

The Martlets' Nest

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For my wife

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Julie and Alex have been honeymooning for the past two weeks. Like two newly-weds with twenty years of experience they've been flirting and making out whenever I was out... or thought I was out. Whatever, I know the past fortnight saw Alex' disappointment fade. Julie says it's been a repetitive curve going up and down for as long as she can remember, with those missing roots always simmering in the back of her mind and the occasional minor eruption of obvious disappointment. I guess more will follow. Having witnessed how much it hurts Alex, I wonder if I really have to watch her go down and choke on it time after time. I honestly don't know how Julie can handle that, or Val for that matter. Julie loves Alex, and I know Val is Alex' best friend, so it must affect her too. I know it does. But the both of them seem to have resigned themselves to this inalienable truth that Alex will forever be haunted by her own missing identity. I'm sorry, but I can't do that. Maybe it's a matter of time, I don't know. All I know is that it tore me apart when I saw her crying on their anniversary. It was supposed to be a happy occasion, but the shadow loomed large. All were there to celebrate the happy couple, but half of that couple didn't know who she was, the imbalance even visible on her own body with Julie's mermaid tattooed on the back of her left shoulder and the blank void on the right. Alex celebrated Julie. She annihilated her share in the occasion and focused on Julie. It's a strategy, but I'd like to see a more balanced picture. The way Julie and even Val are trying to stamp out Alex' belittling nature proves they know it's not right. But still they don't tackle the root of the problem. And come to that, I can't believe Alex' family is so blissfully unaware of the consequences of their refusal to tell Alex about her adoption. I can't believe they don't see it bloody hurts. But they didn't. Alex had been crying and her brothers kept on partying. They love her to bits, but it can't get through to them that there's something fundamentally wrong with their baby sister.

I descend the staircase and saunter through the living room. I'm going to see them in a couple of hours: the three Higgins towers, frightfully protective and terribly ignorant. They'll help me out, only because their dear baby sister asked them. Why won't they answer that other question then?

"Want to go upstairs?" I hear Alex ask.

I have to smile now. I haven't even reached the kitchen, but I needn't guess what Alex is aiming at.

"Just wait till Kenneth's left," Julie replies.

I'll leave in about half an hour, earlier than those two lovebirds expect. I think they can do with a bit of privacy, especially since I've deprived them of it ever since I moved in at the beginning of this month, when my father made life rather impossible at my own place.

"Oh, come on," Alex complains in-between kissing Julie, "The lad's grown up. He knows what we're doing, you know."

Aye, I do, and it's exactly why I'll be leaving so soon. Well, not exactly that.

"It's just another two hours, Lexie."

I grin and walk into the kitchen. Julie and Alex are leaning against the sink... and against each other, their arms around the other.

"Don't mind the puppy," I joke and sit down at the table.

Alex turns around, smiling. Julie doesn't get the joke.

"What's so funny about this?"

"When we did the dig two weeks ago, they had the dogs put in their cages. I mean, those were big dogs, Alsatians, and you know how fond of them I am. So when John found out I was afraid of dogs, he wondered why I got the puppy then."

"What puppy? Oh, that puppy. How nice, I finally have a puppy?" Julie grins.

"Aye, I'll tell John you're ecstatic," Alex smirks.

I look at Alex, John's boss.

"No," I correct her, "You'll tell Mr Hendry."

She nods. I still don't understand. I know why she kept me at such distance, but why John? She calls him John at home, but Mr Hendry when talking to him. Why?

"How long have the two of you been working together?" I ask.

"Ever since I've been teaching at St. Andrews: some three years now."

"And all this time you've been on surnames," I sigh.

"Aye," she confirms.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? He's never told me he wanted to be on a first-name basis with me."

"John? You're John's boss! You're the professor; he's the assistant. You're the one who has to allow him to call you by your first name, not him."

She uncomfortably shrugs.

"Who says he wants to... I don't know."

"John worships the ground you walk upon. How the hell do you think I got to see you? Because he worships you!"

I swear if she could sink beneath the surface, she would. I'm praising her and she responds with timidity.

"Well, I... I didn't know that. Moreover, that doesn't mean he would like to go on a personal level."

"Right, that's why he told you all about his fling in Ibiza," I say.

"For your information, that fling is turning into a pretty serious thing."

"There you go then. But still you call each other Mr Hendry and Professor Higgins. God!"

"Well, well... It's an ADHD thing."

"Hey, don't blame everything on your ADHD. Attention Deficit and Hyperactive, and I'll buy the addictions too."

Matt – in his infinite psychiatric wisdom – enlightened me about a thing or two about ADHD. I asked him about it. I'm determined to make things right with Alex, so I thought it rather useful to know what this ADHD condition is all about. I found out that ADHD people are prone to addictions, and I think I know what Alex is addicted to: Julie.

Matt told me nothing about not being on first names because of ADHD though.

"What do surnames have to do with it?"

"Well... I'm insecure," she replies after a while.

That's true. She bloody looks like a wee fortress, but when you scratch beneath that thin layer you realise you can take her apart with one neat kick. You just have to know where to kick.

"It's true, Kenneth. Her insecurity has a lot to do with it."

"Mm."

I'll ask Matt about this. I'm seeing him tomorrow. We decided to see each other on a weekly basis to sort out my issues. Don't ask me why he's so eager to help me, but I'm very grateful. I have a debt to pay to Alex and I'm sure Matt's the very one to tell me just exactly how I can do that.

"I'll talk to Matt... if you talk to John."

"Well, well, I don't know how... I mean... How am I supposed to..."

She sighs.

"Just tell him to call you Alex. Tell him the puppy threatened to hump your leg if you didn't."

"Martlets don't have legs," she fires back.

So much for honeymooning; it's always in the back of her mind: her nestlessness. I admit I had to look it up, when I heard it for the first time. At the anniversary I was there with Alex, when she confessed to Val she'd thought about having a martlet pendant instead of the mermaid she gave to Julie. I wanted to ask right there and then, but Val

kicked me against the shin, so I quickly understood it was one of those sensitivities encircling her adoption. So I looked it up and found it's often used in heraldry: the picture of the bird with feathers instead of claws, symbolising the fourth son who didn't inherit the estate, couldn't join the army or wear a clerical collar. The fourth son was left to find and build his own nest. Diving into history only gave Alex the image of a martlet.

I get up and clear the table. They're still in each other's arms, so all's not lost. I mischievously grin at the both of them.

"I'm off now. You can go upstairs."

"Alright!" Alex shouts enthusiastically.

"How come you're leaving already?"

"I'm going by bike," I proudly state.

It's good weather, and moreover, I hope it'll please Alex, in more than one way.

"Nice one," she smiles, "Your children will be deeply indebted to you."

"Thank you, Mrs Kyoto, but I'll have to find myself a girlfriend first."

"I'm not sure how Matt will be able to help you with that," she teases me.

"Shut up and go to bed, before I change my mind and keep you and that heated part of your body hostage for another two hours."

I leave five minutes later, for a fourteen-mile cycle to Dunfermline, all to get in Alex' good books. Showing my environmental willingness, disguised under a naughty permission to go wild without me, should be a clear sign. I know how big she's about Kyoto and all.

Cycling allows me to reflect on all the conversations I've had with Matt up till now. They'd always been mostly about Alex; since the anniversary they're solely about how I want to make up for everything. Six years ago I put her in hospital after spreading a computer virus calling her a lesbian rapist. I hated the woman only because I believed my father's lies that my sister, Keira, was raped by another girl and committed suicide because of it. Instead of destroying me, Alex took "revenge" by making sure I got accepted into another university, mediating when I was looking for a job, helping me out with my own family tree, bringing me into contact with my sister's girlfriend and finally saving my life when my dad tried to kill the both of us by shooting at us and burning us alive in my own house. Really, I need to make up, for my own sanity's sake, whatever sanity I still have left.

Matt understands, but tries to temper my enthusiasm all the same. It's the same vigour that got me into trouble in the first place, he claims.

Who am I to disagree with a psychiatrist? All I know is that Matt's been very supportive and I think a lot has to do with the fact that he honestly likes Alex. He was so pleased when I handed him the thank-you card from Alex and Julie for the big bunch of flowers Matt had delivered on their anniversary. Thank goodness Matt had the sense to sign that card with M&M, and not with their full names. I'm sure if he had, they'd have been on a surname basis as well. Imagine that: "Kenneth, would you like me to drop you off at Professor Higgins?"; "Kenneth, could you give Dr MacMurtrie my regards?" Please!

No, they're on first names and I know that they've been e-mailing each other regularly. I wonder what they write each other. Are they discussing my issues? I can't imagine Alex would suddenly discuss her personal affairs. Matt too is always careful not to disclose anything about Alex either. He'll answer my questions, but he'll never say a word too much. I know about ADHD characteristics, but how they apply to Alex, that I have to figure out myself. Whatever he thinks of Alex, I won't be told. Matt agreed to help me, but talking about the one I so badly affronted is not included in that package. You have to respect the man.

It's eleven o'clock when I arrive at my place. The wooden boards still transform my house into a derelict site. God, I hope the Higgins brothers can do something about this depression.

"Ah, Smartarse MacFadden!" I hear.

They've already dropped the "Prick" title. I'm confident we'll get there in the end. I think I no longer pose the threat I did for six years.

"Hi, Michael, Seamus, James," I greet.

Although I must admit James is still the most suspicious. Michael has seen me around Alex a number of times now and he seems reasonably satisfied I won't put his baby sister in hospital again. James has only seen me the once, and that one encounter hasn't been enough to wipe out his feelings of distrust. Fair enough.

I let them in and the three of them immediately start measuring windows, doors, what do I know? I stroll through my former home. I hope I can turn it into a proper home this time. I'll give my sister's pictures a prominent place, in my living room somewhere. She deserves as much.

I want to turn the lights on, but the light bulbs burst in the fire. It remains dark and gloomy, threatening even. God, I long to have proper windows in this house again. I can hardly remember how it used to be.

Standing by the opened, charred back door, with the lock shot out, Michael, Seamus and James are discussing how to approach the

situation. From what I can understand, Seamus could fit me new windows and doors, James could do some of the plumbing that was destroyed during the fire and Michael could do just about all the rest, whatever that might be. Then it will remain for me to turn this house into a home again. I could ask Julie for some advice in that department. She's done a pretty neat job in Kirkcaldy.

I watch them wrap up the conversation.

"Right, Kennie," Michael concludes.

"It's Kenneth," I reply, but I know that'll be to no avail.

If those towering individuals insist on the diminutive form for themselves, why would they use a proper name for someone half their size?

"Right, we've been looking at this mess and we must say, Kennie, this isn't a straightforward job."

"Aye," I sigh, "I'd imagined as much."

What are they aiming at now? Are they preparing a grand refusal, or looking for permanent postponement? I do want to move back in here, some time, preferably before Alex and Julie get tired of me.

"It would take us a while to get this all sorted out."

"Aye," I nod.

"So you'll have to be patient, Kennie, lad. It's not like you'll be able to move in again in a week or so."

"I'd figured that much as well."

"We'll start the second week of September."

But they'll do it. That's a relief.

"But since we want to relieve our baby sister of you, we'll do our best to finish it as soon as possible," James remarks sternly.

"I appreciate this," I say, "I really do."

"Don't thank us, MacFadden," Seamus replies, "Thank our baby sister."

"Everything for our baby sister," Michael joins in.

"Aye," I mutter, "Except what she really wants."

Keep the martlet flying all over. Do they think it's a way of keeping her close?

I want to turn around, but Michael stops me and grabs my right wrist.

"What?"

I look him in the eyes.

"What did you say there, MacFadden?"

I try to keep my calm. Even if they did scare me at first, I can remain calm and ask them, right? For Alex' sake, the wee, horny martlet.

“I said that you’re willing to do everything for her, except what she really wants from you.”

The grip on my wrist gets tighter.

“We would do anything for our baby sister,” he bites at me.

“Aye, except telling her where she comes from.”

Michael’s reaction is fierce and totally unexpected. He violently pushes me with my chest against the wall and yanks at my arm, forcing his weight against my back.

“Keep out of this, MacFadden!” he shouts.

With my face against a dirty wall, an uncomfortable pain immediately settles around my shoulder.

“How can I keep out of this when I see how unhappy it makes her?” I try.

He pulls my wrist higher and somehow that nasty sting affects my breathing as well. Momentarily I forget how to allow air into my lungs.

“Don’t you fucking dare tell us we’re making Bambi unhappy!”

He pulls my wrist even higher. I’m desperately trying to raise myself, because I swear Michael’s about to rip my arm out of my shoulder.

“Don’t you fucking dare suggest we’re making Bambi unhappy!!” he shouts louder.

I’m trying to say something, but the pain is overwhelming. Then I hear a sickening pop, dislocating my arm from my shoulder. I think I’m about to faint. I can’t bear this any longer. But in the midst of this trial, my voice abandons me.

“We are not making our baby sister unhappy!” Michael screams in my left ear, “You get that?”

He gives my arm one final jerk and it feels like my muscles are being torn apart. Then he lets go. I fall to the floor. I don’t hear them leave anymore.

“Over here, Professor!” I hear.

A distant voice hovering closely; I recognise that voice.

“Kenneth! Kenneth!”

I recognise that voice as well.

“I found him like this, Professor Higgins. I didn’t dare touch him, because of...”

“I see, Mr Hendry.”

Not again, not that again. I moan.

“Kenneth, Kenneth, can you hear me? Did you call an ambulance already, Mr Hendry?”

“No, no, I just got in myself. I...”

“We’ve got to get him to hospital, Mr Hendry.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” I groan.

I open my eyes and find Alex kneeling beside me. I’m still down on the floor, and I think I’m in quite a disagreeable position. Actually, I’ve no idea how my arms are attached to my chest.

“We’re going to get you to hospital, Kenneth,” she says and then looks at John, standing where I can’t see him.

I certainly won’t move an inch to find out either.

“Will you help me get him up, Mr Hendry?”

“Of course, Prof...”

“Oh, come on!” I shout and immediately get shot through the shoulder again.

I take a deep breath and bite through my teeth.

“Alex, for God’s sake.”

She looks at me with eyes full of surprise and disbelief. But I won’t yield. Hell, I’m in too much pain to yield. She finally looks up.

“The lad’s... Uh, call me Alex, will you?”

“Of course, Prof... Alex.”

God, they are a couple of academic fools.

“Thank you,” I sigh.

“Now can we get you to hospital, you stubborn monkey?”

“Where’s my banana?” I reply sarcastically.

I have no idea how they’re going to get me up on my feet, because mere breathing hurts like hell. I don’t want to imagine how they’re going to get me up.

“Kenneth, put your arm around my shoulders, alright? John’s going to give you a push.”

“Great,” I groan, “My arse being groped by a gay guy and me seeking comfort with a lesbian.”

“Aye, well, that’s the highlight of this week. Now come on. It’s either this or waiting for another half an hour for an ambulance.”

I scream for pain when they pull and push me to my feet. It’s only when standing that it really dawns on me that Michael did dislocate my arm. In fact, when I look to my right, my arm is hanging oddly backwards. If the image isn’t upsetting enough, it feels like an entire sword is keeping it from its proper place.

“Not good,” I moan.

“No, now come on, let’s get you to hospital.”

Julie stands by the door. When she sees the mess I’m in, she brings her hand in front of her mouth. I must look pretty horrific.

“Open the passenger side, Sweetie,” Alex says.

She puts me in the car. I hear her thank John and promise to keep him posted and then we drive off. She's quite cool again, and protective too, putting my seat belt on and all. When we arrive at the emergency entrance, she asks Julie to park the car, whilst she pulls me out again. Leaning on her I stumble inside. By now I just want a sedative. God, let them fix that shoulder later, as long as I can have a sedative first.

"Kenneth, darling, what has happened to you?"

From one gay guy to the next; I can't say I mind that it's Morris working in emergency this Sunday.

"Morris, hi, please, help us. The lad's shoulder's dislocated. Please, help the lad."

He hurries away and returns with a wheelchair.

"You sit down, darling. I'll see you get help immediately."

"How about something to knock me out," I groan.

"That too, darling, that too."

Alex joins me, silently, wordlessly. When Morris puts me in a separate space, I discern obvious concern... and something else too. She's not asked me yet what happened at my place and I think it best if I don't bring up the subject either, because somehow something's brooding in that chaotic head of hers.

When Julie joins us a few minutes later, she still remains silent, only saying something to hospital staff or urging me to tell them everything I feel. I feel pain, a lot of pain. There's even more pain when some butcher of a doctor brutally examines my shoulder and dryly states that it's most likely dislocated. Did he have to study years to figure that out? I know it's bloody dislocated! I only have to turn my head to see something's bloody wrong there. He sends me out to get X-rayed... or something. Alex walks with me wherever I get wheeled. The puppy has a puppy.

The X-ray shows what everybody already knew. Apparently that's the goods news; the bad news is they'll have to manually pop it back in. I look at them with disgust. They're going to do what?

Morris takes my shirt off and next I get a needle in my arm. Another nurse enters the wee space. I'm beginning to get increasingly nervous. I know this is not going to feel good.

"Alex, darling, maybe you'd better wait outside now, because this won't be a pretty picture."

Alex looks at me. She's reluctant to leave. Morris bends over.

"Kenneth, tell Alex to wait outside," he whispers, "This isn't something she wants to witness. It'll take at least three of us to pop your arm back in your shoulder and the way we have to hold you isn't something that goes down well with those who have to look at it."

How about those who play the part of bloody Plasticine dummy?
I close my eyes.

“Alex, maybe you’d better leave indeed.”

“Can’t you... Can’t you sedate him?”

“It’ll only take a minute, Miss,” the butcher replies.

A minute? A full minute? It didn’t take Michael an entire minute to pull it out!

“It’s Professor,” I grumble, “And I’ll be bloody fine. Now let me suffer on my own, Alex. I’ll be alright.”

She’s wavering. She’s grinding her teeth.

“We’ll take care of him, darling,” Morris says.

She turns around and leaves.

“Why is she so angry?” the butcher wails.

God, she knows it was one of her brothers. Is she angry with me? Will she side with them? Is she only here so I won’t tell anyone it was her brothers? Before I can think about that possibility however, someone pushes something between my teeth and next I scream for the entire hospital floor to hear.

God, that hurt!

I’m still as white as a sheet, when Julie joins me again. Morris has just left to get some bandages, so we’re on our own. Julie takes a deep breath.

“Which one of you gorillas did it?” she says calmly.

“Excuse me?”

“Which one of you gorillas did it? Alex just asked that question to her brothers. Well, she didn’t ask it really; she yelled it at them.”

Okay, so does that mean she’s not angry with me then?

“Uh... What...”

“I think she phoned the right gorilla,” Julie calmly nods, “I told you that the very first time around: Seamus, and James too, will defend their sister, but Michael’s the one who will get physical when it comes to Alex. Right?”

“Uh...”

“What did...”

But when Alex walks into the room again, Julie swallows the remainder of her question. Morris immediately follows suit, so I expect it to go quiet again. Morris starts rubbing some ointment on my painful shoulder and upper arm. When I finally have the nerve to look at Alex, I see her eyes spit fire.

“You want to press charges?”

It’s like a gunshot that just went off. I swear even Morris freezes for a split second.

“What?”

“If you want to press charges, we’ll go to the police station as soon as you’re done here.”

“I... I... Hey?”

Is she serious?

“I can call the police and have them come over as well, if you prefer.”

“No, no, I... Alex, what...”

This is her brothers we’re talking about. I can’t make fun of Michael for mistaking Tokyo for Kyoto, but I can press charges against him? Is she serious? She can’t be serious.

“I won’t let them get away with this. You can be fucking sure they won’t get away with this,” she confirms.

She’s actually seething with anger. Julie though, is as bewildered as I am. Morris is trying to make himself as invisible as possible, pretending not to hear anything. What will he say to Matt this evening? What will Matt make of this? God, what do I make of this? I’m totally baffled. I thought they were as thick as thieves: her brothers and she. Now she wants me to press charges against them? Does she know what that entails?

“Think about it, okay? We’ll talk about this again, when your head is a bit clearer.”

My head? What about her head?

She goes quiet again, listening to the butcher explaining that my shoulder was dislocated and the muscles are ruptured, and how it’ll take quite a while for it to heal to an acceptable degree. When we hear that it might never heal completely, I can nearly detect explosive clouds coming out of Alex’ ears. By now I’m too weary to really understand what it means, but I’m sure Alex does, and she’s not happy about it.

We leave a while later. I can’t believe we spent hours in hospital. Julie gets the car first, whilst Alex waits with me in front of the exit. She doesn’t repeat her words anymore, but her grinding teeth tell me enough.

Julie is driving. Alex doesn’t insist on the wheel and I think we all know why. Her anger is getting the better of her, which is exactly why it doesn’t surprise either Alex or me when Julie halts in front of Val’s house. Alex doesn’t say anything, but gets out and slams the door. Before she can even ring the doorbell, Val already opens the front door.

Then it’s just Julie and I, silently driving to Kirkcaldy. Did Julie phone Val? Why?

As soon as Julie closes the front door behind me, I know why.

“What did you do to make them do that?” she asks sternly.