

Nightblindness · *Thomas Friedmann*

INGRID WOULDN'T LISTEN to reason and divorce was out of the question. "I guess it's back to Joanie's lousy coffee," I told her unhappily. Displaying unusual persistence, Ingrid tried to convince me that things need not change. "My coffee would stay perfect, even if you married me." I tried to explain to her that things always balance. Skill in one area hints at clumsiness in another. Ingrid was too good at not being married to be a success at playing wife. Just as Joanie, if she left, would leave her talents in the marriage bed behind.

Ingrid didn't understand. I had no choice. I told her it was all over and left. When I didn't hear from her for two weeks, I was sure the matter was settled. Accounts balanced, books closed.

Then I woke up one morning to find her calmly eating toast in the kitchen.

"Have you lost your mind?" I whispered. "My wife will be up any minute."

"Don't whisper," Ingrid whispered back. "I've always hated myself for putting up with your wishy-washiness. Speak up, for God's sake." She bit her toast, crackling it. "I've made us coffee."

She had also made two eggs, soft scrambled the way she knows I like eggs. But I resisted. I've always been a cautious man.

"Forget it, Ingrid. I have to go to work." She sneered. "Afraid to try the eggs?"

"It won't work," I told her firmly. "Things like this never do. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life eating every meal twice. Joanie prides herself on her cooking, you know."

Ingrid shrugged, adjusted the green bandana around her head, fluffed the hair in the center. "So I'll take lessons from her. We can be adult about this, you know. I barely eat and take up little room. She won't even notice I'm around."

Her olive sleeping bag (Ingrid's primary color is green) lay neatly rolled in the corner, its pink, fleshy inside tucked out of sight. From the back of her chair hung her knapsack. She seemed to have brought everything she had. She noticed my careful inspection. "You know I travel light."

"You're crazy, Ingrid. You'd never get along with Joan." Ingrid was not disturbed, her confidence typical. She was not offended either. Perhaps my frontal attack surprised her. Usually I attack from the sides, subtly, invisibly. But I was worried. Domesticity doubled is deadly. "It can't work."

She punched my arm. "Relax. I'll be invisible."

I was late for work and hungry. Inside, Joanie was stirring. I didn't want to be there when they met. "All right, let's try the food," and ate quickly. The coffee was perfect, as usual, but the eggs had cooled, run in spots. I said

nothing. She never got it right. Let her play at domesticity. She wasn't the girl for it.

At the door she lifted her face. Feeling obligated after breakfast, I nuzzled her neck and stroked her back and stroked her back and nuzzled her neck but she would have none of that though those used to be our preliminaries. "You're late for work," she admonished and forced me to settle for a wifely peck that missed my lips. "See you later," she insisted but I doubted it. The house was Joanie's domain; Ingrid had made her arrangements with the wrong person. Joanie would handle her. I could count on Joanie.

I called twice from work. The first voice was soft and languorous, a voice wakened from irresponsible sleep. Ingrid. I hung up quickly. The second time it was Joanie's brisk, "Yes?"

"Hi, Joanie," then stopped, unprepared for speaking. She was not at loss. Never was. "Are you going to be late?"

Why not, I thought. Give her time. In her own sweet way, Ingrid was persistent. But given enough time, a thirty-laps-a-day girl like Joanie would be able to handle her easily. Though the same height as my wife, her new house guest was nearly without flesh, only her breasts flaring unexpectedly, flowering from bone with stems like the carved stand of a great cup. "Sure," I said. "That's why I called. I have to go downtown. But I won't eat out."

She was ready to hang up, so quickly but casually I asked, "Anything doing?"

Her voice was as open and trusting as her round face. She could have used lessons from Ingrid. "Nothing, Jerry, why?"

"Any special mail?"

Joanie laughed. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Sure," I said, "sure I'm all right. And listen, I love you." And with that bit of sand to blind her eyes to Ingrid's presence, I hung up.

I didn't leave for home till after eight, sitting alone in the office, reading the *Post*, and working on the five letter words available in PRESCRIPTION without the use of the "s" for plurals. Still six words short, I gave up and made for home.

Determined not to be the first one to say anything, I arrived quietly and ignored the sight of Ingrid's sleeping bag, neatly tucked behind the umbrella stand. Frankly, I was surprised. It was impossible that Ingrid and my wife could have come to an agreement. They had nothing in common and neither of them was hypocritical about friendship. And yet, there was the sleeping bag, and there, on the coat rack, her knapsack.

But I was not about to say anything. Why make unnecessary trouble? Perhaps Ingrid was claiming to be a long lost relative, perhaps Joanie was considering adoption. There was no point in rushing into things.

On the kitchen table, covered with a cloth napkin, was a basket of fried chicken, still warm. Out of habit, I wandered through the house, checking the bedroom first, then various closets, ending with a thorough examination of the shower stall, all the while rehearsing alibis. Why not be prepared? "At seven? In the office, reading the *Post*. A review of the new Redford film. The elevator operator saw me leaving at eight." I'm a careful man. Precise in my relationships.

Joanie was not in the house. I assumed she was visiting her sister. And Ingrid?

Ingrid, face scrubbed and wearing a freshly pressed white blouse (her knapsack, I know from experience, is bottomless), was waiting for me in the den, the one place I didn't check for Joanie.

She came right to the point. "How about the floor?" she wanted to know. "I know all you married men have scruples about the marriage bed."

This was typical Ingrid. The lack of ceremony was her ritual. She demanded we observe it faithfully.

"Isn't this Joanie's blouse?" I asked, touching the ruffles, shuffling my fingers in their warmth.

"I borrowed it for a very short while," she grinned, and began unbuttoning it. Joanie was nowhere, Ingrid's breath familiar. I couldn't understand but did.

Out of habit, we were done quickly. "Listen," I asked her, remembering not to turn my back though I yearned for bed, "all this is fine but what happens when Joanie comes home?"

But Ingrid, her breasts creased, was unconcerned. "We'll manage. Anyway, you're the accountant. Work it out with numbers."

Perhaps it would help if I explained that my integrity as an accountant has never been questioned. I am content to let numbers be. I do not assign places for them; I never ask them to pretend. I see my job as nothing more than bringing the right number together with its proper spot. I reconcile. I create order. I accept their immutability. I don't change. Can I do anything less in my personal life?

The answer is clearly no. I don't demand that Joanie be like Ingrid or vice versa. Instead, recognizing the special essence of each of them, I enjoy it for what it is. I don't interfere. I only help them discover what they do best. And there my responsibility ends. What do I do then if a number leaps of its own volition and heads for another page? Do I calm the leaper or do I protect the inviolability of the other's page? I don't know the answer to this but take comfort in knowing that my good intentions, as my integrity, have never been questioned.

Hopeless as the situation seemed, Ingrid managed. I was sure that she wouldn't notice but she soon discovered Joanie's methodical ways and en-

tered her rhythm. Joanie cleaned every day and thus gave Ingrid no day of rest, but she worked the rooms in sequence, according to a precise schedule. Ingrid, timing it to the fifth of a second (her knapsack a canyon), simply moved along Joanie's path, either a room ahead or a room behind her.

This patience was surprising. Who would have imagined her knapsack to contain a stopwatch? And when Ingrid's presence remained undetected for two weeks, I began to worry about Joanie's health, insisting on a check-up, testing her hearing and eyesight with sudden whispers and movements. But Joanie was in the pink, her faculties unimpaired. It was Ingrid displaying unheard of qualities.

She was surviving by sacrificing her pride. It really showed me something, humility not being a trait she valued. She drank from our cups, ate off our plates, caught catnaps in still unmade beds. To insist on her own cup, plate, chair, bed, would have meant discovery. She was not discovered, though as far as I knew she might have made her deal with Joanie. How is a man to know what goes on at home in his absence?

"I know your wife to a T and it doesn't impress me one bit," she announced one evening.

We were in the attic. Another day had passed, her secret intact. I had told Joanie I needed cigarettes (a flimsy excuse, I have never smoked, but I couldn't think of anything else).

"I never recommended it," I shrugged.

"There's one hell of a loyal statement."

I got up to leave. "I never recommended it for you. Joanie carries it off rather well."

"All right, big shot, keep your pants on. Are you sure you don't bad-mouth me behind my back?"

"I don't even bring you up."

Ingrid began to smile a familiar smile. She looked like Joanie settling down for the evening. "Are you sure?"

I fought her off, carefully. Attic rooms resound and I was afraid she would crush the pack of cigarettes I had brought into the house when I came home. Anyway, tonight was Joanie's night.

"Look, I gotta go. Let me know when you've had enough."

She wouldn't let me go until we had wrestled a bit. She was very active yet somehow restrained, reminding me of Joanie. I tried not thinking about it, unwilling to betray her even in thought.

After we were done, I went downstairs by the back way, smoothing my hair, straightening my tie, putting a crease back into my trousers. Decorum pleases me. I have never been irritated by the attention to detail it demands. Neatness is essential in my line. The disheveled person finds it impossible to return to a former state and must go on in bashful and revealing sloppiness. Not I. I may be a pedant but I prefer safety to flamboyance.

Once downstairs I went to the front door and rang the bell. Joanie buzzed

back, recognizing my pattern. Upstairs, coffee was brewing, its flavor lately on the upgrade. Where was Joanie receiving her lessons? How was Ingrid developing her muscular restraint? I had never seen them together but I wasn't around to assure their separation during the day. The house was too peaceful. How long could it go on like this?

The tormenting of the heart begins often as its pleasuring does, by way of the stomach. I was particularly susceptible, a restlessness of the belly, a family failing. Even as I would be eating dinner with Joanie, I would hear the muted clang of pots in the kitchen. During brandy in the music room or coffee upstairs, I could hear Ingrid's stealthy manipulation of utensils. Joanie heard nothing; my insides moved with fear.

"I am so sorry, darling," Ingrid would cry, "but I just hate eating alone. You don't have to touch anything. Just sit there, if you like, and keep me company."

But could I just sit there when I knew how hard she worked to please, cooking on a tiny primus stove when the kitchen was occupied (her knapsack beginning to show a sag), tossing watercress salad on plastic treated paper platés, neatly sliding waste into an old hat box? There was no other way to show my love but by eating. And so I ate.

Restless with fullness, I stopped sleeping soundly and soon found a new source for worry. I would wake in the middle of the night to lips at my neck. Expecting always Ingrid's boldness, I would recognize Joanie as the thief in the night and wonder at her newfound stealth. And when I woke to find Joanie asleep, I would search in vain for Ingrid.

Stomach anxious, I would leap from bed, land softly, nightshirt flaring cold, and search the house for Ingrid's dark presence. I should explain that a search in the night is no easy task. The house is vast. It was a magnificent wedding gift from Joanie's parents but its generous size has become vengeful since we had not filled it with children. Perhaps this was what her parents had in mind. The house was meant to estrange us, with its many rooms, given to us so that I might be marooned one day in an unfamiliar room and not meet Joanie again for many years. By the time she found me, on one of her cleaning tours, I would be a stranger, my beard grown, my hair trimmed, my speech rustic. That would be the end of us, inhabitants of different rooms.

So I moved carefully through those rooms at night in search of Ingrid, regretting she didn't scatter colored pebbles that would sparkle her path. But clearly she did not want to be found. Where had she developed this uncanny sense of direction? Who taught her passages that remained secrets to me? Shaking with cold, feet icy, stomach churning, I returned to bed, tucking in next to Joanie who received me without questioning me about my travels.

“Some hell of a team player you’re turning out to be,” I muttered to her one night, speaking with bruised lips.

She kissed me on one cheek. “You haven’t told me that in years,” she whispered. “Why the sudden rush of affection?”

“There is nothing sudden about it,” I answered, wondering why we were both whispering. “Maybe it’s just the teams that seem unfamiliar to you.”

“Whatever you say,” she said, her voice already asleep.

Well, I thought, two can play that game. I began to call home at unexpected hours, determined to surprise Joanie into admitting Ingrid’s presence. Because clearly, mischief was afoot. Granting Ingrid’s skills at avoiding detection, how could she manage without Joanie’s collusion? I was not about to stand still for that. Doing things behind people’s backs was one thing. Having my own back prickling was another thing altogether. Anyway, I was forgetting my profession. Even while I reconcile figures I insist on their integrity. If wives and girl friends, on the other hand, went around making accommodations with each other, what would happen to their individuality? The existence of one guaranteed the need for the other. There were Ingrids because there were Joanies and there were Joanies because Ingrids could be nothing but Ingrids. Only if they remained separate was it possible to have them together. I should have put my foot down that first morning, right at breakfast, but the lure of good coffee from an unexpected source had seduced me from my obligations.

But the phone calls at odd hours solved nothing. Sometimes Ingrid answered, at other times Joanie, never the two together. And this with countless extensions in the house! So I began to scatter clues. Hung Ingrid’s knapsack on the prominent hook, smoked extra long, extra thin cigarettes and tipped them with lipstick, ate pointedly less and announced I was “saving room for later.”

There was no reaction. “What are you trying to do,” I demanded from Joanie. “You think that just because we’re married I have no feelings?”

She seemed to have no idea what I was talking about. “I think you have a great deal of feeling, Jerry.” Uncharacteristically, she poked at me. “More lately than ever.”

Clearly, she was beyond retrieving. Perhaps I could reason with the other, I thought.

“How much longer?” I asked Ingrid, finding her knitting baby booties in the den.

“As long as it takes to prove it,” she answered me calmly, giving me Joanie’s open-faced look.

“Prove what?” I regretted everything, denying in my bowels the deepest pleasure I have had of her.

“Haven’t you been paying attention?”

I could not understand a word she was saying. Her cooking was improving and my wife seemed to have borrowed her smells. Even if I threw her out, she would stay in the house. And letting her stay meant my marriage was over. If Joanie was this blind to my infidelities how could I expect her to appreciate my faithfulness? The two of them were too calm, too contained, too content. There was nothing to choose between them. Improve Ingrid's cooking one touch more, give Joanie another midnight prowling and the company's books can be closed. Red and black balanced, the accountant's job is at end.

I stayed home the next day, a Wednesday, a glutton for unmistakable proof. Everything was going to hell. Having Ingrid on the side, while complicated, was manageable. Having her in the house was unbearable. I used to be able to manage everything, paying for the excitement of seeing her with ingenuity I should have often saved for work. I would invent weekend trips for the firm Joanie never questioned. If it was a matter of a single night, I would mask the smells from early evening easily, with a change of clothing kept in the trunk of the car. Hotel bills I paid with money orders; explained gifts of flowers as favors to clients. But having Ingrid right here in the house made no sense at all. Why risk everything to sleep with a member of the household?

And another thought. Risk what? Ingrid had her own room, she seemed to have established her own rhythms. Even her midnight coquettishness was familiar now. Where was the delight of her unexpected greenness? Why could she no longer surprise me with flourishes from her knapsack? Why was she willing to borrow Joanie's clothes?

So I stayed home one morning to be eyewitness to the end. At first it seemed I was to be denied. Joanie, waking, seemed her old, efficient self. None of her recent indolence was apparent. Shaking me away from herself, she moved determinedly out of bed and bounced into her predictable morning routine. Pleasantly surprised, I kept my eyes closed and followed those sounds that used to be so familiar before Ingrid's coming. I heard the creak of her scale, the thump of her exercising heels, the brisk rustle of clothes and thunk of hangers.

"I don't understand this business of your staying home. You didn't say anything last night. Have you called the office? You've seemed a bit muddled lately."

The edges of her disdain sharpened the familiarity. This was the Joanie I recognized. Nothing is more pleasing to a man in my profession than to discover items that have been presumed lost back in their proper places.

"In any case," she continued, "I don't know where you'll spend the day. I was going to clean the den today."

One more test, I thought, and then I would have to warn Ingrid. "Why don't you just forget about the cleaning and stay here? I was going to stay in bed all day."

“Don’t be absurd, Jerry,” she said good-naturedly, “I’ve got work to do. Go chase a bookkeeper or something.”

I watched her from bed for one minute longer. She seemed untouched by the last few weeks. Maybe all I had needed was this waking up from some self-concocted nightmare. She was a good sport, Joanie, and not unhappy with her share. I watched her check her watch impatiently. The mannish width of the watchband was outside the sleeves of her white blouse, but I think I had noticed that already once before. I dressed quickly. If I could find Ingrid, an easier task during daylight, perhaps everything could be saved.

“There is coffee in the kitchen,” Joanie said as I left the room.

In the kitchen I found Ingrid, swathed in green. I sat down to coffee and soggy eggs, not willing to ask if breakfast had been a collaborative venture. I chewed methodically, refusing to ask her about the packed knapsack.

“I can meet you after work,” I told her, “in the usual place, if you like.”

She shook her head, smiled, the bandana holding her hair tight.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

I pointed at her knapsack, her green traveling costume, her sense of impermanence. She was unconcerned. “I’m just getting out of the attic.”

“Have you lost your mind?” I demanded.

“Not so loud,” Ingrid laughed. “Your wife will hear.”

Involuntarily, my voice dropped. “She won’t believe a word you’ll say and I’ll deny everything.”

“I won’t breathe a word,” she waved. “You’ve got nothing to worry about as far as I’m concerned.”

Somewhere in the house I could hear water running. “You promise?”

“I promise, silly.” Beneath that green sheet she was wrapped in I could discern no figure. The memory of her breasts I had long cast from me. The smell of coffee lingered in the kitchen but I recovered my natural caution. I would not be tempted again. The house was big enough; none of us had ever to meet.

“Thanks Ingrid. I really appreciate it, you know. I’ve always told you, if it hadn’t been for Joanie. . . .”

“Sure, Jerry, sure.” She hoisted her knapsack, held her hatbox. “Now close your eyes and make a wish.”

When I opened my eyes, she was gone. Reassured somewhat, I was still not ready to go to work. Things seem clearer during daylight hours but nights don’t just disappear. I moved stealthily through the house, listening for noises. Outside the upstairs bedroom I saw the bathroom door ajar and paused to consider. Ingrid or Joanie? No, I thought, she promised and she wouldn’t dare. Watching, I saw Ingrid coming down the hall, toward the open door, then enter. It was all right, I thought, remembering the sound of water, knowing Joanie’s regular habits, it was all right, I was safe.

When the door closed and the lock didn’t turn, I was ready to go to work.

Ingrid had clearly not forgotten my lessons. Joanie had already gone, I was sure of it, wiping the sink clear of loose hairs, and would not return but one never knew. I hoped that inside Ingrid disturbed nothing. Not everyone can avoid peeking into private lives by checking the contents of cabinets but I hoped Ingrid would. She would gain nothing. I told her repeatedly. Move nothing, add nothing, take nothing. Flush. My instructions, though terse, were kindly and to the point. Ingrid's charm did not lie in her neatness. Loose buttons on her blouse were rarely preludes to seductions. At least not intentionally so.

In any case, just to be sure, I determined to enter the bathroom as soon as Ingrid left and straighten up after her. It is here that my talent lies, in smoothing other peoples' tracks rather than in blazing new ones.

As the door opened, I listened carefully but there was no one else around. As the door opened, I made ready to slip inside the moment she left. When the door opened and Joanie calmly walked out, I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes. Perhaps it didn't mean anything, I told myself. In a house as large as ours, with passages I know nothing about, anything is possible.