

COLOSSUS COMMUNICATION

By Ann Warner

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Amy and Stuart had a perfect marriage. Or, they did until the day Amy needed a plant stand and used one of the dishes Stuart brought from his previous marriage. The sky-blue plate was the perfect foil for the miniature yellow rose plant, and sitting in the middle of the kitchen table, it looked... elegant.

Stuart didn't notice the rose until the next morning at breakfast. It was a beautiful spring day, and they planned to go to the zoo so Jill could see the animals from her picture books.

Jill was singing her morning song, picking up Cheerios one at a time to gum, and Amy was eating a bowl of cereal as well. Then Stuart spotted the rose. "What's this?"

"It's one of those miniature roses," Amy said. "Isn't it pretty? And they're not very expensive."

"I'm not talking about the plant. Why are you using my plate?"

"Your plate?" Amy was genuinely puzzled. Weren't they married? Wasn't

everything that was his now hers? And vice versa, of course.

"That plate was a gift to Lisa and me when we got married, and I don't want it all mucked up with plant droppings."

The plant wasn't dropping anything, but Amy was. Her mouth fell open. Up to now everything she'd done had been fine with Stuart. As long as she left his workshop alone, he was a happy man. He'd let her decorate the house the way she wanted, even when she used florals for their bedroom, something her friends informed her would have sent their husbands into orbit. And he let her pick the music they listened to and the movies they went to see.

He even ate her cooking and complimented it without offering suggestions.

And now he was finally upset with something she'd done, and it was using a plate under a plant, for Pete's sake? Amy sat frozen while Stuart carried the offending rose over to the sink, removed it from the plate, washed the plate and put it away. He returned to the table, leaving the rose sitting by the sink.

"Well, if that isn't the . . . the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. A rose isn't going to hurt the plate." Amy spoke over a lump in her throat. Since he never mentioned his ex-wife, Amy hoped he'd mostly forgotten Lisa, who was one of those tall, golden California girls. Someone short, dark-haired Amy couldn't begin to compete with.

"The water will leave salt deposits. They could ruin the plate."

Trying not to cry, Amy got up from the table, dumped the half bowl of cereal she'd suddenly been unable to swallow into the sink, and walked out of the room. Stuart, eating a piece of toast and reading the sports section, didn't look up. Amy got ready to go to the zoo. After all, she wasn't going to change

her plans just because Stuart had suddenly turned into something roughly approximating her friends' Neanderthal husbands.

When she was ready, she returned to the kitchen and retrieved Jill from her high chair. Jill was gurgling happily and had flung as many Cheerios on the floor as she'd eaten. Amy tried not to step on any as she walked out. Stuart remained buried in his paper. Amy washed and dressed Jill, then carried her out to the car and strapped her into the car seat.

Stuart stuck his head out the door. "Hey, wait a minute, I'm coming."

"I don't care if you come or not." The words were muffled by Amy's clenched teeth.

"What's the matter?"

He really didn't seem to know, but Amy was too hurt and angry to answer. She finished strapping Jill in, closed the back door, and opened the driver's door.

"Uh, sure. You drive." Stuart moved quickly to climb in the passenger side.

Amy drove with deep concentration, merely grunting at Stuart's attempts at conversation. Pretty soon he stopped trying to get her to talk, which only made her madder and more miserable. When they arrived at the zoo, she let Stuart unstrap Jill from her car seat and transfer her to the stroller, but then Amy took the handles and pushed off, not waiting for him. He caught up with her and walked alongside, still muttering occasionally that he hadn't done anything to deserve being treated this way, really he hadn't.

He didn't have a clue.

She stopped pushing the stroller and turned to look at him. He had on jeans and the shirt that made his hazel eyes appear almost green, and he looked terrific. All Amy's insecurities came roaring back. "In case you hadn't noticed, you're married to me now, not Lisa, and we have a child to think about." Jill twisted in her seat and gurgled at Amy on cue.

"Sure. I know that. What does Lisa have to do with anything?"

"You're obsessing over her. And how do you think that makes me feel?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about your plate, that was yours and Lisa's plate. Than I'm not supposed to touch because I'll mess it up."

Jill started to fuss, and Amy jiggled the stroller, not taking her eyes off Stuart.

He made a shushing motion with his hands, and spoke in a low tone. "Do you want the whole world in on this?"

"You're the one who started it."

Jill, began to make sounds of distress, and Amy knelt and played patty-cake with her.

"Let me just get this straight. You're mad at me because I asked you not to put your rose on my plate, and that's what this is about?"

Amy stood and lowered her voice for Jill's sake, but her tone was still fierce. "Your plate, my rose. Listen to you. You're hopeless."

Jill, wasn't buying the softer words or the patty-cake routine. She twisted in her seat and stretched her arms toward her father, chanting, "Da, da, da."

Amy jiggled the stroller, and turning away from Stuart discovered they were standing right in front of the gorilla exhibit. She was surprised at how close the animals were. Of course the moat separated them, but really, it seemed like she could lean right over the short fence and shake hands with the large male gorilla sitting on his edge of the moat watching them, and moving his head back and forth as if he had been listening to their argument and was waiting for more.

Amy watched the gorilla through angry tears. Then Stuart sidled close and reached out to put his arm around her. She jerked away. When she did, the gorilla stood up and fired a stream of urine at Stuart, hitting him right in the middle of his chest. Amy's mouth fell open in shock and Stuart jumped back out of range, but the damage was done. The emerald of his shirt was now a dripping hunter green.

Amy didn't think she'd ever seen quite that look on Stuart's face before--a mix of disbelief, amazement, and disgust. She bit her lip, but she couldn't help herself. She started laughing and then she couldn't stop. She laughed until tears ran down her face and her stomach hurt. Stuart dripped, Amy laughed, and Jill chewed on her fist watching her parents, obviously trying to decide what she should add to the situation.

Amy caught her breath, smiled at Jill to reassure her, and straightened. When she did, Stuart put his arm around her again. Carefully.

"Hey, you're taking a big chance there," she said. "The last time you tried to touch me Colossus hosed you."

"I think you're worth it." Stuart's lips twitched. "Besides, he can't possibly have anything left."

Another fit of mirth convulsed Amy, and this time both Stuart and Jill joined in. After Stuart cleaned up and put on the new shirt Amy bought for him in the zoo gift shop--it had a picture of Colossus on it, of course--Amy let him hold her hand and help push the stroller while Jill chewed on a plastic toy, humming to herself.

"I'm sorry I acted that way about the plate," Stuart said.

"Does it really mean that much to you?"

"No. It doesn't matter at all. You can throw the damn thing away for all I care."

"Then why . . .?"

"This is going to sound stupid."

"I promise I won't laugh," Amy said.

"You see, Lisa was real uptight about her things. She got upset if I even took a mug of coffee out to my workshop. So when I saw the plate under the plant, well, I could just hear her scolding me. And I didn't think, I acted."

"She scolded you?"

"Yeah. There wasn't much I did right, according to Lisa. She used to ask my opinion about stuff, like what color curtains did I think would look good in the kitchen. I'd say something, and then she'd get upset. It didn't take me long

to figure out she didn't want my opinion. She just wanted me to agree with hers."

Amy had a lump in her throat that was equal parts anger at Lisa and sympathy for Stuart. She walked beside Stuart, choosing her words carefully. "You know, all this time, I thought you really didn't care about anything. Food, music, how I decorated the house. And maybe at first I even preferred it that way. But after a while, it bothered me. I never know if you really like something or not."

They stopped walking and turned toward each other.

"Are you saying you want to know what I think?"

Amy gave him an intent look, then slowly nodded her head. "Yes. That's exactly what I'm saying."

After several seconds, Stuart took a deep breath, as if he were getting ready to jump off a cliff. "Okay. There is one thing."

"What is it?" Amy kept her voice calm, and continued to hold his gaze like she had during their wedding, as they recited their vows.

"You promise you won't be upset."

"I promise." She didn't care what it was.

"I prefer my salad without dressing."

It was such a minor request, she almost smiled. But she didn't think that was a good idea. Not yet. She was pretty sure Stuart was testing--to make sure

she really did want to hear his opinion. "Okay. I can deal with that. Anything else, while we're at it?"

"Well, there is one other thing." He flexed his shoulders as if they were stiff. "You're sure you want to hear this?"

"Yes."

"I like country music."

She'd been expecting something portentous, so the subject took her by surprise. "You mean like Johnny Cash?"

"Actually, I'm more of a Trisha Yearwood, Alan Jackson fan."

Amy had no idea who Trisha Yearwood and Alan Jackson were, but first thing Monday, she and Jill would take a trip to the music store and find out. "Okay. Anything else?"

Again, Stuart shifted, but his gaze was steady. "I don't really like florals much."

"You mean like our bedroom?"

"Exactly. You see, Lisa chintzed the whole house."

"Chintzed?"

"Yeah. Isn't that what you call those fancy floral patterns? Chintz?"

Once again, Amy had to work not to smile. One day, she and Stuart were

going to be able to laugh about this, but not yet. "Why don't you come shopping with me, and we'll pick something we both like."

"You're not mad?"

Amy shook her head emphatically. "Actually, I'm relieved."

"You are?"

"Yep. To tell you the truth, I'm not crazy about the bedroom either. I think I picked it to see if I could push you into expressing an opinion."

"You did?"

"Yes. I did." For a moment longer they held each other's gaze, then Amy reached out and took Stuart's hand in hers. "And I'll tell you what. I promise I'll keep our home chintz-free, if you'll promise me something."

"Go ahead."

"Promise me you'll keep on telling me what you think."

For a moment longer, Stuart's expression was solemn, then his lips curved into a smile and the look in his eyes made Amy's knees feel weak. "I do so promise," he said. Then he leaned down and kissed her.

Amy felt an immense rush of love for this surprising man she'd married.

* * *

When they arrived home, Amy carried Jill in and put her in her crib for a nap, while Stuart went off to another part of the house whistling. When Amy walked into the kitchen a few minutes later, Stuart was nowhere around, but the Cheerios had all been cleaned off the floor, and there, precisely in the middle of the kitchen table, sat the yellow rose... on the blue plate.

THE END

NOTE: Colossus, much beloved by Cincinnatians, died in 2006. But although he had a reputation for ignoring the ladies, it didn't mean he wasn't without his gallant side.

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