

Ida Løkås

*The Beauty Drifting By*

Novel, 2012

Translated from the Norwegian by Rosie Hedger

© Ida Løkås

Translation © Rosie Hedger

Nothing's happening. And when I say nothing, I mean nothing. The days drag by as if they're pulling heavy weights. Long and drawn out, they leave a slimy snail's trail in their wake. The hands on the clock move more slowly than usual, and I wait. Wait to be able to move towards something new. But no matter how hard I try, I find myself standing still. It's as if the soles of my shoes are stuck in tacky, freshly-laid tar. Clinging to the ground. I imagine the burning smell rising from my shoes. The stench of inactivity, the smell that tells you nothing's happening.

I used to hang out at the youth club down the road, but it was closed down a few months ago, and a couple of weeks later there was yet another new coffee shop in town. Coffee for people on the go. Coffee in paper cups. Nobody wants the customers to take a seat. Not even the customers want that.

It's the second week of the summer holiday, and Charlie and I are sitting on the steps outside the block, him with his legs outstretched, me with my knees pulled up beneath my chin. The cold from the concrete step creeps up the small of my back and spreads throughout my body. I wrap my arms around my legs. The hairs stand on end, forming tiny, white bumps all over my skin. It's just warm enough not to need a jacket, and the smell of barbecue charcoal mingles with the scent of lighter fuel in the sticky afternoon breeze. Charlie gives a little grunt as if about to say something. I look up, but he closes his mouth again and continues gazing around indecisively, the same vacant expression on his face.

Even though we've lived in the same block for as long as I can remember, it's been years since we last hung out together. But now it seems like everyone we know has gone away and we've been left all alone. The summer holidays do that to people. The ones without any money to go anywhere are left sitting at home and have to create their own little clique. Charlie's alright, but I know that when school starts again, everything'll go back to how it was before. He'll be surrounded by boys trying to talk as loudly as he does, while I'll hang out with the ones who talk as quietly as I do.

'Check out the paedo specs on that guy,' Charlie says, nodding at a short, stocky man locking his bicycle to a lamppost a few feet away. It's Mr Allen from our block. He's a middle-aged man who nobody knows but everyone talks about. The sunlight glistens on his bald patch, and as he bends over to pull the key from the lock, his glasses slowly slide down his nose. He lifts one hand, places a finger on the metal bridge and pushes them back up the way. His eyes are enormous through the thick frames, they make him look like a startled cartoon character. As if he's walking around permanently amazed by something or other.

'I didn't know there was such a thing as paedo specs,' I say quietly.

'Oh yeah, those are classic paedo specs. They're always wearing them in films, the sick bastards who play with themselves in parks when they think no one's looking,' Charlie whispers as Mr Allen walks past us and makes his way in through the front door.

'I've seen lots of people wearing specs like that,' I tell him as I hear the door behind us slam shut.

'Where the hell have you been hanging out?' he asks, laughing before adding: 'Anyone would have to be retarded to buy specs like that.'

He looks at me as if waiting for an answer. Something in his eyes tells me I should agree with him, so I nod. My legs start to tingle so I stretch them out in front of me, feeling the way the sharp edges of the concrete steps dig into the backs of my legs. 'But maybe Mr Allen doesn't know they're paedo specs. It's not like anyone advertises the fact,' I say.

'What are you, the paedo support society?' He peers at me, shaking his head. We don't talk about Mr Allen anymore after that.

Mum calls out to me as I enter the hallway. 'Come here, I've got something for you.'

I step out of my holey trainers and make my way into the kitchen. My jeans sweep the floor, sighing with every step I take. She's sitting at the kitchen table in a baggy pink hoodie. Her blonde hair is pulled back tightly in such a way that her dark roots form a halo around her forehead.

'What is it?' I ask, slumping down across from her at the table. The plastic chair emits several creaks as I lean back.

'Here,' she says, taking a small, brown book from her lap and nudging it in my direction. It's a little smaller than a sketchpad. As long as it is wide. I pull it towards me slowly. The uneven surface reminds me of the skin of a flayed animal, and the various nuances in the hide merge together, as if they were once liquid. Dangling from a hole in the back is a cord, which has been wrapped around the pad three times and tied in a knot.

'No need to scatter your drawings around you anymore,' she says, pushing her sleeves up to her elbows.

'I don't scatter them around me.'

She raises a pencilled eyebrow and smiles. I untie the knot, unwrap the cord and pry open the brown, leathery covers enclosing the pages of the sketchpad. The white sheets are thicker than the copier paper Mum brings home from work. I lift the first page and rub my fingertips against the paper, feeling the way they meet through the two sides of the stiff sheet. The sound reminds me of popping corn. It's nice. It's good-quality paper.

'Thank you,' I say, standing up.

'You're welcome,' she replies, reaching for the pack of cigarettes in the middle of the table. Her arm is milky white and freckled. As she closes her fingers around the packet, the tendons in her hand move in such a way that they look like small worms writhing around beneath her delicate skin. She opens the packet, pulls out a cigarette and lights it with her purple lighter.

I go to my bedroom and pull the chair out from where it's been tucked under the desk, one arm resting on the back. There are sketches all over the surface. Illustrations of lanky boys in washed-out hoodies sharing a cigarette, rubbish bins overflowing with dirty nappies, half-eaten hamburgers and rotten fruit. There are threadbare flags hanging out of open windows, and pregnant girls wearing too much make-up. I pull out the top drawer of the desk, sweep all of the sketches together into a bundle and shove them inside.

Most people are skint. The same goes for us. But paper and pencils are cheap, so I draw. When I was younger, I didn't have the money to buy comic books, so I drew my own. They weren't as good as the ones in the shop, but they were better than nothing. From time to time I would draw naked men with willies dangling down to their knees and women with boobs bigger than their own heads. That was before we got the internet.

I lie in bed and stare up at the ceiling. Something about summer makes my head feel lighter than usual. At school, you become an involuntary magnet for useless information. When exactly is knowing the square root of pi going to come in useful? I picture all of the unnecessary pieces of information clinging on inside my body, as if they were attached with those little see-through plastic suction cups. Dates get trapped between my teeth while the names of capital cities and famous people

become stuck to my earwax. But on the last day of school, everything I've learned starts to seep out of me, and I'm willing to bet that when it's all gone, I weigh less than I did before.

School leaves you with a guilty conscience and makes your thoughts clatter around inside your head like scrap metal whenever you do something you shouldn't, or don't do something you should. Every single hour, from your first day to your last, is filled with constant nagging. When I was in primary school, I was sure that things would change when I started secondary. I was wrong. Things only got worse. Every week I was given letters to take home. It wasn't that I was doing anything wrong. I was just doing nothing. I tore the letters up into small pieces. The torn scraps of paper fluttered through the underground tunnel like snowflakes. One piece with the word 'unacceptable' on it got caught in someone's hair. Another with the words 'last chance' blew onto the underground track down below only to be trundled over by a train, and one small, white fragment with the words 'will soon be expelled' printed in red capital letters was trampled to pieces beneath stiletto heels and Italian designer shoes.

It's not that I'm stupid. I could get good marks if I wanted to, but what's the point? I'll probably end up working in a pub when I'm old enough, anyway, and you don't need to go to school to work in a pub. My Mum's proof enough of that fact.

4

I wake up the following morning to loud voices in the flat above ours. Always the same expressions, the same abrasive tone. 'You stupid bitch, you whore, I'll fucking kill you!' I pull the duvet up over my head and wait for them to stop. Don't know why she doesn't just sort herself out. Judging by what I've heard, it's her fault they fight anyway, because she's never got anything to say for herself. It's obvious that she spends just as little time talking as she does taking care of herself. She's always wearing the same grey jogging bottoms and a baggy purple t-shirt with flowers on it. Her greasy hair clings to her scalp, and there is always as much eyeshadow underneath her eyes as there is on her eyelids. I can understand that it must be frustrating to wake up every morning to find her lying next to you.

The clock on the bedside table tells me it's quarter past ten. I pull on the same clothes I wore yesterday and slip my new sketchpad, a pencil and a chocolate bar into the pocket of my jumper before heading down to the canal. The only bench that's free looks like a dying golden retriever. The two outer planks of wood have been ripped off, and the legs on one side have sunk into the earth. I take a seat and run a hand slowly over the wood, feeling the way the rotten planks pull at my fingertips. Once, when I was little, I fell over in the park and ended up with a splinter in my finger. Mum wanted to pull it out with tweezers but I wouldn't let her, and so she left it where it was. It'll come out of its own accord, she said. But it didn't. Instead my finger swelled up, and when yellow pus started oozing from the wound, she took me to see the doctor. I don't remember much of what happened, only that it hurt, and that when I got home she made me hot chocolate with marshmallows. That's what I got whenever I was upset and cried for ages. It worked every time.

I pull the sketchpad from my pocket and open it up. Draw the outlines of the woodwork, adding eyes in the growth rings and fingers and toes wherever they fit. The page becomes filled with squiggles, circles, patterns. I see something moving out of the corner of my eye and look up. Charlie is heading in my direction. Every time he takes a step with his left foot, his left shoulder follows, as if that side of his body weighs more than the other. It looks as if he's walking in step with a melody only he can hear. Charlie looks up, nods and stops in front of me.

'What are you doing?'

‘Drawing.’

‘You can’t just sit here *drawing*. Are you retarded or something?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s well gay!’

I don’t know what he’s getting at, so I just shrug and carry on. I’m not in the mood for talking. Charlie comes closer. You can always hear when he’s nearby because he breathes as if he’s got asthma. He tears the sketchpad out of my hands without warning and the pencil is dragged across the page, creating a long, thick stroke.

‘What the fuck!’ I exclaim.

‘Didn’t you hear what I said? People can see you!’

I can’t be bothered arguing with him, and instead I simply take back my sketchpad and sit on it. I fish the chocolate bar out of my pocket and open it. It’s started to melt and some of the brown pulp clings to the wrapper. My fingertips sink slowly into the warm chocolate as I take a bite. Charlie hikes up his baggy trousers and sits down beside me. He’s almost always wearing clothes that are too big for him. The same goes for most of my friends. I’m an only child, so my clothes fit me. He sits upright and glances all around him.

‘Don’t think anyone saw that.’

‘I don’t think anyone cares,’ I reply, my mouth full of chocolate. I lick my sticky fingers until the brown colour disappears.

‘People care more than you think,’ he says.

Charlie is obsessed with what other people think. Especially about him. I couldn’t give a shit what people think about me. Most people are idiots, they can think whatever they like.