

The Stained Family Tree

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For my wife

Friday, 4 July

“A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do?”

“No.”

“I think I’m onto something?”

“You leave that to the Professor.”

“Shit, I’m in trouble.”

“Now that might be a better angle,” John jokes.

I sigh. This is an unexpected setback.

“A motivation,” I say.

“Aye, MacFadden, a motivation,” John confirms.

“It’s like being bad at university,” I complain.

“Well, in some way it is. You asked for the Professor’s help.”

“No,” I protest, “You suggested I should get the Professor’s help. That is a big difference.”

“Now I didn’t force you, you know. You came to me for help. Now I’m not bad, but the Professor’s the best. Absolutely and without a doubt.”

By the sound of it, John worships this man. He has to be good to command this sort of respect.

“What did you tell him?” I ask.

John grins at me now. I don’t understand.

“The basics,” he smiles, “That my neighbour is trying to trace his family tree and that he’s stuck somewhere in the second half of the eighteenth century.”

That’s the basics indeed. And what more can I add to that without his looking into my papers? I think it’s intriguing enough... when you get to that particular point in time. But apparently I need to motivate the man to get intrigued. Shit.

“You write down your motivation, MacFadden.”

I grumble.

“A motivation.”

“Aye, well, you have to have a reason for wanting to dig into your past.”

I sigh. That reason is highly personal and I don’t even know if I’ve figured it out myself. It’s to do with my sister; that I know. I can hardly write that down, can I?

“Dear Sir, I have this drawing my sister made for me when I was born. She drew me a family tree. Now I want to put names on that family tree.”

The thing is, my sister made that picture when she was seven. Twenty-five years have gone by and I still haven’t found out what tree

she meant to draw. It's the oddest-looking tree I've ever seen: no trunk, plenty of roots, lots of branches too, thick foliage with odd, red stains spread all over. I wish I could call it a bush, but my sister proudly wrote "Kenneth MacFadden's family tree" on top of the paper. Great, from the day I was born I received a stained family tree. I'm part of that stained family tree. Worse, I'm a stain; my sister is a stain; my parents are stains... Every member of my family is a bloody stain! I can't help wondering where it went wrong. Somewhere along the line our family got messed up and this bunch of hypocrites came to be. I think that's the reason why Keira's no longer here: she was just too good to be part of this rotten family. Somehow God must have realised His mistake and called her back. "Hey, lassie, sorry about that. Come back up and I'll make it right." So she did go up and turned her back on this ugly family. Keira could never be the daughter of a hypocrite and an alcoholic. I wish I were not the son of a hypocrite and an alcoholic. But I am.

So where does that leave me, the end of this stained family tree? I despise my father, because he's a hypocrite. I despise his parents because they're just as bad, and because they bred a hypocrite. Maybe their parents were hypocrites too. They must have been. Unless this race of hypocrites just started all by itself. I'm disgusted by my mother too, and her entire family of drunks. I can't remember a day when I didn't see my mother with that watery film on her eyes or when I didn't hear her speak with a thick tongue stumbling over every word coming out of that mouth. I was embarrassed to bring schoolmates home, because behind all the fake niceties there was always the bottle hidden underneath the sink, in the cellar... and even in my wardrobe. The day I found that bottle of brandy behind a pile of T-shirts of mine, I confronted Mum and Dad. I got a slap in the face from Dad for daring to drink in the house at the age of fifteen. It was a hard lesson, one that I will never forget.

So those are the rotten branches I descend from. The branches they descend from are even worse. So why do I even want to trace the rest of this genealogical repulsiveness? The only reason I have is my sister's drawing. I think I was a genealogist the day I was born. Or maybe it just has everything to do with my sister and my total inability to accept she's not there anymore, for a reason too cruel to speak of. Maybe it's my way of showing I've not forgotten her. I'll never forget her.

"It's kind of personal," I mutter.

"Whatever you do, don't fake your motivation. The Professor has a gift for sifting out the frauds."

I just wonder what the Professor will think. I can just imagine the man: tall, grey, thick curls, maybe glasses... And then he will read my motivation. What can I write? What will I write?

“Dear Professor, I would appreciate your help on my stained family tree.”

Monday, 7 July

I started typing on Friday. I worked on it all Saturday. I reread it over and over again on Sunday, until I finally got fed up with it and sealed it in a big, brown envelope, together with all my papers: both copies and originals. I think it holds more credibility when you can show some original documents. Of course I have copies of everything at home.

I drove from work straight to St. Andrews, where John and I had agreed to meet. It’s close to six. I’m excited. I can hardly contain myself.

“Now look at that,” John smirks, “Aren’t you like a bairn out to get a prize?”

“Hey, this bairn worked really hard to get this prize,” I say.

“Hmm, you working really hard,” John grins, “I can hardly imagine.”

“Hey!”

I hand John the envelope. He looks up when he reads what I wrote on it.

“Uh, I didn’t know the name of your professor.”

John keeps referring to him as “the Professor”. I never really thought anything of it until this weekend, when I wanted to type the letter. But I guess I can’t go wrong if I address the man as Professor as well, can I? The man can hardly blame me for not knowing his name when John didn’t give it to me. So I neatly wrote “To the Professor” on the envelope and wrote my own name in the corner.

“When did you figure that out?” John asks sarcastically.

For just that brief a moment I want to reply until it sinks in he is really mocking me. A historian with a sense of humour; imagine, this could have been me.

“Don’t you want to hand it to the Professor yourself?”

“That’s fine, John. You go ahead. I’ll wait. That’s fine.”

I’d much prefer for the man to read my papers before I burst in there and bombard him with my eagerness.

“Alright then.”

John nods and turns around. I watch him knock on a door and enter. Now I'm getting really nervous. I hope my motivation is convincing enough for the Professor to look into my papers. God, I hope it's good enough.

Not even thirty seconds later, John reappears with the envelope, unopened. He wants to hand it back.

"I'm sorry, MacFadden. The Professor cannot do it."

"What? But why? I mean... Why?"

The man didn't even open the envelope. He didn't even bother to read my motivation. I know John warned me the man can sift out frauds, but I find it a bit harsh he thinks I'm a fraud without even reading my letter."

"I'm sorry, MacFadden."

John still holds out my envelope.

"No," I protest, "No, wait a minute. This is not fair! First he asks me to write a motivation and then he turns me down without even looking at it."

I pass John and march straight to the door I saw John opening just a minute ago.

"MacFadden!" he shouts.

But I don't listen to him, knock on the door and without waiting for an answer I burst in the room.

"Professor."

I halt. I'm horrified.

"Mr MacFadden," I hear a calm voice speak.

"You!"

I can't believe what I'm seeing. It's Dr bloody Higgins, vile, perverted and disgusting Higgins. It's her who had me kicked out of university in Glasgow. It's her sort that is responsible for Keira's death! It's what is bloody wrong with this world!! And then they promote something like that? Professor Higgins; how can someone with John's intelligence admire a twisted mind like that? He should vilify her instead. I did! And God, I am still proud of that. She deserved everything she got back then. How can this be a bloody Professor?

"I trust you understand why I will not look into your case?"

I'm still too stunned for words.

"But I can give you the name of one of my colleagues, if you like."

"Oh, fuck off."

"Professor Higgins?"

I bump against John as I want to leave.

"It's alright, Mr Hendry."

I slam the door on my way out, leaving *Mr Hendry* in full admiration of the most despicable creature on this planet. What an idiot! So intelligent and stupid at the same time.

I leave the building. My car's parked about fifty yards further down the road and the closer I get, the angrier. What a waste of time! What a waste of energy! Just to think I spent an entire weekend on that!

I get in my car and drive off. It's amazing how the streets are still swamped by tourists, even at this hour. And guess what: most of them are used to right-hand driving. One split second thinking of Higgins and I can run somebody down. But I just can't calm down. If I passed her by car I would really have to mind not running her down. God, I thought I had seen the last of her six years ago. Until John had to bring us back together. To think that I wanted her to look into my family tree. She already robbed me of my sister; she could have stolen my entire family as well.

"Shit!"

I left my papers in St. Andrews. I was so shocked I bloody well forgot my papers.

At the first crossing place, I turn the car and speed back, but arriving there, both John and his Professor are gone. My envelope's not miraculously lying about for me to pick up and take back home. God, I hope John took it with him. Of course he did. Higgins probably threw it back at him and wouldn't want it there anymore. I'd better leave as well. John may well have crossed me on my way back without my noticing it. My thoughts are so consumed I can't think straight anymore.

I leave St. Andrews again and by the time I arrive in Dunfermline it's close to eight. Still my thoughts are raging with anger. Maybe I'll cool down when I get my things back. Without even going inside my own house I immediately ring John's bell next door.

"MacFadden?"

"Hi, did you bring my papers?"

John sighs.

"You sure don't waste any breath on things, do you?"

He lets me in. I follow him into the living room, but when I look around I can't see my envelope anywhere.

"I did not bring your envelope," John confesses.

"You what? You left it there with that..."

"I forgot, MacFadden. What are you going to do? Shoot me?"

No, but I could bloody well kick him in the head now.

"Or are you going to spread some nasty virus as well now?"

I could've figured she told John.

"And what are you going to accuse me of?"

“She told you, didn’t she?”

“The Professor did not tell me anything! She’s too big for that.”

Not all that big; she’s the size of a gigantic midget. Can somebody please knock that bloodsucking insect down?

“What do you think: that nobody knows? Idiot! Everybody knows what happened to the Professor. If I had known it was you, I would never have brought the two of you together again.”

“As if I ever wanted to see her again,” I bite back.

I angrily plant myself in the seat. So where does this leave me... and my quest? I still want my papers back.

“MacFadden, do you... God, you still don’t realise what you’ve done, do you?”

What do I have to realise? I sent a virus through the university computer letting the entire campus know just exactly what Higgins really is. What else is there to know?

“I spread the truth,” I state.

“You called her a lesbian rapist.”

“So, isn’t she?” I shout.

John sits down as well, temporarily dumbfounded. Did John ever think about who he’s working for?

“That should be forbidden, somebody in a function like that. That should never be allowed to teach.”

My frustration’s growing bigger again. It was the reason why I sent the virus; and it obviously still bugs me to this day. I just can’t understand why she was ever allowed to teach, let alone why they promoted her at all. Really, it’s a bloody outrage. I thought they would have kicked her out back then, but no, I got kicked out instead and she got a bloody promotion. The world has gone mad. No, this world has turned into a perverted and rotten place. No wonder innocent beauties like my sister decide to leave.

“What should be forbidden, MacFadden?”

“Well, that!” I scream, “A lesbian teaching!”

The power teachers have over their students; imagine: all those potential victims being taught by the likes of Higgins.

“What? Do you think it’s contagious? Oh, my God, you’re right. It is. Well, look at that: I’m gay as well. It must be because of the Professor.”

I hate this sort of sarcasm.

“Don’t joke about this. It’s not funny,” I grumble.

“Who says I’m joking? I’m gay.”

“Stop it, John. I said it isn’t funny.”

“Am I laughing?”

He's not indeed. Suddenly I realise he means it. Now I am lost for words. John's not gay. He can't be. He doesn't look gay. He's... Is he... No.

"But you drink beer."

John bursts out laughing.

"God, you're an idiot. Why would you think we don't drink beer?"

"Well, well, well, you had beer with me. I mean, do you... Was that because you... I mean, are you..."

John turns all serious again.

"Don't flatter yourself, MacFadden. I was having a beer with my neighbour. If I'd known that neighbour was a homophobic idiot, I most certainly would not have wasted any beer on him."

"So you're not... in me?"

"No, I'm not interested in you! What, just because I'm gay I want to go to bed with every man I see? God, you're an idiot. I cannot believe you are such an idiot."

"Well, I..."

My head sinks a bit deeper between my shoulders. What a rotten day this turns out to be. And if I want my papers back I will have to make sure I don't offend John. And I do want my papers back; that's sure.

"Is that why you work for Higgins, because she's..."

"Oh, aye, that makes perfect sense now, doesn't it? I'm a gay man and she's a lesbian."

Aye, it does. But John is not having any of it.

"MacFadden, think for a second, will you? I'm into men and she's into women. What could we possibly have in common? Oh, wait, maybe... No, that cannot be. Maybe it is because I really like history and the Professor does too."

The man is sarcastic by nature, and he's pouring it all over me.

"You're both gay. Doesn't that create a bond?"

"No! I know as much about her personal life as all the other colleagues. Well, maybe a bit more. It doesn't make an ounce of a difference. The Professor and I respect each other professionally. And I intend to keep it like that."

I'm stunned, shocked, dumbfounded... I can't get over it. First I have to find that John's demigod is the same despicable creature I exposed six years ago. Next that devoted fan tells me I have been sharing a beer with one out of the same league. At least he didn't hit on me. Thank God he didn't hit on me. My worst nightmare. I might have ended like my sister. But I'm older than Keira was. Maybe I'm less innocent. I'm armed too.

“So where... How... How do I get my papers back now?”

“Well, I suggest you drive over there and ask them back,” John remarks dryly.

“No!”

The mere thought of seeing that again, it’s outrageous.

“Well, I’m not going back to work this week. It’s the holiday period, MacFadden. Moreover, I’m not your servant.”

I cross my arms. I’m cornered. I don’t like it one single bit.

Tuesday, 8 July

I looked on the Internet, and lo and behold, there she is: Professor A. Higgins. There is a full biography of the woman. Did John write this? Because I don’t care that her specialty is the Post-Union era; I really don’t care. I want my papers back. I want her filthy hands off my family tree.

So after work I drive straight to St. Andrews yet again and just when I arrive at the building I see her leaving... on a bike... wearing a silly helmet. Maybe she’s afraid I will run her down.

I watch her cycle away. Why do I do that? Instead of staring at her I should stop her, follow her, maybe truly run her down. Why are me and my big mouth not running her down? I don’t know why I just stand here like an idiot when instead I should be stopping her to ask for my papers. I have to get a grip on myself.

I get back into my car and drive in the direction of the bus station. Does she live nearby? If she took one of the side streets I will have lost her. But as I drive closer I see her cycle on. She continues all the way to Leuchars station. The woman takes the train? What sort of a professor cycles to the station to take the train? Can’t she take the car, so I can follow her home?

I park my car and sit there, thinking of what to do. The most obvious thing would be to get out of the car and actually confront the woman, but I find I’m simply not prepared to do that. Then why the hell did I even bother to drive up here? If I can’t talk to the woman, I’ll never get my papers back. John made it very clear yesterday he’s not helping me out on this one. What does Higgins hold over John? It takes one to know one? Or maybe Higgins is protecting John and now he’s returning the favour and... Whatever.

I watch the train arrive and pull out again, taking Higgins with it... somewhere. Then I’ve had enough of my immobility. I throw the car

door open and run to the station. When I enter the hall I march towards the station master, who's going inside as well.

"Excuse me, was Professor Higgins on the train that just left? Small woman with short hair?"

Looks like a man, I feel like adding.

"Mrs Higgins?"

He knows her by name?

"Aye, she was on it. Why?"

"Ah," I lie, "Just missed her."

"You're by car?"

"Aye."

"Train to Kirkcaldy's faster than you can drive, lad," I hear.

So it's Kirkcaldy.

"Better try another day," the man smiles at me.

"I will," I reply and leave.

I will. And I'll be better prepared too.

Wednesday, 9 July

Today's not that day. I looked up Higgins's name in the telephone directory yesterday and found her address easily enough, but one night of sleep, a day's work and a short pause before driving to Kirkcaldy didn't make me any wiser. On the contrary, I sit in my car and just stare at her house, an ordinary house in an ordinary street. There's a flower-bed in front of the window and a plant behind it. What else is behind that window, behind that door? Is it wise to ring that bell? I don't want to go inside. Was that what happened to Keira? She was at university when it happened. It must have been with someone with the likes of Higgins. Maybe it even was her. If only Dad would say something. But I know nothing. I was told nothing. Why won't they tell me anything?

I sigh. I don't want to ring that doorbell. Why would Higgins have brought my papers here anyway? I have to reflect a bit longer. Why would she have taken my papers home at all? I need to find her at university. I need John to make an appointment with her.

Friday, 11 July

She couldn't see me on Thursday. The nerve that woman has: holding my papers hostage and putting me off yet another day. But she would see me on Friday. I told John I would pass round after work, but

it is earlier than expected. I had a job to do in Perth and by the time it's four I'm in St. Andrews. It's sunny and there are tourists everywhere, a lot of which must be by car, because I have to park a lot further than planned. It doesn't matter. I've done a pretty good job boosting my confidence so I can finally pull this off. Sending that virus through the computer turns out to have been a lot easier than meeting the woman face to face. Then again, that's why I sent it in the first place: because I did not want to take my oral exam with her. I thought that if I could incriminate her, she would be expelled. I was wrong.

I enter the building. It's quiet inside. John's not here either, so I have to knock on that door myself. I take a deep breath and raise my arm. There's a soft knock on wood. There's no reply though. Great. Is she even here? Maybe she's not here yet. Maybe she'll not show up at all, just to annoy me.

I open the door and put my head around it. Higgins is here, softly humming, earphones in, writing behind a desk. I know what she's listening to as well. I have that CD at home too! God, that annoys me. Everything about her annoys me. It did back then and it still does to this very day. I'd so much looked forward to studying history in Glasgow and then on my first day at university that stands in front of me. She ruined my entire year. I loved the course, but hated the one teaching it. I hated every time I had to be in the same room with her. Why the hell am I back in one and the same room again?

She doesn't seem to be aware of me. So what do I do now? The faster I'm out of here, the better. I knock on the door again, hard this time. She looks up, finds me standing some yards from her and spontaneously looks at her watch. Aye, I know I'm early. She stops the CD and takes the earpieces out.

"Mm," I hear as she gets up.

She takes an envelope, my envelope. She holds it in her hand and then seems to hesitate for a moment, as if she wants to say something. I don't want her to talk to me. I want to have my papers back and go home again. But much to my relief she hands me my envelope. I snatch it back from her, force a grunt out of my throat and turn around. Then I close the door. Thank heavens this is over.

I walk back to my car. The tension that has been building up for the past five days is gently seeping away. It's a welcome feeling. After fleeing disgust and frustration with my parents' behaviour at home, I hated going through this at my own place as well. I can let go of it again.

I open my car door and throw the envelope on the passenger seat. It's only then that I notice that the envelope has been opened. Horrified, I get in my car. She touched my papers. How dare she tamper with my

research? What if she took all of it? What if she stole all my originals? I grab the envelope and tear it open. At first sight everything is still there. A more thorough look reveals plenty of notes, scribbles really. She wrote on nearly every single page, save on the originals. At least she had that much sense. But her scribbles are all over. I try to calm down. It's not easy.

Did she purposely write so small, because I can hardly read a word. Sometimes she crossed out a date I found and wrote a new one next to it. Hey, I looked that up on the Internet. I did not invent a single date. But 1771 has been changed into – I think – 1772 and December into February... or something along those lines. God, the woman has an illegible handwriting. She could write the entire Bible in one notebook, and she would still have space left. I need a magnifying glass to read this. How frustrating. I'm so bloody interested in the part on my missing ancestor and she wrote plenty next, on top and under that part, but I can hardly read a word. I think I can decipher the word "interesting". Great, an interesting illegibility.

The last page is one she wrote all by herself. I think it's supposed to be a hand-drawn family tree: names, dates and – a guess – employment. I compare it with my notes and aye, indeed, it must be employment, because underneath my name she wrote "journalist". I go down the page and much to my surprise I notice she added more names. She found more ancestors in those few days? It took me months to get where I did! Where did she get that information? And what did she write underneath Donald MacFadyen? Ah, this is frustrating! Half my ancestors were called Donald, and Higgins wrote the dates in such miniature script I can't find the right one, let alone read their day jobs.

I sigh. I feel my heart pounding in my throat for excitement and if I ever want to decipher this page I will have to calm down. Maybe a bit of music will do the trick. I turn the radio on and start again, with my pages... and her notes on them. What did she write on my page of Donald MacFadyen?

Half an hour of trying to make sense of her notes makes me want to shout out loud. I'm not getting any wiser. On the one hand, it'll save me confessing to John that Higgins is good indeed, because I can't possibly tell from this. On the other hand, I want to know what she bloody well wrote. She did some research... and it would be a waste not to use this.

"Shit," I curse.

I will have to swallow my pride now. I get out of the car and walk back, but Higgins is gone. This time the door's locked. I run back to my