Corduroy Mansions

Alexander McCall Smith

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Extract

1. In the Bathroom

Passing off, thought William. Spanish sparkling wine – filthy stuff, he thought, filthy – passed itself off as champagne. Japanese whisky – Glen Yakomoto! – was served as Scotch. Inferior hard cheese – from Mafia-run factories in Catania – was sold to the unsuspecting as Parmesan.

Lots of things were passed off in one way or another, and now, as he stood before the bathroom mirror, he wondered if he could be passed off too. He looked at himself, or such part of himself as the small mirror encompassed – just his face, really, and a bit of neck. It was a fifty-one-year-old face chronologically, but would it pass, he wondered, for a forty-something-year-old face?

He looked more closely: there were lines around the eyes and at the edge of the mouth but the cheeks were smooth enough. He pulled at the skin around the eyes and the lines disappeared. There were doctors who could do that for you, of course: tighten things up; nip and tuck. But the results, he thought, were usually risible. He had a customer who had gone off to some clinic and come back with a face like a Noh-play mask – all smoothed out and flat. It was sad, really. And as

for male wigs, with their stark, obvious hairlines, all one wanted to do was to reach forward and give them a tug. It was quite hard to resist, actually, and once, as a student – and when drunk – he had done just that. He had tugged at the wig of a man in a bar and . . . the man had cried. He still felt ashamed of himself for that. Best not to think about it.

No, he was weathering well enough and it was far more dignified to let nature take its course, to weather in a National Trust sort of way. He looked again at his face. Not bad. The sort of face, he thought, that would be hard to describe on the Wanted poster, if he were ever to do anything to merit the attention of the police – which he had not, of course. Apart from the usual sort of thing that made a criminal of everybody: "Wanted for illegal parking," he muttered. "William Edward French (51). Average height, very slightly overweight (if you don't mind our saying so), no distinguishing features. Not dangerous, but approach with caution."

He smiled. And if I were to describe myself in one of those lonely hearts ads? *Wine dealer, widower, solvent late forties-ish, GSOH, reasonable shape, interested in music, dining out etc., etc., WLTM presentable, lively woman with view to LTR.*

That would be about it. Of course one had to be careful about the choice of words in these things; there were codes, and one might not be aware of them. Solvent was clear enough: it meant that one had sufficient money to be comfortable, and that was true enough. He would not describe himself as well off, but he was certainly solvent. Well off, he had read somewhere, now meant disposable assets of over . . . how much? More than he had, he suspected.

And reasonable shape? Well, if that was not strictly speaking true at present, it would be shortly. William had joined a gym and been allocated a personal trainer. If his shape at present was not ideal, it soon would be, once the personal trainer had worked on him. It would take a month or two, he thought, not much more than that. So perhaps one might say, *shortly to be in reasonable shape.*

Now, what about: *would like to meet presentable, lively woman*. Well, presentable was a pretty low requirement. Virtually anybody could be presentable if they made at least some effort. Lively was another matter. One would have to be careful about lively because it could possibly be code for insatiable, and that would not do. Who would want to meet an insatiable woman? My son, thought William suddenly. That's exactly the sort of woman Eddie would want to meet. The thought depressed him.

William lived with his son. There had been several broad hints dropped that Eddie might care to move out and share with other twenty-somethings, and recently a friend of Eddie's had even asked him if he wanted to move into a shared flat, but these hints had apparently fallen on unreceptive ground. "It's quite an adventure, Eddie," William said. "Everybody at your stage of life shares a flat. Like those girls downstairs. Look at the fun they have. Most people do it."

"You didn't."

William sighed. "My circumstances, Eddie, were a bit different."

"You lived with Grandpa until he snuffed it."

"Precisely. But I had to, don't you see? I couldn't leave him to look after himself."

"But I could live with you until you snuff it."

"That's very kind of you. But I'm not planning to snuff it just yet."

Then there had been an offer to help with a mortgage – to pay the deposit on a flat in Kentish Town. William had even gone so far as to contact an agent and find a place that sounded suitable. He had looked at it without telling Eddie, meeting the agent one afternoon and being shown round while a litany of the flat's – and the area's – advantages was recited.

William had been puzzled. "But it doesn't appear to have a kitchen," he pointed out.

The agent was silent for a moment. "Not as such," he

conceded. "No. That's correct. But there's a place for a sink and you can see where the cooker used to be. So that's the kitchen space. Nowadays people think in terms of a *kitchen space*. The old concept of a separate kitchen is not so important. People see past a kitchen."

In spite of the drawbacks, William had suggested that Eddie should look at the place and had then made his proposition. He would give him the deposit and guarantee the mortgage.

"Your own place," he said. "It's ideal."

Eddie looked doubtful. "But it hasn't got a kitchen, Dad. You said so. No kitchen."

William took this in his stride. "It has a *kitchen space*, Eddie. People see past an actual kitchen these days. Didn't you know that?"

But Eddie was not to be moved. "It's kind of you, Dad. I appreciate the offer, but I think it's premature. I'm actually quite comfortable living at home. And it's greener, isn't it? Sharing. It makes our carbon footprint much smaller."

And so William found himself living with his twenty-four-year-old son. *Wine dealer*, he thought, *would like his son to meet a lively woman with view to his moving in with her. Permanently. Any area.*

He turned away from the bathroom mirror and stooped down to run his morning bath. It was a Friday, which meant that he would open the business half an hour late, at ten-thirty rather than ten. This meant that he could have his bath and then his breakfast in a more leisurely way, lingering over his boiled egg and newspaper before setting off; a small treat, but a valued one.

There was a knocking on the door, soft at first and then more insistent.

"You're taking ages, Dad. What are you doing in there?"

He did not reply.

"Dad? Would you mind hurrying up? Or do you want me to be late?"

William turned and faced the door. He stuck out his tongue.

"Don't be so childish," came the voice from the other side of the door.

Childish? thought William. Well, you've got a little surprise coming your way, Eddie, my boy.

2. *Corduroy Matters*

The flat occupied by William and Eddie was on the top floor of the four-storey building in Pimlico known as Corduroy Mansions. It was not a typical London mansion block. The name had been coined – in jest, yet with a considerable measure of condescension – by a previous tenant, but Corduroy Mansions had stuck, and a disparaging nickname had become a fond one. There was something *safe* about corduroy, something reassuring, and while corduroy might be an ideological near neighbour of tweed, it was not quite as . . . well, tweedy. So while William would have been appalled to hear himself described as tweedy, he would not have resented being called corduroy. There was something slightly bohemian about corduroy; it was a sign, perhaps, of liberality of outlook, of openness to alternatives – of a slightly artistic temperament.

Corduroy Mansions had been built in the early twentieth century, in a fit of Arts and Crafts enthusiasm. It was an era when people still talked to one another, in sentences; that had since become unusual, but at least the occupants of all the Corduroy flats still conversed – at least sometimes – with their neighbours, and even appeared to enjoy doing so. "It's got a lived-in feel," one of the residents remarked, and that was certainly true. Whereas in more fashionable blocks down the road in Eaton Square, or the like, there would be flats that lay unoccupied for most of the year, or flats occupied by exotic, virtually invisible people, wealthy wraiths who slipped in and out of their front doors without a word to neighbours, everyone

with a flat in Corduroy Mansions actually lived there. They had no other place. Corduroy Mansions was home.

The staircase was the setting for most of these personal encounters, although every so often there would be a meeting at which all the tenants got together to discuss matters of mutual interest. There were the meetings that took place in William's flat over the new carpet for the stairs – an issue that took six months of delicate negotiation to resolve – and there was also a meeting over what colour to paint the front door. On these occasions it was inevitably William who took the chair, being not only the oldest resident, but also the one most endowed with the *gravitas* necessary to deal with the landlord, a faceless company in Victoria that appeared to ignore any letters it received.

"They're in denial," said William. "We've got them for the next one hundred and twenty years and they're in denial."

But the landlord eventually did what was required, and although Corduroy Mansions could not be described as being in good order, at least it did not appear to be falling down.

"This old place suits me," remarked William to his friend Marcia. "It's like an old glove, familiar and comfortable."

"Or old sock, even," said Marcia, sniffing the air. Marcia was always ready to detect a smell, and she had often remarked on a slight odour on the staircase.

Marcia was a caterer. Ten years previously she had set up Marcia's Table, a firm that specialised in catering for small weddings, board lunches and the like. Actually, to call Marcia's Table a firm was to dignify it beyond what it deserved. Marcia's Table consisted of Marcia and nobody else, other than the helpers she engaged to serve and clear up: young Australians, Poles, Romanians, eager all of them – to a fault – and totally free of the casual surliness that plagued their British contemporaries. It was Marcia who planned the menus, bought the supplies and cooked. And it was Marcia who frequently brought leftovers to Corduroy Mansions and left them in William's flat. He had provided her with a key – in an impulsive gesture of

friendship – and would sometimes come home to discover a pot of goulash sitting on the cooker, or half a plate of only-the-tiniest-bit-soggy chicken vol-au-vents, or cocktail sausages impaled on little sticks, like pupae in a butterfly collection.

It was thoughtfulness on her part, touched, perhaps, by the slightest hint of ambitious self-interest. Marcia *liked* William; she liked him a great deal. It was a tragedy, she thought, that he was on his own; what a waste of a perfectly good man! For his part, he had never shown any interest in her beyond that which one has in a comfortable friend – the sort of interest that stops well short of any gestures of physical affection. She understood: a woman can tell these things, especially one as sympathetic and emotionally sensitive as Marcia believed herself to be. No, William had shown no signs of wanting *closeness*, but that did not mean that he might not do so in the future. So she continued with her culinary overtures and he, replete on vol-au-vents, reflected on his good fortune to have such a friend as Marcia. But in his mind she was just a friend, firmly on that side of the line.

The stumbling block, Marcia thought, was Eddie. If William were truly on his own, and not sharing with his son, then she felt it likely that he would be more receptive to the idea of a relationship with a woman. Having his son there distracted him and took the edge off his loneliness. If only Eddie were to go – and it was surely time for him to fly the nest – then her own prospects would be better.

Unfortunately, Marcia had once let slip her low opinion of Eddie, incautiously describing him as a "waste of space". It had been unwise – she knew that – but it had been said, and it had been said when Marcia, who had been visiting William after catering for a rather trying reception, had had perhaps two glasses of wine too many. Eddie had been in the flat, listening to the conversation from the corridor. Nobody likes to be described in such terms, and he had pursed his lips in anger. He waited for his father to defend him, as any father

must do when his own flesh and blood, his own DNA, is described as a waste of space. He waited.

"That's a bit hard on the boy," his father said at last. "Give him time. He's only twenty-four."

Perhaps Marcia regretted her slip, since she said nothing more. But then Eddie heard William say: "Of course, there's a theory in psychology that many men only mature at the age of twenty-eight. You've heard of that? Seems a bit late to me, but that's what they say."

Eddie had turned round and slunk back into his room, a Polonius in retreat from behind the arras. That woman, he thought, that *blowsy* woman is after my dad. And if she gets him, then she gets the lot when he snuffs it – the flat, the wine business, the old Jaguar. The lot. She has to be stopped.

Then he thought: twenty-eight? *Twenty*-eight?

3. Dee is Rude about Others

As William locked his front door behind him that morning, he heard the sound of somebody fiddling with keys on the landing downstairs. This was nothing unusual: the girls, as he called them, had a difficult lock, and unless one inserted the key at precisely the right angle and then exerted a gentle upward pressure, it would not work. It was not unusual, he had noted, for the locking-up process to take five or ten minutes; on one occasion he had gone out to buy a newspaper and returned to discover one of the young women still struggling with the recalcitrant lock.

As he made his way downstairs, he saw that it was Dee on the landing below.

"Having trouble with the key?" he asked jauntily.

She looked up. "No more than usual. I thought I'd got the hang of it and then . . ."

"Keys are like that," said William. "They never fit exactly.

I remember an aunt of mine who used the wrong key for years. She was determined that it would work and she managed to force the lock of her front door every time. But it took a lot of force. She had lost the right key and was in fact using the back door key. The triumph of determination over . . . well, locks, I suppose."

Dee stood back and allowed William to fiddle with the key. After a few twists the lock moved and he was able to withdraw the key. "There we are. Locked."

They started downstairs together. There were four floors in Corduroy Mansions, if one included the basement. William owned the top flat, the girls were on the first floor, and in the ground-floor flat lived Mr Wickramsinghe, a mild, rather preoccupied accountant whom nobody saw very much, but who kept fresh flowers in a vase in the common entrance hall.

"The others have all left for work?" asked William.

"Some of them. Jo's away for a couple of days. I've actually got the morning off, so I'm doing a bit of shopping before I go in at lunchtime. Caroline and Jenny are at work, if you can call it that."

William raised an eyebrow. "From that, I take it that you don't."

Dee sniffed. "Well, look at Caroline. She's doing that Master's course at Sotheby's. Fine Art. She goes to lectures and drifts around the salerooms. Very taxing."

"Very pleasant," said William. "But she'll have essays to write, won't she? 'The Early Giotto' and that sort of thing. And articles to read? The *Burlington Magazine*, I suppose."

Dee was not convinced. She worked in a health-food shop, the Pimlico Vitamin and Supplement Agency; she knew what hard work was.

"And Jenny?" William asked.

"Her job consists of going to lunch, as far as I can tell," said Dee.

"There must be more to it than that," said William. "Being a PA to an MP must involve something. All those letters from constituents. All those complaints about drains and hospital wards. Surely those must take up a lot of time?"

"Oh yes, I suppose they do. But still she seems to have a lot of time for lunches."

William smiled. "Have you met her boss? The MP."

"Oedipus Snark? Yes, I met him once. He came round to the flat to deliver some papers to Jenny." She shuddered involuntarily.

"He didn't make a good impression?"

"Certainly not. A horrible man. Creepy."

They had now come out of the front door and continued to walk together along the street. William walked to work; Dee was heading for the tube.

"His name hardly helps," said William. "Oedipus Snark. It's very unfortunate. Somewhat redolent of Trollope, I would have thought. What was the name of Trollope's villain? Slope, wasn't it? Snark and Slope are obviously birds of a feather."

"Creep."

"Yes," said William. "That would be another good name for a villain. Creep. Of course that's a name with political associations already. You won't remember CREEP, but I do. Just. Watergate. Remember Watergate?" He realised that of

course she would not. Just as she would know nothing about Winston Churchill or Mussolini; or Kenneth Williams or Liberace, for that matter. "CREEP was the name of the committee that President Nixon – he was a president of the United States, you know – had working for his re-election. The Committee to Re-elect the President. CREEP was the acronym." Dee seemed to be paying very little attention to him, but William was used to that. He was terribly old by her standards. She was twenty-eight and he was in his late forties (well, early fifties if one was going to be pedantic). He was old enough to be her father, a thought which depressed him. He did not want to be a father-figure to the young women who lived in the flat below. He wanted them to look upon him as a . . . friend. But it was too late for that. Being realistic, there were just not enough shared references in their respective worlds to allow for much of a friendship. The most he could hope for was a reasonably neighbourly relationship in which they did not condescend to him too much.

"How does Jenny get on with Snark?" asked William. "Does she share your low opinion of him?"

Dee became animated. "Yes. She really does. She hates him. She thinks he's gross."

"I see."

"But then everybody hates him," Dee continued. "Even his mother."

William laughed. "Surely not. Mothers rarely hate their sons. It's a very non-maternal thing to do. Particularly if one's son is called Oedipus."

He waited for her to react. But nothing came.

"Oedipus—" he began.

"But this one does," interrupted Dee. "Jenny told me all about it. She can't conceal it. She hates him intensely."

"How does Jenny know all this?"

"His mother has spoken to her about it. She said, 'I wish I didn't dislike my son so much, but I do. I can't help it.'" She paused. "And she's plotting against him."

William was silent. Mothers should not plot against their sons . . . and nor should fathers. And yet was that not exactly what he was doing? He was plotting against Eddie in that he was making plans for Eddie's exclusion from the flat. But that was different: he was not working for Eddie's downfall, merely for his moving out. It was a different sort of plot, but nevertheless he felt a degree of shame about it. And yet at the same time, he felt a certain satisfaction at the sheer cunning of his idea. Eddie could not abide dogs and was petrified of even the smallest and most unthreatening breeds. It would not be necessary, then, for William to buy himself an Alsatian or a Rottweiler; a mere terrier would do the trick. If a dog moved into the house, then Eddie would have to move out. It was a very simple and really rather clever plan.

William smiled.

"What's so funny?" asked Dee.

"Nothing much," said William. "Just an idea I've had."

4. A Generous Offer

"Half the time," said Dee, "I can't follow what he's going on about. It was Watergate this morning. Watergate and some guy called Nixon."

"Old people wander a bit," said Martin, her colleague at the Pimlico Vitamin and Supplement Agency. "I had an uncle – or something – who lost all his nouns. He had a stroke and all the nouns went. So he used the word 'concept' for any noun. He'd say things like 'Pass the concept' when he wanted you to pass the salt."

Dee frowned. William was not *all* that old. But there was no need to correct Martin on that; the interesting thing was the salt issue. "He ate a lot of salt?"

"I think so."

"Well, there you are," said Dee. "Sodium blockages. You