

A hand-drawn illustration in a sketchy, artistic style. At the top, a thick, dark grey horizontal band represents a curtain rod. From it, two light grey curtains hang down, tied back with small bows on either side. The background is plain white. In the center, the word 'Mary' is written in a large, elegant, cursive script. Below it, the word 'EXTRAORDINARY' is written in a smaller, all-caps, typewriter-style font. At the bottom of the image, a row of four rectangular shapes, representing the backs of chairs, is drawn with dark grey outlines and light grey shading.

Mary

EXTRAORDINARY

Barely being able to open her eyes, Mary awoke in bed next to her husband. Today was the day, she realized. Fueled by a sudden outburst of excitement, she pushed the blanket away and got up.

"Good morning," her husband murmured.

As a reply, Mary simply kissed him on the forehead and strolled into the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later she was ready to meet the world, while her partner was merely just tumbling outside of the bedroom, completely naked, rubbing his eyes. Mary looked him up and down and grinned. "Mister Andrew Aldaria, in the flesh," she remarked.

He playfully winked at her through half-open eyes. "Are you still here?"

"Of course not, I'm just a figment of your imagination," she said, turning around on her heels, walking towards the door.

"In that case, my mind is truly blessed today," Andrew replied.

Mary waved goodbye over her right shoulder, opened the door and disappeared.

Today was the day, Mary thought again, as she took a deep breath to fight the anxiety. The train station lay a mere three miles away from her house, enough time to examine her plan once more, smiling at everybody passing by, for they did not know of her splendid undertaking.

At the station, she checked the time, realizing that another five minutes had to pass before the train would arrive. Mary looked at the few people standing around her. A man in a suit, wearing a hat and holding a stick in his right hand, an elder woman with a huge plastic bag under her right arm, and two young girls reading a book together and eating ice cream.

"Tough crowd," Mary mumbled to herself.

The train finally arrived with a deafening sound of the engine thumping and the wheels grinding to a halt. There was only one car attached to the locomotive - obviously enough space for the population of the area. The door to the car opened and a man in uniform jumped out, putting on a grimace of importance. The girls boarded the train first. The man in the suit kindly helped the elder woman up the stairs, and then gestured Mary to go ahead.

Alright, Mary thought. Play the part of the woman and boost the gentlemen's ego. She nodded, smiled, and climbed into the car, followed by the man.

Mary took a seat next to a window and hoped that the man would sit in front of her, kind of expecting him to be of the slimy flirting sort. But he went past without even regarding her.

"Hm," Mary said, looking outside.

Well, she thought, it's either him, or the granny, or the annoying kids.

Plus, the man appeared to be on a business trip and not residing in this town, rendering it highly unlikely for him to know her.

She rose from her seat, targeted the man in the suit, followed him and while sitting down in front of him, she asked: "Do you mind?"

The man, seemingly surprised, looked at her, and stuttered: "O-of course not!"

Mary feigned reluctance, then her right arm shot forward, offering a handshake. "I'm Sarah Landauer, I work in the central department of Biological Engineering," she said, drawing up her cheeks and flashing her teeth.

He grabbed her hand. "Sam Twain, pleased to make your acquaintance! Biological Engineering, you say?"

"Yes, I apologize for being so straightforward about it," Mary said and tilted her head slightly as if she were blushing. "Judging from your appearance I figured you for a man well versed in business terms."

He cleared his throat and his hands moved around on his suit, rearranging various parts.

"I am, I am! Well, more of a political figure now, but I was a salesman before that."

"Ah," Mary said.

"You seem to have quite an interesting job, no wonder you long to share that experience, I suppose," Sam continued.

"Yes, indeed! I'm just so excited because recently we have found a cure for cancer!" Mary said with an almost childish expression.

Sam blinked. "What?"

Mary held an index finger in front her lips. "Sshhh, it's still a secret," she whispered, looking right and left to make sure nobody else was too close.

Sam's eyes widened. "Why, that's wonderful!" he exclaimed.

"Not so loud!" Mary whispered, wildly moving both of her hands up and down.

"I apologize," Sam responded with a low voice, leaning forward.

"You know what else we found out a few days ago?"

"What?" Sam said, leaving his mouth open, staring at the woman in front of him.

"We've successfully mixed plants with embryos!" She symbolized the act by gently folding her hands. "The baby was carried out and given birth to by one of our male researchers, and the little boy is now fifty percent photoautotroph!"

Sam raised an eyebrow. "You mean... What?"

"His skin releases oxygen!" Mary explained with heavy emphasis on the last word.

"Isn't that wonderful?" She gazed into the distance, as if the world were suddenly engulfed in utter happiness.

Sam remained silent.

Mary shrunk back from an angel into a shy figure, her head hanging low. "You don't believe me."

The man realized his petrified posture, sat upright and hastily replied: "Of course, of course, I believe you! It just boggles my mind! The sheer weight of your discoveries is mighty staggering; my mind simply needs time to process."

With a pouting mouth, Mary looked up again and folded her arms. "I shouldn't have put the weight on you then, it was quite imprudent of me. Can I still assume that nobody else is going to hear about our little talk?"

"Yes, yes, you have my word," Sam assured, nodding repeatedly.

Mary left her seat and returned to the previous location, leaving a perplexed Sam alone with his incredible secrets.

An hour later Mary was sitting on the stage in the empty theater hall with her friend Elysa just walking in.

"So, how did it go?" Elysa asked, her shimmering golden dress reflecting the spotlights on the ceiling. Mary stood and embraced her.

"It was terrific, just like you said it would be," Mary said.

They sat down at the edge, facing the seemingly endless rows of empty red seats, fading into darkness.

"Will you be doing it again?" Elysa asked, while placing a cigarette on her lips and lighting it with a match, which afterwards she waved through the air until only gray smoke remained.

The no smoking sign at the right side of the scene seemed to scoff at her with angry eyes.

Mary hesitated. "I believe I will, yes, although the rate my heart kept pounding at all the while made me worry for a minute or two," she finally said, chuckling afterwards.

Elysa firmly enclosed the cigarette with her lips, took a long pleasurable draw - highlighting the end of the cigarette as if it were now active and ready to kill - and exhaled a remarkably soft cloud.

"I would say," Elysa began, not looking at Mary. "Do it one more time on a stranger." Mary agreed, just as other dancers joined them.

"How was rehearsal?" Andrew asked his wife, who was sitting next to him at the dining table. He took a fork full of noodles off his plate and almost greedily stuffed his mouth.

Mary swallowed and shrugged. "Well, you know, the usual. People coming late, people complaining, people yelling, people hurting themselves." She took a quick glance through one of the kitchen windows into the night, and continued eating. For a while, they were occupied chewing and drinking.

"Anything happening at the bank?" she asked.

"Still haven't slept with the secretary, if that's what you're implying," Andrew joked.

"I believe he doesn't like me."

"Ain't that a shame," Mary said with a grin and pressed the glass of water on her lower lip.

"Do you mind?" Mary asked while placing her bottom on the soft seat in front of a - seemingly married - woman.

The train had been unusually late this day, which had given Mary a few more persons to choose from.

The woman shook her head and kept focusing on her book.

Mary adjusted her - fake - glasses, and pulled down the lower end of her black skirt towards her knees.

"Excuse me," Mary began.

The woman in front of her drew her gaze away from the world inside her hands, and focused on the intruder.

Mary stretched out her hand. "Sylvie Martins."

The woman, minding her good manners, shook Sylvie's hand. "Tina," she said, obviously not telling her full name on purpose.

"May I inquire about the author of your book?" Sylvie asked, pointing at the item of interest.

"Stam Durkenbarg," Tina replied.

Sylvie rolled her eyes upwards as if searching for an answer in the air. "Hmm, never heard of that one," she said, returning her attention back to her victim.

"It is a newly printed version of a very rare book, written almost two hundred years ago," Tina explained, noticing that her mouth had run away with said words without asking for permission beforehand.

"Are you a collector?" Sylvie wondered.

"Librarian," Tina mumbled, and stuck her nose back into her book. "So, I suppose, yes. In a way I collect them."

"Uh-huh," Sylvie said.

For a moment, she watched the distorted sunlit landscape outside. Wait a bit, Mary thought.

She allowed another quick examination of Tina and her apparent obsession with books, and reached into her black purse, producing her mobile phone. Her fingers dialed an imaginary number and Sylvie pressed the device to her ear, waiting for the fictitious callee to answer.

"Yes, this is Sylvie, how is he?" Sylvie said, loud and clear, so Tina would understand every word. "Yes, use the water to wake him up, and go through the procedure once again. I promise you - he will talk! We need the location!"

Sylvie paused, listening to what the silent electronic piece was telling her, looking concentrated. "I know that," she continued. "It's tough on you, hard to cope with. Hell, I dream about the scenes I've experienced every second night." She touched her forehead with her free hand and then nodded twice, as if trying to console the speaker on the other end. "Just once more, okay? It's really, really important. Okay - Yes, I'll be there soon. Bye."

She removed the phone from her ear, stared at the display for a while, then threw the device back into her purse - and sighed.

"Police?" Tina asked, out of the blue.

Sylvie, acting surprised, spied over her shoulder, checking for prying eyes or ears, and said: "FBI."

"Tough job, I hear?" Tina slowly closed her book and placed it on her lap.

"I, uh, shouldn't really talk about it," Sylvie answered, and strengthened her presentation by throwing another nervous look to the right. "But yes, it has been tough, especially in the past few weeks." Her low voice obviously made an impression on Tina, as she now seemed kind of excited as well.

"This is not your uniform, I presume?" Tina remarked with a frown.

"No, I was actually having a day off," Sylvie explained, brushing a strand back behind her ear. "But they kept calling me, so I had no choice and gave in. I've been visiting a friend, so I'm not wearing my suit."

"It sounded like you were urging a colleague to continue with an ongoing torture," Tina said, folding her arms above her book.

Sylvie swallowed and looked away.

"I apologize if I have offended you, Ms. Martins."

"No, it's just - you make it sound like a game children aren't allowed to play, disregarding the seriousness of the affair. Since you obviously listened so hard, you might have picked up the bit where I talked about my nightmares." A tear crawled onto the stage and ran down Sylvie's left cheek. She closed her eyes and hid them behind her right hand.

"I'm-" Tina said, but the rest of the sentence got stuck in her throat, her chin moving nonetheless. Then she shook her head and frowned again.

"Can I have a hug?" Sylvie sobbed, still hiding behind her curtain of fingers. It took a moment until Tina realized that Sylvie wasn't kidding. She put her book aside, stood and approached the FBI agent. As if she were about to touch fire, her arms embraced Sylvie's body with almost unbearable insecurity. Sylvie sobbed louder.

The awkward situation ended with Sylvie raising her head and saying: "Thank you." Tina sat down again, carrying a puzzled expression; probably unsure, whether to be worried about Sylvie's predicament or her sanity.

The FBI agent wiped her face, sneezed - which was not planned, but Mary found it just perfect anyhow - and chuckled. "I am so embarrassed right now, and I'm sure you're feeling far worse, Tina. I'm so, so, so sorry."

"No, it's o-"

"No, no, let me talk now," Sylvie said and leaned forward. "Let me do you a favour. Do you own a car? Or your husband, maybe?"

"My husband? How did you-"

Sylvie pointed at the ring.

"Oh," Tina said, nudging the golden accessory on her ring finger a bit. "Well, yes, my husband owns a car."

"Great," Sylvie said, dove into her purse with both hands and fished for a pencil and a piece of paper. She found said items and placed them in Tina's hands. "Write down your licence number and I will make sure that you will never have to worry about parking tickets anymore. Leave your car anywhere you want. It's taken care of."

Tina paused, skeptical. "You can do that?"

Sylvie froze. A black cloud formed above her head, lightning struck her eyebrows. She sighed, stood, hung her purse over her shoulder and shot a hurt look at Tina.

"I feel insulted just being in your vicinity."

Mary marched to the other end of the car, keeping out of sight for the rest of the way.

Elysa sighed. "Do you have any cigarettes? I forgot my pack at home."

Mary shook her head, while stretching her legs.

"Damn," Elysa said and nervously leaned left, right, and left again. "FBI agent, huh?"

"Yes," Mary replied. "You know, I'm not sure if people are actually buying into my acts, or just don't know what else to do."

"Once again, girls, from the start," a man in black outfit yelled at the stage from one of the seats, looking up from his script.

The dozen people on the scene reverted back to their starting positions, including Mary and Elysa.

"Whatever the case - you've got to continue, it *is* good practice. Tomorrow, do what we talked about," Elysa whispered in Mary's ear. "I brought the bag."

The man clapped, and the stage began to fill with choreographed movement and sung lyrics.

"Morning," Andrew mumbled while entering the bathroom, in which Mary was taking a shower.

"Hey, you're up early," Mary said, with water splashing around her. "What happened to your twenty minutes of snoozing?"

"I thought I might use the opportunity to see my wife naked for once," Andrew replied, scratching his head. "Say, when will you be back from rehearsal today?" Mary turned off the shower, slid the plastic curtain aside, wrapped her body in a towel and gracefully whirled out of the bathroom. "Late," she sang. "Oh, so very late!"

When she was fully dressed, Mary went outside and set out for the train station, humming a tune.

A few minutes later she arrived at her destination, the giant building artistically mantled with glass. She looked at it from afar, checked her watch - and turned around and started walking. By now, she thought, Andrew must be gone.

Back home, after realizing that - yes, indeed - the place where Andrew's car was usually parked was empty, she unlocked the door and went inside. She grabbed Elysa's bag out of her closet in the bedroom and carried it into the bathroom.

"See you later, Mary," she said to her mirrored self.

Upon opening the bag, she saw that it contained a white shirt, a black coat, black trousers and black socks, dark brown leather shoes, rings with artificial diamonds, extra reflective sunglasses, a fake beard and blue male underwear shorts.

She started slipping out of her clothes and began imagining the scene at the bank.

"I'll move in," she said to herself, while peeling off her jeans, "I'll walk to the counter, actually no, I think I'll hold still for a moment in the center of the bank, so I'll look more important."

The jeans landed in a corner, followed by slip, tank top and bra.

"Then I'll point at the man, or woman, at the counter and march right at him! Or her. You, I'll say. You! I need to talk to you."

She grabbed the blue underwear out of the bag and put her right foot through, followed by the left.

"I'm, uh, what shall I call myself, Frank. Frank Northernstein, okay. Stein sounds rich. Anyway, I'll say, my name is Frank Northernstein, I demand an explanation! And the person will be simply baffled, and say, yes, sir, how can I help you? And I'll throw hell upon that poor bastard."

Now was the trousers' turn to be put on.

"And I will say, you are charging me so much money for holding my account, I could probably start building a mansion in three months!" She giggled, buttoned up her trousers and paused. She looked down her chest. "Hm," she said and recovered her bra from the corner.

"Then the clerk will say, oh, Mister Northernstein, I'm so sorry, I'm sure we can reach some sort of compromise and-"

Mary threw her right fist into her left palm.

"And I'll say, quiet! It is I who is talking now! And I am not finished yet!" She reached for the white shirt with one hand and raised the index finger of the other. "You've lowered my interest rate to a level where I'm starting to think, keeping all my money in a safe at home is more lucrative! How do you justify that?"

She caught her breath and worked the shirt's buttons.

"And I'll hear something like, well, Mister Northernstein, I apologize, I'm not the one making these changes!"

Two buttons left.

"And I'll shoot flames out of my mouth and say, I do not care who changes the rates, I just want them reverted to how they were two years ago when I was stupid enough to create an account in this very bank!"

Mary examined the contents of the bag more carefully. "Where's the tie? Oh, here." The black tie soon hung around her neck.

"And then, haha, I will ask," she pointed at her reflection in the mirror, "for the supervisor! Which happens to be," she formed a kissing mouth and spoke in an exaggerated french accent, "Monsieur Andrew!"

With a few quick movements, she formed her hair into a ponytail. "Hmm," Mary said. "Needs more gel." A few moments later her hair oozed with setting lotion.

Her phone, hidden in her jeans on the ground, rang. Mary quickly washed her hands, dug the phone out of the pile of clothes in the corner, and answered the call. "Hey, darling."

"Hey, just wanted to say, good luck! You know, having the first big rehearsal today, playing everything from start to finish," Andrew said.

"Thank you, oh, I gotta hang up, we're about to start, thank you, love you," Mary rambled. She pressed a red button, flung the device on the jeans and returned her attention to her transformation.

"Anyway," she said while trying to fixate the beard from ear to ear, "I'll be talking to Andrew directly then, ranting about the low interest rates and hoping that he won't see through my masquerade! And before the clerk finds out my name isn't in the system, I will disappear - and voilà!" She looked at her newly acquired facial hair, moving her head slightly to the side. "Mission accomplished."

She picked up her mobile and called for a taxi, which would arrive in approximately ten minutes, according to the lady on the other end.

The poor phone landed on the jeans again, and Mary continued putting on socks, shoes and finally, the coat, which was long enough to reach her lower legs. She grabbed her keys, walked through the living room and opened the front door. She immediately turned to stone.

Andrew and his secretary Martin were standing a few feet away, embracing each other. Noticing his wife, Andrew almost instantly pushed Martin away, sending him into the bushes bordering the stone path.

"Mary!" Andrew exclaimed. "Is that you? What are you doing here? I thought you were in the theater!" He examined her in disbelief. "Why are you dressed like a man?"

Martin gasped in pain, trying to break out of the branches.

Mary, more or less recovered from her shock, darted towards Andrew and downright spit the words out of her mouth. "What am I doing here?" She pressed a finger on his chest. "What the hell were you doing with your secretary? Why do I get this feeling that all those jokes about you fucking him," she nudged her head aimlessly in Martin's direction, "contained a giant grain of truth? What do you say about that?"

"I say, your eyes were obviously deceiving you, just as my eyes have apparently failed to see the secret passions of the woman I've married twelve years ago!"

Andrew shouted. He grabbed Martin's arm and helped him to his feet. Martin dusted off his clothes, while his boss locked his eyes on Mary again. "The man has had a

hard day, so I gave him a hug. Big deal!" Andrew shouted and threw his arms in the air.

The cab arrived, its driver honked the horn and leaned outside the window, observing the weird situation.

Mary slapped Andrew, tore off her beard, jumped into the taxi and the car drove off. "Mary! Wait!" Andrew yelled.

Mary was crying all the way to the theater. Her driver tried to start a conversation a few times, but besides increasing the sobbing noise on the backseat he achieved nothing.

Elysa was about to light a cigarette, when she saw Mary approaching through the theater hall, her face flooded with tears.

"Mary! What on earth happened to you?" Elysa asked, putting away her smoking equipment, embracing Mary when she crawled atop the stage and fell into Elysa's arms without warning.

"How could I not have seen this?" Mary mumbled into Elysa's shoulder. "There must have been a million signs throughout all these years..."

Elysa patted Mary's back.

"To think I just slept with him yesterday," Mary sobbed, her fingers crawling into Elysa's dress. "I'm feeling sick just remembering it! And now he believes I'm putting on man clothes, and I'm sure he's somehow even stimulated by that!"

Mary looked up and almost stabbed Elysa with her blazing gaze. "How could he do this to me?" she asked through her teeth.

Elysa held her right hand before her mouth and grinned.

For a while they resembled two figures carved out of granite.

"I'm so sorry," Elysa whispered with a sad smile. "I should've known the situation would escalate."

Something broke in Mary's figure.

"I couldn't resist telling your husband about your plans today. And he came up with an idea on how to counter your act," Elysa said, trying to shrug it off, finishing her sentence with a forced laugh.

Mary took three steps backward, as if fire had erupted in front of her. Seemingly remote-controlled, she then turned around and walked off the stage in complete silence.

Thank you:

Auri, Nina, Franz, Astrid.

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