

# Rudy Ch. Garcia

## *Mr. Sumac*

Some Denver neighborhoods had their Old-Guy-with-all-the-cats, micromanaging a pension to pamper his feline friends. Others had a Dog Lady who hand-fed pets through the fences when their owners weren't around. His had Mr. Sumac, a sixty-year-old with an altogether different "pet." Better off than Old-Guy and unlike Dog Lady, Mr. Sumac fed and pampered his so-called "sumacs", the vigorous tree-weed blighting Colorado's swelling capitol.

Few from the region knew that the acrid, invasive pest was scientifically termed Ailanthus altissima, though many joked about how the "tree of heaven" indeed stank, all the way to heaven. Many, that is, except for Mr. Sumac, as members of the community had labeled him. In his mind, heaven itself might be lined with his tree-weeds.

Early this August morning, Mr. Sumac let his rear door slip to slam into its loose, worn frame. Careful traversing the patio's uneven flagstones, he singsonged, "How're you boys and girls doing?", as if greeting little children.

But instead of the giggles of kindergarteners, his "sumac" jungle answered him with the rustling of thousands of elongated leaves. The impacted growth insulated the yard from most urban clamor; the tallest-known weed's pungency saturated the air.

"Oooh, look at Doña and Susie, boys and girls. They're monsters! Enrique, Elsa, check out their new seeds."

Had anyone asked, Mr. Sumac couldn't have explained why he'd christened so many of them these last couple of years; it had just felt right. As had become habit, he crossed his fingers, hoping that personifying trees with individual names wasn't a sign of encroaching decrepitude.



In a mimicking of the Fred Flintstone cartoon, he exclaimed, "Wil--ma! You crowding out the other girls, again?"

He asked the absurd. Yards this size might comfortably hold ten trees. Here, more than fifty "sumacs" ran along the north and south boundaries and stood in formation against the alley fence he'd installed years ago; dead center, they huddled in two coverts of twenty more trees. And throughout, scores of tiny to cat-high younglings dotted the yard. The clumps of uncut bluegrass seemed an afterthought.

Overhead, fifteen-inch-diameter, smooth trunks rose to mingle sixty feet and higher, a canopy obstructing power lines and sun. Belowground, their tuberous roots formed flesh-colored ganglia of networks eagerly swallowing of his generous watering. Lacking that, given their density they would have attacked sewer lines or sucked neighboring carpet grass dry. As it was, the roots flourished past his fence--a soil kraken groping, aspiring for more.

In its entirety, the backyard sanctuary could have confused a Guatemalan rainforest into fearing it a rival.

Sitting in his one sturdy lawn chair, finishing the morning paper, Mr. Sumac replenished his coffee from the embossed carafe his bosses had rewarded him on his twentieth. That had been a great day.

His reminiscing was quickly replaced by reminders of how many neighbors hated his verdant realm, while others thought him crazy. As he scanned headlines, he now heard the elderly woman to the north trashing him in Italian invectives, as she likewise cursed, "Sommaccos velenosos!" about saplings from his trees, violating her rose beds. Much like the municipal retiree behind him who'd curse, "Ya con las pinches semillas, Loco," when he crossed the alley to toss back "sumac" seed clusters that disrespected property lines. These thoughts drove Mr. Sumac to abandon the half-full cup and don his tool belt.

"The neighbors, the neighbors," he chimed from atop his ten-foot ladder, snipping suckers off Doña's branches. The tool's built-up rust made his wrist ache. "When's the last time I oiled everything?" He didn't expect Doña to provide an answer.

Moving the ladder to another tree, then ascending, with each step he muttered, "I'll never . . . understand . . . why the neighbors . . . hate my . . . gardening." True, most people considered his "sumac" a weed and worked

## Rudy CH. Garcia

like drones pulling them from their yards. "But some people raise dandelions for tea or pigweed as herbs. Me? I just like sumacs. Nothing strange about that, huh, Enrique?" Enrique's response amounted to limbs bowed toward his caretaker.

Nor did Mr. Sumac think himself different from others, except for making his life "special" through strict routines and self-discipline, especially at his job. He'd always arrived early--despite Denver's weekday, clogged traffic--where he supervised housekeeping of the corporate headquarters. Even on his last day when layoffs and forced retirements hit. Proudly, he now said, "Gave them thirty years plus one day and missed only a week from my ankle sprain." He dropped dead limbs he'd cut onto the pile below. "We were lucky, huh, Susie?"

Many of his co-workers had lost their pensions, but his retirement covered necessities, plus enough for the occasional week of trout fishing. "And some serious gardening, boys and girls," he proclaimed to his audience. Especially after his Kansas, high school sweetheart-turned-wife left him to relocate for that Chicago promotion.

Mr. Sumac held the ladder with both hands and leaned his head into the tree, staring at Denver's distant skyline. "That's when everything changed."

The fishing trips grew infrequent, maintenance on his home suffered, his negligence spreading to his garden tools. A retiree with an odd love for a tree-weed turned into a myope who meticulously nurtured vegetation that survived without pruning and watering. Thinking about how he'd spoiled them with fertilizer made him chuckle.

He flinched from a last snip to Elsa. "Better do something about these cutters, huh, Girl?" he said. "Maybe they've gotten too old." He descended, leaving the ladder angled against Elsa.

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Entering Kobiki's Green Thumb Nursery, he paused at the checkout. "Hi, Allen. Howya been?"

"Fine. What's new?" Allen waited for the inevitable.

"Well, ever wonder if sumacs could sprout, even on Mars? Wanna bet a ten-spot on it?"

## AQC Kingdom Freaks & Other Divine Wonders

In the decade of operating their dream establishment, Allen and his wife Denise had had no client more devoted to his plant-love than Mr. Sumac, as the employees fondly called the old guy, though as instructed, never to his face.



## Rudy CH. Garcia

Allen shook his head, chuckling. "No, I won't bet you." Sure, the misnamed sumac had been the resilient subject of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, but that place obviously didn't resemble Mars, and word was, they were unexplainably dying off even there.

So, the old guy was joking; no need to ask his wife. Denise had educated Allen about the "sumac" that was unrelated to the equally obnoxious poison ivy sumac or the aromatic Anacardiaceae rhus shrub, also termed a sumac. Nevertheless, Allen and his wife didn't correct those who called it sumac; a bit of indulgence, even of educated gentry in this kitschy cow town mushrooming with urban transplants, kept their nursery solvent.

At the same time, Mr. Sumac's joke might indicate his plant-passion had finally carried him into a zany nonsense where most didn't go. Some senior customers got like that, when they got overly senior. Business-wise, Allen knew better than to abet such fantasies, much more those of his quainter customers, so he'd never have wagered.

Besides, he doubted Mr. Sumac could afford to bet; he rarely made more than a fifteen-dollar purchase, and the condition of his clothes and car matched that. Allen wished him well when the old guy headed in Denise's direction.

From behind the information counter Denise always smiled at customers and prided herself on chatting with her regulars. Nevertheless, it was always challenging talking with this one about his weeds that grew tree-high. Back in the 1800s, East Coast nurseries had imported them through England; she thought those people should have been shot for introducing such an invasive species. Still, her store profited from the one effective "sumac" herbicide. Shrugging, Denise greeted him. "How're the . . . sumacs?"

"Fine. Last crop o' seeds came in heavy. I'm wanna check out your prunin' shears. Gotta keep 'em trim, ya know?"

"Okay. Shears and snippers are now in the corner." Denise pointed to the rear and withheld a chuckle, musing, "He treats them like prize roses, in the middle of a drought, no less."

Her client lingered. "Didja know sumac roots keep growin' no matter how many times ya cut 'em? Suckers get bigger'n pterodactyl eggs." He stretched his plump hands to indicate shape and size, followed by patting his hair as if the little there needed tending.

Denise smiled. "No, didn't know that." He shuffled off.