Sketch

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Ag. Jr. Sr.

Most seasons is all right in their place, I guess; but me, I been partial to fall so long I guess it's sorta growed on me like the ivy on Ike Muller's house next door. And I've noticed most folks seem to like fall too. Specially the young folks. Most every night about sundown you can see a bunch of 'em comin' down the street, kicking up leaves and laughin' for all they're worth.

Sometimes they'll stop and chin a bit before they cross the tracks, especially Tim Jeffries and young Eddie Slater coming along hand-in-hand carrying a picnic pack and blanket. Tim's like Skeeter was in a lot of ways, and they're both as good as you could ask for. Like as not, they'll see if Jason wants to go along. Jason's my big Collie who's gettin' old like me. But once in awhile he'll come to life and start after 'em almost frisky like a pup. Then he'll turn around and look at me, and I'll say "Oh, go wan along, and you won't be botherin' me." And then he'll go.

I'll sit and watch the three of 'em cross the tracks with their blankets wavin' and headin' over towards the picnic grounds at Dober's Mill. And I'll light my pipe and set in my wicker chair, smilin' to myself at the devilment they're up to.

The wind'll rustle the big elm in the yard where the squirrels is buildin' for winter, and the leaves'll come floatin' down across the porch, racin' across in front of a body when he's tryin' to see the kids disappearin' in the dusk. There'll be a big bonfire lightin' up the sky above the jack oaks, if Eddie can get it started. And as I sit there watchin' it and smokin' my pipe I can't help thinkin' about how it was with Skeeter and me before things happened the way they did.

I can still see plain as day the way she looked when I first caught sight of her. I was working next door to Mary's at Doc Lawson's trimmin' trees when she came in. All dressed in blue, she was, with bright red frilly stuff ticklin' at her throat from underneath. I almost fell out of the tree looking at her, but caught myself and clumb back up feeling awkward and silly.
She looked up and laughed, and then I saw her Aunt Mary meet her at the door and kiss her and take her inside. I remember I whistled more than usual the rest of the day and kept lookin’ over at Mary’s house every now and then.

Next day I came back to work for Doc again, rigged out in a clean plaid shirt and a white jersey underneath. But I saw nothing more of her all morning and had most forgot about it by afternoon when I slid down to get a drink from the well at the corner of the house. I was tired and dirty and sweaty and sat down on the curb to drink.

Joe Baldwin was shingling the house next to Lawson’s on the east, and I watched him pound away for a while. Maybe it was the noise he made hammerin’ on the roof, and maybe I was day dreamin’ a little, I dunno. All I remember is that I heard nothing until someone close behind me said, “Hello,” and I stumbled all over myself trying to stand up. There she was, and I reckon you couldn’t have pulled my mouth shut with a wire stretcher.

“You look tired,” she said, and smiled.

Her teeth were white and straight like I’d never seen before, and it was quite a while before I stopped lookin’ at her and noticed she had a piece of pie in her hand. When she saw I’d noticed it she held it up so I could see how good it was.

“Just out of the oven,” she told me.

Her voice was low and soft.

“Yea, looks good,” I said, but stared at her. . . . “My name’s Larry Myers.”

Her eyes were devilish.

“That’s a nice name. Aunt Mary told me all about you. Won’t you sit down and eat the pie?”

I did, and we talked for a while. She told me her name was Silva Stone. It wasn’t long until I was at ease again. She was friendly, but natural like she was that way with everyone she knew.

Well, that’s how we met, and before she left she’d asked me a lot of things about the town and me. I didn’t get much chance to find out a lot about her except she didn’t know no one in town and came from Norwalk to go to school.
When I asked her to go to the concert with me on Saturday night it was so easy it slipped out almost before I knew I was sayin' it.

"I'd love to go," she said and looked at me as though she would.

That was on Thursday, I remember, 'cause I finished the job at Doc Lawson's the next day and he paid me that night when he came home.

I think she was surprised Saturday night to see how different I looked when I got combed and shaved and dressed. But I forgot all about myself when I saw her. She had a yellow-gold sweater beneath her coat and her hair looked soft and black as night.

We went to the concert and sat on a bench and talked, with neither of us paying much attention to the music. After it was over, we walked the long way home past Tracy's Tearoom and stopped and ate and talked a lot more.

I felt extra good after leavin' her that night and whistled a little tune that kept runnin' through my head walkin' home. The air was damp with spring and cold, but I kept warm by walkin' fast.

No one was up when I opened the door of the living room, so I went upstairs. Ordinarily, I'd hit the bed without a murmur and go right to sleep. But that night, I recall layin' awake a long while, lookin' out the window at the moon shinin' down on the roof of Rottler's barn, and doin' a lot of thinkin'.

I can't remember all that happened that summer like the first night we were together . . . but I somehow can't forget it all either. And on warm, rainy evenings when Jason and me go walking down along Eagle Creek to stretch our legs a bit, we'll see a lot that makes me think of Skeeter. Maybe it'll be no more than just footloggin' across the creek like we used to do, with me carryin' her.

"I'm too heavy. Put me down," she'd squeal, all the time knowin' she'd been mad if I'd let 'er walk.

"Why, you don't weigh no more 'n a pesky mosquito," I'd say.

And maybe she'd pout a little at the comparison or maybe just laugh and tell me that's why she got under my skin. Finally I got to callin' her Skeeter, and the name stuck.
A lot of the village squires took a fancy to her that summer, includin' Jess Cooper, who worked in his father's bank downtown. He'd take her to church on Sunday mornings and have her over to dinner sometimes. They had a wheezy old organ in their front room, and after the meal they'd get Skeeter to play by the hour with the Old Lady Cooper and the whole clan eggin' her on tryin' to make an impression. Sometimes it would make me almost mad enough to go to church myself, only I'd told her I never would, and I figgered she was doing a lot of the Coopering just to make me sorry. But she never turned me down in all the time I knew her. We just sort of hit it off, I guess. She seemed happy no matter what we did, whether it was walkin' along slow in the rain at night or just sittin' some place talkin'.

One evening I picked some bachelor buttons and started put­ting them in her hair. She was sitting on the grass with her skirt all spread around her carefully so you couldn’t even see her feet, and she smelled even better than the flowers where I'd been working. I never wanted anything more in my life than I did her that night, but couldn't seem to say it. So I stretched out on the grass and put my head in her lap.

She ran her fingers through my hair and around my ears, and I felt so comfortable I knew I never wanted to move again. “You’re nice,” she said after while. “Uh huh. You too.”

She lifted my head and put her arm underneath. “You’re the kind who’ll make somone a good husband.” “I was always dead set against it until you came along.” “That’s silly. I’m lazy. Besides I don’t like to cook.” “Oh, you’ll learn. And even if you didn’t, lookin’ at you would be enough.”

The statement was accidental, but I felt her arms tighten. “That was nice, Larry. Awfully nice.” “But not half as nice as the bride you’ll make.”

She smiled, and I kissed her for the first time since I'd known her. Her mouth was soft and wonderful, just like I always knew it would be. “I'll never get married, Larry.” “Oh, girls are always sayin' that, but they come around. Why in tarnation wouldn't you get married?” “Just because I won’t,” she said and didn’t offer any more.
It wasn't long until I'd find myself thinking about such things as a little cottage with Skeeter and a room with an organ in it, while I'd be working. It even got so I'd mention them to Skeeter now and then when we were alone.

"Sounds wonderful," she'd say and her eyes would sparkle, for a minute, "but not for me, silly."

"That's ridiculous," I'd say. "You'll meet the right varmint some day, who'll woo you properly and haul you to the altar."

That would make her mad, and she wouldn't talk for a while. But I never worried too much about her whims and small talk, because I knew she thought I had it all over Jess Cooper and all the rest of the skirtchasers in town.

Well, it went that way through the summer and into the fall when the nights started getting cool and the leaves were beginning to turn along the ridge at Calahan Hill. I'd taken a steady job by then in the freight house meetin' trains, and with Tony as old as he was I felt good about my prospects of advancing.

I was as crazy about Skeeter as a guy can get about a gal, I reckon, and felt pretty sure I could change her mind before it came time for her to leave. We had a little rift now and then when she was stubborn, and I maybe would stomp off a little huffy at night when I'd leave her. But there was never nothin' serious, and generally we were happy together as a couple of young pups.

Maybe that's why it sorta rocked me back on my heels one night in late September when I dropped in at Mary's to see Skeeter. She knew I was coming, I think, but I was earlier than usual because I quit early to deliver a separator part to Dobbs. The shortest route from Dobbs' place to Mary's was through Mary's back yard, so I walked in the back way 'stead of the front. I'd become so much a regular customer there that summer that I seldom did more than just to knock a little as I walked through the door.

The back door opened into the kitchen and there was a bedroom off the kitchen on the west. No one was in sight when I got there but I heard 'em talking in the bedroom so I sauntered over to say hello . . . and I caught them both busy packing Skeeter's clothes in a big, black suitcase.

By the time they both saw me I guess the surprise was mutual. "What goes on?" I asked.

And Mary said, "Oh, we're straightening up a bit. Do you
think you'd be good help?"

I don't remember what I said to that, but I know I wasn't long getting Skeeter outside alone where I could talk to her.

"You wouldn't be goin' away without tellin' me, would you?"

"Why, Larry, you almost sound suspicious."

She tried to make it teasing, but I could see she was evading the question.

"Vacationing again?"

"A little more permanent than that, I guess."

"When you leavin'?"

"Joe's picking up my things in an hour if he can get away from the station. I'm taking the 11 o'clock train, I guess."

I pulled her down on the porch step beside me.

"How come you didn't tell me you were going so sudden?"

"It's been so much fun pretending I didn't have to, I didn't want to spoil it."

"Oh, I reckon you didn't like it here as much as you let on."

She didn't say anything for quite a spell. Just sat lookin' at the moon gloatin' over our picnic spot on Calahan Hill.

"It's the most wonderful place I've ever been," she said.

Mary carried a lamp by the kitchen door. In the light Skeeter's face looked tired and, I thought, indifferent.

"You say pretty things."

"You think I don't mean them?"

"I reckon there's not much choice nor difference what I think."

Her voice was low but steady. "I'm sorry, I hoped you wouldn't feel that way."

"How'd you think I'd feel? You know I've worked for nothin' else this summer but us gettin' married."

"But I told you—"

"Yea, I know—you told me a lot of things."

She folded her hands in her lap.

"I guess I should have known this would happen. But it was such fun pretending it would never be any other way."

"You shoulda joined Cecelia's dramatic school, if you like pretendin'."

I felt her wince.

"That wasn't fair, Larry . . . and somehow not like you."

"You expected me to dance a jig?"
She reached for my hand, and I knew she was waiting till I looked before she said anymore. It was just plain cussedness, I guess, that made me pull away.

"Larry, I know you're hurt," she said, "but some day you'll know things had to be like they are."

"Yea, I'm learnin' fast."

"I know I've been pretty selfish. I knew I shouldn't have let you come see me—I kept telling myself that. I'd always decide I wouldn't go again, but when you'd come I'd put it off till next time."

"That must have been quite a fascinatin' game. I reckon Jess Cooper'll be glad to hear I'm 'it'."

The way her head jerked up I knew I'd hit home.

"You know he annoys me and always has. He knows it too."

I said nothing.

"This has been my summer, Larry. It's been the kind I always wanted but never had. I couldn't tell you the way things are because it would have spoiled everything. Besides, I wouldn't have dared. There's a limit to how far I can trust myself and—well, you're the kind who'd have been noble."

I got up from the steps.

"Most suckers are noble," I said. "And I reckon you won't be havin' any trouble trustin' yourself anymore as far as I'm concerned."

Little ripples moved up and down below her ear, but she got control before she spoke again.

"Please, let's don't end it this way. I've so much I want to tell you before I have to leave."

"I calculate I've heard enough."

Big tears glistened as they crawled down toward her nose. I felt suddenly disgusted and sick inside.

"I'm goin', Skeeter," I said. "I reckon I need to be alone for awhile."

I was a little surprised that she didn't protest any more—just sat on the step lookin' at me.

"Goodbye, Larry," she said.

I walked out across Mary's front yard towards the path that led to Calahan Hill, and didn't look back till I got to the shadow of a big black oak. Skeeter was still huddled on the steps in the moonlight with her head in her lap.
I stood for awhile in the dark buttoning my coat—mad at whatever it was inside that made me want to go back. While I was still arguing in my head Mary came out on the porch. I saw her help Skeeter up and the two of them go through the door with Mary's arm on her shoulder. That's the last time I saw Skeeter.

I watched the eleven o'clock passenger pull out that night while sittin' on a rock high up on Calahan Hill, and I can still see the firebox glowing hot in the dark like the spot that was burning inside me.

Well, that's how it was, and I got nothin' much to remember her by but the memories of the things we did that summer rushing through my mind and an old scrap of newssheet that's locked in my trunk upstairs. Yellow and almost flaked it is and stained in spots till you can hardly read it.

Most everyone in Plattsmouth will remember Silva Stone. To those who got to know her, and most of us did, the news that came this week was a shock indeed. But we can feel proud for (though none of us knew it but Mary Mathews) Plattsmouth was her paradise.

All her life she didn't live like other kids and got her schooling at home. And her vacations weren't a jaunt to the country to visit. For her it was a trip to a stone-walled bed palace in Lakeshire where eagle-eyed men pored over her because she was "such a peculiar case." And like they expected she got better after a while, and they told her she'd be like others for a time.

That was last spring, Mrs. Mathews says, and they told Silva she'd make it till August. But she wasn't worried and told them she'd have at least till the leaves turned brown.

We didn't know nothing about all that because she wanted it that way. The exact nature of her trouble is still puzzling, according to the city doctors. But they say she died in Lakeshire on the fifteenth of November.