

HIGH AND DRY

Gentle “slup” and “pssst” whispers of the oozing sludge tide announced all was well. As always, familiar red and purple algal mats, lifted and unrolled by the rhythmic swells upon the soft shores of Chesapeake Bay, appeared daily in constant, predictable certainty. Dependable and reassuring, the moon tide imparted a profound sense of security, a feeling of utter tranquility. Small sheening bubbles of swamp gas burped as if sighing contentment into the sulfurous air of another beautiful, balmy day along the Potomac River in the third millennium A.O., After the Orange.

“Now we’re cookin’ with gas!” Muddy “Bud” Solo laughed, if that’s what a clonal, unicellular microorganism does when it’s elated. A chorus of several quadrillion other Solos just like Bud chortled in agreement. “Bogged down just the way we like it. Life is good nowadays.”

“E pluribus unum—out of many, one, eh?” Bud winked, as if he had an eye and a gender. All the microbes and slime molds cheered, recalling the awesome gift humans had bestowed on them.

Releasing planetary stores of accumulated carbon through burning fossil fuels, lovely humans dialed the global greenhouse thermostat beyond the redline. Fortunately, global warming accelerated dramatically in the Orange Period that began in the archaic calendar year 2017. While melting ice caps into a comfortably tepid soup worldwide, real progress occurred in 2020. In what humans called the “Rapture” or “Orange Glow”, mushrooms of bursting atomic bombs in a global nuclear holocaust triggered mass extinction of plants and animals including Homo sapiens. All but Sean’s forbearers and other lowlifes vanished suddenly in an Orange twilight. In humble, joyful thanks to humans, bacteria and other long-standing life forms—well, technically

not “standing”, as creatures with clumsy backbones vanished in the dust of eons past—in the simmering pot of Earth’s vast wetlands kitchen not only persisted but flourished. Within the blip of the human species’ brief existence, the “Opposable Thumbs” had restored the swamps. Quite handily they had facilitated change that created idyllic conditions for the likes of Bud and his ilk “ ‘If life gives you lemons, make lemonade’, as humans used to say,” Pete Moss quipped in reverence. “Bless ‘em.” Clueless as to what in the world a “lemon” was, she (female today, male tomorrow depending on what mood s/he’s in) remained deeply appreciative nonetheless.

Now in their heyday, the slime balls and other spineless greasers on Earth wallowed comfortably in muddy muck, lapping up goo. In all, the planet’s living mass totaled ten trillion tons of carbon, and the globe’s whole lot of protoplasm gently scratched out a living without claws in the soft ooze and rejoiced.

Zigzagging merrily through the morning marsh by means of a tiny flagellum, motile Muddy Solo docked on a mossy bank to join friends. “Never too late to flagellate! Move it or lose it, I always say,” s/he chirped to Pete Moss, who lolled comfortably soaking up another day in paradise.

Chuckling with affection, Pete nodded hello to Bud, then turned to his mushroom friends, “What do you deadheads want to do today?”

“Let’s play Bask in the Bog or how about Marshy Mellow Spa?” Puffer replied.

“Just not Drain the Swamp, that’s too scary,” another added. All of the fungi’s bioluminescent caps quivered, scattering glowing green spores into the mire.

“You’re such powder puffs,” Pete chided. “Well, there’s Unicellular, Multicellular, or Acellular? That’s fun. Or Pro-karaoke sing-alongs?”

“No, we played that yesterday. Besides, it’s boring. And it’s too early for Pro-karaoke.”

Bud was about to suggest his favorite pastime, but Puffer cut him off. “Sorry, Bud, we all know Flagellation makes you happy, but you’re the only one with a tail to wag, so that’s a non-starter. Geesh, how many times do...”

Just then, a loud whooshing sound and strong ripple reverberated through the thick bog’s gelatinous mantle.

“Whoa, did you puffballs hear and feel that huge plop-shake just now?” Pete asked, clumping into a protective mat. “Definitely!” Puffer nodded, spewing spores from its trembling cap. “You suppose it’s a monster blue whale breaching offshore? Or a giant redwood tree crashing the swamp? What else could make a tremendous splash like that?”

“Get real, Puffer, whales and trees are mythical beings, legends. You know they don’t exist, except in sci-fi stories the old spirochetes tell!” Pete said. “Stop scaring everyone.”

“What was that, dudes?” asked Sean Fenn, a blue-green cyanobacterium. The plop-shake had interrupted his day job fixing nitrogen. Acknowledged as the nightly Pro-karaoke song king, the Fennster was for sure the hippest, most jive member of the colony.

“Maybe it’s one of Myra Mudmuffin’s sweet farts over in Foggy Bottom?” a mushroom snickered, attempting to break the growing fear they all felt. No time for lame jokes. They ignored the remark.

“You suppose it’s a meteorite?” Pete pondered.

“Something hard made that large splash just now,” Puffer replied. “Could be a meteorite falling from the sky into the mush. If so, all that stardust is a real treasure.”

“Heavy metal! That’s so bitchin’ rad—beyond organic, spineless hot! It’s righteous, dudes!” the Fennster shouted. Their trepidation melted away immediately into shared excitement, a sense

of adventure. Without glands, it wasn't adrenaline that spurred their action. Rather, it was the prospect of a treasure hunt.

None of them felt or knew what greed was. That archaic motive had long since disappeared with the Orange Period. The prokaryotes simply looked to have some new fun in paradise.

In eager anticipation of discovery, they set off in the direction of the plop-quake. Making their way excitedly through the familiar, warm soupy marsh, they had advanced several hundred yards when a new sound emerged from the bog. "Wiff...tifph." Detecting the strange emission close by, Pete, Puffer, Sean, Bud, and the others stopped to listen. The "wiff...tifph" sound pattern repeated in steady amplitude at regular intervals.

"Maybe we should turn back," Puffer suggested. "I've never heard of a ticking meteorite."

"No, wait." Pete said, extending a filament forward. "Listen, there's a new sound."

"Twit...twit...twit" echoed through the swamp.

"That's creepy, Pete," one of the mushrooms said. "I'm getting a bad feeling." To the group of treasure hunters, those fungal words said a lot because bad feelings were uncommon in paradise.

"It's not a meteorite, that's for certain," Puffer said. "It's beeping."

They huddled together in a clump. "Twit...twit...twit." The repetitive transmissions continued not far away.

"We've got to find out what it is," Pete said. She moved again towards the sound, oozing forward in the muck tentatively.

Sean Fenn eased up alongside Pete and whispered, "I'm gonna poke around ahead. My cell walls are thinner and better equipped than yours to detect what's there." The others admired the Fennster's cool courage.

“Twit...twit...twit.”

After twenty minutes in which the “twit...twit...twit” drummed constantly, Sean returned from the reconnaissance mission. “Let me break it down for you dudes. It’s an old chum bucket made out of some kind of titanium alloy,” he lamented. “Its surface is white and feels hard and smooth. No meteorite, no treasure, just space junk. Come see for yourselves.”

Their protoplasm deflated in disappointment, the lowlifes followed the Fennster through the goo. “Twit...twit...twit.” And there it was—a smooth, white cylindrical monolith buried deep in the muck of their beloved swamp. A time machine. Of course, they had never heard of a time machine or knew what one did. Nevertheless, it had just splash-landed that morning.

Gathering near, the search party enveloped the alien structure. Suddenly, a new utterance sounded from within its titanium shell. “Tweet...tweet...tweet.” The white skin began to crack open.

Opposable thumbs on a pair of tiny hands thrust through the chink. The prokaryotes, longest-lived, most resilient creatures ever to inhabit the Earth, gazed spellbound as an orange tuft appeared in the space capsule’s aperture. The lowlifes lay prostrate in the swamp, wallowing witnesses in awe and reverence as the cloned God from the Orange Period returned in triumph.

A shrieking tweet thundered from within the clonal transport pod. The primitive telecommunication message, used by the last humans to incite perverse and subversive action, flashed in front of them: “Fire and fury like the world has never seen. Humans won’t be around much longer.” In wondrous ecstasy, the prokaryotes cheered, slinging muck everywhere at hearing the historic tweet as a holy writ confirming long-held prokaryotic beliefs.

“All hail the Big Orange!”

A loud, bombastic, off-key voice boomed opening notes of an old-time prokaryotic gospel to the tune of an ancient song, *Waltzing Matilda*. Overcome with elated inspiration and covered in sublime mud, the Fennster rose to join the cloned Savior in singing the universal favorite from the Orange Period that rid the world of humans: “I’m gonna bomb ya!”

In the euphoria after the jubilant anthem, humble Pete posed a question to the Supreme Being:

“Big Orange, you already rendered the world perfect by eliminating humans. Why did you return?”

Looking down his long bony nose, he replied in exasperation, “To finish the deal, of course.”

“The deal?” perplexed Pete asked. As others appeared confused, too, she quickly added, “How might you, Big Orange, improve on the world’s perfection? Now that you’re here, what will you do?”

“I’ll drain the swamp!” he said, smiling at their horror of being left high and dry.

End