

The Last Rung on the Ladder

By

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Adapted from the short story by Stephen King

Second Draft
18/1/2009

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FADE IN:

EXT. CITY ROOFTOP - AFTERNOON

A WOMAN stands on the very edge of a rooftop with her back to us. She wears a long white dress, and her golden hair tumbles down over her shoulders.

She rises up on her toes, leans forward, dives off the roof. Her white dress billows in the wind as she starts to fall...

INT. HALLWAY - MORNING

A white envelope falls from the letterbox and lands on the floor. It's the hallway to a nice apartment. A table with a phone and notepad a few metres back from the door. Some photos on the walls.

A MAN walks down the hallway, bends down and picks it up. This is LARRY, 30, athletic, attractive, a man in physical shape but a weariness to his movements.

LARRY (V.O.)

I got Katrina's letter yesterday,
less than a week after my father and
I got back from Los Angeles.

Larry looks at the envelope in his hand. It's crumpled and worn, with numerous stamps and stickers all over it, evidence of its complicated journey from sender to recipient.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

It was addressed to Wilmington,
Delaware, and I'd moved twice since
then. Funny how those
crossed-off-addresses and
change-of-address stickers can look
like accusations.

Larry opens the envelope, pulls out the letter. It's a single sheet of white paper, folded once. The words 'Dear Larry', written in messy handwriting, are visible to us, but not the rest.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

She could've put it on a postcard.
There was only a single sentence
below the 'Dear Larry'. But a
sentence can mean enough. Can do
enough.

Larry's reaction to what he reads is widened eyes, opened

mouth. Shock and horror at whatever Katrina's written. He quickly moves towards a table in the hall, reaches for the phone. He picks up the handset, but then stops.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

At first I thought I should call Dad and tell him. But I didn't. He was an old man, and he'd had two heart attacks. Calling him so soon after we'd been to L.A. might have killed him.

Larry looks down at the handset he holds. Slowly, Larry places the handset back in the cradle.

He looks up at the wall behind the table, at a photo hanging there. A family portrait; mother, father, brother and sister. Everyone's happy, smiling. The GIRL in the photo is small and very pretty, with long blonde hair. Larry reaches out with fingertips to touch her face.

LARRY

Oh, Kitty...

CLOSE ON the girl in the photo, who just smiles back at him.

EXT. FIELD - DAY - TWENTY YEARS AGO

The height of summer, twenty years ago. The GIRL from the photo runs across a wide, open cornfield, chased by a young BOY. These are KITTY and YOUNG LARRY, brother and sister, at play.

Kitty is 8 and as pretty as in the photo, long blonde hair and big blue eyes. Young Larry is 10, energetic. Both wear shorts and T-shirts. They laugh and scream with delight.

LARRY (V.O.)

The barn incident happened when I was ten and Katrina - or Kitty, as we all called her - was eight. She was a beautiful child and it was already clear she was going to be a beautiful woman, that her cornsilk hair was never going to darken, that her eyes were always going to be a deep, Scandanavian blue. One look in those eyes and a man would be gone.

Young Larry catches Kitty and tackles her to the ground. She screams playfully as they wrestle and he tickles her mercilessly so that she can't breathe for giggling.

KITTY

Stop, stop!

Young Larry does, and they lie side by side, breathless, flushed, happy.

LARRY (V.O.)

We had a happy childhood. We lived in New York, but we had relatives out in Nebraska and that summer Mom had sent us to stay with them. I think our parents just wanted a bit of peace, a break from our endless enthusiasm and energy. There wasn't a whole lot to do out in rural Nebraska, but we made our own amusement.

Young Larry suddenly sits upright, and looks down at Kitty with excitement in his eyes.

YOUNG LARRY

Hey, let's go to the barn!

The two kids jump to their feet and run off across the fields.

EXT. BARN - DAY - CONTINUOUS

An old, tall barn, sturdy but perhaps slightly worse for wear. It stands at the edge of another cornfield, and in the distance a FARMER drives on a tractor. The two kids appear and run towards the big doors.

LARRY (V.O.)

On our first day there we'd found a barn belonging to a nearby farm and adopted it as one of our chief playing places.

Young Larry pulls open one of the doors just a crack, and the kids slip inside.

INT. BARN - DAY - CONTINUOUS

It's dark inside, soft light shines in through occasional windows. There are beds of hay all over the place, and towards the back, a rickety ladder ascends up into the gloom.

The kids appear, and creep in as if interrupting Evensong. They look around. Katrina takes a running jump and lands in a small bed of hay.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

It was nice in there, filled with a pleasant mixed aroma of hay and fur and dung. We'd spent happy hours in there, chasing each other round, pretending it was whatever we wanted to be. But then we started playing with the ladder.

Young Larry walks up to where Katrina rolls around in the hay. He looks down at her.

YOUNG LARRY

(a glint in his eye)

I dare you.

Katrina sits up, looks at him.

KITTY

Dares go first.

YOUNG LARRY

(straight back)

Girls go before boys.

KITTY

(straight back)

Not if it's dangerous.

Young Larry grins.

YOUNG LARRY

All right.

He runs over to the ladder, puts his foot on the bottom rung, looks up. It stretches up and up and up, seemingly forever. Young Larry takes a deep breath, and sets on up.

LARRY (V.O.)

Forty-three rungs led you up to a beam that was seventy feet above the straw-littered barn floor. And then if you edged out along the beam about twelve feet, your knees jittering, your ankle joints creaking, your mouth dry and tasting like a used fuse, you stood over the haymow.

Young Larry nears the top. The ladder creaks and shakes. He climbs off the ladder, onto the beam. Kitty watches from the barn floor. Young Larry inches along until he stands over

the hayrow.

YOUNG LARRY
(calling down)
Hi, down there!

KITTY
(hands around mouth)
Hi, up there!

Young Larry looks down. It's a long way. He gulps.

LARRY (V.O.)
And then you could jump off the beam
and fall seventy feet straight down,
with a horrible hilarious dying
swoop, into a huge bed of soft hay.

Young Larry steadies himself, prepares. He closes his eyes,
holds his nose.

YOUNG LARRY
Here I go...

He steps off. He seems to stay in mid-air for a second, and
then he FALLS. Fast. Plummeting down into oblivion. Young
Larry opens his mouth and yells.

And then he hits the hay and shoots into it, slowly coming
to rest buried in the stuff. He opens his eyes, looks around
him, and starts to laugh with joy.

LARRY (V.O.)
When you came to rest in that sweet
smell of summer with your stomach
left behind you way up there in the
middle of air you felt...well, like
Lazarus must have felt. Reborn.
You'd taken the fall and lived to
tell the tale.

Young Larry climbs out of the hay and hops down onto the
barn floor. He looks around for Kitty, but she's already
startied up the ladder.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)
It was a forbidden sport, all right.
If anyone had found out we'd have
been sent back to New York to face
the wrath of our parents. Because of
the condition of the ladder, and
because if you happened to lose your
balance and topple from the beam

before you had edged out over the loose fathoms of hay, you would fall to utter destruction on the hard planking of the barn floor.

Kitty is almost at the top now. Young Larry watches her, love and admiration in his smile and his eyes.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

Yes, it was dangerous. And we knew that. But did we care? No. We were adventurous kids - Katrina was as brave as me, if not braver - and we'd been doing it now for a week without any accidents. It was too much fun *not* to do.

Kitty hoists herself up onto the beam. She edges out. Young Larry looks up, hears the familiar call and reponse.

KITTY

Hi, down there!

YOUNG LARRY

Hi, up there!

Kitty looks out and down, smiles, puts her hands out in front of her and stands on her toes.

LARRY (V.O.)

To be honest, think she was less scared than me. Because I just got up there and jumped back down. She got up there and dived.

Kitty leans forward and launches herself, swan-diving down. She falls in slow-motion, controlled, her eyes open.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

(as she falls)

I could never get over how beautiful she looked, how perfect, how calm. I think I never believed in the hay the way Kitty believed in it.

Kitty lands in the hay, disappears into it. Young Larry hears her giggling, bright and melodic. Then her smiling face appears, the dark eyes glittering. Young Larry smiles back. Kitty climbs out.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

I remember Kitty telling me once that after diving into the hay she

felt fresh and new, like a baby. I shrugged it off at the time - sort of knowing what she meant, sort of not knowing - but since I got her letter I've been thinking about that, too.

Young Larry and Katrina face each other. Their faces are flushed, their eyes dancing.

YOUNG LARRY

We should go.

KITTY

(knowing he won't say no)

One more turn?

YOUNG LARRY

Okay!

Young Larry runs over to the ladder and starts up again. The wooden poles begin to bend slightly. Young Larry is near the top when there's an awful pulling sound, like a whine, and he dashes up the last few rungs.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

I'd noticed the first time that the ladder seemed even more unstable than usual. I think if I'd been closer to the bottom I would have gone down and that would have been the end of it.

Young Larry drags himself on to the beam and lays there, breathing quickly, cold sweat sticking the straw and his hair to his forehead. Young Larry stands up and moves into position.

KITTY

(confused)

Hi, up th-

Before she can finish, Young Larry jumps. There's no enjoyment in the fall this time. He lands silently and tries to climb out as quickly as possible, but before he can Kitty has already started up the ladder.

LARRY (V.O.)

As is always the way with these things, it wasn't.

YOUNG LARRY

(nervously calling)

Hey! Come back down! It's not safe!

KITTY
(on her way up)
It'll hold me! I'm lighter than you!

YOUNG LARRY
Kitty, I don't think -

And that's when THE LADDER BREAKS.

There's a rotted, splintering crack. Young Larry cries out, moves forward. Kitty screams. The rung she stands on gives way, and then both sides of the ladder give way.

The bottom, broken-off half hangs there for a moment, before it topples backwards, and hits the barn floor with a loud CLAP.

Kitty is left holding the last rung on the ragged end of the ladder. Her legs kick wildly in mid-air. She screams, high-pitched and piercing.

KITTY
Larry! Larry help me!

Young Larry looks up, appalled, but speaks commandingly.

YOUNG LARRY
Kitty! Just hold still! *Hold still!*

Kitty obeys instantly. Her kicking stops and she hangs straight down, holding on tight. Young Larry turns and runs to the haymow. He fills his arms with straw, runs back, and drops it. He repeats this. Again. And again. And again.

He starts to sneeze as does this, straw going up his eyes and nose. The haystack he is building slowly grows. He goes back again and again, desperately, carries as much as possible. Above, Kitty hangs down. She cries, but silently.

KITTY
(high, despairing)
Larry, I can't hold on much longer!

YOUNG LARRY
Kitty, you've got to! You've got to hold on!

Back and forth, back and forth. Hay everywhere. The haystack's as high as his chin now. Young Larry reaches for more straw when Kitty suddenly screams.

KITTY

Larry! The rung! It's letting go!

She starts to kick again. Young Larry looks up at her, hears the rasping cry of the rung pulling free. He looks down at the size of the haystack, which seems to him as big as a postage stamp and just as thin. But he's out of time.

YOUNG LARRY

No! Stop! Don't kick! Just let go!
Let go, Kitty!

He commands and she obeys. Instantly. Her hands release the rung and she drops like a knife, her hair following her. Her hands are up in front of her mouth as if in prayer. This time she doesn't fall in slow-motion but FAST, fast and silent.

She hits the haystack in the centre and disappears. But there's a thud, a loud thud that sounds too loud, much too loud.

YOUNG LARRY

Kitty! Kitty!

He pounces on the haystack and pulls it apart, flings the straw behind him in great handfuls. Kitty slowly appears. Her face is deadly pale, her eyes shut. She looks dead. Young Larry stops, a moment of unbelieving horror.

And then the deep blue of her irises as she opens her eyes. She looks at Young Larry.

KITTY

(a breath)

Larry? Am I alive?

He picks her out of the hay and hugs her close, crying, and she raises her arms and hugs him back.

YOUNG LARRY

(he can't believe it)

You're alive. You're alive, you're alive...

EXT. BARN - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Young Larry carries Kitty out in his arms.

YOUNG LARRY

Help! Someone help me!

He staggers across the field, and the farmer on the tractor

sees him, hops down and comes running.

FARMER

What's happened? What's wrong?

Young Larry can't explain for crying.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - LATE AFTERNOON - CONTINUOUS

Young Larry sits with Kitty's head on his shoulder in a trailer, dragged along by the farmer in his tractor.

EXT. COUNTRY HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON - CONTINUOUS

The tractor pulls up in front of Larry and Kitty's aunt and uncle's house. The AUNT and UNCLE run to the door, and look at the arrival in disbelief. The aunt rushes forward, her hands up to her mouth.

The farmer takes Kitty in his arms and hands her over to the uncle, who carries her inside. Young Larry stands alone and watches as Kitty is carried inside.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

They sent for the doctor, who was there within the hour. She'd broken her left ankle. That was all.

INT. BARN - EVENING

Young Larry, the uncle, the farmer and DR. PEDERSON all stand in the barn, looking at the scene. The pile of hay is scattered across the floor. It's even gloomier now, but when they look up they can just make out the final rung of the ladder that still there, aslant, held by one nail.

DR. PEDERSON

(shaking his head)

A miracle.

He kicks disdainfully at the pathetic pile of hay on the floor.

INT. KITTY'S BEDROOM - EVENING

Kitty sits up in bed, propped up by pillows. She is dressed in clean pyjamas now, and her foot is wrapped up and propped on a board. Young Larry sits at the edge of her bed. Kitty just looks at him.

LARRY (V.O.)

They let me in to see her just before bedtime. She looked at me so

long and so lovingly that I began to feel uncomfortable.

Young Larry shifts slightly. Kitty speaks.

KITTY

Hay. You put down hay.

YOUNG LARRY

'Course I did. What else would I do? Once the ladder broke there was no way to get up there.

KITTY

I didn't know what you were doing.

YOUNG LARRY

You must have! I was right under you, for cripes' sake!

Kitty shakes her head.

KITTY

I didn't look down. I was too scared. I had my eyes shut the whole time.

Young Larry tries to take this in. He stares at her, open-mouthed.

YOUNG LARRY

You...you didn't know? Didn't know what I was doing?

Kitty shakes her head again.

YOUNG LARRY (CONTD.)

And when I told you to let go, you just...just *did it*?

This time Kitty nods vigorously, smiles.

YOUNG LARRY (CONTD.)

Kitty, how could you do that?

KITTY

I knew you must have been doing something to fix it. You're my big brother. knew you'd take care of me.

YOUNG LARRY

Oh Kitty, you don't know how close it was.

Young Larry puts his hands over his face. Kitty reaches up and takes them away, then pulls him in closer and kisses him on the cheek.

KITTY

No, but I knew you were down there.
(yawns) Gee, am I sleepy. I'll see
you tomorrow, Larry. I'm going to
have a cast, Dr. Pederson says.

Kitty leans back, yawns again, shuts her eyes, and is asleep within seconds. Young Larry leans forward, kisses her on the cheek, and then slips off the bed and out of the room.

He stops at the doorway and looks back at his little sister. Then he leaves, shutting the door behind him.

INT. HALLWAY - MORNING - PRESENT DAY

Larry strokes Kitty's face in the photo.

LARRY (V.O.)

She had the cast on for a little
over a month. She got everyone to
sign it, including the farmer who
helped us. My parents didn't really
punish me, but I'm not sure if my
mother ever fully forgave me. The
cast came off, and that was the end
of the barn incident.

Larry strokes the photo one last time. Then he moves off down the hallway, towards the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING - CONTINUOUS

A kitchen as clean and ordered as the hallway. The work surfaces are clear, the whole thing has an almost un-lived-in look. There's a big fridge with something - a rectangle of paper - held up by a fridge magnet, but it's not clear to us at first.

Larry enters, still holding the letter in his hand. His movements are slow and he more glides than walks, still stunned. He moves towards the fridge.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

It was the end, but somehow not the
end. Somehow it never ended till
nine days ago, when Kitty jumped
from the top storey of an insurance
building in Los Angeles.

Larry opens the fridge, reaches in, grabs a can of beer. He yanks at the ringpull and gulps it down.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

I carry a copy of the clipping from the L.A. Times in my wallet. I guess I'll always carry it, not in the good way you carry snapshots from a really good show or part of the programme from a World Series game. I carry that clipping the way you carry something heavy, because carrying it is your work.

Larry steps back, closes the fridge door. We're close enough now to see the thing fastened by the fridge magnet. It's a copy of the L.A. Times story, with a headline that reads: CALL GIRL SWAN-DIVES TO HER DEATH.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Larry lies on his back in a big double bed, looking up at the roof. His eyes are wide open - no possibility of sleep tonight. The letter lies, folded, on the bedside table, next to a glass of water and a box of pills.

LARRY (V.O.)

We grew up. That's all I know, other than facts that don't mean anything. The only things that matter are that we grew up and she swanned from that insurance building, and that Kitty was the one who always believed the hay would be there. Kitty was the one who said, 'I knew you must be doing something to fix it.' Those things matter. And Kitty's letter.

Larry rolls over, picks the letter up, switches on the bedside lamp. Reads it. Re-reads it. Stares at the words, as though the answers are in the ink.

Larry puts the letter back down on the bedside table, but open this time. He reaches for the pills takes two in his hand, puts them in his mouth, gulps them down with water. He flops back against the pillows.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

The envelope was postmarked two weeks before she died. It would have got to me a long time before, if not for the forwarding addresses. I

always meant to write to her, tell her how I was, tell her I'd moved. I always meant to, but I swear I just never got round to it. She must have got tired of waiting.

We're looking at the bedside table, and finally there's the letter, finally we see Kitty's last message. It's written in messy, unrestrained handwriting.

ON THE PAPER:

Dear Larry,

I've been thinking about it a lot lately...and what I've decided is that it would have been better for me if that last rung had broken before you could put the hay down.

Your, Kitty

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

Yeah, I guess she must have gotten tired of waiting. I'd rather believe that than think of her deciding I must have forgotten. I wouldn't want her to think that, because that one sentence was maybe the only thing that would have brought me on the run.

Larry lies in bed, looking up at the ceiling. His eyes are wide open, seeing something else, not what's there.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

But not even that is the reason sleep comes so hard now.

INT. BARN - DAY - DREAM SEQUENCE

A young Kitty, a child again, stands on the beam. She is wearing the long, white dress that the real Kitty died in. The light is in her hair, and she is beautiful. She holds her arms out in front of her, stands on her toes. She leans forward and swan-dives.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

When I close my eyes and start to drift off, I see her coming down from the third loft, her eyes wide and dark blue, her body arched, her arms swept up behind her.

Kitty falls in slow motion, her hair and the dress being played with by the wind. She falls, so gracefully, so peacefully, so beautifully.

LARRY (V.O., CONTD.)

She was the one who always knew the hay would be there.

(beat)

My Kitty.

Kitty falls out of view, and disappears from sight.

FADE OUT