

# Family Secret

Stephan Sanders

*Stephan Sanders* is a writer and columnist on the Amsterdam daily *De Volkskrant* whose publications often deal with sensitive or controversial subjects such as the Rushdie affair, the position of intellectuals in the Western world, the narcissism of the gay movement, the ambiguous status of minorities in the Netherlands, etc. If you think there is nothing left to be said on the subject of "identities," read this essay.

I am a person of colour.

Personally, I find this an exceptionally improbable observation: a remark from a book which has rightly fallen into oblivion and must have been written around the time of *Roots* (I mean, of course, the time dealt with in the television series; the time when slavery existed but t.v., walkmans and airplanes didn't; that's the pre-history I mean).

I imagine that book as one long lament from a man driven by such good intentions that by page eight or nine you've already begun to hate the guy.

Things just aren't going his way.

People misunderstand him and ill-treat him; the white woman who smiles at him in the street turns out to be a bitch who is only interested in setting him up.

As a reader you've just settled comfortably into the story when the woman's

towering, broad-shouldered husband shows up and grabs the person of colour by the scruff of his coloured person's neck and lifts him from the ground with one hand.

"You dirty nigger."

"But I'm a person of colour."

And you've still got 112 pages to go.

At the end you read 'The End', and that's a relief because the final period of this account seems just as arbitrary as the first exclamation point in the first line and all the tragedy and misunderstanding that's crammed in-between.

I find a sentence like "I am a person of colour", a sentence like that is a kind of ... faggot's humour - I'm trying at all costs to avoid using the word *camp*.

A transvestite with hairy legs and a bulge in her skirt who shrieks: I am what I am.

A joke so old that it's not even possible to smile at it anymore.

Have I made it clear that I feel only the most contemptuous affinity with the title of person of colour? That as far as I'm concerned no intonation is sardonic enough to tone the expression down? Open parentheses, close parentheses, what's in-between should be crushed.

But now this: you land somewhere at a distant, foreign airport, as you've done so often because you travel a lot for work, and you're accustomed to the fact that you can't share that sigh of relief that's thoughtlessly released by your fellow passengers - they are, after all, approaching their *home port*; I don't want to make it sound any more beautiful or heroic than it is, but let's say that during this period of time you've developed a certain routine for dealing with the unknown, and you're not expecting familiar faces to be pressing their equally familiar noses against the glass wall at the arrival hall.

The unknown, you know that by now.

But this time it's different: You've never met the people pacing impatiently back and forth near the exit; they're holding flowers and will soon be trying out intimate pinches on a couple of cheeks.

Not on yours, you assume.

But as soon as they get you in their sights they nod encouragingly and seem to recognize you.

Their cousin or their brother must be walking behind me. The gesture must be intended for them.

But you're the last one through the gate with his cart, and rest assured that those warm glances are not intended for the emptiness behind you.

Only later, at the end of the trip, will you understand that at that moment those

people waiting saw something in you that you had shrugged off up until then.

That you're a person of colour in the white man's opinion.

That you're also a person of colour according to the person of colour.

That you're one of those persons of colour in the eyes of the black man.

And before you know it, before you can order a taxi to take you to downtown Johannesburg where you have to watch out because the junkies are more brutal and desperate down there than in Harlem, New York, as the taxi driver with the withered junkie's face assures you, you're already part of a family history.

You've entered a world populated only by relatives: you're on the verge of war with some, you once sealed a cautious alliance with others, nasty aunts are milling about, sugar uncles and lots of *brothers* whom you're supposed to embrace with a genial gesture.

Whatever you may think: no one should leave you indifferent. Nothing is neutral or purposeless or half-hearted. The entire group is so caught up with each other that no hostage-taking could have created stronger bonds.

You don't know them - the man behind the counter with the Cape Town accent who winks at you, the black boys from room-service who wait threateningly for a tip - but they seem to know you. They are obviously assuming that you are aware of the interrelationships in this family. You will avoid the touchy subjects, spare the sensitive spots. You know your place and will follow the seating arrangement, which is so obvious that no one even takes the trouble to explain it to you.

They don't have to tell you that new laws are in effect in this country, but that the old reflexes and impulses which have proven their usefulness for generations, cannot be so easily discarded.

These laws are in the blood - and don't bother denying it, they're in your blood too.

But listen, you want to say: me just arrived.

Me no understand. Me not from here.

Look here, this is my ticket, this is my passport, I'm not part of this history.

There is no reason, lady-with-the-searching-blue-eyes, to praise me for the fact that I read James Joyce.

"Education is so important," you said approvingly, while the airplane screeched over the coloured townships of Cape Town (small brick houses, auto wrecks, mud).

You laid a hand on my arm, and looked down.

"So damn important."

Translated by James Geary