

And my hands flailing in a grim sky
Among the crows.
And yet if in this place of exasperation and tears
I should find the golden smile of the sun
And the siren call of deep water
To bear my happiness for a day,
Surely you can not
With your hammer-handed time
Smash this healing idleness
Too quickly—
Too soon.

Dream Girl

Betty Monroe

THAT'S the girl," Jack thought. One in a million. Ruth McGuire. Ruth at the bookstore. Ruth, walking to Chem from the bookstore. Ruth in the Grill among a blur of other girls. Ruth—only Ruth.

It was as if a spotlight had singled out the dancing couple. Keeping his eyes centered on the dancers he stuck his hands in his pockets and shuffled down the floor behind the long line of disinterested "stags," trying to seem casual.

He had traveled almost the full length of the dance floor when he drew over to the side of the room and leaned against the wall, still watching. Hundreds of other couples were bobbing around the room and over the noise of dancing, scraping feet and voices, rose the high crescendo of the music.

He was close enough to her now to survey her critically. She had long brown hair that curled a little on the ends and straight eyebrows above soft gray eyes. Her figure was slim and supple, with long, straight legs. Tonight she had on white pumps that accented the deep tan of her legs and the familiar jaunty red and white striped dress.

The music stopped suddenly and he found himself still staring at her. As if she were aware of an intent gaze, she turned around slowly and her eyes passed over the fellows standing in front of him. Jack ducked his head quickly and pretended to be absorbed in studying his sporty oxfords. She turned around again and began talking with her partner animatedly.

"Whew, that was close," he thought. Never do to let her guess his cutting in was anything but casual and unplanned.

The music started again and she and her partner resumed their smooth gliding and stepping down the floor in front of Jack.

"Now's the time—" he urged himself. No, he'd wait a minute to watch how she danced. Just putting it off—sounded scared.

"May I cut in?" He tapped her partner lightly on the shoulder. Jeez, what if the guy said no—what happened then?

"Oh, you," growled her partner.

"A cut dance, you know. It's customary." He'd have to talk up to the guy or he'd never get to meet her. Got to meet her. Got to dance with her. Ruth.

Suddenly he was alone with her. Mechanically he clutched her waist with his right hand and grasped her other hand. That was right, he thought, but somehow he felt wooden and his mouth refused to work.

"Got to smile. Haven't even said hello to her. To Ruth." He smiled and felt more foolish and inadequate. It was as if they were standing in the middle of the floor alone, with everyone watching them.

"My name's Jack Collins." It blurted out, lost responsibility to his mind.

"I'm Ruth McGuire and I'm awfully glad to know you, Jack."

Sure her name's Ruth McGuire. As if he didn't know. . . Wonder what she'd think if he quoted her name, address and telephone number . . . and where she was from and what she was taking in college. He'd had to ask a lot of people about her but it was worth it.

"Don't think I've seen you around here before, Ruth."

Not seen her around before . . . Jeez. But maybe she'd say, "Oh, I saw you over in the bookstore last week when I was buying my first supplies for summer school. Aren't you—"

Instead, "No, I'm just a first quarter freshman." She looked up at him and smiled. He remembered the first time he'd seen her in the bookstore. She had turned around and smiled at some-

one across the room and he had wished she were smiling at him. He had nudged Bill Hodge and Bill had looked and whistled appreciatively.

"Just a kid, huh?" he laughed, and she smiled politely.

"What year are you, Jack?"

"I'm a junior." That ought to impress her a little.

"What's your major?"

"Oh, it's a snap—Chem." She'd think he was smart, a regular Einstein.

"No use taking something hard and working your head off when you can have more fun dropping in at the Grill for a cup of coffee in the morning for an hour or so and cutting a couple of afternoon classes to go downtown with the boys and have a beer." It'd be a lot smarter for him to sound like a playboy, Bill, his roommate had said. She was a freshman and things like that impressed them. Bill ought to know because he'd dated lots of girls and freshman girls too.

Sure be a shock to her if she knew that he worked his fool head off over in the lab every morning, tutored freshmen in chem problems every afternoon and studied at night . . . every night. Not much time for coffee in the Union or a beer downtown . . . or girls . . . or dates.

"Oh, is it?" She looked up at him again, quizzically.

"Gosh, she comes just to my shoulder. Nice height. Just right—in fact, she's just right. Wonder when I should ask her if I can take her home. Better not be too abrupt about it," he thought. He'd been planning their first meeting and what he'd say too long for it to be flubbed because the approach wasn't right.

The music was getting faster again so he concentrated on putting his insensible feet in the right patterns. Better say something, he thought.

"How old are you, Ruth?"

"Just an even eighteen. How old are you?"

He wished he could say "Twenty-one" proudly, but if he did she'd find out later when she was going with him that he was a liar.

"How old would you guess?"

"Well—I'm not sure—" she fenced.

"Go ahead—just guess," he reassured her, confident.

"Nineteen—maybe?" she guessed.

He looked at her intently to see if she was teasing. No, she looked serious.

"You're pretty smart. How did you know?" How did she know, he thought. He didn't look that young, did he? No, he was tall enough and he wasn't lean and gangly like he'd been two years ago when he'd gone to the Dean's office to ask for a job tutoring and the Dean had asked him how old he was. Maybe it was his "round, honest face" like Bill always said.

"Come on dope, don't let it get you," he thought. "You still haven't asked her—"

"Since you're so smart and answered the first question—maybe you can answer the second question right." Smoothly put, he congratulated himself.

"What's that?" She smiled and he felt the courage flow back to his lagging feet and warm his clammy hands. She looked better close up than she did at a distance and her smile was nice and friendly. He'd known she would be friendly and right because she looked like that. She dressed right and moved and talked the right way. He'd known that even her dancing would suit him before he'd come tonight. Ever since that day in the bookstore he could see her, even closing his eyes he could still see her. Ruth—even the right name. He wished he belonged to a fraternity. It'd be nice to hang his pin on Ruth later.

"Going home with anyone else tonight?" He stuck his foot into it that time all right. Even worded the question wrong.

"I'm awfully sorry, Jack. I came to this dance with another girl and I promised to wait for her afterward and go home with her."

"Oh." His feet stopped moving but the music dragged on. Someone tapped at his shoulder.

"May I cut in?"

"Yeah, sure," he replied without looking at the fellow, and stepped back, dazed. He hadn't figured on that. She hadn't been impressed maybe. But he'd tried hard. Ruth. She was one in a million. She could have been his girl.

He slunk over to the wall where the other stags were clustered.

"Who was the slick chick?" called one of them.

"Just a freshman," Jack mumbled. Better get out of here, he thought. "If I were a kid, I'd probably bawl." He stuck his hands in his pockets and ambled toward the door, remembering not to look back at the dancers.