Sketch

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The Misfit

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Abstract

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THE LURCHING, soot-covered extra pulled into the station with a jerky halt. Roger stretched hard and reached for his suitcases on the rack.

The stream of passengers emptied from the train. Roger glanced out the window. Above the depot door a sign read, “College Station.” A group of boys in checkered tweed overcoats and white shoes lounged by the station. Roger looked down at his own shoes. They were his best—the brown ones he had purchased back in Sheltonville after the sale of one of his 4-H calves.

Roger climbed from the coach, struggling with the heavy suitcases. He wandered to the end of the platform.

“Taxi, buddy?”

“No, thanks.” Roger didn’t have enough money for a taxi.

“Pardon me,” he said, “can you tell me where to catch the bus to the campus?”

The taxi driver looked oddly at him, shrugged his shoulders, and told him the bus would be by the station in about 10 minutes. Roger walked to the corner and stacked his luggage by the bench. The streets were alive with bewildered freshmen and older students, just returned from summer vacations.

Roger looked up and down the road. Maybe he should have taken the taxi. At least he could have gotten exactly where he wanted to go. His father would know what to do. Sometimes Roger wished his father hadn’t been quite so insistent that he attend college. He wanted to stay on the farm and operate it as his father had. But he was told that the only way to get along by farming these days was to learn the scientific way.

Finally the bus marked “Campus” came. Roger climbed on, but couldn’t find the right fare.

“Hurry it up,” said the driver impatiently. “We’re behind schedule now.” Roger flushed a deep red from the driver’s remarks and the stares of the indifferent passengers. People didn’t seem very friendly at College Station. He lugged his suitcases to the rear and found a seat.

He settled back in the stiff upholstery and wished he
were back in Sheltonville. It was 3 o’clock. Back home, people would be ready to have their afternoon break. He thought of his father, shocking corn for winter feed. They would need a lot of feed this winter. Already, the horses were growing long shaggy coats to protect them from the cold midwestern winter. It didn’t seem to Roger that a college education would be necessary to be a successful farmer. His father was doing all right.

Roger loved the country, especially early in the mornings when he filled the big racks with fodder for the cows. Milking time was always pleasant, too. The stolid cows, lowing mournfully in the dawn, seemed friendly and sort of understanding to Roger.

Most people wouldn’t understand the way Roger felt about cows. To him they represented something . . . security, and solidness, a satisfied and complacent way of living, doing what was expected of them without the worries that plague many people — College Station people.

Roger wondered why the bus driver was so irritable. He looked out the window and noticed large, red brick buildings with wide green lawns. “Campus!” the bus driver yelled.

Practically everyone in the bus got out. Roger shuffled along with the crowd, not knowing exactly where he should go.

He saw a long line of people in front of the largest building and walked toward it.

“Pardon me, but is this the line for new students?”

“This is one of them. Depends on whether you want to register or find a room first.” Roger looked confusedly around him. He hadn’t found a room yet, but maybe he should register and then find one. All the rest of the people looked as if they knew what they were doing.

“Where is the line for finding a room?” he queried.

“Across campus by the housing director’s office,” was the hurried reply. Evidently the man didn’t feel like answering questions. Roger picked up his luggage and headed in the direction of the person’s nod. Maybe he could find another line there.

That was one thing about the farm — no lines to wait in there, no confusion. Roger appreciated the simpleness of country life. And people were much friendlier, too. He wished his father had listened more to his mother. She didn’t
want him to go to college. He helped her around the farm with some of the smaller chores and she needed him.

If only his father weren't so stubborn—but his father didn't very often back down on anything once he had made up his mind. Roger didn't either, and he was already making up his mind that he wouldn't like college.

He found a line in front of the housing director's office. Several hours later, after filling out what Roger thought were too many documents and forms, he was in his new room in the men's dormitory with two other boys. Both his roommates were from big cities. Bill, who had never been on a farm, came from Minneapolis. Dick was from St. Louis. Roger liked Dick the best. Dick had spent 2 weeks as a child on his uncle's farm one summer and knew something about farming. Roger thought maybe he could tell Dick about the calf he was grooming for 4-H honors next summer.

Dick didn't appear interested as he talked mostly about girls. At least he told Roger where to register. Registration was just like finding a room, because of all the forms he had to fill out. One lady got irritated with him because he had forgotten to sign his name in ink and he had to fill out all the papers again. He got mixed up between the different stations, too, and it took him 3 hours to register.

The next morning Roger noticed a small notation on his class schedule which said "special." He asked Dick about it, but he didn't know. Maybe he should see the Dean, Dick suggested. Roger didn't like the idea. In the end, though, he decided to see him. Maybe that "special" was important.

Another long line of people! Roger wondered if they all had "specials" on their class schedules, too. The line moved slowly, and Roger had missed two classes already. It seemed to him that classes started much too soon to give people a chance to find out where things were. The Dean finally greeted him with a smile that Roger felt he didn't mean.

"Come in, my boy. What's your name?"

"Roger Johnson." Well, he wanted to know his name anyhow.

"What seems to be the matter, Roger?"

"I just wanted to know what this special on my class schedule means."

"Oh, yes. Well, Roger, it seems your high school grades weren't quite high enough to allow you to enter school with
full standing. If you get C's or better this quarter, it will be taken off. If you don't get good grades, you'll be allowed to stay in school only this quarter. If you apply yourself, you shouldn't have trouble. What do you plan on doing after graduation?"

"All I want to do is farm. I didn't want to go to college, but my father said that I should."

"Seems to me your father had the right idea, Roger. But I hope your attitude will change. Don't you have any classes today?"

"Yes, sir, but I wanted to find out what that special meant."

"It's not a good practice to miss classes, Roger. Couldn't you find someone who could tell you what the special meant?"

"Well, I asked my roommate, but he didn't know."

"I see. Well, I'll give you an excuse this time, but be a little more thoughtful next time."

"Yessir."

"All right, Roger, glad to have helped you."

"Thank you, sir."

Roger was glad the meeting was over. Actually he didn't know where his classes were to be held. He didn't dare tell the Dean that though. He would go back and ask Dick how to find them. But Dick wasn't there. Roger didn't really care — maybe if he got bad grades in classes, his father would see that he wasn't getting much out of going to college. Of course he couldn't do that deliberately. His father would question him closely if he flunked out and Roger never had been able to lie to his father.

He knew he would have trouble in some of his courses. Mathematics was one. He almost flunked math in high school, but the teacher passed him for his efforts. One course Roger thought he would like — animal husbandry. Maybe they would teach him something about raising champion beef. But naturally the best way to learn about raising beef was to learn by experience. He wished he was back on the farm tending his cattle.

Just as Roger anticipated, the classes were hard. He was lost in mathematics the first day, and the rest of them were not much better. English was bad. He wrote all his themes about the farm, and his instructor told him to try something else for a change. Roger didn't know anything else. When a person has lived on a farm all his life, he gets to know it
well, and if he doesn't want to do anything else, why should he have to learn about it?

Even animal husbandry was disappointing. All they taught him was how to differentiate between breeds of cattle, and Roger already knew almost everything they taught. It seemed to him that his father was just wasting the money he spent on Roger's college education.

He struggled through the first 5 weeks of school with much misgiving. He knew he was failing math and English. The only good grade he was getting was in animal husbandry, and he wasn't enjoying the course at all. But he tried. He wouldn't dare let his father spend all that money without at least trying. Even when he did try, Roger was left farther and farther behind. There were others who had trouble, but Roger was at the bottom of his class in mathematics and English.

The farm seemed more desirable than ever to him after these first few weeks of school. This time of year on the farm was always interesting, when the threshing crews made the rounds of the neighborhood and stores of feed were laid by for the winter. It was beautiful in the country. Sometimes in the evenings Roger would take his dog and go for long tramps through the fields, counting the number of rabbits and pheasants, to figure how the hunting would be. Squirrels would soon be rustling the fallen oak leaves in the grove down by the pond, burying acorns for the winter ahead. The fields were full of shocked corn, piled in crazy-quilt patterns on golden stubble fields. And the fish in the pond would be biting.

It was much prettier in the country than on the campus. The grass was now shriveled and brown, and the falling leaves had no chance to be beautiful, as they were quickly swept up by the ground crews. Everything was barren, and Roger was lonely.

He had no friends. He had found out the first few days that he and his roommates had nothing in common. They just didn't appreciate the wonderful way things were on a farm. Besides they were always busy. Dick had dates practically every day. People Roger saw all the time were still strangers to him, but he made no effort to make friends. On the farm he had needed none. There was something about the farm that filled the hollow spots left by the absence of people. Animals, though they couldn't talk, often seemed
to Roger as though they understood his thinking and talking. Friendly, familiar fields and big warm buildings were comforting.

Dick had told Roger he would be glad to fix him up with a date, but Roger refused. He didn’t dislike girls, but he didn’t know what he would talk to them about. Most girls didn’t like farms. The girls back home in Sheltonville mostly stayed there and married farmers. Roger wanted to marry a girl back home, too, as soon as he got a little older.

Just last week his mother had written him telling of one of the Sheltonville girls getting married. She told him how much she missed his help with the chores on the farm, too. Roger missed doing the chores. He would much rather work on the farm than study.

When midterm week came, Roger had F’s in math and English, D’s in two other subjects, and a B in animal husbandry. The Dean called him in for a conference.

"Seems as though you’ve had a little trouble with your studies, Roger."

"Yessir."

"Unless there is some special reason for your low grades, the future seems dark, don’t you think?"

"I guess so." Roger had thought the future was dark when his father told him he was to go to college.

"Was there any special reason, Roger?"

"I just didn’t understand the stuff, sir." Roger wondered what the Dean was leading up to. He had known his grades were poor; he didn’t need to be told. His mother had sympathized when he informed her of the slow progress. His father had been disappointed.

"Is there any reason for you to think that your grades will improve in the future?"

"Not that I can see, sir. I did try though." Roger had tried, but what’s the use of working at something you don’t care anything about?

He had been happy on the farm. He wanted to stay there and raise cattle, corn, dairy cows and pigs; to get up early in the morning and watch the sun rise; to go to bed late after finishing the milking. He loved the rolling hills and the pond in the grove, the hunting and fishing, and tramps with his dog. He didn’t need a college education to do that.

The Dean continued, "Frankly, Roger, I can see no good
reason for your being in college — you certainly don’t seem to enjoy it or take part in any activities. I think if you wanted to attend college, your grades would be much better.”

“My father wants me to get a degree, sir.” Certainly Roger didn’t care, and his mother had told him he was needed on the farm.

“Well, then, you’ll have to decide. But I’m required to tell you that unless your grades improve, you’ll have to be dismissed. I’m sorry, but those are the rules. You’ll have the rest of the quarter. If you drop out now, no marks will be placed against your name.”

“I understand, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Roger backed out and shut the door. If he quit now, he could say he’d left because he wanted to. And the sooner he got back to the farm, the better. He might even get in on the fall plowing and the soybean harvest. It was only 10 in the morning. Maybe he could pack his stuff and ride the bus home by milking time. His father wouldn’t like it, but his mother would stand by him. He could explain better to them why he didn’t need to go to college, now that he had been there. The bus would leave around 11. Maybe he could pack in time. He broke into a run. Already he could smell the musty odor of the barn.

**The coed**

She draws her knees beneath her chin to wait,
There is a while, yet, to meditate,
A moment to measure and evaluate, without alarm,
To pause with books beneath her arm,
There is time, yet,
To drowse a little, sleep a little,
Wink with a slow liquid eye,
Languidly exact a toll
Of pretty jewelled pins, perhaps,
Or of a clumsy heart.
She moves with a rhythmic gait,
Catching the eyes of boys upon the walk,
Speculative eyes of men,
She moves coyly to the classroom,
Shimmers slowly down the walk,
There are many men, there is much time.