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MORE THAN A WORD

Me and Billy was playing in the alley between Birdie's and the Alamo Saloon when he rode into town. We noticed him right off. We noticed everybody who come into town, especially strangers. But this was no saddle bum or whiskey drummer, I knowed that right off.

He was about to tie his horse to the hitching rail in front of Birdie's Saloon, his back to us, when he suddenly whirled around, a pistol appearing like magic in his right hand. Didn't take him but a second, though, to see we wasn't no threat. He exhaled a deep breath, holstered the gun at his waist, and straightened out of his crouch.

He said, "Boys, don't stand back there in the shadows staring at me. Come on out here, where I can see you."

Billy turned and run off like his pants was on fire. Truth is, I wanted to light a shuck, too, but I'd rather get butted by a goat than be thought a coward. I sauntered out as if I was ten feet tall.

The stranger tied his horse to the hitching rail. "Where'd your little friend run off to?"

I lifted my chin, said, "Billy wasn't scared or nothing...he just had to go home."

"Relax, kid, I ain't gonna hurt you none."

Angered me, what he said. I stepped right up and looked him in the face.

"I ain't skeered of you, mister. I ain't skeered of nothing or nobody."

He looked me up and down. I knowed right off what he was thinking. I could feel my ears redden with shame— but my eyes burned with anger. Both knees of my britches already had patches bordering patches when my mama dug them out of the church's poor box, and they was loose in the waist and too long in the leg. Mama had made my shirt out of flour sacks, and the rough cloth rubbed my skin something fierce when I got sweaty. I glanced down at myself. Mama made me take a bath every night and put on clean clothes every morning. But Mama said boys attract

dirt like a cowpie draws flies. I was coated from head to bare feet with dirt, and a splotch of dried horse apple covered the seat of my pants. The stranger stared for what seemed like a very long time into my smudged face, at my clenched jaw and my narrowed eyes.

Beneath his bushy black mustache, his lips twitched. Not a smile, exactly, but maybe as close to one as he could manage.

He said, "You know, I believe you'd try to punch me in the nose, was I to squat down where you could reach it."

"Don't be making fun of me," I said, and balled my fists. "I'm smaller'n anybody else in the school, mister, but I bloodied the nose of the biggest boy in the second grade!"

He asked my name, and I told him. He nodded as if he had knowed me without even asking.

"Wesley? You say your name is Wesley? John Wesley?" He studied me awhile. "Well now. The name fits you fine, I'd say."

He bent down and put his face close to mine. His eyes were no longer smiling, but they wasn't trying to burn holes in me, either.

"I'm proud to finally make your acquaintance, John Wesley. I'll be your friend, you let me. But don't give me no more sass. You hear what I'm saying?"

He stared at me till I opened my hands, took a deep breath, and nodded.

"Yeah, I hear you, mister."

He nodded, and straightened.

"Well, Wesley, now that's settled, how's about I buy you a cold sarsaparilla."

Grinning, I said, "That'd be real nice of you, mister."

"Well, come on, then."

Me and Billy used to sneak into Birdie's every chance we got. If Birdie was the one working behind the bar, she pretended not to see us if we got out of sight behind something, and kept quiet. Sometimes, she left a piece of hard candy or a licorice stick out so's we could find it. But when Big Ed was working, he always run us off, right quick. The last time, he got a good hold on both of us before we could scat. Billy hollered like a bobcat had hold of him. If Birdie hadn't stopped him, Big Ed would of boxed our ears. Birdie gave us each a whole dollar that day, but first made us promise not to come back, not till we was way, way older.

"Like in another fifteen years, you hear me, Wesley?"

Till now, I had kept my oath. But I wasn't breaking no promise this time, not really. This time, I wasn't sneaking, I was going in with a grownup.

The stranger's hand on my shoulder, we went through the swinging doors, and sat down at the back of the saloon. Birdie's wasn't near as classy as the saloon across the alley. The Alamo Saloon had glass doors in front, a real bar with a brass foot rail and a filigreed mirror, a dozen card tables topped with green felt, and fancy red wallpaper. Birdie's had bare boards laid across beer kegs, a big painting of a naked lady on a wall, sawdust on the floor to soak up all the tobacco juice, no mirror and no felt on the tables. But Birdie's was the busiest place in Abilene when the trail drives hit town. See, Birdie's had rooms upstairs, where the bar girls took men. Mama didn't think I knowed about such goings on between men and women, but I got eyes and ears, and older boys like to brag.

Big Ed was working the bar, and he come over right away, like I knew he would. His eyes was on me the whole time.

To the stranger he said, "You're more'n welcome, bud, but the kid ain't allowed. House rules."

"The boy's with me."

"The marshal catches him in here again, he'll shut us down. So," he shrugged, "you see how it is: the boy cain't hang around, not even accompanied by a grownup."

"I said, the boy stays. Now, whyn't you run along, draw the boy and me some ice cold sarsaparilla. One for each of us."

Big Ed squared his wide shoulders and spread his feet. He was in a mood to hurt somebody— seemed he was always in a mood to hurt somebody. Not a day went by he didn't bloody somebody with that iron pipe he kept in his hip pocket. All the men in town knowed to be real polite around Big Ed.

Big Ed started tapping his leg with the head knocker, which made me kinda antsy, but didn't seem to worry the stranger none.

The stranger said, "Well? You gonna stand here like a statue all day?"

Big Ed decided to ignore the stranger. Knowing that I'd be easier to run over, he pointed one of his fat fingers at me.

"Wesley, I know Birdie's sweet on you, but she ain't here right now, and I am. So, you go on, get on out of here."

I looked at the stranger, and started to rise. The stranger laid his left hand lightly on my shoulder. He was slumping low in his seat like he hadn't a care in the world. His right hand rested on his chest, near his flowered gray vest. He carried a gun in there, I knew,

because I had seen it when he leaned down to me, outside on the sidewalk. And I bet even sitting down he would be god-awful quick getting to the one on his hip.

"Bartender, the boy is with me...I say he stays, he stays." He softened his voice to a rasping whisper, and added, "Unless...you think you're mean enough to make us leave."

The bartender twitched as if he knew he was about to make a stupid mistake, but couldn't stop himself.

I don't know where she come from, but Birdie was suddenly on the floor, shouting.

"Eddie, don't you do it!"

Big Ed stopped whatever he was about to do, and looked over his shoulder at her.

"Birdie, you know what Marshal Hickok said about this boy hanging around here...he'll put us out of business."

"I'll talk to the marshal, he won't mind, not this time."

"You keep forgetting, Birdie, we're partners now. I got as much to lose as you do, we get shut down."

"But it's still my name on the sign, you keep forgetting *that*." She sighed. "Eddie, listen to me: you do not want to mess with this man...he'll kill you straightaway."

Big Ed squared his shoulders. Though his lip quivered slightly, he said, "I know he's a gunslinger, but I ain't armed, so he can't shoot me. He takes off his guns, I'll take him apart."

Through all this, the stranger sat relaxed, amused, his hands clasped below his ribcage. Hearing the threat, he laughed softly.

Birdie said. "But the point is, he ain't ever going to put down his guns. Don't you know recognize him— no, I guess you don't, else you'd be more polite. That there is John Wesley Hardin."

Big Ed sucked in a deep breath, and all at once he began to tremble. His stomach went all sour; I smelled it on his breath and in his sweat. It was plain to see he hated owning up to his fear and backing down, but he took a labored breath, nodded his head a bunch of times, backed up, and headed to the bar, mumbling to himself.

My mama claimed that I had been named after a famous preacher of olden times, but no way that could be true! When me and Billy played with our make-believe guns, he always got to be Marshal Wild Bill Hickok. But that was alright with me, because far as I was concerned, my namesake was John Wesley Hardin, the deadliest gunfighter of them all. Everybody liked the marshal, but he made it plain he thought all kids was a nuisance. And here I was,

in a saloon, with John Wesley Hardin! When I tell Billy, he'll wish he hadn't run off and left me!

Birdie said, "John Wesley."

I thought she was speaking to me. Whenever grownups got angered at my friend Billy they yelled, "William Sylvester Jackson!" When they wanted to get my attention they called me John Wesley, my only two names 'cause my mama never married.

"Birdie," he said.

Birdie said, "You're looking good, John."

"It's been awhile, ain't it, honey."

"Don't call me any sweet names— me big as a cow with your get, and you ran out on me!"

He shrugged.

"Didn't have no choice, honey. After I had to kill them three drovers...."

He shrugged again.

"There was two big trail herds in town...all them drovers got together, they would've strung me up."

"You always got an excuse for everything you do, John Wesley."

He grunted. "They might've burned you out, too, they ever got started, since I killed them here under your roof."

It was interesting, the talk of gunfights. But they was soon holding hands and whispering to one another. I

began to fidget, and hum to myself. John Wesley Hardin slapped my shoulder lightly and told me to stop kicking the table leg and be quiet while grownups discussed things. Birdie said never mind, they'd talk more later, that she had to wake up the girls anyway, get them ready to work. Big Ed brought the sasparilla, set it on the table and backed away. I noticed a weird eagerness in his eyes.

Birdie tapped me to get my attention, then did what she hadn't done but once before, the day she give me and Billy that dollar. She cupped my chin with her palm, and leaned down, and touched my lips with hers for just a instant.

"Now, Wesley, you're a fine boy, I wish you could live here with me. But Big Ed is part owner. I hate the sumbitch, but he's right, a bawdy house is no place for a young'un. I've told you this a thousands times myself, Wesley. It ain't proper. And you did make that promise to me, didn't you? Didn't you?"

My face flushed with shame. I felt like crying, but sniffled it back.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

I glanced at my foamy mug, and started to rise.

"Oh, go ahead, drink your sasparilla," she said, smiling and wiping at her eyes. "But after you finish, you have to go, alright?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'll leave straightaway. It's time I was getting on home anyway. Mama will come looking for me, I don't."

With a quick glance at John Wesley Hardin and a swirl of skirts and perfume, Birdie turned on her heels and hurried up the stairs. I watched her go. Mister Hardin watched me watching her.

"She's a good-looking gal, ain't she, boy?"

"Mister Hardin, Birdie is the purtiest lady in town. Mama and most of the other folks in town won't even speak to her on the street, they call her awful names behind her back, but she ain't like that, she don't ever say nothing bad about nobody. I like her a whole lot."

He grunted. "You know, your eyes are the same color as hers, and it looks like you're gonna be small-framed, like her."

"My mama is kinda little, too. But she said don't worry that I'm gonna stay small, 'cause my daddy was a big man."

His eyebrows arched. "What'd she tell you about your daddy?"

"She won't talk about him much. Only that he ain't never been around and won't never be around."

"She give any reason that might be so?"

"She said once that he was a very bad man but that don't mean I'll grow up bad, because he ain't raised me for 'nary a day. She says that I'm going to be a fine man, because she makes certain I go to church reg'lar."

Mister Hardin didn't say nothing. He was looking over my head, toward the front of the saloon. I twisted around. Marshal Hickok was leaning against the bar staring at Mister Hardin. The marshal was dressed real nice, his long hair flowing over his fancy coat, one hand resting on a pistol tucked into the red sash he always wore, the other holding a beer mug. He took a sip and lifted the mug in salute to Mister Hardin. Hardin nodded back, then acted like he forgot about the marshal-- but I knew he didn't. I bet he never forgot nothing.

"Mister Hardin," I asked, "is it true you killed more'n a hundred men?"

For a second his eyes narrowed like I had done made him mad at me. Instead, he took a breath, and shook his head, and squirmed in his seat.

"Don't call me mister," he said. "Makes me feel old and decrepit. And I'm still a young pup, like you."

He smiled.

I smiled back.

"What'll I call you then?"

He sat back in his chair and pursed his lips.

"Oh, I dunno...." After a moment, he said, "Since we're friends, and friends always call each other by their given names, how about you call me John, and I'll call you Wesley. How's that sound?"

I grinned at him, proud as a speckled pup.

"Drink up," he said.

I pulled my legs up under me in the chair, and sat on my knees so that I could reach the table. We each sipped from our mugs. We each made a face.

"Oh, that stuff is awful," he said, scowling.

This was my first taste of the stuff. I was sorely disappointed. I had expected it to be something really grand, almost like a real beer. I took a bigger gulp, and almost gagged.

"Oh, it ain't so bad," I said, but couldn't keep my face from clenching.

"No, this's pretty awful. Bitter as horse piss."

His head snapped up as if something had just occurred to him and he glared at Big Ed. He turned his head, worked his mouth some, and spit a gob on the floor. He picked up both mugs, and again glaring at the bar, emptied both mugs into the sawdust.

"But Mister Hardin, they cost you a whole two bits apiece, didn't they?"

"Now, tell the truth, that stuff was pretty bad, weren't it?"

I made an exaggerated frown, tongue hanging out, copying the funny face made by my new friend, then grinned at him. This time he didn't grin back.

"It was really really awful, but my mama says it's a sin to waste anything, even a bite of beans."

The gunfighter rested his forearms on the table.

"Well, how about that, how about food? You're skinny as a rail. You getting enough to eat?"

"Most always," I said.

"Mostly...but not always?"

"Sometimes it's just a chunk of cornbread, milk and maybe a piece of fatback for days at a time, but...we make out alright."

"Look at you, you ain't even got a pair of shoes."

"I do too!" For the first time, I felt ashamed, of my mama, and of the life we lived. "They used to belong to Clyde Horvath, till he outgrew 'em. They rub my feet some, so I wear them just to school and church."

He nodded. "Well, we'll have to do something about that. First thing in the morning, we'll get you outfitted real nice, with some new pants and shirts and a brand new pair of boots that fits just right."

My heart hammered in my chest. New clothes...clothes that nobody else ever wore. But then I thought of Mama. She always got her back up, anybody tried giving us things. She earned what she took from the poor box by cleaning the church. My excitement shriveled and died. I dropped my head.

"Mama won't let me take no handouts. She says people got to work for what they get."

"Hell, son, who's talking about handouts? I'm talking about a job, you'll earn what you get."

Hopeful again, I looked up.

"I'm not very big, but everybody says I'm strong for my age. What would I have to do?"

"Anything I tell you, anytime I tell you to do it. Now, you want the job?"

"I want it, sir, I sure enough do."

"I done told you, none of that sir business."

"But...it's awful hard for me not to say sir and no sir to a grownup I just open my mouth and out it comes 'fore I even think about it."

Amused, he shook his head. "Well, I guess it'd be alright, whatever you call me." He grinned. "As long as it ain't sumbitch. Just remember, me and you, we're best friends, alright?"

"Best friends." I spit in the palm of my right hand.
"Shake on it?"

"First lesson of many I'm gonna teach you, son: never let nobody get ahold of your gun hand."

Embarrassed, I dried my palm on my legs. That big red patch sewn on my blue britches stood out like a bloody nose.

"Can we go and get them new duds now? Before the emporium closes?"

My new best friend had stopped paying any attention to me. I glanced over my shoulder again, and saw that Big Ed was looking at us and laughing like he'd just thought of a good joke.

Mister Hardin muttered a cuss word, then said to me, "No, I got things to do, tomorrow morning's early enough."

"When do I start to work?"

"Right this very minute. Lead Darky down to the livery stables and tell the hostler he belongs to John Wesley Hardin, and to give him a clean stall, grain and a good currying. After that, you go home, and meet me downstairs in the hotel early in the morning."

He got up, and I followed. Then, being a kid, I skipped ahead. I smiled at the marshal, but he wouldn't look directly at me. Since I knew Mister Hardin would be stopping to talk to the marshal, I stopped near the doors,

and looked on. Big Ed didn't look so big, cowering against the racks of whiskey bottles.

"Barkeep," Mister Hardin said. "I'm saying this in front of the marshal here. I'm going to fill you full of holes for what you did to me and my boy."

The marshal said, "Suppose you tell me about it before you shoot him, Lil' Arkansas. I may decide to save you the lead and hang him."

Mister Hardin gave Marshal Hickok a quick flick of the eyes. "Wait," he said, and bobbed his head in my direction. To me, he said, "Go on, Wesley, do like I told you."

Hardin was burning up with anger, anybody could tell. Something was going to happen, and I didn't want to miss it. I stepped outside, then quickly turned, dropped to my hands and knees, and peered beneath the two swinging doors.

Mister Hardin glanced again at the marshal, then directed his words to Big Ed. "How about it, you drain your snake in mine and the boy's sarsaparilla?"

My stomach lurched. I knew at once it was true. So did the marshal.

His eyes stone cold, he walked around the end of the bar. "Ed, all's I want to know is if you fouled the whole keg, or just the two mugs."

Although Big Ed knew Death was staring him in the eye, he couldn't hold his ego in check. Sneering, he said, "Well, what do you think? I might want a mug myself sometime."

With a snarl, Hardin yanked his gun. But the marshal was in the way. Marshal Hickok's arm moved in a blur and Big Ed crumpled to the sawdust with a gash from his ear to his chin. The marshal didn't wait for the big man to fall. He whirled with the heavy Navy Colt leveled.

"Put it away, Lil' Arkansas," he said. "He deserves the beating I just gave him, but not a killing."

Hardin's gun was leveled, too. "I ain't letting him get away with that!"

"A shot of whiskey will get rid of that bad taste in your mouth, but getting hung for committing murder will last you till the end of time. Let it go, my impulsive young friend."

Doc Carper chose that time to appear for his weekly visit with Maisy, the little colored gal who worked for Birdie. He stepped on my hand, and I yelped.

Both men whirled instantly, both guns aimed at poor Mister Carper, who threw up his hands and yelped louder than I had. With slight nods to one another, both men holstered their guns.

Mister Hardin was some put out with me. He yelled at me. I wasn't used to getting yelled at. My eyes filled with tears I wouldn't let flow.

"What'd I tell you, Wesley! Go on git out of here, 'fore I kick you into Colorado!"

Well, I got on out of there, lickety split.

The black stud pranced, head bobbing as if to say he was the bestest, fastest, prettiest horse to ever walk down the center of the street, and everybody who saw him agreed. He was showing off. But he was mannerly, easy to lead.

I climbed up on the rails of the stall and watched while the hostler brushed him down. Ol' Joe let me put the hay down for the black and give him a feedbag full of oats. I kissed him on the nose when I said goodnight.

When I got home, the parson's wife had been out there and gone. Mama knew everything that had happened to me.

"And you was at that...that bawdy house with that killer?"

I knew she'd go at me till she broke down and went off by herself and cried her eyes out. So, I sat quiet, and let her misery roll over me. I dozed off, there at the kitchen table. She got me up to climb into the loft and into bed.

I awoke the next morning to the smell of corn mush frying on the stove. Remembering right off that today I

was going to get all new clothes, I come down right quick, and without even being told went outside to the zinc tub she washed peoples' clothes in. I scrubbed extra hard, especially behind my ears and between my toes. I even soaped my hair and dunked my head in the cold water. I was shivering when I come inside buck-naked to the heat. Like every morning, Mama blushed and turned her eyes from my little boy nakedness.

"Your clean clothes is laid out," she said. "Get 'em on quick 'fore you catch your death."

While I dressed, she worked at the stove. She looked like she hadn't slept much. Her eyes was red, her hair was sticking up in all directions at once. Her shoulders was slumping more'n usual. When she walked about the small house, she shuffled her feet like they was too heavy to lift. It suddenly struck me that my mama was an old woman; she had more wrinkles than Old Lady Keesler, and the widow's grandson was older'n me.

Mama didn't want me laying out of school to do Mister Hardin's bidding, but knew she couldn't stop me without tying me to the bedstead.

While I ate my hot corn meal mush and drank a glass of milk that had been stored outside in the nighttime cold, Mama sat across from me, drinking from her tin coffee cup. She drank it black as the hide of Mister Hardin's horse.

Mama claimed that coffee was bad for a growing boy. But sometimes she'd give me a little with lots of milk and a pinch of sugar. Not this morning, though. We both had other things to think about.

"Wesley, I don't want you hanging around that man, you hear?"

I didn't want to lie to her. I kept my head bent and kept shoveling mush into my mouth. We was out of salt, so it was hard to get the mush past the tongue.

"He's a evil man, Wesley...they say he has murdered more'n thirty men."

I looked up, my heart thumping in defense of my hero, my friend.

"Not murdered, Mama-- he beat them all face-to-face, it says so in the dime novels Birdie bought me. He's even faster'n Marshal Hickok, I bet!"

She looked at me a long time, her eyelids twitching, tears beginning to flow. The lines in her face seemed deeper than usual.

"You ain't heered a word I said, have you, son?"

"I hear you, Mama. I always listen to you."

"Since before you was born, I ain't been able to do a reg'lar job standing on my feet all day." She lifted her shoulders, and let them drop. "So, you wear hand-me-downs."

But praise be to God, you ain't had to go to bed hungry even once."

Her cheeks were wet.

"Mama, I ain't never complained none. You provide for me just fine, Mama. Please don't cry, Mama."

She wiped her eyes with her apron. "Ain't crying."

I went around the table, and kissed her cheek. She hugged me.

"I was already a aging woman, living alone, when I became your mama. I've tried, I've done my level best to raise you proper...to make certain you learned that stealing is wrong, and telling lies is wrong."

"You taught me good, Mama. Everybody says I have real good manners. Birdie says I'm the best behaved boy in town."

"That woman!"

"Mama, she's real nice too. I wish everybody'd be nicer to her."

"She runs a bawdy house, boy! And that man...that gunfighter! After all this time, why's he shown up here again. Why? I'll tell you why! They plan on taking you away from me."

"No, Mama, nobody can ever take me away from you!" At that moment, I decided not to play hooky, to go on to class like the good boy Mama had raised me to be. And I'd try,

I'd really try to stay away from that bawdy house, too. Birdie was right, everybody was right: that was no place for a boy to be.

By now Mama was bawling and I was bawling. We clung to one another and cried till both our shoulders was wet with tears, and my nose began to run into her hair. When we finally broke apart, she sent me off to wash my face again and clean my teeth and brush my hair.

Her eyes was still red, but she was no longer crying by the time I gathered up my Swinton's Reader and paper and pencil nub. At the door she gave me a long, hard hug, and held my face in her hands and kissed me.

"I ain't going to worry about it no more. I'm going to put this in God's hands. God sent you to me, and God can take you away again if it's His will."

"God wants me to be here with you, Mama--I know He does. Else, why would you even be my mama?"

"Well, he did send you to me. So, ...whatever will be, will be. Now, you run along to school. I got to deliver Missus Johnson's laundry to her, and she always tips me something extra. So maybe I'll have something special for supper tonight."

"Could we have a porkchop and some rice and gravy, Mama?"

She smiled. "Son, I know all your like and dislikes. So, you go on now off to school."

Billy come skipping outside soon as I reached his house and yelled his name. It was pert near four miles from there to town, but we always walked fast, so we'd be there in no time. Like usual, Billy was smiling, showing his gap-toothed smile.

"Look," he said, pulling back his cheek. "I lost another'n last night, and the Tooth Fairy left me a whole nickel! We can get us some candy after school."

Billy was almost twice as big as me even though we was the same age. Sometimes when we mixed it up, I made him cry and he sometimes he made me holler uncle--but he never made *me* cry.

I told him what happened after he run off yesterday. I told him about meeting my namesake, John Wesley Hardin, the famous gunslinger. I told him about the nasty-tasting sasparilla, and why it tasted so bitter.

"Mister Hardin made that big bully tread water, I tell you--Big Ed liked to of peed his pants when he found out who he was facing."

Billy laughed. "Been better for you if he had, instead of peeing in your glass! What'd it taste like?"

I looked at him. "Pee tastes something awful, you don't ever want to try it, I tell you."

"No, no, you dummy. The sasparilla, what'd it taste like?"

"Don't have a clue."

"You reckon you could maybe get him to take me with you into Birdie's and get us both a sasparilla?"

He asked me a lot of questions. Did I reckon Mister Hardin would let us hold one of his guns, maybe shoot it? Billy's clothes wasn't no hand-me-downs, and he wore shoes even when we was roughhousing, but, he reminded me, he didn't have no shiny new boots. Boy, was I lucky to be named after John Wesley Hardin!

"Wish it was so," I said, "but it ain't. I was named after John Wesley, a famous preacher of olden times."

Billy looked at me. "You sure you was named after some ol' preacher? You sure Mister Hardin ain't your daddy?"

I dismissed the idea out of hand--for him to be my daddy, he and my mama would have had to-- no, no way. My mama was old, and truth be told, kinda homely with her sagging titties and lined face and calloused hands and swollen ankles. I couldn't picture a handsome man like John Wesley Hardin even kissing my mama on the cheek. Mister Hardin liked his women real pretty, with lipstick

and wavy hair and a store-bought dress with lots of frills and such. Women like Birdie. They was sweet on one another, I had seen that in their eyes.

The streets soon filled with kids headed to school and grownups going to work. Seemed everybody knew about me spending time with Mister Hardin. Even grownups smiled and waved and spoke my name. Made my head feel kinda airy, as if I had suddenly grown ten inches. I decided to meet Mister Hardin, after all. I talked Billy into taking my books on to school with him, and I went on into town.

Mister Hardin come downstairs as I was entering the hotel. We went to breakfast in the fancy hotel's even fancier restaurant. He attacked his food like it might eat him if he didn't. I talked with my mouth half full of scrambled eggs and bacon, I was so excited. I told him about how cold it was in Mama's washtub of a morning, about the stray dog that took up with me for a time. When Mister Hardin pushed his plate aside, he poured more whiskey into his glass, and began asking questions. About my studies... could I read yet, could I cipher worth a hoot; about my mama and if she ever hit me with a hickory switch; about other kids and grownups of the town, and if they made fun of me because I didn't have no daddy.

After what seemed the longest time, we left the hotel and went shopping. People stepped off the boardwalk to let

us pass. Curiosity and a touch of something else animated the eyes of the ladies we passed; both fear and a grudging respect were evident in the shifty glances of the men. It made me uneasy, the knowing glances people give one another when they noticed me walking with Mister Hardin. But I also felt the awakening of a pride I had never known. As we walked along, I adopted Mister Hardin's head up, chest out swagger.

"Lil' Arkansas!" the marshal called from across the street. "Hold up there."

We stopped and waited. Mister Hardin's right hand always hovered near one of his pistols, no matter what he was doing. He adjusted the holster and gun on his hip.

He said, "Boy, you stay behind me and out of the way, hear?"

"Yes sir," I said.

"If this here bird takes wing, you drop to the ground right away."

I nodded, unable to speak. I trembled with both gut-wrenching fear and a terrible eagerness.

Marshal Hickok asked, "Where were you last night, John?"

Hardin asked with a sneer, "What's it to you? Somebody got shot and you think I did it. That it, Bill?"

"There was a killing in the alley behind your hotel. Who the perpetrator was is yet to be determined."

"Wasn't me, Marshal. I went to bed right after sunset, slept the night through."

I slipped off to the side, so I could see better. Marshal Hickok saw me, but didn't let on.

The marshal wore his usual scarlet vest beneath his usual black frock coat. The starched collar of his white shirt was buttoned. His wavy blonde hair spread like a warm blanket across his shoulders. A thin stripe running the length of his black pants matched the blue of the scarf around his neck. If he'd of been a lady, they'd of called him pretty. But he was no sissified dandy, not with a brace of pistols tucked into his sash. A couple of inches taller'n Mister Hardin, Hickok was wider in the shoulders and slimmer in the waist, too.

But John Wesley Hardin wasn't no slouch. Shorter than the marshal, he was taller than most folks, and lean like a man who was used to hard work. His black suit was frayed at the sleeves, and his white shirt at the collar. His gray vest was missing the top button. But his boots and the holster at his waist gleamed with black polish, and his guns was both pearl-handled.

Hardin scratched his chin, then like the most natural thing in the world, he slipped all four fingers inside his vest, and let the hand rest on his thick chest.

The marshal noticed the move, and shook his head.

"I'm not a cowpuncher, John, you won't surprise me with that move."

Hardin grunted. "Seeing it coming is one thing, beating it is another."

"Won't be no winner between us at this range."

Mister Hardin nodded, and dropped his hand. "We'd both take lead in the vitals, that's a fact."

They could of been talking about the possibility of rain. Neither man seemed concerned that he might die if he blinked at the wrong moment.

In his official marshal's voice, Hickok asked, "Can anybody confirm where you spent the night?"

"Birdie...I was with Birdie. You doubt my word, ask her."

"Did, while you was eating breakfast. If you gunned down five men in sight of the whole town, she'd still claim you didn't stir a muscle till five minutes ago."

"Spit it out, Marshal Hickok. What are you accusing me of?"

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. But let's pretend otherwise. Big Ed Markham was found in the dead

space beneath your hotel two hours ago with his head bashed in."

I knew about death, I had seen dead animals before. People, like animals, die all the time for all kinds of reasons. Mama and I had attended the funeral of a real old person who had had lots of friends; everybody had cried, even me, and I didn't even know the man. I didn't quite know what to think or feel about this particular death. Big Ed was a mean, mean man that nobody was likely to shed any tears for, but...he was dead? Dead, like that ol' mangy dog me and Billy had found out by the town dump, dead and crawling with maggots and stink? And the marshal thought that my friend had done it?

Mister Hardin said, "I'm glad he didn't die easy. But what's that got to do with me. Since I have such an airtight alibi and all."

"Birdie gained a lot from her partner's death. But, of course, you're her alibi as well."

"For a fact."

"I can't arrest either of you for murder. Birdie's the biggest depositor in the mayor's bank, so I can't do much about her. But as marshal I can post the notorious John Wesley Hardin out of Abilene. I do, the whole town will applaud."

"Bill, you can't make me leave till I'm ready to leave. You try, we'll find out who is cock of this here walk."

"John, you're mighty slick what a Colt. I think I'm a better man with guns or knives, but I don't have to be. I can raise twenty men in about a minute."

Hardin lifted his shoulders slightly in frustration, "Bill, you know why I came to town. I have things to take care of...things that concern only me and Birdie."

"Aren't you forgetting somebody?"

For some reason the marshal shifted his eyes onto me. Mister Hardin noticed. He whirled around, stretched out, and hit me a glancing blow upside the head.

"John!" the marshal yelled.

Mister Hardin's eyes was fuming, looking this way and that.

The marshal said again, "John, don't hit him again."

Mister Hardin took a couple of calming breaths. He wagged both hands at the marshal, and nodding, dropped his hands by his side, and looked at me. I was holding my reddened cheek, and quietly sobbing.

Now that his anger had burned itself out, Mister Hardin seemed contrite. He asked if he'd hurt me. I knew how to answer that question-- kids learn before we can talk to grant instant forgiveness to adults. I nodded.

"I ain't bleeding or nothing...I been hurt worser. I'm alright."

He tousled my hair. His apology, I reckon.

"You disobeyed me, kid...you got me mad."

The marshal's lips were drawn into a thin line. His eyes blazed. His hands gripped his pistols.

"I can't abide any man who'd beat on kids or women."

"I didn't hurt him none...you heard him say so."

The air felt thicker than a boar hog's hide. A twitch of a muscle was all it would take. Seemed to me, they both wanted it to happen. I let go of my stinging cheek and stepped between the two men.

"Can we get my new clothes now? Can we, Mister Hardin?"

The marshal said, "I see it's still 'Mister Hardin' to the boy. So, you haven't told him yet?"

Mister Hardin snapped, "Mind your own business."

With a slow shake of his head, Marshal Hickok turned, crossed the street and stepped into his office. Mister Hardin watched till the marshal closed the door.

All the stiffness left me at once. Mister Hardin, too.

I had to ask. "You didn't, did you? You didn't kill Big Ed, did you?"

After a minute Hardin said, "What I do is my business, boy. If I want you to know my business, I'll tell it to

you. But this one time I'll answer your question. People like that bartender? They're bullies who pick on anybody can't fight back; they use lead pipes to beat people up. Me, I want somebody dead, I shoot 'em-- and unless I'm mistaken, nobody found any bullet holes in that man. Now, does that set your mind at ease?"

I dropped my eyes and kicked at a loose plank in the boardwalk.

"Where to first?" he asked. "Boots, or the new suit of clothes?"

In less than an hour I stood two inches taller in polished black boots, black denims so stiff I could hardly bend my knees, and a bright yellow collarless shirt. A fresh haircut and a new Stetson completed the makeover.

Side by side we walked the streets of Abilene, me taking extra wide steps and hurrying some to keep up with Mister Hardin's stride. Everywhere we went, the same combination of fear and awe was directed at the famous gunfighter. Anybody that didn't give us the whole boardwalk, Mister Hardin used his shoulders or his hands to push them aside. He didn't yield an inch to nobody.

Robby Kline, a local cowboy, blocked my path with his hands on his hips, and looked me up and down.

"My, my, Wesley, ain't you something."

I grinned. "Everything's brand new." I lifted my pants leg to show off the hand-tooled boots. "Look, Robby!"

Robby smiled with me. "Them boots must have cost near about what I earn in a month punching cows and smelling cowshit. You a lucky boy to have an old man like John Wesley Hardin." Smiling, he looked at my new friend. "And, Mister Hardin, you're lucky to have a boy like Wesley."

Before I formed a single word, Mister Hardin drew one of his Colts and hit Robby, hard. Robby crumpled to the ground, blood pumping from his scalp and flowing over his face. Mister Hardin snatched him up by his shirt and dragged him back into the alley. I never seen nobody so mad and hope I never do again. Hardin hit Robby a bunch more times. Robby curled up tight, trying to protect his head. That didn't stop the beating.

I grabbed ahold of Mister Hardin's arm. He flung me aside. I got up and wrapped both arms around his arm, and pulled with everything I had. My weight was enough to stop the attack.

Hardin, still enraged, squeezed my wrist and tried to tear me loose.

"Please, Mister Hardin, please don't hurt him no more!"

"Let go of me, boy!" he snarled.

"He didn't mean nothing by what he said!" I shouted. "Robby's my friend--he let me ride his horse once!" I don't know what all I said. Every thought that come into my head spilled out. After a bit his hand relaxed on my forearm. His breathing had been short and rapid, but suddenly it got deeper and slower.

"Alright, Wesley, you can let me go now, I'm calmed down."

I stared into his eyes. His temper had flared like a lucifer scratched on a fingernail just a few seconds ago, and now the pupils were a bottomless blue pond again.

We walked on toward Birdie's. The September sun was still shining warm, meadowlarks was still flitting about their nests in the rafters above the boardwalk, and my schoolmates was out of school, playing at this and that. My friend Billy was standing at the head of the next alley, waiting anxiously for me to invite him over to meet the famous John Wesley Hardin. I gave him a look as me and Mister Hardin passed, and shook my head. For me, the joy in this special day was as dead as Big Ed.

Birdie had found herself a replacement bartender, a tall skinny man without any hair on his head and quick, nervous hands and eyes.

Birdie give me a good looking over, praising my appearance in the new duds.

"You can stay for now," she said, "but when my girls start working the floor, you'll have to leave, alright?"

I nodded.

"Or, if you like, you can go up to my private rooms, and wait there for John and me to join you. We have things to talk about, the three of us."

"Thank you just the same," I said, "but in a little bit I'll go on home so's Mama don't worry."

She and Mister Hardin exchanged a look.

"Well, I...we'll talk about that later."

She went back to work behind the bar, helping the new man with his duties. Although still early in the day, the place was packed, and every eye followed every move of the notorious gunfighter; everybody was tense, like they was waiting for something to happen. Me and Mister Hardin went to the back of the room. He chose an occupied table.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I believe you're sitting at my table."

Without argument, the three men moved to the bar, where they stood, their backs to us, looking over their shoulders at us and muttering to one another. Mister Hardin took the chair next to the wall, where he could watch the whole room. He directed me to take the seat on his left.

"Another lesson for you, Wesley. You don't ever want to sit with your back to other people."

Mister Hardin told me to keep sitting while he played some cards. Six men was already seated around the closest poker table, cards spread in a fan in their hands. Hardin tapped the player seated next to the wall and motioned with his thumb. The man quickly scooped up his poker chips and hurried from the saloon.

The new bartender brung me a sarsaparilla topped with foam. This one went down the gullet just fine.

This was the first time I had been permitted to sit openly in the saloon when there was a lot of grownups around. It was loud, and smoky, and it seemed that everyone wanted to talk at once.

I sat there a long time, silently watching, my calves and feet dangling, kicking one of my new boots against a table leg. I thought of the bright sunshine outside and the birds chirping and people moving about and Billy and the other boys running and jumping and climbing and laughing. Boredom made my eyes grow heavy.

As I was about to nod off, a chair scraped across the floor, a man began cussing. Mister Hardin sat at the table, his right hand resting on his chest. The man was accusing Hardin of cheating. Mister Hardin's comment was so soft I couldn't hear his reply, but suddenly the other

man clawed at the gun tucked into his pants pocket. Before he got it clear, Mister Hardin's practiced hand moved a couple of inches, and a gun filled it, and he squeezed the trigger, once, twice. A spray of blood erupted from the other man's back and washed over bystanders like a spring deluge pouring off a roof. Thick red droplets splashed people sitting around the table; some got on Mister Hardin.

The room was abuzz. Somebody bending over the fallen man shouted, "Right square in the heart--both rounds--you could cover them both with a silver dollar!"

People would have patted Mister Hardin on the back, but he wouldn't allow nobody to touch him. He calmly reloaded his Colt, tucked it away inside his vest, and pulled a white silk handkerchief from a coat pocket.

"Somebody get the marshal," he said, and wiped the scarlet droplets from his face.

It was if someone had glued me to the chair. I was so little, sitting in that corner, it's likely everybody forgot I was there.

Marshal Hickok come in a hurry. He walked right up to Mister Hardin, and he wasn't smiling hello.

"Hardin," he said, "you're in town two days and you've already killed two men."

Mister Hardin grunted. "You got no proof I killed the first one, and this one was self defense."

Several people spoke up at once. The marshal waved everybody to silence, and spoke to the one voice in the room he trusted, that of Deputy Coyle.

"Yeah, Wild Bill," the deputy said, "it was self defense alright. I never in all my born days seen the like. The sodbuster was standing, and he for sure drew first-- he had the gun in his hand before Hardin twitched a eyelid. But Hardin drew and fanned two shots before the farmer got his gun cocked and level. The shots was so close together, I thought it was only one."

The marshal couldn't arrest anybody, but he was mad enough to bite the head off a chicken.

"Mister John Wesley Hardin," he said, "you are hereby officially posted. I'll give you until noon tomorrow to get out of town."

"Ain't gonna happen," Mister Hardin said. "Birdie and me are getting hitched, we're selling this rattrap and buying a ranch. I'm settling here permanent, me, my new bride and my son. So I'm gonna be around here from now on, and you may as well get used to it."

"Yesterday if you'd told me that, I would have said good for you and wished you luck. But everywhere you go, people drop like flies. So, no, you are not settling in my town." The marshal squared his wide shoulders. "You heard

me, gunslinger. One minute after noon tomorrow I'm coming down Main Street, and I'll shoot you on sight."

Mister Hardin smirked, "Why don't we settle it now? No time like the present."

"Noon tomorrow," the marshal said.

Hardin smiled a thin, tight-lipped angry smile. The only kind of smile he was capable of.

"Then, Mister-Marshal Wild Bill Hickok, I guess I'll meet you on Main Street at noon."

"Boys," the marshal said with a deep sigh, "some of you carry Wilkins home to his wife--the city will reimburse you for your trouble. The rest of you, I advise you to save your drinking and gambling money till tomorrow night, after John Wesley Hardin has moved on or lies beneath the sod."

The bloody sodbuster was toted out, Birdie's Mexican swamper got down on his knees and scooped up the sodden sawdust with a bar towel and a broom. Most of the early customers followed the marshal through the batwing doors: they had gotten their taste of blood, and were satisfied for now.

By and by, everything got back as close to normal as a bawdy house ever does.

When Mister Hardin come over to the table where me and Birdie was sitting, I twisted out of her arms. I didn't want to be in the same room with the killer.

"I got to get on home. When Mama hears about the shooting, she'll be worried."

"You don't have to hurry," Birdie said. "You don't have to take that long walk out to that old woman ever again. You're going to live wherever I do from now on. And before you know it, we'll have us a real home...on a ranch with horses and cows and chickens and--"

"No," I said. "Reckon not. I can't leave my mama alone out there. She needs me, and I...I need her."

Birdie talked fast. Mister Hardin sat slouched at a nearby table, his legs stretched out in front of him, sipping whiskey and listening with his eyes closed.

Birdie said straightaway that she was my birth mama, and John Wesley Hardin was my daddy. He got in trouble before I was born, she said, and had to either run or be killed. And back then Birdie had been a working girl.

"God knows," she said in a rush, "a baby can't live in a room that's visited by all kinds of men at all hours of the day and night-- and besides, you'd of been crying all the time, and the men wouldn't have liked that. So, I done what I had to. I found somebody to raise you proper."

But all that was changed now, Birdie said. She had a lot of money now and my father was back now and he wasn't never going to leave again.

Finally Mister Hardin spoke up. Staring me in the eyes, his thin, tight-lipped smile dancing across his unshaved cheeks, he said, "That's right, son. Birdie's your real mother, and I'm your real father. She give you my given names at birth, but the law wouldn't let her give you my last name 'cause we wasn't married. Well, that's changed now. When me and Birdie get hitched, we'll have your name changed all legal-like in the birth books. From now on you're John Wesley Hardin--my name, my blood. From now on, I want you to tell the world that I'm your daddy."

I muttered, "I wsn't named after you, Mister Hardin. I was named after a preacher of olden times." No one seemed to hear me.

"Things will be real good for us," Birdie said, "now that we're gonna be just like a real family. You'll have your own horse, of course, and--"

I stood. "Meaning no offense, ma'am, but being a mama is more than just a word. I already got a mama, and a home. When I was a helpless baby that nobody else wanted, my mama took me in and fed me and kept my bottom clean. You? You was too busy doing sinful things with men for money." As I was speaking, Birdie's face got hard and

tight, her eyes bone-chilling cold. Maybe she didn't want me anymore. Maybe she had only thought she did.

"Mister Hardin, I thought I wanted to be just like you when I grow up. Well, I don't. People are afraid to even breathe around you; I want people to like me. I hope you saddle Darky and ride out of town before noon tomorrow. Because if the marshal shoots you down, I'll most likely shed tears at your grave, but by and by you'll be just another wish that didn't come true. But if you kill Wild Bill Hickok, I think I'll hate you till the end of time."

Before either one could reply, I ran out the door and down the middle of the street past the school and church, hurrying home. To the only home I had ever known. To the only mother I had ever known, to the only mother I needed or wanted.

As I sloshed across the creek in my new boots, I tore off the fancy yellow shirt and dropped it in the mud. The shoemaker had kept my old shoes for leather scrap, and the milliner had throwed my worn out clothes in her stove to burn. Mama can always make me another flour sack shirt, but she can't sew denim with her swollen, aching hands. So I'll beg her to let me keep the stiff new pants and the shiny new boots.

Somehow, I think that'll be just fine with Mama, this one time. I'll explain to her that her tears and my tears was payment aplenty for a hundred pairs of new boots.

I began to sing as I started up the hill.