



The tank was at the top of a timber derrick among the Santa Fe Railroad tracks, at the end of San Benito Avenue. The timber was old and rickety. The ladder rungs had been nailed to the frame long ago. The nails had rusted, and some were loose. In one place, midway, a rung was missing. The climber going up had to put some muscle into it, and coming down he had to see that he didn't slip. The water tanks had had a sign saying that it was against the law to climb the tower, but somebody had sensibly removed the sign.

One summer I climbed the tower a couple of times a week, once to drop a cat, which landed on its feet, bounced, and ran away at full speed. I was never mean to animals, and on this occasion I was more stupid than mean. I really believed the cat would not be injured in the fall. Perhaps it wasn't. All the same I have always felt a little guilty about having dropped the cat. And ashamed.

The railroad tracks and the eucalyptus trees among the tracks, in the jungle, where the hoboes rested and cooked their stew and smoked cigarettes and talked, black and white alike, but never immigrants, never people who came to America to make good, the railroad tracks had cat packs, old toms, females, and half-grown young cats, all lean, all tough, all dirty. The cat I had taken up with me and had dropped from the top of the tower was one of these—a cat which had been trusting, unlike most of the others in the pack, which were suspicious of human beings, and afraid of them. This cat

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considered me a friend, and there it was—I betrayed the cat. I dropped it to hard ground from a height of at least a hundred feet.

And I had to be clever to do it, for the cat clung to my arm, and spoke, not piteously but rather bravely, as if to say, "You're not going to do something stupid, are you?"

I had to turn quickly and let the cat go. Even while it was tumbling head over heels and the boys who were with me, watching, cheered and laughed, I thought, "Please spare the poor animal, and I will never do such a stupid thing again."

I was thrilled when the cat struck the hard ground *lightly*, feet first and bounced so swiftly that it was almost as if it had not in fact a real impact with the ground, and then raced away. The escape and survival of the cat thrilled me deeply, because it made my mischief something less than a criminal act upon life.

The climbing to the top of the tower, then walking around the tank and looking around at the whole small town in all directions, and the climbing down, required concentration and care. It was all very definitely dangerous. Why did I do it, then?

Because I believed in my ability to do it. After having done it, I actually was able to feel I had accomplished something of some importance to me.