



Don't Look Now

Rating: PG-13

Classification: vignette, humor, romance (H/M)

Spoilers: "Standards of Conduct"

Summary: Picks up right where "Standards of Conduct" left off. Now it's Mac's turn to start pondering.

Disclaimer: If I owned these guys, would Harm have spent half the episode looking like an idiot? I rest my case.

Author's Notes: Okay, I realize that I hold the minority opinion on this one, but with all respect to TPTB ... what the hell was that, people? It's getting awfully "Ally McBeal" in here. Sigh ... if you can't beat 'em, might as well join 'em. Only this time, Mac gets to be the one doubting her sanity. Picture a loyal Harm devotee sticking her tongue out at TPTB like a six-year-old, and you'll have a decent representation of me at the moment.

"You're funny."

His face breaks into a grin at that. I can't tell if he's more relieved than embarrassed, or the other way around. "I'm glad you think so. I think I'm a head case."

"Well, you're that, too." I turn on my best I'm-too-cute-to-die smile, hoping to charm him out of any annoyance that remark might incite. "But I can deal with that."

He shakes his head, still looking amused. Fortunately. After the way he fixed up this case for me, the last thing I should do is piss him off. "I'm out of here. Talk to you later."

As he wanders back toward his own office, I allow myself a minute to think about the conversation we just had. Yow. Shouldn't that have been a lot more awkward than it was? After all, it's not as if we were talking about the weather. We were discussing the idea of having a child together. How is it that we can handle that topic, and yet we've been too skittish to attempt a civil discourse on whether or not we should try dating? Bizarre.

What exactly did I just say to him, anyway? Oh, yeah, something about not worrying about it, because it's a year and a half away. A year and a half? Not quite. Little A.J. was born in mid-May, so it's more like fifteen - sixteen months. And it takes nine months to ...

Wait, what am I doing? This is definitely not an avenue I should be exploring at the moment. But sixteen months isn't a particularly long time, now that I think about it. If nothing changes between now and then - and change doesn't exactly seem imminent at the moment - what am I

going to do? Just waltz into his office and say, "Come on, flyboy, put a bun in my oven?" That'd be great. No awkwardness there.

And what the hell is that *noise*, anyway?

I stand up from my desk and look out into the bullpen. "Petty Officer."

Jen Coates jumps up. "Ma'am?"

"Do you hear something?"

She offers an apologetic smile. "I don't, ma'am, but you know, between Harley rides and rock concerts, I probably shot my hearing years ago."

"It sounds like something's clicking incessantly."

I can tell Jen is seriously doubting me, but she's too polite to say so. "Maybe the fan in somebody's computer is all haywire," she suggests dutifully. "That can be infuriating."

I give up. "Maybe. Carry on." I shut my office door behind me, only to hear the noise even louder. It's not really a click so much as it is ... a tick.

Oh, for Christ's sake. Now I'm almost afraid to look.

Sure enough, there's a big, ornate, wooden cuckoo clock sitting on top of my file cabinet where there previously was none. Apparently my subconscious has all the subtlety of an atomic bomb. This is the part where I'm supposed to realize that my biological clock is ticking, right? Like it's some big revelation? I know I'm over thirty, okay?

You know what - thanks, but no thanks. I'm not playing this game. With exaggerated cool, I turn my back on the clock and reach for the stack of depositions on my desk.

****CUCKOO****

God *damn* it!

Without a thought, I pick up a foam football from the corner and hurl it toward the offending clock. The ball bounces harmlessly off the wall, hitting nothing because there was nothing there to hit, and I *knew* there was nothing there to hit, but I threw it anyway ...

Deep breaths, Marine. There's no justifiable reason to go off the deep end. Harm's not pushing this. If anything, he's more gun-shy than I am. Never mind that he's taken a weird interest in Singer's well-being lately. To be honest, I've got some suspicions about the father of *her* baby, and Harm's behavior seems to bear them out. I mean, I saw the way Sergei looked at her, and I know he didn't drop by JAG on a regular basis just to talk to his brother.

There's something not quite right with the universe if Singer's getting knocked up by a Rabb instead of me.

I need to get a grip. I'm treating this - this *agreement* of ours like a foregone conclusion, when it was really only proposed as a last resort. He just wanted to make me feel better, not set up a serious life plan. Then again, he's the one who brought it up way back on the admiral's

porch, and when I asked just a few minutes ago, he didn't back down. He never does, after all. He never gives his word unless he intends to honor it. I guess that ought to tell me something.

Sixteen months ... I wonder if he'd be willing to go about this the old-fashioned way?

Hold up! Red freaking light, Mackenzie. Thinking about having a baby is one thing. Thinking about sex with your partner is something else entirely. Even if you're convinced it would be searing, mind-blowing sex with your gorgeous, intelligent, dedicated, highly decorated partner ...

Good lord, do I need to get out of here.

Luckily, it's already getting late. I pick up my coat and cover and open my office door - and then I stop cold. On the other side of the bullpen, Harm has ditched his uniform jacket and tie - a fairly drool-worthy look, if you ask me - and there's a little dark-haired boy climbing around on his back. Both of them are grinning with blinding, eerily similar smiles, and when the child looks up, I can see his brilliant blue eyes.

"Want to show Mommy?" Harm asks him, and he nods enthusiastically.

Completely floored, I fall against the doorframe and barely manage to keep my feet. Harm glances over, oblivious. "Hey, Mac, check it out. A.J.'s gonna show Harriet our new trick. Harriet!"

A.J.?

Sure enough, when I blink a few times, the boy's hair is blond, and I recognize our godson. Ohh, I think I'm really losing it.

Harriet appears from the breakroom, narrowing her eyes comically. "All right, what kind of trouble are you boys getting into now?"

"Absolutely none. We're being perfect angels." Harm sets A.J. down and picks up a small basketball. "We've been working on our Harlem Globetrotter moves. Watch this. Ready, A.J.?"

"Ready!" the three-year-old says determinedly.

Harm does an exaggerated spin move and tosses the ball behind his back to A.J., who catches it and shoots it over his head, sky-hook style, into a nearby wastebasket.

"And the crowd goes wild!" Harm swings A.J. up over his shoulder, eliciting a squeal. This is so cute it's killing me.

Harriet claps appreciatively. "Good shot, sweetie! Now it's time to go home, all right? You can show Daddy then."

Harm sets A.J. down again and gives him a high five. "See you later, teammate."

"Bye," A.J. answers, turning to run back to his mom. On the way, he gives me a bright smile, and I can't help thinking about all the different permutations: my looks and Harm's brains, or his looks and my brains, or somewhere in between ...

"Mac? Everything okay?"

The two of us are the only ones left in the bullpen now, and I'm feeling slightly ridiculous for having let my mind stray so far off-course. It takes effort to make myself smile back at Harm's look of mild concern. "Sure. Just thinking, that's all."

"Anything you'd care to share with the class?"

He's got to be kidding. "Nah, no big deal. You heading home?"

"Yeah, as soon as I figure out where A.J. put my tie."

"You let A.J. have your tie?"

He shrugs. "He wanted to wear it. Since when do I say no to him?"

"Good point. I'll help you look for it." We start canvassing the bullpen, looking under desks and on any low shelves. I can see something suspicious sticking out of Harriet's desk drawer, so I pull it open far enough to retrieve a somewhat crinkled Navy Class-A tie. "Got it."

Harm wanders over and takes it from me, attempting to return his uniform to acceptable standards. "Thanks. Harriet's desk, huh?"

"In her drawer." I glance down at one of the framed pictures that line the desk. It's one of A.J. at ten or twelve weeks old, fast asleep in his crib. There's just something so amazingly pure and simplifying about that image - somehow it gives me faith that maybe, just maybe ...

Damn. Did I just sigh out loud?

Quickly I look up to see if I've been caught, and when his gaze meets mine, I realize that he was staring at the same picture. Our eyes are locked together now, and before I can lose my nerve, I open my mouth to speak at the exact moment that he does likewise.

"You want to get dinner?" "Do you have dinner plans?"

We both grin at the symmetry. "My treat," he offers. "To celebrate your victory over Lieutenant Punk-Ass, the computer genius."

"My treat," I counter. "Because you made victory over the aforementioned punk-ass possible."

"Okay, I guess we're going Dutch."

Does he realize that he just made this sound like a date? At least he didn't say 'go halves' - I might have keeled over. "Okay, then. How does Trattoria sound?"

He cocks his head. "I'm always up for Italian. Why there and not Angelo's, though?"

"Well, for one thing, Trattoria's quieter, and I'd like to be able to actually talk to you." I automatically tense up, waiting to see if he takes that as any sort of hint. I wonder if I meant it as any sort of a hint. I think I did. Please don't let him freak out about it.

Thankfully, he doesn't. "I'd like that, too."

"Yeah? What would you like us to be talking about?"

"Nothing in particular. Maybe - how we see ourselves right now. Or how we see each other."

In spite of my shock that he's proposing a surprisingly thoughtful topic, I have to laugh. "Sailor, trust me - you don't really want to know what I've been seeing lately."

"Oh, I don't? Why's that?"

This had better not be a colossal mistake. "Mainly because everything I see relates to the future, and it keeps trying to force me to get serious."

"So let's get serious."

Wait, what? I stare hard at him, waiting for a punch line, but it never comes. His ever-changing eyes are lit with both sincerity and a hint of fear, and I'm starting to think he might honestly mean it. "Name your terms," I manage to squeak out.

"Don't have any. Just dinner, and wherever it goes from there. Just to see if we can."

"Isn't that the part we've been tripping over for the last who-knows how long?"

"More or less."

"Then why now?"

He offers a small, almost embarrassed smile. "Come on, Mac," he says in that warm voice that turns me to mush every time. "If we can talk seriously about having a baby, don't you think it's time we gave a regular old relationship a try?"

Oh, my God! I don't want to scare him off by following my instinct, which is to clap my hands and shriek like a teenager at a boy-band concert. "Who are you and what have you done with my partner?"

That was a mistake. Shock flashes across his features, and his voice drops to a nearly inaudible level. "Is that a no?"

"No! I mean, yes, it's not - I mean - " Oh, Christ, what am I doing? Desperate times call for desperate measures. "I'm starting over, okay? Yes, it's time. It's probably long past time. Yes, I'd like to get serious, and yes, I have a bag packed in my car, so I say we go to your place after dinner."

That suggestion draws another kind of shock altogether, but it's a good kind. "You don't mess around, do you?"

"Not ordinarily. We have a lot of ground to cover in the next sixteen months."

"Sixteen months, or seven months?"

I do the math and note the wicked gleam in his eye. "That's one of the things we need to discuss."

"Well, anything worth doing is worth doing right ..."

I grab his arm. "Come on, flyboy. We're wasting time."

With a gentle hand, he stops my motion toward the door. "Not any more, we're not," he says solemnly. "Okay?"

Someone up there must be listening tonight. "Yeah," I say softly. "Better than okay."

He holds out a hand, which I take without hesitation, and we start toward the parking lot. I don't have any idea where all this is leading, but I've got a feeling that I'm going to like it.

"Mama ..."

What was that? I whirl around, searching for the owner of the young voice I just heard, but there's no one there. I glance up at Harm, feeling self-conscious, but he seems to be looking around for something as well.

"Did you just hear something?"

"Maybe. What did you hear?"

"Um ... nothing. Let's go."

*** THE END ***