
Opening Extract from...

Trains and Lovers

Written by Alexander McCall Smith

Published by Polygon

ALEXANDER
McCALL SMITH

Trains and Lovers

Polygon

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-1-84697-245-4

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

Designed by Teresa Monachino
Printed and bound in Italy by Grafica Veneta S.P.A.

This book is for Christine and Rachel Taylor

1

"I think that's a fishing boat."

It was. He saw it from the train, but not for more than a minute or two, as the line followed that bit of coastline only for a short time before it suddenly swerved off, as railway lines will do. The view of the North Sea was lost, and trees closed in; there was the blue of the sea one moment and then the blurred green of foliage rapidly passing the window; there was slanting morning sun, like an intermittent signal flashed through the trees.

This is the story of four people, all strangers to one another, who met on that train, and of how love touched their lives, in very different ways. Love is nothing out of the ordinary, even if we think it is; even if we idealise it, celebrate it in poetry, sentimentalise it in coy valentines. Love happens to just about everyone; it is like measles or the diseases of childhood; it is as predictable as the losing of milk teeth, or the breaking of a boy's voice. It may visit us at any time, in our youth but also when we are much older and believe we are beyond its reach; but we are not. It has been described as a toothache, a madness, a divine intoxication – metaphors that reflect the disturbing

effect it has on our lives. It may bring surprise, joy, despair and, occasionally, perfect happiness.

But for each person who is made happy by love, there will be many for whom it turns out to be a cause of regret. That is because it can be so fleeting; one moment it may take our breath away, the next it may leave us bereft. When it does that, love can be like be a haunting, staying with us for year after year; we know that it is gone, but somehow we persuade ourselves that it is still there. The heart has more than its fair share of ghosts, and these ghosts may be love, in any of its many forms. I knew one who fell deeply in love at nineteen – smitten, overwhelmed; astonished to find that all he wanted to think about was the other; unbelieving, at first, that this had happened to him. Thirty years later, he found the person he had loved, to whom timidity, if not shame itself, had prevented him from declaring his feelings, regularly coming to him in his dreams. So much had happened in those intervening years, but none of it had been shared, as life had taken them in very different directions. Nobody would choose to be in love like that, to hold on so strongly to something that was no longer there. Yet we admire such instances of tenacity, finding nobility in loss and in the way in which some people bear it.

If it were not for the train journey on that day, these four would never have met. Journeys may be like that, may bring

together people who would otherwise never have known of each other's existence. In that respect, long journeys have something in common with military service or boarding school, or even the shared experience of some natural disaster. Such things bring us into contact with people we would never have encountered but for the sharing of danger or unhappiness.

Journeys are not only about places, they are also about people, and it may be the people, rather than the places, that we remember. Those with whom one shares a carriage on the Trans-Siberian railway may well be remembered, even if the names of the places in which the train stops are soon lost. Of Kirov, Perm, Omsk and Ussuriysk – all of them stops on that long journey, most travellers, other than the locals, will probably remember only Omsk – for its sheer, prosaic finality, and for the fact that of all possible railway stations in the world, we are here in one called Omsk. I know nothing of Omsk, but it seems to me that its name is redolent of ending, a full stop; not a place for honeymoons or rhapsodies. Omsk.

Or Adelstrop. *Yes, I remember Adelstrop, for the train stopped there in the heat* – that is Edward Thomas. The poet was on a train journey into rural Oxfordshire, at a time when there was still an England of quiet villages and hedge-bound fields, and when a train might unexpectedly draw to a halt at a small place and there might be birdsong audible behind the hissing

of steam. Nothing happens there, other than the stopping of a train and the escape of pent-up steam, but it brings home how suddenly and surprisingly we may be struck by the beauty of a particular place and moment.

Edward Thomas was not alone in sensing the poetic possibilities of the train. Auden's *Night Mail* is entirely concerned with a rail journey: *This is the Night Mail crossing the border / Bringing the cheque and the postal order.* You can hear the train in those lines; you can feel its rocking motion.

And then there is the poet, Kenneth Koch, who while travelling in Kenya came to a railroad crossing at which this sign was posted: *One train may hide another.* This was meant, of course, as a warning to drivers of the fact that the train you see may not be the only train to reckon with, but it also meant, as Koch points out in his poem, that there are many things in this life that conceal other things. One letter may mean another is on the way; one hitch-hiker may deliberately hide another one by the side of the road; offer to carry one bag and you may find there is another one hidden behind it with the result that you must carry two. And so on through life. Do not count on things coming in ones.

Trains may hide one another, but they may also hide from us what they have in store – the meetings, the disclosures, the exchanged glances, the decisions we make or the insights that

strike us on a journey. Trains are everyday, prosaic things, but they can be involved in, be the agents of, so much else, including that part of our human life that for so many far outweighs any other – our need for love – to give it and to receive it in that familiar battle that all of us fight with loneliness.

2

There were four people sitting together on this train – three men and one woman. One of the men, wearing a corduroy jacket, was somewhere in his late forties, as was the woman seated opposite him. His name was David, and the woman was called Kay. She might have been a bit older – in her fifties, perhaps. David was well-groomed; there was an expensive look to him, as there sometimes is to people who lead sheltered lives, who have always had everything provided for them. The other two were young men, both somewhere in their twenties; one, Andrew, with dark hair and eyes of a rather unusual colour; the other, Hugh, tousle-haired, was well-built – he looked as if he might be good at the playing of a boisterous contact sport.

The journey on which these people met, the journey from Scotland to England, is not a particularly long one – four or five hours, depending on how many stations are stopped at. But four hours is long enough for conversations to develop and for people to reveal to others something of themselves. A friendship may be conceived in four hours; a short book finished and put away; a life remembered.

The train links Edinburgh with London. It leaves Edin-

burgh behind it and begins its journey over the rich farmland of East Lothian. Then there is a coast, that brings the sight of cliffs and sea-birds; and the North Sea which was still and smooth that day under the clear morning light. Andrew, seated at the window, looked out and saw a boat ploughing across the field of blue, and he said to the woman seated opposite him, the first thing that any of them said that day: "I think that's a fishing boat."

She looked at him, and saw a young man in his mid-twenties, not much more than that, rather slender, but not slight. She noticed his eyes, which were that striking shade of green that some people are blessed with and that in some lights could appear almost grey. She thought that she had once met somebody who looked like him, but she could not remember where or when it was. It was unlikely that it was this particular young man, as she was in Scotland, so far away from home, which was in Perth in Western Australia. And Andrew, from the way he spoke, was Scottish.

"Yes," she said. "A fishing boat." And then she added, "I suppose there are still some fish left. Enough for a few boats here and there."

He nodded and then he looked at her. He was never sure with people who sounded like that. They might be Australian, but they might equally well be New Zealanders, and he had

been told that New Zealanders were sensitive about being taken for Australians. He was not sure if it worked the other way round; he could not think of why the big should be put out by being taken for the small. It was easy, of course, to understand how the small might feel that way.

"You're … " he began.

"My name is Kay."

"Andrew."

"I'm from Perth. Not the Perth here in Scotland, but the one in Australia. Our Perth."

He smiled. "The one that's nearer Singapore than it is to Sydney?"

She said, "Yes. We can get to Singapore very quickly. Bali too."

This incipient conversation, still at the level of the sort of small talk that travellers engage in – and rarely get beyond – was listened to by the two others in the group of four seats. David noticed, as had Kay, the colour of the young man's eyes. He looked at them again. He said, "I've been in Singapore."

Andrew turned to look at him. He sounded American, but then he remembered what he had thought about Australians and New Zealanders. Canadians did not like to be taken for Americans; disparity in size, of course – it was the same sensitivity.

So he said, "You must be Canadian."

David shook his head. "American. But close enough, I suppose – at least in my part of the world, New York State. We're almost in Canada up in Buffalo."

And this was the signal for the other young man, sitting next to Andrew, to say, "I've always thought that Buffalo is a wonderful name for a place."

"Have you?" said David. "For us, it's just our place. You get used to names, don't you?" This young man, Hugh, who was English, smiled. "I'm sure you do," he said. He paused, and then began, "You've been …"

"At a conference," said David. "A conference in Edinburgh. And now I have to go home. A night in London, and then the flight home."

Now Kay turned to Andrew, "Are you going to London?" The train stopped at Newcastle and York, and sometimes stations in between. People went to these places too.

"Yes."

She hesitated. "May I ask why?"

Andrew did not mind the question. "I'm going to start a job."

She waited for him to say more, but he did not. Yet he did not seem to be discouraging her, and so she asked, "What is it?"

"I'll tell you," he said.