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The Dog Who Came in from the Cold

Alexander McCall Smith

1. What Our Furniture Says About Us

William French, wine merchant, Master of Wine (failed), somewhere in his early fifties (hardly noticeably, particularly in the right light), loyal subscriber to Rural Living (although he lived quite happily in central London), longtime supporter of several good causes (he was a kind man at heart, with a strong sense of fairness), widower, dog-owner, and much else besides; the same William French looked about his flat in Corduroy Mansions, as anybody might survey his or her flat in a moment of self-assessment, of stocktaking.

There was a lot wrong with it, he decided, just as he felt there was a lot that was not quite right with his life in general. Sorting out one's flat, though, is often easier than sorting out oneself, and there is a great deal to be said for first getting one's flat in order before attempting the same thing with one's life. Perhaps there was an adage for this – a pithy Latin expression akin to mens sana in corpore sano. Which made him think . . . Everybody knew that particular expression, of course; everybody, that is, except William's twenty-eight-year-old son, Eddie, who had once rendered it within his father's hearing as "men's saunas lead to a healthy body". William had been about to laugh at this ingenious translation, redolent, as it was, of the cod Latin he had found so achingly funny as a twelve-year-old boy: Caesar adsum iam forte, Pompey ad erat. Pompey sic in omnibus, Caesar sic in at. Caesar had some jam for tea, Pompey had a rat . . . and so on. But then he realised that Eddie was serious.

The discovery that Eddie had no knowledge of Latin had depressed him. He knew that the overwhelming majority of people had no Latin and did not feel the lack of it. The problem with Eddie, though, was that not only did he not have Latin, he had

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virtually nothing else either: no mathematics worthy of the name, no geography beyond a knowledge of the location of various London pubs, no knowledge of biology or any of the other natural sciences, no grasp of history. When it came to making an inventory of what Eddie knew, there was really very little to list.

He put his son out of his mind and returned to thinking about the proposition mens sana in corpore sano. Was there an equivalent, he wondered, to express the connection between an ordered flat and an ordered life? Vita ordinata in domo ordinata? It sounded all right, he felt – indeed, it sounded rather impressive – but he found himself feeling a little bit unsure about the Latin. Domus was feminine, was it not? But was it not one of those fourth declension nouns where there was an alternative ablative form – domu rather than domo? William was not certain, and so he put that out of his mind too.

He walked slowly about his flat, moving from room to room, thinking of what would be necessary to reform it completely. Starting in the drawing room, he looked at the large oriental carpet that dominated the centre of the room. It was said that some such carpets gained in value as the years went past, but he could not see this happening to his red Baluch carpet, which was beginning to look distinctly tattered at the edges. Then there was the furniture, and here there was no doubt that the chairs, if once they had been

fashionable, no longer were. If there was furniture that spoke of its decade, then these chairs positively shouted the seventies, a period in which it was generally agreed design lost its way. It would all, he thought, have to be got rid of and replaced with the sort of furniture that he saw advertised in the weekend magazines of the newspapers. Timeless elegance was the claim made on behalf of such furniture, and timeless elegance, William considered, was exactly what he needed.

He would give his own furniture to one of those organisations that collect it and pass it on to people who have no furniture of their own and no money to buy any. The thought of this process gave him a feeling of warmth. He could just imagine somebody in a less favoured part of London waiting with anticipation as a completely free consignment of surplus furniture – in this case William's – was unloaded. He pictured a person who had previously sat on the floor now sitting comfortably on this Corduroy Mansions armchair, not noticing the large stain on the cushion of which Eddie had denied all knowledge, though it was definitely his responsibility. It was a most unpleasant stain, that one, and William had never enquired as to exactly what it was. Yet he had noticed that Marcia, when she had lived with him, had studiously avoided ever sitting on that chair. And who could blame her?

Our furniture, he reflected, says so much about us, and our tastes – perhaps more than we like to acknowledge. We may not like a piece of furniture now, but the awkward fact remains that we once were a person who liked it. And unlike clothes, which are jettisoned with passing fashion, furniture has a habit of staying with us, reminding us of tasteless stages of our lives. William looked at his settee; he had bought it at a furniture shop off the Tottenham Court Road – he remembered that much – but he would never

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buy something like that now. And certainly not in that colour. Did they still make mauve furniture? he wondered.

He moved on to the kitchen. William liked his kitchen, and often sat there on summer evenings, looking out of the window over the roof-tops behind Corduroy Mansions, watching the sun sink over west London. Sometimes, if conditions were right, the dying sun would touch the edge of the clouds with gold, making for a striking contrast with the sky beyond, as sharply delineated as in a Maxfield Parrish painting. He would sit there and think about nothing in particular, vaguely grateful for the display that nature was providing but also conscious of the fact that there was not enough beauty in his life and that it would be nice to have more.

Now, surveying his kitchen from the doorway, he saw not the outside vista but the inside – the cork floor that needed replacing, the scratched surfaces that surely fostered an ecosystem in which whole legions, entire divisions of Pseudomonas were encamped. Best not to think about that, nor about the bacteria which undoubtedly romped around the faithful body of his dog, Freddie de la Hay, who was sitting on the kitchen floor, looking up at his master in mute adoration, and wondering, perhaps, what the problem was.

2. Chinese Submarines

Freddie de la Hay was a Pimlico Terrier, an unusual breed obtained through the judicious crossing of an Airedale with a Border Collie, and perhaps just a touch of something else about which the breeders themselves were now hazy. There

were very few Pimlico Terriers in Pimlico itself, although William had once seen an advertisement in a local shop window for a meeting of the Pimlico Terrier Owners' Club. He had thought for a moment that this was a meeting he should attend, but then stopped and asked himself why. What was the point of a group of dog-owners getting together? What made them think that they would have anything in common, or indeed anything to talk about, apart from Pimlico Terriers of course, a topic of conversation that surely would be rapidly exhausted. It was the same with motorcyclists – why did motorcyclists insist on congregating and travelling in large, leather-clad packs? Did it actually have anything to do with being a motorcyclist, or was it just because they were all a particular type of person who could then talk about the things they felt they had in common? Identity, of course, was a complex matter – he knew as much, and so did Freddie de la Hay, who always liked to encounter other dogs and explore their identities when William took him for walks.

"He likes to see his friends," Marcia had once remarked when accompanying William and Freddie on an evening walk through the immediate neighbourhood of Corduroy Mansions. "He likes to be reminded that other dogs exist. Makes him feel less lonely."

"Possibly," said William. "I suppose he does identify."

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"Of course he does," said Marcia. "He knows which side he's on."

William thought that this was doubtful, if not plainly wrong; dogs were not on the side of other dogs, at least not when it came to a choice between another dog and their owner. In such circumstances they always chose their owner, because he or she led the pack to which they belonged. That was just how dogs saw it. Very few dogs would ever join a strange dog in an attack on his owner, other than in the

fog of battle, the special circumstances of a dog fight; they just would not. It might be different if the dogs were members of the same pack; that might involve confusion which could lead to a dog turning on his owner, but otherwise it would never occur.

Marcia said things that were, quite simply, wrong, even though she said them, as then, with an air of calm authority. It was a difficult issue between the two friends, and William found himself torn between benignly ignoring her solecisms and misinterpretations, or correcting them, which could lead to an edgy debate and a slight air of offence on Marcia's part.

It happened quite often, particularly in those months when Marcia had stayed with William at Corduroy Mansions, following her successful campaign to encourage Eddie to move out. Usually it began with a general observation from Marcia about something she had read in the papers or heard from one of her clients. This observation would be made in such a way as to invite approving comment from William, often with the phrase 'I'm sure you will agree' added at the end.

There had been an egregious example only a few weeks earlier, when Marcia had called in on her way back from a catering engagement. She had been sitting in the kitchen drinking a small glass of Amontillado that William had poured for her, when she had suddenly said: "You know the Chinese kidnapped an Australian Prime Minister once. You know that, don't you?"

William looked at her over the rim of his glass. "That chap? The one who drowned?" He had heard this nonsense before, not from Marcia, but from a book he had picked up and read while waiting his turn at the hairdressers. It was a well-thumbed paperback called Things They Don't Want You to Know, and it had included this story.

"He didn't drown," snapped Marcia. "He was called Harold Holt, and he didn't drown."

William pursed his lips. "Oh. Well . . ."

"He was picked up by a Chinese submarine," continued Marcia. "It was waiting offshore because they knew he was going swimming. They got him."

William shook his head. "I doubt it," he said. "Why would they do a thing like that?"

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Marcia looked mysterious. “They think in centuries,” she said. “As you know.”

William stared at her. This was one of the reasons why it would be impossible to have Marcia as anything more than a friend. It was not that she was always irrational – she was not – but there were times when he found it difficult to fathom how she thought. For his part, he was used to reaching a conclusion on the basis of what he knew to be true from the evidence of his senses. Marcia seemed to go about it in a very different way. She leaped to conclusions, and then tried to construct a basis for her position after the fact. And she would often also resort to the most extraordinary non sequiturs, as she did with this reference to the Chinese thinking in centuries. That was their diplomacy, was it not – they took the long view – but he did not see the relevance of this to the alleged kidnapping of an Australian Prime Minister.

No, he could not become romantically involved with Marcia because he could not bring himself to admire her mind – and that, for William, was a very important part of romance. For some men, the old saw that they never made passes at women in glasses might be true, but it was not true for William. He liked women in glasses because it was suggestive of intelligence, which he found a very attractive quality. Of course glasses were really nothing to do with intellect – he knew that – but relations between people were often affected by vague, subliminal associations, and somewhere in William’s mind there was an equiparation of eyewear and sexual attraction.

And why not? A dimple was only an indentation in the flesh, but how powerful could that minor imperfection be. A well-placed gluteal mass could tip the balance from indifference to ardent, urgent attraction. What indiscretions, what acts of human folly, have been triggered by such little things; how weak men were, and women too perhaps – but not quite as much.

William looked at Freddie. “Freddie, old chap,” he said. “I really must do something about getting myself a lady friend. You know how it is, don’t you?”

Freddie looked up at William, listening attentively. He had a very limited vocabulary, a small number of words that he recognised, and he was straining to pick up one of these. Just one. Walk or biscuit would do very well; but now he could make out no such profoundly welcome sounds, and he resigned himself to staring at his master, ready for what was coming next, whatever it was.

It was the doorbell.

3. A Middle-class Woman Comes to the Door

When William opened the door, it was to find a woman standing before him – an attractive woman in her forties, wearing a navy-blue trouser suit and, most significantly, a pair of elegant gold-rimmed glasses. He had seen her before somewhere – he was sure of it – but he could not place her

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now. Was she collecting for the lifeboats perhaps? Or for the Heart Foundation? Was she something to do with the Neighbourhood Watch? He tried hard to remember, but could not.

The woman smiled. “I’m sorry to disturb you,” she said. “I meant to phone you first, but I lost your number.”

So she knew him. “Not at all,” he reassured her, gesturing for her to enter. “This is quite convenient. I was doing nothing.” Actually, he thought, I was doing something. I was thinking about my life and how I need to meet a woman, and lo and behold . . . But that could not be said, of course; like most of our thoughts, William reflected, which can be thought but not said.

The visitor stretched out a hand. “Angelica Brockelbank.”

William shook her hand. It was soft to the touch. “Of course.” Angelica Brockelbank?

“Would you like tea?” he blurted out. Tea was so convenient. Not only was it an appropriate and immediate response to any crisis – ‘Sit down and I’ll put the kettle on’

– but it was also a tool for social stalling. Tea would allow this encounter to proceed to the next stage, which William hoped would be the stage of discovering who Angelica Brockelbank was.

But then it came back. Angelica Brockelbank – of course! She had run the bookshop next to William’s first wine shop in Notting Hill, a good fifteen years ago. They had seen a certain amount of one another and then, when William had moved to larger premises they had lost touch. She had been beautiful then, but William had been married at the time – as had she – and had admired her from a respectable distance. He wondered now whether she was still married, and whether there might just be a chance . . . He hardly dared think about it.

“It’s wonderful to see you again, Angelica,” he said with renewed confidence. “After all those years. How’s the bookshop doing?”

Angelica, who had sensed that William was having trouble placing her, looked relieved. “That’s very much in the past, I’m afraid. Actually, I closed it fairly soon after you moved. It didn’t make much, you know, and I decided to get a job. Something with a salary.”

“Understandable,” said William. “Business is all very well,

but . . .” “Yes. A salary is a salary.” He led her into the kitchen and filled the kettle with

water. “And your husband?” He had only met her husband a few times and could not remember his name. Rick? “Dick and I are divorced,” said Angelica. “Utterly

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amicably. And we're still very good friends." "It's so much better that way," said William. "It's ghastly when people fight. And they so often do, don't they?"

Angelica nodded. "We just decided that we were friends but not lovers. It was as simple as that. He remarried – a German doctor, a radiologist, who's charming – and it's worked out very well for everybody." She paused. "You would have thought that a radiologist would see through him, but there we are. And you? I was sorry to hear . . ."

"Yes," said William. "It was very sudden. Poor Maggie."

He wondered how she had heard about it. He was not aware of their having any mutual friends, but London was a village in spite of its size – people could humanise even the largest of cities.

"And your son?" Angelica asked. "Eddie." "Yes, of course." She waited for him to answer. "Eddie's fine," he said.

"He stayed here until about six months ago. He was one

of those offspring who find the parental home so comfortable that they're disinclined to leave."

Angelica nodded sympathetically. "I gather that it happens."

"Eddie found somebody," William went on. "A rather nice woman, in fact. They're together. She has a place in the Windward Islands and they spend half the year there."

"What a dream," said Angelica. "Six months in the Windward Islands. How very fortunate."

William nodded. Eddie did not deserve his good fortune, he felt; if Fate was going to allocate either of them a place in the Windward Islands, surely it should be to him, rather than to Eddie? But he knew that this was not the way Fate operated; she handed out her benefits according to a scheme that was beyond the comprehension of mere mortals. Perhaps the Greeks, he decided, had had a better understanding of the world in predicating the existence of entirely arbitrary, capricious gods; such gods would take no account of hard work or public service when allocating places in the Windward Islands.

William switched on the kettle and took two cups out of the cupboard above the sink. "And you?" he asked. "What are you up to these days?"

He hoped that the answer to the question might reveal the reason for this unexpected – though welcome – call. She could hardly just have dropped in, particularly after fifteen years; people rarely did that in London – not any more.

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"I'm working for the government," said Angelica. "After I closed the bookshop, I answered an advertisement in the papers. A job in information processing."

William wondered what information processing was. The trouble with job descriptions like that was that they frequently disguised something much more mundane. There used to be clerks, until they were abolished and became . . . what had clerks become? Perhaps they had disappeared altogether.

"It was at GCHQ," Angelica continued. "You must know the place."

William did. Government Communications Headquarters was a vast building outside Cheltenham, a place that bristled with aerials, even if mainly metaphorical ones, and hummed with electronic activity. So information processing in ordinary English was eavesdropping.

"How interesting," he said. "Monitoring radio traffic."

Angelica smiled. "Yes. Or the equivalent. I hadn't intended to get into that line of things, but it was a regular job and I wanted to get out of London for a while. And I found I really enjoyed it."

William agreed that it must be interesting. But what qualifications, he wondered, did Angelica have for the job? Or was a job at GCHQ like a place in the Windward Islands

– allocated with no regard to desert?

"They took me because of my degree in Russian," Angelica said. "I don't know if you were aware that I studied Russian at university."

William was not.

"Well, I did," said Angelica. "I went to St Andrews. Russian was quite a popular subject in those days. I didn't use it very much, of course – not when I was running the bookshop. But then it came in very handy when I went to GCHQ."

"It would," said William, picturing Angelica at a desk, in headphones, in front of a crystal radio, a frown of concentration on her brow.

"And then I was transferred," Angelica continued. "Back to London. To MI6." William thought that he had misheard her. "MI6?"

"Yes," said Angelica calmly. "Intelligence work. But of a different sort."

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