THE ESCAPISTS

When Teresa Tyler fell ill of some lingering malady, not readily diagnosed, her daughter Elena took a leave of absence from the Kansas City hospital where she was first assistant to the supervisor of the oncologic ward and spent the entire Winter and Spring in Picket Rock.

A tall, neat young woman with big, capable-looking hands and with broad feet that looked even broader in her nurses' oxfords, Elena was neither brusque nor hearty, as large and self-assured people often are. There was, rather, a quietness about her, an air of reserve, an instinctive shyness. She spoke pleasantly enough to the townspeople who stopped her on the street to inquire about her mother. But there was that in her manner that was withdrawn, as though she gave unspoken notice that her time in Picket Rock, of which she was a native, was only an interlude, a silent confirmation that when her mother recovered (or died of her malady) Elena would take leave of the town and in all probability never return again.

Young Grover Gillen spoke with Elena often. Elena came into Grover's Grocery every few days, walking down from the Tyler place on the Heights to see whether she could find anything that might tempt her mother's failing appetite. If there were no customers about, as was often the case, she lingered for a time, visiting, as though, Grover thought, flattered, she derived a certain pleasure from the contact. Grover admired the big, quiet woman, who wore, it seemed to him, the distinct guise of one who has found her niche in life and is filling it to her own satisfaction.

During Elena's visits to the store and Grover's trips to the Tyler house with bags of produce too heavy for her to carry, the two talked of a number of things. They discussed the relative merits of various products carried by the store; such as whether Hawaiian pineapples were really superior to those imported from Mexico, and whether Texas oranges were as tasty as were California navels. Through political dialogue, the pair discovered that both leaned slightly more to the left than to the right as did most rural Mid-West people, but that they also frequently found either extreme shortfall to the point of being ridiculous.

From time to time one or the other harked back to their own earlier years in the town. For all Grover was seven years Elena's junior and many of the young people, as had Elena, had gone elsewhere, they had known many acquaintances in common. "Whatever became of Martin Buren?" Elena would ask as Grover filled her order or lingered in the Tyler kitchen over coffee following a delivery. Or, "Charlie Cox?" Or, "Jim Milligan?"

Grover related the facts concering these to the

best of his knowledge. But sometimes he was obliged to say, "He (or she) was a bit before my time of memory, I'm afraid. But I'll ask my folks and let you know." And he would do this, regarding the promise as an obligation, and pass the word along on her next visit.

Neither, during these exchanges, made reference to their own strange encounter one April afternoon on the road to the Tyler place, when Grover was going on seven and Elena had turned fourteen.

For all their difference in ages, Grover remembered Elena well. On his not infrequent visits as a small boy to the Tyler house to see Elena's brother George, who was Grover's age, he saw Elena at the sink washing dishes (standing slightly round-shouldered because the sink was rather too low for her height), or seated opposite her mother, peeling peaches or tomatoes for the canning jars. Of summer mornings, in later years, as he was about waking from sleep on his pallet on the Gillen porch, he saw her pass on her way to the big Waite house where she worked as a hired girl prior to her departure from Picket Rock to enter nurses' training in the city.

If Elena remembered the encounter, she made no mention of the fact. Nor did Grover. But his mind dwelt often upon the incident as they talked together. For during all of his growing-up years and even now, Grover held firmly to the conviction that Elena had, on that occasion, saved him from an early death, or at least from physical injury of catastrophic proportions.

DROP THREE SPACES

When the dismissal bell tapped that April afternoon releasing the grade school pupils for the summer, Elena Tyler left the Seventh Grade line and struck out alone on the dusty road that led past the graveyard and up to her home on the Heights.

In recognition of the last day of the term and the all-school program that had finished off the school year, Elena wore a tailored white dimity blouse, made by her mother, and a new cotton skirt of a print material in vogue at the time, known as galatea. Her pale, clean hair was neither bobbed nor curled as was that of most of the other girls her age, but braided into two thick ropes that had been wound about her head and pinned with the, even then old-fashioned pins, that held the hair in place. Although the day was nearing its end, the braids remained in place, because they had been pinned securely.

A small"railroad"lunch pail, also much in use at the time, hung from Elena's wrist by a strap, leaving her arms free for the heavy burden of books she carried, having cleaned out her desk for the three-month vacation that would end with the first Monday in September. Tall for her age, Elena walked with her shoulders slightly rounded. This posture of course was partly due to the weight of the books . But it had also to do with a hardly conscious effort on her part to minimize her tallness, a ruse that had without her awareness become a habit.

Immediately following the dismissal, pandemonium reigned in the schoolyard. Shouted goodbyes to the teachers,

largely on the part of the girls, were a trifle bold in tone as suited "the last day of school", when teachers and pupils were of a status more equal in protocol. Evident, also mainly among the girls,was much comparison of report cards with final averages. Indifferent to cards and teachers alike, the town boys moved in a swift line down Schoolhouse Hill, vaulting over each other's backs in a wild game of leapfrog. Young Brant Walter, bolder and more abandoned than most, cut in front of Elena, scattering torn strips from his Seventh Grade geography text, that arose in swirls and settled like so many white butterflies over the blossoming spiraea and button bushes. When a fragment came to rest on the sleeve of Elena's blouse, she brushed it off, and went around the Summers twins, who walked together with their arms about each other.

"Goodbye, Elena," Loretta called. "Your shoes are pretty."

Elena made a face in the shape of a smile. She had forgotten the shoes, patent leather sandals purchased by her mother a month or two ago for the last day's functions. Elena's father, who had worked for years in a Red Goose factory and who liked to display his knowledge of shoe leathers, had complained that the soles were "nothing but cardboard," which he prophesied would simply disintegrate in wet weather. But, enamored with the sandals, Elena had taken them from the wrappings again and again, thinking them the finest she had ever owned.

The shoes had still seemed fine this morning until, at first recess, little Vera Matlock had asked, "What size are they, Elena?"

Elena had replied, truthfully, that the shoes

were "sevens." Whereupon Vera had responded that hers were "four-quad" and hard to find in the stores. Vera had not meant to be unkind, she was not a vicious or boastful girl. She was only relating a circumstance that she found remarkable. But before the day was over the slippers had come to seem to Elena to be uncommonly large and she had kept her feet tucked underneath her desk hoping no one would notice their size.

"Goodbye, Elena," Loretta's twin, Laura, called as the twins left the road. "See you in September."

Laura's remark had been spoken lightly of course. Elena would see the twins often throughout the summer. But all at once September, that had seemed an aeon away, loomed distressingly close, and Elena saw herself at the blackboard, to diagram sentences beside Vera Matlock who would be coming up from the Intermediate Room to the Seventh Grade, and thought of Brant Walter tearing his geography text apart because he would not be needing it any longer. And then she thought with distaste of again having to study THE SNOW IMAGE, which story she detested, and THE MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY, that depressed her.

She should, after all, not have been so taken aback, Elena told herself, by the sight of the word Retained, written in red on the blue face of her report card. She had done well enough, she felt, on all of the test papers sent out by the county superintendent's office, except for arithmetic. Most of the problems in the arithmetic examination had been "story problems," which always gave Elena a bit of trouble unless she could do them at home alone. But, distracted by the busy, moving pencils of the pupils surrounding her on the day of the exams, she had found the questions, with their "time allowed for solution" marked by the tapping of the teacher's desk bell, "tricky." And, feeling pushed,

she had glanced up, wastefully, at the hurrying hands of the wall clock.

Still, the word on the card, written in Miss Rhinerson's stilted hand, had been like a slap on the face. Elena had looked up, startled, to meet Miss Rhinerson's brown eyes behind her bright lenses, and it had seemed as though the teacher had been watching for Elena's reaction. When their eyes met, the teacher had looked away quickly as though embarrassed by the contact and Elena had tucked the card as hastily back into its envelope and had buried the envelope in her history text.

Now as she walked, the sounds from the school ground were diminished by the hedge of tall osage orange trees that grew on either side of the road and by the humming of the telegraph poles and wires. But now, too, the voices of the wires and poles seemed to chant the words "retained, retained," the insulators, closely-spaced, to take up the echo; and Elena began to think of how she would break the news to her mother.

Elena knew that her brothers would taunt her and that her father would be angry with her. But none of this would matter so much as would the look that was sure to cross her mother's face. Elena knew that her mother would neither accuse nor scold. But she knew, too, that the love and concern on her mother's face would be far more hurtful than would her brothers' jibes or her father's anger.

Elena had been at the Summers once when Laura had broken a cherished Majolica plate that had belonged to a grandmother. Because the plate had been an heirloom, Laura had flung her arms about her mother and she and her mother had cried

together. But in the Summers household everyone laughed easily and cried easily, and nothing ever seemed to matter much. And Elena knew that she could not put her arms around her mother and tell her about the word written on her report card. She would simply have to break the news from a little distance, and straight out.

Preoccupied by thoughts of her mother's tired face and her father's reproachful speeches, Elena failed to see Grover until she was almost upon him. Kneeling in the dust of the roadbed, he was drawing absorbedly with a stick, and it was as though he materialized all at once, as though he had popped without warning from an invisible hole in the earth.

Annoyed by his presence there in her path, Elena left the road and climbed the weed-grown bank to the half-trail the town cows had made among the blackberry briars along the fence-row.

Leaving his play, Grover climbed the bank on an angle and blocked her progress. Standing with his feet wide apart, he asked conversationally, "Why are you walking up here? Does your petticoat show?"

Elena moved around him, making no answer. But he kept pace. "You'll get all scratched up, up here," he told her reasonably. "Why don't you come down in the road and walk like other people?"

"It's none of your business," Elena said crossly. "You don't live up this road. Your mother will be looking for you."

"I'm nearly eight now," he boasted. "I can go where I want to go." He added as though in afterthought, "You don't own this road, you know."

"Of course I don't own the road," she said. "No one said I owned the road." But she left the path and descended to the road again, and began to walk swiftly, trying to outdistance him.

He followed, half-running beside her. Fans of dust splayed from his heels and he fell into a shuffle, emitting long-drawn "oo-oo"s in imitation of a locomotive.

"Stop that!" she told him.

He stopped shuffling, but continued to keep up. "What makes you so crabby?" he inquired politely. "Aren't you glad school is out? Or do you have to stay home and wash didies, like my sister does?"

"Of course not," she said. "It's none of your business whether I'm glad or not."

But then, because the time had come when she had to share her incubus, and he had appeared before her like an acolyte in a cloister, she said, "I didn't pass."

He accepted the news with remarkable equanimity. "Is that why you were walking up there in the bushes?"

"No," she said. "I don't know." Regretting her confession, angry at herself, she increased her speed. But he ran along beside her, still keeping pace.

"The desks are already too low for me," she thought aloud. "I have to sit humped over. And I'll grow taller as like as not. I'll look like a shikepoke."

He laughed. And she laughed, too, a little, and then felt hot tears sting her eyelids.

"You could go away," he said after a moment's thought. "Tell them at the new school, if they asked, that you had lost your gradecard. Or that a rat ate it. A rat ate one of my mother's letters once."

"Don't talk crazy," she said. "You know better."

He ignored this. "Maybe you wouldn't have to say anything. Just walk in and sit down like you belonged there. You're not little like some girls, they'd believe you. I know a boy done that. He was my cousin, Charlie."

"Did that," she corrected automatically.

But then, absurd as it was, she felt the suggestion take hold of her. "After the Eighth Grade, I could just drop out," she said. "I wouldn't need to go on to high school. I'm going to be a nurse when I grow up... When I get through training at some hospital," she amended. For she cherished a secret hope that she would not grow any more.

Buoyed by the possible solution, she by the instrument of escape that had been lowered like a drawbridge over the moat of her dilemma and he by the impact of having proposed a panacea so acceptable that he had made a speedy conversion, they walked along in silence, together.

Engrossed in their collusion, neither heard the rumble of carriage wheels. Unaware, they had been nearing the gaunt house in its jungle of shrubbery where old Hank Rainey, a miserly recluse, lived with his spinster daughter. More than once, Rainey had been reported to the County Humane Society for his abuse of

the animals that served him.

Now, his big black carriage burst suddenly into the road from his half-concealed driveway and bore down upon the two children. Crouched, half-standing, in the carriage bed, the old man leaned forward to take the long bullwhip from the dashboard socket, and, with a loud "hud...dup!" bring the whip down on the horses' backs. The animals responded by lunging forward in the traces.

If Hank saw the pair in the road, he gave no indication. With a cry of protest, Elena grasped the boy's shoulder and flung him to the side of the road. The two tumbled together into the road ditch and the carriage swept by, raising a cloud of dust that surged up in its wake and set the pair coughing.

Shaking with anger, Elena sprang to her feet. "Look where you're going!" she shouted after the old man. "You old fool of a horsebeater, you!"

Dropping to her knees, she began to gather up her belongings, the books she had dropped, the burst-open dinner pail with its egg shells and its apple core.

When she had finished, she turned upon the frightened boy. "Where would I go?" she demanded to know. "My father would hunt me out. My mother would be sick with worry. I'll have to stay right here, and you know it."

Grover made no effort to contradict her. For him, as for Elena, illusion had been shattered by the appearance of the hawk-beaked old curmudgeon with his bullwhip and his buckskins. He got to his feet with an effort and began, sadly, to brush the dust from his knickers.

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