

## A Question of Status | Patricia Carmel

Carmella sat motionless except for the twirling and untwirling of an errant curl, a habit she indulged when indecisive, and looked wistfully at the happy smiling couples on her computer screen.

A friend had suggested she subscribe to an internet dating site but she'd dismissed the idea out of hand. Then, as the weeks turned into months, the notion, once planted, took root in her mind. Won't do any harm to just look at one, she muttered, entering the keywords into Google. I'll just look around, she thought, failing to recognize that she used the same rationalization when walking into a clothes store, only to leave with a new piece of clothing in hand.

Carmella started to type, filling in the form with her details. But what could she say about her status – the only options provided were Single, Divorced, Widowed and Separated.

In all honesty, none of those options applied to her, although she had never felt more alone.

\*\*\*\*\*

Amos had left just over a year ago. He hadn't packed a bag and gone off to meet his mistress. If he had, would it have been easier than watching the man she loved gradually become more and more remote to the point that his mind no longer inhabited his body? For part of the difficulty in describing her status stemmed from the fact that his body stayed home, ensconced on the couch, slack-jawed and vacant-eyed, staring at a foreign movie flickering on the wide-screen TV, but his mind had gone AWOL.

It has been quite a serious stroke, the doctors at the hospital had finally told her, although it had taken them weeks to reach their diagnosis. They had been baffled by his

symptoms but appeared to enjoy competing with each other to identify what ailed him; they came up with any number of exotic maladies, such as Legionnaires Disease or some rare viral mutation picked up from the family dog.

And while they conjectured, Amos spent hours at a time meticulously rolling and unrolling his hospital-supplied pyjama top. Every so often he would shuffle off to the balcony to smoke. Carmella marveled how a mind that had become so unraveled could still master the steps required to light a cigarette and to inhale and expel the smoke. Even more remarkable, the part of the brain that controlled language appeared not to be affected at all. Hours would pass without so much as a word from him. And then he would speak words so beautifully structured that they bordered on poetry, yet sadly, were devoid of any meaning.

His body came home from the hospital and he lay on his back in his bed with his head held stiffly an inch or two above the pillow. He intoned her name incessantly and without inflection, as if it were being played back in a loop.

“...’ella. “...’ella. “...’ella.”

Carmella didn’t know if she should respond, force him to express a need or ignore him because he was unaware of his needs. She listened, horrified, while he told her that he couldn’t take a shower because his lower body had been re-arranged, that his right leg now extended up the side of his body, curved around his neck and fell down the other side.

The young man from India hired to care of Amos was called Happy. After the first few days of caring for Amos, Happy was at the end of his tether. “This is not a good job,” he complained as he helped Amos down the stairs for the umpteenth time knowing that in less than two minutes, Amos would again rise from his chair and shuffle towards the

stairs. We've become his yo-yos, thought Carmella, controlled by a body that isn't aware of its power.

Over time, Carmella noticed that the young man was gentle with Amos, that he tended to Amos' body, washed him, fed him, dressed and undressed him, with a touch of affection.

A year passed.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the end, Carmella defined her status as Separated. The following day, her inbox was inundated with emails, eCards and Flirts.

"Well, this is not so shabby," she thought. The eCards displayed pictures of glasses of wine and cups of coffee with animated smoke billowing from the cup while the Flirts were a little more suggestive with animated lips blowing kisses. One would-be suitor made a vague reference to an answer she had given in a multiple choice quiz in the Kibitz section.

It wasn't entirely clear what Kibitz was because the questions, ostensibly about lifestyle preferences, were quite meaningless. She ran her eyes quickly over her responses and one caught her eye. The question was if she would consider a date successful if it culminated in one of the following:

- A chaste kiss on the cheek
- A passionate kiss on the lips
- A full-blown snogging session on the front porch
- Breakfast in bed the next morning

She looked aghast at her answer, wondering whatever had possessed her to select the last option. Perhaps, she mused, it had conjured visions of cosy mornings in bed in days past. Well, I guess that accounts for the enthusiastic response, she murmured and changed her answer to a chaste kiss on the cheek.

She then began to plow through the contenders, looking for a friend to fill the void, to banish the bleakness, to bring laughter back to her life. She scrolled to the profile of a man calling himself Blew-Eyed Gent.

Blew-Eyed Gent was 59 years old, divorced, a non-smoker and lived in an upscale neighborhood about half an hour's drive from her house. He worked in hi-tech and listed his hobbies as dancing, all musical genres, reading and movies. There was no picture of him but he sent her his phone number. With shaking fingers, Carmella keyed in his number.

"I'm glad you called," he said.

The raspiness of his voice could suggest he had been less than honest about being a non-smoker.

"Before we go any further," she said, "I have to tell you that I am married."

"That's all right," he responded. "You wouldn't be the first."

Carmella was momentarily speechless. Is extra-marital dating so common, she wondered. But she was determined that this man fully understand her situation and be given the chance to back out. Unperturbed, Blew-Eyed Gent suggested they meet the following evening at a coffee bar in the mall.

“How will I recognize you,” she asked. “You didn’t post a picture.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find you.” he said.

Carmella tapped the Close button on her phone, shaking slightly at her daring at calling a stranger, a man she knew nothing about other than what he’d chosen to share.

\*\*\*\*\*

Carmella arrived at the coffee bar on time and looked around the room for someone fitting Blew-Eyed Gent’s description. A tall, slim man with thick, graying hair beckoned to her from the back of the room.

“Hi, I’m Danny,” he said, extending his hand.

He ordered a coffee for her, adopting a peremptory tone towards the waitress. Not a good start, she thought. After about a quarter of an hour of desultory conversation, Danny suggested they see a movie. “We’ll take your car,” he declared.

Walking slightly behind her as they exited the coffee bar, Danny said, “You have quite a good body for a woman of your age.” Then putting an arm possessively across her shoulder, he leaned in and whispered in her ear, “You know, at our age, there isn’t much point wasting time waiting to have sex. We should just get on with it.”

Carmella was stunned. There didn’t really seem to be much to say in response. The way he speaks, I could have just brought my female bits and left the rest of me at home, she thought. She considered telling him the date was over but they had arrived at the car and the moment passed.

When they reached the cinema, they began to argue over what film to see. Carmella was beginning to feel increasingly antagonistic towards him.

“I want to see Black Swan,” he said.

“I’ve had a really tiring day and I’ve heard that it’s on the heavy side. How about we see The King’s Speech?”

They argued back and forth for a while until Carmella prevailed. She insisted on paying for her own ticket and he didn’t object, which only served to intensify her antagonism towards him.

About 10 minutes into the film, Danny suddenly grabbed Carmella’s hand and proceeded to maul it. He stroked it, finger by finger, pulling them, bending them, manipulating them until she was ready to scream. Her arm was stiff with pain; she felt like the teenager she’d once been, too embarrassed and awkward to fend off unwelcome attentions. She was relieved when the film, which she’d barely paid attention to, came to an end.

The drive back to the coffee bar where he’d left his car was in near silence. As she drew up in the car park, Danny leaned towards her and rasped in her ear:

“Carmella, we will meet again very soon and we’ll have wonderful communication and even better sex.” And then he aimed a kiss at her lips, missing by a few millimeters as she jerked her head, ending with an imprint of his saliva staining the side of her nose.

\*\*\*\*\*

The house was quiet. Happy was watching a movie on TV with the sound muted and talking to his girlfriend on Skype. Amos had eaten supper, swallowed his pills and was now sleeping. He would wake in the darkness of the night and try to dress himself, insisting that it was morning.

Carmella sat in front of the PC screen, sifting through the contents of her inbox on the dating site. Earlier, she had sent Danny a note saying that she didn't believe they were suited and that he shouldn't contact her anymore. What a nightmare he turned out to be! But there are so many other men out there, she thought, her eyes focused on a picture of a tall man astride a horse.

*Horserider, 59, widowed, musician, loves pasta.*

Hello Horserider, she wrote. I've read your profile and think we might have something in common. But first, I have to tell you about my status.