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THE SCARLET TANAGER

Rosemary Formolo

Time: The spring of my fourteenth year. Nightly strolls with Grandma have tapered off. Without a thought I leave her. I no longer take her stubby, work-roughened hand in mine. My childhood is over.

For a new disturbing magic has taken possession of me. I have erupted into puberty, transformed a wiry lankiness into a fully matured figure. Mama is somewhat alarmed. "Perhaps you're taking after you Aunt Kit? On your Papa's side, of course. And do you remember what *her* bust looks like!"

I do. The gross protuberance, the solid shelf upon which one of our kittens leaped and settled. But of course that horror could never happen to me. I am occupied with better speculations. Though I now am too old for fairy tales, I do hang on to one golden thread common to them all - the arrival of the Prince. Movies at the Bijou have fed the visions. In one I admire the handsome fellow riding on a curvetting white stallion controlling it with ease. Or better yet - on a black horse moving to me by moonlight over desert sands.

As yet I have no boyfriend. In the real world, no one qualifies. Until one day ...

Scene: The town High School, west portico. Miss Ronan, the principal, is standing by, arms folded, surveying the departure of the biology class for a field trip to Pine Mountain. (The first time in memory that an excursion has been taken *on school time!*) The boys are carrying the insect nets, big enough to catch rabbits.

This wildly innovative idea has sprung from the head of our teacher, Mr. Lunquist. He is a soft, red-lipped young man - first year, dewy with inexperience, short on discipline, but long on hope. This spring he has retrieved the disaster of the first semester by changing staid biology into "Nature Study." How lovely that sounds! To us that means a freer, wilder world, like Tarzan of the Apes.

But how has Miss Ronan permitted this crazy adventure of the field trip to Pine Mountain? She does take one precaution, has us sign up on a sheet which states the promise to be back at the east portico by two-thirty sharp. We have to line up to do it.

I glance at her as I pass by. Stiff, military get-up, high-necked blouse over a brown tweed skirt, rigidly corseted hips, fountain pen clipped to her belt like a little sword. Not a loose pinch on her anywhere. Large, sad, bulging gray eyes. She wears the expression of a general reluctantly releasing prisoners to a gloriously unearned freedom.

Once launched from the school, we leave the sidewalk and straggle out on the iron-ore paved road. I walk with my friend Marta Miller. Now and then we skip to this morning in early May, weather fit to corrupt the seraphim. The maples are flowering, the robins chasing, shrieking, scuffling in the bushes in the ritual of courtship. After five months of brutal cold, tobacco-stained snow on the sidewalks, itchy winter underwear and galoshes, it is delicious to feel once more the earth under our feet, to see little eddies of red dust whirl up in the warm sunny breeze. To the upper classmen hanging out of the third floor windows, the boys bow their nets, but with a certain caution, for Miss Ronan is still in sight. Just the lid on the kettle is lifting.

My friend Marta and I have gotten ourselves up with a certain flair. Whipcord riding breeches, our best blouses, and wide-brimmed felt hats. (Mine has a perky partridge feather.) No corsets for me today, but I wear a longish sweater to cover my rear. For some reason I am carrying a braided riding whip.

Unseen by the principal below, upper-classmen are leaning precariously out of a third-story window. Ravenous with envy, they begin shouting and crackling with crow calls:

“Hey, Feets! Look out Feets Forneti! Yer gonna fall into a mining company pit!”

“EEEk, Rosie [for me]! You’ll step on a pine snake!”

“Whatcha going to catch in that bug-net, Pasty? Gonna catch Marta? She’ll love it, Grailer. Won’t you, Marta?”

I look at my companion in alarm. “Do you like him?”

“That ape!” She explodes. “I wouldn’t be caught dead with that ape!”

We leave the outskirts of the town and enter the rough bushy growth at the base of Pine Mountain. Before us lies the wooded slope and thrilling possibilities. Will someone really oblige by falling into a test pit? Will the foolhardy venture on a raft across the Menominee River into wicked Wisconsin?

In the straggling crowd, a certain shifting occurs that changes me forever. Don Lord, the only upper-classman among us, a strolling aristocrat among the agitated dolts, is walking beside me.

Am I dreaming? How does this happen? Where is Marta? Marta is nowhere. She has dissolved into the gross, ordinary world, claimed, no

doubt, by the odious Pasty Grailer. (Although I miss the security, I am also relieved. Marta is better looking than I am.)

Now I feel the pinch of fear. It must be just an accident that he finds himself beside me, jostled by the unruly crowd. But it seems we are walking in step. Glancing sideways, I observe he is using a pair of binoculars to scan the crowd. Unbelievably, he turns his handsome head in my direction. "A bunch of Yahoos," he confides. Indeed, girls are screaming enthusiastically as boys run after them, swishing wickedly with the nets. "Crazy Yahoos," I agree. I have never heard the word before, but in the future, I will use it often.

"Cut it out!" he barks at one obstreperous youth.

Sheepishly, the boy "cuts it out."

I look at him with adoring respect, "Lucky you're with us," I say. "Mr. Lunquist is terrible with discipline."

"That's why I'm here," he admits with honest pomp. "Miss Ronan, she pulled me out of physics class, says to me, Don, as a respected senior (ahem!), I want you to help out with Mr. Lunquist. Can you believe it? She even handed me these binoculars. "Keep an eye on things," she said, "in case -."

"In case - what?"

"Oh, yeah-" Don shrugs and laughs. Then laughs again, more deeply. "In case things get out of hand. With these Yahoos, someone might push a guy off a cliff. Or fall into a test pit."

"Mr. Lunquist - he *could* fall in," I venture gaily. "He's such a nincompoop!" Callously I throw in Mr. Lunquist. At one time I thought him to be rather nifty with his dreamy good looks. Almost a prince, in fact.

We are walking, walking slowly, oh, so slowly up Pine Mountain. How does it happen that we are alone? Has the soft wickedly delicious spring wind pushed us on, edging us, nudging us away from the Yahoos? Halfway up the slope - the big pines are still ahead - we find ourselves inexplicably in a wild and sheltered place, cluttered with enormous boulders and granite outcroppings. The roots of dwarf cedars grip fiercely from the crevices. Several pines and spruce trees have marched in along with a few poplars. Their light green leaves, not much bigger than pennies, tremble with every puff of wind. Wildflowers - anemones, violets, spring beauties - are scattered at our feet. The whole enclosure of lichened rocks, evergreens, earth mold and springtime growth breathes forth lively and intoxicating odors.

Dazed with joy I breathe them in. "Kinda like Paradise," I want to say. Instead: "Oh, lookit! At that patch of snow. And in May!"

"Stupid!" Don says roughly. Too roughly. "That's a pinchberry tree in

bloom.”

He sits down on one of the smooth boulders and adjusts his binoculars in a businesslike way. “Gad!” he exclaims suddenly. “A scarlet tanager!”

“Gad!” I echo. “Where? You must be kidding!”

“Come over here. Want to see?” He plucks off my hat. He hands me the binoculars. “See it? It’s over there - on that branch. To the right.”

With the wobbling ineptitude, I scan the wrong tree. “Over there!” he says. With professional ease, he steadies the binoculars. And me. His arm is around my shoulders, his dark head perilously close to my temple. And there, sure enough, is framed the brilliant red bird with jet-black wing and tail. It stays put on the branch for one long enchanting moment. A moment caught forever on this May morning on the slope of Pine Mountain.

And so the new life begins. Far away, faint and intermittent, we hear a rumble, like bees in clover. Then a louder, shriller bee, its desperation mercifully softened by distance. No doubt Mr. Lunquist is shouting out commands to the Yahoos. And no better a chaperon than the red squirrel scolding us from a pine tree. Don and I look at each other and laugh. Miss Ronan with her sheet of signatures, the whole grownup world with its incomprehensible fears, timidities and rules is whirling away, like chips on a running stream. Even Grandma holds little charm for me now.

Until later. Much, much later, as these things go.