

What the EPA Don't Know Won't Hurt Them
a short story by Suzette Haden Elgin

Foreword

"What the EPA Don't Know Won't Hurt Them" is a prequel to my Ozark Trilogy (published in a new one-volume edition by the University of Arkansas Press in March 2000).

For decades I've been writing short stories to answer the questions people ask me over and over again about Ozarkers and the Ozarks; this story tackles the perennial questions about Ozark yard-trash, field-trash, and ditch-trash.

What the EPA Don't Know Won't Hurt Them

While Johnny Beau and Delmer were buying the '61 Chevy pickup from the man that ran the Stop & Dump junkyard, they were well aware of how funny he thought it all was, and how stupid he thought they were. Dumb, ignorant hillbillies, he was thinking, buying a pickup truck that had been worth maybe fifty bucks before the train hit it broadside and dragged it three miles! Dumb, ignorant hillbillies, he'd been thinking, and illiterate on top of that! He'd been fairly jumping up and down, scarcely able to contain himself, dying to get on downtown and tell everybody the tale of the two big dumb country boys that'd come by his business that morning and downright begged him to fleece them. Johnny Beau and Delmer knew all about that. They were used to it. They ignored him. They ignored the look on his face - a look you could spread on toast - with the patience that comes of long practice. And they gave him the hundred he asked for, and ten bucks more to use his rig to hoist the mangled metal up onto their flatbed where they could haul it on home, although by rights he ought to of done that for free. People like him - waste they hardly ever learned. And worrying about their foolishness was a of valuable time. They hauled the truck on home and called Granny Motley outside to take a look at it. "You see, Granny?" Johnny Beau said. "You see how that lies?" "It's got an interesting shape to it, Johnny Beau," she answered, and she gave him a sharp look over the top of her glasses. "You think it's interesting enough to call me out here in the street to admire it?" "Granny," Johnny Beau said solemnly, "what if Lee Wommack would just move one of those junk cars in his yard over a couple of feet - say that red Rambler that he's got lying up against the garage? If he'd just move that one over and lay this piece beside it, aimed toward town? You take a

good

look now, and see if you don't agree with me!"

The old woman went over to the truck and poked at the pickup with one crookedy finger, and said hmmmmmmph. She walked around to the other

side

and poked it again, and said hmmmmph some more. And then she backed way

off

and climbed up onto a fence to get a better look at what she'd been poking, and she began nodding her head.

"Ah yes," she said. "I see, boys. I do see. And I do believe you're right."

piece

"Granny," Delmer offered, "you realize that's damned near the last

we need?"

It made him feel strange, saying that. When something has

been

more than a hundred years in the building, the idea that it's just

about

finished doesn't lie easy in the mind.

"Yes," she said. "I can see that it is."

"And you'll tell Mr. Wommack?"

Granny nodded. "I'll speak to Lee Wommack," she said. "Be happy to.

However - there's something that's got to be done first."

Johnny Beau and Delmer sighed; they were used to that, too. There was always something else to be done, any day you had to bring the Granny

into

a matter. They'd been expecting it. They said only, "Yes, ma'am,

Granny,"

and looked attentive.

"It's the right shape," she told them. "Just exactly the right shape.

But

it's mightily ugly, you know. It's full of ugly and running over with

it."

"Well...." Delmer jammed his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans.

"There was a couple of people inside when the train hit it."

"Uh-huh. And a little child?"

"Might could be."

"You didn't ask?"

"No ma'am."

"Next time, ask."

"Yes, ma'am," said Delmer.

"People inside!" Granny Motley frowned, and laid two fingers over her

lips

while she thought that over. "Very likely they had time to see that

train

coming at them," she said slowly, with a faraway look in her eyes that made Delmer uncomfortable. "Trying to get that truck off the tracks

where

they'd stalled it, scared too foolish to leave the truck and run. Very likely they had time, just before the train hit them, to think about

what

it was going to be like riding on its nose down the tracks, nothing between them and it but the clothes they had on."

"Very likely," Johnny Beau agreed, glad he couldn't see whatever she

was

seeing.

"Awful!" said the Granny. And then she dropped it, and turned her attention to them. "So!" she said briskly. "You two boys, you take that truck on down to the creek, and you put it out in the running water

there

by the big sycamore."

"For how long, Granny?" Delmer asked.

"Thirty days, for starters," she said. "And then I'll go look at it to see

how matters stand.... Could be that'll do it. Thirty days at least, to purify it and clear out the violence." She folded her arms over her chest

and stared hard at Johnny Beau and Delmer. "I could be a good deal more precise," she said crossly, "if you two had bothered to find out the circumstances."

They agreed, and they apologized. She was right: they should have thought

of it. The way things were moving along now, people needed to be able to

start making plans. And then Johnny Beau said, "Granny, Miz Bridges over

there is gonna have a cat fit when she sees us put this in the creek."

"It's our creek," said the Granny gently.

"All the same."

"Well, let it pass, Johnny Beau. If she comes out and starts in on you, just you yes-ma'am her and tell her it was me that ordered it done, and let her come up and talk to me about it if she likes. And mind you, don't

sass her, or look smart-aleck, or even think smart-aleck. She's a good woman in her way, for a city woman, and it's not her fault she's ignorant.

You mind your manners with her."

"She may not come down," Delmer observed. "I think she's gotten real discouraged about it all."

Delmer was right: Hannah Bridges did not go down to the creekbank and confront them. As he'd said, she'd been through so many useless wrangles

on this subject that she'd about given up hope. And Harry had told her last time to keep still. "These people are my customers, Hannah!" he'd scolded her. "How do you expect me to sell groceries to people if you spend half your time chewing them out?"

"Harry," she said, "I'm sorry. But it's just disgusting! Have you seen that Lee Wommack's yard lately? Harry, you can't tell me there's any excuse for somebody filling up every last inch of empty space around his

house with old junk cars, and old washing machines, and old bedsprings, and pieces of tractors, and -- "

"Just stop, Hannah." He'd cut her off sharply, and that wasn't like Harry, who was as polite a man as she had ever known. "Just let it be," he said.

"But Harry, don't you think that--"

And he'd cut her off again! "Hannah, if you want to eat this year, you'll

let it be!" he'd said angrily. "You say anything you like to me, here in

this house, and I'll listen. I'll even agree with you. But you've got to

quit lecturing people about what they do with their own property on their

own land!"

And he'd gone off to the store, slamming the back door behind him as he went, and left her standing there astonished. It was clear to her that he

really meant it; she didn't remember Harry ever slamming a door before
in
all their years together, not even when he'd had good reason.
Remembering that now, she stood at her window peering out as the two
young
men went about their dreadful task. Watching while the pretty view of
the
swift, clear water and the grassy banks and the sycamore tree was
destroyed by the addition of a twisted pile of black and rusty scrap
metal! It had been a car or a truck, she guessed. And they were leaving
it
there, dumping it, right in the middle of the creek. It made her sick.
Only the fact that she loved Harry, and the memory of the way he had
slammed the door, kept her from going down and attacking the two
Motleys
with a garden rake, or anything else she could put her hands on quickly
that might damage them. What kind of lunatic would dump a wrecked truck
in
the middle of a beautiful little creek and turn it into an eyesore like
that? What kind of Ozark madness did it take to think up such
obscenities
and carry them out, in broad daylight, in front of God and everybody?
"Animals!" Hannah shrieked from behind the glass, not caring that they
couldn't hear her. It made her feel better, whether they heard her or
not.
"You animals!"
It made no difference to them, of course. Both of them had backed away
from the creek's edge, with their silly baseball caps pulled down over
their eyes, and were squinting at the scene. She supposed they would go
on
standing there until they were satisfied that it was ugly enough to
meet
their standards.
Hannah said a word she doubted her own mother had even known existed,
tears of rage and frustration pouring down her cheeks, and drew the
curtains shut over the window. She had no desire to look out that
window
again. When Harry came home that night, she would tell him that it was
time he closed the grocery store and went into the feed business,
because
it was animals he was feeding. Beasts!

The thirty days went by, and three more after Granny Motley inspected
the
wreck, and two more days on top of that. And then, to Hannah's
mystified
delight, the truck was removed from the creek and taken off to be added
to
Mr. Wommack's impromptu junkyard, so that she got her pretty view back.
Johnny Beau went to the Granny then, looking - and feeling - very
serious.

"Granny," he said, "Mr. Wommack tells me - and there's several as backs
him up, now! - that the grid's finished except for just one single
piece.
of
Is that true?" He knew his voice was shaking like a child's; in front
of
Granny Motley, he didn't care about that. He was that scared, anyway.
Sure, he wanted the grid to be finished! He'd been wanting that from
the

minute he'd been old enough for the grown-ups to explain to him what it was and what it was for. But it was scary all the same. This life he had was the only life he knew. She nodded yes, but she didn't look as happy as he'd expected she would, and that was scary, too. "Yes, it's true," she said. "It's really true."

"Well!" Johnny Beau smacked his thigh with one strong palm. "Then let's get the last piece, for God's sake, and do 'er!"

Granny Motley cleared her throat.

"Come on, Granny," he said urgently, "tell me what it looks like, and I'll go find it, if I have to hit every junkyard and ditch dump and sinkhole from here to Little Rock! Come on!"

Her lips thinned, and she got That Look, but she made no objection. Just started describing the missing piece to him, like he'd asked her to. It went on and on, while he fidgeted, and the time came when he risked interrupting her.

"Dammit, Granny!" he protested. "How am I supposed to keep all that in my head?"

"I keep it all in mine," she pointed out.

"Well, I can't do it. Can you draw it for me?"

Granny Motley made an exasperated noise.

"Granny," he insisted, "it's important. Don't be ornery at me."

"You're a lot of trouble, Johnny Beau," she said.

"There's a lot at stake," he told her. "I do the best I can."

"You serious?"

"Yes, ma'am. Dead serious."

"Wait a minute, then."

And she reached into her pocket and pulled out a crochet hook and a hank of brown yarn. "You watch," she said. "I can't draw the fool thing, but I can crochet it." And her fingers went flying, while he waited.

"There," she said finally. "That's it. That's how the last piece would look."

She held it out to him, and he took it and turned it over and over in his hands, marveling.

"Granny," he said slowly, "there isn't anything in this blessed world that looks like that!"

"Maybe not before," she said. "But now there is. And you're holding it."

"But it's got to be metal. And glass. Stuff like that."

"Yes."

"Well, there isn't anything like this made of metal and glass and wire, Granny. I've been looking since I was just a little ol' kid, day and night. I never go anywhere that I don't keep my eye peeled, all the time, just in case I'll see a piece that goes to the grid. And I know there's no piece like that one to be had."

"You've done well, Johnny Beau," she said.

"It's taken me all my life."

"All twenty years of it."

"That's all the life I've got, so far," he said stubbornly. "And I've

mostly spent it working on that grid. When everybody else was out
having fun, lots and lots of times, I've been looking for the pieces. You know
that."
"I do. You're a good boy, Johnny Beau."
"And now you show me this monstrosity, and tell me we're stuck here till
I find it someplace!"
"Well," she said, "I'm telling you the plain truth."
She reached over with one skinny hand and patted the piece of crochet
work he was holding. "Stretched out flat," she said, "it would be thirteen
inches long. And it's got seven turns to it - that have all got seven
turns to them. And some of those ... well, you see the way of it,
Johnny."

"Lord!"
The old woman chuckled, and that annoyed him
"I can't find it," he said, "and I know that. I could look my whole life
long and never find it. But I can make it. That would be just as good,
wouldn't it?~
"It's been tried," she said. "Many and many a time. There's lots of us
knew this piece was going to be hard to come by, and lots that tried to
make it, against the day it would be all there was left to find."
"And?"
"And it never works, because it has all the wrong thoughts with it,
every time. People get mad, trying to get it right, and then it's spoiled."
"I won't get mad," he declared.
The Granny just smiled, and told him to go on about his business and
let her get on with hers. And he went off muttering to himself, the
crocheted thing clutched in his right hand, where he wouldn't lose it, to give it
a try.

Johnny Beau was good with his hands and good with tools. He knew metal,
and he knew shaping. He went at the task with his mind clear and calm,
determined to stay that way. But it was just like Granny Motley had
told him. There was something about the piece that was fiendish, something
he just couldn't seem to get right no matter how careful he was and no
matter how slow he worked and no matter how hard he tried. And just like she'd
told him, the longer he worked at it, the more often he lost his
temper.
Till the afternoon came when he flung his latest try right through the
shop window, and it cost him forty-seven dollars to fix, and he still
was no closer than he'd been when he started.
He felt the burdens of the world on his shoulders then, and he felt
plain desperate not to be man enough to do this one small thing to ease those
burdens, and he needed somebody to take all that out on. He went back
to Granny Motley, that being the safest course and the most likely to lead
to a solution, and he spoke to her in honest, baffled anger.

"You women!" he shouted at her, never mind that she was nearly ninety years old and owed great respect. "You know a whole lot more than you'll tell! You could help, but you don't, for pure meanness and spite! You enjoy it - don't think I don't know that! All of you, you get a kick out of watching us men flounder around trying to get things done with only half the facts we need! Damn the lot of you!"

He'd thought she might hit him, or kick him, or bite him. He was surely asking for it, and in her place that's what he no doubt would of done.

He didn't care. He was that mad. It would of made him feel better if she had hit him. But she just sat and watched him with a patient look on her face, listening to him rant and rave, until he wore himself out.

And then she reminded him of the time when he was maybe eight or nine years old, and he'd accused her - and "you women," talking just like he was talking now - of being able to make it rain. "Remember, Johnny Beau Motley, what I told you that time?"

"Yeah, I remember," he said sullenly. "You said you don't make it rain; you let it rain."

"I did," she agreed. "And that was true. And we have told you men about it once for every star that shines, Johnny Beau. To no avail whatsoever."

"Damn you all," he said again wearily. "Every one of you."

Granny Motley clucked her tongue at him and said, "See there? You can't force things, Johnny Beau! That's never going to get you anywhere. And that holds for women as much as it holds for weather."

His jaw hurt him, and his pride hurt him worse, and he glared at her while she looked right back, steady on, and finally he dropped his eyes and sighed heavily.

"All right, Granny," he said. "I guess you make your point. And after I get over my damn temper, I'll be coming back to apologize. But not right now."

"No. Right now wouldn't be a good choice for it. Right now you'd still be into cussing me out."

"You and all the rest of the women! It's not just you, Granny."

She smiled at him and patted his clenched right fist, and he turned on his heel and left. Johnny Beau lived for the day she would be wrong for once.

He'd meant to go to the woods and walk off his mad, and then go into town and maybe get some chocolate candy for Granny, who was partial to the kind with the orange jelly centers. But the sight of Hannah Bridges stopped him short on the front steps. She was very nearly running up the stone path to Granny Motley's house, waving her arms, with her hair falling down and blowing every which way, and she looked to be delighted with herself. Whatever it was the women knew, Johnny Beau thought, they'd forgotten to tell Hannah Bridges.

"You there!" she called to him. "You, Johnny Motley!"

"Yes, ma'am, Miz Bridges," he said, and waited.

"You see this?" She shook her hand in front of him, and whatever it was that dangled from it.

"Ma'am?"

"You see this?" she demanded again. "You see that child down there by the road?"

Johnny Beau looked past her, and saw his second cousin Amanda down there, making mud pies where the last rain had left her a handy puddle. "You mean Amanda?" he asked.

"I do indeed!"

"What's she done?" he asked politely. "If she broke something of yours, Miz Bridges, Amanda's daddy will fix it or get you a new one."

"She didn't break anything, John, but it's a wonder she doesn't have tetanus this minute! This is what comes of stringing junk all over the county, John! Little children, who don't know any better and can't protect

themselves, end up playing with dangerous pieces of that junk, like this

piece! Don't you people know tetanus can kill a child?"

Johnny yearned to tell her everything he knew about lockjaw, in intricate

detail, but he deferred to Granny Motley; don't sass the woman, and don't

hold her ignorance against her. "Yes, ma'am," he said instead, and took a

good look at the thing she was waving.

And his heart nearly stopped.

Please God, he thought, don't let her mash it or twist it or break anything off it! Gently, carefully, so as not to make her suspicious or alarm her in any way, he held out his hand.

"Here, Miz Bridges," he said in his best church voice. "You let me have that, and I'll put it away somewhere where none of the kids can get hurt

on it; I promise." And he added, "Careful you don't cut yourself, ma'am.

That's a wicked-looking thing!"

It was that. Stretched out flat, it would have been thirteen inches long.

It had seven turns in it, and each of them had seven turns of its own. And

there was a good deal more to it, all of it promising. He could have wept,

he was so scared the city woman would damage it somehow.

Only after he had it safely in his own hand did his heart settle down again. Behind him in the house, he could hear the Granny calling, demanding to know what in the world was going on on her front porch,

for heaven's sakes, and he called back to reassure her.

"I'll be there in just a minute, Granny!" he yelled. "And I've got something to show you!" And then he stood there patiently yes-ma'aming a

good five minutes more while Hannah Bridges told him what a disgrace it was the way Ozarkers left sharp, rusty metal around where innocent children could get hurt on it - and he tolerated her in silence and did not interrupt to tell her that Ozark children were taught not to play anywhere that there was sharp, rusty metal, and had sense enough to do

as

they were told, while city children went roaming the streets looking for soft white drugs to play with. Warming to her subject, she explained to him how he was going to rue the day one of these days, and how it was just plain blind luck that Amanda wasn't in an emergency room this very minute.

And eventually she did run down.

"Thank you, Miz Bridges," he said when that happened, feeling he'd stood there a week.

"You're very welcome, I'm sure!" she said, and went stalking off across the street to her own house, rubbing her hands together as if she'd accomplished a good deal.

Except, halfway down the walk, she turned and looked back at him. "One more thing!" she called to him.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"If you must leave junk lying around on your property, you could at least keep the ground cleaned off all around it, so that it wouldn't be a haven

for snakes! Children die of snakebite, too, you know!"

He smiled at her politely. "Yes, ma'am" he said. He did not tell her that

you had to let vines and brush grow up around the junk, and warn the children away from it. You had no choice about that. Because somebody looking down from high enough up and seeing the grid of junk forming on Earth might very well have recognized it for what it was . . . would certainly have recognized it for a made thing, with a purpose. And that might have been more dangerous than snakes and lockjaw put together.

"Thank you, Miz Bridges he said instead. "Appreciate your trouble."

Not until she was safely inside, and her door closed, did he let out a whoop of joy and charge into the house bellowing, "Granny, you are never going to BELIEVE what I've got here!"

The headlines the next day were no comfort to Hannah Bridges, who kept saying, "But I was just talking to one of them, only yesterday? It's

not possible!"

Possible or not, there it was. "Twelve Arkansas families disappear from the face of the Earth overnight!" the newspapers screamed, using the biggest type they had available. "FBI estimates a thousand gone without

a trace! Authorities baffled!" "Administration suspects terrorists!" They were gone, and much of their belongings with them. All their

houses and outbuildings were swept and tidy and still. On every kitchen table lay

a neat stack of envelopes with bills inside, and checks or cash in each one to cover the obligation. Even the junk piled in the yards and ditches

and ravines was tidy; the vegetation around it seemed to have all been burned away by the kind of fire that burns so hot it leaves not even ashes

behind, though not a single fire had been reported. The junk itself looking burnished and shiny and sparkling, with no sign of the rust and filth that had been there the day before. But nobody had seen the

Ozarkers

leaving the hills. Nobody had seen them drive away, or get on a bus, or

board a plane. Nobody'd sold them gas; nobody'd sold them tickets. Not one of them had given notices at the places where they worked, or offered any other warning. They were just GONE. As if they'd never been there at all.

In the belly of The Ship, grown-ups were rocking children who were little enough to be crying about things left behind, now that the distracting excitement of the launch was over. Earthlight and starlight mingled were streaming in through the windows. The men were looking out at the immensity around them, half-uneasy that they didn't really understand how it had been done, much less what the women were doing now to keep it all going - and half-grateful that they didn't have to know the details. They were reasonably certain they wouldn't have found those details reassuring.

And still - in spite of the tension they all felt - when Johnny Beau pointed out how happy the city people were going to be now, the laughter went round low and easy. He was always a help, that Johnny Beau.

Planetside, Hannah Bridges tried to speak calmly. "Harry," she said, "I understand that even the government doesn't know where they went, or why, or whether they'll ever be back. I understand that. It scares me to death,

but I've accepted it."

"That's my girl," said Harry fondly.

"And I must say, I wish I'd been nicer to them I wish I didn't have to think they'll never know I didn't mean to be so harsh."

"Try not to think about it, Hannah," he said. "It won't change anything."

"Harry, do you have any idea how it could have happened?"

"No, Hannah, I don't."

"You don't suppose they were kidnapped.... You don't suppose they were taken away against their will?"

"By somebody considerate enough to let them pay all their bills first? I don't think so, darling."

Hannah whimpered a little bit, startling herself, and coughed to cover the childish sound of it.

"It's all right, Hannah," Harry said to her, understanding. "I'm just as

scared as you are."

"You're scared, too?"

"Sure I'm scared. Who wouldn't be?"

She went into his arms, glad to have them strong and gentle around her, glad she didn't have to pretend a serenity she didn't feel. And with her

face buried against his chest, she said, "Harry?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"There is one good thing that's come out of all of this," she said, trying to sound casual, not wanting to sound as if she were unaware of the

tragedy of it all.

"And what is that, Hannah?"

"Well, Harry," she said, and, in spite of herself, she smiled in the soft,

warm darkness of his embrace, "finally, we can get rid of all that JUNK!"

© Suzette Haden Elgin 1990, 2000

This story first appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,
1990.