The Man Who Was Almost a Man

Richard Wright 1908-1960

Dave struck out across the fields

, looking homeward through paling light.

Whut’s the use of talking wid

em niggers in the field? Anyhow, his mother was putting supper on the table. Them niggers can’t understan

nothing. One of these days he was going to get a gun and

practice shooting, then they

couldn’t talk to him as

though he were a little boy. He slowe

d, looking at the ground. Shucks, Ah ain scareda them even ef they are

biggern me! Aw, Ah know whut Ahma

do. Ahm going by ol Joe’s sto n git th

at Sears Roebuck catlog n look at

them guns. Mebbe Ma will lemme buy one when she gits

mah pay from ol man Hawkins. Ahma beg her t

gimme some money. Ahm ol enough to

hava gun. Ahm seventeen. Almost

a man. He strode, feeling his long

loose-jointed limbs. Shucks, a man oughta hava

little gun aftah he done

worked hard all day.

He came in sight of Joe’s store. A yellow lanter

n glowed on the front porch. He mounted steps and

went through the screen door, hearing

it bang behind him. There was a str

ong smell of coal oil and mackerel

fish. He felt very confident until he saw fat Joe walk

in through the rear door, then

his courage began to ooze.

“Howdy, Dave! Whutcha want?”

“How yuh, Mistah Joe? Aw, Ah

don wana buy nothing. Ah jus wanted t see ef yuhd lemme look at tha

catlog erwhile.”

“Sure! You wanna see it here?”

“Nawsuh. Ah wans t take it home wid me. Ah’ll br

ing it back termorrow when

Ah come in from the

fiels.”

“You planning on buying something?”

“Yessuh.”

“Your ma letting you have your own money now?”

“Shucks. Mistah Joe, Ahm gittin t be a man like anybody else!”

Joe laughed and wiped his greasy

white face with a red bandanna.

“Whut you planning on buyin?”

Dave looked at the floor, scratched his head, scra

tched his thigh, and smiled. Then he looked up shyly.

“Ah’ll tell yuh, Mistah Joe,

ef yuh promise yuh won’t tell.”

“I promise.”

“Waal, Ahma buy a gun.”

“A gun? Whut you want with a gun?”

“Ah wanna keep it.”

“You ain’t nothing but a

boy. You don’t need a gun.”

“Aw, lemme have the catalog, Mist

ah Joe. Ah’ll bring it back.”

Joe walked through the rear door. Dave was elated.

He looked around at barrels of sugar and flour. He

heard Joe coming back. He craned his neck to see if

he were bringing the book.

Yeah, he’s got it. Gawddog,

he’s got it!

“Here, but be sure you bring it back. It’s the only one I got.”

“Sho, Mistah Joe.”

“Say, if you wanna buy a gun, why don’t you buy

one from me? I gotta gun to sell.”

“Will it shoot?”

“Sure it’ll shoot.”

“Whut kind is it?”

“Oh, it’s kinda old ... a left-hand

Wheeler. A pistol. A big one.”

“Is it got bullets in it?”

“It’s loaded.”

“Kin Ah see it?”

“Where’s your money?”

“Whut yuh wan fer it?”

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“I’ll let you have it for two dollars.”

“Just two dollahs? Shucks, Ah could buy tha when Ah git mah pay.”

“I’ll have it here when you want it.”

“Awright, suh. Ah be in fer it.”

He went through the door, hearing it slam again be

hind him. Ahma git some

money from Ma n buy me

a gun! Only two dollahs! He tucked the

thick catalogue under his arm and hurried.

“Where yuh been, boy?” His mother he

ld a steaming dish of black-eyed peas.

“Aw, Ma, Ah jus stopped down the road t talk wid the boys.”

“Yuh know bettah t keep suppah waitin.”

He sat down, resting the catalogue

on the edge of the table.

“Yuh git up from there and git

to the well n wash yosef! Ah

ain feedin no hogs in mah house!”

She grabbed his shoulder and pushe

d him. He stumbled out of the

room, then came back to get the

catalogue.

“Whut this?”

“Aw, Ma, it’s jusa catlog.”

“Who yuh git it from?”

“From Joe, down at the sto.”

“Waal, thas good. We kin use it in the outhouse.”

“Naw, Ma.” He grabbed for it. “Gimme ma catlo

g, Ma.” She held onto it and glared at him.

“Quit hollerin at me! Whut’s wrong wid yuh? Yuh crazy?”

“But Ma, please. It am mine! It’s Jo

e’s! He tol me t bring it back t im

termorrow.”

She gave up the book. He stumbled down the back steps, hugging the thick book under his arm. When he

had splashed water on his face and hands, he groped back

to the kitchen and fumbled in

a corner for the towel.

I-fe

bumped into a chair; it clattered to th

e floor. The catalogue spra

wled at his feet. When he had dried his eyes

he snatched up the book and held it agaifl unde

r his arm. His mother stood watching him.

“Now, ef yuh gonna act a fool over th

at ol book, Ah’ll take it n burn it

“Naw, Ma, please.”

“Waal, set down n be still!”

He sat down and drew the oil lamp close. He thumbed

page after page, unaware of

the food his mother set

on the table. His father came in. Then his small brother.

“Whutcha got there, Dave?” his father asked.

“Jusa catlog,” he answ

ered, not looking up.

“Yeah, here they is!” His eyes glowed at blue-and

-black revolvers. He glanced up, feeling sudden guilt.

His father was watching him. He eased the book under th

e table and rested it on his knees. After the blessing

was asked, he ate. He scooped up peas and swallowed fat meat without chewing. Butte

rmilk helped to wash it

down. He did not want to mention m

oney before his father. He would do

much better by cornering his mother

when she was alone. He looked at his father

uneasily out of the edge of his eye.

“Boy, how come yuh don quit foolin

wid tha book n eat yo suppah?”

“Yessuh.”

“How you n ol man Hawkins gitten erlong?”

“Can’t yuh hear? Why don yuh lissen?

Ah ast yu how wuz yuh n ol

man Hawkins gittin erlong?”

“Oh, swell, Pa. Ah plows mo lan than anybody over there.”

“Waal, yuh oughta keep you mind on whut yuh doin.”

“Yessuh.”

He poured his plate full of molasses and sopped it up sl

owly with a chunk of cornbread. When his father

and brother had left the kitchen, he

still sat and looked again at the guns in the catalogue, longing to muster

courage enough to present his case to his mother. Lawd, ef

Ah only had tha pretty one! He could almost feel the

slickness of the weapon with his fingers. If he had a gun like that he

would polish it and keep it shining so it

would never rust. N Ah’d keep it loaded, by Gawd!

“Ma?” His voice was hesitant.

“Hunh?”

“01 man Hawkins give yuh mah money yit?”

“Yeah, but am no usa yuh thinking bout throwin nona

it erway. Ahm keeping tha money sos yuh kin have

does

t

go to school this winter.”

He rose and went to her side with the open catalogue in his palms. Sh

e was washing dishes, her head bent

low over a pan. Shyly he raised the book.

When he spoke, his voice was husky, faint.

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“Ma, Gawd knows Ah wans one of these.”

“One of whut?” she asked, not raising her eyes.

“One of these,” he said again, not daring even to point

. She glanced up at the page, then at him with wide

eyes.

“Nigger, is yuh gone plumb crazy?”

“Aw, Ma —“

“Cit outta here! Don yuh talk t me bout no gun! Yuh a fool!”

“Ma, Ah kin buy one fer two dollahs.”

“Not ef Ah knows it, yuh am!”

“But yuh promised me one —“

“Ah don care what Ah promised! Yuh am nothing but a boy yit!”

“Ma, ef yuh lemme buy one Ah’ll

never

ast yuh fer nothing no mo.”

“Ah tol yuh t git outta here! Yuh am

gonna toucha penny of tha money fe

r no gun! Thas how come Ah has

Mistah Hawkins t pay yo wages t me, cause Ah knows yuh am got no sense.”

“But, Ma, we needa gun. Pa am got no gun. We need

a gun in the house. Yuh kin never tell whut might

happen.”

“Now don yuh try to maka fool outta me, boy!

Ef we did hava gun, yuh wouldn’t have it!”

He laid the catalogue down and slipped his arm around her waist.

“Aw, Ma, Ah done worked hard alla su

mmer n am ast yuh fer nothing, is Ah, now?”

“Thas whut yuh spose t do!”

“But Ma, Ah wans a gun. Yuh kin lemme have two dolla

hs outta mah money. Please, Ma. I kin give it to

Pa... . Please, Ma! Ah loves yuh, Ma.”

When she spoke her voice came soft and low.

“What yu wan wida gun, Dave? Yuh don need no gun. Yuh’ll

git in trouble. N ef yo pa jus thought Ah let

yuh have money t buy a gun he’d hava fit.”

“Ah’ll hide it, Ma. It am but two dollahs.”

“Lawd, chil, whut’s wrong wid yuh?”

“Am nothin wrong. Ma. Ahm almos

a man now. Ah wans a gun.”

“Who gonna sell yuh a gun?”

“01 Joe at the sto.”

“N it don cos but two dollahs?”

“Thas all, Ma. Jus two dollahs. Please, Ma.”

She was stacking the plates away; her hands moved slowly, reflectively Dave kept an anxious silence.

Finally, she turned to him.

“Ah’ll let yuh git th

a gun ef yuh promise me one thing.”

“What’s tha, Ma?”

“Yuh bring it straight back t

me, yuh hear? It be fer Pa.”

“Yessum! Lemme go now, Ma.”

She stooped, turned slightly

to one side, raised the

hem of her dress, rolled dow

n the top of her stocking,

and came up with a slender wad of bills.

“Here,” she said. “Lawd knows yuh don need no gun. But ye

r pa does. Yuh bring it right back t me, yuh

hear? Ahma put it up. Now ef yuh don, Ahma have

yuh pa lick yuh so hard yuh won fergit it.”

“Yessum.”

He took the money, ran down the

steps, and across the yard.

“Dave! Yuuuuuh Daaaaave!”

He heard, but he was not going to stop now. “Now, Lawd!”

The first movement he made the following morning wa

s to reach under his pillow for the gun. In the gray

light of dawn he held it loosely, feeling a sense of

power. Could kill a man with a gun like this. Kill anybody,

black or white. And if he were holding his gun in

his hand, nobody could run over him; they would have to

respect him. It was a big gun, with a long barrel and a

heavy handle. He raised and lowered it in his hand,

marveling at its weight.

He had not come straight home with it as his mother had asked; instead he had stayed out in the fields,

holding the weapon in his hand, aiming it now

and then at some imaginary foe. But he had not fired it; he had

been afraid that his father might hear. Also

he was not sure he knew how to fire it.

To avoid surrendering the pistol he had not come into

the house until he knew th

at they were all asleep.

When his mother had tiptoed to his bedside late that

night and demanded the gun, he had first played possum;

then he had told her that the gun was

hidden outdoors, that he would bring

it to her in the morning. Now he lay

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turning it slowly in his hands. He

broke it, took out the cartridges, felt them, and then put them back.

He slid out of bed, got a long stri

p of old flannel from a trunk, wrappe

d the gun in it, and tied it to his

naked thigh while it was still loade

d. He did not go in to breakfast. Ev

en though it was not yet daylight, he

started for Jim Hawkins’ plantation. Ju

st as the sun was rising he reached the barns where the mules and plows

were kept.

“Hey! That you, Dave?”

He turned. Jim Hawkins stood eying him suspiciously.

“What’re yuh doing here so early?”

“Ah didn’t know Ah wuz gittin up so ear

ly, Mistah Hawkins. Ah was fixin t

hitch up ol Jenny n take her t

the fiels.”

“Good. Since you’re so early, how about pl

owing that stretch down by the woods?”

“Suits me, Mistah Hawkins.”

“O.K. Go to it!”

He hitched Jenny to a plow and started across the fiel

ds. Hot dog! This was just

what he wanted. If he

could get down by the woods, he could shoot his gun and nobody would hear. He walked behind the plow,

hearing the traces creaking, feeli

ng the gun tied tight to his thigh.

When he reached the woods, he plowed two whole rows before he decided to take out the gun. Finally, he

stopped, looked in all directions, then

untied the gun and held it in his han

d. He turned to the mule and smiled.

“Know whut this is, Jenny? Naw,

yuh wouldn know! Yuhs jusa ol mu

le! Anyhow, this is a gun, n it kin

shoot, by Gawd!”

He held the gun at arm’s length. Whut t hell, Ahma

shoot this thing! He looked at Jenny again.

“Lissen here, Jenny! When Ah pull this ol trigger, Ah don wan yuh t run n acka fool now!”

Jenny stood with head down, her short

ears pricked straight. Dave walked

off about twenty feet, held the

gun far out from him at arm’s length, and turned his hea

d. Hell, he told himself, Ah am afraid. The gun felt

loose in his fingers; he waved it wildly

for a moment. The he shut his eyes

and tightened his forefinger. Bloom!

A report half deafened him and he thought his right ha

nd was torn from his arm. He heard Jenny whinnying and

galloping over the field, and he found

himself on his knees, squeezing his fi

ngers hard between his legs. His

hand was numb; he jammed it into his mouth, trying to wa

rm it, trying to stop the pain. The gun lay at his feet.

He did not quite know what had happened. He stood up a

nd stared at the gun as t

hough it were a living thing.

He gritted his teeth and kicked the gun. Yuh almos. br

oke mah arm! He turned to look for Jenny; she was far

over the fields, tossing her head and kicking wildly.

“Hol on there, ol mule!”

When he caught up with her she stood trembling, walling her big white eyes at him. The plow was far

away; the traces had broken. Then Dave stopped short,

looking, not believing. Jenny was bleeding. Her left side

was red and wet with blood. He went closer. Lawd, have

mercy! Wondah did Ah shoot this mule? He grabbed

for Jenny’s mane. She flinched, s

norted, whirled, tossing her head.

“Hol on now! Hol on.”

Then he saw the hole in Jenny’s si

de, right between the ri

bs. It was round, wet, red. A crimson stream

streaked down the front leg, flowing fast. Good Gawd! Ah

wuzn’t shootin at tha mule. He felt panic. He knew

he had to stop that blood, or Jenny w

ould bleed to death. He had never seen

so much blood in all his life. He

chased the mule for half a mile, tryi

ng to catch her. Finally she stopped, br

eathing hard, stumpy tail half arched.

He caught her mane and led her back to where the pl

ow and gun lay. Then he stopped and grabbed handfuls of

damp black earth and tried to pl

ug the bullet hole. Jenny shuddered,

whinnied, and broke from him.

“Hol on! Hol on now!”

He tried to plug it again, but blood ca

me anyhow. His fingers

were hot and sticky He rubbed dirt into his

palms, trying to dry them. Then again he attempted

to plug the bullet hole, but

Jenny shied away, kicking her

heels high. He stood helpless. He had to do something.

He ran at Jenny; she dodged him. He watched a red

stream of blood flow down Jenny’s leg

and form a bright pool at her feet.

“Jenny... Jenny,” he called weakly.

His lips trembled. She’s bleeding t d

eath! He looked in the direction of

home, wanting to go back, wanting

to get help. But he saw the pistol ly

ing in the damp black clay. He had

a queer feeling that if he only did

something, this would not be; Jenny woul

d not be there bleeding to death.

When he went to her this time, she did not m

ove. She stood with sleepy, dreamy eyes; and when he

touched her she gave a low-pitched whinny and

knelt to the ground, her front

knees slopping in blood.

“Jenny... Jenny he whispered.

For a long time she held her neck erect; then her head

sank, slowly. Her ribs swelled with a mighty heave

and she went over.

Dave’s stomach felt empty, very empty. He picked up

the gun and held it gingerly between his thumb and

forefinger. He buried it at th

e foot of a tree. He took a stick to cover

the pool of blood with dirt — but what was

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the use? There was Jenny lying with her mouth open a

nd her eyes walled and gla

ssy. He could not tell Jim

Hawkins he had shot his mule. But he had to tell someth

ing. Yeah, Ah’ll tell em Je

nny started gittin wil n fell

on the joint of the plow.... But that w

ould hardly happen to a mule. He wa

lked across the field slowly, head

down.

It was sunset. Two of Jim Hawkins’ men were over ne

ar the edge of the woods digging a hole in which to

bury Jenny Dave was surrounded by a knot of people, al

l of whom were looking

down at the dead mule.

“I don’t see how in the world it happened,”

said Jim Hawkins for the tenth time.

The crowd parted and Dave’s mother, father

, and small brother pushed into the center.

“Where Dave?” his mother called. “There he is,”

said Jim Hawkins. His mother grabbed him.

“Whut happened, Dave? Whut yuh done?” “Nothin.”

“C mon, boy, talk,” his father said.

Dave took a deep breath and to

ld the story he knew nobody believed.

“Waal,” he drawled. “Ah brung ol Jenny down here so

s Ah could do mah plowin. Ah plowed bout two

rows, just like yuh see.” He stopped a

nd pointed at the long rows of upturne

d earth. ‘Then somethin musta been

wrong wid ol Jenny. She wouldn ack right a-

tall. She started snortin n kickin he

r heels. Ah trie

d t hol her, but

she pulled erway, rearm n goin in. Then when the point of the plow was stickin up in

the air, she swung erroun

n twisted herself back on it... . She stuck herself n st

arted t bleed. N fo Ah could do anything, she wuz dead.”

“Did you ever hear of anything like that

in all your life?” asked Jim Hawkins.

There were white and black standing in the crowd. Th

ey murmured. Dave’s mother came close to him and

looked hard into his face. “Te

ll the truth, Dave,” she said.

“Looks like a bullet hole to me,” said one man.

“Dave, whut yuh do wid the gun?” his mother asked.

The crowd surged in, looking at him. He jammed hi

s hands into his pockets, s

hook his head slowly from

left to right, and backed away. Hi

s eyes were wide and painful.

“Did he hava gun?” asked Jim Hawkins.

“By Gawd, Ah tol yuh tha wuz a gun wound,” said a man, slapping his thigh.

His father caught his shoulders and shook him till his teeth rattled.

‘Tell whut happened, yuh rascal! Tell whut

Dave looked at Jenny’s stiff

legs and began to cry.

“Whut yuh do wid tha gun?” his mother asked.

“What wuz he doin wida gun?” his father asked.

“Come on and tell the truth,” said

Hawkins. “Ain’t nobody going to hurt you....

His mother crowded close to him.

“Did yuh shoot tha mule, Dave?”

Dave cried, seeing blurred white and black faces.

“Ahh ddinn gggo tt sshooot hher. . . . Ah ssswear ffo Gawd Ahh ddin.....Ah wuz a-tryin t sssee ef the old

gggun would sshoot —““Where yuh git the gun from?” his father asked.

“Ah got it from Joe, at the sto.” “Where

yuh git the money?” “Ma give it t me.”

“He kept worryin me, Bob. Ah had t. Ah tol im t br

ing the gun right back t me. . . . It was fer yuh, the

gun.”

“But how yuh happen to shoot that

mule?” asked Jim Hawkins.

“Ah wuzn shootin at the mule, Mistah Hawkins. The

gun jumped when Ah pulled the trigger. ... N fo Ah

knowed anythin Jenny was there a-bleedin.”

Somebody in the crowd laughed. Jim Hawkins walked

close to Dave and looked into his face.

“Well, looks like you have bought you a mule, Dave.”

“Ah swear fo Gawd, Ah didn go t kill the mule, Mistah Hawkins!”

“But you killed her!”

All the crowd was laughing now. They stood on tiptoe a

nd poked heads over one another’s shoulders.

“Well, boy, looks like yuh done bought a dead mule! Hahaha!”

“Am tha ershame.”

“Hohohohoho.”

Dave stood, head down, twisting his feet in the dirt.

“Well, you needn’t worry about it,

Bob,” said Jim Hawkins to Dave’s

father. “Just let the boy keep on

working and pay me two dollars a month.”

“Whut yuh wan fer yo mule, Mistah Hawkin

s?” Jim Hawkins screwed up his eyes.

“Fifty dollars.”

“Whut yuh do wid tha gun?” Dave’s fa

ther demanded. Dave said nothing.

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“Yuh wan me t take a tree n beat yuh till yuh talk!” “Nawsuh!”

“Whut yuh do wid it?” “Ah throwed it erway.”

“Where?”

“Ah. . . Ah throwed it in the creek.”

“Waal, c mon home. N firs thing in the ma

wnin git to tha creek n fin tha gun.”

“Yessuh.”

“Whut yuh pay fer it?”

“Two dollahs.”

‘Take tha gun n git yo money back

n carry it to Mistah Hawkins, yuh hear? N don fergit Ahma lam you

black bottom good fer this! Now march yosef on home, suh!”

Dave turned and walked slowly. He

heard people laughing. Dave glared~

his eyes welling with tears. Hot

anger bubbled in him. Then he swallowed and stumbled on.

That night Dave did not slee

p. He was glad that he had gotten out of

killing the mule so easily, but he was

hurt. Something hot seemed to turn over inside him each time he remembered how they had laughed. He tossed

on his bed, feeling his hard pillow. N Pa says he’s

gonna beat me.... He remembered other beatings, and his

back quivered. Naw, flaw, Ah sho don wan im t beat

me tha way no mo. Dam em all! Nobody ever gave him

anything. All he did was work. They treat me like a mule,

n then they beat me. He gr

itted his teeth. N Ma had t

tell on me.

Well, if he had to, he would take old man Hawkins th

at two dollars. But that m

eant selling the gun. And he

wanted to keep that gun. Fift

y dollars for a dead mule.

He turned over, thinking how he had fired the gun. He

had an itch to fire it again. Ef other men kin shoota

gun, by Gawd, Ah kin! He was still, listening. Mebbe they

all sleepin now. The house was still. He heard the

soft breathing of his brother. Yes, no

w! He would go down and get that gun and see if he could fire it! He eased

out of bed and slipped into overalls.

The moon was bright. He ran almost all the way to the edge of the woods. He stumbled over the ground,

looking for the spot where he had buried the gun. Yeah, he

re it is. Like a hungry dog scratching for a bone, he

pawed it up. He puffed his black cheeks

and blew dirt from the trigger an

d barrel. He broke it and found four

cartridges unshot. He looked around; the fields were fille

d with silence and moonlight. He clutched the gun stiff

and hard in his fingers. But, as soon as

he wanted to pull the trigger, he s

hut his eyes and turned his head. Naw,

Ah can’t shoot wid mah eyes closed n mah head turned.

With effort he held his eyes open; then he squeezed.

Blooooom!

He was stiff, not breathing. The gun was still in

his hands. Dammit, he’d done it! He fired again.

Blooooom!

He smiled.

Bloooom! Blooooom! Click, click.

There! It was empty If

anybody could shoot a gun, he

could. He put the gun into his hip po

cket and started across the fields.

When he reached the top of a ridge he stood straight and proud in the moonlight, looking at Jim Hawkins’

big white house, feeling the gun sagging

in his pocket. Lawd, ef Ah had just one mo bullet Ah’d taka shot at tha

house. Ah’d like t scare ol man Hawk

ins jusa little.. . . Jusa enough t

let im know Dave Saunders is a man.

To his left the road curved, running to the tracks of the Illinois Central.

He jerked his hea

d, listening. From

far off came a faint

hoooof-hoooof; hoooofhoooof....

He stood rigid. Two dollahs a mont. Les see now.... Tha

means it’ll take bout two years. Shucks! Ah’ll be dam!

He started down the road, toward the tracks. Yeah,

here she comes! He stood beside the track and held

himself stiffly. Here she comes, erroun the ben. . . . C

mon, yuh slow poke! C mon! He had his hand on his gun;

something quivered in his stomach. Then the train t

hundered past, the gray and brown box cars rumbling and

clinking. He gripped the gun tightly; then he jerked his hand out of his pocket. Ah betcha Bill wouldn’t do it!

Ah betcha. . . . The cars slid past,

steel grinding upon steel. Ahm ridin yu

h ternight, so hep me Gawd! He was

hot all over. He hesitated just a mo

ment; then he grabbed, pulled atop of

a car, and lay flat.

He felt his pocket;

the gun was still there. Ahead the long rails were

glinting in the moonlight, stretching away, away to

somewhere, somewhere where he could be a man. ...

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