

## “Weed Killer”

Like *The Little Shop of Horrors*, this one involves a plant invasion, and it has moments of wry humor. Otherwise, it doesn't have much in common with other invasion stories, but it's as close to a traditional invasion tale as this book gets. What sets this tale apart is its emphasis on people's reactions to the plant invaders rising between the cracks of city streets: where they come from, no one knows, but instead of frightening people, their alienness fascinates and becomes a hot topic. More horrifying than the alien's otherness is its *attractiveness*... and the way curiosity makes people stupid.

### Weed Killer

by Amanda M. Blake

At first, we thought they were just more dandelions.

Mom called me from the back and asked whether I'd forgotten to spray. I hadn't, but in the spring and early summer, we spray practically every week. When one dies, three others pop up in its place until the summer heat off the pavement finally breaks down their yellow-petaled or fluffy wills and we can strip them away without any hope of seedling resurrection.

I'm no landscape artist. We have a pair of window boxes in the front of the

shop, but the plants are all fake. No one has time for gardening here. We're selling fried yeasted dough and puff pastry, not flower pots.

I sprayed the pavement and promptly put weed-killing out of my mind.

But the leaves and stems didn't wither. They remained a ragged but vibrant green and grew taller.

At Mom's prodding, I sprayed again, but the stems thickened, sprouting more leaves. For a moment, I worried they'd vine, and we'd never get rid of them. After about a week, though, the stems thickened enough to support themselves, and the growth continued upright.

The actual dandelions died. I pulled them away without problem. But three clusters remained unaffected, even when I drowned them in enough weed killer to down a thistle and it trickled in a thin line down the storm drain.

The next step was to pull them out by the root. The only reason I used the weed killer was so I wouldn't have to kneel on a hot, dirty sidewalk—just spray, crouch, pull, and toss.

When weeds take root in a sidewalk crack, you don't expect them to put up much of a fight. How deep can they go, right? They only have about a half inch to take root, at best. But no matter how hard I pulled, they stuck tight. Maybe when the seeds sprouted, they created just enough of a crack in an already unstable foundation that the root could reach farther than the average urban weed. These slabs were last updated in the seventies, and some of the slants had caused more than a few skinned knees.

The roots didn't give, but one of the stems snapped, secreting a milky substance onto my hands.

If you don't remove the root system, the weed grows again, but to get Mom off my back about them for a while, I severed the stems and picked all the leaves.

Before we go to bed, Mom likes to watch the five-thirty world news, then the six o'clock local news, so she feels more connected to a world beyond doughnuts. In the local news, they had this informative segment about the new weed-killer-resistant plant popping up in various places all along the stretch of downtown Main Street. They suggested that everyone leave them alone while the botanists at the nearest university studied them because the

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weeds had proven difficult to remove and emitted a defensive substance that damaged garden gloves and irritated skin.

Which was the understatement of the year because Mom had already broken open the aloe vera leaves, and I was soaking my red-hived hands in them, trying not to cry from how badly they itched—like a thousand mosquito bites reaching their worst all at once. It lasted for days. Mom had to call in Tuyet to cover my shifts until the blisters scabbed over and the itch faded into irritating instead of excruciating.

After that, people tried new formulas of weed killer, but mine weren't the only hands with chemical burns that week, so they mostly avoided trying to break or cut the weeds off at the stem. The ones who tried pruning shears ended up with at least some splashes, some eye irritation from aerosolized droplets and from the little filaments like tarantula hair on the leaves and stems.

“We're still looking into this unfamiliar species, but like other plants as well as animals, they've evolved to protect themselves,” the experts said. “They're hardy, but as long as you leave them alone, they should be harmless.”

So, all along the street, people mostly left them alone. Storeowners' kids drew around the weeds with chalk to discourage tourists from walking on them or touching them. Most storefronts had signs in the corners of their windows as well, to minimize liability—not that anyone ever reads signs, based on the number of people who try to come into the doughnut shop after one in the afternoon when the closed sign is turned over in the door.

Soon, the chalk art became more elaborate as curious kids and curiouser adults studied the steadily growing stems and the clenched, closed buds at the tips. Henrik Sorenson, a local window and chalk artist, embellished the work done by some of the kids as they imagined what kind of flower would bloom. Amid giant dandelions, daisies, and sunflowers, he also drew a flower with tentacle petals and a Venus fly trap parody with a cartoon speech bubble saying, *Feed me!*

People laughed and took pictures, but I didn't think it was funny.

Still, the more that people took pictures, the more people came to walk

downtown and into our doughnut shop. Mom extended the hours to three in the afternoon to accommodate the post-lunch dessert crowd. Since Tuyet was an accomplished window artist herself—and since her window art was covered by her hourly wages rather than Mom having to pay Henrik extra—she made the storefront a botanical wonderland that put our fake window-box flowers to shame.

We also designed a specialty doughnut with sugar flowers on top and floral patterns painted into the icing. Customers were encouraged to take pictures in front of the window art or next to the chalk art around the weeds themselves and post with the hashtag *flowerpower*.

Not my idea. To me, it all seemed like a lot of noise over a freaking weed.

When I hinted that Cheryl down at the antique store was maybe having some luck killing the weeds with some essential oils, Mom told me to get back to my kneading and “Don’t interfere with good business.” I didn’t mention that she was the one who’d wanted me to get rid of the weeds in the first place; I sure as heck never minded a dandelion on the sidewalk. She would have scolded me for mouthing off and given me the silent treatment through supper, even though I was twenty-two and only lived at home because she and Dad wanted me to stay with family—until I made my own, she’d say.

Between tourist fascination and academic confusion, everyone had flower fever. Our quaint little town found itself in the middle of its fifteen minutes of fame. “It’ll fade,” I told Mom. “Don’t expect these numbers we’re doing forever.” She said she understood, but she’d milk the attention for all its worth, while we could.

Meanwhile, the weeds continued to grow, leafing like something from the Amazon, the bud at the end growing with it but remaining tightly closed and encouraging more and more outlandish speculation about what was inside.

At this point, I could look up from the cash register to give our customers their change, and I’d see the bud swaying in a breeze. Whenever a child’s laughter rang discordant through the distortion of the window, I’d wait for the scream—from the child stepping over the chalk lines to grab at the stem or tear away the leaves like a lovesick girl, from a customer coming in with their wailing child’s hands or face bubbling with red blisters and exclaiming

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that they would sue us for child endangerment.

I guess when litigation strangles your intestines like that, you know you're an adult. I wondered whether Mom woke up at midnight from the same nightmares.

After the breakfast crowd thinned and I restocked the case, I kept checking through the windows, through the illustrated imaginings of what the weeds would become, to see whether the buds had cracked. But they remained locked closed even as the stems shot up like bamboo and the leaves grew as big as saucepans, expanding beyond the lines of the original chalk art.

I didn't understand how a weed sprouted in a sidewalk crack could get that big. I'd been half kidding with myself when I'd assumed it must have cracked through the foundation. Tree roots could upend a slab, but these were weeds, not two-hundred-year-old oaks. Yet when I stepped out one afternoon and crouched down, a mound of sidewalk pebbles surrounded where the stem emerged from the crack, where the thickening had overwhelmed the integrity of concrete. If the stem could do that, I didn't have the expertise to say the roots hadn't done otherwise. I stood up quickly and edged as far around the weeds as I could, although there almost wasn't enough sidewalk left to avoid them before having to step into the street. The only reason I'd left out the front was to stop by the sandwich shop, but after that, I took the back door every time because at least the weeds growing in the alley stayed along the brick walls.

I started to get even more nervous, though, whenever I saw those weeds back there, where there was no window or chalk art or people taking pictures to make their social media accounts more interesting, no promotions for our little downtown street to make a few extra bucks. No one was paying these weeds any attention, not even the news outlets, because only store employees ever saw them or had to avoid them. But they were still there, both on and around Main Street, as though deliberately surrounding us.

Every time I asked to take some time off to escape from them to the city, Dad told me that plants don't have brains or neural networks, that they communicate, but it's a series of chemical reactions responding to stimuli, nothing more. He didn't have much of a reply for me when I said that we did

the same thing, and my chemical reactions were telling me to get the hell out of Dodge.

But I had responsibilities, at work and at home, and I didn't want to leave Mom and Dad without warning just because I was paranoid.

The coverage became like a countdown to the new year, like those old white people who wait with baited breath for the corpse flower to bloom for a few glorious, stinky hours.

The window and chalk art became more elaborate and colorful; Henrik painted a mural on the other side of the curio shop. With the time that our icing artists had to perfect them, the floral doughnuts became more realistic and popular, even more popular than the croissant doughnuts.

The weed stems thickened to the width of my wrist, and the buds reached the height of my head, shaped almost like a candle flame and as long as my thigh, clenched like a secret and swaying even when there wasn't a breeze.

Now, though, the first buds cracked slightly open outside the tea shop.

Reporters have swarmed upon Main Street, and not just local news. Our alleys and parking lots are clogged with panel vans and rental cars. Tourists have their cameras and phones out, gathered in crowds around the clusters of weeds that the journalists haven't claimed as their own.

We've sold out the floral doughnuts. Our windows have darkened with people, but they form in an arc around the three weeds in front of our shop, so I can still see them perfectly. Tuyet, Suki, Mom, Dad, and I all stand on the other side of the cases and stare out at the swaying buds. The rustle of the weeds' leaves is like hands swirling taffeta. I somehow hear it over the canned chattering of the crowd.

"It's happening." Tuyet steps around the counter as conversations go silent and the cameras and phones flash like thunderless lightning.

I can't speak to how soon the buds at the tea shop bloomed, whether they were the first or whether they were simply the harbinger, the signal for them all to bloom at the same time, triggering a collective gasp and silence along the street. All I can see is our doughnut shop and our weeds, and the press of people crammed shoulder to shoulder to get the first photo, to be the first to see the unknown flower and the first to share it with the world.

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Suki joins Tuyet at the window, but I remain behind the counter, as do Mom and Dad, but they stay because that’s store policy—no crossing the line unless we’re cleaning. Mom doesn’t snap at Tuyet and Suki to get back to work, though. No one’s working, no one’s buying, and everyone just wants to see what happens as the buds crack open, one by one, showing hints of pink like a leg between the slit of a skirt.

It’s slow at first, second by second, glimpse by glimpse of the bright pink through the green, but then they unfurl all at once. The petals are the color and texture of a brilliant hibiscus, but the thickness makes me think of a knife sliding through skin to strip it away in slices. They open like arms.

If there was a collective gasp when they started to bloom, there is a collective moan of awe as the flowers open, more beautiful, thicker, and healthier than anyone imagined—despite the fact that their powerful roots crumbled our infrastructure before they would allow themselves to die, and their stems and leaves burned us before they would let us stop them from growing. Their colors put our most vivid efforts to shame.

When the petals settle in their splendor, a spray of golden mist emanates from the center.

The camera people on the sides of the arc in front of our shop pitch forward first, falling to their knees, perhaps because of the extra weight on their shoulders. But everyone starts coughing around the same time, dry coughs as though they can’t catch their breath, until they heave and spasm in the effort to drink in the air around them.

Their faces turn pale and dark ashen, their lips blue and purple. They grasp at their throats with bruised fingertips, collapsing onto the sidewalk. Some of them fall onto the furred leaves of the weeds and claw at their eyes before they stop moving. Others tear away the leaves in an effort to pull themselves up. Their skin continues to blister well after their hands have relaxed on the pavement.

I try to tell Tuyet and Suki to get away from the windows, but they’re already coughing.

Even as I grab Mom and Dad by their sleeves to pull them out the back, I know there’s no point.

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The weeds along the brick wall have opened as well, sending pollen through the empty alley, a line of defense against those of us who have run out from our stores. I motion that we should cover our mouths with our shirts, but even so, we don't make it four steps before a breath isn't enough to breathe.

The flowers orient not toward the sun but toward us, their faces vibrant flesh and their leaves shuddering, humming. Or perhaps it is simply the desperate rush of blood through my ears.

Birds fall from the sky like hail, thudding to the ground. We join them, even as we struggle to reach the car, as though breathing doesn't pull air in from the outside.

The golden mist fades until it can no longer be seen, but maybe my vision's only going dim. All I know is that just because I can't see it doesn't mean it's gone. Only that it's spreading.

## “Survival Instinct”

This story has an alien invasion dimension—bug creatures are taking over human bodies in the city’s criminal underworld—but that invasion almost seems like background, the situational opportunity for a noirish tale about a professional killer battling cancer (another type of invasion) and contending with his own mortality. As is often the case in the best dark sci-fi, “Survival Instinct” uses the alien to uncover unsettling truths about the human. Bugs masquerading as people, people turning into bugs—alien invasions can force far scarier revelations.

### Survival Instinct

by T. Fox Dunham

Matteo watched Tony Roach offer a glass vial of Sug’ to a junkie kneeling in the filthy alley. Then he chambered a round and aimed the Max-9 at Tony. “You know what it would do to my rep if I let you deal in Scarfo territory?” The junkie grabbed the vial and ran into the crowd of kids partying on South Street.

“Welcome to the bottom of the food chain,” Roach said. He clicked his tongue.

“Everything from Broad Street to Penn’s Landing belongs to the Scarfos,”

Matteo said, always defending. Philly constantly challenged you, and he couldn't show weakness.

Roach shoved the little vials of Sugar into the pocket of his ripped Eagles sweater, then smelled Matteo like a dog. "No one will remember street trash like you when you're dead." He sniffed again, and Matteo felt exposed. "And that ain't going to be too much longer, is it?"

"Forget it," Matteo said, posturing, overcompensating. He'd just come down to South Street to collect a vig from Skinny Ed but couldn't find him or any of the other degenerate gamblers who owed. Then, he'd seen this punk dealing Sug' on Scarfo turf, and that had to be answered even though he wasn't strong enough for a fight. The neuropathy numbed his hand, and Matteo couldn't feel the trigger.

"I can... smell it in you. Death. Eating you up. Eating your blood."

Matteo tried to cover himself with the gun, but his hand shook, nearly dropping it. Did Roach know? If he did, he couldn't let him leave this alley alive—and it had to be fast. College kids swarmed down South Street, hitting the bars and restaurants, home for spring break. Most had been drunk since noon or high off Sugar—the new narcotic from China that the Scarfo Family had introduced to America. PPD ran riot control, trying to regulate the crowds.

Matteo aimed for the Eagles cap covering Roach's head, hiding his face, and Roach yanked back his head and spat a viscous wad at Matteo's right hand. Foam burned his skin, and fumes burned his eyes, aggravating his nausea. Matteo dropped the Max-9 and rubbed his hand on his jeans. The pain quickly eased, but before he could pick up his piece, Roach tried to run. Matteo grabbed his green hood and whipped him into the side of a rusty dumpster. "Burn me with acid?" he said. "Forget you." He punched him in the jaw but instead of feeling the satisfying snap of the bone, his fist hit something squishy, rubbery under his skin. Then, twin tendrils tore through Roach's sweatshirt and lashed out, slicing his black leather jacket. Matteo dodged the arms, but he slipped on a broken beer bottle and collided with a brick wall. Roach lunged at him, and Matteo slashed his face with the bottle, knocking him back. An obsidian carapace broke through the faux skin and

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gleamed in the light from the sickly floodlight hanging on the side of Captain Spizie’s Pizza. Silvery eyes clustered like grapes through his sockets, and Roach clicked its beak.

Was this hell? Matteo wondered. Would he know if he had died in the night? He didn’t mind eternal damnation so much. He’d sinned in his life though never against anyone who hadn’t consented to the rules of their world. What scared him was being forgotten—just another street punk who got what he deserved.

They wrestled in the alley, and black beetles rained down from Roach’s mouth and crawled all over Matteo’s emaciated body. The reek of ammonia finally won, and he vomited onto the fast-food wrappers and syringes. His heart pounded in his ears, and some primal fear gripped his bones, warning him, compelling him to run, run for the Delaware and hide beneath its waves.

“Yo Matt!” his cousin Horatio said, disobeying his orders and leaving the car. “What the holy fuck is—”

“My piece!” Matteo ripped himself free with the last of his strength. He got him the 9, and Matteo fired at Roach’s chest. Roach stumbled backwards, falling into a stairwell.

“What kind of CGI shit was that?” his cousin said.

“I told you keep the car running,” Matteo wiped the bile and coffee off his leather jacket. In the distance, a PPD cruiser squawked, and Matteo searched the dark stairwell with his phone flashlight so he could put one in the guy’s head before anyone saw. Roach wasn’t a “made” guy—an official soldier in the DeCalv family—but whacking him would still cause a beef.

“You’re clipping him?” Horatio asked.

“He knows.”

“Oh shit.”

It wasn’t personal, just survival. If Roach told anyone, Matteo knew how it would go down. Sal Scarfo and the capos would send flowers first, show support, say it was such a shame because he was so young, but they’d wonder about his reliability. A guy with nothing to lose couldn’t be leveraged and would be a threat to the family. That’s how guys got whacked out, and he wasn’t ready for that yet.

“Where the hell is he?” Matteo said, finding the stairwell empty. Something scurried overhead, banging the rusted fire escapes. Matteo tried aiming for it, but the exertion finally caught up.

Police sirens keened from the street, and Horatio tugged on his sleeve. “You’re out of time!” Matteo sighed, holstered his piece, and walked to the car. “That thing was going to lay its eggs in your ass,” Horatio said. He helped him into the passenger side of the Caddy. Ho pulled out onto 34th street as the flashing lights of two PPD cruisers lit the night then turned onto the I-95 onramp. Riding in the passenger side aggravated his constant nausea, and Matteo sniffed piquant peppermint from a glass vial he kept in his jacket pocket, easing the symptoms.

“Some kind of mask?” Ho said.

“You’ve heard the junkie stories,” Matteo said, coming to terms with the reality that his reality had been a fantasy all along. Something had hollowed Roach out the same way Matteo was being hollowed out—his body, his mind, his delusion of dominance and immortality. They invaded his streets, his city, challenging the base of power he’d built and his chance at finally being upped from crew thug to soldier in the Scarfo Family.

“The DeCalvs are just messing with us,” his cousin said, sounding desperate to preserve his reality.

“More things in heaven and... shit.”

“Do we... tell the skipper?” Ho merged onto 95 and drove parallel to the Susquehanna River.

“Fucking forget about it. Nothing went down tonight. Just business. How much Sugar did you move, anyway?”

“Freaking gold mine,” Ho said. “The family’s *pazzo* for charging pennies. What is it? A new horse tranq?”

“The boss brought it back from a source in Hong Kong,” Matteo said. Something scratched at his neck, and Matteo pulled a beetle out from under his shirt. The thing squirmed in his burned hand. He threw it out the window, then checked for more.

“You need some Raid.”

“The mint extract would work just as well,” Matteo said. “They hate the

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smell of terpene."

"Billy Bait wants to buy more of those little safecrackers you cooked up for him. Blew the door right off."

"Just get me home. I have to be at the office at six."

"I got you, Coz. No one's going to know."

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"Can you smell it?" Matteo asked Shark. The nurse wrapped the rubber tourniquet around Matteo's arm, then flicked his fingers along his arm, stinging his skin as he examined his limb with all the grace of a meat inspector in a slaughterhouse. "I know junkies that would hit this on their first try."

"Sorry dude. Your veins are rollin'." He undid the tourniquet, then wrapped it around his wrist. Matteo braced himself for the pain and distracted himself by studying the sepia ink pattern of the Maori tats that decorated the nurse's arm. Shark drove the catheter into thin flesh on the back of his hand, dug around for twenty years, then gave up. "I'm going to get you some water, dude." The nurse yanked off the tourniquet and left the infusion room, leaving him sitting alone in the circle of chairs. Three IV bags of toxic drugs hung from the pole above him, and the sight of the ochre color of the vincristine triggered a wave of nausea.

Ho came back into the chemo room carrying WaWa coffee. "Bobby Toro called, asked if you were working at the site today. I said we were headed down to Florida to collect a thing." His cousin lied for him. Really, Matteo would be throwing up the next four days as the chemo killed the cells lining his stomach, and then his white count would plummet, turning the flu into a killer. They'd been lucky so far. Matteo started shaving his head after his dark hair started falling out, but the weight loss was obvious now. Matteo didn't know how much longer he could hide it.

"Did he mention anything about last night?" Matteo asked.

"I told him you scared off a DeCalv dealer. He didn't care."

"Weird shit, right?"