

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	xi
Ghost Town	1
Hard Times Ahead	15
Sliding Down the Milky Way	27
Be Careful What You Wish For	39
Elitch Gardens	49
Never Mind	63
Good-bye, Old Kid	77
Pipe Dreams	87
Wonderful Words of Life	103
Lost Boy	115

How Is It Where You Are?	129
Fibber McGee's Closet	141
Secrets	153
Saved	171
I Wonder Why-why-why-why	183
Little Deaths & Minor Resurrections	195
Love Songs	207

GHOST TOWN

GRAMP, 1930

Gramp went to fetch Billy himself after the telegram arrived announcing that Carlene had died. Grandma took to her bed, turned her face to the rose patterned wallpaper. Gramp sat at her back, careful not to mar her Double Wedding Ring quilt, tentatively reached his hand out toward his wife but could not think what to offer. He shrugged his shoulders, stood, said well then, and clumped off to the Elmyra train station.

See, he stands on the brick platform with his sheepskin jacket pulled snug against the wind. His shoulders sag. Metal clasps clang against a flagpole, the ground bare with scattered piles of dirty snow. His breath freezes in front of his face. It's early, the light gray and diffused. His jaw aches, clamped in anger.

The train *shuff-shuffs* onto the platform, and Gramp heaves himself up the steps to the passenger car. He's gotten heavy, his wavy hair white, his lower lip scarred from the cancer Dr. Blackford cut away. He still chews tobacco, a stolen pleasure when he's out in the barn or at the far end of the hayfield, brown juice dribbling through his ruined lip onto his overalls front so that he fools no one.

A private man, he moves to an empty seat. He settles into the worn velvet cushion and turns his head to watch the Nebraska prairie roll by. Later, after the train has passed through Cheyenne and Greeley, he steps out to take a breath of air. He's had no lunch, couldn't force a bite between his clenched teeth. His stomach is a bit off. He rides a while on the back end of the train, watching the track slide out from under the caboose and spin across the snowy ground. He'd made his way to this eastern plateau of Colorado as a young man. Orphaned at fifteen, he left England on a freighter and worked his way west from New York City to land a job in a candy factory. Every day he swept, mopped, toted bags of sugar, and every night at closing he scooped up what had spilled during the day and returned it to the swirling vats. He will never, for the rest of his life, eat a piece of store-bought candy, although he loves sweets and orders a dozen tins of fruitcake every Christmas.

The train rocks and rumbles, and although he is shivering and his hands are thrust deep in his pockets and the icy air sears his nostrils, he cannot bring himself to move back inside. He hates cramped spaces. He's thinking that if this had to happen, it's a good thing it happened in February when there's less work to be done in the fields.

After Fort Morgan, he leaves the train at Brush. He asks at the ticket window if anybody knows someone who might be driving south toward Heartstrong. He's told to inquire at the hardware store for Sal Hardy.

Amidst creaky wooden floors, air littered with sawdust, bins of nuts and screws, piled up lumber, pickles in a barrel, smells of oil and wood shavings and tinges of metal, he finds Sal Hardy, a runt of a man sitting on a pine chair tipped back into the corner. Old timer with nothing else to do.

“Hear you might be driving on out to Heartstrong after while.”

Sal turns and studies him. “Could be.” His voice grates like sand underfoot.

“I can pay.”

Sal wipes a grizzled hand across his lower jaw. His long beard hangs in tufts like the mane of a wild mustang. His empty left sleeve pinned back against a shoulder stump.

“You got family there?”

“Some business to take care of.”

“Business? Ain’t no business in Heartstrong. Nobody left there but us ghosts.” The old man laughs then, a silent tremor that shakes his body like a rug on the line.

Gramp stands his ground and lets the old man wind down. He offers no further explanation.

“Suit yourself.” The old man shrugs. “I’m going that way anyhow.”

Sal owns an old truck, the dashboard covered with chaws of spit-out tobacco. Gramp settles into the shotgun seat, places his feet carefully on either side of a gaping hole in the floorboard. He rides with his arms folded, not wanting to take up more space than he has to. Not wanting to touch anything.

The old man drives like a rough rider, yanking the truck with his good hand from one side of the road to the other in pursuit of a strip down the middle. There’s no traffic to speak of. They pass one vehicle, horses hauling a farm wagon loaded with winter hay, and the driver gives the old man’s truck a wide berth.

Gramp feels nothing for this ride or this old man. Dust and gravel and bits of ice spit up through the hole in the floor. He doesn't move a hand to wipe away the chips that dot his face.

When they reach Heartstrong, Gramp asks Sal to drop him in the center of town. Sal won't take his money, says he enjoyed the company. Says he makes the trip every day into Brush, that's his grandson owns the hardware store, so if Gramp needs a ride back, he can catch him on the corner about 10:00. Gramp thanks him, but promises nothing. He can't think of the boy riding in this old truck, his feet dangling precariously over the hole to the open road.

The business street of Heartstrong is four blocks long, a few side streets ambling off of that. The late afternoon light slants, pink tinges on the western edge. Gramp takes the telegram out of his pocket and reads the address again. Carlene's neighbor sent it, and she's got Billy there with her. He walks the streets of the town until he locates what he thinks must be the neighbor's house. Next door, a tiny shack sits back from the street, board planks laid across the front yard. Although the ground is frozen now, it must be a mudhole in summer, the way the house is sunk down low. It's ramshackle, all right, needing paint, tipped to one side. No curtains hang in the window. A padlock on the front door.

A woman steps out onto the porch of the neighbor's house. "You looking for Carlene?" she calls.

He waves the telegram at her. "I'm Carlene's father. Come for the boy."

The woman does not move and a space opens up between them, long enough for Gramp to know she's none too happy to see him. Then, she thrusts the door open. "Best you come on in here, then."

Her name is Melissa Carpenter, she's a spinster schoolteach-

er, and she has Billy sitting at the supper table, a napkin tucked into his shirt collar. In front of him, a plate of stew he's hardly touched.

"You eaten?"

Gramp shakes his head.

"Sit on down, then. Maybe you can get Billy to eat something."

She fusses around them, the man and the boy. She brings him coffee and a plate of stew and hot corn bread. She's homely, a spare frame draped by a brown flowered dress, her hair mouse-colored and twisted into a braid. She's been teaching school a while, he can see that. After putting his food on the table, she leaves the kitchen and goes off somewhere in the house. He hears her feet on the stairs.

He butters his corn bread, scoops stew into his mouth. He's aware the boy is watching him. He's a long, scraggly kid, his hair needing cut, hanging brown and limp. The kid's hands are knotted in his lap. He hardly moves, except for his eyes which are big and dark and full of sadness.

"My momma said you don't give a good goddamn what happens to us."

Gramp stops chewing and considers. He's shocked at such language from a kid, but then, what should he expect?

"You know who I am, then?"

The boy nods his head.

"We'll be going home to Elmyra in the morning."

The boy looks straight out into space. "No, sir. My momma's coming home. Like she always does."

Gramp washes his corn bread down with a swig of coffee. "Your momma left you home alone a lot?"

The boy shrugs. "When she's working."

"Where did she work?"

“Downtown. Flipping pancakes and burgers. I know how to get there. I can walk by myself in the park. I’m her big boy.”

“You’re kind of an old kid, aren’t you?”

The boy doesn’t answer. He sits perfectly still.

“Well, Old Kid, your momma’s not coming home.”

Gramp leans over his plate and softens his voice.

“She got sick, and then she died.”

The kid starts yelling. He’s up on his knees, his voice caterwauling, and then he’s running around the kitchen. He’s a bomb gone off, and Gramp puts out a hand to stop him when Melissa Carpenter flies around the doorway and catches the sobbing child in her arms. She kneels down to the boy and glares at Gramp over the boy’s tousled head.

“What did you say to him?”

Gramp doesn’t answer. He owes this woman nothing.

“Let me go, god dammit, let me go!” Billy struggles in Melissa’s arms until she releases him. He races from the room, up the stairs, and a door slams.

Melissa Carpenter stands up and smooths her skirt. “Mr. Preston. Why don’t we sit down?”

“You should have told him.”

“I did tell him. He’s only five years old. He doesn’t understand death.”

Gramp moves through the front room, takes his coat from the rack and slides his arms into the sleeves. Melissa Carpenter closes in on him.

“Mr. Preston, we need to talk.”

“Thank you for the supper.”

“Don’t you want to know where her body is?”

His hands fumble with the buttons of his coat, his fingers big and awkward. “I got to go.”

“Where?”

“There must be a hotel downtown.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Maybe. But that’s for me to say.”

“I mean about the hotel. Burned down last summer.”

Gramp takes in this news and looks down at his boots. It’s damn cold to sleep on the street. He won’t ask this woman, even though she must have a room up those stairs.

“I got the key to Carlene’s. You could sleep there.”

She holds out a key swinging from a piece of cardboard. He’s seen that look in her eye before. He’s watched it over poker tables or during branding when nobody wants to take on the wildest calf. He saw it on the face of the stowaway who tried to steal his pack, the doctor who leaned over him when he lay weak and puking in his bunk, the parade of hustlers on his way west who thought they were dealing with nothing but a kid. He reaches his hand out for the key and does not look away from her stare.

“All right.”

“There’s an old oil stove in the living room. You’ll have to light it.”

“I expect I can manage. I’ll be back in the morning for the boy.”

“Billy. Billy is the boy’s name. And he doesn’t want to go home with you. He doesn’t know you. I’ve known him almost three years. I looked after him, some.”

She pulls herself up, then. She says the next line straight out, not like she’s pleading for anything. “I want to keep him.”

Gramp stops and grips his hat in his hands. He turns to gaze around Miss Carpenter’s home, takes in her books, the piano, the embroidery-work lying on the rocking chair, stitches neat and tidy but the colors off, wholesome like everything else about her, and still you don’t want any of it.

“I thank you for all you done. But that boy’s mother is not coming back. And he don’t belong to you.”

He wrestles the padlock open without too much trouble. He leaves the door ajar so the moonlight can direct him. There’s a kerosene lamp on a small table right of the front door. He feels around the top of the table for matches. He can’t locate any and is thinking he’ll have to grope his way to the kitchen when he bumps his head on a high shelf on the wall. He runs his hand along the shelf, what do you know, she’s kept them out of reach of the boy.

After lighting the lamp, he shuts the door and turns to survey the tiny house. There’s a shabby brown sofa with one of his wife’s quilts covering it. He walks over and picks up the quilt, studies it to see how old it is, to see if his wife has defied him and sent this to Carlene or if it’s something Carlene had since she was a girl. His fury mounts as he thinks of his wife sneaking behind his back. Too late, he’s asked to pick up the pieces. Too late.

He’s standing with the quilt balled in his fist. He doesn’t want to think about his wayward daughter, her trampish ways. She had a string of good-for-nothing men in her short life. He’s not even sure who Billy’s father is. Not the married man they’d sent her here to get her away from. Not that namby-pamby boy cousin she married for four months before they had that marriage annulled. Not the second husband, either, that Wayne who’d married her pregnant and then left her when Billy was but a year old. He looks down at the pattern of blue and white, slows his breathing. He folds the quilt carefully and lays it back on the sofa, thinking he’ll pack it up and take it home. He’ll hand it to his wife and see what lie she spins this time.

He notices, now, the rest of the sparsely furnished room. There’s a battered chair, the upholstery torn on one arm and white stuffing poking out. A pile of magazines. On one wall an embroi-