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The Importance of Being Seven

Alexander McCall Smith

1. Nothing But Tenderness

If there was one thing about marriage that surprised Matthew, it was just how quickly he became accustomed to it. There is always the danger that a single person becomes so used to the bachelor or spinster routine that a sudden change in circumstances proves difficult to accommodate. Or so the folk wisdom goes. There is a similar piece of folk wisdom that claims that parents, on launching the last of their children, feel the loss acutely, rapidly declining into the empty nest syndrome. Both these beliefs are largely false. Married couples – or those choosing to live together as bidies-in (and there is no more appropriate term to express that notion than this couthy Scots expression) – both adjust remarkably quickly to the sharing of bed and board. Indeed, after a few days, in many cases, a previous life is more or less entirely forgotten, and each person believes that he and she, or he and he, or she and she, have lived together for a very long time. In this way Daphnis and Chloë, or Romeo and Juliet, can only too quickly become Darby and Joan, Mr and Mrs Bennet, or any other famous domestic couple.

As for the received view about the so-called empty nest syndrome, like many syndromes it barely exists. In most cases, parents do feel a slight pang on the leaving of home by their children, but this pang tends to occur before the offspring go, and it is largely a dread of the syndrome itself rather than concern over the actual departure. In this way it is similar to many of the moral panics that afflict an imaginative society from time to time: the fear of what might happen in the future is almost always worse than the future that eventually arrives. So when the child finally goes off to university, or takes a gap year, or moves out to live with coevals,

the parents might find themselves feeling strange for a day or two, but often find themselves exhilarated by their new freedom. Very soon it feels entirely normal to have the house to yourself, such is the rapidity with which most people can adjust to new circumstances. And of course if the child has been reluctant to leave home and has remained there until his late twenties, or even beyond, how much more grateful is the parent for this change. Empty nest syndrome, then, might be redefined altogether, to refer to the feeling of anticipation and longing which affects those whose nest is not emptying quickly enough.

For Matthew and his wife, Elspeth Harmony, the adjustment to married life was both rapid and thoroughly pleasant. Neither had the slightest doubt that the right choice had been made – not only in respect of deciding to get married at all, but also in their choice of partner. Matthew loved Elspeth Harmony – he loved her to the extent that everything that was associated with her, her possessions, her sayings, her friends and connections, were all endowed with a quality of specialness that attached to nothing else. The mug from which she drank her morning coffee was special because her lips had touched it; the tortoiseshell comb that she kept on top of the dressing table was special because it had belonged to Elspeth's grandmother rather than to any other grandmother; the shopping list that she wrote out to take with her to Valvona & Crolla was special because it was in her hand-writing. His affection for her was total, and touching.

For her part, Elspeth could not believe the sheer good fortune that had brought them together. She had always wanted to get married, from her university days onwards, but as the years passed and she was only twenty-eight at the time of Matthew's proposal she had become increasingly concerned that nobody would ask her. There had been one or two boyfriends, but they had not been serious, and her intuitive understanding of this had meant that the relationships had been brief. She saw no point, really, in persisting with a man who would not be with her in a year or two's time. Why invest emotional energy in something that was not expected to last? In her view that led to disappointment and loss, and this could be avoided by simply not taking up with the man in the first place.

Then Matthew came into her life, and everything changed. It was at such a difficult time, too, very close to that traumatic incident when she had succumbed to her irritation over Olive's mistreatment of Bertie – Olive had used her junior nurse's kit to diagnose Bertie as suffering from leprosy – and had pinched Olive's ear quite hard, something she had wanted to do for some time but which she had refrained from doing because to do so would be contrary to every principle of education and child care she had been taught. The fact that Olive richly deserved this pinch, and indeed might benefit from such a sharp reminder of moral cause and effect, was not a mitigating factor, and she had been obliged to resign from her position at the school. Matthew had been there to save her from the consequences of all this. While other boyfriends might have expressed regret over what she had done, and questioned its wisdom, Matthew sided with her completely and unequivocally, making it clear that he believed that the act of pinching Olive's ear was a blow for pedagogic sanity.

"There are many children who would be improved by such a pinch," he observed. Elspeth thought about this. In normal circumstances she would follow the party line and say that one should never raise a hand to a child or indeed pinch any of its extremities, but mulling over Matthew's pronouncement she came to the conclusion that she could think of quite a number of children who would benefit from a short, sharp pinch. Tofu, in particular, might be improved by a small amount of judiciously administered physical violence, even if only to stop him spitting at the other children. Perhaps if teachers spat at him he would get the message, but modern educational theory definitely frowned on teachers who spat at their pupils. That was the world in which we lived.

And now all that was behind her. Matthew had rescued her from professional ignominy and given her a new purpose in life. He had showered her with love, and she felt nothing but tenderness for this kind and gentle man, who had given her his name, his home, his fortune, and himself.

2: A Very Considerate Husband

For Matthew's part, the nicest thing about marriage was the opportunity that it presented to do something for another person. By nature he was a generous man, but had been inhibited in the practice of this generosity because of emotional insecurity. When he had been with Pat, in that curious on-off relationship, he had wanted to do things for her but had felt unable to do very much because of fears that she would reject what he did. With Elspeth it was completely different. He felt quite confident in giving her presents, because she received them with such evident pleasure. And anything he did – from dealing with the washing-up in the kitchen to buying her an Art Nouveau gold bracelet at a Lyon & Turnbull auction – had been received by Elspeth with both grace and gratitude.

Inspired by this, Matthew took every opportunity he could to do things for her.

"Please let me" was one of the most common phrases to be heard in their household. And "No, you've done enough, it really is my turn" had become one of the most common responses.

The whole process started at the beginning of each day when Matthew got out of bed and went through to the kitchen to put on the kettle for a morning cup of tea. Elspeth loved drinking tea in bed, as many people do, and he would take her a piping hot cup of Earl Grey/Assam mixture before turning on the bedside lamp and opening the shutters.

From the comfort of the matrimonial bed, Elspeth would look up at her husband in his tartan dressing gown and smile. She knew that he would now go into the bathroom, shower, dress and then make breakfast for the two of them. By the time that she emerged, the breakfast table in the kitchen would be laid, the muesli jar would be in position, and a pan of water would be boiling on the Aga, ready for a

free-range egg. The Aga, a rich red, had been a wedding present from Matthew's father, along with a matching Aga fridge and freezer.

"Couples with an Aga stay together," her new father-in-law had observed, jokingly, she thought. But he was serious.

"How do people know that?" she asked.

"They just do. It's the attitude that does it. A person who buys an Aga is going to be . . . how should one put it, solid. They want a solid and reliable cooker because they are solid and reliable themselves." He paused. "Do you get flashy types buying Agas? How many flashy types do you know who have an Aga?"

She thought for a moment. Did she know any flashy types? Did she know anybody who had an Aga? Her own parents might have liked one but could not have afforded it, she thought. Agas were expensive, and even an Aga fridge cost about £5,000 or, if one chose the option with the built-in freezer compartment, £7,000. So none of her colleagues had an Aga, and indeed neither did any of her friends, or even acquaintances.

"Do you know anybody who has an Aga?" she had asked Matthew after that conversation with his father. "Hundreds," said Matthew. "Why?" Elspeth frowned. "Do you really know hundreds of people who have one?"

Matthew nodded. "Yes. I thought they were pretty common. They're very nice things, you know. They make for a lovely warm place. You can put your wet washing on the rail, socks, underpants, the works. They get dry in no time."

Elspeth looked thoughtful. Matthew's comment – made so innocently – spoke to the very different circumstances in which they had been brought up. Elspeth's father, Jim Harmony, had been a good provider, but had never been able to provide an Aga. She had been brought up in circles where people had modest means; where the overseas holiday was a treat rather than an expectation; where money was tight, as it is for the overwhelming majority of people. Now she found herself married to a man who had a considerable amount of money, and was used to moving in circles where that was the norm. Not that Matthew was any sort of snob – quite the opposite, in fact, as he seemed completely indifferent to wealth or position in others. That was an endearing quality, and she could not have been happy with a man who thought the value of others was determined by their means. But Matthew's world was certainly different.

So it was upon an Aga that Elspeth's breakfast egg was cooked. And once again, Matthew took great pains to make sure that he did everything he could to please her. When she had told him that she was quite happy to have her boiled egg "as it comes", he had insisted on having a trial boiling of four eggs for different periods and then asking her to state a preference. She had chosen an egg in which the white was solid, rather than hard, and in which the yolk had at least some motility. Thereafter every egg he boiled her was done for that exact length of time; and every bath, which he ran for her while she ate her perfectly timed egg, was brought to just

the right temperature. That temperature had been ascertained by the running of a trial bath in which she had lain while Matthew had gradually brought the temperature up, stirring the water with a large wooden spoon from the kitchen to ensure even distribution of the heat.

After her bath, he would bring her a large towel that he would have specially heated on the towel rail.

"It really is very kind of you," Elspeth said. "But I think I can manage. Why don't you go for a run in Queen Street Gardens?"

The suggestion had been intended to be a helpful one – Matthew liked going for a run in the mornings – but he had taken this badly.

"But I want to be here to help you," he said. "Don't you like what I do for you?"

She had reached out to embrace him, dropping the towel. Matthew shivered with delight. "Of course I do, my darling," she whispered. "Of course I do. You do whatever you like."

She realised how fortunate she was. Many women had husbands who were not in the least attentive – husbands who never ran their wives' baths, nor made their breakfast, nor sent roses to the flat during the day, as Matthew often did. She was so lucky, but of course one needed a bit of space in a marriage, and she knew that sooner or later she would have to talk to Matthew about that. The problem, though, was that people often misunderstood a mention of space, and interpreted it as a suggestion to go away.

3. At Big Lou's

Elspeth need not have worried; of course Matthew understood all about space within a marriage and it was for this reason that he had not suggested that Elspeth help in the gallery. It would be better, he thought, for each of them to have a separate career: "I've seen too many couples come unstuck because they were working together," he said to Angus Lordie. He made this remark without really thinking, and even as he said it he realised that he could not think of a single marriage in which that had happened. On the contrary – all the marriages of that sort that he had seen were rather successful.

"Or perhaps not," he added lamely.

Angus had nodded wisely at Matthew's original observation, and had not really heard the retraction. He knew very little about this as he had never been sufficiently stuck to become unstuck. It was a mystery to him how anybody lived with anybody else let alone worked with them too, and he could imagine nothing worse than having another person in his studio, painting her own paintings while he worked on his. He found that painting required complete silence – an artistic stillness – and

the muse, fickle as she was at the best of times, would surely retreat in a huff if she had to contend with two painters in the same studio.

"So I'm not going to ask Elspeth to help me in the gallery," Matthew went on. "I couldn't bear it if we disagreed." "That girl you had," said Angus. "Pat Macgregor. Did you disagree with her at all?"

Matthew looked over Angus Lordie's shoulder. They were sitting in Big Lou's coffee house during this conversation and he was watching Big Lou wiping the stainless-steel counter with her cloth, or cloot as she called it. Had he seen eye to eye with Pat on matters artistic? He thought that he had, but then that was before he knew very much about anything, and he had probably not been in a position to challenge her views. It would be different now; Matthew had opinions, and some knowledge of art to back them up. He watched Big Lou at work. She was a handsome woman, in a big-boned, rather rural sort of way (Big Lou, of course, came from Arbroath, a part of Scotland noted for its handsome people). Now, as she polished away at the counter, a seemingly Sisyphean task, he saw her as she might appear in a painting by Bonnard, or possibly Vuillard.

Those artists were exponents of intimism, in which small domestic scenes were captured and placed at the heart of a painting: interiors showing a woman sewing, or arranging flowers; a girl picking up a soup spoon at a table; a woman lying in the bath. Bonnard would have loved Big Lou, and had he been there would have depicted her in the act of polishing, her head down, intent on her task. And he would have caught the sun that filtered in through the window – the cold, Edinburgh sun, so unlike the light that he found in the south of France – and the colour of her dress, and the faded apron that she had tied carelessly about her waist. Bonnard would have captured all that and in so doing would have portrayed Big Lou in all her essential Arbroathheit.

"No," Matthew said to Angus Lordie. "Pat and I did not disagree. Not then. It might be different now."

"You'll find somebody else to help you," said Angus. "There must be plenty of people looking for a job like that. You'd probably not even have to pay them."

Matthew looked doubtful. "I couldn't take advantage of somebody," he said. "I know people do it, but . . ."

"You're right," said Angus. "They do it all the time. They call it the internship system. Interns are usually unpaid labour."

"A grand name for an old system," said Matthew. "It used to be called slavery."

Angus laughed. "Slaves were never volunteers. Interns are."

"I still disagree with it," said Matthew. "I would always pay."

Angus thought for a moment. "How about Domenica? How about asking her whether she'd like to help?"

Matthew did not warm to this suggestion. "I know you like Domenica," he said, "but do you really think she'd be easy to work with?" "No, I suppose not," mused Angus. Matthew looked at him quizzically. "Could you work with her?" "The occasion has never arisen," said Angus. "But I imagine that I could. On the other hand, I think that she would have to be the boss. I don't think she would play second fiddle."

"No," said Matthew. He looked at Angus with interest, and continued, "Angus, don't you think that you and Domenica are . . . are an event waiting to happen?"

Angus looked at him in astonishment. "You mean . . ."

"Yes," said Matthew. "Listen, I can tell you about marriage – it's great, it really is. You feel somehow so complete. Yes, that's the word for it – complete. It's like having two moieties united."

"Moieties?" "A moiety is a portion or a part. A half." "I see." Angus wondered whether one might call one's spouse

one's "better moiety". That sounded better than "better half", which was an expression he did not like at all. It reminded him of golf clubs. Not that there was anything wrong with golf clubs

– it was just that sometimes one heard things in the bar of a golf club that sounded as if they belonged there. Not that I've ever been in a golf club, he thought. "So you are happy being married?" Angus asked.

"Yes. Blissfully." Matthew reached out and touched Angus on the forearm. "Why don't you give it a try, Angus? You'd love it." "She'd never look at me," he said. "Not in that way." Matthew shook his head vigorously. "Of course she would!

You're a handsome man, Angus. You're talented, witty. She would hardly be able to believe her luck." Angus raised his head. Big Lou had sniggered at the counter. He had heard it. "So what's funny about that?" he called over to her.

"Nothing," said Big Lou quickly. "It's just that you men need to think twice before you assume that we women are grateful for your company. It's not always like that, I can tell you."

"Don't listen to her," whispered Matthew. But Angus was listening.