

False Papers
a short story
by Austin Mitchell

Clayton Collins looked at his wife and secretary, Opal. She was a petite woman whom he had married seven years ago. The union had produced two boys and a girl. Both of them were in a quandary.

Lascelles Ingram, the mathematics and woodwork teacher for the lower school, had suddenly disappeared. Actually, he had announced that his father had died. When Clayton as principal of the school, suggested that the staff would like to attend his father's funeral he had promptly refused.

"I tell you Opal, I just don't understand the man. Why wouldn't he want us to attend his father's funeral?" Clayton asked in consternation.

"Maybe he just likes his privacy and wanted a private funeral for his dad," she replied. She had never liked Lascelles. This was, especially after he got fifth former, Natalie Holmes, pregnant and tried to keep it a secret.

"His room is locked and has been that way for the past three weeks. I've tried to contact his wife, but to no avail," Clayton stated.

"Aren't they divorced dear and neither of us knows her or for that matter anything about her."

Lascelles had come to the school as a single man, stating on his resume that he was separated from his wife. They had two children. He had told his interviewers that they still got support from him. Of course Clayton and the chairman of the school board, Isaiah Mc Pherson, had been his main interviewers. His references had been checked. They were found to be outstanding persons in their own fields.

"I'm going to give him one more week to turn up and then I'm going to call in the police. The students are suffering. It's a good thing that it's just two weeks to the end of term," Clayton finished.

The school was a private high school with some three hundred students on roll. Kempton High was ten years old and had a good reputation for turning out excellent students. Clayton had been with the school for six years now and felt that he was doing a good job. He was fearful that Lascelles could damage the school's reputation. His work at previous schools where he had taught was okay. So what could the matter be that he was hiding?

Detective Inspector Fred Reidle sat opposite Clayton in his office.

“Why would he just disappear like that? It seems strange, after all funerals these days are hardly private affairs. I tell you, Mr. Collins, that it would be better for you to get a search warrant and go through his apartment. There must be some clues there about him.”

Kempton High had built cottages to accommodate some of its teachers at a reasonable rent, although no boarding was done. The rent was deducted from a teacher's pay before he or she received it so that the school had no late payments for that and other utilities. There were some teachers who complained unceasingly about their utilities, but never Lascelles.

“Do you know where he is from? At least we could start there, probably check his high school and college as a background check on him. I'll assign one of my men to it. You never know what we may come up with.”

“I'll appreciate that very much Inspector. Any help we can get would be most welcome. It's quite embarrassing not being able to inform the students as to his whereabouts.”

The two men talked briefly some more before Reidle left.

Clayton returned to his own work. The holidays were just around the corner. There would be a two week break before summer school would start. Summer school would be for one month and was compulsory for all those students in danger of not moving on to a higher grade in September. Based on the student's reports and meetings with teachers about seventy five students would have to attend this year. It wasn't free and many parents had protested against it, but he felt that it was necessary.

Clayton was going through copies of some school reports that Saturday morning when he heard loud noises. He went outside and observed that they were coming from the guard post. When he went there he found a removal truck parked near the guard post. The driver was remonstrating with the guard.

“Here is the principal. Talk to him, maybe he can help you,” the guard said.

The man, a slim six footer turned his attention to Clayton. The school gate was still locked. The guard had returned to his post.

“Yes sir, what can I do for you?” Clayton asked the man.

“My name is Aston Duffus. Mr. Ingram, he used to teach at this school and he sent me for his things. This guard doesn’t want to open the gate for me to get the man’s things and he desperately needs them.”

“Where is Mr. Ingram now, Mr. Duffus? I’d like to know that before I let you into his apartment. I don’t think it would be right for me to let you take his things like that. You tell him that if he wants his things he should come for them,” Clayton told an angry and bewildered Aston Duffus.

“I can’t tell you where he is. All he did was give me the address of this school and sent me for his things.”

“Just like that, not even a letter of introduction. How was his father’s funeral?”

For a moment Duffus was dumfounded and Clayton knew he was trying to make up something.

“It went okay.”

“I still feel sad that he didn’t see it fit to invite the staff.”

“I don’t know why he didn’t invite you and your staff to his father’s funeral. Look all he did was send me for his things. Since you’re in charge here and don’t want to give them to me, I think I’d better leave,” Duffus said and went to his truck.

“Tell him he can come for his things anytime he wants them and we have two months pay for him too,” Clayton shouted after Duffus as the man jumped into his truck and started reversing it towards the main road. He made sure that he took the license number of Duffus’ truck just in case.

Two weeks later, Clayton was at a seminar in Ocho Rios when he got a call late in the evening. Lascelles had come for his things. He had brought the police from Kingston and took his belongings out of his apartment. It was a Friday evening. Opal and the children had come down too. He was caught in a quandary.

He called Inspector Reidle and related to him what had happened. He said he'd try to find out which police station had authorized Ingram to take his things.

Clayton drove home his family from Ocho Rios that Monday evening. Opal and the children said that they were tired and went to bed. He was watching television when his telephone rang. He went and picked it up.

"Is this Mr. Clayton Collins, the principal of Kempton High. Listen boss, Lascelles Ingram came for his things and got them. He doesn't owe you any money and the two checks you have for him you can keep them. If I were you I would forget about him," the man at the other end of the line said before hanging up.

Clayton stood there staring at the receiver in shock. He knew that it was a threat. He didn't wake up Opal to tell her about it that night.

"A man called me last night, telling me to back off the Lascelles' case," he told her as they breakfasted that morning minus the children.

"You'll have to report it to the police, dear," she advised. "Would you be able to identify the voice?"

"It wasn't Lascelles and it wasn't that man, Duffus."

"Well, report it to the police, dear. We have to be careful. Have they come up with anything yet?"

"No, they haven't, but they're still working on it."

The summer school was two weeks on and everything was going on quite well. During the third week a Detective Sergeant, Patrick Dennis, called on Clayton. It was a Tuesday morning.

"Do you want us to continue the case? After all, you haven't brought any charges against him. For all we know he could be in another part of the country."

Clayton knew that the policeman was telling him that they were getting nowhere and that he should leave it as is.

“Sergeant, I can’t tell the police how to operate. If you feel that there is nothing more to it then that’s it then.”

“There is just one thing I’d like and that is photocopies of all his certificates and his recommendations. I guess that’s where we should have started.”

Clayton called one of the clerks and she got busy on the photocopy machine while he filled in the Sergeant about the school. When the clerk was finished, she put the photocopies in an envelope and the policeman took it and left. Clayton thought that maybe that was the last they were seeing of Sergeant Dennis or Inspector Reidle for that matter.

Finally summer school was over and he was glad for the break, although he was still at school during the holidays.

Clayton was in his office that Tuesday afternoon when he got a call. It was Opal, she couldn’t find Carl, their eldest son.

“Have you called the police, Opal?” he asked. When she replied in the negative he told her to call them and that he was on his way. He practically ran from his office, telling Alrick Atland, the school’s dean of discipline to lock up for him. He told him that something was wrong with one of his sons.

As he turned a corner, he saw a parked car. He continued driving, he saw the car coming up behind him and he realized that something was wrong. He turned on an unpaved road and thought maybe he’d made a mistake. Then he remembered that Stanford Daley lived up here and he was sure to be at home. Stanford was the chemistry teacher at Kempton High. The car was still following him. He continued driving until he saw the man’s driveway coming up. He saw that the man’s car was parked on the roadside and he pulled into the driveway. The car, that was following him, went past him. It went up the road, stopped, but nobody came out.

Then, before Clayton could get out of his car, the car reversed back up the road.

“Clayton, if you pull the police off the case we’ll return your son to you,” a man in the car shouted. The car spun around and shot past him. He saw one of the men in the car point an object resembling a gun, in his direction. He ducked, but the man didn’t fire and soon the car was gone.

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