Another Spring

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SHIRLEY RICHARDS sat in a secluded corner of the grill. The smoke from her cigarette swirled around her in circles of blue mist. From where she sat she could see other couples sitting in small booths, happy in their oneness. It was so easy to be alone and rather sad.

She raised her eyebrows slightly as she saw a tall fellow with a small, blonde girl enter the room. They made their way to a table near hers and sat so that she could see them both. "So Chris is going with Janet now," she thought to herself. "I feel like a Dorothy Parker damsel, left embittered and not giving a damn—and yet, perhaps I do give a very slight damn."

Shirley had once been proud of her cocky cynicism, when she had not anything to be cynical about—that was when she had Chris and life was at its brim—exciting, well-worth living. That had been last spring when everything had been Shirley and Chris—but now it was always Chris and someone else—and Shirley alone.

NOW all of a sudden Janet was turning around, seeing her for the first time. "Shirley, are you waiting for someone?" queried Janet sweetly. "Won't you come and sit with Chris and me?"

"No, thanks," said Shirley, "I don't mind being alone..." She smiled at Chris, who was listening to something that Janet was saying. Shirley wondered if he could still remember the spring before when they had been such good friends—and more. That spring, when each had been incomplete without the other, they had spent the cool spring evenings walking around the campus together.

"Shirley, would you like to order?" It was that nice Union
waiter who always took her order.

"Why, yes, Jim," she answered, "I'll have coffee." As he jotted down her order he remarked something about the rain and spring. It reminded her of that other spring. It had seemed to her that nothing was more beautiful than the campus in the springtime. The great stretches of lawn grew green overnight; the trees, everything seemed to awaken in one spontaneous gesture. At night the lilac bushes were fragrant and damp with evening dew, and the stars had seemed very close. Then something had happened to her and Chris. They had broken off—she'd never found out why, but all of a sudden she had found that she was doing things by herself, or going out with strange, unfamiliar youth whom she seemed to know. She went to proms and games, and Sunday night buffet suppers the same as usual. Occasionally she would meet Chris at one of the gatherings, but nothing seemed real to her. She had entered into a whirl of activities, never stopping to think, living through the winter somehow. But now she was facing another spring, a lonely unfamiliar spring.

"We decided to come and sit with you, Shirley." It was Chris and Janet. She noticed that Chris looked tired and his voice sounded light and too indifferent.

"Did you finish your articles for meal planning?" It was Janet trying to make conversation, trying to interrupt the dead silence that had fallen upon the group.

"Yes, I typed them off last night," she answered dutifully. She wished Janet would go, and leave Chris with her awhile.

"Say, Chris, do you know what the prof in econ. told me this afternoon?" Janet started to tell Chris the cute things she had said back to the prof, and Shirley turned in her chair slightly and looked out of the window. From where she sat she could see the trees budding with pale green sprigs. Later they would be transformed into magnificent shade trees. There was a quiet grayness about the day; the rain fell with gentleness and spattered against the window in quick promissory tones; the whole world seemed to be tense with expectancy—except Shirley.

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"I wish I could talk to Chris," she thought to herself, "make right the things that are all wrong between us. And yet, explanations, mere talk, are so futile . . ."

"What are you looking out the window at so intently?" Janet wanted to know. "Nothing there but rain." She looked at Chris and Shirley. "You're rather quiet, Shirley," she observed. "In fact you're both too quiet." Chris and Shirley gave one another an embarrassed glance.

"If you don't mind," said Janet, her better judgment conquering her public spirit, "I think that I'll go over and sit with Jack and the rest of the bunch—I can't stand these 'old home week' reunions . . ." She opened her purse, inspecting her small pouting lips to see if they were sufficiently covered with lipstick, and got up.

Chris rose, helped her on with her coat, said, "I'll see you tonight," and watched her as she walked off. Shirley, with a puzzled, expectant look in her eyes, gazed at him, waiting for him to begin to talk.

"Have you ordered, Shirley?"

"Yes, coffee . . . Have you?"

"It should be coming along any time now." She watched him as he shook the ashes from a cigarette—he missed the tray by two inches and became much absorbed and preoccupied in brushing the ashes away. He said too casually, "It's been a long time since we've been in here together . . ."

"Yes . . . It was last November . . ."

"Ever since—" he broke off speaking and stared intently at a student dunking doughnuts in the privacy of an end booth. Shirley knew what he was thinking. He had broken a date with her to go home to visit his brother. He had never phoned her or been with her since then.

"What happened, anyway, Chris?" she asked rather non-chalantly, not wanting him to know that she cared in the least.

"Oh—nothing, I guess," he said slowly, rubbing his finger along the table edge. "I was busy . . . had classes to make up . . ."

"You were never too busy before . . ."

"Well . . . er . . ." he was silent for a moment and then began talking slowly, jerkily. "These college affairs don't mean a thing . . ."
“Don’t they?” she questioned.

He ignored her question. “They shouldn’t go on until they mean something. After all,” he blurted out, “a fellow doesn’t like to be tied down to one girl.” She nodded slightly. He was probably referring to his brother Bob, who was married, as soon as he had graduated from college, to a girl he had been engaged to the five years he had been in school.

“Take Bob,” Chris was speaking again, expressing her very thoughts. “He had a chance at a construction job in South America. Did he take it? No. He married Ruth and settled down to a thirty-dollar-a-week job.”

“He could have taken Ruth with him,” put in Shirley.

He couldn’t have gotten any place—a woman would be a hindrance on a construction job, at the very least.” Shirley listened to Chris quietly as he expounded his theories. She had spent a week-end with Bob and Ruth last summer. They lived in a rambling old house that was already becoming over-filled with children’s toys, cluttered closets, and unpaid bills stuffed away in desk drawers.

“Yet, Bob and Ruth are happy,” she reasoned.

Chris sighed impatiently. “Maybe so—but look at them. All the time and money they spent for their educations—and it hasn’t gotten them a thing.”

The waiter brought the coffee they had ordered. It was cold and splashed into the saucer as Jim put it down. “Thanks, Jim,” she said, “this is too sudden . . .”

Chris poured some sugar in her coffee. “Say when!”

“When . . .”

“Shirley . . .”

“Yes?” She stirred her coffee, tinkling the spoon against the side of the cup as though she found a certain reassurance in its sound.

“Please don’t misunderstand me . . . I think you’re . . . well . . . I think you’re swell . . .”

“Thanks,” she said dully.

“—But a fellow has to plan his life . . . have a definite goal to reach.”

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“WHAT has that to do with me, Chris?” she asked him, seeing, yet not wanting to see. “I have ideals and ambitions, too...” She felt the last vestige of pride slip from her as she sat there pleading with him to understand her point of view.

She turned in her chair slightly, in the silence that followed, so that he couldn’t see the hurt expression in her eyes.

Outside, the soft breezes still pushed the rain against the window. Funny how she had looked forward to this talk so much, how she had wanted to make everything right between Chris and herself; and now it all seemed so unimportant. All the time she had been unhappy about Chris she had been worshipping a demi-god, idealizing something that had never been. She wished he’d go—leaving her ideals—what was left of them—still intact—comforting.

A waiter hovered over their table and poured hot coffee into their cups. She would always associate this moment with the bitter aroma of coffee, and cream making small inlets on its dark surface.

“You can see how it is, can’t you, Shirley?” Chris was speaking again. “There isn’t any place for a woman in my scheme of things—not for a long time.”

SHE didn’t say anything at first. Absently she looked at her watch. “I’ll have to be going now, Chris,” she said, and smiled what she hoped was an understanding, friendly smile. She wasn’t going to let him spoil her life just because he didn’t want to become involved with a woman, to lose any of his independence.

He stood for her to pass. As she rose, their eyes met in a quick, brief glance. She had a fleeting glimpse of the things she would miss, the nights and stars, the undercurrents that went with understanding, and felt a tinge of regret.

As she walked out into the fresh damp air, her mind became clear again. The rain splashed on her face and wiped the hurt and sadness from her eyes. She noticed a yellow crocus peeping up through the black, moist earth. “This is another spring!” she said.

Sketch