



The
Floral World
of
Pamela Lumley

by
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The Floral World of Pamela Lumley

It had been a long and tiring day; the usual case for me as the principal male mathematics teacher in what was then known as a secondary modern school situated in London's south east end. The pupils attending these schools generally majored in manual or artisan courses, what you would nowadays call vocational, rather than academic subjects. Anyway, a group of them had been required to stay back for detention, which was scheduled each Thursday, and went for an hour and a half past the school's official closing hour of four o'clock in the afternoon.

On this particular week, it had fallen to me to supervise them, and I was as peeved as the detainees were at not being able to clock out at four and go home. It was left up to the supervising teacher to provide or suggest activities while they sat at their desks, so we let them do what they wished within reason, as we generally felt no constraint to put in more work hours. The more conscientious teachers would catch up on correspondence and suchlike, but most of us would usually sit behind the front desk and read the newspaper. With my brain and nerves often being overloaded at this point, I was usually content to do a crossword or stare out of the window. That day, I watched the sunset.

Every fifteen minutes or so, however, I dutifully patrolled the gangways between the desks and looked over the students' shoulders to make sure there was no monkey business going on. That is when I came upon fifteen-year-old Pamela Lumley with her face in her hands and her elbows on an open exercise book. She was a working class girl from the back streets of Bermondsey and attended my fourth form mathematics class. Her detention was a consequence of having been apprehended for smoking a cigarette in one of the school lavatories.

“Is everything alright, Miss Lumley?” I asked her, not expecting an answer nor even wishing to be bothered with one.

She looked up at me with snivel nose and red-rimmed eyes; she had evidently been crying.

“I just can’t get it, sir,” she whined in her nasal cockney twang.

“Get what?”

“This...”

She pointed a dirty fingernail at her dog-eared, grimy exercise book and the opened pages of smudged, pencil-scrawled numbers bordered with pitiable attempts at patterns and flower sketches. I deciphered that among her fanciful doodling she was attempting to solve a mathematical problem.

“It’s ‘omework, sir,” she said, pulling at her teased coal-black hair.

Having long given Pamela Lumley up as a lost cause, I hardly even checked her daily work anymore, let alone her “omework.” She had only a few more months to go, anyway, and she would leave school; graduating, I judgmentally presumed, to a life on child-welfare benefits. Math, and it seemed almost any other academic skill, was just not her talent.

“Well, just keep muddling through, Miss Lumley,” I said and looked at my watch. Over an hour and ten minutes yet to go.

Suddenly to her and my surprise, I impulsively snatched up her exercise book and returned to my desk, where I casually flipped through the illegible graphite muddle of Pamela Lumley’s tortured world of mathematics. I stopped at the page on which she had been working. It was still wet on one spot where a tear had fallen, smudging the green guidelines. You may assume it would be easy, considering my eloquence, but I cannot adequately describe what I felt in that instant. It was as though Pamela Lumley’s world opened before my eyes and every painful scratch of her grubby, stubby pencil formed a hieroglyphic tapestry of her life in a Bermondsey backstreet hovel with a divorced distraught mother on prescription drugs.

At the time, I would have recoiled from describing what overwhelmed me as supernatural, but now I am convinced it was. I didn’t know why, but I so wanted to weep that my heart ached, yet Pamela was watching me expectantly from her desk.

“I need to step out for a moment,” I announced with a lump in my throat.

“M-Miss L-Lumley, will you temporarily monitor the class?” I found myself saying to her shock, as well as that of the rest of the detainees and especially mine.

Her face lit up. “Why of course, sir. T-ta ... I mean...”

I locked myself in a lavatory stall, sat down and sobbed. I could not understand it, but I felt stupid and vulnerable, yet wonderful at the same time. I must have sat there for about ten minutes, silently philosophizing to myself in an attempt to dissect this emotion. My analysis seemed to be in vain, until I suddenly saw myself as I was before this epiphany: lofty, cynical, wittily sarcastic and erudite with a sophisticated corner on knowledge. It was a discomfiting sight, and it was easy for me to hate myself and—I sadly concluded—for others to regard me with no less abhorrence.

Nevertheless, I stepped out of that stall determined to retain this strange throb in my heart. Avoiding my reflection, I washed my face and returned to the classroom.

“Did everyone behave, Miss Lumley?” I inquired with a smile.

“Oh they was all little darlins!” she chirped with a giggle.

“Good to hear it. Okay then, come up here and let’s take a ‘butcher’s’ at this problem.”

Pamela’s face fell; it appeared as though she would burst into tears again. Yet she bravely strode up to the front and I motioned for her to pull up a chair next to mine.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” she said. “But it won’t do no good to explain. I just won’t get it.”

“The solution is probably very simple,” I said softly. “See this flower you’ve drawn here? What’s it called?”

Pamela Lumley’s eyes lit up. “A Canterbury Bell, sir. But that has next to nuffink to do wiv’ the mathematical problem.”

“I know,” I said. “And this here is obviously a crocus.”

“Yeah.”

“And this one?”

“That’s a Bleedin’ Heart, me mam’s favourite. But...?”

“And I notice you’ve drawn this particular one numerous times but you’ve scribbled through it.”

“Oh yeah. That’s a Gypsophila, me favourite. Can’t get it right, though. The shape of the petals, see?”

I nodded.

“Actually sir, I have a hard time wiv’ gettin’ the petal shapes right on most of ‘em. The Bleedin’ Heart is easy, of course.”

“I’m no artist, mind you,” I said as I opened my desk drawer. I rummaged inside it until I pulled out a small stencil template of geometric shapes. “But it seems the design of this particular petal is based on the trapezoid. See?”

“Ooh, right.”

“And this one has a rather hexagonal shape to it—you know, six sides. This one of course, is a rhombus—a diamond.”

“That’s true, sir. Simple when you look at it like that.”

“You obviously love flowers, Miss Lumley.”

“I do, sir. Don’t ‘ave any, though. Don’t ‘ave a garden and the ‘ouse is dark.”

I turned back a few pages in her exercise book. “Here it seems you are trying to make a design using these two.”

“Yeah. Me mam was goin’ to buy me an embroidery kit for me birthday, but it ended up she didn’t ‘ave the moolah. She was right broke up about it. That was fine, I didn’t take it personal. But I was going to embroider a table mat wiv’ the Gypsophila intertwining around the Bleedin’ Heart and give it to ‘er for Chrissmiss.”

“I see.”

“Anyways, sir, once I get a job, after I leave school, maybe I can scrape up somefink.”

“Very well, Miss Lumley, you may return to your desk,” I said, noticing that some tittering and whispering was going on among the detainees. I handed her the template. “Here, you can have this. Hope it helps you with your project.”

She beamed. “Ta ever so, sir.”



Late July presently came upon us along with the end of the school year and for most of us, spirits were high with anticipation at the six weeks of summer holidays. For the few departing pupils, however, this anticipation was often mixed with some trepidation at the prospect of acquiring full-time employment; Pamela was one of those few.

I was locking up my desk on that last day of term, when Pamela tapped on the glass window of the empty classroom's door. I indicated for her to come in.

Tears were in her eyes as she approached me. "Just w-wanted to say bye, sir. And ta for everything."

Everything? Since that day of detention, I had manifested only discreet interest in her evident progress at sketching flower design by merely nodding my approval when passing by her desk where she, with the geometric template in plain view, would leave her exercise book open for my perusal. But for the occasional smile and a nod, we communicated little.

"Good b-bye Miss Lumley. I wish you all the best and ... umm ... good luck with your choice of career."

"Ta, sir. Looks like I got somefink lined up as a cashier at Tesco's. At least for the time being. It will force me to brush up on me sums, if nuffink else!"

As we stood in uncomfortable silence, I stared at my half-open briefcase and I could not renege on a decision I had made that morning. I reached into the case, pulled out a large ribbon-wrapped package and handed it to her.

"You can open it now, if you wish," I mumbled. "Or wait until you get home."

Curiosity conquered the girl's initial hesitation and she tore at the wrapping. Her mouth fell open.

"I don't know why," I said, as Pamela shook her head and gaped in astonishment at the gift. "But it took no mean courage to stand in the local sewing craft shop explaining my need to purchase an embroidery kit for a 'friend!'"

"But s-sir. You d-didn't 'ave to."

"I suppose not, Miss Lumley. Actually, I bought it that very weekend after your detention but could never quite muster up the pluck to give it to you. It just sat in this drawer the whole

time. Maybe I was tempting circumstance, but I resolved to give it to you today on the one condition that by your own volition you came to wish me farewell. Failing that, I most likely would have posted it to you eventually.”

Pamela’s pale, pinched countenance wrinkled and she burst into tears. It was a while before she was able to speak.

“T-ta ever so, sir. I shall t-treasure it for life.”



The following year, due to a condition regarding the build up of water around my heart, my doctor advised me to move out of London. Consequently, I took a post as assistant headmaster in a comprehensive school up near Aberdeen, Scotland, where I continued for twenty years until my retirement at age sixty-two. A pretty good life stretch, I thought, considering the dire predictions of medical advisors.

Anyway, an odd “coincidence” happened on the very day of the end of my term of office in the education administration. I had attended a small gathering to celebrate and toast my “departure” at a nearby pub, where I benefited from, I am happy to say, the sincere appreciation of my teacher colleagues and a number of departed students who had attended my classes from within the past decade or more. I was touched to the point that my heart began to hurt much like that day in that East London Secondary Modern School and I had to excuse myself. Edith Standwell, a younger female colleague graciously drove me home to my one-bedroom flat overlooking the town square. She asked if I needed help, and I hesitated at first—being a confirmed bachelor all my life. Nevertheless, I changed my mind, as I felt compelled to accept her offer and allow her to aid me up the stairs.

To my surprise, stuffed in the letterbox was a parcel and I waited until we were inside my flat before opening it. The parcel contained a small hardcover book and a letter. Concerned for me, Edith Standwell made sure I was comfortably seated in the armchair and, waiting warily by, offered to make some hot cocoa. I accepted her offer, indicated where the ingredients were and began reading the letter.

Dear Sir,

This might come as a surprise—it's been about twenty years I would say since you left our way, and I was thinking that you was probably retiring soon. Well, to be honest, I didn't even know if you was still alive, pardon me bluntness. Anyways, I went by the old school the other day and I got your address from Mr. Wills, the old geography teacher who's the headmaster now.

I have often thought of you over the years, and when I did so, I would pray to the Good Lord to keep you safe and healthy. Did you ever marry? Maybe not, you never struck me as the marrying kind. Anyways, I wanted to send you a book that just got published about embroidery and flower design, written by yours truly (with lots of help from an editor, of course. Me spelling and grammar still leaves a lot to be desired). Now ain't that a turn up for the book world? Pamela Lumley has a best seller in W. H. Smiths! Well I do, sir. They even wants another one, but I think I've said me piece. Anyways, I put a dedication to you after the title page 'cos after all, this book wouldn't have been possible without you.

And what else is happening in the world of Pamela Lumley? Still Lumley, by the way. Never got married, but I do have a couple of lovely teen daughters. Mum passed on last year. Just got a little poorly and went in her sleep. No pain, thank the Good Lord...

Curious, I took my first look at the book and its title—The Floral World of Pamela Lumley, and I opened to the dedicatory page. As I read, my heart surged again with that wonderful throb and I smiled.

... and so it is to him, a mathematics teacher who saw this floral world beyond my clumsy scrawl, I dedicate this little book. Without his encouragement, it would not have been a reality, and to him I am ever grateful.

- Pamela Lumley -

I was staring at the page when Edith Standwell approached me clutching a couple of mugs of hot cocoa. I looked up at her, she returned my smile and I closed my eyes. That was the last I remember of my last day on Earth.