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TOO MUCH "ALLY MCBEAL"

I've become addicted lately to watching older TV dramedies on streaming Netflix. For the current marathon, it's *Ally McBeal* that has, to my surprise, reeled me in. Spewed from the subversive mind of David E. Kelley, it's about a group of twenty to thirty-something, highly dysfunctional, often abrasive, money-hungry lawyers at Cage & Fish law firm in Boston. There are five seasons and 100 episodes, which begin in 1997. All the women wear Prada, have cutting-edge hair (mostly blond), forever legs, perfect bodies and raging libidos. I am almost old enough to be their grandmothers. My time to grapple with becoming an "adult" and the trauma of turning thirty was in the 1970's.

If that was all there was, I could easily have shut it off. But there's more. There are quirky, well-written characters (I adore quirky, well-written characters), like Richard Fish, who has a neck waddle fetish, knows a secret erogenous place in a woman's knee pit, and spouts Fishisms — "True love means short refractory time. Fishism."; his partner John Cage, who can project his stomach gurgle in court, carries a remote toilet flusher, and overcomes stuttering by reciting names of cities in NY state; Elaine, Ally's assistant, who knows the gossip and tells all, has invented the "Face Bra," "Sounds of a Husband" CD for the lonely single woman, and condoms with personalized sayings.

And, of course, there's Ally McBeal, a vulnerable, frenetic, self-absorbed, walking (often falling down) emotional disaster with a fantastic imaginary life that often seems more real to her than her "real" one. Most of all, and even though the world seems to quash it at every turn, Ally holds fast to the dream of a great love, "the one" who will *know*, beyond all illusion, who she really is, the one who will "get" her. Meanwhile, she hears her emotional life echoed in music — Al Green, Gladys Knight and the Pips, The Everly Brothers, *Goodnight My Someone* from The Music Man, *Dulcinea* from Man of La Mancha —

*I have dreamed thee too long,
Never seen thee or touched thee.
But known thee with all of my heart.
Half a prayer, half a song,
Thou hast always been with me,
Though we have been always apart...*

These and other characters move through outlandish situations, relationships, and court cases in which sex, love and other sacred cows are pushed not to the limit, but over the edge. Somehow this array of bizarre lawyers manages to also be good at lawyering. And even with their irks and quirks and quasi-lunacy, their desire for connection and love pushes through exposing the deeper truths that lurk beneath the comic façade.

Take Richard Fish's neck waddle fetish. On the surface, it's pretty (or grossly) funny. But when you're someone who has her share of waddle, there's hope in imagining there could be an intimate partner in the real world who might find it enticing.

And when this fetish was first revealed on the show, it reminded me of something that had happened many years ago. I had a best friend who smoked cigarettes. Not only was it difficult for me to be around the nauseating smell, but the smoke made me dizzy and affected my eyes and sinuses. At one point this friend became involved in a passionate affair with a man ten years younger than she, which eventually ended badly. A short time afterwards, her ex-lover called me, deeply upset, hoping to learn why exactly she had broken up with him. In the course of our conversation, he told me that he had loved her so much that the smell of her cigarette smoke had actually become erotic to him. *Chacun à son gout.*

I've been hooked on *Ally* for weeks now. A few days ago, I watched a poignant episode in which Ally defends a spinster high school teacher of hers who is dying and wants to be put into a coma so she can live out her days in an alternate life she's created in her dreams. In that reality she has a loving husband, three children, an entire existence that has built upon itself for decades.

Ally understands. So do I. I, myself, have had a rich inner life that has sometimes seemed as real to me as my outer one. Once, decades ago, I, too, had a dream relationship that built upon itself for thirteen years. Like Ally, I, too, still imagine a kind of love far beyond what seems possible in the world. And I, too, hear my life in music. For me it might be Chopin or Strauss, Edith Piaf's *La Vie en Rose*, Linda Ronstadt's *When You Wish Upon A Star*, Ella crooning Gershwin — *Some day he'll come along/ the man I love*, Johnny Mathis sighing *And This Is My Beloved*.

From episode to episode, Ally struggles to come to terms with vision versus reality. *Has the whole world lost its dreams?* she wonders. *Is it foolish to hope for a grand love? Do fantasies keep one from living in the real moment?* These are timeless and ageless questions, ones I still ponder.

Watching so much *Ally McBeal*, however, was beginning to take its toll on me. As the show moved through the years, the dramatic situations seemed to grow more intense, more emotionally wrenching, often rippling the smoothed over surface of my own longing. Yet, just like I often *have* to eat the *whole* huge cookie because it's there (I'm not proud of this), I felt compelled to complete all 100 episodes of *Ally*.

But I knew I was in dangerous territory when I was finding myself dissolved in tears at the conclusion of every show. It's not where I want to be these days. I'm a cheery person. Even though this says something about good script writing, about knowing how to leave threads of drama a little knotted in order to lure the viewer back to see how things unravel, it didn't seem healthy to let myself get so addicted to this family of TV crazies.

Yesterday, I called my friend Margo and made her tell me to TURN *ALLY MCBEAL* OFF! (I thought if the imperative came from someone else, I might not ignore it.) It worked. I've set streaming TV aside...at least for a while. Now I'm back to films. Two hours and it's a done deal. I think I'll revisit my old friend Jane Austen — *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma*. I'll let you know how it turns out.