



Carolyn Steele Agosta

Flags Waving

Hold your head high. That's the very first thing they teach in Color Guard. Keep your chin up, back straight, and throw that flag for all it's worth. If you've done it right, the flag pole will drop right back into your hands, like it's part of you. And if it doesn't, well, you are still holding your head high.

I see him as we round the corner of Main and Beaufort, halfway through the parade, just as I do the overhead horizontal. Dad. Same blonde hair, same square jaw, same way of standing - one hand in a back pocket, the other holding a drink. My hands keep working that flag even though my fingertips buzz. Left, out, swing right. Up, hold, roll out.

He's in front of the bridal shop and just as I pass him, it's flag loop, eyes right and we stare at each other, face to face. Can't tell if he recognizes me, I'm wearing those fake Ray-Bans, but his cup stops halfway to his lips. It's like a tunnel of pure vision between him and me, everything else a blur, and then he's gone, left behind in the crowd as the band swings into *God Bless the U.S.A.*

In front of me, Emily Sigmon drops her flag during the may-spin. I step right over it and keep marching, making sure my feet don't catch on the glittery red fabric. Never stop to pick up a fallen flag because the band marches on. Tilt up, forward, tip left and roll. Front circle, switch hands, back circle, snap. Left, right, Dad, Dad.

Lord a'mighty, it's hot out. Seems like with a hundred years of Old Soldier's Parade tradition, someone should've figured out that August isn't the best time of year for marching in the sun. We get twenty seconds of blessed shade beneath the oaks in front of the library and I see Mumma with Brian and the baby. I wonder if she knows Dad's here. Overhand circles, two, three, four.

The parade ends at the bank parking lot. It's full of convertibles with poster-board signs. "Harry Needham, Mayor!", "Rose Mackie, Register of Deeds!", "Misty Brunette, Tiny Miss All-American Sweetheart!". The 4H Club climbs off hay bales on the back of Kyle Treadmore's pick-up truck and someone presses a cold can of Sundrop into my hand.

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I have to get out of there. Everyone around me is talking but all I can hear is the rattle of my breathing and the roar of my heart. Emily Sigmon is crying and all the girls tell her it's okay, could happen to anyone, but my mind is five blocks back on Main Street. I roll up my flag, put it on the band van, and run to find him. Three whole years since I last saw Dad.

The crowds are still thick, moving toward the big parking lots by Food Lion and Family Dollar, but I cut across the courthouse lawn and zip through the alley behind Main Street. When I come out by the bridal shop I look everywhere, but he's gone. I can't believe it, like he was never there at all. Then, as I wipe sweat out of my eyes, I see him over by Hoyle's Radiator Specialties and call "Dad!" It's no use, there are too many dads in the crowd so I give another yell. "Jesse Lee Yarborough!"

And he turns. Stops where he is, shades his eyes with his hand and looks to see who called. Gives me a smile. A big smile, a good one. "Well, look at you," he says softly when I get to his side. "All grown up."

"Hey," I say, suddenly shy and Dad hugs me, awkwardly with elbows and shoulders banging. Prickly whiskers brush my cheek and I can smell his aftershave and sweat and a little tang of whiskey-touched lemonade. "Hey," I say again.

He looks the same. His eyes are still as blue. Tanned skin stretches tight across his nose and cheekbones, his eyebrows are bleached almost white, and the sun glints off his blonde hair. *Golden Boy*. Little lines are beginning to show at the corners of his eyes. "I saw you waving your flag," he says. "You looked real fine." He sticks his hands in his jeans pockets and looks around at the crowd. "Huh. This town never changes. Sure brings back a lot of memories."

"I have my driver's permit," I tell him. "Three more months of driving with Mumma and I can get my license." There are no pockets in my green uniform shorts. Nowhere to put my hands. "We've got our first game tomorrow night, against Bunker Hill. You want to come?"

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"Is that right? Driving already?" A couple of people walking by say hey and Dad heys them back. "Your mama here?"

"Somewhere. You -- you know she got married again, right?"

"I've been told." He squints up at the sun and then laughs, shaking his head. "Brian, of all guys. Shit."

Shane Gerlitz's dad comes up to talk and so do a couple other guys who recognize Dad from the old days. They're all glad to see him and keep asking why he doesn't come around more. Dad talks about Wilmington and the fishing tournaments he's in and I just stand there, feeling all tall and sweaty, until I see Mumma coming along the sidewalk. Brian's pushing the stroller and he's got perspiration beads in his hair, what's left of it, and his face is sunburned.

Mumma smiles, her gaze shooting off sideways, and gives me a hug. "You did great, J.L.. All the girls looked so nice, I'm real proud of you." She pushes her hair back behind her ear, folds her arms and turns to Dad. "Well, Jesse Lee. How are you?"

He's staring at her like they've got that tunnel vision thing going and then he squats down and speaks to the baby. "Well, who are you? You must be Kinsey. I hear you're a pistol." He gives her his finger to hold and squints up at Mumma. "Hey, Elizabeth. Good to see you." Brian shifts from foot to foot and Dad looks at him, too, nodding. "Brian."

"Jesse Lee." They just stare at each other and I can almost hear the snorting and pawing of hooves. "What brings you back to town?"

"Oh, just passing through." Dad stands up again and looks at me. "Checking up on J.L. here. That okay with you?" he asks, dropping the half-smile. "She *is* my daughter."

"How long are you staying?" Mumma asks. "Maybe you and J.L. can spend some time together."

"Yeah," Dad says, giving Brian the eye-to-eye again. "That can be arranged."

Aunt Jody and I practice the caber toss out in the back yard where we can see our reflections in the sliding glass doors. "You got to spin it real hard," she says, showing me how it's done. The flag pole goes high in the air, end over end, and drops right into her hands. She grins and shimmies at me. "Still got it."

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I try but it goes sideways and clatters to the ground.

"Do it again. Keep your elbows tight and don't lean so far forward. And keep your head up."

The next time, I catch it but just barely and Aunt Jody reminds me to smile. "You get extra points for flash, honey. Always go for flash." She smiles at me, bringing out her dimples and that little sparkle in her eyes. When I try, it looks more like a grimace, like I'm holding back a fart or something. Aunt Jody sighs and says, "Let's try that caber toss again."

Mumma comes out from the kitchen and sits on the picnic bench. "Your dad called. He wants to see you tomorrow."

I head for the house but she tells me he's already hung up. "Why didn't you call me sooner?" I ask, throwing my pole on the ground.

"Because he and I had things to talk about." Mumma moves to find a seat in the shade. With her pale skin, she never could take the sun. Aunt Jody turns on the cassette tape with the half-time music and we run through the routine. She knows every move and does them side by side with me, watching ourselves in the glass. Even without a regular flag to wave, she looks ten times better than me - cuter, peppier, with tons more style, and a much better figure. She was Homecoming Queen and Color Guard Captain her senior year and it still shows.

"This is like being in a time warp," Mumma says, her voice sounding far away. "Between Jesse Lee and you, Jody, I feel like I should be back in high school, wearing glasses and playing flute."

"Better go do your homework, then," Aunt Jody grins. She does a may-spin/overhand/caber toss combination and the pole lands smack in her hands. "Yep. Still got it." She winks at me and goes indoors.

Mumma rewinds the cassette. As she messes with the buttons, she says, "About tomorrow. . ."

"Don't worry. I have my clothes all ready. Ironed the sash. Cleaned my shoes. We're going to meet early and do everyone's hair in french braids--"

"No, I mean about getting together with your dad." She looks at me, kind of nervous and uptight, like just before she told me she was marrying Brian. "I don't want you to get your hopes up too high."

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I notice there's a tiny little rip in my flag, a place where the hem is coming out. Might need to get that fixed before the show, wouldn't want anything to go wrong. I mess with it, saying "We'll probably just hang out. I mean, I'm not expecting anything big, like him deciding he's gonna move back here or something, but you know, it *could* happen."

She meets my eyes and I can guess perfectly well what she's thinking, but jeez, people do change sometimes. Just because *she* couldn't make him stay. . . But we neither of us say anything and she just turns on the cassette player and I practice again. When it's finally too dark to see my reflection any more, we go in the house and Mumma puts her hand on my shoulder.

"He's not a bad person," she says and I twitch away from her, refusing to meet her gaze. "It's just that sticking around isn't the thing Jesse Lee does best. And sometimes you have to let a person be who they are, instead of who you want them to be."

That night, while everyone's asleep, I go down to the den and find Mumma's high school yearbook on the shelf. I flip through the pages I've looked at a thousand times. Aunt Jody in the Homecoming Court. Mumma dressed in her band uniform, a shadow falling across her face and I wonder if maybe she's always like that, in the dark, thinking the worst of people. A little further on, Dad's picture. *Golden Boy*. That's what the caption says and he's smiling there in his green and gold football jersey, sun gleaming off the helmet on one knee. Jesse Lee Yarborough, quarterback, team captain, Class of '81. State champs, the only team from our town ever to get that far, and he's the one led them there.

Dad and I head out toward Juniper Point. They have the best cheeseburgers in the whole state and he lets me drive. It makes me nervous, steering his truck along these narrow, winding roads. I'm afraid of going off onto the shoulder, feeling the tires drop from the edge of the black-top onto the rutted gravel.

"You're doing okay," Dad says. "Picture your right foot in the middle of the lane, where the

exhaust tracks are. Stay centered and you'll be fine. More room for error than you'd think."

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My hands are perspiring, they want to stick to the steering wheel. "So what have you been doing lately?" I ask. It sounds dumb, like conversation with a stranger. "Anything besides fishing?"

The windows are rolled down and Dad rests his elbow on the sill, wind lifting the golden hairs on his arm. "Just working at the garage." He seems moody today, and I can smell the booze on his breath. I wonder why he bothered to come see me at all if he's not going to talk. We're out in farm country now, rolling past barns and fields and fat lazy cows.

"Will you come to the game tonight?" The question comes out of me quiet enough, but it makes the silence afterward feel like a big black beast in the truck with us.

Eventually Dad says, "Maybe."

It's not good enough. It's not nearly good enough. At the four-way stop, I put on my right turn signal and wait for a bread truck to go by. "Well I wouldn't want you to go out of your way or nothing. It'll be a good show, we've been practicing for weeks. My first half-time show." He says nothing and I tell myself shut up, shut up, shut up, but the words just fall out of my mouth and roll everywhere like dropped change. "You know everyone would be glad to see you." He laughs, a short laugh like a bark. "Well, they would. And Aunt Jody'll be there, and --"

"Brian. I don't think he'll be so glad to see me. Pull over here." I turn into the parking lot of a bait shop and Dad tells me to wait while he goes inside. He's in there a pretty long time and I just sit there like a fool, sweating right through my t-shirt, and when he comes back, he smells like a beer. "No, I don't think Brian would like to see me at all," he says, as if he never stepped out at all. "Can't say I blame him. If I was Brian, I wouldn't want me sniffing around either." He flaps his hand for me to get going.

My face feels hot. Not just late-August-no-air-conditioning hot, but really really hot. Burning. He's got to have a beer just thinking of Brian? And doesn't give a crap about leaving me melting in the truck? I peel out of the parking lot with a screech of tires and Dad grabs the armrest. "Whoa, kid! Take it easy."

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Take it easy, like hell. "If you think it's going to be too much trouble, then just never mind, don't bother to come." We round the top of the hill and head back down, curving to the left. "It's not like I'm gonna die of shock. *And my name's not 'kid'.*" The road comes down to the creek bed and turns sharply right. I have to pull hard on the steering wheel and press the brake. Gravel sprays out from under the tires and Dad puts his foot on top of mine and grabs the wheel. We lurch down into a bad rut, the truck almost pitching on its nose, and bounce up again, climbing with all four tires. Even with the jouncing, I can't help noticing the rounded curve of Dad's shoulder in front of me and the acrid smell of his sweat. We come to a stop two feet from a stone wall. My heart is beating so hard it makes my ears thud.

I'm expecting him to yell at me, but Dad just lets out a long blast of air and moves the gearshift to Park. He slides back over into his own seat and after a minute says, real quiet, "Looks like you've inherited more than just my name."

That busts it for me and I jerk the car door open and stumble out, cutting across the field, heading I don't know where until I come up against a split rail fence. My chest feels tight and I'm breathing hard and I swear if he comes near me, I'm gonna smack his face till his whole head spins on his shoulders. But he just sticks his hands in his pockets and comes up to the fence, sitting on it like some cowpoke in a western. All he needs is a hat and something to chew on.

"Sorry," is what he says. "I guess you're pretty sore at me."

I sit down on the ground. The grass is dry and stubbly and it scratches my legs. I'm thirsty as hell, and tired and disgusted. "Why *are* you home then? Why bother to stop by at all?"

"Didn't plan to." He looks at me and shrugs. "I don't want to hurt your feelings any worse than I already have, but that's the truth. I was just headed back from a tournament in Hendersonville and the truck started acting up. Eddie Hoyle was working on it so I went over to have a look at the

parade. Didn't expect to see you there."

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So that was it. Shit. What a fool I am, what an idiot. I stand up and dust off the seat of my pants. "I see. Well, at least I know. Think I'd just as soon go home now." I go back to the car and climb into the passenger seat. Dad looks at me a minute, then gets behind the wheel and turns the truck around to head home. The tires hum on the black top and we go four, five miles in silence.

After a while Dad asks me how I like being in the Color Guard.

"It's the light of my life," I say, real crabby-like. Dad makes the turn onto Tucker's Grove Road and I wonder if this will be the last conversation I ever have with him. Then I take a deep breath and let the tension out. "No, really, Color Guard's fun. For one thing, feels like I'm carrying on a family tradition, you know? Aunt Jody, you, Mumma. We got this football *thang* going on." He grins a little at that and I feel a hair better. "Of course, Mumma didn't get any of the glory, just playing flute, but--"

"Oh, she did all right. She was the smart one. Went to college, got her degree." He looks sideways at me. "She tells me you're doing real good in school. I'm glad to hear that."

The breeze coming in the window is blowing my hair all over and I scrunch it back with one hand, propping my elbow on the sill. "And I just really like doing flags. You know, all of us working together, getting it right. Of course, I'm not much good yet."

"You will be." He sits up straighter. "Just practice. Keep practicing. That's what counts, more than talent, more than skill, is how much heart you give to it. Give it everything. And put the good of the team first."

I know what he's talking about. Everyone in town knows how he wrecked his knee, playing the last minutes of the championship game. The other team's center was a big guy and he'd been beating on Dad all night. I'd heard it a million times - from Aunt Jody, Coach Gilleland; half the kids I go to school with have folks who were at the game. Last play of the night, Dad took the snap and held the ball, just held it while he waited for the receiver to get in place, held it even though that bear of a center was honing in on him. His knee snapped in the tackle, but the pass was good and they won the game. Dad never played football again.

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"Sometimes," Dad says, "you have to sacrifice. Do you understand, J.L.? Sometimes you just have to put the good of the team first and take the crappy end of the deal. Even if it hurts."

He pulls up in front of the house and shuts off the engine. I sit there, listening to the pings and sighs of the old truck at rest and Dad turns to me, laying his arm across the back of the seat. He squints a bit, half-closing one eye, thinking. Then he says, real slow, "Your mom, she's smart. She's got her act together, always did. Deserves the best. But me, I mess up and screw up and do stupid things. I hurt her real bad." He waits, gauging my reaction. "That makes me the bad guy, see? So I took my troubles out of her life, trying to make things better, staying out of her hair. But I don't come see you often enough and that makes me a bad guy again. So which am I, good or bad, do you know? Because I swear, I sure don't."

I look at him real straight and he smiles. "Lord, you look like your mama," he says, shaking his head. "Okay. I'll come to the game if I can."

"Everyone would be glad. They all say--"

"This town ain't everyone and it don't matter what they say. But I'll try." He chucks my chin and sits back, spreading both arms across the back of the seat and shaking his head. "You know that last game I played? It was a night game, and raining. I remember watching the rain against the field lights, all silvery and cold. Made the ball hard to grip. When I threw that pass, the ball spiraled into the light and hung there in the air like it had all the time in the world." His gaze is far off, seeing something I can't. "It was a beautiful sight, J.L.. Just a beautiful sight."

The pre-game show is okay. We don't do anything much except make an arch for the players to run through and then do the *Star Spangled Banner* and the fight song. All the girls have their

french braids and Aunt Jody has covered my head with so much hair spray I can't turn my neck without crackling. I don't see Dad anywhere.

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Mumma and Brian are in the bleachers. They're probably shaking their heads over me and thinking I'll be disappointed when Dad doesn't show up. And maybe I'm a fool but there's this little burning place in my heart that keeps saying *wait, give him more time*.

But he doesn't show and he doesn't show and he doesn't show. We line up for half-time and I can see Aunt Jody and Mumma and Brian all the way across the field, sitting in the stands near the forty-yard line, just like they promised. Brian's holding the videocamera and Mumma's waving a pennant. It's so cheesy but I can't help smiling. Aunt Jody's yelling something and I can just imagine what. "Smile, girl! Show me some flash."

We march out onto the field, flags waving, fringed sashes jouncing, our heads up. Go into our routine, up, left, swirl, down, march march march. The band is playing *Rocky Top* and I finally have to face the fact that Dad's not there. I do the may-spin, overhand, two, three, four. Pivot and march, knees up high. He's not there, he didn't come, I couldn't hold onto him either. Tucker Abernathy goes into his cornet solo and I have a moment to catch my breath and then it's swing left, swing right, arc left and point. A breeze has picked up and my flag ripples and snaps. I have to concentrate, no chance to scan the crowd one more time. There's a roaring sound in my ears and for a moment, as I do the caber toss and my flag goes high in the air, end over end, I see it through a thousand spangles of light. Sometimes, Mumma said, you have to let a person be who they are.

The flag flares and shimmers, silhouetted against the field lights and the pole drops, smack, into my hands like it's a part of me. Tears run down my face but they don't matter. I am still holding my head high.

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