

Parting of the Way, Truman Capote

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Twilight had come; the lights from the distant town were beginning to flash on; up the hot and dusty road leading from the town came two figures, one, a large and powerful man, the other, young and delicate.

Jake's flaming red hair framed his head, his eyebrows looked like horns, his muscles bulged and were threatening; his overalls were faded and ragged, and his toes stuck out through pieces of shoes. He turned to the young boy walking beside him and said, "Guess this is just about time to make camp for tonight. Here, kid, take this bundle and lay it over there; then git some wood—and make it snappy too. I want to make the vittels before it's all dark. We can't have anybody seein' us. Go on there, hurry up."

Tim obeyed the orders and set about gathering the wood. His thin shoulders drooped from the strain, and his gaunt features stood out with protruding bones. His eyes were weak but sympathetic; his rose-bud mouth puckered slightly as he went about his labor.

Neatly he piled the wood while Jake cut strips of bacon and put them in a grease-coated pan. Then, when the wood was ready to be fired, he searched through his overalls for a match.

"Damn it, where did I put those matches? Where are they, you ain't got 'em, have you, kid? Nuts, I didn't think so; ah, here they are." He drew a paper of matches from a pocket, lit one, and protected the tiny flame with his rough hands.

Tim put the pan with the bacon over the small fire that was rapidly catching. The bacon remained still for a minute or so and then a tiny crackling sound started, and the bacon was frying. A very rancid odor came from the meat. Tim's sick face turned sicker from the fumes.

"Gee, Jake, I don't know whether I can eat any of this junk or not. It doesn't look right to me. I think it's rancid."

"You'll eat it or nothin'. If you weren't so stingy with that piece of change you got, we could a got us somethin' decent to eat. Why, kid, you got a whole ten bucks. It doesn't take that much to get home on."

"Yes, it does, I've got it all figured out. The train fare will cost me five bucks, and I want to get a new suit for about three bucks, then I want to git Ma somethin' pretty for about a dollar or so; and I figure my food will cost a buck. I want to git lookin' decent. Ma an' them don't know I been bummin' around the country for the last two years; they think I'm a traveling salesman—that's what I wrote them; they think I'm just coming home now to stay a while afore I start out on a little trip somewhere."

"I ought to take that money off you—I'm mighty hungry—I might take that piece of change."

Tim stood up, defiant. His weak, frail body was a joke compared to the bulging muscles of Jake. Jake looked at him and laughed. He leaned back against a tree and roared.

"Ain't you a pretty somethin'? I'd jes' twist that mess of bones you call yourself. Jes' break every bone in your body, only you been pretty good for me—stealin' stuff for me an' the likes of that—so I'll let you keep your pin money." He laughed again. Tim looked at him suspiciously and sat back down on a rock.

Jake took two tin plates from a sack, put three strips of the rancid bacon on his plate and one on Tim's. Tim looked at him.

"Where is my other piece? There were four strips. You're supposed to get two an' me two. Where is my other piece?" he demanded.

Jake looked at him. "I thought you said that you didn't want any of this rancid meat." Putting his hands on his hips he said the last eight words in a high, sarcastic, feminine voice.

Tim remembered, he had said that, but he was hungry, hungry and cold.

"I don't care. I want my other piece. I'm hungry. I could eat just about anything. Come on, Jake, gimme my other piece."

Jake laughed and stuck all the three pieces in his mouth.

Not another word was spoken. Tim went sulkily over in a corner, and, reaching out from where he was sitting, he gathered pine twigs, neatly laying them along the ground. Finally, when this job was finished, he could stand the strained silence no longer.

"Sorry, Jake, you know how it is. I'm excited about getting home and everything. I'm really very hungry too, but, gosh, I guess all there is to do is to tighten up my belt."

"The hell it is. You could take some of that jack you got and go get us a decent meal. I know what you're thinkin'. Why don't we steal some food? But hell, you don't catch me stealin' anything in this burg. I heard from buddies that this place," he pointed a finger toward the lights that indicated a town, "is one of the toughest little burgs this side of nowhere. They watch bums like eagles."

"I guess you're right, but you understand, I just ain't goin' to take any chances on losin' none of this dough. It's got to last me, 'cause it's all I got an' all I'm liable to get in the next few years. I wouldn't disappoint Ma for anything in the world."

Morning came gloriously, the large orange disc known as the sun came up like a messenger from heaven over the distant horizon. Tim had awakened just in time to see the sunrise.

He shook Jake, who jumped up demanding: "What do you want? Oh! it's time to get up. Hell, how I hate to get up." Then he let out a mighty yawn and stretched his powerful arms as far as they would go.

"This is shore goin' to be one hot day, Jake. I shore am glad I ain't goin' to have to walk. That is, only as far back into that town as the railroad station is."

"Yeh, kid. Think of me, I ain't got any place to go, but I'm goin' there, just walkin' in the hot sun. I wish it would always be like early spring, not too hot, not too cold. I sweat to death in summer and freeze in winter. It's a heck of a climate. I think I'd like to go to Florida in the winter, but there ain't no good pickins there anymore." He walked over and started to take out the frying utensils again. He reached into the pack and brought out a bucket.

"Here, kid, go up there to that farm house about a quarter of a mile up the road and git some water."

Tim took the bucket and started up the road.

"Hey, kid, ain't you goin' to take your jacket? Ain't you afraid I'll steal your dough?"

"Nope. I guess I can trust you." But down deep in his heart he knew that he couldn't. The only reason he hadn't turned back was because he didn't want Jake to know that he didn't trust him. The chances were that Jake knew it anyway.

Up the road he trudged. It was not paved, but even in the early morning the dust still stuck. The white house was just a little bit farther. As he reached the gate, he saw the owner coming out of the cow shed with a pail in his hand.

"Hey, Mister, can I please have this bucket filled with some water?"

"I guess so. There's the pump." He pointed a dirty finger toward a pump in the yard. Tim went in. He grasped the pump-handle and pushed it up and down. Suddenly the water came spilling out in a cold stream. He reached down and stuck his mouth to the spout and let cold liquid run in and over his mouth. After filling the bucket he started back down the road. He broke his way through the brush and came back into the clearing. Jake was bending over the bag.

"Damn, they jes' ain't nothin' left to eat. I thought, at least, there were a couple of slices of that bacon left."

"Aw, that's all right. When I get to town I can get me a whole meal—an' maybe I'll buy you a cup of coffee—an' a bun."

"Gee, but you're generous." Jake looked at him disgustedly.

Tim picked up his jacket and reached in the pocket. He brought out a worn leather wallet and unfastened the catch.

"I'm about to produce the dough that's goin' to take me home." He repeated the words several times, caressing it each time.

He reached into the wallet. He brought out his hand—empty. An expression of horror and unbelief overcame him. Wildly he tore the wallet apart, then dashed about looking through the pine needles. Furiously he ran around like a trapped animal—then he saw Jake. His small thin frame shook with fury. Wildly he turned on him.

"Give me back my money, you thief, liar, you stole it from me. I'll kill you if you don't give it back. Give it back! I'll kill you! You promised you wouldn't take it. Thief, liar, cheat! Give it to me, or I'll kill you."

Jake looked at him astounded and said, "Why, Tim, kid, I ain't got it. Maybe you lost it, maybe it's still in those pine needles. Come on, we'll find it."

"No, it's not there. I've looked. You stole it. There jes' ain't anybody else who could of. You did it. Where did you put it? Give it back, you got it...give it back!"

"I swear I haven't got it. I swear it by all the principles I got."

"You ain't got no principles. Jake, look me in the eyes and say you hope you get killed if you ain't got my money."

Jake turned around. His red hair seemed even redder in the bright morning light, his eyebrows more like thorns. His unshaven chin jutted out, and his yellow teeth showed at the far end of his upturned and twisted mouth.

"I swear that I ain't got your ten bucks. If I ain't tellin' the truth, I hopes that the next time I rides the rail I gets killed."

"Okay, Jake, I believe you. Only where could my money be? You know I ain't got it on me. If you ain't got it, where is it?"

"You ain't searched the camp yet. Look all 'round. It must be here somewheres. Come on, I'll help you look. It couldn' of walked off."

Tim ran nervously about, repeating: "What if I don't find it? I can't go home, I can't go home lookin' like this."

Jake went about the search only half heartedly, his big body bending and looking in the pine needles, in the sack. Tim took off his clothes and stood naked in the middle of the camp, tearing out the seams in his overalls searching for his money.

Near tears, he sat down on a log. "We might as well give it up. It ain't here. It ain't nowheres. I can't go home, and I want to go home. Oh! what will Ma say? Please, Jake, have you got it?"

Damn, you, for the last time NO! The next time you ask me that I'm agoin' to knock hell out o' you."

"Okay, Jake, I guess I'll just have to bum around with you some more— 'till I can get me enough money again to go home on—I can write Ma a card an' say that they sent me off on a trip already, an' I can come see her later."

"I shore ain't goin' to have you bummin' 'round with me anymore. I'm tired of kids like you. You'll have to go your own way an' find y'r own pickins."

Jake mused to himself. "I want the kid to come with me, but I shouldn'. Maybe if I leave him alone, he'll get wise an' go home an' make somethin' of himself. That's what he ought to do, go home an' tell the truth."

They both sat down on a log. Finally Jake said, "Kid, if you are goin' you better get started. Come on, get up, it's about seven already, an' got to get started."

Tim picked up his knapsack, and they walked out to the road together. Jake's big powerful figure looked fatherly beside Tim. It seemed as if he might be protecting a small child. They reached the road and turned to face each other to say goodbye.

Jake looked into Tim's clear, watery blue eyes. "Well, so long, kid, let's shake hands an' part friends."

Tim extended his tiny hand. Jake wrapped his paw over Tim's. He gave him a hearty shake—the kid allowed his hand to be moved limply. Jake let go—the kid felt a something in his hand. He opened it, and there lay the ten dollar bill. Jake was hurrying away, and Tim started after him. Perhaps it was just the bright sunlight reflecting on his eyes—and then again—perhaps it really was tears.

The End