

Courting, by Dan Hershfield

Cast:

Hillary, a receptionist at an investment firm, early twenties

Michael, an accountant who works at Hillary's office one afternoon a week, late twenties

Jack, Hillary's waiter

Daisy, Michael's waiter

Maurice, chef, very French

[A posh French restaurant with two tables and a door to the kitchen. At one table sit Hillary and Michael, and the tension is palpable. There is a bread basket on their table, and they each have a glass of wine; Hillary's is white, Michael's is red. Jack and Daisy are setting the other table, even though it is already set; they do this by continually exchanging cutlery from one place setting to the other.]

Michael: I like your sweater.

Hillary: Thanks.

Michael: Is it new?

Hillary: Sorta. New to me. From a yard sale.

Michael: Oh, neat. Neat. Neat. *(beat)* You know what I find weird? How when people want a drink with no ice, they order it 'neat.' It just sounds so, I don't know, keen or something. It's like a teenager ordering his first drink. "I'm going to be having a scotch. Neat!" *(Putting on a Sean Connery accent)* "No martini for me today, Miss Money Penny. Get me a whiskey, neat."

Hillary: Probably meant more like tidy.

Michael: Oh. Yeah. I guess that would make more sense. Uncluttered with ice, as it were. *(beat)* I'll bet Titanic survivors would agree! *(beat)* The boat, not the movie...although let's face it, surviving the movie was no walk in the park either!

Hillary: I liked that movie.

Michael: Oh...Neat...*(Drinks)* So, anything interesting happen at work yesterday?

Jack: *(Without looking up)* Don't answer that.

Michael: *(Frustrated by the interruption)* So, having a good time so far?

Jack: Objection!

Daisy: On what grounds?

[Jack and Daisy move, Jack to stand behind Hillary, Daisy to stand behind Michael]

Jack: He can't ask a question which obliges my client to feign having a good time or come off as a bitch.

Daisy: He is entitled to validation if she demonstrates willing and knowing disdain.

Jack: When did she do that?

Daisy: She's speaking in sentence fragments, and she said she liked Titanic, which no one would admit to in this sophisticated a restaurant unless they were trying to hurt someone.

[Hillary motions as if she's about to interject, but then changes her mind.]

Jack: You should have raised those objections then. You can't just store them up.

Daisy: I was allowing your client some leeway. I thought you'd return the courtesy.

Jack: You thought wrong. As far as I'm concerned, my client is the wronged party.

Michael: Oh, c'mon!

Jack: Sir? If you have something to say, you should tell it to your waiter.

Daisy: It's alright, Michael...Fine. Let us ask the question again, and we'll allow your client to make a noncommittal but friendly response, one which acknowledges the awkwardness but doesn't lay blame. Let's say she'll reply "Meh", but then shrug and laugh?

Jack: I'm sorry, I'm not going to advise my client to violate standard dating protocol.

Daisy: It wouldn't!

Jack: It would!

Daisy: Wouldn't!

Jack: Would!

Daisy & Jack: Maurice!!

[Maurice emerges from the kitchen]

Maurice: Oui?

Jack: Maurice, if a man asks a woman on a date if she's having a good time, and she answers "Meh," wouldn't that violate standard dating protocol?

Maurice: *(Philosophical)* It is like the integrity of a soufflé in a box marked Fragile sent overnight express: it will all depend upon the delivery.

Daisy: Thank you, Maurice. Michael, please ask your question again.

Michael: Are you having a good time yet?

Daisy: So far. It was "Are you having a good time so far?" I know it seems nitpicky, but it affects the tone. Please ask again.

Michael: Are you having a good time so far?

[Hillary looks at Jack for approval.]

Jack: Go ahead.

Hillary: Meh.

[Hillary shrugs and laughs, not terribly convincingly.]

Maurice: Good enough.

[Maurice exits to the kitchen. Jack and Daisy return to their initial positions. Michael and Hillary take a moment to compose themselves.]

Michael: *(To Daisy)* Can we, umm, proceed?

Daisy: Absolutely.

Michael: Okay. *(To Hillary)* Good. *(beat)* So something funny happened to me the other day—

Jack: You're under no obligation to laugh.

Michael: She knows that, alright? Jesus... So anyway, okay, I'm on the bus and I want to sit down, only there are no empty seats. But then I notice that there's a teenager who's sitting straddled across two seats. So I ask him politely to move, so I can sit down, and he responds "I like to sit on the crack!" *(No big response from Hillary)* Fine. Don't laugh.

Hillary: What is that supposed to mean?

Michael: I just don't see why you had to make this all so confrontational...

Hillary: Just because I didn't laugh at your story doesn't mean...

Michael: Not that! This!! (*Indicating waiters*) Just tell me why.

Hillary: I've told you why! You sent me flowers! At work! After our first date!

Michael: Girls are supposed to like flowers.

Hillary: What, did you read that in Cosmo?!? Next time, read the fine print which says they don't like them at work!

Michael: I know where you work. I don't know where you live.

Hillary: Well, to me, that would be a pretty good sign you're not at the flower-sending stage!

Michael: I just thought it would be a nice thing to do.

Hillary: I get that, and I believe that, but still...And more than even the flowers, what bothers me is that you don't get why I'm upset...

Michael: Is it the money? Because they weren't that expensive and I was happy to—

Hillary: God, no, it wasn't the money! God!

Michael: Well, then, what? I mean, if they bothered you so much, why'd you take them?

Hillary: What choice did I have?

Daisy: Objection!

Hillary: What?

Daisy: Maurice!

Michael: Look, forget it, she can talk.

Daisy: Michael, you have to let me do my job. Trust me.

Michael: But I'd like to—

Daisy: Michael, the date will continue. Just as soon as we get our ruling.

[Maurice emerges from the kitchen and arrives at the table.]

Maurice: Oui?

Daisy: Maurice, I'm making a motion that she be prohibited from arguing that the flowers were "forced upon her." She signed for them. This is a textbook example of a property transfer agreement.

Jack: He bought her the flowers, making them her property prior to her knowledge or involvement. Signing for them only acknowledged receipt of what was already hers.

Maurice: I take it you have a precedent?

Jack: In *Marquez v. Sewall*, this restaurant ruled that even though the jewelry the defendant bought for their anniversary wasn't received until the day after due to courier error, he was not at fault because the purchase had been made on time.

Daisy: Maurice, that case involved a present for which there was implied consent. They'd been going out for a year, she knew a present was coming. Here, there is no implied consent, ergo there was no tacit contract, ergo the flowers were still technically his until she waived her right of refusal, which she did by signing for them.

Maurice: Jack. Daisy. You two become more brilliant every day. I am beaming with pride. But since you cannot both be right, I rule in Daisy's favour. The girl cannot argue she had no choice in accepting the flowers.

Daisy: In light of this ruling, she should also be prohibited from stating that she didn't want the flowers.

Maurice: Why is that?

Daisy: If she willingly and knowingly took possession of the flowers, how can she argue she didn't want them?

Jack: Maurice, these flowers were delivered to her by an intermediary and were given to her in the presence of coworkers and employers. Surely the involvement of these third parties creates enough uncertainty as to her state of mind to preclude any declarative statements as to motive.

Maurice: Ah, tres bien. Now, it is fortune's turn to smile upon you, Jack. My ruling is that she took the flowers by choice, but the reason is still unknown. *(beat)* I may return to my truffles now?

Daisy: Yes, thank you.

Jack: Thank you, Maurice.

Maurice: De rien.

[Maurice exits to the kitchen.]

Michael: So I guess that's the big question then. Why did you accept them?

[Hillary looks to Jack. He nods his consent.]

Hillary: Look, I'll tell you. But I want you to really, really listen, alright?

Michael: Fine.

Hillary: Michael, I didn't want the attention. And if I didn't want the attention from getting flowers, can you understand how much less I'd want the attention from refusing them, or throwing them out?

Michael: I guess. But why wouldn't you want the attention? Guys sending you flowers, that's good attention.

Hillary: Not at work! And guys don't send flowers, boyfriends send flowers! You get flowers from people you're dating, not from people you've been on dates with. Do you see the distinction?

Michael: Not really. I mean, how am I supposed to know when that happens?

Hillary: You just do! And this, this was just way too soon. I mean, now Barry thinks we're "dating" dating, and it's bad enough dealing with a boss who's always prying into my business without him thinking we're in a relationship. Especially since he knows you!

Michael: What does it matter what he thinks?

Hillary: Because! Because now I have to act by all these different rules! Now, it's like I can't just not go on a date with you, I'd have to break up with you, you know? And it's our second date!

Michael: But that's ridiculous...

Hillary: That's dating. Dating's ridiculous! *(Jack and Daisy clear their throats)* I'm sorry, but it is!

Michael: Look, you shouldn't care about what other people think. Let them think we're dating, so what? It doesn't have to change things between us...I mean, the only thing it might...never mind...

Hillary: No, what?

Michael: ...Well, it occurs to me that maybe, you know, if one were so inclined to see it in a certain way, well, it might kind of maybe mean that you couldn't see anyone else...at least for awhile...

Hillary & Jack: What?!?

Daisy: Alright, hold on a minute. Let's not overreact. It may be a slightly radical interpretation of convention, but it's not without precedent. There are well-established rules dictating the amount of time that should elapse between relationships.

Jack: First of all, what *relationship*? And second of all, those rules are designed to protect the new partners, not the old, and you know it!

Hillary: So what, I'm your property now?!?

Michael: No one's saying that!

Daisy: Michael, allow me. *(To Hillary)* No one's saying that.

Hillary: I think I should consult with my waiter. *(Jack moves over to her side)* It's private.

[Jack leans in over the table to allow Hillary to whisper. Instead, she kisses him full on the lips. He stands upright again, slightly dazed.]

Hillary: *(To Michael)* That a long enough break for you?

Michael: Oh! Oh! Oh, that's real mature!

Hillary: You're calling me immature?!?

Michael: No, of course not! Titanic was absolutely a movie made for adults, and not TWELVE-YEAR OLD GIRLS!

Hillary: You know, it won a little award you might of heard of! The OSCAR! For BEST PICTURE!

[From this point until Maurice's intervention, the waiters attempt to calm down their customers. At some point, Maurice enters unnoticed and cuts off their argument, possibly before the end of the text provided.]

Michael: Right, that means a lot.

Hillary: You know the real reason you didn't like that movie?

Michael: Because it was crap?

Hillary: Because you're Billy Zane!—

Hillary: You think a relationship is a contract, not a give-and-take. Your flowers are just a blue diamond! You don't get how Rose could choose Jack, because you don't see what he could offer her. See, that's what you don't get, and what everyone who didn't like that movie doesn't get. Love is about unspoken understanding. They're from different sides of the tracks, but they make it work because they're there for each other. No matter how much things go against them, no matter who tries to stand in their way, no matter how much the boat sinks and how grim things seem...it's sweet, and you cynics can't appreciate sweet...

Michael: Oh please. Who could identify with any of those characters? They were so cartoonish and hackneyed! "I'm the good guy! Love is great! I'm going to get you naked after knowing you for five minutes, but it's an art thing." "I'm the bad guy! Crush! Kill! Destroy! Drown the children!! I have money instead of feelings!" "I'm the rich girl. I can't understand love until a poor boy comes along with his wonderful life experience and educates me, because my world is all about manners, people with money are incapable of real feelings, thank God for the little people, with their simple minds and their pure hearts..."

Maurice: (*Interrupting and cutting off the dialogue above*) SHUT UP! (*They do.*) I mean, SILENCE! I think maybe now you are ready to order, yes? (*To Michael*) Perhaps Monsieur would care for a hot dog? It too is ninety per cent asshole. (*Hillary laughs. Maurice turns to her.*) For Madame, I would recommend a molehill of paté. To you, it will no doubt seem like a mountain.

Michael: Hey now, c'mon, that's not...I mean, who are you to judge us?

Maurice: I'm the judge.

Michael: Yes, well, be that as it may...We didn't come here to be mocked, we just came to...you know...

Maurice: No, I do not. Why did you come?

Michael: Well, you know...see if there was a spark...

Maurice: (*to Hillary*) And you?

Hillary: Ummm, well, I mean, for me, it was a little more because I thought I had to, but when I agreed to the date, and even a little now, umm, yeah, I guess, looking for a spark...

Maurice: Both of you? A spark? A spark?!? A spark of what? Could not be lust, because that you would already know...So then, a spark of...the other! Is that what you're telling me? You are looking for a spark of the other?

Michael: Uh, yeah, I guess.

Maurice: For this, you take up our time? This you could not figure out on your own? For this, you take up a table, two tables in fact, that could have been used by those who had already found their spark?!? Mon dieu!! *(beat)* Wait here!

[Maurice exits to the kitchen.]

Jack: *(To Hillary and Michael)* I'd finish that wine now if I were you.

[They drain their glasses. Maurice returns from the kitchen bearing a fairly large piece of stereograph art. He places the bottom of the frame on the table, displaying it to them.]

Maurice: Do you know what this is?

Hillary: 3D art?

Maurice: Yes, but it is also something more. It is love. The way you look at 3D art is the way you should look at the person you love. Your eyes should become wider. Your blinking should slow. You should stare deeply, afraid to look away, fearing that if you do, it will disappear, never to be seen again. You should feel that you can see dimensions that no one else can or will ever see. To everyone else, it is just surface, but to you, it is deep and it is beautiful. Look at the art. Look at it! *(They do.)* Now, look at each other. *(They do.)* Is there a spark?

Hillary: I don't think so.

Michael: Not really.

Maurice: Might there ever be?

Michael: Probably not...

Hillary: I'm sorry.

Maurice: Date dismissed. Without prejudice.

Michael: *(After a pause, to Hillary)* C'mon. I'll give you a ride home.

Hillary: *(After a pause)* Alright. *(To others)* Thanks.

[They exit. Maurice lays the stereograph art on the table and exits to the kitchen.]

Jack: (*Shouting after Hillary*) Call me!

[Jack and Daisy sit at the vacated table. Maurice returns with wine for all. He stands where he stood with the stereograph art.]

Jack: (*Toasting*) Good job as always, boss.

[They drink.]

Maurice: Bah, it is nothing. It is just King Solomon's logic: You cut a baby in half in front of a couple, and neither of them puts up a fuss, chances are it was not their baby. You do it once, you've done it a million times.

Jack: I suppose.

Daisy: It was nice to hear the 3D art speech again. Nights like this, it helps to know that someone's that passionate about anything...

Maurice: Ha! I'll tell you a secret, chérie: in truth, I cannot even see it!

Daisy: Really?!?

Maurice: Well, I can *see* it, in the sense that I don't run into it, but it doesn't, how you say, (*Makes popping sound*) pop out at me. This one hangs over my stove. It drives me crazy. It plays with me as if I were a child's toy. It makes me so frustrated I just want to spit in the soup!

Daisy: (*Incredulous*) Well then why would you use it as your metaphor for love?!?

Maurice: Because it drives me crazy. Because it plays with me as if I were a child's toy. Because it makes me so frustrated I just want to spit in the soup! (*beat*) Yet I still look at it, for it, every day, knowing that if I manage to see it once, just once, then it will be mine forever.

Daisy: Oh.

[They all look at the stereograph art for quite some time.]

Jack: It's a duck.

Maurice: I knew it!!

THE END