

notes from the disturbed edge - chapter 8

“Excuse me...” The voice was pleasant enough on the surface, but it carried just a hint of a condescending undertone, and perhaps even a whiff of superiority. This happened sometimes when they worked in publicly owned natural areas adjacent to private homes, where the residents considered the woods next door to be theirs.

“May I ask what you are doing?” The voice that hailed them emanated from a middle-aged woman in a cardigan sweater with a pair of bifocals balanced on the end of her nose who was standing on the other side of a low fence bordering a back yard, just a few feet away. Oh yeah, this was going to be a good one. He took the lead. “Good afternoon, ma’am, we’re carrying out some land management activities on this property...” As he went on to explain their mission, she watched the woman’s gaze shift to the sloshing contents of the backpack sprayer he wore, and saw the woman’s countenance change from party-polite engagement to concern. She began her countdown: *Thirty, twenty-nine...*

“Oh,” the woman responded, when he had finished describing the nature of their business, “and what is in that contraption?” “Herbicide, ma’am,” he answered matter-of-factly. *Fifteen, fourteen...* “We’re applying herbicide to invasive exotic plants that have become established in this natural area.” The woman responded in a completely rational manner. “Oh, so you’re poisoning our woods?” He continued, unfazed. “Well, actually ma’am, that’s more than a bit of an overstatement. We are carefully applying appropriate chemicals to selected plants in-”. The bifocaled inquirer interrupted. (*Four, three...*) “Oh, you mean like...(*two, one*) Agent Orange?” *Blast Off!* She simply had to figure out a way to cash in on this uncanny predictive talent, but there was no monetary gain in sight here - pure self-satisfaction would have to suffice. Meanwhile, they had some ‘splainin’ to do. This wouldn’t be the first time, and they both knew the

drill. The woman was proceeding to Act Two, Scene One, in which the adjacent property owner suggests alternatives... “Well, that concerns me. If you are really an ecologist, why do you choose to spread toxins in our nature lands? Why don’t you and your helper just cut these...invasive...exotic...” (she could practically see the thesaurus pages flipping in Mrs. Cardigan’s head, but that was good “plants down?”

She stepped in, right on cue, making a conscious effort to keep her eyes from rolling, keeping that Elvis lip in check, refraining from guttural groaning, she (*hey, how come they always assume I’m the helper?*) replied “I am so glad you asked that question.” The woman stared at her as if she had just popped up out of the ground. She smiled a big howdoo grin, and continued. “Simply cutting these plants down wouldn’t kill them. As a matter of fact, it just kind of ticks them off. They’d regrow from the remaining roots. We really need to kill them completely to prevent regrowth. For these particular plants” (she overpronounced “particular” - what a great word) “we can apply herbicide to the stump after we cut them, or...” (she inserted a dramatic pause) “we can, carefully, apply herbicide to the base of the trunk without cutting anything, or...” (she raised her eyebrows, and nodded her head ever so slightly) “we can even apply herbicide to the leaves, and the plant will absorb it and die in place.” She watched the woman’s mental wheels turn, envisioning a view from her poolside lanai of dead stuff. She recommenced her countdown as the woman ruminated and retorted . . . *Eight, seven, six ...*

“Hmm. Well, if the roots are the problem, couldn’t you just (...*two, one...*) dig them up?” (*Oh, get Jimmy the Greek on the phone right now! She was red hot.*) “You know, get rid of the roots?” She initiated the baton hand-off, and he received it flawlessly. “Great thought - but digging up the roots dis-

turbs the soil and creates a place where other invasive exotic plants could germinate and grow - sort of a vicious cycle. We couldn’t be sure we got all the roots, and it’s also very labor intensive, although,” he added quickly, “some land management programs are using prison labor now. We can apply herbicide to 20 trees, without soil disturbance, in the time it would take me and my helper” (*brave man, very funny man*) “to dig one up.” He stopped talking, letting the woman chew on the prison labor scenario for a moment before her anticipated (*ten, nine...*) reply. “Well, labor intensive or not (she hadn’t really heard the soil part), isn’t it better to keep toxins out of our environment? Why, just think about (*two, one...*) DDT.” (*Shazam!*) She lateraled the ball his way.

“Ma’am, the herbicides we use now are a new generation of products. Each and every one has been through comprehensive private and governmental screening and testing to assure that, with proper handling and careful application, they are not harmful to anything except the intended plants.” He could see that Mrs. Cardigan was still on “comprehensive,” so he cut to the chase. “They’re safe - we wouldn’t work with them almost every day if they weren’t. We could give you some phone numbers, or the names of some web sites where you can learn more if you’re interested.”

She began her next countdown, anticipating a final zinger within 20 seconds, and he waited for a reply, but Mrs. Cardigan was silent. Oh well. At least now she knew she was not a total psychic freak. No lottery tickets today.

He wrapped it up. “Ma’am, we need to get back to work.” Mrs. Cardigan nodded, her brain reeling, and even smiled a little. She signed off as they moved on, “Have a nice day, ma’am.” There was work to be done.

- J.A.

An excerpt from “The Adventures of Hack Garlon and his buxom sidekick Squirt.”