

# NEBRASKA'S

DIRTY FORGOTTEN SAD CHILD



# MAP

EXCERPTS

from

Chapters 3, 5 & 12

# **BOOKS BY ROGER LADD MEMMOTT**

## **Novels**

Nebraska's Map

Voices

Heaven's Way

Sweet Sally Ann

The Gypsy Lover

## **Short Fiction**

Gardening without Gloves

## **Poetry**

Riding the Absolute

## **Non-Fiction**

The Divine Paradox

# NEBRASKA'S

DIRTY FORGOTTEN SAD CHILD



# MAP

**A NOVEL**

**Roger Ladd Memmott**



A GEMSTONE BOOK



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♦ CALIFORNIA / MICHIGAN ♦

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*Ex Malo Bonum*

**FOR**

Marrienne

&

Those Who Love Her

The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location.

—Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*

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EXCERPT...

### ✧ 3 ✧

RUBI LAY AWAKE IN HER ROOM at the top of the stairs hugging the quilt to her chin and gazing at the shadow of the overhead light fixture in the center of the ceiling. She was thinking of herself as a moron while at the same time wondering what a moron was and how a moron differed from an imbecile or an idiot, finally coming to the conclusion that she was all three. There were those who thought she was a heartbreaker without a heart of her own. And she knew this to be true, for even now, lying in her room at the top of the stairs hugging the quilt to her chin and gazing at the shadow of the overhead light fixture in the center of the ceiling, she had the horrible urge to hurt someone she loved. Or, no, to love someone she'd hurt. Um...*whichever*.

A cool green glow came from the lightly gurgling fish tank in the corner of the room. She gazed at the fixture and wondered if when you look in a mirror you're looking at who you are, who you might be, or who you once were, meaning, of course, the time



it takes to perceive your own image before it strikes the eye's retina and registers somewhere in the gooey mess of the brain. For instance, who was Wyatt looking at when he looked at Jolene in the mirror downstairs? The Jolene who was or the one who had already been? Just contours and shadows of what they had done and what he might paint? What if he'd stepped through the mirror and embraced her? Who then would he be? And her mother. Her father. The bits and pieces of who she was now. She listened, but she couldn't hear anything in particular, other than the sea green whisper of the aquarium. It murmured wet fish voices, sounding like the far away blubber of ancestral grieving before some gill creature got the notion and slithered from earth's primordial soup onto dry land. Of course, she could always salve her own good sense by acting reluctant to quell some notion of innate or fatalistic inevitabilities. But the matter of sheer personal choice was neither here nor there to her, for to accede to personal choice would undermine her sense of deterministic gloom.

The seagreen glow freshened the darkness and wavered against the ceiling. It's funny how you spend your life looking at things you don't see. Or listening to what you don't hear: the hush of your breath. Jesse must have come down from the roof, she thought, now warming his feet against Jolene's. She wondered if they were doing it and listened to see if she could hear them, like she sometimes could, the tormented whispers and sighs, and dug the ball of one foot painfully into the opposite's arch. Let a man in the barn. She lay there, uneasy and irritated, antsy and anxious, like when she had a rock in her shoe she couldn't wait to get out, and after a while she got up, groped around on the dresser for the box, and tapped a sprinkle or two of fish food into the tank, wondering if she hadn't already fed them, or maybe Jolene had. Any-

way, they were his fish. She didn't even know how she had ended up with them. One of the girls who had helped her move out—not Jolene, she knew whose fish they were—must have dumped them into a Ziploc bag of water to transfer them back and set the aquarium up in her room. Anyway, what'd she care? She didn't even like fish, well, seafood, she liked that, scallops and lobster, a good halibut—but you couldn't really call seafood *fish*. Trout. Then again, trout. Breakfast trout, like when she turned seventeen and she and Billy Ray Evans went camping in Ranch Canyon and he came back with a mess early in the morning, rolled them in cornflakes and fried them up, then afterward...afterward they'd gone back in the tent. They'd been sleeping together for nearly a year but never done *that*...or done it *like that*. Little did she know she'd come out of that tent with fish in her belly and something else, too. Um—she gave the box a final tap—as big as her forearm from elbow to wrist and turned blue as a cabbage using those lungs. They wrapped her in a pink blanket and put a diaper on her, named her Jenny Lee after her grandmama, but who are you when you don't live long enough to hear your name called?

The stripers came to the surface kissing for snacks while the bluefish threatened the shark. She lifted the lid and swirled a forefinger in the water to chase him away; then she stepped into the darkness of the hall, leaving the door ajar.

Almost immediately she felt a chill, drafty old house no matter how much they worked to renovate it. But it wasn't just the draft from a loose window or gap between a jamb and its ill-fitting door. She shuddered to think it and already wished she hadn't gotten up out of bed. She hated sleeping alone, but hated even more the idea of loving him so, and the way he loved her, with a desperation that bordered on lunacy, and after all she had done! If the ba-

by's ghost came out from under the shadows of the stairwell and clutched her, she'd give in just to embrace the shame that throbbed in her bones. And still she knew what she was likely to do.

Through a window at the far end of the hall, she could see the clouds beginning to part, a wash of moonlight seeping behind. The hardwood floor was cold on the soles of her feet and protested once, then twice, as she moved toward the window. The moon shed a dull dry light on the new fallen snow and made a circle of the place, sleepily acknowledging the geometry of barnyard shadows, from the triangulated water tower that stood like a dark sentinel overlooking the barn to a patch of chicken houses and the rabbit hutch and the pigpen and then to the perfectly squared corrals and blue snow covered fields that rolled away beyond them, finally meeting the black desert and a glint of railroad tracks that spread away to the foothills. So, she supposed, like the rest of the lunatics she'd been drawn by the moon, right out of her bed and down the hall to where she stood now, but not the moon in the sky; it was the golden moon set back like a little gob of fire aglow in the barn. That's what had drawn her, not the Christmas moon agog in the sky but a glow in the window of the bunkhouse. Well, as much as she coveted and hated and relished the idea of tramps in the barn, no matter how ambivalent the decision she'd made, she hoped the child was warm. And now, above the water tower and beyond the tubular concrete silo thrust up like a totem or an obelisk without corners, Freudian and obscene, she could see a smattering of stars glinting distant and cold in the sky, the center of some vast configuration involving the whole order of the universe like a thousand sparkling eyes peering down upon her. She stood there in her nightgown, shivering, her dark bottle-dyed hair glistening, arms folded beneath her breasts, in this rather ungodly

but heavenly light, and then she crossed to the landing and put her hand on the banister. She stood there, hating herself, applauding herself, gazing up the dark stairway leading to the attic, and all at once gave in to what she knew she would do.

EXCERPT...

✧ 5 ✧

IT WAS STILL EARLY when Rubi heard the knock on the front door, and right away she knew whose knuckles were attached to it. It wasn't really a knock, it was more of a *thump, thump, thump*. But she knew and she hurried down the hall, past the stairs, into the entryway, before Jolene might get to the door. *Thump, thump, thump*. He didn't have brains enough to use the bell. She could see his silhouette through the frosted glass pane, stocky and dark, looming like a shadow to stave away light. She pressed her hands down against her thighs, as if smoothing wrinkles out of an apron she didn't have on or drying damp palms. She fingered a fallen strand of hair behind her ear and opened the door.

He said, "Gimme my fish."

He hadn't shaved for a week, at least—certainly not since he got out—and his hair was uncombed. He looked like something out of GQ except for the clothes. The clothes looked like something out of L.L. Bean, rumpled and pre-shrunk, Levis and a plaid

jacket slightly too small. His rugged good looks—in spite of a pimple on his lower right jaw and the way his hair fell. She had to admit he looked kind of sexy even when not. When he poked his face close and widened his eyes in a *Well?* sort of grimace and then swayed to the side, she could see Spug standing behind him, at the foot of the steps, the big dumb dope. He grinned like there was no tomorrow, Spug, like an imbecile grins when presented with a string of glittering bobbles. One bubble off plumb is what Uncle Roy called him: *Both of them are, him and his sidekick*. Which Rubi understood to mean she, too, was one bubble off plumb to take up with their likes. He stood hunched in his letterman's jacket from bygone days, fists punched in the pockets, hatless and ruddy-faced, hair sprouting like a feather duster atop his bullet-shaped skull—always ready to step forward and run interference given the score.

"Gimme my fish," Billy Ray said again. "What else'd you steal?"

"You want your fish," she said. "I'll give you your fish. You wait right there on that porch. Don't you come in this house. If you come in this house, I'll call Wyatt. If you come in this house he'll throw you out on your ass. *I'll* throw you out on your ass. You want your fish? I'll give you your fish. I'll give you your goddamn fish, since you'd rather have a carp than a kid. I'll give you your fish. You wait right there."

"I want my aquarium, too."

"I'll give you your aquarium," she said. "Your goddamn aquarium. I'll give you your fish."

She was on the verge of hysterics and she knew it, his fish. She turned and took the stairs two at a time, the fabric of the skinny jeans taut against her thighs, feeling his filthy eyes on her hips. She couldn't lift the aquarium. She would have to drain it first. She

got a pan, the dog dish, and started scooping the water out and carrying it across the hall to the bathroom to pour it in the sink. When she got the water low enough, she scooped out the fish and hurried back down the stairs. He was standing in the entryway, but the door was still open and Spug hadn't moved.

"You get out of this house," she said, "you want your fish." And holding the dog dish in the bowl of her arm, she pointed with the other, extending her arm and jutting her fist, all but the middle finger to skewer the air. He backed though the door onto the porch and she got the bowl between her hands and slopped the fish at him, water and fish, fish flopping around on the porch and two or three flung as far as Spug at the foot of the steps, now gasping in snow.

"You're crazy," he yelled. "You freaking loon!" He was on his knees grasping for fish. She kicked one off the porch with the side of her shoe. "What's the fish got to do with it?" he said. "What's the fish got to do with it? There's three hundred dollars of fish in that tank—"

"Was," she said. "*Was* three hundred dollars of fish in that tank. Now there's not a penny's worth."

"You freaking slut," he said. He was almost crying, she thought.

But the fish worried her, and somewhere in the quick of her mind and stopped in her heart she knew he was right. What's the fish got to do with it? She got down beside him, on her hands and knees, both of them crawling and clutching for fish. She was sobbing in big belly gulps and could hardly see for the blur. He got as many as he could back in the pan while she rushed in the house to fill a pitcher of water. Then she remembered and got a gallon Ziploc bag. When she returned to the porch, he was counting to make sure he'd gotten them all.

"Here," she said, "put them in this." She filled the Ziploc bag from the pitcher of water; then she held the bag open while he dropped in the fish—two, three, five, seven, nine.

"That's all of them, isn't it?" she asked in a conciliatory tone.

"I think so," he said. "What about my aquarium?"

"I'll get it," she said. She went back in the house and closed the door, leaving him clutching the bag on the porch. She locked the door and glared at his blackened shadow through the frosted pane. When she got to the top of the stairs and in her bedroom, she worked the empty aquarium with its colorful castles and bridges and gravel and plants onto a chair and nudged the chair across the room. She unlocked the window and lifted the bottom pane all the way up and stuck her head out into the cold winter air and yelled for him to come around to the side of the house. When he appeared below, two stories down, holding the bag of fish like an idiot and looking up at the open window, she jockeyed the aquarium from the chair up onto the window sill and poked her head out as far as she could while it teetered against the sill, to say, "Here's your fish tank," and gave it a shove. Billy Ray had to jump back as it tumbled toward him. Even the cushion of snow wasn't sufficient to contain it; a foot from his feet it collapsed on itself, came apart in a shower of bright splinters and shards.

The expression on his face was worth it—amazed disbelief—before it transitioned to outrage and slowly warped to disgust.

"You've got a demon inside you!" he screamed, looking up, clutching the bag with one hand and with the other raising his fist.

Spug came around the corner, laughing stupidly, "Keepin' it in the fambly now, ain't she? I guess she is, ain't she?"



"She'd fuck a goat," Billy Ray said, plucking the little blue castle out of the snow and looking up with his face all distorted, less angry than sad.

She jabbed her tongue at him, like a two-year old, flashed them the finger and slammed the window shut. When she turned and saw the empty space on the dresser and felt how empty inside, she leaned against the window sill and let herself weep.

SHE WAS STANDING IN THE KITCHEN peeling carrots over the sink when she heard a faint tap at the door that led from the mudroom. At first she thought it was him and picked up the serrated bread knife, the one she had used on her wrists, thinking there might be a better use for it now. But when the tap tap tap repeated itself, she laid the knife on the counter and wiped her hands on a dish towel. On the way to the door, she snugged a ladderback chair to the table. In the mudroom she could see nothing through the window of the door but the top of a faded red hat. Before opening the door she pressed her hands down across her thighs, again as if smoothing wrinkles away from her skirt, like Aunt Millie used to do.

The little girl looked up at her from beneath a sweep of unruly bangs that poked out from a red stocking cap yanked down tight on her head. She had strange azure eyes, and the eyes didn't go with the straw hair, or with anything else about her. She held Rubi's gaze and fashioned an odd little smile that seemed even more out of place given the scowl in those eyes.

"Well, hello," Rubi said.

"Lemme innerduce myself," the child said. "What's yore name?"

"My name? I'm Rubi," Rubi said. "But you can call—"

"The purty lady," she said, "what let us stay in the barn. Me and my Paps."

"Why, thank you," Rubi said, not sure what else she might say.

"We was thinking of making a samwich," the little girl said, "and thought maybe you might lend us a slab of cheese or two. Two slabs, one for Paps and one for me."

"Well, come in, little sister," said Rubi, "and we'll see if we might."

Although the sky was clear and it had warmed up a degree or two, the girl wore only the thin rag of a faded blue dress that came to her knees and a sooty-looking jacket at least two sizes too small. She kept her hands laced in front of her, as if she assumed it was the posture of politeness, or perhaps someone had instructed her so.

"I ain't nobody's sister," she said, stepping inside.

"Well, that's just a figure of speech," Rubi told her, "a term of endearment."

"A term of in-what-ment?"

"Endearment, honey. I'm just trying to be friendly."

"I ain't never had no friends," she said. "Cept, well, maybe Suzi Collister."

Rubi opened the refrigerator and told her to sit down, which she did not. "We'll, I could be your friend, if you want."

"I don't know you," she said. She was dripping water and mud on the linoleum.

"I don't know you either," Rubi countered. She pulled a brick of smoked Gouda from the bottom drawer of the refrigerator and closed the door.

"I know me," said the little girl, biting at the edge of a nail on her middle finger that poked through her mitten as if she were

biting at the edge of defiance, trying to chew away as much as she could.

Rubi unwrapped the cheese and lay it on the cutting board and hacked off a half dozen slices, using the serrated kitchen knife. She put the slices in a Ziploc bag and handed the bag to the girl. As an afterthought, she went to the refrigerator again, took out a partially used log of salami and said, "Maybe this will go good with the cheese."

The girl snatched it out of Rubi's hand, said "Thanks," as an afterthought, and turned to leave.

"Say," Rubi said, "what's your name, anyway? You were going to introduce yourself. I'd like to call you by your name."

The girl turned around. Her mouth was pursed and set, lips sucked in and pinched, like an old woman's mouth caved in around her missing teeth after she'd eaten a persimmon. She looked at Rubi, grimaced as if she had just swallowed a stone, and said, "I ain't got no name. Paps never did give me one. I ain't nobody for the most part."

"Well, your Paps must call you something. What does he call you?"

"He calls me Daughter. That's what I am, ain't it? Otherwise he'd call me Son—" she let a grin slither and jiggle under her nose "—which he does sometimes, to be a card."

"Well, what should I call you?"

"Whatever you want. Or don't call me at all." She let the screen door slam behind her and skipped down the steps into the snow, toting her salami and cheese.

Through the porch screen Rubi watched her cross the snow-crusted tractor ruts back to the barn, then she left the mudroom and returned to the kitchen and carrots. She hadn't been whisking

the peelings into the sink for two minutes when she heard another tap on the door.

When she opened it, the little girl looked up at her from beneath the red hat. "Yes?"

"I don't mean to be no trouble," she said. "But maybe you got a slice of bread or two? To go with the cheese and salami?"

"You don't have any bread?"

"No'm. And maybe you could put a little butter on the bread. Paps likes butter on his bread."

"Well, come in," Rubi said, holding the door open and standing aside. "And you might want to take off those boots this time and leave them here by the separator."

The child sat down on a bench against the wall and hefted a red rubber boot to the opposite knee. The boot had a hole in the sole, and when she got it off Rubi could see a piece of wet cardboard stuck in the bottom. She didn't have any socks on.

"Thanks, honey. Don't you have any socks?"

"I never wear 'em," she said.

"Well, if I give you a pair will you wear them?"

"Dunno. Never can tell. Might."

"Come in the kitchen and sit down."

When Rubi came back with a pair of wool ski socks, the girl was sitting in a chair at the table with her arms folded on the tablecloth and her chin on her arms. "I don't like scratchy socks," she said.

"I thought you didn't ever wear socks."

"I don't if'n they scratch."

"We'll, try these. Maybe I've got a pair of old boots you can use."

"What's that?" she wondered, absently stuffing the socks in the pocket of her coat and pointing to a glass jar next to the breadbasket on a shelf over the counter. She knew what it was but didn't want to say. It was full of pretty bobbles wrapped in cellophane.

"I thought you might notice that," said Rubi. She lifted the candy jar down from its shelf and pried off the lid, holding it low enough so the child could peer inside and choose what she would.

"I like green," she said, plucking one out. "An red." She fished around in the jar. "They's a purple one, too. And maybe one them yellors for Paps?" She looked at Rubi Lee, who nodded, and took two or three more. She stuffed them in her pocket with the socks, leaving one out on the table top as Rubi returned the jar to the shelf.

"Thisyer's a big kitchen," she said, unwrapping the sweet. "Is them peaches up on that shelf?" Pointing.

"Peaches," Rubi said, following the invisible line extending from the child's finger. "Yes they are. We bottled them last summer."

"Them jars is gathering dust," she said, swapping the candy from one cheek to the other. "Peaches going to waste."

"We eat them," Rubi said. "We bottled twenty-four jars, Jolene did."

"Well, they's about twenty-three left on that shelf up there. So's you eat em slice by slice I'd guess."

"Oh, I don't think there're that many." Rubi stepped back and looked up at the shelf, the golden syrup swimming about the yellow half-moons in the shiny glass jars. Although they'd given away a dozen or so jars, apparently they hadn't eaten as many as she'd thought. "Would you like a bottle of peaches to take out in the barn along with the bread?"

"I'd eatum," she said. "Paps and me would. Eatum with our chicken supper out there."

"Chicken supper?"

"Paps thinks maybe they's a chicken he can cook."

"Well," said Rubi, "you tell your Paps not to touch any chickens unless he talks to me first."

"Um," said the girl, sucking.

Rubi got the stepstool and positioned it in front of the counter so she could step up and reach the top shelf. The jar she came down with was sticky with syrup around the edge of the brass lid so she ran it under the faucet and then dried it with a dishcloth, the child following her every move.

"Peaches is kind of like eating oysters," said the child. "Don't you think?" She leaned forward again and folded her arms on top of the red and white checkered tablecloth and rested her chin on her arms. "Did you ever eat a oyster?"

"I have," Rubi said. She dried her hands on the dishcloth.

"I ate a oyster oncet. It was pretty good, kind of like sucking snot down your throat. Don't you think?"

"Um," Rubi said. "Well."

"Paps says some people don't like oysters," she said. "But if you can suck snot, you can eat a oyster. Don't you think?"

"Well, honey, I'm not sure it matters what I think—about that, at least." She set the jar of peaches on the table next to the girl's elbow.

"When I eat them peaches," she said, "I'm gonna pretend they's oysters."

*Well, for that matter, Rubi thought, I guess you could pretend they're snot, but she didn't say it.*

"Sometimes when I suck my snot," the child said, pushing herself away from the table, "I pretend it's peaches."

"Well, you are a master of cuisine," Rubi said, "if ever I've known one. An epicurean. A gourmet chef!"

"I are, aren't I?" the child agreed, grinning from ear to ear; but it was obvious she hadn't a clue what Rubi was talking about. After a minute, she said, "Where's Oh-maw-hah?"

"Omaha?"

"That's where I come from Paps says. That's where I was borned. That's where we hopped the freight."

"Really? Omaha?"

"Where is it?" she said.

"Omaha? It's in the Midwest. The breadbasket of the country. The heartland. It's in Nebraska."

"Nebraska?"

"Nebraska," said Rubi.

"Nebraska," said the child. "Where'd anybody come up with a name like that'n?"

"It's an Indian name, I think. The Omaha Indians maybe. I don't know. It's kind of pretty, don't you think? Neh-brass-ka."

"Nebraska," she said. "Maybe I gotsum Indian in me." And she hooted and patted her mouth with her hand. "Wah-wah-wah-wah-wah!"

"Wouldn't surprise me," Rubi muttered to herself, using the serrated bread knife to saw half a dozen slices from yesterday's loaf.

EXCERPT...

## ✧ 12 ✧

IT WAS NEARLY TWO O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING when the lights went out. Upstairs Rubi had fallen asleep on top of the quilt next to the child, and Wyatt was in the kitchen microwaving a wedge of leftover meatloaf, still trying to unwind. When the timer went *ding* the soft strain of Jewel singing "O, Holy Night" was choked off as if she had swallowed her tongue. Either Jewel stopped singing and the lights went out or the lights went out and Jewel stopped singing. Wyatt crossed the kitchen to the double cabinets above the refrigerator and reached for a flashlight. It didn't occur to him that it might be something other than a power failure. He turned on the flashlight and found his way back to the microwave, but the meatloaf was cold, warm around the edges but cold in the center. He poured himself a glass of milk and sat at the kitchen table with the flashlight next to his elbow propped on its butt-end like a torch, swamping the ceiling in a dim amber glow, and picked at the meatloaf. Symme was upstairs lying on the floor



in Rubi's room, at the foot of the bed. She didn't hear the scratching on the back porch like Wyatt did and he vaguely wondered if he or Rubi or Jolene had let the dog out and forgotten about her in the midst of the child's hullabaloo. He clutched the flashlight and got up and went into the mudroom to let her back in. When he opened the door, the one-eyed fat man was standing on the other side of the screen; in the glare of the light he looked like a corpulent worm just dug itself from the nether world to the surface of earth. He said, "We'll need the girl now." He was bundled in his pea jacket with the collar turned up and his head sat in the well of it like a moss-covered slug, the turban a fungus growing on top. His arms were hanging at his sides and in his left hand the tip of a long barrel revolver tapped at his knee. Behind him, standing at the bottom of the porch, dimly, just beyond the reach of light, Wyatt could see but a hint of the other two. "The little one," he explained. "The one come with your man in the barn."

Wyatt didn't say anything. His mind was buzzing with possibilities. He could slam and lock the door and bolt upstairs for the shotgun. Where he had placed the .300 Savage if not in the mudroom he couldn't recall. Either Rubi or Jolene had the pistol with her. The other guns were in the gun safe and Jesse had the key. It was two o'clock in the morning and this vigilante, this bank-robbing murdering hobo, was standing on his porch backed in the shadows by meanness and idiocy. It didn't make sense.

"What girl?" he said. "It's two o'clock in the morning."

"Them in the night gets the most done," said the fat man. The caul over his bad eye was as opaque and slimy as the scum from a snail. He hadn't raised the gun, just let it sag at his knee. "I got a hunch she knows where it's hid."

"Where what's hid?"

"We torn his leg apart and it weren't in there like Bink thought. We'll need talk to her just to make sure."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Wyatt.

The man raised the gun and scratched his beard with the tip of the barrel. The idiot stepped from the shadows into a vague prism of light and Wyatt redirected the glare catching him up in it. His nose and ears appeared red from the cold and he was holding what looked like a pipe or some sort of club or baton in his hand, maybe a foot and a half or so long.

"He's the one done it," he said. "Knock my tooth right outta my head."

"I know who done it," the fat man said irritably, casting his voice across his shoulder with a slight jerk of his jaw. "Just give us the girl and we'll get on with our bidnis."

"The idio—your friend there—said there wasn't a girl. Where was she when you killed the man in the barn?"

"Who says we kilt any man in a barn?" came a voice from the shadows.

"Why'd you stick the shears in him?"

"He was squirmin'," said the idiot.

"You fucking imbecile," said the voice.

"Yore a fucking imbecile," said the idiot.

"Where was who?" said the fat man.

"The girl," said Wyatt, "the simpleton said doesn't exist."

"I got a hunch she knows where it's hid," repeated the fat man. "Her who don't exist." He put his hand on the knob of the screen door, but when he tugged it was locked. He grinned from somewhere deep in his beard. Wyatt took a step back. "Her ol' man stole summit from us," he said. "We just want us a chat, me and the kid."

"Money?" said Wyatt.

"And then some," said the fat man.

"I don't know where she is," said Wyatt. "She took off after the ambulance came and we haven't seen her since."

"The girl who don't exist?"

"According to the idiot."

"This is tiresome," said the fat man, rolling his head in the cone of his upturned collar. "I aim to have me a chat with that kid or tear this farm from chicken feathers to cow shit. Now I'muna axe you once more—"

"You don't think I won't call the Sheriff?"

"Time he gets here you'll not have breath enough to call your dog."

Wyatt swung the door to and slammed the bolt in place before the slug came through the center panel. He lunged back toward the jamb and into the kitchen as a second round shattered the glass and penetrated the opposite wall about a foot and a half above the first.

"I'll have her," the Sheikh shouted, "and ever shoat in its crib!"

*What the hell does that mean,* thought Wyatt as he swung through the kitchen, following the sweep of light before him, and bounded down the hall to the stairs—*ever shoat in its crib?*

"What is it?" said Rubi. The jab of light caught her up where she was standing at the top of the stairs like a ghoul, the wide neck of her nightgown fallen over one shoulder and her interlocked fists clasped beneath her chin in the semblance of either freezing or prayer.

"Where's the kid?" said Wyatt, gulping for breath and taking the stairs two at a time. "Where's the gun? The pistol?"

"She's in my bed, asleep. What is it?"

"Those freaking maniacs want to talk to her. Get her upstairs in the attic. No, better yet—" But he was already down the hall cutting himself off, a wash of light and the blink of a shadow as he entered Rubi's room.

"Jolene's," called Rubi, half in a hush, hurling the words as if hurling a stone. "The pistol's in Jolene's!"

There was a slamming and splintering of wood from below, as if a door were being pulled off its hinges. Wyatt shot out of Rubi's room and leapt up the attic stairs. When he came back down he had the shotgun in both hands ratcheting a shell in the barrel. Jolene was standing in front of Rubi's door next to Rubi. She held the Twerp against her, the pistol tucked beneath her adjacent arm close to her ribs.

Wyatt took the pistol and jammed it into the waist of his pants and gave her the flashlight and shuttled the three of them into the room where the child was sleeping and pulled the door closed. "Don't turn that light on," he whispered back through the door, "unless you absolutely need to. Call nine-one-one on your cell. And don't let that dog out, they'll shoot her."

The door opened a crack and Rubi poked her head out. "I left my cell in the kitchen, I think. Jolene's is in her purse downstairs in her room."

Wyatt clawed the top of her head in his hand as if he were grasping a volleyball and shoved it not too gently back in the room, yanking the door closed as he did, then he opened it and handed her the pistol and told them to shove the dresser in front of the door. "Is she still sleeping?" he wanted to know. "Lock her in the closet if you need to."

He made his way back down the hall to the landing at the top of the stairs where he stopped and listened and tried not to breathe.

With the furnace off, the house was beginning to settle and chill. He wished Jesse were home, then on second thought he was glad he was not. He held the shotgun with his index finger resting behind the trigger ring against the safety, his left hand gripping the forestock, and knelt behind the balustrade at the top of the stairs and tried not to breathe. It was light enough in the entryway below to see if a shadow might move. When one did, he snapped the safety flush with the steel of the trigger guard and wormed his finger against the trigger. Individual panels of light fell through the cut glass panes on either side of the door and through the central window as well, each resting like a pale stain on the floor. The sweat beneath his arms was already cold and it was time for a pill but he had none and if he could have reached beneath his ribs to rip his heart out of his chest he would have happily done so to get it to quit and never again worried if it skipped or failed to beat.

Somebody knocked something over but whether in the kitchen or in the parlor or down the hall in one of the bedrooms he couldn't be sure. Something else fell and ticked across the floor...*laub, laub, laub*...followed by a brief curse.

"I guess he's gottem a gun," growled a voice from below. "Git up them stairs, Andy, and see if he's gottem a gun."

"You git up them stairs," returned Andy, using the softened voice of the idiot. "If he's gottem a gun he might shoot me."

"Naw," said the voice. "He won't shoot a nice feller like you."

"I'll shoot you both, goddamnit," hissed the Sheikh, "if you don't close your pie holes." Then after a minute, he hollered, "I don't guess you called the Sheriff I bet." When no answer was forthcoming, he said louder, "Just let us have the little bitch and we'll call it a night." The Sheikh's voice appeared to be coming from directly below Wyatt where the underpart of the upstairs

landing ceilinged the downstairs hall. He did a Russian duck squat to the edge of the stairs. A board creaked and a slug smashed up through the floor and into the ceiling and may have lodged in the rafters somewhere or kept going right through the roof to blister a star.

"I'll give you brave sonsabitches another five percent you get me that kid, one of you will."

"Make it six," one of them answered.

"Six it is."

In the following quiet the house seemed to settle into itself and breathe a disquieting sigh. And that sigh was broken only by the *tick...tick...tick* of the Regulator clock in the parlor and then a brief whirl before it struck the half hour, the monosyllabic note briefly held and resonating as though it were too late before dying away.

*Tick...tick...tick...*

When the simpleton burst up the stairs, Wyatt didn't know it was the simpleton until just before he shot him. It was simply a lumbering shadow, monstrous, like a hunchbacked hog clambering toward him on its fore and hind hoofs and when it was maybe three steps from the top the blast lifted it back on its hind feet, stood it straight up as if it were a man and spun it head over heels back down the stairs. The first thought that entered his head was that if he was still alive in the morning he would have to see the results of what he had done. It wasn't that the idiot had an unpleasant face; it was just that it was unsettling to look at with its persistent grin and gawking ears. He hadn't uttered a word lunging up the stairs, except maybe a grunt, and now from wherever he lay sprawled at the bottom, he still didn't speak and Wyatt supposed he might not have any teeth left in his mouth or even a tongue.

"Goddamn, I didn't think he'd do it," said the voice that wasn't the Sheikh's, and Wyatt wasn't sure whether it was talking about the idiot or him.

Behind him, Rubi had the door cracked to see who it was: the recipient of gunshot and rattling the house like a hovel of hogs—whether it was Wyatt or not.

"Them goblums git in the house?" came the child's amazed voice, and Wyatt jammed the slide down and back to discard the shell and load the barrel again.

"Is he dead?" wondered the Sheikh.

"I dunno," came the miserable voice. "Are you dead, you fucking imbecile? If you're alive don't say a word." When no word was forthcoming, he said, "See that? He's as alive now as much as before!"

"Yore a heartless sumbitch," said the Sheikh. "Now wot're we gonna do fer fun?"

"We git the little bitch she's of age we can doer fer fun."

The heartless voice seemed to be coming from the parlor. The Sheikh said, "Keep your slop shut. Five minutes from now they won't know if we're still in this house or gone." When he clucked and kissed, some signal it seemed, Symme started to bark from the room down the hall. The mean one was going to have to come across the entryway to get out of the house. Wyatt didn't know whether he was armed or not. How many guns did they have? He had crawled to the other side of the landing and now sat like a gargoyle hugging the wall. Although his heart had settled to a trot the inside of his head still rung like a bell. A thumb of fire sprayed with an after-crack, and another behind it, when Bink, if that was his name, burst from the parlor firing two or three rounds. He apparently stumbled over the idiot to the sound of something that

clattered and rolled on the floor, and when Wyatt saw the muzzle flash, he pulled the trigger again and ratcheted a third shell from the chamber in a single clean stroke.

Before the forestock was in place came an agonized shriek, then a whimper tiering up to a glass-breaking pitch, a whine like a girl's: "Goddamnit, he got me I think, part in the leg, part in the hand."

"Stop yer bawlin. Kin you walk?"

"Ikin walk."

"YOU!" shouted the Sheikh. "You who give us the duck!" And there arose in the dark a rough anomalous laugh, a kind of witch's cackle, a devil's laugh, an angry laugh, deranged and demented but not quite insane. "You won't sleep till your dead!" It was more than a promise, it was an oath, and Wyatt gathered his legs beneath him and stood up as they apparently backed their way down the hall and into the kitchen and as far as he could tell out of the house.





## About the Author

ROGER LADD MEMMOTT is the author of four previous novels—*Voices*, *Heaven's Way*, *Sweet Sally Ann*, and *The Gypsy Lover*—and a story collection, *Gardening without Gloves*. He is a recipient of the WRITER'S DIGEST NATIONAL BOOK AWARD for his book of poems, *Riding the Absolute*. He lives on the West Coast with his wife and family.

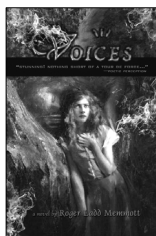
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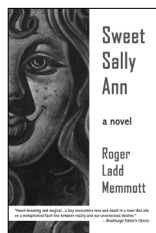
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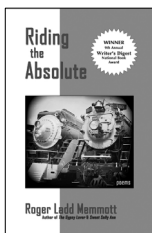
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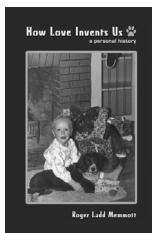
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