

## Red Flag

Growing up, you could always find a bright red flag standing at the summit of the hill nearest my house. No one knew how it got there, and no one knew what it meant.

Every time it sprung up, neighbours of mine, and even my Dad once, evicted the flag from the ground it was placed. Some threw it away, others burned it for a crowd. But no matter what else would go on in the world, the flag would return, standing tall atop the hill, flourishing red in the breeze.

I have been a witness of conflict my whole life. I've seen it all and for every stupid reason. But, always, one side realises that they don't really care, or that the other side wanted it more, that the stakes were too great or not great enough. The child is given up, the war is abandoned, the divorce goes through. Someone offers a hand in peace and someone gives an apology on their knees. The only dispute that I thought would never end involved that red flag.

It was raised and it was brought down, again and again. Now, all grown up, the persistence impresses me. But, as a kid, what really amazed me was how this person had so many flags.

The hill was a little play spot for us, so every time a new flag was found I always got the chance to examine it. I ran my hand down the same plastic flagpole that supported every single flag. I rubbed the flag's fabric in between my hands, feeling that identical material that looked so soft but felt so rough in my young fingers.

Who was this person with all the flags in the world? I felt like it was impossible for it to be anyone around the town. I thought I would've seen the flags through their open windows or poking through their garage doors and spilling out onto their driveway.

This was the period of my life going from when I was six to when I was ten. That's four years. A new, identical, flag every two days for four years. That's, at least, seven hundred and twenty-eight flags. Seven hundred and twenty-nine including leap years. A standard flag is three by five, and they stood at least as tall as me, so let's say a metre, give or take.

To have that many flags just sitting in a house would've been uncomfortable, at best.

I was a sad little kid, that's for sure. Caring about those flags so much. Maybe it makes me a sad little adult, still caring so much.

Eventually, the neighbourhood decided that no one was allowed up the hill. It made it all the more exciting, to sneak up there when no one was looking. Sometimes I even saw the flag before anyone else.

In the fourth year, when I was ten years old, one of my neighbours decided to stake out the hill for the entire night, determined to put an end to things. He didn't tell anyone, knowing they would stop him. Knowing they loved seeing that flag.

In the early morning of a warm summer's night, underneath an endless sea of stars, the criminal was caught.

Me and my family rushed out the house and raced up the hill. The entire neighbourhood was rushing beside us with grins on their faces and the gait of animals. We hurried up the hill like wolves underneath the glorious moon.

At the summit, our neighbour had someone with his hands twisted behind his back. It was a man. It was my Dad.

I stared at the man I cherished, slumped on his knees with a red flag by his feet. Soon the whole neighbourhood was gathered atop the hill. A few dozen witnesses to my father's execution.

I don't mean he died, of course. He's still alive now, even. But that's how he refers to that day.

Fired from his job and shunned by his friends. Divorced by my mother and ignored by my sister. All because of those red flags.

He never told anyone why he did it. He never explained a word. Some people asked when they passed him in the street, some called at his house, some called on his phone. They all stopped talking when he moved the conversation elsewhere. They ended up making their own stories.

'It's a protest against the war,' one of them said.

'I heard he was trying to form a new country,' said another.

'No, no, it's about the meaningless nature of life, obviously,' someone else assured.

And that flag became whatever people wanted it to become. To me, it always just stayed a flag, but I know I'm in the minority. I've seen how other people live.

Everything in this life has a reason, they whisper in their mirrors when their wife leaves them. There's a purpose here, they murmur as their grandmother lays dead on the

floor. What can I learn from this? They ask the spirits floating around them as they travel to the hospital in the back of an ambulance, without any arms.

My father stopped talking to me. For my own good, he said. When I was the only one in the town who visited him, tried to bring him food and some money, try to tell him about my life.

‘They’ll stop talking to you,’ he told me.

And I would just agree with him and walk away with the sandwiches still in my bag and my money still in my pocket.

If I’d known what the flag meant would he have loved me? I have to ask myself that sometimes. I have to otherwise everything would drift away from me.

I make the sandwiches every Sunday, even if I don’t take them to him. He would cut them into triangles for me as a child because I never ate them if he cut them into rectangles. I cut them into triangles even now, stuffing the soft corners into my mouth at the table with the empty chairs.

I visit the hill often, the climb nothing compared to what it was when I was little. I stand there and look at the neighbourhood, the house I grew up in, the houses of my neighbours, the houses I wished I could live in just off in the distance. But I never stake a red flag in the ground. I’m nothing like my Dad.