

ANOTHER APPLE

John DeBon

Most of the children sat cross-legged on the grass, some leaned back on their elbows with their legs splayed before them, and a few crouched in a fidgety squat, giggling as they waited. For Ben, their company was an indulgence, an escape from his lessons with the older ones and their voracious appetites for knowledge. It had been easier in the years just after the end, people had believed what the Elders taught without question; they had wanted to believe . . . had needed to believe. Virtually all who survived had been young, the end had taken almost everyone over the age of twenty, but their curiosity had grown with each new generation, as had their interest in the before.

It was Ben's prerogative to hold a class with the younger children whenever he pleased, and it especially pleased him after a month of lectures and discussions at the river lodge with the older ones.

He turned his face to the midday sun and listened as a breeze rustled the leaves above. The children watched, enjoying the novelty of being outside during class hours, fascinated by his presence. Older members of the Community were now common, had been for two generations, but Ben was the only Elder they had ever known.

When their whispers had grown louder than his thoughts, he leaned forward and said, "As a child I lived in a large community."

"A city!" a boy at the edge of the circle called out.

"Yes, they were called cities," he said with an encouraging smile. "There had been many cities, and it was not uncommon for millions of people to live within each city. Can anyone tell me why we now live in communities and not cities?"

The children called out their answers: "The Elders said to . . . It's safer . . . Less disease . . . To grow our own food"

"Hands," Ben said, "raise your hands."

A flock of small hands – brown, white, black, and yellow – shot up and began to wave.

He looked at their eager faces, finally pointing a thin finger at a petite girl on the right. "Ariel?"

The girl stood, her large brown eyes shining as her delicate lips parted. "So everyone has enough."

"Enough of what?"

"Enough of what they need."

Ben nodded. "Very good, but what is enough?"

Their small hands flew up again.

"Victor?"

A boy with sandy brown hair and dark complexion stood and said, "Enough is when no one is without."

"Thank you, Victor," he said. "And what about too much, what is that called?"

"Waste," the children replied in uneven unison.

"Is waste part of enough?"

The children shook their heads and issued a resounding no.

In the distance several people approached from the Community. Ben watched as they crossed the meadow, resisting the urge to shade his eyes to better see, they would arrive soon enough. "And with how many other communities may each community trade?" This time he selected a girl with a big smile from the back of the group. "Keiko, can you tell us?"

"Two," she said with a nervous giggle.

"Only two?"

"I think so," she replied, her eyes wide and uncertain.

Ben smiled. "You are right, but why only two?"

Keiko giggled again and, shaking her head, said, "I don't know."

"You will start to learn more about communities next year, for now I can tell you that though each community trades with only two other communities, we are all part of a chain that allows us to receive goods from communities around the world. We do this so we do not need to travel far and risk the bad things." He paused to consider how much to say, they were still young. "Before the end, instead of communities there were countries, and each country traded with as many countries as they pleased. Eventually this was one of the factors that made it difficult for them to agree and cooperate, so they fought with each other, and we called that war, and it was a terrible thing. You know a little about war from your lessons. War is one of the Fifty-Three Wrongs."

The children nodded, silenced by the mention of the Wrongs.

"My father said Elders can travel anywhere they want, not just two other communities," Keiko said, breaking the brief silence as she examined a lady bug that had landed on one of her knees.

"That was true in the beginning," Ben said, "to help start the communities and teach about the before and the Wrongs, but there are very few Elders left."

The tall boy at the edge of the group called out, "Have you traveled everywhere?"

"Not everywhere, but I did my share of traveling when I was younger." Then with an exaggerated moan, he added, "but I am too old to travel now."

The children laughed.

The people crossing the meadow were nearer and Ben recognized Adam Smyth, the new Speaker of the Community Committee, Abu Aziz, the Community's Senior Spiritual Counselor, Nina Sanchez, an instructor he had trained, Norihiko Fujimori, a Committee Member from the Lakes Community in the north, and two people he did not know, probably new Committee Members from the Lakes Community. He recalled how in the beginning the population of each community had been in the hundreds, and he had known the names of every committee member from over four dozen communities. Now the populations of most communities numbered in the thousands, and it was said that some on the coasts had populations

in the hundreds of thousands. The children followed his gaze and whispered among themselves.

"Read from your books," he said as he stood, "I will be back shortly." He walked to greet the others.

"See, he returned late last night and here he is holding a lesson with practically every child in the Community," Adam Smyth said, smiling. Tall and broad in the shoulders, he towered over the others. "I hope we haven't interrupted anything important."

"All lessons are important," Ben said, then turned to the others. "Good morning Abu, Nina. And welcome to you, Norihiko." He offered his hand. "It is always good to see you."

A short, compact man with jet-black hair that had begun to turn gray, Norihiko Fujimori accepted Ben's hand with a quick bow of his head. "It's good to see you, Ben."

Ben turned to the newcomers. A man in his thirties with skin as dark as Norihiko's hair had once been, and almost as tall as Adam, but broader in the shoulders and chest, and a woman, perhaps in her late sixties, whose frail body moved with a surprising determination mirrored in the strength of her stare and the set of her jaw.

"And welcome to our guests."

"Ben Fitzgerald, this is Wahde Livingston," Adam said. "Wahde is the Committee Speaker from the Savannah-Statesboro Community, on the East Coast."

Ben nodded. Adam was task oriented, an administrator, and liked to get to the point. He had little patience for formalities unless they served his purpose; a trait common among the younger administrators in the Community. Still, Adam accorded Ben the appropriate degree of respect, though Ben suspected it was more tolerance than respect. "Thank you, Adam, but I still recall on which coast Georgia is located."

Wahde Livingston laughed as he said, "It is an honor, Ben Fitzgerald."

"The honor is mine."

"And this is Yael Ganaim," Adam said. "Senior Spiritual Counselor for the Jerusalem Community in—"

"Israel," Ben said.

"The Western Middle East, Mr. Fitzgerald," Yael Ganaim corrected. "As you know, there are no countries."

"I'm sorry, I've an old mind that likes to play tricks by recalling the past as if it were the present," he said, and looked from Wahde to Yael to Norihiko. "Interesting, we have officials from four communities present. This is either a gross breach of the Wrongs or—"

"Ben, we need to talk," Norihiko said, then looked in the direction of the children. "But not here."

Nina stepped forward with the grace of a healthy woman of twenty-seven, her face framed by thick, wavy brown hair. She placed a hand on Ben's shoulder and

looked at him with brown eyes that seemed to always hold a smile. "I'll stay with the children, Ben."

For a melancholy moment, he wished he were younger. "Thank you, Nina."

"Let's go to the apple orchard," Adam said, leading the way. "We can sit and talk in private." The others joined him on a wide gravel path.

"You have traveled far," Ben said to Yael.

"As have many from my Community. Along the way others have joined us in spreading the Word, such as Wahde."

"Spreading the Word?" Ben said, sounding both surprised and concerned. "You believe the Coming is near?"

"It is not a matter of being near, it is at hand."

"What makes you so certain?"

Wahde, who walked with Abu and Adam, looked back at Ben and said, "For years, Yael Ganaim's Community has drawn scholars from all over the world, and they have been studying the writings and watching the signs."

"Scholars?" Ben said with raised eyebrows. He turned to Norihiko. "What do you think of this revelation?"

Norihiko shrugged. "I think if you look long enough and hard enough you'll see what you want."

Abu sighed. "You sound like an Administrator, Norihiko. We've known this time would come, it's in the writings."

"And you sound like a Spiritual Counselor, Abu," Ben said with a smile. He turned to Yael. "No offense intended."

"None taken."

"Let me finish," Norihiko said. "In my opinion the writings are subject to interpretation. Still, I find Yael's conclusions compelling. I believe her, Ben."

"And which writings are we talking about?" Ben asked. "Aramaic, Roman Catholic, Hindu, Mayan, Shinto, the I Ching, the Tao?"

"I'm glad you're here," Wahde said. "With two spiritual counselors and three administrators, it is fitting we have at least one instructor, and an Elder at that."

"One instructor can sometimes be one too many," Adam said. "We need to prepare, not debate."

They crested a rise and paused to look down at the rows of apple trees that filled the dell, and the clearing in the center where three stone benches had been arranged in a circle.

"And what preparations would you make?" Ben asked as they continued down the steps. "Even if the Coming were true, what does it offer that our way of life does not already provide?"

"It's the Coming, Ben," Adam said. "What do you want us to do, nothing?"

"Doing nothing is usually the wisest course of action. It has served us well for many years."

At the clearing Ben and Yael sat on one bench, Norihiko and Abu sat on

another, with Adam and Wahde on the third.

Ben turned to Yael and asked, "How many communities have your people visited?"

Yael paused, and then said, "From what I last heard, the total number is near one thousand."

"Really! When did you start?"

"Fifty of us left the Jerusalem Community several months ago taking different routes, but as I have said, many have joined us in spreading the Word."

"I left my Community to escort Yael to a neighboring community," Wahde said, "but the more I listened, the more convinced I became, so I stayed with her to help."

Adam sighed. "This is all well and good, but we have to address what needs to be done. Certainly the writings must say what steps we need to take?"

"The writings simply state to spread the word," Abu said. "Yael and the others have traveled the world to tell us that the time is at hand, and we've shared the news with our communities, the rest is not up to us."

Ben turned to Abu. "You informed our Community? When?"

"While you were away at the river lodge," Adam said. "We couldn't wait until you returned."

Ben nodded absently. It was the first time the Committee had acted without consulting him, and there was something else, something unsaid in Adam's tone. "Of course," he said, regaining his composure. "If you believe this is the Coming, you did what you had to."

Yael tilted her head and asked, "Why do you, an Elder, so resist the possibility of the Coming?"

He shrugged. "How can you be so certain? If this is the Coming, is it the Christian Messiah's Second Coming or the Judaic Orthodox Moshiach bringing an age of war? I certainly hope not, I have seen enough war to last an eternity. Is it the Reconstructionist Moshiach bringing an age of peace, which would be pointless since we have already attained that on our own? Perhaps it is the Islamic Day of Judgment, complete with Allah, prophets and archangels, or the Hindu Kalki Avatar come to restore order. Or is it—"

"Enough!" Adam said, then turned to Yael. "I apologize, he didn't—"

Ben held up a thickly veined hand. "No, Adam, I should apologize. The before has made me cynical when it comes to religion, but that is no excuse for treating our guest so rudely."

"There is no need to apologize," Yael said. "You are an Elder, you know history, you remember religion, government, and war, but none of those exist now. I sense fear in your skepticism, but you have nothing to fear."

Ben shook his head. "I know people and remember how it was. If you tell them the Coming is at hand and they believe you, then religion will follow and all the other Wrongs."

"No, Ben," Abu said, "we're not the same as the people of the before, we're spiritual."

Ben shook his head. "That's what they thought."

Adam stood. "This is pointless, it's the Coming, we've no choice."

"We do have a choice," Ben said. "We have free will."

"What?" Adam turned to Ben.

"The old texts say we are made in our Creator's image and given free will. You won't find that in the Community By-laws, Adam, but I'm certain you remember it from the writings."

"Free will? With all respect, Ben, what on earth are you babbling about?"

Adam turned to Abu. "Tell him about the Coming and what's expected of us."

Abu shook his head. "It's not my place to lecture an Elder."

"Adam, think," Ben said. "It has never been a matter of what is expected of us, but of what we expect of ourselves."

"You are correct, Mr. Fitzgerald, we were given free will," Yael said. "But free will comes from the Creator, not from us."

Adam looked around the circle. "That's right, we owe—"

"We owe!" Ben said. He stood and walked over to Adam. "What does an abandoned child owe an absent parent? We filled the Creator's void with religions and governments. We fought wars in the names we gave to the Creator. Your parents' parents were not yet born, but I recall the religious wars, the arsenals of governments used by faiths against each other. I witnessed the greed of the wealthy and powerful, gathering more than they needed while most went without. I lived through the fighting, the radiation, the biological attacks, and the famine and pestilence that followed and signaled the end. If there is a Coming, we owe the Creator nothing. We found peace on our own, made our own paradise."

"Then what do we do when the Creator comes, Elder?"

Ben sat down and rested his elbows on his knees. "In the before, we tried to emulate the Creator, but succeeding in becoming destroyers. The very belief in the existence of a Creator overshadowed our lives and limited our free will." He sighed and looked at Adam. "What do we do? We exercise our free will and cast the Creator out of our paradise, instead of the other way around. We destroy the writings as many of us had wanted to do after the end." He looked at the faces of the others and saw sympathy, pity and doubt, but no agreement.

"Elder or not, you're going to have a hell of a time getting the Community to go along with you on this," Adam said, pacing in the center of the circle. "And even a harder one with all the other communities that have—"

"Adam!" Norihiko said. "He doesn't know yet."

"Then let him hear it now," Adam said. "You didn't grow up with an Elder in your Community. He and the other elders with their humanism and spiritualism turned us into shadows of what we once were. All we have to go on about the before is what they told us, we've been denied our right to believe in our Creator, denied

access to our heritage.” He stopped in front of Ben and looked down at him. “You blame the Creator, you blame the people of the before and their technologies, but what were you and the other Elders if not demigods creating a world of your own liking. What free will did the people of the beginning have? None, you told them what to do, how to live, what the Fifty-three Wrongs were. And you were nothing but a handful of the elite, the once powerful, a privileged few whose status allowed you to enhance your longevity so you would have more time to enjoy your wealth.”

Ben stood. “Where did you hear that? Who told you—”

“Yael told us! Her research revealed the truth about the Elders,” Adam said, eyes wide and glaring. “You’re not an ancient wise man. You and the others weren’t prophets, you were part of what destroyed the before. Then you rode out the end from the safety of your hideaways, but even your bunkers weren’t safe from the wars and all the other Wrongs that followed. How old are you, Ben, one hundred and twenty, one hundred and fifty, older?”

“This serves no purpose,” Yael said. “If the Elders had penance to pay, they did so by spending their extended lives ensuring our survival. With a new age about to dawn, let us not dwell on the past.”

Ben sat trembling, not saying a word. For the first time in his life, he felt the weight of his years pulling down on his bones.

“Fine,” Adam said, “but one last thing. You want to talk about free will, Ben? Because if you want to know about free will, ask Yael. Her Community gathered documents from before the end. Go on, Yael, tell the Elder what you determined.”

“There is no reason to—”

“It’s all right, Yael, go on,” Ben said.

She looked at Ben and after a moment said, “The scholars of our Community have unanimously decided that free will is the cause of all Wrongs. It was because of free will that we strayed, not because of the Creator or beliefs related to the Creator, as . . . as the Elders told us.”

“Beliefs like religion, Ben,” Adam said. “Right, Yael?”

Yael looked down and nodded.

Ben’s shoulders slumped as his body seemed to cave in on itself. “And this along with the announcement of the Coming is the message you and the other fifty have been spreading through the communities these past months?”

“Not fifty,” Adam said, “thousands. Remember, at each Community more joined them to help spread the word.”

“So it will start again,” Ben said. A frail hand gently touched his shoulder, and he looked up.

“Come and see,” Yael said, “it is not what you fear.”

He rose and allowed her to guide him along a path leading out of the orchard and over the rise at the far side of the dell. The others walked silently behind them. Once they reached the crest, he looked out at a field filled with tents. “What is this?”

“They’re coming, here,” Adam said. “We’ve been in contact for months.”

Ben looked past a stand of trees at the far end of the field and saw more tents beyond. "Who are they?"

"Representatives of communities from around the world," Adam said, his smile so wide it seemed as if it would cut his head in two.

Ben took a step forward. "We have to stop them. I have to speak with them, warn them."

"No Ben," Norihiko said, "whether this is real or not, this time you need to let us decide for ourselves."

Adam stepped in front of Ben, blocking his way. "You're not warning anyone. We had enough interference from Elders."

Yael took Ben's arm and, with Norihiko's aide, walked him away.

"Why here?" Ben asked, shambling as if an invalid. "Why did they all come here?"

"The Coming," Norihiko said, "it will take place here, in your Community."

"Here?"

"Based on the writings," Yael said.

He stopped and looked up at the sky, his features taut as if bracing in anticipation of a blow. "And they all came?" He turned and looked back at the tents. "All the communities?"

Norihiko began to speak, but stopped when Yael shook her head.

"What?" Ben asked. "What were you going to say?"

Norihiko looked at Yael, whose eyes had turned stern and cautious.

"I asked the question, old friend, not her. What were you about to say?"

Norihiko shook his head. "Not that it matters, this may all be a mistake, but... that isn't all the communities." He turned to Yael and said, "Tell him, all of it."

The stern look left Yael's eyes.

"Our researchers picked this Community as the site of the Coming," she said, "but as I said earlier, there were teams involved from around the world, and some arrived at different conclusions as to the site and the date."

Ben closed his eyes. "Did they also send out people to spread their versions of the Word?"

In a voice that no longer sounded confident, she said "Yes, but—"

"And they are gathering communities at their sites?"

"I suppose, but we're certain that we are correct, and in time they will see."

Ben shook his head. "No, they will be as certain of their findings as you are of yours. People need to believe in something greater than themselves, it is what limits us."

"What are you saying?" Norihiko asked.

"There will be no Coming," Ben said, "but it has started again all the same, and none of you can see . . . none of you will understand until it is too late."