Molly Fox's Birthday

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Extract

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In the dream I was walking through the streets of a strange city, in a foreign country I did not recognise. I was weary, and my feet were sore because I was wearing shoes that were too small for me. Then, as is the way in dreams, I was all at once in a shoe shop and my grandmother was there. She did not speak, neither in greeting nor to explain what she was doing there, but handed me a pair of shoes made of brown leather. I put them on and they fitted perfectly. Never in my whole life had I had such soft and comfortable shoes. 'How much do they cost, Granny?' I asked. She told me the price in a currency I had never heard of before, but of which I somehow knew the value: I knew that the price she named was derisory, that the shoes were in essence a gift. And then she gave me a thick green woollen blanket and I wrapped myself in it, and it was only now, when I was warm, that I realised how cold I had been, and it was only now that I remembered that my grandmother was dead, had been dead for over twenty years. Far from being afraid I was overjoyed to see her again. 'Oh Granny,' I said, 'I thought we had lost you for ever.' She smiled and shook her head. 'Here I am.'

I awoke and I couldn't remember the dream. I only knew that I had been dreaming and that it had left me full of joy. Then immediately I was disconcerted by not recognising the room in which I had awoken. Whose lamp was this, with its parchment shade? Whose low bed, whose

saffron-coloured quilt? The high windows were hung with muslin curtains, the room was flooded with morning light, and all at once it came to me: I was in Molly Fox's house.

Molly Fox is an actor, and is generally regarded as one of the finest of her generation. (She insists upon 'actor': *If I wrote poems would you call me a poetess?*) One of the finest but not, perhaps, one of the best known. She has done a certain amount of television work over the years and has made a number of films, a significant number given how much she dislikes that particular medium and that the camera, she says, does not love her. Certainly she does not have on screen the beauty and magnetism that marks out a true film star, and she hates, she has told me, the whole process of making a film. The tedium of hanging around waiting to act bores her, and the fact that you can repeat a scene time and time again until you get it right seems to her like cheating. She likes the fear, the danger even, of the stage, and it is for the theatre that she has done her best work. Although she often appears in contemporary drama her main interest is in the classical repertoire, and her greatest love is Shakespeare.

People seldom recognise her in the street. She is a woman of average height, 'quite nondescript' she herself claims, although I believe this fails to do her justice. Fine-boned, with brown eyes and dark brown hair, she has an olive complexion; she tans easily in the summer. She often wears black. Neutral tones suit her – oatmeal, stone – and natural materials; she wears a lot of linen and knitted cotton. On the dressing table of the room in which I was sleeping was a marquetry box full of silver and turquoise jewellery, silver and amber, together with glass beads and

wooden bracelets. For special occasions she wears silks and velvets in deep, rich colours, purple or burgundy, which I think suit her even better than more subtle tones, but which she thinks too showy for everyday wear. She dislikes the colour green and will have nothing to do with it, for like many theatre people, Molly is extremely superstitious, and if she speaks of 'the Scottish Play' it is not only out of respect for the feelings of others.

When the public fails to recognise her in her daily life it is not just because they see her face only infrequently on the cinema or television screen. It is because she has a knack of not allowing herself to be recognised when she doesn't want to be. I have no idea how she does this, I find it difficult even to describe. It is a kind of geisha containment, a shutteredness, a withdrawal and negation. It is as if she is capable of sensing when people are on the point of knowing who she is and she sends them a subliminal denial. *I know what you're thinking but you're wrong. It isn't me. I'm somebody else. Don't even bother to ask.* And they almost never do. What gives her away every time is her voice. So often have I seen her most banal utterances, requests for drinks or directions, have a remarkable effect on people.

'A woman with such a voice is born perhaps once in a hundred years,' one critic remarked. 'If heaven really exists,' wrote another 'as a place of sublime perfection, then surely everyone in it speaks like Molly Fox.'

Her voice is clear and sweet. At times it is infused with a slight ache, a breaking quality that makes it uniquely beautiful. It is capable of power and depth, it has a timbre that can express grief or desire like no other voice I have ever heard. It has, moreover, what I can only

describe as both a visual and a sensuous quality, an ability to summon up the image of the thing that the word stands for. When Molly says *snow* you feel a soft cold, you can see it freshly fallen over woods and fields, you can see the winter light. When she says *ice* you feel a different kind of cold, biting and sharp, and what you see is glassy, opaque. No other actor with whom I have ever worked has such a remarkable understanding of language.

Unsurprisingly, she is much in demand for this gift alone, for voice-overs, radio work and audio-books. Although constantly solicited for it, she always refuses to do advertising. People who have never entered a theatre in their lives recognise her distinctive speech from historical or wildlife documentaries on television or from the tapes of classic children's literature they play to their sons and daughters in the car.

Now she was in New York and from there she would go to London to make a recording of *Adam Bede*. I thought of her sitting alone in the studio with her headphones and a glass of water, the hair-trigger needles of the instruments making shivering arcs, as if they too thrilled to the sound of her voice. I thought of the bewitching way she would call up a whole imagined world so that the sound engineers behind the glass wall and anyone who would ever hear her recording would see Hetty in the creamery as though they were there with her. They might almost smell the cream and touch the earthenware, the wooden vessels, as though Molly were not an actor but a medium who could summon up not those who were dead, but those who had never been anything but imagined.

She lives in Dublin, in a redbrick Victorian house, the middle house in a terrace. The front path that leads from the heavy iron gate to the blue-painted front door is made of black and red tiles, and is original to the house, as are many other details inside. There is a pretty, if rather small, garden at the front that Molly keeps in a pleasing tangle of bright flowers all summer, like a cottage garden. She grows sprawling pink roses, and lupins; there are nasturtiums, loud in orange and red, there are spiky yellow dahlias and a honeysuckle trained up a trellis beside the front window. Bees bumble and drone, reeling from one blossom to another like small fat drunks. Inside, the house is surprisingly bright and airy. There is a fanlight above the front door, which is echoed in the semicircular top of the window, high above the return, which brightens the stairwell. On the ceiling in the hall there is a plasterwork frieze of acanthus leaves, and a central rose from which hangs an elegant glass lamp. Although it has immense charm it is a small house, more modest than people might expect given Molly's considerable success. She bought it at the start of her career and has remained there ever since, for the sake of the garden, she says, although I suspect that Fergus is the real reason why she has never left Dublin. She also has a tiny apartment in London where she is obliged to spend much of her time for professional reasons. She likes the city; its vast anonymity suits her temperament. My home is also there, and I am always pleased when she says she is going to work in London, because it means I will have her company for a few months. She is without doubt my closest woman friend. This particular visit, to make the Eliot recording, coincided with her getting some urgent work

done on her London flat, and I was interested in spending a little time in Dublin, so I suggested that we simply borrow each other's homes, an idea that delighted her, for it solved her problem at a stroke.

I heard the clock in the hall strike the hour and counted the beats. Six o'clock: still far too early to get up. I lay in Molly's wide soft bed knowing that in less than a week she would be lying in mine, and I wondered what it was to be Molly Fox. Slippery questions such as this greatly preoccupy both of us, given that I write plays and she acts in them, and over the years we have often talked to each other about how one creates or becomes a character quite unlike oneself.

In spite of my own passion for the theatre, unlike many other dramatists there is nothing in me of the actor, nothing at all. When I was young I did appear in a couple of minor roles in student productions, which served their purpose in that I believe they taught me something of stagecraft that I would never have known otherwise. But I have never felt less at ease than standing sweating night after night under a bank of hot lights, wearing a dusty dress made from an old curtain, pretending to be Second Gentlewoman and trying not to sneeze. 'You must stop immediately,' one of my friends said to me. 'I know you want to write plays but if you keep on with the acting, you'll lose whatever understanding you have for the theatre. As an actor, the whole thing becomes false to you. I know you believe the theatre has to be a complete engagement with reality or it's nothing. If you guard that understanding and bring it to bear on your writing, you'll be a terrific playwright, but if you keep on trying to act, you'll undermine your whole belief in the theatre. And as well as

that,' he added, with more truth than tact, 'you're easily the worst actor who ever stepped on a stage.'

I have considerable experience of working with actors over the years, and yet their work remains a mystery to me; I believe that I still don't know how they do it. Molly will have none of this, says I have an innate understanding of what they do, and that it's just that I don't know how to explain it. She says this isn't a problem, that most actors can't put it into words either, and that many who do speak confidently about it aren't to be trusted. She also says that there are as many ways to be an actor as there are actors. Once I said to her that I thought what she did was psychologically dangerous. I sometimes think she is more in danger of losing touch with herself than I am, that something in her art forces her to go deeper into herself than my art requires of me, and that the danger is that she might lose her way, lose her self. 'But it isn't me!' she exclaimed. That contradicted something she had said to me once before – that if she, Molly Fox, wasn't deeply in the performance then it would be a failure.

Eventually we decided, after much discussion, that our different approaches to character could be seen as a continuum. For me, as a playwright, the creation of a character is like listening to something faint and distant. It's like trying to remember someone one knew slightly, in passing, a very long time ago, but to remember them so that one knows them better than one knows oneself. It's like trying to know a family member who died before one was born, from looking at photographs and objects belonging to them; also from hearing the things, often contradictory, that people say about them, the anecdotes told. From this, you try to work out how they might speak and how

they might react to any given circumstance, how they would interact with other characters whom one has come to know by the same slow and delicate process. And out of all this comes a play, where, as in life, people don't always say what they mean or mean what they say, where they act against their own best interests and sometimes fail to understand those around them. In this way, a line of dialogue should carry an immense resonance, conveying far more than just meaning.

For me, the play is the final destination. For Molly, it is the point of departure. She takes the text, mine or anyone's, and works backwards to discover from what her character says who this person is, so that she can become them. Some of the questions she asks herself – *What does this person think of first thing in the morning? What is her greatest fear?* – are the kind of questions that I too ask in the course of writing, as a kind of litmus test to see if I know the character as well as I think I do. She begins from the general and moves to the particular. How does such a person walk, speak, hold a wine glass? What sort of clothes does she wear, what kind of home does she live in? I understand all of this, and still the art of acting remains a mystery to me. I still don't know how on earth Molly does what she does and I could never do it myself.

What kind of woman has a saffron quilt on her bed? Wears a white linen dressing gown? Keeps beside her bed a stack of gardening books? Stores all her clothes in a shabby antique wardrobe, with a mirror built into its door? Who is she when she is in this room, alone and unobserved, and in what way does that differ from the person she is when she is in a restaurant with friends or in

rehearsal or engaging with members of the public? Who, in short, is Molly Fox?

I was reluctant to pursue this line of thought because I suddenly realised that, lying in my bed in London next week, she might do exactly the same thing to me. Given her particular gift she would be able to reconstruct me, to know me much better than I might wish myself to be known, especially by such a close friend. But no such reservation had touched Molly when she was showing me around her house a few days earlier to settle me in. 'Make yourself completely at home. Take whatever you want or need and use it. If there's something you can't find, look for it.' She hauled open a drawer and stirred up its contents to show just how free I should make with her things. 'This is good, wear this,' and she took the linen dressing gown from its hook behind the door, tossed it on the bed. When I protested mildly against this unlimited generosity, she replied in a voice not her own, 'Oh come now, my dear, don't be so middle class,' a voice itself so larded with pretension that I could only laugh. What she offered me was far more than I wanted or needed. I thanked her for her kindness and told her to treat my own place in exactly the same way, even while I silently hoped that she wouldn't. And yes, I did feel guilty because it was a mean-spirited thought.

I knew how fond she was of her home and everything in it, something that was difficult to square with her attitude of non-attachment. Take our mutual friend Andrew, for example. I'm even closer to him than to Molly, and I've known him for longer too, but he would never give me the free run of his home, of that I'm certain. Not that I would need it anyway, for he also lives in London, and I

wouldn't want it because of the responsibility. While Molly's house is full of stylish bric-a-brac, unusual but inexpensive things that she has picked up on her travels, pretty well everything Andrew owns – vases, rugs, furniture – is immensely valuable. Worrying that I might spill a glass of red wine over some rare carpet or mark an antique table with a cup of coffee would take away any pleasure in staying there. Given how clumsy I am it's always a relief, even when visiting him, to leave without having broken or damaged anything.

Andrew. He had been much on my mind of late. I had hoped to see him before I left London. I had called and left a message on his answering machine, asking him to ring, but he hadn't got back to me. No doubt this was a particularly busy time for him. His new series had started on television the previous week; the second part would be shown tonight. I had wanted to wish him the best for it.

Yawning, I stretched out and switched on a small radio on the bedside table. The music that came from it was hesitant and haunting, a piano played with a kind of rising courage, the notes sparse and scattered with a yearning quality that somehow seemed to match the mood of the morning: it was, at least, what I needed to hear. What would I do today? I would spend the morning working in the spare bedroom that I had set up as an office for the time that I would be here. Because it was Saturday I would give myself the afternoon off and go into town. I knew that I had had a pleasant dream just before I awoke but I couldn't remember what it had been about. I looked again at my watch and decided it was still too early to get up even though the room was flooded with light. It was

the twenty-first of June, the longest day of the year. It was Molly Fox's birthday.

I saw Molly on stage before ever I met her. When I was in my last year at university, at Trinity in Dublin where I read English, I went one night to see a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, hoping that I wouldn't be disappointed. All my life I have used this play to discover what people really know about the theatre, as opposed to what they think they know. Anyone who dismisses it as a slight, rather empty piece of entertainment immediately falls in my estimation. Too often it is staged in a stale and complacent way which suggests that the director also holds it in limited regard. But this production, by a young company called Bread and Circus, wasn't at all like that. While fully exploiting the elegance and wit of the language, it also brought out the darker side of the play, the snobbery and the social hypocrisy, Wilde's yearning to be a part of something that he knew did not merit respect. *Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that*. Didn't he know that he was worth the whole lot of them put together, and that by not assuming superiority he was only bringing himself down to their level and setting himself up for his own destruction? By the use of Irish accents for certain characters this production subtly addressed a colonial aspect of the play that I had never thought about until then; and it also brought out the sexual politics of the work, the pragmatism and deception. They were a young company, and while that was a part of their strength, giving them their wonderful irreverence, their willingness to take risks, it was also part of their weakness. None of them was over

thirty, a distinct disadvantage for playing Miss Prism or Lady Bracknell; and some of the acting was frankly poor.

But the young woman playing Cecily was outstanding. So fully and naturally did she inhabit the part that it was impossible to see how she was doing what she was doing, to deconstruct her art into its component parts. Her remarkable presence and charisma were not dependent on her looks, for she was not particularly pretty, and her only distinguishing physical feature, waist-length dark brown hair, I took to be a wig. But there was the voice of course, that beautiful, musical voice. During the interval when the lights came up in the shabby theatre, I took out my programme to see who she was, and I noticed several people around me do the same thing. In the course of the following months I saw her in other plays and noticed her name in the papers. Even when a production was comprehensively panned, she always seemed to escape censure. *Only the singularly gifted Molly Fox emerges with honour from this sorry hotchpotch of bad direction and shoddy acting.*

Around the time I left college – I think it was just after Andrew had left for England – something uncanny happened to me one day. I was at a table in a café when I noticed a young woman sitting nearby, with a cup of coffee and a book. Her face was familiar and yet I couldn't place her. Perhaps she was also a student at Trinity and I knew her face from seeing her in the library or passing her in the squares, without ever having spoken to her. She was wearing a black leather jacket and draped over her left shoulder was a dark brown plait, shiny, and stout as a rope that might tie up a ship. With that, I realised who she was: so it wasn't a wig after all. She picked up a small brown packet of sugar and shook it hard so that the

contents fell to the bottom, tore it open and poured it onto the froth of the coffee. For the next half-hour she read her book and sipped at the mug, while I watched her. Nothing else happened. I have described it as an uncanny incident, and it was. I did not approach Molly – what could I possibly have said? *I really liked you in 'The Importance of Being Earnest'*. And what could she have replied? *Why thank you very much*. What would that have amounted to? Less than nothing. There are forms of communication that drive people apart, that do nothing other than confirm distance. But there are also instances when no connection seems to be made and yet something profound takes place, and this was just such a moment.

I realised the enormity of her gift. I had been aware of it when watching her on stage, but seeing her here in the café, unrecognised, anonymous, confirmed it for me. It was hers in the same way that her thick pigtail was hers, complete, real, undeniable, hers to do with as she thought fit. I believe that this was clearer to me then than it could have been to Molly, for how we see ourselves, our future, is often tainted by the very hope of what we wish to become. I was at that time already a person of enormous ambition. I knew even then that nothing except being a playwright could ever reconcile me to life; but my gift, I thought, was only a spark. I had none of the effortless brilliance of this other woman. As was the case with Wilde himself, we are at each moment of our lives the persons we were and shall become. The convict in his arrowed uniform who wept on the station platform as people screamed abuse and spat at him had been present years earlier when the same man had been hailed triumphant on the first night of his theatrical success. In the

same way, the actor who would give some of the most profound and intelligent performances that one could ever wish to see on stage was already there in that young woman with her coffee and book.

I like to think that she looks exactly the same as she did when I knew her first, but it isn't true. The Molly of today is far more groomed and poised than the person I saw in the café all those years ago. The long hair, the leather jacket, the casual slick of lipstick have all gone, but they went gradually, so that her transformation, as is the case with most people, happened slowly over time. It is only now, by making a conscious mental effort or by looking at old photographs, that I can recall her as she was, and I can pinpoint no one day, or even a particular time in her life, when she suddenly appeared to me as having completely changed.

And what had I been doing in the café on that day? By a strange coincidence, jotting down notes for the play I had just begun to write, and which would make both Molly's reputation and mine the following year. It was based upon my experiences in London the previous summer, when I had worked as a chambermaid in the morning and as a domestic cleaner in the afternoon and had gone every night to the theatre. My hunger for the stage at that time was intense in a way I now find somewhat alarming. I watched plays with the kind of voracity with which small children read books; with the same visceral passion, the same complete trust in the imagination which is so difficult to sustain throughout the course of one's whole life. It sat uneasily with my daytime existence, spent in the luxurious squalor of dirty hotel bedrooms and the homes of affluent strangers.

There was one particular apartment, a place in St John's Wood, that spooked me from the moment I stepped into it, and I could never understand why. Having grown up in a fairly modest farming background I'd never before experienced such splendour, and I think I expected to be impressed. Instead of which, I fled every day when I had finished to a greasy-spoon café two streets away, where there was always a group of men off a building site, having their tea break. I grew to depend on them, on their yellow hats and their fag-smoke, their tabloids and their laughter. I don't think they ever noticed me sitting nearby as they ribbed each other and ate bacon rolls, swilling them down with big mugs of tea. The stifling atmosphere of the empty apartment where I worked felt like a parallel universe, and after a few hours there it did me good to be around the builders, to tap into their reality. All the rooms in the apartment seemed too big and were arranged in such a way as to militate against any kind of intimacy and warmth. They lacked such things as books and adequate light by which to read, an open fire or any sign of the presence of children; and no amount of Scandinavian glass, no number of cream sofas, could make up for this.

After I had been working there for about a fortnight, I turned around from the kitchen sink one afternoon and literally bumped into a young woman. Having believed myself to be completely alone in the flat it frightened me horribly, and I screamed so loudly that I frightened her and she screamed too. We both drew back and cowered, staring hard at each other like animals at bay.

Let's call her Lucy. That wasn't her real name, but it's what I called her when she became a character in my play. Over the following weeks a strange relationship

developed between us that I mistakenly took to be a friendship. The manner of its conclusion proved how wrong I had been. Lucy was about three years younger than I, and had left school at the start of that summer. She hadn't applied to go to university and didn't know what she wanted to do with her life. Her boyfriend, she told me, was a film-maker and she was perhaps going to be a photographer, but she wasn't sure. The brother of a schoolfriend owned a photography gallery in the East End, and maybe she was going to have an exhibition there later in the year. Nowadays I would see through this kind of thing immediately; but this was the first occasion I had come across someone for whom art was a means of avoiding reality rather than confronting it head on, an idea so strange to me that I didn't fully comprehend it at the time. In some ways she was far more worldly and experienced than I – the film-maker boyfriend was only the most recent of many men – and then at other times she struck me as remarkably naïve and childlike, given her age. The one thing she craved was an audience, and I certainly provided *that* in due course. In the short term she trailed about the house in my wake as I polished and dusted, while she moaned about her mother and mimicked with little skill her father's mistress, whom she loathed. I came to realise how lonely she was, and how vulnerable. She adored her father, whose attention she could never hold for as long as she needed, and I grew to pity her. I only had to clean this palace of alienation; she, poor girl, had to live in it.

She insisted that I abandon my work for up to an hour at a time, to drink coffee with her and to talk about my life, for I was as exotic and interesting to her as she was

to me. My childhood growing up on a farm in Northern Ireland fascinated her in a way I found hard to comprehend. I told her that I was the youngest of seven children. *I don't believe I've ever met anyone before with so many brothers and sisters*. That one of these brothers was a Catholic priest astounded her further. I described to her the wild boggy upland that was my home and my ambivalent feelings towards it. I thought she understood me. I thought she liked me. I thought she was my friend.

The summer ended and I prepared to go back to Dublin for my final year at college. Lucy wasn't in when I arrived at the apartment on my last day. I wanted to exchange addresses with her so that we could keep in touch. I thought to suggest to her that she would join me in the greasy spoon so that we could sit for a while in the reflected glow of the builders' camaraderie. It would do her good. I was in the kitchen when she did at last arrive home, bringing with her a young man. Whether or not it was the film-maker boyfriend or his successor I was never to know. 'I'll see you in a while,' she said to me, as she took him into the drawing room, which I had already cleaned. I hoped he wouldn't linger, but they sat there talking for the rest of the afternoon. At the end of my shift I put my head around the door.

'Well, what is it? What do you want?' Even I knew better than to suggest tea and bacon rolls at a moment like this.

'I've finished. I'm off now.'

'So, off you go.' I couldn't believe that all the time we had spent together, all our confidences, amounted to nothing.

'It's my last day!' I said helplessly.

'So, it's your last day.' She turned to the man and pulled a face, shook her little head, so much as to say, *You see the kind of people I have to put up with?* I withdrew from the room. As I was putting my jacket on in the hall I could hear him ask, 'Who was that?' and Lucy's reply, 'Oh it was nobody, it was just the cleaner. She's probably trying to scrounge a tip because it's her last day, but she's not getting anything.' I slammed the front door of the apartment behind me with all the force of Nora departing at the end of *A Doll's House*; and I kept this as the conclusion of *Summer with Lucy*: it was effective, even though it had been done before.

As soon as my finals were over at university, I took a job teaching English as a foreign language. All my classes were finished by lunchtime every day, and I spent my evenings and nights working on the play. I remember it as a time of great contentment. I wrote the play easily and quickly; I enjoyed doing it. I thought it would always be like this. I didn't know that forever after it would be a struggle to find the right words, the right form, that this sudden fluency was a gift, never to be repeated. If someone had told me this at the time, how would I have reacted? I'd probably have laughed at them. *Youth is wasted on the young.*

Summer with Lucy was a simple play, a two-hander, requiring a single set and providing two good roles for women. One of the characters was based on me; was a sharper, more witty and ironic me, someone whose *esprit* didn't wait until *l'escalier.* The other character was based on Lucy. I think I more than did her justice. I think I did her a favour. The 'real' Lucy was ultimately rather a dull girl, peevish and whingeing, with a distinct lack of imagination. I resented the choices and chances her wealth

gave her and which she failed to realise. The Lucy I created was a far more complex personality, manipulative, intelligent, vulnerable and sly. The relationship she had with my fictional alter ego was edgier than it had been in real life, with a much stronger bond developing between the two characters and an underlying sense of violence. I knew when I finished it that I'd written a good play.

But I didn't realise just how good until it was accepted by Bread and Circus, the first company to which I sent it, and I attended the read-through.

Is there a more nerve-wracking, a more anxiety-inducing experience possible than first read-through? If so, I hope never to have to endure it. As an actor friend once remarked to me, 'It makes going on a blind date feel like yoga.' I think this is why I have no memory of actually meeting Molly, and this is something I very much regret. I can recall being there in the rehearsal room with her. 'It's so cold in here. Why is it always so cold? Does this thing work at all?' and she dragged the old gas heater across the floor, then hammered at the buttons on the side to try and switch it on. She helped me to a mug of bad coffee and asked me if I wanted milk. I was so nervous that I said no, even though I hate black coffee. All her initial conversation with me struck me as bland and oblique. I found her aloof. She chatted more with Ellen, the young woman who was to play 'my' character, and who, as a fellow member of the company, was an old friend of hers. I would like to be able to recall being introduced to her, the first words we addressed to each other, but in truth it's all lost now.

The read-through itself, though, remains vividly in my mind. Ellen was a fine actor, but Molly was outstanding. Even in that first raw attack on the text, she lifted the

whole thing to a new level. I had thought I knew everything – absolutely everything – there was to know about this play, which, after all, I and I alone had written. It was strange to realise that this was not the case. It was like being a composer and hearing the symphony one had, until then, heard only in one's mind, being suddenly played by a full orchestra, and being taken aback by its depth and resonance, far greater than one could ever have expected. In the course of the hour and a half that the read-through lasted, Molly became Lucy; and in doing so she reminded me, weirdly, of the real Lucy, of the lost and lonely child who had trailed around behind me in the apartment during that hot London summer.

As I have already said, I don't know how actors do what they do, so Molly's interpretation that day seemed almost magical to me, and yet I did wonder, as I was to wonder all through the weeks of rehearsal, what was the secret. It was only while watching her from the wings one night, months later, when the play was already a hit, that I realised one important part of the mystery. It was compassion. Molly never judged a character. I had, at best, felt pity for Lucy, but Molly felt something more. No matter how difficult or unpleasant a character might seem, she could find in herself an understanding of why someone might be as they were and this enabled her to become them.

The read-through ended. Ellen brought the flat of her hand down hard on the table to represent the slamming of the door that ended the play and we all sat in silence for a few moments. Then Molly tossed her script down and threw her arms wide. 'We're all going to be famous!' she said.

It's the sort of foolish, camped-up and half-joking remark any ambitious young woman might make, but it was a memorable moment because she spoke no more than the truth. Within the year Molly, Ellen and I were if not exactly household names then certainly much talked about by anyone with even a passing interest in theatre. As soon as *Summer with Lucy* opened it became a word-of-mouth hit, a sensation. The first run sold out almost immediately, we revived it later that year in a bigger theatre with similar success. We took it to festivals both at home and abroad, and we all won awards. I was commissioned to write my second play; Molly and Ellen were courted with offers of prestigious roles; in short, we were on our way, launched with as much glory and honour as anyone could desire. Of the three of us, it was actually Ellen who became most famous with the general public in the long run. She moved into television work and made her name in a police drama watched by millions. On the day of the read-through she and the director had somewhere to go afterwards, and so it was to me alone that Molly said, 'Will we go and have a proper cup of coffee, instead of this sludge?'

At her suggestion, we went to the café where I had seen her sitting reading. 'I like this place,' she said artlessly, 'I come here all the time.' Our friendship began there on that day, and the café became a place to which we would often go together, or where we would arrange to meet. I found her much warmer than I had before the read-through, yet still she was reserved. At a nearby table someone had lit a cigarette, and the smoke drifted incessantly towards us. Molly fanned it away with her hand, but I could see that she found it increasingly irritating,

until at last I said, 'Why don't I just go over and ask them to stub it out?' She looked at me with alarm. 'No, don't. They might get annoyed.'

'Well, their smoke's annoying us.'

She grasped my forearm to stop me moving. 'Don't, please don't. I can cope, really, it's not a problem.' She pleaded with me so vehemently that I felt I had no option but to do as she wished, and let the cigarette smoke drift on. But her behaviour puzzled me, and as we resumed our conversation, at the back of my mind I kept wondering about this. Suddenly it came to me. I knew it was the truth and yet it was a shock: *Molly Fox was shy.*

How could this be? I had seen her on stage only a few weeks earlier before more than a hundred people . . .

While I had been remembering all of this, drifting in and out of sleep, the radio had been idling. It was seven-thirty, the announcer now said, cutting into my thoughts. He read the news headlines with an air of incredulity, as if even he could hardly believe the horrors – political breakdown, hurricanes, house fires and car crashes – he was sharing with the nation. I rose and went to the bathroom, taking the radio with me. Even though here too Molly had urged me to make free with what was available, I didn't use any of her rose-scented bath oil in its bottle of smoked glass, the label hand-written in French. By the time I had washed and dressed the weather forecast was being read: it was to be a sunny day, warm and dry. I picked up the radio to take it down to the kitchen with me. I passed the door of the room where I had set up my computer and where I had been attempting to work in recent days. Enough: I could think of that later.