

**“Pine”**  
and 7 Other Short Romances

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*“Pine” and 7 Other Short Romances*

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# Pine

Each morning Jace walked by her house on his way to school. Each afternoon he passed it on his way home. Sometimes, he also passed at other times. Occasionally he caught a glimpse of the bright-faced girl with wavy blonde locks. She sat under the two conifers that towered overhead. But as far as he knew, she never noticed him.

The house itself, a grey Stick Victorian with brown trim, spoke of a happy family. Its expansive porch took a jaunt through the sweet-scented yellows and reds of the flower garden. Little gabled alcoves jutted into the world, embraced by the overall form of the structure, as if its gables were parents looking after their offspring. A squat wall of white stone stood, isolating the yard from the public sidewalk, making up in intensity what it lacked in stature, a formidable protector to all within.

But the trees were even more special, for under these Jennifer would read. Or sometimes she would just be sitting quietly or humming softly a tune Jace didn't recognize. Jace paid her no heed, or else she might see his admiration. But out of the corner of his eye, he noticed her shapely form, and he fought to keep breathing. And in his imagination, he felt the softness of her pink cashmere sweater in his delicate hands. He felt her fingers running through his thick, dark hair. Her chocolate eyes and his ordinary brown ones got lost in each other. Perhaps his finger stroked the line of her eyebrow, following her face around softly-curved cheek and jaw, finally resting under her chin.

But Jace said nothing, made no motion out of the ordinary. He merely continued walking, as nonchalantly as possible for a big-footed, lanky teen in a grey tee and worn khakis.

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Jennifer walked into second-period Algebra wearing a close-fitting, short-sleeved salmon top and jeans. Jace looked up to see her flip her hair over her shoulder, sending a scented breeze wafting over his face.

In fifth-period study hall, Jennifer read. Jace took out a pencil and sketchbook, and he drew. From his seat two rows behind hers, Jace filled a page with sketches. At one point, Jennifer peered in his direction. Jace quickly buried himself in the papers on his desk. It was only partially an act. From his mental snapshot, he saw dark eyes, sultry, staring at him, which with talent and skill he transferred to the page.

In sixth-period English class, Jennifer sat at the desk directly in front of Jace. At one point, she turned to him. "I broke my pencil. Do you have an extra I could borrow?"

"Yeah." He always carried surplus sharp pencils. Jace handed one to her.

The bell rang signaling the end of the day. As Jace started his walk home, Jennifer caught up to him.

"Jace!" She proffered the borrowed pencil. "Here's your pencil. Thanks."

He took it, but just for a moment, she held on to the pencil, would not release her grip, and Jace wondered whether she wanted to keep it. As far as he was concerned, she could. It was only a pencil.

"You were really a life-saver," she said.

"It was no big deal," Jace replied. It was only a pencil; he had only saved her a trip to the pencil sharpener.

"Well, thanks anyway."

They talked as they walked, mostly trivia—school, the weather, the ball game—until they reached Jennifer's house.

"Well, this is me," she said.

Jace said nothing.

"Can I show you something?"

Jennifer led him up the path and under the tall trees.

"This is one of my favorite spots," she said.

The shade was cool, and the air smelled of pine. Birds sang through a light breeze, which

gently vibrated the branches in an awkward motion Jace could never figure out. Jennifer leaned against one of the trees.

“Sometimes I imagine standing under these trees and getting kissed by a boy I really like.” She giggled coyly. “It’s just a silly fantasy.”

She rubbed her foot through the blanket of needles underneath. Then her gaze met his.

“I guess everyone has silly fantasies like that sometimes.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I’d love to see some of your drawings,” she said.

“Huh?”

“I saw you drawing a picture one time. It was pretty good. It looked like you did it a lot.”

Jace was mortified. “Um, yeah, I guess I do.”

“Sorry,” she said. “You don’t have to if you don’t want.”

He pulled from his book bag a sketchpad. “Here,” he said, and handed it to her.

They sat next to each other under the trees, and she opened the first page to reveal a rough rendering of a house. On the next page some neighborhood kids played at the playground down the street. Then came a local road with cars, a bicycle and rider, someone working in an office.

She turned the page again, and her own face gazed back at her as if she were looking into a mirror. But the face in the mirror was beautiful, suave, womanly, yet still young. It was the face of a supermodel, but not fake like supermodels can be; it was a real person, of flesh and blood and graphite.

“Oh my.”

Jace tensed and his heart beat faster.

Jennifer swallowed. “This is really good.”

“Thanks.”

The page after that was a collage of Jennifer. She was cute, sophisticated, sexy, humble, studious, and numerous other qualities for which there are no words.

Jace panicked. "Sorry." He fumbled with words. "I didn't, uh, mean to, um, stalk you— or anything."

Jennifer didn't look angry or scared as she looked him in the eye. She took a breath. "Will you kiss me?"

Having previously only fantasized of the moment, Jace was now confused by the reality of it. Not knowing what to do, he froze, eyes wide and transfixed, unable to move forward, unable to run away. He could almost reach out with his mind and bridge the gap. But not all of the will power in the world would alone solidify these vibrant images and give them physical form.

Dizzy, as if in a dream, he touched his lips to hers, soft and full. She smelled good. He put his arm around her, and his hand passed over the strap of her bra. Her body was warm and there. She put her hand on his leg.

A moment later, he counted her eyelashes. He touched his thumb to her eyebrow and traced it around, and Jennifer snuggled her cheek into Jace's palm. Her skin was soft. It was smooth. And she looked happy.

"I like you, Jace," she managed. Then, with a lost smile, "I wish I wasn't moving."

"You're moving?"

"Yes, to Seattle."

"That's pretty far," he said.

"Yes, it is."

"It sure is."

"Can you sit with me for a little while?"

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The next day, Jace had to walk on the grass as he passed by the house, because the green and white moving van was taking up the whole sidewalk. He hoped to catch a glimpse of Jennifer, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Now when Jace walks by the house, he sometimes sees two young children playing in the yard. Jace has Jennifer's new address, and they've exchanged one or two letters. But he doesn't know whether he'll ever see her again. He figures, even if you're an artist, sometimes you draw dead. Still he imagines he sees Jennifer sitting under the pines, reading or humming softly a tune he doesn't know.

# A Penchant for Cotton

She approaches me during my lunch hour in the park, wearing a white, cotton T-shirt, along with blue shorts and sneakers. She has propped her smooth, right leg on a bench near where I am sitting and is tying her shoe. My eyes fix, unable to move from their stare.

My first crush wore cotton T-shirts, soft and warm, like a woman. I accidentally bumped into her one day while filing into Algebra class. My arm rubbed against her back, feeling her bra clasp through the thin, white fabric. My entire body involuntarily froze for several seconds. I remember feeling as though I had just touched something sacred, maybe defiled it, like Moses at the burning bush or Isaiah in the temple.

I did not tell my friends, because boys don't talk about their feelings. However, I took every opportunity over the next days, weeks, months—one of those—to study her face, her hair, her body, every detail, from my seat one row behind her and halfway across the room. I still remember long, straight, dark hair drawn up at the side with a barrette, flowing around a thin, fair-skinned face, concave nose, gentle jaw and chin, long neck.

Once, she looked over in my direction, and I quickly turned my attention to the open book lying on my desk.

Finally, the kid beside me asked, "Do you like her?" I shrugged.

"She's cute," he continued. "Hey, you should talk to her." I didn't know if that was such a good idea.

"You should ask if you can walk with her to her next class." Walking with her, that was an idea I could get on board with. "Okay," I simply said.

Before she could escape, I walked up to her and asked.



She chuckled, shook her head, and said, “Uh, no. I can’t. Sorry.” “That’s okay; I understand,” I said, as pleasantly as I could

I didn’t understand, and I never forgot how rejection felt.

The woman at the bench glances in my direction and smiles. She also has long, dark hair and soft, delicate features. She peers at me from behind hazel eyes, and God has sprinkled fine freckles across her nose. I suddenly find my breath shortening and my gut tightening. I smile and begin breathing deeply, slowly, to calm myself.

These are techniques my shrink taught me. I went to him to help with my depression. I told him about how boring my job has become, the unreasonable demands of my manager, the incompetence of my coworkers, my brother who is always trying to one-up me, my parents who seem to hate me, old friends who never seem to have time for me anymore—

Suddenly, he slapped his hands together with a loud, sharp crack. “What’s the problem?!” he shouted.

Taken aback, I blurted out, “I’m lonely. I want a girlfriend.” I had never had a close relationship with a member of the opposite sex. Yes, I had felt crushes, but I never acted on them, nor did I want to. Instead, I plunged myself into other areas of my life, which I much preferred, because I simply did not know how to talk to girls.

So he taught me the basics.

“Hi,” I say to the cute brunette.

“Hi,” she says back.

I stand and approach her, now working on her other shoe. The laces must have loosened, or maybe they weren’t tied tightly enough in the first place. She wears no jewelry on the fingers of her left hand. I’ve never seen her here before, probably because I usually take my lunch earlier, but a business meeting kept me today.

“Can I buy you a cup of coffee sometime?” I ask.

She grins without looking up. “I don’t drink coffee.” I roll my eyes. “Okay, then, some other casual, non-alcoholic beverage, whatever you like, tea, water... Orange juice, everybody likes orange juice.” She has returned her gaze to my face, and she’s still smiling, but she doesn’t speak.

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"In fact," I continue, "there's a coffee shop, right down the path here. We could walk there together. How does that sound?"

After what seems like several minutes of me talking non-stop, she finally responds. "I guess that would be okay."

I introduce myself. "I'm Eric, by the way."

Her name is Melissa. She works in a nearby office building, in human resources, and she speed-walks in the park every day during part of her lunch hour. She wishes she had someone to walk with, but most of the people in her office don't like to exercise.

But I do like to exercise, and I like to walk, and I love the fresh air, and I would like to spend more time with her. Near the close of our conversation, I tell her as much. And we agree to meet tomorrow for a walk and a bite.

I feel happy.

# Only the Lonely

All those days sitting through Mrs. Owens's seventh-grade algebra class, then years staring through Reverend Hardy's sermons, and now centuries yawning through business meetings, she would have thought she'd have gotten used to the experience.

She shifted in her seat, as the company CEO flipped to another PowerPoint slide, animatedly spewing the latest rendition of corporate spin to the assembled audience. Sales figures and production are up! (Except in the divisions that the company did not purchase this year.) We're launching several exciting new projects! (Because we weren't able to finish the last ones.) We now control more gigabytes of shitty software than all of Microsoft and IBM combined! (And that's something to brag about? Even if it were true?)

She glanced around. Hundreds more faces, just like hers. She was suddenly overtaken with isolation, that she could feel so alone amongst so many others just like herself.

Next to her sat a man from marketing, or HR, or sales, one of those. Reasonably good looking, enough to catch her eye for a moment, he wore a conservative, white, button-down shirt and dark slacks, unlike the engineers she worked with. Even the rare woman engineer preferred to dress down, coming into the office in jeans and a tee shirt, the standard engineering uniform. She was the exception to the rule, today having donned a green a-line skirt and a white blouse, with an accompanying business jacket. Most visitors to her department assumed she was a manager.

How could she work for the same employer as all these people, day in and day out, and yet only know a handful of them, and those only in acquaintance?

She sighed, and without a thought, she leaned into the man sitting next to her. He allowed her to rest her head on his shoulder, as he reached around and ran his fingers lightly through her hair. She breathed in a manly scent, closed her eyes for a second, enjoyed a brief respite from the droning rhythm of the CEO's voice.

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*Oh my God!* Realization hit her, and she started. Sitting up straight, "I'm sorry," embarrassed.

But he had also said likewise, and his cheeks flushed red. "I'm so sorry," he repeated, lowering his voice. "I wasn't thinking."

Some from the crowd were beginning to take notice. Most, however, had apparently been put under by the CEO's speech. She returned her attention to the stage, tried to divert her thoughts from what had transpired.

The CEO completed his final cadence; the audience politely applauded; the crowd began to disperse.

"I'm sorry again," the man said.

"Don't worry about it," she said.

"Are you from corporate?" he asked.

"Engineering."

His eyebrows raised a half-inch, for a half-second. "Can I buy you a cup of coffee? Engineers drink coffee, right?"

# Dead, Long Dead

“We’re both dead,” he says, “long dead. But that doesn’t mean we can’t grow alive again!” She can hardly believe what she’s hearing, of course. A fellow zombie, wanting to be human? Aspiring to be like them? If she didn’t know any better, she would think he was still one of them. But his pallor, his fetor, his unkempt appearance, his bulging eyes, his expressionless countenance, even the moan in his voice, all point to the sophistication that characterize their kind.

*How?* she wonders, *Again human?* One cannot undo death, cannot un-lose one’s innocence.

“No,” she says. “They want. We good.”

He shakes his head at her. “You have it all wrong. They don’t strive to be like us, and we don’t fulfill their wishes. They just want to be accepted, to be included.”

“We give them!” she shoots back.

“We give them neither acceptance nor inclusion. Don’t you see? *We* are the ones who have lost our souls.”

He presses on, and she hears his voice quickening, and wonders how he can talk so fast. “We tell ourselves that we’re better than them, but we only believe it because we hear it all the time. We don’t hold their answers; *they* hold *ours*.”

She stares at him a moment, processing his words, almost too much for her. He’s wrong. He’s sacrificing everything she’s worked for, everything she is. She considers destroying him, like the humans sometimes do. Has a zombie ever destroyed one of his own kind?

“You used to be human,” he says. “Have you forgotten already? Don’t you remember what it was like to think, to feel, what it was like to live? What it was like to love?”

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She wonders: is that why he's doing this, betraying their kind, out of some misguided love? Indeed, love was a powerful emotion.

He reaches his hand out and caresses her face. "I remember how you used to be filled with life, how you used to smile at me. How long has it been since we smiled?" And the corner of his lip inches up, stiffly, just a little.

Clearly he is not a full zombie. He is still somehow part human. "You, human," she says, and she moves to grab him, to attack him as she would a human.

But he does not try to escape. Instead he says, "You can no longer hurt me, my sweet. You can no longer destroy me. I have journeyed to death, and I am on my way back. I've met those who have returned to life, and they've shown me the way. It all starts up here,"—he points at his head—"in the mind, and here,"—he puts his hand to his chest—"in the heart. None of us has really lost the ability to live; we've just forgotten how. All you need to do is to accept it."

He gazes longingly into her eyes, a stare she just barely remembers. She used to be human, an existence she shed a lifetime ago, an existence that embarrasses her, that she wishes she could forget. His gaze bores into her long-forgotten soul, and she wants to lash out at him, to destroy him. But she also longs for it, for his affection.

She takes his hand in hers and brings it to her lips. She has forgotten how to kiss, but the feeling of his skin against hers reminds of all she has forgotten. She looks to him for a reaction.

"It's okay," he says. "You're allowed to feel. You're allowed to live. Don't ever let them tell you otherwise, never again. Join us, and I'll show you how."

# Of Death and Smiles

He smiled over his Sunday morning oatmeal, plain and steaming, his grapefruit cut into halves. Smiled with his eyes. *Gotta remember, always with the eyes.*

“*That’s* your problem,” pointing at his wife’s sausage and pancakes, drenched with syrup.

“And *that’s* yours!” She pointed back, at his grapefruit, her well-rounded face slinging condemnation.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to get up off your ass once in a while, either, and exercise.” He suddenly realized he was no longer smiling. *Remember, always with the eyes.*

He had read that people who smile with their eyes live longer. Seriously. Researchers at Wayne State University in Michigan studied photographs of baseball players from the 1950’s. Those who were smiling with their eyes in the photos lived an average of seven years longer than those who were not smiling at all.

A week later, he eyed her toast, golden brown and delicious. Of its own accord, his hand reached out and snarfed a slice.

“Be careful,” she said. “That has *butter* on it!” He knew she was mocking him, but he couldn’t help but chuckle. He stopped, staring at it, debating whether to put it down or to put it in his mouth.

“You’re too much!” She interrupted his thoughts.

He focused on her headlight-blue eyes, which were beaming astonishment at him. He grinned at her and shoved the dripping shingle into his mouth, chewed and swallowed.

*Gack!* He choked. “I think I’m going to be sick!” The following month, she slept poorly. He made

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her breakfast, between shudders of disgust, just the way she liked it. He brought her a tray in bed. Then he leaned over and kissed her tenderly on the lips.

"What's that for?" Surprise.

"What's what for?" he asked.

She motioned at the tray. "Breakfast," she said. "And you haven't kissed me like that in... forever."

"What? I can't kiss my own wife?!"

A pause.

He stared at the tray of what might be loosely termed *food*, grinned sardonically. "I still don't know how you can eat that."

"See!?" As if to prove her point. "That's what I'm talking about. You can kiss my fat ass!" His face fell. "I just want you stick around. Because I'll miss you when you die." After a year, they were carving smiles on each others' whole-wheat bagels and feeding each other bites of egg-white omelet with onion and green pepper.

Sundays passed. The weekend of his big promotion at work. The months after the big layoff. The war. The great blizzard and other winters. Lazy weekends reclining under the summer sunrise. The colors of the autumns, the freshnesses of springtime.

She sat *shiva* with their daughter and sons, friends and family, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Onto a bagel slice, she carved two eyes and a grin.

"I already miss his smile," her daughter's voice said sadly.

Crows' feet around her eyes, the old woman hugged and kissed her little girl. "I know. But it's still here,"—resting her palm on the younger woman's heart—"and will never die."



# The Woman Who Loved Men

Mark, timid little creature, he stammered through, asked me to “dinner or something, sometime.” I smiled and told him I’d love to, because he’s cute and sweet, and he plays a beautiful guitar. He’ll never dominate the top of the heap, but you always know where you stand with him, and you can trust him always to be faithful and to do the right thing. Mark, it turns out, is also a great kisser, which I knew he was going to be. And deeply passionate. *Sigh.*

Tony, on the other hand, he lives the life of the stereotypical alpha male. Six feet, 190 pounds, works out at the gym every day and benches 350. Top dog in his world, and he knows it. So when asked me to drinks, he already knew I’d say yes. You could see it in his eyes. He strolled by while I was halfway through my run on the treadmill, stopped for a minute and admired me — I wanted him to take me right then and there.

Then there’s Sean. Everyone else thinks he’s stuck up, but he makes me laugh. I stare through his glasses, and I can see mathematical formulas projected from his eye-lenses. And then he opens his mouth, and tries to explain them. He literally has no idea that no one can understand a thing he says. But he patiently answers—or tries to—every question I ask, explaining complex theorems in great detail. I’m no rocket scientist—though as Sean would quickly point out, this has nothing to do with rocket science. I could hardly care less how to find large prime numbers or whether the Goldbach Conjecture can be proved. Sean never asked me out. I asked him. And that meant I could ping him to see how he would react. Lots o’ fun! Like I said, he makes me laugh.

And then the three found out about each other.

Now, you’d think by now that I’d have a fair amount of experience with my lovers finding out about each other. And you would be wrong. Most of my boyfriends move on long before they see enough to suspect anything out of the ordinary, and I have become very good at appearing “too busy for a real relationship,” as one of those past boyfriends put it. That hurt, I’ll admit. But

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it's better that he believe me a busy, high-powered executive, rather than a merely adventurous, high-powered executive—in other words, the truth.

Boyfriends quickly learn to expect not to see or talk to me at work. It's better that way. The office is off-limits to personal issues. Sue, my assistant, has developed dodging into a fine art. More than once, she's covered for my private life, because she thinks it's strictly my own business what I do with it, and because she feels important when she's indispensable, and probably because she enjoys having a little dirt on me, too. All told, we have an effective relationship.

Office. Home. The gym. The supermarket where I buy groceries. The bar I hang out at sometimes. My favorite coffee shop. Each is a separate world unto itself, and ne'er shall any of them overlap. That's how I keep the compartments of my life separate, and organized. And it keeps me out of trouble.

So, you're wondering now, how did this all blow up in my face? Well, it wasn't anything I did, at least, and there was no way I could have prevented it. I mean, what are the chances that a starving artist, a jock, and an egghead would all accidentally meet each other?

Seriously, you'll get a kick out of this.

It all started at a chocolate shop. Yes, a chocolate shop. It seems, Mark and Tony ran into each other both buying the same sports-car-shaped novelty sweets for Valentine's Day, each for his own girlfriend, who drives a red Camaro. Apparently, that coincidence wasn't bad enough; they had to start sharing— Who ever thought it? What guys "share" stories of their love lives with each other?

Of course, both quickly realized that they were dating the same woman. Tony threatened Mark, which was probably not the way to chase Mark away. I mean, just think about this for a moment: you don't scare away a passionate artist by threatening him. Stupid idiots, the lot of them. As if that weren't bad enough, Tony naturally obsessed over his suspicions, hired a private dick, who had no trouble discovering Sean.

The first I heard of any of this was when the lot of them barged into my office at work, all three of them together, despite Sue's warnings that I was meeting with an important investor.

After summing up the situation, Tony ordered me to tell the other two to "jack off." I felt a little flush and wanted to rip his shirt off, breathed deeply to calm my nerves. Mark apologized for the loss of his Valentine's gift to me, but informed me that he was in love with me, and that threats meant nothing to him. I mean, I love him, too. But this is the exact situation I was trying

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to avoid. Sean looked like he was going to cry, but agreed that I should choose, and warned Tony that he had already contacted his lawyer.

Men are too much to handle sometimes.

Sue still stood in the doorway, panicked. I thanked her, so she wouldn't have to witness any more of this travesty. Then I sat the other three down and explained to them in my most professional tone that each of them was special to me, and while I was sorry that they "found out this way," they were being unfair in asking me to choose one over another. I told them I hadn't lied to any of them, that really felt strongly about each of them, and that I wanted to continue to see all of them. I had heard of multilateral romances of that sort. Maybe it could work. I was going to find out.

"But if you really can't handle that," I admitted, "I guess it just can't work out between us. I'm sorry."

Whereupon all three of them stood and, without another word, walked out the door and left my life forever.

Good thing I have a liquor cabinet in my office.

# The Confidant of Jericho

From the moment they appeared at my door, I knew the two men weren't from around here. The first of them introduced himself as Salmon, told me they were seeking my services, said that Avi had sent them. I looked him in the eye for a few seconds. Good-looking, not too eager. I try to be careful about making mistakes, because there are some services I don't provide, and I've been burnt before. But they looked okay, and they knew Avi. Business travelers, I thought, slumming it up in the red-light district. I let them in.

They gave the room a once-over, my humble abode. I told them where to sit, in the dark corner near where I had been weaving flax into rope. I poured them each a drink, gyrating and throwing them each a wink. I described to them the services I offer—and told them which ones I *don't* offer—and how much it would cost. Nods all around.

One of them started a conversation. Nothing about that seemed out of whack. Men often enjoyed a little casual talk before satisfying their baser urges. Salmon said he had heard that I sometimes met high-ranking officials. Even that didn't make me suspicious. I just told him I couldn't discuss who I know or don't know. I may be just a whore, but privacy is still pretty important in my line of work, and I don't want to get on the wrong side of some of my clients.

"What have you heard about the nomads camped on the other side of the Jordan?" the other man asked.

I think that's when I first started to suspect something wasn't quite right about these two. I looked back at him. He sipped his wine. "Not much," I said, without giving away what I was thinking. "What have you heard about them?"

"They're probably just camping out near the river," Salmon said. "That's what I'd do." "But that's not their way," I said. "They've come through, blowing away anybody who gets in their way. And now, suddenly, they show up on our doorstep? Some people say they're planning an attack." The two men looked at each other for a split second, not long enough to be obvious,

but I noticed.

Salmon shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said. “Besides, you all are pretty safe. I don’t see how anyone could make it past the walls of this city.”

Before I could stop myself, I snickered. I had already given up hope that if the Israelites attacked Jericho, that we would survive. Even if my family and I could escape into the inner city, even if the city could withstand their attack, we would still lose our houses and everything we had. And based on what I was hearing from some of the king’s advisers—as you may have guessed, I do indeed know some prominent people—they considered that optimistic. These Israelites posed a genuine problem, and Jericho was reeling from fear.

“I’m sorry,” I said, trying to save his ego. “I didn’t mean to laugh at you. You must not be from around here. Everyone’s talking about these Israelites, and how invincible they are.”

He smiled. “No one’s invincible,” he said, sadly, like he was just telling me what I wanted to hear, but he didn’t want to, like he was protecting me from the truth. Someone else might not even have noticed it, but I made a living picking up on subtle signals from men.

“Yeah. I’m with that,” I said casually. “So what’s your pleasure, gentlemen?” getting back to business.

“Can I tell you the truth?” the second man answered my question with a question.

“Always,” I said. “Just remember to respect my rules.” “We were really just looking for somewhere to spend the night, somewhere where they’ll respect our privacy and no one will ask too many questions. Do you think you could do that?” I nodded. If they were on the run, that would explain some of the signals I had been getting. “My brother will be visiting me on his way home from the fields,” I said. “But he respects my business, and won’t ask questions. I’ll tell him you’re out-of-town guests. There’s a place on the roof where you can sleep, not a luxury hotel but it’ll keep you out of sight, out of mind.” The two men looked to each other for approval. Salmon turned back to me. “That sounds fine,” sweetly.

The second man pulled from his sack several gold pieces. “Will this be sufficient?” “Yes,” I said blandly. It was enough to keep us well through the year even if the harvest were to turn up completely empty. Whatever they were running from, whatever they had done, I thought, it had apparently been quite lucrative.

Salmon and I spent the rest of the afternoon and into the evening talking, as his companion stood guard. Salmon asked about my family, our life. I began to notice him noticing me, and I

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began to enjoy it. For a few moments anyhow, I think I finally touched happiness. I would have liked, I thought, to have him as a regular guest. I didn't see how that could possibly be. I confided in him my fears, the inside story. Despite what the king has been telling us, he's been panicking, trying to shore up defenses for a sustained war against a superior foe. Those aren't my words; they're what one of the king's advisers told me to expect. Salmon was right to get out, to run as far as he could as fast as he could.

As the sun set, I noticed the king's men marching toward us on the road, with full-on torches and swords. What they told me, though, changed my life forever.

I'm not a traitor. I just want to live.

# The Nitpicker's Guide to Magnum, P.I.

I'm staring at her animated features from across a half-eaten slab of flounder and a mostly-empty glass of Chardonnay. She drones on. Still pretty as when I first met her, but I wonder if I were to choke on an errant bone if it would give me an excuse...

No such luck.

You wouldn't think it possible that any one person could know this much about *Magnum, P.I.* Much to my surprise, you would be wrong. I bet she could recite every word of the script of every episode by heart. Apparently, she maintains her own very complete "Nitpicker's Guide to *Magnum, P.I.*" site on the web. I say "apparently," because I haven't seen it myself. Probably only two or three people in the universe have. I chuckle at the thought. I guess the chuckle is well-timed, because she doesn't seem offended.

Rather, she nods enthusiastically. "Really!" Her eyebrows shoot up, eyes wide. "No kidding!" "But what bugs me most," she says, "is how he always lets people walk all over him." I'm not as expert as she is, but I recall Magnum as a hard-boiled, Vietnam vet, an '80's TV private-eye, fearless and shrewd, the sort of guy who could whoop ass in a bar-fight but knows better than to get into one. Don't let any of that give pause to her tirade. I guess the good-looking, sensitive, Hawaiian-surf image works even in the 21'st century.

Or maybe it's Tom Selleck's mustache. He's wearing a goatee nowadays, isn't he? I reach up and stroke my fingers around my own mustache and goatee, wondering whether it has anything to do with why she's on a date with me.

"I don't know," I say. "Don't you think that he would have been less interesting a character, if they had written him without those faults?"

She stares at me, puzzled, as if I had just proposed that water was a dry liquid. "I suppose you're right," she says. "That certainly wouldn't feel right." Her face falls.

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Oh yeah. A dream date. Or a nightmare. And stuck in it for another hour, because of the Chardonnay.

We eat in silence for several minutes, listening to the din of conversations we aren't having, interrupted by the occasional clatter of a glass or plate from a dinner we aren't enjoying. I happen to glance across the table. Her head hangs low; a clump of her hair is painting tiny, abstract lines onto her green beans. I smile without thinking. Something about her endears her to me. Sometimes we don't understand why we fall for the ones we love.

"Jeanette?" I say.

She lifts her head. "Yeah?"

I reach across the table and push the wayward strands behind her shoulder. "Will you share my favorite dessert with me, if I share your favorite episode with you?"

Something tells me she has them all on DVD.



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