

Understudy

by Sean Lovelace

Birgit Tengroth, a performer for the Royal Dramatic Theater, *the* theater, Sweden's national stage, sits fidgety sipping tea and chattering in a quick, high voice, "I am talented and beautiful and want to make a great success! Look at my hands—how they tremble. Look at how unlucky! But why? Last week I meet my understudy. Comes clomping in here like a milkmaid. This big horse, this colt. All young and loud and big and I swear her face like a lighthouse lamp, glowing—I remember thinking, 'She's drunk at nine in the morning.' She had three big sandwiches in brown paper, this crumbly bread: two smelly liver pâtés and one of them stuffed with butter and pickles and eggs. Crazy. And this great thermos of cream. She takes a big chug from this thermos and lets out a belch—I swear to you!—and drops the thermos on the table with a *clunk* and says, 'Hello, I'm Ingrid! Ingrid Bergman! I hope you don't mind me eating. I simply love to eat, don't you?' I said something like, Oh-my-God, and ran out to tell Olof about this crazy teenager peasant woman who had stumbled into my dressing room.

Only Olof had already seen her.

He said, 'She does have a certain naturalness about her, doesn't she?' I could already see it, his eyes; they danced over top my head...He wouldn't look at me.

Naturalness? What are you saying? But I knew exactly what he was saying.

Last night Olof has her as the angel in *Dream Play*. 'Just to try, this one time,' he says and squeezes my shoulder. She comes on stage and suddenly all of us frozen, frozen and fading, like cutouts, some kind of pasteboard. Eyes just seem to fly to her, all the eyes, everyone. And then the people rush up after with flowers and smiles and just laughing and gushing and this one man from the papers has a camera and a notebook and says how clever the way we followed her the whole time with a spotlight. Whose idea was this spotlight?

And now I wish this cup were hemlock, I do. My hands, see this
trembling? At my age! And I can only wish her success. The movies.
If not, I know it's over; I'm already dead here.

You see what I'm saying, right? Can you see it?

We never had any spotlight.”

