

All right, so I haven't done my project. But you've got to understand the strain I've been under. I got home the other day to find a strange woman standing at our sink.

'Stanley!' she said. 'Get those wellies off this minute! How many times must I tell you, I don't want them in the house!'

I rubbed my eyes and looked again. No, it definitely wasn't Mum. Mum is short and tubby and dark. This woman was tall and skinny and blonde.

'Excuse me,' I asked politely, 'but who are you?'

'Don't act the goat,' she replied.

I took off my wellies. Then I searched through the house for my real mum. She wasn't there. I asked the strange woman what she had done with my real mum. She said I should save my acting for the drama class.

Dad came home. He looked the same as normal, worse luck. I tried to tell him about the strange woman, but he had other things on his mind. By now the strange woman was in the front room doing Mum's crossword. She put it down as Dad walked in.

'Good day, love?' she asked.

Dad stopped in his tracks. His face became puzzled. He crept slowly towards the strange woman, like a cat stalking a mouse. His hand reached out towards her face.

'Oh, it's a crumb,' he said. 'For a minute I thought you had a new mole.'

Dad brushed off the crumb and gave the woman a little kiss.

The strange woman had had a bad day at work. She worked at John Lewis, just like Mum. She worked part-time, just like Mum. She worked in the linen department, just like Mum. She didn't see why she should work half the day then come home and cook the tea, just like Mum.

Dad got some fish and chips in. He sat listening to the woman's problems with his hand on her hand, saying 'there, there'. Then the two of them did the washing-up. They sang duets, one line each, and came out with all the old sayings. The woman knew exactly where all the dishes went.

'I don't know why you don't give up that job,' said Dad.

'Geoffrey,' said the woman, 'we've had this discussion a thousand times.'

After tea the woman had a bath. Then she came downstairs in Mum's dressing-gown. I knew it was Mum's dressing-gown, because there couldn't possibly be two like it.

'What are you staring at?' she asked me.

'That dressing-gown,' I mumbled.

'I don't blame you,' said the woman. 'Look at the state of it. I must have had it ten years'

'And every year you grow more beautiful,' said Dad.

'Give over with you!' said the woman, giving Dad a playful slap, then settling down on his knee with one of Mum's favourite books.

By bedtime two things were clear. The woman was not going away, and Mum was not hiding in any of the cupboards, the attic, or the outside bog. I crept off upstairs with the cocoa the woman had given me (one and a half sugars) and locked the bedroom door. About half ten, the handle rattled. Then there was a knock.

'Stan?'

It was the strange woman. She rattled and she knocked and she called again, but I got right under the duvet and didn't make a sound. It was bad enough being kissed by Mum, leave alone a woman I'd never met before.

Next morning I decided to trap Dad on his own, to find out what was going on. I tried to get him in the kitchen, but he was making the woman breakfast in bed. Then he spent half an hour chatting to her, with the bedroom door shut. I was sure I would find out the secret if I

listened at the keyhole. But there was nothing unusual about the conversation. Apart from the fact that Dad was having the conversation with the wrong person.

I finally got him as he was having a shave. I jumped into the bathroom and shut the door behind me.

'Dad,' I said, 'have you noticed anything unusual about Mum lately?'

Dad put down his razor. He turned and beckoned me closer.

'Between you and me,' he whispered, 'yes, I have.'

'You have?' I asked, suddenly brightening up.

'Between you and me,' said Dad, 'she's a different person altogether.'

'So you have noticed!' I cried.

Dad shushed me. 'It's since she started that job,' he whispered. 'She's become more moody.'

'And taller,' I added.

'I beg your pardon?' said Dad.

'Taller, and thinner, and more blonde.'

Dad picked up his razor and gave me a weary look. 'I thought we were having a serious conversation,' he said. 'Not playing one of your little games.'

My next plan was to follow the strange woman to work. I waited two minutes after she'd left the house, then strapped on my roller-skates and went after her. Unfortunately, she was riding my mum's moped, so I never found out if she went the right way. I caught up just as she was going into the staff entrance at John Lewis. I thought I heard the porter say 'Afternoon, Mrs McGann', but I couldn't be sure.

I went into the store and found a hiding-place near the linen department. After a while, the strange woman appeared at the counter and started serving customers. She knew all the prices of the tea-towels and all the colours of the tablecloths. She also knew Mr Fisher, the department manager.

'Afternoon, Mr Fisher,' she said.

'Afternoon, Jen,' said Mr Fisher. 'Is that your young son over there?'

Mr Fisher pointed straight into the bedding department, where I was hiding. The strange woman craned her neck. I ducked too late.

'So it is,' said the strange woman. 'Well, how did you know that, Mr Fisher?'

'He's the spitting image of you, Jen,' said Mr Fisher.

'Do you think so?' said the strange woman. 'Most people say he takes after his father.'

'No, no, I can see you in him, for sure,' said Mr Fisher.

By now I had crept out of my hidey-hole and was sneaking slowly towards the exit.

'Don't go away, Stanley,' called the strange woman. 'I'll get you some new shoes while you're here.'

I couldn't really run. So I sat like an idiot and waited till the woman's tea-break. She took me down to the shoe department, where several other people said how alike we were. Then she picked out the most sensible shoes and ignored everything I said, just like Mum always does.

And she made me do up the laces properly, and parade about, and not walk with my shoulders slouched. In fact, she showed me up good and proper, just like Mum always does.

'Aren't you going to thank your mum?' she said, as I stared sadly at my new shoes.

I said nothing.

'I don't know,' the woman said to the salesman 'Sometimes I think I'm just an unpaid servant. I'm sure if someone else made his sandwiches and pressed his trousers, he wouldn't even notice.'



The days passed. I gave up hope that the strange woman would ever go away. She went through her daily routines without ever putting a foot wrong, till I was so used to seeing her, I began to forget what my real mum looked like. But I never forgot to lock my bedroom door. before she came up for my goodnight kiss. Then, one night, she took me by surprise. I'd been in my bedroom reading comics, and she must have heard me go to do my teeth. When I went back to my bedroom, she was already there.

'I think it's time we had a talk, Stanley,' she said.

I jumped into bed, turned away from her, and hid my head under the pillow.

'You haven't been yourself lately,' she said.

I pulled the pillow tighter round my face.

'A mother knows these things,' she added.

I reached out and stabbed out the light. The strange woman switched it on again.

'Is it school?' she asked. 'Is it your dad? Are you under the weather? Stanley, if someone's been bullying you, I want to know.'

'Go away,' I grunted.

There was a hurt silence.

'And is that all you have to say?' asked the woman.

'Just go away,' I grumbled.

'Very well,' said the woman. 'We'll forget about the party, then.'

I opened one eye. 'Party?'

'Yes. Hasn't your dad mentioned it? We thought a party might be a good idea, to cheer you up a bit.'

I turned over. 'What, a little party, or a big one?'

'Oh, a big one, of course. You can have all your friends round.'

'Even Piddle?'

'Even Piddle.'

'You said you'd never have Piddle after the last time.'

'Well, I've changed.'

The strange woman smiled softly.

'Now, tell me, Stanley, what's the problem?' she asked.

'Oh . . . nothing,' I replied.

The strange woman's smile grew to a warm glow of satisfaction. She put her hand on my head. I removed it.

There was a sneaky smile on my face next morning, as I went down for breakfast. Dad and the strange woman didn't know what was about to hit them.

'Good morning, Stan,' said Dad brightly.

'Good morning, Dad,' I said, even more brightly.

'Good morning, Stan,' said the strange woman.

'Good morning, Mum,' I replied.

The strange woman's face lit up, as if it was Christmas, birthday and pay-day all rolled into one.

'Shall I get you some breakfast, Stan?' she asked.

'Yes, please,' I replied. 'Bacon, eggs, sausages, mushrooms and fried bread.'

The woman set eagerly to work.

'Now, about this party,' I said, pulling up a chair.

'Yes?'

'Will we be having all the usual things?' I asked.

'The usual things?' replied the strange woman doubtfully.

'Yes, you know, Mum,' I said. 'The things you always get me.'

'Such as?'

I began to count on my fingers. 'Pizza . . . chipolatas. . .lemon meringue pie . . . baked bananas and honey. . .cherryade. . .

'Are you sure I get you all those things?' asked the woman.

'Mum!' I exclaimed. 'How could you forget what your own son has at his parties!'

'Of course,' said the woman. 'It had just slipped my mind for a moment.' She exchanged nervous glances with Dad.

I carried on. 'Ice-cream . . . strawberries . . . tandoori prawns. . .'

Dad looked warily into the housekeeping kitty.

'Chocolate cake . . . blackcurrant mousse . . . ten flavours of crisps . . . barbecue peanuts . . . oh, and breadsticks, of course.'

The woman handed me my breakfast with a shaky arm.

'Thank you, Mum,' I said charmingly. 'That smells delicious. I think I'll leave the list at that. I don't want to overload your shopping wheels.'

Dad and the woman exchanged glances again, deciding who was going to speak. I ate hungrily.

'Stan . . .'

'Yes?'

'You do realize this will be very expensive, don't you?'

I dropped my knife and fork. 'What's the matter?' I said. 'Aren't I worth it?'

'Yes, yes, of course you're worth it,' gabbled the woman quickly.

'Good,' I said, picking up the knife and fork again. 'Now, about the records. Obviously, we can't listen to all those old singles. Now, if I give you a list, could you go down to Spillers and order them?'

I gave the woman the list I'd written, which she stared at as if it was a sentence of death.

Then we discussed the decorations and the invites. By the time I'd finished, there were beads of sweat on the woman's brow, and Dad's napkin had been screwed into a piece of pulp.

'Bye then!' I said, jumping up for school.

The woman held me back. Her eyes became steely.

'Aren't you forgetting something?' she asked.

My eyes also became steely. We were like two gamblers across a card table.

'Goodbye, Mum,' I said, and gave the woman a lightning peck on the cheek.

The party was arranged for the next day. Dad phoned the Co-op to make sure they'd got enough stock in. The strange woman rang the agency to make sure the magician was coming. I set off with a huge stack of printed invites. I was about to become the most popular person in school.

Piddle thought my party was a practical joke. He couldn't believe there would be so much food, and he certainly couldn't believe there was an invite for him.

'There's something funny about this,' he said.

'There's nothing funny about it,' I replied. 'Oh, by the way, if you notice a strange woman at the party, and I'm calling her Mum, don't say anything.'

That three-thirty bell was a long time coming. But when it did come, I was out of those school gates before it had even finished. I ran home by the railway line and I think I overtook a high-speed train. But I can't be sure, because there was only one thing on my mind, and it wasn't trains.

I couldn't resist a peek through the front window before I went in. I wasn't disappointed.

There it was, all laid out, like a feast of the gods. Even as I watched more food arrived, till I was dribbling down my track-top. This was going to be the best night of my life.

I knocked on the door. A strange boy answered. Probably a distant cousin, I thought.

'Have you an invitation?' he asked.

'No, no,' I explained, 'I live here. It's my party.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' replied the boy. 'I live here, and it's my party.'

I looked him up and down. He was taller than me, and more muscly. But that wasn't what really upset me. What really upset me was that he was wearing my jumper.

'What's your name?' I demanded.

'Stanley,' he replied. 'Stanley John McGann.'

Now I was worried.

'You listen to me,' I said, squaring up. 'That's my name, and that's my jumper, and this is my house. Now get lost!'

The boy called into the house: 'Mum!'

The strange woman appeared, wiping her hands on a John Lewis tea-towel.

'I suppose this is your mum, is it?' said the boy.

'Um . . . yes! Of course it is!'

The strange woman viewed me a while, coldly, then turned to the boy. 'What's the problem, Stan?' she asked him.

'This boy says he's me,' said the boy.

The woman turned back to me.

'Have you got an invitation?' she asked.

As a matter of fact I hadn't got an invitation, because I'd given them all away. So I just stood there, lost for words, gaping like a goldfish.

'Just as I thought,' snapped the woman. 'A gatecrasher.'

With that, the strange woman slammed the door in my face. No matter how hard I knocked, it would not open again.

It was the best thing that ever happened to me, getting locked out of that party. I might have become a selfish, lying little toad for the rest of my life. And I'd have had to kiss that funny woman every bedtime. Instead, I was back to my normal pleasant self, except I hadn't got a home, and I hadn't got a family.

But luck was on my side. After just two nights sleeping rough, I happened to be walking past the Job Centre. Someone caught my eye. I couldn't be sure who she was, but it gave me a peculiar warm feeling when I looked at her. I thought maybe she was a distant aunt I'd met when I was four. Then I noticed she was looking back at me, just like I was looking at her. She came up to the window and we stood there, with identical puzzled faces.

'Stanley?' she murmured.

'Mum?' I murmured back.

'Stanley!'

In no time, Mum was out there on the pavement, showing me up something awful. But I was that pleased to see her, I didn't fight. I hung there like a rag doll while she squeezed the life out of me.

'But what are you doing here?' she asked, brushing bits off my shirt.

'Hard to explain, really,' I said. 'I went home, and somebody else was me.'

'Ah,' said Mum, 'so you've been fired as well.'

'Fired? What do you mean, fired?'

'Given the sack. By God.'

'What, the Lord God?'

'No, not that God. Godfrey. Godfrey Pinkerton-Poole. The director.'

'Director of what?'

'The soap opera, of course.'

'What soap opera?'

Mum laughed. She thought I was pretending not to know what she was on about. Then she realized I wasn't.

'You mean, you never realized we were in a soap opera?' she said.

'I thought we were just . . . living,' I replied.

Mum scoffed. 'Nobody just lives nowadays!' she said. 'Everybody's in a soap opera. Don't they teach you anything at school?'

I still couldn't believe it. 'But where are the cameras?' I asked.

'Oh, you never see those,' replied Mum. 'They make everything so tiny these days.'

It was quite a shock to find out that nothing had ever been what it seemed. I had to sit down for a while.

'But what are we going to do?' I asked, when I felt a bit better.

'Wait for your dad, I suppose,' said Mum.

'How do you know he'll come?' I asked.

'Oh, he'll come,' said Mum, with great certainty.

Sure enough, a couple of days later, who should turn up at the Job Centre but Dad.

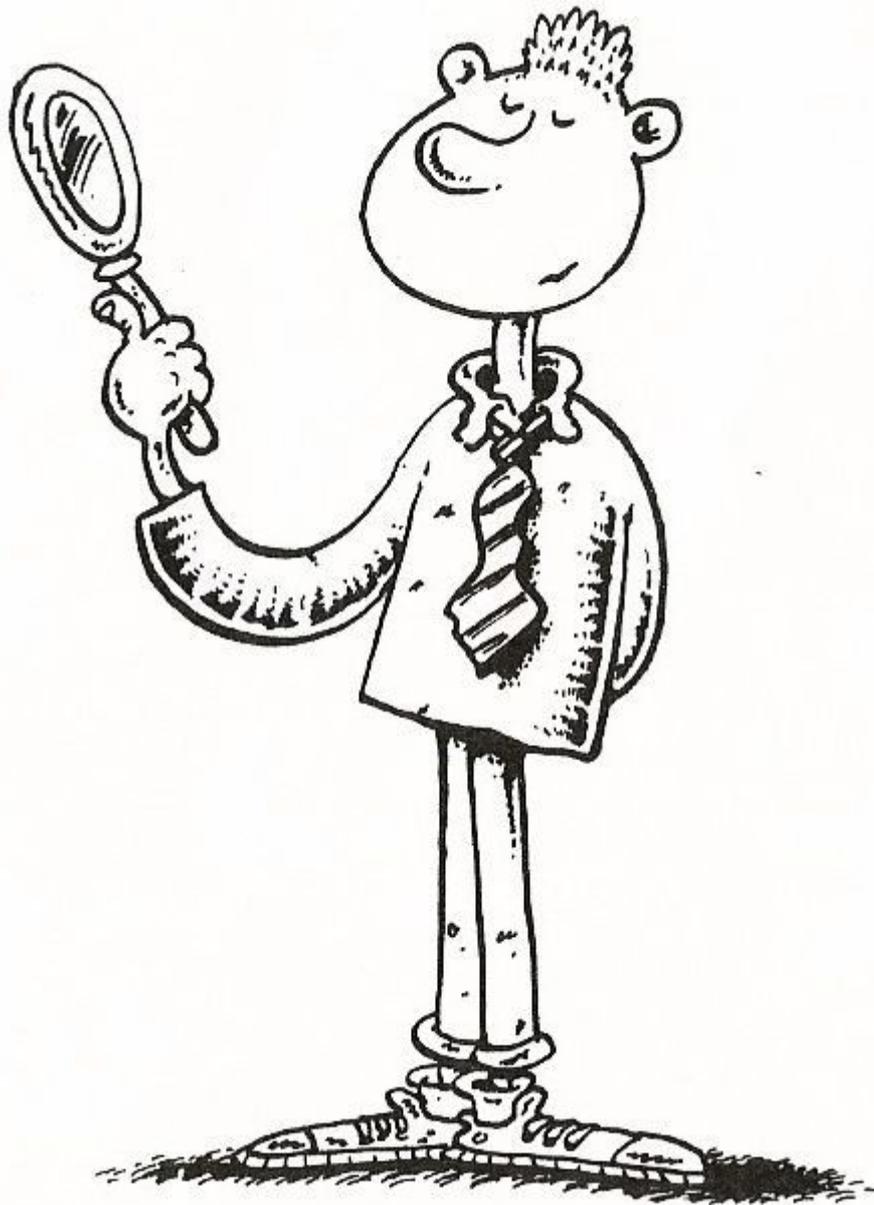
'They said I wasn't good-looking enough,' he said gloomily.

'That's what they said about me,' replied Mum.

'I think it was the bags under my eyes,' said Dad.

'You've got to be perfect, for soap operas,' replied Mum, and Dad nodded sadly and wisely. Things didn't turn out so bad. We rented another house, exactly the same as the last one, and found out that all our old neighbours had moved to the same street. Life got back to normal, except every morning I checked the mirror to make sure I was still me. Only one thing still puzzled me. All right, so Mum and Dad were sacked because they weren't good-looking

enough. But what about me?



*Illustrations by Martin Chatterton*