

The following are several chapters from *“When the Earth Died”* which will give you an indication of my writing style.

PROLOGUE

UNRUFFLED AND GENTLY, the wind blew over the land. Above it, a few clouds travelled across the withered sky, and below, on top of the earth, the stones were steaming, scorching from the sweltering day which hadn't put an end to it yet. Earth and sky in deep silence, fashioned by centuries, even more muter than silence, declarations of the late day: amiable stillness. God would be covering his eyes soon, the sun and the moon, and would be falling asleep. It was probably the twilight colours that danced on top of the mountain. Through the depth of the smog, you could see, or sense something, which was indistinguishable. Slowly, the eyes exploited the haze and got used to the miasma of the late day; you could now discriminate a glimpse from up above. On top of the blazing soil, in some places thrown on top of each other, in other places solitary, the scorched houses, brewed of bricks, mortar, and wood.

“We’re not going anywhere,” we would shout. How many days and nights did we search to rid ourselves of this catastrophe, of this insult on earth? Are you counting? We dropped in on assemblies of powerful politicians; we left and got into the cathedrals of the world. They charmed and flattered us, but we were expelled and forced out because they said it was God's will. *“You are,”* we screamed, *“you are the ones to save us, why are you hiding?”* But they would look at the books we carried with us, they would settle on the idea that we were

Reds, and they would kick and scream: “*We’re not, we’re not,*” they yelled, and they would submit themselves to heretical tenders, diverging from their responsibilities. We crossed the threshold of taverns and brothels but found no one standing up against this denial. They’re all liars, thieves, murderers. We left. “*Brother,*” he would turn to me and say, “*Brother, forgive me, but we ploughed the earth, every assembly, every council, every cathedral; in vain, we chased to find answers. We must go it alone.*”

CHAPTER 4

Summer 2029

*“You’re too small, and there is no room for my tormented sighs.”*THE RAINDROPS

MULTIPLIED AND PILED UP on top of the dry, dusty earth. The first birds of the morning, yearning for the welcome rain, chirped as their mating song rumbled and reverberated from the treetops to the top of the mountain, gratified, indulging in the wet air. The melody of the chorus and the warble of the day birds echoed throughout the ruins of the town, which were scattered about, still smoking and smouldering from an earlier fire. Silence again. The earth propped itself up like a newborn toward the sky to breastfeed. It was a welcome rain, falling upon the thirsty and craving earth, longing for it, so much missed, foregone for months. The earth smelled; perhaps from the dryness, or perhaps from its dirt and grime and from the fumes of the fire, which rose into Orson and Niles'

nostrils, sometimes pleasingly, other times offensively. There was a syndicate, a communal combined effort, to show the pain of the people, the pain of the birds, of the trees, and of the rocks. They all made their decision: "We don't want to die." They were waving a declaration which was signed by all the birds, the beasts, the trees, and the people: "We don't want to die; we don't want the earth to die," was their proclamation. They were shouting, pleading, and imploring, as tears traversed their faces. They lifted their eyes to the sky; they looked; they tried to say: "Mother Nature, is it true there is no salvation?" But their tongues were stuck in their larynx; they tried to come closer, but their knees twisted and collapsed to the ground. They extended their hands to touch her as if they were drowning, asking her to rescue them and salvage and reclaim their privilege before they sank into oblivion. They got hold of her hand, dry, bony, and yellow, as if she were born in the desert. First, they touched her heart; then they touched her soul, and gained courage and strength, and were able to ask: "Mother," they said, "Mother, give us guidance, give us counsel."

They felt, along with their ancestors, an obligation and compulsion which was their intent to lift from deep down in their guts the thick darkness and transform it into a nibble of light. Was that not the longing and desire of our mother? Was that not what they should do? To follow and execute her yearnings? Their life was like lightning, which cracked its light for a moment and disappeared, but they still had time. The entire universe, without knowing, followed that same practice. Every living creature was a machine shop, hidden within it, working with Mother Nature to give form to the mud.

That was why the trees blossomed, the animals gave birth, and that was why the apes, fighting their own fate, were able to hoist themselves upright on their own two feet and stand erect. And now, for the first time, people yearned to enter nature's machine shop and work together. As long as flesh and tree bark were able to be transformed into blossoms and sustenance, they had a chance to become children of nature again.

People had the patience and the endurance of the earth. Bending over the soil, they became one with her. Their feet, hands, nostrils, and hair were gorged in soil. They felt an astonishing adoration for the earth, and having faith, they entrusted all their hopes to her. Their fathers and forefathers had become one with the Earth, and they pledged their loyalty to her. During the dry days, they dehydrated together with the Earth, but when the rains came, they were as happy and contented their bones clattered and rattled, and when they ploughed the Earth, slicing and sculpting the soil, they lived again in their chests and their bellies the first night they slept with their wives. But now, slowly, those exploits and endeavours had vanished; the Earth had turned into sand dunes, it was dry, and the plough could not carve the soil any longer. The Earth was dehydrated, and the rivers and lakes had dried up.

Somewhere, someone had said that sometimes the sun stands still on its way to hear a young woman sing; if that were only true! To be able, for necessity's sake, to change its ways, astonished and amazed by a soul down on Earth to hear her song. To be able to create a ruling, a decree of some sort, by crying, singing, or dancing, to put some order

into this chaos. Then the sweet song, coming from the depths of that tormented young woman, would temper and alleviate the shouts and cries.

Such were Orson's thoughts, the images of the lake he had witnessed enduring in his mind as he looked upon it not too long ago. The lake, which was declared dead a decade later, was breathing with assistance. Its shallow water would not be able to sustain life for very long. The anaemic vegetation was trying to survive on the polluted water feeding its roots.

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What kind of days were those in which lightning ripped Orson's mind? What kind of sleepless nights were those in which Orson's being was beleaguered? His days passed so heavily in this unfair and deceiving world. He was not asking for eternity; it was just the chase from death that which Orson was subjected to that tormented his soul. He couldn't sleep any longer; he'd rise from his bed, put his dreams aside, go downstairs quietly so as not to wake the others, open the door like a thief, and soar outside. He walked along the dark streets of the town as the houses were immersed in darkness, the doors were bolted, and he eavesdropped on the quiet breathing of the town as it slept. Orson went to the edge of the town, where, lying below in the blackness, was the stormy and barren sea. It would launch and blast off the force of its waves against the sea walls, eating them. The waves, crashing against the rocks, would splash his face, lips, and hands, and he'd cool off. "You're too small, and there is no room for my tormented sighs," he would say to the stormy sea, "don't abandon the world's balcony."

"Who's chasing my life?" he would ask. He'd look at the infuriated and wrathful sea, he would look at the calm and quiet land, perhaps sleeping, or perhaps considering her fate, and he would yell and scream at the sea: "They haven't killed her yet; she's just sleeping; please do not forget her." He'd stand there for hours. "This is my mother," he thought, "not the land, but the sea; she can only understand my agony, because she possesses the same agonies as me, and she cannot sleep any longer. She would strike and punch her breasts, her waves asking for kindness and compassion, day and night, tormented by her agonies, struggling over her afflicted wounds." The land was quiet. Governed and reigned by fear, she had accepted her fate; she was dying slowly without complaining or being outraged. Mother Nature, then again, as wild as the sea could be, was revolting with her catastrophic winds, fires, droughts, scarcities, and famine; she was irritable and ill-tempered; she complained and protested. Orson could hear her; she could hear him, and they would offer courage to each other.

Nature had given people more than they could handle or bear; she had asked of people more than what they could offer her, and now she was dying alone, and nothing was left but the bitter smile of her wounded and proud soul. Her life was like lightning victorious over the darkness briefly, but vanishing into oblivion. That was how the Earth would vanish, but that was not an alternative or a discretionary thought, nor was it for her, who gave birth to us and killed us all the same, without any justification or excuse.

"Orson, I'm tired. How much further is the river?" young Niles asked, as he sat down on the ground.

"We'll be there soon."

"Can we sit here for a while?" Niles asked, the question rhetorical, having no intention of moving.

"Yes, we can." Orson looked at the little boy. The colour had disappeared from his face, his little reedy legs were shaking, and he was looking at Orson with that guessing and anticipating look, demanding, perhaps, something to soothe his feathery and downy heart.

"Courage, my boy," Orson said, "don't fret and agonize your little heart. Let's hope our souls are noble and obedient, so it doesn't collapse, because if some of the souls in the world fold and crumple, the entire world will cave in. Those are the pillars that hold it. They're few, but they're enough."

Niles was looking at Orson with a smile, trying to understand, or even speculate and predict in his young mind, what Orson was telling him. A beautiful boy, as he was then in the early stages of his life, with his Homeric smile, and with his unpolluted, untainted bright eyes full of questions.

Niles' fledgling brain was seeking vindication for his tribulations and dilemmas. He did not understand a great deal, but he knew that he was hungry and thirsty and tired. His little legs couldn't take him any further; his hunger and thirst were engulfing his entire body, and he had no strength left. The river wasn't that far away, although, in a little boy's mind, that walk was an infinite journey. They sat under a tree to gather their strength before they got back on the road. Several pilgrims passed them by, some carrying bundles, others carrying children or old people, while others, destitute and without any

belongings or prospects, were following. Niles was looking at the crowd intensely; the swarm of people walking by, combing through them, searching with his little eyes one by one, anticipating and hoping to catch a glimpse of his sister. His eyes raked every face of the pack, searching the eyes of every little girl with wet cheeks walking by. It was a massive exodus from a town that was scorched to the bone, as its people were taking an unfamiliar journey. The sadness and uncertainty were painted on their faces; they were not talking, they were just walking, slowly, placing one foot in front of the other toward an unsure and hesitant future. The road was a lengthy and prolonged voyage. Orson's road was getting him to the river, but where after that? Where would his fate take him?

Orson was singing beneath his breath, within the bounds of his soul, the eternal words of a forgotten song, as he took the road to the river, holding Niles' hand. He was eager to see the river again, to assess and evaluate its deterioration and decline. The rocks, grey and yellow, drenched by the untamed and blustery sun, were fuming and smouldering. From time to time, a stifling and scorching breeze would blow, only to fill his mouth with sand. Sweltering rocks; not even a flower, not a drop of water; not even a bird to chirp and welcome the voyagers. Dead, decaying bodies were littering the ground hither and thither. They covered their noses with their shirts. The stench coming from the decomposing carcasses was reeking and perverting the air. "This is not the land I know," Orson would say. "This is not the sweet-spoken land I know. This is the grey and ugly world, the dark side of nature." He was looking for something, but he found

something else. How could he escape from the dark muteness, the undesirable and unsolicited cycle of its silence? His head was in flames as he walked into that deserted and hot wasteland, shouting at nature to come out and talk to him. Was she not the one who made him? The questions were piling up on top of Orson's head. "Mother," he would yell, "Mother, open up your door, let me in; I'm drifting rootless in your barren land. I didn't come here to mourn your death, because you're not dead yet. I came here to revive you, resuscitate you, and bring you back. Don't abandon me." Orson waited and waited, but the door never opened.

Such were Orson's thoughts as he was traversing this hot and blistering land. He was breathing the warm air, wishing, and yearning inside his bowels for better days ahead. All of a sudden, as a bouquet of dried-up shrubs came into view at the side of the road, the river appeared among the rocks, sparkling under the rays of the sun, blue, moving slowly, decorated by the reeds and bushes at its embankments. He hurried his pace, dragging Niles behind him, as he approached the river. He stood at its banks, looking at the water for a long time, mystified, struggling to form the face of Mother Nature on the calm waters of the river. He implored the sky to illuminate like lightning in the middle of the night and cast its light on her face to see her again for the last time, as he closed and opened his eyes, only for her to vanish again. With gluttonous eyes, he looked around; he looked at the river, the dead trees, and the scrublands which had eaten and drunk for centuries from this river. But now, standing there fateful and devastated, they wrote in red letters on top of the burning rocks and thirsty earth: "God does not exist here,"

and they bowed their heads to the river to show their gratitude for their survival all these past centuries.

Immobile and frozen, standing on top of a sandhill, Orson could feel his temples banging like the drums of an elapsed tribe of the Sahara, failing to recall the voice he could now hear inside him. Was it the voice of God, the voice of nature, or the voice of man fighting inside him? Or perhaps the voice of God, nature, and man together unruffled? For a moment, it seemed as if the air became thicker, and standing in front of him was she, Mother Nature, shoeless, with her hair dragging on the sand, untidy and scruffy, with her arms extended toward him, brutish but turbulent. He was imploring his brain to find the keys and reveal his heart to welcome her. He should cleanse his heart and soul, exorcise and expel the demons, to receive her; she had suffered a great deal. He should disentangle himself from ephemeral, transient thoughts and his manners and endure her.

The sun was descending quickly over the dry fields and orchards, and they had to find a place to spend the night. The dry shrubs next to the river would protect them from the wind. Orson piled up the sticks he found along the riverbed and lit a fire. He opened his backpack and retrieved rations for their meagre dinner.

They spent a few days by the river, sustaining themselves with the few provisions they had and with the water from the river. But their supplies were diminishing, and they had to get back on the road in search of food. One morning, early, with the first sunbeams, their journey resumed, embarking for the unknown among wetlands, drylands, sandy

lands, deserted and rocky. A very difficult terrain to walk on. A kind of terrain that had an aversion to humans and that harassed and chased them away. The entire day, the rhythm of their footsteps, the soft song of Orson's, and the prospect that they might find another town to reinstate their life gave them strength and courage. The heat from the sun was falling on top of them like fire, and the wind was trembling and quivering aggressively above their heads, repositioning their clothing.

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The large church they passed by on the way, even in that dilapidated condition it was in, still preserved and sustained its magnificent and majestic façade. Inflicted by its splendour, they were obliged to walk in. That enormous church stood there empty, dark, without a soul. The colourful Byzantine icons, with their golden wreaths around their heads like crowns, were shivering in the cold nights under the cover of darkness. Dust and sand covered the cracked floor and the centuries-old icons. There were big holes in the floor where boards used to be; perhaps they had been taken by people to use as firewood. Whatever boards were left covering the floor were broken and had lost their impressive shine and colour. There weren't any candles lit; no scents of sage, Palo Santo, or burnt palms; no melodious choruses, and no keyboard playing Handel's Messiah. Pastors and vicars were long gone, abandoning the house of their God. There was an old woman at the entrance guarding the empty tray of offerings. Her warm breath, coming out of her mouth and nose, was not enough to warm that enormous church and the saintly flock, the icons hanging on the walls. Suddenly, and from high above, melodious and tuneful voices of men and women were heard, as they started to

chant. Their velvety, melodic voices filled this abandoned church, as the walls summoned up and reminisced about the happy and blissful days of the past, when the floors were swept, the icons were dusted, and the pastor would guide the congregation on a spiritual journey.

They found the marble staircase, hidden behind a wall, and started to climb it. They arrived at a warm corner, finding themselves among men and women kneeling and chanting. Numerous candles were burning on a stand, and the angelic voices of the chorus, along with their colourful clothing, were offering a divine ambiance. Standing among the kneeling believers who had gathered to chant and to forget and disregard their human condition, removing from their minds the disasters that had been afflicted upon them, Orson felt the excitement and the passion of the affair. They were recalling their God who had abandoned them, or perhaps they were grieving his absence. It seemed as if it were a farewell, a send-off of a beloved brother to a faraway and dangerous journey. Bitterly, those last believers, who were left alone and without a pastor to assist them and facilitate communication with their lost God, were breaking away from their beloved, lost, and seemingly dead God. He was not there to alleviate their loneliness. Was he dead? Had he abandoned them? That apparent demonstration of abandonment was in line with the relationship they had with nature, which they had already lost. And now, as the valediction was appropriate like a beloved mother who abandons her children, nature was dying peacefully and serenely, abandoning her children. They lived in very crucial and decisive moments, where an old religion was dying, and a new one was born within the obliteration and annihilation of nature. But

that new religion was not ruled by gods; it did not include idols or statues of deities. The new religion was born out of their anguish and misery. Their new god was the god of suffering, the god of torment.

The times, the age they lived in or even more horrific, the times that awaited their children, would be even more arduous and dreadful. But the difficulties that stood before their lives, the impediments, were the great eruption. It was the great outbreak, which awakened and stung all their strengths and senses, good and bad; so they would jump over the stumbling blocks and impediments that suddenly rose in front of them: hunger, thirst, cold, heat, and obstinacy. And so, they summoned up all their strengths and powers to put them to work, to crush and collapse into oblivion the stumbling blocks and impediments. But how? Did they still hope? Did they still have faith that one day the earth, along with nature, would emerge from their crypt and rise again like another phoenix, to be reborn from its own ashes? The mobilized powers were not only theirs alone, and neither were they the only anthropoids. The strength they had been shouldering for so long, to jump over the stumbling blocks, they now let loose inside them the three powerful forces, the stumbling blocks: personal, superhuman, and archaic. The time when a man curled up like a spring to attempt the leap, the entire being inside the planet curled up with him, and together they captured the force for the leap. Then they both felt the simple truth, which was so often forgotten during comfortable and undemanding moments: that man and nature are not immortal; their

immortality was eclipsed and became obscured along with the extinction of Mother Earth and the death of Mother Nature.

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When the liturgy ended, and the disciples of the new God started to descend the marble staircase, Niles took Orson's hand, whose eyes were full of tears. Wiping Niles' tears and his own, and holding him by the hand, they also descended the marble staircase. They got back on the road along with dozens of other people, following the same road that Orson had taken many times before, trying to remember the signs and traces that were there no longer. The footsteps which were left behind them on top of the dry sand were wiped out by the wind, unable to trace them. There were no landscapes left to outline their journey. This deserted land, this forsaken landscape unrecognizable and distorted, stood as a symbol of hunger, thirst, and destruction. With gluttonous eyes, Orson looked at the rocks, the sandy land, and the dried-up trees, stigmatizing and branding his mind with the realization, setting it on fire: everything was lost. Orson remembered that when he was at a deserted seashore a few years back, he had found a cave hidden behind bushes, trees, and rocks. He entered it and walked for hours among stalactites, stalagmites, and smaller stony caverns, which glowed deep red under the weak light of a torch. It used to be a large river that flowed underground for hundreds of centuries, but now it had abandoned its course, leaving its caverns to dry up as the river itself had dried up, and there was no more. In the same way, the landscape around Orson irradiated in his mind, its grandeur and splendour having

vanished. He passed by dried lands and wetlands that used to be lakes, reminiscing about the greatness that was no more.

As centuries went by, and with the comfortable existence they were leading, people became calloused. They began to disregard Mother Nature, failing to recall her face, neglecting her. That forged refinement and sophistication brought about discord and disharmony between people and nature. The earth was agonizing and grieving; she had been ailing since the beginning of the destruction. The first signs of disenchantment were coming about as the world-weariness became evident. The earth was unhappy; she felt dejected and discontented. Then famine embraced the world, new diseases were born, drought was prominent in many regions, and people started to revolt, turning against politicians and religious leaders, beseeching them to mend or at least stop the bleeding; the unorthodox conditions that were engulfing the entire planet. And now, as they felt hungry and thirsty, they pondered the idea that perhaps it would have been better if they had been a tiny bit hungry back then, rather than standing next to the stove, preparing elaborate meals, eating meat and bread, filling their bellies. Now, drifting about rootless, they yearned to find on the ground a grain or two to make a loaf of bread. But the earth could not sustain them any longer. She could not produce any more grains, as the soil had become sand, the water was scarce and in short supply, and the rivers and lakes had dried up. Then Mother Nature would bend her head, with the little strength still left in her, and look upon the people, listen to their complaints and whines, and shed tears of denunciation because it was their own doing. Sometimes she would

send them a rainstorm, and other times a hot, scorching sun. The rains would flood towns and orchards, and the sun would dry them up. As time went by and people came across hunger and thirst, feeling the suffering, their faces became desolate and angrier. Their faces were taking on the unsightly and aggressive face of the earth, and they became one with her, and abandoned their God, because they said that God did not exist and Mother Nature was dying.

CHAPTER 5

Spring, 2048

“I’m hungry, and you’re talking to me about nakedness... Shame to the rich.”

NO ONE HAD UNDERSTOOD SO IMPECCABLY and implicitly the secret and with such confidence and assurance the value and worth of Mother Nature, as those who were affected and afflicted deeply by her wrath and might. Those who lost their home and their families; those who became sick and had no medicine or treatment; those who were hungry because the earth did not produce the necessary rudiments to deliver them their daily bread; and those who were thirsty because their wells had dried up. When life had failed to succeed in its daily fight to win against the enemies surrounding it, such as natural powers, beasts, hunger, thirst, and illness, it so happened that sometimes there was some strength left. The strength that was left, the earth summoned to help sustain

and prolong her life, but was it enough? Was it too late for Orson to reverse the catastrophe and mend and restore the wrong that was done? To stitch her torn sartorial wardrobe and heal the wounds which instigated this calamity and cataclysm?

The world was an apparition, and the people were dewdrops of the evening dew, ephemeral children of the night. The elusive existence of man, that intangible and obscure existence, was coming to an abrupt annihilation, like the dewdrops of the night; like the apparition which faded away with the first sunbeams at the crack of dawn. When the white, hot sun rose from its sleep, everything dissolved and scattered; displeasure and distress dominated Orson's soul, agony, and torment. He wished he could hold, for a tiny moment at the side of his eye, that apparition before the sun came and it vanished. He felt that his heart was not yet wrapped around it, under the sparks of the sun. He felt that his heart was not enveloped by the warmth of the sun, to feel the thoughtfulness and the solitude. There was only one heartbeat left inside him, deep, ceaseless, and red beating with the strength of the mind, and it was not letting that peaceful aggressor, the sun, make him completely its possession. Inside him, another Orson lifted his head and deprived the amiable invader and intruder of bread and salt, the sun of his mind and carcass. He did not submit or surrender to the supremacy and dominance of the sun, resigning himself, giving notice to him. He ought to fight; he ought to fight the omnipotence of that powerful beast, but how?

He didn't know, or perhaps Orson was not aware, that there was so much pain in the world, so much hunger, so much injustice. He had never encountered, and had never

been drawn so close to, that repulsive and appalling face of privation and destitution. Here, other laws reigned and dominated, and hate was the first to repay. The Decalogue, which was given to Moses by his God at the top of the mountain to change hate and war to love and covet, took on a new meaning. The other day, he saw a woman, skin and bone, lying on the sidewalk; her torn and shredded dress was raised, and her nudity was revealed. He felt for her, and he stopped to ask her to lower her dress. "Your nakedness is showing," he said to her. The shamed and discredited woman raised her shoulders and sliced her mouth to a sarcastic laugh. "I'm hungry," she said, "and you're talking to me about nakedness... Shame to the rich." He could not regard so much astonishment. Next to her, with cheeks sunken from hunger and eyes full of tears, small children were mining the garbage to find something to eat. Their bellies were green and swollen, and their bones were wrapped in yellow skin. Some were using crutches because their legs were too weak to support them, and others had grown beards on their childish and anaemic faces.

He couldn't bear it any longer; he diverted his eyes to avoid looking at them. He was embarrassed and mortified.

He remembered now; he remembered very well. Before he felt repentance for humanity, he first felt, deep inside him, humiliation and shame. He was embarrassed to even look at the pain of humanity, as he was trying to exemplify and personify it into ephemeral and conceited spectacles. "It is not true," he was thinking, "don't be manipulated like the simple man and believe; hunger and surfeit, happiness and pain, life and death, and

everything else is an apparition," he said it and he said it again and again, as he looked at the children with the anaemic cheeks and the crutches, who were hungry and were crying, and the women with the sunken cheeks and with their eyes full of hate and pain his heart slowly melted. He was following with sadness the unexpected and startling change taking place within him. In the beginning, the shame hit his heart; then came compassion and pity. He began to feel the pain of others as if it were his own pain. Then the enragement came, and above all, the obligation and duty came. He felt responsible. "My ego is to blame," he thought, trying to rationalize it within him. "My ego is to blame for all the hunger in the world; for all the injustice; I owe the responsibility." Intellectualizing, perhaps, his inaction and everyone else's during the past years and decades.

What was he to do? He realized that his responsibilities were shifting; the world was getting bigger, the needy and destitute were getting angrier; the rich had the same fate, but they at least had their cupboards full. He felt that he was a prisoner in his own skin, and his spirit was suffocating and smothered.

What was he to do? Which way to go? Deep down, he knew what he had to do, but he didn't dare reveal it; that road seemed to him as if he were going against nature, and he was not sure if he was able to surpass it with love, with struggle, with whatever other means. "Does he," he was pondering in his mind, "does the man have such a creative power? And if he does, there was no justification not to break, in those crucial moments, his boundaries."

During those difficult moments, he fought against his nature to go beyond his detestable and hateful "ego" and to try to ease and alleviate man's pain. A decent and reputable challenge of sacrifice and love passed by his mind, as if he were craving to find his way; and he remembered the few words someone had conveyed to him one day: "We must always listen to the shouts, the screams of the people who are asking us for help."

CHAPTER 6

Fall, 2029

"During the dry days, they worked together and dehydrated together with the earth; but when the rains came, they were as happy and contented, and their bones clattered and rattled, and when they plowed the earth, and they were slicing and sculpting the soil, they lived again in their chests and their bellies the first night they slept with their wives."

THE FIRST REMINISCENCES OF HIS EARLY DAYS were when Orson, a toddler then, slithered to the threshold of his paternal home; he couldn't stand up yet. Frightened, eager, and impatient, Orson came out into the open air of the courtyard. Up until then, he would look at the outside world through the windowpane, but now he wasn't just looking, he saw the world for the first time; an astonishing and exceptional wonder! The small garden in the yard looked to him to be enormous. Intoxicating smells. A brilliant and scorching sun above, thick as honey, the air sparkled, and his eyes were going

around and around, marvelling at the world. For a tiny moment, he thought he saw insects coming toward him like angels with multicoloured wings, which were not moving; he became scared; he screamed and filled his eyes with tears.

Another time, still very small, he was taken even further into the outside world. His mother carried him in her arms to the edge of the town, where the endless and massive sea was unfolding. Suddenly, unusual and discreet smells invaded his infant nostrils for the first time: the smells of freshly baked bread, the smells of the orange tree blossom on the street, and the salty, cool breeze from the sea. What a monster the sea was, he thought, with its deep blue colour, bursting with sounds and odours. Those were his first impressions and imprints in his young mind; his initial validities and influences, which fascinated him for the rest of his life. Even now, in his later years, he still lived those impressionable moments, as when he was a little boy, new to the world. Those elements that gave him his first impressions of life still lived deep inside him, as deep as the heart could allow. He wanted to re-live the same wonders: fright and happiness. Those elements gave him the marvels of life while he was a small boy, with astonishment; and because those were the first dominant powers that consciously became part of his essence, they all became one, as if it were one persona exchanging masks. And as he often looked at the cloudy sky, sometimes it seemed to him to be an orchard with blossoming trees, other times a sea, dark and threatening, precarious to his existence; and other times it seemed as islands spread throughout the vastness of

the ocean. And now, every thought, every grief, every regret, every blissful moment, was made up of those elements and recollections.

The world was different then. The night sky was transparent, and the myriad stars were bright. The air was untainted and unspoiled. The sea, the lakes, and the rivers were unblemished and well-defined, and the earth was healthy and nourishing. The people loved the earth and were faithful to her; they confided their troubles and worries to her, and she obliged. They entrusted all their hopes to her, having faith in her, and she believed them. Their fathers and forefathers had become one with her; they relied on her and had confidence in her, and she gave them everything they ever needed. During the dry days, they worked together and dehydrated together with the Earth; but when the rains came, they were as happy and contented, and their bones clattered and rattled, and when they ploughed the earth, and they were slicing and sculpting the soil, they lived again in their chests and their bellies the first night they slept with their wives. But later, as Orson was getting older and people were getting greedier, the Earth became stubborn, and she seemed inflexible; people became oblivious to the changes taking place, obscuring the willingness and determination of Mother Nature to help them overcome their defeats and demises. She was strong; she was willing to work hard with them to overcome the tribulations which people brought upon her. But they didn't oblige. People were wounding and bruising her, and she was weeping and howling; she was shouting and exclaiming her pain to them. Desperately and dreadfully, with tears in her eyes, she pleaded with them; implored them to take a stand against this

destruction; to get hold of a strong branch, a few bricks, and stones, and support her, so as not to plummet into the abyss. The icebergs were crying, melting into the sea; the Amazon was burning away her oxygen, and the fires were burning towns and mountains and orchards.

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As he got up from underneath a sheet of metal that served as shelter, Orson cleared his throat, and the sound that came from deep in his larynx disturbed the dull and extreme silence. The sun was concealed by the choking smoke, which covered the sky and the small, devastated town. The wind was blowing gently; ashes floated in the air as a distant dog was heard barking among the ruins. Orson put his jacket on, picked up the bundle of possessions he had accumulated, and got on his way. This town, which had been his home for many years, he now had to abandon.

The intense and fierce wind had blown from the south the week before, and the dry thunderstorms sparked fires that spread to the small town. Nothing was left standing; the structures of the town were engulfed in flames, and the inhabitants gathered whatever they could salvage in a very short period and got out. They took the road to the unknown with the others, as many towns were turned to ashes, encountering the same fate. Orson walked among ruins, smouldering homes, and burnt-down trees as small fires were still burning here and there. The heat was unbearable as the sun, concealed behind the smoke, was spreading its heat harshly all around. He sneaked a quick peek inside burnt homes in search of food or clothing, but everything had been consumed by

the fire. There was nothing he could do in that town. There wasn't a sign of life, as everything was covered with ashes and deadly silence.

He had lived in that town all his life, and now it was time he left. He walked among the ruins, undecided about which way to go. It was a charming town, adorned by trees, early-century architecture, and a river that flowed at its edge. But for some time now, there was far less water streaming down this scenic river, although it still retained its charm and exquisite landscape. The bushes and trees that decorated the banks of the river had survived the heat and the drought until now. It had served as a sanctuary to numerous birds and wildlife, which had called it home for centuries. Although not as many animals and birds visited the river then, there were a few still calling it home. Orson approached the river and dipped his hands into its lessened water to wash his face. Lifting his head, he noticed a little boy wandering along the riverbank, going through garbage. Orson looked around this desolate and forsaken place; there wasn't a soul. Discarded and abandoned, as far as one could see, was the town and the surrounding fields. He walked in the direction of the little boy. His face and hands were black from dirt and smoke, his clothes soiled and stained, and he wore no shoes. He wasn't any older than five or six years old; the tears were streaming down his face, mixing with the grime and dirt that covered it.

"Hey, little boy," Orson shouted. The little boy, rattled and disturbed by Orson's voice, lifted his head. He looked nervous and distraught as he moved his little arm hastily and hurriedly to hide something behind his back. He looked at Orson with a frightened look as Orson approached him. "Where are your parents?" The little boy took a step back and

continued looking at Orson nervously. "Are you alone?" Orson asked again. The little boy lowered his head.

"My house is burnt, and I can't find my mum," he said, as tears flowed down his dirty face.

"Don't cry, little boy. What's your name? I'm Orson."

"Niles," he said, wiping his tears with the back of his hand.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm hungry, but I can't find anything to eat."

"Do you want to come with me? We'll find something to eat."

"OK, Austin," Niles said and took Orson's hand.

"Orson."

"What?"

"Orson, my name is Orson."

"Oh, OK, Orson."

The two of them walked side by side, quietly. As they left the town behind them, the smoke cleared, and the sun, now visible, was hitting the ground with vengeance and retribution as if it were settling scores.

"Aberdeen!" Niles yelled suddenly.

"What?"

"Aberdeen."

"Who's Aberdeen?"

"Aberdeen, my sister; she's smaller than me. Where is she?"

"I don't know, Niles. Did your mother take her and go away?" Niles lifted his head and looked at Orson, saying nothing. "She must be around here somewhere. We'll find her."

"I missed my sister and my mummy."

"What happened to your father?"

"He left a long time ago. He said he's never coming back."

"Do you know where he went?"

"No. But he went very far away; I don't know where."

They both walked in silence, dipping into their own thoughts. The road was long, treacherous, and unfamiliar. They joined others on their journey who had met the same fate, walking away from their lives in search of something new to re-establish, but where? Other towns were burnt down while others were still standing, but for how long? Food and water were regulated; extreme penalties were imposed on those who disobeyed the rules. At least for now, the government was working, but only barely. Many of the services had been suspended or reduced. The two lonely souls walked side by side, heading toward an unfamiliar and inexplicable future.

CHAPTER 8

"If we were not made in the bowels of nature, if we were not made at all by design, but merely by accident, then we would have no dignity, no purpose. Nothing would. How black then the world would have become!"

ANY CONFIDENCE IN NATURE, ANY CREDENCE, if it were to be of any account, had to be transformative. It had to reach inside our bowels; otherwise, it might have been best to leave her alone. If we were not ready for her, it would only give her a bad name and encourage those who saw no significance in her. Of all the enemies of nature, none had been more enduring, more formidable than those who claimed to be her trusted servants but had never gotten hold of her. A comfortable living was what most people wanted; something that soothed their hearts but never upset them. Comfortable living was a paradox, an oxymoron. It implied that we were here to enjoy ourselves in all the usual carnal ways and that nature should facilitate these pursuits. We might also like to feel virtuous, so nature would allow us to contribute to this or that "social justice" cause, which is usually aligned with the non-believers. Then we would put nature away, along with our chequebook, and live our lives. But what if nature did not remain in the background, waiting to be summoned for ceremonial occasions? What if nature were our sanctification, as Buddha suggested, and she would not leave us until we became perfect, or until we rejected that perfection?

We often wondered why things went so badly in this world and our lives. Was it because we had turned away from nature? Partly, but it was also because nature would not turn away from us, or so we thought. We said, "Let me rest with my worldly success. Let me just enjoy the good things which I value," and nature replied, "I love you immensely to allow it. I want us to be together; I will take away from you whatever gets in the way of our union."

This might seem hard to us at times, for we thought Nature's mercy and compassion should conform to our notions of mercy and compassion. That we should suffer loss and pain might be nature's kindness to us. We might think of it as cruelty, as if nature were punishing us, but nature had no interest in our suffering; only in our recovery. It would be cruel of nature to let us continue living in indulgence and offensive behaviour and not chastise us. Did we not correct our children because we loved them? Were we not imitating Nature when we did so? So, when we say we believe in nature, let's not pretend to know more of her than we do. Let's not presume to prescribe her mercy nor dictate the terms of her providence. But, most importantly, when we said we believed in nature, let it be the same as saying that we trusted in her completely, that our lives were hers completely. Then, perhaps, by slow or fast degrees, our profession of belief would mean something to us and to those who shared our trust.

All these reflections had to do with the temptation to pretend we knew more about nature than we actually did, and that our professed belief was real and operative when it was only imagined and irrelevant. But we could also err in the opposite direction and pretend to know less of nature than we actually do. Most of today's complacent non-believers in nature committed this error. I said "complacent non-believers" because someone, somewhere, had encountered those who were on fire with their denial of her. There was reason to be more hopeful about the militant non-believers, for the existence

of nature appeared to be a crucial concern in their lives, and that meant they might come to know her. But in almost all such cases, the nature that was vehemently denied was a nature that should be vehemently denied. She was a product of imagination or misunderstanding, and not nature, which made us and loved us.

But the complacent non-believer was like the comfortable Christian: he wanted no Divine interference in his life. But rather than accepting the existence of God and relegating Him to a position of practical insignificance, the complacent non-believer simply said he saw no compelling proof of a Creator and went about his business without a backward glance. To do this, he had to pretend to know less than he knew.

For we all know love. No one had failed, in some way, to put the good of another above his own good. Even the meanest of men had known a moment of self-sacrificing tenderness toward a child, a spouse, a friend, or even a stranger. And at that moment, he had known nature. That experience was nature's invitation to him: "Here is my kingdom. It is yours. Come inside, connect with me, and bridge our worlds," Nature said. But that voice was often drowned out by the coarse cries of selfish concern. Still, nature would not be silent, nor could any man fail to hear her, however faintly. With just the slightest attention to that voice, the feeblest minds, turning in the direction of love, would be answered immediately with grace.

To pretend that we had no evidence of nature was perverse. It rested on the false presumption that we could only know things through the senses and, therefore, that only what was verifiable by direct perception, including perception amplified by

scientific instruments, could be called genuine knowledge. But we simply did not apply that criterion to any other aspect of our lives.

We did not, indeed could not, understand or explain our enjoyment of music, art, or nature in that way. The mere perception we shared with the animals. Appreciation of beauty, repugnance to ugliness, and a desire to comprehend causes and know the meaning of phenomena (transcendent meaning) were peculiarly human and could not be accounted for materially.

Our thought was given to us, for we naturally thought, and our being reflected our nature. Our consciousness was given to us by her, who was conscious of us. It could not be accounted for as an "epiphenomenon" of matter. Such talk begged the question. And we could only regard that empty verbiage as somehow definitive or final by ignoring the vast experience of life we had that could not be contained or described by it.

But there was comfort in believing in nothing: it imposed no obligations. It drained all actions of ultimate meaning and justified whatever we might choose to do. In fact, actions needed no justification, for right and wrong were merely conditioned responses, cultural programming, and part of the epiphenomena that had their provenance in the brief flash of a mysteriously born and quickly decaying bit of matter.

As I stated earlier, there was some comfort in that reduction of all to ultimate meaninglessness. It allowed a seeming relaxation of the moral tensions of life. But that comfort was purchased at a terrible price: our humanity. If we were not made in the

bowels of nature, if we were not made at all by design, but merely by accident, then we would have no dignity, no purpose. Nothing would. How black then the world would have become!

But would anyone accept the position of the complacent non-believer? If nature were the prime reality, then the denial of nature rested on a falsehood that all of nature was in the business of contradicting. Then every sunrise and sunset, every smile of an innocent child, every impulse to love and give and will another's good, every feeling of moral failure, these and a myriad of other things belied the pretended ignorance of nature.

We appeared to have arrived at some crucial juncture in our collective history. Both the secular world and the politicized world were bent upon either denying nature's existence or making her subordinate to human providence.

Our only hope lay in believing that nature would not abandon us to our own perverseness and stupidity. Like a loving mother, she always scanned the horizon for the return of her prodigal children. Our sufferings, our disappointments, and our schemes to make a better world according to human wisdom all failed. But Nature would say to us, "Come home. Take your place in your maternal house, where you are loved." How long would we tend the pigs in a foreign land, looking with hunger at the very husks we feed the swine? God only knows. But we would each have to make the return on our own.

PART 2

CHAPTER 10

Spring 2049

“He could now see the lands and the seas he trespassed and intruded, the people he met, the women he kissed and loved, and above it, the soil, the water, the fire, and the woman’s skin.”

WHEN IT CAME BACK UP, LIKE AUTUMN, from the soil of that town the devastation and he saw for the first time that unforeseen spectacle, the scorched houses, the blackened stone staircases and the brick fireplaces, the yards full of debris, the threshold of the stables, untold and unthinkable, grief and sorrow filled Orson's heart for this charming town which had gone adrift and vanished under the dark ashes. The fate of every man and woman who had held the spark of life like fire, like lightning, sank into chaos eternally and ceased to exist. In Orson's mind, the bricks and stones of the buildings were coming alive and erecting and rebuilding the houses, the stables, and the roads under the scorching sun. Like an apparition erected from the depths of darkness, it was now glowing with radiance, only for a moment. He could now see the children playing on the streets and in the yards, women feeding their young, and the stables reverberating with the sounds of the animals, as steam came out of the warm mouths and nostrils of the horses. A second coming was unfolding in front of him, as the old and

disregarded folk were ascending from the soil, silent and discreet, smiling, dressed in sartorial clothes embroidered and decorated with the stars of the sky and the sea and the flowers of the earth, only to sink back down again and evaporate.

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Orson and Niles walked among the ruins of that town, which had come to life all of a sudden like lightning and disappeared. They walked for hours among the ruins; like a painting, it seemed to them, with no colour, no order, and no symmetry. Everything was grey and black. The broken pavement was covered with thistles and debris; that portrait troubled and offended them as if they were looking at that devastating picture for the first time. Certainly, that picture was responding and reacting to the current fears and hopes of their hearts, and that was why, for the first time that day, they understood its secret meaning. They were looking with discomfort and empathy at the devastated town, as if it were their soul dying on the ground, on the stone staircases, on the broken pavement, on the burnt-down and scorched trees. They were looking persistently around them, perceiving the world around them, which was decomposing and decaying. The pure souls were trying to resist, but the demons blew upon them, and their wings were shattered.

When the devastation began, Orson took to the streets, the mountains, and the seashores. He was looking not for tranquillity or serenity; he was looking for honour, which a man needs in difficult times to triumph over. "Look," he would say to himself. "Look, if you can," he said, "look fear in the eye and the fear will go away."

Out of nowhere, they heard the desperate voice of a man who was climbing down from a ruined house.

"Eh, you, desolate men, wait a moment; I need to ask you something."

Orson lifted his head and saw a man coming down from the ruins of a house with large strides. He could now see him clearly; he was a big man, shoeless, with his hair flying in the wind and his bushy eyebrows covering his small, round eyes. So, they stood and waited for him. His hairy chest was bare, and steam was coming out of his nostrils and mouth. Orson turned and dropped a glance at Niles.

"My good men," the shoeless man with the small, round eyes said, out of breath as he approached them, "what's happening to this town? Is the whole world on fire?"

He had heard of fires devastating towns and cities; he did not know very well the magnitude of this devastation, but he knew that something was wrong with the disposition of the situation, and he was concerned about his existence.

"The whole earth is not on fire, my good man, but many towns, meadows, and mountains have met the same fate," Orson said, answering the man's question.

"Thank God, it's not the whole earth," he said and crossed himself.

"Would you like some water?" Niles asked him.

"I don't want anything; I just want the earth to be okay," he said, put his hands in his pockets, and walked away among the ruins.

The world today is illuminated; it is steaming. A strong, deafening rainstorm unravelled overnight, and the dried-up soil welcomed the rains and was revitalized. The silence and the intense morning sunlight woke Orson. The sunlight came through the cracks in the

ceiling and walls and speckled the floor around him. The storm was over. And now, in this calm early morning, Orson and Niles took their walk among the ruins of the town, as the sky above them was glowing, freshly washed white from the heat of the sun. The earth smelled of wet soil and of the carbonized houses which the fire had consumed a few days earlier. Just like a piece of earth, their chests were cooled by the nightly rainstorm, which had been welcomed by the dried-up earth. Orson and Niles felt an unexplained contentment, feeling and breathing the wet air, sensing the wet earth under their feet, a paradoxical sentiment, as if the earth had gone on for centuries without a drop of water.

They took their leave towards the mountain. The world had gone insane and irrational. They could clearly see that every epoch had its monsters. Those monsters, those beasts, governed and not the people, as the monsters of that epoch were bloodthirsty. Such were the monsters when the world was decaying and vanishing. One might have thought that a mind so gentle, so serene, and superhuman helped the spirit to be freed from these decaying people and ascend, but when it saw that the calamities and mayhem came as an obstacle or impediment to the liberation of the soul, the mind sent the monsters to open up the road and liberate the beleaguered souls. Orson and Niles were looking around them at the world, which was demolished and wiped out. They didn't have the strength or the acquaintance to fix it, but they could stop it or delay its destruction. They ascended the mountain, walking among dried-up trees, bushes, and rocks.

The night came. They spread their blankets and lay down under the stars. They closed their eyes. Orson was agitated; turbulent thoughts again arose inside his head. He could now see the lands and the seas he had trespassed and intruded upon, the people he had met, the women he had kissed and loved, and above it all, the soil, the water, the fire, and the woman's skin. On another trip, the ship he was in was made out of clouds, and the land, the sea, and the people were made out of infinite sequences of cords that came out of his bowels. But then, the ship dispersed and vanished; the sequences of cords dissolved and faded away, and the idols of the world disappeared; only the black sun remained, alone, darker than the night, deaf and unresponsive, blind, frozen still. "It must be God, who knows," he thought, "it must be God." He tried to lift his hand to welcome him, but he couldn't.

For two days, they climbed the mountain. Orson knew that there were springs on this mountain, and he had gathered all his senses, concentrating, absorbed, pondering, trying to find them. As if nothing had disappeared, he relived in his mind his former life. He could even see the most unimportant details: a blossomed almond tree in his neighbour's yard; a fragrant, sweet-smelling watermelon that filled his embrace; a little girl selling flowers outside a theatre; the happy, triumphant sounds of the shoes of a young woman dancing at a wedding, in the yard of her house; and the smells coming from a fruit stand in the town square. All these notions were coming up from the cellar of his mind and were filling his bowels with happiness. And at night, when he was lying on his bed, and his mind was traversing the world, he continued in his mind the same

travels, but only because those nightly travels were prejudiced by the weight of truth. They were shifting in the air because of a lighter, more eloquent, and worthier essence.

There was nothing truer than the truth; yes, the legend, the tale, whatever it was called, which gave some meaning to the ephemeral truth. All his exploits and quests, all his apprehensions and dreads, were now harmonized and came closer and became intimate; they dissolved and faded into a lonely voyage. He knew where he was coming from, why he was leaving, and where he was going; and every station was not without meaning: the idiosyncratic phenomenon of fate, rather than an existing plan of fate. His voyages became one black line that started from the human essence, and it ascended to reach humanity, integrity, and candour; the highest summit of hope.

CHAPTER 12

"Feel unity with spirit and all creation; all things share the same breath: the beast, the tree, the man; the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports."

Chief Seattle, 1786-1866

GLOWING STONEWASHED AND DULL, the moon looked down upon the mountain, as the sun at the other end of the sky, still scorching the mountain slope, was setting in total stillness. On the trail between the rocks and the dried-up trees, a horde of people, one behind the other, were ascending the mountain slope slowly, bending their heads,

contemplating perhaps their ruinous and ill-fated life. A slender hound, his muzzle to the ground, sniffing the air in that quiet evening, jumped from rock to rock, searching for his master. A young woman at the front of the line, in a tight dress which emphasized her firm body and which stood out very boldly, had a particular air about her presence; her manner was subdued and restrained, declaring her presence. Her blonde hair was plaited in two braids above her forehead, braids like ropes of a ship, too thick for her delicate hands to grip. The dog, exhausted now from the steep bridle path, stood there panting, motionless, staring into the eyes of the young woman with the braids above her forehead and the tight dress. A nightingale was heard as the procession was ascending the mountain. Orson was standing in front of the tent watching, searching for a familiar face. As in an earth hive, his heart moved inside him; as if a joyful bee swarm, secretly increasing, sought to release into the trees its grape-like cluster. And he felt the earth as crystal beneath his feet, the soil transparent, as the strong and peaceful bodies of young people rose around him. Glowing, jovial, and celebratory, like a young man standing by his tent, Orson's heart consented to repose for a while.

Orson turned and looked at Niles sitting by the pond, weaving a rope. He turned and looked at the girl with the blonde braids and the tight dress, and then turned to Niles again. "Niles, come over here. Look at that girl with the blonde hair." Niles put the rope down and approached Orson. Standing next to him, he examined the girl, trying to figure something out, something that would remind him of his sister, Aberdeen. In quick and long strides, he approached the girl.

"Hello, I'm looking for my sister," he said to the girl as she stopped and looked at him with hesitation. "What's your name?"

"My name is Hope," she said, examining him with her bright blue eyes.

"How old are you?" Niles asked.

"I'm 22."

"Do you have a locket on you?" he asked her eagerly, hoping she did.

"No, I don't," she answered, looking at Niles with apprehension. "I'm sorry, I'm not who you're looking for. I hope you find your sister," she said and started to walk away along with the crowd.

"Just a moment," he said, and he walked quickly behind her. "My name is Niles; my sister's name is Aberdeen. She has blonde hair and blue eyes, and she has a locket around her neck with our father's picture. I'm staying here with some other people."

"I'm not sure where we'll end up, but I will come and visit you if I have any news about your sister," she said, drawing her mouth into a sorrowful smile. Niles walked back to the camp, disappointed and saddened.

"Don't be discouraged, Niles; we must keep our hopes up. We'll find her," Orson said.

"It's been a long time, Orson; it may be too late now."

"I'm sorry if we didn't make more effort in the past, more willingly, to find her."

Niles shook his head and went back to the pond. He resumed weaving the rope more vigorously, as tears traversed his face. Orson went and sat next to him, watching him work his fingers swiftly.

"Feel unity with spirit and all creation; all things share the same breath: the beast, the tree, the man; the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports.' These are the wise words of an Aboriginal chief, Niles, from many years past," said Orson, trying to lift his spirits. "Self-pity," he continued, "is our worst enemy, and if we yield to it, we may never accomplish anything wise in this world. So, my boy, let your optimism shine all over your face, and tell yourself that your sister is walking this earth somewhere and you'll find her."

"Thank you for your wise words, Orson, but I don't think your words give me either courage, incentive, or motivation to hope; but I won't stop looking, if that's what you want to hear from me."

"That's my boy," Orson said, and he kissed his blonde hair as he got up. "You know, Niles, I found an old potato in my satchel. I will plant it and see if we can grow potatoes."

"That's a great idea; let's try."

Orson went to the other side of the pond and started digging the soil. The earth was rigid and unyielding, but he worked it in such a way that it became softer and darker, and he was delighted. He cut the potato into four pieces and placed each piece in the ground in little cavities he had dug, covering them with soil. He took water from the pond and irrigated it. Standing back, he marvelled at the dark earth. "The soil still looks very fertile here," he said, wiping the dirt from his hands. "We may be lucky."

Ciara came back from the forest with Kolten, carrying mushrooms and some kind of greens, insisting they were perfectly safe and healthy. She placed the earth's offerings on a rock and sat down. She started coughing.

"Your cough is getting worse, Ciara," Orson said, offering her a cup of water. "Is there anything we can find here on this mountain to alleviate it?"

"I don't know, Orson. I will boil these greens and drink the juice from them; it may help."

CHAPTER 18

Spring 2050

"He was sunken into an ocean of sounds and light, but the light became rhythm and was beating on his temples. Now that he contemplated, the words seemed to him like exorcisms, and as soon as he pronounced them, the demons, good and bad, gathered inside those exorcisms and lost their strength."

THE HOURS HE LIVED AT SUCH A DEPTH, he was unable to name as happiness or sorrow. As such, Orson would rest his body, but he left his thoughts inside his skilful and proficient mind, deeper than the word, with a transparent carcass, with movement and rhythm. He was sunken into an ocean of sounds and light, but the light became rhythm and was beating on his temples. Now that he contemplated, the words seemed to him like exorcisms, and as soon as he pronounced them, the demons, good and bad, gathered inside those exorcisms and lost their strength.

He put down the tools of his mind and went for a long walk. Like a caterpillar of the earth, he was enjoying the warmth of the sun. The smells from the pine trees were coming alive. He felt his strength plunging onto the earth, but it would bounce back up, stronger. He was tired. He wanted to lie down and close his eyes. "Spring is coming," he thought, "spring is coming, and it's a great temptation. Even the most unable bodies come out to warm up; even the hardest bark of the body flourishes in the Spring." He closed his eyes. The sea of rocks and that of the anaemic trees and bushes lifted heavy and fat waves, as he saw it in his mind. The south wind was blowing, warm and tender. Spring was coming, and the earth smelled of decaying and rotten branches, or perhaps of its own decay. The moment had come to end his journey. It appeared that time had gone swiftly and hastily over the years; he had hardly had time to enjoy the sea, the mountain, and the sun as a youth. His last days were near; they were days of repose. He had hunted his brain all winter; now it was time for it to rest. He placed his hopes and faith in a case to hand to Niles and Kolten, yearning for his return to the earth.

The sun had positioned itself midway up the sky, and the heat was agonizing. He walked the trail toward the pond, where Niles was sitting, watching for pilgrims to come by, hoping to inquire about his sister. Under the scorching sun, the intense light was falling on Niles's head as he was bending over, immersed in his thoughts. His golden, translucent hair radiated under the sun's rays. The rocks and the sand on the ground were hot. He had arranged all his thoughts and notions on the scorching sand next to each other, marvelling at the day he would see his sister again. Niles had an innocent

and kind expression on his face as he lifted his head to look at Orson. He smiled. Happiness is not fleeting and transient; the entire winter, he had pondered over that one thought: his sister. Now all his thoughts were lined up in a row like soldiers in front of him on the sand, as he contemplated his actions rushing ahead of him.

Suddenly, Orson sensed his departure from this earth, squeezing his heart, feeling the severance in his soul. He looked around the mountain. The hot sun was smouldering the rocks, the trees, and the earth; a few birds were flying sluggishly and lethargically, and the wind was calm. The few pilgrims who were dragging their feet up the mountain looked anguished and distraught. Nature was dispirited and dejected, but a new spring day had arrived, which exulted the soul and the heart. Orson approached Niles.

"Your face looks bright, and your soul seems serene. What are the thoughts you're harbouring and turning over in your head?" Orson said as he sat next to Niles.

"Thoughts which have become ornaments in my brain, Orson. For a long time now, I've been thinking about Aberdeen and my search for her. But time has gone by in a hurry, and it's becoming increasingly difficult to find her."

"Time is going by for me as well, Niles. I'm old, and I'll be going soon. I want to make sure that you have all the tools to endure and live through this desolate and bleak life."

"You speak of death again, Orson. You're not going anywhere yet; you can't go. We're not ready for that."

"We'll be ready, Niles. We can't avoid it. My body imprisons my soul, and it's time for it to be liberated. I feel that life is behind me."

"Then, you see your death as liberation and not as punishment," Niles said, thinking perhaps that, if the soul lived eternally, then the human carcass indeed imprisoned the soul and it had to be liberated at some point.

"The liberation of the soul is in the books, Niles. The imprisoned soul must be freed to roam in eternity. Our body deteriorates with time, and our carcass cannot sustain the prisoner forever. We need to understand it as something inevitable, something explicable, given our composition and our structure. Any living thing is meant by nature to go through a cycle of growth, activity in its prime, and decay, leading to death."

"Nature has designed and prepared us to eventually decay and die," Niles said, confirming the eventuality of death.

"But we leave something behind; our offspring, which will continue that cycle of life." Orson got up and, with a reflective expression, paced the ground, looking at the dry, hot soil. "This is the soil," Orson said, "this is the soil which will consume us one day. We'll return to nature; wounded as she is, she'll welcome us and reunite with us." He scratched the dry soil with his foot, raising dust. "This is our dust, Niles. It rises and falls back down again and becomes one with the soil. We should not fear death."

Orson placed his hands on Niles's shoulders, affectionately. "Niles, I can endure pain, hunger, even injustice. But there are things I cannot endure. My life has taught me to be wise. Whatever happens to me, remember this: I raised you since you were a little boy. You have become me." He shook Niles and fixed his eyes on him. "As I get older, I see myself even more in you, and it fills my heart with contentment. It's gratifying and fulfilling to look at the man you have become, and I know that I had a part to play in that.

To know that I haven't survived hunger, pain, or illness for nothing. You'll be here long after I'm gone, but I will be with you. My spirit and soul will survive within you, within Ciara and Kolten. I know deep down inside my heart that you'll persist through any hardship that may come your way, but I cannot endure the thought that perhaps you won't be strong enough to overcome it. But I taught you well, and I know you'll be ready to fight your struggles alone; to stand up against any impediments, any obstructions, and contest them; of that, you must be sure."

Tears ran down Niles's face. He had been preparing himself for Orson's death for a long time, but looking at death straight in the face was not what he had been expecting. But he didn't know what to expect. Niles looked at Orson, trying to convince himself that Orson would perhaps depart from this life soon, and he had to reconcile himself to that eventuality. He ought to accept it and carry on with his own life. He had learned a great deal from Orson; he had been his mentor and teacher throughout his life.

Orson understood well the meaning of existence, endurance, and survival, and the meaning of the annihilation of the body, which leads us to that eventuality which is death. Nothing, composed of body and soul, is meant to remain perpetually as a whole. Although composite things can exist without end as a species, which is numerically mortal, they are generically immortal; and so, we are meant as individuals, within a species of living things, to succeed one another in an endless cycle. Death is not prejudicial. If nature had designed us to meet that eventuality, then why should we fear death as the worst evil? Violent death on a battlefield is not feared; why should we fear

a natural death? We should accept it and look forward to death as we look forward to childbirth. Are we looking for a moral or theological causal explanation of death? If the natural explanation leads us to regard our offspring and our relatives as descendants who carry on our species, then we are meant to regard our death as good; as such, the species makes no claim on us except through these relations. Decay of the body follows growth; every living entity goes through this cycle. We welcome growth, but have an aversion to decay. This is the price one pays for having lived a full and productive life. But why should we decay? Plato explicitly rationalized it in his *Timaeus*: "By simply having matter, we must decay, since it is not controllable."

As we reach our prime, we have achieved all our goals, and there is nothing more to ponder about. The nature of a living being is to reach maturity and produce another being like itself. As with some insects, they reach their death after they reproduce and raise their offspring. At the end of an exhausting day, sleep is welcome. Throughout our lives, we become exhausted, and death comes as a welcome culmination to our lives, to rid us of that perpetual fatigue that life has imposed upon us.

CHAPTER 23

Autumn 2050

“Of course, it was his irrational and eccentric foolish sentiment that he thought he would see her phantom. That outrageous presumption that the souls of the dead wander around libraries, luring children inside, had overtaken his fantasy to higher grounds.”

THAT NOVEMBER DAY, ON WHICH NILES had descended to the town where Aberdeen lived, the streets were obscured by fallen leaves that rippled through the broken pavement and front yards like yellow skins. The sky was clear, and a soft breeze gusted from the west. It was warm, considering it was the middle of November, and the few clouds, which had threatened rain the night before, had dispersed discreetly, and the sun was climbing the sky in full view.

Niles came again to the town where his sister lived, to try once more to convince her to come with him. He had promised his mother that he'd find his sister. He'd promised her that when he visited his burnt-down house, with his mother's skeletal remains lying underneath the debris. He had found Aberdeen, but that was not enough; he now had to convince her to come with him. His mother came into his mind again, as she had done many times before. He reminisced about the walks he had taken with her when the air was frosty and bitterly cold for running. They took extended walks along the river. He liked watching its changing surfaces; in some places, it was wrinkled or silky, and in other places coarse or turbulent. In clear and fair weather in the summer, the faraway sea would be sprinkled with the white peaks of sailboats sailing on the calm waters, or, in the early morning, a parade of the

smooth, kaleidoscopic gliding of skulls. Other days, in winter, the surface of the river turned a shimmering or burnished grey metallic colour, something forbidding and unkind about it. At night, the glow and glare of the town lights bounced about the surface of the river.

Niles recalled an unkind, frosty, windless afternoon. The icy water of the river was pallid and anaemic, an impervious greyish-white that mirrored the snow on the ground. There was only a touch of blue in the white. He walked hurriedly and vigorously with his mother, on the way to the library, and every so often he brought his hands against his mouth, dosing the tips of his gloves with his warm breath, a puff of white, as if that might have prevented his fingers from freezing. He liked the coldness of the air on his face; he liked its cold translucence, and its sharp reminder of what life had been, a splendid intensity that was also sometimes painful. As they reached the bridge, he recalled, they turned away from the water and crossed the bridge that took them to the street, which would lead them to the east side of the park and gardens, over to the farthest corner of the library, the library which young Niles had visited many times with his mother.

And now, walking the streets of the town, as the fallen leaves rippled through the streets and front yards like yellow skins, and the sky was clear and a soft breeze propelled from the west, the old, dilapidated town library came into view. His mother came into his mind again, and like a phantom, her shadow passed before his eyes, as if she were calling him to follow her into the library, as they had done many times before when he was a small child. He quickly walked by the library, and it seemed to him that he saw her behind the window with a smile

that neither depicted nor rendered any dejected or distressing sentiment, without indicating any point of view. Of course, it was his irrational and eccentric foolish sentiment that he thought he would see her phantom. That outrageous presumption that the souls of the dead wander around libraries, luring children inside, had overtaken his fantasy to higher grounds.

Niles scraped his mind clean of these imprudent and irrational thoughts as he continued his journey to his sister's house, hoping to find her there.

CHAPTER 28

"Forgive me, my young man. I had a son as charming as you. One morning, his brain moved; he opened the door, and he went away. He said he was looking for himself."

NILES WALKED AMONG PINE TREES AND ROCKS, breathing in their scent and tasting the resin exhaled from them. A few birds were flying, landing on trees, chirping, and diving over his head. The sun had crowned the unblemished sky, and the earth was hot and dry. A few small clouds were drifting across the sky, and the wind was calm, carrying the smells of the mountain and of the earth gently into his nostrils in a combined symphony of fragrances. He set off to visit Hope at her camp, as he had done many times before, on that exquisite late-autumn day. He opened his shirt, letting the wind caress his chest, his hair blowing softly in the breeze. On one side, the mountain rested its ill-fated body, and on the other, far into the distance, lay the sea. Above it, the blue

sky enhanced the numerous colours of the surroundings, giving everything a bright and elusive look, as if it were a nineteenth-century painting.

He had walked a fair distance. The shadows were curled up now beneath the trees. It was almost noon. As he walked up the mountain, enjoying the world with his mind adrift in thought, the smell of freshly baked bread hit his nostrils; he felt hungry. His nostrils trailed the wind, and he followed the smell. He leaped over a trench, jumped over a rock, and entered the deep forest. He caught a glimpse of a low shack beneath a pine tree. Smoke was rising into the sky along with those exceptional smells. A swiftly moving, long-nosed, skeletal, undernourished old woman was bending over the fire, baking bread. Next to her sat a big, black, furry dog with its front paws on the stones close to the fire; its gluttonous mouth was open, exposing a mouthful of teeth. When it heard Niles' footsteps, it dashed at him, barking. The old woman turned, and as she saw Niles, she was startled; her eyes, deep inside their sockets, were small, and they glowed brilliantly in front of the fire. She was happy to see a man in her loneliness and desolation, and she stopped, a baker's trowel in her hand.

"Welcome," she said. "Are you hungry? Where are you coming from?"

"From down below. We have a cabin there."

"Are you hungry?" she asked again, and she parted her lips in a peculiar and distinctive smile which revealed a deep void. Niles' nostrils were moving faster than the dog's.

"Yes, I am forgiving my forwardness."

"What?" the old woman said, for she was hard of hearing. "Speak louder."

"I'm hungry, my good woman. Forgive me."

"Why should I forgive you? There is no indignity in being hungry or thirsty, young man. All these things come from God. Come then, don't be ashamed." She smiled again, and her only tooth came into view. "Here you'll find bread. That's all." She picked up a loaf of bread she had placed on a rock next to the fire a little while ago, among the others. Niles hadn't tasted bread for years. "Here, this is the loaf we keep for visitors. It's not mine; it's yours. Sit down and eat."

Niles sat on the ground, resting his back against the trunk of the old pine tree. He tasted the bread. His gluttonous intentions were revealed, for the bread was delicious, fresh from the oven and still warm. He calmed down, pacified and thankful for the old woman's offerings. As he ate and his senses exulted, consuming the old woman's creation, he felt that the body and the soul united and became one. He was devouring the bread, blissful and contented, for both the body and the soul were nourished. The old woman, taking a break from her baking, leaned against the tree and looked at him.

"You were hungry," she said. "Eat some more. You're a young man; you have a long and laborious road ahead of you, plenty of burdens and frets. You need to get strong to persevere and keep life going. I'm old. I've eaten all my loaves of bread. Now it's your turn." She cut another piece of bread and offered it to Niles. With a groan that came from deep down inside her, she sat next to him. "Where are you headed, young man?" she asked, studying his face with a searching look.

"I'm chasing my devils and monsters."

"Where? Speak properly, young man."

"I don't know. I'm chasing my battles."

The old woman looked at him with an angry look and grimaced with her toothless mouth.

"Why? You're a young man. Enjoy your life in this desolate society. These things are not for you yet. Not now." Niles kept quiet. The old woman shook her head, and her mantilla slipped from her thin, white hair. She quickly adjusted it over her head and wrapped it around her neck. "You're looking for yourself?" she asked, crossly, and Niles suddenly felt her genuine question piercing his heart very deeply. "Yes, I'm looking for myself," he thought, but he didn't dare utter it aloud. She looked at him again, got up, and stood in front of him. "Oh, you adverse and ill-fated young man. You ain't gonna find it in the mountains or the meadows; it's inside you. You must look deep down in your heart, in your thoughts, your dreams; that's where it is. You look in vain all around. Every footprint on the sand, every breath you take, every word you utter, it's all you. That's where you'll find it."

The old woman spoke, and as she voiced her objections, she became increasingly agitated. But she said what she intended to say, and she calmed down. She touched Niles' shoulder. "Forgive me, my young man. I had a son as charming as you. One morning, his brain moved; he opened the door, and he went away. He said he was looking for himself. And now I bake this bread, but who am I going to feed? My children? My grandchildren? I'm alone, deserted, living a solitary life." She stopped, wiped her eyes, and said in an unsettled voice: "For years I would raise my hands to God and yell: 'Why was I born? I had a son, but you took him away. Why?' I yelled and yelled, but he didn't hear me. One night, I had a dream: he came, and with his thundering voice,

asserting his authority and proclaiming his influence, he said: 'Scream and yell if you like; I'm deaf.' Since then, I stopped yelling."

Niles got up and shook the old woman's bony hand. She looked at him with a tear marking her face. "Don't you have eyes, my son? Can't you see the sun, the mountains, the sea, the women? Go and open your eyes. Haven't you ever read the Bible? God doesn't want prayers; he wants you to get married and have children."

"Goodbye, my good woman. God may repay you for the bread you fed me," he said, as he walked back into the forest and toward the trail. The dog followed his trail quietly, wagging its tail.

The heat from the sun was now piercing his skull, and the warm breeze coming from the south was hitting his open chest. "Can't you see the sun, the mountains, the sea, the women?" The last words the old woman had uttered disturbed his soul. "Yes," Niles thought, "the polluted sea, the devastated mountains, and the desolate earth; the woman; she who will give birth to the child which will carry on humanity into the next generation of a hungry and sick society." Such were his thoughts as he walked slowly on the trail, sunk in his own thoughts, hoping for salvation from his notions. The deep blue of the sea was now visible in front of him, among the immersed colours of the pine trees. The white caps of the water were visibly moving in a peculiar direction, which seemed to be sideways in contrast with the position and outline of the shore. The sea was illuminated; the sun was caressing it, amused by its feverish glimmers. On the right, by

the sea and at the foot of the mountain, there stood the cemetery, decorated by numerous white crosses, all in a row.

