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The God Bloom

By Angel Leigh McCoy

The voices in Bert's head droned on.

...are optimistic that the new superstrain of HCB, that's hydrocarbonoclastic bacteria for you non-biojackers out there, will consume the spilled crude oil and return the Gulf to a state of health. We haven't seen such a disaster since 2010, when the first Deepwater Horizon explosion released 185 million gallons. Biotech has advanced. Back then, it took years to clean up. Today, it takes days.

Bert passed through the marina gate, half-listening to the program. He liked the background noise in his head. He'd spent the majority of his life in one of the noisiest places in the world: a kindergarten class. Now that he was retired, he was never quite comfortable with silence. He'd had the Cephalopod™ implanted after he left the school system, and he rarely turned it off.

...numerous accidents on the I-10 this morning. Expect long delays.

Outside his head, the dock was quiet. The occasional squeak of a boat bumping a rubber pad, a splash of water against a pylon, and the cry of a seagull was all that broke the stillness—and Bert's own footsteps. He wore shorts, a tank top, and his dock shoes without socks. The day promised to be warm, and he preferred to wear light clothing under his submarine coveralls.

...bio-hazard leak suspected. Patients are being flown to Gulfport Memorial Hospital for treatment until the cause can be—

“Time?” Bert said quietly, and after a beat, the Cephalopod in his head replied, “The time now is 07:27.” Bert oriented himself in the time stream. He had half an hour until the kids were scheduled to arrive.

He continued down the dock, past yachts and fishing boats to his berth. His Antipodes mini-sub sat low in the water. He stepped across to the flat deck and began his preparations. He unlocked the hatch. Once the seal was broken, the musty smell of sea water and sweat puffed out. His Antipodes could carry up to five adults, one adult and eight kids, or some other relative combination of big and little people. Most of the year, Bert took adult passengers: tourists or college students studying oceanography. But, once a year, Bert took groups of kids, pro bono. It was his way of reminding himself who he was. For him, it was that first week of school all over again, when he was learning names, and the kids were over-excited and anxious.

...responding to an apartment building collapse. The building had more than eighty units on eight stories. At this time of morning, there could be nearly two hundred people trapped in the rubble. Police are trying to build an accurate list of who lives in...

Bert climbed down into the mini-sub and began checking systems. He could cross the sub in three strides, and he usually stood or sat in the center, leaving the bench seats at either end for his passengers. The benches curved against two hemispherical, convex viewports five feet in diameter, one at each end of the sausage-shaped sub. The Antipodes had been designed for observation of underwater environments.

All systems were good, and supplies were restocked. Bert had to carry extra provisions during Kindergarten Week: emergency scuba systems, snacks, and vomit and

pee bags. Nature would inevitably call during the dive, and a kid would ask, “Where’s the bathroom?”

Bert smiled to himself, already feeling nostalgic about Kindergarten Week. He had reached the end. He wouldn’t live to see another year’s class. A woman in a white coat had informed him, three days earlier, that his cancer had metastasized. It was growing inside him, spreading out among his healthy cells and taking over. The doctor, with a well-practiced look of concern, had gone over Bert’s options, and they weren’t many. Then, she had said, “Six months.”

Bert had walked out without another word. He had told no one. He would not burden his friends, and he had no intention of letting chemotherapy ravage him with false hope.

...bringing in experts from Mississippi State to study the algae bloom. Dr. Hin Hsu of the Department of Biology has stated that he—

“Cephalopod silent,” said Bert.

A gym bag sat in the corner of the sub where Bert had left it the day before. It was his personal bag, the one that held his life. It also held his death—a pistol. Bert was prepared to make the most of his last Kindergarten Week, then put away his toys, and lay himself down to sleep for the last time. He stowed the bag in a locked cabinet.

Bert considered himself a spiritual man. He understood the importance of ritual and the power of intent. He didn’t pray, but he did take a deep breath. He considered the weight of the moment. His life stretched out behind him, no longer ahead, no longer hidden. He could see it all, and he had to admit to himself that he had few regrets. He had led a good life, and he was prepared for it to be over. He was confident that he would be remembered with fondness.

Bert pulled on the blue overalls with the nametag that said, “Captain Williams,” and returned to the deck to wait for the first wave of children to arrive. He checked seals and ropes. Inland, in the distance, he could see smoke billowing into the cloudless sky.

He said, “Cephalopod volume level one.”

...Gulfport-Biloxi International Airport. Officials have warned that they will be forced to divert some traffic to other airports. They’ve promised to investigate the sinkhole, and they’re confident that this tragedy was an isolated incident. They will be evaluating...

Bert watched the kids come down the dock, led by Martha Blankenship, their teacher, and he smiled. It was like being greeted by his own children, if he’d had any. Eight shiny new faces—new to Bert anyway—studied him with open curiosity. Bert stepped up onto the dock and held out his hand for Miss Blankenship to shake. “Ahoy there.”

“Ahoy,” she replied. She was at least 20 years younger than Bert, but he had known her for almost that long. Her hair had gone ragged from too many color changes, and her figure had become bottom-heavy. But, she still looked at him with sparkling gray eyes, and her smile still revealed those same crooked teeth she had never managed to get fixed. She said, “Kids, this is Captain Williams. He’s going to be driving the submarine today. Can you say ahoy?”

“Ahoy!” the kids all said in a cacophonous uprising. Several were already fascinated with the Antipodes, making comments like, “Wow,” and “Are we going in that?”

One of the many reasons Bert preferred to work with kindergartners was because they hadn’t yet lost their sense of adventure. He felt his own excitement rising as he watched them.

“All right, kids,” Bert called with his booming playground voice. “I need y’all to pay attention for a minute while I tell you the rules of the sub. Gather around.” He made sure they understood that he would put up with no monkey business. No one was allowed to touch anything, leave their seats, or talk above a whisper. That last rule was for his own comfort; sound tended to echo within the steel sub.

He helped them into their life vests and then guided them—two at a time, four girls and four boys—onto the sub and down inside it. He could hear them, whispering and giggling, as if they were spelunking mysterious caverns. Normally, he would have followed the last child down, but on that particular day, Bert felt the need to spend a private moment with Martha Blankenship. He shouted through the hatch, “Don’t touch anything!” and then stepped across to the dock.

“This will be the last year I do this, Martha,” he said. “I just wanted to say thank you for taking time out of your week to bring the kids down here. You’re a fine teacher.”

Martha shook his hand with both of hers. “Why, thank you, Bert. What a nice thing to say. Taking some time off for yourself, are you?”

Bert smiled. “So it seems,” he replied. He studied her eyes, thinking she had so much life ahead of her. So much yet to discover.

Martha turned and walked up the dock. Bert watched her go, then bent to release the lines keeping the sub in place.

...the mayor of Gulfport has scheduled a press conference for 10:30 this morning.

We’ll cover it live. After today’s events and the chaos that has resulted, Mayor—

A voice came out of nowhere. At first, Bert thought maybe he'd accidentally changed waves on himself, but the drone continued on, and the other voice was superimposed over it.

The other voice belonged to a tall, slim teen, no older than eighteen, with a black Mohawk and piercings in her nose and cheek. She was dressed retro-punk, her skinny legs sheathed in tight-fitting jeans. She wore an antique Black Flag t-shirt worn thin and held together with safety pins; she had army boots on her feet; and, despite the heat, she'd put on a ragged jean jacket covered with studs and ink doodles.

“Bert Williams?” she asked.

Bert straightened and nodded, “That'd be me.”

“I need you to take me to Sigsbee Laboratory.” The punk girl pulled a gun from her pocket. “Right away.”

Bert's mind skittered on the words, his attention focusing on the gun, trying to figure out what it meant.

“Look, man. I'm not joking. I need to get the fuck out there, as quick as you can take me.” The girl's eyes were a dark shade of green. They held purpose and determination, not the slightest sign of fear or anxiety.

Bert nodded. “Sure. No problem, but I got kids in the sub right now. Let me get them out first, and then I'll take you.”

“No time,” said the girl. “We gotta leave right now. We'll all go together.”

Bert bristled, Papa Bear instincts rising up his spine. “What's your name?”

“Synthia.”

“Look, Synthia. I’m not taking you anywhere so long as those kids are in the sub.” He stared back at the girl, his gaze as direct as hers.

Synthia stepped across to the sub, her gun pointed straight at Bert’s heart. “This ain’t the island, old man. We don’t vote. You fuck around with me, and I’ll shoot your kids.”

Bert watched her sidle over to the hatch and start to climb inside. He wanted to do something, but he couldn’t. He knew when he was beaten. The mohawk disappeared into the sub, and Bert finished untying the Antipodes.

When Bert came down the ladder, the kids were talking among themselves in excited whispers, watching schools of small fish. Bert shut the hatch overhead. When he sealed it, it sounded so final, like the closing of a casket. His legs suddenly went weak. “You realize it’s gonna take us several hours to get there?”

Synthia nodded. “Let’s go.” She had graciously hidden the gun in her coat pocket.

The attempt to avoid scaring the children eased Bert’s mind, somewhat, and he made an effort to do the same. “You kids ready to go?”

“Yeah!” they all shouted, the sound filling the sub. Bert put his finger to his lips, and they whispered, “Yeah!”

Bert smiled. “Good. I see you’ve all claimed your seats.” The girls had congregated on one side of the sub, the boys on the other. Bert looked around at their baby faces and glowing eyes, and he started the sub’s engines. Standing up in the conning tower, under the hatch, Bert could see in all directions through small viewports placed there. Using a hand-held unit not unlike a console game controller, he guided the sub out of its berth.

They slid through kelp and interrupted the paths of fish. The children pointed and tapped on the viewports, squealed when a jellyfish came close, and craned their necks to

look up. Bert kept the submarine at the surface, slowing or throttling up to avoid boat traffic, until they reached deeper waters, and then he said, as he always did, “Okay, mates. Let’s take this baby down.”

...has declared a state of emergency in the Gulf Coast states due to the breakdown of road surfaces. People have begun to clean out grocery stores for fear that, if the infrastructure continues to fail, supplies will not be—

“Do you believe in God, Bert?” The punk girl with the gun sat on one of the fold-down pilot seats.

Bert glanced at her, then resumed his watch. “If you’re asking me if I believe in an old man with a white beard who plays havoc with our lives, then no. I don’t believe that. I believe in nature and a higher order.”

Synthia gave a little laugh. “But humanity rules nature. Haven’t we proven that?”

Bert watched a group of albacore tuna swim by. The kids saw them too, and a bevy of whispers arose from either end of the tiny sub.

“I don’t know,” Bert replied. “I’ve seen hurricanes, tornados, and earthquakes that have leveled whole cities. I reckon that’s nature ruling man.”

“Or warning him.” Synthia hung her head.

For awhile, Bert had to focus on guiding the submarine safely through the 3,858 oil rigs that hugged the Gulf coast. The rigs loomed out of the darkness, most still active, some abandoned, their steel legs being assimilated by sea creatures and plants.

Synthia asked, “You know the way to the laboratory, right?”

“Yeah.” Bert sometimes ferried scientists and students out to the underwater lab. It was the largest of its kind, built between the continental shelf and Sigsbee Deep, the

deepest trench in the Gulf of Mexico, often called the Grand Canyon of the Gulf. Built ten years earlier, the laboratory had multiple purposes that appealed to government and scientific organizations. It housed a couple dozen researchers at any one time. Most importantly, it was way off the path that Bert had filed with the Coast Guard.

Synthia directed, “You need to head southwest.”

Bert bent down out of the conning tower. “I need to get past the rigs first, then I have to connect with the Coast Guard and report our change of course.”

Synthia shook her head. “No. I assure you, the Coast Guard isn’t out here today.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.” The punk girl gave Bert an intense stare to underscore her words, and Bert found himself believing her. He returned to his look-out.

...brings the death toll to sixteen. The CDC has quarantined the hospital where the infected patients were taken. Initial symptoms include itchy, irritated patches on the skin, difficulty breathing, and a greenish discoloration of the lips or eyes. They’re asking anyone with these symptoms to stay in their homes and connect to CDCHELP1135. That’s CDCHELP1—

“Ew!” groaned one of the boys. “What’s that?”

Bert saw a slick of fluorescent green slime floating in the water. He said, “That’s probably some form of sea plant like plankton.”

“What’s plankton?” asked a girl in pink pants.

“Plankton,” Bert said, “is a plant so tiny that you almost can’t see it unless a whole lot of them stick together and make a big crowd. A crowd of plankton is called a bloom. Plankton has been on our planet since long before humans were here.”

“Whales eat plankton,” said a boy in an oversized t-shirt.

“That’s right,” said Bert. “Some of the biggest fish in the ocean eat the tiniest plants.”

“Wow,” was the general response.

Synthia said, “Did you know that plankton is responsible for ninety percent of the oxygen created by photosynthesis on our planet?”

Bert studied her for a moment, shaking his head.

“It’s true,” Cynthia said. “Eliminating that one little plant from our world would suffocate us all. Did you know that it creates clouds? It’s damaged by UV rays in the same way humans are. When the ozone layer gets too thin, plankton near the surface are injured by the sun—sunburned. To protect themselves, they create clouds that shield them. These clouds become the storms, hurricanes, and tornadoes you mentioned earlier.”

“Yeah, sure, nature has its own balance,” said Bert. He didn’t like the ominous way the punk girl was looking at him. The lighting in the sub made the whites of her eyes appear verdigris, as if her irises were bleeding green out into the surrounding tissue. Bert turned his back on her and his attention to the ocean. He dropped the sub down another twenty-five meters, well out of the way of surface vessels. He wanted the girl off his sub as soon as possible. The sub’s engine thrummed a notch louder as Bert throttled up.

...have identified the cause as recombinant hydro-carbon oxidizing bacteria called HCB. It was genetically engineered in a laboratory and has been used successfully to clean up oil spills around the world. We believe that some of the bacteria has become airborne or rain-borne and has left the ocean and moved onto land, where it is continuing to do its job. It’s seeking out petroleum products and, basically, eating them. We have a dedicated team of scientists—

A voice in Bert’s head interrupted the news stream to say, “Incoming call from Martha Blankenship.”

Bert looked over at the punk girl. “Their teacher is calling me.”

Synthia shrugged. “Answer if you want. They can’t stop us now.”

“Incoming call from Martha Blanken—” Bert squeezed his earlobe and said, “Hello, Martha.”

“Bert. How are things going? Are you running late?”

Bert sighed. “Martha, I’m going to take this group out to Sigsbee Lab. You don’t have to worry. Everything’s fine.”

“What?” she said. “Bert, things are going crazy here. I’m getting calls from scared parents who want their kids home. They’ve closed all the schools. There’s some sort of bacteria breaking down asphalt. You have to get those kids back here, right away.”

“I can’t.” Bert listened to Martha breathing in his head. “Everything’s under control. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of these kids, I promise. Go home, Martha.”

She raised her voice then, and Bert heard the panic edging it. “Bert! You bring those kids back, right—”

Bert pinched his earlobe and cut the connection. He hated doing that to Martha, but he couldn’t change what was, and nothing he said would make her feel any better.

Another hour passed. Bert bent out of the conning tower, took the other pilot’s seat, and put an eye on the sonar.

...CDC has issued a list of products to be avoided. They’re petroleum products and therefore vulnerable to the bacteria. Physical contact with infected petroleum products can result in severe skin irritation similar to acid burns as the bacteria breaks down the

hydrocarbons in the product. Among the items on the list are diesel fuel, solvents, insecticides, caulk—

One of the boys, a scruffy kid with freckles, said, “It’s a shark!”

Everyone wanted to see, so the girls all tried to rush to the other side. Bert caught them in the middle. “Hey, no. Get back to your seats.”

...duct tape, transparent tape, tires, epoxy, car battery cases, motorcycle helmets, life jackets—

“I don’t see anything,” commented the boy with the oversized t-shirt.

“There!” The boys pressed against their viewport, steaming it with their breath.

...hairspray, deodorant, hand lotion, synthetic fabrics and yarn, shower curtains, eyeglasses, fertilizers, denture adhesive, tooth brushes, toothpaste, soft contact lenses, lipstick, artificial limbs, toilet seats—

“It’s going to eat us!” one of the boys cried.

...vitamin capsules, aspirin, antihistamines, food preservatives, water pipes, heart valves—

Bert hesitated a moment too long, distracted by the voices in his head, before he said, “It’s not going to eat us. We’re too big.” Then, “Cephalopod silent.”

The damage was done. The littlest girl, a pixie with blond pigtails, began to cry. The other girls took her cue and huddled together, watching for the shark to appear in the beams of the submarine’s lights.

Bert went over and picked up the crying child. He took her back to his seat and held her in his lap. “It’s okay,” he said with the expertise of a man who had spent his entire life talking to children. “The mermaids won’t let the sharks hurt us.”

The rest of the trip was spent entertaining children who were growing increasingly restless. They used up some of the snacks and pee bags, and Bert told a long story about a sea captain and a mermaid named Martha. The children passed the final hour, happily watching for mermaids.

Synthia remained silent. She sat with her head down, eyes closed, gun-hand in pocket. At one point, Bert thought she might have fallen asleep, and it occurred to him that he could probably overpower her if he could take her by surprise. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind, however, than she lifted her gaze directly to his. Her eyes were the fluorescent green of GFPs, the proteins used to make rabbits, mice, and yogurt glow in the dark.

“What happened to you?” Bert asked quietly.

“*You* happened to me,” Synthia replied, matter-of-factly. She didn’t blink. Her lips had a decidedly greenish tint, and branching veins, in her forehead and around her eyes, were darkening beneath her pale skin.

Bert shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s ironic,” she said. “Humans are a destructive bloom. You’ve penetrated every corner of the world and destroyed what was there. Do you see that?”

Bert nodded. “But,” he said, “that doesn’t tell me what happened to *you*.”

“I’m not who you think I am. I’m not me—not anymore. I’m we. And, *we* are God.”

“What?”

“We’re fighting back with biotech you yourselves created. You raised the stakes until Nature was forced to go all in. Humans went too far—again—and we, God, have pushed the reboot button. You *were* warned, you know.”

A sense of dread filled Bert as the day’s background noise all started coming together in his mind. He glanced right and left, at the two groups of children huddled on the viewport benches. One was asleep. Another curled against her friend, sucking her thumb. Two were playing Rock Paper Scissors.

The punk girl said, “God’s cleansings always involve water. This world has seen it many times, more than your civilization can even imagine. The Great Boiling, the Deluge, the Ice Age, and now this. It will be known as the God Bloom.”

“You’re crazy,” whispered Bert.

Synthia closed her eyelids. “You’ll see,” she said.

A blip appeared at the edge of the sonar—the Sigsbee Laboratory. Bert pinched his earlobe and said, “Connect Sigsbee Lab.” He had to wait longer than normal, but finally a man answered, “Sigsbee Laboratory. Bert, is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“What are you doing out here, man? The world’s going to shit.”

“So I heard. Look, I’ve got a sub full of kids here. Can we dock?”

“Hold on. I need to check on something.” The young man went silent.

Bert watched the lab’s lights become visible in the distance.

A woman’s voice came into Bert’s head. “Mr. Williams, this is Dr. Ingrid Eckstein. I’m the head researcher here at the lab. I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Hello,” said Bert. “I run tours in my mini-sub. We can’t go back. We need to dock. Can I have permission to do so?”

Ingrid Eckstein replied, “I’ll need to know who’s on board with you, and whether you’ve seen any sign that your people have been infected by the bacteria.”

Bert looked over at Synthia. The green had spread through her veins, visible on her cheeks and neck.

She said, “I will stay on the sub. You and the children will go without me.”

“Dr. Eckstein, I have eight children of kindergarten age here with me,” said Bert.

“None of us are showing any symptoms of infection.”

“One second, Mr. Williams.”

Bert waited. The silence went on for minutes. The sub approached the docking bay, and Bert lined it up to link with the laboratory.

The children sent a wave of questions his way about the lab and what it meant.

Bert explained, consuming the time. He had begun to think that the laboratory would turn them away, when Dr. Eckstein came back into his head, “Permission to dock granted, Mr. Williams. Expect to be greeted by an armed escort, however. I apologize for the inhospitable welcome, but with everything that’s happening, we need to make sure...”

She didn’t say exactly what she needed to make sure of, but Bert understood. He began to instruct the children on what would happen and what they would see when they emerged from the submarine. He gave it a heroic spin, and the kids got excited. For them, it was an adventure.

The Antipodes linked to the laboratory via the conning tower. Bert eased it into place and heard the seals come down. He waited for the lab to pump the water out of the docking tube. Several minutes later, he got word from Dr. Eckstein that it was safe to open the hatch.

Bert did so and looked up into a circle of worried faces. “Ahoy,” he said. “Permission to come aboard?”

“Permission granted,” said the young man who had been in Bert’s head. He had a sallow face with Asian features.

Bert sent the children up first, helping them climb the ladder into the arms of the waiting lab residents. When the last of the children had gone, he glanced back at the punk girl.

She was standing perfectly straight, arms loose at her sides, no gun. Her veins showed on her hands, in her face, and down her neck to her chest, a greenish-black network beneath skin gone translucent. Her eyes—irises and whites—were completely fluorescent, GFP green.

“Bert,” she said, but her lips didn’t move, and her voice was inside his head. “You are the patriarch of a new age. Do you understand your responsibilities?”

Bert kept one hand and one foot on the ladder, but she had his attention. He shook his head and peered at her through narrowed eyes.

“It means,” she said, “you will lay the foundation for the next human civilization.”

“The next?” Bert was confused. “Why don’t you just make us extinct? Get rid of us all, if we’re such a menace to the balance?”

“No.” Synthia’s voice drifted through Bert’s mind like sweetened cream added to coffee, gradually spreading and swirling. It felt different from the Cephalopod, more intimate, more personal. “Humanity is a piece of the puzzle, a cog in the machine. Without you, there can be no balance at all. When you see the big picture—and one day, you will—you’ll understand that we require humanity’s weight upon this world. We trim you back when you get too large and begin to tip the scales, but without you, the whole thing grinds to a halt.” She didn’t blink, and didn’t—as far as Bert could tell—even

breathe. “You must stay here, inside Sigsbee Lab until you receive a sign from God. Only then will you emerge and plow the land anew.”

Adrenaline was putting an edge on Bert’s nerves. “You’re staying here?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to seal you in.”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Bert looked up to find the young Asian man staring down at him with consternation. “I’m coming,” he said, and then he looked back at Synthia one last time. To his surprise, she was right beside him, her face next to his.

She whispered, “Go with God,” and breathed upon him.

Bert smelled the sea and the land, fresh as rebirth. His eyes met the punk girl’s, and then he started to climb. He heard Synthia’s body hit the floor before he’d even exited the hatch. When he was on the deck, he didn’t hesitate. He sealed and locked the Antipodes. He turned to find himself surrounded by security officers bearing weapons.

“Cephalopod volume level one,” said Bert.

...reporting general panic in Rio de Janeiro, riots in France, and mass suicides in Japan. Hospitals are filled beyond capacity, and authorities are discouraging people...

The armed crew members escorted Bert to the medical bay, where they tested him for infection and other health problems. They quarantined him and the children until they got back the results.

...triage area on the lawn. Doctors are leaving their posts as crowd control becomes impossible. A Toronto nurse was murdered by people fighting for her attention.

Bert realized as he was waiting, that he'd forgotten his bag of death on the sub. The realization that he would be eaten away by cancer in front of the children and lab crew hit him like a tidal wave.

When the doctor lifted the quarantine, a young woman led the children off to what would become the kindergarten. Bert took the doctor aside and asked, “What about me?”

The doctor looked surprised. “Your labs came back well within normal ranges.” He clapped Bert on the shoulder and joked bravely, “It must be all that fresh sea air you get.”

...skies are clear, all aircraft grounded. In Djibouti, the multi-national military is taking defensive action against locals storming the base looking for food and uninfected water. The death toll continues to rise throughout Australia, reports now indicating figures in the millions. This is...wait, I have a report coming in. Breaking news. The Chinese have issued a statement saying they demand retribution for what the United States has done, and they have launched a barrage of missiles from submarines located—

The Cephalopod went dead in an unnatural and jarring way. The silence that ensued inside Bert's head put his hackles on edge. He knew, without a doubt, that it would never come back. None of it would ever come back. The silence made his head ache.

Seeking solace, Bert went in search of the sounds of children.