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# Sure of You

**Armistead Maupin**



# SURE OF YOU

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*Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.*

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*“Pooh!” he whispered*

*“Yes, Piglet?”*

*“Nothing,” said Piglet, taking Pooh’s paw.*

*“I just wanted to be sure of you.”*

A. A. MILNE  
*The House at Pooh Corner*





# Contents

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Epigraph

Pretty Is

Her Day

Life with Harry

A Practicing New Yorker

Some Rather Exciting News

Well Enough Alone

Dance with Me

The Designer Bride

A Picnic

Parlor Games

Desperadoes

A Bad Dream

Lesbian Sauce

The Wave Organ

Interrogations

A Blind Item

The Third Whale

Disguises

Completely Amicable

A Long Evening

The Kastro

Cock-and-Bull Stories

Remembering's Different

Nickel-Dime Stuff

[In the Loo](#)

---

[That Eternity Crap](#)

[Love on the Machine](#)

[Inheritance](#)

[Not That](#)

[Snaps](#)

[Stay, Then](#)

[Another Letter to Mama](#)

[Relief](#)

[That Much in Love](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Praise](#)

[Other Books by Armistead Maupin](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)



# Pretty Is

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THERE WAS SOMETHING DIFFERENT ABOUT HIS WIFE'S face, Brian Hawkins had decided. Something around the mouth, maybe. It was there at the corners, where her real mood always showed, even at a moment like this, when she certainly couldn't want it to show. He tilted his head until his eyes were even with hers, then withdrew a little, like someone appraising a portrait.

God, she was pretty! She gave depth to pretty, investing it with seriousness and intent. But something was eating at her, nibbling away from inside, while she sat there smiling, nodding, speaking softly of pet bereavement.

“And Fluffy is...?”

“A Pomeranian,” replied this morning's guest, a big, blowsy matron straight out of Laurel and Hardy.

“And when did she...pass away?”

The pause was masterful, he thought. Mary Ann's gentle little search for the euphemism was either admirably kind or savagely funny, depending on the sophistication of the viewer.

“Three months ago,” said the matron. “Almost four.”

Poor old cow, he thought. Headed straight for the slaughterhouse.

“So you decided to have her...?”

“Freeze-dried,” said the woman.

“Freeze-dried,” said Mary Ann.

There was nervous tittering in the studio audience. Nervous because Mary Ann had yet to abandon her respectful, funereal face. Be nice to this lady, it said. She's a human being like anyone else. As usual, it was hugely effective. Mary Ann was never caught with blood on her hands.

His partner, Michael, walked into the nursery office, dropped his work gloves on the counter, draped an arm across Brian's shoulders. “Who's she got today?”

“Watch,” said Brian, turning up the sound. The woman was opening a wooden carrying case,

shaped like a doghouse. “She’s my child,” she was saying, “my precious little baby. She’s never been just a dog to me.”

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Michael frowned at the set. “Whatthefuck.”

The camera moved in for a tight shot as Mary Ann silenced the gigglers with another glance. The woman plunged her chubby hands into the box and produced her precious Fluffy, fluffy as ever.

“It’s not moving,” said Michael.

“It’s dead,” Brian told him. “Freeze-dried.”

While Michael hooted, the woman arranged the rigid beast on her lap, patting its snowy fur into place. To Brian she seemed horribly vulnerable. Her lip trembled noticeably as her eyes darted back and forth between the audience and her inquisitor.

“There are some people,” said Mary Ann, even more gently than before, “who might find this... unusual.”

“Yes.” The woman nodded. “But she keeps me company. I can always pet her.” She demonstrated this feature half-heartedly, then gave Mary Ann a look of excruciating innocence. “Would you like to try it?”

Mary Ann shot the quickest of takes to the audience. The camera, as usual, was ready for her. As the studio reverberated with laughter, Brian reached out and slapped the set off with his palm.

“Hey,” said Michael. “That was good stuff.”

“She was set up,” said Brian.

“C’mon. You don’t go on TV with a freeze-dried dog and not expect a little teasing.”

“Did you see her face, man? She wasn’t expecting that.”

“Hey, fellas,” said a customer in the doorway.

“Oh,” blurted Michael. “Find what you need?” “Yeah. If someone could help me load them...”

Brian jumped to his feet. “Hey...fix you right up.”

The woman strode—no, slinked—through several aisles of shrubbery, making her selections. Brian followed her, feeling a boner growing in his overalls, then lugged the cans back to the office, where he tallied her bill and clipped the cans.

“Will that be all?”

She handed him her Visa card. “That’ll do it.” Her hair was brick red and sleek as sealskin. Something watching from behind her molten eyes made him think she might be shopping for more

than shrubbery.

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Fumbling, he ran her card through the machine. “You been here long?” she asked.

“Uh...me or the nursery?”

Her mouth flickered. “You.”

“I’ve been here three years, I guess.”

She tapped her long fingers on the countertop. “I used to come here when it was called something else.”

“God’s Green Earth.”

“Oh, yeah.” She smiled. “I like Plant Parenthood better.”

“Yeah, so do I.”

He removed the slip and handed it to her with a pen. She signed it with a flourish, then ripped the carbons into neat little squares, smirking at him all the while. “Not that I don’t trust that face,” she said.

He felt himself reddening. *You fucking dork. How long has it been, anyway?*

“Think I could tax those muscles?”

“What? Oh...sure.”

“My car’s down the street.”

He gestured toward the cans. “Is this all?” Of course this is all, asshole. You just rang up the purchase, didn’t you?

“That’s it.” She wet her lips with a cat’s precision, touching only the corners with the tip of her tongue.

He had grabbed two of the cans when Polly came bolting into the office. “Need a hand with those?”

“That’s O.K.,” he said.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

His employee sauntered around the shrubs as if to size up the situation for herself. “You can’t do three.”

“Says who?”

Polly gave him a half-lidded smile and a courtly little sweep of the hand, as if to say: She's all yours, greedy. Polly was young enough to be his daughter, but she could be pretty damn intuitive when it came to sex.

The woman looked at Brian, then at Polly, then at Brian again.

"O.K.," he told Polly. "Gimme a hand."

Flashing a freckled grin, Polly hefted two of the cans and strode out of the office. "Where to?"

"Over there," the woman told her. "The Land Rover."

Polly led the way down the sidewalk, her tank top wet at the breastbone, her silky biceps made wooden by her cargo. Behind her strode the redhead, pale and cool as marble, her ass looking awesome in a knee-length white sweater. Brian brought up the rear, lugging his lone plant and feeling against his better instincts, less a man for it.

"This is nice of you," said the woman.

"No problem," said Polly.

"You bet," Brian put in idiotically. "Part of the service."

They stuffed the cans into the back of the Land Rover, Polly pondering the placement a lot longer than usual. "That oughta hold you," she said at last, whacking one of the cans.

"Thanks." The redhead smiled at Polly, then slipped behind the wheel and pulled the door shut.

"Remember," Brian said, dropping his voice conspiratorially. "Keep 'em real wet. I know we've got a drought on, but they'll die if you don't."

"I'll do it at night," she said, looking at both of them, "when the neighbors aren't looking."

He laughed. "There you go."

"Thanks again." She turned on the ignition.

"Nice car," said Polly.

The redhead nodded. "She's all right." She pulled away from the curb, flashing her palm in a sort of parting salute. Brian and Polly watched until the car had disappeared around the corner.

"She's been here before," Polly told him as they walked back to the nursery.

"Oh, yeah?"

She nodded, scratching a fleck of dirt off her cheek. "I'd have those panty hose off so fast..."

Brian smirked at her sideways.

“You would too,” she said.

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“Nah.”

“C’mon.”

“In a pinch, maybe.”

Polly chuckled.

“You think she likes girls?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“I thought she might be one of yours.”

“Why?”

He thought about this for a moment. “She called her car ‘she,’ for one thing.”

“Huh?” Polly screwed up her face.

“Her car. She referred to it as a she.”

“And you think that’s some kinda...what? secret lesbo code?”

He shrugged.

“I call my car Dwayne,” she said.

He smiled, picturing Polly behind the wheel of her vintage Mustang.

“You’re something,” she said. “You check ’em all out, don’t you?”

“Look who’s talking,” he said. “I thought you found your main woman last month.”

“Who?”

“Whoever. That one you met at Rawhide II.”

Polly rolled her eyes.

“Done with her, huh?”

No answer.

Brian chuckled.

“What?”



“How long did that last, anyway?”

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With her ragged haircut and guilty grin, Polly looked like something out of Norman Rockwell: a truant schoolkid, maybe, caught red-handed at the fishing hole.

“You know,” he told her, “you’re worse than any man I know.”

“That’s because”—she moved alongside him and bumped him with her lean little butt—“I’m *better* than any man you know.”

Polly’s teasing aside, he was hardly the rogue he used to be. He hadn’t strayed from home for over three years now, ever since Geordie Davies got sick. Diagnosed several weeks before Rock Hudson’s announcement, Geordie had lasted almost two years longer than the movie star, finally succumbing offstage, at her sister’s house, somewhere in Oklahoma.

He had offered to care for her himself—with Mary Ann’s knowledge—but she had dismissed the idea with a laugh. They had been playmates, not lovers, she’d told him. “Don’t make us into something we weren’t. We had a good time, pilgrim. Your services are no longer required.”

When his test came back negative, his relief had been so profound that he embarked on a regime of feverish domesticity. Now he rented movies and baked brownies and stayed at home with his daughter, even on the nights when Mary Ann had “important” parties to attend. He had lost his stomach altogether for the sycophants and socialites who revolved around his famous wife.

If something had been lost between him and Mary Ann, it was nothing dramatic, nothing he could pinpoint with certainty. Their sex life still flourished (though it slacked off dramatically during ratings periods), and over the years they had grown increasingly adept at avoiding arguments.

Sometimes, though, he wondered if they weren’t *too* careful in each other’s presence, too formal and solicitous and artificially jolly. As if their domestic arrangement were no more than that: an arrangement, which demanded courtesy in the absence of the real thing.

Or maybe, as she often suggested, he was just overanalyzing again.

He was back in the office, updating the work schedule on the computer, when Michael’s beeper sounded. He tracked the shrill plastic disk to the pocket of his partner’s cardigan, clicked it off, and took it out into the greenhouse, where he found Michael on his knees, potting succulents.

“Oh, thanks,” he said, pocketing the pillbox. “Sorry ’bout that.”

“Hey.” Brian shrugged, embarrassed by the apology. He had long ago accepted the beeper as a fixture in both their lives, but it was Michael for whom it really tolled. Every four hours. “You need some water?” he asked.

Michael had already returned to his potting. “I’ll take ’em in a minute.”

As a rule, he realized, Michael refused to jump to the beeper's commands. It was his way of keeping the poisonous drug in its place.

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"So," asked Michael, "which one of you got her?" Brian pretended not to know what he meant.

"You know." Michael jerked his head toward the door. "Jessica Rabbit out there."

"Who said there was a contest?"

"That's funny. I could have sworn I smelled testosterone."

"Must've been Polly," said Brian.

Michael laughed and plunged the trowel into the soil. "I'll tell her you said that."

Brian turned and headed for the door. "Take your pills," he said.

"Yes, Mother."

Chuckling, he headed out into the sunshine.



# Her Day

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**B**ACK IN THE DRESSING ROOM, A VEIN POUNDING BRUTALLY in her temple, Mary Ann Singleton stretched out on the sofa and kicked off her shoes with a sigh. No sooner had she done so than someone rapped tentatively on the door.

“Yes?” she called colorlessly, already certain it was Raymond, the squirrely new assistant they’d assigned her while Bonnie, her regular, was off houseboating in the Delta with her boyfriend.

Just what she needed right now. Another greenhorn who didn’t know squat about television.

“Mary Ann?”

“Yeah, Raymond, come in.”

The door eased open and Raymond eased in. He was wearing a thigh-length black Yamamoto shirt that was meant to be stylish but only served to exaggerate his dorkiness. “If this is a bad time...

“No,” she said, managing a thin smile. “Sit down, it’s fine.” He took the stool in front of the makeup table and fidgeted with the notes on his clipboard. “Interesting show.” She groaned.

“Where did they find her?”

“Are you kidding? They find *us*. Have you seen the lineup this week? It looks like talent night at Napa.”

He nodded solemnly, obviously not getting it.

“It’s a mental hospital,” she explained. “Up north.”

“Oh.”

“You’re not from here, are you?”

“Well...I am now, but I’m originally from the Midwest.” After a moment’s consideration, she decided not to tell him she was from Cleveland. This was a professional relationship, after all, and she didn’t want things to get too chummy. Why give him something he could use against her later? “So,” she said, “what have you got for me?”

Gravely and with great deliberation, Raymond perused his clipboard. It might have contained a list of fatalities from an airlines disaster. “First off,” he said, “Channel Two wants you for the Jerry Lewis telethon next year.”

“Meaning what? That I have to go to Oakland for it?” He shrugged. “I guess.”

“O.K., tell ’em I’ll do it, but I don’t wanna be paired off with that imbecile cohost they gave me this year. Or anybody else, for that matter. And make sure it’s at a decent hour, like not after midnight or something.”

“Gotcha.” He was scribbling furiously.

“Did you know they actually like him in France?” “Who?”

“Jerry Lewis.”

“Oh. Yeah. I’d heard.”

“That is the sickest thing,” she said. “Isn’t it?”

Raymond merely widened his eyes and shrugged. “Don’t tell me you like him,” she said.

“Well...I know he’s been sort of a joke for a long time, but there’s an increasing number of American cineastes who find his early work...well, at least comparable to, say, Tati.”

She didn’t know what that was and didn’t care. “He uses too much Brylcreem, Raymond. Give me a big break.”

His tiny eyes locked on the clipboard again. Apparently he found her uncool for not knowing that Jerry Lewis was cool again—among film nerds, at any rate. If she’d told him she was from Cleveland he’d be using that against her now. You just couldn’t be too careful.

“What else?” she asked.

He didn’t look up. “Some professor at City College wants you to address his television class.”

“Sorry. Can’t do it.”

“O.K.”

“When is it? Never mind, can’t do it. What else?”

“Uh...one of your studio regulars wants you to autograph a picture.”

“Talk to Julie. We have a whole stack of them, presigned.”

“I know, but he wants something personal.” He handed her the clipboard with a glossy. “I brought you an unsigned one. He said anything personal would do.”

“Some people,” she said, grabbing a felt-tip. “What’s his name?”

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“Cliff. He says he’s watched you for years.”

After a moment’s consideration, she wrote: *Cliff—Thanks for the Memories—Mary Ann*. “If he wants more than that,” she told Raymond, returning the clipboard, “he’s shit outa luck. Is that it?”

“That’s it.” He turned up his hands.

“Great. Fabulous. Get lost.” She gave him a lame smile to show that she was kidding. “I’m about to do our PMS show a week ahead of schedule.”

“Oh...” It took him a while to get it. “Can I get you a Nuprin or something?”

“No, thanks, Raymond. That’s O.K.”

He edged toward the door, then stopped. “Oh, sorry—there was a phone call during the show. A guy named Andrews from New York.”

“Andrews?”

He retrieved a pink phone memo slip from the pocket of his Yamamoto. “Burke Andrews,” he read.

“Oh, *Andrew*. Burke Andrew.”

“Yeah. I guess so. Sorry.” He set the slip on the makeup table. “I’ll leave it here.”

A thousand possibilities whirred past her like a Rolodex. “Is it a New York number?”

Raymond shook his head. “Local,” he said, sliding out the door. “Looks like a hotel.”

Had it really been eleven years?

He’d moved to New York in 1977 after the Cathedral Cannibals fuss, and she hadn’t heard from him since, unless you counted the Kodak Christmas card, circa 1983, of him, his grinny, overdressed wife, and their two little jennifer-jasons—strawberry blonds like their father—hanging cedar garland somewhere in Connecticut. It had stung a little, that card, even though, or maybe even because, she was already married to Brian.

She had met Burke on the Love Boat, as irony would have it, drawn instantly to his affable colli face, his courtliness, his incredible thighs. Michael Tolliver, who’d been there at the time, maintained later that it was Burke’s amnesia she’d fallen for: the tempting clean slate of his mind. His memory had returned, however, in a matter of months, and he’d moved to New York almost immediately. He’d asked her to come with him, of course, but she’d been too enraptured with her new life in San Francisco to seriously consider leaving.

From then on her interest in him had been strictly professional. She had followed his increasing

prestigious byline through a succession of glamorous magazines—*New York*, where he'd started out, *Esquire*, a media column in *Manhattan, inc.*—and through television, where he'd recently been making waves on the production end of the business.

She had often wondered why he'd never made an effort to get in touch with her. Their brief romance aside, they had a certain media visibility in common, if nothing else. True, she wasn't a national figure in the purest sense, but she'd been profiled on *Entertainment Tonight*, and no visitor to San Francisco could have failed to notice her face on television or, for that matter, on billboards on the sides of buses.

Oh, well. She had a funny feeling he was about to make up for it.

He was staying at the Stanford Court, it turned out. The operator put her through to his room.

"Yeah," he said briskly, answering immediately.

"Burke?"

"Yeah."

"It's Mary Ann. Singleton."

"Well, hello! Hey, sorry—I thought you were room service. They keep botching my order and calling back. How are you? Boy, it's great to hear your voice!"

"Well," she said lamely, "same here."

"It's been a long time."

"Sure has."

A conspicuous silence and then: "I...uh...I've got kind of a problem. I was wondering if you might be able to help me."

Her first thought, which she promptly discarded, was that his amnesia had come back. "Sure," she said earnestly. "I'll do what I can." It was nice knowing that she could still be of use to him.

"I have this monkey," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"I have this monkey. Actually, she was more like a friend than a monkey. And she died this morning, and I was wondering if you could arrange to have her freeze-dried for me."

Catching on at last, she collected herself and said: "You shithead."

He chortled like a fifth grader who'd just dropped a salamander down her dress.

“God,” she said. “I was actually picturing you with a dead monkey.”

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He laughed again. “I’ve done worse.”

“I know,” she said ruefully. “I remember.”

She was embarrassed now, but for reasons more troubling than his dumb joke. Of all the shows he might have seen, why did it have to be today’s? If he’d come a week earlier he might have caught her interview with Kitty Dukakis or, barring that, her top-rated show on crib death. What was he laughing at, anyway? Freeze-dried dogs or the way that she had made her name on television?

“How the hell are you?” he asked.

“Terrific. What brings you to town?”

“Well...” He seemed to hesitate. “Business mostly.”

“A story or something?” She hoped like hell it wasn’t AIDS. She’d grown weary of explaining the plague to visiting newsmen, most of whom came here expecting to find the smoldering ruins of Sodom.

“It’s kind of complicated,” he told her.

“O.K.,” she replied, meaning: Forget I asked.

“I’d like to tell you about it, though. Are you free for lunch tomorrow?”

“Uh...hang on a sec, would you?” She put him on hold and waited for a good half minute before speaking to him again. “Yeah, Burke, tomorrow’s fine.”

“Great.”

“Where do you wanna meet?”

“Well,” he said, “you pick the spot, and we’ll put it on my gold card.”

“Only if you can deduct it.”

“Of course,” he said.

She thought for a moment. “There’s a new place downtown. Sort of a tenderloin dive that’s been upscaled.”

“O.K.” He sounded skeptical.

“It’s kind of hot right now. Lots of media people.”

“Let’s do it. I think I can trust you.”

She wasn’t quite sure how to take that, so she let it go. “It’s called D’orothea’s,” she said. “It’s



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