

Love Story

In the fall of my senior year, I got into the habit of studying at the Radcliffe library. Not just to eye the cheese, although I admit that I liked to look. The place was quiet, nobody knew me, and the reserve books were less in demand. The day before one of my history hour exams, I still hadn't gotten around to reading first book on the list, an endemic Harvard disease, I ambled over to the reserve desk to get one of the tomes that would bail me out on the morrow. There were two girls working there. One a tall tennis-anyone type, the other a bespectacled mouse type. I opted for Minnie Four-Eyes.

"Do you have *The Waning of the Middle Ages!*?"

She shot a glance up at me.

"Do you have your own library?" she asked.

"Listen, Harvard is allowed to use the Radcliffe library."

"I'm not talking legality, Preppie, I'm talking ethics. You guys have five million books. We have a few lousy thousand."

Christ, a superior-being type! The kind who think since the ratio of Radcliffe to Harvard is five to one, the girls must be five times as smart. I normally cut these types to ribbons, but just then I badly needed that goddamn book.

"Listen, I need that goddamn book."

"Wouldja please watch your profanity, Preppie?"

"What makes you so sure I went to prep school?"

"You look stupid and rich," she said, removing her glasses.

"You're wrong," I protested. "I'm actually smart and poor."

"Oh, no, Preppie. *I'm* smart and poor." She was staring straight at me. Her eyes were brown. Okay, maybe I look rich, but I wouldn't let some 'Cliffie—even one with pretty eyes—call me dumb.

"What the hell makes you so smart?" I asked.

"I wouldn't go for coffee with you," she answered.

"Listen—I wouldn't ask you."

"That," she replied, "is what makes you stupid."

Let me explain why I took her for coffee. By shrewdly capitulating at the crucial moment—i.e., by pretending that I suddenly wanted to—I got my book. And since she couldn't leave until the library closed, I had plenty of time to absorb some pithy phrases about the shift of royal dependence from cleric to lawyer in the late eleventh century. I got an A minus on the exam, coincidentally the same grade I assigned to Jenny's legs when she first walked from behind that desk. I can't say I gave her costume an honor grade, however; it was a bit too Boho for my taste. I especially loathed that Indian thing she carried for a handbag. Fortunately I didn't mention this, as I later discovered it was of her own design.

We went to the Midget Restaurant, a nearby sandwich joint which, despite its name, is not restricted to people of small stature. I ordered two coffees and a brownie with ice cream (for her).

"I'm Jennifer Cavilleri," she said, "an American of Italian descent."

As if I wouldn't have known. "And a music major," she added.

"My name is Oliver," I said. "First or last?" she asked.

“First,” I answered, and then confessed that my entire name was Oliver Barrett. (I mean, that's most of it.)

“Oh,” she said. “Barrett, like the poet?”

“Yes,” I said. “No relation.”

In the pause that ensued, I gave inward thanks that she hadn't come up with the usual distressing question: “Barrett, like the hall?” For it is my special albatross to be related to the guy that built Barrett Hall, the largest and ugliest structure in Harvard Yard, a colossal monument to my family's money, vanity and flagrant Harvardism.

After that, she was pretty quiet. Could we have run out of conversation so quickly? Had I turned her off by not being related to the poet? What? She simply sat there, semi-smiling at me. For something to do, I checked out her notebooks. Her handwriting was curious—small sharp little letters with no capitals (who did she think she was, e. e. cummings?). And she was taking some pretty snowy courses: Comp. Lit. 105, Music 150, Music . 201—

“Music 201? Isn't that a graduate course?”

She nodded yes, and was not very good at masking her pride.

“Renaissance polyphony.”

“What's polyphony?”

“Nothing sexual, Preppie.”

Why was I putting up with this? Doesn't she read the *Crimson*? Doesn't she know who I am?

“Hey, don't you know who I am?”

“Yeah,” she answered with kind of disdain. “You're the guy that owns Barrett Hall.”

She didn't know who I was.

“I don't *own* Barrett Hall,” I quibbled. “My great-grandfather happened to give it to Harvard.”

“So his not-so-great grandson would be sure to get in!”

That was the limit.

“Jenny, if you're so convinced I'm a loser, why did you bulldoze me into buying you coffee?”

She looked me straight in the eyes and smiled.

“I like your body,” she said.

(after Erich Segal)

Cultural Notes

Radcliffe (College) - part of Harvard University where women study

preppie - a person who attended a private preparatory school before going to university.

Music 150; Music 201 - standard system of courses ID in American universities - each course has its ID number.

Crimson - the biggest student newspaper of Harvard University

e. e. cummings - Cummings, E. E., in full EDWARD ESTLIN CUMMINGS (b. Oct. 14, 1894, Cambridge, Mass., U.S.--d. Sept. 3, 1962, North Conway, N. H.), American poet and painter who first attracted attention, in an age of literary experimentation, for his eccentric punctuation and phrasing, e.g. not using capital letters.

Harvard University - situated in Cambridge, Mass., oldest institution of higher learning in the United States (founded 1636) and one of the nation's most prestigious. The main university campus lies along the Charles River a few miles west of Boston.