



THE COURTSHIP

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It was nearly seven. Uncanny the way she could sense that particular hour even without looking and even on days that were not Thursday. The library was quiet as always. The afternoon people had been and gone, and the evening people had not yet come. She glanced at the round clock above the doorway. He had four minutes before she would consider him late. And she must now decide whether to look up as he passed or remain intent upon her book. It was all right either way. People in a library acknowledged every minor disturbance. Men watched women and women watched men; it intimated nothing. So tonight she would glance and even smile, but fleetingly — unconsciously. Then she could hear his footsteps: she smoothed her skirt, she touched her hair, she looked at the book in her lap.

They had always come on Thursday, but she doubted that even the library staff was aware that they had always come on Thursdays. Sometimes during long hours of filing she even doubted that he had ever noticed, but he had spoken twice and often smiled, and surely he must realize that their joint arrivals were past the point of coincidence. It was almost as if they were there to meet each other. But of course this was not so, and she admitted that it was not.

Indeed, she had learned to admit a number of things, but though she admitted some things openly, others were admitted only to herself. She was thirty as of last August. The girls at work had teased her a little on her birthday, had said she must be pretty choosy to have not yet found a man who was good enough, but they were generally quite kind. Turning thirty, she supposed, meant that she was after all an old maid. She quietly admitted this. She did not, however, confess that she had never had a suitor or a date for that matter. Her mother had had a friend who had a son, and twice while she was in high school they had both come for dinner. Once the young people had gone for a walk, and the next time he had a new sports car, and they had gone for a ride and then to a drive-in for cokes. But they never really hit it off very well. They went together because of “circumstances” and that was all. During the walk, not a word was spoken. He had called it a nice quiet walk, but she knew he meant it had been quite dull. She also knew that she was quite plain.

When she had been thirteen and others, too, had been quite plain, her

mother had told her it was the gawky stage and not to worry; she would outgrow it. But though the removal of braces from their teeth turned some girls into little beauties, she remained awkward and self-conscious. From high school on her mother kept quiet about her looks except to say that she looked better *with* her glasses, because it gave her face a distinctive feature. Even without her glasses there was nothing really ugly about her. Indeed, everything was perfectly ordinary — too ordinary, and people were constantly forgetting they had ever met her.

But the man too was ordinary. Often when he entered the reading room his glasses were steamed, and as he removed them to wipe them clean, she saw that he was more attractive with them on.

She had not been aware, until he looked up, that she had been staring at him for some time. He was nervously adjusting his tie as he often did, and she jerked her head down too quickly to acknowledge a friendly smile. Furious with herself for acting so stupidly, she ached to look up and return the smile but could not. Perhaps he too was shy. Perhaps all he needed was an encouraging smile, and he would sit closer next time and start a conversation. What a ninny she was! Did girls who were outgoing have any inclination of what it was to be timid, to have people forever commenting on how very quiet you are — still water runs deep — but know they really mean that you're not much fun?

Cookie at work spoke easily to men and women alike. She liked Cookie though, and even confided in her a little and asked advice about men. Cookie had suggested a padded bra once, but she had not the courage to purchase one in an expensive store where the saleslady insisted on attending you so closely, and cheap ones were too obviously pointed. She knew it would take more than that anyway. Cookie was nice but was, after all, not very perceptive, and she put so much emphasis on a full bosom simply because she had one.

But why had she jerked away so nervously? The smile had been warm, almost personal, and she had disregarded it entirely. If he would only smile again she would smile back immediately. Maybe, especially if he was shy, she should smile first, or at least do something. Maybe if she walked somewhere he would notice, but there were not many places to go. She did not want to go to the rest room, and the drinking fountain would take her in the opposite direction. This left only the magazine rack, and the trip would require her to walk directly in front of him. She hated to walk in front of *anyone*, but it wasn't far, and on the way back the magazine would occupy her hands. Besides, it might be her last chance.

With the decision made, she quickly stood before further thought could frighten her into not going. She felt shaky, but once up, was obligated to move, so she stepped toward the wall where the magazines were. He did not look up as she passed, but continued to fiddle with his tie. She was relieved but disappointed. Cookie had said that she really poked out in this particular blouse and she hoped that he would notice. She wondered if after she was past he had looked at her the way she had seen other men look at other women, but she supposed not. However, on the way back, he looked up slowly, and as she approached his chair he moved his briefcase

unnecessarily out of her way. She thanked him. He smiled. She smiled. He nodded. He adjusted his tie, and they both smiled.

When she was again seated, she was excited, but disgusted with the beating of her heart over such an insignificant incident. She felt somehow degraded at spending her entire evening at the library, and other evenings too, thinking of this man she did not know, and attaching such exaggerated importance to small bits of recognition. But he had recognized her all the same, and she could not help the feeling inside her.

When she had finished flipping through the magazine and had set it aside, he was standing at the window as were two other men, and several people looked from where they sat at the winter's first snow. Huge flakes filled the sky and settled on the panes in slow motion. She had no boots, but it was beautiful and romantic. He turned and they smiled, he pointed to the snow, and he grimaced a private grimace for her eyes only. She liked the look on his face and tingled.

Everyone went back to his reading, but she could not.

It was almost nine, and since she walked home, she never stayed later. She somehow felt that tonight would be the night, and if she left, it might mean leaving it all behind, and all the warm smiles would be for nothing. But if he had timed her departure as she had his arrival, he might think it strange if she did not go, and if he was not aware of what time she usually left, he was probably not interested anyway. Perhaps he was waiting for her to rise. Then he would softly speak and she would answer in the quiet room. But others would hear and think they were friends or maybe lovers.

Her anxiety had made her almost faint. Her hands perspired and she needed air. She simply must get up. If he followed fine, and if not, that was that and she would not allow herself to return again on Thursdays. She looked at the snow, at the man, and at the library walls. She started to gather her things, slowly, to postpone her leaving and possibly ending her romance.

At 9:15 she pulled on her coat. Her fingers trembled and would not move the buttons into the holes, so she picked up her things and started out. In the huge glass doors she saw him rise, and she started to shake and her stomach turned. She would have to slow down or he could not catch up, but her steps were uncertain, and the heat rushed to her face. She needed the outside air. If she stayed longer in the stuffy building she would surely faint.

But when she finally pushed the doors open, the relief was only temporary, and even when she stepped into the cold, she felt queasy. Perhaps it wasn't worth it after all. She was really not that unhappy living alone. She paused to pull on her gloves and button her coat, when the doors opened again. She swallowed and fumbled with her things.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello."

"It's cold."

"It's very cold," she replied and turned to face him. He had a nice face, and she was happier than she had ever been. But he was standing so close — too close. She could see his whiskers even in the dim light, and she was

sure she would be sick. She swallowed and could not speak and was embarrassed.

"It's very cold," he repeated nervously as though he could think of nothing else to say.

The heat in her face became more intense. Her hands were damp against the fur lining of her gloves, her back perspired, and she was sure that he could see the droplets on her forehead in spite of the cold, and was humiliated – unbearably so – and frightened.

If she could just think of something to say. Anything at all. But her lips would not move, her eyes would not move, her mind would not move.

"You don't have any boots. Perhaps you'd like a ride." His voice was uncertain and he toyed with the top button of his coat, but even this did not calm her. She was aware that she was trembling all over, and hated herself for trembling, for shaking, for fumbling and blushing.

"Thank you," she stammered. My God! What was the matter with her? Tears were welling and she knew she was red and ugly. "That is . . . I mean, thank you but I have a friend," she finally said. "A friend . . . He picks me up . . . always . . . on every Thursday." She stared at him not believing what she had uttered, and hoping he did not.

"I'm terribly sorry," he mumbled as he turned and went quickly down the steps. He dropped a glove but did not turn to pick it up.

"My God," she said again weakly and sank onto a step. He disappeared into the snow, and she put her head in her hands. The heat left her face and she shivered. When people walked by she pretended to be waiting for someone.

