“All right,” agreed Finny absently. He had a way of turning cliches inside out like that. “Come on, let’s go. We’ve got to be there. You never know, maybe he will do it this time.”

“Oh, for God sake.” I slammed closed the French book.

“What’s the matter?”

What a performance! His face was completely questioning and candid.

“Studying!” I snarled. “Studying! You know, books. Work. Examinations.”

“Yeah …” He waited for me to go on, as though he didn’t see what I was getting at.

“Oh for God sake! You don’t know what I’m talking about. No, of course not. Not you.” I stood up and slammed the chair against the desk. “Okay, we go. We watch little lily-liver Lepellier not jump from the tree, and I ruin my grade.”

He looked at me with an interested, surprised expression. “You want to study?”

I began to feel a little uneasy at this mildness of his, so I sighed heavily. “Never mind, forget it. I know, I joined the club, I’m going. What else can I do?”

“Don’t go.” He said it very simply and casually, as though he were saying, “Nice day.” He shrugged, “Don’t go. What the hell, it’s only a game.”

I had stopped halfway across the room, and now I just looked at him. “What d’you mean?” I muttered. What he meant was clear enough, but I was groping for what lay behind his words, for what his thoughts could possibly be. I might have asked, “Who are you, then?” instead. I was facing a total stranger.

“I didn’t know you needed to study,” he said simply, “I didn’t think you ever did. I thought it just came to you.” It seemed that he had made some kind of parallel between my studies and his sports. He probably thought anything you were good at came without effort. He didn’t know yet that he was unique.

I couldn’t quite achieve a normal speaking voice. “If I need to study, then so do you.”

“Me?” He smiled faintly. “Listen, I could study forever and I’d never break C. But it’s different for you, you’re good. You really are. If I had a brain like that, I’d—I’d have my head cut open so people could look at it.”

“Now wait a second …” He put his hands on the back of a chair and leaned toward me. “I know. We kid around a lot and everything, but you have to be serious sometime, about something. If you’re really good at something, I mean if there’s nobody, or hardly anybody, who’s as good as you are, then you’ve got to be serious about that. Don’t mess around, for God’s sake.” He frowned disapprovingly at me. “Why didn’t you say you had to study before? Don’t move from that desk. It’s going to be all A’s for you.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, without any reason.

“It’s okay. I’ll oversee old Leper. I know he’s not going to do it.” He was at the door.

“Wait a minute,” I said more sharply. “Wait just a minute. I’m coming.”

“No you aren’t, pal, you’re going to study.”

“Never mind my studying.”

“You think you’ve done enough already?”

“Yes.” I let this drop curtly to bar him from telling me what to do about my work. He let it go at that, and went out the door ahead of me, whistling off key. We followed our gigantic shadows across the campus, and Phineas began talking in wild French, to give me a little extra practice. I said nothing, my mind exploring the new dimensions of isolation around me. Any fear I had ever had of the tree was nothing beside this. It wasn’t my neck, but my understanding which was menaced. He had never been jealous of me for a second. Now I knew that there never was and never could have been any rivalry between us. I was not of the same quality as he.

I couldn’t stand this. We reached the others loitering around the base of the tree, and Phineas began exuberantly to throw off his clothes, delighted by the fading glow of the day, the challenge of the tree, the competitive tension of all of us. He lived and flourished in such moments. “Let’s go, you and me,” he called. A new idea struck him. “We’ll go together, a double jump! Neat, eh?”

None of this mattered now; I would have listlessly agreed to anything. He started up the wooden rungs and I began climbing behind, up to the limb high over the bank. Phineas ventured a little way along it, holding a thin nearby branch for support. “Come out a little way,” he said, “and then we’ll jump side by side.” The countryside was striking from here, a deep green sweep of playing fields and bordering shrubbery, with the school stadium white and miniature-looking across the river. From behind us the last long rays of light played across the campus, accenting every slight undulation of the land, emphasizing the separateness of each bush.

Holding firmly to the trunk, I took a step toward him, and then my knees bent and I jounced the limb. Finny, his balance gone, swung his head around to look at me for an instant with extreme interest, and then he tumbled sideways, broke through the little branches below and hit the bank with a sickening, unnatural thud. It was the first clumsy physical action I had ever seen him make. With unthinking sureness I moved out on the limb and jumped into the river, every trace of my fear of this forgotten.