

MOLLY #1

MOLLY SWEENEY

ACT ONE

When the lights go up, we discover three characters — MOLLY SWEENEY, MR. RICE, FRANK SWEENEY — on stage. All three stay on stage for the entire play.

I suggest that each character inhabits his/her own special acting area — MR. RICE stage left, MOLLY SWEENEY centre stage, FRANK SWEENEY stage right (left and right from the point of view of the audience).

MOLLY SWEENEY and FRANK SWEENEY are in their late thirties — early forties. MR. RICE is older. Most people with impaired vision look and behave like fully sighted people. The only evidence of their disability is usually a certain vacancy in their eyes, or the way the head is held. MOLLY should indicate her disability in some such subtle way. No canes, no groping, no dark glasses, etc.

MOLLY. By the time I was five years of age, my father had taught me the names of dozens of flowers and herbs and shrubs and trees. He was a judge and his work took him all over the county. And every evening, when he got home, after he'd had a few quick drinks, he'd pick me up in his arms and carry me out to the walled garden.

"Tell me now," he'd ask, "Where precisely are we?"

"We're in your garden."

"Oh, you're such a clever little missy!" And he'd pretend to smack me.

"Exactly what part of my garden?"

"We're beside the stream."

"Stream? Do you hear a stream? I don't. Try again."

"We're under the lime tree."

"I smell no lime tree. Sorry. Try again."

"We're beside the sundial."

"You're guessing. But you're right. And at the bottom of the pedestal there is a circle of petunias. There are about twenty of them all huddled together in one bed. They are — what? — seven inches tall. Some of them are blue-and-white, and some of them are pink, and a few have big, red, cheeky faces. Touch them."

And he would bend over, holding me almost upside down, and I would have to count them and smell them and feel their velvet leaves and their sticky stems. Then he'd test me.

"Now, Molly. Tell me what you saw."

"Petunias."

"How many petunias did you see?"

"Twenty."

"Colour?"

"Blue-and-white and pink and red."

"Good. And what shape is their bed?"

"It's a circle."

"Splendid. Passed with flying colours. You *are* a clever lady."

And to have got it right for him and to hear the delight in his voice gave me such pleasure.

Then we'd move on to his herb bed and to his rose bed and to his ageratum and his irises and his azaleas and his sedum. And when we'd come to his nemophila, he always said the same thing.

"Nemophila are sometimes called Baby Blue Eyes. I know you can't see them but they have beautiful blue eyes. Just like you. You're my nemophila."

And then we'd move onto the shrubs and the trees and we'd perform the same ritual of naming and counting and touching and smelling. Then, when our tour was ended,

he'd kiss my right cheek and then my left cheek with that old-world formality with which he did everything; and I loved that because his whiskey breath made my head giddy for a second.

"Excellent!" he'd say. "Excellent testimony! We'll adjourn until tomorrow."

Then if mother were away in hospital with her nerves, he and I would make our own meal. But if she were at home she'd appear at the front door — always in her headscarf and Wellingtons — and she'd shout, "Molly! Daddy! Dinner!" I never heard her call him anything but Daddy and the word always seemed to have a mocking edge. And he'd say to me, "Even scholars must eat. Let us join your mother."

And sometimes, just before we'd go into that huge, echoing house, sometimes he'd hug me to him and press his mouth against my ear and whisper with fierce urgency, "I promise you, my darling, you aren't missing a lot; not a lot at all. Trust me."

Of course I trusted him; completely. But late at night, listening to mother and himself fighting their weary war downstairs and then hearing him grope his way unsteadily into bed, I'd wonder what he meant. And it was only when I was about the same age as he was then, it was only then that I thought — I thought perhaps I was beginning to understand what he meant. But that was many, many years later. And by then mother and he were long dead and the old echoing house was gone. And I had been married to Frank for over two years. And by then, too, I had had the operation on the first eye.

~~MR. RICE. The day he brought her to my house — the first time I saw them together — my immediate thought was: what an unlikely couple!~~

~~I had met him once before about a week earlier; by himself. He had called to ask would I see her, just to give an opinion, if only to confirm that nothing could be done for her. I suggested he phone the hospital and make an appointment in the usual way. But of course he didn't. And within two hours he was back at my door again with an enormous~~