

BIG SKY

A drama in one act
by
Bradley Hayward

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SYNOPSIS

Perched on a towering oil rig, a rugged oilman and his creative son attempt to bridge the gap between industry and art. Their conversation high above the world reveals the quiet struggle of a father trying to toughen a son who was born to see the world differently. As the sun stalls on the horizon, the endless sky illuminates a hidden depth to their relationship that neither could find on solid ground.

CHARACTERS

(2m)

ROY: (48, m) A rugged oilman who sees the potential of the land. He wears a western shirt tucked into his jeans, leather belt with a big buckle, and cowboy boots.

WYATT: (15, m) His artistic son who questions the world. He wears an oversized yellow hard hat, brightly coloured t-shirt, and khaki pants.

SETTING

The raised platform of an oil rig, high in the sky. A vertical ladder descends through a hatch in the floor, and steel guardrails surround the platform on all four sides. A majestic sunset casts a spectacular pink glow on a scrim behind.

RUNNING TIME

10 minutes.

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(The lights rise on a raised platform of a tall oil rig, high in the sky. A vertical ladder descends through a hatch in the floor, and steel guardrails surround the platform on all four sides. A majestic sunset casts a spectacular pink glow on a scrim behind.)

(WYATT sits on the steel grating, and his legs dangle over the edge as he clutches a guardrail for dear life. He wears an oversized yellow hard hat that slips down over his eyebrows. ROY stands at the edge, his cowboy boots half over the precipice, looking out toward the horizon like he owns the sky. WYATT adjusts the brim of the hard hat.)

WYATT: It doesn't fit.

ROY: (Without looking) Tighten the plastic notch in the back. It's adjustable.

WYATT: No, it's not.

ROY: Everything's adjustable, Wyatt.

WYATT: I tightened it as far as it goes. It still slides.

ROY: (Chuckles) You've got your mother's bone structure. I got a head like a cinder block. Use your hand to hold it up. Then stop looking at your shoelaces and look at the horizon.

WYATT: I'm not looking at my laces. If I look down, I'll puke. I'm looking at the structural integrity of these bolts. Did you know a significant percentage of workplace accidents occur because of –

ROY: Look at the sky.

(WYATT slowly lifts his head, pushing the hat back. The light hits his face. He winces.)

WYATT: It's a lot of pink.

ROY: It looks like money.

WYATT: (Sighs) Of course it does.

ROY: No, look. See that line? That's the grid. Every one of those pump jacks is a heartbeat. This area is a giant engine and we're standing on the spark plug. You feel that vibration? That's the earth giving us a handshake.

WYATT: It feels more like the earth is trying to shake us off.

ROY: You gotta get some grit in your gears. I brought you up here so you could see the scale of it. You spend all your time in your room rehearsing those plays, talking to the walls. I want you to see a stage this big.

WYATT: It's a bit over produced, don't you think? The lighting is a little on the nose.

ROY: (Ignores him) Your grandfather put the first pipe in the ground three miles from that ridge over there. He didn't even have a safety harness. He had a grip like a snapping turtle and a dream that his son wouldn't have to eat dirt for breakfast.

WYATT: And now his grandson is a hundred feet in the air, wearing a hat that's trying to swallow his brain. Evolution is a funny thing.

ROY: You're smart, Wyatt. Scary smart. You know things about acting and lighting and whatever else. But you gotta know the ground you're standing on. If you don't know the land, you don't know yourself.

WYATT: I know the land, Dad. It's flat. It's dusty. And it's very far down.

ROY: It's home.

WYATT: Is that why we're here, to talk about home? Or is this the part where you tell me I need to spend the summer hauling pipe in Estevan so I can bulk up?

ROY: I wanted you to see what I see. Just once, before the light goes.

(He pulls a tin of peppermints from his pocket, cracks it open, and offers one to WYATT, who shakes his head. ROY pops one in his mouth.)

Sun's dipping. Watch the purple.

WYATT: It's violet, Dad.

ROY: Purple. Deep as a bruise.

WYATT: (Quietly) It's beautiful, I'll give you that. It's like the sky is trying to apologize for how boring the dirt is.

ROY: Dirt's never boring. It's got a memory.

WYATT: Is that why you're so quiet? Remembering?

ROY: Just looking.

WYATT: You know, I did a scene last week, from "The Glass Menagerie." Tom Wingfield wants to leave, but he's stuck. He's always looking at the moon, but he's stuck in a warehouse.

ROY: What kind of warehouse?

WYATT: You're missing the point. What matters is he's not a warehouse guy. He's a moon guy.

ROY: Do you think I'm an oil rig guy?

WYATT: Well, look at your hands. Even when you wash them, the oil stays in the lines of your palms, like a map.

ROY: (Looks at his hands) Good map. Led me here.

WYATT: But I'm not on the map, am I?

ROY: You're on the map. You're just a different colour ink.

WYATT: (Surprised) That's almost poetic. Careful, you'll lose your tough guy credentials.

ROY: (Changes the subject) Wind's picking up. You can see the trees leaning sideways.

WYATT: Dad?

ROY: Yeah?

WYATT: Is it just me, or are the shadows going the wrong way?

ROY: (Looks straight ahead) Doesn't matter. Just look at the light.

WYATT: I'm trying, but I'm scared of heights. Why did you really bring me up here?

ROY: Because you're always looking at your shoes. I wanted you to see how big it is.

WYATT: It's big, I see it. Now can we go?

ROY: I wanted you to see how much room there is for you.

WYATT: Room for what?

ROY: To be whatever.

WYATT: Whatever?

ROY: Whatever you want to be.

WYATT: (Stunned) You've never said that before.

ROY: I'm saying it now.

WYATT: You've said I need to smarten up. You've said I'm too soft for this world. But you've never said much else.

ROY: I was wrong. This world's got plenty of room for soft.

WYATT: That's not what you said when you opened the sweater I picked out for you last Christmas. You said it made you look like a fancy pants.

ROY: It's a comfortable sweater.

WYATT: You've never worn it.

ROY: I've worn it.

WYATT: You're lying! When did you wear it? I've never seen you wear it!

ROY: You've got your mother's eyes. Especially when you're mad.

WYATT: Who says I'm mad?

ROY: You pick a fight when you're looking to make an exit.

WYATT: I'm looking for the stairs, Dad. There's a difference.

ROY: No stairs up here. Just a ladder.

WYATT: How did Mom ever let you climb these things? She worries if I go near the bathtub without a life jacket on.

ROY: She doesn't "let" me do anything. Your mother is the only person who looks at a guy like me and doesn't see a project.

WYATT: She says you're handsome.

ROY: She does?

WYATT: (Nods) She must mean in a cracked pavement kind of way.

ROY: You know where I met her? At a gas station in Moose Jaw. She was trying to fix a fan belt with a hair tie.

WYATT: That sounds like her.

ROY: I walked over to help, and she told me to stay back. She said she had a system. She didn't, of course. She was covered in grease up to her elbows, looking like a coal miner, but she was...

(He searches for the word.)

She was light. Like she wasn't quite touching the gravel.

WYATT: Is that when you fell in love? Right there between the diesel and the unleaded?

ROY: I did.

WYATT: How romantic.

ROY: I fell in love when she realized I actually knew what I was doing and she didn't get embarrassed. She just laughed. The one with the snort. Most girls back then, they wanted you to think they were perfect. She just wanted to get the car moving.

WYATT: She still laughs like that. Especially when you aren't around to tell her to simmer down.

ROY: It's true, I like a quiet house. But your mother, she's the radio. You're the radio, too. You've both got all these frequencies.

WYATT: Is that why you're always at the office? Are we too much noise?

ROY: No. It's because I don't know how to tune the dial. I'm a one station kind of guy. I'm AM and the two of you are FM, on a higher altitude.

WYATT: I'm not high altitude, Dad. I'm terrified up here. My knees are literally knocking. If I'm a radio station, I'm currently broadcasting a distress signal.

ROY: Lean into the wind, not away from it. If you lean away, the wind wins. If you lean in, you're part of it.

(WYATT leans forward, carefully.)

WYATT: It's warm up here. Even for July.

ROY: We're closer to the sun.

WYATT: Do you think mom is looking at this sunset right now? From the kitchen window?

ROY: She's looking at the horizon. But we're above the horizon now. It's a different view from here.

(He taps the steel floor with the heel of his boot.)

This rig? This isn't just a ladder to the clouds. It's a straw. A silver straw that's plugged into the juice of the world.

WYATT: But the world is running out of juice.

ROY: Don't start with that climate stuff. Everything you see... those tractors on the field, the heater in your room, the bus that takes you to those play rehearsals... it all starts here. People hate the smell of oil until their house gets cold. Then they love it.

WYATT: I don't hate it. I just don't want it under my fingernails for forty years. Is that okay?

ROY: I'm forty eight. My back hurts and my hearing is sixty percent gone from the machinery. I did the grease so you could do the... whatever it is you do. The play stuff.

WYATT: The play stuff has a name, Dad. It's art. It's how people talk when they aren't grunt talking about the price of oil.

ROY: (Laughs) Grunt talking. That's good! You've got a sharp tongue. If you could swing a sledgehammer as hard as your mouth, you'd be a foreman by twenty.

WYATT: But I don't want to be a foreman. I want to be the person who notices that the sun isn't just setting, it's bleeding. Bleeding pink all over the place, like someone hurt its feelings or something.

ROY: See, that's what I don't get. Why's it gotta be hurt? Why's it gotta be anything than just the sun?

WYATT: Art is how we find each other. Artistic license is how we get there.

ROY: You think I'm lonely, standing up here?

WYATT: I think you're the loneliest man I know. You're always looking at the horizon like you're waiting for a ship to come in, but we're in the middle of a field.

ROY: (Quietly) Maybe I'm just looking for a way to tell you I'm proud of you without sounding like a fancy pants.

WYATT: (Bluntly) You've never said it!

ROY: I'm saying it now. In my way.

WYATT: (Frustrated) Your way is a riddle. It's a scavenger hunt where the prize is a peppermint and a lecture on grit. Why can't you just say it? "Wyatt, I like that you're sensitive. I like that you care about things that don't make money."

ROY: Because in this world, sensitive gets you stepped on. I want to build a shell around you. A hard hat for your whole life.

(WYATT adjusts the hard hat on his head.)

WYATT: It doesn't fit, Dad. I told you. It just doesn't fit.

(ROY points forward. WYATT's eyes follow his finger.)

ROY: See that? Past the Qu' Appelle Valley? That little cluster of lights just starting to blink?

WYATT: (Squints) The ones that look like fallen stars?

ROY: Those are the rigs at Weyburn. And further left, that's the grain terminal. My dad helped pour the concrete for those silos. He used to say that from up there, you could see the skeleton of the world. And those bones are how people survive.

WYATT: So is that why you wanted to build something even higher?

ROY: Hmm. I never thought of it like that.

WYATT: I think like that all the time.

ROY: You're probably right.

WYATT: But from up here, everything looks so tiny. Like if I blew hard enough, the whole grid would flicker out.

ROY: It's tougher than it looks. You just gotta know where the pressure points are. I brought you up here to show you that. Not the oil. Not the money. I wanted you to see the scale.

WYATT: The scale of what? How small I am?

ROY: No. How much room there is to move. Down there, everyone's looking at each other. Checking if your grass is cut or if you're wearing the right boots or if you're strong enough or manly enough or good enough. Up here...

(He gestures in a complete 360 degree circle.)

There's no one to tell you you're doing it wrong.

WYATT: (Softly) Except you.

(There's a pause. ROY takes this in.)

ROY: Yeah. Except me.

WYATT: It's true.

ROY: I know. I've spent a lot of time trying to fence you in. I thought if I kept the perimeter tight, nothing could hurt you.

WYATT: Fences keep things out, but they also keep things trapped.

(ROY points toward the horizon.)

ROY: Look at that light. Right on the seam. That's the most beautiful thing I know. It only lasts for ten minutes a day, but it's the only time the world looks relaxed. Like it's taking off its work clothes.

WYATT: Is that why you stay late every night? To feel relaxed?

ROY: I stay late because I don't know how to go home and tell you that I like your plays. Or that I like the fancy pants sweater.

WYATT: You could just say, "Good job, Wyatt." Or, "Thank you."

ROY: I'm saying it now. Listen.

(WYATT closes his eyes and listens. The wind picks up. They both hear it.)

WYATT: Dad?

ROY: Yeah, son?

(WYATT taps the steel guardrail he's been holding onto the whole time.)

WYATT: The metal. It's not warm anymore.

ROY: That's the sun draining out of it.

WYATT: But it's cold. And the smell. It doesn't smell like oil anymore. It smells like your recliner. And peppermint.

ROY: Good memory. You always had a nose for the details.

WYATT: Dad?

ROY: Yeah, son?

WYATT: Why has the sun stopped?

ROY: Stopped?

(WYATT points toward the sun.)

WYATT: It's been sitting on that ridge for I don't know how long. It's not moving. The light is just hanging there, like a curtain that won't drop.

ROY: Maybe it's waiting for us to finish.

WYATT: Finish what? We aren't doing anything. We're just... being.

ROY: Exactly. We were never very good at that, were we? You were always practising for a play, and I was always practising for the next big thing. We were always becoming something. Never just being.

WYATT: I feel... light. Like if I let go of this rail, I wouldn't fall. I'd just drift away, like a balloon.

ROY: Then let go, Wyatt.

WYATT: (Whispers) I'm scared. If I let go, the world starts.

ROY: No, son. If you let go, the world opens. Look at the horizon again. Really look.

(WYATT looks outward. His voice trembles.)

WYATT: Where are the lights going? Where is Weyburn?

ROY: They're going where they're needed. You don't need them anymore.

(WYATT turns to ROY. His eyes open wide.)

WYATT: Your hands! Dad, I can see the stars through your sleeve.

ROY: (Smiles) They're good stars, aren't they? Better than the ones in your plays.

WYATT: I can't feel the grit anymore. I can't feel the dirt.

(A faint white light very slowly begins to swell around ROY as he speaks.)

ROY: You always wanted to know why I was so obsessed with the dirt. Why I spent so much time measuring pressures and checking valves. You thought it was the money. Or the business.

(He shakes his head.)

It wasn't. It was the weight. Down there, everything has a weight. I loved the rigs because they were the only place where the weight made sense. You build a tower, you stay on top of it, and for a while, you're taller than your failures. I wanted to bring you up here so you could feel that. I wanted to give you a view where you didn't feel small. I spent my whole life trying to build a floor beneath your feet so solid that you'd never have to worry about falling. I didn't realize...

(He touches WYATT's shoulder.)

I didn't realize you already had wings. You didn't need my steel. You needed my sky.

WYATT: I didn't want a floor, Dad. I just wanted a hand to hold while I looked at the edge.

(He looks at his hands.)

I remember biting my nails at the hospital. I remember the smell. I remember that little green line jumping across the screen. It was like a neon pump jack. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down. And then, it went flat. Like the horizon.

ROY: The horizon isn't a straight line if you keep moving.

WYATT: You aren't here. This isn't July. There's no sun. It's three in the morning. And I'm asleep in your recliner, aren't I? With your fancy pants Christmas sweater over my legs.

ROY: (Smiles) I wore that sweater in the hospital.

WYATT: You did?

ROY: Every night. My bed was near a crack in the window and it kept me warm.

WYATT: Why didn't you tell me?

ROY: I didn't think you'd believe me.

WYATT: There are so many things I never told you. About the plays. About the applause. About who I am. I thought you'd hate it.

ROY: I knew, Wyatt. I always knew. I just didn't have the script. I was a one station guy, remember? I didn't know how to play your music. But I was always listening.

(WYATT takes the hard hat off, tears in his eyes.)

WYATT: It doesn't fit, Dad.

(ROY reaches out. WYATT gently sets the hat in his hands.)

ROY: No. It doesn't fit.

WYATT: I'm sorry.

ROY: You don't need a hat where you're going. You just need to keep looking up.

(He puts the hat on his head and begins to descend down the ladder.)

WYATT: (Whispers) Wait. Dad?

(ROY stops and looks up.)

Just one more thing.

ROY: What's that, son?

WYATT: Tell me about the sky again.

ROY: It's big, Wyatt. It's so big. And it's all yours.

(He slowly disappears down the ladder. WYATT looks out toward the big sky as the lights fade.)

THE END