Next Spring

Helen McElhinney*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

Beck sat still. "It is possible to shut someone out. It’s got to be..."
BECK sat still. "It is possible to shut someone out. It's got to be. I've thought it all out by myself. Not just in pieces this time—the whole thing."

Sandy, her roommate, hugged her knees. "Mm-hm."

Beck walked over to the desk. She took out the white leather box of letters. They were all there. Filed. She dropped on to the bed and began to leaf through them. "They're all here." She looked down at them. "They're Ted. But they're not enough, Sandy. I can't marry a complete stranger. Three more years of letters. The Point's so far away. I won't even know him. It's so simple. There isn't any problem. There isn't any problem because there isn't anything."

Sandy sat up. "Oh, I see, Beck. There isn't any Ted. No more letters. Bingo, the man's out of your life."

"Yes, that's it. Because after three years, there isn't anything anyway." They eyed each other in silence.

"I don't know him very well anyway, and, besides, he's not my type." Beck laughed.

Sandy snorted, "Well, all I can say it—" She drew a deep breath, "For not knowing him very well, you've certainly spent the greater part of your college career trying hard to get to know him even less. And, Beck, I might as well tell you. You've changed too. Why, sometimes I don't even know you. And maybe Ted wouldn't think your type is so desirable either—now." She stopped and held her breath. No, she wouldn't back down.

Beck froze. "You didn't mean that. Or maybe you did." She remembered the warning notes left on her desk by the officers' council. "I suppose you've been reading those notes. Well, I should think you'd believe me before you'd believe them, Sandy."
Sandy smiled. "I'm sorry, Beck. I haven't read your notes, honest. I didn't need to. I've seen you down at Jose's myself with the fellas. I've heard some things too, Beck. That sort of stuff gets around fast, you know. It isn't too good, Beck. Especially when I know you're not like that."

Beck didn't smile. "I'm not like that. But—, how do you know I'm not like that? And how do you know what it's like to sit there and think about someone that's a thousand miles away? It's fun. It's so much fun you can hardly wait to get so darned happy you don't even know there is a someone."

"I said I was sorry, Beck."

"It doesn't make any difference. It's fun to sit there across from the blanks and laugh. And wonder about the darling blanks that must be sitting across from him. Only maybe they aren't. Maybe he's found someone that isn't a blank. Maybe Beck's the big blank."

Sandy had left the room. Getting up, Beck took the box of letters over to the desk and dropped them, one by one, into the waste basket beside it.

She was tired of wanting and never having her want fulfilled. Well, she wouldn't have to want anymore. She could lose that feeling inside that held her back—or egged her on. She'd lose him right now and not have to keep on trying to forget. She could be nice and Sandy would like her—and the others. She could keep on writing, but it would be a waste of time. He didn't really think about her. She looked down at the letters in the wastebasket, and remembered the post marks on them. He wrote regularly. She remembered her spasmodic writing. His off and on girl, he called her.

Well, he wasn't her type. He didn't take her out with the crowd all the time. And when they danced, she only remembered dancing together. They never had had a crowd gather to watch. She cringed as she remembered the night she'd been too happy, the night she and Jack had put on a show. And Jack had let her. They had laughed about it. Maybe Ted wouldn't like her. When she had been with Ted, she had only been herself. She remembered that she had liked that.

But she didn't know him very well. How could she? It had been so long. She didn't know him. She knew him by heart. Beck remembered the way he always walked so straight. The way he talked fast and laughed when he was excited about telling her
something. She remembered the way he'd always have her check his ties, and then he'd straighten them. He was proud of his ties. He'd never buy that kind again. But she remembered how he'd waited for his appointment to West Point and how proud he'd been when it had come.

She looked down at the letters in the basket. She hadn't torn them. Just dropped them in.

Beck knelt beside the basket and started taking them out. “January 5, January 12, January 19, U. S. Corps of Cadets, West Point, N. Y.”

She looked up. Sandy was standing in the doorway. She closed the door. “Hi.”

Beck stared at her. “Oh, hell,” she jammed the letters back in the basket, pushed them down hard, and held them there, looking at them and at her hand holding them down. Sandy watched her. After a while, she got up.

“Going somewhere?” Sandy stared after Beck, who had grabbed her jacket from the closet.

“Out,” Beck slammed the door.

“Oh, don't, Beck. Don't do it again.” Sandy whispered to the door.

But Beck was walking, half-running across the commons. Her hair whipped back. She ran as fast as she could to feel the cold spring air. She slowed down as she neared campus town and turned down the second side street. There weren't many people. It was late.

Beck opened the door and slipped into the first booth at Jose's. She sat there for a while, her hands in her jacket pockets, feet up on the opposite cushions, and thought.

Then Joe saw her and came over. “Kind of late, ain't it, Becky? Haven't you got hours tonight?”

He'd always called her Becky. Couldn't he learn she hated it?

“This is Beck, Joe. And I haven't got hours.” Then she smiled. “You haven't got a couple of beers for me, have you?”

She threw her money on the table. Joe left and returned with the bottles.

“Thanks.” Beck drank one. She smoked a cigarette and drank the other. It was good. Just to drink. She raised her hand. The waiter came over to the table with another beer and took away the empty bottles.
“Drop this in on the way back, will you?” Beck tossed him a dime. She watched him punch the juke box dial twice. Then it came out loud. High, blaring. Hot jazz. Jammed. So jammed it can’t think.

If she had enough beer, she couldn’t.

She wouldn’t, no she wouldn’t. Come down here alone. She’d come down with Joe, or Jack, or Chip. And sit across the booth from them. That one in the back. In the corner. And be gay and laugh. They were adorable. They were nothing. They were something. They filled in the gaps of time.

Time, time, time. The bottle was cold. And wet. Hold it tighter. Time, fuzzy. Awfully clear. Three years away. Last night. Yes, I’ll take it. I’ll take it. I want it.

Lift it up. Cold, tangy. Ice-cold fuzz.


Soft, sickening music. Kick the damned box.


Chug-a-lug. Down the hatch. No one to watch. Laugh. By yourself.


Sandy got her out of the booth. She got her out of Jose’s and somehow back to the house. It was hard pulling her up the fire escape and she cried. Cried for Beck. She put her to bed, and in the morning, Beck told her “Thanks.”

Thanks. Well, what else was there to say? She didn’t feel sorry. She didn’t feel anything. She told Sandy she wasn’t well and was going to stay in bed. Sandy would be gone all day. She could slip out of the house. She wanted to be by herself. She wanted to walk. By herself.

She walked a long time. Past the campus. Past the radio tower. Beyond the city limits. She climbed down the embankment by the railroad bridge and crossed the field beyond which
was the forest where they'd gone for picnics. She liked being out here alone. She never had been before. It was powerful. She wished that she had brought her paints along to sketch the trees. She would like to try to capture the feeling of power. She wondered if the trees would be so powerful if they each stood alone.

Then she saw the tree that stood by itself at the edge of the forest. It was bare. The leaves were stripped from its limbs. It was by itself standing naked in the field outside. The tree whipped to one side and came back. Its skeleton of limbs was strong. They grew straight up, she noticed. Every small branch was strong too, and stood by itself.

She wondered why people should not stand by themselves. He'd said that he needed her, but she wasn't sure she wanted to need him too. To need someone necessitates giving at least a part of one's self to satisfy the need. And in giving, she would be losing the right to feel and think completely in her own way. He wouldn't mean to, but his self would get in the way, and she would become partly him.

The sky was very gray. It made the brown limbs look darker. The tree grew up straight out of the ground. There was only one gnarled place where it twisted. The limbs, branching out from the trunk, curved smoothly upward. Only two of the limbs had grown the other way, branching out horizontally without the curve and the straight upward line. Beck studied the tree.

Yes, there were the two horizontal branches, two places where the limbs had not grown straight upward in unison with the others. They were a part of the tree, like the gnarl just below them.

She wondered if it would make any difference. There was still some feeling toward him. She wondered if it were hate. Hate for making the scars. She wondered if the scars would make any difference.

The other trees branch out, Beck thought. The limbs get lost among themselves. It made it hard to disentangle them and get a picture of the whole.

She had been branching out, trying to be so many different things. Until all of her selves were being hopelessly entangled. They were fighting among themselves. They didn't like each other. She tried hard to remember what her real self was like.
Beck suddenly felt cold. She put her hands over her eyes and shook her head. Then she got up from the ground and hiked back to the campus.

Sandy couldn't understand. She'd told Beck over and over that she wasn't mad. She didn't care that she'd gotten drunk. Or that she'd been gone all that day she'd promised to stay in bed. She just wished she'd quit punishing herself. She wished Beck would have some fun. Beck had always had fun.

But she was forgetting what fun was. She was trying to find herself. And she couldn't make room for anyone until she did. She wondered if there would be room for Ted, or if there could be for anyone, when she did find herself. She was beginning to feel complete alone. She was picking up the pieces, putting them together. Do you need to have someone a part of you? She wondered.

* * *

One afternoon in June she sat in the sunken garden, remembering how cold it had been in April, thinking how it could be just as cold in May and June. Ted came down the steps. He was walking toward her and half-smiling. She felt as if she would die if she didn't breathe soon.

"Ted," she managed. She sat still on the bench, her legs tucked under her.

"Sure." He laughed. "And I haven't come back from the dead, Beck. Don't look that way."

"But you . . . when did . . ."

"You should have written to me, too. I ought to give you hell, you know. But I guess you've just been having a lot of fun." He stepped back.

Beck almost shouted. "No. I mean, it's been different. Oh, I don't know." Then she collected herself. "Ted, I haven't written to you. Why are you here? And suppose I've changed?"

Ted laughed as he came toward her. "I'm here to see you, Beck. And I've changed too. See?" He pulled himself to attention and saluted snappily.

And they were together again. But during the three days he was there, they got nowhere. She asked him about the Point. He told her about it. And when he asked questions about her, she led him on with more about the Point. The Point. They talked about it for three days.

The last evening they went dancing. She held herself away
from him and talked. She talked until he took her out on the balcony and shook her. He shook until it hurt her and he didn't stop.

"I'll say you've changed! You've changed so much that this act isn't funny anymore. I don't know what you're trying to cover up, but I'm getting damned tired of it." He stopped. "Oh, Beck, what is it?"

She was crying. She was looking straight at him and crying hard. "No, don't touch me. Don't touch me, Ted. I love you. And I've changed. I'm so ashamed. I don't want you to have to love me. They told me you wouldn't. And then you came back. And I don't want to be by myself." She turned her back on him. Now she'd said it. He could go away.

Ted turned her around. "God, Beck. That's the most decent thing you've said all evening. Come on. I'll take you home. I won't touch you."

Back at the house, Beck fell into bed. She slept. She slept hard and for a long time. She slept as she hadn't slept for three months. And when she woke up, she was exhausted. But she felt very calm.

Ted had gone. She didn't know if he would come back. He hadn't said. She didn't know if he would ever come back. But at least she knew. She knew that she loved him. And even if he couldn't love her, it was all right. Because she knew, as she had never known anything before, that she did love him. And that was a wonderful thing—to know something for sure. To be sure of one part of her was a beginning. She felt closer to finding herself than she had been since that April. It had been so cold then. It was getting warmer now.

She got up and went over to the window seat and looked out at a sunny afternoon. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. Perhaps he would come back. Next spring.