



WHAT THEY'RE SAYING ABOUT

# JOHN O'FARRELL

'JOHN O'FARRELL IS A CONSISTENTLY HUMOROUS  
WRITER WITH AN ACUTE EAR FOR THE  
ABSURDITIES OF MIDDLE CLASS PRETENSION'  
MAIL ON SUNDAY

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VOICE AND A DELECTABLY  
UNDERSTATED WAY WITH  
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VERY FUNNY'  
NEW YORK TIMES

'BULLSEYE.  
TAPS INTO MIDDLE  
ENGLAND'S NEUROSES  
WITH TERRIFIC WIT'  
HERALD

'SO FUNNY BECAUSE IT RINGS TRUE...  
PACKED WITH WELL-OBSERVED JOKES' THE TIMES

'O'FARRELL GIVES AN  
EXTRA SQUIRM  
TO THE TRADITIONAL ENGLISH  
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SUNDAY TIMES

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HUMOUR. GIGGLING SEVERAL TIMES  
A PAGE WITH PLENTY OF OUT-LOUD  
LAUGHS IS GUARANTEED.**

**A HILARIOUS  
CONFESSIONAL  
NARRATIVE...  
WICKEDLY  
OBSERVED'**

**IS JOHN  
O'FARRELL  
FUNNY? VERY'**

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John O'Farrell

THE MAN  
WHO FORGOT  
HIS WIFE



BLACK SWAN

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*For Lily*



# Chapter 1

I remember when I was a child I used to watch *Mr & Mrs*. We all did; it seemed like the only option available, so everyone just put up with it. A bit like all those marriages on the programme, now I think about it. Obviously *Mr & Mrs* wasn't the cultural highlight of our week; we didn't all rush to school next morning and share our outrage that Geoff from Coventry didn't know that Julie's favourite foreign food was spaghetti. But unquestioningly we just watched the procession of unglamorous couples go through the minor embarrassment of revealing all the little things that they didn't know about each other. Or, worse still, that there weren't any.

If ITV had wanted to increase the ratings a bit, perhaps they should have done a little more covert research about the big stuff the partners really didn't know. 'So, Geoff, for tonight's star prize, do you think that Julie's favourite way to spend a Saturday night

is: (a) Watching television? (b) Going to the cinema? Or (c) Secretly meeting her illicit lover Gerald, who at least asks her about her day occasionally?’

But the subtext of *Mr & Mrs* was that this was all there was to marriage: just knowing each other very well. Being very familiar with one another. The giant heart-covered cards of Valentine’s Day should say *‘I’m really used to you’* or *‘Love is . . . knowing every single thing you’re going to say before you even bloody say it.’* Like two lifers sharing a prison cell, you just spend so much time in each other’s company that there really shouldn’t be anything left that might surprise either of you.

My marriage was not like that.

Lots of husbands forget things. They forget that their wives have an important meeting that morning, they forget to pick up the dry cleaning, or they forget to buy their wife a birthday present until they are passing the Texaco mini-mart the night before. It drives their partners mad that men can be so self-obsessed as to overlook a major event in the life of their other half or a key date in the marriage calendar.

I didn’t suffer from this careless absent-mindedness. I just completely forgot who my wife was. Her name, her face, our history together, everything she had ever told me, everything I had said to her – it was all wiped, leaving me with no knowledge that she even existed. I would not have done very well on *Mr & Mrs*. When the glamorous hostess escorted my wife out of the sound-proof box, I would have been losing points already for optimistically asking which one I was married to. Apparently women hate that.

In my defence, it wasn't just my wife I forgot, it was everything else as well. When I say, 'I remember watching *Mr & Mrs*', that is actually quite a momentous statement for me. The phrase 'I remember' was not always in my vocabulary. There was a period in my life when I might have been aware of the TV show but would have had no personal memory of ever having seen it. I was very even-handed during the dark ages of my amnesia: I had no idea who *I* was either. I had no memory of friends, family, personal experience or identity; I didn't even know what my own name was. When it first happened, I actually checked to see if there was a name tag on the inside of my jacket. It just said 'Gap'.

My bizarre reawakening occurred on a London underground train at some point after it had emerged into the daylight, stopping pointlessly at nowhere places that seemed unsure whether they were the outskirts of London or suburbs of Heathrow Airport.

It was a drizzly afternoon in what I vaguely still understood was the autumn. There was no blinding flash or euphoric energy surge; just a creeping confusion about where I was. The humming tube carriage started up again and then I became aware that I had no idea why I was on this journey. 'Hounslow East' said the sign outside the grimy window as the train came to a halt, but no one got on or off. Perhaps this was just a momentary blackout; perhaps this blank nothingness was what everyone felt as they reached Hounslow East.

But then I realized that not only did I not know where

I was going, but I couldn't remember where I had come from either. Am I going to work? What is my work? I don't know. Now the panic was rising inside me. I'm not well; I need to go home and go to bed. Where is home? I don't know where I live. Think! Think – it will come back to me!

'Come on—' I said out loud, intending to address myself by my own name. But the end of the sentence wasn't there; it was like a missing rung on a ladder. I searched for a wallet, a diary, a mobile phone, anything that might make it all fall back into place. My pockets were empty – just a ticket and a bit of money. There was a small red paint stain on my jeans. 'I wonder how that got there?' I thought. My brain had rebooted, but all the old files had been wiped.

There were loose pages from free newspapers scattered around the floor. I saw the tear in the fabric of the seat opposite. My mind was processing new input at great speed now, devouring advertising slogans and signs telling people to look out for suspicious packages. But staring at the tube map in front of me, I found all these new lines of thought were unable to link up with anything else on the network. The synapses in my head were closed for essential refurbishment; the neurons were being held at King's Cross due to signalling problems.

The fear made me want to run away, but this was an affliction that followed me around. I was pacing up the empty carriage now, bewildered as to what to do next. Should I get off at the next deserted station and try to get help? Should I pull the emergency lever in the hope

that the sudden stop would jolt my memory? 'It's just a temporary blip,' I told myself. I sat and squeezed my eyes closed, pressing my hands against my temples as if I could force some sense out of my head.

Then, to my relief, I was no longer completely alone. An attractive-looking woman boarded the train and sat diagonally opposite me without making eye contact.

'Excuse me,' I said quickly. 'I think I might be going a bit mad!' and I may have emitted a slightly manic laugh. Before the doors even had time to think about closing, she got straight up and left the carriage.

I noticed on the map that the train would do a loop at Heathrow. If I travelled back in the direction in which I had come, maybe a station or some visual prompt might help me relocate myself? And more people were bound to get on the train at the airport; surely then I would find someone who could help me? But at Heathrow Terminal 2 I went from travelling alone on an empty train to being trapped in a jam-packed carriage, with luggage-laden travellers squashed up against one another, talking a hundred different languages, none of them mine. I noticed every button on every shirt, heard all the different voices at once – everything was louder, colours too bright, smells too strong. I was on a tube train with maps clearly stating the route, with thousands of people travelling there with me, and yet I felt as lost and lonely as it is possible to be.

Half an hour later, as the only person standing still in a teeming railway terminal, I scanned the boards for some route back to my previous life. Arrows pointed to

platforms and numbered zones; dozens of signs told hurrying travellers where they might go, as ceaseless information scrolled across screens and distorted announcements filled my ears. There was a short queue at a stall offering 'Information', but I was guessing they wouldn't be able to tell me my identity. I ventured into a public toilet just to stare into a mirror and was shocked by the age of the bearded stranger I saw frowning back at me. I guessed I was around forty, maybe more, greying at the temples and thinning on top. It was impossible to know whether it was the years or the mileage. Without even thinking about it, I'd presumed I was somewhere in my early twenties, but now I could see that I was actually two decades older than that. I learned later that this was nothing to do with my particular neurological condition – that's just how everyone feels in middle age.

'Sorry – can you help me? I'm lost . . .' I said to a young man in a smart suit.

'Where do you want to go?'

'I don't know, I can't remember.'

'Oh, yeah, I know where that is. You want the Northern Line; change at Wanker Street.'

Other passers-by just ignored my requests for help: eye contact was avoided, wired-up ears were deaf to my pleas.

'Excuse me – I don't know who I am!' I said to a sympathetic-looking vicar pulling a suitcase on wheels.

'Ah, yes . . . well, I don't think any of us knows who we really are, do we?'

'No, I mean I really don't know who I am. I've forgotten everything.'

His body language suggested he was already keen to be on his way. 'Well, we may all sometimes feel as though we don't know if there is any meaning to it all, but in fact each of us really is very special indeed . . . Now I'm forgetting that I'm already late for my train!'

Seeing the clergyman made me wonder if I had actually died and was on the way to Heaven. It seemed unlikely that God's sense of humour was so warped that he would make us travel to Heaven on the London underground during the rush hour. 'Paradise plc would like to apologize for the delay for those travelling to the afterlife. Customers destined for Hell are advised to alight at Boston Manor, where a replacement bus service is in operation.' In fact, this experience did feel like a kind of death. Trapped as I was in some dream-like suspended state, I knew of no one who cared if I lived or died. I had no character witnesses who could vouch for my existence. I think I learned then that that is the most basic primeval human need of all – that simple reassurance that you are alive and will be acknowledged by other human beings. 'I exist!' declare all those Stone Age cave paintings. 'I exist!' say the graffiti tags on the underground walls. That's the whole point of the internet – it's given everyone the chance to proclaim their existence to the world. Friends Reunited: 'Here I am! Look over here! Yes, you had forgotten me but now you remember me again!' Facebook: 'This is me. Look, I have photos, friends, interests. No one can say I was never born – here is the proof for all to see.'

That is the central tenet of twenty-first-century Western philosophy: 'I tweet, therefore I am.'

But I was trapped in something worse than solitary confinement. Even the individual travellers around me, thousands of miles from their homes, would still have their friends and family with them, efficiently packed away in their heads. My mental vacuum had physical symptoms; I was shaking and felt short of breath. Part of me wanted to go back to the underground platform and throw myself in front of the next train. Instead I watched a rushing commuter aim an empty coffee cup at the trolley of a litter-collector, but then continue on her way when it missed and fell to the floor. I bent down, picked it up and added it to the other rubbish that was being slowly collected by the elderly Asian man in his ill-fitting luminous suit.

'Thank you,' he said.

'Um, excuse me, I think I've had some sort of stroke or something . . .' I said, as I began to explain my predicament. It sounded so implausible, I thought, as I heard myself describing it, that I felt an enormous gratitude to this man for appearing genuinely concerned.

'You need the hospital! King Edward's is a mile up the road,' he said, pointing in the general direction. 'I would take you there, but . . . I'd lose my job.'

It was the first compassion anyone had shown me and suddenly I felt like crying. 'Of course – medical help!' I thought. 'That's what I need.'

'Thank you! Thank you!' I gushed to my best friend in the whole world. The location of the hospital was

confirmed by a map on the side of a bus shelter; you just went straight up the road and turned left at the giant lump of chewing gum. Now I was going somewhere; just this mission gave me a fragment of hope. And so I strode up the busy main road like an amazed time traveller or an alien from another planet, trying to take it all in, some of it strangely familiar, some of it completely bizarre. There was a brief moment of hope when I saw a sign on a lamp post with the headline 'MISSING'. Underneath was a photocopied picture of an overweight cat. And then the towering concrete block ahead turned into the hospital and I felt my pace quicken, as if the people in there might somehow immediately make everything better.

'Excuse me – I really need to see a doctor,' I gabbled at the front desk of Accident and Emergency. 'I think I've had a sort of brain freeze or something. I can't remember who I am or anything about myself. It's like my memory's been completely wiped.'

'Right. Could I take your name, please?'

There was a split second when I actually went to answer this question in the casual manner in which it had been posed.

'That's what I'm saying – I can't even remember my own name! It's like, all personal information has suddenly been erased . . .'

'I see. Well, could I take your address then, please?'

'Um – sorry – I don't think I'm making myself clear. I've got this extreme amnesia – I can't remember a single thing about myself.'

The hospital receptionist managed to look harassed and bored at the same time.

'Right. Who's your registered doctor?'

'Well, *I don't know*, obviously. I was on a train, and then I suddenly realized I didn't know why I was on it, where I was going or anything. And now I can't remember where I live, where I work, what my name is, or even if this has ever happened to me before.'

She glanced up at me as if I was being particularly uncooperative. 'NHS number?' Her exasperated tone at least conceded that this was a long shot. The phone rang and she left me there in limbo while she dealt with someone more amenable. I stared at a poster asking me if I had remembered to examine my testicles. I didn't know, but felt this probably wasn't the moment.

'I'm sorry, but we're not allowed to process you without asking these questions,' she said, when she returned her attention to me. 'Are you currently on any prescriptions or regular medications?'

'I don't know!'

'Do you have any allergies or follow any special diet?'

'No idea.'

'And could you please provide the name and contact details for your spouse or next of kin?'

That's when I first noticed it. The indented ring of white flesh on my fourth finger. The ghostly scar where a wedding ring had been. All the fingertips were crowned with badly bitten nails, red raw around the edges.

'Yes, next of kin! I have a wife maybe?' I said excitedly. The ring could have been stolen, along with

my wallet and phone. Perhaps I had been robbed and concussed and maybe my dear wife was looking for me right now. The shadow of a wedding ring filled me with hope. 'Maybe my wife is at this moment ringing round all the hospitals, trying to find me,' I said.

A week later I was still in the hospital waiting for her call.