

ERIC SPENDALL

By

Diana F. Johnson

Mother and I take the train to Chicago. She wears the ivory raw silk suit I made for her. A cab drives us to an Art School on Michigan Avenue. Inside the building, crowded with students, we sign with a security guard. Elevator doors close on hollow sounds of students laughing. On the sixth floor, we move down a long hall with open doors on either side. The smells of oil paint and turpentine make our eyes water. We glance into a life class filled with students painting at easels. Near a tall window, a male model shifts position and yawns in the afternoon sunlight.

Mother seems unusually silent, tense. Her head lowers. She studies her hands. We enter the last office on the right. Through an outer waiting room filled with young people, who are studying notebooks or sketching each other, we can see Professor Black talking on the phone at his desk. He's in his fifties, nice looking, with wild dark hair. We pause by an empty desk outside his open door. He motions to us to come in. "I'll be free in a minute. It's my assistant's day off and final conference week too," he says. This is my mother's conference time, her moment as a correspondence student in drawing.

I wheel her chair closer to his desk. With paint-stained fingers, he shoves his hair behind his ears. "Nice to see you, Barbara." He rises and takes her hand. She lifts her head slowly. She smiles. I step into shadow. He sits down. She leans in closer. I cannot hear what they say. He laughs suddenly. She nods and smiles, sharing the joke I can't make out. She leans back. Her face is beautiful, smiling like the face of a young girl.

Again, his phone rings. He looks at Mother. She gives him a reluctant nod. He answers the call. He slams down the receiver on a wrong number. Mother glances at her watch to confirm minutes left. A female student looks in. Mother gasps. She studies him. He waves the student off with a smile. I feel like dragging the girl away by her long straight hair. Mother smooths the silk sleeve of her suit.

“It means everything to her to see you in person,” I tell him. “Your comments on her sketches...she adores these visits.” Professor Black smiles in my direction. He reddens and nods quickly “You’ve come from so far away.” He kisses my mother’s hand. She realizes her time is up. He pushes her wheelchair to the door. “Barbara is my ‘A’ student.” She looks up at him. I take over the chair. He turns to shake my hand. Two young men hover in the space behind us.

In a loud voice, Mother says to everyone present, “We met at an opening once. I was much younger then.” “Yes, yes, I remember. Well, goodbye,” he says. “Watch your mail box for your next assignment.” “She will,” I say. We wheel down the hallway. “An ‘A’ is good,” Mother says to herself in a quiet voice.

A few days later, the phone rings in mother’s apartment. It’s Eric Spendall, Professor Black’s assistant. I take down the address of a prestigious gallery on Chicago’s near north side. Mother smiles up at me. “Yes,” I assure the assistant. “We will send over five of her paintings in care of ‘Eric Spendall’”. Mother grabs my hand, “There’s my ‘plus,’ Diana. I knew he wanted to give me an ‘A+.’ This is his way.”