

Closest Living Relative

by Daniel Passamaneck

I first encountered Uncle Enos just a few months after we moved to town. We'd gotten everything we were supposed to get — apartment, library card, utilities, phone; though we'd only been there a short time it really felt like home already. But, of course, our “new home” became just our home, plain and simple, the day we made it into the local white pages. As soon as it arrived we tossed the chunky floppy book onto our little kitchen table and pawed it open to our page, our name - our verification, our validation. There we were, in the middle of a column in the middle of the page in six-point Ariel narrow, my cumbersome family name delimited by the two given names of myself and my wife. It fit among the other names so neatly that at first I didn't notice the repeat. I thought my vision was stuttering or something. It took us both a few moments to see it clearly.

“Who's Enos?”

We asked each other the same question at the same time, then looked back down at the page. Someone named Enos, living here in this city, shared our same last name. He must be a relative, but I knew almost nothing about dad's side of the family. I'd never heard of this guy before, for sure.

The phone rang. My thoughts rapidly progressed: “That can't be him,” to “But wouldn't it be funny,” to “No, that would be a bad sign,” to “It must be him.” I debated whether to let the answering machine pick it up, but that felt callow. I wasn't about to disappoint fate. I knew that I had to answer, and I had a feeling I knew what it would get me. My smile freezing on my face, I picked up.

“Hello?”

“Who the hell is this?”

“Who's calling, please?”

“I know who the hell this is. Ryan Flendrik.” He spoke my name with heavy sarcasm. “Now what I want to know is, who the hell are you? What the hell are you doin' with my name?”

“You must be Enos.”

“Must I? MUST I? I don't gotta ‘must' be a goddamn thing, boy. Don't be getting all smart ‘n' final on me. I'm your elder, goddamn it. You pay me some goddamn respek. Right? Right, boy?”

“You called me. There's no reason to be rude.”

“I'm rude? You stole my name! That's against the ten commandments! False witness! Was a time you'd get kilt for that! You out to get kilt?”

He pronounced it like a Scottish skirt. His speech had the flat articulation of the inbred rustic; his voice was all blade and no edge. I'd heard enough. “You needn't quote scripture to me, Enos. And I don't need this attitude. This conversation,” I concluded, “is over.” I hung up the telephone, but as I glanced at the receiver in its cradle, I just knew Enos had more in store for me.

Enos' voice was like the written possessive form of his first name: something seemed wrong with it, though exactly what it was eluded me. His age was indeterminate: 50 to 70, maybe, unless he was messing with me, which was a distinct possibility. He sounded like an old-timer from up in the hills. He seemed distinctly eccentric. The kind of person that, once he has your number, he doesn't just go away.

Three days later the phone rang again and I could tell just from the sound of the ring that it was Enos calling back. It sounded the same as it always did, but from the instant before it went off I knew it was him. I was standing next to the phone so I picked up fast. It was time to face the inevitable.

“Hello, Enos.”

“HA! You got the caller eye-dee, doncha, right?” He pronounced it as if it were words, not an acronym. He sounded genuinely delighted, too. My throat constricted and a prickle ran down my neck at the sound of his voice. “Nope. Just guessed.”

“NO! NO! HAW! You are one hell of a guesser, Ryan. You guessed me out good. So how ya doin', cousin?”

“Not bad.” I tried to keep my comments brief, so as not to ensnare myself more than necessary - but this was a real change of tack from our last conversation. And frankly, instability seemed more worrisome to me than pure malevolence. Caution was indicated.

“Hey, mebbe ya knew it were me callin', because of us bein' cousins and all, cousin! Ever think of that?”

There was a pause. He wanted me to respond. “Nope, never did.”

“Yeah, me neither, seein' as I didn't even know from you till last week, or more specifically, three days ago. That's when I found ya out from the new die-rectory. Didju know about me, afore ya come to town?”

“Nope.” It sounded like he knew something about us already, which exacerbated my sense of foreboding. I held my tongue.

“Well that's okay, it's good yer here. I do like to know where my kin

is at. So I guess you're Stuart's boy, right?"

The mention of my father's name chilled my blood. He'd been an only child, as had been his father, who'd died before I was born. As far as I knew growing up, we were all the family he had — till I learned in college of a few others of our surname scattered widely around the country. It stood to reason, I supposed; everybody came from somewhere, but it surprised me to discover it anyway so I mentioned it in passing to dad at some point during the summer break. He blew up. "Who the hell have you been talking to? Goddamn it what are those sadistic bastards saying behind my back?" His fist tightened around his glass as if to hurl it. I stammered an explanation, tried to put some distance between me and whatever was making him so angry. It looked like a sore subject.

Since then, I'd gotten a little of the background, but not much. It started coming up once I got to the point that he'd drink with me; we'd drink and talk and eventually sometimes he'd mention something about his family one way or another, and I'd draw him slowly out. What I learned was, Grandpa had been an only child, but great-grandpa had been the youngest of an even dozen boys in a family that had started out in an important old eastern port city. They'd all moved after a time from the seaboard to a major river city a few hundred miles inland, and then to a rail hub a piece further west, before settling down for good in the backwater upcountry burg dad said gramps said he was from. A few boys peeled off to seek their own fortunes every time the family relocated; grandpa probably never even met some of his older brothers. As for the six or so who really grew up with gramps in the hills, grandpa apparently didn't like to tell dad much about them but would sometimes invoke their names at the heights of his increasingly violent rages. It sounded like a highly inharmonious familial situation. Dad knew they'd all moved out eventually and had families of their own but that was all he knew, maybe all grandpa

knew. The way he told it, there were uncles out there somewhere and good riddance to 'em.

Uncles. Cousins. Enos. No matter how loosely a net is woven, eventually the strands come together again.

"Yes, I'm Stuart's boy. Whose boy are you?"

I regretted the words as soon as they left my lips. It was an invitation, an incitement. I could almost feel Enos hearing it on the other end of the line. I could hear him smiling as he began his answer:

"Well I don't know how far you've studied our illustrious family tree, but I'm sort of the unofficial genealogist for this ol' clan. It's like a hobby, in a manner of speakin'. So, in answer to your question, I'm Luther's boy, and Luther were Mal's boy, and Mal were Saul's boy, and Saul and Martin were brothers, along with all of grandpa Peter's other issue. And I guess you know, Martin were Bobby's dad. So that's our connection, there."

"Bobby?" I was hearing a lot of information for the first time; I didn't recognize the names.

"Bobby. Robert. Yer grandpaw. Doncha recognize the name, cousin?"

"Yes, 'Robert' I recognize. Dad — Stuart — never called him Bobby. He was 'Robert.' Or, usually, just 'sir'."

"HAW! His laugh rasped. "Well, I don't know about that. Mal met Bobby a few times and the story goes that he was a kinda a baby-man, always whining and slinkin' around. Mal sed 'Robert' were too grand a name for him, so they dubbed him in th' diminutive."

"Mal said that, did he?" I was reluctantly curious. This was more

family background than I'd ever heard before.

“Oh yea. Mal loved to tell the tales, ya know. He'd pull out a couplea firearms and sit on a stump just cleanin' on'em and talkin', and we'd all sit around listinin'. Of course, I was the most interested, but all of us partook to greater or lesser degree.”

“Who's 'all of us'?” I glanced up in the middle of my query; my wife was looking at me as if I were picking up a hitchhiker near a prison — but after so long in ignorance I just felt I had to ask.

Then Enos laid it all out for me — his grandpa's stories of cousins, ramshackle cabinlands crawling with brawny vulgar men and their untended offspring; dutch oven cookouts and merciless woodsheddings, brother against brother and cousins disciplining their own to establish primacy and to keep dangerously unpredictable grownups from getting involved. Hearing the history, I felt a resonance with these scraps of patrilineage that I'd suddenly inherited like an unwearable old uniform discovered in an attic from some ancient forebear's army days . But it wasn't a uniform, I'd inherited — it was my own heritage. It looked itchy and ill-fitting, but now it was indisputably mine.

We talked — or, he talked and I listened — for several minutes. Names poured out of his mouth and into my life. However, as stories kept unfolding I started to get antsy after a while. Enos' voice was gating and his hyperfamiliarity was shot through with a supercilious superiority that made me feel defensive. Suddenly, a loud bang sounded through from the other side of the line. Enos paused briefly in his recitation, uttered a short unintelligible curse to himself, then asked my forgiveness: “So sorry ma cousin, I've got a slight issue here needs my attention. It's good talkin' at ya, though. Hell, we're both in the same town now — you must be my closest living relative! I'm glad I foun' ya, cousin. We'll take this all up agin real soon.” And with that he peremptorily hung up on me.

As the dial tone hit my eardrum, I couldn't help but feel rather left hanging. He'd answered so many questions I'd never asked, and I'd had about enough of being lectured to for the time being - but by the same token, I was just starting to formulate queries of my own. Where were these uncles now? How had Enos gotten to this cosmopolitan city? What genetic predispositions ran in the family? Well, maybe it was just as well he hung up. He did seem like a pretty odd duck. I harbored a suspicion, though, that Enos was not finished with me quite yet.

So: I'm at the post office a few weeks ago. Fifteen years have come and gone, for better or worse. It feels like no time at all; it feels like twice a lifetime. One thing is sure, though: I haven't wasted any of that decade-and-a-half on Enos. After he'd hung up on me that night so long ago, I'd moved on — to a new job, a new hairstyle, a new apartment. My eyes were on the future; I had let go the mystery of my unsavory progenitors. I lived in the kind of blissful naïveté that any thinking man would know can't last.

“Flendrik. Ryan Flendrik.” I was picking up a package and I had to tell them who I was. I didn't know why at first; it was already written right there on the notification form they'd left on my door, but the postal clerk asked me my name and I told him. It was only later that I figured it out: I needed to say my name out loud so he could hear me say it. My fate had finally caught up with me again.

“Ryan Flendrik?!! You! Don't! Say!!” The voice rang my memory like an old-fashioned telephone bell. Everyone in the line turned to view the source — the others behind me, with curiosity; I, with dread. My expectation was that I wouldn't like what I saw, and I was right: Enos was approaching from the end of a long queue of impatient people. He was locked in on me with coon-dog focus, a wide sloppy grin on his moonlike face. His hair was a graying auburn frizz, big as a beach ball and clumped like cauliflower. His

plaid shirt was threadbare and seemingly held together purely by virtue of food stains. His massive gut strained against it, stretching it at those of his buttons he had remembered to fasten; his pants were, in a word, distressed — multi-patched, crudely restitched at the inner thigh. His feet wore sandals seemingly whittled by hand, with tired filthy socks through which several of his clawlike toenails had burrowed individual escape routes. His wide clip-on suspenders were spangled with logo buttons — I noticed one about supporting the president, right or wrong, and one equating abortion with genocide. His overall presence bore pungent evidence of either a vigorous work ethic or (more likely) a very relaxed approach to hygiene. He came at me fast with arms outstretched, exposing dark maxillary stains and pendulous manboobs.

“Member me, cousin? Enos! Enos Flendrik! I guv y'a call back when ya moved to town. You livin' roun' here, now?” He leaned in fast, almost knocking me aside to check the address on my paperwork. “Willya lookit that, willya? I just moved into a new place just barely up the street from yew!” He draped a soft soggy leg-like arm around me and, beaming with pride, turned me toward the dozen or so folk in the line. “Yer ma closest living relative, for damn sure!”

I felt the horizon closing in on me as his armpit soaked through to my shoulder. Closest living relative. As he gave me a humid squeeze, I realized that extricating myself from him was going to be a serious challenge. I wasn't sure I was up to it, to be honest.

