

REMOVAL

Written by

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Based on the short story "Zillah Harmonia"

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EXT. FLAT LANDSCAPE - DAY

A police-style patrol vehicle cruises down a lonely road. The landscape is flat, vegetation sparse, buildings tumbledown.

Spinning wind turbines dominate the skyline in rows one after the other.

An autonomous industrial repairbot tends an inert turbine. The robot, benign, almost comical, hoists itself to the pylon's height and applies a welding torch.

Ignored by the bot, the patrol car weaves among the turbines.

INT. PATROL VEHICLE - DAY

Law enforcement RADIO TRAFFIC fills the car's interior. The driver adjusts the volume down.

ZILLAH HARMONIA (38) - serious, confident, determined, rigid - adjusts the crease in the slacks of her forest green uniform.

A gold tulip, the logo of the Bureau of Environmental Security, gleams on her tunic.

EXT. SUBURBAN RANCH HOUSE - DAY

A tidy house occupies a plot of land the size of a city lot. The property sits alone in the scrubby landscape.

Next to the old house and along borders of the patchy lawn grow the last flowers of the season. Remnants of foundations and driveways fill overgrown spaces among the streets, hinting at a suburban past.

A pair of hands in gardening gloves, one hand holding a pruner, deadheads dried-out blossoms with a SNIP. The other hand tosses the blossoms into a robotic cart.

EDNA SPARGO (74) - careful, tenacious, wary, widowed - the owner of the house, moves along the flowerbed, the cart following her.

Two lawn chairs invite respite on a warm day.

The patrol car stops at the curb. The tulip logo decorates the door.

Edna sees the car, but she is partially hidden from the driver's view. Edna steps further away to conceal herself.

Zillah, unaware that Edna has spotted her, exits the patrol car with a manila envelope and an electronic tablet. She approaches the house's front door.

In the distance, on the plain behind the house, the repairbot works on the wind turbine.

Zillah rings the DOORBELL.

Edna watches. She's been expecting a visit by the BES.

Zillah glances around. Memories of CHILDREN PLAYING in the front yard come back to her. She rings the DOORBELL again.

Edna can't avoid the inevitable conversation. She lifts herself to her diminutive height, and she shows herself. The cart follows her.

EDNA

Yes? May I help you?

Zillah approaches Edna.

ZILLAH

Is this the Spargo residence?

EDNA

I don't see any other houses around here. Do you?

ZILLAH

(unfazed)

Mrs. Edna Spargo?

EDNA

That's my name.

Edna glances at Zillah's name patch, which reads "Harmonia". A hint of recognition passes over her face.

ZILLAH

I'm Sergeant Zillah Harmonia. I'm with the Bureau of Environmental Security.

EDNA

I gathered that from your uniform and your car. What can I do for you? Is something wrong?

ZILLAH

You haven't responded to any of our communications, Mrs. Spargo.

EDNA

What sort of communications? I'm always cooperative with the authorities.

ZILLAH

The application for the relocation aid. I brought the materials with me.

Zillah pulls out her tablet and the envelope.

ZILLAH (CONT'D)

The compensation package is very generous. Your neighbors--

Zillah stops mid-sentence.

ZILLAH (CONT'D)

Mrs. Spargo, you don't remember me, do you?

EDNA

I don't know. Should I?

Edna does remember, but won't let on.

ZILLAH

It's me, Zillah Harmonia. I grew up on this block. Amber and I played together. Right here. With the other neighborhood kids.

Edna fakes recognition.

EDNA

Zillah? Is that you? Oh, my goodness. I'm so sorry. My eyes. My memory isn't what it used to be.

ZILLAH

It's alright, Mrs. Spargo.

EDNA

Edna, if you like.

An awkward beat.

ZILLAH

Well, anyhow, I was assigned to visit you to discuss our relocation proposal. I've emailed it to you again and printed it out.

Zillah offers the envelope.

EDNA
It's getting hot out here. Maybe
you'd like some iced tea?

Edna goes to the front door. Zillah follows her in.

Meanwhile, as the door closes behind Zillah, smoke starts to rise from the industrial repairbot working on the broken wind turbine.

Two helicopters THWOP-THWOP-THWOP overhead toward the repairbot.

INT. SUBURBAN RANCH HOUSE - DAY

Edna slips off her sandals. She glances back.

EDNA
Shoes off.

ZILLAH
Excuse me?

EDNA
No shoes in the house. I won't be
sweeping or vacuuming after you.

ZILLAH
(complying)
I'd forgotten.

KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

The two women make their way into the dated, but clean and orderly kitchen. A kitchen clock marks the time.

A breakfast nook has a well-loved wooden table and chairs. The table is uncovered, though it has a vase and flowers.

EDNA
Have a seat, Zillah.

Edna takes two glasses out of the cupboard. From the refrigerator, she brings out a pitcher of sun tea.

Zillah discreetly looks around, as if checking off things she remembers and doesn't remember.

Edna steals glances at Zillah.

Edna brings over the glasses. She serves Zillah and then herself.

EDNA (CONT'D)
I hope you like it sweet.

ZILLAH
Yes, ma'am.

EDNA
Still have a sweet tooth, I see.

ZILLAH
Look, Mrs. Spargo--

EDNA
Edna, please.

ZILLAH
I don't mean to be rude, but this isn't a social call. It's just luck that I was assigned this duty.

EDNA
You could at least do me the courtesy of telling me how you got in with the BES. As I recall, you wanted to be a doctor.

ZILLAH
Well, I spent four years in the army. A tour in Australia. Another in Brazil. About a month after I mustered out, I got a letter from the BES. It seemed a natural fit.

EDNA
Amber always wanted to be a scientist. She's working on the new fusion plant, just a few miles from here. Lead researcher. Did you know that?

ZILLAH
No, I didn't.

EDNA
In a few years, we won't need any more land for wind turbines. We can take down these ugly monstrosities.
(directly at Zillah)
We can leave people alone.

ZILLAH
 (attempting a joke)
 You know what they say. Fusion is
 just 30 years away. Been saying
 that for a century.

Edna is impassive.

Clearing her throat, Zillah switches on her tablet.

ZILLAH (CONT'D)
 In the meantime, we're offering
 compensation--

Edna stares at a point on the table.

EDNA
 Do you remember this stain, Zillah?

ZILLAH
 (nonplussed)
 Come again?

Edna traces it with her hand.

EDNA
 It's very faint after so many
 years. And so many cleanings. Don't
 you remember?

ZILLAH
 No, I don't.

EDNA
 It's your own blood, Zillah. You
 were seven, maybe eight years old.
 You and Amber were playing in the
 front yard. I don't know what
 happened, but you rushed into my
 kitchen, bleeding. You'd cut your
 hand. You put your hand right here
 while I cleaned you up and put on a
 bandage. You were back outside
 playing within a minute. You still
 don't remember?

Zillah shakes her head.

EDNA (CONT'D)
 This table, these chairs, these
 walls, have seen so much. Amber,
 you, Mr. Spargo - rest his soul -
 family, friends, strangers. Do you
 offer compensation for that?

Zillah is by turns ashamed and determined.

ZILLAH

Mrs. Spargo - Edna - I took an oath when I joined the Bureau of Environmental Security. I swore that I would do everything in my power to uphold the laws protecting earth, water, and sky, and all the creatures that live in those places.

EDNA

Even if it means people must suffer?

ZILLAH

Mrs. Spargo, the government has created this compensation program--

Edna leaves the table.

EDNA

Oh my goodness, is that the time? I promised Amber I'd call her. Please excuse me, Zillah. Do you mind waiting in the other room?

Zillah waits a beat.

She leaves the table and goes into the next room.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Edna dials Amber on her phone.

AMBER JOHNSON (37) - intelligent, intense, overwhelmed - appears on Edna's screen.

AMBER

Mom! What is it? Is something wrong?

Edna turns down the phone's volume.

EDNA

(sotto voce)

Amber, I'm so glad you answered. Someone's here.

Zillah, making a effort to give Edna privacy, examines knickknacks and photos in the living room.

AMBER

Someone? Who--

A scream comes through the phone. For a moment, Amber is off-screen, revealing a kitchen sink full of dishes and a counter disordered and chaotic.

In the other room, Zillah catches the scream, but ignores it.

 AMBER (CONT'D)
Wait a minute, Mom.

A beat.

 AMBER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I'm going to paddle someone's
behind if you don't stop...
 (audio unintelligible)

 EDNA
Amber? Amber?

 AMBER
Alright, Mom. I put the VR goggles
on the boys. That'll keep them
quiet for five minutes. Now what's
going on?

 EDNA
They're here. The BES. They're
trying to evict me!

 AMBER
What? What the hell are you talking
about?

 EDNA
Amber, please just come over.

 AMBER
I can't. Jerry's at a meeting in
Singapore and the au pair has the
day off.

 EDNA
Amber, for God's sake.

 AMBER
 (concerned)
Okay, Mom. I can leave the boys
with Joanne next door for a little
while. I'll be over in a few
minutes.

 EDNA
 (relieved)
Thank you.

The call ends.

Edna glances into the living room. Zillah studies a family photo, though she's aware of Edna's gaze. From the kitchen, Edna exits through a side door into the yard.

In the living room, Zillah hears the screen door SLAM.

EXT. SUBURBAN RANCH HOUSE - DAY

Edna tries to buy time by putting her gardening gloves back on and continuing her deadheading.

INT. SUBURBAN RANCH HOUSE - DAY

Zillah realizes that Edna has gone outdoors. She pulls on her shoes and heads through the kitchen to the side door.

ZILLAH

Mrs. Spargo, why are you running away?

EDNA

I have to get back to my roses. Do you want to help?

The robot cart trundles up, ready for more dead blossoms.

ZILLAH

Edna, you know I'm not here for--

EDNA

Roses are very particular. If you don't feed them right, prune them right, they don't grow as well. I've been taking care of these bushes for twenty-five years. I can't stop now.

ZILLAH

Edna, roses can grow anywhere.

In the distance, behind the house, workers repair the industrial repairbot.

EDNA

(to Zillah)

But I want to grow them here. In my garden. Not wherever you'll send me.

A private vehicle speeds up the street and abruptly stops in front of the Spargo home.

EDNA (CONT'D)

You were never interested in growing things. With you, it was always do it my way, follow the rules, do it because other people are doing it.

Amber exits the car and takes in the scene with the BES vehicle, her mother and Zillah.

AMBER

Mom!

Amber rushes to her mother, uncertain how to react to the uniformed BES officer.

EDNA

(to Zillah)

You need to think for yourself, Zillah Harmonia.

AMBER

Mom, what's going on here? Are you in trouble?

ZILLAH

No, ma'am, she's not in trouble.

EDNA

Amber, you remember Zillah.

AMBER

(incredulous)

Zill-- Zillah? Zillah. But you're--

ZILLAH

Hello, Amber. Nice to see you again.

EDNA

She's an officer in the Bureau of Environmental Security.

AMBER

(rising anxiety)

The BES. Mom, is this who scared you?

ZILLAH

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare anyone.

AMBER

I'm sure. But why... Zillah
Harmonia, of all people.

ZILLAH

I was assigned to visit Mrs. Spargo
because she didn't answer our
communications. Any of them.

AMBER

This is about the compensation
program, isn't it?

EDNA

You don't understand, Amber. You've
never understood. I've told you a
thousand times. They want to get
rid of an old woman who just wants
to live her life in the home she
built, that your father built, with
our own hands.

ZILLAH

I wanted to explain that the
government had increased its offer.

Zillah hands the tablet to Amber.

ZILLAH (CONT'D)

The offer is more generous than
ever.

AMBER

You promised me, Mother, that you
would talk to the government. That
you would answer them. You lied to
me.

Edna knocks the tablet from Amber's hand.

EDNA

I told you I didn't want their
stupid money. How can I make you
see? How can I make either of you
understand? There are tears on this
grass, this dirt, from children and
parents. Blood from cuts and
bruises. Lost toys. Lost rings.
Spills of juice and beer from those
picnics we hosted. All the
neighbors.

(MORE)

EDNA (CONT'D)

The McInerneys, the Chous, old Mrs Kingsbury who paid you to mow her lawn when you were 11 years old, the Goldblatts, the Larsons with that goddammed yappy dog, all relocated, except for Edna Spargo, the last one, the holdout, the last one standing.

AMBER

(gently)

Mom, it's for the best. It's for everyone, you, Zillah, me, your grandchildren. We have to fix what we've broken. This is part of that.

ZILLAH

The energy from the wind turbines is clean and supports the planet's healing.

EDNA

Shut up! Shut up! Both of you! Do you know what happened to Mrs. Chou? She was the last person to leave the neighborhood.

A beat. Zillah is unmoved. Amber is embarrassed.

EDNA (CONT'D)

Six months after they tore down that monstrosity of a house, she died. They told everyone it was cancer. I know it's a lie. A lie! She died of a broken heart. My heart is breaking, Amber. Why are you doing this to me?

A beat. Another.

Edna makes her way to the sidewalk near the vehicles. She walks along, slowly. She stops at an overgrown foundation.

EDNA (CONT'D)

John and Julie McInerney. They moved in right after us. I took Julie to the doctor once or twice when she was pregnant. So much love. Where has it gone?

A beat.

EDNA (CONT'D)
(thoughtful, distant)
It's alright, girls. It's alright.
Everything will turn out okay. You
run along and play. I've got to fix
your supper. Dad will be home soon.

She sits in one of the lawn chairs.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SUBURBAN RANCH HOUSE - DAY

A moving van arrives and parks in front of the Spargo house. Edna watches from the yard as movers take boxes, furniture, mementoes from her home.

Zillah eyes her from nearby.

Amber empties the deadheads from the robot cart into a compost bin.

LATER - CONTINUOUS

The moving van drives off.

Edna gazes at her home of more than forty years. Amber tugs at her mother, resisting until the last possible moment.

She finally gives in.

Amber pulls away from the curb, with Edna in the back seat.

Standing next to her vehicle, Zillah takes in the empty ranch house, remembering children LAUGHING and playing in the yard.

In the distance, on the plain below the Spargo home, the industrial repairbot is back at work, though a little worse for wear.

FADE OUT.