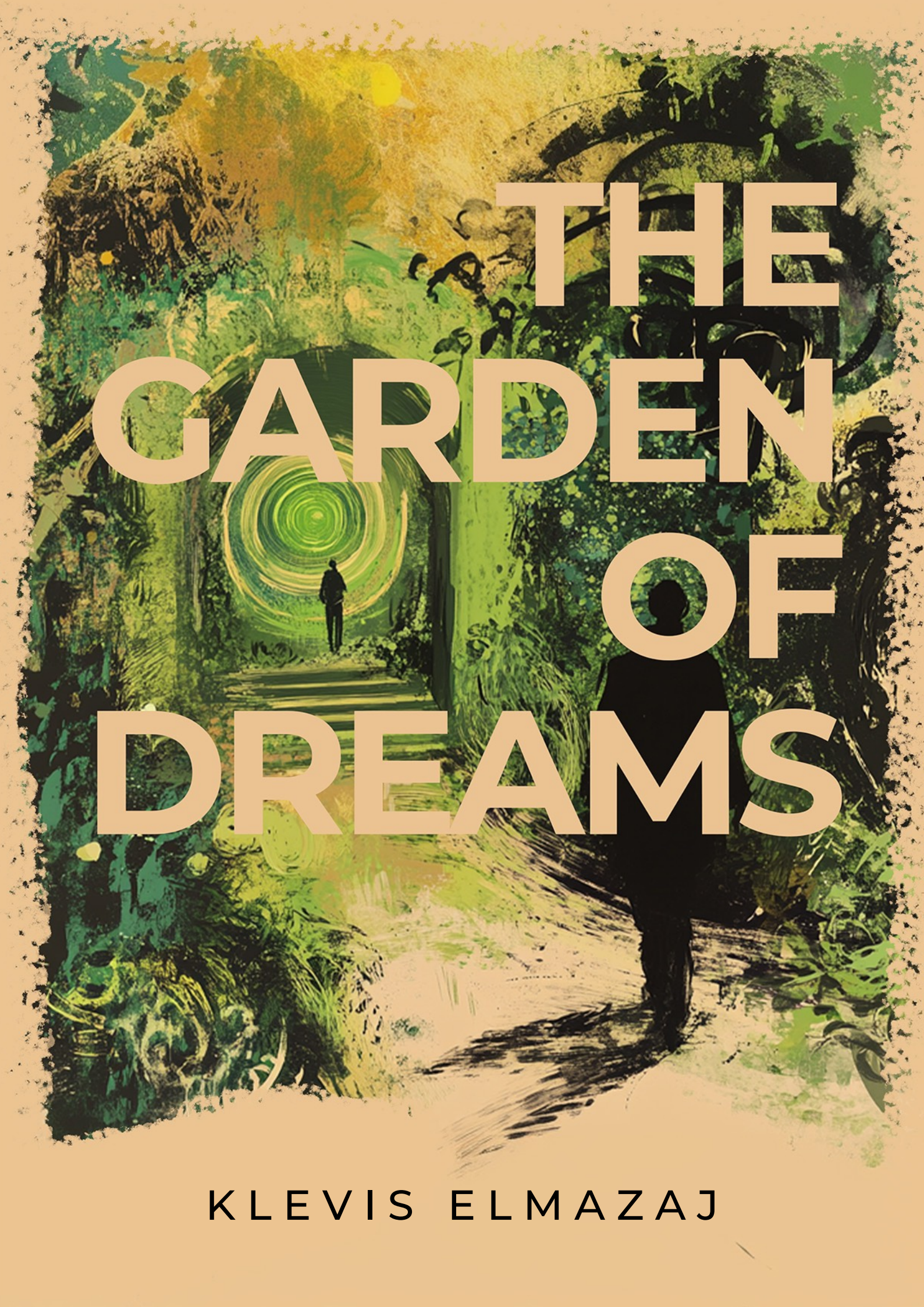




THE GARDEN OF DREAMS

KLEVIS ELMAZAJ

The Gardens of Dreams

Old Fernando Sáles had been the gardener of the Van Der Haar Castle estate for 35 years. A relatively easy research on his accessible accounts, states , he was born in Peru, 1928, and emigrated at the age of 45, until he reached Europe shortly after. The account of his full travels before that, are not clear, but from that information onwards, documents provide nothing. As a matter of facts, like my young assistant Johansen put it in uncomplicated words, in Europe Mr Sáles was a ghost. Quite an attempt to hypothesise a missing for a young aspiring detective, but he was right, and I believe this to be the reason why Mr. Van Der Haar was afraid of deep scrutiny. That's why when his beloved gardener Fernando Sáles disappeared, instead of calling the authority, he personally reached out to my bureau. Also because he seemed to believe that the disappearance of his gardener, had something to do with... 'magic'. Now, if it wasn't for some personal connections of mine who have so warmly described to have attended lunches and parties at the estate, I wouldn't give too much verity to the

words of Mr Van Der Haar, as my point of view is of one of those who rejects the paranormal, and seek the truth that lays behind it. Sure, I am well knowledge and a vigorous student of the spiritual, the mystical and theological, but only in order to serve my cases and bring the truth to light. Some call it skepticism, others disenchantment or even stoic. I don't call it anything. However, even I, must here confess something that I didn't feel worthy of writing down on my notes when I arrived at the estate. As. I reached the palace, I expected to visit a crime scene, or at least a place carrying some clues of darkness. Having solved a few similar cases of disappearance, I knew what to expect. Instead I was embraced with a warm sense of elation, for lack of better words. I can say this for certain because I had just been on a very intense call with my daughter, family matters, so the shift was uncanny. I turned right with my car to find my self in front of the gates. The Palace was just tall enough to appear from the tree tops, and was placed right in the middle of green, but the sight cannot be described with mere words like '*garden*' or '*green fields*', as this was just something more. A complex collection of forests, flower arrangements of very specific colours, expansions of a vivid-green-grass next to a canal leading to a lake. A church was sitting next to the palace itself, then an animal stable right beyond the tall forest, and a continuation of all sorts of designed corners and levels of colourful flowers and plants,

tunnels of majestic trees, extending seemingly forever. As Mr Van Der Haar later stated, these were all handpicked and arranged by Fernando Sáles himself during the years he worked at the estate. Now, as I mentioned earlier, I attribute part of the success of my work to the fact that I do consider myself someone with his feet on solid ground. But if someone was to describe the work of ‘magic’ to me, this would be the place to base their stories. Coincidentally I had recently come back from a holiday in Peru, not more than 6 months ago, and the country with its people had left in me a certain, aftertaste of the ‘unknown’. In specific, during a trip to the Andes, our dear guide named Alfonse Andrés who accompanied us along the 7 days, seemed to have had deep knowledge in nature, teleology, cosmology, physics and biology, and his telling had planted a seed of curiosity somewhere inside me, throughout our conversations. Was I a man about to change his own belief on the mystical? No one can know for certain what the future holds... we can only understand it later, when we see it as ‘past’. But the accounts at the Van Der Haar Castle, seemed to have proven otherwise.

Mr Van Der Haar was a single child and only heir, who had inherited the castle (and some wealth) from his family. With what my assistant Johansen would say in uncomplicated words, just ‘too much free time on his hands’, he was known to organise the most luxous high teas and lush lunches, with large

amount of friends, powerful colleagues and wealthy peers, very proud of his estate to which he would always take pride of having renovated with his refined taste. He had later added the 'discovery' of Fernando Sáles to his pride and great accomplishments, for his gardens were the work of a 'craftsman botanics with a magic hand', word around would say.

Normally I wouldn't eve consider the case of a missing gardener, I would let Luisa (my secretary) redirect the case to the police authorities. But when I heard it was the Van Der Haar Castle, I took the opportunity at once. As I mentioned already, some common acquaintances of mine, which I would prefer stay anonymous, had heartily expressed the mesmerising sights of Mr Sáles gardening work at Castle Der Haar while guesting at the palace, and as someone whose work is to read peoples body language to differentiate lies from truth, the way they spoke about their experience felt to me always a touch, overdramatic. Almost as if they had been under the *Sistine Chapel* at the Vatican. I my self, have been under those mesmerising *affrescos*, so this felt wildly peculiar, that so many different people all agreed on that profound emotional experience, which some even dare describe: next to life-changing. One in particular is stuck in my memories ever since: a renowned banker and his wife who had been at the estate, were invited by the mayor Louis Merchant at a city dinner that

I too had attended. Amongst much small chatter in front of a cold drink and soft music, they too like others almost in secrecy, described to me the experience of the gardens with extremely great enthusiasm. But when his wife left the table, the banker's face turned serious and he leaned over to my ear and whispered words that i did not comprehend then:

“Seek not, the Labyrinth of what shall not be seen.”

Shortly after, I received news that his Mrs passed away from an unknown disease. This episode added to an unsettling mysterious image I had built of Castle Der Haar and its ‘gardens’ through time. What labyrinth was he talking about, and what is it that shall not be ‘seen’? After that case, more rumours arose of people who said to know people who had visited the gardens and the labyrinth, and the image became a little clearer. The only thing is, no one who has been in the labyrinth, has spoken or admitted to have been in it, yet even honestly denied having seen a maze of bushes. But other guests have seen them enter in a state, and exit completely changed. Rumour has it, the Labyrinth, which was supposed to be the last work of Mr Sáles at Castle Der Haar, was a party breaker: people would enjoy a day of company, food and fun, until entering the maze, and all I have heard is that they would come out of it... different, they would leave the estate either

joyful or fazed, and would deny speaking about having been in it. Unfortunately there hasn't been any recent accounts of the gatherings in the last 2 years, as the castle and its owner have been inaccessible... until that day.

"Mr Garmant, you're probably thinking your investigating skills do not match the task I engaged you with. I can't blame you for that. But I am glad you accepted this case. I promise it will be up to your standards." said Mr Van Der Haar with a calm content face, as he greeted me and my assistant getting out of the convertible, like he was happy to see me. Then shook the hand of Johansen.

"Mr Van Der Haar, with all due respect but, when you pronounced the word 'magic' I was very close to refuse the job. Then I was reminded of all the..."

"Of all the rumours around the gardens? I can imagine" and he smiled.

"Well, you must be aware of your guests speculations sir. Always positive though." I didn't know how much he knew.

"I am very aware of everything that happens here Mr Garmant, and I make sure my guests have a great time when they visit my estate. I have sent many invitations to your office. Never a reply. Yet I call you for a case, and here you are. A man devoted to your job. Less to its pleasures."

"Gatherings and crowds do me little good, I confess. I hope my absence didn't offend you sir"

"On the contrary. It's always good to have someone who can see things... objectively." he seemed to have chosen those words carefully. I then felt a strange sense of purpose again.

"So, Fernando Sáles, the men in question. I must say he lived up to the expectations. The gardens are truly beautiful." I confessed, looking around.

"They are indeed."

"You don't mind if my assistant takes some photographs and notes around the house right?"

"Oh not at all. Please do your job by any means." He assured. And I gave the signal to Johansen. One thing this job teaches you, is to take every piece of information possible, you don't know which one will solve your puzzle.

"It must be a pity to have to see all this go rotten soon. It will be hard to find someone who can keep this work alive. Someone with the craft of a 'magician'." I admitted as I scanned the surrounding one more time. Johansen was already in the distance, near the church.

"Mr Garmant. Fernando Sáles disappeared 5 year ago."

"What? 5 years... I am terribly late to this party then." I replied in unexpected shock, hinting at my watch. Then quickly composed my self trying to look unfazed. "But how is..." turning to the immense gardens again.

"There is no need, for anyone, to keep the gardens alive Mr Garmant. *La natura se preocupa de su misma* apparently. *Nature can*

take care of itself. Words of Fernando.” He continued with the smile of someone who had lived in this paradise for some time. For a moment I hated my self for not being able to comprehend how that could be possible.

"You are saying that..."

"Your rumours are not without foundation Mr Garmant. But not based solely on appearance. Mr Sáles worked on this gardens for 15 years before completing what you see. And it has been flourishing like this ever since. Without a single need of human hand. It is only me living here.” He said taking two steps on the path leading towards the little forest on the left of the church.

“But why call only now, 5 years later?” I asked. “My services may be of no help, after all these years.”

“I will explain. Please follow me.” And we made way towards a path that seemed to intertwine throughout the whole estate. "The path of Joy, or the path of Dreams?" He asked as he stood in front of a forking way.

I hadn't even noticed the narrow path split in two until he asked me. But the question took me off guard, and without even thinking, I matched his humour and played along.

"Well if we must. Let there be dreams." I replied in a half smile and joined him.

“Good choice.”

Mr Van Der Haar was 75 years old then, in good shape for a man his age, if I hadn't read his files, I would have guessed early 60s. This made me think he had little to joke about 'magic' gardens, and spiritual paths. But how could I take any of this seriously. And if I didn't, I had to be careful not to fall in deception.

"So which path is more popular amongst your guests?" I dared ask as we joined what he deemed the 'path of dreams'.

"You tell me. Which would you guess, based on the rumours?"

And the question brought me back to their descriptions. To their body language. To that spark in the eyes they all had while describing the views. The smells, the feeling of embrace. They all seemed to have experienced something profound.

"Joy. Joy would be my guess." I answered.

He smiled and nodded positively. "To my surprise almost no one has dared to take the path of dreams. Isn't that peculiar?" But to me this didn't feel peculiar at all, that's why I felt confident with my answer. Those kind of people who attended these gatherings, had no knowledge of dreams, nor the need to dream. No, their life was just a constant seeking for the next piece of joy, the next piece of elation that could be easily bought.

"Your guest don't strike me as people in need of dreams. No offence in my statement, but that wouldn't surprise me at all."

“And you believe you are?” He stopped and asked.

“I am... here to conclude an investigation Mr Van Der Haar. My answer for the ‘path of dreams’ was purely instinctive. I don’t want to stop your enthusiasm but, what matters to me, is this conversation.” I responded, hiding a little sense of nostalgia arising in me. For a moment I flashed back to those description, and I could smell the different flowers, see the colours and almost feel the textures of the plants, as we continued walking on the wavy path. The scenery changed and layered behind to infinite views. The levels of the garden aligned and misaligned with one another the more we walked. First the church appeared under the brunch of a tree, then a little wooden bridge covered by rain leaves passed over a pure blue of flowers. The sounds of waters flowing, birds and insects sharing life with the plants. A strange tingling sensation enveloped my body, like my hair was rising. Someone dear to me would have truly appreciated this beauty.

“When I fist met Fernando, I was grieving the loss of family, and contemplating a life of loneliness. He was a poor immigrant, swiping the floors at a flower store in town I would visit frequently. One day I had made such a big order, that they had to deliver it with a van. The estate was not even remotely as flourishing as you see it today, and when he had finished unloading, I saw him standing there in the dryness of it all, near the edge of the pond. He looked around, and looked

deeply. Every time I think back to that moment, I would dare say he was looking inwards, as much as outwards. I saw him taken by his thoughts, his feelings. He closed his eyes and stood there, I believe he saw it all already then. I asked if he liked working with plants and flower. He said he did so back in his country. So I engaged him for a season to come work the gardens. So he did, and we became friends.” He explained as I drifted back from a dear memory.

“Seems like you saved him from being deported. This must be the result of the gratitude he must have had for you.” I replied.

“I had never considered this point of view. I will cherish that.” He looked at me with a grateful expression. Then the look became a stare.

“What would be the cause of his disappearance then?” I asked directly.

“What is your dearest dream, Mr Garmant? I am sure you have at least one.” To this day, I could not explain why that question worked like a switch inside of me. But as I collected air, suddenly it clicked, and a window opened to that image of a dream, that dear memory cherished my whole life, a dream so secret, I had buried it from my self. An image that came to life. Please understand if I do not share the details of that dream in this recount, but if you know me well, my life, my days, you wouldn’t be wrong believing that dream became

reality, and that it had sparked deep in me in that exact moment. Was I a man about to change his own belief on the mystical? I just couldn't know it yet at the time.

I took a breath and felt like I had just joined reality once more, with a strange new feeling of revelation. "Mr Van Der Haar, I am not here to investigate the disappearance of Fernando Sáles, am I right?" I stood there,

"I promised my engagement would be up to your standards Mr Garmant. I was starting to be afraid you'd never guess." He half smiled again.

"Mr Garmant! I have rounded up the collection of photos like you asked." Interrupted Johansen approaching us from the opposite path. "Most of it could be displayed in a museum as a collection. These sights truly are amazing." He seemed enthusiastic. "With exception of what looks to resemble a maze which, in all honesty, seemed like a failed attempt at an area that almost doesn't fit the rest of the gardens. It had a 'NO TRESPASSING' sign, so I thought to ask permission first." And with that he closed the camera and wrote it down to his notepad.

I frowned and looked at Mr Van Der Haar for a reaction.

"The maze... was his last creation, before disappearing. I plan to burn it down, and build an extension of the summer dining." And he looked at me.

“The Labyrinth...” I whispered to myself as I recalled the bankers words.

“Perhaps you have heard of it Mr Garmant?” Asked Van Der Haar.

“Faintly... I wish to see it with my own eyes, if you don't mind.” I asked.

“Without a doubt. Your assistant can lead the way.” He smiled at Johansen as he took the lead ahead.

“Sure, I was just there. This way.” The boy walked in front of us.

As we walked in silence, I thought about the strange situation I was in, and wondered if Van Der Haar was expecting my presence and my reactions. My gaze scanned the surrounding of the path we came from, once more. A new sensation arose which I had failed to notice before. It had to do with a visual feeling. A sense of symmetry of it all, a sense of equivalent distances, graded curves, like repeating patterns of mathematically calculated spaces. From the separation of the flowers to the Castle, the width of the path, right up to the sizes of the different leafs of each plants, and the way it was all arranged. Then my gaze went further, beyond the gardens, beyond the estate. To the horizon. And I saw the mountain tops rising high on the east side in a sense of awe. I felt enveloped by the whole world. I looked up and saw the clouds trying to avoid the aerial space of the estate, opening to an

infinite blue patch and letting the sun shine in. Then I stopped. I Closed my eyes and felt the tingling sensation rising again, until leaving my body, passing through my hair.

“All good there, Mr Garmant?”

Also Johansen turned to see. “Such sunny days are a gift.” He stated .

I opened my eyes again with a peculiar need to take my shoes off. The need for my bare feet to be in touch with the ground. “We don’t see much sun in this country, gotta take every opportunity. You don’t mind if I ‘be one with nature’ for the next part?” and Johansen led the way again after smiling in disbelief. In that moment I felt like I had found the right path to the truth. This was a good opportunity to gain more specific informations. “All hand picked by Mr Sáles himself you mentioned?”

“Indeed. He was so keen and detailed to the choice of species he was going to plant. I couldn’t refuse his passion.” I had almost no doubts about it anymore. He was telling the truth.

“Even the location of each arrangement?”

“I gave him complete Cart-blanche.”

“What about the maze?”

“What about it?”

“Sáles last creation. Why burn it?” I asked.

“Maybe for the best.” My assistant was keen to share his opinion once more. Was this the labyrinth the banker was talking about?

“A path of Joy. A path for Dreams. And where does the labyrinth’s path lead?” I joked.

“I was hoping to find out today Mr Garmant.”

“You had never been inside it yourself?”

“I have...” He replied in deep thought.

“And...”

He hesitated for a moment before turning his head. “The Labyrinth has a way in. But infinite ways out.” He stated like it meant nothing to him. Johansen stopped and turned around towards us.

“That’s not possible of course. Would you mind explaining?” I asked puzzled as we all stopped.

“Mr Johansen, what do you know about relativity? Space-time? Multiple universes? Time travel?” He asked. And I also looked at my assistant with hesitation waiting for his answer.

“Uh? Well... these... are all different theories and studies Mr Van Der Haar. Relativity has been proven, and the fabric of space-time is what causes relativity in the first place. The others are all theoretically possible, but they usually fall into fictional speculations.’

“Fictional speculations... or simply rumours.” And he looked at me as he pronounced that last word. “People turn into

fictional rumours anything they cannot explain with their science or mathematics. In the past we would call it magic, but that's an old word that means almost nothing to our 'disenchanted' times. ”

“Undoubtedly people have experienced something profound in these gardens Mr Van Der Haar. Something unique, that they cannot explain. I thought to find answers in our conversations, but, I seem to gather more questions instead... ”

“I want you to walk the Labyrinth Mr Garmant.” He asked promptly, and the questions was followed by a moment of silence from all of us.

I thought about it for while and the idea excited a part of me. The other part, felt like it was being deceived by a trick. So I thought humour would be the best answer “What if I get lost in one of the infinite ways out?”

“But of course that can't be possible” Johansen replied “If I may, whatever level of scientific peculiarity is in that Maze, it exists in this reality with a way in and a way out. Worst case scenario, we find a chainsaw and create a way out. I think is perfectly safe to walk. I will do it in your place Mr Garmant if you wish.” His almost tangible funny skepticism was stronger than mine. There is something about young age that fights against the possibility of the unexplainable. *'Revealing the magic trick, is more important than the illusory world it creates'*. And in that moment, after hearing Johansen's youthful pragmatic words, I

had the realisation that finally, I was indeed, a man about to change his own belief on the mystical. As we approached the big rectangular outer green ‘walls’ of the Labyrinth, the words of Johansen ‘exists in this reality’ echoed in my mind. And I understood. I understood that I was meant to be exactly there, that day. That it had all happened the way Van Der Haar has expected it: the way it was inevitably meant to. And a sense of calmness enveloped my whole body. I believe he noticed the sudden change in me. Profound yet so subtle to the outside, my assistant could have not perceived it.

“I shall wait for you on the outside Mr Garmant.” His temporary farewell words. “Please, allow your dearest dream lead you.” He said with the same smile as when we greeted me, while removing the small chain blocking the entrance.

The outer shape was that of a rectangle, but the inner path was wavy, curving and forking to double and at times even triple paths. The plant walls on each side were tall and green, of the same species. *‘Handpicked by Mr Sáles himself’* I thought as I walked further in the Labyrinth. Its ways became even more unexpected the more I ventured in, as levels started appearing deforming the flat surface of the ground: a path crossing under another path, and forking into paths that led up like a passage bridge, or under, like a short tunnel, and suddenly the sensation that I was going to be truly lost took over. But my dream appeared in my mind and it stayed there, stuck on the walls of

my imagination, sending tingling signals to my stomach anytime the right way was in front of me, until at some point I couldn't tell if I was choosing the path, or the path was coming my way. The green walls moved faster even if I walked slow, until becoming a blurry running image, and I felt like I was speeding through the curvy and twisty layered ways of the inner maze. Breathing heavily. The blurry image blurred further before sharpening again, but this time I was not in the maze anymore. I was outside. Not even outside the maze, but somewhere completely else, a place unknown to me. My bare feet where on beach sand, and the view looked like a wide shoreline. In the middle of it I could see the silhouette of a house built on these sands. A beautiful house like those in the movies, and as the sound of waves brought me back to childhood, the house made me feel cozy; a view that gave me an indescribable warmth, and attracted me to it, like a sailor to a mermaid chant. So I walked, leaving the only footprints on the beach, towards the window, trying to make no noise for I felt I was a guest in this place. I dared peek inside the house from the window, not knowing what to expect, but fear was not present in me no, only a sense of elation. I saw a dinner table prepared for 6, a young man entered holding a baby on his arms, followed right after by an older woman whose features shocked me, as they resembled those of my daughter. The woman had a smile on her face. The same smile I saw on Van

Der Haar content face when he saw me. I was speechless, my hand touched the glass, possibly in an involuntary attempt for contact, but right then, the image blurred quickly and I snapped back to what felt like reality. No more sand under my feet. No more sound of waves. In front of me the last meters of what seemed like a corridor of bushes. At the end of it two silhouettes of people waiting for me, one tall one shorter. I tried to recollect memories but the thoughts were hazy and unsure. Maybe they can give me directions? I walked towards them.

“Not everyone is ready to see what you saw Mr Garmant. I have walked the maze several times, and every time I saw new things, but the same. Amongst many, I saw this day. I saw you walking the gardens and entering the Labyrinth.” The taller and older of the two spoke with a smile and in a split second his voice worked like a switch, and my brain reconnected what felt like years of memories.

“Mr Van Der Haar...” I barely whispered.

“It must be a very peaceful walk in there for such thoughts Mr Van Der Haar.” Johansen joked. I looked at Johansen, and then back at Van Der Haar.

“Johansen, I believe we’ve collected enough evidence for the case. Please take everything to the car, I will join you.” And he left, leaving me and Van Der Haar alone, at the only true exit of the maze. I wanted to tell him. I wanted to let him know the

truth I had discovered about his gardens, but his smile made me realise he was happily satisfied with the mystical world those gardens had created for him. He was content to be enchanted, for the enchantment worked. Magic really happened in the gardens of Fernando Sáles. If one allowed himself to see it.

To this day, Mr Garmant never told me what he saw inside the Labyrinth. He never wanted to share it, and he was almost convinced that the maze didn't exist. But I was there, and I beat myself for listening to Van Der Haar's "...not your turn today." when I asked if I could walk the maze. Only after 25 years from that day, a strange curiosity avails me, that something beyond our knowledge lies in the creation of that Labyrinth and those gardens. I keep looking at those old photos I snapped and wonder what had happened to that place after Van Der Haar's death. Mr Garmant closed the case of Fernando Sáles disappearance a few days after our visit, without explanation. He closed his bureau and said he was going travelling. It was only when my beautiful fiancé suggested we go visit Castle Der Haar. An extremely smart writer Arenas Fondles, whom I've met not so long ago at a retreat I did in the south of Spain. One evening, during a trip to the Spanish mountains, she told me that I reminded her of a character also named Johansen, she had once read inside the diaries of a

certain Thomson G., which talked about magic gardens in my country. She found it funny that I had the same name of the character, and asked me if I believed in the ‘unknown’.

I dusted off 2 of the evidence photos I had framed in my apartment, and kept since that distant day. I sat on the sofa and recollected. It is the last words in his diary, that have left a strange aftertaste of that ‘unknown’ in me.

The truth is, I can never know for certain if Fernando Sáles ever existed, but I have my doubts. Nor am I certain that my so-knowledged guide on the Andes, Mr Alfonse Andrés, with whom I have had profound conversations on my travels, existed. For I felt silly it took me too long to found out that, Alfonse Andrés is nothing but another anagram of the same name: Fernando Sáles. I like to believe, a ‘person’ like Alfonse or Fernando appear in our lives as bridges to higher knowledge, when we most need it, and bring a new perspective to our existence. They carry the message of God, of the Universe. They open a window to our own universe, where time doesn’t run forward nor backwards, but all directions at once, and we can finally access past and future memories. But only when we are able to resist the temptation of wanting to know the reveal, and be truly happy with the illusory world that the magic trick creates. Only then we are able to see beyond. In the end, all the plants and flowers forming the garden, where handpicked and places by its gardener.

If Van Der Haar believed his times were those of ‘disenchantment’, I wonder what he would think of my times today. The gardens of Castle Der Haar are still here, with no more rumours behind them, nor speculations. No one even knows the true story of these gardens, yet people walk by and picnic along them as they keep flourishing without maintenance. Today, magic is a word for children, and mystic is a word for heretics. Science tries hard to give an explanation to this reality, but fails to accept anything beyond it, calling it mere speculative conspiracies. Am I a man who is about to change his believe of the unknown? I cannot say for sure. But I have just walked the path of dreams with Arenas, and as I stand at the entrance of the Labyrinth, just where Mr Garmant once stood, only here I realise, her name is also an anagram of Fernando Sáles, and Alfonse Andrés. My beloved Arenas Fondles, who sparked in me the call to venture, into *what shall not be seen*.