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The Forever Girl

Written by Alexander McCall Smith

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The Forever Girl

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McCALL SMITH

ABACUS

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This book is for Neil and Judy Swan

Part One

1

I have often wondered about the proposition that for each of us there is one great love in our lives, and one only. Even if that is not true – and experience tells most of us it is not – there are those, in legend at least, who believe there is only one person in this world whom they will ever love with all their heart. Tristan persisted in his love of Isolde in spite of everything; Orpheus would not have risked the Underworld, one imagines, for anyone but Eurydice. Such stories are touching, but the cynic might be forgiven for saying: yes, but what if the person you love does not reciprocate? What if Isolde had found somebody she preferred to Tristan, or Eurydice had been indifferent to Orpheus?

The wise thing to do in cases of unreturned affection is to look elsewhere – you cannot force another to love you – and to choose somebody else. In matters of the heart, though, as in all human affairs, few of us behave in a sensible way. We can do

without love, of course, and claim it does not really play a major part in our lives. We may do that, but we still hope. Indifferent to all the evidence, hope has a way of surviving every discouragement, every setback or reversal; hope sustains us, enables us to believe we will find the person we have wanted all along.

Sometimes, of course, that is exactly what happens.

This story started when the two people involved were children. It began on a small island in the Caribbean, continued in Scotland, and in Australia, and came to a head in Singapore. It took place over sixteen years, beginning as one of those intense friendships of childhood and becoming, in time, something quite different. This is the story of that passion. It is a love story, and like most love stories it involves more than just two people, for every love has within it the echoes of other loves. Our story is often our parents' story, told again, and with less variation than we might like to think. The mistakes, as often as not, are exactly the same mistakes our parents made, as human mistakes so regularly are.

The Caribbean island in question is an unusual place. Grand Cayman is still a British territory, by choice of its people rather than by imposition, one of the odd corners that survive from the monstrous shadow that Victoria cast over more than half the world. Today it is very much in the sphere of American influence – Florida is only a few hundred miles away, and the cruise ships that drop anchor off George Town usually fly the flag of the United States, or are American ships under some other flag of convenience. But the sort of money that the Cayman Islands attract comes from nowhere; has no nationality, no characteristic smell.

Grand Cayman is not much to look at, either on the map, where it is a pin-prick in the expanse of blue to the south of Cuba and the west of Jamaica, or in reality, where it is a coral-reefed island barely twenty miles long and a couple of miles in width. With smallness come some advantages, amongst them a degree of immunity to the hurricanes that roar through the Caribbean each year. Jamaica is a large and tempting target for these winds, and is hit quite regularly. There is no justice in the storms that flatten the houses of the poor in places like Kingston or Port Antonio, wood and tin constructions so much more vulnerable than the bricks and mortar of the better-off. Grand Cayman, being relatively minuscule, is usually missed, although every few decades the trajectory of a hurricane takes it straight across the island. Because there are no natural salients, much of the land is inundated by the resultant storm surge. People may lose their every possession to the wind – cars, fences, furniture and fridges, animals too, can all be swept out to sea and never seen again; boats end up in trees; palm trees bend double and are broken with as much ease as one might snap a pencil or the stem of a garden plant.

Grand Cayman is not fertile. The soil, white and sandy, is not much use for growing crops, and indeed the land, if left to its own devices, would quickly revert to mangrove swamp. Yet people have occupied the island for several centuries, and scratched a living there. The original inhabitants were turtle-hunters. They were later joined by various pirates and wanderers for whom a life far away from the prying eye of officialdom was attractive. There were fishermen, too, as this

was long before over-fishing was an issue, and the reef brought abundant marine life.

Then, in the second half of the twentieth century, it occurred to a small group of people that Grand Cayman could become an off-shore financial centre. As a British territory it was stable, relatively incorrupt (by the standards of Central America and the shakier parts of the Caribbean), and its banks would enjoy the tutelage of the City of London. Unlike some other states that might have nursed similar ambitions, Grand Cayman was an entirely safe place to store money.

'Sort out the mosquitoes,' they said. 'Build a longer runway. The money will flow in. You'll see. Cayman will take off.' Cayman, rather than the Cayman Islands, is what people who live there call the place – an affectionate shortening, with the emphasis on the *man* rather than the *cay*.

Banks and investors agreed, and George Town became the home of a large expatriate community, a few who came as tax exiles, but most of them hard-working and conscientious accountants or trust managers. The locals watched with mixed feelings. They were reluctant to give up their quiet and rather sleepy way of life but found it difficult to resist the prosperity the new arrivals brought. And they liked, too, the high prices they could get for their previously worthless acres. A tiny white-board home by the sea, nothing special, could now be sold for a price that could keep one in comfort for the rest of one's life. For most, the temptation was just too great; an easy life was now within grasp for many Caymanians, as Jamaicans could be brought in to do the manual labour, to serve in the restaurants frequented by the visitors from the cruise ships, to look after the

bankers' children. A privileged few were given *status*, as they called it, and were allowed to live permanently on the islands, these being the ones who were really needed, or, in some cases, who knew the right people – the people who could ease the passage of their residence petitions. Others had to return to the places from which they came, which were usually poorer, more dangerous, and more tormented by mosquitoes.

Most children do not choose their own name, but she did. She was born Sally, and was called that as a baby, but at about the age of four, having heard the name in a story, she chose to be called Clover. At first her parents treated this indulgently, believing that after a day or two of being Clover she would revert to being Sally. Children got strange notions into their heads; her mother had read somewhere of a child who had decided for almost a complete week that he was a dog and had insisted on being fed from a bowl on the floor. But Clover refused to go back to being Sally, and the name stuck.

Clover's father, David, was an accountant who had been born and brought up in Scotland. After university he had started his professional training in London, in the offices of one of the large international accountancy firms. He was particularly able – he saw figures as if they were a landscape, instinctively understanding their topography – and this led to his being marked out as a high flier. In his first year after qualification, he was offered a spell of six months in the firm's office in New York, an opportunity he seized enthusiastically. He joined a squash club and it was there, in the course of a mixed tournament, that he met the woman he was to marry.

This woman was called Amanda. Her parents were both psychiatrists, who ran a joint practice on the Upper East Side. Amanda invited David back to her parents' apartment after she had been seeing him for a month. They liked him, but she could tell that they were anxious about her seeing somebody who might take her away from New York. She was an only child, and she was the centre of their world. This young man, this accountant, was likely to be sent back to London, would want to take Amanda with him, and they would be left in New York. They put a brave face on it and said nothing about their fears; shortly before David's six months were up, though, Amanda told her parents that they wanted to become engaged. Her mother wept at the news, although in private.

The internal machinations of the accounting firm came to the rescue. Rather than returning to London, David was to be sent to Grand Cayman, where the firm was expanding its office. This was only three hours' flight from New York – through Miami – and would therefore be less of a separation. Amanda's parents were mollified.

They left New York and settled into a temporary apartment in George Town, arranged for them by the firm. A few months later they found a new house near an inlet called Smith's Cove, not much more than a mile from town. They moved in a week or two before their wedding, which took place in a small church round the corner. They chose this church because it was the closest one to them. It was largely frequented by Jamaicans, who provided an ebullient choir for the occasion, greatly impressing the friends who had travelled down from New York for the ceremony.

Fourteen months later, Clover was born. Amanda sent a photograph to her mother in New York: *Here's your lovely grandchild. Look at her eyes. Just look at them. She's so beautiful – already! At two days!*

'Fond parents,' said Amanda's father.

His wife studied the photograph. 'No,' she said. 'She's right.'

'Five days ago,' he mused. 'Born on a Thursday.'

'Has far to go . . . '

He frowned. 'Far to go?'

She explained. 'The song. You remember it . . . Wednesday's child is full of woe; Thursday's child has far to go . . . '

'That doesn't mean anything much.'

She shrugged; she had always felt that her husband lacked imagination; so many men did, she thought. 'Perhaps that she'll have to travel far to get what she wants. Travel far – or wait a long time, maybe.'

He laughed at the idea of paying any attention to such things. 'You'll be talking about her star sign next. Superstitious behaviour. I have to deal with that all the time with my patients.'

'I don't take it seriously,' she said. 'You're too literal. These things are fun – that's all.'

He smiled at her. 'Sometimes.'

'Sometimes what?'

'Sometimes fun. Sometimes not.'

2

The new parents employed a Jamaican nurse for their child. There was plenty of money for something like this – there is no income tax on Grand Cayman and the salaries are generous. David was already having the prospect of a partnership within three or four years dangled in front of him, something that would have taken at least a decade elsewhere. On the island there was nothing much to spend money on, and employing domestic staff at least mopped up some of the cash. In fact, they were both slightly embarrassed by the amount of money they had. As a Scot, David was frugal in his instincts and disliked the flaunting of wealth; Amanda shared this. She had come from a milieu where displays of wealth were not unusual, but she had never felt comfortable about that. It struck her that by employing this Jamaican woman they would be recycling money that would otherwise simply sit in an account somewhere.

More seasoned residents of the island laughed at this. 'Of course you have staff – why not? Half the year it's too hot to do anything yourself, anyway. Don't think twice about it.'

Their advertisement in the *Cayman Compass* drew two replies. One was from a Honduran woman who scowled through the interview, which did not last long.

'Resentment,' confided David. 'That's the way it goes. What are we in her eyes? Rich. Privileged. Maybe we won't find anybody . . . '

'Can we blame her?'

David shrugged. 'Probably not. But can you have somebody who hates you in the house?'

The following day they interviewed a Jamaican woman called Margaret. She asked a few questions about the job and then looked about the room. 'I don't see no baby,' she said. 'I want to see the baby.'

They took her into the room where Clover was lying asleep in her cot. The air conditioner was whirring, but there was that characteristic smell of a nursery – that drowsy, milky smell of an infant.

'Lord, just look at her!' said Margaret. 'The little angel.'

She stepped forward and bent over the cot. The child, now aware of her presence, struggled up through layers of sleep to open her eyes.

'Little darling!' exclaimed Margaret, reaching forward to pick her up.

'She's still sleepy,' said Amanda. 'Maybe . . . '

But Margaret had her in her arms now and was planting kisses on her brow. David glanced at Amanda, who smiled weakly.

He turned to Margaret. 'When can you start?'

'Right now,' she said. 'I start right now.'

They had not asked Margaret anything about her circumstances at the interview – such as it was – and it was only a few days later that she told them about herself.

'I was born in Port Antonio,' she said. 'My mother worked in a hotel, and she worked hard, hard; always working, I tell you. Always. There were four of us – me, my brother and two sisters. My brother's legs didn't work too well and he started to get mixed up with people who dealt in drugs and he went the way they all go. My older sister was twenty then. She worked in an office in town – a good job, and she did it well because she had learned shorthand and everything and never forgot anything. Then one day she just didn't come home. No letter, no message, no nothing, and we sat there and wondered what to think. Nobody saw her, nobody heard from her – just nothing. Then they found her three days later. She was run over, thrown off the road into the bush, I tell you, and the person who did it just drive off – just drive off like that – and say nothing. How can a person do something like that to another person – run over them like they were a dog or something? I think of her every day, I can't help it – every day and wonder why the Lord let that happen. I know he has his reasons, but sometimes it's hard for us to work out what they are.

'Then somebody said to me that I could come to Cayman with her. This woman she was a sort of aunt to me, and she arranged it with some people at the church, she did. I came

over and met my husband, who's Caymanian, one hundred per cent. He is a very good man who fixes government fridges. He says that I don't have to work, but I say that I don't want to sit in the house all day and wait for him to come back from fixing fridges. So that's why I've taken this job, you see. That's why.'

Amanda listened to this and thought about how suffering could be compressed into a few simple words: *Then one day she just didn't come home . . .* But so could happiness: *a good man who fixes fridges . . .*

There was a second child, Billy, who arrived after another complicated pregnancy. Amanda went to Miami on the last day the airline would let her fly, and then stayed until they induced labour. Margaret came with David and Clover to pick her up at the airport. She covered the new infant with kisses, just as she had done with Clover.

'He's going to be very strong,' she said. 'You can tell it straight away with a boy child, you know. You look at him and you say: this one is going to be very strong and handsome.'

Amanda laughed. 'Surely you can't. Not yet. You can hope for that, but you can't tell.'

Margaret shook her head. 'But I can. I can always tell.'

She was full of such information. She could predict when a storm was coming. 'You watch the birds, you see. The birds – they know because they feel it in their feathers. So you watch them – they tell you when a storm is on the way. Every time.' And she could tell whether a fish was infected

with ciguatera by a simple test she had learned from Jamaicans who claimed it never let them down. 'You have to watch those reef fish,' she explained. 'If they have the illness and you eat them then you get really sick. But you know who can tell whether the fish is sick? Ants. You put the fish down on the ground and you watch the ants. If the fish is clean, they're all over it – if it's got ciguatera, then they walk all the way round that fish, just like this, on their toes – they won't touch it, those ants: they know. They've got sensitive noses. You try it. You'll see.'

Amanda said to David: 'It could have been very different for Margaret.'

'What could?'

'Life. Everything. If she had had the chance of an education.'

He was silent. 'It's not too late. She could go to night school. There are courses.'

Amanda thought this was unlikely. 'She works here all day. And then there's Eddie to look after, and those dogs they have.'

'It's her life. That's what she wants.'

She did not think so. 'Do you think people actually want their lives? Or do you think they just accept them? They take the life they're given, I think. Or most of them do.'

He had been looking at a sheaf of papers – figures, of course – and he put them aside. 'We *are* getting philosophical, aren't we?'

They were sitting outside, by the pool. The water reflected

the sky, a shimmer of light blue. She said: 'Well, these things are important. Otherwise . . . '

'Yes?'

'Otherwise we go through life not really knowing what we want, or what we mean. That's not enough.'

'No?'

She realised that she had never talked to him about these things, and now that they were doing so, she suddenly saw that he had nothing to say about such questions. It was an extraordinary moment, and one that later she would identify as the precise point at which she fell out of love with him.

He picked up his papers. A paper clip that had been keeping them together had slipped out of position, and now he manoeuvred it back. 'Margaret?' he said.

'What about her?'

'Will she have children of her own?'

She did not answer him at first, and he shot her an interested glance.

'No?' he said. 'Has she spoken to you?'

She had, having done so one afternoon, but only after extracting a promise that she would tell nobody. There had been shame, and tears. Two ectopic pregnancies had put paid to her hopes of a family. One of them had almost killed her, such had been the loss of blood. The other had been detected earlier and quietly dealt with.

He pressed her to answer. 'Well?'

'Yes. I said I wouldn't discuss it.'

'Even with me?'

She looked at him. The thought of what she had just felt – the sudden and unexpected insight that had come to her – appalled her. It was just as a loss of faith must be for a priest; that moment when he realises that he no longer believes in God and that everything he has done up to that point – his whole life, really – has been based on something that is not there; the loss, the waste of time, the self-denial, now all for nothing. Was this what happened in a marriage? She had been fond of him – she had imagined that she had loved him – but now, quite suddenly and without any provoking incident, it was as if he were a stranger to her – a familiar stranger, yes, but a stranger nonetheless.

She closed her eyes. She had suddenly seen him as an outsider might see him – as a tall, well-built man who was used to having everything his way, because people who looked like him often had that experience. But he might also be seen as a rather unexciting man, a man of habit, interested in figures and money and not much else. She felt dizzy at the thought of . . . of what? Years of emptiness ahead? Clover was eight now, and Billy was four. Fifteen years?

She answered his question. 'I promised her I wouldn't mention it to anyone, but I assume that she didn't intend you not to know.'

He agreed. 'People think that spouses know everything. And they usually do, don't they? People don't keep things from their spouse.'

She thought there might have been a note of criticism in what he said, even of reproach, but he was smiling at her. And she was asking herself at that moment whether she would ever

sleep with another man, while staying with David. If she would, then who would it be?

'No,' she said. 'I mean yes. I mean they don't. She probably thinks you know.'

He tucked the papers into a folder. 'Poor woman. She loves kids so much and she can't . . . Unfair, isn't it?'

There was an old sea-grape tree beside the pool and a breeze, cool from the sea, was making the leaves move; just a little. She noticed the shadow of the leaves on the ground shifting, and then returning to where it was before. George Collins. If anyone, it would be with him.

She felt a surge of self-disgust, and found herself blushing. She turned away lest he should notice, but he was getting up from his reclining chair and had begun to walk over towards the pool.

'I'm going to have a dip,' he said. 'It's getting uncomfortable. I hate this heat.'

He took off his shirt; he was already wearing swimming trunks. He slipped out of his sandals and plunged into the pool. The splash of the water was as in that Hockney painting, she thought; as white against the blue, as surprised and as sudden as that.