

## PART SIX

# THE CAFETERIA

I walked to the counter and asked for coffee and rolls. It must have been a strange order for that time of night, for the counter man looked at me strangely. I felt the troubled uneasiness of old and wished that I had not entered. But it was too late to go to the automat on Fourteenth Street. I was afraid of Fourteenth Street at night—Fourteenth Street with its prowlers who dared to clutch my arm.

I walked to a chair with my coffee and rolls and the check which had been punched at ten cents. Only then did I look around me, and then my heart began to sing. The loneliness left me. Surely these were my people. The people I had wanted to know. These were the poets, the writers, the artists—my own kind. By chance I had stumbled on their meeting place.

How wild they looked, but no wilder than I looked. It was as if I recognized my own by this wildness, this wildness that was akin to my own wildness. Their hair was not smooth and composed, their eyes were not smooth and composed. I recognized them.

How to get to know these people? I constantly had before me the knowledge of my deafness and it killed every free, spontaneous impulse to action. The gnome, during the six years he had had possession of me, had indeed permeated my whole being. Not even in my dreams—the dreams of sleep—was I free of him. Not even in my dreams dared I accost people. Even in my dreams I had come to do only those things which were possible for me to do awake, within the area of the walls the gnome had built. It was

impossible to go over the walls even in my dreams. I could not talk to another person in my dreams. Invariably the picture became blurred, I stirred uneasily and sometimes woke up. So, little by little, I had come to accept the gnome's possession of me. And as it was in my dreams, so it was in reality: I avoided people so that I might not constantly be reminded of the walls, be made aware of my deficiency, my un-wholeness.

These people: would they want to know me if they found out I was deaf? I lived in fear that the countermen in the cafeteria might address me when I was not looking. They would find out my deafness immediately. Too, there was the fact of my voice. I had not used it much for six years, partly from distrust of it because I could not hear it myself, partly because no one had talked much to me: I had lived alone by myself most of the time. The counterman would say to me when I gave an order, "What did you say?" My voice was rusty from disuse. It hardly came out of my throat. I must swallow a few times, water my throat with saliva, so that my voice might come out more freely.

I lived in continual fear of that comedy which must be going on behind my back. A remark addressed to me, and I not observing as well as not hearing—if I had observed it, I would have smiled meaninglessly, stupidly. But suppose I had failed to notice anything? Then they would repeat and repeat their words and when I still failed to turn around they would whisper among themselves, tap their ears knowingly. Oh, I could construct the picture well without having actually seen it, although I knew that it had been enacted, for sometimes I would look up and catch the last reel of the picture in their eyes, or there might be about their hands and face the motions of the last act. The curtain had not yet been drawn down. Or the fault was perhaps mine. I should not have looked around and seen what was to be seen.

The people at the tables—my people—seeing this little comedy enacted by the countermen . . . would they want to know me afterward? It seemed impossible that they should want to know me.

I returned to the cafeteria the next night at the same hour of nine. This time I had fortified myself with my poems. But there was no one in the cafeteria. Only some people who were not my kind. That phrase, my kind, warmed me, made me feel less lonely.

Had they gone somewhere else? Where had they gone? I felt hopeless and alone again. I waited, there was nothing else for me to do. I was tired of walking on the streets, seeing faces that were all closed to me. I waited in my seat, the empty coffee cup beside me. I waited. Ten, eleven, twelve o'clock. Then they came. I recognized them instantly, their laughing carelessness, their complete naturalness, their boisterousness. Nine o'clock—what was nine o'clock to them? Time did not exist for them. The hours around midnight were their hours. They only came in when the timid people scurried off to bed.

I had waited for them and now I saw them, although they were oblivious of me. Would there ever come a day when they saw me?

I propped my book of poems against the napkin-holder and pretended to be absorbed in it. But I was really watching them all the time, hungrily.

It was an ordinary cafeteria, like any of the thousand other cafeterias in the city. There were the too ornate windows, the cashier hunched on top of the show-case filled with cigars and cigarettes. There were the rows of imitation marble-topped tables, each with its napkin-holder and condiments and sauces. There were the counters with their signs, "Salads," "Sandwiches," "Hot Dishes," "Beverages." There were the electric-light clusters hanging from the ceiling, so many lights that not a corner of the room escaped, not even the space under the tables. There were the three or four tables down front with their tags of "For Service Only," and where only the privileged ones sat—that is, the uptown sightseers who came to peer and stare. It was just an ordinary cafeteria, but the people frequenting it around midnight—curiously by day it was what it was: an ordinary cafeteria, frequented by ordinary people, factory and shop employees, taxi-drivers, laborers—transformed

or rather hid its ordinariness with their carelessness, their youth, their dreams. It became an extraordinary place, taking on the quality of these people. At midnight and the hours around midnight, the shine of the brass was less hard; it had almost the softness of gold. Even the counter men relaxed.

The owner of the place was a Jew of forty, gross, with highly manicured nails. He had a soul which wavered between ordinary money greed, and a desire for color. He was always threatening to put the twelve-o'clock crowd out because they ate too little and stayed too long. He had a fondness for big white signs with black lettering which read, "No Loitering." When the white became brown from fly specks and smoke grease, he substituted new white signs, although they had no effect on the crowd. And he himself made no move to kick them out of their seats beyond threats, gross little threats like himself. In his brown suit—he always wore brown suits—covering his short, fat body, in his diamond-ringed fingers, his manicured nails, his fat hanging cheeks, his oily, almost strange smile, he sat and observed the twelve o'clock crowd. He had a ringside seat, a seat at one of the reserved tables. There he sat by himself, or someone might join him, and he would play with his manicured diamonded fingers, watching the people with his oily, almost strange, smile.

He realized his power. He meant life or starvation to many of them. One day he might relax, but the next day he would shake his head, smiling his smile. No, no more credit. He would shake his head on its fat baby neck.

He could be hard, but he could also be all obsequiousness. When a group of uptowners came in and the waiter could not bring the glasses of water fast enough, he himself went running, gross in his gross brown suit to bring the glasses of water.

But most of the time he sat in his ringside seat, or stood by the cashier and watched the crowd. People came, uptowners, to watch these freaks with their wild hair and wild faces. The fame of the cafeteria had spread. Perhaps that was why he did not insist on the

no-loitering sign. People came to stare and paid good money for admission. He let the freaks stay. He muttered threats when they would buy only a cup of coffee and stay from midnight to dawn, but he let them stay.

The Jew had a wife who was as much a part of the cafeteria as he was. They took turns in being on hand. She had none of his love of color. If he was hard, she was harder. They fought an endless battle over the cafeteria. Neither trusted the other. She wanted the twelve-o'clock crowd kicked out. She distrusted their color, their unordinariness. In the end, there was more money to be made out of the ordinary people. This popularity with the uptowners would be merely a transient thing; the crazy people would go elsewhere, and the uptowners would follow them. The crazy people never stayed long in any one place. Now it was this cafeteria that they frequented, now that tearoom. They were not permanent as the taxi-drivers, the various habitués of the underworld, silent people who came from nowhere but were expensively dressed and ate and bought freely, were permanent. She and her husband were constantly at war. She made a bid for the taxi-driving crowd. She installed a five-cent gambling machine in the back of the cafeteria.

The cashier was the henchman of these two. He was more than a cashier. He was as much of a personality as the owner. He could be fawning or snarling, depending on whether the person before him had money or owed a bill which he could not pay. He had curiously cold, disillusioned eyes. He would stare out of them at the twelve-o'clock crowd, unmoving, but when a chair was knocked out of place, he would run snarling to adjust it.

This was the cafeteria and the three who stood over the twelve-o'clock crowd.

I, too, stood over them at first, but I did not want to continue standing over them. How was I to get to know these people? I wanted to know them all, the long-haired men and the short-haired girls who flitted, light as birds, from table to table.