

THE DRAWINGS

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I sat back in my chair, and sipped at the Chablis. I watched people eat and talk. I played games in my mind with conversations I couldn't hear. I read faces. Then she came in. Without waiting for the hostess, Ingrid bustled back into the darkened room, her head turning from side to side knowing I was there.

"Lee," she called across the room. This was my friend, hurried and intense at all times. Now her dark brown eyes settled on me and I lost sight of her fuzzy hair, the silk blouse loose at the waist. I listened, she spoke.

It was evident from the lines around her eyes, that she was working too hard. Her hands worked like radar screens that turn and follow the energy bounding between them.

For a moment, I flipped back to one of the many art sessions I had attended on the courthouse lawn. Ingrid brought a band of beginners there each summer under the sugar maples. She called it her "universal room" because it sat right in the center of town and was walled by shoe shops and banks, bakeries, and department stores.

I wasn't an artist, but I wanted to know what it felt like to be someone who creates with a brush instead of a pen. The sessions took me into the realm of the driven. While the others captured real images on paper, I played with colors on a pad, and sketched out notations in my mind of the characters around me. Instead of telling me that I didn't belong, Ingrid played along with my game. It was fun and it brought us close.

Ingrid was folding pleats in her cocktail napkin as she confided details of a shoebox marriage. She and Jim were seeing a counselor. For the time being, the three of them had decided that Ingrid and Jim could live in the same house and be separate. No reports, no permissions, no restricted time schedules. Jim questioned the value of the arrangement, but after years of child raising, she said, she wanted to open the door to her little house and let her creative energies run, not walk. As her children grew away from her, the forces had leaked out without Jim's permission anyway.

"I rented an apartment downtown." I peeled the cellophane off a cracker carefully.
"You did."

"It's a space," she said. An old house with long windows and water-stained wallpaper. But once behind those doors, it was as though in the emptiness her free spirit bounced from the canvas to the long yellowed walls and back again.

A studio of my own, I mused, picturing my own desk, tucked in one corner of my kitchen. I had a corner to write in, a cramped space, yes. But what did one forego in order to have a room of one's own?

Our shrimp, boiled in beer, arrived; large pink tails, rice pilaf, a sprig of parsley. The waitress, smiling and silent, placed it in front of us and disappeared.

Ingrid picked up a shrimp and said, "There is someone else." Her black eyes watched me. I wedged rice onto my fork and held it a moment. After a while, she said, "I'm not sure, Lee, because of the kids."

I swirled the white wine around the thin edge of the glass, trying to picture Ingrid with another man. It didn't fit into what I knew of Ingrid.

Several weeks had passed before I called Ingrid to say I was coming to see the studio. It was raining and she was wallpapering with Jesse. If I could stand the dark smell of sweat and wallpaper paste, come on by.

I found the house. It was close to town, a dowdy orange shingled one on the corner. As I climbed the varnished staircase to her upper flat, I had to admit that the place had character, if it lacked image. Image was something that existed for Ingrid on canvases.

The door was open. There was Ingrid straddling the ladder sideways and sticking an oozing nine-foot strip to the top. Then she shifted and slid the rose colored paper in place. I heard

Jesse rumbling in the back of the apartment. When Ingrid saw me she came down off the ladder.

"Let me hang one more strip and I'll stop."

I poked around looking for woodgrain lines under the syrup colored varnish of the window sills.

Jesse came in with a cut and pasted strip. Her straight hair was slicked back under a red bandana. Her plain face acknowledged me with a look. Jesse's presence was something I had accepted in my friendship with Ingrid, but never given much thought to. Ingrid had all sorts of followers, and I regarded Jesse as just one of them.

They hung the strip together. I marveled at the luxury of having someone to guide the end of the long strips into place.

That done, we moved into the dining room. It was practically bare. Ingrid had set up her easel, and tubes of paint were strewn out on a bulky old work table.

Ingrid went to get her drawings. I saw a straight kitchen chair, and near it the largest round rattan chair I had ever seen. It could have held two people, but empty, looked overwhelming. Ingrid folded herself into this chair and opened the portfolio.

I was prepared for the unusual, for bright but obnoxious colors, and conflicting movements. Men's faces, ugly and angry, were gargoyles in three-piece suits. I drew back on the chair without knowing what I could say.

Then Jesse, like an apostle at Ingrid's feet, pointed out a favorite drawing. It was the head of a man with bulging eyes, as though strangled. It grew on the top of a grey corinthian pillar. I looked at Jesse. She seemed genuinely pleased with the picture. Ingrid on the other hand seemed removed from the drawings, as though the message they conveyed was no longer a part of her. Something was going on here that I didn't want to be a part of. I left immediately.

Out on the pavement, the heavy vapor that follows summer rains closed in on me. Nausea edged up my throat. I drew the close moist air in slowly and followed the lines in the sidewalk as I went along. Two bright yellow dandelions squeezed out of a crack. I locked this picture into my mind and let it lead me home.

That night I lay in bed letting the day slip through my mind. Over and over I saw myself look from Jesse to Ingrid, reading their faces. Neal lay behind me, spoon fashion, his arm across my side, caressing. But I was wrapped in the memory of my own illusions. The day's experience was like walking into a cobweb. I still felt like I was pulling little pieces of it off my face.

Neal rolled me over toward him. Face to face in the semi-dark.

"Look," I bargained, "let me tell you what's on my mind then I'll make love."

He rolled over and put his hands under his head and stared at the ceiling. "Tell me."

So I told him what I saw, what I thought I saw. He wondered what difference it could make to me. So did I. I would have to sort that out, and I hoped that time would help me. I let my hand follow the hard muscles of his thigh.

For weeks I had nursed my naivete. I sat safe at the desk in my own kitchen. I drummed pencils on paper and made designs of millions of questioning dots.

Before me was a small white envelope. It was an invitation. Ingrid had an agent now and this was her first formal showing and sale. I wanted to go. What held me back? Weary, I put my head down on both arms crossed on the desk. The sounds of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" came tumbling into the room. I sat with my head down, listening to the music, humming and keeping time with my tongue.

The dream was so real. I remember parking on the highway and locking the car. Signs all around said "No Trespassing" and "Private Property". Still we walked across the grass as though we belonged there. Hand in hand, Ingrid and I strolled out across the field toward the lake. The old road spread hard and smooth with use, lead us quickly away from the dull green truck that crossed the road behind us.

The cool October morning came up around us like a kind of pass to freedom. I felt milk-

weed pods brush open against my jeans, leaving little clinging silks behind. The cloudy vapor protected our visions. The touching of spirits was as real as the yellowing willow branches that slid across my shoulders as we walked and talked.

When we reached the lake, the quiet water silenced us. For a long time we stood there, looking into the green water that still wriggled with egg laden crayfish and algae colonies. To my left, along the shoreline, an old boat had sunk by its own weight into the sand. Ingrid kept looking at it and finally going over, rocked it back and forth shaking the wedge of sand away from the hull. I stood watching her pull off her Nike's and roll up her pant legs. "Coming along?" I only shook my head, uncovering some stones with my shoes. I picked them up and turned their smooth sides over in my hand.

Ingrid pushed the boat out into the water and stepped in. I shivered and rubbed my shirt sleeves. The flannel was soft and warm under my hands. As I held myself, the figure of a woman in a boat became smaller and smaller. I felt large against the shoreline. I looked around for some evidence of change. The willow trees still waiting by the road we had come down were the same. I pulled loose a bunch of dried grass. As I pulled them through my hands I watched tiny seeds feather to the ground. I was the same, wasn't I?

When I awoke, the house was quiet. No sounds of an autumn allegro penetrated the room. The typewriter sat untouched beside me. My shoulders were stiff, and I raised up and pushed back against the chair. The invitation lay waiting for my attention. I took hold of my coffee mug instead. I got up and filled it. I sipped at the steaming black liquid and stood looking over my desk. Now I picked up the invitation and looked at it squarely.

I found the country arts commission building across from the theatre. Its entrance was merely a door wedged tightly between storefronts with a small painted sign overhanging it. The door opened into a dim staircase. I went up and heard the soft caucus of guests gathered in the open room at the landing.

Along both sides and at one end of the white walls were hung Ingrid's paintings. At the other end, clustered behind a table of wine and hor d'oeuvres, violinists were picking up their bows.

Ingrid was there among the guests, but not Jim. Beside her was someone in a black suit, whom I imagined to be her agent. This person took Ingrid by the arm and ushered her smilingly to another set of guests.

A waiter in a short red waistcoat carried a tray of wine glasses toward me. I took mine and went to look at the display of Ingrid's oils, watercolors and pastels. I walked slowly from picture to picture.

I found a pastel and studied the lavender lines that shaped into a soft feminine pose. There was another beside it in green tones.

Ingrid was working her way through the guests toward me. This drawing, this new drawing of women, what was it saying to me? Tension strung between my shoulders.

I looked at the drawings and I looked at Ingrid. I thought of myself. Two women very much alike, but different. That was it, wasn't it? Then she was there, smiling that half-cocked smile.

I needed no magic words. I was here and that counted more than what could be said.