



AN ORDINARY MAN

Ellen Read

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About *An Ordinary Man*

‘Don’t judge a book by its cover’. Never had those words held such gravity as they did during a chance meeting at a pharmacy. It was soon obvious that this ordinary, unassuming man was astonishing and extraordinary.

AN ORDINARY MAN

It was an ordinary day, at least for summer in North Queensland. The humidity slapped me in the face as I stepped out of the car and took me into its warm, unwanted embrace. Six paces later I was inside the Pharmacy and air-conditioning. My spectacle lenses, now clouded, would soon clear and I would be able to see where I was walking. Fortunately, I know the way to the counter. I greeted the Pharmacist and handed over my prescription. This had become an all too familiar thing to do. After my bout of whooping cough, I was battling yet another chest infection.

"It may take about fifteen minutes," the chemist said.

I smiled and nodded. The fog had lifted from my glasses, and I glanced about. The pharmacy was busy. I sought a chair. After a visit to the doctor, the cold air-conditioning and the heat, my legs felt as if the bones were melting and I didn't know how much longer they'd support me.

One chair available. There were only two chairs in the shop. A man occupied one of these. I glanced away and then back again. Two chairs forbade the unwritten rule. Did everyone follow it? Miss one chair and sit down, but there was no third chair.

My legs were starting to tremble, like a jelly turned onto a plate, wobbling backwards and forwards.

Still I hesitated. The empty chair beckoned but there was a man in the other one. He looked harmless enough, just an ordinary man, though if we believed the news reports, even men we admired and least expected to be harmless had proven to be predators. How ridiculous of me! I gave myself a mental shake. We were in a chemist shop, for goodness sake! Sit down next to the man.

It was the way I was raised. Don't sit next to strange men. A hard lesson to shake!

I gave another sweeping glance of that side of the room, taking in the chairs. My gaze settled back on him. Now, I've always believed that I never made judgements on people. Book by its cover, and all that. Still, it's human nature to assess someone, to size them up. This man in gym gear athletic, this woman dressed to the nines probably on her way to lunch with the girls, this man in his Akubra a bushy. We did it without thinking about it. It was written into our DNA. Surely even Neanderthals sized up their fellow men and women. Would he make a good husband? Would she bear enough children? Was the newcomer a threat to their safety? It may have been more basic to their existence thousands of years ago but we still make instant assessments.

So what was my first impression of this man in his Akubra? A bushy? Well...perhaps. The hat was pushed too far down on his head so that his ears were bent outwards. The shirt was tucked into shorts that sat too high on his waist. This was obvious even though he was sitting. His belt was around his lower ribs. The shorts were not fashionable, and he wore grey socks with his sandals.

I decided an Akubra did not a bushy make. He obviously lived on his own, or perhaps with a brother or male friend. There certainly wasn't a woman around to help him choose his clothes. Young men these days may know what they like, know their particular style, but this man was seventy-odd and men of that generation often deferred to their wife or partner for help. There was no woman's touch here.

Overall, he seemed inoffensive and quiet. I took the plunge and sat down. I edged to the other side of the seat, so that I wasn't too close.

He spoke to me almost immediately. I nearly sprang out of the seat but even the jelly in my legs was melting now.

"Scripts are expensive, aren't they?"

I half-turned my face to him and nodded.

"Of course, now I'm a pensioner, I get my scripts a bit cheaper."

A small fissure appeared in my assessment of him. I didn't think he'd be talkative. I really didn't feel like a chat but I didn't want to appear rude. I nodded again. "I know with my parents' scripts, the discount helps."

"Of course, before I retired I was rarely ill," he added.

"Well, that's something," I said.

"It's no good getting old."

I smiled sympathetically. What I could say? I didn't like to agree that he was old.

"Do you live around here?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, not wanting to offer more information. "And you?" I enquired when he kept watching me as if he expected more to be said.

"No. I live out a bit but this chemist is on my way when I have to come into town."

So the Akubra fitted, no pun intended. I wondered how far out he lived. The rest of his attire did not say 'bushy' to me.

"Never been one for the city," he continued. "Give me the wide open spaces any day."

The fissure opened a little further.

"Got myself a few hectares out there." He waved his hand in no particular direction. His finger finally pointed at the baby shampoo and nappies. With a stretch of my imagination, I decided that must be past Mt Stuart.

"I don't have my snakes anymore," he said, as if he was telling me he didn't have his hat anymore, or his truck. "Just me and m'dogs. Do you have dogs?"

"Yes," I replied, although I suspected my long-haired, spoiled babies would be different from the dogs on his property. But I really couldn't get past the... "Snakes?" I asked. Is that what he said?

"Snakes, oh yeah. All sorts."

The fissure widened.

"Were they pets?"

"Not really. Only city people would have a snake as a pet."

I felt that hard to believe but didn't voice the opinion that most city people stayed well clear of snakes.

"I was a snake catcher."

"A snake catcher?" I repeated.

"Oh yes. I used to travel around and exhibit them."

"Travel around and exhibit them?" I repeated again. My amazement was making an idiot of me.

The fissure was gaping open now.

I didn't doubt his words but I couldn't visualise him catching snakes in his high-waisted shorts, socks and sandals.

"I eventually bought a place further up north and had them on display. I used to do shows with them, handle them and tell people about them. Educate the kids, you know."

"Were you ever bitten?"

"Awh, countless times. It didn't worry me but the Doc eventually said another lot of venom might be the end of me. So I sold the place. I miss the snakes, though." He pursed his lips and silently nodded his head. I could see that he was thinking of those lost days.

"That's when I started collecting orchids," he said, after a minute.

"Orchids?" Here I go again, repeating every word but this time I smiled. Orchids. Now that sounded better. More like my first impressions.

The fissure closed a little.

I could see him on his property, maybe under a shady tree or under the shade-cloth

of a bush-house. Potting his Cymbidiums, Cattleyas and Phalaenopsis, with pots, secateurs and bark strewn on a bench. His Akubra pulled down, turning out his ears, his shorts belted over his ribs, his socks catching every burr.

"I have orchids at home," I said, at last feeling some common ground. "Do you specialize? Or do you collect most varieties?"

"I collected rare types but I don't do it now? I'm not that fit anymore."

I frowned. How fit did you have to be to pot and water and nurture orchids?

"They weren't for me anyway," he added, which did nothing to help my confusion. "I sold them to wholesalers or orchid collectors." He could see I was puzzled and chuckled. "I used to go out into the wilds and find the orchids. South America, South-East Asia, Borneo, New Guinea. If they have rainforests that grow orchids, I've been there."

The fissure tore wide.

"Really? How fascinating!" I tried to make my voice reflect only moderate surprise but I don't think it actually came out that way.

"The rarest and most beautiful were in the Amazon, and the best of those I found behind waterfalls."

"In caves?" I asked.

"On the rock-faces," he said.

"Behind the falling water? But how could you find them? How could you see them?" I felt certain my fever was increasing and I was hearing things.

"I abseiled down the front of the waterfall. Not some great raging torrent, of course, but sometimes it was challenging. I found some beauties hidden in the crevices."

The last of my first impressions tore to shreds. The pieces swirled about my brain, tauntingly tickled my feverish forehead and evaporated into the cool blast of the air-conditioning.

I blinked several times. I was hallucinating. With only the slightest waver, like a heat haze on a hot road, my vision of the man sitting next to me morphed into Indiana Jones. I nearly laughed and I couldn't help thinking that even Indiana Jones changed back into his corduroys and tweeds and lost himself in his university when he'd finished his adventures. I couldn't picture Indiana in socks and sandals!

But I was locked into my vision of this man standing on the waterfall's edge, ropes over his shoulder, abseiling gear strung over his torso, his Akubra on his head and R M Williams boots on his feet.

Without any hesitation, he plunged over the side of the waterfall, the spray and mist enclosing him, and the rushing water drenching him as he pushed his way through to the rock-face. I could almost see the delicate colours of the orchid and smell its heady fragrance as he eased it from its secluded nook into his backpack. Then he was pulling himself up to the top of the waterfall.

"Mr..." the chemist called.

I didn't register the voice at all. I was still in the Amazon, amongst the heat and humidity and the wonderful rainforest. The sound of the waterfall was still deafening me.

"That's me," he said, as he started to rise. "It's been lovely chatting to you."

I had to blink hard to clear my thoughts. "Same here," I said. "Take care." I watched as he went to the register and paid for his tablets. He looked across and touched his hat in farewell.

I don't know how much longer I sat waiting. It didn't matter anymore how long my scripts took. My mind was back in the Amazon.

Finally, the chemist came to me and told me my antibiotics were ready. I gathered she'd called and I hadn't heard.

I paid for the capsules and went outside. The hot enervating breath of the day instantly turned my legs back to jelly. I suddenly realised they had been feeling stronger. I sat for a minute in my car with the engine going, waiting for the air-conditioning to cool the steering wheel and me. The rush of air sounded like the waterfall my mind had not long left.

I laughed out loud. I couldn't help myself. Who needed Indiana Jones? I'd just met Orchid-man at the pharmacy. What an extraordinary man!

Note from Ellen, the Author

Dear Reader

An Ordinary Man is based on a chance meeting I had one day at a pharmacy.

After meeting this astonishing man, I knew that I had to write a short story about him. If ever the words ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’ applied, it was then.

I hope you enjoy *An Ordinary Man*.

Love The Gift, my first novella, is available on Amazon, Smashwords, the Apple iBookstore, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and other fine eBook retailers.

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Best wishes

Ellen