

Over the Back Fence
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Approx 650 words

Curses! Foiled again!
By Alva Wood

Every year at this time, people start turning on their irrigation systems again. Every year they discover problems they didn't have when they turned the systems off in the fall.

Usually, the problem is pipes split by frost. When the owners turn on the water again, up through the ground come a-bubbulin' spring.

Dunc McMahon had a different problem. He turned on the water one evening, and all his sprinklers worked perfectly.

When he woke up the next morning, they were still working perfectly.

He whacked the control box a couple of times.

The sprinklers were still spraying water.

He flipped the switch to "Off."

The sprinklers didn't stop.

He pulled the plug that feeds power to the control unit. The sprinklers went off.

He reset all of his irrigation zones to zero. He plugged the unit back in. Every zone came on again.

He went to Canadian Tire for a replacement unit.

Canadian Tire was busy. Customers wandered the aisles helplessly, trying to find the right kind of anti-rust paint, the right size of windshield wiper, or the left flasher signal for a 1952 Hillman Minx.

Dunc found a whole shelf of irrigation control units. But none of them matched the one he was replacing. He needed some expert advice. But there was not a staff member visible anywhere.

Dunc picked up the unit that he thought he probably needed, tucked it under his arm, and went in search of anyone in a red T-shirt. He did find a guy behind the auto parts counter, who said he wasn't allowed to leave.

"Where is everybody?" Dunc demands.

"I think they're all attending a seminar on improving customer service," says the guy.

There was only one cashier on duty.

"Where is everybody?" Dunc asks her.

"It wasn't busy, so the other cashiers went for their coffee break," she replies.

Dunc can understand why she wasn't busy. No one can find the things they want to take to a cashier.

He goes back to the aisle that has his irrigation control units. There's still no one there. But he sees Julie Burkholder-Smith over at the next aisle. She's looking for someone who can help her select a starter bicycle for her young son Paul.

"Where is everybody?" she asks.

"Learning how to serve us better," Dunc grunts. "Did you try pushing the button?" he asks, gesturing at a device on a pillar.

"I didn't think it would do any good," says Julie, "but I'll try anything."

She pushes the red button. After a suitable pause an automated voice blares over the store's PA system: "Sporting Goods personnel to Bicycles, please. Sporting Goods personnel to Bicycles, please."

Dunc realizes he has one of those call buttons in Garden Supplies too. The same voice announces: "Seasonal personnel to Garden Hardware, please."

Then the voice repeats Julie's message.

Dunc and Julie look at each other with the same thought.

"You go that way," says Julie. "I'll go this way."

They weave their way through the store, pushing every button they can find.

Soon the announcements are falling over each other: "Hardware personnel to paint, please... Seasonal personnel to barbecues... Hardware personnel to electrical... Houseware personnel... Auto parts... Sporting goods..."

There are so many requests coming over the PA system that customers start laughing. The store can't even squeeze in its in-store commercials about specials on oversize garbage bags.

A crew of red-shirted Canadian Tire employees explode out of a side door. But there are so many requests for personnel they can't figure out where to go to first.

Dunc watches them mill around with a big grin on his face. Then he heads for the exit.

He forgets that he still has a control unit tucked under his arm. As he passes through the sensors at the exit door, all the alarms sound.