

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 it 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 vanished. He felt that his heart was not wrapped around it yet, 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 that was left inside him: deep, ceaseless, and red, which was beating with that strength of the mind, and was not letting that peaceful aggressor, the sun, make him completely his 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 at least 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 the repulsive and appalling face of privation and destitution. Here other laws reigned and dominated, and the 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 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 she 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 sunk from hunger, with 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 turned his eyes away, 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 men 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 the 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 have 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 were 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."*

In the course of 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 conveyed to him one day: *"We must always listen to the shouts, the screams of the people who are asking us for help."*

*

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 in 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 multicolour 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 discrete 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 have allowed. 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 that was exchanging masks. And as he often looked at the starry 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 islands, it seemed, spread throughout the vastness of the ocean. And now, every thought, every grief, every regret, every blissful moment, were 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 unpolluted. The sea, the lakes, and rivers were unblemished and well-defined, and the earth was healthy and nourishing. The people loved the earth and they were faithful to her; they confided in her their troubles and worries, and she understood. They trusted all their hopes in 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 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. But later on, 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 to them her pain. 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.

As he got up from underneath a sheet of metal that served as shelter, Orson, waking up, cleared his throat, and the sound that he made disturbed the dull and extreme silence. The sun was concealed from 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 was his home for many years, he now had to abandon.

The intense and fierce wind blew 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 into 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 smock, was spreading its heat harshly all around. He sneaked a quick peek inside burnt homes in search of food or clothing, but everything was 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 lived in that town for several years, 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 was flowing at the edge of it. 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, which decorated the banks of the river, had survived until now the heat and the drought. It served as a sanctuary to numerous birds and wildlife which would call 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 can 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, hearing 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 mom," he said and tears were flowing 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 up 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 mommy."

“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 dipped 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. A lot of the services had been suspended or reduced. The two lonely souls walked side by side, heading toward an unfamiliar and inexplicable future.