

An Invasive Species



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Tree Trunks with Ivy by Vincent Van Gogh, 1889

by Fred McGavran (January 2022)

Nature sells. Bill Bob and I learned that when we got us space at the Organic Farmers Market. We didn't have the time to grow the stuff ourselves, so we took the best we could find from a supermarket dumpster, dipped it in mud, and laid it on a crate like it was right out of the ground. Even if it wasn't always so fresh, people were willing to cut real farmers some slack. We always made enough for beer and gas, but then Bill Bob found a crate of baby carrots, wiped them on his truck to dirty them up, and packaged them in baggies. Folks were snapping them up until some woman started shouting, "You don't

dig baby carrots out of the ground! They're big carrots cut down to size!"

That got people's attention.

"You didn't grow these!" she screamed.

Now Bill Bob's only about five foot four and has a beer belly so big he has to lean back to keep from falling on his face. When he gets worked up, he rocks back and forth like he's about to topple over. He rattles a lot too, because he always carries a few beers in his cargo pants.

"I spent all last night whittlin' 'em down to size!" he yelled, flipping open his pocket knife to prove it.

The blade is six inches long.

The woman started hollering like she'd been stabbed. We were lucky to throw the crate into the truck and get away before the police arrived. I felt real bad about leaving all those baby carrots, but you can't fall in love with your inventory.

After all our talk about farming, Darlene (that's my wife) wanted me to get something green for our apartment. I'd had to throw out the ivy in the window box to get dirt for our produce.

Darlene's no gardener either, so we went to a Big Jeff's "Stuff 'n Save" store that has aisle after aisle of plastic plants and flowers. What really got me was the plastic ivy. They even had Kudzu, the kind that's taken over parts of South Carolina and Georgia. People will buy anything, as long as it looks natural.

When I told Bill Bob about it, he said, "They got a pretty good stand of that down by the river."

When the weather's good, Bill Bob spends a lot of time at Riverfront Park, even when Lois (that's his wife) will let him

into their apartment. So we checked it out and sure enough, park maintenance was chopping the stuff down and pouring Roundup on the roots.

"This is good as anything they got in the stores," I said. "I'll bet we can sell it cheaper than they get it from China."

Park maintenance let us take as much as we wanted. While I was throwing it into the truck, Bill Bob managed to borrow a half gallon of their weed killer in case things didn't work out.

Right off we hit a speed bump. The store wanted it in three foot lengths and not looking like somebody just hacked it off a tree. Besides, if you let it sit out in the truck it dries up, and if it rains it comes back to life and grows like hell. You got to make it damn near waterproof in case somebody forgets it's plastic and waters it. Then Bill Bob remembered the weed killer and stuffed a few strands into the bottle to see how they'd take it.

We had a hell of a thunderstorm that night, and the next day most of the ivy was going crazy. But the stuff in the weed killer was just lying there limp, like it was coming off a bad drunk. When the sun came out, it stayed bright green and didn't shrivel up a bit.

"I think we got it licked," Bill Bob said.

"It'd take too long to wash every strand with Roundup®," I said.

He hadn't thought of that.

"What're we going to do?" he says. "It's too good an idea to let go."

And then I had my inspiration.

"Let's pop it with a little weed killer, just enough to keep it from growing."

“Like suspended animation?” he says.

Sometimes Bill Bob uses big words like that. His VA doctor told him he'd been in a state of suspended animation for damn near fifty years.

So he borrowed one of Lois' needles. She has diabetes pretty bad and gets them free at the clinic. When he injected the ivy, it straightened out like the electric eel the time my brother Donnie used one to jump start a dead battery for his high school science project. It might have worked better if Donnie'd worn rubber soled shoes. Rubber gloves might have helped, too.

Bill Bob gave the next piece a lot less, but it didn't do a thing. When we left it out in the sun, it shriveled up, and when we threw water on it, it grew like hell.

“It's dose related,” I figured.

In case you're wondering how I knew that, I didn't waste all my time in prison library writing up appeals for the other guys in return for some spending money. Course I always plead out. If you're any kind of a negotiator, that's the way to go.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Bill Bob said, even though he'd had more injections at the VA hospital than anyone could count while they were trying to get his meds right.

“It means we have to figure how much to pop a three foot section and we're home free.”

So we went back to work and used up our weed killer getting the dose right. When we did, our Kudzu was beautiful. It would lie in the sun for days, green and shiny as the plastic stuff, and when it rained, it just shivered like a kid who's been in the pool too long. We thought we had it made when we took our first truckload of “Bill Bob and Larry's All Natural Ivy” to Big Jeff's. Then it got complicated.

The manager agreed it was the best damn ivy he'd ever seen and got real excited when we told him we'd cut him a deal on the price.

"But we got a problem," he said. "I can't buy anything unless it's approved by corporate."

"What's corporate?" Bill Bob asked. He doesn't know business the way I do.

"Big Jeff himself. He makes all the decisions."

"Where's he at?" Bill Bob said, a little ticked we'd have to drive downtown.

"Just outside his home town of Bryer's Gulch, Tennessee."

"How many stores he got?" Bill Bob said to see if it was worth our time.

"5,437."

"Where's Bryer's Gulch?" was his next question.

"Not on the map," says the manager.

"So how do we find it?" I said.

"Go to Nashville, turn left, and start asking at gas stations five or ten miles off the freeway."

So we cashed Bill Bob's VA disability check and headed south.

"This better work out," he said. "Lois gets all kinds of pissed when I don't give her the money."

Finding Nashville wasn't that hard, but checking out all those gas stations off the freeway took some time. We were getting low on money, sleeping in the truck and drinking beer in VFWs along the way. And we weren't alone. We kept seeing limos full of manufacturers' reps on the back roads, all trying to find

Bryer's Gulch. Big Jeff must've figured that you had to show some initiative to cut a deal with him. Something about our truck made the limousines follow us.

Finally we found this station where they spoke Bill Bob's language.

"Trade you twenty yards of ivy for a six pack and directions to Bryer's Gulch," he said.

I don't know whether they thought it was a bargain or because Bill Bob was picking his teeth with his pocket knife, but they pointed us down a dirt road. So off we go, followed by a half dozen limos. After a couple hours we were ready to turn back, but there was so much dust we were afraid the limos would run us off the road. Then all of a sudden we came over a ridge and there was the headquarters of the biggest retail chain in the world laid out with bunkers and a landing strip and razor wire all around it just like the state pen. When they saw our truck, they let us right in. The limos weren't so lucky. They had to wait outside the wire and buy food from trucks and access to portalets until Big Jeff was ready to see them.

Big Jeff himself came out to meet us, because we were the first ever to breach security. The guards had confused us with him because we drove the same kind of truck. He thought that was real funny, but the guards weren't laughing when he fired them.

"I hear you boys got live ivy for half what the Chinese charge for plastic," he said nice and easy, thinking he'd soften us up. "How'd you get it to lie down for you?"

"We got a secret formula," I said.

That pissed him off. The store manager back home told us later Big Jeff'd been trying to reverse engineer our ivy, and now we'd spoiled his plan.

"OK, Hilljack," he says starting to write. "Here's the deal. Deliver five tons a month starting in 30 days and this is what I'll pay you."

It looked like we'd won the lottery.

"But if you don't deliver, you can forget it. This is your first and last chance."

So we signed the contract. On the way out, Bill Bob picked up enough snacks in their test kitchens to get us home. You should have seen the guys in those limos when we drove by, smiling and waving our contract. We were so excited we didn't talk about how we were going to do it until we were back on the freeway to Nashville.

"How we gonna deliver five tons of ivy in 30 days?" I wondered. "We'd have to have a plant and a ton of Roundup®, and we're all out of cash."

"You aren't watching enough TV," Bill Bob said. "We'll get us a spot on Coyote Circle. One of the Coyotes is sure to back us."

Damned if he wasn't right. Soon as we called the show, the producers asked for our photos and bios and said they wanted to meet us. A disabled veteran and a reformed non-violent criminal were sure to appeal to their audience. Besides, I guess nobody in LA had ever heard of an environmentally friendly substitute for plastic ivy.

"Don't have the money for another trip," Bill Bob told him.

When he's relatively sober, he's a good negotiator.

"Then send us your business plan," the producer said.

"Don't have one. All we need is a plant, and the money will pour in like water outa a rain barrel."

That's the way the Coyotes looked at it, too. When they saw our contract with Big Jeff, they slobbered to get on board. Part of it was how Bill Bob pitched them. It'd been a long drive to LA with the truck bed full of beer and beef jerky and enough ivy to close the deal. Neither of us had bathed in six days, and Bill Bob was the first guest to appear in wife beaters.

While the Coyotes circled and made offers for eighty or ninety percent of the deal, Bill Bob pulled a beer out of his cargo pants and told them he wouldn't give away more than 30 percent no matter what. That stopped them cold.

"You," Mr. Dark Suit, the bald Coyote that always wears a dark suit pointed to me. "Larry, is that your name?"

"You got it, partner."

"I'll set you up in my factory, stand you the money to buy your proprietary formula, and pay you \$1,000 a week to get started and 50 percent of the profits as long as your buddy's not part of the deal."

Why he didn't want Bill Bob part of the deal I can't say, but \$1,000 a week is \$1,000 a week.

So we huddled to figure this thing out. Bill Bob found me another beer.

"Way I figure," he said, loud enough for everybody to hear. "We're partners. Let Mr. Fancy Ass lend us his plant and his money, and you and I will settle up when the real money comes in."

Bill Bob and I shook hands on it, and Mr. Dark Suit came down from the platform to shake our hands, too. The other Coyotes were weeping. That show had more viewers than any in its history, and the rerun went viral. For the next few weeks, we had more people following us on Facebook than those boys who

carve duck decoys in Louisiana. What they liked most was how Bill Bob made Mr. Dark Suit give us our first check right there on stage.

"That's \$5,000," Bill Bob says when he started to write.

"I said \$1,000 a month," Mr. Dark Suit said.

"I'm saving you the trouble of writing the next checks."

The other Coyotes just loved that, and so did the TV audience. Nobody had ever messed with this guy before. But we needed the money to get home, and Bill Bob had to make things right with Lois after "losing" that VA check.

Like any start up, the business had its ups and downs. Mr. Dark Suit had an old plant along the Georgia-South Carolina line where Kudzu ivy was at its worst, complete with a railroad siding to ship the stuff to Tennessee. He wasn't too happy to learn our proprietary formula was Roundup®.

"You trying to screw me?" he says.

Now I wasn't sure what a proprietary formula was, so I just started talking. That's my gift.

"A good idea is a good idea," I said.

"Bullshit."

"Besides," I says, "we'll get it cheap because Roundup is in a world of shit with their proprietary formula."

So Mr. Dark Suit backs down. Getting it cheap means a lot to him.

His factory had been built to inject drugs into vials with needles (at least until the FDA decided the drugs did more harm than good), but it was a challenge to get the ivy to lie down long enough to get popped. Once it was pacified, though, blades chopped it off in three foot strips and bundled them

just like Big Jeff wanted.

They had a brass band on the siding when we shipped our first five tons in time for Big Jeff's deadline, and Bill Bob and I had so many interviews about living the American dream that it started cutting into Powerball sales. If Bill Bob and I could make it in business, why the hell throw away your money on the lottery when you could be an entrepreneur? Mr. Dark Suit even let Bill Bob come to the factory, because so many people were bringing in tons of ivy just for the chance to shake our hands. We even had a contest for the longest strand. The one that won was over two miles long.

When they started feeding that strand into the factory, the injection needles worked just fine, but when the tip of the ivy reached the choppers, it coiled up over the cutting blades like a giant snake getting ready to strike. If they had just shut down the line, nothing would have happened, and they could have chopped it up by hand. But Mr. Dark Suit wouldn't allow any down time, so it kept rolling until the tip broke a light bulb and stuck in the socket. At first it just sparked like hell. Then the current surged through the vine and snapped it out straighter than my brother Donny's electric eel. I thought it had burned itself out until it hunched up like a giant inch worm, rolled off the line and humped out of the factory. We jumped off the loading platform to let it pass, and it lurched off down the railroad siding swaying like a conga line.

The guy who'd brought that two-mile strand got it all on his phone, and the video went viral. Bill Bob had brought a tub of beer to celebrate with the winner, and we were all standing around watching the video and saying, "No shit!" when another video appeared. This was of the strand wrapping itself around a transmission tower and pulling it down, high tension wires and all. Then it moved on to the next tower, and then the next, and within hours South Carolina and Georgia went dark. Nobody would have missed them much, but when the blackout hit

Florida, people took notice.

Mr. Dark Suit called his insurance agent, who told him to warn the public not to stick our ivy into electrical outlets. This worked the same as that drug company warning people not to smash their pain pills and snort them. All over the country, people started sticking the ivy into wall sockets, and the stuff went berserk, tearing up houses and dragging down anybody who tried to stop it. Next time Mr. Dark Suit called his insurance agent, he told him they'd cancelled the policy.

Bill Bob and I decided to head back home. We had a new Ford 150, and Mr. Dark Suit rode with us as far as the Ohio River under a tarp in the back. Lucky for us the media were blaming him for everything. After a few hundred miles drinking beer under the tarp, he looked like a native when we dropped him off at the Ohio River.

Lucky we left when we did. The government got involved and decided the only way to deal with the ivy was Agent Orange. Of course Florida and Georgia and South Carolina objected, but sometimes you have to throw somebody off the boat to keep the others afloat. Bill Bob said they were a lot better off than if they'd used napalm, and for all I know he's right.

That's the problem with an invasive species. You never know what it's going to do to the native wildlife. The experts say injecting Roundup into the ivy modified its genetic code. I say when you got a good idea, you gotta run with it, and we sure did.

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