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The End of Courtship?

By ALEX WILLIAMS

MAYBE it was because they had met on OkCupid. But when the dark-eyed musician with artfully disheveled hair asked Shani Silver, a social media and blog manager in Philadelphia, out on a “date” Friday night, she was expecting at least a drink, one on one.

“At 10 p.m., I hadn’t heard from him,” said Ms. Silver, 30, who wore her favorite skinny black jeans. Finally, at 10:30, he sent a text message. “Hey, I’m at Pub & Kitchen, want to meet up for a drink or whatever?” he wrote, before adding, “I’m here with a bunch of friends from college.”

Turned off, she fired back a text message, politely declining. But in retrospect, she might have adjusted her expectations. “The word ‘date’ should almost be stricken from the dictionary,” Ms. Silver said. “Dating culture has evolved to a cycle of text messages, each one requiring the code-breaking skills of a cold war spy to interpret.”

“It’s one step below a date, and one step above a high-five,” she added. Dinner at a romantic new bistro? Forget it. Women in their 20s these days are lucky to get a last-minute text to tag along. Raised in the age of so-called “hookup culture,” millennials — who are reaching an age where they are starting to think about settling down — are subverting the rules of courtship.

Instead of dinner-and-a-movie, which seems as obsolete as a rotary phone, they rendezvous over phone texts, Facebook posts, instant messages and other “non-dates” that are leaving a generation confused about how to land a boyfriend or girlfriend.

“The new date is ‘hanging out,’ ” said Denise Hewett, 24, an associate television producer in Manhattan, who is currently developing a show about this frustrating new romantic landscape. As one male friend recently told her: “I don’t like to take girls out. I like to have them join in on what I’m doing — going to an event, a concert.”

For evidence, look no further than “Girls,” HBO’s cultural weather vane for urban 20-somethings, where none of the main characters paired off in a manner that might count as courtship even a decade ago. In Sunday’s opener for Season 2, Hannah (Lena Dunham) and Adam (Adam Driver), who last season forged a relationship by texting each other nude photos, are shown lying in bed,

debating whether being each other's "main hang" constitutes actual dating.

The actors in the show seem to fare no better in real life, judging by a monologue by Zosia Mamet (who plays Shoshanna, the show's token virgin, since deflowered) at a benefit last fall at Joe's Pub in the East Village. Bemoaning an anything-goes dating culture, Ms. Mamet, 24, recalled an encounter with a boyfriend whose idea of a date was lounging in a hotel room while he "Lewis and Clarked" her body, then tried to stick her father, the playwright David Mamet, with the bill, according to a Huffington Post report.

Blame the much-documented rise of the "hookup culture" among young people, characterized by spontaneous, commitment-free (and often, alcohol-fueled) romantic flings. Many students today have never been on a traditional date, said Donna Freitas, who has taught religion and gender studies at Boston University and Hofstra and is the author of the forthcoming book, "The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused About Intimacy."

Hookups may be fine for college students, but what about after, when they start to build an adult life? The problem is that "young people today don't know how to get out of hookup culture," Ms. Freitas said. In interviews with students, many graduating seniors did not know the first thing about the basic mechanics of a traditional date. "They're wondering, 'If you like someone, how would you walk up to them? What would you say? What words would you use?'" Ms. Freitas said.

That may explain why "dates" among 20-somethings resemble college hookups, only without the dorms. Lindsay, a 25-year-old online marketing manager in Manhattan, recalled a recent non-date that had all the elegance of a keg stand (her last name is not used here to avoid professional embarrassment).

After an evening when she exchanged flirtatious glances with a bouncer at a Williamsburg nightclub, the bouncer invited her and her friends back to his apartment for whiskey and boxed macaroni and cheese. When she agreed, he gamely hoisted her over his shoulders, and, she recalled, "carried me home, my girlfriends and his bros in tow, where we danced around a tiny apartment to some MGMT and Ratatat remixes."

She spent the night at the apartment, which kicked off a cycle of weekly hookups, invariably preceded by a Thursday night text message from him saying, "hey babe, what are you up to this weekend?" (It petered out after four months.)

Relationship experts point to technology as another factor in the upending of dating culture.

Traditional courtship — picking up the telephone and asking someone on a date — required courage, strategic planning and a considerable investment of ego (by telephone, rejection stings). Not so with texting, e-mail, Twitter or other forms of “asynchronous communication,” as techies call it. In the context of dating, it removes much of the need for charm; it’s more like dropping a line in the water and hoping for a nibble.

“I’ve seen men put more effort into finding a movie to watch on Netflix Instant than composing a coherent message to ask a woman out,” said Anna Goldfarb, 34, an author and blogger in Moorestown, N.J. A typical, annoying query is the last-minute: “Is anything fun going on tonight?” More annoying still are the men who simply ping, “Hey” or “ ’sup.”

“What does he think I’m doing?” she said. “I’m going to my friend’s house to drink cheap white wine and watch episodes of ‘Dance Moms’ on demand.”

Online dating services, which have gained mainstream acceptance, reinforce the hyper-casual approach by greatly expanding the number of potential dates. Faced with a never-ending stream of singles to choose from, many feel a sense of “FOMO” (fear of missing out), so they opt for a speed-dating approach — cycle through lots of suitors quickly.

That also means that suitors need to keep dates cheap and casual. A fancy dinner? You’re lucky to get a drink.

“It’s like online job applications, you can target many people simultaneously — it’s like darts on a dart board, eventually one will stick,” said Joshua Sky, 26, a branding coordinator in Manhattan, describing the attitudes of many singles in their 20s. The mass-mailer approach necessitates “cost-cutting, going to bars, meeting for coffee the first time,” he added, “because you only want to invest in a mate you’re going to get more out of.”

If online dating sites have accelerated that trend, they are also taking advantage of it. New services like [Grouper](#) aren’t so much about matchmaking as they are about group dates, bringing together two sets of friends for informal drinks.

[The Gaggle](#), a dating commentary and advice site, helps young women navigate what its founders call the “post-dating” landscape, by championing “non-dates,” including the “group non-date” and the “networking non-date.” [The site’s](#) founders, Jessica Massa and Rebecca Wiegand, say that in a world where “courtship” is quickly being redefined, women must recognize a flirtatious exchange of tweets, or a lingering glance at a company softball game, as legitimate opportunities for romance, too.

“Once women begin recognizing these more ambiguous settings as opportunities for romantic possibility,” Ms. Massa said, “they really start seeing their love lives as much more intriguing and vibrant than they did when they were only judging themselves by how many ‘dates’ they had lined up.”

THERE’S another reason Web-enabled singles are rendering traditional dates obsolete. If the purpose of the first date was to learn about someone’s background, education, politics and cultural tastes, Google and Facebook have taken care of that.

“We’re all Ph.D.’s in Internet stalking these days,” said Andrea Lavinthal, an author of the 2005 book “The Hookup Handbook.” “Online research makes the first date feel unnecessary, because it creates a false sense of intimacy. You think you know all the important stuff, when in reality, all you know is that they watch ‘Homeland.’ ”

Dodgy economic prospects facing millennials also help torpedo the old, formal dating rituals. Faced with a lingering recession, a stagnant job market, and mountains of student debt, many young people — particularly victims of the “mancession” — simply cannot afford to invest a fancy dinner or show in someone they may or may not click with.

Further complicating matters is the changing economic power dynamic between the genders, as reflected by a number of studies in recent years, said Hanna Rosin, author of the recent book “The End of Men.”

A much-publicized study by Reach Advisors, a Boston-based market research group, found that the median income for young, single, childless women is higher than it is for men in many of the country’s biggest cities (though men still dominate the highest-income jobs, according to James Chung, the company’s president). This may be one reason it is not uncommon to walk into the hottest new West Village bistro on a Saturday night and find five smartly dressed young women dining together — the nearest man the waiter. Income equality, or superiority, for women muddles the old, male-dominated dating structure.

“Maybe there’s still a sense of a man taking care of a woman, but our ideology is aligning with the reality of our finances,” Ms. Rosin said. As a man, you might “convince yourself that dating is passé, a relic of a paternalistic era, because you can’t afford to take a woman to a restaurant.”

Many young men these days have no experience in formal dating and feel the need to be faintly ironic about the process — “to ‘date’ in quotation marks” — because they are “worried that they might offend women by dating in an old-fashioned way,” Ms. Rosin said.

“It’s hard to read a woman exactly right these days,” she added. “You don’t know whether, say, choosing the wine without asking her opinion will meet her yearnings for old-fashioned romance or strike her as boorish and macho.”

Indeed, being too formal too early can send a message that a man is ready to get serious, which few men in their 20s are ready to do, said Lex Edness, a television writer in Los Angeles.

“A lot of men in their 20s are reluctant to take the girl to the French restaurant, or buy them jewelry, because those steps tend to lead to ‘eventually, we’re going to get married,’ ” Mr. Edness, 27, said. In a tight economy, where everyone is grinding away to build a career, most men cannot fathom supporting a family until at least 30 or 35, he said.

“So it’s a lot easier to meet people on an even playing field, in casual dating,” he said. “The stakes are lower.”

Even in an era of ingrained ambivalence about gender roles, however, some women keep the old dating traditions alive by refusing to accept anything less.

Cheryl Yeoh, a tech entrepreneur in San Francisco, said that she has been on many formal dates of late — plays, fancy restaurants. One suitor even presented her with red roses. For her, the old traditions are alive simply because she refuses to put up with anything less. She generally refuses to go on any date that is not set up a week in advance, involving a degree of forethought.

“If he really wants you,” Ms. Yeoh, 29, said, “he has to put in some effort.”

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