

MARY PLAIN TURNS 40.

by

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EMPTY STAGE. A WOMAN AND MAN STAND ON OPPOSITE SIDES, OBLIVIOUS TO EACH OTHER. BOTH HOLD MOBILE PHONES. THE WOMAN STEPS FORWARD AND ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE DIRECTLY.

CAROLE: So this is me. My fortieth birthday.

SHE TURNS HER MOBILE PHONE ROUND, TAKES A SNAP AND WE SEE THE PICTURE PROJECTED ON THE BACK WALL. A CROWD OF PEOPLE. A PEACE RALLY.

CAROLE: Not what you expected? Not quite what I expected. I don't usually like crowds. I'm a homebody. But.. well, here's how it came about. In my twenties I guess I was as radical as most young people. Talked the talk. A lot. Never really walked the walk though. (pause) I grew up in the shadow of the Greenham Common women and I guess I was always afraid I might end up like them. Now here I am. Forty, unmarried, no children, stable job... Bridget Jones I'm not, I can tell you. (pause) It has been a slippery slope to radicalism. My descent is due to Force of circumstances. What do they call it? Circumstances beyond my control? (pause) You see, increasingly, over the years, I somehow just couldn't come to terms with switching my brain off and believing all those things I knew in my heart really weren't true. Meringue dresses. One true soul mate.. Capitalism cares. Perhaps if I'd married. Had children. Had an "investment" in the future it might have been different. I'd have been so busy protecting that investment I'd have had no time to stop and think. I may not have talked the talk in years, but I've begun to think the thought. And today, for the first time, I'm ready to

walk the walk. (pause) I suppose it came about in stages. As all those milestones of mythology passed me by. (pause) At thirty I stopped wearing make-up. I didn't shave my hair, or sneak off to hide up trees with Swampy, but I did decide that what with animal testing and with world poverty, me "putting a face on" was not imperative for the survival of the race. In fact, when you think about it, there's far too many masks being worn by all sorts of people all the time, and for women to be terrified of being seen "without their face" on seems to me to prove that feminism never really changed anything. Or that we became our own oppressors.

Anyway, at thirty five I stopped celebrating. Christmas, birthdays, you name it. Just stopped. It took a while for other people to come to terms with what seemed like a stark truth to me. I don't believe in God, I don't like shopping and I find capitalism consumerism notions of exchange of booty to be somewhat distasteful. A kind of grown up equivalent of "same to you" And whenever I tried to buy something I got this picture of a starving Guatemalan peasant (not that I know exactly where Guatemala is of course) or a benighted woman working in an Asian sweat shop, and the urge to consume just passed.

HER PHONE RINGS.

CAROLE:

Excuse me.

ANSWERS PHONE.

CAROLE: It's Jane. My best friend. We're supposed to meet her, but as you can see...

PHONE PICTURES FLASH UP ON BACK WALL PROJECTION AS SHE SPEAKS.

A TEXT C. A PICTURE OF A SHEEP. TEXT
"AT"

CAROLE: How do I know it's her? She's the only person I know
who's got the hang of this picture messaging.

PAUSE

CAROLE: What? You don't get it either. Look. (explaining)
See. You. Female sheep. At. See you at..

PICTURE OF NASSER HUSSEIN FLASHES
UP.

CAROLE: Protest. (*laughs*) I know. That one requires a bit of
lateral thinking. Nasser Hussein.
Professional cricketer, Ashes fifth test? Pro
- test. That's the beauty of these things.
You invent your own private language. Look
at all these people. A crowd of tens of
thousands of people, all caught up in their
own worlds.

SHE POINTS TOWARDS THE MAN.

CAROLE: And most of them on mobile phones. (*in hushed tones*)
Probably reporting the action to someone too
lazy to get out of bed!

CAROLE GETS ONTO HER PHONE.

THE MAN STEPS FORWARD. ADDRESSES THE
AUDIENCE DIRECTLY.

STUART: These are the most incredible devices. I mean it.
Technology has finally come up with something
useful. (*pause*) Sorry? What am I doing here?
Protesting of course. "Not in my name". And..
well, there are other reasons. There are
always other reasons aren't there. (*pause*) I'm
a semiotician. (*laughs*) I can hear you. You
think this is the only way I can experience
companionship. A semiotician. What's that
when it's at home. I've had it all. Okay.
Simple explanation. I'm interested in the
spontaneous creation of language. Words and

pictures. Spontaneity in general.. like, this protest is a kind of spontaneous gesture on the part of many people. It has a semiotic significance over and above a bunch of people standing around in George Square. (pause) Semiotics? Okay. I can describe it to you easily enough. Using this.

HE WAVES MOBILE PHONE AT AUDIENCE.

HE CLICKS PHONE.

PICTURE OF SADDAM HUSSEIN.

STUART: Okay. You see a picture of Saddam Hussein. You recognise it. But you also contextualise it. And in doing so you give it a semiotic significance. It can mean "the great evil dictator" it can mean "purveyor of weapons of mass destruction" it can mean "leader of the faithful" or.. you can make up your own meaning. For example. My colleague Bob sent me this and when he sends me a picture of Saddam Hussein he isn't trying to stir me into political warmongering frenzy, he's actually saying "I am sorry." (pause) You don't get it? Okay. Look it's Sadd - am. I am sad. I am sorry. (pause) Sounds longwinded? Stupid? Yes, but that's the beauty of these gadgets. You create your own private language, and it can be so personal that you can share a vocabulary with only one other person, so privacy is ensured. (pause) And it's fun. Yes FUN. Look. I'll send a message -prove it.

HE CLICKS AWAY. THE IMAGES COME UP ON THE PROJECTION AS HE SPEAKS. A COW. TEXT M E TEXT A T. PICTURE BICYLCE.

STUART: Meet.. me.. at.. rally. (pause) It's simple. The cow. Meat. M E, me. Now there I could have just taken a picture of my mugshot and sent it. But I have an ulterior motive here, I

don't want the recipient to guess who I am so.. A T. At. Still haven't got a good picture stored for that one yet. And the bicycle. Raleigh. Those of you of a certain age will remember the days long before mountain bikes, and even before choppers, when a real bike was a Raleigh bike. So you see, I have to be texting someone who understands. Someone who shares the same cultural references as me. Someone..

HE FADES OUT AS LIGHTS UP AGAIN ON CAROLE. WHO ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE.

CAROLE: It's Jane. Meet me at the rally.

TALKS TO THE PHONE, HOLDING IT AT A DISTANCE, TO SHOW SHE'S NOT OBVIOUSLY NOT ACTUALLY CONNECTED, BUT RATHER RANTING AT THEIR GREAT IDEA.

CAROLE: Yes. Great idea. It was a great idea last week. Last night even. But we didn't factor in the tens of thousands of people. Meet me in George Square at 11. Hmm. And here we are all packed in like sardines and no sign of Jane. (pause) No worries. Technology to the rescue.

HOLDS UP PHONE AND TAKES A PICTURE. PROJECTS ON BACK SCREEN A BUILDING.

CAROLE: Now. I send her this and she'll know where I am relative to it, and she can make her way there. Or send me one of where she is and we can try and make our way towards each other. I just press REPLY and there is goes.

FADE DOWN ON CAROLE AWAITING RESPONSE.

FADE UP ON STUART.

STUART: We can use the thing like a compass. See. I'll take a picture of the most prominent thing... here,

TAKES PICTURE, IT PROJECTS ON BACK WALL.

STUART: The statue... and.. press send.. we can work our way towards each other by taking pictures.. and she has no idea..

FADE DOWN STUART, FADE UP CAROLE.

CAROLE: Oh, we're moving now. That could add complexity. As you can see, I don't have a lot of personal space right now so.. I'll just have to go with the flow I suppose.

SHE PLAYS WITH HER PHONE FOR A MOMENT. THEN ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE DIRECTLY AGAIN.

CAROLE: Sorry? (pause) You didn't think a woman like me would be so techno? (pause) I'm forty you know. Child of the sixties. I've lived with all the great discoveries. Automatic washing machines, polystyrene, polyester, plastic.. you name it.. and you know, it's my childhood which has prepared me for this device. Made for me it was. (pause) How? (pause) Mary Plain. (pause) Mary Plain? You don't know Mary Plain? The bear? The one who comes after Winnie the Pooh and Teddy Robinson on the reading list. (pause) Showing my age? D'you know what. I don't care. Not today. Forty and proud. So. Mary Plain. She was a bear in a book who lived in Berne zoo. And she used to write just like this picture text thing lets you do. Words and pictures when the words were too difficult to spell. Jane and I loved Mary Plain. We used to write to each other in Mary Plain style. Pictures and words. It was like our own language. It was great. Something I never really grew out of. I did it with my first boyfriend too.. but then.. well, you know first love, that's another story. But a girlfriend? A girlfriend is like a teddy bear. With you forever. And now Jane and I can relive our youth, via picture

messaging. Mary Plain lives.

PICTURE OF AN EYE THEN OF AN EAR
THEN A BUILDING PROJECTS ON BACK
WALL. CAROLE LOOKS AT PHONE.

CAROLE: See. This say's "I'm here" An eye for I, an ear for here and a picture of the building for where she is. Of course she could have just sent the picture of the building, but this is more fun. And it's right over there, and no one's moving fast, so we might as well have fun. (starts) Oh, oh, here we are, moving on again.

CLICKS PICTURE.

CAROLE: I'll just send my location. Click reply. And it's gone. That simple.

FADE DOWN CAROLE, FADE UP STUART.

STUART: We haven't met in ages. She may even have forgotten about me. It was her friend suggested it. A reunion. Me. I couldn't forget her. Once met, never forgotten, know what I mean? And when you get to a certain age, people from, well, your past, become increasingly important to you. Is that just part of the mid life crisis? Well, the mid life crisis that led me here started via that website, friends reunited. She wasn't on it of course. She wouldn't be. Not her thing. But her friend was. And we started an e-conversation as you do.. very enlightening.. and the rest... well.. oh, picture coming through..

FADE DOWN STUART, FADE UP CAROLE.

CAROLE: I'm really proud of myself actually. Forty years old and taking part on my first real protest. Not in my name. No war in Iraq. No war anywhere. Something worth NOT fighting for eh? And alone, here, in a crowd, when usually the thought of the high street on a Saturday

afternoon is enough to give me claustrophobia. Yet here I am. Part of it. Part of something much bigger than me. The biggest birthday party..

PICTURE COMES THROUGH.

CAROLE: We're getting closer.

LOOKS AROUND. POINTS OUT TO THE AUDIENCE.

CAROLE: If I can just get.. over there.. past this.. beyond that.. chicken costume.. Tony Blair mask.. wow, the lengths some people will go to.. if.. then.. we should be just about right next to each other. Okay. For once in your life, think like Aunty Rosa at a jumble sale. Push for your life and take no prisoners..

FADE DOWN ON CAROLE, FADE UP ON STUART

STUART: Of course she's never really been one for surprises.. but..

HE CLICKS A FEW BUTTONS IN THE PHONE.

FADE DOWN STUART, FADE UP CAROLE. SHE INTERPRETS THE PICTURES AS THEY PROJECT ON THE BACKSCREEN.

TOM HANKS. RICHARD BRANSON. A BOX WITH A RIBBON ROUND IT.

CAROLE: Big Surprise. Big. Tom Hanks was the actor in the film. Sir. Sir Richard Branson. Prize. That's the box.. it's the one Mary Plain always used for prize. (pause) Of course she didn't use Tom Hanks or Richard Branson.. we've adapted our language for modern use. It's constantly changing. Like an annoying in joke that mutates daily.. annoying to everyone else. But they don't have to share this. So it's okay. Just me and Jane. Me and

Jane and Mary Plain. (pause) Of course, I'm not sure what she means by it.. but it is my birthday so..

SHE FIDDLES WITH THE PHONE.

PICTURE OF KANT (PHILOSOPHER) AND A TON WEIGHT COME UP.

CAROLE: Can't wait. Can't. Kant. The philosopher. I know that's a bit left field but.. and wait.. a weight. Another Mary Plainism. Press reply. She'll get it. (pause) But she didn't tell me where she was.

URNS ROUND TO LOOK FOR JANE.

STUART APPROACHES FROM BEHIND.

CAROLE TURNS BACK ROUND. THEY COME FACE TO FACE.

STUART: Surprise. Carole. Big surprise?

CAROLE: No. Stuart? It can't be..

STUART: Happy birthday. The big four oh, eh?

CAROLE: It's been over twenty years... how could you.. what a coincidence. It must be true, what I always thought, that there's only about a thousand people in the world, and they all, they ARE all here today.

STUART LAUGHS.

CAROLE: I can't believe it. Jane will be amazed. She should be here any time now

SHE WAVES HER PHONE AT STUART

CAROLE: We arranged to meet here, but.. and we've been using these as compasses.

STUART SHOWS HER HIS PHONE.

STUART: Jane? Are you sure? Did you ring her?

CAROLE: No I.. she..

STUART: Did you actually dial her number?

CAROLE: No. I pressed reply, but.. only Jane..

STUART KEYS A COUPLE OF TIMES ON HIS
PHONE.

CAROLE'S PHONE BEEPS.

PICTURES PROJECT ON BACK WALL.

MISTY SKY. SHEEP. PICTURE GLOVE.
TEXT "G" TEXT "X" PICTURE. POT OF
STEW

CAROLE INTERPRETS IT.

CAROLE: Missed you. Glove, no G, love Stew. (pause) How did
you?..(pause) did Jane put you up to this?

STUART: Kind of. But I still remembered Mary Plain. She
played a bit part in my life too you know.

CAROLE: So.. um.. so.. what do you do?

STUART: I'm a semiotician.

CAROLE: A what?

STUART WINKS AT THE AUDIENCE.

STUART: A semiotician..

CURTAIN.