

# A Valentine Memory

by Roland Foster

"Reach for the sky, Pardner!"

Carl paused for a moment, then kept working.

Robbie took two steps into Carl's bedroom and demanded, "Git yore hands up, before I fill ya full a holes!"

Carl gave a small sigh. This wasn't a good time for an interruption. He slid a handy sheet of paper over his drawing and laid the red pencil carefully on top of it. He slowly raised his hands above his shoulders.

"Git 'em all the way up, you *miscreant!*"

Carl lowered his hands and turned toward his seven-year-old brother. "Miscreant? Where did you get that?"

"Read it in a book. I looked it up." Robbie had a huge unabridged dictionary in his bedroom. He liked to look up unfamiliar words, and he remembered their meanings.

Robbie holstered his six-shooters — two new Lone Ranger cap pistols, a special Christmas present from Carl. He came and stood beside his brother, peering at the papers and pencil on the desk. "What are you working on?"

"None of your business. It's a secret."

"I can keep a secret."

Carl sighed again. "Okay, I'll tell you, because if I don't you'll just pester me to death until I do. Won't you?"

Robbie smiled and nodded. "Yep," he said.

"I'm making a valentine."

"A valentine card?"

"No, not a card, a drawing. Something somebody might put in her scrapbook, or maybe even someday have it framed." That wasn't as egotistical as it sounded; Carl was becoming a pretty talented artist.

"Oh. Who is it for?"

"Nobody you know, Mr. Nosy."

"Maybe I've heard of her. What's her name?"

"Suzie Perkins. Except now she wants to be called Susan."

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The vivid dream slipped gently away, and Carl opened his eyes. He saw his brother, Rob, sitting by his bedside. He raised his hand an inch or so above the blanket, and Rob grasped it. "I'm here, Carl," he said.

"I see that you are. Hello, Brother." They both smiled.

After a minute, Carl said, "I was just dreaming ... do you remember ... that time I was making a Valentine for Suzie what's-her-name?"

Robbie answered, "Oh, man, that was long years ago. Yes, I remember that you were pretty proud of that drawing — it was a beautiful horse, with a heart-shaped wreath of roses around its neck. A big pink heart as a background. I liked it."

"Yes, you did. Unfortunately, Suzie didn't care much for it."

"Or perhaps fortunately?"

"Well, that's true. For me and for her. We both found somebody better."

After a while, Carl said, "You remember what you said that day, when you came into my room?"

"No, what did I say?"

"You said, 'Reach for the sky, Pardner!' Remember that?"

Robbie laughed. "Oh, yeah, I do. And I threatened to fill you full of holes. I loved to say mismatched things like that. I still do that, once in a while."

"Mom even made up a name for them."

"'Robbishness'," both said, grinning.

They were silent for another while. Then Carl spoke. "We were different, you and I. Not just from each other; I mean, we were really close for brothers born nine years apart."

"Yes, we were. We always knew that. I think we valued it. I know we did."

"For sure."

Rob shifted in his chair. "It was hard for me, when you went off to college."

"I know. Hard for me, too, but not as much, because I was busy all the time. All the classes, all the labs ..."

Rob continued, "... all the parties, all the football and basketball games, all the girls, et cetera, et cetera ..."

"Were you jealous?"

Rob thought, then shook his head. "No; in a way I was glad for you. I just ... I missed having you around. You were always there for me, and then you weren't. I understood, but I wasn't happy about it."

"You wrote me a few letters."

"Yes, we both wrote a few, but it didn't help, did it? At least it didn't help me."

"Yes. What was there to say? So we stopped writing."

"And went on with our separate lives." Rob sighed. "Which was normal, and inevitable, and somehow okay and not quite okay at the same time."

"And then ..."

"And then, forty-some years later, you decided to retire from your government job and do some serious art ..."

"Not serious, just self-indulgent. Draw and paint whatever I wanted to. I figured if it was good enough for Eisenhower and Churchill, it was good enough for me."

"And you came back to the old home town."

"To my roots, Robbie. Really, my family, the only family I had that wasn't gone or scattered to the far corners of the world. You."

"I know. I knew it when you showed up on my doorstep. You didn't have to say a word."

"You always were pretty astute."

"Couldn't help it. You got the family artistic talent and I got the brains."

"Yeah, well, at least you never let it go to your head." They both smiled at the familiar, long-running badinage.

The brothers chatted for a while longer, remembering their departed wives and scattered children and other blessings, with interspersed intervals of silence. Rob squeezed Carl's hand occasionally, as if to say, "I'm still here."

Mrs. Reed, the nurse, came in to check on Carl. She made him raise his head so she could plump his pillow, checked on the glucose drip, made sure he wasn't hurting or needing something, and went away again.

After a few more minutes, it was apparent that Carl was having trouble keeping his eyes open. Rob said, "If you want to take a nap, go ahead. I'll be here."

"Yeah," Carl replied. "I think I'll just take a short nap." He closed his eyes.

After a while Rob smiled, patted Carl's hand, and said gently, "Reach for the sky, Pardner."