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My Italian Bulldozer

Written by Alexander McCall Smith

Published by Polygon

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MY ITALIAN BULLDOZER



ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH



Polygon

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First published in Great Britain in 2016 by
Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

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Cover illustration © Iain McIntosh, 2016

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN 978 1 84697 355 0

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library

Typeset by Studio Monachino
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

THIS BOOK IS FOR

William Dalrymple, author and historian



❖ 1 ❖

People do strange things



It was the first time that Paul had made duck à l'orange for friends since Becky left him for her personal trainer. Her departure – after four years of living together – had been a surprise, but not as great a shock as the discovery of her new lover's identity. Looking back on it, Paul realised that all the signs had been there, and might so easily have been spotted. He felt a lingering, slightly reproachful regret: had he been less absorbed by his work, he might have noticed her indifference; had he given her more time, he might have been forewarned by her restlessness, by the occasional guilty, almost furtive look; but even had he picked this up, nothing could have prepared him for her choice of Tommy, the tattooed mesomorph with whom she suddenly went off to live.

"I didn't want this," he said to Gloria, his editor, trying as hard as he could to be stoical. "But it's happened. That's all there is to it, I suppose. People split up."

They were having coffee together in Gloria's kitchen when this conversation took place. Her office was in her flat, and Paul dropped in from time to time to see her, to collect proofs, to bounce ideas off her – or just to be listened to. She was good at that – she would make him a cup of the Assam tea he liked, sit on her sofa with her legs tucked under her, and let him talk. "No, go on," she would say if he asked her if he was wasting her time. "I like wasting time with you, Paul – you know that."

She was, he reflected, one of his closest friends, in a rather curious, slightly old-fashioned way. *Dependable Gloria*, he said

to himself, *always there, always positive.* But in spite of their closeness, what did he know about her? That she was a freelance editor who lived in Edinburgh but who came from somewhere else originally – somewhere near Bristol, where she had gone to university. Her parents had both died when she was in her early twenties – she had told him about that – and she had no siblings. She was rather alone in the world, he imagined; there was an aunt she spoke about, and there were her friends in a hill-walking club. But apart from that did she have much of a social life? He had never really thought much about any of that. She was roughly his age – in her mid-thirties – and attractive in, well, a homely sort of way. She wore her hair short and she never used make-up. Yet she did not really need to, as her skin had that clear, almost translucent tone to it that one finds on the Celtic edges. Her mother, she had told him, was Irish, and that might explain the complexion. Rain-washed. Atlantic-blown. A friend of his had once described her as "worth a second look", but Paul, who had never seen her in that way, had simply nodded and said, "Yes, I suppose so."

But the most striking aspect of Gloria was her clothing. Paul had occasionally seen her dressed more formally – they sometimes attended book events together in London – but for the rest she seemed to be wedded to loose-fitting Indian print dresses, shifts that hung about her like light curtains. Somewhere behind the curtains was a figure, but he had never really seen it. There must be a mill somewhere in India, he thought, producing those designs almost exclusively for Gloria – she had so many of them, in so many colours. He had once complimented her on them, and she had beamed with pleasure, as if he were the first man ever to say anything like that to her; perhaps he was, he thought.

And now that he needed somebody to talk to, of course Gloria was there, and prepared to listen – as she always was.

She nodded sympathetically. "Yes, but the one left behind, so to speak, always feels a bit raw? Who wouldn't?"

"Perhaps." He sought to reassure her, not wanting to be thought self-pitying. "I'll get over it, of course."

"Good."

Gloria was about to say something else, but Paul continued, "Yet I can't help asking: Why *him?"*

Her eyes widened. She was pleased that Becky had left. She was pleased because … She stopped herself. It was, she feared, only too obvious. She was not in the least surprised that Becky would go off with somebody … somebody less intelligent than Paul. *The dark anarchic force of sex* … That explained so much. "People do strange things. They fall for the most unlikely people." She felt uncomfortable delving any further, but she could understand why he wanted to talk. "They just do. And listen, Paul; it's not your fault. Fault doesn't come into it." She was not sure that this was quite true; there were times when an inference of fault seemed inescapable.

Paul sighed. "Have you actually seen them together?"

Gloria had. She had spotted the two of them entering a supermarket hand-in-hand and she could not help but notice his pugilistic features – the broken nose, the vacuous expression, the rolling walk that only sailors and bodybuilders seem to have. She had stared – discreetly, of course – but with a certain fascination.

"He's obviously very …" She searched for the word, and alighted upon *physical*. "Very *physical."* She uttered the word quietly, tentatively, as people do when they feel they might immediately have to retract what they have just said.

Paul nodded. "She met him in the gym," he said. "She started going there pretty regularly – sometimes twice a day. I should have realised that something was going on."

Gloria thought about this. It seemed to her that the gym was an odd place to conduct an affair. But perhaps not; perhaps there was something about the vaguely sweaty atmosphere of a gym that could set the heart racing. And people fell in love in all sorts of places; her friend, Alice, had fallen head over heels for a man she first met at the fish counter of her local supermarket. "I was examining a piece of halibut," she had said, "and I found myself looking at Tony, who was standing next to me. I just knew – right at that moment, I just knew."

"And all the time she was seeing him," continued Paul. "You would have thought there'd be a code of ethics forbidding personal trainers from having affairs with their clients. Psychotherapists have that sort of thing, don't they?"

Gloria nodded. "They do. They can't get involved with their clients, even if their clients fall in love with them – which I gather they often do. I gather they even expect it."

"Probably," said Paul, hesitantly. "But falling for one's therapist is surely entirely natural – of course we're going to fall in love with people who listen to us."

"Perhaps. So few do."

"Fall in love – or listen?"

She suspected that many people who appeared to be listening were in reality thinking about what they would say next. "Listen."

"And the relationship," Paul went on, "is not all that different – trainer and trainee, therapist and client. I could probably report him to his professional body, if I chose to."

For a moment she imagined a meeting of the personal trainers' professional body – a stern committee of the egregiously fit, all muscle, all glowing with health, conducting their business while running on the spot and lifting weights, the secretary taking the minutes while perched on an exercise bicycle.

Paul blushed. "No, I didn't mean to say that. I'm not feeling bitter." He hesitated. "She might come back, of course."

She looked grave. "Paul, once somebody runs away with somebody … somebody like that, she's unlikely to return." She thought of a friend, an art historian, who had fallen for a professional tennis player whose only topic of conversation was tennis. She had been blissfully happy, which was not the outcome that many had predicted – or wished for, for that matter: we do not want those of our friends who embark on adventures to get away with it. She remembered Vidal's famous comment – so waspish and at the same time so true – *every time one of my friends succeeds, I die a little.*

Paul was staring at the floor. *I don't need her*, he thought. *He's welcome to her. Tommy. Tommy and Becky. Oh, God …* He wanted to cry. He wanted to utter her name and sob.

The moment passed. *"La donna è mobile,"* he muttered. "Where does that come from again? You know … *La donna … something, something, something."*

"Verdi," said Gloria. *"Rigoletto*, if I remember correctly. *La donna è mobile, qual piuma al vento, muta d'accento e di pensiero …* Of course, you speak Italian, don't you. Didn't you live there once?"

"For two years. In Florence. I was a student." He thought back to that time – the period of greatest happiness in his life;

to be twenty, in Florence, with no commitments and with a sense that life would always be like this, as golden, as full of possibilities.

"So no translation is necessary."

"Woman is fickle," he mused. "Like a feather in the wind, changes in voice and thought … So true."

Gloria disagreed – with Verdi and with Paul. "Not at all. More men leave women than the other way round. Everybody knows that."

"Are you sure? Or is that just what women want to believe?"

"No, it's absolutely true. There have been studies …" She waved a hand vaguely; she thought there probably had been, although chapter and verse were not always at hand when one needed them.

"*La donna è mobile* sounds nice," she continued, "but is utterly false, as so many operatic themes are."

Paul returned to the subject of the personal trainer. "I met him once or twice, you know. I went along to the gym with her and watched him taking her through her paces." He winced at the painful memory. "He stood very close to her, and every so often he would put a hand around her biceps and smile encouragingly."

"Oh dear."

Paul sighed. "What do they talk about, I wonder?"

Gloria tiptoed round the issue. "In those relationships, conversation is often not the principal thing. There are other …" She struggled to put it gently. At the same time she thought: there's no point in talking about this. Things happen. People go.

Yet wounds have to be licked.

"You mean sex?" asked Paul.

She nodded sadly. "It's very odd. I could never bring myself to … to get close to somebody like that." She shuddered. "All that brawn. That thick neck – I take it he has a thick neck – I didn't see his neck outside the supermarket."

"His neck?" mused Paul.

"Yes, I imagine the veins stand out on the side of it, like creepers round the trunk of a tree." She shuddered before continuing. "But listen to me, Paul, you have to put all that behind you. You have to move on."

The advice brought a grimace. "You're not the first person to say that to me. Even my mother's said it – and when your mother tells you to move on …"

"I know that's a resounding cliché," Gloria persisted, "and one should never tell somebody to move on, but it's true. The only way you're going to get over this is to … well, to move on. Socialise, have fun … Invite the whole crowd over to your place. Cook for us, like you used to. Meet new people, even."

"New people?" said Paul. "I like the friends I've got."

"Then get people round," said Gloria. "I'm free next Saturday, for example."

He looked at her. "You and I … You weren't suggesting …"

He had intended this as a joke, but realised, to his embarrassment, that she was taking it seriously.

"Heavens no," she said, blushing. "All I'm saying is that your old friends are the ones to help you get started on a new life. That may seem paradoxical, but the truth is often paradoxical, you know. I don't know why, but it just is."

When Gloria first discovered Paul he already had a growing local reputation for his knowledge of food and wine. But had

she not coaxed that first book out of him – *Paul Stuart's Bordeaux Table* – he would probably have remained where she found him: working in the Scottish branch office of a London wine merchant, writing the occasional newspaper column, and from time to time helping friends with their struggling deli business.

"I saw the possibilities," said Gloria. "That's all."

She spotted the potential when she read a small column that Paul occasionally contributed to a local lifestyle magazine. The photograph above the piece helped: "He has an interesting face," she wrote to a colleague. "He's good-looking, but I suspect he doesn't know it – you can always tell. (I can't abide vain men.) The little-boy-lost look helps, and there's something about the way he puts things. It's as if he's taking you into his confidence. People like that: they like the idea that somebody is telling them things that he's not going to tell anybody else, even if they're reading it in a magazine or newspaper."

Gloria worked as a freelance editor, specialising in books that her publishers blandly described as "lifestyle". She had a talent for bringing out the good idea that lurked in sometimes chaotic manuscripts, and at the end producing something coherent. Although most of her work was sent to her by publishers, very occasionally she suggested to them what they might do, in this way crossing the boundary into the territory of the commissioning editor. When she did this, publishers had come to trust her instinct, which more often than not was correct.

"I'm not an agent," she said to Paul. "I'm an editor. It's different. I'm on your side, but not one-hundred-per-cent, if you see what I mean."

"It means you can tell me what to do," said Paul.

Gloria laughed. "I'd never do that. No, it's more a case of telling you that you can't do what you want to do."

"I see."

"But telling you in such a way that you don't think I'm telling you what not to do."

"Right."

"In other words … look, you know how it works, don't you?"

He did. And he was grateful to Gloria, not that he tended to express his gratitude very often. She knew, he thought; Gloria knew that he liked her and was grateful. You don't have to spell everything out.

When *Paul Stuart's Bordeaux Table* was published there was no real reason for it to stand out in its discouragingly crowded field. Food writers, it seemed, were two-a-penny, with every regional cuisine having been thoroughly covered from all conceivable angles. Julia Childs and Elizabeth David had been the trailblazers; those who followed were precisely that: followers. Yet there was something about Paul's writing that gave it particular appeal – and this was picked up by reviewers.

Once it had been described as "insanely readable" by the gushing food editor of a major London paper, the die was cast. There were interviews and television appearances, and on television Paul simply *worked*. In an age of self-promotion, people responded well to his good manners. There was nothing of the diva about him, none of the braggadocio of other well-known chefs. He was, in a word, likeable.

"Okay, Paul," counselled Gloria. "Big success – well done. But …" She had had this conversation with so many authors, and the *but* had often proved prophetic. "A first book can be

a last book only too easily. The second is the real test. Put everything you have into that."

Paul heeded her advice. The success of the Bordeaux book had emboldened him to resign from his job with the wine merchant, and so he needed the advance that the publishers for whom Gloria worked offered for *Paul Stuart's Provençal Table*. Again, the formula worked, and three months in Provence resulted in a book that was even more enthusiastically received. There then followed a further three French books, one on the food and wines of Portugal, and three on Spanish regions.

By his thirty-sixth birthday, which was when Becky ran off with the personal trainer, Paul had embarked on his tenth book, which was to be *Paul Stuart's Tuscan Table.* By now the success of the enterprise meant that he could employ a part-time researcher to undertake much of the preparatory work, collating the facts that Paul would then seamlessly weave into his conversational narrative. If he wrote knowledgeably – and effortlessly – about *trésors de cuisine* such as a means of preserving meat glaze, it was because his assistant had ferreted out a copy of Mique Grandchamp's *Le cuisinier à la bonne franquette*, published in 1884, and discovered just how one might heat a slightly depleted bottle of Madeira in a pan of hot water, pour in the meat glaze, and then recork the bottle. Similarly, Paul himself would not have had the time to extract the recipe for *Soupe au Pistou* from Eugène Blanchard's *Mets de Provence*, but his assistant had. Every recipe, though, and every wine, was tried and understood before Paul wrote about it; Gloria understood that and knew that she could rely on him.

"Italy next," she said when they met for lunch one day. "What about Tuscany? I know it's the obvious choice, but

there's nowhere to beat it. At least not in my view. Cypress trees along ridges, as in a Renaissance painting. Dusty roads. Abbeys tucked away in the folds of hills. Bean stew …"

Paul nodded. "All right," he said.

She looked at him. There was a lack of enthusiasm in his tone that she had not heard before. "You don't want to do another Spanish book, do you? I thought you said you wanted something different."

He shrugged. He was not looking at her directly, but seemed to be gazing out of the window. "Tuscany's fine. It'll do."

She looked at him again. "Is something troubling you?"

This brought a further shrug. And then he laid down his knife and fork with the air of one with something to announce.

Plaintively, he told her what had happened. "Becky's gone off with her personal trainer."

For a while Gloria stared at Paul blankly, not saying anything. *At last,* she thought. *At long last*.

Now Paul broke the silence. "You were never too keen on her, were you?" He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone; he did not sound accusing.

Gloria blushed. Her distaste for Becky's selfishness would have to be put carefully. "I just thought that the two of you were rather different people."

Paul took time to weigh this. "Maybe," he said. "I obviously didn't do it for her. I tried, you know."

"I'm sure you did." Gloria thought of Somerset Maugham's *Painted Veil*. It was the classic theme: good man, worthless woman – and, of course, the other way round, the moral failure reversed.

"I did my best to make it work," he sighed. "But I suppose she'd just had enough. You can't blame somebody for that, can you?"

"No," she said, although without conviction. "Some relationships work – others don't. It's as simple as that."

"I suppose so, but still …"

"You needn't reproach yourself."

She found her dislike for Becky growing, now that she could admit it to herself. Paul was everything most women would ever want: he was good-looking, personable, kind, amusing; Becky had obviously failed to appreciate any of this. The personal trainer was exactly the sort of person whom somebody like Becky might fall for, at least in the short term.

Would it last? Gloria was not sure that purely physical attraction could keep a relationship going for long. Personal trainers, like the rest of humanity, lost condition, put on weight, lost their vigour. That was undoubtedly true, but then it was possible that Becky had found a soul-mate, and that the outsider's view of the relationship was all wrong. Perhaps they were simply compatible. Perhaps each had found that the other saw the world in the same way. Perhaps they had just fallen in love, which is not always a matter that can be attributed to looks or sex or some shared enthusiasm. That might even have been the trouble with Paul and Becky – they had never actually loved one another – for all of those four years together. That sort of thing happened; the inertia that for years keeps people doing jobs they do not like, or living in houses they feel uncomfortable in, can keep them in relationships with those they do not love, or sometimes do not even like.

But something else was beginning to worry Gloria. She had experience of writers who suddenly lost their way when their personal lives became unstable. Paul made money for his publishers and that effectively paid a large part, if not all, of

her salary. Gloria was far from selfish: her first concern was Paul's welfare, but there were other things at stake here too. A disaster for Paul would be painful for quite a number of others. More was at stake here than Paul's personal happiness.

Gloria saw Paul for a catch-up lunch every month. Now she decided that she would increase the frequency of these meetings, at least until the Tuscan book was safely in production.

"I'm always here for you, Paul," she said at one such lunch, which took place a couple of weeks later. "I know how you must be feeling."

He looked at her doubtfully. Gloria was kind – he had always known that – but had she ever been rejected by anybody? There had never been any mention of boyfriends; she had never said anything about an unhappy love affair in her past. And if you had never experienced that, would you really understand?

He looked at her doubtfully. "Do you?"

"Yes, as it happens I do." She paused. "There are few things worse than the thought that the person with whom you live no longer wants to be in your company. I know that."

"Sorry," said Paul. "I'm sure you do." He sighed. "I know I have to try to get over her."

"Then you must."

"It's just that I keep thinking of her. I miss her. I wake up in the morning and I imagine she's there. But then I turn round and I'm by myself. Corny, isn't it?"

"No, not in the slightest bit corny. Not in the slightest." She reached out to take his hand. It was not how things usually were between them; they never touched. He looked down at her hand, almost with surprise. He gave it a squeeze, and then withdrew his hand from hers, not abruptly, but gently, and

slowly. She glanced down, but then looked up again, as if she had surprised herself with the gesture.

"Make an effort," she said. "Think of other things." She paused. "You were going to invite people over. We're waiting, you know."

He smiled at her weakly.

This is potentially very bad, she thought. *And the solution that she would most have liked was not, it seemed, remotely possible.*

She helped him plan the evening.

"Only old friends," he said.

"Agreed."

"And not too many people. Eight?"

"Ten."

He conceded. "The usual crowd? Jenny and Bill? Bob? Fran? And I can sit next to you?"

She reassured him. "Of course you can. And Fran on the other side, and Jock beside her."

He looked away. "I haven't really got the heart for this, you know. Somehow I feel just … just fed up with everything."

"Which is precisely why you need to do something about it." She wanted to shake him, and for a moment her impatience showed.

He looked taken aback. "You're cross with me?"

She swallowed hard. "No … well, yes. Yes, I am. You have everything going for you – everything. People like you. They like your books. They buy them. They write to you. You have this nice flat. You've got enough money to live comfortably. You're not at all bad-looking. So why …" She stopped. She knew that there was no point: misery was nothing to do with objective good fortune. Misery was like bad weather; it was

just there, and no number of optimistic comments could make the weather better.

But for some reason her words had resonated with him. He closed his eyes briefly, as if summoning up resolve, and then nodded. "You're right. Everything you say is right."

She was unprepared for this. "Really? Do you mean …"

"I mean that I need to do exactly as you say. I need to stop thinking of Becky. I need to look …"

"Forward?"

"Yes, forward."

"Well, I must say that I'm relieved. I thought we were losing you, you know. I thought you were … sinking, so to speak."

"Well, I won't. I won't sink."

"Good."

He looked at her, clearly waiting for her to say something more.

"So …" She trailed off.

'Yes?"

"So you have this party. You get everybody together. It'll be a sort of announcement that you're starting again. The beginning of the post-Becky era."

"And then?"

She saw her chance. "And then you get back to work on your Tuscany book. It's already six weeks late." She did not mention that the food photographer was waiting for his instructions and had already threatened to cancel.

"I'm sorry."

She was quick to reassure him. "No great disaster. You can catch up. I suggest that you go to Italy. Finish it there. Do some on-the-ground research."

He looked thoughtful. "Next month. July?"

"Perfect."

"It'll have to be organised. Reservations made and so on …"

She cut him short. "I'll do all of that. I'll book you into that place you told me about, the one you went to before, that hotel in Mont-something."

"Montalcino."

"Yes. And I'll arrange the flights, car hire, and so on. Everything. You needn't lift a finger."

He was caught up in her enthusiasm. "It's best to fly to Pisa. I can pick up a car there and drive down. It's only a few hours."

"There you are. Simplicity itself."

"And I'll finish the manuscript. I've only got five or six chapters to go. I've been sitting on them."

"I know." For a moment she imagined all the authors who were sitting on chapters – the piles of paper neatly stacked on their chairs, with the authors sitting on top of them, slightly uncomfortable, and certainly feeling guilty. She smiled at the thought.

"What's so funny?"

Gloria shook her head. "A ridiculous thought. Authors sitting on their chapters."

Paul was earnest. "But you'll get them. I'll deliver."

"I know that too."

He turned his attention to the dinner. "What am I going to give them? I haven't thought about it."

"You decide. You're the famous cookery writer. I'll do the inviting for you – but the food and so on is up to you."

He suggested duck, as it was the first thing that came to mind, and she agreed. "And we'll have *Brunello di Montalcino*.

It's probably the best Italian wine there is. It's my favourite, as it happens."

"My mouth is watering," said Gloria.

She knew all the guests – her circle intersected with Paul's and she had encountered all of them socially before this.

"His confidence has taken a real battering," she explained when she telephoned with the invitation. "This is his putting a toe back into the water. Gingerly. But we'll need to be careful. We need to keep things upbeat. So no mention of Becky … or of unfaithfulness in general. Keep it positive."

Everybody had been understanding, and had assured Gloria that not a single gloomy observation would come from them. "You want Polyanna?" said one of friends. "You'll get Polyanna in spades!"

When they arrived the *bonhomie* was tangible. *Don't overdo it*, thought Gloria, as the ten of them stood in the living room, each with a glass of prosecco in hand.

"Paul's going off to Italy," Gloria announced. "Next week, Paul?"

Paul nodded. "Yes. Next Wednesday."

"*Bravo!*" said Fran.

Paul shrugged. "Hardly heroic," he said.

"But to go off all by yourself …" said Fran.

There was a silence.

"To Tuscany," said Gloria quickly. "Montalcino."

This triggered a memory in Bob. "We went there on our honeymoon," he said. "We were in Siena and Florence, but wanted to get away from the crowds. It's a great place for a honeymoon."