

Flags
by Jason Shankel
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Flags...

I don't want to be misunderstood, here. Times like this, a man has to be careful with his words. So, believe me when I say, hand to God, I never had a problem with those people. To the contrary, more power to them. This is America. It's not what you say but your right to say it and blah blah blah and I know that. What's more, I believe it. I do.

But it's just...and this is where it gets touchy...it's just that now doesn't feel like the time to bring all that up. I'm not saying don't be proud. Take pride. Pride is what makes this country great. But, on the matter of flags...and I don't think I'm alone here...I think now's the time to put aside our differences and march together, under one standard.

I'm not saying they should stop doing what they're doing. We're all as God made us. But I'm just saying, maybe now isn't the time to wave any flags about it, know what I mean? Times like this a man has to ask himself, what am I, first and foremost? It's a question of...I don't want to say loyalty...but, maybe, identity? Yes, identity. Times like this, a man has to know who he is, you know?

It's like this fella at work. Now don't get me wrong, nice enough sort. Dresses well. Always polite. In early, out late, does his work, so on. But, after a while, you start to wonder, what is it with this guy? Each of us has our little personal touches. Pictures of family. Wife. Kids. Two of the dog. You know. But this guy, he never...spotless...ha ha...his desk was always spotless.

It's not just that it was spotless. I mean we all...I mean I like to keep a clean workstation, too. But with this guy, nothing personal. No pictures, no artwork from his kids at school, nothing. Nothing to let us know who he was, you know? Nothing to...nothing to...to reassure the rest of us. Because you can never know who someone is, not just by looking.

But give him his due: in early and out late, everyday. Some nights I'd try to stay as late as I could just to see if he was really working. But, you know how it is, six-thirty rolls around and the phone calls start and "Will you be home for dinner or should I just leave it out in the rain?" and blah blah blah.

So anyway, anyway, that's not the point. I know. Anyway, so one day this guy, and keep in mind, he never kept anything personal at his desk...one day I come in and I notice this...this...flag. Not like a big deal or anything, just this little, like, three by four inch number, sitting there in his pencil holder. Just sitting there. A little rainbow flag.

Now, I know what those flags mean. I mean, I know. I've seen them around. Certain neighborhoods...you know what I'm talking about. And he knew that I knew...that we all knew. And it just...it burned me up, truth be told. I mean, after all that's happened, people are feeling the need...well...for unity. You see it, all around the office, bumper stickers and little banners with the good old red, white and blue. It's time to kick a little ass and stand up for what's right, am I wrong? Is it too much to ask for a little solidarity?

Well, apparently it was too much for this guy. He just had to be different, had to be special, had to...to...rub our noses in it. Don't get me wrong, man has a perfect right to...privacy of his own home, so forth. But right out there, so all of us have to look at it? What was the point? Can I ask you that? What was the minuscule goddamn point?

But what's more, it got me to thinking about his hours. I get in at nine AM, everyday, on the dot. Out at five, no sooner. I'm a spear carrier like all the rest. I'm not asking for special attention. I'm not trying to stand out. I just want a day's pay for a day's work. I want to follow orders and keep my mouth shut. That, my friend, is the American Way.

But this guy...everyday...this guy...I'm in at nine and it's like he's been there for hours already. Five o'clock rolls around, no sign of letup. His coat still hanging on the cubicle wall. Face buried in that monitor. Typing. Typing. Typing. I mean, who is he trying to impress with that?

And then it occurs to me. He's doing this shit because he can. He doesn't have a wife...a wife gonna soak his dinner in the rain, Heaven forbid he's fifteen-fucking-minutes late...well excuse me but traffic is not the most predictable thing in the world...can't a man get a break?

No, probably he's the swinging single type. Or maybe he's got some boyfriend back home in the same boat he is. Two salaries. Two careers. No problems. Peas in a pod. A man understands another man.

And it all just seems so...so...well, like something's not right, like somewhere along the line things got fucked up. I mean, the system was supposed to work for guys like me, right? I mean, tell me if I'm wrong, but I'm playing by the rules here. And yet for five years I'm stuck in the same goddamn...while I watch this...this...this cocksu...well, you know what I mean...this, other guy, rise through the ranks like he's the chosen one or something.

I mean, it just seems to me like things are a little bass-ackwards, you know? It's no wonder we had all the loss of life and all the...well...you know what happened. Maybe it was, like, a wake-up call. We don't watch our backs, no one's gonna do it for us. Am I lying?

And that flag is just part of it. It's like, they're conquering America, one desk at a time. And in the laws... the pieces of paper...man can't crack a joke in the lunch room for fear of..."domestic partners"... "hate crime legislation"...and marriage, now, too. Now they want to get married? It's like, nothing's sacred. It's like, they won't be happy until they're as good as...no, not "as good as" the rest of us...that's not what I mean...the same as, that's it, it's like they want to be the same as the rest of us.

But they're not the same. And that's not just me talking. They're not. I'm sorry. And that flag...that flag just goes to show...well...that they know they're not the same, right? I mean, if they were the same, would they have their own flag? Doesn't make sense, does it?

Time was when it was harder for those types. Not saying they don't have a perfect right...man's home is his castle, so on. But now, it's like the system favors them. Two salaries. No kids. Time was when they would at least have felt ashamed. Now, they're waving flags. Waving *their* flag, see, instead of...well, it's like the man said, you're on our side or you're on theirs. Got me to thinking, whose side is he on? Not mine, that's for sure. That's for sure.

Which is what I was thinking when I saw the envelope on his desk. He was in the bathroom, and his paycheck was just...lying there, open. I know I shouldn't have...and maybe if I didn't things would have been...but it was just lying there...and that flag...it was like, reconnaissance. Know your enemy, all that.

The rest of the day, I couldn't work. Son of a bitch makes twice what I do. Twice. He'll be running this office next year and I'll be in the same shit. Or worse. Same shit, I should be so lucky. My life in his hands. So on and so forth through my head all day long. Well, you can understand how it might get to a man.

Steps had to be taken. Steps. A man has to defend what's his. His family. Himself. These days that means defending your job, your livelihood. We're all under attack. Enemies, foreign and domestic. It's our responsibility to...our side or their side...with us or against us...for me or against me. He made his choice...that goddamn flag.

Steps...

I got the address off his paycheck. I didn't exactly have a plan. I figured, if I couldn't find a way in, it wasn't meant to be. But, as luck would have it, there was an open window down in the alley and I just slipped in. It was an sign, a gift from God. This was what was right.

I don't really know what I wanted. I wanted to...to...I don't know, like, break something. Or leave something. Or take something. No real harm. Just enough for him to know that I...no...that *someone* had been there. To let him know that he couldn't just go around...not without...that there would be consequences. That, times being what they are, he should take it down a notch, especially with the flags.

The flags...that would do it...the flags...oh, that would be so perfect...and I still had time...I'd just slip out and...the flags...they're on sale everywhere...right in...down at the...there's a gas station on the corner...out and back...leave the front door unlocked...quick as you please...just a small red, white and blue number...three or four inches...just pop down...seventy-nine cents...and leave it, where?...on his pillow...oh, beautiful...on his pillow...on that bed...the bed he uses to...next time he's with...he's on his hands and knees...biting it, biting the pillow...he'll think of the flag...where did it come from?...some guy behind him...pushing his face into the...grabbing his...reaching around to...and he'll think "Are they watching me? Are they watching me now?"

I can still remember the sound of his key in the lock. It sounded like jailhouse doors slamming shut. I was sitting there in his living room, on his couch, frozen stiff. If I could just make it back to the kitchen and out into the alley...but it was too late. I could have made it if I didn't have to pull up my...well, I just didn't have time, is all.

So I just sat there, right there, locking eyes with him. I didn't know what I was going to do. My heart was racing. A million thoughts were going through my mind. Two words kept repeating themselves: hate crime.

Hate crime.

Hate crime.

Hate. Crime.

Is there another kind of crime?

He was going to call the police. They'd book me. I could see the judges and the lawyers and the bailiffs.

Like on TV. Like the last time I had jury duty. And me.

Suppose the situation were reversed. Suppose one of them broke into my house. He gets a slap on the wrist. Me, because this guy is a...because of my *reasons*, understand?...not because of what I'd done but because of my...what?...my motive...the book. They'd throw the book right at me and they would not miss. I saw the calendar...months flying away like in those prison movies...prison. And in prison...what they do to...to pass the time...the company of women is...it's not...available. They make do...they make do...

But he didn't call the police. At first, he didn't do anything. He just stood there, not saying a word. Then, after about the longest minute of my life, he stepped closer to me. Right up, so I could feel his breath on my face. I didn't know what he was going to do. I didn't know what I would do in his shoes. Hit me, probably. Beat me to a...

He kissed me. Can you believe that? The nerve of this guy. Kissed me right square on the lips. And not just a little peck or that "I know it was you, Fredo" kiss of death thing, but soft...romantic...his hand...with his hand...he was reaching...down...down to...

Well, what could I do? I kept thinking about the police and jail and my wife and explaining to my wife... and my daughter...six years old...how could she understand? He held all the cards. I knew he could just...any time...pick up the phone and..."Hello, operator? Get me the police..."...and with sirens...and lawyers...and hate crime...and "That's him, Your Honor..."...and the system, favoring him.

What could I do? What else could I do? He had everything and now he had me...their side and our side...I was a prisoner of war. In war, a man makes sacrifices. In prison they...make do.

So, I did what I had to do.

Anyway...best not to dwell on...anyway, after a few weeks it became easy to forget the whole thing. It was made easier when he...the fella...got transferred to another division. "Transferred" isn't the right word. "Promoted" is more like it. At first, that burned me a little. Could have been me, but for the hours he put in. How's a family man supposed to...see, this is what I was saying about the system. The system is supposed to...well, you know how I feel on that subject. Less said the better, my motto.

Anyway, anyway, looking on the bright side, out of sight, out of mind. Like the whole thing never happened. Like a bad dream. Everything back on an even keel.

Until...

See, and you have to understand me now, it's not like I don't want to take responsibility for what happened. A man has to take...otherwise...what I'm saying is that it's not like I'm not willing to do my part, here. But, and this is just me talking, it seems that there is...well, there should be...a certain, what? discretion? with these things. I mean, it's not like this is the first time a fella...it's not like these things are so uncommon, a man, men...sometimes a man just understands another man, you know? But part of that understanding, and this is my point here, part of that understanding is that it's winked between men. Don't ask, don't tell, understand? What's so hard...with the flags and all...what's so hard for these types to understand about that?

Anyway, anyway, all I'm saying is that it's best to let sleeping dogs lie. Leave the past alone. Don't go bringing up...

Okay, okay, I know, get to the point. Get to the goddamn...it's just...it's just that it didn't have to be this way. Everything could have...

Anyway, I didn't see him again until the holiday party...goddamn it...Christmas party...why does everything have to be so...see, and this is part of it, too...a man can't call a spade a...fucking Christmas Chanukah Ramadan Kwanza Secular-Fucking-Humanist Pagan Wicca Winter Solstice Festival Celebration, okay? Fit that on a goddamn Hallmark card...

Anyway, the Christmas party. Company puts it on every year. This year it was down at the Ramada, in the big room, the big pink and gold ballroom, you know the one I mean? With the...? Right. Anyway, it's just a chance for everyone to let their hair down. Meet the families. Treat each other like human beings for a change. A little dancing, a little dinner, a little booze, a chance for us foot soldiers to razz the brass a little. You know, a good time.

Anyway, anyway, so, I'm there with my wife. We got a sitter to stay over with our daughter and we got a suite for the evening on the excuse that we might both be a little too...you know...don't want drive in that condition, especially in the winter season with the ice on the roads and the holiday shoppers driving like maniacs. It's better, sake of safety, spend the night and drive home in the morning.

And why not spring for the two bedroom suite? A man can stretch out. Two rooms. The wife can...well...she can spend a few minutes doing...doing...whatever it is women do to make themselves presentable...to make themselves desirable.

Maybe while she's doing that a man can browse through the selections on the television. Pay-per-view, why not? Why the fuck not, once a year? A little...you know...to get into the mood. The things they show, these days, right in your room. What a country. What a time to be alive. This isn't...this isn't...like in the old days, if you wanted that, right in your room you had to...they had special kinds of hotels...catered to...but not today. Today, right there, in the Ramada. It's like it's...expected. Like it's respectable.

Which is what I'm thinking when I catch him out of the corner of my eye. He was sitting at a table across the room with a bunch of guys I didn't know. I mean, I recognized a couple of them. The others, never seen them before. And they were smiling and laughing and acting like it was no big thing. Acting casual. Acting like they...belonged here. Like they had a right to...well, I guess maybe they did.

But you know what I mean. Flaunting it. Burns me up. Whispering and giggling and carrying on like... well, why can't a man say it?...like a bunch of...

Anyway, anyway, one of them leans over, really slowly, and whispers in his...in the fella's...ear. Under the table I can see him rubbing his...well...I just hope it was his leg is all.

And then the two of them laugh, and turn, and look at me. I swear to God, I'm not making this up, they look right at me...like, to stare me down, you know? What did I do? Well, what could I do? I stared right back. A man can't back down in the face of...can he? I mean, you can't let them win, can you? Can't let them see that you're afraid to...

Well, anyway, you won't believe what happened next. The fella, he gets up, just gets right up out of his chair and walks across the ballroom floor to our table, easy as you please. Like it's the most natural thing in the world. Like he's just a...a...just a regular coworker gonna introduce himself to the wife. "Oh, hi, I'm so-and-so. I'm sure your husband mentioned me. We used to work together until he came over and I rode him all night like a..."

Christ Almighty. Christ Almighty. Not enough booze in the world to...

So, he sits down right next to me. Can you believe it? I mean, this guy's got more nerve than a swollen tooth. He sits right down at our table, just like he was at home, and introduces himself to my wife. For a minute, I think she catches something in my eye, but I let it go. Gotta play through this. No other way. He

makes a little small talk. "Oh, we used to work in the same department, but I just got promoted..."...the nerve...razz me like that in front of... "We never really got to talk much, but I thought I'd just, you know, slip in here and say 'hi'..." Jesus, Jesus Almighty.

And then he gets up to go, just like that. It feels like about a million pounds of elephant shit was leaving the table. I'm just about done counting my blessings when he stops...like he forgot something, you know? ...stops and turns back.

"Oh, yeah," he says, all coy, trying not to laugh. He's looking back at his table now. His little coven of... well...they're all giggling and raising their glasses and carrying on...egging him on...

"Oh, yeah," he says. "I almost forgot. You left these in my apartment." And he bends down and before I can move or stand up he drops something on the table, right next to my plate, right next to the rubber chicken and three-bean salad: a pair of cotton briefs, men's cotton briefs, dyed with rainbow colors. I don't know where he got them. They weren't even my size, ferchrissakes. But still, he made his point, yes he did, he made his goddamn point.

Needless to say, the rest of the evening was a little...well, let's just say, it didn't go as I'd planned. My wife, bless her, my wife didn't dig too deep, writing the whole thing off to too much booze and my coworker's "strange sense of humor." I did my best to salvage the thing. Telling her that he was...you know...that way, and that, truth be told, I was never comfortable with it and he must of picked up on something and with his boys...his troops...all there that night to back him up, he just felt the need to...you know...get his little bit of...whatever. But it was all in good fun, in his mind anyway. Best not make a big thing out of it.

She played along, bless her. But part of me knows that she knows better. Part of me, to this day. Sometimes I think I catch something. Something in her eye. Something in the way she touches me when we...when we're...you know, together...a certain, tentativeness...

Sometimes I just want to tell her the whole thing, top to bottom. Just come clean and let the chips fall where they may. But then I think, what good would that do? Not much. Plenty of bad, though: separation, divorce, custody, community property, visitation, alimony, child support, and blah blah blah. Each like a bullet with my name on it. Like the system's chambers are all loaded and the barrel is pointed right at yours truly.

So I don't say anything. And it's not just for me. I can't put her through all that. Deep down I know, she'd rather let sleeping dogs lie. And my daughter? How could she ever underst...well, she just couldn't, is all. So I just swallow it. That's what a man does. And he doesn't expect any awards for it, and he certainly doesn't go waving any goddamn flags.

And that's all I'm trying to say.