INSPIRATIONAL FICTION

Who Raises the Flag at Bell Prairie Elementary

Russ Kettering drinks his coffee black and leaves the Prairie Kitchen at ten minutes to seven. You could set your watch by it. For three years I sat two stools down from him at that counter and never once asked where he was going.

He's eighty now. He was drafted in 1968 and spent a year in Vietnam as a radio operator with an artillery battery. After that he climbed poles and read meters for the county electric co-op for thirty-one years.

If you ask him about the war, he'll tell you the food was bad and the rain was worse. Then he'll ask how your tomatoes did.

Last October he had his hip replaced. The night before the surgery he called me at home.

"I need a favor," he said. "Fair warning, it's every day."



He came over with his instructions written on the back of a feed store receipt. He'd drawn a little picture of a cleat, the metal piece on a flagpole you wrap the rope around.

“Bell Prairie Elementary,” he said. “Delia Ochoa unlocks the side door at a quarter to seven. Flag’s in a canvas bag on the hook inside her closet. Raise it brisk. Lower it slow at four-thirty. Don’t let it touch the ground, and don’t let it touch wet grass either.”

“How long have you been doing this?”

“A while,” he said, and went back to the drawing of the cleat.

The next morning Delia met me at the side door in her work jacket with her keys on a lanyard. She has been the custodian there for twenty-two years.

“So you’re the substitute,” she said, and handed me the bag.

She told me the story while I fumbled with the clips. Nineteen years ago she hurt her shoulder lifting a cafeteria table. One windy morning she was out there fighting the rope, and Russ was driving past on his way back from the Prairie Kitchen. He pulled over, got out, and helped her.

He came back the next morning, and the morning after that.

“I never asked him to,” she said. “My shoulder’s been fine for fifteen years. I told him so once. He said he’d keep coming anyway, if it was all the same to me.”

“Has he ever missed?”

“Snow days. And then he calls me at six so I know to do it.”

I raised the flag. It took me longer than it should have, and I felt foolish standing out there in front of an empty parking lot with my breath showing.

Except it wasn’t quite empty. Over by the curb, where the early breakfast kids get dropped off, a girl in a purple coat was standing very still with her hand over her heart.

She was there the next morning too. On the third morning she walked over while I was wrapping the rope on the cleat.

“You go faster than Mr. Russ,” she said.

“He told me brisk.”

“He says names when he does it.”

“What kind of names?”

She shrugged. “Grown-up names. He says them real quiet.”

Her name was Marisol Rios. She was in the fourth grade, and she had to go in because the breakfast line was starting.

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I went to see Russ that Saturday. He was sitting in his recliner with a walker parked beside it, watching a ballgame with the sound off.

I told him the flag was going up fine. Then I told him what the girl had said.

He didn’t answer for a while. Out in the kitchen his refrigerator hummed and clicked off.

“Tommy Lyle,” he said finally. “Dennis Archuleta. Bobby Fenn. Carl Mott.”

He said them the way you’d read off a grocery list, steady and plain.

“Tommy was from Arkansas,” he said. “He raised the flag at our firebase every morning. Nobody assigned him. He said the fellows coming back in off patrol ought to be able to see it up. Said it let them know somebody was expecting them.”

“What happened to Tommy?”

“After Tommy, Dennis did it. After Dennis, Bobby.” He looked at the ballgame. “Carl was the last one before me.”

I didn’t say anything. There wasn’t anything worth saying.

“I just say their names to the Lord while the flag’s going up,” he said. “Seems like the right time for it. Nobody’s listening but Him.”

Then he turned in his chair.

“That little Rios girl still coming out?”

“Every morning.”

“Her daddy’s deployed. Guard unit, been gone since spring. She started standing out there in April.” He shifted in the recliner. “I add him on the end. I say the verse from Genesis for him. ‘The LORD watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another.’”

“I know it,” I said. “Genesis thirty-one.” My mother had it engraved on a locket.

“Well,” he said. “You don’t have to say anything out loud. I just thought you ought to know what you were standing in for.”

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I said the names the next Monday. I said them under my breath and felt like I was borrowing something that wasn’t mine. Then I said the verse for Sergeant Rios, and Marisol

stood by the curb with her hand on her coat, and the flag went up brisk.

I did it for five weeks. Some mornings it rained and the rope was cold and stiff. One morning the wind took the bag clean out of my hand and I chased it across the lot like a man after his hat. Delia watched from the door and was kind enough not to laugh until I got back.

Russ came back the first week of November, a few days before Veterans Day. He walked with a cane now, and I drove him over because his doctor hadn't cleared him to drive yet.

It was cold enough for frost on the ball field. Delia brought out two cups of coffee in foam cups and set them on the bench.

Marisol was already at the curb. When she saw Russ she forgot about standing still and ran over, purple coat flapping.

"You're back."

"I'm back," he said. "But I've got this cane in one hand, so I'm short a hand."

He looked at me, and then he looked at her, and he held out the rope.

She took it in both mittens. He showed her how to keep the flag off the frosty grass, and he kept one hand over hers on the rope, just in case.

“Brisk,” he said.

She pulled, and the flag went up into the gray morning, and it snapped once when the wind found it. Russ said his four names, and one more, and the verse.

Then the bus from Haddam Road turned into the lot, and the day began.