

That Damn Flag

by James Speed Hensinger

There it was. Every morning I drove past it. Every evening I drove past it going the other way. It was on a very tall pole in front of an apartment complex with a fountain and a duck pond nearby. Day after day, month after month it was getting more and more ragged. It was in tatters. The red and white stripes were slowly disintegrating. It had started with the seam at the end breaking and streaming in the wind. Now the feathers of fabric were halfway back to the field of stars.

The owners were probably using it as an advertisement. I had read that the city banned commercial outdoor signage over 15 feet high, but flags were exempted because of the First Amendment. There were car dealers on Havana Street who competed with each other to see who could display the bigger flag.

One Saturday night after the bars had closed in Glendale, I was driving home on Leetsdale Road and there it was. This time I decided to do something. I parked my truck and grabbed a pair of limb loppers from the toolbox. Holding them against my thigh, I walked to the base of the pole. The bottom of the halyard was caged in a padlocked box, but the loppers cut right through both lines just above it. I grabbed the lines, and pulled on the lower leg. After a foot or two, it started falling. I had to drop the loppers to catch the flag as it dropped. I had to catch it. She couldn't be allowed to touch the ground. Wadding it in handfuls against my chest, I worked the snap links off. Then picking up my loppers, I hurried back to the truck. Three days later, when I was sober, I built a charcoal fire in my grill and burned it. No salute. No music. Just a few minutes of silence as I poked it with tongs to make sure it all burned. It was the best I could do.



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