



## THE DREAM OF THE BIFIDA

Punta Alta, Buenos Aires Province, 2084

By Michel NIEVA

How were we supposed to know when the plant spat its acid at me that my leg would swell so quickly into this deformed, solid block, bursting through my pants and shoe leather?

We first heard about the bifida (so-named for its characteristic two-pronged leaves) from ranchers who had started to miss a few head of livestock and suspected that rustlers might be working in the area. However, their initial suspicions were dispelled when a ranch hand, following the fetid trail of stink, came across a mountain of wormy, jellied flesh rotting next to the plant. It had clearly been broken down by a corrosive substance which had transformed the jumbled pile of skin, guts, flesh and bone into a volcano at whose center bubbled a putrid foamy brew. The hand realized that this accumulation of dead fermented flesh amounted to more than just the missing cattle: cows were certainly part of it but the moribund stew also offered up glimpses of rats, chickens, boar, viscacha, otters, bats and even the remains of a few human children whom no one was able to identify such was their state of decomposition.

Shock at this wanton butchery, this vegetable horror, spread throughout the town. Farmers loaned their spraying drones to the Municipality, who sprayed hundreds of liters of herbicide over the murderous vegetation. They boasted that a weed would have to be made of titanium to survive the oceans of poison they'd unloaded. But in spite of their initial confidence, the bifida colony didn't just seem unharmed by the toxic downpour, the treatment actually appeared to encourage it to grow, thickening the stalks and fattening the leaves as though the pesticides, which were deadly to all known life on earth, were to these plants a delicacy to be savored.

Where, people near and far began to wonder, had these malevolent murderous weeds, hungry for animal flesh, which reproduced at a plague-like proportions and seemed immune to all known herbicides, come from?

All manner of hypotheses began to proliferate but none had a solid enough foundation to progress from a mere rumor. Some said that a collector of carnivorous plants in Bajo Hondo had accidentally released an exotic species from the Paraguayan Chaco that, after decades absorbing pesticides, had genetically mutated to develop a killer instinct and the now notorious gastric juices. Others believed that this was a Jurassic species that had emerged from an Antarctic glacier and been blown by chance to these shores. Given that its evolutionary competitors had died out tens of millions of years ago it was able to reproduce in a frenzy with no predators to hinder the spread. The more fantastically minded ventured that the plant's spores had arrived from XTR-6453, an exo-planet from the galaxy of Andromeda, more than two million light years away, carried on a meteorite that had recently crashed into

Monte Hermoso whose alien origin accounted for the unusual structure of its digestive glands, which had no equivalent in the carnivorous plants of Earth.

Wherever they had come from was now immaterial: they were here, among us, and I had been hired as an expert from the National Institute of Agricultural Technology to study their physiology and come up with a plan to eradicate them. The first question that needed answering was why these plants used their dense, powerful venom to so voraciously exterminate all manner of animals, humans included, but, in contrast to other carnivorous plants, didn't subsequently consume the bodies. They just let their prey rot. One theory had it that in order to survive in barren land devastated by countless years of intensive agricultural monoculture, the bifida thrived on the chemical processes of decomposition as the flesh broke down to release organic compounds such as nitrogen that fertilized the soil. However, my analysis showed that soils as degraded as the kind in which these plants grew were unable to absorb nitrogen. In fact, the decomposition made them even more acidic and saline, resulting in greater toxicity and infertility.

Could it be that, as they said here in Punta Alta, the plants were just evil and killed out of pleasure? Because they felt, if they were capable of feeling, like anachronisms in this place and time? Might it be that displacement from another geological habitat or even another galaxy had converted their profound loneliness into an unending thirst for destruction? Or perhaps their biological makeup was simply so alien to our planet that their will to live, perhaps even to love and relate, was here an uncontrollable cosmic cataclysm?

At this point, it is also worth taking a moment to note the unusual symbiotic alliance that the bifida established with the fungi kingdom.

The deadly venom secreted by the plant was enhanced by the psychoactive substances produced by fungi, passed on through their micelia. Once absorbed by its victim, the thick, milky liquid didn't kill immediately. Unsurprisingly, poisoned animals would instinctively try to run as far away as they could get but this unusual venom, once the psychotropic element had taken effect, induced a powerful hallucinogenic state in the creature's mind. Like an arrow from a chemical Cupid, the doomed animal felt a pressing need to go in search of more venom and a bigger high and in this psychedelic trance they returned to die at the feet of the plant.

Another point that has intrigued the few specialists that have come across the bifida first hand is that the plant only secretes its venom at night, when its flowers close their petals and appear to be enduring a terrifying nightmare. In 1755, the naturalist Linnaeus published a brief but celebrated treatise presenting the hypothesis that plants can dream but later scientists dismissed the notion as a confused and unscientific metaphor that excessively anthropomorphized the nocturnal behavior of vegetation, which of course

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lacks a brain or nervous system that might stimulate such a physiological state. However, the unusual nature of this plant, utterly without earthly precedent, makes the idea more credible.

Do the bifida dream?

And if they do, what happens in their dreams as they secrete their venom?

Might they dream of unimaginable alien landscapes, geysers of volcanic sulfur, exo-suns shining dimly over weird birds and oceans we'll never see?

Might they dream like someone yearning for a lost family member, of brontosauruses, ammonites, terodactyls or thyreophora and the other extinct Jurassic fauna they will never see again?

Or is their dream of an absolute, wholesome beauty that enriched their lives in their far off galaxy but that is so incompatible with the conditions of our world that we can never understand

it, or if we did would find it awful and abhorrent?

In any case, there's no point speculating with no empirical information to go on. Yesterday, while Sergio, my assistant, and I were collecting samples of the soil where the bifida grow, I stepped on something that felt white and acidic. Because of a strange sensory dissonance I subsequently discovered that it hadn't been my foot: the bifida had unexpectedly sprayed its venom over one of my legs.

With Sergio's help, as I was already limping, we made it back to the house where we were staying.

I sat down and felt an acute prickling sensation run from head to toe.

"Get me some rum!" I shouted at Sergio.

He poured me a glass. It tasted of nothing and I spat it out.

"I said rum, you idiot! Not water!"

Sergio, confused, came back with the bottle of rum and I took several swigs. I couldn't feel anything in my throat.

Was I already suffering from the psychoactive effects of the poison?

I used scissors to cut off my pants and relieve my swelling flesh. Veins and stretchmarks were spreading across my skin, and it was turning brown and gooey.

I've begun to hear a ringing in my ears, they're buzzing like bullets on the final afternoon, and perhaps it's time to stop writing. But first, a final thought:

Humans have lived with plants since we first appeared on the planet and yet we are far from understanding them. They hide terrible secrets that harken back to the beginning of the cosmos. Can't you see it in the perverse smile of the bifida? They existed millions of years before humanity emerged and will doubtless have no compunction about spreading over our remains once we've disappeared from the face of the earth.

Several truths flash through me like lightning but I don't have time right now to reveal them all. The bifida are, think, and exist and their existence and thoughts flood me with an understanding of myself and the rest of the cosmos.

I feel now that the bifida are like a ball of cow dung from which randomly sprout insane bushes consisting of all the ideas to be found in the conscious matter of the brains of this and every other world. In every star of this and every other galaxy.

I have to go back. I need to return.

The forest is a funeral hearse.

What does a plant dream?

Does it dream of my pleasure, or my destruction?

Am I the dream?

Or perhaps I'm dreaming that this is a dream?

The trees loom over the path and the night blurs the textures of the expanse with a majestic mist.

Just as Nicolaus Copernicus argued that the Earth orbits the Sun, I can say at this precise moment that the Universe and the Milky Way and the Sun and the Earth and humanity inexorably revolve around plants.

Plants are an extraterrestrial dream that must be worshipped and that's where I'm going. Love is the ridiculous, superfluous act of kneeling before the beast that scorns me. Oh bifida, I prostrate myself at your feet, feast on my deformed, twisted flesh, I am your servant.

Eat my flesh!

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*Amor Alien*  
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