Which theme is stronger in the story, “The Last Rung on the Ladder” – hope or despair?

“The Last Rung on the Ladder”, by Stephen King, tells the story of a brother and sister whose different life directions result in the weakening of their bond and Kitty’s ultimate suicide. While we see Kitty and her brother Larry both experience the feelings of hope and despair over the course of the story, overall, the theme of despair is slightly stronger. Certainly, early on, hope, as well as trust in one another, are strong feelings the characters display. Larry’s flashback to the barn incident reveals just how strong Kitty’s trust in her brother is. While helplessly dangling from the last rung of that ladder seventy feet up, Kitty never dares to look down, and instead puts her complete faith in her brother to save her life. Indeed, it is out of desperation that Larry frantically builds a haystack under Kitty, as there is no other option to save her from crashing directly to the floor. He commands her to let go, “Because it was too later for me to get any more hay. Too late for anything except blind hope”. Thankfully, Kitty survives this life-threatening experience, entirely because she places her trust and hope in her brother’s efforts. Later, she reveals that she had no idea how he was going to save her, but that didn’t matter because, “’You’re my big brother. I knew you’d take care of me”.

The theme of hope continues as Larry describes their lives after high school; we learn that Kitty’s life becomes a series of failed relationships and broken dreams. But despite each failure, Kitty reaches out to her brother through letters, hoping and trusting that Larry will visit her, to “save” her as he did long ago in the barn. Even when Larry pours his attention into his own life and career, neglecting his sister’s calls for help, Kitty continues to reach out to him. It is Larry’s lack of a response that begins the unravelling of Kitty’s hope and turns it to anguish, and this is where the theme of despair becomes prominent in the story. When her faith in her brother fades, this is certainly where Kitty grows more and more hopeless. Kitty reaches a tragic point of despair when she writes her last letter to her brother, confessing that the believes “it would have been better for me if that last rung had broken before you could put the hay down”. She could only wait so long hoping that her brother could save her before she realized that, this time, he was not going to catch her fall. Resorting to suicide is Kitty’s final act of desperation; perhaps if she had not placed such faith in her brother, she may not have reached such a dire level of desperation. Kitty’s suicide causes despair for their father, of course, who has “a heavy sadness in his voice” as he and Larry fly back from Los Angeles. And Larry, who has “been awake all night” with Kitty’s last letter, is haunted by her final words to him. Not only does he experience the pain of losing his beloved little sister, but he also feels guilt and regret that he had not know how desperate Kitty was, “because that one sentence was maybe the only thing that would have brought me on the run”. In the end, Kitty’s blind hope in her brother underscores the tragic desperation of the end of her life.