

THE FIRST SIGN OF MADNESS

A one-act play by Chris Neville-Smith

Joanna sits with Craig and talks about the times they spent together. But who is she really talking to?

The Cast:

Joanna

Craig

Groundskeeper

The stage:

The location of the play should be deliberately kept vague by the staging. There should be little or no scenery other than the park bench. It may add to the play to include ambient outdoor noises and light up the stage to show it is a sunny day, but there should be no need to do any complex staging.

Most of the stage directions are only a rough guide. In the original production, stage directions were frequently changed, moved to different points in the script, added or just ignored.

*Lights fade up on a park bench on a fine day. Sitting at opposite ends are **Joanna** and **Craig**. Both are in their twenties. **Craig** is dressed in his best clothes, and **Joanna** wears a pretty dress for a summer's day and holds a bunch of flowers. For a while, **Joanna** and **Craig** stare ahead. Eventually, **Joanna** speaks.*

Joanna: It's beautiful ... so beautiful ... I never thought I'd say it's beautiful, but it is. (*Staring out front.*) I always dreamed of a scene like this. You, me, a park bench, the flowers. Not the location I had it mind, but, still – it's beautiful. ... Oh God, Craig, I can't believe I'm saying this. I mean, the first time I came here to talk to you, what did I see? A big power station, the by-pass, a whole load of pylons, and I thought: why here? Why does it have to be here? But it's grown on me since then. Does it make sense? It might, to you. It's not something I'd say to anyone else, they'd think I'm mad – not that it makes much difference, what with me coming here all the time. *That's* harder to explain.

*Joanna gets up and takes a look out the front. As the monologue progresses, **Joanna** periodically moves about the stage, but **Craig** remains seated. He vaguely watches Joanna and reacts to this she says, but only ever in a subtle way.*

Joanna: Look at this place: don't you agree it's the most beautiful sight? I like the way the steam wafts from the cooling towers. The hum of the traffic soothes me, and the pylons make me think of a big house of cards. Guess you win that argument ... You know, it only crossed my mind the other day how much I enjoyed our arguments, don't know why. Maybe it's because it's the only way I'd get to talk to you. I mean *really* talk. Not just the usual “Hello, how are you, I'm fine, what about you, that's nice.” It's the only way I could get you to open up.

It still doesn't make sense though. Every boyfriend I had was nice and agreeable – to start with at any rate. But we disagreed on everything: the EU, religion, the Middle East, what else? Football, the X Factor, repeats on TV – and another thing doesn't make sense. First impressions. Every boyfriend I had gave a first impression, but you (*tails off*) ... To be fair, I was in a stinking mood when we first met. Not the coffee shop, that pub – do you remember that? I'm not sure ... But I do. I remember every detail. I'd had the final split with Richard, you know, that prick, so I was feeling pissed off with the world, so when you came up and started talking I thought “Oh God, what does he want?” Sorry. And when you said you'd been stood up and I said “What a shame”, what I really thought “Oh God, he's trying it on” and that's why I sneaked off ... but I see now you meant what you said. You really had been stood up, you really were checking if I was all right. I guess I'm not used to people being that honest, (*directed at Craig*) and this is the bit where you say it's wrong to judge on first impressions.

*No response from **Craig**.*

Joanna: Oh, what's the use, of course you're not going to answer ... I still think I was right about her though – Sonia. I thought she was a bitch for standing you up, and I still think she's a bitch, and I don't care what you said. I saw her in town today. She's milking it for all it's worth. Everyone's going all (*imitating a sickly voice*) “Sonia, it wasn't your fault” and “Is there's anything I can do?” Okay, I'm not exactly impartial but – it's her fault what happened, and it's not fair, not fair on me, not fair on you, and I know you, you'll blame yourself, you always do, and if I said something then maybe – just maybe ... Oh God ...

Joanna looks off-stage.

Joanna: Oh God, someone's looking. Crap, he's coming this way.

Joanna returns to the seat and tries to look inconspicuous.

Joanna: I knew this would happen.

A groundskeeper, a middle-aged man, approaches. He takes no notice of Craig and speaks directly to Joanna.

Groundskeeper: Excuse me ... Are you all right?

Joanna: Yes, yes! I'm fine.

Groundskeeper (not convinced): Yes, that's ... I saw you were – doesn't matter.

Joanna (curiously): What's happened to Sam?

Groundskeeper: Sam? Oh, he's off for the week, I'm standing in for- ... (*Embarrassed*) Oh yes, I know you. Sam told me.

Joanna: It's all right, I don't need to-

Groundskeeper: It's fine, stay as long as you like. I'll let you get on.

The groundskeeper exits. For a moment Joanna sits in silence, watching the way he went off-stage. She only talks again once he's evidently out of earshot.

Joanna: Sorry about that ... So, looks like I'm a regular. Me and all the old dears. Well, as long as they're okay with that, I am. Strictly speaking, I've got no business here. I've only ever been a friend – well, officially. I doubt anyone ever believed that, but since we've never talked about that, that's what I am – just a friend. If I'd have known what was going to happen, of course I'd have said something but ... how could I know what would happen? All it took was a certain time and certain place and (*snaps fingers*) it changes forever ... Ironic really. If you look at it that way, it began the same way it ended. Just a certain time and a certain place. Not the pub, the coffee shop. You must remember that.

Joanna rises from the bench again, this time leaving the flowers behind.

Joanna: Now, Craig, before you flatter yourself, I didn't walk in and think “Oh my God, it's Matt Damon's twin!” Sorry ... It might have been easier if I did. You see, that morning I'd decided that I, Joanna Miller, was going to get myself a new man. I had it all worked out. I'd look around, find the perfect face, think, “he's the one for me”, walk up, say hi and so on, but instead I saw you and I thought “I know him, where have I seen him before?” So I got my coffee and sat down and tried not to think about who the hell you were, and instead I thought about what make up I'd wear tonight or something and then – we got talking – about something. What were we talking about? ... I know, fair trade coffee. I said it was good this place did fair trade, and you said it did more harm than good – or was it the other way round? Anyway, we disagreed – but you weren't nasty about it. You listened to me, and I listened to you. In fact, all of our arguments were like that. Then we moved on to my family, your job, that bastard who'd dumped me, and then I realised you were the weirdo in the pub who tried it on, except I now knew you weren't a weirdo after all, and I was all ready to say something when you mentioned this Sonia, and that was the end of that ... except, of course, it wasn't.

So, should I have said something? ... I don't know, what could I have said? “Oh, Sonia? She must be the bitch who stood you up.” ... All right, it crossed my mind but – you seemed okay with it. I think her mother was ill or something, but I've never waited for an excuse. Every time I've been stood up, it's dump first, ask questions later. I liked that about you – never judgemental, always ready to give the benefit of the doubt. It's now the thing I hate about you the most, but that was then.

I know! How about “I hope things work out with Sonia, but whatever happens, I'll be there for you”? No, far too clichéd. What else could I have done? Walked away? Maybe I should. I knew you'd be in the coffee shop again, but I didn't have to come back. So why did I do that? ... No, you don't have to answer, I know why, and I'm not proud of it. I had a plan: become your friend, wait until you'd broken up, then strike. But I waited, and waited, and the more I got to know you, the more I wanted you for myself. And the more I wanted you for myself, the harder it got – the harder got to ...

Joanna tails off for a moment.

I think that's why I've been coming to see you here. It's so much easier this way. Easier to say the things I've wanted to tell you, because it doesn't matter now. There's nothing you can say to change things, nothing I can say either ... It's not much of a consolation though, is it? If I'd said something earlier, it could have been different, but I didn't, and here we are now.

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