

BRADY

I give you Mathew Brady's Mary Lincoln as America's 16th First Lady.

*The studio fills with a blank silhouette of MARY, all bathed in shadow and impossible to see clearly.*

MARY

Is that your perception of me? I can't see myself.

BRADY

Let's just say you are you and I am me. But you don't know who you are. So I have made you a fuzzy silhouette.

MARY

It's fuzzy because you can't see.

BRADY

I think what you're describing is my artistic style. I choose to see what I want to see.

MARY

Your eyes are failing. You're compensating with those blue-tinted glasses.

BRADY

Over 10 feet, objects do blur and colors run together. So, I squint. Style follows imagination. My imagination. I don't like normal vision, Mrs. Lincoln.

MARY

You leave out too much of me. I am more than a fuzzy silhouette, Mr. Brady. My bodice is nicely fitted by way of clever stitching of vertical pleats in the back. Don't you think? You don't capture my fashion. Didn't you notice my skirt required 25 yards of oak-colored silk?

BRADY

Lovely.

MARY

It is generously draped over a hoop, made of whale bone.

BRADY

Expensive. Your mother would be proud. Are you defining yourself as other people see you? Is what you are wearing who you are?

MARY

Oh? Don't think for a moment that people don't scrutinize my every garment. Politics and seduction are really the same thing. Particularly in Washington.

When I became First Lady, I was laughed at. My clothes were perceived unfashionable. I was believed as a spy.

BRADY

Or a traitor. You are from the South. And there is a civil war.

MARY

I became an Illinois housewife who was plucked out of anonymity, following my husband, who became president. Did I have any say in the matter?

BRADY

You did come to my studio, Mrs. Lincoln.

MARY

Mrs. President.

BRADY

A new, corrected image? Is this what you're looking for, Mrs. President?

MARY

In a way, I like being First Lady. It defines me. Actually, I would prefer to be President, but we women don't have the vote. Instead, I am the victim of envious eyes. I need a new image of myself to persuade Washington society that I was worthy of being Mrs. President.

BRADY

We have to keep up with how people see ourselves. Most people don't know who they are. I give them that.

MARY

I don't follow.

BRADY

I shoot famous. Famous Americans. I shot your husband. The President. Many times. Don't you remember? I have photographed a man who killed birds in the name of art. I made him Audubon the lover of all beings that fly. And I have photographed John Brown, the abolitionist who I made a martyr... Even Chief Justice Taney was here and is coming again. Like yourself, he too needs a new, more favorable, public image.

All my life, I've photographed those illustrious Americans residing in my head. Photography is my way of letting them out and sharing them with a hungry public. So, I shape the image of people shaping America. So, it must follow that I am shaping America. Can you imagine the narcissism if everyone could take their own picture?

MARY

If you are to include me in such company, please, you must not make me like your other portraits. I want to be photographed as...

BRADY

As...?

MARY

I don't know... Mrs. President. Mary Lincoln. Me.

BRADY

My portraits will define you. I make ordinary people extraordinary. This is clear if you study my photographs. I take the most horrific images of the age, war itself. I remove power to provoke any extreme emotional reaction.

MARY

I hear that when you photograph war, you purposefully arrive late so that the battlefield is sanitized.

BRADY

You know my work.

MARY

You share a little discomfort with human feelings which results in the same work of art repeated.

BRADY

Subtly nuanced.

MARY

You send others to photograph carnage. And you wait until the landscape has been swept clean with no hint of chaos or death. Is this true?

BRADY

I don't photograph just death! I create heroic death. When I encounter a fallen warrior, I move his body, rearrange his limbs to suggest self-sacrifice. Head thrown back. Uniform open. Rifle diagonal to the body. Dead bodies are not beautiful, Mrs. Lincoln. I make them so.

MARY

Where is the truth in that? I know the truth about death. And I know photographers don't tell the truth.

BRADY

We do tell the truth. Until life intrudes. I elevate what is real. Even the dead can become celebrities. Especially the dead, because they don't resist my transforming them into an image that is larger than life. I do this for all my subjects. And I will do it for you. Larger than life. That is what true art is about.