

The Bench in the Park

By William Matter

George Sardonia was a very lonely man. His countenance did him no good service. Swarthy, warty, and unkempt, George had a gaunt face, reminiscent of an elderly Phil Spector. That visage was awkwardly conjoined to a large, tubular body, which had not seen exercise in years. But it was not precisely his appearance that caused a visceral revulsion from others. It was something deeper. Something painfully undefinable. Women were reviled by him and even animals shied away. The Central Park pigeons, those that crowded around tourists pecking ruefully for a scrap of food, avoided him. His usual retreat was a remote bench, where he read and threw popcorn to the pigeons that kept their distance. Children recoiled in shock as he limped along the path toward his bench, his cane making a click, click, click on the rough concrete. He had no friends. So mysteriously repugnant was he that even his own shadow stayed away, refusing to be cast next to him in broad daylight.

Most of his adult life had been spent seeking out the source of the distaste he generated. He was a man composed entirely of good intentions, yet he moved through society generating an instinctual revulsion he could neither smell, see, nor comprehend. George searched *The New England Journal of Medicine* for insight into his condition. He even reviewed the *DSM III*, looking for some psychological connection. He was desperately, heartbreakingly alone, trapped by the unique torture of a man who knew he was a monster to his peers, but had never been given a mirror that could show him why.

Aside from reading medical journals in the darkened corridors of the public library, he took an outdated Ipad to his bench. In that isolated location, away from everyone who would avoid him, he searched the Internet for a solution that texts could not provide. Finally, on a Thursday evening, he found Fish Odor Syndrome. It sounded promising: “a rare metabolic disorder causing an individual to emit a strong, foul odor resembling rotting fish, sweat, or fecal matter.” He was particularly taken with the last sentence: “It can lead to severe social alienation.” George lifted his forearm to his nose and sniffed. Nothing. Maybe he was immune to the stench.

The following evening, he stopped short on his journey to the bench because he saw something in the distance that befuddled him. Sitting at the far end of his bench, where no one ever went, was a woman. At least he thought it was a woman. So disheveled was her appearance, so slovenly in deportment, so odiously appalling and frumpish was she that there weren’t enough words in the thesaurus to capture the totality of revulsion. She rivaled George in repugnance. Cautiously seating himself at the other end of the bench, George had an epiphany. For the first time he could sense what others saw in him. He was overcome with insight. There was an aura around her—a patina of social stigma that was palpable, even to him. She looked up from her own iPad briefly, like a kitten, and gently sniffed the air. “Fish Odor Syndrome?” she asked.

“Maybe so,” George said. “I’m not really sure. And you?” Recalling the vast catalogue of maladies he had reviewed in the medical texts, “Treacher Collins syndrome?”

“Never been diagnosed. I made an appointment, but the office cancelled it—twice.”

And the two of them sat at each end of a bench momentarily safe from ridicule and for the first time sharing an insight that had escaped them individually. Each could see in the other something that was tragically askew. The mirror society failed to provide was sitting at the other end of the bench. Maybe they would walk away together, clicking along the path in unison—their individual canes striking out a new tune of recognition for a world that had never accepted them.