

## PRELUDE

[...] picture a world from which we all suddenly vanished. Tomorrow.

Unlikely perhaps, but for the sake of argument, not impossible. Say a *Homo sapiens* - specific virus – naturally or diabolically nano-engineered – picks us off but leaves everything else intact. Or some misanthropic evil wizard somehow targets that unique 3.9 percent of DNA that makes us human beings and not chimpanzees, or perfects a way to sterilize our sperm. Or say that Jesus – more on Him later – or space aliens rapture us away, either to our heavenly glory or to a zoo somewhere across the galaxy. (5)

## PART I

### CHAPTER I

#### A LINGERING SCENT OF EDEN

You may never have heard of the Białowieża Puszcza. But if you were raised somewhere in the temperate swathe that crosses much of North America, Japan, Korea, Russia, several former Soviet republics, parts of China, Turkey, and Eastern and Western Europe – including the British Isles – something within you remembers it. If instead you were born to tundra or desert, subtropics or tropics, pappas or savannas, there are still places on Earth kindred to this *puszcza* to stir your memory, too. (9)

The fragrance that wafts from eons of accumulated mulch in the forest's core hearkens to fertility's very origins. In the Białowieża, the profusion of life owes much to all that is dead. Almost a quarter of the organic mass aboveground is in assorted stages of decay – more than 50 cubic yards of decomposing trunks and fallen branches on every acre, nourishing thousands of species of mushrooms, lichens, bark beetles, grubs, and microbes that are missing from the orderly, managed woodlands that pass as forests elsewhere.

Together those species stock a sylvan larder that provides for weasels, pine martens, raccoons, badgers, otters, fox, lynx, wolves, roe deer, elk, and eagles. More kinds of life are found here than anywhere else on the continent – yet there are no surrounding mountains or sheltering valleys to form unique niches for endemic species. The Białowieża Puszcza is simply a relic of what once stretched east to Siberia and west to Ireland.

The existence in Europe of such a legacy of unbroken biological antiquity owes, unsurprisingly, to high privilege. During the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a Lithuanian duke named Władysław Jagiełło, having successfully allied his grand duchy with the Kingdom of Poland, declared the forest a royal hunting preserve. For centuries, it stayed that way. When the Polish-Lithuanian union was finally subsumed by Russia, the Białowieża became the private domain of the tsars. Although occupying Germans took lumber and slaughtered game during World War I, a pristine core was left intact, which in 1921 became a Polish national park. The timber pillaging resumed briefly under the Soviets, but when the Nazis invaded, a nature fanatic named Hermann Göring decreed the entire preserve off-limits, except by his pleasure.

Following World War II, a reportedly drunken Josef Stalin agreed one evening in Warsaw to let Poland retain two-fifths of the forest. Little else changed under communist rule, except for construction of some elite hunting dachas – in one of which, Viskuli, an agreement was signed in 1991 dissolving the Soviet Union into free states. Yet, as it turns out, this ancient sanctuary is more threatened under Polish democracy and Belarusian independence than it was during seven centuries of monarchs and dictators. Forestry ministries in both countries tout increased management to preserve the Puszcza's health. Management, however, often turns out to be a euphemism for culling – and selling – mature hardwood that otherwise would one day return a windfall of nutrients to the forest. (10-11)

## CHAPTER II UNBUILDING OUR HOME

On the day after humans disappear, nature takes over and immediately begins cleaning house – or houses, that is. Cleans them right off the face of the Earth. They all go.

If you're a homeowner, you already knew it was only a matter of time for yours, but you've resisted admitting it, even as erosion callously attacked, starting with your savings. Back when they told you what your house would cost, nobody mentioned what you'd also be paying so that nature wouldn't repossess it long before the banks. (17)

After we're gone, nature's revenge for our smug, mechanized superiority arrives waterborne. It starts with wood-frame construction, the most widely used residential building technique in the developed world. It begins on the roof, probably asphalt or slate shingle, warranted to last two or three decades – but that warranty doesn't count around the chimney, where the first leak occurs. As the flashing separates under rain's relentless insistence, water sneaks beneath the shingles. It flows across four-by-eight-foot sheets of sheathing made either of plywood or, if newer, of woodchip board composed of three-to four-inch flakes of timber, bonded together by a resin. (18)

After 500 years, what is left depends on where in the world you lived. If the climate was temperate, a forest stands in place of a suburb; minus a few hills, it's begun to resemble what it was before developers, or the farmers they expropriated, first saw it. Amid the trees, half-concealed by a spreading understory, lie aluminum dishwasher parts and stainless steel cookware, their plastic handles splitting but still solid. Over the coming centuries, although there will be no metallurgists around to measure it, the pace at which aluminum pits and corrodes will finally be revealed: a relatively new material, aluminum was unknown to early humans because its ore must be electrochemically refined to form metal.

The chromium alloys that give stainless steel its resilience, however, will probably continue to do so for millennia, especially if the pots, pans, and carbon-tempered cutlery are buried out of the reach of atmospheric oxygen. One hundred thousand years hence, the intellectual development of whatever creature digs them up might be kicked abruptly to a higher evolutionary plane by the discovery of ready-made tools. Then again, lack of knowledge of how to duplicate them could be a demoralizing frustration – or an awe-arousing mystery that ignites religious consciousness. (21)

## CHAPTER III THE CITY WITHOUT US

In 1939,