WILLA CATHER

LUCY GAYHEART

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Lucy Gayheart

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BOOK I

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In Haverford on the Platte the townspeople still talk of Lucy Gayheart. They do not talk of her a great deal, to be sure; life goes on and we live in the present. But when they do mention her name it is with a gentle glow in the face or the voice, a confidential glance which says: “Yes, you, too, remember?” They still see her as a slight figure always in motion; dancing or skating, or walking swiftly with intense direction, like a bird flying home.

When there is a heavy snowfall, the older people look out of their windows and remember how Lucy used to come darting through just such storms, her muff against her cheek, not shrinking, but giving her body to the wind as if she were catching step with it. And in the heat of summer she came just as swiftly down the long shaded sidewalks and across the open squares blistering in the sun. In the breathless glare of August noons, when the horses hung their heads and the workmen “took it slow,” she never took it slow. Cold, she used to say, made her feel more alive; heat must have had the same effect.

The Gayhearts lived at the west edge of Haverford, half a mile from Main Street. People said “out to the Gayhearts’ ” and thought it rather a long walk in summer. But Lucy covered the distance a dozen times a day, covered it quickly with that walk so peculiarly her own, like an expression of irrepressible light-heartedness. When the old women at

work in their gardens caught sight of her in the distance, a mere white figure under the flickering shade of the early-summer trees, they always knew her by the way she moved. On she came, past hedges and lilac bushes and woolly-green grape arbours and rows of jonquils, and one knew she was delighted with everything; with her summer clothes and the air and the sun and the blossoming world. There was something in her nature that was like her movements, something direct and unhesitating and joyous, and in her golden-brown eyes. They were not gentle brown eyes, but flashed with gold sparks like that Colorado stone we call the tiger-eye. Her skin was rather dark, and the colour in her lips and cheeks was like the red of dark peonies—deep, velvety. Her mouth was so warm and impulsive that every shadow of feeling made a change in it.

Photographs of Lucy mean nothing to her old friends. It was her gaiety and grace they loved. Life seemed to lie very near the surface in her. She had that singular brightness of young beauty: flower gardens have it for the first few hours after sunrise.

We missed Lucy in Haverford when she went away to Chicago to study music. She was eighteen years old then; talented, but too careless and light-hearted to take herself very seriously. She never dreamed of a “career.” She thought of music as a natural form of pleasure, and as a means of earning money to help her father when she came home. Her father, Jacob Gayheart, led the town band and gave lessons on the clarinet, flute, and violin, at the back of his watch-repairing shop. Lucy had given piano lessons to beginners ever since she was in the tenth grade. Children

liked her, because she never treated them like children; they tried to please her, especially the little boys.

Though Jacob Gayheart was a good watchmaker, he wasn't a good manager. Born of Bavarian parents in the German colony at Belleville, Illinois, he had learned his trade under his father. He came to Haverford young and married an American wife, who brought him a half-section of good farm land. After her death he borrowed money on this farm to buy another, and now they were both mortgaged. That troubled his older daughter, Pauline, but it did not trouble Mr. Gayheart. He took more pains to make the band boys practise than he did to keep up his interest payments. He was a town character, of course, and people joked about him, though they were proud of their band. Mr. Gayheart looked like an old daguerreotype of a minor German poet; he wore a moustache and goatee and had a fine sweep of dark hair above his forehead, just a little grey at the sides. His intelligent, lazy hazel eyes seemed to say: "But it's a very pleasant world, why bother?"

He managed to enjoy every day from start to finish. He got up early in the morning and worked for an hour in his flower garden. Then he took his bath and dressed for the day, selecting his shirt and necktie as carefully as if he were going to pay a visit. After breakfast he lit a good cigar and walked into town, never missing the flavour of his tobacco for a moment. Usually he put a flower in his coat before he left home. No one ever got more satisfaction out of good health and simple pleasures and a blue-and-gold band uniform than Jacob Gayheart. He was probably the happiest man in Haverford.

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It was the end of the Christmas holidays, the Christmas of 1901, Lucy’s third winter in Chicago. She was spending her vacation at home. There had been good skating all through Christmas week, and she had made the most of it. Even on her last afternoon, when she should have been packing, she was out with a party of Haverford boys and girls, skating on the long stretch of ice north of Duck Island. This island, nearly half a mile in length, split the river in two,—or, rather, it split a shallow arm off the river. The Platte River proper was on the south side of this island and it seldom froze over; but the shallow stream between the island and the north shore froze deep and made smooth ice. This was before the days of irrigation from the Platte; it was then a formidable river in flood time. During the spring freshets it sometimes cut out a new channel in the soft farm land along its banks and changed its bed altogether.

At about four o’clock on this December afternoon a light sleigh with bells and buffalo robes and a good horse came rapidly along the road from town and turned at Benson’s corner into the skating-place. A tall young man sprang out, tied his horse to the hitch-bar, where a row of sleighs already stood, and hurried to the shore with his skating-shoes in his hand. As he put them on, he scanned the company moving over the ice. It was not hard to pick out the figure he was looking for. Six of the strongest skaters

had left the others behind and were going against the wind, toward the end of the island. Two were in advance of the rest, Jim Hardwick and Lucy Gayheart. He knew her by her brown squirrel jacket and fur cap, and by her easy stroke. The two ends of a long crimson scarf were floating on the wind behind her, like two slender crimson wings.

Harry Gordon struck out across the ice to overtake her. He, too, was a fine skater; a big fellow, the heavy-weight boxer type, and as light on his feet as a boxer. Nevertheless he was a trifle winded when he passed the group of four and shot alongside Jim Hardwick.

“Jim,” he called, “will you give me a turn with Lucy before the sun goes down?”

“Sure, Harry. I was only keeping her out of mischief for you.” The lad fell back. Haverford boys gave way to Harry Gordon good-naturedly. He was the rich young man of the town, and he was not arrogant or overbearing. He was known as a good fellow; rather hard in business, but liberal with the ball team and the band; public-spirited, people said.

“Why, Harry, you said you weren’t coming!” Lucy exclaimed as she took his arm.

“Didn’t think I could. I did, though. Drove Flicker into a lather getting out here after the directors’ meeting. This is the best part of the afternoon, anyway. Come along.” They crossed hands and went straight ahead in two-step time.

The sun was dropping low in the south, and all the flat snow-covered country, as far as the eye could see, was beginning to glow with a rose-coloured light, which presently would deepen to orange and flame. The black

tangle of willows on the island made a thicket like a thorn hedge, and the knotty, twisted, slow-growing scrub-oaks with flat tops took on a bronze glimmer in that intense oblique light which seemed to be setting them on fire.

As the sun declined, the wind grew sharper. They had left the skating party far behind. “Shan’t we turn?” Lucy gasped presently.

“Not yet. I want to get into that sheltered fork of the island. I have some Scotch whisky in my pocket; that will warm you up.”

“How nice! I’m getting a little tired. I’ve been out a long while.”

The end of the island forked like a fish’s tail. When they had rounded one of these points, Harry swung her in to the shore. They sat down on a bleached cottonwood log, where the black willow thicket behind them made a screen. The interlacing twigs threw off red light like incandescent wires, and the snow underneath was rose-colour. Harry poured Lucy some whisky in the metal cup that screwed over the stopper; he himself drank from the flask. The round red sun was falling like a heavy weight; it touched the horizon line and sent quivering fans of red and gold over the wide country. For a moment Lucy and Harry Gordon were sitting in a stream of blinding light; it burned on their skates and on the flask and the metal cup. Their faces became so brilliant that they looked at each other and laughed. In an instant the light was gone; the frozen stream and the snow-masked prairie land became violet, under the blue-green sky. Wherever one looked there was nothing but flat country and low hills, all violet and grey. Lucy gave a long sigh.

Gordon lifted her from the log and they started back, with the wind behind them. They found the river empty, a lonely stretch of blue-grey ice; all the skaters had gone. Harry knew by her stroke that Lucy was tired. She had been out a long while before he came, and she had made a special effort to skate with him. He was sorry and pleased. He guided her in to the shore at some distance from his sleigh, knelt down and took off her skating-shoes, changed his own, and with a sudden movement swung her up in his arms and carried her over the trampled snow to his cutter. As he tucked her under the buffalo robes she thanked him.

“The wind seems to have made me very sleepy, Harry. I’m afraid I won’t do much packing tonight. No matter; there’s tomorrow. And it was a good skate.”

On the drive home Gordon let his sleigh-bells (very musical bells, he had got them to please Lucy) do most of the talking. He knew when to be quiet.

Lucy felt drowsy and dreamy, glad to be warm. The sleigh was such a tiny moving spot on that still white country settling into shadow and silence. Suddenly Lucy started and struggled under the tight blankets. In the darkening sky she had seen the first star come out; it brought her heart into her throat. That point of silver light spoke to her like a signal, released another kind of life and feeling which did not belong here. It overpowered her. With a mere thought she had reached that star and it had answered, recognition had flashed between. Something knew, then, in the unknowing waste: something had always known, forever! That joy of saluting what is far above one

was an eternal thing, not merely something that had happened to her ignorance and her foolish heart.

The flash of understanding lasted but a moment. Then everything was confused again. Lucy shut her eyes and leaned on Harry’s shoulder to escape from what she had gone so far to snatch. It was too bright and too sharp. It hurt, and made one feel small and lost.

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The following night, Sunday evening, all the boys and girls who had been at home for the vacation were going back to school. Most of them would stop at Lincoln; Lucy was the only one going through to Chicago. The train from the west was due to leave Haverford at seven-thirty, and by seven o’clock sleighs and wagons from all directions were driving toward the railway station at the south end of town.

The station platform was soon full of restless young people, glancing up the track, looking at their watches, as if they could not endure their own town a moment longer. Presently a carriage drawn by two horses dashed up to the siding, and the swaying crowd ran to meet it, shouting.

“Here she is, here’s Fairy!”

“Fairy Blair!”

“Hello, Fairy!”

Out jumped a yellow-haired girl, supple and quick as a kitten, with a little green Tyrolese hat pulled tight over her curls. She ripped off her grey fur coat, threw it into the air for the boys to catch, and ran down the platform in her travelling suit—a black velvet jacket and scarlet waistcoat, with a skirt very short indeed for the fashion of that time. Just then a man came out from the station and called that the train would be twenty minutes late. Groans and howls broke from the crowd.

“Oh, hell!”

“What in thunder can we do?”

The green hat shrugged and laughed. “Shut up. Quit swearing. We’ll wake the town.”

She caught two boys by the elbow, and between these stiffly overcoated figures raced out into the silent street, swaying from left to right, pushing the boys as if she were shaking two saplings, and doing an occasional shuffle with her feet. She had a pretty, common little face, and her eyes were so lit-up and reckless that one might have thought she had been drinking. Her fresh little mouth, without being ugly, was really very naughty. She couldn’t push the boys fast enough; suddenly she sprang from between the two rigid figures as if she had been snapped out of a sling-shot and ran up the street with the whole troop at her heels. They were all a little crazy, but as she was the craziest, they followed her. They swerved aside to let the town bus pass.

The bus backed up to the siding. Mr. Gayheart alighted and gave a hand to each of his daughters. Pauline, the elder, got out first. She was short and stout and blonde, like the Prestons, her mother’s people. She was twelve years Lucy’s senior. (Two boys, born between the daughters, died in childhood.) It was Pauline who had brought her sister up; their mother died when Lucy was only six.

Pauline was talking as she got out of the bus, urging her father to hurry and get the trunk checked. “There are always a lot of people in the baggage room, and it takes Bert forever to check a trunk. And be sure you tell him to get it onto this train. When Mrs. Young went to Minneapolis her trunk lay here for twenty-four hours after she started, and she didn’t get it until ...” But Mr. Gayheart walked

calmly away and lost the story of Mrs. Young's trunk. Lucy remained standing beside her sister, but she did not hear it either. She was thinking of something else.

Pauline took Lucy's arm determinedly, as if it were the right thing to do, and for a moment she was silent. "Look, there's Harry Gordon's sleigh coming up, with the Jenks boy driving. Do you suppose he is going east tonight?"

"He said he might go to Omaha," Lucy replied carelessly.

"That's nice. You will have company," said Pauline, with the rough-and-ready heartiness she often used to conceal annoyance.

Lucy made no comment, but looked in through a window at the station clock. She had never wanted so much to be moving; to be alone and to feel the train gliding along the smooth rails; to watch the little stations flash by.

Fairy Blair, in her Tyrolese hat, came back from her run quite out of breath and supported by the two boys. As she passed the Gayheart sisters she called:

"Off for the East, Lucy? Wish I were going with you. You musical people get all the fun." As she and her overcoated props came to a standstill she watched Lucy out of the tail of her eye. They were the two most popular girls in Haverford, and Fairy found Lucy frightfully stuffy and girly-girly. Whenever she met Harry Gordon she tossed her head and flashed at him a look which plainly said: "What in hell do you want with *that*?"

Mr. Gayheart returned, gave his daughter her trunk check, and stood looking up at the sky. Among other impractical pursuits he had studied astronomy from time to time. When at last the scream of the whistle shivered

through the still winter air, Lucy drew a quick breath and started forward. Her father took her arm and pressed it softly; it was not wise to show too much affection for his younger daughter. A long line of swaying lights came out of the flat country to the west, and a moment later the white beam from the headlight streamed along the steel rails at their feet. The great locomotive, coated with hoar-frost, passed them and stopped, panting heavily.

Pauline snatched her sister and gave her a clumsy kiss. Mr. Gayheart picked up Lucy's bag and led the way to the right car. He found her seat, arranged her things neatly, then stood looking at her with a discerning, appreciative smile. He liked pretty girls, even in his own family. He put his arm around her, and as he kissed her he murmured in her ear: "She's a nice girl, my Lucy!" Then he went slowly down the car and got off just as the porter was taking up the step. Pauline was already in a fret, convinced that he would be carried on to the next station.

In Lucy's car were several boys going back to the University at Lincoln. They at once came to her seat and began talking to her. When Harry Gordon entered and walked down the aisle, they drew back, but he shook his head.

"I'm going out to the diner now. I'll be back later."

Lucy shrugged as he passed on. Wasn't that just like him? Of course he knew that she, and all the other students, would have eaten an early supper at the family board before they started; but he might have asked her and the boys to go out to the dining-car with him and have a dessert or a Welsh rabbit. Another instance of the instinctive

unwastefulness which had made the Gordons rich! Harry could be splendidly extravagant upon occasion, but he made an occasion of it; it was the outcome of careful forethought.

Lucy gave her whole attention to the lads who were so pleased to have it. They were all about her own age, while Harry was eight years older. Fairy Blair was holding a little court at the other end of the car, but distance did not muffle her occasional spasmodic laugh—a curious laugh, like a bleat, which had the effect of an indecent gesture. When this mirth broke out, the boys who were beside Lucy looked annoyed, and drew closer to her, as if protesting their loyalty. She was sorry when Harry Gordon came back and they went away. She received him rather coolly, but he didn’t notice that at all. He began talking at once about the new street-lamps they were to have in Haverford; he and his father had borne half the cost of them.

Harry sat comfortably back in the Pullman seat, but he did not lounge. He sat like a gentleman. He had a good physical presence, whether in action or repose. He was immensely conceited, but not nervously or aggressively so. Instead of being a weakness in him, it amounted to a kind of strength. Such easy self-possession was very reassuring to a mercurial, vacillating person like Lucy.

Tonight, as it happened, Lucy wanted to be alone; but ordinarily she was glad to meet Harry anywhere; to pass him in the post-office or to see him coming down the street. If she stopped for only a word with him, his vitality and unfailing satisfaction with life set her up. No matter what they talked about, it was amusing. She felt absolutely free

with him, and she found everything about him genial; his voice, his keen blue eyes, his fresh skin and sandy hair. People said he was hard in business and took advantage of borrowers in a tight place; but neither his person nor his manner gave a hint of such qualities.

While he was chatting confidentially with her about the new street-lamps, Harry noticed that Lucy's hands were restless and that she moved about in her seat.

"What's the matter, Lucy? You're fidgety."

She pulled herself up and smiled. "Isn't it silly! Travelling always makes me nervous. But I'm not very used to it, you know."

"You're in a hurry to get back. I can tell," he nodded knowingly. "How about the opera this spring? Will you let me come on for a week and go with me every night?"

"Oh, that will be splendid! But I don't know about every night. I'm teaching now, you see. I'm much busier than I was last year."

"We can fix that all right. I'll make a call on Auerbach. I got on with him first-rate. I told him I had known you ever since you were a youngster." Harry chuckled and leaned forward a little. "Do you know the first time I ever saw you, Lucy? It was in the old skating-rink. I suppose Haverford was about the last town on earth to have a skating-rink."

"But that was ages ago. The old rink was pulled down before your bank was built."

"That's right. Father and I were staying at the hotel. We had come on to look the town over. One afternoon I was passing the rink and I heard a piano going, so I went in. An old man was playing a waltz, *Hearts and Flowers* I think they

called it. There were a bunch of people on the floor, but I picked you out first shot. You must have been about thirteen, with your hair down your back. You had on a short skirt and a skintight red jersey, and you were going like a streak. I thought you had the prettiest eyes in the world—Still think so," he added, puckering his brows, as if he were making a grave admission.

Lucy laughed. Harry was cautious, even in compliments.

"Oh, thank you, Harry! I had such good times in that old rink. I missed it terribly after it was pulled down. Pauline wouldn't let me go to dances then. But I don't remember you very well until you began to pitch for Haverford. Everyone was crazy about your in-curves. Why did you give up baseball?"

"Too lazy, I guess." He shrugged his smooth shoulders. "I liked playing ball, though. But now about the opera. You'll keep the first two weeks of April open for me? I can't tell now just when I'll be able to run on."

Young Gordon was watching Lucy as they talked, and thinking that he had about made up his mind. He wasn't rash, he hadn't been in a hurry. He didn't like the idea of marrying the watchmaker's daughter, when so many brilliant opportunities were open to him. But as he had often told himself before, he would just have to swallow the watchmaker. During the two winters Lucy had been away in Chicago, he had played about with lots of girls in the cities where his father's business took him. But there was simply nobody like her,—for him, at least.

Tomorrow he would have to deal with a rather delicate situation. Harriet Arkwright, of the St. Joseph Arkwrights,