

# The Garden of Eden

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## Summary

Year 2237. Humanity reached a crossroad. After more than two hundred years of refinement, biotechnology yields to animals and plants that can compete with the inorganic ways of production of everyday life goods. As they rely on organic materials produced by photosynthesis, they are entirely sustainable. Some people, the Naturophiles, attempt to solely rely on these living beings to provide for them. This short story involves a young girl, Coriander, from the inorganic tradition who meets a young and charming Naturophile, Willow. Through their discussion we discover that on a long-term basis, biotechnology is probably the only answer to the energy crisis. Humans will engineer ecosystems that can sustain them without irreversible damage.

## The Garden of Eden

Coriander was waiting for her drink. She knew it would take ages to be synthesized by the cactus-like fountain so she pre-ordered it using her cell-phone. She was just on time but Willow was late, as always. His parents were so right to name him after a tree. He is so placid, so out of this world. She did not want to come in this cafe at first place, too bio for her. Why wait for ten minutes for a drink that can be served from a bottle in the bar next-door in less time than it takes to order it?

Finally it was done. The barman looked at her and asked her two Euros. She felt ridiculous with her credit card. She thought it would be much more expensive. She had ordered a cocktail, with alcohol, fancy and expensive stuff.

"I see it is the first time you come here."

"Yes! How can it be so cheap?"

"We are asking for what it costs, not to make profit. Profit means expansion, expansion means unsustainable."

Coriander shook her head and her artificial blue curls. She did not understand.

The barman smiled. His teeth were covered with purple spots that Coriander knew being moss to keep away carries. That was one of the most well known arguments against the Naturophiles: they did not clean their teeth, they had a bad breath and they let moss grow in their mouth. They didn't shower either. Their skin was scrutinized by some weird insects and microbes that were supposed to take care of their hygiene. Coriander had actually been surprised the first time she had talked to Willow: he did not stink, nor had a foul breath. His overall body odor was actually very attractive, smelling more "natural" than all the perfumes that people wore those days.

The barman went on:

"I mean, if we want to cooperate with Nature, we should not expand forever. We have a certain space allotted in the food chain, and in the global ecosystem of the World. If we take more than the space we are allowed to, we are unsustainable, we consume more than Nature can produce for us."

"But technology can palliate for the food that nature cannot provide," she attempted.

The barman smiled again. Coriander really had to get used to this sight.

"Really, you don't know anything about sustainability. Well, you know, all energy that we use comes from the sun..."

"What about coal or geothermic energy? It does not come from the sun," she interrupted. Oil had been gone for a long time but they relied on huge coal resources in China.

She realized that Willow had arrived.

"The same," Willow said in his quiet tone. "It's solar energy that has been stored for long in the form of organic carbon. But we have to face it: if we don't fulfill our energy budget, we are not sustainable, and the only number on the credit column is the solar radiation."

He attracted the attention of the barman for a glass of sap.

"It's the specialty of the house. You can get sap from different plants. They are a bit like milk cows. The plants produce a lot of sap. You just help yourself. Come I'll show you."

The barman gave him an empty glass against 1.5 Euro. Willow tried to take Coriander's hand to lead her, but she withdrew quickly. It was a reflex. She blushed. He looked at her: "Don't worry I am used to it. For your info, the insects that I use for washing myself stay in a restricted area of my bathroom and the bacteria that populate my skin are not pathogenic and they are washed away by water."

He extended his hand again.

"I'm sorry, later maybe."

She could read understanding in his eyes. He smiled. No purple spots. As they walked to the back of the cafe, she asked him about it.

"They have cross-bred new species that do not carry the pigments. They are slightly less efficient but I didn't want to scare you too much."

Coriander remarked the slight irony in his voice, as if he was making fun of himself.

They reached an elevator and some stairs. Without thinking, Coriander extended her finger to press the button to call the elevator. Willow stopped her.

"Just for handicapped people, we can take the stairs, it's more energy efficient."

Coriander didn't know what to think. She was used to technology since she was a baby; it was part of her. And here come this handsome young man, telling her to part from facilities that were as natural as breathing. It was like if he suddenly said to her that she was not breathing properly, that there was another more efficient way of taking air in, that even though at first it would be painful, with time, it would do her good to make the effort to change.

They entered a large greenhouse where different sorts of trees grew. Their roots dived into a yellowish fluffy material. She could hear water running. But the most striking was the light. It looked so natural.

"It's natural light," explained Willow. "Optic fiber draw it from the top of the skyscraper to here. And for the night, we have glowing fungi growing on the walls."

"What about this fluffy thing?"

"Rock wool... the best for hydroponics."

They walked towards the center of the greenhouse. People were sunbathing there, like on the beach. Willow showed a tree.

"It's a willow, my favorite tree as you can imagine. It gives also my favorite sap."

The tree didn't deliver the sap directly. The sap was stored in a sort of large pocket that one pressed to get the sap slowly in the glass. Then one could add water that was dripping from mossy stones.

"The trees here have been genetically modified to create those pockets. It's a sort of reserve but the sap actually circulates from the pocket into the tree, so that it doesn't stand still. It's the best way to preserve it."

"I don't understand. You claim that you want Nature but all I see here are genetically modified trees and optic fiber and hydroponics. This is not really natural, is it?"

For a second, Coriander thought she managed to surprise Willow. She was expecting a concession from him, an acceptance that they weren't as naturophiles as they claimed. But instead he laughed.

"What do you think? We will give up what civilization has discovered, go back to the forests and live in a hut? Let's be pragmatic here. We want to have a normal life. What we don't want is to use up the planet. But we are intelligent, that's the weapon evolution gave us. We use it to make nature more efficient and fulfill our needs."

"So what's the difference between this and using steel and producing chemicals? Those trees are probably as alien to nature as a silicon chip! I really don't see the point."

"The difference is that those trees are alive. The optic fibers are produced by a species of spider that threads it instead of silk. Talking about silk, all my clothes are from this material, also threaded by billions of silkworms. Our bio-computers use sugar as their power source instead of electricity that has been produced using fossil fuels and rejecting toxic compounds. Even the rock wool is made by living beings, special coral reef. The waste from the Naturophile industry are entirely biodegradable, because they are biological."

As they argued on, Coriander found it more and more difficult to make the point of the people who preferred to rely on inorganic technology. The inorganic industry's products and wastes were not suitable to Nature. They were too far away from the living beings, and of no use for them. Living being wastes were processed by living beings. The leaves of any of the trees would make excellent compost to grow the next generation of trees, or to feed fungi that would produce antibiotics. Who knows? But it would be of use to some living being. And she realized that the only way human beings could continue to be part of Nature and go on, would be to reinsert themselves in the food chain, with their own special additions to it.

She tried a last argument:

"What about the risk of corrupting Nature's own genetic code?"

To her surprise, Willow's face darkened.

"There, you're right. What we deal with today is not the same nature as before biotechnology. But it's too late. It happened in the beginning of the 21st Century, when they tried the first experiments with GMOs<sup>1</sup>. There has been some contamination and today nobody really knows what is natural and what is man-made. What we are sure of is that most of the plants created by the old biotech multinationals disappeared: they had a terminator gene that prevented them to reproduce. The firms

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<sup>1</sup> Genetically Modified Organisms

claimed it was to prevent the spreading. From what I read, I have the impression that they essentially tried to protect their property."

"Could one put a patent on genetic material?"

"Yes. Isn't it weird? But somehow it was such a new thing that it was an incentive for creativity and a way to feed the research. But they went too far and before long, some people launched pirate copies of the products, without the terminator gene. Nobody bought the biotech firms's products anymore: as the sequencing techniques were archaic and slow, people claimed that they couldn't make the difference. And it worked!"

"Maybe one day, humans will live in a huge garden where even their houses are alive," she said almost as a joke.

"It will happen sooner than you expect. A group of researchers have created a tree that has a hollow trunk. People can live in it."

"What about the windows?"

"Made of matter similar to the wings of insects. And the air conditioning is also controlled as a biological process."

"How can it be?"

"Your body controls its temperature to the tens of degree, and the composition of all your physiological liquids is also regulated to a precision that requires a lot of care in a chemical plant, but that are done continually in any biological system. The air-conditioning is just another biological process. No need for cleaning filters, no need for maintenance: everything is self repairing."

"We are learning to be Gods," Coriander said in a dreamy tone. "We truly interact with Nature."

She added after a pause:

"We are re-creating the garden of Eden."

She came closer to Willow and took his hand.

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