

POISON OAK

Rick Hill

LARRY'S DREAMS OF wealth and romance dissolve inexorably into an itch that crawls the length of his body. He sits up in the wan glow of his nightlamp, clawing his forearms and contorting painfully to reach the small of his back. Stumbling from bed, he gropes for the overhead light, and, squinting against its sudden brightness, begins a frantic inspection of his upper body.

There—on his left forearm—a small red bump, like a mosquito bite. Another just above the wrist. He stares, wide-eyed, searching. . . . Nothing! No, wait, here's two small ones crowded against his watchband. He looks back to his left arm, knowing what he'll find. Yes, four bumps now, four red, itching eruptions, and they're no mosquito bites. Four more on the right arm now too, then six, then ten. . . . Larry yanks off the light; he can bear no more.

Poison oak! The curse of the coastal redwoods, the scourge of this so-called mountain paradise for which he's fled the midwest and its comforts—poison-oak is descending once again to deny him restful sleep, hot showers, and all else that normal people take for granted. Normal people? Larry smiles grimly in the dark. Here it comes, symptom number two: he's already beginning to feel like a leper.

He throws himself backwards on the bed and lies in a stupor of self-pity until his alarm clock sounds at 6:30. While dressing, he forces himself to examine the still-immature blisters dotting his limbs, an ant-like procession heralding another two weeks of torment. Two weeks of torment. . . . This phrase appeals to Larry, even through his morose haze. As he stuffs his backpack, he makes a note of it on the inside cover of his Executive Memo book. Might make a good song lyric . . . something like, "Two weeks of torment for each careless caress"—but no time for songs now.

He clumps downstairs and into the bathroom, where he stands scowling into the medicine cabinet, his armory of poison oak remedies

with everything from natural herbal to modern tech: Ivy Dry, Aloe Vera, Double Strength Antihist Cream, Corto-rub, Lanacaine, Witch Hazel, Green Clay—the whole pitifully ineffectual arsenal that cost so much and accomplishes so little against the demon king of skin eruptions.

Fully annoyed, he adjourns to the kitchen to pack his lunch. He can feel an insidious itch percolating beneath the lotions and creams, stretching his nerves taut, tantalizing him with the urge to scratch—but he knows from bitter experience that scratching only intensifies the itch, only heightens the anxiety. Why, why did he get it again so soon? It wasn't fair! He snuffles. His eyes begin to water; he dabs at them with a plastic sandwich bag.

Tex, his old friend and now landlord, ambles in from the living room, carrying a *TV Guide* and a cup of coffee. "Morning, Homes," he says.

Larry snuffles again and bags a sandwich. Tex's grin fades. "You ok there?"

"Got poison oak again."

"You kiddin'! Again? You poor chump!"

Larry shrugs. "Ahh, no biggie. I'm gettin used to it. I guess."

"Used to it? You talk-um plenty tough, Kemo-sabe, but no one gets used to THAT itch!" Tex starts for the refrigerator but halts in mid-step. "Say, Homes, uh, don't let it get you down this time, huh? Kind of roll with it in a manly fashion, know what I mean? Write one of your funny songs, get a few laughs out of it somehow, right?"

Larry smiles wanly. Tex would tell a colon cancer patient to cheer up. "It's not funny. I can handle it alright, but it just ain't funny."

"Whatever you say, Blood." Tex shrugs and opens the refrigerator.

Larry gathers up his lunch and backpack. "Later."

"Toodles, Killer. Hey, really, take it easy today, huh? It ain't what you been through, but how you been through it, savvy?"

Larry plods the half-block to the bus stop. Not even eight o'clock and already he feels gritty and exhausted. And this, he knows, is only the beginning. After four or five days without a warm bath or sleep, he'll have the hygienic tone and sunny outlook of a skid-row bum with wine sores and scabies.

He stands beside the bus shelter in the fog. After a couple of minutes, his legs begin to rub together and his right hand steals toward his left shoulder. He pulls it back hastily and forces his legs apart. No scratching! Will the stupid bus EVER get here? He stares at his watch. Red, blister-tipped pustules framing its black plastic band seem to stare back, malignantly.

Larry drops his arm stiffly and turns his head. His eyes wander to

the stand of overgrown holly and trampled ferns by the roadside, then to a tangle of shiny-leaved vines growing up through the shrub's woody limbs. Their leaves are flecked with red blotches . . . blotches just like the ones on his arms. Larry steps backward hastily. He's never really studied poison oak up close, never really distinguished it from the Vinca and Blackberry vines that tangle through the redwoods. Every time he's walked in the woods he's come down with the rash, but he's always equated it with other skin disorders, like boils or warts: some get it and some don't.

But—it dawns on him now—it isn't really HIS fault he gets it. It's this three-leaved, creepy looking vine gangling out into the roadway that PUTS it on him! He stares at the blistering constellations of soreness on his arm, then back to the poison oak leaves. Sneak attacker. You can't be careful of it, not really. It worms its way through bushes and sneaks into lawns. It spreads its oily venom on your shoes, then to your hands when you tie your shoelaces. You can be infected by petting a dog or picking a flower, and YES! You can even get it off a toilet seat!

"You scum . . ." Larry begins stalking toward the glistening leaves, and they, in turn, seem to twine sinuously, malevolently, toward him.

"Sucker!" he hisses. "You ain't fit to—"

The city bus rumbles around the curve and stops. Larry, startled, turns and hurries to board it. He juggles his briefcase and lunch up the stairs, searching his wallet for his bus pass. Suddenly, a stinging itch, a prickling that will brook no denial breaks across his shoulder blades. He twists spasmodically; the briefcase bangs against his knee and flies open. Comic books and file folders tumble out as his lunch bag rips, spilling sandwiches, apples, and corn chips down the aisle.

Scowling, Larry stoops to retrieve what he can while the bus driver chuckles overhead. It WOULD have to be her, the grandma-type who thinks nothing of chiding him about misbuttoned shirts, unmatched socks, and poor posture—as if he were a baby instead of an up-and-coming Systems Analyst. Now she tsks and says, "You're such a cutie pie! You better unwrinkle or your face will freeze like that!"

Most of the morning bus riders are kids bound for the junior high down the street; they find this remark uproariously funny. Larry stumbles to an empty seat, ducking his head to hide his flushed cheeks. For the duration of the ride downtown he stares out the window, rubbing his wrist and wearing a look of deep concentration. He lets the bus roll past the offices of Sluicegate Technology and on to the end of the line: City Hall and the Municipal Library.

As the afternoon sun slants in through the library's west windows,

Larry, who has spent the entire day hunched over thick volumes of botany and horticulture, removes his glasses and rubs his tired eyes. Who was it, he muses, who said, "Know Your Enemy?" Was it MacArthur? Marcus Aurelius? Bismarck?—or was it Luther Burbank?

He returns home at twilight, giddy and half-delirious, envisioning himself in an asbestos space suit, scourging the roadsides with backpack flame thrower and napalm hand grenades, laughing as the vines sizzle before his relentless onslaught. He knows of course that this sublime idea is out of the question, practically speaking. Even if he could find a space suit and flame thrower, even if there were such things as napalm hand grenades, his trainee-level budget won't begin to cover it. Besides, his research has revealed that burning poison oak is worse than touching it: if you breathe the smoke, if you inhale just once . . . he shudders, knees weak and mouth dry at the thought of the loathsome itch in his lungs, mouth, nose, throat. Ghastly, ghastly!

No, not death by fire. Pulling it up by the roots won't work either: even with protective clothing, one brush on the nose, one microgram of the urushiol oil that impregnates the leaves, and . . . No, it had to be chemicals, powerful chemicals! Herbicides designed to either asphyxiate on contact or systematically saturate the hellish growth to the outermost cilia of its poison-bloated root system.

Larry shudders through a cold bath, rebalms himself, and goes to bed wearing a pair of socks on each hand. He squirms and tosses late into the night, body wracked with itches and brain ablaze with plans.

In the next few days he ranges the farm districts, making discrete, whispered inquiries of older nurserymen and hard-bitten county agriculture agents. San Lorenzo Garden Supply is just down the street, but its owner is a smiling, bearded young man who wears rainbow suspenders over his "Love Mother Earth" tee-shirt and holds Monday night classes on organic integrated pest management. Larry knows an appeaser of that ilk just wouldn't understand. This is WAR!

The following Saturday morning, as the wraithlike mists drift sluggishly through the forest that nestles Tex's Redwood Courts, Larry strides toward the tool shed, fully awake and grimly determined. He wears knee-length rubber boots and a raincoat jacket zipped over his coveralls. His turtle neck sweater is rolled up to his chin and his forehead is covered with a rolled down wool stocking cap. "Do it. Let's do it," he whispers. "Move it. C'mon."

"You're up early!" Larry drops to a fighting crouch, then straightens up again, warily. It's his neighbor, Sharon, peering at him and smiling through her screen door. "What's happening?" she yawns.

"Somethin' I gotta do." Larry speaks tight lipped and stern, but with a hint of anticipation that is almost sensual.

Sharon pulls her robe up tighter around her throat. "Uh, how's your poison oak? Tex told me you got it again. Drag!"

"I can handle it."

"Wow, you're really brave." Was there the faintest hint of sarcasm in her voice? No man could tell.

"Yeah, well. Nothing to cry about." Larry aims a steely squint through his glasses. "Me, I don't get mad. I get even."

"Huh?" she says, but he turns on rubber heels and is swallowed by the mist.

In the privacy of the tool shed, he pulls on elbow high rubber gloves and goes to work. First he pours the legal—but frowned upon—Ortho Brush Killer "A" into the bottom of a Hudson Sprayer. The directions call for eight ounces of herbicide per two gallons of water, but Larry empties the entire quart bottle into the tank. From a flat metal container wrapped in a paper bag, he adds the pint of illegal and infamous 2,4-d—the bottle that grizzled old feed store owner in Watsonville charged him so dearly for. After mixing the two chemicals into a slurry, he fills the sprayer to the two-gallon line with water and screws on the plunger cap. He works the pump handle in quick, forceful strokes until the pressure is correct, then snaps it into lock position. Cracking the shed door an inch, he makes a quick reconnoiter. All clear. He secures his plastic safety goggles and steps out, creeping stealthily down the back service road, gripping the sprayer and wand tightly in rubber-sheathed fists.

He begins as far away from Sharon's view as possible. She doesn't seem to be one of those quisling ecology types, but you never can tell.

There. The shiny, sebaceous, reptilian green and red-splotted horror. Twining itself around the lower branches of a young redwood. Another strand at the base of the fence post ahead. More a few feet southwest.

A white ring forms around Larry's lips from their pressure against his teeth. "Okay. My turn now," he whispers to the plant nearest him.

His hand tightens on the pump handle as he creeps forward, stroking the spring action trigger. He raises the wand, then pauses, savoring the touch of his gloved hand on hard metal. He bends over, bringing his head within inches of the plant. His face looms in the fog, a grinning death's head of cold fury. The wand begins to wave back and forth rhythmically, his finger ever-tightening on the trigger.

A new bud on the vine before him is opening, and the large leaf above it hangs over, seeming to shelter it. Other leaves curl up toward

him, as if in . . . supplication. He smiles unpleasantly and swings the wand within a half inch of the stalk.

A drop of dew glistening on the tip of the large leaf suddenly drops to the ground. Then another drop from an upturned neighbor, and two more in quick succession, like tears falling onto the damp earth.

Larry swallows and knots his brow. His eyes dart to the sky, then back to the leaf curling maternally over the newborn bud. He feels a stirring uneasiness. Roman soldiers flicker in his mind's eye from a movie he watched as a child, laughing as they killed newborn babies. . . . Scenes from recent TV specials knife through his brain: gas chambers, jackbooted soldiers . . . Policemen with dogs and clubs attacking innocent marchers. . . . Vision upon gruesome vision parades forth, every inhuman atrocity he's ever heard or read about, faster and faster, a ruptured vein of cruelty—

“NO!”

The word rages from Larry and echoes raggedly in the mist. His fingers loose their grip on the wand. A shudder passes through him and he staggers against a fence post.

Slowly the tremors subside. He wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. Looking down at the poison oak plant, he shakes his head slowly. How could it have happened? He always considered himself a reasonably moral man; how could his abhorrence of slaughter for “sport” or revenge be swept away by an itch, however annoying?

Larry pushes away from the fence post and straightens himself. The sweat dotting his forehead begins to dry in the morning breeze. The fog is dissipating; leaves rustle overhead. He removes his stocking cap and addresses the plants, twisting the hat in his hands as he speaks:

“Some monster. You couldn't even move out of my way, much less ATTACK anyone. . . . I'm—I'm sorry. I don't hate you. . . . Can you really sense when people want to— uh, have bad thoughts about you, like in ‘The Secret Life of Plants’?”

He pauses and sighs, eyes scanning the redwood studded hills. He looks back down at the poison oak, clearing his throat to speak further.

Strange. If he didn't know better, he'd swear one of the vines has moved a leafy tendril a few inches closer to his leg. Wait a minute. One three-leafed cluster is definitely hanging toward him, shiny with urushiol oil.

Larry steps back in revulsion, sweating anew. “No, really, you aren't—I don't really think—”

He lunges for the sprayer, swinging the wand from the hip and squeezing the trigger in one motion. His heart is pounding, but he watches unblinking as the pale poison stream bursts from the nozzle

and splashes upon the leaves.

“I feel terrible about this, I really do! “But . . . well, little kids play around here and . . . and stuff—and Tex doesn’t need . . . but somebody’s got to—believe me, this is no fun, really.”

He marches along the fence, methodically dooming plant after plant, careful to spray underleaf and drip line around the base of each one. He works steadily until the tank runs dry, only pausing to scratch himself as necessary.

Sharon, upon seeing him later washing his hands by the shed, is struck by the expression on his face. “Hi, Lar— Wow! What are YOU grinning at?”