

It is an appropriately serene afternoon in Regent's Park: hazy golden summer light, long shadows and the smell of cut grass. We walk, Claire Foy and I, from a long, chatty lunch in Primrose Hill towards the West End, where she is due to drop off a signed contract with her agent. The brown envelope in the small hemp carrier bag she is swinging commits her to an upcoming project: Damien (*La La Land*) Chazelle's *First Man* perhaps, playing the wife of Ryan Gosling's Neil Armstrong, or Fede Alvarez's *The Girl in the Spider's Web* – the fourth in the Millennium series – in which she will play Lisbeth Salander.

One thing is absolutely certain. This brown envelope does not contain a contract committing her to a third season of *The Crown*, Netflix's £100 million drama series written by Peter Morgan, in which she gave a masterfully poised Golden Globe-winning turn as Queen Elizabeth II. Foy's commitment was to only two series – the second of which is released next month. By the end of this forthcoming season, which spans the years between 1956 and 1963, the monarch will be approaching middle age and Foy will therefore, in the interests of authenticity, be replaced by an (as yet unnamed) older actress. "To say that Claire is going to be a hard act to follow is an understatement," says Morgan. "Everything – everything – pivoted on her performance, which was faultless, by the way. Without someone as technically brilliant and as hardworking as Claire at its centre, a show like *The Crown* would have completely disintegrated."

Disintegrate it didn't. If the naysayers needed proof that long-format television series were capable of filling a hole which a quick-fix society has left in our souls, *The Crown* was it. Clever writing, sumptuous production values and truthful performances gave it a core strength and solidity not unlike the 65-year reign of the woman whose life it follows – whether you support her or wish to depose her – and that has also threaded through the tapestry of our lives.

On paper, there is nothing to link the two women – one a jobbing actress from Buckinghamshire, the other a jobbing monarch from the mid-20th century – and yet... There is an essence, a certain poise, which chimes. It's there in the face, in the pretty plainness that simultaneously distinguishes and disappears, and it's behind

it in the sense of a spirit, a silent strength which speaks – from somewhere beyond that blue-eyed gaze – of a certain knowing.

Bubbling and chatting and sharing jokes, as a lunch companion Foy, in dressed-down, fresh-faced mode wearing a blue denim Citizens of Humanity boiler suit, silver Converse All Star hi-tops and with her hair loosely braided back from her face, behaves like an old friend. But behind the jokes – the stories of her two-year-old daughter, Ivy, thinking that every stately home or town hall they ever pass is "Mummy's work", and her entire extended family trying to use her as a means to get to Matt Smith (her co-star in *The Crown*) and "basically lick his face" – there is a secret self that is harder to reach. This self is the one whose parents divorced when she was eight, whose single mother then struggled to make ends meet, whose early teenage years (more on which later) were marred by a battle with juvenile arthritis, and whose later teenage years were shattered by the discovery – and subsequent treatment with steroids – of a benign tumour growing behind one eye. Little wonder that, when asked if she had anything in common with the Queen, whose elusive combination of delicacy and steeliness she portrays so flawlessly, Foy was reported to reply, "I guess we can both be tough old birds."

Making *The Crown* has required Foy to draw on all her deepest reserves of resilience. Famously hardworking – professional and uncomplaining to the umpteenth degree – she started filming the first series a mere four months after giving birth to her daughter. "On the first day of filming, I found myself halfway up a Scottish mountain, with engorged boobs and no way of getting down to feed my baby," she remembers. "I had to ring my husband [the actor Stephen Campbell Moore, whom she met on the set of *Season of the Witch*] and tell him to give her formula. It was like someone had stamped on my heart and, as I sat in a Land Rover trying to get a broken breast pump to work, I felt I'd made the worst mistake of my life." In retrospect, Foy – who had a very traumatic birth involving haemorrhages and blood transfusions – thinks her hormonal exhaustion might have served her well. "Because I was so tired, I just played each moment as each moment," she explains. "I didn't over-think it, and I genuinely didn't have the energy to invent any emotions that weren't there.

It was just one steady bulldozer of emotion pushing me all the way through."

For season two – in which we see the Queen entering middle age, with all the accompanying crises (particularly within her marriage) that that might entail, and her sister Margaret embarking on an explosive relationship with society photographer Tony Armstrong Jones (Matthew Goode) – Foy had a different kind of hardship to contend with. As well as the pressure of the success of the show, and always being "mindful of complacency", she had to juggle the demands of her work – a rigorous, sometimes six-day-a-week shooting schedule sustained over nine months – with the needs of her family. Ever the company player, Foy – who, for the most part, had Ivy with her on location ("she's basically in love with Matt [Smith]") – took it upon herself to speak up for everyone when, on occasion, the demands of the production became too much. "Because I

was number one on the call sheet, I was in a position to stand up for my department and say, 'I don't think you can work people on a Sunday. And no, I'm not being antsy and I'm not being tricky. I just think it's out of order and we all need a day at home with our families.'"

While on the one hand the success of *The Crown* spurred cast and crew on – "Everyone upped their game," says Morgan – on the other, it played against them. For Foy and Smith, in

particular, days off from filming were spent promoting the first series around the world. "Eleven-hour flight there, blah, blah, blah about the show, 11-hour flight back and straight back on set saying, 'Oh, that was glamorous.' Not! And now I've got an eye infection..." By the time filming finished in May, Foy was a physical and emotional wreck. As the director called "Cut!" on the final scene – an exchange between her and Vanessa Kirby (Princess Margaret) – disco lights started flashing and a spontaneous party was held on set. "And I didn't cry or laugh or feel anything particularly. All I could think was, 'I need to go home now.'"

To say that *The Crown* has been life-changing for Foy is an understatement. Little more than a year ago she was relatively unknown, aside from her complex portrayal of Anne Boleyn in the BBC's *Wolf Hall*. Now she is a *Vogue* cover girl ("Who would have thought it? Claire Foy on the cover of *Vogue!*" she laughs), the star of a show that has been watched by tens of millions around the globe. "I know, it's completely > 154

"If this had happened to me when I was 23, I probably would have spun into a vortex"