

Lunch With Miss Hepburn

The phone rang and rang. When it was finally picked up, there was silence, which grew longer and longer. As it did so it became louder and louder, until it roared in my ears like the ocean.

" Is thater..... Katharine Hepburn? ", I ventured timorously. I felt as though I had just swallowed a fish-bone. My mouth was dry. My heart was knocking against my ribs.

" WHO IS THIS????! ", a shockingly fierce, voice barked.

" My name isuh... Simon Worrall ", I stammered nervously. " The English journalist ..."

" I KNOW LOTS OF ENGLISH JOURNALISTS ! ", barked The Voice. " WHICH ONE ARE YOU ?! "

" I am the one who is doing a story for Geo magazine ", I said, swallowing hard.

" Freya Manston uh ... gave me your .. er... number."

" WELL, WHADDAYA WANT !!!!! ", barked The Voice.

" We're doing a story about New England ... "

" SO WHY D'YOU WANT TO SPEAK TO ME????! "

" I was ...er hoping to talk to you about your life-long love-affair with Connecticut. "

" WELL, WHEN D'YOU WANNA COME ??! ", The Voice demanded.

" Whenever is ...er Convenient for you ", I ventured.

" WELL, I'M HERE NOW !! "

My heart sank. I was two and an half hours away, at my home in East Hampton, on the east end of Long Island. By the time I got to New York it would be too late.

" Would ...er tomorrow be alright? ", I asked timorously.

" NO! ", growled The Voice. " I'M GOING AWAY TO CONNECTICUT TOMORROW! "

Oh, God,, I thought, she's going to cancel the whole thing .

" Well, could I ...er come and see you when you get back ? "

" CALL ME ON MONDAY EVENING ! "

There was a loud clunk as she hung up the phone.

Hepburn was already 85 years old on that day in 1992. But even among teenagers, she ranked not far behind Michael Jackson and Elvis as one of the most idolised figures of the century. The last thing she needed was publicity. She had recently done some television interviews in connection with her autobiography, *Me* , which had just been published - when Phil Donahue, the talk show host, asked her to sign a copy of her book on his show, she looked at him with those mischevious, grey-blue eyes and said: " And what's your name

again ? “ - but she did not do any print interviews. Everyone said I had a snowball’s chance in hell of getting one.

Undeterred, I spent three months wheedling, begging and flattering Freya Manston, Hepburn’s literary agent. Manston was the dragon at the gate. No, she told me, again and again, Miss Hepburn does not do interviews. But the more she said no, the more I badgered her. The ruder she was, the more charming I became. I wrote glowingly affectionate letters. I made her laugh. The fact that I promised I would confine my questions to her lifelong love-affair with the Connecticut coast, and not ask any about the legendary one she had with a man called Spencer Tracy, probably helped. So did Hepburn's well-known soft spot for Englishmen. And finally, a few days before Easter, Manston called to give me Hepburn’s number in New York.

I spent the Easter weekend trying not to think about Monday. I went for walks on the beach. I played tennis. I watched some of Hepburn’s greatest movies again. By now, I knew several scenes almost by heart: like that wonderful sequence in *Bringing Up Baby* , when she and Cary Grant hunt for a leopard in the grounds of a Connecticut farmhouse, and Hepburn turns to Grant, and says, in that inimitable voice: " There aren’t any leopards in Connecticut, are there ? ". Or that moment in Frank Capra's *State of the Union* when Hepburn strides into a newspaper office in a black two piece suit and black gloves, her red hair

swinging on her shoulders, her nostrils flaring like a racehorse, and one of the newspapermen asks: " Has she moved in yet ? ". To which his colleague replies:
" She's established a beach-head. "

As Monday arrived, I grew more and more nervous. What time should I call ? She did not have an answering machine. What if I missed her ? She had said I should call her in the evening. But that was pretty vague. Did she mean early evening ? Or late evening ? What if she leaves Connecticut late in the afternoon, and does not arrive back in New York until 9.00 p.m or 10.00 p.m. ? She might have gone to bed. After all, she is eighty-five. I decided to call at 8 p.m.

It was at least twenty years since New York's phone system had been reorganised, but the number Freya Manston had given me – Plaza 324576- still used the old district system. As I dialled it, it conjured images of a New York that no longer existed: of checker cabs and whistling bellhops; Cole Porter songs; and cocktails at *El Morocco*. Again, the phone rang for a long time. When it was picked up, all I could hear was a faint hissing . In the deep background, a woman was talking Spanish.

" Hallo ? ", I began. " Is that ...er ... Katharine Hepburn ? "

" WHO'S THIS ??!!! ", bellowed the Voice.

" I'm that English journalist "

" WELL, IT'S TOO LATE !!! CALL ME TOMORROW !!! "

" That's the old redhead ", Cary Grant says to her in Philadelphia Story. " No bitterness, no recriminations, just a swift left to the jaw. "

Now I had a real problem. Freya Manston had told me that the interview was tentatively scheduled for the following day, Tuesday, at 11.00 a.m. This last call had been to confirm that time. But it had not been confirmed ! What to do ? Should I drive to New York regardless? Or call her on Tuesday and re-schedule the interview ? That might irritate her, though. Maybe she will change her mind and decide this is all too much trouble. I decided I would drive in anyhow. But to get to Manhattan by mid-morning , I would have to leave my home in East Hampton by eight o'clock. *After* having phoned Hepburn to confirm.

So on Tuesday morning, I got up at at dawn, showered, then spent an hour agonising over what to wear. A suit seemed too formal, a leather jacket and jeans too casual. I decided on a Spencer Tracy look: shirt and tie, chino pants, a white raincoat, and my old Borselino hat tilted at a suitable rakish angle. Then I picked some flowers in the garden. Hepburn loved flowers. Not of the hot-house variety, though: flowers of the field. Luckily, the garden was still full of daffodils, so I went out onto the dewy lawn and I picked a big bunch, then wrapped it with a silver ribbon.

But I still had not confirmed the appointment. So, just before leaving, I went back to the phone. I looked at my watch. It was 7.30 a.m. But I knew from my reading that Hepburn had been an early riser all her life. Usally, when making a

film, she had usually been the first to arrive on the set. *After* cycling ten miles, and eating a huge cooked breakfast. I dialled the number.

This time, the phone rang for even longer. Should I hang up and try again ? If I did, I was going to be late into the city. Finally, after ten or so rings, the phone was picked up. Again, the silence boomed in my ears.

" Hallo? ", I said, sheepishly. " Is thiserKatharine Hepburn ? "

I was expecting another blast of steam. Instead, a pitifully frail and shaky voice said in a hoarse whisper: " What time is it? "

" It's about seven thirty ", I said, as gently as I could.

" WELL, IT'S TOO EARLY !!! ", groaned The Voice.

I waited for the familiar clunk. Instead, there was a knocking, scrabbling sound, like someone tapping their knuckles on a table. With a sickening feeling, I realised that I had woken up the greatest movie actress of the twentieth century and that the noise I had heard was her struggling to put the phone back on the hook. Three months of hard work were about to go down the tubes. I felt sick.

There was nothing for it. I would drive to New York and hope for the best. After all, the worst that could happen would be that she slammed the door in my face. So, leaving my house in East Hampton, I headed west along the Long Island Expressway. I can't remember much of the drive, except that I drank coffee and chain-smoked all the way, and that somewhere between Ronkonkoma and Hicksville I went through my notes, re-read the questions I had prepared;

checked my tape recorder; saw that my pen had ink in it; that my tie was knotted; my shoes polished; my jacket free of lint; and that the dog had not sat on my Borselino. As I crossed the Queensboro Bridge, my heart was beating fast. Ahead of us, the reflection of the metal spars of the bridge scrolled over the rear window of a Lincoln Town Car, like frames of a film. I lit another cigarette and imagined I was Cary Grant. Ahead of me, the towers of Manhattan, severe and beautiful as the Alps, rose into a misty, early morning sky.

I put in a last call to Hepburn at a pay phone a few blocks from her house. To my relief, it was not she who answered the phone this time, but an English woman. She told me to present myself, as planned, at eleven o'clock. Just before I reached Turtle Bay I stopped at a florist and bought six, dark blue irises to supplement my humble daffodils.

Turtle Bay, where Hepburn lived until she moved back to her childhood home in Fenwick, Connecticut, in 1996, is an exclusive enclave of brownstone houses on 49th. Street, between 2nd. and 3rd. Avenues., with a large, shared garden to the rear, From the outside, it looks like any other row of brownstones. But behind the facades is a sequestered garden the size of a London square. Hepburn loved gardening, and she spent most of her time in the summer here, tending her beloved plants, trowel in hand, a straw hat on her head. One of her Turtle Bay neighbours was Stephen Sondheim.

The entrance to Hepburn's house was down a short flight of steps, through a black, wrought-iron gate. White linen curtains were pulled tightly across the windows. Clutching my flowers to my chest like a schoolboy on his first date, I rang the doorbell. It was opened by a trim octogenarian in glasses: Phyllis Wilbourn, Hepburn's British " secretary-companion-assistant-indispensable ", as she called her in *Me*.

" Miss Hepburn is waiting for you upstairs ", she said, in one of those ringing English accents that immediately command respect, as she closed the door behind me. With a whoomph, the cacophonous roar of New York disappeared, and I found myself in the hallway of what could have been a country house in England. There was the same discreet, antique furniture; the same sense of calm; the same upstairs-downstairs relationships. In the kitchen, to the left of the stairs, an elderly black man in a smart, blue uniform, Hepburn's chauffeur, sat at a table drinking coffee with her maid, Nora, a redoubtable woman from County Clare, in Ireland. As I climbed the stairs, I felt like Pip going to see Miss Havesham.

" I THOUGHT YOU'D GOT LOST ! ", said Hepburn, rising from her chair on one side of the long, sunny living room. She was dressed, as ever, in scarlet and black, her favorite colors: a black, turtle-neck, cashmere sweater with a scarlet, wool jerkin over the top of it; black pants; and a pair of battered black sneakers that looked as though they had been bought at a thrift shop. A red scarf hung

over the black, linen covering of her rocking-chair, to further enhance the color scheme.

Time had ravaged her beauty. The lustrous red hair was now grey and worn on top of her head. Her skin was covered in blotches, and had a strange, shiny texture to it, as though covered in vaseline. Her head bobbed up and down, from the Parkinson's disease that was already beginning to overwhelm her. And she was limping slightly from a recent car accident. But the spirit that shone out of her eyes was as alive, and as mischevious, as ever. I stood there rooted to the spot, unable to say a word.

" Well, sit down ", she said, brusquely. " Over there. On the sofa. "

The living-room breathed restrained, old-world taste. Along one wall ran the squashy, white sofa piled with hand-made cushions. Behind it was a row of tall windows looking down into the garden. The floor was covered in antique Persian rugs. On the wall, hung paintings from friends and some of Hepburn's own water-colours, mostly seascapes of Fenwick. There were no Oscars on display (" god forbid ! ", she roared, when I asked her why not); no tacky movie souvenirs; no signed photos of Bogey or Cary Grant. Just cherished, personal mementoes - a collection of bibelot boxes; some chunks of crystal; a group of figures carved from petrified wood; a silver cigarette case inscribed with the words: *To my dearest Kate*. It was a gift from Spencer Tracy.

" You certainly have a lot of competition ", she said, with a chuckle, as I proffered my flowers: one whole wall of the living-room was knee deep in tulips, lilies, and daffodils. Advancing to the head of the stairs, she bellowed :

" NORA ! BRING A VASE FOR THESE FLOWERS ! "

Hepburn sat back down at what she called her " command post ": a lacquered, black rocking chair half turned to one of the two tall, graceful windows that looked out onto a courtyard. On the cherry-wood table next to her was the telephone that I had rung all those times. It was one of those big, black, old-fashioned telephones that weighed about two pounds. When it rang, it sounded like the bells on a fire-engine. No one, except Hepburn, was allowed to touch it.

" It's very queer ", she said, contemplating the unseasonably cold weather outside. " I moved in some potted cyll ... ". Her voice stumbled on the word momentarily. " ... cylla plants recently. They should be fat ones by now, and beautiful: but they just said: What is this? We don't like it. And died. "

A country person at heart, throughout our interview Hepburn noticed, and commented on, the smallest changes in the weather outside, as we spoke. " And the cyllas usually are out ", she continued. " Daffs are out ! Everywhere ! "

The voice cracked slightly, becoming a hoarse whisper. It reminded me of that famous scene in *On Golden Pond* , Hepburn's last film, when she turns to Henry Fonda and says: " You're my knight! You're my knight in shining armor! "

" I don't understand what this article is about " , she said to me, impatiently.

" It's about your love-affair with Fenwick ", I said, hoping to set her talking.

" Humph " , said Hepburn, and stared out of the window.

" I've got a lot of questions"

" Well, ask me a few " , she countered, sardonically. Even at eighty-five, she didn't miss a beat.

" While I was getting ready for this interview " , I began, tentatively. " I aksed everyone I knew, people of all ages and from all walks of life, what they thought of you"

An image of Tom , tip-toeing out of his mousehole, as Jerry watches him, flashed into my mind.

" ... and without exception they had all said that they loved and admired you " , I continued, cautiously. I swallowed. " Why did she think that is ? "

Hepburn chuckled.

" That's obviously been sold very successfully " , she said. Then, she said something that took me aback. " I think it's my mother. "

The reply seemed so tangential, and so odd, that I could not think of anything to say. Then I remembered the opening of *Me*. " *From where I stood. Dad at the left of the fireplace. Mother at the right of the fireplace. Tea every day at five. They were the world into which I was born. My background.* "

Hepburn, more than anyone I have ever met, was deeply attached to her parents. And throughout our interview she referred to " Mother " and " Dad ", as though they had just left the room. Even now, she told me, there was not a day when she did not wish she could speak to them.

" My mother was much more in everything than I was ", she continued. " Much more intelligent than I am. And they did a lot for the general public. To make the world a better place, an easier place to live in. They were interested in - and I suppose I was not - planned parenthood, and all that stuff: birth control, venereal disease. So it put me in a spot that was ... a bit different from other actors. "

She was born Katharine Houghton Hepburn in Hartford, Connecticut on November 9th, 1907 (the date is sometimes disputed), into an educated, politically active, middle-class family. It was a household in which the idea of social action to better the lives of the less fortunate was part of the air she breathed. Dr. Hepburn, her adored father, hailed from Virginia. He was a doctor who specialised in urology, and tried to get what in those days were taboo issues like venereal disease, and prostitution onto the public agenda. Her mother - " very feminine, very quick, very sharp, a brilliant speaker " - was a feminist long before the term was coined. The famous suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst, was a family friend. Hepburn's first public appearance was not on the stage, but marching in a suffragette parade with her mother, filling balloons,

marked *Votes for Women*.. " Can you imagine listening to seven Hepburns all talking *at once* ", Spencer Tracy recalled. " About the Negroes, the slums, the Puerto Ricans, abortions, the homeless, the hungry?. "

Like all great artists, kept the path to her childhood open, and available. It was the well-spring of her life. It is also why, after her brief union with Ludlow " Luddy " Ogden Smith (the marriage was over by the time they returned from their honeymoon in Europe), she never re- married or had children of her own. To do so, would have been to sever her links with her parents, and her childhood. Well into her forties , when she was already a Hollywood star, " Dad " paid her bills and wired a personal allowance out to Los Angeles. " I'm like the girl who never grew up ", she once told an interviewer. " I just never left home, so to speak. I've always come back. I've come back almost every weekend of my life . "

The place she came back to was Fenwick, a village at the mouth of the Connecticut River, which looks east across the river to Lyme, and south across the Sound to Long Island. One of Hepburn's favourite jaunts was to sail across the Sound with her brother for lunch in The Hamptons with friends. " That's where I developed. Where I learned to ride a bike ", she told me. " Mum and Dad felt very much at home there. Although they disagreed with practically everything everyone thought. "

Her father found the Fenwick property, a sprawling, three story, shingled house, with stairs right down to the beach, in 1913, when Hepburn was only 5 and a half. It was one of a colony of summer houses owned by the scions of the solid businesses that made Hartford - " very nice - very Republican - very Aetna Life Insurance", she called it - prosperous in those days. Fenwick, she once said, was a place " composed of space - and about forty houses. "

As a child, Hepburn was a tomboy. She swam and collected hermit crabs in pails, caught fish or dug clams, dived off piers and sailed her skiff " Tiger ", a small, precariously balanced boat which she used to take out onto the Sound. On one occasion, she nearly drowned. She was rescued by a local fisherman named Frank Ingham. His fish-shed became Hepburn's special haunt. He taught her how to clean fish and how to row. He remained a friend for the rest of her life.

" I used to spend all my time with Mr. Ingham. Go out on his fishing-boats with him ", she said, smiling. " He was my life. " She paused. " You see, my family were involved in stuff that was ... sort of odd. Birth-control and votes for women were not very popular subjects at that time. And the rest of the people who went to Fenwick in those days were very stuffy. "

I asked her if she was conscious, as a child, of her parents being different ?

" Not different ", she said, with a twinkle. " Better. "

There were a few kindred spirits in Fenwick. Dorothy Thompson, a journalist and proto-feminist (she was the model for *Woman of the Year*) was one. Sinclair

Lewis, the author, was another. " He was a forward-thinking man ", recalled Hepburn. " A funny man. It was customary in those days, when a person moved to a certain district, for them to be called on by various of the natives. So, Lewis went to a party that Mother was at and said: You haven't called on me ! To which Mother said: Well, go home, and I will ! So he rushed home, and she called on him. And they became close friends. *He* was interesting. He thought about all the possibilities of the human animal. "

Hepburn was always intensely proud of being a New Englander (" Some people are New York or London ", she once famously said. " Or - God help them - Los Angeles. I am Hartford. ") When, later in the interview, she pronounced the word " Oh-i -o ", she made it sound like the ends of the earth.

" I think a New Englander assumes that it's the best place to live " she told me. " And that it's really where everybody should live ! " Then, with a snorting laugh, she added: " *Is* there anywhere else? "

The full sting of her wit was reserved for " smog-patch ", as she liked to call Los Angeles. " I never could understand why everyone thinks California is so great ", she said, rolling her eyes. " It's terrible, terrible. All that sunshine there's supposed to be! And there isn't ! "

Reviewing Katharine Hepburn's opening night as Epifania in George Bernard Shaw's *The Millionairess* at the New Theatre, in London, in 1952, The

Times theatre critic wrote that Hepburn played the part with " such a furious, raw-boned, strident vitality that it sweeps away likes and dislikes and presents the creature as a force of nature. "

The force of nature was ebbing, but Hepburn still exuded a quite extraordinary vitality. I knew from my reading that no one was allowed to tend the fire (until she was almost eighty, she cut and stacked her own firewood), so I didn't leap up, as I might have at my grandmother's house, when she got up from her chair to put on another log. Moving stiffly, but straight-backed and determined, she bent over, picked up a chunk of wood and rammed it into the fire. Then, grasping the poker, she prodded vigorously away at it, like a navy gunner ramming home the powder. " The life I lead is the life that I've lead all my life ", she said, as she sat down again.

With that lapidary utterance, Hepburn revealed the key to her personality, and the secret of her happiness. Stardom and success didn't change her. She remained, throughout her life, essentially the same person. And that is why she kept returning to Fenwick. It was her tap-root: the place she came to get away from the unreality of Hollywood. Here, she was not Katharine Hepburn, movie star. She was " Kathy " , private citizen.

" Fenwick is a place I don't get watched ", she said, leaning back in her rocking chair. " I've been there all my life, so I'm nothing much to them. I can

walk around and do whatever I damn well please. I'm still, I suppose, Katharine Hepburn. But I don't have the feeling of being watched. "

She hated the rootlessness, and superficiality, of Hollywood. And when she became famous, she built an almost impenetrable ring of privacy around herself, to protect her secret world from the gaze of strangers. Woe betide any reporter, or fan, that tried to break into it. " I don't think anyone has a right to know everything about you ", she said, firmly. " If you wish to be private. "

" *They want to undress you, inspect you ... at 15 cents a copy* ", I said, quoting from *Philadelphia Story*.

" Yes, yes, it's true ! ", she replied, animatedly. " And I think they also wanted to ...er ... er .. POSSESS you. Really! They wanted to. And I don't think I found that interesting. "

" Did that frighten you ? " , I wondered.

" No, not really ", she said. Then, with a laugh. " I am not given to fright. "

Fenwick was also the scene of her theatrical debut, at the age of eleven, when she and a friend performed *Beauty and the Beast* for charity. Hepburn played the Beast. The seventy-five dollars they raised went to buy a Victrola for the Navajo Indians of New Mexico. Fifteen years later, at the age of twenty-six, she burst to stardom like a comet in a film that drew powerfully on the world of her New England childhood: George Cukor's 1933 version of Louise M. Alcott's *Little Women* . When Winona Ryder performed the role in 1994, she begged

Hepburn to appear in the film as Jo March's mother. Hepburn politely declined. Her last great film, *On Golden Pond*, was an elegy to the world of her childhood. Shot at Squam Lake, in New Hampshire, the film was bathed in the light of the New England summers Hepburn loved more than any other weather. In the most dramatic scene in the film, as Henry Fonda and his 13 year old grandson, Billy, cling to a rock after their boat has been smashed, Hepburn comes to the rescue in a dory. Pulling off her raincoat, she dives into the freezing cold lake and swims a fast crawl towards them. She was eighty-one at the time, but she adamantly refused a stunt double.

In the many films she made in between, Katharine Hepburn came to symbolise the spirit, and manner, of New England. Her voice, with its the broad vowels (`aah´ for `I´, `fahnd´ for `fond´ ; `ahdeas´ for `ideas´) and clipped consonants had the clarity of a steel-strung harp. Combined with an instinctive intelligence that knew how to shape and explore the nuances of dialogue to bring out the full meaning, it was her greatest asset. She knew how to use her voice's full register, quickening her pace or slowing down to drop the emphasis on a single word, as she made a particularly withering remark. If America had a Queen, this is how she would have spoken.

But whether playing the prim Rose, opposite Bogart's raunchy captain in *The African Queen* ; or Tracy Lord, the haughty, society girl in *Philadelphia Story* ; or Jane Hudson, the Ohio secretary, who discovers passion in Venice, Hepburn

was always at her most hypnotising as an actress when that flinty New England spirit was in dissolution, because of love. That moment was always signaled by a big close-up of her face, with its spare, cubist lines and high cheek-bones (" the greatest calcium deposit since the White Cliffs of Dover ", another English journalist called them). The strong, almost masculine, jaw softened by a diffusion lens, her lips parted, her chin trembling slightly, her ash-grey eyes welling with tears, and her nostrils flaring with emotion, Hepburn was, in those moments, at her greatest. No one charted the journey from Puritanism to passion better than she did.

Away from the set, she loved being outdoors and playing sports. She cycled (" at 90,000,000 miles an hour "), played an excellent game of golf, adored tennis. " If there is a heaven, and that's where I end up ", she said once. " And if I'm a tennis champion, then I'll be happy " . Throughout her life she also swore by cold ablutions.

" My father was a great believer in iced water ", she told me. " So I think I just did it as a kid, because I was told to. Then I continued doing it. I used to swim in Long Island Sound, even in the winter. Now, that *was* cold ! But I liked it. It waked me up ! "

With hard exercise went a granite-like stoicism. " The thing about life is that you must survive ", she wrote in *Me*. " Life is going to be difficult and dreadful things will happen. What you do is to move along, get on with it and be tough.

Not in the sense of being mean to others, but tough with yourself and making a deadly effort not to be defeated. "

Like the golfer she played in *Pat and Mike* , Hepburn kept her chin up and her eye on the next tee, blasting her way out of life's sand-traps without a backward look. " She's sort of hard, isn't she? ", says a little girl about Tracy Lord, Hepburn's character in *Philadelphia Story*. " She sets exceptionally high standards for herself ", her mother corrects her. The words could equally be applied to Hepburn.

For today's culture of complaint - the phrase alone made her hoot with derision - in which everyone feels themselves to be a victim of someone else's good fortune, she had three, short, sharp words. " Bore, bore, bore ! " Perhaps because of this stoical attitude to life, she has outlived all the great actors and directors of her generation: Cary Grant; Rita Hayworth; Vivien Leigh; David Lean; Lucille Ball; Laurence Olivier. Humphrey Bogart, her co-star in *African Queen*, died of cancer forty years ago. Spencer Tracy hung on till 1967.

" They' re all dead ", said Hepburn, matter-of-factly. " It's very queer. It's amazing how many of them have died, isn't it?"

" People do ", I said.

" Yes, I suppose so. But I feel more have. Or I've lived longer. " She gave a hearty chuckle: " I think I've lived longer so that they have had lots of time to die ! Ha ! Ha ! "

Death clearly held no terror for her. Rather, it seemed to be a source of black humour. The day I went to see her, Hepburn's upstairs neighbour was ill in bed. At one point, Hepburn telephoned downstairs to Nora to ask her how the lady upstairs was.

" Hope she hasn't died up there ! ", she said, looking over at me with an impish look in her eye.

Later, she commented on the state of a lampshade. " That poor shade ! ", she said. " Everything in this house has begun to wear out. I had a man who was very clever, who did a lot of it buter ... he's dead ! Ha ! So he won't be able to make a new lampshade ! Ha ! Ha ! "

Applied to personal tragedy, this no-nonsense attitude could seem callous. On stage or in films, Hepburn could howl like a banshee, but in real life she could be reserved to the point of coldness. In one chapter of " Me ", she describes how she found her beloved younger brother, Tom, hanging from the rafters, after he had committed suicide. It was the one tragic moment of her happy childhood. But Hepburn describes it with the cool, matter-of-factness of an insurance assessor. " The facts were as follows ", she writes, crisply. " Next morning I went upstairs to wake him up. There he was - next to the bed - his knees bent - hanged by a torn piece of sheeting. It was tied to a rafter. He was dead. Strangled. "

With her stoicism went what James Fenimore Cooper called the most American of qualities, candor: " a contempt for all designing evasions of our real

opinions. " Hepburn said what she meant, and meant what she said, regardless of whom she was speaking to or the consequences of her words. She had disliked phoniness or pretension of any sort. When I asked her if she ever ate out at restaurants, she threw back her head. " GIVE ME SIXTY DOLLARS ", she said, her voice croaking like Donald Duck's. " AND I'LL COOK YOU A DAMN FINE MEAL ! "

Unlike the celebrities of today, whose every breathe is controlled, and manipulated, by the PR companies who represent them, Hepburn never allowed the sharp edges of her personality to be smoothed out by Hollywood's well-oiled control mechanisms. As a rising starlet, she rode rough-shod over the dress-codes of tinseltown, shocking and dismaying hand-wringing studio bosses and their handlers by dressing in overalls, a fireman's shirt and torn canvas tennis-shoes. Later, even though she was dressed for her roles by designers like Balmain or Hartnell, she was happiest in an old pair of slacks and a sweater. She did not own a single pair of high-heel shoes. She never permed or dyed her hair. " Here I am ", she said, summing up her attitude to life. " And you better like me, or not like me. "

There was one person, though, for whom she was prepared to tow the line. " It was a unique feeling that I had for Spencer Tracy ", she wrote in *Me*. " I would have done anything for him. My feelings. How can you describe them? The door between us was always open. If he didn't like this or that, I changed

this or that. There might be qualities I personally valued. It didn't matter. I changed them. Food? We ate what he liked. We did what he liked. We lived a life which he liked. This gave me great pleasure. The thought that it was pleasing him. "

In Tracy, Hepburn found her opposite: WASP Queen collides with Irish Catholic Bruiser. He was a working-class mid-westerner from Wisconsin (his father was the hard-drinking manager of the Sterling Motor Truck Company in Milwaukee), whose own life was always unraveling towards the bottle.

" Spencer sees the ludicrous side of everything ", she once remarked. " That's why the Irish have the miseries. They see themselves as clowns falling through life. " She was a Connecticut Yankee who liked flat shoes, social justice and equality between the sexes. Tracy was conservative, emotional and, at some deep level, lost. She was as rooted as an oak tree. But he was great company and possessed the thing that Hepburn valued most in a person: a wicked sense of humour. When they connected, it was like the two ends of an electric cable being brought together. There were bright, blue sparks. Their greatest comedies - *Adam's Rib*; *Pat and Mike*; *Woman of the Year* - are charged by that electricity. They also record the opening rounds of the war of the sexes.

But, though the world remembers her for her stormy affairs with famous men - first Howard Hughes; then Spencer Tracy - she spent most of her life in sororities, with women. She disliked marriage; wanted no children; and felt

superior in mind, will and stamina, to most men. The sight of Nancy Reagan looking goonly into her husband's eyes, or Liz Taylor going down the aisle for the umpteenth time, were, to her, images of female dependency and stupidity. " If you don't want to get married ", she said, when I asked her why she had fallen in love with Tracy, " you choose someone who is unavailable, don't you ? "

What remained was sisterhood. First, with Laura Harding, then Constance Collier, her one time voice-teacher and drama coach. Finally, with Phyllis Wilbourn who had previously been Collier's secretary and, at Collier's death, became Hepburn's companion-cum-secretary. Wilbourn even lived with Hepburn throughout her relationship with Spencer Tracy, in a peculiar *menage a trois* that Tracy hated (he did a devastating impersonation of Winbourn's English accent). They were the sort of relationships forged at Bryn Mawr, the progressive, independent-minded college Hepburn had attended in Philadelphia. Were they lesbian liaisons ? Was Hepburn a closet dike ? We will never know. All the indications are that she might have been, however. For a start, Hepburn was a cross-dresser long before the term was invented. As a child, she shaved head, wore her brothers' clothes, and loathed being a girl. When I asked her why she had called herself Jimmy as a child, she said: " Well, I wasn't a girl, was I ! "

You weren't?

" That was the main thing ! Yes."

" Why did you hate being a girl so much ? ", I asked.

" Well, I thought a boy' s life was a lot more interesting ", she replied, without skipping a beat. Then, she said, with a chuckle: " It is, too, isn't it ? "

As a student, she loved to dress up in men's clothes. In one early photograph, from the film *Sylvia Scarlett* , she stares out at us with short, cropped hair, men's clothes and a champagne glass in her hand, like a young David Bowie. As she aged, she would never be one of those voluptuous, female types like Taylor or Rita Hayworth. She was skinny (" a bag of bones ", Tracy called her) and androgynous; yin and yang; and her ability to move between those poles was one of the keys to her magnetism as an actress. Sex ? I suspect that she had a typically WASP ambivalence about it. She probably preferred whacking golf balls.

" D'you wanna eat ? ", she asked, after an hour, in her croakiest Donald Duck voice. I grinned sheepishly.

" D'YOU WANT SOMETHING TO EAT ? ", she roared, as though addressing an imbecile.

I nodded.

" D'you like S ..S .. SOU P ? ", she asked, her head ducking and bobbing.

" That would nice ", I said, submissively.

Hepburn got up and advanced stiffly to the head of the stairs.

" NORA ! ", she bellowed.

There was no reply.

" HEY ! ", she roared, like an Irish foreman calling for more bricks. " HEY ! "

Moments later, Nora arrived bearing two trays groaning with food - caesar salad garnished with mushrooms and carrots; home-made mayonnaise; lashings of toast; and two bowls of piping hot carrot soup. Balancing hers across her knees, Hepburn tucked into her lunch with the gusto, and concentration, of a child, scooping thick wedges of butter out of a plastic tub and daubing it delightedly on her toast, and ladling soup into her hungry mouth. She had asked me to turn off my recorder, and most of the time we ate in silence, enjoying the food, only occasionally exchanging a phrase, or a laugh, as the fire crackled and spat in the grate. At one point, a piece of leek got stuck on her chin. Later, her tray tilted ominously to one side so that, for a moment, I thought everything was going to crash to the floor. Otherwise, she seemed fully in control of her faculties. She didn't drink, but asked Nora to bring up a bottle of Beaujolais for me.

" I was never much of a drinker, you know. I smoked at one time, and then I stopped because Spencer had to stop. And I never started again. I thought: that's one good deed I should take a bit of profit from myself. I like whisky, but it presents no problems for me. I have no desire to be unconscious. "

While in Wales, for the filming of *The Corn is Green* , when she was already well over seventy, Hepburn would get up at five, devour a huge breakfast of fruit, eggs, bacon, chicken livers, toast, marmalade and coffee, study the script,

take a cold shower, then go for a five mile bicycle ride, all before the car picked her up at 7.30 for the day' s shooting.

I asked her if she still ate such hearty breakfasts.

" I don't diet particularly, one way or the other ", she told me, buttering another piece of toast.

" I remember reading that you like chicken livers ", I said, downing my second glass of wine.

" I *love* chicken livers ! " , said Hepburn, grinning from ear to ear.

" These days, it's not the sort of food that movie stars eat, is it ? ", I said.

" CHICKEN LIVERS ?!", she bawled. " WHAT'S WR-AWNG WITH CHICKEN LIVERS ???! "

By mentioning breakfast, I had reminded her of her rude awakening that morning.

" Someone woke me up this morning ", she said, testily.

" It was me ", I said.

I expected a fork to come flying across the room at me.

" Oh ? "

" Yes, I'm really sorry ", I stammered. " It was twenty to eight. "

" TWENTY OF EIGHT ?!! ", she growled. " WELL, THAT'S A STUPID TIME TO CALL ANYONE ! "

I apologized profusely.

" IT WAS DUMB ! " , she said angrily.

As we spoke, Nora bustled in and out, fetching and carrying plates. For dessert we had chocolate ice-cream covered in flaked almonds, with a Florentine on the side. Hepburn ate up every scrap with visible pleasure. Then she turned to me and said: " I think you should go now. "

What I remember most about the hours I spent with Katharine Hepburn was her laugh. Her speech was already faltering. Words were like stepping-stones for her by then, each crossing, a little triumph. Sometimes she stammered on the first syllable. Sometimes she would land with all her force on a word, then pause, as though struggling to keep her balance, before going on across the river of incoherence rising up beneath her. But when she laughed, the whole person connected.

She laughed many times as we spoke, always deflecting any over-seriousness, particularly about herself, with a joke, or a witty aside as perfectly timed as her funniest screen moments. When I suggested that, apart from her beauty, it was her voice that was her greatest gift, she paused, then said, with a chuckle: " Well, it kept them awake ! "

Later, I noticed a goose hanging from the ceiling. Not a real one: a carved, wooden one, suspended from a chain. Recognising it from a photo I blurted out: " That ' s Spencer Tracy ' s goose, isn't it? "

Spencer Tracy's goose ? ! No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I wanted to dive under the table in embarrassment. Hepburn threw her head back and roared with laughter.

" Yes ", she said. " And I gave it to him ! "

The laugh that followed began as a series of chuckles deep in her throat: a warm, infectious sound, like a bowling ball knocking over a cluster of ten pins. Then, she threw back her head, and let out a full-throated " Ha ! Ha ! Ha ! " that set the whole room vibrating. While she laughed, her ash-grey eyes narrowed like a cat's. Her cheeks reddened like a girl's. As a cloud shifted across the sky, Hepburn cried out: " Look at the sun ! The sun' s coming out ! It' s coming out ! "

It was the child in Hepburn that the world loved, and Hollywood paid her many millions of dollars for : that bubbly, head-strong, utterly authentic spirit.

" There's a magnificence that comes out of you, that comes out of your eyes, and your voice, and the way you walk ", Jimmy Stewart says to her at the end of the finest scene she ever played, that thirteen minute tour de force in *Philadelphia Story* when she and Stewart perform a pas de deux of wit and romance around a swimming pool. " You're lit from within! You're banked down deep with fires ! "

When I suggested to her that the secret of her success was that she had remained uncompromisingly herself, as children are fiercely and beautifully themselves, she gave me an impish look and said, quietly : " Lucky, lucky, lucky. "

(7,783 words)

The End

Simon Worrall
2003.

East Hampton, May