



Driving Away From Home

By Paul Gallagher

Read at Storytails on 31st January 2010

At night it is blackness, the sky hosting an array of piercing stars. You can lie on your back and wait and watch for shooting stars, if you're lucky the northern lights may emblazen the sky. Quiet reaches out from sunrise and long through all the day. This land extends flat and empty, making you alone in space, brown earth and maybe some shape miles away, so you look to the cloudless open skies. Straight roads run for hundreds of miles. Then there is a farmstead, or a silo or a church. After the long heat of summer, there is a short fall, then the wind begins to howl hailing a long winter, and snows which will come to cover all and close everyone in.

The history of the land was stolen with lies, with a bible, by encroachment, by treaty and where necessary by murder. There is an unspoken slaughter, never referred to, marked by small stones on an outcrop or in a ravine. The dispossessed scream but no-one hears across the distances.

Becca grew up in Mission, she was a small town girl. She loved life. Mission had a population of less than two thousand people, all white. Everyone knew everyone. The town has one through road running alongside the railroad track. There are a few significant buildings, a courthouse, a prison and two imposing churches; Protestant and Catholic. The town is divided between the two faiths. It hardly seemed to matter to Becca, she had friends on both sides.

Religiously she studied at bible class, believing what she was taught, to respect God, family and country. In that order. She studied dutifully. She learnt economics, husbandry and to read music. She played the piano, sometimes with her mom. Sometimes she

practiced on her own. She loved the farm, the animals, the wide open spaces. Her mother would take her on secret flying trips in her light aircraft for no reason other than to fly. She loved these flights going anywhere through the sky. Her mom talked to her, about the world, about everything. She was her mom's true friend, but her mom told her too much. Sometimes she didn't want to hear.

She was happy, safe, running free, a tomboy, always playing with the boys. One day she was running with the boys, when climbing a wire fence to escape off a neighbour's property her skirt got snagged, and the boys turned and looked up at her caught, dangling, and reached for stones. She didn't understand. They hurled them at her body and ran off leaving her impaled, crying..

It was harvest. The whole town was out working. It was a race against time. The corn and sugar beet was ripe. It had to be harvested before the cold and the frosts came. Everyone helped each other. Mexicans were drafted in and domiciled in makeshift encampments. Even Lutherans worked with Catholics. Enormous combines worked through the night. All hands ferried the corn and the beet to every available truck to transport the produce to the silos. The town was a community. It had to be. Becca loved this, working with the farmhands, thinking of nothing but to bring the harvest in. It was a community of minds.

After the harvest, the town celebrated. She went with Luke, her older brother, to the town parade. First came the trumpeter and the flag, everyone stood and clutched their fists to their heart, then came the big artillery guns, with white graffiti on their shafts, 'Let's kill the towel heads' or 'I bagged one for Mission'. The floats passed, local politicians, sometimes even the congressman, everyone waved and cheered, as the representatives from clinics, real estate companies, churches, timber merchants, all passed. Throwing candies to the crowd. Adults and children alike scampered to collect candies like trophies. There were horsemen, jazz musicians, leather clad Hell's Angel's bikers, classic cars, beauty queens. Her neighbour Sarah was the Mission queen, again. There she was a white princess, thirteen, in her swimsuit, smiling, waving from her sparkling float. And there was the fire service, beloved, protecting all, with its huge red machines, and of course Luke's favourite was the giant trucks lumbering by, bigger than houses. So big they made no sense but to be big.

Luke loved all the things he grew up with. He loved all things. He played in the minor league, he was proud of the Vikings, he'd play rock music and liked going to the cabin and fishing on the lakes. Becca loved him dearly, and they hung out together even though he was years older. Becca would listen to him tell her about music and stories about the woods. Luke loved the woods. Why? Because there he was the same, equal to everyone else. The woods loved him because they accepted him. And Becca could tell Luke everything, they shared their lives. Luke was Luke, she didn't think he was any different even though he was autistic. She told Luke about her studies, the books that she was reading, and how she wanted to continue her studies and go to college. He thought this was a good idea. He loved her. He wanted her to make the most of her life.

Becca shared the things Luke loved too, she played football and softball with Luke and the boys. At fifteen she even joined the Farm Boys Union, she was the first girl ever to join. Of course some things she had to keep secret. She wasn't meant to be smoking and drinking and going out with boys. But she thought it's okay, it doesn't do any harm.

One time at the Lake she went out with a few of the guys and her friend Kirstie. They had a bottle of vodka and someone had some grass. They went to John's cabin and played new music. One track she'd never heard, she fell in love with it, even though it was by a UK band, Driving Away from Home by It's Immaterial. Maybe she was stoned, but it all made sense. She kind of fancied John, he was cool, he knew about different things, he'd been to New York, he'd seen Iggy Pop, he treated her like a friend, but she didn't know if he fancied her. She was always thought of as one of the guys.

By the lake looking out at the stars he kissed her. It wasn't like any other kiss. It was gentle, slow, sustained. Her head spun. She wanted him. They fell together on the grass, and she was making love. It just happened.

That Fall was the best ever. She continued to see John and make love. She knew her dad was becoming suspicious, but her mom didn't mind. Well she was pretty artful at keeping her life divided up, and as her mom told her 'you must always do your own thing'. She told Luke about John, Luke was happy that she was so happy. He asked about the music and about the truck that John drove. And it all was working well till one

night she came back late, and her dad was sitting there in the dark waiting. She didn't see him at first. To say the least she was dishevelled and a bit drunk. 'Well?' he said. She was flummoxed. She can't remember what she replied immediately. 'Where have you been?' he demanded in a solemn tone. 'Nowhere' she answered. There was a silence. She didn't feel she could leave the room. She stood there feeling almost afraid, shamed. She felt she was shaking. 'I want to know the truth' he said quietly. 'I...I've been out with Kirstie' she answered, which was a half truth. Kirstie had left earlier, and she had been with John. Again there was an uneasy silence. 'And who else?' her dad asked. 'No-one, no-one else' she answered. Her dad stood up and looked at her. He looked into her soul. He knew she was lying. He turned away from her and walked out.

After this Becca avoided her dad. She couldn't look at his eyes. She felt shamed. She had lied. She had never lied like this before. She comforted herself by being with her mom. The next time she met John she was edgy. He noticed and asked why and she tried to explain. She felt guilty about not being the best company, he seemed to understand. He said if we make love you will feel better. But when he held her she just couldn't do it. John became silent and walked off and started to do his own things, almost ignoring her. She left early, and walking home she felt her heart beating hard, and suddenly she was crying. It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense. Before she entered the house she tidied herself up, her mom was in the kitchen and saw she was upset, her mom said nothing but looked sad and half smiled.

Becca couldn't get hold of John for a few days after that. She phoned but his mom said he was out. Luke could see that Becca was upset, and sitting out in the garden one night Becca told him what had happened. He listened thoughtfully. He put his arm around her. And when she had nothing left to say, he said 'Look up at the stars' and she did. 'I dream of going away, somewhere far away, one day I will just go.' She looked at him, she never knew he felt this way. She loved him more than ever.

Becca buried herself in her books. She was reading a new economics writer, a professor Buchanan on public choice theory. Individuals who behave selfishly in markets can hardly be expected to behave altruistically in political or social life. She wondered,

did everyone just mainly act from their own interests. She didn't have any answers, it was enough to read everything to try and find out.

That evening she tried to call John again. This time he answered. He was cool. She asked him what he was doing tonight. He said he didn't know for sure. She said shall I come round then? 'No' he said. 'I need some time and space to think about things.' 'What do you mean?' she asked. 'Becca, I think we should stop seeing each other' he answered. She was in shock. There was a silence. He said nothing. She said nothing for a while. Then she heard the click of the phone. It was dead.

Becca didn't cry, well not immediately. After that when she managed to speak to him, he was distant, it was if nothing had ever happened between them. The world was there but somehow it all looked different. Her dad still treated her with a courteous appropriateness. Her mom took off in her plane by herself more frequently than she had ever noticed before. And Luke had taken to walking into town at night.

In fact, she was for the first time alone in her life. She felt she had to make some decisions. But what exactly? She needed her friends. Kirstie only wanted to go out drinking with the same group of guys, John might be there. Okay she talked to Kirstie, they shared a bottle of vodka on the golf course one night. Kirstie was sympathetic, Becca wanted to talk about feeling alone, how somehow she felt different now to the life of Mission. Kirstie just focussed on John, her advice was just move on find someone else. Then mostly she wanted to talk about how she and Rick were going through a hard time because Rick had been seeing Jenny and she had tried to get back by seeing Tom. It all passed Becca by somehow, whereas once she would have been enthralled. Was it just about finding someone else?

Becca's answer was to cut herself off. She stayed in her bedroom reading. She read everything. Novels, economics, politics, even the hunting magazines. It was a respite to the silence in the home. Voices from outside. Whatever they might say. She started writing too, a diary which she attempted to fill in retrospectively. She read about the Lakota, their history and how they lived now. She read about the Warren Commission and the coup deposing Allende. She just read. She was convinced that this would all make sense eventually.

She tried to make it up with her dad. He just was kind, but she couldn't really talk to him. She tried to talk to her mom, and her mom would talk to her, she understood, her mom encouraged her to study and get a college place but always it came back to how Becca should go back to playing the piano. Why didn't she keep playing? Becca said she had learnt to play and read music, she tried to explain this. She could play if she wanted to.

The air was becoming colder, winter was nearing. It had been a good harvest this year. Her dad took her out hunting. She was pretty adept with a gun. It was good to share some time with him after the hiatus. And she bagged a deer, she saw it, and she shot it. When they approached, it was lying there shuddering. It was kicking its legs staring into space. She looked at it. It was suffering. 'Well done' her dad said. 'To put it out of its misery. You have to shoot it in the head.' Becca just stared. 'Go on' her dad encouraged. She raised her gun. She vaguely remembered her dad saying 'Go on, go on.' She closed her eyes and pulled the trigger. The noise was almost deafening. When she opened her eyes her father was kneeling over the animal, its eyes wide open, its head blasted bleeding. She couldn't look anymore. She dropped the gun and ran away.

She remembered the drive back in the truck shivering. Was the buck in the back? It must be. Why did I do this?

After, Becca couldn't look at the trophies hanging on her uncle's wall anymore. Bison heads, roebuck heads, bear heads. She had to leave the house and stand outside and look at the sky.

She talked to Luke on the steps of their house. Luke could never hunt. Now he couldn't even catch a softball. Luke looked her in the eyes and said 'I love you more than anyone else, More than softball.' She hugged him and said with all her heart 'I love you too, more than anyone else.' He looked up at the sky and pointed, 'That's Orion' he said.

Nothing much changed after that. The snow began to fall. Everyone knew it was the beginning of winter. Everyone talked about it and when the snow came, three, four, five feet deep, everyone cleared away their pathways, their driveways, and sometimes the road outside their house. Everyone survived.

Life went on. Sometimes at weekends the bars became full. Everyone was still happy, it had been a good crop, and no-one really cared about anything after the hard year. Let's be happy, let's be free, we've made something, we know, maybe no-one else understands. Who cares? We did it.

Becca was just beginning to see how we must stick together. How what matters is community. How family who love you are forever. How it didn't matter who you fell in love with, your life was your own, and no lover would ever make her life. Her life was hers, she would decide on men. She would be just like a man. They had no power over her. She had her life. She could make it whatever she wanted.

Then it happened. The snow was deep. Continuing. Incessant. Where was Luke? He had gone out to the bar, but then hadn't come back. Who was he with? Where was he? He hadn't come home. Why hadn't he come home? Becca was waiting. Her mom and dad were frantic. Where was he? She waited. The police had gone out searching. Her mom and dad were arguing, in trauma, her dad went out searching.

No-one found Luke. He'd gone. Where was he? Someone said he'd gone to a bar. He met up with some guys there. So? Where was he? They had a truck and they had driven off, Luke was with them. Who?

It was minus ten, he was found, dead in a ditch thirty miles out of town. He'd tried to walk back to town. He didn't make it. No-one ever found out who took him out there and who left him. Becca cried for days and months and years, she left the town but never found the stars without going back. Nothing mattered anymore. No love could ever be the same. Love would never make her life. It was done. It was the end of love. But she still longed for home. She wished life could be the way it was. And in trying to be free, she never ever was.

