

Ingrid Bergman Answers the Call

by Sean Lovelace

Day after day, she expects *something* to happen. But what are expectations? Ingrid sits on the floor of a large rented house, against an oversized couch, her legs beneath a coffee table. She flattens the creamy center of a ruptured éclair with a spoon. She spreads the cream, rubs the spoon along her gums. Her stomach gurgles, swollen; beads of sweat trace a tight curve along her forehead as she scans the table: a bowl of strawberry ice cream, a plate of lemon squares. A plate of cinnamon buns and scones. A hazelnut cheesecake glistens with raspberry icing. A vanilla tart quivers on layers of applesauce. She studies all of this—her mind takes it in, and she isn't hungry, isn't, as she lifts a peppermint tart into her mouth.

Her daughter, Pia, rolls along the floor, attempting her first somersault, flailing along.

“Did I do it?” her daughter asks.

“I don't know,” Ingrid answers.

“Where's daddy?”

“At the hospital, working. I've told you three times.”

“Why are you wearing pajamas?”

“Because I have nothing to dress for.”

But what does she want to dress for?

For *Strange Woman*. Bette Davis gets the role.

For *The Keys of the Kingdom*. Rosalind Russell gets the role.

For *Keeper of the Flame*. Katherine Hepburn gets the role.

Pia runs to her room and returns with a toy ambulance. She makes wide loops around the carpet edges, a deep thrum from her throat.

“Is this a movie truck?” she asks her mother.

Ingrid doesn't understand, and so says, "I don't think so."

"Yes. It's a movie truck," Pia says.

Ingrid sips from a cold cup of coffee. Contemplates a splash of gin, or is it too early? She yawns, though she isn't sleepy. Out the window is an empty birdbath, dry flaky concrete ring, no birds.

"You're going to stay with me," Pia announces.

"Of course, dear," Ingrid answers.

Pia smiles, hovering near the couch, pushing her ambulance up and down the curves of its pillows. Ingrid thinks how it is to watch a child play, interesting, sometimes humorous, but soon absolutely tiring. Her mind is sludgy, congealed, but then her fingers fidget, and her left foot taps the floor. Somewhere a woman is staring into a backlit mirror. She is reciting her lines and watching her lips move. She is having her hair done, her makeup, surrounded by lights and cameras and professionals—wardrobe, continuity girls, stylists—scurrying to and fro, all of them together, in that room, all their skills and experiences and talents gathered, for her, and a nervous kind of stomach-tingling, up through the arms, hands, fingers, observing herself, meeting her own eyes, smiling, thinking: How did I do it? How did I get here, from there? Why I am one of the lucky ones?

But this woman isn't Ingrid.

Ingrid thinks: This is the bathtub, this is the water, this is a yellow rubber duck. This is giving your daughter a bath, one per day. Pia yells, giggles, grabs the duck—a gift from Selznick; the duck wears sunglasses—leaps into the air, crashes into the tub, water gushing, spraying Ingrid. Then a clattering ring. Ingrid rises to her knees; quick steps, yanks the phone from its receiver.

"Holy thank you Jesus fucking god."

"Nice language," Selznick says. "Glad to see you're settling in here."

"They want me!"

"Sure, once Ann Sheridan turned it down. Oh, and MGM wouldn't loan out Hedy Lamaar. And there was some other girl; she's in rehab, so..."

"It's a good script, though?"

"Nobody knows. It isn't written yet."

"But it's a romance?"

"Absolutely. With Nazis."

"Who gets the girl? My leading man?"

"Men. Yeh, there's two. One you've never heard of. The other you've heard of, but he has a face like a very old potato. Also his wife will be on the set, most likely drunk and with a gun. It was me, I'd make your love scenes very professional."

"But it's a hit, right? I mean you brought me here. I've been waiting."

"Who knows a hit? The public is insane. Hell, Van Gogh sold one painting his whole life, and that was to his brother. You been begging for a movie; now you got a movie. You and your hubby can quit calling me all day and night. How's Pia?"

"Who?"

"Your daughter."

Ingrid drops the phone and skips—actually skips—her way to the bathroom. The tub is vacant. Ingrid listens: the buzz of silence, then a murmured whispering. Pia huddles naked behind the door, against the wall.

"I'm making a movie!" Ingrid says. She clutches her daughter tight. Then she releases, runs down the hallway, throws her body at the phone.

Pia leans into the tub and pulls the plug. She watches the water spiral away into the dark drain, shivers; hugs herself for warmth. Once the tub empties, she grabs the duck, and tosses it into the open toilet. She hears her mother, shouting, laughing.

Casablanca, Pia thinks. *Where is Casablanca?* She sits on the toilet, above the duck. She thinks for a while. And then she flushes.

