

Old Glory by Bruce Coville

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ESSAY: THE DAY I DID MY DUTY

My great-grandfather was the craziest man I ever met. Sometimes it was embarrassing even to have him be part of the family. For example: You should have seen how he acted when Congress passed the SOS law last June. He actually turned off the holo set!

"Well, that's the end of life as we know it," he said as the image started to fade. Then he stared at the floor and started to mutter.

"Oh, Arthur, don't be ridiculous," said my mother. She switched the set back on and waited for the newsgeek to reappear in the center of the room.

"Ridiculous?" yelled Gran-Da. "You want to see ridiculous? I'll show you ridiculous!" He stood and pointed to the big flag that hangs over the holo set. "That's ridiculous! Thirteen stripes, sixty-two stars, and not a bit of meaning. After what they did today, it's all gone."

That was a relief. After Gran-Da came to live with us, I was always afraid he was going to get us into trouble. So I felt better whenever Dad made him be quiet. Sometimes, I wished Dad would just throw him out. I didn't really want him sleeping on the streets, like all the old men I walk past on the way to school. But I didn't want to make our Uncle angry either.

Later that night, when I was going to bed, Gran-Da called me into his room. "How are you doing?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I'm okay."

Gran-Da smiled. "Are you afraid of me?"

I wanted to say no. Only that would have been a lie. So I just nodded my head.

"Afraid I'll talk dangerous?"

I nodded again. I didn't know what I would do if any of my friends were ever around when he started talking like he does sometimes. I knew what I *should* do, of course. But I didn't know if I could do it. I mean, he *was* my great-grandfather, even if he was crazy and wicked.

He looked sad. "Are all the kids at your school like you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Scared little sheep, afraid to talk."

"I'm not afraid to talk," I said loudly.

"I just don't talk nonsense like..." I broke off.

"Like me?" he asked, scratching at the little fringe of white hair that circled his head. (I don't know why he never got his head fixed. All the other great-grandfathers I know have full heads of hair, whatever color they want. Not mine.)

I looked away from him. Suddenly I realized what was wrong with his room. "Where's your flag?" I asked.

"I took it down."

I must've looked pretty funny. At least, the look on my face made him snort.

"How could you?" I asked in a whisper.

"It was easy," he said. "I just pulled out the tabs at the corners, and then--"

"Gran-Da!"

"Donald!" he replied. "When the government passes SOS, they took away the last thing that the flag stood for. I don't want to look at it anymore." He paused and stared at the floor for a while.

I looked at the door, wondering if he would say anything if I just left.

Suddenly he looked up again. "Listen, Donald. I'm ninety years old. That's not that old, these days -- I could probably last another thirty."

That was no news. It was one of the reasons my mother was so upset when he moved in. I felt sorry for her. Thirty years of Gran-Da was my idea of a real nightmare.

"The thing is," he continued. "I'm just a normal guy, not a hero. But sometimes there's something that you have to do, no matter what it costs you."

I looked at him in horror. "You're not going to do anything crazy, are you?" I felt sick in my stomach. Didn't he understand he could get us *all* in trouble? If he wasn't careful, the Uncles might come and take us all away. I glanced at the ceiling, half expecting it to open up so that a giant hand could reach down and snatch my great-grandfather then and there.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked at last.

"Maybe I'm hoping that if I scare you enough, it will make you start to think." He shrugged. "Or maybe I just want to see what you'll do."

"Can I go now?"

"Yeah," he said bitterly. "Go on. Get out of here."

I slipped out of his room and ran down the hall to my own room. I flopped onto my bed and lay there, staring up at my beautiful flag and trembling. I thought about Grand-Da all that night. I thought about him in school the next morning, while we were saying the pledge, and the Lord's Prayer, and reciting the names of the presidents. I remember what Gran-Da had said the first time he heard me recite the list -- that there had been more presidents than we were naming, that some of them were being left out. I wanted to talk to my teacher, but I was afraid.

The next morning was Saturday. When Gran-Da came to breakfast he had a red band tied around his head. He was wearing a vest with fringe on it, a blue shirt, and faded blue pants. He was carrying a lumpy plastic bag. He had a button on his vest that looked like an upside-down Y with an extra stick coming out of it.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing to the button.

"A peace symbol," he said. He dropped the bag to the floor and settled into his chair.

"Really, Arthur," said my mother. "Don't you think this is carrying things a little too far?"

"SOS was carrying things too far," said Gran-Da.

My father sighed. "Look, Grampa, it's not really a problem. If you don't break the rules, SOS won't have any effect on you."

I was amazed to hear him say that. Then I decided he must be trying to get Gran-Da to calm down. It didn't work. Gran-Da shook his head stubbornly, and suddenly, I knew what he had in the bag. My throat was thick with fear. I couldn't finish my breakfast.

After breakfast I followed Gran-Da out of the house. He was heading for the town square. I was pretty sure I knew what he was planning. My stomach was churning. What if the Uncles thought he had polluted our whole family?

I could only think of one way to save us. I slipped into a televid booth to call my Uncle. When I told him what was happening he looked stern and shocked.

"You won't hold this against the rest of us, will you?" I asked nervously.

He shook his head. "Of course not," he said. "You've done the right thing. We'll have to come and talk to all of you when this is over, of course. But I wouldn't worry about it much."

The screen went blank. I hurried back out to the street. I felt embarrassed, and frightened. But I was also a little excited. Would the SOS men really show up? My friends would think I was a real hero. I hurried toward the town square. Gran-Da was already there. He had climbed onto the bandstand, of all places, and he was shouting about SOS. People looked at him nervously. To my

surprise, a few actually stopped to listen. I stood beneath a large tree, about a hundred feet away. I didn't want to get too close.

Suddenly, Gran-Da reached into the bag and pulled out the flag he had taken off his wall the night before. Holding the upper edge, he rolled it over the side of the bandstand. A slight breeze made the stripes slide and shift.

I covered my face with my hands and wished the terrible scene would end. Where were the SOS men?

"Friends!" cried Gran-Da. "When I was a boy this piece of cloth used to stand for something. Yes, it did. In fact, it stood for a whole lot of things. Ideas. Like that a man should be free to say what he thinks, and worship where he wants, and het together with other folks when it pleases him."

More people were stopping to listen now. Someone started to boo.

"But that's all over!" shouted Gran-Da. "Bit by bit, piece by piece, we've given away all the things this used to stand for. SOS was the end of it. Now this poor old flag doesn't stand for anything at all. That being so, I think it's time to put it out of its misery."

I looked around. Where were the SOS men? Why didn't they get here?

Now that people realized what Gran-Da was going to do, they started to back away. Some of them left. I could tell that others wanted to, wanted to get as far away from the terrible thing he was about to do as they possibly could. But they couldn't bring themselves to go. They wanted to see if he would really do it.

Gran-Da raised the flag and lit a match. "Good-bye, Old Glory," he said sadly. "It was a good idea while it lasted."

He touched the corner of the flag with the match. Nothing happened, of course, since like all flags it was made of flameproof material. You couldn't burn a flag even if you try. Gran-Da knew that. He wasn't stupid -- just crazy. A crazy, dangerous person -- the kind who could ruin the wonderful country we've built.

Suddenly, I saw the SOS men. They looked beautiful in their blue pants, white shirts, and red vests. Gran-Da saw them, too. I know he did. So it's not like it's my fault, really. He had a chance.

Everyone knows that even though the new law allows for instant executions, the Shoot-On-Sight men are supposed to give a guy a chance. But Gran-Da didn't care. When his first match went out, he lit another one. He held it to the corner of the fireproof flag and just stood there, smiling at the three men. So everyone could see that he was crazy.

The men lifted their laser rifles. The leader counted to three, and they fired in unison. The light sliced right through the old man. He toppled over the edge of the bandstand. The flag curled around him as he fell. He was still holding it when he hit the ground.

My throat got thick. I could feel the tears at the corner of my eyes. Crazy, I know. But he was my great-grandfather, after all. So I don't think it was too bad to feel a *little* sad about what had happened.

That doesn't mean I don't know I did the right thing by calling the SOS guys. I mean, think about it. What would happen if other people started to believe like Gran-Da -- crazy things, like everybody should be allowed to say whatever they wanted to?

What kind of world would that be?