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A LIFE IN THE SHADE

FOUR MONTHS AGO I LEARNED THAT LINCOLN STACEY, the brother of the great Archibald Stacey, was still alive and residing on the West coast. Through a flurry of inquiries to my contacts there, I was able to obtain his address, and he agreed to meet with me.

Lincoln was the most elusive primary source in the country. He had been highly sought by academics and biographers for forty years, particularly after his brother died, and for a while every ambitious graduate student in a host of related fields would look him up in Guelph, Richmond, or Phoenix. But all would make a solemn return to their department offices without word from the only surviving relative of one of the country's most provocative and consequential historical figures. Faced with this unbroken silence, much of the academy gave up pursuing him, and as the years passed most of the research community assumed he was dead. They took for granted that any living relative of Archibald Stacey would have been plumbed for testimony and committed to the historical record long ago.

Now he was shaking my hand and showing me through the tidy entrance to his low pink bungalow sheltered among sweetgums on a quiet suburban street. For a man approaching 94, his movements were swift and agile. He had a round, high forehead that was accentuated by the low perch of the glasses on his nose, and a mist of grey hair had staked out a ring around the crown of his head.

He insisted that I not remove my shoes, and when we moved into the kitchen he collected a jug of cola and a honeydew melon from the photo-cluttered refrigerator.

"I thought we could sit out back," he said. He placed the fruit on the counter and sliced into it.

"It's great to finally meet you, Mr. Stacey," I said.

"Yes, well," he said, "I don't know." He gestured toward a dish sitting out of reach on the counter, and I handed it to him. "Your voice reminded

me of my son's, so I said, 'Why not?' But I'm no big fan of folks like you."

"I wondered about that myself," I said. "You spent years refusing to speak to anyone. Now you're welcoming some grad student from the Maritimes?"

"Lucky for you, right?" he said. "You're at my late wife's alma mater."

Lucky for me.

Lincoln's brother had been the kind of Renaissance man the world would seldom know again, and his career was the focus of my studies. He was a lawyer, scholar, diplomat, writer, poet, and early television celebrity, who died a bachelor twenty-five years before I was born. His biography was still pierced with unknowns, so getting in touch with anyone who had known him in the flesh was a profound thrill. However, little was known about Lincoln aside from a few public records and information gleaned from his brother's books and interviews. He was so reclusive that he might as well have been living at the bottom of Desolation Sound.

We walked together through the sunken living room of his house, which was vast and orderly, as though everything had been put away for good. A bookshelf held a few titles but mostly framed portraits of smiling people with horn-rimmed glasses and beehive hairstyles or long-haired children with missing baby teeth. The television in the corner was a behemoth and perhaps the finest you could buy fifteen years ago.

"You have a fine place," I said.

"I keep the lights off to save energy," he said. "I used to work for the power utility, so I know. I proposed to my wife next to a substation."

He led me out to his back deck, and we set down the food. I took off my shoulder bag, in which I had an audio recorder that I was keen to bring out when the moment was right, but he didn't sit down.

"Look," he said, moving into the yard. "These peonies just don't get enough sun anymore."

His yard was a lush horseshoe of flowers and trees, with an inner footprint of well-tended grass. Close to us near the patio was a bird feeder where robins, sparrows, and squirrels jockeyed for seeds and suet. He pointed up at a cherry tree that had just finished flowering. Faded blooms were dropping to the ground.

"It grew too tall. It's blocking the sun," he said.

"Have you always enjoyed gardening?" I asked.

"Only once the kids left," he said. "Alice and I began to tend the garden

when the house became empty, and we were feeling old. It reminded me of my parents, who farmed out in Ontario."

His parents were Abel Stacey, a farmer and later a dealer in agricultural machinery, and Katherine Stacey, née Giesbrecht, a daughter of Danish immigrants. The Staceys had five children, of which Lincoln was the youngest. Archibald was the next youngest by a gap of twelve years. The rest of the children were older still and had faced sore poverty while their father worked a thin layer of soil on the Canadian Shield. When the clan moved south to Peterborough for Abel to set up a business, they thrived. As a result, the last two children were raised and educated more comfortably than their siblings.

"Had you seen much farming," I asked, "before the move into town?"

He was walking along the edge of the garden as I followed, touching leaves and pulling weeds when he saw them.

"Chickweed," he said, holding up a root. "It's taking over the cool patches, crowding out my begonias. Alice used to put it in salad, but I don't bother." He tossed the root over his shoulder. "I have some memories from back then, sure. Archie showed me how to spread chemicals around the badger holes, and I watched the older kids working the crops or the animals."

Archibald often claimed that his first experience in diplomacy was on the farm. "As someone who farmed chickens as a boy, I can tell you plenty about world leaders," he would say before expounding on the League of Nations or the Nuremberg trials.

My companion now had two fists full of chickweed. "Of course, the fire is the big event I remember," he said.

"The fire?"

"Sure! Call it a family secret. Our farmhouse burned to the ground. I don't imagine Archie ever talked about that. It's why we moved."

Present scholarship held that the Staceys had been troubled by low yields before turning to a new life in business. Archibald himself had written that his father had discovered, after making a good profit selling a few plows to a neighbour, that he had a gift for salesmanship, and he had moved his family the next week. What's more, the farmhouse—a grand Victorian outgrowth in southern Ontario now known as Stacey House—still remained. It was even open for weddings and private events, and the Archibald Stacey Historical Society convened there every three years.

"The farmhouse is still standing, Mr. Stacey," I said. "I was there myself

last May."

"Did you try the nice restaurant in the back room?" he asked. He was up and wandering along the edge of the garden once more. "We went there a long time ago. They had the yard landscaped like an English garden and served lemon sorbet in little cups between courses."

"Yes, the Harvest Room is still there," I said. "They have a vineyard, too."

"That was our neighbour's house, the McKinleys. It was a lot bigger than ours, and when they bought our land it became the farmhouse for the whole property. I only ever went in there when our dogs hunted their chickens. Our own birds were too skinny for them." He laughed. "Mrs. McKinley would serve me a slice of pie if I could round up the dogs before they caused too much bloodshed."

I flipped through my memories of archives and source material. I assumed that some of my colleagues had verified the land titles, but I could not be sure.

"You mean to tell me that Stacey House—the historic site marking the birthplace of Archibald Stacey—is a fake? My supervisor is on the Board of Directors there."

"Tell you what," he said, "you go and get the hose that's coiled up at the side of the house, and I'll let you water this lettuce."

He was changing the subject, and it occurred to me that his trustworthiness was far from certain. I was not going to let an unverified voice upend established truth.

"Why don't we go taste some melon, Mr. Stacey? I haven't eaten a thing since the airplane. Besides, I'd love to get you on tape."

"I forgot the melon," he said. Then he looked back to his vegetable patch. "But those vegetables need a drink. Just watch the tool shed. It has a fresh coat of paint."

When I was finished spraying the garden, he turned off the faucet and returned to the yard, coiling the hose as he went.

"Tell me," I said as he gathered the rubber in hoops over his shoulder, "when was the last time you saw your brother?"

He looked over my head into the tree that sheltered his begonias.

"It was in July 1957. He'd just returned from a fellowship in England and was moving back to the capital for a job with the new government."

This date fit with Archibald's life as I knew it: he had worked as an advi-

sor on Parliament Hill from August of that year.

"Did he tell you about any conversations with Mr. MacDougal?" I asked. "What did he think of the platform changes? Some have suggested he wished to run for office himself."

He heaved the hose from his shoulder and held it towards me. "It goes over there," he said. "You'll see a hook in the wall."

"He would have been writing his fourth book at that time," I continued, "*Papineau and the National Myth*. Did you discuss any of his research? His letters show that the subject was obsessing him during his first weeks in Ottawa, and I've argued that this guided some of his reasoning with regards to the Ryder Act, although some of my colleagues disagree."

He stayed quiet, and I left to go replace the hose, which weighed on my shoulder like the corpse of a snake. It was a wonder that a man of his age could still do this type of work.

By now I had been there over an hour, and night was spreading over us like ink. The air had settled, and the neighbourhood had gone still. I watched a yellowjacket burrow into a crack in the foundation of the house and considered whether this man knew much about his brother's intellectual life at all.

When I returned, my host was on his knees with his back to me, hunched over a different patch on the edge of his garden. He was tossing soil behind him, and I saw that he held a spade.

"Mr. Stacey?" I said as I approached him, careful to miss the rain of dirt he sent my way.

"I've been meaning to trim up the edge of this section into a clean line. See? The turf is growing into the flowerbed."

I saw that there was a second spade by his knees.

"If you start at that end, and I work down here, we can finish this whole stretch before it gets too dark."

"That's a great idea," I said, crouching to meet him, "but you understand that I came here for material on Archibald. Why don't you come to the table and let me record an interview? Then I can help with your garden."

He looked at me with a depth of focus that I had not yet seen from him. It was so striking that I thought I had offended him. Then he pressed the second spade into my hands.

"Let me tell you about our childhood," he said, and he talked about his life growing up in Peterborough, the deaths of two siblings who were hit by

the 4:12 to Toronto, their mother's drinking and flights of anger, Archibald's success in school societies, and their father's early business ventures and increasing withdrawal from home life. This was all told with an elder's attention to the minute details of family life, including the names of cousins, pets, and neighbourhood friends, none of which I knew about or remember now. He listed so many facts and events so quickly that my skeptical defences fell, and I absorbed his stories with the open enthusiasm of a child.

I worked as he told me to, first helping to trim the edges of his flowerbeds, then cutting back the hedges of buckthorn that were creeping in from the park adjacent to his property. We raked the trimmings, loaded them into a wheelbarrow, and deposited them on the compost heap behind the shed. By the time he was satisfied with our labour, the stars were out, and moths were circling the floodlights that illuminated the yard. He returned the tools to the shed and was careful to close the door behind him while I stayed outside. I was filthy and hot, with streaks of mud running down my slacks and dirt stuck under my fingernails. When we finally sat around the patio table, he joked that we should get the hose out again to water the roses and then slid the plate of melon to me.

"Now you're hungry," he said, biting into a slice.

He was silhouetted by one of the lights, which fired the remaining wisps of his hair into a drifting nimbus around his head. It was evident that the work had energized him, as he breathed deeply and radiated strength and hunger.

"Mr. Stacey," I said, searching my satchel for my recorder, "you never finished telling me about the last time you saw your brother."

I pulled out the device and turned it on.

"Right. That was July 12, 1957," he said. "Archie slept with my wife."

"He what?"

"She was helping him pack for Ottawa, apparently. It was awful. I left them both." He threw a melon rind over the fence into his neighbour's yard, leaned toward me, and spoke almost directly into the recorder. "People tell lots of stories about him, but the truth is that he was the slimiest bastard ever to walk the halls of power. He humiliated every woman he was ever with and betrayed every friend who ever got close to him. After he slept with my wife, I never talked to him again. He was nothing. Nobody."

We were both silent for a moment, scored by the chanting of crickets, and then he took up another piece of fruit and bit into it. The juice dripped

from his chin to the table like a stream of jewels. “You probably think you know about the Dominion Summit of ‘59,” he continued, referring to a famous speech Archibald gave about peacemaking and foreign policy, which was the source of some of his most enduring quotations. “We weren’t speaking by then, but I have it on good word that when he gave that speech he was so drunk they had to carry him to the stage. Before he went on, he threw up in a lampshade. Afterward he knocked over a mirror backstage and cut his arm open. There was blood everywhere, and he was in the hospital until the next morning, but they paid off the newspapers and nothing ran about it.”

I’d heard the vomiting story, which was often framed by my colleagues as an endearing glimpse of stage fright in a powerful public figure. Now my mind raced back to the recordings of his address in the National Archives. Could I detect any slurring? I’d never read that he looked unfit that night or had difficulty walking.

“Also,” he added, before I finished registering his remarks, “he had his hands in some mafia racket—public works contracts in Ontario and Quebec and some money laundering scheme involving casino chips.”

I gathered myself straight up in my chair and towered over the old man across the table. “I’ve never heard that before,” I said. “Can someone corroborate any of this?”

He tossed another rind over the fence. “My famous brother,” he said, “but he’s dead.”

I looked at the garden, and the foliage appeared waxy and stiff in the light coming from the lamps, like a studio set for a film.

“Were you ever tempted to live like he did?” I asked. “Your brother ran with world leaders, knew great artists and luminaries, went to parties in Monaco and Saint Tropez . . .”

“He’s a historical figure—nothing more,” he said. “He’s more interesting to scholars than a man like me, as everything I did was offstage—out of the light. But from my viewpoint it was a good life, even if it doesn’t look like that to you.” He wiped the table idly with his sleeve and seemed to shrink under the solitude of the empty house before him.

“What happened to your son?”

“What about him?”

“You said earlier that I sounded like him. What did you mean by that?”

“I’m an old man. I don’t have many folks left, is all.” His voice, which had plummeted to the crinkle of Bible paper, now came firm and steady.

"You wanna hear something? I'll tell you this. Back when our farmhouse burned down, you know how it happened? My mother did it." He started eating another slice of melon and absorbed the effect of his words like a drunkard sipping gin. "She put on her wool coat one night, spread some hay around under the living room curtains, and laid a kerosene lamp on it. Then she walked straight out the front door and watched the house light up. It was 11pm. Dad was out. We kids had to scramble from our bedroom windows and leap from the roof while the smoke gushed after us. You know how we knew to run?" He gave me a wooden look, the lamplight tracing his face. "Archibald saw her. He heard her shuffling down there, went over to the stairs, and watched the whole thing happen through the banister. And after the curtains caught, and she turned to leave, she saw him there and just walked right past."

I didn't know if I could believe any of this, but the idea that this lonely stranger was humouring me began to seem like the best alternative.

"He told me that story before he went to England," he said. "I reckon he fought with it all his life."

"What did you think when he said that about your mother?" I asked.

"My mother was a good woman, but she was disturbed. I forgave her long ago," he said. "What I mean by all this is—oh, hell."

He turned to look back into the garden, which was now a deep and unbroken shadow. "Hear that?" he said, and only then did I hear an earthy scratching from the darkness. "Oh, hell," he said again, "I thought I got rid of those rodents. Stay here."

He rose from his chair and walked in the direction of the tool shed at the back of the yard. I followed the sound of his footsteps through the grass and heard the door of the shed wobble open. As I approached, the structure's slanted roof blotted out the stars in the patch of sky above me. The scratching had gotten louder. Then we heard a crash as something scampered away through the buckthorn.

"Damned raccoons," he said. "I just don't know how they get in here."

As soon as I laid a step on the floorboards, he pulled the cord on a lightbulb in the ceiling, and the space was illuminated. While his attention was cast on a torn bag of birdseed in the far corner, I was looking along the inside edges of the shed. Among the shovels, rakes, fishing rods, jerrycans, and the lawnmower were stacks of cardboard boxes, each of them overflowing with curled papers and dirty notebooks. Some of them were rippled with

moisture, and others were held together with tape, but every box had a label on the side: “Archie’s Diaries,” “Notes for the Memoir,” “Early Poems,” “Letters from Dad,” “Papineau Notes and Drafts,” “Photos 1920-1939,” “Photos 1939-1962,” “BURN,” “Recordings and Tapes.”

I moved towards some of the boxes stacked behind the workbench, which was covered in paint cans edged with drippings of blue. The bench itself was lined with what I thought at first were sheets of newsprint, but as I approached I saw that they were the torn and yellowed pages of a handwritten notebook. Among the drops and rings of paint on these pages were unmistakable blood stains, faded brown with the years. I could only make out, with some difficulty, a scrawled heading at the top of one page—“Address to Dominion Summit ’59 / Canada on World Stage”—before Lincoln pulled the cord above us, and the bulb went out. The shed was darker now than it had been before. I heard the sharp laughter of crickets flooding in and was overcome by the expanding night.

“Get out,” he said. “Out, out, out.”