

Stop F*cking Feeding Me

By Nicole Crowe

It was around the time I turned thirty that my father developed an interest in my dating life. I was living in Brisbane and had a decent job. I could pay my rent and feed myself. I maintained a healthy number of friendships and a good level of personal hygiene, but my father didn't care about any of that. "You married yet?" This was the first thing he wanted to know whenever he spoke to me on the phone. "Who's that friend of yours who likes gardening? Pete, is that his name? Have you married him yet?"

"No, Dad. Pete's already married, remember?"

"Well, what about that other friend of yours, Mike?"

"Mike's gay."

"But unmarried."

"He has a boyfriend."

My father could meet a female friend of mine a hundred times and not remember her name. He only remembered the names of my male friends to make his marriage enquiries more specific. "What about Nick?" he'd ask. "Or Ben, or Tim, or Chris, or Alan, or that other one, what's his name, Sunju?" I could see him standing there in his painting clothes, on a break from one of his beach-scapes. In one hand was the phone and in the other was some lumpy-looking thing he'd



found washed up on the beach and dragged home.

"Stephen!" my mother shouted in the background. "Leave her alone."

I heard her running over to snatch the phone. "Ignore your father, Nicole. My mung beans have just sprouted! It's a bumper crop this time. I've solved the moisture problem so no more mould."

"Yeah." My father had the phone again. "We'll be eating the fucking things for a week. What about that Ron fellow? What happened to

him?”

“He was addicted to marijuana.”

“But he had a good job, didn’t he?”

It wasn’t that I had anything against marriage. Some of my best friends were married or close-enough to it. I’d had a number of boyfriends by that point but none of them had seemed very interested in marrying me. The most recent of them, a man I’ll call Adrian, had a curious way of complimenting me on my appearance. On the most memorable occasion I was on my way to work and he’d stopped me on my way out the door. “I was going to say you look nice today,” he said, “but now that I see you’re wearing makeup, I’m not going to say it.” I wasn’t wearing a lot of makeup, just a light layer of foundation and some bronzer, but I suppose he found this offensive. He had strong views about marriage too, said he would never, under any circumstances—even if he had a gun to his head—ever get married. A year or two after we broke up I heard through a mutual friend that Adrian had gone and married his last girlfriend before me.

My father, naturally, had an opinion on the issue of my love life. “You need to be nicer,” he said. “Don’t be mean to them or you’ll drive them away. Be *nice*.”

“I think the real issue is that you’re weird,” I was told by a long-time friend. “And now you’re old, too. You need to find a man and lock that shit down before it’s too late.”

I was sitting on the back deck of my house while I was on the phone to my father. When I

hung up, I lit a cigarette and listened to my neighbours talking. I could often hear them talking because they were both half deaf and so had to shout at one another. Their names were Daryl and Margaret and because they were both in their sixties, I assumed they had been married for forty years.

“I told you,” Daryl shouted, “I don’t want a fucking sandwich!”

Margaret, who spoke with a thick Dutch accent, said something I didn’t catch. Daryl didn’t hear it either: “*What?*”

She murmured something else and then Daryl replied with shouting. “If I’ve told you once I’ve told you a thousand times, my love. Stop fucking *feeding* me.”

“But what about sandwich?” Margaret was shouting now. “I have tuna. I make little sandwich.”

“For fuck’s sake, woman.” I heard Daryl walk over to his stereo on their back deck. “I told you already I don’t want a fucking *sandwich*.” The stereo clicked and started to play *Mambo No. 5*. Daryl chuckled and began to sing along. At least three times a day I heard *Mambo No. 5* blasting out of my neighbours’ house. What a thing it was to be married for forty years.

Online dating was just starting to take off and I had myself an account. That night I checked my profile and saw a message from a man I’ll call Anton. He was in his mid-fifties, quite a bit older than me, but unlike a number of other men on the site, Anton had yet to send me a picture of his

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penis. On the other hand, he had, unlike any of the other men on the site, written me a bunch of bad poetry. I found this offputting, but if my friend was right and I was weird and old now, I thought perhaps I couldn't afford to be fussy. I agreed to a date the following day.

I met Anton for a coffee at The Three Monkeys, a West End institution he told me he visited for the first time in 1984. "Oh, look at me showing my age," he said, "but that's right, the dating website already told you my age!" His profile said that he worked in a specialist medical field. That could have meant anything. He could have been the hospital CEO or the guy with the hairnet loading sandwiches in the cafeteria. I told him I'd like a flat white, please, and studied him while he placed the order. He seemed nice—tall and well-dressed. What was left of his hair was clipped to a neat crescent moon around the back of his head.

We found a table and Anton told me he was a psychiatrist. "Do you like Dostoevsky?" he asked.

I told him that I hadn't read a lot of the old Russians. I had tried to read Tolstoy once but put it down when I came to a description of a woman's hair clip that went on for half a page. I told Anton I was sure the Russians could teach me a lot about depression and human failings but the SBS nightly news had all of that, and with

pictures.

"I just love *The Idiot*," Anton said and squeezed his eyes shut. "I just relate to it so... strongly." He lowered his head into his hand and massaged his shiny scalp. "It has *themes*." I sipped my coffee and watched his breathing become laboured. "Themes that I relate to. I've recently gone through some, *traumas* in my professional and personal life." Anton's hands went back to the table and he smiled at my breasts. "I had an extra-marital affair with a patient."

If he noticed my shoulders tense he didn't show it.

"But she was stalking me," he continued while I tried not to choke on my drink. "She'd been stalking me for years without my knowledge."

This was the first time I'd had a conversation with a real psychiatrist. I'd seen the movie version, the dignified professional lounging in a thousand-dollar antique chair with a notebook in hand and one knee crossed over the other. Of course, movies often trade in stereotypes and are not the best places to look for authenticity, but watching Anton claw at his scalp, I wondered if he was deliberately playing to the cliché. Surely, I thought, this was just a wild story. Everybody knew that it was illegal to sleep with a mentally-ill patient mid-treatment. I waited for him to laugh and confess he was messing with me but his eyes

went to the middle of the table.

“I had to take some time off. I’ve only recently been getting back into practice. I’m not allowed to work for Queensland Health anymore and I’ve been barred from working with women. I’ve built myself up to about a day and a half worth of patients. I’ve been visiting prostate cancer support groups to find patients that way.”

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“It’s been quite a difficult time for me,” Anton was saying.

I stared at my coffee. It was still half full. I looked at my phone and willed it to ring but it sat silent on the table. Then I noticed a fat silver ring on his thumb.

“Hey, that’s a great ring,” I lied. It was an ugly ring and the compliment was an attempt to steer the conversation. I thought it might be easier to slip away from a discussion about a store-bought ring than a stranger confessing his most personal indiscretions. It was a desperate act, a weak attempt to change the subject, and one I was sure a psychiatrist would be able to see straight through, but Anton’s eyes stayed on the table.

“I joined the dating site in December after I left my wife,” he said.

“Wait.” I did the numbers in my head. “This December *just gone*?”

“Yeah, a couple of weeks ago. I always find it

hard to meet women. I’ll be talking to a woman at a party or something and as soon as I tell her I’m a psychiatrist she suddenly wants to become my patient. It’s because I have a talent for making people feel comfortable very quickly.”

And then, as if demonstrating his ability to make people feel comfortable, he smiled and said he loved movies. “What’s *your* favourite movie?” I was halfway through answering when he cut me off. “Tell me something, Nicole. What are your thoughts on open relationships?”

“That ring has a lot of silver in it,” I said, throwing caution to the wind. “My dad trades in silver. I reckon you could sell that to a dealer for fifteen bucks. Maybe even seventeen.”

He spun the ring on his thumb. “Nicole, do you think that you and I could be close?”

“What?” I reached for my phone.

“You don’t mind going out with an old fart like me?” He cracked his knuckles and undressed me with his eyes.

“Well,” I said and downed the rest of my coffee in a single gulp. “Age is just a number, right? You’re only as old as you feel?”

“Exactly!”

“Look.” I held up my phone which still wasn’t ringing. “It’s my friend’s birthday today.” This was a lie. “She’s expecting me for drinks.”

“I’d really love to see a movie with you on the weekend if you’re free. I’ll see anything you like.”

“Yeah, well.” I scooted out from the table as fast as I could. “I’ll let you know if my schedule opens up but I’ve got a few birthday parties to go

to.”

Anton reached into his wallet and pulled out two business cards. One listed his credentials in Psychiatry and the other one offered his services as a professional poet. “You might as well take them both,” he said, “but remember, don’t call me for a psychiatric appointment because I’m not allowed to work with women.” He began to laugh awkwardly. He was still chuckling as I walked away.

“What was his name?” my father asked me over the phone.

“Anton.”

“I hope you were nice to him.”

“As nice as I could be to a convicted sex offender.”

“Good. Maybe just find someone else on that . . . what’s it called . . . dating site, and take that attitude into your next date.”

Image: “[Restaurant](#)” (CC BY-SA 2.0) by [lorda](#)