

WINTER TERM

IT WAS INCONVENIENT. AND WORSE: Hal watched the woman behind the desk ruffle through filing cards and wondered if she had noticed that he came to the library every evening. She must have noticed, for during the past month he had looked at her so often that he had begun to recognize her dresses and the two ways she fixed her hair. He often felt that she was watching him and Ellie and feeling surprised that they came every night. During the day Hal sometimes planned a new kind of evening, in the library still, for the dancing-and-movie Saturday nights he spent with Ellie were even more

stereotyped. Sometimes he imagined that Eleanor would be there when he came, or that she would not be wearing lipstick, as when he had first seen her. He knew that the small change in details could not alter the whole evening. And so in the past week he had begun to imagine the only possible change: that Eleanor would not come at all. Hal planned to wait at the library until a quarter past seven, and then if she had not come he would leave, not pausing to button his coat and turning at once onto the street.

"Why don't you take off your coat?" the librarian asked him. He had never heard her voice before. It was pleasantly colorless, and he was surprised that with such a voice she had spoken to him at all.

"Oh, that's all right," he said vaguely. "I may have to leave in a few minutes." She pulled out another drawer of filing cards and began to go through them from the back. As he watched her, Hal became more and more surprised that she had spoken to him. It reminded him that he was still an intruder, even after a month; there were usually only one or two other boys in the library, so few that the girls stared openly. He walked over to the reading room door and looked in; the red-haired boy whom he had begun to speak to on the street was studying with his girl. Eleanor said they were engaged, although Hal pointed out that the girl was not wearing a ring. Eleanor said that it did not really matter: they never went out except with each other, and on Saturdays and Sundays she had seen them having breakfast together in the Waldorf. Hal remembered asking her what they had been eating; it was a new way he had of testing Ellie, to see how long it would be before she laughed; he knew that if he teased her for a certain amount of time she would more probably cry. "French toast," she had answered promptly, "three orders, with maple syrup," and then she had asked him why he had laughed, and when he shook his head and went on laughing her mouth had begun to quiver in the way that made

him tighten, and she had asked: "Why do you always laugh at me?" They had had a bad evening. The tightening had started it, Hal knew; he granted that to her in the careless objectivity of his remembering. He wondered if he would ever be able to prevent himself from feeling like that when she didn't laugh with him, or when she was inexplicably depressed, or when she asked him: "What are you thinking?"

He looked at the clock. She was already seven minutes late. It happened every night; he imagined her dawdling over combing her hair, watching the clock and planning not to leave in time. She often warned him against taking her for granted. Surprised by his own bitterness, he thought, Oh, God, why do I always have to be so hard on her; lately she can't do anything right. He remembered the way he used to feel when she came toward him, running because she was late, or to get in out of the rain; she would shake the rain out of her hair (too vain to wear a scarf), and her face would be flecked with drops. Then her coming had canceled irritation.

Eleanor came in the door before he could decide when the change had begun. She started toward him, red-faced from the wind she had fought for four blocks. "Hello!" she said, and he knew that if he had looked permissive she would have kissed him, in spite of the librarian. It was one of the things that he first liked about her: she was willing to kiss him even on the Saturday night subway, when the whole row of people on the other side of the car was watching them. Hal remembered how surprised he had been when they first danced together and she had pulled close; the action did not suit the mild, high-necked dress she was wearing, or even the coolness of her cheek.

She was peeling off her coat and sweater, and he noticed how limberly she bent to unfasten her boots because he was watching. Her figure had improved since she gave up sweets. He remembered proudly that she had started to diet because he had told her once that a dress was too tight; he never had

to tell her again. Now her hips were straight under her skirt, and he knew from looking at them how they would feel, very firm as she clenched the big muscles and smooth through her slippery underpants.

They went into the reading room. Hal had grown accustomed to the people who looked up as they walked down the corridor between the tables, but he knew from the way Ellie was smiling they still made her uncomfortable. When they sat down she whispered to him fiercely, "You'd think they'd learn not to stare every night!" and he whispered back, leaning so close her hair touched his mouth, "It's just because you're beautiful."

"You've said that before," she told him, mocking and pleased, but he had already realized it; it did not matter how often he repeated the compliment, for each time the situation was the same, until the lie had become as familiar as the library room. He did not think he would tell Ellie that she was beautiful if they were in a new place, a city or a green park. He looked at the clock.

"Bored?" she asked quickly.

"No." He tried not to frown. She made a little face at him and bent over her notebook.

Hal wished that he had not learned to translate her expressions; when he first met her he had been charmed by her good-humored pout or her wide-eyed expression after they kissed. But now he knew that the pout was made to conceal the quiver in her mouth, and if he watched her he would see that she was not reading; she was staring at the page and trying not to look at him. And as for her expression after they kissed—it always seemed to Hal that he was watching her rise through deep water—he did not know what it meant, but it irritated him. It reminded him of the way she acted after they made love. She went into it as exuberantly as she jumped up to dance, she left it to him to make sure that his roommates were out and that the shades were down. By the

time he had checked she would have pulled her dress over her head, rumpling her hair in bangs like a little boy's. He began to undress, folding his clothes on the chair—"Ellie, won't you hang up your dress?"—but when he turned around and saw her waiting, naked under her slip, he went to her and forgot what he had been about to say.

But afterward, if she did not cry, she would not let him go. She clenched him in her arms when he tried to get up, and he had to hurt her in order to break away. When she clung to him with her fingernails pricking his back he tried to force himself out of his sleepiness, to smooth her hair and kiss her. But her mouth tasted stale when he was so tired, and he was afraid she might think he wanted to do it again.

"I'm sorry I was late," she said, not looking up from her book, and he realized that for the last five minutes she had been trying to decide why he seemed irritated.

"I thought we said we wouldn't apologize anymore." He wanted to sound gay, but he noticed at once that he was still raw to the subject; she said softly: "I wish you could forget that." She was bending down the corner of a page and he wanted to tell her to stop; the little mechanical action irritated him out of all proportion, and he wondered if he was so tense because they hadn't made love for four days. How did she feel about tonight? He knew that his roommates were out. He looked at her, but he could tell from the way she was hunched over her book that she was not thinking about making love but about the evening a week before when they had quarreled and then made a list of resolutions over coffee in The Grill. One of them had been not to apologize to each other anymore, for they had agreed it was hypocritical: apologies were only dog-in-the-manger ways of saying, I was right all along but I'll give in for the sake of peace. It had been a terrible evening and he wished that they had not gone to The Grill, for before they had both associated it with one of their first evenings together, when he had held her hand between the salt and pepper.

"Oh, I forgot to ask you about the exam." She had not whispered, and the girl at the next table glanced up, frowning. "How was it?"

"Terrible!" The word did not relieve him; he had come back in the winter darkness, coffee-nerved, fingering the three pencils in his pocket whose points were worn flat. He remembered cursing himself for not reviewing more, and he wondered if he could have written at the end of the thin, scratched-out blue-book, "Circumstances beyond my control . . ."

"But I thought you were so well prepared; you've been reviewing for practically a week."

He tried not to say it, but the words promised too much relief: "Yes, but I can't really study here." He knew before he looked at her that she was hurt. As soon as he saw her mouth he felt the tightening; he wanted to laugh out loud and throw his head back and yell with laughter, and at the same time he wanted to pull her into his arms and fold her so tightly that her breath came in gasps and she groaned, Hal, Hal, you're hurting me . . .

"You never told me you couldn't study here," she said, and he knew how carefully she had weeded the hurt out of her voice.

"Well, I mean, what do you expect? How can I concentrate with you around?" He had meant it to be a compliment—he wanted to see her smile, flushing a little and looking up at him—but it sound like an accusation. As she turned her face sharply away he thought, Oh, God, not another scene! And then he noticed abruptly how thin she had grown; he could see the point of her collarbone through her sweater, and her little breasts stood out almost too sharply.

Ellie had bent down the corner of the page so often that it broke off in her hand. She turned to Hal, smiling brightly. "You should have seen the dormitory tonight." In spite of the new-paint smile, Hal wanted to kiss her for changing the subject. He thought that afterward he would buy her an ice

cream cone at the drugstore on the way back to her dormitory. She loved sweets, and she hadn't had any for at least two weeks; he remembered her inexpensive salad dinners, even on Saturdays. And she was really almost too thin.

"You know Wednesday night's usually bad anyway," she was saying. The girl at the next table looked up again, annoyed, and Ellie put her hand to her mouth. She would not have gone on if Hal had not asked, "Well, what happened?" And then she turned to him and whispered so softly, hesitantly, that he could hardly hear. "You know Wednesday night is boy night, and they have candles and ice cream for dessert. Just because we eat at a quarter past six instead of six! Tonight I sat at a table with three other girls and their dates and I literally didn't say a word!" Hal had heard it often before; he looked around the room, trying to distract his attention from his own irritation. Why was she proud of not talking for a whole meal? He noticed the pretty girl who was in his humanities class; she was winding a shank of hair around her finger as she studied. Pretty hair. But she looked even more tense than the rest of them. During exam period you could cut the atmosphere in the reading room with a knife. Most of the girls looked overtired and ugly, and they had not bothered to comb their hair. Hal remembered that the library was the one place they had not expected to see any boys. But Eleanor hated the men's library. She said she felt too stared-at when there were so few girls. Hal had seen some of the looks boys gave her when they walked down the corridor, and he agreed. She had such a damn good figure.

"You're not listening," she said. "I know—don't apologize; I shouldn't be bothering you." As though her rigidly calm tone really expressed her feelings, Eleanor neatly wrote the date at the top of a notebook page and began to read.

"I am interested!" he lied, feeding her hurt. "It's just that I'm interested in this place too." She did not answer, and he slammed his book open and turned the pages roughly, looking

for his place. They sat for ten minutes in silence. Hal tried to read but he was too conscious of the tip of her elbow, almost touching his; it looked a little chapped, and he remembered how hard the winter weather was on her blond skin. Then he wondered how he had known that—he had been through no other winter with her, or even a spring or summer—and inconsequently he wondered what she looked like in a bathing suit. He hunched his shoulders and bent closer to the book, trying to force the words into his attention. There were long, ruler-straight lines under some of the sentences, and minute notes were printed in the margins. He had written them in October, when for a week he had devoted himself to Schopenhauer, reading each page passionately, proud of the learned comments he wrote in the margins. He had even found time to go into town to visit the museum, where there was a portrait of the philosopher, and he remembered how his head had pounded as he climbed the long steps and hurried down the corridor to the door of the room where the portrait hung. It had been a disappointment: an old, placid gentleman in conventional black. Did pessimism embodied look like that, he remembered wondering, like your own grandfather? But he had come back with a feeling of accomplishment.

Now he could not read his own notes. When Ellie was hurt the consciousness of it ticked like a clock at the back of his mind and he could not concentrate on anything. He gave up trying to ignore the point of her elbow. He wondered if she would move first, as she often did, slipping her hand into his or turning into his arms as soon as they were alone. He noticed how rigidly she was sitting; why did they both keep on pretending to study? He looked at the clock. Already half an hour wasted. God, I wish we'd had a chance to so I wouldn't feel like I'm going crazy! Exams—we couldn't afford the time. He remembered how self-righteously they had avoided his room, knowing that once they were there, where they had first told each other that they were in love,

their resolution would dissolve in a panic of desire. Their coming together was always too violent, he thought, like the too-big lunch you ate after missing breakfast, snatching and tearing at the food if no one was watching. But I bet she needs it now, he thought, that's why she's so quivery, close to tears, and maybe that's why I loused up that exam. He knew it was not an excuse, and he felt his resentment heating as he wondered why he had not really reviewed. But she's right: I spent all last week on it, he thought, and then he added, enjoying his own bitterness, Yes, but you know what studying here means, jockeying for position for three hours with our knees about to touch or our hands, and she's always looking up or else I'm looking at her until finally we give up and hold hands though that means I can't write or else she can't. Why didn't I have sense enough to tell her I had to study, two evenings would have done it . . . but I knew she'd cry. Not over the phone but in the booth after I hung up, so she couldn't go back to her room without the other girls seeing she'd been crying. He wanted to turn to her and break the thin, unreal wall of her concentration by asking, Why does everything hurt you too much? And why do I always have to know? Although he knew the last, at least, was not her fault.

He heard eight strike in silver, feminine notes from the clock over the girl's gym. That clock would never let him forget the amount of time he was wasting; all evening he would have to listen to its reproachful chiming. The thought drove him to the peak of his irritation and he slammed his books closed and began to stack them together. Eleanor looked up and he saw the terror in her eyes that he had seen once before when he told her that he would have to go home for the weekend. She had said: "You know that means three days without talking to anyone." And he had answered, trying to laugh: "But there must be someone—all those girls."

"I'm not a girl's girl; I don't really know how to talk to them. And anyway I haven't been spending my extra time

in the smoker, so they hardly even know my name." He had understood what she had been unwilling to say, that he had taken up the evenings she might have spent padding herself with her girl acquaintances against the time when she would be alone. In the end he had left without telling her goodbye and the weekend had been spoiled because he had known how she was feeling.

He stood up, although he had not decided what he was going to do; only, no more waste. "You want me to leave?" she asked, hurriedly gathering up her books, and Hal knew that she thought he was going to walk out without her. If she began to cry he would be more than ashamed; he would feel that his hands were as clumsy as trays as he tried to soothe her, and when he struggled to think of something gentle to say he would begin to go mad with irritation. He started toward the reading room door before she was ready, and he heard the almost hysterical ruffling of pages as she closed her books. He waited for her on the other side of the door, and when she came, almost running, he saw her face become young again as she smiled with relief.

"I agree with you; let's get out of this dreary place," she said, and Hal wished that she had been angry.

"Look, I'm going to walk you back now," he said as they went out into the sudden coldness. She began to fumble awkwardly with her scarf, adjusting it inside her coat collar.

"Right now?" Her voice was carefully casual.

"Look, Eleanor, I've got to get something done tonight. Friday's the Phil 101 exam."

"Oh, I understand." They began to walk, conscious of not holding hands. The quadrangle was dark except for the library windows and the illuminated clock over the gym. It was always five minutes fast, on purpose, Hal knew, so that the girls who were late starting would still get to class on time. In spite of the clock Ellie was always coming in late; she would drop into the seat beside him, panting, and snatch off her gloves.

"You taking our history class next term?" Ellie asked.

He wished that she would not keep her voice cheerful.

"I guess so. You can't divide it." He was ashamed of his grudging tone, although it was easy to justify it; even if he broke with her now (it was incredible, the idea of pushing off her hands and running without hearing her calling), he would still have to see her every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at ten in the history class where they tried not to look at each other.

Her dormitory was full of lights. "At last they've taken down the wreath!" he said.

"And high time!"

Her voice had revived with his cheerfulness—real, this time, although he knew it was ridiculous that the tarnished wreath should have depressed him. It had been a soiled reminder of the Christmas vacation they had spent straining to be together, through long-distance calls, which they spent saying goodbye, and too many letters.

They stood under the porch light and she held out her hands. He took them and slipped his fingers inside her gloves. Her palms were soft and lined.

"Look at the bikes," he said, "you'd think they'd give up in this bad weather," and they both looked out at the heaped, stone snow. He remembered that he had a long walk back, but as he bent hurriedly to kiss her she slipped her arms around him and he had to pull back hard in order to get away. She let go at last and, no longer smiling, she whispered: "Hal, don't go." He hesitated. "Please. Don't go. Please." She was rigidly controlling her voice, but he knew the limit of her endurance and he wanted to be away before she began to cry, for then he would never be able to leave. He would have to stay until she was calm, rocking her in his arms and kissing her hair. Afterward when he walked back to his dormitory he would avoid looking at clocks. But when he was in his room he would see the tin alarm clock that was already set for the

morning and then he would throw his books violently into a chair. He would go out and buy coffee so that with luck he could study until three. By that time nearly all the lights across the courtyard would have gone out and often it would have begun to snow.

Eleanor was watching him. "About tomorrow," she said lightly, wiping a fleck off one of her books, "I know we both have a lot of work. I'll call you up in the morning and we can decide then. Maybe we ought to study by ourselves tomorrow night." Her voice was so matter-of-fact that if he had not known the pattern Hal would not have believed that next day, when they came to the deciding, she would plead with him to study with her—"Really, I promise, we'll get something done"—and offer to sign a pledge that she would not speak to him for three hours. Now she was looking down and running her fingers along the edges of her books. "Hal," she said, "I'm sorry about tonight. You know how I get sometimes." He put his arms around her, trying not to tell her how sorry he was, trying to choke back his softness. "Oh, God, Ellie," he said, and he heard the almost-tears in his own voice, the rawness that was both tenderness and irritation. She strained up to kiss him and when she opened her mouth he felt tricked, for if he put his tongue between her lips he would not be able to leave. He kissed her, beginning half-consciously to forget that he should go. She dropped her books and they tumbled over their feet. He was only vaguely conscious of the porch and the starting light as he pulled her against him, hearing her moan with pain and excitement. Then he drew back and said, his voice already labored, "Isn't there anywhere we can go?" Her face was flushed, reminding him in a twisted way of a child waking up, damp and fresh. She was trying to think of somewhere to go and holding his hands tightly as though she could brace his desire.

"It's too late to have you in the dormitory," she said, and they silently checked their short list of private places. It was too cold for the park—they had been nervous there, on the bench behind the thin screen of shrubbery—and it was too late to go to his room. Parietal rules! He wondered how many people they had forced into marriage. They had talked now and then of renting a room but Hal knew they would never do it; they were still too aware of the connotations. And although they prided themselves on their indifference to surroundings, Ellie's face seemed to reflect the gray walls when they lay together on his bed.

"At least let's get out of this porch light," he said, and they went down on the steps and stood hesitating on the sidewalk. She was looking around eagerly and hopefully, and he wondered again how much of her desire was passion and how much grasping; girls used sex to get a hold on you, he knew—it was so easy for them to pretend to be excited.

They wandered down the sidewalk. As they passed the parking lot Eleanor hesitated. "Look, we could—" She did not go on, but Hal knew that she meant the cars, the college-girl cars with boxes of tissues and clean seat-covers that were parked in the lot behind the dormitories. "All right," he said, knowing that the whole time they would be afraid of someone coming, listening for steps. They walked around the lot, comparing cars, and Ellie was laughing so that he would not think it was sordid. Hal wondered why it had become so easy to accept the backseats of cars and student beds with broken springs. Finally she chose a station wagon, and he felt himself growing more excited as she climbed into the back. He followed her and she turned to him and they sank together down onto the seat. For a moment her willing softness seemed to cancel the whole tense evening. He began to unbutton her blouse, feeling her stiffen and gasp as he traced her breast. Across the quadrangle the gymnasium

clock chimed. Nine o'clock. Suddenly violent, he tore her blouse open, and as she whimpered, terrified, and tried to push him off, he pulled at her slip. "Stop it, Eleanor, God, stop it," he said when she tried to hold his hands, and as he dragged the straps off her shoulders she began to cry.