

Cross and Sawyer decided they should have Maria, if she agreed of course, invite Littlethumb for a casual evening at Sawyer's home. Cross noticed and relayed to Sawyer the brief exchange between Littlethumb and Maria in the courtroom.

"I believe he's smitten with your nanny," Cross said.

"Really," Sawyer responded in a playfully sarcastic tone. "What gives you that idea?" Everyone in court that day heard Littlethumb's comments about the beautiful nanny.

"It wasn't only his description of meeting her and your daughter. Just before he left the courtroom, Mr. Brooks signed to her that he would call her later," Cross said.

"You know sign language?" Sawyer asked with surprise. "How does everyone know sign language all of a sudden?"

"Actually I read lips," Cross said. "It's a useful tool for a detective. I was able to read his lips because people who can speak have a tendency to mouth the words when they're signing."

"Oh, of course," Sawyer said. "Makes perfect sense."

Maria agreed to the assignment. She was pleasantly surprised when Sawyer asked her if she was interested in delivering the invitation, but she did have a familial relationship with the Brookses. She readily admitted to Sawyer via text messages that she was indeed attracted to the painter and was curious to learn more about him. She asked Sawyer if he thought Littlethumb was safe.

"If he's still the same boy I knew," Sawyer replied, "he might be the safest, most loving, most special person on this planet." That was a hefty endorsement. Sawyer, being a typical male, did not realize he was melting Maria's heart with his words.

Littlethumb was pleasantly surprised when he saw Maria's face on the front door's surveillance monitor. She held what appeared to be a cake. Not only was he pleasantly surprised, but he was also instantly sweaty, nervous, and awkward. He scrambled out of his chair, almost falling when she rang the doorbell a second time. He stepped in a trash can, knocked a pile of files off the corner of a desk, and stood with the trash can still attached to his foot as he checked his hair in a mirror, desperately licking his palms and smearing hair away from his face.

Holy cow, I look like shit, he thought.

Maria felt the vibrations of a commotion coming from the house. She wore an inquisitive expression when Littlethumb opened the door, though her expression quickly shifted to a warm smile when she saw him. She could not see his foot, still stuck in the metal trashcan and hidden behind the door.

Littlethumb smiled at her and cocked his head. Maria held the cake out for him. It was covered in white icing with the words "Invitation Cake" written in chocolate icing on the top. A note card stuck out from the cake. Littlethumb pulled the card out of the cake and removed the icing from the envelope with his finger. He promptly stuck the finger in his mouth to clean off the icing and opened the note.

The note read: "I baked you a cake to invite you to dinner."

Littlethumb smiled and reached for the cake. He set it on a table by the door and invited Maria inside.

"No," she signed. "I really can't stay."

"Okay," he replied. "I have to admit, I'm kind of surprised you're here. How did you find me?"

"The tall man working for Mr. Pettimore," Maria replied.

"Oh. Yeah, that makes sense." Littlethumb was slightly disappointed.

"Before you make up your mind," Maria continued, "you should know I am here for Mr. Pettimore. He asked me to deliver the invitation."

"Oh," Littlethumb said. He wasn't sure how to sign disappointment, but he figured she would see it on his face.

"But I really hope you will come," Maria signed.

"Will you be there?" Littlethumb signed. *Argh? Really, dude, he thought. She just said she hoped you would come. Why would she care if she wasn't going to be there?*

At just the right time, all four of his monkeys decided to see what was happening at the door. The two smallest, Sir Alister Pickney and Stevie Two-Sharks, jumped up onto his left shoulder, while their older brother Zeus jumped onto his right shoulder, and Jojo landed gently atop his head. Littlethumb smiled awkwardly.

Maria giggled and signed, "Yes. I will be there."

"Then I will come," Littlethumb signed. "Are you sure you don't want to come inside for a minute?"

"Yes," Maria replied. "It looks like your hands are full, but I will see you on Thursday."

"Okay," he responded. "Oh, by the way, we haven't really met yet. I'm Littlethumb." He stuck his hand out and, as he did so, was suddenly embarrassed. He realized his name felt a little juvenile, so he pulled his hand back and signed, "But you can call me LT if you like," then stuck the hand out again.

Maria left and our hero staggered back into his apartment. *Well that was super smooth, he thought. You're just a regular, old Don Juan Casanova there, ain't-cha, kid?* He sighed and replayed the meeting in his mind, hoping that, upon review, it might not seem so awkward. But he realized he couldn't remember what she looked like.

Have you ever been so infatuated by someone that you can't remember what they look like? When you're with that person, you are so head over heels that when they are gone, your memory of the interaction is so hazy from all the butterflies you were feeling in your head that you can't remember stuff, sometimes even what the other person actually looks like. Brain butterflies are much more debilitating than stomach butterflies, by the way. You just feel elated and confused. That's what happened to Littlethumb. He gave up using his memory and went into his studio to stare at his portraits of her, trying to sort the whole mess out in his head.

When Daring Bird returned, he found Littlethumb in his studio, tinkering on his piano. All of his portraits of Maria were uncovered and on display in the room. The cake sat on top of the piano with a large corner section missing.

Daring Bird walked to the center of the room and took in the paintings. "She is beautiful, isn't she?" he said.

Littlethumb did not respond. He simply hit a key on the piano several times like the “ding ding ding ding ding . . .” noise on a game show when a contestant answers correctly. Daring Bird walked over and broke off a chunk of cake, tossing it in his mouth. He shook his head with approval.

“Good cake. Moist.” He moseyed back to the room’s center. “I like that word. Moist. A lot of people don’t, you know, and I get it. It’s one of those words. But I like it.”

Littlethumb chuckled quietly and shook his head, momentarily breaking from his befuddled, not-quite-melancholy state. Daring Bird caught the reaction from the corner of his eye and whirled on his nephew, crossing over to the piano with a jaunty step.

“I gotta have more. Yes I do, yes I do. This cake is good.” I’m not sure what fake accent Daring Bird was going for, but whatever it was, the creaky pitch was off putting. Still, his attempt to lighten the heavy air in the room worked.

Littlethumb shuddered. “Never do that again,” he said with a fake grimace.

“So what’s the invitation for?” Daring Bird asked.

“Dinner.”

“Man oh man. That’s my boy. Barely knows who he is and broads are showing up at the front door with cakes and dinner dates.” Daring Bird took another chunk of cake. “Good cake, too.”

“Yes, you made note of that,” Littlethumb replied.

“So what’s the problem, kid?”

“It’s not dinner with her. It’s dinner with Sawyer.”

“Pettimore. Well, that makes sense,” Daring Bird said, then he walked over and took a closer look at one of the portraits of Maria. “Good to see you haven’t lost your touch.”

“Thanks.”

“So, again, what’s the problem? Why are you in here torturing yourself?”

“It’s not torture,” Littlethumb explained. “I just . . . I couldn’t remember what she looked like.”

“Ah,” Daring Bird said. “I know that. If that’s what she does to you, you gotta go get her.”

“What about our work? It could be dangerous for her.”

“So could waking up in the morning,” Daring Bird replied. Then he turned and walked over to his nephew. “Look, kid, you just got smacked in the face with a ton of shit to cope with all over again. I get it. For 15 years, I’ve been dealing with the possibility that it was my business that killed your mom and . . . everyone. I understand.”

Littlethumb noticed the tiniest trace of tears in the corner of Daring Bird’s eye. Daring Bird never wavered, however. If he was stirred emotionally, it did not show in his voice.

“In the grand scheme of things,” Daring Bird continued, “we don’t control jack shit. You know this. Life is worth very little except for a few amazing things like music and art. What you can do with a paintbrush. Laughter. Brief moments of intense sadness so we know just how wonderful laughter is. And love. You’re the most loving creature I believe I’ve ever met. You remind me of my father.” Daring Bird’s words weren’t impassioned so much as instructional. He spoke with a fatherly professor’s tone. “In summary, the point of my little speech here is threefold: Without all the shitty parts of life, we wouldn’t recognize the great ones. We can’t control shit, like when it’s someone’s time to die, despite all of the illusions of control we create to protect our own sanity. And three, love trumps everything.”

“Should I be taking notes?” Littlethumb asked with a smile.

“Hopefully you learned something,” Daring Bird said, then he playfully smacked at the back of Littlethumb’s head.

“You need to go to the dinner with me,” Littlethumb said. “I want you to.”

“I’ve got no business with Pettimore,” Daring Bird replied.

“Yes, you do,” Littlethumb disagreed. “Whatever your distaste for him is, I will need you to forgive him.”
“Good luck with that,” said Daring Bird.