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**Happily ever after**

Looking for hope on the silver screen

I never thought I'd be saying this, but I watched a movie last night starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks—and I liked it. It was late, I was flipping through the channels aimlessly, and there it was. It was *You've Got Mail*, a film I was sure would make me want to retch.

But it was that or reruns of *The Brady Bunch* on Nick at Nite. You can only watch Marcia's nose get broken by that football so many times, so I decided to take a chance on Meg and Tom.

Much to my surprise, it was charming. Of course, it has the advantage of being based on the wonderful 1940 Jimmy Stewart film *The Shop Around the Corner*, which was made at a time when people still knew how to make charming films. Still, even in its updated version it manages to retain something that very few films these days have: It made me believe in romance again.

I know, I always complain that romance is dead. Well, it is, especially in the movies that pass for romantic comedies these days. Gone are films like *It Happened One Night* and *The Philadelphia Story*, movies that had you really hoping the main characters would get together by the end of the picture. Now we just have anxiety-ridden star vehicles in which we're forced to watch characters undergo 90 minutes

of therapy while they try to figure out why they can't commit to each other before deciding they're better off single. Let's face it, the last movie that really gave us a good romantic ending featured Julia Roberts as a hooker doing Richard Gere a favor. Hardly the stuff of fairy tales.

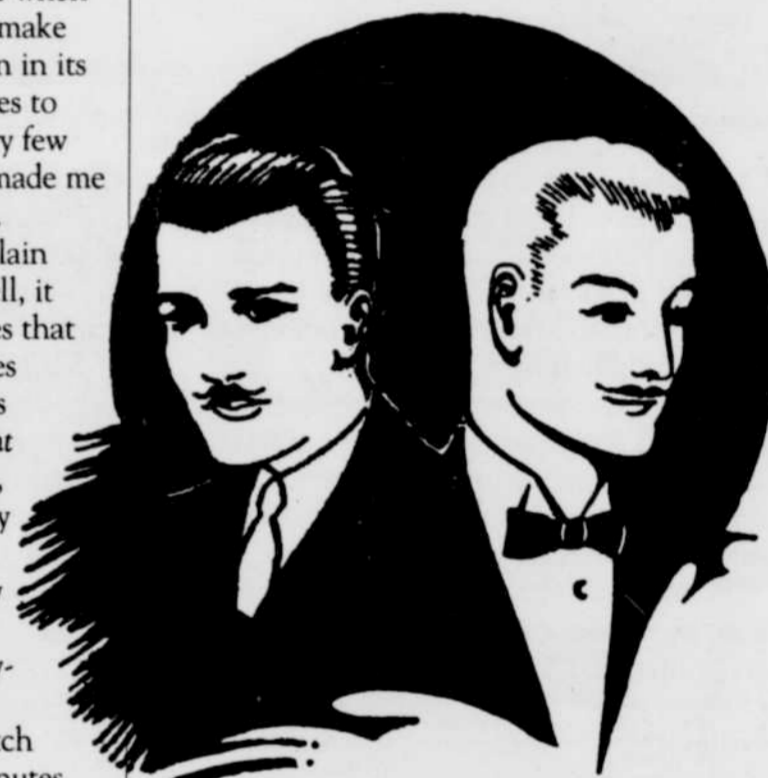
Perhaps I was particularly susceptible to *You've Got Mail* because I'd just come from a screening at my local queer film festival of a movie that was anything but romantic. I won't embarrass the creator by naming the film. I will just say that it was a painful, not very original look at the demise of a dysfunctional gay relationship. It was one of those movies where you hate all the characters, don't want any of them to end up happy, and feel the need to shower immediately upon returning home because everyone in the film smoked too much.

As I watched Tom and Meg doing their courtship dance, I found myself wondering why all the queer relationship films I've ever seen are so depressing. I couldn't think of even one out of the many I've watched over the years after which I felt a sense of hope, a feeling of happiness because the characters really seemed to enjoy being in love and getting lost in the joy of being together. Instead, the films all seem to be about how dismal it is trying to find someone to love.

This surprises me. As a rule, gay audiences go wild for those old romantic comedies. At least, most of the guys I know do. We love to

see other people's lives turn out well. But not, apparently, our own lives. The films we make about our romances tend to be pretty bleak, filled with one-night stands that never call back, boyfriends who cheat, and lots and lots of drinking.

I think *Jeffrey* is supposed to be a romantic comedy, but it comes off more as a farce than anything heartwarming. And *Love, Valor, Compassion* is sweet in its way, although it doesn't exactly leave me with a warm, fuzzy feeling. The closest gay cinema has come to creating anything truly like an old-fashioned romantic comedy is last year's *Trick*. But it was hard to really become caught up in the trials and tribulations of two guys trying to find a place where they can get off.



Although the film tries to redeem itself with a sweet, nonsexual ending, it is a little too late. A stripper nicknamed "Beer Can" is no match for Cary Grant or Clark Gable.

My friend Jeff says there will never be a true queer romantic comedy, because only straight

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people still fall for the notion of happily ever after. He thinks gay filmmakers opt for bitterness over sentimentality because it's more realistic. "Watching two guys looking for a place to have sex is a lot more believable to most of us than watching them do a courtship dance," he said to me once. "It's probably because we know that, even if they do fall in love, one

of them will leave the other for a guy at the gym six months later."

That does indeed seem to be the basic message of most gay films about relationships. But is it because we really aren't good at romance, or is it because it's easier to jump straight to the bitterness and save ourselves the risk of getting hurt by trying something else?

Maybe it's time we gave it another try. After all, if Tom and Meg can do it, so can we.

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**Congratulations to Michael Thomas Ford, who just won his second Lambda Literary Award for his book *That's Mr. Faggot to You*.**