

EXCERPTS

# HEAVEN'S WAY



*a novel*

ROGER LADD MEMMOTT



A GEMSTONE BOOK



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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*"Lili" - Words & Music by Helen Deutsch & Bronislaw Kaper, 1952  
Recorded by Leslie Caron & Mel Ferrer, 1953 (#30)  
Featured in the movie "Lili"*

*From "Blue Bayou" - written by Roy Orbison and Joe Melson  
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*"O Western Wind," 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Anonymous – From The Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi  
2 – From "Rocking Horse Cowboy," Anonymous – From Ulysses, James Joyce – From A  
Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, James Joyce – From "Not Knowing," No. 894,  
Mary Gardiner Brainard – From "Among School Children," 1928, William Butler Yeats*

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“For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things.”

— *The Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 2:11)*

“And we will prove them herewith...”

— *The Pearl of Great Price (Abraham 3:25)*

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## Heartache and Clowns

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I AM TWO FEET TALL.

It is night and stars are splashed against the sky like unfallen rain. When you are small, the vanishing rains can sweep the overhanging night with a frenzy of stars, the stars themselves like a handful of rain flecked on the sky. It is in the absence of rain that you smell it, the air without weight and so clear it is like earth in your breath: the earth you have come to. Above, the watery, misshapen moon hangs like an ambivalent eye. You can see it among the stars in the glistening street and tread on those worlds above, watch how they burst up and then ripple away. They are nothing but water, these stars and the moon, whether in the street or the sky.

“Oh, Danny,” I hear Momma’s voice, “now your shoes are all wet!” Poppa tugs on my arms and flies me over a puddle or two. Buddy is giggling, leaping the puddle I sloshed. When we come beneath the light our shadows go squat and waver as we walk, now thrown against the high stadium wall. The man at the turnstile says, “Hey, Cotton Top,” and spins us through, though I easily duck beneath the horizontal bar before it clicks around. I turn back and shoot him twice: *click, click*. He grins, staggers back and slaps a hand to his heart, returns fire with the barrel of a finger.

The evening air is filled with the scent of my mother and yet with something of rain. I feel my hand in the hand of my father, and then I am lifted and plopped next to Buddy who is dangling his legs over the retaining wall.

I think my memory is skewed here.

Although, I see us awaiting the spectacle: Momma, Poppa, Buddy, and me sitting on a retaining wall, six or eight feet above the ground, it is in all likelihood the bench of a bleachers.

When the clowns come out, I shoot each one: *click, click, click*. It is my little blue pistol, with a yellow hammer and red trigger. The yellow-red cylinder spins as I click. The colors are bewitching, like those you would find in any kindergarten room: primary blue, yellow, and red. Roy Rogers has nothing on me. Sometimes when I click, the clowns actually fall, struggling around in the mud. It is a sad sight, watching clowns die. But then they get up, and I can breathe once again.

They set a house afire and rescue the fat lady. She is flailing from a window two stories up. The clowns are scrambling up the ladder and spraying each other while the house burns.

This is the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus, in Salt Lake City, up near the University of Utah football stadium, on the east shelf of Foothill Drive. But I remember only the clowns and the blazing house—the elephants marching about swinging their trunks. I remember only the precious toy I drop in the mud and how time plants its feet, dallies for a moment, and then rushes on.

I look at Poppa, but he won't. It is soggy down there, under the bleachers, where my little gun weeps. I turn to Buddy, but he has on his best shoes and a clean shirt. I plead with Momma, but she shakes her head and shushes a finger to her lips. Beneath me the yellow hammer winks up from the mud. This is the first time my breath leaves me; it simply evaporates in a thin mealy wheeze. Getting it back is painful as sparks in my lungs, embers among the alveoli glowing like coals.

"What's the matter?" Momma says, watching me suck at the air through my sobs. She has a damaged look in her eyes like wrinkled squash.

"He's turning blue." Poppa examines me, I remember, I think, as if beset by a ravenous dog.

"Danny," Buddy teases. "Stop crying like a baby and breathe. Look! The lady's about to get stomped!"

And it is true, how life gets in the way of itself: the lady in fishnet and sequins lies on her back on a red mat on the ground as the elephant's forehoof comes within an inch of her nose. The ringmaster barks orders for the elephant to lower its hoof. "Stay, stay," he directs, hunched over the handle of his whip as he uses it to point. Then he shouts, "Up, up!" and the elephant raises its leg. It sits back on its haunches, pawing the air with its forehooves and trumpets while the lady leaps to her feet, sweeps her arms wide, and bows low.

All around us people are shouting and clapping. My breath seems stopped in my lungs and beneath me my little gun shines. When the air comes out, I cry from relief that the lady's pretty head isn't smashed. Buddy points to the center ring where the unburning house continues to burn. At the foot of the ladder the blue-haired clown is trying to wiggle out from under the fat lady—and I laugh as I cry.

My head hurts with laughing through tears and I am trying to think. All about me the smell of ozone and dung, and my family as close as the evening damp. The wheezing won't quit and I am trying to think how to get my gun out of the mud below. I am trying to think how I dropped it in the first place. I am trying to think what the rest of my life will be without it. I am trying to think whether I have done something wrong. I am trying to think what it means to be good. I am trying to think how to make it all right. And what, I wonder, is my little gun trying to think?

Such is the memory that begins my life: family, rain, heartache, and clowns.



I remember Momma packing the suitcase; it lay open on top of my bed and she was crying like me. She was jerking things out of my closet and throwing them in: pants, shirts, shoes. Between wails I heard the

wire hangers rattle and watched them swing and scrape on the rod. One fell on the floor. Then she was yanking out drawers to get at my T-shirts and socks. But as fast as she packed, she wasn't faster than me.

"Stop that!" she said.

My chest hurt with the sobs, and she cried but not louder than me. I ripped at the stuff she threw in the suitcase and flung it out on the floor.

I tried not to blubber but to openly cry.

"We'll leave the s-o-b," she said through clenched teeth. Her upper lip was glossy with snot. "We will. Once and for all!"

"No we will not!" I heard myself scream. When I opened my mouth my cheeks stung from the tears. She folded my church pants and put them in, too. When she turned back to the closet I threw them out in the hall. I gathered Buddy's shirts in my arms and threw them out, too.

"Momma! Momma!" I cried.

I plucked at my socks, stuffed in a wad, and threw them at her. I thought about getting a butcher's knife and killing us both. I would rather all of us be dead than apart.

"Stop that!" she said. "Put that back in."

"But families—" I heard myself sob, "—are forever, didn't Jesus once say?" My ears were hot with my tears and when I tried to scream I heard myself choke. When I tried to say it again, I gagged and I coughed until I finally threw up. I threw up in the suitcase and struggled for breath. I wondered why there wasn't any air in the room.

"Oh, Danny," she said. She fell to her knees. I tried to push her away but her smell was too sweet. Her face was too soft. Her arms were too tight. And I couldn't tell her sobbing from mine.

If Buddy were home, he would kill us all, too.

"I want Poppa," I said. "I want Poppa," I said.

"He'll come back," she wept as she held me and soothed. She took a deep breath and hushed her voice low. "He'll come back. He always comes back."



"What are they doing you think?"



We lay awake in the dark listening to the fevered exchange down the hall.

"I think Pop's whispering sweet nothings to Mom," Buddy said, assuming I knew what he meant. "They're at it again."

Even then I had a suspicion they'd like us to believe we were spontaneously generated, that we just happened along, bundles of joy left on doorsteps by some feathery emissary conjured in ancestry's mind. To whom do we belong? An abandoning bird? From which egg were we hatched? And who should hold us accountable for the deeds that we do?

For a long time I thought it had something to do with a slap. She would slap him and he would slap her, not on the back or the cheek, but in that unmentionable place. And *voila!* Down came the stork. When I came to know otherwise, I remember, the knowing was odd—certainly as odd as a slap. And how would Pop give the signal to Mom? Was it when she stood at the kitchen sink, her arms up to her elbows in suds, seeming so shy while he nudged her and chuckled and dried? Was it when he patted her fanny and kissed the back of her neck? Called her Blondie with a glint in his eye?

I listened and thought maybe I could detect the faintest of slaps—but who was slapping who I couldn't be sure. And what of such moans? Did it hurt or was that actually a giggle and sigh?

"I got an idea," Buddy proposed.

We snuck out of bed and crawled down the hall quiet as mice. When we got next to their bed we rose up like lions and roared.

Heart attack time for parents in love.

"I'll kill them!" Dad cried. "Don't think I won't!"

Had they been in some frenzied embrace working on Sam? Such did you wonder in the small of your heart. For certainly Sam came and not by the stork. This is the wonder of love; this is the wonder of spirits on high. Out of a single intimate embrace we summon them down.



"Aunt" Flossie and "Uncle" Joe tended me during the day. They lived

in a yellow boxcar house next to the tracks. There was a neighborhood of those transformed homes, about a dozen or so at the south end of town, across the tracks from the roundhouse and next to the switchyard, with gravel roadways between. The boxcars had been set on cinderblock foundations and painted bright Union Pacific yellow, but on some you could still see the ghost of a red, white, and blue shield beneath. Two or three windows had been cut into one side, and a slab of concrete jutted from beneath the front door for a stoop.

Joe had worked as a switchman for thirty-five years; but now he was retired and to me just a little man, soft-spoken and kind, with big ears and a nose like a beet. Flossie was a jovial sort, squat and stout with a bushel of snow-colored hair. Joe smoked a pipe. I wanted to smoke a pipe like Joe. "Aunt Flossie," I begged. "You, Uncle Joe." I bawled and I whined, threatened to bash my head on the wall. Finally he relented and let me choose one from his pipe rack. "What can it hurt," Aunt Flossie agreed, "if he just sucks on the taste." It was ruby red, translucent, and to me the pipe of all pipes. Good flavor, I thought. Momma, on the other hand, was so disgusted she boiled the flavor away.

I was still banging my head on the coffee table from time to time, and she was so fearful of my tantrums that she'd rather sterilize the pipe and let me keep it than throw it away. I knew that smoking was bad but I couldn't get it through my head that only bad people smoked, because several of my uncles smoked and drink a little, too. My Aunt Gerti was an alcoholic and had a voice graveled by tobacco and clothes rancid from smoke. These people were kind, loved their families and me. Nevertheless, I knew smoking was bad regardless of how good the smoker might be, had been told and re-told, and didn't Jesus want me for a sunbeam besides?

But still there was something about sucking that pipe, even at four. Oh, wicked boy that I was! But not so wicked as wickedness would.

Across the way, in one of the yellow boxcar houses lived a girl, maybe about three. She had a tricycle and came out to ride it up and down the road in front of her house to watch me play. I was a cowboy most of the time, a Pony Express Rider, riding Old Paint and delivering

the mail from this house to that. When I wasn't delivering the mail, I'd wrangle Joe's dog and suck on my pipe. I may have swaggered a bit—for the benefit of little girls who watched. Her hair was beribboned in red and the ribbon tied in a bow at the top. She had come out to say "Hi." I remember meeting her half-way between her house and Joe's. The day was bright as a bead, and she looked up and smiled like heaven itself. She had ringlets of blonde and a face like a dream.

"I'm Lily," she said.

What demon raged in my heart, I have yet to divine. Was I the Black Menace gathering speed in a swoop?

I pinched her hard on the arm.

She all at once wailed and out came her mom. While I reared back on Old Paint and galloped for home.

This was the beginning of love I've since thought.

Love is so dangerous, love is so kind. If not love, what then? The hurry-up of a child's sexual encounter gone sadly awry? Oh, how wickedness will! Except for the goodness of guilt! For the next several years that little tyke was fixed fast in my mind, with every onslaught of regret and desire, she and the hint of some pact we'd made in a previous realm. If not in this life then in the next, I told myself, I would ask her forgiveness, perhaps marry her then—and love her forever as only children can love.



The following year, or maybe the next, I had my first fight. And how could I have known what terrible events might follow from that? Knowing hardly what is we are left with only what was and haven't an inkling of what could possibly be.

It was on the south end of the football field. That was the year I got glasses, and Nick Nicholson said something about "four eyes." Not only did I have to wear glasses that year to correct my lazy eye in spite of 20/20 vision, but for reasons unknown, Mother insisted I wear suspenders as well. This was truly cruel and unusual punishment for a

child of my ilk. For a kid whose self-esteem was always at odds with the world, having to wear suspenders *and* glasses was a tough cross to bear.

“Four eyes?” I said.

All the girls stood around watching while we wrestled and slugged. “So you think I’m a dope?” And he hit me again. He yanked my suspenders. He pawed at my face, dragging my glasses down to my chin. They came off, got crushed as we rolled. I’d be cross-eyed, I thought, for the rest of my life before I’d wear glasses again. I’d rather be blind.

We got back to our feet and continued to slug.

He was ruddy-faced with a trickle of blood on his chin, his coarse yellow hair frazzled in spikes. I half wondered what he saw seeing me and punched him again. He tried to headbutt me.

Somehow in the fray, Nick’s pants came undone, fell to his knees and hobbled his feet. Here was my advantage, not to mention the humiliation splashed in his face. When he stooped and groped for his pants, I could have popped him hard on the ear. Instead, I just turned and waved him away, kind of feigning disgust.

He should have been wearing suspenders, I guess.



I don’t know whether it rained frogs in Maxwell or not, but after every rainfall you could seek out the puddles and ponds and fill a coffee can full of pollywogs. Then you could whittle a “flipper crotch” (slingshot to some), sling it with bands cut from an inner tube and the tongue from a shoe for a pouch, and fire pollywogs at the girls, or even your friends. Pollywog fights were almost as fun as the BB gun fights with which we endangered ourselves, except with a coffee can full of pollywog ammo, you could shoot your enemy above as well as below the waist. You could shoot him right in the head.

I’ve yet to hear of someone losing an eye from a pollywog round.

Not long after Dad built the Playhouse and painted the front door, Nick Nicholson and I crayoned a bulls-eye on the new paint and

splattered pollywogs from top to bottom while my little brother Sam stood there and watched.

"Dad's gonna kill you," he said.

But there is nothing like slinging a pollywog hard from your flipper crotch pouch and watching it explode on a door. The guts dribble and drool and then crust over hard.

"Look at that door!" Dad shouted, when he got home.

"I didn't do it," I shrieked.

"Oh, so now you're fibbing as well?" He had me by the nape of the neck, gave a slight shake. "Sniffing your armpit won't save you," he said.

He didn't kill us, of course. But scraping the hardened pollywog gel from the door and repainting it twice nearly did.



In the vacant lot just north of our house, we dug foxholes and tunnels and tried to trap trespassing kids, if not the devil himself. One day we did. Not the devil, of course; the kid didn't break his leg, but "might have," Pop said. So that fall we filled in the hole and dug it again in the spring.

In the spring, while waiting for trespassing kids now too smart to fall in our hole, we slept outside on the balcony three stories up of the four story apartment building from which Nick's mother had fled. We slept in our sleeping bags and read comic books by flashlight until the batteries played out.

"Look at this one," he said.

"That's not a comic book," I said.

"It is for adults. Look at this one right here."

"Where'd you get this?" I said, trying to see as the batteries grew weak. And what I saw was hard to believe.

"It's my brother's," he said, turning a page and showing me more. "What do you think about her?"

I didn't say what I thought, pretty much glad when he put it away, half wanting to see it again. I rolled on my back and wished we'd trapped

the devil instead of that kid. I wondered if the devil could ever be trapped and in wondering felt the breath of a demon cold on my neck.

Above us the sky hung like the upside down depths of the sea, and the sea seemed to salt and wring out my lungs. I made out the big dipper and wondered what kind of a car a car salesman had. I wondered if Nick was wondering, too, and wondering struggled to see how far I could see.

A star fell.

"Do you think there are angels?" he wondered aloud.

"You mean like the one on top of the temple blowing a horn?"

"I mean ones that can fly."

"I suppose if there are angels they can probably fly."

"I doubt if there are angels," he seemed to decide. "In heaven, I mean. And my brother's not sure about the ones down below."

I thought about that and with each fretful breath heard myself say: "When my cousin's grandpa was on a mission in Mexico about a hundred years ago he wrestled with the devil and threw him into a well."

"Into a well?"

"That's what he said. Into a well. And I believe him, I think.

"How deep was the well? Deep enough to kill him, I hope."

"I don't think so. I don't think the devil can die. Anymore than God or the angels above."

He studied the stars and seemed to think about that. After a minute, he said: "I doubt if your cousin's grandpa threw the devil into a well. And, anyway, if it didn't kill him, what good did it do?"

He had a point, but I wished he hadn't said what he said anymore than I wished I had seen in that magazine, or even wanted to see, what I saw. I was tired and getting the creeps. And, besides, if it didn't kill him, I thought, he must have climbed out—maybe with a cut or a scrape or at most a broken arm or a leg, probably more enraged than when he fell in.

"I wisht I could fly," he all at once said.

"Like a angel you mean?"

"No. Like a dragonfly. Or maybe a bat."

I was too tired to think about it, and the weight of the moon hung in my eyes and softened my brain. "My Mom's going to hell," I think maybe Nick said. In the predawn I awoke just enough to spy him standing on top of the wooden railing that ran the length of the balcony, his head slung forward like a gargoyle's, stony with anger and fear.

"You'll fall," I told him.

He raised his arms in the fashion of wings, like Icarus I've since come to know, but it was no use. To keep his balance he couldn't get the one arm high enough even to put his nose in the pit, let alone fly.

I closed my eyes to a remnant of dreams, still warding off spooks, and before he climbed down snuggled back into sleep, dazed by the one with the staple where her navel should be.



The next year Nick and I vied for the attention of Lily Winterspring. She was the little girl who had stolen my heart, the one who lived in the yellow boxcar house down by the railroad tracks—and, still, even in Fifth Grade, a year younger than me, had ringlets of blonde. Although she remembered the pain of first love, she didn't let on—other than to forgive and reassure me with glances and smiles. But she couldn't make up her mind it appeared between Nick Nicholson and me. If Linda Wilson hadn't lived all the way across town I might have got chummy with her. I knew she liked me a lot, and we grew up together in the same grade. She was blonde, like Lily, and cute as a bug. Her front teeth overlapped. I took her to a Gold and Green Ball and dated her a few times in high school. I think I kissed her once at her door.

But Lily Winterspring lived only a couple of blocks from my house, down by that vacant lot whose weeds Nick and I had burned a few years before. She was Danish, like me, on her mother's side, liked to braid her hair in pigtails sometimes and had grown into killer-blue eyes. Nick and I walked her home after school. He'd put his arm around her until we got to half-way and then he'd release her and I'd loop mine. Sometimes

she'd walk between us, not wanting to play favorites, supporting both of our arms.

"Does her mother still drink?" I think Mom asked me one day. "She used to be a boozer," she said: "—a floozy, I think."

I was never quite sure whether Lily wasn't a floozy as well.

"Like mother, like daughter," I think Mother said.

We kicked around in the weeds in the vacant lot across from her house after school one day. Sometimes she blushed, and Nick teased her about the titties she had. What size was her bra and would she give us a peek? He tried to look down her blouse. I remember how my flesh that day got too tight for my bones. Was Nick just a tease or did he mean something scary by this? I stood around and watched Lily squirm.

"C'mon, Nick," I said.

He plucked a weed and whipped at her legs. "You go if you want, but not me until she gives me a kiss."

I looked at Lily and she looked at me. "You gonna kiss him?" I asked.

She clasped her hands, cocked her head on her shoulder and stretched down her arms, did a little twist and sway with her hips and looked away as she shrugged. I headed for home and didn't look back.

To hear Nick tell it at recess the following day, she did more than give him a kiss, although when I caught her up and asked with my eyes, she shook her head, *No*.



Here's an inexplicable thing: porkypines and my Dad.

We'd go fishing, say, up in Ranch Canyon or Rock Corral in the Mineral Range Mountains. After fishing all day, if we left the lake before dark, we usually saw a porcupine or two on the way home. They'd be doing their porkypine stuff, waddling across the road or gnawing a pine in a meadow close by. Dad would squeal the tires jerking the car to a stop. "There's one!" he'd shout. "Let's get the damn thing." We'd pile out of the car and each pick up a log. Sometimes, if he'd thought in advance, Dad put a shovel in the trunk. "I got the shovel!" he'd cry. The critter



would hobble around this tree and that, quills a-bristle, and us in pursuit. If you smacked her hard on the back you got nothing but quills. The place to bop her was square on the nose. Buddy or Sam would slow her down with a blow to the head, and then Dad would use the shovel and drive her nose to the back of her brain. We'd all stand around for a minute sweating over the work we'd just done. Sam might wheeze a comment to break the nefarious spell, "She's a big one, isn't she, Dad?" And Dad would nod and shake his head at the deed.

All three of us, Buddy, Sam, and I—such obedient sons—not once did we ever ask Dad what the evil in porcupines was. This has been a great regret for us each, not knowing what sorrows lay in the depths of Dad's heart to treat porcupines so.



Maybe it was Rubi Esposito's fault, this whole thing about girls.

Once, at Emilio's, when he had gone to the bathroom, I wandered into her room and sat down on her bed—the bed she'd slept in just hours before. I didn't touch anything. I sat there, bouncing lightly, my hands in my lap, trying to take it all in. The room was girlish with mystery and frills and a lazy befuddling scent. Pillows and doilies and dolls. Little mirrors and big mirrors, silver-backed brushes and combs, lingerie spilling out of a drawer. I caught a glimpse of myself in the oval of glass over her bureau that had how many times and in what state of undress reflected back her? I wondered if she had ever been slapped in that most loving of ways and if not yet when she might be. The bed was unmade and I thought about not doing it before I ducked my face in her pillow and breathed as deep as I could.

"What are you doing?" Emilio said.

Before I looked up my heart socked me hard in the chest. He was leaning against the doorjamb with a quizzical, half-annoyed gaze.

"I'm tired," I said, thinking fast. "I need a nap."

"Well, you can't nap in here. Rubi will drown you for real."

They had the same pale blue Mexican eyes, eyes I've never seen since in one of their race.

"Were you sniffing her pillow?" he said.

"Are you kidding?" I said.

"She's too old for you," he said.

"Only because she was born first."

He looked at me like my skin had turned green.

So maybe it was Rubi's fault, I've since come to think. The way my breath sags in my lungs when a pretty girl walks by. Or that day I saw Lily at the end of the lane riding her trike. Or the night Nick brought out his brother's comic book for adults. Or listening to Mom and Pop shushing themselves not far down the hall. Or maybe it had nothing to do with anything except some inexpressible seed nuzzled deep within me.



When we were courting Lily, Nick and I were inseparable. That way, if we went to a Saturday matinee or just knocked about town, we could have Lily around and not feel too uncomfortable or get overly razzed by our friends. Trouble was, Nick wouldn't let up about the titties she had. He was forever coaxing her to give us a peek or to let us feel her up. Whatever she might have let him do when they were alone, I could tell she didn't want him to do around me. Almost every Saturday we went to the matinee and shared a popcorn and licorice. I remember the three of us watching Flash Gordon while she shoved at him. She squirmed in the seat between us and nudged at his hand while holding mine.

When the feature came on I was dumbfounded. It was a re-release of the movie *Lili*, with Leslie Caron and Mel Ferrer, the most enchanting movie I had seen in my life. I couldn't believe I was sitting next to a girl named Lily and watching the beautiful Leslie Caron playing a girl of the same name. I felt like the puppets she fell in love with. I was a puppet falling in love.

Nick dug around in the box on Lily's lap and munched on the popcorn while she leaned toward me and sighed. I leaned toward her, the scent of her licorice-breath and redolent-hair so wonderful I failed to breathe out.

When we came from the dark theater into the light, she squeezed my hand and gazed at me with the wisp of a smile and a heart-stopping squint. Her wide-set eyes seemed remarkably blue. I hadn't realized until then, after I saw the movie with Leslie Caron, how thoroughly in love I'd fallen with Lily Winterspring—from the day I first saw her and gave her that pinch.

All the way home she hummed or sang, sometimes skipping between us:

A song of love is a sad song  
Hi-Lili, Hi-Lili, Hi-Lo  
A song of love is a song of woe  
Don't ask me how I know

Then on the chorus we would join in:

Hi-Lili, Hi-Lili, Hi-Lo...Hi-Lo  
Hi-Lili, Hi-Lili...Hi-Lo-o-o  
Hi-Lili, Hi-Lili, Hi-Lo...Hi-Lo  
Hi-Lili, Hi-Lili...Hi-Lo-o-o-o-o!

When she skipped, her hair danced and her little dress swayed. I gave her a sidewise glance and felt my stomach go small. Oh, how I wished Nick wasn't there. I wished I could make him disappear. I wished he'd never been born.

As we came to the yellow boxcar houses, I felt a deep sense of loss. "Uncle" Joe had died the year before and "Aunt" Flossie now lived by herself. She was sitting in a lawn chair next to the stoop and peered at us through her thick-lensed glasses. She wouldn't have recognized me if I hadn't waved and called out.

"Danny!" she said. "Is that Lily, too?"

Nick kind of gave her the once-over as if she were too old to bother with. We walked Lily to her door and saw her inside. Mrs. Winterspring came to the screen.

"Hello, boys," she said, red-nosed and tipsy, I think. "Treating my Lily like the lady she is?"

We assured her we were and danced down the steps waving good-bye.

"Gosh," Nick said, as we made our way between the yellow boxcar houses and back to the street, "I put my hand right in her lap digging around in that popcorn box." He nodded and cast me a glance. "She wants to," he assured me.

"Wants to—?"

"She wants to be licked."

I gaped at him. I didn't know whether he meant "spanked" or licked with the tongue and if with the tongue whether on the cheek or the nose—although I considered maybe the lips.

When he wiggled his eyebrows and screwed up his mouth like maybe I was a dimwit, I knew he'd been getting information from his older brother, far more information than mine had doled out.

It conjured up an image that wouldn't let go—and I told myself over and over it couldn't be true. I thought maybe she wanted to be kissed, but surely not *licked!*

"You're an idiot," I said.

I don't remember for sure, but either that day or the next we made our way across the vacant lot to the railroad tracks and then across the tracks to the granaries. We batted at the fiddlenecks and stepped around the foxtails, burrs nevertheless seeming to leap and spur deep in our socks to prick at our flesh. Often we would go down to the granaries next to the tracks just south of the old stockyards and let ourselves down in the maintenance tunnel that ran beneath the silos. The tunnel was about three feet wide by three feet high and maybe a hundred yards long. Prone on trolleys used by the workers, we'd use our hands to paddle ourselves toward the pin of light at the far end, brushing rats and mice out of the way with our BB guns. It was something to do.

When we arrived at the other end and crawled out, we were white with dust from the wheat. If we failed to wash ourselves off with the freestanding spigot, we itched. Before we got home we had scratched ourselves raw. Then the following day we'd do it again.

That afternoon, instead of trolleying ourselves through the tunnel, we climbed one of the silos. The silos were corrugated patchworks of riveted steel, about fifty feet high, the tops slightly domed with low rails running round. Nick went first, after a dare, and I followed him up the rusty ladder right to the top. Halfway up, he looked down at me and yelled through the wind, "She wants to, don't think she don't!" I stopped and clung to the rungs and took a deep breath, let the wind flap my pant legs and billow my shirt. He continued on up and I followed hand over hand. The wind pushed at me and when a shadow darkened the sun I looked up, but there was hardly a cloud in that fathomless blue. It was a crow, on locked wings, riding in circles the air. I crawled up the last few rungs and pulled myself onto the hobbled platform and sat. Before I sat I looked down. That's when my heart attacked me—like a crazy animal puffing itself up beneath my ribs and raging to get out.

"Don't be a Fraydy Cat," Nick said.

'*Acrophobia*,' Pop later explained. I wasn't sure I would ever get down, and the notion of descending the ladder was more frightening than trying to fly—just one leap would settle the bounce in my gut. I would either soar like a bird or plunge like a stone—and the notion of death was preferable to any such dread. I sat on my rump, leaning back against my braced arms. The wind whapped in my ears and thrashed in my hair. I didn't have my inhaler with me and each thud of my heart sopped at my breath. When Nick sidled toward me, probably to offer a comforting word, a lump of distrust rose in my throat and I went nearly berserk. "Don't come near me!" I screamed at my friend. "If you come any closer, I'll jump!" I remember the surprise in his eyes as he inched away in retreat.

That shadow again, and when I glanced up there were two.

"Look, Danny," he said, still trying. "How far you can see."

Below, to the north, a yellow diesel hostled between the depot and the stockyards, switching tank cars from this track to that. Each time it approached the highway, the semaphore bobbed down and traffic backed up until it hostled away. I watched and held on. Nick sat about two or three feet away and looked at me. I looked at him. The wind was blowing a little too fierce, and I was sick with terror and rage—then all at once clutched by a cold unthinkable thought.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “Look—” and he got up on his knees and walked on his knees to the rail. The rail was about knee high I could see when he stood. It had been riveted maybe a foot from the edge of the dome and ran the whole way around. He spread his arms wide, as if he might fly.

“Better sit down,” I told him, trying not to think what I’d thought.

“No. Look.” And in the attitude of flying he bent over the rail to see what he could. The wind snapped his hair and flared it around.

“Better sit down,” I told him, forgetting how life gets in the way of itself—and reached out my hand, hardly brushing the leg of his jeans.

Whether it was an ill-timed gust of wind or vertigo—who knows? He simply tipped forward and fell.

He was there and then gone.

I gazed at the space he had left.

If he cried out I couldn’t have heard for the wind.

“Omigosh!” I said to myself and let my hand fall.

On the other side of the railroad tracks, maybe three blocks away, someone had seen. What they had seen, I suppose, was two figures—unknowing whether children or adult—against the skyline fifty feet up. What they had seen was one rise to his feet, lean over the rail, and fall. What they had seen was the other one fail to move—unknowing how frozen he was. What they had seen—unknowing, of course—was the folly of youth. Just like that. There and then gone. And a future that would never again be what it was.

When the fire engine came I refused to look down. I still hadn’t moved. I was trying to stop time—or at least call it back. I was trying to

be nothing more than my tears in the wind. I was trying to be the wind in my ears. I was trying not to think what I'd thought. I was trying to dissolve into space. I was trying to never again be.

From below, I heard someone call.

It must have been some kind of eon before I saw the fireman's red helmet bob above the platform and beneath it the face. He had a rope coiled and slung over an arm. And then there were two. They were saying something, kneeling next to me, prying at my fingers and trying to get me to loosen my grip. My hands were bloody and raw from gripping the sharp metal hobs of the platform and my breath sighed out in a wheeze.

Over the grief-swollen wind in my ears, I couldn't hear what they said. I was too busy wondering, *What world now?*



The following day I sat in the Sheriff's office, my chair pulled up close to his desk. I could see Mom and Dad through the slat blind waiting outside—not *outside*, but in the waiting room or foyer or whatever it was: outside the Sheriff's office, waiting for me. I waved at them, with my gauzed hand.

"Just like that?" the sheriff asked me again. "Stood up in that rather stiff wind, leaned over the railing and fell?"

I looked from my mother to him. I didn't know what else to say. "He had his arms spread, like he was going to fly."

The Sheriff, a big man, grunted and scrubbed a hand through his hair. He screwed his rump tight to the chair and gave me the eye—or what I imagined might be *the eye*. "Your very best friend?" He turned the pencil he was holding upside down and tapped the eraser against the pad, but he didn't erase anything. "Tell me about this girl," he said. "Lily. The one you both liked—*like*."

I shrugged. "There's nothing to tell. She wasn't there."

“No.” He had gray, shaggy eyebrows, and he raised them in an unsettling way. “She wasn’t there. But that doesn’t mean she wasn’t *there*.” He peered at me, I think to see if I understood what he meant.

I knew what he meant but didn’t let on. He had icy blue eyes. I glanced toward the window again, but Mom wasn’t there; neither was Dad. Then again, I suppose they were *there*.

“Were you...maybe...mad at him? I mean just a little ticked off? Because of his feelings toward your girlfriend?”

I followed the room with my eyes back to his face. I looked at the county map on the wall. I didn’t look in his eyes. I wondered where he’d gotten his information about Nick’s feelings for Lily—or for that matter, mine. And then I looked in his eyes.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I told him.

“No, I suppose not.” He puckered his mouth to remove a slight smile. “Anything else you remember?”

I tried to remember whatever I could. I couldn’t remember the firemen getting me down. But I did remember standing at the bottom of the silo looking up. It was a long way up, but not as far up I suppose as far as it was down. By the time they got me down, Nick was already in the ambulance and they took me to the hospital in the fire truck, the Chief’s pickup truck. I’d have rather ridden in the water truck or even the hook-and-ladder truck. The Fire Chief didn’t even put on his siren or run the red lights. I don’t remember looking out the window when we left the granaries but I suppose I did, because sitting in the Sheriff’s office that afternoon, I remembered distinctly the spot where Nick must have hit—the concrete black with his blood.

“I watched Dad kill a beef once,” I told him.

“What?”

“I watched him and my Uncle Jim stick a pig.”

He gazed at me and leaned back in his chair, a little confused. But it’s true—although now it strikes me as odd: I remembered watching a man slaughter pigs at the stockyards. At the time I was probably about five, maybe six. Buddy and I would go down there with Dad. We would lean against the fence of the sty and watch the pigs slop. Finally, Buddy



would say, "How about that one, Pop? He's a big hog." Dad would pay for the pig and the man would slaughter it and hack it up for the freezer.

Uncle Jim and Dad slaughtered a pig at Grandpa Perry's one time. It was a "hog"; they called it a "hog." To me it was a pig, but not a "Practical Pig"—it was the other one that made its house out of straw.

They drove the pig from its sty into a chute and up on a ramp where Uncle Jim got its head in a noose. I had to hold the bucket under its throat while Dad stuck it. It squealed and snorted, of course. Uncle Jim yanked at the noose while the bucket grew heavy and the pig grunted and jerked and I watched its life drain away. Finally, with a wretched, sickening croak, it slumped on the ramp, all its blood gone.

They shot a cow once in that corral ("kill a beef" was the term). It was a big red Hereford with a patch of white on its head. Grandpa levered a round into his 1921 Savage 99 and shot it behind the ear. It was less painful than killing a pig—less painful for me. Although a side of beef, together with a brisket of pork, will keep you alive until spring.

The Sheriff got up and went to the door. He opened the door and called for my Mom. I was glad Lily wasn't there, because streams of emotion had begun to wash around in me. Such are the sorrows you see, the woes that you do, the ambivalent wonders that grow in your heart as a child. I couldn't properly see out of my eyes or make the sobs stop.

"Necessary evils," Mom said, "in this veil of tears." She hunkered beside my chair in front of the Sheriff's desk and held my head to her breast. I don't know where the Sheriff had gone, but I was vaguely aware that the door was closed and it was just me and my Mom. Her blouse was wet from my snot.

"Nothing means anything," I think I thought through my tears and may have told her as well. And she may have said then, if not later, I think, "No. That's not true. Everything means something. We just don't always know what."

"He wasn't anybody," I tried to believe. "And neither am I. I don't want to be somebody. I'd rather be dead, and I wish he was, too."

"Well, he's not dead," she assured me. "He's still alive—and the doctor thinks he might live. And anyway, death doesn't belong to the

dead. Just as our lives belong to one another, so do our deaths. In the event he dies, his death will be yours, and rightfully so. He's inside you now, either dead or alive, this incident is." She awkwardly cradled my head and, hunkering, rocked on the balls of her feet. "And that is sufficient, my honey, my sweet. That is enough."

I didn't quite understand what she was talking about—and yet somewhere inside me I did. Even worse, I came to understand that although he remained inside me, his death wasn't mine anymore than the hope for my death might have been his, because Nick didn't die.

