



Coast Range Chronicles 2: “Malodorous Loam”

by

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It was a gorgeous spring day as I conducted a wetland delineation on an abandoned industrial lot near San Francisco Bay. The site was complex, the topography subtle, numerous vernal wet depressions with diffuse boundaries. I dug dozens of soil pits to decipher the subsurface hydrology. Elbow deep in the vaguely malodorous loam, I searched for hydric soil indicators and a restricting layer that might perch water and create wetlands. Clay content was important, so I spent a lot of time kneading the soil between my fingers—really working it into my skin—trying to determine the texture. Mud covered me head to toe.

I finished the work late afternoon. As I prepared to leave, a guy walked from a construction trailer and approached me. He was some kind of site foreman, wearing a respirator and a pair of hardcore rubber boots.

“You should be wearing a mask and gloves,” he said through the respirator.

"Why?"

"This is a Superfund Site. It's toxic."

I felt alarmed. "Toxic?"

"Yeah."

"What kind of toxic?"

He shrugged. "Beats me. But it's bad shit. Don't touch it."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier? I've been here all day."

"I forgot. But I'm telling you now."

He turned to go. I watched him trudge off in his biohazard gear. Probably back to his coffee and newspaper, his climate-controlled trailer.

"Thanks," I called to him. And then, a little louder: "Asshole."

He glanced back, shot me a glare, and continued to the trailer.

I hurried home and took the longest shower of my life.