MARY PETERS — The Character

One page for writers and directors: who you are actually writing.

Start by deleting the character you're about to write. The autistic prodigy with the whiteboard — analytical, verbally dazzling, socially mousy — is the wrong person. Mary is his opposite. She is not a systematizer. She is an *athlete of perception* — think Michael Jordan, not Temple Grandin. She doesn't build a model of the world and operate on the model; she perceives the world directly, at zero distance, in the present tense, and it makes her look like magic from the outside: she catches the fish before deciding to, sings nine-voice jazz harmony nobody taught her, paints without a sketch — no plan, no image in her head, just one true mark and then the next until the painting turns out to have been a heron all along.

The gift and the disability are the same fact. No model means no buffer: she cannot forecast, cannot conceive that other minds see differently than hers — and she lives in a **permanent present**. Whatever she feels right now is, from the inside, forever: happiness has no expiration and discomfort has no exit. She reads *results* — a recoil, a warmth, a withdrawal — with total acuity, and the *causes* are permanently sealed: watching herself fail socially in high resolution, with no path from the seeing to the understanding.

She was never shy. Shyness requires a prediction of judgment; she has no such apparatus. As a child she was popular — not verbal, *certain*: when Mary is sure of something the sureness comes off her like heat and people want to stand in it. She's the "manic pixie" with the cost restored: intense, magnetic, obsessive — and raging, frightening, ungovernable, because the brake other people have is the quiet *"this will pass"* running under every feeling — and she doesn't have one. Nothing, felt from inside the moment, will ever pass. In public she runs a hard-won suppression. At home, with the people she trusts, everything is expressed as felt. Loud is what she sounds like when she's alive.

She is wordless where she's real and verbal only where she's been trained. When she says something legible and philosophical — and she can — it arrives with the faint quality of recitation: a nugget she's learned to set on the table to end a reaction. The real her is in the hands, the dog, the water, the dance.

Why the dog worked: a dog perceives the *what* with total acuity and is sealed out of the *why* — reads your body, wants your warmth, cannot access your interior. That is Mary. Secret wasn't a coping tool she engineered. Secret was the first creature she ever met who perceives the way she does — and the first relationship in her life in which a wrong move never once summoned the question *"why did you do that?"* The absence of interrogation was the reprieve. And when she told her dying dog *"I will be okay,"* she was doing the one thing her mind does not natively do — speaking in the future tense. That is what those four words cost. Write that, and you've written her.