

FROM

Green Grass, Running Water

BY THOMAS KING

"You must be the lucky young man who won the free plane ride."

Lionel had only made three mistakes in his entire life, the kind of mistakes that seem small enough at the time, but somehow get out of hand. The kind that stay with you for a long time. And he could name each one.

The first mistake Lionel made was wanting to have his tonsils out. It had happened when he was eight, and, in many ways, it was more of a simple error in judgement. Several of the kids at school developed sore throats, and Lois James wound up having her tonsils out. What Lionel noticed most about Lois's tonsils was that she got to stay home from school for over two weeks and you couldn't even tell she had had an operation. Then, too, the teachers treated her like she was royalty of something. Mrs. Pratt brought Lois a sucker, the kind with a hard candy shell and a chewy fudge centre. Green, Lionel's favourite. So when Lionel developed a sore throat, he began thinking about Lois and her tonsils. When his throat didn't improve, his mother took him to the band office to see Dr. Loomis.

Dr. Loomis was a skinny old man with a huge pile of white hair and eyes that looked as though they would pop out of his head. His tongue was inordinately long, and, as he talked, he would run it around his face, catching the sides of his mouth and the bottom of his chin. Once a week, he came out to the reserve to doctor the sick. There was no formal clinic, and he seldom had any patients. Most of the people on the

reserve went to see Martha Old Crow or Jesse Many Guns, who were the doctors of choice. Dr. Loomis generally spent his time in the cafeteria, drinking coffee, and talking about the hospital in Toronto where he had trained just after the turn of the century.

Lionel's mother had taken Lionel to see Martha first, and, after Martha was done feeling his ears and shoulders and looking in his eyes, she said, "Simple thing, this. Maybe take this boy to see the Frog doctor. No one comes to see him last week. Maybe his feelings are hurt, that one."

So, on Wednesday, Lionel's mother arrived at the band office with Lionel in tow. Dr. Loomis shook Lionel's mother's hand and touched his nose with his tongue, and told her that her boy was in the best of hands. "I studied in Toronto, you know," he said.

Lionel told him that his throat hurt something awful, that it was hard to swallow or move his head, and that he kept making mistakes on his math homework. Dr. Loomis pursed his lips and nodded gravely. He squeezed Lionel's neck and face and shoulders and had Lionel suck in air in a quick, noisy gulps.

Lilly Morris, who worked behind the snack bar, got on the phone, and, by the time Dr. Loomis got around to thumping Lionel on the chest and feeling under his armpits, there were about twenty people in the cafeteria.

"Does it hurt here?"

"Something awful."

"Does it hurt here?"

"There, too."

"Does it hurt here?"

"Ohhhh..."

Charlie Looking Bear, who was two years older than Lionel and related through a second marriage, grabbed his crotch and asked in a high voice, "Does it hurt here?" But Dr. Loomis ignored Charlie and continued to prod Lionel with his bony fingers. Finally, he took a flat stick out of his jacket pocket and stuck it down Lionel's throat. "Say abhhhhh."

Lionel almost choked.

"Well," said Dr. Loomis, "the boy has a sore throat. Pretty bad one, too. Can't do much about it. Best thing is a little crushed aspirin mixed up with honey and lemon. Give him lots of fluids. Maybe keep

him in bed for a couple of days."

"It hurts real bad!" said Lionel.

"Course, the tonsils are inflamed and they don't look all that healthy. Wouldn't hurt to get them out sometime. They can just gettin' inflamed. Always better to get them out when the child is young."

Lionel could see the distress in his mother's face. "Don't think need a hospital," she said. "We should wait and see."

"I can't even eat!" said Lionel.

"It's an easy operation," said Dr. Loomis.

Lionel's mother shook her head. "He's not doing too well in school right now. If he had that operation, how much school would he miss?"

This was where, as Lionel remembered, the idea began to fall apart.

"Actually," said Dr. Loomis, "there's no need to miss any school at all. We could do it this summer."

"Summer?" said Lionel. "I don't want no operation during the summer."

Charlie was grinning. "What would John Wayne do?" he whispered, and he grabbed his hair and pulled his head off to one side and made cutting motions across his throat.

"We don't want you missing any more school, honey."

"I don't mind missing school. Lois had her tonsils out, and she missed school and she still gets good grades."

Dr. Loomis laughed, and his eye bugged out of his head even more, and his tongue went looking for his chin. "Why don't you think about it and let me know. See how the throat does. He'd have to go to Calgary to have it done."

In the car, on the way home, Lionel sulked in the front seat and stared out the window. "I know I can't do any homework with my throat like this."

For the rest of the week and the next, Lionel shuffled around the house, coughing and complaining, until finally his mother called Dr. Loomis and asked him to arrange for an operation as soon as possible.

And so, in early February, Lionel and his mother drove the two hundred and ten kilometres to Calgary. One of Lionel's aunts lived in Calgary. "I'm going to stay with Jean," his mother told him, "so Jean can come and see you every day."

There were no beds available in the children's ward, and Lionel

was given a bed in another wing. "It's just for the night," the nurse said. "After the operation, we'll move you in with the other children."

To his delight, Lionel discovered that the nurses were much too busy to bother with him, and he was free to roam the hospital. The cafeteria was his favourite stop. His mother had given him three dollars in an emergency, which Lionel decided, after thinking about it, would be the purchase of doughnuts. Later in the evening, a tall blonde man came into the room.

"Hi," she said. "You must be the lucky young man who won the plane ride."

Lionel liked playing these kinds of games. "That's me," he said. "When do we go?"

"Well," said the blonde woman, "we're almost ready. Have you been on a plane?"

"No!"

"Well, you certainly are lucky."

An hour later, a nurse came in with a wheelchair, and Lionel was pushed into a red-and-white ambulance, driven to the airport, and placed on the plane.

"Is my mother coming on the plane?"

"Don't worry, kid," said the ambulance driver. "Nurse said she's going to meet us in Toronto."

"Toronto!" said Lionel. "I've never been to Toronto!"

"Pretty exciting, huh?"

"It sure is."

When Lionel arrived at Sick Children's Hospital, everyone was so friendly. An older nurse who reminded him of his Auntie Louise took him to his room and told him all about the doctor who was going to perform the operation. This doctor had three children of her own, and at operations, the nurse said, were a very common thing these days.

"Nothing wrong with my heart," said Lionel. "It's my tonsils that are bad."

"You don't have to worry," said the nurse. "A heart operation like yours is really very simple."

"My heart is just fine."

"And it'll be even better tomorrow."

Lionel thought the nurse was kidding and he laughed, and then he

looked at her face. "Where's my mother?"

"She'll be here tomorrow, sweetheart. She'll be right here when you wake up. You better hop into bed, now, and get some sleep."

In that instant, Lionel knew that some horrible mistake had been made, that he was alone in Toronto, that his mother was in Calgary, that, in the morning, some doctor with three kids was going to cut his heart open. And he began to cry.

"My heart's good. There's nothing wrong with it. My tonsils are rotten, that's all."

The nurse tried to calm him down, told him she would see if the hospital could get in touch with his mother, and, in the meantime, why didn't he watch some television in the lounge which was just down the hall to the left. At the last moment, the nurse must have realized her mistake, because she called to him as he got to the door. "Wait a minute, honey," she said. "I'll go with you."

But it was too late. Lionel turned right and bolted down the hall. He found a set of stairs going down, crashed into the main lobby, and before anyone could do anything he was out the front door and into the night. He got as far as an arcade on Yonge Street and was trying to call home when the manager noticed that there was a barefoot Indian kid in what looked to be a hospital gown in his arcade and called the police.

By the time Lionel was dragged back to the hospital, insisting the entire way that his heart was just fine, the resident on call had had the good sense to phone Calgary and had discovered that the patient they had been expecting was a ten-year-old white child named Timothy and not an eight-year-old Indian boy named Lionel.

The next day, he was on a plane, his heart and tonsils intact, and by the time they got back to the reserve, Lionel's throat felt fine.

But that wasn't the end of it. Fourteen years later, when he applied for an insurance policy, Lionel discovered that, while he had almost forgotten the incident, the original error had somehow worked its way into a computer file. The insurance company wanted him to have a physical with a separate evaluation of his heart condition.

The Leap

BY LOUISE ERDRICH

"My mother once said that I'd be amazed at how many things a person can do within the act of falling."

My mother is the surviving half of a blindfold trapeze act, not a fact I think about much even now that she is sightless, the result of encroaching and stubborn cataracts. She walks slowly through her house here in New Hampshire, lightly touching her way along walls and running her hands over knickknacks, books, the drift of a grown child's belongings and castoffs. She has never upset an object or as much as brushed a magazine onto the floor. She has never lost her balance or bumped into a closet door left carelessly open.

It has occurred to me that the catlike precision of her movements in old age might be the result of her early training, but she shows so little of the drama or flair one might expect from a performer that I tend to forget the Flying Avalons. She has kept no sequinned costume, no photographs, no flyers or posters from that part of her youth. I would, in fact, tend to think that all memory of double somersaults and heart-stopping catches had left her arms and legs were it not for the fact that sometimes, as I sit sewing in the room of the rebuilt house in which I slept as a child, I hear the crackle, catch a whiff of smoke from the stove downstairs, and suddenly the room goes dark, the stitches burn beneath my fingers, and I am sewing with a needle of hot silver, a thread of fire.