

# SIMULACRUM

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There was one day when Foster Thistle's writing professor had asked the class, "How do you eat on a first date?" Murmurings from the students. "Very carefully," several had proffered in response.

"Exactly," the professor had said. "Think of that sort of process as a good exercise in describing a scene. Think about how you would describe eating a meal on a first date. It's careful, it's artificial, it's awkward. You're trying not to look like a pig, trying not to spill your food. You're trying to look sophisticated. You order the salad even though you actually really want the steak."

Actually, the professor was wrong, thought Foster. That occurred to him just today. Just on his date. Just at this moment. Gazing over the harbor, awash in the soft light of early evening, he said, "It's a lovely view isn't it?" He glanced at Stephanie, across the table from him, then back to the harbor.

He was angry and resentful. He recognized that, expectation failure welling up in him, yet again.

He scolded himself for not being more charitable, for not accepting her as the pleasant person he knew she was. As he reminded himself, she was the same person he'd met on the web site less than a week ago. The same person he'd spoken to engagingly, at length, for more than an hour on three successive nights on the phone during the past week. Each conversation had been fun, sparkling with wit and wordplay, or at least it was that way in his recollection. They'd discussed his career as a legal officer in the Army, her time as a military wife. They'd talked of his time as a judge, of criminal cases tried, and her current life as an investigator for the state health department. This led into a discussion of child sexual abuse cases he'd tried as a defense counsel and as a military judge.

"They're the worst," he'd told her. "I like making legal rulings, like on what evidence comes in, but I don't like judging people – what they've done, what punishment they deserve." Those words singed him a bit now. For here he sat, subjecting her to intense judgment.

Foster wasn't good at meeting women. He knew that

attractive women intimidated him into awkward silence. And the women he usually dated often frustrated his efforts to reach across the conversational no-man's-land and find common ground. His phone calls with Stephanie had been startlingly different. And she had kindled the fire of his anticipation with pictures she'd sent him. She'd told him that she'd recently had some "boudoir" photographs taken. It was her present to herself, for her approaching 50th birthday, to prove to herself that she was still beautiful. And then, with the miracle of modern technology, a picture of a dark haired middle-aged woman clad in black stockings and lingerie appeared on his phone. The pictures were artistic and well-angled, with provocative but not-too-revealing glimpses of her legs and breasts. His pulse quickened as he gazed at the pictures. Surely this bold gesture was an indication that Stephanie felt the same chemistry he did, and that intimacy was relatively imminent.

Of course, Foster being Foster, he had stayed up most of the night, no longer aroused but instead assailed by doubt, suddenly anxious that intimacy with Stephanie was a lousy idea. Perhaps she wants to rush into marriage? You're an idiot, he'd admonished himself. You don't want that. It's too soon after Grace.

Grace. His thoughts were dragged to her, unbidden. Thoughts once lush with her radiance, now wind in dry grass. What a raw, fresh wound was the memory of her. Lovely, chic, erudite, full of cute little eccentricities. The only woman he'd ever known who used "eschewed" in conversation. Grace, a scent of vanilla ever on the air around her. Yet even now Time was reducing her to cliché. Her consuming sensuality, her husky, musical laughter. A music forever denied him now. A music she'd decided to play for another.

He had chosen her. He had chosen to commit to her. A first for him. He'd been alone most of his life. Women had been in the past an appurtenance. They came and went, were dutifully, if briefly, mourned, then replaced. But as he'd drifted into his fifties there was a nagging doubt. He was disconcerted by his lack of a commitment to another. And then there she was. Grace, red hair catching fire in the morning sun, hazel eyes playfully alight, a smile that beamed right through him. He chose her, but she'd summoned him. In response, he'd pushed himself to be part of something greater for her, with her. And he'd been surprised to find how satisfying it was to devote himself to her, and to the mundane things that made a life. Like helping her around the house, taking her daughter to ballet, looking after her dog. Attending events with her family, birthdays, dinners, holidays. Lingering evenings over dinner holding hands and talking of their days.

Over the years there had spread like a lake a deep-seated contentment, a world that was new to him and into which he eased carefully, lest by a sudden whim or movement he would upset it all and send it tumbling. In the end, as it turned out, it was her whim and not his that upended the comfortable little world. In the end, an importuning ex-lover whisked her away, leaving him febrile and broken-hearted, deeply skeptical of his ability to love or to be desirable to another. He'd cursed himself. He'd thought she was content. He'd missed the warning signs, her restlessness at turning 50, her vague grumbling of expectations not met. Foster cursed his heedlessness, his ignorant complacency, his irresolute lack of action.

Well, I'll be firm on this date, he'd told himself, I'll not be drawn into intimacy so quickly. I can't panic and wreck everything. I'll be firm, steadfast. We'll have a nice dinner, and if we decide to see each other again, we'll do that. No sex. Don't drink too much and persuade yourself it's the right thing to do. Be in control.

All resolved, or so he'd thought. He'd not anticipated this turn of events. This Stephanie. Not only was she not clad in black lingerie, as far as he could tell, she was, after so much build-up, so much tension, so much ambivalence, an imposter. Where was the woman with whom he'd imagined he had such a connection? Where was the attraction, the sparkling conversation? Where had all this other awfulness come from? The expensive, awkward meal, the stilted conversation, the attempts at humor that were taken seriously so that they were deflated like a balloon?

He strove to resist judging her harshly. He must be fair to her. He tried to enjoy and appreciate her stories about her chickens, smiling agreeably, if a trifle idiotically, reproaching himself for idealizing her prematurely, for conjuring up a vision of her from thin air, as he had so many of his past romantic interests.

"Well, that's so neat that you have horses," he said, with an enthusiasm that to his own ear sounded tinny and forced. "Do you ride much?"

Stephanie put down her fork, with which she'd just speared a hunk of bloodied beef. She continued chewing the previous piece contemplatively, then swallowed decisively, taking a gulp from her frosty cocktail. "I ride as often as I can. I really enjoy it. Of course, it plays hell on the titanium knees. I can't ride for very long."

"That's too bad you're in pain," he said sympathetically.

"I know, right? Like, the doctor told me I'd be on my feet in two weeks after the titanium replacements went in, and they were wrong." She speared another piece of hapless flesh dramatically, and

brandished her fork like she might skewer the doctors there and then. "I've been in constant pain for the past two years."

He began to seethe silently, castigating her agedness, the lack of attraction. His gaze rested on the lank black hair framing rough, pallid features. She should never have sent the boudoir photos. Was it simply airbrushing? Why did the beautiful woman in the photos bear no resemblance to his date? She was guilty of not being who she purported to be, he thought. But her greater crime, it began to dawn on him, was that she was simply not Grace. There was no light, no room-warming glow, no smile that engaged the world and made everything better. Grace's eyes held a kingdom of brightness. Stephanie's seemed lifeless as a dead star.

"May I interest you in dessert?" the waiter asked as he strode to the table and began to clear their plates.

"No, tha -" Foster began but Stephanie interjected.

"Sure!" she said, with an evidently new-found enthusiasm for the evening. "I'll have the berry crisp," she said cheerily, as Foster swirled his wine and took a sip, yearning for a large whiskey. Several.

Dammit, why can't this evening just end? he railed in his brain. He hoped desperately that she would not propose a walk along the pier.

So, Professor, Foster would ask now, how does one actually eat on a first date? Well, I'll tell you, since you asked. It's a very counterintuitive prescription. First, one first pretends to be an object of Aphrodite-like desire. Then one orders a large platter of meat, despite knowing her date – and presumed benefactor – is vegan, the most expensive item on the menu, eats most of the bread, and follows up with dessert. Are you getting this down? Jesus.

He watched her mix the generous dollop of ice cream into the trough of berry crisp and begin spooning it methodically into her mouth.

"Is it good?" he asked.

"Oh yes!" She nodded and smiled.

She excused herself to go to the restroom and he turned again to the harbor, watching the evening sun playing silver light on the bay. I don't think she wants me tonight, he conceded gratefully, exhaling a sigh of relief. It's almost over, and I think she's feeling the sense of disappointment and disconnection that I'm feeling.

He thought back over the pictures she'd sent. They were so sexy! How he'd been on fire for her when he saw them. They had intensified his sense of anticipation for their date. But it was a lie.

All those expectations had come crashing down over the course of the evening. She could never compare to Grace. Those pictures either were airbrushed or taken a long time ago, they were so clearly not her now -

He caught himself, just as the sun was just about to dip behind the horizon and the day ebbed into twilight. The pictures. Perhaps she wasn't coming on to him at all. The pictures. Maybe they weren't an invitation to sex. Maybe, he thought, they were her way of showing him something. Maybe they were her statement of "Look I was once beautiful and sexy, even though life since then has taken its toll." Maybe she'd hoped he'd still see shades of that beauty still in her. He felt suddenly guilty, foolish, his anger ebbing. He sat still, listening to the babble of the customers at the bar.

Those pictures were her reality. They were... he had to search for the word in his confused brain. They were a simulacrum. They were her likeness, her similarity. From somewhere in the cobwebby corners of Foster's mind came a tidbit from one of his philosophy classes. The French guy, that fellow Baudrillard, he'd argued a simulacrum is not a copy of the real, but becomes truth in its own right. I get it, Foster told himself. It's not fair to condemn the pictures as fake. In the end, they're Stephanie's hyper-reality. But they were no longer real to Foster. He realized with a start, with a creeping sense of shame, the really stupid part of it was that his reality was even less tangible. His hyper-reality was transcendent. It lay in the luminous eyes and dazzling smile and husky laugh of someone who no longer existed, if she ever had. Someone who'd left him and taken her light and his one great love. She'd left in her place an idealized woman who could never exist, who no jinni could conjure up, no matter how hard he rubbed the fucking lantern. A woman no woman could measure up to. What an idiot he was to succumb to this dumb fantasy. This has got to end, he declared to himself. I've got to be more real, and accept their reality, and enjoy it.

Something painful caught in his throat, and his eyes grew moist. He swallowed the last sip of merlot to wash it away, to wash it all away.

She returned to the table just as he received the bill.

He looked up at her. She caught him and her blue eyes caught his, gazing at him frankly. A beat. She sat down.

"That was very nice, thank you," he stuttered and reached for his wallet and keys. "Shall we go?"

"Oh," she said, "Yes, that was very good. Thanks. That's fine." She gathered her coat and purse.

She stepped past him. He caught her perfume, subtle and different, flowery but faint. Nice.

He followed her out the front door. "Where are you?"

"I'm right here, the big truck." She walked to the cab of a silver behemoth.

"That's a big truck!" he said, laughing.

"It is," she agreed, "I can haul my horse trailer where we need to go."

She turned to him. She opened her arms. He leaned in and gave her a chaste hug.

"Thank you again. I'll call you. This was fun." He felt the lines were forced, but they were not mean-spirited.

"Yes, thanks."

He turned away, to the harbor receding before the encroaching gloom, to the shadows of the fishing floats bobbing in the bay. He turned back to her, felt his voice softening with the dusk.

"Would you, um, like to go for a walk?"

She paused.

"Um, I really should be going." She laughed. "Got to feed the horses, you know?"

"Ok." He swallowed. "Well, thanks anyway."

She turned to the truck. Then turned back to him.

"Look, you're a nice guy. I want to say I'm sorry I sent the pictures. I hope I don't sound harsh, but I think you've got to work on your expectations. The pictures didn't help. I just wanted you to see me the way I see me, and I guess I hoped you'd accept that. I get the feeling I wasn't enough."

He looked at her, past her, into the murk of evening deepening around them. She was right, of course. He felt again the dim light that had begun to dawn on him in the restaurant, the sense that chasing an idealized love would inevitably leave him alone and adrift, a buoy in the harbor.

"I think you're right," he said, forcing a smile and a laugh, "about me working on my expectations, I mean. I've got some work to do." His professor's words occurred to him again, and he thought, really, how right they were. This is awkward. Life is awkward.

He took a deep breath, let it out, and smiled at her, a genuine smile. "Thanks for the free psychotherapy."

She smiled too. "Glad I could help," she said, and she opened her arms to him again, chastely, but warmly.