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Opening Extract from...

Chance Developments
Unexpected Love Stories

Written by ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

Published by Polygon

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ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

Chance Developments

Unexpected Love Stories

Polygon

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Contents

Sister Flora's First day of Freedom 10

Angels in Italy 56

Dear Ventriloquist 112

The Woman with the Beautiful Car 160

He Wanted to Believe in Tenderness 192

Author's note

Some years ago I was invited by the distinguished American museum curator, Robert Flynn Johnson, to write an introduction to a book he was about to publish. This book was a collection of 'orphaned' photographs – old black and white photographs that had no clear provenance and featured unknown people in all sorts of situations. In that introduction I chose to create stories around some of these photographs – very short stories in that case, and most of them highly unlikely. I enjoyed the experience so much that I decided that one day I would do an entire book of photographically-inspired stories.

Recently I wrote a book about Edinburgh based on the magnificent collection of photographs owned by the conservation body, Historic Environment Scotland. I asked my editor for that book, Jamie Crawford, if he might find me a selection of black-and-white photographs of people from the past so that I could imagine the stories behind the images. He came up with an intriguing collection, and the result is this offering. We know nothing about the real people in these photographs – by the age of the prints none of them will still be alive; these stories imagine who they

might have been and what their personal history was. The people in the stories, then, are not the same as the people in the photographs: rather, they are suggested by them. They are all love stories in one sense or another, because love lies at the heart of our experience of the world. They are also about friendship, love's cognate, and frequently both its prequel and sequel.

Love transforms the people in these stories, as it may transform any of us. In some cases it will not be reciprocated as fully as it might be, but if that happens we could do worse than to remember the advice of the poet, W.H. Auden, who tells us that 'If equal affection cannot be, then let the more loving one be me.' I have always thought that those lines can be read in such a way as somehow to express an entire philosophy of life, a guide to all of us on our journey.

Alexander McCall Smith

Sister Flora's First Day of Freedom



1

They did their best to be generous to Sister Flora when she left the convent, but the dresses they gave her left something to be desired. A great deal, in fact, according to some.

'Well!' muttered one of the laywomen who helped with the vegetable garden. 'Did you see the outfits they gave her? You wouldn't think it was 1961 – more like 1931!'

She was right about the dresses, of which there were two. Both had been donated to the convent by the women's guild at the local church, and both were irretrievably dull. One was made of beige bombazine, the other of a rough wool fabric of the sort that a rural schoolmistress might have worn decades earlier. Both had been retrieved from somebody's wardrobe, both had a faint odour of camphor, although neither appeared to have suffered any moth damage.

They also gave her an unbecoming grey cardigan, a plain, full-length coat, and a pair of shoes that was slightly too small. The shoes, at least, were new, although they, too, were far from fashionable. Then there was a small suitcase, a sponge bag of toiletries, and an envelope containing fifteen pounds.

'We might have entertained the possibility of giving you a slightly larger sum,' said the Mother Superior, 'but since you are going to be living with your aunt you will have no rent to pay and I imagine your aunt, being the pious woman she is, will provide necessities.'

Flora smiled. 'I don't really deserve anything,' she said. 'I brought nothing with me when I came ten years ago, and I don't think I should leave with anything.'

'That's a very good attitude,' the Mother Superior continued. 'Mind you, I gather that money is not going to be a problem. This sum is purely to tide you over until such time as your . . . your arrangements are in place.'

'I have been most fortunate,' she said. 'I am not intending to forget that, Mother.'

'No,' said the Mother Superior. 'I don't imagine you will. You always had a very good disposition, you know. I'm sorry that one or two people have been passing . . . well, what can only be described as uncharitable remarks.' She looked away, her lips pursed in disapproval. 'I heard somebody say they thought that money had interfered with God's plan for you.'

'I don't think that's entirely fair,' said Flora.

'Neither do I,' said the Mother Superior. 'And indeed I imagine there are circumstances that suggest that God's plan

for certain people is that they *should* have money. After all, if nobody had any money, then who would give to the Holy Church?'

'Precisely,' said Flora.

The Mother Superior looked out of the window. 'I was very reassured to hear that you hadn't lost your faith. That was a great comfort to me, you know.'

'I haven't lost it,' said Flora. 'It's just that . . . oh, I suppose it's just that I decided that I'm not cut out for the religious life. I've enjoyed it well enough, but I feel that somehow life is passing me by.'

'Quite understandable, my child,' said the Mother Superior.

'And I thought that I really had to make a decision one way or the other. So I decided that I would go out into the world. It just seemed the right thing for me to do.'

'We all understand,' said the Mother Superior. 'I understand; poor Sister Frances understands – just; and Father Sullivan understands. You'll be happy doing God's work in the wider world – whatever that happens to be.'

'I hope so.'

'And, of course,' continued the Mother Superior, 'you will be a wealthy woman.'

Sister Flora lowered her eyes. 'I didn't reach the decision because of that,' she said. 'I had already decided.'

'Oh, I know that,' said the Mother Superior. 'I wasn't for a moment suggesting *post hoc*, *propter hoc*. But being wealthy will be . . . well, rather *nice*, don't you think?'

2

It was difficult for her to remember when it dawned on her that she had a vocation. Some people spoke of a moment of revelation – a moment of certainty – the meaning of which was completely clear. One of the younger sisters had said that it had come to her one morning when she got out of bed and opened the window. 'There was a particular sort of light,' she said. 'It filled the sky, and I knew at once that I was being called.' Another said that it had come to her in a dream, when she had seen the Virgin herself, who had beckoned her. That, she said, was a sign that would only come once in a lifetime and should not be taken lightly, nor questioned.

It had been different for Flora. She had never had a sense of controlling her own future, of making decisions

about what she would do – this, it seemed to her, had been done for her by others. It was not that anybody imposed their will on her; it was more gentle than that. There were suggestions that she had been thinking of a religious life all along; that it was something for which she had somehow shown an aptitude. And then, just as she was about to leave school, there had been that fateful conversation with Sister Angela, a particularly sympathetic nun, who had said, 'There will always be a place for you in the Order, you know.' And she had been flattered that she should be thought of in this way.

At university she had become involved in the Catholic chaplaincy, and again assumptions were made. 'It's easy for you,' one of her friends had said. 'You're obviously going to end up in the Church. You don't have to look for something.'

Flora had simply said, 'No, I suppose I don't.' And that, she thought, was the moment at which the decision – if one could call it that – was made. She finished her degree, and took a year's teaching diploma after that before entering the convent as a novice. They were delighted that she had joined them; they ran a school and there was a shortage of nuns with recent, recognised teaching qualifications. A newly minted graduate of the University of Glasgow – in mathematics, of

all things – was exactly the sort of young woman the convent wanted.

Her parents were proud of her. They were now elderly, and she was their only child. Any thoughts they had about losing the daughter who might care for them in their old age were eclipsed by their pleasure in having provided the Church, which was at the core of their lives, with such a charming servant.

Her father died a month after she took her final vows, and her mother survived him by barely a year. Thereafter her only family was her aunt and uncle, a childless couple, who lived in a small town on the Clyde estuary. This uncle had been a successful hotelier and caterer, who had made wise investments in land on the outskirts of the city. Flora was aware that he was well off, but it had never occurred to her that he would direct that a large part of his estate was to go to her. She had met the lawyer at his funeral, a thin man with a nasal voice, who had been introduced to her by her aunt at the funeral tea.

'I was always a great admirer of your uncle,' said the lawyer. 'His good works were legion, you know.'

She smiled. 'He will be missed,' she said.

The lawyer adjusted his tie. 'I will need to speak to you at

some point,' he said. 'Not here, of course – this isn't really the moment. But you are, you may know, his heir.'

She looked at him blankly. 'But my aunt?'

'She is very well provided for already,' said the lawyer. 'You're what we call the residuary beneficiary, and that will involve a substantial amount. A very substantial amount.'

She was not sure what to say. 'Well . . .'

'These provisions were made when you were still at university,' he said. 'He did not change them after you went into the convent.'

'Oh.'

'They're perfectly valid, of course. I don't anticipate any problem. But you might care to be advised on what to do . . .' He made a gesture that she found hard to interpret – a rolling of the hand. Was this because he had never had to deal with a legacy to somebody who had taken a vow of poverty?

'Will it be possible for me to come to see you at the convent?' he asked.

She nodded. 'If you telephone.'

He looked apologetic. 'I wasn't sure whether it was one of those open orders.'

'We are. We're not enclosed.'

He looked relieved. 'I had an aunt in Dublin,' he said. 'She was a nun and none of the family ever saw her.'

'There are some orders that keep themselves away from the world. It's to do with prayer.' She paused. 'Telephone the school office. The secretary there is Mrs Morrison. She'll make an appointment. It's best just after school's out – about four.'

He reached out to take her hand briefly. 'I'll do that, and I'm so sorry about your uncle. There are so few good people these days that the loss of one of them makes such a difference.'

She thanked him, and he moved away. She closed her eyes. She wondered whether she had brought this upon herself; that this was somehow a consequence of having taken the decision to leave the convent. She knew it was irrational, but she had struggled for years with guilt and a tendency to give in to superstition. She had bargained with herself, identifying what she had to do to avert disaster: one more rosary, just one, or something dreadful will happen; one further novena or something would happen to one of the girls in her class – these were the little pacts, familiar to anybody who suffers from obsessive compulsive disorder; these were the ways in which she negotiated her way through life.

The lawyer came to see her two weeks later. He brought her aunt, and the three of them sat facing one another in the convent parlour. The floor was highly polished – that was the mark, she thought, of a nun's parlour anywhere in the world: the smell of polish, the air of scrupulous, antiseptic tidiness.

The Mother Superior had suggested that she might be there too. 'I'd be perfectly happy to see Mr O'Malley with you,' she said. 'His brother is in the St Vincent de Paul Society and I've met him. That family had a daughter here some years back – I think she was his niece.'

'That's very kind of you, Mother, but I think my aunt might prefer the meeting to be a small one.'

'If that's what she wants . . .'

'Yes, it is. Thank you all the same.'

Now they sat together in the rather faded and uncomfortable Morris chairs, each with a cup of tea on the small occasional table beside them.

The lawyer produced a file and extracted several copies of a document.

'Mr O'Malley wanted to explain things to you,' said her aunt. 'He's always been very good at translating legal documents into plain English.'

The lawyer smiled weakly. 'I do my best,' he said. 'And your uncle's will is far from complicated. May I tell you – in the most general terms, of course – what he had in mind?'

'He was always very well organised,' said the aunt. 'He never liked disorder.'

'Admirable,' said the lawyer.

She was given a copy of the document. She glanced at it and saw her uncle's signature. It saddened her; she had loved him. He was a kind man.

'Effectively, what he asked his executors to do is to create two trusts,' said the lawyer. 'One is an offshoot of an existing trust he had created for your aunt, and this makes provision for her maintenance at, well, I hope she will agree, a very comfortable level.'

'Very,' said the aunt.

'There are certain legacies,' the lawyer continued. 'There is something for the St Vincent de Paul Society and there is an outstandingly generous one to the Diocese of Glasgow. After that, everything goes into your fund, to be administered by trustees appointed under the will.'

'There's an awful lot in that,' said the aunt. 'All the property in Renfrew. His shareholdings in ICI. The Clydesdale Bank funds. It's a lot of money, Flora.'

'The trustees have the power to make disbursements,' said the lawyer. 'That means they will meet such reasonable requests as you may make. Funds should be adequate for . . . well, for just about everything you would care to do with it.'

He looked at her expectantly and she, in her turn, glanced at her aunt. The aunt smiled encouragingly.

'I have decided to leave the Order,' said Flora.

The aunt's surprise was evident. 'Well,' she said. 'That *is* news.'

The lawyer frowned. 'I must say that I have always said to legatees that they should sleep on any decisions they make. Sometimes the prospect of an infusion of funds makes people behave a bit rashly. Not that this would apply to you, of course, but I should perhaps sound a note of caution.'

Flora shook her head. 'I've been thinking about this for some time.' She turned to the aunt. 'I was going to tell you, but then Uncle Hector became ill and I never got round to it.'

The aunt reassured her. 'Of course, my dear. And I must say that I'm rather relieved. I know it's an important calling, but I've always felt it a pity that you hadn't led a life before you went in. I've always thought you left the world before you got to know it.'

'Well, I'm going to do something about that now. I'm thirty-two so I don't think it's too late.'

'Not in the least,' said the lawyer. 'We shall hold funds for you in our clients' account,' he added. 'They will be available when and as you need them.'

'Where are you going to go?' asked the aunt.

She shrugged.

'Come to me,' said the aunt. 'Stay as long as you like.'

'You could easily afford a flat or house of your own,' said the lawyer. 'It's exactly the sort of purchase that trustees are very happy to authorise.'

'I'll think about it,' said Flora.

That ended the business side of the conversation, and as they chatted over a cup of tea, she thought, *Would it be better to get a flat before a husband, or get a husband first and then a flat?* She would have like to have asked them, but she could not, because neither knew the nature of her plans just yet, and she was eager not to play her hand too soon.

3

She might have continued as a teacher; she might have continued as a nun, if it had been possible to live with a less doctrinaire faith with conviction. But she could not see how