Sketch

Volume 26, Number 3 1960 Article 6

Parting

Cole Foster*

*Iowa State University

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STRETCHING SOUTH and curving out of sight around a dense stand of frost-killed weeds, the railroad tracks gleamed in the autumn sun until they darkened from the weed shadows. Rollie walked in a haze of fall warmth. An early junco flitted across the tracks into the timber, its white tail bobbing ostentatiously on the little gray bird. Rollie caught his toe on a tie and stumbled forward. Regaining his balance lazily he looked at Jim, who was walking beside him. Jim was shorter, with broad shoulders and eyes that were friendly in a brusk way, but could turn defensively to blue stone instantly.

Neither boy could look the other in the eye. Walking on the tracks, they heard a pheasant crow and the begrudging off-balance cough of an old John Deere. Cottonwood leaves tumbled in the soft autumn air, coaxed to Squaw Creek by a lazy breeze.

They reached the bridge and sat down. Rollie dangled his long legs over the side. A leaf settled quietly on the water and a jay rasped in a nearby walnut tree. In the shallow water a school of minnows played and silvery bellies glinted.

As if it would always be this way; but it wouldn’t. This afternoon Jim’s Aunt Marie would pick him up and he would travel with her in the circus. She was a fortune teller and Jim would get to water elephants and talk to clowns. Rollie dropped his head and saw his narrow face reflected in the water; his small piercing green eyes stared back at him.

“There’s a crawdad claw.”

“Yeah, ol’ man coon ate good last night,” answered Jim in the voice that, in spite of its twelve years, was deep and rock-steady. Rollie’s father called Jim a hood because of his black boots and turned-up collar. But then he had never
seen the thin, eight-inch scar on Jim's muscular back. Nor had he heard Jim's old man ranting after the old lady with a paring knife, nor seen an eight year-old boy fighting for his mother's life.

Rollie looked at Jim's square face and the chin which permanently dominated it along with the blue eyes which could go from mirth to ice in such a slight fraction of a second that it was like being hit with a hammer.

A whistling of wings and a pair of blue-winged teal splashed in among the morass of water-soaked wood at the bend of the Squaw. To be able to fly and to hear the wind whistle in your ears as you settled down in a marsh in Minnesota, and in the fall, to slide into a reservoir in Texas and soak all winter in the jubilant sun. Freedom.

“Well, Punk. S'pose we better be getting back. Marie'll be around this afternoon, an' I suppose I'd better mouth with Gram for a little before I take off.”

“Yeah, an' I got to clean my pigeon cage. Dad's been on my back for weeks,” Rollie answered. He noticed Jim's eyes harden at the word Dad and then he smiled at his friend. The scar on his back was his smallest one.

Two crows flew above the timber to the south and called absently — caw — caw, then swerved down to the remains of a jack rabbit carcass.

The sun sidled under a cloud and the wind blew harder. Cottonwood leaves drifted across the track and tumbled stiffly as they hit the ground.

They walked along in step, Rollie, tall for a twelve-year-old, Jim, short and broad. The hut over in Kelly's timber wouldn't be used any more because there was no use going there without Jim. What about going over to throw rocks on Moony's porch with Jan and Sandra? Rollie heard a squirrel in the old elm above Cooper's pond and looked up. The branches were bare — it hadn't seemed that bare yesterday. A ripple of anxiety plinked in his stomach and his head whirled. A cricket lay squashed on a tie and Rollie saw him. Death and autumn. Then he felt Jim beside him. The hard blue eyes, square jaw and shoulders. The springing walk with powerful arms held ready.
Turning off the tracks, they trudged down the graveled rutts of South First Street. As they came to the small green house of Jim's grandmother they turned in.

"Say, Punk."

"Yeah, Scrounge."

"Ya can have Tony if yuh want."

A lean bluetick hound slept near the back door. "Yeah, that'd be fine." Such a gift was almost beyond Rollie's belief but he wasn't as happy as he'd have thought he would be considering such a fine gift.

"I won't need him none, feedin' elephants and all. Wouldn't giv 'im to anyone else. I know you an' him have things in common."

"Yeah," Rollie felt heavy inside and a soggy swirling rocked his stomach and head.

"Well, Punk, I'll write yuh when I get time from feeding elephants an' lions. Maybe some day I'll be a trapeze acrobat an' I'll give you a free pass."

The boys laughed but it died quickly. Jim turned his eyes to the ground, "Well, so long, Punk."

Rollie looked toward the line of naked poplars at the back of the lot, "See yuh, Scrounge."

Jim turned and ran to the house, his head down. He didn't look back.

Rollie took Tony by the collar and started across the back yards toward home. He'd have to get at the pigeon cage. It was filthy and it wasn't fair to the birds to make them live in a dirty place. A bright yellow leaf bounced off his nose. High overhead a small formation of grackles check-checked their way to a land of more permanent and solid sunshine, a place where the sun shown not so brilliantly but more steadily.

Cole Foster, Sc & H. Sr.