was rather shocked by this, but then again, what had he imagined? That the hedgehog would first jump up at the slug's throat and squeeze the life out of it before eating it, like a lioness killing an antelope?

It was too cold for hedgehogs now. They would all be sleeping in a pile of forgotten dead leaves somewhere.

Fred came round to the entrance of the caretaker's flat. There was an intercom next to the door. If Fred had seen anything unusual he would wake up the caretaker.

The job at the courthouse consisted only of walking around the outside of the building.

Fred didn't even have a key to enter the courthouse. Usually he came here twice a night. The first time would be around ten o'clock, and if there were any lights burning in some of the rooms it would most certainly be because of somebody still working there. Thus it was rather silly to warn the caretaker about them.

The second time Fred came back here would be at about three o'clock. If the lights were still burning by then, that would obviously mean that they had been forgotten. If Fred awoke the caretaker about them the latter would usually be annoyed at not having been told earlier. Thus Fred would mostly ignore the forgotten lights (if there weren't too many of them).

Today there weren't any lights at all. Everybody had gone home early. Only fools like himself would still be walking around in the cold at this time of the night...

Fred got back to his car, scrambled into the seat, sighed as he started the engine and drove off.

Fred was walking through to the second part of the night now. That meant that he would visit most of the buildings for the second time, but in less detail. All the important things would already have been checked, and so he would just have to walk around, reading bar-codes into his control-watch here and there.

Of course he still had to walk around the exteriors of the buildings before being allowed to go inside, but this time it would be enough to flicker the light at the windows to make sure they weren't broken without having to test them manually.

To minimize the distances Fred edged around the corners as tightly as possible, almost bumping into them and scraping his uniform.

He was thinking what a stupid thing to do this was, since anybody smart enough would get the idea and might wait with a stick or metal-bar behind the next corner. A good bang over the head would send Fred into unconsciousness (especially since he was barely conscious anyway in the second part of the night), and it would then be very easy to take all the keys from him.

The relevant keys for the building would possibly already be separated from the rest of the bundle (that should make things easier), and a smart guy might even think of stealing Fred's uniform. If he then managed to walk around with the tired-out gait of a typical nightwatchman he would be as inconspicuous among the buildings as a goldfish in a pond.

In fact, Fred himself had thought of playing this dirty trick on one of his colleagues.

Knowing the whole place by heart it would be very easy for him to find what he wanted, pack up the car and drive away without any alarm being raised.

But Fred was scared of being recognized by some office-boy who would for some strange reason of his own come to his office in the middle of the night. Of course Fred would never be suspected in the first place, but the other guy might later remember having seen him around when he was supposed to be on a holiday.

Fred had practically no memory of faces, but he knew that other people did. He often recognized people by their reaction to him (a very bad habit for a nightwatchman, who is supposed to positively identify whomever he meets). Any burglar would simply have had to say "Good evening!" in a jolly friendly way, and Fred would have identified him as the person whose name was on the door of the office that happened to be robbed out that night.

But faces weren't the only thing Fred didn't notice. He felt quite capable of walking through a deep puddle in the middle of the corridor, his shoes making splotchy noises, without the thought that anything was wrong ever entering his mind.

The other reason why Fred didn't try robbing the buildings, in effect making the most out of his job, was that there wasn't any cash lying around. The only things worth stealing were computers, and then he would have had to sell them. A tedious and risky job...

Perhaps Fred almost hoped that he would, someday, be hit across the head. For years he had been telling anybody who would listen that he couldn't bear his job, that it weakened his mind so much that he couldn't think of undertaking anything else... But as long as the job didn't actually get on top of him nobody would worry too much about him. After all,

he was doing just fine, there was nothing obviously wrong with the way he worked and he was financially independent. That's what being an adult is all about.

But if he got hit across the head, people would start wondering. Perhaps even his parents, with whom he maintained a very loose, barely existing contact, would start thinking things over once again and feel guilty for what they had done to him. Though what that would concretely be and in what way their feelings of guilt would possibly help him Fred himself didn't know.

Perhaps suicide was a better alternative.

Fred had fantasized about this a lot.

The idea would be to shoot himself. He didn't carry a gun as a nightwatchman, but he owned one personally. He might take it with him and then lock himself up in the fridge. He would hide his equipment, uniform and all his clothes among the spare sheets, then lie down on one of the shiny tables, his gun hidden underneath him, then shoot himself through the head from behind.

The hourly radio-message being missed out, his superiors would eventually come looking for him. They would look all over the place, possibly helped by the police since he might have been trapped by some burglars...

They would even look in the fridge, but it would take a long while before anybody thought of taking a close look at the naked corpse innocently lying on the table. Fred wished, even though he was dead, he could see the shocked face of his superior looking down at him and finally realizing the full truth...

In many rooms there were machines, computers, fax-receivers and the like which were meant to run through the whole night. They all bore big yellow notices saying: "DO NOT SWITCH OFF!"

Nightwatchmen being so much conditioned to switch off everything with a power-button would of course occasionally switch off even these machines. If they noticed their mistake they might switch the machine on again, but then it would possibly have lost its memory or something like that. Occasionally these situations would give rise to complaints and severe reprimands of the involved nightwatchman.

Fred had thought of entering a room with many of those machines, switching them all off and shooting himself with a "DO NOT SWITCH OFF"-sign hanging around his neck.

He wondered if anybody would get the joke.

Anyway, there he would be lying, the keys spilt all over his body, eyes wide open and a silent reproach staring out of them...

Of course Fred would never really do such an insensible thing with his gun - he might lose his shooter's license, and that thought was unbearable.

He was coming up to the door from where he had started off on his exterior round-trip. It was time to enter the building and he took out the key.

There was a small van parked near the entrance. It hadn't been there earlier. This was the entrance where corpses would be brought to the morgue or collected from the morgue. They would usually be brought in a small, grey, box-like truck from the main hospital-building and taken away in elegantly elongated station-wagons with black shutters across the back windows. It was impossible to imagine that the colourful little van standing here now could have anything to do with that kind of business and Fred was asking himself what it might be doing here.

The front doors of the van opened and two men climbed out. They walked to the door and stood in front of it. Fred approached them seemingly unperturbed but holding on to his torch very tightly.

"Good evening," he said, but the men didn't answer.

One of them was very tall and good-looking. If he had combed his hair and was wearing less sloppy clothes he might have come straight out of a female teenager's pillow-fantasy with his tall, well-proportioned figure. And yet there was something else missing, Fred now thought, to make him into a male sex-symbol - the sparkle of intellectual competence in the eyes that he lacked. He had, in fact, a very blank, almost bored look. The other guy was stout and mean-looking. His general appearance was dirty. He seemed quite nervous, but this nervousness must have been a natural state for him, because there was no evidence that his surroundings were affecting him (he didn't react to them). He was plucking at his sleeve and his eyes were flickering as they scanned Fred. But as Fred came closer these movements actually subsided.

The two men were still standing in front of the door, the tall one looking incuriously at Fred. Fred would have to brush past them to get to the door.

"Okay, now," said the stout fellow, and Fred realized that he was pointing a small-caliber pistol at him. He almost backed away.

So it had finally happened!

Fred had always thought that this kind of things only happened in the fancy-talk of his superiors and in his own fantasy. Somehow he felt unprepared.

And yet he wasn't as scared as he might have been. The pistol aimed at him was very real to him, and although it was a small-caliber he was aware of the damage it could do, especially at short-range. But it didn't have the surrealistic aura it would have had for the average shitter who sees guns as a symbol of power in all the movies and never actually ever touches, let alone fires one.

Fred had handled all types of hand-guns, semi-automatics and revolvers, right up to the fantastic 44-Magnum, a revolver whose recoil could supposedly (so he was told) break your arm if you fired it while holding it stiffly. He had fired fifty rounds with such a weapon, and he still remembered slipping the big, heavy cartridges into the cylinder and the sharp smell of burnt powder after each shot.

Fred identified the pistol that was aimed at his belly now as a Berretta, caliber 25, and he suddenly had a great urge to stay alive. It would be pitiful, he felt, to die of a 25-bullet.

"What do you want...?" he asked slowly.

"Open the door and lead us to the forensic medicine department," answered the tall guy calmly, in a manner suited to sensible questions.

Fred let go of the key he was holding in his hand, loosened all the other bundles and let them fall all together, clattering, onto the ground.

The tall guy looked incuriously down. The stout guy's eyes flickered, but his gun-hand remained steady.

Fred was standing there, foolishly looking from one to the other, like a small boy who has just filled his pants.

"Come on now," said the tall guy, slightly impatiently, "take up the key and open the door."

Fred bent down, and as he did so, his hand, reaching out for the keys, brushed past his side and felt for the emergency-call button on his radio. As he pushed it the radio made

its little electronic noises, then came the buzz signaling that the call had been registered at the main Securitas-office.

"The office is calling me..." Fred said innocently.

"Give me that radio!" said the tall man with a note of desperation in his voice, pulled out the radio from its clip and flung it away.

The radio flew across the parking-lot and Fred heard the rustle of leaves as it landed among some bushes further off.

Now at least the office was warned. Having got the emergency-signal they would try calling him back. Getting no answer they must assume that something was wrong and the superiors would come looking for him.

Unfortunately they wouldn't know where he was. He very much doubted that they would have the good idea of looking at his notes of the previous nights to find out where he might be by this time. Anyway, a nightwatchman wasn't supposed to be predictable and only burglars knew that he was.

He picked up the enormous heap of glittering keys, held it in one arm like a baby, selected a key at random with his other hand and tried it on the lock. Of course it was the wrong key.

"Ah..!" he said for the benefit of the two guys waiting for him to open the door.

He tried another key which didn't work either.

He looked helplessly up at the tall guy and said meekly: "I lost the damn key..."

The tall guy grabbed him by the hair, turned Fred's throat upwards, and a knife-blade flicked up in his other hand. He laid the cold blade on Fred's throat, then against Fred's cheek and whispered into his ear: "Don't you play these tricks on us. If the next key doesn't fit, I'll cut your ear off, understood?"

Fred nodded sourly, feeling his scalp, in the grip of the man's huge hand, sliding over his skull.

It didn't take Fred long to select the correct key. Being a master-key its blade was cribbed with lines and holes making it very recognizable. He pushed it into the lock, turned it round and opened the door.

He entered the building, the two men following closely, but, bloody hell! he would show those guys that he wasn't just an ordinary nightwatchman!

As he led them to the lift he put away all the keys except the ones he would need.

The two ruffians had brought no torch. Possibly the idea occurred to them now. The tall one grabbed hold of one of Fred's shoulder-straps to make sure he wouldn't suddenly dart away and leave them in the dark.

Fred pushed the lift-button, and the door opened with its fine-sounding hydraulic hiss, revealing the blank and brightly illuminated interior of a lift big enough for a bed (or rather coffins in this case).

As a rule, nightwatchmen were not supposed to take lifts. Since they were often alone in the buildings they visited, being caught in the lift could be a major problem. The portable radio was not a reliable means of asking for help, because radio-waves sometimes had difficulties emitting out of lift-shafts.

Fred assumed that a major power break-down was very unlikely in buildings belonging to the hospital and thus, in spite of the rules of his trade, this lift was familiar to him.

They entered the lift and he confidently pushed the lowest button. The lift started moving downwards. Forensic medicine was on the top-floor, there even was a notice next to the top button saying so, but the two ruffians never noticed.

The door opened and they were in the basement. Fred led them along a dark corridor, past many doors behind some of which the whine of machinery could be heard.

At the end of the corridor there was a big, electrically powered sliding-door. Fred pushed the button and the door started to open with a screeching sound.

The tall guy standing behind Fred was feeling nervous. He had been so cool and emotionless a while ago, when he had taken charge of Fred. But now he was in a place he didn't know, and he didn't like the way Fred confidently touched buttons here and there, without waiting for his permission (they could have been alarm-buttons) - he felt out of control.

Fred sensed the uncomfortable vibrations of the tense body behind him. The guy was still relatively calm, outwardly, but the storm was building up, and his inner nervousness showed in some sinister way that felt like a threat.

Fred almost preferred the company of the stout fellow, the one with the gun. He was hyperactive and unpredictable. He looked mean. There was always some part of him twitching, but all this activity seemed rather cheerful. Fred liked him better because there was no chance of anything building up in him - whatever came to his mind was directly transferred to his body. Fred might die through his hands quite unexpectedly, but at least he always had direct feed-back of the fellow's emotions.

Fred led the two of them through an underground tunnel, through the basement of another building and then through yet another underground tunnel.

"Where the hell is forensic medicine?" asked the stout guy, putting some kind of general resentment into his voice, but without yet the least trace of suspicion.

Fred said: "They don't keep the dead among the living. When somebody dies in the hospital some nurse gets the job of pushing away the bed. They roll it along these endless corridors. It happens any time of the day or the night."

This was of course a beautiful piece of bullshit.

"Isn't there any light in these corridors?" asked the stout guy.

"There must be," answered Fred, "but as a nightwatchman I'm not supposed to switch on any lights, so I wouldn't know where the switches are, you see..."

"Shut up, now!" said the tall guy, and the tone of his voice was the sign of more to come. The stout guy didn't attempt making more conversation.

They now arrived in the basement of the building called "Pathology". It was the oldest and most sinister building of the whole complex. The walls were all grey and peeling, the hinges of the wooden doors with old-fashioned handles all needed oiling and there was a black bust of a wise man with prominent moustaches in the majestic stairways. There were pictures along the walls of the stairways too - faded black and white photographs of old rock-carvings showing various (chilling) aspects of primitive medicine.

Fred had known this building even before his nightwatchman-days. There were lab-rooms in here where young students learnt to dissect bodies. He remembered the days when he would be sitting on a bench in a reasonably white shirt at a crude wooden table, scraping out the yellow fat of an open leg.

He remembered the rooms well, the way they had seemed to him in those days. All the wooden tables with all the skin-coloured, hairy, spongy, humid limbs, strongly smelling

of alcohol, all the students in their white blouses sitting around them, talking and laughing, just as students do in all lab-sessions. Perhaps they did so here even more, making an effort to distinguish themselves from the deadly silent and yet humanoid objects they were dealing with.

Yes, Fred remembered those fat-scraping days very well, cutting and tearing at the alcohol-soaked limbs, looking for nerves, arteries, veins, getting impatient and scraping them away with the fat...

He remembered working on a head with two or three other guys.

After many years of bathing in alcohol the features had all faded away. The lips were colourless and the mouth just a narrow slit. The beard-hairs looked like tiny arrows sticking in the spongy flesh. Except for them, the shape of the nose was the only prominent thing in this face.

But then Fred had raised one of the shriveled-up eye-lids with the blunt edge of his knife-blade, and suddenly an eye had been staring at him!

The eye had lost every sparkle of life, and yet it still seemed to be aimed somewhere, as though it were ready to come to life again anytime at some divine command.

Fred had taken out the eye. After cutting through the nerve and all the muscles, some of which were surprisingly thick and tough (he used to know their names, long ago), it popped out quite easily. There it was, lying on a metallic plate in front of him.

Fred had dreamily looked out of the window for an instant. When he looked back and the washed-out face appeared in the corner of his visual field he got a small shock because the other eye was staring at him - one of his mates had opened the lid. Fred looked straight at the challenging eye - it was lifeless, what else had he expected?

Today things were different. The rooms were always dark and deserted when Fred visited them. The limbs covered up so they wouldn't dry out, or even put away altogether into some fridge.

Today he wasn't wearing a white shirt. He was buckled up in a heavy nightwatchman-attire, and there were two ruffians following him. He took them through a side-door to the staircase that led up towards the ground-floor of this ill-loved building.

Forensic medicine wasn't in this building at all, of course.

The two ruffians followed him up the stairs and into the corridor full of little ovens, fridges and centrifugal-machines. Fred took them along the corridor for a while and opened the door to the big lab-room. There was the familiar poster of a human skeleton, covered with arrows leading from tightly printed paragraphs at the side to the various bones, hanging on the back-wall, next to a show-glass partition where various items were kept in jars. Among them was a human embryo, its tiny fingers clasped to fists and its small face, lacking none of the features, looking just like a rubbery mask for an expensive doll. Fred made sure that his two followers noticed it.

The tables in the room were empty, though.

Fred took them into the next room which contained more charts and empty tables. Behind this room, in the corner of the building, there was a relatively large, refrigerated chamber. The other wing of the building contained some dignified, wood-paneled rooms, with flower-pots and trestles, where recently deceased people could be seen for the last time before burial (or before being stored away for the future use of science, perhaps).

There was a tiny, thick-glassed window in the heavy chamber-door. Fred didn't bother to take a look. He pushed the old-fashioned key into the lock, turned it and bashed down the big handle. He pulled the door fully open without peeping into the chamber first. Two coffins were lying side by side on some trestles in the middle of the room. Their lids were resting against the wall.

Fred stepped into the chamber unhesitatingly, and the ruffians had to follow. "Okay," he said.

The stout guy remained standing next to Fred, his little gun pointing. The tall guy moved gradually in among the coffins and looked at the livid faces resting on the pillows.

"Where's the girl..?" he then asked slowly.

"There's only these two," said Fred.

The tall guy looked up from the coffins. There was the faintest trace of suspicion in his eyes as he addressed Fred: "The girl was brought in this evening. She couldn't already be packed away in a coffin!"

"Fuck!" said the stout guy, who obviously had the sharper mind of the two. "This isn't forensic medicine at all!" There was an admiring and deadly menacing undertone in his voice.

The tall guy convulsively moved up towards Fred, almost upsetting one of the coffins. He looked as though he were going to slap Fred across the face.

Fred looked up at him, seeming completely abashed. "This is where they keep the bodies..." he said helplessly.

"Come on, there must be another place!" said the stout guy. "This isn't forensic medicine!"

The tall guy wasn't talking. He was just looking down at Fred, his eyes spitting X-rays.

The stout guy seemed to be thinking, then he said, almost kindly: "Take us back to the entrance we came in and we'll find the department for ourselves."

Fred nodded silently.

"Okay, move! move!" the tall guy finally burst out.

They left the chamber and Fred locked the door. They let him do it, they let him lock all the doors behind him. Possibly it gave them a sense of security.

Fred took them back down the staircase into the basement and through to the underground tunnel. Although he was trying to think of some way to waste more time he couldn't prevent himself from walking briskly. The tall guy was walking beside him, holding on to the shoulder-strap and occasionally, for no reason at all, pulling him this way and that way.

"Bang!.. Clash..." There was the sound of a sample-carrier banging around a corner in the air-flow tube ahead of them. Nothing could be seen in front of them - just the tunnel peacefully sloping away in a sweeping bend. Fred felt the tall man's grip tightening on his shoulder.

The sample-carrier came whizzing towards them.

As it swished past overhead, Fred felt the grip on his shoulder suddenly loosen completely, and as he half turned round he saw the tall guy taken aback in amazement and the stout fellow almost crouching, pointing his gun up into the air with an expression of utter bewilderment.

Fred switched off his torch and made a dash for it.

He ran, the bundles slopping against his hips. Luckily the tunnel was bending to the right in front of him. Every few steps he gave a quick flicker of his torch. It took several seconds before he heard the first report of the gun. He wasn't too scared - bullets don't go around bends.

He arrived in the basement of the next building rather breathlessly, but he took care to lock all the doors. Then he ran up the stairs, to the main entrance, unlocked it rather nervously, tore it open and took a deep breath of the clean, fresh night-air.

He was so excited he actually had to stop and think about what to do next. Since he had lost his radio he would have to find a telephone. Where was the closest telephone?

He found one in an office and selected the three-digit emergency number of the police he had known by heart for so long without ever needing it. While the phone was ringing at the other end, he tried to cool down. When the calm, deep voice answered, Fred immediately felt at ease. He said "Good evening", gave his function and name and a brief account of what had happened. He needed help immediately, he said, and would wait for it at the main entrance of the building "Pathology".

The guy at the other end repeated the message, Fred said "yes, good-bye" and hung up. Then he rang up the Securitas-office which was very glad to hear from him having got the emergency-call earlier. He gave a quick explanation of what had happened and asked for a couple of superiors to come and help dealing with the police. Whenever Securitas and the police worked together there would be a mutual exchange of signatures and extensive report-writing about which Fred didn't feel too confident.

Then Fred left the phone, the office and the building, went outside and walked back to the main entrance of the Pathology-building. He waited under a street-lamp, his eyes on the road, but looking behind him at the door every once in a while, afraid to see the two burglars suddenly rushing out and coming to take revenge on him. Of course that was impossible - even if they found their way in the dark, unknown place, they would still have to break through several doors before getting out.

Nevertheless he was very relieved when the first police-car appeared, cruising down the street at great speed with flashing lights.

The police were very efficient. Fred took a few of them into the basement and unlocked the doors for them. He left them as they penetrated into the underground tunnel.

Then he took a couple down to the other building and let them into the tunnel from the other side.

Within minutes all the policemen came out, the two ruffians wearing handcuffs held between them.

Then Fred's hand was warmly shaken by the police-officer and by the superiors and finally he was allowed to get on with his usual job.

He went back to the forensic medicine department, found his radio in the bushes, had another look at the woman in the fridge and took down her false name, Hanna Sedgewick.

The next day Fred's story appeared in the newspaper. It would also find its way into the Securitas-yearbook. The day after, Fred got a letter of congratulations from the federal police. He framed it and put it away among some other useless documents.

Instead of victimizing himself, he had managed to make himself into a hero. For this reason he was very reluctant to show himself pleased and responsive when admired for his courage and cleverness. Besides he had also been lucky, not only clever.

The two men, captured thanks to Fred, had been wanted by the police for several months. They were accused of some attempted and one effective murders.

And yet they were small fry. They had been paid by somebody they didn't know to steal a body in the morgue and dispose of it in the best suited way. They didn't seem to know why, what this was all about, and they didn't care.

So the case was closed.

But why didn't anybody get the idea that Hanna wasn't Hanna? And where was the real Hanna?

Fred could think of only one sensible reason for stealing a corpse, and that was to prevent its identification. So obviously someone wanted society to continue believing that Hanna was dead, or that Maria was still alive, or both.

By now, formal identification of the body would have taken place, and yet Fred had heard nothing about an unfortunate confusion. He had even read the announcement of Hanna's death in the paper. So by now, Maria would have been buried as Hanna.

How was this possible?

Perhaps Hanna was rather alienated from her parents, and they didn't know what she looked like anymore... And possibly the idea that it wasn't Hanna might have seemed absolutely absurd for some strong reason, washing away all doubts...

But these could only be partial explanations - the resemblance between Hanna and Maria would still have to be bloody big!

So Hanna and Maria must be twins.

So Maria's surname must be Sedgewick, unless she was married, or adopted...

There definitely was some mystery to be uncovered in this whole business. Fred wondered if he should go to the police and tell whatever he knew.

But what did he really know?

He had seen the body of a beautiful woman in the morgue, and the woman had a birth-mark on her left breast. This had brought back to him the memory of a most unfortunate experience - his first sexual experiment, a bitter failure.

That was all that had really happened. How could Fred possibly claim that he had positively identified the body? His emotional reaction to the body had been very strong, and that was understandable, after what he had been through. That meant something about him, but nothing about the body.

And yet,...

Fred had seen many dead bodies. Corpses were part of his life. If that particular body had brought back a faded memory, there must have been a reason, a reminder...

The birth-mark was in the right spot, and it was the right shape too. Fred closed his eyes and tried to picture it, turning it around in his mind.

But could he be sure? The more he thought about that damned birth-mark, the less he remembered it.

Should he go to the police and tell them about this birth-mark that he had first seen many years ago on a school-girl he had tried to rape? Tell them that this school-girl was Maria and not Hanna?

And then possibly the corpse would have to be exhumed, the parents would be asked to confirm the identification of the body...

It would be a big thing.

Surely Fred's mind, numbed and blurred by too many years of inaction, was just confused at having been shaken awake so suddenly. It was seeing connections where there weren't any. The birth-mark was just a birth-mark, a meaningless blotch with no particular shape that just happened to be on the left breast.

Whatever Fred had originally wanted to do with Maria, he had failed and lost her. It was no use to go on hoping that he might meet her again and fix things up.

All he had to do was shut up and forget about it.

Okay, he would shut up. He wouldn't go to the police. But he couldn't forget about it and so he would do some research of his own.

Maria was dead, lost to the world. But her sister Hanna might still be saved. Perhaps she was held a prisoner by the murderers of Maria. Perhaps there was something for Fred to do. Besides, that was what his inner voice had told him, wasn't it?

Obviously there was no use in asking people about Hanna. Everybody would tell him that she was dead. He would have to find out about Maria first. Assuming that she was a Sedgewick, all he had to do to get started was to find the Sedgewicks.

So Fred dug out the death-announcement from amongst the old newspapers. There wasn't any address given, of course, he should have known, but the church in which the ceremony took place was in the suburb where Fred had had his first flat, about ten years ago...

Fred looked in the telephone-book for some Sedgewicks living in that suburb. As luck would have it, there was just one family with that name. Well now? should he ring them up?

He didn't like talking to people over the phone too much. He was always scared of forgetting to ask some of the relevant questions and not getting all the answers. Then he would have to ring up again and that was usually beyond him.

When he talked to people directly, the introductory "hello"s and all this stuff would be much more extensive, giving him time to settle into the conversation and feel comfortable. Then he would be less likely to forget to ask all the questions. Besides, in physical encounters it was always possible for him to feel strong through imposing his physical presence. People couldn't just hang up at his face if he got too boring and so he could take his time even when they were growing impatient.

There was another reason for going to see the Sedgewicks - he would get an impression of the place, and since he didn't exactly know what he was looking for, that could be important.

He put his town-map into the breast-pocket and took his motor-bike to go and see the Sedgewicks.

He found the place quite easily. It wasn't very far from his former flat. It was an uninteresting, average-sized family-house with grey walls, large windows with rather colourful curtains, and a reasonable front-yard. Fred left his bike on the drive-way and walked to the entrance-door. There were flower-pots everywhere which seemed to have been left on the lawn randomly. Only half of Fred's mind wondered about this.

He knocked on the door using the blackened brass door-knocker.

It took a while till he heard steps inside. Then the door opened halfway and a non-descript, elderly woman peeked out.

"Good afternoon." Fred said in his most polite manner. He was wearing his uniform without the badges. Those were the only formal clothes he had and it made people confident or at least gave them a feel of his fake authority.

But this woman reacted as though she had seen many men in uniform lately and had grown rather tired of them. "What do you want?" she asked in a resigned way without opening the door any further.

"I once knew your daughter Maria," said Fred, "but I lost touch with her. I was wondering if you could give me her current address."

The woman looked up mildly surprised. Clearly she had been expecting something, but this was something else.

There you are! thought Fred. This woman hasn't got a daughter named Maria!

"Aha..." said the woman and remained quiet. She seemed to be thinking, and the effort made her look older and completely worn-out.

"Yes, you see, we were sort of friends in the time when I..."

"Yes, yes, I understand." said the woman and nodded. Maybe she had wanted to explain something, but now she felt too tired.

"Just a moment..." she said and walked away, leaving the door open.

She came back a little later with a piece of torn-off paper on which she had scribbled a street-name with a number.

"There you are." she said and handed the note over to Fred.

"Oh, thank you!.." said Fred, but she was already closing the door.

He returned to his motor-bike and drove off.

Now all those flower-pots made sense to him - they must be leftovers from the ceremony. He had just talked to Hanna's mother who had another daughter called Maria..!

Well, Fred set out to find Maria's place immediately.

The street where Maria lived already belonged to the main town, Fred guessed. There were a couple of bus-stops, a mechanic's garage or two, a few shops and many elderly houses lacking in character, some of them tastelessly renovated. The number Fred was looking for belonged to one of these houses. The entrance was at the side, away from the street, hidden behind some bushes. Fred looked at the letterboxes, most of them bearing a little sticker with some girl's first name, written in cute, girlish hand-writing, sometimes accompanied by a drawing of a little red heart.

Fred grew a bit suspicious seeing all this, and sure enough, Maria's name was there too... He stepped into the building and looked for her door. He didn't hesitate for too long when he found it and knocked purposefully.

Nothing happened.

So now what? He had found the place where Maria lived, and since she was dead she could obviously not be home...

He went over to the next door and knocked there. It took only a quarter of a minute and the door opened a crack. A female face stuck out and said in an artificially melodious and suggestively flavoured voice:

"Hello, darling... Do you want to come in..?"

"I'd be looking for Maria." said Fred, matter-of-factly.

"Oh, I see..." said the slow, slurring voice, "well, what about me for a change..?"

“No offence meant,” said Fred with a half-smile on his face as though he were tolerantly amused, “but my mind is rather set on Maria.”

“Yes,” said the woman, and her voice lost most of its surface sensuality, which uncovered something that seemed to Fred almost mournful. “Maria is young and beautiful, just the type suited to a guy like you.”

“Thank you,” said Fred, “now where or when can I find her?”

“How would I know?”

“She’s your neighbour. What can you tell me about her?”

“Listen, either you’re going to come in, or I’ll have to close the door. You might be blotting out my customers.”

“I’ll come in.” said Fred simply.

The woman started to open the door further. Fred saw her tight skirt under which some elaborate underwear was showing. Her legs looked fat and reddened, bursting out from under the skirt as it seemed.

“That will be eighty euros, then.” she said.

“No, no,” said Fred, laughing and holding the door. “All I want is to find out about Maria.”

“If you want to talk, we can talk.” said the woman. “You can have me as a bonus. It’s all the same price.”

Fred had the money. He suddenly felt like going in there with her and undressing, completely, lying down on the mattress with its pink little roses on the bed with its artistically curved, golden bedstead. There he would be lying, on his back, shamelessly naked, looking up into the cracked ceiling and at the fancy lamp with all the purple wool-cords hanging down from it...

A slight breeze would be coming in from under the light, pink curtains mildly filtering the daylight, and would brush softly past his genitals and through his body-hair...

She would come towards him and put a glass of whisky into his outstretched hand...

But then she would lie down next to him, put her fat hands all over his body, try to make him do something, and this thought didn’t stimulate him at all.

“I want Maria, not you.” he said, quite sternly. He was glad to be wearing a uniform. It was good to be appearing as a diplomat instead of just a man in front of such a woman who could imagine any man naked so easily.

“What do you want of her?” said the woman, suddenly suspicious. Obviously she had gathered that he really wasn’t here just as a man, but as a representative of something bigger.

“Guess..!” said Fred and smiled quizzically.

Now the woman really didn’t know what to think.

“You can help me.” said Fred. “I’ll give you eighty euros now if you promise to ring me up as soon as somebody enters her flat. I’ll give you another eighty euros when it has happened.”

“You really want to meet her, don’t you?” asked the woman.

“Yes.” said Fred.

“Well, you see, she hasn’t been round for quite a few days now. She didn’t tell anybody where she went. She never talked much. She is much younger than most of us and seems to come from some rich and well-educated back-ground. Her customers also are strange...”

“What do you mean?” asked Fred, hardly hiding his interest.

“Well, they would only stay for a few minutes, so I sometimes wondered what she was doing with them. They are mostly gentlemen in suits and with business attaché-cases. They come fairly regularly, I suppose. I saw a few hanging round recently, not knowing what to do now that she is away.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” asked Fred, as though he wasn’t interested.

“Well, you don’t seem to be part of the game,” said the woman, looking at him curiously, “so I just wanted to warn you that in the end you might be dealing with something bigger than you think.”

“That’s okay,” said Fred with faked casualness, “you just ring me up as soon as somebody is around.”

He took out a note-pad and wrote down his phone-number. He gave her the number and eighty euros.

“Okay?” he asked.

“I’ll do what I can...” she said.

“Just ring me up any time of the day or the night.” he said and left.

Fred was lying on his bed in the dark, listening to music. It must be rather late in the evening, but of course he wouldn’t be able to sleep - nightwatchmen don’t sleep at night, not even in their holidays. Their circadian rhythm is tuned for night-activity.

He was wearing his head-phones and felt surrounded by the music. Somehow he didn’t remember having enjoyed music this much for a long time.

He wasn’t quite sure if music should be considered as a useless invention, a soothing voice that beckons to the mind and leads it into issueless dreams and illusions, or if it should be considered as mankind’s greatest achievement.

Is music just a drug?

First of all, what is a drug?

A drug is usually some chemical that sets the mind spinning. It doesn’t bear any information, it doesn’t teach or show the mind anything new but just reveals to consciousness things that were hidden or carefully filed away, throws them about, lets the mind play with them, and then its effect wears off, leaves the mind sitting in its own mess.

Perhaps the mind really gets fun out of playing with its own fantasies. Perhaps it gets so much fun that it doesn’t wish to interact with the outside world any more.

But of course drugs don’t bring any renewal. They just disrupt connections, hinder inhibitions to do their work, allow the mind to play but never offer it any new items to play with.

And so what? Why should the mind be so neophile in the first place?

Well, being neophile is possibly what life is all about - after all the universe is not an excessively stable place, its entropy keeps growing and nothing in it is ever absolute. By being neophile, life-forms manage to keep ahead of the changes in their environment and thus to survive.

While a mind which plays its own games without interacting with anything outside of itself will just drown in this careless, aimless world, waves of destiny regretfully lapping over the sinking body as it disappears from view together with its amazing (but useless) internal structure.

So drugs, whatever they are (good or bad), certainly don't uphold life.

What about music? Is music just a drug?

Fred certainly was addicted to it, but it wasn't a drug for him, he felt.

Music bears some information, many people have put a life-time of effort into setting it up.

Music, Fred felt, offered him a roster for his thoughts and feelings. With its rhythm, its recurring and yet evolving themes it offered him the kind of steadiness his mind needed to organize its blurred visions into some picture that made sense.

Like a washing-line to hang out the freshly cleaned and invariably hopelessly mixed clothes from the washing-machine...

And yet music is more than just a steady line.

Even when there is a steady line, a mixed-up mind might still forget what it was trying to do while walking between the line and the washing-basket. This is where music offers some real help - through the familiarity of the musical theme it reminds the mind of what it has just done, and through the novelty of the development it shows the mind what might come next.

Well now, what about a piece of music that you know so well it has become a part of yourself? What about listening to it over and over again? Does this start to resemble drug-addiction?

This is when the phone rang.

In the middle of the night? Incredible!

It was the prostitute. She didn't sound like a prostitute over the phone. Her voice was slightly excited, but not at all in a suggestive way. In fact, she was trying to hide it.

"You wanted to find out about Maria, didn't you?" she said instead of a greeting.

"Yes..." answered Fred, also becoming rather excited.

"Well, there's somebody in her flat now, rummaging about."

"I'll be right there!" said Fred and hung up.

He got properly dressed, shut down the CD-player and the lights, left the flat and went into the big, underground, common garage of the building. His Mustang was standing there, waiting for him, looking at him with its rounded headlights from under its fierce brow, ready for a night-ride.

But Fred decided that his present assignment was too ill-defined to take the car and warm up its eight cylinders. He went for his motor-bike instead. It was standing further off, next to the supermarket-trolleys. Its rough two-stroke, air-cooled one-cylinder engine would be better suited for the job.

He fitted a couple of ear-plugs into his ears, unfastened the helmet and slipped it on, threw himself astride of the saddle with its crackled and bursting pseudo-leather covering, fitted the key and punched the choke in to its full capacity.

Then he kick-started the motor with a single, violent movement of his leg and fed it with little bursts of gas from his right hand on the handle-bar. The growling noise was unpleasant, high-pitched and nerve-wrecking.

Keeping the engine alive with his right hand, Fred eased the choke away. Then he pulled the clutch with his left hand, clanked in the first gear with his left foot, gradually let go of the clutch, and stimulating the engine a bit he drove off.

The huge garage door opened in front of him, he drove through, and it silently glided back into its place behind him.

The fresh night-air that hit his face was extremely rejuvenating, and soon the motor-bike was howling through the streets, rushing along at rather unlawful speeds.

He came to the house of the prostitutes and left the bike on the sidewalk. There wasn't any light in any of the windows on the street-side. Obviously it was too late at night even for sex-business, or maybe they were just all doing it in the dark. But everything was so quiet that Fred suspected there was nothing going on at all.

He entered the building (the main-door was still open at least - it must always be open) and went straight to the door of the woman he had met last time, next to Maria's door. He knocked on it, discreetly. The door opened, the woman appeared, hurriedly drew Fred inside by the sleeve and closed it.

Her one-room flat was inadequately illuminated by the fancy lamp with the wool-cords, giving a yellowish, dirty glow by which diverse colours couldn't be told apart. The light curtains were drawn, behind them the window and the shutters were closed. The air was stuffy and stale, listlessly hanging in the room like the feeble light.

"He's still there!" said the woman, rather nervously.

"It's a He then, is it?" asked Fred.

"I think so," the woman whispered, "listen...", and she applied her head against the wall. Fred did the same and listened carefully. There was some kind of noise, as if some biggish stuff was being shifted around.

"How long has this been going on?" asked Fred.

"It had just begun when I rang you up." That was less than a quarter of an hour ago.

"Here's eighty euros for you." said Fred and handed her the money.

Then he just remained sitting there, on her bed, listening at the wall, while she sat beside him, not very close, waiting for him to go.

The shifting stopped. Fred stood up and silently moved to the door. He listened intently. The mysterious man next door was leaving. Fred could hear the key being turned in the lock, then steps down the corridor.

Fred waited for half a moment, then he swiftly opened the door and let himself out.

The man was just going through the main-entrance. He was carrying a big cardboard-box. Fred followed him out of the building, remaining in the shadows when possible, only going a few steps at a time, around the block till he saw him loading the box into the boot of a smart car.

Then he ran to his motor-bike, started it and rode to the other side of the street where he stopped and waited among some parked cars, the small motor in front of his feet, still warm, busily but not too loudly tuckering at a steady idle.

Then the car came out of the parking-lot, its blinding headlights seeming to shine straight into Fred's face, turned into the street and drove away with the soft, low-pitched whine of a modern, powerful engine.

Fred let the car gain plenty of distance, then started off in pursuit.

The car was going at a steady, sensible speed, and Fred had to be careful not to get too close, because then it would have seemed strange for him not to overtake. But when the car left town and struck a national road that was winding its way into some woods the driver's mood seemed to change abruptly - Fred had to push his bike very hard in order not to lose him on the steep upgrades.

It occurred to Fred that the driver of the car might actually be trying to do just that - lose the hunter. As long as there were curves he didn't have a chance, of course, because by

bending low Fred managed to corner in a way no car could. With the Mustang he might have been unable to keep up, despite its eight cylinders.

After the upgrades came the downgrades. Fred decided to play a trick. In a tight curve with little visibility he suddenly flung the gears from fifth into fourth and accelerated. He passed the corner of the car at a few centimeters' distance, and, the small engine howling like a desperate, cornered creature as it launches its final attack, he overtook the car with his knee almost scraping the ground.

He swung back into his lane a short distance from the grill of the car, shifted back into fifth and swiftly left the car behind him.

Now the car-driver must assume that Fred was just a crazy kid playing dangerous games on the almost deserted roads at night - nothing more.

Further off, when the headlights of the car had disappeared from view, Fred slowed down, shifted down into second gear and switched off the high-beam headlight, leaving the job of illuminating the road ahead to the feeble park light.

The car was coming up, still driving relatively hard.

Fred was tuckering along at the side of the road like a baby-motorcycle, or a moped. The car was behind him. It wasn't slowing down.

Whamm! It passed him at great speed, Fred felt the gush of wind, and it was gone, disappearing in a curve ahead.

Fred switched the high-beam back on again and accelerated. He had some difficulty catching up with the car, but finally he managed and kept at a sensible distance from it. He didn't reckon that the car-driver would get the idea that the hunter was behind him again - Fred was just another bike, and the original hunter must be miles ahead or lying in a ditch, dead.

The road was leaving the woods now. They were coming into the spacey suburbs of the rich. This was not too far from where Fred's parents lived, where Fred himself had lived for most of his youth, in fact..

The car slowed down to a lawful speed, and so did Fred as he came up closer.

He was following the car closely, but without rousing suspicions this time, he hoped.

When the car turned into a drive-way, Fred refrained from following it only just in time.

He parked the bike further off and came back to the drive-way by foot. He memorized the house-number and checked out the name of the street.

Now should he go and spy out the house?

There might be a big dog or some form of burglar-alarm in the garden. Fred's prey would get very suspicious if he suddenly saw all the lights going on in his garden, specially since he probably didn't have a clear conscience and possibly hadn't quite forgotten about those motor-bikes following him.

Fred decided against it. He had played the hero for long enough. It was time for him to go to the police, tell them about the strange things he knew and let them finish the job.

So he walked back to his motor-bike and set off on his way home.

At three o'clock in the afternoon Fred was sitting in the kitchen, eating lunch. He had reluctantly come out of bed a couple of hours earlier, when he had lost interest in the car-magazines that were lying on the floor next to it.

Then he had got dressed, putting on the same smelly clothes he had worn the day before, since it didn't indispose him himself and there was no chance that anybody else would take a close sniff at him today.

Then he had watched a trick film on video, the story of a little dinosaur looking for his mother in a grand, desolate, antediluvian world. The stereo-soundtrack was excellent, he loved the music, a grand orchestration of sentimentality...

He wondered what he got out of these children's tales. Perhaps his parents should have taken him to the movies when he was the right age for this stuff. But they had made him wait till he could afford it for himself. Nowadays these films didn't make him happy.

After the film, Fred got hungry, and so he went into the kitchen. He was sitting there now, finishing his lunch, and didn't yet know what to do with the rest of the day - and the better part of the night.

The police - he should go to the police and tell them...

Tell them what?

Well, Hanna's parents had a daughter called Maria who was a prostitute and who had disappeared after Hanna's supposed death...

Maria's den had been searched at night by a man who drove a smart car and lived in the well-to-do eastern suburbs...

And so what?

Fred would have to tell them that Hanna wasn't Hanna, that Maria was the one who had been killed and that efforts on solving the case should be concentrated there.

He would have to claim that even though he hardly knew Maria he had been more able to identify her than her own parents.

The whole story about how he knew of the birth-mark would have to be brought to light...

Well, maybe not. He could possibly say that he had been one of Maria's customers, since she was a prostitute. That would explain his knowledge about the birth-mark and his immediate reaction to finding her body in the fridge.

Immediate reaction... The police would then inquire why he hadn't come to see them about this earlier, if he was so sure.

But he wasn't so sure. Perhaps Hanna too had a birth-mark on her left breast. Perhaps Maria who was a prostitute had nothing to do with the Maria he had fleetingly met ages ago.

Perhaps there had never even been a birth-mark on the corpse in the fridge - perhaps the swelled edges of the deadly stabbing-wound had only seemed like a birth-mark in the wavering torch-light, and Fred, being in the midst of sexual fantasies, had jumped to conclusions...

Fred could never go to the police now.

When the telephone rang he shivered almost convulsively.

But it was only Securitas, asking him if he could do some extra work. Since he had no family and hardly any friends with whom to make arrangements it wasn't very important to him when he had his holidays, and he had often accepted work at short notice. He was the odd-job-man at Securitas.

"Yeah," he answered, "if it's not the usual walkabout around the hospital-buildings."

"No it's not, it's some business-man who wants someone around his house for the night while he is away. A very quiet job."

"Fine." said Fred.

“We’ll expect you at the office in full uniform at seven pm, then, ok?”

“Right.” said Fred.

“Thank-you!” said the guy at the other end with some real warmth, because by saying yes Fred had spared him from making at least half a dozen more unsuccessful calls.

Well, the question of what to do with the rest of the day was resolved. He had four hours to go shopping (buying some food and some comics to read for the night), to prepare a big meal that he would be able to take with him (something like a cheese-pie and an apple-pie; the cheese-pie would get cold, but maybe there would be a microwave-oven in the house).

He would also pack his portable TV-video-set together with a few stimulating tapes into the car.

Then he would spend a quiet, rather boring night, with nothing but the hourly radio-messages to worry about, but at least every one of these idly spent hours would mean a net-sum of fifteen euros coming into his pocket.

The early-morning hours would be the worst - the pictures in the comics would be flickering in front of his tired eyes, and even the simplest bullshit-story would be hard to follow.

Driving back to the office and then home in that state wasn’t very clever, of course, but probably he would manage to get home before the morning rush-hours, and then he would take a quick shower to get rid of the uniform-smell, crawl into his bed and gratefully forget about the awakening world outside his window.

Shortly before seven Fred drove up in front of the Securitas main office. On the seat beside him were several bags with all the stuff he would need tonight to spend a pleasant and extended evening.

He entered the office and looked around. “Mister Stroehm?” said the girl behind the bullet-proof window.

“Yeah?” answered Fred non-committedly. She was a pretty girl, really, but Fred had no idea what kind of conversation he could possibly ever have with her. She called most of the men working here by their first names, but had made an exception for Fred who always treated her very formally and avoided talk when she handed out the keys and radio to him in the evenings.

“Inspector Dupertuis will take you there.” she said.

“Thanks.” answered Fred.

She was talking into a microphone beside her, telling Dupertuis that Stroehm had arrived, no doubt.

Then Fred was approached by a superior. “Mister Stroehm?”

“Yes, good evening.”

“Inspector Dupertuis.” and he stretched out his hand.

Fred grabbed and shook it, unsmilingly. He didn’t like the inspector very much. He was friendly enough, but that friendliness was so constant that it obviously could have no meaning.

“You’ve got a car?” he asked Fred as he led him out.

“Yes, the blue one there...” said Fred.

The inspector didn’t comment on it. “You follow me.” he said, taking out the key for one of the company-cars.

He didn't take off his cap in the car and drove off at a rather quick rate. By the time Fred had started his Mustang and maneuvered out of the parking-slot he was almost out of sight, down the road.

The Mustang wasn't warm yet, since Fred lived quite close to the Securitas office. "That fool can bloody well wait a moment!" Fred muttered with shut teeth to himself as he calmly motored down the road towards his superior.

When he had caught up, the inspector accelerated again and was smoothly gaining distance over Fred.

The double-exhaust of the Mustang was bubbling with a thunderous undertone. "You just wait till I'm hot, then I'll show you!" muttered Fred.

It took less than a minute, and the needle was beyond the blue mark. "Now I'll be sticking to your fucking rear-bumper!" said Fred.

He hated the inspector. There was a correctness about him which was exceedingly tiring. The well-groomed, black moustaches above his colourless, paper-thin lips seemed to monitor whatever he said, filtering out any possible emotions in his voice. Even jokes coming out of this mouth would have a robotic quality which might appeal to some people, specially to those who basically believed in his authority, but which made Fred feel tired and bored.

What the jokes were all about were people who had dropped out of the natural ways of things, people who had stepped out of line (and had consequently got caught in the most ridiculous situations).

Fred didn't believe in such a "natural" way of things. The rules had been made up arbitrarily and without foundations (they actually themselves served as foundations for further rules), and if people stepping out of line got caught in embarrassing situations, this wasn't a proof of the validity of the rules at all - it only happened because some shitters made sure it did.

So this inspector's sense of humour, meant to convey a powerful feeling of belonging together and being strong (we're the ones who know the rules), made Fred feel weak and helpless (I'm the one caught in the labyrinth).

Fred suspected that this inspector would treat anybody at least as an equal. All professions work along the same principles. Even scientists and doctors are basically the same as a high-ranked nightwatchman - they're involved with another set of rules, that's all the difference.

This man would never understand that some things can actually be discovered and understood, not just learned by heart.

Fred was helpless in front of such a man - all he could do was repeat "yes" as often as he was expected to, and assure him that he had really got the message whenever he was told one of those jokes meant to emphasize a point.

But now the Mustang was warm.

The road led up a hill, and the Mustang growled as it kept close to the company-car. But why did the Mustang growl so much when the other car managed to make the same effort without a sound?

They stopped at some red lights. When the lights turned green the company-car swiftly accelerated, and when Fred drove off a microsecond later he didn't have to check his Mustang as he would have expected, but was kept busy shifting through the gears in order to keep up.

So! This conventional four-cylinder car was actually competing against a Mustang and not even doing badly!

They entered the highway. At least on a long, straight stretch the Mustang would eventually beat the company-car, no doubt about it. Its top-speed was 200.

Barely 200... while the company-car, without making the slightest claim of being a sports-car, could probably better 180...

This was upsetting.

At least the Mustang had plenty of torque - no four-cylinder would beat it there. It would gladly climb up a hill with four loaded trailers behind it which would make any of those swift little Japanese runners stall even on flat country.

But who cares about trailers? Fred didn't even have a tow-bar on his Mustang...

Torque isn't only good for towing. But if it improves neither top-speed nor acceleration, what can it be good for?

But of course the Mustang was also much heavier. In an accident it would squash any of those little modern cars like an egg while hardly getting a scratch itself on its massive bumpers...

Fred watched the speedometer carefully and realized that his superior was obviously not very respectful of speed-limits.

Of course Securitas company-cars wouldn't usually get fined - they were always in a hurry. The police and Securitas covered each other in an unclean brotherhood-way. Fred had heard a story about an occurrence at a National Exhibition. Some security-guard watching an entrance had noticed three men bashing up an elderly drunk. He immediately ran to find some policemen standing on duty further off to seek help. The policemen told him it wasn't their business to get mixed up in those things, and the drunk was finally left behind, unconscious, by the three guys who left unapprehended. The security-guard, working for Securitas, was ordered by his superiors to shut his mouth about what had happened, or else he would be sacked on account of having left his position unattended. So what was the use of security-guards and policemen when people could be bashed up in front of their noses?

Never mind that now...

Perhaps Fred's speedometer was fucked. Perhaps it was drastically overestimating speed. That would mean that on the few occasions when he had been in a racing-fit and had pushed the Mustang towards 200 he wasn't actually going that fast...

200, being a nice, round number, is the limit between a shitter-car and a real car. Fred would have a sleepless night (or rather day) if he suddenly doubted that his car could reach at least 200, as the speedometer kindly suggested...

These doubts were becoming unbearable! Fred would have to buy another vehicle. A real racer!

What about a super-motorbike, since he already had a car? A Yamaha V-max, one of those things which leave steaming rubber-bands behind their wheels when they drive off. No street-legal car can beat a Yamaha V-max on acceleration..!

But what about the winter? Surely a Yamaha V-max wasn't very good in the snow.

Besides Fred had never seen any on the road except in sunshine. They were the toys of the rich, for those people who already had a powerful car.

So Fred would have to continue using the Mustang in the snow. He would in effect sacrifice it to the motorbike...

That was unthinkable! The Mustang was part of his image. If he let it rust away under him he would end up with a blob-shaped modern car and lose the very last of his distinctiveness!

The company-car was still in front of him, with that fucking inspector at the wheel. If only Fred had not had to follow him! He would have been spared all these unworthy, unfruitful doubts about nothing!

Why hadn't they just given him the keys and the address of the place instead of actually leading him there? He would have enjoyed the ride in his wonderful car instead of mumbling to himself!

The company-car was leaving the highway now. So, they were heading towards those eastern suburbs, where Fred had chased a car only yesterday. It would be funny if... Well, no, these things never happen.

The company-car was going this way and that way, along familiar routes. And here was the drive-way to Maria's "friend"...

Sure enough, the company-car put out its blinker and entered the drive-way!

It drove up to the house and stopped in front of it, Fred's superior making no effort to park it in any usual, tidy sense. He stepped out of the car and stood beautifully upright, looking grand in his well-cut uniform in front of the white car with blue lettering, with the elegant mansion in the background. Securitas, the guardians of law and order!

Fred parked his Mustang next to the double-garage in an orderly fashion and clambered out of the seat. He demurely walked up to his superior and let himself be flooded by explanations about the alarm-system, the doors, windows and keys, as well as more general things that any nightwatchman knew anyway.

He was very glad when the tiring superior finally left, because he was eager to explore the house.

Fred had always liked to see other people's houses when he had them to himself. He would examine their stereo-equipment, check through the magazine-stands and book-shelves, have a look at their bed-rooms and kitchens and try to picture their lives. In that sense, if only there had been more diversity, being a nightwatchman would not have been totally unsuited to him.

In this house there was something in particular to discover - the cardboard-box. Fred remembered the box, a big, solid box with red lettering all over it. He had all night to find it.

He started with the garage, which was so tidy it contained virtually nothing more than the smart car.

So the gentleman hadn't left with his car. That meant he had probably taken a taxi to the airport and was flying. If he was flying the chances that he had taken the huge cardboard-box with all its mysteries with him were very small. That was good news.

Fred checked out the boot of the smart car - the box wasn't in there any more.

And if the gentleman was actually delivering the box somewhere? That would explain why he was away so shortly after having found it.

Fred dismissed this depressing idea. Something else had occurred to him - if the gentleman required a security-guard in his house tonight while never having needed one before, that might mean that he had something very valuable to protect and was feeling threatened.

Perhaps it was because of those motor-bikes which had chased him that he was scared.

Fred felt that he was getting close to solving a case all on his own. How was this possible? Through sheer, highly improbable luck?

No, everything that had happened so far made sense. When somebody died violently in town it was within a reasonable range of probability that Fred, being one of the few men who shared the job of watching over the morgue at night throughout the week, would see the corpse. So when Maria, living in this town, was killed, it wasn't so absurd that Fred would discover her body in the fridge.

Then Fred had made a few sensible assumptions and acted upon them. He had freaked out the gentleman by chasing him at night, and it was logical for the gentleman to be worried over his precious box. Whoever wanted a security-guard at his home would contact Securitas, the most known name in this business, and whenever Securitas needed a man on short notice in this town, they would ask Fred, since he was their odd-job-man. So the whole thing wasn't just a huge streak of luck - it was perfectly logical for Fred to be here tonight and have a chance of finding that box. It was as if he had planned for this to happen.

But then again he might not find the box. Somewhere or other his careful examination of this case might still stall, and then he would regret that he hadn't gone to the police earlier.

Well, for the time being he would look for the box.

He found the stairways to the basement. It was like the entrance to a bunker, strangely alien to the rest of the house, which was comfortably kept in a rather neutral, but pleasant style, like the living-room in an embassy which also serves reception-purposes.

The basement consisted of a dark hall with grey concrete-walls. Part of it was organized into a cellar with a couple of large, softly buzzing fridges, their little control-diodes dimly (macabrely, Fred thought) glowing, a wide stand for wine-bottles and boxes of food that would last for many months.

Further off there were several filing-cabinets. The keys of some of them were sticking in the locks, but others were closed. Fred opened whatever could be opened, but found nothing of interest.

Wouldn't there be a safe somewhere? Well, if there was, it would certainly be locked. An unpleasant idea came to Fred - what if the gentleman had unpacked the cardboard-box, and locked up the precious contents in a safe, for instance? Fred would never get behind the mystery then...

This gentleman didn't seem the kind to be keeping things in boxes, except for his food... There it was, the box with red lettering, two other boxes piled on top of it! Or maybe it was just a similar box to the one Fred had seen him carrying that evening. Perhaps it was the same box, but with different contents...

Well, Fred checked it out anyway. He lifted off the two other boxes, the top one containing lettuce, the lower one various tin-cans (it was very heavy), and tore the box with the red lettering open, not knowing what to expect.

It contained many identical and sealed plastic-bags full of some white powder. Flour, what else could it be?..

But Fred, keeping his own house-hold, knew about flour - it is sold in the supermarkets within paper-bags full of fancy print. You cannot buy it within blank, transparent plastic-bags...

Fred took out his pocket-knife and made a small hole into one of the bags, then squeezed out some of the powder and carefully tasted it.

It had a rich, sickeningly sweet aroma.

This definitely wasn't flour!

It must be heroin, like in the films...

Fred's heart was thumping fast! So finally he had found something, something definite!

Calm down now! What is there to do next?

Fred decided not to leave the box here. He lifted it up and carried it away, out of the house and towards his car. He put it into the boot of the Mustang, on top of the spare tyre. Well now, was this a good idea?

A superior might come here any time of the night to see how Fred was working, to check out his vigilance (Fred hoped he would someday surprise one of his superiors by hitting him over the head with his torch; he would then claim that he hadn't been able to identify the guy as a superior, but that he was obviously behaving in a very suspicious, threatening way, so that Fred had done what had seemed best in the circumstances).

The superior, after discreetly watching over Fred for a while, would then come out of cover and ask Fred to empty his pockets and would also want to have a look inside Fred's car. Then he would write a huge report about Fred, and Fred would have to read through it, nodding his head several times, the superior would make him sign it and would then finally, after having given Fred a big smile, leave him alone to go and bully somebody else.

The superior would see the video-recorder in Fred's car: "Is that your video-recorder?"

"Yes."

So then the superior would write in his report: "carries a video-recorder in his car." Of course there can be no law against this. Fred might have been using the car for other things during the day, and he might have forgotten to take out the video-recorder.

Then the superior would see the box in Fred's car.

"What is this?"

"Flour."

"Aha..." The superior would have to accept that. Fred wouldn't come up with any stuttering explanations. It is no good to become embarrassed in front of superiors, it makes them suspicious. If they want to know more, let them ask.

Fred had been given some similar piece of advice about girls, long ago, by a friend he hardly remembered now, when he was a boy:

"When you go and see a girl, never make up any stupid excuses for doing so. If you do, your interaction with her will remain stuck within that fake purpose. Just let her wonder about you for a while, and if you then manage to make her comfortable and you both have a good time, the question why you came in the first place will never pop up again." Yeah, that's how it works for other people. But Fred was so uncomfortable with girls that the question why he had come would naturally reappear. The girl would insist, and Fred would have nothing to say...

Well, Fred was uncomfortable with everybody, not just superiors and girls. The only reason why these two classes of people stood out from among the rest of the shitters was that he had some basic need to interact with them...

So Fred had found the box, had made an important discovery, and yet he managed just now to sadden and depress himself! That was stupid!

He took the TV-video-set together with his bag of tapes out of his car and carried them to the house where he settled down to watch some thoughtless film and spend a pleasantly empty evening.

Fred was lying on the bed, holding up his 357 Magnum in front of him. The grip of the revolver lay smoothly and ergonomically in his hand. He was aiming at some spots in the ceiling and occasionally pulled the trigger, the cylinder would turn by sixty degrees, the hammer would bounce back upon the empty chamber and Fred would listen to the precise clicks of the fine mechanism.

A 357 Magnum is an excellent weapon. The cartridges are about the same size and weight as for an ordinary 38 Special, and while a 38 Special will usually do the job for you, killing your man without too much trouble, a jacketed 357 Magnum bullet, though it won't compare with the massive 44 Magnum, will gladly penetrate a car from behind, traverse both rows of seats as well as the driver and then still have enough thrust to go and encrust itself in the motor-block.

Fred turned round in bed, rested his head on his elbow, laid down the gun next to him and admired it. He let a finger glide over the glistening, soothingly cool metal-surface of the six-inch barrel.

Well now, time had come to do something. The box with its contents, doubtlessly worth several millions of euros, was lying on the kitchen-table.

He stood up and walked through his room half naked, holding the gun casually, and went to his desk where he laid it down. Then he got dressed, left for the bathroom and then for the kitchen, leaving his gun on the desk.

When he came back he opened a drawer, took out his holster as well as a box of cartridges, loaded the gun, fastened the holster around his shoulders and slipped the gun into it. The box of cartridges he forcefully drove into his rather too small pocket.

He left the room, grabbed and put on his jacket, made sure the holster with the revolver was hidden beneath it, and left the flat.

He drove off to the eastern suburbs on his motorbike.

When he came to the drive-way of Maria's "friend" he didn't hesitate - after all he had spent a whole night on that property. He had no official business there now, but at least it wasn't unknown ground.

He drove up to the house and left his bike next to the garage, on the spot where the Mustang had been some time ago. As he walked to the main door over the lightly crunching pebbles he could see a curtain being drawn aside in one of the windows, and a worried man looking out.

Fred came up to the door and pushed the bell-button. He couldn't hear any ringing-sound. Either the bell was broken, which seemed highly unlikely considering the condition of the whole property, or it was ringing within the hidden, soundproof depths of the house.

The bell had obviously been heard, because very soon the door opened.

There was the gentleman, the guy who had carried the box out of Maria's den, the guy with the smart car who had tried to escape from the motorbike, the guy who had hired a nightwatchman for a single night and thus led the enemy straight into his fortress. He looked tired, spent, downtrodden. But he was tall, well-groomed and had this competent look which is unbeatable, the look of someone who is above, who has succeeded in

securing a higher position for himself and will keep it whatever happens, the look of someone who has the backing of society being a superior member of it.

“What is it?” he asked, tiredly, and looked down upon Fred.

Fred felt himself blushing like a child trying to sell flowers on the doorstep.

“Well now...” he said and didn’t know how to continue. He pulled out the little plastic bag with the white powder from his pocket and showed it to the man. The man took it, turned it round in his hand (was it slightly trembling?..) and gave it back.

“Yes?” said the man, very politely, making Fred feel like saying: “Oh nothing, I’m sorry...” and going away with his head on fire.

But Fred remained brave. “Do you want it back? I’ve got the whole box.”

The man remained quiet. Soon it was too late for him to say, in the manner of a slightly impatient gentleman with more important things to do: “What box? Tell me what you want or please leave.”

He said nothing of the sort. He just remained quiet, but the way he looked at Fred was disquieting nonetheless.

Fred didn’t say anything either. He only touched the reassuring bump under his left shoulder and tried to look as unemotional as possible.

It seemed endless, but finally the man deemed it necessary to answer the question. “How much do you want?” he asked softly.

“No, no,” said Fred, smiling (the worst was over), “I don’t want any money. I want the girl.”

The man was truly astounded. “The girl? Which girl?”

“Her name is Hanna Sedgewick.” said Fred.

“I don’t know her!” said the man and looked angry and scared.

“Of course you do!” said Fred. “Anyway, you hand over the girl to me, and I’ll hand over the powder to you.”

“The whole lot?” asked the man, regaining his calm and his natural superiority.

“Sure...” said Fred, dryly, as if answering a totally irrelevant question.

“I’ll take note. I’ll talk to my friends about this.” said the man, almost in his probably usual, competent manner.

“Now you listen,” said Fred, trying his hardest not to be put off by the reassumed patronizing manner of his opponent, “I’ll be waiting for you tonight at three o’clock in the woods. You take the first woodcutter’s path on your right when you drive from here into the city. I’ll be waiting there with the powder. Make sure you bring the girl.”

“We’ll be there...” answered the man and gave Fred a menacing half-smile. He had obviously totally regained his strength. Fred would have to be very careful.

“Right!” said Fred, turned briskly round and went off to his motorbike.

It was night, about one o’clock, nothing as yet suggested that daylight would ever reappear.

Fred was in the woods, standing beside his car. He had switched off all the lights, and his eyes were getting slowly accommodated to the dark. After a while he managed to make out that the sky above the gravel-path was a deep purple instead of totally black, and the path itself shimmered feebly like a silvery snail-track.

Fred listened for any sounds. At first he could hear nothing, but gradually he became aware of a rustle of leaves here and there, as well as the soft dripping of water

somewhere. He knew nothing about these sounds, and would probably never find their origins, even if he went to look for them with his torch. They belonged to the mystery of the forest. Here all kinds of creatures did their own thing, and each of them saw the world in its own way, so that in effect each of them represented a different world, and each of these worlds probably held a paradise as well as a hell. All these worlds were inaccessible to Fred. He could only witness the occasional overlapping with his own realms of experience and try to imagine the rest.

Fred also did his own thing around here - he would occasionally come here to do some shooting. Further down the track there was a big mound of rubble. If Fred switched on the headlights now it would be in sight. Fred would walk the two dozens of meters to the mound and set up tin cans at the foot of it. Then he would walk back, take up his gun and leaning against the bonnet of his car he would carefully take his aim.

The front and back sights would be in line, the surface of the far-off can shining in the muddy darkness ahead exactly behind them, and he would pull the trigger.

The "Boom!" would seem tremendous in the stillness, but it would quickly be swallowed up by the forest. The tin-can would have taken off like a rocket, and now Fred would hear the hollow clattering as it fell back on the gravel.

And so what?

Well, for a start this was very different from shooting at a club, where some asshole with a drooling voice would yell: "Five rounds -load!"

Then, when all the shooters would be standing at their benches, all in the same, compulsory stance, the asshole would yell: "When you're ready - begin!"

Then all the shooters would start firing with their oversized small-caliber pistols, making tiny, invisible dot-holes on the cardboard-target twenty-five meters away (or missing the target altogether).

After several minutes all the shooters would finally have put down their gun with the barrel exposed and the empty magazine presented openly. Then the range-officer (the asshole, that is to say) would walk from bench to bench, checking that all the guns were safely unloaded, and finally holler out: "Range is clear - move forward and patch!"

And all the little shitters would rush to their targets to count the holes and patch them up after the asshole had come by to comment on their group-size.

This was not Fred's idea of shooting.

Let's be honest about this! For him, whatever it might be down there was the enemy, and unless he missed he wanted to see something happening - he wanted to see the enemy jump, burst or topple over!

To shoot at something that showed no reaction was so boring that Fred's frustrated concentration would quickly fade away, and his bullets would fly anywhere...

Well, here in the depths of the forest Fred had found a spot where he could shoot in just the way that pleased him, where he could do his own thing. Of course this was illegal, but he only came here in the dead of the night, and no human being would ever know about it.

Can something, which is known and felt by nobody (and never will be), except for a single person who gains pleasure out of it, really be considered illegal, immoral, unjust..? In a philosophical sense Fred guessed the answer was no. This was just like masturbation - nobody else's business unless it is done in public.

What about the forest itself?

Well, the forest is like an expanse of water - if you dip something in, the water will close around the object. If the object sinks, the water will fill in the space above it and close the surface again. The surface will always recover its perfect smoothness, whatever you throw into the water.

Even the commotion made by a swimming creature will eventually flatten out again. In a way this is infuriating, but on the other hand it allows you to do your own thing confidently, knowing that any real progress will be within yourself. Only progress will be recorded - the marks of all your struggles will kindly be wiped out by the world.

So the forest, in its neutral grandness, would peacefully swallow up whatever Fred had to let out of himself, and keep his secret for him, together with all the other mysteries it had in safe-keeping.

Fred opened the door of his car. The light inside went on. It wasn't a very bright light, hardly for map-reading. In fact it illuminated mainly the leg-room. There was another lamp, an adjustable spot-light overhead featuring an individual switch specially for reading inside the car - whatever might be said about American cars, all these little extras and gadgets sure make up for comfort and you miss them in any other car once you've had an American, inadequate though they may be in other ways.

Fred pulled out a shovel from behind the front seats and set himself to work. He dug out a shallow, broad puddle-bed in the gravel-path beside his car.

Then he pulled out a large plastic-sheet from his car and laid out the hole with it, secured its edges and corners with some large stones.

He stood back and looked at his work in the light spilling out from the doorway of the car.

The car, dimly lit from within, looked incongruous in the otherwise profoundly dark forest.

And yet, was it really so much out of place? Its shiny blue body glistened like a pool of fresh water. Its fluid lines all tended towards the grill, suggesting a desire, an aspiration.

The nose of the car was outstretched towards new smells, ready to suck in fresh, unknown winds (to cool its motor-block as well as to mix some samples with fuel in the carburetor so as to burn it in the cylinders and spurt out the result from its double exhaust-pipe, polluting the environment).

The car, with its suggestively aggressive looks, might have appeared from among the trees for the first time in the history of life. It was born in the hidden depths of the forest, where Nature still experiments with her creative powers, far from the woodless, easily overruled plains where mankind has settled itself with its well-controlled machinery which leaves no chance to any new form of spirit and life...

The Mustang was born! It was ready to surge forward into the grey world of mankind and attack established norms!

But for its first testing sortie it had chosen the dark hours of night, the time when all mysterious creatures of the woods, never as yet seen by any human eye, will spread out their tender wings for their maiden-flight, to test their freshly created abilities in the harsh world of the outside which won't spare them if they fail and never makes any allowances. Man himself had once come out of the forest in very much the same way...

Man had left the forest first, but then the Mustang had come to join him...

Fred loved his car..!

What was this bullshit Fred was going on about? That fucking car had been made in a stinking factory in some stinking, crime-ridden town in some state of America which probably still believed in capital "punishment"!

That was many years ago. Now the car was old, and like the mysterious process of fermentation which makes precious wine out of ordinary grape-juice, in this same sense the car had developed a soul of its own, something which was beyond the control of the simple engineers who had originally designed and built it...

Fred loved his car!

What the hell was he going on about? He had better get back to work!

He walked up to the car, unafraid of the two big, as yet lightless eyes and the snarling grill between them, walked past it letting his hand casually brush against the whole length of the coachwork and opened the boot. He took out the big box with the bags full of powder and carried it to the shallow basin he had built. He set the box down in the middle of the basin. Then he took out a huge, full canister from the boot and put it down next to the basin.

There wasn't too much else to do just now.

At three o'clock he opened the canister and poured the fuel into the basin. The boxful of heroin became an island in a sea of petrol.

Fred lit himself a cigarette and waited.

It took only a little while till Fred saw the light of a car. The car was still on the road, far to the left behind the trees, but it was slowing down. Now the light beams were turning towards Fred, and as the car passed over a bump a whole section of tree-tops was illuminated.

Soon Fred could hear the sound of an engine. It was a growling, low-revving engine, probably with plenty of grunt, but certainly not of the elaborate sort.

Now Fred was standing in the blinding light-beam. The high-legged car, doubtlessly a tough four-wheel-drive, was coming closer at a great pace. In front of Fred it stopped short with a quick squeak of tortured brakes and the light switched to low-beam.

As Fred silently sucked on his cigarette the doors opened and three men clambered out. A large, fat bully with a rather bloated, red face came up to Fred while the two others discreetly stayed back, standing on either side of the elbow-high bonnet of their Jeep.

Before the bully had a chance to say anything Fred asked calmly: "Where's the girl?"

"Well now," said the bully. He didn't have an unfriendly face, his expression was merely ironic, because he obviously didn't take Fred seriously as an opponent. "There's three of us and you're all alone. What do you expect?" His voice was very dry. He made a droll movement of the hand towards Fred's left hip. "I can see that you are armed, but we're well trained. You wouldn't have a chance."

"How do you know that I'm alone?" asked Fred, the light shining in his dark eyes.

"Who would your men be, my friend? Someone hidden among the trees around here?" he laughed "Don't be ridiculous. Just let me take that box here..." he bent down.

"Stop it!" said Fred so sharply that the man looked up.

"Now you wouldn't want to do anything silly, would you?" the man half whispered.

"We'll shoot you!" he added.

Fred blew out some smoke. It whirled away, showing off nicely in the lights of the car.

The bully had caught the smell of spilt petrol. There was no need to explain, but Fred enjoyed this moment of power: "If you shoot or hit me, I'll fall, and if I fall, the cigarette

will fall with me and set off the fuel. Your damned box with all its contents will go up with it.” He made a pause, sucked on his cigarette, blew out some more smoke and continued: “You’d better hand over the girl. If you haven’t got her with you, come back tomorrow.”

The bully straightened himself, mumbling. He walked back to his car.

Fred was standing all alone next to his puddle of fuel. Despite all his precautions he was still at the mercy of those three men. He was dependant on the decision they were going to make.

But even for a complete fool there remains some dignity in lighting his own cigarette, something he does only for himself. He can pretend that he isn’t here just because of the others - he is also here to smoke his cigarette. He isn’t just waiting - he has something of his own to do. That gives him a sense of independence, and thus of sovereignty.

The girl was brought out of the car. Yes, it was her, no doubt about it, the living version of the woman in the fridge! Fred stared at her, completely amazed.

The bully pulled her by the hand, swung her forward and let her go. She caught herself up just before falling into the dirt, and the bully shouted: “Go! go over to that gentleman!”

The girl half turned round. “Why? Who is he? What’s happening?”

Her voice, though scared, was fluid and clear.

“Don’t ask! Go!” the bully called out, annoyed.

“I’m a friend,” Fred said softly. “You’re part of a bargain; go and sit in my car.”

The girl obeyed.

Fred opened the door on his side and lowered himself into his seat.

“Just a moment!” the bully shouted. He rushed up with a gun in his hand. “Let me check that powder!”

Fred had switched the engine on. He left it idling.

The door was still open, the bully had bent down next to it and was examining the contents of the box. His gun was pointed at Fred.

“Okay, go!” he said after a while and lowered his gun.

Fred put in the first gear, dropped his cigarette and drove violently off, the gravel spurting out from under his rear tyres. The fire blazed up, the bully’s yell was drowned in the flames and Fred pulled the door shut.

The Mustang was bouncing up and down on the rough gravel-path. Fred pulled into the next side-track on the left and drove hard. The car was slithering sideways, its wheels spinning and churning up mud, the engine angrily revving higher, as they crossed some puddles. But then they turned into the road, the ride became smooth and Fred quickly shifted through the gears till they reached a high and steady cruising speed.

The girl half turned round in her seat. “Who the hell are you?!” she asked, an admiring undertone in her voice.

Fred looked sideways at her and wondered when he had had his last female passenger. He couldn’t remember. He hardly ever had any passengers at all, and usually the seat next to him was cluttered with maps and various other papers.

“Who are you?” the girl asked again.

“It doesn’t matter...” said Fred.

“Come on, tell me your name!”

“Fred Stroehm.”

“Well, go on, talk! Tell me about yourself!”

Fred took his eyes off the road and looked at her. He loved her for what she had just said. "I was a friend of your sister." he said.

"Maria didn't have any friends like you," the girl answered, "were you one of her customers?"

Was there some bitter irony in her voice?

"No." said Fred simply. He didn't add anything.

Hanna remained quiet for a moment. Then she said: "I know who you are - you're the guy with the advertisement photos?"

Fred was completely astounded. "How did you find that out?"

Hanna bit her lower lip. "Maria talked about you a lot, in later years, that is... At first she hadn't mentioned you to anybody, for many years, trying to work out for herself why she wasn't suited for those damned photos. Then she realized the photos were just a bad excuse, and that in reality you were desperately trying to make contact. She still reckoned she had failed and started to hope that she would meet you again to make up for it."

"What??" Fred was astounded.

"I tried to explain to her that you were just a hunter after his prey, but she insisted that, if that were the case, you would have finished the job and not let her go. You were looking for something that you obviously couldn't find and she felt guilty for it."

Fred was looking at the road in front of him, expertly steering the Mustang around the curves, but he couldn't believe it.

Hanna was going on: "Maria did very badly at school and she never managed to study. She became a prostitute in the hope of meeting you again..."

This story was getting worse and worse.

"I tried to tell her that you must have forgotten about her, but she felt sure you hadn't found anybody else and that she ought to help you."

"She didn't even hate me?" Fred asked, incredulously.

"Oh yes, she hated you with a passion. But as long as she didn't know what was wrong with her, why she had failed with you, she couldn't approach anybody else. I tried to advise her into seeking professional assistance, but she refused."

"So she became a prostitute..." said Fred softly.

"Yes, and at first she almost liked it, gained some kind of pleasure out of it - you know, a job well done. The men liked her because she was young and pretty. But gradually it started to disgust her, and then she got involved with those drug-dealers. She didn't have to sleep with her customers any more, not most of them, anyway - she just sold them the dope and still made the same kind of money."

Fred suddenly had some awful doubt. "You know that she is dead, don't you?" he asked softly.

"Yes..." she answered distractedly.

They were silent for a while. There was only the hum of the eight cylinders.

Hanna broke the silence first: "Won't they follow us?"

"They can never catch up with us." Fred answered with finality.

"So you got me in exchange of the dope?" asked Hanna.

"That's right."

"Why did you burn it then? You broke the contract! You might even have killed that fat bully! He wasn't the worst of them, you know..."

“That fat bully was going to shoot me as soon as I was out of reach of the precious box. They couldn’t afford to lose you. I did the only possible thing. Besides, there isn’t any fairness or ethics in that kind of interaction.”

Hanna didn’t answer.

“What are we doing now?” she asked after a while.

“We’re going to see some gentleman in the eastern suburbs and scare the living shit out of him!” answered Fred.

They had come into town by now. Fred followed the directions to the highway so as to drive back to the eastern suburbs along that other possible way.

"You know you are to blame for Maria's death, don't you?" asked Hanna.

"Yes." said Fred, softly but definitely.

"She always hoped that you would turn up again... Now you finally did, when it was too late."

"Yes..." said Fred patiently.

"But how did you get mixed up with those drug-dealers?"

Fred told her how he had found Maria in the morgue and how everything had started from there. "That is how I re-entered this unfortunate story." he concluded.

Now Hanna told her part of the story. Maria had come to visit her in her small flat some evening. She was still wearing her funny prostitute-clothes and wanted to take a shower before doing anything else. But then she would have something very important to tell Hanna. Just when she was coming out of the shower there was a knock on the door.

Without waiting for an answer three men came into the flat. One of them pulled a knife and they went for Maria. Hanna was going to intervene, but they took care of her too. Maria defended herself so vigorously that she got accidentally stabbed and died within seconds. By this time Hanna had become hysterical and was dragged out of the flat. She was bound and gagged inside of a car, and while one man remained with her, the two others wanted to go and fetch Maria's body, but in the meantime the whole house had become alive with bustling people wanting to know what was going on, and so Maria's body had to be abandoned in Hanna's flat.

Fred knew the rest of the story already. Maria's body was mistaken for Hanna, and the drug-dealers wanted this mistake to be kept up so that the police-investigation wouldn't be directed towards Maria's surroundings, which might have been fatal. So they arranged for the corpse to be stolen out of the morgue before formal identification could occur. At this stage Fred had entered the game. Despite Fred's efforts the mistake in identification remained ("that shows a lot about my parents" Hanna commented bitterly).

So all was still going well for the drug-dealers. They kept Hanna as a prisoner, hoping that she might eventually play Maria's part in case Maria's public appearance became indispensable at some stage. They were still working on means to make Hanna into a trustworthy slave when Fred saved her.

"Your sister was probably trying to run away and go into business for herself." Fred commented.

"I reckon so," said Hanna, "and she got herself killed in the process. There couldn't have been another ending to her fucked-up life."

Fred didn't answer to that one. It thrust the whole responsibility upon him, because he had initially fucked up Maria's life.

"Why don't we just denounce the whole bunch to the police?" asked Hanna. "We're two witnesses, and between ourselves we know enough to get them all locked up."

"No, no," said Fred, "the organization would lose some of its members, but it would survive. I think we can find a way of destroying the whole of it."

"And get ourselves killed..." added Hanna.

"There is some risk..." said Fred dreamily. He remained quiet for a little moment, but then he clapped one hand against the steering-wheel and said rather vehemently: "This is my case! I'm going to see it through to the end! I've been a shitter for long enough!"

"You want to be a hero?" Hanna asked very calmly.

"Yes, probably it's as simple as that." answered Fred just as calmly.

They didn't talk from there on till they reached the house of the rich gentleman.

Fred drove into the driveway hardly slowing down and came to a skidding halt on the gravel in front of the proud mansion.

He jumped out of the car and rushed to the big oak-wood door where he pressed the bell-button with more vigour than was necessary. By the time the door opened, Hanna was standing beside him. After all, she also wished to pay back these people, and since Fred was going on with this so confidently, she went along with him.

The gentleman had a shock when he saw the two of them, and this time he didn't try to hide it.

"You?!" he called out. Then slightly calming down: "What happened?"

"Well," said Fred, "I freed Hanna Sedgewick as you can see, and burnt the dope. Your men will still be lost somewhere in the forest, I guess."

"You burnt the dope?" the man asked incredulously.

"Yeah," said Fred, "and we came here to make you an offer."

"What can you offer me?! you fool!" the man said with real despair. "I'm finished!!" He seemed ready to bolt off, to disappear in the dark depths of the house behind him.

"Calm down." said Fred, and he pulled the left side of his jacket away from his body, uncovering the grip of his pistol. "I'm quick on the draw." he added rather proudly.

"Even if you don't denounce me to the police..." the man said, and his wrinkled face, with the lines of sternness and competence so deeply embedded that they couldn't fade away altogether, looked very inadequately anguished, "...if I can't pay for the dope the company will kill me!"

He remained quiet for a moment, his face going through the strangest and most unfitting contortions.

Then he added with a whelping voice: "I haven't got that kind of money, and you burnt the dope!"

"Here's my offer," said Fred, feeling stronger and stronger: "we won't denounce you if you will participate in following up the pipeline and destroying the organization. Once this is done, you will have nothing more to fear from anybody. You will be able to come back here and resume your normal life. You will lose nothing, neither your money nor your standing."

"But who are you?" asked the man, some real curiosity flickering up in his humid eyes.

"I'm just me," said Fred, "I'm not a member of anything, if that's what you mean."

"But you're crazy!" said the man with a certain amount of returning desperation. "You don't know what you're letting yourself in for!"

"I'm eager to find out!" said Fred smiling.

It occurred to him that Hanna might not be going along with this. He looked at her, standing by his side, out of the corner of his eye. She was quite pale, but she was watching the man Fred had in his grip with interest and perhaps some mild cruelty. "How many men have you got?" asked the gentleman, regaining some of his standing. "As I say," answered Fred, "there's just me," and he politely half turned towards Hanna, "and possibly her."

Hanna looked up at the gentleman and there was a slight half-smile on the corner of her lips. She nodded slowly. Then she asked, taking initiative for the first time in this interaction: "And how many men have you got?"

The gentleman answered seriously: "I can raise an army of ten men, maybe more." "Right," said Fred. "When do you meet with your end of the pipeline for the next time?" "In less than a week..." answered the gentleman, the nervousness showing through his voice again.

"Can you gather your men till then?" asked Fred.

"I hope so..." answered the gentleman.

"We'll keep in touch," said Fred. "By the way, what is your name?"

"Didn't you know?" asked the gentleman, quite astonished. "I'm Wolfensberger."

"Okay," said Fred, "see you, Mr Wolfensberger."

He turned away and walked off to his car. Hanna followed and Wolfensberger slowly shut the big oak-wood door.

As soon as they were in the car, Hanna said to Fred: "You're totally crazy, you know that?"

"Yeah," answered Fred as he drove off, "but I've been sensible for long enough and it didn't do me any good."

"Anyway, I'll be going along with this. I want to see this organization destroyed. But before we start I think we should take some precautions. We have to make sure that the police get all the information we hold in case of our death."

"We can do that," said Fred, rather surprised by Hanna's professional attitude.

"And where are you taking me now?" asked Hanna.

"Wherever you want to go," answered Fred.

"Well, I've got nowhere to go. My flat will have been cleared by this time, I expect, since I'm supposed to be dead, and I could hardly show up at my parents, just like that..."

"You can stay at my place," said Fred, smiled and added: "Don't worry, I won't make any advances."

"I wouldn't care if you did," said Hanna.

"You mean you'd say yes?" asked Fred, talking as unemotionally as possible.

"No," answered Hanna dryly and added nothing.

Fred didn't know what to make out of this and so he remained silent.

The next day, in the afternoon, Fred and Hanna were sitting in the kitchen at the table, eating what would have to be called breakfast.

Hanna was very casually dressed and not feeling uncomfortable in Fred's presence at all.

"You don't have a girl-friend, obviously..." she said.

"No," answered Fred, but didn't elaborate, since indulging in self-pity usually ended in his having a monologue - he had learnt that long ago.

"And you never had one?"

"Never..."

Hanna looked at him sharply. Perhaps she was trying to understand why.

"What about you?" asked Fred. "Do you have a boy-friend?"

"If I did," answered Hanna and looked at Fred over the edge of the cup in her hand, "I wouldn't be here with you, would I? I would have rushed to him as soon as I could."

"Well, you must have some kind of friends," said Fred, "how come you don't make contact with them and just let them continue believing in your death?"

"Obviously none of them were good enough friends to realize that the body wasn't mine at the funeral." said Hanna and frowned at Fred quizzically.

"I reckon only your parents got a proper chance of identifying the body." said Fred. "It's their fault."

"Maybe..." said Hanna and dismissed the matter. "Anyway, I don't feel like seeing any of my former friends just now."

"But how come you don't have a boy-friend, a pretty girl like you?"

"And how come you don't have a girl-friend?" she asked back. "Though I must say that you have a boring face. That perpetually tired look in your eyes, it's as though you had shutters over your real face."

"This is my real face." said Fred, slightly upset.

"Well, tiredness is only a state. It can't belong to the hardware of a face. Your real face is capable of more than just showing this steady-state mask all the time."

"Aha..." said Fred. This was getting too personal.

"Now you would gladly have sex with me, here and now, wouldn't you?" Hanna asked, perfectly sure of herself.

Fred almost choked on a piece of bread in his mouth. He coughed and it sent tears into his eyes. But he caught himself up, looked straight into Hanna's eyes, gave her a wolfish grin and said: "Yes, here and now!"

"That's what I thought," said Hanna calmly, "you're trying to lead your life upside down. Well, you won't get it from me."

"Are you trying to send me up?" asked Fred with a roaring undertone in his voice. "What do you mean, leading my life upside down?"

"Why do you think I wouldn't want you?" asked Hanna. "Do you believe I've got no desires?"

"I guess I'm not good enough, that's all..." said Fred.

"You've got a well built body, you're okay. Though I must say that the extinguished, listless air you have around you is not attractive."

"If..." Fred began.

"Don't go any further, I know what you're going to say. But that's not the way. In fact, that's what I call leading a life upside down." She remained quiet for a moment, and Fred had nothing to say either. Then she began to explain a few things: "What I want is someone who knows where he's going, and who is aiming at something which seems worthwhile to me as well. Now this doesn't describe you at all. You're aiming nowhere and whatever you're doing you don't consider worthwhile yourself. And I suppose you have the fantasy that by gaining access to sexual satisfaction this would suddenly change; but believe me, it's the other way round. Once you know where you're heading and happy with it, I know you will find someone."

Fred interrupted her dreamy speech: "Well, suppose I make an inhuman effort to do something that seems worthwhile, and then nobody throws in with me - I'd be worse off than I am now!"

"This is not just an empty, uncommitting piece of general wisdom coming from an unconcerned representative of the female gender. This is something I as a person say to you as a person..."

"You mean it's a promise..?"

"Shut up now, I won't be tricked into saying any more!" This came so suddenly that Fred looked up. She gave him a queer smile containing traces of embarrassment. So Fred said nothing more.

But he kept thinking about this. That talk about finding someone who is aiming at something which seems worthwhile to her as well, seemed too technical to Fred - what about falling in love? something that just happens, catches you unawares and then clings on?

But when this happens you can't just rush forward. You have to make sure the other person deserves you...

The topic wouldn't be brought up again between Hanna and Fred, not for the time being, anyway.

For the next few days Hanna stayed with Fred. She did some shopping and cooking for both of them and spent the rest of the day reading and wondering about her future. Fred was working again, but when he came home in the early morning she would come out of bed for a while and keep him company as he drank a cup of tea before going to sleep. It was quite a new feeling for him to be greeted by someone he liked and cared for at the end of his lonely round-trip in the dark.

One night he saw a fox sneaking around the courthouse. As Fred flashed his light at him, the fox stood still and looked in his direction with eyes redly glistening in the light. His mane formed an aurora around his pointed face, strong neck and powerful shoulders, and he was holding his bushy tail proudly off the ground. After a moment he turned his head away and trotted casually off on a business of his own.

Normally this would just have been a random, meaningless occurrence for Fred, but today he made a mental note to mention it to Hanna when he came home, and the occurrence became meaningful, making the whole night into something special.

Perhaps Hanna would have something of her own to tell about a fox too, or about some other animal, some pet...

Thoughts of this kind were cruising through Fred's mind all night, and when they got interrupted it didn't matter, because something else would soon remind him of Hanna in some other way, and his thoughts would get started in some new direction just as worthwhile.

So in the next few days Fred got so used to being with Hanna that he could hardly imagine his life without her, aimlessly lounging in his empty flat when he wasn't working...

It was hard to tell what really made everything so different - there were many tiny little things, not one big item on which you could put your finger. Instead of hanging about, nowadays he was chatting, smiling, sometimes talking earnestly and listening actively, and he felt that he was internally evolving again.

But then the day came when it was time to ring up Wolfensberger.

Fred was doing some weight-lifting. This was something he had started doing regularly as a teenager, imagining all kinds of things...

Of course progress had been slow at first, but at that age he still basically believed in himself and had stuck with it. Nowadays Fred continued the work because it was a habit. His muscles didn't grow any bigger anymore, but he maintained what he had, and he was glad for what he had, because it gave him a sense of self-value when he wasn't in his car, or even when he wasn't in his clothes either...

So every second day, usually in the early morning before going to bed, Fred sat down on a chair with the weights on his lap. After breathing carefully and deeply for a moment his mind would be empty of everything except for the desire to contract muscles. Then he would take the weights into one hand, make sure the hand was comfortable on the bar, then lift the weights off the lap and lower them to the full length of his arm, at the side of the chair. From there on the real exercise would begin. He would pull the weights up over his shoulder, then push them up over his head, to the full length of his arm. As he then lowered the weights again he would pantingly whisper "one" and start all over, whispering "two" this time.

After having done this twenty times it would be the turn of the other arm.

This exercise didn't take a lot of time - only a few minutes every second day - but it seemed to make a big difference on Fred's body. He would have been proud, as a little boy, to see what he was going to look like as a man and to see the strength he had, enabling him to lift up his whole body-weight with a single arm, almost far enough for him to touch the bar with his chin.

But while he exercised Fred didn't look at his body, even though he undressed to the waist for freedom of movement and cooling down, but followed with his eyes the movement of the ugly, blackened chunks of metal in his hand.

Thus he didn't know what he looked like when he heard the knock on the door of his bedroom and answered "Yeah..?" rather breathlessly.

Hanna burst into the room and saw his body with knots of concentrated power, moving under the skin, all over it.

She was taken aback. "Sorry..!" she said. But she didn't leave the room. She just stood there, waiting, watching him.

Fred didn't disrupt the exercise. It consisted of twenty liftings in a row. If he stopped now, he would have to start from the beginning again, later, while his arm was still tired from what it was doing now. Hanna would just have to wait.

He was breathing regularly and hard, breathing out while lowering the weights and greedily gulping for air while hauling them up. He wasn't ashamed of the sounds he was making.

In the past he used to be ashamed of these breathing sounds. One day his mother had surprised him in the midst of physical exertion by bursting into the room, and he had almost dropped the weights (they were smaller weights in those days) on his head.

Fred had never liked to admit his dreams to his parents. He felt that if they knew about them they would destroy them for him. The dream to become strong was one of them - it had to be hidden.

Of course it was unavoidable that his mother, who cleaned the room for him (not out of kindness, but because she felt responsible for the whole house) or at least directed some

hired woman into it for the job, would know about the weights. Of course she didn't know how regularly he exercised. Maybe she considered them just as a toy, and Fred wouldn't have wanted her to know that this "toy" exerted him as much as a violent orgasm would.

So today, Fred pondered, was the first time he exercised in full view of somebody, and there seemed to be no cause for embarrassment, so that his muscles were doing the job for him just as well as if he were alone.

"Twenty" gasped Fred and lowered the weights into his lap. "Ah..." he said and smiled up at Hanna.

"I never would have thought..." said Hanna, and seemed almost delighted.

"What?" asked Fred.

"That you were so strong!"

"Did I look weak?" asked Fred with a mocking smile.

"No, not at all..." Hanna had difficulties making herself clear. "Only you seemed not to care..."

"To care for what?" asked Fred slightly puzzled.

"For your own strength, for anything..." Her voice was drifting off.

"You mean I seem more human now?" he asked dryly, seriously.

"Yes!" she answered happily. "I'm glad I saw you do it!"

"Well..." said Fred, smiling again. "And by the way, what did you want?"

"It's almost useless to ask now." said Hanna. "I just wanted to make sure that you weren't entering the game of the drug-dealers because of me, to impress me or something..." She sighed and wobbled her nose comically. "But I can see now that you really have some energy of your own!"

"What about you?" asked Fred. "Are you sure you want to come along?"

"Yes, I am. I want to see the destruction of this organization."

"Okay," said Fred, stood up and looked at his watch lying next to the pillow on his bed.

"See you in... eight hours then!"

"Good night!" said Hanna.

"Good night." said Fred, not realizing that for her there wasn't much of the night left.

When he woke up in the early afternoon it was almost time to start moving. If he stayed in bed much longer, Hanna would come and shake him. He would have liked that, but there was no use in lounging in bed for so much longer, so he got up.

Hanna and Fred had a quick meal together, then they packed a few things into the car and started off.

They arrived at the meeting-point, the parking-lot in front of a disaffected factory-block, a few minutes too early. The truck wasn't there yet, nor was any familiar vehicle, but Fred reckoned they were at the right place because of a dashing, red Volkswagen Golf GTI with spoilers and skirts and over-large tyres incongruously standing among the rubble. He stopped the Mustang somewhere nearby and climbed out of his seat.

There were two men patiently sitting in the Golf. But now they left their car and slammed both doors shut, on either side, in quick succession. They came walking towards Fred, their jackets flapping in the wind, unhurriedly and casually. They were both tall and young and had rather blank faces expressing nothing but a bit of ironical pride. They might have come straight from a catalogue for menswear, and the red car behind them

would have fitted into the picture as well, though the desolated surroundings would have been a mark of originality that those catalogue-images usually lack.

Hanna had left the Mustang too by now and come around the long bonnet to stand next to Fred, offering him moral support.

“I think these two were involved in the killing of my sister and in my kidnapping!” she whispered.

“Why can’t you be sure?” asked Fred, giving vent to some annoyance, but Hanna didn’t answer.

While Hanna and Fred were standing rather closely together the two men were standing widely apart, their hands hanging casually along their hips. Fred was inadvertently reminded of some scene in a spaghetti-western.

“Well now, who have we got here?” asked one of the men in a well-carrying baritone-voice.

“That’s the whore’s sister and her little boy-friend!” commented the other man, as though he were pleasantly surprised.

“Yeah, it sure is...” said the first man. “The two who got us into this mess!”

It wasn’t quite clear what was going to happen next, but they got interrupted because a third car was coming. It was Wolfensberger’s smart limousine.

Wolfensberger stopped his car exactly between the two groups and got out. “Hello, everybody.” he said taking a quick look around.

“What do we need those two loving doves for?” asked one of the blank men and made a throw-away gesture towards Hanna and Fred.

“If anything happens to them, the police will be after us.” said Wolfensberger. “But as far as closing down the pipeline is concerned, they might be of some help.” He said all this quite matter-of-factly.

“But why should we close down the pipe-line?” asked the other blank man.

Wolfensberger turned a stern look on him: “I thought we had gone over all of this already. We took the dope but we can’t pay for it. How can we avoid breaking the contract?”

“Let’s get the money from somewhere else! Let’s rob a bank! Why should we obey those two chickens there?!”

“Then you’ll be denounced.” answered Wolfensberger calmly. But maybe he didn’t trust his authority to the full, or maybe he wasn’t too sure of his own decision. Anyway, he felt like adding something, and the tone of his voice suggested that he very much desired for his men to agree with him: “I think we’ve been part of this organization for far too long and become much too dependant. We’ve made a lot of money out of it, but now, before it is too late, the time has come to invest somewhere else.”

The two blank men looked down at their feet and said nothing. Wolfensberger was their master-mind after all.

Then the next car came. It was the battered jeep Fred had met in the forest on that arranged meeting of his when he had daringly delivered Hanna from the gangsters. In some strange way he felt that he and Hanna were progressing backwards again.

Men were already leaving the jeep before it had stopped properly, and the doors banged shut as it came to a sudden halt. Now the driver clambered out of the jeep. He had a toad-like figure just like his three mates, and he wore a broad panama-hat just like them. In fact he was the fat bully Fred had almost fried to death that night some time ago.

Fred reflected on wearing hats while driving - there would be no chance of doing such a thing in his low-slung Mustang. Only high-legged four-wheel-drives allow such things. All of this was slightly ridiculous - Wolfensberger, the gentleman in his limousine, the "thinking" gangster, then the two sleek thugs in the sporty Golf, and finally the jeep full of hat-wearing city-cowboys. It seemed like a slightly over-stylized plot of a cheap gangster-film in the best American tradition.

What about Fred? The guy with uniform-like clothes, a beautiful girl at his side and driving a shining-blue Mustang? What would he represent in such a plot?

The private detective?

No, hardly, because he lacked the tall, good looks, and even more important, the dark sun-glasses.

But how had all of this come about? Was all of this just a played act for Fred's benefit?

These doubts always...!

What this really meant was that there is some truth in cheap American gangster-stories, Fred decided.

By now the fat bully had seen and recognized him.

"Hey!" he hollered out and came towards Fred, "it's the smoker!"

"I don't generally smoke." answered Fred calmly, but he really was impressed by the big mass of flesh moving towards him.

"Let me bash you up!" said the bully and curled his lips into a frightening non-smile.

Then Fred swept the corner of his jacket away from his hip with his left hand and grabbed his Ruger GP-100 with his right.

The bully was taken aback when he suddenly saw the rather large gun appear in Fred's hand.

"Please!" said Wolfensberger and held up his hands in desperation, "none of that!"

"Why shouldn't we fight it out?" asked the bully. His face had never been a pretty sight, but with all the peeling blisters imperfectly covering it up, with rosy fresh skin showing underneath, it looked worse than ever. "If that guy is a real man he'll put away his gun and stand out an honest fist-fight."

"Come on, now!" said Wolfensberger. "You're too heavy!"

Fred was still holding his revolver in his hand. "What about an arm-wrestle?" he suggested.

"Yeah!" answered another of the toad-like men standing behind the bully. "That's the idea!"

The bully drew out his tongue and drove it over his fat lips. Then slowly, maliciously he smiled wetly.

A few big strides brought him to the corner of the Mustang where he kneeled down and hammered his elbow onto the bonnet with a hollow clanking sound.

Fred joined him on the other side of the corner, along the snarling grill of the Mustang.

Across the corner of the bonnet they joined hands. Fred felt his hand disappear in the spongy mass of the bully's palm.

"Ready?" asked the bully in a rough tone full of anticipation.

Fred's field of vision was almost filled by his opponent's strawberry-like nose. He swallowed the excess saliva in his mouth and nodded.

"Ho humpf!" went the bully and tried to bend Fred's arm down, but Fred resisted.

The bully had to take breath and Fred managed to swing both forearms back into the middle-position.

Now they were both steadily pushing hard and nothing was happening.

"Come on, beat him!" It was that inner voice again. "That guy is just a big-mouth. He may be big, but you've got more training than he has. Can you picture a guy like him exerting himself? Never! He just talks. You can beat him! Even if you trained the wrong muscles for this kind of job, you've got self-discipline going for you!"

Fred had almost forgotten about this inner voice of his. Schizophrenics listen to such inner voices and become mass-murderers. Well, why not, if their life was just too boring otherwise? Fred had only ever heard his inner voice once before, and he had followed its advice. Ever since he was having the best time of his life. He would go on listening, however insane that meant he was.

So he pushed harder and was really gradually getting on top of things...

The bully was contorting his huge face and sweating freely.

Fred was massaging his jaws against each other, pressing harder.

Fred sent a telepathic message to his opponent: "You never thought that you'd cop it, eh?" He could feel the other's strength fading away. "You've got big arms, but it's all wobbly fat!"

Yet Fred was reaching the limit of his own strength. If he wanted to win, he'd better win now. So he leaned forward a bit, stared at the two hands intimately joined in a sticky embrace, one of which was his, and with a sudden burst of concentration he flung them both down!

"Ouch!" the bully called out and looked at Fred out of watery eyes. Fred let go and stood up.

The bully was still crouching next to the car, massaging his arm with his other hand.

"Come on, stand up!" said one of his friends, jokingly, coming up behind him.

"He beat me..." said the bully meekly.

"Well, maybe he isn't that weak, after all." said his friend. "But never mind, you survived it!"

Despite a surge of pride that sent some colour into his face, Fred wondered if he had just made himself a new enemy. Would the bully wait for an appropriate moment to kill Fred? Well, hopefully not. There would be no honour in doing that and the bully wouldn't be admired for it. His friends might even despise him for doing such a thing, not out of ethical reasons of course, but because somebody who cannot afford fair-play must logically be weak. As long as Fred lived, the bully would still have the chance of winning a return-match, and he would look stronger if he pretended to believe in that than if he quietly got rid of Fred.

If the bully started showing off his weakness too much, he would lose his authority over his men. Somebody else would suddenly feel confident about taking over his place.

The toad-like men were hauling their beaten boss away from Fred's Mustang, and Fred was glad for it.

Now the truck was coming.

Fred had always loved trucks, as might be expected from anybody who likes power and torque, specially those with a huge bonnet in front. Of course they need more space on the road and they are also less aerodynamic than trucks with a flat front, but they look so much more stimulating..., like the head of some vicious animal. A twofold windscreen

stands for the eyes, the headlights for the nostrils and the grill for the gnarled teeth of the beast.

This truck was just like that. It had a windshield on the roof of its cabin full of fancy lights. At night it must look like a lit-up Christmas-tree.

The truck came to a stop in front of the group of people with a purging puff of compressed air being let out, releasing the spring-coils that hold the brakes in place when the hand-brake is pulled.

The driver's door swung open and the driver came out, clambered along the front mud-guard and jumped over the bumper. Then he remained standing there, in front of his truck, resting one hand on the bumper and grinning.

He was a fattish guy with a very round, white face full of darker spots topped by an unkempt mop of hay-coloured hair. He had a boyish grin showing rather small teeth in his otherwise wide mouth.

"Well, what's the matter?" he asked gaily. "Why are there so many of you today?"

"Bad news," said Wolfensberger, putting himself forward. "There's no money."

"Have you written a letter for our boss?" asked the driver, his face reddening a bit.

"No letter," said Wolfensberger.

"But that's impossible!" said the driver and his face was now brightly red, almost glowing. He wasn't leaning against his truck anymore but bracing back and forth on his short legs.

"You just take back today's consignment of drugs to him and tell him that we're finished with him."

"He'll think that I kept the money for myself! He'll kill me! And if I don't show up at all, I'll be tracked down and killed all the same!"

"That's your problem now..." said Wolfensberger, pretending to be regretful.

The driver's round face seemed to have inflated as he suddenly came forward like a charging bull, unclear words spilling from his foaming mouth. "...you filthy bastard!..."

But the toad-like men and the two thugs from the sporty Volkswagen all made one or two steps forward, and the driver stopped short.

"We have a proposition," said Wolfensberger calmly. "We'll come with you to the meeting, all of us."

"But that's highly irregular," said the driver, his flabby lower lip trembling as he spoke.

"I'm not supposed to show the meeting-place to anybody..."

"Yes, what we're doing is highly irregular. We intend to follow up the pipeline, closing it down as we go, and kill the boss at the end. Now you can either join our army or die..."

"You can't do that!" said the driver looking like a kid about to burst into tears.

"You're not going to stop us," said Wolfensberger, obviously enjoying his power in the same way Fred had enjoyed his when he had got this mess started.

"All I ever asked for were some extra earnings through carrying hidden boxes back and forth. I needn't even know that these boxes contain dope and money. I don't want to be involved with your internal struggles. Just write a letter for me to hand over and leave me out of your mess!"

Wolfensberger looked at the driver, standing there like a sick puppy, with stern, unyielding eyes.

"You carried your part of the responsibility all along," he said in an almost friendly tone.

"You can't be disinvolved. Thanks to you - among others, I agree, but it wouldn't have

worked without someone like you - young people in a momentary fit of depression have found momentary relief, which swept them into a deep abyss much more permanent than anything they had witnessed before..."

"But I never encouraged anybody to take drugs..!" yelled the driver.

"Not explicitly..." agreed Wolfensberger.

Hanna nudged Fred. He looked at her. She gave him a meaningful frown. Fred nodded thoughtfully.

Wolfensberger walked away. He came back from his car a moment later, carrying a flat holster with thin shoulder straps and a slim semi-automatic hand-gun.

"Slip this on." he told the driver and handed it over. He helped the fat boy into the thin shoulder-straps, then slapped him on the back as he was examining the gun.

The driver's eyes were glistening wetly, but he almost had a pleased smile on his face.

"You'll feel better about your whole life after having done this!" said Wolfensberger with fatherly firmness and the driver nodded shyly.

As he joined his men, Wolfensberger said to Hanna: "I've got one for you too."

"Thanks." said Hanna.

Fred was astounded when he saw all these guns. So while conditions to get guns legally are becoming tougher and tougher, gangsters aren't worried in the least because they obviously have their own bottomless means of getting as many guns as they like. So while the common population is being gradually disarmed, gangsters keep arming themselves happily and totally unhindered. In the end it will be easier for anybody to get guns illegally than to buy them legally.

"Well now, let's get down to business!" said Wolfensberger as the boss of all men present.

It turned out the truck-driver first had to deliver his pay-load here in this town and pick up some new merchandise. Then he would head off to the meeting-point a few days' journey from here. The cars of his new friends could of course just follow him, but perhaps they would rather like to meet him at his favourite trucker's restaurant at the sea-shore and then they would proceed to the meeting-point all together from there.

They all agreed to this, and after making a few cheering jokes they all set off in their various vehicles.

"Wolfensberger is a good man." Hanna said to Fred when they were alone.

"Yes," said Fred, "he knew how to handle that truck-driver."

"Do you think it was just tactics? Doesn't he believe in what he said?"

"Believe in what?" asked Fred, puzzled.

"That thing about young people falling into an abyss when seeking momentary relief..."

"Well," said Fred, "everybody knows that. It's part of any drug-dealer's job to get new customers by trapping unsuspecting (or momentarily careless) youths."

"But the words he used... an abyss more permanent than anything previously experienced..."

"This is not something you choose to believe or not. It's a fact. Wolfensberger was describing a fact."

"The way he talked about it suggested that he had thought about it, from the point of view of the victims."

"Maybe he has." said Fred.

"Yes," he added after a silent minute, "Maybe he is a better man than I would have suspected."

"Then why did he start dealing with drugs in the first place?" mumbled Hanna. She didn't ask Fred. She just dribbled the question into emptiness.

"There's probably a sad story that put him on the wrong track somewhere in his life." said Fred, "Failure in love, perhaps. I never noticed any evidence of there being a woman in his life."

"And now he tries to make amends, not only by exiting the organization, but by destroying it." said Hanna dreamily.

"This is quite a romantic vision." said Fred.

"Let's believe in it." said Hanna.

Later on, as they were cruising down the highway at a steady speed, Hanna said: "Did you notice that all we've seen of the organization so far consists solely of men?"

"What about your sister?" asked Fred.

"She wasn't really in control. She was just a lesser employee, a slave almost."

"I don't see in which way the rest of Wolfensberger's men are in a nobler position than your sister was."

"Well, he listens to them."

"Only these days, because he brought them to the edge of mutiny. Anyway, what are you trying to say?"

"What about the victims? Are they only male?"

"Definitely not. Are you trying to say that the whole organization is patriarchal and putting down the female gender?"

"Something like that..."

"Forget it." said Fred. "We're going to destroy the organization, so you needn't worry anymore about it being patriarchal - it will cease to exist anyway."

"Let's hope so." said Hanna.

After having spent the first night in a hotel (in separate rooms) they were on their way again. They had decided to leave the highway and follow the more interesting national roads to see some of the country-side. They had plenty of time, because the truck wouldn't be going very fast.

Fred was driving pretty hard and competently, changing gears before tight curves and accelerating smoothly out of them, overtaking slow-moving vehicles with quick bursts of power, all this while comfortably leaning back in his seat, his shoulders relaxed, his big, gnarled hands holding onto the wheel with calm firmness, his eyes professionally scanning the road ahead.

Hanna was watching him with pleasure. He was so absorbed that he didn't notice. While he was driving he struck Hanna as a perfect human machinery, and while she liked him very much as a person also, it was this very physical aspect of him which made him attractive as a male.

Hanna was enjoying the ride.

That was for several hours in the morning. Later he seemed to grow impatient with the road, started to drive faster than was necessary, approached curves without slowing down so that he had to give the brake a few jerky pushes while negotiating them, overtook

other cars when the visibility was doubtful and behaved more and more like a rowdy, occasionally even clearing the road ahead with angry hoots of his horn.

“There’s no hurry!” said Hanna, trying not to sound too bossy, since Fred had some of the tendencies of a reactionary. “You’re far over the speed-limit already!”

“Those limits are a joke!” said Fred angrily, as they sped around a curve with squeaking tyres.

“They’re not.” said Hanna. “They’re quite sensible. Why can’t you ever be happy without breaking rules?”

“Shitter-rules!” said Fred. “Not for me!”

“Why?” asked Hanna.

Fred hardly slowed down, but he started to talk: “If society wants to lock me up in their set of laws and rules and expects me to accept that, then they must also provide me with all I need to survive within such a cell. In other words, I will only accept to be locked up in a cell if that cell provides me with all the basic things any man may rightfully expect to have for himself in his life.”

“Well, that is the case, isn’t it?” suggested Hanna. “All you may need to have a fulfilled life is at your disposal, ready for the taking without breaking rules. As far as speeding goes, that isn’t a basic right at all, since you didn’t build your car yourself. Society provided you with it, and so it is also their right to impose speed-limits upon it.”

Fred turned his head and looked at Hanna for a flickering moment with fiery eyes. “I’m not talking about speeding!” he said harshly. “If society expects me to follow any of their rules, then they must also provide me with a girl, a wife..!”

“What??”

“Yes, I’m alone and frustrated. I’m trying very hard to compensate, and that gives me the right to break rules!”

“You’re mad!” said Hanna, and she didn’t mean it banteringly. She was positively annoyed with him.

“There’s no flaw in my reasoning.” growled Fred. “It all makes sense.”

“Why should it be the business of society to find you a wife?”

“Because they lock me up, hindering me to find one for myself.”

“That’s bullshit. They lock up some parts of you and provide you with a most generous compensation. If it weren’t for society you wouldn’t be able to drive a car at all, so why should you complain about speed-limits? As far as your sentimental life is concerned, society has never locked that one up. You are still free to strike up conversation with any girl you like, any time, and if she likes you too, you may, totally independently of society, decide to stay together. You may make love together, securely hidden away in a home where nobody else may enter without your permission while society even makes sure for you that it won’t be overrun while you’re defenseless.”

“Society made me impotent, so now I cannot accept any of their rules. I’m trying to get even with them.”

“How?” asked Hanna. Then she added: “You’ll only manage to hurt innocent individuals. Whatever has been done to you was not done by a malicious beast that will learn its lesson if you hurt it back. Whatever has happened to you was just a series of chance-occurrences. If you remain so bitter, you’ll manage to lose all your chances of making things better again.”

“There’s no way things can get better!”

"I think there is, but if you don't want to believe in me either..."

What had she said? "believe me" or "believe IN me"? She was giving hints all the time that she might want him, but on the other hand she always kept her distances. Fred was sick of this game. What he needed was sex, now! So he hardly slowed down and drove worse than ever.

They didn't talk after that, till Hanna saw a sign directing towards a sea-side holiday-town. "Let's stop there for a while." she said. So Fred swung the car into the side-road leading towards the sea.

They were motoring steadily along, each of them silently chewing in their mind on bits of the previous conversation, when a long column of standing vehicles suddenly appeared in a curve, so that Fred had to push the brakes sharply. Some of the people ahead were leaving their cars standing in the middle of the road, and walking forward to where a police-car was parked.

Fred switched off the engine. "Let's find out what's going on!" he said dryly. Hanna didn't answer. They left the car and walked forward like everybody else.

A policeman was explaining something to a group of people, but Hanna and Fred were too far away to hear what he was saying. He was wearing a jacket with shoulder-pads and upholstered sleeves, so that he looked like a gorilla. The holster with the black semi-automatic was hanging casually and totally unconcealed at his hips, and furthermore he was wearing dark sunglasses and chewing steadily on a piece of bubble-gum.

When Fred came closer the policeman had already returned to his car, and when Fred caught up with him he was already sitting at the wheel. As Fred politely addressed him through the open side-window he didn't even look up, stared through the windscreen and continued to chew.

Chewingly he answered that there was too much traffic in the village and that Fred could leave the car here and go there on foot if he liked. Then he switched on the engine and drove off, left Fred standing there, quite surprised, to follow the gurgling double-exhaust with his eyes.

So Fred didn't really know what was going on.

If he were here as a nightwatchman, wearing his classy uniform with all the badges and modern control- and communication-equipment, then the policeman would have taken the time to explain everything to him with almost boot-licking helpfulness. Because a nightwatchman complaining to his rich and important clients about the police-force making the job harder for him would have very bad consequences on the reputation of the local police.

Those policemen are assholes!

Hanna was standing next to Fred. "Okay," she said, "meet you at nine this evening here at your car." Then she walked away, down the road along the column of parked cars.

Hell! Fred was not going to follow her, apologizing or whatever! He returned to his Mustang and maneuvered it into the shrubs at the side of the road, putting it out of the way as far as possible. Then he decided that even though it wasn't all that warm he might go for a swim and burrowed into the mess in the boot to find his swimming-trunk.

Fred locked the car and walked down the road, swinging a little plastic-bag, containing a towel and the trunk, in his hand.

When he came to the beach it was reasonably deserted. Where had all those people gone to? Ah, Fred didn't care that much. He went and touched the water. It was cold, but not

frightfully so. He changed into his swimming-suit. The sand was smooth as velvet under his naked feet. He took his time to get into the water.

When he dived under the mighty, foaming and roaring waves, the water was clear to the bottom and he was suddenly floating in a strangely silent and peaceful world all alone, where except for a soft swinging motion and the strongly dampened noise of the surf nothing could be felt of the waves, as though the raging surface of the water was just a deterring barricade between two different spaces of existence.

He played around in the water for quite a while before he felt cold and came ashore. He was shivering a little and the hairs on his body were standing on end. He rubbed himself down with the rough towel and felt some simple pleasure as the warmth due to friction flooded his body.

Swimming requires wholesome body-control, all parts acting interdependently, unlike most other activities where some part of yourself is usually carried along almost uselessly. Furthermore, immersed in water the whole body is subjected to a single, homogeneous sensation. No part is locked up in shoes or any other clothes, the pressure is constant, so is the temperature. Any localized feelings are produced by the body itself through its swimming motions in the surrounding fluid.

After swimming Fred usually felt more a body than a mind, or perhaps rather that the distinction had no meaning. It was a wonderful feeling that he would have liked to keep, but which always faded away in the harsh realities of life for a terrestrial animal.

He felt that maybe sharing his life with a friend to whom not only his mind but also his body meant something would possibly unite these two things for him, and for her as well.

Sex with a prostitute wouldn't do the trick he had long since realized, bitterly.

Fred was wading across to some huge rocky island that was standing in the sea like a pudding in a plate full of maple-syrup. He put his shoes on and climbed the rocks. There were some bushes and shrubs growing on top. Fred pushed his way through them and walked to the edge of the cliff and there he stood, staring out over the sea. From up here the big breakers breaking at the foot of the cliff looked slow-moving and sluggish. The water was clear and bright, the sea seemed very peaceful, flattening out in the distance. Fred felt he had to urinate, and so he did (there was nobody in sight anywhere), over the edge of the cliff. For some reason he suddenly felt ashamed of what he was doing. Why did he grandly piss into the ocean from above with this high-pressure hose, as though he were proud of it, instead of hiding in the bushes?

The feeling of being a coherent unity was definitely gone, he realized - the upper half of himself was feeling ashamed of what the lower half was doing.

Later Fred was walking up some hill towards a light-house. It was already getting dark. Soon the big light would be put into action.

While he was climbing he was wondering why, when he thought of the benefits of having a girl-friend, only things that concerned himself internally came to his mind. Wouldn't there be a chance that they might create something between them that wouldn't only concern each of them egoistically? Maybe the fact that Fred never thought of such an aspect in a relationship was the reason why he was still alone...

But then again, how could he possibly think up such an aspect when all he had to think about was himself? How could he possibly invent such a thing, which needed the input from a second person, when all the base material he had was himself, a single person?

All you have is yourself, he told himself. You cannot invent another person. You have to find her in nature.

"You cannot invent a person." He was trying to define the exact meaning of this statement. But while he was doing so his thoughts were stumbling over each other and a feeling of depression was trying to catch up with him.

He reached the top of the hill and was walking around the fenced-in premises belonging to the light-house. Behind them there was a sandy path leading to another beach. So many people were coming from there that Fred became curious and went there too. First he couldn't understand what was going on. A police-car was standing there, in the sand, together with several other vehicles, the Salvation Army had built up a stand where food and hot drinks were distributed, tents had been set up in the sand and people were scurrying around everywhere. An electric generator was rattling somewhere, feeding a set of projectors with current.

As Fred came closer he saw that people were busily going up and down between long black objects, some of them covered up in towels.

The dark objects were stranded whales!

Here they were, helplessly lying in the sand, these big, noble creatures, occasionally stretching and wagging their tail-fins, here and there noisily puffing out their breath! People were coming and going with buckets between the sea and the whales, pouring water over them so they wouldn't dry out. Some of the whales had been covered up with wet towels frequently renewed with freshly soaked ones.

Fred walked into the crowd, idled around among the whales, standing in the way of people rendering voluntary service to them, touching their smooth, leathery skin out of curiosity and altogether behaving like a tourist in the worst sense of the word, feeling rather inadequate nevertheless.

Pretty girls in shorts were coming and going with their buckets, lovingly caring for a whale, and for a moment Fred thought how romantic it would be to save a whale together with such a girl...

Then Fred felt ashamed of his thoughts. He would generally claim that he cared for animals, and here was the possibility to do something concretely, and all he managed to think about were the pretty girls to pick up!

If you settle down to work with that kind of goal before your eyes, naturally you won't make yourself very attractive to the girls who are working here with true idealism, and the whole thing becomes pointless.

Fred realized, once again, that the way he was leading his life, floating in the void, made him attractive to nobody. He wondered what had become of all his ideals. He had probably lost them among the keys, torch, papers and control-watch...

So he left the beach, with a bad conscience nevertheless.

Then his intellect took over, drilling into him with some unbearable question: to attract girls you must pretend that you're not trying to attract them, is that right?

Isn't there a paradox?

Well, Fred eventually found the answer. To attract girls you must seem a worthy person to them first. That is more important for them than your being attracted to them.

Being attracted to a girl and showing it is not in itself a bad thing, but it is insufficient, and if it blots out everything else it may even be a hindrance.

But Fred felt that he could only become a worthwhile person if somebody helped him to break out of his cell. He felt that his true personality would only be revealed if somebody loved him unconditionally.

He was hoping to set up the various stages in his life in the wrong order, trying to lead his life backwards, as Hanna had put it. Why had he ever got so mixed up?

What a pity he had stuffed it up with Hanna! She was the one who understood him best after all!

As he was walking back to his car he came across a food-stand where he bought a hamburger for dinner. He ate it without enjoying it.

He arrived at the Mustang just about in time. Hanna was already there, sitting on the bonnet. All the other cars were gone. All those people who had heard about the occurrence on the radio and come here to see the curiosity had left as the night was breaking in, leaving the job of caring for the whales throughout the night to proven enthusiasts. They ought to be just as ashamed of themselves as Fred was.

"Have you been waiting for a long time?" Fred asked.

"No, as a matter of fact I just arrived."

Fred unlocked the car. They both took their seats.

"Have you had dinner?" Fred asked.

"Sort of." said Hanna. "What about you?"

"Yeah, just like you." said Fred.

Fred switched the engine on and maneuvered the car around. Then they were heading off, away from the holiday-town with its dying whales.

"There's still an orange left over from lunch." Hanna said. "Let's stop somewhere and eat it."

"Okay." said Fred.

They didn't talk for half an hour. When Fred saw a street-sign directing to a side-road, with the fancy name of some beach on it, he only asked: "Here?"

Hanna still remembered what this was about. "Okay." she said.

They drove to the beach, left the car and walked to the water's edge.

The full moon was out, hanging low over the horizon and looking unnaturally big. Fred was wonderingly staring at its reticulated surface which was so familiar to him and yet so meaningless. The moon was giving some light to huge cloud-structures floating above the sea, slowly wheeling across the horizon, driven along by a purposeless wind.

The light of the moon was also producing a glittering path over the ocean. It seemed perfectly smooth and well-defined in the distance, but became a series of glittering flashes as the light bounced off the waves coming towards Hanna and Fred, lapping at the smooth, sandy surface and stretching forward to fleetingly touch Hanna's bare toes.

"Who will peel the orange?" Hanna asked.

"You can do that." said Fred. "You most certainly have cleaner hands."

So she did, very carefully, and after a while she handed over half an orange to Fred, from which she had carefully scratched off all the white stuff Fred didn't like.

"Thank you." said Fred, parted the pieces and started to eat, feeling pleased that she had handled this partial orange for so long and with such obvious care before giving it to him.

"I'm sorry," he finally said, "for the unpleasant conversation we had earlier."

"That's all right." she said rather tenderly. There was some moonlight shining in her eyes and the shadows across her face suggested that she was smiling.

"What I was saying was not really justified." said Fred.

"I knew you were in that kind of mood when I started you talking." said Hanna. "I knew you were going to say that kind of thing. But sometimes it can be good to share even such negative thoughts. It was better than having an accident with the car anyway."

"I was annoying you the way I was driving, wasn't I?"

"Yes, it was..."

"Next time that happens I'll leave the wheel to you."

"Is that a promise?" she asked quizzically.

"Yes..." said Fred.

"I'll remind you of it in time!" said Hanna, and they both laughed.

After another night spent in a hotel, Hanna and Fred were on their way again, temporarily away from the sea, following the course of a river. They stopped for lunch in some small village, parked the car at the side of the National road which cut it in two and walked along on the ridiculously narrow pavement to look for a restaurant or some bakery. They came across a dashing red Volkswagen Golf GTI with oversized tyres and side-skirts, parked a few car-lengths away from the Mustang, and before either of them mentioned the car the two thugs who belonged to it appeared in the doorway of a food-shop further down the road.

They came towards Hanna and Fred with elegant strides, their abdomens fluidly twisting from side to side within their open jackets, their shoulders level except for a slight rolling motion which kept their arms casually swinging back and forth in a barely recognizable imitation of the movement of their legs. Their tall gait was in sharp contrast to the shuffle of an old man, which sent passive wobbles up through his unshapely belly with each step, whose lonely path they swiftly crossed.

Now this may all be very exciting for a young woman, but it made Fred mad! He felt it was slimy exhibitionism. He didn't like the innocent fascination with which Hanna was watching the two thugs approaching. Maybe he was just jealous.

"Now look who's here..." said one thug to his identical companion, putting a cigarette into the corner of his mouth which was slowly forming into a dirty smile.

"The two lover-doves!" exclaimed the other in mock-surprise.

They were still approaching, shoulder to shoulder, blocking the whole pavement between the wall and the row of parked cars.

Fred's madness grew to a wave of hatred, and like a surfer he got caught in the wave and suddenly rushed forward, flung himself with head and fists first into the slim but firm abdomen of one of the thugs, then straightened himself bringing up his knee with a jerk into the soft genitals of the man. The man fell over backwards gasping and was out of combat.

Fred turned towards the other thug too late to avert a well-aimed fist-blow into his cheekbone, but he hit back and kept at it like a raging fury.

There was no chance of an easy victory this time since he hadn't got this other guy by surprise like the first. The thug was taller than Fred which made things hard. But while Fred was absorbing heavy blows like a rock the other guy seemed to grow a bit wobbly, and eventually Fred managed to make him bend over like a vegetable stalk with a huge blow in his stomach, then brought him down further with a rabbit-punch in the nape of

his neck with the corner of his left hand, and finally finished him off by bringing up his knee in his face.

The thug was lying on the pavement like a worm, hopelessly wriggling his limbs into various positions, trying to get up, while Fred was standing in front of him, breathing heavily, his massive pectorals heaving up and down, looking down upon his victim out of his blood-smearred face.

The other thug had managed to take up a sitting position against the wall but was still nursing his pains.

Hanna came up from behind Fred, took him by the arm and dragged him away. "Give me the car-keys!" she said impatiently. He slowly drew them out of his pocket and she grabbed them out of his hand. She opened the passenger-door of the Mustang and pushed him into the seat. Then she got in on the other side, started the engine, messed around with the gears a bit and drove off.

"Can you manage?" mumbled Fred as they left the village and she shoved the gear-lever into top.

"Of course I can manage!" she said. "This thing has got twice as many cylinders as anything I've ever driven before, but it's only a car after all!"

Fred thankfully let his head fall backwards and rest against the back-support of his seat. Hanna stopped in the next town and bought some cotton-wool and a small bottle of distilled alcohol in a pharmacy to clean Fred's face with. Fred protested grudgingly that water would be perfectly good enough, that all he needed was a water-closet with a tap and a mirror, but she bent over him and did it for him, rather tenderly. The alcohol had a nice cooling effect on his face, but when it burnt on his bruises he jerkily turned his head away from Hanna, hissingly swearing to himself.

"Hold still!" she said rather harshly, but also faintly amused.

The next cut she washed out applying some pressure, a trick which somehow numbs pain, and Fred relaxed.

"Stupid, boyish games..." she muttered with a motherly smile on her face.

Well, perhaps she didn't admire Fred for what he had done, but her taking care of him ended up being quite pleasant, so that Fred still felt that it had been worth it, even if she didn't approve of it.

After that they had some lunch, and then Fred felt fit to take the wheel again.

The road was climbing away from the river, into some mountains, and before long they realized they were driving along the edge of a spectacular canyon. They stopped along the way and looked over the edge into emptiness. The cliff was almost overhanging, falling down so abruptly that you felt like holding on to the near edge of the stone-wall over which you were bending. On the other side of the abyss there was a road too, under which you could see the beautiful colours, various tones of reddish brown, of the layers in the cliff. The road looked pathetically small, built by ignorant, trustful ants, perched on the edge of the huge bite into a multi layered birthday-cake. It was scary to think that the broad road behind you was the same kind of tiny ledge at the side of the cliff as the one you saw opposite.

And yet, when you looked down along the cliff's face, you could see some green specks; some tough vegetation was actually clinging to the cliff's side!

Down below the river was winding its way. It looked like a mere trickle nobody would sensibly have held responsible for this huge cut into the landscape. Only the glittering on

its surface and its deep blue colour suggested that it was not, in fact, such a small mass of water.

They were on their way again. The canyon was to their right, a steep, rocky upgrade to their left. The road was thus stuck between emptiness and an all too solid mass of rocks. It was still climbing, but the Mustang drove upwards with the slightest adjustment of the pressure on the gas and Fred didn't remember that its speed had ever slackened because of the steepness of an upgrade.

They drove up to an old French car pattering along, its motor screaming at its driver, a scrawny old man holding the wheel at five past eleven and staring out of the windscreen as if his life depended on something straight ahead. Since there was enough visibility Fred pushed down the gas and the Mustang swiftly drifted past the high-slung, narrow little car with a casual gurgle from its exhaust.

Further on there came a long left-curve, following the side of the canyon. Fred came up to the curve pretty fast, and for a moment it seemed that the Mustang would fly out into the blue emptiness, but Fred held on to the wheel, and so instead it turned and turned, a whole panorama of endless sky above the rugged edges of the cliff on the far side of the canyon drifting past the Mustang's broad windscreen.

They had the road to themselves, and Fred was driving hard and competently. It was fun! Fred wouldn't have thought that anyone could keep up with them, but there was somebody who could. He saw the red Volkswagen Golf in his rearview-mirror, suddenly appearing out of a curve like a racing-car, its front-tyres turned towards the outer edge of the road, trying to bring the car back into line at the end of the curve taken at speed.

Those guys must be rally-class drivers!

It was catching up, and sure enough, soon Fred could see the two thugs, with identical grins on their indistinguishable faces, behind their high-browed windscreen.

Fred tried to drive faster, but they wouldn't let him get away.

"Stop it!" said Hanna, but Fred wasn't listening.

If anything the road had become steeper and its curves tighter.

Fred was driving in third gear, and whenever he came out of a curve where he had slowed down, he just pushed down the gas to the full, allowing the engine to suck in excessive amounts of fuel, and it would just rev up with all the lazy power a V8 has to offer. In the meantime the driver of the Golf would have to shift down into second to pick up lost revs again, and the Golf would lose some distance over the Ford despite its superior power-to-weight ratio at high revs.

"Stop this game!" Hanna was shouting.

"This is not a game!" said Fred quite calmly, but with an expression of determination on his face that Hanna had never seen on him before.

"For God's sake..." Fred suddenly gasped, his eyes widening as he stared into the rearview-mirror.

Hanna didn't understand.

In the next moment there was the report of a gun and reddish matter splattered all over the windscreen in front of Fred! He let go of the steering-wheel, yelling like hell!

Hanna reached out for the wheel across the middle-console, grabbed it and managed to pull it around just in time for the next curve.

Fred was convulsively wriggling in his seat, yelling to the full power of his lungs like an alarm-siren, straight into Hanna's left ear as she was steering the car, bent over his lap. He probably wasn't conscious of what he was doing.

"Let go of the gas!" she shouted. But the car kept steadily going and Fred's wailing didn't abate either.

God! There was a one-lane bridge across a water-fall ahead! The light was turning red! The Mustang kept surging forward, squirming through the curves with tortured tyres, sped onto the bridge, there was the rattling as it passed over the wooden planks, a huge truck was appearing ahead, soon Hanna could only see its grill! The Mustang's bonnet might just manage to pass under the bumper of the truck. Then there would be an explosion of glass from the wind-screen, Hanna might save herself under the dash-board, but Fred would have his head chopped off!

The truck was going to enter the bridge. Its driver had seen the light turn green and had automatically, self-righteously as any unsuspecting person would, started the truck.

The Mustang might just manage to squeeze through the gap between the truck and the wall, if only that truck-driver would see them coming and hit the brake!

There was a "Ping!" as one of the outside rearview-mirrors got scraped off the Mustang, the angry horn of the truck and they were through!

Hanna managed to negotiate the next few curves, then, thanks God! there came a straight stretch of road! She tried to bang the gear-lever into neutral. Since there was no way of getting at the clutch that lever wouldn't go. In the end she almost climbed on Fred's lap and kicked it.

The lever finally popped out of fourth into neutral with not so nice mechanical noises. The engine, suddenly churning in neutral, started to howl in protest.

Hanna stopped the car at the side of the road with the hand-brake.

Fred came to his senses as the wailing of his emptily high-revving V8 was taking over from his own yelling.

"Let go of the gas." Hanna said as loudly as she could without seeming harsh. He did, and the noise abated with a diminishing roar. It became very quiet.

"What happened?" asked Fred with striking innocence.

"You got hit in the shoulder by a bullet it seems..." Hanna said.

"What about our pursuers?"

"They must be stuck on the bridge."

"A bridge? Was there a bridge?"

"Why, yes! I must have been steering that car for more than a kilometer while you wouldn't let go of the gas!"

"Oh my God!" said Fred.

"Don't touch your wound." said Hanna. "Does it hurt?"

"No..., actually I can't feel anything just now..."

"You could have had us both killed, the way you reacted when you got hit! What was it that put you off so much? The sight of your own blood or the pain?"

"I don't know... I just had a terrible shock! I saw the guy take aim, and there was nothing I could do!"

"Okay, get out of your seat now. I'll do the driving for a while, but from the right spot!"

"We have to go back and kill those two thugs!"

"Never mind them! They won't try it again. It was just meant as a warning, but they needn't even know that they hit you!"

"What?? What makes you think that they won't try it again?"

"They know that next time we'll be prepared and shoot first."

Fred had to admit that there was some sense in that. He got out of the car, walked to the other side and carefully, trying to spare his wounded shoulder, eased himself into Hanna's seat.

Hanna bounced into the driver's seat and wiped away Fred's fleshy blood from the windscreen in front of her with a towel.

"It's fun to drive your tough car!" she said and laughed. Fred only smiled tiredly.

After a few minutes of motoring along Fred suddenly said: "And Hanna... Thanks for saving my life!"

"You mean both our lives!" she answered. "As well as your car!"

Fred leaned back in his seat and said nothing.

Hanna brought Fred to a Doctor who cleaned and stitched up his wound. It wasn't a dangerous wound and would probably heal without any fuss. Fred was all the more embarrassed for having reacted so violently and dangerously when it was inflicted on him.

That evening they didn't have any luck in finding a hotel. Perhaps they had started looking too late, but they had expected that there would always be free rooms in this out-of-season time.

It was already fairly late when they were told at the reception of a motel that there was just one room left. Fred helplessly looked back at Hanna, but she just nodded, nudged him almost, so they took the room.

As luck would have it, there was just a double-bed, not even a big one, in the room. Fred thought of asking for some arrangement, an extra mattress to put on the floor or something like that, but they were both tired and it was late.

Hanna locked herself up in the bathroom, and when she came out she was wearing rather masculine, black pyjamas. Fred liked the sight of her naked feet as she walked over to the bed, chose her side and crawled into it, stretching herself and pushing them under the sheets.

When he was ready Fred joined her, but keeping as closely to his edge of the bed as possible.

He realized that he wasn't going to enjoy this at all. Of course it was wonderful to sleep in the same bed with her, but usually he would indulge in some sexual fantasies before going to sleep, wriggle around in the sheets for a while till he had the full physiological reaction, and now he couldn't do this. There was no way he could put his mind and body at ease.

He thought this over for a while. He had done his weight-lifting in front of her and no harm had come of it. Why shouldn't he masturbate in her presence? He could wait till she had fallen asleep and then do it very discreetly. But the movements of his body would transmit through the single mattress. She would be pleasantly shaken by the rhythmical waves. She might wake up, or it might just stir up her dreams. What if, while she was still asleep, her head passively rolling this way and that way on the pillow, a pleased smile gradually appeared on her face?

Friendship may consist of profound feelings, just as profound as in love, covering some aspects of life. Love consists of those same feelings, but covering all aspects of life, including sex.

Sex may be, after all, just an internal struggle to unite the mind and the body, a very personal and not at all a sociable thing. But in love you share even that.

But since it is such a personal thing, it may be offensive to do it anytime and to get anyone involved.

Things that can produce strong reactions of desire and lust can usually also produce extremely strong reactions of distaste and disgust. Why is that so?

Probably because these things affect a living being very much, and that can have disastrous effects if it happens in the wrong context. Fred wondered what this meant in the particular case of sex.

It was time to switch off the lamp, but somehow Fred dreaded this moment. As long as it was burning he could distinguish the normal from the abnormal because there was a whole frame-work of normality to compare things against. But once in the dark his feelings would get even more mixed up than they were now.

Here we are: "Switch off that lamp," Hanna said, "I want to sleep."

Fred reached for the switch. "Do it!" he told himself. He knocked the switch and the light was gone immediately, though his eyes, unaccustomed to the sudden darkness, saw some sizzling explosions of colours fading away into the distance for a moment.

"I can't sleep," said Fred and realized that his voice still perfectly worked in the dark.

"I'm so tired," said Hanna, "but I'm not sleepy either." She sighed.

"Let's do something else," said Fred.

There was the noise of a head turning sharply on a pillow.

"You'd have to force it upon me! I don't want it!" said Hanna.

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Fred.

"Go ahead and do it!" said Hanna. "Then I'll run into the bathroom and wash it off. I will survive it, with just another filthy memory to bear!"

"But..."

"And you'll survive it too. We'll both survive it, SEPARATELY!"

"Why would it be so disgusting anyway?"

She had calmed down: "The wrong thing at the wrong time."

"Let's just talk, then," said Fred.

"Yes," said Hanna, "go on, talk, I'm listening."

"No," said Fred, "this time you talk and I'll do the listening. Tell me why a girl like you doesn't have a boy-friend."

Hanna suddenly felt that it would be very easy to talk. Her words would just spin off into the empty darkness and eventually reach Fred's ears, but not as though they were intended for him. Fred would just hear the words, coming from a place he couldn't see, and in the morning, when he would see Hanna, he wouldn't be reminded of what she had said during the night.

So the speech Hanna was going to make would be forever out of reach of any tactical games, a nightly intimacy that doesn't withstand the light of day.

So Hanna started to tell her story:

"I used to be rather lonely as a child. I guess Maria took part in social life much more, and since we were very similar, there wasn't any room left for me. And somehow I never

learnt to be part of things. Perhaps I was scared to try. Perhaps I was afraid of being confronted with things I hadn't set up, being mistaken for my sister, and then being forced to evolve in a world that would never be wholly known to me, being hers and not mine. Maybe Maria would have had the same fears, but by retracting I left the path open for her and she didn't have that problem.

When we got older our parents made a real effort to separate us, sending us to different schools and actively encouraging us to evolve differently. Though I guess I was the one who was encouraged to be different - Maria always got the first choice that would have appealed to me more also.

Yet later Maria started to have some real problems, not knowing what she wanted any more, and of course I took over the dominant position. Now that I think of it, that must have been when you had entered her life.

I started to feel freer and tried to get more involved with other people and with groups, and wasn't so scared anymore of suddenly finding myself in a world I didn't understand. And yet I still didn't naturally become part of things. People were friendly to me, listened to me, took me seriously, but they somehow didn't include me into whatever their main social activities were. Somehow I had missed out on something in the past that was taken for granted at this stage and not taught anymore. And while I was too big to go back into the past, I was simply not an interesting enough partner in my age-group to be made part of things in the present.

When I grew older I also got more in touch with the other sex, or rather, they got in touch with me. I guess I had all the physical attributes they were looking for, and it got them interested.

Now I was still lonely, and I got attached to those nice guys who walked me home and made serious efforts to get to know me. But I wasn't ready yet for whatever else they expected, and they all left me after some time, some of them showing hurt feelings, one of them actually going so far as to tell me that he still liked me but was too upset in my company to be with me.

Now I didn't really understand what this was about. Of course I had romantic feelings too, as well as sexual desires, and I showed signs of wanting physical affection, but somehow this male idea of just giving it a try didn't appeal to me at all.

But of course, that's what happened a little later. I fell in love with a somewhat older guy who was more explicit about what he wanted. I got sexually involved with him for fear of losing him. That was the worst thing I could do.

We got into bed together, naked, and at first he was really nice to me and I half responded. Then suddenly he had to do it, and he did. And it was painful! And it was over in no time at all!

And then he just left me. He got up and left me lying there. It was horrible! I felt strange all over and just didn't know what to do. Nothing seemed sensible anymore!

In the end I got out of bed and ran into the bathroom. I took a long shower, but even the familiar movements of washing myself didn't tell me what to do next. Get dried and dressed, what else could I do? But whatever I did, it all seemed equally purposeless. Somehow I had lost the idea, which I had never even known to be just an idea, that there is a meaning relating one moment of life to the next!

It took me a long time to recover, and maybe I never fully did. Sometimes I still feel that something was broken in me that day, not just physically. I often wondered what went wrong.

From his point of view nothing went wrong. I guess it was his first try, though he never admitted it, and it wasn't excellent but it would go better next time. He expected me to come downstairs with him, have a drink and make some jokes. He didn't understand why I lingered on in bed and then in the bathroom. He probably resented me for being so strange.

I think I know, now, what went wrong - he shouldn't have left me. When it was all over for him he should nevertheless have stayed with me, held on to me, stroked and kissed me, perhaps, to ease away the shock of what had happened to me. He probably couldn't have led me towards a full orgasm, but he could at least have spanned the void after his penetration by giving me some sense of fulfillment.

After that adventure I felt very uncomfortable with him and our friendship broke to pieces."

Fred couldn't see that Hanna had wet eyes, but of course he knew the feeling.

"Later I met another guy, a weedy intellectual, a highly excitable youth, so enthusiastic about science that no sexual thought had a chance of entering his mind. My head was still full of the failure with the first guy and I had a great need to talk about it. Now this other guy listened to me for two minutes and then said that exactly the same had happened to him with a girl. Of course the only similarity between our two stories was that we had both been left by somebody we still cared for and both felt that the break had come about through our own fault. The first evening we met, that guy and I had a drink together and felt united by a great feeling of compassion. First there were some other people with us, but by and by they all felt left out and we were left alone, just the two of us, and ended up talking for half the night.

I remained friends with that guy for quite a long time, and maybe we still are friends, though we haven't met in several years. He lent me books and music-tapes, which totally overwhelmed me. I often felt very silly compared to him.

Of course he should have been more didactical if he wanted to introduce me to his favourite literature and music. He should have fed me with one or two short-stories from one or two authors at a time and given me some short music-pieces from one or two composers instead of flinging Bartok chamber music and huge Shostakovich symphonies at me. But his enthusiasm was always spurting forth, bubbling and boiling, and he never gave me time to really get to know and understand him. Of course I felt I was not bright enough for him. I tried very hard to dig into his literature and music, but it was all too much for me I felt, and the old fear that I might lose a friend came over me again.

One day I asked him what kind of girls he was attracted to. I had made up my mind by then that our relationship was purely platonic, because, of course, that was what it was meant to be after my previous experiences with men.

He told me this and that and ended up saying that yes, he was also attracted to me. I guess I was a bit flattered at first, but then I got scared. I suddenly started wondering what he really wanted. I felt that I had failed in sharing his enthusiasm with him and was full of doubts anyway, and now I wondered if perhaps he just wanted me as a girl, possibly only sexually, without even consciously knowing it himself. He had often been physically very

close to me, stroking my hand while talking to me, and now all this suddenly got a new meaning!

I talked to him about this, told him that I feared that all that was between us was solely due to his romantic attraction to me. He assured me that this romantic attraction and the other feelings he had towards me were totally independent. Of course I didn't believe him. I had wondered what he saw in me beforehand, and now it all made sense far too well!

I reckoned that if he had any other feelings towards me at all, they must be completely overshadowed by his sexual attraction.

I worked it out later, what he should have told me. He could have said that sexual attraction had been the initial drive, but that he had then made a real effort whose result was now present whatever the motivation had been at first. In other words, he would have said that the relationship might have started inadequately but was now based on something solid.

The way he talked to me, making his sexual drive and other feelings totally independent of each other, just worsened my worst fears!

So there I was - I knew that he would sooner or later find out that I couldn't satisfy him romantically, and I felt I had nothing else to offer him!"

"That's really sad." said Fred. It might have seemed like a stupid comment, but there was nothing much else he could say, and there wasn't any irony in his voice.

Since Hanna said nothing more, he felt he had to ask some questions himself: "But I don't quite understand your attitude to sex. It could be so easy for a woman - just lie down, relax and let it happen. Maybe some day you'll want to play an active part in it, but if you don't, so what?" Before Hanna had a chance to answer he quickly added: "I understood what you said about your first experience. But why would the second one have been the same kind of shock?"

Hanna just sighed, but she said nothing yet.

Fred continued to talk: "You know, sex is much more difficult for a man. If something puts him off, he simply can't do it, and there's no way he can fool anybody about his failure..."

"So what?" said Hanna with the patience of a mother talking to a child worried about some trifle. "If he feels like doing it, he can just do it, and if he doesn't, well then nothing happens. He makes himself ridiculous, perhaps, but then he can just put his clothes back on and walk away, feeling foolish in the worst case.

For a young, inexperienced girl this is very different. If she suddenly doesn't feel like it, it might nevertheless come and roll over her. There will be that guy on top of her, having an adventure of his own up there. She will be submitted to it without taking part in it.

By the way, that was my problem anyway, that feeling of never really taking part in things, of always being at the side or possibly buried underneath without understanding them."

"Well okay," said Fred, "I understand. But as far as sex is concerned, why couldn't you just let it happen, give him some pleasure and perhaps even learn to take an active part in it by and by? I mean, the way you talk it looks as though you meant to flee from everything that temporarily affects you while you don't have any power over it."

"Don't you see it can become a habit? My partner would get accustomed to having me just as a passive pet with no ideas of its own, and this attitude would expand towards

other aspects of life. And the habit-forming process would also affect me, and each time I was subjected to sex I would lose some more of my hope that things could be any different. In the end I would be just the ghost of myself instead of a person."

Fred didn't answer for a while. Then he said: "Okay, I understand. Being passive sexually would force you to fight for your usual rights everywhere else, because they wouldn't be granted as naturally anymore. And since that seemed to be your problem already... In fact, your failure in sexuality illustrated your problem as a whole, that was why it hurt so much..."

"Exactly..!" said Hanna.

"Yes," said Fred thoughtfully, "I guess it's not as easy for a girl as I thought. She can't just say yes to anybody, because she might slide down into some form of hell. And perhaps not even her former friends would try to help her out. They would all have seen her say yes, they would all reckon she had made a promise and would all think that she was in the place she deserved to be. In fact, the habit-forming process would have affected even them.

She would have to conquer her rights back all by herself.

So girls might be less eager to give it a try rapidly than boys, and they might say no in spite of their sexual desires, because it's safer for them to stay in their secluded world of virginity where their rights aren't challenged."

"You're saying all this in a very unfeeling, unsentimental way," said Hanna, "but I guess you're basically right."

"But now," said Fred, "what about a man who makes it a habit of failing with women?

Don't you think he might also lose his rights in other aspects of life? not be considered as a force to be reckoned with anymore? be considered instead as someone who doesn't manage to follow his own ideas through? someone whose threats therefore can't be taken seriously? Don't you think his self-confidence will also take a huge blow?"

"Is that your case?" asked Hanna, perfectly innocently, seriously, not at all ironically.

Fred said neither yes nor no, but they talked a long time after this, and they did finally get sleepy. Their voices gradually became slurry, but neither of them noticed, and the thoughts that were passing back and forth between them joined into a more continuous flow in which the bouncing side-movements became less and less pronounced till it was almost the flow of a single consciousness...

But at some stage Fred had drifted off into sleep completely while Hanna hadn't. "Are you asleep?" she asked tenderly, and it made her wide-awake herself.

Yes, Fred was definitely fast asleep. Hanna switched on the little lamp on her side to look at him. The light blinded Hanna as she switched it on, but it was dim on Fred's face. He looked sweet while sleeping, endearing. His mouth, which she had often seen taking a cruel twist, looked so soft and innocent in this relaxed state.

She bent over him and gave him a warm kiss on the lips. A kiss only she would ever know about.

Then she turned around, switched off the lamp and went to sleep, accompanied by the regular breathing at her side.

When Hanna and Fred started off in the morning there were just a few hundred kilometers left to the trucker's restaurant where they would meet with all their gangster-"friends".

Usually this was the kind of distance Fred would think twice about, because it took him far away from his home-base. But he was always amazed how everything changed once he had pulled himself free of that home-base - distances became meaningless and spending up to ten hours sitting in the car and driving became just as normal as lounging in bed for ten hours at home.

And somehow driving the car was never really boring. Fred would watch the countryside in its smooth, continuous variations as he drove through it, his thoughts peacefully drifting...

The job of a truck-driver might be quite pleasant, he mused.

Though of course driving through town was a different matter - waiting for the lights to turn green, driving a few metres then stopping again, always being alert despite the empty moments spent in traffic-jams (because even in traffic jams you have to be ready, when the time comes, to nudge your way into the correct lane before your path is blocked by some other impatient driver). Specially in summer, when the heat would build up in any standing vehicle and your only wish was for some fresh air to blow in through the window, being caught in a traffic jam must be ghastly.

Working as a garbage-truck driver, for instance, must be just as boring as Fred's job as a nightwatchman. He would be suffering from the same syndrome - the mind too busy to be left to its thoughts, but not busy enough to be satisfied.

But why was ordinary driving so compatible with day-dreaming while driving through town or working as a nightwatchman was not? After all, ordinary driving demands attention too.

Fred remembered a time when he was cruising along steadily, his mind totally elsewhere, when suddenly he saw a deer crossing the road in front of him. By the time he realized it was a deer, his foot was already on the brake, applying pulsated pressure, he had leaned forward in his seat and he remembered his knuckles had turned white on the wheel.

The deer disappeared on the other side of the road, Fred switched down into second gear and started off again, gradually relaxing. He had been shaken out of his day-dreams, but not so much by the deer itself (he didn't hit it, after all) as by his own, automatic reaction to the deer.

So the alertness had been there, but it wasn't interfering with the stream of consciousness which was allowed to go its own ways.

Why was this possible in ordinary driving, but not possible while working as a nightwatchman?

The answer was quite simple really - only if a deer appeared every hundred meters or so would ordinary driving correspond to the nightwatchman-job or driving through town in crowded conditions. Each "deer" would interrupt the mind in its peaceful dreams and eventually the mind would suffer from what is generally known as boredom.

Boredom is usually associated with lack of stimulus, but in this case it was paradoxically produced by the stimuli themselves, because they were intruding.

An adult human mind has enough memories, unanswered questions and incomplete files to keep itself busy for hours on end without too much external stimulus. Many kinds of minimal inputs into an adult human mind raise heaps of questions which had been previously filed away and to which the new piece of information might give a hint leading towards the answer if it is competently processed. So an adult human mind can keep itself pleasantly alive for a very long time feeding on a minimum of external input.

This is quite different for young children who haven't yet got so much material to work on. For them it is more important to collect information rather than endlessly processing the insufficient data they already have. So when the surroundings don't offer them enough stimulus they become impatient, cranky and a pest for the adults who would quite happily enjoy being left alone with their thoughts.

But sometimes Fred felt jealous of those kids who have the energy to make things exciting when the environment becomes too boring by yelling, running and screaming till some adult would slap their face or be driven to some other drastic act that would definitely break the pattern of endless boredom...

Fred didn't believe, as suggested by some crazy psychologists, that children actually ask to be slapped (because they like it?), but he knew that, by driving their parents to it, they definitely make a point.

The slap they get is a guarantee for the children that they have managed to upset their parents. As long as they don't get this guarantee they will just go on and on making the situation unpleasant for their parents, and that is why anti-authoritarian education ultimately doesn't work.

The children want to make it so unpleasant for their parents that the parents will think twice about bringing them to such a boring place another time. The only guarantee the children get of having succeeded in this is the revengeful slap they receive from their truly upset parents.

The softish and ultimately patronizing attitude, which doesn't allow you to become angry with the weaker than yourself, finally leads to a sense of utter powerlessness in the victims of that attitude. The ill, the mentally deranged, the elderly people as well as the children, they all need to feel that they managed to make you angry from time to time.

So, when you're angry, show it! Fred mused.

He turned his head halfway to look at Hanna who had been sitting next to him in the car for so long without saying a word. Was she angry with him but not really showing it, just falling into ice-cold silence instead?

Her face was expressionless. She hadn't noticed yet that Fred was watching her.

Perhaps she thought that Fred was angry with her, because he hadn't spoken to her either. Why hadn't they made love last night? Fred wondered.

Hanna realized that Fred was looking at her. She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. Fred smiled back and put his eyes on the road in front of him again.

So everything was fine, just fine. There really was no need to talk all the time. But Fred would have felt more confident if they had made love last night. Why? he wondered.

The physical presence of another person, day in, day out, ends up being somewhat stressful, even when there is no hostility a priori. You have to accommodate the other person, watch out for the other person, check your own actions at all times to make sure that you don't become too invading and overbearing...

There is only so much a man can endure, and if the tension keeps mounting, it necessarily has to lead to an offensive act.

Perhaps the physical presence of a single person is well within the limits of what a man can endure, but if this presence is added to the stress caused by social life more generally, the tolerated tension might be overstretched.

But this is where the problem provides its own solution. Two friends, by offering each other support, might become more confident in their dealings with petrol-station

attendants and the like, so that social life in general becomes less stressful if you manage to accommodate the presence of a friend.

But with Hanna, Fred had been much closer, and his desire to throw her off had grown, or rather to ravish her instead...

Because maybe sex is just an escape from stressful society, and more generally from the stressful world.

To feel that single touch all over your body, it's like floating in thin air where up and down have no meaning anymore. Floating high above the worries of the world...

Naturally you might feel lonely up there after a while, but that is when you become conscious of your partner. And since there is nobody else up there with you, you will be affected by your partner as much as you would be by the herd you left behind. There is nowhere else you can direct your gregarious instincts.

And that is how, together up there, the two of you will become such a strong entity that when you come back down, together you will master all social stresses with calm sovereignty.

So initially sex is an act of hatred, hatred towards the herd, including your partner, hatred towards all social pressures. You fling yourself up into the air with your partner, and in the isolation up there you make a bond so strong that all social pressures in the underworld will seem meaningless thereafter.

Of course all this means that at some stage, when a friendship becomes closer and closer, sex becomes imminently necessary, or else the friendship will collapse under the extreme pressure of proximity.

"Lovely," Fred told himself and in his mind he gave himself a tap on the shoulder. "You just desire this woman, that's all. You have a crush on her. It's as simple as that. But look at the immense theory your intellect has managed to fabricate for you to support your desires!"

"Let's see if I can find another, independent explanation for the fact that having sex with Hanna is absolutely necessary and unavoidable." and he put his mind, which was obviously so loyal to his feelings, on the job.

He had to smile. No problem at all...

Feelings can be verbalized, they can be communicated from one person to the other through spoken language, or through writing, through telephone-wires, through mail or electronic messages. This is possible thanks to a code, common to the people involved. To invent or learn such a code, communication must already have existed previously, maybe on a simpler and more limited basis, but the code must definitely be built up on some foundations, so that it could be learnt by association.

Fred proposed that, in early childhood, children communicate with their parents through an inborn body-language which forms the basis for learning the verbal language.

Since all relationships in later life start verbally, it is very important that nothing goes wrong in this early childhood-stage. If you don't learn to express yourself at that early stage, your ability to enter relationships will be blocked for ever after, because the relationship with your parents is the only one which begins physically (where you can trust your instincts) and then becomes verbal. All later relationships start the other way round.

And perhaps Fred had a defect in his verbal abilities. Maybe he had never been close enough to his parents to learn the verbal language properly.

To enter a relationship he must penetrate immediately into the realms of intense body-contact where he could trust his instincts.

If that wasn't possible he would have to remain distant enough to trust his incomplete social code. That's what he had done so far. He was a loner and didn't like being casually embraced by women. Only if it were continued right up to a full-fledged orgasm could he possibly appreciate it.

Fred's smile froze on his face. He actually believed in this fucking-sad story!

But his mind was busily churning up some other issues - so Fred believed that a verbal language could only evolve thanks to the existence of an inborn, instinctive language? Is this really so?

Fred tried to figure out some other way the verbal language might come into existence, a way which doesn't involve any previous, unconditional understanding between the beings.

Let's say the child first associates the word X with the grimace X without actually understanding this grimace. Then the child hears the word X in connection with its own facial expression (when feeling X) and thus manages to connect this word with the feeling X.

Couldn't that be an explanation?

Wouldn't such an explanation completely discredit the importance of the inborn body-language?

No, in fact it would make body-language and verbal language interdependent. The child can only associate a grimace with a feeling because they are both linked to the word X.

And the child can only associate the word X with the feeling X because it instinctively makes the same grimace X as everybody else upon feeling the emotion X, and this grimace triggers in the adults the verbal response "X".

So this theory, even though denying that children instinctively understand grimaces, is still based on the fact that all human beings make the same, inborn grimace upon feeling X.

Fred was a bit upset at not being able to discard this theory, because he preferred to believe that the inborn, physical language works perfectly all by itself.

But there is a delicate question here, which goes right back to the definition of instinct.

An instinct is supposed to be something that depends wholly on itself and works perfectly on its own, but there aren't many such things...

Fred liked to believe that all animal (including human) behaviour ultimately serves to satisfy some instinct. But if that is true, then instincts, though being the driving force, must be very strongly affected by relevant experiences. In fact, sometimes it can be very hard to find the link between somebody's behaviour and the instinct that is driving him or her. Clearly the pathway (which can involve the whole neocortex) between the internal drive and the person's actions may be very, very complicated.

So what happens to the definition of instinct?

Would it be possible to consider the instinct more like the mental image of a goal instead of a rigid behaviour-pattern meant to lead to such a goal?

But goals result from intellectual activity. They result from the realization of what will satisfy the instinct and are the first intellectual step towards satisfying such an instinct which may at first have expressed itself by producing only a very vague desire in the conscious mind.

So what is an instinct?

“You just passed it!” Hanna shouted.

Fred didn't know what she was talking about. “Passed what?” he asked, bewildered at being caught with his thoughts totally elsewhere.

“Why, the trucker's stop where we're supposed to meet with the others!”

Since they were on a modern highway, Fred had no choice but to wait for the next exit, leave the highway and re-enter it from the other direction, hoping that there would be an entrance to the trucker's stop from the other side as well.

The trucker's stop was a big complex, and there was a tunnel under the highway (big enough for full-sized trucks) linking both sides. There were shops, over-sized petrol-stations offering mainly diesel, restaurants and many, many parking-places for trucks among some sickly trees and dilapidated picnic-tables.

Fred drove around the complex, looking for some familiar vehicles and admiring the trucks.

Now there definitely can't be any instincts relating to trucks, thought Fred, and yet they are very stimulating. Trucks have been invented and evolved much faster than instincts could. Instincts only evolve on a geological time-scale, while today's cars and trucks had come into existence in little more than a single human life-span.

The snarling grill, clustered with dead insects, the fresh ones still colourful, the glistening bonnet housing the thudding and thumping machinery, the windscreen behind the bonnet, surprisingly humane in its size compared to the enormity of the rest of the vehicle, the doors at the side of the cabin with elaborately wrought, glistening rearview-mirrors, the tall exhaust-pipes behind the cabin that would blast dark smoke high above the road when such a truck started up...

Well okay, such a truck hadn't affected the evolution of human instincts (yet), but the way these vehicles evolved was certainly not independent of the instincts of their inventors, and the fact that trucks are stimulating is definitely not pure chance.

The desire for a car must be very old. As a kid Fred had raised frogs and thus he knew that frogs like to sit in some hollow under a stone and watch the world from this comparatively secure lodge. When the frog sees an appetizing insect jogging along, he is faced with a dilemma - is there a chance that the insect will come closer, or shall the frog come out of his hole to get it, possibly to be snatched himself by a bird waiting for just that to happen?

The solution to this problem is a lodge that will move around with its owner, making it possible for the owner not to get in touch with the surroundings in any direct sense while actually moving around in them.

Thus the true inventor of the motor-car is the frog. The technical details were filled in later when an intelligent enough species had finally evolved.

And why had the petrol-motor gained total supremacy? Because there were too many problems involved in storing electricity? Because petrol can so easily be found under the earth?

Maybe, but perhaps also because petrol-motors smell and growl!

Fred pictured himself at the wheel of a truck. He would be sitting there, locked up in the cabin with an instructor next to him. There would be all kinds of controls to watch, the rearview-mirrors to watch, the road ahead to watch and Fred would feel very small and futile in front of the great dashboard.

But then, by and by, with practice, his mind would forget about the foot on the unfamiliarly shaped gas-pedal, about his hand reaching out for the lever in the complicated configuration of the gear-box, about his eyes searching for the rearview-mirrors, about the spring-coils, clamps, studs and other parts sending his messages to the big machinery in front.

After a while, with practice, his mind would be directly directing the truck, the body automatically knowing what to do to pass the messages onwards. The mind wouldn't be occupied with anything inside the cabin anymore - those surroundings would be only a relay-station that you trust without spending any time thinking about it.

Fred's awareness would have become the awareness of the whole truck. Fred's influence would have extended to the whole truck.

And what about Fred's consciousness?

Is consciousness just a working brain?

No, consciousness isn't just a brain, it's what happens inside the brain. In that sense, consciousness is not matter.

Things would be happening in Fred's brain, and these things would be triggering other things throughout the truck, and then some feedback would be coming from the road, through the truck and into Fred's senses.

And where would the consciousness be in all this? Was it just in Fred's brain?

But the inputs Fred was receiving were completely artificial, coming through rods and spring-coils and all kinds of specially designed mechanical parts. And the outputs from Fred wouldn't make any sense either if he weren't sitting at the wheel of the truck.

Clearly, whatever can be called consciousness couldn't be understood by watching Fred alone.

No, in this case, consciousness is something happening throughout the truck.

Only in the first driving-lesson, when Fred has a working-model of the truck present in his mind and interacts with this mental image while interacting with the real truck through his body does consciousness cover only Fred's brain.

But for the experienced driver consciousness covers not only his brain and body, but also all the clamps and rods and spring-coils connecting it to the world outside the truck. The truck's influence has now become the range of your influence, and the truck's awareness is the domain of your awareness.

The truck is now a living being - the soul of the driver has embraced the whole of the complex and yet crude steel-contraption.

So if you want to become bigger and stronger, extend yourself to a car, then to a truck... This has gone much further than just a lodge for the frog...

Fred remembered how he once got stuck in the snow with his Mustang. First he had tried to reverse out of the snow-drift, then he had tried revving high, then he had also tried to drive off very smoothly, in second gear, to give the wheels time to get some grip.

It had taken him a while to realize that he would have to get out of the car and push it from outside. He had quite forgotten that he was a functional unit on his own, even outside the car...

Here he was, in his Mustang, driving in and out among the trucks, or rather, the Mustang was driving on its own, and Fred was just the name of its central brain.

And Hanna was the passenger, sitting inside of him, subjected to every one of his moves...

Can there be a more intimate relationship, except perhaps between a mother and her unborn child?

Wouldn't it be normal, if the car ever stopped, that Hanna and Fred would resume this relationship by having sex? Why should this intimacy be broken every time they left the car?

The Mustang was driving in and out among the trucks, hoping that he wouldn't find any familiar vehicle, so that he would never have to stop and the intimacy would never be broken...

"Stop now," Hanna finally said. "We're still a bit too early. Let's go and have a cup of coffee."

Hanna and Fred were sitting in the Cafe, face to face, drinking coffee, and it was awkward. When she had been sitting next to him in the car it hadn't been awkward, now it was.

Imagine all the happy young couples, boy-friend and girl-friend, each feeling sure of the other, knowing when to put his hand on hers or hers on his, confidently making conversation or just smiling without saying much...

But Fred had nothing to say, felt foolish when he smiled and missed his steering-wheel terribly! He took a sip of coffee every two seconds. If he were a smoker he would have taken out a cigarette.

Hanna was calm. She looked sleepy. She seemed quite comfortable but somehow unhappy nevertheless. That made Fred even more nervous. He felt that it would have been his role, as her entertainer, to bring up some enjoyable topic that they could discuss vividly.

Later, when the coffee-cups were empty and cold, Fred had calmed down and was looking out of the window, deep in thought, not caring about his unresponsive friend anymore and not making up any new tactics to get her on his side. He was wondering if the gangsters would really come. Perhaps they had just cleverly arranged to get rid of Hanna and Fred, so that they could peacefully go and rob a bank...

Then Hanna and Fred would be shot when they returned to their car, while an accomplice among the police-force had destroyed their former statements.

Or perhaps...

But there they were! Fred could see them, a group of men, approaching the Cafe, obviously looking around. There was Wolfensberger in the lead, ushering the unfit looking fat-boy (the truck-driver) along with him, the two thugs, as elegant as ever, behind them the four toads, carrying their huge bellies proudly in front of them. Fred's heart was beating faster, the blood had drained out of his face and his hand on the table had formed into a whitish fist. But else he showed no reaction and was just staring out of the window as before.

He didn't make any move to get up when the eight men entered the Cafe, still looking round. He turned his head towards them and stared coldly up at them, till Wolfensberger's face lit up having recognized him.

The seven other men all gradually found him with their eyes, and those eyes all expressed hatred. After all, Fred had bashed up the two thugs and beaten the chief of the toads in an arm-wrestling match. Besides he was the source of all their problems.

Hanna finally looked round and showed some vague signs of recognition which definitely wasn't joy. She slowly stood up, as if she had been sitting in a doctor's waiting-room and was now called by the nurse.

Fred also got up, his eyes fixed upon Wolfensberger.

"Come on!" Wolfensberger said curtly, and they all walked out.

"The truck stands here." said Wolfensberger to Fred and pointed. The fat-boy, walking beside him, also nodded towards Fred, with a comically grave expression of anticipation on his full-moon face.

Behind the truck, the limousine, the red Golf and the battered Jeep were standing.

"Go and get your car!" said Wolfensberger. "We're waiting for you!"

Fred and Hanna left the group without a word and walked off to the Mustang.

Soon they were sitting in their seats again and had taken their place in the procession behind the Jeep.

"I can't imagine what's going to happen from now on." said Fred. "I wish we weren't part of this game at all. We don't fit in."

"Yeah." said Hanna, not very encouragingly.

They were quiet from then on, just following the truck and cars ahead.

After half an hour's drive they were approaching the harbour. The smell of the sea was prominent together with the chlorine stench of some neighbouring chemical industry.

Fred closed the window.

The truck had put out the blinker and was entering a narrow lane between two modern storage sheds. The cars all followed.

Behind the sheds there was a big parking-area, big enough even for the truck to make a U-turn. The truck stopped and so did the four cars. The fat-boy clambered down from his cabin and went over to Wolfensberger's car, speaking worriedly. It seemed that Wolfensberger wouldn't listen. The two thugs had left their Golf and were leisurely going up to the limousine to see if they should give their boss some assistance in dealing with the cowardly truck-driver.

The Jeep had, as usual, stopped with a jerk, and the four toads were hobbling out of their high seats, rubbing their bums and twisting their thick, short necks as they came out into the sun-light.

Fred just remained sitting at the wheel of his Mustang. Hanna didn't seem to be in a hurry to get out either.

"This is the same kind of meeting as the one back home." said Fred. "There will be another truck or car, another driver who needs convincing, and we'll be off again, hurrying to another part of the country where there will be a third truck waiting, with a third driver who needs convincing..."

"Shut up." said Hanna tiredly.

All the men were standing in the middle of the parking-lot, the fat-boy still arguing.

"Well, I guess we have to join them." said Fred.

When they came up to the others, Fred could hear the fat-boy saying: "They will see all those cars and they will just turn round again if you don't hide your cars behind my truck. Why don't you hide your cars behind my truck?"

"No they won't." said Wolfensberger, probably not for the first time. "And if they do, we'll just follow them. Unless they have a Ferrari they won't be able to lose us!"

The fat-boy finally shut his mouth. He tried to calm himself down, but his lower lip was slightly trembling. He touched the pouch under his left breast where the small semi-automatic Wolfensberger had given him was hidden. It looked as though he was trying to feel his own, faltering heart.

After a quarter of an hour of standing, pacing around and feeling strange, there finally was the sound of a car approaching through the narrow lane.

It was a little, clean and new-looking van. It came up to the group of men and stopped. Two men, broad-shouldered and tall, came out. Their torsos broadened out towards the top. They were both wearing white T-shirts with short sleeves, big hairy arms hanging out of them, with a slight angle at the elbow due to the tension of the well-trained biceps even at rest. Thus the hands were hanging some distance away from the comparatively slim hips even though the whole body was perfectly relaxed.

Their heads were well shaped as their body, with powerful jaws and faces that were neither friendly nor grim. The skin was tight, without wrinkles, the eyes small and expressionless.

The two men were so identical (even more identical than the two thugs) that they must be twins.

They were ignoring the nine people standing around the truck-driver and addressed only him: "Well? Have you got the merchandise?"

"That is to say... You see, these people here..." the fat-boy began.

Wolfensberger pushed himself forward and said: "Let me introduce ourselves: we are the dealers at the other end, and we have come to change the conditions. Take us to the boss!"

The athletes addressed the truck-driver again: "You should have brought a letter, not the people themselves!"

"They wouldn't write a letter!" the fat-boy cried out and raised his hands in despair. As soon as he did that, he had two guns pointed at him which had come somewhere from the hips of the two athletes.

Wolfensberger became more stern: "You want us to have a shoot-out here and now?"

Come on, bring us to the boss!"

Fred suddenly got scared. This was becoming serious. Was he fast enough on the draw? Perhaps! after all, each of the athletes would have to shoot five people and Fred would have a chance if they didn't choose him first. Fred looked around and saw that Hanna was standing somewhat further behind him than a minute ago.

Fred wondered if he should uncover his holster. He always feared that, one day, the flap of his jacket (which was hiding the holster) would trap the grip of the gun when he pulled it away. Then his other hand would be grasping emptiness while he was shot by the enemy!

But if Fred uncovered his holster now, he might be chosen as the first target, in case there was a shoot-out...

So Fred didn't move. He was standing there, arms held out at his side, like a water-hydrant.

Wolfensberger was still talking. He must have immense trust in his thugs, Fred thought, because there was no sign of fear in him. The two athletes would not be able to ignore him much longer, because if they kept standing there, doing nothing and just staring at the fat-boy, they would end up looking undecided.

“You can shoot us all and bring the corpses, or you can go back empty-handed.” said Wolfensberger. “Or you can join us in our endeavour!”

“This guy is crazy, Charlie!” said one athlete to the other.

“Yeah, but what are we going to do, Tom?” answered Charlie. They didn’t look at each other while they spoke, and they were still holding their guns.

“The boss won’t need us anymore once this side of the pipe-line has broken down.”

“We have to bring him some proof that we’re not the ones who broke it down.”

“Corpses are no proof: we might have killed these guys for reasons of our own.”

“Right, we need a letter!”

“Then we’ll be sent out with some other men to kill these guys!”

“Right!”

Wolfensberger interrupted them rather firmly: “We won’t write a letter!”

For the first time one of the athletes smiled, or if it wasn’t a smile it was at least a queer twist of his mouth: “We’ll torture you!” he said.

To everyone’s surprise Wolfensberger burst out laughing. “You don’t know the code that has been arranged. I can write anything and you’ll never know. If you take me to the boss alive, it will be your word against mine. I’ll make sure that if the boss decides to get rid of me, you’ll sink too!”

Wolfensberger obviously knew the system very well, because the athletes shut their mouths in astonishment. The system had been built in such a way that nobody could, on his own, leave it and go into business for himself, and nobody could pull his mates down with him if he got caught by the police. But Wolfensberger was using these in-built securities, namely the lack of trust and communication between the compartments, to dismantle the system from within!

And it worked!

“What are we going to do, Charlie?”

“We’re going to join these fellows and kill the boss, Tom.”

Fred couldn’t believe it!

Perhaps Tom and Charlie would have liked to exit the system long ago, but didn’t know how to go about it. This was their chance. They were going to make use of Wolfensberger and his lot, and later go into business for themselves.

They tucked away their guns. “Follow us.” they said quite unemotionally and got into their van.

“Get seated, everybody!” Wolfensberger said and invited the fat-boy to come along in the limousine with him.

They all went to their cars and were off once again.

They were driving into the harbour. The raucous cries of the seagulls filled the air with an annoying liveliness. Fred didn’t appreciate it, because he was stuck in a dull, heavy gloom on top of which were growing little bursts of nervous, painful anticipation that seemed to pop open like blisters at every cry, releasing creamy, acid wetness.

As they passed over some bridge Fred saw the sea, the massive, slow swell of the polluted water, like the breathing of some shaggy, brown beast, fast asleep, but beware when it would wake up..!

They passed from the oily, rusty, industrial part of the harbour to the more cheerful, colourful side where private speed-boats and cruisers were moored, their elegant white bodies shining in the sun. The noisy seagulls were just as predominant though, and

additionally there were the hollow splashing and clanking sounds of a multitude of these smaller boats being incessantly shifted around in their position by the turbid water and tugging at their moors.

They drove past all these pleasant, speedy toys and came to the bigger ships, the private luxury yachts fit for international travel on the high seas.

We are doubtlessly coming closer to our destination, thought Fred.

The little van stopped alongside a streamlined white ship with comparatively gigantic proportions. This was definitely a floating residence, probably complete with swimming-pool and conference-rooms.

The five cars stopped in a row next to this super-yacht.

The two athletes had left their van and were standing at the level where the second deck started in the front. They called up to some sailor who appeared above, dressed in traditional marine clothes. The sailor saluted and disappeared. The two athletes signaled to Wolfensberger and his lot to come and join them.

The two thugs came first. They quickly left their Golf and swiftly moved forward. Then Wolfensberger had obviously managed to persuade the fat-boy to leave the comparative comfort and safety of the limousine and together they went towards the small group near the stern of the ship. Then the toads clambered out of their Jeep and gingerly walked to join the rest, one of them scratching and easing his crutch as though he didn't feel very comfortable in his oversized pants.

"Well," said Fred, "Let's go!"

Hanna didn't answer. She looked down at her left breast and squeezed her arm against her side to feel the slim semi-automatic Wolfensberger had given her. Then she wordlessly opened the door and got out of the car. Fred joined her and together they silently went up to their mates.

The sailor had reappeared above. Something was attached to a strap around his shoulder. He was holding it against his side. It was black, it had a mean, hollow, pointing finger, it was a sub-machine gun!

"The boss doesn't want to talk to you!" he called down.

"Go and get him!" called up Charlie.

The sailor aimed his gun at him.

The two athletes didn't seem put off, but they obviously couldn't move without being shot. They were diverting the sailor's attention so that someone else could do something. But nobody did.

The uneasiness in the group was growing.

Wolfensberger was expecting his two thugs to make a move, but they didn't know the right thing and were waiting for some order.

Even the athletes were growing weary. So all the big talk had been bluff after all! They should have known!

"Come on! Piss off!" the sailor shouted down.

People were looking at each other, and suddenly Fred felt several eyes focused on him.

He reacted like the others: why me? He half expected his inner voice to start talking to him. He vaguely remembered that there had been the body of a man lying next to Maria's body in the morgue. He hadn't bothered to look at it then, being too taken in by Maria's body. That's why it was haunting him now – Fred was sure it was his voice he occasionally heard...

But then Hanna nudged him with her right elbow, and as Fred looked at her as though he didn't understand, he saw that she had left her right hand at the level of the hidden pistol after nudging him. She was offering him her support, as far as she had any to offer.

That was enough. While everybody was looking at him, Fred turned round, as if he wanted to leave, invitingly raising his right hand and saying: "Okay, let's go!"

While he was still turning he lowered his arm again, as if he was going to push the whole group along with him, and his left hand invisibly pulled the flap of his jacket away from the holster. His right hand dived for the gun, and in one swirl of a motion he turned right round again, raised his arm along its full length, and while the gunman was watching if the others were really following him, he even had time to take aim through his sights. He had unconsciously cocked the hammer, and now, in single action, he just pulled the trigger.

The boom seemed terrific to his unprotected ears. The massive recoil that hit his hand was comforting in its familiarity - the bullet was off!

The sailor had jerked backwards as though hit by an invisible fist, but he was still standing at the moment, leaning backwards, holding desperately on to his gun, and was gradually pointing it up into the sky.

Then, as though this were a great relief, the ejaculation coming at last when the excitement has reached unbearable heights, the machine-gun started firing, pumping bullets up into the sky at a tremendous rate.

Then, very slowly it seemed, the gunman was tipping over backwards, disappearing behind the railing, his spitting machine following him closely, shooting vertically into the air by now, then falling silent as it disappeared from view as well.

Fred was standing still, in trance, his gun-hand still held up straight, and he had cocked the hammer again with his thumb, without knowing it.

When another sailor appeared at the railing, coming to see what was happening, Fred immediately shot him.

More men appeared on deck. They were rushing out of the cabins without being quite prepared, so they were quickly dealt with, not just by Fred. He could hear the high-pitched report of Hanna's pistol next to him.

The rest of the gangsters had pulled out their guns too and were readily firing at anything that moved on the ship.

Then there was a pause in the shooting. The sailors had become clever - they weren't rushing out of the cabins anymore, they were going to prepare something!

But Wolfensberger had regained his control and natural authority. "Come on!" he yelled and ran along the side of the ship to a point where they could climb onto the lower deck. The thugs were following, the toads were following, dragging along the fat-boy, and then the two athletes came along as well, reluctant to obey but ready for the massacre!

Fred was going to run after them, but Hanna held him back.

The others were already entering the ship.

"You did your part!" Hanna said.

"It would be cowardly to leave them now!" Fred answered, but he didn't shake her off and he didn't follow the others.

"You might die." Hanna said softly.

"But dying is part of the game!" said Fred eagerly.

"It's not our game." answered Hanna.

"We set this whole thing up!"

"No, no, we were just the sand corns in the mechanism. Come on, let's go!"

Fred let himself be led towards the car and seated at the wheel.

They heard a few sharp reports of some gun, then some muffled shots from deeper within the ship.

Hanna was sitting next to him now: "Drive off!" she said.

"How many guys did you kill?" he asked.

"One for sure, the other maybe in part." she answered.

"I killed two as well..." he said.

"We must leave now," she said, "the police will be here any moment and arrest everybody. We must get out of here!"

Fred found the key and started the engine. Then he drove off as casually as ever.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Why, home of course!" she answered.

"Whose home?"

"Yours, I don't have any of my own..."

Then they heard the first of a series of unexplained explosions, and looking back they saw the big, beautiful ship in flames. Soon it was shaken by a second and a third explosion, and while they were still watching, it was already beginning to sink.

Fred expected some people to escape from the ship, into the water and onto land, but nothing moved on the decks.

A fourth explosion shook the ship, and now it started to lean sideways. Still no signs of life could be seen aboard.

"Push down that gas and let's get away from here, for God's sake!" Hanna called out.

Fred obeyed.

"I would be in there, you know, probably dying..." he said.

"Yeah." she answered.

When they were out of the harbour, cruising along a main road among ordinary family-cars, Fred asked: "Do you think we crushed the organization now?"

"We ripped a bloody big dent in it, anyway!" Hanna answered.

"Then at least your sister didn't die in vain." Fred said. "All that happened can be related back to her trying to exit the system."

Hanna answered quite bitterly: "Don't think that it's my role to forgive you for what you did to her. Only she could do that, and she's dead. As for this current thing, she didn't gain anything through it, being dead."

"But she left behind a better world for her descendants." Fred insisted.

"She didn't have any descendants." Hanna said.

Fred was talking so softly compared to her harshness. He was full of sentimentality at this moment. It was the only way he could save himself from falling into a bottomless anti-climax after what had happened.

"You carry her genes as well." said Fred. "If you have any children, they will be indistinguishable from children she might have had..."

"And you would want to be their father?" Hanna asked mockingly, but it was very dark mockery.

Fred felt as though he had been slapped across the face. "Of course you wouldn't want that..." he said in a state of near-shock. "You couldn't possibly..."

Hanna softened. "No, that's okay..." she said suddenly. "Just tell me that you would have loved Maria if you had been strong enough."

"I shouldn't have put her out the door!" Fred said. He was pale and feeling sick. "I should have given her my identity card and told her to denounce me, because I had done something very, very bad..."

"She wouldn't have denounced you. She would probably have come back later to see you..."

"Yes, I was weak!" said Fred, not hearing what Hanna was telling him.

"Dying in the explosions on that ship back there would have solved nothing, if making up for your lovelessness is your true goal."

"Then what will?" asked Fred desperately.

"Be a good husband to me. In memory of her as much as for any other reason!"

Fred had no answer to this, but at this very moment it made perfect sense to him.

Later on the drive Hanna said to Fred: "Don't go back to your nightwatchman-job."

"But what else can I do?"

"I'm sure you must have savings. Give up your job now and take your time to find something else."

"But what?"

"Why don't you take truck-driving lessons? Then you could perhaps join an international convoy bringing relief-supplies into war-ridden countries. Maybe I could even come along with you."

Fred thought about his savings with which he had planned to get a reworked Cleveland 351 small-block fitted into his Mustang, or buy another, second-hand sports car, or a Yamaha V-Max...

But Hanna was a million times right. Fred would just have to accept that his Mustang was not the best car on the road and would eventually rust away and end at the wrecker's like any other car. It didn't matter - what really mattered was not to end up there with it.

He already began to draft his letter of resignation in his mind, and he never regretted it.

He never heard his "inner" voice again either – he still wasn't schizophrenic after all.

Hanna and Fred were happily following the huge bonnet of the Mustang homewards.

Part 4

The school-teacher.

Well, it was fine for Fred and Hanna to go play trucks, driving relief convoys into war-ridden countries (or at least dreaming of it). Me, I wasn't satisfied that they had really finished their job with destroying the drug ring and the whore business.

So I flew back to the brothel where Maria had been working and looked around. From there I followed a link to a brothel in Switzerland, at the lake of Geneva. This place seemed to have an active "recruiter", a guy who "seduced" young girls he picked up into becoming whores.

But one day he picked up a young pussy cat who was a pupil at one of those exclusive Swiss private schools in the postcard-worthy lake-side town of Montreux...

Perhaps that wasn't so smart. Anyway, in the end it proved fatal.

From him I hopped over to the girl and from her to the most unlikely person you can imagine – one of her teachers in the exclusive private school, a guy called David. And guess what – David was yet another loser full of sexual complexes just like Tom and Fred had been! I was really specializing on that type of person, it seems! I myself had never had such complexes and girlfriends had always come to me easily. On the other hand I had never really loved a woman either, except maybe my mother when I was a baby...

Perhaps having some complexes to overcome isn't only a bad thing after all – at least you appreciate what you've got when you get something at last! Though I must say, I hate this kind of argument. Do we really need to be miserable first so that we can appreciate happiness later? To me that's absurd and I could never accept such an idea! But forming a couple is a complicated business. Maybe having some hurdles to overcome together is what really binds two people. That's how they really learn to get along with each other. Without such an iron test a couple never lasts, and you never get to know the benefits of a lasting couple...

And then you just become a cynic like me! So maybe I was really trying to heal myself by following around those guys with their tremendous complexes that would normally only have made me laugh! Anyway, so here I was, stuck with that David-guy for another big adventure!

David had once been a student. He had studied some physics, then lost interest, then some biology and lost interest even faster, and finally some medicine (and lost interest, although he would have liked to become a psychiatrist). Now he was teaching at a private school in Montreux, Switzerland, at the lakeside. He didn't have any teacher's diploma (or any other diplomas of any kind), and he would never have been employed by a state-school. But private schools were free to do what they liked, they needed someone in a hurry, and they had taken on this serious-looking young man, so that he could gain some experience before continuing his studies. Actually David wasn't here to gain experience, and he had no particular desire ever to become a proper teacher. He just happened to be looking for some kind of job, because studying had become nothing but an empty pretense.

At this school, he was paid by the actual hour, and he received no salary whatsoever during the long summer-holidays. So he would file himself as an unemployed during that time, get some state-money, and occasionally work as a security guard in a local disco. He wasn't very tall, but he was strongly built, and in the bulky T-shirt of that security-guards' company, with blue relief-lettering saying "CNC-Sécurité", standing at the doors to the toilets (where his job consisted mainly of watching whether people going in would also eventually come out again, and of making sure that girls went to the girls' toilets and boys to the boys') he indeed looked like a very typical security guard. As the night would wear on, his stance would become more and more toad-like, his face more and more bored, and once there were a couple of girls who flashed him with a mini-camera in that position, and in some sense he was even proud of it.

His role at the school was quite different. There were only a few teenage pupils in each class, and that would have seemed ideal. But actually the combinations of those pupils were disastrous - some of the kids were reasonably bright, and others in the same group completely dumb (the kind who wouldn't be accepted in an ordinary school, but whose

parents are rich enough to pay for a private school). David didn't really know what to do with them. If he ignored them, they would just sit there, mooning at the blackboard with empty eyes, and he would feel sorry for them, and if he made them do some simple exercises, the brighter pupils would get out of control and make fun of everything. In fact, maintaining authority and some form of discipline was a problem. There was no kind of official punishment for the pupils (except being thrown out of the school, but since they were "clients" of the school, so to speak, that hardly ever happened, and they knew it). At first David was frustrated by this, but by and by he cared less and less and himself took the school much less seriously too. He was there to teach them maths, sure enough, but if they just wouldn't listen and kept interrupting him, wanting to talk about sex ("When did YOU do it the first time?"), well, there was no point in getting upset and shouting at them, because he would only make himself ridiculous. He guessed that the older teachers wouldn't be asked such questions. But David was young, not even ten years older than his pupils. He wasn't respected the same way as an older teacher. As a security guard he would have shoved such kids away from himself and into the crowd if they got too pushy, maybe even knocked them to the ground (knowing that his colleagues would come running, only too happy if there were any signs of a real fight). But what could he do as a teacher?

So David would tell them that it had been about fifteen years ago with a girl he had met at a party. The boys pretended that they didn't believe him, and he pretended that he didn't care. They said she must have been very ugly and very old, and he just answered: "Not really." Then he added, all thoughtfully, as if he were lost in a dream: "No, actually she was very beautiful, really beautiful... and shy..."

They wanted to know how he seduced her, and he went on, all dreamily, that he didn't remember, that she must have seduced him, that he was a bit drunk...

That of course raised all kinds of speculations, so David told them to shut up, or he would throw them out of the classroom, and they really quieted down a bit, because they didn't really have anything to say.

And David thought he had been very smart.

Because actually there hadn't been any such beautiful and shy girl in his life, ever. There hadn't ever been any girl at all. David didn't understand it, and it worried him a great deal. He thought it was because he didn't know the tricks.

Well, perhaps it was because he didn't have any friends, neither boys nor girls. Ever since he had left school himself, he had stopped meeting people. University was too anonymous for anybody to notice him, and he was never motivated enough in his studies to draw attention. He didn't go to any sport clubs either. He just went swimming in the lake in summer. He would swim a huge distance, straight out into the lake, crossing the path of the big steam-boats converted to diesel (once a grandpa on such a boat pointed him out to a little girl, as if he were a monkey in a zoo), then swim back, dry himself and go home. He didn't enjoy basking in the sun for hours.

At home in his small flat he would sit around, prepare his classes a bit (just a bit), cook himself his dinner, idle around, and have lots of deep thoughts (philosophical or about girls, and why they were so hopelessly far away from him).

In fact, some of his pupils at school were girls too. They seemed to like him. One of them, called Michelle, once came to his class all alone, because the three other pupils were somehow missing (it was a hot day - they must have been at the beach). Well, at

some point, while explaining something to her, David came close to her, corrected something she had just written, and their hands almost touched, and she giggled a little... But he pulled away again, almost disgusted of himself - she was so young, a baby! At night, before going to sleep, he would remember when he was a small kid himself, going to school. He remembered they had to take a shower after the gymnastics lesson, and sometimes some naughty girls would peek into the boys' changing room, and it was a delightful experience to be caught naked like that, much more delightful even than going to peek into the girls' changing room...

But now David was big. These kinds of little games didn't exist anymore. You couldn't even think of them anymore. The innocence was gone. Now you just did the "fucking", as frequently and bluntly as possible. All the little games and chitchat around it, they were nothing but tricks for the males to trick the girls into it. They weren't the kind of stuff you would wonder about, or talk about. The "fucking" itself was something you could boast about, possibly even discuss in deep, meaningful ways, but anything that came before that was just taken for granted, like talking and walking, stuff you had learnt during childhood.

Of course there were other ways. You could just pick up one of those strange women stalking about on certain streets at night, and pay. David had wanted to do that, and he had driven through such streets with his old, battered sports car, all slowly, but whenever he started to wonder whether this was the one to stop for, he had already passed her, however slowly he was moving...

Of course there were yet other ways, massage-parlours and such. David had gone there, his knees shaking, but the girl who opened the door for him wasn't really all that young, and she was a bit fat too, even a bit wrinkly, but he went in anyway. She talked to him with a runny honey-voice that was as artificial as her dyed blonde hair, helped him out of his clothes, laid him down on a bed and touched him all over. He just felt bloody hot and wanted to leave. But some of his money stayed behind, of course.

There were yet other things to do, of course. David had heard about a nude-bathing beach not far from where he lived (perhaps the only one in the whole of Switzerland, or at least the only one on the Swiss side of the lake of Geneva). He would n't have wanted to ask anyone where exactly it was, so he set out to find it himself in spring already. The problem was that nobody was taking a bath yet, and he couldn't see whether the beaches he found were nude-beaches or not. The big public beaches seemed a bad bet. It would have to be a hidden beach somewhere. There were some more beaches hidden away in a swampy nature-reserve. On the biggest such beach there were some wooden picnic tables and benches, and this looked a bit too public too, somehow.

But when he went there in early summer, the path leading through the bushes ending suddenly, he found himself, as he brushed the last few branches out of the way, in the midst of what he had been dreaming of for so long! His pupils dilated widely, and for a moment he just stood there. But he couldn't allow himself to hesitate for too long, that would look stupid, so he walked on, picking his way among the arms and legs spread out all over the place (which gave him a good excuse to look at everybody properly). When he reached the end of the beach, he kept walking, and luckily there was another path for him to follow, so that he could get back in among the bushes...

A few days later, on a less sunny day, he went back there again, and there were just a few old men standing in a group (all naked, of course). He walked past them and found a spot

at the other end of the beach, close to the second path leading away from it again. There he undressed, and it surprised him how easy it was to step out from his underwear. He straightened up and felt something like a little breeze between his legs, caressing all the biological equipment he had down there. It was a strange, exciting feeling, and as he forced himself not to look down at his body but rather to look across the lake, the water seemed to be a deeper blue, the glittering of the sun on the little waves seemed more sparkling and more alive and the clouds floating in the sky more three-dimensional and real than he had ever seen them before. And as he stood there like that, he could feel his yearning penis stretching itself ever so slightly as it was looking around in this bright, colourful, beautiful world for the first time of its life...

Then he could see to his horror that one of the old men was coming his way, leading a tiny, struggling dog on the leash. The man came closer and closer, the features of his face seemed to be crowded together in the center of his huge, bloated and bald head, and his enormous, hairy tummy preceded him like a tank clearing the way, the deep and dark hollow of his belly-button pointing straight at David. The dog purposefully pulled the man in David's direction and actually came to sniff at his toes, so that David and the man ended up facing each other. David, feeling like a tall and slim youth in comparison to the man, stood still as a statue and didn't dare to look down along his body at the dog, afraid of being reminded of how naked he was, which might encourage the penis to raise itself up to its full length.

"How old is the dog?" he finally asked, as friendly as he could. The man mumbled some answer, pulled his dog away and walked further.

After that, David found it easier to take a few steps away from the pile of his clothes and to walk along the water, in the direction of the group of old men. He could now see there was a female among them too. She wasn't as fat and repulsive as they were, although still far from attractive. At some point she looked in David's direction (he knew he could turn and escape into the water, in case anything too obvious started happening in the lower region of his abdomen), and he looked back at her, and then she looked away again, probably not even aware that he was new here. That settled it for David - this wasn't a dangerous place. He took a swim, took his time drying himself after coming out of the water, then went home where he masturbated wildly...

Unfortunately, in the next few days he began to get disappointed of this place. There always seemed to be more men than women there, and they were usually old, ugly men, their small reddened penises pitifully sticking out from under huge bulges of wobbly fat. And they would sit down on benches, bags of blubbery fat splashing everywhere and covering up the benches completely, and eat their barbecued steaks with the same hands with which they had just scratched themselves all over their body.

Once he saw a not very young woman bending over, the two cheeks of her bottom separated somewhat, and he saw a small piece of toilet-paper still sticking in there.

Disgusting!

Those bodies reminded him of the kind of bodies he used to chop up in the anatomy-labs - they had the same potato-shapes, but the skin of the corpses there was yellower and the penises even more blackened, probably because of the formaldehyde they had been soaking in for so long.

But sometimes there were some really young girls, running towards the water, dropping ALL their clothes. He loved to see the neat little tuft of black hair between their legs (it

was so cute!), the hips merging into the stream-lines of their legs without the interruption of any piece of tissue, the little, rounded bottoms bobbing up and down in the waves as they jumped around in the water!

After a few days he didn't need to be afraid of getting any half-erectations anymore, not even quarter-erectations. Somehow his penis had learnt that even though these girls were naked, it couldn't touch them.

For a while he still got some feeling of a coming erection when he watched a woman undress. She isn't always naked, since she is undressing right now. She is doing this for a special reason, perhaps...

Perhaps for him!

That gets the penis interested, and he lifts up his snout.

But even that didn't work anymore after a while.

He also used to get somewhat excited when he saw a girl whose normally hidden parts were still completely white. Ah, she doesn't usually go nude bathing. Perhaps she's doing it today for the first time! There must be a special reason. Perhaps it's all for his personal benefit...

There was a woman with an absolutely perfect body whom he saw almost daily. But her face didn't look very interesting and she usually was with a man who didn't seem very good-looking or sporty and didn't treat her especially nicely either. He seemed rather impatient and haughty towards her.

David didn't understand that. Why were they together?

There was also quite often a nice-looking young woman with a small child. She would lie on a mat under an umbrella, quite naked, holding the baby against her and softly singing something into his ear to make him go to sleep. David couldn't hear the song, he just saw her lips moving.

Of course the lucky husband would be somewhere nearby.

That kind of thing hurt David. It was like a needle stinging into his heart.

Some of the children weren't naked. They came here with their parents, but they didn't want to be naked. David could understand this. When he was their age, he used to dream of running around naked in front of all his school-mates, for example, but he would never have dared to do it, of course, and with his parents and other adults around it would have been all the more impossible, and if it had happened by accident it would have been awful and not at all exciting.

Sometimes there was a girl, about sixteen or less, who usually wore a bathing suit but would take it off when she went in the water. David didn't quite understand this. Perhaps she noticed him staring at her and felt uncomfortable (but that should have been the most exciting part of it!), or perhaps she didn't want to become sun-tanned all over because the other girls in school would wonder, when they took their shower after the gymnastics-lessons, how that was possible.

But there were also some children really happily running around naked, trying to catch each other and playing other games. Those pre-adolescent bodies, slowly beginning to show their adult curvatures...

Why were they developing like that? To excite David! For him, for him!

All this used to make David's penis stretch a little, but it affected him less and less.

Nevertheless his mind still enjoyed all these images and stored them away.

Then he would go home quickly and make use of them in his fantasies!

He wondered if perhaps now his penis was so relaxed about being seen and being surrounded by the most wonderful girls that all this meant nothing to it anymore. Perhaps the reptile-beast living deep inside his skull wouldn't be affected anymore by such things unless he allowed it to. Perhaps it would work in the positive as well as the negative sense. Perhaps if he went to see a prostitute now, his penis would do its job just as easily as if he were alone at home, instead of being traumatized by the unusualness of the whole thing. He would have to try.

Anyway, he never really understood why he had so much trouble with it, getting erections when he shouldn't, and getting none when he should.

Of course, if everything happened just the same with a girl as if he were alone, the question would arise: what's the fun of it?

While he was having such unworthy thoughts, his job as a teacher kept him busy with all kinds of just as disquieting questions.

Once again, the nice girl Michelle was alone with him in class, because the other pupils, who were all boys, just wouldn't turn up. Before the bell rang for the beginning of the class, she managed to get him involved in some kind of almost philosophical discussion. David couldn't make up his mind whether she was just trying to get away from having to do maths, or whether she was telling him something she had to get rid of. She had played some kind of "game" in the dormitory with some friends. It consisted of a board, on which you put a tooth-glass upside down. All the participants must put two fingers on the glass, then call a spirit and ask it questions. Then the glass would start moving around on the board, from letter to letter (the letters were painted on the board) and thus spell out answers to the questions. Some of the spirits you could call were liars, others weren't very good at spelling, but all in all their answers made sense. It took awhile for David to understand how the game worked, because he didn't know it. When he finally did, the bell had already rung, and it was too late to start doing maths. After explaining how the game worked, Michelle told David that one of those spirits had said something about her that was true. The others didn't know it, and she wouldn't tell David either, but she wanted to know what he thought of the game, the spirits and what they have to say. David didn't think too much of the whole thing, but she insisted that it was really all true, and he didn't want to upset her. After all, this boarding-school was her life, and who could she talk to, if not the teachers?

Unfortunately, David suspected that most of the teachers (especially the respected ones, the "proper" teachers, not like himself) wouldn't take their time to look into this. If asked about such a stupid game (if the pupil dared to ask such questions at all) they would declare that it's all rubbish, and that would be it.

Well, who knows why David didn't brush away such questions the same way and why the pupils came to him with them? Just because he was such a nice guy? Actually he felt bad whenever they weren't doing maths (since that was what he was paid to teach them). The only other teacher David could imagine would sometimes be asked such personal, out-of-context questions was a nice little old lady with a really charming personality who had been working at this school much longer than David. She was teaching biology, but actually, as a good Christian, she believed the world had been created twenty thousand years ago. As such this belief was fine with David - everybody can believe whatever they like. But he found it problematic that biology as a science believes something different, and that if you teach biology, you should teach it properly. In other words, you can't

teach biology while at the same time claiming that the world was created twenty thousand years ago. What about the dinosaur-bones? God just put them in the earth to amuse us? Well, David knew of course that you should never question what God is doing, since He is too far above us and doesn't have a human way of thinking anyway. But still, biology is concerned about those bones, about evolution-theory and many other things that you can't just neglect if you're going to teach the topic!

This teacher also claimed (of course) that animals don't have souls, which upset some of the pupils who had pets at home (and in some cases even missed those pets pretty badly, together with everything else that meant "home"). David consoled them by saying that whatever you call "soul", you couldn't possibly find a definition that excludes animals. David sometimes had to laugh straight out when his pupils told him what the little old lady had said. He had a very scientific mind, and he believed in evolution. Of course, he argued, maybe the universe had really been created only twenty thousand years ago, but then again, it might just as easily have been created two seconds ago as well. The little discussion we're having right now might never have taken place - we were just created with the memories of it two seconds ago. Maybe the universe gets destroyed and created again every two seconds, or every tenth of a second, or even continuously... Maybe that's what the passing of time is all about - a continuous act of creation. He didn't really know if his pupils could follow him at all. In any case they were listening with rapt attention (anything was better than doing maths, he guessed).

Then he explained that however and whatever things really, REALLY are, didn't matter (in his opinion) because what matters is how they affect us. When mankind builds itself a car that really works, maybe it's just an illusion. But when you sit at the wheel, pressing the gas and feeling the power, being taken from your illusion-home to your illusion-workplace in no time at all, then you know that a car is a pleasant illusion. Is there any other way to create such a pleasant illusion than to study the illusion of a physical world that seems to surround us and to build ourselves a car accordingly?

Because that's what science is really about, David explained with shining eyes! Science gives us the means to understand the physical world around us (be it an illusion or not), so that we might discover ways of shaping it to our liking. Even dinosaur-bones might tell us something about evolutionary biology that might one day become meaningful in medicine and save lives. If that is the final result, do we really need to care whether the dinosaurs ever really existed or whether their bones were just put in the ground by some tricky God?

Did David believe in God, one of the boys asked.

Yes, said David, but he didn't believe God was any person-like being. The boy said maybe God was a form of energy, some really amazingly powerful energy...

Yes, maybe..., said David, let's look at those equations now!

But the harm was done, of course. It seems that whatever the pupils got from David's philosophical explanations, it was enough to be able to go and tell the nice little biology-teacher lady that Mr. Becker had said what she taught was all shit. So why should he be surprised that she was against him whenever she could at the teacher-conferences?

But she was a really nice little old lady otherwise. At Christmas she gave all her pupils a little bag of home-baked cookies, for example. The kids, being sent exorbitant pocket-money by their rich parents, weren't impressed, though. They were used to buying any kind of pastry that happened to appeal to them from the local "confiserie", sometimes just

out of curiosity, and throwing it away after the first bite if they stopped feeling like it. They tore open the bag of cookies without bothering to undo the carefully knotted ribbon, gobbled a few of them down, put crumbs all over the place, and then forgot the remains in the classroom for the cleaning-woman to dispose of. David saw this mess and kept it in mind.

But right now David had to say something clever to Michelle and her question about the spirits and the board- "game". He explained that the glass probably moved around because each participant unconsciously pushed or pulled it a bit. The individual participants would also (just as unconsciously) give in to the general movement of the glass or resist it, depending on who knows exactly what, thus interacting with each other in some mysterious way. So of course there really was a spirit expressing itself - it was the group-spirit!

Michelle said that actually he was just saying, in a nicer way, that he didn't believe in the whole thing at all. But he said that he did, because the group-spirit might really know things that none of the group's members consciously knew, things that you can only feel, because they're somehow "in the air" (like a spirit) but that you can't express on your own...

The girl pondered this for a while. David hadn't really robbed the whole thing of its magic and mystery. He had turned a metaphysical experience into a psychological one, and looking at it that way made it less scary, but not less interesting! On the contrary, with this new way of looking at it, there was something to think about, while before it was just something to be afraid of and have bad dreams about...

She didn't resist when David wanted to turn to the homework, except that now the bell rang and the class was over!

Before the summer break, there were exams. David too had to hold some exams for his pupils. In itself, that was an impossible task, because the levels of his pupils were so different that if he made the test too easy, some of them would just laugh at it, and if he made it harder, some others wouldn't be able to answer a single question. And it wasn't just a question of making the test, but also of giving marks afterwards. Besides, he was given a somewhat too small room in which they could all copy from each other anyway. In the general messy atmosphere, one of them, a big, fat bully, even lit a cigarette. David didn't know what to do. If he told that big bully to go out, he wouldn't go. If he went down to fetch the director, he would make a fool of himself, and who knows what the kids would do in the meantime. He would have liked to throw out this bully with his own hands (he had done that to pupils in the past, although he had been warned against using physical violence towards these kids whose parents were rich lawyers or who knows what), but in this case the bully was too big and certainly too heavy. So David decided not to give a fuck.

Emboldened by David's embarrassment one of the smaller boys stung the girl in front of him, who happened to be Michelle, in the neck with his pen, and when David ran there with white knuckles, the boy cried out: "You're in love with her! That's why you protect her!"

David told him to shut up and sat down again, but the boy said: "Did you fuck her already?"

David calmly asked back (and now he really didn't give a fuck anymore that he was supposed to be a serious, responsible teacher around here): "And how many girls did you fuck, dear Björn?"

The boy answered: "More than you anyway!"

David smiled a bit (but inwardly he cringed - could it be that this stupid little boy had already experienced sex?): "Seeing how obsessed you are by the topic, I can only conclude that your life is somewhat incomplete in this respect. I don't think you ever did it."

"Just look at yourself," said the boy, "who would do it with YOU?" and he laughed stupidly, but it was already somewhat forced. David was hitting home.

David continued: "Looks aren't everything, you know. Do you remember the little bag of cookies your biology teacher gave you for Christmas? Well, you tore it open, spread the cookies all over the place and then even forgot them in the classroom. That's what I call insensitive, even heartless. In fact you're so insensitive, even a prostitute would ask for a special bonus before accepting you!"

David could see the boy was taken aback. "And you," he said all loudly, "she would ask a million dollars bonus to fuck with you!" Then he noticed that it was pretty still in the classroom. Even the fat bully had gotten bored of his cigarette and had for some reason stubbed it out on his test-paper. He was pushing around the ash with his pencil.

They were listening. Even though David didn't know the mystery of authority and had none as far as these kids were concerned, he could still mark points when he lowered himself to their level. The boy realized he was talking too loudly while having nothing to say, or at least nothing that would really hit home. So he just mumbled: "Even a million dollars wouldn't be enough..." David didn't bother to answer, and henceforth there was silence.

Towards the end of the hour, some of the kids handed back their papers, saying they had finished. David looked through them. They had hardly done anything, and what they had done was all wrong. He wondered how on Earth he would give them marks on that piece of work. But he decided not to worry. He would just see what kinds of marks they got in the other topics and give them similar marks. To hell with it all. The other teachers just gave them things to learn by heart, and they copied it from the book on their laps during the tests. With math you can't do that, because you need to THINK, and that was one thing these pupils were unwilling to do...

When the hour was over, David collected all the papers, put them in his bag, locked the classroom after all the kids had left, went to his car and drove to the nude-beach. There weren't too many beautiful nude babes today. There were just the retired old men and a few of their wives. The young girls (and their boyfriends) usually came on Saturdays and Sundays. But there was still always a chance of seeing one or two at midday and in the later afternoon, and in any case David enjoyed his swim and the feeling of being naked. David was a bit depressed by the summer break. On one hand it meant a holiday for him, but at the same time he had no money to spend, so he would have preferred to work (and earn) a bit more.

But this time he was lucky. The school always held some summer courses according to demand, and children from all over the world came to study French or German at the Monte Verdi School for a few weeks while enjoying all kinds of sport activities organized by the school as well. Of course these were mostly children of rich parents too,

but not all of them were as utterly spoiled as Björn and his friends, for example. Sometimes there were even children coming from a fairly normal home and whose parents were trying to offer them something special. This was the case of Irena, a young German girl who was going to the “Gymnasium” in her home-town in Germany. She wasn’t here because the “Gymnasium” had thrown her out or anything like that. She was here to improve her French, but it wasn’t a topic she didn’t like, and she wasn’t here to have a crash-course to catch up with her class-mates in Germany. On the contrary, she was good at it and wanted to make use of her holidays to become even better. In short, she was highly motivated, and that was something very rare and precious to David.

David didn’t usually teach languages, but since he knew French, and since this girl needed as many French-classes as possible, he was asked to give her some extra classes, namely an hour every day. David was very happy about this, because it meant some more money and quite an agreeable way to earn it, too.

When he saw Irena the first time, he could immediately tell how different she was from his usual pupils. She had something very sophisticated about her, while at the same time seeming somewhat vulnerable and childish. She had a finely chiseled face, long hair falling about her shoulders, and she was wearing a long, artisanal dress, so long that it covered her shoes. David had some little texts to read with her. So they read them through, and he explained the words she didn’t understand with simpler words (doing his best never to speak anything but French) and then he asked her what she thought about this and that in the text, and so he made her talk, and he asked her about how the French-classes were at her “Gymnasium”, which other topics she liked at school, and so on. She told him of a certain Eugen Drewermann, who had been invited to give a talk in the class by the history teacher (who was a friend of this Eugen Drewermann). David had never heard of Eugen Drewermann, so Irena explained that he was an ex-priest (and they checked the word priest in the dictionary) who had new ideas about Christianity that didn’t appeal to the Catholic Church. It had become a big scandal when he claimed that Mary wasn’t a virgin and that Joseph was Jesus’ biological father, and he had lost his chair. But he was a very learned man. He could substantiate what he said, showing that different parts of the Bible were written by different authors, and that some of the texts of these same authors hadn’t been put in the Bible because they were pure fantasy. He explained that the final version of the Bible was a collection of texts put together in a sometimes almost haphazard way, and he showed how a person with some historical background and a lot of patience could work his way to the sources and look for overlapping accounts of what really happened two thousand years ago and what Jesus had really said, while filtering out inconsistencies which had undoubtedly been added later. In that sense he was more of a historian than a religious man.

But he wasn’t just a historian either. He was in some sense a psychologist as well. He even acted as a spiritual counselor to a selected few who believed in him deeply, and in his talks he would sometimes draw on the life-experience of these patients (or disciples?) of his. He wrote books in which he interpreted the symbolical meaning not only of the Bible, but also of the classic Grimms’ tales, for example. Irena had taken one of his books with her from Germany, and when she had finished reading it, she would lend it to David...

It was easy for David to get facts about Drewermann out of Irena, and it was rewarding for both of them when she managed to make herself understood without slipping in a

single word of German. But when it came to finding out why Irena had been so taken in by this Drewermann, what he meant to her, it was much harder. She said that he was such a charming, open man, while at the same time being so intellectual and learned. He was probably the most intelligent man she had ever met. But she somehow wouldn't say more. David asked her if maybe she was impressed by his ability to listen as well, and to take other people seriously without hiding behind his competence in an arrogant way. Yes, of course, Irena said, that was part of it. But she didn't have more to say, and she wondered what else David wanted to hear from her. It wasn't just a question of difficulties with French, even though she seemed to be searching for words all the time when David asked her what Drewermann meant to her. In fact, if David hadn't been her teacher who could bore into her with the excuse of making her practice French conversation (while she could evade the issue with the excuse of not being able to express herself so well in this foreign language), the situation would have been even more uncomfortable.

In the French workbook they were supposed to be working with, there was a short text about the Dupond-family living in a big house with a big garden and a swimming-pool. David and Irena read the text, worked their way through the words she didn't understand, and then David asked her how she liked the house of the Duponds. Irena said she didn't like it. It was too modern, too... As usual, she didn't know how to express herself, or didn't want to. David asked her if it was too stylish, and she said maybe. David asked her if she knew anybody who had a house like that, and she said yes. She had done some baby-sitting there. David asked her if she liked children. She laughed and said no, not much. And she didn't like the children in that big house either? Well, yes, she did, in the end. Generally she preferred being in a big library full of old, dusty books where she could wander around to let herself be tempted by whichever book took her fancy and get herself absorbed in the whole new world some writer would open up for her... She didn't like children and all the little every-day worries (which keep repeating themselves) that go with them. David tried to tell her that children don't just mean the same every-day worries every day, because children grow, they change, they develop their personality and gradually find their place in the world - it's a big adventure! Irena was doubtful about this. She agreed that children can be interesting. While she was baby-sitting those two little boys, she had to play the mother-lion, and the two boys were the baby-lions, and then all kinds of things happened. There was originality, spontaneity in it. Perhaps the game had started with some TV-cartoon characters (she didn't know, because she didn't watch enough TV), but then the game took its own turn and became completely personal in its essence. Irena's conclusion: it makes you sorry when you see what becomes of such kids later on, when they grow up and become conformists like their parents!

David asked Irena if it was the big house that helped the children to become conformists like their parents. Irena didn't really know. Perhaps yes, among other things. How would she like her house to be? She wasn't sure she ever wanted a house. But if she did, it would be a little cottage with a big, messy garden, with dead frogs lying around...

David told her he had once raised frogs himself in an aqua-terrarium. Dozens of fat tadpoles had grown into tiny, fragile little frogs most of which died after a few days. The next spring only two were left, but they rapidly grew big and fat and aggressive, jumping at his fingers like mad when he fed them. They liked to float in the water, and the white

surface of their bellies was visible through the aquarium-glass, their long, muscular thighs hanging beneath them, looking strangely human...

But David didn't manage to make Irena say more about those dead frogs in her imaginary garden. He pictured them as naked bodies, human-like in their stretched-out state, strewn all over the place, and he thought up all kinds of Freudian explanations for their presence, but Irena wouldn't say any more and was sorry she had ever mentioned them at all. So in the next lesson, David all cleverly maneuvered the conversation back to a safer topic, namely Drewermann, asking Irena what she thought Drewermann would have told the hero in the sad little dilemma-story they had read together that day. This was an easier question for Irena, and she explained the theories of Drewermann taking this example as a starting-point.

It turned out that Drewermann had much more to say than whether Mary was a virgin or not. His basic idea, that gradually came to the surface as Irena explained his theories, was that Jesus wanted to liberate human beings, not from the Romans or the "sinners", but from their own strictness in religious matters. The idea to create a new religion was far from him. In fact, he was deeply suspicious of organized religion.

His story of the Good Samaritan illustrated this idea neatly: there was a wounded man lying at the road-side, and when the priest came by, he wouldn't help, because he was on his way to the temple and couldn't dirty his hands. Then a Samaritan came by. The Samaritans were outcasts who had rejected "true" religion. Well, the Samaritan didn't mind making his hands dirty, and he helped the wounded man...

The point was that the Samaritan's mind wasn't locked up in dogmas, and so he was free to do what came to him naturally.

There was also the story of the father and his three sons whom he asked to work in the vineyards. The two elder ones said "Yes, Father" but didn't go. The youngest said "NO", but then he still went to work. Well, which one obeyed his father? The youngest, of course. But as far as appearances go, the two elder ones were more obedient.

There was also the story of Jesus saying that the big temple should just be broken down, because he would build a new one in three days. The temple means organized religion, which takes thousands of years to grow and then grows stale. But what really counts can be built in three days, because we already carry it in ourselves since we are children of God. According to the Bible, Jesus was also speaking about himself, because he knew he was going to be put to death. But while you can kill the man who spread an idea, you can't kill the idea itself. It will always crop up again, and by putting to death the person who originally brought it up, you only acknowledge the threat it represents to you, which can make it even more popular.

Irena could explain all these things very nicely, struggling a bit with the language, but always managing in the end, because David was a pretty good listener. David was beginning to feel quite taken in by her.

Once, when David came to give Irena's private lesson, she wasn't there. He sat in the classroom, waiting. After a while he took out his book to read. It had happened more than once that students didn't come, and he always had a book with him to read. Deep down he didn't really mind, because he got paid the same amount anyway, whether the students turned up or not. But this time he was surprised at how disappointed he got. He couldn't even concentrate on his book, listening for every little noise, hoping that she might still

arrive (at other such times he would greet his students without lifting his head, when they finally came, and he would go on reading till the end of a paragraph while they got seated, showing them how much he didn't care).

Finally he put down his book, walked to the window and looked out over the lake, wondering where Irena might be right now, what she might be doing...

After half an hour had gone by, he left the classroom, locked it reluctantly and went home feeling lonely and a bit depressed.

The next day he was already worried that she might not turn up once again, and she really didn't. After waiting for her twenty minutes he went down to the classroom of the big "boss", the head of the department in which David taught, looked in through the windows to see if there were pupils inside, and since there weren't any and he was just sitting at his desk doing some paper-work, David knocked on the door.

The "boss", a big man in all senses, tall and heavy-set, respected by the pupils (in any case more so than David), called him in. David told him meekly that Irena hadn't turned up for her lesson, and the day before neither. The "boss" looked up all interested.

"Yesterday neither, you said?" he asked. Then he took on a more confidential tone and explained that Irena hadn't been seen since yesterday, that she hadn't even slept at the school. He asked David, looking at him quizzically, with strangely flashing eyes, but staying dead-serious all the while, whether he knew anything, whether she had told him something, whether he had any idea at all. It looked as though she had somehow "eloped" with somebody, escaped from the school, which nobody would have expected in the least, not of a girl like that. David felt his face grow hot as if he were guilty of something, but he controlled his voice and assured the "boss" that he knew strictly nothing. The "boss" went on to explain that it was a serious matter for the school. What should the parents be told? And how should they be told? David nodded his head with faked empathy (what did he care?). Then he asked whether he should come the next day for Irena's lesson. The "boss" told him to come once more, give her one more chance. If she still didn't turn up the next day, then he shouldn't come anymore until he was called back with the good news (hopefully) that she had reappeared.

Of course there was nobody the next day, and the day after David didn't go to school, and nobody called him either. He went for walks along the lake-side, and he couldn't stop himself from hoping that he would suddenly see her, sitting on a rock, looking across the water, enjoying the sunshine...

But now it was Saturday evening and he was acting security guard in a discotheque in Lausanne. This discotheque was nicer than the "Space"-parties in the Casino of Montreux where he used to stand guard in front of the toilets. There were some good old Rock'n'Roll songs (and not just boring techno-music with its ever recurring rhythms). He was standing in the main hall where he had to watch over two billiard tables nearby (and put away the sticks and balls that the players left lying around when they finished a game). He watched the girls dance and listened to the songs, and it wasn't so bad.

At some point a male dancer with a beer in his hand who was jumping around nearby, managing to spill beer in all directions even though his glass was practically empty, bumped into David. When he saw it was just a security guard, he drunkenly started slapping David's cheek with a big, chubby hand. But a certain kind of look came into David's eyes, and the dancer suddenly said "Hooooo!" as if he wanted to calm down a nervous horse, and went away quickly. Luckily for David big muscle-guys don't

generally try things like that. Only pitiful little shitters feel the need to prove their courage to themselves by teasing the security guards.

Somewhere in the hall there was a very, very tall guy with a stupid smile on a stupid face. He was dancing in the crowd, but his head, all round and whitish from the spot-lights, with a strand of wet hair continuously brushing against his brow like a wind-screen-wiper, was floating above the endless sea of all the other heads. What could be seen of his dancing was nothing but the most boring nodding-movements of that stupid head (the rest of the body was submerged in the crowd and couldn't even be made out), and that stupid, drunken smile never left him, and the strand of wet hair never stopped wiping his brow.

The more he irritated David, the less David could stop himself from watching him. Then there was a series of slows, "for lovers and those who wish to be", as the disc-jockey put it, and that stupid tall guy finally left the dancing-floor.

David watched the girls tenderly embracing their boys. There was one girl who reminded him a bit of his pupil Michelle, although she might have been twice as old, and she had such a happy smile on her face as she was dancing with the same young chap during the whole evening! They were trying out all kinds of steps and movements, doing it really together. At some point David, standing in his corner all lost in the sea of sound and flashing lights, visible mainly because of the shiny white T-shirt emphasizing his torso-muscles while his head remained anonymous and unnoticed, let go a long, long sigh! But then a guy came towards him, tall and skinny with a little moustache. He bent down towards David and asked: "Are you new here?"

David didn't understand the question. Was he new with "CNC Sécurité"? No, he had been working for that company for more than a year. Was "CNC Sécurité" new at this discotheque? David didn't know. He hadn't worked here before.

"Sorry?" he said, and little folds of annoyance appeared on his forehead. What the hell did this guy want, asking him like a school-teacher whether he was new here? David was about to shove him away: "Yeah, yeah, go back to dance and leave me alone, okay?"

The tall, thin guy repeated: "Are you new here, I asked. Why don't you take out the ear-piece of your walkie-talkie when you talk to me?"

Now David suddenly knew who this guy was. His superior had pointed him out to David when David was shown around the discotheque before the big crowds came. The tall slim guy had been sitting at a table munching spaghettis. He was the manager of the discotheque!

So of course the answer to the question was yes. David hadn't worked at this discotheque before. But it had nothing to do with the fucking ear-piece of the walkie-talkie! And what did this asshole-manager want in the first place? Why did he ask him whether he was new, if he knew the answer anyway? David didn't take out that ear-piece (because it really had nothing to do with the whole matter) and said: "Yeah, I haven't worked in this place before." He waited for the manager to say something else, to tell him what he wanted at all, but the manager was already disappearing in the crowd with a busy air about him. Presumably he was going to complain to David's superior about this new guy who didn't bow to the boss.

David went back to watching the dancing girls. A slim blonde with a short, almost boyish haircut caught his eye. She saw him too and smiled at him. Then she even came towards him, her eyes shining with recognition. David was bewildered: who could that be? It

dawned on him as if in a dream, and then it struck him hard: the girl in the black bodice, short black skirt twirling about her shapely legs in the black tights, shining black shoes and with a little black hand-bag, was Irena! No patchwork dress going all the way down to her ankles, no long hair falling about her shoulders and none of the melancholic dreaminess and shyness that had struck him in her when he had first seen her. Now she was wearing a tint of makeup, her eyes were shining, she looked happy and a bit excited, and very, very seductive. David got a bit excited too, but he was also bewildered and somehow disappointed: she looked like any of the countless other pretty girls around, exciting like a brand-new sports-car, surely absolutely thrilling to dance with, to seduce and eventually to go to bed with (David could only imagine, having had no such experience). The thought of groping under her short skirt and having her squeal with delight made David feel hot and cold all over and his knees became weak, but the partly dream-like, partly intellectual fascination that had radiated from her during the French classes in the small sunny room smelling of chalk-dust in “Monte Verdi”, that was missing.

But she still wasn't like all those other girls around, because she was materializing in front of him, close enough that he could touch her, and there even was a wee bit of shyness in her eyes that were looking into his.

“Hello!” she said.

“Hello!” he answered. “How are you going? What are you doing here?”

She laughed seductively. “Such a question!” she said. “Look at yourself! What are YOU doing here? This was the last place I would have expected to find you!”

“I work here sometimes.” he answered.

“I can see that...” she said and laughed again.

“You didn't come to my classes anymore, the school is all worried because you disappeared!”

“Yes, I'm sorry. I won't be coming anymore. There have been quite a few changes in my life... I'll catch up with you later. Can you look after this hand-bag for me while I dance?”

“Sure,” he answered, “I have to stand here anyway!”

She handed him her hand-bag, and was gone with a wink. He was surprised how heavy it was and put it down against a pillar behind himself.

He was still pondering all this when his superior came up to him and told him that he looked a bit asleep here and that he was moving him to another spot.

“Asleep? What do you mean asleep?” asked David, growing angry. “Nobody put any ash trays or drinks on the billiard tables and nobody is sitting on them or leaning against them either. You see, I'm paying attention. And there's no fight going on anywhere either, everything is perfectly calm. And I'm not even leaning against the pillar behind me. Do you want me to dance so that I wouldn't look asleep, or what?”

The boss was a big fat chunk of a male, and he had no time to waste on this new little recruit. “Yeah, yeah, but you look sleepy and bored anyway. The manager complained about it, so I'm moving you to another spot where you're less visible!”

David explained that he couldn't leave right now, because he was looking after the hand-bag of a customer who had gone to the toilet (he didn't dare to say that actually it wasn't for anything as specific as a trip to the toilet). The superior told him that the customers were supposed to leave their things in the cloakroom. David said okay, that he shouldn't

have accepted to look after that bag, but that it was too late now since he had already accepted to do it.

The superior said he didn't care and even sort of tried to drag David away. The moment David felt that big hand on his shoulder, he blew up and yelled: "No! I'm staying here! Is that clear?"

Now the superior became really angry himself and said that he was the boss here. He told David that that was it and that he could go home. So David tore off his upholstered T-shirt and his walkie-talkie, dropped them in front of his superior, said "Good night!" and left, taking Irena's hand-bag with him.

On the way home David wondered whether he was doing the right thing. Perhaps Irena needed her handbag to get home (wherever her home might be now) - perhaps her train-ticket was in there. He should have left that hand-bag somewhere for her to find or waited for her at the entrance of the disco. He had no business taking that hand-bag with him. On the other hand, he couldn't bear dealing with his security-guard colleagues for even one second longer, and he had to escape, go back to his comfortable little flat and forget about all those assholes.

Now he began to wonder why he had become so angry. He didn't understand why he was accused of looking asleep. He wasn't at all asleep. He was doing his job just fine. Why were they bothering him?

But now that he started thinking about it more deeply, he DID in the end understand why he was accused of looking asleep. It wasn't at all true that he was doing his job just fine - he wasn't. The obvious part of his job was looking after those billiard-tables and making sure no squabbles were going on among the customers - he was a security-guard. But he was also, in some sense, a representative of the discotheque, of its manager. His appearance, his behaviour gave the discotheque a certain image. It was logical that the manager would want him to look a certain way.

Of course David could claim all indignantly that he was doing EXACTLY what he was told and pretend that he didn't at all understand what he was being criticized for (and that's what he was going to do in case he had to defend himself). But in reality he knew full well that he wasn't doing his job properly. It was true that his heart wasn't in this job, and employing him had been a mistake in the first place.

And why had he taken on such a job at all? Well, the reason was mostly that the "Monte Verdi" school hadn't given him a full-time job (but was his heart in THAT job any more than in this one, actually?), and he needed some extra odd jobs to get some extra money. That's what this security company offered.

In spite of these two jobs he was still on the dole part-time. In order to go on cashing unemployment money, he had to show good-will in looking for work and do odd jobs even outside of his domain of specialization (well, actually he didn't even have any domain of specialization).

So maybe that was the only real reason why he was working as a security guard. He lived in a society where everybody needs money, because that's how the society works. And you get money for working, so you need a job. That's why David needed a job - everybody needs one.

But for the security business, things with respect to David looked quite different. They didn't give him a job because he needed one - they gave him a job because they thought

he would be useful to them and fit into the function they would assign him. And since he didn't fit in, they had made a mistake, actually.

David was a kind of person who didn't really fit in anywhere. It wasn't exactly laziness - he could force himself to do things even if he didn't specially like them, namely, he could force himself to look after those billiard tables the whole night. He could even force himself not to lean against the pillar or the wall while he was on duty. But he couldn't force himself to look bloody enthusiastic while doing all this. He didn't look part of it all because he WASN'T part of it all...

The reason he kept doing (or trying to do) such jobs was because society demanded it. Why couldn't society realize that there simply isn't enough work for everybody?

Machines have replaced a good deal of manual labor. Why not enjoy this fact and work less? Why should everybody continue working eight hours a day like hundreds of years ago?

Many thousands of years ago, those who wouldn't work probably starved. But at the same time the work was probably simpler. Those with a good team-spirit could join together and go hunting. The more dreamy ones could pick fruits or design clever devices for opening nuts or traps to catch animals or who knows what. There was something to do for everybody.

But now society has taken care of all those basic needs, and the only way to keep everyone busy is within society itself, within its social web. Society has taken away the self-sustaining work from the individual and has compensated for it by inventing new jobs for him. The problem is just that these new jobs, invented by society, grown out of society, necessarily have to be social jobs that require social skills. Selling and buying various kinds of merchandise, including oneself, that's what all these jobs are all about (even ideas, scientific discoveries, even art - it all has to be sold, else it dies with its creator). People like David who don't have too many social skills are obviously in trouble. But they have to play the game too. They can draw the dole, but in exchange they have to keep trying (and failing) to fit in somewhere. Those like David necessarily become losers, because they are forced to play in a game they can't win, a game that isn't their kind of game.

On the other hand, how could society cater for such extreme cases?

Maybe the first step would be to let go, at last, of the idea that everyone should have a full-time job. Nobody should even want a full-time job! Of course, if the salary goes down by the same occasion, then working less will be unacceptable for most people. But the salary wouldn't necessarily need to go down, because all those people working less would leave more space for the unemployed, so that there would be some work (not too much!) for them to do as well. What society spends on the dole could be spent on shortening working-hours without lowering the salaries.

On the other hand, if people generally had more free time, all kinds of new hobbies would have to be catered for, which would in turn mean new jobs. But since the general tendency is that there are less and less jobs (less and less work to be done), this wouldn't be a problem. In the meantime, those people who are dreamers and don't need entertainment by society, they would gladly go horse-riding or walking their dogs in the forest without having to feel guilty about "not fitting in" anywhere and being "losers"!

Ah, good old David! Why didn't he study economy at the university if he wanted to make theories like that? Then somebody might even listen to him! Maybe his problem wasn't any of this, after all, but just pure, dumb laziness!

The next day he wrote the security business a short letter explaining about the hand-bag and also that the habit of saying "tu" (instead of the polite form "vous") to each other among superiors and subordinates doesn't help to stay polite in situations like this. He didn't explicitly write that he still had the hand-bag, and he wondered how Irena would ever get it back. On the other hand he hoped that this hand-bag would be an excuse for seeing her again. He suddenly had the enlightening idea that the hand-bag itself might help him find her again (some addresses or phone-numbers might be in there)! Of course it wasn't nice of him to search it, but, on the other hand, if he didn't search it, who would ever know that he didn't and appreciate that he didn't?

So he did. And what he found in it surprised him pretty much. It was a black, medium-sized, heavy and metallic device with a hollow snout: it was a gun!

Apart from that gun there wasn't anything of much interest in the bag: lipstick, a comb, a mirror, some other make-up accessories, but not a single piece of paper with any information on it. Furthermore, all the stuff looked brand-new, without a smear, unused. David didn't know what to make of all this. He held the gun in his hand, gazed at it, turned it around in his hand, sniffed at it, unloaded it, loaded it again. What the hell was Irena doing with THIS?

But even when such monstrously unfitting things happen in an ordinary life, somehow the ordinary stuff still has to be taken care of too. Namely, David had an appointment at the mechanic's to get the exhaust-pipe of his car replaced. They had agreed that he would bring the car on Sunday evening and leave the key in the letter-box so that the mechanic could start working on it first thing the next morning. So, some time after having munched down his dinner, David took the car from the garage and drove it to the mechanic's whose workshop was walking-distance from David's flat. He walked home slowly, enjoying the cool evening air, watching the lights go on in the houses one by one as it got dark and stroking a fearful little cat who lived nearby and whom he had gradually tamed over the months of walking by. He wondered if he ever thought of this cat before or after crossing its path. He concluded he didn't. In some sense, up till today, he hadn't even been properly aware, in a truly conscious sense, of knowing this cat. If he had moved to another town yesterday and was later asked about things he missed in Montreux, this cat would never have come to his mind. But now, because of all this musing he was doing right now, he might remember this particular cat even in ten years time. Strange how the human brain works...

He went home, read a bit in the book lying on his bedside table before going properly to bed, then made himself comfortable and fell asleep easily.

But he woke up with a start in the middle of the night. There seemed to be some kind of scratching sound at the door to his flat, and since it was a one-room flat, he could hear it close at hand. Yes, someone seemed to be trying to fit a key into the lock! Someone must have gotten mixed up with the doors or was at the right door but on the wrong floor (something like that) and was slow realizing it. Damn you, move on now!

But the noise wouldn't stop. How could that asshole insist so much? Wouldn't he ever get it that this wasn't his door?

And what if it were a burglar, patiently working on getting in? David resisted the temptation to switch on the light and yell through the door. He quietly got up, found his way through the dark to the door, put his hand on the lock and...

He unlocked and opened the door wide in one flow of a motion! His messy, slept-on hair formed a crazy mane around his head, his eyes were closed to slits in the sudden light of the corridor and his chin was thrust forward in anger. His naked, hairy legs were slightly braced and the muscles of his upper body showed clearly through the pyjama-shirt he was wearing.

He was facing a youngish guy dressed in an elegant black evening suit, holding some kind of fine screw-driver. There was a sophisticated tool-box standing on the floor next to him. He was sort of taken aback, and he even flushed a little. He bent down quickly to take his tool-box and was going to bolt off. "Sorry, sorry!" he said.

"Wait!" said David.

The guy seemed to come to his senses, straightened up and tried to look tough.

"You were going to break in here." said David. It was a statement.

"You certainly know why I'm here." said the guy.

"The gun." said David.

"The gun." agreed the guy.

David switched on the light in his room and said: "Come in."

The guy came in. David made him sit at his table full of crumbs and a dirty plate or two.

"Well?" said David.

"The gun." said the guy.

"Uh-huh." said David. "I locked it up in a locker at the railway-station."

"Give me the key." said the guy.

"Not so fast." said David. "How do I know this is your gun? Why didn't Irena come to pick it up? Are you a friend of hers?"

"Look," said the guy, "I don't want any fuss. How come you're home at all? You were supposed to be away."

"Who said I wasn't home?" asked David, surprised.

"The guys watching your car. You took it out of the garage and haven't driven back since. We thought you were off to work or something."

"At night."

"Yeah, at night. You're a security guard, aren't you?"

"Just part-time, but that's not the point."

"Yeah, that's right. Just give me that key and let's leave it at that, okay?"

"No, no, it's not that simple. I want to know what happened to Irena. I'm sure her parents are looking for her."

"What is she to you?"

"Yeah, that's what I'd like to know: what is she to YOU?"

The guy was getting uneasy. This certainly wasn't going as planned. He was thinking of taking out his pen-knife and threatening David. But David didn't look like that was going to impress him all that much. He would make a bigger fuss, start raising a row. He didn't look all that dangerous, but he didn't exactly look harmless either. Maybe he knew how to fight. Maybe he'd had some training...

David sensed the hesitation of his opponent. It was like with the pupils at school when they were acting contrary. There is always a moment when you have a chance to win them over in exchange of not being angry with them anymore.

“Really, what became of her?” asked David. “I don’t want any fuss either. I don’t care about that gun, really. But I care about Irena. I was her teacher, I liked her, and one day she just didn’t turn up at my lessons anymore.”

“Well,” said the guy, “my boss offered her a job.”

“A job? What kind of job?”

“Well, you know, a hostess for our guests.”

“You mean a call-girl, a prostitute?”

“Well yes, a call-girl.”

“She accepted to work as a call-girl for you?”

“Yes.”

“She accepted? She wanted it herself?”

“Yes. Why do you doubt it?”

“It doesn’t fit in.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t fit in? In what?”

“It doesn’t fit in with what I know of her.”

“What do you know of her?”

David became angry: “She’s a young, intellectual girl full of dreams and ideals! How could she want to be a call-girl!?!?”

“Well she does.”

“Who hired her? Or rather, - what’s the word? - who recruited her?”

“I did.”

“You just went to her and told her: come and be a call-girl for my company!”

“No, of course it’s not that simple...”

“You tricked her, then.”

“No, of course I didn’t trick her. How could she do such a job against her will?”

David became even angrier: “Why, all over the world women are doing this job against their will!”

Now the guy became more vehement himself: “Always the same story of the poor, poor victims! Always the same brainless feeling of collective guilt in which our whole society is wallowing! I tell you, we’re not the ones starving the poor children in Africa, we’re not responsible for ethnic cleansing, and we’re not the ones who make poor girls into prostitutes, because these things are NATURAL!!!”

“WHAT!?!?!?”

“Yes, they are.” The guy became calmer. He was ready to explain. “Believe me, they are natural. Every girl dreams at some point of becoming a prostitute, of giving herself to each and everyone without choosing, of just letting herself go and taking all men at once or in a row.”

David became more thoughtful too. “At some POINT, maybe, that’s what she dreams. But all in all, on the long run, that can’t be what she wants...”

“Why not? How do you know? Are you a great moralizer, or what?”

“Yes, maybe. Giving her love to one man, living with him, not just fucking with him, having a family, isn’t that so much richer an experience, so much more personal?”

“Sure.” said the guy ironically. “That’s why all these married couples are soooo happy, and such interesting people too...”

“You don’t believe in anything, do you?” asked David.

“Well, I certainly don’t believe in monogamy.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

“No.”

“So?”

“So what? Who are you to come and tell me that my life is wrong? Is yours so much better? Are you so much happier? You’re just like all those other moralizers brandishing their Bibles. You make me sick!”

“The Bible survived for two thousand years, you know. How could it all be shit?” said David quietly.

There was silence for a while. Then the guy said: “Okay, explain it to me!”

“I can’t explain the Bible,” said David, “but I think that people who believe in something, monogamy for example, they stick around, having their little lives, minding their little business, while the likes of you, they just appear from time to time and then go under.”

“Everyone goes under at some point. You can’t escape death.” said the guy. “You might as well have fun while you’re here. Who are you to tell me that that’s wrong and that what you do and believe is better?”

“Oh, that’s simple,” said David, “when you’ll be too old to have the kind of fun you’re having now, I’ll still be around having MY kind of fun, and I’ll come and see you in a museum where they keep old, run-down objects such as you will be.”

“You mean you’ll have a longer life than me? Could be... You’ll have a long and boring one, while I’ll have a short and intense one. Why do you think yours will be so much better?”

“Well,” said David, “which life is better won’t even be a question by then, because you simply won’t be THERE anymore.” But he knew he was splitting hairs.

Indeed, the guy said: “We’re talking about NOW. I don’t care about you dragging yourself through museums in a hundred years and taking pride in still being alive.”

David had a last fling at it: “No, but we don’t even need to take your attitude towards life into consideration at all because it’s destructive, it’s anti-life! It’s a goner! You’re already dead! How can you even compare it to REAL life?”

“We all have to die one day,” said the guy calmly, “even you. You don’t convince me at all.”

David knew that he had lost, for the time being. He would have to think it over for himself. He didn’t really know what to say, but he wanted to know more about Irena.

“So that’s what you told Irena?” he asked, finally.

“More or less.”

“You told her to make the most of life here and now.”

“Yes.”

“And that meant becoming a call-girl?”

“Well, why not? It’s an experience!”

“And her studies, that wasn’t an experience?”

“Yes, but she herself said that she wasn’t doing them just for their own sake. She was doing them for something to come. She was preparing herself for who knows what kind

of great life. She didn't know herself what that great life could or should be. She was full of doubts. I showed her that a great life can be right HERE and NOW."

"How on earth did you do that?"

"I seduced her."

"You what?!?"

"I seduced her. She was sitting alone, all lost, in a pub here in Montreux, nipping at a drink, feeling out of place but nevertheless desperately waiting for something to happen..."

"In a pub? She was in a pub?"

"Why not? In pubs there's noise and people, and those people don't just come and go. They sit down and they have time. That's where they meet and exchange ideas, all kinds of people, not just the members of some club, and all kinds of ideas, not just the authorized ones. There's alcohol to help you let go of conventions. Pubs are the crossroads of mankind. Poets and composers have written their finest pieces in pubs."

"So she was just sitting there, waiting, and you went there and seduced her?"

"Yes, that's pretty much how it was. You see, I know the signs. As you said, I'm a recruiter, after all. I sat down with her, chatted with her, bought her another drink, took her home with me, made love to her all night... She was very happy!"

David couldn't believe it. "And then you told her to become a call-girl, and she accepted straight away?"

"No, of course not. We took our time over everything. I let her discover my philosophy of life, and then it didn't even come as a surprise when she heard what I do for a living. She asked me if I had in mind to recruit her too, and of course I told her that I live for the present moment, that the present moment was pretty good, and that's all that was on my mind, and I kissed her, and we made love again, and then she said she wanted to be recruited too. You see, I was the living proof that someone who just appears out of the Blue can suddenly make everything else in life seem meaningless. If you stay with that person, you get clogged with responsibilities again. So why not make sure that you will never be bogged down again? Why not make sure that you will never be short of ephemeral meetings? Why not live like that on purpose, make a living of it?"

David was flabbergasted. "But that's disgusting!" he said, "I would never have thought that a girl like Irena could fall for a trick like THAT!"

"It wasn't a trick, that's the trick." said the guy.

David was sick to the heart. He couldn't say anything.

"What about that key now?" asked the guy.

"Which key?" David asked back feebly, lost in gruesome thoughts.

"The key to the railway-station locker where you left my gun!"

"What were you doing with that gun anyway? Why did Irena give it to me at all?"

"Oh, that's a long story."

"Let's have it."

"Yeah, well, there was a fight, someone got killed. Irena and I felt we were being followed by plain-clothes policemen. The whole thing must have been a set-up anyway. So we went into that disco to lose them, but they came in too, so we had to get rid of that gun before they checked us out. That's all."

"You mean someone was killed with that gun?"

"Yeah, someone got shot."

“You shot him?”

“Yeah, I did that.”

David remembered the shiny and sexy Irena he had seen in the disco. So that’s how she looked just after witnessing a murder. What kind of a monster had she become?

“How come they let you into the disco with that gun? Didn’t they check the hand-bag at the entrance?”

“No, no, they know us there.”

“Yeah, well here’s the key.” said David and took the spare key from his old bicycle lock from a cupboard in his desk. “The number of the locker,” he added as an afterthought, “is hundred twenty three.”

1-2-3, hell, couldn’t he think up anything more original?

The next day David mostly slept. He just woke up once to go to the toilet. When he woke up the second time it was past midday. He got up, ate some corn-flakes, hanged around. Finally he rang up the garage to ask if his car was ready. They told him to come in an hour. So he hanged around some more, got dressed, went down to his letter-box (which was empty), came back up again and hanged around some more and finally put on his shoes and left the flat to go and get his car. He was walking on a small path along the railway-line, watching out for snails that he didn’t want to squash. There were some guys ahead, three of them, sort of blocking the path, and they had a dark look. David wasn’t too happy about having to brush past them. As he came closer he said “Bonjour” all non-committedly, and he saw that the first one gave him a pretty strange look...

That’s all he seemed to remember. Now he was lying on a bed, looking up at the ceiling that was gradually coming into focus. There was a spider web leaning against the cord of a strange, purple lamp. The lamp was hanging from the ceiling, but actually it might as well have been the floor, and he was floating above it, and that lamp was growing out of it like a strange flower...

He had a terrible head-ache. It was as if some drummers were continuously beating against the inside of his skull, and the echo of it, a dull pain, never had time to fade before the drummers hit again.

He had no idea how long he was hovering above that purple flower. He was wondering if maybe the drumming in his head was just an echo of the beating of the insect-wings he must undoubtedly have on his back. He felt like throwing up. Maybe that way those wings would run out of juice, and he would gently settle down on that white surface below him...

He heard some noise of a door opening up, some footsteps, light and graceful, and then a face was above him. It was a nice face, caring and sweet, a female face. Actually it was Irena.

“So, you’ve finally woken up.” she said kindly.

He tried to clear his throat and coughed a bit. The face went out of focus. He wasn’t sure anymore that it was Irena. “Where am I?” he whispered.

“It’s okay,” she said, “you’re a guest here.”

“But where, where?”

“You don’t need to know. Just relax. And if there’s anything I can do for you, anything at all?..”

“Bring me some water, please.”

“Okay...” she said all sweetly and left.

When she came back he was sleeping.

He woke up much later. It was dark in the room except for some blue light coming in through the window. He sat up in bed. His head was still hurting a bit, and it hurt when he touched it. Otherwise he felt pretty fine, but he was bloody thirsty and even sort of a bit hungry. He got up and went to the door. Of course it was locked. He found a light-switch, though. The light from the purple lamp was yellowish and none too bright. He looked around. It looked like some kind of hotel-room, although it was a bit Spartan for that. There wasn't even a wardrobe, nor even any kind of table except the small one on which the TV was standing.

He sat down on the bed again and put his hands to his face. Then he got up again and went to knock on the door, pretty loudly, hoping that someone outside would hear him. It only took a moment and Irena appeared again. She was wearing a black miniskirt and a white blouse leaving her belly-button uncovered. Her shapely legs and her feet were naked. She had plenty of make-up on. She came in and put a cool hand on his forehead.

“How are you feeling?”

“Not too bad, but I'd like a glass of water. And I'm a bit hungry too!”

“A chicken sandwich would be okay?”

“Yeah, that would be great!”

She kissed his cheek and left. He heard the lock in the door.

She came back a moment later. He wondered what would happen if he smashed his way through the door as soon as she opened it, but he didn't quite feel up to it. Besides he really wanted that glass of water she was undoubtedly bringing.

Really, she handed him a tooth-glass full of nice, fresh water, and he gulped it all down and asked for more. She gave him the chicken sandwich and went in the other room to get it, leaving the door open. Obviously there was n't really anywhere to escape to from here.

He finished the sandwich and drank the second glass more slowly, then he put it down and said: “I guess it's about the gun.”

“Yes, of course,” she said and sat down on the bed beside him, “but there's plenty of time.” And she took his hand and put it on her naked thigh.

He felt something strange happening in his pants. It was a coming erection. She was just playing her call-girl tricks on him. How come that they worked? He had gone to see prostitutes before, and his dick had always shriveled up to nothing in their hands. How come that now it worked? Maybe because he hadn't come here by himself and hadn't paid anything. He hadn't set it up like this and he wasn't here to want anything from her. At other times the reptile-beast within himself had been shooed into the spotlight, and since it was a reactionary beast, it had always refused to perform. But this time it came out in the spotlight by itself, and he could shoo it away from there just as little as he could shoo it onto the spot at other times.

Irena's hand wandered to his groin, and her palm surrounded the bump there in just the way it felt best, and a bit of tugging and squeezing was just right to encourage it to grow further.

At the same time he could feel her breath on his face, and her nose came to touch his nose...

“All the time in the world.” she whispered. Then she abruptly stood up and went to the door. There she paused and said with shiny eyes: “If you’d like anything, just call me!” Then she turned on her heels, her hand casually brushing aside the skirt so that the whole length of her legs would be shown, and left.

David collapsed on the bed and waited for his throbbing erection to subside.

The next time she came he started talking before she had a chance to sit down next to him and work on his body.

“What are you doing here, actually?”

“I’m looking after you.”

“No, but I mean more generally. You work here?”

“Yeah, it can be called like that.”

David got it out: “As a whore.”

Irena smiled, and there was something like pity mixed with a bit of mockery in her eyes.

“Yeah, as a whore, if you like!”

“That’s the point,” David said. “I don’t like it, not at all. I’m sure your parents are dead worried about you. You just disappeared!”

Irena, still standing, looked straight into his eyes: “My parents are not at all worried about me, not about ME! They are worried about the little girl I played for them and whom they let go to Switzerland all alone for a treat. That’s what they’re worried about!”

“Well,” David asked, trying to be calm, composed, “what happened to that little girl?”

“She never even existed!”

“What about the dreams you had?”

“Which dreams?”

“I don’t know...” David suddenly felt trapped. “What about Drewermann? Do you think he would approve of the life you are leading now?”

“Drewermann?” Irena suddenly laughed. “You were very taken in by that Drewermann of mine, weren’t you? Or rather, you were taken in by me talking about him! You know, I could see through you all along. You just loved to see me, the poor little virgin, locked up in her secluded, safe little world of virginity, but trying to get out, trying to set herself free by setting her mind free. You thought you would accompany my mind in its struggle, but deep down, what you always wanted was to have me, take the poor little virgin for a ride, show her how to have fun...”

“Why would I have wanted to do that?”

“Oh, because maybe you were afraid that girls who already know how to have fun wouldn’t fall for you?”

“Hell,” said David, “let’s suppose that’s true, then. But anyway, what about Drewermann?”

“What about him?”

“Would he approve of the life you’re leading now, yes or no?”

“I guess not. What difference does it make?”

“What difference does it make? Hell, you used to believe deeply in his ideas! You’ve lost your old dreams, just as I said!”

“Ah...” Irena made a gesture with her hand as if she was wiping something away, “I just got taken in by him because he was against the establishment. I saw a kindred spirit in him. He was fighting against the old dogmas of the Church, but he might as well have been fighting against any other aspect of what the Big Shitters of Good Society, in their

endless hypocrisy, pretend to believe in. All young girls have such an idol at some point. For me it was Drewermann because I grew up in an intellectual family. Otherwise it might as well have been Michael Jackson.”

David didn't know what to say.

“What's the matter?” asked Irena, “you don't like losing the poor little virgin?”

“I don't get this,” mumbled David more to himself than Irena, “I really don't get this.”

“Look,” said Irena, “here's the deal: I give you a free ride, and you give us that gun you've hidden, and then everyone's happy and satisfied, okay?”

David just sat there, not saying anything. Irena came towards him, put her hand to his face and said all gently: “I'll give you a bloody good one, you'll see. It will be much better than breaking in an innocent little virgin, I promise...”

David got hot in the face. “Stop it!” he said and pushed her hand away. Irena sat down on the bed next to him. At this moment she seemed a bit lost too.

“But what is it you want?” she asked.

David put an arm around her shoulders. It came all naturally. He gave her a hug, and she hugged him back a bit.

He drew away from her and asked calmly: “And that gun? What's the story of that gun?”

“Someone got shot.”

“By your boss.”

“Yeah, if that's what you call him.”

“You were with him when it happened?”

“Yeah, I was with him.”

“You saw the other guy get shot.”

“Yeah, I saw the other guy get shot.”

“But why? What was it all about?”

“It was a deal that didn't work out. Probably it was a set-up by the police.”

“What kind of a deal?”

“Drug deal.”

“You do drugs as well?”

“Yeah, we sell some drugs, mostly cocaine.”

“You take some yourself?”

“Yeah, I took some. Would you like to try?”

“What? Cocaine?”

“Yeah, sure. It doesn't harm you!”

“No thanks, I'd rather stay in touch with the real world.”

“The Real World!” she laughed again, but this time slightly bitterly. “What on Earth is that?”

David felt trapped again.

Finally he said: “I just think you would have a much richer life, much richer and much more personal, if you gave your love to one man, if he's the right one.”

“Even if that's what I wanted, one day: what's stopping me?”

“Bah!” said David disdainfully, “do you think you could tell him about what you've been doing here?”

Irena hesitated for just a second. Then she said: “Yeah, why not? And if he can't deal with it, then he wasn't the right one anyway!”

“That's not how it works.”

“Why not?”

“Well,” said David, “before people can start building up a really deep and personal relationship, before they can really let themselves go and not just share their body but their dreams as well, they need to feel that they won’t be hurt.”

“A kind of guarantee, you mean!” said Irena mockingly.

“Call it that, if you like!”

“So?”

“So, if sex is a tremendously forbidden thing, a big taboo, then giving yourself to someone sexually is a bloody big thing too. It’s an emotional commitment. But if sex doesn’t mean anything to you anymore, then, in some sense, you lack the language to say I LOVE YOU, and you will never feel that you can completely give yourself to someone, emotionally as well as physically.”

Irena laughed (God, how David hated to hear that laugh again and again!). Then she said: “I LOVE YOU is just a quotation. Anyone saying I LOVE YOU is just quoting all those who said it before him. There’s strictly nothing original in it, let alone personal!”

“Sure,” said David. “Every single word you say is a quotation, because someone somewhere has said it before. Every single feeling you have is just a quotation, because some animal somewhere in the Universe must have already felt the same once. That’s not a way to argue!”

“Anyway,” said Irena, “I don’t need to give my love to one man for ever and ever, especially not by making such a commitment in advance - if it turns out that I love him for a longer time, that’s something different. What counts is the present moment, what we can share here and now. Monogamy is just hypocrisy.”

David sighed: “You run the risk of ending up being bloody lonely when you’re old, too old to start afresh, and too old for this job anyway!”

“I don’t intend to get that old!”

There it was again. The trap. The same trap David had fallen into when he was talking with the guy who came to fetch the gun.

“One day you’ll regret it.” he insisted.

“Oh yeah, Mr. Becker...”

“Call me David.”

“Okay, David, you just know everything, don’t you?”

“Yeah, well you just go back into your artificial cocaine-world, and you’ll see!”

“Yeah, and you just go back into your real world of solid truths, and you’ll see too. Just give back that gun you’ve got, and we’ll let you go!”

“I threw it in the lake.” David said.

“The lake? You threw it in the lake? What the hell for?” asked Irena.

“Well,” said David, “just to get rid of it.”

“Hm,” said Irena, “if the gun has really disappeared, that would be fine. The trouble is, we would need to take your word for it, and I don’t think that’s how my bosses do things here...”

“No problem,” said David, “I can show you where I threw it, and a diver can get it back.”

“A diver!” said Irena. “That’s a good one! A diver indeed!”

She left.

Much later three tough-looking guys came in.

“Okay,” said one of them, “let’s go and get that gun!”

“It’s at the beach of Lutry.” David said dutifully.

“Okay, let’s go!” said the guy.

David followed them and they packed him in a car and drove off.

The weather was gray, stormy. There wouldn’t be too many people at the beach. Not much point in raising a row among the bathers in order to try to get away...

Indeed, as they walked along the windy beach towards the concrete three-meter high diving board, David saw nobody at all. The place was deserted (else, he guessed, his good friends wouldn’t have taken him here this same day in the first place).

“I threw it from the diving board.” said David. “I need to get up there to orientate myself, but then I’m pretty sure I can give you the approximate direction.”

So they all waded over to the concrete staircase and started climbing up, four men, serious looking, all dressed up, their jackets flapping in the wind. David could feel the first few raindrops on his cheeks.

David went to stand at the edge of the board and peered into the distant grayness. The water under him was somewhat choppy, pretty gray as well. Some debris were bumping into each other as they went up and down with the waves...

David seemed to concentrate, trying to picture how exactly he had thrown that gun the other day...

He took a pretty deep breath. Then he jumped!

Wow, the onrushing air! But he seemed to stay in the air for so long! Plenty long enough, it seemed to him, for the guys above him on the diving board to pull their guns and shoot!

But then he hit the water. The coolness flooded him as the water still seemed to explode all around him! He brushed his shoes off with his feet and started swimming, still under water. The clothes made it a cumbersome business, and he already had an urge to breathe! But he remembered the guys on the diving board above him, and so he swam downwards a bit more.

Further off there was a big rock jutting out of the water ever so slightly. Now, with the waves and the debris floating around it, David guessed you couldn’t see it at all. But David knew it was there. It was just far enough from the water’s edge that you couldn’t reach it without swimming a few strokes. Reaching that rock, that’s how David had learned to swim as a little boy. Yeah, the beach of Lutry, he knew it like his own pocket! Summer after summer he had come to swim here, with his parents, and later on his own... David swam and swam. With all his clothes still on, he had an awful feeling that he wasn’t moving at all. He stayed well under the surface, but didn’t go so deep that his oxygen-starved mind would start panicking. What if the general direction wasn’t right? What if he was swimming past that rock at this very moment, not being able to see it in this turbid water?

But then he suddenly saw a dark, ominous outline right in front of himself. It seemed to want to engulf him, it was coming towards him so fast! David twisted his body to the left and glided past the seaweed-overgrown, familiar shape of the rock. Then, holding on to the surface of the rock he came up behind it, where his good friends on the diving board (if they were still up there - but where else would they be?) couldn’t see him and took a good, long breath!

He stayed there, clinging to the side of the rock, for a long time. Hardly more than his nose was looking out above the surface of the water, and he let the waves wash over him,

not daring to let himself rise with them. Then he risked a peak: sure enough, the three men were still up there on the diving board!

When he looked again, a long, long while later, there was just one guy up there, sitting with dangling legs. The two others were nowhere to be seen. Maybe they had gone back to the car to prepare the diving suit. They were going to look for him under water! Would they come till this rock to see? Anyway, you couldn't see further than a meter or two in this turbid water, even with glasses! David decided not to get worried. He just needed to be patient! But then again, the guy sitting on the diving board wasn't looking in his direction at all... Maybe it was time to try to get away! He would swim straight out into the lake, keeping his head low. The mop of his hair among the waves could be mistaken for any kind of debris. Besides, it was steadily becoming darker. He would watch the guy on the diving board as he swam and dive under if he turned his way! But if he still spotted him, that would be a problem, because the diver with palms on his feet (he must be coming any minute) would catch up with him in no time at all!

On the other hand, if David didn't start moving soon, he would freeze to death!

So David started swimming, and he swam and swam till the diving board was a tiny feature of the far-off shore. No chance that anyone could spot him from the beach now! He turned to swim along the shoreline, and gradually moved inshore again. Finally he came back ashore on another beach. It felt all strange to walk again. He almost had problems keeping his balance on his two feet! The wet clothes were clinging to his body, and the wind that started drying them felt freezing cold!

He walked fast, swinging his arms.

He went to sit in the waiting room of the train-station, trembling, his teeth clattering, hoping that nobody would see the puddle forming under his seat.

He took the train back to Montreux.

But when he got to his flat, the same three men were already there, looking for the gun, and he walked straight into their arms!

So they brought him back to the little room and locked him up. He sat on the bed and stared down at the carpet.

Really, how could he have been that amazingly stupid to go back to his flat? On the other hand, where else could he have gone with his soaking wet clothes? If at least he had turned away as soon as he suspected something was wrong...

He wondered what a clever person would have done in his place.

Then after a while Irena came in, sexy as ever.

She sat on the bed next to him and said: "They wanted to try all kinds of methods to get that gun from you, but I convinced them to let me have another try."

"That's nice of you." was all David could say.

"Well, where is it? It's not in your flat, so much they know."

"I put it in a padded envelope and put it in the letter-box of the police-station."

"What?!!" She stood up. "Are you crazy?"

"Not at all. That gun is a murder-weapon - the police should have it."

"The police can't do anything with that gun."

"Why?"

"Because they can't know who did the killing with it."

"So why do you want it back so badly?"

“Because together with your statement, it would be enough to arrest the killer.”

“Oh, I see. Me and the gun, that’s enough evidence.”

“That’s right. You see, if they get rid of you, they don’t even need that gun back. But if they get the gun, your statement will be worthless, and they can let you go. If I tell them that the gun is already in the hands of the police...”

“I will have to be disposed of.”

Irena paced the room. “That’s right.” she said after a while.

Then she turned straight to David: “What do we do now?”

“You ask me?” he asked back feigning surprise.

She started pacing again.

Then she turned to him with obvious aggressivity: “You could be more nervous at least!”

“Oh well,” he said, “they won’t have to make me suffer, I guess...”

“You’re crazy!!” she cried out with an almost hysterical, tearful voice that she muffled the best she could so that nobody outside would hear it.

“There, there...” said David and stood up. He took her by the waist and pulled her close. She buried her face in his shoulder and cried, her whole body shaking. David held her strongly.

Then she pulled herself away, her face hot, red and wet, and whispered: “Why are you doing this to me?”

“I’m not doing anything to you.” he answered calmly.

“I can’t let them kill you.”

“Then we have to escape.” he answered sensibly.

“Ah, that’s what it really is,” she said, sniffing angrily, “isn’t it?”

“What?”

“You desperately want to get me out of here, back to a NORMAL life, back to where in your eyes I belong. Of course you know I can’t just leave you to your death. It’s a form of blackmail!”

“Come on,” he said, “I hadn’t even thought of all these things.”

“Then it’s all unconscious.” she said, sobbing.

But under all her frustration and anger, her despair, he could feel something else: she was also impressed by him. She felt he was somehow doing all this for her, and he had touched her at last.

“I will have to betray my people here to get you out.” she said firmly. “But first let’s see how we can do that at all.”

Climbing out of the window, down the façade or onto the roof, were quickly dismissed as solutions - it wouldn’t really have been feasible. Besides, as Irena kept reassuring herself, the bosses didn’t know yet that they ought to kill David, so there was no great hurry.

She brought a business-suit from another room and told him to try it on. It was a tight fit, but it would do. “This won’t be enough of a disguise.” David said, although he was himself impressed how different he looked in the mirror.

“Of course not,” Irena said, “we will shave you as well and cut your hair a bit.” She went to get the appropriate equipment.

“Yeah, yeah,” David said when she came back. “All this is fine, I will look quite different, but I’m still me.”

“As we walk past the guard downstairs,” Irena said, “we will kiss passionately, and he won’t see your face. It will work just fine, you’ll see!”

David got bloody red in the face, and Irena started shaving him.

“We will wait for the busy hours,” Irena explained, “when people come bustling in and out.”

Soon David was all ready, and there was nothing else to do but wait for the busy evening hours.

“In some sense it’s quite exciting.” Irena said. She really looked quite excited, like a little girl waiting for Christmas Eve, full of that same innocence. She hadn’t become a monster, after all.

“Of course, life is exciting!” David said.

“Well, not the kind of life you’d want me to go back to.” Irena commented.

“Yes it is!”

“The hell it is - it’s nothing but rules and hypocrisy!”

“And who do you think invented those rules, and why?”

“I guess they just develop within society.”

“And society, why does society develop in the first place?”

“Bah, I guess humankind just gets too crowded, so they either develop into a society or kill each other, and it seems that worldwide they do a bit of both...”

“But developing into a society is still a pretty complex thing. Not any animal could just do that, however necessary it might be. Saying that it’s necessary for survival doesn’t automatically mean that it’s nothing special.”

“Yeah, well I think that our western society is heading towards a collapse, sooner or later.”

“Maybe all societies collapse sooner or later, and then new ones grow out of the ashes.”

“Oh David, you’re so wise..!”

“And you, you want to accelerate the decline by being the first to go under?”

“Really, David, what does it all matter? What does anything matter? Perhaps we shouldn’t think of ourselves as that important. Without rules, we die out, but then something else, with rules, survives instead. When the rules become too stiff, guys like Drewermann work on relaxing them again. When they become too relaxed, another civilization with stricter discipline comes to overthrow us. But what is it all for, this whole process? I guess what it all boils down to is whether you believe in God or not. Supposedly He’s the One who dictates the right rules and shows us the right way.”

“So you don’t believe in God? Did you ever?”

“I don’t know. I guess not. I guess it’s nice to believe, but how can you just go on believing without ever knowing for sure? Do you believe in God?”

“In some sense yes... I think the struggle of all living beings, not just of humankind and its various cultures, as you described, but everything else too, I think that is God.”

“Yeah, really? And what do you do with it?”

“What you described before, namely that this struggle keeps repeating itself, that it is so static, that can actually be a stable point in our lives. Of course, nothing is ever really stable, but things can be working their way towards ever greater stability. The first living cell on Earth could be wiped out by the tiniest disturbance, but it multiplied, it colonized the ocean, and so it became less and less likely that any natural phenomenon would just wipe out all of the copies. Then they assembled into multi-cellular creatures, and these creatures crawled out of the ocean to colonize land, and maybe the next step will be space, as humankind sends out its first rockets beyond Earth. There’s more and more

living things of more and more different kinds, and they go further and further. At the same time it becomes less and less likely that some chance occurrence can just wipe them all out. There are too many forms, there's too much diversity. In other words, the struggle of life, evolution, is becoming less and less dependant on these chance-occurrences that could wipe it out, so, in yet other words, the struggle of life is absolute. The absolute is God."

"That's fine with me, but what do you do with it?"

"You said yourself that God dictates the rules, shows us the right way, didn't you?"

"This abstract concept of the STRUGGLE OF LIFE shows you the way?"

"Yes it does. It shows me that me too, I have to take part in the struggle of life and help humankind, however indirectly, to build its rockets to carry the struggle of life out to the stars..."

Irena laughed a bit, but not as cynically as she had laughed all along before. Now it was a sweet little laugh, just slightly mocking.

"You take yourself much too seriously," she said, "we're not that important - the struggle of life doesn't need us at all."

"Important? How could we not be important? Before you can use the concept of IMPORTANCE at all, you need to have a goal. Things can only be important with respect to a goal. If there isn't any goal, then things can be one way or another, and it doesn't matter, so nothing is important. Solutions are important when they help you reach your goal. Problems are important when they stop you from reaching your goal. But when there is no goal, there cannot be any concept of importance either. In other words, when we living beings started having goals, we INVENTED importance. It didn't even exist before. So don't tell me we're not important!"

"So what's the goal, then? Taking part in the STRUGGLE OF LIFE? Why should that be my goal at all? What's it all for?"

"But just look at yourself! A skeleton giving your body a definite shape. See these bones here? Arms and legs with the ability to move in a coordinated way, muscles to move them." David touched her legs and massaged her thighs all the way up to her underwear. She twisted and squirmed to free herself, giggling. "Eyes to see, ears to hear. Why, you didn't just appear like that in the blink of an eye - you're the product of millions of years of EVOLUTION. The goals are deeply engraved in your genes, programmed in your instincts!"

"Oh yeah, how come I don't feel it, then?"

"Of course you can feel it! If you go on wasting your life, throwing away your potential, doubts will assault you one day, and you'll remember what I just said."

Irena couldn't stop giggling. This super-idealistic David was just so sweet!

"In some sense I guess my philosophy is the same as yours: set yourself free, do whatever makes you happy. But to find what makes you happy isn't always that easy. There are so many powers deep within yourself, fighting for a chance to express themselves. That's why it may help to have an idea what it's all for, what it's all about. Something clear and stable (something absolute, in fact) underlying all these twisting and squirming secret desires of ours, something that makes sense of it all. That's what we need God for, and all the rules He dictates to us. Something to put order in all our secret dreams, so that they can be realized one by one, each in its turn and in its own good time. Otherwise it's all too messy, and we might end up over-satisfying some of our urges while neglecting

others, and the end-effect is a bad after-taste, sort of like a hang-over, and a feeling of disgust.”

Irena still giggled. She was all red in the face. Yes, she loved all these super-idealistic theories! But then she became a tiny bit more serious again and said: “All this is very nice. But it all only makes sense if there really was an EVOLUTION that programmed my instincts like you say.”

“What do you mean?” David didn’t at all get it.

“Well yes, you have to assume that there is really a world in which we appeared over millions of years of evolution, through this GOD which is our driving-force and our aspiration at the same time, as you say.”

David still didn’t get it: “You mean maybe there isn’t any such world, maybe it’s all in your mind?”

“Well, maybe it’s not all in MY mind in particular, and maybe there still is some kind of world. But the theory of evolution, which seems to be the centre-piece of your beautiful philosophy, that’s just a product of our western civilization. It’s a product of our mechanized way of seeing things. It’s all just cultural. It may make you happy, but it ultimately doesn’t satisfy me. I like to have experiences beyond all this and reach an inner peace that doesn’t even require any underlying who-knows-what God that makes sense of it all. SENSE itself is just a product of our rational way of thinking which, again, is cultural.”

David was beaten again, radically beaten.

It was time to go down now. David was shaven, his hair was cut, and he was wearing the dignified black suit. He felt as if he were going to a funeral (maybe his OWN funeral, who knows?) or some other bloody ceremonious occasion.

Irena took him by the hand and they went out in the corridor, down the stairs, and she snuggled herself under his arm. Then, as they came around the corner, she pulled his face down to her throat, then pushed it firmly against her bosom, into the valley between her breasts. David could smell her body. It wasn’t at all the same as other women he had touched. This body hadn’t just been laid out for him to use, passively, bored - this body was alive, the heart was beating fast, the sweat was running from the arm-pits. This body was guiding him out of a dangerous place. It was his ally, his friend! So he inhaled the smell deeply, he kissed the moist, quivering skin. He was almost tearing her open-necked blouse!

It was a bit like in a tent, under that blouse, and the floor of that tent, that was her live, throbbing body! And inside that tent it smelled good of a living, feeling body!

Then Irena grabbed his head by the hair and pulled it out. She brushed the hair from his brow and kissed him lightly on the corner of the mouth. “We’re through,” she said,

“Goodbye!”

“Goodbye?”

“Yes, I got you out, and now I’m going back!”

David looked bewildered and wouldn’t let go of her.

“But,... but,...” he stuttered.

“It will be fine.” she said.

“But they’ll know it was you!”

“No they won’t. It could have been anybody. You escaped, and I don’t know anything about it. Now goodbye. Take care of yourself!”

She turned and left.

“Take care of yourself too!” he called after her. Or maybe that’s just what he wanted to call, he didn’t remember later on.

He walked down to the railway station in a daze and took the next train to Montreux. He went to his flat, called the police because of the break-in, arranged for a temporary new lock to be put on his door, put some order in his things once the police-report was written, ate something and went to bed.

Sure, the gangsters might come back again. But he was armed. He had taken the gun from his own letter-box where it had lain hidden all the while!

Of course he couldn’t fall asleep. Too many thoughts were cursing through his mind.

What was there to do now? What was it he wanted to achieve, anyway? Get Irena back to her parents safely?

On the other hand, if he just let it all go, to be left in peace at last, what was there to be done? All he needed to do was to return the gun, actually. But that seemed impossible. After two kidnappings, in one of which he had been knocked unconscious, and one break-in, he didn’t feel like just going there and handing back the gun saying: “Here it is - sorry to have caused so much trouble...”

No, no, that wasn’t what he was going to do!

Something in him told him not to. Some inner voice he had never heard before.

So what was it he was going to do....?

He had to convince Irena that there was more to life than that job she was doing!

But whatever he could say, she would say it was all cultural stuff, totally lacking in objectivity (because actually there is no objectivity) and all completely relative (because actually there is no absolute).

Of course it was a bit too easy to argue like that. If everything was so relative anyway, then there wasn’t even any point in talking. But maybe that was exactly what she was trying to tell him - there is no point in talking so much. Maybe there is no point in thinking so much either. Maybe we should just live our little lives as they come and stop worrying. But then why would we have such a big brain to think with? Maybe after all thinking is completely natural - it’s part of taking life as it comes...

But who says so? It’s just cultural shit. Everything is nothing but cultural shit, right?

And guys like Einstein? They were just intoxicated by our Western way of thinking, of course. Those theories of theirs too are just cultural crap. Relativity of time? Bah, he just didn’t get it that his relativity theories are relative themselves, relative to our Western culture. Sure, sure.

Some rain forest Indian tribes, they don’t even know the concept of time in the first place. They would just laugh about Einstein’s Special Relativity. Their own myths are just as good at explaining Nature as our stupid relativity theories. They don’t need such complicated stuff. We Westerners are just stupid!

But what if you took one of those Indians, you send him on an intergalactic trip at almost the speed of light, and when he comes back he is younger than his own children? Surely those rain forest Indians couldn’t just ignore that, could they? They would have to acknowledge that something has happened.

Sure, maybe they would have their own mythical fairy tales to explain it all. But...

Could they have predicted it beforehand???

Maybe there's still something to our beloved Einstein?

Of course this still doesn't prove that the real world outside of ourselves really exists. But it does sort of show that this real world, whatever it may be, seems to be the same for everybody (at least more or less). Thus it isn't cultural.

David was looking at the faint glow from a street lamp outside coming in through the slits in the blind. Of course, "street lamp", that's just a cultural concept. David had been culturally indoctrinated right from the beginning of his life, and this indoctrination had never stopped since then. But before he could get indoctrinated, before he could be told anything at all, he needed to have an open mind, he needed to hear the voices of his parents and have the curiosity to try to discover some meaning behind them.

Society has to exist before it can indoctrinate you about the "real world". If David hadn't been able to feel the existence of things right from the start, he wouldn't ever have felt the existence of society either, and they would have had a hard time trying to indoctrinate him.

So, the "real world" doesn't come from society. It's not cultural. If anything, then it's biological!

The days went by and Irena sometimes wondered how David was doing. She didn't think her employers would kidnap him again. They had wasted enough time with him. Since he wouldn't hand back that gun, it was better to kill him and get the whole thing over with once and for all. But for that they needed to find him first. Where might he have gone? Perhaps he had already gone to the police to make his statement. Then he would have police-protection as well. That would be the safest for him, but that would also mean that the police was closing in on the murderer. They would arrest Paul, in whom Irena had once seen a friend. She didn't know whether she should warn him that things might be going really badly for him. Anyway, he knew, since David was roaming around free and the gun still hadn't been found.

Besides, Paul didn't have much time for Irena these days. He didn't seem to suspect that Irena had helped David escape. She almost wished that he would. Then at least he would notice her.

The days just went by, and nothing much seemed to happen. It was very frustrating. Paul had promised her such a cool, carefree life. At the same time (and this he hadn't promised, but that's how Irena had felt about it) it would be outrageously opposed to everything she had been brought up in, not to say immoral. So it had seemed to her like it would be a Big Bang in the face of her previous life, about which she just hadn't been able to make up her mind whether she liked it or not. It was messy. She had always known she didn't want to become ORDINARY. That much was for sure. She had felt that by throwing everything overboard, she could start again and do it her way!

But that's not quite how it had worked out. She was having sex with strangers several times every day, and she was proud that she was good at it. She could make them come. She could make anyone come. It was outrageous to do such a thing. It was outrageous to be proud of such a thing. In that sense it gave her a glorious sense of freedom.

But however glorious it was, it was still always the same. Some of those men wouldn't even remember her face afterwards (and she wouldn't remember theirs either). And towards the end of the day, she sometimes even caught herself feeling a bit sick of having

to satisfy yet another customer, of having to smell the acrid sweat of yet another pair of armpits, of having to stroke yet another patch of curly, oily black hair, of having to suck in yet another of those thick warm tubes, the taste of the rubber and whatever artificial flavours might be on it filling her mouth for the umpteenth time...

Some customers couldn't do it just like that. They needed some reassurance and human warmth. But it was always surprisingly easy to give it to them, to make them feel at home. The same tricks worked time after time, while the individual customer would feel that he was being spoiled and that something really personal was going on.

On one hand all this gave Irena a feeling of power. But at the same time it sometimes gave her a feeling of emptiness. Men are nothing but dick-carriers of various shapes and sizes. They wander from one fuck to the next. In between they do some other things, but that's always the same too. They find a job where they can stay. They settle down with a woman who agrees to give it to them for free. Then they have children that whine all the time. They are happy if they can do overtime at work in order to avoid having to go home. The ones occasionally going to a brothel (the ones Irena saw), daring to do such a thing, must actually already be the less boring ones, in some sense...

All this just wasn't really interesting. It wasn't how Irena had imagined it. God knows what she had imagined. The first few mighty chords of the opening to "Also sprach Zarathustra" by Richard Strauss? And then what?

She began to wonder what would happen if she quit now. Would she get her money, the money her employers owed her till now? It would already have to be quite a lot. More money than she could imagine. Just a few weeks ago she couldn't even dream of having money. What were her dreams back then, actually? To study abroad, away from her meaningless hometown, away from her parents (who were fine in their own way but just seemed to hold her back all the time). To go to a historically important place in the heart of Europe, with an old University and endless museums and libraries, or off to a small fisherman's village in Scotland to study the specific dialect and customs there, to be able to peer out to the sea with the eyes of an old seaman and imagine the swell of the sea as you hear the swell in his voice...

Yeah, but first she should finish her school in Germany, else she wouldn't be able to go to University at all, abroad or wherever, because she wouldn't be accepted as a student! But that was unimaginable! School must have already started again by now. She would have to skip this year. She could only go back to school the following year, while all her class-mates, many of them friends, were going to finish school this year... She would lose them all. She had already lost them all...

They would go on with all kinds of exciting studies, perhaps not always directly aiming at a profession, but rather following their interests, knowing that it isn't easy to find your way, but trying hard nevertheless... That's what they would be doing, while she would be driving around in a convertible, changing it every year when its ash-trays got full, because what else do you do when you get addicted to money but spend too much of your soul earning it?

These thoughts made her quite sad.

David and his theories came back to her mind. Maybe he was right that things aren't just cultural. Of course she had been indoctrinated all her life, primarily by her family, who were intellectuals, and the circles they lived in. But if indoctrination was enough to explain who she was, then it should also be possible to make changes anytime. She

should be able to be indoctrinated anew. She should be able to be re-programmed from a good school-girl to a perfect whore. Since this didn't seem possible after all, the first indoctrination must have taken place at a sensitive point in her life, which would explain why it couldn't be erased anymore. But if we assume that there are such sensitive points, then this is already a proof that not everything comes from education. The sensitive points, coming up and fading away, are a proof of the existence of an internal program unfolding itself inside us. Of course such an internal program still requires a culture into which the individual can grow. It's the same with legs or wings - they grow by themselves, but the program for their development pre-supposes that there will be ground to walk on or air to fly in. And if for some reason there still isn't, the muscles will never develop as they should. If the possibility to walk or fly appears too late in the life of an animal, the limbs might already be so atrophied that it is too late for the animal to ever learn to walk or fly. This still doesn't mean that legs and wings aren't basically inborn. It's very much the same with education. Of course it's utterly impossible to live without it, and if you isolate a newborn baby from all social interactions so that you would get an individual with nothing but the inborn patterns of behaviour, of course you will get nothing but a cripple. So it's easy to claim that education is everything and that there's nothing inborn.

The fact is, only education allows us to really make use of our inborn possibilities. Perhaps Irena wasn't just an intellectual person because of her social surroundings. Perhaps it was in her genes that she was meant to be a thinking person. Of course, along this path of reasoning, we can reach the neo-Nazi kind of conclusion that some people are just inherently better than others (but of course this conclusion is utterly flawed, because any authority claiming to know what is "better" can only be a self-declared authority). If on the other hand we say that everything comes from cultural indoctrination, we soon reach the conclusion that every way of thinking is just as good as any other, and then why make any efforts to think in the first place?

In the end, a conclusion like this was unacceptable to Irena. She was beginning to hope that David would turn up again, and they would have one of those discussions again in which she somehow always managed to win while still learning a lot of new things for herself at the same time...

David really did turn up - the simplest possible way: as a customer. Irena opened her door, and there he was!

"David!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, that's me!" he said, and smiled, happy to see the surprise lighting up Irena's face.

"But how did you come in?"

"Well, the guard downstairs wasn't part of any of the kidnapping teams. He's never seen me before. So, of course, he just let me walk in..."

Irena didn't know what she had expected. Perhaps that David had made some kind of deal with Paul, that he was on their side now. Who knows? But of course it was nothing of the sort. David had just appeared out of the Blue, and none of the problems were solved. In fact he had just made up a new one - how on Earth would he get out of here again? Paul or one of the other guys who knew David by sight could turn up any minute, and then David would be trapped!

"Are you crazy? Why did you come here? You ought to be hiding!"

“Oh,” said David with a big smile, “I came for you!”

“You think we’ll walk out kissing again? Is that it? Once wasn’t enough?”

“Well, as far as the kiss goes, once definitely wasn’t enough... But no, I came to talk to you. I came to explain to you that the Real World isn’t just a cultural concept.”

Up till now they had still been talking in the open door. Now Irena took David by the sleeve, pulled him in the room and shut the door. She regretted it straight away - after all, the goal was to get him out of here, not in.

“This isn’t the time to discuss such matters. We can meet somewhere else, but first we need to get you out of here!”

“Sure,” said David happily, “I’d be delighted to meet you somewhere else. I just came here because it’s the only way I knew I could contact you!”

Irena opened the door and looked out into the corridor. It was empty. She shoved David out.

“Okay, let’s go! Let’s hope the guard downstairs is still the same guy!”

“Hey, what about the kiss!” said David.

But at that moment Paul appeared on the landing of the staircase. There was a brief flash of recognition between the two men, and then they ran at each other, David to get out of here, Paul to stop him.

Irena screamed.

The guard who was sitting downstairs, receiving the customers, came running up to see what was the matter.

“I’m a paying customer!” David was yelling, “I have a right to be here! Leave me alone!”

The guard looked at the two men grappling at each other, at odds about what was happening.

Then David somehow got a pile of banknotes from his pocket and threw them up in the air. “I’m a paying customer!” he kept yelling. “You see, I have money! I have a right to fuck that girl!”

All that money flying around in the air above them was effective (although later it turned out that the notes were crude colour photocopies, but flapping around in the air they looked real enough) - the guard got completely bewildered and grabbed Paul, pulled him away from David and shouted: “Paul, what are you doing to that guy? Leave him alone for God’s sake!”

Paul started yelling too: “It’s the guy with the gun!”

But the guard didn’t get it, of course: “Okay, he has a gun. Why shouldn’t he have a gun?”

“My gun!!!” Paul was yelling. “It’s the guy who’s got MY gun, you idiot!!! We can’t let him go!!!”

By the time the guard realized what Paul was talking about, David had somehow managed to disappear, of course.

But Irena was right after him and caught him in the street. She was bloody angry.

“How can you take such risks!” she shouted at David.

David was out of breath, but his face was shining as if he had just had an orgasm.

“Actually I’m glad it turned out like this!” he said.

“Why?” said Irena, as they were still hurrying down the street to get further away from the brothel.

“Because,” said David, “this incident showed you that I was prepared, that I came for you prepared. You see, I really wanted to see you!”

They disappeared in a side-street together and calmed down.

“Okay, now you’re seeing me,” she said, “so what do you want?”

“As I said before,” said David, “I just want to explain to you why the Real World isn’t just a cultural phenomenon after all.”

Irena realized there was going to be no way to bypass this. “Okay, shoot ahead!” she said, and as they were still walking further and further away from the brothel, he explained about Einstein and the rain-forest Indians and all these things.

“So, if anything, the Real World is biological, not cultural!” he concluded proudly.

“Aha,” said Irena. “So?”

“What do you mean: so?” said David. “That changes everything, doesn’t it?”

“Well,” said Irena, happy to trap David again, “that still doesn’t at all explain why I should believe in that Real World of yours!”

“Don’t you see?!” David exclaimed. “The Real World isn’t a cultural invention. I’ve just proved it. Of course this still doesn’t prove that it really exists. But it shows us that it isn’t arbitrary. The way it is, as a real, existing thing or as an illusion, is the way it has to be.”

“I can’t quite follow.” Irena said doubtfully.

“Well, what I mean is this” said David, and he started talking as he would when explaining a math-problem to his pupils: “we see the real world as we need to see it in order to survive. The way we see the real world isn’t objective. For example, we can’t judge the wave-length of light coming into our eyes directly. Rather, we see wave-lengths as colours ranging from red to blue. Infra-red and ultra-violet we can’t see anymore. When something is redder than red or bluer than blue, then we see it as purple. This closes the circle of the visible colours. After red we come back to blue and after blue we come back to red, just by putting purple between these two extremes. Purple doesn’t correspond to a specific wavelength. We see two totally different wavelengths as purple. Objectively purple doesn’t correspond to anything. But we can see it subjectively. Anyway – since, thanks to this “artificial” colour, purple, the colours are now arranged in a circle - each colour now has an opposite (the colour lying on the opposite side of the circle). These “opposites” don’t have any objective reality either. In reality colours just correspond to a limited set of wavelengths from among all the existing wavelengths which range from zero to infinity and aren’t at all arranged on any circle. You see what I mean?”

“I don’t really get it what you’re driving at.”

“Anyway, let me continue. So, for us the colours are arranged on a circle and each colour has an opposite. Two opposites cancel each other out by forming what we see as “white”. Well, when we look at an object in bluish light, the brain produces extra “red” to compensate. And when we look at the same object in reddish light, the brain compensates by producing extra “blue”. And that’s how the same object will always appear the same to us, irrespective of the light-conditions. That’s how we are able to recognize it as the same. Because that’s what the brain cares about. It doesn’t care about the real wavelength of the light. It just cares about being able to recognize specific objects that are essential for its survival. That’s how we see the world: we see it in accordance with what we need to see in order to survive, and not at all in accordance with what it really, really is.”

“So?”

“Well,” said David, “what I’m trying to explain is that we aren’t even equipped to deal with such questions as whether the world really, really exists outside of our awareness of it or not, because our awareness of it has a special purpose: to allow us to survive. We can’t see beyond this purpose, because there was no natural selection making us evolve beyond this purpose. So, in fact, beyond this purpose there really isn’t any real world we could talk about, wonder about or ask questions about. Our awareness of the world is limited to what we need in order to survive. We aren’t equipped, biologically speaking, to deal with any questions such as: is the world really real?”

Irena laughed a bit: “How come I can still wonder about this question, then? How come I can even formulate it in words?”

“Well,” said David, “that’s the point, you see. The whole question is a false question. There is no answer because, actually, there isn’t any real question either. It just looks like a real question, maybe precisely because you can formulate it in words that make sense grammatically. But actually it isn’t a real question. If you really think about it, asking yourself what the question is really about, you will realize it isn’t about anything. It isn’t even a question at all. It’s a false problem.”

“I see...” said Irena. She was thoughtful for a while as they were taking seats in a small coffee-shop to have a drink. Then the slightest trace of a smile started appearing at the corner of her lips. She enjoyed this moment very, very much!

“So you tell me that we can’t ask a question like that because we aren’t biologically equipped to deal with such questions in the first place. Natural selection only equipped us with a way of seeing the world that we need in order to survive. Of course, that makes perfect sense...”

“Doesn’t it?” said David, happy that she had understood him.

“You’re just forgetting one small detail: biological evolution, natural selection and such things - the existence of these things is based on the existence of a Real World. If I doubt the existence of the Real World, I don’t see why an argument about natural selection should convince me otherwise, because if there isn’t any Real World, there isn’t any natural selection either!!!!”

David was dumbfounded. She had beaten him again, at his own game! How could she keep doing this?

“You got me there.” he said after a longish pause.

Irena took a delicious sip of her drink.

After a while, David said: “Well, at least it’s consistent with itself.”

“Sorry,” said Irena, “what is consistent with itself?”

“My view of the Universe,” said David. “It’s true that there is no answer to the question whether the Universe really exists, but my view of the Universe also tells us that the question doesn’t make sense.”

“You mean that your view of the Universe doesn’t allow itself to be questioned? That’s sort of what you mean, right? Isn’t it a bit self-righteous?”

“No, I’m not self-righteous! All I’m saying is that...”

“Not you! Your view of the Universe. That’s what’s self-righteous!”

“Yeah, I see,” said David, “well yes, maybe my view of the Universe is self-righteous. But if it allowed a question within its frame-work without offering any means of ever

providing an answer, it would be a somewhat incomplete theory. But as it stands, it doesn't even allow the question. That makes it complete and consistent with itself."

"Sure," said Irena, "once you're inside that theory, you can bathe in its completeness and consistency. But before you enter its framework it doesn't really tell you why you SHOULD enter its framework. Me, I'm outside of this framework, and I don't think you have anything to tell me, from within the framework, that will convince me to go and join you in there..."

"Well," said David, "the completeness and consistency of it could still be an enticement..."

"But a nice nihilist way of looking at things can be just as complete and consistent!"

"Yeah, I guess so..." said David.

There was another pause.

Finally David said: "Let's go about this methodically: even if there is no real world, you still can't really doubt your own existence, can you? I mean, someone has to be there, somehow, to do the doubting."

"Je pense, donc je suis." said Irena, "Descartes already knew that."

"Yes, indeed. It is possible, of course, that the whole rest of the world is just an illusion, that you just made it all up."

Irena laughed a bit: "That would mean that I am talking to myself right now, you being nothing but a creation of my own imagination! We can discard this possibility straight away! I sure don't believe I would ever have made up anything as crazy as YOU!"

"Okay," said David, and he laughed a bit too. "So the other possibility is that someone else imagined it all and is fooling you with it."

"You mean," said Irena, "that some god is projecting a fake world to me to amuse himself?"

"Yeah, sort of something like that."

"Oh, you know, Descartes dealt with that question too. He said that the beauty of mathematics is such that the god who invented it could only be a good god. And why would a good god want to cheat him? In other words, the world offered by God has to be real."

"Well, does that proof satisfy you?"

Irena laughed. "Of course not! The beauty of mathematics might be a creation of the mind while the world might be who knows what else. I don't see any reason to believe that they were created by the same god."

"But," said David, "I seem to remember that Descartes first proved that there can only be one God."

"Well," said Irena, "I don't remember that proof. I guess the whole thing didn't really satisfy me, else I would surely remember!"

"Anyway," said David, "so we're basically left with two possibilities: either the world is real, or some gods are just fooling us for who knows what purposes."

"Okay, let's say so," said Irena, "Now where do we go from there?"

"Maybe it can help to ask ourselves why we're wondering about this whole thing in the first place," said David.

"I guess we just want to reach happiness!" said Irena.

"Exactly!!!" exclaimed David. "That's exactly what it's all about! Within the framework of my 'Real World' this means satisfying our instincts -- you know, that inner drive that

evolved over billions of years and keeps evolving, making life conquer more and more of the Universe, so that in the end no chance-occurrence in the Universe could ever wipe it all out anymore, which means that it will have become independent of those chance-occurrences, in other words: absolute. What is absolute can't be questioned any further, precisely because it doesn't depend on any other things. Thus it is God, the final answer to the final question."

"So?"

"Well, then it becomes all easy." said David. "Before even wondering whether there's a real world or not, we look at things to see whether they feel good and right or not. That's where it all starts: with a feeling."

"Oh," said Irena, "you must have read 'Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance' by a guy called Pirsig."

"Don't make fun of me!" said David.

"I'm not making fun of you at all. In that book, which is actually neither about Zen nor too much about motorcycle maintenance, he tries to define the concept of 'Quality' and discovers he can't. So he postulates that 'Quality' has no definition. He argues that our classical philosophical systems, inherited from the ancient Greek and so on, always start with subjects and objects interacting somehow. The objects themselves or at least the interactions with the subjects give rise to high or low quality. But then what is quality? Why can't it be measured objectively?"

"Quality can't be measured objectively?" asked David who couldn't quite follow.

"Oh, this isn't about the quality of a hi-fi system. The quality of a hi-fi system consists of reproducing the quality of the music it plays, and the latter is what we're talking about here. How do you define the quality of a piece of art?"

"I don't know." said David, prompting Irena to go on.

"Well," said Irena, "this guy Pirsig claims you can't. He suggests that before you split up the real world into subjects and objects, before you even decide there is a real world, you start with the immediate experience of Quality. You can tell whether something is of high or low quality by how it feels. Based on that you can start constructing a real world with subjects and objects. But Quality is where it all starts. Quality doesn't have a definition because it's the origin of all definitions. You can't have any basis to base it on, because it is the basis itself. That's what Pirsig says, or at least that's how I understood it."

"Yeah," said David thoughtfully. "Yeah, yeah, yeah... That sounds about right!"

Then he added: "But you aren't convinced?"

"Convinced of what?"

"That it all starts with a feeling!"

"Sure!" said Irena.

"Then why don't you act that way? Why don't you do what feels good and right to you?"

All of a sudden, Irena looked slightly angered: "But that's exactly what I'm doing! It just happens that what feels good and right to me isn't the same as for you, and that's the soup we've been turning around in all the while, bringing up who knows what philosophical concepts in the process that have strictly nothing to do with the central question!"

"What is the central question?" asked David.

"The central question is: what the hell do you want of me? Why don't you leave me alone?"

“Why are you angry?”

“I don’t know. I’m getting tired of all this...”

Irena had spent hours talking with David. Hours before she had been hoping that he would turn up, that something would happen. Now something had really happened, and he had really turned up. Now what? She could just go back to the brothel, say sorry for the afternoon she had taken off without asking for permission, tell Paul that the question of the gun was solved long ago, because David had gotten rid of it, and that David made all this fuss just to get in touch with her again... Something like that.

But it seemed impossible. She just didn’t want any more smelly males to climb on her (and as often as not the smell wasn’t even of a beastly desire, but rather of the cold sweat of fear - because for many of these males it wasn’t a straight-forward thing to go to the brothel, and she had to reassure them, soothe them, be a mummy for them...). It wasn’t even that she was truly disgusted of them, all of a sudden. It just wasn’t exciting anymore. She was sick of it. She just wanted some peace to think about her own stuff for a while. Even when there were no customers, she didn’t have this peace of mind, because a new customer could turn up any moment, and so she never had the feeling she could truly let herself go.

Right now she badly wanted some of this peace and quiet, and actually she would have liked to get rid of David too. But where would she go after leaving him, except back to the brothel?

Actually David wasn’t even annoying her. He kept silent and seemed lost in thought. He wasn’t trying to make theories about their differences in taste. He paid their drinks when the waitress came by and kept sitting there in silence, seemingly in no hurry to leave.

Finally Irena had to ask: “What do we do now?”

“I don’t know...” he said, “I badly wanted to talk to you. Now we talked. It was good. I hope we can talk more another time. I don’t know what to do right now. Maybe we could just arrange where and when to meet again next time. I very much want to meet you again!”

“Where do you live at all?” Irena asked.

“In my flat, of course, why?”

“But you’re crazy! Paul can find you there!”

“Paul, who is Paul?”

“The guy whose gun you handed over to the police!”

“No, I didn’t hand it over to the police,” said David, “it’s here.”

He took it out and handed it over to Irena. She looked at it flabbergasted. She reached out to touch it but held herself back in the last moment.

“Take it back!” she whispered urgently. He took it back. Still whispering she asked: “Is it loaded?”

“Sure.” he answered, cool as can be.

“Why did you keep it? What do you want to do with it?”

“It could come in handy.” he said mysteriously.

“You’re just crazy.” she finally said.

“So when can we meet again?” he asked.

“Look,” said Irena, “let’s go back to the brothel together, we find Paul, you give him back his gun, shake hands with him, make peace, and then you can go home worry-free, and what’s more, after that you can come and see me anytime you want!”

“Sure,” said David, “if I pay.”

“What do you mean: ‘If I pay’?”

“Well, you’re their employee, so to speak. You’re one of their assets. They provided you with a room in their bully business quarters. You belong to them in a sense. How could I just come and spend time with you without even paying?”

“David, please!”

“Well, isn’t that how it is?”

She was silent for a while. Finally she said: “I don’t want to go back there.”

David didn’t answer straight away. He was too surprised. Then he said all carefully: “I’m sure you can get your room in Monte Verdi back straight away.”

“No, no,” she said, “I won’t go back there. What would I tell them? It’s impossible...”

And she wouldn’t just go back to her parents either. David knew that much without suggesting it. He was surprised himself at how shy he felt when he finally made his true, heart-felt suggestion:

“Just come and stay with me. I’ll let you have the bed and sleep on the floor!”

Irena laughed a little and shook her head like a tiny little girl. David could tell she was moved.

“Paul can find us there.” she finally said.

“Let’s go for a little trip then!” said David. “Let’s just sit in the car and drive off!”

Irena looked up and smiled. A bit of mockery came back into her eyes: “Okay!” she said. They walked back to the brothel, always looking around, always a bit afraid that someone might recognize them, and Irena jumped in to get a few personal belongings. She didn’t think anyone would stop her from coming back out again. Questions about her behaviour would come at a later date (except that she wouldn’t be there anymore at a later date).

Then they walked to where David had left his car. They got in, and Irena felt a flood of relaxation stream through her body. The inside of the car smelt a bit stale, it was a bit dirty, but it was the smell of ONE man - this was his kingdom. This wasn’t a place where hundreds of fucks between all kinds of different people had taken place, like the small room she had at the brothel. No, this was David’s car, and she appreciatively watched as his hand went through a series of automatic motions, shifting the gears as he drove out onto the road and smoothly accelerated. She could tell he was completely in control here, and it all felt smooth and safe and powerful. Nobody could catch them now. This smelly little space was just part of the world, of course, like everything else, but being mobile meant that the world outside its windows could be changed, and this meant freedom, and it also meant that the car was still, after all, a small world of its own...

They stopped at David’s flat so that he too could get a few things for the trip, and then they were off on the highway, crossed the border into France, and just drove on, down into the South.

They drove until they arrived in a town called Grenoble by sundown. They stopped somewhere and walked around a bit, then went into a Chinese restaurant to eat. They didn’t talk much. After the meal they walked back to the car, taking in the calm atmosphere of this French town. Walking past a phone-booth, Irena suddenly felt like

calling home, exchanging a few words with her mother. She couldn't have dreamt of doing such a thing earlier, when she was a prostitute. But now she wasn't a prostitute anymore! She was just on a holiday with this nice boy with whom she might have an affair or not. Of course this wasn't something mothers accept easily, but it was still something they can be faced with. The urge to talk to her became a big clump in Irena's throat.

"Wait!" she called to David.

David turned around, surprised. The voice had sounded urgent and almost tearful. As he saw her standing there all forlorn next to the phone-booth in the sweetly yellowish last rays of sunlight, he felt a great pang of affection for her. He felt like embracing her and holding her tight and whispering into her ear that everything was okay...

"I'd like to make a phone-call!" she said.

David helped her work out how French public phones work and then walked away a few steps.

"Thanks so much!" she called after him.

After dialing, Irena held the receiver tightly against her ear and carefully listened to the beep repeating itself once, twice, a third and a fourth time...

Her heart was beating in her throat!

Then she heard the deep, grunting voice of her father.

"It's me!" she called out.

"Irena? For God's sake!"

"It's me!" she repeated happily.

"Where are you? What happened to you? Were you kidnapped? Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine! I wasn't kidnapped! I'm with a boy. Everything's fine. He will bring me back home! How's mummy? Can I speak to her?"

"Mummy? Yes, yes, of course!"

Irena heard her father's shattering voice echo through the house: "It's Irena!"

Then she heard her mother's voice come on line, hysterical with joy: "Irena?!?!!"

"Yes, it's me!"

She answered pretty much the same questions again with the same answers, then she said: "Look, the money is running out. I'll call again another time. But I'm fine and I'll be back home soon, okay? I'm really fine. Everything is fine! Really."

Then she hung up suddenly, as if the money had just run out. She couldn't anymore. She felt shattered. She was going to collapse right there, on the spot. But David was there. He tore open the door of the phone-booth and caught her in his arms. She wept on his shoulders. She sobbed on his shoulders like mad and it felt tremendously good.

"Sorry!" she said, when she straightened up again. "That's okay." was all David could say, somewhat clumsily.

They walked back to the car. Irena leaned on David somewhat, and he put his arm over her shoulders quite naturally. He didn't try to talk, and Irena was grateful to him for it.

They drove till they found a calm hotel somewhat outside of town. David took two rooms and they carried up their bags. Irena was a bit reluctant in saying which room she liked better. So they watched TV sitting on the bed in one of the rooms for a while, and eventually Irena said she was going to bed and left for the other room. She closed the

door slowly, and when it was open just a crack she leaned into the room, saying: “Well then, goodnight!”

“Goodnight.” said David, hardly looking at her.

If there had been any hints, they were lost on him. If she wanted to sleep with him, she could say so, couldn't she? That's what human language is for, isn't it?

Actually David couldn't imagine that anyone would ever WANT to sleep with him.

Maybe he would find someone one day who would love him enough to put up with it.

Sex is something dirty that males have to trick females into. Everybody knows that.

David just didn't know the tricks.

Of course David could never have uttered such a belief consciously. He still tried hard to see some inherent value in sex. But deep down he was convinced there wasn't any and that women really don't need it at all.

He fell asleep thinking of the soft warm body in the room right next door...

The next morning they met at the breakfast table. Irena seemed pretty happy, but there was that mocking smile around her lips again. David didn't understand what it meant.

She showed him some tourist leaflets she had picked up at the reception desk of the hotel - places to visit. There was some kind of a bird-zoo where there would be something like

a circus-show with parrots. That seemed quite interesting, so they decided to drive there.

They found their way to a small town of stone-houses trembling in the midday-heat and

the singing of the crickets, and from there they followed the signs till they got to the bird-

zoo. David was doing the driving, Irena the map-reading. They weren't having any deep

philosophical discussions, but they were enjoying themselves and happy to be together!

The bird-zoo was some kind of messy park full of big bird-cages packed with noisy birds.

It wasn't as it would have been in Switzerland where every square-meter of grass would

have been carefully raked. It all seemed a bit haphazard, making the stroll through the

park into some kind of adventure-tour, since you never knew what to expect around the

next corner!

They were too early for the parrot-show, and because of the heat they soon got tired of walking around and lied down in the grass in the shade of a tree. They looked up along the trunk of the tree and watched the leaves gently rustle high up above them. There must have been a slight breeze up there - what a pity the air wasn't stirring down here, too, it was so hot!

Then they went to see the parrot-show that was held next to the pick-nick area. The showmaster, a sporty-looking woman, came out with one big parrot at a time sitting on her arm. She held each one up to a stem at the top of a post, and he would willingly climb on to it. Each time she told the audience the name, age and gender of the parrot, and how long he had lived here at the zoo. They were different kinds of parrots, one of them a snow-white cockatoo with a bush of feathers standing straight up on his head. The woman explained that he was born in the zoo all recently. He wasn't trained yet, and he was just brought here to watch and get used to the whole thing. She would decide later what exactly to teach him, depending on his character. Later he would also need to find a mate, and then hopefully he would breed, like his parents. For this he would be brought together with other cockatoos until one of them took his fancy. It takes a while for these cockatoos to find the right mate, she explained, because after having found him, they usually stay together for life.

While the other parrots were made to do their little performances, riding small bicycles and playing the xylophone, the white cockatoo quietly sat on his perch, his feathers all puffed up, babbling something to himself from time to time, the bush of feathers on his head bobbing up and down.

These parrots weren't just birds, David realized - they were little PERSONS of their own, each one of them. David saw that none of them had any chain on their feet and that they weren't tethered down in any other way either. At the end of the show, the woman even made them fly back to their cages over the audience, each one of them. The kids in the audience yelled with delight and held up their hands, pretending that they were trying to catch them. The white cockatoo still wasn't used to this treatment and shrieked his head off while flying past.

David was very impressed and clapped like mad. Irena didn't. Maybe she thought clapping was stupid or maybe she hadn't enjoyed the whole thing, David couldn't tell. At the end of the show, they left the zoo and went back to the car. They drove further south during most of the afternoon, ate dinner in a nice little restaurant and found another comfortable hotel to spend the night.

"Don't take two rooms," Irena told David at the reception of the hotel, "that's just a waste of money."

"Okay," said David and asked for a double room. They went up and inside there was a big double bed. Irena sat on it straight away and tried out the springs of the mattress. "A bit bouncy," she declared, "a bed like this every day and you'd end up with quite a back-ache. Which side is mine?"

"Oh, I don't know," David said vaguely, "you choose." Actually he felt quite strange with the idea that she would just stay here all night in his room. It didn't even occur to him that it wasn't his room if they were both going to stay here - it was THEIR room. Of course it was very exciting. On the other hand, nobody had claimed that anything would really happen. Maybe they were just going to sleep, saving money, as Irena had said. David joined Irena on the bed. "I don't want to watch TV," she said.

"I wasn't going to switch it on," he answered.

"You quite liked those parrots, didn't you?" she said.

"Yeah, specially the white one... Did you know that they were monogamous?"

"Sure," she said, "everybody knows that. Are you trying to tell me that this is another proof that monogamy is the natural thing and the only way to become happy and so on?"

"Hey, I didn't say anything of that kind..."

"Anyway, parrots are birds and we're mammals, that's not at all the same. There's heaps of monogamous birds but hardly any monogamous mammals!"

"I didn't say anything of that sort at all! Why are you...?"

"But you still think monogamy is the best thing for us humans, no?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact I do. You see, we humans are sociable creatures. We can do all kinds of great things working as a team that we would never manage alone. We can play symphonies as an orchestra or send rockets to the moon as a nation. But in a team we never really need all our talents. You might work in a team as an engineer. But nobody is nothing but an engineer."

"Yeah, I know," said Irena, "even an engineer needs a fuck from time to time!"

"As a matter of fact, yes, he does."

“And so he needs a little wife at home who also cooks him nice meals and washes his underwear.”

“I didn’t say that. Why are you so provocative?”

“It seems to me that it’s just old crap that you’re telling me here, as if it were an original new thought that just came to you.”

“Yeah, well you don’t listen till the end. How can it be interesting if you don’t even hear me out!”

“Okay, I’m listening. Go on.”

“Well, what I’m trying to say is that it’s a bit like the cells in our body. As an organism we are bloody highly evolved. But the cells in our body are rather simple beings compared to an amoebae or a bacterium which can move on her own, hunt down food for herself, exchange genetic material with a mate, stuff like that, while most of our brain-cells, for example, can do little more than pass on the impulses they receive. When cells associate to become highly evolved organisms like ourselves, they become more simple creatures, individually speaking.”

“Yeah, I understand,” said Irena, “so, with continued evolution, one day there will be engineers who don’t even need any fucks anymore. They will be nothing but engineers. Of course, under such circumstances, there is no future in the whore-business, and you’re right to talk me out of it!”

David chose to ignore the provocation and to answer, instead, as if he had taken her completely seriously: “No, maybe not. You see, that’s how it was for cells associating to become organisms, but that doesn’t mean it has to be the same when organisms join together to become civilizations. Evolution doesn’t just repeat the same patterns at higher and higher levels - cells joining together to become organisms joining together to become civilizations joining together to become super-civilizations joining together to become super-super-civilizations... It’s not that simple. Evolution wouldn’t be evolution if it were that simple. It would just be a stubborn, repetitive process.”

Irena didn’t have anything to say at this point.

David continued: “A highly evolved organism such as a human being can do stupid things, like committing suicide. A single-celled being wouldn’t have such a crazy idea, but in a more complex being there are more chances that something can go wrong, and then some misfiring neuron can mean the death of the whole organism, of all the billions of billions of cells it is made up of...”

“Oh, I see,” said Irena, “people committing suicide just suffer from a misfiring neuron!”

“No, no, forget about it! Whatever they suffer from, the point is that it can condemn billions of cells in one go, and...”

“This is boring,” said Irena, “come to the point.”

“The point is,” said David, “that human beings associating to become a military power can get out of hand the same way and create a holocaust. But if they each keep a conscience of their own, ideas of their own, have a private life of their own in spite of belonging to a bigger organization as well, then such things as holocausts couldn’t happen.”

“But without adequate discipline, a military superpower is just a joke. People have to put aside their personal feelings and take orders, else it can never work. So what are you saying? Superpowers are bad?”

“All I’m saying is that they would be even worse if their citizens didn’t have individual lives of their own as well.”

“So, in other words, it’s good that even engineers still need fucks.”

“Yeah, that’s sort of what I’m saying. You see, you can’t ever influence a team as much as you are influenced by it (unless you are the boss). Not every suggestion from every member can be taken into account. You and your opinion are bound to be overlooked sometimes when you are in a team. But in a one-to-one relationship this is all different. If you don’t agree with your partner, and since it is a one-to-one relationship, you can actually block him, and since he can block you too, the two of you will be forced to find a solution together, creatively, that suits both of you. You can never be overlooked like in a bigger team.”

“Why not do things on your own, then, and be really free?”

“Oh, because when you’re on your own, without ever a reference point outside of yourself, you might go insane.”

“I see, but why would this partner, with whom you have this one-to-one relationship, always need to be the same person? Why not sleep around?”

“Oh, if you have several partners, then you might play chess with one of them, and when you’re ready to play tennis, you meet another one. But the other one might have already played tennis with some other partner of his that day (he would have several partners too, of course). He would rather play chess. But since you have already played chess that day, you would rather play tennis. You see what I mean? If you keep several partners, you end up needing to keep a detailed agenda, so that you, and all your partners too, get enough chess, tennis and all the rest. This would kill spontaneity, which means freedom. It’s much simpler and more straight-forward if you play chess and tennis with the same person. Then you can decide together when you play what, and it doesn’t affect the activities of a whole network of other people. Playing chess AND tennis with the same person, that’s what I call love. Playing only chess or only tennis with a person, that’s friendship. In its own specialized area friendship can be just as deep as love, but it still isn’t love.”

“Ah, ah, beautiful definitions! Love and friendship, you know it all! But let’s come back to that chess-and-tennis partner: why would he have to be the same person throughout your life?”

David didn’t know the answer.

They were getting ready to go to bed. Irena went to the bathroom first, spent quite a while in there (David could hear the gushing water and imagined her body stretching and twisting itself under it) and came out with some kind of pyjamas on. For a fleeting moment he wondered how easy it would be to rip them off her body, but then he dismissed the thought. It was his turn. He went in and instinctively reached for the lock under the door-handle, but there wasn't any key there. He scolded himself for his stupidity – what was he afraid of, that she would come in and rape him or what? He stepped into the shower and washed himself very well, especially all the regions of his groin (one never knows, he told himself, feeling faintly ridiculous all the same). He dried himself, dressed for bed, brushed his teeth and came out. Just a bedside-table lamp was burning, else the room was dark. The cover on his side of the bed was pulled aside, ready for him to get in. Of Irena he could only see the hair on her pillow.

But as soon as he was in bed, she reached over to the lamp and switched it off. They were plunged in complete darkness. For a moment David felt very uncomfortable.

Then Irena's voice rang out, fresh and clear, in spite of the darkness: "When did you make love the first time?" she asked.

He was afraid his voice wouldn't want to come out of his throat, and he was surprised when he heard it: "Well... I didn't ever really do it..."

"What does that mean - you tried and it didn't work?"

There was silence. Finally David said: "I think I don't like to talk about it."

"Aha," said Irena, "you THINK you don't like to talk about it. But you're not sure!"

"Yeah," said David.

Irena's hand reached out and touched David's cheek. It was a warm hand.

"Maybe I can help you," she said.

"Yeah," said David, swallowing hard.

The hand wandered down along his neck, through the collar of his pyjama-shirt to his chest, then out again. "Take it off!" she whispered. He took it off, twisting and turning in the bed nervously. Her warm hands, this time both of them, soothed him again. Irena knew she mustn't take too long to get to the point. He wasn't experienced enough for that. He would lose any erection that might be in the workings right now. She checked it out through his pyjama shorts. Yes, things were looking up down there. Her hand cupped the penis in just the way that felt right and squeezed it a tiny bit, not so much that it would frighten the erection away. Yes, she knew how to do it. She had had plenty of practice. Her hand found the way into the pyjama shorts. Ooh, that penis was grateful to her hand, growing into it big and hot! She stripped off the shorts.

Without stopping the work on the penis, she leaned over and kissed David's neck, then his chest, then his tummy...

David didn't exactly know what was happening. All he knew was that she had stripped off his last bit of clothing and that he was completely naked. He should have felt exposed, but instead of that his body was just yearning for more of that warmth of hers. Her moist kisses moving steadily downwards were burning on his skin. He couldn't believe it when the first suspicion of this moisture applied itself to the tip of his fifth limb. Only corresponding parts of the two bodies should ever meet, right? Everything else is utterly disgusting and pervert, right? That too is completely inborn, and anything else is deviant and ultimately won't make you happy, right?

Wrong! Or rather, at this moment David couldn't care less. As he felt himself, or rather this outer extremity of his, which had grown beyond any sensible proportions, go in to be massaged and then drawn in yet further, all he wanted was MORE of the same...

And then, when he couldn't hold it back anymore and came, he made a beastly sound he hadn't ever heard himself make before, and he felt the flow of sperm being taken in greedily till the last drop, till he was completely dried out and felt completely empty.

All he felt now was a tremendous sleepiness...

He vaguely felt that Irena laid down her head on his tummy, and he put his hand down on her shoulders. Then he fell asleep.

The next morning he woke up early. The room was stuffy and smelly. He was still naked and felt a bit cold. Irena was fast asleep on her side of the bed. He tried to cover himself better, but the cover was in such a mess that he couldn't manage to arrange it properly

over his body. "Some kind of topological problem we have here" some boring teacher-voice said inside himself. He got up to find his pyjama shorts and shirt that had been torn off him the evening before. He found them, dressed up in them and walked over to the window. He opened it and stood in front of it. He soon got really cold, but it somehow felt refreshing. He was looking into some kind of back-yard. There was an old lawn-mowing tractor and some other equipment he couldn't identify. It wasn't interesting, but he stared at it for a very long time. He couldn't tell if he was happy. He felt relaxed like never before, but at the same time he also felt down, somehow.

He was still standing there when Irena woke up, got up and walked over to him, put her arms around his waist from behind, pressed her whole body against his and said: "Good morning! Did you sleep well? What are you thinking about now? Still about monogamy?"

"No, rather about sex..."

"Did you like it?"

"By God, I loved it! But now I feel lost..."

"Of course you feel lost," she said, "because it wasn't at all real sex, you know. I did everything. You just came along for the ride."

"Why did you do it?"

"Oh, because I felt like it, of course!"

"You did, you really did?"

"Of course I did!"

"But it wasn't the real thing."

"No, it wasn't the real thing."

"Will you do the real thing with me one day?"

"That depends on you."

Over breakfast she started explaining a few things to David:

"You still have lots to learn" was how she brought up the topic.

"Yes, but what exactly do you mean?" asked David.

"You know," said Irena, "in principle the boy should be the active one right from the start. He should be the one working on the girl, while the girl resists him. He should keep going till the girl gets so worked up that she wants him."

"But why is it like that?" asked David. "I don't understand. Girls and boys need sex equally much. Why don't they just get together and do it? Why are there so many tricks to learn?"

"I can't believe you're saying this," said Irena. "You were the one going on about monogamy and how you need to find the right partner and so on. How will you find the right partner if people just get together and do it?"

"But they're not finding the right partner or anything like that," said David full of desperation. "They just take the ones who happen to know the tricks, that's all!"

"No, no," said Irena, "it's not that simple..."

"Anyway," said David, "if boys and girls need sex equally much, why would the boy have to be the active one while the girl resists him. That just doesn't make sense."

"Oh," said Irena with another one of those mocking little smiles of hers, "because it's inborn like that. It's instinctual. You're the one who keeps going on about how everything

is instinctual. I thought about it and in some sense I quite like it – everything can be explained so easily that way!"

"Yeah, yeah, sure, but I still need to know WHY it is inborn like that and HOW it is programmed that way. I want to understand it."

"Well," said Irena, "I guess the usual explanation is that females make a big investment when they get pregnant, while males just provide the sperm. That's why females are more reluctant than males - they need the sperm of a really worthy male for the child they're going to carry in their womb for so long. Males, on the other hand, can never be sure that any child is really theirs, but at the same time producing sperm is very cheap for them, so their best bet is to fuck around as much as they can so that at least some of the offspring would really be theirs. You can read such stuff in good biology books."

"Yeah..." said David.

"That's your own way of arguing," said Irena laughing. "I learnt it from you to bring up arguments like that!"

"Yeah," said David again, "that explains the WHY, but it doesn't explain the HOW. If boys and girls need sex equally much, HOW can the girls be more reluctant, wait for the boys to work on them, resist them and all that..."

"Yes, I see your problem," said Irena. "I think girls really need to feel that they are wanted. The boys have to make a show of wanting them."

"Didn't I make that clear all my life?" said David annoyed. "And yet it didn't work!"

"Oh no!" said Irena, "not like that. If they just see you sitting there with your tongue hanging out, slobbering like a dog, that won't at all attract them."

"And why not?"

"Because then they could just come and do something to you to make you happy, as if they were your servant or something."

"Like a prostitute, you mean?"

"Yes, like a prostitute."

"But if they need it themselves just as much, what's the problem?"

"The problem is, I think, that they might end up not getting what they need."

"But if the boy has to be the active one, he too might not get what he needs in the end. What's the difference?"

"Oh, it's not at all the same. The boy is the one who has to do the penetration. He can't do that if he doesn't want to. He's in control. Boys can rape girls, but girls can't really rape boys."

"I don't get it," said David with a whiny voice. "You say the boy has to be active. But if he's active, then he's precisely MORE like a rapist. If he just sits there with his tongue out, waiting for a girl to notice him, then he's not at all likely to rape her."

"Well, boys precisely need to have a bit of the rapist in them..." Irena surprised even herself when she said this.

"This is crazy!" was all David could say.

"No, look, I think this is how it works: when a boy has sex with a girl, it can only be because he wants it. Else he wouldn't have an erection, right?"

"Right."

"When a girl has sex with a boy, it can basically be for two reasons: either she wants it, or she submits to him to gain some advantage. She can do that, since she is able to have sex, or at least some kind of sex, even when she doesn't want it."

“Yes.”

“When she wants it, it has to be CLEAR that she wants it and that she’s not submitting to the boy. Else the boy will think that now he can lead her by the nose, and she’ll have to fight later on to prove him wrong.”

“Yes. So far I can follow you.”

“Well, if the boy just waits for the girl to let him fuck her, or whines for her to let him fuck her, then all she can do is come and do him that favour, and that’s whorish.”

“But it’s not much like submitting to him, is it?”

“Yes it is. You know, I saw some film about chimpanzees once (you see, I’m arguing completely according to your lines of thought - chimpanzees are our closest cousins in terms of evolution, aren’t they?). Anyway, these chimps, whenever they saw something that scared them, they quickly turned their bum to it to be fucked. Offering yourself to be fucked like that, it’s the most humiliating thing you can do. You only do it to a bloody scary big boss to distract him from hurting you.”

“Even if you need it bloody much yourself?”

“Of course! If you can’t make it clear that you bloody much need it yourself, the humiliation of offering yourself for a fuck is exactly the same as if you did it only out of submissiveness.”

“Why don’t you just make it clear, then?”

“Sure, that’s how women do it. But for that they need the man to do something to which they can react. The man needs to do something so that the woman can show him: that’s right, baby, that’s what I want! They don’t just offer themselves! Only whores do that!”

“So it’s humiliating to be a whore?”

“Yes, mostly it is. Not with all customers. Some of them are seductive. They do stuff to deserve you. But most of them just want you to offer yourself. It made me sick in the end.”

“In other words, asking for sex, that’s already wrong.”

“Yes, definitely. You mustn’t ever ask. You have to do something. Brush against the girl, touch her cheek, all casually, of course, and only in the exact moment when it feels right, else you’re a rapist. If she likes it, she will press against your hand, she will do all kinds of things to keep your attention. Eventually you’ll end up in bed with her. But if you tell her ‘I don’t know the tricks, let’s just do it’, then she’ll dismiss you straight away!”

“I’m not sure I really got it why.”

“But I just explained it all! It’s a beautiful theory, and it’s all built up on the fact that, mechanically speaking, the man has this one essential role in sex, namely penetration, that the woman doesn’t have. It’s the kind of theory you love to make!”

“Yeah, well please explain it to me once more. I got lost in it somewhere.”

“Okay. So: before having sex, a woman has to make it clear that she does it because she wants it and not because she’s scared or trying to gain an advantage or anything like that. Else she’ll feel humiliated, however much she needs sex.”

“Yes, that much I understood.”

“If the man just expects her to come and offer herself, then it doesn’t work.”

“Okay.”

“But if the man reaches out to her with a certain amount of pushiness (but without ever going too far in one go, of course, because then it’s nothing but rape and she has no time to get into it), then he gives her a chance to get turned on and show him how she likes it.”

“But then too she could just be giving in out of submissiveness, couldn’t she?”

“No, not at all. Once the man is active, she can guide him. She resists him, but he keeps trying other things, and when she likes it, she reacts more positively, and by and by he learns to please her, and that’s how in the end they do it all. If the man isn’t active to start with, she can’t guide him.”

“Why couldn’t she just tell him how she likes it?”

“Oh, there aren’t enough words in verbal language for that. Besides, maybe she doesn’t even know it herself, how she likes it. She discovers it when it happens to her, when it feels right. They discover it together.”

“But why wouldn’t the woman come at the man the same way? Why does he have to start?”

“Oh, that happens sometimes, you know, like yesterday evening...”

David blushed like mad.

“But it’s still more the man’s role to start, because he definitely can’t be doing it without wanting it himself, just to please her, out of submissiveness. Or if he tries, then it becomes obvious straight away and doesn’t work, because he doesn’t get an erection.”

David said: “I still don’t get it. If the woman gets into it, even if the man started it originally, it can still be submissiveness. How can you be so dead sure that it isn’t?”

“Why, because the woman doesn’t just give in like that! The man has to do all kinds of things, listening with his hands to the reactions of her body, in order to properly get her in the mood. He really has to deserve her. Only then they will finally ‘do it’, and then there’s nothing humiliating in it anymore.”

“You think we’ll ever do it like that, you and me?”

“Ah, ah, ah!!!” said Irena “you mustn’t ask! That’s the whole point of what I was trying to explain to you!”

That day they went to visit a crocodile “farm”. Actually it was some kind of zoo again, except that this time it was for crocodiles instead of birds. David had seen crocodiles before, in vivariums, where they just stayed absolutely still all day, their piercing reptile eyes open but looking at nothing. Here in this crocodile farm there were many, many crocodiles in a setting as natural as possible (many pools, artificial water-falls, tropical plants). There was a foot-bridge above the whole thing for the human visitors. Of course here too the crocodiles were mostly sunbathing and keeping absolutely still, their mouths (the insides of which looked dry and unreal) half-open. Sometimes one of them clumsily climbed over his mates to find a better spot, but otherwise there wasn’t much activity. But further off, in one of the pools, a huge commotion suddenly started. Two crocodiles were fighting! They were beating the water to foam with their powerful tails, their bodies were twisting around each other like humans in foreplay. The pale under-belly of one of the crocodiles was clearly visible for a while as he struggled to wriggle back to an upright position. Then it was all over. The loser retreated, and the winner floated along proudly, only the upper jaw of his half-open mouth and his eyes breaking the surface of the water.

“Instinct-driven beasts!” David said.

“I thought according to you we were all instinct-driven.” said Irena.

“Yes, sure, but in more highly evolved creatures, the instincts drive the intellect, and the intellect has to work out how to satisfy the instincts. In more primitive animals, when an

instinct awakens, this leads to an action much more directly. There isn't much thinking in between."

"You really think life is all about satisfying instincts?"

"Yes, they can be very complicated instincts, of course, and to satisfy them might require a lot of unconscious who knows what (some processing of some sort) and conscious thinking."

"And monogamy too is instinctual?"

"Well, maybe monogamy is just a tendency. Maybe it's just the best we could come up with to satisfy our instincts."

"But even if everything we do that makes us human is nothing but what we came up with to satisfy our instincts better, maybe the instincts at the bottom of it all are still quite simple. Maybe what makes us human is what we built up on top of the instincts. Maybe we don't even have so many instincts, after all. Maybe you attach too much importance to our instinctual side, after all."

"No, I don't think so," said David, "Let me explain this with an example: eating. You see, we need sugar in our blood, so we have a taste for sweet things and starchy things. We need fat, so we have a taste for fatty things. We need protein, so we have a taste for meat. When we have too much of one thing and not enough of another, our desires change accordingly. All this is quite complicated. We don't just become hungry at regular intervals. We become hungry for certain things. That's already a lot of instincts!"

"Yeah, well this is still pretty basic stuff. Nothing as complicated as monogamy! I'm sure all animals, even the most primitive, have this kind of internal regulations!"

"Not really! A frog, for example, just eats whatever moves in front of his snout. He doesn't know exactly what it is that he needs. He just trusts the fact that it's all contained in the stuff that moves in front of his snout. If one day his food stopped moving in the way that triggers his reflex to catch it, he would starve in the midst of plenty! He wouldn't have the idea to try out something new."

"Yes, well he is programmed to catch stuff that moves in a certain way. That's what I call an instinct, and we have less instincts like that, because we have an intellect instead!"

"Yeah, well we have less instincts that tell us exactly what to do, that's right. But we have all those tastes that need to be satisfied. All these tastes amount to many more instincts than a frog has. A frog just has this one instinct with respect to food: catch whatever wriggles in front of your snout! We have many more, and so it becomes much more complicated to satisfy them, and that's why we need an intellect."

"But are you sure all these tastes, as you call them now, should really be called instincts? For me an instinct is something that tells you EXACTLY what to do."

"Well, for me instincts are the origin of emotional energies. These energies get processed somewhere in the depth of our brains and then become conscious as feelings, and the feelings then get processed further through conscious thought. Our thoughts finally tell us what to do. But whatever we do, the origin is always an instinct. That's my firm belief."

"Aha, that's interesting..." was all Irena had to say about this right now.

But she came back to the topic later, when they were sitting in the car:

"So life is all about satisfying your instincts, you are sure?"

"Absolutely. Instincts produce emotional energies that become conscious feelings which make you think. Thinking tells you what to do. You do it, and it either feels good or not. If it doesn't feel good, you think some more and try again. When it finally feels good and

right, that means the instinct, or rather the particular constellation of emotional energies resulting from ALL the instincts active at that moment, is satisfied.”

“In other words: when Quality, in the Pirsig sense of the word, is high.” said Irena. “You know, that American author I told you about?”

“Yes.” said David.

“Well, that’s fine,” said Irena, “but why not take drugs that satisfy your instincts directly in your brain? Why bother doing things when drugs can satisfy the instincts just as well?”

“Oh, they can’t really do that,” said David confidently, “they can make you feel good temporarily, but they can never satisfy every single instinct inside you and give every neuron in your brain exactly what it individually needs. A drug like that couldn’t possibly be invented. That would be like inventing language-classes in pill-form - you take a pill, and there you are, you know a new language.”

Irena smiled her ironic little smile: “It doesn’t need to be a pill, you can also put micro-electrodes into the brain. You put each electrode exactly where it is needed to satisfy a particular instinct...”

“Oh, that wouldn’t work either,” said David, “the brain is much too complicated for that!”

“Well, I think actually it would work,” said Irena. “From what I’ve learnt about the brain, it seems there are special pleasure-centres in it. Probably all your instincts, in the process of being satisfied, converge onto those pleasure-centres. It isn’t at all necessary to put an electrode for each instinct into the brain. You just put a couple of electrodes into the pleasure-centres, and there you are! No more worries! If satisfying your instincts is the ultimate goal of your life, and that’s what you build your whole philosophy of life upon, then why not just put in those electrodes? Then all your instincts can always be satisfied at the touch of a button!”

Oh, Irena had trapped him again! But this time David wasn’t going to give in so easily!

“If it’s that simple, then why wouldn’t everybody have such electrodes in their brains by now?” he asked.

“That’s what I’m asking you,” said Irena, “you’re the one who claims that satisfying instincts is all life is about.”

Oh-oh...

David thought about it for a while. The car was speeding along at a steady 100 kilometers per hour. The engine was humming softly. A grandpa in a Citroën 2CV was coming up ahead. The visibility was good. David overtook him without slowing down, in a stride, so to speak.

He remembered a science fiction book by Michael Crichton he had once read. Maybe that’s where Irena got her idea of the electrodes from too. It was called “The Terminal Man” and was about a man who got electrodes fitted into his brain to deal with some form of psychological seizure. Crichton was warning that the world would be filled with electrode-junkies in just a few decades. If there’s a market for it, there would always be somebody to perform the operation, somewhere in the world, Crichton had argued.

People would be willing to pay anything for this ultimate happiness, Crichton had claimed. And yet it hadn’t happened. Maybe people just weren’t informed enough to know about the possibility? Or could there be another reason that there just wasn’t any market for that kind of thing, after all?

“I guess we have an instinct that forbids it.” David finally said.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” said Irena, “nothing ever needs to be explained, because there’s an instinct for everything!”

“Of course there is,” said David annoyed, “our instincts evolved over billions of years. We’re made up of them. They are the essence of our being...”

“That may be so,” said Irena, “but this time I’m not going to let you get away with it so easily. So you say there’s an instinct that makes us refuse to get electrodes put in our heads? That’s what you’re saying, right?”

“Yeah, well some kind of self-preservation instinct, something like that...”

“Sure, sure. The problem is just that every instinct, even that one, will be taken care of by the electrodes. Even that self-preservation instinct will be made happy, along with all the others. Even that self-preservation instinct can’t have anything against those electrodes, because those electrodes will satisfy even him.”

“Wait a moment,” said David, “the electrodes will only satisfy him once they’re in place. Before they can satisfy him, they first have to be put there. But he doesn’t want them to be put there. If you force them on him, he will suffer. Of course he will suffer only until they start working. Once they work he will be happy for ever. But as long as they’re not there yet and he can still have a say, he will refuse them. Who can say that an eternity of delight can compensate for even just a second of suffering? (the French writer Camus brought up this question in “La Peste”).”

There was silence in the car except for the humming of the engine. Finally Irena said: “Okay, that’s not a bad answer.”

They drove ever further South. They did some horse-riding in the Camargue, galloped among the dunes and along the beach, the aromatic, salty air filling their nostrils, their hair blowing in the wind...

They swam naked in the sea.

They slept in hotels. David caressed her body before going to sleep, and she obviously enjoyed his hands all over herself, but she showed no inclination to do to him what she had done on the first night. And David knew he mustn’t ask...

Without having really discussed it, they gradually started moving northwards again (homewards..?). They stopped in cultural places too. They enjoyed the small French towns, their French atmosphere, the charming restaurants, the cozy hotels.

One place they remembered vividly later on was the inner court of a monastery. A covered round-walk for the monks surrounded it. The walls, the ceiling and the pillars were decorated inch by inch with fine rock-carvings depicting all kinds of scenes from the Bible and any number of angels and devils sharing out the souls of the good and the wicked among themselves.

“This is where the monks walked round and round, meditating.” said David.

“Yes, this is how they saw the world,” said Irena, “a perpetual fight between good and evil.”

“Maybe that’s how everybody more or less sees the world.” said David.

“Maybe,” said Irena, “it’s not so bad either. It just gets complicated when you start wondering what GOOD really means instead of only wondering how to BE good.”

“Oh,” said David, “when you start having doubts about what is good, then that’s already Satan’s influence, and that already means you have to seek forgiveness from the priest. They knew how to keep their sheep from going astray, those shitters!”

“Hm, yes,” said Irena, “but they have no power over me, those shitters, as you call them. Sometimes I wish they did. It must be very comforting to have a priest who is responsible for your life.”

They sat down on a bench from which they had an overview over a good part of the place. Right above David there was a devil sticking his tongue out at him.

“So, what do you think, how do you see the world?” asked David.

“That’s a good question,” said Irena. “I think I haven’t found out yet.”

“How could you not have found out? If you are able to walk around without bumping your head into every second obstacle you encounter, that means you can SEE. It’s obvious that you can see the world in some kind of way!”

“Yes, well I think I’m still in the process of bumping my head into obstacles and then wondering if there wouldn’t have been a way to see the obstacle beforehand. I think I’m still learning.”

“Falling for that whore-business, you think that was bumping your head?”

Irena thought it over for a while, then she said: “Yes, I guess you might say so. Not that I could or should have avoided it, though. By bumping into such obstacles you learn a lot about these kinds of obstacles, and you learn how to maneuver around them in the future. If you never bump into any of them thanks to just keeping still, then you never learn to maneuver around them either, and then you can just go on keeping still for the rest of your life. That’s not what I call living.”

“But,” said David, “some theoretical knowledge could have shown you how to maneuver around obstacles too, without any need to bump into them first.”

“You mean some big theory proving that prostitution is bad and that monogamy is the real thing?”

“Yes.”

“Well, such a theory might have stopped me from becoming a whore, okay. But then how could it have told me how to achieve monogamy, even if that was what I believed in?”

David didn’t know what to say. Irena realized that she was marking a point and continued: “Such a theory might tell you to steer away from certain things, but at the same time you miss out on all the fun as well.”

“But a really good theory should also be able to tell you how to get the good things, not just how to avoid the bad ones.” said David. Even to his own ears it didn’t sound like a very meaningful argument.

“Sure,” said Irena, “a theory might tell you what to do, but then you still really have to go out there in the big, cold world and really do it. It’s not enough to just plan it in ever greater detail. Besides, even the best theory can only tell you what to do IN GENERAL. It doesn’t give you any step-by-step instructions for the concrete (and unpredictable) cases in which you will find yourself. Whatever big bully theories you have, in the end you still have to ACT, and that means taking risks.”

“But you don’t need to become a whore!” David insisted.

“Well,” said Irena, “maybe in general it isn’t something people have to do. But in my case...” She hesitated. Her legs had been crossed a moment ago, but now one of her feet was resting on the knee of the other leg. Her thighs were wide-apart. She was occupying quite a lot of space on the bench. It was a somewhat masculine position. She played with the shoe-lace of the foot that was on her knee.

In the end she said: "You and I, we do good to each other." She turned to David and looked him in the eyes with serene determination: "I really think so, you know." She turned to the shoe-lace again. "If I hadn't gone to butt my head into that whore-business, we wouldn't have come together like this. You would still be my teacher at Monte Verdi, and I would be your little pupil, smiling shyly at you sometimes, and you would blush whenever our fingers would brush against each other over the book we would be reading together..."

David couldn't say anything.

"Isn't that how it would have been?" asked Irena.

"Yeah, I guess so... But why?"

"Why? Because all your theoretical knowledge didn't tell you how to seduce me!"

"Why didn't YOU seduce ME instead?"

"Well, I did." said Irena, hitting his shoulder. "I went off to be a whore, and then you came running after me at last!"

"Oh yes," said David, "because of course you couldn't just offer yourself to me. That would have been humiliating. The man has to be the active one. The man has to run after the girl. So instead of offering yourself to me, you rather offered yourself to countless strangers, so that I would come running. That makes a whole lot of sense. And of course you planned it all like that."

"Of course not!" said Irena, laughing. "I didn't just go there and offer myself to countless strangers. First I was seduced by Paul. He knew how to do it. He gave me what you wouldn't."

"Paul? Who is Paul?"

"The guy whose gun you've got! When will you remember his name at last!"

"Aha," said David, "so you still didn't plan it all like that so that I would come running after you?"

"Of course not! But that's how it turned out, and I'm happy about it. I'm happy to be here with you!"

"So it was still necessary to become a whore, you mean?"

"Yes, and did you hear what I said last?"

"That you are happy to be here with me?"

"Yes!" she said and hit his shoulder again: "Be moved a bit, at least!"

That night, as they were lying in bed together, his hands didn't just do the soothing, gentle kind of caressing. Tonight his hands grabbed for her more greedily, and allowing his hands to do that was in itself enough to get him excited and start an erection. She let him undress her in bed, and he delivered his own body from his shorts too. He pulled her on top of himself, and kneading her buttocks he pulled her down onto himself and pushed himself up at the same time and penetrated her all the way till their waists met, and it felt amazingly good...

Then his body started moving under hers like a powerful horse, sending her up and down with huge pelvic thrusts. At some point she caught the rhythm and urged him along. They fell sideways when he came and they stayed lying side by side, and he was still inside her, and he barely moved, so that he wouldn't slip out and lose the entrance, but his big hands held her tight, and he moved just a bit, and that's how she came, and it was

amazing how long it seemed to last, and as their bodies were finally relaxing, he still held her tight...

They fell asleep in each others arms, and it hadn't been necessary to say a single word. The next morning when he woke up, she was lying there, next to him and smiled. There was a sparkle in her eyes and a complicity in her smile of the kind he had never shared with anyone before, and he felt wonderfully good. Perhaps for the first time in his life he felt really happy to be alive and to be himself and not someone else!

Over breakfast the rock-carvings at the inner court of the monastery seemed bloody far away to David, like some kind of ominous, dream-like memory of a previous life, and yet Irena brought them up again: "All those little angels there, do you think they ever have sex, or just the devils do?"

"Hm, that's a good question!" answered David.

"Did you ever notice," said Irena, "that in gothic art the bad guys and their associated monsters are usually much more interesting than the good guys and the angels? The good guys are so pure that there's hardly anything left of them!"

"Yeah, well," said David, "I guess that's because it's much harder for soft gentle little things to be BAD than for tough, strong things. That's why the artists always put the tough, strong things on the side of the bad guys. If they put the tough, strong things on the side of the good guys, they would always need to wonder if they really got it right, because tough strong things can so easily turn BAD. It's much easier to control the softies. That's why all the saints (including Jesus himself) are always portrayed as softies. It was your idol Drewermann who showed me that Jesus, as he challenged the existing order of his time, was probably more of a Rambo-figure than a softie."

"You read some Drewermann because of me?" asked Irena.

"I sure did!" answered David, and Irena looked happy.

"You think sex is one of those strong, tough things?" she asked after a while of sipping her hot tea.

"Yeah, sure." said David, gobbling down a big mouthful of bread and butter and jam.

"And since it is so strong, when it goes wrong, it goes very wrong, right?" said Irena.

"Right." said David.

"Anything but monogamy is very wrong?"

David wiped his mouth on the napkin and said: "Why do you keep bugging me with that monogamy-stuff? All I said - and I said it only once, I think - is that you would have a much richer life if you chose a partner and stuck to him, rather than fucking around."

"Why would fucking around be so bad?"

"Well, maybe it isn't so bad if it's just a phase. But if you do nothing but fucking around, you won't ever progress further than the first few phases of a relationship (those up to the first fuck), and you won't experience the worlds upon worlds that could come after that, as the relationship matures."

Irena smiled a bit as she drank her orange juice. She liked it, what David just said, but she was determined to give him a hard time: "If we are really so instinct-driven as you say, then what is there to discover? There are instincts responding to instincts, and it should all work the same way with whatever partner you happen to be with."

"No, not at all!" said David. "First of all our instincts get activated in different ways and we have different methods of satisfying them depending on our life's experiences."

Secondly I guess we have inborn talents - which means that the quality of various instincts isn't the same in each person, I believe, which further means that the quality of the genetic makeup isn't the same for each person either."

"Aha," said Irena, "and how do you explain things like falling in love, then building up a relationship and all that? How does that work and what does it mean?"

"Well, I think first we select, in some mysterious way, people who have the same kinds of talents as we do, so that their general life-style would be compatible with ours, but who in addition have some particular talent that we lack, so as to complete ourselves in a sense..."

"Sorry to interrupt," said Irena, "but if talents can be related back to instincts, then how would we be able to appreciate a talent that we don't have ourselves? We wouldn't have any echo to it, we wouldn't even SEE it, right? I mean, an instinct is something inborn, and if it's inborn, then it isn't something you can learn, right?"

"Yeah, well..." David paused. Nobody had ever asked him such tough questions before. Nobody had ever listened to him long enough to be able to challenge his views in such a clever way. This was really special.

"You see, I guess when someone has an inborn talent, it means that a certain instinct (or a constellation of instincts) in him is of particularly high quality. It doesn't mean that other people don't have that instinct at all. It's like the colour of the eyes - it can be different, but we still all have eyes, and their goal, so to speak, is still always to enable us to see. Furthermore, you may have a talent that enables you to satisfy all kinds of other instincts in a better, cleverer way, instincts that aren't, as such, dependent on that talent."

Irena looked at him with questioning eyes.

"I'll try to make up an example," David said, "a dog, for example, couldn't possibly invent and build a car. But he can still SEE cars, and he can appreciate being driven around in them, even without understanding them deeply."

Irena said: "Building a car requires engineering skills, logics, mathematics, stuff like that. Do you call that kind of stuff instincts?"

"Yeah, I guess basically I do," said David. "I think the rules of logics are inborn. The axioms of mathematics too, although perhaps not in the elegant, pure form you find them in math-books. I guess we use them all the time, even for the most primitive, basic thoughts. The trick we need in order to invent and plan such an incredible thing as a car is to put those rules onto paper somehow. Then a thought too complex to be contained in the brain in one piece can be broken down and worked out on paper. Each step may make sense to the brain, but the whole thing only comes together thanks to the piece of paper, because it wouldn't all fit into the brain in one piece. But it can only be worked out on paper if we have invented a code for putting it on the paper (or in the computer, or whatever). Working out such a code, that's where mathematics, as a science, start. The ability to work out such codes, the ability to invent languages, that too is inborn, I guess. When the ability to work out (and understand) codes comes together with the ability to imagine things in three dimensions, then such things as cars can be invented."

"Okay," said Irena, "so you may appreciate a talent just by seeing its result, without understanding it yourself."

There was a pause.

Then she said: "We were talking about how people fall in love, build up relationships and all that."

“Yeah.” said David. He didn’t quite know what he had to say about this topic at this point.

“You said that we select people with the same general talents and who have some additional talents.”

“Yeah.” said David.

“Then what happens?”

“Well,” said David, “then they fuck.”

“Aha.” said Irena.

“Yes,” said David, “and since each of the partners has some talents that the other one lacks while they have a large basis of talents in common as well, there is a chance that these additional talents will be brought together in the offspring. The offspring will thus be something more highly evolved than the parents were.”

“I see,” said Irena with mock-seriousness, “falling in love is a mechanism by which the quality of the offspring can be enhanced. But that still doesn’t explain why we should want just one partner in a lifetime. Of course I don’t mean we should have several at once, because then that chess-and-tennis problem you once brought up would occur. But we could have several in turn.”

“Maybe we need to stay with the same one because the children take so long to bring up. During that time the two parents need to work together to bring them up.”

“So you mean we’re programmed to stay with the same person, however boring it gets? And those who still go astray, they will suffer from having disregarded one of their instincts?”

“Yeah, well it’s more complex...” said David uncomfortably.

“Okay, you explain it to me!” said Irena.

David suddenly knew where to start: “Animals that live in big herds, they’re in tune with the herd. When the herd stops to eat, seeing all the others eat makes you hungry too, so you start eating too. When the herd stops to sleep, seeing all the others yawn makes you yawn too, and so you sleep too. When the herd starts panicking, you find that bloody scary, and you start panicking too. The idea is that what hundreds of eyes can see, hundreds of ears can hear and hundreds of noses can smell is far more meaningful than what you can see, hear and smell all by yourself. So it’s useful that the emotions of the herd can affect you, and that’s how emotions spread through the herd.”

“Okay,” said Irena, “that’s how emotions became contagious. And then?”

“Well,” said David, “when you fall in love, a single person suddenly becomes the whole world for you. Whatever this one person feels, it grips you and you immediately feel it too.”

“As if this one person were a whole herd all by himself?”

“Exactly. Exactly like that. And it can happen in a split second. Some cog-wheels in your brain get re-positioned, and there you are: the reactions you should have towards a whole herd, you suddenly have them towards a single person.”

“And how does that happen?” asked Irena, playing the good pupil.

“Well, it’s like this: when the weight of living becomes too heavy for you to carry, you float up into the sky. You forget about ‘up’ and ‘down’, clothes trapping your body, taboos restricting your desires. All you feel is the air surrounding you equally from all sides. You forget about all the messy little messages cruising around and through your body and your mind. You become ONE. And you become ONE with your surroundings

too. The medium can be water or air, or the body of your lover, but in any case it engulfs you completely. And then, as you float in it, high above the worries of the world, you suddenly feel dreadfully lonely. You left the herd behind. The closest thing to the herd that you've got left, that's your lover who is up there with you. There isn't anybody else - he's all that's left of the herd. So of course all the instincts regarding the herd are now directed towards him."

"Aha," said Irena, "so you fall in love by fucking. That's interesting..."

"Of course not always," said David. "This is just an idealized kind of story. But I believe that through sex (if it's really the real thing, you know, really exciting and all that) you make a kind of bond with your partner."

"Okay," said Irena, "so he becomes the herd. And then?"

"Well, as you get more and more entranced, you either dissolve completely, or some primitive part of you suddenly wakes up and drags you back to reality. It does this in a very crude but effective way, by sending huge spasms through your body. It's called orgasm. After the orgasm you're back in reality, but you're wiped clean of all the annoying little thoughts and senseless aggravation that had accumulated in your mind and that had made you escape by flying up into the sky in the first place."

"Yes, I like this image," said Irena. "And then?"

"Well, if that partner of yours, that guy you fell in love with, represents the herd for you, your emotions will be pulled this and that way quite erratically, because a single person is something much quicker and much more erratic than a big, slow herd."

"What's it good for then?" asked Irena. "How you describe it, it doesn't sound like much fun!"

"Well, after a while you get used to it..."

"Sounds great!" said Irena mockingly.

"No, no," said David quickly, "I didn't mean that you get used to being pulled around erratically. Rather, you get used to the way the other person's emotions work. You start seeing something more systematic in it. Gradually the emotions of your partner won't surprise you all the time, because you'll be expecting them. Having to share them with him becomes much easier."

"And that's love?" asked Irena doubtfully.

"Yes," said David, "that's how having fallen in love leads on to true love."

"I don't know," said Irena, "this explanation somehow doesn't satisfy me..."

"Why not?"

Irena thought it over for a while.

"Well, for a start, if emotions result from activated instincts and instincts are inborn, then I don't see how acquired stuff like getting used to each other and so on can be part of the story. Either you have instincts that complement those of your partner, and then everything works automatically, or you don't, and then nothing will ever work, because the two of you will just be biologically incompatible. Instincts can't be learnt, else they're not instincts. Or did I get that wrong?"

"Surely you don't believe..."

Irena didn't let him finish his sentence: "Of course not! Rather, I believe that this 'instinct'-explanation of yours doesn't work. There has to be something else, something additional!"

“Of course instincts can’t be learnt,” said David, “but the way they get activated, the way they express themselves and the way you satisfy them, THAT can be learnt!”

“Okay,” said Irena, “But these different ways that different people find to deal with their instincts, where do they come from?”

“Well, they come from your life-experience and from your personality.”

“PERSONALITY?!?” said Irena, “What on Earth is that (in your instinct-philosophy, I mean)?”

“Oh well, okay, personality differences ultimately arise from instinctual variations.”

“You see, and instincts can’t be learnt. So I come back to my original question: how do different personalities get ‘used’ to each other?”

“But we already discussed this earlier!” said David. “Many talents, however instinctual they may be, only serve the purpose of satisfying more basic instincts in a new, better way. If you share the more basic instincts, you can see the benefit of those talents even if you don’t have those talents yourself. You can drive a car without being able to build one. You can also love an engineer without being an engineer yourself. That’s how two people can complete each other and have a richer life together than each one of them would have on his own. And if they have offspring, the offspring has a chance to inherit a bit of both worlds and to unite in himself two kinds of talents that definitely go together but that had never been united in a single individual in the history of the world before. That’s how human beings become more intelligent with each generation.”

“Boah!!!” said Irena (she wasn’t even sure that David was really serious at this point), “that’s big bullshit! The offspring has exactly the same chance of inheriting each side’s lack of talent and ending up more stupid than either of its parents!”

“No, not at all.” said David. “The two parents have a whole stock of talents in common. That’s how they chose each other. But each one also has one or two additional talents that the other one lacks. If the child inherits one of those from each parent, then evolution will have made a step forwards. And if not, well the stock of common talents can’t get lost...”

“All this sounds like Nazi-philosophy to me.” said Irena.

“No, not at all!” said David. “The Nazis wanted to control these processes from above, which of course is wrong. The two people who unconsciously choose each other by falling in love, they’re already at the top of the pyramid. They’re at the forefront of evolution. There isn’t anybody above them who can judge whether their choice is good or not.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know,” said Irena. On one hand she liked this idea that every young couple starting a new life together would be at the forefront of evolution, making evolution happen, being part of the process of evolution. But on the other hand, all this sounded a bit too crazy. “Maybe a group of people, or a class of people, can get more and more intelligent that way through a natural process of selective breeding. But I don’t see how the whole of mankind can get more intelligent that way, unless there is something or someone weeding out the non-chosen ones at some point. That brings us back to the Nazis again.”

“Maybe we human beings are already chosen ones, in that sense.” said David. “In prehistoric times, our species (the chosen ones) probably exterminated the Neanderthals and other human-like species that existed at that time.”

“That’s very nice,” said Irena, “so when’s the next Holocaust? And you’ll be one of the chosen ones, I assume?”

“There doesn’t need to be any holocaust.” said David. “Perhaps one class of people will evolve one way (getting more and more clever with some particular thing) while another class of people evolves another. We’ll end up evolving into wholly different species, making the world a richer, more diverse place. There is no need for anyone to be weeded out. I find it fascinating that this process may have been going on in the past and is certainly still going on now!”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Irena, “there will be a species of engineers, a species of artists, and (why not?) a species of whores... It all sounds bloody promising!”

David didn’t know what to say.

Irena and David made love often now. Irena was beginning to think that there was really something in monogamy. From all the men in the Universe, Irena probably wouldn’t spontaneously have chosen David as her partner. Or perhaps she still would have? When she first met him, he was her teacher, and he had seemed so big, so grown-up. And yet, somehow he was still boyish, still close enough to her to relate to the kind of world she was living in (although of course he was incredibly wise with respect to that world), and he was also endearingly clumsy, even a bit shy, in dealing with her burgeoning femininity. She had been really proud to have such an effect on a boy so much bigger than herself!

Then Irena had grown up very fast. David was all but forgotten until he turned up as a security guard in that discotheque. From then on she had seen him in a different way. He was FAR from big. He was a tiny little boy who knew NOTHING of women. She had to teach him.

Sometimes she wondered why she had bothered to teach him. She didn’t want to be the mummy of that boy, did she? Maybe it was because even though he was such a kid, he was still manly in some sense, he still had testosterone cruising through his blood. He got her out of the brothel she had begun to hate. A real man like Paul, who had gotten her in, couldn’t have gotten her out any better. David was still, in some sense, her saviour. That’s why she stuck with him. And sticking with him would have been unbearable without teaching him to be a man. That’s why she was teaching him, because else she surely wouldn’t have bothered to get involved with such a clumsy guy. But he was learning fast. His caresses that had been clumsy and hesitant at first had become firm and determinate. Just feeling his hands could turn her on nowadays. In some sense she was proud that he hadn’t learnt this with other girls, that she had brought the manliness out of him all by herself. In the course of each day as they traveled together, she could feel the sexual tension mounting in him and how her own body responded to it, and after a night of continence, she could feel the tension becoming a NEED, and then, after a meal in a garden-restaurant, looking into each other’s eyes, sharing little hints, teasing smiles and so on, they would find their room for the night, set down their bags, nudge each other through all the motions of going to bed and then finally do IT, passionately!

The whole day, or even a period of several days, was all part of the foreplay. How would Irena have felt, after several days of sharing the mounting excitement and anticipation, if he suddenly left her and came back all emptied out and drowsy? She would have felt cheated! She would have been disgusted of him, actually! Even though originally he hadn’t been a dream-guy, and he hadn’t swept her off her feet as he should have, she still wasn’t going to SHARE him with anybody. He was HERS!

Maybe that's all monogamy is about. It's not that amazingly complicated, really.

They were steadily driving northwards on a main road. They had stopped using the highways in order to save money on the tolls and also to see more of the landscape. The road was lined by tall trees, the windows were open a bit, and the air, reverberated by the trees came into the car by blasts. The humming of the engine was agreeable.

Irena said: "You know, Pirsig once said..."

"Who is Pirsig?" asked David.

"The guy with the Zen and the motorcycle maintenance, you know."

"Oh, the one who said that it all starts with a feeling?"

"Yeah, well actually he said it all starts with Quality which is something you feel."

"Anyway, what about Pirsig?"

"Well, he said that in order to understand the world, you need to cut it up into different elements, but sometimes you cut things in a way that doesn't suit their pattern. Then the slices don't come apart properly and cleanly. I think it's the same with nurture versus nature."

"Yeah," said David, "that sounds like an interesting idea. Can you explain it some more?"

"A Swiss ethologist called Hans Kummer once said that asking whether behaviour is inborn or acquired is like asking whether a drumming sound you hear in the distance comes from the drum or the drummer."

"Aha," said David, "that sounds like an interesting analogy."

"I didn't really understand what he meant with this when I first heard it, but it struck me, and that's why I remember it at all. After the discussions you and I had together about nurture versus nature, I think it makes more sense to me now."

"Aha..." said David.

"You see, what makes the sound, the drummer or the drum, that's a meaningless question. But there still are meaningful questions concerning nurture and nature that can be answered scientifically. For example, when you hear two different drumming sounds, you may ask whether they result from the same drummer playing on two different drums, or the same drum played by two different drummers. That's a question that makes perfect sense and that science can answer. Now that I thought about the whole thing so much, I think this analogy is really good!"

"Yes, it is..." said David thoughtfully. After a while he added: "Yes, there really needn't be a contradiction between biology and the human sciences. Everything can depend on nature and still depend on upbringing and culture as well. No drumming if there's no drum to play on. But of course, on the other hand, drums aren't even drums if nobody plays on them..."

"Yes," said Irena, "and drummers can't be drummers if they don't have any drums."

"Of course!" said David.

"The kinds of drummers -- I mean instincts -- you're made up of and the kinds of drums -- upbringing and experience -- you have to play on, that's what will make you feel pleased or displeased with the things around you. That's where it all starts, with this feeling of Quality (or lack of it)."

"Pirsig again, right?"

"Right!"

“And then?”

“Then we try to make the things we like more likely and the things we don’t like less likely, so that we can live in a high-quality world.”

“Yeah,” said David, and then, prompting her to go on (he liked this kind of reasoning): “and how do we do that?”

“Well,” said Irena, “to make things we like more likely, it helps to have an idea how things in general work. Science takes care of that. It also helps to have a general idea, in advance, of what kinds of things we are likely to like and what kinds of things we are likely to dislike. For this we need some kind of general idea how our feelings are made up.”

“Science takes care of that too, no?” asked David.

“Yeah, well that’s the problem.” said Irena. “Science tells us how to manipulate things, but if we start artificially manipulating our feelings, then we’re actually manipulating the referee, and once you start manipulating the referee, the whole game makes no sense anymore.”

“What do you mean with ‘artificially manipulating our feelings’?” asked David. “Drugs and such?”

“Yes,” said Irena, “drugs and such, but also maybe in a distant future we will be able to do enough genetic engineering to design animals and humans to suit certain needs, for example a type of hyper-aggressive human to become a super-soldier.”

“I think a super-aggressive human would make a very bad soldier because he would surely lack the cooperative spirit that soldiers need, and he would just turn against his superiors. Besides, nowadays soldiers are cool, level-headed technicians, not battle-field freaks.”

“Anyway,” said Irena slightly annoyed, “whatever they’ll need to be, they will be custom-designed that way!”

“But we don’t need genetic engineering for that,” said David. “Selective breeding can work just as well. Look at pit-bulls. They’re nothing but killing machines lacking all the subtle instincts of normal, healthy dogs!”

“Okay, okay,” said Irena, “that’s not even the point! All I was trying to say is that when we start manipulating the referee himself, who knows where we’re going!”

“I think I see what you mean...” said David.

“Do you really?”

“Yes, I think we’re scared of manipulating the referee (this fear too, of course, is just a feeling - manipulating the referee could result in very low Quality, except that maybe, once the referee has been tampered with, there won’t be anyone left to measure Quality). On the other hand, what’s stopping us? Science can’t help us here. So we need more than science...”

“Yes,” said Irena, “we need religion as well.”

David waited for her to go on.

“Religion is an attempt to find out what the referee is all about.”

“But the theory of evolution can tell us that!” said David.

“Yes,” said Irena, “but such scientific theories only describe things as they are or could be, not as they SHOULD be. We need more than that. We need a code of ethics that satisfies us - a high-quality code of ethics...”

David felt a bit lost. “Kind of like the rules of the game?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Irena, “but it’s more serious than a game. It’s not just for relaxation. It’s for the whole rest of life too.”

“Well,” said David after a long silence, “in order to do that (to make sensible rules, I mean) I guess you need to know what the whole thing is all for - life, the world, everything!”

“Yeah, that’s the problem.” said Irena. “What is it all for?”
David didn’t say anything.

After a while Irena went on: “Basically I see just two possibilities: either the world was set up by some god with who knows what purpose. It can be a real world or it can be an illusion that he’s projecting to me, that doesn’t even matter. The best I can do in such a case is to stay alive, keep others alive, to ensure that someone will be here to listen when the big revelation comes...”

“Interesting idea.” said David. It was obvious that he didn’t find it all that interesting.

“The other possibility,” said Irena, “is that the world is real as it is and appeared just like that. In that case I guess your bully theory of the ‘absolute’ really holds, and all we need to do to keep ourselves happy in that case is to satisfy our natural tendency to uphold life, to spread it across the Universe and be part of the process that makes the ‘absolute’ absolute.”

“And then the absolute is God.” said David.

“Yep,” said Irena, “and in either case, the conclusion is the same: life is all about upholding life.”

“But what about the code of ethics?” asked David.

“Well, we have to derive it from this big piece of wisdom somehow.” said Irena.
There was a long silence.

“Well,” David finally said, “what does that mean for US? What is there for US to do? How do we put all this big wisdom in practice?”

Irena wasn’t quite prepared for this question. She thought it over for a while, then she said: “I guess first I should get proper training in something I’m interested in. Then I can work in that field and do my best there, whatever it will be. I guess that’s how it works. First I will go back to Germany and finish the Gymnasium, then I’ll go to University and study something. I guess that’s the way for me.”

David got pretty depressed about this. There was nothing about HIM in all these plans.

“And me?” he said.

“You should do the same,” said Irena without hesitating. “Why don’t you go and become a proper teacher?”

“Who would pay for my studies?” David called out.

“Why, you would get a scholarship or something, surely...”

“Maybe I’m already too old for that.” said David, depressed.

“Maybe, maybe not.” said Irena. “Why don’t you find out?”

“I don’t have any natural talent to be a teacher.”

“You? You were one of the best teachers I ever had!” Irena called out.

David was bloody surprised. “How..? What do you mean? In what sense?” he asked.

She thought it over a bit. Then she said: “You have a kind of warmth that is very engaging. You are always so happy when your pupil gets something right that it becomes a real pleasure to get something right! At the same time you are endlessly patient. I think you were born to be a teacher of some kind!”

David was so moved he felt uncomfortable. Finally he said: "But I don't have authority. Those awful Monte Verdi pupils kept treating me as if I were one of them rather than their teacher!"

Irena smiled a little and had a hard time keeping back a giggle. She turned away from David and looked out the side-window so that David wouldn't notice. Then she said: "Part of the problem is, of course, that you're so taken in by wanting to share your enthusiasms with your pupils that you really get a bit too close to them. So of course they treat you like their equal."

"That wouldn't be a problem if they stayed polite and behaved themselves, at least!" said David.

This time Irena giggled straight out, not being able to hold herself back anymore.

"What? What did I say?" asked David.

Irena looked out the window again, still giggling. Trying to control herself she became all red in the face.

"Explain! Explain!" urged David. "What's so funny?"

"What do you think do little boys want to learn from big boys the most?" she asked and giggled her head off. She buried her head in her hands and her shoulders were shaking with giggling.

"You mean sex?" he asked.

"Of course!" she said.

"Well, what's so funny? I'm not paid to give them sex-education classes. I'm paid to teach them math, physics and chemistry. When they start talking about sex, I have to shut them up."

"Sex-education classes!!!!" Irena exclaimed and laughed even more.

"What's so funny?" asked David, not just perplexed by now but also getting slightly annoyed.

She calmed down and said all seriously: "Yeah, maybe you could give them sex-education classes."

"But what was so funny?" he asked.

"Well," she said trying to stay serious, "one word about sex and they could surely tell you weren't all that comfortable with the topic. That makes them want to tease you."

"A lot of people aren't comfortable with that topic." said David flatly.

"Oh come on," said Irena, "a big fat daddy of three children, you don't even wonder whether he's comfortable with the topic or not, because it's definitely not interesting. But a young guy like you... Of course they wonder what experiences you had, how you had them, what kinds of things you do to a girl, and so on..."

David had to admit Irena was completely right again. DAMNED right she was!

Irena continued: "That wouldn't be a problem anymore!"

"Why, what would I do?" asked David. "I just start telling them about sex in the middle of the chemistry-class?"

"Yeah, why not." said Irena, "there are many, many chemistry classes throughout the year. You can afford to sacrifice a few for the common good of your pupils. Some teachers who don't have any problems with discipline, they just talk to the radiators at the back of the classroom while their completely well-behaved and polite pupils clean their finger-nails. Of course they still learn enough chemistry to pass some tests (because that's something they still always care about, even with the worst teacher). If your classes are

more intense, you can teach your pupils in a month what other pupils learn in one year, easily! I think it's completely okay to talk about sex the rest of the time!"

Now David started to laugh too!

"What on earth could I tell them about sex for eleven months?"

"Oh, lots of things!" said Irena. "You can tell them wise things you read here and there, other wise things you made up yourself (like the story of how you float above the herd, stuff like that), and they will listen to you with rapt attention, because it will be written all over your face that you really know what you're talking about."

"Because earlier I didn't?"

Irena exploded with laughter again.

"Honestly," she finally said, "I think you lost your innocence with me!"

One morning, as they sat into the car and drove away from their hotel, Irena said: "So we're driving back to Switzerland, actually, aren't we?"

"Are we?" David asked back.

"Well," said Irena, "it's just a couple of hundreds of kilometers. Where else do you want to drive?"

"Yeah, well I don't know..." said David. "What do we do when we get back?"

"Me, I'll go back to Germany to finish my school, and you, I guess you will go back to your job, and you will also try to find out about how to become a proper teacher so that you can get a proper job one day!"

"Yeah, but I meant right now. We cross the border, and then what do we do? Where do we go?"

"To your flat, maybe?"

"You said it wasn't safe there!"

"Yeah, well, we'll call Paul, we'll arrange to meet him in a public place where he can't start a fuss, you give him back his gun, we part peacefully, and hopefully we'll never hear of him and his whore-business anymore, ever!"

"Did he pay you for the work you've already done?"

"Work?!?" Irena laughed bitterly. "I don't want any of that money. Fuck that whole business!"

"Hey," said David, "we shouldn't just give that gun back without anything in exchange!"

"In exchange we'll be left in peace, that's good enough for me!" said Irena. "It's all I want!"

"No, but..."

Irena turned to him angrily, surprising him so much he almost forgot he was driving the car and should also pay some attention to the road. "I don't want any money from them, is that clear?" she almost shouted.

"Why the hell not?" asked David.

"It's dirty money. What the hell would I do with it? Anything I would buy with it would taste like shit and get stuck in my throat!"

"You don't need to buy food with it, for God's sake!" said David. "You can... I don't know... pay your bills with it, your health insurance, or even better: your taxes!"

"I don't pay these kinds of things myself, you know. I live with my parents. When I go to University, I will probably live in a student home... That money could only embarrass

me! But you can have it! Don't let me stop you from asking for it in exchange for the gun!"

David remained silent. Why do girls have such an unpractical mind? Money is money.

He would sure need some savings if he were going to study again, for example...

Or maybe it wasn't really the money he cared about. Maybe "giving in" was the problem.

He didn't want to just give back that gun. He wanted to come out from this situation as a winner. Some other kind of idea was dawning in him.

"That Paul, he's the boss of the gang?" he asked.

"No, of course not." said Irena. "He's a guard, a recruiter, a salesman... He's all kinds of things. But he's just an employee, so to speak."

"And who's the boss?"

"How would I know? Maybe there is no boss. Maybe they're just a bunch of mates who set up this business together, and Paul is one of them. I don't know how it works."

"Surely there's a boss. There always is. He must be living in a big mansion with a swimming-pool in the garden!"

"What do I care?" asked Irena and turned away, disgusted. David was jealous for that swimming-pool or what? After all their philosophical talks she wouldn't have imagined that he could be so materialistic!

"We should get him killed!" said David.

"Sure!" said Irena.

"In exchange for the gun!" said David.

"What do you mean?" asked Irena.

"Well, this Paul surely knows the boss. And Paul is the one who so badly needs that gun back, not the boss. Paul can get the gun back in exchange for killing the boss!"

"Just for argument's sake," said Irena, "how do we know whether he really kills the boss or not?"

"We'll go with him to kill the boss!" said David, all proud of the idea that was taking shape in him.

"And what's the good of all this going to be?" asked Irena.

"Well, without their boss the whole gang will split up, and that will be a good riddance. The world will be a tiny bit better place, thanks to US!"

"Aha," said Irena, her voice soaked in contemptuous mockery, "this is how we put all our wonderful theories about the meaning of life in practice, right?"

"It's a start, no?"

A malicious gleam came into Irena's eyes: "I rather think it's nothing but satisfying a primitive instinct which, on the other hand, is perhaps the most altruistic of all instincts: the desire for revenge!"

She chewed on her lip for a while, then she said: "Okay, tell me how you imagine the whole thing!"

"Why do you say the desire for revenge is an altruistic instinct?"

"Because revenge won't ever make anything undone. All those smelly males I put up with, that's a part of me now. I can try to forget it to some degree, but it happened, it's there. On the other hand, if I get the boss killed, I make sure they won't do it to anyone else! So taking revenge is good for others, not for me."

"So it's good to take revenge, that's what it means, no?"

“Not really,” said Irena, “maybe revenge and the fear of revenge is what allows people to live together outside of law and order. It allows them to live together long enough to start building up a culture with law and order. But we already have law and order. We’re civilized. We shouldn’t fall back on old patterns of behaviour like revenge!”

“So what should we do?”

“Maybe we should denounce the boss to the police instead of killing him...”

“But we don’t know who he is!”

“We get his identity from Paul, in exchange for the gun!”

“I don’t see how that could work!” said David.

“Why not?”

“He could give us anybody’s name. We need more than that. We need proofs!”

“If we go on a killing-spree with him, he can take us to any rich guy’s house. The problem is exactly the same!”

“Not at all!” said David, “First we’ll let Paul talk to the boss. As soon as we’re sure he’s really the boss, we shoot him. And we don’t need solid enough proofs to convince the court. We just need to be sure for ourselves. Irena, I think we can shut down that gangster gang!”

Irena kept silent. She was thinking it over.

Before even crossing the border into Switzerland, they stopped at a phone-booth and Irena called Paul over his cell-phone. Paul didn’t at all seem surprised, not even curious. Irena managed to agree on a meeting with him in a coffee-shop in Lausanne without any difficulties. From then on, David and Irena drove back to Lausanne purposefully. When they arrived in Lausanne they killed some time walking along the lake-side. They didn’t talk much. They both seemed to have some kinds of lumps in their throats. They got to the coffee-shop well in advance, but Paul was already there, sitting at a table. He was surprised when he saw David and straight away ignored Irena completely. “So what’s the deal?” he asked. “You still have my gun?”

“I’ve got it right here.” said David and gave a little tap to his pocket.

“And what’s the deal?”

“In one word: we want to get the boss of your organization killed.”

David didn’t know what to expect. Would he even be taken seriously at all?

There was a moment of silence. Paul’s crossing and double-crossing mind was working hard. You could almost hear the cranking of the cog-wheels behind his brow, but there was no way to guess the contents of his thoughts.

“I see.” he finally said. “We kill the boss, then I get the gun back, right?”

“That’s right.” said David.

After another short silence Paul said all jovially: “Okay, I’ll tell you what we do: tonight at eleven we meet here in front of this coffee-shop again, and we’ll see what we can do!”

Paul was already standing up. Irena and David hadn’t even ordered any drinks.

“See you at eleven, then!” said Paul and left.

David was too surprised to say or do anything to stop him. He himself stood up and started walking away. Irena came charging after him: “Now what? You agreed or not?”

“I guess I agreed.” said David. “In any case I didn’t say no...”

“Let’s not go.” said Irena. “I don’t like this at all.”

“Why? What else did you expect? I thought we had agreed on this.”

“No,” said Irena. “We were going to talk it over with Paul. Not just let him give us orders like this!”

“I can’t believe you slept with this guy!” David suddenly called out, pretty much out of context. “You even gave your virginity to him!”

“However much you hate to hear it, my dear David,” said Irena with icy coldness, “he was really good in bed. And that’s not the only place he’s good in. I don’t know what he just brewed up in his mind right now, but I sure can’t imagine that he made up his mind to kill his boss this quickly.”

“You think he wants to cheat us?” asked David naively.

“Yes, and perhaps kill us as well...”

“And you gave your virginity to this guy!” David exclaimed again.

“Why didn’t you come and take it for yourself, if you didn’t want him to have it?” Irena asked back ferociously. “I hate these men going on about how all women are whores deep down, while they’re the ones who have nothing to offer!”

David shut up for a while. Then he said: “I don’t see why we shouldn’t come here tonight at eleven. This place is in the middle of town. I don’t see what he could do to us here, amidst all the people.”

“There aren’t so many people here at eleven,” said Irena, “besides, he will pack us into a car, telling us that he’ll take us to the boss, and somewhere on the way, in a forest or who knows where, we’ll be killed!”

“But we have the gun!” said David.

“Do you know how to use it?” asked Irena.

“Sort of...” said David, “I had some practice once on a shooting-range.”

“Well, would you know how to use it in the heat of action? Wouldn’t you just lose your nerves?”

“How do I know unless I try?!?”

“And you’re desperate to try..?” asked Irena, more worried than angry now.

There was silence.

“Yes.” David finally said.

Irena didn’t say anything.

“So?” said David after a while. “What are you thinking?”

“That we’ll come here tonight.” said Irena.

“You don’t need to come.” said David.

“Sure I will!” said Irena.

They spent the rest of the afternoon hanging around in town. They ate a hamburger, they looked at shop-windows, not really seeing what they were looking at. David kept trying to make up hypotheses about what would happen tonight, about what Paul might have in mind, but Irena wouldn’t listen.

They were on the square in front of the coffee-shop well before eleven, pacing, not managing to talk to each other, feeling nervous and sick.

Paul arrived exactly on time, but of course he wasn’t alone. There were three reasonably tough-looking guys with him. David and Irena stood close together, the four guys came closer, forming a kind of half-circle around them.

“You have the gun?” was the first thing Paul asked.

“It’s here.” said David. He was going to take it out of his pocket, but Paul said: “Don’t bother, I don’t want it right now.”

David took his hand out of his pocket empty.

“Okay, let’s go!” said Paul, playing the joyful guy.

“Where are we going?” asked David.

“To Schroeder.”

“Who’s Schroeder?”

“Well, he’s the boss. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

They started walking off, David was going to follow, the four guys all around him.

“Wait!” Irena called out. They all stopped.

“It doesn’t take six of us, for God’s sake!”

“Yes it does,” answered Paul in a dismissive, impatient tone. “Schroeder’s house is guarded. Let’s go now!”

“NO!” said Irena.

David stopped, and so everybody else stopped too.

“What now?” asked Paul, smiling sweetly and condescendingly at Irena. Irena remembered the very first time he had smiled at her like this, how the thought that such a big, strong male, to whom she logically shouldn’t have meant anything at all, would care to smile at her had made her melt straight away. Showing contempt was part of the trick. If you can allow yourself to show contempt, that must mean you are a superior being. And if such a superior being takes the trouble to lower his eyes on the inexperienced little virgin and sees a WOMAN in her, then of course she melts straight away. But it didn’t work this time. Now Paul’s contempt met with contempt on Irena’s part too.

“We blow it off.” said Irena. “There’s too many of you.”

Now she spoke directly to Paul: “Come back tomorrow, and come ALONE!”

Paul let out a little laugh.

“David, let’s LEAVE!” said Irena.

“Not so fast!” said Paul. He turned to David: “I’ll still have that gun now.”

The four guys all moved a step or so closer to David. He was surrounded. Irena was already further off, she had turned to leave. David felt dreadfully alone. He put his hand in his pocket, felt the gun there. Was he going to perform miracles with that gun? Pull it out fast, threaten the four guys by waving it around, yelling at them to back off?

“Take it out slowly!” said Paul.

David could only see three of the guys. The fourth one must have somehow moved behind him. Where the hell was Irena?

Now he heard her voice behind him. It was shrill, there was fear in it, but it was steady:

“Leave him alone! back off!”

And now David saw the most amazing thing! They were all backing off, including Paul, holding their hands out to the side, showing the empty palms, pretending that they weren’t going to do anything anyway.

“David, come here!” Irena called out with the same shrill voice. She was standing behind the fourth guy, holding him in some kind of magical grip. He was standing very still, his mouth half open, his eyes staring up into the sky as if hypnotized. As David came closer, she blinked at him. First he didn’t understand that she was blinking at his pocket. Her eyes were begging him to understand. At last he did and took out the gun. Irena suddenly let go of the guy, jumped away from him backwards, grabbed David’s hand and pulled

him backwards too. David pointed the gun at the guys, and Irena called out to Paul: "Tomorrow night, same time, okay? But come ALONE! And now leave us, all of you!" Paul just stood there, his arms held out to the sides, showing his empty palms, and didn't move. He looked a bit like Christ on some baroque painting.

"Wait, wait!" he said. Then he told his three mates to leave. They walked away, shaking their heads.

"Leave us alone!" said Irena, but he just stayed there.

Irena walked away backwards, pulling David, with the gun safely in his hand, after herself. When they reached a street-corner, they turned and ran.

"How on Earth did you do that?" asked David, when they had seen that Paul obviously hadn't followed them and calmed down a bit.

"Done what?" asked Irena.

"Held that guy who had moved behind me!"

"Oh," said Irena and laughed. "With this!" she said and showed David (how could he not have thought of it himself?) a tube of aspirins. "I was really angry," she explained, "else I would never have dared to do this! They were all surrounding you, trying to get that gun from you and leaving me out completely, ignoring me. I had plenty of time to look in my hand-bag and find something suitable. I took out this tube of aspirins and pushed it in the nape of the neck of that guy. He must have had guns aimed at him before, because he froze straight away. Then it was easy!"

David gave her a kiss. "You're a genius!" he said.

"Aren't I?" she said and glowed with happiness.

They went to sleep in a hotel, but when they tried to make love, David didn't manage at all.

"I think it's because I feel like a fool..." he explained.

"No you weren't..." she whispered in his ear. "This kind of job takes two of us. While you were drawing all the attention, I could trick them from behind. You were in the riskier position all along. You did a good job!"

"You just tell me this to make me feel good!" he said, and sighed.

"Don't sigh like that." she told him. "It isn't masculine."

She started working on him until he began making VERY masculine sounds!

The next day, in the evening, they were on the square in front of the coffee shop again, waiting. They didn't have to wait long, Paul really came, and he really came alone. His manner was all different than the night before. He was the same boy who had tried to break into David's flat, thinking it was empty, and had been fooled with the key of a bicycle lock. It seemed that, whenever something didn't work out as he expected it to, he changed from a ruthless gangster into a somewhat helpless young man. He said hello to both of them, Irena first. Then he waited for them to say something.

"Okay, so we go to that Schroeder's?" asked Irena.

"Okay," said Paul, "your car or mine?"

"Your car." said Irena.

"I left it there." he said, and pointed with his finger.

"Let's go." said Irena.

He didn't lead them through any dark passage-ways. There weren't any tricks. He led them straight to his cool yellow hatch-back sports car with leather seats.

He got in, Irena made David sit behind him and got in next to Paul. He drove off and expertly maneuvered through the traffic, getting them out of town fast. He took them to the well-to-do eastern suburbs. All the while he talked. He explained how he himself had gotten sick of this business, how he would like to do a less stressful, in other words an honest job. By profession he was an electrician. Maybe he could work as an electrician again. He said he had plenty of savings and wouldn't need to earn so much anymore. He was afraid to leave this illegal business because there might be reprisals (he knew too much). He was partly held responsible for having lost his gun and having let Irena get away. Schroeder had warned him that if the police started showing interest in him, he would be disposed of (which meant killed).

Actually, to be quite honest, he had already played with the idea of murdering Schroeder. What had mainly stopped him so far was that the gang had seemed like his only chance to get the gun back. Without them, nobody would help him.

To both David and Irena he seemed sincere, though they couldn't work out why he had tried to get the gun back forcefully the day before. David even asked him, but Paul didn't give any clear answer. He just said that it would still have seemed simpler that way.

But then Paul asked: "But why do you want to kill Schroeder? What's your problem with him?"

David wanted to answer something philosophical, but Irena was faster: "Oh, it's just an act of revenge!"

"Revenge?" asked Paul, slightly surprised. "For what?"

"For what you did to me, what you put me through."

"Why not take revenge on me, then?" he asked, quite puzzled.

"Oh, you're just small-fry..." she said, and laughed a bit, slightly mockingly. He didn't know what to say. This was somewhat above him.

They drove past a big old house. "This is it!" said Paul. They parked in some side-street and came back to the house on foot. It was a solidly built white house with a steep, tall roof, two balconies and standing in quite a large garden with a few tall trees and many bushes. There was a box with a camera at the tall entrance gate.

"He won't just open to us like that, of course," said Paul, "and the whole place is under alarm, so it's not very advisable to try to climb into the garden either."

"So how do we get in?" asked David.

"Here!" said Paul and showed a sticker on the gate. The logo on the sticker was a stylized but ominous eye. In small letters around the logo it said: "Secur itas, Surveillance Company".

David didn't get it.

"This means," Paul explained, "that a nightwatchman will come around here at some point during the night. He will take a stroll through the garden, see if everything is okay, read some bar-codes into his control watch and leave again. In order to do that, he needs to know how to deactivate the alarm-system, so we'll just wait for him!"

"And when he comes, what exactly will we do?" asked David.

"Oh, we'll make him deactivate the alarm for us and let us in, then we'll knock him out and go about our business!" said Paul cheerfully.

This sounded straight-forward, but David couldn't quite imagine it. It sounded like the plot for an action film.

They waited.

"When will he come?" asked David.

"Some time during the night." said Paul. "It depends how he gets on with the other buildings he has to watch."

David wondered how Paul knew all these things. He felt out of his depth. Irena didn't say anything all the while. It seemed she was just watching how the boys would carry out this mission.

Around three o'clock in the morning, a dark-blue car with white lettering ("Securitas", sure enough), came around the bend from the main street fast, drove past them with the radio inside on at full power and skidded to a halt in another side-street nearby. The door opened and a tall, lean youth in a dark-blue uniform and with bundles of keys and other equipment hanging from his waist got out and came towards them. He hadn't noticed them yet.

"Okay, intercept him!" Paul whispered to David and pushed him out from among the shrubs where they were waiting.

David stood up, took out his gun and pointed it at the nightwatchman who immediately froze to a statue.

The nightwatchman had a smooth baby-face and looked very young otherwise too. He could have been one of David's pupils at the Monte Verdi School. He was still too surprised to be really scared.

"That's... that's a real one?" he finally asked. Perhaps he had never seen a real gun before.

"You can bet on it!" said David.

Now Paul and Irena crawled out from among the shrubs. Paul said: "Don't worry, we won't harm you. All we want from you is to switch off the alarm and open the gate for us."

"I can't... can't do that!" said the nightwatchman.

"Yes you can." said Paul in a fatherly voice. "Just come over here. No, no, don't touch your radio." Paul pulled the radio out from its clip at the nightwatchman's belt and threw it away into the shrubs.

"Okay, here we go!" he pushed the nightwatchman towards the gate. David stood nearby with the gun in his hand and watched. This nightwatchman didn't seem to want to give them any trouble. So far so good.

The nightwatchman opened a little box with a small key from his bundle. Inside the box there were a series of buttons. He punched in a code, closed the box and locked it again conscientiously.

"Good boy!" said Paul and tapped him on the shoulder. "Now open the gate!"

The nightwatchman unlocked the big gate and let them in.

"You come in with us!" said Paul. David came last, following the nightwatchman, the gun pointing at the nightwatchman's back.

"Now lock the gate again!" said Paul. The nightwatchman locked it.

"Well done!" said Paul. "Okay, now give us that big bundle of keys, there's a good boy!" The nightwatchman slipped out from all his shoulder-bags. "And what have we got

here?" asked Paul, but it was just a mock-question. "Aha, a biiiig torch. Look David, that's for you!"

David took it.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" asked Paul.

"What do you mean?" asked David.

"Well, hit him over the head with it!"

"What??" asked David.

"The torch!" said Paul, "the big heavy torch! Hit him over the head with it!"

The nightwatchman started trembling and was going to turn around to face David.

"I didn't tell YOU to move, you dummy!" Paul told him harshly, and he winced as if in pain.

David wonderingly looked at the big torch in his hand.

"Yeah, just lift it up above his head and hit downwards with all your might! It's easy!"

"I can't." David finally admitted.

"Let me do it, then." said Paul impatiently and came towards David to take the torch from him. In that moment the nightwatchman bolted away like a gazelle.

David woke up as if from a stupor and pointed his gun as if he were going to shoot.

"Don't!" Paul almost yelled.

Then he whispered intensely: "We don't want any shots to ring out just yet. Let's find him, he can't be far. He's as locked up in this garden as we were locked out before!"

They shone around the bushes until they saw his feet looking out from under one of them.

Paul kicked the feet. "Okay, you, come out of here, we won't harm you."

"I won't move!" said a faint, high-pitched voice from under the bush.

"Give me a hand." said Paul to David and started pulling on the feet. "Don't let go of the gun, though." he added as an afterthought.

They pulled the nightwatchman out from under the bush, turned him on his back and shone in his eyes with the big torch. "I'll scream..." he said meekly, his eyes blinking in the strong light.

"Let's not knock him out." said David. "You said so yourself: he's locked up in this garden. And he doesn't have his radio. There's nothing he can do."

"Who knows what else he's got on him!" grumbled Paul.

"Let's take everything from him, then." said David.

"Okay," said Paul. "Well then, you," he addressed the nightwatchman, "you heard him: Undress!"

The nightwatchman took off his jacket, his trousers, his shirt...

His body was very slender, the body of an adolescent.

"Socks and underwear too!" Paul roared when the nightwatchman hesitated to continue.

David looked at Paul and saw that Paul was enjoying himself. He was a sadist, David decided.

With the torch shining into the naked nightwatchman's scared eyes, Paul bent down and picked up the clothes, wrapping up the underwear in the shirt so as not to touch it, as if it were highly septic. He shaped the clothes into a bundle and threw them over the gate onto the street.

"Okay," he told the nightwatchman, "now just lay low and don't make noise. If you do, we'll find you and kill you. Don't forget that, understood?"

The naked boy nodded, his skinny body shivering in the torch-light, his hands covering his private parts.

“Okay, let’s go!” Paul said to David and pulled him away.

They broke into the house through one of the ground-floor windows and climbed in. It was easy.

They messed around a bit in the dark till they heard some sound upstairs. They kept quiet and switched off the torch. The light went on in the staircase, and a big man majestically came down into the living room. He wore a fire-engine red dressing gown and looked strangely dignified in it. He had black hair sticking straight up where he had slept on it, a black beard, big, somewhat bulging eyes under bushy (and equally black) eyebrows.

“So,” he said with a well-carrying bass-voice, “burglars, eh?”

David pointed the gun at him.

“Oh, it’s you, Paul!” the man continued with mock-surprise. “And I see you brought two friends with you. What about introducing them to me?”

“Why not?” said Paul, and he seemed like an adolescent locking horns with his father for the first time. “This is David and Irena.”

The face of the big man became sombre.

“Ah, yes,” he said, “ever since those two came into the picture, things have been looking worse and worse for you, Paul. Now you associated with them, or what?”

“Actually,” said Paul, “we came here to kill you!”

There was a brief silence, then the big man started to laugh. It was a big laugh. It echoed from the walls like gunshots. The three youngsters couldn’t even tell whether it was forced or natural.

The big man finally closed his big mouth, after slapping his thigh to finish off his performance. He straightened up and with great dignity he said: “Let’s have a brandy before we go into the details...”

David became alert. The big man walked to a cabinet in his living room. David was ready to shoot. The big man opened the cabinet, and really, there were just bottles and glasses in there. He took out three glasses, took a bottle by the neck, uncorked it swiftly and poured the beautifully rich and yellow liquid into the three glasses.

“Please.” he said and held out the first glass to David.

“No, thanks...” stammered David.

The big man shrugged his shoulders and emptied the glass himself.

“So, you want to kill me!” he told Paul. “You weren’t happy with the work? Or with the pay? Isn’t there anything we could still talk about?”

“No, there isn’t.” said Paul. He turned to David and said: “What are you waiting for: go on, shoot him!”

David had a quick look at Irena, but there was no message for him in her expression.

“And you,” said the big man, finally addressing David, “what is it you want? Whatever it is, in exchange for that gun you’re holding, I’m willing to discuss it. We don’t need to settle it all right now. We can draw up some kind of preliminary contract.”

“What I want,” said David with difficulty, “is you dead!”

The big man raised his eyebrows theatrically, like a Santa Claus listening to an awed child, then he laughed again, although not as long or as loudly as before.

“And you?” he finally asked Irena.

“I’m with him.” she said non-committedly.

He took the second glass of brandy and emptied it too.

“I see,” he finally said, talking directly to David, “you’re an idealist, aren’t you? You want to destroy this wicked business I built up, isn’t that it? You want to go home with the feeling that you did a good deed for once, don’t you?”

He paused. Nobody said a word.

“Your proud little heart will beat with twice its usual force, you will hold your chest a little straighter, and you’ll always remember this day, however boring and meaningless the rest of your life becomes, this one day when you did this one good deed. This one day that justifies your whole existence, isn’t that so?”

David didn’t say a word. He held out the gun straight from his body, with both hands. He was ready to pull the trigger.

“Good deeds of this kind, I could have performed hundreds of them, thousands, ten every day of my life!!!” the big man suddenly roared.

“My business, this house of mine, all my money, I pounded them out of raw rock with my own two hands!” he showed his big hands with many rings on them, “I wasn’t born with a golden spoon in my mouth like you lot of troubled youths in search of lost ideals! I grew up in an orphanage, if you need to know, and as far back as I can remember, I was the only one I could ever depend on for anything...”

His eyes sparkled with an inner fire. He’s insane, David thought to himself.

“I made a name for myself, a real one! I created something!” he roared.

“Now here I stand, so that you can make one for yourself too. Fair enough, I guess...” he ended with a whisper, grabbed the two sides of the collar of his dressing gown and bared his chest.

“Go on, shoot!” he said with a steady, unemotional voice.

David didn’t move.

“Shoot me! Shoot me!” sang the big man with a suddenly high-pitched voice, dancing from one foot to the other.

David still didn’t move.

“Or perhaps you’re thinking you might still strike a better deal with me, is that it? You might be right, you know. I will die anyway. I’ve got brain-cancer. The doctors give me one more year to live, at most two...” This made him giggle. “At most two,” he repeated, “isn’t that hilarious?!?”

“Shoot!” said Paul. “For God’s sake, SHOOT!!!”

David was as still as a statue. His eyes were full of shock, hatred and disgust, all at the same time.

With one swift movement, Paul jumped over to him, grabbed the gun from his hands, and the shot went off. The big man threw his arms up in the air in astonishment, his eyes turned up towards the ceiling till the pupils disappeared under the eye-lids, and he fell down backwards.

“Okay, let’s go!” urged Paul with the smoking gun in his hand. He pushed Irena and David towards the window through which they had broken in. They both seemed stoned, aware of their surroundings, but not interacting with them in the usual, straightforward way.

They climbed out the window, and it seemed much harder than when they had come in. The fresh night air brought them to their senses, though, and they ran to the gate.

“Not so fast!” Paul called out. “What about the nightwatchman?”

“What about him?” David called back.

“He saw our faces! We must find him!” Paul started shining all over the garden with the torch, looking behind and under every bush. If his face had been visible, David and Irena would have seen that it was blushed as if he had just had a violent orgasm. Now that he was worked up (it had taken him quite a while this evening, much longer than usual), his eyes were greedily looking for another helpless victim to shoot. Guided by a rustling sound, he finally found the nightwatchman sitting in the shrubs, still totally naked. He shone the light straight into his face and took aim.

But David, who had suddenly materialized from nowhere, grabbed his hand and forced it up against his chest, the gun pointing straight up into the air. Paul punched him in the head with his other hand, but David didn't let go.

David had finally gotten worked up too. He hardly felt the punch, but the shock of it made him so angry that one of his fingers slipped in next to Paul's trigger finger without thinking, but purposefully, and forced the trigger down.

Paul, when he realized what was going to happen, made one last, desperate effort to free himself, to pull his right arm away from his chest, but it was too late. Blackout! He never even heard the report of the gun.

An explosion of blood and pieces of Paul's shattered jaw flew around David's head before he shoved Paul away from himself. Irena stood next to him in a second.

“There he lies, the noble knight who took your virginity...” David said dryly.

“Very funny!” said Irena, just as dryly, and dragged him away from there.

“Wait! The keys!” said David.

They went back, and Irena took the keys from the body while David threw up in the grass nearby. The nightwatchman was nowhere to be seen.

They ran to the gate, let themselves out (leaving it wide open) and ran to Paul's car. They got in and drove off, gravel spurting from under the wheels.

“Okay, okay!” Irena yelled to David after a few minutes, “Slow down, pull over, stop!”

David stopped, and in the feeble map-reading light, Irena helped him clean up his blood-splattered face somewhat with tissue-papers from her hand-bag and some additional ones from the glove box. Then they drove off again, slowly, reasonably, back to town.

“Are you satisfied now?” Irena asked shyly, after a few more minutes had passed.

“No...” said David thoughtfully, with a deep and this time wholly masculine voice.

“I guess that asshole Schroeder was right...” said Irena.

“In what?”

“In that we too could build up something for a change, not just destroy!” said Irena.

Part 5

Conclusion.

Towards the end of this last bit I got somewhat sick...

With Tom, the act of killing had been something glorious and deeply satisfactory.

With Fred, it took quite a while till he killed anybody, but then it was glorious too, and his girlfriend Hanna helped him. It was a kind of cathartic deed for them, allowing them to start a new life...

So of course I got convinced that killing is the trick and did my best to lead David to a kill too – with such a depressing result!

It seems killing isn't the trick, after all, or not always. As Irena wisely said, maybe for a change we could build up something rather than just destroying.

Build up something, but what? A flourishing business? Get very rich and then lose it all in the next recession, when your business goes bankrupt? Or organize a relief convoy to war-ridden countries, like Hanna and Fred were dreaming? Just so that the local bullies would confiscate it all and the poor people get nothing, like usual? Or am I being too negative?

Or maybe you could just have kids. Maybe your kids will do something great, and since you're the one who made them and brought them up, it's your achievement too...

And if your kids don't manage, maybe your grand-children will, or your great-grand-children, or whatever. As long as everyone keeps having kids, you're always part of any great deed that will ever be performed somewhere down the line. Isn't that great?

So maybe that's the real goal of life: survive and procreate!

That's what David claimed, anyway, and maybe he was right?

That reminded me of what had been my own goal when I jumped into those guys' heads and lived through their adventures with them – I had wanted to find God!

Well, how far had I got?

Tom just became a great gun-slinger and then developed a deep sense of justice and fairness as he grew older. So far so good.

Fred had a more philosophical mind, but he didn't think about God much.

And David? He was probably the most humane of the three. He was also the funniest and the least bitter of the lot, although he had pretty much the same problems as the two others. He was probably more humane than the others because of his job that forced him to meet and interact with other people. A mind bent over itself ends up entangling itself in obsessions, like Fred with his endless musings about his wonderful old car. David's mind didn't do that – there were other things to keep it busy. David had a car too, but it wasn't the same.

All this tells us some things about human beings. But what about God?

Had I come any closer to God?

Having become a ghost with the ability to move freely through space and time, I should definitely have the ability to find God at last, shouldn't I? Or else who should?

But maybe you just don't find God by moving through space and time. Maybe you can only find Him through a spiritual discipline, and maybe it doesn't at all matter whether you're an ordinary human being or a ghost like me.

I had realized it myself, and David had kept saying it too, that before you can find an answer, you have to be sure what the question is.

So what is the question? What am I looking for? How can I look for God if I don't even know what He looks like?

If God is somehow the point of everything, shouldn't there also be a point to the point?

No, that's the point. God is the point of everything, thus of Himself as well, and there is no further point. He is the Absolute around which everything else revolves.

The thought that vaguely started dawning in me was that if we're all revolving around this point (Which is God), then maybe actually it's our revolving that defines It in the

first place. If we all stopped revolving around it, there wouldn't be a center of revolution anymore, would there?

If we all stopped revolving around Him, there wouldn't be any God anymore...

What a heretical thought!

And yet, of course it's not me or you who define God all by ourselves. It's a deeper undercurrent passing through you and me and all the others as well. And this current is just spiraling in towards some central point. But if there was nothing doing the spiraling, there couldn't be a central point. There would just be... Nothing.

So even if God is indeed greater than you or me, greater even than all of us, He might still, in the end effect, be "made" of us.

Maybe the universe started as a Big Bang, particles were formed, space and time were formed for the particles to move in, and they got organized into more and more complex structures, because maybe it's an inherent property of those particles to get organized like that. They form galaxies, solar systems, complicated atoms like the carbon atom, then complicated molecules made of these carbon atoms, then living beings... And it's all a big struggle. A struggle at the centre of which there is always the same immutable principle: God.

We're part of that struggle too. That's what we're made of. So much the better if we're aware of it. Then we can actively move ourselves along the way which is our natural way anyway. All our energies tend this way. We cannot even want to go another way. There is no other way. We can just go along this way in a smarter or a more stupid fashion. And it's part of the struggle that the struggle should become smarter along the way.

Once I know that this is what I want - because there isn't even anything else I could want, since wanting is just part of the struggle too - I will perhaps also learn how to do it. Once you know what it is you want it's easier to do it - that seems logical, doesn't it?

And that's what religion is about, too.

Once you've found God, you know what it is you really want, and you can at last work on getting there.

No wonder those chosen ones who have found God want to help all the others to see the light too!

But that's the problem - because different beings may be on different parts of the path, your point of view may be of little use to them.

But since we're all human beings, there are still some noteworthy similarities between us: human beings are social animals, VERY social animals. Our natural environment is an environment of caring, gentleness, compassion and love. That's why our great religions carry on so much about these things.

Of course we have other instincts too: self-realization, territoriality, aggression. When we lose our natural environment, these basic instincts come into play, and they work hard on bringing us back into our natural environment, or simply on helping us survive till we find it again. Indeed, our natural environment is not one of self-centered pursuits and aggression. These are just phases we pass through occasionally. That's why all our great religions see themselves as beacons leading us out of the world of aggression and into a world of caring gentleness and compassion instead.

But this can backfire - you can preach compassion and love while actually being in a phase of aggressive self-realization!

It's all part of the human struggle, which is just part of the larger struggle of the cosmos itself, which might be part of yet a bigger struggle of something we can't see at all... And if it's all just an illusion, the world, the universe, all of it, then God is just the centre of that illusion. It's still a big struggle, there's still a centre to it, and it's still a good idea to find out about this centre. So never mind whether it's an illusion or not – just try to find the centre of it. That's how you'll find happiness. There's no other way.

With these great thoughts in my mind, the next step, of course, was to decide what all this meant for ME. I quickly decided I was just part of the struggle too, because what else could I be? I just had to find a space for myself in this struggle and... struggle along with the rest.

And yet, wasn't I free? Wasn't I free to do anything else I pleased, or to fly out into outer space and get lost there, or to do nothing at all?

And then what would happen? I would gradually go insane in the emptiness, the emptiness around me, or just the emptiness inside me, or both...

Going insane, suffering from it, then finally disintegrating... It's still a struggle. You cannot NOT struggle. You cannot just keep still – you always struggle somehow, till you're dead!

Or maybe through deep meditation you can really learn not to struggle, to let go of everything, to just keep still, to find inner peace...

Maybe, but then what? You come back into the struggle being wise – you know how not to struggle pointlessly. The point being to struggle smartly.

Struggling smartly means struggling the way that fits your deep, inner nature. And you know you're struggling the right way when it really deeply makes you happy. That's the ultimate test – there cannot be any other.

And indeed, meditating monks are happier people. Objective studies have shown that. They struggle too, but they know how to.

So that's what I had to do too – since I was going to struggle anyway, the best was to struggle smartly.

I was a ghost, I could go wherever I liked, but I decided to stay right here, among these people I had found.

Tom and Theresa – they were having a family.

Fred and Hanna – never mind the relief convoy, they were going to settle down and have a family too.

And David and Irena? I wasn't sure yet, but hell, it seemed even they were going to have a family eventually!

And a bit of me stayed with each one of these couples, with each one of their babies, accompanying them, not doing anything as obvious as talking in their heads anymore, but just being there for them, merging into their subconscious selves and sharing my wisdom with them...

And being spread out over different people like that, I gradually stopped being an entity, I stopped being ME. I just let myself merge into their struggle, become part of it, dissolve in it...

So this is the last you're hearing from an entity called ME. It's dissolving even while you're reading this.

And if you doubt that I ever really existed, thinking that I'm just in the mind of the author of this text, well then, let me ask you a little question: how did I get there?

Look at yourself: you may not have anything as obvious as a voice in your head. But maybe you have some thoughts sometimes that somehow aren't wholly your own.

Thoughts that come from who knows where. Thoughts that were somehow "whispered" to your inner ear. By... a ghost like me perhaps?

But don't worry – these ghosts are part of the struggle of life like you are yourself.

Human beings may be bad-willed, they may be obsessive about some hurt pride, greed for money or whatever. But ghosts aren't like that. What is money to them?

They live for ever and ever. You cannot keep an obsession that long. As a ghost, you lose your obsessions one by one, or you disintegrate with them. Whatever doesn't disintegrate over time, whatever remains of you after centuries of being a ghost – it has to be good-willing. Malevolence just can't survive that long. Malevolence appears in the narrow framework of a specific purpose, then it can turn into an obsession, but eventually it peters out. It just runs out of energy.

So you may listen to ghosts whispering into your inner ear. They will share the wisdom of centuries over centuries with you. They will guide you.

Unless they are fresh ghosts, inexperienced ghosts, ghosts who don't master the art of "whispering to the inner ear" yet. Ghosts who speak directly inside your skull, literally, because they don't know any better yet. If you listen to them, they might turn you into a mass-murderer.

But you have a choice. You can decide not to listen. Choosing is part of the struggle of life too. You have to weigh your options and choose accordingly. The ultimate test is whether something makes you happy deep inside or not. That's how you can tell right from wrong. There is no other way. Heaven, that's what all great religions promise.

Because once you've got past all the self-righteous priests caught up in a selfish process of self-realization, that's what the great religions deep down really lead you to. They're just another possible help on the way, born out of the struggle of all their followers.

So you see, you're part of the struggle of life, you're made of it. That's what all your deep desires and hopes are all about too, that's what they're made of too. That's why they can guide you. You just have to pay attention that you don't get distracted by momentary urges that can become obsessions and haunt you long after their relevance has passed out of your life, out of your personal struggle.

Your personal struggle which is just part of the general struggle of the whole cosmos, which defines God.

And if all this is just a big load of bullshit, well, it's certainly neither the first piece of bullshit you've ever read, nor the last. If you don't like it, make up your own!

(By the way, after my little accident of falling through the gap between the highway-bridges, the authorities opted for a net to be strung up across the gap, so that such an accident could never happen again. Hurray for the policy-makers!)