

Patience is a Virtue by Lolita Chakrabarti

Patience Matthews had come to England to help her sister Flora with her first child. That had been in 1975 and baby Michael was almost thirty now. The years had sped past and Patience had kept meaning to return to Jamaica but somehow she'd never had the time. Flora continued on the family path and had four more children so Patience had felt needed and stayed. She'd become favourite auntie to them all. She had lived with Flora and her husband for the first few years. But after the birth of their third child the house had become so full that Patience had bought a flat nearby. It gave everyone a little space even though the sisters spent most of every day together.

Patience was a jovial soul and had found it easy to make friends. But the majority of her life had centred round Flora and the kids. She had loved it. She had the best of both worlds, living in the heart of Flora's family with none of the responsibilities. But now, at the age of forty-eight, she wanted more. The kids had all grown up and moved away. Flora was still great company but there was a gap in her life and she fancied filling it with some permanent male company.

Over the years, marriage had not been something Patience had much time for. Her mother said she was too fussy, Flora knew she was just choosy. If Patience was going to share her life with a man, he better be the right one. Someone who made her happier and who was an asset to her life. She'd seen too many marriages around her going wrong, and compromising was not how she wanted to spend her youth.

Her Mother had written copious letters from Jamaica, suggesting eligible men from the island. But Patience had guffawed with laughter at the suggestions as she read them out to Flora over the years. 'Johnny Longbottom – how short was he? He needed an extra firm cushion at the table to reach his fork!... Trevor Johnson – smelly Johnson who never washed his feet!' Flora had tears in her eyes. 'Victor Matthews – I-I-I d-d-d-d-d-do!' Mommy meant well but her choice of suitor got more and more hysterical. She wanted to see her girls married, to anybody if it come to that. Patience secretly thought that The Older Man seemed more content with himself, so she would wait if necessary.

Patience was not stranger to love, of course. She'd been courted by many eligible bachelors in her time. Wilbert Cranham, the jeweller. Gilbert Grant, the grocer. Gerald Corbett who'd actually asked her to marry him. But the idea of having to bring up three brattish kids as part of the bargain and scared her off and she'd declined gracefully. She had enjoyed her life so far, eating, drinking and laughing a lot. She was a big woman with a big heart and her ample backside turned many heads in Brixton market. She had no regrets really but now she wanted companionship, someone who was interested in her.

Patience wanted someone who matched her, liked the things she liked, enjoyed the theatre, books, music. Flora called round on Wednesday with the answer. In her hand she had a cutting from the paper.

'I saw it today. You have to fill in the details and pay a nominal fee. And they'll set you up with a minimum of twelve men and they guarantee that one of them will be

Mr Right', Flora beamed from ear to ear. She had a smile like the Cheshire cat, it warmed you up all over.

'What does that mean?' asked Patience, 'Mr Right? A good date? A good match? Marriage?'

'I don't know,' said Flora, 'but it sounds hopeful don't you think?'

Patience looked at the cutting and thought she had nothing to lose. It was time to get pro active and find a man who she could admire, long term.

That evening, while sipping wine and watching television, she filled out the form and sent it off. A few days later, the booklet arrived in the post. She filled out all the questions. She had to give some of them a lot of thought. What's your ideal man? What's your ideal night out? How would you spend £1000? It took her a couple of days to mull over the questions and answer them as truthfully as possible. She showed Flora the completed booklet and sent it off with the £100 cheque.

She waited.

Three weeks later she received a call.

'Is that Patience?' asked the warm, deep voice.

'Yes?' replied Patience in her poshest English accent. 'How can I help you?'

'I picked your details up from Dating Machine. I thought you sounded like my ideal woman.' Patience was very flattered. 'Would you like to meet?'

They exchanged details and the date was set for the following week.

Flora helped her to get ready, physically and mentally. Patience was nervous, she had never been on a blind date before. Flora brushed her long hair back and looped it round into a twist at the back.

'Gorgeous, he won't be able to resist. Just be yourself. He'll be helpless, screaming for more....'

'But...'

'No buts. You're a catch, any man would be lucky to get their hands on you.' Flora laughed and Patience joined in nervously.

The restaurant was empty when Patience arrived. The waiter showed her to a table. She ordered a glass of sweet white wine and waited. Twenty minutes later the same dark, warm voice spoke to her.

'Patience?' he asked.

She looked up with her biggest eyes and widest smile and before her stood Dennis, a white man in his fifties, fat, and very short. Her smile was disintegrating, she tried to keep it. He sat down.

'I'm glad you came,' he said warmly. 'I didn't know if you would. I've done these before and people get scared.'

'This is my first', revealed Patience. She didn't know what to say. This wasn't her ideal man at all. She could have married Johnny Longbottom years ago if she'd wanted this. Still she was here now and he seemed pleasant enough, so she resigned herself to a passable evening after which she would never have to see Dennis again. And she could look forward to the next possibility.

'I read in your booklet that you like the theatre' he said.

'I do,' she said politely, 'classical mostly'.

'Shakespeare?' he asked with a surprising twinkle.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I love Shakespeare.’

‘And does he love you back or is it a one-sided relationship?’ he quipped.

There was a moment before Patience burst into laughter. ‘I think I’m harbouring an unhealthy fixation,’ she said and with that the evening took off.

She found out that Dennis used to be an actor but a health problem meant he’d had to give it up. He was now a curator at the Theatre Museum, somewhere she visited regularly. He referred to his height with great ease and said that while it made him unusual in the theatre it was not such a bonus in life.

‘The way I look at it, my height I mean, is that I’m everything packed more economically into one package. Nothing goes to waste.’ He was charming. Funny, interesting, bright, but short, so what? By the end of the evening they had both eaten big food and the evening was drawing to a close.

‘That Dating Machine were accurate weren’t they?’ he offered.

‘Yes,’ she beamed, ‘very’.

‘I haven’t had such fun since I fell off the stage at Winchester,’ and there began another tale. They talked till midnight and then thought it better to leave before they were locked in. He walked her to the bus stop, waited with her till her bus arrived and by then, they’d made another date.

By the time Patience got home and put on her living room light, the phone rang. It was Flora.

‘Saw your light go on. How was it?’ she asked whispering in case she woke up the rest of the family.

‘Good,’ said Patience, carefully. ‘He was nice.’

‘Nice nice?’ asked Flora, ‘or nice but ...?’

‘Definitely nice nice,’ answered Patience smiling.

‘Tall dark and handsome I’ll bet,’ mused Flora over the phone.

Patience said nothing.

‘Is he?’ she asked. ‘Is he tall, dark and handsome?’

‘Not quite,’ said Patience choosing her words carefully.

‘Tell me the worst,’ insisted Flora, knowing her sister’s reluctance to speak meant a hidden problem.

‘Well...he’s...short, white and perfectly plain.’

‘So?’ said Flora, ‘what’s wrong with him?’

Patience laughed. Unlike the rest of her friends and relatives, Flora judged no one but on their qualities. And if you were happy then so was she. In her head she could hear her friends criticising him for appearances. And what was the point of that?

‘What’s wrong with him?’ asked Flora again.

‘Nothing’, said Patience, ‘Absolutely nothing.’