

*Rebecca Babcock*

## FLAG MAN

Summers during university, my brother Michael worked on a road construction crew. He was the flag man. He spent most of the day holding a *Stop* sign, then turning it around to *Slow*, letting the cars creep by as other people ran the machinery behind him.

I used to ask him if it didn't drive him nuts, standing around like that all day.

"I don't mind," he'd say. "It gives me time to think. And I get to spend my summers outside."

Michael had managed to collect enough scholarships not to have to worry about working summers, but he worked anyway. He told me once that he had saved almost everything he made, working the road crew. He didn't say how much that was, exactly, but I knew it was a lot. I asked him what he was saving for.

"Don't know yet," he replied.

I knew he was lying.

I drove by him a couple of times, while he was working. He didn't even look at the cars he was signalling, just gazed off, staring at the sky or the buildings, or past them, watching things I couldn't see. Behind him, the other workers on his crew tore up asphalt with jackhammers, or thrust shovels into the dry earth that lay beneath the roads. Michael didn't even seem to know that they were there. He just stood in front of them, holding his sign in one hand, with the other hand, glove and all, thrust into his pocket, his chin tilted up and away from me and the people in the other cars.

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With all the money he made, my brother didn't bother to buy a car for himself. He said he liked riding the city bus. He also caught rides home with me, whenever we went up to visit our Mom. He never pitched in for gas.

My last year of university, Michael and I drove home for Christmas Holidays. We agreed that I would pick him up at ten that morning. At eleven, I was still sitting in his living room, listening to him rummage through his closet and pack for the week-long trip. Finally, he emerged freshly shaved, his clothes neat and ironed, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

“Could you grab that one for me?” he asked, gesturing to a backpack by the foot of his bed.

I picked it up and nearly toppled under the weight. “What is this?” I asked, hoisting it over my shoulder.

“My books,” he said.

“You’re going to do homework over Christmas?”

“You’re not?”

The ride home took three hours on a good driving day. You don’t get a lot of good driving days in December. We’d had a short autumn and a lot of snow already that year. The roads were slotted where tyres had worn through the packed snow, and my nerves crackled at the possibility of black ice and of animals on the highway. I told Michael to keep his hands off the radio while I was driving, that I didn’t need his crappy music to distract me. As I crept around the slick curves of the highway, with my teeth gritted and my fingers locked on the wheel, he teased me about being a nervous driver. He rode with his seat all the way back, staring out the window at the sky. His legs were crossed, and he looked at once uncomfortably pretzeled and oddly lotus-positioned.

“Take your feet off the seat,” I told him. He grinned and dropped his sneakers to the floor.

We pulled into my mom’s driveway around suppertime. She rushed out into the cracking-cold evening air in sweatshirt and jeans. “What took you so long?” She hoisted Michael’s book bag over her shoulder.

“You know how Katie drives,” Michael replied, hugging her.

“As long as you’re both here safe, I’m happy,” Mom said, squeezing my arm with her free hand. She was smiling widely, almost vibrating with excited energy. When she ran into the house ahead of us, my brother’s bag slung from her shoulder, her jeans hanging loosely on her thin legs and her too-big sweatshirt falling almost to her thighs, she looked like a little kid.

We spent a quiet week at my mom’s house. Christmas was just the three of us, like it had been most of our lives. The temperature slipped down to a forbidding cold that kept us indoors most of the time, and the sun shone all week, so bright and so clear that it looked like a bleached stain in the impossibly

blue sky. Michael and I let Mom fuss over us and cook us more food than we could ever eat, pretended we didn't notice when she loaded up the trunk of my car with home-made frozen dinners to take back with us.

It had been a long time since I'd been around my brother as much as I was that Christmas. Michael had grown wide-jawed and monosyllabic, and he seemed to have trouble sitting still. He walked aimlessly from room to room, or sat on the couch, watching TV and flicking from channel to channel. He hardly spoke at all, and when he did, his voice would trail off before he reached the ends of his sentences. I filled silences for him, and so did Mom, as though we could calm the air around him and ward off that nervous silence. His textbooks lay spread across the dining room table most of the time we were there. When we sat down to eat, we would have to push them out of the way. Mom was always careful not to lose his page. Every few hours, Michael would sit down in front of his books, flipping from page to page, scribbling notes into a notebook with a torn cover, and Mom would beam at him, offering him warmed plates of Christmas leftovers. After a half hour or so of studying, though, he would be up from his seat, staring out the window, his pencil twirling in rapid circles between his fingers.

The last afternoon before classes started up again, I was jamming our bags into the back seat of my little car, as Michael looked on from the patio. He was leaning against the wall of the house, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"If you're in that much of a hurry to get back, come help me," I called.

"I'm in no hurry," he replied. "Do you want to go for a drive?"

"Yeah," I replied. "A drive home."

"First let's go out to the cabin," Michael said.

I didn't answer for a moment. I closed the car door and leaned against it, hoping Michael wouldn't see that my right leg had started shaking so badly I couldn't put weight on it. Our father had built the cabin years before. It was in the elbow of a pine forest that stretched thirty miles in each direction. There was no power or running water. When we were little, our father had wanted us to spend weekends out there, but Michael wouldn't — and I wouldn't go without him. Finally, Dad gave up, disappeared. We didn't see him for years after that. "What if someone else lives there now?"

He shook his head. "There's no one there. I went to see it last summer. We should go have a look together."

I wanted to say no, to tell him that we had to get on the road before it got dark, but I was afraid that if I did, he would hear the thinness of my voice, my desperate desire to stay as far away from the cabin as I could. I was afraid he would ask me why I was so afraid to go. And if he asked, I didn't know what to tell him. I felt trapped. "Okay," I called back. "Let's go."

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The clear, white-brightness of the sun sharpened the cold, lending the winter air a searing quality that snagged my breath. As we drove out of town, I fought a quiet panic that was uncurling just under my rib cage. I hated the area outside the Northern Alberta town where I'd grown up. I hated the sparse, stunted poplars and the weedy-looking fields. I hated the way the gravel roads dropped away without warning, their sides disintegrating into marshy ditches. The fields were edged with whited-over ponds, filled with cat-tails and stunted willows tipped in hoar-frost and poking through a heavy white blanket. I hated the loneliness of the place. I always did.

It was a long drive to the old cabin, and we had to wind through old back roads. I had been out there only once since I was a little girl, but I knew every road, remembered every field. The houses along the way seemed smaller now, and some of them looked abandoned, but I remembered them. As I cut down range roads that spat gravel at the underside of my car, I remembered every curve and every corner. Finally, I turned down the old driveway. I had to slow almost to a crawl as the heavy spruce boughs scraped the sides of my car.

When we got there, I climbed out of the car first and walked bravely to the front door. A small pine tree had grown up in front of it, and the kitchen window was smashed. The walls were weathered and greying. Here and there, bits of grass and plants were growing out between the logs. They were dead and frost-covered, but I could see that they had taken root in the wood.

"Probably animals living inside it now," I said, brushing past Michael as I moved towards the faint indentation in the earth under the bay window. I remembered playing there when I was little; it was the spot that Dad said would be a flower bed some day. I pushed away the snow with my foot, but all I could see underneath were the same weeds and wild grasses that had always covered the rest of the cleared area around the cabin. Michael nodded, and rubbed his hand along the greying logs. He was smiling faintly, looking into the trees on the other side of the driveway.

"I remembered it being so big," he said softly. It still surprised me how deep his voice had become. I always expected a faint adolescent squeak, even though

he looked much older than his eighteen years. "Look," he said, laughing, as he reached up and put his hand on the eavestrough, his fingers grazing the curling shingles of the roof.

"I'm getting cold," I said. "Can we get going?"

He was quiet for a long moment, his palms pressed flat against the cabin walls. "Can we go inside for a moment first?" He didn't wait for to answer. "Bet the door's not locked," he called, testing it.

I followed him into the kitchen. The window had been boarded over, but the plywood had been torn away, letting in the dim winter light that managed to filter through the evergreens. I wondered if Michael had been the one to pull the plywood down. "Okay," I said, trying to relax. "Okay, Michael. What are we doing here?"

He didn't answer for a long moment. Instead, he rubbed his foot back and forth along the floor until he had pushed aside the dirt enough to see the lino beneath. He closed his eyes. His face was mostly turned away from me, but I could see that he'd closed his eyes. "Did you ever meet my girlfriend Pam?" he said at last.

"No," I said. I thought for a moment. "I don't know, maybe. Why?"

"She was fun. I liked her. She was a runner, did triathlons, things like that." Michael had opened his eyes, but he was staring out the window, through the space where the glass clung to the frame like thick pointed teeth. "Then she went jogging one night, back when we were still dating. She was running over the High Level Bridge, and this guy came up behind her and punched her in the back of the head. She fell down. Hurt like hell, she told me, and it made her mad. When she was still lying on the sidewalk, she started swearing at the guy — *What the fuck are you doing, Why the fuck did you hit me*, stuff like that. And she said that he just stood over her, staring at her, looking confused. So finally, Pam stops swearing long enough to get scared. She's still lying on the ground, so she kind of rolls off the sidewalk, under the guard wire, and onto the road part of the bridge. Thank God there weren't any cars coming, but she did manage to flag down one guy, this old man in a great big Buick. When they drove off, she could see this guy who punched her, still standing on the bridge, watching her."

"Jesus," I said.

"Yeah," Michael replied, finally looking at me. "Police said that this guy was a rapist, he knocked women out by punching them in the head, then

dragged them off to — you know.” He shook his head, and looked back out the window. “Pam was lucky. She called me over the next day, told me about the whole thing. I thought she was so brave, she didn’t cry or anything. I was freaked. But Pam seemed so calm when she told me about it. After that, though, she didn’t want to go out much. I told her, No big deal, I understand. I was glad she wasn’t going running alone anymore. Then, pretty soon, she stopped going to her classes, she quit her job. And one day, she hands me her bank card, asks me if I’ll go grocery shopping for her. Tells me she can’t stand the crowds at the grocery store. She stopped going out altogether. Wouldn’t leave her apartment. I bought her groceries, fucking tampons and everything, and when she ran out of money, I paid for everything. I didn’t tell her she was broke, just kept taking her bank card with me when I went.”

Michael stopped talking. He looked like he was going to start crying. He kept swallowing hard, blinking. “Why didn’t you tell someone?” I asked him.

“Who was I going to tell?” he said. His voice was even again. He wasn’t going to cry. “I didn’t know her parents, and what were her friends going to do? So I just kept coming back to her place, bringing her food. She gave me her apartment key. She said she didn’t need it.

“She stayed inside her apartment for nearly a month. After the first week or so, she started yelling at me every time I came by, picking fights over the kind of milk I brought her, started screaming that she doesn’t like the shows on TV. And I take it. I let her yell at me, if that’s what she needs to do, and I buy her groceries, and I look after her. Then, all of a sudden, she asks me for her key back. Says she’s managed to re-enrol herself in a couple of classes, that she’s got a job. And then she just stops calling me, won’t answer when I phone her. And that’s it.”

I didn’t know what to say. I just stood there. I couldn’t look at Michael. He shuffled off, and I could hear him prowling around the place, heard him dragging something — maybe it was our old bunk bed — across the floor in the room we used to share. I didn’t want to follow him, just stayed where I was, looking at the cracked log wall. I stood there, listening to Michael move through the bedrooms of the cabin until my fingers were frozen and numb, and my toes became unresponsive lumps in my boots. I walked back out to my car, hoping that he would hear the engine. I held my hands in front of the hot air vents, waiting for him.

Finally, he emerged. I watched him shut the door behind him, shove it with his shoulder to make sure it was closed.

“Just wait a minute,” he said as he climbed into the car.

"I want to get home," I said. "To Edmonton. To the city."

"Help me."

I looked at him. He was looking at the cabin, smiling a little. "Help me," he said again, more softly this time.

"Help you what?"

"Help me buy this place. We can share it. You get it one weekend, I'll take it the next. It could be fun. Like going on vacation whenever you want to."

I looked out at the rough-looking log walls, the bits of dead grass that clung to the joints. I could feel the silence, and it seemed even heavier in the cold. I had to remind myself to breathe, to draw in the searing dry air that was blasting out of the car's vents. "Michael, I can't afford it," I said at last.

He nodded. "Right," he said. "I understand." He still wasn't looking at me.

We didn't say anything else as we drove back to town.

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Mom hugged us at the door until our bones almost cracked. She was still scolding us for waiting until dark to drive home as we pulled away from the house. Michael put his seat back and slept. I kept the music loud enough to keep me from dozing off.

As we rounded a dark corner on the highway, a motion in the darkness along the ditch caught my eye. I slammed on the brake, and the car skittered across the lanes and along the shoulder before finally sliding to a stop, the right bumper nudged into the snow bank. I watched as the deer leaped across the highway and down into the ditch, its white behind fading like a puff of breath into the darkness.

"What's up?" Michael asked sleepily, following my gaze into the darkness.

"Nothing." I cranked into reverse, tightening my arms to hide the quaking. "Roads are slippery." I pulled back onto the highway, and Michael fell asleep again without another word. He snored a little as he slept, and I imagined him sleeping alone in our father's cabin, his snores resonating between the cracked log walls.

It was dark by the time the highway curved us around the city. To my right, yellow-tinted lights glowed above the contours of the earth, bounded on the far side by a bright edge of pearls. We drove closer, nearing the lights, and I had a sudden desire to see what was underneath the lights and roads — a hidden world of meaning and mechanism, almost independent of everything above. I felt if I could get my fingers under that blanket of lights, I could pull it up, and it would sound like I was pulling a handful of chickweed from my mom's garden — a slow, juicy popping and tearing as I rolled the lights and the streets and the houses away from the ground. And underneath, in the cool, damp-smelling earth there would be pink worms and bright-black beetles, surprised by the sudden air on their backs. Before I could imagine them squirming and writhing, the highway dipped down into the lights, and we were in the city, the streetlights and neon storefronts all around us, rolling alongside other cars, and I couldn't see it as a blanket anymore, as anything that could ever be torn up or rolled away.

I reached over and nudged my brother awake.

"Almost home," I said.

That night, as I lay in bed, I didn't need music to keep me awake. I couldn't close my eyes without seeing the inside of the old cabin, and Michael's oddly blank expression as he told me that story. I tried to remember if I had ever met Pam. I called up the faces of all the girls I could ever remember seeing him with. There weren't that many, and none of them seemed to fit the name *Pam*.

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I didn't talk to Michael much that spring. We were both busy with school, and he never was much good at being the first to call. Every time I picked up the phone to talk to him, I would stand there, trying to think of what to say, wondering what I had been doing while my brother was buying food and tampons for his shut-in girlfriend. And I would hang up the phone, nothing to say to him, nothing to ask but questions about him and Pam.

I didn't sleep well that spring. I had nightmares, sometimes. I would wake up, and be too afraid to close my eyes again. Most often, I would phone my boyfriend Aaron who had just moved to London, usually catching him just as he got home from work. I would ask him about his day, and tell him I missed him, listening to his deep, familiar voice when he told me he missed me, too. I would close my eyes and imagine being with him in a country without breath-cracking cold and thick black forests that go on forever.

One night, I had barely fallen asleep when my dreams woke me. Too unnerved to close my eyes again, I lay awake until I knew Aaron would be home. I listened to his voice in the dark as he told me about his music students.

“Aaron,” I interrupted him, “what would you do if I asked you for help?”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “What kind of help?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, frustrated. “Just — help.”

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” I replied. I closed my eyes in the dark. “I’m just tired. And I miss you.”

I didn’t see Michael again until one weekend, not long before the end of classes, when my mom called from his apartment. She was spending the weekend, she said, and she had cooked dinner for us.

Michael’s apartment was a twenty-minute walk from mine. It was a warm night, and I enjoyed the cool, green smell of grass and damp spring earth. It reminded me that soon people would be mowing these lawns, planting flowers in the soil. I slowed down when Michael’s building came into view, enjoying the softness of the night. Across the street, a guy dressed in dirty jeans and a baseball cap stepped out from a pub doorway. I felt him watching me, and my steps quickened, almost running me up the walkway and into the lighted doorway of Michael’s building. My hands were still shaking when I knocked on his door.

Mom was still making dinner. “Go and sit down with your brother,” she said, hugging me quickly. “I’ll be done in a minute.”

Michael was on the couch. I took the chair. “Have you bought Dad’s old cabin yet?” I asked. I hadn’t meant to ask it like that, I had intended to say *Hello* first, at least, but *Hello* didn’t come out.

“No.” He didn’t even look away from the TV.

“Michael — why do you want to buy that place? Dad only lived there a couple of years. Do you even remember being out there when we were kids?”

“A little,” he replied. He wouldn’t look at me. Mom came to tell us dinner was ready. He grinned suddenly and told her a joke.

Mom and Michael chatted over dishes of stew and dumplings. I couldn't keep up with what they were saying. I wasn't hungry, but I finished my supper before they made much of a dent in theirs. There was the tiniest lull in their conversation, and I blurted, "Mom, Michael wants to buy Dad's old cabin." I hadn't intended to tell her that, certainly not over supper, but I was glad that I had. I watched my mother's face, eager for her reaction.

"What?" Mom looked up from her dinner, her gaze almost frightened as she glanced back and forth between me and my brother.

"It's what he's been saving his road crew money for." I couldn't look at Michael.

"Michael?" The frightened stare was on him now. I heard Michael clear his throat and fidget in his chair.

"It was an idea I had," he said. His voice was strangely deep, and I knew he was trying to sound grown-up, in control. "I found out who bought it after Dad left, and he said he'd be willing to sell, but it's more than I can afford right now. I'd have to take out a mortgage."

"Why on earth?" Mom said. Her napkin found a dribble of stew on the table, and rubbed it briskly. "What would you do with a broken-down old cabin in the middle of nowhere?"

"I thought it would be a nice place to get away to. Weekends, that sort of thing. Only — I spoke to the bank, and I don't really have the credit to get the kind of mortgage I'd need. I would have to get someone to co-sign."

"Me." Mom's eyes had narrowed. I could look at Michael now. His gaze was locked on the table.

"I was going to ask," he muttered. His voice had softened. He had already lost his bravado.

"Michael, I don't think you've thought much about this."

Michael didn't answer. For a long while, no one said anything.

After supper, Mom went out onto the balcony to smoke while Michael and I washed the dishes. His silence prickled me, made me shut up.

"I'm sorry, Michael," I managed to say at last.

“Yeah. Well, she probably wouldn’t have said yes anyway.”

I heard the sliding door open then, and Mom stepped back into the living room. I looked at Michael. He was stacking the plates in the cupboard, and his back was to me, but I knew he wasn’t mad anymore. “Are you doing the construction crew again this summer?” I asked him.

“Yeah. What about you? Have a job yet?”

“Not yet.” I looked away. In fact, I had a job — in a library in London. But I couldn’t tell him that. Not yet.

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I remembered one girl that Michael introduced me to. She was small, pretty. She spoke with an accent. I wasn’t sure if she was from New Zealand or Australia. We went bowling together, the three of us. It was Michael’s idea. Whenever it was my turn, she and Michael would sit close together, and she was always touching him, her hand on his shoulder, or his thigh.

When she went to the washroom, I waited for Michael to ask me, *Do you like her?* or *What do you think?* He never did. He bowled his turn, then slid into the seat in front of the scoreboard, stage-whispering *Gutter ball* as I stood to take my turn. He didn’t tell me where they had met, or even what she did. And before I could ask, she was back, sliding her arm hand down his back as she walked past him to bowl her turn.

I tried hard to remember her name. I was pretty sure it wasn’t Pam.

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