

*Lucy's innate talent for acting fascinates Steven. But is her alter ego a product of expertise, hallucination or something unearthly?*

## ALTER EGO

By Michael Watson

Too frequently the old question turns up in the journals. I wonder sometimes if people in our profession read articles other than their own. 'What do we mean by love,' they ask. I have to be careful what I say: Lucy would be terribly hurt if she had access to my early attempts to explain.

Lucy is perfect — or so I thought until recently. We met in a typically student way: she was doing teacher training practice in the school where I sat in on the career guidance person. My first impression (and again, she'd hate this) was of a girl who oozed sex. She looked younger than she was. She had the firm full breasts of teenage jail-bait — the first thing (or things) I noticed. She smiled at me to reveal two creases (not dimples) at each corner of her mouth. She has long blonde hair and liquid brown eyes. (God, that's corny). I can't go on: as a psychologist, I'm well aware of the human endocrine system's embarrassing mechanism. Suffice it to say that it was lust at first sight. Typical male, aren't I?

Lucy has a good degree in English; Drama is her core subject. I suppose this should've sounded an alarm. I plan to specialise in perception dysfunction — being paid a whole lot to tell people they're schizoid. After three wordless meetings in a corridor — and three radiant smiles — I asked her out. From then it was conveyor belt stuff towards my bedsit. Making love to Lucy was wicked.

My previous girlfriend wanted it known that she knew it all: it was as if she had a checklist of activities for me to tick off as the long night wore on. True, much of it was aimed at pleasing me (she reckoned) but I got the impression that one day she'd produce an itemised invoice.

Lucy, however, was an innocent — or so it seemed on that first shy encounter.

It was all a lie really: mere acting. After all, how many girls reach the age of twenty-two without having ... no, sorry, we're back at the menu and I can't go into detail: it would be make me appear even more of a pig.

I was fascinated by her ability to play the part of an imaginary person. She was utterly convincing in any role she chose. Her love of theatre was responsible, I thought. We went to plays and films a lot; we even watched TV drama instead of humping sometimes. She said that I'd become quite good at describing the character she was playing — and it didn't have to be a female role. She could change without warning: one moment a frightened virgin, the next a TV gay. Then, just as things began to blow my mind, she'd snap into her normal persona. In the dark, I could believe that I was having a succession of partners but it was always the real Lucy who ended the performance.

My bedsit was above a shop on the wrong side of Islington; she shared a flat in a snobby Hampstead avenue. The other two girls there were so busy at work that they had no social life. Lucy thought them boring; neither attracted me. Nevertheless they became fantasy figures in Lucy's repertoire. It was quite possible to believe that the girl beneath me was the little Asian virgin who temped in the City or the older one who turned out to be lesbian — fingers and tongue only, of course. How did Lucy know so much?

I found the answer in our third month together: her mother.

Lucy is an only child whose father is long gone. Her two stepfathers seem not to resent each other: one's West African and the other Hungarian. Her mother — Samra or Tzigany depending whether it's her ex or current husband in favour — gets her clothes from a school dressing up box. She has a smoke-damaged gravelly voice, a face lift, fantastic boob job and wonderful legs. She came as a shock.

But it was clear that Lucy had no wish to stay in her mother's presence for a second longer than necessary. She needed to be her own person but hadn't made up her mind who that person was.

"Do you smoke, Stevie?" Samra asked as Mojo, her ex, proffered what seemed to be a Silk Cut pack of home rolled cigarettes.

"It's Steven, not Stevie, Mummy," Lucy frowned after a quick glance at me.

"Spliffs," her mother smiled in case I hadn't noticed.

"Why not?" I replied, taking one.

Why I took it I can't explain. I'd tried the usual stuff at university but only in the interests of science (I told myself). We did an experiment with LSD once: highly illegal, of course. So I puffed away, becoming more and more fascinated by the smooth tanned cleavage above Samra's magenta vest. She grinned like a Cheshire Cat through the smoke, chatting about her daughter as if she wasn't there.

"She had this imaginary friend called Benny," she told me. "It started when she was three or four. We lived in a high-rise at the time: a dreadful silent tomb of a place with invisible neighbours. Lucy never had friends ..."

"Oh Mummy, you know I did," her daughter objected.

"No friends but Benny," Samra persisted. "Not while we were there."

Lucy looked embarrassed. It had struck me that her accent didn't match a Lewisham working-class background. I smiled knowingly at Samra.

"Perhaps she made friends at her elocution class," I suggested craftily.

"Or the drama group — there were some odd people there," Samra agreed.

Odd? Odder than her mother?

"Though they weren't friends as such," she continued, "role models ..."

Lucy muttered something angrily and left the room. I wanted to follow but Samra wagged a finger at me.

"She doesn't like to be reminded of where it all came from. I was on the stage, you know, though I never starred. Her father (rot him) disapproved and wouldn't let me travel. Why I married him ..."

"He was a good earner," Mojo prompted from his corner.

Samra nodded.

"And without the cash where would we be now?" she sighed.

Lucy and I returned home in silence. The dope had made my brain drift. I went through all the pros and cons of our relationship (horrible word) and pondered that word 'love'. Could I find a better girl than Lucy to settle with? What if, like her mother, she developed a wanderlust? I'm a great believer in genetics and know all about female attraction to father lookalikes. Am I her father? I smiled at the idea.

Later, as we undressed, she asked what had amused me.

"I was thinking of how so many girls marry men like their dads. I suppose your Mum's was a civil servant with a little moustache and wire-rimmed glasses."

"He was, actually," she frowned.

"Did you get on well?"

"Yes, I loved Grandad. He understood about Benny."

We didn't make love. We lay on our backs, hands clasped — a horizontal version of Adam and Eve. I had my speech ready.

"Would you like us to be married?" I asked.

"Yes, Steven," she replied simply — and we continued to lie there.

We made adjustments to our working lives. I found a new post at the Faculty of Psychiatry, Lucy sailed through her interview for a job at the comprehensive close to her flat. The Asian girl left first — the day after she found Lucy and I making love in the shower. The other girl wouldn't take the hint so we ignored her and treated the flat as our own. And then — as if we weren't lucky enough — my aunt died.

She hadn't lived at Netherley Farm for years. Most of the land had been sold off and the house was rented out to a self-sufficiency New Age freak and his several women and children. But further down the lane there was a labourer's cottage. It had no name but was marked on a Victorian map the solicitor sent me.

"Your aunt had work done to make it fit to rent out as a holiday home. The valuer wasn't impressed: though it's sound enough, there's no electricity, water or even a septic tank. It'll cost thousands to bring it up to standard for letting."

Without telling Lucy, I went there with a camcorder. The commune made me eat vegetables and drink goat's milk. They were relieved that I wasn't a profiteering developer with plans to dump a clutch of holiday lets on their doorstep. The eldest boy led me to the cottage rather like an African guide taking Big White Carstairs to a hidden temple.

"Watch out for *her*," he called.

He left me when the brambles and stinging nettles blocked our path. I could see the cottage a hundred yards further on up a steepish bank.

"It looks lovely," Lucy said as we watched the video. "Is that a New Ager?"

I rewound and paused the tape. A teenager in a long skirt was lugging a heavy pail from the undergrowth. I'd heard the spring but not put it on camera. I don't remember seeing the girl and she appeared in only a few dozen frames.

The video continued: shots of the broad valley, the honeysuckle and boarded windows. Lucy was delighted. She'd be like Marie Antoinette, acting the part of a lowly peasant before transforming herself into the switched-on producer of school plays. That's how I decided where we'd spend our honeymoon.

For each of the five weekends before the wedding, I drove a hire car loaded with DIY stuff down to Somerset. I paid the New Agers too much to trim the garden and cut steps into the steep bank. I splashed paint everywhere, took delivery of basic furniture and almost fell in love with one of the girls.

I suppose it was the one on the video. I think she must have realised what might happen because she took off whenever I went after her. The closest I got was twenty yards. She had long dark hair tied with a ribbon, she was slim — probably about sixteen, so it would've been legal — and always wore the same. I saw her gathering rosemary once.

"Your daughter's made a good job of the herb bed," I told the commune head.

"She has," the man agreed, glancing behind him.

But she wasn't there to be thanked. One of the others — a girl of twelvish with her father's dark looks — grinned at me as if aware that I fancied her sister.

Next night Lucy shed five years and played the part of a virginal country girl.

"Thank you, Sir," she said in a rural accent when I'd exhausted myself.

The wedding went as expected. I tried not to drink too much but failed. I danced with Tzigany (the ex was doing the catering) who wore a flamenco skirt, gold coin headband and low cut vest. Forgetting myself I squeezed a soya implant breast and was told to be careful not to get an eyeful.

"You're a sexy bugger," she remarked. "Lucy is too — takes after me."

The wedding night was like any other except that it took place in a country club hotel: all our neighbours were loud, energetic male golfers with trophy wives. Lucy hated it. Next morning we loaded the car at a supermarket and reached our secret destination at sevenish. I think Lucy expected to be taken to an all mod cons rented thatched cottage in a chocolate box village. Instead, I switched off the engine where the lane ends and you have to start walking. To my profound relief, she was delighted.

After we'd settled in she went upstairs; I went out for a breath of dusk air.

Minutes later, she crept up behind me — perhaps guessing what I had in mind. She'd changed into what I assume was the usual dress of a Victorian milk maid complete with smock over a laced bodice and bare feet. She'd even changed her name.

"I'm Lucinda, Sir, if it please you," she said with a dainty bob curtsey.

And so it was Lucinda (I had to play the game) who cooked our supper. She ignored the supermarket bags and used the vegetables the hippies had left with a congratulatory note. So we had soup, local cheese and bread, elderberry wine and plums. Thoughtfully, the hippies had provided some cannabis from their greenhouse. I puffed away but Lucy/Lucinda said she'd better tidy up.

I heard her clattering about outside — singing quietly one of the folk songs she uses in school plays — but then there was silence.

I don't know how she got passed me — the spliff must've been stronger than usual. I took the smoke-dimmed oil lamp up the steep staircase at tennish and found her asleep in the corner of the bedroom. She'd spread the duvet on the floor, put a pillow against the wall and was curled up beneath a sheet. At her feet was the smock-dress neatly folded but no underclothes.

"Lucy," I called, "come to bed."

She didn't move. I held the light above her head and watched. She was breathing quietly, a smile on her face but her eyes were still. She can act dead quite well. I grasped her shoulder but she merely squirmed and made a little mewling sound. The sheet slipped: she still wore her bodice — Lucy always sleeps nude.

I was tired. We had a week to catch up on our sex life so I fetched another sheet and was soon asleep on the bed.

The hard-to-get bit continued next morning. I awoke early but she was already up. She'd folded the duvet and sheet, opened the window and taken the oil lamp away. I went down in my boxer shorts but couldn't find her. She'd left breakfast for me: more plums, bread and cheese. I supplemented it with Weetabix and red-top milk but would've liked something cooked. She hadn't returned when I came down from dressing. I found her at the spring.

"So what's all this avoiding me — did I fart in bed?"

She looked puzzled.

“I’d to get things done, Sir,” she said in her new accent.

She smiled coyly before turning back to the spring.

The lads had cleared the ivy around a limestone cistern which I hadn’t seen before. The water was crystal clear and ice cold. She’d filled two buckets which seemed to have been made by sawing small beer barrels in half. These she picked up, staggering under their weight as she made her way to the cottage.

“Hey, Lucy, I’ll do that,” I called, but she carried on.

I found her next at the kitchen range,

I’d spent half a day tarding the thing up but didn’t expect it to be used. Lucy had lit the fire and was working hard at the bellows. I went up behind her and put my hands on her shoulders as I used to at home. (One of her fantasies was a ‘take me from behind’ act which started when I stripped all her clothes off in one downward movement). Lucy shrieked.

“Oh, Sir,” she said, a hand to her mouth, “you didn’t ought do that.”

“Lucy ...”

“Lucinda, Sir,” she corrected me with a faint smile and a bob.

“Lucinda, what must I do?”

“Well, Sir. You might be more gentle like a gentleman should.”

So I played the game as she wanted. There was to be no rushing in and no touching ‘those *secret* places’ (as she called them). She had the girlish giggle off perfectly.

But she had work to do. I watched her sweeping the floor, sewing a torn petticoat, peeling the rest of the vegetables, making scones and fetching firewood for the range. We ate our lunch at the kitchen table then went around the garden identifying herbs and flowers. She seemed to have learnt a long list of country names for things. The main thing was that she was so happy. I’d expected the novelty to wear off quickly but she seemed more excited by our cottage than when she first saw it.

We sat that evening on the bench overlooking the valley, drinking the last of the elderberry (it would be Tesco’s box plonk next day) she singing one of her songs to me as the sun went down. We sat until a chill breeze blew in and she shivered.

“Shall I fetch your sweat shirt?” I offered.

She looked at me quizzically and laughed.

I took her cold hand and stretched forward to kiss her lips. She teased by turning her face away so I kissed her neck and then her throat and then a little lower. She giggled.

This was fun. I remembered the first time we’d made love and repeated the procedure. She reacted perfectly, pretending surprise — shock even — when I began to unlace her bodice. She took no active part at all — which was exciting.

“Lucinda,” I whispered, “will you give yourself to me — your lawful wedded husband?”

In the gloom, I saw her eyes widen and her lips part to reveal a flash of white before she ran her tongue over her teeth.

“Husband, I’ve waited so long,” she sighed — and began to sing.

I watched her swaying gracefully in the half-light. She loosened her hair ribbon and shook her head. I was reminded of the film of Carmen we’d watched together. Like Carmen, she began a sinuous dance, removing her smock frock as she turned. She shrugged off the unlaced bodice, her back to me. The song stopped.

It was my turn. We’d done this before. I undressed completely before I moved behind her and drew down her slip — which was actually a pair of drawers with a string. With stage modesty, like a well-rehearsed stripper, she covered her breasts with her forearms. I turned her towards me. Her eyes flashed with mock surprise.

We weren’t at home in her flat with a nice soft bed within reach, we were on a recently strimmed wilderness on a chilly hillside. I picked her up meaning to carry her upstairs — then I thought, how do we get up there without breaking our necks?

Of course, it wasn’t so much necks as impetus I had in mind. Hard ground or no, the garden was to be our bridal bed.

She said nothing when I laid her down. I could wait no longer. The last time I’d been so rough with a girl was on the night I passed my GCSEs. Lucy took it all without a word, I’ve never known her so submissive.

When I'd finished, I lay panting on top of her rather ashamed of being so selfish. I raised my head intending to kiss her gently but stopped. Even in that light I could see that she'd been crying.

"What's wrong, Lucinda?" I asked.

She squirmed beneath me so I rolled off. She put a hand down and brought it up again close to her face.

"Must I bleed every time?" she faltered in that fake rural accent.

"OK, game over," I replied, getting to my feet.

She remained on the ground, her lips parted, staring up at my body.

"You'll get cold, come on — time to go in," I said, offering her a hand.

She gathered up her clothes before she took it. As I collected mine she went indoors, the clothes pressed against her chest.

That night she slept naked in my arms as usual.

The game wasn't over. I woke before her to the unfamiliar sound of a distant cock crow. Lucinda sat bolt upright and stared about the half-lit room.

"Why, here we are, my lover," she remarked — and beamed at me.

She seemed surprised that we should make love before breakfast. I was gentle, playing her game by pretending that she'd lost her virginity only hours before.

I tried to have her a second time but she slipped from my grasp and giggling, pulled on her smock. She shrieked downstairs before I could reach her. I followed and stood in the doorway as she sluiced her naked body in cold water from the cistern. I did the same while she dried herself with her smock. Shivering loudly, we ran indoors.

"Lucy — Lucinda — I love you," I told her.

Her smile was so radiant, triumphant even, that I realised for the first time what the word 'love' really means. We were one person.

She role-played happily all day. She examined her own clothes in awe as I unpacked them, pretended ignorance of the packaging of the shopping and was astonished when I said I'd cook lunch. If I liked veggie soup better and had a smock for myself, we could've played peasants for a week.

But on the third day, the bubble burst.

I suppose she had her plan worked out and I interrupted it. To keep up the act for all that time must've been difficult. We'd run out of ready meals and I'd no intention of living off the self-sufficiency freaks' salted goat. So I suggested a trip to the local market.

Still pretending she found her clothes awkward, she followed me down the hillside steps for the first time since our arrival. If the car had been abandoned for so long in London it would've been nicked but this was the sticks. I took out the key fob and pressed the remote. Dutifully the lights flashed. Lucy stopped and stared.

I thought she was ill. For a whole minute she said nothing — though her lips moved. She ran her hands down her body, pulled her tee shirt from her waistband and stared at it. She stared at me too, as though I'd suddenly materialised.

"Where are I?" she asked.

"Snap out of it, Lucy, we've shopping to do."

"It's you, Steven," she said, holding out a hand as if blind.

"And it's you, Lucinda," I responded tolerantly.

"Lucinda? Grandad used to call me that. Why not 'Lucy'?"

"OK, so it's Lucy again. You played your alter ego part brilliantly," I told her, taking her hand. "You really made my day doing your innocent virgin bit. There can't be many blokes who have a honeymoon like this."

I kissed her; she responded with the passion reserved for her more flamboyant roles. She reminded me of Samra/Tzigany whose breasts, unlike Lucy's, were man-made. Here, that sort of sex didn't feel appropriate: it was artificial.

"What a lot we townies miss," I remarked as I came up for air. "Simple pleasures make a such nice change — you can drop into the peasant role whenever: I loved it."

"What do you mean?" she frowned as we got into the car.

Fearing an argument, I said nothing but started the engine.

The sun had cleared the hill. Our holiday home in its shorn garden looked lived-in. Lucy peered at it, frowning.

"Who's that?" she asked.

It was the girl in the video. She stood beside the spring, straining to lift a pail.

Leaving Lucy in the car, I hurried nearer. When the steep hillside blocked my view I rushed up the steps and ducked below the gate. The girl was still at the spring, her back towards me. When she turned and smiled lovingly, I saw Lucy's face: the mouth was bounded by those little creases and the liquid brown eyes sparkled.

But Lucy — whose schizophrenia wasn't diagnosed for another year — was still in the car. She waved. I spun round. Her *alter ego* had vanished.

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